Effective Forms of Evidence to Use in Outcomes Measurement

Outcomes measurement involves **proving** that you reached (or didn't reach) your project goals and then **explaining** why. So—what kind of data constitutes real evidence? Below are a brief "cheat sheet" and more detailed explanations for six different types of data. Four of them can provide evidence; two cannot but may still be useful for other purposes.

So, how many program participants do you need to provide data? The short, but complicated answer is, "You should collect data from a representative number of participants." How much is a representative number? It depends on the program. If your program serves only five people you should collect data from all of them. If your program serves 50 people, collecting from 40 people might be enough. If the people are, by definition, particularly hard to reach, maybe 30 would be enough. The Grants Development Department would be happy to help you figure this out.

CHEAT SHEET

Name	Is it Evidence?	How Can I Use It (Anyway)?	Other Things to Remember
Anecdotal Evidence Universal "truth" based on one or a few people's experience	No	- To guide further exploration - To gain a sense of whether your program is on the right/wrong track - To show positive reactions from some of the kinds of people you're trying to help	This is the most tempting kind of data to collect because it's so do-able, but, "we talked to some of our participants and they said…" is not true outcomes measurement.
Participant Observation Truth based on observing clients in a rigorous, consistent way	Yes	To chart client progress during a program, leading to particular outcomes at the program's end	Participant Observation must be planned, include a representative number of clients, and be done in a thorough, consistent, and systematic way
Case Notes Truth based on a doctor, social worker, or similar professional's direct work with clients	Yes	To show your program's ability to move participants through a problem-solving process, leading to particular outcomes at the program's end	Case Notes are another form of participant observation. You will need to de-identify data to avoid client confidentiality issues.
Surveys, Focus Groups, & Interviews Truth collected through direct questioning	Yes	To gain hard data on program outcomes, as well as background information that can help to explain the hard data. Surveys, focus groups, and interviews each have their own limitations. If you can afford it, using all three methods can produce very effective results.	A "participant" is a participant in the program being evaluated. A "respondent" is a person who completed an outcomes measurement process. If you served 100 participants but only 50 completed a survey or interview, your data came from 50 respondents.

Dot Voting Truth collected through free-form questioning	Yes	Similar to surveys, focus groups, and interviews, except that dot voting mostly asks yes/no or "degree of agreement" questions.	Must be done with care because dot-voting is more open to manipulation than most data collection methods.
Story-telling Universal "truth" based on a client's individual experience, expressed in a story-telling format	No	• To clarify how a complex program works • To show how you got negative, complicated, or hard-to-understand outcomes • To humanize your program results • To demonstrate why more resources are needed	• Get clients' permission; change their names • Be careful about adding stories to a report when you funder only requests hard data

DETAILED EXPLANATIONS

Anecdotal Evidence

What is anecdotal evidence?

Anecdotal evidence is testimony that something is true, false, related, or unrelated based on isolated examples of your own, or someone else's, experience. It attempts to "prove" that something that happened to a few people probably happened to a larger group of people. Examples:

• Our job training program is an important community asset; for example, John Smith had been unemployed for three years but got a great job after completing our program.
• Our summer camp provides a high-quality experience. Some families have been coming for generations!
• Several teachers said the training would help them work more effectively with students.

Is anecdotal evidence an acceptable form of evidence for outcomes measurement?

No. Anecdotal evidence may be accurate, but it's missing two things: scope (a representative number of people involved in the evaluation) and rigor (a thorough, consistent, systematic approach to understanding cause and effect). In each of the examples above, one or a few people are being allowed to speak for the whole program. There isn't even enough data to clarify whether the happy participants have been affected by other circumstances. John Smith, for example, may have already had special skills that helped him get a job once he got a little more help. The families that have been using the summer camp may have been influenced by location, start/end times, or even habit, rather than the quality of the program.

How can you use anecdotal evidence?

Anecdotal evidence cannot be evidence of success, value or failure, but it can serve as the basis for further exploration. It can help you sense whether your project is on the right/wrong track. It can also show that your project is viewed positively by at least some of the people you've served.

Participant Observation (also called Empirical Evidence)

What is participant observation?

Participant observation is evidence gathered by observing a critical number of test subjects in a consistent and rigorous way. Much scientific research is grounded in observation: bench scientists watching amoebas under a microscope and field workers watching gorillas in the wild all use observation to gather data.

Is Participant Observation an acceptable form of evidence for outcomes measurement?

Yes, if done correctly. Before you begin you must develop a systematic method of collecting the data from all, or a significant number of, program participants, in a thorough and consistent way.

How can you use Participant Observation data for outcomes measurement?

- Choose observers who are mature enough to be impartial, consistent and take the work seriously
- Limit observation sessions to a few hours to avoid observer fatigue
- If you have multiple program sites, consider moving observers among the different sites to reduce complacency, boredom, and bias
- Create a data recording tool that is easy to complete and quantify. A tool that uses a scale of 0-5 or yes/no checkboxes will be much easier to gather into a graph and final report than a tool that relies entirely on narrative notes
- Consider including a comment box on your recording tool so observers can mention things that could affect outcomes, such as changes in program staff, bad weather, multiple participant absences, or the introduction of new program activities

Remember:

- Participant Observation requires staffing and data management capacity
- It can be tempting to read meaning into general observations, e.g.: "The campers all seemed to have a good time," "The level of discussion indicated that residents understood the issue," "The students were proud of their essays and several read theirs aloud," but this is no substitute for rigorous, consist observation of every participant or a pre-determined representative number of participants, using pre-determined indicators
- Observer bias, fatigue, and inconsistency are an inherent problem with this form of data collection. Professional researchers are highly-trained and use control groups, peer review, and other methods to address these problems. If you do not have these resources you can still make a reasonable effort to avoid tainting your data. You can also address these issues head-on in your evaluation report

<u>Case Notes</u>

What are case notes?

Case notes are a formal record of interactions between a client and their doctor, social worker, clinician, legal aid provider, etc.

Are case notes an acceptable form of evidence for outcomes measurement?

Yes. If done properly, case notes are rigorous and consistent form of participant observation. Providers are trained to collect the same kinds of data each time they meet with a client, in the same way, and to the same degree.

How can you use case notes for outcomes measurement?

Case notes are extremely personal, so it's tempting to use them to track individual people in your program. For confidentiality reasons, however, case notes must be heavily de-identified. They are most effective as evidence of your ability to move people, in general, through a problem-solving process.

<u>Example</u>: A City department is evaluating an emergency program that serves residents dealing with a wide range of issues. The emergency program gets clients in several ways, including referrals from a local medical group. The medical group counselor's case notes show that 10 residents during the year needed emergency services because of X problem and eight needed services because of Y problem. The counselor referred all 18 residents to the emergency program. The emergency program's own data shows that nine medical group clients with an X-related problem followed up with the emergency program and eight had their problem solved, but none of the medical group clients with a Y-related problem followed up with the emergency program. The City department can use this information to explain (for example) why they didn't serve as many residents as projected, that the program is highly successful for people with X-related problems, that next year's program should include a partnership with a provider who specializes in Y, and why they expect next year's program to require a bigger budget.

Remember:

- Unless you have clients' express permission, you cannot use case notes in ways that would allow the reader to guess at the client's identity. Somerville is a small city with many sub-communities, and some providers have relatively few clients, so it can be especially difficult to hide identities. In the example above the City department would seek to de-identify data by pooling its referrals and follow-up data from all of its referral sources.
- Make sure that the provider's program goals and methods will provide you with the data you need. Some providers follow clients all the way through a problem-solving process. Others simply help identify problems before directing clients to outside services.
- Clients can drop out of counseling medical/counseling services or change providers at any time, thus reducing data consistency.
- Case notes exist in narrative form and are often written by hand. It can be time consuming—and therefore expensive—to tease out the data you need.

Surveys, Focus Groups, and Interviews

What are surveys, focus groups and interviews?

Surveys, focus groups, and interviews are the standard ways that community-based programs collect participant impact data:

- Surveys are a set of questions provided to participants in order to determine how a program or activity has changed them. Surveys can be completed online or on paper. Short-term programs may decide to distribute surveys after their main event or activity, but programs that last weeks or months may distribute surveys several times. Typical intervals include the start of the program (the "pre-test"), midway through the program (the "mid-test"), and at the end of the program (the "post-test"). Surveys that use a pre/post-test method will often include the same questions, phrased the same way, to capture changes in participant knowledge or perceptions over time. Each survey may also include different questions in order to capture new ideas and test impacts from activities that have been introduced later in the program. Program managers can develop their own surveys or, in some cases, identify vetted survey tools online. Some of these tool are available free-of-charge; others are licensed for purchase.

- Focus groups are live meetings between a facilitator and a small group of participants (generally no more than 10) in order to discuss program outcomes (they can be used to collect other types of data as well). Focus groups can be handled much like surveys, with the facilitator asking questions and recording answers with an electronic recording device. The goal, however, is to eliminate some of the problems encountered when using surveys: because there is time to discuss each question, participants are less likely to be confused by questions, skip questions, or feel that none of the survey answers matches what they want to say. At the same time, focus groups are time consuming. In addition, participants who make the most of focus groups tend to be self-confident and verbal. While the facilitator will seek to mitigate this, more introverted program participants may feel too shy or out-of-step to speak up.

- Interviews are one-on-one conversations between a facilitator and individual program participants. They may combine the best features of surveys and focus groups, but because they are one-on-one they use the most resources. All interviews should be recorded to ensure that the results are transcribed consistently and honestly.

Are surveys, focus groups and interviews acceptable forms of evidence for outcomes measurement?

Yes. If done properly, they can provide an alternative to participant observation.

How can you use surveys, focus groups and interviews for outcomes measurement?

Each of these methods can provide numerical data. Focus groups and interviews can provide additional background information:

- 80% of participants in our gardening program reported feeling "very confident" about their ability to maintain an herb garden in their own backyard or window box

- 40 out of 70 interview subjects (57%) confirmed that they used the nutritional guidance charts provided through this program "every week" when planning supermarket trips.
- Only 32% of pre-test respondents demonstrated that they understood the health dangers of doing X and 70% said they did X every day. By the mid-test, 65% demonstrated that they understood the dangers and only 40% said they did X every day. By the end of the program, 98% of respondents demonstrated that they understood the dangers, and only 30% said they did X every day.

Remember:

A "participant" is a participant in the program being evaluated. A "respondent" is a person who completed your outcomes measurement activity. If every one of your participants contributes outcomes data you can use the two words interchangeably, but if only some participants contribute you must use "respondent" to show that data came from only some participants. If you have a high participation rate (95 of 99 participants completed the survey) feel free to point that out in your reports to show why you have great confidence in your data.

Dot Voting (Dotmocracy)

What is dot voting?

Dot voting involves printing survey statements on individual poster boards and asking program participants to place colored stickers on each board to show agreement or disagreement with the statement. Most often used in public meetings to identify group priorities and rate participant agreement with proposed plans, dot voting can also be useful when language/literacy issues would make written surveys impractical (it can even be used with young children) or when your program design doesn't lend well to other forms of outcomes measurement.

Is dot voting an acceptable form of evidence for outcomes measurement?

Yes, dot voting is an established survey method. It will never be as in-depth as a survey or focus group but if managed rigorously can still provide useful information from populations that otherwise could not easily be surveyed.

How can you use dot voting for outcomes measurement?

Dot voting involves the same challenges one finds with surveys: participants can ignore questions, falsify answers, and become confused by similar questions. But dot-voting also isn't confidential, which can cause additional problems, including voting-along-with-the-group, not voting in order to avoid confrontation, and manipulating responses by moving other people's dots or adding multiple dots to one question while leaving other questions blank. You can address these issues by:

- Ensuring that participants get only enough dots to answer each question once
- Color coding the dots for each question and ignoring wrong-colored dots on each poster board
- Counting all of the dots that got used to see the percentage of participation

- Stationing monitors next to each board to prevent participants from moving or adding dots. Monitors should be as encouraging as possible while still protecting the board
- Carefully wording your questions so that each addresses a single, discrete, concept that clearly requires a yes/no answer.
- Wording questions so that participants are not embarrassed to answer in front of the group. Be especially careful about questioning a participant's ability (example: "I now know how to follow my employer's dress code."). Instead, talk about participation (example: "I now frequently follow my employer's dress code.")

Story-telling

What is story-telling?

Story-telling is the use of a participant's individual personal story to demonstrate positive or negative impacts. Most stories are one paragraph. They begin by introducing the participant and their reason for joining the program, take the reader through the participant's experiences, and then summarize the positive or negative impact of those experiences. If you decide to use stories in your reports, limit yourself to 1-2 stories.

Is story-telling an acceptable form of evidence for outcomes measurement?

No. As with anecdotal evidence stories do not prove success because they are based on the experiences of one or a few people.

How can you use story-telling?

Stories can be used to elicit an emotional response from the reader and serve as a form of advocacy or illustration. They can:

- Clarify how a complicated program works by walking the reader through the program as if they were a client
- Show how you ended up with negative, complex, or hard-to-understand outcomes
- Celebrate the hard-to-quantify but still valuable impacts from your program
- Show how your program worked for one client so logically the reader could reasonably assume that your program works for other clients
- Demonstrate why more resources are needed

Remember:

- Before using a client's story, get their written permission (email is ok), including permission to use their name. Some clients may let you use their story but want you to change their name. Some clients may let you use their name and also be willing to meet with your funders or speak at your events.
- When writing a story you can choose a "voice":
  - The participant's point of view ("I joined the XYZ program because.…")
  - Your point of view, with a focus on the participant ("Mary joined our program because.…")

- o Your point of view, with a focus on the program ("Our program first welcomed Mary as a participant because….")
- You can also choose a point of view:
  - o A positive story can show that resources were well spent: ("Additional funds from State Agency made a huge difference for Mary….")
  - o A negative story can show a need for more resources: ("We did all we could for Mary, and she made a tremendous effort, but it simply wasn't enough….")
- Some report forms ask you to include stories, but story-telling can backfire if the funder is only interested in hard data. Be careful about including stories when your funder's report format doesn't seem to welcome them.