Data Sources for Assessing Program Effectiveness

The type and abundance of information sources that are available on a particular program can have a significant impact on whether the program is considered effective. Availability of data can influence which aspects of the program are evaluated, the quality of the evidence, and the resulting interpretation. Poor measurement might impede the detection of program impacts, or a lack of data on a particular aspect of a program can hamper a thorough investigation of important outcomes. Below are several different types of data sources that researchers and policymakers can draw on to assess program effectiveness.

Performance management and assessment data	• **Program administrative datasets** that can track program components such as applications, enrollment, services, participation, structural quality, costs and follow-up. Depending on available data systems, sometimes data can be linked across programs. These data can be used to determine whether programs are meeting benchmarks and for research in impact and implementation evaluations.
Data collection in program evaluations	• **Program participant surveys** that include extensive information on participant demographics, family characteristics, educational and health outcomes and specific program outcomes (individual or agency-reported). • **Program participant biomarker data** that include the collection of biological samples from program participants to measure physical and psychological health conditions such as chronic diseases, exposure to toxins, and stress. • **Program participation tests and assessments** that include psychological assessments and achievement tests (e.g. Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test or the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale). • **Process/Implementation data** that include case management files, public and internal program documents, curricula, key informant and program staff interviews about program design and operations, observation of work processes and service delivery, and qualitative research and assessments of participants.
Large scale surveys	• **Nationally representative, population surveys** that ask respondents about program participation (e.g. Survey of Income and Program Participation, Current Population Survey, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study). • **Census data** that can be used to describe the neighborhood characteristics of program service areas or communities where program participants live (e.g. the American Community Survey).