HCP-C

MODULE 9

Evaluation

OVERVIEW

This module focuses on designing, running, and troubleshooting an evaluation of programs that aim to help youth exit out of homelessness. There are many ways to design and run an evaluation in this space, and individual evaluations will look quite different depending on your local context and population. The information in this section is meant to be read as helpful guidance that emerged out of our learnings from running the HOP-C program in Toronto over a 3-year period. The key takeaways from this section are:

1. **Collectively identify and affirm your evaluation goals and principles.**

Early in the process it can be helpful to explicitly and collectively have a discussion on the goals of your evaluation. When partner's have different expectations of an evaluation's goals the operations of the evaluation can be pulled in multiple directions leading to evaluation that does not answer partners key questions about the program. Building an agreement on research questions and a logic model early can be helpful.

Discussing and formulating evaluation principles early can avoid ethical dilemmas and identify differences in opinions between partners which can help to avoid disagreements during the operation of an evaluation.

2. **Assess your evaluation capacity and resources.**

Evaluations require resources and staff time to conduct well. An evaluation can flounder if resources and the desired scope of an evaluation are misaligned. Clearly identifying the research questions, methods, and available resources early can avoid mid-evaluation problems.

3. **Plan your evaluation.**

- Taking the time early on to have discussions with participants, staff, and funders can help to create a model that all partners agree on. It can be helpful to construct interview packages and interview questions together as a group.
- There are different types of evaluations to be considered.
- Mixed-methods approaches that collect both quantitative and qualitative information can be helpful to round out an evaluation.

4. **Anticipate troubleshooting evaluation issues.**

From our experience, there are a number of specific challenges that can be expected in conducting an evaluation of a program supporting youth in their transition out of homelessness. A few of these might be:

- Difficulties in connecting and communication with youth. In particular, things like participant recruitment and scheduling can be difficult.

- Missing data. This can happen for different reasons including attrition between evaluation time points and skipped questions. Too much missing data can create problems for the analysis and the interpretation of findings.
- The research might be triggering: Planning sensitive, supportive, and accommodating interviews can help to protect participants and improve the quality of the data.

For more in-depth information on evaluations, please see Mental Health & Addictions Interventions for Youth Experiencing Homelessness: Practical Strategies for Front-line Providers.

1. Collectively identify and affirm your evaluation goals and principles.

Collaboratively identifying your team's goals and principles can take place at a meeting early in the program formulation stage. Deciding together what the goals are and are not can help clarify what can be expected as results of the study.

Some potential goals of evaluations can include:

- To satisfy a funder's reporting requirements
- To produce quality improvement recommendations
- To gauge the feasibility and effectiveness of the intervention
- To learn about best practices in supporting youth
- To capture and share learnings, best practices, and how to reproduce the program

Some potential principles could include:

- **Incorporate young people in the research design**
  Meaningful consultation and engagement with young people through the design phase will strengthen a project and create buy-in
- **Share back findings with youth**
  This should be done in an accessible way where youth are given the necessary tools, time, and information to provide meaningful feedback on the validity of the findings
- **Ask only evaluation relevant questions**
  Unnecessary or overly invasive questions can be triggering or create research fatigue
- **Provide fair honoraria for youth**
  Best practices value the time and difficult information shared by youth
- **Conduct the evaluation in a supportive and sensitive way**
  If there is a control group, thought is needed to ensure an ethical approach
  Accommodating youth in supportive ways during the research
  Providing a safe and supportive interview environment to discuss difficult topics

CASE STUDY
Brief HOP-C Feasibility Evaluation Plan

Research Question
Is it possible to develop a feasible, integrated set of supports that show promise in addressing the key challenges faced by youth who have exited homelessness?

Participants and Recruitment
Participants were 30 formerly homeless individuals between the ages of 18 and 26 who have obtained secure housing in a time period between 1 and 12 months previously. The full range of HOP-C supports were offered to this group of youth.

We expected 10-15% attrition. Having 25 individuals complete the intervention would be adequate to assess feasibility qualitatively, likely with sufficient power to assess change for the group as a whole via a paired sample t-test and to detect medium to large effect sizes.

We employed a purposive sampling to build a diverse sample in terms of gender and ethnicity to develop a representative sample. All participants were recruited in Toronto through Covenant House and LOFT.

Measures
Qualitative
1. The youth participants will be interviewed on 2 occasions using a semi-structured interview. Interviews will be done in person with participants paid $40 for each.
2. Caseworkers, peers, service coordinators, psychologists and physicians will be interviewed immediately following the completion of the intervention. Interviews will be conducted in a complementary manner probing aspects of the intervention that seemed effective, challenges, and areas requiring improvement (see appendix).

Quantitative
Descriptive measures: A detailed demographic profile will be developed including homelessness history, age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation/identity, etc.

Scale measures: Quantitative scales that describe participants' quality of life, mental health, hope, resilience, degree of mindfulness, social support, etc.

Analysis

Feasibility was assessed primarily through the qualitative interviews with the quantitative measures being used for triangulation. Our qualitative thematic analysis involved the identification of core themes through structured coding.

2. Assess your evaluation capacity and resources.

Does someone on your team have the skills, experience, and time to conduct an evaluation that meets your goals? Do you have resources for honoraria for youth, transcription, and transportation? Some things to keep in mind:

- **Evaluation requires resources/staff time**
  Do an inventory on the resources and staff time available
- **Evaluations can be built backwards from available resources**
  An evaluation can be scaled up or down depending on available resources, sometimes it can be helpful to start with the resources and work backwards
- **Outside resources may be available to support the evaluation**
  Grants can be available for evaluating programs
  Partners, such as university researchers, can often contribute time, resources, or research assistants for an evaluation

Plan your evaluation

Taking time early on to have discussions with participants, staff, and funders can help to create a clearly articulated and shared vision of the evaluation. Logic models, interview packages, and interview questions can be discussed and agreed upon. Different methodological approaches can be helpful for answering different research questions. Incorporating both qualitative 'why' questions and quantitative 'what and how much' questions can allow for a fuller understanding of the program.

For more on the pros and cons of external evaluators, see Mental Health & Addictions Interventions for Youth Experiencing Homelessness: Practical Strategies for Front-line Providers.

CASE STUDY

HOP-C Feasibility and Random Control Trial Protocols

The HOP-C Protocols outline clearly the support program, research questions, methods, and analysis plan for the evaluations. It can be helpful to construct similar protocols for your program prior to beginning the evaluation. Differences in opinions of partnering organizations can be negotiated early to avoid disagreements later. Each organization reading, asking questions about, discussing, and signing onto the protocol can assist the evaluator in having a clear mandate and direction.

3. Anticipate troubleshooting evaluation issues.

Anticipating and planning for challenges can assist with troubleshooting issues when they emerge. Having a plan can ease differences in approaches to challenges that partners take within their own organizations. A collaborative intervention allows for the possibility of taking new approaches to challenges, which can be one of the most valuable ways for organizations to learn alternative ways of dealing with challenges.

Some potential challenges that might emerge during an evaluation:

Connecting and communicating with youth

It can be expected that some youth will be not be available for follow-up interviews due to a multitude of reasons. Some of these can be addressed if they are decided on early and included in potential research ethics board applications.

- For example, if youth are moving out of the community, does it make the most sense to interview them before they leave, on the phone in their new community, or travel to interview them in person?
- Expect a certain percentage of youth will be lost to follow-up interviews, often in the 10%-20% range. How will this impact your evaluation? What are some ways of reducing attrition? For instance, it can be helpful to get youth's permission to reach out to friends, family members, or other workers. As well, it can be helpful to visit areas and services that the youth has connected with previously to reconnect.

Difficulties in communication

Plan on using communication methods that youth prefer.

- Today, this can involve texts, WhatsApp, Facebook, and other tools.

- These forms of communication often need to be accompanied by policies around protecting youth in crisis and confidentiality, and it is better to come up with these policies in advance than during a crisis.
- Be flexible on location and timing of interviews. The youth are sharing their time and expertise with your researchers, and efforts should be taken to make this as easy as possible for youth.

Providing a safe space for discussing difficult topics such as homelessness, mental health, and life struggles. Be accepting of the degree that youth want to engage or discuss topics. Allow youth to drive the conversation within some bounds of time and topic.

Missing data

- The strategies above can help reduce attrition and improve the representativeness of the sample. Too much missing data, or missing data from particular sub-populations within the group of interest can hurt the quality of the evaluation.
- Expect some youth will not want to discuss some topics. One way to address this is by only asking questions about things that one expects to change or be a meaningful factor in the research. Many study interviews ask invasive questions of youth that do not meet these criteria, where less invasive questions would suit the needs of the study. Ask yourself if you would feel comfortable answering each question by someone you did not know.

Cultural Considerations in Program Evaluation

A few guidelines for culturally-appropriate evaluation of implemented programming.

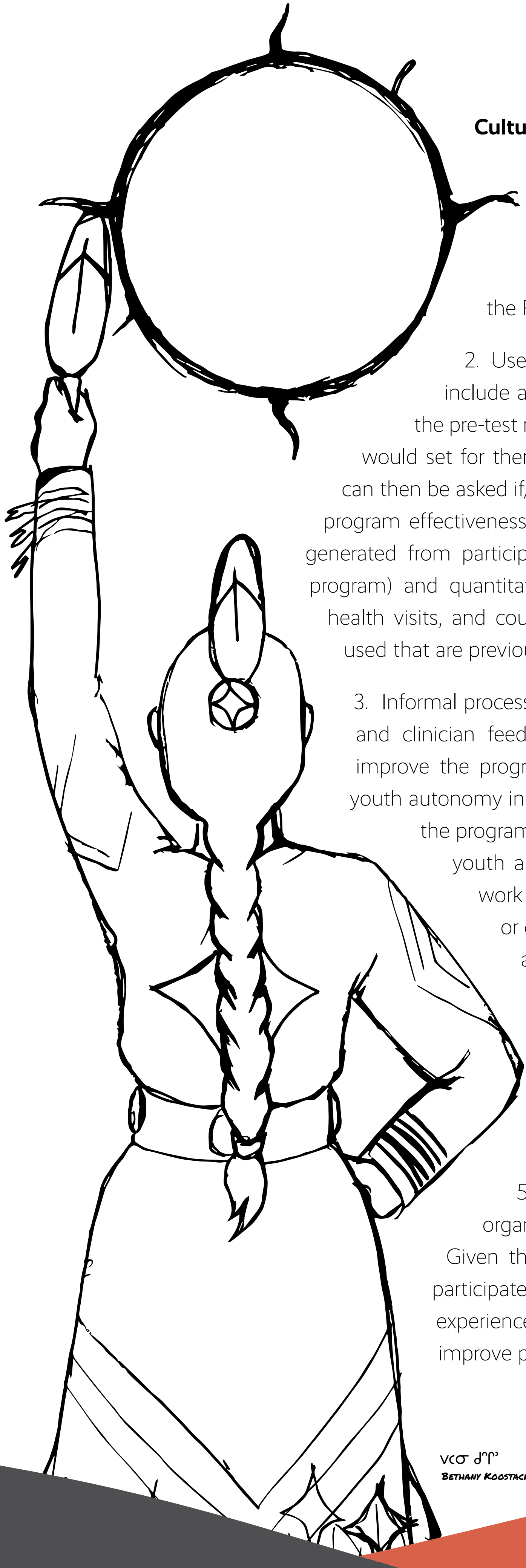
1. Use of the Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP) principles first conceptualized by the First Nations Information Governance Centre (2014).

2. Use of measures that are meaningful for youth. This can include a measure of goal attainment initially set by youth at the pre-test measures. Youth can be asked what type of goal they would set for themselves for the next 6 months. At follow-up, youth can then be asked if/how they met this goal. This serves as a measure of program effectiveness. Additional measures include qualitative indicators generated from participants (framed as strengths and weaknesses of the program) and quantitative indicators such as hospitalizations, emergency health visits, and counselling engagement. Additional measures can be used that are previously validated with the population involved.

3. Informal process evaluation throughout the program. Seeking youth and clinician feedback and suggestions is one way to consistently improve the program as it is being administered. This can increase youth autonomy in programming, but also is a way to demonstrate how the program is being implemented. This also will naturally solicit youth and staff feedback. Given that staff members often work in program-specific domains (ie: case management or counselling), it serves as one way to get staff together and reduce silos of care/knowledge through program implementation.

4. Program evaluation participation does not influence program participation. Youth may not want to complete relevant evaluation tools, and this should not influence role in programming.

5. Evaluation results should be useful to both the organization and youth who participated in the project. Given the resources (particularly time for youth) it takes to participate in research, the results should be used to capture the experiences of youth (looking backwards) but also as a way to improve programming in the future (looking forwards).



ᐯᑕᓂ ᑯᐢᒋᐣ
Bethany Koostachin

WORKSHEET 1

Building an Interview Package

A clear and strong interview package allows for interviews to go smoothly. Creating a standard interview pattern assists in the analysis of the information gathered.

Here are two examples of the HOP-C interview packages from the feasibility trial and random control trial.

- What information do you already collect?
- What are your identified primary outcomes?
- What factors do you think could impact outcomes?

Identifying Data Sources:
Internal administrative data: collected in the regular course of work, such as client engagement and need screeners.

- Surveys: are useful for collecting information on demographics and specific set of questions. Surveys should be as short as possible to prevent survey fatigue.
  There are many validated scale questionnaires that have been tested and proven reliable. For a list of reliable, brief, and free scales for consideration see Beidas et al. (2015).
- Qualitative Interviews: one-on-one interviews can gather in-depth information on how participants felt about the program, why they felt the supports were helpful or not, and how the program could be improved.

Look elsewhere in the guide for:

- Goal Attainment Scaling, where workers and youth together identify goals to measure success—this can be used as an evaluation outcome (see page X in the Case Management module).
- The Outcomes and Engagement spreadsheet can be used to build a consensus among staff on engagement level and changes in key life domains over the study period.

E-mail HOPCProject@gmail.com to obtain a copy of the HOP-C interview package

REFERENCES

Frederick, Tyler J, Mardi Daley, and Will Zahn (2018). Peer support work to enhance services for youth experiencing homelessness (Book Chapter). In Sean Kidd, Stephen Gaetz, Tyler Frederick, Jeff Karabanow & Natasha Slesnick (Eds.) Mental Health and Addiction Interventions for Youth Experiencing Homelessness: Practical Strategies for Frontline Providers. Canadian Observatory on Homelessness.
https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/Ch4-2-MentalHealthBook.pdf

Beidas, R. S., Stewart, R. E., Walsh, L., Lucas, S., Downey, M. M., Jackson, K., . . . Mandell, D. S. (2015). Free, brief, and validated: Standardized instruments for low-resource mental health settings. Cognitive and behavioral practice, 22(1), 5-19. doi:10.1016/j.cbpra.2014.02.002
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25642130