



A PLAIN-LANGUAGE GUIDE

Outputs vs. Outcomes

The most common measurement mistake in the sector — and the easiest to miss.

Nearly every program tracks its **outputs** — how much it does. Far fewer track its **outcomes** — what actually changes as a result. It's an easy mistake to make: outputs are simple to count, they happen immediately, and they're what most funders ask for. But a program can produce impressive outputs while its outcomes go unmeasured — or unmet.

THREE WORDS THAT GET CONFUSED — ACTIVITY, OUTPUT, OUTCOME

ACTIVITY

What you do

A street outreach worker builds contact with people living unsheltered.



OUTPUT

How much

400 outreach contacts made this quarter — the *count* of the activity.



OUTCOME

What changes

The share of those contacts who exited outreach to a positive housing destination (HUD SPM 7a.1) — the change it's meant to produce.

The activity is the work. The output counts the work. The outcome measures the change the work is meant to create.

OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES, SIDE BY SIDE

OUTPUTS How much you did Counts of activity. Immediate, within your control, easy to report.	OUTCOMES What changed Changes in people's lives. Slower, harder to measure — and the actual point.
150 people received case management	68% retained housing at 12 months
1,200 nights of shelter provided	Median return to homelessness dropped
85 households enrolled in rapid re-housing	72% stably housed after program exit
300 Housing Problem Solving conversations held	54% resolved their crisis without entering the system

Same program, two different questions — "how much did we do?" and "did it work?" — that require two different measurements.

Outputs tell you a program is **busy**. Only outcomes tell you it's **working**. When a program measures only how much it does, its strongest efforts look identical to its weakest — because activity is all that's visible. A team can make every contact, hold every intake, and fill every bed, and still not move the outcome the program exists to change. Without outcome measurement, no one finds out until it's too late to adjust.

Outcomes are also where the **feedback loop** gets built. When you measure what actually changes, you can see *where* the system is working and where it isn't — which points to the leverage: the specific place a process needs to change, or a program working well enough to scale. A count of activity tells you what happened, not where to push. Measuring outcomes turns your data from a report card into a map.

None of this is a knock on hardworking teams. Outputs dominate reporting because they're what's easy and what's asked for. But funders — and the people you serve — ultimately care about the change, not the activity.

Turning an Output into an Outcome

- 1 Take one output you already track. Ask: **what is this activity supposed to change?** Outreach contacts exist to move people off the street — so a housing placement is the outcome.
- 2 Define the change using a measure that already exists where you can. For outreach, HUD's **successful-placement rate (SPM 7a.1)** is the recognized outcome — no need to invent one.
- 3 Track both side by side over time. Rising contacts with a flat placement rate is a signal worth paying attention to — activity up, outcome unchanged.

If you can only count what you did, you can't yet say whether it worked.
That gap is where evaluation begins.

To think through the outcomes your program should be measuring, visit homelessresponselab.com.