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COMMUNITY CONDITIONS THAT STRENGTHEN FAMILIES: PROTECTIVE FACTORS WORK AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL



Introduction

The Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework, developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP), has had a significant influence on how child- and family-serving programs operate and support healthy development and well-being. Now, many organizational partners and members of the Strengthening Families National Network are interested in looking beyond programs and services to apply a Protective Factors approach to transform communities, address root causes of adversity, and advance equity and social justice.

In order to explore this interest, CSSP partnered with several organizations to develop, administer, and analyze the results of a survey. Participants were recruited via CSSP's Strengthening Families newsletter and webinars, and by other Steering Committee members sharing it through their networks. In total 77 respondents completed the survey, representing organizations working at both state and local levels from 20 U.S. states. This survey was designed to capture the various ways organizations approach community-level work focused on improving child and family outcomes at the population level, and their viewpoints on community conditions that support children and families.

Community-level work is defined here as work aimed at creating positive change for a community as a whole, which might include policies, programs, public messaging, infrastructure, or concrete supports for families. This contrasts with programs or initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for individuals or families, but not necessarily the broader community.

This work was carried out by an informal Steering Committee of partners, including the Center for the Study of Social Policy; the Center for the Prevention of Abuse and Neglect (University of Oregon), 90by30 initiative in Lane County, OR; Safe & Sound in San Francisco, CA; Colorado's Office of Early Childhood; the Center for Public Partnerships & Research at the University of Kansas; and others.

Community Conditions that Foster Thriving

Participants described several factors that they believe must be present to ensure all families thrive. This included, broadly: a) equitable access to essential needs, b) social support and connection, c) racial and social justice, and d) a shift in the "social contract" to include shared community responsibility for child and family well-being. Examples presented by respondents of needs within these categories are listed below.

Essential/Basic Needs

- High quality, affordable, and equitable early learning; k-12 and adult education
- Health care
- Safe, affordable, and reliable housing
- Food security
- Economic opportunities
- Family-friendly employment

Social Support and Connection

- Neighborhood cohesion
- "Willingness to work toward long-term cultural shifts" and to "address stigma related to child abuse"
- Normalization of help-seeking behaviors
- A collective acknowledgment that parenting is hard and all parents benefit from support

Racial and Social Justice

- Fostering anti-racist and equitable social structure
- Developing norms and practices that "address historical and structural racism"
- Community members committing to "actively work to change systems-wide bias so that all thrive"

Social Contract

- Shift in community-level social norms
- Fundamental change in the "social contract"
- High-level prevention efforts and messaging
- Restorative justice practices
- A culture of looking out for one another



Current Efforts

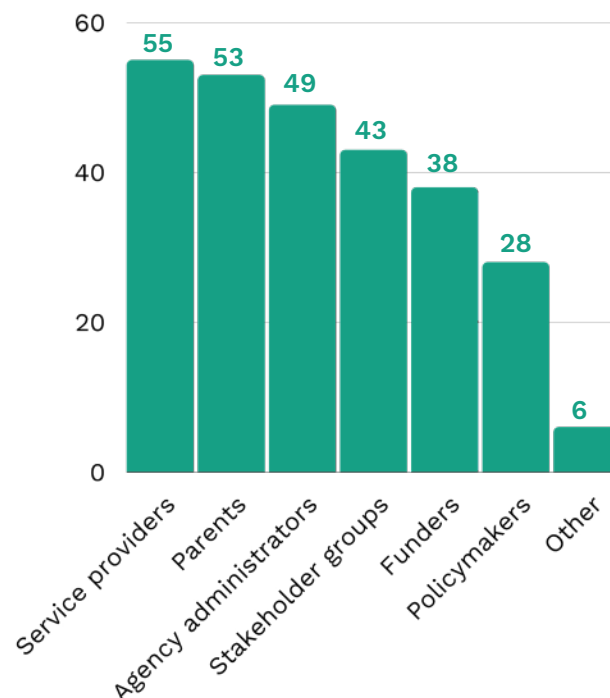
The vast majority of survey participants ($n=73$, 95%) reported that they are currently developing or implementing work related to creating community conditions for the prevention of child abuse and neglect and/or promotion of better outcomes for children and youth. Just a handful ($n=4$, 5%) responded that they were not currently doing this but were interested in learning more.

Fifty-eight participants (75%) reported that they are using a specific framework or resource to inform their community-level work on community conditions. Many who referenced specific external frameworks referred to the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework, which is not surprising given the networks to which this survey was sent. Among those who shared names of resources that were developed locally, many referred to work that was still underway.

Partnerships in Community-Level Work

Participants reported engaging and partnering with a wide range of partners at the local level. Nearly all of those who responded ($n=60$) indicated that they were engaging and partnering with service providers ($n=55$) and with parents ($n=53$), as shown in the chart below (Figure 1).

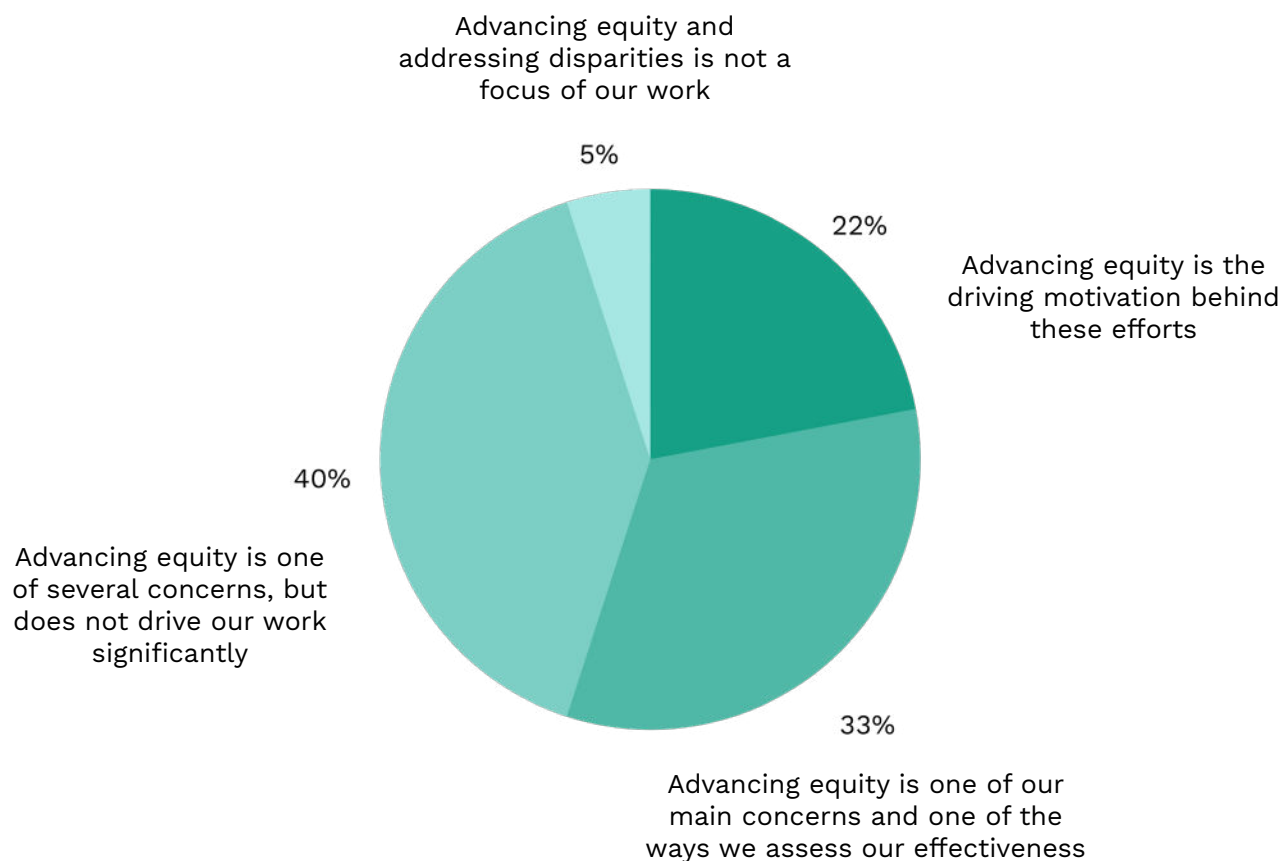
**Figure 1. Who are you engaging and partnering with in this work?
(check all that apply; $n=60$)**



Attention to Social Justice, Issues of Equity, and Anti-Racism

Almost all participants reported that advancing equity or addressing racial disparities and other inequities was part of their work, as shown in the chart below (Figure 2). Twelve participants reported that advancing equity was the driving motivation behind their efforts. In another question, 10 participants (18% of those responding to the item) reported that they had developed and applied an intentional race equity action plan at the community level, while the majority ($n=46$, 82%) had not yet done so.

Figure 2. In what ways does a concern about advancing equity or addressing racial disparities and other inequities factor into your work? ($n=55$)



Looking to the Future

In analyzing responses, it is clear that regardless of whether they are already involved in community-level work, respondents hope that a community Protective Factors Framework can help them improve how they work in at least three ways: 1) coordinating across systems, 2) communicating more effectively, and 3) shifting focus from intervention to prevention and promotion. Several respondents suggested that a framework would offer assistance in coordinating across organizations working on similar issues, give organizations shared language around important community conditions, and assist in transitioning approaches towards ensuring that all families have what they need to thrive.

The community must recognize that protecting children and creating resilient families is everyone's job.

It is important to note that the four factors highlighted by this survey are important to everyone, not only families and children. We consider these community conditions to be a public good and believe that strengthening them sets all individuals and families up for success—particularly those who have been marginalized because of their race, ethnicity, abilities, immigration status, or socio-economic status.

We also realized that these Protective Factors are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. For example, supporting equitable access to essential and basic needs supports social justice. The bi-directional relationship between each of the other community-level factors and racial and social justice leaves us considering whether it might be more accurate to view child maltreatment as a racial and social justice issue, rather than a public health issue.

This survey was intended to be the first step in a process to develop a simple and coherent community protective factors framework. Based on these findings, we have identified several potential next steps:

- Conducting key informant interviews with types of stakeholders who were not represented in this survey, such as community organizers, neighborhood groups, and local political or religious entities.
- Engaging with parents and community members to understand their perspectives on the community conditions that support them and their families to thrive.
- Conducting a literature review and engaging with researchers to further explore the community conditions that are essential for the prevention of child abuse and neglect, and promotion of family well-being and effective strategies to create those conditions.
- Seeking funding to support these research activities.
- Developing a policy agenda that identifies policies and legislation that we believe support these community conditions.
- Synthesizing the results from this survey and other sources into a comprehensive and succinct community Protective Factors Framework.

To learn more about this project, download the full paper at <https://cssp.org/resource/community-conditions-report/>.

