

How to Be a Voice for Babies: Using Data to Advocate Effectively

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When we advocate for public policies that improve the lives of infants and toddlers, we bring lots of things to the table. We bring stories of our experiences with very young children, we bring examples from our programs, we bring research on child development, we bring visual depictions of babies and their families, and we bring data.

What is data? Webster's Dictionary defines it as "factual information (as measurements or statistics) used as a basis for reasoning, discussion, or calculation."¹ In our work with very young children, timely, accurate data can be one of our most important tools. Whether we are advocating on behalf of infants and toddlers, writing grants to support a program or developing a plan for providing services, data will make the case more persuasive.

For example, consider the two paragraphs below and see how adding data helps make your case more descriptive and persuasive:

Statement without data: In recent years, South Dakota has seen both a need and a demand for low-cost, high quality child care. South Dakota has a high number of females with children who are in the workforce. The need for child care touches the lives of every South Dakotan. The child care industry is an essential part of the state's economic development strategy.

Statement with data: Without child care, most South Dakota businesses would be hard-pressed to find enough employees. That's because in South Dakota 73 percent of children under age 6 have one or both parents who are in the workforce. South Dakota leads the nation in the percentage of women in the workforce who have children younger than 6. In our state, the percentage is 77.5%, compared to 63.5% for the United States as a whole. At 47 percent, South Dakota also leads the nation with the highest percentage of children under age 6 in paid child care. That's almost twice the national average of 26 percent.

Licensed or registered child care itself is a significant industry in South Dakota that:

- Generates \$100.6 million in gross annual receipts.
- Creates 4,410 jobs in South Dakota.
- Yields \$124.5 million in direct economic activity.²

As you can see, adding data makes your advocacy efforts compelling, relevant to current need and useful to policymakers.

¹ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. Retrieved January 13, 2006.

² Child Care Matters. The Economic Impact of the Child Care Industry in South Dakota. South Dakota Coalition for Children. November 2004.

While we know that data can support our advocacy, it is not always easy to understand how to find and use the data in the most effective way. To assist you in your endeavor to find and use the data you want or need, use the following three step process:

1. Define your purpose for the data

- a) Why do you need data? (purpose)
 1. To illustrate a need
 2. To reduce uncertainty
 3. To inform public opinion
 4. To substantiate for others what you already know in your day-to-day experiences

- b) Based on your purpose, what data do you need?
 - People data – age, race, gender
 - Events data – births, deaths
 - Things data – places, organizations

2. Where to find the data

Your search for data could begin at the Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov>, which is a source for social, demographic, and economic information. Most people know that Census data is used every ten years for apportionment of representatives among the states. But it is also used for many other policy purposes, including:

- to identify the distribution of over \$200 billion annually in federal, state, local and tribal funds
- to evaluate programs
- to identify populations in need of services

The American FactFinder (<http://factfinder.census.gov>) web site is an interactive online tool of the Census that allows individuals to obtain the following kinds of data:

- The Economic Census (to get key business statistics)
- The American Community Survey (to get demographic, economic, and housing profiles of America's communities every year)
- The 1990 Census, Census 2000
- The latest Population Estimates

Data from American FactFinder are available for a number of geographic levels, some of which are states, counties, tribal areas, cities, census tracts, block groups and blocks. The South Dakota KIDS COUNT website, <http://www.sdkidscount.org> (**How-To Guides**) has step-by-step instructions for how to extract data from American FactFinder and other data sources.

The Census Bureau website also includes links to a number of government agencies that provide statistics, such as the National Center for Education Statistics, Bureau of Economic Analysis and many others. **FedStats**, <http://www.fedstats.gov/>, is the gateway to statistics from over 100 federal agencies. It gives users the ability to find the information they need without having to

know in advance which agency produces that data. **FirstGov**, <http://www.firstgov.gov/>, another national data source, includes a link to *Data & Statistics* in their *Reference Center*. Data users can find information on a variety of topics, such as child & family statistics and health statistics.

Within your state, there are several sources for data. The Annie E. Casey Foundation produces a national data book on child well-being and funds a KIDS COUNT project in every state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. To locate the KIDS COUNT project in your state, visit <http://www.aecf.org/kidscount/>. In addition, each state has a State Data Center -- go to <http://www.census.gov/sdc/www/> to locate yours. Universities can also be an excellent source of data for you. Contact a nearby university and ask for their university research bureau. They may have difficult-to-find data to meet your needs.

Data specifically about infants and toddlers is often hard to come by, which means that public policies are being created without the knowledge of how many infants and toddlers are in a particular area or the specific needs of those very young children. You can make a significant impact by advocating for better data collection of the birth to 3 population in your state. One good national source of data for this age group is *America's Babies: The ZERO TO THREE Policy Center Data Book*. Although published in 2003, *America's Babies* is the most comprehensive publication providing data on children from birth to age 3 in the United States. For more information about this publication, visit <http://www.zerotothree.org/bookstore/index.cfm?pubID=2550>.

3. Explaining the data (Adding/subtracting, percents, rates, percent change)

To help people understand the data, you need to put it in a form that best presents your case. Remember, the visual is more powerful than the audio. As you calculate the figures, put them in charts or maps to show trends, progress, patterns or differences. When explaining your data, do the basics—you do not need to be a statistician. Remember, most people are not mathematically inclined, so putting the numbers in context can go a long way toward helping them understand the size and scope of the data. Some ways to calculate data include:

Percent

A 'percent' means one part in one hundred. To calculate a percent, divide the number in a sub-group (or smaller number) by the number in the total group and multiply by 100.

Rate

A rate is simply the number of things per some other number, usually 1,000, 10,000 or other multiples of 10. To calculate a rate you need three pieces of information- (1) the total group number, (2) The number in the sub group and (3) the 'per' number--per 1,000, 10,000, or 100,000. The "per" number is your multiplier. Rate: (# in sub-group / # in whole group) x multiplier.

Percent Change

Change from one time period to the next can be calculated. This is called the 'percent change'. The percent change is calculated in the following manner: (newer year number - older year number) / older year number x 100.

Explaining the Size & Scope of the Numbers

The FrameWorks Institute, a communications research organization, provides us with some useful tips for communicating numbers to advance infant/toddler policy issues.³

1. Connect the numbers to the story you are trying to tell.
2. Use numbers to explain solutions, not just the problem.
3. Use social math, a technique pioneered by The Advocacy Institute and The Berkeley Media Studies Group, to tie the numbers to values that people can understand. But pay careful attention to the values you are triggering to make sure it is effective for telling the story you want to tell. An example of social math is:

“Community residents near a gasoline refinery noted that the plant emits 6 tons of pollutants per day – or 25 balloons full of toxic pollution for each school child in the town.”⁴

Data can be a powerful tool in your efforts to improve policies for infants and toddlers. Take the time to explore the data sources available to you and practice using data to make your advocacy even more compelling.

KIDS COUNT is a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. It is a national and state-by-state effort whose goal is to improve the collection of national, state, and local data on the well-being of children in a way that increases awareness of their situation and provides the means to address their needs. South Dakota KIDS COUNT (www.sdkidscount.org) began in 1993.

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³ Bales, S.N. *The Storytelling Power of Numbers*. (2003) KIDS COUNT E-Zine, Issue 25. The FrameWorks Institute: Washington, D.C. Retrieved November 21, 2005. <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org>.

⁴ Wallack, L., Woodruff, K., Dorfman, L. and Diaz, I. (1999). *News for A Change: An Advocate's Guide to Working with the Media*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.