

Using Data To Inform Action

Once you have collected data – from government sources and your own surveys, focus groups, key informant interviews and informal discussions – you need to organize the information so that you can make meaning from it to inform your actions. Preparing your data for interpretation is not a technical task – mostly, it just means summarizing your findings succinctly and presenting them clearly.

Presenting your Data

Findings from Surveys

Once you have conducted a survey, create a simple table listing the questions in the left-hand column and the number or percentage of responses in the right-hand column:

Survey of Residents 60+

Questions:	Frequencies (150 responses)
1. How long have you lived in this community?	
• Less than 10 years	15 (10%)
• Between 10-20 years	60 (40%)
• More than 20 years	72 (48%)
• Don't know	3 (2%)
2. How satisfied are you with this community as a place to live?	
• Very satisfied	23 (15.3%)
• Somewhat satisfied	45 (30%)
• Somewhat dissatisfied	67 (44.7%)
• Very dissatisfied	15 (10%)

It is very easy to create graphs from these data as well. You can also “cross-tabulate” data to extract more information from it (cross-tabulation can tell you, for example, how many seniors who have lived in the community more than 20 years are very satisfied with it). A university partner or the research department of a health partner may be able to help you with the more sophisticated statistical techniques that are involved.

Findings from Focus Groups and Other Discussions

Review your notes or transcripts from focus groups, key informant interviews, and informal discussions to identify cross-cutting themes. And don't forget to highlight any idiosyncratic insights that may have come up as well.

Using bullets is an easy way to present information. For example, you can summarize your findings like this:

Housing

- Not enough options in this neighborhood for seniors who want to downsize.
- Property taxes too high for people on fixed incomes.
- Upkeep, such as shoveling snow, is too hard and too expensive.

Making Meaning of Your Data

Simply reviewing “frequencies,” or the number of responses in each category, can stimulate productive discussions.

For example, people who have lived in the community for less than 10 years are likely to have very different perspectives about it than those who have been there much longer.

The survey data in the example above showed that a majority of people were either somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied, with the community as a place to live. It might be interesting to find out whether those who were dissatisfied had lived there for longer or shorter periods of time.

Survey information may also suggest follow-up questions for a focus group or some other setting for discussion. The focus group leader might ask, “What do you think accounts for this undercurrent of dissatisfaction?” If findings from an earlier survey suggest that satisfaction levels have changed, the leader might ask questions to find out why.

In a focus group, a provider might say, “My clients tell me that they are unhappy with the new people moving in because they don’t seem to want to get as involved in the community as the old-timers.”

Someone else might say, “Property taxes have gone up so much in the last few years that older people can’t afford to pay them any more. There was an article in the paper about this last week. No wonder everyone’s unhappy.”

These are not definitive explanations, but they offer a lot of food for thought. Typically, a focus group generates a lot of ideas that you’ll want to discuss further with your advisors and partners.