

EVALUATION BRIEF

Commonly Asked Questions about Random Assignment

November 2007

1. Why do random assignment?

Random assignment is the best strategy for ensuring that children who go into the control group are statistically equivalent to those in the experimental group. This is important because it enables the study to say with highest confidence that any differences in key outcomes between the two groups are due to the service intervention each state is testing rather than some other characteristic of the case or other differences in child welfare services.

2. Why won't a comparison site work just as well?

Comparison groups cannot be demonstrated to be statistically equivalent. In reality, there are likely to be differences in client demographics and problems, local agency characteristics (e.g., caseload size) and availability, and access to other services.

3. Why won't an overflow model work just as well?

Some evaluations use an overflow comparison group, which consists of cases not served because the program was full. Using an overflow model, doesn't guarantee that the groups are statistically equivalent. The possibility exists that case referrals and assignments can be manipulated. For example, staff who want to access the experimental services on behalf of clients may delay making a referral when they know there are no vacancies. Conversely, an administrator may delay referrals of particularly problematic cases when openings exist. Even if such events do not happen, the possibility of their occurrence makes any observed differences between the groups subject to criticism.

4. Why can't we just track changes in outcomes over time in the same site?

Other factors which may affect outcomes may also change during the demonstration: client demographics may change; agencies may reorganize; budgets may increase or decrease. In addition, changes in Federal laws, such as the ASFA requirements, may also result in changes in outcomes not attributable to the demonstration. Under random assignment, such changes would likely affect one group as well as the other.



5. What happens to cases assigned to the control group? Aren't they being denied services?

No, cases in the control group continue to receive the services available prior to the implementation of the demonstration. This would also be true if a comparison site was selected. Only cases in the demonstration site would receive the service; cases in the comparison site would not.

6. Isn't this illegal or unethical?

No. First, all services provided before the demonstration project are still provided to all children and families. Second, the evaluation is first testing whether a service has any benefit to children and families. While many believe that the proposed service is beneficial, there is no hard evidence. That is why there is a need for the demonstration project.

7. Isn't random assignment unfair?

No, it is actually fairer than alternative designs since each eligible child or family has an equal probability of being selected. If a comparison site is used, then the State has purposely chosen to make the service available to some children and families based on where they live.

8. Will families be angry if they learn that some families are getting a service and they are not?

This may be true at first, but random assignment can be explained to families. Most people are familiar with lotteries. People may participate or support them because they believe that their chance of "winning" is the same as anyone else's chance. The same is true for random assignment.



Key Steps in Implementing Random Assignment

1. Establish a written work plan agreement with sites.
2. Establish written eligibility criteria.
3. Identify what information is required for random assignment to be done.
4. Identify a screener(s) who will review cases to determine eligibility.
5. Develop procedures to screen out inappropriate referrals and duplicates.
6. Random assignment should occur immediately after a case is determined to be eligible.
7. Random assignment should be made by the evaluator.
8. Screener(s) should have immediate access to the evaluation team member responsible for random assignments.
9. If possible, use a computer to make the assignments to the control and experimental groups.
10. Explain procedures to front line staff and supervisors.
11. Develop a system for monitoring random assignment:
 - Check administrative data;
 - Continue to talk with local staff; and
 - Develop ongoing written procedures.
12. Remember that once a case is assigned to the experimental or control group, it maintains that assignment throughout the demonstration.
13. Document any violations to the random assignment process.
14. Obtain informed consent.

Source: Adapted from Kaye, E. & Cook, R. (2000). Random Assignment: It's Not Illegal, Unethical, or Fattening. Presentation at the Fourth Annual Child Welfare Demonstration Projects Meeting. March 2000. Washington, D.C.