

# Research-to-Results

Fact Sheet

Child TRENDS.

...information for practitioners,  
funders, and program designers on  
commonly used research terms for  
evaluation

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## A GLOSSARY OF RESEARCH TERMS FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAM PRACTITIONERS

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This glossary of common research and evaluation terms can serve as a quick reference guide for out-of-school time practitioners as they face the challenges posed in this new era of program accountability. Subsequent briefs will provide more detailed information on particular types of research and evaluation designs.

### RESEARCH TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

#### Intervention

Any program, program activities, or other planned efforts aimed at producing changes in the individuals who are served by programs.

#### Target Population

Children/youth, parents, communities, organizations, or similar groups that are the focus of a program, program activities, or other planned efforts.

*Example:* The target population for a mentoring program might be youth who live in low-income households or in a particular neighborhood.

#### Study Sample

A group within a larger population that is selected for a study.

*Example:* The study sample for an out-of-school time program aimed at improving reading scores might consist of children in certain schools from among all the schools in a particular state.

#### Outcomes

Specific attitudes, behaviors, skills, or characteristics of children or youth that are influenced by a program. Programs seek positive outcomes, although negative outcomes might also occur.

*Examples:* Child and youth outcomes might include reading skills, responses to conflict, self-esteem, employment, knowledge of nutrition, and avoidance of drug use.<sup>1</sup>

#### Data

Facts and information that are collected about a program, its services, or its participants.

*Example:* The number of teenage girls participating in activities provided by a pregnancy prevention program is one type of data that a program can collect.

#### Data Entry

The process of entering information collected on a program or its participants into a computer spreadsheet or information management system.

#### Data Analysis

The process of describing, examining, summarizing, and explaining data.

## Survey/Questionnaire

A tool for collecting information from a sample of individuals. Individuals who are given the survey are asked questions as a way to gain information about their background, opinions, behaviors, or other topics. Surveys can take a number of forms, including oral, written, and electronic.

*Example:* An out-of-school time tutoring program may give a survey or questionnaire to participants in the program to learn where they attend school, what school subjects are most difficult for them, and whether their tutors are perceived as helpful.

## Interviews

The method of obtaining information directly from people (“respondents”) who participate in a study. Interviews can be *structured*, in which case the researcher follows a specific question-and-answer process. Interviews can also be *unstructured* and resemble a conversation that develops throughout the interview. Interviews can be conducted in person or over the telephone.

## Focus Groups

A form of interviewing in which individuals who participate in a study are brought together in a group to offer opinions, provide reactions, suggest ideas, or recommend actions to be taken.

## Cognitive Interviews

A way of determining if people completing a survey understand the questions, think that a question is worded strangely, or find the vocabulary used hard to grasp. The individuals who respond are provided with questions and are asked to think aloud and describe what comes to mind as they answer them. On the basis of this information, questions may be changed or clarified.

## Open-Ended Survey Questions

Questions on a survey that allow the people who respond to answer freely and in their own words, as opposed to responding according to pre-set categories provided by the researcher.

## Qualitative Research

A type of research in which information is generally collected in non-numerical form. Such information may be useful in helping to interpret quantitative findings (see the next item in this glossary) and may provide deeper understanding about how participants feel about a program and its activities. This type of research often involves detailed, verbal discussions.

*Example:* Qualitative research could include conducting *unstructured interviews* with open-ended questions among out-of-school time program participants about their favorite program activities, their least favorite program activities, and their interactions with program staff.

## Quantitative Research

A type of research in which information is collected in numerical form (using numbers).

*Example:* Quantitative research could collect data on students’ grades, absences from school, or the average number of hours that program participants spend watching television each week. These data could provide evidence of program outcomes.

## EVALUATION TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

### Evaluation Research

The process of acquiring and assessing information to provide useful feedback about the effects of a program or program activity to a variety of audiences, including administrators, staff, volunteers, sponsors, funders, donors, program participants, and others. Many different types of evaluations exist, depending on what is being evaluated and the purpose of the evaluation.

## Formative Evaluations

Evaluations that examine the delivery of the program and the quality of its implementation, as well as assess the organizational context, personnel, procedures, inputs, and other aspects of the program. They strengthen or improve the program element being evaluated.

Formative evaluation includes several evaluation types:

- **Needs assessment** determines who needs the program, how great the need is, and what might work to meet the need.
- **Evaluability assessment** determines whether an evaluation is feasible and how stakeholders can help shape its usefulness.
- **Structured conceptualization** helps stakeholders define the program, the population that will be served, and the possible outcomes (i.e., the results that occur for program participants).
- **Implementation evaluation** monitors the effectiveness of program delivery.
- **Process evaluation** investigates how the program is delivered, including alternative ways of producing program services.

## Summative Evaluations

Evaluations that describe what happens as a result of the delivery of a program or program activity. They assess whether the program or activity could be said to have caused an outcome, as well as estimate the costs associated with the program or its associated activities.

## Outcome Evaluations

Evaluations that investigate whether the program or activity is associated with changes for program participants. This type of evaluation looks at whether, to what extent, and in what direction outcomes change for those in the program.<sup>2</sup>

*Example:* A pregnancy prevention program designed to reduce sexual activity among teenage girls in the program can conduct an outcomes evaluation. Such an evaluation could let program staff know if sexual activity among youth decreased, stayed the same, or increased after they were in the program.

## Cost-Effectiveness/Cost-Benefit Analysis

Addresses questions of efficiency by assessing program outcomes in terms of their dollar costs and value.

## Meta-Analysis

Summarizes findings from multiple studies to arrive at an overview of an evaluation issue or question.

## Pre-Test Assessment

An assessment of participants that occurs before or at the beginning of a program. This is also referred to as a *baseline assessment*.

## Post-Test Assessment

An assessment of study participants that occurs at the end of a program or shortly afterward. The data obtained from a post-test typically are compared with data obtained from the pre-test to help determine what effect the program or program activities had on the individuals in a program.

**Random Assignment**  
(also called *Randomization*)

Assigning participants in a study to a treatment or control group by chance, similar to the way that winning numbers are picked in a lottery. Using random assignment reduces the possibility of bias in selecting who will be in each group.

**Experimental Design**  
(also called *Random Assignment Study*)

A type of evaluation that compares the outcomes of two groups, such as children or youth, that are randomly assigned to either an *experimental group* (also called a *treatment group*) or a *control group* (the *no-treatment group*).

**Experimental Group** (also called the *Treatment Group*)

Those who are selected through *random assignment* to receive the program services, but who otherwise do not differ from the control group.

**Control Group**

A group selected through *random assignment* to receive no program services.

**Quasi-Experimental Design**

An evaluation design that compares the outcomes of two groups, such as children or youth- the *treatment group* and a *comparison group* - who were not randomly assigned to their respective groups.

**Comparison Group**

The group, such as children or youth, in a quasi-experimental evaluation that receives no program services.

**Cross-Sectional Study**  
(also called *Point-In-Time Study*)

A type of study in which data are collected at one specific point in time, without a follow-up. The same data may be collected at a later point in time, but for a different set of study participants.

*Example:* The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) is a cross-sectional study that surveys high school students once and does not follow these students over time. The same information is collected from new groups of high school students each year.

**Longitudinal Study**

A study that follows the same study participants over a period of time and collects data from them at multiple time points.

*Example:* The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth – 1997 Cohort (NLSY97) collects information annually from the same individuals who were first interviewed in 1997.

**Observational Study**

A study that collects data by observing study participants and coding their behaviors and/or interactions.

*Example:* An observational study could be one in which a researcher counts the number of times a mother praises or punishes her child in a 20-minute period.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR YOUR PROGRAM**

- § Gambone, M.A. (2006). Community action and youth development. In Fulbright-Anderson & Auspos (Eds.). *Community change: Theories, practice, and evidence* (pp.269-322). Washington, DC: Aspen Institute.
- § Harvard Family Research Project: Out-of-School Time Learning and Development Project/Out-of-School Time Evaluation Database.  
Among many materials, the project produces a periodical about evaluation purposes, methods, and trends.  
<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/>
- § Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) Out-of-School Time – 21st Century Community Learning Centers.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES (cont.)

NWREL's Web site provides a number of resources, including research about out-of-school time programs and information about how to conduct program evaluations.

<http://www.nwrel.org/ecc/21century/index.html>

- § Southwest Educational Development Laboratory – A Resource Guide for Planning and Operating After-School Programs.

This site provides resources on evaluation practices, including information on data collection and analysis.

<http://www.sedl.org/pubs/fam95/evaluation.html>

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<sup>1</sup> Bronte-Tinkew, J., Moore, K.A., & Shwalb, R. (2006). *Measuring outcomes for children and youth in out-of-school time programs: Moving beyond measuring academics*. Washington, DC: Child Trends.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.