



Working With Small Numbers

National Center Guidance

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Introduction

When one infant or child dies, the loss is profound for the family and community. When we refer to “small numbers,” we are not minimizing the impact of a single child’s death. Rather, we are highlighting the important data challenges that arise when working with small numbers: Confidentiality concerns and unstable statistics. This brief guidance describes these challenges and provides actionable strategies for working with small numbers.

Key Challenges When Reporting Small Numbers

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is a top priority for fatality review programs when sharing data about infants, children, and families. Suppression policies vary by jurisdiction; for example, some restrict sharing counts below 10, while others have no formal policy. It is essential to follow your agency’s rules. At the same time, programs must balance these requirements with the need to represent and honor all children, families, and communities impacted.

Unstable Statistics

When statistics are based on small numbers, even minor changes can significantly affect results. Importantly, one or two additional deaths may cause large shifts in percentages and rates.

DO*	DON'T
Follow your agency’s suppression rules.	Share small numbers if they risk identifying individuals.
Explain instability with confidence intervals and context.	Present small number-based statistics without context.

*Practical tips continue on the next page.

Why Small Numbers Matter



Small numbers often occur for minoritized populations, and suppressing or excluding them can lead to underrepresentation or misinterpretation of results. It is important to find ways to acknowledge small numbers, so all populations remain visible in the data. We must balance confidentiality requirements with the need for accurate representation. In addition, every infant and child’s death affects the community and offers insights for prevention. To honor each infant, child, and family, prevention efforts can be addressed at the local level.

Practical Tips for Working with Small Numbers

Aggregate Data

Combine multiple years of data to aggregate small numbers into a larger number suitable to share, per your suppression policy. For example, instead of presenting only 2025 data, present a five-year aggregate of 2021-2025.

Group Transparently

Whenever possible, keep groups disaggregated. However, it sometimes makes sense to combine groups to avoid data suppression. If multiple groups are combined, be transparent about the groups included. For example, include a footnote in your table or chart that defines the combined group.

Report Proportions Carefully

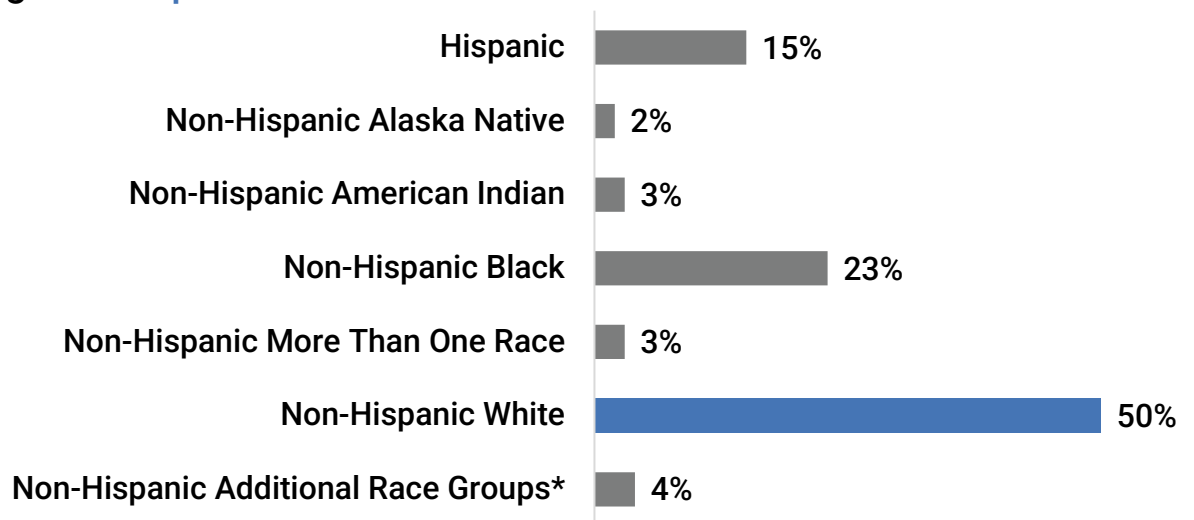
Report proportions instead of numbers and without the total count so that the viewer cannot back-calculate the small number. Include a note about why total counts are not included. Use this strategy with caution, being careful that total counts are not reported anywhere in a chart, table, or text.

Avoid “Other” Categories

Avoid lumping groups with small cell sizes into an “other” category. “Other” has a negative, exclusionary connotation. Instead, suppress the data or use an alternative label (e.g., “additional groups”).

Some of these tips in action might look like:

Half of all child deaths reviewed over the last five years were among **non-Hispanic White children**.



Data Source: Fake Data, 2021-2025.

Total counts are not shown to protect confidentiality.

* Due to small numbers, “Non-Hispanic Additional Race Groups” includes Asian and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander children.

Use Supplemental Data

If you ultimately cannot share small numbers due to suppression rules, it is important to consider still including information in your report or presentation about that suppressed group.

Be transparent about potential challenges with data collection and why you are unable to share the data. Then, follow up with what you *do* know from supplemental data sources, in lieu of being able to share data from fatality review. Population data sources can help fill gaps and provide context.



View the National Center's guidance on [Using Population-Based Data to Inform Fatality Review](#).

Address Unstable Rates

For programs that can use their data to calculate rates, you may want to report a rate that is calculated based on a small number (i.e., less than 20). However, rates based on counts less than 20 are unstable, often with wide confidence intervals. Consider:

- Publishing the rate alongside a measure of uncertainty, such as a confidence interval.
- Including a note about rate stability and interpreting the data cautiously.
- Providing additional context and comparable supplemental data (e.g., national level data).

Some of these tips in action might look like:



Annual Report

"Rates based on fewer than 20 deaths are suppressed due to instability with small numbers; therefore, this report does not include suicide rates for American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) youth. Misclassification of race and ethnicity of AI/AN people on death certificates is a key limitation because it leads to an underestimate of deaths in this population. Nationally, however, AI/AN youth have significantly higher suicide rates compared to all other races, and Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) data show they report the highest prevalence of suicide attempts—more than double state estimates."

Key Takeaways

Every infant and child's death matters, even when numbers are small. Leverage local prevention efforts.

Confidentiality must be protected while ensuring populations are represented.

Small numbers can distort statistics — interpret cautiously.

Transparency and supplemental data help fill gaps.

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Contact us at info@ncfrp.org.



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