

Evaluating Welfare and Training Programs

Charles F. Manski and Irwin Garfinkel, editors

The purpose of government-sponsored welfare and training programs is to bring disadvantaged citizens into the economic mainstream. How best this can be accomplished is not known, and the programs enacted to date reflect a variety of assumptions about what works best and why. The purpose of evaluation is to learn from past experience so that we may improve the effectiveness of programs in the future.

It may seem self-evident that social programs should regularly be assessed and revised in the light of lessons drawn from experience. Nevertheless, systematic program evaluation is a recent development. Modern evaluation practice is generally agreed to have begun in the middle 1960s, when attempts were made to evaluate the impacts of programs proposed as part of the War on Poverty. Earlier efforts were largely limited to descriptions of how enacted programs were administered.

Concern with program evaluation has spread rapidly since the 1960s. Today almost every substantial social program is subjected to some form of evaluation. Findings from evaluations not only fill many professional journals but are reported routinely in the media, where they presumably influence public thinking on social policy.

Evaluation requirements now appear in major federal statutes. Evaluation is prominently featured in the recently enacted Family Support Act of 1988, which revised the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. In Title II of this statute, Congress mandated separate implementation and effectiveness studies of training programs initiated by the states under the new Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training Program (JOBS). Taking unusually specific action, Congress even stipulated the mode of data collection for the effectiveness study: "A demonstration project conducted under this subparagraph shall use experimental and control groups that are composed of a random sample of participants in the program."

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Garfinkel, "Introduction,"
p. 1.

Given the self-evident need to evaluate welfare and training programs, this volume addresses the methodological questions that arise in carrying out such evaluations. In the Introduction the editors examine the domain of an evaluation (what part of a program should be subjected to evaluation), controversies regarding evaluation methods (such as reduced form vs. structural evaluation; the selection problem), and some of the special problems related to the evaluation of social programs.

The chapters in Part I describe evaluation practice during the past decade and report findings from some notable recent evaluations, such as the demonstrations under the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (1981) and the programs under the Job Training Partnership Act (1982). Part II explores methodology and, in particular, the role of social science in evaluation. In Part III the various institutions that administer social programs are examined.

The chapters were commissioned for this volume and were presented at a national conference on evaluation sponsored jointly by the Institute for Research on Poverty and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It was held in April 1990. (For contents of the volume and information on how to obtain it, see box, p. 36.) The third annual conference on evaluation is described in this issue of *Focus*. ■

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