



Implementation Studies

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April 2023



WHAT IS AN IMPLEMENTATION STUDY?

The primary goal of an implementation study is to determine whether an intervention is being carried out consistent with its goals and design. Such a study is designed to answer questions about how program services are delivered and what factors influence program implementation. Specifically, an implementation study documents program operations and participant experiences and the organizational, social, and economic contexts in which the intervention operates. Evaluators use this information to identify lessons for program improvement and sustainability and to help interpret findings from complementary research such as an impact study. An implementation study typically integrates a range of qualitative and quantitative data sources.

In the context of Reemployment Services and Eligibility Assessment (RESEA) evaluations, implementation studies examine how RESEA services are delivered to Unemployment Insurance (UI) claimants, the extent to which a program operates as planned, and whether it reaches the intended target population(s) and provides the intended services. This brief discusses the research questions that can be addressed by an implementation study, the potential data sources for an implementation study, and the benefits and limitations of an implementation study.¹

WHAT QUESTIONS DOES AN IMPLEMENTATION STUDY ADDRESS?

When beginning an implementation study, an evaluator develops the research questions it will answer, often in consultation with program staff. The key research questions typically involve describing the services delivered (including their content, quality, and structure) and documenting the extent to which the target

Example Implementation Study Research Questions for RESEA Programs

- What are the characteristics of UI claimants who participate in RESEA programs? How are they recruited and enrolled in the program?
- How is the RESEA program structured and staffed? How are RESEA services coordinated with other workforce development or job center services?
- To what extent do claimants participate in program services? What are the reasons for not participating?
- What activities do RESEA claimants engage in most and least commonly? How long do they attend?
- Do claimants with different demographic characteristics have different experiences in the RESEA program?
- What type of assistance is provided to claimants during meetings with program staff?
- What reemployment services do claimants find most and least helpful?
- How are RESEA program requirements enforced?
- How do services vary by site?
- What are the operational lessons for program administrators and policymakers?

This document was prepared for the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), Chief Evaluation Office by Abt Associates under Contract # 1605DC-18-A-0037. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to DOL, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement of same by the U.S. Government.

population received the services (including their type and duration).

Implementation studies also examine whether these program elements varied over time, across sites, or by claimant demographic characteristics such as age, gender, race or ethnicity or other characteristics such as educational background and work experience.

Finally, implementation studies typically address questions related to operational lessons, including promising practices and strategies for improving existing interventions, that can guide policymakers, practitioners, and future investments. (See box above for examples of questions.)

Evaluators sometimes combine implementation studies with other study designs to maximize learning and provide a more complete assessment of the program being studied. When paired with an impact study, implementation studies can help interpret the impact results by providing important insights into why impacts did or did not occur. Implementation studies also can be conducted before an impact study to determine whether the program is operating as intended and thereby providing a potential candidate for a future impact study, or to identify ideas for program improvement that could be tested in a future impact study.²

WHAT DATA ARE COLLECTED FOR AN IMPLEMENTATION STUDY?

Implementation studies typically involve identifying specific program dimensions, often drawn from the program's logic model, that should be measured to answer the research questions. For the RESEA program, the program dimensions to be studied likely would include the local context, the target population and recruitment, the organizational structure and partnerships used to deliver services, the nature and content of services provided, and the experiences of claimants.

Documenting these program dimensions involves systematic collection of a range of both qualitative and quantitative data that are integrated to answer the research questions. Such a combination is often referred to as a “mixed methods” approach. The richness and complexity of the data collected in implementation studies distinguish it from many other forms of qualitative research. For example, implementation studies typically seek to integrate qualitative data on how and what services staff provide and how the services are perceived by participants with quantitative data on participant characteristics and service receipt (Martinson & O'Brien, 2015).

Determining which data sources to use and how to collect them is critical for any implementation study, and evaluators determine the type of data that is most useful for a specific study. Data collection often relies on coordination between the evaluator and RESEA program staff, with some data collected directly by the evaluator and some provided by the program to the evaluator. Key data sources for RESEA implementation studies include:

- **Interviews with program administrators, staff, and partners.** Semi-structured interviews with program administrators, staff, and partners generally are the most critical data source for implementation studies, to document the nature and content of services provided. Evaluators often conduct interviews in person on site visits, although they can be conducted virtually. Alternative (although not mutually exclusive) approaches for collecting this data include focus groups or surveys of program staff.
- **Program administrative data.** Administrative data maintained by the RESEA program (contingent on availability and data quality) can be used to describe program activity levels and trends, claimant

characteristics, the services in which claimants participated, the duration of services, and how services vary over time or by offices.

- **Interviews with RESEA participants.** Interviews with program participants can provide information on their experiences and opinions about the RESEA interventions firsthand, including perceptions of the usefulness and effectiveness of the services. This information also could be captured by surveys or focus groups with participants.
- **Observations of program activities.** To augment the documentation of the nature and content of services, evaluators can conduct observations of one-on-one meetings or group classes, workshops, or other activities.
- **Program documents.** Policy and procedures materials, recruitment materials, blank versions of forms used during intake and ongoing meetings, and materials used in meetings can be important sources of data on program design, planned operating strategies, and program context.
- **Publicly available population, economic, and labor market data.** Such data generally are used to understand the context in which a program operates. They can include the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey and economic and employment data from the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics and state labor market information agencies.

The table below shows specific program dimensions that each of these data sources can address and factors to consider (including benefits and challenges) of each.

Implementation Study Data Sources, Program Dimensions, and Considerations

Data Source	Program Dimensions	Considerations
Interviews with program administrators, staff, and partners (also can be conducted with focus groups and/or surveys)	• Program context • Target population and recruitment • Organizational structure and partnerships • Nature and content of services	• Allows for multiple perspectives on key areas of interest • Provides opportunity for staff to offer insights and solutions • Can be time-consuming to collect and analyze data • Surveys allow for more systematic and quantifiable data, but samples can be too small to fully analyze without breaching respondent confidentiality
Program administrative data	• Demographic characteristics of UI claimants • Service receipt activity levels and trends, including types of services received and duration of services • Service trends and variation over time, by site, or for different demographic groups	• Using data collected by program allows for some efficiencies • Limited to data items collected by the program • Data quality can vary depending on the nature of the data system and data management capacity • With sufficient planning, data elements of interest can be added or procedures revised to improve data quality
Interviews with RESEA participants (also can be conducted with focus groups and/or surveys)	• Claimant experiences in the program • Perceived effectiveness of the program • Factors affecting reemployment	• Captures details specific to how participants experience the intervention • Time intensive to collect and analyze data • Difficult to obtain representative samples • Surveys more costly, but allow for larger and potentially more representative samples

Data Source	Program Dimensions	Considerations
Observations of program activities	• Nature and content of services • Level of engagement and tone of interactions • Physical conditions	• Difficult to determine whether event observed is representative • Observations can be structured for systematic coding of important characteristics associated with each event, but time intensive
Program documents	• Program context • Target population and recruitment • Planned organizational structure and services	• Relatively inexpensive to collect • Do not provide information on how programs were structured or operated in practice
Publicly available population, economic, and labor market data	• Population characteristics in the targeted service area • Local area economic and employment conditions • Information on the industries and occupations relevant to state programs	• Readily accessible and in the public domain • High-quality data • Limited to the types of data and geographic areas available; can lack some detail for particular locations • Data might not be available for time period of interest

HOW ARE THE DATA COLLECTED AND REPORTED?

Evaluators will take the steps to secure the data needed for implementation studies. The process starts with developing protocols that provide a road map for how the data will be collected and then using the road map to guide the evaluators through the study. The protocols address the specific sources of data, the sites/offices to be included in the data collection, the key respondents to be interviewed, and the timing for each of the data collection activities. At the heart of the protocols are the data collection instruments for staff and participant interviews that provide the substantive questions to be asked.

Evaluators will also take steps to ensure the confidentiality and security of data collected, including approval of the data collection protocol (as needed) by an Institutional Review Board. Once this is completed, the data collection will begin.

After evaluators have collected data, they analyze the data and prepare written reports (and sometimes other products, such as briefs, infographics, and presentations) to document and share findings from the implementation study. The goal of products produced for implementation studies is to integrate findings from multiple data sources to provide an easily understood narrative. It is important for implementation study reports or other products to be tailored to the needs and goals of specific audiences. States should communicate their needs and goals clearly to evaluators to ensure learning from the study is maximized.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS OF IMPLEMENTATION STUDIES?

As discussed, implementation studies can provide valuable information on the operation of the RESEA interventions and lessons from these experiences. The studies help program administrators understand whether specific aspects of the program are operating as planned, and the reasons why or why not. This understanding provides important opportunities for making programmatic adjustments. It also provides valuable lessons for other practitioners developing or operating similar programs.

Implementation studies are also important for interpreting impact findings and understanding why impacts did or did not occur. However, there are also limitations. Implementation studies can only answer questions about whether the full package of program services documented by the implementation study resulted in impacts and cannot attribute impacts to any particular element of the intervention. Nonetheless, by carefully and thoroughly documenting the context and service delivery of the RESEA program, an implementation study can suggest factors that could be influencing impacts and provide insights for other practitioners and evaluators to consider when interpreting impact findings.

NOTES

1. Further information and detail about implementation studies can be found in the *RESEA Evaluation Toolkit: Key Elements for State RESEA Programs* (Mills De La Rosa et al., 2021).
2. Further information and detail about impact studies can be found in the *RESEA Evaluation Toolkit: Key Elements for State RESEA Programs* (Mills De La Rosa et al., 2021).

REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Clearinghouse for Labor Evaluation and Research. (2014). [“Implementation Guidelines, Version 1.0.”](#)

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

Evaluations by state agencies of their RESEA interventions (i.e., the whole program or components of it) are integral to expanding the evidence base of effective service delivery strategies. This brief is part of a series on evaluation types developed as a quick-reference tool for states planning, launching, and carrying out evaluations of their RESEA programs.

Suggested citation: Trutko, J., Nightingale, D., Trutko, A., & Copson, E. (2023). *Implementation studies*. RESEA Evaluation Technical Assistance Brief. Prepared for the U.S. Department of Labor, Chief Evaluation Office. Abt Associates.