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Using Administrative Data for Monitoring and Evaluation

FEBRUARY 2016

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Administrative data refers to data collected for the administration of programs. It should be systematically collected, stored and used for program operation and management decisions. While administrative data is designed to track a program's implementation—primarily the project's activities and expenses—it can also include indicators on program outcomes. Examples of administrative data include educational records, client information from financial institutions, and hospital records of patient visits and health outcomes. Other examples include information held by government agencies, such as tax filings and Medicare claims.

The CART principle of responsibility tells us that organizations should find the right balance between collecting enough data necessary to obtain credible, actionable information about a program, and the costs of doing so. Administrative data, due to its low cost and accuracy, can be an important part of a data collection strategy, useful for both monitoring and evaluation.

The advantages of using administrative data include time and cost savings, and the possibilities of obtaining accurate data and a large sample size at low cost. Because administrative data are already being collected, they can reduce or eliminate the need to collect data through additional monitoring activities or surveys. And because they already exist in the management information system and are usually updated regularly, incorporating administrative data into your monitoring activities can enable a more timely response to implementation issues or faster analysis of key indicators.

The content of administrative data presents other potential advantages. Because administrative data typically cover the entire population of beneficiaries, they imply a large sample size. And by reducing the likelihood of social desirability bias, poor recall, and other data quality issues, administrative data can be more accurate than self-reported survey data.

While administrative data have many advantages, ensuring that they are accurate and reliable is more important than their low price tag. Recall the principle of Responsibility—that all data have costs—which emphasizes the balance between data quality, actionability, and the resources spent to collect it. In this article, we discuss the tradeoffs associated with using administrative data for M&E. We also provide a checklist for organizations interested in using administrative data; while the checklist is most relevant when collecting administrative data from a partner or third party, it also applies when gathering administrative data from within your own organization.

January 10, 2016