Hub Tool: Suggested Minimum Tracking for Project Activities and Participants

Tool overview

Suggested use: By teams who are developing or reviewing their research and evaluation plans for projects addressing mental health promotion for children and youth. This tool suggests minimum information for projects to collect about what they do (project activities) and with whom (project participants). This information allows projects to provide credible links between any outcomes observed and what contributed to those outcomes. This tool will be most helpful if teams have completed previous steps in a typical study planning process (see checklist on p. 1).

Tool content: This tool begins with a checklist to help project teams determine whether they are ready to develop a minimal approach to tracking. It then offers perspective on what information might be tracked as part of a minimalist approach. Next, it proposes minimum tracking for project activities and for participant reach and engagement. The appendix offers sample project event and product tracking logs.

The Hub uses the term *intervention study* as more generic than *research and evaluation* and interchangeably with them. Project teams may use any of these terms. All terms involve systematic inquiry about interventions/ innovations.

Tool format: 5-page document and 2-page appendix

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CHECKLIST: Is our team ready to develop a minimal approach to tracking?

- ✓ We have a shared understanding of our project's theory of change
- ✓ We have a good understanding of intended uses of information from our intervention studies (e.g., for project improvements, new knowledge, accountability)
- ✓ Our team has consensus on intervention study questions that are informed by our theory of change, intended use of information and stages of project development
- ✓ Our team has a shared understanding of main outcome concepts we intend to learn about and how we might measure them
- ✓ We have some good direction on study designs that may be most suitable to answer our questions and for measuring our main outcomes

With the above steps accomplished or underway, your team is ready to consider what information you will track related to project structure and process[i]. Much of this information may be defined by program reporting requirements.

MINIMALIST APPROACH

For this tool, a minimalist approach to tracking project information means identifying essential project structures and processes to avoid 'black box' studies – a name given to studies that document project outcomes without knowing how the outcomes were achieved. The minimalist approach described in this tool does not necessarily include all information required for reporting purposes to funders and partners. A project's minimum tracking will most likely include more than what is proposed in this tool.

Project teams can always add to the information they collect over time. This tool proposes what we would encourage as *minimum* information to collect about project implementation.

Consider spheres of influence (see Figure 1). In a project theory of change, proposed minimum tracking includes information that is within the sphere of control (inner sphere that includes project activities designed and delivered), and entering the sphere of direct influence (middle sphere that includes participant reach and engagement). The minimalist approach we propose normally provides sufficient information about *'what is done, with whom, and how'*.

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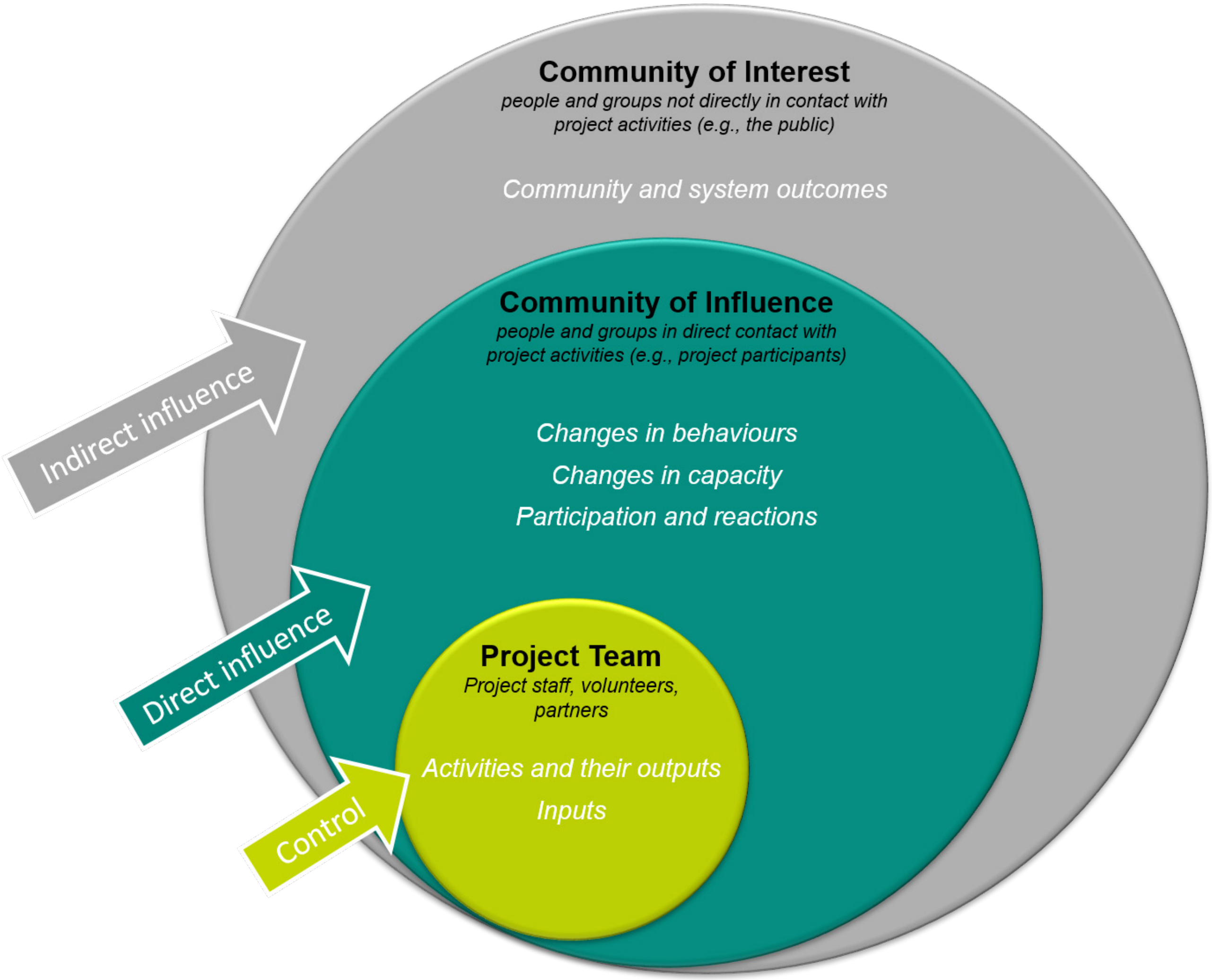
[i] **Structures** are aspects of the project that can be thought of as its 'package' at the outset, including its location, physical setting, resources invested, equipment, supplies, staffing including training, and basic characteristics of participants. **Processes** are project activities or actions, such as the content covered, the numbers of events or touchpoints, the amount of time participants are involved, 'satisfaction' with involvement, etc.

Figure 1. Spheres of influence [ii]



Minimum tracking should include information in the sphere of control (smallest sphere) as well as information about participation and engagement (reach) in the sphere of direct influence (middle sphere).

[ii] Spheres of influence diagram adapted from : S. Montague 2000. [Circles of Influence: An Approach to Structured, Succinct Strategy].

PROPOSED MINIMUM TRACKING

1. Project activities

Information	Minimum tracking suggestions
Types and amount of activity	• Description of project activities and their implementation at regular intervals, including: their purpose, format, frequency, duration, audience, estimated reach, and adaptations over time • Activities may be events (e.g., program sessions, webinars, training, speaking events, launches), or products (e.g., fact sheets, manuals, infographics, videos, websites)
Activity quality	• Description of how the design and implementation of activities is aligned with evidence-informed principles and practices • Markers of activity quality such as participant data on satisfaction and retention (included under participant reach and engagement)
Costs	• Use standard categories for monitoring program costs over time: personnel, travel, materials, equipment, monitoring and evaluation, and other expenses • Costs of implementing an overall project or program of work may differ from the cost of implementing specific interventions. Consider keeping records of main expenditures for specific interventions that may be especially useful to inform scaling

Tips for tracking project activities

- Set up your tracking system as early in a project as possible.
- Assign one or two people who will take overall responsibility for the system; co-design with all team members who will collect information about what should be recorded and at what intervals. Keep any tracking feasible and friendly.
- Build tracking project activities into job descriptions and make it a regular part of project team updates.
- Collect and track information in real time whenever possible (e.g., maintaining activity logs). Retrospective tracking increases reporting burden and is unlikely to be complete and accurate.
- Identify whether baseline information is needed to establish targets or to measure progress towards project goals.
- Engage relevant project partners (e.g., those working with participants directly) early on and establish appropriate and feasible information gathering and sharing protocols with them.

2. Participant reach and engagement

Information	Minimum tracking suggestions
Participant recruitment	• Collect input from participants on recruitment strategies, including how they heard about the program and what attracted them to it • Make sure that recruitment approaches consider culture, equity, gender and ability (see Participant characteristics below)
Participant engagement	• Record observations and ask program participants directly about their level of participation in the program. For level of participation, consider frequency, length, and quality of participant engagement
Participant characteristics	• Collect a minimum set of participant characteristics that will allow for a) sufficient description of participants, b) meaningful sub-group analyses (as appropriate), and c) assessment of who may be left out • Examples of participant characteristics include age, gender, sexual orientation, racial or ethnic group, disability status, postal code (the first three characters for geographical location and as proxy of socio-economic status)
Participant satisfaction	• Assess participant satisfaction periodically throughout and when they leave the program
Retention	• Track duration of participation; record reasons for drop out

Health equity considerations

When tracking participant information such as recruitment, level of engagement, drop out, and so on, it is important to consider health equity. Who is not being reached and why? Are there existing barriers for specific populations that could be addressed? Are there ways to improve accessibility for disadvantaged populations?

Tips for tracking participant reach and engagement

- Communicate to participants why their feedback matters to your project or organization and to improving mental health promotion actions and outcomes more broadly.
- Identify what sources of information may be most appropriate to use. Might you have access to existing sources that collect the information you need? What information might you need to collect directly from participants?
- Consider appropriate options for seeking feedback from participants about their experiences with your project: what data collection methods may be most relevant and useful (e.g., participant surveys, focus groups, interviews)? Are there ways to incorporate data collection as part of regular program activities? Are there ways to make it interesting and enjoyable?

- Try to collect information as efficiently as possible so that participants are not over-burdened. Even more important is for any data collection to be sensitive to participant cultures and contexts. Ask participants directly about these sensitivities and their preferences.
- Consider barriers and facilitators to collecting participant feedback: can barriers be minimized (e.g., is it possible to minimize language barriers by seeking feedback in the participants' native language)? Can facilitators be leveraged (e.g., can you offer incentives for providing feedback)?
- Questions about participant characteristics can be worded in a variety of ways and some questions and wording may be inappropriate for your project participants. Whenever possible, standard questions are preferred so participant characteristics can be compared to population data or other programs. Also, standard questions have normally been extensively tested, although not necessarily for populations engaged by your project. For considering if and how to ask for participant information, consult credible sources (e.g., PolicyWise Datapedia), including your participants themselves.
- Build in time to obtain ethics approval for data collection from project participants.
- Ensure that program personnel involved in data collection are informed about relevant research and ethics protocols for their situation and have completed all necessary training (e.g., Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS2), OCAP®, Canadian Professional Association for Transgender Health Ethical Guidelines for Research Involving Transgender People and Communities).
- Never (ever!) collect information without pre-/ pilot-testing protocols first with your participants. Pilot testing procedures can be done with different degrees of formality. Consider what is most suitable for your participants and context. As a general guide, build in some early feedback from participants on any data collection tools and procedures. This includes all components, such as framing, consents, background information, questions, and response options. If possible, pilot testing can also include implementing data collection on a small scale first, refining procedures as needed, and then implementing more fully.

A few concluding tips

- Stay mindful of your goal to better understand what is working, for whom, under different conditions; this takes paying attention to what is done, with whom and how, in addition to what happens as a result (outcomes).
- Use your (evolving) theory of change as a touchstone and adapt your theory of change based on what you learn from your minimum tracking.
- A useful supplement to information on project activities and participants relates to factors influencing your project design, delivery, and results. In your theory of change, focus on testing assumptions and external factors, especially those that are least understood.
- Do **not** track everything!
- Make essential tracking part of your project's routine practice ("it's just what we do!").
- Reinforce often and show your project team and partners how information is being used. A compelling 'why' is a great motivator.

APPENDIX: SAMPLE PROJECT ACTIVITY LOGS (Events and Products)

Sample project EVENT log (fictitious events)

Event name	Type	Location/ site	Description/ purpose	Audience	Participation/ reach	Format	Start date	End date (if applicable/ known)	Duration and frequency	Language
Adult ally training workshop Summer 2022	*Training*	*Winnipeg (MB), East Elmwood Community Centre*	*This workshop is offered twice a year and is delivered by youth leaders and experienced adult allies. Training was provided to increase adult ally capacity in areas such as creating safe spaces, minimizing 'adultism', amplifying youth voices, understanding principles of participatory approaches, and working with vulnerable populations*	*Adult allies*	*7 adult allies participated in this training (5 new to the training; 2 previously trained and refreshing their skills)*	*In-person and virtual (Zoom)*	*August 23, 2022*	*August 23, 2022*	*5-hour workshop; one-time completion is mandatory; allies are encouraged to refresh their skills yearly*	*English*
East Elmwood youth leadership group	*Regular programming*	*Winnipeg (MB), East Elmwood Community Centre*	*Youth and adult allies convened to plan and implement community outreach projects; youth were supported as they developed skills such as teamwork, leadership, and social justice*	*Youth aged 13-18 and adult allies (aged 18+)*	*11 youth participants; 3 adult allies*	*Virtual and in-person*	*October 5, 2022*	*December 18, 2022*	*2 hours bi-weekly*	*English*
Presentation at Provincial Youth Summit 2022	*Presentation*	*Winnipeg (MB)*	*Youth from the East Elmwood youth leadership group shared their experiences of being involved in community outreach projects as part of a 1-hour summit session*	*Individuals and groups interested in youth-led initiatives, including members of the public, community leaders, school board and local government representatives*	*Three youth leaders were presenters; approximately 25 people attended the session*	*In-person*	*April 21, 2022*	*April 21, 2022*	*One-time; 1-hour session*	*English and French*

Sample project PRODUCT log (fictitious products)

Product name	Description/ purpose	Audience	Participation/ reach	Format	Distribution start date	Distribution end date (if applicable/ known)	Distribution/ promotion methods	Language
Updated training manual for adult allies	*Updates were made to a manual that facilitates the adult ally training process and informs prospective allies about this opportunity*	*Prospective adult allies*	*Estimated reach: 10-20 allies a year; 11 allies had been trained using this manual as of March 31, 2022*	*Print, digital (PDF)*	*April 13, 2021*	*Revisions planned for January 2023*	*In-person; via website; social media; email*	*English and French*
Project website	*New website for the project was launched to raise awareness about the youth empowerment program and help engage potential participants. The website was promoted using a social media campaign, via a community partner newsletter, and through targeted emails sent to partners, community organizations, and others with shared interests*	*Youth; individuals and groups interested in youth-led initiatives, including members of the public, community leaders, school board and local government representatives*	*200 visits to the website as of March 31, 2022*	*Virtual*	*January 18, 2022 (website launched)*	*N/A*	*Social media campaign; community partner newsletter; targeted emails*	*English and French*
Vlog post #1	*Youth leaders recorded a vlog to share their experiences with a recent community outreach event*	*Individuals and groups interested in youth-led initiatives, including members of the public, community leaders, school board and local government representatives*	*4 youth collaborated to develop and record this vlog; the vlog had 30 views as of March 31, 2022*	*Video blog*	*Posted January 27, 2022*	*N/A*	*Website; social media*	*English*