

# THE POWER OF COMMUNITY VOICE

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**W**e are in the midst of a national reckoning of confronting the racial inequities that permeate every aspect of our nation. Given our nation's history of using evidence as a powerful tool for driving change, we have a serious opportunity and challenge before us: attending to how evidence is used as we confront and understand our nation's history of racial inequity. Also, how evidence is used as we work toward a more racially equitable and sustainable nation becomes essential.

For evidence to be truly useful in taking up this work, it needs the appropriate context, relational framing, and community grounding. At Independent Sector, we hold true that individual and collective flourishing are inextricably linked. Because of this, evidence—and the production and analysis of it—is beneficial to all when viewed in a framework of progress; not just on an individual basis but also a collective one.

Evidence and the building of it needs to include people and communities who are not flourishing by developed methodologies, as well as partners and institutions that can provide support, reflection, and insight for positive systemic change. For stakeholders—including foundations, government, practitioners, and researchers—this is an important, and at times a complicated, shift toward making democratic spaces to incorporate community voices in their institutional missions, grantmaking, and evidence-building work. They are doing this with full knowledge of the power, advantages,

and insight that philanthropy and their institutions bring to the nation. By building the appropriate structures to unearth more relevant evidence and bringing this resolute awareness to our work, we know data can inform policies and solutions that lead to progress and, ultimately, help people thrive.

Two examples from my career support this idea. For seventeen years, I worked at Communities in Schools, a national nonprofit that supports students in overcoming barriers and staying in the education system for long-term success. I watched and learned of Black and brown children pipelined into the juvenile justice system because school officials used data—grades, absentee rates, and the number of behavioral issues—punitively. The corresponding response to this evidence from school officials was institutional and systemic punishment, which harmed a student’s long-term future.

We, in the Communities in Schools movement, worked with students, families, practitioners, school personnel, and board members and realized these data were showing us what many authorities were missing—that a young person was experiencing deep distress. To avoid sending a young person into the juvenile justice system, we partnered with specialists and community members and knew the education system needed to build a constructive environment for student resilience and long-term flourishing. We used the same evidence as school officials and the juvenile justice system, but we realized this: It is *how* people in and with power in these systems use it that matters. We also took this important step: We centered the lives and future of Black and brown students and their families in our work. We continuously asked what it would take for them to flourish, and then used data and evidence to create the conditions for individual and collective flourishing.

Our movement, too, was aided by disaggregated data by race, class, and geography, as well as the explosion of the integrated student support field and the national awakening to racial inequities. In both cases, officials used evidence to release large amounts of public money. In the punitive context, dollars went to the juvenile justice system, school-based security officers, and metal detectors. When we centered our efforts on resilience and thriving, money helped fund better social service support, holistic family supports, and shifting a school environment into a place in which all students could thrive.

The other example involves our Upswell Summit, which Independent Sector powers each year to bring together changemakers for sense-making

discussions about communities, collaboration, the social sector, and our nation. To help us gauge feedback, we use a variety of evaluation methods, including the Net Promoter Score (NPS) system, which is a number rating for each overall summit. We have one required question of people who attend each summit: “Would you recommend Upswell to a friend or colleague?”

From 2016 to 2018, our NPS rating hovered in relatively the same range, with an increase or decrease that was not extraordinary. Still, based on feedback and continuously testing hypotheses, we made changes to the next summit. But from 2018 to 2019, our NPS rating dropped dramatically. We took a deeper look at our evidence and audience feedback, and from a design approach, we asked: Given our data, how can we turn the curve of user experience, given our mission and what people say they care about? For 2020, we settled on two key Upswell Summit themes instead of several: racial justice and all aspects of health. These two themes still allowed us breadth and depth in our sense-making, social sector work. From 2019 to 2020, our NPS rating increased by more than twenty times—an indication that we built, collected, and used evidence to be more focused, adaptive, relevant, and forward looking. Our Upswell Summit audience told us that our anti-racism discussions gave them tools to use in their social sector work and everyday life—giving us, in 2020, our highest “strongly agree” ranking, of 92 percent. We are applying all our lessons to our everyday work because we want to do better.

For the social sector, recognizing the influence and role of evidence in our missions is pivotal. As an engine of renewal, the social sector plays a unique and powerful role in America, especially on our much-coveted path to progress and inclusion. The social sector listens and works with people in communities. We build trust. We help implement public policies. We are partners in crafting public policy solutions, as well.

What is key is that we agree on and accept ways in which people in communities, especially those that are structurally marginalized, define what individual and collective human and environmental flourishing looks like for themselves, their loved ones, and their neighborhoods. Then, we build evidence in service of progress toward that human, environmental, and community flourishing. This framework will lead to deeper answers and policy and community solutions because people will have a vested interest in all of it. It will accurately reflect their lives and communities. **We have come to believe that building evidence like this is a deeply**

**authentic way to help people steward the environments where they live.** It also allows for adaptation that accounts for the rich diversity across communities nationwide.

In no way am I advocating that methodologies and tools that hard and social sciences have to offer be left out of this evidence-building process. Rather, these methodologies and tools should be put in service to communities engaging in development of their own pathways forward to authentic human flourishing. Critical to the application of these methodologies and tools will be the trust of people in communities and the relationships to institutions designated to serve them. Trust is one of the most pressing adaptive challenges of our day.

Given how COVID-19 swept across the United States and world in 2020, we face an opportunity to rebuild a stronger social sector and healthier communities. So, establishing what trust looks like in communities is of paramount importance. We need to take care and be thoughtful in how we frame our steps and goals, and how we collect and build evidence.

In our journey, this means listening well, interrogating our own steps, and devoting enough time to get beyond a transactional relationship with communities and their members. It means being a partner because trust, by definition, is relational and characterized by vulnerability. It extends beyond individual agency by vesting or sharing your own ability to flourish with other people. It spotlights critical questions that Independent Sector and many in the social sector are asking to ensure we center equity on people at the margins of society.

The United States has so much important work before us. We have so much to gain to support our array of rich and vibrant communities and collective potential. We cannot ignore this question about evidence and how we build, disseminate, codify, apply, and accept it. We use evidence to disperse power and money. It can liberate, illuminate, and inspire. It also can stifle. Broadening our ideas around evidence can lead to making more of us in America whole people and restore some semblance of balance to the intersecting systems in which we live.

One unanswered part of this important calculus of equity and healthier communities for all remains—particularly for all types of leaders: Are you and your organization willing to build new evidence, analyze existing data in the context of a racial equity analysis and resilience, or consider the changing and relational nature of both, so everyone in the United States can thrive? Are you willing to ask new questions and accept new or overlooked

answers as evidence to make sense of it all? If so, how can we collaborate to support the common good for people in our communities? What new lessons are you learning? What are you seeing? If not, are you interested in a conversation about the role of evidence in life, the social sector, and making greater progress for everyone?