



## *POLICY AND PRACTICE REPORT*

### “ Health impact assessment

is a systematic process that uses an array of data sources and analytic methods and considers input from stakeholders to determine the potential effects of a proposed policy, plan, program, or project on the health of a population and the distribution of those effects within the population. Health impact assessment provides recommendations on monitoring and managing those effects. ”

National Academy of Sciences, Committee on Health Impact Assessment, 2011. Adapted from the International Association for Impact Assessment's definition of health impact assessment.

### **Health Impact Assessment: A Basic Guide**

The importance of considering health impacts in developing all types of policies and programs is now widely recognized, but decision-makers in fields such as transportation, housing, workforce policy, education, and agriculture often have lacked the critical information and analysis required to understand those impacts. The Health Impact Assessment tool increasingly is being used in the United States to identify health impacts before critical decisions are made, to facilitate collaboration among policymakers and decision-makers in different fields, and ultimately to improve the health of Americans.

#### **What is a Health Impact Assessment?**

At its core, a health impact assessment (HIA) determines the likely health effects in a community of a proposed action, such as a policy, rule, project, program, or other activity.

A HIA is similar to an environment impact assessment (EIA) in seeking to identify and evaluate potential harmful effects of proposed decisions, although the scope and specific processes of HIAs are different. HIAs also differ from other health assessment tools in three ways: they are intended to inform specific proposals rather than providing comprehensive assessments; they systematically assess influences on health that can occur as a result of specific social, economic and environmental changes; and they use a broad definition of health that includes physical and psychological health and general well-being.<sup>1</sup>

However, they are similar to other health assessment tools in seeking to engage a wide array of stakeholders in the assessment, and more broadly in the public conversation about a community's health.

<sup>1</sup> Hodge, James G., et al., "Legal Review Concerning the Use of Health Impact Assessments in Non-Health Sectors," Health Impact Project, Washington, D.C., April 2012.



The cost and length of HIAs can vary, depending on the complexity of the proposals being evaluated, the number of stakeholders, the resources available, and the timeline for reaching decisions. HIAs can be fast-tracked (Rapid HIAs) when time and resources are limited, or can take many months when the project demands such attention and the resources are available.

The vast majority of HIAs are conducted voluntarily, but a study by the Health Impact Project, a collaboration of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts<sup>2</sup>, found that an increasing number of federal and state laws either specifically

require or, more frequently, facilitate the use of HIAs in a wide variety of areas such as energy and environmental projects, transportation, agriculture, and waste disposal and recycling. Environmental impact assessments are required to consider health effects of projects, but historically, health has been examined only cursorily. These laws can be invoked as professionals, policymakers, advocates, and citizens seek cross-sector cooperation to shape projects that assure that the public's health is protected.

### How is a HIA conducted?

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The National Academy of Sciences' Committee on Health Impact Assessments developed a 6-step framework that captures the elements which must be included in order for a HIA to be successful.<sup>3</sup>

- **Screening** – establishes whether a HIA is needed and how it would be useful.
- **Scoping** – identifies the elements that will be examined in the HIA, including the populations that would be affected by a proposal; the health effects to be evaluated; research questions and plans to address them; data and methods to be used and alternatives to be assessed; the team that will conduct the HIA; and critically, a plan for stakeholder participation throughout the process.
- **Assessment** – describes the current health status of affected populations, and characterizes how each alternative under consideration would affect their health.
- **Recommendations** – suggests actions or changes in the proposal to minimize its negative effects and maximize its positive effects.
- **Reporting** – communicates findings and recommendations to the full range of stakeholders, including decision-makers, other policymakers and professionals, advocates, the media, and the public.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation** – tracks the impact of the HIA on the decision-making process regarding the proposal and/or on the health of affected populations.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> National Academy of Sciences, Committee on Health Impact Assessments, Expert Consensus Report: "Improving Health in the United States: The Role of Health Impact Assessment," September 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Health Impact Project, Pew Charitable Trusts, Washington, D.C. "Health Impact Assessments in the United States." Recovered May 7, 2012 at <http://www.healthimpactproject.org/hia/us>

## How are HIAs being used in the United States?

HIAs have been used widely in Europe and Canada where they sometimes are mandated by law. While the use of HIAs in the United States has developed more recently, they already are being used to evaluate a wide array of proposed projects.<sup>4</sup> For example:

- **Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corp land parcel, Boston** – This community development corporation is considering four possible designs for a 23,000-square-foot vacant lot near a commuter rail line. The lot is located in the Fairmont Greenway, a 9-mile corridor that includes numerous vacant lots that communities have been seeking to transform. Until recently, health considerations were not explicitly part of the discussions although the designs address social determinants of health such as urban agriculture, economic development, education, and food access opportunities. As a result, the Codman Square NDC asked Health Resources in Action (HRIA) to conduct a HIA so that health issues would be considered in any final design decisions. Considerations for the HIA include opportunities for safe physical activity, social cohesion, soil and air quality, traffic, and crime. Partners include several state and local public health and community planning agencies, neighborhood residents, a local foundation and community groups.
- **South Lincoln Homes Redevelopment, Denver** – When the Denver Housing Authority was developing a master plan to redevelop the South Lincoln Homes, where 38 percent of the population is poor, it commissioned a HIA to help maximize the positive health effects of the plan. Analyzing data from surveys, walkability and food audits, and other documents, the HIA made detailed recommendations to reduce noise, increase physical activity, and provide social support through innovative methods including providing better lighting, noise barriers, bike lanes and sidewalks, and urban agriculture.
- **Piedmont Hospital Expansion, Atlanta** – When Piedmont Hospital, a major anchor institution in Atlanta's Peachtree Corridor, wanted to expand, the Georgia Institute of Technology and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation conducted a HIA to analyze the localized health impacts, including the impact of increased traffic on pedestrian safety and the ability of residents to engage in physical activity. The HIA's recommendations included improvements to the neighborhood's sidewalk network, buffers between pedestrians and traffic, new opportunities for health education, more community input into hospital planning, and the use of urban and universal design methods to improve the safety of transit between the hospital, neighborhoods and other local destinations.
- **Maine Paid Sick Days** – A consortium of organizations conducted a HIA to examine a proposed Maine-specific version of the federal Healthy Families Act, which would have entitled employees to accrue paid sick time at a rate of one hour for every 30 hours worked, up to 9 days per year.
- **Boston public transportation system (the "T")** – The Metropolitan Area Planning Council, working with both Harvard and Boston University schools of public health, examined the health and indirect economic impacts of two proposals to cut the Boston T's projected deficit of \$161 million. Both proposals involved significant fare increases and service reductions. The HIA evaluated the impacts on vehicle miles travelled, time spent driving, ridership loss, and air quality in the region. In consultation with experts on air quality, environmental health and physical activity, the HIA team applied findings from peer-reviewed scientific literature to transportation agency models.

While such policies often are examined almost exclusively in economic terms, the HIA examined the spread of communicable diseases through workers; the income and stress-related impacts from salary losses and employer retaliation for missing

work; and the potential effects on emergency room use and delayed medical care. The resulting report helped focus attention on the health outcomes of the legislation.

## Potential HIA partners

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As these examples demonstrate, there is a wide array of partners that may collaborate to conduct HIAs. They often bring added expertise that one organization may not have on its own and can include:

- Federal/State/Local Governments
- University-based researchers and facilities
- Public health agencies and institutes
- Community-based organizations
- Hospitals
- Health care organizations and providers
- Advocacy organizations
- Business and industry stakeholders
- HIA experts
- Philanthropic institutions

## For More Information

Health Resources in Action (HRiA), a national non-profit organization dedicated to advancing public health and medical research, has developed several resources to help organizations that are considering a HIA. A good starting point is: <http://hria.org/resources/public-health-toolkits.html>. HRiA's *Health Impact Assessment Resources* list includes numerous organizations and websites that provide extensive information about HIAs.

HRiA employs numerous staff who have been trained specifically in using Health Impact Assessment methodology, and we currently are conducting a number of HIAs. We also partner with others who are interested in putting HIAs to work in their own communities. To learn more, please contact Laurie Stillman, Chief Strategy Officer, at [LStillman@hria.org](mailto:LStillman@hria.org).