

Evaluating Workforce Programs

The decision

Choose the evidence needed to improve delivery, assess participant outcomes, or estimate an intervention's effect. These questions require different data and designs. Define the decision owner, target population, intervention, alternative, and observation window first.

What this package provides

The toolkit supplies a cohort specification, evaluation data dictionary, outcome-reporting structure, analysis-plan template, and decision worksheet. It reports no participant outcome estimates and no program effects. No linked participant cohort or comparison-group analysis was conducted for this publication.

Match the claim to the evidence

Delivery monitoring asks whether services reached the intended population and were delivered as planned. Outcome analysis describes what happened to a defined cohort. Impact evaluation estimates a change attributable to an intervention relative to a credible counterfactual.

A before-and-after increase, a completion count, or a favorable regional trend does not by itself establish effectiveness. Participant selection, economic conditions, and incomplete follow-up may explain observed differences.

Specify before extracting

Record eligibility, assignment or offer, enrollment, participation, exit, and follow-up separately. Define repeat episodes and the observation unit. For each measure, state the numerator, denominator, time window, source, exclusions, missingness rules, and reporting lag.

Preserve submitted grant protocols and required funder measures. Use a versioned crosswalk for additional research questions. This toolkit does not amend an existing protocol or authorize access to participant records.

Actions for the evaluation owner

Approve a data-access and disclosure plan with the data steward. Freeze a dated extract and retain source queries. Check keys, duplicates, date ordering, source coverage, linkage rates, and whether follow-up has matured for the reported cohort.

Show the cohort flow from eligibility through observed follow-up. Report unknown outcomes separately. An unmatched administrative record is not automatically nonemployment or zero earnings. Compare observation completeness across groups before interpreting outcome differences.

Choose the strongest feasible design

Random assignment can support an effect-of-offer estimate when properly implemented and analyzed. Comparison designs require explicit assumptions and checks appropriate to the design. Matching does not remove unmeasured selection; difference-in-differences requires a credible parallel-trends argument.

If no defensible counterfactual exists, publish a descriptive or implementation study. Define the primary analysis before examining treatment differences. Plan precision from the actual design and data rather than adopting an invented universal sample-size threshold.

Decision and reporting discipline

Publish numerator, denominator, observation window, and missingness with each descriptive measure. Report uncertainty and sensitivity for estimates. Keep exploratory findings distinct from planned analyses.

Cost per participant or completer is an accounting ratio. Incremental cost-effectiveness requires an incremental outcome estimate and a defensible comparison. Do not label descriptive outcome changes as a causal return on investment.

Evidence basis

The full toolkit links DOL performance-accountability resources and CLEAR causal-evidence guidance, and explains the contextual roles of BLS and Census sources. These sources do not provide a program effect for this package. Use current program-specific reporting definitions and approved data-use terms.

Next action: complete the reusable evaluation plan for the actual program, then determine which claims the resulting data and design can support. Prepared 24 September 2026.