STATE OF RESEARCH AND PROGRAMME EVALUATION IN THE SOCIAL SERVICE SECTOR: A Simple Survey
• About us

Research for Evidence-based Practice (REP) was established in the Social Service Institute (SSI) in 2014, in partnership with the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF). We conduct and disseminate research in the following areas:

(i) Risk and needs assessment tools for rehabilitation and protection, particularly the Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (YLS/CMI), and Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS);

(ii) Characteristics of rehabilitation and protection clientele (i.e., youth offenders and maltreated children);

(iii) Prevention and intervention in rehabilitation and protection; and

(iv) Other relevant social service topics, especially those that support SSI’s training efforts.
• Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Clinical and Forensic Psychology Service of the Ministry of Social and Family Development and the Social Service Institute for supporting this project. In addition, we would like to express gratitude to Ms. Jennifer Teoh, Ms. Belinda Tan, Ms. Susan Han, Ms. Priscilla Seet, Ms. Michelle Leong, Dr. Ting Ming Hwa and Ms. Nasuha Ramin for their facilitation at different stages of the project.

Last but not least, we would like to thank all participants who took time to respond to the survey. Without them, this project would not have been possible.
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Summary

- A simple survey was conducted to examine the current state of research and programme evaluation in the social service sector.

- 155 MSF and 147 VWO participants completed the survey.

- We found that research and programme evaluation were conducted at a low intensity (i.e. low proportion of time spent per work week), although MSF and VWOs regarded them as being important.

- Among participants who conducted research and programme evaluation, most did not utilise complex research and programme evaluation designs.

- The frequency of usage of research and programme evaluation findings was not high.

- Possible strategies to address these were suggested.
Introduction

The social service sector is entering its next phase of development. There is growing awareness of the importance of rigorous policy-making and programme development within the government and among Voluntary Welfare Organisations (VWOs). This has led to a higher demand for relevant scientific evidence to design policies and programmes to make decisions about them and gauge their effectiveness. Local research and programme evaluation will likely play an increasingly important role in the years ahead.

Efforts in research and evaluation have only just begun to take off. A review of studies conducted by the government and VWOs over the last ten years showed that most of the studies tend to be ad-hoc and small-scale. It is only in the last few years that a shift towards large-scale cross-sectional and longitudinal studies has started. Larger research set-ups have also emerged, such as the Social Service Research Centre most recently. However, there is a lack of systematic information about the current state of research and evaluation efforts in the sector. To the best of our knowledge, none of the papers and reports published in the last ten years had examined this topic.

For research and evaluation efforts to keep up with the growing demand, it is critical to understand its current state of development, which in turn helps to identify the areas required to develop and strengthen the sector’s research and evaluation. This includes examining the current level of efforts in conducting research and evaluation, the type of designs used, and the facilitators and barriers to research and evaluation.

This survey was conducted among social service professionals to provide a first glimpse into the current state of research and evaluation in the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) and among VWOs. As this was the first time that such a study was conducted, we aimed to answer the following fundamental questions:

(i) How important was research and evaluation to the social service sector’s work?
(ii) What was the level of efforts in conducting research and evaluation?
(iii) What were the designs used in conducting research and evaluation?
(iv) What were the facilitators and barriers of efforts in conducting research and evaluation?
(v) What was the level of usage of research and evaluation findings?
(vi) What were the facilitators and barriers of usage of research and evaluation findings?
### Findings

#### Profile of participants

A total of 154 and 147 participants from MSF and VWOs completed the survey. This comprises three in five of all the participants who took part in the survey.\(^1\)

#### Level within organisation

A large proportion of MSF and VWO participants were executive level (64% and 70%, respectively). A smaller proportion was from management level, which included heads of MSF divisions and branches and heads of VWOs (33% and 13%, respectively).

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\(^1\) As there were a sizeable number of participants who did not finish the survey, complete deletion of non-completers from the subsequent analyses would have resulted in a substantial loss of data. Instead, participants were excluded only when they had missing data on the variables of interest.
Years of experience

Two in five of the participants had been in the social service sector for at least five years.
**Work functions**

Participants had varied work functions. The most common functions among MSF participants were (i) programme planning/funding, (ii) case management, and (iii) policy and strategy. For VWO participants, it was (i) programme delivery, (ii) case management, and (iii) counselling.

**VWOs (n=205)**

- **60%** Case management
- **65%** Counselling
- **14%** Research
- **2%** Staff Management

**MSF (n=225)**

- **35%** Case management
- **30%** Policy & Strategy
- **19%** Research
- **4%** Staff Management

- **24%** Programme Delivery
- **12%** Therapeutic Intervention
- **17%** Others

- **37%** Programme planning

- **7%** Policy & Strategy
**Age of organisation**

Majority of VWO participants were from organisations that were more than 10 years old (91%).

**Comparisons between completers and non-completers**

Chi-square analyses were conducted to compare completers with non-completers. Completers were largely comparable in their overall profile with non-completers. Among the VWO participants, completers were similar to non-completers in their level within their organisation, years of experience, work functions, and organisation age. Completers and non-completers from MSF were similar in most of their profiles, except that completers were more likely to be involved in these work functions: case management and therapeutic intervention.
Attitudes towards importance of research and programme evaluation

MSF and VWO participants recognised that research was important for their work, the organisation, the sector, and public policy (means = 4.23 and 4.28, respectively).

Rate the importance of research on a five-point scale.
Similarly, evaluation was rated as being important for their work including learning about outcomes and implementation, the organisation, the sector, and public policy (means = 4.33 and 4.38, for MSF and VWOs respectively).

In summary, participants recognised that research and programme evaluation are important.

Rate the importance of programme evaluation on a five-point scale.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>MSF (n=161)</th>
<th>VWOs (n=155)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strengthen future work</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>4.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn whether work objectives were achieved</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>4.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthen organisational practices</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>4.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribute to knowledge in sector</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>4.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthen public policy</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>4.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn about outcomes</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>4.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn about implementation</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>4.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conduct of research and programme evaluation

How much time do you spend on conducting research?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MSF (n=168)</th>
<th>VWOs (n=160)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5 hrs</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 hrs</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;10 hrs*</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*collapsed across these response categories: 11-15 hours, 16-20 hours, 21-30 hours, and more than 30 hours
Using the median of the response categories, we estimated that time spent on research was approximately 44% of a week (taking each work week to be 44 hours) or 19.53 hours, among MSF participants who had indicated research as one of their work functions (n = 34). For VWO participants (n = 25), it was 71% of a week or 31.34 hours. For programme evaluation, it was 30% and 25% of a week or 13.18 and 10.78 hours² for MSF and VWOs respectively.

In general, however, MSF participants spent only 14% of time in a week, or 6.15 hours on research. VWO participants spent only 16% of a week, or 7.21 hours. For programme evaluation, MSF spent approximately 9% of time in a week or 4.04 hours, while VWOs spent 11% of a week or 4.75 hours.

**Overall, research and evaluation were conducted at a low intensity among MSF and VWOs.**

² It was not appropriate to statistically test for differences between MSF and VWOs, or differences between research and PE, because average time spent was an estimated value.
Types of designs used

Among MSF participants who conducted research, the three most commonly used designs were (i) Survey, (ii) Case Study, and (iii) Experimental. The same designs were also commonly used by VWOs. More complex research designs such as Longitudinal, Meta Analysis, and Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) were not highly endorsed.

Which type(s) of research designs do you use?3

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3 Applicable only to participants who conducted research; participants can indicate more than one design.
The three most commonly used evaluation designs among MSF participants who conducted evaluation were (i) Outcomes Evaluation, (ii) Before and After Measures, and (iii) Process Evaluation. In addition to Before and After Measures and Outcomes Evaluation, VWOs also used Needs Evaluation. More complex designs such as Economic Evaluation, Long-term Follow-up, and RCTs were not highly endorsed.

**Which type(s) of programme evaluation designs do you use?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MSF (n=76)</th>
<th>VWOs (n=94)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>64%</strong> Before &amp; After Measures</td>
<td><strong>65%</strong> Before &amp; After Measures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>74%</strong> Outcome Evaluation</td>
<td><strong>63%</strong> Outcomes Evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>45%</strong> Process Evaluation</td>
<td><strong>35%</strong> Process Evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>18%</strong> Long-term Follow-up</td>
<td><strong>21%</strong> Long-term Follow-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>42%</strong> Needs Evaluation</td>
<td><strong>44%</strong> Needs Evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>9%</strong> RCTs</td>
<td><strong>1%</strong> RCTs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>9%</strong> Don't know</td>
<td><strong>4%</strong> Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>0%</strong> Others: 0%</td>
<td><strong>3%</strong> Don't know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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*Applicable only to participants who conducted programme evaluation; participants can indicate more than one design*
Facilitators and barriers of conduct of research and programme evaluation

For VWOs, know-how, availability of time and resources, interest, and a management that is supportive of research and evaluation were important for facilitating research and evaluation activities. The barriers faced were: lack of know-how, time, and resources.

For MSF, know-how, resources, and a supportive management facilitated research and evaluation activities. The barriers were: lack of time and resources and the availability of researchers in the organisation.

In summary, the most consistent facilitators or barriers were knowledge of how to conduct research and evaluation and availability of resources (e.g., research assistants, funding). These two areas may be critical to address to increase the intensity of research and evaluation efforts by MSF and VWOs.

What makes it possible for you to conduct research?²

²Applicable only to participants who conducted research; participants can indicate more than one facilitator
What prevents you from conducting research? 

6. Applicable only to participants who did not conduct research; participants can indicate more than one barrier.
What makes it possible for you to conduct programme evaluation?

- Knowledge: 63% (MSF), 55% (VWOs)
- Protected time: 47% (MSF), 44% (VWOs)
- Resources: 51% (MSF), 55% (VWOs)
- Interest: 42% (MSF), 40% (VWOs)
- Supportive management: 57% (MSF), 40% (VWOs)
- Supportive colleagues: 33% (MSF), 37% (VWOs)
- Others: 3% (MSF), 4% (VWOs)

What prevents you from conducting programme evaluation?

- Lack of know-how: 66% (MSF), 44% (VWOs)
- No time: 20% (MSF), 5% (VWOs)
- No resources: 36% (MSF), 4% (VWOs)
- No interest: 5% (MSF), 36% (VWOs)
- Organisation has researchers: 1% (MSF), 0% (VWOs)
- Unsupportive management: 36% (MSF), 5% (VWOs)
- Unsupportive colleagues: 5% (MSF), 0% (VWOs)
- Others: 15% (MSF), 23% (VWOs)

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7 Applicable only to participants who conducted PE; participants can indicate more than one facilitator
8 Applicable only to participants who did not conduct PE; participants can indicate more than one barrier
Usage of research and programme evaluation findings

Less than one third of participants from MSF and VWOs used research findings frequently (once a month, once a week, or every day). The remaining did so occasionally (once every half a year or once every few months) (44% and 39%, respectively) or rarely (once a year or never) (25% and 31%, respectively).

How frequently do you use research findings in your work?

MSF (n=170)

VWOs (n=164)
20% and 23% of participants from MSF and VWOs used evaluation findings frequently. The remaining used them occasionally (37% and 35%, respectively) or rarely (43% and 42%, respectively).

**Overall, the level of usage of research and evaluation findings was not very high among most participants from MSF and VWOs.**

**How frequently do you use programme evaluation findings in your work?**

![Pie chart for MSF (n=161)](chart_MSF)

- Never: 27%
- Once a year: 16%
- Once every half yearly: 10%
- Once every few months: 27%
- Once a month: 12%
- Once a week: 3%
- Every day: 5%

![Pie chart for VWOs (n=155)](chart_VWOs)

- Never: 24%
- Once a year: 18%
- Once every half yearly: 12%
- Once every few months: 23%
- Once a month: 11%
- Once a week: 6%
- Every day: 6%
Facilitators and barriers of usage of research and programme evaluation findings

For VWOs, the following facilitated the use of research and evaluation findings: time to read, access to papers, training on how to apply findings, and the requirement of evidence. The lack of time to read, lack of access to papers, difficulties in understanding papers, and the lack of local studies made it difficult to use findings.

For MSF, the facilitators were: time to read, access to papers, availability of local studies, and the requirement of evidence. The barriers were: lack of time to read, lack of access to papers, lack of training and suggestions on how to apply findings, lack of local studies, and no requirement for evidence.

Overall, the most consistent facilitators or barriers to usage of research and evaluation findings were having time to read up and having access to research and evaluation papers. These two areas may be important to address to encourage a higher usage of research and evaluation findings.

What makes it possible for you to use research findings?9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilitator</th>
<th>VWOs (n=136)</th>
<th>MSF (n=150)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time to read</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of papers</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to papers</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of local studies</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training on how to apply findings</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions on how to apply findings</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work requires evidence</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive organisational culture</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9 Applicable only to participants who used research; participants can indicate more than one facilitator.
What prevents you from using research findings?¹⁰

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barrier</th>
<th>MSF (n=18)</th>
<th>VWOs (n=24)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No time to read</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papers are too technical</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of access to papers</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of local studies</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of formal training on how to apply findings</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of suggestions on how to apply findings</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No need to turn to evidence</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsupportive organisational culture</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹⁰ Applicable only to participants who did not use research findings; participants can indicate more than one barrier
What makes it possible for you to use programme evaluation findings\textsuperscript{11}?

\textsuperscript{11} Applicable only to participants who used PE; participants can indicate more than one facilitator.
What prevents you from using programme evaluation findings?\textsuperscript{12}

\begin{itemize}
\item No time to read: 43%
\item Papers are too technical: 40%
\item Lack of access to papers: 38%
\item Lack of local studies: 38%
\item Lack of formal training on how to apply findings: 30%
\item Lack of suggestions on how to apply findings: 30%
\item No need to turn to evidence: 28%
\item UNSUPPORTIVE ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE: 27%
\item Others: 23%
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{12}Applicable only to participants who did not use evaluation findings; participants can indicate more than one barrier.
• Implications

MSF and VWOs regard research and programme evaluation as being important for their work, organisation, the social service sector and public policy. However, this has not yet translated into habitual consumption of research and evaluation findings. The main barriers, in line with the main facilitators of usage of research and evaluation findings, are lack of time to read up, and lack of access to research and evaluation papers.

The state of conduct of research and evaluation is more positive. Despite a low intensity of efforts in general, those specialised or involved in research are conducting research and evaluation at a high intensity. However, it is not clear whether it will be viable for the sector’s 10,200 social service practitioners to rely on only a small group of researchers to meet the demands in research and evaluation in the long-run.

The main barriers to conducting research and evaluation, in line with the main facilitators of conduct of research and evaluation, are lack of knowledge on how to conduct research and evaluation and lack of resources. In addition, research and evaluation efforts tend to rely on basic and small-scale designs with limited utilisation of relatively more complex designs. This may suggest a limitation in the quality and rigor of research and evaluation efforts. However, it is also possible that complex research designs have not been required to answer policy or research questions.

Two strategies that can be implemented by MSF and VWOs to strengthen their research and evaluation efforts are:

(i) Equipping staff who have an interest in research and evaluation with skills to conduct research and evaluation, which will in turn increase the pool of skilled researchers; and

(ii) Collaborating with other researchers and organisations so that limited resources can be pooled and economies of scale can be reaped.

With regard to encouraging a culture of using research and evaluation findings, it will be important for researchers to communicate findings in summarised forms to allow end-users to have a choice of reading a condensed version of the full reports. The dissemination of research and evaluation findings can also be improved through strategies such as tapping on social media platforms to reach out to more end-users, allowing them to benefit from them.

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13 Estimated figure as of 2011, cited from Ministry of Social and Family Development
http://app.msf.gov.sg/Policies/Social-Service-in-Singapore
• Future Studies

To track the long-term development of research and evaluation efforts in the social service sector, future studies should consider a prospective design. The same set of survey questions can be administered once every three to five years to gather data for comparisons across the years.
Appendix

Development of survey

The survey questions were developed with reference to two previous surveys conducted in Singapore and USA, respectively (Chu et al., 2014; Morariu, Athanasiades, & Emery, 2012) and the current survey’s aims. To ensure content validity, the survey was piloted with eight social service professionals and revised according to their feedback.

The length of the survey was between 26 and 35 questions, depending on the number of questions applicable. For example, if the participant did not conduct research at all, the question about the type of research designs used was not applicable. The survey comprised of the following sections:

- work profile (e.g., level within organisation, work functions, years of experience)
- perception of research (e.g., attitude towards research, frequency of use of research, frequency of conduct of research, facilitators and barriers of use and conduct of research), and
- perception of programme evaluation (e.g., attitude towards evaluation, frequency of use of evaluation, frequency of conduct of evaluation, facilitators and barriers of use and conduct of evaluation).

Besides gathering data for the current study, the survey also contained other questions on areas of research that participants deemed as important and questions on training courses on research and evaluation.¹⁴

Recruitment of participants

Majority of the participants were recruited through email. The survey’s web URL and a description of the study were sent to 925 MSF officers, excluding officers who were in corporate support and administrative services. In addition, an email was sent to the heads (e.g., Executive Director, Superintendent) of 331 VWOs whose email addresses were captured in our database, for dissemination to their staff. Only VWOs involved in social and welfare services were included. Up to three reminders were sent to potential participants to encourage their participation.

¹⁴ These findings are not covered in this monograph, as they are beyond the scope.
The exception was a small group of eight participants who were recruited from 18 training courses conducted at the Social Service Institute in May 2015. Before the start of each class, a researcher distributed printed copies of the survey to the course attendees. The researcher also gave instructions on how to complete the survey in their own time and how to submit the completed survey.

Administration of survey

The survey was administered using an online survey tool from March 2015 to May 2015. The only exception was the group of eight participants, who had completed the printed version of the survey.

Before starting on the survey, participants read the information sheet which provided them with information about the study and indicated their consents to participate. It was emphasised that they should respond to the survey questions honestly. To help participants make a clear distinction between research and PE, a definition showing the differences was provided. Participants were also given the contact details of the researchers who were conducting the study in case they needed clarification on the survey.
• References

