

EVALUATION 101



What is evaluation?

- To evaluate is to establish the worth or value of a program or practice. Worth or value is established in relation to the desired ends of the program or practice.
- Program evaluation involves “the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of programs” in order to “inform decisions, clarify options, identify improvements, and provide information about programs and policies...” (Patton, 1997).

Goal of evaluation

- The primary goal of evaluation is to improve the quality of a program or practice. By establishing the worth or value of a program or practice in achieving the desired ends, decision makers are able to make programmatic adjustments that improve quality in relation to the desired ends.
- Many program directors perceive evaluation as a burdensome “hurdle” that must be crossed in order to assess whether a program should receive future funding. Evaluation should be seen as a necessary part of good management and quality improvement.

Types of evaluations

- **Planning evaluation.** A planning evaluation focuses on developmental issues prior to program or practice startup. It requires one to examine the specific needs of the population to be served prior to establishing a program or practice. Planning evaluations consist of:
 - An identification of the nature of the problem.
 - A statement of the objectives based on the problem identified.
 - An identification of the specific population affected (i.e., target population), as well as a rationale as to why the target population was chosen.
 - An identification of all factors related to program implementation (e.g., political, economic, public opinion, etc.).
 - An identification of the resources needed/available.
 - Selection of an evaluator (in-house or independent) to conduct **process** and **outcome** evaluations.
- **Process evaluation.** A process evaluation assesses the steps that occur within the program or practice setup. Some key questions that get answered with a process evaluation include, but are not limited to, the following:
 - Why was the program introduced?
 - What people/institutions became involved? What roles did they play? How did the program affect their relationship with each other?

- What did the program actually do? Were the program's activities undertaken as specified in the initial design?
 - Was the program directed at the target population originally identified?
 - Why did the program reach some people in the target population but not others? What were the characteristics of the dropouts and non-participants?
 - How satisfied are clients and staff?
- **Outcome evaluation.** An outcome evaluation assesses whether the desired ends of the program or practice are achieved. While outcome evaluations establish the "bottom line" evidence of whether desired ends are being achieved, in most cases it is impossible to determine what factors of the program or process produced the desired ends without also conducting a process evaluation. The type of outcome evaluation measures that might be used with mentally ill offender programs include, but are not limited to:
 - The number of crimes committed by clients after they leave the program (i.e., recidivism).
 - The number of jail or prison bed days saved by the program.
 - The number of hospital or other community bed days saved by the program.
 - Other measures of client success, such as employment, education, or strengthened families.

Please note that outcome measures are best when stated as a comparison. This comparison is most frequently with a similar group (a control group) or by comparing data on the offenders before and after the program. As with process measures, select outcome measures that reflect what relevant practitioners and decision makers want to know about the impact of a program or practice.

Methods of data collection (process and outcome evaluations)

- **Interviews.** Interviews involve one-on-one communication with key players in the program or process being evaluated. Interviews can be one of two types:
 - **Structured** questions are predetermined and the interviewer does not deviate from these questions.
 - **Semi-structured** questions are predetermined, however, the interviewer is able to deviate from them whenever necessary.
- **Focus groups.** Focus groups typically consist of between 5-10 individuals who are brought together with the goal of obtaining their perceptions regarding a particular area of interest. A few carefully chosen questions are asked one at a time by a skilled facilitator, and participants take turns sharing their opinions/perceptions and responding to others' comments.
- **Observation of events.** Observations of a program's workings can give insight into how processes within the program interact. Observation also allows one to gain a truer perspective on the program being evaluated (e.g., does the program

truly function in a manner consistent with what key players immersed in the program perceive to be the case?).

- **Questionnaires/Surveys.**
 - **Close-ended questions.** Responses to these questions are predetermined. Common formats of close-ended questions include multiple-choice questions and rating questions. The advantage of this type of question is that it allows for relatively easy data consolidation and analysis. The main disadvantage of this type of question is that it does not allow the responder a way to expand on his/her answer to specific questions, nor does it allow the responder to provide a response that is not present among the choices listed.
 - **Open-ended questions.** Responses to these questions are not predetermined, but instead allow the responder to answer a question without restrictions. The advantage of this type of question is that it gives the responder freedom to express his/her opinion in a way that best addresses the question being asked. The main disadvantage to this type of question is that the evaluator has very little control in the type of response that is given. This can be problematic if the responder misinterprets the question being asked or gives an answer that is unclear or vague. Additionally, it is often difficult to combine, or code, varying individual responses into categories reflecting general trends.
- **Analysis of existing documents/official records.** Documents and records from hospitals, jails, service providers, and other agencies or organizations can provide information on individual clients (e.g., how many times a client has been hospitalized or jailed), and can also allow for demographic information to be collected (e.g., what population of clients is being served). Generally, a “release of information” form needs to be signed by the client in order to obtain client-specific information.

Types of data to be collected

- **Quantitative data** are data that can be explained in number terms (e.g., percentage of people who recidivate, number of jail bed days saved, etc.). The data often come from either an analysis of existing documents, such as hospitalization records and jail records, or from close-ended survey questions. These types of data are generally easy to analyze and interpret.
- **Qualitative data** are data that come from open-ended questions, such as those from interviews, focus groups, and some questionnaires. The data can provide detailed descriptions of all facets of a program or practice. Qualitative data captures a person’s attitudes, beliefs, thoughts and experiences. Because of the subjective nature of qualitative data, these data are typically more difficult to analyze and interpret than quantitative data.

Both quantitative and qualitative data can be extremely useful. Which type of data one should collect is dependent upon what the evaluator is trying to obtain. Typically, planning and process evaluations have a large qualitative data component, whereas outcome evaluations have a large quantitative component. However, it is common for an evaluation to consist of both types of data.

Other factors that need to be considered in conducting evaluations

- **Cost-benefit analysis.** A cost-benefit analysis looks at the relationship between the costs associated with the program or practice and the benefits to be gained by the program's or practice's existence. Generally, this relationship is expressed in financial terms. What is included in a cost-benefit analysis can vary greatly, and depends upon those costs and benefits that are most important to decision makers and funding sources.
 - Direct costs and benefits. Direct costs and benefits are those that are directly related to a particular project, such as a mental health court. Examples of direct costs are those costs that are typically noted in a grant application.
 - Indirect costs and benefits. Indirect costs and benefits are those that cannot be identified readily and specifically with a particular project. These costs and benefits usually do not show up on grant applications. Often these indirect costs and benefits are harder to measure and to quantify financially, but in programs for mentally ill offenders, such indirect factors typically give a better picture of the value of the programs. For example, what is the value of a former offender who achieves more stable employment after program completion?

Choose a model that will generate findings on the costs and benefits that are most important to decision makers and funding sources.

Whether measuring direct or indirect costs and benefits, it is also important to distinguish between short-term and long-term costs and benefits. For example, a court may not experience many short-term benefits from lower rates of recidivism. But even modest reductions in recidivism sustained over years can produce substantial long-term benefits to the court.

- **Independent vs. In-house evaluations.** An evaluation can be conducted in-house or by an independent source. There are three advantages of using in-house evaluators:
 - 1) In-house evaluators are more likely to be familiar with the structure and function of the program, as well as what data is available to analyze.
 - 2) In-house evaluators may be more adept at fine-tuning the evaluation to best suit the needs of the program and its stakeholders.
 - 3) In-house evaluators are typically cheaper to use than independent evaluators.

There are two primary advantages of using independent evaluators:

- 1) Independent evaluators may have greater technical expertise in conducting evaluations.

- 2) Independent evaluators may be perceived as more credible because they do not have a tie to the program or a stake in the program.

The decision is then, given available funding, how technically challenging is the desired evaluation, and how important is enhanced credibility that comes with independent evaluators?

Do not let cost keep you from conducting an evaluation. If necessary, select someone in-house or appoint a group and conduct a rudimentary evaluation. The goal is to generate information that enhances the program.

- **How to Select an Independent Evaluator** – If you choose to hire an independent source to conduct an evaluation, cost will be a crucial element in the selection process. Beyond cost considerations, assess (1) the technical ability to conduct the desired evaluation, and (2) familiarity with the subject matter being evaluated. Establish technical ability by looking at academic background and evaluations previously conducted by the independent vendors. Additionally, choose someone who has previously conducted evaluations in the subject matter of interest, or is very familiar with the subject matter. In other words, if what you really want to evaluate is case management, select a vendor that knows something about case management.

Above all else, make sure the independent evaluator will be generating information on what you most want to know about your program or practice.

References

Books

Patton, M.Q. (1997). Utilization-Focused Evaluation: The New Century Text (3rd Ed.). California: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Witkin, B.R., & Altschuld, J.W. (1995). Planning and Conducting Needs Assessments: A Practical Guide. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Altschuld, J.W., & Witkin, B.R. (2000). From Needs Assessment to Action: Transforming Needs into Solution Strategies. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Maxwell, J.A. (1996). Qualitative Research Design. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Periodicals

The American Journal of Evaluation. A publication of the American Evaluation Association.

New Directions for Evaluation. A publication of the American Evaluation Association.

Organizations and Websites

Ohio Program Evaluators' Group (OPEG). OPEG is an affiliate of the American Evaluation Association (AEA), which is devoted to the application and exploration of evaluation in all its forms.

Telephone: (614) 445-8131

Fax: (614) 444-3541

Web site: www.opeg.org

AEA web site: www.eval.org

Bureau of Justice Assistance. BJA, a component of the Office of Justice Programs, has a web site devoted to program evaluation, including an exhaustive set of links devoted to all aspects of evaluation.

Web site: www.bja.evaluationwebsite.org