

AMPLIFY YOUR STORY: Using Public Data for Context + Comparison

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Purpose: Your stories—the impacts you are making, and the ways you are supporting your communities—have even more power when they are given *context*. You have a great breastfeeding rate—but how do you *demonstrate* how great it is to the community, or to funders? Use public data to compare your outcomes to state or national averages. You hear from clients they can no longer afford to live in their neighborhoods, and you need to expand your service area. How can you *demonstrate* this need to funders? Look to public data for patterns of gentrification in the neighborhoods you serve. In this emPower Tool, we discuss using Public Data to a) give context to your stories, and b) keep your org informed of trends impacting your communities, locally and beyond. **A special thank you to Dr. Joice Chang who contributed the content for this emPower Tool!**

What Are Public Data?

These are data that are freely available (but not always cost-free) to the public.

OPEN data are structured, open-licensed, and standardized, whereas PUBLIC data exist everywhere else and are often unstructured.

In this emPower Tool, we use “public data” to cover both types.

What about Big Data?

Big Data are very large volumes of information, usually unstructured, that are difficult or impossible to process with traditional data management tools (like Excel). An example is data from Google, Twitter or Facebook usage.

Researchers use “queries” and programming to pull out relevant pieces of the data to answer specific questions.

Because of their amount and variety, big data can be useful in addressing issues you might not have been able to tackle before. For example, with huge amounts data you can make predictions for the future based on past trends.

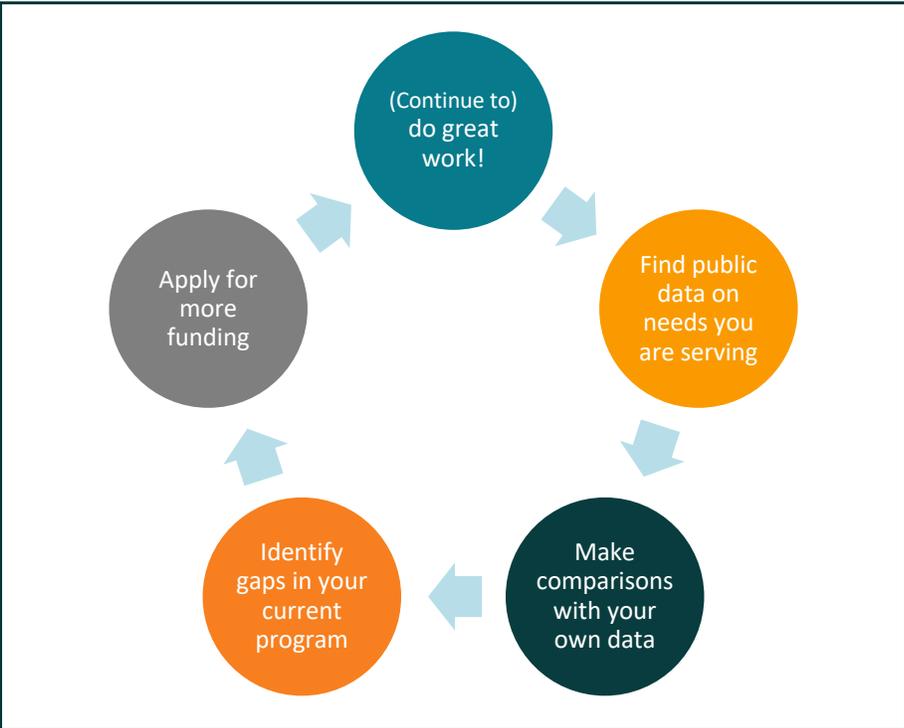
Learn more about using Big Data for Nonprofits with articles like “5 Ways Nonprofits Are Getting Access to Big Data” on the Smart Data Collective web site.

Should We Be Using Public Data?

In your work, you end up collecting a wide range of data about your clients and the communities you serve. These data are invaluable for being responsive to your communities and understanding your impacts.

You can leverage these data even more when you analyze them in comparison with public data. By comparing “your” data with relevant data at the county, state, and/or national levels, you can better:

- ✓ Make evidence-based/evidence-informed decisions for your program and organization
- ✓ Uncover new and emerging needs in the communities you serve
- ✓ Make meaningful comparisons to understand your organization’s impacts in comparison to bigger pictures
- ✓ Apply for more funding, demonstrating gaps around which you can develop and implement programming



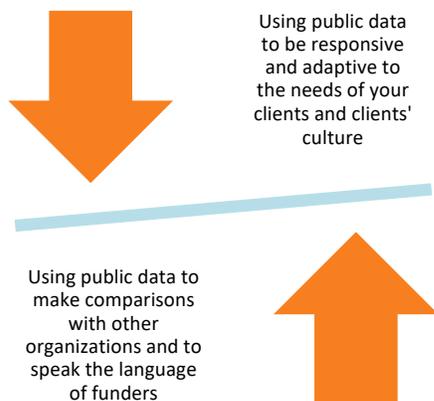
Connecting with Academic Research: What Are the Scholars Saying About Our Work?

Google Scholar (www.scholar.google.com) is a FREE resource for finding scholarly literature on topics relevant to you and your clients. It can guide you to articles and resources that don’t require payment to use. You can check in on the research periodically, or consider setting up a Google Alert when new info is posted (see page 2: *How Do We Stay Up to Date?*).

Using Public Data is a Balancing Act

To be responsive to the communities you serve, use language and data tools that are accessible and meaningful to those communities (see the [Collect Meaningful Data: Be Responsive to Community emPower Tool](#)).

Here is the balance: you may also need to use the language of government or funders to be able to compare what you are finding to the bigger picture.



Keep this in mind and adapt the data you collect as needed. For example, some organizations collect two measures of race: 1) measures that match the **US Census categories** in order to speak to legislators and funders, and 2) a **self-defined measure** of race to capture the real-life nuances and lived experiences of communities they serve.

Where Can We Find Public Data?

- 1 **Our Web Site.** Links to dozens of public data sources for a variety of topics, including education, health, crime, economics and labor, and more. *We link to each data source listed below.* thecapacitycollective.org/resources/public-data-sources/
- 2 **King County BSK Initiative.** Dashboard with a variety of social, health, and education data collected from BSK programs.
- 3 **Data.gov.** A search engine for accessing U.S. open source data on a wide variety of topics, including agriculture, climate, consumers, education, public safety, etc.
- 4 **Kids Count Data Center.** A project of the Annie E Casey Foundation, this site provides easy access to a variety of national and state-level data.
- 5 **U.S. Department of Education.** Access to a variety of national and state-level early learning and K-12 data collected by the federal government.
- 6 **WA State Dept of Health Center for Health Statistics.** Access to current health data that covers deaths, births, pregnancies, abortions, behavioral risk factors and hospitalizations.
- 7 **King County & Seattle Public Health.** Provides regularly updated data on the Health of King County's population.
- 8 **US Census Data.** The US Census Bureau shares data in many formats, including interactive web applications and data visualizations to be able to find and analyze data within the site.
- 9 **American Community Survey.** Detailed population and housing data (including education, job and veteran data) at the local level so you can see issues impacting the communities you serve. Data used to allocate federal and state funds each year.

How Do We Stay Up to Date?

Google Alerts are a good way to keep track of changes on topics relevant to you and your clients. Customize alerts to be sent to your email inbox when new results that match your search terms are detected (separate emails or digest).

1. Go to www.google.com/alerts
2. Enter search terms of interest to you
3. Click on "Show Options" to customize
4. Click on "Create Alert"

Tips for a meaningful search:

- Put a search term in quotation marks (" ") to return only articles that contain that exact term.
- Search terms can be general ("early learning") or specific ("infant mental health").
- Use Boolean Operators (AND, OR, NOT): "Early Learning" AND "Somali" will only return articles that include *both* terms so you can get specific.
- Try different terms and combinations of terms until you find the results that are right for your needs.
- Set up multiple alerts, if needed, to maximize the information you receive.

How Do We Analyze Public Data?

1. Analyze on the site

- Some websites allow you to conduct basic analyses of the data, such as generating **crosstabs** (combining two or more variables to see what the relationships are, if any).
- **Example:** Data from the Current Populations Survey (CPS) (Census.gov > Surveys/Programs > CPS > CPS Data Web Tools)
 - Example: Comparing Health Insurance Coverage (HIC) between foreign-born & native-born persons ("Nativity").
 - CPS Data Tools > CPS Table Creator > Define Your Table.
 - Select "HIC" as ROWS and "Nativity" as COLUMNS.
 - Click on Statistics > Percentages By > Health Ins Coverage.
 - Click on Get Table to view the crosstab with percentages.

2. Download and Analyze in Excel

- Download data as a **.xls, .xlsx or .csv** file and open it in Excel
- **Best practice:** Make a new copy to keep the original intact
- "Clean up" data: delete columns that aren't relevant to your current project (don't worry—they are still in the original file!)
- Use **basic functions** (=sum, =ave) for basic statistics, and consider using **Pivot Tables** to make quick crosstabs (see our [Excel Training Guide](#) for more info on data analysis in Excel!)

We encourage you to share these resources with your organization, and other local social service organization. PLEASE NOTE: this handout is the intellectual property of The Capacity Collective. Please do not duplicate parts, or adapt, without the express permission of The Capacity Collective.

Thank you for supporting our work!