



# National Resource Center on Domestic Violence

## ***Outcome Evaluation for Domestic Violence Programs***

*Evaluation Issue Brief #2*

### **What is the Difference Between Research and Evaluation and Between Process and Outcome Evaluation?**

Many people find the distinction between “research” and “evaluation” to be confusing, but it’s really not complicated.

- ***Research is a broad term that refers to collecting information about a topic in an organized, systematic way.*** It can answer many questions that are interesting and useful to us, such as how widespread domestic violence is in a particular country, or within a particular age group. Research can answer simple questions such as these (although getting credible answers might be difficult), or much more complicated questions, such as “what are the primary factors that contribute to survivors’ increased safety after an episode of abuse?”
- ***Evaluation is a particular kind of research. It answers questions about programs or other kinds of efforts to provide services or create change in some way.*** Again, the questions can be simple, such as “what did the program do?” or more complex, such as “how was the program helpful, and for which people?” Evaluation research, as the term suggests, tries to answer questions about a program’s “value.”

Both research and evaluation can provide very useful information for domestic violence programs. Research usually is conducted so that its results can be applied or “generalized” to broad segments of the population, such as all victims who call the police after an abusive incident. Large evaluation studies may also be designed so that they can be applied to many programs of a particular type, such as shelter programs.

Most credible research and large evaluations—especially the ones that follow people over time, to determine long-term outcomes—can be complicated to conduct, require substantial funding, and are likely to need help from people who have received specialized training. Without extra resources they are probably beyond the capacity of most local domestic violence programs to do on their own. Very good and helpful evaluations can be done, however, by local programs without a huge financial investment.

For detailed research summaries and program profiles related to key domestic violence services for adults and children affected by domestic violence, please go to the NRCDV’s DV Evidence Project online resource center at [www.dvevidenceproject.org](http://www.dvevidenceproject.org). Knowing about such research and evaluation findings can suggest program ideas, as well as ideas for questions you can ask about what your program is doing (or not doing). Using these kinds of research and evaluation results is what is meant by “evidence-based practice”—something that makes sense and is being urged more and more frequently. It essentially means using the best scientific evidence you

can find to decide how to provide services or do other things to help people and communities affected by domestic violence, and to prevent further violence from occurring.

## **A Brief Primer on the Difference Between Process and Outcome Evaluation**

There is enough confusion about the difference between the two to warrant a brief discussion of the distinctions between process and outcome evaluation.

- **Outcome evaluation assesses program impact.** It answers the key question: *What occurred as a result of the program?*
- **Process evaluation assesses the degree to which your program is operating as intended.** It answers the following types of questions:
  - What (exactly) are we doing?
  - How are we doing it?
  - Who is receiving our services?
  - Who **isn't** receiving our services?
  - How satisfied are service recipients?
  - How satisfied are staff? Volunteers?
  - How are we changing?
  - How can we improve?

These are all important questions to answer, and process evaluation serves an important and necessary function for program development. Examining how a program is operating requires some creative strategies and methods, including interviews with staff, volunteers, and service recipients, focus groups, behavioral observations, and looking at program records. Some of these techniques are also used in outcome evaluation, and are described later in this *Evaluation Issue Brief series*.

When designing outcome measures and designing outcome evaluation, it is common to include a number of "process-oriented" questions as well. This helps us determine the connection between program services received and outcomes achieved. For example, you might find that survivors who received three or more hours of face-to-face contact with your legal advocate were more likely to report understanding their legal rights than were women who only talked with your legal advocate once over the phone. Or you might discover that residents of your shelter were more likely to find housing when a volunteer was available to provide them with transportation.

Process evaluation is also important because we want to assess not just whether survivors received what they needed (outcome), but whether they felt "comfortable" with the staff and volunteers, as well as with the services they received. For example, it is not enough that a survivor received the help she needed to obtain

housing (outcome), if the advocate helping her was condescending or insensitive (process). It is also unacceptable if a she felt "safe" while in the shelter (outcome) but found the facility so crowded and noisy (process) she would never come back.

***In summary...***

- ◆ ***PROCESS EVALUATION*** helps us assess what we are doing, how we are doing it, why we are doing it, who is receiving the services, how much recipients are receiving, the degree to which staff, volunteers, and recipients are satisfied, and how we might improve our programs.
- ◆ ***OUTCOMES EVALUATION*** assesses program impact, or what occurred as a result of the program. Outcomes, as we discuss in the next Evaluation Brief, must be measurable, realistic, and philosophically tied to program activities.

Knowledge is power. The more service providers and advocates know about designing and conducting evaluation efforts the better those efforts will be. Evaluating our work can provide us with valuable information we need to continually improve our programs.

*The other Evaluation Briefs in this series address why domestic violence programs should want to evaluate our work (#1), explore ways to attend to safety, confidentiality and diversity (#3), further define outcome evaluation (#4), provide practical guidance on gathering, maintaining and analyzing data (#5), and recommend how we can make evaluation work for us (#6).*

The content of this series of Outcome Evaluation Issues Briefs is drawn from a 2007 NRC DV publication entitled "Outcome Evaluation Strategies for Domestic Violence Services Programs Receiving FVPSA Funding: A Practical Guide", authored by Eleanor Lyon, PhD and Cris Sullivan, PhD.

***Eleanor Lyon*** recently retired from her position at Director of the Institute for Violence Prevention & Reduction at the University of Connecticut, where she directed many research and evaluation projects focused on violence against women. She remains active as a consultant for the NRC DV, the National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma and Mental Health, and others. ***Cris Sullivan*** is Professor of Ecological/Community Psychology and Coordinator of the Violence Against Women Research and Outreach Initiative at Michigan State University (MSU). She is also Associate Chair of the Psychology Department and is a Senior Fellow of MSU's Office on Outreach and Engagement. She has been an advocate and researcher in the movement to end violence against women since 1982. Her areas of expertise include developing and evaluating community interventions for abused women and their children, and evaluating victim services.