

BUILDING EVIDENCE AND ADVANCING EQUITY

A CALL TO ACTION FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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For the past twenty years, I have been immersed in local government decision making in King County (Seattle, Washington) government. My training as an economist has naturally led to an interest in applying evidence-based practice to my work in the public sector. But my most important education and work has come through engagement with the diversity of communities in King County on advancing racial equity.

King County government's intentional focus on equity and social justice has been grounded in data and evidence from its inception about a dozen years ago.¹ At first glance, King County's metrics depict a flourishing region—one that has weathered even the effects of COVID-19 better than many other places. Yet, our communities attest and a deeper look at the data show that our region suffers from large disparities by race and place. Despite some important gains, many disparities have persisted and even worsened.

All local governments must recognize that we have contributed to racialized disparities and have a responsibility to eliminate them. Building an anti-racist pro-equity future requires local governments to work with community to deeply challenge the status quo, innovate, be willing to fail,

and try again. Often, local governments assume that community-based and evidence-based practices don't mix. But my experience is that communities are eager to build, interpret, and use data and evidence. It is not that local governments need to set aside data and evidence to work with community; it is that we need to do the hard work of challenging our data and evidence practices to be more driven by, inclusive of, and responsive to communities.

Fundamentally, King County and other local governments cannot become anti-racist organizations that contribute to building a pro-equity future without co-creating and innovating with community, and that includes how we use data and evidence. We need to work with community to create the conditions under which the next generation of evidence flourishes in our organizations, and apply a constant vigilance so data and evidence are used in service of equity.

Here are *five calls to action for local governments* to support evidence building and use for a pro-equity future.

1. LEVERAGE LOCAL GOVERNMENT'S MULTIPLICITY OF ROLES

Local governments are directly accountable to the community for outcomes and the use of data and evidence to increase and demonstrate impact. We are at once policymakers, funders, practitioners, and implementers of evidence-based practice, contributing to both the supply of and demand for evidence building and use. Local governments, therefore, have an opportunity and a responsibility to model the way. It is time to get our act together. Here are a few ways to leverage the roles we play.

As Funder—Set-Asides for Data and Evidence: Data and evidence need to be recognized as foundational practices that contribute to impact, not as “overhead” that easily can be cut. Local policymakers can signal their commitment by setting aside a percentage of their budgets specifically for data and evidence building.

In 2015 and in 2021, King County voters approved an annual property tax levy (estimated at \$132 million in 2022) called Best Starts for Kids (BSK) to help ensure every child here grows up happy, healthy, safe, and thriving.² BSK includes a 5 percent set-aside dedicated to data and evaluation. Those funds have allowed King County to develop a Child Health Survey, giving us data on the health and well-being of our youngest residents and their families for the first time.³ The funds also help build capacity in hundreds of

community organizations to use data and evidence to contribute to BSK results.

As Policymaker—Learning Agendas: Local governments cannot complain that evidence generated by researchers doesn't meet our needs if we are not clear about what questions are our highest priorities. We can do that through development of learning agendas,⁴ now required of federal executive agencies by the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act.⁵

At King County Metro Transit, we see the opportunity to move beyond learning agendas, which we have used for some programs, to develop an agency-wide strategic evidence plan.⁶ Working with community, a strategic evidence plan will help set our learning priorities and build capacity and skills for continuous evidence generation and use over the long term.

As Implementer—Act on the Results: Local governments need to be clear and work with community partners on what we will do with results from evidence we build together. Too often, we leave programs showing positive results in the “pilot” phase because we have not considered how to scale them up. And, often, ineffective programs limp along for too long. Acting on results more quickly allows us to invest funds where they have the biggest impact.

That does not mean every promising finding results in big new investments, nor does it mean every null finding results in overturning a policy or eliminating a program. Evidence building takes time, and we should strive for evidence-informed decisions that balance many other considerations local governments face. For example, through a randomized control trial study, the Lab @ DC⁷ found that body-worn cameras⁸ had no statistically significant impact on police use of force and other outcomes measured in the study. The Lab @ DC provided a thoughtful analysis of several possible reasons for this result.⁹ The city continues to use body-worn cameras for their important transparency and evidentiary value while focusing on rigorously evaluating other innovative efforts to improve police-community interactions.¹⁰

As Convener—Partner across the Regional Evidence Ecosystem: Local governments can convene other organizations, like universities, philanthropies, nonprofits, and the private sector, to partner on evidence building and use. For example, King County was instrumental in bringing partners together to form HealthierHere, a regional nonprofit driving and testing innovations to advance equity and improve health and wellness as part of Washington State's Medicaid Transformation.¹¹ HealthierHere's collective

action model allows us to better link and interpret data, much of which is maintained by King County, to catalyze and test innovations across the healthcare system.

2. CENTER EQUITY AND INVOLVE COMMUNITY FROM THE BEGINNING

To build a pro-equity future, local governments need to center equity and involve community in all of our processes, including evidence building. People closest to the issues also are closest to the solutions, and we need to be continuously engaged with community so they drive priorities and innovations.

An exciting example of this is the co-creation of a new Mobility Framework by King County Metro Transit and the community-based Mobility Equity Cabinet.¹² The framework, adopted in early 2020, provides overarching policy guidance for how Metro Transit can advance mobility, particularly for communities “where the needs are greatest.” Working closely with communities at the earliest stages of policy development produced a much stronger and innovative policy response. A commitment to continuously engage with communities as we implement and build evidence will also produce better, more durable solutions.

3. BUILD EVIDENCE FROM THE BEGINNING

Like equity considerations, local governments often treat evidence building as an afterthought. Decision makers often fail to ask about the learning objectives or establish success criteria until well into a project or until something isn’t working well. When we do not consider equity from the beginning, rather than advancing equity, we often end up having to mitigate negative impacts. Likewise, when we do not consider evidence building from the beginning, it may be impossible to build strong evidence. Equity and evidence work together from the outset to support stronger pro-equity impact and outcomes.

In 2015, King County was one of the first jurisdictions in the country to implement a discounted transit fare for people with low incomes.¹³ While we built an equity and performance measurement focus into implementation, we failed to consider how we would build causal evidence about the impact of fare discounts on mobility and quality of life outcomes among

different communities. The program enrolled 60,000 people at its peak and while we have measures on how much people use the benefit, retrospectively we do not have the ability to rigorously demonstrate how the lower fare created changes in mobility and other life outcomes for people in the region.

Learning from this, when, in 2020, King County implemented a fully subsidized annual transit pass,¹⁴ available at no cost to our residents with the lowest incomes, we considered evidence building from the beginning. This has led us to stronger partnerships, data infrastructure, and other mechanisms for program improvement, and will allow us to demonstrate the impact of the pass on quality-of-life outcomes for the diversity of communities in King County.

4. INVEST IN INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CAPACITY AND RELATIONSHIPS

Local governments often approach the generation of evidence as something they contract for through external researchers. Often, there is little interaction between researchers and government staff, with results of the research being delivered in a report several months later, which then sits on a (proverbial) shelf.

Local governments need to be more engaged in the production of evidence if that evidence is to be put to use. Even where government brings staff with evaluation expertise in house, teams like the Lab @ DC demonstrate that the most useful evidence building occurs when those researchers are continuously engaged with program staff. This ensures that evidence is highly tuned to program needs, that continuous learning and improvement occurs, and that program staff build knowledge and skills that help interpret evidence.

In King County, we have benefited greatly from “matching services,” such as through the State & Local Government Innovation Initiative at J-PAL,¹⁵ to pair us with researchers on specific evidence-building projects. From there, we have invested in building those into long-term partnerships, such as with the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities at Notre Dame (LEO)¹⁶ and the Regulation, Evaluation, and Governance Lab at Stanford Law School (RegLab),¹⁷ where we now are involved in several evidence-building projects together. We are able to generate useful research much more quickly with each project as

these researchers build their expertise and relationships in King County, and we integrate data across more projects.

Local governments also need to recognize the value of the knowledge, expertise, and time that communities bring. We need to pay community members and community-based organizations for this expertise, just as we pay for the expertise of consultants with whom we regularly contract. As well, when we require community-based organizations to participate in data or evidence-building activities, we need to fund and support their capacity to do so.¹⁸

These relationships among people dedicated to the same goals while holding different perspectives and roles benefit us in countless ways and are much more nimble, durable, rewarding, and—frankly—fun than the transactional interactions that come with a contract, which tend to vanish when the work is complete.

5. SHARE RESULTS AND LEARNINGS TRANSPARENTLY AND BROADLY

Too often, the results of a research project do not make it beyond the program being examined. We need better mechanisms in local government to share evidence across programs and agencies, with community and the public, and with other local governments. The value of sharing evidence is not just about the results but also about the thought process that went into establishing our hypotheses, what failures of implementation we recovered from, and how we were able to build process equity.

Evidence building in King County is strengthening through sharing across departments, with local communities, and with other governments. Evidence on the impact of case management in a homelessness prevention project has directly influenced an initiative to reduce barriers to transportation through community navigators. In Best Starts for Kids, we have established a regular practice of data deep dives to enlist communities' expertise in the interpretation of data and results.¹⁹ Outreach to other jurisdictions started a few years ago regarding evaluation of income-based transit fares has led to the establishment of an Interjurisdiction Transit Equity Research Collaborative, a monthly convening of over twenty major transit agencies to share learnings, challenges, and research.

If local governments can make progress on the five areas above, we will be well poised to make the following *three requests of the research and*

evidence-building community. At the Causal Inference for Social Impact Lab at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University,²⁰ which I co-direct, we are taking up these considerations:

1. **Treat Government and Community as Equal Partners:** The most productive evidence-building processes are where government staff, community members, and researchers work together as equal partners. We ask research partners to value the expertise of our staff and community partners and respect the priorities of community and the multiple constraints and pressures of the environment in which local government operates. These constraints don't always make for the perfect research project, but they often are more likely to reflect the actual conditions in which policy and program innovations are implemented.
2. **Innovations in Causal Inference:** We also need innovation in the methodologies and practices used to build rigorous evidence. While randomized controlled trial experiments are one important tool, we should prioritize evidence building for our most important questions and promising interventions that advance equity, regardless of whether we can randomize. We also need research practice innovations that center equity while challenging the definitions of core elements of our evaluative practice (validity, rigor, and objectivity) so that inquiry better reflects the multiplicity of experiences within multiple cultural contexts, as envisioned by the Equitable Evaluation Initiative²¹ with their Equitable Evaluation FrameworkTM.²²
3. **Collaboration across Researchers:** The decisions individual researchers make can have enormous effects on the results generated and, subsequently, on the policy responses that impact residents' lives. Local governments need researchers who are willing to consult, collaborate, and act as "critical friends" with one another and with us and our community partners. We need researchers who know that any one study does not provide definitive answers, understand that the best studies provide some answers and more questions, and are willing to work across disciplines so local governments and communities can make evidence-informed decisions based on the best imperfect information.

Just imagine the progress we could make to advance racial equity if local governments, community, and our research partners were co-conductors of this evidence train!

NOTES

1. See King County Equity and Social Justice website, <https://kingcounty.gov/elected/executive/equity-social-justice.aspx>.

2. See Best Starts for Kids page on the King County Department of Community and Human Services website, <https://kingcounty.gov/depts/community-human-services/initiatives/best-starts-for-kids.aspx>.

3. See Best Starts for Kids Health Survey page on the King County Department of Community and Human Services website, <https://kingcounty.gov/depts/community-human-services/initiatives/best-starts-for-kids/survey.aspx#:~:text=The%20Best%20Starts%20for%20Kids%20Health%20Survey%20is%20a%20survey,Washington%20to%20collect%20this%20information.>

4. See the Learning Agendas page on the Evaluation.gov website, <https://www.evaluation.gov/evidence-plans/learning-agenda/>.

5. See “Achieving the Promise of the Evidence Act,” Results for America, <https://results4america.org/evidence-act-resources/>.

6. See “Supporting Effective Policymaking through the Development of Strategic Evidence Plans,” Project Evident, <https://www.projectevident.org/updates/2020/9/2/supporting-effective-policymaking-through-the-development-of-strategic-evidence-plans>.

7. See The LAB @ DC website, <https://thelab.dc.gov/>.

8. The LAB @ DC, “Do Body-Worn Cameras Influence Police-Community Interactions?” <https://thelabprojects.dc.gov/body-worn-cameras>.

9. See The LAB @ DC, “Do Body-Worn Cameras Influence Police-Community Interactions?” conclusions, <https://bwc.thelab.dc.gov/conclusions.html>.

10. See The LAB @ DC, “Can Knowledge of Historical and Cultural Context Have an Impact on Policing,” <https://thelabprojects.dc.gov/historic-cultural-training>.

11. See “An Overview and Highlights from Our Current Work,” Healthier Here website, www.healthierhere.org/our-work/.

12. See the Mobility Framework page on King County Metro’s website, <https://kingcounty.gov/depts/transportation/metro/about/policies/mobility-framework.aspx>.

13. See the ORCA LIFT page on the King County Metro website, <https://kingcounty.gov/depts/transportation/metro/fares-orca/orca-cards/lift.aspx>.

14. See the Subsidized Annual Pass page on the King County Metro website, <https://kingcounty.gov/depts/transportation/metro/fares-orca/subsidized-annual-pass.aspx>.

15. See the State and Local Innovation Initiative page on the J-PAL website, www.povertyactionlab.org/initiative/state-and-local-innovation-initiative.

16. See the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities website, <https://leo.nd.edu/>.

17. See Stanford University's Regulation, Evaluation, and Governance Lab website, <https://reglab.stanford.edu/>.

18. "New in 2020, More Data and Evaluation Support," Best Starts for Kids blog, January 7, 2020, <https://beststartsblog.com/2020/01/07/new-in-2020-more-data-and-evaluation-support/>.

19. "What's a Data Dive?" Best Starts for Kids blog, June 12, 2018, <https://beststartsblog.com/2018/06/12/whats-a-data-dive/>.

20. See the Causal Inference for Social Impact Lab page at the Stanford University website, <https://casbs.stanford.edu/programs/causal-inference-social-impact-lab#:~:text=In%20Spring%202021%2C%20CASBS%20will,So%20Impact%20Lab's%20Data%20Challenge.&text=Unlike%20most%20data%20challenges%2C%20the,the%20questions%20posed%20to%20them>.

21. See the Reimagining the Purpose and Practice of Evaluation page of the Equitable Evaluation Initiative website, <https://www.equitableeval.org/>.

22. See the Equitable Evaluation Framework page of the Equitable Evaluation Initiative website, www.equitableeval.org/framework.