

REPORT



Center for the
Study of Social Policy
Ideas into Action

THE EVIDENCE DECISION-MAKERS WANT

DECEMBER 2019 | STEVEN D. COHEN



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Introduction

This study emerged from two observations about the widespread effort to promote “evidence-based policy” across many fields, with an emphasis on the human services.

First, much of the progress achieved to date has been focused on a relatively small subset of decision-making, involving the selection of “evidence-based programs” that address individual needs, for example in substance abuse treatment. This study explored how decision-makers consider and use evidence across the full range of their work, with particular interest in decisions related to larger scale system reform and community change efforts.

Second, research about the use of evidence by decision-makers has been focused on how to get policymakers to use existing research, especially program evaluation studies. A [literature review](#) conducted for this project confirmed that remarkably little has been done to understand what evidence decision-makers want or need. This study focuses on that question.

The study involved in-depth interviews with 10 decision-makers. Half of them work in child welfare and half in youth employment. Interviewees included leaders in Federal, state, and local government, as well as leaders of non-profit service providers.¹ They were asked to identify some of the most important decisions they had made in the past year, and then to reflect on what evidence they had used in reaching those decisions. They were also asked to identify any evidence they would like to have had but could not obtain, and any constraints on their use of evidence. The methodology is described in greater detail in Background Information on the Study (see: page 26).



Findings

A. What evidence do decision-makers use?

The large majority of the decisions discussed by the interviewees were policy-related, at a variety of levels. Some were broad choices about priorities or goals, such as: to shift the focus of a child welfare agency towards prevention and away from foster care; to come up with a new framework for addressing the needs of youth seeking employment; to try to understand “the future of work” and adapt accordingly. Many others were about specific actions that could help move leaders’ priorities into practice. Examples include integrating multiple separate funding streams into one; changing eligibility requirements for a program; and paying service providers based on a child’s needs rather than the child’s age. Leaders of service providing organizations also named decisions about which lines of business to pursue and whether to continue programs that were either losing money or not producing the desired outcomes.

Cutting across these kinds of decisions, we identified five categories of evidence discussed by the decision-makers. We will refer to these categories collectively as “multiple types of evidence” in the remainder of this paper.

(1) Administrative data.

There were many references to using data from agency operations, typically in order to better understand the characteristics of the populations being served and the results of their encounters with the system or organization. Examples include the types of family problems that led to involvement in the child welfare system; program completion rates for people receiving employment services; and placement stability data for children in foster care. The examination of national trend data, for example about changes in economic conditions or in the size and composition of the foster care population, also falls into this category. There were several instances in which decision-makers cited their organization’s growing capacity

to analyze administrative data and extract conclusions from it.

(2) Information about how similar problems are addressed in other places.

In some instances, decision-makers examined policies and practices in jurisdictions they thought were similar to their own, or that they regarded as leaders in addressing an issue. The interviews did not address how they chose which places to consider.

(3) Structured and semi-structured interactions with customers and front-line staff.

A majority of the respondents described efforts to learn about the experiences of people

affected by their system or organization. In child welfare, that meant speaking with youth in care, birth parents, and foster and adoptive parents. In youth employment, decision-makers sought information both from people seeking work and from employers. For both fields, there were also numerous references to information gathered from staff members who work directly with service recipients. Sources of this kind of information included focus groups, stakeholder meetings, and reviews of customer complaints.

(4) Observation and personal experience.

Decision-makers had long experience in their fields, and in many instances had reached conclusions that shaped the way they thought about problems and solutions. These might include references to specific data points, but typically they were framed broadly. Examples of such conclusions, which might guide which options were considered and which were excluded in reaching a decision, include:

- “Families don’t want to have people in their home for 12 months, and it’s overwhelming;”
- “The people that we’re working with, given their starting pointneed a longer period of time” than allowed by most existing programs; and
- “A network of caring adults and people that will cheer them on and take them into industry spaces” is the key to youth successfully entering the job market.

This category, along with #3 above, reflects types of evidence developed primarily by practitioners rather than researchers.

(5) Research evidence.

Interviewees made numerous references to using research evidence. In many instances, of course, the research had been accessed by a staff member or a team of staff members, not the decision-maker. Therefore, the person interviewed may not have known exactly what evidence was considered. There was one case in which the decision-maker mentioned having personally reviewed numerous studies.

a. Type of research reviewed. Most references to research were about literature reviews. These were conducted by agency staff, who identified and reviewed relevant research without attempting to be exhaustive. There were no specific references to finding and reviewing existing, published literature reviews; as noted above, this should not be taken to mean that such reviews were never used.

b. Purpose of reviewing the research. In many cases decision-makers turned to research to better understand a problem and to get the lay of the land in terms of how the problem might be viewed and addressed. Examples cited include research that identified a group of youth “who had no vision of a successful economic future for themselves,” and research that analyzed the prevalence of mental health challenges among youth in foster care. There were a few references to research from other fields that decision-makers thought might open up new possibilities in their own work, including research about “brain science,” trauma, and resilience. There were also instances in which research was used to look for solutions—promising examples of system reforms, or programs with strong evidence of effectiveness in addressing specific problems.



Source: Center for the Study of Social Policy

B. What evidence do decision-makers want but find difficult or impossible to obtain?

Prompted to think about what other evidence might have helped them make important decisions, the interviewees mentioned the following.

(1) Descriptive or analytic data to better understand a problem and/or a population.

This category represents, in effect, the additional administrative data (or analysis of administrative data) that decision-makers wanted, beyond that which they had. Some examples reflected the limitations of data systems within the field or within a particular organization. For example, interviewees wanted data about what skills employers need, and about the frequency of post-adoption disruption. In other instances they sought analysis of administrative data that pulls together information from multiple programs and systems, as is possible in jurisdictions that have developed integrated data systems. administrative data and extract conclusions from it.

(2) Evidence about effective approaches to problems.

Interviewees expressed a need for additional information about “what works” that goes beyond what is now available.

They had unmet needs with regard to:

- a. **Areas where the evidence about “what works” is lacking.** Three such areas stand out. The first is an entire field: “in the workforce development world there’s very little evidence about what works.” The second is evidence about solutions to co-occurring problems or conditions, such as what would be effective for families experiencing both domestic violence and child abuse, or how best to provide employment training for youth who have been in foster care. The third is problems or populations perceived as new and therefore not yet researched, for example how to work with people who previously had long-term stable employment but who became unemployed during the recession.
- b. **“What works” conceptually, rather than at the level of specific programs.** Interviewees cited the need for evidence that would help them with decisions about overall direction and strategies, not just program choices. For example, they wanted to know whether coaching models that prepare youth for the workforce

are generally more effective than case management models; what the optimal array of services in residential care is; and whether and under what circumstances pay-for-performance approaches to contracting for services are effective.

(3) Evidence about variation in effect by sub-population and/or context.

Many of the interviewees touched on this point, with one describing it as wanting “evidence that is tailored to us,” so they can make a better judgment about “what’s going to work in {location}, for the families that we serve?” For example, is it likely that a particular approach will work in rural as well as urban settings, or in communities where most residents are people of color, or are immigrants? In most cases the interviewees appeared to understand this question as an either-or judgment, and there was little exploration of the possibility of adapting interventions to better fit a new context. This may reflect constraints with regard to time (inability to wait for an adaptation to be developed) and money (inability to pay for the adaptation).

(4) Evidence about the experiences and perspectives of the people who are supposed to benefit.

This category reflects the desire for additional information beyond what leaders had been able to learn from “structured and semi-structured interactions” with clients and staff, about the experiences and attitudes of those

receiving human services. One interviewee mentioned, in the context of child welfare, the continuing challenge of hearing the “voices of the disenfranchised...who are afraid of us.”

(5) Evidence about implementation and implementation challenges.

Interviewees wanted evidence about the effectiveness of different implementation strategies; how long it takes to implement major changes; and how to evaluate the underlying problem when a service is not well utilized (poor choice of model, wrong eligibility criteria, or provider resistance). Interviewees were aware of the importance of strong implementation, though they made few references to the emerging body of evidence in implementation science.

(6) Benchmarking.

Interviewees raised questions about evidence that could help them evaluate their progress in addressing a problem. What is the typical rate of success in a service area such as youth employment? How does this vary for particular populations? What constitutes a high level of performance? In the absence of this evidence, decision-makers struggled to know whether to regard current levels of performance as poor, adequate, or good, or to set targets for how much improvement could realistically be achieved.

(7) The effects of interventions, understood broadly.

Some of the interviewees wanted longitudinal studies to help understand whether program effects persist over time. There were also questions about whether there might be positive effects besides those that are directly targeted, for example whether a parent gaining employment leads to changes not only in income but also in family functioning.

(8) Honest case studies of system reform.

One interviewee expressed the need for case studies that are “fully transparent about what works and what does not,” noting that there are relatively few case studies available and they tend to sanitize the difficulties encountered in change efforts.



C. What non-evidentiary factors drive decision-making?

As interviewees described why and how they had reached important decisions, they repeatedly cited influences that we have grouped into two categories.

(1) Political and institutional factors.

These sometimes created opportunities, sometimes constrained choices, and sometimes did both.

- a. Some constraints and opportunities related to **the agendas of elected officials or more senior appointed officials**. For example, in one case the appointment of a new leader with “some political cachet” opened up options that had previously been ruled out because they were seen as politically infeasible. In another situation, higher-ups sent instructions to focus on administrative action after a change in composition of the legislature made it unlikely that new legislation could be passed.
- b. **Destabilizing events** were important influences on decision-makers. Examples cited in the interviews included new legislation, a lawsuit, and a negative audit of a program. Especially when they created a sense of crisis, these stressors had multiple effects. They constrained the range of options considered, but also made decisions necessary, as not acting did not seem a viable choice in these circumstances. They

might also limit the evidence considered to that which was readily available, given pressure to act quickly to resolve problems perceived as urgent.

- c. **Decisions were shaped strategically to appeal to those who needed to authorize them**, including not only elected officials but also key staff members such as a Governor’s policy and fiscal aides. The need to avoid or at least moderate negative consequences to other stakeholders also influenced decisions.

(2) Values.

Underlying assumptions and beliefs led policymakers to seek some kinds of solutions and avoid others. Examples include the belief that “...children should grow up in families;” that it was important for a system always to be “...treating families with dignity and respect;” and that “...we want our system to be one that stabilizes families.” There were also references to other organizational values such as promoting innovation and “becoming a generative organization.” Comments about values were more prevalent in the child welfare interviews than in those focused on youth employment.

D. Where do decision-makers get their evidence?

Interviewees relied primarily on their own staff, who in some instances had expertise in research and/or data analysis, to find and analyze evidence. But they also referred to trusted outside partners, who fell loosely into two groups.

(1) University-based researchers.

One interviewee spoke of deliberately cultivating relationships with local universities for this purpose, and several others mentioned connections with researchers that extended over time and beyond individual issues. The absence of such relationships could make it difficult for other decision-makers to get and analyze the evidence they wanted.

(2) National intermediaries, such as think tanks and research organizations.

These came up most often in child welfare, where there were references to interactions with staff from the Annie E. Casey Foundation; Casey Family Programs; Chapin Hall; and the National Implementation Research Network. In both child welfare and youth employment, there were also a few mentions of material accessed on the internet from think tanks and research organizations.

There were surprisingly few references to directories of evidence-based programs. This surely reflects in part the kinds of decisions being reviewed, which as noted above were relatively infrequently about choices of programs that might be informed by the directories. With regard to those decisions that were about programs, it is possible that staff working for these decision-makers may have made use of the directories.

Discussion



Theme 1: Problem Definition

There were, in these interviews, a few instances in which decision-making progressed neatly from problem identification to review of relevant evidence to choice of solution. More often, however, problems were initially conceived very broadly, for example the desire to keep more families intact, or to keep up with changes in the labor market. In fact, some respondents needed time to identify the important decisions they had made and found it easier to speak about critical problems or issues addressed.

Evidence helped decision-makers define and narrow problems, not just identify solutions. For example, a review of administrative data showing changes in the characteristics of job seekers led to a search for evidence about effective approaches focused on the groups that now made up a larger proportion of the target population. Observations and client feedback convinced a leader that “we were often having interactions with our families that weren’t engaging,” and this led to a formulation of the problem focused on the system’s offerings rather than on client behaviors. Similarly, the research finding identifying a significant group of youth who “had no vision of a successful economic future for themselves” encouraged solutions that addressed changing mindsets as well as developing specific skills.

This theme raises the question of what kinds of supports and incentives would help decision-makers take particular care about the initial formulation of a problem and then periodically re-examine the problem definition in light of the emerging evidence.





Theme 2: A Broader View of Evidence, and its Role in Decision- Making

These findings suggest a view of decision-makers as **triangulators**, seeking solutions that align multiple sources of evidence and a course of action that aligns **evidence, opportunity, and values.**



The “evidence” in evidence-based policy is generally understood to be research evidence, preferably evidence published in peer-reviewed journals. This is, at least implicitly, a researcher’s view of what constitutes evidence that has undergone sufficient scrutiny to be trustworthy.

For the policymakers interviewed in this study, scholarly research was only one of multiple types of evidence. They also relied on administrative data; on feedback from service recipients and other key stakeholders; and on their own accumulated observations and experience in their fields. They did not necessarily label these sources of information “evidence,” but they provided many examples of ways in which such information was relevant, even essential, to their decision-making. Evidence was convincing when multiple types of information reinforced and complemented one another. When they did not—when some forms of evidence were missing, or sources of information seemed to lead in different directions—decision-making was much more challenging.

Moreover, evidence was only one driver of decisions. Decision-makers work in a political context, and the interviews reinforced the familiar conclusion that all policymaking is inherently

political. That label is meant to be descriptive, not pejorative. The decision-makers interviewed took evidence quite seriously. But they also took into account a complex economy of opportunity, in which the demands of senior officials and key stakeholders make some issues urgent while diverting attention from others and, for any given problem, open up some possible solutions while foreclosing others. In at least some instances decisions were also guided by a set of values that created a strong pre-disposition to prefer some possible solutions to others.

Taken together, these findings suggest a view of decision-makers as triangulators, seeking solutions that align multiple sources of evidence and a course of action that aligns evidence, opportunity, and values.





Theme 3: A Variety of Research Evidence

In describing the research evidence they wanted but did not have, decision-makers referred to information at several different conceptual levels, each of which might be informed by different types of research.

First, they had questions about broad concepts, relevant to their thinking about policy and about what kinds of services to offer. Examples include whether coaching is a more effective approach than case management in preparing youth for the workforce, and whether pay-for-performance approaches to contracting lead to improved results. Meta-analytic research could be of substantial assistance in addressing such questions, but it is in relatively short supply. An example from another field is research establishing that juvenile justice programs based on a therapeutic model are collectively considerably more effective than those based on a punitive model.²

Second, with regard to decisions about specific programs, they had questions that they could not answer from information currently available in directories of evidence-based programs. For example, they wanted to know about programs that are effective for families with multiple and overlapping needs, such as those that experience both domestic violence and child maltreatment. They also wanted to understand effectiveness in particular settings, such as what behavioral health interventions would be most useful in an early childhood education program.

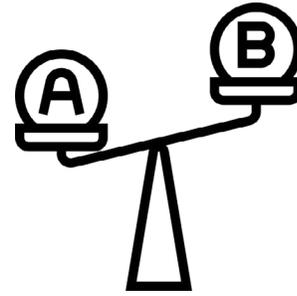
Third, they had questions about practice elements associated with better outcomes. For example, what components should be included in a post-adoption services program? Such questions might arise when there were no “evidence-based programs” available to meet a particular need, or when a leader wanted to improve current offerings without adopting a formal program. They sought to understand what effective practitioners do, even if they are not using a formal model. “Common elements” research, which tries to isolate the elements of practice that contribute to effectiveness, has much to offer here.³

Decision-makers could benefit significantly from greater availability and improved accessibility of each of these kinds of evidence—meta-analysis, program evaluation research focused on specific contexts, and common elements research.

Theme 4: Context

The decision-makers interviewed for this study thought a good deal about context. They wanted to find solutions they could reasonably expect, or at least hope, would prove effective in a particular place at a particular moment. To judge the likelihood that a possible solution could work for them, they sought the following:

- 1. Evidence of a solution to the problem, in any context.** Thanks to the development of directories of evidence-based programs in many fields, it is now relatively easy to obtain information about effectiveness when the challenge is to select a program model. It remains much more difficult to get even an understanding of what solutions have been tried, much less an evaluation of their effectiveness, when decisions are about broader system-level reforms.
- 2. Evidence of a solution in a similar context.** Decision-makers also wanted to know if solutions with a successful track record had been tried in places similar to the locations and systems they lead. Similarity was in part a matter of community demographics (e.g. race, ethnicity, income levels) or system characteristics (e.g. size, and whether a child welfare system is state- or county-operated). The implied notion was broader, however, and related to a larger sense of culture. Had the solution been tried in a place where people's lives are a lot like the lives of people here? Would it be appealing, or at least acceptable, to the people who are supposed to benefit from it—and to the people who are supposed to deliver it? Location

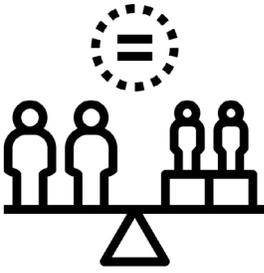


could be a proxy for these factors. So, for example, the head of a child welfare system might be more impressed by results in another state nearby than by similar results in a different part of the country, with “nearby” taken to mean “like here” across a variety of demographic, cultural, and political factors. There were few references to the question of how adaptable an approach is to different contexts.

- 3. *Technical feasibility.*** Can the decision-maker reasonably expect to be able to put together the resources needed to implement the solution well enough to produce the desired effects? These include money, time, leadership, staff capable of carrying out the idea, space, and technology. This consideration weighed heavily when a leader was downstream of a decision made by a higher authority, for example when a state or local child welfare director was charged with implementing a new Federal policy, or a non-profit executive had to implement an evidence-based program mandated by a government funder. Decision-makers could benefit substantially from tools to help them assess how well a proposed solution fits their context or might be adapted to do so.⁴
- 4. *Political feasibility.*** Decision-makers also needed to judge whether they could expect to achieve sufficient alignment among key stakeholders, first to get the solution authorized, then to give it a reasonable chance to survive the inevitable problems associated with implementation, and ultimately to succeed.

The feasibility questions—points three and four, above—are matters of judgment. Two decision-makers presented with identical evidence could legitimately answer them differently. It seems likely, however, that the conclusion a decision-maker reaches about the first two considerations will have a significant influence on the conclusions they reach about the last two. And it seems worth noting that the stakes are high: the ability to form good judgments about technical and political feasibility may, over time, help distinguish “decision-makers” from “former decision-makers.”





Theme 5: Equity

Numerous issues raised in these interviews relate to the widely shared goal of achieving more equitable results in systems that have historically produced disparate outcomes. For example, the substantial interest expressed in understanding the experiences of the people most affected by these systems may bring to light issues that can be invisible when considering only research evidence. We note two additional considerations related to equity that received less attention.

First, in most public systems there is a great deal of evidence of a kind well-known to many decision-makers but nevertheless rarely discussed in these interviews. This is the evidence of pervasive inequities—in access to services, in the type and quality of help received, and in outcomes—by race, ethnicity, and other factors. Addressing these inequities is likely to require answers to questions like these: What evidence, from what sources, can best help us understand why inequities exist and how they can be redressed? What does the existing evidence say about the sources of inequities, within the system as well as in the larger society? What can we learn from other efforts to reduce inequities that might be applicable to the question at hand? It's difficult to imagine how a policy or program choice could rightly be described as “evidence-based” unless it has taken questions like these into account.

Second, important questions about equity and power apply to all of the forms of evidence discussed. For example, unless administrative data are disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and other factors, they can hide important differences in how a system affects different groups. Implicit biases may affect the way in which decision-makers hear and understand what people affected by a system say about their experiences. Who is in the room to make meaning from evidence may have a profound impact on the conclusions drawn. Decision-makers' understanding of these and similar concerns may have a substantial impact on their ability to use evidence in a way that promotes equity.



Theme 6: Rigor

Ideally, decision-makers wouldn't just use evidence; they would use high-quality evidence, targeted to answering the right question about a specific population, and they would use it well. And, as noted under the prior theme, they would keep in mind considerations related to equity as they choose which evidence to use and consider what it means. These are difficult challenges. While decision-makers of course vary widely in their level of knowledge about how to evaluate the quality of evidence, as a group they have neither the time nor the expertise to review individual studies, judge how rigorously they were conducted, and take their findings more or less seriously as a result.

For one subset (program evaluations) of one type of evidence (research evidence), at least a partial solution has emerged over the last two decades. Well-respected researchers staff clearinghouses or directories of evidence-based programs. They review the research about each program, make judgments about its quality, and take those judgments into account as they determine whether, for example, a program's effectiveness is "well supported" or "promising." Decision-makers can then turn to these authoritative sources, confident that rigor has been built into the results they display.

But what about the other forms of evidence discussed in this paper, such as evidence from what we have labeled "structured and semi-structured interactions with customers and sometimes with front-line staff"? Many of the interviewees referred to the results of focus groups and other formal processes designed to understand the experiences and attitudes of those who are supposed to benefit from human services. In almost every case, these activities were conducted by the staff of the government or non-profit organization, not by people working in a university or another setting whose primary purpose is research. Decision-makers need help in understanding what "rigor" means in gathering and analyzing these kinds of evidence as well.



Recommendations



What are the practical steps that proponents of evidence-based policy could take to better support decision-makers in using evidence across the wide range of choices they make?

This question is perhaps most relevant to those such as government regulators and philanthropic leaders, who make rules and create incentives designed to guide the choices of decision-makers like the people interviewed for this study. But it is also meant for researchers who want to see their products used and policymakers who want to make good use of evidence.

In considering the opportunities identified by this report, a useful point of reference would be the work involved in developing directories of evidence-based programs, mentioned earlier. It has occurred across multiple fields and involved a wide range of actors; it has been sustained over a considerable period of time; and it has created a level of access to evidence that did not previously exist. How might a similar commitment of resources and enthusiasm build the other kinds of evidence decision-makers need, and build their capacity to make good use of that evidence?

The following recommendations describe how leaders in evidence-based policy can contribute to the wider and better use of the rich array of evidence that decision-makers need. The first four recommendations call for changes in discourse about evidence and the tools available to decision-makers, and they would be inexpensive to implement. The last two call for more extensive changes in the types of research conducted and the ways that research is made available to decision-makers, and they will take longer and cost more to put in place.

(1) Acknowledge the importance of a broad array of evidence.

Decision-makers in human services must address questions of many types, and there can be no single “right” kind of evidence applicable to every question. Particularly when the questions are complex, though, it is also a fair conclusion that evidence of multiple types will almost always be needed. Evidence drawn from administrative data, from the experience of those who provide and receive services, and from published research all have a part to play. This should perhaps be an obvious conclusion, but it is not obvious to decision-makers who work in a policy environment in which “evidence” has been used almost exclusively to refer to a particular kind of evidence (from experimental trials) relevant to a particular type of question (about the effectiveness of specific programs). Funding and regulatory guidance that emphasizes the necessity of a broad array of evidence, and policy choices that incentivize the use of multiple sources of high-quality evidence, would be welcome steps forward.

(2) Provide guidance to policymakers about using evidence to promote equity.

Practical guidance on how to build equity considerations into the development and use of evidence would be of substantial value to decision-makers. There is now a considerable body of material available on this topic, most of it aimed at evaluators and at the funders of evaluation.⁵ Adaptations focused on the needs of public sector system leaders using a wide variety of evidence would be particularly helpful.

(3) Develop tools to help improve problem definition.

Framing a question carefully is a big step towards identifying what evidence is needed to answer the question. This is difficult for researchers and it is surely far more difficult for decision-makers who operate in a complex and ever-changing environment under significant time pressure. But it ought to be possible to help decision-makers first to understand the value of good problem definition, and then to get better at it. The field of human-centered design has already produced a variety of tools that touch on this question. It would be useful to adapt those tools to the needs of decision-

makers in the human services and to provide support for leaders who want to use them.

(4) Develop a practically useful definition of rigor

that encompasses the multiple types of evidence that decision-makers need, especially review of administrative data and the “structured and semi-structured interactions” used to learn about how a system or organization is experienced by those involved in it. The type and extent of activities now used no doubt vary considerably, based on differences in staff expertise and in the amount of time, money, and other resources that can be provided. Practical guidance offering advice about how to conduct these activities, along with standards that are realistic in the context of organizations whose primary purpose is not research, could be of significant value to decision-makers.

(5) Enhance the information included in directories of evidence-based programs, to better reflect the wide range of research evidence needed by decision-makers.

These directories are widely known, and may well be the most visible result of the movement towards evidence-based policy. They could be a platform for providing decision-makers with a much wider range of evidence, though it will surely be evidence that is complex to evaluate. We see two categories of particular importance. The first is evidence about system and community reform efforts, to help leaders understand what has been tried and with what

results in their field. The second is research evidence that goes beyond program evaluation studies, to include meta-analysis and common elements research. Funders who have supported the development of the directories could play a particularly important role in enhancing them.

(6) Build field-specific evidence agendas.

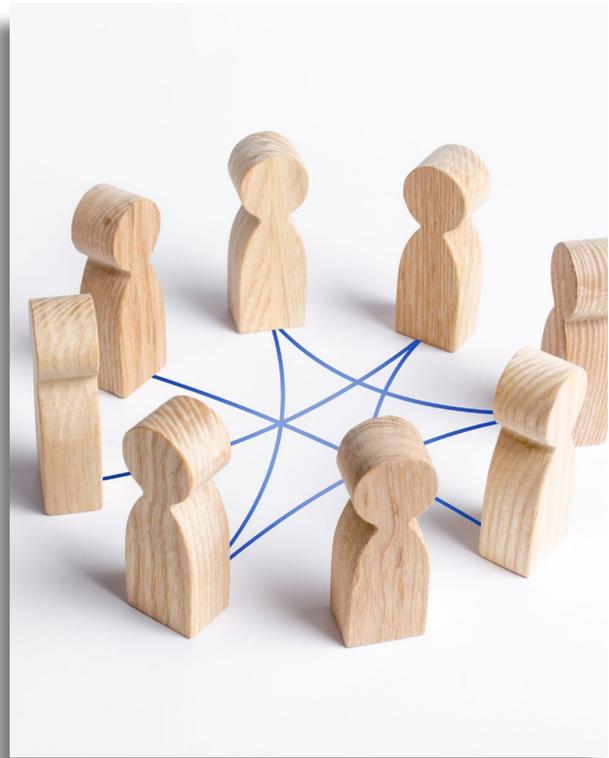
The interviews conducted for this study, taken together, generated a list of questions that are important to leaders in youth employment and child welfare. That list is necessarily idiosyncratic, reflecting the current interests of a relatively small number of policymakers. We nevertheless think that it is instructive and could be the basis for coordinated efforts to identify and address critical evidence needs in each field. For youth employment, questions raised by the interviewees include:

- What *skills* do employers need, and how is the demand for various skills likely to change over time?
- What is known about youth who do not successfully connect to the economy, that could be informative in developing new approaches to these youth?
- What is the evidence about the extent to which having a credential is necessary in order to be able to perform various jobs adequately?
- What practices are effective in providing employment services to people who have experienced trauma?
- What is the evidence about the effectiveness of pay-for-performance contracting in employment services?

While some evidence that could help answer these questions may already exist, well-informed and thoughtful policymakers either were unaware of such evidence or thought it was insufficient to help them. The questions are, however, answerable—not definitively, and not once for all time, but it ought to be possible to develop evidence that would support actionable conclusions about them.

There is as yet no forum for exploring such questions with a larger number of stakeholders, much less reaching consensus on which questions are most important to the field, also taking into account questions that might help get at the root causes of problems. Accordingly, researchers and funders of research have little to guide them, in terms of the needs of the people they want to inform and influence, in choosing the topics they will explore.

This is an opportunity. Philanthropic leaders interested in promoting evidence-based policy in a field, perhaps joined by government leaders under the auspices of affinity groups such as the National Governors Association or the American Public Human Services Association, could convene respected leaders and researchers in that field to jointly agree upon an evidence agenda. And they might then back that agenda with resources that create incentives for researchers to pursue it and for decision-makers to use the results.



Background Information on the Study

About the Study

This study was originally conceived as part of a broader effort to understand and compare decision-makers' use of evidence in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. A variety of considerations delayed the parallel work in the other two countries, while the US project was poised to go forward with the generous support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We decided to proceed, in the hope of being able to introduce initial findings that can then be refined and further developed. Michael Little in the UK and James Radner in Canada made substantial contributions to the thinking behind this work and commented on drafts of the findings and conclusions.

Interviewees were selected based on recommendations from colleagues at the Center for the Study of Social Policy and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. They were asked to identify leaders they viewed as effective and thoughtful, without regard to their knowledge or views about how those individuals use or do not use evidence. Eleven potential interviewees were selected from a pool of approximately 15, with the choice based on an effort to achieve a diverse group with regard to field, type of leadership position, geography, and the race and gender of the participants. All 11 agreed to participate, but one subsequently became unavailable, and the interviews proceeded with the remaining 10.

An interview protocol was developed, tested with one decision-maker in each of the three countries, and then modified for greater clarity. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the software program Dedoose. Preliminary findings and conclusions were developed and then reviewed by the other researchers, one of whom also read the majority of the interview transcripts before commenting.

A literature review focused on decision-makers' demand for evidence and conducted for CSSP by Bronwyn Clarke, also formed part of this project. The executive summary of the literature review is attached as an appendix, and the complete review is available at <https://cssp.org/resource/literature-review-the-evidence-decision-makers/>.

Interviewees

We appreciate the time and thoughtful participation of the leaders interviewed for this report:

Virginia Hamilton

American Institutes for Research (formerly US Department of Labor)

Kermit Kaleba

National Skills Coalition

Eleni Papadakis and Eric Wolf

Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board, State of Washington

Erick Serrato

Pacific Gateway Workforce Innovation Network, Long Beach CA

Jill Rizika

Towards Employment, Cleveland OH

Brenda Donald

Child and Family Service Agency, Washington DC

Allison Blake

Child and Family Agency of Southeaster CT (formerly New Jersey Department of Children and Families)

Bryan Samuels and Clare Anderson

Chapin Hall (formerly Administration on Children, Youth and Families, US Department of Health and Human Services)

Greg Rose

California Department of Social Services

Lena Wilson

Vista del Mar Child and Family Services, Los Angeles (formerly Samaritas, Michigan)

Literature Review

Bronwyn Clarke, MPhil Comparative Social Policy⁶

Summary of Findings

From March to June 2019, we conducted a literature review to learn about what types of evidence policymakers say they want or need to make decisions. Our review of 27 articles and reports led to the following findings:

- 1. Very little research has been done about what evidence policymakers want or need.** We could only find six research studies that addressed this question directly.
- 2. Policymakers are open to multiple forms of evidence.** They draw on a range of information—including agency data, constituent feedback, and research—to make decisions.
- 3. Policymakers reject a hierarchy across these forms of evidence.** They value both qualitative and quantitative evidence.
- 4. Policymakers are skeptical about the relevance of much academic research to their everyday decisions.** They're concerned about timing (research too old to help), context (not sure it applies to us), and failure to generate actionable recommendations (it's interesting, but it doesn't help me figure out what to do).
- 5. Policymakers want evidence that is timely, context-relevant (or even better, locally-generated), and accompanied by clear recommendations.** The converse of Finding #4.
- 6. Policymakers prefer brief and clear presentations of evidence.** One- to two-page executive summaries and short reviews of bodies of research are great. But they must be jargon-free—no academese.
- 7. Policymakers find stories combined with empirical data compelling and useful.** While data might inspire action, real people's stories illustrating the problem help them get others on board.
- 8. Policymakers rely on relationships for evidence.** Information comes to them via other colleagues, staff, trusted academics, or representatives from think tanks and interest groups. Trusted and credible people from these various organizations translate evidence for policymakers, helping them to understand what is relevant to them, what it means, and actionable propositions.
- 9. Policymakers have a hard time finding unbiased and credible information.** Policymakers are aware that much of the information coming at them is biased, of mixed methodological rigor, or has been cherry-picked by advocates to promote their own views. They want help sorting through this "mixed economy of evidence" and screening out bad or misleading information.
- 10. Policymakers' approach to evidence is informed by their roles.** At the end of the day, policymakers—unlike most researchers—must make decisions, whether they have good information or not. This responsibility, combined with related time constraints and political realities, informs their pragmatic approach to evidence.

Endnotes

¹All government officials were in the executive branch; no legislative or judicial leaders were included.

²Lipsey, M.W. (2009). The primary factors that characterize effective interventions with juvenile offenders: A meta-analytic overview. *Victims and offenders*, 4(2), 124-147.

³A prior CSSP publication, “Better Evidence for Decision-makers: Emerging Pathways from Existing Knowledge” (2017) provides further discussion and examples of the successful use of meta-analytic and common elements research to inform human services decision-making.

⁴For an example of such a tool, see the National Implementation Research Network’s materials at <https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/resources/drivers-best-practices-assessment-dbpa>.

⁵See, for example, the Equitable Evaluation project (<https://www.equitableeval.org/>), and materials from the Annie E. Casey Foundation (<https://www.aecf.org/blog/step-by-step-guide-on-using-equity-principles-in-social-science-research/>) and the Center for the Study of Social Policy (<https://cssp.org/our-work/project/evidence-for-equity/> and <https://cssp.org/resource/race-equity-impact-assessment-tool/>).

⁶This report was prepared for the Center for the Study of Social Policy under the supervision of Steven D. Cohen.

