

What to Do When the Data You Need Are Not Available

What Can You Do If the Data You Need Are 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 can substitute for the information you need because the measures relate closely to your issue. If you need up-to-date poverty data for people in your neighborhood, for example, 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 information 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. There are some concerns with bias, however. 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 requires on-going medical care. We also know there are large differences in the rates of diabetes by race and age. To estimate the number of persons with diabetes in your community based on national trends—or state or county data if you have access— take the following steps:

1. Identify the diabetes rate (proportion of people with diabetes) using the national data source.
2. 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 0.02 percent for ages 18–44, 0.143 percent for ages 45–64 and 0.203 percent for ages 65 and over.

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

3. 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 sum them.

Number of Latinos with diabetes in your community:

	RATE	x	POPULATION in your community
Ages 18-44	0.020	x	30,000 people = 600
Ages 45-65	0.143	x	11,000 people = 1,573
Ages 65 and over	0.203	x	2,000 people = 406

Next sum the various populations with diabetes:

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

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

Note: *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 know. With this approach, you piece together data from several sources to illustrate your argument.

First, consider whether other communities or 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 data search. 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, select data that are most relevant and organize the data 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.