



# Five Simple Rules for Evaluating Complex Community Initiatives

By Thomas Kelly, Jr., The Annie E. Casey Foundation

Complex community initiatives are... complex. Evaluating them can be an even more complex undertaking. Community change initiatives (CCIs)<sup>1</sup>, indeed most comprehensive place-based initiatives, consist of multiple interventions over a number of years at individual, group, institutional, social, and political levels. Any one of these interventions could be an evaluation in and of itself, but with a CCI, you want to capture what matters. But what do you measure? How often? Which methods should be used? And how does what you measure influence the very nature of the CCI itself?

Over the past 10 years, the Annie E. Casey Foundation has been funding, implementing, and evaluating Making Connections, a CCI in 10 urban neighborhoods across the U.S. As part of the evaluation team for this initiative, I found that I have compiled lists of rules and lessons for myself about the evaluation process, and these lists have

become important reminders of things to consider when embarking on the evaluation of a comprehensive place-based initiative. In particular, the final evaluation and documentation of Making Connections has reinforced five lessons about evaluating CCIs that I wish I had known ten years ago. They're certainly not hard-and-fast rules—maybe one lesson I've learned from this work is that there are no hard-and-fast rules! Instead, think of them as prompts to consider when planning and implementing evaluations of CCIs and other place-based initiatives.

## ***1. Evaluations of complex, major initiatives are not experiments but part of the community change process***

When it comes to CCIs, there is no single theory or model, no simple causal relationship that can be tested with traditional experimental designs. You can forget



classic approaches such as the objective view of the evaluator and random assignment or control versus treatment cases. Communities are much too complex, and constantly changing as a result of both internal and external forces, and so the community in a place-based initiative becomes simultaneously the experimenter, the research subject, and part of the interventions.

Controlling all the factors at play in a community is impossible. Too many contextual variables are present for evaluators to control for or examine fully—think about the rich fabric of community life, and all the relationships, transactions, forces, and happenstances that occur every day. As researchers, we are limited in our ability to define and control the conditions under which we implement place-based interventions. As a result, CCIs are not appropriate for experimental or quasi-experimental research designs that require both a more certain pre-definition of the intervention we want to test and more control of variables than we are able to have in a changing environment. For example, if a CCI includes a workforce development component and manages to move 100 residents into new jobs, but then a huge company opens up a plant in the neighboring “non-treatment” community and commits to employing 1,000 neighborhood residents, would that mean that the CCI was not effective compared to the community that didn’t have a CCI?

This does not mean that CCIs are not evaluable. To truly understand the impact of a CCI, evaluations must be designed so that they include constant assessment, adaptation of strategy, and accommodation of interventions to new and changing conditions. They must include rigorous measurement tools and methods, and be implemented throughout the life of an initiative, not just at the beginning and the end. The evaluation should catch the construction of the plant in the neighboring community well before the final employment statistics are revealed, and this knowledge should help to direct choices about workforce development as part of the CCI. In this way, the evaluation constantly informs the choices and strategies for community change. The very process of collecting and reporting data become interventions.

This means the evaluation itself is capable of changing a community.

This point alone argues that evaluation must be developed as part of a CCI, linked closely to the CCI’s goals and theories, and not just tagged on as an afterthought to satisfy a donor.

## ***2. Evaluations of CCIs need a strong focus on the processes of community change***

Building on the first point, credible, useful, and relevant evaluations of CCIs need to focus not on simple cause-and-effect relationships, but instead should strive to illuminate the interactions across multiple pathways over

time. Predicting cause and effect isn't possible in complex community systems, nor can we replicate the exact conditions and interactions in another community because of the unique factors and history of each one. For this reason, an evaluation that focuses solely on establishing causal relationships will not contribute meaningful and useful information; even if a methodologically rigorous evaluation could uncover the relevant cause-effect relationships, we would be unable to replicate the same success in another place and at a different time.

Instead, evaluations of CCI should include a strong focus on documenting and examining process, implementation, interactions, and multiple effects (intended and unintended); and these methods must provide information in real-time (or as close as possible) for learning and feedback to the community. Unfortunately, many evaluations give process less attention and dedicate the majority of resources to documenting outcomes and establishing causality. But in CCIs, the process of community change is both the intervention and the intended outcome (as well as the output) and as such, we need an intentional focus on documenting the factors that influence change, not just what the change results in on the other side. Moreover, focusing on the process allows the evaluation to directly inform ongoing decisions related to strategy and approach. One prominent evaluation researcher calls this approach complexity-based developmental evaluation.<sup>2</sup> Developmental evaluation offers CCIs the ability to include in their multiple interventions the assessment, learning, and critical analysis that evaluation can bring if it is both integrated in and responsive to the changing needs of the community.

### ***3. Evaluations of CCIs need to measure ongoing progress towards achieving outcomes and results in order to help a community guide its change process and hold itself accountable***

Although a stronger focus needs to be placed on assessing and providing feedback on the process, complex relationships, and interactions present in a CCI, this does not mean that outcomes and results should not or cannot be defined or measured. In fact, the 10-year experience of Making Connections emphasized the need for complex community initiatives to define specific results on which all community participants can focus, and hold themselves collectively accountable as well.

Achievement of positive outcomes and results is how the process of community change is reinforced and sustained. CCIs are the most successful when they have been able to define explicit results and outcomes that multiple agents and community constituencies can share. These results provide the focus and mission (the “so what”), but also the relevancy and reinforcement that community change processes must have to justify the difficulties

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of transforming the status quo. For example, despite the diversity of the Making Connections sites (and their very different development trajectories), each of the communities was focused on achieving a few positive outcomes such as an increase in the number of children who are prepared to succeed in school. A goal like this can serve as a benchmark for multiple stakeholders in a community, even though each stakeholder may approach it quite differently, be it providing immunizations, creating an urban garden to ensure access to fresh fruits and vegetables, launching a literacy campaign, or lobbying for educational policy changes in the school district.

The extent to which communities can collaboratively and comprehensively come to common agreement and understanding of a reasonably sized shared list of outcomes is again a measure of whether community change, that is change of and by the community, is possible. Evaluations play a role in helping communities define not only reasonable outcomes based on their goals and needs, but also in developing meaningful measures of progress that will inform and provide feedback on an ongoing basis over several years.

Evaluations of CCIs also need to help communities understand the difference between program or single agency-level outcomes and neighborhood-wide or population-level outcomes, and measure each. Community-wide change at the population level is rarely achieved through an additive process of multiple tactics or actors. Instead, simultaneous strategies occurring at multiple levels within the system are needed. Data measurement and evaluation must help communities and implementers measure incremental changes, such as the number of community residents who found new jobs, as well as instrumental or system change, such as a drop in the neighborhood unemployment rate or a shift in workforce development policies at the state level.

Evaluation here is not simply the regular measurement of performance and interim progress. With transparent reporting of data, it is also an instrument of accountability and feedback capable of motivating, informing, and reinforcing positive change. CCIs need to include and integrate evaluation as an intentional intervention and evaluators need to be prepared to act and interact within the community change process in this way—evaluation as an instrument of learning and accountability.



#### **4. Evaluations of CCIs need to understand, document, and explain the multiple theories of change at work over time**

Given the broad scope of intervention and reach that CCIs embrace, many initiatives have struggled with focus and an integrated approach or theory. Often what is named or defined as “theory” within CCIs is a general theory of implementation, a theory of how the primary funders and implementers intend to act on and with the community. Too often, we do not explicitly define upfront the theories of achieving broad community scale and reaching an improved and sustainable state of transformation. However, having a clear, broadly shared theory of how community change happens is important to helping the field advance.<sup>3</sup>

Evaluations traditionally focus on single theories—for example, increasing the childcare tax credit will increase work among single mothers—but in a CCI a single theory is not sufficient. CCIs are usually driven by multiple theories from a wide range of disciplines. Microeconomics, macroeconomics, sociology, cultural anthropology, individual and community psychology, organizational behavior, management science, political science, and many other frameworks or theories provide a basis of understanding community change and their related interventions. Evaluations of CCIs cannot track and measure all these theories. However, they should help communities and implementers understand the implications of these theories for program design and document the effects that the critical ones have on the community change process at different times.

As stated in rule #1, CCI evaluations cannot be conducted with a goal of documenting and proving a single strategy for replicating community change because community transformation is a complex process that cannot be replicated exactly. Instead, evaluations in these initiatives need to document and explain which relevant forces, strategies, and interactions are important to pay attention to at different stages of change. This will help inform future decisions and implementation strategies that increase the likelihood of positive impact.

#### **5. Evaluations of CCIs need to prioritize real-time learning and the community’s capacity to understand and use data from evaluations**

CCI evaluations and evaluators need to prioritize the learning and accountability capacity of the community as a critical requirement of the evaluation but also a necessary element of community change. This self-assessment and learning capacity cannot be built only within a few individuals or organizations. If communities are going to create and sustain large-scale change within their systems, learning and accountability need to be fundamentally integrated at all levels and across the community as a whole.

Building self-evaluation, learning, and accountability capacity and infrastructure among and inside organizations, systems, and the community is a necessary task of the evaluation. CCI evaluators need to understand and apply adult-learning and organizational change approaches to building and incentivizing assessment and analysis capabilities. CCI evaluators need to build their own capacity to evaluate change while simultaneously being an engaged and trusted participant in the community change process and in community itself. Also, to be relevant and effective, CCI evaluations cannot be implemented “outside” the community. Both the community and evaluators need to build relationships and capacity to work together to make sure that effective community transformation is informed and reinforced by strong and relevant data collection, analysis, and reporting on process and outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

As part of Making Connections, The Annie E. Casey Foundation made a commitment to undertaking this type of broad evaluation of its sites, and gathered both quantitative and qualitative data to help to inform the community change process and its outcomes. But perhaps most importantly, the lessons from Making Connections and other place-based demonstrations will help others to understand not only the links between process, interventions and outcomes, but also the critical role that evaluation can play in ensuring those outcomes. Evaluation implemented well and practiced intentionally can be the most critical ingredient of transformative community change. **CI**

# Endnotes

## Community Change Initiatives from 1990-2010

- 1 The full publication will be available in summer 2010. For more information, see [www.aspenroundtable.org](http://www.aspenroundtable.org) or contact [akubisch@aspenroundtable.org](mailto:akubisch@aspenroundtable.org)

## Understanding the Different Types of Low-Income Neighborhoods

- 1 Elwood M. Hopkins is Managing Director of Emerging Markets, Inc. and President of the Center for Place-Based Initiatives. Juan Aquino, Rudolph Espinoza, and Daniel Tellalian also contributed to this article.
- 2 *Managing Neighborhood Change, A Framework for Sustainable and Equitable Revitalization* (2006), Alan Mallach proposes a six-type classification system based on the condition of the local housing stock, homebuyer characteristics, and housing prices. For each type, he specifies strategies for improving housing as well as the implications of these strategies on local residents. In a 2005 study entitled, "Housing in the Nation's Capital," Margery Austin Turner, G. Thomas Kingsley, Kathryn L.S. Pettit, Jessica Cigna, and Michael Eiseman propose a new neighborhood typology for Washington, DC neighborhoods based on housing characteristics.
- 3 The Center for Housing Policy uses a composite of data on subprime lending, foreclosures, and mortgage delinquencies to categorize neighborhoods according to foreclosure risk. Similarly, in *Using Data to Characterize Foreclosure Markets*, Phyllis Betts at the University of Memphis segmented five different types of home loan borrowers (in terms of their level of financial precariousness and ability to absorb a mortgage) and characterized neighborhoods according to which type of borrower predominates. She then factors in the type of housing stock and general housing market trends, discovering four distinct neighborhood types: Classic Distressed; Transitional-Declining; Stable Neighborhoods of Choice; and Transitional-Upgrading.
- 4 In *Contributions of Accessibility and Visibility Characteristics to Neighborhood Typologies and their Predictions of Physical Activity and Health*, a team from the University of Michigan and Detroit Health Department proposed nine neighborhood types in terms of health impact. For each, the team correlated physical characteristics (housing density, sidewalk coverage, street configurations, pedestrian pathways) to physical activity of residents and the prevalence of heart disease, diabetes, dietary cancers, and obesity.
- 5 In 2005, the USC School of Policy, Planning, and Development compared twenty residential neighborhood types in terms of the mobility patterns of residents. They separated neighborhoods by their location in the inner city, inner suburbs, outer suburbs, or exurban areas. The types are grouped according to clusters of traits that influence transportation decisions: street configurations, access to freeways or public transit, local land uses, topographies versus level ground and so on.
- 6 In *How Does Family Well-Being Vary across Different Types of Neighborhoods?*, Margery Austin Turner and Deborah Kaye use data from the National Survey of America's Families to classify neighborhoods as family environments. The authors of *Neighborhood Poverty: Policy Implications in Studying Neighborhoods*, tackle a similar task. In "Explorations in Neighborhood Differentiation" in *The Sociological Quarterly*, Donald Warren compares service utilization across neighborhoods.
- 7 In *Sharing America's neighborhoods: The Process for Stable Racial Integration*, Ingrid Gould Ellen examines six types of neighborhoods in various stages of racial and ethnic transition. For each, she identifies a typical bundle of quantifiable factors (ethnic breakdown, tenure, and demographic shifts under way) and qualitative factors like overall social stability. In *Paths of Neighborhood Change*, Richard Taub, D. Garth Taylor, and John Dunham identify eight neighborhood types at different stages of evolution from decline to gentrification to stability.

## Five Simple Rules for Evaluating Complex Community Initiatives

- 1 CCIs here are defined broadly and include community change initiatives, complex community initiatives, comprehensive community initiatives, and even comprehensive place-based initiatives.
- 2 Patton, M.Q. (2006). Evaluation for the way we work. *Nonprofit Quarterly*, Spring, 28-33.

- 3 Weiss, C. (1995). Nothing as practical as good theory: Exploring theory-based evaluation for comprehensive community initiatives for children and families, in J. Connell, A. Kubisch, and L. Schorr (Eds.), *New Approaches To Evaluating Community Initiatives: Concepts, Methods, and Contexts*, Washington, DC: Aspen Institute.

## Understanding How Place Matters for Kids

- 1 Leventhal, T. and J. Brooks-Gunn. (2000). "The neighborhoods they live in: Effects of neighborhood residence upon child and adolescent outcomes." *Psychological Bulletin* 126; Leventhal, T., V. Dupere, & J. Brooks-Gunn. (2009). "Neighborhood Influences on Adolescent Development." In R. M. Lerner & L. Steinberg (Eds.), *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology* (3rd ed). New York: John Wiley and Sons; Sampson, R.J., J. Morenoff, and T. Gannon-Rowley. (2002). "Assessing 'Neighborhood Effects': Social Processes and New Directions in Research." *Annual Review of Sociology* 28:443-478; Sampson, R. J., S.W. Raudenbush, F. Earls. (1997). "Neighborhoods and Violent Crime: A Multilevel Study of Collective Efficacy." *Science Magazine*. August 1997 277(5328): 918-24.
- 2 Johnson, Heidi. (2009). "Vulnerable Youth and the Transition to Adulthood: Youth in Distressed Neighborhoods, ASPE Research Brief." Washington, D.C. The Urban Institute.
- 3 Tough, Paul. (2008). *Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada's Quest to Change Harlem and America*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- 4 Bronfenbrenner, Urie. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Harvard University Press, 1979; Bronfenbrenner, Urie. 1989. Ecological Systems Theory. *Annals of Child Development*, 6, 187-249.
- 5 Ellen, Ingrid Gould and Margery A. Turner. (1997). "Does neighborhood matter? Assessing recent evidence." *Housing Policy Debate* 8:833-866; Leventhal, T. and J. Brooks-Gunn. (2004). "Diversity in developmental Trajectories across Adolescence: Neighborhood Influences." Pp. 451-486 in *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology* (2nd ed), edited by R. M. Lerner and L. Steinberg. New York: John Wiley and Sons. Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, supra note 1; Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley, supra note 1.
- 6 Edelman, Peter, Harry Holzer, and Paul Offner. (2006). *Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press; Holzer, Harry. (2009). "The Employment Problems of Men in Segregated Urban Areas." In Margery A. Turner, Susan J. Popkin, and Lynette Rawlings. *Public Housing and the Legacy of Segregation*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press: 237-246.
- 7 Alan Guttmacher Institute. (1994). "Sex and America's teenagers." Author, New York; Albert, B., S. Brown, and C. Flanigan. (2003). "14 and Younger: The Sexual Behavior of Young Adolescents." National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, Washington, DC; Cooksey, Elizabeth, Ronald Rindfuss, and David Guilkey. (1996). "The Initiation of Adolescent Sexual and Contraceptive Behavior During Changing Times." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 37:59-74; Tubman, J. G., M. Windle, and R. C. Windle. (1996). "Cumulative sexual intercourse patterns among middle adolescents: Problem behavior precursors and concurrent health risk behaviors." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 18:182-191; Johnson, supra note 2.
- 8 Furstenberg, Frank F., Jr., Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, and S. Phillip Morgan. (1987). *Adolescent mothers in later life*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Kendall-Tackett, Kathleen A., Linda Meyer Williams, and David Finkelhor. 1993. "Impact of Sexual Abuse on Children: A Review and Synthesis of Recent Empirical Studies." *Psychological Bulletin* 113.
- 9 Quane, James M. 2008. "Low-Income Female Caregivers' Expectations for Their Adolescent Sons or Daughters in Disadvantaged Urban Neighborhoods." Unpublished paper
- 10 Sampson, Robert J. 2008. "Moving to Inequality: Neighborhood Effects and Experiments Meet Social Structure." *American Journal of Sociology* 114(1): 189-231.
- 11 Browning, Christopher R., Tama Leventhal, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn. 2005. "Sexual Initiation in Early: The Nexus of Parental and Community Control." *American Sociological Review* 70: 758-778; Sampson, Robert J., Jeffrey D. Morenoff and Stephen Raudenbush. 2005. "Social Anatomy of Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Violence." *American Journal of Public Health* 95 (2): 224-232.
- 12 Jencks, Christopher, and S. Mayer. "The Social Consequences of Growing Up in a Poor Neighborhood." In *Inner-City Poverty in the United States*, edited by Laurence Lynn, Jr. and Michael McGeary. Washington: Nat. Acad. Press, 1990; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, supra note 1.