

Quick Guide: How Can My Program Be Evaluated and Contribute to the CVI Evidence Base?

An ARCvi Quick Guide for community violence intervention programs



The main idea: Programs do not have to wait until they are ready for a large impact study. Building evidence usually starts with clearly describing the program, strengthening routine data, and selecting an evaluation that fits the program's stage of development.

Building the Evidence

A program contributes to the CVI evidence base by documenting how it is implemented, whom it reaches, what participants experience, and what outcomes change. However, to determine whether a program itself caused reductions in violence or other outcomes, the evaluation must use rigorous causal methods—typically comparing participants, neighborhoods, or communities that received the program with a control group or a carefully constructed comparison group that did not.

Implementation studies, participant feedback, and outcome tracking remain important because they explain how the program operates and why results may differ across settings. But these forms of information alone are not enough to establish that the program caused the changes observed.



Evidence develops in stages: A newer program may first need a logic model, stronger performance measures, or an implementation study. A mature program with stable services and reliable data may be ready for an impact evaluation, where a comparison or control group acts as the counterfactual to help establish the impact of the CVI program on violence.

Start by becoming evaluation-ready

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Clarify the program model using a formal logic or theory of change. Describe who is served, how participants are identified, what services are delivered, and why those activities are expected to reduce violence or strengthen protective factors. Connect program activities to realistic short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes.

2

Collect basic data on all relevant program components, where possible. Track eligibility, enrollment, engagement, service dosage, referrals, completion, and other measures that show how the program operates.

Lead by example in using data. Program leaders should consistently discuss performance measures, review findings with staff, and show how data inform decisions about participants, services, staffing, and resources. In addition, frame performance measurement as a tool for learning—not compliance. Create regular opportunities for staff to review data together, identify what is working, and make practical improvements.

4 Identify the questions that matter most. Decide whether the immediate need is to understand implementation, participant experience, service quality, violence outcomes, costs, or some combination.

5 Assess program stability. Consider whether staffing, eligibility, services, and data systems are consistent enough for the type of evaluation being proposed.

Match the study to the program's stage

- Planning or evaluability assessment: Is the program model clear, measurable, and ready for evaluation?
- Process or implementation evaluation: Is the program reaching the intended population and being delivered as planned?
- Outcome evaluation: Are participant or program outcomes changing over time?
- Impact evaluation: Did the program itself cause the observed changes compared with what likely would have happened without it (program/treatment versus control/comparison group)?
- Cost or cost-effectiveness study: What resources are required, and how do costs compare with outcomes?

Finding Funding for an Evaluation

Program leaders do not have to design or finance an evaluation alone. Evaluation support can be built into program funding, added through a separate grant, or developed through a partnership with a university, research organization, or independent evaluator.

Ask funders for more than program dollars

\$ Make the request explicit: When seeking program support, ask whether the funder can also fund an evaluation partner, allow evaluation costs in the grant budget, or introduce the program to trusted researchers and technical-assistance providers.

- Include evaluation as a distinct budget line rather than expecting program staff to absorb the work.
- Ask whether evaluation funds can cover staff time, data-system improvements, participant compensation, analysis, and community-facing products.
- Explain what the program wants to learn and how the findings will be used to improve services—not only to satisfy reporting requirements.
- Ask whether the funder supports a planning period before a larger study begins.
- Request introductions to evaluators with experience in CVI, credible messenger programs, implementation research, or community-engaged methods.

Why private foundations can be especially helpful

Private foundations often have flexibility to support relationship-building, evaluation planning, data capacity, and smaller pilot studies that may be difficult to fund through a standard government program grant. They may also know researchers, intermediaries, or technical-assistance organizations that are a good fit for a particular program and can make introductions before a formal proposal is developed.

Look for both research solicitations and research-practitioner partnership solicitations

→ **Another pathway:** Government agencies and foundations issue solicitations specifically for research and evaluation. A research partner can often lead the technical proposal while the CVI organization helps define the program, research questions, meaningful outcomes, and community-engagement approach.

- Build relationships with researchers before a solicitation is released so the partnership is not rushed.
- Ask the researcher to explain the funding opportunity, study design, data requirements, timeline, and expected workload in plain language.
- Discuss whether the solicitation supports planning, implementation research, outcome evaluation, impact evaluation, or a multisite study.
- Make sure the proposal includes adequate resources for program staff participation, participant and community engagement, and data preparation.
- Discuss and create meaningful ways for participants/community to have a voice. This might include paid advisory roles, listening sessions, participant interviews, community review panels, partnering on presentation of findings and as authors, or other opportunities to influence the study methods—not simply provide data.
- Agree in advance on how participant confidentiality, data ownership, publication, community review, and dissemination will be handled.
- Avoid allowing the funding opportunity to define the partnership entirely; the study should still address questions that matter to the program and community.

Possible language to use with a funder

“ **Sample request:** “We are seeking support not only to deliver the program, but also to strengthen our data capacity and work with an independent evaluation partner. Can evaluation costs be included in this grant, or can you connect us with researchers or technical-assistance partners who understand community violence intervention?”

Consider U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) Pilot and Feasibility Grants

- **Understand the shift to "investigator-initiated" proposals:** Recent White House policy directives have shifted the NIH heavily toward [investigator-initiated funding](#). This means instead of waiting for the NIH to release a highly specific, prescriptive call for community violence proposals, [the research team must invent and pitch the idea themselves](#). The idea should be aligned with NIH general topics of interest. While the specific objectives are designed entirely by you and your partner, the NIH still publishes general "Highlighted Topics" and broad mission areas that you must align with—such as addressing health disparities, mental health, or trauma.

- **Partner with an eligible institution:** NIH grants require extensive administrative compliance and are usually awarded to universities or research institutions. The academic researcher will serve as the Principal Investigator (PI), while the CVI organization participates as a funded community partner, study site, or subrecipient.
- **Leverage specific mechanisms:** Work with your research partner to explore early-stage, broad NIH [Parent Announcements \(grants.nih.gov\)](#) like the R21 (Exploratory/Developmental) or R34 (Planning Grant) to build the team, finalize protocols, and collect pilot data.
- **Ensure you are funded:** Make sure your organization's staff time, community engagement efforts, and data management tasks are explicitly written into the grant's budget.

Choosing an Evaluation Partner

The best evaluator is not simply the researcher with the most technical credentials. Look for a partner who understands the program context, respects community expertise, communicates clearly, and is willing to design a study that is both rigorous and feasible. We provide more details below, but also see our Quick Guide: [Engaging a Research Partner for CVI Work](#) on the “Working Together” pages of ARCVi.org.

Questions to ask a potential evaluator

- ? Do you have experience with CVI, street outreach, credible messengers, or other community-based programs?
- ? How will program staff, participants, and people with lived experience help shape the study?
- ? What information will be needed, and how much staff time will the evaluation require?
- ? How will sensitive participant information be protected?
- ? How will you handle changes in implementation, staffing, or local conditions during the study?
- ? Will the program be able to review findings for factual accuracy and community context?
- ? How will results be shared with participants, practitioners, funders, policymakers, and the public?
- ? What will happen if findings are mixed or do not show the expected effects?

A Final Readiness Checklist

- ☐ Our program model and intended population are clearly defined.
- ☐ We know what we most need to learn from an evaluation.
- ☐ Our routine data are reasonably complete and consistent—or we have a plan to improve them.
- ☐ Program leadership and frontline staff understand the proposed evaluation.
- ☐ Participants and people with lived experience have a meaningful role in the evaluation.
- ☐ The evaluation budget includes the real costs of staff time, data work, and community engagement.
- ☐ Expectations for data, publication, review, and communication are agreed upon and are in writing.
- ☐ The proposed design fits the program's stage and does not promise conclusions the data cannot support.

ARCVi Takeaway



The goal is not simply to earn an “evidence-based” label. A useful evaluation should help a program understand whom it is reaching, how well it is being implemented, what outcomes are changing, and what support or improvements are needed. Over time, strong studies from multiple programs and communities strengthen the evidence base for the entire CVI field.