The initial phase of a participatory action research project necessitates the development of a base of knowledge about the area where you hope to work, the people who live in this area, and their issues/concerns. In Patricia Maguire's words this means "gathering and analyzing existing information about the research area and about the central problems faced by people" (p. 40).

One should begin this phase prior to entry into the community (or organization) where one will work - assuming that one is not a member of the community - OR prior to the initiation of this particular research project - assuming that one is a member of the community. Obviously it is critical how you define “the community.” Clearly there are many understandings of community and within each community there are many sub-communities and you cannot become an expert on all of them. However, in addition to the more global analysis of the "broader community" you should develop some background information about the particular group/organization/sub-community with whom you hope to work.

The researcher should make use of the multiple forms of data available to him/her about the community. These include census data, neighborhood publications, city-wide comparisons, national surveys, organizational histories, documents, newspaper articles, etc. You should be able to describe the community residents statistically (populations, sub-populations, education levels, income levels, literacy, ethnic and racial composition, etc.) and the resources of the community, i.e., its institutions (including, schools, hospitals, stores, banks, police, transportation system, etc). You should also note any particular geographic characteristics that might distinguish this community. For example, is there a river that divides the community? You might want to note any climatic factors that might be relevant - for example, intense snow storms for five months out of the year; unbearable heat for three months, hurricanes, etc.

Finally, you should identify the various community organizations as well as the community's leaders. To the extent possible you should identify the formal and the informal leadership structures and be able to characterize them in terms of their relationships to power and their social capital.

Through gathering this information you will begin to develop ideas about the central problems experienced by people in this community, and, as importantly, by particular subgroups within the community. This latter point is particularly important in thinking about research that takes gender, race, and power seriously. For example, are the problems similar or different for women and for men? For whites and for African-Americans or Latinos or Asian American or Native Americans? For those that are differently abled? What voice or role or power do local women have in community organizations? In its institutions? Which ones? (See Maguire, page 106, 1

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1 This is an excellent exercise for those planning to collaborate in a PAR project. You may do the exercise in teams but should each write your own paper.
If you are actually developing a PAR project this is also an opportunity to begin to make personal contact with leaders in the community and with community organizations. They can both serve as key informants as you gather information about the community and as future resources in your actual work. You might ask them to make the same kinds of observations you have been making and note these. This is NOT a formal interview. You are interested in another person's experiences with and reflections on the community/group. You should also take advantage of previous contacts and resource people within the community and its sub-communities.

Obviously you cannot identify all of the resources, all of the institutions, etc. However, you should strive for a more global view initially, and then look to develop more in depth data about the institutions, organizations, forces that impact most directly on your research interest (or on the research interests of the community group with whom you are collaborating).

**WRITTEN SUMMARY** (double-spaced, typed, 8-10 pp, without Appendices): Begin with your definition of the “community” that you are observing and with your observations of that community/group. Be sure to be as explicit as possible, sharing details of the community or group and organizing the data that you have gathered in a representational format that allows you to interpret it, clarifying the problem/issue focus for your future research. You should also include a summary of what you have learned from any of the informants consulted. You may choose visual as well as verbal re-presentations for your report. You should attempt to organize the diverse sources of data towards a focus on the particular area of interest you hope to pursue in your research - although at this stage of your planning this may be quite broad - e.g., exploring the impact of urban violence on immigrant youth’s experiences.

Consult at least one source that discusses information gathering, rapid appraisal or community mapping for field research (see www sites for possible sources) and discuss this article/book in light of your experiences. Summarize your “findings,” that is, what you learned about this community/project and your interpretations of your observations. How did you position yourself within the community and how did they position you? What have you learned from this exercise about the community/group with whom you hope to engage? What questions do you have about the community based on these observations? About the exercise? What additional information do you need prior to engaging in a participatory action research project with this community? What ideas do you have about how you might go about getting these questions answered?

Include a reflexive statement, that is, your reflections on the experience of doing this exercise. Summarize what you have learned about yourself as a researcher. What has this method taught you? How did you feel “in context?” What, if anything, changed in you over the time that you spent gathering this information? What would you do differently the next time?

Finally, include any tables, demographic summaries, diagrams, tables, etc. as Appendices to your report.