

# Enhancing the Usefulness of Evidence to Inform Practice

National Child Welfare Evaluation Summit

Panel #4: Comparing the Level of Rigor in Child Welfare Evaluation to Other Fields

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# Issues I Will Address

1. What is the current situation regarding “evidence-informed” practice?
2. Where might we find criteria for judging the credibility of evidence?
3. What is needed to facilitate the transferability of policy interventions?

# Why Is the Quality of Evidence So Important?

- Calls for evidence-based policy making, evidence-based practice, and evidence-based management are here to stay
- Foundations and professional organizations, such as the Cochrane Collaboration and the Campbell Collaboration, are drawing attention to the need for higher levels of evidence to inform public policy debate
- The federal government has embraced the notion of evidence-based management as seen in the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guidance that random control trials (RCTs) are the “gold standard” for producing credible evidence, and the What Works Clearinghouse at the Department of Education

# What Are Implications of the Focus on Evidence in Evaluation Practice?

- Higher demands placed upon evaluators to demonstrate the quality of the evidence they produce
- Lack of a clear, shared understanding about when evidence is good enough
- Anxiety about how to produce high level evidence in fieldwork where random assignment is simply not an option
- Attempts in some fields to create decision rules to apply to interventions so that they are then listed as “Evidence-based” so that others can adopt them

# Criteria for Judging the Credibility of Evidence

# How Might We Source Criteria for Judging Evidence?

- In the public policy arena there are multiple audiences who bring different perspectives, values, and priorities to the assessment of evidence
- Child Welfare policy research brings together a number of professionals with different training and perspectives
- Adherence to social science methodological norms and accepted practice is a place to start, but may not be enough
- Producing actionable evidence in the public domain entails consideration of policy-relevant criteria
- The Government Accountability Office conducts policy-relevant research in the public eye and offers a useful rubric, called the “rule of evidence”

# The Rule of Evidence\*

- ❑ **Competence:** Was the methodology used to collect the evidence competently executed by competent professionals?
- ❑ **Relevance:** Does the evidence address the evaluation question?
- ❑ **Sufficiency:** Is the evidence convincing to the consumers of the evaluation?

\* The Rule of Evidence from the GAO “Yellowbook” of Government Auditing Standards

# Competence

## What Constitutes Competence?

- Valid and widely accepted measures (**measurement validity**)
  - Selecting credible measures is challenging in many areas, such as obesity interventions where the measures of the food and physical activity environments are “first generation measures” in many ways
- Reliability in measurement procedures (**reliability**)
- Data and logic supporting inferences about the causal linkage between the intervention and the observed outcomes (**internal validity**)

**Competence** will be judged by well-founded and clearly explained decisions about...



# Relevance and Sufficiency

## How Do We Judge?

- Experience and professional standards can help but will not dictate the “correct” methodological choices
- Resources must be balanced with rigor
- Producing “compelling” data may well be harder when you are evaluating policy interventions in the field without much control over the context
- The goal is to produce convincing data that constitute “compelling” and understandable evidence to inform practice

# What Is Needed to Facilitate the Transferability of Interventions

# Transferability of Interventions

- ❑ What will others need to know to replicate the intervention?
- ❑ What are reasonable expectations of results for future replications?

# What Will Others Need to Know to Replicate the Intervention?

- The **context** of the policy intervention must be described in enough detail that others may know whether it is feasible to replicate the intervention. Include:
  - Relevant demographic information about the participants in the evaluation
  - Resource requirements for implementing the intervention
- The manner in which all key components of the intervention were implemented must be described in enough **detail** that others may actually implement it

# What Are Reasonable Expectations of Results for Future Replications?

- A realistic **assessment of the overestimation of effectiveness** due to the methodological aspect of the evaluation, such as participants and/or staff being highly motivated to behave in the desired direction due to the novelty of the situation
- Pertinent information about **implementation processes** so that the essential elements needed to ensure appropriate implementation, and a reasonable time dimension for observing results, is clear
- A realistic **description of all training** required to implement intervention

# In Sum: Expectations Matter!

1. The **current environment**, in which calls for evidence-based interventions and evidence-based policy are prevalent, has raised the stakes for production and presentation of evidence
2. Competent execution of rigorous methodology is **necessary, but not sufficient**, for production of credible evidence
3. In addition to being **competent**, evidence must be **relevant** and **sufficient** to be convincing to the audiences for your evaluations

# Expectations Matter! Cont'd

4. It is critical for evaluators to clearly convey the **credibility** of the **measures, inferences, and numbers** they generate
5. In order to facilitate replication of successful interventions, detailed information about **implementation** of the intervention is necessary to allow others to implement policies and interventions in new contexts
6. Evaluators have a professional responsibility to provide **detailed information** about their evaluations, the **context for the intervention** they evaluated, and the **implementation itself** to permit successful transference to new locations

# Resources

## Evaluation Texts

- \* Pawson & Tilley (1997): Realistic Evaluation, Sage Publications
- \* Rossi, Peter & Freeman (2003): Evaluation: A Systematic Approach, Sage Publications
- \* Weiss (1997): Evaluation, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Prentice Hall
- \* Wholey, Hatry & Newcomer Eds. (2004): The Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation, Jossey-Bass