

Supporting Policy Making with Research: Challenges, Opportunities, and Lessons Learned

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Introduction

Children, youth, and families encounter public systems in many ways throughout every stage of their development. From maternal access to prenatal care, through postsecondary and workforce supports, policies drive which services are available and to whom, the quality of these services, how they are accessed, and where they are located. The likelihood that federal, state, and local policies will yield the greatest benefit to children, youth, and families often depends on decision makers having access to high-quality information that is grounded in research, data, and on-the-ground experience. This creates an urgent imperative for researchers to increase their skills and capacity to understand the research needs of policymakers, and to communicate relevant—and often complex—data and findings in ways that respond to their time and resource constraints (Tseng, 2012).

Much is at stake: Public programs and policies have tremendous power to change the lives of children and families. Programs and policies can support children's well-being by supporting parents; providing enriching early educational experiences; supporting the learning and social development of children and youth; strengthening families and children who interact with the child welfare system; and providing the core income, housing, and nutrition support necessary for families to provide for their children's basic needs.

Beyond the challenge of providing effective services, policymakers must also use limited funds as efficiently and equitably as possible. Public systems must contend with both historical and current inequities in how they distribute resources and services to children and families, particularly across socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic demographics. The challenge of creating more equitable public systems is exacerbated by wide gaps in family resources: The proportion of Black and Hispanic children living in poverty far exceeds that of white children (29%, 25%, and 11% respectively) (Child Trends, 2019). Similarly, almost 28 percent of American Indian children live in poverty (Around Him & DeMand, 2018). Data and research that help policymakers understand the present circumstances of these children and families, and the role of public systems in creating, perpetuating, and alleviating these circumstances, are critically important in designing policies and programs that are equitable and effective.

Our experience at Child Trends demonstrates that good research and data can support good policy making by giving policymakers essential information about children at the local, state, and national levels—who they are, what they need to thrive, and which programs and services best meet their needs. Once empowered with this knowledge and context, policymakers can employ research findings to determine what policies and services they fund and to support effective implementation. Finally, ongoing data and evaluation are essential to help policymakers continuously refine services to ensure that they are effective and efficient means of helping children thrive.

Over the past four years, with support from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Child Trends has examined its work to share research with policymakers and explore new strategies to strengthen these efforts. This initiative aligns with other Child Trends efforts to bring research into policy discussions—including efforts supported by the Irving Harris Foundation, the Alliance for Early Success, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Throughout the course of this initiative, we strove to incorporate the lessons learned in each individual effort across Child Trends' entire body of work.

Our examination began with a deep exploration of the existing academic research on how policymakers use data and evidence (Jordan & Cooper, 2016); using this research as a base, we organized our strategies for sharing research with policymakers into four themes. Each theme is rooted in a challenge and set of related opportunities for policymakers to incorporate research into their work:

- Interpreting complex research concepts
- Sharing research during crises
- Using data to highlight and address inequity
- Strengthening and applying the evidence base

This brief explores each theme through case studies of how Child Trends infused research and data into the policy landscape for some of the most pressing child/youth policy issues of recent years, from gun violence to equity to landmark child welfare legislation. In each case study below, we present a complex and nuanced issue and the initial response from policymakers, note the obstacles to using research to formulate policy solutions and the underlying challenges that create these obstacles, and share our strategies for engaging with policymakers. Later, we offer recommendations for both policymakers and researchers as they work to achieve better outcomes for children and families.

Case Studies in Sharing Research

Case Study 1: Interpreting complex research concepts

Policymakers often infuse research and evidence into policy in new and exciting ways. Officials at all levels of government rely on evaluations to design more cost-efficient and effective programs likely to produce good outcomes for families. For example, federal, state, and local policymakers are currently using the research around brain science and early childhood development to determine their legislative priorities, and are providing funds to build the evidence base in a variety of ways (Hart & Meron, 2019). Although this movement creates opportunities for policies to better support children and families, it can also lead to challenges as new and emerging research concepts are brought into policy discourse. For example, childhood adversity and trauma are issues that affect multiple public systems; the absence of commonly understood terminology has inhibited the use of research and evidence in policy making.

What is the issue facing children and families?

Numerous studies have highlighted the prevalence and long-term negative outcomes associated with childhood adversity, as well as the implications for multiple child-serving systems (Felitti et al., 2019; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). Child Trends contributed to this body of work with research examining the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences (or ACEs). We found that 45 percent of U.S. children experienced at least one ACE (Sacks & Murphey, 2018). Expanding research and data on the prevalence of ACEs, and the resulting public awareness about the potential impact that they can have on later health outcomes, has served as a catalyst for new policy initiatives.

How are policymakers responding?

In response to this growing research base, policymakers at the state and federal levels increasingly promote strategies to address ACEs. These include programs to prevent ACEs from occurring, screenings to understand the scope of the issue within states and communities, and services to ensure that children who have experienced childhood adversity have a full slate of services to help them thrive (Prewitt, 2019). While well intended, some policy solutions advanced at the state level—such as universal screenings—will create new challenges for children and not fully address childhood adversity.

What is the research-to-policy challenge?

ACEs represent only a subset of childhood adversities that children may experience, and most children who experience an ACE do not experience trauma (Murphey & Bartlett, 2019). This means that screening data that provide the number of children who have had an adverse experience will not directly correlate to those who need services for trauma exposure. Further, any data collected on the prevalence of ACEs (or the number of children who experience an ACE) cannot be used to adequately determine the type of trauma-based services needed in a specific community (Murphey & Bartlett, 2019).

Why is this challenge emerging?

As we assessed policy proposals, we realized that policymakers frequently conflate terms related to childhood adversity—including ACEs, childhood adversity, and trauma—leading to potentially harmful policies. Without distinct responses that reflect the different definitions and implications for each of these terms, policy approaches may not fully address childhood adversity or may unintentionally stigmatize children. To address this, we produced and disseminated a brief that provided clear definitions of the following relevant terms related to childhood adversity (Bartlett & Sacks, 2019):

- **Adverse childhood experience (ACE):** A term introduced by the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente, 1995-1997) to refer to the specific types of household challenges assessed in that study, occurring prior to age 18.
- **Childhood adversity:** One or more events or circumstances (including, but not limited to, those used in the ACE study) that can be harmful to a child's short- and long-term physical and psychological health.
- **Trauma:** An individual's experience of one or more events or circumstances as psychologically and/or physically harmful or life-threatening.

The brief also encourages policymakers to develop and implement policies that promote resilience, in addition to conditions that create ACEs, helping children as they respond to trauma.

Policymakers need a clear understanding of the research concepts and available data to ensure that policies meet the needs of children and the systems that serve them. With stronger communications from researchers to policymakers about these related concepts, policymakers can skillfully use the research on ACEs to advocate for comprehensive, evidence-based policies to prevent childhood adversity and address trauma.

Child Trends advances strategies to clarify childhood adversity for policymakers

Child Trends produced blogs, briefs, and policy guidance that can help policymakers eager to support child-serving systems in addressing trauma avoid the pitfalls that may result from misunderstandings of research language. These materials provided two messages to policymakers:

New policies to address child trauma must be grounded in a firm understanding of the relationship between childhood adversity and trauma. We published multiple products that provided an overview and clear definitions of concepts related to child adversity and trauma.

Initiatives to address child trauma that focus primarily on screening for childhood adversity are flawed. Our researchers published a brief with concrete recommendations for policymakers on how to support service providers in addressing the needs of traumatized children; advance a comprehensive, strengths-based approach to addressing adversity; invest in research to strengthen tools for assessing adversity; increase access to evidence-based therapies; and focus on the prevention of childhood adversity.

Resources that elevate the needs of children who may not be adequately represented in the ACEs data. Our researchers published a blog urging researchers and policymakers to examine ACEs more closely for American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) children, acknowledge and share the historical trauma and resilience of AI/AN families, and consider the unique policy levers and challenges that arise with tribal sovereignty (Around Him, DeMand 2018).

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Case Study 2: Sharing research during crises

Researchers must anticipate and be responsive to the policy environments and public context in which they disseminate research. Having this capability is most important, but also extremely difficult, in the aftermath of devastating tragedies—from environmental disasters to school shootings—that deeply affect children, adolescents, and families. The media attention and public concern that follow these events create opportunities for policy change by putting pressure on public agencies to present solutions and prevent further tragedies. However, the speed and complexity with which crises unfold, and the pressures that public leaders face to quickly respond to the causes and context of the crisis, can heavily influence how researchers contribute to policymakers' efforts (Boin, 2009). One event that helps to illustrate these challenges is the 2018 school shooting at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.

What is the issue facing children and families?

School safety continues to be at the forefront of public conversations and policy action in light of school shootings that resulted in multiple student and staff deaths. These shootings include the relatively recent incident in Parkland, but also others that remain fresh in public memory, including Columbine High School, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and Sandy Hook Elementary School. Within two months of the Parkland shooting on February 14, 2018, state policymakers in 27 states proposed over 100 bills focused on school safety (Erwin, 2019). This flurry of legislative activity was only the latest instance in which state policymakers sought policy solutions following a school shooting: Similar spikes occurred in 1999, 2007, and 2012, immediately after school shootings (Temkin et al., Forthcoming).

How are policymakers responding?

While federal investment in school safety increased overall after the Parkland shooting, the emphasis on research and prevention decreased. Federal funding for a key formula program focused on student health and safety—the Student Support and Academic Enrichment program—dramatically increased from \$400 million in 2018 to \$1.2 billion in 2019 (Harper & Temkin, 2019). However, that same year, federal policymakers redirected \$75 million in funding away from the Comprehensive School Safety Initiative—a program that funded school safety research and programming, including prevention—toward a new STOP School Violence program focused on threat assessment and school hardening, with no provisions for funding research (Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2018).

What is the research-to-policy challenge?

State and federal responses to the shooting in Parkland varied widely with respect to their grounding in violence prevention literature. State legislation heavily emphasized school hardening—a set of procedures, practices, and equipment designed to prevent active shooters and other individuals intending harm from entering a school. Such approaches include arming school staff, developing emergency response plans and drills, hiring school resource officers, and increasing building security. Most school hardening approaches are designed to address immediate threats, rather than help schools take proactive steps to prevent violence. Further, some of these approaches are not grounded in evidence. For example, research examining the presence of school resource officers has not shown that this investment results in improved school safety (Jonson, 2017; James & McGallion, 2013). To the extent that states proposed new investments in prevention, these were narrowly focused on improving mental health services (Erwin, 2019).

Research on youth violence emphasizes the need to address risk and protective factors—in schools as well as within the home—in order to prevent violence (Moore et al., 2015). This means employing approaches to identify and build upon students' strengths and sources of support, rather than a narrow focus on mitigating student risks and deficits. School-related protective factors include student perceptions of engagement and feelings of connection with the school, while risk factors include bullying victimization and substance abuse (Moore et al., 2015). Drawing upon neuroscience, including findings that the brain retains significant

plasticity well past adolescence and even after individuals experience trauma, youth violence research also places a priority on prevention (Moore et al., 2015). School shootings remain rare, which makes identifying what works with respect to prevention a difficult undertaking. However, schools are uniquely positioned to help: Most school shootings are committed by students with a connection to the school, rather than by strangers, so services and supports offered to current students should be an important part of prevention (Blair & Schweit, 2014).

Why is this challenge emerging?

Given the devastating trauma and loss of life caused by school shootings, policy discourse on school safety has been driven by community fears of an imminent risk of school shootings. Policymakers may have difficulty understanding and applying the research in the aftermath of school shootings for a wide range of reasons, but two are of particular consequence for researchers: 1) public perception that school shootings are a close and imminent threat, and 2) beliefs that, even if school hardening and new security features are an overreaction to recent shootings, they are worth the cost and risks that might accompany them. Interviews with school administrators, teachers, and counselors have indicated heightened fears among staff that school shootings could happen at any time, despite their relative rarity (Madfis, 2016).

Researchers attempting to support policymakers in this context must balance the need to acknowledge community fears of further violence with effective communications that explain the actual risk of school shooters. They must quickly and clearly share the evidence about what works in violence prevention and response, and the risks that come with implementing approaches that are not evidence-based, to ensure that policymakers have the tools to advance policy and reassure their constituencies. In the aftermath of a crisis, researchers can use data to provide the broader context. Youth are also victims of gun violence outside of the school setting—gun violence is the most common cause of death among young men ages 15 to 19—yet these incidences often do not get the same public attention as school shootings (Pane, 2018). By presenting the broader context, researchers can play a vital role in highlighting the disproportionate attention paid to school shootings compared with broader gun violence threatening large numbers of Black and Latino children and youth (Garcia, 2016).

Child Trends produces rapid responses to questions about school safety

Within one month of the February 14, 2018 shooting, Child Trends researchers were able to leverage our organizational processes, relationships with policy intermediaries, and funding support to pull together timely, high-quality, short products. These efforts carried the following critical messages to policymakers:

- **Policy responses to school shootings should recognize long-term trends in school safety, school capacity, and student needs, and avoid disrupting areas of improvement.** We coordinated with one policy intermediary to disseminate school safety data packets to high-level state education officials during an annual conference. We provided state-level indicators with both protective and risk factors, including students' carrying of weapons, youth reports on school safety, child homicides at school, student engagement, and school counselor availability.
- **Since most school shootings are committed by students, policy responses should be grounded in youth violence prevention research** (Moore et al., 2015; Temkin et al., Forthcoming). Child Trends published blogs and provided legislative testimony to highlight the limited research supporting investments in school security (Harper & Temkin, 2018; Harper, 2018; Temkin, 2019). Further, we encouraged policymakers to use comprehensive approaches to violence prevention that address students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs, and informed parents about the questions they should ask about school safety in their communities (Harper & Seok, 2019; Harper & Temkin, 2019).
- **Efforts to safeguard students from the threat of gun violence must address threats beyond school campuses, including homicide and suicide.** We published multiple blogs that elevate the data on gun-related injuries and gun violence, barriers to progress in addressing gun violence, and the impact of gun violence on Black and Latino youth (Pane, 2018; Child Trends Databank, 2019; Oster, 2016; Garcia, 2016).

Case Study 3: Using data to highlight and address inequity

Federal and state statutes are increasingly requiring public programs and agencies to collect and use data that address racial and ethnic inequity. The 2018 reauthorization of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act, for example, requires states to identify and analyze data on race and ethnicity to understand disparities within the juvenile justice system (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2019). Similarly, the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act requires states to publish state and local report cards with indicators of school quality or student success, disaggregated by racial and ethnic subgroups (Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended through P.L. 115-224).

High-quality, timely data are essential to good policy making. Policymakers also need data broken down by race, ethnicity, income, and other demographic factors to assess conditions across populations, with attention to gathering data about any contextual factors (e.g., inequities in access, quality, opportunity) that can explain disparities. This requires close attention to past racism and long-standing systemic inequities that may provide important context to the data (Andrews, Parekh, & Peckoo, 2019). As public transparency and accountability to address disparities grow, public agencies are under pressure to demonstrate improvement. For example, data in child welfare and education clearly highlight disparities that policymakers should address, such as the overrepresentation of children and youth of color in the child

welfare and juvenile justice systems, and the disparate application of school discipline policies. Data play a critical role in identifying the inequities that policymakers must address in their decision making, such as in developing responses to child behavior within the early care and education and K-12 education systems.

What is the issue facing children and families?

In schools and communities, children of color and children with disabilities face punitive and exclusionary responses to their behavior at higher rates than their peers. During the 2015-2016 school year, the average school suspended black children out of school twice as often as white children (8 percent and 3.8 percent, respectively), and children with disabilities twice as often as children without disabilities (8.6 percent and 4.1 percent, respectively) (Harper, Ryberg, & Temkin, 2019). Research has shown that the use of suspension increases the likelihood of dropping out of school, as well as future arrest and incarceration as an adult, and reduces the likelihood of receiving a bachelor's degree.

How are policymakers responding?

Persistent disparities by race and disability in school discipline outcomes have prompted policymakers, advocates, communities, and other stakeholders to seek reform from education, health, and law enforcement agencies. States are passing legislation to restrict the use of exclusionary discipline, especially in the early grades. As of 2019, 16 states prohibit suspensions and expulsions for children in preschool through third grade (Fischer & Weyer, 2019). Federal agencies have advanced efforts to address school discipline disparities and invested in powerful datasets that can highlight community-level disparities. For example, the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection is a federal data source containing data on school characteristics; student enrollment and attendance; and multiple aspects of school discipline, including suspensions, expulsions, referrals to law enforcement, school-based arrests, restraint, seclusion, and corporal punishment. Further, the latest 2016 regulations to guide states' implementation of Section 618(d) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act require states to use a standard approach to identify school districts with racial and ethnic disparities in the identification, placement, and discipline of children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

What is the research-to-policy challenge?

Declining suspension rates appear to show progress, yet data also reveal persistent disparities. Since the 2011-2012 school year, when federal officials expanded the Civil Rights Data Collection to include preschool suspension and expulsion data and capture school discipline data from every public school in the country, the prevalence of out-of-school suspension has been falling. Over a span of four years, rates of out-of-school suspension have fallen from 5.6 percent to 4.7 percent (Harper, Ryberg, & Temkin, 2018). In secondary schools, the drop is even more pronounced, from 9.6 percent during the 2011-2012 school year to 7.6 percent during the 2015-2016 school year. While out-of-school suspensions fell for students across racial and ethnic groups, and for students with and without disabilities, gaps in suspension for black students and students with disabilities held steady.

As state and federal agencies work to increase data transparency and public accountability for disparities in discipline outcomes, shifting discipline trends may reflect both positive and negative changes in discipline practice. It is unclear whether the downward trend in suspensions is due to shifts in practice (intended or unintended) or to changes in reporting that give the appearance of improvement. Recent shifts in state policy suggest that schools may be using informal types of discipline to avoid reporting suspensions.

In 2018, Washington state issued new discipline rules to clarify for schools that nontraditional forms of disciplinary exclusion—for example, sending a student home early, giving students a “day off,” or telling parents to keep children home—constitute a suspension (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2018). It is also possible that schools are trading one type of discipline for other types: Child Trends has found that schools with decreasing rates of suspension for black, Hispanic, and disabled students were more likely than other schools to have increasing rates of school-based arrests (Harper, Ryberg, &

Temkin, 2018). Greater accountability for outcome data necessitates greater investment in verifying data accuracy and quality. To address discipline and discipline disparities, policymakers need access to high-quality discipline data that can support their efforts to track trends over time.

Why is this challenge emerging?

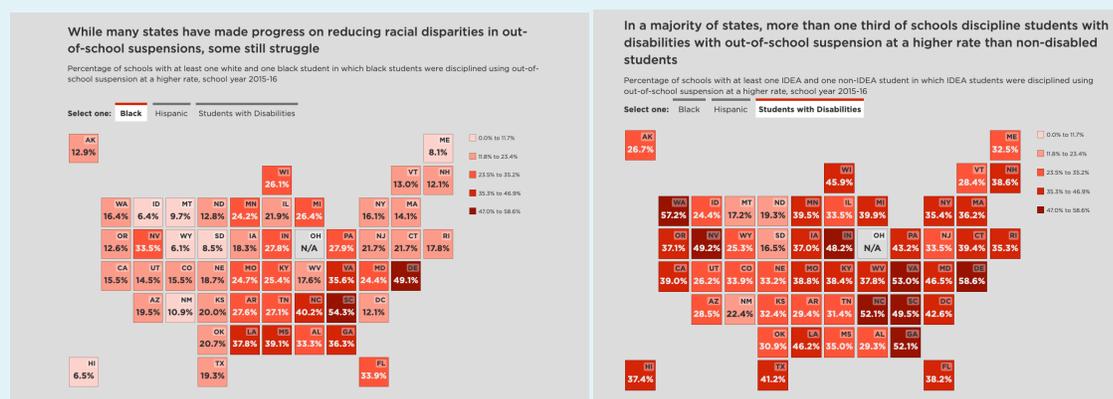
In their efforts to address discipline disparities, policymakers have focused on school discipline practice without addressing the underlying school- and district-level inequities that may have given rise to discipline disparities in the first place. For example, black middle and high school students are more likely to attend a school that has more security staff than mental health providers (Harper & Temkin, 2018). If schools that serve different populations of students vary with respect to their culture, resources, and staffing, these inequities should be addressed as part of an effort to improve school discipline. One study found strong differences between schools within a single school district: While 69 percent of the schools studied had either under-resourced and under-staffed environments or punitive environments, the remaining 31 percent of schools with more collaborative environments and stronger teacher morale were more prevalent in communities with less poverty and more white families (Gray, A., et al., 2017).

Child Trends shares data broadly to display and diagnose inequity

Our researchers used multiple strategies worked to bring attention to findings from the 2015-2016 Civil Rights Data Collection and other data sets to highlight inequity.

Using data visualization to highlight and make meaning of the data. We published state-level data from the Civil Rights Data Collection in visually appealing ways that clearly illuminate discipline disparities. Each map features state-level data on disparities in out-of-school suspensions, making it easy for the reader to see exactly where the most striking disparities exist for students who are black, Hispanic, or have disabilities. Our publication also provides important policy context and implications by exploring school discipline practice and initiatives that have helped (or not helped) decrease out-of-school suspensions, and by explaining the limitations of the data and the implications for policy (Harper, Ryberg, & Temkin, 2019).

Exhibit 1. Black students and students with disabilities remain more likely to receive out-of-school suspensions, despite overall declines



Source: <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/black-students-disabilities-out-of-school-suspensions>

Participating in federal information collection requests to provide expert feedback on the utility and quality of key indicators to measure equity. We also participate in the federal comment process to provide feedback on potential changes to the Civil Rights Data Collection (Emig, 2017).

Providing federal testimony to clarify the underlying root causes of long-standing disparities. Our researchers testified before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights to present our analyses of disparities by race and ethnicity in school discipline practice and explain how such disparities mirror inequities elsewhere in public education systems. Child Trends presented research on the disparate identification of disabilities among children of color, inequitable access to school-based mental health professionals, and inequitable access to experienced teachers (Harper, 2019).

Case Study 4: Strengthening and applying the evidence base

Federal and state policymakers increasingly acknowledge the value of evidence when making decisions about programs in various ways: referencing specific programs; promoting or requiring, via funding mechanisms, that programs be evidence-based; and supporting ongoing program implementation through technical assistance (Hart & Meron, 2019). Infusing evidence into legislation in this way is an important step forward; however, it also creates challenges as state and federal policymakers and program administrators—who generally do not have a background in research—implement these policies. We provide here an example of the challenges associated with implementing federal mandates to increase states' use of evidence-based programming to implement the Family First Prevention Services Act.

What is the issue facing children and families?

Currently, there is limited evaluation evidence around programs and supports for children in foster care and strategies that can help prevent children from entering foster care (McKlindon, 2019). Researchers conduct evaluations to better understand whether programs meet their intended outcomes. In the child welfare field, researchers are beginning to understand which programs and policies work best for children and use public dollars most effectively and efficiently (Children's Bureau, 2019). However, this work is still in the early stages.

How are policymakers responding?

In the last two decades, policymakers at the federal level have invested in research evidence on specific programs to ensure that public funds are used for programs that have a strong evidence base (Tseng, 2015). For example, the Family First Prevention Services Act (2018) sets specific requirements allowing states to access federal funds for services that prevent entry to foster care when they comply with evidence-based requirements described in the statute and regulations (McKlindon, 2019). These requirements were established to ensure that the programs funded would be effective in keeping children from entering foster care.

Examples of recent federal legislation that strives to use and create evidence and some of the foundational ways they differ are shown below.

Table 1. Recent federal legislation with ties to evidence-based programs

	Family First Prevention Services Act (2018)	Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (2018)	Every Student Succeeds Act (2015)	Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) (2018)
Purpose of the legislation	Supports children in remaining safely with their families and being placed with families when foster care placement is necessary	Combats juvenile delinquency and supports at-risk youth and youth who come into contact with the justice system, through evidence-based programs and practice	Provides federal education funding and establishes school accountability requirements for states	Provides resources and parenting skills to pregnant women and families
How grantees are encouraged or required to implement evidence-based programs	Funds for prevention programs tied to evidence base; funds incentivize reduction in congregate care and placement with families	Funds tied to evidence-based and trauma-informed programs	Funding and accountability standards established to specify appropriate use of federal funds	Majority of the funds are reserved for programs that have evidence of effectiveness, with a smaller proportion of funds available to implement and test new ideas
Number of evidence tiers included	Three: <i>promising, supported, and well-supported</i>	Two: <i>evidence-based and promising</i>	Four: <i>strong evidence, moderate evidence, promising evidence, and demonstrates a rationale</i>	Two: <i>evidence-based and promising</i>
Clearinghouse or repository for evidence-based programs	Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse	Model Programs Guide	What Works Clearinghouse	Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness

As shown in Table 1 above, there is not a uniform approach to incorporating evidence-based programs across federal statutes. In other words, in one federal statute, the definition of a “well-supported program” may not match the requirements outlined in another statute. This lack of consistency can challenge state administrators, who must decipher new evidence standards for each law and determine whether a program that qualifies under one statute also qualifies under a different one. The limited state of the evidence base in

child welfare programs creates additional complexity as policymakers strive to identify programs that allow them access to federal resources.

What is the research-to-policy challenge?

The child welfare field is contending with a number of challenges in implementing the new evidence requirements of the Family First Prevention Services Act (2018). First, although the Act generally opens up federal funds for prevention programs, it requires that 50 percent of state expenditures go toward “well-supported programs.” This will pose challenges due to the limited number of prevention programs that fall into that category. Second, while the new statute sets ambitious evidence standards for programs, state efforts to implement them to good effect will be hindered by the fact that some programs under consideration as evidence-based in accordance with the law have not been tested for families with child welfare involvement. Moreover, such evaluations may not have samples that reflect the demographics or experiences of the children being served in different locations across the country; that is, a program that shows evidence of the desired outcomes with families living in an urban area on the East Coast may have different outcomes with families living in a rural community in the Midwest. Additional evaluation and program adaptations may be required to ensure that programs adapt to the strengths, needs, and preferences of different communities. This is especially true for communities that have large American Indian/Alaskan Native populations that have unique characteristics and both historical trauma and resilience (Around Him & DeMand, 2018). Finally, implementing new evidence-based programs can be its own challenge, requiring an understanding of the existing evidence and monitoring to ensure fidelity to program models. Practitioners and policymakers need ongoing support from the research community—beyond academic research articles—as they strive to implement new programs in new environments and with new populations.

Why is this challenge emerging?

Without an understanding of key evaluation concepts or the existing evidence base, legislators drafting new policy and administrators working to implement policy may inadvertently create challenges for programs that will impact children and families. Without this knowledge, legislators may not fully understand the implications of the specific criteria for evaluation standards they include in legislation (Supplee & McCann, 2019). Such policies should be carefully crafted with input from the research and practice communities to ensure that the criteria selected are responsive to the evidence in the field and will not create unintended negative consequences during implementation. Researchers must partner closely with states and programs as they design, conduct, and share findings from evaluations to ensure that the resulting research truly supports their ongoing work with children and families.

Child Trends supports policymakers in using evidence-based programs

We strive to support strong implementation of policies requiring evidence-based programs. In doing so, we provide clear definitions of key research terms and honestly discuss challenges in implementation. In our recent brief, *Applying the Research and Evaluation Provisions of the Family First Prevention Services Act*, we provided policymakers with an overview of the research-based provisions found in the Act, a glossary of definitions for key evaluation terms, an assessment of current and upcoming implementation challenges, and implications for policymakers and researchers (McKlindon, 2019).

Recommendations

At Child Trends, we have made valuable contributions to support policymakers' use of research and evidence. But there is still much leaning and work ahead for researchers and policymakers in order for research to support and strengthen policy decisions. Both groups can play important roles in facilitating the increased use of research to drive better outcomes for children and families. Below, we lay out some next steps for policymakers and researchers to continue to expand the use of research in policymaking.

Policymakers

- **Engage with researchers.** Given the expanded role of research in policy development and implementation, we encourage policymakers to consult with researchers and intermediaries. By asking questions about complex research concepts, policymakers can help researchers clarify implications and understand how their research may be applied. It is also important that policymakers share their own expertise in crafting policy and their knowledge of current policy barriers and facilitators. This can help researchers reframe how they think about their work to respond better to policy opportunities and limitations.
- **Explore more formal, ongoing partnerships.** As noted above, researchers are using an expanding research-to-policy/practice partnership model (Supplee, Johnson, Chamberlain, & Illangasekare, 2019). Policymakers should consult with research partners to decide whether a formal partnership, in which policymakers and researchers co-design a research study, could support ongoing policy work and decision making.
- **Demand data.** With access to understandable and relevant information, policymakers can make more informed decisions. They can use a variety of policy levers to support ongoing data infrastructure, collection, and reporting, such as through legislation, financial support, and coalition building. At the federal level, for example, the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 opens doors to better accessibility and use of federal data sources (Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018, P.L. 115-435 (2019)). With administrative data at the federal, state, and local levels, policymakers will better know their constituents, their needs, and how they are faring—as well as whether (and how) programs and services are producing their intended outcomes.

Researchers

- **Provide definitions of key terms and refer to them often.** As researchers craft written materials or presentations for policymakers, they must recognize that their terminology may be unfamiliar to policymakers, or that policymakers may assign different definitions to the same terms. Define terms using clear, simple language and identify possible areas of confusion. Researchers should also be available to answer questions that policymakers may have as they apply research to their work.
- **Develop rapid response capabilities.** Sharing research during and after a crisis can be extremely helpful to policymakers and others striving to incorporate research into their work. Providing resources that translate research into simple, actionable advice after traumatic events is one way researchers can connect their expertise to what is taking place (Bartlett, 2018; Bartlett, 2017).
- **Explore racial and ethnic disparities and share findings in their proper context.** As policies increasingly require data collection and reporting, it is critically important for researchers to thoughtfully and intentionally elevate the need for data that facilitates understanding of racial and ethnic disparities. They should also explore the historical, political, and cultural factors that may underlie and explain

these disparities. Child Trends' recently developed guiding principles, published in *A Guide to Incorporating a Racial and Ethnic Equity Perspective Throughout the Research Process*, provide a foundation for how to approach this work (Andrews, Parekh, & Peckoo, 2019).

- **Share the context and limitations of the data and advocate for improvements.** As discussed above, there are many gaps in existing data and many challenges in applying the evidence base. Researchers need to acknowledge those limitations openly and spend time ensuring that policymakers understand their implications. As policymakers move toward new mandates that use data to strengthen public transparency and accountability—creating pressure on child-serving institutions to show improvement and hide challenges—researchers should provide guidance and tools to help public agencies maintain the validity and accuracy of administrative data.

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