OVC TTAC
Office for Victims of Crime
Training & Technical Assistance Center

OVC TTAC HUMAN TRAFFICKING ACTION RESEARCH TOOLKIT

OVC TTAC
Human Trafficking
Action Research Toolkit

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the Human Trafficking Action Research Toolkit is to provide information, strategies, tools, and other resources to help organizations and programs understand and conduct action research. We created this toolkit to benefit the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC)-funded Human Trafficking Program Grantees; however, any victim service program wishing to conduct action research can benefit from the information and resources provided within this toolkit. This toolkit defines action research, explains why action research is important, and provides a detailed overview of the action research process over the course of five sections:

- Choose a Focus and Partners
- Generate Knowledge through Data Collection
- Leverage Data to Develop an Action Plan
- Implement the Action Plan
- Reflect and Report

Each section contains:

A. A brief overview of the step of the action research process;

B. Potential challenges and solutions for that step of the process;

C. Examples of action research projects; and

D. Tools, templates, checklists, and other resources to help conduct action research.

Action research is not always a linear process, and individuals may find different sections of this toolkit valuable at different times. Consider reading through the toolkit at least once to become familiar with the process and then referencing individual sections as needed. The phrase "action research team" will be used throughout this document to refer to the group of organizational or program stakeholders and researchers who are conducting action research collaboratively.

WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH?

The goal of action research is for researchers and representatives from a specific organization or group to work together to generate data-driven solutions specific to the organization and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their work.[2] The researcher contributes scientific and analytic skills, while key stakeholders contribute knowledge of the problem, context, and population.[3] Through this process, the researcher helps the organization or program build its capacity to conduct research and evaluation independently in the future.[4] Thus, collaboration is a key feature of action research.

There are several major differences between action research and more traditional types of research and evaluation. Action research is focused on problem solving in real time to help organizations improve services, processes, and other activities quickly. While more traditional research approaches attempt to generate knowledge that applies to a variety of populations and contexts, action research focuses on finding solutions to specific problems in a specific context.[5]

> “Action research focuses on solving the micro-challenges that organizations face with any project implementation. It is like course-correcting as we drive down the road, not waiting until we arrive at the wrong destination to realize we were off course.”[1]

"You get the people affected by a problem together, figure out what is going on as a group, and then do something about it."[6]

Action research tends to include program staff in the process of collecting and analyzing data more often than traditional research and evaluation.[7] The table below provides a comparison of traditional research versus action research.[8]

TRADITIONAL RESEARCH	ACTION RESEARCH
The purpose is to increase knowledge and understanding.	The purpose is to increase knowledge and understanding, and improve a program, practice, or policy.
Independent decisionmaking takes place throughout the research process.	Collaborative decisionmaking takes place throughout the research process.
There is personal ownership of the project.	There is mutual ownership of the project.
Research questions often originate from academia and highlight the deficits of an organization or program.	Research questions often originate from the organization or program and highlight the strengths of an organization or program.
This research typically tests a hypothesis.	This research typically looks for a solution to a specific problem.
The research design is typically highly structured with a specific scope.	The research design may evolve continuously as the team collects more data.
Research design, data collection, analysis, and dissemination are carried out by the researcher.	Research design, data collection, analysis, and dissemination are carried out by the organization or program, with assistance from the researcher.
Findings and implications are shared at the end of the project.	Findings and implications are shared throughout the project, which allows for mid-course corrections.
This process does not include community capacity building.	Capacity building is ingrained in the process.
Findings are disseminated primarily through reports and journal articles after the research has concluded.	Findings are disseminated across a variety of formats and outlets for many different audiences throughout the research process.

Stringer provides a helpful analogy for understanding the action research process.[9] Think of action research like a wheel. Although wheels solve the general problem of transporting people and objects from one place to another, the same type of wheel cannot be used in every situation. For example, a car wheel cannot be used on an airplane, and a bicycle wheel cannot be used on a skateboard. Each wheel has a different function and can only be used safely and effectively on a specific type of vehicle. The wheel analogy goes to the heart of action research—finding the right solution to a highly contextualized problem. What works for one organization may not work for another organization because organizations work with diverse populations within communities with very different histories and dynamics. Organizational policies, practices, partnerships, and funding vary widely, so a one-size-fits-all approach may not be optimal. An action research approach gives organizations the flexibility to do what works best for them and the communities they serve.

KEY COMPONENTS OF ACTION RESEARCH

- Translates knowledge into practice
- Multidisciplinary collaboration
- Strong relationships
- Context-focused/customized
- Data-informed decisionmaking
- Seeks practical solutions
- Transparent
- Dynamic
- Reflexive
- Builds capacity
- Frequent feedback and course correction
- Benefits the organization, community, and researcher

SPOTLIGHT ON ACTION RESEARCH

THE DETROIT SEXUAL ASSAULT KIT ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT*

Problem

During a tour of a remote storage facility for police evidence, representatives from the police and prosecutor's office discovered a large number of sexual assault kits (SAK). The police were unsure how many SAKs were stored in this facility or if they had been tested. The Detroit SAK Action Research Project was implemented to conduct a census of all SAKs in police property, identify factors that contributed to the large volume of SAKs that were not submitted, develop and evaluate the efficacy of a plan for testing SAKs, and develop and evaluate the efficacy of a victim notification protocol.

Action Research Team

Researchers at Michigan State University and Harder+Company Community Research partnered with a multidisciplinary team of practitioners, including law enforcement, prosecution, forensic scientists, forensic nurses, and victim advocates.

Methods

The team conducted key stakeholder interviews and document reviews to assess the types of resources that were available to test SAKs, analyzed police reports and interviewed law enforcement to explore why SAKs were not submitted for testing, tested a random sample of 1,600 SAKs to explore the utility of and methods for testing SAKs, and tested the victim notification protocol with 31 survivors.

Impacts

Findings from this study led to significant changes to policies for submitting SAKs for forensic testing, training for law enforcement and other practitioners, securing funding to test SAKs, and finally to the passage of statewide legislation requiring law enforcement agencies to submit SAKs for testing.

* Campbell, R., Fehler Cabral, G., Pierce, S. J., Sharma, D. B., Bybee, D., et al. (2015). *The Detroit sexual assault kit (SAK) action research project (ARP) final report*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice.

WHY CONDUCT ACTION RESEARCH?

Action research can benefit organizations and programs in a variety of ways:

Action research is adaptable and dynamic.
It can be challenging for organizations and programs to work within a one-size-fits-all approach to research and evaluation. Action research provides an opportunity to develop research methods that are tailored to an organization or program's specific needs and confront challenges as they arise (e.g., changing research questions or research methods).[10]

Action research can provide immediate feedback that leads to data-driven solutions.
Findings from more traditional research and evaluation are often provided at the end of a project, which means that organization or program staff may have to wait several months or years to begin improving services, processes, or products. Action research findings are provided continuously throughout the duration of a project, which allows organization or program staff to make mid-course corrections that lead to immediate system, process, practice, and policy improvements.[11]

Action research builds the capacity of service providers and other key stakeholders to continue conducting action research after a project ends.
Traditional research and evaluation approaches are often conducted by a research team rather than organization or program staff. Action research is conducted collaboratively with organization or program staff, which facilitates learning different research methods and analytic techniques that can be used to make improvements continuously.[12]

Action research can improve collaboration and coordination.
Action research may bring together individuals or groups who may not usually collaborate on a project. This collaboration has the potential to turn into a network of individuals who continue collaborating and sharing resources after the action research project ends. Organizations can benefit from getting different perspectives on their programs, which may lead to developing more innovative ways to plan and deliver services.[13]

Action research can lead to sustainable changes in program delivery.
Organizations and programs that participate in research or evaluation projects at one point in time may struggle to implement and sustain organizational and programmatic changes. Action research allows organizations and programs to institutionalize new processes, policies, and practices during the project and address challenges immediately as they arise.[14]

WHAT IS THE ACTION RESEARCH PROCESS?

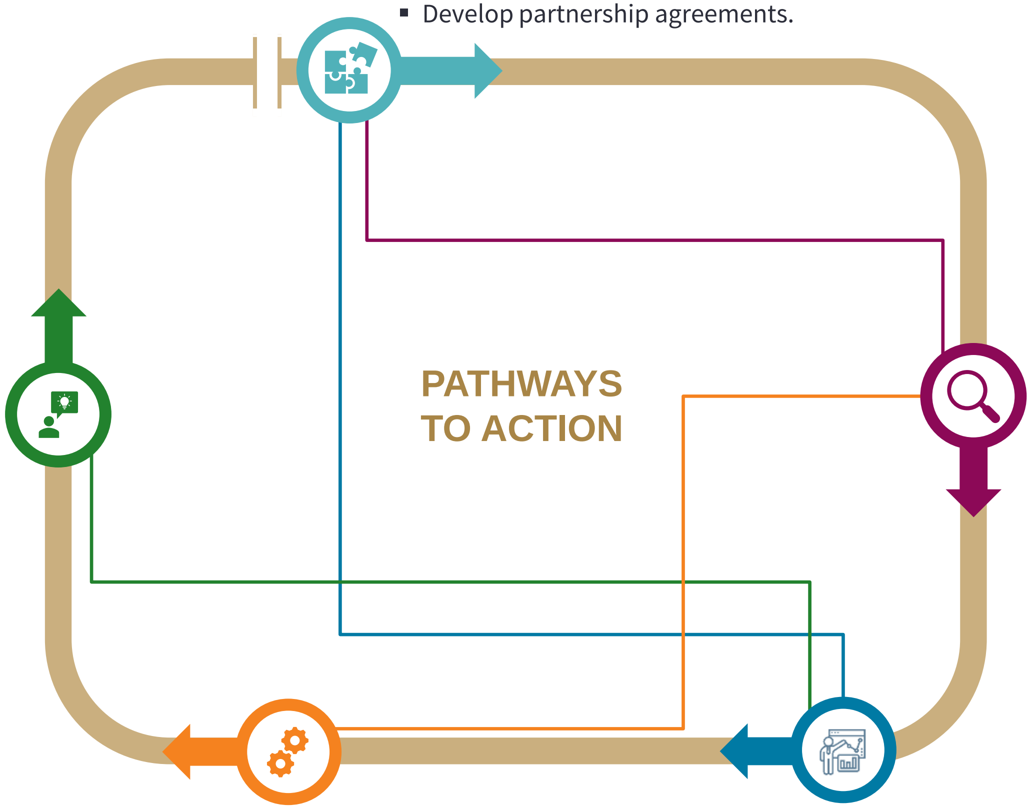
Action research is a systematic and cyclical process that occurs over several months or years. It may not always be a straightforward process. As more information is collected, the action research team may realize it needs to reevaluate its research questions or repeat a step. The following model shows the steps that an organization or program will use to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of an organization or program.

ACTION RESEARCH PROCESS

STEP 1
Choose a Focus and Partners

Identify the action research project focus.

- Collect background information.
- Choose the right partners.
- Develop partnership agreements.



STEP 2
Generate Knowledge through Data Collection

Generate knowledge about the focus area through data collection.

- Develop or improve a theory of change and logic model.
- Choose the research questions, design, and methods.
- Consider human subjects protections.
- Conduct data collection and analyze findings.

STEP 3
Action Planning

Leverage data to develop an action plan.

- Interpret the data.
- Review and interpret key findings.
- Develop an action plan.

STEP 4
Implement the Action Plan

- Implement changes.
- Communicate regularly.
- Monitor and document the process.
- Course-correct and repeat steps if necessary.

STEP 5
Reflection and Reporting

- Reflect on goals and objectives were met.
- Discuss lessons learned and next steps.
- Translate and disseminate project findings.

STEP 1

Choose a Focus & Partners

1 Choose a Focus & Action Research Partners

This section outlines how to choose a focus for an action research project, build an action research team, and describe the components of effective collaboration. In some cases, the action research team will already have chosen its focus. In other cases, the action research team may have to work together to choose a focus or narrow down a list of topics.

IDENTIFYING THE FOCUS

Action research projects are typically practice-based. The goal is to understand how and why something is happening so that the action research team can improve the quality of programs or services, improve client outcomes, solve a specific organizational problem, make data-driven decisions, and achieve its goals.[15] For example, an organization might choose a topic that is based on an organizational or program initiative or a problem associated with service provision, staff retention, or outreach to underserved communities. Start brainstorming by asking the following questions:

- What services does the organization want to expand or improve?
- Is the organization experiencing specific challenges? If so, what are they?
- What gaps does the organization want to fill?
- What new clients does the organization want to serve?
- What skills should organizational staff to have?

❖ The Community Toolbox *Deciding on a Problem Statement* and *Choosing Which Problem to Solve* tools provide examples and templates for identifying a problem to solve.

❖ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention *Community Needs Assessment Participant Workbook* provides tools, templates, and examples for conducting a needs assessment.

EXAMPLE OF
FOCUS AREAS

An organization is awarded funding to provide services that meet the individualized needs of victims of human trafficking. The grantee currently provides services to victims of human trafficking but wants to expand service provision. They identified the following topics that could be addressed through an action research project.

1. The organization does not have a logic model that clearly links the services it provides to intended outcomes and impacts.
2. Staff find the intake process confusing and feel they are not identifying victim needs adequately.
3. Victims are reporting that their referrals to other organizations are not leading to service provision.
4. The service coordinator wants to assess client service outcomes and satisfaction with services.
5. The executive director wants to ensure that all services, procedures, and policies are trauma-informed and culturally competent.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT ACTION RESEARCH PARTNER

Once the focus of an action research project is identified, the next step is to choose an action research partner. The researcher's role in an action research project should serve as a resource and partner, rather than the project leader.[16] An action research partner should have advanced knowledge of research, analysis, and relevant literature on a specific topic (e.g., providing services to survivors of human trafficking or other vulnerable populations) but also understand the differences between traditional research methods and action research. The following are examples of questions to ask a potential action research partner to make sure they are a good fit for an action research project:

- What is your experience conducting research and evaluation on human trafficking?
- What is your experience conducting action research?
- What is your experience conducting research in this community or jurisdiction?
- How do you ensure that your research is trauma-informed and culturally competent?
- What is your experience working with vulnerable populations, particularly survivors of trafficking?
- What is your experience collecting and protecting personally identifiable information?
- How will you ensure that practitioner/survivor perspectives are included throughout the entire process, including writing and dissemination?
- Are there any barriers to committing to a long-term partnership (e.g., institutional challenges at a university or consulting firm, location)?
- What is your fee? What costs should we consider when thinking about an action research partnership?
- Are there any conflicts of interest?
- Can you provide examples of action research tools or reports to which you have contributed?

After asking these questions, think about whether the potential research partner seems to respect the clients and services provided, will be accessible, and is willing to collaborate as an equal partner rather than a leader.[17] Reflect on past experiences as an organization working with a researcher. Were any of those experiences bad? If so, in what ways? Talk through these issues as a group.[18]

- The Center for Victim Research *Quick Reference: Finding a Research Partner for Victim Researcher-Practitioner Collaborations* provides information on identifying research partners, questions to ask to determine if a research partner is a good fit, and a sample job announcement.

- The OVC TTAC *Guide to Hiring a Local Evaluator* provides several resources for deciding when to hire a local evaluator, advantages and disadvantages of hiring a local evaluator, how to find and choose an evaluator, a tool for exploring evaluator roles and responsibilities, and a list of interview questions.

- The Center for Victim Research *Victim Researcher Directory* provides a tool for searching for victim researchers and evaluators.

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention *Evaluation Brief: Selecting an Evaluation Consultant* reviews the process of identifying and hiring a qualified evaluation consultant, and the procedures for accountability.

Also consider where the researcher is located and how they can be fully integrated into the project. Effective relationship building and trust will be limited if the research partner is perceived to be an outsider who is interfering in the organization or program or imposing their own agenda. One way to circumvent issues is for the research partner to spend time at the program site and with each of the organizational partners throughout the action research project. The research partner should be visible and accessible to each organizational partner.[19] Some research partners embed a research staff member at the organization to ensure the researchers are fully immersed in the project. If frequent in-person interaction is not feasible, the team can consider regular video conferences, periodic in-person meetings (e.g., strategic planning sessions), event attendance, and participation in outreach efforts.[20]

UNDERSTANDING THE ORGANIZATIONAL OR PROGRAM BACKGROUND

The research partner should have indepth understanding of the organization or program to help plan the action research project.[21] It is the research partner's role to learn about the organization or program—the burden should not be on the organizational or program partners to educate the research partner. The research partner can first review organizational materials to become familiar with the structure, mission, values, and culture of the organization or program that will be hosting the action research project. Examples of helpful materials include strategic plans, annual reports, organizational policies, training manuals, intake and referral protocols, outreach materials, and existing data. The research partner will probably have a list of follow-up questions, so it may be helpful to schedule in-person or phone meetings, as well as observations of program operations, staff meetings, or other events (as long as those observations do not violate the safety or confidentiality of the survivors).[22]

COLLECTING BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The next step is to collect more information about the focus of the action research project (e.g., improvements, challenges, gaps, outcomes). Conducting a literature review is a good place to start to explore how others have researched the same topic, what they found, and what challenges they experienced.[23] The action research team can also explore the types of data needed to complete research, as well as conduct interviews with key stakeholders to explore their perspectives and suggestions for the project (e.g., survivors, community members, front line staff members). Discussing the entire team's interpretation and understanding of human trafficking,*[24] and agreeing on terminology that can be used throughout the duration of the project, will help focus the research design, data collection, and analysis. At this point, the action research team may find that the project requires a higher level of effort than anticipated or more resources than budgeted. This might require the action research team to reconvene and decide whether to continue pursuing the original research topic, adjust the research topic, or find a new research topic.[25]

❖ The University of Arizona developed a web page called *Conduct a Literature Review* that defines literature reviews and provides resources for how to write them.

EXAMPLES OF

COLLECTING BACKGROUND INFORMATION

An organization decided to **1)** improve its intake and referral processes, **2)** assess client service outcomes and satisfaction with services, and **3)** ensure that all services, procedures, and policies are trauma informed and culturally competent. The organization collected background information to inform the action research process by:

- Conducting a literature review. The action research team reviewed reports and journal articles that explore:
  - Challenges that other organizations experienced with intake and referral processes and how they solved them.
  - How other organizations measured client outcomes and satisfaction with services.
  - How other organizations collected and analyzed client outcome and satisfaction data.
  - Examples and indicators of trauma informed and culturally competent service provision.
- Reviewing documents that explain the organization's current policies, processes, procedures, and data collection instruments associated with intake, referrals, service provision, and client outcomes.
- Exploring existing data and data tracking systems to understand what data are already available, what new data are needed, and the challenges associated with collecting new data.
- Conducting interviews with the executive director, managers, and staff members who conduct intakes, make referrals, and provide services. The purpose of these interviews at this early stage of the action research process is to understand their perspectives of the problem, potential barriers to solving it, and potential solutions.

*The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 and reauthorizations define human trafficking in two ways: 1) Sex trafficking is defined as "the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act, in which the commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age" (and) 2) Labor trafficking is defined as "the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion, for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery."

ENGAGING THE RIGHT ACTION RESEARCH PARTNERS

Forming effective partnerships beyond organizational staff and researchers is a critical part of the action research process. Although many victim service organizations may have already engaged several multidisciplinary internal and external partners, others may want to begin new partnerships or expand existing partnerships. The goal is to ensure that the action research team has a diverse mix of partners who have different perspectives and knowledge about the topic and can represent the needs and interests of each group that the project affects. This may include individuals who represent different organizations, regions, occupations, gender identities, races/ethnicities, socio-economic status, and staff roles (e.g., case managers, referral coordinators, intake specialists).

Consider asking the following questions when deciding who to partner with on an action research project:

- Who has a good understanding of the organization and community (e.g., culture, history, norms)?
- Who can help reach communities and populations that the organization or program wants to serve but are not serving currently?
- Are there any potential partners that the organization or program has not worked with in the past? Can they be engaged to bring new perspectives?
- Who has established trust, credibility, and rapport with service providers, survivor leaders, and other community members?
- Who has experience providing services to survivors of trafficking? Which types of services?
- Who has access to important resources that the action research team will need?

To engage a diverse mix of partners with different perspectives, occupations, and skills, explore the connections that the organization have already established and continuously ask who else should be contacted to discuss the project. This group of partners (sometimes referred to as an Advisory Board or Steering Committee) can then drive the planning and implementation of the action research project.[26] Although the size of the Advisory Board/Steering Committee will vary by project and size of the organization, 5 to 10 members is often enough.[27]

POTENTIAL PARTNERS

- Survivors
- Service provider organizations
  - Housing
  - Mental/Physical Health
- Staff members
  - Intake specialists
  - Counselors/Social Workers
  - Case Managers
  - Volunteers
  - Leadership
- Board of directors
- Community members/leaders
- Advocates
- Law enforcement
- Prosecutors
- Court stakeholders
- Forensic nurses
- Politicians (e.g., mayor, city council)
- Task force members

PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENTS

Developing partnership agreements is a critical part of action research because it makes the project transparent and inclusive. Establishing a new partnership agreement (e.g., sub-award, Memorandum of Understanding, Memorandum of Agreement) or refining existing partnership agreements can provide collaborating organizations with a detailed overview of what the partnership will entail throughout the duration of the action research project. Partnership agreements greatly benefit collaborative efforts because they establish roles and responsibilities; provide a space to outline the terms of the collaborative agreement and negotiate complicated issues; describe how victims' safety and privacy will be protected during the research process; and facilitate trust, transparency, and shared ownership of the action research project.[28] A partnership agreement can provide a wide variety of information and terms. Once the terms of the partnership agreement are decided, each partner should sign and date the partnership agreement.

❖ The Center for Victim Research *Quick Reference: Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for Victim Researcher-Practitioner Collaborations* defines and describes MOUs, the benefits of MOUs for researcher-practitioner partnerships, and the types of information to be included in an MOU.

Consideration: Purpose of the Partnership Agreement

- Why is this partnership being formed?
- What are the goals and objectives of the action research project?

Consideration: Parties Involved

- Which organizations should be included in the partnership agreement?
- Which specific individuals should be included in the partnership agreement?

Consideration: Time Limits

- How long will the partnership be valid?
- If there no specific end date for the collaboration, when will the partners revisit and resign the partnership agreement?

Consideration: Partner Roles and Responsibilities

- How will each partner contribute to the action research project? Who is responsible for each individual task? Consider digging into the details:
  - What knowledge, skills, strengths, and resources can each partner contribute?
  - What will each partner be asked to do specifically (e.g., tasks, meetings)?
  - What are the time commitments for each partner?
  - How will each team member be held accountable?
  - How flexible are these roles and responsibilities?

Consideration: Data Collection, Use, and Ownership

- Who will control and own the data (e.g., the researcher, grantee, someone else)?
- Who will have the authority to grant access to the data?
- Who can use the data?
- In what ways can the data be used?
- How will access to the data be granted (e.g., electronically, on-site)?
- Will supervision or oversight be required when using the data? If so, how and by whom?
- After the project ends, what will happen to the data?

Consideration: Victim Protections

- How will the safety and privacy of victims be protected (both as clients and research participants)?

Consideration: Intellectual Property

- If the action research team develops a tool, application, curriculum, training, or other type of product, how will the team determine who owns it? Who will update and maintain new products?
- How will the team decide who is listed as an author on written works? For example:
  - Does the person have to contribute to writing the publication to be listed as an author?
  - Does the person have to participate in data collection but not contribute to writing to be listed as an author?
  - Will all members of the action research team be listed as authors, regardless of whether they wrote part of the publication or participated in data collection?
- How will the order of authorship be determined (e.g., for peer-reviewed journals, reports, conference presentations)? Is it necessary to get approval from the grantor if products are developed with grant funds? Who has publication rights?

Consideration: Financial

- Who will manage the budget and make funding decisions?
- How will the team be compensated for their time?
- How will money be spent? For example:
  - Will action research partners be compensated for their time on the action research project?
  - What types of equipment, software, and materials will be needed to complete data collection and analysis (e.g., paper, copies, audio recorders)?
  - What types of travel expenses will be required for the research?

Consideration: Conflicts of Interest

- Are there any conflicts of interest?
- If so, what are they and how will the team handle them?

EXAMPLE OF

ENGAGING THE RIGHT PARTNERS AND FORMALIZING PARTNERSHIPS

An organization is focused on improving job readiness and employment for survivors of trafficking. The organization partnered with local businesses, social service agencies, human trafficking task forces, court systems, and universities. The action research project was designed to assess client services, job readiness, job placement, and job retention. Each partner participated in the action research project by administering multiple surveys with clients and staff at multiple time points to assess outcomes and impacts associated with participating in the program. The partners used the data to continuously improve their services (e.g., adjust the timing of service delivery, provide more support to survivors, develop new psychoeducational materials, identify more business partnerships to provide more opportunities for diverse job placements).

The organization developed a partnership agreement to clarify the terms of the action research project. For example, an action researcher at a local university will help organization staff members design the action research project. The organization and action researcher will design the data collection instruments collaboratively. The action researcher will train four staff members at the organization to conduct data collection and then lead the data analysis with support from organizational staff members. The organization and action researcher will co author action research reports, a presentation at one conference, and one journal article on project findings. The organization will own and control the data, giving electronic access to the action researcher through a protected file sharing system.

KEY COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE ACTION RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

COMMUNICATION

Communication is one of the most critical components of effective action research. There should be open and clear lines of communication between each partner on the action research team. Each partner should feel comfortable sharing their perspectives and discussing ideas. To facilitate this, there should be transparent conversations at the beginning of the project about:

1) Who will coordinate the action research project,
2) Modes and frequency of communication (e.g., in person or virtual meetings),
3) Expectations for participation in meetings and other project activities,
4) Who will lead meetings and other activities,
5) How meetings will be facilitated (e.g., format, agendas),
6) How the action research team will address challenges and disagreements, and
7) Decisionmaking processes.

Action researchers often suggest making decisions through consensus to facilitate collaboration.[29] Consensus can mean different things to different groups. For example, one group may decide that consensus can only be reached if every single person agrees. Another group may decide that consensus is reached if there are situations where not every single person agrees but none of those people object.[30] The action research team should also discuss whether the partners want to participate equally in each part of the action research project (e.g., research design, data collection, analysis, writing, dissemination) or negotiate participation in specific parts of the action research project based on expertise, interest, time, and resources. In some cases, there may be an authority figure who has the final say (e.g., an executive director of an organization or a chief of a law enforcement agency).

The following examples describe different types of communication and how they can be used:

Emails and Phone Calls
Conduct frequent and consistent interactions to keep up the momentum of the project.
Action Research Meetings
Hold full action research team meetings to discuss project activities, progress, challenges, and solutions. These meetings can be weekly, biweekly, monthly, or quarterly, depending on the needs of the team.
Service Provider Meetings
Invite the researchers to listen and observe organization staff, leadership, multidisciplinary teams, or task force meetings.
Research Partner Presentations
Research partner staff can give a presentation at the beginning of the project to introduce themselves, as well as share their work and other research that is relevant to the action research project.
Research Meetings
Invite organization staff to listen and observe researchers discussing the research design, data collection, and analysis.
Working Groups or Subcommittees
Create groups or subcommittees that are composed of a few partners who focus on a specific task over a longer time period.
Retreats
Hold 1- or 2-day meetings to focus on larger or more intensive tasks, like strategic planning.

EXAMPLES OF

SUBCOMMITTEES

An organization is focused on developing a committee to improve collaboration and coordination between law enforcement and service providers, using a victim centered approach to investigate and prosecute human trafficking crimes, and providing comprehensive services to survivors of trafficking. They created four subcommittees to focus on specific activities (survivor services, community awareness, law enforcement, labor trafficking) and one training and evaluation subcommittee that uses action research to evaluate activities, identify gaps and areas of focus, track progress toward meeting action research goals and objectives, and make data informed decisions. The action research team worked with each subcommittee to ensure cohesive findings.

- **Survivor Services** to ensure that survivors of trafficking can access high quality and coordinated services. This subcommittee is developing criteria and a protocol for an online coordinated service referral network to provide comprehensive, trauma informed, and culturally appropriate services for survivors and monitor the quality of referrals for all formal members of the network.
- **Community Awareness** to increase public awareness about trafficking, improve identification of victims, increase case referrals, generate political will and support for trafficking responses, and become a clearinghouse for outreach and education efforts.
- **Law Enforcement** to coordinate anti trafficking efforts across state and federal law enforcement agencies, share information, strategize on cases, and develop data informed human trafficking risk assessments.
- **Labor Trafficking** to raise awareness about labor trafficking; improve identification, investigation, collaboration, and education related to labor trafficking in the region; and identify gaps in responding to labor trafficking.
- **Training and Evaluation** to identify training gaps, develop training plans to address these gaps, deliver trainings to improve multidisciplinary responses to trafficking, collect data on the regional prevalence and response to trafficking, evaluate task force activities, and make data informed decisions. This subcommittee is conducting a regional needs assessment to explore the use of currently available community resources and gaps in resources to improve the coordinated service referral network.

BUILDING TRUST

Collaborating on an action research project will not always be easy, especially when staff are unfamiliar with research and evaluation or had negative experiences working with researchers and evaluators. The action research team will need to build trust and learn to navigate tension that may arise during the process of conducting action research.[31] Spending time together and engaging in respectful negotiations, discussions, and relationship building can help establish trust. Trust is also developed when each partner feels like they can contribute to the project equally and that the group considers their input seriously.[32] Action researchers

- ❖ The Center for Victim Research *Building Successful Victim Researcher and Practitioner Collaborations* document provides tips and resources for building successful collaborations.
- ❖ The FSG *How To Lead Collective Impact Working Groups* web page provides tips, tools, and resources for building trust among collaborative teams.

frequently recommend developing mission statements; shared values; transparent processes, roles, and responsibilities; and MOUs that can be revisited when the team disagrees or experiences specific challenges.[33] The action research team must work together to build strong relationships that effectively leverage the expertise, strengths, and perspectives of each partner.[34] Developing an MOU can help build transparency and trust before the action research project even begins because it provides a detailed overview of how the team will work together (see the "Partnership Agreements" section for a discussion of MOUs).

EXAMPLE OF

BUILDING TRUST THROUGH CULTURAL HUMILITY

Applying the four principles of cultural humility ”ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other oriented (or open to the other) in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the [person]” is an effective way to build trust among stakeholders.* An example of adhering to the process of cultural humility is exemplified by a federally funded study to conduct research using traditional American Indian healings for survivors of crime.

- **Develop mutually beneficial and non patriarchal partnerships.**
  The project benefits greatly from the expertise of the partner and advisory board, composed of tribal community members and survivors. They are consulted on every aspect of the project, including all data collection instruments, reviewing and translating findings, co authoring all materials, and receiving compensation for the time they spend on the project.

- **Engage in a lifelong process of self reflection, self critique, and learning.**
  A willingness to learn from partners and other stakeholders is critical. For example, discussing the use of preferred language made participants feel valued, understood, and respected).

- **Recognize and address power dynamics.**
  For this project, power dynamics can be manifested in several ways, including grant requirements that run counter to the sovereignty of tribal nations (e.g., archiving of data). To help rebalance the power dynamic and maintain equal partnerships, the researcher sought to honor sovereignty, value indigenous knowledge, try to understand the context of research with tribal communities, and be mindful of language. Knowing the history of data being used against tribal communities, the grantee established a data use agreement, which stated clearly that data belong to the partner and approvals must be sought before engaging in any activity outside the scope of the project. This data use agreement extends beyond the life of the grant, and the data will never be used without permission.

- **Advocate and maintain institutional accountability.**
  As a non native organization, the researcher is intentional about meeting its partner and advisory board where they are and letting them guide the research organization in identifying and addressing their needs. The partner was involved in every aspect of the proposal process and project implementation. This ensures the grantee is meeting the needs of its partner and the community it serves and doing so in a way that is respectful and culturally humble.

*Hook, J. N., Davis, D. E., Owen, J., Worthington Jr., E. L., & Utsey, S. O. (2013). *Cultural humility: measuring openness to culturally diverse clients*. Journal of Counseling Psychology, 60(3), 353 366.

BUY-IN & ENGAGEMENT

Action research projects are more likely to succeed when there is strong buy-in for and engagement from each action research partner and the organizational leadership. There are several ways to ensure buy-in and long-term engagement. First, the action research team must communicate effectively the value and usefulness of the action research project, how the project will benefit each partner, and how the project will benefit the partner's clients and community.[35] For example, partners may be able to share resources and information, raise awareness about the needs of victims and the services their organization provides, expand and improve services, and inform and influence public policy.[36] Second, the team should build strong relationships with each other. This may help the team increase trust in each other, work together more effectively, and make decisions more quickly.[37] Third, frequent communication can keep the partners up to date on project activities, deliverables, and timelines. Partners who are involved in each stage of the action research project and are aware of their roles and responsibilities may stay more engaged.[38] Finally, compensating the partners for their time can help increase buy-in and engagement.[39] For example, some action researchers compensate partners and other staff who work on the action research project at their hourly salary rate.[40]

- The OVC TTAC *Human Trafficking Task Force e-Guide's Buy-In and Participation* page provides tips for increasing buy-in and participation.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention *Program Evaluation Framework Checklist for Engaging Stakeholders* provides tips for choosing the right stakeholders and keeping them engaged.

EXAMPLE OF **GENERATING BUY-IN & ENGAGEMENT**

Several organizations formed a steering committee to develop a wraparound network of organizations providing services to victims of crime. The steering committee held monthly in person meetings to plan the project, review milestones and timelines, discuss data collection and analysis, monitor implementation, and address challenges. These meetings were attended by the action research partner and representatives from organizations that were providing services through the network, including executive directors, caseworkers, and technology specialists. The action research partner facilitated a discussion of recent data collection activities, analysis, and research findings at each steering committee meeting. The action research team made decisions through consensus, using data whenever possible. The steering committee had bylaws that provided a detailed overview of roles and responsibilities, expectations for participation, and guidelines for making decisions. Each steering committee member was required to sign an MOU, data use agreements, and data sharing agreements.

> “Capacity building refers to the process of identifying the internal and external barriers that inhibit victim services organizations, allied professionals, or individual providers from delivering effective services to all crime victims, and building on existing strengths, enhancing skills, and providing new tools to overcome these barriers.”[41]

CAPACITY BUILDING

One of the primary goals of an action research partnership is to build the organizational and individual capacity to conduct action research. Each partner should have a voice, as well as the opportunity to learn and grow.[42] Capacity building is a great way for organizational and community partners to sustain the project effectively after funding for the research partner ends, deliver more effective services, increase credibility as a service provider, and increase staff empowerment.[43] Capacity building can be accomplished in a variety of ways. For example, it might be helpful to assess the organization’s current framework for conducting research and evaluation, individual staff research skills, strengths and weaknesses, and training needs. Make sure staff understand why building the capacity for research and evaluation is important for themselves, the organization, and their clients.[44] The research partner could provide trainings for the organization and partner staff on research designs, human subjects protections, instrument development, data collection, data analysis, and translation and dissemination of findings. Embedding organization and partner staff in each stage of the action research project will allow partners and staff to build on these training opportunities by gaining hands-on experience (e.g., data collection and analysis, co-authoring reports, presentations, and peer-reviewed journal articles). Examples of opportunities for action research capacity building are provided throughout this toolkit.

STEP 2

Generate Knowledge through Data Collection

2 Generate Knowledge Through Data Collection

Once the focus of action research is identified and partnerships are finalized, the action research team should formulate its research questions collaboratively, develop a research design, and conduct the research.[45] The research process will be driven by the problem the action research team is trying to solve and may continue to evolve even when data collection is under way. As more data are collected, the team may realize that new information is needed to solve the problem.[46] This section will focus on developing and conducting action research steps and analyzing research results.

THEORIES OF CHANGE & LOGIC MODELS

If the action research project is focused on improving organizational or programmatic processes, systems, or outcomes, then reviewing the organizational or programmatic theory of change and logic model could be a good place to start. Both can help guide program implementation, as well as the research questions, design, methods, measures, outcomes, interpretation of findings, and dissemination plan for the action research project. For example, the logic model will show how the program is supposed to work and help identify where gaps or unrealistic assumptions exist, which pieces of the program are not working, and which outcomes are not being achieved.[47] If an organization or program does not have a theory of change or logic model, it may be helpful to develop them to guide the action research project.

- The OVC TTAC *Guide to Performance Measurement and Program Evaluation: Evaluation and Performance Measurement Checklist* can be used to kickstart action research planning.

THEORY OF CHANGE
Tells the story of how program activities are linked to their outcomes, as well as how and why the program will result in those outcomes.

LOGIC MODEL
Provides a visual of how program resources, activities, outputs, and outcomes are operationalized and linked.

Performance measurement is an important part of developing a logic model. Performance measurement is defined as “the ongoing monitoring and reporting of program accomplishments and progress toward preestablished goals.” An organization or program’s performance can be measured by collecting data on organization or program inputs, outputs, and outcomes to understand the relationship between the activities in which an organization or program engages and the results of those activities. This is the evidence needed to show that an organization or program is (or is not) working.[48] Key elements of a logic model are described in the table below.

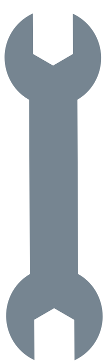
See **Appendix A** for an example of a logic model developed by an OVC Human Trafficking Program Grantee.

- The following tools can help with developing a logic model:
  - OVC TTAC Guide to *Performance Measurement and Program Evaluation Program Planning Model*,
  - OVC TTAC *Planning Model Template*,
  - OVC TTAC *Evaluation Plan Template*,
  - CDC *Program Evaluation Checklist*, and
  - W.K. Kellogg Foundation’s *Logic Model Development Guide*.
- The OVC TTAC *Guide to Performance Measurement and Program Evaluation* provides tips for identifying and measuring outcomes.

Inputs →	**Activities** →	**Outputs** →	**Outcomes/Impacts**
Resources that support the program.	Activities that the program conducts with the resources.	Products provided by the program.	Results of the activities, services, or products (short-term, intermediate, or long-term changes).
Examples: Funding, staff, volunteers, pro bono attorneys, office space, software, partnerships.	Examples: Services, events, tools, technology.	Examples: Number of clients served, intakes, referrals, services provided, outreach activities, and calls to a hotline; types of clients, services, referrals, and calls to a hotline.	Examples: Increased use of services, peer support, and community programs; increased satisfaction with services received and self-sufficiency; improved employment, job readiness, or mental health.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Developing research questions will narrow the focus of the action research project and help guide the team through the research process. Because the goal of the action research project is to solve a specific problem, the research questions will likely be both descriptive (i.e., what is happening?) and explanatory (i.e., why is it happening?).[49] Try to develop research questions that are neither too broad nor too specific, feasible to answer, and lead to a tangible impact. Framing good research questions can help the action research team understand the effects of different parts of a program, whether program components are operating as planned, unintended consequences of program activities, and whether client needs are being met.[50] It is critical that the research questions are developed collaboratively by the action research team. Organizations, survivors, and members of the community have a deeply contextualized understanding of the problem the team is trying to solve. Their perspectives must be included to ensure that the research questions accurately frame the action research project.



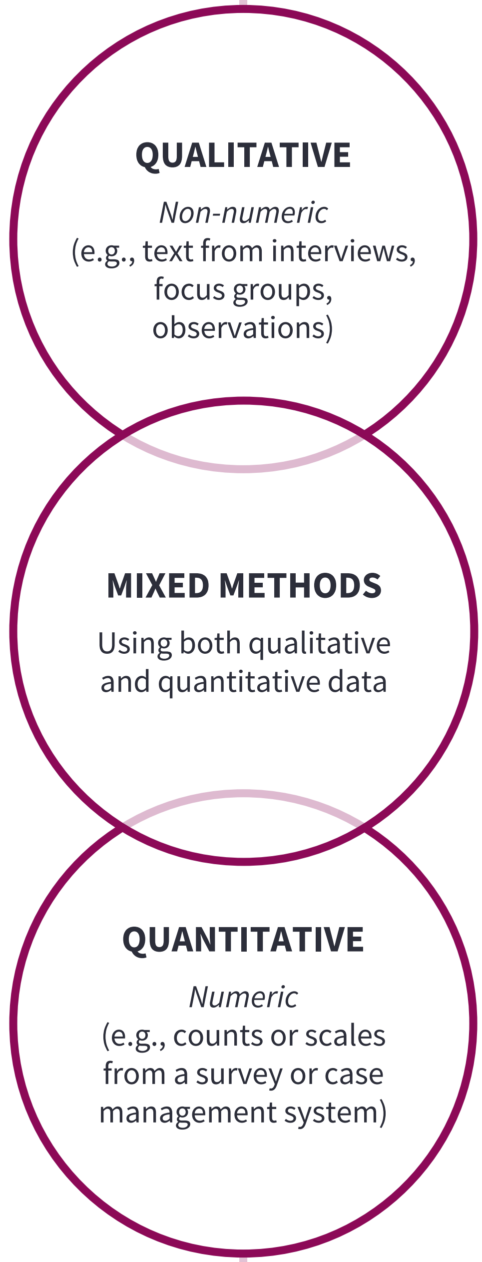
- The OVC TTAC *Formulate Research Questions* page provides sample research questions and tips to ensure the right questions are asked.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's *Evaluation Brief: Developing Process Evaluation Questions* presents the steps to constructing useful research and evaluation questions and includes sample questions for reference.
- The W.K. Kellogg Foundation *Step-by-Step Guide to Evaluation* is a comprehensive resource that explains the basics of research and evaluation at each stage of the evaluation process.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention *Developing an Effective Evaluation Plan* workbook examines each step of the participatory evaluation planning process and includes relevant resources to support effective evaluation.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to conducting action research.[51] The team can start by thinking through the types of data (i.e., information) needed to solve the problem and how the team can obtain these data consistently. Quantitative data provide numeric information that can be counted or measured. These numbers can be used to answer questions exploring "what" is happening, "who" is involved, and "how much" or "how often" something is happening (e.g., number of clients in a program, number of staff who strongly agree that a training increased their skills). The challenge is that quantitative data often cannot answer "why" something is happening.[52] Qualitative data refer to non-numeric information that explores people's knowledge, beliefs, opinions, and personal experiences (i.e., the "why"). This gives context to quantitative data but often cannot be generalized to other groups that were not included in the data collection.[53] Mixed-method approaches work well for action research projects because they use both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis to provide a more comprehensive understanding of a research question.

The table below provides examples of the different types of data collection methods, the purpose of each method, and examples of how these methods can be used. Before choosing which methods of data collection the action research team will use, think about the following questions to help drive a data collection plan:[54]

- Who are the potential respondents?
- How many respondents are needed?
- Who will collect the data?
- How much time is available for data collection?
- When will the action research team be able to collect the data?
- How much money is budgeted for data collection?



Method: Document review	
Purpose: • *Qualitative*: Collect detailed information about an organization to understand its history, mission, goals, structure, policies, practices, program development, activities, and clients. This information may help give an overview of the problem the team is trying to solve, as well as help generate research, interview, and survey questions. • *Potential Challenge*: Documents could be incomplete and difficult to understand without additional context.	**Example:** OVC TTAC Document Review Guide • Exploring whether policies, practices, and marketing and outreach materials are trauma-informed • Assessing the validity and reliability of intake and assessment tools • Understanding past research and evaluation efforts • Identifying opportunities for data collection
Method: Observation	
Purpose: • *Qualitative*: Collect information by observing everyday activities and interactions between study participants. This provides the opportunity to observe processes, challenges, and solutions as they naturally occur. • *Potential Challenge*: People may change their behavior because they know they are being observed.	**Example:** OVC TTAC Observation Guide • Intake procedures • Service delivery • Counseling sessions • Staff meetings • Task force meetings
Method: Interview	
Purpose: • *Qualitative*: Collect indepth information from individuals who have experience with the priority area the team is addressing. Interviewers can build rapport with the interviewees, observe body language and other nonverbal cues, and explore new information that may be unexpected. • *Potential Challenges*: Interviews can be time- and labor-intensive, and thus more expensive. Interviews also are not anonymous, so the team will need to develop procedures to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality.	**Example:** OVC TTAC Sample Interview Guide • Experiences with intake and referrals • Facilitators and barriers to accessing, providing, and receiving services • Collaboration among staff members • Collaboration among external partners
Method: Focus Group	
Purpose: • *Qualitative*: Collect information from a group of individuals who have experience with the priority area the team is addressing. Participants will have the opportunity to share their ideas, react to others, discuss different opinions, and develop new ideas collaboratively. • *Potential Challenges*: Focus groups are less time- and labor-intensive than interviews, but it is difficult to engage in indepth discussions because there are several people participating. It can also be difficult for facilitators to manage the conversation (e.g., keep everyone on topic, make sure everyone has equal opportunity to participate) and ensure confidentiality.	**Example:** OVC TTAC Focus Group Checklist and Guide • Client awareness of available services • Client satisfaction with services • Recommendations for improvement

Method: Survey	
Purpose: • *Quantitative*: Collect information from individuals through close-ended and/or open-ended questions that elicit information on experiences, opinions, and beliefs. Surveys are easy to administer, cost-efficient, highly structured, standardized, and provide the opportunity for statistical analysis. • *Potential Challenge*: Requires expertise in survey design and sampling, data entry and cleaning, and statistical analysis.	**Example:** OVC TTAC Sample Survey • Level of collaboration among partners • Client satisfaction with services • Whether service provision has improved over time
Method: Secondary data	
Purpose: • *Quantitative*: Collect statistical information by analyzing data that were already collected by the organization or program. Examples include organizational records (e.g., service providers, law enforcement, prosecutors) and publicly available data. Secondary data analysis requires fewer resources and less time to complete. • *Potential Challenge*: There may be missing data, which will limit the scope of the analysis. Secondary data can only explain what is happening; they cannot explain why something is happening.	**Example:** • Basic demographics • Averages • Basic frequencies by group/type • Performance measures • Number of clients receiving services • Number of services per client • Number of referrals to and from the organization and by whom • Types of services provided

The partners should develop the research design, methods, and measures collaboratively rather than the research partner developing them on their own. If action research team members have contradictory opinions, then they will have to compromise, modify the research design (if necessary), and come to consensus. Having these conversations can lead to better research, build capacity, and allow the partners to develop deeper relationships by sharing their perspectives on specific topics.[55]

Consider asking the research partner to conduct a training for non-research staff members on the research process, developing research questions, data collection and analysis, and the different rationales for a variety of decisions made throughout the research process.[56]

If data collection is not going as planned, a mid-course correction may be needed.[57] Continuously cycling through data collection and analysis can provide increasingly nuanced insights that can lead to more effective practices and policies.[58]

❖ The Center for Victim Research *Research Basics* page provides links to trainings on understanding data, conducting data analysis, continuous quality improvement, and building logic models. Its *Needs Assessment* page provides links to several resources for conducting needs assessments and gaps analysis.

❖ The OVC TTAC *Instrument Development Checklist* offers a list of items to be considered for an evaluation instrument; some of these items include important disclosures and formatting structure.

❖ The Center for Victim Research *Collecting Data* page provides resources on instrument design, testing, and implementation; a link to the data collection instrument database, which is a tool that locates sample questionnaires and guides; and tips to narrow search results based on a particular subject.

CROSSWALK

Human Trafficking Program Grantee's Action Research Questions & Methods

To what extent is the organization meeting its goals for programmatic activities under its OVC Human Trafficking Program?

Action Research Questions	Document Review	Literature Review	Survey	Interviews
1) To what extent is the organization collaborating with partners to identify victims of human trafficking, identifying them in their existing client population, and referring them to appropriate services?	✓	✓	✓	✓ (Client)
2) What is the impact of organizational trainings on educating professionals about human trafficking issues?	✓		✓	
3) What is the impact of organizational outreach activities (e.g., tabling) on educating the public about human trafficking and attracting clients for services?	✓		✓	

To what extent does the organization meet its desired client outcomes in this OVC Human Trafficking project?

Action Research Questions	Document Review	Literature Review	Survey	Interviews
1) To what extent do clients experience enhanced well-being (interpersonal and intrapersonal) and/or self-sufficiency after receiving services from the organization?			✓	✓ (Client)
2) What are the characteristics of clients who experience the greatest enhanced well-being and/or self-sufficiency from project services? (Accessed in Year 3, analyzed with respect to demographic characteristics collected by the organization in intake and exit assessments).		✓	✓	✓ (Client)
3) What organizational legal and/or case management interventions do clients identify as most impactful on their well-being and/or self-sufficiency?	✓		✓	✓ (Client)
4) What organizational legal and/or case management interventions do staff identify as most impactful on client well-being and/or self-sufficiency?	✓		✓	✓ (Client)

ENGAGING DIVERSE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

A victim service provider, for example, will likely conduct action research with survivors of human trafficking who have a variety of experiences. The action research team should consider how it can conduct activities that are inclusive, culturally competent, and meets the needs of the target population. Part of this process is recruiting culturally, socially, and linguistically diverse participants. For example, consider building flexibility into research protocols so that different words, phrases, or practices can be used to frame human trafficking in different communities. Translate surveys, interview protocols, and focus group guides into multiple languages, hire bilingual research staff, or hire interpreters.[60]

Consider ways that the action research team can make the study accessible to all people, including Deaf and hard-of-hearing people and people with disabilities.[61] Identify parts of the research process that may be less inclusive or make some individuals uncomfortable.[62] Discussing cultural competency as a group can help action research team members identify their own assumptions about the target population and potential biases to avoid unintentionally influencing participant interaction and data interpretation.[63]

> "Cultural competence in research is the ability of researchers and research staff to provide high quality research that takes into account the culture and diversity of a population when developing research ideas, conducting research, and exploring applicability of findings."[59]

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention *Practical Strategies for Culturally Competent Evaluation* provides a variety of strategies, tips, and tools for conducting culturally competent research and evaluation.
- The Vera Institute of Justice *Creating an Accessible Meeting Environment* tip sheet addresses several considerations and tips to establish a comfortable environment for individuals with disabilities and people who are Deaf or hard-of-hearing.
- The Vera Institute of Justice *Working with Sign Language Interpreters for Events* tip sheet explains how to identify and provide effective interpreters at events for participants who are Deaf or hard-of-hearing.

EXAMPLE OF **ENGAGING DIVERSE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

An organization was funded to develop a network of victim service providers. The organization conducted action research to explore how it could improve access to services for victims of crime who were immigrants, had limited English proficiency, or lived in rural communities. The action research team administered a statewide survey and focus groups with crime victims to explore victim perceptions of services (e.g., access to and awareness of services, service needs). The survey and focus group protocols were translated into six languages to reach a broad range of underserved populations. The steering committee and research partner designed the survey collaboratively to align definitions, infuse a trauma informed approach, and think critically about how best to measure service needs within the specified populations. Extensive outreach was conducted to ensure that the survey reached the target population, and all interested parties were able to participate regardless of language. Following these survey efforts, the action research team also explored the extent to which each organization in their network had access to interpreters and translation services.

SELECTING ACTION RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The action research team should decide collaboratively on what types of research participants will be included in the action research project.[64] Consider whether the action research project will focus on specific types of participant demographics or characteristics, and then make sure to include participants who meet the selection criteria. The following table has a few considerations for the action research team.

Selection Criteria	Considerations

Age	• Will all participants be over the age of 18?
	• Will all or some participants be age 17 or younger? If so, there are additional human subjects protections that must be put in place to ensure their safety and protection. Allow for more time to receive approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) when youth are involved. See the following section for a description of human subjects protections and IRBs.
	• Is the action research team interested in focusing on any specific age groups? If so, explain why.
	  ○ For example,
	    ▪ Is the team exploring human trafficking among youth?
	    ▪ If so, how is "youth" defined? Age 17 or younger? Or age 24 or younger? Why?
	• If hosting focus groups, will multiple age groups be included in the same group or in different groups? Why?

Gender/ Gender Identity	• Will the team conduct research with more than one gender/gender identity or focus on one specific gender/gender identity? • How will gender/gender identity be defined? • If hosting focus groups, will multiple genders/gender identities be included in the same group or in different groups? Why?
Race/Ethnicity	• Will the team conduct research with more than one race/ethnicity or focus on one specific race/ethnicity? Why?
Sexual Orientation	• Will certain sexual orientations be included or excluded? Why?
Setting	• Does geographic region matter for this research project? Why? ○ For example, is the project focused on urban, rural, or statewide populations? If so, why?
Type of Trafficking	• What type of human trafficking is the project focused on (e.g., sex, labor, domestic, international)? Why? • How will the team define each type of trafficking?

HUMAN SUBJECTS PROTECTIONS

Human subjects protections is the "collective term for the federal, state, and university policies, procedures, and ethical considerations that protect the rights and welfare of human beings who participate in research as the subjects of that research."[65] The goal is to ensure that research participants are treated ethically and safely, participate voluntarily, and understand the potential research risks so they can make an informed decision about participating. Researchers must also protect the privacy of research participants and keep their data confidential.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

The federal government requires researchers to obtain approval from an Institutional Review Board (IRB) if their project is defined as "research." An IRB is a committee that reviews the methods of research projects that involve human subjects to make sure the project is ethical. Their job is to protect the rights, privacy, and welfare of any individual who participates in research. Determining whether the project requires IRB approval can be confusing. It may sound like any research involving human beings requires IRB approval, but that is not true. The federal government developed a very specific definition for the term "research." This definition is focused on the *intent* of the project. As of June 2020, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) defines activities that constitute research involving human subjects as "systematic investigations designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge." DOJ defines generalizable knowledge as information that could apply to other programs. Data that are collected for internal program improvements or quality assurance often are not considered generalizable; however, this can get tricky. Research is considered generalizable if one is:

1) Conducting a program evaluation, program assessment, demonstration project, or other activity that is designed to inform other programs;
2) Planning to replicate a program;
3) Drawing general conclusions; or
4) Using findings to inform policymakers.[67]

"The term *systematic investigation* is generally thought of as a predetermined method for answering certain questions or studying a specific program or topic. Examples include: program evaluations, program assessments, interviews, surveys, focus groups, and comparisons of groups."[66]

DOJ developed a **Decision Tree** to help grantees determine whether their project requires human subjects protections, but grantees should discuss this further with their grant managers.

If IRB approval is needed for a project, it can usually be obtained it through a research partner (e.g., university, research firm). In some cases, a project may need approval from multiple IRBs. For example, some funders, organizations, school districts, and American Indian/Alaska Native tribes have their own IRBs that must provide approval to conduct the study. Obtaining IRB approval can be a lengthy process; make sure to allocate several months in a timeline to finish the entire approval process.

Staff who will be working with research participants or personally identifiable data may have to complete a training on human subjects research and protection. This training typically covers the history of human subjects protections; why these protections are important; ethical issues associated with human subjects research; and guidance on current regulations, policies, and practices. Human subjects research and protection trainings can usually be taken online but are not free. One popular program is the **CITI Program**, which provides options for organizational subscriptions or individuals who are not affiliated with an organization that has a subscription.

- ❖ The OVC TTAC *Guide to Protecting Human Subjects* provides detailed information on why human subjects protections are in place, which activities are affected, and who approves affected activities, as well as sample forms.
- ❖ The DOJ *Human Subjects Protection* page provides detailed information on the humans subjects protection requirements and processes.

CONFIDENTIALITY VS. ANONYMITY

The action research team must ensure that the identities of research participants are kept private during data collection, analysis, and reporting. One option is to keep research information *confidential*, meaning the action research team will have access to the identities and personal information of the research participants but that information will not be linked to participant data. Personally identifiable information should be kept in a password-protected computer file or in a locked drawer that is separate from the data and destroyed as soon as the study is completed.

A second option is to collect *anonymous* data, meaning the action research team will not collect any personally identifiable information from research participants. This is the safest option for survivors of trafficking. For example, research staff can have research participants use a unique identifier on a survey or interview transcript (rather than a name), obtain verbal consent during interviews or focus groups (rather than signing a consent form), and ask focus group participants not to state their names during the discussion.

It is important to note that it may not be possible to protect the identity of the city, community, and (in some cases) organization in which the action research project takes place. Be sure to discuss this with each partner and research participant to ensure they are comfortable participating in the research. It may also be difficult to keep the identities of research participants confidential in tight-knit communities. For example, certain people may be able to identify a research participant by the topic of discussion or speech patterns, even though the name of the research participant is removed from the document.[68] In some cases, the action research team should consider sharing high-level summaries of information rather than transcripts of interviews, focus groups, or meeting notes with funders and other audiences.

OBTAINING CONSENT FROM RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS DURING DATA COLLECTION

Before data collection begins, potential research participants must give their permission to participate in the research project. If a research participant is age 17 or younger, then the research staff will have to obtain written permission from the participant's parent or guardian. The consent process should include a discussion of the following points:

- An overview of the action research project and what the participant will be asked to do.
- How much time the participant will spend on research activities.
- Participation is voluntary, even if the individual receives services at the organization.
- Deciding not to participate in the study will not negatively impact the individual in any way (e.g., termination of services).
- The participant can withdraw from the study at any time.
- The benefits and risks of their participation.
- Whether their participation will be audio recorded; if so, how the recording will be used and stored.
- Whether they will receive compensation for their participation; and if so, how much. Organizations that are planning to use incentives should discuss with their funders.
- How will personally identifiable information be kept confidential or anonymous.
- Who will have access to the data.
- How the data will be used.

❖ The OVC TTAC *Guide to Protecting Human Subjects: Forms and Written Statements* provides tips for drafting consent forms.

❖ The OVC TTAC *Sample Forms* document provides examples of a consent form, privacy certificate, confidentiality statement, request for IRB action, and protocol for IRB action.

CONDUCTING TRAUMA-INFORMED ACTION RESEARCH

Survivors of human trafficking and other types of crime often experience trauma, which can have serious physical and psychological impacts on the survivor. Engaging individuals who have experienced trauma requires careful planning to avoid causing further trauma or other harm. It is also critical to address vicarious trauma among staff who are conducting research. The following tips and tools can help research staff avoid re-traumatizing survivors, as well as address vicarious trauma among research staff.

FOR ACTION RESEARCH STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Research has shown that experiencing trauma, posttraumatic stress disorder, or being extremely upset does not impair decisionmaking.[69] Many trauma researchers have found that survivors can be empowered by the research process and rarely feel distressed while discussing traumatic experiences in a research setting.[70] It is critical, however, to protect individuals who have experienced trauma throughout the research process. The following six principles of trauma-informed care can help guide trauma-informed research practices.[71]

Principles of Trauma-informed Care	
1) Safety	
• Research methods that ensure participants are emotionally and physically safe.	**Example:** • Collect data at a location that makes participants feel safe. • Choose a data collector who makes participants feel safe (e.g., a female victim may want to be interviewed by a female researcher). • Ask research staff to sign a pledge to protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants. • Use research methods that do not re-traumatize participants. • Do not ask participants to discuss traumatizing events if it is not pertinent to the research.
2) Trustworthiness and Transparency	
• Explain the purpose of the research and what participants will be asked to do.	**Example:** • Provide examples of what types of questions participants will be asked to answer. • Explain how participants' privacy will be protected. • Explain how participants' responses will be shared with other people.
3) Peer Support and Mutual Self Help	
• Offer participants support during and after their participation in the research project.	**Example:** • Have a crisis counselor available during and after a focus group or interview. • Provide a list of local and national resources for participants who might experience distress (e.g., helplines, hotlines, service providers).

Principles of Trauma-informed Care	
4) Collaboration and Mutuality	
• Ask survivors for feedback throughout the research process.	**Example:** • Ask survivors to review and make suggestions for study design and methods (e.g., survivor advisory board, invite survivors to be part of the action research team). • Use survivor input to improve recruitment of study participants. • Present study findings to survivors and interpret those findings collaboratively (e.g., a survivor advisory board, survivor consultants).
5) Empowerment, Voice, and Choice	
• Avoid designing studies that stigmatize victims/survivors. Focus on the strengths and resilience of victims/survivors. Empower victims/survivors throughout the research process.	**Example:** • Consider giving survivors the option to participate in an interview or focus group, whichever they are most comfortable with. • Use strengths-based and empowering language in data collection instruments and written deliverables. Avoid using stigmatizing language.
6) Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues	
• Include diverse populations as research participants to get a variety of perspectives and experiences. Consider the context of the program, organization, and community when designing research and interpreting findings.	**Example:** • See the “Engaging Diverse Research Participants” section above for a detailed overview.

❖ The Center for Victim Research *Quick Reference: Protecting Victims in Research* lists specific strategies and key components to protecting victims using a trauma-informed framework.

❖ The National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services developed a *Resource Library* to share information on providing trauma-informed care.

EXAMPLE OF **COPING STRATEGY FOR RESEARCHERS**

The action research team is conducting indepth interviews with survivors of trafficking. Before beginning data collection, the interviewers took a vicarious trauma training and developed a plan for how they will respond to secondary trauma. This plan included a weekly check in with peers and biweekly check ins with a supervisor to debrief and discuss their experiences conducting the interviews. The team also scheduled survivor interviews over a period of two months and divided up the interviews between four interviewers.

- The OVC *Vicarious Trauma Toolkit* offers tools and resources to address vicarious trauma.
- The Sexual Violence Research Initiative *Guidelines for the Prevention and Management of Vicarious Trauma Among Researchers* outlines recommendations to prevent and address vicarious trauma for researchers who interact with victims of sexual violence.

FOR RESEARCH STAFF

Professionals and volunteers who work in victim-serving fields are often exposed to other people's violent and traumatic experiences (e.g., victim service organizations, law enforcement, emergency medical services, fire services). Vicarious trauma is "a negative reaction to trauma exposure." Individuals may experience a variety of negative reactions (e.g., difficulty managing emotions; feeling emotionally numb, fatigued, hopeless, or vulnerable; experiencing relationship problems or addictive behaviors). For researchers, work-related trauma exposure can occur while reviewing case files, listening to and transcribing interviews or focus groups with individuals who are discussing trauma or violent experiences, or working with data that are associated with trauma or violence.[72] There are a variety of coping strategies that researchers can use, such as:

- **Preparing** for the project before beginning data collection. This may include researching the topic to prepare, taking a training on addressing vicarious trauma, or making a plan for how to address personal experiences of trauma.
- **Forming and using support systems** throughout the project. This may include talking with other members of the research team, supervisors, friends, family members, or therapists.
- **Creating a timeline** that spaces out difficult periods of data collection, analysis, and writing, so that the research team can take a break from traumatic material.
- **Using self-care strategies**, like spending time with family and friends, engaging in physical exercise or hobbies, and finding ways to relax (e.g., reading a book, doing yoga, or meditating).[73]

COMMON CHALLENGES, RISKS, AND SOLUTIONS

A variety of challenges will probably occur throughout the action research process. Some of these challenges can be anticipated, which allows the action research team to put a plan in place.

Potential Challenge	Potential Solution
Staff Turnover Staff providing services to survivors of trafficking may experience vicarious trauma. It is possible there will be high turnover among staff who experience this trauma.[74]	Provide support to staff (e.g., self-care plans, opportunities to discuss stressful elements of their job with supervisors or colleagues).[75] Develop a plan for how the team will adapt if a key staff member leaves the project (e.g., select a backup staff member who is kept in the loop and cross-trained).
Survivor Pressure Survivors may feel pressured to participate in the action research project if asked by their service provider.	Provide human subjects training and discuss research ethics as a group. Include language in the consent form emphasizing that declining to participate in the action research project will not affect client services in a negative way. Ensure staff read the consent form aloud and allow participants to ask questions.
Staff Workloads Heavy caseloads may take precedence over the action research project. Organizations providing services to survivors of trafficking may experience exceptionally busy months during the year (e.g., human trafficking awareness month) when staff have large events to coordinate and attend.[76]	Build in more time for the action research project than the team thinks it will need. This will give the team a buffer if unexpected challenges arise. Create a detailed timeline that accounts for months that are typically busy.
Confidentiality Action research might be conducted in a small community where research participants know each other. It can be difficult to keep participation confidential.[77]	Ensure that each research staff member is trained in human subjects protections and confidentiality. During the consent process, discuss potential breaches of confidentiality and solutions so that the person can make an informed decision to participate in the study. For example, offer research participants the opportunity to participate in a focus group or individual interview (rather than hosting focus groups only). Ensure that a research staff member who does not know the participant conducts the interview. Consider making participation in surveys anonymous. Restrict data access for research staff who know the participants.
Time Research frequently takes longer than expected.[78]	If possible, build some flexibility into timelines to leave room for unexpected delays (e.g., receiving IRB approval, receiving organizational approval or permissions, low response rates).
Low Response Rates It may be difficult to recruit enough people to participate in data collection (e.g., surveys, interviews).	The research partners can help determine the appropriate sample size for each method and help brainstorm the best ways to reach the relevant population safely.

ANALYZING RESEARCH RESULTS

At this point in the action research process, the team should have collected data that need to be analyzed and synthesized. The action research team will break the data down into smaller, more manageable pieces to understand the problem being explored. This will help the action research team explore study findings and determine whether the research questions need to be adjusted or more data need to be collected.[79] The data are the "evidence" that the action research team can use to make decisions on how to improve the program, better serve clients, and justify funding.[80] As discussed in the previous section, there are two types of data: qualitative and quantitative.

QUALITATIVE DATA

During qualitative analysis, the action research team will review and code the qualitative data collected (e.g., interviews, focus groups, observations, documents); identify themes; and analyze the data by looking for similarities, differences, and relationships between the themes.

1) **Review**
   Read through the transcripts (i.e., written record of the oral interview) to become familiar with the data.

2) **Code**
   Coding is a way to categorize information. A code is a word or phrase that is used to label the different concepts being explored in the data. Codes help organize the data so the team can start to identify themes. It is often helpful to develop a codebook that provides a list of all the codes and how those codes are defined. A codebook will help the team apply codes consistently to the data and remind the team what each code means. The team can develop a codebook before beginning the coding process or while coding. The action research team can code transcripts on paper, in Excel, or through a qualitative data analysis software (e.g., ATLAS.ti, NVivo, MAXQDA, Dedoose).

3) **Analyze**
   Compare the codes to identify the themes and patterns in the data. What similarities and differences were identified? Did certain groups of people tend to discuss specific topics in the same way? What types of strengths, challenges, lessons learned, and recommendations did participants discuss? How frequently were specific themes discussed?

4) **Interpret**
   Discuss what these themes and patterns mean for the project (e.g., who is being affected, how and when they are being affected, relationships between people and processes, attitudes, when challenges are occurring). What are the key takeaways that can help improve the organization or program? For example, the data may show confusing or inconsistent standard operating procedures, gaps in services, client dissatisfaction with services, or a lack of resources to support activities.

❖ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention *Evaluation Brief: Analyzing Qualitative Data for Evaluation* provides an overview of how to plan for and analyze qualitative data.

EXAMPLE OF

QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

An action research team is interviewing human trafficking task force members to understand their experiences with collaboration. The action research team already knows some challenges with collaboration that the task force is experiencing, and they identified other challenges during a literature review. They developed a preliminary codebook that includes the following codes and definitions:

- *Challenge_Sharing*: The task force cannot share certain types of case information (e.g., without violating victim confidentiality, jurisdictional issues).
- *Challenge_Capacity*: Task force members do not have the capacity to participate (e.g., time, heavy caseloads).
- *Challenge_Engagement*: Some of the task force members are not engaged (e.g., lack of buy-in, meeting attendance).

The action research team calculated the code frequencies. They found that 80 percent of respondents said they did not have the capacity to participate on the task force, 65 percent said they were not as engaged in the task force as they could be, and 50 percent said they were unable to share information easily. When synthesized with other codes, the team realized the task force members were not fully engaged in the project because they carried heavy caseloads and were frustrated that they could not fully share cross-jurisdictional case information. Participants recommended developing information-sharing agreements and mechanisms to ensure confidentiality, talking with agency leadership to reduce the caseload of task force members, and holding biweekly meetings instead of weekly meetings.

QUANTITATIVE DATA

During quantitative analysis, the action research team will develop a data management system, clean the data, conduct a variety of statistical tests, interpret these findings in the context of the action research project, and summarize the data. Quantitative analysis focuses on numerical data and uses the data to answer questions about how many, how much, and how often. Look for changes over time, and similarities and differences within and between groups, as well as between sites if the action research project is being conducted at multiple locations.

1) Review

Explore the numerical data using descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies by response category, averages, range of responses for each item) to identify places where the data need to be organized, recoded, or cleaned to reflect the type of responses intended to be captured and to keep the data formatted consistently within each variable. A variable or data element is another way to refer to a question or measure in a set of data that fluctuates based on the respondent, time, or other factors related to the data. For example, how many clients were served during the specified time period? What types of services did they receive? Were referrals made to external organizations?

There are a variety of software packages to support these efforts (e.g., Excel charts, graphs, and pivot tables; SPSS; SAS; Stata). Statistical software packages provide options for running more rigorous statistical tests, whereas Excel and Access allow for warehousing data and creating charts, graphs, and basic statistics to inform the program.

2) Code

Coding is a way to categorize information and clean responses to prepare for analysis. Labeling each item in the dataset with a variable name helps to organize common measures. A codebook will be used to capture a list of all variables, the question or way in which the data were gathered, and the types of response options provided (e.g., was it an open-ended item or a question using an agreement scale, with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree?). It is important to “clean” the data as part of the coding process to ensure that data is entered consistently. This may include removing symbols, adjusting text/ characters to numeric format (e.g., ten to 10), labeling numeric responses with a descriptive title (e.g., 1 equals strongly disagree and 5 equals strongly agree), grouping similar measures together (e.g., demographics, types of services, satisfaction), and removing any erroneous responses (i.e., the response does not belong to the question being asked). Be sure to save the original data and make notes about which items changed during this cleaning process so the steps can be replicated if needed, and there is documentation should it be necessary to go back and understand what was changed later in the program.

3) Analyze

Before analyzing quantitative data, identify what is being sought in the data and the framework used to answer the questions at hand. Grounding the analysis in theory is helpful with organizing the analytic plan. For example, what outcomes are expected to be achieved through the program? What issue was identified, and how will it be clear it was addressed? What does success look like numerically?

Basic statistics provide a descriptive summary that paints a data-driven picture of what was accomplished, such as frequencies, averages, most common value, and percent change. More advanced techniques include looking at changes between two time points (e.g., comparing people served or the types of services provided before and after implementation), trends over time (e.g., are the number of clients served in a specific population increasing month-to-month?), and cross-tabulation (i.e., connecting two data elements to compare groups, such as satisfaction improving for older clients or number of T-visa applications increasing for labor trafficking victims ages 19–24). In order to state that the change seen by a program is statistically significant, more rigorous models are required, such as t-test, chi-squared, or regression analysis.

This is a good opportunity for capacity building and training. Discuss whether there are staff who would like to work with the research partner to learn how to clean, analyze, and interpret the action research project data. Consider asking the research partner to provide a training on qualitative analysis, basic statistics, and cleaning and managing data.[81] Another option is to shadow a researcher, take on small analysis tasks to learn the basics, and sit in on research partner meetings where the analysis is discussed. Practitioners and survivors bring a very important perspective that should be included throughout the action research analytic process to enhance the credibility and utility of the study.

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention *Evaluation Brief: Analyzing Quantitative Data for Evaluation* provides an overview of how to plan for and analyze quantitative data.
- The W.K. Kellogg Foundation *Step-by-Step Guide to Evaluation* provides an overview of data collection and analysis.

EXAMPLE OF
QUANTITATIVE DATA

An action research team is analyzing anti trafficking program data to explore increases in service provision. It is important to compare apples to apples when interpreting findings. Asking questions at two time points provides one means to do that and remain consistent with measurement. Also, keep a common denominator. If a program served more individuals within a specific racial group, this may not mean that a gap was closed and services were diversified; rather, looking at the percentages will show whether the specific group the program was targeting in outreach efforts improved the proportion of underserved individuals.

- **Accurate comparison**
  Number of victims served by the program initially was 16 percent American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) and, following extensive outreach with tribes, the population served is now 24 percent AI/AN.

- **Inaccurate comparison**
  Services provided to AI/AN victims improved significantly; the number served rose from 20 to 24 individuals last month.

In the second statement, the raw counts are shown without regard for the number of victims served overall. What this would not show is 20 out of 100 victims served in one month were AI/AN (20%), versus 24 out of 120 victims the following month (20%). This represents no change in the percentage of AI/AN served in comparison to the volume each month. Using percentages allows for direct comparisons.

STEP 3

LEVERAGE DATA TO DEVELOP AN ACTION PLAN

3 Leverage Data to Develop an Action Plan

At this point in the action research project, the team should have already identified the focus for the action research project; formalized partnerships; and gathered, analyzed, and interpreted the data. The next step is to leverage that data to improve the organization or program. To do this, the action research team should discuss findings in the context of the organization or program, resolve issues collaboratively, and develop an action plan to apply action research findings. Adams, Nnawulezi, and Vandenberg developed an interactive six-stage approach to leveraging data for action planning that may help guide organizations through the process.[82] This process is called “Expectations to Change” and can be accomplished through one or more workshops. The six stages are described below.

STAGE 1: SET EXPECTATIONS

The goal of Stage 1 is for the action research team to set guidelines or criteria for *how* findings will be reviewed and interpreted. For example, what should the team be looking for? How will the action research team differentiate between positive and negative findings? How will the team determine whether findings indicate the organization or program is functioning as intended or needs improvement? It is important to develop these guidelines collaboratively through consensus because they set the stage for how the team will work together to leverage findings. The following activities can help with developing review guidelines.[83]

A. Expectation Statements

Use research questions and the logic model to develop fill-in-the-blank statements about what the program is expected to accomplish.

- Example: A grantee is interested in exploring whether clients are receiving referrals and services for housing.
- Expectation Statements: We expect that 80 percent of clients will receive referrals for housing services. We expect that 100 percent of clients referred for housing will be placed in housing.

B. Rubrics

Develop a tool to assess whether the program is meeting key outcomes. Rate whether the program met those outcomes (e.g., develop a scale for poor, fair, good, very good, or excellent).

- Rubric: 50 percent of clients were referred for housing services. Do you think this outcome is poor, fair, good, very good, or excellent?

Thirty percent of clients were placed in housing. Do you think this outcome is poor, fair, good, very good, or excellent?

STAGE 2: REVIEW FINDINGS

The action research team can use the expectations developed through Stage 1 to review findings in Stage 2. One option is to ask the research partner to present visual representations of the data (e.g., tables, charts) to the group using paper, flipcharts, or PowerPoint slides. The research partner can use this opportunity to build organizational capacity to interpret research findings. Once the action research team understands the action research findings, take some time for each person to review and reflect on the research findings individually. It is important for each person to develop their own reactions to and opinions on the data before engaging in a group discussion. Each person can take notes on whether the findings met their expectations and then reconvene for a group discussion. Consider going around the room and giving each person time to share their thoughts on the data and the findings they thought were the most important. This is a great time to celebrate successes that are reflected in the data.[84] For example, maybe the findings show that clients are reporting higher levels of job readiness than expected or are more satisfied with services than expected.

❖ The Michigan State University *Expectations to Change (E2C): A Participatory Method for Engaging Stakeholder with Evaluation Findings* provides a six-stage guide for collaboratively interpreting data and developing action steps.

STAGE 3: IDENTIFY KEY FINDINGS

The next step is to identify findings that indicate areas for improvement. In some cases, there may be a short list of negative findings that are easy to identify and act on. In other cases, it may feel like there is an overwhelming amount of information to process and a long list of challenges to address. Prioritize the top three to five findings that are most relevant for the organization or program.[85] Brainstorming is often a good starting place because it provides a way for groups to generate new ideas collectively, solve problems, build trust, and ensure that everyone on the team has space to contribute. In good brainstorming sessions, the group considers all ideas in a nonjudgmental way, encourages offering a lot of different ideas, welcomes creative and outside-the-box thinking, and ensures all voices are heard. Make sure to record and display ideas so that everyone can reflect on them, group similar ideas together, remove duplicates, and identify priorities.[86] The Nominal Group Technique and **S**trengths, **W**eaknesses, **O**pportunities, and **T**hreats (SWOT) Analysis are two structured ways to brainstorm and prioritize key findings.

- The **Nominal Group Technique** allows groups to make decisions by generating and ranking ideas. Participants privately write down their ideas, take turns sharing and discussing their ideas with the group, and then vote on next steps.[87]

- **SWOT** Analysis allows groups to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that are associated with a specific goal or objective. This process can help the group to make decisions, identify new priorities and opportunities for innovation, and plan next steps.[88] The action research team can first write down their ideas in private and then share and discuss their ideas with the group. Collectively, the group ranks the top 5–10 ideas in each category.[89]

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention *Communities of Practice Resource Kit: Brainstorming Techniques* document describes steps to conduct an in-person or electronic group brainstorming session.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention *Evaluation Brief: Gaining Consensus Among Stakeholders Through the Nominal Group Technique* describes each step of the Nominal Group Technique.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention *Do a SWOT Analysis* describes how to develop goals and objectives using SWOT analysis and provides a template in which to work.

STAGE 4: INTERPRET KEY FINDINGS

During Stage 4, the action research team should interpret the meaning of the findings. Choose one person to facilitate the discussion and another person to take notes. Have a visual display of key findings so that everyone can participate in an interactive discussion. For example, if the team prioritized five key findings on which to act, set up five flipcharts or whiteboards next to each other (one for each key finding). Form one small group to talk about each finding and then rotate through each of the remaining findings. Ask each other questions about what the findings mean and how to use these findings to improve the program.[90] The following questions can help the team explore findings.

1. What did the action research team learn from the data? For example:
   a) Is the organization or program meeting the goals and objectives?
   b) Are staff roles and responsibilities clear?
   c) Are policies, processes, and procedures clear? Are they functioning as intended?
   d) Are clients satisfied with services? Are staff satisfied with current operations?
2. Do the data complement or contradict existing assumptions? How? Why might that be?
3. Do the data give us a good understanding of what is going on?
4. Has the program or organization recently made changes that might affect our interpretation of the data?

Once each small group has a chance to discuss each of the findings, reconvene the full group to talk about and synthesize the interpretations. Continue using flipcharts or whiteboards to interpret the data, categorize findings that are related to each other, identify strengths and challenges, and brainstorm solutions.[91] Is there a need for additional research before moving forward? If so, now might be a good time to collect more data. If not, the action research team and partners can start making collaborative decisions about next steps.

STAGE 5: MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS

The next step is to make recommendations for how to address the key findings. Consider asking the team the following questions:

- According to the data, what changes are needed?
- Are those changes possible within the project timeline and budget?
- What factors might impact the feasibility of implementing the recommendations?

As a group, brainstorm some specific changes that should be made to the organization or program. It may be helpful to continue using flipcharts or whiteboards to visualize the discussion. Make sure the decisionmaking process is collaborative and inclusive. Try making decisions through consensus or by voting.[92] Collaborative decisionmaking can be difficult. Members of the action research team may have different values, opinions, and perspectives, which could lead to heated discussions, negative emotions, and unproductive dialogue.[93] Some team members may also feel pressure to go along with the majority opinion.

To navigate difficult discussions, the action research team can try some conflict resolution strategies,[94] such as:

- Using visual and verbal cues to encourage active listening.
- Providing warnings before discussing sensitive topics.
- Acknowledging disagreements as soon as they occur.
- Taking a break
- Revisiting ground rules on having respectful and responsive discussions.
- Acknowledging the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the action research team members to refocus on consensus building.
- Redirecting the group's attention back to the agenda.

STAGE 6: DEVELOP AN ACTION PLAN

Once the action research team chooses priority areas of focus, the next step is to develop an action plan for accomplishing new goals.[95] Action plans link goals to objectives and actions to reach a desired outcome. A useful action plan outlines detailed action steps and provides clear information on who will do what. Consider answering the following questions when developing an action plan:[96]

1. What do we need to do to complete each step?
2. Who can help us complete each step?
3. What is the timeframe for completing each step?
4. How will we make sure each step is completed as planned?
5. What resources do we have to complete each step? What other resources do we need?

The process of developing an action plan forces the action research team to think about the details of accomplishing each step which, hopefully, will help the team identify potential challenges and ideas that are too logistically difficult to accomplish. This should help the team save time and resources in the future, as well as hold staff accountable for their roles and responsibilities during implementation. Writing SMART goals and objectives can help the team develop the action plan, monitor implementation, and assess whether the organization or program is achieving positive outcomes.[97]

- **S**pecific: Clear and detailed description of what the team will do and who will do it.
- **M**easurable: Clear and detailed description of how the team will measure progress and success.
- **A**ttainable: The goal or objective is challenging but realistic.
- **R**esults-Oriented: Clear and detailed description of intended outcomes.
- **T**ime-Bound: Clear and detailed timeframe.

Action planning should be collaborative and inclusive. Teams that have a shared understanding of what the program is seeking to accomplish, how the program will function, and how resources will be used tend to be more successful.[98] The action research team should consider involving staff in action planning to gain diverse perspectives on implementing new processes or policies, building trust, and obtaining staff buy-in.[99] For example, ask staff to clarify roles and responsibilities and identify potential logistical challenges. Consider their interest, availability, and commitment to planned changes. The action research team may have to build staff capacity to implement new policies or practices (e.g., through training) or hire new staff with specific areas of expertise.[100]

- The OVC TTAC *Strategic Planning Toolkit* provides a guide for the action planning process, including sample strategic plans and tips, tools, and examples for developing SMART goals and objectives.

- The Community Toolbox provides an *Action Plan Form* to help the team collaboratively brainstorm actions, staff roles and responsibilities, timeframes, resources available and needed, potential barriers, and communication plans.

STEP 4

IMPLEMENT THE ACTION PLAN

4 Implement the Action Plan

Now is the time to implement the action plan. Implementation will likely be very different across organizations. Some organizations may implement small changes, like new intake and referral procedures, while others implement large changes, like creating a new task force or services. Try implementing one change at a time to allow for assessment of whether the change is working as intended. The action research team can support the implementation process by communicating regularly with the staff members involved in implementation, documenting the process, engaging in capacity building, and celebrating successes. Schedule regular meetings with everyone involved in the implementation process to facilitate consistent information sharing, staff buy-in, and continuous decisionmaking. Avoid implementing the action plan in siloes—the goal is to understand how new processes are working and how they affect different parts of the organization. Repeating data collection and analysis conducted in ***Step 2*** to measure changes that occurred as the result of implementation may be needed.

For example,

- **Ask** staff and clients (where applicable) the following questions:[101]
  - Is the new process or service functioning as planned?
  - Do any new processes or policies need to be modified?
    - If so, why? How?
  - Are staff comfortable with the new processes and procedures?
  - Do staff need additional support or training?
  - Is the organization or program experiencing any challenges with implementation?
  - Are clients satisfied with the services they are receiving?

- **Analyze** available data to explore whether the change is resulting in anticipated outputs and outcomes.
  - How many clients is the organization or program serving?
  - What types of clients is the organization or program serving? Is the program reaching the right population?
  - What outcomes are clients experiencing?

The action research team can provide valuable insight about how new processes or tasks are being implemented, staff time spent conducting new processes or tasks, interactions between staff and clients, and caseloads. The action research team can also observe implementation activities, obtain staff and client feedback, and provide the following support:

- **Provide** constructive feedback to improve processes.
- **Explore** opportunities to increase staff knowledge and skills to conduct new processes. Suggest external professional development courses, workshops, or trainings.
- **Offer** staff training or coaching.
- **Determine** whether staff have the capacity and expertise to conduct new tasks. Is there a need to hire new staff?
- **Review** the program logic model and assess the need for updates based on feedback.

The action research team can help the program troubleshoot implementation challenges such as those noted in the following table.

LEADERSHIP

Challenges	Solutions
Ineffective collaboration	Arrange ongoing review and discussion of group progress on the proposed changes. Consider how needs change over time and the implications of that on an annual or as-needed basis.
Ineffective communication	Communicate to all relevant audiences how their feedback was used to modify the action plan—or even the broader vision, mission, objectives, and strategies—of the group. Clarify complex uncertainties.
Lack of leadership buy-in	Action research is not always a priority for organizational leadership and leadership may not believe the action research findings can be addressed (e.g., due to budget constraints). The action research team can generate buy-in a variety of ways. For example, clearly articulate how the action research findings can solve a specific organizational problem and be embedded in existing organizational processes. Ensure that leaders have a role in the action research project. Individuals who take ownership of a piece of the project may be more invested in the outcomes.
Disagreements about further action	Share interim findings with the collaborative to explore new avenues for further study. Invite consideration of the importance of changes that have occurred to the mission. Negotiate group conflict. This may include disagreements about the best approach to providing services that are in the best interest of the client. Implement evidence- and trauma-informed practices.
External influences on work scope	Consider how the action plan might be modified. Revise the list of proposed changes periodically to correspond to new opportunities and challenges.

DAY-TO-DAY OPERATIONS

Challenges	Solutions
Insufficient resources to carry out action	Identify when extra supports are needed, such as training time and monitoring compliance with procedures; troubleshoot difficulties with implementation. Identify funding to support new plans, if necessary.
Unresolved tasks and activities	Ask staff to report on accomplishing planned tasks regularly. Consider making this a regular part of the meeting. Document kudos and suggestions for improvements or topics.
Lack of ownership	Communicate to everyone involved how his or her input was incorporated. Implement practices that ensure inclusivity, equity, and opportunities for survivor-informed insights.
Burdened and overwhelmed staff	Balance workloads across staff. Identify when needs are not being met. Identify duplication of efforts and training needs of staff and volunteers. Identify what supports staff need and who or what resources could help them, including vicarious trauma, self-care, and work-life balance. Ensure resources and supports are regularly and predictably accessible. Leadership should demonstrate a culture that encourages use of resources.
Staff turnover	Develop a set of onboarding tools to facilitate staff transitions and learning roles and responsibilities.

STEP 5

Reflect & Report

5 Reflect & Report

After the team implements the action plan, members should reflect on the extent to which the action research goals and objectives were met and discuss lessons learned and next steps. Action research teams should try to engage in the reflection process soon after implementation while their experiences are at the forefront of their minds.

Reflection questions:

- What were the strengths and weaknesses of implementation?
- What activities appear to be effective in bringing about positive change? Were there any unexpected positive or negative outcomes?
- What structural and procedural refinements helped strengthen program implementation?
- What outputs and outcomes did the program achieve?
- How sustainable are the changes that were made? What policies, processes, and practices need to be in place to sustain program improvements?
- What new skills did staff learn? Is there a need for more capacity building and training?
- What communication strategies were most effective and in what context? What communication strategies were not as effective? What else might be worth trying?
- What are some lessons worth sharing with others?
- Does the team need to conduct more research to understand whether the changes improved the program or caused new challenges? If so, circle back to ***Step 2***. It may be possible to repeat the original data collection and analysis to assess whether the organization or program achieved the intended outcomes.
- Are there other challenges or areas for improvement that the team identified through the action research process but have not addressed yet? If so, circle back to ***Step 3*** and choose another change to implement.

REPORTING AND DISSEMINATION

The action research team should develop a process for translating and disseminating project findings collaboratively through a variety of formats and outlets.[102] The goal is to disseminate information that shows the partners, community, funders, and others working in this field how the action research team conducted the research project, what they found, and how those findings will lead to sustainable improvements to organizational processes and policies. For most dissemination products, the team should make sure writing is:

- Straightforward
- Non-technical
- Articulates clearly the real-world application of their findings and recommendations.[103]
- This information will reach the largest number of people if it is shared through multiple formats and outlets. It is also important to keep in mind the audience, as well as the types of outlets they typically access. For example, a service provider may be more likely to read a newsletter or infographic shared through a listserv, while a researcher may be more likely to read an article in a peer-reviewed journal or a final report shared through a funder's website.

The action research team should also consider who will be involved in dissemination and in what capacity. For example, organizations and research partners should consider co-authoring peer-reviewed journal articles, conference presentations, and other written products.[104] Make sure that everyone who wants to collaborate on writing and dissemination has time to review each product and provide feedback. Team members should discuss what they think is fair at the beginning of the project and continue those discussions throughout the duration of the project. Dissemination of findings and products can cause a great deal of tension if the partners disagree on who should be involved and how the process should be carried out.[105] This tension can be alleviated through transparent and collaborative discussions that consider the skills, strengths, and time limitations of each partner.[106]

❖ See the OVC TTAC *Sample Report Outline* for a suggested report format.

Methods

- Literature reviews
- Environmental scans
- Your action research process
- Summary of findings

Products

- Fact sheets/infographics
- Brief reports
- Curricula
- Newsletters
- Videos
- Webinars
- Tools/toolkits
- Presentations

Outlets

- Email listservs
- Organization websites
- Peer reviewed journals
- Conferences
- Roundtable discussions
- YouTube
- Newsletters
- Blogs

See the Connecticut Department of Children and Families funded *Human Anti Trafficking Response Team (HART) in Connecticut* 2020 5 Year Review final action research report PDF.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

OVC Grantee Logic Model

OVC Human Trafficking Grantee Specialized Services Project Logic Model

INPUTS

Funding
OVC-Specialized Services

Human Resources
Board
Staff
CCA volunteer interns
Pro bobo attorneys

Material Resources
Office space
Equipment
Case management software
furniture/supplies

Partnerships
Formal – CAST
Informal

ACTIVITIES

Legal Services
Holistic Assessment
Legal Advice
Immigration assistance
Family law Assistance
Restraining orders
Public benefits advocacy
Crime Victims' rights advocacy

Case Management Services
Assessment
Information
Individual advocacy
Accompaniment
Linkages
Safety planning
Skill building
Social support

Outreach/Education
Partner activities
Outreach activities
Education activities

OUTPUTS

Legal Services
new clients
clients served/matter type
#/% immigration petitions filed/type
#/% matters closed/level of service
#/% matters closed/matter type
#/% of clients participating in criminal investigation/prosecution

Case Management Services
clients served
#/% services plans created
#/% supportive services provided/type
#/% clients referred/service type
#/% of referrals made/service provider

Outreach/Education
outreach activities/type
#education activities/type

CLIENT OUTCOMES

Intrapersonal Changes

Knowledge Outcomes
Increased knowledge of legal rights
Increased knowledge of the workings of legal system
Increased knowledge of how to respond to threats
Increased knowledge of peer and community resources
Increased knowledge of response to law enforcement

Emotional Outcomes
Feels more confident
Feels more comfortable asking for help
Improved satisfaction with emotional well-being
Improved satisfaction with sense of safety
Feels less fearful, depressed, and stressed
Feels more helpful
Feels more satisfied with physical well-being

Interpersonal/Social Changes

Social Outcomes
Experiences less abuse
Spends more time with friends/family
Better relationship with children
Gained new freedoms
Increased satisfaction with ability to co-parent

Resource Outcomes
Increased use of government benefits
Increased use of community programs
Increased use of personal support network
Improved satisfaction with financial situation
Improved satisfaction with housing situation
Improved employment situation

Justice & Procedural Fairness Outcomes
Accomplished legal goals
More fully accessed legal system
Experienced just process

FACTORS PREDICTING IMPROVED WELL-BEING

Intrapersonal Predictors
Self-efficacy
Hopefulness

Interpersonal/Social Predictors
Social Connectedness
Economic Opportunity
Access to safety

GOAL

CLIENT WELL-BEING

Extent to which community supports victim safety and provides resources

Extent to which survivors participate in services

Extent to which law enforcement, service providers and community organizations join in collaboration

Contextual Factors Impacting Work and Success

APPENDIX B

Considerations for Including Action Research In Proposals

CONSIDERATIONS

for Including Action Research In Proposals

Anti-trafficking organizations sometimes seek funding to conduct action research projects. The following table provides a list of questions and criteria for applicants to consider when seeking funding to develop action research proposals (adapted from Dymnicki et al., 2014).*

COMPONENT: Choosing a Focus and Partners

Questions	Potential Information to Include in Your Proposal
• How will you choose your area of focus? • How will you choose a research partner? • How will you choose other partners? • How will you consider the interests of your staff, clients, and partners; political influences; and local culture?	• The area of focus and why it is important to address. • Whether the research partner is in-house or external and why they were chosen. • Other multidisciplinary partnerships and why they were formed. • Practitioner and research partner experience with action research. • How the partners and research partner will communicate (e.g., monthly meetings).

COMPONENT: Generating Knowledge through Data Collection

Questions	Potential Information to Include in Your Proposal
• How will you collect background information (e.g., review of local data sources and published research, conduct interviews with key stakeholders)? • What are the current practices and existing programs, strengths, and challenges? Why/how will this action research project help your organization better meet the needs of the population you serve? • How will you develop and conduct research steps? • How will you analyze the results? • How will you continuously assess whether the intervention or program is working and whether mid-course changes are needed?	• The programs and practices that are currently being implemented. • How the action research project will address unmet organizational, staff, and client needs. • Types of local data sources and published research you will review. • How the action research project will improve current programs/practices. • The process you will use to develop and conduct research, including types of data collection (e.g., interviews, focus groups, surveys, observation), sample, sample size, justification for choosing specific methods, plans for analysis.

* Dymnicki, A., Wandersman, A., Osher, D., Grigorescu, V., and Huang, L. (2014). *Willing, able -> ready: basics and policy implications of readiness as a key component for scaling up implementation of evidence-based interventions*. Washington, DC: Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.

COMPONENT: Leveraging Data to Develop an Action Plan

Questions	Potential Information to Include in Your Proposal
• How will you discuss and translate your findings? • How will you use your findings to set priorities and develop an action plan?	• The process for discussing and translating findings. • A plan for making decisions about which changes will be prioritized during implementation. • A plan for communicating findings to the rest of the team and other key stakeholders in the organization/program. • The process for action planning.

COMPONENT: Implementing the Action Plan

Questions	Potential Information to Include in Your Proposal
• How will you apply findings to improve your program? • How will you determine whether you improved your policies, processes, or services?	• The process for implementing changes based on action research findings. • The process for measuring change (e.g., new data collection and analysis).

COMPONENT: Interpreting the Results of the Action Plan

Questions	Potential Information to Include in Your Proposal
• How will you sustain the new policies, procedures, and practices implemented through your action research project? • How will you collaboratively disseminate project findings?	• A plan for sustaining new programs or practices (e.g., instituting new policies; applying for new funding; staff training; annual reviews of the program/practice; continued collaboration through calls, reports, and observations). • A plan for developing written products and disseminating project findings (e.g., type of product, outlets for dissemination, who will write and disseminate products).

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