Conducting Program Evaluations to Determine Effectiveness

Outcome evaluations ask the question, "Is the program working?" The aim of an evaluation is to determine if there are positive (or negative) changes in the children, youth, or parents served. Organizations are encouraged to partner with a university or another type of research institution to help them select an evaluation design that works best for their program. It is typically recommended that an organization first start with a *process evaluation*, which examines the program's structures and practices, including the logic model, data systems, and implementation. An **Evaluability Assessment (EA)** is a type of process evaluation that helps identify whether an outcome evaluation is justified, feasible, and likely to provide useful information. Click on the link in the box below for more information.

A **Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT)** is the scientific gold standard for determining the effectiveness of a program. An RCT measures a program's effect by *randomly assigning* a sample of program participants to a group that completes the program, or to a *control group* that does not. Many policymakers and administrators use findings from RCTs to make evidence-based policy and programming decisions. An **Opportunistic Experiment (OE)** is an RCT for real-world settings with limited time or resources. OE examines the effects of an initiative, program change, or policy action that an agency or program plans or intends to implement. See links in box below for more information on both types of RCTs.

Lastly, **Quasi-Experiments** can be a second best alternative when an RCT is not possible**.** Quasi-experiments feature an intervention group and control group but lack the randomization of participants into each group, which limits the generalizability of the study's findings.

IMPORTANT EVALUATION TERMS:

- **Random assignment** – A process that reduces the likelihood of bias by assigning people (or sites or counties) to specific groups (e.g., your program or a control group) by chance alone (i.e., randomly). When groups are created by random assignment, individual characteristics are less likely to make the results inaccurate.
- **Control group** – A group that receives no intervention or a different type of intervention (e.g., treatment as usual). Allows researchers to compare the impact of the intervention to other groups.

RESOURCES ON PROGRAM EVALUATIONS:

1. **Evaluability Assessment** (BetterEvaluation, 2015) – Information & resources on conducting an EA (www.betterevaluation.org/en/themes/evaluability_assessment)
2. **Key Items to Get Right When Conducting Randomized Controlled Trials of Social Programs** (Arnold Foundation, 2016) – A checklist and description of critical tasks for conducting a successful RCT (www.craftmediabucket.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/Key-Items-To-Get-Right-When-Conducting-Randomized-Controlled-Trials-Of-Social-Programs.pdf)
3. **Opportunistic Experiments Toolkit** (Mathematica Policy Institute, 2015) – Detailed information on OE (www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/oe_learning_what_works_toolkit_final_2_b508.pdf)
4. **Which Comparison-Group ("Quasi-Experimental") Study Designs are Most Likely to Produce Valid Estimates of a Program's Impact?** (Arnold Ventures, 2018) – Considerations for quasi-experimental designs (www.craftmediabucket.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/Validity-of-comparison-group-designs.pdf)

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