



# research and evaluation



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The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is one of the largest funders of health and health care research in the United States.

Research is central to the Foundation's mission. In fact, about one of every five grant dollars provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funds research and evaluation initiatives. Findings from these initiatives highlight lessons learned from our investments and inform our future work in health and health care. At the same time, our research efforts provide a useful knowledge base that is designed to assist the efforts of our colleagues in the health and health care policy fields.

## OUR STRATEGY

All research and evaluation grants fit squarely within RWJF's mission, support our funding priorities and have three elements in common:

- **Applied Studies:** RWJF strives to produce research and evaluation that both policy-makers and practitioners in the field will find useful. As a result, virtually all of our research and evaluation projects are applied initiatives. They're designed to make specific contributions to solving health or health care problems related to the Foundation's priorities.
- **Objective and Independent:** RWJF is committed to providing high-quality, objective information. We design evaluations to build the evidence base around a strategy—not to prove our ideas work. Related to its commitment to objectivity, RWJF emphasizes the integrity that flows from the independence of its researchers and evaluators. The Foundation does not interfere with the research and evaluations it funds to alter or suppress findings in any way.
- **Easy to Understand and Widely Shared:** The rigor of our research and evaluation efforts is valuable only if our findings are easy to understand and widely shared. We commit resources to ensure that our findings are both understandable and actionable for public and private decision-makers.

... the Foundation conducts between 30 to 40 active program evaluations, accounting for about 5 percent of our annual grantmaking. As with research grants, evaluation grants are quite diverse in size and scope. They range from small program assessments to multimillion dollar outcomes evaluations.

#### OUR APPROACH TO RESEARCH

Research grants account for roughly 20 percent of Foundation awards. Projects are quite diverse, ranging from small, quick-strike targeted research studies that inform the strategic direction of our grant-making to more elaborate research-driven demonstrations.

RWJF's research projects share the following characteristics:

**Most are Solicited:** The Foundation awards most of its grants through calls for proposals (CFPs). Childhood Obesity, Coverage, Public Health and Quality/Equality award grants only through calls for proposals. CFPs are also issued by RWJF's organized national programs, such as the *Health Care Financing and Organization* program.

Three interest areas—Building Human Capital, Pioneer and Vulnerable Populations—accept unsolicited proposals throughout the year.

RWJF reviews all projects for the quality of the research questions posed, the feasibility of the proposed design and the value of the grant given the proposed budget. RWJF often asks external experts to review projects as part of our proposal review process.

**No Biomedical or International Research.** The Foundation typically does not fund international research, nor does it support biomedical research.

#### OUR RESEARCH INITIATIVES

RWJF directs a wide range of research initiatives that cut across our four portfolios—Targeted\*, Human Capital, Vulnerable Populations and Pioneer. Research may involve a small, ad hoc project or a large multisite national initiative.

Here are the five main types of research projects we support:

**Targeted Research.** While most Foundation-sponsored research is applied, our targeted research projects are quick strikes that fit squarely with the current strategic directions of our portfolios. Aimed either to provide fast answers to urgent analytic questions or to provide facts about the problem that our portfolios address, most of these projects are small in nature (below \$150,000) and are completed on short time frames.

**Research and Policy Analysis.** Much of our research falls into a broad category of research and policy analysis. This category includes health services research, behavioral research, some evaluative research and policy analysis.

Grants in this area span from exploratory research to broaden our knowledge about a problem to more advanced research that seeks a better understanding of the implications of alternative solutions to a problem. Work on policy analysis and research typically focuses on supporting informed decision-making rather than promoting or examining a particular policy. For

example, our *Bridging the Gap* initiative focuses on the role of policy and environmental factors in youth substance abuse.

#### Research-Driven Demonstrations.

Research-driven demonstrations are projects that seek to answer a particular research question. Unlike our other demonstrations, the research objectives take precedence over the programmatic ones. One of our high profile research-driven demonstrations, *Cash & Counseling*, was a randomized trial designed to test the effects of allowing disabled Medicaid beneficiaries to manage cash allowances in lieu of receiving agency-delivered services. This program is now being replicated in 11 states and the Deficit Reduction Act allows all states to adopt this model.

**Research Training.** Many of our training and education initiatives involve developing future researchers or supporting individuals to advance understanding of health and health care problems as they grow in their careers. For example, our *Investigator Awards in Health Policy Research* program supports individuals to think broadly about the future of health and health care.

**Syntheses.** Research syntheses weigh existing evidence surrounding policy concerns and identify for decision-makers what's known, and what's not, about these complex policy issues.

\* The Targeted Portfolio includes four areas of interest: Childhood Obesity, Coverage, Public Health and Quality/Equality.

## OUR APPROACH TO EVALUATION

Program evaluations are a cornerstone of our efforts to learn from our work. In any given year, the Foundation conducts between 30 to 40 active program evaluations, accounting for about 5 percent of our annual grantmaking. As with research grants, evaluation grants are quite diverse in size and scope. They range from small program assessments to multimillion dollar outcomes evaluations.

RWJF's approach to evaluation focuses on the following key tenets:

**Solicited.** Foundation staff members solicit most of the research projects funded. They work to determine the general direction of program evaluations. Then, they open the evaluation for a full or limited competition. While RWJF usually develops initial evaluation plans, the selected evaluators heavily influence the final evaluation designs.

**Focused on Learning.** In its early days, the Foundation designed most program evaluations to test the effectiveness of a given intervention. Today, we employ a much more varied approach, where evaluation designs flow from the greatest opportunities for learning—including how to best create social change and improve our own grantmaking. In part, evaluations follow the maturity of our grantmaking in the area in which we are working. In cases where the information base is less developed, our evaluations might focus on understanding possible promising approaches for making change. For example, we funded the data collection activities of a larger evaluation of Arkansas Act 1220, an ambitious state initiative to combat childhood obesity through school policies. In more developed areas, evaluations might center

on refining or replicating promising approaches or linking those approaches to outcomes of interest. For example, we funded a large, mixed method evaluation of *Covering Kids and Families*, a multisite program that focuses on outreach, simplification and coordination of health insurance coverage programs.

**Objective.** We are committed to objectivity and independence in our evaluations. Evaluations are not a means to prove that our strategies are the right ones, but rather to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the strategies we've employed.

**Distinct from Monitoring Efforts.** Our program evaluations are distinct from our grant monitoring. Evaluations focus on assessing processes, outcomes and strategies and on capturing the factors that account for our successes and failures. Monitoring individual grants is generally the responsibility of the Foundation's program officers or national program staff.

**Intended for a Broad Audience.** Audiences for our evaluation results include not only RWJF staff and trustees but also policy-makers, researchers, advocates, RWJF program grantees and other stakeholders of the programs we evaluate. Many of the results from our funded evaluations are available in journals. We continue to work on more user-friendly ways to capture and share the many important lessons our evaluations hold for improving health and health care.

## OUR EVALUATION INITIATIVES

RWJF directs a family of evaluation initiatives that range in scope from understanding the results of a single grant to understanding how the Foundation itself is performing. Below is a brief description of our various evaluation initiatives.

**Program Evaluations.** At any time, the Foundation has more than 30 active program evaluations aimed at helping us learn from our strategies in different areas. Our program evaluations are as varied as our programs. We design them to capitalize on the greatest opportunity for learning, given the nature of the program and strategy being examined.

**Performance Measures.** Performance measurement focuses on assessing progress within our interest areas. RWJF has created a set of performance indicators for each of our seven interest areas. They aim to clarify the underlying strategic approach of our grantmaking and provide management short-term, intermediate and long-term benchmarks to indicate progress in implementing that approach. Foundation management and trustees receive quarterly reports on these indicators.

**RWJF Assessment Report.** Each year the Foundation completes an annual assessment of its own organizational performance through a scorecard. The Foundation's version of a scorecard includes information on the health of its program development efforts, its customer service (defined as its service to its grantees and the field) and its impact on its interest areas. Data for the annual Assessment Report, which is presented to the Foundation's staff, management and trustees, comes from surveys of grantees, staff and key stakeholders in the field, as well as from administrative data.



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