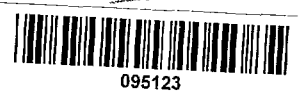


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evaluating federal programs:

an overview for the
congressional user

september 1976



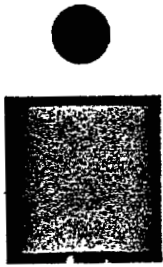
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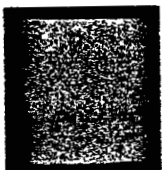
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foreword

There are neither ready nor easy means for measuring or predicting the results of most Federal programs. Yet, legislators need this kind of information so they can effectively address issues like:

- What actually has happened as a result of past legislation (or legislative inaction) and why?
- What should be done in the future, what are our options, and what are the likely consequences of each option?

The objective of this pamphlet is to aid the congressional user who is somewhat familiar with approaches for evaluating current and proposed programs but who needs general guidelines or helpful hints for improving the usefulness of evaluative information.

This document, therefore, covers the following topics:

- why evaluate ?
- deciding what to evaluate.
- who will do the study ?
- getting useful results.
- realistic expectations.

We recognize that the need for the information in this pamphlet will vary, depending on the user's familiarity with the topics discussed. To some with a great deal of experience with evaluative studies the subject matter may appear elementary. For this user we have developed a more detailed document, "Evaluation and Analysis to Support Decisionmaking," OPA-76-9. It provides a more extensive treatment of the topics covered herein.



Comptroller General
of the United States

Why evaluate?

oversight

Congressional oversight involves continuous monitoring to insure that the laws enacted by the Congress are:

- Appropriate.
- Competently administered.
- Helping to achieve intended purposes.

Oversight supports specific congressional activities, including:

- Authorizing appropriations.
- Making appropriations.
- Renewing or amending enabling legislation.
- Formulating and enacting new legislation, if necessary.

Evaluations of current and proposed programs can be used in oversight to help legislators:



Verify the effects and accomplishments of policies and programs.

Judge the success or failure of implementation of the laws.

Improve program performance.

Challenge executive branch requests for authorizations and appropriations.

Clarify options for meeting anticipated needs.

Assess the probable effects of alternatives.

Determine the necessity or desirability of enacting legislation to achieve objectives.

budget

The congressional budget is the Congress' plan for allocating scarce resources among competing public needs. The new budget process, designed to improve congressional control over Government spending, emphasizes the need for improved fiscal, budgetary, and program-related information to help the Congress determine priorities for spending.

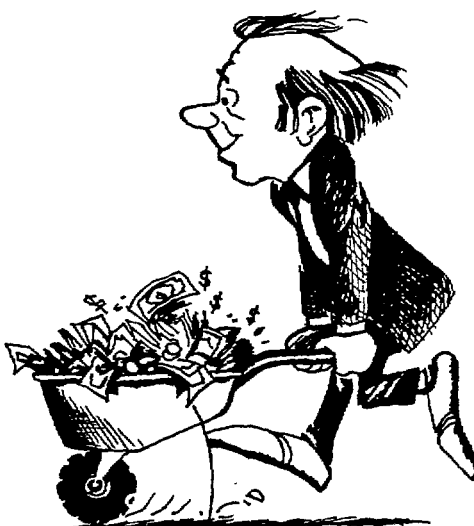
Evaluations of current and proposed programs can be used during each stage of the congressional budget process to help support legislators' actions, such as:

Recommending funding levels for functional areas to the budget committees.

Appraising legislative proposals included in the President's budget.

Debating functional spending targets in the concurrent resolution on the budget.

Determining appropriate levels of budget authority and outlays for achieving public objectives efficiently.



deciding what to evaluate

It is not possible to evaluate every program and policy issue each year. Because studies require time and scarce analytical staff, choices are required to insure that analytical talent is used effectively. Some of the factors that should be considered in making these choices include:

- The anticipated payoff of a successful study (e.g., decreased costs or improved effectiveness).
- The chances for a successful study (e.g., are available data and study methodologies adequate for resolving issues, and can sufficient resources be obtained to complete the study in time for decisions) ?
- The cost of the study (e.g., resources needed, dollar costs, and opportunity costs. Opportunity costs include all the potential benefits that must be foregone from studies which can't be undertaken because available analysts are working on the chosen study and cannot work on others).

Some considerations in selecting areas for study include:

programs in transition

- Before expanding or reducing the size of a program, should we find out how well it is performing? Are changes needed?

policy impact

- Before changing policy (e.g., energy or economic policy) or methods of financing, should we determine the impact of policy on programs?



new programs

- Are the potential consequences of a new program unknown? Should we pilot test different approaches before deciding on this program?

life of the program

- How long has it been since this program was evaluated? Have conditions changed which may require a new analysis of options?

concern with national needs or target population

- How are employment programs working? How well are programs meeting the needs of a particular target group?

building a base in each budget area

- Should we select programs for study in such a way that we can build a base of information in each functional area or budget category, possibly representing a certain percentage of the total outlays within a functional area or budget category?

renewal of legislation

- Should we study a program whose authorization of appropriations is due to expire next year, so we can decide on extending or modifying the program?

Who will do the study ?



Since evaluation is a fundamental part of effective program administration, we believe the responsibility for making studies should rest initially with the responsible executive agencies. In some cases, however, Congress has found it appropriate to request evaluative studies from an independent agency. Some examples of evaluative studies requested by the Congress are cited below.

- The Rangeland and Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974 (Public Law 93-378) requires the Secretary of Agriculture to prepare a National Renewable Resources Assessment and a Renewable Resource Program for submission to the Congress. It also requires an annual report by the Secretary which evaluates progress in implementing and achieving the goals of the congressionally approved program.

- The Energy Reorganization Act of 1974 (Public Law 93-438) requires the Administrator of the Energy Research and Development Administration to annually report on the short- and long-range goals, priorities, and plans of the Administration, together with an assessment of the progress made toward attaining those objectives.
- The National School Lunch and Child Nutrition Act Amendments of 1973 (Public Law 93-150) required the Secretary of Agriculture to study and report whether the benefits of programs carried out under the National School Lunch Act were accruing to the maximum extent possible.
- The Radiation Control for Health and Safety Act of 1968 (Public Law 90-602) required the Secretary of HEW to (1) study and report on State and Federal control of health hazards from electronic product radiation and the necessity for developing standards for the use of nonmedical electronic products for commercial and industrial purposes and (2) annually appraise the incidence of biological injury and effects, including genetic effects, on the population resulting from exposure to electronic product radiation, and the degree of observance of applicable standards.
- The Economic Opportunity Amendments of 1967 (Public Law 90-222) required the Comptroller General to evaluate the goal achievement and administration of all OEO programs. GAO was also requested to determine the effectiveness of local public and private agencies in implementing OEO activities.

getting useful results

The conduct of an evaluative study should go through a sequence of four basic steps to get useful results:

1. The requestor of the study and the analyst consider the issues, programs, and/or alternatives to be examined.
2. The information necessary for analyzing each issue, program result, and/or legislative alternative is specified. Program or policy goals are identified so the analyst can develop valid indicators or measures that will provide evidence of effectiveness and cost.
3. The data for each indicator or measure is collected and analyzed; i.e., program results are appraised and the effectiveness of alternatives is compared.
4. The study results (findings, conclusions, and, where applicable, recommendations) are reported.

If the committee decides that one or more Government agencies should do the study, the committee can use both statutory means (e.g., language in legislation) and nonstatutory means (e.g., language in a committee report or informal agreements between the committee and the agency) to communicate its decision. In any case, the committee should clearly specify, in its communications with the agency, the issues that should be addressed and the questions that should be answered in the study. Considering agency views before requesting the study may help facilitate the desired study effort. To make sure the study results are useful, the committee and the agency doing the study should agree on the following points:

1. Study objectives.
2. Legislative intent.
3. Study design.
4. Resources.
5. Timeliness.
6. Quality control.
7. Reporting study results.



study objectives

Some of the recurring legislative issues that can be addressed in an evaluative study are outlined below.

purpose of the study	legislative issues
Diagnose problem	What public condition exists that requires a change in policy or a new policy?
Develop program	What kinds of programs will address the need? What are the probable consequences of each program option?
Appraise implementation	Has the program been implemented as called for in the legislation or program plans?
Assess equity	Who is or will be receiving benefits from the program, and who is or will be paying the costs?
Measure outcome	What have been the costs and achievements of the program? How cost-effective has the program been in achieving its objectives?
Appraise impact	To what extent has the program met the total need addressed in the legislation? What resources are needed for meeting the total need? Is there any impact on other programs?
Improve program	Should program goals, operations, rules, or scope be changed? Do alternative approaches offer promise of better results?
Justify program	Does the problem or need still exist?

legislative intent

The prerequisites for getting useful results from an evaluative study are clarity and specificity in stating program objectives.

The agency doing the study needs a clear, definitive statement of the intended results of a policy or program so it can know what kinds of evidence are needed to judge effectiveness.

Intent can be spelled out in the enabling act or documented in the legislative history. Ideally, statements of intent should identify both the changes to be brought about by the program and the program's potential adverse consequences.

When legislative intent is explicitly stated, the study can focus on measuring the degree to which programs achieve legislative expectations or on comparisons of the probable effectiveness of alternative proposals in meeting such legislative goals. When legislative intent is vague or ambiguous, the task of satisfactorily appraising and assessing effectiveness becomes more difficult because of the lack of agreed-upon standards for measuring program success. In such cases, however, studies can still help the legislator assess various program impacts and can point out compatible and conflicting program objectives.

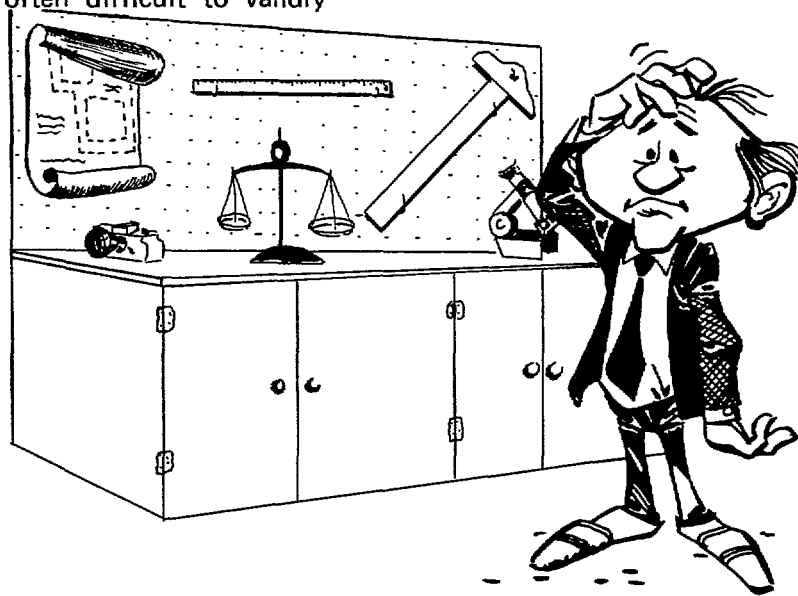


study design

Agreement on the study design insures that appropriate analytical methods and data will be used in the study to develop valid findings and conclusions needed to judge how well a program is performing or how well alternative proposals might achieve legislative objectives. However, a comprehensive review of all program results may not be possible because the state of the art in developing reliable and valid methods of measuring program accomplishments is still limited. Representative surrogate or proxy measures, such as social indicators or expert opinions, may help provide insights into the program's effects. It is important that early understanding be reached with the decisionmakers on the indicators used to measure program results.

It is often difficult to validly

test the assumptions upon which a program is founded. Cause/effect links may be difficult to establish. To answer the question "What happened that would not have happened without the program?" may require an experimental program with experimental design evaluation procedures; data gathering before, during, and after the program is implemented; and comparisons with control groups, randomization, etc. The continuous nature of many Federal programs does not easily permit such experimentation. There are also ethical and administrative difficulties which hinder experimentation. Although an experiment may not be feasible, other study methods can be used to help identify the relationship between a program and its consequences.



resources

Evaluative studies require scarce resources: skilled staff. Budgets for making studies are sometimes written into legislation as a percentage of program funds; this fixed percentage, however, does not always correspond to the needed resources. Also, rigid personnel regulations or the scarcity of trained personnel may limit an agency's ability to effectively spend the set-aside money. Review of the agencies' study plans, procedures, and reports can help assure that scarce resources are applied according to agreed-upon priorities.



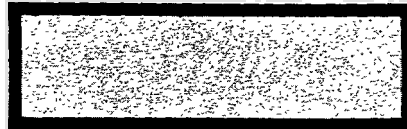
timeliness

Dates for reporting study results should be specified to insure that the information gathered will be available in time for legislative decisions. Often, however, studies may require more time than decisionmakers can afford (e.g., some pilot testing evaluations take several years to complete). The committee may want to sacrifice some accuracy for timeliness. In such cases, provisions can be made to insure that preliminary findings or progress reports on the results of the study are available for legislative decisions.



quality control

Review of evaluative studies is necessary to assure that their content and quality meet the committee's oversight and legislative requirements. Although executive agencies' summaries are tempting because of their brevity, they may mask or omit important factors or findings. Complete documentation of data, sources, methods, and assumptions used in the study should be required so that an independent appraisal and/or reanalysis may be made. This documentation is also desirable in building up a body of factual knowledge within a functional area or budget category.



reporting final study results

Report format and distribution requirements are important factors in proper and timely communication of study results. They need to be agreed upon well in advance of the study publication date, instead of late in the study when decisions on formats may cause major reworking of study information.



realistic expectations

Although the potential of evaluative studies for contributing to more effective government is unquestioned, difficulties in carrying out studies should be recognized. Those that have been addressed earlier in various parts of this document are:

- Program intent may be elusive.
- Measurement of all program effects may be impossible.
- Cause/effect links may be difficult to establish.
- Time, talent, and resources are a scarce commodity.

A number of qualifications have been made about how evaluation can really be made useful to decisionmakers. Problems will be encountered in most studies, and it is important that the legislative user understands these problems and develops realistic expectations about the usefulness of study information in assisting legislative decisionmaking.

