
WHAT ARE POSSIBLE CONCERNS ABOUT USING AVAILABLE INFORMATION?

Making use of available information – information already being collected and/or maintained by another group or organization – can be an efficient resource for evaluation. However, several issues should be reviewed in deciding whether and how to use available data.

- Coverage – how much of the target group is included in the available data
 - Sometimes available information does not include all of the group that is the target of the strategies being evaluated or includes some parts of groups that are not targeted.
 - For example, zip code and census tract boundaries are often used to define reporting groups, but actual neighborhoods may not exactly correspond with these boundaries.
 - Or, only people who participate in a particular program (such as Head Start) may be included in a data set, rather than all the children who are eligible for that program or all the children receiving a comparable support (all children in publicly funded early education and care, for example).
- Currency or timeliness – how recently the data were collected
 - Some data are available almost immediately after they are collected (how people voted in an election, for example), while other data do not become available for several years after they are collected (for example, much of the Census information).
 - It is important to know how current the data are that you are using for two reasons:
 - If you want to use those data to identify key issues and concerns, you will want to put the data in the right time context – what was happening in the community or around your issue for the time period the data are talking about, and
 - If you want to see if you are making a change as a result of the work you are doing, you will have to do the work, let it have its impact, and then wait for the data that cover the time period when you might have had an impact to become available.
- Disaggregation – for what subgroups the data can be presented
 - Often data that are available will be broken into groupings for you. Sometimes you can rearrange these data into other groupings, but often you cannot. These groupings may or may not match the ones that matter to you. For example, published Census reports will provide information broken down by different age categories but these may not be the exact age categories that are important to your work. Someone who knows how to work with Census data, and has access to Census data files, can produce different age groupings for you, but otherwise you are dependent on the groupings that are in the published reports.
 - In addition, people have made decisions about how to define various racial/ethnic groups by the way in which they ask the questions about that issue, in how they collect and analyze the data

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and in the way it is grouped in public reports. It is important to understand what these definitions and decisions were for any data that you use so that you can look at your results in light of them.

- Detail – how specific the information is in the areas of interest
 - Available data may contain a great deal of or very little detail on things of interest to the evaluation. For example, student records in elementary school may include the marks received in each subject area, but not include a summary measure like GPA, which is generally computed only at the upper grades.
- Bias – what factors might potentially lead to misleading or inaccurate information
 - Many sources of available data are from the administrative records of public programs. Maintaining eligibility for these programs may depend on meeting specific conditions, creating an incentive toward over-reporting or under-reporting of certain information. For example, informal or irregular income may not be reported by applicants for programs based on income eligibility. Fear of negative repercussion may also lead to reporting bias. For example, it is estimated that as few as 8% of all women who are victims of domestic violence report that fact even to their doctors when they are asked.