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Using secondary data for evaluation of early interventions – opportunities and challenges

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Drawing on two large scale evaluations of Australian early intervention programs (the Commonwealth Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, and the NSW Early Intervention Program), and from the international literature, in particular the evaluation of Sure Start in the UK, this talk will discuss the opportunities and challenges of using secondary data for evaluative purposes. Two types of data will be discussed – administrative data and data generated by the management information of the program funder. Secondary data potentially offers evaluators a rich source of information at little relative cost, and with new data sets and technologies developing which can link different administrative datasets, evaluators are increasingly turning to these sources. Well designed management information systems can serve both evaluative and monitoring functions, and avoid excessive administrative burdens being placed on front line workers. On the other hand, there are a number of technical, ethical and methodological challenges to be overcome, and in reality most data sources turn out to be far less useful than anticipated. Some of the challenges include:

- Technical

    - Sensitivity of data to change

    - Availability at different geographical levels

    - Timescales of collection

- Methodological

    - Relevance to the program logic

    - Methods of collection

    - Data flows

- Ethical

    - Maintaining an arms length evaluation

    - Feeding back to participants