

“WHO KNOWS?” TO “KNOWING WHO!”: Collecting and Using Age- and Sex-Specific Data

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Background

Mercy Corps is guided by our belief in evidence and learning. We use data to manage our programs more effectively, understand the impact of our work and influence other actors seeking to solve some of the world’s most complex challenges.¹ Based on this guiding principle, collecting [Sex and Age Disaggregated Data \(SADD\)](#) is a [Minimum Standard of Program Management](#).

Any time we collect data on individuals, during assessments or monitoring and evaluation, we should be collecting sex² and age-specific data. We know that sex and age can dramatically affect individuals’ needs, risks, access and capacities, and we need a clear picture of these differences in order to effectively design and target our actions to those most in need. This is a cornerstone of our commitment to achieving greater impact as we work to help create more secure, productive, and just communities.

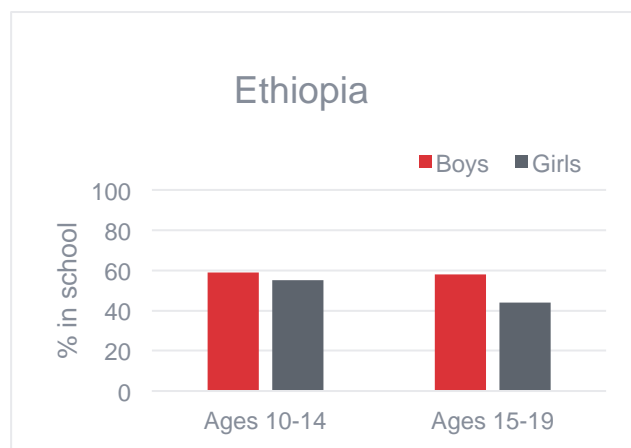
Collecting Age Data

Recording exact ages is the simplest and most accurate way to collect age data. During analysis, ages can then be broken down into age segments (15-19 yrs. for example) to examine differences between various groups of women, girls, boys and men. **We do not recommend that teams record ages in segments during data collection.** Doing so means that data can never be ungrouped and it limits the range of analyses that can later be performed and reported on.

When collecting age data, field teams may choose to ask for date of birth, year of birth, or age. There are pros and cons to each of these methods, and depending on the context, one method may work better than the others.

CASE STUDY: SCHOOL ENROLLMENT IN ETHIOPIA

Analysis of national-level data from Ethiopia highlights the **impact that both sex and age can have on school enrollment**.³ While younger adolescent boys are enrolled in school at slightly higher rates than girls, the gender gap widens dramatically for older adolescents with the onset of puberty. Identifying these trends allows us to explore why they exist⁴ and sheds light on the critical window of opportunity for interventions aimed at keeping girls in school. By understanding which girls are most likely out of school, we are also able to target non-formal education opportunities to those who need them most.



¹ [Mercy Corps Strategic Roadmap](#) Guiding Principle, 2017.

² Sex refers to the biological characteristics that identify a person as female or male. This definition may need to be discussed with field staff to avoid any confusion and language may need to be changed to a more culturally appropriate term. In some contexts, a third category falling outside of female or male, such as transgender, may need to be included.

³ Source: Demographic Health Survey Ethiopia 2005. Analysis by [Katharine McCarthy, Population Council, 2013](#)

⁴ Early marriage, childbirth and financial constraints are a few of the many factors that can lead to girls withdrawing from school, [UNICEF](#).

Collection Method

Advantages

Disadvantages

Date of Birth (DOB) <i>(day/month/year)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Age can be tracked over a period of time - May be used as unique identifier for program beneficiaries with the same name 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Requires an extra step to convert to age - DOB is considered personally identifiable information and may increase confidentiality risks/concerns. - In some contexts, individuals may not know their exact DOB
Year of Birth (YOB) <i>(year)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In some contexts, individuals may not know their exact age or birthday, but may know the year they were born. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Requires an extra step to convert to/estimate an age - Does not provide any more specificity than recording an age
Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No extra steps needed to convert to an age - Minimizes confidentiality risks/concerns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does not allow age to be tracked precisely over a period of time

To ensure consistency in our approach across the agency, and to align with emerging best practices, **Mercy Corps requires the following age segments when reporting annual beneficiary counts to HQ:**

	0-5	6-9	10-14	15-19	20-24	25-34	35-49	50 plus
Male								
Female								

* Shaded areas represent Mercy Corps' definition of adolescents and youth (10-24 yrs).

Beyond reporting beneficiary data in alignment with these segments, we recognize that different sectors may have different reasons for disaggregating data and that alternative segments may be required for context-specific analysis or donor reporting. Consider:

- Many health-related indicators refer to children under 1 or even the first 1,000 days of life.
- In contexts where the average life span is longer, it may be necessary to extend the age segments to include 50-65, 66 plus, to track age and gender specific issues and needs for the elderly.
- Programs that work specifically with children should learn the national age limit for a minor and the intricacies for different legal ages (for example, the legal age a child can work, be recruited into armed forces, or be married). These factors may need to be reflected in the age segments used for assessments and program analysis.⁵

We ask that teams use Mercy Corps' recommended age segments for data analysis unless there are donor or sector-specific considerations that require use of an alternative system of categorization.

Additional Notes:

While you may choose to be more specific in your disaggregation (10-12 yrs. for example), please do not be less specific (10-17 yrs. for example).

Ages for children under 5 should be collected and reported in months. All other ages should be reported in years.

⁵ The UN [Convention on the Rights of a Child](#) defines a child as anyone under the age of 18. While this is the international standard, different countries may provide different age limits for minors depending on the situation.

Focus on Adolescents and Youth

Mercy Corps' recommended age segments support our ability to reach adolescents and youth (ages 10-24)⁶ who are a strategic focus for the agency. These groups face both heightened vulnerability and opportunity as they transition from childhood into the roles and responsibilities of adulthood, and we believe their actions can set the course for a country to thrive or decline socially, politically and economically. In order to provide young people with the right support at the right time, it is critical that we identify and account for the diverse experiences among them.

We understand that age and sex can't tell us everything about what a young person experiences in their life and when. Social and developmental milestones such as puberty, marriage and educational attainment happen at different times based on individual and cultural characteristics. While teams are encouraged to collect and disaggregate data around additional factors that are relevant to their specific context (ethnicity, geographic location, etc.), separating young adolescents (10-14), older adolescents (15-19) and older youth (20-24) offers us a useful starting place when exploring the developmental diversity present in young people's lives.⁷

Questions from the Field

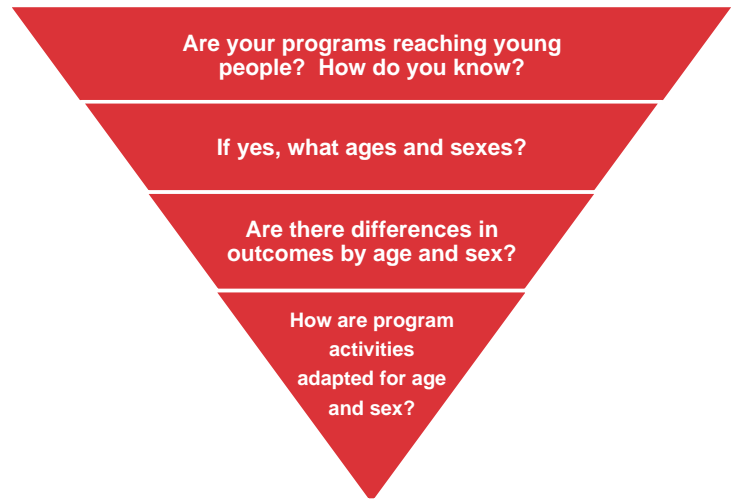
How can we collect accurate information when many of our beneficiaries don't know their date of birth or exact age?

Working in places where individuals may not know their exact age can present a challenge when trying to collect age-specific data. Fortunately, many of our field teams have found that even when someone does not know their birth date or exact age, they can usually estimate it within a few years of accuracy. We recommend that teams work with beneficiaries to estimate an age in years rather than select from a list of age segments. Remember that when it comes to designing, implementing and measuring the impact of our programming, achieving 100% accuracy in our data is less important than identifying trends.



Techniques using local historical event calendars or rights of passage to estimate age may be helpful. Consider questions such as: "Was _____ leader in power?" or "Had ____ war/natural event happened?" to identify a month or a year of birth, depending on the level of detail needed.

Getting to the Point: Assessing Age and Sex in Your Programs



⁶ Age categories are based on The World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF and UNFPA's definitions of adolescence as 10-19, youth as 15-24 and young people as 10-24.

⁷ Due to the rapid sexual and cognitive changes that occur during adolescence, it is useful to separate this decade into early adolescence 10-14 and older adolescence 15-19. Mercy Corps believes that early adolescence 10-14 is of particular importance to reach girls before they face risks associated with puberty that often negatively impact the trajectory of their lives.

Some of our beneficiaries are uncomfortable sharing information about their age, or have a reason to lie about it. What can we do?

There are many reasons why someone may feel uneasy about sharing their exact age or might choose to provide false information. Teams working on the Syria response have found that young men are often reluctant to share their birth dates or age due to fears around forced military conscription. In Nigeria, our *Educating Nigerian Girls in New Enterprises* program required that girls turn 18 (the legal age to work) before graduating the nine-month program that equipped girls with business skills and assets to start their own microenterprises, and program staff found that some girls lied about their ages in order to participate.

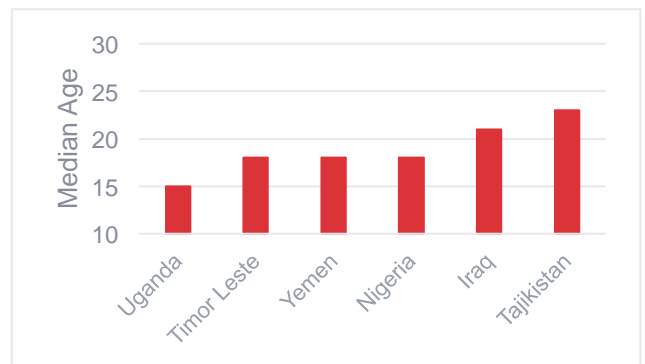
While we will never be able to completely eliminate these challenges, there are steps we can take to reduce them. Training enumerators to develop trust and rapport with beneficiaries and explain confidentiality is essential. We can also decrease the incentive for individuals to lie about their age in order to gain access to a program if we are able to identify other programs to refer younger or older individuals to.

Whenever possible, it is helpful to document a person’s refusal to provide an age, as well as instances of being given a false age. Modifying data collection tools to document these challenges can provide us with valuable information on a group’s unique vulnerabilities, as well as gaps in programming.

My programs don’t specifically target youth. Is it still important to disaggregate by all of these age groups?

In many of the places we work, young people represent more than half the population. This means that even if programs don’t have a specific youth-focus, youth are likely directly reached by our programs and we need to be considering their needs and vulnerabilities to achieve our desired impact.

No matter who our programs are targeting, we should be collecting and disaggregating sex and age-specific data across the age spectrum. Doing so enhances our learning and ensures we are accountable to all.



Median Age by Country⁸

My program targets adolescents 10-19. Can I combine these age categories when analyzing and reporting my data?

When we combine categories, we miss capturing the diversity within our target population and the opportunity to develop more responsive and impactful programming. We are also unable to clearly identify who is being reached and more importantly, who is not. One study that examined youth programs across five countries revealed that programming was primarily reaching boys over the age of 20. On average, less than 15% of those reached were between the ages of 10 and 14. Only age and sex disaggregation can shed light on these imbalances, allowing us to make adjustments to our programming in order to reach girls and adolescents.⁹

**Some patterns, such as geographical dispersion, may be more readily apparent by combining age segments. In these cases, we ask that teams take the extra step to analyze both the aggregated and disaggregated data.*

⁸ Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_median_age

⁹ Weiner, Adam. 2010. "Geographic variations in inequities in access to services," *Studies in Family Planning* 41(2): 134–138.

Our donors ask for different age segments when disaggregating data. Which segments should we use?

When analyzing and reporting data, our first priority must always be to comply with donor requirements. The good news is that by recording exact ages during data collection, we can disaggregate ages into different categories for donors, local governments, and Mercy Corps as needed.

Often times, donors use larger age segments than Mercy Corps, or skip ages they don't consider to be essential. This means that reporting beneficiary segments of 0-5, 6-9 to Mercy Corps can easily be added together if a donor asks for a segment of 0-9. Mobile tools like Ona and Tola are making this process much easier for our teams across the globe.

We conduct surveys at the household level and collecting and analyzing exact age data for every person really slows us down.

We recognize that it can feel overwhelming to add additional questions to already lengthy surveys in order to collect this information, especially when working under pressure in insecure and unstable environments.

However, we know it is both possible and necessary to do so, and that the improvements in programming (as well as money saved by avoiding costly program failures due to errors in targeting and design) make any additional time well worth it. Also, as Mercy Corps' data collection tools increasingly use digital data collection devices (phones, tablets, etc.), the time and effort required to collect age-specific data will be reduced.



SUCCESS IN TURKEY/ NORTH SYRIA

Teams in Turkey and North Syria were struggling to collect and analyze different age segments for different donors - an incredibly time intensive process - so they decided to make the switch to collecting exact ages (in years). By using mobile data collection tools, the time necessary to gather exact ages for all beneficiaries (including household members) was significantly cut down. This process also provided cleaner, more accessible data right away for analysis, streamlining the whole process.

I understand that collecting and using sex- and age-disaggregated data is important, but our teams don't currently have the systems to manage and process the data. How can we get support?

In order to support field teams around these important data management issues, our Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) team is currently working on developing standardized forms and procedures that can be adapted to specific contexts and geographies.

However, we recognize that teams may need assistance *now* and we don't expect you to wait! Check out the list of tools and resources on the next page, or, for individual support around data collection, management, or analysis, contact Jon Prettyman and Marcel Jansen, *Interim MEL Advisors*, at dme@mercy Corps.org

Tools and Resources (click on tool/resource to access):

- PM@MC Gender Minimum Standards
- DIG: Design for Impact Guide
- Tola
- Sample Data Collection Tools
- Enumerator Training Materials
- Why Sex and Age Matters: Mercy Corps Success/Learning Stories
- Sex and Age Matter: Improving Humanitarian Response in Emergencies

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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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