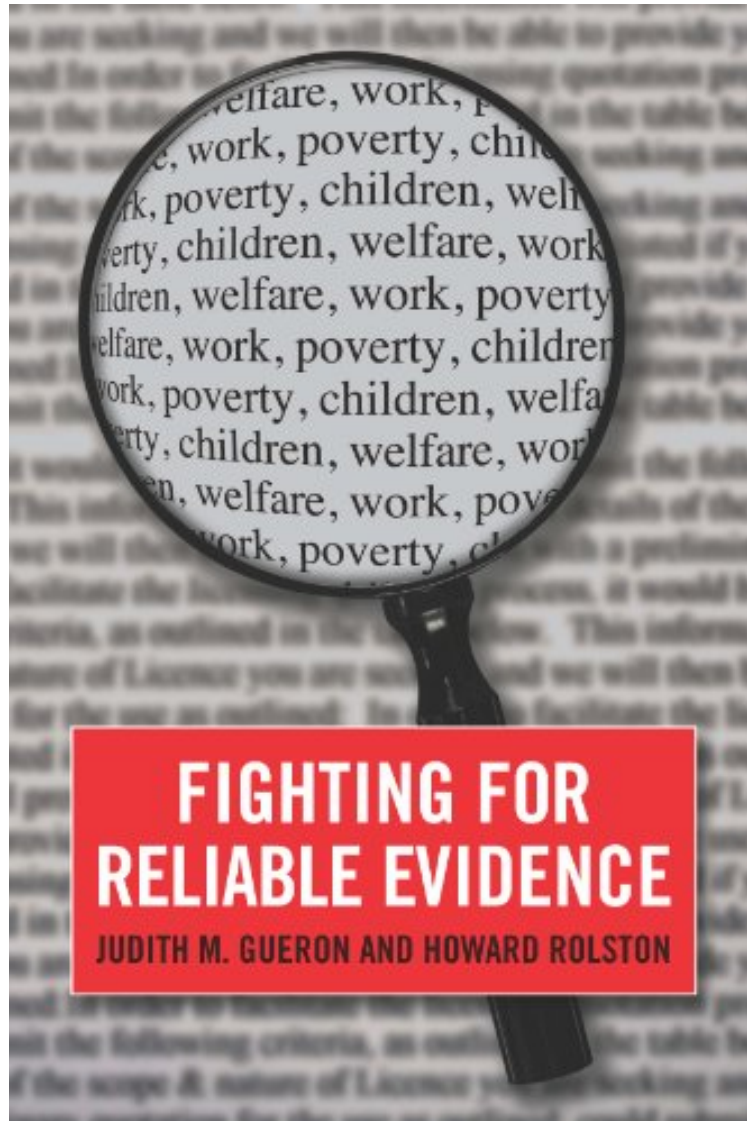


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Fighting for Reliable Evidence;

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Judith M. Gueron, Howard Rolston : Fighting for Reliable Evidence; before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Fighting for Reliable Evidence;

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A very important bookBy russell pannierThis is an important book, one that should be read by anyone interested in governmental and private efforts to move welfare recipients into work, and, more generally, by anyone interested in the ways in which Federal, State, and Local governments cooperate in the pursuit of shared goals (Federalism), and, even more generally, in how American democracy can work well. Written in a clear, lively, informative, and well-organized style, the book describes a forty-year period of welfare-to-work evaluations of the effectiveness of State and Local programs.The book is written from two perspectives. Gueron writes

from a private-sector perspective, as a former leader of MDRC, a non-profit research organization which includes a specialization in evaluating employment programs for welfare recipients. Rolston writes from a public-sector perspective, as a senior civil servant in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) who was charged with the responsibility of evaluating State and Local welfare-reform efforts. The book's central theme is the development of welfare studies that incorporate "random assignment," a method long used in medical-research studies and systematically promoted by MDRC and HHS for use in evaluating welfare-reform efforts. In applying the method, study participants are randomly assigned to one of two (or more) groups. The "experimental" group is given the new treatment; the "control" group is given "usual care," what individuals would get in the absence of the study. The selection process ensures that the groups differ only in the treatment they receive. As the book helpfully explains, random assignment is critical, because the control group provides a reliable basis for determining what would have happened in the absence of the experimental treatment. At the close of the study the researchers statistically compare the average outcomes for the two groups to determine which were better. There was much opposition to random assignment, but by the early 21st century most of that opposition had been overcome by the success of the new method. However, that victory was no easy task. The book relates in great detail the obstacles and the complex and sophisticated responses to them put forward by the two organizations. The authors stress that the decision to use random assignment in welfare studies was influenced by the success of the methods in medical studies. However, there is a significant difference between the use of the methods in the two contexts. In medical studies subjects are "blinded," meaning that participants are not told which study group they belong to. Medical researchers blind study subjects because they believe that allowing them to know their own study classifications would weaken the scientific credibility of the results. Does this inability to blind study subjects in welfare studies undermine their scientific credibility? As someone who has served on an Institutional Review Board for medical studies, I find this a complex and difficult question. However, after reading the book's careful description of welfare-study methods, I came away with the conviction that these studies do produce scientifically-credible results. The authors make a persuasive case that using random assignment, even without blinding study subjects, is superior to the alternative - using weaker methods that lack scientific value. I have touched upon only a very few of the many illuminating and valuable dimensions of this book. It deserves to be read by many.

Once primarily used in medical clinical trials, random assignment experimentation is now accepted among social scientists across a broad range of disciplines. The technique has been used in social experiments to evaluate a variety of programs, from microfinance and welfare reform to housing vouchers and teaching methods. How did randomized experiments move beyond medicine and into the social sciences, and can they be used effectively to evaluate complex social problems? *Fighting for Reliable Evidence* provides an absorbing historical account of the characters and controversies that have propelled the wider use of random assignment in social policy research over the past forty years. Drawing from their extensive experience evaluating welfare reform programs, noted scholar practitioners Judith M. Gueron and Howard Rolston portray randomized experiments as a vital research tool to assess the impact of social policy. In a random assignment experiment, participants are sorted into either a treatment group that participates in a particular program, or a control group that does not. Because the groups are randomly selected, they do not differ from one another systematically. Therefore any subsequent differences between the groups can be attributed to the influence of the program or policy. The theory is elegant and persuasive, but many scholars worry that such an experiment is too difficult or expensive to implement in the real world. Can a control group be truly insulated from the treatment policy? Would staffers comply with the random allocation of participants? Would the findings matter? *Fighting for Reliable Evidence* recounts the experiments that helped answer these questions, starting with the income maintenance experiments and the Supported Work project in the 1960s and 1970s. Gueron and Rolston argue that a crucial turning point came during the 1980s, when Congress allowed states to experiment with welfare programs and foundations, states, and the federal government funded larger randomized trials to assess the impact of these reforms. As they trace these historical shifts, Gueron and Rolston discuss the ways that strategies for resolving theoretical and practical problems were developed, and they highlight the strict conditions required to execute a randomized experiment successfully. What emerges is a nuanced portrait of the potential and limitations of social experiments to advance empirical knowledge. Weaving history, data analysis and personal experience, *Fighting for Reliable Evidence* offers valuable lessons for researchers, policymakers, funders, and informed citizens interested in isolating the effect of policy initiatives. It is an essential primer on welfare policy, causal inference, and experimental designs.

Fighting for Reliable Evidence is an incredibly powerful book, full of information that graduate schools do not teach and that would take a lifetime to learn on the job....[It] deserves a place on the required readings list for students of policy analysis, public administration, applied social sciences, and organizational leadership. It also is a must-read for thought leaders and practitioners who are intent on channeling scarce resources to achieve the greatest good. Rebecca A. Maynard, University Trustee Chair Professor of Education and Social Policy, University of Pennsylvania. This remarkable book is a must-read for anyone who is interested in evaluation or national social

policy....a dazzling achievement. Lawrence M. Mead, Professor of Politics and Public Policy, New York University. Truth-seeking social policymakers and serious students of social policy and social policy research will read and reread this book. Fighting for Reliable Evidence does not provide a permanent truth but it describes a forty-five year quest to understand what works and what does not. Paul O'Neill, former U.S. Secretary of the Treasury. A fascinating review of the development of the commitment to use randomized experiments for learning about the effectiveness of current and proposed social welfare programs. [The authors] demonstrate how feasible and useful experiments can be and have been. The history they tell is riveting, and the lessons they draw are compelling. No one else from inside the community of random assignment pioneers could have told it better. Thomas D. Cook, Joan and Sarepta Harrison Chair of Ethics and Justice and Professor of Sociology, Psychology, Education, and Social Policy, Northwestern University. About the Author. JUDITH M. GUERON is scholar in residence and President Emerita at MDRC. HOWARD ROLSTON is principal associate at Abt Associates.