



UCLA CENTER FOR HEALTH POLICY RESEARCH

Technical Assistance Series

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What to Do When the Data You Need Is Not Available December 2004

What Can You Do If the Data You Need Is Not Available?

Sometimes the data you need may be limited or unavailable for your specific population. In these cases, you can try to localize data, or take existing data and show how it applies to your population of interest. The following approaches can help you localize data:

- A. Use proxy measures
- B. Make estimates using existing data
- C. Paint a picture
- D. Ask a researcher

A. Use Proxy Measures

Proxy measures are information that can substitute for the data you need because it relates closely to your issue. For example, if you need up-to-date poverty data for people in your neighborhood, you could take the number of people receiving Medi-Cal —since Medi-Cal is limited to low-income persons— as an indicator or proxy of the poverty level of people in the neighborhood. Note that this would be an undercount since not all low-income people are enrolled in Medi-Cal. This data does not give you a precise number or rate of your problem, but it provides useful comparisons between communities; for example, “The rate of poverty in our neighborhood may be much higher than the city average, as shown by our higher rate of people receiving Medi-Cal.”

A major advantage of this approach is its low cost. The data can be relatively easy and inexpensive to collect. However, there are some concerns with bias. Your estimates may be biased because they are not able to capture actual rates or precise numbers.

B. Make Estimates Using Existing Data

Extrapolating involves taking a national, state, or county pattern of a problem and applying that pattern to your local area. Diabetes, for example, is a condition that needs on-going medical care. We know that there are large differences by race and age in the rates of diabetes. To estimate the number of persons with diabetes in your community based on national trends (or state or county data if you have access to it), you can take the following steps:

1. Identify the diabetes rate (proportion of people with diabetes) using the national data source. Obtain the rate for subgroups where there is variation (e.g. race, sex, age, or

income). For example, the diabetes rate for Latinos nationally is .02 for ages 18-44, .143 for ages 45-64, and .203 for ages 65 and over.

[Source: National Health Interview Survey, Table 8, available at: http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/pdf/sr10_209.pdf]

2. Identify the number in the population for the same subgroups locally. For example, say your community has the following:
 - a. 30,000 Latinos ages 18-44
 - b. 11,000 Latinos ages 45-64
 - c. 2,000 Latinos ages 65 and over
3. Multiply the national rates by the local numbers and add them up.

Number of Latinos with diabetes in your community:

	RATE	x	POPULATION in your community	
Ages 18-44	.02	x	30,000 people	= 600
Ages 45-65	.143	x	11,000 people	= 1,573
Ages 65 and over	.203	x	2,000 people	= 406

Next add up the various populations with diabetes:

$$600 + 1,573 + 406 = 2,579$$

There are an estimated 2,600 Latinos with diabetes in your community

Remember that this method does not provide precise data on your topic, but it offers a way to generate estimates that can be useful in your program planning and policy advocacy work.

C. Paint a Picture

If you are unable to find the exact numbers you need to describe the impact of a health issue in your community, you can paint a picture with the information you do have. With this approach, you piece together data from several sources to illustrate your argument.

First, think about whether other communities or other issues are similar to your community and your health issue. If the available data does not apply to your intended population, health issue, or region, perhaps you could show that other communities or issues are similar. Data from other communities and issues can help you describe the demographics and issues in your community.

Next, try rethinking your search for data. How else can you approach the problem or issue you want to address? What can you do to support your argument with the data you do have?

Finally, choose a few pieces of data that are most relevant, and organize the data you have to make a convincing argument.

D. Ask a Researcher

If you find a particularly helpful study, it might be possible to contact the researcher to find out more. Expect that it will take time to get a response, since many researchers have moved on to a new project by the time results from a particular study become available to the public. When you do get data this way, pay attention to any limitations the researcher mentions about the data. These limitations may be the reason the researcher did not publish that information, even if he or she found it interesting. Seek out those sources of information that provide ongoing support or technical assistance.