



Getting to Know Your Community

Knowing your community well is key to running a successful volunteer program. Community composition indicators, such as unemployment rates, whether or not there is a highly transient population, income levels and education levels in the community, and more can affect your volunteer program. Examining these factors and understanding the people who make up your potential volunteer base will be important before beginning recruitment efforts. Volunteer managers will be more successful if they take the time to learn about and from the people they are hoping to engage.

By collecting information on the people and conditions in your community, you can plan better to make a positive impact and effectively engage volunteers. As you are beginning to try to better understand your community's composition, there are three general categories of information that you will need to know:

1. The people you are targeting
2. What exists in the area where they live—the physical environment
3. Community life—what else is happening in the community

The people you are targeting

- Their practical needs and problems
- Issues that worry or concern them
- Their hopes for the future
- Their attitudes toward and opinions about the issues you focus on
- The spread of age groups, gender, employment status
- What they do with their free time—membership of organizations, clubs, religion

What exists in the area where they live

- Types of housing, basic services like water, sanitation and electricity
- Schools
- Roads



- Essential services, such as hospitals and clinics and ambulance, firefighting and police services
- Postal and telecommunication
- Sport, parks and other recreational facilities
- Government offices—welfare, revenue services, home affairs
- Shops, markets and banking facilities
- Factories
- Places of worship
- Community halls
- Access to public transportation

Community life

- Political organizations
- School governing bodies
- Community policing forums
- Local development forums
- Trade unions
- Civic organizations
- Religious organizations
- Youth, women, business organizations
- Traditional leaders
- Sport and cultural clubs
- Crime



How to collect information about your community

Once you have an understanding of what information you need as a volunteer manager, consider how you will go about getting this information. Much of this information is readily available from official sources.

- Schools can provide enrollment figures as well as gender breakdowns.
- Local colleges and universities may have resources to help with data collection and analysis.
- Hospitals and clinics can provide details of admissions and of the major health problems facing the community.
- The local police station can provide crime statistics.
- The United States Census Bureau's web site, <http://www.census.gov/>, can provide demographical information about your community.
- Check with both nongovernmental and government agencies for any studies conducted in your community.
- Local community foundations may have already collected demographic, socioeconomic, and other data for your community.

Information in this resource was adapted in part from *Understanding your Constituency* <http://www.etu.org.za/toolbox/docs/building/constituency.html> and revised by HandsOn Network in 2010.