

A Best Practices Approach to Data Gathering for Public Policy Decisions

Gathering data for public policy decisions requires a step-wise approach, with patience counseled at all times. Hasty and expedient data gathering for social policy decisions often undermines the original good intentions of the policy body. On the other hand, careful collaborative data definition and collection can be an excellent opportunity to obtain buy in from all interested and concerned parties.

- First, the policy body needs to decide whether the data will be used for monitoring or is intervention anticipated? Single point data can be misleading at best, both approaches require trend data. The final format and presentation of data, as well as the depth of analyses, will vary based on monitoring versus intervention.
- Second, the data keepers and analysts need to be identified. What is currently gathered and at what geographic level? Who is charged with it? Is this legally mandated data or gathered for in-house purposes? Identifying the data sources on a local level is often a difficult step for communities unused to sharing information. The type of data needs to be mirrored at every geographic level for which information is gathered. Not apples and oranges, in other words. Agencies that primarily gather and provide raw data with little analysis may not be aware of exactly what they “know.” This will further complicate the process.
- Third, the possible data universe must be examined in light of the original purpose. Do the data cover the required time period? Do the data cover the needed geographic area? Do the data include all demographic groups of interest to the policy makers? Notice that no decisions have been made yet regarding what questions to ask.
- Fourth, for each major category of data (for example economic, housing, health, crime and so forth) a realistic set of questions, keeping the ultimate policy purpose in mind, must be drawn up, calling upon the expertise of those most familiar with the subject. If the data are not sufficient for policy purposes, another track must be set up with experts determining what needs to be measured and how best to accomplish this in an economical, replicable, and reliable fashion.
- Fifth, for data that seem to meet the policy needs, the best format needs to be determined. This is not a simple matter. Often, good information is lost in poor presentation. Gathering numbers is not the same as gathering data. The implications of certain trends may be apparent only to experts. Most experts will prefer to gather, analyze, and, format their own data sources because commenting on data others have gathered and analyzed can lead to erroneous conclusions.