

Realizing Evaluations Produce Estimates NOT “Certainty”

John P. Proctor, P.E., Proctor Engineering Group, Ltd.

Introduction

This poster presents research into the problem of overstating the results of evaluations simply in the words used to describe the results. How often have you seen the words: “True”, “Actual”, “Measured”, “Real”, etc. ascribed to the results of an evaluation? This poster presents the statistics from just one conference.

Rejoinder: “But everyone knows that these are really estimates.” If “everyone” knew that these were estimates, not absolute facts, it would still be incumbent on the evaluator to use accurate wording that was less likely to be misinterpreted by the reader of the evaluation. The most common readers of evaluations are not high level statisticians, but rather utility personnel, utility regulators, and others that can, and do, easily take the results of evaluations as absolute and immutable facts.

These estimates, taken as facts, become embedded in policy and calculations such as the California Database for Energy Efficient Resources (DEER). Many readers do not recognize that, generally, evaluations are of programs, not of measures. The results of a particular program are erroneously taken as establishing the value of a measure, without regard to how or to whom the measure(s) in the program were applied.

The Statistics

In 192 documents from the 2011 IEPEC, we find:

- Measured- 67 documents, 141 instances
- Real- 50 documents, 110 instances
- Actual- 73 documents, 210 instances
- True- 37 documents, 75 instances

The Problem

The problem doesn’t necessarily originate from the EM&V professionals, but sometimes when non-technical people take evaluation reports and ignore the word “estimate”. This may be because they think in black in white instead of shades of gray, or because they are trying to make the most compelling case possible to support some agenda and facts sound more compelling than estimates.

As professional evaluators we need to watch both our use of statistics and our use of words that provide an easy path to misinterpretation.

The Poster

The poster includes some examples of how the words we use sometimes assist misinterpretation.