

MYTHBUSTER:

ARE EVALUATIONS TOO CHALLENGING?

In general, the importance of evidence as input for decision-makers is agreed upon. Evidence-based decisions can improve the design, implementation and effectiveness of initiatives.¹ There are many reasons why the prevention workforce wants to operate in an evidence-based manner. For example, due to concerns on the quality of services or because of political desire to achieve promised changes in society.² However when looking at the reality, the implementation of evaluations and evidence-based decisions remains inadequate. Evaluations are not just a summary of an initiative or collecting feedback from those involved; they are a tool to systematically examine the work that has been done, whether or not the desired results were achieved and how those results occurred.³



EVALUATIONS ARE ...

This mythbuster examines common reasons why people remain hesitant regarding evaluations. It discusses both myths and actual challenges faced by the prevention workforce when conducting evaluations.



Too difficult

Evaluations are often considered a difficult and time-consuming task due to various reasons. First of all, they require planning as well as a certain level of (theoretical) knowledge and research skills to carry them out. This is particularly challenging for practitioners in the crime prevention field as they often operate with limited resources, meaning that there is little extra time to dedicate to an evaluation or to reflect on the work that is being done instead of the project delivery.⁴ Another facet of the issue is that a large part of the prevention workforce never learned about evaluation research and methods, and those that did often struggle to implement this knowledge in practice as they have never done so before.⁵

Even though designing and conducting an evaluation require certain skills, it does not have to be as difficult as is believed. To illustrate, the advantage of an internally performed evaluation is that the people conducting the evaluation are the programme designer and/or implementers. As they typically are experts on their own project, they are consequently best placed to gather the necessary data without it requiring much additional work.⁶ This eases the complexity of an evaluation.

Another significant challenge is channelling scientific information into the public sector decision-making processes. Authorities often deal with limited policy timelines, making it more difficult to embed evidence-based approaches that require long-term investment, planning and monitoring.⁷ For this reason, evaluations should be considered from the very start of the initiative. In that case, all project partners know their tasks and responsibilities and data collection efforts can be shared among many parties. This also allows for the type, extent and complexity of the evaluation to be adapted to the capacity (i.e. available staff and dedicated budget) of the organisation.⁸ Finally, it offers the chance for expert knowledge from diverse sectors to be combined in joint activities and goals.⁹



Too expensive

Another common criticism of evaluations is that they are (too) expensive. While it is true that evaluations of the highest methodological standards (i.e. randomised controlled trials) turn out to be expensive, this does not have to be the case.

In many instances, an evaluation can be based on internal expertise and include data that is at hand for the evaluators. For example, law enforcement departments generally collect many forms of data, including official statistics on crime phenomena or victim reports. A caveat, however, is that these data can be limited, depending on the personal data contained. While official statistics are publicly available, access to police reports will require specialised permission because of privacy restrictions. Moreover, police data are not automatically a reflection of reality. There is always a dark number of offences that are committed but never reported. These data might be obtained through questionnaires on offending or victim experiences. Yet this does require extra effort in creating and distributing such surveys.¹⁰ To counter these difficulties, evaluators should identify the relevant data sources in good time so it becomes clear whether additional funding or time will be required to obtain that data.

Furthermore, it is vital to allocate a budget for the intervention and its evaluation beforehand.¹¹ When a specific budget is assigned, it helps the process of designing an evaluation (i.e. deciding who will conduct the activities based on their expertise). The funding question is also related to the availability of human resources. The design of the evaluation can be taken on by a small team, whereas the gathering of data and analysing everything afterwards will likely require more people and time. This time should be calculated separately from the time needed to implement an initiative.¹²

Finally, it is important to remember that an effective evaluation is cost-saving in both the short and long term. Including an evaluation from the very start ensures that the entire design of an initiative becomes (more) evidence-based, leading to higher chances of effectiveness. Furthermore, in the long run, evaluations prevent resources from being invested in ineffective initiatives. It is, therefore, a matter of changing mind-sets so the benefits of evaluations are more widely acknowledged and promoted.¹³



Discouraging

The need for a mentality change brings us to the third misconception which deems evaluations discouraging or even opposing innovation. Evaluations occasionally reveal problems or inadequacies of an initiative and may consequently be seen as a threat to its survival.¹⁴

It is important to shift this perspective. When it comes to prevention, there is no one-size-fits-all solution, meaning that some initiatives are only/mainly effective in a specific area or in relation to a particular target group. An evaluation helps to identify what is working, where, in what timeframe and under which conditions. Based on these results, adjustments can be made to tailor the initiative more accurately. A negative evaluation should only lead to the termination of a project in limited circumstances, when it is absolutely necessary (for instance due to harmful effects); this means in turn, those resources can be repurposed towards effective initiatives. This is why evidence-based working does not run counter creativity or innovation; it ensures effective prevention mechanisms are used in the correct settings.¹⁵

Encouraging an evaluation culture nevertheless requires systematic commitment from both the policy and practice level by building capability and skills.¹⁶ As a result, people might realise it is helpful to learn what does not work for both crime prevention theory and practice, instead of merely trying to aim for success stories.¹⁷

While mentality change is one aspect, some practical elements of conducting an evaluation are also considered discouraging, such as the time and resources needed to design the evaluation, to bring the required stakeholders

around the table and to gather or access the necessary data.¹⁸ Additionally, many consider an evaluation as an administrative burden as it requires follow-up and reporting. This becomes problematic when the results of an evaluation are not considered by higher management or when ineffective projects keep on being replicated.¹⁹ This is why strategies are needed to increase both the amount and quality of evaluations throughout Europe. To do so, local agencies should be encouraged through sponsorship or trainings that enhance the capacity of practitioners to develop and perform an evaluation.²⁰



Unnecessary

Lastly, the prevention workforce generally considers evaluations both positive and necessary for various reasons, because of the feedback it provides to strengthen a project or the motivation it offers those involved, for example.²¹ It is clear that evaluations are essential to obtain effective crime prevention. They validate whether an initiative was implemented correctly and what the effects are. Furthermore, they contribute to the creation of an evidence base that can be used by policy-makers and practitioners to shape prevention plans and actions.²²

Yet some still consider evaluations to be unnecessary, for instance because they are convinced of the effectiveness of their initiative to the extent that an evaluation seems pointless. Then there is the issue of conflicting motives: policy-makers are often guided by public perceptions, (social) media and gaining political support. As a result, the pressure to align with these societal factors might outweigh the desire to perform evaluations.²³

For this reason, policy-makers should be supported in incorporating evidence-based information. This entails making such information more accessible and practical for those working in the field. The translation from theory to practice enhances the uptake of reliable research.²⁴ One technique would be through registries, which serve as a link between researchers and the public and offer information on prevention initiatives and (in many cases) their evaluation. Yet in reality, registries need to offer more comprehensive information on the potential implementation and replication of the initiatives for other users.²⁵



European Crime Prevention database

EUCPN offers a database of evidence-based initiatives on various topics in the field of crime prevention. A personalised profile is created for each initiative that provides a clear overview of the strengths and weaknesses of that initiative (e.g. the quality of the outcome evaluation and the problem analysis). What distinguishes the EUCPN database is the inclusion of information on the context in which the initiative is being implemented and key aspects needed to replicate it elsewhere.

Find out more: [Knowledge center](#) | [EUCPN](#).

CONCLUSION

It is evident that a multitude of myths and attitudes surround the idea of evidence-based prevention. While some of these attitudes constitute actual challenges, such as merging an evaluation culture with the complex and fast-paced nature of the public sector, many of the perceived difficulties can, in turn, be disputed.

Firstly, evaluations do not have to be difficult: basic skills and understanding of the initiative can shape an internal evaluation performed by the project implementers without the need for extensive methodologies. Secondly, when the evaluation is conducted internally and easy-access data is used, it does not have to be an expensive undertaking. Thirdly, a mentality shift is required to acknowledge the added value of evaluations towards the crime prevention field and avoid the misuse of valuable resources. Finally, these benefits show the necessity of evaluations in practice. They contribute to the creation of an evidence base by proving the effectiveness of prevention initiatives and demonstrating areas of improvement.

Endnotes

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