This paper briefly describes Utah's approach to conducting evaluating the quality of the program evaluations used in our analysis.

Evaluating Evaluations

CCJJ
Utah Commission
on Criminal and
Juvenile Justice

Overview

A critical component of our cost benefit model was a "meta-analysis" to determine the quality of the programs we included. But more broadly, knowing what to buy is at the core of making good economic decisions. Such a decision can be difficult if you must depend only on price to determine the appropriate good to purchase. Of equal import in that decision is evaluating the quality of the goods or service, and good evaluations of programs can provide the measure of quality that we seek.

To ensure that the evaluations that we use can be relied upon, they themselves must be of high quality. In conducting our meta-analysis for the cost-benefit study, we established guidelines of what constituted a good study. Creating evaluations that can be depended on is important not only for our cost-benefit analysis but is also of critical importance to the implementation of our commitment to "evidence based practices".

What follows is a "best practice guide" to create evaluations that can be relied upon to provide the measure of program quality that we need.

What are good evaluations?

In poorly designed research studies, the difference in recidivism between treated and untreated offenders may be a function of pre-existing group differences rather than a given intervention. In order to reduce potential bias in the research, we developed strict inclusion criteria.

The criteria are summarized here:

- The study must compare a treatment group to a group receiving no treatment or an alternative treatment. Studies using only a single group of offenders should be avoided if possible.

- The study must demonstrate that the treatment and comparison groups are equivalent. Ways that this can be accomplished are listed below:
  - Studies using random assignment.
  - Studies using a matching design, wherein treated and untreated offenders are matched on a set of variables related to recidivism, such as age, gender, criminal history, and risk level.
  - Studies using statistical analysis, such as logistic regression, to control for pre-existing differences in the treated and untreated groups.

- Studies must provide outcomes for all participants, including drop-outs from the treatment group. Drop-outs cannot be used as the sole comparison groups.

- Studies can use a comparison group of offenders who were eligible for, but refused, treatment. However, these studies need to demonstrate that the two groups are statistically similar.