

Using evidence in policymaking

Policymakers at each level of government are using research, combined with context from local practitioners and community members, to guide policy and funding decisions. This document highlights key questions and resources to use when incorporating evidence of program effectiveness into your decision-making.

Questions to assess the evidence

- **Production:** Who produced the evidence, when, and why?
- **Rigor:** What type of evidence is it? What are the potential weaknesses?
- **Outcomes:** What does the evidence say about the effects, for whom, and where?
- **Variability:** What other interpretations and perspectives should be considered?
- **Evidence base:** What additional evidence supports these results? Opposes?

What questions are answered by different types of evaluations?

- **Process evaluations:** Was the program implemented as intended? What types of unexpected issues emerged and how can they be addressed? What ideas should we test?
- **Outcome evaluations:** What outcomes did participants experience during/after the program?
- **Impact evaluations:** Did the program have the desired impact(s) on participants (relative to comparable nonparticipants)?

The Results First Initiative rates services using qualifying **impact evaluations** that reveal the extent to which there is a cause and effect relationship between the program and desired outcomes.

What are qualifying evaluations?

Qualifying evaluations are impact evaluations that use either a randomized controlled trial or quasi-experimental design to assess the effectiveness of a program on desired outcomes.

- **Randomized controlled trial (RCT):** Researchers use random assignment to place individuals into “treatment” and “treatment as usual” groups. Participants have similar characteristics, except for the service they receive. The difference in outcomes at the end of the study is attributed to the treatment offering.
- **Quasi-experimental design (QED):** Sometimes randomization is not appropriate for technical or ethical reason. QEDs use statistical matching or practical strategies to create a like comparison. For example, a program with a waitlist could be an opportunity to use a QED. Researchers ensure treatment and comparison have similar characteristics at the “starting point” of the evaluation, so any differences can be attributed to the program.

Rating the quality of a qualifying evaluation

Definitions	
Proven Effective [Evidence-based]	A Proven Effective service or practice offers a high level of research on effectiveness for at least one outcome of interest. This is determined through multiple qualifying evaluations outside of Minnesota or one or more qualifying local evaluation. Qualifying evaluations use rigorously implemented experimental or quasi-experimental designs.
Promising [Evidence-based]	A Promising service or practice has some research demonstrating effectiveness for at least one outcome of interest. This may be a single qualifying evaluation that is not contradicted by other such studies but does not meet the full criteria for Proven Effective. Qualifying evaluations use rigorously implemented experimental or quasi-experimental designs.
Theory Based	A Theory Based service or practice has either no research on effectiveness or research designs that do not meet the above standards. These services and practices may have a well-constructed logic model or theory of change. This ranking is neutral. Services may move up to Promising or Proven Effective after research reveals their causal impact.
No effect	A service or practice rated No Effect has no impact on the measured outcome or outcomes of interest. Qualifying evaluations use rigorously implemented experimental or quasi-experimental designs.
Proven harmful	A Proven Harmful service or practice offers a high level of research that shows program participation adversely affects outcomes of interest. This is determined through multiple qualifying evaluations outside of Minnesota or one or more qualifying local evaluation. Qualifying evaluations use rigorously implemented experimental or quasi-experimental designs.

Resources

Minnesota Management and Budget

- Evidence-based policymaking resources: <https://mn.gov/mmb/evidence>
- Results First website: <https://mn.gov/mmb/results-first/>
- Inventory of services: <https://mn.gov/mmb/results-first/inventory/>

Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative

- National Results First: <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/projects/pew-macarthur-results-first-initiative>
- Clearinghouse of services: <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/data-visualizations/2015/results-first-clearinghouse-database>
- Guide for evidence-based policymaking: <http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2014/11/evidence-based-policymaking-a-guide-for-effective-government>

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