

Collecting and Using MEANINGFUL PROGRAM DATA and PARTICIPANT INFORMATION to Support Evaluation and Services

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**National Responsible
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INTRODUCTION

Collecting meaningful program data provides high quality information that can be used to monitor and assess program operations and track progress made toward overall program goals and desired outcomes for participants. Providers and program staff can collate and analyze program data to see how well their program is doing and how well each service component works for their participants. Additionally, data can be used to improve program activities and services and identify areas for future improvement (Brennan et al., 2019).

This National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse (NRFC) information brief aims to demystify research terms for fatherhood practitioners. In this brief, we provide a comprehensive description of the different types of program data and their purpose, offer practical guidance for collecting and using data, and underscore the importance of routinely evaluating program services and outcomes to enhance programming and disseminate program impacts. Additionally, this brief emphasizes the value of using program data in a meaningful way and offers recommendations on how to leverage this data to improve program effectiveness and better support program participants.

Data can be used to:



DEMONSTRATE
program success



IDENTIFY AREAS
for program
modifications and
improvements



TELL A STORY
to help achieve
long-term program
sustainability

Vann, 2021



WHAT MAKES PROGRAM DATA MEANINGFUL?

It's important to think about how data might be useful for program administrators, community collaborators, and funders. Rather than collecting data for the sake of collecting data, programs should ensure they are collecting data that is meaningful and will help them:

1 Tell the program's "story" and communicate the success and effectiveness to outside collaborators.

2 Help identify where more attention, resources, adjustments, or modifications are needed for overall program improvement.

Program data can help providers:

DETERMINE SERVICES

Determine what services participants need, how engaged and satisfied they are, and whether additional services may be needed.

UNDERSTAND GOALS

Understand participant goals and how successful they are at achieving their goals.

OBTAIN FUNDING

Obtain additional or continuation funding by demonstrating program effectiveness.

TELL THE STORY

Tell the story of their program and communicate their message with the community to enhance recruitment, garner community support, and increase awareness of the program.

UNDERSTAND EFFECT

Understand the overall effectiveness of the program and make adjustments as necessary.

Over the past decade, the notion of evidence-based grantmaking has gained popularity, with funding partners using “evidence of effectiveness” as part of their selection criteria when awarding competitive grants. The goal of evidence-based grantmaking is to invest in programs with the proven ability to deliver positive results for program participants and the communities they serve.



(Results for America, 2021)

Program data can help current and potential program partners understand:

- ☒ **The program’s objectives and intended outcomes.**
- ☒ **Whether the program aligns with their mission and goals.**
- ☒ **How beneficial and effective the partnership could be for their organization and their participants.**

Program data can help funders:

- ☒ **Make informed funding decisions.**

Program outcome data demonstrates program success, impact, and effectiveness, which is increasingly becoming more important to funders and funding partners.
- ☒ **Realize the need for additional funding and flexible funding sources.**

Program outcome data can highlight participant needs that require additional funding or more flexible funding sources to adequately meet those needs (e.g., child care for parents attending programming, stipends to support participants’ attendance during work hours, an evening meal or transportation vouchers to further support attendance).

As fatherhood programs expand their service offerings, the need for accurate information and data around service delivery and outcome attainment increases.

(Lugo-Gil & Vann, 2014)

HOW DO YOU COLLECT MEANINGFUL DATA?



Meaningful program data...



REFERS TO INFORMATION

gathered, collected, and recorded by staff throughout the implementation of a specific program or intervention.



INCLUDES MANY DATA TYPES

both quantitative and qualitative, such as participant demographics, program activities, outcomes, and participant feedback.



SERVES AS A VALUABLE RESOURCE

for evaluating program effectiveness, tracking progress, identifying areas for improvement, and informing future decision-making.

THE ROLE OF STAFF IN PROGRAM DATA COLLECTION

Prior to collecting data, program staff should discuss and establish a plan regarding staff roles and expectations and a formal data-entry procedure to ensure data are accurate and complete. Each program staff member plays a distinct role in collecting data. Intake staff collect participant baseline information at enrollment, case managers routinely update program data, and program managers work alongside data specialists to help interpret program data to determine the program's effectiveness and impact.

As a best practice, program staff should receive relevant trainings to understand the data they will be collecting from participants and how they can use the data to modify or improve programming and services to enhance participants' experiences.

Staff trainings should cover:

-  Why collecting and storing data is important.
-  How to collect necessary program data.
-  When to collect data and how frequently data should be reviewed for accuracy.
-  Appropriate storage protocols to ensure participant confidentiality.

THE ROLE OF LOGIC MODELS IN DATA COLLECTION ACTIVITIES

*Logic models*² help provide structure and clarity to program planning, implementation, and evaluation efforts. They allow programs to communicate their objectives and intended outcomes by defining specific inputs, outputs, and outcomes, and determining what data should be collected, when it should be collected, and how it should be measured to assess the program's success. This data-driven approach allows programs to make informed decisions, optimize resource allocation, and strive for meaningful and measurable results. Additionally, logic models provide flexibility as they can be adapted to program changes, allowing for continuous improvement and ensuring the program remains relevant and responsive to their participants' evolving needs. Program staff should refer to the logic model during all data collection and analysis processes and be prepared to adjust the logic model and their data collection approach as needed.

**Data collection tools
should be clear, efficient,
and tied in a logical way to
program implementation.**

(Vann, 2021)

² A *logic model* is a helpful tool for planning programming and managing ongoing program activities. A logic model maps program inputs, activities, and outputs and helps organize intended short- and -long-term outcomes and how they will be measured (Lugo-Gil & Vann, 2014).

Examples of the types of data that fatherhood programs use: A toolbox for practitioners

The tables below represent a toolbox with examples of the different types of data a program may gather during participants' engagement with the program.

1. PARTICIPANT INTAKE DATA

During the program intake process, programs collect baseline data from participants to learn more about the participants' background and determine which services would be best suited to address their needs.

Data metrics collected	Data collection methods
• Demographics • Family information • Child support obligations • Income • Participant needs • Case management goals • Employment history	• Participant intake form • Formal intake interview notes • Participant background documentation

2. PROGRAM SERVICES AND SERVICE DELIVERY DATA

Throughout participants' engagement in programming, program staff regularly collect participant data that details the service offerings participants receive, as well as the frequency and timing of program activities being delivered.

Data metrics collected	Data collection methods
• Program activities (may include required and optional activities)³ • Service delivery (e.g., skills based, cognitive, behavioral, educational) • Program length/modality (e.g., number of modules or courses, length of programming or courses)	• Participant background documentation • Participant progress documentation • Program orientation documentation • Program attendance documentation • Case management conversation notes

³ Examples include classes to obtain education credentials, job skills training, job placement assistance, food assistance, transportation assistance, legal assistance, substance abuse counseling, anger management, workforce development and job preparation training, mentorship and peer support, financial literacy, parenting education, relationship skills, child care, mediation services, domestic violence education and screening, general health and nutrition, and counseling and crisis intervention.

3. PROGRAM OBJECTIVES AND INTENDED OUTCOMES DATA

Staff routinely collect data on program implementation to determine how well program goals are being achieved and to help evaluate program performance. These data help assess the implementation fidelity of the program and allow staff to compare their intended objectives and outcomes with actual participant outcomes. This type of data can be used to determine where improvements or additional services may be needed.

Data metrics collected	Data collection methods
• Program goals • Enrollment targets • Class frequency • Communication and engagement methods • Types of incentives • Community outreach and engagement • Program referrals • External partnerships • In-house service offerings • Length of services or program engagement	• Participant background documentation • Participant progress documentation • Notes from informal participant meetings or conversations • Program orientation documentation • Program attendance documentation • Internal program staff documentation • Program staff class notes and training documentation

4. PARTICIPANT PROGRESS AND OUTCOMES DATA

Throughout programming, staff collect data from participants to gauge their uptake and satisfaction with services and program activities. These data also help monitor participant engagement and progress, as well as measure participant success in meeting their intended goals and outcomes.

Data metrics collected	Data collection methods
• Program attendance and retention • Participant goal setting • Progress made toward intended goals and outcomes (individual and program level) • Participant referrals • Participant perceptions of program services • External or familial supports available to fathers • Perceived barriers to services • Adjustments made to address perceived barriers to services or engagement	• Participant intake form • Program attendance documentation • Case management notes • Notes from informal participant meetings or conversations • Documentation of participant progress

5. POST-PROGRAM OUTCOME DATA

Another way programs gauge participant success and satisfaction with program services is by following up with past program participants. These post-program data can also help staff assess participant referral outcomes and determine where to make additional adjustments to programming.

Data metrics collected	Data collection methods
• Referral outcomes • Employment and retention • Success with intended outcomes and goals • Participant perceptions of program services • Perceived barriers to services • Adjustments made to address perceived barriers to services or engagement	• Notes from informal participant meetings or conversations • Follow-up calls with past program participants (e.g., six months or one year after leaving the program)



HOW TO USE MEANINGFUL PROGRAM DATA

Analysis, performance monitoring, and evaluation

A set process and system for recording and storing program data is needed, and these data should be frequently updated and reviewed for accuracy. Program staff need to ensure they consistently gather documentation and routinely monitor information gathered from participants, and they should understand the importance of maintaining accurate and complete data.

The Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation within the Administration for Children and Families highlights two types of program assessments: (Alberty & Zaveri, 2022)

PERFORMANCE MONITORING AND IMPROVEMENT:

Ongoing monitoring of program performance, as it relates to quality improvements, performance measurement, and program sustainability. Internal program staff typically complete these assessments.

PROGRAM EVALUATION:

Systematic studies to assess how well programs are working, the extent to which programs are impacting participant outcomes, and other effects of programming by comparing those who received services with those who did not through formal evaluation methods (process and implementation evaluations, outcome evaluations, and/or impact evaluations). An external, independent partner typically completes these assessments.

Analyzing program data involves identifying outcomes, *trends*,⁴ and patterns at both an individual and program level. Program data analysis provides a mechanism to monitor program performance.

The purpose of evaluation efforts

Program evaluations can demonstrate effectiveness and show that a program is working as intended. Data collection activities may include pre-post surveys, focus groups, and interviews with program staff, partners, and participants.

If a program has funding support for a formal evaluation, the staff should work with an independent researcher or local evaluator. Program evaluations should not be used as an end-all-be-all determination of a program's value. Instead, evaluations are an essential tool for celebrating successes and identifying areas for growth and continuous improvement.

Evaluations are critically important for program credibility, accountability, improvement, sharing of best practices, and to prove to funders that their dollars were well spent.

(Byers, 2014)

⁴ A *trend* refers to the pattern of data points given repeated measures of levels over time. Measures and measurement tools might assess levels of outcomes at different points in time, and researchers might use those data to calculate a trend (Eddins et al., 2023).

The importance of dissemination

COMMON DISSEMINATION MATERIALS INCLUDE:

Social media



Print reports or
annual reports



Program brochures
or flyers



PowerPoint
presentations
and information
sessions



Dissemination of program data can help programs achieve long-term sustainability, support, and funding. After collecting and analyzing program data, it is important to demonstrate the program's impact and value by sharing information with stakeholders, including funders, policymakers, community partners, and other practitioners in the field.

Sharing quantitative findings can help demonstrate program effectiveness for participants and showcase the overall impact of programming. Quantitative findings are derived from data (often numerical) collected in a structured way through surveys or assessments that can be coded and analyzed to show frequency of responses or quantification of certain aspects of program services and participant outcomes (Lugo-Gil & Vann, 2014).

Qualitative findings can capture and communicate the unique experiences of participants, yielding a story or narrative that highlights the program's *human impact*. Qualitative findings are summaries of information gathered through focus groups, interviews, and observations that provide context to quantitative data or provide answers that quantitative data are not suited to answer (Lugo-Gil & Vann, 2014).

Sharing success stories and communicating this type of data can help programs garner external support for, and increased engagement in, fatherhood programming. When sharing this information, program staff should determine who their audience for the information sharing will be and how they can share this information in a transparent and accessible manner.

When shared across programs and organizations, results of program data analysis contribute to collective knowledge building and field advancement. Researchers and practitioners can draw upon program data to identify best practices, generate new insights, and contribute to *evidence-based*⁵ approaches for future fatherhood programming.

⁵ *Evidence-based* is a term associated with research-based and science-based programming or practices in which independent research shows the program or practice effects a change in program participants compared to people who did not participate in the program and that the change is likely due to the impact of the program, not chance (Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County, 2007).

WHY USING MEANINGFUL PROGRAM DATA IS IMPORTANT

Empowering fatherhood practitioners with the knowledge and tools to gather and analyze data can help them make informed decisions and drive positive *program outcomes*.⁶ In this information brief, we learned the following:

Systematically collecting and analyzing data can:



SERVE AS A VALUABLE FEEDBACK LOOP

that allows practitioners to continuously refine and improve their programming



HELP PROGRAM STAFF ASSESS THE EFFECTIVENESS

of their programming and services, identify successful strategies, and determine areas that require adjustments



HOLD PROGRAMS ACCOUNTABLE

by demonstrating how resources are being utilized and the extent to which program goals are being achieved

⁶ *Program outcomes* are measurable changes in program participants across the facets of their lives that programs intend to change or improve (Lugo-Gil & Vann, 2014).

Helpful resources

Using program data

- [Using Documentation and Data in Fatherhood Programs](#)
- [Using Data to Understand Your Program](#)
- [Data-Driven Decision Making: Documenting Program Progress and Success](#)
- [Using Data to Identify and Solve Common Program Challenges](#)
- [Beyond Reporting: Using Data as a Performance Management Tool](#)

Engaging in research and evaluation

- [Ongoing Research and Program Evaluation Efforts in the Administration for Children and Families](#)
- [NRFC Webinar Slides: Using Data Evaluation to Improve Program Performance and Outcomes](#)
- [Evaluation Resource Guide for Responsible Fatherhood Programs](#)
- [The Evaluation Exchange: Evaluation for Continuous Improvement](#)

Common research term definitions

This additional resource includes definitions of common research terms to help practitioners interested in engaging in or learning from formal program evaluations. By bridging the gap between research terminology and practical application, we can equip fatherhood practitioners with the skills needed to unlock the full potential of program data to better support fathers, families, and their communities.

- **Program Inputs:** The types and amounts of investments or resources available to operate the program and deliver services to participants (Lugo-Gil & Vann, 2014).
- **Program Outputs:** Products and services delivered to participants that are the result of program activities and participation (Lugo-Gil & Vann, 2014).
- **Validity:** A term often applied to data collection instruments (e.g., surveys, questionnaires), which have a uniform set of questions and standardized administration procedures for collecting data on program implementation and participant outcomes. Validity is a rigorous test performed to ensure these instruments measure what they are intended to measure (Office of Family Assistance, 2010).
- **Implementation Fidelity:** The extent to which the delivery of a program and its activities adheres to the program logic model (Mowbray et al., 2003).
- **Promising practice:** Refers to practices or programs that have measurable results and report successful outcomes, although not enough rigorous research evidence is available to suggest that the practice or program will have the same effect across a wide range of settings and people (Positive Supports, 2023).
- **Formative Evaluation:** Evaluations designed to ensure that programs and program activities are feasible, appropriate, and acceptable before they are fully implemented. They are commonly conducted when a new program or activity is being developed or when an existing one is being adapted or modified (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).
- **Process/Implementation Evaluation:** Evaluations that aim to determine whether program activities have been implemented as intended (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).
- **Outcome Evaluation:** Evaluations that measure a program's longer-term effects on their target population by assessing the progress in the outcomes or outcome objectives the program aims to achieve (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).
- **Impact Evaluation:** Evaluations that assess a program's effectiveness in achieving its ultimate goals (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).
- **Level of Significance:** The degree of probability that the finding of an effect could be attributed to sampling error or, if there was another sample, that there would be no effect. The accepted convention is $p \leq .05$, which means there is a 5% or less possibility the effect is due to chance or sampling error, leading to the conclusion that the effect is real (Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County, 2007).
- **Experimental vs. Correlation Design:** In an experimental design, participants are randomly assigned to a treatment group (that receives program services) and compared to a control group (that does not receive program services). Researchers use rigorous standards of research design, data collection, and analysis to ensure any observed impacts are due to the services or program itself and not to other factors. In a correlation design, researchers use statistical analysis to look for relationships or trends between two variables (e.g., program services and participant outcomes) but cannot account for other factors that may explain any relationships or trends and so cannot confirm a causal relationship (Office of Family Assistance, 2010).
- **Quasi-experimental Design:** In a quasi-experimental design, participants are not randomly assigned so researchers cannot control for all potential factors that may cause the outcomes of a program (Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County, 2007).
- **Descriptive Design:** In a descriptive evaluation design, data is collected on who receives the program services, what services they receive, and the extent to which the services were provided. Descriptive statistics (e.g., participant demographics; number, type, and duration of services; employment status) are collected throughout the course of program participation and often utilize aggregate data, which combines and summarizes information collected from multiple sources, measures, variables, or individuals. This can help programs understand whether they are reaching their intended target population and determine who benefits most from the services (Office of Family Assistance, 2010).

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