

Observations and Conversations

Two of the methods used in assessing what's going on in a community are methods that many if not all outreach workers already incorporate into their work: making observations in the community and having conversations with community members.

Observations are often the first step to entering a new community. A good guide to follow in doing an observation is the step-by-step guidelines below, adapted from the ones developed for the Community Identification (CID) process, a special assessment approach that is designed to help researchers understand and interact effectively with the community.

1. **Identify places** that you want to observe by doing a walk-through or drive-through of the area where you're interested in working. Look for spots where you can observe without being obvious, such as bus stops and eating spots.
2. **Have a purpose for being there.** Try to fade into the background—have a cup of coffee, read a newspaper. For safety reasons, always carry your project identification information with you and have it easily available.
3. **Take in the whole scene around you.** Note your general impressions. Then look at specifics—the physical layout of the area, traffic (both car and pedestrian traffic), the general condition of the neighborhood and the types of people in the area (their ethnicity, sex, age, business or purpose for being there, etc.). Pay attention to the interaction of people in the area, the pace of their interactions, how they dress, the “mood” of the area (if it's bright or gloomy, for example), how long people stay, any graffiti, and any type of posted information, such as in windows or on bus stops or telephone poles.
4. **Record what you see,** including the time, date, location and weather. Make notes without drawing attention to yourself. Writing down a few key words is often preferable to writing long sentences in a way that can look suspicious, *if* the words are enough to remind you of the detail that you can write later.
5. **Observe vertically and horizontally.** In other words, look from side to side as well as up and down.
6. **Close your eyes and listen.** Pay attention to noises or lack of noise. Listen to the tone of voices, the languages being spoken.
7. **Pay attention to groups of people in the area.** Note what appears to bring them together as a group and how they interact. Repeated observations can reveal that all or some of the people are “features” of the area, that you often or always find together there. Describe these groups each time in your notes, including a description of their members at each observation.

8. ***Make observations at different times of day.*** Describe what's the same and what's different depending upon the time of day—morning, afternoon, evening.
9. When making notes, ***describe only what you see and save the interpretation for later.*** “I saw someone pass a package off to a man about six feet tall” is describing. “A drug deal went down with a tall man” is labeling. An experienced outreach worker may be able to label, but it's best to try to describe as much as possible before making assumptions that allow things to be labeled, especially in a new area/community. In fact, when recording field notes after an observation, limit the notes to simply describing what went on until the team discusses together what they saw and decide if they have enough information to begin interpreting it.

In the case of HIV and substance abuse, observations are most likely the type described above, observations to simply observe what's going on. Another name for this type of observation is “natural group observations” that take place in “natural and unstructured settings.” (CDC, 1999) The process of observing a community or environment allows for a broader understanding of risk behavior and the context in which these behaviors occur.

Another type of observation is called ***participant observation***, where members of the project team actually *participate* (as the name implies) in what's going on in order to learn more about the daily activities of a community. Because of our focus on HIV risk behaviors, participant observation usually isn't possible or desirable (and may even be illegal). But there may be ways to participate in the life of a community in a relevant way, for example, accompanying a community member on a trip to a health facility using mass transit. This type of participant observation may help team members to better understand how difficult it is for members of the community to access health care.

Conversations are informal ways of gathering information without set questions. Team members can begin by walking up to people, identifying themselves and asking general questions about community concerns, problems or challenges. They may ask about how the neighborhood has changed and solicit their opinions about such changes.

One method that combines both conversations and observation is the ***transect walk***, a method which comes from the Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) approach described later in this manual.

Conducting a Transect Walk:

1. Develop several routes for several teams to walk or for the same team to walk at different times.
2. If possible, arrange for community members to accompany these team members.
3. Each team plans its transect walk by determining what they want to find out. Members can choose to simply converse with people along the way or can utilize one of the visual data gathering techniques described later in the book (pgs. 36-49) with people they encounter, if it seems appropriate.

4. After completing the walk, participants “debrief” by asking the following questions of themselves:

- “What methods did you use to gather information?”
- “What did you discover that was new?”
- “How did you feel talking to community members on their own turf?”

The purpose of these transect walks is to observe the community and to talk about things of local importance (Pretty et al, 1995). They can either be done early in a community identification process or after spending some time there.



As part of the assessment of the area with high gonorrhoea rates, all six members of the Any Community AIDS Network team began their assessment with observations in various parts of the community. One pair made several observations at different times of day and days of the week at a park. One pair picked a particularly busy street corner. The remaining group observed several apartment communities in the area.

After a few sessions observing, the groups began to start conversations with people they encountered in the community. Some community members started their own conversations first and asked team members about why they were there. Each member gave his/her organizational affiliation, then told them, “We’re here to find out more about what concerns people in this community have. What do you think?”

When they’d developed a rapport with several people in the community, including some key respondents and gatekeepers, each pair of the team followed the transect walk activity accompanied by community members. This activity helped them to understand even better what they’d been observing.

See the following example of how one group in the assessment team chose to conduct their observations, or refer to **Attachment 2** in the back of the guide.