# Requesting Suicide Data From a County Epidemiologist

As you begin to work on your county’s strategic plan for suicide prevention, you may need to request data from your county health department. Your county health department should direct you to the county epidemiologist to gather suicide death and attempt data. The following are some considerations and suggestions for drafting a communication requesting suicide data from the county epidemiologist or other staff at the county health department. It was adapted from the Suicide Prevention Resource Center’s “Making a Data Request” resource[[1]](#footnote-1).

## Preparation

The most challenging part of drafting the communication for the health department or the epidemiologist, if such a position exists in your county, is the preparation. The following six steps will equip you with the information you need to effectively communicate your data request.

1. **Before writing, make clear to yourself what you need and why.**

Make clear for yourself what you need and why before requesting data. Answering the following questions will help you draft a clear and concise email.

* What question(s) related to suicide are you trying to understand? (e.g., suicide deaths, attempts, ideation; trends, single point in time; disparities by different demographics or geographical regions)
* What specific population(s) do you want to focus on? (e.g., specific age groups or races, males and/or females) Are you looking to compare them to other groups for the same time period or see trends for this specific group over time?
* What geographic areas are you interested in? (e.g., state, county, legislative district)
* Is your variable of interest identifiable within the requested dataset?
* What time frame(s) would be useful to examine? (e.g., most recent year, 5 years, 10 years) It is especially important to understand how many years of data you will need to determine significant changes in rates, trends, etc.

1. **Consider the content you want to include in your request.**

Once you are clear about the basics, you need to think specifically about the data you want to access. The following questions will help clarify what you want from the health department.

* What time intervals for data aggregation do you need? (e.g., 1-year, 5-year increments)
* What demographic characteristics do you want the data disaggregated by? (e.g., age, race, sex)
* Do you want rates, percentages or counts of the data? We recommend asking for all three if possible.
* Do you want the data formatted in graphs or tables, or do you simply want the numbers?
* If you are requesting the numbers (raw data) do you have internal access to software, time and capacity to analyze the data?
* How do you want to “report out” the data you get? For example, ask yourself if you can create the graphs if the health department is unable to do so. If not, who else could help you? Would the data be better suited in narrative talking points or visual depictions such as graphs, tables and figures?
* What software can you use to analyze the data that is provided? (e.g., Excel, SPSS, SAS) If you are requesting raw data, what format will the epidemiologist be sending it to you in? Is it compatible with your software?

1. **Assess your capacity.**

In addition to clarifying your data needs, consider your own capacity to access, analyze, store, protect and use the data received. Analysis of data requires some quantitative skills and may require a small learning curve. Think about your strengths and areas of improvement, and brainstorm who else may be needed to support data analysis and database maintenance efforts. Determining any gaps you have, and how they might be filled, will help you answer any questions posed by the health department about your capacity and security measures. This will also allow you to hit the ground running when you receive the data.

1. **Assess your relationship with the health department or county epidemiologist.**

Ask yourself these questions: 1) Do they know and trust you? 2) 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 health departments do not routinely share their data with others and do not understand how it might be used. Be prepared to explain the purpose of your project and why the department’s data is valuable.
* *Why they should care*: Sharing data takes effort. It also involves some degree of risk. 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 do not know the precise name of the record or report you need, at least be able to describe the type of information you are looking for.
* *How you will use their data*: Health departments want to be assured that their data will not be misinterpreted or misrepresented, and they do not want to be surprised! Be prepared to describe how you will (and will not) use the data and be ready to adequately address their concerns. Keep in mind that some health departments may want to review any products you create with their data prior to release.

1. **Create a table shell of what you need.**

Creating a table shell ensures you receive the data you need, as it helps clarify the information you are requesting. The following are table shell examples with blank cells that contain titles, headings and categories you may find useful.

**Table 1. Number of Suicide Deaths by Gender: Coroner’s Data, 2015-2020**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Year | | | | | |  |
| Gender | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | Total |
| Male |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Female |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Total |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

**Table 2. Rate (per 100,000) of Youth Hospitalization for Intentional Self-Harm (Suicide Attempt) by Age and Race: Hospitalization Discharge Data, 2020**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Race/Ethnicity | | | | |  |
| Age Category | White (Non-Hispanic) | Black (Non- Hispanic ) | Hispanic | Asian | Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander | Total |
| 11-14 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 15-19 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 20-24 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Total |  |  |  |  |  |  |

Remember you may have multiple table shells and/or table shells may have more demographic variables included than the examples provided. Feel free to contact the technical assistance team for help with drafting these tables.

1. **Be aware of data limitations.**

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

* Is the data collected consistent across the system? (e.g., between staff, across sites)
* Are consistent definitions used across agencies?
* How long has the health department been collecting this data?
* Has the data been collected consistently over time?
  + If yes, for how long? How often is data missing?
* Is 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.
  + Keep in mind that the more variables you divide your data by (e.g., age, non-white, means) the smaller the numbers become, and they may be suppressed due to your county’s reporting guidelines around confidentiality. This also makes numbers less stable and therefore harder to determine significance.

# Checklist for Drafting the Email Communication

After reading the preparation steps outlined above, you should be ready to compose an email communication specifying your data requests. The following eight steps can help you draft an effective data request. Use these steps as a guideline and feel free to adjust them as needed.

* 1. *Warm Introduction*: It is always beneficial to start any request with a friendly opening. You might have a colleague provide a warm introduction that you can then use to start the communication. If a warm introduction is not possible, you can introduce yourself by sharing your job title and stating that their assistance will help you complete an important task. *Confirm they are the appropriate contact person for this request and, if not, ask if they can share the name and contact of the person who is*.
* 2. *Why they are being included*: After the introduction, elaborate why they, specifically, can assist you with this task. Explain that this information will be used to inform suicide prevention strategic planning efforts. Inquire about any internal protocols they may have regarding sharing/publishing data and follow those guidelines. If none exists, state that they will be informed of any public-facing data publications based on this data prior to dissemination to ensure their input/review.
* 3. *Data request:* Explain in a paragraph what you need, including specifying variables, the time period of the data request and answering the questions about content noted above.
* 4. *Sample tables:* Share that sample data tables are included as an attachment, to further clarify the data being requested.
* 5. *Data limitations*: Ask about any data limitations you should be aware of such as those noted above.
* 6. *Turnaround time/follow-up*: Share your timeline or deadline and ask how much time the request will require. Ask if a follow-up conversation via phone or email would be helpful.
* 7. *Clarification:* This process can require a back-and-forth conversation or email exchange to verify data completeness, answer follow-up questions and to establish an agreed-upon citation for all data used.
* 8. *Thank them:* Conclude your communication with a thank you and note that you look forward to working with them.

*Looking forward:* Consider whether this will be a single data request or whether you will be asking for information on a repeat basis. Keep, edit and return to your data request to modify and use for future requests. Consider a discussion around a data-sharing agreement if this will be an ongoing request.

1. https://sprc.org/sites/default/files/Handout-MakingDataRequest.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)