Building the evidence base: A perspective from Washington State

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Explicitly nonpartisan
Mission to produce practical research for the legislature
Assignments to produce evidence

What works? (and what does not?)

a) Produce new evidence
   ✓ Evaluate outcomes for participants in state programs

b) Synthesize existing evidence
   ✓ Meta-analyze research on specific programs
   ✓ What is the potential return on investment?
What is the evidence in Washington?

Outcome evaluations of real-world programs implemented in the state

- Administrative data
- Use rigorous research methods (establish causality)
- Identify comparison groups not receiving the program
- Apply statistical controls for potential confounds
  - Special attention to selection bias
What does the existing research tell us?

Meta analysis of research on specific programs

✓ Standardized approach
✓ Consider all published evidence we can find
✓ Apply consistent standards of rigor (causal evidence)
✓ Combine evidence statistically
✓ Estimate how much change we would expect
What is the potential return on investment?

WSIPP’s benefit-cost analysis

✓ Standardized approach
✓ Use results from a meta-analysis (or outcome evaluation)
  • How much change can we expect?
✓ Apply consistent valuation of outcomes
✓ Estimate cost of program per-participant
✓ Consider risk of each investment
  • How likely to “break even”? 

Value of crime includes:

- Police
- Courts, prosecutors
- Prison or jail
- Probation or parole
- Victim property
- Victim physical and mental health, quality of life
Publishing our findings