

FINDING & USING DATA

STRENGTHEN YOUR ADVOCACY EFFORTS WITH CONVINCING DATA

Effectively using research can help you convey your position to legislators, the public, your board, funders, and members. Credible data can complement personal stories and anecdotes about your cause, thereby making your point more convincing. Gathering research and pulling out the important points that support your position, as well as points that negate the argument of those who oppose your position, will help you to gain supporters for your cause.

■ FINDING DATA

Most commonly, data is thought of as numbers or numbers representing a particular category (e.g. 1=yes, 2 = no). This is quantitative data. Qualitative data is another, valid type of data that is often obtained through methods such as focus groups or observation. While this information sheet focuses on quantitative data, see the resources section on the next page for more information on using qualitative data.

Most nonprofits already collect data and analyze it, both for their own knowledge (program evaluation) and to report to stakeholders (grant reports, annual reports, etc.). If you are looking for information beyond what you can collect yourself, there are several sources of public data available on the Internet. Use different search terms to find ready-to-use statistics or data you can analyze yourself.

>> STATISTICS OR DATA:

Searching with these terms will return research results, usually descriptive statistics that have been drawn from an original survey or government data. Descriptive statistics tell you about the sample being measured (e.g., what percentage of those surveyed fall into category X). They are often presented in a data chart, graph or within the text of a report.

>> DATA SET:

Including this term in your search will return a database of survey responses that can be used for analysis. You may be limited by the questions that were asked on the survey. Data set results are large files that can be used in a spreadsheet program or a statistical analysis program (SPSS, SAS, Stata). While data sets don't provide the "off the shelf" information you might be looking for, they are useful for performing a deeper analysis of an issue.

RESOURCES – FINDING DATA

- Government Resources– www.fedstats.gov, state & county Web sites
- Think Tanks and other Nonprofits
- Trade Associations
- Universities, particularly research centers
- Research Librarians
- Internet Searches
- Primary Sources – Surveys, focus groups, interviews



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■ USING DATA

Almost all data you will use will be “samples.” Good researchers and demographers take great care to design a survey sample that is truly representative so that research results can be reliably generalized to an entire population. There are a variety of sampling methods, but generally, when using large government databases to produce descriptive statistics, you can be sure that the data you’re using is from an acceptable, representative sample. For deeper analysis, particularly one that you expect to yield controversial results, consult with an experienced researcher.

Take some time to understand the source of data. When and how was the data gathered? For example, if a survey was administered by telephone and you are hoping to use the data set to answer questions about a very low-income population, you may question whether the survey reached your target population who may not have telephones. Similarly, a sample may be statistically representative at the national or state level, but not at the county level. In both cases, it does not necessarily mean you can’t use the data if it is the best available, but you should be aware of and transparent about the limitations. Finally, get comfortable with the basic concepts of percentages, rates, per capita and standard deviation. You will be in a position to better explain to your audiences what the numbers really mean.

RESOURCES – USING DATA

- www.robertniles.com/stats - A good introduction to talking about numbers, written for journalists.
- *Damned Lies and Statistics: Untangling Numbers from the Media* by Joel Best, www.ucpress.edu
- <http://learningstore.uwex.edu/pdf/G3658-12.PDF>, The University of Wisconsin - Extension’s Program Development & Evaluation program offers a downloadable, 10-page publication that provides a good introduction to qualitative data collection and analysis.
- Introductory statistics courses through associations, community colleges or university extension programs.