Demonstrating Return on Investment Through Evaluation: Recommendations From the Field

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Gang violence presents a significant concern for many cities, and municipal leaders employ a range of alternatives to improve public safety. Increasingly, comprehensive prevention and intervention strategies complement what was once an exclusive focus on suppression. While these comprehensive approaches hold significant promise, the current economic climate of limited resources and extensive budget cuts requires evidence to justify ongoing investment. Cities must demonstrate that comprehensive strategies go well beyond making sense from a policy perspective and actually contribute to significant improvements in the problem. Evaluation can provide critical insight into the value, sustainability, and impact of implementation.

In May 2011, staff from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) and the National League of Cities met with representatives from five cities (Los Angeles, Oakland, San Bernardino, San Jose, and Santa Rosa) in the California City Gang Prevention Network (CCGPN) that have evaluated their comprehensive violence prevention initiative and/or key program elements. Summit participants assumed a unique endeavor—to "rise above" the talk about program evaluation and address how best to evaluate comprehensive community initiatives. In doing so, they sought to contribute to the discussion about how to understand progress (or lack thereof) of comprehensive gang reduction strategies, and also comprehensive neighborhood improvement efforts and other "place-based" strategies.

This report synthesizes the key findings from the California Cities Gang Prevention Network Evaluation Summit. It describes the utility of evaluation for Network cities and options to consider when choosing an evaluator. It also provides an overview of the fundamental principles to consider when developing an evaluation of a comprehensive initiative.

I. The Utility of Evaluation: Examples From Network Cities

Evaluation can serve as a powerful tool to demonstrate and promote the success of a comprehensive violence prevention initiative. It offers critical insight into how to refine programs and policies to increase their impact on saving money and lives.

Evaluation Summit Goals and Process

The goals of the California Cities Gang Prevention Network Evaluation Summit were threefold:

1. To take a first step towards demonstrating the success of comprehensive strategies in reducing gang violence and increasing community health;

2. To provide a source of peer support and feedback; and

3. To develop a set of "recommendations from the field" for evaluating comprehensive gang prevention and reduction initiatives.

During the two-day summit, which was sponsored by the California Endowment and the California Wellness Foundation, participating Network cities described their evaluation processes and findings to date. They also discussed the challenges they faced and the lessons learned from planning, executing, and disseminating their results.

It provides key evidence to support advocacy efforts; continue funding; or shift local, regional, or statewide policies. It also encourages organizations to integrate systems for measurement and data collection into their infrastructure and operations over the long term. Network cities have used evaluation to accomplish a variety of specific and tangible objectives.

Ensure Maximum Efficiency and Effectiveness: Cities use evaluation to establish a return on investment and document how increasingly limited resources support activities and efforts that produce positive outcomes with maximum efficiency. Both San Jose and Santa Rosa require grantees to incorporate continuous quality improvement (CQI) measures (e.g., information about customer outcomes, customer satisfaction, and financial performance, and compliance to measure and improve products and services to customers) into their routine recordkeeping in an effort to hold programs accountable. Organizations receive an initial data summary

along with evaluation coaching to help interpret results and integrate findings into programming and services, creating the opportunity for agencies to improve without immediate budget consequences. San Jose also looks at each agency's progress over time, making annual comparisons to past performance, and considers these data when making tough funding decisions.

Identify Successful Program Elements: All cities want to know "what works" in reducing gang violence and participation, and evaluation is the only way to identify the programs and activities that actually make a difference. Oakland used evaluation to understand the most successful components of their comprehensive initiative. For example, examining service delivery and client outcomes for individuals who received street outreach, reentry, community education, and employment/ training/placement services, evaluators found that this combination of services yielded better results in recidivism rates and fewer probation violations among both youth and adult participants. In Los Angeles, evaluation data showed statistically significant reductions in risk factors and risk behaviors for youth receiving comprehensive intervention services. The Los Angeles evaluation also highlighted specific programs with promising results, such as the Summer Night Lights program, where after-dark park activities contributed to increased safety and reduced gang violence.

Expand Comprehensive Strategy Support: In an age where voters want quick, easy, and cheap solutions to complex social problems, evaluation results offer city leaders a platform to build support and buy-in from policy makers and the broader community. San Bernardino built support for its overall strategy by engaging residents in measuring perception changes in neighborhood violence, police response, and community commitment attributable to initial implementation activities. This data collection approach engaged citizens in the process, provided substantial qualitative and quantitative information, and served as a marketing tool for the initiative. San Jose increased awareness and support for their work by incorporating different aspects of the evaluation findings into their presentations to the mayor's task force and broader community. Qualitative data offered anecdotal evidence and case examples to highlight personal stories and individual participant changes. Quantitative outcome measures and time trend data demonstrated the larger impact of the overall strategy.

Support Ongoing Sustainability: Programs and approaches that demonstrate success and positive impact can leverage these findings when seeking to sustain or increase funding. The evaluation of Oakland's Measure Y, a parcel tax that allocates funds to expand needed violence prevention programs and increases the number of police officers in Oakland neighborhoods, helped build constituent support for Measure BB, an amendment to continue financially supporting the 60+ programs in the comprehensive initiatives. The findings illustrated the positive outcomes of the programs, built community awareness for the initiative, and instilled citizen confidence about the return on its parcel tax investment—

resulting in voter passage of the new amendment.

Build Long-term Capacity: Data collection may last well beyond the formal evaluation period. Thus, helping community-based organizations improve their capacity to collect and interpret data furthers not only the goals of the overall initiative, but leads to more successful and productive programs. Los Angeles evaluators developed a new instrument, the Youth Service Eligibility Tool (YSET), to measure levels of risk among youth referred to prevention services. The YSET enables service providers and researchers to analyze changes in risk factors, behaviors, and gang involvement for each participant and to tailor services for particular high risk youth. It also improves organizational skills in data collection, management, and integration. Oakland created a new database to track and evaluate community policing (one of the primary initiative goals). The Scanning, Analysis, Response, and Assessment (SARA) system requires police officers to document community-identified problems, proposed solutions, responses, and the outcomes from intervention. The process builds individual officer problem-solving skills, increases the accountability of the police department, and provides a source of community policing impact data for the city.

II. Choosing Your Evaluator: Options to Consider

Evaluators shape the foundation of a measurement strategy and bring an unbiased, academic perspective to the design and analysis approach, yet they must work closely with city leadership to ensure meaningful results. CCGPN representatives at the Evaluation Summit indicated that a strong relationship between the evaluation team and the initiative stakeholders was essential to the success of the evaluation effort.

CCGPN cities chose evaluators with experience in violence prevention and gang violence reduction who were familiar with a range of social science methods and able to work through the complexities of local politics and bureaucracies. Each city employed its own team and determined its unique evaluation timeline, focus, and scope. Some looked to independent research organizations while others drew on university support to design an approach, define an underlying change theory, collect data, interpret results, and share findings.

Research Organizations: Oakland and Los Angeles both budgeted for evaluation expenses in their comprehensive plans and funded them with voter-approved tax measures. To solicit a range of bids, they each released multi-year RFPs for their evaluation initiatives. Oakland focused on hiring a team that could measure the impact of the strategy on a variety of violence indicators while also building local community-based organization (CBO) and city evaluation capacity. Los Angeles not only hired an independent evaluator to study process and outcome measures, but also brought on a research director to oversee research objectives and communicate with stakeholders

about the evaluation, helping to create a strong, mutually beneficial relationship between evaluators and service providers. San Jose and Santa Rosa employed evaluators to focus on quality assurance and incorporate the voices of both individuals and communities served by their comprehensive initiative into their results.

University Support: With limited funding for evaluation, San Bernardino established a relationship with California State University to conduct a low-cost study that pooled resources to show the impact of its initiative. CSU–SB, the City of San Bernardino, and community members worked together to design, distribute, collect, and analyze surveys measuring perceptions of safety before and after an initial eight-month implementation. San Bernardino further capitalized on its relationship with CSU–SB to study the results of two core initiative programs (Urban Youth Conservation Corps, a workforce development program, and Catholic Charities of San Bernardino, a social service provider).

Other Sources: Another option for cities is to engage a foundation or private sector institution with a vested interest in violence prevention as an evaluation partner. Minneapolis, Chicago, and Memphis are examples outside the CCGPN that have drawn on the resources and commitment of these groups to conduct evaluation efforts.

III. Principles of Evaluation Practice: The 10 Fundamentals

Even at the most basic level, evaluation supports and sustains the work of those implementing comprehensive violence prevention initiatives, bringing validity, rigor, and a commitment to best practices. It illuminates successes in policy shifts, program investments, and new collaborative models. More than just an academic exercise or research opportunity, evaluation is an action tool to include as an integral component of a comprehensive effort.

The 10 principles outlined below emerged from the Evaluation Summit and provide a road map for those interested in incorporating evaluation into their practice to any degree. These principles highlight the lessons learned from the CCGPN cities that have included an evaluation component in their work— concepts gleaned through experience and ideas to incorporate into future evaluation efforts.

1. Reinforce Stakeholder and Evaluator Relationships: Partnership between evaluators and local stakeholders reinforces both citywide collaboration and community involvement, two fundamental goals of most comprehensive initiatives. Close collaboration increases the pool of knowledge about the data sources that already exist. It allows research and practice to influence one another, ensuring that multiple perspectives inform the evaluation design and subsequent integration of results. It also builds support for data collection and data-driven decision making. San Bernardino's community perception survey provided the opportunity to strengthen the partnership between the city, CSU–SB, and the community. Evaluators trained local residents to collect survey data, minimizing costs and increasing community skills, involvement, and investment in the overall initiative.

2. Mixed Methods: Incorporating multiple methods into the evaluation design ensures that different types of data are available to fully understand impact of the initiative. When combined, quantitative data (such as reductions in neighborhood gunfire) and qualitative data (such as perceptions of community gun violence) tell a more interesting and informative story. They also yield a strong evaluation with descriptive results that indicate what is successful and what is not working as well. San Jose includes case examples and other qualitative findings when presenting the findings of their initiative to illustrate and underscore quantitative outcomes.

3. Mixed Levels: Looking at how an intervention or policy is working across different levels of influence (individual, family, neighborhood, and city) deepens knowledge about the full impact of an initiative. Often, evaluation focuses on the effect of programmatic efforts on individuals served, providing important insight for agencies and other stakeholders. Comprehensive initiatives, however, also focus on shifting broader community outcomes, and changes in these variables (e.g., neighborhood safety, resident commitment, police presence) are also important to consider. San Bernardino, Oakland, and Los Angeles all included community-level outcomes in their evaluation methodologies. Oakland's findings demonstrated the impact of the initiative on both individual youth and the neighborhoods served (participating youth had lower recidivism rates and probation violations, and communities with street outreach workers experienced less violent crime).

4. Guiding Framework: Logic models, theories of change, and conceptual frameworks provide the underpinnings of a comprehensive strategy and its evaluation methods. They describe the intention of the initiative, the components of the strategy, and how it will be measured. The three basic criteria necessary to develop a guiding framework include (1) a clearly articulated, comprehensive initiative mission and vision, (2) specified goals and anticipated benefits, and (3) a rationale linking the goals and objectives to the programs components. Ideally, the development of the guiding framework happens during the planning stages of a new initiative, but in practice this often comes organically after work is underway. For example, Los Angeles articulated its framework after considering the findings from the first year of evaluation. The data suggested that target youth make decisions and behave within the context of what is acceptable to their peer and family group. Given this, Los Angeles is creating a model grounded in family systems theory and designing interventions that target both at-risk youth and the larger gang network.

5. Data Measurement Standards: Creating a clearly articulated evaluation focus with consistent terminology and defined variables ensures that findings are relevant and tell the right story. However, while many organizations already collect and use data in their work, few measurement standards exist across agencies. Los Angeles decided to use its initial evaluation to reflect on the process of implementing a comprehensive Initiative and the evaluation effort itself. These results not only guided the development of the conceptual framework, but also helped define variables for the second year of evaluation (understanding the ways that the various programmatic components integrate and implement the new framework).

6. Invoke Action Through Participatory Action Research: Participatory action research (PAR) involves those engaged in implementing a comprehensive initiative. Instead of looking at individuals and communities as service recipients alone, this method considers participants as experts to engage in the research process, suggest recommendations for improvement, and take action based on findings. PAR also builds programmatic capacity, creating new knowledge and skills to incorporate in the service delivery process. For example, Los Angeles' risk assessment helped programs realize that their interventions were not serving the youth most at risk for gang involvement, which subsequently led to increased efforts to reach a more targeted population.

7. Reciprocity: Evaluation and service delivery efforts share common goals; providers and initiative stakeholders strive to make a difference in the underlying problem and researchers seek to demonstrate this change. Including both groups in the planning of an evaluation effort strengthens trust and builds deeper relationships. In San Jose and Santa Rosa, evaluation coaches work closely with program staff to design and implement data collection, creating mutual investment in the evaluation process and a clear channel for research to inform practice and vice versa. San Bernardino's citizen survey is another example that connects evaluation efforts closely to the community served by the initiative.

8. Melding Methodological Approaches: Mixing traditional research methodology with quality assurance measurement offers unique insights into the scope, magnitude, and impact of programmatic efforts. This melding of approaches ensures that organizations consider how they are delivering services as well as the overall results of their work. Both San Jose and Santa Rosa included CQI as a primary component of their evaluation to document change, build capacity, create a culture of learning, and demonstrate efficiency and effectiveness in program delivery to attract additional funding.

9. Build Capacity: The best evaluation methods build local capacity to track, collect, and analyze outcome and impact data so that ongoing assessment becomes second nature for organizations and programs, not an extra "thing to do." With training and technical assistance, an initiative can conduct evaluation regardless of whether funds are available for extensive outcome measurement. Stakeholders can learn to pool or share data, bringing disparate sources together to expand the universe of information and get stakeholders in the habit of sharing data. Los Angeles and Oakland evaluators worked with initiative stakeholders to design and build new tools and tracking systems for their priorities and then trained program staff to implement them, creating built-in mechanisms for data collection and results reporting for the long term.

10. Assessment Data Drives Programming and Evaluation: Ongoing assessment of individual, family, and community needs and assets should inform not only the programmatic priorities of a comprehensive initiative, but the overall evaluation strategy. Santa Rosa works with its evaluators to review individual and community needs before publicizing its annual request for qualifications (RFQs). The assessment data drive the types of programming the city will fund and shape the language and requests delineated in the RFQ.

IV. CCGPN Evaluation Source Documents

CCGPN cities communicate results to local policymakers, residents, and other stakeholders on a regular basis, at minimum annually. Summary documents, evaluation methodologies, and detailed evaluation findings are available online for the cities participating in the Evaluation Summit.

Oakland's Measure Y Initiative
http://measurey.org/evaluation

San Bernardino's Operation Phoenix
http://www.ci.sanbernardino.ca.us/cityhall/mayor/operation_phoenix/operation_phoenix_homepage.asp

San Jose
http://www.sanjoseca.gov/prns/grants/best.asp

Santa Rosa CHOICE Program
http://ci.santarosa.ca.us/departments/recreationandparks/programs/MGPTF/CHOICEGrants/Pages/default.aspx

Los Angeles Gang Reduction and Youth Development Program (GRYD)
www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/412251-LA-Gang-Reduction.pdf

V. Additional Resources

INITIATIVES

California Cities Gang Prevention Network

The first of its kind in the nation, the California Cities Gang Prevention Network is a collaborative effort between the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) and the National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education, and Families to reduce gang violence and victimization in 13 major California cities. It focuses on identifying and publicizing successful policies and practices that interweave prevention, intervention, and enforcement. The project's website houses detailed descriptions of Network initiatives, relevant and downloadable publications, and information about model strategies for comprehensive gang prevention. Cities can subscribe to receive regular Network bulletins that share news, describe promising strategies, and report on policy changes or funding opportunities by emailing lgutierrez@sf.nccd-crc.org. http://www.ccgpn.org

The National Juvenile Justice Evaluation Center

Housed at the Justice Research and Statistics Association, the National Juvenile Justice Evaluation Center is a new initiative funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) that will provide evaluation and performance measurement information, along with technical assistance, to states and municipalities. The web-based resource center will include evaluation-related publications and a survey of state and local OJJDP grantees that assesses evaluation capabilities and needs. http://www.jrsa.org/programs/jjec.htm

The National Gang Center

The National Gang Center website maintains the latest research about gang involvement; descriptions of evidence-based anti-gang programs; and links to tools, databases, and other resources to assist in developing and implementing effective community-based gang prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies. A number of evaluation articles and summaries are available online. http://www.nationalgangcenter.gov/

WEBSITES

CrimeSolutions.gov, an Office of Justice Programs project, uses rigorous research to inform practitioners and policy makers about what works in criminal justice, juvenile justice, and crime victim services.

Findyouthinfo.org features a program directory of evidence-based programs whose purpose is to prevent and/or reduce delinquency or other problem behaviors in young people. You can search for programs by risk factor, protective factor, or keyword.