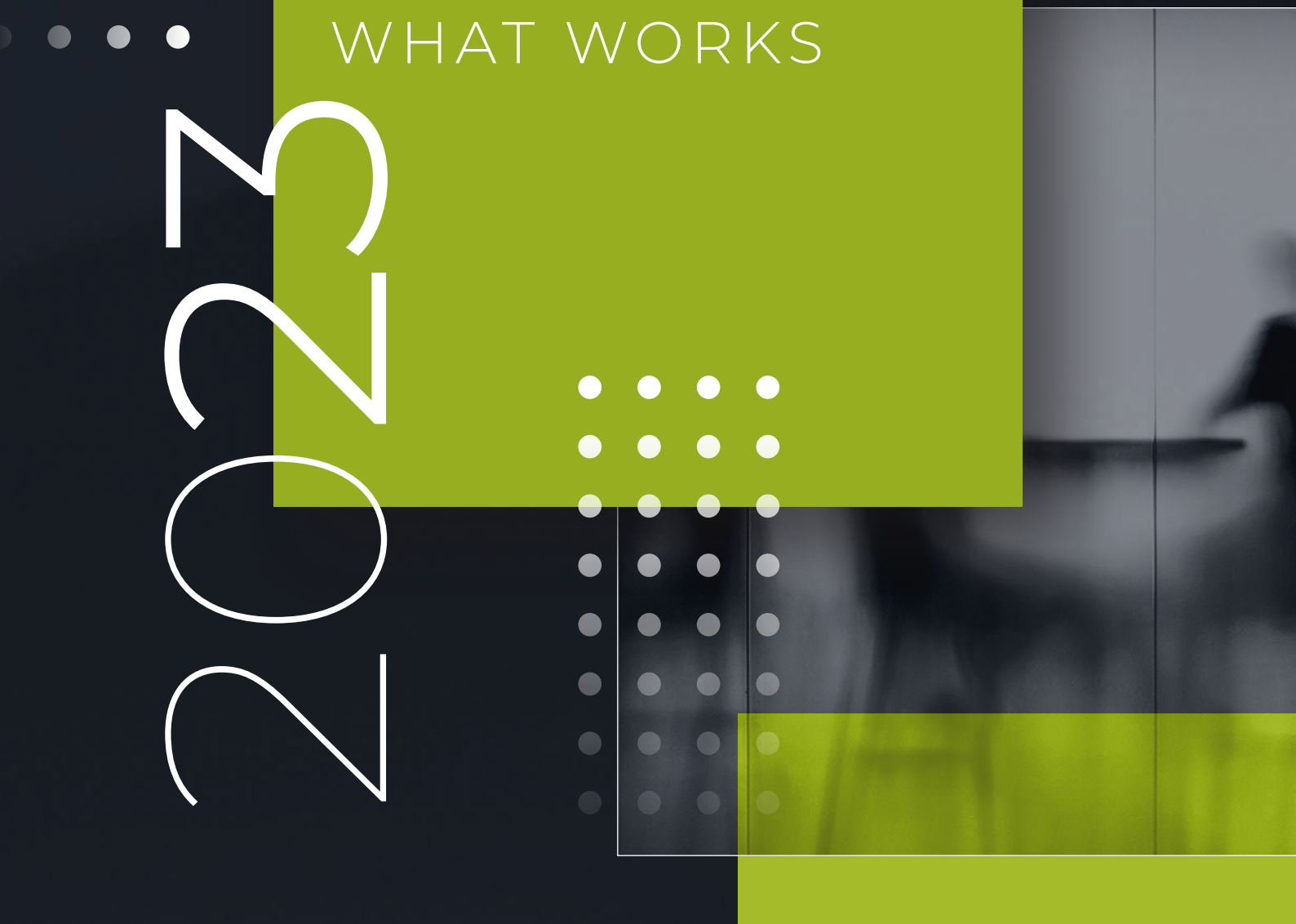
committee for economic development of australia

DISRUPTING DISADVANTAGE 3: FINDING WHAT WORKS

2023



ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

Finding what works is the third report in CEDA's *Disrupting Disadvantage* series. It focuses on improving the evaluation of community services for their effectiveness and value.

This report outlines how governments can use data collection to build more disciplined and consistent program evaluation, and how to foster a culture that enables this.

Across all of its work, CEDA's purpose is to shape economic and social development for the greater good.

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CEDA's objective in publishing this report is to encourage constructive debate and discussion on matters of national economic importance. Persons who rely upon the material published do so at their own risk.

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About CEDA

CEDA is Australia's leading member-driven think tank. Our purpose is to achieve sustainable long-term prosperity for all Australians.

Our trusted independence, and a deep and broad membership base that extends across all sectors, states and territories, enables us to bring diverse perspectives and insights to guide and advance policy debate and development in the national interest.

We aim to influence future economic, social and environmental outcomes by:

- Promoting public discussion of the challenges and opportunities facing Australia;
- Enabling members to shape future outcomes through policy and their own actions;
- Partnering and collaborating to tackle emerging opportunities and entrenched challenges; and
- Advocating for policy change based on our independent research insights.

Our work is overseen by our independent Board of Directors and our research is guided and approved by an independent Research and Policy Committee whose members are leading economists, researchers and policy experts.

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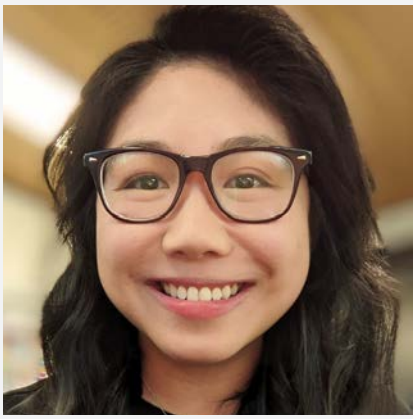

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CEDA IMPACT STATEMENT: REDUCING POVERTY AND DISADVANTAGE

Australia has failed to make any meaningful progress in reducing disadvantage over recent decades despite significant government spending. As the first two reports in CEDA's *Disrupting Disadvantage* series have shown, the drivers of disadvantage are complex and multi-dimensional.

Addressing this problem therefore requires new approaches to policy and program design, investment, implementation and consistent consideration of impact and outcomes.

CEDA's aim in releasing this report is to ensure evidence and evaluation are used consistently, to improve the effectiveness and impact of government programs and spending aimed at reducing the incidence and perpetuation of disadvantage.

Disrupting Disadvantage Part 2, released in 2021, recommended the establishment of a consolidated linked national human-services data asset by 2025 and piloting predictive analytics to design early-intervention services for young Australians at greatest risk of disadvantage.

The outcomes we are seeking from this report include:

- The new Office of the Evaluator-General should foster and champion an evaluation culture in government departments and external providers;
- Incentivising evaluation, including legislating the review of existing major Commonwealth-funded programs at least every five years;
- Improving evaluation practices through a framework that works across a range of programs;
- Improved data access and availability to enable better evaluations; and
- Better governance and embedding an evaluation culture within the public sector.

Governments, business and the community all have an interest in pursuing better outcomes in this space.

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REPORT SNAPSHOT

POVERTY POLICIES FAILING

The level of poverty in Australia is unacceptably high and we are not making any progress in reducing poverty and disadvantage. This is in part due to governments' failure to evaluate community services for their effectiveness and value.

GOVERNMENT SPENDING INCREASING

Over the past decade, federal and state government spending on community services has increased by roughly five per cent each year. We cannot continue to increase spending on these programs without properly assessing why they are failing to make tangible progress on reducing poverty and disadvantage.

INSUFFICIENT PROGRAM EVALUATION

Without consistent program evaluation and implementing improvements based on data, evidence and analysis, ineffective programs are allowed to continue even as effective programs are stopped.

CEDA has examined a sample of 20 Federal Government programs with a total expenditure of more than $200 billion. Ninety-five per cent of these programs were found not to have been properly evaluated.

95%

OF THE SAMPLE PROGRAMS WERE NOT PROPERLY EVALUATED

$61bn

OF COMMUNITY SERVICES SPENDING A YEAR IS UNLIKELY TO BE PROPERLY EVALUATED

OFFICE OF THE EVALUATOR-GENERAL

CEDA recommends that an OEG would primarily champion and steward evaluation and develop capability and capacity throughout the public service.

LEGISLATE REVIEWS

A good starting point is to legislate a regular review of all programs.

BUILT-IN EVALUATION

Evaluation must be part of any policy or program design process from the very beginning, with clearly stated outcomes and objectives.

INVEST IN DATA

Government must invest in developing data assets and data availability, and upskilling public servants to improve capacity and capability.

IMPROVE GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

Evaluations are key to improving government accountability and transparency. The community should be able to hold the government to account for the success of its programs and policies. Currently, we do not have the information to do so.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The level of poverty in Australia is unacceptably high and we are not making any progress in reducing poverty and disadvantage. This is in part due to governments' failure to evaluate community services for their effectiveness and value.

Over the past decade, federal and state government spending on community services has increased by roughly five per cent each year.[1] We cannot continue to increase spending on these programs without properly assessing why they are failing to make tangible progress on reducing poverty and disadvantage (Figure 1).

The community rightfully expects that taxpayer funds are used to effectively improve economic and social outcomes for all citizens, but too often this is not the case.

Without consistent program evaluation and implementing improvements based on data, evidence and analysis, ineffective programs are allowed to continue even as effective programs are stopped.

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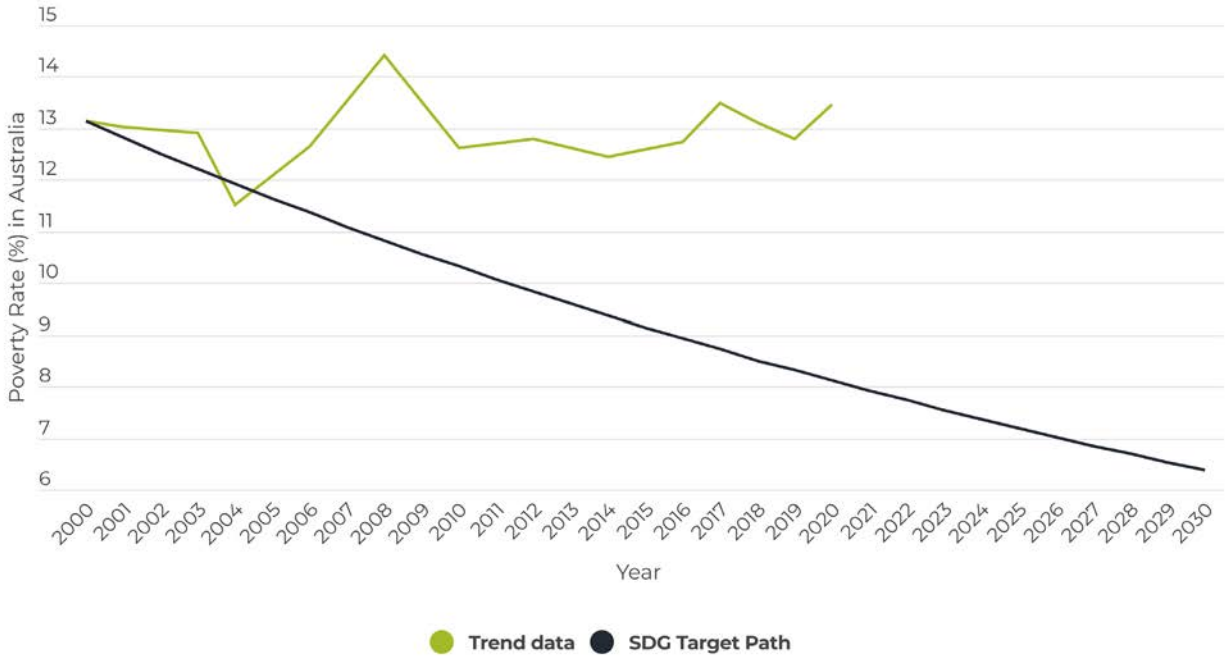
FIGURE 1:

Australia isn't on track to meet its goal to halve poverty

Income poverty trend vs target



Source: ACOSS and UNSW Sydney - Poverty in Australia 2020; 50% poverty line (pre 2007 measure).

CEDA's analysis of program evaluations is sobering. We examined a sample of 20 Federal Government programs with a total program expenditure of more than $200 billion. Ninety-five per cent of these programs were found not to have been properly evaluated. But the Federal Government is not alone in this problem – analysis of state government evaluations shows similar results.

The problems with evaluation start from the outset of program and policy design – many programs were found to lack clear objectives and any definition of "success". Most programs also do not adequately collect, or plan to collect, data from the outset – impeding the ability to evaluate further on.

95%

OF THE SAMPLE PROGRAMS WERE NOT PROPERLY EVALUATED

Australia has a poor track record on improving evaluation in the public service. Despite multiple reviews and decades of attempted reform to public-sector evaluation process, the results have been ineffective and inconsistent.

With increasing political will, we can finally make some breakthroughs in this area and build on the growing appetite for using data to improve policy design and review.

This is not due to a lack of good intentions. Policymakers and politicians clearly want to improve the welfare of Australians and we have seen some welcome progress on data availability and sharing across governments.

What is holding back change is a complex system that encourages policymakers to implement rapid responses to societal problems, rather than insisting on regular, proactive evaluation of existing programs. This is compounded by challenges in undertaking evaluations and a lack of resourcing, leading to long-term atrophy of evaluation culture and capability.

Evaluation is important across all policy areas, but we consistently see the failings of poor policy and limited or no improvement in service delivery in the community services designed to tackle entrenched disadvantage. These services must be where government begins its commitment to regular, robust evaluation.

There is plenty of evidence showing what makes a good evaluation and how to conduct it. The bigger issues are cultural change, political will and the capacity and capability within the public sector to work with data and undertake quality evaluations.

The good news is there is growing momentum to change the status quo. With increasing political will, we can finally make some breakthroughs in this area and build on the growing appetite for using data to improve policy design and review.

The Albanese Government appears committed to improving and embedding evaluation culture. It has said it is committed to making evaluation a priority, and it has proposed the establishment of an Office of the Evaluator-General (OEG). Such an office, particularly if given a clear remit and appropriate resourcing, is a good starting point to change the culture and raise the profile of evaluation within government.

CEDA recommends that an OEG would primarily champion and steward evaluation and develop capability and capacity throughout the public service. Evaluation activity would continue to be primarily undertaken at the departmental level. An OEG is not the solution to all the problems with evaluation, but it is the kind of circuit breaker needed to drive change.

Firmly embedding effective evaluation into policies and programs will take time, as it has been neglected for decades. To have true reform, governments need to take the time to carefully implement changes.

Cultural change is particularly difficult, and the tone needs to be set from the top by ministers and senior policymakers. Moving too quickly, or being too ambitious, risks further failure in this space and repeating the mistakes of the past, where evaluation becomes a tick-the-box exercise rather than being meaningfully embraced by policymakers.

If we want to end the ongoing cycle of reviews and inquiries that gather dust on politicians' desks after the latest policy scandal, evaluation must be integrated into a range of government decision-making and budget processes.

An OEG is not the solution to all the problems with evaluation, but it is the kind of circuit breaker needed to drive change.

The role of data cannot be understated. Without appropriate planning to collect, analyse and link data from the outset of program design, evaluations will not be successful. This needs to be funded as part of the program resourcing – including where programs are delivered by external providers.

A good starting point is to legislate a regular review of all programs. Evaluation must be part of any policy or program design from the very beginning, with clearly stated outcomes and objectives. Government also must invest in developing data assets and data availability and upskilling public servants to improve capacity and capability.

The role of data cannot be understated. Without appropriate planning to collect, analyse and link data from the outset of program design, evaluations will not be successful. This needs to be funded as part of the program resourcing – including where programs are delivered by external providers.

Evaluations are key to improving government accountability and transparency, and should be made publicly available and accessible to the broader community. The community should be able to hold the government to account for the success of its programs and policies. Currently, we do not have the information to do so.

We have seen some good progress on data sharing in recent years across governments. Momentum appears to be growing around reforming evaluation practices. Now is the time to build on these good intentions to truly reform the culture and capability of evaluation in Australia.

Australia will be choosing to perpetuate the cycle of disadvantage if we do not proactively respond to poor past performance and evidence of policy shortcomings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1

THE NEW OFFICE OF THE EVALUATOR-GENERAL SHOULD:

CHAMPION EVALUATION CULTURE

Champion an evaluation culture throughout the public service to embed a strong culture of developing a quality evidence base and evaluation.

PROVIDE EXPERT ADVICE AND REVIEW

Provide expert advice and review to departments, and external service providers, to undertake their own evaluations, including assisting with methodological design and maintaining a panel of independent data, policy and evaluation experts.

UNDERTAKE RANDOMISED CONTROL TRIALS

Where required, undertake complex or high-profile evaluations such as those requiring randomised control trials.

REVIEW DATA GAPS

Review key data gaps across evaluations and work with statistical agencies to prioritise data requirements. This would include reporting to the Treasurer and the Data and Digital Ministers Meeting on priorities for data investment.

MAINTAIN A NATIONAL REPOSITORY

Maintain a national repository of completed evaluations.

2 INCENTIVISING EVALUATION WITHIN GOVERNMENT PROCESSES

LEGISLATE REVIEW OF MAJOR PROGRAMS

To rebuild discipline in program evaluation, the Federal Government should legislate the regular review of existing major Commonwealth-funded programs (i.e., those with spending of more than $100 million) at least every five years. Priority should be given to community-services programs.

FUNDING DEPENDENT ON EVALUATION PLAN

Initial funding for new programs should require the submission of an evaluation plan as part of budget processes. Plans must include resourcing, policy objectives, expected outcomes and how data and evidence will be collected to support an effective evaluation. This should also apply to services contracted to external providers.

3 IMPROVING EVALUATION PRACTICES

EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

The Federal Government (through the OEG or otherwise) should implement and enforce the uptake of an evaluation framework fit for application across programs of different magnitudes and complexity, including external service providers, building on the Commonwealth Evaluation Policy and Toolkit.

ACADEMIC ACCESS

Allow academics access to data on key government programs to provide outside accountability and encourage stronger evaluation within government.

4 IMPROVING DATA ACCESS AND AVAILABILITY FOR BETTER EVALUATIONS

NATIONAL HUMAN SERVICES LINKED DATA ASSET

Develop a National Human Services Linked Data Asset in line with the recommendation of CEDA's 2021 report *Disrupting Disadvantage Part 2*.

ASSESS DATA AVAILABILITY

Data availability, and timelines to appropriately collect data, to be considered from the outset of program design (including where programs are being delivered by external providers) as part of the evaluation framework.

WORK WITH STATISTICAL AGENCIES

Review key data gaps across evaluations and work with statistical agencies to prioritise data requirements.

5 IMPROVING GOVERNANCE AND EMBEDDING AN EVALUATION CULTURE WITHIN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

EVALUATIONS MADE PUBLIC

All evaluations should be made public to enhance accountability and maintained in a national repository.

DEPARTMENTAL RESPONSES TO RECOMMENDATIONS

Require departmental responses to recommendations made in evaluations.

PANEL OF INDEPENDENT EXPERTS

Establish a panel of independent experts with data, policy and program expertise that can advise government departments on evaluations.

1. WHY EVALUATION MATTERS FOR DISADVANTAGE

Australian governments devote significant expenditure to community services with an aim to improve outcomes. But they spend relatively little time and money on evaluating those services to regularly assess their effectiveness in detail. Fundamental to making real change in our approach to addressing disadvantage is understanding what works, and what doesn't, and using this information to inform policy decisions and government spending.

Previous CEDA research has found that the limited use of evidence and data has been holding back progress on disrupting disadvantage. Combined with a focus on addressing symptoms rather than causes, and limited focus on prevention, we have made no progress on changing our approach and actively addressing the causes of disadvantage in Australia. Continuing to do the same thing and expecting different results is not an option.

Good quality evaluation is important across all government policy areas. But it is critical to prioritise it for community services, where spending is growing but we are not seeing improvements in outcomes or service delivery – instead, we are going backwards in many areas.

To ensure value for money, it is imperative that we know what programs and areas of spending are most effective through good quality evaluations. Evaluation could also encourage more spending allocations towards early intervention approaches. There is emerging evidence that shows these approaches are effective in overcoming entrenched disadvantage.

A failure of serious and consistent program evaluation and improvement means that poorly designed and implemented programs persist. This is a waste of valuable government resources that could be better spent on programs that work.

> *To ensure value for money, it is imperative that we know what programs and areas of spending are most effective through good quality evaluations.*

> *Building a culture of robust and transparent evaluation and embedding that into the policy design, development and review process is crucial to making inroads into entrenched disadvantage.*

While program evaluation is sometimes a pre-requisite to continued funding for a program, it is rare for governments to require evaluation to confirm the failure of a program before discontinuing its funding. For example, CEDA's first *Disrupting Disadvantage* report highlighted cases of programs that were showing promising results but were discontinued without rigorous justification, such as the Victorian Government's Neighborhood Renewal Program.

Disrupting this status quo is made harder by a tendency for programs to focus on easier-to-measure inputs and outputs, rather than genuine outcomes and effectiveness. If desired outcomes are not clearly defined and measured, how can they be evaluated? And if programs are not evaluated, how can we establish they are worth the dollars being invested?

Despite the obvious importance of evaluation, embedding the required culture, discipline and capabilities has proven difficult. This must change if we are to avoid defunding programs that are effective, while retaining and not changing course on programs that are not delivering on outcomes or objectives.

Poor program design and delivery risks creating persistent disadvantage. Building a culture of robust and transparent evaluation and embedding that into the policy design, development and review process is crucial to making inroads into entrenched disadvantage.

2. THE CURRENT PROBLEM WITH EVALUATION

25 per cent (5 of the 20 programs) had no evaluation framework

70 per cent (14 of the 20 programs) were deemed to have either an incomplete, inconsistent or poor evaluation framework.

Australia has a poor track record on improving evaluation in the public service. Despite multiple reviews and decades of attempted reform to public-sector evaluation process, the results have been ineffective and inconsistent.[2]

Evaluation is currently decentralised in the public service. Some evaluation arrangements are formalised by central agencies but remain devolved to departments. There is no requirement for evaluations to be made public, no requirement for a central repository of completed evaluations and no coordination of evaluation at the whole-of-government level.[3]

Evaluations are either not undertaken, or are of poor quality

CEDA analysed a sample of 103 programs – 20 federal and 83 by states and territories – covering a broad range of policy areas based on Auditor-General performance reports (See Appendices 1 and 2 for full details). We used performance audits that had been completed in the past decade that included commentary on evaluation (not all reports discussed evaluation). Under current arrangements these performance reports, along with occasional selected reports from the Productivity Commission (PC), are the only external scrutiny of government evaluations.[4]

The analysis of evaluation in the past decade is sobering. The programs analysed had total costs of more than $200 billion over multiple years. We found 95 per cent of the federal programs had not been appropriately evaluated. Of the 20 federal programs analysed:

- A quarter (5 of the 20 programs) had no evaluation framework; and
- Seventy per cent (14 of the 20 programs) were deemed to have either an incomplete, inconsistent or poor evaluation framework.

Australian governments spend around $64 billion per year on community services such as disability, aged care, social supports and child-protection services (this number does not include cash welfare payments). Based on our finding that 95 per cent of programs over the past decade had not been properly evaluated, this suggests at least $61 billion of community services spending a year is unlikely to be properly evaluated. These programs support our most vulnerable population. It is a major failing that they are not evaluated to ensure they are delivering to both our community and taxpayers.[i]

The only major policy that was found to have an effective evaluation framework in place was the administration of the JobKeeper scheme (Table 1). This is likely due to it being a relatively simple program to evaluate, looking solely at whether or not people stayed in their jobs, with good data sources. The evaluation still did not assess whether there were potentially other more effective ways of spending the money to achieve a similar outcome, nor assess all the COVID-19-related stimulus programs on their effectiveness as a whole.

This is not solely a Federal Government issue. The findings were similar in all states and territories (see Appendix 2).[ii] Most programs had some form of evaluation framework, but with major gaps and therefore limited usefulness. Of the 83-program sample, 53 (64 per cent) were found to have either no evaluation framework or evaluation processes with major problems.

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i This figure has been calculated using the amount of overall spending on community services in 2019-20 from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Overall, 95 per cent of the 20 federal evaluations from Auditor-General Performance audits were found to have inadequate or no evaluation. In 2019-20, $64 billion of spending was on welfare/community services – excluding cash payments. Therefore, (0.95 x 64) $61 billion is the extrapolated figure.

ii CEDA was unable to track exact spending figures for the various state and territory government programs. Unlike most federal Auditor-General reports, expenditure is not reported on for the state and territory reports. There were difficulties in tracking spending from other sources because some programs were a part of a larger spending program and spending was not specified in detail for the sub-program that was audited. Data on this at the state and territory level is generally sparser. Roughly, likely total spending would be in the billions of dollars.

TABLE 1

Sample of key federal program evaluation results (see Appendix 1 for full list)

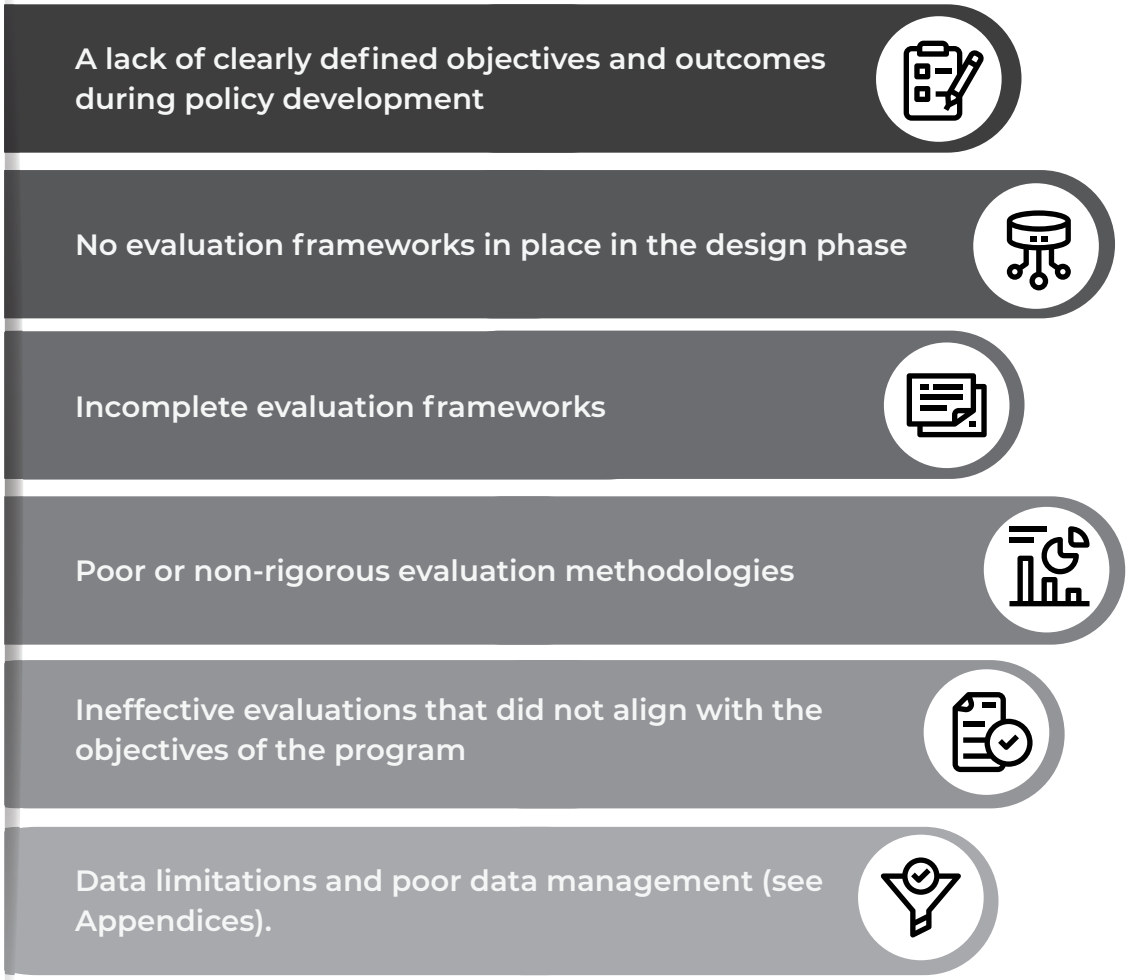
PROGRAM	YEAR OF AUDIT	COST OF PROGRAM	ENTITY	EVALUATION SUMMARY
Administration of the JobKeeper Scheme[5]	2021-22	$89 billion from 2020 to 2022 (Treasury)	Australian Taxation Office and Department of Treasury	Evaluation framework was established and deemed largely effective at performance monitoring; final report released in late 2022.
Design and Governance of Child Care Package	2019-20	$37.1 billion from 2019 to 2022 (ANAO)	Department of Education	Evaluation framework was established during the design phase, however objectives such as greater workforce participation should be outlined more clearly in key documents. Data limitations prevented evaluations from yielding substantive findings.
Implementation and Performance of the Cashless Debit Card Trial – Follow-on	2021-22	$36.5 million in 2020-21 (ANAO)	Department of Social Services	Had an evaluation framework but was ineffective and failed to improve upon previous iterations. Evaluation had flawed methodology and no cost-benefit analysis.
Coordination and Targeting of Domestic Violence Funding and Actions	2018-19	$723 million from 2015 to 2019 (ANAO)	Department of Social Services	Performance monitoring and evaluation was not sufficient to provide assurance that the department was on track to achieve overarching targets. Lacks robust data to assess outcomes. Progress reports lack public transparency.
Evaluating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs	2018-19	$33.4 billion in 2015-16 (PC, 2017)	Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet	Evaluation framework with potential is still being developed five years on. Did not develop a reliable methodology for measuring outcomes. Implementation of framework is only partially effective. Past evaluations mostly focused on process and not enough on outcomes.
Jobactive: Design and Monitoring	2017-18	$7.3 billion from 2015 to 2020 (ANAO)	Department of Employment	Had an evaluation framework but did not address all aspects of the program (only two out of the five main services had an evaluation strategy).
Administration of the National Rental Affordability Scheme	2015-16	$3.3 billion from 2008 to 2027 (ANAO)	Department of Social Services	No processes in place to evaluate whether the scheme had achieved some of the objectives identified, including whether it had any flow-on effect in the housing market.

Green = Evaluation framework complete and deemed effective or has very minor issues

Orange = Evaluation framework incomplete or has minor issues

Red = Evaluation framework absent or has major issues

CEDA's analysis found consistent themes among the failures in evaluation, including:



Outcomes and objectives are not clearly defined

Governments continue to face a major issue: not clearly defining the outcomes that the policy or program is intended to achieve from the outset. This fact stands out when reviewing government evaluations. Without clearly defined outcomes from the start, we cannot properly assess whether the policy has been successful, no matter how well the evaluation is undertaken. When outcomes are not clearly defined, evaluation is far more difficult, and often impossible, to undertake to a high quality.

> *Major policy and spending decisions will be poor when they are made based on perception or opinion, rather than clearly articulated, defined and evaluated outcomes.*

The impacts of poor-quality evaluation are widespread. Without proper evaluation, communities cannot be assured that governments are spending on policies and programs that are in their best interests. This is evident in case studies of major Federal Government policies that were all found to have inadequate evaluations (see Appendix 4).

- The National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS) highlights the lack of regard for key outcomes that were supposed to be achieved.
- The National Ice Action Strategy Rollout highlights the problems when faced with incomplete evaluation frameworks compounded by data limitations and poor management.
- The cashless debit card trial highlights that even when evaluations were being completed and the evidence relied upon by the government to legislate its expansion, the lack of rigour meant the conclusions were unreliable and inconclusive.

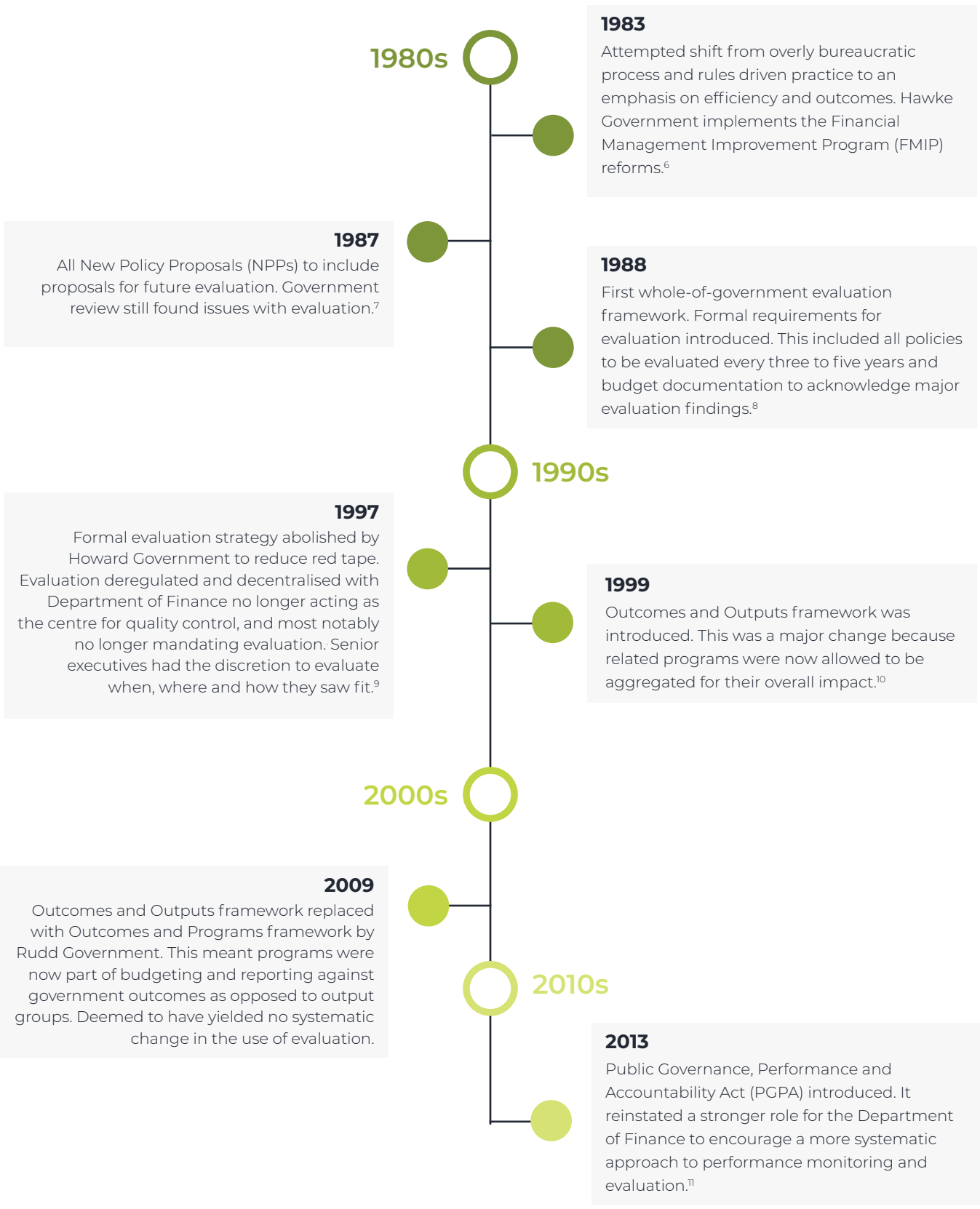
Discussions about whether these programs are a success or a failure are common in the media, particularly around high-profile programs such as the cashless debit card. Major policy and spending decisions will be poor when they are made based on perception or opinion, rather than clearly articulated, defined and evaluated outcomes. This is not possible with the current level and quality of evaluation in Australia, and community services are suffering because of it.

3. DRIVERS OF POOR EVALUATION PRACTICE

The problems with evaluation and consequences of poor evaluation are well known, and many attempts have been made over the years to improve evaluation practices within Australian governments, with very limited success.

This is not due to a lack of good intentions. Policymakers and politicians clearly want to improve the welfare of Australians. What is holding back change is a complex system that often incentivises rapid solutions to problems without proper evaluation of existing programs, combined with challenges in undertaking the evaluations, all compounded by a lack of resourcing.

History of evaluation in the Australian public sector



Incentives

There is often good intent with evaluation, but little incentive to undertake them – this applies across all levels of government. Evaluation plans are rarely required or assessed by governments as part of budget processes, and spending decisions do not rely on having comprehensive evaluation plans, or even clearly defined objectives and outcomes of proposed programs.

Evaluations are time consuming and can be costly to undertake well. Ministers and policymakers are often driven by community pressure to focus on short-term goals and to be seen to be taking action and addressing issues. These understandable time pressures are at odds with the longer-term work required to properly evaluate programs and policies. This leads to evaluations being pushed down the list of priorities, and often not being appropriately resourced.[12]

There is also the potential for reputational risk for both departments and ministers. It is likely that evaluations will show failings in some programs, creating uncomfortable scrutiny and criticism.

Comparison with other countries highlights the lack of incentives for evaluation in Australia. While few countries do evaluation well and many face similar issues around a lack of robust evaluation,[13] some initiatives have shown signs of success.

Canada requires a senior management response and follow-up procedures to evaluation reports. In the UK, where there is no requirement to do so, it is still common for ministers and senior officials to respond to evaluation results where they are undertaken.[14]

This convention seems far weaker in Australia, where a lack of interest in creating a strong evidence base and a tendency to treat evaluation as a compliance measure remain the prevailing attitudes. The use of evaluation champions in some jurisdictions has, however, started to change cultural attitudes.[15]

Complexity and capability

Good quality evaluations are not simple to complete – they take time, money, skills and access to data. This is particularly the case for large or complex programs that may have many

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For those evaluations that are undertaken, it was not uncommon to find that data limitations – ranging from the basics of data not being collected, to a lack of investment in linked data and sharing across jurisdictions, constrained the questions that could be asked, the quality and the method.

interactions with other programs or policies. While there is clear evidence on how to undertake good evaluations (see Section 4), implementing this is challenging and requires appropriate investment.

Evaluation is a specialist skill set, and one that has not seen sufficient investment by successive governments across all jurisdictions. There has been a well-documented decline in evaluation capability in the public service, in particular a lack of expertise and evaluation skills.[16, 17] This undoubtedly translates into poor evaluation quality. The OECD recently found Australia only satisfied one of five mechanisms for promoting evaluation quality.[18]

Access to data

There have been some improvements to data access and sharing in recent years, particularly through the Data and Digital Ministers Meeting, but it must continue to be prioritised.

The importance of data to good evaluation cannot be understated. Governments have failed to generate the data needed to evaluate their own programs. For those evaluations that are undertaken, it was not uncommon to find that data limitations – ranging from the basics of data not being collected, to a lack of investment in linked data and sharing across jurisdictions, constrained the questions that could be asked, the quality and the method.

CEDA examined a sample of 25 evaluation reports on major federal programs, mainly from the social services and health sector. The most significant limitations we found included: failing to identify a comparison group or collect adequate baseline data; a lack of clearly defined objectives; poor data availability; and small sample sizes (see Appendix 3). For example:

- Policies aimed at tackling disproportionately high rates of smoking in Aboriginal communities did not collect any baseline data and failed to establish standardised outcome measures.[19]
- A 2018 evaluation report of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) originally planned to use administrative data to link with survey data for a more robust analysis, but the researchers were unable to access the administrative data during the evaluation.[20]

- Two evaluations of My Health Record suffered from small sample sizes due to fewer than expected survey completions.[21, 22]
- Evaluation of the Individual Placement and Support Trial only covered two years of the three-year trial.[23]

Unfortunately, states and territories do not seem to perform better. Although most state and territory governments have some form of evaluation guideline or toolkit that is well developed, they are not well understood throughout the public sector and usage is inconsistent. For example, a 2016 performance audit of NSW's implementation of its evaluation initiative found it was largely ineffective. It found that no information was provided on the performance of programs that were evaluated and evaluation outcomes were not used to analyse agency funding proposals.[24]

Culture

Most of these issues arise from the pervasive problems with evaluation culture in government departments.[25, 26] The Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) submission to the 2019 APS review acknowledged these issues in depth (see Box 1).

Common attitudes that undermine a healthy evaluation culture include: a belief that they are a waste of time because the results are never used; concerns they may be used to shut down programs that staff think are successful; and concern that evaluations may reflect poorly on staff performance. There is a lack of understanding across the public service about how evaluation can be used to improve service delivery and ensure resources are being used appropriately.[27]

Resourcing

With little incentive to complete evaluations, or even plan for them, combined with a culture that does not encourage or value them, it is unsurprising that they are not appropriately resourced within governments.

There has been a lack of investment in upskilling and training staff, improving data sources and

“

There is a lack of understanding across the public service about how evaluation can be used to improve service delivery and ensure resources are being used appropriately.

access and implementing evaluation frameworks. Resourcing is varied across governments. Some departments have dedicated evaluation units and strategies while other departments have none. Very few departments have formal criteria for evaluation.[28]

This also extends beyond government departments. Community services are increasingly being delivered by the not-for-profit sector and external providers, rather than direct service provision by governments. Evaluations are no less important under these circumstances, yet evaluation and data collection is rarely properly resourced as part of contract arrangements.

BOX 1

Evaluation in the APS

In 2019, the Australia & New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) published a research paper submitted to the Independent Review of the Australian Public Service (APS). It examined the current state of the evaluation framework and actions needed to deliver world-class public policy performance.

It found the APS approach to evaluation consists of:

- Focusing on immediate priorities at the behest of ministers;
- Focusing on reputational risk, with efforts and resources dedicated to defending against criticism, rather than learning from experience; and
- Viewing evaluation of policies as a lower priority.

Barriers to effective evaluation included:

- Accountability misalignment;
- The media cycle and immediate community pressures driving ministers to focus on short-term goals while ignoring long-term governance; and
- Debate over whether evaluation should be centralised into a particular unit or remain decentralised and undertaken by line departments.

Other common themes that emerged included:

- Evaluations have been too narrowly focused and did not ask the right questions;
- Poor methodology;
- Limited data;
- Lack of independence; and
- A preference for promoting successful programs, while evaluations that showed failure were restrained due to fear of embarrassing government.

Source: Gray, M., & Bray, J. R. (2019). *Evaluation in the Australian Public Service: current state of play, some issues and future directions.* Carlton: The Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG).

4. HOW TO GET IT RIGHT

The elements of good evaluation policy have been well researched and documented. Multiple guidelines and principles have been prepared by global and Australian organisations,[iii] all with some clear common elements. There is no need for new guidelines to be developed from scratch, but governments should agree on a framework and implement it consistently.

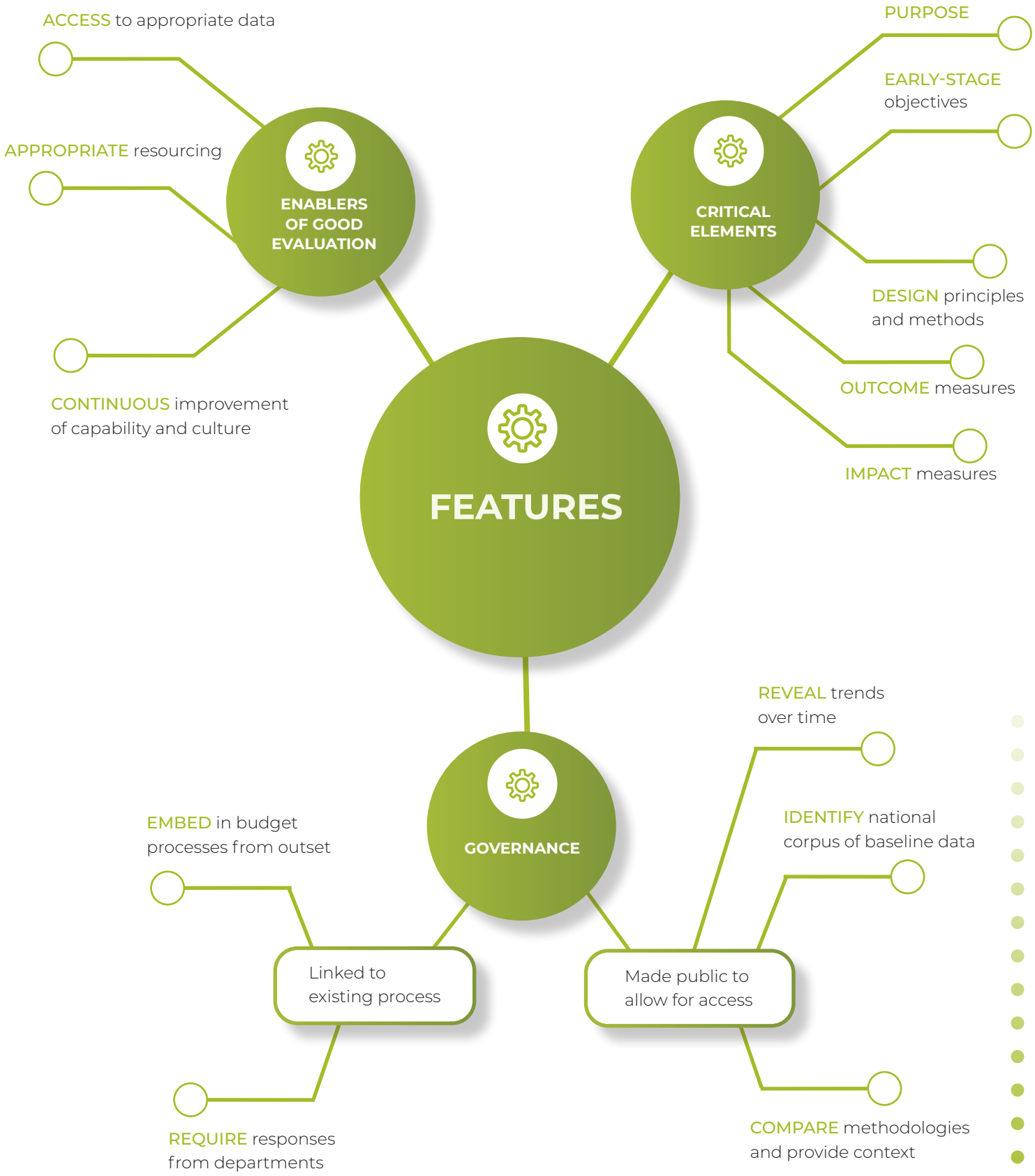
National evaluations must be consistent, especially throughout successive government programs.[29] A whole-of-government focus is important – not just in consistent approach but also in understanding the linkages and interdependencies across portfolios and consulting.

There are many features of good evaluation practice. Our analysis suggests the following areas are the most critical to embedding and maintaining good practice over time (Figure 2).

iii For example, the World Bank's evaluation guidelines, the UK Government's Green and Magenta books, and the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Lab resources.

FIGURE 2

FEATURES OF GOOD EVALUATION PRACTICE



Enablers of good evaluation

Access to appropriate data, particularly linked data sets, is crucial to good evaluation. Evidence for effectiveness and impact must be collected and kept over time. Agencies must be appropriately resourced to collect data upfront, and to analyse and update over time.

CEDA set out in detail the importance and role of data for evaluation and policy development, particularly linked data, in our previous report, *Disrupting Disadvantage Part Two*.

Critical elements of an evaluation

All evaluations must be fit for purpose and take into account the broader policy context of the program. Conducting evaluations is expensive, and the evaluation process must be proportional to the size and complexity of policy or program, not one-size-fits-all.

Whole-of-government programs or policies, which may include multiple agencies or sub-programs, will require large-scale evaluations, and may require the input of outside experts or additional support. Smaller evaluations, particularly for agency-specific programs, can primarily be done by departmental staff and should be less resource intensive.

It is critical to identify which components of a program are to be evaluated and for what purpose, which will aid in identifying what works and what doesn't work during a program's life cycle. It is important to evaluate both outcomes and impacts. Evaluating the outcomes measures the effects on a particular group, while evaluating the impacts assesses its contributions to achieving the program's larger objectives.

Governance

Evaluations must be linked to existing government processes.

Evaluations cannot be left up to the choice of departments or ministers. They must be embedded within a range of existing government processes, including the Budget Expenditure Review Committee, to change the incentives around undertaking evaluations. There is also a role for evaluation frameworks and plans to be included in National Agreements and other major spending commitments.

Evaluations need to be incentivised, not just to secure funding, but throughout the lifecycle of the project.

Initiatives that have had some success overseas include requiring a response from senior departmental management to the recommendations made in evaluation reports, as well as the use of evaluation champions to embed a strong culture and governance. [30] For example:

- In the United Kingdom, the What Works Network was launched in 2013. Activities of the network – which are both government and non-government funded – focus on improving the use of high-quality evidence and helping policymakers commit to using this evidence. The network is committed to publicly releasing the results of evaluations, regardless of whether programs were shown to work or not.[31]
- The United States has evaluation officers who serve as a champion for evaluation within their agency. These officers serve as senior advisors to agency leaders on evaluation practice and are required to collaborate with the Chief Data Officer to develop an agency's learning agenda and annual evaluation plan.[32]

Other approaches that are showing signs of success include the implementation of Results Based Accountability, which has been adopted by both the South Australian and Queensland Governments. This approach identifies the performance accountability of program managers and population accountability that rests with the broader community to improve program outcomes, particularly in key areas such as early childhood and community services. [33][34]

Evaluations must be made public to allow for accountability.

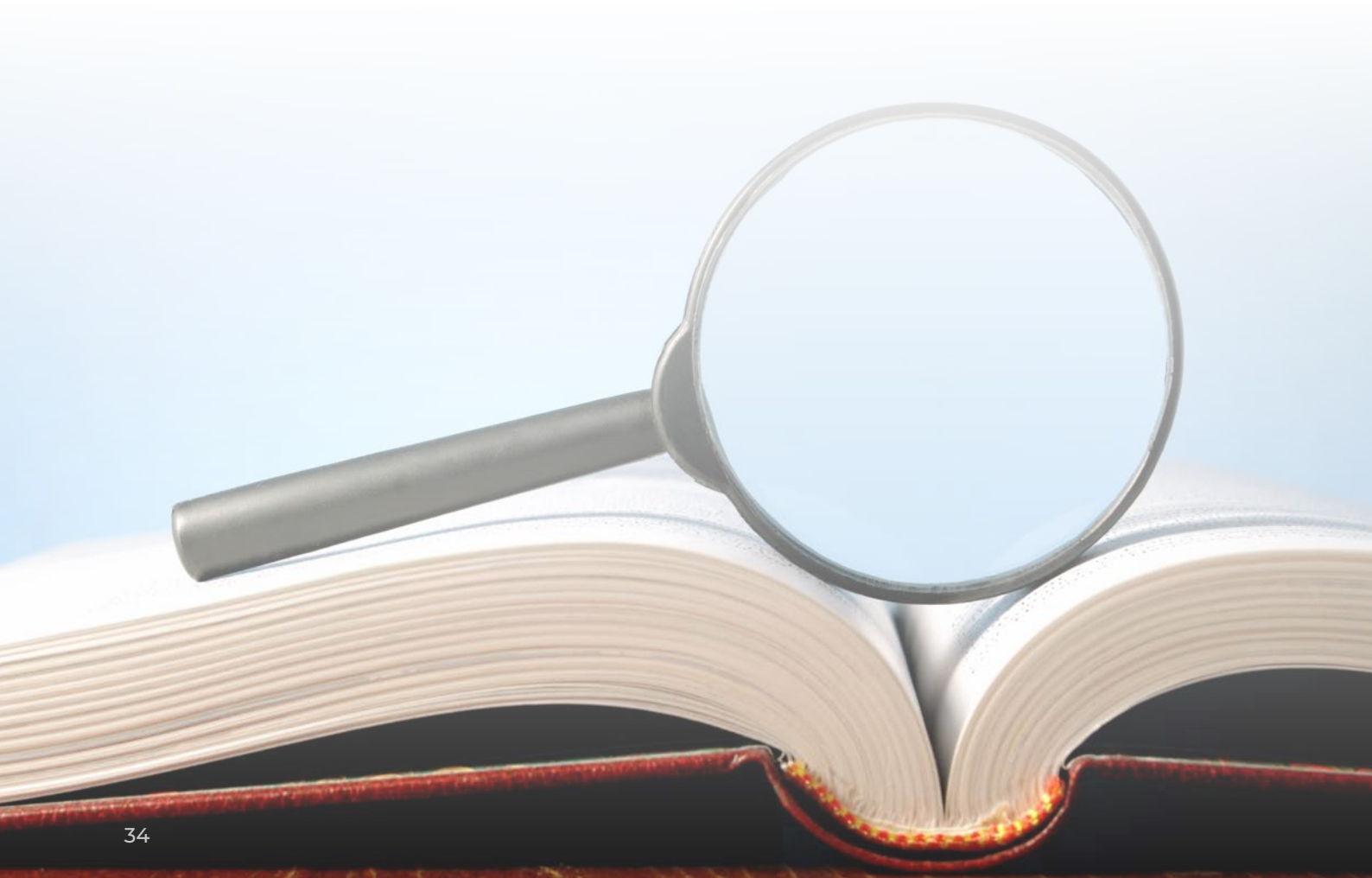
A key feature of good evaluation practice is the public release of all evaluation reports. This allows for accountability, but also the ability to track programs and progress over time and avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.

These should be maintained in a public national repository, allowing policymakers and the community to approach evaluation as a learning process and not simply a box to tick or a potential reputational risk. A sizeable repository of national data and evaluations across time will help to demonstrate that programs are not simply an opportunity or a cost, but instead a critical piece to solving a problem.

Commonwealth Evaluation Policy and Toolkit

In 2021, Federal Treasury launched the Commonwealth Evaluation Policy and Toolkit, which is currently being implemented. It guides government agencies on evidence-based policy and aims to embed a culture of evaluation and learning from experience. This policy and toolkit broadly match the best practice frameworks and principles noted earlier, although it should continue to be reviewed as agencies make use of it. Additionally, the Productivity Commission has developed an Indigenous Evaluation Strategy, which follows many of the principles outlined above (Box 2).

The key to the success of these policies and strategies will be in implementation and uptake amongst government agencies. It is therefore crucial that the appropriate mechanisms are in place to not only tackle the technical challenges of evaluation, but also the cultural challenges that prevent the widespread application of good practice.



BOX 2

Indigenous Evaluation Strategy

The PC's 2020 Indigenous Evaluation Strategy provides a whole-of-government approach. It notes that evaluation of Indigenous programs is often considered an afterthought, which affects data collection and evaluation design.

It aims to improve the lives of Indigenous Australians by:

- Centring Indigenous people, perspectives, priorities and knowledge in all stages of evaluation;
- Lifting the bar on the quality of program evaluation;
- Supporting a culture of evaluation and building an accessible body of evidence; and
- Promoting a whole-of-government approach to priority setting and evaluation of Indigenous policies and programs.

Although it focuses on Indigenous policy, many elements can be applied to policy design more broadly. Guiding principles include:

- **CREDIBLE** – Evaluation must be rigorous and fit-for purpose, answer the right questions and suit the context in which the program operates. Releasing data to allow results to be replicated enhances credibility.
- **USEFUL** – Agencies should always intend to use the findings to inform new or improve existing policies. What is important to Indigenous people should also be strongly considered. Useful evaluations will contribute to the evidence base and allow policymakers to conduct meta-analysis.
- **ETHICAL** – Ethical standards should be applied at all stages. This will improve quality and consistency. Under the strategy, some evaluations will be reviewed by an ethics committee and all will need to rigorously document ethical risks. Budgeting and timeframes should also incorporate ethics requirements through engaging with relevant stakeholders.
- **TRANSPARENT** – Publishing findings, information on how evaluations were conducted and how the findings were used to improve policies is critical. This allows stakeholders to judge their credibility, ethics and rigour. Agencies should respond to the findings, so the public understands how they are improving policies and programs.

To support an evaluation culture, the strategy recommends: departments be required to publish Three Year Evaluation Forward Work Plans; departments prepare Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Impact Assessment and Evaluation Plans; and the establishment of an Office of Indigenous Policy Evaluation to ensure agencies have the required skills.

Source: Productivity Commission Indigenous Evaluation Strategy (2020).

Examples of good evaluation

Despite ongoing issues with embedding consistent and high-quality evaluation across Australian governments, some good evaluations have informed ongoing policy development. Examples include:

- The School Enrolment and Attendance Measure (SEAM), which underwent multiple evaluations, including a randomised controlled trial, to inform policy decisions;
- The Drug Court of NSW underwent multiple evaluations, including a randomised controlled trial and recent subsequent evaluations, to inform its effectiveness;
- The National Competition Policy (NCP) embedded evidence-based policy and evaluation throughout its implementation, including a combination of ex-ante and ex-post evaluation.
- The Try Test Learn program focused on improving the evidence base of what works to reduce long-term welfare dependence by embedding evaluation across pilot programs using a range of qualitative and quantitative methods.

For more detail on these examples, see Appendix 5.

Common elements of these successful evaluations included:

- A program having clearly defined outcomes and objectives from the outset;
- Programs undergoing evaluation throughout their life cycle, not just at completion, and program design being amended to reflect evaluation findings;
- Availability of a range of data sources, and sufficiently large sample sizes; and
- Rigorous methodology employed and sufficient resources to complete the evaluation.

5. THE PATH TO BETTER EVALUATION PRACTICE

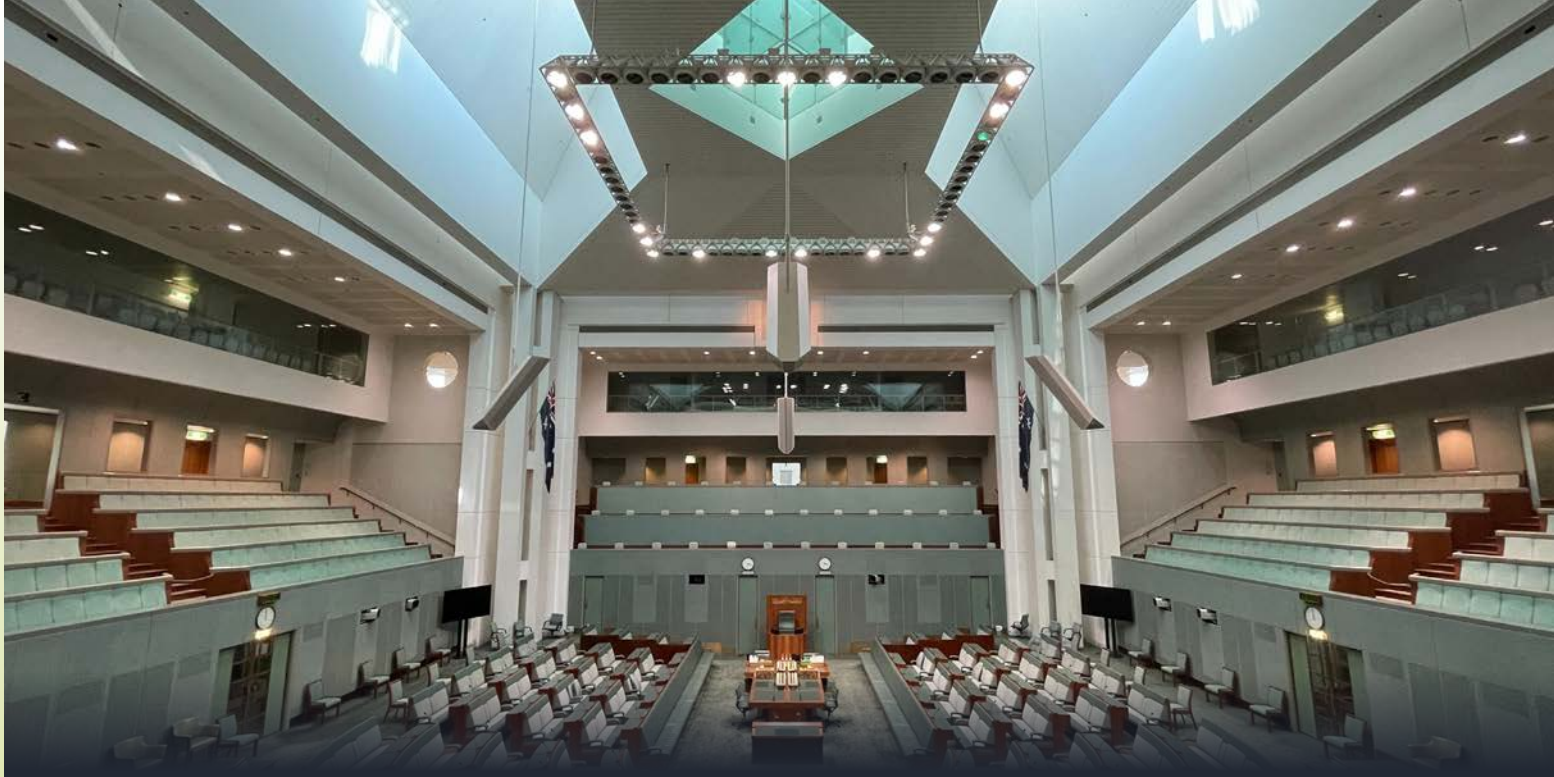
Given the problems are well known and many previous attempts to improve them have failed, how can we improve the quality and breadth of evaluations in Australia?

The Federal Government has committed to improving and embedding evaluation culture. Assistant Minister for Competition, Charities and Treasury Andrew Leigh has been vocal about the need to get a better sense of which policies work.[35] Minister Leigh has pushed not only for more programs to be evaluated, but also that they are high-quality evaluations.[36] Treasurer Jim Chalmers and Finance Minister Katy Gallagher have also mentioned the benefits of better evaluation in various speeches, particularly in relation to addressing the spending side of the Budget.[37, 38]

Embedding effective evaluation will take time, and we are clearly starting from a low base. Currently, almost no federal programs are being effectively evaluated. Good evaluation is not an easy task and will take time and resources – outcomes and objectives are difficult to measure, particularly in the community services space. But we need to start making progress.

For true reform, governments must take the time to carefully implement changes. We can't expect that problems will be resolved overnight, but need incremental change as capability is developed.

Cultural change is particularly difficult and needs to come from the top – from ministers and senior policymakers. Moving too quickly, or being too ambitious without targeted prioritisation, risks further failure and repeating mistakes of the past.



BOX 3

Labor plan for Office of the Evaluator-General

In late 2018, Dr Andrew Leigh announced Labor would create an Evaluator-General if it won the 2019 Federal Election.[39] The Office of the Evaluator-General (OEG) would:

- Be based within the Department of Treasury;
- Preferably conduct randomised trials of government programs; and
- Be allocated a budget of $5 million per year, starting in 2019-20.

Dr Leigh raised the pledge for an Evaluator-General in a June 2022 speech to the Australian Bureau of Statistics after Labor won the 2022 Federal Election.[40]

RECOMMENDATION 1

Where to start?

Labor's proposal for an Office of the Evaluator-General (Box 3) is a good starting point to change the evaluation culture in Federal Government but it currently lacks detail. To be successful, the OEG would need to have a clear remit and purpose, particularly regarding interactions with line agencies.

We recommend that an OEG's primary role should be to champion evaluation and develop capability and capacity throughout the public service. Evaluation would continue to be primarily undertaken by departments, however, the new central evaluation body would steward and oversee progress and best practice.

If the Government decides not to establish an OEG, these functions could be carried out by a central agency such as Treasury.

The OEG would also need a clear remit as to how it interacts with other agencies in this space. There is scope for agencies to coordinate which stage of the evaluation cycle they enter. The Office of Impact Analysis can create regulatory impact statements when needed for policy proposals at the very beginning.

The OEG would embed an evaluation culture, provide the resources for evaluation, convene evaluation networks and guide process and impact evaluations. The Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) would continue conducting performance audits to see if evaluation frameworks have been embedded with policy programs. The ANAO in this capacity would have a close relationship with the OEG. Finally, the PC would be critical to identifying systematic evaluation gaps in its policy inquiries.

There are risks to going too far with centralisation of evaluation. Problems occur when evaluations are completed by staff with little understanding of policy and its objectives, and are too far removed from the experience of those implementing the policy or the people impacted by the policy.

Too much power vested in a central body can also create an adversarial relationship with line agencies that weakens support for evaluation. Primary responsibility should remain with line agencies and their subject matter experts.

An OEG is not the solution to all evaluation problems, but it is a starting point. It is neither feasible, nor desirable, that all evaluations would go through an OEG. The ultimate mark of success for an OEG may be that after a decade it is no longer required, as a culture of high-quality evaluation has been embedded throughout the public service.

THE NEW OFFICE OF THE EVALUATOR-GENERAL SHOULD:

CHAMPION EVALUATION CULTURE

Champion an evaluation culture throughout the public service to embed a strong culture of developing a quality evidence base and evaluation.

PROVIDE EXPERT ADVICE AND REVIEW

Provide expert advice and review to departments, and external service providers, to undertake their own evaluations, including assisting with methodological design and maintaining a panel of independent data, policy and evaluation experts.

UNDERTAKE RANDOMISED CONTROL TRIALS

Where required, undertake complex or high-profile evaluations such as those requiring randomised control trials.

REVIEW DATA GAPS

Review key data gaps across evaluations and work with statistical agencies to prioritise data requirements. This would include reporting to the Treasurer and the Data and Digital Ministers Meeting on priorities for data investment.

MAINTAIN A NATIONAL REPOSITORY

Maintain a national repository of completed evaluations.

RECOMMENDATION 2

What else needs to be done?

There must be broader reform beyond the establishment of an Office of the Evaluator-General. To truly address and improve evaluation, governments must improve incentives, invest in data and capability and embed cultural change.

Get the incentives right

It is necessary to integrate evaluation into as many government decision-making and budget processes as possible. Evaluation plans should be developed at the same time as the policy is being developed, along with clearly defined objectives and expected outcomes from the policy or program. This should be a core funding requirement.

Without a legislated requirement, there will be no incentives for agencies to improve on evaluation outcomes. There is good intent within government to improve on evaluation, but it is complex and costly, and the incentives need to be there.

Evaluation plans should include proper resourcing for undertaking the evaluation and data collection. This should also apply where services are contracted out to external providers, which is increasingly the case.

Governments should establish a rolling schedule of program evaluations.[iv] Priority should go to the largest spending programs that are growing faster than the economy – these are primarily in the community space. Such evaluations should not simply identify what is wrong with a program, but also assess a range of options for greater effectiveness in meeting program objectives and outcomes.

Evaluation plans and frameworks should also be used to develop a shared understanding of outcomes and objectives for the provision of major national services. These can then be used to inform the development of National Agreements between the Commonwealth and states and territories. These are major spending commitments between jurisdictions on areas of importance and would promote better evaluation and accountability across all levels of government.

iv CEDA is reiterating a position it took in its *Budget Reset Paper* from March 2022.

Evaluation plans should include proper resourcing for undertaking the evaluation and data collection.

Evaluation is important across all policy areas. However, community services and entrenched disadvantage are areas where we consistently see the failings of poor policy, even as spending is growing.

INCENTIVISING EVALUATION WITHIN GOVERNMENT PROCESSES

LEGISLATE REVIEW OF MAJOR PROGRAMS

To rebuild discipline in program evaluation, the Federal Government should legislate the regular review of existing major Commonwealth-funded programs (ie: those with spending of more than $100 million) at least every five years. Priority should be given to community-services programs.

FUNDING DEPENDENT ON EVALUATION PLAN

Initial funding for new programs should require the submission of an evaluation plan as part of budget processes. Plans must include resourcing, policy objectives, expected outcomes and how data and evidence will be collected to support an effective evaluation. This should also apply to services contracted to external providers.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Ensure evaluation requirements are well targeted and proportionate

All policies and programs require some level of evaluation, but it should be fit-for-purpose and commensurate to the size and impact of the policy or program being evaluated. Frameworks and policies should clearly set out the appropriate level of evaluation, what skill sets are required and who should undertake evaluations, depending on the size and complexity of the program.

Evaluations are often contracted out by government departments to academics or consultants due to capacity or capability constraints. There will always be some role for this, particularly if specific expertise is required. But these third parties can simply assist with technical challenges rather than conducting an entire evaluation. For example, the ability to use large administrative data sets has not historically been within the capability of the public service. Trusted independent third parties could help with this.

Contestability of evaluation should be a part of the conversation. There would be benefit to allowing broader access to government data, particularly to academics or other experts. This would provide increased levels of accountability and ensure there is nowhere for governments to hide by only providing high-level information or data.

Reasonable concerns about privacy will arise, but these can be mitigated through careful planning and management of data, such as by de-identifying data.[v] Transparency is paramount to effective evaluation practice.

Widespread use and reliance on external experts, however, should not be the norm, particularly for smaller programs or policies. Short and sharp process evaluations for smaller policies can be done within government. Using trusted experts outside government will be necessary while capability within the public service is being built up and to bring independent thinking, but ultimately, evaluation should be a core skill and capability within departments.

v This is discussed in detail in CEDA's *Disrupting Disadvantage Part Two.*

There is scope to conduct more randomised controlled trials (RCTs) where appropriate, to establish causal connections. One example in Australia is the Behavioural Insights Unit established within the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet, which collects data on the frontline and undertakes RCTs to inform future government interventions.[41]

RCTs are considered the gold standard because such experiments answer the critical question for many policy interventions: what would have happened to the people affected if the policy was not implemented? Of course, RCTs cannot be applied to all policies, and may be politically challenging due to necessarily having to deny the policy to a control group. They are, however, extremely powerful in eliminating selection bias, which has been prevalent in previous government evaluations.[vi]

IMPROVING EVALUATION PRACTICES

EVALUATION FRAMEWORKS

The Federal Government (through the OEG or otherwise) should implement and enforce the uptake of an evaluation framework fit for application across programs of different magnitudes and complexity, including external service providers, building on the Commonwealth Evaluation Policy and Toolkit.

ACADEMIC ACCESS

Allow academics access to data on key government programs to provide outside accountability and encourage stronger evaluation within government.

vi Randomised control trials are viewed the gold standard for policy evaluation but are rarely utilised. As there is no single comprehensive database of government evaluations, CEDA replicated a simple exercise Andrew Leigh conducted over 10 years ago. CEDA searched on Google 'randomised' and 'evaluation' on the gov.au domain which brought up 33,500 hits, while a search for just 'evaluation' brought up 2,200,000 hits. These numbers overestimate the true number of randomised and non-randomised evaluations, since they are counts of hits rather than unique files, and many files may just talk about methods and theory as opposed to actual evaluation of programs. However, to the extent that the ratio of hits to unique files is the same for both (a reasonable assumption), this suggests very roughly that less than 1.5 per cent of Australian government documents or evaluations in recent years have used or mentioned a randomised design. When Andrew Leigh conducted the search in 2009, it was 0.5 per cent. Source: *Leigh (2009), Evidence-based policy: summon the randomistas?*

RECOMMENDATION 4

Overcome data and technical challenges

There remain some technical challenges that prevent comprehensive evaluation of policies and programs. These are well understood, however, and can be overcome with targeted investment, particularly in linked data. There has been some good progress on data collection and sharing at both federal and state and territory level, but it does need to continue to be a priority.

CEDA addresses the issues around data and data sharing in detail in *Disrupting Disadvantage Part Two*. CEDA continues to advocate for the development of a consolidated linked national human services asset, which would facilitate stronger evidence-based policy design and evaluation. Policy in support of data sharing is well progressed across jurisdictions but needs to move faster and take advantage of the growing momentum and use cases.

Many of the data limitations could be overcome by better evaluation design from the outset – by ensuring appropriate data is available and collected. Data collection must be an obligatory part of program design and appropriately funded, including where the program is being delivered by external providers.

Without early planning for data requirements, evaluations will be severely limited or unnecessarily expensive. Poor design for data collection can also result in false inferences being drawn.

Evaluation is a specialised skill set. The ability to work with data needs to improve across all areas of government.[42] While all staff working in program design and policy need to be upskilled to understand and prioritise evaluation, there must also be investment in the specialised skill sets required to design and undertake evaluations.

Difficulties with evaluating programs for effectiveness should not be a reason to not

evaluate them or make it a lower priority. An ongoing program of high-quality research that enriches the evidence base alongside tackling the challenges of direct evaluation will always help to supplement policymakers' decision-making and expert opinion.[43]

The Intergovernmental Agreement on Data Sharing came into effect in 2021 and commits all jurisdictions to share data as a default. This is a great step forward, however in practice data sharing is still limited. There is an ongoing role for the Data and Digital Ministers Meeting to progress data linkage and sharing and prioritise better evaluation across governments.

IMPROVING DATA ACCESS AND AVAILABILITY FOR BETTER EVALUATIONS

HUMAN SERVICES LINKED DATA ASSET

Develop a National Human Services Linked Data Asset in line with the recommendation of CEDA's 2021 report *Disrupting Disadvantage Part 2*.

ASSESS DATA AVAILABILITY

Data availability, and timelines to appropriately collect data, to be considered from the outset of program design (including where programs are being delivered by external providers) as part of the evaluation framework.

WORK WITH STATISTICAL AGENCIES

Review key data gaps across evaluations and work with statistical agencies to prioritise data requirements.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Get the governance right

There is plenty of evidence showing what makes a good evaluation and how to conduct one. But it takes more than just knowing what makes a good evaluation to change practice.

The bigger issues are cultural change, political will and the capacity and capability within the public sector to undertake quality evaluations. Some of this will happen through the legislative changes recommended above, but more is required to truly change the culture around evaluation.

The attitudes of both senior management and ministers will be crucial to embedding cultural change – the tone must be set from the top. It is particularly important that agencies, and individual staff, are not punished for evaluations showing that programs are unsuccessful. Instead, they need to be viewed as tools for improving future program design.

Making all evaluations public is an important step to enhancing accountability. A national repository should include all evaluations of government policies and programs. This should include a clear list of programs where evaluations have not been undertaken.

Cultural change is crucial but it will be a slow process. It requires buy-in and leadership. A research-and-evaluation culture that values evidence-based results, establishing dedicated evaluation units, achieving a critical mass of researchers and strengthening links with academic and other research bodies will take time and effort, but must be prioritised.[44]

It is particularly important that agencies, and individual staff, are not punished for evaluations showing that programs are unsuccessful. Instead, they need to be viewed as tools for improving future program design.

IMPROVING GOVERNANCE AND EMBEDDING AN EVALUATION CULTURE WITHIN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

EVALUATIONS MADE PUBLIC

All evaluations should be made public to enhance accountability and maintained in a national repository.

DEPARTMENTAL RESPONSES TO RECOMMENDATIONS

Require departmental responses to recommendations made in evaluations.

PANEL OF INDEPENDENT EXPERTS

Establish a panel of independent experts with data, policy and program expertise that can advise government departments on evaluations.

Conclusion

The poor quality and low level of evaluations across government in Australia are resulting in badly designed and implemented policies that harm those who can least afford it.

We know how to do better, but have so far lacked the political will, culture and resources to implement true change.

Evaluation will need to become a legislative requirement to build discipline within the public sector. But this on its own will not be enough. There must be an investment in capacity and capability, and true cultural change – role-modelled by ministers and senior executives – through all levels of the public service.

We can no longer accept money being wasted on services, policies and programs that fail to deliver outcomes for the community. We must take steps now to improve evaluation, starting with major community services.

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Auditor-General's Department of South Australia 58

Australian Capital Territory Audit Office 58

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National Rental Affordability Scheme 67

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Drug Court of New South Wales 71

National Competition Policy 71

Try Test and Learn Program 72

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LEGEND FOR APPENDICES 1 AND 2

Green = Evaluation framework complete and deemed effective or has very minor issues

Orange = Evaluation framework incomplete or has minor issues

Red = Evaluation framework absent or has major issues

Appendix 1

Summary of evaluation efforts from Auditor-General performance audits (Federal Government)

PROGRAM	YEAR OF AUDIT	COST OF PROGRAM	ENTITY	EVALUATION SUMMARY
Administration of the JobKeeper Scheme[45]	2021-22	$89 billion from 2020 to 2022 (Treasury)	Australian Taxation Office and Department of Treasury	Evaluation framework was established and deemed largely effective at performance monitoring; final report released in late 2022.
Design and Governance of the Childcare Package[46]	2019-20	$37.1 billion from 2019 to 2022 (ANAO)	Department of Education	Evaluation framework was established during the design phase, however objectives such as greater workforce participation should have been outlined more clearly in key documents; data limitations prevented evaluations from yielding substantive findings.
Implementation of the My Health Record System[47]	2019-20	$1.15 billion from 2012 to 2016 plus $374 million from 2017 to 2020 (ANAO)	Department of Health	The research required for evaluation and official evaluation documentation setting out milestones for these arrangements were not present.
Defence's Implementation of the First Principles Review[48]	2017-18	Hundreds of millions of dollars (ANAO)	Department of Defence	Originally intended a limited evaluation that only considered parts of the review; now includes a more comprehensive evaluation of all review areas.
Delivery and Evaluation of Grant Programmes[49]	2015-16	Billions of dollars (ANAO)	Various departments	Two of three departments had evaluation plans, only one was deemed comprehensive; all departments gave less attention to acting on evaluation findings.
The Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure[50]	2013-14	$107.5 million from 2013 to 2023 (ANAO)	Department of Human Services	Evaluation framework was established but had limited performance measures; this was later improved and evaluation reports were released but these evaluation reports found the trial's impact on school enrolment was unclear at the time; insufficient enrolment history of non-government school systems prevented full evaluation; other data-related issues prevented effective evaluation.

Expansion of Telehealth Services[51]	2022-23	$100 million in 2020 (ANAO)	Department of Health and Aged Care	Did not have any plan for performance monitoring or evaluation; lacked measures and targets that could inform performance.
Implementation and Performance of the Cashless Debit Card Trial – Follow-on[52]	2021-22	$36.5 million in 2020-21 (ANAO)	Department of Social Services	Had an evaluation framework but was ineffective and failed to improve upon previous iterations; evaluation had flawed methodology and no cost-benefit analysis.
Monitoring the Impact of Government School Funding – Follow-up[53]	2020-21	$20.23 billion in 2019 (ANAO)	Department of Education, Skills and Employment	Department planned to undertake an evaluation. This was difficult due to limited ability to measure impact of school funding on educational outcomes.
Grant Program Management by the Australian Renewable Energy Agency[54]	2020-21	$2.2 billion from 2012 to 2021 (ANAO)	Australian Renewable Energy Agency	Evaluation framework did not clearly demonstrate that objectives were being achieved; evaluations had potential conflicts of interest and lacked clarity on meeting objectives.
National Ice Action Strategy Rollout[55]	2019-20	$451.5 million from 2016 to 2021 (ANAO)	Department of Health	Had no overall evaluation framework, no collection of baseline data and ineffective public reporting of progress due to lacking a sound approach to utilising data effectively.
Delivery of the Humanitarian Settlement Program[56]	2019-20	$129.8 million in 2018-19 (ANAO)	Department of Home Affairs	Lack of reliable performance information meant program effectiveness could not be determined; client outcome data was not tracked.
Implementation of the Digital Continuity 2020 Policy[57]	2019-20	--	Across entities	Evaluation arrangements were inappropriate; effectiveness of evaluation was limited; evaluation objectives and targets did not align with program objectives; had neither quality assurance processes nor clear and consistent benchmarks.
Evaluating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs[58]	2018-19	$33.4 billion in 2015-16 (PC, 2017)	Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet	Evaluation framework with potential was still being developed five years later; did not develop a reliable methodology for measuring outcomes; implementation of framework was only partially effective; past evaluations focused on process and not enough on outcomes.
Coordination and Targeting of Domestic Violence Funding and Actions[59]	2018-19	$723 million from 2015 to 2019 (ANAO)	Department of Social Services	Performance monitoring and evaluation was not sufficient to ensure the department was on track to achieve overarching targets; lacks robust data to assess outcomes; progress reports lack public transparency.

Management of Commonwealth National Parks[60]	2018-19	$200 million plus $50 million per year since 2019 (ANAO)	Department of the Environment and Energy	No effective evaluation framework established; performance measures incomplete and lacked rigour, clear targets, baselines and description of measurement methods.
Funding Models for Threatened Species Management[61]	2017-18	$237 million from 2015 to 2018 (ANAO)	Department of the Environment and Energy	Not well placed to monitor effectiveness; had yet to establish a fit-for-purpose measuring and reporting framework; limited performance data available; limited evaluation only commenced as an afterthought.
jobactive: Design and Monitoring[62]	2017-18	$7.3 billion from 2015 to 2020 (ANAO)	Department of Employment	Had an evaluation framework but did not address all aspects of the program (only two of the five main services had an evaluation strategy).
Indigenous Aged Care[63]	2017-18	$216 million in 2015 (ANAO)	Department of Health	A 2009 report indicated limited evaluation and recommended developing a framework, however no evaluation was undertaken by the release date of this report.
Administration of the National Rental Affordability Scheme[64]	2015-16	$3.3 billion from 2008 to 2027 (ANAO)	Department of Social Services	No processes to evaluate whether the scheme had achieved objectives, including whether it had encouraged large-scale investment in affordable housing, the innovative design of affordable housing and/or had any flow-on effect in the housing market.

Total reports = 20. Green = 1/20 (5%). Orange = 5/20 (25%). Red = 14/20 (70%).

Appendix 2

Summary of evaluation efforts from Auditor-General performance audits (state and territory government)

Victorian Auditor-General's Office

PROGRAM	YEAR OF AUDIT	ENTITY	EVALUATION SUMMARY
Protecting Victoria's Biodiversity[65]	2021	Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning	Evaluation framework in place with models for best practice, however, gaps in data prevent demonstrable outcomes.
Delivering the Solar Homes Program[66]	2021	Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning	Evaluation not embedded from the start; methodology only finalised three years after program started.
Reducing Bushfire Risk[67]	2021	Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning	Evaluation framework in place, however gaps in implementing evaluation of particular programs.
Managing Rehabilitation Services in Youth Detention[68]	2018	Department of Justice and Regulation	No official documented evaluation policy, but still conducted evaluations with some gaps in implementation.
Community Health Program[69]	2018	Department of Health and Human Services	Process evaluation frameworks in place, seemed to be undertaking evaluation but some gaps noted.
Quality of Child Protection Data[70]	2022	Department of Families, Fairness and Housing	Significant issues with data (incomplete, inaccurate and inconsistent) made it difficult to monitor progress and conduct evaluation of outcomes; department did not comply with government data quality standards.
Victoria's Alcohol and Other Drug Treatment Data[71]	2022	Department of Health	Poor quality data limited ability to conduct effective evaluations; limited capability of staff and service providers to handle and understand data.
Kinship Care[72]	2022	Department of Families, Fairness and Housing	Unable to know if outcomes were being achieved because they were not reported or monitored; incomplete data prevented effective evaluation.
Offsetting Native Vegetation Loss on Private Land[73]	2022	Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning	Evaluation framework in place with reports released, however no reports covered outcomes; data limitations also persist.

Victoria's Homelessness Response[74]	2020	Department of Health and Human Services	Evaluation framework in place; gaps in implementing evaluation of particular programs; no baseline data from which to measure performance against objectives.
Ravenhall Prison: Rehabilitating and Reintegrating Prisoners[75]	2020	Corrections Victoria	Major gaps and flaws in evaluation framework to understand Ravenhall's recidivism outcomes is a "significant missed opportunity".
School Compliance with Victoria's Child Safe Standards[76]	2019	Department of Education and Training	Evaluation framework in place, however conflicts of interest arose (department evaluating its own program); evaluations did not align with minister's stated expectations; and regulator could not be assured it implemented an evidence-based regulatory approach and is unable to evaluate outcomes.
Child and Youth Mental Health[77]	2019	Department of Health and Human Services	Evaluation framework in place; some evaluations have not been publicly released due to "a change in government", only 0.6% of funding was allocated to evaluation.
Access to Mental Health Services[78]	2019	Department of Health and Human Services	Long-term evaluation framework only established five years after plan became active; workforce strategy had unclear objectives and no plan for formal evaluation.
Reporting on Local Government Performance[79]	2019	Local Government Victoria	No formal evaluation and no resources allocated at the outset for evaluation.
School Councils in Government Schools[80]	2018	Department of Education and Training	Lack of performance evaluation represented a "missed opportunity to improve the functioning of government schools".
Safety and Cost Effectiveness of Private Prisons[81]	2018	Department of Justice and Regulation	Noted a need to improve evaluation processes; various gaps in evaluation; did not routinely evaluate impact of improvement activities.
Assessing Benefits from the Regional Rail Link Project[82]	2018	Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources	Lack of methodical evaluation culture meant there was no systematic and objective collection of lessons learnt from past projects; unable to demonstrate expected outcomes.

Total reports = 18. Green = 0/18 (0%). Orange = 5/18 = 28%. Red = 13/18 = 72%.

Audit Office of New South Wales

PROGRAM	YEAR OF AUDIT	ENTITY	EVALUATION SUMMARY
Bushfire Recovery Grants[83]	2023	Department of Regional NSW	Evaluation plan in place with multiple evaluations planned, however delays in implementation meant learning from mistakes could not occur on time for the next round of grants.
Student Attendance[84]	2022	Department of Education	Data collection for long-term evaluation has improved since 2018; schools are prompted in annual reports to evaluate impacts of strategies; some evaluations have been done over time, however there is scope for more evaluation and ensuring this remains an important aspect of program design. The department could also do more to promote evidence-based programs to schools.
Police Responses to Domestic and Family Violence[85]	2022	NSW Police Force	Evaluation plan in place with some gaps; some projects have stalled due to lack of evaluation capability; limited funds allocated to some evaluation initiatives; increased scope for proactive evaluation of programs in Aboriginal communities.
Responses to Homelessness[86]	2021	Department of Communities and Justice	Evaluation strategy in place; most programs seem to have upcoming evaluation, however implementation delays prevented clarity and strength of outcomes data; no evaluation of COVID-19 temporary accommodation was planned.
Local Schools, Local Decisions: Needs-Based Equity Funding[87]	2020	Department of Education	Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation provided evaluations and guide for best practice; some gaps in defining student outcomes remained.
Wellbeing of Secondary School Students[88]	2019	Department of Education	Evaluation framework in place; some minor issues but overall deemed to be ongoing and effective; schools reporting on outcome measures is of variable quality; some programs deemed to have a strong evidence base.
Managing Antisocial Behaviour in Public Housing[89]	2018	Department of Health and Human Services	Some evaluations completed and improvements made in response; lack of accurate data and other limitations prevented effective evaluation in cases.

COVID Intensive Learning Support Program[90]	2021	NSW Government	Evaluation arrangements developed early on and deemed sufficient, however data limitations prevented evaluation from being able to fully assess all program objectives.
Mental Health Service Planning for Aboriginal People in New South Wales[91]	2019	NSW Health	Gaps in evaluation strategy; not enough funding allocated to evaluation; lack of linked data impeded ability to evaluate effectiveness of programs.
Ensuring Teaching Quality in NSW Public Schools[92]	2019	Department of Education	Evaluation framework in place; overall impacts are not evaluated; evaluation had been conducted on only one of two strategies; data limitations persisted.
Matching Skills Training with Market Needs[93]	2018	Department of Industry	Major gaps in evaluation; evaluation had not been conducted on almost all major programs; additional funding had been justified without evaluation.
Energy Rebates for Low Income Households[94]	2017	Department of Planning and Environment	Had no measurable objectives which meant evaluations could not assess outcomes or room for improvement.
Managing Demand for Ambulance Services[95]	2017	Department of Health and Human Services	Initiatives lacked key documentation and evaluations; some internal evaluations had been done in the past; gaps remain.
Therapeutic Programs in Prisons[96]	2017	Corrective Services NSW	No systematic evaluation to inform if outcomes were being met; no collection of robust data; no framework to manage relevant data.

Total reports = 14. Green = 0/14 (0%). Orange = 7/14 = 50%. Red = 7/14 = 50%.

Queensland Audit Office

PROGRAM	YEAR OF AUDIT	ENTITY	EVALUATION SUMMARY
Family Support and Child Protection System[97]	2020	Various QLD public sector entities	Deemed to have made good progress by following through with various reviews and evaluations since the Carmody Inquiry.
Protecting our Threatened Animals and Plants[98]	2023	Department of Environment and Science	Incomplete evaluation framework; no measurable targets made evaluation difficult; data is being collected to evaluate programs.

Measuring Emergency Department Patient Wait Time[99]	2021	Department of Health	Evaluation plan in place but gaps in implementation meant evaluations not always followed through; difficulty in defining objectives for initiatives; evaluations that were done did not always provide informative learnings that would be key to improving initiatives.
Evaluating Major Infrastructure Projects[100]	2020	Building QLD	Four of the five business cases only included qualitative evaluation without quantitative evaluation (no financial or economic analysis of costs and benefits); evaluation period was not long enough to consider future costs and benefits.
Criminal Justice System – Reliability and Integration of Data[101]	2016	Department of Justice	Entities have not improved evaluation; data has been linked between entities but is not managed in an integrated way.
Managing the Performance of Teachers in Queensland State Schools[102]	2016	Department of Education and Training	Formative evaluation process and framework in place; did not action plan in time to evaluate outcomes; survey results for second evaluation report delayed.
Road Safety – Traffic Cameras[103]	2015	Department of Transport and Main Roads	Outcome evaluations were regularly commissioned; actions to address recommendations slow or selective.
Managing Workforce Agility in the Queensland Public Sector[104]	2023	QLD Government	Monitoring, evaluating and reporting on performance needed development; lack of measurable indicators of success outlined in roadmap plan.
Keeping People Safe from Domestic and Family Violence[105]	2022	QLD Government	Major gaps in conducting evaluations; some programs had comprehensive evaluations while others had no evaluation.
Managing Queensland's COVID-19 Economic Response and Recovery[106]	2022	QLD Treasury	Key performance data was not collected for most programs; no oversight on whether programs met their objectives.
Delivering Social Housing Services[107]	2022	Department of Communities, Housing and Digital Economy	No evaluation in place to determine success of initiatives.

Total reports = 11. Green = 1/11 (9%). Orange = 6/11 (55%). Red = 4/11 (36%).

Auditor-General's Department of South Australia

PROGRAM	YEAR OF AUDIT	ENTITY	EVALUATION SUMMARY
Access to Mental Health Services[108]	2022	SA Health	No evaluation framework; evaluation tools yet to be established; performance targets not established; lack of data and lack of understanding of what data is needed.
Management of Kerbside Waste Services[109]	2022	Various local government councils	Had set targets for evaluation; no evaluation of any initiatives had been done; other difficulties in evaluation remain.
Examination of the Community Wastewater Management Systems[110]	2021	Local Government Association of SA	Did not develop a process to regularly evaluate, monitor and report on performance.
Education Capital Works: Planning and Governance[111]	2020	Department of Education	No performance measures meant it was not possible to effectively evaluate whether strategies were meeting objectives.
Flinders Link Project[112]	2020	Department of Planning, Transport and Infrastructure	Evaluations were not conducted for all activities; some evaluations not prepared fully; data used for one evaluation contained major errors; overall inconsistencies.
Darlington Upgrade Project[113]	2019	Department of Planning, Transport and Infrastructure	No detailed reporting for effective evaluation of project delivery performance and risks.

Total reports = 6. Green = 0/6 (0%). Orange = 0/6 (0%). Red = 6/6 (100%).

Australian Capital Territory Audit Office

PROGRAM	YEAR OF AUDIT	ENTITY	EVALUATION SUMMARY
Performance Information in ACT Public Schools[114]	2017	Education Directorate	Followed evaluation best practice documents; acknowledged value in establishing evaluation culture; baseline indicators and objectives defined.
ACT Childhood Healthy Eating and Active Living Programs[115]	2022	Health Directorate	Evaluation framework in place; gaps remained in implementation; some programs evaluated while others were not.

Teaching Quality in ACT Public Schools[116]	2021	Education Directorate	Evaluation framework in place, however not always followed through; data limitations persisted in some programs; baseline data was not consistently collected.
ACT Government's Vehicle Emissions Reduction Activities[117]	2021	Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate	Evaluation framework in place; needed improvement and specifics on what was to be evaluated.
ACT Taxi Subsidy Scheme[118]	2022	Treasury and Economic Development Directorate	Lack of clarity in purpose and objective; no process in place for review or evaluation.
Management of Care for People Living with Serious and Continuing Illness[119]	2020	Health Directorate	Lack of evaluation framework; no whole-of-strategy review; successes could not be attributed to the strategy due to lack of evidence.
Maintenance of ACT School Government Infrastructure[120]	2020	Education Directorate	Lack of baseline data prevented effective evaluation of outcomes.

Total reports = 7. Green = 1/7 (14%). Orange = 3/7 (43%). Red = 3/7 (43%).

Western Australian Office of the Auditor General

PROGRAM	YEAR OF AUDIT	ENTITY	EVALUATION SUMMARY
Viable Cycling in the Perth Areas[121]	2021	Department of Transport	Program started in 2015, evaluation plan not developed until 2020; no cost-benefit analysis and lack of baseline data, however this audit indicated evaluation capability and capacity has improved since.
Waste Management – Service Delivery[122]	2020	Various local government councils	Better access to data would enable better evaluation of program and other initiatives.
Administration of Family and Domestic Violence Support Services[123]	2020	Department of Communities	Issues raised by program providers, but department could not show how they were resolved or evaluated to inform future service design.
Vocational Education and Training for Year 11 and 12 Students in Public Schools[124]	2016	Department of Education	Great deal of data collected for evaluating impacts and outcomes; data quality issues persisted; data had not been used to produce insights to improve program.

Administration of the Perth Parking Levy[125]	2023	Department of Transport	Did not evaluate how well projects achieved objectives; will start creating an evaluation framework.
Delivering School Psychology Services[126]	2022	Department of Education	Did not provide clarity to schools on services available and how to evaluate effectiveness; program does not define measures of effectiveness or efficiency so outcomes cannot be evaluated.
Regulation of Commercial Fishing[127]	2022	Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development	No evaluations undertaken of regulation enforcement activities; no targets or measures established.
Improving Prisoner Literacy and Numeracy[128]	2021	Department of Justice	No evaluation framework in place from outset, however there were plans to create a framework and appropriate measures to confirm program is delivering intended benefits.
Access to State-Managed Adult Mental Health Services[129]	2019	Department of Health	Gaps in data collection and other related issues prevented effective monitoring and evaluation.
Treatment Services for People with Methamphetamine Dependence[130]	2018	Mental Health Commission	Need for better evaluation of delivery and outcomes; process and impact evaluation would require additional resources.
Managing Disruptive Behaviour in Public Housing[131]	2018	Department of Communities	Data collected only captured part of the work to support tenants and address disruptive behaviour; patchy data management and room for improvement to evaluate outcomes.
Young People Leaving Care[132]	2018	Department of Communities	Did not adequately monitor performance of program providers by measuring outcomes achieved; outcome measures were not sufficiently specific to inform program design.
Minimising Drugs and Alcohol in Prisons[133]	2017	Department of Justice	No evaluation of processes and outcomes; poor procedural rules and lack of data.
Diverting Young People Away From Court[134]	2017	Department of Justice	No evaluation of effectiveness of programs; limited progress towards evaluation.
Rich and Rare: Conservation of Threatened Species Follow-up Audit[135]	2017	Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions	Lack of coordinated approach to evaluation despite a 2009 review recommending this.

WA Tourism Strategy 2020[136]	2017	Department of Jobs, Tourism, Science and Innovation	Gaps in data collection necessary for evaluation; lack of using evaluation information to improve policies.
Maintaining the State Road Network – Follow-on Audit[137]	2016	Main Roads WA	Since 2009 audit, still had no standardised process to monitor and evaluate road maintenance work.
Follow-On: Managing Student Attendance in Western Australian Public Schools[138]	2015	Department of Education	Strategies have not improved attendance and department has not formally evaluated major strategies against objectives since implementing in 2009.

Total reports = 18. Green = 0/18 (0%). Orange = 4/18 (22%). Red = 14/18 (78%).

Northern Territory Auditor-General's Office

PROGRAM	YEAR OF AUDIT	ENTITY	EVALUATION SUMMARY
Local Jobs Fund[139]	2023	Department of the Chief Minister and Cabinet	No performance evaluation undertaken and no plans to do so.
Modular Housing[140]	2023	Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities	Remote Housing Program was not subject to any evaluation; had no formal evaluation framework; no evaluation scoped or scheduled to date.
Grant Management[141]	2023	Various agencies	Framework established but could not follow up with evidence of evaluations being followed through; official framework not abided by; no formal planned outcomes.
NAPLAN Data Analytics and Cause Analysis[142]	2019	Department of Education	No formal process to evaluate NAPLAN results and assess whether objectives are being met; data limitations prevent effectiveness of evaluation.

Total reports = 4. Green = 0/4 (0%). Orange = 0/4 (0%). Red = 4/4 (100%).

Tasmanian Audit Office

PROGRAM	YEAR OF AUDIT	ENTITY	EVALUATION SUMMARY
COVID-19 Support Measures – Community Support[143]	2021	Various departments	Monitoring and evaluation deemed mostly effective, with some room for improvement in data collection.
Administration of Two Grant Programs by the Department of State Growth[144]	2018	Department of State Growth	Unable to conclude whether outcomes consistent with expected outcomes; evaluation criteria and program objectives deemed sound.
Gambling Revenue and Managing Harm from Gambling[145]	2017	Department of Treasury and Finance	Noted difficulties in evaluation; evaluated some programs but not others; monitoring and performance deemed sufficient in absence of evaluation.
Improving Outcomes for Tasmanian Senior Secondary Students[146]	2022	Department of Education	Measures to evaluate progress and impact established but not reported on for some programs; evaluation needed baselines and standard approach.
Accessing Services for the Safety and Wellbeing of Children and Young People – the Strong Families, Safe Kids Advice and Referral Line[147]	2022	Department of Education	Patchy framework with limitations on evaluation measures; too much focus on activity measures instead of outcome measures.

Total reports = 5. Green = 0/5 (0%). Orange = 3/5 (60%). Red = 2/5 (40%).

Total state/territory reports = 83. Green = 2/83 (2%). Orange = 28/83 (35%). Red = 53/83 (63%).

Appendix 3

Data limitations in recent federal evaluation reports

EVALUATION REPORT	YEAR PUBLISHED	AGENCY	EVALUATOR	LIMITATIONS
The Evaluation of jobactive Final Report[148]	2022	Department of Employment and Workplace Relations	Department of Employment and Workplace Relations	Data quality issues such as missing or poorly recorded data; changes to program model caused outcome measures to change, reducing comparability.
Local Jobs Program 2020-2022 Evaluation Report[149]	2022	Department of Employment and Workplace Relations	Department of Employment and Workplace Relations	Challenges in defining a counterfactual; response bias in surveys; monitoring data mostly self-reported; data collected may not have been timely enough to inform policy decisions.
Evaluation of the National headspace Program[150]	2022	Department of Health	KPMG	Survey completion rates very low; no consistent data collection across services related to cost of delivery; time constraints limited data linkage; new data items changed definition, preventing comparability.
Evaluation of the Health Care Homes Trial[151]	2022	Department of Health	Health Policy Analysis	First survey of baseline data inadequate; no comparison group, lack of linked data prevented comparability of sub-groups.
Evaluation of the Cashless Debit Card in Ceduna, East Kimberly and the Goldfields Region[152]	2021	Department of Social Services	University of Adelaide	Inadequate baseline data, small sample sizes, failed to improve upon previous flaws in first evaluation.
Child Care Package Evaluation[153]	2021	Australian Institute of Family Studies	Australian National University	Significant limitations in reporting of family data; relatively small sample sizes and lack of necessary activity data; parent data available 18 months after program start and not 24 months after as planned.

Online Job Seeker Classification Instrument Trial Evaluation Report[154]	2021	Department of Employment and Workplace Relations	Department of Employment and Workplace Relations	Results of survey likely to be influenced by some degree of selection bias; difficult to determine whether differences in outcomes were due to a causal effect due to self-selection.
National Suicide Prevention Trial: Final Evaluation Report[155]	2020	Department of Health	University of Melbourne	Key outcomes of reduction in suicide deaths and attempts could not be evaluated due to lack of clear program logic; massive variability in data quality across sites; small survey sample sizes.
Sporting Schools Program Evaluation[156]	2020	Department of Health	Deloitte Access Economics	Delays in research application approval prevented more detailed survey findings; significantly lower sample sizes than expected; high relative margin of error in interpreting participation in community sport; other data limitations.
Final Report for the Evaluation of the Individual Placement and Support Trial[157]	2019	Department of Social Services	KPMG	Trial data only covered two years of the three-year trial; ethics approval problems prevented timely data collection from one of the sites.
Evaluation of ARENA's Impact and Effectiveness[158]	2019	Australian Renewable Energy Agency	EY	Small sample sizes; basic before and after analysis prevented attribution of outcomes to ARENA activities.
Large-scale Solar Portfolio: Evaluation Report[159]	2019	Australian Renewable Energy Agency	EY	Limited information and cost data resulted in multiple sources, which limited comparability due to varying assumptions in calculating figures.

Evaluation of the Pilot Program of Specialist Domestic Violence Units and Health Justice Partnerships Established under the Women's Safety Package: Final Report[160]	2019	Attorney-General's Department	Social Compass	Inconsistency in the way Domestic Violent Units and Health Justice Partnerships collected and reported on data in quarterly reports; sampling bias present in surveys.
Evaluation of the Partners in Culturally Appropriate Care Program[161]	2018	Department of Health	Australian Healthcare Associates	No pre-program data available and reports on changes over time were based on recall.
The Impact of My Health Record Use in primary care in the Western Sydney Primary Health Network Region[162]	2018	Department of Health and Aged Care	Western Sydney University	Small sample size and restrictions in region affected generalisability of findings.
Evaluation of a multifaceted intervention to change clinical practice using My Health Record (MHR) in primary care[163]	2018	Department of Health and Aged Care	University of Wollongong	Lack of complete data (fewer than expected completed surveys) collection and lack of control group; unable to extrapolate findings due to small sample sizes.
Tackling Indigenous Smoking Program Final Evaluation Report[164]	2018	Department of Health	Circa	Lack of baseline data, no comparison group; monitoring data could not be aggregated across jurisdictions; lack of standardised outcome measures.
Evaluation of the NDIS: Final Report[165]	2018	Department of Health	Flinders University	Originally planned to use administrative data linked with survey data, but unable to access administrative data.

An Evaluation of Family Advocacy and Support Services[166]	2018	Attorney-General's Department	Inside Policy	Surveys could not be conducted in some key areas; limited survey participation; gaps in administrative data prevented measuring some outcomes.
Cashless Debit Card Trial Evaluation[167]	2017	Department of Social Services	ORIMA Research	Not enough time to collect adequate baseline data.
Evaluation of the Second Action Plan of the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022[168]	2017	Department of Social Services	KPMG	Difference in data sources prevented reliable comparability and unable to compare sub-groups.
Evaluation of Settlement Grants[169]	2017	Department of Social Services	University of New South Wales	Key outcome and demographic data collected on voluntary basis; using different administrative data sets made comparisons difficult.
Job Commitment Bonus for Young Australians Evaluation[170]	2016	Department of Employment and Workplace Relations	Department of Employment and Workplace Relations	Introduction of new reporting system during evaluation resulted in data discrepancies; income data differed across administrative data sets.
Evaluation of the National Palliative Care Strategy 2010 Final Report[171]	2016	Department of Health	Urbis	Lack of baseline data or measurable indicators by which to assess progress.
Evaluation of the Humanitarian Settlement Services and Complex Case Support Programs[172]	2015	Department of Social Services	EY	Limited sample sizes; limited qualitative and quantitative data about settlement outcomes; lack of clarity on program outcomes.

Appendix 4

Examples of poor-quality evaluation

CASE STUDY 1

National Rental Affordability Scheme

The National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS) commenced in 2008. It was intended to increase the supply of rental accommodation and improve affordability for low-income households. It used a mixed-market approach in which there was a joint agreement between the Federal Government and state governments to subsidise private rentals based on eligibility criteria. This would incentivise housing supply from private investors. To be eligible, the investor had to build a new dwelling and rent it out at a 20 per cent discount. In return, they received an annual incentive of $10,000 ($6000 from the Federal Government and $4000 from state governments).[173] The 2014-2015 Federal Budget cut funding for the scheme, effectively closing it.[174]

Research by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) concluded that complex administration, poor targeting and administrative delays contributed to the discontinuation. It emphasised the need for clear and measurable targets and objectives.[175] The Auditor-General performance report said while the department monitored the delivery of dwellings and whether they were being rented at 20 per cent or more below the market rate, no processes had been put in place to evaluate whether the scheme had encouraged large-scale investment in affordable housing, the innovative design of affordable housing or whether it had any flow-on effect on the housing market.[176] Arguably, this program could have been successful if a proper evaluation framework had been in place and it was permitted to continue through increased funding.

CASE STUDY 2

National Ice Action Strategy

In 2015, a taskforce was established to address crystal methamphetamine use. It made recommendations aimed at reducing both the supply of and demand for ice.[177] The strategy had one primary goal: reducing the prevalence of ice use and resulting harms across the Australian community. The Auditor-General performance report in 2020 identified various problems when it came to evaluation:[178]

- Evaluation was referenced multiple times in departmental documentation, however in many cases this was not fully followed through;
- Although departmental delivery of the strategy was effective, the department did not have an evaluation approach and as a result was not monitoring progress towards the goals and objectives;

- Of the 19 actions, only two had evaluation frameworks in place, another two had been evaluated and one was scheduled to be evaluated from July 2019. There had been no overall evaluation framework;
- Public reporting was done by a range of entities, but the department did not develop an approach to bring this data together to provide sufficient transparency on whether the goals and objectives were reached; and
- The department had not identified or collected baseline data from which progress could be ascertained. Whatever data had been monitored was not assessed to determine whether it was suitable or relevant.

The Department of Health agreed to develop a more robust evaluation framework. Consultancy firm 360Edge was commissioned to evaluate the strategy and released its final report in 2021. The report contained major limitations. As evaluation was not embedded in policy design from the start, the initial statement of expected outcomes was weak, data collection was inconsistent and the lack of good-quality data prevented the researchers from being able to draw definitive conclusions on overall impacts. Due to these gaps, some programs could only be evaluated based on qualitative data in consultation with a small sample size of stakeholders. This greatly limited the evaluation questions that could be asked.[179] That an evaluation framework and report was established five years after the rollout of the strategy shows a culture of evaluation was not embedded within the department from the start and considered an afterthought.

CASE STUDY 3

Cashless Debit Card Trial

Income-management programs – which have been implemented in one way or another by the Federal Government since 2007 – can vary by whether they are compulsory or voluntary, the proportion of payments that are managed and who is targeted.[180] The cashless debit card (also known as the cashless welfare card) was a form of compulsory income management introduced in 2016. It quarantined 80 per cent of a person's income-support payments, which could not be used to withdraw cash from machines or buy alcohol, tobacco or gambling products. The remaining 20 per cent was paid into the person's account as cash.[181]

The card was first introduced in Ceduna (SA) and the East Kimberly (WA). Legislation passed in 2018 to extend the scheme in these regions and expand it to the Goldfields region (WA).[182] The program was later conditionally approved by the Senate to be expanded to Bundaberg and Hervey Bay (Qld).[183]

According to the government at the time, the program was designed to reduce social harms by selectively targeting locations where high levels of welfare dependency existed alongside high levels of harm related to drug and alcohol abuse.

The new government in October 2022 made the program voluntary, effectively abolishing it.[184] As a result, nearly half of participants nationwide transitioned off the card.[185]

Two evaluation reports were commissioned by the government to develop the evidence base for the cashless welfare card. The first evaluation was conducted by ORIMA

Research. The second was conducted by the Future of Employment and Skills Research Centre at the University of Adelaide. It used a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis:

- The first independent evaluation was done in the Ceduna and East Kimberly region. The government commissioned ORIMA Research to undertake a full report. The evaluation period was from April 2016 to July 2017. It used a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis. The final report released in September 2017.
- Baseline data collection in the Goldfields was conducted shortly after the program was rolled out in the region in 2018. The report sourced qualitative data from in-depth interviews with 66 stakeholder representatives and 64 program participants. The findings were released in February 2019.
- Baseline data collection was then conducted in the Bundaberg and Hervey Bay region. The report sourced qualitative data from 58 in-depth interviews with 74 stakeholder representatives and 66 current and potential program participants. It included quantitative analysis that provided an overview of key social and economic characteristics of the population in the regions prior to the rollout. The findings were released in May 2020.
- The final independent impact evaluation of the program included the first three sites of Ceduna, East Kimberly and the Goldfields. It used quantitative surveys of program participants and qualitative interviews with participants and stakeholders. Federal Government administrative data and community-level data provided by state governments was used and analysed. The final consolidated report was released in February 2021.

The final review of evidence was mixed. The researchers found clear evidence that alcohol consumption had reduced since the introduction of the card. They could not fully attribute the decline to the program alone, but it could be attributed to a combination of policies in the trial areas. A definitive conclusion could not be reached about whether the cashless debit card influenced the personal or social harm caused by the use of illicit drugs.[186]

A variety of stakeholders criticised the evaluation methodology and subsequently the government's heavy reliance on the findings:

- The *Australian Council of Social Services* said the positive effects identified by some evaluations were opinion-based, and not supported by relevant data measuring health and wellbeing outcomes related to the policy's objectives. For example, the first ORIMA study did not collect adequate baseline data. Some participants were simply asked to recall patterns of alcoholic behaviour 12 months earlier. As for the baseline data collection in later reports, the data was still collected after and not before the trial. They noted the government failed to improve upon earlier evaluations, instead relying on self-reporting data with low sample sizes.[187]
- The *Human Rights Commission* argued it was difficult to attribute the positive effects to the card, as distinct from other factors such as increased support services (correlation does not imply causation). This was further exacerbated by the self-reporting nature of the evaluations, which was subject to desirability bias.[188]

- The *Australian National Audit Office* found the Department of Social Services failed to improve upon earlier evaluations by implementing cost-benefit analysis and post-implementation reviews. Results from a second impact evaluation were delivered 18 months after the agreed time, affecting the relevance and timeliness of data. The commissioned design of the latest evaluation did not require addressing the limitations of the first evaluation. Monitoring data existed but did not provide a clear view of the program due to limited performance measures and no targets. It concluded that the department had failed to show the card was achieving its intended objectives.[189]
- Researchers from *Monash University* identified major limitations in the government-commissioned evaluations, which they argued relied too much on self-reporting data with limited methodological justification and insufficient baseline data collected prior to the trial.[190] The researchers cited their own academic paper published in 2020, which accounted for seasonality patterns and collected baseline data to establish clear trends before and after the trial. It found no impact of the cashless debit card on alcohol and drug use.[191]
- The *Society of Saint Vincent de Paul* pointed out that the most recent University of Adelaide evaluation found the lack of baseline data made the evaluation difficult, with mixed findings overall. They also pointed out the government disregarded previous research on income-management programs in the Northern Territory, which they claimed was more reliable and compared findings across a decade that income management was in place.[192]

Despite multiple stakeholders highlighting flaws in government-commissioned evaluations, a bill expanding the program was passed by the Morrison Government. This is an example of a program which, despite having mixed evidence and a lack of proper evaluation, was continued for six years.

Appendix 5

Examples of high-quality evaluation

CASE STUDY 1

School Enrolment and Attendance Measure

The Improving School Enrolment and Attendance through Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM) was an often-cited example of good quality evaluation that informed policy decisions. SEAM operated in the Northern Territory between March 2013 and December 2017. The measure aimed to reduce truancy by linking certain welfare payments to children's school attendance. Parents would be required to attend a social support conference to develop an attendance plan for their child. If they did not attend or comply with the attendance plan within a specified period, their income-support payments could be suspended.

As identified in Appendix 1, the ANAO conducted a performance audit of SEAM in 2014 and concluded that although an evaluation framework was established and reports released, insufficient enrolment history of non-government school systems as well as other data-related issues prevented effective evaluation of outcomes. However, data collection was improved and subsequent evaluations that were more robust, including a randomised controlled trial in 2018, found SEAM was not achieving its objective of increasing student attendance.[193] [194] In response, the policy was stopped.

CASE STUDY 2

Drug Court of New South Wales

The Drug Court of NSW provided a new approach to dealing with offenders with drug addiction compared to traditional criminal justice approaches. Offenders would be referred to the drug court by local and district courts to undergo a detoxification program before they stood trial. A randomised controlled trial conducted in 1999 found it was effective in reducing the rate of recidivism.[195] Subsequent evaluations done recently confirmed the robustness and reinforced the results, indicating long-term benefits of the policy.[196] Drug courts have subsequently been rolled out across Australia and the program is often cited by policymakers around the world.

CASE STUDY 3

National Competition Policy

The National Competition Policy (NCP) – implemented between 1995 and 2005 – was Australia's landmark microeconomic reform program. The program introduced policies that sought to maximise competition, which was seen as a marker of success by serving the interests of consumers and the broader community.

The NCP is widely seen as a major success that contributed significant gains to economic growth and subsequent living standards. A robust combination of ex-ante (cost-benefit analysis) and post-ante analysis and evaluation was embedded throughout the program.[197]

In 1995, the Industry Commission projected that the NCP could generate a net benefit of 5.5 per cent of GDP. Evaluations done retrospectively reinforced the projected benefits.

The NCP evidence-based process also placed the onus of proof on those wanting to retain anti-competitive regulations. If they could not demonstrate that these regulations benefitted the wider community, rather than serving particular interests, they would be removed.[198]

CASE STUDY 4

Try Test and Learn Program

In the 2016-17 Federal Budget, $96.1 million was allocated to the Try Test and Learn (TTL) Fund.[199] Its objective was to generate new insights into what works to reduce long-term welfare dependency among disadvantaged groups including older people, migrants, young parents, young carers and young at-risk people. During its life (it ceased funding in 2021), 52 projects received grant funding.[200]

The University of Queensland and University of Melbourne were commissioned to conduct an independent evaluation of all 52 projects. This was embedded within program design and used a wide mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, including a randomised trial, quasi-experimental methods, service provider and participant interviews, progress reports from service providers and welfare-system data.[201]

In 2021, a final evaluation of the program found it did achieve its stated objective of generating new insights into what works to reduce long-term welfare dependency. TTL found a number of projects were successful in increasing workforce participation, increasing skills and improving health and wellbeing.[202] The report also identified data limitations that could be addressed in future to improve evaluation of trial programs.

The trial also highlighted the need for further evaluation of long-term outcomes and other considerations when evaluating programs that address disadvantage. Although the Department of Social Services is continuing to monitor program impacts through tracking administrative data, the report suggested there was far greater scope to extend and improve evaluation under this model.

Appendix 6

Sources of data for evaluation

- **Existing administrative and monitoring data** – Can serve as explanatory data to identify long-term pre-trends. Existing data reduces financial costs of evaluations and the burden on respondents. However, such data might not focus on specific questions of interest or be collected regularly enough to provide useful evaluation evidence.
- **Existing large-scale survey data** – large-scale surveys have large sample sizes that provide robust estimates. However, the purpose of these surveys will be different to the purpose of evaluation and is unlikely to give the amount of detail required (the total sample may be large, but the targeted group of evaluation may be small).
- **New sources of data specifically required for evaluation** – data collection for the evaluation that involves different methods such as surveys, qualitative methods (interviews, observations, focus groups) and quantitative data for regression analysis and randomised trials.
- **Social media data** – a relatively new source of data, but potentially very rich for gauging an unprompted reaction to a policy intervention.

Source: United Kingdom Magenta Book (2020)

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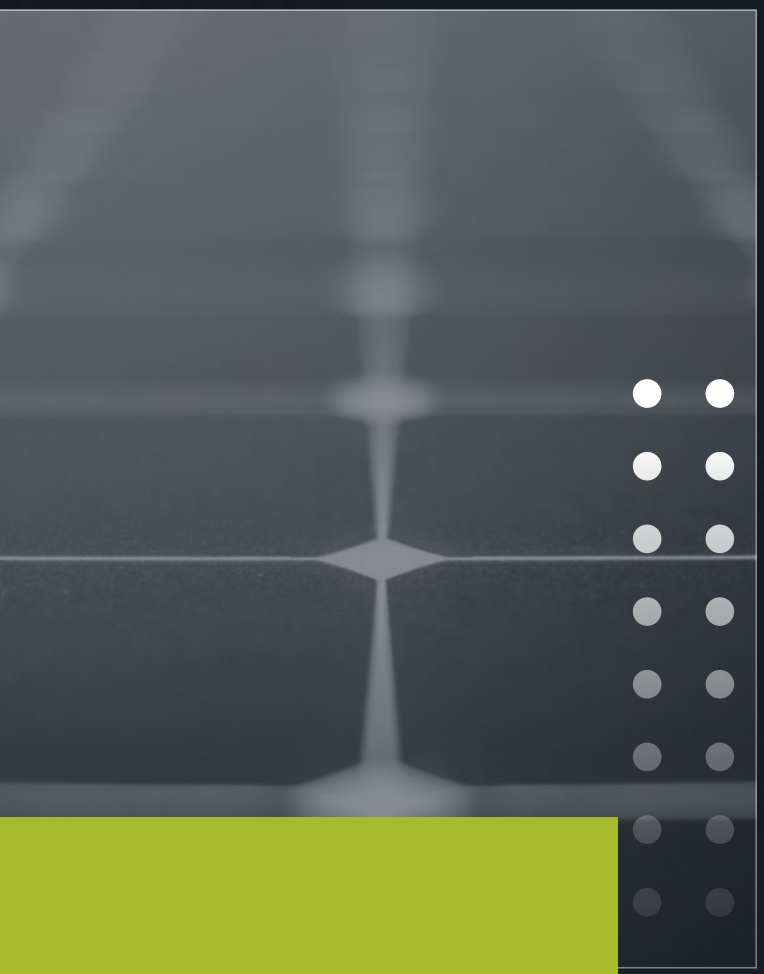
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