

# Health Impact Assessment



## Background

### Definition

Health Impact Assessment (HIA) ensures that health is a key factor in decision-making, including planning, policies, programs, and other projects. The International Association of Impact Assessment defines HIA as: “a combination of procedures, methods and tools that systematically judges the potential, and sometimes unintended effects of a policy, plan, program or project on the health of a population and the distribution of those effects within the population.” In addition to simply evaluating or assessing, HIA identifies appropriate actions to increase the potential for improved health resulting from a policy, plan, program, or project. HIA also aims to inform the public and decision-makers when decisions about policies, plans, programs and projects have the potential to significantly impact human health, and to advance the values of democracy, equity, sustainable development, the ethical use of evidence and a comprehensive approach to health.

**A health impact assessment can help to spur investment in a project by identifying health benefits that would have otherwise gone unrecognized.**

[The National Research Council](#) highlights that HIA 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. HIA provides recommendations on monitoring and managing those effects.”

The National Research Council suggests that HIA typically includes the following stages:

- Screening (identifying plans, projects or policies for which an HIA would be useful)
- Scoping (identifying which health effects to consider)
- Assessing risks and benefits (identifying which people may be affected and how they may be affected)
- Developing recommendations (suggesting changes to proposals in order to best promote positive health effects or to minimize adverse health effects)
- Reporting (presenting the results to decision-makers)
- Monitoring and evaluating (determining the effect of the HIA on the decision)

HIA likely has maximum impact when it:

- Is a forward-looking and systematic process that seeks input from multiple stakeholders and other sources (rather than retrospective or even after a policy, plan, program, or project has already been adopted or implemented)
- Progresses through and is resourced to complete each and all of its stages

- Is integrated early and in an on-going way into the process of public policy development to inform decision-making (some have suggested that HIA is a policy formation tool)

### **Health, equity and sustainability considerations**

HIA by definition is a process that attempts to better incorporate health and equity into all planning and decision-making processes. HIA specifically incorporates equity through a multi-disciplinary analysis of how the project or plan impacts various social determinants of health. The inclusion of equity and health is further fostered through community and stakeholder engagement (e.g., usually through community meetings and/or a resident, community leader, and community-based organization advisory committee), where the various stakeholders can identify and deliberate about health interests related to the target plan or decision.

## **Program and Policy Examples**

### **Program examples**

HIA has been used extensively, originally and more robustly outside of the U.S. to examine potential health impacts of plans, policies, and programs. The flexibility of an HIA allows for the examination of multiple aspects of health (e.g., physical activity, obesity, injury) of single policies, plans, or programs, or conversely one singular aspect of health in the context of multiple policies, or complex plans, or multiple programs. Most HIAs fall somewhere in between these extremes, with the first step (i.e., scoping process) being a critical part of defining the scale and direction of a specific HIA.

Common targets of HIA have included:

- Comprehensive and neighborhood plans
- Transportation and related changes (e.g., expansions of transportation infrastructure or service)
- Green infrastructure, including parks, recreation, and open space
- Housing and other development
- Employment conditions and benefits (e.g., living wages, paid sick days)

Although many HIAs have been conducted on policies, plans, or projects that are already known to have a direct connection to health, HIA should also be considered for policies, plans, or projects that have a less well known connection to health. Despite its intent to infuse consideration of health into all policies, plans, projects, and programs, HIA is often not considered or pursued if there is not a direct or well-established link with health.

### **How is it used locally?**

There are recent local examples of HIA work completed in western Washington around planning, transportation, and other issues.

In 2008, Puget Sound Clean Air Agency and Public Health – Seattle & King County published information about an HIA conducted on the State Route 520 replacement project near and over Lake Washington. The [520 HIA](#) (2008) focused on construction-related noise and pollution, transportation, and green space, with corresponding recommendations in these areas to support better health and active living in particular. Additional content of this HIA addressed neighborhood aesthetics, connectivity, and storm water management.

A rapid [HIA](#) in Clark County in 2010 focused on the county's bicycle and pedestrian master plan. Examples of policy recommendations stemming from this HIA included creating policies to improve bicycle and pedestrian access to healthy food, prioritizing projects that increase walkability through greater street network connectivity and greater density and land use mix, as well as including health equity in project prioritization. There was a positive follow-up, [Evaluation of Health Impact Assessment: Clark County Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan](#) (2011), regarding how conducting this HIA contributed to the bicycle and pedestrian master plan development and process.

Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department partnered with the City of Puyallup to work with community partners and organizations on the [South Hills Neighborhood Health Impact Assessment](#) (2010) and this area's associated plan policies for future development. Within this HIA, they explored the impacts on various aspects of health (physical activity, injury, crime/safety, access to healthy foods, social networks and cohesiveness) of land use and urban form, green infrastructure, and transportation. Examples of recommendations within this HIA report included modifications to existing codes and standards and enforcement of existing codes, added planning (e.g., for neighborhood-wide green infrastructure, for healthy food access), ongoing measurement (e.g., travel modes), and specific infrastructure changes (e.g., safe walking/cycling amenities).

The HIA regarding the proposed cleanup plan for the lower Duwamish River was reported on in 2013. The [Health Impact Assessment: Proposed Cleanup Plan for the Lower Duwamish Waterway Superfund Site](#) (2013) has targeted recommendations for the various partners engaged in this cleanup, with a particular emphasis on ensuring equity, creating local economic opportunities, and addressing health concerns of local communities. Through the CDC-funded Community Transformation Grant (2012-2014) awarded to Seattle Children's Hospital, Public Health – Seattle and King County, and the Healthy King County Coalition, the city of Auburn is embarking upon an HIA regarding their comprehensive plan update. The link will be posted when available.

## Implementation

### Considerations for local implementation

There is no single way to conduct an HIA. The HIA needs to be tailored to local context while still retaining the systematic and multi-step approach to its implementation. Most HIAs are conducted in consultation with or through organizations with prior experience in conducting HIA. This can be done sometimes through local organizations (with the benefit of local knowledge) or through outside organizations with a history of conducting HIAs not necessarily in their local area.

Often, community members and elected officials fear an HIA is a binding contract. Outreach efforts can help to educate residents and leaders about the benefits of an HIA and that they provide essential information that the community can use as it sees fit.

[Human Impact Partners](#) is a recognized leader in HIA. Their core mission includes increasing awareness and provision for health and equity in all policies and decision-making. Health Impact Partners' website has tools and resources for learning more about and implementing the various steps of HIA (e.g., screening,

scoping). [Examples of completed HIAs](#) across a variety of topic areas and an extensive searchable [list and links to HIA reports](#) are available from Human Impact Partners.

### **Opportunities for funding**

The Robert Wood Johnson and the Pew Charitable Trusts have a collaboration called [The Health Impact Project](#), which seeks to build healthier communities through promoting the use of HIA as a decision-making tool. They have also been funding HIAs since 2011, with yearly calls for proposals in 2011, 2012, and 2014.

### **Challenges to local implementation**

Challenges to implementing an HIA may include:

- Inadequate time and resources to conduct the full HIA process and to fit HIA into the political and other decision-making processes and timeframe that drive planning, policies, projects, and programs
- Only limited data sources available regarding the various aspects of health that may be impacted by plans or policies
- Limited or weak engagement of some stakeholders and decision-makers

## **Resources**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's [Health Impact Assessment Resource Page](#) (2014)

National Association of County and City Health Officials' [Health Impact Assessment Resource List](#) (2014)

Public Health—Seattle & King County's [Health Impact Assessment Resource Page](#) (2014)

University of Minnesota Design for Health's [Rapid Health Impact Assessment Toolkit](#) (2008)

World Health Organization's [Health Impact Assessment Resource Page](#) (2014)