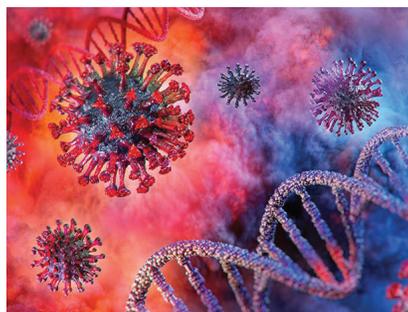


Evaluating Interventions in the Time of COVID-19



Conducting research in the real world can be tricky even in the best of times. During a global pandemic, common challenges can become even more complex, and entirely new challenges present themselves. Evidence for Action (E4A) grantees have faced both. Below we highlight some of those challenges and promising practices to navigating them.

Recruitment & retention

Even under the best possible conditions, researchers often face challenges recruiting and retaining enough participants to power a study. The added uncertainties around COVID-19 can make it even more challenging, as potential or current participants' lives are being upended. Participation in a research project or adherence to study protocols can move even further down someone's list of priorities. Logistical barriers to study participation, such as lack of transportation, paid time off, and childcare are exacerbated by the pandemic response and even more difficult to surmount.

Promising practices: Open and compassionate communication with research participants can go a long way. Acknowledging that the pandemic may make participation in both the intervention and research more daunting can help humanize the experiences of participants and build trust with researchers. Adjusting timelines and being flexible with protocols that aren't core to the fidelity of the research may aid in retention. It may also

be necessary to delay additional recruitment for a while.

Interventions suspended or canceled by implementors

Some organizations and government bodies funding intervention(s) have put their programs on hold or canceled them outright. In cases of intervention suspension or cancellation, any on-going evaluations also have to be put on hold for an unknown period of time. Additionally, intervention suspension may also result in loss of services or financial supports for program participants, as well as the loss of any additional incentives provided to those individuals taking part in the research project.

Promising practices: Researchers should collaborate closely with implementors to determine the best ways to minimize impacts to program participants. While there may not be much that can be done, they should strive to be transparent with participants about what is happening with the intervention and why in as timely a manner as possible.

Shift to virtual schooling

With the shift to virtual learning this past spring, many researchers conducting studies situated within schools had to postpone or plan to completely restart their studies. In addition to being designed to occur in classroom settings, many school-based interventions are planned to coincide with the academic year or semester. Mid-year school closures and uncertainties about re-openings may mean study delays of a full year or more, resulting in fiscal and practical implications.

Promising practices: Similar to other interventions that have been put on hold, researchers and program implementers should be as collaborative as possible with school administrators and transparent with teachers, students, and parents about what is happening with the intervention. If also transitioning the intervention from in-person to virtual delivery, researchers should apply appropriate adaptation approaches, and confirm adherence under virtual conditions. To the extent possible, researchers should try to align the academic terms during which intervention delivery and data collection were originally taking place with subsequent activities.

Limitations and delays to data access and collection

Social distancing and widespread shutdowns have inhibited the ability of researchers to access secure datasets as well as collect primary data. Interactions with research participants have been lim-



ited and researchers have had to rethink how to hold in-person meetings, such as focus groups. The addition of survey and focus-group questions regarding the impacts of COVID-19 have also been limited or delayed by Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) or other governing bodies in some cases, with IRB offices and staff not as readily available to answer questions and review applications.

Promising practices: Best practices for protecting participant privacy and ensuring confidentiality should be followed if moving participant interviews or focus groups to virtual formats (e.g., [Zoom](#)). Submitting applications to data centers or the IRB as soon as possible may help, but likely what is needed here is patience and perseverance.

Blending of interventions

In some situations, the pandemic has led to a proliferation of shared experiences between control and treatment groups, reducing differences in exposures. For example, interventions by city, state, and federal governments (e.g., stimulus checks, increased unemployment benefits, etc.) have been layered on top of

interventions that were already underway and being evaluated, making it more challenging to disentangle the effects of the original treatment alone.

Promising practices: Track as much data as possible about the resources and services participants have access to, and gather qualitative information about participant experiences if possible to contextualize study results.

Data gathering. People are experiencing the effects of the pandemic in varied ways. Careful documentation of what's happening on the ground and how people are responding can help ensure that the initial randomization is maintained and services are being appropriately delivered. This might mean shifting to virtual focus groups or adding relevant survey questions, for example, "Did you receive a stimulus check from the CARES Act?". Thorough data collection can help researchers better understand the full impact of an unexpected shock on the research study.

Tumultuous news cycles and political agendas

Grantees with actionable results to share with decision and policy-makers have found it challenging to do so, as COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, and other historic events have overwhelmed news cycles and policy agendas. Unless research findings can be directly tied to one of these weighty issues, it's challeng-

ing to get media placements or the attention of policy-and decision-makers.

Promising practices: Consider whether aspects of the intervention or study can be framed in a manner relevant to current events and conditions. Determine who the most important end-users of the research findings are, and tailor the message and timing according to their specific information needs. Be patient and persistent. Even if timing may not be ideal now, the results should still be informative in the future.

In addition to all of these challenges, researchers and their teams are also being directly impacted by COVID-19, from having to work from home and provide care or learning support to family members, to travel restrictions and connectivity issues. As we all continue to contend with the complexities introduced by COVID-19, researchers should try to be as flexible as possible, and appreciate that the skills they develop navigating uncertainty now will strengthen their approaches to research in the future.

E4A is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation committed to developing the evidence base to align with RWJF's vision to build a Culture of Health. We fund investigator-initiated research and providing technical assistance to researchers and organizations working in communities to develop rigorous evaluations of innovative interventions.

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