

What Is a Data Audit and Why Would I Want One?

Although “data audit” can refer to a compliance review, many organizations use a data audit as a periodic internal quality control check of their information and analysis system. A data audit requested by an organization is like preventive medicine for information, similar to taking a child to a pediatrician for well-child care.

A data auditor, or “well-data care provider,” makes a two-part assessment—of your data collection system and of the quality of the data themselves. When a data collection system is operating effectively, the program’s staff is minimally grumpy about the need to collect data, and the program’s database has very few missing or incorrect data.

Who or what is a data auditor?

- * A data auditor is a researcher, independent of your organization, who has data diagnostic and analytic skills.
- * A data auditor needs to have insight into your programmatic areas.
- * A data auditor also needs to have the skill of being able to work empathetically and supportively with the program staff who are responsible for data collection and analysis.

What can “well-data care” offer, since it isn’t about compliance?

- * An auditor may be able to suggest modifications to your data collection system to improve its efficiency or user-friendliness.
- * If the data you collect are not as complete or as accurate as you would like them to be, an auditor can work with your staff to diagnose the difficulty and decide on a suitable treatment.
- * If your staff members are doing a top-notch data collection job, an auditor’s clean bill of health can be a way to recognize the staff for their important data-related contribution.
- * An auditor’s report can enhance the attractiveness of your organization in a funder’s eyes. A voluntary process of checking and enhancing the health of your information and analysis system does more than reflect your organization’s commitment to a high level of performance. It provides an assurance that reports of program outcomes will be based on sound information.

What is it like to get the “well-data care” treatment? Does it last long? Does it hurt?

- * There, there, now, it won't hurt a bit! And even for a large program with more than one site, a data audit should take only a few days unless complications are found.
- * Unless you think that you have site-level data problems, most of a data auditor's attention will go to the copy of your consolidated, centralized database that you provide. Data will be checked for completeness, consistency, rationality, and agreement with the summary statistics that your agency has derived.
- * An auditor may want to assess the quality or process of site-level data collection. The number and scope of site visits can be shaped by two factors: Were problems found in the database that need to be traced to their source? Is there a purpose that you, the manager, have for one or more site visits, such as highlighting the diligent data-collection efforts of your staff?

How often should an information and analysis system receive “well-data care”?

- * A routine check-up once a year is a good general guideline.
- * Needless to say, the answer to “How often?” may vary from the general guideline because of your particular circumstances.