Evaluation Plan Guide

About this guide: Use this guide to complete your Evaluation Plan. This guide contains instructions and examples for each section of the Evaluation Plan template, along with links to resources to learn more.

If you have questions, reach out to your coach.

2025

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Guidance: Evaluation Project Summary

Your Project Summary serves as a concise overview of the program being evaluated and the key questions the evaluation seeks to answer.

Your Project Summary should clearly and compellingly articulate the purpose of your evaluation to stakeholders unfamiliar with it -- and why time and resources should be dedicated to this project.

Use this section to articulate how your evaluation is **meaningful**, **novel**, and **actionable** for your city:

Meaningful	Answers a question you and your stakeholders care about. Aligns with the city's strategic priorities. Has a clear benefit to residents.
Novel	Gives you new information you wouldn't have had otherwise. Other alternatives (e.g., performance management, quality assurance checks) cannot provide sufficient direction. There is limited existing evidence to understand a problem, identify the best solution, or validate a new program.
Actionable	Gives you an answer you can use to improve your service or policy. The timing allows you to resolve an urgent issue, or inform an important decision. Staff and leadership are interested in using evaluation as a tool and learning from the outcome.

Example: Evaluation Project Summary

Process Evaluation: Municipal Court Special Services Docket

Evaluation Project Summary

What is the program we plan to evaluate and what does it aim to achieve?
The Special Services Docket (SSD) is a program that aims to break the cycle of incarceration by coordinating the efforts of law enforcement, prosecution, mental health, and social services in addressing the root causes of law violations. It allows the "targeted population", individuals (i) affected by mental illness, substance abuse, and homelessness and (ii) who have committed low-level municipal offenses, to avoid jail and fees/fines and improve their self-sufficiency by participating in a six-month program. After successfully completing the program, participants may have (i) charges dismissed, (ii) fines and fees reduced or eliminated, and/or (iii) court records expunged.

What do we hope to learn through this evaluation?
The evaluation aims to examine whether the SSD program is being implemented as intended. The results of the evaluation will inform decision-making for expanding SSD and Municipal Court mental health initiatives more broadly. The evaluation will also provide learning for municipal staff, city leadership, and COT departments on program implementation and expansion.

This evaluation will be **meaningful**, **novel**, and **actionable** for Pinebrook. In the table below, we outline why this evaluation is important and how results will be used.

Meaningful: This evaluation is aligned with the city's strategic priorities:

- Homelessness (Mayor/Council priority 2023)
- City Council Fees and Fines Working Group recommendation to expand SSD

Novel: This evaluation provides us with new information about the SSD program:

- Map the SSD process
- Quantify intake steps
- Quantify appearance rate

Since this evaluation looks at the implementation of SSD within our city specifically, this evaluation will provide new information beyond the existing evidence base.

Actionable: This evaluation will inform decisions on the expansion of SSD and Municipal Court mental health initiatives more broadly. Municipal staff, city leadership and other city departments will also gain new learnings on program implementation and expansion that they can apply to their current and future work.

Impact Evaluation: Fresh Bucks Benefits Uptake

Evaluation Project Summary

What is the program we plan to evaluate and what does it aim to achieve?
Fresh Bucks is a program that provides food access to low-income residents of Centreville.

What do we hope to learn through this evaluation?
Despite applying and being enrolled in the program, some customers are not actively using their benefits. The Office of Sustainability and Environment, which administers the program, is interested in learning whether email communications to new program members will be an effective way of increasing benefits utilization among new enrollees. This evaluation will test the impact of an email reminder on Fresh Bucks participation and benefit utilization rates.

This evaluation will be meaningful, novel, and actionable for Centreville. Below, we outline why this evaluation is important and how results will be used.

Meaningful: Fresh Bucks provides food access to low-income residents of Centreville. There are customers who are enrolled in the program but not active, and we would like as many as possible to be active. There is a recently enrolled cohort, and the 6-8 weeks post-enrollment determines whether someone becomes an active user or drops off the program.

Novel: The program team has not previously sent or tested any enrollee communications. This evaluation will provide new information on whether email is an effective communication channel with program participants.

Actionable: Results will directly inform future actions/planning for new enrollee onboarding and managing customer participation in general.

Guidance: Program Overview

The Program Overview describes the program under evaluation, detailing its goals and its Theory of Change. A **Theory of Change** is a document that lays out:

- what resources go into a program (inputs)
- components of the program, or what the program does (activities or strategies)
- what the program produces (outputs)
- what desired changes the program brings about (outcomes)
- a program's desired long-term impact

A Theory of Change gives you a complete picture of what the program aims to achieve and how it plans to do so. Understanding how a program is designed and how it should work in theory will help you identify meaningful research questions to understand if and how the program is successful.

For example:

- **Understanding program impact:** If you want to assess the impact of a job training program, your Theory of Change should clearly define the specific outcomes the program is designed to achieve, such as increased employment rates or higher wages for participants. This clarity will guide you in formulating research questions like, "Are participants securing jobs at a higher rate compared to non-participants?" and identifying the data sources needed, such as employment records or income data.
- **Understanding program implementation:** If you want to understand who is engaging with your program and where participants are dropping off, you need a detailed sequence of expected activities, and expected outputs. For instance, in an online education program, your Theory of Change might outline steps like course enrollment, module completion, and final assessment, and outputs such as numbers of students enrolling and numbers of students graduating. This can help you identify research questions such as, "At which module are participants most likely to drop out?" and determine the data sources needed, like platform analytics or participant surveys.

If you are evaluating an existing program, consult with the program team to identify if a Theory of Change already exists. If the program doesn't already have a Theory of Change, work with the program team to create one. If you plan to evaluate a new program or initiative, develop a simple Theory of Change for your program.

How to develop a Theory of Change:
You can find additional guidance for filling in your Theory of Change in the "Scope an Evaluation" Sprint course slides.

We also recommend this external guide if you'd like to read more about developing a Theory of Change for your program: Logic Model Development Guide

Example: Program Overview

Process Evaluation: Municipal Court Special Services Docket

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">These <u>inputs</u> and <u>activities</u>….</th><th>….should lead to these <u>outputs</u> and <u>short-term outcomes</u>….</th><th>….which should lead to <u>long term outcomes</u></th></tr>
<tr><td><u>Inputs</u>

<u>Activities</u></td><td>• Time: 6 months per cohort
• Budget: TBD
• Physical resources: courtroom, service provider locations, phone
• Staff: Court: judge, minute clerk, bailiff; Prosecutor; Public defender / defense attorney; Service providers

Intake: The individual
• Is identified for eligibility and referred to prosecutor for approval (by judge, prosecutor, public defender, private attorney, service providers, police mental health unit?)
• Is approved for participation in the program by prosecutor
• Receives overview of program from judge/prosecutor
• Is screened by service providers
• Is approved for participation in the program by service provider
• Decides whether to participate in program or not
• Promises into the program via ABCs on the record (by judge)
• Assigned with a case manager (by service providers)

Program duration: Participants
• Receive services corresponding to their needs
• Receive ongoing case management
• Use services
• Are compliant to program requirements each month (ABC) and receive ‘compliant’ report from service provider
• Complete requirements to graduate</td><td><u>Outputs</u>
Graduates
• Graduate / receive record of graduation
• Completes exit interview (optional)

Prosecutor
• Graduates participants
• Recommends charges be dismissed
• Recommends fees, fines, and court costs be suspended
• Recommends expungement when appropriate

<u>Short-term outcomes</u>
Court
• Dismisses charges
• Suspends fines, fees and court costs
• Expunges court records when appropriate</td><td><u>Long-term outcomes</u>
Graduates
• Improve on self-reported measures of self-sufficiency (employment, housing, food stamps, ID and documentation, income, healthcare)
• Improved self-sufficiency outcomes
• Decreased recidivism (any new charge received within 6 months/1 year after graduation from program).</td></tr>
</table>

Validate assumptions in the TOC *(Assumptions listed in **bold text** are the key assumptions to be tested in the process evaluation)*			
	1. Intake identifies and refers all eligible individuals (judge, prosecutor, public defender/defense attorney) **2. Intake approves all eligible individuals (prosecutor, service provider)** 3. Prosecutor/Judge accurately relays information on program **4. Screening accurately identifies individuals' needs and relays information on services offered** 5. Participants understand the how the program works and the ABCs they are swearing to 6. Service providers assign a case manager **7. Service providers provide services corresponding to participant needs** 8. Service providers provide ongoing case management 9. Participants use resources 10. Participants are compliant to program requirements each month (ABCs) 11. Service providers complete compliance report each month and share with prosecutor 12. Participants complete requirements to graduate 13. Service providers verify graduation requirements and share with prosecutor	1. Record of graduation is being presented to graduate 2. Prosecutor graduates participants 3. Prosecutor recommends that court dismisses charges, suspends fines, fees and court costs, and expunges records when appropriate 4. Court dismisses charges 5. Court suspends fines, fees and court costs 6. Court expunges records when appropriate	• We have initial findings that indicate this is true

Impact Evaluation: Fresh Bucks Benefits Uptake

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Impact
Funding: Financial resources to fund benefit cards and program operations. **Staffing**: Administrative personnel to manage card distribution, customer service, and vendor relations. **Partnerships with Local Retailers**: Agreements with retailers who offer healthy food and accept the benefit card. **Technology**: Systems to track card usage, enrollment, and communication, including email systems. **Target Population**: Low-income residents eligible for the benefit cards. **Marketing/Outreach**: External communication	**Partnership Coordination**: Work with local retailers to ensure benefit cards are accepted and promote healthy food options. **Program Awareness Activities**: General outreach to the broader community to raise awareness of the program through media and community organizations. **Benefit Card Distribution**: Identify eligible low-income residents and distribute cards to them. **Onboarding**: Information provision to new enrollees about how to use the benefit	**Number of Cards Distributed**: The total number of benefit cards provided to eligible residents. **Activation Rates**: Number of individuals that activate their benefits card. **Utilization of Benefit Cards**: Percent of enrollees that use the benefit cards regularly (at least once a month) to purchase healthy food from participating retailers. **Retailer Participation**: The number of retailers accepting the cards and offering healthy food options.	**Improved Access to Healthy Food**: Low-income residents experience better access to affordable, healthy food options through local retailers. **Improved Nutritional Intake**: Participants improve their diets by purchasing more nutritious food.	**Reduced Food Insecurity**: Long-term reduction in food insecurity among low-income residents due to sustained access to affordable, healthy food options. **Health Improvements in the Community**: As a result of better nutrition, there may be reductions in diet-related health issues such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease.

strategies to drive awareness of the program and encourage participation.				
		Key Assumptions: • Participants receive their cards • Participants know how to activate and use their benefits cards • Participants remember to use their benefits • Participants can find local retailers		

Guidance: Evaluation Overview

The Evaluation Overview explains your motivation for running this evaluation. It sets out, in plain language, what do you want to learn from this evaluation, and why?

Specifically, you'll need to highlight the components of your Theory of Change that your evaluation will examine, and why you've chosen those components.

Because evaluation projects have limited time and resources, you should also identify areas that are out of scope, so your evaluation stays clear and focused. Use this moment to ensure stakeholders, such as program or department leaders, understand what questions your evaluation will, and will not, answer.

Choosing what to evaluate has equity implications. Consider how you might prioritize evaluation questions that focus on the program's effects on equity. When possible, include resident voices in key evaluation decisions. For more resources on how to ensure an equitable evaluation, visit We All Count and the Equitable Evaluation Initiative's websites.

What you want to learn will help determine the appropriate evaluation method for your project. The questions you seek to answer will guide your choice of evaluation methodology. Different methods are suited to different types of questions:

If you want to know if a program, policy, or initiative worked:

- You should run an **impact evaluation**. Impact evaluations can help you answer comparative questions like, "which option is better?" or, "what are we achieving?" These evaluations typically focus on testing assumptions around the outcomes and impact in your Theory of Change.

If you want to learn about the implementation of a program, policy, or initiative:

- You'll want to run a **process evaluation**. These evaluations typically focus on testing assumptions on the inputs, activities, and outputs in your Theory of Change. Process evaluations can help you answer questions like:
    - What's actually happening in practice? Is a new program be implemented as planned (logistically and/or acceptably)?
    - What ways can a program's implementation be improved?
    - Did everyone in the target audience get what they were supposed to? Were there groups for whom the program seemed more or less promising?

Specifying dimensions of implementation for process evaluations:

Dimensions of implementation provide a structured way to think about what components of the implementation of your program are most important to evaluate. Examples of some of the dimensions include:

- **Quality:** How well was the intervention delivered?
- **Participant responsiveness:** How engaged were participants?
- **Reach:** Who actually received the intervention?

You may want answers to many of the above questions. But the more information you seek, the more complicated your process evaluation will become (i.e., you may need to collect additional data or run more analyses). Discuss and prioritize these questions and dimensions with program staff and leadership.

Resources to inform your choice of evaluation questions:

- Criteria and instruction for using different methodologies:
    - Page 31 - Table 2.2 - Magenta Book
- Implementation frameworks
- "Scope an Evaluation" Sprint course slides

Example: Evaluation Overview

Process Evaluation: Municipal Court Special Services Docket

Evaluation Overview

Our evaluation will test key assumptions in the program's Theory of Change, helping us to better understand if, how, and to what extent the SSD program is working. This evaluation focuses on a the following components of this Theory of Change:

1. Activities: This evaluation focuses on two types of activities:
    a. The intake activities, which refers to the set of processes wherein a potential program candidate is identified and entered into the program (referral, consultation, intake interview, approval)
    b. The program activities, which refers to program administration and service provision activities

In this evaluation, we hope to validate or challenge some of the key assumptions underpinning the design of program activities, such as whether eligible individuals are appropriately referred to the program and whether participant needs are accurately assessed and relayed to service providers. We chose to focus on these two types of activities because we believe that these two sets of activities are the most critical to the success of the program: If eligible participants are not referred to the program, or (once referred) do not receive the appropriate services for their needs, we would not anticipate the program to achieve its desired outcomes.

We will conduct a process evaluation to answer our research question(s).

Our process evaluation will focus on the following dimensions of implementation:

- **Fidelity:** Was the program being implemented as planned?
- **Adaptation:** What changes were made during the implementation?
- **Reach:** Who received the intervention?
- **Quality:** How well was the intervention delivered?

This following program components are out of scope for this evaluation:

- First, the evaluation team will not examine participants' experience during the duration of the SSD program due to confidentiality concerns.
- Second, the evaluation will not conduct interviews with program candidates or participants regarding the topics at issue in the research questions.
    - Such participant interviews would be considered human subject research requiring Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, since they would be more sensitive in nature given the emphasis on the candidate and participant experience (as opposed to the program's processes).
    - There is not adequate time to obtain IRB approval for this evaluation since interviews with human subjects generally require a high level of scrutiny.

The evaluation team will mitigate these limitations by including questions to key informants that will approximate candidate/participant feedback.

Impact Evaluation: Fresh Bucks Benefits Uptake

Evaluation Overview

From looking at existing program data, we know that many participants who enroll in the program do not end up using the benefit. We also know that benefit usage within the first 6-8 weeks of the program is key to enrollees becoming active users. We are interested in testing ways to increase active use rates of the benefit among new enrollee.

Within the program Theory of Change, our evaluation will examine the assumptions underlying the program outputs. Specifically,

- Do participants know how to activate and use their benefits cards?
- Do participants remember to use their benefits?
- Can participants find local retailers who accept their benefit?

We hypothesize that an email reminder to new enrollees could help increase benefits utilization among new members. The team would like to test whether a reminder email communication to new enrollees with information on how to activate the card, find retailers, and use the benefit, will positively impact the number of enrollees who use the benefit.

With previous cohorts of participants, the program team relied on community-based organizations to onboard participants to the benefits program. The team is interested in whether email communication might be a more efficient or effective way of getting enrollees to activate and use their benefits.

We will conduct an impact evaluation to answer our research question, by randomly assigning half of the enrolled participants to receive the reminder email communication and half to receive the standard onboarding.

This evaluation will not explore participant experience in the program or collect information on why program participants may or may not be activating their cards or using their benefits. Its primary goal is to test whether a reminder email can increase program use rates among enrollees.

Guidance: Research Questions and Methods

Now that you know what you want to learn through your evaluation, you can form specific research question(s). The more specific your questions are, the more useful they'll be in guiding your research process. Once you have specified your research question(s), choose the appropriate research methods to answer them.

Impact Evaluation

Research Question for Impact Evaluations

Impact evaluations typically have one central research question, which includes four key building blocks:

1. a specific reference to a sample (e.g., students in the city school district)
2. a measurable outcome (e.g., improved grades)
3. a realistic time frame (e.g., 1 year)
4. a comparator (e.g., access to a mentorship program)

These building blocks can be combined into one clear research question: "Does receiving [option A] increase the [proportion / number / length of time] of [sample] who [outcome measure], compared to [sample] that/who are exposed to [option B]?" For example: Do students in the city school district get higher grades after a year enrolled in a mentorship program than they would have without the program?

Methods for Impact Evaluations

There are several different methods that you can use to answer impact evaluation questions.

If you're able to randomize participants, you will usually want to run a **Randomized Controlled Trial** to determine the impact of your program, policy, or intervention. If you're not sure how you can randomize or would like to talk through a few options, reach out to your coach!

If you're not able to randomize participants, you will need to run a **Quasi-Experimental Design (QED)**, such as a pre-post, group comparison (simple difference), difference-in-differences, or matching design. The key assumption of most QEDs is that the groups you're comparing are, in fact, comparable. You will need to validate key assumptions based on the method you are using, which can be found here. Talk to your coach about whether you can validate key assumptions for a QED.

For any impact method you choose, be sure to specify the data source you'll use to report on your outcome measure.

Before finalizing your research question, check in to make sure it's still: meaningful, actionable, and novel. Consider what you would do if you got positive, negative, or null results. An evaluation should provide information you could use no matter the outcome. Additional resources to inform how you use results:

- Why Null Isn't for Naught. Lessons from the Behavioral Insights… | by What Works Cities
- What does it mean when a study finds no effects?

Example: Research Questions and Methods - Impact

Impact Evaluation: Fresh Bucks Benefits Uptake

Research Questions and Methods

Research Question	Is it an impact or process question?
Does a reminder email to new participants that have not yet used the Fresh Bucks program increase the proportion that use the program within 9 days of receiving the email compared to those that receive no reminder email?	Impact

Research Method	Description of data source(s)	What RQs will this answer?
RCT	Participant benefit usage data from Fresh Bucks database; Email lists from govDelivery	1

How will you use the results of your evaluation

- If positive: Incorporate this email communication process into our onboarding communication sequence
- If negative/backfire: We will discuss with community-based organization partners what may have impacted uptake rates
- If null: Revise the email language, or increase the number of reminder emails, and re-test

Process Evaluation

Research Questions for Process Evaluations

Unlike impact evaluations, process evaluations typically have multiple research questions.

Your research questions should correspond to the dimensions of implementation you've prioritized. For example, if you prioritized 2 dimensions of implementation (e.g, fidelity and quality), you will usually want to write 2 specific research questions—one focused on each of those dimensions.

Consult your Theory of Change to help make research questions as specific as possible, to guide your data collection. For example:

Clearly define standards for 'success' in each dimension.

- If you're assessing the "quality" of a financial services program, what constitutes high quality program delivery? Is it participant experience, number of participants served, participant outcomes, or some combination of these measures?
- If you're assessing the "fidelity" of this program, define what "fidelity" means beforehand. How long does each counselor have to spend with each client, and what topics do they need to discuss, to 'count' as implementing the intervention the way it was planned?
- This specificity will help guide your research design by indicating what data you need to collect to answer your research questions.

Specify the individuals and activities from your Theory of Change in your research questions.

- If you're evaluating the implementation of a financial services program, you may choose to assess fidelity with a question like, "Do program staff complete each activity as planned?" But looking at the specific activities outlined in the Theory of Change can help ask a more specific question: Do *financial counselors* complete each *step of the new intake process* as planned?
- This specificity will help guide your research design by indicating who you need to collect data from, and what questions you might want to ask them.

Methods for Process Evaluations

There are several different methods that you can use to collect and analyze data to answer process evaluation questions. Choose methods based on which ones will provide the data to answer your research questions, and what resources and expertise you have available to conduct the method. Below we describe some of the more common methods, but if you're interested in using a different research method, discuss with your coach!

Interviews: An interview is a guided discussion that you can use to learn about the participants' ideas, knowledge, perceptions, opinions, and/or experiences. There are several kinds of interviews, but semi-structured interviews are the most common. In this type of interview, interviewers rely on an interview guide that details the questions they are planning to ask and the approximate time they intend to spend on each. This tool helps structure the conversation as it ensures that the key topics of interest are being addressed and that interviews are consistent across participants. However, at any point, interviewers can choose to probe further or ask additional questions in order to uncover meaningful insights.

Focus groups: Focus groups are facilitated discussions involving multiple participants. Focus groups help show the breadth of ideas, knowledge, perceptions, opinions, and/or experiences among different participants. Focus groups are shaped by group interaction. Facilitators typically rely on a focus group guide that details the questions they are planning to ask, but their main role is to steer the discussion while allowing for interactions between participants, debates, and collaborative creative thinking.

Observations: Researchers observing in specific settings can provide explanations for patterns and differences in behaviors that cannot be captured through an interview, focus group, or quantitative analysis. Observations are appropriate in a few situations: when a research topic involves people's interactions within an environment or physical context, when actions or behaviors are so normal or commonplace to participants that they struggle to convey them in words, and/or when social norms or pressures to conform with expected behaviors make interviews or focus groups infeasible. Researchers conducting observations rely on observation guides where they can record notes about what they see and hear.

Descriptive analysis of administrative data: Administrative data is data that already exists in a program's database. Analyzing administrative data uses this existing data to generate a better understanding of a program or policy. Administrative data can include datasets like: school attendance reports, court records, case notes, housing inspection results, bike share usage data, geocoded/map data. Conducting descriptive analysis means answering some questions "describing" the program through basic statistics (How many people does the program serve? What is their average age? Where do they live?) or thematic analysis of qualitative data (What were some of the most common challenges reported to caseworkers? What subjects are they working on with their tutors?).

- **New administrative data collection processes:** If you would like to use administrative data you don't currently collect, you'll need to develop a new data collection process. You may be able to collect the data you need in a simple and relatively low-tech way. For instance, you could ask program staff to use a new spreadsheet to tally the number of residents who attend a town hall. In other cases, you might be able to adjust how you're currently collecting data such as adding a new field to a database you're already maintaining. For example, you could add a few new demographic questions to an existing intake form. At the most complex, you might want to work with your IT department to develop a new database (i.e., a Management Information System).

Surveys: Though surveys can be used to collect qualitative data (e.g., in free response answers), they often gather quantitative data points (e.g., satisfaction on a Likert scale, self-reported behaviors). Surveys allow you to gather data from many participants and usually don't require a large time investment from facilitators. They do require careful design of questions and may involve significant recruitment efforts to ensure you receive enough survey responses from a representative sample of your target population. Surveys usually provide less in-depth information than an interview or focus group, but can gather data from a greater number or variety of respondents.

For any process method you choose, be sure to describe the method and any data sources you'll use. This should include specifics of who you'll be reaching out to, and how many people you'll be collecting data from; or, what specific existing data sources you'll use. Connect each data source to your research questions to ensure you are collecting and analyzing data to answer all of your questions. Keep in mind that one research method may be able to provide answers to multiple research questions, while sometimes you'll need to combine results from several methods to answer a single research question.

Before finalizing your research question, check in to make sure it's still: meaningful, actionable, and novel. Consider how you will use the results of the evaluation to inform program decision making.

Example: Research Questions and Methods - Process

Process Evaluation: Municipal Court Special Services Docket

Research Question and Methods

The table below provides our research questions based on our Theory of Change, and how we plan to answer each question.

Research Question • Sub-questions (if applicable)	Is it an impact or process question?
RQ 1: How does the identification and referral process work? • **Sub-question 1:** How are defendants being identified as being affected by an SSD-relevant issue? • **Sub-question 2:** How is it determined if a defendant is a good candidate for SSD?	Process
RQ 2: Which referred defendants enter the program? • **Sub-question 1:** Which referred defendants are approved by the prosecutor? Which defendants are rejected? • **Sub-question 2:** Which defendants are approved by the Lead Service Provider? Which defendants are rejected?	Process
RQ 3: How well do the services offered fulfill the needs of program candidates? • **Sub-question 1:** Are current service providers able to address the service needs expressed by candidates during the intake interview? • **Sub-question 2:** Is SSD able to make an impact on participant self-sufficiency outcomes through service provision? • **Sub-question 3:** How does SSD fit within the larger service provision ecosystem?	Process
RQ 4: How is the program being managed?	Process

Research Method	Description of data source	What RQs will this answer?
Descriptive data analysis	• Analysis on SSD candidate approval, using the following data sources: ○ The Prosecutor's Office (PO) Monthly SSD Referral Sheet ○ The Lead Service Provider (LSP) monthly intake summary ○ The Monthly SSD Call Sheet	RQ 2 (2.1 and 2.2), 3 (3.2)
Descriptive data analysis	• Analysis of SSD candidate service needs, using the following data sources: ○ LSP monthly service needs summary	RQ 3 (3.1)

	○ LSP program fliers	
Interviews	● Interviews with 15 professionals in the criminal justice system and non-profit community who are or have been engaged with the SSD	All research questions
Observations	● Observations of 7 arraignment dockets at the Pinebrook Municipal Court	RQ 1 (1.1 and 1.2)

We will use the results of this evaluation to provide recommendations to the SSD program team on how the program is currently working in practice, and opportunities to increase the program impact through changes or modifications of activities.

Guidance: Research Methods Planning

Once you've chosen research methods, develop a detailed plan to guide your research. For every research method, you'll need a **completed evaluation plan**: to complete your plan, respond to the prompts in the "Research Method Planning" section of your Evaluation Plan template.

For some methods, you may also need additional materials, such as interview guides, consent forms, or recruitment materials. Refer to the chart below for what you need for each research method you plan to use. If you have questions while planning your research methods, reach out to your coach!

Research Method	What you need to plan and execute this method	Resources to read before completing your evaluation plan
Interviews	**Completed evaluation plan**, including: **Sample:** Who will participate in the interviews **Recruitment plan:** How you'll reach your interviewees **Analysis plan**: A plan for organizing the data you get back so it's ready for analysis **Ethics and risk mitigation plan** **Interview guide:** A plan for conducting the interview, including interview questions **Informed consent:** A form signed by participants consenting to participate in the interviews **(optional) Recruitment materials:** Copy of email, flyers, text messages or other materials you will use to recruit participants	Qualitative research guide from [Code for America]() Course slides - Session 2 (Qualitative data collection) Course resource: City Interview Guide
Focus Groups	**Completed evaluation plan**, including: **Sample:** Who will participate in the focus groups **Recruitment plan:** How you'll reach your focus group participants	Qualitative research guide from [Code for America]()

Research Method	What you need to plan and execute this method	Resources to read before completing your evaluation plan
	○ **Analysis plan:** A plan for organizing the data you get back so it's ready for analysis ○ **Ethics and risk mitigation plan** • **Focus Group Discussion Guide**: A plan for conducting the focus group, including discussion questions • **Informed consent**: A form signed by participants consenting to participate in the focus group • **(optional) Recruitment materials:** Copy of email, flyers, text messages or other materials you will use to recruit participants	Course slides - Session 2 (Qualitative data collection)
Observations	• **Completed evaluation plan**, including: ○ **Sample:** Who will participate in the focus groups ○ **Analysis plan:** A plan for organizing the data you get back so it's ready for analysis ○ **Ethics and risk mitigation plan** • **Observation guide**: A guide for observers on what to look for and what information to include	Qualitative research guide from Code for America Course slides - Session 2 (Qualitative data collection) Course resource: City Observation Guide
Survey	• **Completed evaluation plan**, including: ○ **Sample:** Who will participate in the survey ○ **Recruitment plan:** How you'll reach your survey participants ○ **Analysis plan:** A detailed plan for analyzing data from each question in your survey ○ **Ethics and risk mitigation plan** • **Survey questionnaire**: Questions you'll ask respondents, including collecting informed consent.	REL Resource | Creating Effective Surveys: Best Practices in Survey Design

Research Method	What you need to plan and execute this method	Resources to read before completing your evaluation plan
	• **(optional) Recruitment materials**: Copy of email, flyers, text messages or other materials you will use to recruit participants	
Administrative data descriptive analysis	• **Completed evaluation plan,** including: ○ **Data biography:** description of data sources, how it was collected, included variables, and any limitations ○ **Analysis plan:** A plan for how you will analyze the data and how you will report results	Administrative Data Analysis — The Lab @ DC
Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT)	• **Trial implementation and analysis plan**, including: ○ Population and sample ○ Comparison group(s) ○ Randomization plan ○ Outcome measure ○ Linking assignment to outcome ○ Internal validity ○ Power calculations ○ Description of data sources ○ Analysis plan ○ Risk mitigation plan ○ Implementation plan	The Experimenter's Inventory | Nesta
Quasi-experimental design (QED)	• **Trial implementation and analysis plan** *(see above)*	The Experimenter's Inventory | Nesta

Guidance: Timeline

In the Evaluation Timeline you'll create a detailed plan for your evaluation, mapping out specific tasks and deadlines. The timeline will help you keep the evaluation on track and ensure that all necessary steps are completed in a timely manner.

The tasks you include will vary depending on the types of data collection methods you plan to use, such as interviews, focus groups, descriptive data analysis, surveys, or randomized controlled trials (RCTs).

As you build your timeline, you need to plan what needs to happen and when. Assign each task an owner, specifying who will complete it and when. A well-organized work plan will ensure clear coordination from all involved parties.

- **Ensure stakeholder buy-in:** Engage with stakeholders early on to discuss your evaluation plans, what you hope they will contribute, and any ideas or concerns they may have. It's important that everyone understands the value behind their involvement and is committed to the process.
- **Confirm data collection plans:** As part of your implementation plan, incorporate checks to ensure that your data is being collected as intended and includes all necessary information. This will help you avoid gaps in your analysis later on.
- **Consider and mitigate implementation risks:** Anticipate specific risks that could affect your evaluation and include strategies in your plan to mitigate them. This might prevent problems from occurring, catching and fixing issues quickly, or documenting any challenges to learn from them for future interventions.

By addressing these considerations, your timeline will serve as a comprehensive guide for your evaluation, helping to ensure its success from start to finish.

Example: Timeline

Process Evaluation: Municipal Court Special Services Docket

Activity	Owner	Deadline	Status
Workstream: Evaluation planning	**Leslie (Project manager)**	**01-13-2023**	Complete
Develop/refine Theory of Change with SSD team	Leslie (Project manager)	01-01-2023	Complete
Complete evaluation plan	Leslie (Project manager)	01-10-2023	Complete
Review evaluation plan with SSD team and other key stakeholders	Leslie (Project manager)	01-13-2023	Complete
Workstream: Observations	**Leslie (Project manager)**	**03-17-2023**	
Observations: Create observation guide	Leslie (Project manager)	01-13-2023	In progress
Observations: Coordinate with Municipal Court to gain access to the population to be observed	Tom (Project team member)	01-20-2023	
Observations: Conduct observation/s and record data	April (Project team member)	02-24-2023	
Observations: Analyze data	April (Project team member)	03-10-2023	
Observations: Report findings	Leslie (Project manager)	03-17-2023	
Workstream: Interviews	**Leslie (Project manager)**	**04-28-2023**	
Interview: Create guide	Leslie (Project manager)	02-10-2023	In progress
Interview: Create recruitment plan and materials	Leslie (Project manager)	02-24-2023	In progress
Interview: Begin recruitment	Tom (Project team member)	02-27-2023	
Interview: Complete recruitment	Tom (Project team member)	03-10-2023	
Interview: Send communications about sessions	Tom (Project team member)	03-13-2023	
Interview: Conduct sessions	April (Project team member)	04-07-2023	
Interview: Qualitative analysis	April (Project team member)	04-21-2023	
Interview: Report findings	Leslie (Project manager)	04-28-2023	

Activity	Owner	Deadline	Status
Workstream: Descriptive data analysis	**April (Project team member)**	**06-02-2023**	
SSD Candidate Approval: Request data for analysis	Tom (Project team member)	05-05-2023	
SSD Candidate Service Needs Summary: Request data for analysis	Tom (Project team member)	05-05-2023	
SSD Candidate Approval: Clean and analyze data	April (Project team member)	05-26-2023	
SSD Candidate Service Needs Summary: Clean and analyze data	April (Project team member)	06-02-2023	
SSD Candidate Approval: Report findings	April (Project team member)	06-02-2023	
SSD Candidate Service Needs Summary: Report findings	April (Project team member)	06-02-2023	
Workstream: Final report and presentations	**Leslie (Project manager)**	**07-17-2023**	
Outline final report, consolidating findings across observational research, interviews, and descriptive data analysis	Leslie (Project manager)	06-09-2023	
Draft content for final report, including recommendations	April (Project team member) and Tom (Project team member)	06-23-2023	
Meet with SSD team to review initial findings and receive feedback	Leslie (Project manager)	06-27-2023	
Finalize report	Leslie (Project manager)	07-11-2023	
Prepare and present findings and recommendations to city leadership	Leslie (Project manager)	07-17-2023	

APPENDIX: Additional Guidance on Research Methods

Guidance for Conducting Focus Groups

Focus groups are powerful methods for gathering in-depth insights directly from participants. If you're conducting focus groups, you will need to prepare 3 things:

- **Sample & recruitment plan:** Who will participate in the focus group(s) and how you'll reach them:
- **Conducting sessions:** A plan for conducting the focus groups and a focus group guide
- **Analysis plan:** A plan for organizing the data you get back so it's ready for analysis

Who will participate in the focus group(s) and how you'll reach them:

- **Outline who you'd like to hear from:** Ensure you're reaching the people who are best suited to answer your research questions. Develop clear criteria for who will be eligible to participate in a focus group (e.g., participants in a certain program) and who will be excluded (e.g., people who previously attended a town hall meeting). Sometimes, you may want to target multiple groups of people (e.g., students and teachers or hospital workers and patients) in order to get a fuller picture of the issue you are investigating. In those cases, you may have inclusion and exclusion criteria for each subgroup.

  A general rule of thumb is that you should conduct 3-5 focus groups and include 3-8 participants per focus group. However, it depends a lot on your research question and whom you want to hear from. You should break your total target sample size down into targets for each subgroup (e.g., 18 participants with at least 6 women and 6 people who have finished the program).

- **Outline how you'll create the groups:** One of the reasons you might have chosen focus groups is so you could see how participants interact with each other. For this reason, it is important to lay out not only who will participate in your focus groups in total, but also how you will group those participants together based on the types of interactions you'd like to observe. For example, say you want to collect data from department staff members with a wide range of years of experience. There could be benefits to having mixed focus groups or having focus groups of staff with similar levels of experience.

- **Outline how you'll reach them:** You may need to reach out to participants directly or through advertisements. In other cases, you might identify partners who have trusted relationships with potential participants and ask them to reach out to people on your behalf. You should recruit 20-50% more participants than your target in case of no shows. Remember, the ways you recruit participants will affect who is represented in your sample (e.g., if program staff recruits participants, you should be transparent that your sample will likely underrepresent the views of participants who are disconnected from program staff).

- **Make it easy for participants to engage:** Finally, think about how you can make it as easy as possible on a practical level for people to be included in focus groups. Providing compensation is a best practice and can help address financial barriers to participation. Also, consider factors like the time and day focus groups will be held and whether providing childcare or transportation would be helpful. Conducting focus groups virtually may make them more accessible as well. It's critical to do this planning beforehand to ensure your sample represents the people you want it to. For example, if you don't provide childcare, you may inadvertently exclude single mothers from your sample.

How you'll conduct the focus group:

Thinking through and laying out the logistics for exactly how the focus group(s) will be conducted is also important. Consider logistics like:

- Who will facilitate the focus group?
- How long will the focus groups last? A good rule of thumb is to keep each focus group between ~45 and ~90 min long.
- Will they be in person or virtual?
- Do you plan to take written notes, record the conversation, or do both?
- What are the relationships between the participants and moderator(s)? What are the power dynamics at play? How would participants perceive the moderators?
    - For instance, you should consider if the data collectors are the same gender, race, and/or speak the same language as the participants. Being intentional and clear about this relationship will allow you to identify potential ethical concerns (e.g., if the moderator has significant power over the participants such as their direct boss, the participant may not feel comfortable speaking freely when interacting with other employers as part of a focus group) and limitations to the kinds of information you might receive (e.g., a participant may not openly discuss information with an outsider present as they would in a group of their community members).

Answering these questions ahead of time can ensure that you don't run into any unexpected hiccups in the middle of a focus group.

How you'll uphold ethics and equity principles:

Whether you need to collect consent from participants varies from city to city. But as a general rule of thumb, you should collect informed consent from anyone you interview who is asked to discuss their experiences (rather than questions about facts they might know in their professional capacity).

If you need to collect consent, define how you will do so beforehand. Depending on who the participants are, you may need them to sign a consent form informing them of the details of the focus groups, how their data and personal information will be handled, and of their rights as potential participants. It's important to note that you can't guarantee confidentiality in a focus group since other participants could share what they hear. Remind participants of that ahead of time. In other cases, you may be able to verbally cover these points and get a verbal confirmation before starting the focus group.

Remember to always take specific risks into account that come from participants' identities, statuses, or roles (e.g., if participants are minors) or from the context and topic of your interview (e.g., if you are discussing a sensitive or upsetting topic).

Finally, one of the ways you can make your focus groups more equitable is by sharing what you learned and how it was used with participants. Sharing the data back to those who provided it is a great way to center their experiences and further involve them in the research.

Developing a focus group guide:

Now it's time to write your focus group questions! Begin by reflecting on your research questions, then brainstorm a few overarching topics you want to cover. Under each topic, list out questions and probes that you would like to learn more about. Once you've brainstormed this list, pause and reflect. For each question, ask yourself, "Does this topic help me answer my main research question?" When you're conducting focus groups, it's important to be concise and selective. Focus on the most relevant questions so you can get through them in time. Schedule at least 10 minutes per question (potentially much more) to allow for a useful discussion and contributions from all participants.

Once you have a strong list of focus group questions, add indicators for how long each should take to answer. Double check that you can cover everything in the time you have. You may also find it helpful to include instructions for the moderator to make it as easy as possible for them to facilitate (e.g., "give the participants the materials to review"). Consider marking on the guide itself if a question is required or optional. This can help the moderator ensure they cover everything needed without feeling like they have to rush the group through every question. Ask a colleague to read over the guide and flag any questions that are confusing or ambiguous.

Remember:

- Don't ask questions to individual group members. Avoid slipping into "interview-mode." Participants are meant to discuss the topics as a group.

- Avoid close-ended questions (e.g., “Did you like the program?” could be answered with a yes or no. Instead, you might want to ask, “Please describe your overall experience in the program”).
- Avoid leading questions (e.g., “The program helped you, right?”).
- Use the guide as just that—a guide! Deviate from the guide as much or little as needed.

How to run effective focus groups:

Before beginning a focus group you should:

- Start by greeting the participants, thanking them for their time, and asking everyone to introduce themselves (you could ask them to answer an easy ice breaker as part of their intro). Introduce the institution or organization you are affiliated with and discuss your role within it.
- Before beginning, explain the purpose of the focus group and ensure that participants have knowingly consented to participate.
- Ensure you’re conducting the focus groups in a quiet space that is comfortable for the participants.
- Provide ground rules like: 1) One speaker at a time and no side conversations. If you’re conducting a virtual focus group, consider asking participants to use the raised hand or chat function. 2) Acceptance of all viewpoints, dissenters are welcome. 3) Everyone should participate; no one should be dominating the conversation or censoring others.

During the focus group:

- Note down & remember the names of participants to address them directly if needed (e.g., if someone is quiet).
- Encourage debate and discussion between participants and refrain from interrupting or speaking too much.
- Focus on listening and showing that you are listening.
- Effectively manage a range of group dynamics. Be patient and allow the group to follow its own style. When participants are relaxed and respectful with one another, it also means that the moderator should be able to manage a difficult dynamic (e.g., if people get angry, acknowledge their emotions, emphasize the value of having diverse opinions, and take a break if needed).

- Ensure that everyone is heard and feels valued. Note who is not participating and draw them into the conversation instead of only focusing on dominant participants.
    - You can make participants feel validated by using conscious language (e.g., " it sounds like XYZ…") and repeating what they said back to them.
    - Avoid asking questions to individual participants.
- Keep personal opinions and feelings to yourself and adopt a neutral facial expression, tone, and language.
- Take notes that include: 1) Setting and participant description, 2) People's names and their responses (i.e., quotes), 3) Observations about participants' moods, non-verbal cues, and questions for future interviews and focus groups.
- If conducting a virtual focus group, expect technical issues and be patient.
- If conducting a virtual focus group, consider using online tools such as Miro or breakout rooms.

At the end of the focus group:

- Thank participants again, outline the next steps (e.g. they will receive an email or some compensation), and review how the data will be used (and shared back with them)
- Give participants an opportunity to share additional questions, concerns, or remarks.

Creating a plan for organizing the data you get back, so it's ready for analysis:

As you're developing a focus group plan, you should also consider how you will analyze your data. At the end of your focus groups you will usually have a folder of notes and/or transcripts. Turning those documents into useful insights requires structured analysis.

There are many ways to organize your data so it's ready for analysis. One common approach is to develop a simple framework in a spreadsheet ahead of time. This framework should have a row for each group and columns for each of the key topics you wanted to focus on. Say you wanted to learn about "participant experience" in your study so you asked participants several questions about what they liked or didn't like about the program. As you read through your notes from each focus group, you can add notes about what people said about their experience to the "participant experience" column in your spreadsheet. Once you've read through all the notes from a focus group, you'll have already summarized that group's takeaways about each topic you wanted to cover. It's a best practice to have more than one person on your team conduct this process independently.

When it's time to conduct your analysis, you will be able to review your organized framework and debrief with your team to conduct your analysis. There are several ways to do this, but a common one is to identify key themes in order to generate a final list of findings.

If you are undertaking a large number of focus groups or are focused on complicated themes, you may want to use a software like NVivo to keep track of your data and make your analysis easier. However, this type of software is not typically necessary unless you are collecting a large amount of data.

Tips for Conducting Observational Research

Observations, or observational research, provide a unique opportunity for you to directly observe people and processes, learning how things work in practice and providing you with valuable insights that you can't obtain from interviews or surveys.

Conducting observational research can also feel overwhelming at first. It's important to make a plan ahead to know what you want to observe, organize how you'll take notes and report back information, and ensure your observers are on the same page.

Take the following steps to organize and plan your observations:

- **Outline the purpose of your observations:** You should develop clear criteria for whom and what you will be observing (e.g., if you want to understand why people do not engage with an employment center, you may choose to observe anyone who enters the office on a certain day, then follow their interactions and activities while there).

- **Pick an observation site:** Observations are very context-dependent, so you need to make sure that the location and timing you choose allows you to observe the people you are most interested in (e.g., if there's an employment center in every neighborhood but you're only observing one, it's important to consider how that choice will impact whom you collect data on). Once you choose a site, you may need to get permission to conduct your observations there.

- **Determine how involved the observer will be in the process:** In some instances, observers are completely detached from the situation and do not interact with the people they're watching at all. In others, they may talk to participants and even ask them questions about their experience and about the activity they may be performing. You might choose to be a:
    - **Complete participant:** the researcher engages in the same activities and interactions as participants and conceals their observer role.
    - **Participant as observer:** the researcher's status as observer is made clear but they are able to take part in activities.
    - **Observer as participant:** the researcher observes as unobtrusively as possible but may sometimes engage in some activities.

    - **Complete observer:** the researcher is detached from any engagement and is not usually known to those they are observing.

- **Plan out the logistics:** Before conducting any observations, consider questions like: Will there be more than one observer? If so, will they all adopt the same role or will it vary? How will you record notes?

- **Ensure an ethical observation process:** Whether you need to collect consent from people you're observing depends on the context of the observation and on the role you are taking as an observer/participant. In some cases, you may choose to be open about your role as an observer. As a general rule of thumb, you should always collect informed consent from anyone you've had a conversation with and plan to quote directly (even if anonymously). Remember to always take risks into account that come from your participants' identities, statuses, or roles (e.g., if your participants are minors) or from the context and topic of your observation (e.g., if you are observing a hospital ward, you may learn participants' private health information).

- **Make an observation guide:** An observation guide is a place where you can make notes to record what you observe. Observation guides are often structured with close-ended questions, check boxes, or specific spaces for free response text or additional observations. The goal of this structure is to make it easy for the observer to collect relevant data. Your notes should be relevant to the research questions, inclusive, and as detailed as possible including recording details on the setting. A good exercise is to map the social and physical scene that you are observing and count specific metrics (e.g., the number of residents in the waiting room, the number of calls that the office received during observation, etc.).

Designing Effective Surveys

Surveys allow you to collect information from a large group of people. To get the most value from a survey, ensure you're reaching the right people, take an ethical approach to collecting information, and carefully design your survey questions.

Plan whom you're surveying and how you'll reach them

- **Outline whom you'd like to hear from:** Develop clear criteria outlining whom you will survey and the number of surveys you will conduct. Ensure that the sample of people you are surveying is representative of your population of interest across relevant characteristics (e.g., demographics) and note any groups that will be left out of your data collection.

- **Choose a medium:** Surveys are often digital (e.g., using platforms like Qualtrics, Google Forms, or SurveyMonkey) and delivered online (e.g., by email or to people who click on an ad). However, surveys can also be delivered in person, over the phone, or by mail. In-person surveying often achieves a high response rate and can be particularly effective if your target sample is otherwise hard to reach, especially when the survey is embedded in another process (e.g., program intake) or the person administering the survey is someone the participant knows and trusts (e.g., program staff). Using online survey methods can be helpful if you want to reach a very large group of people.

- **Outline how you'll reach participants:** You'll need to send participants your survey or embed it in some process they're already interacting with. It's usually helpful to work with a partner who can give you a contact list for the people you'd like to survey or who can survey participants on your behalf. Often, the more trust participants have in that partner, the better response rate you will be able to achieve.

- **Make it easy and attractive for participants to engage:** Achieving a high response rate means you have the most possible data back from all the work you've done assembling and fielding your survey. Response rates will vary depending on whom you're surveying, what medium you use, and the content of the questions. However, they also depend on how easy it is to fill out the survey. Short and simple surveys with unambiguous questions are easier to complete than long and confusing ones. Have a colleague test your survey before you roll it out to ensure it's easy to use. Additionally, consider providing some compensation for participants who complete your survey (e.g., a gift card or entry into a raffle), especially if it is long or is being sent out on an adhoc basis, rather than embedded in another process.

Plan how you'll ensure that your survey upholds ethical standards

Most surveys have a brief screen, page, or verbal section at the beginning to collect consent from participants. Some surveys can use implicit consent statements (e.g., "by completing this survey you consent to…") while others should ask for explicit consent (e.g., asking a participant to check a box, sign, or otherwise give consent to continue). The information you need to provide participants may vary based on the context of your survey, but it's usually important to: 1) Tell participants the purpose of the survey, 2) Inform participants that the survey is voluntary, 3) Describe how their data will be used and whether or not it will be kept anonymous or confidential, and 4) Give an overview of the instructions to complete the survey.

If you're collecting personally identifying information, you may need to work with your IT department to ensure you have a secure way to store that data. You should also have clear processes laid out to uphold the anonymity or confidentiality that you promise participants. For example, if you tell participants their answers will be kept confidential, you will need to make sure that only the research team has access to their data and ensure you don't share back any identifying information in reports.

Remember to always take risks into account that come from your participants' identities or roles (e.g., if your participants are minors) or from the context and topic of your survey (e.g., if you are asking workers to comment on their employer or their company's work practices).

How to design effective survey questions:

What to do:

- Use clear words instead of vague or ambiguous ones.
- Divide complicated questions into a series of short and simple questions.
- Give a short definition for any concept that is not commonly known as part of the question.

- Use open-ended questions if you want to gather more detail.
- Keep instructions simple (on paper, people usually look at the top left corner of the page. Put key instructions there.)
- Use shading and boxes to direct the eye: don't use color. (People attach emotions to colors and people with color blindness may not be able to see them).
- Make sure there is plenty of space – dense text is hard to read and off-putting.
- Aim to make the first question interesting & relevant to the central topic.
- Try to order questions in a meaningful way.
- For web and paper questionnaires: 1) Make sure the layout of questions and answer categories doesn't confuse participants, and 2) Use shading & brightness to create signposting.

What to avoid:

- Avoid making respondents do math in their heads.
- Avoid asking two questions in one (e.g., did you find the course useful and easy to follow?). Instead, split them into separate questions.
- Avoid question and answer category mismatch.
- Avoid assumptions: instead, use conditional questions (e.g., did you use X tool? (Y/N) if Y → when did you use it?).
- Avoid vague quantifiers (often/sometimes/rarely): instead, use actual numbers (1 time per week), number ranges (1-5 times per week), or approximate ranges (everyday, once a week).
- Avoid "check all that apply," instead, use Y/N for each option.
- Avoid satisfaction questions (i.e., "how satisfied were you with X?") as these questions are biased towards the positive side. Instead, use ratings (i.e., How effective do you think X was?").
- Avoid agree/disagree questions: instead, use ratings or different answer categories (e.g., use Completely True, Mostly True…/ Always, Sometimes, Rarely etc.).
- Avoid requiring questions to be answered unless necessary.

Before sending your survey to participants, you may want to ask a colleague to test the survey to catch any issues.

Descriptive Data Analysis: Considerations for new data collection

If you need additional quantitative data that you do not already collect, you might need to develop a new data collection process. There are three types of new data collection processes you may need to use:

- Adding a new field to an existing database (e.g., working with IT to add new demographic questions to an existing intake form)
- Asking staff to track new data in a low-tech way (e.g., on paper or a spreadsheet)
- Developing a new database (i.e., a Management Information System)

Usually, you can collect the data you need in a process evaluation without having to create a new database. If there's a preexisting data collection process (e.g., intake), it is often simplest to expand on that process rather than create a new one—though it might require working with someone on your IT team to ensure the new data is captured correctly. If you do not have a pre-existing process or do not have technical control over the current process, you might consider asking staff to track data in a low-tech way. This is often a good option if the data you're asking them to collect is simple and does not need to be collected long term. However, it may require additional training, support, and buy-in from the staff who are being asked to collect it. If there is no data system in place and you need one long term, you might consider working with IT to create a new database. But this is a big project all on its own and will require additional time and expertise.

Check in with staff early on as they start using the new data collection process. You may be able to give them more support or recognize a miscommunication in advance. Staff may also be able to tell you if there's a different process that might match the data they're entering more closely (e.g., say you wanted to track if people attend a specific appointment and have that as a Yes/No field, but staff see that people are often rescheduling appointments rather than just not attending—you might want to revise your data collection instrument to capture that nuance).

Choosing between Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) and Quasi-Experimental Designs (QEDs)

When conducting an evaluation, Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) are often the most rigorous way of establishing causal relationships between an intervention and outcomes. However, RCTs are not always feasible due to ethical, practical, or financial constraints. In such cases, Quasi-Experimental Designs (QED) offer a valuable alternative. These methods aim to estimate the causal impact of an intervention without random assignment.

Key Differences Between RCTs and QED:

1. **Randomization:**
    - **RCTs:** Involves randomly assigning participants to treatment or control groups, ensuring comparability between groups and minimizing selection bias.
    - **QED:** No randomization. Instead, comparison groups are formed based on other criteria, which may introduce selection bias that needs to be addressed through statistical techniques.
2. **Internal Validity:**
    - **RCTs:** Generally offer high internal validity due to randomization, which controls for both known and unknown confounding variables.
    - **QED:** Internal validity can be lower because groups may differ systematically. Careful design and analysis are required to control for these differences. However, QEDs often reflect real-world conditions better, making the findings more generalizable and externally valid.
3. **Ethical and Practical Feasibility:**
    - **RCTs:** Best used when ethical and logistical considerations allow for randomization.
    - **QED:** QEDs are particularly valuable when randomization is unethical or impractical. They enable researchers to study interventions without withholding potentially beneficial treatments from a control group or facing political/social resistance.
4. **Applicability in Real-World Settings**:
    - **RCTs**: Typically conducted in controlled environments, which might not fully capture the complexities of real-world implementation.
    - **QED**: Conducted in natural settings, reflecting how interventions perform under typical conditions. This makes QEDs particularly useful for

evaluating policies, programs, or interventions as they are actually implemented, providing insights that are often more applicable to real-world scenarios.

Common Quasi-Experimental Methods:

1. **Difference-in-Differences (DiD)**:
    - **What It Is**: This method compares how outcomes change over time for a group that receives the intervention (like a new program or policy) versus a group that does not.
    - **Why It's Useful**: It helps us understand the effect of an intervention by looking at differences in outcomes before and after the intervention, comparing these changes between groups.
    - **Limitation**: It assumes that the two groups would have followed the same trends over time if the intervention hadn't happened. If this assumption isn't true, the results could be misleading.
2. **Regression Discontinuity (RD)**:
    - **What It Is**: This method is used when there's a clear cutoff or threshold for who gets the intervention. For example, only students with test scores above a certain level might get extra tutoring.
    - **Why It's Useful**: By comparing those just above and just below the cutoff, we can estimate the effect of the intervention, assuming those near the cutoff are very similar.
    - **Limitation**: It only works well around the cutoff point, so the results might not apply to people who are much higher or lower than the cutoff.
3. **Matching**:
    - **What It Is**: This method matches people who received the intervention with similar people who did not, based on certain characteristics (like age, income, or other relevant factors).
    - **Why It's Useful**: It helps create a comparison group that's more like the treatment group, making it easier to see the real effect of the intervention.
    - **Limitation**: It only controls for factors that we can measure. If there are important differences between the groups that we don't measure, the results could still be biased.
4. **Pre-post:**
    - **What It Is:** This method measures outcomes before and after an intervention within the same group of participants. You compare the

results from before the intervention (the "pre" period) with the results after the intervention (the "post" period).

- **Why It's Useful:** This method is simple and straightforward. It's especially helpful when the intervention is applied to everyone at once and there isn't a suitable comparison group available.
- **Limitation:** The main challenge with the Pre-Post method is that it doesn't account for other factors that might change over time and affect the outcomes. For example, if something else happens between the "before" and "after" periods (like a change in the economy or season), it can be hard to know whether the change in outcomes is due to the intervention or these other factors.

Practical Considerations for Using QED:

1. **Assumptions Matter**: Each method relies on certain assumptions (like assuming two groups would have followed the same trend over time). If these assumptions don't hold, the results might not be accurate or they might be biased.
2. **Good Data is Key**: High-quality, detailed data is essential for these methods. The better your data, the more reliable your results will be.
3. **Interpreting Results Carefully**: QED can suggest causal relationships, but they aren't as strong as RCTs in proving them. Be clear about the limitations of your study and avoid over-claiming what the results show.