CLEAR POLICIES AND PROCEDURES, VERSION 3.1

The U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL's) Clearinghouse for Labor Evaluation and Research (CLEAR) provides a central source of research and information on labor-related topics for a broad audience that includes practitioners, policymakers, researchers, the media, and the general public. This document provides details on all aspects of CLEAR operations, including how topic areas are selected, the procedures for identifying studies to be reviewed, review guidelines, reviewers and the review process, and reporting. The policies and procedures documented here provide transparency regarding the approaches implemented June 1, 2016, and thereafter. Previous versions of CLEAR Policies and Procedures are available at http://clear.dol.gov. The CLEAR review process is summarized in Figure 1.

Topic Area Selection

The topic areas in which CLEAR reviews the research are determined by the DOL Chief Evaluation Office (CEO). The CEO might consult with multiple stakeholders, including various DOL agencies, other federal departments, CLEAR contractor project staff,[1] and the CLEAR technical work group (TWG) of advisors. In choosing topics, the CEO considers factors such as the importance of the topic to CLEAR stakeholders, the relevance of the topic to current policy issues, and the availability of research to address the topic. CLEAR is designed to include research relevant to many of the agencies within DOL.

After a broad topic area has been identified, CLEAR staff work with CEO and DOL agency staff to develop and define the topic area. Subject matter experts from outside DOL also provide insights and help define some topic areas. The subject matter experts and DOL staff advise CLEAR staff in developing primary research questions of interest for the topic area. The research questions narrow the scope of the review but are broad enough to ensure that the products of the review will be useful to a range of stakeholders.

CLEAR staff then draft a topic area review protocol that focuses on the research questions of interest. The review protocol sets forth the criteria for research to be included in the review process, including types of research designs to be included, populations of interest, and domains and outcomes of interest.

Identifying the Research

CLEAR project staff, including research librarians, develop a process for identifying the research that could meet the criteria set forth in the topic area review protocol. For systematic reviews, the literature search is designed to capture *all* research papers and reports that examine the research questions of interest. The specific strategies used can vary across topic areas. Each topic area protocol describes the process CLEAR staff will use to search for research that might meet the criteria for that

---

[1] Mathematica Policy Research (Mathematica) and ICF International are the CLEAR contractors. Mathematica drafted and revised this policies and procedures document, with input from TWG members and DOL.

Figure 1. Procedure for CLEAR Search, Screening, Review, and Synthesis
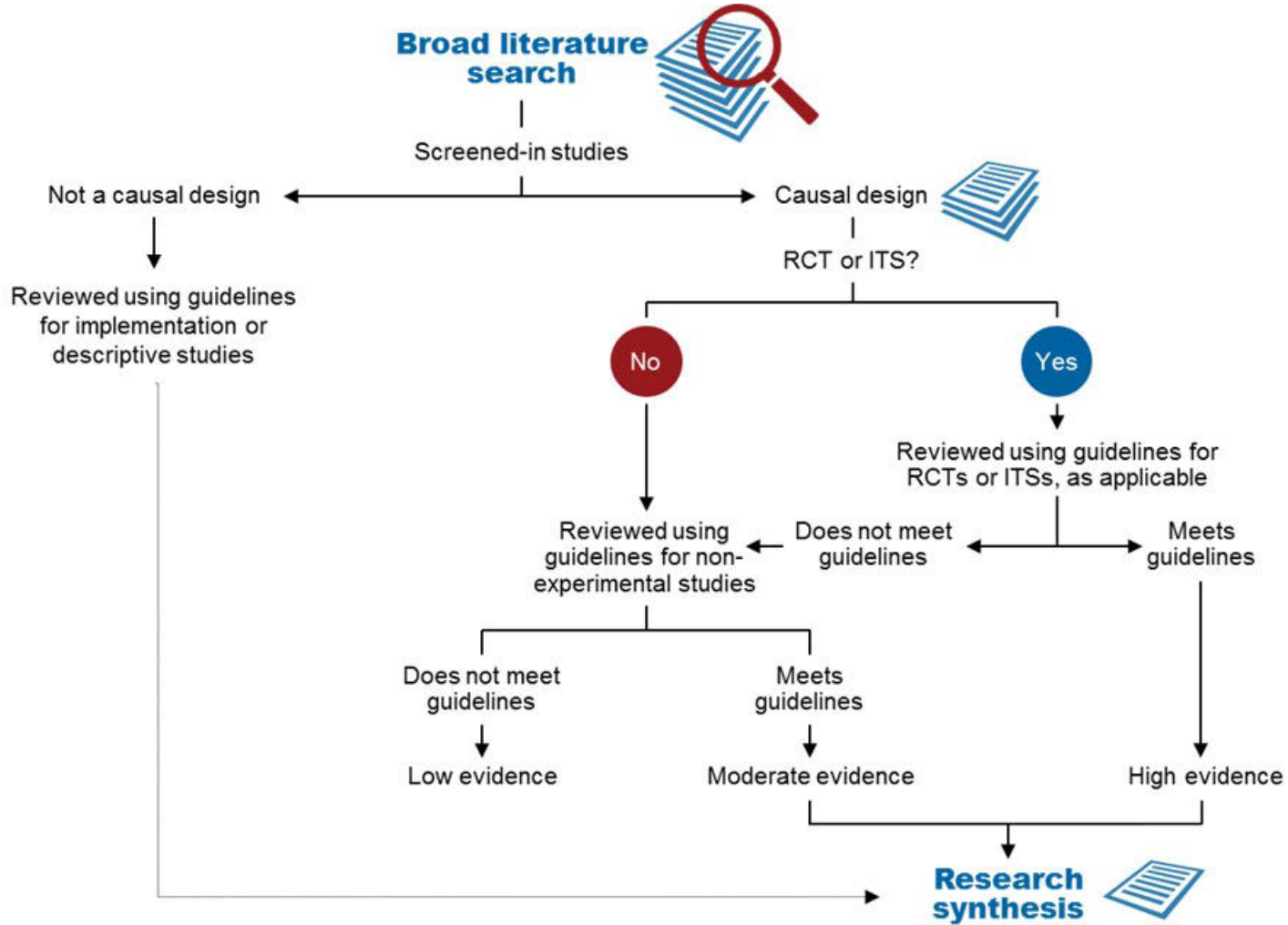
Note: Findings from causal studies that rate high and moderate are incorporated into the research synthesis, as well as findings from implementation and descriptive studies that examined an intervention for which the causal study of the intervention rated high or moderate.

ITS = interrupted time series; RCT = randomized controlled trial.

topic area. This includes specific search terms, date ranges,[2] and databases to be queried. The subject matter experts and DOL staff provide input on the search process.

Not all the research papers and reports that are identified through the literature search fit within the topic area as defined by the topic area review protocol. Therefore, the first step in the review process is to screen for relevance. A trained screener reviews the search results and indicates which research might meet the criteria to be reviewed. Then, the principal investigator (PI) for the topic area examines those studies more thoroughly to determine whether they fit within the topic area protocol. (Note that all published studies and final reports identified by CLEAR's search and screening process will be included in CLEAR, along with their causal evidence ratings, if applicable.)

As part of the systematic review process, CLEAR staff search other clearinghouses (such as What Works Clearinghouse [WWC], FindYouthInfo.org, Employment Strategies for Low-Income Adults Evidence Review, and Self-Sufficiency Research Clearinghouse) to determine whether they have already reviewed research in similar topic areas; if so, CLEAR staff use the references from those reviews as a starting point for the literature search. If research that another clearinghouse reviewed fits the topic area criteria for CLEAR, CLEAR staff examine the review guidelines from that review and whether the outcomes and study samples align with those of interest to CLEAR. If the review guidelines are the same as CLEAR's, CLEAR staff simply confirm the review from the other clearinghouse. If not, the research is subject to CLEAR's review process. A link to the relevant clearinghouse is available on the CLEAR website for all topic areas in which there is overlap with another clearinghouse.

In addition to identifying studies as part of a systematic literature search in a defined topic area, CLEAR conducts flash reviews of research that has been nominated for a review and meets eligibility criteria. All members of the public can suggest a study for review through the Contact Us section of http://clear.dol.gov. In addition, CLEAR accepts nominations from DOL agencies that have an interest in a particular study. See the CLEAR Flash Reviews Protocol for further details about these reviews.

Review Types

CLEAR uses a two-level approach for conducting reviews. All research that meets the criteria for inclusion under a topic area protocol receives a review that captures the highlights of the study. These highlights reviews include basic information about the research question of interest, data and methods, and findings. They do not attempt to assess the quality of the causal evidence or methods. The purpose of highlights reviews is to provide enough information about the research so that CLEAR users can determine whether it is relevant for their purposes. CLEAR provides a link to each report that undergoes a highlights review so that users can easily find the original research.

Many—but sometimes not all—studies also undergo a more comprehensive review that results in a detailed profile of the study's methods, quality of causal evidence, and findings. Each topic area review protocol describes the selection criteria for research that is subject to a detailed profile review. Typically, selected studies examine a research question that is particularly relevant for decisions about programs and policies. For example, in the Opportunities for Youth topic area, impact studies examining the effectiveness of non-school-based programs for economically disadvantaged youth

---

[2] Rarely, CLEAR might specifically search for an earlier report in a series that was published before the start of a topic area's date range. This occurs only if reviewers need to consult such reports for details that are required to assign a causal evidence rating to a subsequently published study.

were selected for profile reviews. The implementation studies associated with these impact studies also received profile reviews.

CLEAR Guidelines for Profile Reviews

Comprehensive guidelines for profile reviews emphasize quality and consistency in the review process, directing CLEAR staff to produce summaries of the research that provide clear and concise information about its purpose, context, and findings. The profiles provide information on the strengths and limitations of the research to help a lay audience interpret the study's findings. At this time, CLEAR has developed review guidelines for causal, implementation, and quantitative descriptive studies.

- **Causal studies** are those that attempt to estimate the causal impact of an intervention.

- **Implementation studies** examine in-depth the experiences of service providers, government agencies, or both as they provide such programs.

- **Descriptive studies** encompass many other kinds of studies that use quantitative methods to describe some aspect of a program, policy, or intervention; these include cost-benefit analyses or descriptive statistics.

As CLEAR evolves, it might become relevant to distinguish additional categories for types of analysis that require a different approach to the review.

CLEAR will revise the review guidelines over time and adjust them based on issues faced when implementing the guidelines as well as input from experts and others. In addition, as the science of research evolves, so will the guidelines. A TWG will review the CLEAR guidelines every three years. The topic area protocols list which version of the guidelines were used in the review for the topic area.

Causal Research

CLEAR reviews experimental and nonexperimental research that makes causal claims (that is, that claim to estimate the effect on a program, policy, or intervention on outcomes). In collaboration with DOL and a TWG, CLEAR staff developed causal evidence guidelines to use in reviewing nonexperimental research with causal designs, to provide an objective assessment and rating of the degree to which the research establishes the causal impact of the intervention. These causal designs include instrumental variables and various other regression analyses, including those with fixed or random effects and difference-in-differences. CLEAR assesses the quality of causal evidence for randomized controlled trials (RCTs) using an adaptation of the Institute for Education Science's WWC standards.[3]

---

[3] The full set of WWC evidence standards is documented in the *WWC Procedures and Standards Handbook, Version 3.0*, which is available at http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/documentsum.aspx?sid=19. The handbook explains the criteria for evaluating RCTs, which mainly involve determining study attrition and any other threats to the validity of the study's design. Other federal research clearinghouses have adapted the WWC standards, including the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) for the Teen Pregnancy Prevention evidence reviews, the Institute of Education Sciences for evaluation of Investing in Innovation evidence, and the DHHS Office of the Administration for Children and Families for the Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness systematic reviews.

During CLEAR's pilot phase, CLEAR staff continuously reviewed, improved, and revised the evidence guidelines to reflect lessons learned as they were first implemented. Version 1.1 incorporated these revisions, as well as feedback from DOL and the TWG for CLEAR. It also incorporated additional examples of how to apply the guidelines, gleaned from reviews in the pilot phase. During CLEAR's second phase, in collaboration with two technical experts from the TWG, CLEAR staff developed evidence guidelines for evaluating the quality of causal evidence for studies with interrupted time series (ITS) designs. Version 2.0 incorporated these guidelines.[4] Version 2.1 included minor refinements to the Version 2.0 standards, adding language that more clearly describes confounding factors and how they affect a study's causal evidence rating.

CLEAR has three possible ratings to describe the strength of causal evidence presented in a given piece of research: high, moderate, and low (Table 1).

- Two types of studies can receive a high causal evidence rating, the highest evidence rating that CLEAR offers: (1) well-conducted RCTs that are determined to have low attrition and no other threats to internal validity and (2) ITS designs with sufficient replication wherein the researcher intentionally manipulates the intervention condition.[5] A high causal evidence rating means we are confident that the estimated effects are solely attributable to the intervention that was examined. RCTs and ITS designs that cannot be classified as providing high causal evidence can be evaluated against CLEAR evidence guidelines for nonexperimental designs.

- Research designs that meet the guidelines for nonexperimental designs receive a moderate causal evidence rating; this indicates there is evidence that the study establishes a causal relationship between the intervention being examined and the outcomes of interest, but there might be other factors that were not included in the analysis also could affect the outcomes of interest.

- Research that does not meet the criteria for a high or moderate rating receives a low causal evidence rating, which indicates that we cannot be confident that the estimated effects are attributable to the intervention being examined.

---

[4] Regression discontinuity designs are not currently included in the causal evidence guidelines. Studies with regression discontinuity designs will be reviewed under CLEAR's quantitative descriptive guidelines until causal evidence guidelines for such designs are developed.

[5] Research has shown that ITS designs can provide strong causal evidence (see Shadish, W., Cook, T., & Campbell, D. (2002). Quasi-experiments: Interrupted time-series designs. In *Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for General Causal Inference* (pp. 171–206). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company). In addition, ITS designs can be seen as a hybrid of single-case and regression discontinuity designs, both of which experts have deemed to provide strong causal evidence when well executed (see *WWC Procedures and Standards Handbook, Version 3.0)*. Note, however, that CLEAR leadership anticipates that ITS designs in topic areas of interest to CLEAR will rarely be strong enough to receive a high causal evidence rating.

Table 1. Summary of Causal Evidence Ratings

Rating	Rating definition
High causal evidence	There is strong evidence that the estimated effects are solely attributable to the program or policy being examined. *This rating can apply only to RCTs and ITS designs.*
Moderate causal evidence	There is moderate evidence that the estimated effects are attributable at least in part to the program or policy being examined. However, there might be other factors that were not accounted for and that might also have contributed to the estimated effects. *This rating can apply to nonexperimental designs. It can also apply to RCTs and ITS designs that do not meet the criteria for a high causal evidence rating.*
Low causal evidence	There is little evidence that the estimated effects are attributable solely to the intervention; other factors are likely to have contributed. *This rating applies to all causal designs that do not meet the criteria for high or moderate causal evidence ratings.*

The full set of CLEAR causal evidence guidelines is available at http://clear.dol.gov.

An evaluation can produce multiple reports that examine the impact of an intervention over the course of time. CLEAR typically reviews and rates each causal report separately. (When possible, the website links the profiles for these reports together for easy access.) Occasionally, if a topic area PI determines that doing so is necessary to clarify the findings of the evaluation, CLEAR reviews, rates, and reports aspects of a report separately. For instance, an evaluation might investigate several programs that each offered different services to different populations, and researchers might combine the results into a single report. Because each program is essentially its own study, CLEAR examines each program in such a report separately. In these cases, in bracketed text after the study citation, CLEAR indicates which program is being rated, and the website links the profiles for these reports together.

It is important to note that CLEAR causal evidence ratings refer only to the quality of ***causal*** evidence of a given research design and not to the overall quality of the research. In some cases, authors might use innovative quantitative methods that would nevertheless receive a low causal evidence rating because of the study's data limitations or some other factor outside the authors' control. Also, the causal evidence rating is not an indicator of effectiveness. Studies with a high or moderate causal evidence rating might show that an intervention being studied had positive, null, or negative effects. In addition, some studies might provide interesting and important descriptive evidence, which is not factored into the CLEAR causal evidence rating. These aspects of the studies are discussed in CLEAR study profiles but are not factored into the causal evidence rating itself.

Implementation Research

CLEAR uses implementation research guidelines to review reports that describe the implementation process of a program or policy, or that measure implementation inputs and outputs to assess the fidelity of a planned program's implementation. The guidelines present a checklist for examining issues related to the research design, sample, data collection, data analysis, and findings. The implementation research guidelines were developed and synthesized from several sources on assessing research evidence in qualitative and implementation studies (see the guidelines for more details). CLEAR project senior staff, two TWG members who are experts in implementation research, and DOL staff reviewed the guidelines.

Implementation research is not subject to a rating system under CLEAR, nor is there a minimum bar of quality or rigor that the research must meet. The purpose of the review of technical qualities is to ensure that the findings reported in the research are accurate and appropriate for the design. The criteria for technical adequacy help identify the strengths of the research and important limitations. This information is used in the CLEAR profile (in the section for "Considerations for Interpreting the Findings"). In some cases, these considerations might be well-aligned with the limitations reported by the authors; for others, the considerations noted in the CLEAR summary might be different or more comprehensive than those of the authors.

Quantitative Descriptive Research

For reports that use statistical techniques and other quantitative approaches but do not attempt to assess the causal impact of a program or policy, CLEAR follows guidelines for quantitative descriptive research. The guidelines describe the characteristics that reviewers assess related to design, data collection, data quality, study sample, analysis methods, and findings. The guidelines were developed and synthesized from several sources related to assessing descriptive research. CLEAR project senior staff, two TWG members with expertise in quantitative research methods, and DOL staff reviewed the guidelines.

Descriptive research is not subject to a rating system under CLEAR, nor is there a minimum bar of quality or rigor that the research must meet. As with the reviews of implementation research, the purpose of the review of technical qualities is to ensure that the findings reported in the research are accurate and appropriate for the design. CLEAR's use of the guidelines and its reporting on the technical strengths and limitations is the same for quantitative descriptive studies as it is for implementation studies (as described in the previous section).

Reviewers and the Review Process

CLEAR reviewers must be trained on the review process and guidelines and demonstrate that they can apply the CLEAR guidelines with fidelity. In addition to this training, senior CLEAR staff conduct additional training that is specific to each new topic area. These trainings focus on the aspects of the topic area protocol that are relevant to applying the CLEAR guidelines (for example, required control variables for nonexperimental designs).[6]

For highlights reviews of all types of research, a trained reviewer systematically captures information about the research question of interest, design, setting, data, methods, and key findings. A quality assurance reviewer confirms the information that the reviewer summarized is accurate.

For profile reviews of implementation and quantitative descriptive research, a trained reviewer reads each report that meets topic area criteria in detail, applies the full set of relevant review guidelines, and documents all aspects of the review in a comprehensive study review guide. This guide is a template that CLEAR uses to confirm that reviewers systematically capture consistent information across studies and record it in a consistent way. In addition to directing reviewers to capture the study information required to describe study highlights, the comprehensive guide also directs them to assess technical aspects of the research and describe considerations for interpreting the findings.

---

[6] No specific educational attainment is required for CLEAR reviewers, although some graduate-level training on statistical methods is recommended for those who review causal studies.

Profile reviews of causal research have additional steps and undergo additional scrutiny to confirm the accuracy of the assigned causal evidence rating. For these, trained reviewers also begin by completing a comprehensive study review guide, as previously outlined, and they also assess the quality of the study's causal evidence. Causal studies often report numerous results about similar outcomes (for example, annual, quarterly, and monthly employment rates). When this occurs, CLEAR reviewers apply a set of decision rules to identify outcomes that are the focus of the review. CLEAR focuses its reporting on the main research group in the study and examines subgroup analyses only if the authors' report does not present results for the combined group. If the first reviewer assesses the quality of causal evidence as high or moderate, a second reviewer also reviews the study to confirm such a rating is warranted. After a causal study receives one (if rated low) or two (if rated moderate or high) reviews, a senior CLEAR staff member examines the completed comprehensive study review guide to resolve any discrepancies, confirm that the information is accurate and verifiable, and clarify key points as needed.

Although reviewers systematically apply causal review guidelines, they might occasionally encounter concerns about the study design that are not clearly specified in the guidelines. When this rare situation occurs, the reviewer summarizes the issue and its implications for the causal evidence rating and submits that summary to the topic area PI. The PI recommends how to handle the issue and rate the study's causal evidence. This recommendation is reviewed—and either affirmed or refined—by a committee of senior CLEAR staff that includes the project director, the senior advisor, a statistical methods expert, and at least one PI from another topic area that reviews studies with similar designs. When the committee reaches a resolution, the topic area PI communicates the decision back to the study reviewer, who documents the concerns about the design and the resolution in the CLEAR profile. For consistency, the CLEAR leadership team also logs the decision, informs reviewers across the project, and updates the causal evidence guidelines with a clarification, if needed.

When a report containing causal research does not contain sufficient information to determine its causal evidence rating, CLEAR may contact the study authors to gather this information; whether this step occurs depends on the age of the study and the quantity of information that the reviewer would need to gather (so as not to overly burden study authors). Authors receive at least two weeks to respond, and reasonable requests for extensions are granted. If the authors provide the information, it is incorporated into the review and factors into the causal evidence rating. If the authors do not provide the relevant information, or do not respond to the author query or follow-up communications within one week, the design is given the highest rating that can be determined with the information available in the report.

As of this version of the CLEAR policies and procedures document, most reviewers are CLEAR project staff at Mathematica and ICF. However, to avoid potential conflicts of interest, independent subcontractors who are not employees of either company review studies conducted by either Mathematica or ICF. Future phases of CLEAR might use reviewers who are not CLEAR project staff. For example, reviewers might be trained and certified through a web-based system. Certified reviewers would then apply the CLEAR review guidelines to conduct reviews and submit review materials. These submissions would lead to CLEAR publications, subject to a quality review process.

CLEAR Responses to Inquiries

CLEAR responds to inquiries about the CLEAR website, topic areas, and specific study reviews, and uses a set procedure for responses to support handling such inquiries consistently, transparently, and equitably.

Anyone wishing to submit an inquiry must do so through the CLEAR website: http://clear.dol.gov/about/contact-us. Through this contact point, CLEAR can help users by:

- Answering general questions about CLEAR

- Taking nominations for studies to receive CLEAR reviews

- Addressing questions or concerns about a study's inclusion in CLEAR

- Addressing questions or concerns about CLEAR's review of a study

CLEAR staff will log all inquiries and will typically confirm receipt of the inquiry within one business day. Inquiries about the website or topic area nominations can typically be resolved within two or three business days.

Occasionally, study authors might have questions or concerns about CLEAR's review of their study. Such inquiries might require a more in-depth investigation and response. For instance, CLEAR might need to identify and relay details of how a study was identified or why a certain rating was applied. If an author can provide additional information, not included in the publication, that could affect the study's causal evidence rating, CLEAR will incorporate this information into the study's review, document any changes to the causal evidence rating, update the rating and study profile on the CLEAR website, and report those changes back to the study author. Throughout this process, CLEAR staff will keep study authors apprised of the timeline for resolving their request.

When a study author disagrees with the CLEAR causal evidence rating and communications through the inquiry process have not resolved the issue, the study will undergo a blinded review by an independent subcontractor trained in applying the CLEAR causal evidence guidelines. CLEAR staff will examine the independent party's causal evidence rating for consistency with the original rating, and the independent reviewer will then review the study profile. If the independent reviewer supports the original rating and the conclusion in the original CLEAR profile, the rating and the profile will remain the same. If the independent reviewer's rating differs from the original rating, or the independent reviewer notes clarifications or other edits to the study profile, the profile will be updated accordingly. In both cases, the author will receive a full explanation for why the study received the causal evidence rating, originally, on independent review, or both.

CLEAR Website and Reporting

CLEAR maintains a website—http://clear.dol.gov—to disseminate the results of topic area reviews. CLEAR produces four products:

1. **Research database.** Citations for all eligible studies identified through the literature search for a given topic area and nominated for flash reviews appear on the website in a searchable research database. Each citation is accompanied by an indication of the research design, the relevant topic area protocol, and the causal evidence rating (if applicable).

2. **Highlights.** All citations in the CLEAR database have highlights—a set of bulleted items that capture the main features of the research: the research question of interest, description of the program or intervention studied, research methods, and key findings.

3. **Profiles.** For research that undergoes a profile review—typically research that is particularly relevant for decisions about programs and policies—CLEAR produces profiles that provide more detailed information. The profile begins with a highlights

section (described in the prior point). The second section describes the features of the program, including the target population and the implementation sites, if applicable. The third section describes the features of the study, data sources, methods used, and outcomes studied. The fourth section describes findings of the study. The fifth section provides considerations for interpreting the findings, such as features of the study design or implementation that could influence the interpretation of the results. For causal research, the final section of the profile explains the causal evidence rating and contains critical information about the quality of causal evidence presented. The website contains a feature whereby users can export the information contained in profiles of interest to an Excel spreadsheet for analysis.

4. **Research syntheses.** CLEAR develops a variety of research syntheses to meet the needs of CLEAR users. For example, a synthesis could draw on causal evidence reviews to summarize the evidence for policies and programs that improve specific outcomes. It could also point out gaps in the existing literature. Another type of synthesis could weave together the findings from causal and noncausal literature to provide a comprehensive view of the existing research. Research syntheses are developed in consultation with subject matter experts, DOL agency staff, or both.

In addition to containing the products of CLEAR reviews, the website contains CLEAR background documents. These include this policies and procedures document, topic area review protocols, review guidelines, and other relevant materials. Materials describing the review process have their own tab on the website (the About CLEAR tab).

Finally, the topic area pages provide links to other research clearinghouses that might be of interest to CLEAR users. For instance, the Opportunities for Youth topic area page includes links to FindYouthInfo.gov and Workforce3One.org. In the future, the website could be developed to allow for user interaction regarding research evidence on labor topics. For example, users could recommend research, provide their own reviews, and pose and respond to questions about research evidence.