Accountability Basics Guide – Working with Data

You are familiar with using a variety of methods to understand the forces driving legislation, what specific changes might make a difference, and what you might reasonably expect for results.

You read research and articles, you listen to stories and accounts of particular events, you receive high-level overviews of organizational performance, you wade into the details of promising practice, and you make sense of graphs and charts and infographics.

While all of this contributes to building effective policy, it is important to identify reliable and consistent methods for assessing past and current conditions from which we can gauge future change over time.

This Guide is meant to help you distinguish between the different types of data you may be seeking or shown while developing and considering legislation, and identify what matters most.

Types of Data

Population Data/Indicators

Population data/indicators help us understand how whole communities of people are doing relative to changing circumstances or conditions in a geographic area, or how a whole geographic area is changing, due to circumstances beyond the control of any one organization or initiative.

Examples include: national, state, and community level data that is focused on health, social, economic, and demographic trends, climate patterns, natural events and impacts, wildlife population changes, etc.

Often, sources of population data/indicators include surveys (such as the census), and polls.

When to use Population Data	
When you want to understand context and the bigger picture	• Understand population data/indicator trends related to the issue you seek to address through a specific bill. • Understand what root causes and forces at work have been established • Assess myths/assumptions/opinions vs. facts
When you want policy to have a broad and reaching impact	• Ask questions about which population data/indicator trends illustrate something centrally important to your legislative intent • Ask questions about what trends might also shift in relation to your specific legislation so you can understand wider impacts • Become clear about when you might begin to see changes in specific trends - it will probably not be immediate! - and understand progress • Consider the relative contribution of your legislation against other forces at work (understand it in the context of other active strategies)

Importantly, policy changes take time to implement, and population data/indicators often "lag" - meaning that you may not be able to see the impacts of particular legislation in the subsequent legislative session.

Performance Data

Performance data helps us understand the scope, quality, and impact of the particular strategies that we implement to try and make a difference. Unlike population data which measures conditions and circumstances, performance data typically measures investments and strategies.

Performance data is used to understand the impacts that specific strategies, programs, organizations, and systems are making for the people or areas of jurisdiction that they exist to benefit.

Most often, sources of performance data include program evaluations, client and staff surveys, as well as performance reporting and financial accounting.

Data about the performance typically falls into the following categories:

Quantity	Generally used to understand the scope of work being done
Quality	Generally used to understand to what extent activities are meeting standards of quality and experience
Impact	Generally used to assess the extent to which progress toward intended outcomes is being made

Performance data about impact is not always as easy to collect as you might think. Often, the impact of particular strategies, programs, or investments is demonstrated over the long-term and would be best measured beyond the boundaries of program jurisdiction and funding for data collection.

When to use Performance Data	
When you want to understand more about strategies & investments	• Understand the scope of what particular strategies, programs, organizations, and systems are doing (funding, activities, clients, scale) • Better understand the quality and experience of particular strategies, programs, organizations, and systems • Get a sense for the results/outcomes of a particular strategy, program, organization, or system within their sphere of influence
When you want policy to have an impact on a specific client population or area of service	• Identifying the appropriate measures to gauge how a policy change will facilitate greater or different results for a particular strategy, program, organization, or system

How Data is Presented

Baselines & Forecasts

A baseline is a data trend that shows current data in the context of previous years. It allows you to track what was happening in the past to understand if we are doing better, worse, or the same as we were before.

When to use Baselines	
When you want to understand how things are going, in context	• Better understand the extent to which a condition or circumstance has been steady or fluctuating over time, to what extent, and why • If a positive increase or decrease in a measure is being reported, ask to see a baseline so that you can put it in historical context and understand relative significance

A forecast is a data trend that predicts the future by analyzing past and present data.

When to use Forecasts	
When you want to understand where things may be headed	• Better understand what we have reason to believe will happen in the future in order to be proactive