Andreas Cebulla
National Centre for Social Research, London

Meta-Analysis of US welfare-to-work programs – approach, problems and lessons

Abstract:

In the era of global policy learning, meta-analysis has the potential to become a powerful and efficient tool for enhancing our understanding of the effectiveness, operation, and transferability of policy natio-nally and internationally. In 2001, a group of social policy and economics researchers from the UK and the US conducted a meta-analysis of US welfare-to-work programs in order to

a) assess the potential for using meta-analysis in labour market policy evaluation; and

b) explore whether UK policy-makers' perceptions of the US role model to the UK New Deal were an accurate reflection of the empirical evidence of the effectiveness of US welfare-to-work reforms.

The research anticipated many of the concerns subsequently raised by policy-makers in the UK about limits to the effective delivery of welfare-to-work reform initiatives and methods for improving outcomes. The meta-analysis, since then extended, integrated data from over 100 mandatory welfare-to-work interventions into a multi-level database, recording impact data, and information about program participants, the nature of services provided, and environmental context. The presentation will highlight practical problems arising during the assembly of the database and its analysis, and how they were addressed. It will illustrate the relevance of meta-analysis to policy-making, while noting the limits of meta-analysis. The presentations will conclude with suggestions as to how meta-analysis may be facilitated by improvements in the provision and presentation of evaluation data, and enquire how meta-analysis may be used to promote internationally comparative studies.