

BUILDING CAPACITY,
OVERCOMING
OBSTACLES, AND
CREATING EVIDENCE:

AN EVALUATION GUIDE
FOR STATE AND LOCAL
POLICYMAKERS



J-PAL

ABDUL LATIF JAMEEL POVERTY ACTION LAB
NORTH AMERICA

ABOUT J-PAL NORTH AMERICA

J-PAL North America is a regional office of the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), a global network of researchers who use randomized evaluations to answer critical policy questions in the fight against poverty. J-PAL's mission is to reduce poverty by ensuring that policy is informed by scientific evidence.

 Read more about [J-PAL North America.](#)

Founded at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 2013, J-PAL North America leverages scholarship from more than 190 affiliated professors from over 40 universities, and a full-time staff of nearly 40 researchers, policy experts, and administrative professionals, to generate and disseminate rigorous evidence about the effectiveness of various anti-poverty programs and policies.

To address the complex causes and consequences of poverty, J-PAL North America's work spans a range of sectors including health care, housing, criminal justice, education, and labor markets

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Building Capacity, Overcoming Obstacles, and Creating Evidence: An Evaluation Guide for State and Local Policymakers

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2015, J-PAL's State and Local Innovation Initiative has partnered with state and local governments to generate rigorous evidence on what works to reduce poverty around the United States. J-PAL North America has received more than 100 letters of interest from state and local governments across the country over the past five years. This initiative formed the basis for many conversations, conferences, training courses, and opportunities for mutual learning with these government partners. Local and state governments have identified critical knowledge gaps, in essence, sketching out a "demand map" of where research needs can be targeted to address policy challenges. We have launched in-depth partnerships with 29 state and local governments to develop randomized evaluations designed to inform their priority policy questions.

With this guide, J-PAL North America aims to share lessons learned from government partners, so that other governments that are interested in pursuing randomized evaluations can learn from their experience. This guide builds on J-PAL North America's publication, "Implementing Randomized Evaluations in Government," with lessons and activities from the past five years of the initiative. This guide also draws upon the experience of J-PAL's staff, who have worked with many different government agencies, non-profits, and other partners, as well as the more than 1,000 ongoing and completed randomized evaluations conducted by J-PAL's affiliated researchers worldwide.

The guide provides practical direction on how to identify good opportunities for randomized evaluations, embed randomized evaluations into program or policy implementation, and how to overcome some of the common challenges in designing and carrying out randomized evaluations. The guide also includes links to resources and toolkits with more information.

ABOUT THE J-PAL STATE AND LOCAL INNOVATION INITIATIVE

The J-PAL State and Local Innovation Initiative supports U.S. state and local governments in using randomized evaluations to measure the effects of programs and policies serving low-income and historically marginalized populations. The work of the initiative is aimed at enabling leaders within and beyond government to draw on evidence to support programs that work. Through the J-PAL State and Local Innovation Initiative, J-PAL North America works to:

- Equip state and local governments with the tools to generate and use rigorous evidence;
- Share this evidence with other jurisdictions that may be facing similar challenges; and
- Document and disseminate best practices for feasibly implementing randomized evaluations at the state and local level.

The leaders selected to participate in this initiative work together to serve as models for others across the United States, demonstrating how state and local governments can create and use rigorous evidence to address challenging social problems.

 Read more about [J-PAL's State and Local Innovation Initiative.](#)

 Read more about [Implementing Randomized Evaluations in Government.](#)

 Watch [Building Partnerships to Promote Evidence-Based Policy](#) for more background and context on J-PAL's State and Local Innovation Initiative mission.

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WORKING WITH STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

J-PAL North America works with state and local partners to identify policy priorities and gaps in research that randomized evaluations can potentially fill. This is done through a range of activities:

- **Training and capacity building:** J-PAL North America runs customized trainings to build the capacity of state and local government agencies to interpret and generate evidence. Training courses provide policymakers with an understanding of key concepts related to evaluation, guidance on how to identify opportunities for building rigorous evaluations into programs and policies, and practical tips for how to design and implement a randomized evaluation. Trainings are designed as an opportunity to refine an agency's ideas for evaluation through feedback from colleagues, peers, and J-PAL staff.

Since 2015, over 100 of J-PAL's state and local government partners have participated in a five-day,

in-person training, *Evaluating Social Programs*, which provides an in-depth look at why and when randomized evaluations can be used to rigorously measure social impact, methods and considerations for their design and implementation, and how findings can inform evidence-based policies and programs. The course is taught by J-PAL affiliated professors and senior staff, and is tailored to the needs of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners from non-profit organizations, governments, international organizations, private sector companies, and foundations from around the world.

➔ Read more about [Evaluating Social Programs](#).

- **Evaluation development and matchmaking events:** J-PAL North America brings researchers and state and local policymakers together to workshop ideas for randomized evaluation.

For example, in **South Carolina**, J-PAL North America convened a kickoff meeting for agency leaders, including South Carolina's then-Health and Human Services Director and researchers from Northwestern University to develop a list of potential research questions that could be explored over the year-long engagement. J-PAL North America and South Carolina facilitated an open, candid discussion of challenges the state faces and pitched evaluation ideas. The ideas that came out of the event drew on the breadth of researchers available through J-PAL's network and reflected South Carolina's experience on an evaluation of the Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) program. The Nurse-Family Partnership program provides regular nurse home visits to low-income, first-time mothers through pregnancy and up to the first two years postpartum in order to improve the outcomes of both mothers and their children. The NFP evaluation provided the state with a proof of concept for how random assignment can work in the field, attuning government partners to spot other evaluation opportunities. Because South Carolina had built a relationship not only with the NFP research team but also with J-PAL North America, the state gained an access point to multiple researchers through J-PAL's network. South Carolina could explore multiple projects outside of any single researcher's area of interest, and it could continue exploring projects even when individual researchers no longer had bandwidth to take on new projects.

- **Technical assistance and matchmaking:** J-PAL North America's provision of technical assistance (TA) supports government agencies implementing social programs in developing promising randomized evaluations that might not otherwise happen. The overall goal for TA is to help partners identify feasible and policy-relevant opportunities for randomized evaluations, connect partners with interested researchers from J-PAL's network, and build partners' capacity for creating and using evidence. TA provides project management and research support. In addition, TA staff facilitate matchmaking between partners and researchers in J-PAL's network.
- **Short Term Research Management Support (STReAM):** STReAM is a program that provides approximately six months of research management support from J-PAL staff. This support can be used for either full studies or pilots, and may include, but is not limited to: coordinating communication across stakeholders; refining randomization implementation design and consent procedures; pilot design and implementation; study process monitoring.

 Read more about [STReAM](#).

J-PAL North America State and Local Government Partners

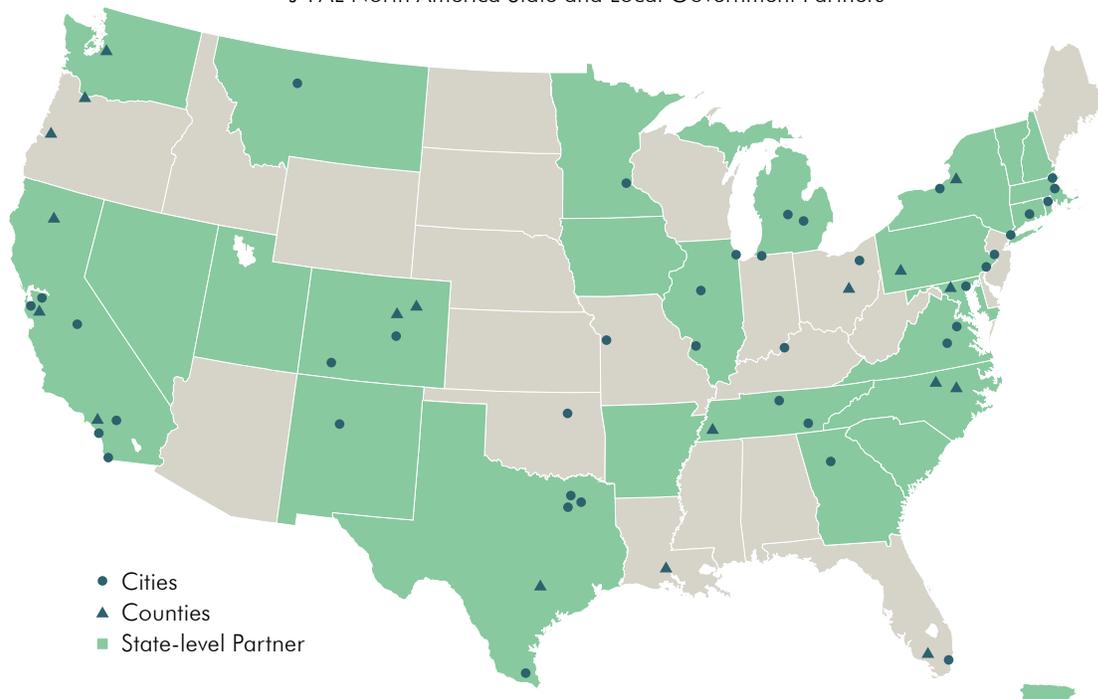




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LESSONS FROM WORKING WITH STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

The following chapter details lessons learned during the past five years of the initiative. Each lesson is illustrated with examples from state and local government partners and the work they are doing.

LESSON 1: THERE IS UNTAPPED DEMAND AMONG STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS FOR HIGH-QUALITY EVIDENCE

J-PAL North America has received more than 100 letters of interest from 88 city, county, and state governments across the United States. These letters of interest have proposed randomized evaluations to inform a wide range of policy issues, including crime and violence prevention, education, employment, health care, and homelessness. Each includes an overview of the policy problem in question and ideas for randomized evaluations to address the problem. We highlight two examples below.

In Washington, the **King County Department of Community and Human Services** submitted a proposal to J-PAL North America in 2016. Their proposal identified the challenges of homelessness prevention and criminal justice reform. In turn, the County proposed two ideas for randomized evaluations, one of the voter-approved Youth and Family Homelessness Prevention Initiative, which provides prevention services to youth and families at risk of homelessness, and one of the Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion program, which diverts low-level offenders towards harm-reduction services and case management instead of booking and prosecution. In partnership with J-PAL-affiliated researchers, the first idea has now become a full randomized evaluation, and preliminary results on the homelessness prevention efforts are expected in Summer 2020.

In 2018, the **Minnesota Management and Budget** office identified challenges in their state related to the opioid crisis and inequalities in the criminal justice system. Minnesota submitted proposals for randomized evaluations related to each of these challenges. They proposed testing ways to increase use of its prescription monitoring program (PMP) and measuring the effect of increased PMP use on prescribers' rates of opioid prescriptions and other tertiary outcomes (e.g., opioid overdoses or emergency room visits). A Prescription Monitoring Program (PMP) is a system that keeps records of prescriptions of certain types of substances (e.g., opioids), and can be set up to notify prescribers of their prescribing habits (e.g., reports that show levels of prescriptions compared to other prescribers or alerts when prescribing at or above a certain threshold). Minnesota was also interested in understanding low-cost nudge tactics to reduce failures to appear (FTAs) in court for misdemeanor offenses. Reducing FTAs can prevent individuals from becoming further intertwined in the criminal justice system. Minnesota aims to use low-cost nudges to reduce failures to appear, which involves sending individuals text and letter reminders to appear for their court dates, thereby avoiding arrest warrants and subsequent fees.



PHOTO: J-PAL

GOVERNMENTS ACROSS THE COUNTRY FACE MANY SIMILAR CHALLENGES AND CAN SHARE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT WHAT WORKS TO ADDRESS THEM

Many state and local governments share common policy challenges. For example, in the first round of the initiative, multiple governments applied to develop evaluations of programs related to opioid and other substance use disorders. Several of these governments then participated in a conference hosted by J-PAL North America to brainstorm ways to test approaches to combat the opioid epidemic with other policymakers, researchers from J-PAL's network, and medical experts. Our work with state and local governments on this issue also informed a policy brief on strategies to combat the opioid epidemic, which was created at the request of the [White House Office of National Drug Control Policy](#).

In a recent round of the initiative, preventing homelessness was featured as a top policy concern among governments. J-PAL partnered with three governments to design evaluations around strategies for preventing and reducing homelessness, and plans to work with these governments and their research partners to share knowledge across sites. Ultimately, the aim is to share what these governments learn about which approaches are most effective with the broader community of policymakers and researchers working to address this issue.

Below we highlight the opportunities J-PAL has created for government partners to share their work and their ideas with each other.

WHAT DO THESE STATES AND CITIES HAVE IN COMMON? SIMILAR POLICY GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:

Jurisdictions	Policy Objectives
Baltimore, MD; King County, WA; Santa Clara, CA	Preventing and alleviating homelessness
Minneapolis, MN; Rochester, NY	Expanding opportunities for individuals living in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty
California, Massachusetts	Increasing take-up of social services
Philadelphia, PA; South Bend, IN	Improving education and employment outcomes for young people

A LEARNING COMMUNITY OF STATE AND LOCAL LEADERS CAN SHARE LESSONS LEARNED

It is helpful for state and local policymakers to hear from one another on how they addressed these obstacles in their own jurisdiction. The J-PAL State and Local Innovation Initiative has hosted three convenings to bring together policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to discuss best practices and lessons learned from developing and running randomized evaluations, discussing new evidence, and identifying policy and research priorities. See below for more information and videos of each of the convenings.

- The First Annual Convening featured governments and researchers who have partnered to use evidence from randomized evaluations to reduce crime and violence, improve maternal and child health outcomes, and promote housing mobility.
 - ➔ Read more about the [First Annual Convening](#).
- The Second Annual Convening highlighted examples of state and local policymakers who have been leaders in building rigorous evidence in their jurisdictions and institutionalizing evidence-based practices. Additionally, the convening included a workshop on conducting randomized evaluations of programs and policies designed to address homelessness.
 - ➔ Read more about the [Second Annual Convening](#).
- The Third Annual Convening focused on demonstrating how rigorous evidence can help state and local governments shape policy to improve the lives of the people they serve.
 - ➔ Read more about the [Third Annual Convening](#).

WILL IT WORK HERE?

Will results from one context replicate in another? When is an evaluation needed and when is it not? In the context of limited resources, helping government partners answer questions like these is a core part of J-PAL's State and Local Innovation Initiative. J-PAL developed a practical framework for evidence-informed policy that helps governments draw on the available evidence, both from the local context and from the global base of impact evaluations, to make the most informed decisions. J-PAL North America's Executive Director Mary Ann Bates describes the generalizability framework in this short video.

- ➔ Read more about the [framework](#).
- ▶ Watch the [video](#).

LESSON 2: THERE ARE MANY OPPORTUNITIES FOR MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND ACADEMIC RESEARCHERS

J-PAL's network of affiliated researchers consists of professors from 62 universities who conduct randomized evaluations around the world to design, evaluate, and improve programs and policies aimed at reducing poverty, and publish the results of these evaluations in high-quality academic journals. As noted above, J-PAL matches selected state and local partners with affiliated professors to develop mutually beneficial partnerships.

BENEFITS OF PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN GOVERNMENTS AND ACADEMIC RESEARCHERS

Partnerships between researchers and governments can generate actionable, localized policy insights that meet a specific community's needs while growing the overall body of evidence around what works. Given their deep knowledge of the local context, state and local policymakers are well-positioned to identify which policies and programs would benefit most from rigorous evaluation. Researchers bring technical expertise around rigorously designing evaluations as well as expertise on a number of issues that would be difficult for individuals without training in evaluation methods to navigate on their own. These include generalized lessons on behavior, estimating the minimum sample size needed to detect a given change in outcomes, designing the randomized evaluation to minimize disruptions to service delivery, and identifying measures and data sources for outcomes of interest. Researchers may also have access to specialized research staff, such as survey designers, data analysts, or project managers.

Additionally, governments bring valuable knowledge of program operations, potential ethical, financial, or logistical constraints, and availability and quality of administrative data. In most cases, the government partner is also responsible for identifying funding to implement the program that will be evaluated. The government and research team can then work together to secure funding for any additional costs associated with the evaluation, applying to either J-PAL North America or to other funding sources.

 Watch [Partnering for Policy: Government Research Partnerships](#), which discusses ways governments and researchers can partner to create impactful policies.

WHAT DOES A SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIP LOOK LIKE?

In J-PAL's experience, a successful research partnership involves close collaboration between the researcher and the government to design a high-quality evaluation that is also politically, ethically, and logistically feasible.

In a successful research partnership, the government agency:

- Wants to better understand the impact of a policy or program;
- Is implementing the policy or program at a sufficient scale, such that an evaluation will be able to detect meaningful changes in outcomes;
- Is willing to think creatively about incorporating evaluation into program operations; and
- Facilitates access to administrative data.

The researcher:

- Respects the agency's priorities and determines areas of substantive overlap with their own research interests;
- Works with the government agency to assess the feasibility of an evaluation;
- Is willing to think creatively about designing the evaluation to address practical, political and ethical concerns; and
- Helps the government navigate institutional or legal obstacles to sharing data.

As an example, the **Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA)** proposed an evaluation of one of their employment programs, with an interest in measuring the impact of the program on children. Working closely with the researcher and J-PAL, DTA recognized that their original proposal was not feasible for a randomized evaluation. The team was able to pivot and design an evaluation to assess the effectiveness of text message reminders to increase the take-up of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The researcher and program staff have shared their partnership experiences on panels at a J-PAL convening and a national conference.

J-PAL recognizes the importance of these researcher-government partnerships and has developed resources to support both sides of the partnership. The Evaluation Toolkit is a set of resources that provide practical guidance for designing, implementing, and communicating about evaluations, including resources specific to developing strong partnerships.

 Read more about the [Evaluation Toolkit](#).

COMMITMENTS FROM THE GOVERNMENT

While the J-PAL State and Local Innovation Initiative offers funding and technical support to offset some of the upfront costs of developing a randomized evaluation, governments in successful partnerships have also made a number of important commitments to their projects.

In particular, engaging in a randomized evaluation generally involves the commitment of (a) a senior-level decision-maker within the government, who ensures that the project aligns with the government's overall priorities, helps navigate relationships with key stakeholders, and provides momentum when needed, as well as (b) a day-to-day project manager, who allocates a significant percentage of their time to the project, serves as the point person for moving the project forward, and meets regularly with the researcher and other partners. J-PAL North America looks for evidence of these commitments when making awards through the J-PAL State and Local Innovation Initiative.

J-PAL's State and Local Innovation Initiative, the **California Franchise Tax Board (FTB)**, and a research team from the California Policy Lab partnered on an effort to increase take up of the state's earned income tax credit (EITC). The FTB leadership demonstrated a strong commitment to developing and implementing the research design. They designated a senior staff member to work closely with the research team to ensure the project moved forward. J-PAL provided technical assistance to the project in the form of trainings and capacity building for the team at the FTB.

RESEARCHER-GOVERNMENT PARTNERSHIPS CAN HELP STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS OVERCOME OBSTACLES

State and local governments face many obstacles in implementing randomized evaluations. By partnering with J-PAL North America and researchers, we believe that state and local governments can address identified obstacles like time, resources, and data.

Governments typically face several common challenges to launching an evaluation:

1. Time to run an evaluation;
2. The cost of an evaluation; and
3. The feasibility of incorporating randomization.

Below we examine each obstacle and provide some general guidance on how states can address them.

Time to run an evaluation

Governments are often concerned that launching an evaluation will require upfront time and resources, and the evaluation's benefits do not come until later. However, randomized evaluations are not inherently more expensive, nor do they necessarily take longer to complete than other types of evaluations. The length of time required to measure the impact of a program is largely dependent on the outcomes that one is interested in measuring, rather than the evaluation method. For example, an evaluation designed to measure the impact of an early childhood education program on high school graduation rates would inherently take longer to yield results than an evaluation designed to measure the impact of the same program on third-grade reading scores. A research partner can work with the government to carefully design a study that answers the questions policy makers want to understand while also acknowledging time constraints.

Cost of an evaluation

Launching a randomized evaluation requires a government to invest resources up front, while many of the evaluation's benefits are not realized until a later date. The J-PAL State and Local Innovation Initiative was designed to help address this challenge. J-PAL offers funding and technical support to selected governments to offset upfront costs and to help governments overcome obstacles that might normally make research more difficult and expensive. This changes the cost-benefit analysis that governments often face when undertaking a research project.

More broadly, linking a research project to an external opportunity, such as a grant or competition, can be a useful strategy for building the support and momentum needed to get a project started. In addition to the J-PAL State and Local Innovation Initiative, there are a number of foundations and non-profits that offer opportunities that governments can leverage to build support for new research projects.

The cost of an evaluation often depends on whether the evaluation is using original data (such as data collected through surveys) or administrative data, which are information collected, used, and stored primarily for purposes other than research. Evaluations that draw on existing administrative data generally cost less than evaluations that require new survey data.

 Read more about [using administrative data for randomized evaluations](#).

USING ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

State and local governments are typically already collecting data for operational purposes that can be used in randomized evaluations. Advantages of using administrative data include ease of use and lower costs, reduced participant burden, near-universal coverage, accuracy, minimized bias, long-term availability, and availability of cost data. When state and local governments are considering using administrative data they should be aware of biases like differential coverage and reporting bias. For more information on biases please see the Evaluation Toolkit.

State and local administrative data sets can include health care data, unemployment insurance data, public school data, voter records, criminal history records and more. J-PAL North America has compiled a catalog of administrative data sets that may be used for randomized evaluations.

For more information on administrative data please see J-PAL North America's Evaluation Toolkit.

 Read more about the [Evaluation Toolkit](#).

Feasibility of incorporating randomization

Embedding randomization into the operations of a program can seem unethical or infeasible. If there is rigorous evidence that a program is effective and enough resources to serve everyone who is eligible, then it would not be ethical to deny some people access to the program in order to conduct a randomized evaluation. However, in many cases, it is not known yet whether a program is effective. And, unfortunately, it is often the case that there are many more people who could benefit from a program than there are resources to serve. When there are more eligible participants than program slots, random assignment, often referred to as a lottery, provides a fair way to enroll participants because all who are eligible have an equal chance of receiving services. For example, by law, charter schools must be open to any student residing in a given school district, region, or state. When more students apply to enter a charter school than the school has seats available, the charter school must admit students by lottery.



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J-PAL's State and Local Innovation Initiative is currently developing a cohesive learning agenda to identify the policy priorities of local governments in their efforts to reduce poverty. By leveraging its existing network of state and local government partners and its network of leading academic researchers, the initiative will synthesize the most pressing needs among local policymakers related to fostering mobility from poverty, and identify key opportunities for research to help address these needs.

State and local governments can play a central role in the efforts to build more rigorous evidence on strategies for reducing poverty and promoting upward mobility. State agencies, county authorities, and city offices can pioneer innovations by testing new policy approaches to foster upward mobility and then scaling up those approaches that have demonstrable impact. State and local governments exercise significant regulatory, financial, and programmatic discretion to create supportive conditions that foster the economic mobility of residents. State legislatures raise revenue to fund public schools and community colleges, health care for low-income residents, and public assistance programs; city and county agencies provide direct assistance with housing, education, jobs programs, and transportation; and court systems may experiment with new practices to address disparities in the criminal justice system.

When identifying policy areas as part of a mobility from poverty learning agenda, there are two important considerations:

Nexus to mobility

The US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty's definition of mobility includes three core principles:

- **Power and autonomy:** Power is a person's ability to influence their environment, other people, and their own outcomes; and autonomy is a person's ability to act according to their own decisions, rather than according to other's decisions.
- **Being valued in community:** Being valued in community is a person's sense that they belong and are included among family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, other communities, and society. A related concept is social capital, which is a web of relationships that has economic benefits.
- **Economic success:** Economic success captures factors that directly contribute to individuals' and families' material well-being. Those factors fall into four broad categories: income, assets, and income adequacy; employment; skills (human capital); and family demographic circumstances.

Potential impact on upward mobility

Throughout the proposals submitted to J-PAL, many state and local governments have dreamed big and imagined large-scale changes to programs and policies, while others have thought more practically about what smaller changes to existing systems can be made to improve outcomes for residents. Both ways of thinking will be important for fighting poverty and promoting mobility, but it is important to distinguish between the two when prioritizing which areas are best positioned to move the needle on outcomes for residents.

For example, many applications have focused on how state and local governments can improve the social safety net to support low-income families. Some of these proposals offer bold policy ideas that would engender a significant change to current programs: changing work requirements for public benefits, piloting universal basic income, etc. Given that these proposals would require a significant change in resources, we might imagine them to have a significant impact on the amount and type of assistance that households receive. On the other hand, many government agencies have thought instead about how to improve existing programs and maximize their reach—by testing strategies to increase the take-up of public benefits such as the EITC and SNAP, for example. Previous research has demonstrated that these types of interventions, when effective, can have small impacts that, when applied at scale to millions of people, altogether constitute a significant impact. Therefore, both ambitious ideas and marginal tweaks to existing systems can have an impact on mobility, but it is important to distinguish between the two when comparing and prioritizing among policy ideas as part of a larger learning agenda.

LESSON 3: STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS CAN BUILD A CULTURE OF EVIDENCE AND RIGOROUS EVALUATION

J-PAL North America builds the capacity of state and local governments to integrate research and evaluation in their agency through resources, training, technical assistance, evaluation development, and opportunities to share learnings. Our hope is that state and local governments will not just conduct one evaluation, but will prioritize research, evaluation, and evidence in their agency and in policy-making. Below we provide some insight into expanding ideas about what programs can be evaluated via randomized evaluation, when and *when not* to evaluate, and examples from state partners on dedicating resources to research and evaluation.

IDENTIFYING OPPORTUNITIES TO EVALUATE

State and local governments are eager to identify evidence-based solutions in difficult-to-evaluate policy areas, including housing and homelessness, criminal justice, and access to mental health services. These are policy areas that have been historically perceived as difficult to evaluate using randomized evaluation methods.

For example, it may not seem feasible to conduct a randomized evaluation of an entitlement program. Government agencies can consider whether the entitlement program has full or low take-up. Low take-up presents an opportunity for a randomized evaluation. Individuals who are eligible but not yet participating in the program can be randomly assigned to receive encouragement to enroll, such as by letters in the mail, phone calls, or text messages. In this instance, the randomized evaluation can also help answer the question of how to effectively encourage more people to participate in the program. Additionally, if the sample size is large enough and the encouragement has a big effect on participation, researchers can evaluate the impact of the program itself by comparing those who received the encouragement to those who did not. This enables rigorous evaluation of a program, without denying anyone access to the program.

An example of an entitlement program with low take-up is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), where only 41 percent of eligible elderly individuals had enrolled in 2013. The non-profit organization Benefits Data Trust (BDT) provides targeted outreach and comprehensive application assistance to individuals who are likely eligible for SNAP and other programs. BDT has partnered with J-PAL affiliated researchers to conduct a randomized evaluation of the effect of informational mailings and application assistance on SNAP enrollment in Pennsylvania. The evaluation examined the effect on SNAP enrollment based upon two different interventions—a low-intensity informational mailing and high-intensity outreach with SNAP application assistance. Researchers found that informational mailings nearly doubled SNAP enrollment while informational mailings plus application assistance tripled SNAP enrollment, suggesting that both the lack of information and the effort required to apply pose barriers to SNAP take-up. The evidence generated by the evaluation enabled BDT to direct the most effective and cost-effective outreach strategies to eligible households.

➔ Read more about [BDT](#) and [Randomized Evaluations](#).



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WHEN IT DOES (AND DOES NOT) MAKE SENSE TO DO A RANDOMIZED EVALUATION

J-PAL and J-PAL affiliates can help governments determine when it isn't feasible to conduct a randomized evaluation. There are a number of circumstances in which a randomized evaluation would not be appropriate, including when:

- **There is strong evidence that the program has a positive impact and there are resources to serve everyone who is eligible.** It would be unethical to deny people access to a program that has been proven to be effective for no reason other than conducting a randomized evaluation. Under these conditions, resources would be better spent ensuring that the program continues to be implemented as intended and/or scaling up the program so that more people can benefit.
- **The program's implementation is changing.** Evaluating a program while the implementation is changing could yield results that would be difficult to interpret. For example, suppose that a tutoring program shifted from being mandatory during the day to optional and after school midway through an evaluation. The results of the evaluation would represent the average impact of both approaches. If the evaluation found a positive impact, it could be because both approaches had a positive impact, or because one approach had a positive impact and the other had no impact or even a negative impact.
- **The sample size is too small.** If researchers believe that the potential sample size is too small to be able to detect meaningful changes in outcomes, then there is a risk that the evaluation could consume time and financial resources but produce only inconclusive results. Imagine, for example, a randomized evaluation of a tutoring program that found that the program increased test scores by 10 percent, but that increase was not statistically significant. It would be unclear whether the program had a positive impact or whether the increase was due to chance.
- **The time and financial cost outweigh the potential benefits of the evidence generated.** Governments should always weigh the potential costs of an evaluation against the value of the evidence generated. In some cases, answering a particular question will require a large investment of time or other resources (for example, because the outcomes of interest are difficult to measure or can only be measured after significant time has passed). If the evaluation would answer a question of great importance to the government or others, then it may still be worth pursuing. If the evaluation is unlikely to provide new insights or influence decision-making, then those resources may be better spent elsewhere.

HOW GOVERNMENTS CAN PRIORITIZE RESEARCH AND EVALUATION WITHIN AGENCIES: EXAMPLES FROM OUR PARTNERS

Many J-PAL state and local partners have prioritized research and evaluation within their agencies. The government partners highlighted below have built specific offices or teams and invested time and resources to conduct research and evaluation. These examples aim to provide ideas for how to build a culture of evidence and evaluation in your own state or local government.

Minnesota Office of Management and Budget Results Management

The Results Management team is housed in the Budget division of Minnesota Management and Budget (MMB). The team supports policymakers and practitioners in their use of evidence to inform investments that improve the quality of life for Minnesotans. As part of this work, the Results Management team partners with agencies, counties, and providers to inventory and conduct benefit-cost analysis on state investments. This information is then used to support decision-making in budgetary and legislative processes. The Results Management Team is currently extending its contribution to evidence-based policymaking by conducting experimental and quasi-experimental research of state investments in human services.

Lab @ DC

The Lab @ DC is a scientific team in Washington, DC Mayor Muriel Bowser's administration and based out of the Office of the City Administrator. The Lab uses scientific insights and methods to test and improve policies and provide timely, relevant, and high-quality analysis to inform DC's most important decisions.

The Lab collaborates with DC agencies to:

- Design policy and program interventions that are tailored to DC, based on theory and evidence from academic and industrial research, as well as analyses of available administrative data;
- Conduct high-quality evaluations—including randomized evaluations and rapid, iterative experimentation—to learn how well programs and policies work and how to improve them;
- Foster a scientific community of practice, engaging and collaborating with experts and stakeholders across agencies, universities, and community groups.

Through The Lab @ DC, DC government has begun to embrace randomized evaluations and their ability to generate policy-relevant evidence. The Lab has demonstrated experience working with agencies to execute randomized evaluations in the most complicated of experimental environments, ranging from large-scale evaluations like the DC police department's high-profile Body-Worn Cameras program to rapid experimentation with letters and text messages to low-income residents. The Lab works hand-in-hand with DC Government agencies spanning the full range of state and local government functions, from education to operations, to crime and public health.

➔ Read more about the [Body-Worn Cameras Program](#), the [letters](#), the [text messages](#), and the [lab's work](#).

New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee

The New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee (LFC) is the interim legislative committee that provides budget and policy recommendations and program oversight for the state of New Mexico. The LFC provides specific budget recommendations for the entire state budget of the \$6 billion general fund. The LFC has a staff of ten program evaluators that work year round on projects across all state agencies. Partnering with the New Mexico Public Education Department and the New Mexico Department of Higher Education, the LFC applied to the J-PAL State and Local Innovation Initiative to evaluate the state's Early College High School program. While a randomized evaluation was ultimately not feasible, the partnership with J-PAL has continued.

▶ Watch [Bringing It Home: Evidence-Informed Decision Making](#) for highlights on how evidence can help inform decision-making.



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CONCLUSIONS: CONTINUING TO BUILD A CULTURE OF RIGOROUS EVALUATION

In our experience, partnering with state and local governments to carry out randomized evaluations involves building trust with stakeholders. When government stakeholders are able to play an active role in designing the evaluation to be relevant to their policy context, they recognize the value of rigorous evaluation.

Ensuring that the evidence generated by an evaluation is credible to decision-makers within government is key to shifting perceptions. One could likely find an anecdote, for example, supporting multiple contradictory views on the effectiveness of a program, making it very difficult to make decisions about the program. Having evidence from a randomized evaluation can lend clarity by shifting the discourse from questioning whether the evidence itself is sound, to questioning how best to interpret and apply the findings.

Additionally, governments can frame randomized evaluations not as a “one-off” but as part of a larger effort to improve their ability to address complex policy challenges. For example, the City of Philadelphia’s ongoing evaluation of the WorkReady summer jobs program will ultimately look at the impact of the program on criminal justice, employment, and education outcomes. City leaders were also very interested in better understanding whether

the program is reaching young people throughout the city, including in the most historically-disinvested neighborhoods. The research team, with support from J-PAL North America staff, used linked program and administrative data to create detailed maps and analyses that provide insight into the young people served through the program and identify gaps in who is being served. In addition to providing useful information on how the program could improve targeting, this analysis helped build support for the randomized evaluation among key stakeholders within the city.

BUILDING MOMENTUM

Creative approaches developed by state and local governments and their research partners can overcome many of the challenges of launching a randomized evaluation. The lessons discussed throughout this guide highlight what J-PAL North America learned from our partnerships with the governments selected to participate in the J-PAL State and Local Innovation Initiative to date. Our hope is that these governments will serve as models for other state and local governments in the United States, demonstrating how to design high-quality and feasible randomized evaluations at the state and local level and encouraging others to consider randomized evaluations as a tool for addressing key challenges in their jurisdictions.



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