DEVELOPING AND USING DATA AND EVIDENCE TO IMPROVE PLACE-BASED WORK:
PROCEEDINGS FROM A MEETING CONVENED BY THE ASPEN INSTITUTE ROUNDTABLE ON COMMUNITY CHANGE WITH SUPPORT FROM THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

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September 8-9, 2011
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Over the past twenty years, place-based initiatives to increase the wellbeing of children, families and communities have become more sophisticated about developing and using data to improve the design, management, and assessment of their work. The data they use come in many forms and serve many purposes. Despite this general progress in data collection and use, there remain three specific challenges which, if identified and better understood, could guide investments in research and data production for the future:

• First, the community change field continues to rely primarily on static neighborhood level “snapshot” data that fail to address the dynamic dimensions of neighborhood life.

• Second, there is still a wide gap between the potential contribution of good data to the planning and management of complex place-based efforts and their actual on-the-ground use. This has to do with both the kinds of data that are produced and the supports practitioners need to use data effectively.

• Third, there is no systematic infrastructure for developing and making available the kinds of data that policymakers and practitioners need to guide decisions about how to improve outcomes for children and families in poor communities.

In September 2011, the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change, with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, brought together twenty-four high-level researchers, policy experts from federal agencies, foundation staff, and practitioners to discuss how to develop and use data that can improve the design, management, and evaluation of place-based change efforts. This paper summarizes the meeting discussion on each of the three topics, highlighting the significance of the issue, the progress that has been made to date, and the challenges that still remain.

I. Using longitudinal data about both individuals and communities to understand neighborhoods and increase the effectiveness of place-based work

Longitudinal information that captures the dynamic nature of neighborhoods and tracks changes in the lives of the individuals and families who live in them is especially valuable in place-based work because it provides a rich and nuanced understanding of neighborhoods and their residents. By contrast, point-in-time data, although more commonly used, do not capture neighborhood dynamics. One dynamic that has surfaced as extremely important in recent surveys relates to population turnover or mobility. For example, without longitudinal information about how residents are faring over time coupled with information about who is moving in and out of the neighborhood, it is impossible to know whether a neighborhood is improving because the residents are better off, because poor residents are moving out, or because more well-to-do residents are moving in. To get a more accurate assessment, it is important to understand what is driving the changes. For program manag-
ers and funders, this kind of information could improve program performance at several stages of an initiative: site selection, initial design, ongoing management, and evaluation.

Longitudinal data are also important to understand how neighborhood context and conditions are changing over time, and to analyze the flow of money and resources into the neighborhood. For example, combining data on crime rates, demographic shifts, and mortgages helps to understand a neighborhood’s investment context.

**Understanding the dynamics of a neighborhood**

A lot of people think that “neighborhood conditions” is a static concept. I like to think about these conditions as resulting from flows of human and financial resources through a set of pipes, and what you measure in a snapshot is just one pressure gauge reading. But what you need is to look at flows in all of the pipes connecting a neighborhood with others in the metropolitan area and, as a result, get some sense of a dynamic trajectory. The field lacks the ability to measure adequately the flows going in and out of the neighborhood’s pipelines. We shouldn’t be satisfied with changing outcome indicators; we need to change flow indicators.

– *George Galster, Wayne State University*

Surveys that are both longitudinal and cross-sectional are particularly rich sources of information that can track both individual-level change and community-level change over time, and allow analysis of the interaction between the two. Several major research projects – notably, the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey, and the Making Connections Cross-Site Survey – have collected these data, and researchers are mining them to enhance understanding of some critical aspects of neighborhood life, including:

- neighborhood mobility and turnover
- neighborhood-level social capital and social organization
- neighborhood trajectories and typologies, and
- individual development within a neighborhood context

Researchers have used these longitudinal data sources to document the degree to which individuals and families move within the neighborhood as well as move in and out of the neighborhood. Finding that mobility rates are far higher than anticipated has had a profound effect on how researchers, funders, and practitioners think about the effectiveness of their work, issues of scale, and who should be targeted for services in place-based work – issues that have considerable practical implications for practitioners on the ground. (For more information about these surveys and studies and their relevance for place-based work, see “Using Neighborhood Survey Data To Understand Neighborhoods and Improve Practice In Comprehensive Place-Based Change Efforts,” a paper prepared as background reading for this meeting.)

1 Available at the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change website at www.aspenroundtable.org.
Using longitudinal data to improve program design

When Making Connections started, information on residential mobility was unavailable. Sites were selected based on census data that produced snapshots of neighborhoods. Making Connections commissioned a three-wave household survey, and the results were shocking: over 50% of families with children moved within the first three years of the Making Connections project. This caught people’s attention and raised a key question: what does success really look like for this community initiative? We had to think about the implications of losing the most successful people and most vulnerable people. We had to think about the chaos that moving created in people’s lives, even if they moved just a short distance. Our conceptual understanding of place-based interventions also evolved. Once we realized the importance of mobility, we changed our view of how placed-based initiatives work and began to consider how community change efforts can help folks even if they move outside of selected neighborhoods. For example, it caused us to pay more attention to housing needs and strategies to address them.

— Cindy Guy, The Annie E. Casey Foundation

Using longitudinal data to evaluate effectiveness

The goal of Jobs-Plus was to see whether it was possible to substantially increase employment and earnings among public housing residents, and as a result, improve other outcomes in the community. The evaluation had a very rich dataset that included longitudinal Unemployment Insurance wage records covering about five years prior to the launch of Jobs-Plus and seven years afterward. We could measure earnings trends for a specific cohort of residents, as well as year-to-year changes in average earnings levels in a development, taking resident turnover into account. With these data, we could estimate the program’s effects both at the individual level and at the housing development level. At the individual level, we found that average earnings among individuals in the developments where Jobs-Plus was fully implemented were 16% higher than the earnings of the residents of the respective comparison developments where Jobs-Plus was not operated. But because residents could move out, we knew that these results could not speak to what was happening at the development level. So we separately estimated the effects of Jobs-Plus at the development level. We found that how much the positive effects of Jobs-Plus on individual-level earnings would raise average earnings levels in the development depended on the degree of resident turnover. For example, where fewer residents were moving out, earnings gains at the individual level remained in the development, thus increasing average development-level earnings. Thus, with place-based initiatives, given the mobility issue, it is important to assess an intervention’s effects at both the individual and the community levels.

— James Riccio, MDRC
These two cases demonstrate that mobility is high, and that it is important to document. The next step is to understand whether the effect of population turnover is good, bad, or neutral.

**Identifying how neighborhood context and dynamics influence outcomes**

Turnover is complicated and can mean good things or bad things, depending on how it's perceived. In the late 1990s, my colleagues and I studied why there is more child maltreatment in some neighborhoods than in others. We found that concentrated disadvantage had a large effect on child maltreatment and that neighborhood residential turnover appeared to have no effect. Later, we conducted interviews in a small number of neighborhoods with similar levels of concentrated disadvantage and residential turnover. Greenside (neighborhood names have been changed to protect confidentiality) was an African American neighborhood with good housing stock. Residents explained their turnover by noting that the recent in-movers were folks that were coming back to Greenside to establish families and settle in homes, meaning that turnover was seen as positive. In this case, there was mutual trust and a belief that the neighborhood was going to do better. Therefore, community building was strong there. Westville was a predominantly white and factory-centered neighborhood. Westville's longtime residents were distrustful of newcomers (and vice versa), even though they were all white. The child maltreatment rate was lower in Greenside than Westville despite similar rates of residential instability, because the meaning of turnover was positive in Greenside and negative in Westville.

Today, there is a reversal of fortune. Greenside was targeted by sub-prime mortgage brokers, and residents were given improper loans. Now, the vacancy rate is huge and resident connectedness has broken down. Westville, however, was not targeted as heavily and the turnover started to change, perhaps because young pioneers were coming to the neighborhood and community development intermediaries had made good investments. There is still some tension between the young residents and the longtime residents, but the former are willing to reach out to the latter. And child maltreatment is down in this area. The takeaway: turnover, location, and housing stock all matter and intersect in complicated ways.

– Claudia Coulton, Case Western Reserve University

A key challenge for the field going forward is to develop data sources that provide a longitudinal perspective but can be produced more cheaply and more quickly than surveys. One possibility is to use administrative records data that are already routinely collected by government agencies and other public institutions across the country. Meeting participants believe there is considerable potential to use these administrative data for improving design and on-going management over the course of an initiative.

Administrative data sets that are relevant to place-based work include welfare, unemployment insurance, crime and arrest statistics, school records, housing, health, birth and death records, and the like. When geo-coded, these data sets could be used in place-based work, allowing practitioners
and researchers to better understand the resident population. They could be used to track interim and long-term outcomes for individuals and families across a number of domains and see the interactions across multiple systems. These data sets could also be used to track the outcomes of neighborhood residents who move away. Finally, they could be used to track neighborhood dynamics, such as population flows over time. School records, for example, contain information on students’ residential addresses, and postal service information can document residential vacancy rates.

Integrating data across agencies has particular promise to show the interactions between neighborhood residents and multiple service agencies and how individuals and families are doing across a broad range of outcomes. This information could be instrumental in changing institutional responses and conceptions as well as those of neighborhood actors and place-based managers.

In order to get to this type of merged data set, however, researchers need to overcome confidentiality rules and negotiate interagency agreements to allow data matching. These are complicated and time-consuming processes.

II. Helping practitioners make better use of data for planning, program management, and assessing progress

A second challenge is to make data available to practitioners in ways that encourage and support their use for decision-making on the ground.

Documentation of program inputs and outputs, survey findings, trend data, and other data sources should not be seen simply as building blocks for establishing accountability and measuring effectiveness at the end of an initiative, but also as information that is critical to planning and on-going program management, useful for making decisions that improve performance over the life of an initiative. Even at the first step, site selection, funders and planners can add rigor to the decision-making process and move away from reliance on “gut” assessments and political considerations by developing neighborhood typologies and matching intervention strategies to different types of neighborhoods. Combining data sources is key to informing these kinds of decisions. For example, neighborhoods with limited institutional infrastructure or sense of community are likely to require different approaches than ones which have greater capacity or resources or more favorable locations.

“Showing program staff the picture of the people they’re serving using their own data is incredibly powerful for institutional change — sometimes even more powerful than expensive panel survey data.”

— Erika Poethig, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

“We need to encourage and support a cultural shift in the way we think about the role of data in our work: shift to a mindset and expectation that data have value for program planning, implementation, and performance management, not just for evaluation. We should want to find ever more effective ways to use data to inform our work because it helps us work smarter. It’s not only about accountability and assessing what happened.”

— Alaina Harkness, The MacArthur Foundation
In the unfolding of place-based efforts – which are usually long term and aim for outcomes in a broad range of domains – there is a particular need to develop interim indicators that can demonstrate meaningful progress at each stage of the work. “Small wins” and “early victories” can help to keep stakeholders, including residents, engaged and mobilized, and build ongoing support for the initiative. In projects that have very long timeframes, program managers are also under pressure to demonstrate to funders and other stakeholders that the intervention is making progress and likely to be effective over the long time. As federal, state, and city government become more involved in funding place-based work, pressure to show meaningful change early on will likely increase since political time tables are typically shorter than the timeframes of community change efforts. For managers, interim measures of progress are needed to diagnose and correct problems, better address needs, target resources more appropriately, and respond to changing circumstances and conditions. Finally, developing meaningful interim indicators of progress can also help to create more realistic expectations about what can be accomplished and discourage what one participant called “fantasy projections.”

Considerable progress has been made in using data for the early stages of initiative development including initiative design, site selection, program planning and early implementation. At the federal level, policy makers are currently trying to use data and evidence to drive decision-making around initiative design and programmatic strategies in federal initiatives like Promise Neighborhoods and Choice Neighborhoods and asking practitioners to do the same at the local level.

At the neighborhood level, organizations can receive support and assistance in collecting and using data from intermediary organizations such as the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP) and its network of local data intermediaries, the Promise Neighborhoods Institute, the local

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**Combining data to make strategic decisions throughout an initiative**

Mobility affects neighborhoods in different ways, and requires different strategic responses. Delivering this kind of information in a timely and persuasive way can make a big difference in how managers shape the initiative on the ground. For example, in one of the Making Connections neighborhoods, families are moving in and out because their housing is unstable. The neighborhood as a whole may look the same at the macro level over time, but the intervention must take this movement into account. Managers need to acknowledge, for example, that children in the intervention community are showing up in other schools and that other children are coming into the intervention site’s school. How does that affect the way they think about who’s benefitting from the intervention? Knowing this gives program managers the opportunity to, perhaps, expand the boundaries of the site or talk to families about school enrollment policies so they don’t disrupt their children’s education. Another strategy is to find ways to use the school or the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) office to identify families who need small sums of money so they can remain in their neighborhood.

– Margery Turner, The Urban Institute
learning partners in Making Connections, and the local organizations that work on data with sites in LISC's Sustainable Communities Initiative. Their efforts have been successful in helping local organizations use data to plan, identify neighborhood assets, document problems, develop action strategies, make a case for change, and mobilize support. Combining data sources is key to informing these kinds of decisions.

As work on the ground matures from planning and early implementation to mid-life, the data needs are different. Here, practitioners need high quality data for performance management and assessment of interim outcomes. The field of social change has made some progress on identifying early outcomes that are predictive of long term success. For example, if a long term outcome of an initiative is to increase the percentage of high school students who go to college without remediation, the effort needs to measure progress along the way by developing indicators that are predictive of this result. Evidence suggests that interim measures like increased attendance rates and improvements in third grade and eighth grade reading scores are predictors of longer term educational success. Such measures might therefore serve as useful indicators of interim progress at the individual, organizational, and community level.

Some place-based efforts are already using data of this type to assess whether the initiative and its individual programs are on track toward long term success, and to make adjustments to improve performance. This is especially the case for initiatives targeting improved outcomes for individuals in domains such as education, employment, and early child development – all of which have a long history of basic research and evaluation. The appropriate progressions or “strings” of outcomes are not well understood in every domain, however, especially those that are targeting community level outcomes such as community economic development. More work is therefore needed to develop “proxy indicators of community change.” For the most part, the community change field is just beginning to grapple with using interim data for performance management purposes. As discussed in a follow-up meeting on Performance Measurement and Management in Place-Based Work, convened by the Aspen Roundtable in January 2012, developing and using interim indicators for performance management in complex, place-based initiatives poses special challenges not encountered in other types of organizations or collaborative efforts.2

Moreover, knowing the steps that lead a child from a current status to a desired outcome is only half the challenge. Also important, and perhaps less well understood, are the adjustments needed in communities and institutions to make those individual changes happen. For example, research in child welfare reform has developed indicators to determine whether the institutions are functioning properly or not. Similarly, basic research in education has developed a set of indicators for conditions that affect school outcomes. Findings like these could potentially be used to put together a basic set of indicators to judge how well local organizations and institutions are performing and how they might improve their effectiveness.

2 For additional information on this meeting, see the Aspen Roundtable website at www.aspenroundtable.org where we will post forthcoming issue briefs.
Understanding the roles of institutions and communities in improving outcomes for individuals

Research using sixteen years of longitudinal data on Chicago schools identified a five part framework to improve elementary schools including: a coherent instructional system, teacher quality (the single most important variable), quality of school leadership, overall learning climate, and the connections between families, communities, and schools. This research suggests that the connection between communities and schools is critical, but community development has not focused enough on the in-school components that this work highlights. Both education and community development folks need to think more explicitly about the role of families and communities in schools.

-- Larkin Tackett, U.S. Department of Education

A particular challenge is defining and developing indicators of intermediate outcomes around building capacity for lasting change, such as resident engagement, organizational or institutional capacity, civic capacity, influence, and the ability to partner and network. Funders, practitioners, and researchers view these as critical aspects of community change efforts but continue to have difficulty defining their components, tracking progress, measuring increases in capacity, and conveying their value to policy makers. This also makes it difficult to assess the performance of intermediary organizations. The Aspen Roundtable’s follow-up meeting on Performance Measurement and Management in Place-Based Work endorsed the idea of advancing work on interim indicators of community capacity by developing a taxonomy of how place-based change efforts are defining civic capacity, its dimensions and outcomes, and what tools and protocols they are using to measure it or to track increased capacity.

Not all the information that is useful for performance management is quantitative data. Supplementing data on service use with survey information, ethnographic studies, or other sources of “thick description” on the ground can also increase understanding of how well specific interventions are implemented and how well they address resident needs.

Using ethnography to improve implementation

Without good ethnographic data that reveals how individuals and families are using services or interacting with other residents, we may think we know what is happening, but we can’t understand the implementation context, and that’s important. Even the best-designed program intervention can be improved, and in order to do that we need to understand the context, especially organizational structure and process.

-- Alaina Harkness, The MacArthur Foundation

Ethnography peels back the onion on how folks are navigating these systems. You can’t substitute for it. It’s an important piece for policy makers and practitioners.

-- Erika Poethig, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
Finally, meeting participants felt that the community change field has not done a good job of helping practitioners on the ground to use data and research findings for either program design or management over the course of an initiative. A growing number of data platforms that can help non-profit organizations develop automated management information systems are available from companies such as nFocus Solutions, Social Solutions, and the Results Leadership Group. But even when practitioners have these systems, they will still require assistance in using the information to make their work more effective.

Like CEOs of for-profit companies, non-profit managers don’t need to do data analyses themselves, but they do need to be intelligent consumers of data and know how to use data to make smart decisions. Funders often impede the process by overloading data requirements on communities.

Using data and evidence for on-going program management

Helping an organization use data to evaluate itself is a very challenging undertaking. Experience has been that it’s very difficult for practitioners to interpret what appears to researchers as “user friendly” results. Practitioners require very direct help on what questions to ask and how to collect information. Translating research into practice requires long-standing relationships and sufficient depth of experience on both the researcher side and the practitioner side.

— Brett Theodos, The Urban Institute

To overcome these problems, the field needs to invest resources in developing “data intermediaries” – organizations and individuals that can work effectively with neighborhood groups and help them interpret the data and make use of it in their programs. This will require training a cadre of individuals and intermediary organizations to understand neighborhoods as well as statistics and using them as “data coaches” to community groups. To be effective data coaches, individuals and organizations must be responsive to communities and their priorities, get better at “translation work” that allows them to interpret data and present it in forms that are useful to practitioners, and develop tools and strategies that make it easier for practitioners to use data for self-evaluation and decision-making.

“The challenge is getting practitioners to integrate data into the culture of what they do.”
— Alaina Harkness, The MacArthur Foundation

III. Building a durable data infrastructure and evidence base to inform place-based work

Two types of field-building activities would be helpful to make progress on the data issues and challenges discussed at this meeting. First, the community change field would benefit from developing durable, multi-purpose data sources that are routinely collected and are not tied to a particular program. Place-based work is “held hostage,” as one researcher phrased it, by the data that are – or are not – available. Absent reliable data sources on key aspects of place-based work, projects are forced to make decisions and assessments with incomplete or misleading data. Or, in location after location, initiative designers and managers are repeatedly compelled to create and collect data from new sources, an exercise that is akin to reinventing the wheel time and again.
Building durable multi-purpose data sources will require dedicated resources and funding, and investments by both government and philanthropy. As noted, there is considerable interest in using administrative data sets as sources of longitudinal information about how neighborhood populations are faring over time at the individual and family level as well as at the community level. The potential to access information about the same individuals and families from an array of public agencies has particular applicability to place-based work because of the multi-sector, comprehensive nature of these efforts, and the hope that these initiatives will be able to affect a broad range of outcomes.

Researchers anticipate using integrated sets of administrative records data to study patterns of service use, interactive effects of service receipt, and risk and protective factors, in the hope of developing strategies that can lead to greater efficiency, effectiveness, and cost savings. Using these data at the neighborhood level to help manage and improve intervention strategies over the course of an initiative is currently largely uncharted territory, however.

Ideally, the community change field would benefit from developing and using standard measures across projects and initiatives, but such efforts seem premature given the current environment and state of knowledge. Major survey projects provide useful data and analyses, but are difficult to use for comparative studies or meta-analyses because the measures were not sufficiently well-defined at the outset. Better definition and specification in research design and protocols is a vital part of the work on developing cross-project learning in the future.

A second way to make progress on these issues, it was suggested, would be to develop research forums, or an institutional framework along the lines of the What Works Collaborative, which could convene across the wide spectrum of people and organizations involved in place-based work, assess findings, and set a research agenda for the field. Such forums could also provide opportunities for “interdisciplinary dialogue” that pushes against the boundaries of discrete disciplines and sectors. Federal agencies are currently quite interested in this approach, and there is already an interagency platform involved in the Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative that is working across government silos to develop more integrated and evidence-based strategies. Ideally, such efforts should involve state level policy makers as well as federal ones.

Suggestions for key topics for future research, in addition to developing early or “proxy” indicators of community change, included the following: understanding the role social networks play in helping the most vulnerable residents, understanding how intermediary organizations mediate the provision of city services to communities, developing “early warning” indicators of neighborhood instability, exploring how communities and schools can interact more effectively, and developing appropriate strategies for neighborhoods that lack institutional infrastructure, organizations with much capacity, or that are located deep within a segregated space.

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“Place-based work is constrained in its ability to develop indicators that are satisfying and reliable and by the availability of data. We should be thinking about building more robust datasets and how they relate to communities.”

— Erika Poethig, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

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The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change is a national organization that distills lessons about how to revitalize distressed communities and helps policymakers, practitioners, and funders develop and implement effective strategies for promoting vibrant, racially equitable communities in the United States and internationally.

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