UNDERSTANDING & INTERPRETING DATA

Examining data can help leaders to identify issues, important changes and new opportunities; understand what has and has not worked in a community; and make decisions that reflect the entire community and situation rather than merely the perception of a vocal or influential group.

Secondary data are collected by entities such as state and federal government agencies and tend to be inexpensive and easy to access. Secondary data users should consider whether the data is relevant to the community's question; the time period and geography fit their needs; the data source is reliable; and variables, definitions, and measurement are consistent or comparable over time.

Data may be:

- **Cross-sectional**, looking at a single point in time
- **Comparative**, looking at one region relative to another. Comparative data can provide interesting case studies and help to identify and vet potential opportunities.
- **Longitudinal**, considering how the situation changes over time. Longitudinal data provide opportunities to address the assets and needs of changing communities.

What to Look for in Your Data:

- **Conditions** – What appears to be happening? E.g., Is unemployment high or low?
- **Direction of change** – How is the current condition changing over time? E.g., Is the employment picture improving or worsening over time? (Identify the time period(s)).
- **Intensity of change** – How dramatic is the shift?
- **Overall picture** – How does this piece of information fit with other information? E.g., Is unemployment lower because people are getting jobs, families are moving away, or the population is aging?

Sources:

Stronger Economies Together Module 5: Examining Current Demographic Features of Your Region, Alison F. Davis, University of Kentucky, http://srdc.msstate.edu/set/curriculum2/module5/module_5-instructors_guide.pdf.

Developing Critical Thinking Leaders Module 4: Strategies for Obtaining and Using Qualitative and Quantitative Data, Greg Clary, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service