

Project “Increasing the awareness of child-centered fathering in order to reduce the risk of harm to children and their mothers caused by domestic violence” 2018-1-EE01-KA204-047115

Data collection and evaluation of effectiveness

Data collection and evaluation of effectiveness are key parts of responsible work for every program working to reduce violence. The evaluation process is used for various reasons, which can include:

1. Knowing whether the program is effective as a whole
2. Knowing which parts of the program work well and should be kept stable
3. Knowing which parts of the program are flawed and should be improved
4. Showing the effectiveness of the program, compared to costs

Whatever metrics are used, the main benefits of this evaluation should be knowing what effects it has (both positive and negative) so that the program can be both improved and after gaining legitimacy used by others.

What is the effect that should be measured?

Basic metrics of a good program

The basic metrics are not the goal of the program, but tools to see if the program is working properly towards those goals. This list is a basic outline of some of the

Regular check-ups are needed

The program needs to know what the situation is in the beginning of the program. This information is needed to show that the program is aimed correctly and to know which problems need to be addressed with each client.

In addition to this the program needs to check up on the situation when the program ends. This can show the change that has happened during the program. This check-up can also reveal the weak spots of the program and what it has been unable to change. Participants remember the program well when they are ending their participation and can give good feedback because of this. They also are more likely to give feedback during the last's meetings than after the program, so the feedback should be included into the last meetings of the program.

The changes of the program may be only temporary. It is easier to avoid violence when there is regular support and goals to strive for. To know if the program has given the participants tools to help with the violence or only temporary support, the situation should be checked up on after the program, for example after 6-12 months after the program. These after-program check-ups are much less successful in reaching the participants, but they are also of paramount importance in showing whether the program has lasting effect.

Completion percentage

Completion percentage is a regular metric for the violence reduction programs. This is used to show if the program is successful in working with all kinds of clients and keeping them within program.

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All violence reduction programs lose some percentage of their clients during the process. The loss percentage has internationally been anything between 20 and 80 percent and there is no clear distinction on what is a good percentage and what is not. Only rules are that when working the more complicated clients the completion percentage will be lower and that whatever the loss percentage is, there should be some sort of explanation for this.

It is especially important to show that the program is not just losing certain type of clients and is not seeking to correct the situation.

Variety and regularity of violence

Every program should ask their participants about what kinds of violence they are experiencing. Different kinds of violence are important to know what is happening, what should be done and in how much of a danger people are in.

It is also important to know how often the violence happens and when it happens. If the violence is more severe, has happened recently and is more regular, it is more urgent to work on than something that happened once decades ago.

Who is or who are using the violence and against whom?

It is regular occurrence in violent situation that everyone has used some form of violence at some point. It should be recorded to know the dynamics of the violence. There may be certain paths to violence that can only be found out by asking what different form of violence people have been using, in what situations and against whom.

At the same time, it is important not to get confused by the fact that most of the people have used violence. Make note of the regularity and severity of the violence. All parties may have done similar things, but if someone uses the violence hundred times, it is not the same as using it once.

How has the violence been changing?

The change in violence should be asked about. This information is important, because if there is escalating violence, people may be in more danger.

This escalation can be both in what kinds of violence there are, how regular it is and who get involved in the violence.

Reduction of violence

The main effect and the main metric of every domestic violence reduction program should be the amount of violence it has prevented. If the program is unable to show that the amount of violence has been reduced, the main goal has not been achieved.

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And not all violence is equal. There is a distinct hierarchy on what the program should be able to prevent in the long run. The more severe the violence, the more important it is to prevent it.

The most important thing to keep record of is death. Programs should aim to prevent violent loss of life, meaning both homicides and suicides. If the program can prevent these deaths, it is succeeding. If on the other hand the rates of homicides and/or suicides are higher than it would be without any intervention, the program should cease its work immediately.

Deaths are usually one of the easiest things to measure if the program has access to public records. The same goes for hospitalizations caused by violence and court sentencing. These are clear and severe situations, that can be measured from public records. If the participants of the program have less hospitalizations and sentences than they would have in other programs or at least without the intervention, the program is working.

Interventions by police and social workers because of violence can be used as a metric too if the reasons for these interventions are considered. Interventions can happen because of various things, which are not all equally dangerous, so they are not as clear as signals as for example court sentences. Because of this they must be evaluated more carefully. But regardless of the circumstances, it can be said that having a large amount of regular interventions is not a good sign and can be used as a measurement of distress that should be addressed.

Various other forms of domestic violence can only be measured by the stories and assessments the participants give. There is no other evidence or data available about these forms of violence, as it may not leave any markings, or it may have been hidden. These forms of violence include for example some physical and sexual violence, most of psychological violence, economic and religious violence. Reducing all these forms of violence is very important and is contained in almost all programs that seek to reduce domestic violence.

Even though this hidden violence may not leave a paper trail, it is important to keep records of it and how it changes during the process. These effects can be recorded with customized tools, for example questionnaires and interviews.

Secondary effects and other metrics

There can be various effects the programs can have on their participants. The change in one area of life can make a difference in various other parts of their life, as control in one area of life raises the whole quality of life for the participant. Not all these changes are as important for violence reduction programs. For example, the feeling of physical well-being of the participant is not as important as a metric as the feeling of safety of the children of the participant. The secondary effects that are important are usually of two sorts: ethical and monetary.

Ethical considerations are usually about making things safer for participant and the people around them. These can include feeling safe, sleeping more, children being healthy, marital stability, stress, general well-being and generally how the people participating in the program and their families are faring later in life compared to people in the same situation who didn't participate in the program. These variables are useful to collect and

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Monetary considerations usually boil down to the amount of money the society can save by investing in violence prevention programs. These evaluations can include for example the amount of time not spent in jail, the amount of hospitalization days not needed, the amount of child welfare services not used, the amount of mental health services not needed, the amount of later violence prevented and the amount of life not lost. These and other variables can only be used by estimating the amount of services not needed by comparing the participants to non-participants in the long run, which can be a time-consuming process, but this can pay off by making the benefits of the program (if any) very easily accessible to politicians and donors.

Both ethical and monetary considerations can be used as part of various explanations for why the program is needed. Monetary cost-benefit analysis is usually easier to explain, but ethical considerations can be made understandable to non-experts by for example using the SROI (social return on investment) methodology.

Who does the evaluation?

On top of objective official and unofficial data, every program should collect data from various people around the program. This data should not be only collected from one group of people. If there is only one point of view present in evaluation, it is less likely to create a whole picture of what is going on in the program. Because of this the evaluation of benefits, what the work does in practice, what the program fails to do and what should be improved must be done on multiple levels at once.

In Finland, the basic form of evaluation has been done by participants, workers, possible collaborative partners, and volunteers, if the program has them. This is not a universal model and if there are some other instances that can be used, these sources of information should not be neglected.

Participants

The participants of the program should always be used as informants on what works in the program and what does not. They are the target audience and their information usually up to date on what is going on in the program. Getting this information is vital for both the program and people collaborative partners of the program.

The participants may not be objectively right about the change the program, but if there is something hindering their participation in the program, those things must be addressed.

The participants may not notice everything that the program aims to do. This may not be necessary, but if the lack of discussion can also be a hint that something has not been communicated properly. If there is for example apparent lack of recognition for some part of the program, or if the program gets misinterpreted, the situation should be evaluated and addressed.

Workers

The workers in violence reduction programs are usually trained professionals. They are the ones most in touch with the participants and know how different parts of the program work in their day-to-day work. They also regularly know more about the participants than the participants will give out in the data the program collects. Because of these things getting the workers involved in data collection is essential for the success of program.

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The workers are, of course less likely to notice their own failings. They may repeat same mistakes over and over or blame others for them. Because of this their information should not be the only data that the program uses.

Collaborative partners

The collaborative partners that programs have are the ones that can view the program from outside. They know how it seems to outsiders. They know if it is easy or hard to refer participants to program. They may see flaws in the program (or the communication) that others will not notice.

Gathering data from collaborative partners also has the advantage that it gets them involved in the program and more likely to

Volunteers

Volunteers are usually non-professionals with some experience about the things they want to volunteer work on. This makes them see things in different light compared to professionals and the participants. The participants also are likely to converse with volunteers in different way than with profession.

Because of these things having volunteers evaluate the program can give information that would otherwise go unnoticed. When combined with other data from other sources, their information can either confirm it, define it, or prove it wrong.

How effective should the program be?

When being introduced for the first time, almost all programs are effective in violence reduction. The reason for this is that as there is no previous awareness or previous work model for handling the violence, the violence may have previously gone unnoticed and addressed in unprofessional ways when it has been brought up.

This basic fact should be acknowledged, but the measurement should still be done. As the data keeps on getting collected, the evaluation of effectiveness gets easier and easier. At least it can be made apparent if the program is failing miserably or if both the official data and all the people doing the evaluation are showing clear lessening of violence.

The basic motto while working with violence should be that higher the risk, the lower the change can be. The longer and more the people have been using the violence, the less likely they are to give it up.

This motto makes the amount of impact needed for a program dependant on both the violence that is met and the participants. The higher the risk and harsher the violence, the less likely the program is to have an impact. The more violent crime and other problems the participant has, the less likely the program is to succeed. So, the programs working with highest risks and the most difficult men should not be measured the same as programs who deal with less severe cases.

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