



What works? Learning from the literature

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Abstract: *A sensible first step in seeking to understand what works is to identify lessons learned from past experience and research. Yet, faced with a proliferation of articles, research, evaluation reports and other evidence, this can be challenging. Where do you look? What do you select? And how can you assess the credibility of what you read? This paper provides a guide to learning from the literature.*

¹ This paper draws from a longer discussion paper, which includes reflections on the Foundation's experience in trialling systematic review methodologies with literature relevant to legal assistance strategies. The valuable contribution of Erol Diguisto to the longer paper and Ania Wilczynski is acknowledged. Thanks to Catriona Mirrlees-Black, Christine Coumarelos and Jane Kenny for comments on this document.

Introduction

What works and at what cost? It's a question commonly asked by funders, policy makers and practitioners seeking to make the best use of available resources. To make informed decisions, a sensible first step is to look at what may be learned from past experience and research.

Yet, this may not be as straightforward as it seems.

On the face of it, there has been a proliferation of research, evaluations, articles, inquiries and reviews from which useful lessons might be drawn. Indeed, the sheer volume of material can make it difficult for users to remain up to date.

Further, the apparent volume may be misleading. To distil robust 'what works' lessons, funders, policy makers and practitioners need to test the available literature against two important questions:

- Is the material sufficiently relevant to the strategy and circumstances of interest?
- Having identified apparently relevant material, has the research been conducted with appropriate methods and rigour to yield reliable evidence of what works and at what costs?

This paper provides a guide to identifying relevant research and, in a transparent way, reporting the best available evidence drawn from these studies. The steps outlined below are informed by (but do not fully replicate) systematic review processes, which are designed to distil relevant and reliable evidence from the plethora of existing research literature.²

Learning from the literature: the steps

1. **Select and define** the research question(s) or topic relevant to practice.
2. **Develop a review plan or protocol**, the inclusion criteria to be used and review process to be followed.
3. **Search for and select literature**, finding an unbiased sample of research which addresses the question.
4. **Assessing the evidence**, critically assessing whether the conclusions of the research studies selected are supported by appropriate methodology and the evidence presented. This step often requires input from skilled researchers.
5. **Write and disseminate your results**, communicating conclusions to those who can use the evidence to inform their decision making.

Each step is outlined in more detail below.

² Systematic reviews go beyond the procedures outlined here in their rigour and in the resources they require. For an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of different types of review methods, including systematic reviews, see (<http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/networks/gsr/resources-and-guidance/rapid-evidence-assessment/what-is>).

1. Selecting and stating your question

The first step in the review process is to clearly define the topic or research question(s) you want to answer. Whatever the question, this is a critical step, as the question you ask defines the process which you follow: where to search and what to look for, how to assess the quality of the research, and how to synthesise and report the resulting evidence.

Given that a primary reason for undertaking a rigorous review is to inform decision making, a review process should ideally start with your audience in mind – people who are likely to use the review's findings. Consult with relevant key stakeholders from the outset about what questions they need answered. This will help ensure that the final report will be useful and relevant to practice.

Bear in mind that the broader the question asked, the greater the chance of finding more material. However, if the question is broad then the material found may not necessarily apply equally to all situations or groups, and it may be harder to draw firm conclusions at this global level. For instance, take the broad question: 'Is outreach effective in reaching people who need legal help?' A blanket 'yes' or 'no' answer to this question may not be possible if it turns out that outreach is effective in some locations or for some client groups, but less so for others.

Some reviewers use the acronym PICO to focus the research question. PICO helps to define:

- the **P**opulation of interest – that is, who the intervention is for
- the **I**ntervention – that is, the type of program or strategy (e.g. a family law outreach service)
- a point of **C**omparison – such as, whether a new program is better than no program or better than an alternative program
- **O**utcomes – that is, what the program is aiming to achieve (e.g. increase in target clients reached and assisted).

2. Developing a research plan

Once you have settled on a research question, draft a research plan or 'protocol' to guide the review and keep it focused. It also acts as a record of what you were looking for and where you looked.

First, the plan lists the research question(s) you are asking (e.g. Do family law outreach services reach clients otherwise isolated from services?). Then it specifies 'inclusion criteria' which set the boundaries of your literature search and your selection criteria.

Additional inclusion criteria include:

- the time period during which the data were collected (e.g. from 2010 onwards)
- the languages in which documents are written
- which databases, websites and other evidence sources will be searched (there is scope to add websites or other sources which may be identified during the search)
- whether unpublished data or reports will be included and how this will be located (e.g. through professional contacts).

Finally, and based on the above, the plan details the:

- search criteria to be used to identify relevant studies
- process for selecting and reviewing the documents.

Clearly articulating what material you are looking for, and how far you plan to look, makes for a transparent (and replicable) review.

3. Literature searching

Traditional systematic reviews attempt to locate all relevant literature.³ This is difficult in the legal assistance sector because rather than being contained in discrete databases, research and evaluation relevant to legal service delivery is broadly dispersed. Literature in this sector can be found across journals, websites and databases from a range of disciplines. Even within the legal sector, there are numerous organisations that can provide relevant literature, including legal service delivery agencies, government departments of justice or Attorney General, and legal support organisations such as the Law and Justice Foundation of NSW, Legal Services Corporation (USA) and the Canadian Forum on Civil Justice.

With limited resources, a more realistic objective is to conduct *as thorough and unbiased a search as possible*, given the resources available, and then to be transparent about where you have searched and where you have not. This may involve limiting the scope of the review at the outset (e.g. the range of sites visited, the number of search terms used) and detailing these limitations in the protocol.

Whatever limits are put on the search, it is important that the resulting set of documents should not be biased in any *systematic* way: any studies that are inadvertently missed should not systematically differ from those which were found. Potential sources of bias when searching for documents may include:

- citing only studies which support the reviewer's own views
- searching only for studies that are carried out within the reviewer's own discipline

- searching only the online databases and other sources which are readily available (e.g. free of charge) at the reviewer's own institution
- citing only widely published material, and thus possibly missing studies worthy of inclusion but which had no clear findings or found poor outcomes
- not including unpublished literature (e.g. reports commissioned by agencies or government which are not publicly available).

As well as identifying where to search for literature, also think about the search terms to be used within databases or websites. Again, it is best to consider the search terms prior to commencing the search and trialling these to see which work best, bearing in mind international differences in the terms used to describe similar interventions or interest groups. To search in a systematic and transparent way, it is best to use the same set of terms (or subsets – depending upon the website or database being searched).

4. Assessing the evidence

In this part of the review process you aim to separate valid and reliable conclusions from those conclusions which are not supported by the evidence presented. This is very challenging to do well.

Ideally two suitably skilled researchers with expertise in the methodologies appropriate to answer the research question(s) should independently assess the relevance and “evidence quality” of the located documents. If there is disagreement between the first two reviewers, a third reviewer may become involved. While this is beyond the resources of many organisations, the use of an appropriately skilled researcher (or if possible, consultation between two skilled researchers) at this point will add rigour to the process.

In a systematic review, evidence quality is assessed against a list of pre-defined criteria. The criteria used depend upon the research question(s) asked and relate to the particular methodologies which are appropriate to answer those questions. This is because different research methods are appropriate for answering different research questions. For instance, a qualitative study is appropriate for answering questions of why and how things happen as they do, for instance, identifying the sometimes unexpected factors which impact upon the effectiveness of interventions as they operate in ‘the real world’. However qualitative research generally cannot accurately answer questions about the relative effectiveness of one intervention compared to another in achieving specific outcomes (over and above other possible influences) (see Digiusto 2012, Weatherburn 2009).

³ Material in this section has been extracted, in an adapted form, from Hammerstrom, Wade, and Jorgensen (2010).

BOX 1: WEBSITES WITH RESEARCH RELEVANT TO LEGAL SERVICE DELIVERY

The Law and Justice Foundation of New South Wales website is a useful starting point, as any materials we have located in our extensive searches have been included as references on this site. The Foundation's site can be searched using the 'Just Search' facility <http://www.lawfoundation.net.au/justsearch>. The Foundation's own published research is available at <http://www.lawfoundation.net.au/publications>

Following is a (non-exhaustive) list of websites that contain research relevant to legal service delivery:

Websites:

- Civil Justice Research Online (Monash University, Australian Centre for Justice Innovation)
<http://www.civiljustice.info/>
- Legal Aid Commissions in each State, for example
<http://www.legalaid.nsw.gov.au/publications>
- International Legal Aid Group
<http://internationallegalaidgroup.org/index.php/en/>
- The Ministry of Justice, UK (with link to the former Legal Services Research Centre)
<https://www.justice.gov.uk/publications/research-and-analysis>
- The Legal Service Board (UK), Research
<https://research.legalservicesboard.org.uk/reports-all/>
- Citizens Advice UK
<http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/index/aboutus/publications.htm>
- Money Advice Trust Information Hub, UK
<http://www.infohub.moneyadvicetrust.org/>
- Scottish Government
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/Recent>
- Legal Services Corporation US
<http://www.lsc.gov>
- American Bar Association ,Resource Center for Access to Justice Initiatives
http://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_aid_indigent_defendants/initiatives/resource_center_for_access_to_justice.html
- Canadian Forum on Civil Justice
<http://www.cfcj-fcj.org/>
- Legal Aid Ontario
<http://www.legalaid.on.ca/en/publications/reports.asp>
- Law Foundation of Ontario
<http://www.lawfoundation.on.ca/resources/publications/>
- Law Foundation of British Columbia
<http://www.lawfoundationbc.org/reports-papers/>

Outcome-focused research typically requires rigorous, quantitative research methodology, such as an experiment or quasi-experiment with pre- and post-testing and/or a control or comparison group/condition. Similarly, cost analyses or similar methods are required to measure an intervention's cost, cost-effectiveness and net benefits. A mixed-method approach might be used to explore why an intervention works or does not work, and what might be needed to make it work better.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to detail all the various possible quality assessment criteria for the various types of research questions asked.

Sources for this information are included in Box 2 below.

While the specific questions vary from review process to review process, broadly speaking questions tend to fall into three broad categories:

1. Were the data/evidence collection methods appropriate to the questions or topics?
2. Were the data/evidence collection methods appropriately executed?
3. Were the data reporting and the data analysis procedures appropriate and adequate to avoid significant bias?

BOX 2: FURTHER RESOURCES REGARDING HOW EVIDENCE CAN BE APPRAISED

UK Government Social Research Service, *Rapid evidence assessment toolkit*
<http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/networks/gsr/resources-and-guidance>

EPPI Centre, *UK Methods and tools*
<http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=88>

The Cochrane Collaboration, *Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions*
<http://www.cochrane.org/training/cochrane-handbook>

The Campbell Collaboration Resource Centre
http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/resources/resource_center.php

Joanna Briggs Institute *2014 Reviewer's Manual*
<http://joannabriggs.org/assets/docs/sumari/ReviewersManual-2014.pdf>

These three questions help answer the broader question of the extent to which taking into account all of the report's quality assessment issues, the report's findings and conclusions be generally trusted.

Again, we stress that it can take particular research expertise to answer these questions accurately, and such expertise should be sourced externally where organisations do not have this expertise in-house.

There are various ways in which evidence drawn from studies may be classified. In reviews we have undertaken we have classified the data as:

- *Supported*: A finding that was directly, logically and convincingly supported by the reported evidence.
- *Credible*: A finding that could reasonably be inferred from the reported evidence but about which there are other plausible explanations. (Reasons for doubt were noted.)
- *Not supported*: There was insufficient evidence presented that supported the finding or assertion made (these findings were excluded from the synthesis and reporting).

Synthesising or summarising the evidence

The next step is to organise the supported or credible evidence identified in the review, to make it accessible and relevant to readers. A thematic analysis is useful for questions commonly asked about legal assistance strategies. In a thematic analysis you draw together supported or credible findings from different studies on like issues or themes, illustrating consistencies and noting the inconsistencies.

The resources listed in Box 2 also provide more detailed instructions about how to synthesise information.

5. Communicating your findings

The aim of a good review should be to locate the best available evidence about the impact or experience of an intervention, and to communicate that information in a way that is useful for practice. To do this the report should:

- be written with the review's expected audience or audiences in mind
- be written in an interesting and readable manner, avoiding technical jargon as far as possible
- clearly and specifically outline the research question(s) being asked
- clearly and succinctly address and answer the original research question using specific pieces of evidence from the studies which are included in the review
- include the inclusion criteria and review methodology, even if in an appendix to provide transparency and enable replication or updating later.

If appropriate, you can also include recommendations, ideally in an unambiguous, financially and practically feasible, actionable, step-by-step form which is appropriate for the local context.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the steps involved in learning What Works from available literature. By following such an approach, you can limit bias and enhance rigour and transparency with the ultimate objective being to uncover the most trustworthy findings.

References

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