

Outcome-Based Model For Evaluating Programs For Children At Risk

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An increasing number of youth must cope with a variety of negative life experiences while growing up, such as racial and ethnic prejudice, severe learning and behaviour problems, inadequate parenting, family violence, and poverty. Consequently, many youth are “at risk” in many ways – dropping out of school, facing prolonged unemployment, participating in delinquent activities, and experiencing mental and physical health problems. Intervention programs aimed at helping youth cope with these problems have traditionally been provided by government, but as the demand for services escalates, and government resources diminish, local communities are being called upon to provide urgently needed services and support. At the same time, funding agencies want to know if the programs they are asked to support truly achieve their intended outcomes. Research now being conducted at UNB’s Atlantic Centre for Policy Research is aimed at developing a practical and inexpensive model to evaluate community-based programs serving youth at risk. The model will be tested and demonstrated by applying it to an evaluation of Partners for Youth, a community-based program located in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada.

- < Community-based organizations face many challenges when carrying out program evaluations. In many cases, they lack the resources and expertise needed to develop an appropriate assessment framework for conducting a comprehensive evaluation.
- < Where programs do carry out their own assessments, they tend to focus on delivery *processes* and aspects of program improvement rather than on clearly defined program *outcomes*. Often, such assessments are based on anecdotal evidence pertaining to only a few children who stand out in the program in some way.
- < Organizations also encounter difficulties when attempting to use existing assessment instruments because they are usually too expensive for community-based organizations to purchase. Moreover, administration of the instruments, and the subsequent analysis and interpretation of data, require specialized training.
- < Another assessment problem organizations face is that it is usually difficult to locate a suitable control group against which to compare the progress of children receiving an intervention. Collecting data for a control group is also expensive, and thus impractical in most non-research settings. However, without data for a control group, it is difficult to isolate program effects on developmental outcomes from the effects of natural maturation and other influences.
- < Our research aims to develop and test a practical model for evaluating programs serving youth at risk. Through discussions with program leaders and youth, and an extensive review of literature, we have identified seventeen important outcomes for evaluating community-based programs. The model also provides an inexpensive means for comparing the progress of youth receiving an intervention with the progress of a comparable cohort of youth who are not receiving the same intervention.

Overview

As community agencies assume a greater role in program delivery for at-risk youth, they are now being asked to demonstrate their program's effectiveness in clearly measurable terms. Sponsors want to be assured that the programs they support truly achieve their purported benefits and long-term outcomes. This study, through funding for two years from the Toronto Sick Children's Hospital Foundation, endeavours to address the growing demand for a more rigorous assessment of community programs designed for at-risk youth.

The principal aim of this study is to develop a valid, practical and inexpensive model for evaluating community-based programs serving youth at risk in Canada. The model is being tested and improved by applying it to a full-scale evaluation of New Brunswick's Partners for Youth program. The evaluation will assess the program's effects on youth over a three-year period, the duration for which children generally enrol in the Partners program.

Partners for Youth, located in Fredericton, New Brunswick, is a community program that aims to improve the educational and health outcomes of youth at risk. It delivers a school-based program that directly supports youth at risk, and increases the capacity of the school to fulfil its aims. It also operates a specialized foster care program for children who are wards of the province. The program is founded on the principles of adventure-based counselling that integrates counselling and targeted skill-building activities. Counselling and regular group activities are provided year-round.

Outcome-Based Evaluations

The people responsible for funding services for youth tend to want *summative* evaluation. Organizations need to inform sponsors about the efficacy of their programs in measurable terms: Does the program achieve its intended aims? Is it effective for children with

differing background characteristics? Are the effects realized across diverse settings? Yet very few evaluations are outcome-based.

Often there are strong pressures from within organizations to conduct *formative* evaluations with a view to improving methods of service delivery. Many evaluations therefore focus on the demographic characteristics of the population served, the type and frequency of services received by differing types of clients, and the costs of service delivery.

Outcome-based evaluations are difficult to execute because the reliable measurement of children's health and educational outcomes requires repeated measurement and longitudinal analysis. Also, it is often difficult or politically infeasible to obtain a suitable control group against which to compare the progress of children receiving an intervention. Consequently, where evaluations have been conducted, they have usually been expensive and subjective, and have emphasized delivery processes rather than children's outcomes. Evaluators also face conceptual and pragmatic difficulties concerning which outcomes are important and whether they can be measured reliably. Thus, outcome-based evaluations generally take longer, are more costly, and are more difficult to execute than formative evaluations.

Program Outcomes

There are seventeen outcomes in our evaluation model that have been identified as the most important outcomes for measuring the success of programs serving at-risk youth. These outcomes, displayed in Figure 1, have been categorized into three strands: personal development, social behaviour, and school engagement. The schema was established by conducting a detailed review of the literature pertaining to at-risk youth, analysing the goals of Partners for Youth and other comparable programs serving at-risk youth, and through consultation with stakeholders who work with at-risk youth, including program staff, volun-

teers, and social workers.

The outcomes included in the first strand, *personal development*, include measures pertaining to a child's personal qualities, characteristics, and general sense of place, belonging, and well being. Improving personal factors like self esteem are common to most programs serving at-risk youth. Many equally try to improve relationships between children and their parents. Our model also includes two outcomes particular to children who are wards of the government in foster care situations: a child's knowledge of and level of contact with his or her birth family, and the type and frequency of care placement a child has experienced.

The outcomes in the second strand *social behaviour*, encompass youths' social context and the interpersonal nature of their peer relationships. Two measures of particular note are the monitoring of prosocial and antisocial behaviours, and the ability to work well with others. The monitoring of prosocial and antisocial behaviour is particularly important because youth with emotional and conduct disorders are vulnerable to experiencing mental and physical health problems as adults. The ability to work well with others is also important because the capacity to work collaboratively has important implications for school success in the short-term, and for workforce success in the longer term.

The third outcome strand, *school engagement*, includes outcomes associated with personal, social, and academic engagement. Some programs serving at-risk youth primarily aim to provide a "safe haven" in which youth can develop personally and socially, but school success is not part of their mission. Many other programs, including Partners, strive to help youth understand the goals of formal schooling, and increase their participation. A growing literature suggests that youth who are more engaged in school activities, including extracurricular activities, are more likely to succeed academically, and less likely to drop out during secondary school.

Evaluation Outcomes for Programs Serving At-Risk Youth

<p>Personal Development pertains to an individual's personal qualities, characteristics, and general sense of place, belonging, and well being.</p>	<p>Social Behaviour encompass participants' social context and the interpersonal nature of their peer relationships.</p>	<p>School Engagement consists of outcomes associated with personal, social and academic engagement and achievement in schooling.</p>
<p>Self Esteem is an individual's appraisal of their self-worth, personal dignity, and self-confidence.</p>	<p>Relationships With Other Children considers a youth's peer network and its degree of influence on various attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours.</p>	<p>Academic Achievement refers to the growth in academic achievement based on standardized test scores and teachers' grades.</p>
<p>Locus of Control and Personal Responsibility describes one's sense of personal control over their fate, and how this is reflected in goal-setting, planning, and problem-solving.</p>	<p>Prosocial and Antisocial Behaviours considers a range of both positive and negative behaviours that demonstrate either a responsible orientation to others or a violation of the rights of others and of societal norms.</p>	<p>Acceptable School Conduct covers a range of variables associated with the type and degree of critical incidents occurring at school, a youth's level of attendance at school, and the frequency of school placement and relocations for purposes other than regular promotion.</p>
<p>Sense of Security and Well Being is the degree to which youth feel secure as opposed to feeling vulnerable and in danger.</p>	<p>Use of Free Time measures out-of-school behaviours to determine what activities are engaged in outside of school and how youth use their free time.</p>	<p>Engagement in Academic Activities considers the extent to which youth commit to and value their education, and their level of academic aspirations.</p>
<p>Family Relations refers to the extent to which youth strive to resolve conflict, develop positive relationships, and share in family responsibilities.</p>	<p>Use of Tobacco, Alcohol, and Illegal Drugs measures the extent to which youth participate in substance use and substance abuse.</p>	<p>Engagement in School Life considers the degree to which youth become involved in the social fabric of their school through interactions with others.</p>
<p>Social Support pertains to youths' perceptions about their level and availability of social support from friends, family, and other sources.</p>	<p>Ability to Work Well With Others includes factors associated with engaging positively in teamwork and working to aid group members in achieving positive results.</p>	<p>Sense of Belonging at School determines the degree to which youth feel accepted or alienated by others within their school community.</p>
<p>Knowledge of Birth Family and Level of Contact refers to the type and degree of contact children living outside of their natural family have with their birth parents, and the background knowledge they have about their parents, siblings, and relatives.</p>		
<p>Type and Frequency of Care Placement pertains to the frequency that youth move in and out of care (often referred to as "foster care drift") and the kind of care facilities experienced.</p>		

Figure 1.

Implementation

The information needed to carry out the evaluation is being gathered by administering three questionnaires: one to the youth themselves, a second to each youth's teacher, and the third to the person designated as the person most knowledgeable (PMK) about that youth, in most cases the birth

parent or official guardian. For children who are wards of the province, the PMK may be the foster parent or a social worker.

The youth questionnaire asks the children to provide information pertaining to all but two of the outcomes – academic achievement and school conduct. Five of the outcomes –

relationships with other children, prosocial and antisocial behaviour, ability to work well with others, engagement in academic activities, and sense of belonging at school – are included in all three questionnaires. This strengthens the reliability and validity of measurement, and allows for comparisons among respondents.

In addition, the PMK is asked questions about family relations, use of free time, academic achievement and school conduct. The teacher is queried regarding the youth's academic achievement, school conduct and engagement in school life.

An important component of the questionnaires is the behaviour checklist, which is comprised of a standard set of questions designed to gauge prosocial and antisocial behaviour. It consists of 46 questions related to conduct disorder, hyperactivity, emotional disorder, indirect aggression, physical aggression, inattention, prosocial behaviour, difficult behaviours, and risk-taking behaviours. The checklist is useful for determining a child's perception of his or her general behaviour and engagement in risk-taking behaviours, and for determining how these perceptions compare with those of the PMK and the teacher's. It also enables youth to be tracked along a number of significant at-risk indicators.

Determining a Program's Success

The goals of research design in evaluation studies are to identify and isolate the effects of a program on client outcomes, and to discern the extent to which these effects are generalizable to other clients and settings. The chief problem in isolating program effects is that clients are likely to change even without intervention. Other events might also occur during the intervention period

that change behaviour such that it is difficult to discern whether it was the program or the event that caused the desired effect. The preferred approach for controlling for these threats to the internal validity of an evaluation is to include a control group. This is often infeasible, however, because it is usually deemed unethical to deny treatment to children in need of services. Also, there is usually pressure to treat the most severe cases first. Collecting data for a control group is expensive, and for this reason alone, impractical in most non-research settings.

There are two alternatives to design that employ a control group, and both will be used in this study. One is to collect longitudinal data for the treated individuals, and determine their growth trajectories for each outcome measure. In essence, each child serves as his or her own control.

This strategy improves the reliability of measurement, but it does not account for the possibility that the children could have made similar changes without any intervention. The other strategy is to match the treated individuals on key characteristics (such as risk factors) to others who are not receiving the treatment. Generally this is difficult because one does not have a large enough pool of potential control subjects to match on more than one or two key variables.

This study will match the individuals in the Partners for Youth program with comparable children who

are being studied in Canada's National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth (NLSCY). The NLSCY is following over 20,000 children, roughly 4000 of which are in the age range covered by Partners. Thus, it is feasible to identify a large group of comparable children.

The essence of our evaluation design, then, is to compare the growth trajectories of the children in the Partners group with the growth trajectories of a large set of children followed in the NLSCY who have comparable characteristics. This matching technique, combined with the longitudinal analysis of each child's growth trajectory for each outcome measure, will adequately discern the overall effects of the program for each youth.

A major product of our research will be an evaluation manual for a range of organizations for at-risk youth to use in evaluating their program outcomes. The manual will include the data collection instruments and provide details on the statistical techniques of how to match the clients of a youth program to the NLSCY children. It will also explain how to estimate and compare the growth trajectories of the two groups.

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Contact Sandy Harris at (506) 447-3178 for further information about this project or other research initiatives in UNB's Atlantic Centre for Policy Research.

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