



Key Elements of Evidence-Based Policymaking

Overview

As government leaders continue to face tough budget and policy choices, using evidence to inform decisions can help them direct limited resources more efficiently and effectively. Evidence-based policymaking consists of five key components identified by the Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative that governments can adopt to effectively engage in this approach.

Outlined below are various actions that state and local policymakers can take to implement each of the five components and encourage the use of evidence. While a jurisdiction does not need to apply each one to engage in evidence-based policymaking, leaders should use this list to examine what they currently do and identify opportunities for improvement.

For more information on these components, please visit the [Evidence-Based Policymaking Resource Center](#).

Program assessment: Identifying effective programs

Review the evidence base of public programs in order to take actions to improve outcomes, reduce costs, and increase accountability.

- ✓ Establish formal definitions of evidence and create a shared understanding of them across agencies and branches of government.
- ✓ Create a comprehensive list of currently funded programs in a specific policy area that includes key information such as program description, frequency, and duration, and compare that list with the evidence base to determine which programs are most likely to be effective based on rigorous research.
- ✓ When feasible, analyze programs' benefits and costs to identify their anticipated return on investment.

Budget development: Using evidence to inform funding decisions

Use evidence of program effectiveness in budget processes to make more informed investment choices.

- ✓ Embed requirements into contracts and grants that prioritize the use of programs that have been proved effective.
- ✓ Require agencies to use evidence to justify requests for new or additional program funding.
- ✓ Prioritize budget allocations for programs that are supported by strong evidence of effectiveness.

Implementation oversight: Ensuring effective program delivery

Support effective implementation to ensure that the benefits of evidence-based programs are achieved.

- ✓ Regularly assess community needs and use that information to select appropriate evidence-based interventions.
- ✓ Develop implementation policies or guidelines that clarify expectations for program fidelity and hold service providers accountable to these standards.
- ✓ Provide training and technical assistance to staff and service providers on how to implement evidence-based programs with fidelity.
- ✓ Create systems to continually monitor program implementation and improve performance.

Outcome monitoring: Measuring results

Track and report outcome data to determine whether programs or priorities are achieving desired results.

- ✓ Regularly track outcomes (e.g., annually, quarterly, monthly) for key programs, priority areas, or goals, and ensure that all measures and benchmarks are accurate and meaningful for providers and policymakers.
- ✓ Analyze and report targeted outcome information (e.g., by jurisdiction, provider, and/or demographic characteristics) to more efficiently identify problems and develop targeted strategies to address them.
- ✓ Provide ongoing opportunities for leadership and agency staff to discuss performance data and strategies for improving outcomes.
- ✓ Coordinate and combine outcome monitoring activities with other complementary efforts that use research and data to evaluate programs and inform decision-making.

Targeted evaluation: Assessing untested programs

Support impact evaluations of select public programs to learn what works.

- ✓ Hire and train staff to facilitate impact evaluations.
- ✓ Build partnerships with external research entities such as local universities that can conduct or provide support for impact evaluations.

- ✓ Use existing administrative data instead of gathering data from scratch to reduce evaluation costs.
- ✓ Align data policies—such as data-sharing agreements—and funding to support evaluations.

Glossary of key terms

Administrative data: Information—such as vital records, college enrollment data, or Medicaid utilization statistics—collected and maintained primarily for the routine management of programs and services.

Cost-benefit analysis: A comparison between a program’s expense and its expected benefits to understand what each dollar invested “buys” in short- and long-term benefits to a community. Some benefits can be realized within one annual budget cycle, while others will accrue over a longer period.

Evidence-based program: A program that has demonstrated measurable impact on a desired outcome, gauged by rigorous evaluations that incorporate valid and reliable comparison group designs.

Fidelity: The extent to which the delivery of an intervention adheres to its protocol or original model.

Impact evaluation: A targeted, rigorous study of how an intervention affects specific outcomes.

Outcome measure: A metric that tracks the achievements or impacts of a program or policy, such as the post-graduation employment rate of students who entered a program aimed at increasing school attendance. An outcome measure is different from an output measure, which tracks a program’s activities, such as the number of students served.

Program: Systematic activities that engage participants in order to achieve desired outcomes. For example, a child abuse prevention program provides early intervention services to at-risk and underserved parents to promote greater family stability and decrease the incidence of abuse or neglect.

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The Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative, a project of The Pew Charitable Trusts and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, works with states to implement an innovative evidence-based policymaking approach that helps them identify and invest in policies and programs that are proven to work.