OPRE

The Administration for Children & Families Common Framework for Research and Evaluation[1]

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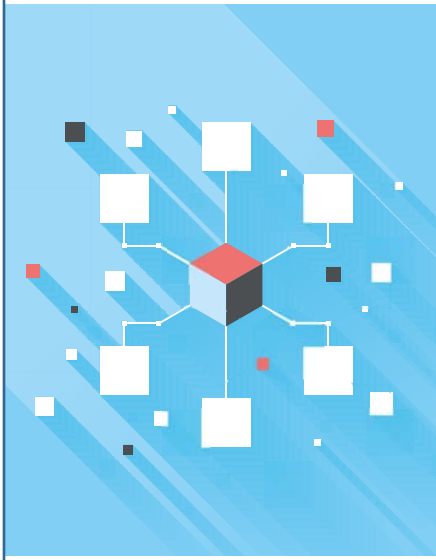

This document outlines the roles of various types of research and evaluation in generating information and answering empirical questions related to the human services provided by the Administration for Children & Families (ACF). More specifically, this document describes the purpose of each type of research, the empirical and theoretical justifications for different types of studies, types of study outcomes, and quality of evidence.

Fundamentally, this framework aims to (1) help organize and guide ACF's decisions about investments in research and evaluation and (2) clarify for potential grantees and contractors the justifications for and evidence expected from each type of study, as well as relevant aspects of research design that would contribute to high-quality evidence. The primary audiences for this document are agency personnel and organizations who seek funding from ACF for or who are engaged in research and evaluation projects, as well as broader audiences, including state and local policy makers and administrators.

By defining common expectations for study characteristics and clarifying the products that should result from different types of studies, ACF hopes to strengthen research and evaluation in human services – including obtaining meaningful findings and actionable results – through a more systematic development of knowledge.

TYPES OF RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

The six types of research and evaluation described in this document fall into two overarching research categories: Descriptive and Impact. Together, these six types of research and evaluation form a continuum of evidence that begins with basic and exploratory research; moves to design and development of interventions, programs, or strategies; and results in examination of their efficacy and effectiveness in improving health, wellbeing, or other relevant outcomes. However, the reality of

[1] This framework is based on the "Common Guidelines for Education Research and Development" developed by the Institute of Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education and the National Science Foundation, August 2013, available at: http://ies.ed.gov/pdf/CommonGuidelines.pdf

scientific investigation is often complicated, disorderly, and not linear. In addition, these categories do not represent the entire array of useful investigations, nor does this document describe the full range of purposes for which a given approach is valuable. Further, a study might not necessarily fall distinctly into one of these categories; rather, some studies might incorporate aspects of each of these research types into a single project. Below, we provide a basic description of the purpose of each of the six types of research and evaluation.

Descriptive Research and Evaluation contributes to core knowledge about human service-related constructs and phenomena, understanding of the programs and populations served, and development of solutions to achieve human services-related goals. Descriptive studies may be used to support "evidence-informed" service delivery. Descriptive studies can focus on program/policy implementation (e.g., describing implementation factors of an intervention or program, exploring relationships between implementation factors [i] and outcomes, designing and pilot testing implementation factors for an intervention) or on program content and participant outcomes (e.g., describing program content and/or target populations, exploring relationships between program components and outcomes, designing and pilot testing program content as part of an intervention). These types of studies might collect new data or include analyses of existing datasets or administrative data to address their objectives.

Descriptive Research and Evaluation contributes to core knowledge about human service-related constructs and phenomena, understanding of the programs and populations served, and development of solutions to achieve human services-related goals.

- **Research/Evaluation Type #1: Foundational Descriptive Studies** provide fundamental knowledge that may contribute to improved health, social wellbeing, economic wellbeing and other relevant outcomes. Studies of this type *provide descriptions and documentation* of interventions, services, programs, or policies currently being implemented in the field (including their program activities/components and implementation features) or populations eligible for or being served by human services interventions, programs, or policies and their characteristics. They examine these phenomena without establishing an explicit link between inputs and outcomes. They also seek to generate hypotheses and develop, refine, or test theories around human services-related constructs or phenomena (e.g., factors related to health, social or economic wellbeing, child or adolescent development, self-sufficiency, employment, etc.) and may develop methodologies and/or conceptual frameworks that will influence and inform research and development in different contexts. Examples of ACF foundational studies include:
    - Responding to Intimate Violence in Relationship Programs (RIViR)
    - Development of a Measure of Family and Provider/Teacher Relationship Quality (FPTRQ)

- Youth Demonstration Development Project (YDD)
- National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4)

- **Research/Evaluation Type #2: Exploratory Descriptive Studies** *examine relationships* among human services-related constructs (such as social or economic well-being, child or adolescent development, self-sufficiency, and including those related to program implementation, participant-level characteristics, or program components and activities) to identify logical connections that may form the basis for future interventions, programs, or strategies to improve health, social wellbeing, economic wellbeing, and other human services-related outcomes. These connections are usually correlational rather than causal. Exploratory descriptive research can also provide evidence for whether an existing intervention or program is ready to be tested in an efficacy study. Examples of ACF exploratory descriptive research studies include:
    - Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES)
    - National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being (NSCAW)
    - A Descriptive Study of County versus State Administered Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) Programs
- **Research/Evaluation Type #3: Design and Development Studies** *develop solutions* to achieve a goal related to human services, such as improving child wellbeing or increasing self-sufficiency. Projects of this type draw on existing theory and evidence to design and iteratively develop interventions, programs, or implementation strategies, including testing individual components to provide feedback in the development process. These projects may include pilot tests of fully developed interventions or programs in order to determine whether they achieve their intended outcomes under various conditions. Results from these studies could lead to additional work to better understand the foundational theory behind the results or could indicate that the intervention, program, or strategy is sufficiently promising to warrant more advanced testing. Examples of ACF design and development research studies include:
    - Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS)
    - TANF/SSI Disability Transition Project

Impact Research and Evaluation generates evidence of efficacy or effectiveness of a fully-developed intervention, program, or policy by providing estimates of the intervention's, program's, or policy's ability to achieve its intended outcomes. Impact

studies can focus on 1) program content (i.e., evaluating the impact of program content on participant outcomes), or on 2) program/policy implementation (i.e., evaluating the impact of implementation factors on implementation-related outcomes or participant outcomes). The three types of *impact evaluation* share many similarities in their approach, including designs that eliminate or reduce bias arising from self-selection into treatment and control conditions, clearly specified outcome measures, adequate statistical power to detect effects, and data on implementation of the intervention or strategy and the counterfactual condition. However, these studies vary with regard to the conditions under which the intervention is implemented and the populations to which the findings generalize. Specifically,

- **Research/Evaluation Type #4: Efficacy Studies** allow for testing of a strategy or intervention under "ideal" circumstances. For example, these conditions may include more implementation support or more highly trained personnel than would be expected under routine practice, or in contexts that include a more homogenous sample of individuals or families than is typical. Additionally, efficacy studies often including a higher level of support or developer involvement (if applicable) than would be the case under normal circumstances. Efficacy studies may choose to limit the investigation to a single population of interest. Examples of ACF efficacy studies include:
  - Permanency Innovations Initiatives Evaluation (PII)
  - Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM)
- **Research/Evaluation Type #5: Effectiveness Studies** examine effectiveness of a strategy or intervention under routine practice or circumstances that would typically prevail in the target context. "Typical" circumstance means that implementation should be similar to what would occur if a study were not being conducted and that there is no more substantial developer or technical assistance support than in normal implementation. Examples of ACF effectiveness studies include:
  - Head Start CARES (Head Start Classroom-based Approaches and Resources for Emotion and Social skill promotion)
  - Head Start Impact Study and Follow Up
  - Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project (ESHRE)
  - Employment Retention and Advancement Project
  - Health Professional Opportunity Grants (HPOG) Impact Study

Impact Research and Evaluation generates evidence of efficacy or effectiveness of a fully-developed intervention, program, or policy by providing estimates of the intervention's, program's, or policy's ability to achieve its intended outcomes.

- **Research/Evaluation Type #6: Scale-up Studies** examine effectiveness in a wide range of populations, contexts, and circumstances without substantial developer involvement in implementation or evaluation. As with effectiveness studies, scale-up research is carried out with no more developer involvement than would be expected under typical implementation. Examples of ACF scale-up research studies include:
    - Mother and Infant Home Visiting Program Evaluation –MIHOPE
    - Head Start Impact Study

All types of research and evaluation (both descriptive and impact research) should adhere to standards of rigor. Rigorous research incorporates the four following criteria:

- *Credibility:* The study should ensure that what is intended to be evaluated or researched is actually what is being evaluated or researched. The descriptions of the constructs, phenomena, programs, or populations being studied should be accurate and recognizable to others. The methods used should be the most definitive and compelling approach that is available and feasible for the research question(s) being addressed. If conclusions about program efficacy or effectiveness are being examined, the study design should include a comparison group (i.e., randomized control trial or quasi-experimental design).
- *Applicability:* The generalizability of the findings must be made clear to indicate how well the sample does or does not represent a particular population and whether findings apply to contexts and populations outside of the study parameters.
- *Consistency:* Processes and methods should be clearly outlined and followed so that they can be replicated in future studies to confirm findings.
- *Neutrality:* Studies should produce results that are as objective as possible, and acknowledge any biases that are introduced into the collection or analysis of data, or the interpretation of results.

Table 1 describes how these different types of research can be used to focus on program implementation and implementations factors/outcomes ***or*** on program content and participant/characteristics outcomes. Some research and evaluation studies might include a focus on both implementation and program content.

Table 1: Design and Focus of Research or Evaluation

DESIGN	FOCUS OF RESEARCH OR EVALUATION: Program Content and Participant Characteristics/Outcomes	FOCUS OF RESEARCH OR EVALUATION: Program Implementation and Implementation Factors/Outcomes
Descriptive Studies	• Foundational studies (#1) to develop theory or methods related to participant outcomes • Foundational studies (#1) to describe program content or participants and their characteristics • Exploratory descriptive studies (#2) of relationships between program activities or components and participant outcomes • Design and development studies (#3) of program activities or components	• Foundational studies (#1) to develop theory or methods related to program implementation • Foundational studies (#1) to describe program implementation factors (with a focus on systems and participant experiences in systems) • Exploratory descriptive studies (#2) of relationships between program implementation features and program activities • Design and development studies (#3) of program implementation features
Impact Studies	Efficacy (#4), Effectiveness (#5), or Scale-Up (#6) studies of the impact of program content (i.e., program activities or components) on participant outcomes	Efficacy (#4), Effectiveness (#5) or Scale-Up (#6) studies of the impact of program implementation features on implementation outcomes or participant outcomes

For each of these research/evaluation types, Table 2 characterizes:

- the **purpose**, or how the type of study contributes to the evidence base;
- the **policy and/or practical significance justifications** for the research or evaluation study;
- the **theoretical and empirical justifications** required for conducting this type of study; and
- expectations for **design** and expected **outcomes** of the research/evaluation.

Table 2: Research Type Summaries

RESEARCH TYPE	PURPOSE	POLICY AND/OR PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE JUSTIFICATIONS	THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL JUSTIFICATIONS	RESEARCH PLAN EXPECTATIONS	STUDY OUTCOMES
Descriptive Research					
Foundational Descriptive Research	• To describe and document existing interventions or programs and/or their target populations • To generate hypotheses, develop, refine, or test theories and methodology, create conceptual frameworks, and provide fundamental knowledge about constructs or phenomena related to human services provision	Study proposal should: • Indicate how the study will address important research problems or questions pertaining to human services-related constructs or phenomena • Have a clear description of the programs, populations and/or practical human services problem or issue that will be the study's focus and a compelling rationale for describing or studying the program, population, or problem	Study should be justified by: • A theoretical and empirical basis indicating why it is necessary to develop new theory, explore constructs, or create conceptual frameworks	Research plan should include: • Key hypotheses, research questions and objectives with theoretical or empirical basis • Detailed description of study design (including population of interest) • Sampling methods and sample size • Data analyses methods • Acknowledgement of limitations and potential bias in the plan	• Advances in theory, methodology and/or understanding of important constructs related to human services
Exploratory Descriptive Research	• To examine relationships between modifiable factors (e.g. behaviors, technologies, programs, policies, practices) or fixed factors (e.g. demographic characteristics) and human services-related outcomes in order to inform development, modification, targeting, or evaluation of intervention or program	Study proposal should: • Have a compelling case for generating important knowledge to inform the development, improvement, or evaluation of human services programs, policies and/or practices	Study should be justified by: • A theoretical and empirical rationale with citations of supporting evidence • A compelling explanation of why exploratory research (vs. efficacy research) is more appropriate, if it is a study of an existing intervention • Gaps in the existing research	Research plan should include: • Hypotheses and/or research questions with theoretical or empirical basis • Detailed research design • Justification for proposed research context and sample • Description of data sources and/or data collection procedures and instruments • Description of data analysis procedures and reporting plan • Acknowledgement of limitations and potential bias in the plan	• Empirical evidence on association between modifiable factors and human services-related outcomes • Conceptual framework supporting a theoretical explanation between the modifiable factors and outcomes • A determination on whether there is a basis for pursuing a design and development or efficacy study

RESEARCH TYPE	PURPOSE	POLICY AND/OR PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE JUSTIFICATIONS	THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL JUSTIFICATIONS	RESEARCH PLAN EXPECTATIONS	STUDY OUTCOMES
Design and Development Research	• To develop program or intervention approaches or components to address a human services-related issue based on well-specified theory of action • To create measures and collect data to assess the implementation and outcomes of the solution in a typical delivery setting • To conduct a pilot study to examine the promise of generating intended outcomes	Study proposal should: • Provide compelling rationale that specifies the practical problem and justifies its importance, describes how the intervention differs from others, and explains how the intervention will improve human services-related outcomes	Study should be justified by: • A theoretical and empirical justification for the development of the proposed strategy • Gaps in the existing research	Research plan should include: • The method for developing an intervention • The method for collecting evidence on feasibility of implementation • The method for obtaining pilot data on the promise of the intervention for achieving expected outcomes • Acknowledgement of limitations and potential bias in the plan	• Fully developed version of proposed research design • Well specified theory of action • Descriptions of major design iterations and resulting evidence for the theory of action • Description and empirical evidence of the adjustments to theory of action and intervention design resulting from design testing • Measures to test the intervention implementation • Pilot data on intervention's promise for generating intended beneficial outcomes

RESEARCH TYPE	PURPOSE	POLICY AND/OR PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE JUSTIFICATIONS	THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL JUSTIFICATIONS	RESEARCH PLAN EXPECTATIONS	STUDY OUTCOMES
Impact Research					
Efficacy Research	• To determine whether an intervention can improve outcomes under "ideal" conditions or under different conditions than in a previous evaluation	Study proposal should: • Provide clear description of the intervention to be tested • Provide compelling rationale that specifies the practical problem and justifies its importance, describes how the intervention differs from others, and explains how the intervention will improve human services-related outcomes • Justify the choice to examine impact of intervention under tightly controlled conditions	Study should be justified by one of the following: • Empirical evidence of the intervention's promise from a pilot study • Empirical evidence supporting the intervention's theory of action from early-stage research • Evidence that the intervention is widely used • Evidence of impacts from previous studies with a different population • Gaps in the existing research	Research plan should identify and justify: • The study design used to estimate causal impact of the intervention on outcomes of interest; should include randomly assigned treatment and comparison groups when feasible; quasi-experimental designs should only be used when threats to internal validity are implausible • Key outcomes of interest and the minimum effect size for policy or practical relevance • Study settings and target populations • Sample size and power for detecting an impact • Data collection plan, including information about procedures, measures, strategies for ensuring reliability and validity, program implementation data collection plans, comparison group practices, and study context • Analysis and reporting plan • Acknowledgement of limitations and potential bias in the plan • Studies focused on program implementation should consider measurement of implementation factors and outcomes[i]	• Detailed descriptions of study goals, design and implementation, data collection and quality, analysis, and findings of estimates of the intervention's average impact, including estimates of impact for sample subgroups as relevant. • Implications of the findings for theory of action and suggestions for adjusting the theory of action if warranted • Identification of organizational supports, tools and procedures that are key features of intervention, if impact is found • Identification of possible reasons if no impact is found (e.g., weaknesses in implementation) • Effect sizes for each outcome of interest, including details on how they were calculated.
Effectiveness Research	• To estimate impacts of intervention when implemented under conditions of routine practice	Study proposal should: • Provide clear description of the intervention to be tested • Provide compelling rationale that specifies the practical problem and justifies its importance, describes how the intervention differs from others, and explains how the intervention will improve human services-related outcomes • Justify the choice to examine impact of intervention under routine practice conditions	Study should be justified by: • Strong empirical evidence of the efficacy of the intervention, demonstrated by statistically significant and substantive estimates of impact • Evidence that the intervention is widely used even if it has not been evaluated for efficacy • Gaps in the existing research		
Scale-Up Research	• To estimate the impacts of an intervention, program, or strategy under conditions of routine practice and across a broad spectrum of populations and settings • Population groups should be sufficiently diverse to broadly generalize findings	Study proposal should: • Provide a clear description of the intervention to be tested • Provide compelling rationale that specifies the practical problem, justifies the problem's importance, describes how the intervention differs from others, and explains how the intervention will improve human services-related outcomes or increase efficiencies • Justify the choice to examine impact under typical implementation conditions with a broad sample	Study should be justified by: • Compelling evidence of intervention's effectiveness, demonstrated by statistically significant and substantive estimates of impact • No overriding evidence demonstrating negative impact of intervention • Gaps in the existing research		

[i] Implementation factors can include:

- **fidelity** (i.e., the extent to which the intervention is delivered as intended)
- **dosage** (i.e., the amount, quantity or strength, of the intervention that is delivered)
- **quality** (i.e., how clearly or correctly the intervention content is delivered)
- **participant responsiveness** (i.e., how well the intervention holds the attention or stimulates the interest of participants)
- **acceptability** (i.e., how satisfied participants or providers are with the intervention)
- **adoption** (i.e., the intention, decision, or action of stakeholders to implement an intervention)
- **appropriateness** (i.e., the perceived relevance or compatibility of an intervention for the setting, provider, or participants)
- **cost** (i.e., cost of providing program activities including materials, facilities, salaries and benefits, etc.)
- **feasibility** (i.e., the extent to which an intervention can be successfully delivered in a setting)
- **penetration** (i.e., the extent to which an intervention is integrated into a setting)
- **sustainability** (i.e., the extent to which an intervention is sustained or institutionalized into a setting's activities and operations)

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