Concept Paper: Community Well Functioning

The strengths perspective suggests that we understand well-functioning communities as well as problematic communities. The following perspectives help define a well functioning community.

From Systems Theory, a well-functioning system is characterized by the following
- The environment is as important for system functioning as subsystems
- Information flows between subsystems
- Synergy (teamwork) replaces entropy (parts pulling down each other)
- New stimulation comes in from the outside the system, diversity is seen as a strength
- Criteria exists for system success
- Feedback loops and automatic self-correcting mechanisms exist, e.g., exit surveys, utilization review, performance evaluations, program evaluation, agency self-assessments, etc.
- Members can interact with the larger system without destroying local autonomy
- The system balances and meets the differential needs of its various subgroups

Characteristics of the structures and processes of a well-functioning community
- Mechanisms exist to handling conflict and reach consensus
- Power is diverse and shared
- Collective events, celebrations, and other community building and integration activities exist
- A variety and integration exist of different income, ethnic, religious, and interest groups

Characteristics of the residents of a well-functioning community
- Basic needs (food, shelter, and safety) of individuals and families are met
- Ability to use existing resources to solve the problems of living
- Ability to engage in successful problem solving, e.g., create new resources
- Have a sense of belonging and commitment to the community, are aware of its values and beliefs, can communicate effectively, and participate in community activities.
- Capable of identifying and reaching consensus on community needs, priorities, and solutions

Characteristics of the service delivery system of a well-functioning community
- Builds on the strengths and competencies of residents
- Begin with community priorities (start where the client is at)
- Reduce long-term risk and vulnerability
- Focus on outcomes (changes to the client) and not the process (# services available) or output (clients treated)
- Maintains existing and establishes new social networks and assist individuals to locate and use these networks
- Accept and support a wide range of family and community structures while respecting individual rights
- Use volunteers in service delivery
- Sees that empowering residents to solve their problems is preferred to establishing treatment agencies
- Views a community approach to problem solving as valid as an individual or family treatment approach.
- Involve representatives of service users in agency decision making, e.g., agency committees and boards

Measures of a well-functioning community
- Number of community building activities & % of resident participating in social/civic affairs (Putnam social capital)
- Number of and diversity of decision making committees because people will support what they helped to create
- Percentage of problems solved by local people vs. those requiring outside resources
- Percentage of the residents in the community who own their own home
- Number of high expectations about the community and its residents (resilience theory, Saleebey)
- Cries for help, e.g., 911 calls, code enforcement, crime rates, juvenile delinquency rates, truancy rates, etc.
- Number of diverse neighborhoods vs. segregation of residents by age, income, ethnicity, etc.
- Ratios such as housing starts vs. renovations, vs. housing demolitions, etc.

References
- Various WWW sites, e.g., Putnam, Social Capital (http://epn.org/prospect/24/24putn.html)
Study Links Suburban Sprawl to Ailments

AP, Tue Sep 28 2004, 2:21 PM ET

LOS ANGELES - Warning: Suburban sprawl may be hazardous to your health. A report released Monday found that people who live in sprawling metropolitan areas are more likely to report chronic health problems such as high blood pressure, arthritis, headaches and breathing difficulties than residents of more compact cities.

The difference — which remained even when researchers accounted for factors such as age, economic status and race — may have something to do with the way people get around in more spread-out cities.

"People drive more in these areas; they walk less," said Roland Sturm, co-author of the report by Rand Corp., a nonprofit research group.

The report suggests that an adult who lives in a sprawling city such as Atlanta will have health characteristics similar to someone four years older, but otherwise similar, who lives in a more compact city like Seattle.

The report is not the first to suggest that sprawl cramps a healthy lifestyle. Last year, major studies found that residents of such areas weighed more than their counterparts in walkable cities like New York.

The study was based on information from a telephone survey, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, that questioned adults about their physical and mental health in 1998 and 2001. The study analyzed information from more than 8,600 people in 38 metropolitan areas.

The study found no link between suburban sprawl and a greater incidence of mental health problems.

Regions considered to have the worst suburban sprawl included Atlanta; Riverside-San Bernardino, Calif.; Winston-Salem, N.C.; West Palm Beach, Fla.; and Bridgeport-Danbury-Stamford, Conn., the report said. Regions with the least amount of sprawl included New York City, San Francisco, Boston and Portland, Ore.

The findings appear in the October edition of the journal Public Health.