Research Plan Essentials

A Primer for CCDF Lead Agencies

OPRE Report #2024-109

Lauren Akers, Ellen Litkowski, and Gretchen Kirby
MATHEMATICA

May 2024

This primer shows CCDF Lead Agency staff what content is common in a research plan and how to structure a plan. You can use this primer to learn what to include or look for in a research plan. This primer can be useful for you whether or not your agency conducts its own research and evaluations or works with a research partner.[1] It can help you learn how to use a research plan to guide research and evaluations and make decisions.

The order of this primer follows the common sections of a research plan, as shown in box 1. Throughout this primer, we share tips and ideas about the types of information that can be useful to have in each section. These tips can help you think about the content of each section as you create a plan yourself. Or they can help you know what to look for when you work on a plan with research partners. The level of detail and exact content in any section will depend on your project. You might not complete the sections in order. Sometimes the content you create for later sections will help you fill in the early sections.

[1] To learn more about working with a research partner, see *Procuring Research and Evaluation Services: A Guide for CCDF Lead Agencies and Researchers* (Derrick-Mills, Reginal, and Isaacs 2020).

Resources on how to create content

Boxes like this provide links to resources that can help you create detailed content for each section.

Ideas for how to engage partners

Boxes like this describe how to engage key partners to plan or carry out your research project.

BOX 1

Research Plan Outline

A. The reason behind and purpose of the research:
- State the purpose.
- Provide background about the research topic.
- Describe the knowledge gap your research will fill.
- Connect to action.

B. Plan to engage partners:
- Decide who you will engage.
- Describe why you want to engage them and when.
- Determine how you will engage them.
- Think about what you will do with what you learn.

C. Research questions:
- List your research questions.
- Describe how you came up with the research questions.

D. Study design:
- Describe your study design.
- Explain how the study design will answer your research questions.
- Connect the study design to a logic model or theory of change.

E. Plan to collect information:
- Choose data topics or elements.
- List information sources you know.
- Describe new tools to collect information.
- Describe your information sources.

F. Plan to analyze the data:
- Describe how you will structure and combine the data.
- Explain your analysis approach in detail for each research question.
- Describe how you will present results.

G. Plan to communicate findings

H. Timeline

I. References

A. The Reason Behind and Purpose of the Research

This section of your plan will describe what the research project will do and why.

State the Purpose

Clearly state the problem or issue and how the research will help address it. Here are examples of what your purpose might be:

- **Find or test solutions to problems.** For example, you might want to learn how to attract and support qualified child care and early education staff.
- **Learn about the supply and demand for services.** For example, you might want to compare the number of open subsidy slots providers have for care during nontraditional hours—that is, care offered in the early morning, evenings, overnight, on weekends, or varied hours (the supply)—with the number of children who are eligible for subsidy and whose parents work during nontraditional hours (the demand).
- **Examine barriers to finding and getting services.** For example, you may want to learn about the barriers families face and how you could improve their access to services. Not all families have the same resources or opportunities. Using an equity lens to study access to services can help you better support all families (box 2).
- **Improve how you provide services or find new ways to provide them.** For example, you might want to create new ways to share information with families to help them access and use subsidies.
- **Explore or test a change in policy or how you will carry out the services.** For example, you might want to look at changes in how often eligible families use child care subsidies over time after you show them how to find their way through the subsidy system.

BOX 2

Definitions of Equity and Equitable Research and Evaluation

Equity is defined as the "consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who have historically been denied such treatment."[a]

Equitable research and evaluation efforts seek to study and address the needs of diverse communities throughout the evaluation process. Efforts should account for the role that systemic barriers (that is, policies, practices, or norms that lead to some groups having less access to resources, opportunities, and rights) may have played a role in people's opportunities and outcomes.[b]

[a] Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government, Executive Order No. 13985, 86 Fed. Reg. 7009 (January 20, 2021), https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2021/01/25/2021-01753/advancing-racial-equity-and-support-for-underserved-communities-through-the-federal-government.

[b] "The Equitable Evaluation Framework: May 2023 Expansion," Equitable Evaluation Initiative, May 23, 2023, https://www.equitableeval.org/framework; Lila Gutuskey, "Centering Equity in Program Evaluation," OPRE report 2022-211

(Washington, DC: Insight Policy Research; Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, September 2022), https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/centering_equity_program_evaluation_feb2023.pdf.

Provide Background about the Research Topic

- **Describe your agency's program and policy context around the issue.** For example, you might discuss whether this issue is new or has been around for a long time. And you might discuss whether the agency has tried to learn about or fix the issue in the past. You might describe how the issue has become a focus because of changes in policy, funding, administrative structures or oversight, or top agency concerns.
- **Discuss the families, communities, and their needs that relate to the issue. And discuss how your agency works to meet these needs.** For example, you might describe the demographics of children and families and the economic features of their communities. Then you could describe how the two might affect patterns in how families access or use subsidies.
- **Describe what you know about the issue from past research or literature, current program data or performance reports, or any other source.** For example, you might describe past findings from studies that were done at the national level about a topic you are going to explore at the state level. Don't forget to include in-text citations and provide full references for any works cited in the references section (see below).

Decide on the Information You Want Your Research to Provide

- **Describe how your research will provide information beyond what you know now.** For example, your research project might add to the current research by looking at a certain place (such as your state or a region within your state). Or you might look at a specific group of people, such as parents who work nontraditional hours. You might also look at an outcome in a new way, such as looking at whether people use subsidies on a regular basis rather than how many people use subsidies at a certain point in time.
- **Explain why this information matters and who it matters to. This could include families, providers, program administrators, businesses, or other key partners.** For example, you might highlight that having enough child care supply to meet demand matters not only for families but also for businesses to maintain a stable workforce.

Connect to Action

Highlight how the results could be used to improve the services you offer to children and families. Here are examples of how you could use results:

- **Show where and how families' experiences may not be the same.** For example, you might find that parents who work nontraditional hours have different characteristics and child care needs than those who do not. Parents who work nontraditional hours may need care close to their home instead of near their work. You might share this information with nearby providers, so they can better meet families' needs.

- **Suggest changes to policy.** For example, you could learn about the barriers families and providers face when trying to access and provide care during nontraditional hours. Then, you could propose policy changes that might help. One example could be to increase the number of contracted slots for subsidized care during nontraditional hours.
- **Propose changes that could be made in CCDF processes at the state, local, or provider levels.** For example, you might start a new professional development system with providers in one place. Then, you could see if it might help improve the education, training, or credentials for the child care workforce to expand throughout the state.
- **Show varied ways to connect with families and providers.** For example, you could look at the types of information families find most useful when they try to access subsidies. Then, you could suggest ways to help families find their way through the subsidy system based on their unique needs.

B. Plan to Engage Partners

This section of your research plan will describe the "who," "why," "when," "how," and "so what?" of working with key partners on your research project. Bringing the voices of key partners into your work can make your findings more useful to communities. It shows you want to listen and learn from those who experience program services and changes that come from new or different policies. You might come back to your engagement plan sometimes over the course of the research project to change your approach.

Decide Who You Will Engage and Why

Describe the people or groups you will engage in the research as key partners. These might include families, child care and early education providers, community members, or other people who care about the research topic or issue. Clearly state why you want to engage with key partners about the topic(s). Knowing what feedback you need may help you think of who to engage. You can also ask your partners about who else you should work with. Make it clear how their input will be part of the work and inform the next steps. Here are examples of how their feedback may help you:

- **Define the research questions.** For example, you might engage parents and providers to refine the research questions, drawing on their lived experience (that is, their life experiences) to explore the most urgent and relevant aspects of the issue.
- **Think about whether your study design advances equity.** For example, you might work with program administrators, staff, providers, or families to draft your logic model. Input from various partners can help you think about the program context from a range of experiences and

ideas. It can also help you consider how different families might access and receive services and how this could affect outcomes.

- **Make plans to collect the information.** For example, you might ask parents and providers to review your draft surveys to check if the information is clear, makes sense, and flows well. You might ask parents and providers to propose ways to reach and recruit people to take the survey. They could also offer new ways to conduct the survey. You might also engage a trusted community partner to help recruit survey takers.
- **Analyze the results.** For example, you might hold a session to ask parents and providers for their input on your early findings. This could help you make sense of findings you did not expect or outliers (that is, findings that differ from most other findings). And it could help you figure out new ways to analyze the data.
- **Communicate findings and next steps.** For example, you might ask parents and providers for input on how findings should be shared, where they should be shared, and who they should be shared with. You might ask them to review a draft brief to suggest ways to improve it before you share it more widely with their peers and people they work with.

Describe When You Will Engage Them

The reasons for why you engage your partners will drive the timing. You might engage key partners when you plan your research project; when you collect, analyze, and report information; and when you communicate results.

Determine How You Will Engage Them

Explain the way you will invite key partners to be part of the research project, how you will meet with them, and how often.

- Will you reach out to partners, or will you work with other organizations or groups to do the outreach?
- Will you speak with each partner or have group meetings?
- Will you meet with key partners online or in person?
- Will you connect on a routine basis, like during community advisory board meetings, or through one-time events?

Consider What You Will Do with What You Learn

Describe what you expect to do with the information you have gained to help shape, revise, or share results of the research. This can connect back to the reasons why you engaged with your partners.

Resources for how to create a plan to engage partners

For resources to help you learn what you need to engage partners, make plans for how you will engage them, carry out your plans, and review how those plans have gone, see "Planning Your Engagement Efforts," Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences, accessed March 26, 2024.

To learn more about how to engage key partners and community groups so they take part in a meaningful way and share their voices, see "Participatory Approaches to Planning Community Interventions," Community Tool Box, University of Kansas, accessed March 26, 2024.

C. Research Questions

This section of your research plan will present the questions you want to answer with the research. The questions will guide your planning and explain your goals to key partners who are helping plan, fund, or carry out the research. This section of your research plan will (1) list the research questions and (2) describe how you formed the questions.

List Your Research Questions

State the research questions the study will address. A strong research question names the topic or issue to explore, highlights the purpose, and signals how to explore it. Strong research questions are

- **related** to the needs and top concerns of program staff and the people they serve;
- **useful** to inform how the program can be designed or improved;
- **focused** on one topic, issue, or problem;
- **specific** to your purpose, outcomes, and time frame; and
- **feasible**, or possible to answer within your period of research, with the information you have, and by the staff at your agency.

When you state your research questions,

- use clear language that gets to the point quickly;
- focus on a few key questions (one to three is ideal);
- present subquestions listed as bullets under each main question; and
- reflect on how you can look at issues of equity in your research.

Think about these example research questions for a study that explores how to get information to families to help them access and use subsidies:

- What information about how to access subsidies has been most useful to families with infants who have used subsidies on a regular basis? How and where did they get this information?

- Do families with infants who receive tailored help with how to access and use the subsidy system use subsidies more regularly over a six-month period than families with infants who do not receive this help?

Describe How You Came Up with the Research Questions

Include who was involved and how you set priorities for this research. Include content about how you engaged the community, families, or other key partners in forming the research questions. Name any points in the process when you might revise your questions, such as when you make final decisions about data sources and types of analysis.

Resources for how to create research questions

To learn more about strong research questions and how to form them, see "Developing Research Questions to Get Answers for Policy and Practice," OPRE, August 4, 2022.

For tips on how to use the right research questions for different types of study designs, see "How to Develop the Right Research Questions for Program Evaluation," AmeriCorps, accessed March 26, 2024.

How can the way you engage partners strengthen your research questions?

Seeking input from community members, families, or other key partners can lead to better research questions. Seeking their thoughts at the start of a research project also helps build trust with the people who programs and policies affect. For more information, see "Engaging Stakeholders in Research: Tips for CCDF Lead Agencies" (Derrick-Mills 2021).

D. Study Design

Use this section to describe the type of study you will use to answer your research question. The study design needs to work given your time frame and resources. The CCDF lead agency and research team will need to have the right skills and capacity to do the work.

Describe Your Study Design

There are many ways to group and talk about study designs, such as descriptive and impact studies (box 3). The resources on how to create content (below) describe a range of study designs. The resources also provide guidance about how to select a design that is best suited to your research.

BOX 3

Types of Study Designs

Descriptive studies use information to understand the content or outcomes of a program, policy, or service, or the processes for carrying it out.

Impact studies assess the *effect* of a certain program, policy, or service on chosen outcomes.

Explain How the Study Design Will Answer Your Research Questions

This will help ensure that your research questions match what your study design can do. For example, a descriptive study cannot answer questions about how well a program works.

TABLE 1

Examples of Fitting Study Designs Based on the Research Question

Research question	Fitting study design
What information has been most useful to families with infants who have consistently received subsidies over the past six months?	Descriptive study that looks at services to learn about what can be improved
What does subsidy use look like for families with infants who have received tailored help with accessing or using the subsidy system?	Descriptive study that looks at outcomes of tailored help
How often do families with infants who receive tailored help with finding their way through the subsidy system use subsidies over a six-month period compared with families who do not receive this help?	Impact study that looks at the effect of tailored help

Source: "Developing Research Questions to Get Answers for Policy and Practice," OPRE, August 4, 2022, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/training-technical-assistance/developing-research-questions-get-answers-policy-and-practice.

Connect the Study Design to a Logic Model or Theory of Change

Your study design should connect to a logic model or theory of change that maps your program's process (inputs, activities, and outputs) to the changes you expect to see as a result (outcomes). Logic models and theories of change are tools for showing how a program works to achieve the desired results. Explain how your research will confirm or test part of the logic model or theory of change.

Resources for how to select a study design

To learn about six types of research across descriptive and impact studies, see "The ACF Common Framework for Research and Evaluation" (OPRE 2016).

To learn about different study designs and how to choose one for your research project, see these resources:

- "Chapter 5: Design Your Evaluation" in *The Program Manager's Guide to Evaluation* (El Mallah et al. 2022)

- "Evaluation Design," Manager's Guide to Evaluation, Better Evaluation, accessed March 26, 2024
- "Selecting an Appropriate Design for the Evaluation," Community Tool Box, University of Kansas, accessed March 26, 2024

How can the way you engage partners support your study design?

When you create your logic model (described above), you can engage key partners—such as program administrators, staff, and families—to help you capture a full and correct picture of the program's process and outcomes. To learn more about how to create a logic model or theory of change, see these resources:

- "Describe the Theory of Change," Manager's Guide to Evaluation, Better Evaluation, accessed March 26, 2024
- "Chapter 7: Developing a Logic Model, Evaluation Questions, Measurement Framework, and Evaluation Plan," in *The Step-by-Step Guide to Evaluation* (W. K. Kellogg Foundation 2017)
- "Chapter 4: Prepare for the Evaluation" in *The Program Manager's Guide to Evaluation* (El Mallah et al. 2022)
- "Asking the Right Research Questions," AmeriCorps, accessed March 26, 2024

E. Plan to Collect Information

This section of your research plan will

1. list the exact **information you need** to answer each research question—either qualitative or quantitative information or data, or both (box 4);
2. describe **current sources** that can provide the information;
3. outline plans for **new information collection**; and
4. describe the information sources you will use to answer each research question.

BOX 4

Types of Information

Qualitative information or data is most often data that's not numbers—for example, information shared by respondents during interviews and focus groups. You can analyze it based on themes. Using qualitative methods to gather information directly from key partners can provide rich context (the "how" or "why") for your study.

Quantitative information or data is in the form of numbers and can be analyzed using math. One example is administrative data (such as the number of people a program serves) and their demographic traits (such as such as age, income, and education level).

Choose Data Topics or Units

Clearly describe the information you will need to address your research questions by topic or unit of information. You can use your logic model or theory of change to choose and structure the information you will need. You might need to collect information about the following:

- **Inputs, including your program's assets (such as staffing and resources) and the features of the community and people taking part in the program.** For example, you might include demographic and economic features of the community and families taking part, the quality rating of providers (that is, a rating assigned by a state or territory about the quality) taking part in the program, and family views about access to subsidies.
- **Program actions or policy decisions that you are studying.** For example, you might pilot a new professional development system with providers in one geographic place. You might track the steps you took to update the new system and train providers on how to use it.
- **Outputs that are a direct result from program activities.** For example, you might track the number of provider staff who took part in professional development to increase their education, training, or credentials activities during a pilot program.
- **Outcomes, or the change in outputs over time.** For example, you might collect quality ratings as an output. To measure the outcome, you can compare the increase in quality ratings over time for providers who took part in the professional development pilot and those who did not.

Check to see that you have all the topics or units of information you need to address each research question. Topics or units that you will learn about from qualitative information can be described in words. One example could be issues families face where they live when trying to access child care. Topics or units that you will learn about through quantitative information can be described in numbers. Examples could be the number of child care providers in a neighborhood or the quality rating levels across providers.

Make sure to include any other information you will need to better grasp your study results. For example, you might try to explain patterns or differences in what certain groups of people go through when they try to access child care. In that case, you might look at the demographic factors (such as age, income, and education level) of staff, children, families, providers, or community members.

List Current Information Sources

For each topic or unit of information that you will get from a current information or data source, list the

- information source;
- unit of information (such as families, children, or providers); and
- time frame covered.

It is also useful to think about and write down steps needed to use current information, such as

- forming data use agreements and sending data requests to use administrative data;
- linking data across sources; and
- keeping information confidential, or private, including methods to collect, store, and transfer sensitive data (such as names or addresses).

Describe New Tools to Collect Information

For each topic or unit of information that you will collect through a new information or data source, list the

- information source;
- when you will collect the information;
- how you will collect the information (such as through interviews, surveys, or focus groups);
- who will provide the information (such as families, child care providers, or program administrators); and
- payments or thank-you gifts for people who complete surveys or take part in interviews or focus groups.

You will also want to discuss how you will prepare to collect the information. You will want to consider the following:

- **Data collection tools.** Describe how you will build your tools or instruments, such as a survey, interview, or focus group instructions. If you plan to adapt an existing tool, describe that tool and how you plan to adapt it.
- **Training.** Describe how you will train people to collect the information.
- **Sampling and recruiting.** Describe how you will choose who you want to respond to or take part in your information collection. Also explain how you will invite them to take part.
- **Privacy and data security.** Discuss your plans to keep the information confidential and private. Explain whether an Institutional Review Board (IRB) will need to review and approve your information collection. An IRB is a group that helps protect the rights and privacy of respondents. Also discuss how you will assure respondents that their information will remain

confidential. You may plan to use a consent form (that is, a form respondents read and sign to show they agree to be part of your information collection). Explain how your methods to collect, store, and transfer data will maintain privacy for those who take part in the study.

Describe Your Information Sources

To outline your approach, present a brief overview of the information sources you will use to answer each research question. This will help you see whether you have all the information you need to answer your research questions. And if there are gaps, you can build on your information collection plan to address them.

Resources for how to create a plan to collect information
To learn more about types of quantitative and qualitative data, see "Chapter 5: Design Your Evaluation," in *The Program Manager's Guide to Evaluation* (El Mallah et al. 2022). To learn more about qualitative study designs, see "What Is Qualitative Research Design? Definitions, Types, Methods and Best Practices" (Jain 2023). To learn more about how to choose information sources, see "Chapter 6: Gather Credible Evidence," in *The Program Manager's Guide to Evaluation* (El Mallah et al. 2022). To learn more about how to select a data collection method and key things to think about when you collect data, see "Chapter 8: Data Collection and Analysis" in *The Step-by-Step Guide to Evaluation* (W. K. Kellogg Foundation 2017)

How can the way you engage partners support your information collection?
Community members, families, or other key partners can provide input on the information collection plan. This will help ensure that you answer your research questions in a way that responds to the community's top concerns or needs. Community members can provide input on the "what," the "who," and the "how" of information collection. For instance, they can help figure out the types of information you need to fully answer your research questions. When you collect new information, they can help you figure out who should provide the information (the respondents). They can also help you figure out methods that are culturally appropriate (that is, in keeping with a person's culture) and reliable for collecting that information from respondents (such as surveys, focus groups, or interviews). They can also provide input on how to word surveys or instructions in a way that makes sense and relates to those taking part. Finally, they can provide input on the best ways to recruit people and proper ways to compensate them. You can build trust, space to work together, and strong partners in the research when you engage the community in planning how you will collect information. See Tanisha Tate Woodson, "Using a Culturally Responsive and Equitable Evaluation Approach to Guide Research and Evaluation," Mathematica, July 26, 2021, to learn more.

F. Plan to Analyze the Data

Your analysis plan needs to show how you will make sense of the information you gather to answer your research questions. This section of your research plan will

1. explain how you will **link data** across sources;
2. present your **analytic methods** for how you will answer each research question; and
3. describe **how you will present your results**.

Describe How You Will Organize and Link Data

Describe your approach to linking different information sources to conduct your analysis. You might need to detail how you will do these things:

- **Link different data files by using unique information (or identifiers).** For example, you might use provider numbers or family or child case numbers to link data from certain providers or individuals across sources. Or you might use provider addresses or zip codes to connect child care services with other types of service availability data for a certain neighborhood or region.
- **Order and link information from different qualitative and quantitative sources to prepare for your analysis.** You can use the topics and units from your information collection plan to group data across many sources. For example, you might connect codes from qualitative sources about access to child care or subsidies with quantitative data about the number of open subsidized child care slots.

Detail Your Analysis Approach by Research Question

Describe how you will analyze information for each research question and its related data sources. Planning for analysis can help guide how you collect your information. That way you collect all the information you need to conduct the analyses you want to do.

- **Describe each step in the analysis process.** Doing so will give you a clear and detailed plan to guide your work. Look back at your research questions. Make sure the analytic methods you chose will help you answer those questions. Then outline each step you will take to analyze your information. For quantitative information, include plans for how you will clean data and account for missing data. For qualitative information, include your methods for how you will ensure the coding is correct and reliable. For both, describe any subgroup analyses you plan to conduct. For example, you might want to know information just for a certain group of people, like those who use nontraditional-hour care, or compare information for groups who live in urban versus rural settings. Having a record of these details can help you see issues coming in advance and decide how you might address them. As you develop this part of your plan, you might need to revise parts of your analysis to make sure they will work.

- **For quantitative information, describe the descriptive, statistical, or modeling methods you plan to use.** For example, you might look at the lowest, highest, and range in number of child care providers that offer care during nontraditional hours in certain places to learn about patterns of where people have access to this care. Or you might test for statistically significant differences (that is, differences that are greater than what might happen by chance alone) between rates of providers taking part in a quality rating and improvement system for various groups of providers (such as center-based or home-based) to figure out whether targeted quality improvement incentives show promise. You might also plan for analyses to figure out if professional development efforts affect staff turnover (when other factors are held constant) to help address questions about effects of professional development on providers' outcomes.
- **For qualitative information, explain your coding approach.** You might choose to use a deductive, inductive, or mixed coding strategy. A deductive coding strategy begins with a list of codes you choose in advance, often tied to a program's logic model or conceptual framework (a way to show how concepts relate to each other). An inductive coding strategy starts without any codes—researchers first review the data and use that to create codes. A mixed coding approach uses both inductive and deductive strategies.
- **Lay out the limitations of your analysis**—that is, anything that limits the findings you can draw from your research. For example, you might describe limits of the study design itself and explain that your descriptive study can only suggest that an outcome improved rather than an impact or effect the outcome had on anything. You might also describe limits of the data collection and analysis, such as small sample sizes. Or you might describe limits because of selection bias. This means that those who took part in the study were not assigned at random to take part. Both limits might mean your findings may not be the same for those who did not take part in the study. Where you can, describe how you will try to address or lessen any limits you foresee.

Describe How You Will Present Results

Describe how you plan to review and present your results. For example, you might create blank tables or figures that you will fill in to review results within your team or with key partners before you create a report or other product. Thinking about how you will present results at the start can help ensure that your data collection and analysis plans do not leave you with any crucial gaps.

Resources for how to create a plan to analyze data

To learn more about how to select and use analytic methods—including statistical methods, coding approaches, and ways to account for missing data—see these resources:

- "Chapter 7: Analyze Data" in *The Program Manager's Guide to Evaluation* (El Mallah et al. 2022)
- "Chapter 8.3: Analyzing and Interpreting Data" in *The Step-by-Step Guide to Evaluation* (W. K. Kellogg Foundation 2017)

- "Evaluation Plan Development Tip Sheet," memorandum from the Administration for Children and Families to State, Tribal and Territorial Agencies Administering or Supervising the Administration of Title IV-E and/or Title IV-B of the Social Security Act, August 13, 2019
- "Analyse Data," Rainbow Framework, Better Evaluation, accessed March 26, 2024

How can the way you engage partners support your analysis?

Seeking input from community members, families, or other key partners on both the analysis plan and the analysis results can help you make sure your findings are correct. For the analysis plan, community members can help you figure out the most important subgroups to look at. That way you can learn how a program or policy might affect people differently or help certain groups more than others. With analysis results, community members can help you make sense of findings you did not expect or outliers. Including community members in your analysis can also help check any biases that research team members bring to the work, given their own lived experiences or professional training. To learn more about ways to engage community members in analysis, see these resources:

- *Data Walks: An Innovative Way to Share Data with Communities* (Murray, Falkenburger, and Saxena 2015)
- "Guide to Equitably Co-Interpreting Data with Community Collaborators" (Tiwari, Chojnacki, and Smith 2023)
- "Data Party," Rainbow Framework, Better Evaluation, accessed March 26, 2024

G. Plan to Communicate Findings

Laying out a communications plan in a thoughtful way can help you be clear about the research and meet project goals. Such goals could make more people aware of the research, gain the support of future funders, or affect positive change in related policies and programs or how they are carried out. A communications plan can also help you reach each group of people you want to target (that is, your intended audiences) in ways that make sense to them.

A communications plan can help you plan dissemination of findings (that is, how you will report and share them). It can also help you plan how you will engage with your intended audience(s) to get their feedback. This section of your research plan will describe research products and communications plans for each intended audience.

Present plans for how you will get results to key audiences. For each intended audience, describe the following:

- **The product you plan to create and how it will be tailored to that audience's information needs.** For example, you might produce a detailed report for program administrators, a brief for policymakers, or a fact sheet or an informative graphic for families or providers.

- **The dissemination approaches you will use to reach each audience.** For example, you might want to send out an email blast to providers or a mailing to families, plan a briefing for agency staff or policymakers, or write a blog post on the agency website for the general public.
- **The ways you will get feedback on how findings are shared from the intended audience(s).** For example, you might ask parents and providers to review a draft brief to suggest ways to improve it before sharing broadly with their peers and people they work with.
- **Plans for feedback loops,** where you follow up with people that you have engaged to let them know how their input was used in your analysis, reports, and choices you made along the way.

Resources for how to create a plan to communicate findings

To learn more about how to draft a communications plan, see these resources:

- "Chapter 8: Share Lessons Learned" in *The Program Manager's Guide to Evaluation* (El Mallah et al. 2022)
- "Chapter 9: Summarize, Communicate, and Reflect on Evaluation Findings" in *The Step-by-Step Guide to Evaluation* (W. K. Kellogg Foundation 2017)
- Seligman et al., "Tips on Equitable Communication Practices in a Policy Context," HHS, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, September 2022.
- "Develop Reporting Media," Rainbow Framework, Better Evaluation, accessed March 26, 2024

How can the way you engage partners help you communicate your results?

Any communication plan should include efforts to disseminate—or share widely—your findings back to the community. However, asking for community members' input on the communications plan itself can make your communication efforts clearer and ensure they have a greater impact. For example, community members can provide useful guidance on the types of products (such as briefs, infographics, or video reels) and methods (such as email blasts and social media) to use for different audiences. You can also include community members in your efforts to draft products. Or you can ask them to provide input on your drafts to ensure they will make sense to the intended audience. To fully engage with your audience, you should also include feedback loops where you share back to the community members and ask them to provide feedback on your findings. In doing so, you should make sure to include those who served as primary data sources (that is, those you collected data from). To learn more, see "Disseminating Results with a Community Focus" (Smith, Tiwari, and Zukiewicz 2023).

H. Timeline

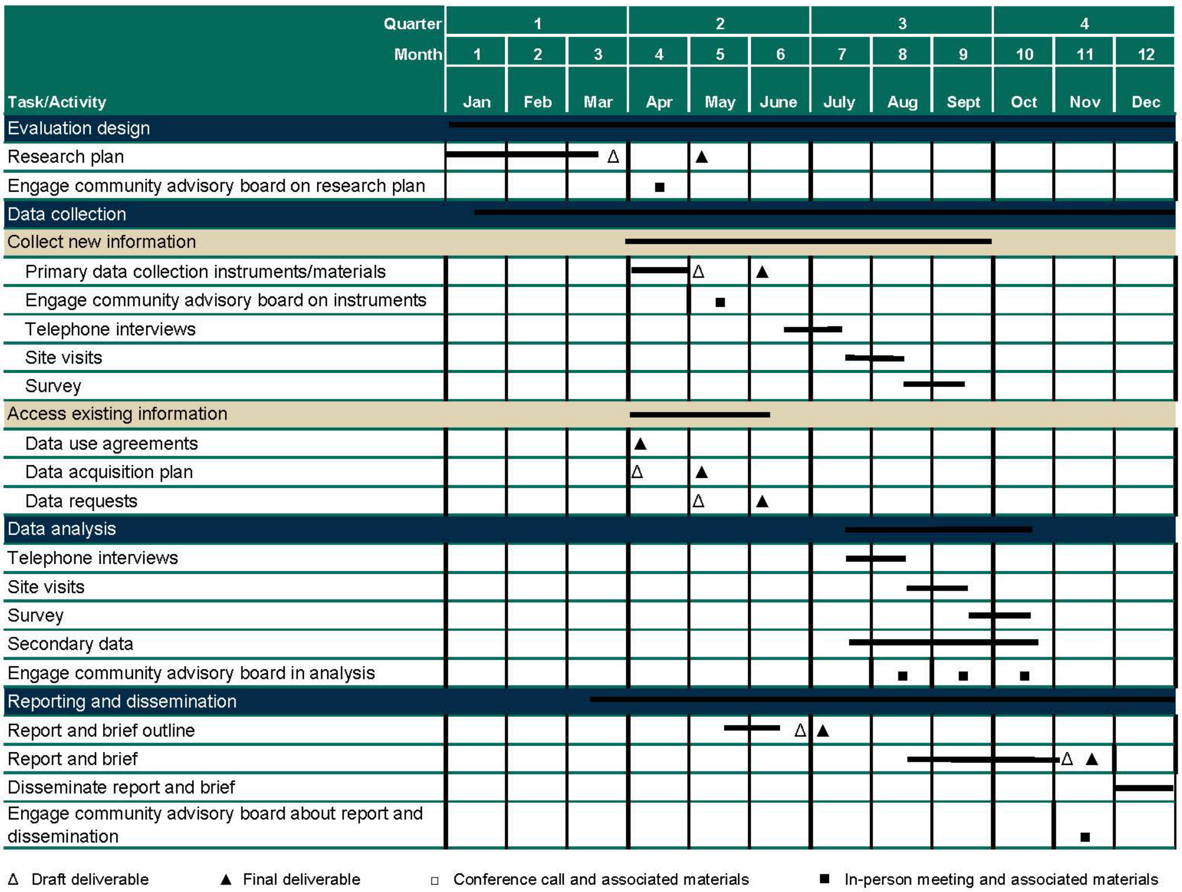
This section of your research plan will lay out the **timing of each step** to help you stay on schedule with your research. The timeline should name the start and end dates you expect for all major activities (and, where it makes sense, draft and final versions of plans and products), including when you

- create the research plan;
- collect new information, including when you choose, adapt, or create information collection tools and gather information;
- access current information sources (such as administrative data), including when you form data use agreements and make data requests;
- analyze the data;
- report your findings;
- disseminate, or share, your findings; and
- engage community members to gather their input on the research plan, data collection plan, analysis or findings, and dissemination plan.

By laying out how different steps in the research project are related, you can determine how you might need to adjust the timing of one step if there is a delay in another. You might use a table or a timeline graphic (like the sample Gantt chart on the next page) to clearly lay out the time frames for each activity in your research project.

FIGURE 1

Sample Gantt Chart



Source: Created by the authors of this brief.

Resource for how to create content

To learn more about how to create a Gantt chart, see "Present Your Data in a Gantt chart in Excel," Microsoft Support, accessed March 26, 2024.

I. References

The final section of your research plan should include references for any sources cited.

Resource for how to create content

To learn more about different citation styles, or how you should format your source citations, see "Citation Styles: APA, MLA, Chicago, Turabian, IEEE," University of Pittsburgh Library System, accessed March 26, 2024.

References

Derrick-Mills, Teresa. 2021. "Engaging Stakeholders in Research: Tips for CCDF Lead Agencies," OPRE report #2021-76. Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE).

Derrick-Mills, Teresa, Travis Reginal, and Julia Isaacs. 2020. *Procuring Research and Evaluation Services: A Guide for CCDF Lead Agencies and Researchers*, OPRE report #2020-89. Washington, DC: HHS, ACF, OPRE.

El Mallah, Shereen, Lila Gutuskey, Allison Hyra, Amanda Hare, Rachel Holzwart, and Chrissy Steigelman. 2022. *The Program Manager's Guide to Evaluation*, OPRE report #2022-208. Washington, DC: HHS, ACF, OPRE.

Hyra, Allison. 2022. *Engaging Community Representation in Program Evaluation*, OPRE report #2022-169, Washington, DC: HHS, ACF, OPRE.

Murray, Brittany, Elsa Falkenburger, and Priya Saxena. 2015. *Data Walks: An Innovative Way to Share Data with Communities*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

OPRE. 2016. "The Administration for Children & Families Common Framework for Research and Evaluation." OPRE report #2016-14. Washington, DC: HHS, ACF, OPRE.

Smith, George, Nikhil Tiwari, and Marykate Zukiewicz. 2023. "Disseminating Results with a Community Focus." Washington, DC: Mathematica.

Tiwari, Nikhil, Gregory Chojnacki, and Kamillah Smith. 2023. "Guide to Equitably Co-Interpreting Data with Community Collaborators." Washington, DC: Mathematica.

W. K. Kellogg Foundation. 2017. *The Step-by-Step Guide to Evaluation: How to Become Savvy Evaluation Consumers*. Battle Creek, MI: W. K. Kellogg Foundation.

About the Authors

Lauren Akers is a senior researcher at Mathematica whose work focuses on the design and improvement of early childhood programs and policies. As a facilitator and human-centered design practitioner, she specializes in helping organizations cocreate with the communities they serve.

Ellen Litkowski is a researcher at Mathematica whose research focuses on how young children learn, both as a function of development and through contextual influences. Litkowski aims to understand how parents and teachers can best support children's early learning and promote positive school transitions. She is especially interested in how developmental science informs early education policies at the classroom, state, and national levels.

Gretchen Kirby is a principal researcher at Mathematica with extensive experience studying the implementation and outcomes of programs and policies in early childhood, child care, and employment programs for people with low incomes. Her recent work focuses on measuring leadership, implementation of supports for quality, and costs in child care and early education programs.

Acknowledgments

This brief was funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples.

Submitted to
Alysia Blandon and Dianna Tran, project officers
Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation
Administration for Children and Families
US Department of Health and Human Services

Contract Number: HHSP233201500064I

Submitted by
Teresa Derrick-Mills, project director
Urban Institute
500 L'Enfant Plaza SW
Washington, DC 20024

 Suggested citation: Akers, Lauren, Ellen Litkowski, and Gretchen Kirby. 2024. "Research Plan Essentials: A Primer for CCDF Lead Agencies." OPRE Report #2024-109. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

Disclaimer
The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation; the Administration for Children and Families; or the US Department of Health and Human Services. This brief and other briefs sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation are available at www.acf.hhs.gov/opre.

About the Child Care Research and Evaluation Capacity Building Center
This brief is a product of the Child Care Research and Evaluation Capacity Building Center. The center aims to assess and build the research and evaluation capacities of state, territory, and tribal CCDF Lead Agencies. It develops resources and activities to support CCDF Lead Agencies in using research and evaluation for decisionmaking. The center is run by the Urban Institute in partnership with Mathematica with funding from the US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation. More information on the Center is available at https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/center-labor-human-services-and-population/projects/building-child-care-research-capacity.

Subscribe to OPRE News and Follow OPRE on Social Media