



# Six Steps to Success

## Collecting and Using Performance Data in Place-Based Initiatives

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A consensus is growing among funders and practitioners that effective performance measurement is essential to improving the results of community change efforts.<sup>1</sup>

Gathering and using performance data can be a daunting task, however, particularly for place-based initiatives that engage multiple service providers and aspire to bring about population-level change. Drawing upon guidance given to the twelve implementation grantees in the US Department of Education's Promise Neighborhood initiative,<sup>2</sup> as well as lessons learned from similar efforts around the country, this document summarizes six key steps for collecting and using data to track and improve the performance and results of major place-based initiatives.

### 1. Define a Set of Indicators through Which to Measure and Report Results

Shared measurement systems are essential to initiatives that seek to coordinate the efforts of multiple partners and programs. Agreement on shared goals cannot produce results without agreement on the ways results will be measured and reported. Collecting data and measuring results consistently on a shared list of indicators at the community level and across all partner organizations not only ensures that efforts remain aligned, it also enables partners to hold each other accountable and learn from each other's successes and failures.

The starting point for many initiatives is to examine how their *theory of change*—the assumptions about what factors influence a desired outcome and how efforts within and outside the initiative will

bring about changes in those underlying conditions—indicates what the initiative will accomplish and how it proposes to do so.

Often, place-based initiatives are trying to improve the conditions of life for whole communities, but since those changes can take a long time to manifest themselves it's important to understand whether individual programs are directly supporting the overall changes the initiative seeks. For this reason, initiatives should establish indicators for both population accountability and performance accountability.<sup>3</sup>

*Population accountability* is about the well-being of whole populations (neighborhoods, cities, or counties) and can be tracked through aggregate or summary data. For example, school test scores can be used to measure the ultimate success of education-focused initiatives, while city-wide unemployment rates can be a measure for the success of workforce-development initiatives.

*Performance accountability* is about the well-being of client populations directly served or affected by a program. Because programs typically serve only a subset of the whole population, initiatives must establish ways to measure performance for those served, often using individual-level data. For example, individual test scores can be used to assess progress for students participating in after-school academic programs, while individual health records can be used to track results of efforts to connect families to primary care.

Several efforts—for example PerformWell.org and Child Trends' Results and Indicators for Children—have created catalogs of common indicators for various initiatives that can be consulted as communities develop their own measures.

## 2. Select Target Populations and Establish Baseline Population Counts and Penetration Rates

Indicators must be attached to specific populations that are the targets of interventions, both for accurate measurement and to track whether the initiative's efforts are reaching the intended population.

Selecting the appropriate target population requires some consideration. Potential options include individuals (children and adults), households, housing units or properties, businesses or nonprofits, social networks or relations, neighborhoods, and entire cities. In addition to programmatic criteria, initiatives should also consider the most feasible target population for data collection and reporting. For example, in some communities it may not be possible (at least at present) to track academic outcomes based on where students live, rather than where they go to school.

A core expectation of many initiatives is that whole communities will improve as the number of people served by programs increases over time. This growth can be accomplished by increasing the number of people served, increasing the effectiveness of programs, or (ideally) both. The number of people served within a community can be measured as a *penetration rate*—the share of the target

population actually receiving program services. Initiatives must first determine baseline population counts for specific target populations, such as children five and under or households with children. Data from the US Census Bureau or local school districts can be used to establish baseline population counts for target populations. Initiatives can then use current and future enrollment in specific programs (along with data on program effects) to estimate the penetration rates required to produce the desired population-level results.

### 3. Align Evidence-Based Programs to Indicators and Target Populations

Along with scaling programs to serve more people, choosing effective programs (and effective partners to implement these programs) is an essential step to achieving better outcomes. For each desired result, a program or set of programs should be identified that can positively affect these indicators. While there is often little data at the beginning of implementation to help initiatives understand what kind of programs might have the most impact, program effects can be estimated based on evidence from past evaluations, past experience from other partners or communities, national benchmarks, or other data sources.

To the extent possible, initiatives should choose programs with solid evidence demonstrating their effect on the intended indicator and target population. Initiatives should clearly outline each indicator, the programs chosen to affect these indicators, and the evidence base for those programs. Examples of evidence-based programs have been compiled for indicators and populations, such as the Child Trends' What Works Database, the Harlem Children's Zone Cradle through College Pipeline, and the Promise Neighborhoods Institute's Directory of Evidence-Based Practice Databases.

Even if initiatives choose programs with proven evidence of impact, they must still track actual outcomes for their own efforts and make changes as needed to achieve desired results. Past experience has shown that it is not only possible for programs to fail to produce intended results: they may even, in the worst cases, harm participants. Initiatives need to use performance data on programs and implementing partners to avoid such negative outcomes.

### 4. Inventory Available Data and Decide What Original Data Collection is Necessary

Given constrained resources, there are tradeoffs between collecting and reporting data on different indicators and target populations, and initiatives are likely unable to track all of them equally well.<sup>4</sup> In light of such limitations, initiatives should take advantage of data that are readily available and then decide what additional data need to be collected to report on important indicators of interest. Initiatives must balance the cost of data collection with the value of the data to improving programs and

reporting on results. Both individual-level and aggregate data, as well as both program-implementation and outcome data, are needed to tell the full story of an initiative.

Program-implementation data track details of program participation, such as the frequency with which people participate in programs and what types of programs they use. Examples of implementation data at the aggregate level include the number of professional development classes provided to early childhood teachers, or the number of college preparation classes provided to high school seniors. Implementation data at the individual level include the number of times specific clients participate in programs and the duration of client participation (e.g., differentiating between a 20-minute tutoring session and an all-day class).

Outcome data track changes in individual and population conditions. Multiple sources of data are available to assess outcomes, with each providing a different set of strengths and limitations; many of these sources should be used in combination. Initiatives should begin with an understanding of what data are available in their communities.

Cities frequently have, and may make available, local administrative data from or about business licenses, properties (e.g., sales prices, assessed values, building permits, tax delinquencies, code violations), vital statistics (e.g., births, deaths), immunizations, Medicaid/the Children's Health Insurance Program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, child welfare, child maltreatment, education records from public schools (e.g., proficiency scores, absenteeism, school mobility), health records, juvenile court statistics, and reported crimes. Local data intermediaries like the National Neighborhood Indicator Partnership exist in many localities to help collect and make this data available to initiatives working in the community; such intermediaries are likely have a list of locally available data sources for various outcome areas, indicators, and target populations.

Local administrative data may be more readily available in aggregate for certain populations; for example, a school district or census tract. Accessing individual-level outcome data is usually more difficult. For example, the release of identifiable school records requires obtaining written parental consent to comply with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), and accessing health records requires complying with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). Initiatives may also need to negotiate with providers for access to personal data and provide assurances that adequate security procedures are in place to protect private information.

A few communities have created Integrated Data Systems (IDSs), which keep merged data on people, with the data provided by each of the individual programs they receive services from. For example, a local IDS system may have child welfare data which is merged with individual school attendance records and foreclosure notices. Where they exist, IDSs can be an invaluable resource for initiatives.

When data needed to track important outcomes are not collected in existing systems or are not readily available, initiatives may need to collect the data themselves. For example, to understand how parents support children's learning, an initiative may want to survey households in the community to

ask about things such as reading to children and talking to children about college and career. Original data collection requires robust and reliable methods, such as surveys based on a random sample of the population, to produce meaningful information. Initiatives should hire a survey firm or other research experts to help design and field significant data collection tasks.

## 5. Establish an Appropriate Data System

Given the breadth of most initiatives and the range of data elements described in the section above, the use of a shared data system is critical to providing ready access to essential information that different partners will need to be successful. The data system will house regularly collected summary data from local, state, or national sources, as well data collected directly by the initiative. The data system will also need to be conducive to tracking individual-level implementation and outcome data from service providers, also referred to as case management data. Such data systems are important not just for reporting results but also as a management tool for understanding programmatic efforts.

Initiatives can choose to develop their own data systems or to make use of existing systems available for purchase. Software platforms like Social Solution's Efforts to Outcomes, Salesforce, and Community TechKnowledge allow initiatives and program administrators to invest considerably less time than would be required to create their own systems. These products have been developed over many years, with large real-world user bases to draw upon for testing and improvement. While there are many factors to consider, experience has shown that making use of existing technology can allow initiatives to get their data systems up and running faster than starting from scratch.

In addition to selecting the right platform, good data systems require major, sustained investment of both budget and staff resources for design and maintenance. Initiatives should seek staff with the appropriate skills to manage the data system, including data input, organization, cleaning, analysis, and reporting. Initiative leaders may need to train and build the capacity of partners with limited information technology expertise in appropriate data collection and sharing. The importance and magnitude of designing and implementing a data system should not be underestimated in budgets or staffing.

## 6. Collect and Report On Indicators

For each indicator an initiative seeks to measure, it should determine a specific data source, target population, level of data collection, and system for data storage. Each of these elements should remain as consistent as possible through the duration of the initiative to produce comparable data over time. For example, if an initiative measures the graduation rate of a target set of high schools in the baseline year of implementation, and then adds additional target schools in the second year, the summary indicator alone will not be able to describe the impact of the initiative given the changing target population. For this reason, initiatives should work through the preceding steps as fully as possible with all partners before beginning data collection.

After determining the data source, target population, level of data collection, and data storage system for each indicator, initiatives should consider the following checklist for collecting and reporting data:

- Negotiate data-sharing agreements with each partner agency and service provider for data to be shared with and among the initiative.
  - » Create agreements that detail exactly which data will be shared with the initiative by each partner agency and service provider.
  - » Outline terms of access to case management data and other initiative data.
- Institute data security and governance structures to secure and protect data.
  - » Establish a data security plan.
  - » Create a framework of policies and procedures (also called a data governance plan) that direct the handling of data from acquisition to disposal.
  - » Appoint an initiative data manager (who will likely need additional staff support).
  - » Establish an initiative data governance board.
  - » Train initiative and partner staff on data security procedures.
  - » Require staff to sign a confidentiality statement.
- Obtain written consent or authorization to allow partners and other service providers to disclose any personally identifiable information to be shared with the initiative.
  - » Set up procedures to obtain written consent or authorization (e.g., during an enrollment process, at the start of a school year, or when services are delivered).
  - » Ensure proper procedures are followed for data protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other special privacy laws.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Mario Morino, *Leap of Reason: Managing to Outcomes in an Era of Scarcity*, (Washington, DC: Venture Philanthropy Partners, 2011).
2. Much of this guidance is contained in *Measuring Performance: A Guidance Document for Promise Neighborhoods on Collecting Data and Reporting Results*, <http://www.urban.org/publications/412767.html>.
3. For more information, see <http://resultsaccountability.com/>.
4. For a full discussion of these evaluation issues for place-based initiatives, see Joseph S. Wholey, Harry P. Hatry, and Kathryn E. Newcomer, *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

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