

Evidence Capacity in Organizations: A Literature-Informed Framework

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Federal agencies often have some experience with building and using evidence to design, manage, and improve their work on behalf of the public (see Exhibit 1 for the definition of evidence we use in this brief). For example, agencies typically are familiar with using performance measurement to assess and report their progress against goals. Some agencies have invested in additional evidence-building activities, including creating learning agendas, designing and commissioning evaluations, and developing data infrastructure. But regardless of their experience with evidence, all agencies can benefit from taking a close look at their capacity to build useful evidence and apply it to their programs, services, policies, regulations, and operational processes.

Evidence capacity encompasses the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and resources that support an agency's ability to build and use evidence to make decisions and inform its work. An agency might have relatively stronger evidence capacity along some dimensions, and some offices or units within the agency might have greater evidence capacity than others. Importantly, evidence capacity can improve and deepen over time.

An evidence capacity framework

This brief describes an evidence capacity framework that the Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) developed in partnership with Mathematica. The framework draws on a review of literature on evidence capacity in organizations (see Exhibit 2 and Appendix A) and is informed by interviews and focus groups about evidence use with staff in OPRE and the Administration for Children and Families program offices. OPRE intends the framework to be a durable resource for assessing evidence capacity over time and identifying areas for attention and investment.

This evidence capacity framework could be useful to a variety of government agencies and other organizations. Federal agencies could use this framework to inform their evidence capacity assessments required under the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 (the Evidence Act).¹ Specifically, agencies could use this

Exhibit 1. What is evidence?

We define **evidence** as facts, data, research, evaluation, or other information collected and used systematically to understand the effectiveness or efficiency of an organization's work, or to understand the context or communities in which an organization conducts its work.

This definition is consistent with the Office of Management and Budget's statement that "evidence is broadly defined and includes foundational fact finding, performance management, policy analysis, and program evaluation" (Vought 2019).

¹ The Evidence Act requires the 24 agencies covered by the Chief Financial Officer Act to assess their capacity for planning and implementing statistical, research, evaluation, and analytic activities; disseminating findings; and using evidence in day-to-day operations. Every four years, these agencies must publish a report on their findings from the capacity assessment (Vought 2019). Examples of published capacity assessments are available at the Office of Management and Budget's evaluation site, www.evaluation.gov.

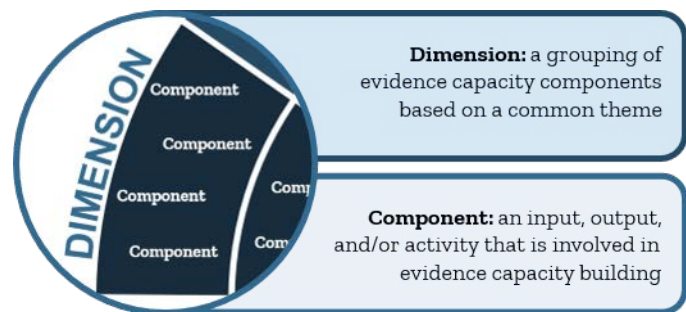
framework to lead qualitative self-assessment and reflection about their current capacity and to begin strategic conversations about potential capacity-building efforts. The framework can help agencies develop a shared understanding of the specific capacities they are trying to develop and the opportunities they could unlock by developing those capacities. Likewise, state and local government agencies, as well as private-sector human services organizations, can use the framework to assess their capacity to build and use evidence about their own work and contribute evidence as requested by federal agencies.

In this brief, we describe the evidence capacity framework and introduce the framework's five dimensions (evidence culture, evidence infrastructure, engagement, human capital, and leadership). Then, we describe the five dimensions in detail, including the components that make up each dimension. A concluding section discusses how organizations can use the evidence capacity framework to assess their own capacity and identify areas for focused improvement. Finally, Appendix A provides more detail about the literature search process.

Exhibit 2. Reviewing the literature on evidence capacity in organizations

To develop the evidence capacity framework, we searched broadly for literature published from 2006–2021 that addressed evidence capacity or evaluation capacity (hereafter, described as evidence capacity). The search included major databases (Academic Search Premier, Education Resources Information Center [ERIC], SocIndex, Business Source Corporate Plus, and Scopus). We also conducted a gray literature search using a custom Google search.

From this search, we identified **49 sources** that described an evidence capacity framework or components of such a framework. The sources, which are listed in Appendix A, consist mostly of research studies of capacity building, and toolkits and guidance to help organizations build evidence capacity. We reviewed each source to identify the evidence capacity **components** it described (that is, inputs, outputs, or activities involved in evidence capacity). For each identified component, we extracted from the source the component's definition and associated measures. We then grouped these components into **dimensions** of evidence capacity based on common themes.



By grouping components described in the literature, we identified **five dimensions** of evidence capacity and **17 components**. Each dimension has multiple related but distinct components.

To assess whether the dimensions and components should be modified or tailored based on recent evidence-related activities at the Administration for Children and Families, agency research staff led interviews with six program office staff, and the Mathematica team conducted three focus groups of program office and research staff. These interviews and focus groups yielded examples of evidence capacity in practice and identified no dimensions or components beyond those mentioned in the literature.

More information on the literature search is presented in Appendix A.

The five dimensions of evidence capacity in organizations

Drawing on the literature about evidence capacity, we identified the following five key dimensions of evidence capacity in organizations:

- **Evidence culture.** In organizations with a robust evidence culture, the organization routinely uses evidence to support the organization’s mission, objectives, and program and policy choices. Staff regularly pose questions about the organization’s work and effectiveness, and they review evidence to inform answers to these questions. Evidence routinely guides the organization’s decision making.
- **Evidence infrastructure.** Evidence-related tools, resources, routines, and processes form an infrastructure that enables the organization to build and use evidence in a timely and efficient manner. Examples of evidence infrastructure include data collections and systems; policies and processes for planning, conducting, commissioning, managing, and/or reporting evaluations and performance metrics; and financial resources for carrying out evidence activities.
- **Engagement.** Organizations with engagement capacity have systems and processes that promote collaboration within and across internal and external audiences to advance informed and equitable evidence building and evidence use. Engagement includes conveying and receiving information related to evidence by communicating and connecting with a variety of audiences.
- **Human capital.** This dimension involves the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the organization’s staff to build evidence and communicate about it, as well as the opportunities for staff to develop this expertise. Organization capacity is strengthened when a variety of staff have a foundational understanding of logic models and evidence-building methods. Staff in roles focused on evaluation, data, or performance management—and their collaborative relationships—are also important to this dimension.
- **Leadership.** In organizations with this capacity, leaders foster an evidence culture, identify opportunities to build evidence, allocate staff time and other resources to support evidence activities within existing budget constraints, and make decisions transparently based on evidence.

In depth: The dimensions and components of evidence capacity

Each of the five dimensions of evidence capacity includes several components that describe related but distinct inputs, outputs, or activities. In this section, we present each dimension and its components in detail, including the observable attitudes, skills, knowledge, and behaviors indicating a component is thriving in the organization.



Evidence culture

Organizational culture refers to widely shared expectations, beliefs, and values held by people in an organization. In organizations with a thriving evidence culture, building and using evidence is central to the mission and choices of the organization. Staff routinely ask questions about the organization’s work and impact and use evidence to help answer those questions. Evidence regularly guides the organization’s decision making. Drawing on the literature, we identified three components of evidence culture:

- **Learning mindset.** This component refers to the organization’s openness to and support for evidence-informed improvement and innovation. At organizations where a learning mindset thrives, staff are inquisitive, are willing to try new approaches, and assess progress using evidence. Leaders encourage and model innovation, learning, and reflection. The organization also implements structures and processes to share knowledge among staff.
- **Commitment to evidence.** This component describes how the organization creates enabling conditions and supports for building and using evidence. Organizations committed to evidence seek to document organizational priorities; define needs for evidence; offer constructive feedback; and share credible and accessible findings in a timely manner. As resources allow, the organization provides staff

and supports for building and using evidence in its many forms, including foundational fact finding, policy analysis, performance measures, and program evaluations. The organization uses change management processes to apply evidence to improve the design and administration of its programs continuously, with the goal of improving outcomes and achieving the organization's mission.

- **Equity and inclusion.** This component describes the extent to which an organization's culture promotes involvement, respect, and connections among team members to channel a variety of perspectives and experiences into evidence activities. At organizations where equity and inclusion are central to designing and conducting evidence activities, the organization uses participatory methods to engage a variety of staff. The organization ensures that questions and methods promote equitable access, participation, and outcomes.



Evidence infrastructure

Broadly, evidence infrastructure is the tools, data, routines, policies, and processes that enable an organization to build and use evidence in a timely and efficient way. The specific elements of evidence infrastructure that an organization needs depend in part on the organization's mission, programs, and services. Drawing on the literature, we identified four components of evidence infrastructure:

- **Evidence tools.** This component describes tangible resources that can guide and encourage the use of evidence, such as by helping staff assess the organization's evidence-related strengths, shortcomings, and opportunities, or documenting standards for study design and reporting. Examples of tools to support evidence use include logic models, learning agendas, needs or capacity assessments, guidance for evaluation methods or dissemination strategies, or evaluation policies that define when and how study findings are publicly released.
- **Data infrastructure and technology.** This component refers to the technical infrastructure (hardware and software) and defined processes necessary to collect, store, analyze, access, share, and manage data securely. At organizations with thriving data infrastructure and technology, sources of data are high quality, appropriate for the intended use, and easily accessible to those who need to use them. These organizations consistently invest in new technology, such as automation, to create more efficient processes for data management and use.
- **Performance monitoring and improvement.** A key component of evidence infrastructure is the thoughtful design and routine analysis of metrics to track progress against performance goals that have been communicated to staff. Organizations with thriving performance management and improvement efforts use a systematic process to identify challenges, develop and implement strategies to address those challenges, and collect and analyze data to determine whether strategies had intended effects.
- **Program evaluation.** Organizations with thriving program evaluation capacity conduct or commission systematic studies to identify where or how to focus their programs and services (through foundational fact-finding and policy analysis) and assess how well a program is working (through evaluation). Evaluations include process and implementation studies, outcome evaluations, and impact evaluations. As needed, thriving organizations increase their internal capacity by seeking external expertise for conducting studies.



Engagement

Engagement capacity refers to an organization's systems, processes, and routines for communicating and collaborating about evidence with internal and external audiences. Because effective engagement relies on access to and use of dissemination channels, this dimension relates to evidence infrastructure. Engagement also relates to evidence culture because it involves patterns of organizational behavior and interactions with external communities. Drawing on the literature, we identified three components of engagement:

- **Dissemination.** This component describes the extent to which the organization can access and deploy dissemination formats and channels that effectively share evidence with intended audiences. Examples

of dissemination formats are technical reports, presentations, and briefs, and examples of channels include technical assistance providers, newsletters, webinars, conferences, email communications, and social media.

- **Internal engagement.** In organizations with robust internal engagement, staff share evidence collaboratively within and across offices and departments, operating as a cohesive learning organization rather than keeping information in silos. As opportunities and resources allow, staff work across organizational units to identify common learning agenda questions and combine resources to build and share evidence.
- **External engagement.** This component refers to the extent to which leaders and staff build relationships that enable collaborative information sharing, consultation, and involvement with external audiences. Audiences could include program clients and their communities, partner organizations, and external researchers, among others.



Human capital

Staff with knowledge, skills, and abilities to build and use evidence are important to an organization's evidence capacity. This dimension refers to the expertise of individual staff and communities of staff, as well as opportunities for staff to increase their understanding of methods for building and using evidence. The organization can increase its internal human capital by engaging external expertise. Drawing on the literature, we identified three components of human capital related to evidence:

- **Evidence building and analytic skills.** This component refers to staff's ability to carry out systematic activities using appropriate methods that contribute to evidence-informed decision making. In a thriving organization, staff can develop logic models, research questions, information collection approaches, and instruments to generate credible, reliable information. The organization has sufficient staff with training and skills to use a variety of data sources to explore hypotheses and test ideas.
- **Communication skills.** This component refers to the extent to which staff have strong written and verbal communication skills that enable them to summarize and communicate research findings effectively to internal and external audiences. They communicate clearly and concisely using plain language.
- **Professional development.** An important component is the "capacity to build capacity" through professional development opportunities. In a thriving organization, staff regularly engage in internal professional development activities (for example, lunch-and-learn sessions, trainings, and communities of practice) and external development opportunities (for example, conferences and continuing education) to develop skills for building and using evidence. Professional development opportunities help staff stay current with leading evidence-building practices.



Leadership

Leaders set the tone for building and using evidence in organizations by fostering an evidence culture, modeling decision making informed by evidence, identifying opportunities to build evidence, and allocating staff and other resources to evidence activities when possible. Drawing on the literature, we identified four components of leadership related to evidence:

- **Evidence-informed decision making.** In organizations where this component thrives, leaders incorporate evidence into decision making, thereby modeling for the organization how to develop and modify plans, programs, and policies based on evidence. Leaders consistently identify opportunities for the organization to build and use evidence.
- **Budgeting.** This component reflects the extent to which leaders use budget development activities to build and use evidence in the organization. Within budget constraints, leaders seek to allocate financial resources to evidence-building activities and to activities with evidence of effectiveness.

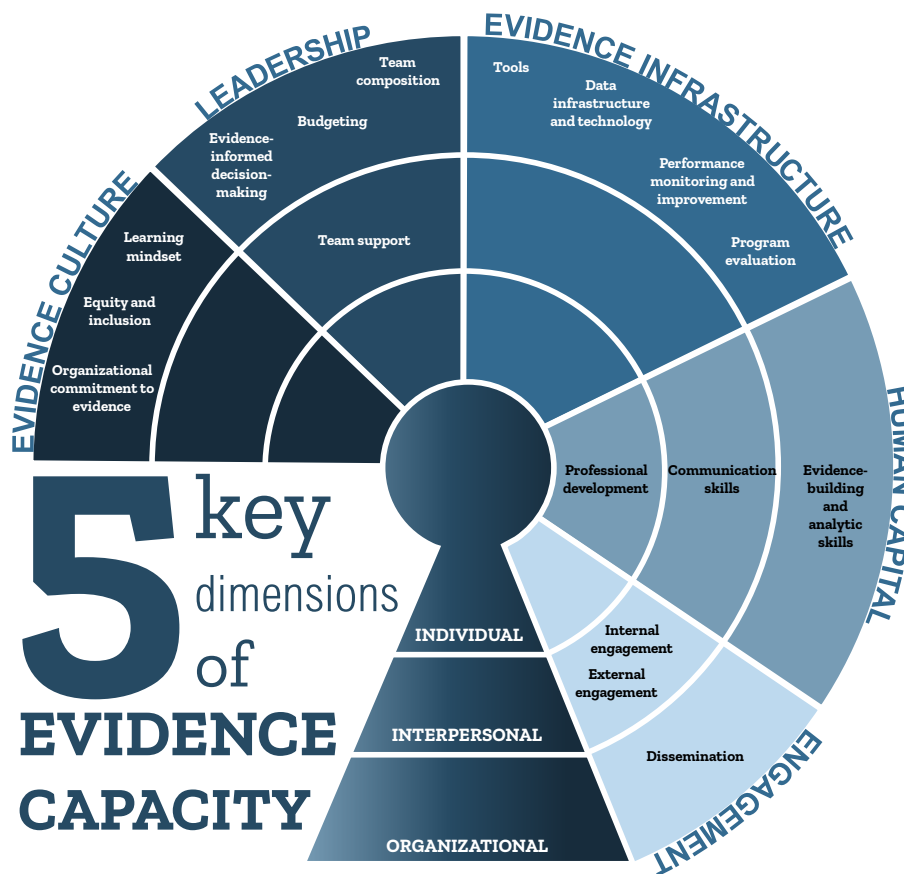
- **Evidence teams.** Although all staff might be expected to seek opportunities to build and use evidence, leaders strategically deploy staff with appropriate skills to spearhead evidence-related activities and engage the broader group of staff. Staff charged with leading evidence activities have clearly defined roles.
- **Evidence support.** In organizations where this component thrives, leaders ensure staff have the time, authority, and other resources to lead evidence activities. To foster innovation, leaders encourage staff to spend time learning about advances in their fields and improving their skills related to building and using evidence.

Evidence capacity at the individual, interpersonal, and organizational levels

We identified components of evidence capacity from the literature on effective organizations and found that components pertained to the individual, interpersonal, or organizational level. To depict these levels, we developed a graphic showing the levels in three concentric rings (**Exhibit 3**). The *individual level*, the innermost ring in the graphic, encompasses an individual's knowledge, skills, and values (for example, how an individual values research, uses data in their day-to-day work, or synthesizes findings). The *interpersonal level*, the second ring in the graphic, focuses on interactions between people or groups of people (for example, communication and collaboration that takes place among staff). The *organizational level*, the outermost ring, addresses components for the organization as a whole (for example, data infrastructure and technology) as well as the collective capacities of staff.

We observed that most components pertained to evidence capacity at the organizational level, with a few components at the interpersonal level and one component at the individual level. This suggests that much of evidence capacity is driven by efforts at the organizational level and cannot be sustained by a few trained individuals in a silo.

Exhibit 3. Dimensions and components of evidence capacity at the organizational, interpersonal, and individual levels



Using the evidence capacity framework

The purpose of the evidence capacity framework presented in this brief is to help agencies and other organizations develop a shared understanding of the dimensions of capacity described in the literature. Developing this shared understanding is a step toward identifying areas of organizational strength and weakness, and making plans to develop or deepen specific evidence capacities.

The evidence capacity framework can help inform and structure an organization's systematic assessment of its evidence capacity. For each dimension of evidence capacity, or for specific dimensions and components of interest, organizations can use interviews, focus groups, document reviews, surveys, or reflection questions to gather data and initiate staff discussions about existing evidence capacities. Exhibit 4 presents illustrative reflection questions for specific dimensions and components of evidence capacity (Derr et al. 2022). Organizations can use these questions or other data-gathering methods to document change and continuity in evidence capacity over time.

Exhibit 4. Illustrative reflection questions for evidence capacity dimensions and components

Dimension	Component	Reflection questions
Evidence culture	Learning mindset	What strategies do we use to cultivate a learning mindset that prioritizes and dedicates time for learning and reflection within our organization? What does this process look like in our organization?
Engagement	Dissemination	How do we distill and communicate evidence within and outside of the organization? What processes do we use for dissemination, including deciding who gets what information and in what form?
Leadership	Budgeting	Are funds or other resources set aside for evaluation activities? What kinds of resources? How do we use evidence to inform budget priorities? How extensive is this use of evidence?

Source: Derr, Michelle K., Jonathan McCay, and Alexandra Stanczyk. "Building Organizational Evidence Capacity: Guides for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Related Programs." OPRE Report #2022-126. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022.

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Appendix A

We conducted a targeted review of the literature to inform updates to the evidence capacity framework. We identified potential sources, assessed whether each one met screening criteria, and extracted consistent types of information from the sources that met the screening criteria. We applied two screening criteria to all identified sources: (1) contained an evidence or evaluation capacity framework or specified dimensions of evidence or evaluation capacity and (2) published in the last 15 years.

We followed the following process for the literature search:

1. We identified 102 sources from a related project, Supporting Partnerships to Advance Research and Knowledge (SPARK). Twenty-nine of these sources met the screening criteria.
2. Using the terms listed in Exhibit A.1, we searched the following databases: Academic Search Premier, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), SocIndex, Business Source Corporate Plus, and Scopus. The searches identified 379 sources, and 11 of them met the screening criteria.
3. We searched gray literature using a tailored Google search that produced more than 3,000 search results. We screened the first 100 results from each search group (agencies and offices within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], governmental organizations outside of HHS, and nongovernmental organizations), for a total of 300 results (Exhibit A.2). This generated 2 new sources that met screening criteria, and the rest that met screening criteria were duplicates of sources we had identified already.
4. We screened 15 sources identified by OPRE staff, and 7 of these sources met the screening criteria.

Exhibit A.1. Search terms

1. ((Develop* n2 "evaluation capacity") OR ("Evaluation capacity" n2 build*) OR ("Evaluation skill*" n2 build*) OR (Evaluation n2 "technical assistance") OR "Evaluation training" OR "Evaluative inquiry" OR (Develop* n2 "evidence capacity") OR ("evidence capacity" n2 build*)).
2. n2 enables the search terms to be within two words of each other and in either order.
3. We also performed searches for "empowerment evaluation" and "insourcing."

Exhibit A.2. Gray literature tailored Google search

Organization	Website
Group 1. Agencies and offices within HHS	
Office of Population Affairs (OPA)/Office of Adolescent Health (OAH)	opa.hhs.gov
Children's Bureau (CB)	acf.hhs.gov/cb
Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE)	acf.hhs.gov/opre
Office of Data, Analysis, Research, and Evaluation (ODARE)	acf.hhs.gov/acyf/research
Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE)	aspe.hhs.gov
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)	samhsa.gov
Group 2. Governmental organizations outside of HHS	
U.S. Department of Labor (DOL)	dol.gov
U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences (IES)	ies.ed.gov
General Services Administration (GSA)	gsa.gov
U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)	usaid.gov
Office of Evaluation Sciences (OES)	oes.gsa.gov
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)	hud.gov
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)	oecd.org
Small Business Administration (SBA)	sba.gov

Organization	Website
Group 3. Nongovernmental organizations	
Urban Institute	urban.org
Wandersman Center	wandersmancenter.org
Project Evident	projectevident.org
Results for America	results4america.org
Altarum Institute	altarum.org
James Bell Associates	jbassoc.com

HHS = U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Ultimately, we identified 49 sources. We reviewed each source to identify the **components** of evidence capacity, defining a component as an input, output, or activity that is involved in building evidence capacity. For each component we identified in a source, we extracted from the source the component's definition and associated measures. We developed a tracker in Excel to guide us in extracting this information from each source. Across the sources, we found about 228 non-unique components of evidence capacity that we then uploaded to Mural (a platform that enables users to manipulate digital sticky notes on a whiteboard in real time) and sorted to determine common components in the literature (that is, similar components mentioned across multiple sources). We grouped these components into **dimensions** based on a theme. We describe how we analyzed these components in depth in the following section. These common themes became the five dimensions of evidence capacity we present in this brief.

Reviewed sources²

Administration for Children and Families. "ACF Evidence and Evaluation Maturity Model." Internal document. Washington, DC: Administration for Children and Families, n.d.

Altarum Institute. "Assessing the Evaluation Capacity of Large Nonprofit Organizations: A Detailed Account of the Methods, Findings, and Lessons Learned from the YMCA Evaluation Capacity Assessment." Washington, DC: Altarum Institute, December 2012. Available at http://www.evaluativethinking.org/docs/YMCA_Evaluation_Capacity_Assessment.pdf. Accessed July 1, 2021.

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² Among the 49 reviewed documents, we reviewed several from a federal agency marked for internal use. We do not include those documents in this list.

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