Improving the Use of Demonstration Projects

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Overview*

I.   When to Use a Demonstration? When to Evaluate?

II. Improving Demonstration and Evaluation Design

III. Improving Data Use – Surveys & Administrative Data

IV. Maximizing the Use of Demonstration Findings

V.   Building a Stronger Evidence Base

*The findings and conclusions of this presentation are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Social Security Administration.

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I. Framework for deciding among demonstration options

When to Use a Demonstration?

- A demonstration tests a program or policy change (intervention)
- Often applied to a random subset of population (easing evaluation)
- Or pilot in some narrower way, or simply roll out the intervention (e.g. randomly staggered by geography and time)
- Consider the costs and benefits of alternative demonstrations

When to Evaluate? How?

- Some interventions are not "ready" for a rigorous demonstration
- Some evaluations are more practical without a demonstration

II. Improving Demonstration and Evaluation Design

- Test more Policy Options, e.g. via Factorial Designs

- Theoretical Models to understand policy interactions

- Falsifiable Logic Models (FLMs): assess whether policy changes are ready for more rigorous "effectiveness" evaluations

- Heterogeneity of impacts

- Cost-benefit analyses in demonstrations: require strong assumptions

III. Improving Data Use

Surveys:
- Only source for some information
- Quality concerns: Response rates, responses, etc.

Administrative Data:
- Available on all program participants, fewer quality concerns
- Lacking key data needed for evaluation

Advantages to Combining Administrative Data with Survey Data
- Assessment of survey response rate, potential "selection bias"
- Assessment of reliability of survey responses (e.g., employment, earnings)

IV. Maximizing the Use of Findings

- Engaging Stakeholders Early and Often

- Dissemination: Getting Results Out Faster

V. Building A Stronger Evidence Base

- Use of Qualitative Findings

- Making Data Available For Re-Analysis

- Synthesizing Results Across Demonstration Projects

Key Takeaways

- SSA is operating state-of-the art demonstrations at scale

- We identify opportunities to build on SSA's strong foundation and leverage current opportunities e.g. the Evidence Act

- Chapter focuses on three questions
  1. What research question needs answers? (policy → research)
  2. How should the question be addressed? (design)
  3. How can we maximize the use of answers? (research → policy)

Discussion: Improving the Use of Demonstrations

Discussant: Jonah B. Gelbach, Professor, Berkeley Law

RCT Demonstration Challenges

- RCTs achieve balance only on average

- Some questions are hard/impossible to answer with RCTs

- Treatment effect heterogeneity

Alternatives?

- Rich literature in econometrics on program evaluation

- Both structural modeling and reduced form estimation

A Plea

- Increase data access for wider research community

- Lots of free research is waiting to be done…

Discussion: Improving the Use of Demonstrations

Discussant: Elizabeth Curda, Director, Government Accountability Office

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Agenda

Three buckets of suggested improvement:

- Methodological

- Process

- Communication & Dissemination

Overlap with past GAO work:

- Recommendations

- Best practices

- Internal control standards

Methodology

- Leveraging logic models

- Evaluation based on comparison to a counterfactual

- Identifying data needs and using high quality data

- Identifying risks to the demonstration and the evaluation

Process

- Use qualitative information → consider participant voices
- Ensure transparency regarding changes during the demo and evaluation

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Communication

- Involve stakeholders early and often

- Communicate interim results and use appropriate internal communication

- Carry out a 'post-mortem' of the demo and assess policy implications

- Develop quality, appropriate communication