

# Evaluation Method: Observation

## HOW-TO-GUIDE

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### Purpose of Observation:

- To help evaluators observe and document evidence of a need or that an effort has (or has not been) successful.
- To use a variety of strategies and tools to collect observations (as appropriate).

### Observation's 8 Steps:

#### 1. Write a list of what you want to know.

*What kind of information do you want to know?*

Are you looking for evidence of a need in the community? Or are you looking for evidence that your efforts have been successful? In either case, a list of what you want to know will help you be intentional about what evidence you look for, where you look for it, and how you record it.

#### 2. Create an observation guide.

A guide is made up of the questions you want to answer through observation. This guide will act as an anchor for your observations, reminding you what you are looking for and why.

#### 3. List the kinds of visual evidence that might tell you what you want to know.

*How might things be or look different because of this work? What are people doing differently?*

Think about what visual signs there might be in the community to answer your questions – people's behaviors and activities, natural or built environment, etc.

#### 4. Add to that list when you could collect observation data.

*In what settings is data collection most likely? What day(s) or time(s) might it be easiest to collect data?*

Considering the visual evidence listed in step 3, determine what conditions might lead to the greatest success in collecting data.

#### 5. Plan how you will collect and record the data.

*Will you use audio, video, or still photos? What kind of written notes will you need to keep for each?*

Audio, video, photography, and written notes each have advantages and disadvantages. Think through them to decide how to collect the data and what level of detail might be needed for the written notes.

#### 6. Implement your observation plan.

When you have developed a strong plan for what, when, where, and how to collect the necessary data, it is time to implement the plan. Observe carefully, following the plan, and enjoy what you learn.

#### 7. Analyze and summarize your observations.

After you review all the collected data, the first step is to make note of your observations. What do you see? Then, consider what you think that means. Finally, how would you apply what you learned to this situation or another?

#### 8. (Optional) Decide how to tell the “story” of your observations.

*How do you want to share what you learned through your observations? What impacts might you want to build on? Where might more work be needed? Who else should be involved?*

## What Should You Record?

As you develop a plan for observations, written notes and other recorded details (through photography, videos, drawings, etc.) help to set the stage for the data you collect. Consider the advantages and disadvantages of collecting each of the following pieces of data for each setting you observe:

<p><b>Environment</b>—Note the setting—location, natural and built structures, flow of people, etc. Then note, the energy and overall feeling where you are making observations.</p> <p><u>Example</u>: The energy may be (but won't necessarily be) different at a farmer's market versus a food pantry.</p>	<p><b>Objects</b>—Note the objects that seem to stick out in the setting. You may also notice what appears to be missing</p> <p><u>Example</u>: Signs advertising tobacco or alcohol products may be large on the windows of a neighborhood convenience store.</p>
<p><b>People</b>—Note who is (or is not) visible in the setting where you are making observations.</p> <p><u>Example</u>: At a local community garden, perhaps many young people are present.</p>	<p><b>Activities/Actions</b>—Note what the people are doing or not doing.</p> <p><u>Example</u>: Maybe those same young people are not gardening as expected, but rather playing near their family garden plots.</p>
<p><b>Time</b>—Note the time of day, the day of the week, the time of year. These time designations can have important impact on what you observe.</p> <p><u>Example</u>: People and activities at the local park will look different in summer versus winter. Likewise, they may be different in the morning versus early evening.</p>	<p><b>Feelings</b>—Note how you feel as you make your observations. It may surprise you to know that feelings can add bias to otherwise factual observations. By recording feelings, you can help keep observations as unbiased as possible.</p> <p><u>Example</u>: It might make a person feel sad to see children at a food pantry.</p>
<p><b>Everything</b>—Note anything else that jumps out at you as you collect observations. Planning is very helpful, and no plan can prepare you for all the observations that may come up. The best plan, therefore, is to be ready to record all the details you can, even if they do not seem important in the moment. Staying open to everything around you can help you notice unexpected themes and data that may become important later.</p> <p><u>Example</u>: Though the plan doesn't list anything about the state of the playground equipment at a neighborhood park, you may notice that it is rusty or in disrepair, which may reveal an important reason why children do not play there very often.</p>	

### Additional Resources:

For more detailed information, visit the [Youth Leading Community Change Evaluation Toolkit](#) and read pages 75-76.



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