

Making a Data Request

There may be times when you need data from other agencies or organizations (e.g., juvenile justice or health department or local hospital) for purposes such as suicide prevention planning and quality improvement. Developing a clear request that includes the specifics you need can help you obtain the most useful data.

Before contacting an agency to make a data request, you will need to do some preparation.

Clarify Your Needs and Capacity

What do you want to understand about suicide? Make sure you are really clear about this since it will help inform the data you need.

Answer the following questions to clarify your basic data needs:

- What problem related to suicide are you trying to understand? (e.g., suicide deaths, attempts, ideation)
- What specific population(s) do you want to focus on? (e.g., specific age groups or races, males and/or females)
- What geographic area are you interested in? (e.g., state, county, legislative district)
- What time frame(s) would be useful to examine? (e.g., most recent year, 5 years, 10 years)

Once you are clear about the basics, answer the following questions:

- What are your preferred intervals for data aggregation? (e.g., 1-year, 5-year increments)
- By what categories do you want the data aggregated? (e.g., age, race, sex)
- Do you want rates and/or count data?
- Do you want the data formatted in graphs or tables, or do you just want the numbers? Using what software platform (e.g., Excel, SPSS, SAS)?

In addition to clarifying your data needs, also consider your own capacity to access, analyze, store, protect, and use data you might get. Determine any gaps you have, and how they might be filled. Be prepared to answer questions from potential agencies about your data capacity.

Assess the Relationship

Assess your existing relationship with the identified agency. Do they know and trust you? Do they know about your work? Even if you do have an established relationship, be prepared to explain the following:

Why you need their data

Many agencies don't routinely share their data with others and don't understand how it might be used. So be prepared to explain the purpose of your project and why their agency's data are valuable for it.

Why they should care

Sharing data takes effort. It also involves some degree of risk. So explain how your prevention efforts, and their support of your efforts, will benefit *their* work and the people they serve.

What data you would like them to share

Be specific, and be sure to ask for data that the agency actually collects. This will go a long way in establishing your credibility. If you don't know the precise name of the record or report you need, at least be able to describe the type of information you're looking for.

How you will use their data

Agencies want to be assured that their data won't be misinterpreted or misrepresented. And they don't want to be surprised! Be prepared to describe how you will (and won't) use the data, and be ready to adequately address their concerns. Keep in mind that some agencies may want to review any products you create with their data prior to release.

Other Considerations

Table shells for requesting data

One way to ensure you get the data you need is to create a table shell. It can help clarify the information you are requesting. Table shells are blank tables that contain titles, headings, and categories. Here is an example:

Rate (Per 100,000) of Youths Hospitalized for Intentional Self-Harm by Age and Race, Hospital Discharge Data, 2010

Age group	White (Non-Hispanic)	Black (Non-Hispanic)	Hispanic	Total
15–19				
20–24				
Total				

Data limitations

When asking for data, there are some limitations to consider, such as the consistency and time frame of the data that are available. To determine the limitations you may encounter, it can be helpful to ask the following questions:

- Are the data collected consistently across the system (e.g., between staff, across sites)? Are consistent definitions being used?
- How long has the agency been collecting these data? Have the data been collected consistently over time? If yes, for how long? How often are data missing?
- Are there enough data for your purposes? In populations or systems with very few suicide deaths or attempts, for example, it might not be possible to use the data to determine impact.