CAMDEN INFORMATION GAPS AND NEEDS

¿NECESITA RECURSOS O INFORMACIÓN MIENTRAS CONTINUAMOS LIDIANDO CON COVID-19?

TEXT "CAMDEN" TO 73224

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SALUD MENTAL
Y MÁS

ESTAMOS AQUÍ PARA AYUDAR

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Introduction

In communities all over the country, people consistently cannot access the information and necessities they need to meet their challenges and achieve their goals. Reporters, organizers, and community-based organizations often don't know where to begin when so many needs and issues seem pressing.

Knowing what information people need but don't have — what we will refer to as an information *gap* or information *need* — is only a necessary first step in beginning to make news and information services able to improve the conditions in people's lives and in communities. With this assessment in hand, we hope you feel more prepared to contextualize the challenges your community is facing and begin to fill those information or accountability gaps.

In this report, we are going to take you from the methods for identifying information gaps to our recommendations for addressing those gaps, getting partners on board, and laying the groundwork for an information ecosystem that is more responsive and accountable to the communities it serves. Throughout the memo, you will see purple boxes that indicate special annotations relevant to our Camden analysis.

Information gaps

Information gaps are not just what people don't know; it is information people need but where there is a barrier to accessing, understanding, or trusting the information.

Not having information can lead to severe consequences, something that has become more clear to many during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the hierarchy of information needs, we are most concerned about core needs for meeting day-to-day basic needs like finding housing, food, and employment, for example. These are not the only needs that matter but in our experience, it is impossible to have a healthy information ecosystem or community when these needs go unmet.

Information gaps change over time and with specific periods. For instance, people are more likely to need to know how to find utility bill assistance during the winter. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw the information people needed shift to reliable health and safety info. One year later, we are seeing people need to understand how to successfully navigate the unemployment benefit system and find food pantries.

Methods

Local news and information providers have limited resources. So, the question of what people need to know *most* becomes a critical one. No community has a single

information gap, and we know racism, poverty, and divestment lead to a slew of negative outcomes that are all connected. So how do we pick which information gaps we allocate resources toward filling?

The first and most straightforward method is we ask them. We purchase phone numbers and use SMS to send a short survey that can help us better understand what information people need to thrive, what information they are unsure of, and how they would prefer to receive information in the future.

We aim to have our survey completed by around 50 randomly selected respondents. We send each person a $10 gift card for taking the survey, which typically takes less than five minutes. Camden is a small city, with about 74,000 residents[1] but we were still able to have 47 resident's complete the survey in our three day window.

The majority of needs were relevant to how to make ends meet. Well over half of all needs were about income support, employment, or basic needs. Information

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[1] United States Census American Community survey estimates for 2019 available at https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/camdencitynewjersey

needs were predominantly about what resources are available to keep afloat.

The most common immediate and longer-term need voiced by participants in the Camden survey, related to issues of income support and employment. That was followed by a need for basic needs in food, utilities and transportation. Info or resources needs related to COVID-19, outside of economic impacts, were a minority of responses.
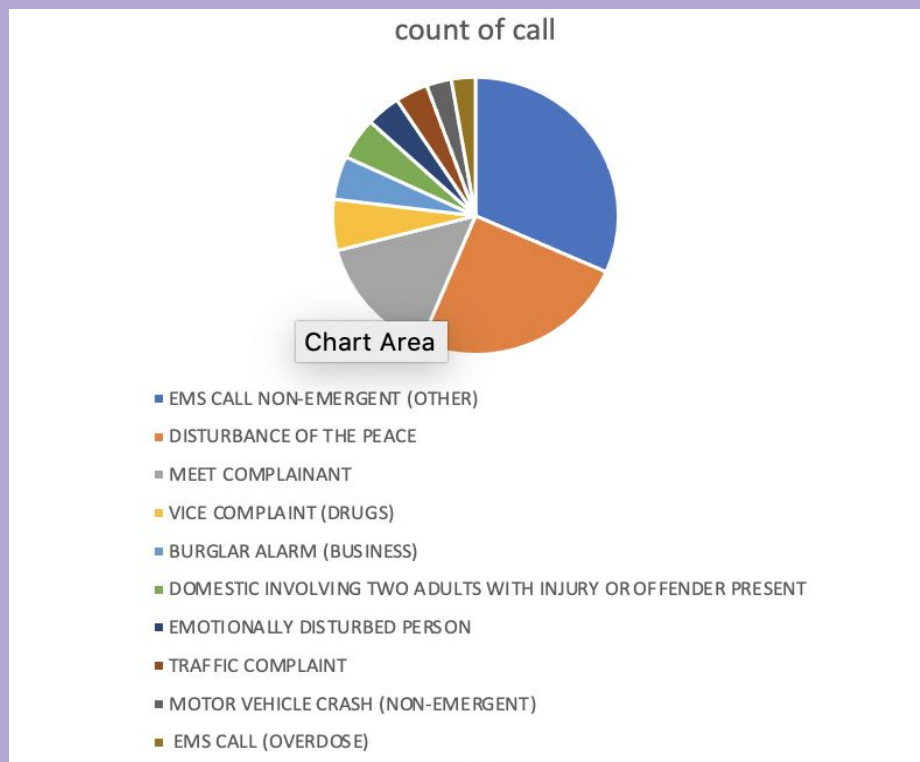
Beyond asking individuals we also look for signals in the city at large that necessary resources or information is scarce. We look for sources where people turn to when they are in need. This could mean reviewing a log of complaints or inquiries filed with public agencies. It could be data on the nature of calls made to 911 or 211. If you're lucky to have access to granular Google data, it could be search trends for your community. What we are asking here is: without quality information, how did people try to get what they needed? What questions did they ask?

We collected and reviewed Camden 211 data, a collection of data about calls for resources or help made to the United Way's 211 service. Need has increased dramatically over the last year. In fact, calls have more than doubled. Between March 1, 2020 and March 1, 2021 there were 19,684 requests made to 211, compared to only 7,628 calls made between March 1, 2019 and March 1, 2020.

In particular, people are asking for help paying for housing and utilities (specifically electric). The third most popular request was for services for already vulnerable populations, like the elderly or people with disabilities. **We recommend making more information about these subjects and resources a staple of any community coverage.**

In addition to looking at 211 data, we requested 911 call data. The lions' share of 911 calls are for non-emergencies. This demonstrates that there is a need for more personalized assistance citywide and an overburdening of the services that do exist.

A graphic representation of 911 calls between 1-19-2019 and 6-20-2020. The "meet complainant" category means police presence was requested to mediate a dispute or an argument or check on a situation.

count of call

- EMS CALL NON-EMERGENT (OTHER)
- DISTURBANCE OF THE PEACE
- MEET COMPLAINANT
- VICE COMPLAINT (DRUGS)
- BURGLAR ALARM (BUSINESS)
- DOMESTIC INVOLVING TWO ADULTS WITH INJURY OR OFFENDER PRESENT
- EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED PERSON
- TRAFFIC COMPLAINT
- MOTOR VEHICLE CRASH (NON-EMERGENT)
- EMS CALL (OVERDOSE)

We also request any complaints that are filed with the city. We requested all complaints from January 1, 2019 until June, 2020 (when the request was filed). We received a 76 page pdf in return with 1,931 complaints. Most of these complaints were referred to the Department of Public Works, and concerned abandoned property, vacant properties, trash pick up, or problems with roads. This complaint data, along with answers to our SMS survey demonstrates people in Camden are invested in the condition of their neighborhoods and expect their government to be responsive. These are both very good places for healthy information ecosystems to build from.

We also requested property tax and school free/reduced lunch records to identify distress signals that show who is behind on property taxes or facing food insecurity. About 14% of children in Camden were food insecure before the COVID-19 pandemic. That number is higher than the state average, but lower than the national average.

An excerpt from an email received in response to a public records request for complaint records from the City of Camden.

8/26/2020	Complaint/Problem	HIGH WEEDS/TRASH/BOARD UP-2ND TIME CALLING	DPW	REF TO YVETTE

When looking for information gaps, ask what kind of public records are created when people seek the resources they need.

We would recommend finding and calling Yvette in the Department of Public Works and interviewing her about the challenges to getting residents complaints and concerns addressed.

If there is a government data portal available online, we assess those resources as possible flags for information needs.

Camden has an open data portal available online. However, there is not much data in the portal. We did find the city very responsive to our FOIA requests, and they might be willing to put more data online.

In some cases, we are interested in identifying the sub-communities that need concentrated reporting and attention. We use income as an identifier for folks who are underserved by traditional media.

In some ways, this is intuitive. We know that newsroom business models drive resources toward an audience who can afford it. We also know that income is a good predictor for other indices of wellness: education attainment, housing stability, physical and mental health.

Income is also a data point that is often collected. Depending on the population size, we might identify the ZIP codes, neighborhoods, or wards that are lowest income and focus on getting them the information they need in the format that is most accessible.

Camden has nine zip codes. In our SMS survey zip code 08105 returned the most surveys.

The final method we employ is looking for the outcomes of an information gap: what happened as a result of people not having the information they needed?

Basic needs: People in Camden are facing challenges meeting a range of basic needs according to all the data sources we examined.

Further reporting should help people navigate this financial insecurity. It should aim to hold agencies accountable when they fail to remedy this hardship.

Property tax: From Census Bureau data we know the majority of people in Camden rent their homes. We requested property tax records from the city clerk to understand whether property owners are paying what they owe the city. In the U.S., property ownership is perhaps the most stable indicator of generational wealth.

Our initial findings indicate that the majority of properties with delinquent taxes are commercial properties, not residential properties.

We recommend more analysis of this data, and contacting the city for answers to why the delinquency rate among commercial properties and landlords is so high.

The assessment

We look at Census and American Community Survey data to determine how many people speak a language other than English at home.

Language at home, children 5-17: 60% English only, 38% Spanish, % 2 Islander-Asian
Language at home, adults 18+: 53% English only, 44% Spanish, 2% Islander-Asian

In Camden, we recommend providing as many news products in Spanish as possible. We offered our survey in Spanish but none of the responses were in Spanish.

There are three main ways we try to identify the most critical information needs from a data perspective:

1. Prevalence: the information gaps that affect the most people.

    In Camden, right now, the most prevalent information gaps surround navigating basic financial sustainability. We would suggest coverage on the unemployment insurance system, the gig economy, economic mobility, economic development, and state and municipal solutions. This coverage should center the information needs of the unemployed or underemployed.

2. Severity: the information need that results in the most critical harm or suffering.

    The most severe information gap we found in Camden was the inability to provide for basic needs like food, rent and transportation. We suggest coverage that critically examines the lack of resources available and who is and who is not affected.

3. Rarity: the information gaps that stand out, relative to other communities.

    The information gap that stands out to us is the question of property maintenance and property tax collection. We suggest this issue warrants more reporting and investigation.

Information should be delivered, at least in part, over SMS message based on internet usage and survey participant preference.

We note some demographic basics in every assessment, namely: population size, race, rate of home-ownership, median age, unemployment rate, median income, transportation methods, and places of birth.

Population: 74,100
Median household income: $33,120
Race: 59 % Hispanic, 39% Hispanic, 6% White, 2% Asian
Foreign-born population: 12%
Ownership of occupied units: 61% renter-occupied
Housing stock occupancy: 83% occupied

Conclusions and take-aways

The information gaps in Camden are widespread and serious, but they are not overly complicated. **People need access to basic resources** and they are not easily able to find the resources they need. The high number of calls to 211, emergency services, and the city from Camden residents demonstrates residents are resourceful and engaged. Our biggest take-away from this report is that **basic, valuable and verified information that can help people meet their needs and achieve their goals is harder to find than it should be in Camden**.

In our SMS survey we ask people if they have heard rumors or information they aren't sure they should believe. We did not see overly high levels of misinformation or disinformation in Camden as compared to other communities where we have done these assessments.

It was easier to get English speakers to take our survey than in many other communities we have worked in. We believe this indicates that people in Camden are eager for better information and willing to participate in a process to create those resources.

We did not have any participation on our Spanish language survey and believe the information needs of Spanish speakers will need to be assessed.

It was much easier to get our Freedom of Information Act requests answered in Camden than in other cities where we have done these assessments. This level of government transparency is a community asset.

What's next?

Knowing what people need to know is just the first step. The next is finding the actual information that could meet these needs.

Know that your audience is intelligent and capable — if the information were easy to access, they likely would have found it. In our experience information and resource gaps indicate a bigger problem with disconnection or accountability.

The data we see from Camden shows an engaged city and a relatively responsive city government. These are places of strength to build from. While the needs in Camden are widespread and serious they are not as widespread or as serious as in other communities we have surveyed. However, we do have concerns about the needs of Spanish speakers being met.

Never forget the digital divide. As storytellers shift to new platforms supported on new devices, we must cope with tools that have little investment. we look at internet access markers from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Household internet access of any kind
Camden: 74%
Household cellular data plan
Camden: 66%
Camden households without internet access by income
Less than $20,000: 50%
$20,000-$74,999: 15%
$75,000 or more: 11%

We can see from ACS data that the digital divide is significant in Camden, and that it is felt more acutely by low-income people. We recommend getting critical information to people using media that is accessible: SMS, fliers, billboards, and in-person presentations at community meetings.