

REIMAGINING EVIDENCE AS JUSTICE

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As the leader of a national organization pushing for more equitable public policies, the question I get asked more than any other is, “Where’s the evidence this policy will work?”

Now, I am a big fan of evidence. Evidence, when effectively and properly marshalled, can provide vital clues toward equity. My organization, Policy-Link, relies heavily on evidence to make the case for equitable policy change in city halls, state capitals, and Congress every day. We dig through mountains of data, research, and studies to hone our policy proposals.

Evidence can, unquestionably, help improve existing programs and identify promising innovations. It can help us see where programs are falling short. It can help us challenge our own perspectives to see new ways of tackling thorny challenges.

But as important as it is to build evidence, it is just as important to ask, “Who is required to show evidence to prove their basic humanity?”

No one ever asks a white suburban town council what evidence they have for building a new park or community center. No one ever asks a white school what evidence they have for expanding an afterschool program or varsity sports. Rarely is the business association in a white town asked why they invest in improved infrastructure on Main Street.

All those investments are seen as self-evidently good for the community, so we skip right past the evidence phase to the implementation phase.

But when it comes time for truly equitable policies—policies that allow everyone to participate and prosper to their full potential—suddenly we cannot even begin to move forward without ironclad, peer-reviewed evidence. When we try to make life better for Black, brown, Indigenous, and other marginalized communities, the threshold for action is much, much higher.

This is what I call “evidence as a double standard.” When policies that uplift Black and brown people are at issue, “evidence” is too often used in calculated, inhumane ways to reach some cold cost-benefit analysis completely removed from the real lives and lived experiences of the people affected by the policies. On the other hand, largely white communities too often use “evidence” as a proxy to deny poor people access to the resources and programs that wealthier people take for granted.

That is why we must face what is evident before we demand evidence. It is evident that America is built atop centuries of ingrained white supremacy and systemic racism. It is evident that the effects of our history are felt in every corner of our nation, from schools to businesses to transportation to infrastructure to banks to housing. It is evident that systemic inequities were purposefully built into the DNA of our institutions. And it is, therefore, evident that we cannot overcome these systemic obstacles without reimagining the very design of our nation.

Deployed without a deeper understanding of the roots of American injustice, evidence can become merely its own form of white supremacy by reinforcing the racist status quo. That may be a largely unintended consequence, but it is a consequence, nonetheless.

Racism has been the driving current of American public policy for 400 years. We cannot address that reality by narrowing our vision solely to “evidence” for specific policy proposals, in a vacuum of history and context. For far too long, we have treated Black people and other marginalized communities as mere test subjects in a scientific endeavor to find evidence.

When you continue to deny our nation’s origin story, when our hearts are too calloused to see the humanity of others, evidence alone (as currently conceived) will never compel people to act. There are reams and reams of evidence for equitable policies that have been dutifully and painstakingly compiled by folks like the Children’s Defense Fund, Urban Institute, and PolicyLink. Evidence shows we must dramatically reverse income inequality if we want to sustain our democracy. Evidence shows climate change will

soon swamp states along the Gulf Coast. Yet the equitable policy solutions to those challenges remain unenacted, gathering dust on the desks of the very same elected officials who dismiss our demands for our own basic humanity with a blithe, “But where’s the evidence?”

That is why it is time for us to create a new vision of evidence—evidence as justice, evidence as truth. If evidence is not leading us inexorably toward justice, we are not maximizing the use of evidence.

To create a new paradigm of “evidence as justice,” we first must ask ourselves some vital questions: What does it take to reverse 400 years of systemic oppression? What does it take to undertake a truly equitable redesign of a country built upon genocide, stolen land, and slave labor? If we do not ask ourselves these questions before we set out to gather evidence, we will miss the destination. Evidence today is a microscope. We need it also to be a telescope.

When policymakers ask for evidence, they really are asking for proof that an intervention will work. They are attempting to manage risk before investing in long-underinvested communities. But equity work is risky by nature. You cannot wring the risk out of the vital work of creating a world that has never before existed.

One of the darlings of the evidence-first policy world is the Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ), a group PolicyLink has been working with for more than a decade. The basic premise of the HCZ model is that we can dramatically improve the lives of children by investing in wrap-around services—schools, mentorships, health care, parental support—that help provide children in need with the same foundational supports wealthier families take as a given.

The truth about HCZ, though, is that while the evidence is promising, it is still scarce. And it never would have made the progress it has made so far if it had not secured significant investments long before the green sprouts of “evidence” began to push through the soil.

Finding evidence for radical ideas is, by definition, extremely difficult because they are policies that would create a different world than the one in which we currently live. We have plenty of evidence for the ways white men govern. We have plenty of evidence for how patriarchies and capitalism work. We have plenty of evidence for the status quo.

But what evidence is there for how our governing institutions, public servants, laws, and regulations should act in a multiracial democracy? What evidence is there for how fiscal policy can be marshalled to lift up

underserved communities? What evidence is there for how to undo the inherently oppressive structures of modern capitalism?

To be clear, many people are trying to figure out how to use evidence for justice. Participatory and community-based evaluation, in particular, provides a promising way forward for bringing the insights and voices of impacted communities into the policy process. And we can and should continue to use data when it can be marshalled in service of justice and equity.

One of the leading voices in this new movement is the Equitable Evaluation Initiative (EEI), founded by Jara Dean-Coffey to help spark “paradigm-shifting conversations” among practitioners in the philanthropic, nonprofit, and consulting communities. EEI offers five key considerations for how to reimagine evaluation and evidence:

1. Acknowledge that evaluation reflects a paradigm that cloaks privilege and racism as objectivity.
2. Explore the ways in which current practices in foundations and nonprofits and among consultants can be barriers to the adoption of equitable evaluation principles, and identify and share approaches that interrupt those habits.
3. Elevate evaluative thinking that links organizational culture, strategy, and evaluation to be a leadership competency and organizational capacity.
4. Move beyond methodological approaches and evaluator demographics to address culture and context and, in so doing, unpack our definitions of evidence, knowledge, and truth so we may create new ones grounded in this time, place, and set of intentions.
5. Continue to diversify and expand the talent pool of evaluators, and ensure that their training (both formal and informal) introduces and nurtures a myriad of new and different ways to conceptualize evidence, knowledge, and truth in service of greater validity and rigor.

Each of these steps requires us to think beyond raw numbers and spreadsheets and truly understand the historical and social context in which we are operating—and how that context requires us to think more creatively and deeply about seemingly intractable problems.

Project Evident is already moving in this direction with its goals for the Next Generation of Evidence Campaign: Practitioner Centric; Embracing

an “R&D” Approach; and Elevating the Voices of Communities. The third goal, in particular, is where the researchers and policymakers can make an enormous difference almost immediately. Bringing the voices, insights, and ideas of people most affected by policies can make those policies sharper, more effective, and more equitable.

Even as we develop the next generation of evidence, though, we must constantly be asking ourselves: Evidence in service of whom? Are we requiring marginalized communities to contort themselves into the narrow boxes of the status quo, boxes they have been shut out of for hundreds of years? Or are we beginning from a place of justice and working backward to create evidence and evaluation strategies that will achieve equity—just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential?

As the United States becomes ever more diverse, the need for truly equitable policies becomes more urgent. But we cannot understand those policies if we continue to see them through an inequitable prism.

Evidence is not a road map; it is a flashlight. Evidence alone does not guide us to where we need to go but, rather, illuminates our path toward justice.