

Using Data Strategically: Social Math

(This section has been developed in conjunction with The Access Project.)

When used effectively, numbers help substantiate claims about the magnitude of a problem or issue. However, it can be a challenge to make numbers—especially large ones—meaningful to the audience. “Social math,” the process aimed at making data more interesting and understandable, is a useful as a means of drawing attention to your issue. Social math can take a variety of approaches. One common approach is to compare a number with something that is more easily understandable to the audience. For example:

In 1991 U.S. college students consumed 430 million gallons of alcoholic beverages per year at a cost of \$5.5 billion. Enough alcohol was consumed by college students to fill 3,500 Olympic-size swimming pools, about one on every campus in the United States. The overall amount spent on alcohol per student exceeded the dollars spent on books and was far greater than the combined amount of fellowships and scholarships provided to students.

Another variation is to make numbers smaller and more familiar. For example:

The alcohol industry spends more than \$2 billion every year to advertise and promote consumption. This amounts to approximately \$225,000 every hour of every day.

Yet another way to highlight a large amount of money is to compare it with the amount currently being spent on your issue. For instance:

The tobacco industry spends more money promoting smoking in a week than the entire federal government spends on preventing smoking in a year.

The goal of social math is to help people understand numbers and issues in a broad context. However, numbers that lack a strong scientific basis detract from your point and damage your credibility. Pay careful attention to the accuracy of the claims you’re making. If you are using math for advocacy, you must be able to understand and defend the data and the way you are presenting the information. The opportunities for creative, accurate use of data are considerable, and the value of this tactic is great. Use it with care.