Community Research Institute

Empowering communities with quality research and data

Nonprofits and Data: A How-To Series

2 Monitoring Trends and Identifying Emerging Problems

Johnson Center
at Grand Valley State University

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

The Community Research Institute (CRI) at Grand Valley State University is a partnership between the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership and the Grand Rapids Community Foundation.

CRI provides innovative applied research to West Michigan communities. It empowers communities with quality research and data, generates information that will improve their decision-making process, forecasts trends for effective problem solving, and measures results and reports outcomes of investments in community change.

CRI gathers, analyzes, interprets and shares national and local data through partnerships with nonprofit and neighborhood groups, and assists local and regional nonprofit leaders with decision making, grant writing, and program evaluation. This is research that makes a difference through a distinctly valuable blend of university rigor and community relevance.

For additional information visit our website at www.cridata.org or contact us directly by calling (616) 331-7585.

Nonprofits and Data: A How-To Series is available to download at no cost at www.cridata.org/publications.

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2 Using data to monitor trends and identify emerging problems

INTRODUCTION

This How-To Series is designed to demonstrate six ways in which data can be used to enhance the work of nonprofit organizations and community groups. These include using data to:

1. Support Grant Applications and Other Funding Opportunities
2. **Monitor Trends & Identify Emerging Problems**
3. Disseminate Information to Engage Community and Policymakers
4. Evaluate Progress in Meeting Goals
5. Establish Priorities and Plan Programs
6. Characterize Disparities Across Sub Populations/Communities

The information contained within each guide has been developed by combining our community knowledge with that of a variety of data experts. More specifically, within each series installment, you will find an introduction to the topic, guidelines for using data to achieve the specified outcome, good practices and pitfalls with corresponding examples, and resources to find data.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO MONITOR TRENDS AND IDENTIFY EMERGING PROBLEMS?

Monitoring trend data is one of the most important things a nonprofit can do when implementing programs and developing service delivery strategies. Keeping on top of trends and data within a community can provide early warnings of new problems or present new opportunities and increase a community's ability to respond to both.[2]

"Data goes beyond numbers, averages and percentages. Data sets are the raw materials for effective decision making." Data can provide quantifiable proof that has the potential to help take the emotion and subjectivity out of a tough decision for a community leader. It can help to determine whether perceptions match the reality in a community, and it can also provide the substance for meaningful, ongoing dialogue among stakeholders. Armed with the right data and a full understanding of what it is telling you, communities can identify problem areas or community assets, promote change, and measure progress.[1]

Monitoring trends does more than assist organizations with the identification of problems. The process can also be valuable in promoting stability and preserving what is good about a community. Many times, indicator data is expressed negatively, only focusing on problems within a community. An example of this may be to look at poverty rates or the percentage of vacant buildings in a community. While identifying problems is important, indicators can also focus on the positive aspects of a community. Examples of indicators that illustrate community assets include the number of community-based organizations or the percentage of persons with a college education.[5]

Communities are dynamic. As a result their needs are continuously changing. Because we live in an era where nonprofits have limited staff and financial resources, nonprofit organizations must constantly make sure their resources and energies are being directed in the right way. To accomplish this objective, nonprofits must continually work to identify changing community needs and then take action to align their programs and improve quality of life for citizens. Using data to monitor trends is instrumental in this process.

GUIDELINES FOR USING DATA TO SUPPORT GRANT APPLICATIONS

Part 1 - Gathering Trend Data

Whether you create trend data yourself or collect it from existing sources, ask yourself several questions. These questions might include: How does our community define success? What elements are important to that success? What would we need to see that would indicate improvement?

Once you have answered these questions, you will be better positioned to determine what trends to monitor. Trend data can be broken down into several broad categories, such as:

- *Demographic data*: As members of the community change, their needs change as well.
- *The economy*: As the economy strengthens or weakens, community needs often follow.
- *Major environmental changes*: As community assets change, needs change.

Here are a few guidelines to think about when beginning to gather or examine trend data:

Look for community indicators to help gain perspective. To accomplish the goal of monitoring trends, many communities have created systems of key indicators that are updated periodically. An indicator is a number intended to measure some social, health, economic, or other characteristic of people, organizations, or communities.[5] This type of data can help you understand where you are, which way you are going, and how far you are from your goal. Indicators can alert community leaders to a problem so that they can take action before the problem gets too bad. In addition, indicators are useful for generating discussion among people with different backgrounds and perspectives and helping to put these people on a path towards a shared vision of what they would like their community to be.[3]

Use benchmarks to gain perspective on indicators. A benchmark is a specific value that you have selected as a reference point.[4] Establishing benchmarks for indicators can help a community to interpret their meaning. For example, if the crime rate in a particular neighborhood in 2002 was 5.6 crimes per 1,000 people, you could compare that to the citywide crime rate of 8.8 crimes per 1,000 people in 2002.

Consider focused acts of monitoring and improvement. If there is no target or goal in mind, decisions can be made that lead to "random acts of improvement." It is better to begin with core issues and move on from there as things progress. Monitoring trend data can start with a broad question like, "What is it that we want to learn about our community?" Then it should be narrowed down to a more specific area of focus. It is also important not to overwhelm the group or audience with too much data. At first, try to work with the data available in your community that is most closely related to your topic. If you find you do not have enough data, you can broaden your scope later. [1]

Part 2 – Incorporating Trend Data into Your Work

Gathering information is just the first step. You must also carefully interpret the data AND use it to plan your strategies. Discuss your conclusions with others. It is unlikely that everyone will believe the same thing, but seeing their perspective will help you to think about your own findings more objectively.

When analyzing data:

- Use data from the same sources from year to year whenever possible. It is common for different sources to use different data management procedures. This creates comparability problems.
- Always take the time to fully understand what is being measured. For example, are high school retention rates the same as graduation rates? Is home ownership the same as housing tenure?
- Compare performance from different groups of people and different geographies.
- Consider the timeliness and frequency of the data. Are you looking at current information?

In addition, here are a few general guidelines to use when beginning to interpret trend data.

Work as a team to monitor trends. Because implementing strategies for change in communities is central to the work of many organizations, there is an increasing recognition that people must work collaboratively. Information can be used to build bridges between different organizations and to unite them for action on a common set of goals. These might be groups working on the same issues in different parts of the community or on complementary activities in the same service area. Oftentimes, these different groups may not be aware of other activities that are going on in their community or how their clients may overlap with other service providers.[2] We suggest you take the time to find out what data different stakeholders care about most.[1]

Just having good data is not enough. The use of data is not an end in itself. Data is most valuable, when it is helping people and community groups to better accomplish the goals they have set for themselves. "If an organization collects a lot of information on a community, but cannot use it in an effective way to bring about desirable change, then the data serve no useful purpose."[5] When you are presenting data to an audience, it helps to think about what story you can tell from the information you will be presenting. In order to make the greatest impact, your message must get straight to the point and be easy to understand. It helps to consider how familiar your audience is with looking at and understanding data. If you can tell an audience something interesting that they did not know before, this will do a lot to jumpstart their interest in what you have to say.

Break it down for best results. Data can be measured on many different levels. Breaking down, or disaggregating data, provides a more complete view. It goes beyond the what and tries to discover the why and how. This can be done by asking a few specific and thoughtful questions in order to gather more precise data. With regard to indicators, this can be done by organizing indicators into several groupings. These groupings might all relate to the same topic. For example, you might categorize workforce data, unemployment rates, and job creation numbers into an economic development grouping in order to create a more precise picture of that topic.

PITFALLS AND GOOD PRACTICES

Using data accurately to monitor trends in a community can present several challenges. Included below are several pitfalls to avoid, as well as related good practices to keep in mind when using data. After each set of pitfalls and practices, an example is provided to illustrate a potential use.

CAREFUL NOT TO ASSUME

Possible Pitfall	Good Practice
Assuming everyone views the data from the same perspective	Using the data as a starting point for discussion and dialogue

Putting it to use...

It is important to remember that not everyone sees data the same way. For example, data might not resonate well with specific people if it is inconsistent with their experiences or knowledge base. Because of this, it is wise to acknowledge any limitations the data might have and to present data as a starting point for conversation, not a conclusion. [2]

To get conversation started, you might ask residents, stakeholders, or community leaders the following questions:

- Does this data support or contradict your experiences as a service provider? Can you tell a story that backs up this data? If not, how has your experience been different?
- What stands out to you about this data?
- This is what I think the data means. How do you interpret it?
- What might be influencing this data? Are there factors that cause to numbers to go higher or to drop?
- Who else needs to see this data? [2]

GET REGULAR CHECKUPS

Possible Pitfall	Good Practice
Only reviewing trend data when you need to	Examining the data every year or two to keep a consistent watch on things

Putting it to use...

Instead of looking up a few statistics when you write a grant or revise your strategic plan every five years, it is important to keep your eye on the data available in your community. That way, your organization can remain familiar with the data sources available, as well as any updates to existing data that might apply to your client base or service area.[4]

It is important to remember that year to year changes in many indicators can be erratic and not indicative of real trends. For example, ridership numbers for the public transportation system in Grand Rapids recently jumped over 20%. At first, you might conclude that the general population must be taking the bus more due to rising gas prices. After examining the data further, you would probably conclude that rising gas prices played a small role in the increase and that the real cause of the increase was the fact that a local university recently contracted with the public transportation system for the transportation needs of its student body.

While it is important to collect the data consistently, it may be better to wait for at least two or three more years of data before drawing interpretations.[4]

PAY ATTENTION TO THE DETAILS

Possible Pitfall	Good Practice
Overlooking what community trend data may be telling you	Using trend data to inform staff of the environment the organization currently exists in, plan programs, acquire funding, etc

For example...

A series of interesting cases have been pointed out by the Making Connections initiative at the Annie E. Casey Foundation. According to the initiative, you might want to step back and rethink existing strategies and approaches if:

- "Your site has emphasized employment and getting a job…but survey results show a majority of neighborhood residents are employed but lack benefits or opportunities for wage and job advancement."
- "Your site's strategic plan calls for training and supporting residents as community leaders to move a particular program forward…but you learn the neighborhood already has many identified leaders and natural helpers."
- "Your strategic plan puts a priority on increasing safety in the community…but the survey shows residents are most concerned with whether their children are healthy and prepared to enter school."
- "You expect to tap into established informal support networks to increase interest in community transformation…but you learn that few social support networks currently exist."
- "One of your strategies focuses on increasing the number of children in the neighborhood who have health insurance… but the survey indicates most children are already insured through a state program."

Possible Pitfall	Good Practice
Creating community indicators that will not help you in the future	Creating indicators that can be compared consistently over time

Putting it to use...

In order for community indicators to be used to monitor trends and identify emerging problems, they must be created in a consistent form that allows them to be compared over time and between places.

For example…

If you have data indicating that $800,000 was invested in housing renovation in one neighborhood over the past year, and $2.6 million was invested in commercial investment in another neighborhood, you cannot tell which neighborhood had the best renovation record because the investments were different and the numbers cannot be compared directly.

WHERE TO BEGIN FINDING DATA

The Community Research Institute (CRI) has a number of community indicator projects underway. These projects have numerous corresponding publications available for download.

Visit our website at www.cridata.org to begin exploring community trend data. There you will find community trend data on local, county and regional levels. Examples include:

- Data on regional trends including topics such as: Healthy Youth, Healthy Seniors, Education, Civic Engagement, and Community and Economic Development, Arts and Culture, Poverty, and Philanthropy.

- Neighborhood level data that includes housing, health, labor, safety, assets, etc.

- Regional data on the following topics: Child Welfare, Civic Engagement, Demographics, Economic Development, Education, Health, Poverty, and Safety

For more information on monitoring trends and identifying emerging problems please contact Korrie Ottenwess, Research Manager, or Gustavo Rotondaro, Associate Director for the Community Research Institute at:

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