



TIP SHEET: COLLECTING DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Basic Principles and Considerations

WHY COLLECT DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Programs often collect demographic data because they are required to, but demographic data can also shed light on important issues. Sometimes overall averages can mask disparities that need to be addressed. Are certain groups in your program faring better than others? Are the young people who participate in your program representative of the broader community? Do all demographic groups feel a sense of belonging in your program?

HOW TO COLLECT DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Sometimes your approach to collecting demographic data will be dictated by the requirements of your funding. But like other data collection activities, it should also be guided by the questions you wish to answer. Also, keep in mind the following core principles related to demographic data collection:

- **Ensure that categories are inclusive:** When you are asking participants to self-identify demographically, it is important that they are able to see themselves in the options you provide. Race and ethnicity categories that are too broad, or binary gender categories, can alienate participants. Try to provide options that are reflective of the community you serve.
- **Include open-ended response options:** Whenever possible, allow respondents to describe themselves in their own words. If you need to report demographic information according to the seven race and ethnicity categories prescribed by the federal government, include a separate question that allows for more nuanced self-identification.
- **Pay attention to *when* you ask demographic questions:** Sometimes asking for demographic information can have unintended consequences; for instance, research has shown that asking for demographic information at the beginning of a test or performance task can negatively affect performance.¹
- **Tell participants *why* you are asking:** Demographic questions can seem intrusive or threatening in some contexts. Let people know why you are asking (e.g. “in order to make our program better for you and other young people”) to avoid misunderstandings.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

If you are looking at outcomes by demographic group, bear in mind that results for small groups (generally less than 10) should not be reported for privacy reasons. Also consider whether the way you are reporting results could serve to reinforce existing stereotypes. See [the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s report on reporting data using an equity lens](#).²

¹ Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 69(5), 797. DOI: 10.1037/0022-3514.69.5.797

² Annie E. Casey Foundation (2008). Advancing better outcomes for all children: Reporting data using an equity lens. *More Race Matter, Occasional Update #3*. Retrieved from <http://www.aecf.org/resources/more-race-matters-occasional-updates-3/>