Evaluating Comprehensive Community Change

Report of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's
March 1997 Research and Evaluation Conference

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Conference Overview

The life circumstances of our poorest families are so dire, the fabric of their neighborhoods so frail, and the strands of their varied problems so tangled, that we must think more comprehensively than the reform of individual systems.... It is clear that we need to do more than just refine evaluation. We need to reconceptualize it.

—Tony Cipollone, Annie E. Casey Foundation

Researchers and evaluators, funders, community representatives, and other stakeholders in comprehensive community initiatives took on the challenge of refining and reconceptualizing evaluation at the Annie E. Casey Foundation's third evaluation conference, held in Baltimore in March 1997. For two days, participants shared ideas, identified obstacles, explored solutions, and debated the merits of various strategies. The goals of the conference were to: (1) provide a forum for discussion among researchers and evaluators involved in assessing programs, practices, and policies designed to strengthen children, families, and communities; (2) shape this discussion around current and emerging themes in evaluating comprehensive community change; and (3) build on the themes explored during the Foundation's two previous conferences, which focused on comprehensive system reform and using evaluation results to create change and influence public policies.

Context for the Conference

The topic of the 1997 conference, evaluating comprehensive community initiatives, represented a four-year evolution in the Foundation's approach to improving outcomes for children and its understanding of how to change public systems. Initially, the Foundation focused on improving outcomes through the "comprehensive, durable, and radical reform" of traditional systems for serving children and families, noted Foundation Director Tony Cipollone. This approach viewed existing service systems as fragmented, categorical, and inaccessible. It motivated the Foundation to create initiatives for reforming specific service systems, including:

- The Family to Family Initiative, which helps states and communities jointly develop effective, responsive policies and practices for foster care
- The Plain Talk Initiative, which helps communities combat teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases through education and improved access to health care
- The Urban Children's Mental Health Initiative, which supports state and community collaborations to make mental health services more preventive, neighborhood-based, relevant, and culturally sensitive

Although system reform remains a central theme of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's work, the Foundation realized that simply changing a single system will not improve the whole array of important child outcomes. Real improvement requires an infrastructure and environment that can drive and support change in multiple systems simultaneously. The Foundation developed several "place-based initiatives" to meet this challenge. These grants required recipients—including the state governments of Iowa, Illinois, Nebraska, Vermont, and Missouri and the city governments of Indianapolis and Richmond (Va.)—to fundamentally alter public service systems and build new infrastructures. The sites collected and used data to drive policy decisions, developed cross-agency strategies to fill gaps in services, formed partnerships with communities and neighborhoods that shifted more resources and authority to local decision makers, and used outcomes to drive budgets and establish accountability.

Despite their successes, these experiences taught the Foundation that even the best system-reform efforts may not be able to change outcomes for families living in the most distressed neighborhoods—those with multiple risk factors such as poverty, single female-headed households, high rates of school dropout, unemployment, limited or nonexistent support services, declining community resources, and reliance on public assistance. In these locations, efforts to improve child outcomes must target social and economic strategies for the entire community. The Foundation has pursued community-level change with the Rebuilding Communities Initiative, which is attempting to revamp and revitalize neighborhoods in Denver, Philadelphia, Boston, Detroit, and Washington DC.

The Foundation's current approach builds on the lessons and experiences of earlier initiatives in several ways. It retains the mission of improving life outcomes for large numbers of disadvantaged children and families, recommits the Foundation to the importance of supporting and sustaining strong families as a means for improving child outcomes, and embraces the idea that community development and transformation play a central role in supporting fragile families. The Foundation is acting on these commitments in two concrete ways: (1) by concentrating investments and supports in selected demonstration communities that will show that comprehensive community change can occur; and (2) by building public awareness about challenges and solutions in distressed families and communities, with the ultimate goal of increasing the public's willingness to support, contribute to, and demand better outcomes for children and families.

The 1997 conference was designed to stimulate and contribute to discussions about some of the key factors needed to support the Foundation's current efforts. According to Cipollone, these factors include:

- Rigorous evaluation systems
- Better processes for engaging community members in changes
- Better incentives for cities, counties, and states to commit to change

- Diverse public and private partners willing to make long-term investments in reforms
- Strong assistance networks
- Clear descriptions of goals
- Compelling messages that can move people from awareness to action

Cross-cutting Themes of the Conference

The conference covered many aspects of evaluating comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs), from methodology and outcomes to issues involving causality, cultural relevance, and the relationship between research, policy, and practice. Across the many topics raised in breakout discussions, plenary sessions, and featured speeches, the following common themes emerged:

1. **Evaluation is an evolving process, not a static, one-time action with a clear beginning and end**. The research goals and methods of an effective evaluation can change in response to refinements in the target outcomes and strategies of a comprehensive community initiative.

2. **Useful evaluations of comprehensive community initiatives use a variety of approaches** to collect and analyze data from many sources and to disseminate findings to diverse audiences, including practitioners, community members, funders, policy makers, and other researchers.

3. **Effective evaluations do more than collect and analyze data;** they also make it possible for community stakeholders to use the information to continuously improve programs and policies.

4. **Opportunities for learning about comprehensive community initiatives can be improved** by strengthening collaboration and building relationships between researchers and community stakeholders, by engaging stakeholders and building their capacity to participate in the evaluation process, and by incorporating knowledge about how communities and people change from a variety of research fields.

5. **Critical design issues must be addressed and resolved.** These issues include: (1) ensuring that evaluations understand the assumptions and philosophies underlying CCI strategies; (2) controlling for complex variables; (3) defining key interim and long-term outcomes that are recognized throughout CCI research, practice, and policy making; (4) developing reliable and appropriate indicators of change in the policies and practices of public systems, as well as indicators of whether those changes are compatible with desired outcomes for families and communities; (5) refining and improving measurement tools and methodologies for assessing change; (6) embedding evaluations in reform efforts; and (7) building the capacity of individuals who are involved in comprehensive community change and decision making to participate in the evaluation process.

6. **Evaluators must reconcile the competing expectations of various CCI stakeholders** without letting them dilute or excessively complicate evaluations. These differing purposes cannot be

accommodated unless researchers and evaluators clarify what CCIs are trying to accomplish and make evaluation more useful to multiple stakeholders.

7. **Evaluations must balance the compelling stories of unique, local experiences with a broader discussion of universal principles** if they are going to produce information that people can use to take action and to inform policy making.

This summary of the conference presents the discussion of these themes and other relevant issues. Section I, *Strengthening Evaluations by Clarifying Goals and Outcomes*, raises questions about the goals and expectations of CCIs and the meaning of community that are fundamental to clear, effective studies. Section II, *Central Issues in Conducting Convincing and Useful Evaluations of Comprehensive Community Initiatives*, describes concerns about study design and methodology; data collection and management; and the interpretation, presentation, and use of results. Section III, *Where Do We Go From Here?*, concludes the summary with participants' suggested next steps for improving evaluations of comprehensive community initiatives. Appendices contain the conference agenda and a list of participants.

I. Strengthening Evaluations by Clarifying Goals and Outcomes

Strong research studies and evaluations have clear goals and outcomes. Evaluators who want their work to help comprehensive community initiatives, their funders, and the children and families they serve must first clearly understand what these unique improvement efforts are trying to do. This means asking hard questions about what comprehensive community initiatives can and should accomplish, which outcomes can realistically be expected, and how contextual factors, including culture, influence decisions about target populations, service strategies, and goals.

Questions about CCIs' objectives and expectations are central to the goal of improving research and evaluation because the answers shape study design and methodology, data collection, and strategies for interpreting, presenting, and using data. As keynote speaker Claudia Coulton observed, CCIs can be viewed either as vehicles for changing the lives of individuals or as agents for community-level change:

- Initiatives that seek to improve outcomes for children and families by boosting their economic status, building parenting skills, enhancing child development, or providing other targeted services are concerned with individual change. This approach has generated widespread support for CCIs because it assumes that the initiatives can fix urban problems such as joblessness, school failure, and family disintegration.

- Initiatives that focus on improving governance, garnering resources, initiating progressive policies, and increasing local participation in civic affairs are concerned with changing outcomes at the community level. In this approach, a comprehensive community initiative's goal is to help establish structures and relationships that improve the community's networks, identity, human capital, and climate for child- and family-oriented services.

Change often operates in both directions—people change communities and communities change people—making it difficult to fully understand the relationship between the two. CCIs and their evaluators need to clarify the connection because it affects which outcomes are measured, what lessons that can be gleaned from evaluation, and how people use findings to refine goals and strategies. As Coulton observed, understanding the connection between individual and community change means asking questions that link goals and outcomes, such as: "Just how is it that strengthening of community networks and institutions can support residents' efforts related to employment, and just how can these efforts actually lead to earnings, and just how can the community create a climate in which these earnings lead to value for children and local institutions?" Making these links, and translating them into useful guidelines for evaluation and practice, will require new partnerships between evaluators and practitioners.

Evaluations of comprehensive community initiatives need clear definitions of "community" to measure outcomes realistically. The geographic areas that represent community in an evaluation should reflect the same areas targeted by the initiative, the boundaries that residents consider meaningful, and the areas that truly define residents' experiences.

CCIs vary considerably in their target areas. Some focus on small units of geography that have the quality of real neighborhoods or communities.... However, many CCIs target rather large areas that undoubtedly contain many niches. If community change is to be captured in an evaluation, these niches... must be identified so that concepts can be correctly measured.

Claudia Coulton

The definitions that evaluators use should be consistent enough to support common findings across research, especially when the topic is community or institutional change. Unfortunately, important concepts like empowerment, human capital, governance, community identity, and collaboration frequently have different meanings for different evaluators. Definitions of community also should go beyond residents' race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status to capture neighborhood quality, cohesiveness, and other characteristics at communal and institutional levels, Coulton urged.

Definitions of target community, desired outcomes, and strategies for meeting goals all are influenced by the local context in which an initiative operates. One of the most pervasive influences is the culture or cultures of people who participate in the initiative. Cultural beliefs and experiences—especially those reinforced through education and training—also affect the ways that evaluators view reality, communicate with CCIs and community members, and present their findings.

An evaluator has "cultural competence" when he or she is aware of and understands the beliefs and experiences that help a group of people define their reality, suggested Mario Hernandez, evaluator of the Urban Children's Mental Health Initiative in Florida. Becoming culturally competent means learning about a community and understanding it, realizing that culture influences the way one approaches and examines a community, and recognizing the role that an evaluator's own cultural background plays in his or her choices about research methods and interpretations. Hernandez said that any evaluator can develop the capacity to understand cultural factors, although fellow presenter Marcela Gutierrez-Mayka described cultural competence instead as an attitude that a person either has or lacks. While professionals working in mental health, child welfare, and juvenile justice often receive training in cultural competence, many evaluators of CCIs do not.

Finally, several participants urged evaluators to be realistic about what comprehensive community initiatives and their evaluations can accomplish. Both should explore not only outcomes but also the fundamental processes through which communities affect people.

II. Central Issues in Conducting Convincing and Useful Evaluations of Comprehensive Community Initiatives

Unlike most traditional interventions, comprehensive community initiatives are very complex. They operate within and across many sectors of society, from local congregations to large public agencies, and they seek changes at many levels: for individuals and families, communities, organizations, and service systems. The strategies these initiatives use, and the goals they pursue, often are flexible and evolving. Comprehensive community initiatives support both broad outcomes that affect general populations and subtler changes designed to build local capability for leadership and decision making. Finally, CCIs operate within social, economic, and cultural contexts that they cannot control, and these environments directly influence the initiatives' accomplishments.

Together, these characteristics raise special issues for evaluators of comprehensive community initiatives. The major areas of concern include study design and methodology; data collection and management; and the process of interpreting, presenting, and using results to improve programs and policies.

Concerns about Study Design and Methodology

Key issues in designing meaningful, appropriate evaluations include:

- Ensuring that the evaluation comprehends the context, assumptions, and philosophies behind intervention strategies
- Controlling for complex variables
- Defining important interim and long-term outcomes
- Developing reliable and appropriate indicators of change in the policies and practices of public systems
- Refining and improving measurement tools and methods for assessing change
- Embedding evaluations in reform efforts
- Building the capacity of CCI stakeholders to participate in the evaluation process

Understanding the Context, Assumptions, and Philosophies Behind a CCI's Intervention Strategies

All of a community initiative's choices—regarding its mission, intervention strategies and practices, policies, use of resources, outreach efforts, and staffing—are guided to some extent by the context in which the CCI operates and by philosophies or assumptions about the best way to respond to that context. Key contextual factors may include the availability or lack of local resources; reform movements within major public systems, such as education or health care; unique local needs, such as high rates of unemployment or families receiving public assistance; and local cultures.

Just as the local environment influences a CCI's community perspective, goals, and outcomes, context—especially cultural beliefs—also affects how evaluators define both outcomes and observations, what they perceive as important, and what they believe is happening or failing to happen in an intervention, Hernandez said. The cultural expectations of a CCI or of an evaluator may dictate the methodology an evaluator uses to study the initiative's effect, which in turn can affect the types of data he or she collects. Evaluators trained to value only quantitative data collection and analysis, for instance, often are culturally biased against studies that use qualitative methods, such as focus groups.

One strategy for discovering a CCI's underlying philosophy is called a theories of change approach. This is not the only appropriate approach, and evaluators are still debating its role and significance. However, the model was widely discussed throughout the conference.

The theories of change approach is "a systemic and cumulative study of the links between activities, outcomes, and contexts of [an] initiative," according to plenary speaker Anne Kubisch. This approach assumes that key stakeholders in a program or initiative—the program designers, staff, funders, and community residents—have a "theory" or explanation of how and why the activities in an initiative will achieve specific short-, interim, and long-term outcomes.

What Makes a Theory of Change Useful For Evaluation Purposes?

- *It is plausible.* Do evidence and common sense suggest that the activities, if implemented, will lead to desired outcomes?
- *It is doable.* Will the necessary resources be available to carry out the initiative?
- *It is testable.* Is the theory of change specific and complete enough for an evaluator to track its progress in credible and useful ways?

—Anne Kubisch

The theories of change approach is intended to help evaluators identify and make explicit an initiative's intended outcomes and strategies for reaching them. These theories help determine which outcomes will be measured and when and how they will be measured. The approach also takes into account the context in which an initiative operates.

Proponents of the model say it unites CCI stakeholders and evaluators in jointly defining long-term desired outcomes, identifying the short-term outcomes and conditions needed to produce those results, figuring out the supports and activities needed to achieve the short-term outcomes, and identifying and obtaining the resources needed to implement chosen activities.

Although the theories of change approach has attracted considerable attention recently, evaluators do not universally accept it as the best model for evaluating comprehensive community initiatives. Evaluator Robert Granger dismissed it as “old wine in new bottles,” noting that the concept has been used implicitly, if not under its current label, for many years. He also cautioned that an important goal of evaluation is to produce information that can be generalized across sites—a process that cannot occur if an evaluation simply summarizes an individual community initiative’s unique theories and effects. Proponent Anne Kubisch conceded that the approach’s requirement that stakeholders and evaluators identify, prioritize, and measure key activities in advance—rather than in retrospect—does present “a challenge.” However, Kubisch, James Connell, and other advocates argued that the approach offers one of the few practical ways to measure the very complex effects of CCIs, which, as one evaluator said, are “not just changing links along the causal chain but attempting to change the contextual parameters in which those links that we’ve been trying to study occur.” The model also promotes a collaborative relationship between evaluators and community initiatives that most evaluators agree is beneficial.

The theory of change model may be best suited to answer evaluation questions that have the following goals, concluded Howard Bloom, co-principal investigator for the Jobs Plus initiative:

> *You have to bring some structure to [evaluation]. But... to come in with absolutely everything pre-ordained... is equally problematic. A lot of the importance of the theory of change [approach] is it focuses people’s attention and it gives them a vocabulary.*
>
> —Howard Bloom

- Describing the fundamental nature of the problem being addressed
- Designing an intervention with activities that are likely to produce short-term and ultimate outcomes
- Mobilizing public support for an intervention and its goals
- Documenting implementation of a change process in a systematic, organized way; tracking, guiding, and describing who did what to whom and with what consequence
- Determining an initiative’s impact, using multiple methods for measuring change that are united by a common framework or research strategy

Controlling for Complex Variables

Comprehensive community initiatives address diverse needs and encompass a variety of stakeholders, cultures, and resources, some of which have competing expectations. CCIs also produce changes that are hard to capture, such as the development of human capital. This complexity means that many factors contribute to a CCI's effect, including some variables that are unintended and, perhaps, invisible.

Evaluators of comprehensive community initiatives face the following challenges in controlling for variables:

> *My efforts to isolate specific elements of the intervention sometimes seem sterile and futile next to the complex, intricate, dynamic, and subtle occurrences that are revealed by observations and interviews within the CCI communities.... One wonders, if a person had made a different choice or if an organization had responded differently, would change have followed a different pathway?*
>
> —Claudia Coulton

- **A single evaluation must measure change across many systems and at many levels of impact:** on children, families, communities, practices, processes, and service systems. Ideally, an evaluation design provides a framework for recognizing the differences in variables among levels and for distinguishing between the variables' effects at each level. However, the breadth of goals and, consequently, variables in comprehensive community initiatives can make the scope of an evaluation extremely broad.

- **A healthy community initiative has strong interrelationships among institutions, and evaluations should focus on these connections—a focus that may be at odds with efforts to isolate variables.** For example, individual components of system reform, such as good professional development or site-based decision making in schools, empower stakeholders to take on new roles and relationships within the system. In doing so, they change the system itself. Therefore, evaluators cannot simply ask whether changing one component of a system is a good idea, holding all other variables constant, observed Tony Bryk, director of the Center for School Improvement at the University of Chicago. If the new component works, "all other things are not constant," Bryk said.

- **Comprehensive community initiatives typically evolve during the course of an evaluation in response to contextual factors, including the evaluation itself.** As Bryk noted, "The enterprise you're engaged with is changing as you move along, and... if your research is of any quality, of any utility, you're contributing to that change."

For other issues involved in determining the effect of specific variables, please see the summary of discussions on establishing causality, beginning on page 21.

Defining Important Interim and Long-term Outcomes

Evaluators cannot accurately measure a program's impact without first defining its most important outcomes and the indicators of success for each outcome. As Cipollone noted at the start of the conference, CCI evaluators must define several types of outcomes and indicators, including: (1) results for children that will enable them to lead productive lives as adults; (2) critical dimensions of family well-being, especially those that demonstrate stability and nurturance; and (3) indicators that show whether a community has developed the ability to provide supports and resources families need to successfully raise their children. Conference participants raised the following additional issues:

Definition of Terms

Outcomes are the effects caused by an initiative's activities and strategies. For the sake of simplicity, this summary uses "outcomes" and "results" interchangeably.

Indicators are specific, measurable manifestations of an outcome.

Measures are the instruments used to collect data on indicators and outcomes.

To provide a full view of comprehensive change, evaluations should measure progress toward desired outcomes and the achievement of short-term or interim goals in addition to long-term goals. Evaluation, like community change, is a continuous process. Real improvements in the lives of children, families, and communities usually do not happen quickly; they require many incremental achievements which, together, form a pattern of progress toward a long-term goal. Although evaluators do want to know whether long-term goals ultimately are achieved, they also can learn valuable information about programs, policies, and practices by measuring interim goals and assessing progress.

It is much easier to define long-term outcomes and early implementation activities than it is to define interim or long-term activities and link them to long-term outcomes. Long-term outcomes typically are so broad that they are uncontroversial; for example, building a sense of community may be a desired long-term outcome. But the current research base offers little evidence on specific long-term activities that will lead to this type of outcome and other results, especially those that involve capacity building and economic development, Kubisch said. Part of the problem is that most CCIs have not existed long enough to have achieved interim or long-term outcomes.

Measuring interim outcomes and progress allows evaluations to capture changes in goals and standards that individual programs and systems participating in a community initiative make during the course of the evaluation. Viewing evaluation as a way to measure change at many transition points, rather than only at the end of an initiative, enables evaluators to adjust the outcomes they are measuring appropriately.

> *Evaluation... is a process to detect gradual improvements and outcomes and attribute them to intentional actions. It is not a once and for all event. [Evaluation] as a process means that you have set certain outcomes... But those outcomes and those standards of performance prevail only to the point that the system is transformed.*
>
> —Lynn Usher

Although most evaluators agree that outcomes should be measured at various stages, there are no guidelines for deciding how long to let an outcome develop before trying to measure it—especially when the outcome in question is a complex interaction occurring within a complex context. This issue exemplifies some of the differing assumptions held by stakeholders and evaluators. Communities may see changes as gradual and long term, while evaluators want to make judgements about change every few years, observed Coulton. This dilemma raises the question, Are evaluations concerned only with big effects or also with smaller, more gradual changes? The answer has implications for the activities that a community initiative chooses to pursue. As evaluator James Connell asked, if early outcomes do not indicate large effects, should the activities—or even the initiative itself—continue?

The time at which an outcome is measured also affects the level of data that an evaluation collects. For example, in some strands of a community initiative, such as human services, the individual-level changes that determine the success of an intervention tend to be long-term outcomes, such as improved mental health or reduced instances of neglect. Changes that occur at the community level, such as accessibility of services, more often are short-term or interim effects, noted Cindy Guy of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Measuring change at multiple stages of an intervention may prevent evaluators from erroneously assuming that long-term community-level outcomes are equivalent to aggregated, short-term individual outcomes.

Conflicting assumptions held by diverse stakeholders—which often operate simultaneously within a single community initiative—can make it difficult to agree on which outcomes to measure. The act of specifying which steps will lead to long-term changes is a politically charged process because of its implications for resource allocation and for decision-making authority, Kubisch observed.

Developing Reliable and Appropriate Indicators of Change in the Policies and Practices of Public Systems

In addition to measuring the child, family, and community outcomes described above, evaluators of comprehensive community initiatives also need accurate tools for learning whether public policies and practices are changing in ways that strengthen families and neighborhoods. Indicators of change in public systems grow from ideas about what a particular reform is supposed to achieve. In other words, if the systems have improved, what should the policies and practices be accomplishing?

For example, a longitudinal case study of reform in elementary schools described by Bryk hypothesized that the transformed school system should expand the participation of parents, community members, and teachers in major organizational changes in schools. Indicators of change in this public system might include:

- Evidence that the school is reaching out in more productive ways to engage parents and community members by strengthening ties between the schools and other organizations and establishing programs that improve stakeholders' access to the education system

- Activities that build professionals' capacity, including commitments to professional development, signs of an emerging school-based professional community in which teachers work productively together, and commitments to improving instruction

- Evidence that teachers are personally engaged in helping students learn

Refining and Improving Measurement Tools and Methods for Assessing Change

As the issues highlighted above illustrate, current comprehensive community initiatives require measurement (1) across multiple systems and at multiple levels, (2) over long periods of time, (3) of outcomes that are hard to capture, and (4) with user-friendly tools that make sense to CCI stakeholders and local decision makers as well as professional evaluators. To meet these needs, evaluators will need to refine and improve their tools and methods for measuring change.

Types of Measures for CCI Outcomes

- **Surveys** of individuals or groups, administered in person, by telephone, on paper, or through electronic means
- **Administrative data** collected by participating agencies—the information regularly and consistently collected in support of an organization's function and stored within that organization's information system
- **Qualitative assessments**, including structured, semi-structured, and open-ended interviews and observations of participants and/or collaborators

Many of the same issues involved in clarifying an evaluation's goals resurface when evaluators try to refine their measures of change. According to conference participants, measures should be based on agreed-upon definitions and indicators for concepts such as empowerment, human capital, governance, community identity, opportunity structure, and collaboration. They should be cast in terms of positive outcomes, not just deficits, so the resulting data accurately reflect the community's experience. They should approach measurement from a variety of perspectives, capturing the full story by using what Bryk referred to as "a very eclectic and flexible" set of methods and approaches. And they should capture real effects and differences at the communal and institutional levels.

The complex nature of community initiatives makes it difficult to select solid measurement tools. Measures of community attributes and institutional change are more elusive than measures of such straightforward outcomes as improvements in employment rates. Furthermore, the "treatments" that evaluators must measure actually are sets of activities that occur in clusters, each of which is shaped by the outcomes of earlier activities, Kubisch said. She outlined two measurement issues in particular which, although they were presented within the theories of change approach, are also relevant to other evaluation methods:

- **First, it is as important to measure a comprehensive community initiative's activities as it is to measure its outcomes.** Some activities create the conditions or capacities necessary for achieving goals, in which case their own outcomes can serve as indicators of readiness to continue with additional activities. Evaluator Berle Driscoll reinforced this view when she noted that practitioners in the field often do not speak about immediate- short-term, and long-term outcomes but refer instead to long-term results and immediate "system elements" or activities needed to achieve them.

- **Second, what threshold of change will CCI evaluators and stakeholders consider "good enough"?** A clear understanding of this measure is especially important when evaluators do not compare the changes produced by a community initiative with circumstances at a control site to determine whether the changes are statistically significant.

The Aspen Institute's Evaluation Steering Committee is developing an interactive, electronic database of outcomes, indicators, and measures of change in comprehensive community initiatives, which may help evaluators and CCI planners address some of these measurement issues. The database allows users to select the areas and levels of impact—individual, family, institutional, or community—for which they want to review outcomes and indicators. Outcome areas include community building, economic development, education reform, housing and physical conditions, security, and service reform. Users will be able to view indicators that define each outcome; each indicator will be linked to four types of measures, including surveys, administrative data, qualitative assessments, and other assessments. A profile of each measure will describe its origin, method of data collection, practicality, validity, and reliability, according to steering committee director Karen Fulbright-Anderson.

Embedding Evaluations in Reform Efforts

Lodging an evaluation within a larger reform helps evaluators include the voices of many stakeholders, forge links among change efforts, and share findings with policy makers. However, embedding a CCI evaluation within broader reforms also creates special challenges. The evaluator of Chicago's school system, for example, described his use of a community consortium to channel research findings to local policy makers and to elicit feedback from these key audiences. The consortium's steering committee includes university-based researchers and members of advocacy groups, community-based organizations, professional associations for educators and school councils, foundations, businesses, and the media. The research agenda provides a disciplined, coherent "intellectual anchor" for the consortium's discussions and decision making about school system improvement. As a result, the researchers and community representatives together are reframing both the overall reform and the organizational framework for the research. At the same time, however, conflicting views among members of the consortium sometimes place the evaluation on "very murky terrain," the evaluator acknowledged.

Tips for Effectively Embedding Research and Evaluation in Reform Efforts

- Maintain an extensive commitment to engaging diverse stakeholders throughout the research or evaluation
- Use multiple, flexible methods and approaches to collecting and analyzing data
- Establish a comprehensive data archive about the neighborhoods, initiatives, and systems being studied that can meet the information needs of various decision makers
- Make a strong commitment to publicizing the goals and findings of the study, to make sure local decision makers know what evaluators are learning, to engage stakeholders in the research process, and to begin conversations about how the reform can respond to research results
- Produce non-partisan reports on your research or evaluation that give local policy makers the tools they need to take action

Building the Capacity of Stakeholders to Participate in the Evaluation Process

Relationships among CCI stakeholders—including community organizations, residents, funders, and technical assistance providers—and between stakeholders and evaluators influence the process and outcomes of evaluations. Involving stakeholders in evaluation has several benefits, according to Stan Schneider, evaluator of the Savannah-Chatham Youth Futures Authority initiative:

> *I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves, and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them but to inform their discretion.*
> —Thomas Jefferson, quoted by Terri Bailey

- It gives participants an opportunity to enhance their communication skills and make a connection between learning and real life
- It increases interaction and communication with stakeholders around problem solving with the goal of creating social changes
- It can improve survey response rates and generate more thoughtful responses from participants who know that their peers are involved in the research
- It provides valuable perspectives on how the people most affected by an initiative view their environment and the successes and shortcomings of the initiative
- In some cases, it introduces CCI participants to career opportunities and lets them earn compensation for helping the researchers

However, many relationships between evaluators and community stakeholders fail to build local capacity because they are not specific enough to allow credible measurement and they cannot be implemented with available resources, Connell said. Some of these relationships focus on capacity building and collaboration as an end in itself, which ultimately leaves CCIs stuck without a direction in which to invest their newly developed skills. Other relationships give communities flexibility in exchange for accountability without building the knowledge and leadership needed to take effective actions. Still other relationships involve repeated negotiations about what community initiatives should do but fail to provide any blueprint for achieving outcomes. Instead, stakeholders should be considered both investors in community initiatives and potential beneficiaries of them, with the right to protect their investments and responsibilities for ensuring positive outcomes, Connell said. He suggested that involving stakeholders in evaluations can increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for children and families because stakeholders who help design and maintain their own theories of change are more likely to create and sustain the sense of "urgency, possibility, and inexorability" needed for a successful community initiative.

Most participants, regardless of their acceptance of the theories of change approach, agreed that evaluations benefit from the involvement of stakeholders. Major issues involved in helping communities participate in evaluation include:

Setting realistic expectations for what capacity-building efforts will accomplish. Involving stakeholders in evaluations is not going to wipe out poverty, but it may help communities begin to take care of themselves, cautioned one researcher.

Building credibility and acceptance of capacity-building efforts within communities. Neighborhood residents and agencies often distrust researchers and doubt that they are qualified to make decisions about local capacities. Evaluators can only overcome this resistance by investing time and effort in building personal relationships in the community *before* the evaluation begins, by demonstrating long-term commitment to community collaboration, and by showing a genuine interest in studying the issues that community members consider important.

> *[Community relationships] are two-way streets.... Not only do relationships give you a platform to go into communities to say, "I've got this great idea," it gives the people in communities a platform to come to you and say, "I've got this great idea."*
>
> —Terri Bailey

Institutionalizing the increased capacity so changes last beyond the evaluation or grant funding. Capacity-building efforts that develop the skills of only a few residents are vulnerable to setbacks as these people move on to higher-paying jobs, taking their increased capacity with them. Ideally, evaluators should involve a core group of residents in research and continuously expand the number of local participants to include a broad base. Evaluators also can involve community members or agencies in writing training guides that provide continuity.

Recognizing cultural competence and its impact on community engagement in research. According to Gutierrez-Mayka, culturally competent efforts to engage community partners in research and intervention begin by having researchers develop a knowledge of the community that includes not only socio-demographic figures but also the community's values, politics, and history. "When we recognize that we really don't know [everything about a community], we go in with an attitude that there's a possibility of learning," Gutierrez-Mayka said. "[We] allow... the community to teach us." Culturally competent methods for promoting partnerships between evaluators and residents of targeted communities include asking non-evaluators at the local site to help define the domains of study and select appropriate methods of measurement, Hernandez added.

Building local capacity for using and disseminating data.[1] Evaluation data collected through research and evaluation can help build capacity in neighborhoods when it indicates local strengths that can be developed and areas in need of intervention. Data also are a tool that residents can use to advocate for their own needs. Participants described the following examples evaluations that engaged, developed, and retained stakeholders as research partners:

- An evaluation of the Plan Talk initiative engaged communities in Hartford, Connecticut in using data for planning and management. According to presenter Tony Hall, the project involved residents in community mapping—creating geographic maps that identify the characteristics of the community, including resources, assets, deficits, and needs, with the goal of better connecting resources with solutions. With help from the professional researchers, the residents located data from the U.S. Census, schools, and other public sources; collected their own information through surveys and negotiated with agencies to release additional data; purchased a computer and mapping software; developed a database; and learned how to convert the data into compelling graphics. They created maps showing service gaps and duplication in areas of high need and used the maps to mobilize community action and negotiate for better services.

- Nurses working in the Oakland public schools developed self-determination skills and improved their program through an empowerment evaluation—a self-evaluation coached by a professional evaluator. According to evaluator David Fetterman, empowerment evaluation involves: (1) training community organizations in basic evaluation techniques; (2) facilitating the self-evaluation as needed; (3) building the data analysis skills that enable people to effectively advocate for themselves; (4) helping communities think about

> *...[E]mpowerment evaluation is not what an evaluator does to someone. Is barely is what an evaluator does with somebody. It really is the group doing the self-evaluation in which the...professional evaluator is the coach or facilitator all the way through....*
>
> — David Fetterman

[1]Issues of data collection and use that are not specifically related to capacity building are discussed later in this summary.

what they want to accomplish, a process Fetterman calls “illumination”; and (5) and empowering stakeholders to “liberate” themselves by renegotiating their own roles and circumstances.

When the Oakland nurses began working with Fetterman, they were frustrated by school policies that limited their roles, wasting their talents and making them dispensable. Through self-evaluation, the nurses realized they wanted to play a role in collecting health data, such as patterns in asthma rates and HIV infection. The attention to data gave the school health program a sharper focus that satisfied the nurses and appealed to the school superintendents.

- The Rebuilding Communities Initiative (RCI) involved communities in designing, conducting, and using data from a Neighborhood Residents Survey. The survey, one of four components of the RCI evaluation, measured neighborhood climate, including its identity, quality, mobility and stability, employment opportunities, political civic interaction, racial harmony, fear of victimization, uncivil or “nuisance” behavior, service availability and quality, and community involvement. Community members helped identify meaningful outcomes and indicators for measuring progress. Residents now are using the data to refine and expand their strategic plans.

> *The survey really challenged our perceptions of our neighborhood.... We learned that people are not necessarily as disempowered as we think that they are but that there’s a gap... between people’s perception of an opportunity to influence a system and their ability to take action—and their willingness to take action.*
>
> —Wanda Mial, project director
> Germantown Settlement

- A partnership between evaluators and participants in the Family to Family Initiative developed self-evaluation teams to assess progress toward outcomes, with the goal of sustaining the community’s evaluation abilities beyond the life of the funded initiative. Professional evaluators worked with city and state child welfare agencies to acquire local staff with data analysis capabilities, transform event-oriented child welfare records into longitudinal data, and develop generic reporting formats that site-based managers could use to create their own data files.

One of the self-evaluation’s most important contributions was to identify the placement patterns of individual children and cohorts of children, so staff could accurately identify the number of children with highly disruptive patterns of care. When data showed that 20 to 30 percent of the children in Philadelphia’s child welfare system have more than two placements, administrators established three placements as their benchmark for taking action.

> **Key Premises of Self-Evaluation**
>
> ➢ Evaluation data are worth more when the community members or organizations involved in self-evaluation have authority to make decisions and allocate resources in response to findings.
>
> ➢ Monitoring—simply examining trend data relative to a given outcome—is not evaluation. Self-evaluations must make comparisons and place data in broader contexts so they can attribute changes in outcomes to specific interventions.
>
> —Lynn Usher

- The evaluation of the Savannah-Chatham Youth Futures Authority engaged middle and high school students in designing, conducting, and analyzing a survey to learn whether young residents knew about and used the local Family Resource Center. Students identified locally appropriate names to use for neighborhoods, suggested response options for the instrument, proposed topics of interest to neighborhood youth that ultimately expanded the range of options on the survey, and conducted the survey among their peers. When results showed that 43 percent of respondents did not use the center because they were unaware of its activities, students helped develop community outreach strategies

Tips for Building Community Capacity for Data Use and Dissemination

- Express data simply
- Make data easily accessible
- Cultivate a habit among residents of using information to make group decisions
- Provide guidance on how to use information to address specific needs
- Gather and provide data that can answer the community's questions and generate results
- Provide broad data banks that many users can turn to for information

Data Collection and Management Issues

Collecting and managing data well means continuously improving the quality of data collected; focusing collection efforts on outcomes, rather than simply processes; consolidating the information into one organized resource; and making the information easily available to a variety of stakeholders. The issues outlined below—some common to a range of evaluations and others specific to certain research techniques—can complicate researchers' efforts in these directions.

Common Data Collection Issues

Issues shared by most research and evaluation methods include:

- **Knowing what kinds of data to collect when the research question or the future use of the data is unclear.** Too often, evaluators and their community partners begin to collect data without fully understanding what they hope to learn or how the information might be used by others. When this happens, initiatives simply gather the information that is easiest to collect and use it because it has been collected, not because it truly meets their needs. Data collection that combines longitudinal case studies with a large database on the status of communities and community systems offers valuable flexibility in these situations, according to Bryk.
- **Addressing confidentiality concerns.** In order to produce meaningful findings, researchers and evaluators need detailed data on individuals. However, people who benefit from the programs and agencies that give data to researchers should not have to sacrifice their privacy, said Sister Mary Paul Janchill of Brooklyn's Center for Family Life. The issue is even murkier concerning data obtained from private sources, which have the right to refuse to release data but at the same time are not bound by the confidentiality rules that restrict data collection from public agencies.

Evaluators can address privacy concerns by: (1) establishing confidentiality agreements with agencies that provide data, specifying that the evaluators will not release any identifiable information (even to the agency that provided the original data); and (2) using locally aggregated data instead of individually identifiable information when possible. For example, to learn about a neighborhood's poverty level, one speaker suggested asking banks to provide information on the number of checking and savings accounts belonging to (unnamed) residents of a neighborhood, and the average amount of money in each account. Researchers could compare these data to the number of people living in the area to determine the average amount of disposable income.

> *Small neighborhood groups that want to engage in research "don't have the leverage to go to public agencies...and negotiate [confidentiality agreements]. Even if they did have the technical expertise, they probably don't have the political leverage to get the data."*
>
> — Tony Hall

Issues Related to Ethnographic Research

Ethnographic research—also known as qualitative or interpretive research, case study, or participant observation—involves "social interactions between the researcher and the informant in naturalistic settings, during which data are systematically and unobtrusively collected," according to urban sociologist Robin Jarrett. Through interviews with community members, ethnographic researchers create a detailed description of the way of life in a culture or society, including people's beliefs, attitudes, and understandings. The goal is to produce conceptual and theoretical data about social life that are tied to empirical data. Ethnographic or qualitative research is especially important for studies of racially and ethnically diverse communities, because it helps researchers understand the differing perspectives of various residents affected by community initiatives.

Ethnographic researchers need to simultaneously follow a structured, consistent approach to data collection, so they can make comparisons across families or communities, and also remain flexible enough that observations and interviews can pick up unusual features. Ethnographers also must be meticulous about documenting their work; their field notes should be accurate, detailed, and complete to ensure data quality, and they should include observations, emerging theories or conjectures about observations, and personal reflections on the effectiveness of the research methodology. Ethnographers should ensure data quality by triangulating findings from multiple data sources, cross-checking information with various informants, and conducting repeated interviews and observations to assess the credibility of statements. It is this "high level of systematic documentation, along with systematic data collection strategies, that differentiates ethnographic research from anecdotal accounts," Jarrett said.

Ethnographic researchers face tough decisions about when to use ethnography alone and when to combine it with other data collection methods, how to select samples, and how to gain the type of deep community access that ethnography requires. Ethnographers also must find ways to ensure data quality, manage and analyze massive collections of field notes, and address ethical issues such as confidentiality (a topic discussed in more detail later in this summary).

Using Public Administrative Data for Research Purposes

Evaluations that collect data from public systems face several issues:

The information may not support community-level analysis. Administrative databases often do not link the individuals served and the services provided with geographic locations, so researchers cannot always produce data that will explain community-level effects or promote community-level change.

Researchers may encounter problems over data ownership, access, and quality. For example, although some states are beginning to develop large repositories of integrated data, most administrative databases currently belong to individual government agencies and are not integrated across agencies, even within the same county or state administration. Several factors constrain evaluators' access to these data, according to Robert Goerge, assistant director of Chapin Hall Center for Children: (1) Many states periodically purge their files and databases, destroying background data that researchers need to make longitudinal comparisons; (2) the agencies' data systems are incapable of producing information quickly, so it can take up to a year to obtain requested data; and (3) rigid interpretations of rules governing some data, such as information on Medicaid recipients (which by law can be used only for program administration), cause some agencies to refuse access for researchers.

Even when researchers do gain access to administrative data, its quality is inconsistent and often poor, and it may use more than one identifier for the same individual—rendering inaccurate the reported numbers of program participants. Reporting formats frequently are incompatible with each other, so researchers must invest time and resources in understanding, cleaning, and reorganizing the data. State and community agencies rarely have staff with the time or capability to help in this task.

Administrative Databases that Use Multiple Identifiers Complicate Data Collection

When a midwestern state decided to apply for a federal waiver affecting human services, the governor asked a top-level administrator in the Department of Human Services to tell him how many state residents participated in the human services system. State leaders were shocked to learn that, according to the statistics, the system served more people than actually lived in the state. The data error occurred because the reporting system relied on duplicate databases, and each database used a different method to identify the same individuals.

Privacy and confidentiality are major issues for researchers working with administrative data at the community level. As Goerge observed, data on a given topic at the state level may pertain to thousands of individuals. But at the community level, it may include only a handful of people. “When we map that data into a community map, you know what block [the individuals] are coming from,” Goerge said. “If there’s only one, and you know that that child is African American and three years old and also has two siblings, one five-year-old and one seven-year-old—you know who that kid is.” Researchers can address these concerns by creating formal agreements that stipulate what will and will not happen with the information; by sharing what they learn with their data sources, so the agencies trust that they will have opportunities for commenting on the findings before they become public; or—in the case of surveys—by obtaining informed consent from participants.

Evaluations that rely on administrative databases may have trouble locating sources of data on non-traditional indicators, especially those related to economic investment and community well-being. Indicators such as job retention and access to high-quality jobs are hard to quantify, and public agencies typically do not keep databases with this information. Lacking solid indicators, evaluators struggle to find combinations of methods that will produce information not only on individuals but on communities.

Data Tracking Matches Individuals and Families Across Systems

A study by the Urban Strategy Council in Oakland, California matched records of 40,000 students across 19 different income, health, and social service programs to learn how many students participated in more than one type of program and how service utilization corresponded to race, ethnicity, and language.

The evaluations may result in “data snapshots,” rather than the more desirable tracking of individuals and cohorts over time. Most research, especially that which relies on public agencies’ administrative data, collects routine data for a specific point in time—for example, how many people meet a designated standard or live in a specific location on a given day. Many studies do not match data on people who fall into one snapshot category against data on individuals in another category, so the resulting descriptions of communities or populations are incomplete. This issue has become more urgent with the advent of welfare reform, because community agencies and initiatives now need to know whether the recipients currently counted as being employed are the same individuals who were employed a year earlier.

Collecting and consolidating data from multiple administrative databases is often expensive. The cost of trying to compile information from all of the appropriate agencies in a city can be prohibitive for small-scale, community-based evaluations, researcher Tom Kingsley said. Some community initiatives, although they may have the desire to collect and use administrative data, may see evaluation as a high-cost item that competes with vital services, cautioned Sister Mary Geraldine, project director of the Center for Family Life in Brooklyn.

Involving Community Residents in Evaluation

Research that solicits data and data collection assistance directly from community members can be difficult but rewarding to conduct. It can raise residents' expectations that the research results will be noticed, considered, valued, and acted on, noted evaluator Mary Ann Castle. And it enables—perhaps requires—evaluators to incorporate input from other sources into their theories, methodologies, and findings. But engaging community stakeholders in evaluation also increases the number of people involved in discussions and meetings, which can complicate efforts to plan and communicate about activities. It is time consuming for both researchers and local participants. The increased complexity of relationships can exacerbate tensions about timeliness and work quality. It requires new skills of researchers, who not only have to be technically proficient but also able to engage diverse community members in their work, educate community organizations or individuals about the nuances of measurement, and keep collaborators focused on their new roles.

In addition, involving stakeholders in self-evaluations, empowerment evaluations, and other partnerships that build local advocacy skills blurs the line between professional evaluators and stakeholders; the evaluators risk losing the objectivity that traditionally detaches them from the environments they assess (although some participants argued that evaluators have never been truly neutral or objective).

Community Involvement in Research Means New Roles for Data Seekers and Providers

An RCI site that used community members to conduct a neighborhood survey initially found residents suspicious and unwilling to talk. After the surveyors refined their skills, however, they gained residents' trust and collected valuable insights. For many of the long-time residents being interviewed, the survey marked "the first time anyone sat in their living room and said, 'How do you feel about your neighborhood?'" recalled projected director Wanda Mial. "The fact that that [interviewer] was there indicated to them that things were changing and that there was a certain level of hope associated with this initiative."

Despite the rewards of using neighborhood surveys, this method of data collection can make it difficult to compare data across multiple sites, unless the instruments are standardized. It may also be difficult to clearly attribute changes to an initiative unless the survey results are supported by other data.

Producing Data and Analyses that Promote a Community Change Agenda

Research and evaluation that promote positive community change require data collection that can drive action—not simply produce data for their own sake. Studies that collect and analyze the data with the most potential for use also have the most potential to meet real community needs. In particular, the compelling stories elicited by research can motivate communities to take action, Coulton suggested.

Evaluations that hope to stimulate community change should collect data on community assets instead of focusing on deficits. One of a neighborhood's most important assets is its committed residents—people who are "determined to change that rubble into life and vibrancy," as community initiative representative Wanda McLain said. These living assets are the same people who are likely to become partners in studies or evaluations that aim to build local capacity. Another key asset is culture, as described earlier.

Evaluations that allow local needs and interests to drive data collection are especially likely to promote a community-change agenda, because they produce information that stakeholders are more likely to use. However, this approach can make it difficult to apply universal indicators of success.

Issues Involved in Interpreting, Presenting, Disseminating, and Using Data

Valuable research and evaluation inspires better practices in the field, more responsive policies for programs and systems, and stronger efforts to improve on existing research. These impacts can only occur if researchers, evaluators, and the community stakeholders who contribute to their studies interpret the data skillfully, present it effectively, and continuously use it to improve their work.

Interpreting Data

The following major issues are involved in interpreting data:

Cause and effect are difficult to establish. The problem of proving cause and effect is the same when it comes to interpreting data as it is when clarifying goals and outcomes, controlling for complex variables, defining important outcomes, and developing reliable and appropriate indicators of change—topics addressed earlier in this summary. In all cases, the complex, multi-layered character of comprehensive community initiatives and the dynamic nature of relationships between people, systems, and communities make it very difficult to know the exact cause of an outcome.

Social science research typically resolves this dilemma by assigning individuals randomly to treatment and control groups, which increases the certainty that the events or actions included in an intervention were responsible for differences in outcomes, Coulton noted. However, random assignment is not possible in initiatives that attempt to serve an entire community in a comprehensive manner. Researchers must redefine the concept of evaluation if their work is to produce generalizable knowledge about CCIs and if they hope to make credible, unbiased judgements about causality.   Key considerations include the following:

If we only are capable of saying anything about big effects, it's going to be a big problem for [CCIs].... It's my sense that the communities are seeing [some] changes as gradual.

—Claudia Coulton

If we're not talking about big effects in the eyes of the community, why are we doing these things?... Why are we planning these comprehensive community initiatives?

—James Connell

- **What size of effects should be analyzed?** It may be possible to establish causality for big changes but not for modest, more subtle effects, given the amount of uncontrolled factors in the community context, Bloom said. But focusing on large effects may not meet stakeholder's needs to learn about interim changes, Coulton countered—and some important interim outcomes, such as changes in relationships among people in a community, happen very subtly and incrementally. Granger observed that the same type of change may have a large or small effect at different stages of an intervention. "The real task is to try to... help people make causal decisions about whether or not their early implementation strategies are getting implemented in the way that they hope will happen," he said.

- **After what time span should effects be analyzed?** The complexity of CCI interactions and of the context in which they occur suggest that initiatives should be given some time to develop before evaluators try to link outcomes with causes, Janchill said. However, CCIs' needs to refine practices, allocate resources effectively, assess progress, and extract lessons from intervention strategies all require stakeholders to make judgements about the causes of specific outcomes, and these activities cannot remain on hold until evaluators have determined the causes of long-term outcomes. Researchers should try to establish cause and effect for both short- and long-term outcomes, Granger suggested.

- **What level of effects should be analyzed?** Researchers can attempt to link causes and effects at the individual, organizational, or community level. The ways in which evaluators aggregate data across these levels can influence their ability to show causality. As Granger noted, organizations are more than simply "bundles" of individuals, and communities are more than a collection of organizations.

- **What is the scale and distribution of the CCI's effects?** Evaluators who discover big effects on individuals often struggle to convert those findings into lessons that can be applied to larger groups or communities. For example, an individual's participation in a community initiative that involves job training may cause him to receive a $10,000 increase in earnings—a large effect. However, that increase averaged across the larger population is a considerably smaller effect, observed Rick Brandon, executive director of the Human Services Policy Center at the University of Washington.

- **What are the recognized standards for causes of specific changes?** Even when evaluators and stakeholders agree that a strategy should cause a desired outcome, and the outcome is measurable, there often are no standards for measuring the strategy. For example, if parent meetings are a strategy, how many parents need to attend, how often, and with what involvement for the strategy to be implemented adequately? Lacking accepted protocols for measuring the implementation of a strategy, evaluators must decide what constitutes appropriate implementation at various stages of an intervention, and whether that threshold has been met, before they can determine whether the strategy caused an outcome.

- **What are the essential ingredients of a comprehensive community initiative that cause changes?** Although Coulton's keynote address advocated distinguishing the most important CCI strategies from those that are simply neutral, especially by comparing within and between initiatives that vary on an important dimension, Granger said it is "illusory" to believe that the individual elements that cause key changes can be clearly identified. Ultimately, unpacking the causes of changes is less important in evaluations of CCIs than in other research because the comprehensive initiatives are built around a belief in "synergistic intervention... across levels of individuals [and] organizations," Granger said.

A theories-of-change approach to evaluation may reduce but not eliminate problems associated with attributing outcomes to specific causes. This approach contends that the more the events predicted by the theory actually occur during the intervention, the more confidence evaluators can have in the theory's validity. According to Kubisch, evaluators can assume that an initiative "worked" if: (1) at the beginning and throughout the initiative, a well-specified and plausible theory of change described the steps needed to move toward meaningful change; (2) the activities that constituted those steps were implemented as planned; (3) the changes in early, interim, and long-term outcomes following the activities were of the predicted magnitude; and (4) no obvious and pervasive contextual shift occurred that could account for all of the outcomes. Kubisch acknowledged that this method of establishing causality will not satisfy all researchers but said it is more feasible than trying to rule out all alternative explanations through randomized experimental methods.

Ultimately, building "a sense of compellingness" that can be used to demonstrate credibility may be just as important as demonstrating causality, Cipollone said. Evaluators also may be able to use the reliable replication of strategies for change as evidence of an intervention's effects. "Replication becomes a substitute for controlling all extraneous factors, because replication sites can be assumed to vary on extraneous factors," Coulton said.

Incorporating and analyzing qualitative data, including information on cultural context, augments and clarifies researchers' interpretations of quantitative data. Qualitative data analysis actually occurs simultaneously with data collection, as researchers follow up on hunches, identify emerging themes, and return to the field to pursue new theories, Jarrett said. Researchers analyze these data by coding or sorting them into themes and concepts, which emerge from the information itself, and then integrating the findings into a comprehensive description.

Cultural competence plays an important role in the interpretation of qualitative data because researchers who fail to understand cultural context may analyze their data incorrectly. Ramon Del Castillo, director of Denver's Rebuilding Communities Initiative, described a visit he once made with a clinical psychiatrist to evaluate a 26-year-old man living in his parent's home. The psychiatrist said the man's problem was a lack of emancipation; Del Castillo, who knew that the man's culture valued extended family living arrangements, knew that the problem came from some other source. Cultural context also influences the way in which researchers interpret their data to identify "problems" and "assets." In a case documented by researcher Beth Herron, a school psychologist told a Puerto Rican mother that her daughter had a severe learning disability because she couldn't read, and suggested that the girl join a special education class. The mother rejected the intervention, saying the girl did not have a problem; after all, the child's father couldn't read either, and there was nothing wrong with him.

Effective research distinguishes between unique accomplishments and universal principles. Each stakeholder in a community initiative looks for different findings in the data. As Coulton observed, "funders and policy makers want proof of what works, the social science community wants generalizable knowledge, CCI staff want information to improve what they do, and the community needs to know of its accomplishments." By linking the two major levels of data—the compelling stories and the generalizable findings—researchers and evaluators can give all stakeholders a powerful tool for changing their conditions and improving the public policies needed to support their goals, Coulton said.

Presenting and Disseminating Data

Data on comprehensive community initiatives have the greatest impact on practices, policy making, and future research when the information is presented and shared in the following ways:

- **As a systematic, cumulative study of links between activities and outcomes**, rather than as the documentation of a process or a type of implementation. Information about process cannot substitute for information about effectiveness, Kubisch warned: "[Reporting] whether and to what extent activities are implemented is a necessary but not sufficient condition for good evaluation.... What early outcomes are these activities supposed to affect? How are these outcomes being measured, and how are the links between activities and outcomes established?"

- **With specific audiences in mind.** Data cannot improve practices and policies unless the people who design and implement interventions have access to the findings. Too often, researchers simply publish their reports and hope they are discovered and used by the appropriate audiences, Bryk complained. He and other presenters suggested several strategies for presenting and disseminating data to gain maximum impact: (1) produce frequent public reports and fact sheets for key state and local decision makers, advocacy groups, and members of business, foundation, and policy communities involved in reforms; (2) conduct face-to-face briefings with these audiences during the course of the research to discuss how the work is evolving and what findings are emerging; (3) release findings to intermediate organizations that can distribute them to the appropriate local stakeholders, such as local membership associations for principals or other professionals; (4) make data available to community stakeholders on computer diskettes, accompanied by training sessions; and (5) use the news media, the Internet, and research papers to share findings with national audiences.

- **Using strategies that anticipate and reduce opposition.** In particular, Bryk suggested (1) holding meetings with interested stakeholders about controversial findings, to avoid surprises and to find ways for the negative findings to inspire improvements; and (2) keeping the focus on issues rather than on people and personalities.

Participants disagreed over whether evaluation reports should take neutral positions on policies or present data that can support community members' advocacy purposes.

<u>Using Data for Continuous Improvement</u>

Successful comprehensive community initiatives have learned to use data not only to validate strategies or raise funds but also to inform positions, strengthen programs, and build capacity for change among community members and groups. But before community members can accomplish these changes, they must first understand how to interpret, disseminate, and maximize the information provided by the data. Therefore, using data for improvement often involves:

- **Setting goals and strategies for local data use.** For example, the Comprehensive Community Revitalization Program in the South Bronx required participating community development organizations, with input from residents, to use data on existing community resources to develop five-year action plans. Based on their data analyses, the community councils set goals of increasing the number of local playgrounds, stores, banks, and child care facilities and discussed ways to create these resources.

- **Getting data into the hands of community members for local decision making**. Cities participating in the National Neighborhood Indicator Project have made large archives of administrative data available to neighborhood groups and members that traditionally did not receive data. This services "democratizes" data use by getting information into the hands of the people who are most affected by initiatives but are rarely involved in decision making, according to the Denver site's director of research. The Denver site also sends neighborhood-specific fact sheets to members and graduates of the initiative's leadership program—community residents who helped develop the local project, received professional development, and serve on the governing board. These local contacts disseminate the data to their colleagues involved in decision making.

A Management Information System (MIS) Supports a Variety of Local Data Uses

A customized MIS used by the Comprehensive Community Revitalization Program in South Bronx enables CCI members to manage social work cases, match employment opportunities with appropriate job applicants from the employment program, track job training participation rates, monitor attendance in the Beacon School, track immunization needs and services, and link demographic data with service strategies. Staff working in the CCI's job resource centers learned from the databases that more than half of the community residents are Latino and have difficulty speaking English, which impedes their ability to get and keep jobs. The CCI has created a task force to respond to this finding.

- **Using data to engage community members in continuous program planning and management.** Once community members start to use data, they begin to see more types of information that would be useful and more ways they can use the data to make their own decisions. This often means that the local data users' interests in continuous growth in turn drives some of the data collection and dissemination efforts of researchers. "It's not [as if] you develop a system for people to get this data and you give it to them and forever after everything is fine. It's an ongoing development," noted information technology specialist Debbie Busch.
- **Balancing the competing interests of data providers and data users, especially when administrative data are involved.** Communities or local governments are likely to use data that evaluators obtain from state agencies to lobby the state government for more resources or to push for changes in policies that affect specific communities—activities that may help communities improve their circumstances but may also make state agencies reluctant to release the data in the first place.

- **Ensuring that data are used fairly**. Information can be a tool or it can be a weapon, as Cindy Guy noted. People and organizations can use data for useful, unproductive, or even harmful purposes, and their intentions are not always clear when they seek data from evaluators. Evaluators often struggle with the competing goals of making data universally available, following a belief that information belongs to everyone, and protecting the information so it cannot be misused. When the data pertain to a controversial topic, one effective strategy is to release the same information to all stakeholders at the same time, during a meeting where researchers can explain what it means and what it can and cannot prove.

III. Where Do We Go From Here?

Next Steps in Improving Research and Evaluation On Comprehensive Community Initiatives

Many of America's poorest residents face a bleak existence. Although the economy is growing and productivity is rising overall, real incomes are declining and jobs for unskilled laborers are rapidly disappearing. People who can find employment must work longer and harder just to earn subsistence wages. Changes in federal welfare policy are bringing more untrained workers into the market at low wages, displacing the workers who previously held those entry-level jobs. Decades of poverty, coupled with crime and violence, have left many families fragile, isolated, and afraid to connect with their communities. And, as invited speaker Ernesto Cortes, Jr., told conference participants, public policies often exacerbate these problems by failing to invest in human capital and community development.

In this environment, comprehensive community initiatives are more important than ever. In addition to making services more accessible and systems more effective, CCIs have the potential to accomplish deeper changes urged by Cortes and other participants, such as:

- Developing local leaders who can initiate, negotiate, and sustain positive changes, and strengthening these emerging leaders by establishing collaborative networks within communities

- Stimulating people to explore the issues and solutions that matter to them, to learn how to distinguish between opinions and judgements, and to support their views with evidence in ways that make action possible

- Building communities whose members regularly and systematically evaluate their circumstances, opportunities, and processes, use that information for strategic planning, and take action to meet new goals

Above all, CCIs can reconnect community residents with the institutions that will help them build skills and develop the ability to engage in public action and reflection. These institutions include extended families, neighborhoods and communities, congregations and churches, schools, and political parties—all of the entities that helped previous generations "make some kind of connection to the promise of American life," Cortes said.

If CCIs—and, ultimately, the families and communities they serve—are to succeed, however, there is still much to do. As Cipollone observed:

> We need more thoughtful processes for engaging neighborhood residents [and] more potent incentives for securing the commitment of cities, counties, and states. We need a strong and diverse array of public and private partners willing to risk resources on the cultivation of a reform effort that may not bear fruit for years, and strong assistance networks that can help neighborhoods and public systems secure new skills. We need creative strategies that can engage diverse audiences, compelling messages that can move people from awareness to action, and... strong, clear, descriptions of what we need the public to do.

Methods and strategies for evaluating comprehensive community initiatives also must improve. Specifically, participants suggested the following steps that researchers, evaluators, and their funders can support to enhance their understanding of CCIs:

1. **Build on current efforts to identify common measures and concepts for CCI evaluations.** These efforts include the Aspen Institute's Roundtable for Comprehensive Community Initiatives and Measurement Project, the National Neighborhood Indicators Project, and the Family to Family evaluation. These efforts should focus on the accurate measurement of strategies, short-term changes, and interim progress in addition to commonly sought outcomes.

2. **Improve partnerships for learning between evaluators and communities.** This will mean changing relationships among the stakeholders involved in evaluation—including researchers, communities, program staff, clients, university partners, and funders—in ways that (1) build the capacity of all stakeholders to participate in evaluation and to use evaluation data for continuous improvement, (2) demystify data collection and analysis at the community level, (3) increase opportunities for locally appropriate data analysis and use, and (4) develop partnerships that strengthen all stakeholders and unify their efforts. The process of changing relationships between evaluators and community members will include:

    - Protecting stakeholders' rights and clarifying their responsibilities
    - Creating more collaborations between university-based researchers and community groups and "refram[ing] and recalibrat[ing] the way we invest in knowledge development," as Heather Weiss of the Harvard Family Research Project suggested
    - Encouraging public and private funders of research to support studies of long-term processes of change around a core set of ideas and evaluation partnerships that involve communities
    - Encouraging evaluators to share their tools and methods more widely, put more products in the public domain, and accept responsibility for disseminating their data to stakeholders

3. **Incorporate knowledge about how communities and people change from research outside the field of CCIs.** Useful contributions may come from research on: (1) the effects of deindustrialization, suburbanization, immigration, segregation, devolution, and urban ecology; and (2) how community structures, processes, and governance affect residents. Not only will this step improve evaluations, it may help CCIs target their strategies more effectively to meet their desired outcomes.

4. **Build awareness among evaluators, evaluation participants, and audiences that evaluations should support the continuous improvement of programs, practices, and policies** by providing stakeholders with high-quality, accessible data.

5. **Combine evaluations of the processes and outcomes of community-based initiatives with policy-level analyses** and move beyond studies of local collaborations to evaluations that provide data on the more complex programmatic and policy issues involved in comprehensive initiatives at the state and federal levels. One step in this direction would be to identify typical combinations of strategies and the theories that explain why and how these strategies work together to achieve CCI goals.

The time is right for these changes. New technology is producing tools for data warehousing and cleansing that will make data collection, analysis, and use easier. More CCI stakeholders recognize the need for evaluation data and are willing to invest their time and effort in evaluation. Emerging partnerships between governments, private funders, researchers, and community initiatives support the many strategies which, combined, generate solid findings. These trends—augmented by the specific steps outlined above—offer hope for evaluation systems that, in the words of one conference organizer, are "robust and compelling

> *On the intervention side, while the challenge is high, I feel that we are getting closer and closer to understanding, articulating, and, ultimately, being able to act on the right combination of strategies, ideas, and resources required to bring about neighborhood-level changes.... [O]n the evaluation side, I truly do sense an openness and eagerness on the part of neighborhoods, cities, and states to [getting] involved in evaluation efforts.*
>
> —Tony Cipollone, Annie E. Casey Foundation

enough to push the envelope of comprehensive community change."

Appendix A:
Conference Agenda

March 12

5:30 - 6:30 p.m. Reception

6:30 - 8:30 p.m. Welcome speech and dinner
Remarks by Tony Cipollone

March 13

8:45 - 9 a.m. Plan for the conference
Michael Grady

9 - 9:45 a.m. Keynote address: *From Compelling Stories to Universal Principles: Tensions in the Art and Science of Evaluating Community Initiatives*
Presenter: Claudia Coulton

9:45 - 11:15 a.m. Plenary session: *Applying a Theories of Change Approach to the Evaluation of Comprehensive Community Initiatives: Progress, Prospects, and Problems*
Paper: Anne C. Kubisch
Discussant: Howard Bloom
Moderator: Cindy Guy

11:30 - 1 p.m. Breakout sessions:

- Ethnographic Methods (Robin Jarrett)
- Measures and Outcomes (Karen Fulbright-Anderson)
- Neighborhood Surveys (Tom Burns, Frances Schorr, Kimberley Huff, Wanda Mial)
- Establishing Causality (Robert Granger)

1 - 1:45 p.m. Lunch

1:45 - 3:15 p.m. Plenary session: *From Collaboration to Commitment: Rights and Responsibilities of Partners in Community-Change Initiatives*
Paper: James Connell
Discussant: Ron Register
Moderator: Manuel Gutierrez

3:30 - 5 p.m. Breakout sessions:

- Self-evaluation and Partnerships (Lynn Usher)
- Empowerment Evaluation (David Fetterman)
- The Role of Culture and Ethnicity (Mario Hernandez, Marcela Gutierrez-Mayka, Carmen Pola, Valerie Muhammad)
- Youth Involvement in Community Assessment (Stan Schneider, Berle Driscoll, Mary Ann Castle, Ernest Dailey, Isaac Wilson, Ozziah King, Otis Johnson)

<u>March 14</u>

9 - 10:30 a.m. Plenary session: *Facilitating Comprehensive Reform: Refiguring the Relations of Research, Policy, and Practice.*

Paper: Tony Bryk
Discussant: Heather Weiss
Moderator: Tony Cipollone

10:45 - 12:15 Breakout sessions:

- Community Mapping as a Resident Engagement and Planning Tool (Tony Hall)
- From the Few to the Many: Using Data to Support Community-building Efforts (Terri Bailey)
- Using Administrative Databases (Robert Goerge)
- Developing Internal Capacity (Wanda McLain)

12:15 - 1:30 p.m. Lunch

1:30 - 2:30 p.m. Invited address: *Reweaving the Social Fabric: Lessons Learned from Engaging Schools and Communities*

Speaker: Ernesto Cortes, Jr.
Introduction: Manuel Gutierrez

2:30 - 2:45 p.m. Closing remarks
Tony Cipollone