

Chapter 1. An Introduction to Program Evaluation and This Guide

What's Inside?



What this chapter contains

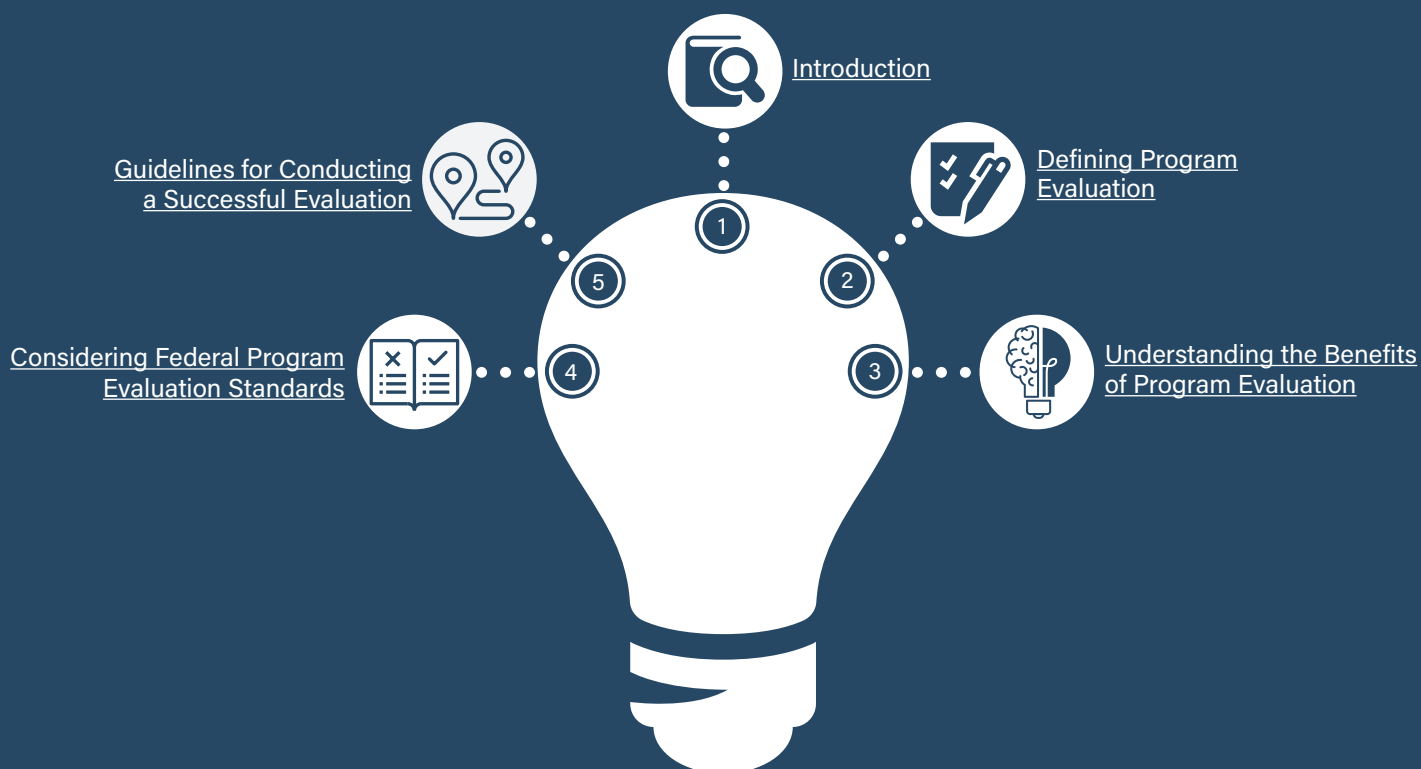
The importance of program evaluation and this Guide



Who can use this chapter

Program managers new to evaluation or seeking an overview of this Guide

Click the links below to view the relevant section



Introduction

As a program manager, you already know human services programs aim to improve individuals' families' and communities' health and well-being. However, you may be wondering why it is important to evaluate programs, how to conduct an evaluation, or how to ensure an evaluation is equitable for your community. This Guide will address these questions and connect you to other resources that can help.

Each chapter of this Guide addresses specific steps in the evaluation process and provides guidance on how to tailor an evaluation to your program's needs. The following features will help you navigate the Guide.

Stand-alone chapters

Reading the full Guide from start to finish is an excellent way to build an understanding of the evaluation process. However, each chapter also functions as a stand-alone document, enabling navigation to specific topics of interest.

- **An initial overview of the chapter.** At the start of each chapter, you will find a “What’s Inside?” box describing what the chapter addresses, who might be interested in reading it, and what subsections are included.
- **Links for further reading.** This Guide will explain important concepts at a high level. However, if you are looking for more information on a topic, you will find links to other chapters or appendices for further reading.
- **Illustrative examples.** This Guide has examples and explanations embedded throughout in callout boxes to illustrate important concepts.
- **Appendices with additional resources and tools.** If you have reviewed the Guide and want more resources, check out the appendices. [Appendix A](#) provides additional resources such as relevant evaluation materials and lists of professional organizations. [Appendix B](#) provides helpful templates, tools, and worksheets to support your evaluation efforts.

Practice culturally responsive and equitable evaluation

At the end of every chapter, the Guide provides approaches and examples of ways to incorporate principles of equitable evaluation in each stage of evaluation. These principles will help ensure your evaluation benefits from contributions from program participants and members of the communities your program serves.

Defining Program Evaluation

Program evaluations can determine how a program is operating, reveal if it is working as intended, determine whether it has achieved its objectives, and identify potential areas for improvement. What distinguishes program evaluation from the more informal feedback program managers and staff obtain from program users is the systematic approach.¹ This approach ensures the information is gathered and analyzed objectively.

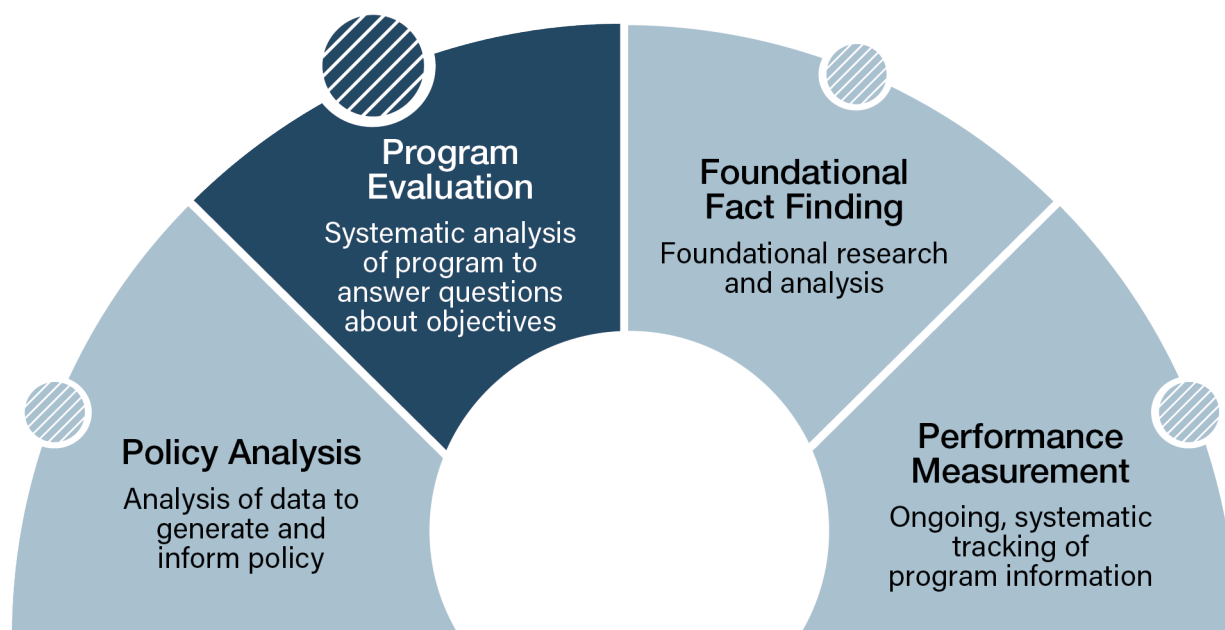
By following well-established steps to collect, analyze, and use data to answer questions about a program, you can achieve results that clearly assess the quality of program activities. Your evaluation findings can then be used to inform local decision-making, build organizational capacity, and/or facilitate the use of rigorous evidence among federal, state, and local agencies.

Federal guidance

For more details on federal evidence building, as identified by the Office of Management and Budget, see Young (2021).

The recently enacted Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (also referred to as the Evidence Act) reinforces the importance of using data and evidence to solve complex issues and challenges. Program evaluation is just one approach to generating evidence-based knowledge. The Office of Management and Budget identifies four ways evidence can be collected (evidence-building activities)—foundational fact finding, policy analysis, program evaluation, and performance measurement (Young, 2021) (see figure 1.1). While each of these evidence-building activities can provide useful information about

Figure 1.1. Federal Components of Evidence Framework



Source: Young, 2021

¹ A systematic approach is methodological and repeatable and can be learned via a step-by-step procedure. The Law Dictionary. (n.d.). *What is systematic approach.* <https://thelawdictionary.org/systematic-approach/#:~:text=The%20approach%20that%20is%20methodical,step%2Dby%2Dstep%20procedure>

your program, this Guide focuses on one specific component of evidence-based policymaking—program evaluation.

Program evaluation is a broad term that can include many types of research activities, all involving a systematic process of collecting, analyzing, and using data to answer questions about a program's objectives. This Guide focuses specifically on evaluation that assesses the implementation of a program or its outcome objectives, defined as follows:

- **Program implementation objectives.** What you plan to do in your program, how you plan to do it, and your intended target population (e.g., the services or training you plan to provide, the number of people you plan to reach, the staff training you plan to conduct)
- **Participant outcome objectives.** Your expectations about how your program will change participants' knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, or awareness

You may be familiar with other types of evaluation and research activities as highlighted in table 1.1. These activities may also yield critical information, complement implementation or outcome evaluation activities, and offer relevance to one or more evidence components. However, they are not the primary focus of this Guide, which describes program evaluation activities most relevant to a broad range of program managers. You can find more detail about other types of evidence-building activities in the appendices.

Table 1.1. Common Types of Evidence-Building Activities

Type of activity		When is it typically used?	What is the focus?	Why is it useful?
Primary focus of Guide	Implementation (also called Process) Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Early stages of program implementation ■ Ongoing 	<p>Assesses whether program activities are being implemented as planned, whether the expected program services are being delivered, and how the program is operating in practice</p> <p>Might collect information on processes, content, quantity, quality, and structure of program activities</p>	Provides periodic feedback that compares actual performance with target objectives or standards the program seeks to achieve
	Outcome (including Effectiveness or Impact) Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ At defined intervals ■ At end of program delivery 	<p>Offers understanding as to whether change has occurred as intended</p> <p>For certain types of outcome evaluations (i.e., impact evaluations), can focus on long-term program effects or results and whether change can be attributed to program activities</p>	<p>Can provide evidence of program effectiveness</p> <p>Can explain the population that benefits most from the program and the conditions needed for success</p>

Table 1.1. Common Types of Evaluation and Research Activities (continued)

Type of activity	When is it typically used?	What is the focus?	Why is it useful?
Foundational Fact Finding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anytime 	Systematically describes a program without inferring causality or measuring effectiveness	Helps describe what is happening in the program or among the target population. Can provide insights into the demographic characteristics of the target population or what characteristics are related to a particular outcome
Formative Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Before program is fully implemented 	Assesses whether program—or some aspect of the program—is feasible, appropriate, and acceptable before it is fully implemented. Can include process and outcome measures	Determine what aspects of the program are working as intended and whether the program can be implemented as designed
Developmental Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Early stages of developing new program Ongoing 	Provides rapid and real-time feedback to promote innovation and support program adaptation	Offers methodological flexibility and can be better suited in less predictable situations or complex contexts
Continuous Quality Improvement, Progress Monitoring, or Performance Measurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Throughout program delivery 	Offers understanding of how the program is working and not working, who it is reaching, how it operates differently across contexts, and how it is progressing toward established goals	Supports improvement in program design and delivery
Economic or Efficiency Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> After program delivery 	Assesses the cost-effectiveness (i.e., cost per desired outcome) and cost-benefit (i.e., cost per overall benefit)	Facilitates comparison with other programs designed to achieve the same outcomes
Implementation Science Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Late stages of scale-up and replication 	Identifies what is needed to bring effective strategies to scale by examining factors that promote the uptake of evidence-based practices into routine settings	Maximizes evaluation investment and promotes the translation of evaluation findings into practice (i.e., closes the gap between “what we know” and “what we do”)

* Note: While this Guide does not discuss needs or evaluability assessments in detail, you will find information throughout about how to design an appropriate and feasible evaluation.

Source: Table content compiled from multiple sources including Types of Evaluation (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020), Components of Evidence (Office of Management and Budget, 2019), and Cost Analysis Standards Project (American Institutes for Research, 2021).

This Guide provides general advice for conducting or participating in implementation and outcome evaluations, with links to helpful resources, templates, and tools throughout. It is not intended to make you an evaluation expert but rather to provide you with an understanding of the overall process and considerations to keep in mind along the way.

Understanding the Benefits of Program Evaluation

Familiarity with the program evaluation process and its many benefits can help as you begin to engage your team and community.

Benefit 1

Program evaluation helps programs use limited resources more effectively

Evaluation is a worthwhile investment in your program. While it's true that implementing an evaluation will require additional staff time and financial resources, evaluations can provide actionable information and evidence that, over the long term, can help you improve and revise services to make them even more effective and efficient (e.g., eliminating program components not necessary to achieve intended outcomes). For more information about the steps to conduct program evaluation, see [chapter 2](#). For more on evaluation costs and budgeting, see [chapter 4](#).

Benefit 2

Program evaluation supports the work of program staff

In addition to answering basic questions about a program's effectiveness (e.g., how the program is being implemented, how participants experience the program, ways participants might benefit from program participation), evaluation activities can also identify strategies program staff should employ to improve their work. Ideally, evaluation should become part of your program, integrated into the way you do business. In many cases, evaluation processes can be incorporated into ongoing program activities (e.g., collecting evaluation information from clients as part of normal intake processes) and program management tasks (e.g., reviewing data trends during management meetings). For more about how your team may support evaluation, see [chapter 3](#). For more about ways to obtain the information you need for an evaluation, see [chapter 6](#).

Benefit 3

Program evaluation methods can be adjusted to your needs

Program evaluation can build your personal and organizational capacity to collect, use, and understand data and research. As a practitioner, you have built a specialization in serving children, youth, and families. But you also routinely examine information about your program and make decisions.

Community members

This Guide uses the term "community members" throughout the chapters to refer to people who are eligible for or receive your program services or who share geographical or cultural identities with your program participants.

Participating in a program evaluation is a great way to build your knowledge around data collection and analysis. It can refine your ability to collect accurate information about your program participants and your ability to use that information to make decisions. Participating in evaluations will also enhance your ability to interpret and incorporate new research findings in the future. For more information about hiring an outside evaluator, see [chapter 3](#). For more information about preparing for an evaluation and developing an evaluation plan, see [chapters 4](#) and [chapter 5](#), respectively.

Benefit 4

Program evaluation supports program improvement

An evaluation will likely document facilitators and barriers to program effectiveness and may reveal areas where a program is exceeding goals. All this information helps you make evidence-based decisions and provide opportunities to improve your program. As evaluation becomes part of your organization's culture, you will find you regularly look toward evaluation results to manage your program, remain accountable to community members and funders, and secure funding and support for your organization's future. For more information about how to use the results of your evaluation, see [chapter 7](#). For more details about reporting your findings, see [chapter 8](#).

Benefit 5

Program evaluation offers unique benefits compared with other types of research and evidence building

This Guide walks you through the steps of conducting implementation and outcome evaluations. An evaluation will help you see how a program is carrying out its work (implementation evaluation) or the effectiveness of a program in producing change (outcome evaluation). While other evidence-building activities (such as an analysis of Census data to understand local community demographics) can help inform your work generally, only program evaluation efforts are specific to your program, your staff, your participants, your community, your context, and your world today. Program evaluation asks different questions and provides unique benefits (see [figure 1.1](#) and [table 1.1](#)).

Evaluation principles

To learn more about the guiding principles to evaluation design in the Administration for Children and Families' Evaluation Policy, see their website (OPRE, n.d.).

Benefit 6

Good evaluation can engage your community

As a program manager, you know programs work best when they meet the needs of a specific community. When program activities—including evaluation—are respectful and inclusive of the communities they serve and reflect the communities' aspirations, they can be more successful. You can structure your evaluation to provide frequent opportunities to engage your community throughout the research cycle (e.g., during the design phase, through data collection, sharing results when the evaluation is complete). Evaluation can also

empower your community to be partners (e.g., engaging them to collectively affirm your program goals) and co-creators of knowledge and information generation. Throughout this Guide, you will find examples of ways to ensure your evaluation is appropriate for and inclusive of the populations you serve. You can find more information about community engagement and culturally appropriate research practices embedded throughout this Guide.

Benefit 7

Evaluation can inform policy

Policymakers can make better decisions when they have credible evidence—evidence collected through high-quality, carefully constructed and executed evaluations—about how to design and implement programs, and what does and does not work. By conducting an evaluation and sharing your findings, you contribute to collective knowledge about human services programs and potentially influence decisions that can inform oversight and funding for programs like yours.

Considering Federal Program Evaluation Standards

Careful planning is needed to design an effective, high-quality evaluation, but methods and approaches may vary, depending on your program's unique circumstances and needs. The Administration for Children and Families' evaluation policy outlines the following broad evaluation principles to consider when designing an evaluation:

- **Rigor.** Does the evaluation use the most technical and credible methods appropriate to the evaluation questions and feasible within budget and other constraints?
- **Relevance.** Does the evaluation address questions of importance and serve the information needs of program staff, community members, funders, and the research field?
- **Transparency.** Is information about the planning, implementation, and reporting phases of the evaluation available and accessible to enable accountability, and does it enable users of the evaluation to understand and critique the design and methods?
- **Independence.** Does the evaluator operate with an appropriate level of independence from programmatic, regulatory, policymaking, and funding organizations activities?
- **Ethics.** Does the evaluation safeguard the dignity, rights, safety, and privacy of participants, community members, and affected entities?

These principles can also be found in the evaluation policies of several other federal agencies and in guidance related to the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018.

Balancing these principles will help protect you against launching an evaluation that is, for example, rigorous and independent but not useful to your organization's decision-makers or sensitive to the cultural background of your program participants.

Guidelines for Conducting a Successful Evaluation

As you prepare for and conduct your evaluation, the following guidelines can help you enhance its benefits. We address many of the guidelines in more depth throughout this Guide.

Invest in planning

Invest time and effort in deciding what you want to learn from your evaluation. This is the single most important step you will take in this process. Consider what you would like to discover about your program and how it affects participants, and use this information to guide your evaluation planning.

What about evidence standards?

You may have heard of “evidence standards,” which are standardized criteria that must be met for programs to be judged as tested and effective. Sometimes program evaluations are expected to generate specific types of evidence. For more details on evidence standards, see [chapter 5](#).

Tailor your evaluation to your program’s needs

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to program evaluation. An evaluation’s design will depend on several factors, including the types of research questions you need to address; your program’s structure, objectives, and resources; your community and program participants’ information needs, past experience with evaluation, and trust/comfort with the program; and how evaluation results will be used. Take the time to thoroughly assess these factors, and tailor your evaluation accordingly, rather than assuming you must use a specific type of evaluation design or data collection methodology.

Integrate the evaluation in ongoing program activities

Some program staff may see evaluation as something an outsider does after a program is over or as an activity “tacked on” to please funders. Unfortunately, many programs are evaluated in this way. You can increase the benefits of an evaluation by planning it and the program simultaneously so you can use evaluation feedback to inform and improve program operations.

Participate in the evaluation and show program staff you think it is important

An evaluation needs the program manager’s participation to succeed. Even if you hire an outside evaluator, that person or team cannot do the needed work without your input, and they will need you to teach them about your program, your participants, and your objectives. Staff will value the evaluation if you, the program manager, value it. Talk about it with staff individually and in meetings. If you hire an outside evaluator to conduct the evaluation, have them attend staff meetings and give evaluation updates and receive input and feedback from program staff. Your involvement will encourage a sense of ownership and responsibility for the evaluation among all program staff.

Identify and engage people and organizations who are interested in the program as much as possible and as early as possible. Program staff, partners, participants, community members, and others have considerable interest in the evaluation's success, and their ongoing engagement can make the evaluation more meaningful, relevant, and potentially more likely to inform future practice. These individuals and their representing organizations will have questions and issues the evaluation can address. Because of their experiences and expertise, program staff, community members, and policymakers can ensure the evaluation questions, design, and methodology are appropriate. Community members and program participants may also be more willing to participate in data collection and other evaluation-related tasks if they have been invested in the process along the way.

Be realistic about timing and burden

Evaluations take work. Even if your evaluation uses an outside evaluator to help design, collect, and analyze the data, time is needed to arrange for the evaluator to have access to records, administer questionnaires, or conduct interviews. Agencies and evaluators often underestimate how much additional effort these activities involve. When program managers and staff brainstorm about all the questions they want answered, they often produce a long list. Creating buy-in through brainstorming is often a good start to program evaluation, but it is important to narrow goals and information requested so your final evaluation plan is not too complicated. Focus on your top priority questions to ensure your evaluation is feasible within your budget, timeframe, and scope.

Address cultural and ethical issues

Good evaluation aligns with the social and cultural context of program participants and their communities. For example, it respects the cultural backgrounds and individuality of program participants and staff, makes use of their knowledge and strengths, and incorporates culturally sensitive data collection methods and instruments. It may also engage community members in various steps in the evaluation. Participants must be informed that they are taking part in an evaluation, and they have the right to refuse to participate in this activity without jeopardizing their participation in the program. You must also ensure confidentiality of participant information will be maintained.

Manage expectations

Make sure you clearly communicate with program staff, your participants, and others for whom the program's success is important, such as community members and funders, about the evaluation's goals, processes, scope, and the intended use of the findings. This will help ensure everyone is on the same page and knows what to expect regarding products the evaluation will produce, questions it will answer, and decisions its findings can inform.

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