

Mapping Evaluation Practices in Youth Intervention Programs

This paper provides a snapshot of the kinds of program evaluation that youth intervention programs in Minnesota are conducting in the spring of 2010. This report maps the “who”, “what”, “why” and “how” of youth intervention evaluations. The “who” includes both who is conducting the evaluation and also who wants to know about its results. The “what” includes both what models of evaluation are used and also what information is being collected. The “why” is both a practical and a philosophical question that addresses both how program evaluation leads to better results and more resources, but also lays out some larger debates about the purpose of program evaluation. Finally the “how” gives insight into the daily operations of program evaluation, both how data are collected and also how results are incorporated into the program.

The information in this document came from ten hour-long informational interviews with either program managers at YIPA member sites or with members of the evaluation community, like Dale Blyth at the University of Minnesota and Dana Swayze at the Office of Justice Programs.

While this document has several useful applications, it also has some limitations. This does not reflect all youth intervention programs in Minnesota, nor is it a random sample of programs. Rather, the organizations represented in this report were filtered in two ways. First, they are all members of Minnesota Youth Intervention Programs Association (YIPA). Second, they all volunteered to speak with YIPA’s Promise Fellow. Programs chose to participate, so they likely had something to say about program evaluation. Programs that were not conducting rigorous evaluation were probably more reticent to come forward. For the purposes of this report, this selection may, in fact, be an advantage. Individuals who came forward to speak about evaluation did so because they had something to add to the conversation. These people might be models for those organizations that have not thought deeply about evaluation techniques in the past. Some participants in this process joined because they were struggling with evaluation and wanted to be part of a larger community looking for new strategies. These individuals may provide inspiration as well, by showing organizations that you don’t have to have all the answers to start looking seriously at evaluation.

Who

Youth intervention programs vary greatly in staff size. Some programs have one full time staff person, while others are part of much larger organizations. Sometimes a large staff allows the organization to do in-house evaluation with a staff person in charge of collecting data and analyzing results. On the other hand, larger organizations may also have the resources to hire an external evaluator. That is not to say that large organizations are the only ones who should do program evaluation. Small organizations can also conduct program evaluation by making it a routine part of day-to-day operations. Organizations can use volunteers to conduct surveys, for example, or use weekly case meetings as a chance to check in on the success of certain programs.

Internal Evaluation

This typically falls to the program supervisor, who collects surveys, talks to case managers and is responsible for reporting results to funders. There are pros and cons to this approach. One benefit is that external evaluations can be expensive and cumbersome for a small program. Also, internal evaluators have intimate knowledge of the program and (hopefully) have already gained the trust and respect of the program staff. The downside is that not all program managers are trained as evaluators and they may not possess the same data analysis skills as an evaluation professional. Secondly, their closeness to the program may reduce objectivity about the true value of certain practices. The majority of evaluation is

done “in-house,” although there is sometimes external assistance with some parts, such as data analysis. An example of “in-house” evaluation is at The Storefront Group, a mental health-focused program in the suburban metro area, where the program supervisor compiles data from a variety of sources. This includes quarterly reports of recidivism from the county and school attendance from the schools. It also includes weekly meetings with caseworkers to ensure that young people are following their personal action plans. One supervisor says that these weekly meetings add a new dimension to her understanding of the quarterly reports. The reports, she says, are useful for grant applications and funding, but the meetings are what they use to make sure that things are running smoothly within the program.

External Evaluation

External evaluations are rarer and more complicated. Some larger organizations take part in things like the Youth Program Quality Assessment (More on this below). In cases where someone else comes in to perform an assessment, there are usually costs associated with this process. Some organizations are part of a collective of organizations that try to use a standard guide for their different programs. So while the evaluator may be internal, the standards are formed by a larger collective group. Pillsbury United Communities, for example, is part of a team of MACC Commonwealth members who use the 5 C’s (Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character and Caring/ Compassion – with the potential 6th C of Contribution) as a starting point for program evaluation across organizations. MACC Commonwealth provides technical and financial support for Twin Cities non-profits and provides opportunities for collaboration, like in the example above.

Which programs are doing evaluation? YIP grantee organizations are now required to provide a pre and post survey created by the Office of Justice Programs. Apart from that, the decision is often based upon funding and upon collaboration with different groups like the Youth Work Institute. The Office of Justice Programs reports that prior to beginning the required survey, all YIP grantees were already conducting some kind of self-assessment (See text box).

The final “who” is who wants to know? One of the large problems in youth intervention is that since there is not a robust collection of studies on promising practices, there is a risk that funders will equate lack of research with lack of success. Some communities in Minnesota that are currently discussing evaluation and youth services are early childhood, juvenile justice, education and out-of-school time. Funders have been incorporated into conversations about program evaluation in a variety of ways, including the quality matters funders group lead by the United Way.

What

What information are people looking to find? What is important in evaluation? This information varies depending on intended audience and program philosophy. The large debate between process and outcomes evaluation will be addressed in the “why” section. The truth is that most organizations have a mix of process and outcomes, qualitative and quantitative reviews.

Youth Intervention Program grantees are required to conduct a pre and post survey with the young people that participate in their program. The OJP began to pilot a new pre and post survey collection tool in 2009. Many YIP grantees were a part of this initial process either as survey pilot sites, or as contributors to the survey content. The reasons for the survey are threefold: 1) A uniform strength and risk assessment allows a wide range of youth programs with diverse program goals to share common outcomes. 2) Data assist programs in on-going improvement strategies and responsiveness to youth’s needs. 3) Demonstrating the collective statewide value of YIP programming to young people will hopefully assist in securing continued funding at the state level. It is also the case that funding is increasingly tied to

evidence. YIP grantees sites are not limited to learning about their organization solely from this survey, however, and many use other methods in addition to this (see text box).

One reoccurring theme in program evaluation, perhaps unsurprisingly, is youth behavior before entering the program and upon completion of the program. How young people see themselves, their relationships with family and authority figures, their connection to peers, school and other activities, and their ability to make healthy decisions are all commonly tested elements in youth intervention programs. Some measures include the BASC (behavior assessment tool for children), DASES (drug avoidance self efficacy scale), and other lykert-scale surveys that show a young person's attitude toward school, self and community. These measures are then used to create a personal action plan for that young person during their time in the program.

At the Youth Service Bureau (YSB), a counseling, education and school-based organization east of the Twin Cities, several of the new tools listed above have recently been introduced. The YSB introduced these new behavioral measures in part to better link their programs to their organization's overall "logic model." That way, what they hope to accomplish, what they offer their young people, and what they measure are all aligned. This has, according to one staff member, changed the overall thinking about their programs. They are constantly looking for better evidence, have recently implemented a new database system to better track their data, and have used this data to convince the community of the value of what they do. The Youth Service Bureau has, in the past few years, expanded into new schools and has begun to train other districts in their approach.

Another important theme is program quality. Those interested in program quality look for staff performance, youth engagement in the program and other "setting-level" measures. That is, measures that look at the program itself, rather than at individual young people within the program. Quality measures are at the root of the Minnesota Community Education program ever since they were a part of the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) pilot in 2005. This quality assessment program included 18 hours of quality training, individual site assessments by external observers, and continued coaching. According to a community education VISTA member, quality has infused itself into everyone's vocabulary, even influencing how coordinators choose programs, hire staff, and support staff development.

An emerging theme, which YIPA members cited on several occasions, but which remains an open question, is program length. Youth intervention programs are particularly interested in how much contact a young person should have with an early intervention program in order to have the optimal effect. Some programs last a year or longer, such as some of the early intervention programs at Northwest Youth and Family Services, while others, such as the anti-shoplifting classes at The Storefront Group, last a few sessions. Hopefully, new research will continue to shed more light on this question in the future.

Why

Evaluation takes time and resources, its complex and, even if done perfectly, there is no guarantee that it will provide positive results. So why do it? Despite all of the effort that it takes to do evaluation well, the rewards can vastly outweigh these challenges. First of all, funders love results. Knowing what the program does, how it does it and what effect it has on the youth it serves is the best advocacy tool you can ask for. Secondly, there is always room to make a program better for the young people it serves. We all want to get the biggest impact for our dollar and programs can feel confident that they are if they can show that they are running a quality program with positive outcomes for youth.

YIPA encourages every one of its members to provide the best evidence they can for the quality and success of their program. We hope to use this information to become better advocates for early youth intervention as a whole. We are continually building relationships with researchers, funders and others who can help improve our members ability to operate with evidence-based best practices.

On the large scale of youth program evaluation as a whole, the current debate revolves around quality versus outcomes measures. Quality measures explore “setting-level” program elements like staff quality and choices in activities. Proponents of this model state that a young person has so many factors that go into the outcomes that are typically measured (school success, substance abuse etc.) that measures that look only at those elements miss how youth programs do make a difference. They contend that returning to the program’s strengths and challenges put power back in the hands of the providers to change and improve, rather than expecting individual youth to change in a certain way. Those who argue that outcomes measures are more valuable say that programs need to be able to show that they are making a difference and that young people who come through their programs are changing for the better.

While there may seem to be a certain level of either-or about this debate, we believe that both elements lead to the strongest programs. Quality programs will likely lead to the best outcomes and high outcomes usually indicate quality at the program level. We support outcomes-based measures as long as they are realistic and that the outcomes being measured reflect the goals of the program. We also support quality measures as long as they are rigorous and persuasive to funders.

How

How programs choose to incorporate evaluation into their daily routines depends on all of the elements discussed above. Most programs, however, share certain elements. First, most organizations have an evaluation tool of some kind when a young person enters the program and when they leave it. Second, many organizations have a chain of command with regards to evaluation. For example, youth workers or volunteers provide data on the youth and programs they have direct contact with, this information goes to a case worker or administrator who collects all of the information and either analyses it or sends it to an executive director or to an outside review (such as funders or external evaluators).

At Northwest Youth and Family Services Discovery Program, for example, there is a survey at intake that is filled out by both the youth and his or her parents. This survey includes statements like “my child shares easily with others,” which are rated on a Lykert scale. The young person has a similar assessment with things like, “I like going to school” and “I feel like my family life is secure.” During course of program the young person is assessed with behavioral tracking tools and the young person’s coach looks at the specific issues that brought the him or her to the program. Progress on these issues is charted over the course of 12 months. This progress includes, for example, both each month’s attendance record and detailed weekly case notes. At the end of the program, the youth and parent do a post-program survey and create a family transition plan.

How programs incorporate their results into their daily programming is less clear. This is an area that we believe programs can strive to improve upon. One way to do so is to look at gaps between what outcomes hope to achieve and what your program plans look like. Do your goals match the activities that you provide? Do you and your funders have the same goals in mind? We are confident that YIPA member programs are high-quality, effective early youth intervention programs, but we can always do better!

Conclusion

For those who are new to evaluation and see this as a daunting task, consider starting with the following steps. Learn about what is out there. The accompanying documents to this one (executive summary, literature review, and what's next guide) are a good place to start, but the world of evaluation and best practices is always changing as new standards emerge. Talk to your fellow providers. One great asset to working in youth intervention in Minnesota is that there is a built-in community ready to discuss strategies and their own successes and pitfalls. A common theme for the people interviewed for this study was that collaboration was the best path to success. Another indicator of success was not relying on one evaluation tool to tell you everything. Mixing statistics and written reports, survey and observation seemed to produce the best picture of the program.

The Office of Justice Programs provided the following information regarding the kinds of evaluations that YIP grantees were conducting when the OJP survey was introduced:

Before the survey, programs all individually defined how they would measure their outcomes; evaluation was a required aspect of the grant award. Programs used a variety of tools. Most programs are continuing to use additional outcome measures beyond the survey. These are some of the tools programs stated in their grant applications that they intend to use in addition to the survey. OJP very much supports programs collecting additional information about their program outcomes to the degree that they are able, as no one assessment tells the whole story of impact on youth. Here are some of them, in no particular order:

- Parent, teacher, and mentor pre and post surveys or interviews about youth's progress and behavior*
- School truancy and attendance data*
- # CWS hours completed*
- Progress towards graduation (credits) and grades*
- Recidivism (no new offenses/charges/probation violations/police contacts); severity of new offenses*
- Dropout rates*
- Curricula tests*
- Exit surveys about skills/work readiness or exit interviews*
- Program satisfaction, attendance*
- Completion of individualized case plan goals*
- Completion of MH and CD assessments*
- # Truancy petitions filed*
- YLSI score*
- Knowledge/Awareness quizzes*
- Housing stability*
- A wide variety of strength, risk, emotional regulation, skills, attitudes scales/tools*
- Reparations paid/made to victims*

As you can see, YIP programs are evaluating their programs and youth success beyond just the survey. Many have catered their outcome measures to their unique program needs through a variety of sources. While YIP survey participation is the minimum assessment allowed, many have chosen to retain other methods they used in the past.