Developing data collection plans for descriptive evaluations

This document will help SRAE grant recipients create a data collection plan for descriptive evaluations. It describes common methods for collecting data and gives an example of a data collection plan.

Selecting data collection methods

What are your research questions?

Research questions define what we want to find out when conducting descriptive evaluations. Strong research questions should be clear, specific, and well-defined; the things we set out to learn should be measurable when possible; and the questions should align with your program's logic model. They can focus on implementation by, for example, focusing on the inputs or activities involved in program operations. They might also investigate program outputs and outcomes, including whether the program achieved its expected outputs and outcomes, if there were changes in the outputs or outcomes, or if there were differences in the outputs or outcomes between subgroups. Before beginning data collection, review your research questions to see if you can break them up into smaller questions or sub-questions to clarify what you want to know.

Do you need to collect quantitative data, qualitative data, or both types, to answer your research questions?

Quantitative data deal with numbers or measurable concepts. You can use them to answer questions like "how many," "how much," or "how often." Quantitative data can also measure changes in outputs or outcomes. Quantitative data are often gathered through closed-ended items on surveys, fidelity logs, attendance records, or other administrative records.

Qualitative data are used to answer questions like "what happened," "why," or "how" and can provide context for quantitative data. Qualitative data are often gathered through interviews, focus groups, and open-ended questions on surveys. They might describe experiences, characteristics, and other non-quantifiable information.

Mixed-methods approaches use both quantitative and qualitative data to answer a research question. For instance, quantitative data can be used to detect a measurable pattern, and the qualitative data can be used to try to understand why that pattern is occurring and what the story is behind the numbers.

Do your research questions request sensitive information from respondents?

SRAE grant recipients may need to collect sensitive information to answer research questions, such as information about sexual behavior, attitudes, or beliefs. Consider which methods of data collection will maximize privacy and help respondents feel comfortable answering honestly. Examples are surveys they complete by themselves, or one-on-one interviews. A respondent's comfort level in providing honest answers can also depend on who is collecting the data. Consider choosing a neutral party without a direct stake in the data collection to collect sensitive data.

Whose perspective(s) do you need to answer each question?

Consider the level and unit(s) of analysis needed to answer your question. Common units of analysis for SRAE programs are individual youth, classrooms, and locations or sites. You may want to collect information from more than one kind of respondent, such as individual youth and facilitators or parents, to answer one research question.

Consider how many people you will need to collect data from to produce credible evidence to answer your question. It might not be feasible to collect data from everyone in your unit of analysis. What is considered credible will depend on your research question, the type of data you are collecting, and your program's context. An external evaluator can help you make these decisions. Before you start collecting data, create a sampling plan including the respondents you want to include, the anticipated number of respondents, and how you will recruit and retain them.

When and how often will you need to collect the data for each question?

Data collection can be done one time or repeated. Consider how many times you need to collect data to answer your question. Some questions, like ones about program satisfaction, could be answered once at the end of a program. Others, such as how outcomes change over time, will need at least one follow-up.

What data collection method(s) will you use to answer each question?

Use the guiding questions above to decide which data collection method(s) is the best way to answer each research question. Table 1 describes common methods of data collection in SRAE programs and how they relate to the guiding questions.

Table 1. Common data collection methods

Method	Description	Sensitivity and privacy	Level and unit(s) of analysis	Data collection schedule	Example data collected
Surveys	Collect data about attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, opinions, and population characteristics. Data can be quantitative (closed-ended items) or qualitative (open-ended items), or both.	May collect sensitive data. To ensure privacy, data can be collected anonymously or linked to respondents by, for example, using a unique identifier known only to a few people overseeing data collection.	Individual: typically youth, facilitators, other program staff, partner staff, or parents and caregivers	One time or repeated	Youth knowledge of curriculum topics
Interviews	Gather in-depth information on experiences, opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and lessons learned from individuals or small groups. Data are qualitative.	Ideal for collecting data on sensitive subjects and probing for information in real time. Data can be de-identified (for example, by removing identifying information from notes) and collected by a neutral party.	Individual: typically youth, facilitators, other program staff, partner staff, or parents and caregivers	Typically one time, can be repeated	Facilitators' thoughts on what makes delivering the curriculum easier or harder
Focus groups	Gather in-depth experiences and views from group discussions. Data are qualitative.	Group setting is not ideal for collecting data on sensitive subjects. Data can be de-identified and collected by a neutral party.	Group: typically groups of youth, facilitators, other program staff, partner staff, or parents and caregivers	Typically one time, can be repeated	What worked well in the curriculum according to the youth participants
Observations	Collect data about what people do and how they do it. Data can be quantitative or qualitative.	May observe delivery of sensitive topics. Data can be collected anonymously or linked to respondents.	Group: typically classrooms Individual: typically facilitators	One time or repeated	Classrooms' engagement in the curriculum
Fidelity logs	Collect data about what happens and how it happens. Data can be quantitative or qualitative.	Could involve sensitive topics, but not likely. Data can be collected anonymously or linked to respondents.	Groups: typically classrooms Individual: typically facilitators	Typically repeated after each session	Facilitators' experiences implementing the program as intended in classrooms
Administrative data	Gather tracking data and characteristic information. Data are quantitative.	Not used to collect sensitive data. Data are typically linked to respondents.	Individual: typically youth or facilitators	One time or repeated	Youth attendance

Example data collection plan

Research question	Data collection method	Sensitivity, privacy, and data collector	Level and unit(s) of analysis	Sampling plan	Schedule
How many youth thought the lesson structure helped them retain the content from each lesson?	Survey questions about youth overall opinions on lesson structure (closed-ended question) and thoughts on lecture, activities, and discussions (open-ended question). Will add questions to the SRAE exit survey.	Some sensitivity—participants may be hesitant to share constructive or negative perspectives with facilitators. To promote honest responses, youth will complete self-administered surveys and will not be asked to enter their names or any identifying information on the survey. The survey will include randomly assigned unique identifiers that can be used to analyze data by classroom and facilitator. Facilitators will administer surveys for classes in a neighboring school district, and not for their own classes.	Individual youth	Survey full population of youth. Anticipate 80% response rate. Youth who respond to the survey will be eligible to receive an incentive.	One time, at the last lesson of the program (or within two weeks for those who did not attend last lesson)
How often are facilitators using the co-regulation skills they learned about in orientation training?	Observations of facilitators' use of co-regulation skills during lessons.	Some sensitivity—facilitators may be concerned observations will influence performance evaluations. To support privacy, evaluation partner will conduct observations. Each facilitator will be assigned a unique identifier known only to the evaluation partner.	Individual facilitators	Observe all facilitators monthly.	Once per month

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Related resources

This video provides an overview of strategies for conducting virtual surveys: https://sraene.com/resource/Video%203:%20Best%20Practices%20for%20Collecting%20Survey%20Data%20Virtually

This video provides an overview on administering in-person surveys: https://sraene.com/resource/Video%206:%20Best%20Practices%20for%20Collecting%20Survey%20Data%20in%20Person

This video provides an overview on conducting interviews and focus groups: https://sraene.com/resource/Video%205%3A%20Collecting%20High-Quality%20Data%20in%20Interviews%20and%20Focus%20Groups

This video provides an overview on conducting observations to collect data: https://sraene.com/resource/Video%204:%20Collecting%20High-Quality%20Data%20Through%20Observations

This video provides an overview on using fidelity logs, including when and how to use them: https://sraene.com/resource/Video%2010%3A%20Monitoring%20Programs%20Using%20Fidelity%20Logs

This document discusses data sources to answer common research questions in implementation evaluations: https://sraene.com/sites/default/files/2023-04/SRAENE-ResearchQuestions.pdf

This toolkit includes 11 resources for collecting data for an implementation evaluation, covering focus groups, interviews, fidelity logs, surveys, and observations: https://sraene.com/resource/Toolkit%202%3A%20Data%20collection