Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program: Ensuring Quality Evaluations

Evaluation Brief
Design Options for Home Visiting Evaluation
October 2018

The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (MIECHV) expects awardee evaluations to be rigorous and well designed.[1] The evaluations should (1) answer programmatic question(s) of interest to the awardee, (2) include an appropriate evaluation design, (3) link to the awardee's logic model and learning agenda, (4) meet expectations of rigor, and (5) be feasible for completion within the project period and the available funding.

This brief will help MIECHV awardees develop their evaluation plans. It is a companion document to the *Evaluation Plan Development Checklist for MIECHV Awardees: A DOHVE TA Resource*. Contact your Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) Federal Project Officer or DOHVE Liaison for a copy of the checklist.

Components of a Quality Evaluation Plan

Evaluation Questions and Logic Model

Identify specific, measurable, and relevant research questions. Prioritize the research questions and tie them to the key goals identified in the award application. Focus on one or two aspects that contribute something new and relevant to the home visiting knowledge base. The research questions should be narrow so that they lead directly to the hypotheses. While it is acceptable to have multiple research questions, try to select one or two that will be the basis of the evaluation.

Include an evaluation framework, logic model, or conceptual model. A logic model outlines the theoretical or empirical linkages between the proposed program or grant activities and the expected outcomes. It describes how the evaluation design will help the awardee test those linkages.

MIECHV supports the development and implementation of evaluations by MIECHV awardees. MIECHV is administered by HRSA in partnership with the Administration for Children and Families.

Evaluation Design

Consider the feasibility of the proposed design. Can it be implemented in a rigorous way within the project period and available funding? A narrow scope that answers the research questions and produces a quality study is better than a broad scope that spreads resources thinly and compromises the study quality and timeline.

Ensure that the evaluation is rigorous. No specific study type is more rigorous than another. Descriptive, quasi-experimental, and experimental studies can all be rigorous. Include quantitative and/or qualitative research approaches that meet the criteria in the table on the following page, which is adapted from Appendix A of the award application.

Describe the methodology. Aim to minimize biases, whether in the study design, data collection, or data analysis phase of the evaluation. For more information on reducing and acknowledging biases, see Trochim's *Research Methods Knowledge Base.*[2]

Specify the research design. Examples include—

- A qualitative stakeholder analysis to understand the feasibility and appropriateness of proposed program or grant activities

- A non-comparison group implementation or fidelity study to understand the implementation of program or grant activities

- A matched comparison study to compare participants that received program services to those who did not

- A waitlist/overflow design that allows people on the waitlist to serve as a comparison to those receiving services

- A single case or time series design that uses multiple time points to assess changes before and after the program or grant activities are introduced

- A randomized control trial that can draw causal inferences between program services and outcomes

Questions to consider include—

- Has a clear and specific plan for data collection been provided? For all designs, who will collect the data on intervention and comparison families? Will it be the same staff? Will they use identical protocols? What measures will be implemented to ensure standardization in data collection across groups?

- How will participant retention and dropout issues be addressed?

- What is the expected sample size? Will it provide sufficient power to detect change (if implementing an outcome study)? Was attrition taken into account when estimating the sample size? If an outcome study is chosen, will you strive to meet the Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness (HomVEE) standards of a moderate or high study rating?[3]

- If a randomized control design is chosen, what is the randomization plan? How will you minimize bias and complete the study within the funding period?

- If not conducting an outcome study now, how does the current study lay the groundwork for a future rigorous impact evaluation?

- Does the evaluation design adequately address proposed questions? For example, if a research question implies causal conclusions, the design should adequately address impact.

Identify the instruments or tools. Will the measures provide reliable, valid data, and are they appropriate for the target population? Minimize the burden of data collection on the home visitor and participants as much as possible. The data should provide useful findings that outweigh the burden of data collection. If a focus group or individual interviews are proposed, include questions or a structured interview guide.

Criteria for Rigorous Evaluations

Rigor in Quantitative Evaluation

- ⚙ ***Credibility/internal validity.*** Ensuring what is intended is actually what is being evaluated; ensuring the method(s) used is the most definitive and compelling approach that is available and feasible for the question being addressed. For example, include psychometric properties of surveys and data collection instruments.

- ⚙ ***Applicability/external validity.*** Generalizability of findings beyond the current project (i.e., when findings "fit" into other contexts); ensuring the population being studied represents one or more of the populations being served by the program. For example, check that your sample's demographics are not vastly different from the general population you are sampling from.

- ⚙ ***Consistency/reliability.*** Following processes and methods consistently; describing the approach clearly so it can be replicated and other studies can confirm the findings.

- ⚙ ***Neutrality.*** Producing results that are objective; acknowledging the biases and limitations brought to the collection, analysis, and interpretation of results. For example, fully support conclusions and recommendations with study findings.

Rigor in Qualitative Evaluation

- ⚙ ***Credibility.*** Presenting an accurate description or interpretation of a human experience so people sharing the same experience can recognize it. For example, obtain informal feedback from participants to ensure accuracy and, in the final report, draw on the words of participants and note the time spent with them to strengthen study validity.

- ⚙ ***Transferability.*** Transferring research findings or methods from one group to another. For example, provide context and demographics on the population studied.

- ⚙ ***Dependability.*** Following the decision chain in qualitative work so other researchers can determine the credibility of findings. For example, describe the purpose of the study, inclusion criteria, data collection methods, and interpretative methods.

- ⚙ ***Confirmability.*** Requiring researchers to be reflexive, or self-critical, about their biases. For example, examine the extent to which other researchers can corroborate or confirm the findings.

Include a plan for ensuring data ownership, privacy, and confidentiality. Questions to consider include—

- ▷ Is it necessary to obtain institutional review board (IRB) approval?
- ▷ Are confidentiality and protection of client privacy ensured?
- ▷ Are staff trained in protection of client privacy?
- ▷ How will data safety be ensured?

- ▷ Do evaluator staff have the skills, experience, and knowledge to design and implement the evaluation? Identify published materials and previous similar work in the plan.
- ▷ Do program staff have the skills, experience, and knowledge to coordinate and support the evaluation activities?
- ▷ Does the evaluation contract specify ownership of the data and ensure your organization will receive data collected during the contract period?

Data Analysis and Interim Reporting

Include a plan for analysis. Are the analyses appropriate and will they provide the kind of results needed to answer the research questions? If using primarily qualitative data analysis, discuss plans for data reduction (e.g., coding, defining themes and emergent patterns), testing validity (e.g., triangulation, validation procedures), and qualitative data analysis software.

Specify how interim data and findings (including null or weak findings) will be used during the project period to inform program improvements and activities and the role of contracted local implementing agencies (if applicable). If conducting a formative evaluation, discuss how findings relate to program and grant activities or how strength of associations with interim or short-term outcomes will be used to improve program and grant activities.

Dissemination of Evaluation Findings

Include a plan to disseminate findings. HRSA encourages awardees to share the evaluation findings. Describe how you will share findings with MIECHV awardees and the home visiting field within the proposed timeline.

Describe how you will share lessons learned with stakeholders. To enhance the utility of findings, identify opportunities to share lessons learned within the program and with home visiting models, community partners, and families. Discuss how and when lessons will be shared and how they will inform practice.

Organizational Capacity and Key Personnel

Summarize your organizational capacity to carry out the evaluation. Describe the organization's governance and leadership structure. Does the organization have the human resources, facilities, technology, and management policies and practices to carry out or coordinate the evaluation? Does the contract with the evaluator address the organization's role overseeing the evaluation contract? Include a description of how the organization will provide oversight and monitor the evaluation progress.

Identify key personnel. Specify staff roles and responsibilities for all major evaluation activities. Include the relevant experience, skills, and knowledge of evaluation staff. Identify meaningful support and collaboration with stakeholders in developing and conducting the evaluation. Collaborating with stakeholders throughout the process can help ensure that the evaluation and its findings will be useful to the community.

Evaluation Timeline and Budget

Include an evaluation timeline. Evaluation timelines help break down tasks and monitor what has been accomplished and what is left to do. Evaluation staff should plan to meet quarterly with their HRSA Federal Project Officer and DOHVE Liaison to assess progress.

Describe how the evaluation fits within your organization's learning agenda. [4] Many MIECHV awards have a two-year period of availability. Can the research questions be addressed within the funding period, or will they be staged across multiple funding cycles? If your evaluation will be completed in phases across multiple funding cycles, does the timeline for this evaluation build on prior evaluations or set the stage for future evaluations?

Include an evaluation budget. The evaluation budget and proposed timeline will help demonstrate that the evaluation is feasible. Budgets should be appropriate for the design and question(s), adequate

to ensure quality and rigor, and in line with available program and organizational resources. HRSA recommends a maximum evaluation budget of 10 percent of the total budget for all activities, with a minimum evaluation budget of $100,000. However, if appropriate to the scale, complexity, and design of the evaluation, you may propose less than this amount, with support in the budget justification.

Other Resources for Designing Evaluations

BetterEvaluation

Information on choosing and using evaluation methods and processes, including managing evaluations and strengthening evaluation capacity

Program Performance and Evaluation Office, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Tools, technical assistance, and resources to enhance program evaluation efforts

Office of Adolescent Health: Evaluation Training and Technical Assistance

Support for ensuring that evaluations are designed, implemented, analyzed, and disseminated to meet quality standards

Program Development and Evaluation, University of Wisconsin-Extension: Logic Models

Examples, templates, bibliography, and training resources for developing logic models

For more information about ensuring quality evaluations, contact the DOHVE team: Susan Zaid, M.A., Deputy Project Director, James Bell Associates, szaid@jbassoc.com.

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[1] The MIECHV legislation calls for "a continuous program of research and evaluation activities to increase knowledge about the implementation and effectiveness of home visiting programs, using random assignment designs to the maximum extent feasible." Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program, Social Security Act, Title V, Section 511 (42 U.S.C. §711). Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance. Retrieved from https://www.cfda.gov/index?s=program&mode=form&tab=step1&id=22f1f81ec176f5b75b289dc5bceb5a0c

[2] Trochim, W. M. (2006). *Research methods knowledge base*. Retrieved from http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/design.php

[3] HomVEE Review Process: Producing Study Ratings. (n.d.) Retrieved from https://homvee.acf.hhs.gov/Review-Process/4/Producing-Study-Ratings/19/5

[4] Till, L. (2018). *Developing a Learning Agenda: The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program.* Arlington, VA: James Bell Associates.