



Using evidence from common social policy research methods

This guide provides an overview of different types of study designs and methods commonly used in social policy research, and how evidence from different types of studies can be applied. It also outlines what to do if the research evidence available in a particular area is limited or under-developed.

Common research methods used in social policy

What counts as useful research evidence often depends on the way the research was conducted, and the purpose you have in mind for the evidence. Different research designs have different strengths and limitations. When looking at questions of impact and 'what works' the most appropriate research design is often a randomised control trial, or quasi-experiment (see the DCJ guide [What is an evidence hierarchy](#) for tips on searching for evidence that demonstrates effectiveness).

Other types of policy and practice questions will be best answered using studies with a different research design. For example, interviews and focus groups can help you understand services from a user perspective and think about how to improve the ways in which people engage with your service. Qualitative information about user's experiences is central to effective service design and continuous improvement.

While most types of research can tell you something useful about a particular topic, it is important to understand that all methods also have their limitations, and that these limitations directly relate to how useful the research is in answering the question you have in mind.

The Alliance for Useful Evidence and Nesta outline and summarise the pros and cons of common research designs in their report [Using research evidence: A practice guide](#) (reproduced below¹). Their overview can help you understand what conclusions can and can't be drawn from different types of research evidence and select the most appropriate evidence for the task at hand.

¹ Breckon J 2016 *Using research evidence: A practice guide*, Nesta, Alliance for Useful Evidence.

Types of research and evaluation	What is it?	Pros	Cons
Personal anecdote	An account by a person with direct experience of, or affected by, a particular issue.	Powerful and immediate; may give vivid insights into events concealed from much of the population.	Difficult to verify; may lead to inflation of prevalence; emotive first person stories may inhibit critical appraisal; individual anecdotes may not be representative.
Service use feedback	Narrative or survey accounts of user views or reported needs.	Valuable insights from those at the receiving end; compels professionals to stay focused on the service users' priorities.	Correlation between satisfaction and service effectiveness is low; expressed needs may not translate into actual service use.
Single case study	Detailed and intensive examination of a single case such as community, family, organisation, event or individual.	Easy and practical; can be used by practitioners and non-specialists; good for interventions that have already happened; can possibly identify adverse consequences from intervention; helps to describe innovations; generates hypotheses for other studies.	Bad at inferring causations; small size means hard to generalise to national/ population level.
Case control studies	Compares a group who have, say, a health condition with a group of people that do not have it, and looks back in time to see how the characteristics of the two groups differ.	Require fewer resources to carry out than intervention studies; useful when RCTs not practical, e.g. studies of cot death.	Rare in social policy (see closely related 'case-based' evaluation below for approach more common in social policy), more frequent in epidemiology and health; provide less evidence for causal inference than an RCT; high risk of bias e.g. recall bias, selection bias, interviewer bias.
Participatory	An approach where the judgements and experiences of stakeholders and beneficiaries are highlighted. May be described as normative designs; participatory or democratic evaluation; empowerment evaluation; learning by doing; policy dialogue; collaborative action research.	Beneficiaries are best able to identify the most relevant theories of change and meaningful outcomes; more potential to be ethical and democratic and understand what beneficiaries really need; more appropriate to 'values-led' interventions; more opportunities for programme adoption due to closer ties to beneficiaries; ability to adapt and customise intervention.	Argument that it is fundamentally un objective, open to bias and not really research but more about ideology and community activism. ³⁹
Theory-based	An approach to evaluation that looks at what happens compared with pre-existing theories or causal pathways identified during an evaluation. Can be associated with realist evaluation; qualitative comparative analysis (QCA); contribution analysis; process tracing.	Strong on explanation of causes; can be used in messier areas of social policy where there may be many causes and context is important. <i>[Note: this category is used very broadly here, for more detail on this area see Stern (2015)⁴⁰ and White and Phillips (2012)⁴¹].</i>	Lack of agreed methods; opportunities for bias; weak on estimating quantities or extent of impact; relatively little evaluation of the techniques used e.g. compared to the large body of literature criticising RCTs.
Cross-sectional study	A representative sample of people surveyed at one point in time. Although surveys such as questionnaires and structured interviews are commonly used in cross-sectional design, they are not	Quantitative data can be examined to detect patterns of association; relatively cheap and ethical; survey can be repeated at intervals, illustrating changing trends over time (see Longitudinal below).	Establishes association at best, not causality; rarely possible to attribute any measured change to the intervention, or to understand what would have happened in the absence of the intervention – e.g. change could have been to broader issues such as economic conditions, weather, media campaigns – and not the intervention.

	the only way e.g. content analysis or analysis of official statistics can be used.		Other disadvantages: risk of recall bias, social desirability bias, researcher's (Neyman) bias; group sizes may be unequal; confounders may be unequally distributed.
Cohort/Longitudinal studies	The same sample of people surveyed over several points in time, sometimes from childhood to old age.	Best source of evidence on association between childhood experience and adult outcomes can give powerful support for certain early interventions.	Data often emerges too late for effective policy-making; study members may drop out over time; very expensive approach when maintained over decades.
Quasi-experimental design	Different interventions are offered but with no random allocation to groups, i.e. through the use of natural populations or case matching.	Can provide reasonably strong evidence of the relationship between the intervention and the measured outcomes; powerful method of exploring the impact of an intervention when randomisation is impossible; can be applied to large communities as well as groups; no need for randomisation from the start (ex-ante), which avoids the PR and ethical issues of randomisation.	Inability to ensure equivalence of groups and to prevent change over time can result in less reliable findings; matching techniques tend to require a lot of data in both intervention and comparison groups which can be time-consuming and expensive; a good understanding is required of the factors that need to be matched – without this, it remains possible that there are systematic differences between the two groups that are not being controlled for; these designs require complex analytical work and specialist knowledge.
Randomised control trial (RCT)	One group receives an intervention while another receives none or one of another type, with the chance of trial (RCT) being allocated to either group being identical.	Offers the most robust, reliable findings, which give confidence that any measured difference between groups are the result of the intervention; random allocation should overcome any systematic difference between groups; greater confidence in the effect size, and the relationship between the intervention and outcome; internationally recognised approach.	Poor on taking context into account e.g. cultural, institutional, historical and economic settings; difficult to conduct at a national population level; risk that when used at small pilot level not relevant to national/ population level (although this is a risk for all designs); can be hard to manipulate variables to experiment in social policy e.g. class, race or where you live; mistakes in randomisation can invalidate results; can be hard to persuade decision-makers (e.g. politicians) of benefits of this design; potential political, ethical and PR issues over randomisation (e.g. some groups randomly getting potential beneficial intervention, and not others); can take more management time and longer to set up than quasi-experiments.
Systematic reviews/meta-analysis	Aggregation of results from eligible studies, with the eligibility criteria defined in advance and methodologies reviewed.	Best source of reassurance that an intervention works (or doesn't); meta-analysis pools statistical results; large reviews carry considerable statistical power; is replicable by other researchers; can be applied to any kind of data.	Requires a substantial number of robust primary studies in a given area; methodology less well developed for synthesising qualitative data and 'grey' literature <i>[For wider approaches to synthesis, see other approaches such as narrative synthesis, and realist-based synthesis]</i> .

What if limited evidence exists in a particular area?

Sometimes a clear demand emerges for evidence in new areas of social policy or program design, before the evidence base has developed sufficiently to give decision-makers a clear idea of how to approach the problem or topic. In these cases, policy-makers do not have the luxury of conducting research into the problem before they act.

The following sections provide some guidance about how to proceed if the research evidence available in a particular area is limited or under-developed.

Look to similar or related examples

Generally, there will be some evidence in similar or related areas/topics. Looking for evidence in related areas or contexts can often provide guidance on how to frame your own research questions. In these cases, you should ask questions like:

- What other policy areas or disciplines have faced similar challenges?
- How do other countries or jurisdictions address this problem/topic?

You may need to look for other types of research evidence that have lower indications of effectiveness such as:

- qualitative research
- case studies
- expert opinion
- grey literature.

Start off small

Many government and non-government organisations test new ideas and models through the implementation of a 'pilot project'. A pilot project is a small-scale trial of a larger project. While pilot projects often produce benefits for the people involved in them, their most valuable contribution are the lessons they provide about 'what works', as this provides decision-makers with the confidence to implement the model more widely.

Evaluate and review your programs

New social policy initiatives present opportunities to generate evidence while also improving programs, policies and approaches. A common method for achieving this is through evaluation – a rigorous, systematic and objective process to assess the effectiveness of a program or project and to determine which of its elements led to positive outcomes. Evaluations are most effective if they are planned before the project is implemented, so that data collection mechanisms can be built in to ensure data is collected as the project progresses, rather than retrospectively. For more information, see [What is Evaluation?](#)

What is grey literature?

The term grey literature refers to research that is either unpublished or has not been published commercially. Examples of grey literature include:

- government reports
- policy statements
- conference papers
- theses and dissertations.

A second method often used to generate and consolidate evidence is through a program or sector review. A review is a comprehensive assessment of the functioning of a sector or program area, conducted by an independent, impartial body, for example a government Ombudsman or appointed Commissioner, a Parliamentary committee, or a contracted consultant. Typically it provides a current description of the positive and negative aspects of the sector or program area, and makes recommendations for improvements.

Build capacity in your organisation or sector to engage with and use evidence

An important part of helping an evidence base to mature is to ensure that other organisations working in the area can both engage with and contribute to it. This involves:

- Developing skills, values and norms to promote evidence informed policy at an individual level.
- Supporting the adoption of procedures, incentives and resources to enhance the use of evidence.²

An example of the Department of Communities and Justice working with the sector to promote the use of evidence can be found on the DCJ website – [Using Evidence in the Targeted Earlier Intervention Program](#).

A good example of a non-government agency initiative to improve its capacity to engage with evidence is [Life Without Barriers' Evidence-Informed Strategy](#).

Useful resources

You can read more about different types of research designs and methods in '[Impact Evaluation; A Design Guide for Commissioners and Managers of International Development Evaluations In the Voluntary and Community Sector](#)' (Stern, 2015) – in particular see Table 2, pp. 18.

The Scottish Government Social Researchers' [Method Guides](#) also provide useful information about some of the most common methods used in social science research.

[Quality in policy impact evaluation: understanding the effects of policy from other influences](#) (supplementary Magenta Book guidance produced by HM Treasury/ DEFRA/DECC) is a guide to help policy makers assess the quality of impact evaluation designs and understand how well each design can allow for any measured change to be attributed to the policy intervention being investigated.

Visit [Sage Research Methods Online](#) to access a range of books and journal articles about research methods.

² OECD, *Building Capacity for Evidence Informed Policy Making: Towards a Baseline Skill Set* <http://www.oecd.org/gov/building-capacity-for-evidence-informed-policymaking.pdf> accessed 17 April 2020

[Evidence, hierarchies, and typologies: horses for courses](#) is a great resource for understanding evidence hierarchies and types of evidence.

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