

What is evidence?

Evidence is factual information used as proof to support a claim or belief. It is information and research selected from the best available sources to support a decision. Evidence alone does not make decisions, but is used to help inform decision making to achieve the most effective outcomes.

The appropriate use of evidence involves combining professional expertise with facts identified through the appraisal of relevant, high quality sources and research to form the basis of an opinion. This opinion gives managers, leaders and practitioners confidence that their decisions are supported with the best evidence of 'what works', 'what works well', 'what does not work' and 'what needs to be changed'.

This Factsheet explains what we mean by evidence, where evidence comes from, and why using research evidence is essential to good policy and practice decisions. It is important that Communities and Justice staff understand and engage with evidence.

Where does evidence come from?

Evidence comes from a range of sources:

- journal articles and published literature
- analysis of statistics and data
- conference presentations and papers
- grey literature (publications by government and non-government organisations)
- interviews/surveys
- expert opinion
- magazine and news articles.

Types of evidence used in decision-making

Three distinct, but overlapping, forms of evidence used in decision making are commonly identified in the literature: the best available research evidence, experiential evidence and contextual evidence. Puddy and Wilkins (2011) define these as:

Best available research evidence is the body of research with the most rigour and relevance to the issue or question you are trying to answer.

Experiential evidence is professional expertise, insight and skills accumulated over many years.

Contextual evidence is based on factors such as the extent to which an approach is relevant and acceptable to a specific community and feasible to implement and sustain.

Evidence based decision making should consider all three types of evidence. Rather than basing decisions on research evidence alone, it aims to take into account the contextual and experiential factors that may influence outcomes.

Figure 1: Types of evidence used in decision-making



Source: Puddy and Wilkins, 2011

How to I understand the strength and quality of research evidence?

Evidence can vary in strength, quality and appropriateness for your purpose. While research is only one type of evidence, it has the advantage of greater rigour and independence when compared to some other types of evidence.

When looking at questions of impact and 'what works', formal standards of evidence such as an [evidence hierarchy](#) can help you to assess the strength of research evidence. Evidence hierarchies are used to help identify research with the strongest indication of effectiveness such as systematic reviews, meta-analyses and randomised controlled trials (RCTs). Using an evidence hierarchy to guide your search for information can save you time and help you locate the best available evidence first.

Even when research ranks highly based on its research design, it still needs to be assessed for quality, generalisability and applicability. [Critical appraisal](#) is the systematic evaluation

of a research paper to identify methodological flaws and determine the quality of the evidence. It involves considering the validity and rigour of the research, the credibility of the findings, generalisability or applicability of the findings, and how useful and relevant the findings are to you and your needs.

Communities and Justice staff, particularly those with decision-making responsibility also need to think about the quality of the broader evidence base and not just the quality of individual studies. This means assessing the number, type and quality of studies, the consistency of study results and the applicability of the results to the target population and local context.

What counts as useful research evidence often depends on appropriateness. It is important to consider the purpose of the evidence, how it is going to be used and in what context, before you start your search. This will help you to select evidence with the research design, method and approach to collecting data that is best suited to answer your question.

Useful resources

You may also want to refer to the [Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation \(CESE\)](#) evidence hierarchy and the [National Health and Medical Research Council \(NHMRC\)](#) website for tips on rating the quality of evidence.

[The Alliance for Useful Evidence](#) website has a range of publications and resources to help decision-makers use high quality evidence in policy and practice.

The Knowledge Translation Network has developed a number of useful guides to help non-government organisations to access and engage with evidence and use evidence to influence policy and practice:

- [Engaging with evidence: How communities can get and use evidence](#) aims to introduce what is meant by communities engaging with evidence, why it is important and how communities can engage with evidence.
- [Evidence from Elsewhere: Gathering, analysing and using other people's evidence](#) provides guidance on how to use secondary evidence to inform, influence and improve policy or practice.
- [Evidence for Success: the guide to getting evidence and using it](#) provides guidance to non-government organisations on how to use evidence to influence policy and practice.

You can read more about different types of research designs and methods in '[Impact Evaluation; A Design Guide for Commissioners and Managers of International Development Evaluations In the Voluntary and Community Sector](#)' (Stern, 2015) – in particular see Table 2, pp. 18.

The Scottish Government Social Researchers' [Method Guides](#) also provide useful information about some of the most common methods used in social science research.

[Quality in policy impact evaluation: understanding the effects of policy from other influences](#) (supplementary Magenta Book guidance produced by HM Treasury/ DEFRA/DECC) is a guide to help policy makers to assess the quality of impact evaluation designs and

understand how well each design can allow for any measured change to be attributed to the policy intervention being investigated.

Visit [Sage Research Methods Online](#) to access a range of books and journal articles about research methods.

[Evidence, hierarchies, and typologies: horses for courses](#) is a great resource for understanding evidence hierarchies and types of evidence.

References

Puddy, RW & Wilkins, N 2011, *Understanding Evidence Part 1: Best Available Research Evidence. A Guide to the Continuum of Evidence of Effectiveness*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, GA.

Produced by

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