

PRACTICE

Laying the Groundwork for an Impact Evaluation

OVERVIEW

This three-part exercise is designed to accompany Modules 1, 2, and 3 of the Homelessness Evaluation Resource Hub. Complete the corresponding section of this exercise after completing the “watch” and “read” materials in each module.

Module 1

Overview of Impact Evaluations → complete exercise [Part 1: Developing a Research Question](#)

Module 2

Creating a Theory of Change → complete exercise [Part 2: Building a Theory of Change](#)

Module 3

Data and Measurement → complete exercise [Part 3: Mapping a Measurement Strategy onto a Theory of Change](#)

Completing this entire exercise will provide users with a resource that can serve as a roadmap for future evaluation activities related to their program or intervention of interest.

Part 1: Developing a Research Question

INSTRUCTIONS

Complete Part 1 of this exercise after viewing the video and reading the resources under Module 1: Overview of Impact Evaluations.

A **research question** articulates the central inquiry that a study seeks to address. Different questions can be answered through different types of research. While program administrators and policymakers may have several questions about their programs, impact evaluations aim to measure the differences in a group or between groups that are a result of the program. In other words, impact evaluations measure the effect of a program on specific outcomes.

Example

“What is the **effect of emergency rental assistance** on tenants’ **long-term housing stability**?”

Before beginning an impact evaluation, it is critical to articulate your questions and determine whether an impact evaluation is the right method for answering them.

The questions below will help guide you through developing a research question about your program, along with a corresponding hypothesis to be tested with an impact evaluation.

1. Identify one program, policy, or intervention that you want to better understand the impacts of.
Examples: a rapid rehousing program, a rental assistance program, a legal aid program.

2. What are the goals—or intended outcomes—of the program you identified? Which of these goals are you most interested in better understanding? (Suggest selecting just one or two).

3. Using your responses to questions 1) and 2), write a preliminary impact evaluation question using the format: *What is the effect of [program, policy, or intervention] on [intended outcomes]*?

4. Why is it important for you to understand the answer to your research question? How will knowing the impact of your program affect your work, and how would you plan to use this information?

A **hypothesis** is a tentative prediction of the research question's answer. Rather than answering a research question directly, evaluations assess whether the evidence supports the hypothesis.

Example

*"Emergency rental assistance will **increase** tenants' long-term housing stability."*

5. Based on your experience and prior knowledge, what do you predict the answer to your research question will be? Please write a preliminary hypothesis.

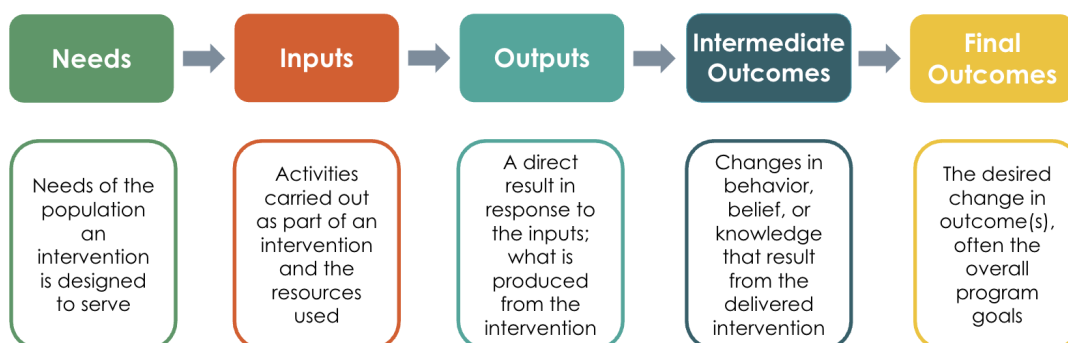
Part 2: Building a Theory of Change

INSTRUCTIONS

Complete Part 2 of this exercise after viewing the video and reading the resources under Module 2: Creating a Theory of Change. Part 1 of this exercise should be completed before starting Part 2.

A **Theory of Change** is a structured approach to mapping the logical chain of how a program can achieve its final outcomes through activities, outputs, and intermediate outcomes. A critical component of both designing and evaluating social programs, Theories of Change can help articulate the rationale behind a research question and hypothesis.

A Theory of Change is a **road map** for your program.



Note on commonly confused terms:

- An **output** is a direct action or fact that is part of a program being implemented as planned.
For example: “tenants receive rental assistance.”
- An **outcome** is a change (also called, effect or impact) that you can measure.
For example: “tenants pay off arrears (past-due rent) and stay in their apartments.”

The prompts below will guide you through how to build out a simple Theory of Change for your own program and potential evaluation. Please leverage your responses in Part 1 to answer the questions and fill out the table below.

YOUR THEORY OF CHANGE

Using the table below, draw out a causal chain (a Theory of Change) that connects the program to your expected intermediate and final outcomes.

	Part 2: Theory of Change What happens at each step? What has to happen in order to get to the next step?
Needs <i>Needs of the population that an intervention is designed to serve</i>	
Inputs/Activities <i>Activities carried out as part of an intervention and the resources used</i>	
Outputs <i>The direct results of the inputs; what the intervention produces</i>	
Intermediate Outcomes <i>Changes in behavior, beliefs, or knowledge that result from the delivered intervention</i>	
Final Outcomes <i>The desired changes the program aims to achieve, often the overall program goals</i>	

Assumptions are preconditions that underpin a Theory of Change. These must be in place for a program to work as expected. An assumption cannot always be directly observed or verified.

Examples

Legal representatives provide accurate information;
Tenants trust advice given.

1. What are the main underlying assumptions you are making at each step of the Theory of Change?
What needs to occur or be present for this chain to work?

Part 3: Mapping a Measurement Strategy onto Your Theory of Change

INSTRUCTIONS

Complete Part 3 of this exercise after viewing the video and reading the resources under Module 3: Data and Measurement. Parts 1 and 2 of this exercise should be completed before starting Part 3.

Measurement strategies outline the *indicators* and *data sources* you will use to quantify and qualify the constructs (or components) outlined in your Theory of Change. While it can be tempting to focus exclusively on outcome measures, it's valuable to map measures onto each stage of the Theory of Change so you can also check whether the program in question is being implemented as intended.

- A *construct* is the concept being investigated. A construct is sometimes abstract and can have multiple definitions. *Example: housing stability*
- An *indicator* is a way to measure a given construct. There are often several potential indicators for any given construct. *Example: evictions*
- *Data* is the information we use to measure our indicators. *Example: court records*

Your Measurement Strategy

Using your responses to the table in Part 2 and the guiding questions below, brainstorm some indicators and data sources for each component of your Theory of Change. We suggest copying one or two components from each row of your Part 2 Theory of Change into the table below.

Consider:

1. How would you assess whether the program is operating as planned? In other words, what are the indicators for the inputs and outputs of the program?
2. How would you measure intermediate outcomes as described in your Theory of Change? In other words, what are the indicators for intermediate outcomes?
3. What should you measure to assess whether the intervention has an impact? In other words, what are the indicators for the final outcomes?
4. What are the data sources for these indicators? Consider both primary (e.g., surveys) and secondary (e.g., administrative) data sources.
5. Which data sources do you already collect or have access to and which would you need to obtain? What would you need to do to get access?

	Part 2: Theory of Change	Part 3: Measurement
	What happens at each step? What has to happen in order to get to the next step?	Note the indicators and data that provide information on this step of the Theory of Change.
Needs <i>Needs of the population that an intervention is designed to serve</i>		
Inputs/Activities <i>Activities carried out as part of an intervention and the resources used</i>		
Outputs <i>The direct results of the inputs; what the intervention produces</i>		
Intermediate Outcomes <i>Changes in behavior, beliefs, or knowledge that result from the delivered intervention</i>		
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Additional measurement questions

6. What challenges might arise during the data collection, analysis, and measurement processes?
Think about the reliability and validity of how you have chosen to measure your indicators. What types of bias might your measurement strategies be vulnerable to? Is data readily available, or do you need to collect it or request access to it (for administrative data)?
 - a. *Reliability refers to whether the data will give you a consistent and precise measure. Reliable measures are consistent across time and across data collectors.*
 - b. *Validity refers to how closely related your indicator is to the concept you are trying to investigate.*