

what works policy brief

Getting to Results: Data-Driven Decision-Making for Children, Youth, Families and Communities

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What is Data-Driven Decision-Making?

How do policy makers know what works? How do they justify their choices and decisions? How do they balance among competing interests and priorities? Policy makers can help answer these questions by collecting, organizing and analyzing data from multiple sources. Data also provide a framework that brings people with diverse interests together, helping people to focus on *mutually desired results* for children, youth, families and communities.

Data can increase the quotient of rationality in planning, policy development and resource allocation decisions, whether at the program, agency or service system level. Data help people to understand their assets and problems and to create shared visions and hopes for the future. Using data, people from different perspectives can often find common ground, agreeing on the *results* they want to achieve, their priorities for action and the *indicators* that will demonstrate joint progress toward improving the well-being of the children, youth and families in their

communities. Data-driven decision-making processes can also help decision-makers *hold people accountable for the results* they want to achieve.

Why are Data so Important?

Shared information is the key to better results for children and youth. To improve the well-being of children, youth, families and communities, many people with different perspectives must be involved. Concerned organizations, disciplines and formal and informal groups such as neighborhood associations must focus their resources and energy on common purposes. Data become the collective language that enables them to work together toward these purposes.

Shared information helps people from different cultural, community and professional perspectives value and respect their differences while developing:

- joint appraisal of their community's strengths and problems;
- mutual understanding of what works for children and families in their communities;

Information for
Schools, Communities and
Government Working
Together to Improve the
Well Being of Children
And Families

Definitions of Terms

An outcome or desired result is a bottom-line condition of well-being for children, youth, families or communities. Some desired results may be achieved by the efforts of a single agency or program and the families it serves. Usually, however, the efforts of multiple programs and agencies, community groups and families are needed to achieve important outcomes or results. Examples include: children are born healthy, families are self-sufficient, and youth succeed in school.

Indicators are measurable elements, for which data is available, that help quantify achievement of desired results.

Performance measures track how well programs, agencies or service delivery systems are working.

Second in a
Four-Part
Series

2

Los Angeles County Children's Planning Council

The Los Angeles County Children's Planning Council was formed in 1991 by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. The Council has a mandated structure with representatives from major county agencies, cities, school districts, private and nonprofit associations concerned with children and families, business, and the geographic, youth and ethnic communities of Los Angeles County. Its chair rotates among the five members of the Board of Supervisors. As approved by the Board, the Council will concentrate its work in the years ahead on four major priorities:

- ensuring that the voice of the County's diverse communities is heard in decision-making affecting children, youth, and families;
- encouraging large public agencies to become more responsive to the needs of children, youth, and families through coordinated planning and service delivery;
- linking resource allocations and results achieved; and
- supporting action by community and regional groups to identify program priorities for children's services.

In Los Angeles County, the Children's Planning Council has provided a forum for public-private dialogue and action on children's issues for the past six years. A major governance reform itself, the Council has devoted much of its first efforts to establishing Service Planning Areas (SPAs) that divide the County — a nation-sized jurisdiction of more than 9.6 million residents — into eight planning areas for children's and family issues. All county agencies and several key private entities (such as United Way) have agreed to observe those boundaries. During the past two years, a SPA Council has been created in each area with a membership mirroring that of the Children's Planning Council. A countywide American Indian Children's Council has also been established. These councils now have their own staff and are hard at work developing area-wide plans to improve results for their children as well as regionalized responses to countywide programs such as family preservation, health insurance enrollment, domestic violence prevention, and early childhood development. The work of the SPA Councils and the Children's Planning Council has been aided greatly by a history of data-driven development of a strategic agenda for children that has included detailed children's budgets and a regularly issued score card on children's outcomes. Both these Council products have been national models cited in the work of the Finance Project and other organizations concerned with children's and family issues. These two governance reforms — the creation of the Children's Planning

continued on page 3

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- collective interests; and
- shared strategies and goals.

A continuing flow of strategic information about the wide array of education, health and social service programs available for families and children is essential both to policy-makers and to community residents. Data can help policy-makers assess equity of resources across geographic areas, track service utilization among different cultural, ethnic, racial and community groups and identify which agencies and departments are serving the same clients. Planners and policy-makers can also use data to track expenditures and measure the effectiveness and cost-efficiency of funded programs. Such information is also vital for community residents. Within the context of the history and roles of major service systems and their ever-changing laws, funding and management practices, residents can use data to hold agencies accountable for key *performance measures*.

Key Components of Data-Driven Decision-Making

Data can provide helpful tools — shining a light on key issues, challenges and accomplishments. Sometimes, though, the sheer amount of data available through current technology can be overwhelming, killing initiative, not sparking action. *The ideal is to present enough data to stimulate thinking, inform planning and focus action without burying people in mounds of data they don't know how to use or apply.*

A great deal of experimentation with new approaches to using data in broad-based planning and policy making for children and families is going on across the country. This Policy Brief draws primarily on the experiences of the *Los Angeles County Children's Planning Council* (LACPC). The following are components of the data-driven planning done by the LACPC. They reflect many lessons learned along the way.

What Works Policy Brief

1. *Begin with one or two high-priority, cross-cutting questions that can be answered by existing data.*

The first question raised in Los Angeles was: How much money is spent on services for families and children by the county, the cities, the schools and private agencies? Another question was: How many children are served by more than one county department? Other questions might include: How different are the needs in each community and the resources available to children and families in different communities in the county? How will demographic and economic trends affect the need for services? (See “Tools,” page 5.)

2. *Identify a core group of people from different backgrounds and perspectives to provide leadership in developing new data-based approaches to collaborative planning.* If possible, select co-convenors or co-facilitators who represent different perspectives (i.e., public and private sector, researcher and community leader, etc.). The leaders of the data committee should also model the key aspects of successful collaborative planning, including: helping participants to learn and develop skills over time; encouraging the involvement of others in an expanding circle; sharing credit and blame; and keeping the focus on children and families — not on organizational agendas.

3. *Be clear about purposes, but be flexible about methods.* The data committee’s jobs are to:

- determine the types of data needed;
- locate sources of available data;
- collect and analyze data; and
- make connections between findings and the actions needed to improve the well-being of children, youth, families and communities.

Methods will vary depending on local circumstances. Challenges abound. Available data and access to data sets will differ. Judgements about

the usefulness and accuracy of data will conflict. Sometimes data from different sources will be difficult to integrate. In too many cases, needed data do not exist. The committee can play a lead role in resolving these challenges, as well as making recommendations about establishing new or improved information systems.

4. *Reach out to a broad range of partners.* Include people with technical knowledge and experience from the public and private sector, university-based researchers, community representatives and others who understand the meaning and implications of the data. Assemble a group of people with geographic, cultural and disciplinary diversity. Keep the doors open, continually recruiting new members as tasks and responsibilities change.

5. *Include the people who have the data.* Identify key people in organizations that have access to databases. Respect their concerns regarding confidentiality by working with them (and the juvenile courts when necessary) to develop agreements about how data can be used for planning. Protect client confidentiality by reporting aggregate data — not data on specific identifiable individuals or families.

6. *Make a conscious effort to build relationships among data committee members.* Over the long term this will yield unexpected rewards. One of the key functions of the committee should be to build a network of people interested in using data for planning and decision-making who can learn from each other and work together.

7. *Translate findings for a non-technical audience.* Remember that most of the intended audience may not be comfortable using data or familiar with the jargon that often surrounds it. Provide access to data that has been analyzed, summarized and “translated” for non-researchers to assure that a broad array of elected officials, professionals and community representatives can participate.

Los Angeles, continued

Council and its decentralization to the SPA Councils in building community-level forums for addressing and monitoring progress on children’s issues — are exemplary in responding to the needs of an immense governmental entity.

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How do we Know Data-Driven Decision-Making Works?

The jury is still out on whether data-driven decision-making will lead to significant improvements in the lives of children and families, but there are some indications that strategic use of data do help groups to build consensus on the best directions for change, to prioritize among competing alternatives, and to focus discussion on the needs of children, rather than on organizational needs.

One of the measures used by the Los Angeles County Children's Planning Council (LACPC) to judge its success in building a consensus for change is the voting record of the county's Board of Supervisors on LACPC motions. Of 23 motions brought to the Board between June 1991 and December 1997, all but one was unanimously carried (the other motion was approved but not unanimously).

In the children's field, it is all too common that energies which should be focused on children are spent in turf protection and conflicts based on old organizational and disciplinary rivalries. Another measure that data can help was the LACPC's experience in developing recommendations to the Board of Supervisors for improving outcomes for children and families in Los Angeles. The 250 people who worked in five work groups to develop the recommendations used the Children's Score Card as a starting place for their discussions.

The data helped them to set aside some traditional rivalries, put aside organizational agendas, and listen to community residents about the most pressing priorities for action. The Board adopted their recommendations and a collaborative two-year implementation process is underway.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge yet undertaken by the LACPC was reaching agreement on a common set of sub county regional or SPA boundaries to be used for planning, information-sharing and data-gathering purposes by public and private funders. Data were key in reaching consensus on boundaries that had been debated for over 20 years. This was especially difficult because, although major county departments providing services for families and children have routinely divided the county into districts, each set was different both in number and in the boundaries used. Early consensus on some criteria helped the process. It was agreed that these boundaries should not divide natural or ethnic communities, should try to balance population sizes in each region, should not split census tracts, and should respect city limits, school districts, police jurisdictions and health districts where possible. Broad participation and hands-on work with population data, maps and the myriad of existing boundaries helped to offset the

continued on page 5

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8. *Focus on analysis useful to multiple audiences.* Data-driven decision-making requires not just that statistics are collected and reported, but that they are analyzed from multiple perspectives and important to many audiences. Trends and implications of the data must be communicated to planners and community members. Implications lead to policy choices, important to decision-makers. Findings relevant to improving service delivery should be communicated firmly to front-line practitioners.

9. *Take incremental steps towards building a system that can track results.* Seek broad agreement on desired results and the indicators that will be used to track progress. Focus on concerns shared by the whole community. Start with a few key indicators stated in understandable terms that are practical, results-oriented, and clearly important. Use indicators that reflect the impact of services on families and children, not on who used the services or how they were delivered. Improve the list over time based on feedback and experience.

10. *Even when the task is technical, pay attention to "politics."* The task of developing a workable system for tracking results of systems change is technically daunting, but even more challenging is the fact that it is also threatening to many established groups. **The processes used to define desired results, performance measures and indicators are as important as the measures selected.** The committee will need to develop understanding and buy-in from a broad range of participants by providing opportunities for informed discussion of underlying values and assumptions.

11. *Incorporate data-based thinking into key planning, implementation, budgeting and policy cycles.* Training in data-based planning and analysis will be needed by professionals working in governmental systems, as well as by community-based professionals and community

What Works Policy Brief

members. Over time, as people become more familiar with data tools and methods, efforts should be made to incorporate them into regular decision-making.

Data-Based Tools for Decision-Making

There are many tools for organizing and analyzing data and making it useful to multiple audiences. The LACPC has used the following tools.

1. *A data match* is an electronic matching of individual case files to determine the number of cases served by more than one service delivery organization. Confidentiality is protected by reporting aggregate community-wide numbers, percentages or rates rather than on individual cases.

The *Findings and Recommendations of Los Angeles County's First Data Match Project* (1995), based on matching of 1993 cases served by five major county departments, found that 1.3 million children, 49 percent of the county's child population, had received services during that year. Of these:

- 1.1 million children had been served by one department;
- 175,096 had been served by two departments;
- 11,732 had been served by three departments;
- 813 had been served by four departments; and
- 61 had been served by all five departments.

2. *Resource or asset mapping* uses geographic information systems to map locations of facilities providing services or supports for children, youth and families.

The *Profiles of Los Angeles County* (1996) mapped the locations of parks, libraries, museums, schools, government offices and other resources for children and families countywide in each of

the county's eight Service Planning Areas (SPAs). The profiles also included the perceptions of residents based on focus group discussions, surveys and interviews with key informants, as well as data on the geography, demographics, and key cultural groups and community-based organizations in each SPA.

3. *Children's budgets* provide analysis of annual state, county or municipal expenditures on programs targeted to children, youth and families. They identify expenditures on specific programs serving children and families, the organizations and departments responsible for administering programs, and the kinds of services provided.

In its first *Children's Budget* report, the Los Angeles Roundtable for Children reported that about one dollar in every three spent by the county government between 1980 and 1985 went to support about 90 programs for children and families run by 17 different departments. In subsequent years, the *Children's Budget* has accounted for between one-quarter and one-third of annual county expenditures. Adding these dollars to those spent by the county's 88 cities, 81 school districts and over 1,000 not-for-profit agencies helped make the case for establishing a single collaborative body with responsibility for overall planning for children — the LACPC.

4. *Projections or analyses of trends* assess change in key indicators over time. Analysts track past rates of change in order to make predictions about how conditions may change in the future. The 1999 *Los Angeles County Service Planning Area Databook* presents population, poverty and social service utilization estimates and projections through the year 2003 for each of the eight SPAs. These data were designed to support community-based planning by each of the community-based SPA Councils.

How do we Know, continued

political nature of the process. Now that agreement has been reached about a common set of SPA boundaries (although they can still be adjusted and fine-tuned), Los Angeles finally has a framework for cross-agency, cross-jurisdictional planning for children and families.

Compelling Data Match Information

- 1.3 million children, 49 percent of Los Angeles County's child population, received services during 1993;
- 1,100,000 children had been served by **one** department only;
- 175,096 had been served by **two** departments;
- 11,732 had been served by **three** departments;
- 813 had been served by **four** departments; and
- 61 had been served by all **five** departments.

For More Information

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5. *Children's score cards* present indicators of child, youth and family well-being, organized for a specific geographic area, in a simple format designed to direct public attention to improvements or decreases in child well-being. Score cards may focus on change over time in a specific community, or on comparison of conditions in neighboring communities, or both. Some are akin to report cards in that they also rate the performance of agencies charged with providing services for families and children.

The *Kids Count Data Book* issued annually by the Annie E. Casey Foundation contains data on a selected set of indicators for all 50 states, allowing for comparison of data across states. The Children Now report card issued annually provides statewide data on key indicators for California; it also provides data on each of the 58 California counties, allowing comparison across counties. The 1998 version of the Los Angeles County Children's Score Card, produced jointly by the LACPC and the Greater Los Angeles Area United Way, shows changes between 1993 and 1997 in 43 indicators grouped in five outcome areas. It also includes data for each of the eight SPAs, allowing comparison of conditions across regions of a very large and diverse county.

6. *Program evaluation* uses traditional social science research methods and data to track how programs are implemented and to determine their results for the children, youth and families who use the services.

For example, California's Healthy Start (SB 620) evaluation found that K-3 students in Healthy Start schools were making statistically significant gains in grades, and families were becoming better able to meet their basic needs and improve their access to health care. Program evaluations are more often conducted for new or demonstration programs, or on an exceptional basis, due to the costs of hiring research staff and implementing special data collection procedures.

What Works Policy Brief

For this and other reasons, some programs modify formal program evaluation and data collection methods to encourage program staff to improve or fine-tune services on an on-going basis.

7. *Program monitoring and quality assurance* typically track a limited number of *performance measures* to assure that programs processes are being followed and that service quality is consis-

tent. Schools, for example, track how many of their students graduate or dropout, their student/teacher ratio and their percent of certified teachers. If a school were to focus more on the output of its performance, it would track the percent of students who graduated on time, the percent that entered work or college after graduation, or the percent of 3rd graders reading at grade level. ■

Publications

Kids Count Data Book: State Profiles of Child Well-being. Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1998. (Available annually from 701 St. Paul Street, Baltimore, MD 21202.)

Defining the prize: From Agreed-upon Outcomes to Results-based Accountability. Falls Church, VA: National Center on Service Integration Clearinghouse. Charles Bruner 1997.

California County Data Book, Children Now, 1997.

A Strategy Map for Results-based Budgeting: Moving from Theory to Practice. Washington, D.C.: The Finance Project. Mark Friedman, 1996.

Laying the Groundwork for Change, Los Angeles County's First Action Plan for its Children, Youth and Families. Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles County Children's Planning Council, 1998.

Outcomes Measurement in the Human Services, Cross-cutting Issues and Methods. Washington D.C.: National Association of Social Workers. E. J. Mullen & J. L. Magnabosco (eds.), 1997.

Foundation Consortium's Publications

What Works Learning Community Documents:

Capturing Cash for Kids (1998) User-friendly workbook introduces reinvestment as a tool for funding comprehensive, integrated services for

children and families. It shows how preventing bad and costly outcomes for children and families can be used to capture cash for prevention programs. It includes how to build a reinvestment and four case studies.

Quality of Life Indicators for Children and Families (1998) Features 58 indicators available from public sources that can be used to measure progress toward the following results: children & families are healthy; children are ready for school; children & young people are succeeding in school; children are safe; families are stable & thriving; families are economically self-reliant; communities are supportive of children and families; communities are thriving. Each indicator is described clearly with implications noted, suggested formulas for calculations, sample data presentation and available detail analysis listed.

What Works, After School Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnerships Program (1998) A guide for designing and implementing strategies for effective after school programs under the provisions of the California After School Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnerships Program. This guide provides: an overview for developing after school programs with measurable, educational, and enrichment components; insights about leveraging resources; staffing considerations; training; and more.

Getting Started

How can policy makers begin to use data more effectively on behalf of children, youth, families and communities?

1. Identify two to three key questions that could influence your decisions and could be answered by using existing data.
2. Identify leaders and develop a diverse data committee that will begin collecting, organizing and analyzing data. Include people from key organizations that "own" the data.
3. Ensure that findings are stated clearly. Encourage honest debate and discussion of the findings and their implications. Everyone should feel comfortable that they have found the best possible answers to their questions.
4. Base the next set of activities on the information generated. Use an iterative process to frame the next set of questions. Despite challenges, keep on going.



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The Foundation Consortium is a change-agent promoting the **Community** approach: schools, communities and government working together to improve child and family well-being. Eight corporate, private, community and family foundations, diverse in scope and purpose formed an alliance in 1991 to establish the Foundation Consortium. Now fourteen in number, Consortium members are united by a shared vision, the **Community** approach, which promotes cooperation across organizations, embracing the key principles of family involvement, community partnership and shared accountability for results. It includes programs that foster health and self-sufficiency by devoting resources to family supports and core services rather than acute care and crisis intervention and by focusing on the strengths and needs of children, family and communities rather than isolated issues.



Data-based Decision-making Starts Young

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What Works Policy Brief

Information for schools, communities and government working together to improve the well being of children and families.