



# Bridging the Gap between Public Policy and Evidence to Improve Social Outcomes

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While America's political divide remains stark across key policy domains, the concept of "evidence-based" policymaking – the notion that decisions about design, implementation, and funding of policies and social programs should be based on scientific evidence of effectiveness – continues to garner support among policymakers from both sides of the aisle. However, despite important advances in the development and use of evidence to improve government effectiveness (including the work of the bipartisan Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking), critical gaps between the integration of research and public policy persist. Chiefly among them: 1) the current supply of evidence-based practices and programs that provide meaningful solutions for communities is thin; and 2) most providers of education, health care, and social services lack the capacity, resources, and data they need to rigorously measure the impact of their work and to influence public policies that affect their communities.

In this brief, we discuss how public policymakers can help create the conditions that enable social sector practitioners to build and promote evidence of what works for communities in need – evidence that public policymakers can then use to craft and fund more effective policies and programs, and what Project Evident is doing to help.

Sara Peters is the Director of Policy and Evidence at Project Evident; Farhana Hossain and Mary Bissell are advisors and contributors to Project Evident. Ms. Hossain is a social sector consultant specializing in research, evaluation, and dissemination. Ms. Bissell is a founding partner of ChildFocus, and a child and family policy expert.

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## Barriers to Evidence-Based Policymaking

The use of evidence in policymaking is on the rise, and considerable progress has been made in the last two decades to build a foundation of understanding about what programs and services work best for traditionally underserved communities.<sup>1</sup> However, while most policymakers agree that evidence should play a greater role in their decision-making, limited attention has been paid towards the necessary investments that must be made by national, regional, and local policymakers to catalyze the creation and use of evidence-based social service solutions. As we seek to reduce persistent disparities in education, employment, health and other outcomes of wellbeing that are too often based on income, race and geography, more work is needed to identify cost-effective solutions that improve outcomes for disadvantaged Americans and to produce rigorous and practical evidence that can be used to implement and sustain those solutions at scale.

The government, research, and social service communities have consistently overlooked and/or undervalued social service providers' role in evidence-based policy. Contrary to any narrative suggesting that nonprofits are simply situated at the receiving end of evidence-based policy, nonprofit service providers' evidence of impact is critically important for crafting effective public policy agendas and for outlining the specific outputs and outcomes that can be obtained by those policies. In fact, nonprofit organizations' evidence of impact is essential in influencing evidence-based legislative and regulatory reform, government contract structures and terms, and the form and application of public-private partnerships at the federal, regional, and local levels.

Accordingly, the many varied applications of evidence-based policy must include and spotlight the needs and desires of nonprofit service providers. Yet, the federal government and many in the research community have promoted a narrow definition of

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**In my way of thinking about evidence-based policy, the single most important player is the group of people who establish and run programs that actually deliver services. All politics might not be local but all program implementation is.**

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**Given the major role [nonprofit] organizations play in implementing the nation's social programs, they represent a major institutional asset of the evidence-based movement.**

**Ron Haskins**, Co-chair of the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking and the Co-Director of the Center on Children and Families at the Brookings Institution

*The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*

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<sup>1</sup> Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking (2017)

“evidence-based” in the last decade, where findings from large-scale randomized control trials (RCTs) are at the top of a tiered hierarchy used to make funding and policy decisions. While an important starting point, this framework fails to address the need to produce actionable evidence that is broadly applicable and scalable across various communities (in other words, not just “what works” but what works for whom, where, and how) and provides an insufficient basis for policy recommendations.<sup>2</sup>

While clear and consistent evidence standards are valuable and necessary, the reality is that this narrow definition of evidence, and equating a single method of evidence-building with rigor, has left policymakers without the information they need to meet the needs of their constituents. Most social programs that have been evaluated with RCTs were found to have modest or no effects – results that have not enabled a more nuanced discussion about the limitations of the research or how to improve systems, programs and services to produce transformative change for communities.<sup>3</sup> For example, we must consider the value of different program inputs, appropriateness of the outcomes measured, quality of implementation, and contextual or regulatory factors that may challenge program implementation and outcomes.

RCTs are also not feasible in many cases for technical, financial, and ethical reasons; for example, a rural program that serves a small number of people may not have the requisite number of participants needed to precisely measure the program’s impact (the small sample size would limit the statistical power to detect the difference made by the program). We have come a long way in defining and strengthening the standards for evidence and raising the demand for evidence in policymaking, but too little evidence is produced to help policymakers diagnose constituent needs, set service and accountability standards, assess performance and cost-effectiveness, and compare different policy options. Instead, a diversity of evaluation methods must be supported so that

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**In the areas of evidence-based programs, the research community has come a long way in strengthening standards of evidence on what works, but little progress has been made on critical questions about what it takes to implement programs and whether they would be effective with different populations, under different operating conditions, and in different contexts have been studied to infrequently.**

**Vivian Tseng**, Senior Vice President of Program at the William T. Grant Foundation

*Social Policy Report*

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<sup>2</sup> Parkhurst (2017); Schorr, Farrow and Sparrow (2014); Tseng (2012); Peticrew and Roberts (2003)

<sup>3</sup> Gordon and Haskins (2017)

providers can continuously learn from and improve their results and produce evidence that can drive policy decisions.

Federal, state, and local governments rely heavily on nonprofit providers to deliver a range of critical services, from homeless shelters to child care to education and job training. However, while nonprofits deliver a sizable chunk of the nation’s social services, there remains a significant imbalance between public policy and nonprofit service delivery. Government and philanthropic funders rarely help nonprofit organizations build the critical capacity and infrastructure needed for on-going evaluation, learning and continuous improvement. Moreover, government regulations and policies hobble nonprofit access to administrative data and contribute to data fragmentation across multiple systems and structures; this fragmentation has created an ecosystem that fails to produce evidence that both providers and policymakers can use towards improving outcomes for the communities they serve.<sup>4</sup>

Evidence-based policy provides a common framework for nonprofits and government to work towards the shared goal of achieving meaningful and demonstrable outcomes for communities. Evidence-driven programs and services may be more easily replicated and scaled with the support of government champions, through public funding support, and statutes and regulations that align with organization’s programmatic goals. As governments increasingly include evidence provisions in budget and policy decisions, a higher proportion of public funds will go towards those programs that demonstrate the highest return on investment for public spend. Given all that is at stake, nonprofit providers must have access to the proper set of resources and supports needed to generate the evidence that evidence-based policy depends upon.

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<sup>4</sup> Sullivan (2018)

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## How Policymakers Can Empower Practitioners to Lead Evidence-Building

Nonprofit leaders and practitioners are deeply committed to understanding the impact of their work on program participants. Contrary to conventional wisdom, practitioners want to build evidence not to meet grant requirements or check off boxes for funders, but to provide better services and show that those services make a difference.<sup>5</sup> Policymakers can accelerate the pace of evidence-building in the social sector and increase the availability of quality evidence by removing barriers that hinder the capacity of practitioners to use data and evaluation for evidence generation and improvement. To start, they can broaden the evidence framework to encourage methods and tools that are more appropriate for continuous evidence generation; strengthen the capacity and infrastructure of nonprofits to measure and improve outcomes; and improve nonprofit access to data to support evidence generation.

- **Promote a framework that recognizes the value of a broader range of evidence-building tools.**

Evidence-based policymaking is not just about making thumbs-up/thumbs-down decisions on whether a particular program should receive funding because it is found to have long-term impact on certain outcomes with a certain population. Policymakers need evidence to answer a broad range of questions: to diagnose and compare needs of local and national constituents; to find solutions to new or changing problems; to set program implementation and accountability standards; and to assess performance and cost-effectiveness at different settings.

RCTs are a useful tool and the best method for assessing the causal relationship between an intervention and outcome in a

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**One key to the future success of evidence-based policy is partnerships between government and nonprofit agencies to build programs that are well implemented, rigorously evaluated, and continually improved.**

**Robert Gordon,**  
Senior Fellow at  
Results for America,  
and **Ron Haskins**

*The Hill*

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<sup>5</sup> Project Evident surveys and interviews with nonprofit leaders and practitioners between 2016 and 2018; Morariu, Athanasiades, Pankaj and Grodzicki (2016); Buteau, Gopal and Glickman (2015)



controlled setting. However, as noted above, they are often impractical given certain implementation considerations, can be expensive and time-consuming, and too infrequently produce findings that are widely generalizable, useful to practitioners for continuous improvement efforts or immediately useful for policymakers' varying needs.<sup>6</sup>

A recent assessment of more than 130 evaluations funded by the Social Innovation Fund (SIF) – a federal tiered evidence initiative that spanned from 2009 through 2017 and, amongst other responsibilities, was tasked with using public and private resources to strengthen the evidence of impact of nonprofit service providers – concluded that it is imperative to allow programs the flexibility to “answer the questions most important to the program and to select evaluation designs that are appropriate and feasible at the local level.”<sup>7</sup> Policymakers should broaden the prevalent evidence framework and encourage the use of multiple modes of learning – including administrative data analysis, rapid-cycle evaluations, qualitative research, microsimulation and prediction models, among others – to produce evidence that is more relevant for decision-making and that answers different policy questions.

■ **Strengthen nonprofit capacity and infrastructure for data use, innovation, evaluation, and policy.**

The SIF assessment also found that “it is difficult for many nonprofits to meet [their] evaluation requirements without concerted support” and that “many local organizations do not have the resources, capacity, and expertise to conduct quality evaluations of their programs.”<sup>8</sup> Only 8 percent of nonprofits have an internal evaluation staff, according to a recent survey of the sector.<sup>9</sup> “If nonprofit social service providers are to contribute to our understanding of ‘what works,’ systematic efforts to build the capacity of grant-makers and service organizations are required,”

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**No single research tool or methodology can deliver the evidence policymakers need to make informed decisions.... Instead, policymakers and practitioners need a portfolio of rigorous research tools to effectively advance evidence-based policy.**

**Margery Austin Turner,**  
Senior Vice President  
for Program Planning  
and Management,  
The Urban Institute

*Congressional Testimony*

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<sup>6</sup> Sullivan (2018); Turner (2013)

<sup>7</sup> Zandniapour and Deterding (2017)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Morariu, Athanasiades, Pankaj and Grodzicki (2016)

the SIF report concluded.<sup>10</sup>

Evaluations of social programs are periodic studies that are typically outsourced to third-party researchers and do not leave nonprofit providers with a sustained capacity for learning and innovation. In an interview with Project Evident, one nonprofit leader reported: “Many funders want to fund programs that are evidence-based or to fund the type of research that would lead to a third-party rigorous evaluation that ‘proves’ program impact. However, just as important is funding the steps leading to this type of rigorous evaluation work.”

The Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking (CEP) made various recommendations in its final report to strengthen the evidence-building capacity within the federal government, which includes modernizing the government’s data and technology infrastructure, establishing a Chief Evaluation Officer at each agency, and strengthening “human capital” by hiring staff or by leveraging external partnership arrangements.<sup>11</sup> To realize the promise of evidence-based policymaking, such capacity investments in nonprofit human capital and infrastructure are also necessary.

However, government and philanthropic funders rarely help practitioners build this core evaluation and learning capacity. In fact, governments usually do not cover the full cost of contracted services and often impose artificial caps that seek to minimize non-program spending or restrict spending flexibility. While government contracts limit spending on indirect costs, contractual rules place costly administrative burdens on providers. Nonprofits also report that untimely receipt of government grant and contract payments adds huge financial strain. The Government Accountability Office found that to bridge the gaps in funding, nonprofits “forgo or delay physical infrastructure and technology improvements and staffing needs” – a finding reinforced by surveys and research by other

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**Government seldom reimburses a CBO for the full cost of providing services.... The result is that philanthropic donations are used primarily for program-related funding gaps instead of to enhance programs, research and development, testing new approaches, and investing in technology.**

Report commissioned by the Alliance for Strong Families and Communities and the American Public Human Services Association

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking (2017)



organizations.<sup>12</sup> These capacity constraints also negatively affect the ability of nonprofits to advocate for policies that better allow them to serve their communities.

Governments cannot continue to demand outcomes and evidence without fully covering the costs of essential social services or the costs associated with building the evidence needed to inform key public policy decision-making. To start, policymakers can address problems in procurement practices that limit the ability of social sector providers to invest in evidence by:<sup>13</sup>

- Paying the full costs incurred in delivering contracted services;
- Committing to contract terms and payment practices that support timely payments;
- Allowing more flexible funding that can be reallocated based on provider needs;
- Simplifying costly administrative burdens, including reporting requirements, that are more about unnecessary compliance than outcomes; and
- Considering the merits of results-based contracting structures over more traditional fee-for-service contracts to provide greater autonomy to providers in program selection and implementation.

In fact, there is increasing interest in moving away from traditional government procurement contracts that pay service providers based on program inputs and outputs (such as the number of people served) to contracts that reward performance and outcomes, and embed evidence-building at the core of operations. In February 2018, Congress enacted the Social Impact Partnerships to Pay for Results Act (SIPPPRA), creating a \$100 million standing fund within the U.S. Department of the Treasury that allows the federal government to serve as an end payor for Pay for Success projects in state and local governments. For outcome-based contracts, it is imperative that nonprofit service providers have a leadership role in establishing the transaction structure and payable outcomes, and that the nonprofits have access to technical assistance to prepare for this new approach to funding, including resources for the necessary expansion of data and evaluation capacity.<sup>14</sup>

### ■ **Improve nonprofit access to outcomes data.**

Nonprofit providers collect a great deal of data on their clients to inform service decisions and to track outputs for contractual requirements. However, most lack access to intermediate- and long-term outcomes data available through administrative records, such as employment, earnings, college completion, criminal justice involvement, etc. In an assessment of the social sector's data for evidence ecosystem conducted for Project Evident, experts at Monitor Deloitte concluded that legal and regulatory

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<sup>12</sup> Alliance for Strong Families and Communities (2018); Pettijohn, Boris, De Vita and Fyffe (2013); Czerwinski (2010); National Council of Nonprofits (2010)

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Gayeski (2016); Blum (2015)

constraints and misaligned incentives limit data sharing and integration in the social sector, and that there is confusion and concern over whether privacy and data security policies and practices sufficiently safeguard and provide control to constituents. Moreover, the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking concluded that data silos and lack of coordination across government (both within federal government and across federal, state and local agencies) “leads to unnecessary burden and cost from duplicative data collection, missed opportunities for programmatic collaboration, and a less robust response to a cross-cutting policy or programmatic question.”

The Commission made several recommendations to expand the availability and use of federal data for policy evaluation and research while strengthening federal policies and technological infrastructure to ensure transparency, privacy, and data security.<sup>15</sup> While action on these recommendations at the federal level is crucial, policymakers also must work towards standardizing administrative data access for providers at the state and local levels by establishing:<sup>16</sup>

- Norms and protocols for secure, responsible and equitable data sharing among service providers and state and local agencies; and
- Common definitions and measures for administrative data collection and reporting across jurisdictions.

By improving nonprofit providers’ access to outcomes data, reimbursing providers for the full cost of delivering services, and providing them with resources to build internal capacity for data use and evaluation, policymakers can encourage continuous evidence generation, rapid-cycle experimentation, and program improvement in the social sector. This, in turn, will produce knowledge and evidence that allow policymakers and practitioners to shape more effective social programs and policies.

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**Government has a unique ability, and obligation, to ensure equal access to public goods, including the vast knowledge contained in its data systems....**

**Administrative data should be seen and used as a public good. Local governments should embrace broader administrative data sharing because doing so fully aligns with their own values of transparency, accountability, and collaborative problem-solving.**

**Robert Doar**, the Morgridge Fellow in Poverty Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, and **Linda Gibbs**, a Senior Fellow at Results for America

*Results for America Brief*

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<sup>15</sup> Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking (2017)

<sup>16</sup> Doar and Gibbs (2017); Blum (2015)

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## A “New Normal” for Evidence-Based Policy

Project Evident is working towards a “new normal” for evidence building that places social sector practitioners in the driver’s seat of their own evidence-building efforts. We are giving practitioners access to the strategy, technology, tools, and talent they need to lead their own evidence agenda, with the ultimate goal of increasing the supply of outcomes-producing programs for communities who need them. A key part of the work involves helping practitioners align their evaluation and learning activities with their policy, funding, and advocacy work in order to facilitate the broader development and application of evidence-based policy.

- We are working with nonprofits of varying sizes in different policy domains – including education, employment, child welfare and criminal justice – to develop **Strategic Evidence Plans (SEP)**. A SEP is a multi-year roadmap to accelerate investments and activities for continuous evidence generation and program improvement that are grounded in an individual organization’s operational reality, policy and funding contexts, strategic goals, and learning objectives. We are helping our nonprofit partners effectively integrate policy-related strategies into SEPs to:
  - Strengthen advocacy for public funding to support and scale evidence-based services;
  - Identify procurement strategies and practices that drive operational sustainability;
  - Address evidence gaps and align organizational learning agendas with public policymakers’ shared priorities and agendas;
  - Communicate different, compelling types of evidence to policymakers and philanthropic funders; and
  - Pursue public-private partnerships and innovative, outcomes-based funding opportunities.



### EVIDENCE

Nonprofits build rigorous, compelling evidence on their own terms, embedding data use, learning, and evaluation as standard practices.

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### POLICY

Nonprofits strategically integrate their evidence goals and evaluation results into their policy, funding, and advocacy work to ensure organizational alignment and coordination.

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### OUTCOMES

Effective programs and services are more easily identified, funded, and scaled with the support of government champions, public funds and contracts, and statutes and regulations.

Project Evident is also providing technical assistance in these areas to nonprofits that are not working on SEPs.

- In particular, we are partnering with various organizations, like ChildFocus, to provide strategic planning and technical assistance to encourage nonprofits and state and local agencies to **take full advantage of recent federal laws that require new evidentiary standards and evaluation** of federally funded social service programs. Currently, this includes SIPPPRA and the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018, that reforms federal child welfare financing streams and prioritizes preventative, evidence-based child welfare services. We also plan to launch a **“Talent Accelerator”** program designed to increase the data and evidence capacity of practitioners and administrators through virtual learning workshops.
- In light of SIPPPRA and Project Evident’s work in strengthening the resources and supports available to providers to build practical and operational evidence, we are working with nonprofits to **advance a more nimble, outcomes-focused, and results-based contracting model** that is driven by the needs of the nonprofits. We expect that this model will dramatically empower nonprofit organizations to build the supply of investable, evidence-based and outcomes-focused contracting transactions. Project Evident believes that a more optimal results-based contracting structure is possible – one that is more adaptive and attentive to nonprofit operating realities in determining the project’s evaluation, performance management, and payment structures. We are hopeful that results-based contracting can be a catalytic financing option for a wider array of social service providers, and are currently working with several providers to embed this structure in future results-based contracting transactions. These efforts include providing advisory services on project structuring activities (including operations and evaluation planning), helping to develop contracts, payment and governance structures, and focusing on other external relations work.
- As we work through Project Evident’s approach to helping nonprofits build evidence and use it to advance policy, we are also trying to learn more about the kinds of supports nonprofits need. Accordingly, we have worked with our partners to develop a needs assessment survey that will help identify: (a) the ways nonprofits currently incorporate evidence and evaluation into their core policy activities; (b) the primary obstacles nonprofit leaders face in bringing an evidentiary focus to their work; and (c) the main motivations and measures of success nonprofits bring to evidence-based policy. We are currently piloting this **Evidence-based Policy-Mapping Tool** with several dozen nonprofit organizations and will use the findings to adapt the tool further. The ultimate goal is to provide nonprofits with an internal resource that allows them to:
  - Understand and document the role that evidence can play in their daily policy and advocacy activities;

- Create customized plans that expand their capacity to integrate evidence-based learnings in the decisions they make about their policy-focused activities; and
- Prioritize their efforts and investments in policy-focused activities in order to advance and secure broader evidence-based funding and decision-making.

Nonprofits are essential in generating the evidence that can drive and transform federal, state, and local public policy. Much, if not most, of the evidence used to develop and refine social programs and policies is actually a result of the research and evaluation work completed by, for, and with nonprofit service providers. Yet, the current evidence ecosystem is driven predominately by the interests of funders, policymakers, and researchers rather than by the practitioners who are delivering core social services in partnership with communities in need. Policymakers have the power to advance a healthier, more equitable ecosystem, and create the conditions that enable social sector practitioners to continuously build and promote evidence and improve outcomes and lives in the process.

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- Overdeck Family Foundation
- Carnegie Corporation of New York

We would also like to thank the nonprofit organizations that have partnered with us: we value their commitment to building strong evidence that help their communities, as well as their engagement and input that continues to shape our work.

At Project Evident, we believe in the commitment and courage of social sector practitioners. They have a singular view, and with the right tools and talent, are uniquely positioned to address challenges facing children and families on an ongoing basis. With support from like-minded funders, practical and sustainable positive change is more likely. As a trusted partner, we help practitioners and funders accelerate social impact. We are currently concluding an ambitious proof of concept phase to develop, demonstrate and plan the future of a shared services platform for continuous evidence building in the social sector. The Project Evident team looks forward to continued efforts to strengthen the evidence ecosystem and to working directly with practitioners and funders to produce better outcomes for communities.

**Evidence is reason to believe.**



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