Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking

Testimony to the Commission on Evidence-Based

Policymaking: Building Evidence for Communities

of Color and Integrating Data for Public Good

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BUILDING EVIDENCE FOR COMMUNITIES OF COLOR AND INTEGRATING DATA FOR PUBLIC GOOD

I. OVERVIEW

Good morning, Commissioners. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you. I am delighted to be here because your mission is closely aligned with the Annie E. Casey Foundation's commitment to build a brighter future for millions of children at risk of poor educational, economic, social and health outcomes.

Today, I would like to share with you the Foundation's insights into using data and evidence to develop the best possible policies for those children and families. To get better results, all levels of government must allocate scarce resources to strategies that work. But too often, policymakers fund well-intentioned approaches that lack evidence of effectiveness and end up failing the children they seek to help.

Most social scientists agree that randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are the gold standard for classifying evidence-based programs. Yet researchers and policymakers also understand that RCTs can be conducted only in a very limited set of circumstances. And even when an RCT is feasible, the results may not be applicable to other people, places and contexts. Because of these limitations, the Foundation urges the use of best evidence available rather than solely relying on RCTs.

The Foundation supports evidence-based work carried out by professionals with backgrounds in education, health and child and adolescent development.

In my testimony, I would like to cover three areas. First, the data tell us clearly that children of color face the greatest obstacles to opportunity. Programs and strategies should therefore demonstrate success in communities of color, and we should develop a more diverse group of researchers to evaluate those efforts. Second, government should adopt integrated data systems to identify broad community trends and patterns and develop solutions to respond accordingly. And finally, I will discuss why policymakers cannot afford to lose the critical information gained through the U.S. Census, American Community Survey and Supplemental Poverty Measure.

II. USING EVIDENCE TO MAKE BETTER DECISIONS FOR COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

Our nation is more of a quilt than a melting pot, so the traditions, social practices and cultural dynamics in communities of color have formed very differently over generations compared to those in predominantly white communities. They can also vary greatly from one community of color to the next. A program that works well in urban Chicago, for example, will likely have little relevance in a rural Native American community.

Yet the traditional approach to developing evidence-based programs and practices often does not incorporate the perspectives, experiences and input of communities of color. These programs are largely tested with primarily white trial groups and are created by an overwhelmingly white scientific community. By failing to appropriately consider children and families of color, developers and researchers miss the opportunity to gain critical knowledge about what does and does not work in diverse settings.

A close look at the development of evidence-based programs for communities of color reveals three major themes: 1) an absence of adequate funding for rigorous impact evaluations of programs geared toward communities of color; 2) a lack of culturally specific and sensitive data collection approaches in evaluations; and 3) a dearth of evaluation professionals with adequate knowledge and training on the cultural issues facing these communities. Indeed, many evaluators and researchers are not well versed in community engagement and participatory research techniques that build trust and partnership within communities already wary of being research subjects. Investments to address these three themes will help minimize the gaps in evidence-based programs and practices for communities of color.

Increasing and engaging more researchers of color will enable human service providers to learn more about what works best in communities of color from people who are more intimately familiar with the intricacies of those communities. The Casey Foundation's Expanding the Bench initiative aims to increase the small but growing number of researchers and evaluators of color and to strengthen their influence in the field. Expanding the Bench provides networking opportunities that connect researchers of color with funders and supports professional development activities that place those researchers in leading evaluation centers and research firms. We encourage more efforts in this vein.

We have seen progress. Some evidence-based programs have emerged to support communities of color. Strong African American Families (SAAF), for example, helps rural

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African-American families strengthen their relationships, improve parenting and help young people develop. SAAF has included specific ways for parents to help young people cope with discrimination in response to research that exposure to racial discrimination is a strong predictor of preadolescent and adolescent depressive symptoms and substance abuse.

SAAF was developed by child psychologist Gene Brody with a foundation of rigorous research. The program follows the standards of the National Institute of Mental Health prevention research cycle, which requires longitudinal, epidemiological research on target populations before developing prevention programs designed for them. For more than a decade, Brody and his colleagues at the University of Georgia's Center for Family Research have worked to identify protective factors that allow some rural African-American children in the state to thrive despite living in more challenging circumstances than their white peers.

Evaluations of SAAF showed several areas of statistically valid success. When compared with a control group, youth participants experienced fewer problem behaviors, such as theft, truancy or suspension. Those who didn't drink alcohol were less likely to begin drinking, and those who did increased their use at a significantly slower rate. The program also showed improvements in parenting, with increases in positive communication and in youth protective factors, such as negative attitudes about alcohol and sex. SAAF also delivered some unanticipated health benefits: Youth participants showed lower levels of stress hormones, inflammation and cellular aging.

Another program, Con Mi MADRE (Mothers And Daughters Raising Expectations), works with Latina mothers and daughters in Austin, Texas, to instill a shared vision of higher education and make that vision a reality. Con Mi MADRE provides tailored services to mothers and their daughters, from the child's sixth-grade year until she graduates from college. Services include personal visioning techniques, development of intergenerational communication skills, college visits and financial literacy education.

Con Mi MADRE is designed to take advantage of close family ties in Latino culture to build confidence in two generations simultaneously. Once moms develop these skills, every child and grandchild in their homes benefit. In a program that serves 750 children per year, 100 percent of the participants graduate from high school, and 77 percent go on to college. Of those who attend college, 54 percent persist and/or graduate, compared with a 15 percent college graduation rate for Latinas throughout central Texas.

Con Mi MADRE demonstrates the importance of taking culture into consideration. While cognitive behavioral therapy is probably one of the best-known clinical evidence-based practices, the organization found it to be less effective with its Latino families.

To develop additional evidence about the effectiveness of programs serving communities of color, it is essential to listen to the communities themselves. We can learn from organizations applying evidence-based practices in a culturally relevant way and use their experiences to enhance scientific knowledge about what works for children and families of color. We can also learn from many successful local programs that are not deemed evidence-based but are

building proof of their effectiveness by engaging in research, by placing joint emphasis on qualitative and quantitative outcomes and by developing community-centered approaches. Such programs combine academic and community knowledge to deliver effective, culturally relevant solutions.

III. PROMOTING STATE AND LOCAL INTEGRATED DATA SYSTEMS

Through decades of work with child welfare, juvenile justice and other public systems, we have encountered numerous challenges and frustrations caused by the inability of government agencies to share information that can help children. We advocate the adoption of an integrated data system (IDS) to link individual-level administrative data from multiple government agencies. By linking records across agencies and over time, an IDS creates a rich picture of individual service needs, participation and outcomes over many years. In some cases, individual records are linked together to form comprehensive, long-term household and family histories. We believe it is important to develop these systems for state and local governments, both of which play key roles in the management and delivery of education and human services essential to child and family well-being. Facilitating and accelerating data-driven decisions across agencies will also enable them to respond more swiftly to address needs and issues as they arise.

The federal government has been an important partner in promoting IDS development at the state and local levels. The field has benefited from continued federal efforts to clarify and emphasize that privacy regulations such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act and Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act actually allow and encourage data integration among state and local public agencies. Also important has been the federal role in supporting the costs of state and local IDS development and encouraging comprehensive approaches to public systems planning and management that require cross-system data sharing. For example, the Office of Management and Budget has increasingly exercised leadership here, directing agencies to use a portion of their budget for low-cost evaluations using administrative data and issuing State System Interoperability and Integration Project grants to seven states in 2014.[1] More broadly, the federal government has mandated and funded efforts to build longitudinal databases in every state with information on student achievement from early learning through workforce entry.

A significant number of state and local governments, as well as nonprofit and university partners under the governance of public agencies, already operate integrated data systems. By offering large sample sizes, longitudinal data and the ability to identify multiagency clients, an IDS is a valuable tool for policy analysis, program planning and monitoring

and evaluation. Because of the sensitive nature of the data, organizations that house an IDS carefully follow privacy laws to protect the confidentiality of children and families, securely store data and maintain rigorous standards for use and access.

By using an IDS, states can understand whether their approaches are working or having unintended consequences for children. In Wisconsin, for example, child welfare workers and child support enforcement workers have routinely pursued child support orders to offset the cost of a child's out-of-home placement. But when researchers analyzed the administrative records in the state's IDS, they discovered this policy not only failed to recover costs but actually lengthened the time children spent in foster care. Acting on these findings, officials in the Department of Children and Families crafted a new policy. When it goes into effect, caseworkers will not collect child support from a parent during the first six months a child is in foster care and will apply new criteria in deciding to do so after that period.

An IDS can provide proof points to show a program is working and worth continuing. In Washington, for example, analysts used the state's IDS to evaluate the effectiveness of an innovative policy that reversed the typical practice of reducing or terminating Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits when a child is removed from home and placed in care. Designed to speed family reunification by easing economic hardship, the new policy allows a parent to receive full TANF benefits for up to 180 days after a child enters care. The evaluation's positive findings on improving reunification rates without additional costs enabled state officials to keep the benefits in place.

Integrated data systems also advance two-generation approaches, which simultaneously address the needs of children and their parents so both can succeed. For example, the South Carolina IDS links inmate and household records (including use of mental health services, involvement with child welfare and juvenile justice systems, reliance on income support and student academic performance), which enables researchers to study the impact of incarceration on families. The state can use this information to improve family services and ease reentry.[2] In Oregon, the state's Center for Evidence-Based Policy used a combination of birth and parent records (from vital statistics, child welfare and programs related to self-sufficiency and substance abuse) to develop a model that predicts the likelihood of a child being maltreated by age 2 and placed in foster care by age 6. The data are geocoded down to the census-block level to create hot-spot maps that illustrate the prevalence of child maltreatment and foster care placement rates by location and are used to target preventive services to families.[3]

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IV. USING FEDERAL DATA TO INFORM BETTER DECISIONS

Two of the most valuable data resources for the Casey Foundation and all practitioners of data-driven, evidence-based decision making are the decennial census and the American Community Survey. Both are currently at risk. Another key resource for providing accurate assessments of government programs designed to help families, especially those with children, is the Supplemental Poverty Measure.

No data resource is more fundamental to the operation of our federal system than the decennial census, which plays a key role in allocating political representation and federal funds. Despite the importance of ensuring a complete and accurate count in 2020, Congress has required the U.S. Census Bureau to hold the cost of the next census at the same level as the 2010 census, approximately $13 billion. This significant budget constraint will make it all but impossible to meet, let alone exceed, the precedent for accuracy set in 2010. Even within the constrained spending levels, the census has been bound up in the ongoing continuing resolutions for funding government. In most cases, this means level funding with the previous year. For the census, which has a planned schedule of increased appropriations as we near 2020 implementation, level funding translates into a significant cut. We hope the Commission would consider two recommendations: 1) an increase in spending for the 2020 census, and 2) either an approach outside the traditional appropriations process for funding the census or a commitment to avoid level funding through continuing resolutions.

While the census provides basic, once-a-decade numbers essential to government operations, the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) provides a rich body of continually updated social and economic indicators that the public, private and nonprofit sectors rely on to target and improve policies, programs and investment. For example, staff at the Casey Foundation analyze ACS data to provide accurate information on child well-being disaggregated by geography, income, race and many other factors. Our KIDS COUNT Data Center has 4 million data points, many of which are derived from analyses of the ACS. These data are important to public and private organizations that are developing evidence-based programs.

For example, Congress uses the ACS data to allocate grants for homeland security, highway planning and construction, Medicaid, substance abuse treatment, community development, rural electrification, public transit and dozens of other programs. Community leaders use ACS data to analyze the emerging needs of their neighborhoods; plan for the future; and locate new schools, recreational areas, hospitals and police and fire departments. Businesses use the data to make key marketing, site selection and workforce decisions. In recent years, there have been repeated efforts in Congress to undercut the ACS by making participation voluntary (a change that will reduce response rates and raise costs of data collection, according to Census Bureau tests and international experience) and by reducing or eliminating its funding. To maintain this fundamental data resource

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for evidence-based policymaking, we must defend the ACS against attempts to undermine the accuracy and reliability of the survey. We hope the Commission would oppose making the ACS voluntary by acknowledging that the ACS is the long form of the census and part of the constitutional obligation for enumeration, and we urge you to address the importance of funding the ACS.

In 2011, the U.S. Census Bureau created the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) to provide a more accurate measurement of poverty than the official poverty measure reported. The SPM measures the impact of a number of programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and Earned Income Tax Credit, and it accounts for rising costs and other changes that affect a family's budget. The measure has advanced the nation's understanding of child poverty and the effects of safety net programs and tax policies on families. By using the SPM, researchers have determined that the rate of children in poverty has declined since 1990, while the official measure shows almost no change. Data-based benchmarks and measures like the SPM are essential tools for evidence-based policymaking, and federal policymakers should use and sustain them.

V. LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discovering what works to serve children and families, particularly in communities of color, and proving the efficacy of culturally relevant approaches are still very much works in progress. Questions of balance between scientific knowledge and community experiences are ongoing. However, those involved in the program examples described earlier share the following observations:

• Evidence is necessary for broader adoption and scaling. Whether or not a program is recognized as "evidence-based," the presence of compelling proof provides greater assurance that an investment in a program will indeed deliver the desired outcomes. However, creating that assurance requires significant investments of time and money on the part of program developers.

• Partnerships are key in developing evidence-based programs. Research institutions, universities and government research agencies such as the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality all have experience with creating evidence-based protocols and securing funding for promising programs that seek to prove their efficacy. Partnering with those institutions can give small organizations a leg up in achieving evidence-based status.

- Culture is key. Programs that deliver great results for one group may not do so for another. Understanding culture and incorporating it into the creation of an evidence-based program will help ensure success in communities of color. In addition, understanding community culture will help create local support and buy-in during the research and pilot phases of an evidence-based program.

- Evidence comes in multiple forms. When examining cultural relevance, qualitative evidence is just as important as quantitative in terms of determining a program's efficacy and effectiveness.

- Evidence-based research must respect community values. Data collection processes must be sensitive to communities to avoid making people uncomfortable, especially in cultures that consider family matters private or have a deep distrust for outside organizations. By respecting community values, data may be collected with more fidelity and more comprehensively and can be used to inform stronger research design and more culturally competent methodology.

- The federal government must continue to play an important role in promoting IDS development at the state and local levels. It can do so by defining federal privacy regulations in ways that encourage cross-agency data integration, by helping support the costs of state and local IDS development and by encouraging comprehensive approaches to public systems planning and management that require cross-system data sharing.

- A complete count of the 2020 census, a mandatory American Community Survey and valid benchmarks of economic well-being such as the Supplemental Poverty Measure are essential to support data-driven decision making at every level of government. Federal policymakers should protect and sustain these data resources and tools.

VI. RESOURCES TO HELP EMPLOY EVIDENCE-BASED PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES AND PROMOTE DATA-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING

"Implementation Research: A Synthesis of the Literature," by Dean L. Fixen, Sandra F. Naoom, Karen A. Blase, Robert M. Friedman, and Frances Wallace (University of South Florida, 2005) http://ctndisseminationlibrary.org/PDF/nirnmonograph.pdf

"Evidence-Based Programs and Practices: What Does It All Mean?" by Lisa Williams-Taylor (Research Review, Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County, 2007)

California Reducing Disparities Project website.

National Evidence-Based Practice Databases

While these databases may not hold a significant number of evidence-based programs focused on communities of color, they may be helpful in providing useful general information such as definitions of different types of evidence-based practices.

The Social Work Policy Institute (www.socialworkpolicy.org/research/evidence-based-practice-2.html) lists the following databases and registries, among others:

Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development (Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence)

California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare

National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)

Social Programs That Work

Additional Resources

"Counting for Dollars: The Role of the Decennial Census in the Distribution of Federal Funds," www.brookings.edu/research/counting-for-dollars-the-role-of-the-decennial-census-in-the-distribution-of-federal-funds

"Surveying for Dollars: The Role of the American Community Survey in the Geographic Distribution of Federal Funds," www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/0726_acs_reamer.pdf

Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy, www.aisp.upenn.edu

Endnotes

1 See OMB-M-12-14. Grants were awarded to California, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, New York and Oklahoma, and interviewees confirmed their importance to IDS development in these states.

2 DeHart, D, & Shapiro, C. (2016). Integrated administrative data and criminal justice research. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 1–20. doi:10.1007/s12103-016-9355-5

3 Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy interview with C. Kelleher in 2016, retrieved from www.aisp.upenn.edu/qa-with-christopher-kelleher

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private philanthropy that creates a brighter future for the nation's children by developing solutions to strengthen families, build paths to economic opportunity and transform struggling communities into safer and healthier places to live, work and grow. For more information, visit the Foundation's website at www.aecf.org.