

Health Services Research: Determining What Works and What Doesn't in Healthcare



Health services research (HSR) is the science of studying what in our health care system works, for whom, at what cost, and under what circumstances. The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) is the leading federal agency for HSR, which evaluates health care programs and innovations across various settings including insurance companies, hospital systems, and community-based health organizations. Investments in AHRQ and HSR are the pathway to a high-quality, cost-effective health care system that is focused on improving patient health outcomes.

HSR's Role in Assessing Cost Effectiveness

HSR is the primary research area analyzing costs associated with health care interventions. Health care spending in the U.S. **continues to grow** due to an aging population, investment in new technologies, and rising rates of chronic illnesses. HSR can help decipher which programs provide the greatest improvement in quality of life for the lowest cost -- leading to cost savings for the health system and American taxpayers. For example, a recent AHRQ-funded **study** found that providing HIV screening for more targeted populations (i.e., individuals at higher risk) versus the general population provided more cost savings with little difference in diagnostic rates.

HSR's Role in Evaluating Quality

Health services researchers help improve the quality of care we receive by conducting actionable research to examine how effective different interventions are in different care settings. **Improving the quality of care** can improve health outcomes, lower costs, and increase patient satisfaction. Specifically, greater emphasis on patient safety and operational effectiveness has been directly linked with a **better patient experience** and positive changes in **health related outcomes**. Health service researchers are at the forefront of evaluating which treatments and services would be considered the greatest investment for improvements in health.

AHRQ is Supporting Actionable Evidence Generation for Greater Efficiency

AHRQ-funded studies have evaluated vital health care questions such as the effect of **medical debt on barriers to care, rural area disparities in paying for postpartum care,** and the introduction of a **hospital-based**

fall prevention intervention that provided improvements in cost and health. AHRQ has also had recently funded projects examining the **safety and effectiveness** of Telehealth, promoting **safe transitions off of opioids,** and evaluating **health outcomes during post-acute care** for patients on different payment models – all current health priority areas needing further research evidence. AHRQ-funded studies support findings that can be implemented to produce cost savings and/or improve patient health through creating a more efficient healthcare system.

Data storage and infrastructure is also an important function of AHRQ. As the primary agency maintaining and distributing the **Medical Expenditure Panel Survey (MEPS),** AHRQ provides researchers access to national health and insurance data which helps inform future policy priorities. MEPS data has been used to highlight policy implications such as the **extent of private insurance coverage** for employees and providing **medically tailored meals to improve health outcomes.**

Health care evaluation means supporting AHRQ and HSR

Policymakers can support the evaluation and improvement of health care delivery by supporting the researchers, patients, and funders that make it happen. That entails:

- Ensuring that AHRQ has consistent and robust funding for HSR grants and dissemination and implementation of research
- Proactive collaboration with health service researchers on policy and research priorities
- Supporting secure access to necessary health data, including ensuring interoperability of data systems