

University of Idaho

How to use data to tell your county's story

A number by itself cannot tell a complete story. It might grab your attention, but it is only one small piece of the larger picture. To tell a story, you need to add context. There are several ways to do this:

- Review the questions for each indicator in the "Indicator notes for talking about data" document to learn how each indicator can be used.
- Look at how the indicator has changed over time.
- Compare your county to the state, the nation, and/or neighboring counties.
- Look at several indicators at the same time.
- Look at how the indicators relate to changes you see within your community.

There will be times when the numbers you present don't fit with someone's idea of what is happening locally. This is when it will be important to know where the data come from and what they're really measuring. Data are rarely perfect. Pay close attention to the information in [General cautions about using data](#). All of this background information is meant to give you the knowledge you need so people in your community can trust what you are saying.

To see several indicators at the same time, start by looking at your county brochure. It provides a wealth of data about many indicators. Look at how difference indicators might fit together and write down some of the trends you see.

For example, you might see that population is growing rapidly, but the number of housing units is not growing as rapidly. What about housing prices? Try contacting your local board of realtors to see what is currently happening to housing values. Another indicator you might want to look at would be income. Are housing values increasing at a higher rate than household incomes? Is it getting harder for local residents to purchase a home? Keep asking questions.

Don't forget that county-level data do not always capture the diversity within your county. People in rural areas may look at the county-level data you are presenting and think or say, "but that doesn't apply to me." Consider gathering data about the individual cities and towns in your county to see what's happening on a local level.

Do not provide only those indicators that spin a positive light on your community. The indicators that show where work needs to be done can be powerful tools in motivating people to make changes.

If someone asks you a question you do not have the data for, do not be afraid to say, "Let me get back to you." There are many data sources outlined in this handbook and available online. If you do not have the data with you, you do have the right information to find that bit of data later and then report back.