

PROGRAM EVALUATION PRACTICES

OMB M-20-12, Phase 4 Implementation of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018: Program Evaluation Standards and Practices

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Memorandum [M-20-12](#), “Phase 4 Implementation of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018: Program Evaluation Standards and Practices,” provides examples of leading practices for agencies to draw upon as they build evaluation capacity, develop policies and procedures, and carry out evaluations to support evidence-based policymaking. The practices were selected for their potential usefulness in supporting agencies’ implementation of the program evaluation¹ standards described in OMB M-20-12, and [Appendix C](#) of the memo includes a more detailed explanation of the practices. This set of practices are not meant to be exhaustive of the efforts an agency, office, or program could, should, or must undertake to ensure the quality and integrity of evaluation or adherence to legal or other requirements.

These practices are not intended to be a substitute for the extensive literature on evaluation theory, methods, and operations, and the application of these and other evaluation practices requires evaluation expertise and judgment that also balances usefulness, need, and efficient allocation of resources. Agencies may be starting at different places when using these practices to carry out evaluation activities. Consequently, agencies should consider their prior evaluation experience, existing expertise, and current needs before engaging in specific activities or strategies.

1. **Build and Maintain Evaluation Capacity:** Staff the Federal evaluation workforce with qualified personnel and support their continued professional development in order to effectively plan, manage, implement, and oversee high-quality evaluation activities.
2. **Use Expert Consultation Effectively:** Expand the content knowledge and technical expertise of the evaluators designing and conducting an evaluation by allowing for supplemental expert input and review at critical junctures.
3. **Establish, Implement, and Widely Disseminate an Agency Evaluation Policy:** Ensure that evaluation activities adhere to an evaluation policy and that stakeholders are aware of its content and use.
4. **Pre-Specify Evaluation Design and Methods:** Make an evaluation’s design and methods² available before the evaluation is conducted and in sufficient detail to achieve rigor, transparency, and credibility by reducing risks associated with the adoption of inappropriate methods or selective reporting of findings,³ and instead promoting accountability for reporting methods and findings.
5. **Engage Key Stakeholders Meaningfully:** Identify and involve critical internal and external stakeholders to help ensure relevant and useful evaluation activities.
6. **Plan Dissemination Strategically:** Ensure key audiences are aware of and understand evaluation activities broadly and each evaluation’s purpose, progress, and findings.
7. **Take Steps to Ensure Ethical Treatment of Participants:** Put measures in place to ensure the dignity, rights, safety, and privacy of participants, other individuals, and entities affected by an evaluation.
8. **Foster and Steward Data Management for Evaluation:** Establish and maintain an organizational culture that values protecting the integrity, security, privacy, and confidentiality of data when carrying out evaluation activities.
9. **Make Evaluation Data Available for Secondary Use:** Establish procedures that facilitate and promote reuse of data from evaluations, taking into consideration any legal, ethical, or other constraints for disclosing the data.
10. **Establish and Uphold Policies and Procedures to Protect Independence and Objectivity:** Ensure that Federal agencies establish and maintain the necessary policies and procedures to ensure that evaluation offices and staff have the authority to approve an evaluation’s design and methods and release evaluation findings to safeguard against bias.

¹ “Program evaluation” and “evaluation” are synonymous. The term “evaluation” signifies “an assessment using systematic data collection and analysis of one or more programs, policies, and organizations intended to assess their effectiveness and efficiency.” 5 U.S.C. § 311(3). “Evaluation,” “program,” and other key terms are further described in OMB 20-12 [Appendix A](#).

² “Design and methods” is used to collectively address the structure of an evaluation, inclusive of evaluation approach; variables for, conditions under, timing of, and sources from which data are used or collected; and quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis methods.

³ “Findings” refers to results, conclusions, and recommendations that are systematically generated through analyzing and interpreting data.