

Data Decoded (Qual, Quant, Mixed Methods Basics)

PURPOSE

This guide introduces mixed methods research and evaluation in a simple, practical way. It is designed for nonprofit organizations, community programs, and social impact teams that want to better understand how to combine numbers, stories, and lived experiences to evaluate their work.

This guide explains:

- ▶ What mixed methods research is
- ▶ How it differs from qualitative and quantitative methods alone
- ▶ Why organizations use mixed methods
- ▶ Common mixed methods designs
- ▶ Real-world examples of how mixed methods can support learning and decision-making

Use Case

This guide may be useful if:

- ▶ You are new to evaluation or research and want to better understand different approaches to collecting and using data.
- ▶ You are deciding whether qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods approaches are the best fit for your project or program.
- ▶ You want to better understand how stories, experiences, and numerical data can work together to communicate impact.
- ▶ You are designing an evaluation, needs assessment, community engagement effort, or learning project.
- ▶ You want to strengthen how your organization collects, interprets, and uses data for decision-making and improvement.



ABOUT BSRI

BSRI was created to support informed and effective decision-making for our partners with tools, resources, and data for action. As we wind down operations, we are creating these resources for the community to continue the work. We use our guiding principles in engaging with partners and communities, putting people first through accountability and reciprocity, communicating transparently, and sharing our knowledge widely.

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

BSRI developed this resource based on our experience supporting nonprofit and social impact organizations in designing and implementing qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods evaluations. Through this work, we have seen how combining different types of data can help organizations better understand community experiences, strengthen programs, and communicate impact more effectively. This guide was created to make mixed methods research more approachable and accessible for people who may be new to evaluation. Rather than focusing heavily on technical language or academic theory, this resource provides a practical introduction to mixed methods concepts, common research designs, and real-world applications.

The goal of this guide is to help organizations understand how different types of data can work together to support learning, decision-making, and meaningful action.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

Our organization utilizes artificial intelligence (AI) tools to enhance efficiency, support data analysis, and strengthen evaluation practices. We also encourage our partners and clients to thoughtfully explore AI as a means to build future-ready evaluation capacity. All AI use is governed by strict data privacy and ethical standards. We do not input any personally identifiable information (PII), protected health information (PHI), or other sensitive data into AI systems in a manner that would violate HIPAA or other applicable privacy regulations.

Additionally, we exclusively use licensed AI tools and platforms that explicitly prohibit the use of submitted data for model training or retention beyond the scope of the intended task. This ensures that all information remains confidential, secure, and protected.

What Is Mixed Methods Research?

Mixed methods research combines: **Quantitative data** (numbers, surveys, statistics, counts) with **Qualitative data** (stories, interviews or focus groups, observations, experiences)

The goal is to use both types of information together to better understand a program or community, or to answer a research question.

In simple terms:

- ▶ Quantitative data helps us understand **what happened**.
- ▶ Qualitative data helps us understand **why or how it happened**.

Mixed methods brings both together to create a fuller picture.

Understanding the Different Types of Data

Type of Data	Definition	Examples	Example Statement	Strengths	Limitations
Quantitative ("The Numbers")	Focuses on measurable information	▶ Survey ratings ▶ Attendance numbers ▶ Percentages ▶ Pre/post test scores ▶ Demographic data	▶ "85% of participants reported improved confidence after the program."	▶ Helps identify trends and patterns ▶ Easier to summarize across large groups ▶ Useful for measuring outcomes	▶ May miss personal experiences or context ▶ Does not always explain why something happened
Qualitative ("The Stories")	Focuses on experiences, perspectives, and meaning	▶ Interviews ▶ Focus groups ▶ Open-ended survey responses ▶ Observations ▶ Participant stories	▶ "Before this program, I didn't feel comfortable speaking up in class. Now I feel like my voice matters."	▶ Helps explain experiences and emotions ▶ Provides context behind the numbers ▶ Centers participant voice	▶ Usually involves smaller groups ▶ Takes more time to collect and analyze

Why Use Mixed Methods?

Organizations often use mixed methods because numbers alone do not tell the full story.

For example:

- ▶ A survey may show that participants improved.
- ▶ Interviews may explain *what helped them improve*.

Another example:

- ▶ Program records might show how many people attended an event.
- ▶ Interviews or conversations may explain *why people attended the event*.

Using both together can help organizations:

- ▶ Better understand community needs
- ▶ Strengthen programs
- ▶ Improve decision-making
- ▶ Communicate impact more clearly
- ▶ Combine accountability with human stories

At BSRI, we view mixed methods as a way to move beyond reporting and toward deeper learning and action.

Common Mixed Methods Designs

1. Convergent (Parallel) Design



Organizations collect quantitative and qualitative data during the same phase (or time frame) and compare the findings together.

Example

- ▶ Participants answer surveys about program satisfaction
- ▶ Conduct interviews during the same time period
- ▶ Compare the results to see how people rated the program (on the survey) and what they said specifically about how satisfied (or not) they were

Best Used When

- ▶ You want multiple perspectives on the same issue
- ▶ You have time/resources for both methods simultaneously
- ▶ You have a tight timeline that requires doing both simultaneously

2. Explanatory Sequential Design



(One method conducted before the other)

Organizations start with quantitative data and follow up with qualitative data to explain the findings more deeply.

Example

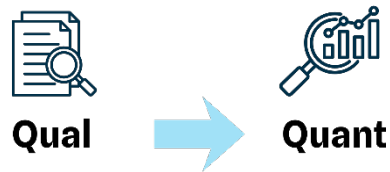
- ▶ A survey shows lower engagement among youth participants
- ▶ Follow-up interviews explore why engagement was lower

Best Used When

- ▶ You need to explain survey findings
- ▶ You want a deeper understanding behind the numbers



3. Exploratory Sequential Design



(One method conducted before the other)

Organizations begin with qualitative research and then use those findings to develop or improve a quantitative tool.

Example

- ▶ Conduct focus groups about barriers to care
- ▶ Use themes from those conversations to build a survey

Best Used When

- ▶ Little information already exists
- ▶ You want community voice to shape measurement tools



Real-World Example

A youth program wants to understand whether participants gained leadership skills.

Quantitative Data

Survey results show:

- ▶ 78% reported increased confidence
- ▶ 72% reported stronger communication skills

Qualitative Data

Participants shared:

“My favorite lesson was the one where we practiced speaking in front of our peer groups. This really helped me with confidence to speak up during group projects.”

Mixed Methods Insight

The surveys showed improvement, while interviews explained *how* the program created that change.



Questions to Ask Before Choosing a Mixed Methods Approach

Before starting, ask:

- What are we trying to learn?
- Do we need numbers, stories, or both?
- What information would help improve the program?
- How much time and capacity do we have?
- Who will use the findings?



Challenges to Consider

Mixed methods can provide richer insights, but it also requires:

- More planning
- More resources (time, budget, staff)
- Multiple skill sets
- Clear integration of findings

The goal is not to collect more data just for the sake of collecting more data. The goal is to collect the **right** data to answer **your** meaningful questions.

Final Takeaway

Mixed methods research helps organizations combine evidence with lived experience.

When done thoughtfully, it can help teams:

- ▶ Understand both outcomes and experiences
- ▶ Tell stronger impact stories
- ▶ Make more informed decisions
- ▶ Build evaluation practices that are both rigorous and people-centered