TOOLKIT 5: EVALUATING EVICTION PREVENTION POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

There is no shortage of local policies and programs aimed at preventing evictions and supporting mom-and-pop landlords. These include rental assistance programs, mandated eviction mediation, risk mitigation funds and more. However, cities often lack the capacity to measure the impact or efficacy of these programs or policies.* For example, a city may have a risk mitigation program, but very few landlords participating in the program. At the start of a new budget season a department may need to provide evidence of a program's efficacy to secure funding for the next fiscal year. Without a means of evaluating programs, cities must guess about the best ways to increase landlord participation. Failure to accurately evaluate programs could leave cities or departments empty-handed following funding conversations.

WHY SHOULD CITIES CARE?

Evaluation plays a critical role in local government work. By incorporating evaluation into programs, cities can ensure their efforts are achieving their intended goals, identify areas for improvement and make evidence-based decisions on resource allocation. This is particularly important when the success or failure of eviction prevention programs carries such high stakes.

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* For simplicity, we will refer to "policies and programs" as just programs, but this can refer to both.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Consider evaluation at the onset of building a new policy or program. It is easier to conduct evaluations if prior thought is given before launch.

Integrate equity considerations into evaluation frameworks. Programs designed to support underserved populations may have impacts different from those intended. Carefully determine which metrics to use for assessing efficacy and preventing unintended harm.

Be realistic about resource availability, time constraints and capacity, but do not disregard evaluation altogether. Limited resources may pose challenges; however, there are many lower-cost ways to conduct meaningful evaluations.

Information management. Evaluation primarily involves managing information. Clearly define your information management strategy from the beginning and ensure you document your reasoning along with any data collection or analysis. It is much easier to collect data on an ongoing basis than to retroactively decide how you will conduct evaluation.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THIS TOOLKIT?

This toolkit will provide cities and their partners with tips on building an evaluation framework, with key examples and additional resources.

- ◆ **Evaluation in an Ideal World**
- ◆ **Real World Pivots**
  - ◆ Collect qualitative data through interviews or surveys
  - ◆ Use administrative data
- ◆ **Building an Evaluation Framework**
  - ◆ Step 1: Clarify the evaluation's purpose
  - ◆ Step 2: Describe the program and create a theory of change or logic model
  - ◆ Step 3: Focus the evaluation
  - ◆ Step 4: Plan to gather credible evidence
  - ◆ Step 5: Analyze the data and disseminate findings
- ◆ **Key Considerations**
  - ◆ Consider participant harm
  - ◆ Embed equity considerations into program metrics
  - ◆ Select evaluator(s)
- ◆ **Conclusion**

Evaluation in an Ideal World

The gold standard to test policy efficacy is through **randomized evaluation or randomized control trials (RCTs)**. Researchers can establish a causal link between a policy and its impact by randomly assigning participants into two groups — an experimental group and a control group — and ensuring that the only expected difference between the two groups is the variable or policy under study.

RCTs can range in size and scope from evaluating landlord responsiveness to different email subject lines to assessing landlord willingness to accept low-income tenants through a financial risk mitigation guarantee.

However, conducting randomized control trials is challenging for most cities due to high costs (in time and money) and low capacity (in resources and expertise). Local universities may be willing to provide research support free of charge for cities that are interested in RCTs but unable to conduct them.

Real World Pivots

While randomized control trials provide the "gold standard" of program evaluations, they are not always feasible for local leaders who must contend with constraints such as time, money and capacity. Leaders can consider the "real world pivots" below if a randomized control trial is not within scope.

COLLECT QUALITATIVE DATA THROUGH INTERVIEWS OR SURVEYS

While quantitative data — such as the number of participants in a program or the increase of participants in a program — is critical, it is also important and compelling to gather qualitative data directly from landlords. Testimonials from landlords can prove valuable in convincing key stakeholders in the city to continue funding a program or make adjustments to its implementation, especially when combined with quantitative data.

Consider conducting interviews and focus groups to obtain direct feedback from landlords. Presenting landlords with different options and gauging their likelihood to change behavior based on each intervention can provide valuable insight. Based on these results, the city can choose the intervention landlords are most responsive to, guided by the feedback received.

Once the intervention is available, the city can ask both participating and non-participating landlords questions such as "What do you think you would have done if you had not learned about the program?" or "Why did you not choose to participate in this program?".

When possible, compensate interview and focus group participants for their time. This will not only increase participation but show a good faith effort by the city to engage landlords and signal that their opinions are valuable.

SURVEY EXAMPLES

Cities will often collect qualitative information through surveys. Below are examples of city-run surveys aimed at gathering more information on and from landlords. These surveys range in sophistication and purpose. Some are simple and easy to run for quick feedback, while others are longer and more comprehensive to inform long-range plans.

Manhattan, KS
Analyzed results from a landlord survey conducted October 17 – 27, 2019. This survey gathered information on landlords, their practices (e.g., how they advertise vacancies, security deposit requirements), conditions of their units, whether they have evicted tenants (and if so, why?) and more.
https://cityofmhk.com/DocumentCenter/View/56496/MHK-Landlord-Survey

Oakland, CA
Analyzed results from a survey to understand the impact of COVID-19 on tenants and property owners from July-September 2020. This survey asks demographic questions and breaks all analyses down by these demographics.
https://cao-94612.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/HIP-Oakland-RAP-Survey-Analysis-v2-1.pdf

Olympia, WA
Analyzed survey results to inform a regional Housing Action Plan. The survey mailing list was created from the Thurston County Assessor's property list. The survey asked questions about demographics, unit size and building types, managing rentals, rent and utilities, evictions and more.
https://trpc.org/DocumentCenter/View/8425/Landlord-Survey?bidId=

Administrative Data

Cities can also use administrative data to conduct evaluations. Operational programs generate a wealth of data simply as a byproduct of being operational, and cities can collect and benefit from much of it. If the city implements a landlord incentive program, for instance, there is likely programmatic data available including the number of participants, how much money they received and what types of tenants they rent to.

For example, a city might want to increase participation in a landlord education program by giving landlords $250 for successful completion. After six months, they observe a 35 percent increase in landlord participation. While the city will not be able to say with statistical certainty that the incentive — $250 for successful completion — increased participation by 35 percent, it can reasonably conclude that the incentive likely influenced participation rates. Augmenting these fundings with qualitative data, such as feedback from landlords on what influenced their decision to participate, can further enhance the city's understanding.

Potential data sources can include programmatic data, court eviction data, county property assessors' data, housing inspection results, 311 service requests, program budgets and more.

Cities can even implement low-cost RCTs by baking random assignments into the program design and evaluating outcomes using administrative data. An example is New York City's low-cost RCT, where the city allocated a $75 million dollar program budget to provide annual bonuses to teachers in low-performing schools, resulting in increased student achievement and other benefits. By using administrative data, the cost of evaluating the program was only $50,000.   Another alternative that can also address resource constraints is a delayed-start or stepped-wedge trial meaning groups access the program in phases and changes over time among those groups get measured.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Handbook on Using Administrative Data for Research and Evidence-based Policy
Evaluators can encounter data-sharing hurdles while trying to access administrative data sets. Read this resource for data sharing agreement best practices, including how to develop one to access administrative data for a research project.
https://admindatahandbook.mit.edu/book/v1.0-rc4/dua.html

The Lab @ DC
The Lab @ DC sits within the mayor's administration in the Office of the City Administrator's Office of Performance Management. It is an applied research team that conducts randomized evaluations, predictive modeling, administrative data analysis and resident-centered design. Visit this resource for more on the benefits of administrative data analysis and some examples of projects in the District of Columbia.
https://thelabprojects.dc.gov/administrative-data-analysis

Building an Evaluation Framework

This section provides a brief overview of the several foundational steps involved in building an evaluation framework. These steps are useful both before, during and after a program has launched.

STEP 1: CLARIFY THE EVALUATION'S PURPOSE

Clearly define why you want to conduct an evaluation. Is it to determine whether the program should be funded next year? Is it to identify ways to improve the program? The purpose will dictate what type of evaluation to conduct (refer to the "Forms of Evaluation" chart for more guidance) and will also help ensure clarity and transparency among evaluators and participating stakeholders. Transparency in evaluation is key for ethical evaluations.

### WHEN INVOLVING PEOPLE IN THE EVALUATION PROCESS, CONSIDER:

◆ Those who would use evaluation results (e.g. clients, community groups, elected officials)

◆ Those who are involved in running the program (e.g. program staff, partners, funders, coalition members, community organizations)

◆ Those who are served by the program (e.g. residents, their families, the general public)

It can be helpful to engage these individuals when clarifying the purpose and win their buy-in.

STEP 2: DESCRIBE THE PROGRAM AND CREATE A THEORY OF CHANGE OR LOGIC MODEL

Once there is a shared understanding among all stakeholders involved, including "target users," agree on and develop the program theory, or theory of change. In greater detail, outline the exact steps between the program launch and the desired outcome. Why do people anticipate that the program will result in a given outcome?

Figure I. Logic Model in Theory
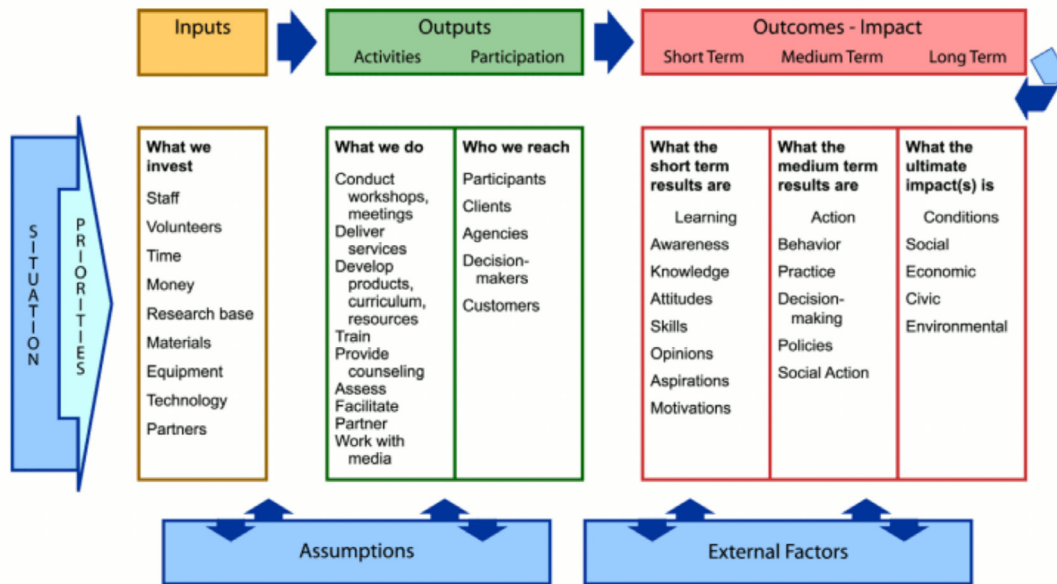
Source: Logic Modelling and Outcome Evaluation for Housing First (2019)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following are great resources and templates for designing a logic model or theory of change.

University of Wisconsin Extension
Program Development and Evaluation Resources (logic model)
https://logicmodel.extension.wisc.edu/introduction-overview/section-1-what-is-a-logic-model/

Tools4Dev Templates
Logic Model Framework
https://tools4dev.org/resources/logical-framework-logframe-template/

Switchboard TA
Theories of Change, Logframes, and Indicators: An Updated Resource Collection on Project Design
https://switchboardta.org/blog/theories-of-change-logframes-and-indicators-an-updated-resource-collection-on-project-design/

STEP 3: FOCUS THE EVALUATION

With a clarified purpose and stakeholders in mind, narrow down the key questions you want to address with the evaluation. While there are potentially limitless questions you can ask, it is important to prioritize and select the most relevant ones. Determine the specific questions to ask and choose the most appropriate method(s) to answer them. Specify and agree on the criteria for measuring success.

STEP 4: PLAN TO GATHER CREDIBLE EVIDENCE

Verify that there is existing data, or data that you can collect (either qualitative or quantitative) that can answer your evaluation question(s). "Evidence" may include existing program data, focus groups, surveys, one-on-one interviews and more. The selection of appropriate evidence will depend on factors such as what is feasible to collect and what will best address the evaluation questions.

Figure 4.1: Evaluation Plan Methods Grid Example

Evaluation Question	Indicator/ Performance Measure	Method	Data Source	Frequency	Responsibility
What process leads to implementation of policy?	Interview description of process steps, actions, and strategies	Case study, interviews, document reviews etc.	Site visits and reports	Pre and post funding period	Contractor

Taken from: Developing an Effective Evaluation Plan (2011)

STEP 5: ANALYZE THE DATA AND DISSEMINATE FINDINGS

Finally, analyze the data and disseminate the findings. Analyzing the data may be relatively straightforward, but the challenge lies in translating the findings into actionable steps. Consider the intended goal of the evaluation again: Is it to demonstrate the program's effectiveness to secure additional funding? Is it to identify areas for process improvement? Revisit the initial purpose and determine how to present the information in a manner that is accessible and compelling to the intended audience. Involving stakeholders in this conversation will lend credibility to the evaluation and acceptance/buy-in of resulting recommendations.

Key Considerations

CONSIDER PARTICIPANT HARM

For example, New Orleans, LA, and Washington, DC, explicitly address the ethical considerations involved in evaluations, specifically emphasizing the need to minimize potential burden and harm. Burden and harm can manifest in various ways, such as relying on non-compensated participation of subjects or implementing programs that lead to tenant evictions. The Lab @ DC provides a useful breakdown of the types of harm that an evaluation might impose on residents. Minimizing these potential forms of harm is critical to ethically sound evaluations.

TYPES OF POTENTIAL HARM

◆ One could be **psychological burden** from knowing that you're part of a randomized evaluation that doesn't necessarily benefit you directly. We put in a lot of work to be transparent about our projects and actively engage residents—by using resident-centered design to get feedback on our ideas, posting our evaluation plans and findings publicly, and holding community events—to ensure that our work is responsive to residents.

◆ Another type of harm is when an **evaluation poses large burdens on those who participate**, often through excessive surveys or interviews. We try to minimize this harm by designing our evaluations to work with normal government operations—existing touchpoints and data already collected rather than special sessions or surveys—as much as possible.

◆ With great data, of course, also comes great responsibility. A third potential harm is if an evaluation **fails to protect residents' privacy**. All of our evaluations have stringent data security protections; our data use agreements document our responsibilities ranging from working on secure networks from encrypted laptops, storing data anonymously or in locked filing cabinets, and destroying unneeded data.

Source: The Lab @ DC

EMBED EQUITY CONSIDERATIONS INTO EVALUATION METRICS

The evaluation of program equity relies heavily on the ability to disaggregate data by demographic groups. This initial step acknowledges that different groups of people, such as people of color or people with different abilities, experience cities in distinct ways. These disparities could stem from redlining, exclusionary zoning, mistrust of government, language barriers and more. Disaggregating data will help evaluators identify who is benefiting and who is not benefiting from a program.

SELECT EVALUATORS

Carefully select who will conduct the evaluation. Some cities have internal capacity to conduct evaluations, while others do not. Even if there is the capacity to conduct an evaluation internally, that might not always be the best option, such as in instances where the relationship between community members and the city government is strained. External evaluators can include independent consulting firms, research institutes, universities and more. Each comes with its own benefits and downsides, and determining what is best for 1) a given project and 2) the city in the long run is critical.

In certain cases, choosing an external evaluator may not be ideal. For example, if the evaluation includes recommending improvements, external evaluators might lack awareness of the political climate or implementation feasibility, leading to impractical of ineffective recommendations for the program team. Additionally, external evaluators may lack program-specific knowledge or expertise, as well as connections to relevant program staff who can provide crucial context.

Cities may take different approaches but often try to combine external evaluators and program staff on the same team. For example, NYC Opportunity contracts out evaluations but leverages internal staff to oversee the work. Other cities like Washington, DC, have in-house evaluation capacity.

Conclusion

As more cities implement eviction prevention policies and programs, evaluation becomes increasingly vital to ensure that efforts are effecting change. Evaluating programs allows cities to determine which programs are most effective, whether resources are being used in impactful ways, and whether services are equitable.