

**Program
Evaluation
Briefing
Series**

#6

**Evaluability Assessment:
Examining the Readiness of
a Program for Evaluation**

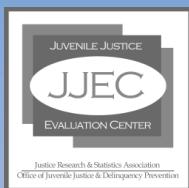


**Juvenile Justice
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**Justice Research and Statistics
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**Office of Juvenile Justice and
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The JJEC, which is supported by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, provides evaluation information, training, and technical assistance to enhance juvenile justice evaluation in the states. For more information about the JJEC project, visit our Web site at www.jrsa.org/jjec, or e-mail us at jjec@jrsa.org.

Evaluability Assessment: Examining the Readiness of a Program For Evaluation

This is one of a series of briefings prepared by the Justice Research and Statistics Association under the Juvenile Justice Evaluation Center (JJEC) project. The purpose of this briefing series is to provide juvenile justice program managers with information that will help them evaluate their programs. Each briefing addresses a topic that is of particular interest to juvenile justice program managers who are trying to determine the effectiveness of the programs they operate.

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Evaluability
Assessment can
help an evaluator
determine
whether a pro-
gram meets
the criteria for
a meaningful
evaluation.

Introduction

Program evaluation is a resource-intensive activity that can provide program managers with a great deal of information about how well their programs are operating. Unfortunately it is not uncommon for an evaluator to discover after an evaluation is underway that the program is not ready for it. A program may not be fully operational, for example, or may not be able to handle the data collection requirements of an evaluation. Determining whether a program is ready for an evaluation prior to beginning it can help ensure that precious evaluation resources are used at the most appropriate time.

There are two main types of program evaluation—process and outcome. A *process evaluation* focuses on program implementation and operation. It identifies the procedures and the decisions made in developing the program, and it describes how the program operates, the services it delivers, and the functions it carries out. *Outcome evaluation* is used to identify the results of a program's effort. It seeks to answer the question, "What difference did the program make?" In order for either of these types of evaluation to be carried out successfully, it is important that a program be ready for evaluation. One way to determine its readiness is to have an evaluator conduct an Evaluability Assessment (EA). Developed by Joseph Wholey in 1979, EA is a tool that can help an evaluator determine whether a program meets the criteria for a meaningful evaluation to take place.

The purpose of this briefing is to introduce program managers to the concept of Evaluability Assessment. Even if a program does not undergo a formal EA, the concepts and ideas are nevertheless important for a program manager to understand and consider prior to having an evaluation conducted. Program managers should bear in mind how these concepts may affect the evaluation process and results.



Evaluability Assessment is a systematic process that helps identify whether program evaluation is justified, feasible, and likely to provide useful information.

What Is Evaluability Assessment?

Evaluability Assessment (EA) is a systematic process that helps identify whether program evaluation is justified, feasible, and likely to provide useful information. It not only shows whether a program can be meaningfully evaluated, but also whether conducting the evaluation is likely to contribute to improved program performance and management. An evaluator needs to answer some important questions about a program before a process and/or outcome evaluation takes place. These questions are the focus of this briefing.

EA is a formal process that requires knowledge of and commitment to the program. It can take several weeks to complete. While EAs can be conducted by a program staff member who is knowledgeable about evaluation, they are probably most successfully conducted by a professional evaluator. (The second briefing in this series, *Hiring and Working With an Evaluator*, discusses the benefits of internal vs. external evaluation at length.) It is important to keep in mind that the person performing the EA should have a strong background in evaluation and juvenile justice. The program's documents and case files should be ready for review, and staff should be ready to be interviewed. It is necessary for an evaluator to look at all of these program pieces to fully understand what a program does on a day-to-day basis.

Although an EA may sound very similar to a process evaluation, there are some important differences between the two. As stated above, an EA is a *systematic process that helps identify whether program evaluation is justified, feasible, and likely to provide useful information*. An EA determines whether a program is ready for evaluation—either a process or outcome evaluation, or both. Conducting an EA can tell the evaluator whether the program is able to produce the information required for a process evaluation, and whether the program meets the other criteria for beginning an outcome evaluation. Since process evaluations require a great deal of time and effort, it is important to determine whether the program is ready to undergo such an evaluation. There

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are similarities in the nature of the data collected in an EA and a process evaluation. EA, however, determines whether a program has the basic foundation for an evaluation to take place (data collection, program model, adequate staffing, etc.), while process evaluation takes the components that make up the foundation and assesses whether and how they are utilized.

EA is a stepping-stone toward any type of evaluation, whether it is a large process or outcome evaluation or a smaller, internal assessment of program performance. While the EA is taking place, the evaluator is also working with program staff, funding agencies, administrators, and participants to help the program get ready for an evaluation. For example, he/she can help clarify program goals by making them more realistic and meaningful. This is a major advantage of having an EA—it will improve a future evaluation by formalizing the agreement between the evaluator and decisionmakers on what is important in the program, anticipating evaluation problems, and smoothing the overall process.



An EA may identify shortcomings in the program's design or implementation that indicate the program is not ready for evaluation.

Is Your Program Ready For Evaluation?

One possible outcome of an EA is the conclusion that a program is not ready for an evaluation. Most often the reasons are related to shortcomings in the program's design or implementation.

Program Design Issues

Two major flaws can make a program unevaluable:

1. No formal program design or model is in place.

As discussed in *Juvenile Justice Program Evaluation: An Overview*, the first briefing in this series, a program needs to have a design or model that lays out its goals and objectives, as well as their relationship to program activities. Without these elements, the program cannot be effectively assessed. A program model must be in place so that what is actually happening in the program can be compared to what the program was designed to achieve.

2. The program design or model is unsound.

Programs are designed to address specific needs or to solve specific problems. In order to address these needs or problems, programs must develop realistic and achievable goals, plausible objectives that can be measured, and activities related to those objectives. If goals or objectives are unrealistic or unattainable, or activities are unrelated to objectives, then the program cannot succeed, and the evaluation is a waste of time and resources. Unattainable goals and objectives might result from the program proposing to change an entire community's behavior, for example, while providing direct services to a relatively few juveniles in the community. Activities that are unrelated to goals and objectives might result from the program designers misunderstanding the causes of the behaviors they are targeting for change. In any case, having an unsound program design renders the program unevaluable in much the same way as having no program design at all.

Program Implementation Issues

Similar to a process evaluation, a major task of an EA is to compare the program design to the program in operation. If program operation varies greatly from its original design, it will be impossible for the evaluator to attribute the outcomes of the program to the program itself. If this is discovered early on in an EA, time and money will be

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saved. In the EA, the following questions about program implementation are important:

1. Does the program serve the population for whom it was designed?

Even though a program may be up and running, it may not be serving the type of population it set out to serve, and an evaluation concerning program success would be misleading. For example, consider a new restorative justice program for property offenders. One of the program's objectives is to ensure that these juveniles provide restitution to the victim. The program has been running for about a year, and has been serving many youth. However, when looking at the program's data on the youths being served, it becomes apparent that the judge has been sending drug offenders to the program, not property offenders. Even though the program has spent the last year serving youth, it has not been functioning as intended. This is not necessarily the fault of the program, but it still would be a waste of time and money to have an evaluator try to conduct a process or outcome evaluation on the impact of the program for property offenders. The program would be better off finding out about this major problem through an EA rather than through a more expensive and time-consuming evaluation.

2. Does the program have the resources discussed in the program design?

In order for a program to function well, it requires resources, such as well-trained staff, equipment, and space. If any of the required resources are not present, problems with implementation arise. For example, if a program has an insufficient number of staff to run the program or if the staff members do not have the appropriate background qualifications and training, it will be difficult for the program to achieve its objectives.

3. Are the program activities being implemented as designed?

Even though a program may be well designed, the design must be carried out as planned in order for the evaluation to be able to attribute outcomes to the program itself. Since the evaluation will collect data based on the actual activities implemented, substantial differences between the stated design and the actual activities will mean that the evaluation will be assessing the program as imple-

mented, not as planned. If the program activities being implemented are very different from those planned, then what is being evaluated is essentially a different program from the one that was initially proposed. Though the evaluation can assess the activities as implemented, it cannot assess the program itself, since the logical connection between activities and goals and objectives has been broken. In this case, the program design should be respecified before the evaluation takes place.

4. Does the program have the capacity to provide data for an evaluation?

Both process and outcome evaluations require programs to produce a great deal of data. It is crucial that programs document the activities of their clients and staff members and the services they provide using forms such as intake assessments, progress reports, and other formal records. In addition, programs must develop measures to assess their progress in achieving their goals and objectives, and must systematically measure changes in the juveniles they serve. The program must have in place, or have the capacity to develop, procedures to generate the data that would be required for the evaluation. The evaluation cannot commence until these data collection procedures are in place.



A key to a successful EA is for the evaluator to understand the program “on paper” and to understand the program’s theory, or why proponents think the program will achieve the desired goals.

How Do You Perform an Evaluability Assessment?

An EA has five crucial tasks that an evaluator must successfully complete:

- Task 1. Study the program history, design, and operation;
- Task 2. Watch the program in action;
- Task 3. Determine the program’s capacity for data collection, management, and analysis;
- Task 4. Assess the likelihood that the program will reach its goals and objectives; and
- Task 5. Show why an evaluation will or will not help the program and its stakeholders.

A key to a successful EA is for the evaluator to understand the program “on paper” (i.e., the program design) and to understand the program’s theory, or why proponents think the program will achieve the desired goals. Interviews of the program’s staff are critical for feedback on plausible links between the program’s problem statement, activities, and goals.

If staffing is available, the program should form an EA work group or team composed of implementation staff responsible for program management, as well as local stakeholders and the person conducting the EA. The first activity of the team should be to identify the scope of the EA, the parameters of the program, and the individuals to be interviewed.

Task One: Study the Program History, Design, and Operation

The evaluator should gather any available program documentation before conducting the first site visit. Once he/she has read this information, a series of site visits will provide additional insight into the program. Program team members must be part of the EA process (including the program manager, program staff, and local stakeholders). The first meeting with the team members should include a discussion of the following:

1. What is the purpose of the EA?
2. Where does this program fit within a larger agency or organizational structure?
3. What is the nature of local stakeholder commitment to the EA?
4. Who should be interviewed as part of the EA?

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The meeting should help familiarize staff with the EA process and provide preliminary information about the program to the person performing the EA. In the course of site visits and interviews, answers to the following questions should be sought:

1. **What is the program's history?** What was the impetus for creating the program? What is the problem that the program was designed to address? How did the program start? How long has the program been in operation? Is the program part of a larger agency? Has the program ever been evaluated? What was done with the information that came out of the evaluation?
2. **What is the program's design?** What are the program's goals and objectives? Is there a mission statement? What resources are in place for implementing and operating the program? What is the maximum capacity of the program? What is the duration of the program (i.e., how long can clients stay)? What problems, if any, have been encountered in implementing the program?
3. **How does the program actually operate?** How are clients' needs assessed? What services are provided? How are staff trained for program implementation and operation? Is there an implementation plan for the program? If it is a new program, what concerns, if any, do stakeholders have?

Task Two: Watch the Program in Action

Interviews with staff and review of program documentation can only tell so much. It is critical that an evaluator conducting an EA actually watch the program in action to learn if the program "on paper" differs from the program in practice. For example, if an EA of a juvenile drug court is being conducted, the evaluator should observe court proceedings to see how the judge interacts with the clients and the other staff involved, how the cases are generally handled, how long they take, etc. If only interviews are conducted, an evaluator will not get a complete picture of how the program works.

Task Three: Determine the Program's Capacity for Data Collection, Management, and Analysis

In order to determine whether a program's objectives have been met, a sufficient amount of good quality data must be collected and

analyzed. In deciding whether a program is evaluable, it is imperative that an evaluator find out the following:

- What data are collected? How are they entered/stored? Are they qualitative, quantitative, or both?
- Will the evaluation require additional data collection?
- How well are data collected? Are they reliable? Is the program capable of collecting and managing the data needed for an evaluation?
- Who enters the data? What are their qualifications?

Task Four: Assess the Likelihood That the Program Will Reach Its Goals and Objectives

As stated earlier, in addition to learning what a program's goals and objectives are, it is important for an evaluator to also assess whether the program is likely to achieve those goals and objectives. A program that has unrealistic goals and objectives is likely to fail to meet them regardless of how well it performs. It would be foolish to undertake an evaluation and conclude that the program is a failure based on its inability to achieve unrealistic goals and objectives.

Task Five: Show Why an Evaluation Will or Will Not Help the Program and Its Stakeholders

Once the evaluator has completed all relevant site visits and interviews and has gathered all of the pertinent information, he/she should produce a final report that states whether or not an evaluation will provide useful information to the program's managers and funders. In making this final determination, he/she should provide a detailed analysis based on the data collected from the program.

To conduct a thorough EA, an evaluator must know as much as he or she can about the program. Even though a program manager may know how the program functions day-to-day, it is important to understand how staff see the program. For example, do staff think the objectives of the program are the same as what the manager thinks and what was laid out during the planning phase? The same goes for the clients; why do they think they are in the program? What do they think they are getting out of the program? These and other questions are crucial in finding out whether or not a program is evaluable. For a sample set of questions that can be used in an EA, see the appendix.



It is very important for program managers to be aware of the elements of an EA to ensure that their programs are evaluable.

How Can Program Managers Ensure That Their Programs Are Evaluable?

All programs do not have the funds necessary to conduct an EA as well as an evaluation. However, it is still very important for program managers to be aware of the elements of an EA discussed here in order to ensure that their programs are evaluable. Each program should have a model that is clearly structured. Within the model, the goals and objectives should be measurable so that the degree to which they have been achieved can be assessed. Program managers must think objectively; that is, what data can be collected that will provide clear evidence that the goals and objectives have been met? Overall, program managers should ensure that their programs are serving those youth they set out to serve, that they are collecting relevant data in an organized and consistent fashion, that they are staffed with people with the appropriate qualifications and knowledge, and that the program activities are being implemented as designed. If all of these elements are in place, a program will most likely prove to be evaluable.

Conclusion

After an EA is conducted, one of two conclusions can be drawn:

1. **The program is ready for an evaluation.** The program is deemed evaluable and is ready to be part of an evaluation. It is also likely that the EA will suggest some of the parameters for the evaluation (e.g., criteria and performance measures.)
2. **The program is not ready for an evaluation.** The program is not ready for an evaluation due to fundamental planning and implementation issues. If this is the case, the evaluator conducting the EA should direct the program manager to areas of the program that need further development. If a program is not ready for an evaluation, the evaluator should point out why this is so and instruct the team on what can be done to bring it to the appropriate level. From here, program managers can begin rethinking their programs and making plans to implement the necessary changes.

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The planning of any type of program evaluation, which should lead to improved program performance, requires the evaluator to make several decisions. One of the most important is whether a program is ready to be evaluated. By conducting an EA to look at program planning and implementation, an evaluator can save a great deal of time and money by determining whether or not an evaluation is feasible and appropriate. Poorly planned and/or implemented programs should not be evaluated because the findings of the evaluation will be inconclusive at best and misleading at worst. EA begins the evaluation process by carrying out a preliminary assessment of the program design. At its conclusion, the program will know if it is ready for a full-scale evaluation, or a smaller scale assessment of a program's performance. It is in a juvenile justice program's best interest to either invest the time and funds necessary to have a formal EA conducted or, at a minimum, to have an informal one conducted in-house.

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Note: To see an example of an evaluability assessment, visit the JJEC Web site (www.jrsa.org/jjec).



Appendix: Sample Interview Questions for an Evaluability Assessment of a Juvenile Justice Program

Questions To Ask the Program Manager

History of Program

1. What was the impetus for creating the program or the problem that the program was designed to address?
2. How did the program start?
3. How long has the program been in operation?
4. Is the program part of a larger agency?
5. Has the program ever been evaluated? If so, by whom? When? What was done with the information that came out of the evaluation? What did you learn about the program?

Funding/Stakeholder Information

1. Where does your funding come from? How often do you need to reapply?
2. Would you say that the community knows of your program? If so, would you say that it supports the program?
3. Who do you think are the program stakeholders?
4. Is there collaboration among the stakeholders?

Staff-Specific

1. Which staff work directly with the clients?
2. What are the qualifications/backgrounds of the staff (social workers, clinicians, etc.)?
3. Can I have a copy of the program staff schedule?

Questions for All Staff Interviewed (Program Manager, Administrative Staff, and Line Staff)

Program Design

1. What are the program's goals and objectives? What is the problem that the program was designed to address? Is there a mission statement? What resources are in place to implement and operate the program?
2. What services are provided? How do they relate to the program's goals and objectives?
3. Do clients ever return after discharge? Why or why not?
4. What is the maximum capacity of the program? How many youth can be served at once?
5. What is the duration of the program (i.e., how long can clients stay)?
6. What problems, if any, have been encountered in the implementation of the program?
7. Does the program hire or contract out for services not provided directly by the program?

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Data/Evaluation

1. At the outset of the program, did you collect baseline data to assist in defining the problem of the program?
2. Do you collect any information on the juveniles that come through the program? If so, what do you collect? When do you collect it (i.e., at what point during the program)?
3. How do you maintain client information? Does your program have a Management Information System database?
4. Do you do any follow-up on the clients after they leave the program? If so, what do you do?
5. Would you say that the program is successful in retaining participants? Do participants drop out? If so, why do you think they drop out?
6. What information would you need to know to be able to tell that your program was working?
7. How would you identify if a client has been successfully discharged from the program?

Staff-Specific

1. What are your qualifications?
2. Who else staffs the program besides line staff? What is the hierarchy?
3. How are staff trained for program implementation? Who trains the line staff?
4. Are there in-service trainings provided for the staff?
5. How often do you have staff meetings? Who meets and for how long? What do you meet about?
6. How many staff have left the program in the past year?

Client-Specific

1. What is the target population for the program?
2. Why would you reject a client from the program?
3. How are clients referred to your program? Who refers them?
4. What would you say are the demographic characteristics of the clients (race, gender, socioeconomic class)?
5. In your opinion, is there a high rate of recidivism for the clients? How do you know? (If applicable.)
6. What problems and/or offenses does the program target? How about other target population criteria, such as age, race, etc.?
7. Do the clients you serve differ from those you want to serve?

Questions for Clients

Program Perceptions

1. Why are you attending the program?
2. What do you think the program is supposed to do for you?
3. What kinds of things are you learning in the program?
4. What kinds of things do you do at the program?
5. How long have you been attending this program?
6. Have you attended this program before?
7. What staff do you work with?
8. Do you think this program is a good fit for you? Why or why not?

Program Evaluation Briefing Series

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- #1 Juvenile Justice Program Evaluation: An Overview
- #2 Hiring and Working With an Evaluator
- #3 Strategies for Evaluating Small Juvenile Justice Programs
- #4 Cost-Benefit Analysis for Juvenile Justice Programs
- #5 Incorporating Evaluation Into the Request for Proposal (RFP) Process
- #6 Evaluability Assessment: Examining the Readiness of a Program for Evaluation

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