
WHAT ARE SOME NON-STATISTICAL METHODS FOR INDICATING WHETHER AN ACTIVITY MADE AN IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTION TO CHANGE?

While it is clear that long-term, large-scale change in racial disparities and injustice will happen only as a result of sustained efforts on many fronts, a community group working these issues and its supporters will want to know whether what it is doing is making a contribution toward change.

There are three questions that need to be considered when assessing an activity's contribution toward change:

- Did a change occur? Is the observed change large enough, broadly spread enough and long-lasting enough to be important?
- Is the pattern of change associated with the activities? Are they associated in time, in direction and in magnitude?
- Can the contribution of other factors that might affect the observed change be separated from the contribution of the activity?

There are both statistical and non-statistical ways to look for answer these questions. This tip sheet focuses on non-statistical approaches.

The importance of an observed change depends on how meaningful it is. Tests of statistical significance can be performed with quantitative data that give a certain level of confidence in whether an observed change is likely to have occurred by chance (to be statistically no different from zero or no change). However, even when such tests are possible it is necessary to consider the meaningfulness of the change.

Here are some questions to ask about meaningfulness:

- Is the size of the change likely to make any difference in the well-being or experiences of the people involved? For example, a 5 percentage point increase in school attendance means that students on average would attend about 9 more days of school. Is this likely to make a difference in student learning and performance?
- Did the target group as a whole experience change, or was change confined to only a few? Is that enough to make a difference for the community?
- Was the change able to be sustained over time, or did things revert to the status quo after the activity was over or soon thereafter?

How the activity is associated with the observed change should not only meet tests of statistical significance, it should also line up with what you expected.

- If you are using a theory of change approach – what is expected is what you laid out in your theory of change picture.
- If the change lines up in the way you predicted in advance, that can help you feel more confident that there is some relationship between what you did and the change you observed – that your strategies helped cause the change.

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In addition, whether statistical tests are conducted or not, the changes you observe (here, observe means that you measured through evaluation) need to be understood within the context of other things that could also affect the results of your work or create the change you have observed. Ask yourself:

- What else was going on that might have affected the observed change, and
- Did you implement your work at high enough quality that it could have contributed to the changes you see?

People often use stories or case studies to describe what they see as the way their strategies contributed to change, as a way of deepening or substituting for statistical analysis. Some groups have created very formal processes for doing this. In general, you develop stories or case studies that lay out in detail, step by step, the chain of influence that goes from the activities you implemented to the change you observed. For example, you might lay out how your group organized with others to create anti-predatory lending legislation, and then track who was contacted, what messages were sent, how those messages reached people, at what meetings negotiations and next steps took place, who participated in them, which groups that were part of your collaborative effort mobilized and how they applied pressure and shared information that influenced legislators and their staff, and so on through to the introduction of legislation and the passage of the legislation.

You can then review these case or story details to see the extent of movement toward the desired outcome and the degree to which the activity or program appeared to be a major cause of this movement.