

PRACTICE

Is a randomized evaluation the right fit?

OVERVIEW

Understanding the feasibility of a randomized evaluation is a key step in the process toward developing a research project. This exercise will ask you to reflect on key considerations for your proposed evaluation to help guide your next steps and conversations with your team and researchers. While randomized evaluations are a very strong tool for understanding how a program or policy works, they are not always the right choice for a given evaluation.

The housing and homelessness sector has unique constraints: people experiencing homelessness have complex, urgent needs. Research projects often give rise to ethical questions about who gets served and service providers may also be operating under legal mandates related to access. In addition, limits to funding, staff time, and data availability may hinder a successful research project.

This two-part activity will help you assess whether a randomized evaluation might be a practical and feasible way to answer your research question.

Part one walks you through an evaluation readiness checklist for housing programs. You will reflect on your program's current structure and who gets served; your organization's capacity and appetite for evaluation; and legal, ethical, and practical constraints unique to housing work.

Please complete part one after reviewing the other materials in Module 6: Key Components and Considerations of Randomized Evaluations.

Part two explores which randomized evaluation design might actually fit your context. Please complete part two after reviewing the materials in Module 7: Opportunities for Randomization.

Part 1: Readiness Checklist

INSTRUCTIONS

After viewing the video and reading the resources under Module 6, consider a program you would like to evaluate. The following questions will help you think through whether a randomized evaluation might be a good fit for you at this time.

Please note, these questions aim to help provide a starting point, but will not provide you with a definitive answer.

Basic Program Information

Please briefly describe the program, policy or intervention you would like to evaluate. What is it called, who does it serve, and what are its main objectives?

How many people does this program serve each year?

How are the program spots filled? (For example, is it provided on a first come, first served basis, a random drawing or lottery, based on a need or risk assessment score, etc.)

If program enrollment is not currently done by lottery or other randomized method, is there any flexibility to change enrollment protocols?

What is the current stage of the program and how long has it been operating?

Note, the ideal timing for a randomized evaluation is once the program has already been piloted to confirm implementation protocols and feasibility, but before it is so cemented that changes cannot be made based on findings. However, randomized evaluations can and have occurred at various stages of a program's life cycle.

Research Question(s) and Impacts

What do you most want to learn about your program?

Start with restating the research question(s) you set forth in Part 1, Module 2: Developing a Research Question and add any additional questions you are hoping to have answered.

A good evaluation answers questions that matter to you. If you are not clear on what you are hoping to learn, the evaluation may not be useful to you.

What does existing evidence show about this topic?

Reviewing existing research—especially from other rigorous evaluations—can help shed light on how similar programs have performed. They can also help identify where there are gaps in our knowledge that your study can help address.

What do you hope to do with the answers you learn?

How might the findings from an evaluation inform policy decisions for your jurisdiction or organization (e.g., modify program design, budget allocations, expand program to reach more people)?

A good evaluation should answer questions that could genuinely change your program, your budget, or how you expand. If findings are unlikely to inform future programmatic decisions, it may not be worth the investment.

Status Checks

The following checklist includes several key components of successful randomized evaluations. If responses to any of the following fall in the red or yellow categories, it does **not** mean that a randomized evaluation is impossible in your context, but it may be helpful to work on cultivating those elements.

BUY-IN FROM KEY STAKEHOLDERS			
Leadership interest/investment. To what extent is relevant leadership in your jurisdiction or organization invested in evaluating this program? <i>Evaluations require significant time and money. Without leadership support, the study may face barriers to getting off the ground.</i>	Low ☐	Medium ☐	High ☐
Level of team/department buy-in. If other teams/departments will need to be involved in program implementation, what is the likelihood that they will be supportive of and willing to contribute to the evaluation as needed? <i>Running an evaluation involves many workstreams and often requires coordination across teams. If other departments aren't aligned, implementation issues may arise.</i>	Low ☐	Medium ☐	High ☐
Use this space to expand on any responses above, if helpful:			

PRACTICAL FEASIBILITY

Program reach. How many clients does your program serve in a given year?

Well-designed randomized evaluations require a large sample size to reach sufficient power (the ability of your study to detect an effect if there is one). Note, whether these numbers are “big enough” will depend on your specific context and research question.

**Fewer than
100
people/year***

☐

* A reach of fewer than 100 people does not automatically disqualify an RCT. Sufficient sample is very context-specific.

**Between
101-499
people/year**

☐

**Over
500
people/year**

☐

Program staff. Does/will the program have dedicated staff that can support evaluation design and implementation?

A good evaluation requires dedicated staff to coordinate with researchers, manage data collection, and troubleshoot problems as they arise.

No

☐

**Maybe, limited
staffing**

☐

**Yes, sufficient
staffing**

☐

Does the program have funding? Have or will a significant amount of resources be dedicated to this program? Is the funding source reliable or undetermined?

Before embarking on an evaluation, it's critical to ensure that the program's funding is stable enough to last through the course of the study.

No

☐

**Some
funding**

☐

**Sufficient
funding**

☐

Data infrastructure. Does the program currently collect data or is there a data collection plan for the program?

Data is a critical component of a strong evaluation and must be considered well in advance of the start of a research study. In addition, many evaluations require data sharing agreements between researchers and organizations.

No

☐

**Some data,
or preliminary
collection plan**

☐

**Yes, we have
current or
planned robust
data collection**

☐

Use this space to expand on any responses above, if helpful:

Part 2: Finding the right fit

INSTRUCTIONS

Use your answers from Part 1 and the Common Randomization Designs reading to explore which randomized evaluation designs could work for your program.

Design Solutions for Randomized Evaluations in Housing and Homelessness

The following checklist includes key considerations for selecting not only if a randomized design might be a good fit for your program, but which design might work best in your context.

PROGRAM ELEMENTS			
Program Design: Does your program have flexible components you could adjust? (e.g., subsidy levels, service intensity, outreach methods, caseload ratios)	Yes ☐ <i>If this is you, you might consider multiple treatment arms.</i>	No ☐ <i>If this is you, you might consider a simple treatment-comparison allocation.</i>	
Use this space to expand on your response:			
Program Availability: How does enrollment compare to capacity?	Oversubscribed We have more eligible applicants than we can serve ☐ <i>If this is you, you might consider a basic lottery.</i>	Balanced We have capacity to serve everyone who applies, but not more ☐ <i>If this is you, you might consider a phase-in design.</i>	Undersubscribed We have space for more applicants ☐ <i>If this is you, you might consider an encouragement design or an expanded eligibility design.</i>
Use this space to expand on your response:			

PROGRAM REACH

Entitlement: Is your program legally guaranteed to anyone who qualifies (e.g., right to shelter)?

Yes

☐

If this is you, you might consider an **encouragement design** or **expanded eligibility design**.

No

☐

If this is you, you might consider a **basic lottery** or a **phase-in design**.

Scope: Are certain subpopulations guaranteed access by law or organizational policy? (e.g., people who score over a certain risk threshold, residents of a specific geography)

Yes

☐

If this is you, you might consider an **encouragement design** or **expanded eligibility design**.

No

☐

If this is you, you might consider a **basic lottery** or a **phase-in design**.

Targeting: Are you interested in understanding the impact of your program on a specific population (e.g., those who score within a certain risk threshold), or on all participants?

Yes

☐

If this is you, you might consider an **expanded eligibility design**.

No

☐

If this is you, you might consider a **basic lottery**, a **phase-in design**, or an **encouragement design**.

Use this space to expand on your responses: