

Why Are Evidence-Based Programs So Important?

by Lisa Williams-Taylor

Criminal offenses make a significant impact on not only those directly affected but also society as a whole. Despite decades of research on the risk factors related to crime and crime's cause and prevention, violent crime¹ increased by 1.9 percent between 2005 and 2006. The U.S. Department of Justice (2007) reported that juveniles accounted for 16.5 percent (73,991 arrests) of the violent crimes in 2006.

Local communities are one of the many entities plagued with the problem of crime, and local government managers are in search of answers for what can be done about crime and the various related social problems. The question becomes whether anything really works in preventing crime. Many anti-crime programs target children and their families, but most have shown only modest effect when tested using a rigorous research design (August et al. 2004, 2018).

This modest return has led service providers to begin searching for programs with scientifically accepted results. City and county managers charged with finding the most effective ways to use tax dollars are leading the push toward finding what works best.

Recent research shows that some programs are in fact effective in combating the propensity for delinquency and later criminal involvement. These programs usually intervene early in the child's life. According to Welsh and Farrington (2007), many government entities are recognizing the significant impact that scientifically authenticated early prevention programs can have on protecting children from embarking on a life of crime:

- The states of Washington and Oregon have passed legislation requiring scientific evidence that positive program results are probable before funding is approved (Chemers and Reed 2005, 261).
- In the Government Performance Results Act of 1993, Congress required federal agencies to set program goals, measure performance, and report publicly on their progress (Chemers and Reed 2005, 261).
- Nonprofit organizations such as the Children's Defense Fund, the Child Welfare League of America, and Fight Crime: Invest in Kids are promoting evidence-based methods to prevent childhood delinquency.
- The National Academies' Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development and its Juvenile Crime: Prevention, Treatment, and Control project as well as the Surgeon General's 2001 report on youth violence highlight the importance of evidence-based programming.

If we have so many entities agreeing on what works to significantly decrease crime in our communities and protect citizens, you would expect that the social movement of investing in evidence-based programs would be greatly expanding. This is not the case: it is only slowly gaining momentum.

One possible reason is that investing in children today may not show community impacts for years to come. Although we may begin to see some early behavioral changes in children touched directly by programs, community impacts take longer to see; and funders, government entities, and politicians want and need to show immediate results. One way to do that is through education, clearly demonstrating that investing in the early years of a child's life yields the greatest return on investment.

According to prison projections, in 2011 the national incarceration rate will be 562 per 100,000, or one in every 178 people (Pew Charitable Trusts 2007, 234). This is a 13 percent

increase compared with 2007, and it means an additional \$27.5 billion in costs—billions that could be better spent on prevention programs and education.

The return on money spent on prevention could be enormous: fewer children dropping out of high school, less likelihood of them becoming teen parents, and a greater likelihood of them becoming contributing members of society. Even more important, crime rates could well be lower and fewer individuals victimized.

A MANDATE FOR RETURN ON INVESTMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Funders want to invest in programs that have demonstrated outcomes, which means achieving a good return on investment. Implementing evidence-based programs helps ensure that this happens and helps agencies and organizations move toward accountability. Too often programs continue to receive funding without ever showing that what they do works for the children and families they serve:

In an era of increasingly tight fiscal budgets, public sector policymakers need more objective and impartial means of reviewing publicly funded programs to determine if the greatest value is being provided for the taxpayer's dollars. No longer can these policymakers assume that programs are effective simply because the program's supporters assert that they are effective (Brown 2005).

"In times of shrinking budgets and increasing federal and state deficits, policymakers and practitioners must make efficient use of prevention resources by opting for programs that have the greatest likelihood of producing positive effects" (Kyler, Bumbarger, and Greenberg, 2005).

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP) conducted

research examining the benefits and costs of prevention and early intervention programs for children and youth; it focused on three main areas: (1) identifying which programs produce a positive return on the dollar; (2) developing criteria to ensure fidelity and quality of program implementation, and (3) developing recommendations for state legislation encouraging local governments to invest in evidence-based programming and providing these governments entities reimbursements for implementing such programs (Pizzigati, Stuck, and Ness 2002). WSIPP found that some programs do produce positive effects and also generate more benefits than costs.

Conversely, they also found that some programs were not good investments and, thus, an inefficient use of taxpayer money. A program may appear on the surface to work and logically should work, but when formally and rigorously evaluated it may show no results or may in fact be harmful to the population it serves. One such program is Scared Straight.

Participants in Scared Straight are juveniles who visit prisons with the intention of decreasing the likelihood of their engaging in criminal activity by making them aware of what incarceration is really like. Although it has been implemented across the nation, a meta-analysis of experimental studies showed a negative effect—an increase in subsequent criminal activity—by participating youth (Petrosino and Lavenberg 2007). Despite these research findings, a state representative recently signed legislation that required schools in Chicago to implement this program (Dodge 2006).

WHAT IS AN EVIDENCE-BASED PROGRAM?

No universal definition exists for the term "evidence-based program." Evidence-based is often used synonymously with research-based and science-based programming. Other terms commonly used are promising programs, model programs, effective programs, and exemplary programs. Each of these terms has a different

meaning depending on the organization defining them.

At least 23 organizations have created various criteria to rate program effectiveness on a scale of evidence basing. Although the varying terms and criteria may be confusing, most definitions of evidence-based do include such common elements as a strong theoretical foundation and evidence of effectiveness.

For a program to show evidence of effectiveness, it must include a strong research design testing the outcomes. This means using a randomized control trial (RCT) or quasi-experimental design. The RCT (experimental design) is often referred to as the gold standard in research. An in-depth discussion of research designs and methodology is outside the scope of this report, but it is important to note that specific types of studies are needed in order to say that a program is working and achieving specific outcomes.

Without an evaluation that compares a group that received the program or intervention with another group that did not, it would be difficult to determine whether the program and intervention caused the differences between the two groups. If participants are simply measured before and after they receive treatment, the measurement cannot say that the gains they made would not have occurred despite the intervention.

Other characteristics of a rigorous research design are an adequate sample size (meaning there was a sufficient number of research subjects who received the intervention); a measurement of sustainability; replication; and a measure of participants' gains or changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors.

One example of rigorous research is the Nurse-Family Partnership (David Olds) program. This is a home-visiting program for first-time, low-income, at-risk mothers; it promotes improved maternal, prenatal, and early childhood health. Outcomes achieved include:

- **Improved birth outcomes:** Decreased low birth weights, preterm delivery, and neuro-developmental impairment.
- **Improved outcomes for at-risk mothers:** Reduced rates of subsequent pregnancy, reduction in maternal behavioral problems caused by substance use, reduction in school dropout rates, reduction in unemployment, reduced use of welfare and food stamps, and fewer arrests.
- **Improved child outcomes:** Reduced rates of childhood injury, abuse, and neglect. Long-term follow-up also shows children have

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fewer sexual partners, reduced cigarette smoking and alcohol use, and fewer arrests and convictions 15 years later.

WHAT CAN BE DONE IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

Palm Beach County, Florida, is buzzing about evidence-based programming, and various organizations have begun to move in this direction. For example, the local school district, criminal justice commission, and the Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County (CSC)² are each implementing nationally rated, evidence-based programs.

CSC, an independent special district of local government in the county, has taken this initiative a step further. For CSC to be accountable to taxpayers by helping children and families, the organization has to expect the programs and services it funds to demonstrate that they are achieving positive results.

This means that CSC is either funding programs that are already nationally rated as evidence-based, providing services that enable children to enter programs that are evidence-based, or embarking on a continuum of becoming evidenced-based. This continuum is a tiered system in which programs move up when they have more evidence of effectiveness. An example might be moving from "promising" to "effective" to eventually reaching "model" program status.

To assist in this process, CSC organized an evidence-based program committee consisting of a cross-section of divisions and outside consultants. The committee both gathers research on nationally rated, evidence-based programs and constructs an assessment tool composed of specific criteria to rate locally funded programs.

This tool will enable CSC to see where programs and services fall on a continuum of effectiveness so that CSC can better understand program needs and also assist programs in their journey toward becoming more effective. It is CSC's goal to eventually have this tool available for others to use. A Web-based database of evidence-based programs will also be available for other organizations across the nation to use in their efforts to fund evidence-based programs.

The process of moving programs toward becoming evidence-based is time-consuming and takes investment and collaboration among multiple stakeholders. We know that not all programs in the community will have the resources necessary to complete a rigorous experimental study, which is a requirement to become labeled evidence-based.

All programs should have some fundamental evidence, such as a logic model, and should be actively collecting data in order to show some level of effectiveness for those they serve. If funders begin moving in this direction and begin advocating that others in their communities do the same, we will begin seeing results and spending money where it is best used—on programs that work and get sustainable results—which is a true return on investment. **PM**

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¹Violent crimes include murder and non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault.

²In 1986, the citizens of Palm Beach County recognized the widening gap between the growing needs of children and their families and the limited resources available to meet those needs. In response, they voted overwhelmingly to create the CSC to specifically support services for the children and families of Palm Beach County.

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(Open to Full ICMA members only)

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May 14-17

ICMA Gettysburg Leadership Institute
Gettysburg Hotel & Battlefield,
Gettysburg, Pennsylvania
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May 25-30

LGMA National Congress/International
Leading Practices Symposium
Gold Coast Convention and Exhibition
Centre, Queensland, Australia

June 4-6

The Alliance for Innovation-2008
Transforming Local Government
Conference
Carolina First Center, Greenville,
South Carolina

July 1

Application Deadline
ICMA's Voluntary Credentialing
Program

August 15

Application Deadline
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PM Look to ICMA

The ICMA Center for Performance Measurement (CPM) helps local governments with evidence-based decision making. ICMA's Comparative Performance Measurement Program currently assists more than 220 cities and counties in the United States and Canada with the collection, analysis, and application of performance information. Visit icma.org/performance for more information or to join.

One of ICMA's pre-conference workshops at the 2008 ICMA Annual Conference in Richmond, Virginia, is “Prevention Programs: Proven Strategies for Achieving Results, a Local Government Management Seminar.” It will be held on Sunday, September 21. To see a full schedule of conference events, visit icma.org/conference2008.