



The Permanency Innovations Initiative (PII) Approach to Evaluation

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The Purpose of the PII Approach to Evaluation

The PII Approach to Evaluation is part of the overall [PII Approach](#), which integrates implementation science and program evaluation in a coordinated framework. Because the PII Approach to Evaluation incorporates ongoing collaboration between the evaluation (PII-ET) and implementation (PII-TTAP) teams, Grantees benefit from their cooperative support throughout the stages of implementation and phase-based evaluation.

The PII Approach to Evaluation supports a key goal of PII: to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of research-informed innovations and adapted evidence-supported interventions (ESIs) in reducing long-term foster care (LTFC). Effective innovations require both implementation integrity and intervention validity (Testa & White, 2014). Implementation integrity is whether an intervention is implemented as planned. Intervention validity is whether the intervention achieves the intended results. To assess implementation integrity and intervention validity, the PII Approach to Evaluation involves rigorous evaluations of Grantee interventions. In addition to site-specific evaluations, the PII Approach to Evaluation includes a cross-site evaluation that examines implementation, costs, and the achievement of permanency outcomes.

Permanency Innovations Initiative (PII)

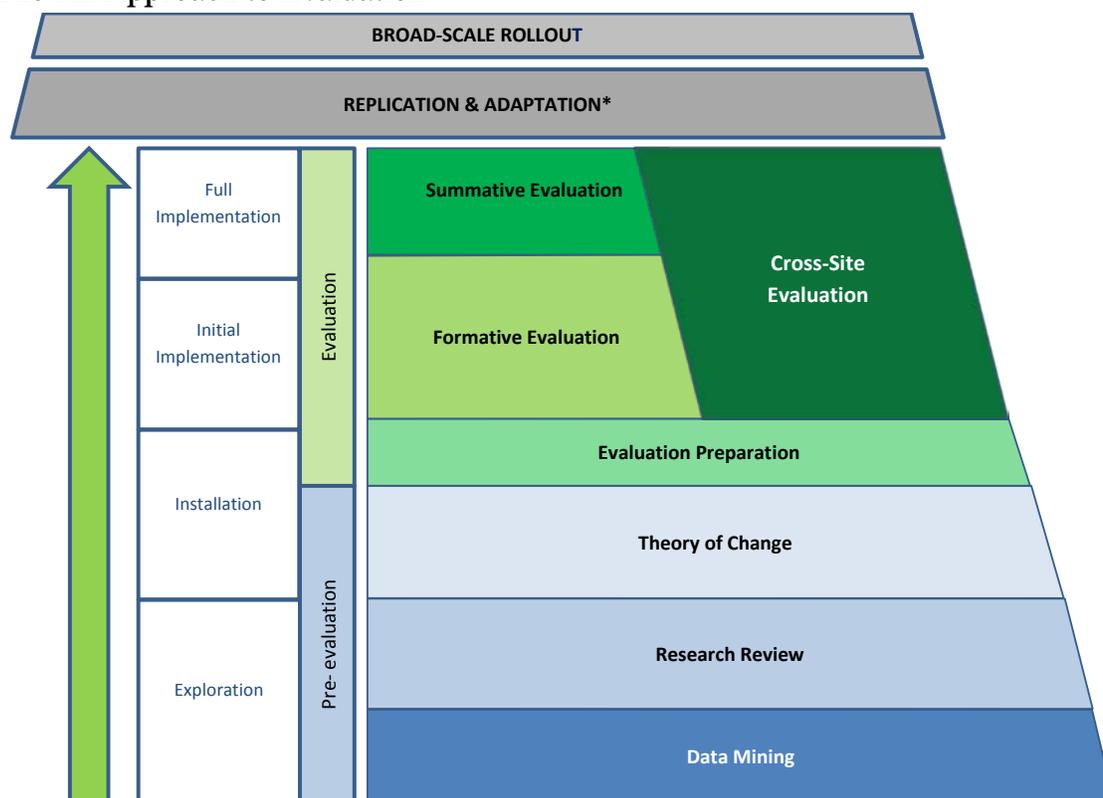
The federal Permanency Innovations Initiative (PII) is a multi-site demonstration project designed to improve permanency outcomes for children in foster care who face the most serious barriers to permanency. Child welfare policy and practice are limited by a lack of evidence-supported interventions. The PII project aims to address this lack by increasing the rate of children discharged to permanent homes and adding to the body of knowledge about what works in child welfare. In 2010, the Children's Bureau, within the Administration for Children and Families funded six Grantees, a training and technical assistance provider (PII-TTAP), and an evaluation team (PII-ET). Each Grantee is implementing a unique approach to the project, both in the populations they target and the interventions they develop or adapt. PII-ET is charged with designing and carrying out rigorous evaluations to examine the implementation and effectiveness of the interventions designed to reduce long-term foster care stays and improve child and family outcomes.

The Evaluation Process – Pre-Evaluation and Evaluation Activities

As shown in Figure 1, the evaluation process runs concurrent with the four stages of implementation, as defined by the National Implementation Research Network, part of PII-TTAP: (1) Exploration, (2) Installation, (3) Initial Implementation, and (4) Full Implementation.



Figure 1. The PII Approach to Evaluation



*Beyond the scope of PII

Pre-Evaluation Activities

Pre-evaluation activities, as shown in Figure 1, include: data mining, research review, and the development of a theory of change and take place during the exploration and installation stages of implementation.

PII-ET’s first pre-evaluation step is *data mining*, an activity that helps Grantees identify a target population for their intervention—a specific sub-set of the foster care population at risk of LTFC. Data mining is the process of reviewing existing administrative and program data to confirm or identify factors that put the selected target population at risk of LTFC¹.

The next pre-evaluation step is to conduct a *research review* to identify an appropriate intervention to meet the needs of the target population. Research review is the process of assessing the relative strength of the research evidence in support of proposed interventions. Research review findings are used to support the fit of an intervention to the target population or inform how it needs to be adapted to attain the desired outcomes².

¹ For more information, see *Using Data Mining to Identify At-Risk Populations in the Permanency Innovations Initiative*.

² For more information, see *Research Reviews in the Permanency Innovations Initiative*.

The final pre-evaluation step is for Grantees and PII-ET to define each Grantee's *theory of change*. The theory of change describes (1) external conditions that impact the outcomes of interest

The PICO Framework: Building an Evaluation Plan

PII uses the PICO framework (Testa & Poertner, 2010) to guide evaluation planning. PICO builds on the information gained through data mining and research review to prepare Grantees to develop a theory of change. With PII-ET and PII-TTAP, Grantees complete four PICO templates:

1. **Population** template - uses data mining results to present evidence in support of the chosen target population.
2. **Intervention** template - incorporates research review findings to support the fit of an intervention to the target population or inform how it needs to be adapted to attain the desired outcomes.
3. **Comparison** template – assists Grantees to identify appropriate comparison groups.¹
4. **Outcomes** template - summarizes the short- and long-term outcomes that Grantees expect to achieve through their intervention.

PII-ET then uses the completed PICO templates to develop evaluation plans for Grantees which include the research questions and design, data collection procedures, analysis plans, and timeline for each site-specific evaluation.

such as economic and historical factors; (2) assumptions about the match between the intervention and the needs of the target population; and (3) the desired outcomes of the intervention. PII-ET works with Grantees to summarize the theory of change in a logic model. The logic model connects implementation activities to expected intervention outputs and outcomes.

Evaluation Activities

Once implementation begins (installation stage), evaluation preparation also begins. This includes testing data collection procedures to ensure they yield valuable evaluation information. PII-ET evaluates the PII interventions in two phases: (1) formative evaluation; and (2) summative evaluation. ***Formative Evaluation*** begins once an intervention is operational. The

formative evaluation has two primary purposes: (1) provide information that allows Grantees to adjust service delivery strategies, if necessary; and (2) advise PII-ET of the project's readiness for summative evaluation. The formative evaluation is a critical phase as it provides the opportunity to make mid-course corrections to both interventions and evaluation procedures. Data collected during the formative evaluation phase are used to ensure that short-term outcomes are moving in the right direction and the initiative is not harming children or producing negative results.³

Summative Evaluation is the final phase of the PII Approach to Evaluation and occurs only after the formative evaluation shows that an intervention is stable. For the summative evaluation phase, PII-ET encourages Grantees to implement Randomized Control Trials (RCTs) to test the impact of PII interventions on long-term outcomes (i.e., permanency). RCTs are the most rigorous

³ For more information, see *Using Evaluation Data and Making Mid-Course Corrections: Examples from the Permanency Innovations Initiative Formative Evaluations*.

method for determining if a causal relationship exists between interventions and outcomes, that is, whether the outcomes observed can be directly attributed to the interventions.

Looking at the Big Picture

In addition to site-specific evaluations, PII-ET conducts a [cross-site evaluation](#) which merges data across sites to answer key research questions: Do PII interventions reduce LTFC? Do PII interventions achieve shorter-term outcomes, such as improved readiness for permanency? Do case-level entry characteristics (e.g, child age) influence the achievement of shorter-term outcomes and reductions in LTFC? Does service delivery influence the achievement of shorter-term outcomes and reduction in LTFC? Is the implementation capacity of Grantees improved? What are the costs of the PII Approach? What are the costs of operating a fully implemented intervention?

The cross-site evaluation answers these questions through four separate studies: (1) an implementation study, (2) an administrative data study, (3) primary data studies, and (4) a cost study. The PII implementation study examines how implementation processes relate to outcomes and the role training and technical assistance plays in facilitating successful implementation and improvements in permanency outcomes. It includes four components:

1. A baseline web survey of organizational readiness to change which explores agency personnel's willingness to use ESIs or develop a new innovation to address barriers to permanency for children and youth most at risk of LTFC;
2. Qualitative case studies of each Grantee's experience, including the context in which PII is implemented, the structure of each PII organization, and first-hand accounts of agency personnel involved in the project;
3. An Implementation Quotient (IQ) Tracker to assess fidelity to the intervention; and
4. A web-based driver assessment survey to track the implementation processes used by Grantees.

The administrative data study uses existing state administrative data⁴ to assess whether interventions help improve outcomes for children and families, including long-term permanency outcomes. The primary data studies collect data on selected short-term outcomes, such as readiness for reunification, that are unavailable in child welfare administrative data systems. The cost study uses agency data to assess costs associated with implementing interventions, including personnel costs associated with various intervention activities.

Conclusion

The PII Approach to Evaluation is helping to build the evidence-base in child welfare by engaging Grantees in a comprehensive and rigorous evaluation strategy designed to better understand which interventions work and for which populations of children, youth, and families. It is supported by the PICO framework which helps Grantees understand and better prepare for evaluation, which in turn, promotes the development of rigorous and effective evaluation plans that

⁴ For more information, see *Using Administrative Data in the Permanency Innovations Initiative Evaluation*.

yield reliable results. In addition, the cross-site evaluation provides opportunities to understand the PII “big picture” by merging data across Grantees to answer key research questions about what works (and how) to reduce LTFC. In the end, the PII Approach to Evaluation will yield information to guide the development and evaluation of interventions that effectively reduce LTFC and, in doing so, improve the lives of children and youth nationwide.

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