



How can Health Impact Assessments lead to better policy decisions?

Takeaways:

- Health impact assessments (HIAs) allow policy-makers to consider how proposed policies that may seem unrelated to health—the development of a new transit system, for example—would affect health, and could be used to improve it.
- HIAs can help marshal community support for a project, facilitate collaboration across sectors, and offer benefits for businesses.
- More than 200 HIAs that are focused on policies at all levels of government have been completed or are in progress across the country.¹

Overview

Many of the biggest policy decisions that impact our well-being are made outside of the health and healthcare sectors. For example, local zoning and transportation planning, state budget decisions, and federal agriculture and energy policies can all impact our health. HIAs help policy-makers consider how such decisions will affect health and offer guidance for improving health and minimizing health-related risks, and costs.

HIA: A KEY TOOL FOR PROMOTING HEALTH

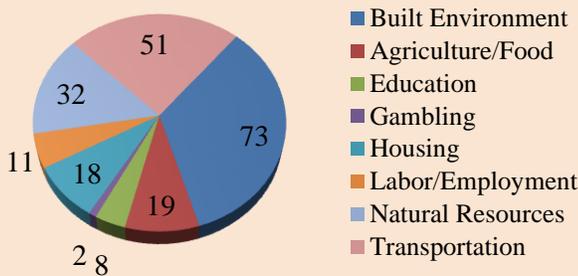
A health impact assessment (HIA) is a pioneering tool that helps policy-makers more fully understand the health effects of proposed laws, regulations,

programs, and projects, from big infrastructure projects to school curriculum development. HIAs combine scientific data, health expertise, and public input to assess the potential health impact of a proposal. HIAs provide health recommendations that are practical and can be implemented quickly, so they are relevant to the policy or project under consideration. HIAs can be conducted on local, state, or federal policy or regulations and can be initiated by governments, think tanks, academic institutions, nonprofits, or community organizations.

BENEFITS AND BEST USES OF HIA(S)

- **HIAs can build community support for a project.** By identifying and addressing concerns from multiple stakeholders, HIAs help reduce conflicts that can delay projects. For example, an Alaska Native community considered suing to block oil and gas lease sales in their traditional hunting areas. Instead, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) worked with the local government to complete an HIA, which resulted in new protections to address community concerns. Since then, the BLM has begun using HIAs in similar planning and permitting decisions.²
- **HIAs facilitate collaboration across sectors.** HIAs provide a structured, pragmatic way for public health practitioners and researchers to collaborate with officials in other agencies and sectors, ensuring that these officials have the health data they need to make well-informed decisions.

Number of HIAs Done by Sector



Source: *Health Impact Project*

- **HIAs benefit businesses.** Companies and lenders are turning to HIAs as small, prudent investments in the long-term success of initiatives. Many large banks now use HIAs in their approval process for development loans. Trade organizations like the International Committee on Mining and Metals and the International Association of Oil and Gas Producers have HIA handbooks. Many companies are adopting their own standards for HIAs.³

SUCCESSFUL EXAMPLES OF HIA(S)

More than 200 HIAs are completed or underway in 35 states and Washington, D.C. Examples include:

- The Kids' Safe and Healthful Foods Project released an HIA in 2012 finding that updating nutrition standards for school snacks and drinks could help students maintain a healthy weight and support school food service revenue.⁴ When the U.S. Department of Agriculture issued proposed standards for school snacks in 2013, it cited this HIA in the Federal Register as a "comprehensive and groundbreaking assessment."⁵
- When officials were grappling with Atlanta's traffic congestion, an HIA showed that a light-rail system would encourage developers to locate parks, residential areas, schools, and grocery stores along the route, which could improve residents' health and prevent health problems. The HIA led to health experts being included in transit decisions and a federal grant to clean up old industrial sites.⁶

- In Massachusetts, an HIA of the state's Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program found that some families burdened by high heating costs are forced to crowd around space heaters or ovens to stay warm, increasing risk of fire and carbon monoxide poisoning. Policy-makers realized that such dangers could dramatically increase Medicaid costs, which drove the state legislature to increase funds for energy assistance.⁷

CONCLUSION

HIAs also are catching on at the federal level. The National Prevention Strategy, the country's first-ever comprehensive action plan for improving the health of all Americans, includes HIAs as an effective strategy for eliminating health disparities.⁸ The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services also recommends HIAs as a planning resource for implementing Healthy People 2020 initiatives.⁹

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- [Health Impact Project \(Advancing Smarter Policies for Healthier Communities\)](#)
- [National Prevention Strategy](#)
- [Human Impact Partners](#)
- [Health Impact Assessment](#)

¹ <http://www.healthimpactproject.org/hia/us>

² <http://www.healthimpactproject.org/resources/policy/file/health-impact-assessment-bringing-public-health-data-to-decision-making.pdf>

³ <http://www.healthimpactproject.org/resources/policy/file/health-impact-assessment-bringing-public-health-data-to-decision-making.pdf>

⁴ http://www.pewhealth.org/uploadedFiles/PHG/Content_Level_Pages/Reports/KS_HIA_revised%20WEB%20FINAL%2073112.pdf

⁵ http://www.pewhealth.org/uploadedFiles/PHG/Content_Level_Pages/Reports/KS_HIA_revised%20WEB%20FINAL%2073112.pdf

⁶ <http://www.healthimpactproject.org/resources/case-study-atlantas-beltline>

⁷ <http://www.healthimpactproject.org/hia/us/massachusetts-low-income-energy-assistance-program>

⁸ <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/initiatives/prevention/strategy/report.pdf>

⁹ <http://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/about/advisory/SocietalDeterminantsHealth.pdf>