

Maximum Impact: Visual Representation of Data

A picture is worth a thousand words. This can especially be the case when reporting and presenting data. In a narrative summary of results or even in a table, hoards of numbers and percentages start to swim senselessly before your eyes after a while. But if you can create a picture with your data, represent it in a visually compelling way, you can really get your point across with impact!

Let me show you what I mean. "Despite spending more per capita each year than every other country (\$6,714), life expectancy in the United States is the same as a third world country like Cuba (78 years), below other industrialized countries such as Spain (81 years), Australia (82 years), and Japan (83 years) which spend much less on health." In this narrative form, you can see firstly that it's hard to cover all of the relevant statistics in a readable fashion. Also, the enormity of the comparison gets somewhat buried in the words.

With this many variables, a table has the advantage in presenting all of the statistics in an organized way so that the comparison becomes more obvious. However, your eyes still have to do some work because while the life expectancy is sequenced in declining order, the amount spent is not. But it does become clear that the amount the US is spending is much more than every other country.

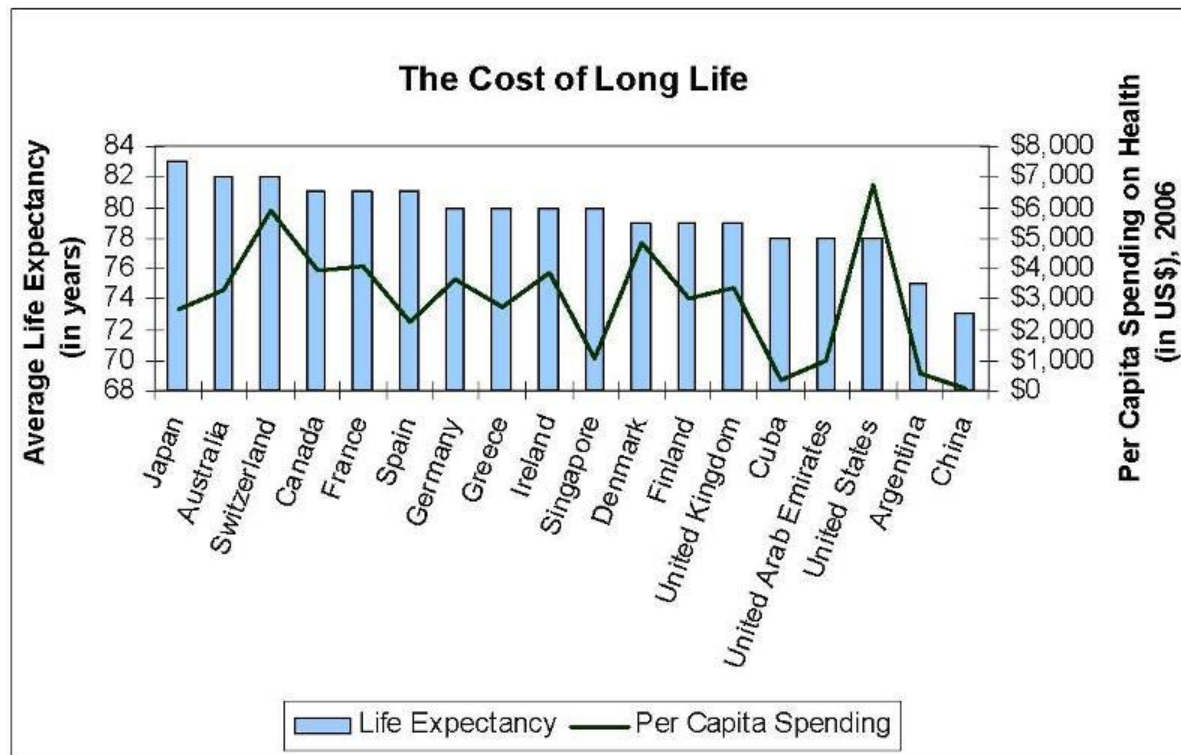
Total Annual Per Capita Spending on Health in 2006, by Country

Country	Life expectancy, in years	Per capita expenditure on health*
Japan	83	\$2,690
Australia	82	\$3,316
Switzerland	82	\$5,878
Canada	81	\$3,912
France	81	\$4,056
Spain	81	\$2,263
Germany	80	\$3,669
Greece	80	\$2,733
Ireland	80	\$3,888
Singapore	80	\$1,035
Denmark	79	\$4,828
Finland	79	\$2,994
United Kingdom	79	\$3,361
Cuba	78	\$355
United Arab Emirates	78	\$982
United States of America	78	\$6,714
Argentina	75	\$551
China	73	\$90

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*at average exchange rate, in US\$

Presented just as numbers alone, the differences may raise one eyebrow but still may not get the attention they deserve. However when depicted visually, it becomes easy to see that something is amiss in US health care. Cuba, Singapore, Greece, Spain and even Canada all have longer life expectancy than the US despite spending just a portion of what we do. The green trend line which peaks over the US life expectancy like a mountain top creates a visual metaphor for the problem. It has more impact than statistics alone or even a table ever could.



That's what you should be aiming for when representing your data in the results section of your evaluation reports. Find ways to tell the story behind your data in as compelling a manner. You want your audience to feel a connection to the human side of the issue. To understand how secondhand smoke is harming people -- people that might look like their elderly parents, or their children.

By using images with visual impact, you're making it harder for your readers to ignore the problem. You're making it personal. Their decisions and actions have an impact on real people.

To help your project explore ways to make your data more visually compelling, the Tobacco Control Evaluation Center will be working with other statewide projects to develop some resources which will make it easier for you to create graphs, tables, press releases and briefs that catch the public eye. So stay tuned for word on our progress.