# What is evaluation?

Evaluation is a rigorous, systematic and objective process to assess a program's effectiveness, efficiency, appropriateness and sustainability.[1] It is about reflecting back on lessons learned and making a judgement about a program to influence decision making in policy and practice.

A robust evaluation can result in improvements to the design, implementation and impact of a program and can lead to a better understanding of program outcomes and 'what works'.

This Factsheet outlines the main types of evaluation often used in the human services sector, explains common methodologies, and provides links to resources to assist you to understand more about evaluation.

## Types of evaluation

The main types of evaluation used to evaluate social support programs are process evaluation, outcome evaluation and economic evaluation.  An evaluation may use one or a combination of these types of evaluations to assess a program.

### Process evaluation

Process evaluation is used to:

- examine how a program is implemented
- define what is required in making a program successful to enable replication of the program
- facilitate continuous improvement of a program.[2]

This type of evaluation can be used to differentiate between ineffective programs and programs that have failed due to implementation issues.

### Outcome evaluation

Outcome evaluation (sometimes called impact or results evaluation) is the most commonly used evaluation type and is used to:

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[1] NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet 2016, NSW Government Program Evaluation Guidelines, NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet, Sydney.
[2] NSW Government, 'Develop the evaluation brief', accessed on 23 March 2020, http://www.dpc.nsw.gov.au/programs_and_services/policy_makers_toolkit/steps_in_managing_an_evaluation_project/2._develop_the_evaluation_brief

- assess whether a program has been effective in producing change and how the program contributed to the outcomes

- identify for whom, in what ways and in what circumstances the outcomes were achieved.[3]

## Economic evaluation

Economic evaluation is about analysis of costs and outcomes. It explores whether a program provides value for money, cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit.

For example, the evaluation of the Housing First program in Canada involved completion of a preliminary cost-benefit analysis. The analysis found that for every $10 invested in Housing First resulted in an average reduction in costs for health, social and justice services of $9.60 for participants with high needs and $3.42 for participants with moderate needs.[4]

# Evaluation methodologies

Good evaluation design is critical to the overall credibility and utility of an evaluation. The key evaluation questions will influence the type of evaluation undertaken and the methods for data collection and analysis.

Evaluators often use the same methodologies that are used in social research. Most program evaluations will collect quantitative and qualitative data in a mixed methods design. This can produce a more complete understanding of a program and balance the limitations of one type of data with the strengths of another.

- **Quantitative methods** measure the extent and pattern of outcomes across a program through the use of surveys, outcomes measures and administrative data.

- **Qualitative methods** enable more detailed exploration of the behaviour of people and organisations, using observation, in-depth interviews and focus groups to help understand 'how and why' a program might work or fail.

Evaluations are most effective if they are planned before the project is implemented, so that data collection mechanisms can be built in to ensure data is collected as the project progresses, rather than retrospectively.

# Experimental and quasi-experimental designs

For outcome or impact evaluations, the most rigorous methodology uses comparison or control groups which compare the outcomes of program participants (intervention group) and a control group. While they require careful planning to implement in practice, such experimental designs are often used to evaluate the impact of complex interventions, as they reduce biases and have a better chance than other methodologies of tracking cause and effect.

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[3] NSW Government, 'Develop the evaluation brief', accessed on 23 March 2020, http://www.dpc.nsw.gov.au/programs_and_services/policy_makers_toolkit/steps_in_managing_an_evaluation_project/2._develop_the_evaluation_brief
[4] Goering, P, Veldhuizen, S, Watson, A, Adair, C, Kopp, B, Latimer, E, Nelson, G, MacNaughton, E, Streiner, D, & Aubry, T 2014, National At Home/Chez Soi Final Report, Mental Health Commission of Canada, Calgary.

Examples of experimental designs include individual or cluster randomised control trials, stepped wedge designs, preference trials, randomised consent designs, and N-of-1 designs. For a description of these methodologies see Appendix 2 of Using Research Evidence: A Practice Guide.

The above designs all rely on some degree of randomisation. When randomisation is not possible, quasi-experimental designs can be used to provide reasonably strong evidence of intervention effectiveness. In these designs, different interventions are offered but with no random allocation to groups. Rather comparison groups are formed through natural populations or by matching participants with a similar group (case-matching). Careful matching and analysis to reduce the major differences between groups increases confidence that outcomes can be attributed to the program, however this may require complex analytical work and specialist knowledge.

Research designs that lack control or comparison groups cannot rule out other influences to prove that a program is the cause of differences in participant outcomes. Although they may provide support for program effectiveness, these evaluations do not provide sufficient evidence for a program to be classified as evidence-based.

## Useful resources

The NSW Government Program Evaluation Guidelines provide consistent guidelines for application by NSW Government departments.

The NSW Government Evaluation Toolkit provides information and resources to help government agencies implement the Evaluation Guidelines.

The Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation paper, 5 Essentials for Effective Evaluation provides an overview of the five prerequisites for effective evaluation in education.

Better Evaluation is an international collaboration for sharing and generating information about evaluation methods, processes and approaches.

The Local Government Association of South Australia provides a list of evaluation methods and evaluation terminology.

Developing and evaluating complex interventions: new guidance by the UK Medical Research Council discusses a variety of ways to develop, evaluate and implement complex interventions.

You can read more about different types of evaluation designs and methods in The Alliance for Useful Evidence and Nesta's Using research evidence: A practice guide.

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Strategy, Outcomes and Evidence
FACS Insights, Analysis and Research (FACSIAR)
NSW Department of Communities and Justice
320 Liverpool Rd, Ashfield NSW 2131
www.facs.nsw.gov.au
Email: facsiar@facs.nsw.gov.au

For more information contact FACSIAR at
FACSIAR@facs.nsw.gov.au