



THE EVIDENCE DECISION-MAKERS WANT

DECEMBER 2019 | STEVEN D. COHEN

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) works to promote the use of evidence in decision-making by leaders in public sector human services systems (such as child welfare and mental health) and in closely related organizations such as non-profits that provide many social services. We wanted to know more about how decision-makers think about and use evidence in their work and chose to examine this question in two very different fields: child welfare and youth employment.

The study summarized here is different from other examinations of evidence use in two ways. First, it addresses a wide range of decisions. While much has been written about “evidence-based programs” aimed at individual needs, we examined the full range of decisions made by leaders, including large-scale efforts to improve public systems. Second, it looks at evidence primarily from the perspective of the decision-makers who work within these systems, rather than from the point of view of researchers who produce evidence. We asked leaders to tell us about some of the important decisions they had made recently and the evidence they used as they reached these decisions. We also asked about evidence they would like to have had but could not get, and about constraints on their decision-making that affected how they used evidence.



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About CSSP

The Center for the Study of Social Policy works to achieve a racially, economically, and socially just society in which all children and families thrive. We do this by advocating with and for children, youth, and families marginalized by public policies and institutional practices.

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Here's what we learned:

- Leaders described many kinds of decisions, from broad policy changes (for example, how to re-orient a child welfare system towards family support rather than out-of-home placement) to specific actions needed to implement their strategies (for example, integrating multiple funding streams into one, or changing eligibility requirements for a service).
- Leaders use **multiple kinds of evidence**, in part to help them define a problem and understand its extent, and in part to help them evaluate potential solutions. Alongside research evidence, leaders rely on:
 - Analysis of administrative data, which provides evidence about the characteristics and needs of the people they are serving, and what happens when those people encounter their system or organization;
 - Evidence about how similar problems are addressed in other places;
 - Evidence generated by deliberate interactions (often interviews or focus groups) with their customers and their front-line staff, aimed at understanding their needs, values, and experiences; and
 - Their own observations and personal experience, often over many years in the field.
- When they use research evidence, leaders are highly sensitive to **context**. They want to know not only whether a solution has worked somewhere, but whether it has worked in a setting that they view as sufficiently similar to their own to provide confidence that it can be successful for them. This judgment involves cultural fit, their capacity to implement the solution well, and the extent to which they believe the solution will be acceptable politically.
- Leaders are interested in **using evidence to promote equity**, as shown in part by growing attention to the lived experience of people who use or are affected by public systems. They do not uniformly have available a set of tools to help them identify relevant considerations (for example, ensuring that data are disaggregated by race and other relevant factors; considering sources of expert opinion from a wide range of backgrounds; and ensuring diversity in the group of people who make meaning from the evidence).
- Leaders want research **evidence that goes beyond the evaluation of specific program models**, to help them understand both broad policy choices (for example, whether coaching is likely to produce better results than case management, or whether shifting to pay-for-performance contracting is likely to produce improved results) and about the specific elements they should include in services (for example, the components needed for a good post-adoption service program).
- Leaders want **evidence relevant to implementation**, such as information about what kinds of practices are likely to support success in system change, and how much change is reasonable to expect over what periods of time.

- Important **constraints on the use of evidence** include the agenda and effectiveness of political leaders; destabilizing events, such as a lawsuit, a new piece of legislation that has to be implemented, or a crisis that has to be responded to; and values, both their own and those of the organizations they lead.
- In effect, decision-makers have to triangulate, seeking a course of action that aligns evidence, opportunity and values.

Important actors in government, philanthropy, and policy advocacy have worked to promote the wider and better use of evidence. Given the findings of this study, we have two sets of recommendations that we believe would contribute to their success.

First, four recommendations address the way proponents of evidence-based policy think and talk about evidence and suggest the development of small, practical tools to help decision-makers:

1. Acknowledge and support the need for *a broad array of evidence*;
2. Help those who use evidence build skills around *problem definition*;
3. Provide *guidance and tools to help decision-makers use evidence to promote equity*; and
4. Develop a *working definition of ‘rigor’* that encompasses multiple forms of evidence and that includes attention to equity.

Second, two larger recommendations propose areas in which sustained attention and resources could make a substantial difference.

- *Enhance the directories of evidence-based programs* that are now available in many fields, so they also:
 - address a wider range of topics, including prior system reform efforts; and,
 - address a wider range of evidence, including evidence from meta-analysis and common elements research.
- *Develop field-specific evidence agendas*, bringing together decision-makers, researchers, and advocates to reach consensus on the most important questions to research in their field, and then prioritize that research in the funding decisions of government agencies and foundations.

The full study is available at <https://cssp.org/resource/evidence-decision-makers-report/>.