

Evaluation Policy¹

2019

Introduction

This evaluation policy outlines key principles that govern our planning, conduct, and use of evaluation. This policy indicates our commitment to conducting rigorous, relevant evaluations and to using evidence from evaluations to inform policy and practice. We seek to promote rigor, relevance, transparency, independence, and ethics in the conduct of evaluations. This policy addresses each of these principles.

Minnesota Management and Budget's mission is to serve the people of Minnesota by providing the state with leadership and guidance to support efficient and effective government. The importance of these goals demands that we support continual innovation and improvement of state-funded activities, as well as those of our partners. Through research and evaluation, we can learn systematically so that we can make our services as effective as possible.

Rigor

We are committed to using the most rigorous methods available given our evaluation questions, budget, and other constraints. Rigor is relevant in all forms of evaluation, including process, outcome, and impact evaluations that use qualitative and/or quantitative data. Rigor requires ensuring that inferences about cause and effect are well founded (internal validity); requires clarity about the populations, settings, or circumstances to which results can be generalized (external validity); and requires the use of measures that accurately capture the intended information (measurement reliability and validity).

In order to assess the effects of programs or services in a rigorous way, our evaluations use methods that isolate to the greatest extent possible the impacts of the programs or services from other influences such as trends over time, geographic variation, or pre-existing differences between participants and non-participants. For causal questions, experimental approaches are preferred. When experimental approaches are not feasible, high-quality quasi-experiments offer an alternative.

Accordingly, we employ staff with academic training and experience in a range of relevant social science disciplines. We provide professional development opportunities so that staff can keep their skills current. We also consult with external advisors who are leaders in relevant fields.

Relevance

Evaluation priorities should reflect the interests, needs, and sensitivities of the populations served; legislators and other state leaders; partners such as other state agencies, tribes, local governments, and grantees; researchers; and other stakeholders. There should be strong partnerships amongst evaluation staff, frontline program staff, policy-makers, target populations, and service providers. These stakeholders should have the opportunity to influence the questions that will be answered by evaluations. For new initiatives, evaluations are more feasible and useful when planned with stakeholders from the outset of the initiative, rather than as an afterthought.

We disseminate findings in ways that are accessible and useful to policy-makers and practitioners. We also strive to provide this information at the right time, place, and format to facilitate use.

¹ This evaluation policy draws extensively from the [evaluation policy](#) published by the federal government's Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in November 2012 (the policy is also explained in this [short video](#)). We thank ACF for their leadership in concisely articulating these important principles.

We integrate both use of existing evidence and opportunities for further learning into all of our activities. Where prior evidence exists, we use it. Where an evidence base is lacking, we seek to build evidence through strong evaluations. The emphasis on evidence is to support—not inhibit—innovation, improvement, and learning.

Independence

Independence and objectivity are core principles of evaluation. Agency and program leadership, program staff, service providers, and others should participate actively in setting evaluation priorities, identifying evaluation questions, and assessing the implications of findings. However, it is important to insulate evaluation functions from undue influence and from both the appearance and the reality of bias. In order to objectively assess programs, we protect independence in the design, conduct, and analysis of evaluations. To this end, the Results Management team has authority to approve the design of evaluation projects and to publish evaluation findings.

Transparency

To promote accessibility and replicability, we pre-register evaluation hypotheses, analysis plans, and limitations in advance ([MN OSF page](#)). We release evaluation results regardless of the findings.

Final evaluation reports describe the methods used, including strengths and weaknesses, and discuss the generalizability of the findings. These reports present comprehensive results, including favorable, unfavorable, and null findings. We release results in a timely manner, usually within two months of a report's completion. When permitted by data privacy laws and feasibility we archive evaluation data for secondary use by interested researchers.

Ethics

We conduct high-quality evaluations in an ethical manner and safeguard the dignity, rights, safety, and privacy of participants and their data. We seek to uphold the [Belmont Report](#) principles of respect for persons (protecting participant autonomy), beneficence (minimizing participant risks and maximizing benefits), and justice (fair distribution of any risks and benefits in participating in the study). To support these aims, we seek appropriate Institutional Review Board approval for evaluations classified as Human Subjects Research, uphold both the spirit and the letter of relevant regulations requirements, and adhere to professional guidelines (such as the American Evaluation Association's [Ethical Guiding Principles](#)).