States Turn to Research to Improve Outcomes for Children and Youth

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By Sara Dube and Darcy White

Policymakers want to improve outcomes for children and youth but often struggle with how best to allocate limited resources. In recent years, many have turned to evidence-based policymaking—the systematic use of high-quality research in decision-making—to help address this challenge. Extensive analysis, for example, has demonstrated that some interventions achieve outcomes that benefit children and youth—such as reducing child abuse and juvenile recidivism rates. But policymakers need access to these findings to identify, fund and sustain these proven programs.

A report released in January by the Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative assesses the prevalence and level of data-driven policymaking across a spectrum of human services, including child welfare and juvenile justice, in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The report, which involved an extensive review of over 5,000 state laws and documents, analyzed the degree to which states engage in six evidence-based policymaking practices: defining an “evidence-based program”; inventorying the programs in their state that meet this standard; comparing program costs and benefits; targeting funds to evidence-based programs; reporting outcome data in the budget; and requiring these actions through state laws, codes and rules.

While the report found that the majority of states have used some form of evidence-based policymaking, few have taken the actions necessary to identify the evidence behind their child welfare and juvenile justice programs, assess these programs’ expected returns on investment, and steer funding to those proved to work. By not taking these critical steps, government officials miss the opportunity to focus limited resources on cost-effective programs, identify and reduce funding for ineffective programs, and improve outcomes for children and youth.

But, two states—Florida in juvenile justice and Ohio in child welfare—demonstrate how evidence-based policymaking can help lawmakers make better investments in programs targeting children and youth.

How can states better engage in evidence-based policymaking?

To help other states expand their evidence-based policymaking over the long term, the Results First report identified several approaches that states, in addition to Ohio and Florida, have adopted.

First, states can increase their commitment to using evidence and data to guide decisions. For instance, New Mexico’s Legislative Finance Committee partnered with Results First to expand its use of evidence to direct resources to the most effective programs. When possible, the committee uses the Results First cost-benefit model to identify interventions that would achieve high returns on investment and uses the results, along with evidence on program effectiveness, to inform the annual budget recommendations it develops for legislators. The Legislature has used these recommendations to appropriate $161 million to evidence-based programming for adult corrections, behavioral health, child welfare and early education.
Second, states can invest in strengthening the infrastructure needed to make their agencies’ data systems compatible and enable staff to conduct analyses that identify cost-effective programming.

For example, South Carolina’s Revenue and Fiscal Affairs Office created a centralized administrative data warehouse that includes information from multiple agencies that oversee numerous policy areas, including child welfare and juvenile justice. The central database links data on individuals that are collected by various agencies (such as a juvenile offender whose case information is listed in both a state’s correctional and human services databases) using unique identifiers to protect each individual’s identity. The fiscal affairs office provides guidance on sharing and using this data so researchers can study how to improve outcomes for youth.

Finally, states can expand their staff capacity to identify and implement programs shown to be effective. In 2015, the Minnesota Legislature appropriated funds over two years for the state’s Management and Budget Office to hire two full-time employees to inventory programs and analyze returns on investment. Since then, the staff has conducted cost-benefit analyses of corrections and adult mental health programs to inform policymakers on which evidence-based programs would provide the best returns, and the staff is conducting similar analyses on juvenile justice programs.

With the growing data on how to build a better future for children and youth, policymakers can expand their engagement in evidence-based policymaking by strategically investing in public programs proved to deliver strong returns on taxpayer dollars.

Florida

With a mandate to divert youth from the juvenile justice system, the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, or DJJ, has for several years championed an evidence-based policymaking approach to improve outcomes for this population.

For instance, in 2011, participation in the Juvenile Justice Improvement Project—an initiative to improve youth outcomes—spurred the department to use the nationally recognized Standardized Program Evaluation Protocol to identify how well the state’s juvenile justice programs adhere to key principles of evidence-based interventions. The department also created a supplementary model that compares programs based on how effective they are in reducing recidivism relative to their operating costs. These efforts enabled program providers to identify which programs lower recidivism rates while increasing the return on investment for taxpayers.

In 2015, the DJJ expanded its use of data-driven tools when Florida Gov. Rick Scott issued an executive order directing several human service departments to collaborate on improving mental health outcomes for youth. It also—along with the Department of Corrections—partnered with Results First to implement evidence-based budgetary tools to assess the cost-effectiveness of the state’s juvenile treatment programs.

As part of the effort to engage stakeholders in evidence-based policymaking, the DJJ hosts Common Definitions, an annual conference for legislative and departmental staff, researchers, and contract service providers to review and offer feedback on analyses of treatment programs and share the latest research findings on improving outcomes for juveniles. Departmental staff members have reported that the conference builds trust, transparency and collaboration.

Ohio

In 2010, the Ohio Children’s Trust Fund—a government entity that is a dedicated funding source for child abuse and neglect prevention programs, led by a 15-member board representing the governor’s office, Legislature, state agencies and the public—turned to evidence-based policymaking to attract private-sector funders and introduce more accountability into how the state’s limited resources are spent.

The trust fund used research clearinghouses—databases that provide information on the effectiveness of various interventions—as sources of evidence-based programs it would consider funding. To allow for some
flexibility, program providers can implement an intervention that is not listed in a clearinghouse if the intervention meets certain evidence criteria set by the trust fund or the regional prevention councils that administer contracts with child welfare program providers. Providers also must work with program developers on any modifications of a program’s delivery to make sure these changes do not limit the program’s effectiveness.

Since shifting funds to evidence-based programming, the number of children entering the child welfare system due to abuse and neglect has declined in Ohio. Kristen Rost, executive director of the trust fund, credits strong leadership, the ability to support decisions with data and a commitment to providing technical support for the state’s success with evidence-based policymaking.

About the Authors

Sara Dube directs the Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative, a joint effort of The Pew Charitable Trusts and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Dube manages Pew’s work to advance evidence-based decision-making by states and counties, including the use of an innovative cost-benefit analysis tool that helps government leaders direct investments in programs and policies that generate the best outcomes while making the most of limited resources. In doing so, she brings to state and county partners the latest research on data-driven programs and analytical tools to help assess the true costs and benefits of these taxpayer-funded initiatives. Darcy White is an officer with the Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative at The Pew Charitable Trusts. In this capacity, White manages research projects to promote evidence-based policymaking in state and county governments. Prior to joining Pew, White worked at the Public International Law and Policy Group, where she conducted research and policy analysis on good governance, and served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Kenya’s Deaf Education sector. She has a master’s degree from American University’s School of International Service and has published on government performance.

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