

# Community Collaborations and Youth Development: Preliminary Findings on the State of the Evidence

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*“Community-based approaches to improving outcomes for residents of poor neighborhoods have been shown to have great potential. In order for them to fulfill that potential, we need to learn how to do them better. Learning how to do them better will depend on improving the knowledge base about how to bring about community change, how to implement community change strategies, how to assess what is working and why, and, finally, how to ensure that all of the key actors make use of and apply that knowledge.” — Auspos & Kubisch, 2004*

In 2004, the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change emphasized the need for a comprehensive base of information on the effectiveness of community collaborations for youth — an accessible, evidence-rich resource that could guide local efforts to bring about meaningful change. Nearly 10 years later, this need remains largely unmet. In communities across the country, cross-sector partnerships are working to improve the lives of young people. As the number of these collaborations has grown dramatically in recent years, an accurate, up-to-date understanding of the outcomes of such efforts is even more essential than it was a decade ago.

To help close the current gap between research and practice, we undertook an exhaustive review of the existing research and evaluations of collaborative community efforts. In this brief,<sup>1</sup> we review collaborations that have targeted public health and broader youth development outcomes and whose efforts have been evaluated.

We are less concerned here with listing the policy or practice recommendations developed from assessing the evidence — the typical product of a systematic review. Rather, we focus on identifying the prevalence in the empirical literature of various methods of evaluating collaborations, and on relating those approaches to findings across different types of outcomes.

For our purpose, we define “community collaborations” as

1 This brief precedes a forthcoming paper based on this systematic review and analysis, which will also include an analysis of the themes from the existing research.

multiple organizations working interdependently toward a common goal to improve community outcomes<sup>2</sup>. These outcomes fall into three general categories (Auspos & Kubisch, 2004):

1. Collaboration outcomes (e.g., increased trust and communication among the participants)
2. Community capacity outcomes (e.g., increased civic engagement)
3. Social outcomes (e.g., reduced teen pregnancy rates or improved high school graduation rates)

## How Previous Reviews Approached This Subject

Earlier reviews have found that most of the empirical evidence on the effectiveness of community collaborations tends to focus on the first two types of outcomes. For example, while one review of collaborations in the community health field (Granner and Sharpe, 2004) identified 146 measurement scales or indices of effectiveness, very few of these indicators addressed the impact on young people themselves. Meanwhile, another review of two decades of coalition research in public health (Zakocs and Edwards, 2006) completely avoided “outcomes” as a measure of effectiveness, relying instead on coalition functioning and community-wide changes as “indicators.”

In addition to focusing only on a limited set of outcomes, these earlier studies varied widely in their approach to producing evidence — from interviews with a single member of a collaborative effort to multi-community, randomized control-group trials. Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses. Typically, however, the earlier reviews lumped these various methods together as if they were alike.

2 In this brief, we focus on comprehensive community change efforts; thus, laudable, important, and potentially effective efforts such as individual community schools are not included as they generally focus on improving outcomes for a specific sub-population of a community.

## Our Approach

Our own search focused on two general areas: the interventions (community collaboration) and their focus (children and youth). We did not restrict our search to specific outcomes since we wanted to cast a wide net to see what evidence exists regarding a wide variety of outcomes. We included empirical articles, which could range from single-community case studies to multi-community randomized control trials. Because community work is so contextualized, we restricted our search to studies in the United States. We began by searching the ProQuest database, a meta-aggregator of databases, including PsycInfo, ERIC, Sociological Abstracts, and Dissertation Abstracts International, among others. We included scholarly journals, reports, books, conference papers and proceedings, and dissertations and theses in our results.

The initial search parameters identified 1,000 relevant publications. However, after applying our inclusion criteria, and after several rounds of review by the research team, we winnowed our final sample to approximately 40 publications that reported primary empirical results from research evaluations on community collaborations. After reviewing these publications, we looked to organizations that conduct research or fund programs on children and youth, and on collaborations.<sup>3</sup>

### Initial findings from our review:

- Very little empirical research on community collaborations has focused on children and youth. A multitude of papers have focused on *why* communities should engage in comprehensive, collaborative action and on how to undertake such efforts. However, few of these papers present a research base to support their contentions.
- Most existing research involves single-community

<sup>3</sup> Organizations included Annie E. Casey Foundation, Aspen Roundtable on Community Change, Aspen Forum on Community Solutions, Bridgespan Group, Chapin Hall, Child Trends, Ford Foundation, FSG, John M. Gardner Center at Stanford University, Mathematica, and MDRC.

case studies that take a narrative approach in describing the work of the collaborations; only a few discuss policy changes and other systems-level outcomes. The quality of case studies also varies greatly. Some, for example, involve comprehensive assessments, from the systems level down to residents of the community. Others simply tell the story of the collaboration, highlighting apparent successes and failures but lacking a systematic methodology or analysis. While there is real value to these case studies, their benefit is limited by their scale. They encounter the “N of 1” problem: that is, in identifying community-level outcomes, the unit of analysis is the community. Thus, each community is considered a single observation, whereas multiple observations are needed to provide more generalizable results.

- Most other studies have focused on how well the collaborations worked rather than the results they achieved. Typically, these studies employ surveys of participants in the collaboration to gauge the level of trust among them, how much they communicate with each other, whether they share visions and goals, and how decisions are made. While a collaboration that functions well is *presumed* to be essential to creating conditions that lead to improved lives for children and youth, there is not yet enough data on the impact of community collaborations to confidently extrapolate that well functioning collaborations mean improved outcomes for young people.
- Several studies have examined community capacity outcomes, such as whether efforts are coordinated and focused on previously identified problems. As examples, the evaluations of New Futures, Rebuilding Communities Initiative, Neighborhood and Family Initiative, and Neighborhood Improvement Initiative all examined whether these collaborations strengthened programming and brought more resources into the communities. The evaluations found that the collaborations did not increase

capacity in every community.

- Very few studies have estimated the impact of community collaborations on outcomes for children and youth. The few exceptions (such as evaluations on Communities that Care and PROSPER) have primarily focused on risk behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use, and teen pregnancy, with some findings on educational outcomes such as high school dropout rates. Interestingly, and importantly, the evaluations of the initiatives mentioned in the previous finding also estimated the impact on children and youth; finding, more or less, no or negative effects.

## Conclusions

Our preliminary analysis reveals few empirical studies of community collaborations focused on children and youth. Most of the existing evaluations, moreover, are individual case studies. The knowledge we can glean from such reports is valuable but far from complete.

Across the country, initiatives such as Promise Neighborhoods, Grad Nation Communities, the STRIVE Network, and Ready by 21 are promoting and catalyzing collaborative efforts. To realize the full potential within collaborations to produce the positive changes they seek for young people, to build a data-driven base of best practices that can inform efforts in other communities, and to cultivate support from potential funders and participants, more evidence is needed that empirically demonstrates the effectiveness of these efforts. The long-term success of the community collaboration movement may ultimately depend on how well its champions meet this challenge.