

# Using Evidence to Inform Policy & Program Decisions: Rapid-Cycle Evaluations & Opportunistic Experiments

---

54<sup>th</sup> National Association for Welfare Research and  
Statistics Annual Workshop

Tuesday, August 19, 2014

---

Michelle Derr (moderator) • Jonathan McCay •  
Alexandra Resch • Lauren Akers

---

---

# Rapid-Cycle Evaluation in the TANF Service Environment

# State of the States

---

- **TANF programs experience continued budget cuts and are under increased pressure to prove that their programs work**
  - **Having to rethink program structures and make fast changes in response to these constraints**
  - **Facing greater scrutiny of how funds are used**
- **Policymakers and program administrators need quick and reliable information about what works and how to improve**
- **Rapid-cycle evaluation offers an approach that can meet the needs of program staff and policymakers, while benefiting the broader research community**

# Importance of Evidence-Based Decision-Making

---

- **Federal push: guidance from the Office of Management and Budget (July 2013)**
  - Encouraged “high-quality, low-cost evaluations [to] help agencies improve the quality and timeliness of evaluations – for example, by building evaluation into ongoing program changes and by reducing costs by measuring key outcomes in existing administrative datasets”

(Burwell, Munoz, Holdren, & Krueger, 2013, p. 3)

# Importance of Evidence-Based Decision-Making

---

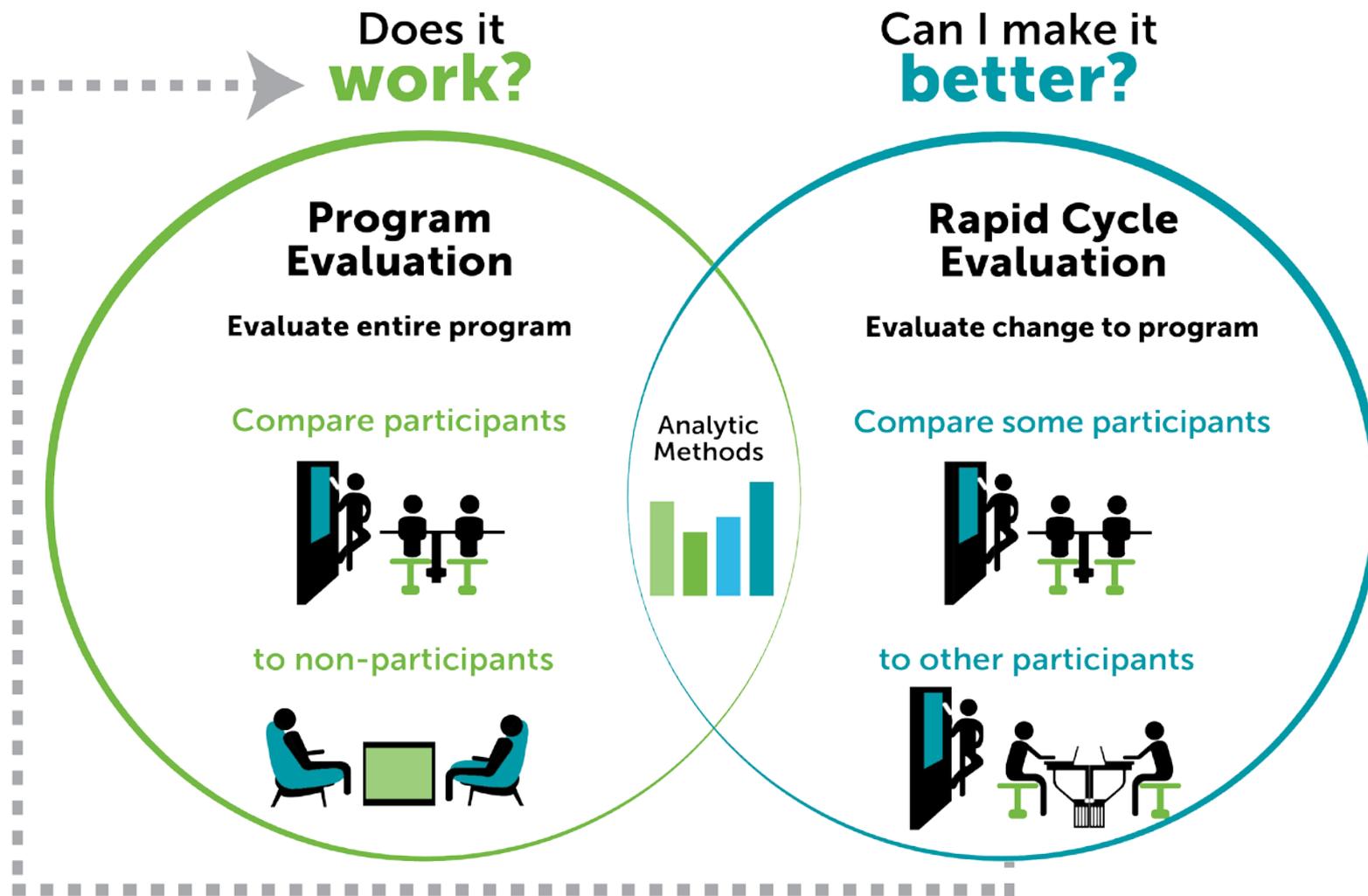
- By **not** incorporating research where reasonably possible, we miss an opportunity to generate reliable evidence
  - Policy decisions and program changes often lack the validation of reliable evidence
  - Interventions may squander already limited tax-payer funds, staff time and resources on policies that are ineffective
- A strong research design helps pinpoint an intervention's impacts
- Rapid-cycle evaluations can produce **trustworthy** and **timely** evidence at **reduced cost** regarding the effectiveness of a particular service or program change

# What is “Rapid-Cycle Evaluation”?

---

- **Testing program and service delivery changes specific to your context**
- **Leveraging administrative data to measure impacts**
  - **Eliminates the need for wide-scale data collection → can drastically reduce costs and administrative burden**
- **Making tweaks and changes in response to the data in a shortened timeframe (months vs. years)**
  - **“Test and tweak” as opposed to “test and abandon”**

# What is "Rapid-Cycle Evaluation"?



# What is "Rapid-Cycle Evaluation"?

	<b>Program Evaluation</b>	<b>Rapid Cycle Evaluation</b>	<b>Performance Monitoring and Piloting</b>
<b>Question</b>			
Is the program better than alternatives?	●		
Is the program getting better?		●	●
<b>Outcomes</b>			
Primary	●	●	●
Intermediate	●	●	●
<b>"Real Time" Information</b>		●	●
<b>"Clean" Test?</b>	●	●	
<b>Precise Impact</b>	●	●	

# Opportunities for Rapid-Cycle Evaluation

---

- **The TANF service environment is rich in opportunities to conduct rapid-cycle evaluations**
  - **Test small changes or tweaks to service delivery**
    - Communication strategies
    - Intake procedures
    - Case management
- **Example: NYC Human Resources Administration**

# Opportunities for the TANF community

---

- **Advancing Welfare and Family Self-Sufficiency Research (“Project AWESOME”) contract funded through ACF/OPRE**
  - **Goal is to build state/local research capacity**
  - **Adapting opportunistic experiment toolkits to the TANF context**
  - **Data Center and Scholars Network**

---

# Taking Advantage of Opportunistic Experiments

# Two Guides Developed for the Institute of Education Sciences

---



## **Making the Most of Opportunities to Learn What Works: A School District's Guide**

Guides available at  
<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/>

# Evidence-Based Decision Making

---

- **Lack of rigorous evidence prevents many administrators from making evidence-based decisions**
- **Existing evidence may not be relevant for the client population or service environment**
- **Experiments conducted by states and localities provide a chance to fill this evidence gap**

# What Are Opportunistic Experiments?

---

- **Opportunistic experiments are randomized controlled trials that take advantage of a planned intervention or policy action—that is, an opportunity—to generate rigorous evidence**

# What Characterizes Opportunistic Experiments?

---

- **An opportunity to randomly assign participants to a planned intervention, policy, or practice**
- **Low-disruption experimentation initiated by the entity being studied**
- **Strong partnership between researchers and implementers**
- **Relatively easy access to data about key outcomes**

# Identifying Random Assignment Opportunities

---

- **Excess demand**
  - **Example: In-demand training program**
- **Limited resources**
  - **Example: Rollout of new intensive assessments**
- **Pilot test of new program or service**
  - **Example: New curriculum**
- **Centralized communications**
  - **Example: Outreach campaigns**

# Assessing the Feasibility of the Research Project

---

- **Theory of change**
- **Specifics of random assignment**
- **Outcome measurement**
- **Timeline**

# Developing a Theory of Change

---

- **Describes the causal chain of events that leads from the implementation of the intervention to the desired outcome**
  - Inputs: What is invested in the program?
  - Process: What is done in the program?
  - Outputs: What is produced by the program?
  - Outcomes: What results?
- **A diagram can provide a structure for thinking about the actions or changes in behavior we expect to see as a result of the intervention**

# Specifics of Random Assignment

---

- **What will be randomly assigned?**  
**Individual clients? Case managers?**
- **Who is eligible to be included?**  
**All? Volunteers?**
- **When does random assignment occur?**  
**In the fall? On a rolling basis?**
- **Where does random assignment occur?**  
**Centralized location? At each site?**
- **How big will the treatment and control groups be?**  
**50 percent in the control group?**

# Measuring Outcomes

---

- **What are the key outcomes?**
- **Do you have access to data on these outcomes?**
- **Are missing data common?**
- **Are the outcomes measured similarly for the treatment and control groups?**

# Timeline

---

- **When does the intervention occur?**
  - **Can affect timing of random assignment, so important to assess early**
- **How long does the intervention last and when will we see the desired outcomes?**
  - **Affects choice of outcome measures, length of study**

# Key Challenge: Building Support for Random Assignment

---

- **Random assignment is a fair way to distribute resources and services in cases of excess demand**
- **Study findings can enable an organization to better serve clients and allocate limited resources**
- **If needed, the study can offer participation incentives**

# Key Challenge: Accommodating People Who Must Be in the Program

---

- **Researchers can exclude these individuals from both random assignment and the study**
- **It is important to:**
  - **Identify exemptions before random assignment**
  - **Ensure that all exemptions are accurately documented**
- **Remember, exemptions reduce sample size and may limit external validity**

# Key Challenge: Examining Long-Term Outcomes Vs. Making Quick Decisions

---

- **Researchers should identify short-term outcomes that may shed light on long-term outcomes**
- **When possible, researchers should collect IDs that would allow for long-term follow-up**

---

# Case Studies

# Case Study 1: Rental Assistance Program

---

- **A state public housing agency (PHA) currently provides rental assistance to families whose children cannot be returned to home because of a lack of adequate housing. The agency wants to expand the rental assistance program to former foster youth, ages 18 to 21, whose housing is inadequate and who were at least age 16 when they exited foster care. The PHA is unsure whether the program will be effective for this population.**

# Planning the Research Project

---

- **Is there an opportunity for random assignment?**
  - **Pilot an unproven intervention with a new population**
- **Is the project feasible?**
  - **What is the theory of change?**
    - **Stable housing → self-sufficiency and well-being**
  - **What are the specifics of random assignment?**
    - **Randomly assign local PHAs? Youth within each PHA?**
    - **Centralized random assignment**
  - **How will outcomes be measured?**
    - **Housing, employment, and education enrollment?**
    - **Health and mental health outcomes?**
  - **What's the timeline?**
    - **How long until we see program results?**
    - **How long can the control group wait?**

# Responding to Stakeholder Concerns

---

- **At the PHA's partner agency, the state child welfare agency, program administrators feel that it would be unfair for some youth to receive rental assistance while others do not.**
  - **Program impact unknown**
  - **Evidence of program impact could enable PHA to serve more youth**
- **Case managers are concerned that the experiment will be disruptive. Will the experiment add to their workload?**
  - **Planned program change happening with or without study**
  - **Outcome data already collected**
- **PHA administrators are concerned about the financial implications of the experiment. They have heard that these kinds of studies are expensive.**
  - **Low recruitment costs because PHA initiating the research**
  - **Outcome data already collected**
  - **If program ineffective, could save otherwise wasted money**

# Case Study 2: Health Certificate Program

---

- **The local community college has developed a new accelerated health certificate program. Unfortunately, the number of clinical slots available at local hospitals is limited and only 150 students will be able to enroll in the first cohort. The college anticipates that it will receive at least 500 applications.**

# Planning the Research Project

---

- **Is there an opportunity for random assignment?**
  - **Program with excess demand**
- **Is the project feasible?**
  - **What is the theory of change?**
    - Accelerated health certificate → employment and earnings
  - **What are the specifics of random assignment?**
    - Assign applicants through lottery
    - Centralized random assignment
  - **How will outcomes be measured?**
    - Employment status at graduation? Other?
  - **What's the timeline?**
    - Duration of the program plus follow-up?

# Responding to Stakeholder Concerns

---

- **The director of the health certificate program is concerned that many of the applicants are not prepared for the academic rigor of the program.**
  - **Only randomly assign qualified applicants**
- **The hospital director is concerned about potential bad publicity from participating in an experiment.**
  - **Data-use agreement to ensure anonymity and right to review**
  - **Importance of dissemination for field, contextually relevant results, and staff communication**

# Case Study 3: Messages to Noncustodial Parents

---

- **A state is concerned that their current communications with noncustodial parents are too focused on child support enforcement and may discourage participation in useful services. They believe that messages that focus on employment services might be more effective at increasing child support payments.**

# Planning the Research Project

---

- **Is there an opportunity for random assignment?**
  - **Centralized communication effort**
- **Is the project feasible?**
  - **What is the theory of change?**
    - Messages about employment services → service participation → employment → child support payments
  - **What are the specifics of random assignment?**
    - Centralized random assignment
  - **How will outcomes be measured?**
    - Service participation, employment status, and child support payments?
  - **What's the timeline?**
    - Immediate implementation—no need for recruitment or consent
    - How long until we see results of communication?

# Responding to Stakeholder Concerns

---

- **Employment program managers are concerned that their programs have specific eligibility criteria. Will they be obligated to provide services to anyone who responds to the new messaging?**
  - **Advertising employment services, not guaranteeing participation**
- **Advocates for noncustodial parents wonder whether, given the history of punitive enforcement, noncustodial parents will feel safe participating in state services.**
  - **Parents not obligated to participate**
  - **If parents do not participate, may indicate need to address feelings of safety**

---

# Group Discussion

# For More Information

---

- Jonathan McCay  
[jmccay@mathematica-mpr.com](mailto:jmccay@mathematica-mpr.com)
- Alexandra Resch  
[aresch@mathematica-mpr.com](mailto:aresch@mathematica-mpr.com)
- Lauren Akers  
[lakers@mathematica-mpr.com](mailto:lakers@mathematica-mpr.com)
- Michelle K. Derr  
[mderr@mathematica-mpr.com](mailto:mderr@mathematica-mpr.com)