# How to write a plain language summary for a Campbell systematic review

Version 1.1

CampbellCollaboration

# Colophon

The Campbell Collaboration was founded on the principle that systematic reviews on the effects of interventions will inform and help improve policy and services. Campbell offers editorial and methodological support to review authors throughout the process of producing a systematic review. A number of Campbell's editors, librarians, methodologists and external peer-reviewers contribute.

# Table of contents

# 1    About the template

In this document, we describe how to write a plain language summary (PLS) for a Campbell Systematic Review. The PLS headings are given with a description of the content required under each heading. Examples are given.

## 1.1    WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF A PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY?

A plain language summary is a tool to make information about the main findings of each review available in an easily understandable format, and to report this information in a consistent way.

The key content of a plain language summary is the presentation of the following:

- the intervention(s) being assessed (if applicable)
- the primary and intermediate outcomes
- the results for each outcome, including analysis of heterogeneity
- discussion of theory of change (if applicable)
- the quality of the evidence
- implications for policy, practice and research (if applicable)

It is also a tool that can be used by authors to improve the way they report findings across different sections of their review (for example, the abstract, the results section and the conclusion).

Plain language summaries are the main source document that Campbell uses to produce other outputs, such as policy briefs and press releases. In these additional derivative products, the relevant findings are placed in more specific contexts, help people answer specific questions, or contribute to more focused debates and concerns.

## 1.2    ABOUT THE APPENDIX MATERIAL

Further information about what plain language is, useful plain language guidelines, sample PLSs and further resources can be found at the back of this template.

## 1.3    RECOMMENDED LENGTH OF A PLS

The target length is 600 to 750 words.

## 1.4    PRODUCING A PLS

Authors should submit a PLS with their final review.  It will be edited by the Secretariat, the revised content checked with the lead study author, and the standalone version put into the PLS format.

## 1.5    A NOTE ON STYLE

PLS should be written in an accessible manner avoiding jargon. However, specific terms which will be familiar to policy makers and practitioners in the relevant field should be retained. Footnotes and references should not be used in the PLS.
Use direct language. Report the study findings directly e.g. 'detention of asylum seekers has adverse effects on mental health', not 'The analysis shows...', 'the review says...', 'the authors argue...' etc.

Present tense is preferred.

# 2 The plain language summary template

## 2.1 REVIEW TITLE

The title should be in headline style summarizing the main findings of the review e.g. 'Enforcing conditions makes cash transfers more effective in increasing enrolments' and 'Detention of asylum seekers has adverse effects on mental health'. The title for empty reviews can state that there is no evidence, e.g. 'There is no rigorous evidence on the effectiveness of refugee resettlement programs'. Titles can also reflect the size of the effects or the quality of the evidence, e.g. 'Support to SMEs can boost firm performance and economic development... but the effects are not large' and 'Limited evidence and limited effects of advocacy to reduce intimate partner violence'.

A reference to the full review title is added at the end of the PLS "This summary is based on ...." (see below).

## 2.2 FIRST HEADING: 'THE REVIEW IN BRIEF'

A short summary of the main findings of the review. This section may be no more than one sentence, and should not exceed 50 words. For example, 'Custodial sentences are no better than non-custodial sentences in reducing re-offending.'
Selective outcome reporting is to be avoided. So reviews with several primary outcomes will require a longer review in brief section, e.g. 'Intensive advocacy may improve everyday life for women in domestic violence shelters/refuges and reduce physical abuse. There is no clear evidence that intensive advocacy reduces sexual, emotional, or overall abuse, or that it benefits women's mental health. It is unclear whether brief advocacy is effective.'

## 2.3 SECOND HEADING: 'WHAT IS THIS REVIEW ABOUT?'

This section should include:

- A 'problem statement' of the issue being addressed. For example, 'Half of all crime takes place in small, localised areas, or hot spots'; and 'Forests are an important resource for managing climate change because they store carbon, which helps mitigates the effect of carbon emissions. However, the amount of forest cover,

particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), is declining. Deforestation is responsible for 10-17 per cent of global carbon emissions.'

- A clear description of the intervention being assessed. For example, 'Payment for environmental services are voluntary contracts to supply a well-defined environmental service in exchange for payment. For the purposes of this review, the service must involve the maintenance or rehabilitation of natural forests.'
- The outcomes included in the review. For example 'this review looked at whether custodial and alternative non-custodial sanctions have different effects on the rates of re-offending. '
- Optional: the policy question being addressed. For example, 'the review considers evidence regarding the debate about whether PESs should also aim to reduce poverty, or whether doing so would undermine conservation efforts.'

## 2.4     PAGE ONE BOX: 'WHAT IS THE AIM OF THIS REVIEW?'

People do not always understand that the results of a plain language summary come from a systematic review rather than a single study.  Some also wrongly assume that the review authors have carried out the studies themselves. A text box should be included on the first page stating what the review studied, and how many studies were included. For example:

> **What is the aim of this review?**
> This Campbell systematic review examines the effects custodial sentences on re-offending, compared to the effects of non-custodial sentences.  The review summarizes evidence from fourteen high-quality studies, including three randomized controlled trials and two natural experiments.

## 2.5     THIRD HEADING: 'WHAT ARE THE MAIN FINDINGS OF THIS REVIEW?'

### 2.5.1   First sub-heading: 'What studies are included?'

A brief description of the number of included studies and key characteristics (e.g. study design and region or country). For example, 'This review includes studies that evaluate the effects of custodial and non-custodial sanctions on re-offending. A total of 38 studies were identified. However, only 14 of these were assessed to be of sufficient methodological quality to be included in the final analysis. The studies spanned the period from 1961 to 2013 and were mostly carried out in the USA, Europe and Australia.'

Optional: add a statement about the quality of the evidence. For example, 'the studies all had some important methodological weaknesses. None of the included studies used experimental designs (random assignment).'

### 2.5.2 Additional sub-headings

Additional sub-headings state the question being answered in that section, for example, 'Does focusing crime prevention efforts on crime hot spots reduce crime?' and 'What factors affect how well PES programmes work?'.

These sub-sections give a short summary of the review evidence to answer that question. Present the results consistently, using similar words and expressions for similar levels of effect (see Appendix 1 for suggested wordings). Ensure that the results are reported consistently between the plain language summary and the main text of the review, including the abstract, results, and summary of main results. For example, 'Yes. There is an overall reduction in crime and disorder when hot spots policing interventions are implemented. The largest reductions are in drug offences, violent crime and disorder offences, with smaller reductions in property crime.'

Notes:

1.  The findings are presently directly, and in the present tense. So do not write 'the authors found' or 'the review found'.

2.  Avoid selective reporting. The results for each main outcome must be presented in the section called "What are the main findings?" (or a variation specific to the review such as 'Does focusing crime prevention efforts on crime hot spots reduce crime?'). If you found no data on an important outcome, you must present the outcome anyway, but explain that no data were found.

Using qualitative statements when presenting the effects of the intervention: You may be able to increase the accessibility of the review by avoiding numbers and using qualitative statements to present the results. By 'qualitative statements' we mean an expression of your results in plain language, using similar words and expressions for similar levels of effect. Qualitative statements about effect are difficult to get right. It is easy to cause confusion and misinterpretation by using words inconsistently or statements such as "a high likelihood of somewhat small but possibly important effects".

Appendix 1 includes a set of standardised statements to help authors formulate clear, consistent statements. The use of this tool is not obligatory.

### 2.5.3 Optional sub-heading: 'How has this intervention worked?'

Present here the evidence relating to the main assumptions and links in the theory of change for the intervention(s) being assessed. The findings with respect to intermediate outcomes can be reported here.

## 2.6 FOURTH HEADING: 'WHAT DO THE FINDINGS OF THIS REVIEW MEAN?'

Include here the main policy relevant findings and their implications for policy and further research. Reviews do not make policy recommendations. Include also implications for research.

## 2.7 FIFTH HEADING: 'HOW UP-TO-DATE IS THIS REVIEW?'

State here when the review authors searched for the included studies: 'The review authors searched for studies up to 2013. This Campbell Systematic Review was published in January 2015.'

## 2.8 SIXTH HEADING: 'WHAT IS THE CAMPBELL COLLABORATION?'

The following text should be included in PLS published separately from the review:
The Campbell Collaboration is an international, voluntary, non-profit research network that publishes systematic reviews. We summarise and evaluate the quality of evidence about programs in the social and behavioural sciences. Our aim is to help people make better choices and better policy decisions.

## 2.9 SEVENTH HEADING: 'ABOUT THIS SUMMARY'

To be included for PLS published separately from the review:
This summary was prepared by [Name] (affiliation) based on the Campbell Systematic Review 20XX:X '[Title]' by [Authors]. XXX designed the summary, which was edited by XXX.

# 3    Appendix 1: Other tools and reporting considerations

The following table structure is based on the GRADE reporting system. This table may help authors to think about how they report findings and keeping the reporting language consistent.

This table provide qualitative statements which could be used for different combinations of the magnitude of effect and the quality or certainty of evidence. The intended wording shows proposed content for different combinations of quality of evidence and the importance of the effect. Authors may vary the style provided they convey to the reader: (1) the quality of the evidence, and (2) the importance of the effect.

To use the table:

1. Select an outcome that you are planning to report
2. Determine the quality/certainty of the evidence for that outcome
3. Decide whether the size of the effect is important, less important or not important. This decision is a judgment call and should focus on importance to the end user, i.e. in policy terms, rather than "statistical significance"

| Table of standardised statement about effect | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Important benefit/harm | Less important benefit/harm | No important benefit/harm |
| **High quality evidence** | High quality evidence shows that [*Intervention*] improves/reduces [*outcome*] | High quality evidence shows that [*Intervention*] slightly improves/reduces [*outcome]* | High quality evidence shows that [*Intervention*] makes little or no difference to [*outcome*] |
| **Moderate quality evidence** | There is evidence of moderate quality which suggests that [*Intervention*] improves/reduces [*outcome*] (moderate quality evidence) | There is evidence of moderate quality which suggests that [*Intervention*] slightly improves/reduces [*outcome*] (moderate quality evidence) Or There is evidence of moderate quality which suggests that [*Intervention*] leads to slightly better/worse/less/more [*outcome*] (moderate quality evidence) | There is evidence of moderate quality which suggests that [*Intervention*] makes little or no difference to [*outcome*] (moderate quality evidence) |
| **Low quality evidence** | Low quality evidence suggests that [*Intervention*] may improve/reduce [*outcome*] | Low quality evidence suggests that [*Intervention*] may slightly improve/reduce [*outcome*] | Low quality evidence suggests that [*Intervention*] may make little or no difference to [*outcome*] (moderate quality evidence |
| **Very low quality evidence** | The quality of the evidence in the included studies is very so we are uncertain whether [*intervention*] improves/reduces [*outcome*] | | |
| **No studies** | No studies were found that looked at [*outcome*] | | |

**Presenting confidence intervals in qualitative statements: In most situations, it is not necessary to refer to the confidence intervals. However, there may be situations where this may be useful.  For instance, in situations where the confidence interval includes the possibility of both an important benefit and no effect or an important benefit and harm, consider the following type of statement:**

**"[*Intervention X*] may lead to [*better outcome Z*]. However, the range where the actual effect may be shows that [*intervention X*] may lead to [*better outcome Z*] but may also make little or no difference/may worsen/increase [*outcome Z*]."**

Occasionally, a confidence interval will suggest that the plausible range of values includes negative effects that, if real, would be evidence of clinically meaningful harms and positive effects that, if real, would be evidence of clinically meaningful benefits. In situations like this, the width of the confidence interval is far more important than the point estimate associated with that confidence interval or the fact that these results were not statistically significant. The width of the confidence interval tells us that we actually know very little about the effects of the intervention on that outcome. Therefore, you should consider using the following type of statement:

> "[*Intervention X's*] effect on [*outcome Z*] is not statistically significant. However, the range where the actual effect may be shows that [*intervention X*] may lead to better [*outcome Z*] but may also lead to worse [*outcome Z*]. Therefore, we know very little about the effects of [*Intervention X*] on [*Outcome Z*]."

# 4 Appendix 2: Sample PLS

**Hot spots policing is effective in reducing crime**

**The review in brief**

Focusing police efforts at high crime locations ('hot spots') is effective in reducing crime. Hot spot policing does not displace crimes to nearby areas. Rather, the benefits of reduced crime diffuse into the areas immediately surrounding the targeted locations. A problem-oriented approach has a larger effect than a traditional policing approach.

**What is this review about?**

Half of all crime takes place in small, localised areas, or hot spots. Examples of crime hot spots are apartment buildings, street corners, or a few city blocks. Can crime be reduced more efficiently if police officers focus their attention on these places? Or will this style of policing simply result in the crime moving to a different location?

**What are the main findings of this review?**

*What studies are included?*

The review includes studies of police efforts to control crime, such as patrols and traffic enforcements, aggressive disorder enforcement and problem-oriented policing. In each study, a hot spot approach was compared to routine policing that did not specifically focus attention on the crime hot spot.

The effect of policing efforts was measured using official crime data such as incident reports, emergency calls and arrests.

**What is the aim of this review?**

This Campbell systematic review examines the effects of focusing police crime prevention efforts on crime 'hot spots', and whether focused police actions at specific locations result in crime displacement (i.e., crime moving around the corner) or diffusion (i.e., crime reduction in surrounding areas) of crime control benefits. The review covers total of 19 studies covering 25 tests. Seventeen of the studies were conducted in the USA.

Nineteen studies were identified, of which 10 were randomized controlled trials, covering 25 tests of hot spot policing. Seventeen studies were conducted in the USA, 1 in Australia and 1 in Argentina.

Seven of the studies were in large cities with more than 500,000 residents, 10 were in medium-sized cities with populations of 200,000-500,000, and two were in smaller cities with populations below 200,000.

*Does focusing crime prevention efforts on crime hot spots reduce crime?*

Yes. High quality evidence shows an overall reduction in crime and disorder when hot spots policing interventions were implemented. The largest reductions were in drug offences, violent crime and disorder offences, with smaller reductions in property crime.

The review also suggests that hot spot policing, particularly problem-oriented policing, is more likely to reduce crime in the surrounding area than it is to lead to crime moving to that area.

**What do the findings in this review mean?**

Investing police agencies' limited resources on hot spot policing in a small number of high-activity crime places will prevent crime in these and surrounding areas, reducing total crime. Problem-oriented policing approach allows for developing tailored responses to specific recurring problems in high activity crime spots.

Implementing situational prevention strategies that reduce police reliance on aggressive enforcement strategies may also have positive benefits for police-community relations. The reactions of local communities to hot spot policing must be considered. Residents may welcome efforts to reduce crime. But if programmes are seen as heavy-handed, or focus too much on particular population groups, they may end up driving a wedge between the police and those they trying to help.

**How up to date is this review?**

The review authors searched for studies in January 2011. This Campbell Systematic Review was published on 27 June 2012.

**What is the Campbell Collaboration?**

The Campbell Collaboration is an international, voluntary, non-profit research network that publishes systematic reviews. We summarise and evaluate the quality of evidence about programs in social and behavioural sciences. Our aim is to help people make better choices and better policy decisions.

**About this summary**

# 5 What are these instructions based on?

These instructions were prepared by Simon Goudie, Eamonn Noonan and Howard White of the Campbell Collaboration and Claire Glenton and Marita Sporstøl Fønhus (Cochrane Norway), with inputs provided by Julia Littell (Campbell Collaboration) and Jeff Valentine (University of Louisville). They build on earlier instructions developed by Claire Glenton and Elin Strømme Nilsen (Cochrane Norway) and Nancy Santesso (Cochrane Applicability and Recommendations Methods Group), and on the following sources:

1. Glenton C, Santesso N, Rosenbaum S, Nilsen ES, Rader, T, Ciapponi A, Dilkes H. Presenting the results of Cochrane systematic reviews to a consumer audience: A qualitative study.  Medical Decision Making 2010 Sep-Oct; 30(5):566-77
2. Santesso N, Glenton C, Rosenbaum S, Strømme Nilsen E, Rader T, Pardo J, Ciapponi A, Moja L, Schünemann H.  A new format for plain language summaries: does it improve understanding, and is it useful and preferable? A randomised controlled trial.  17th Cochrane Colloquium.  Singapore, 2009
3. Glenton C, Kho M, Underland V, Nilsen, ES, Oxman A. Summaries of findings, descriptions of interventions and information about adverse effects would make reviews more informative, Journal of Clinical Epidemiology 2006, 59 (8): 770-778
4. Woloshin S, Schwartz LM. Communicating data about the benefits and harms of treatment: A randomized trial. Annals of Internal Medicine 2011; 155:87-96.