

# Research and Evaluation of Place-Based and Community Collaboration-Based Initiatives

Advisory Memo

3/17/2017

The Office of Justice Programs includes many place- and community collaboration-based initiatives. These efforts are unique given their emphasis on locally-informed and locally tailored processes (e.g., Violence Reduction Network – see <https://www.bja.gov/programs/vrn.html>) and the mobilization of local stakeholders to respond to complex criminal and juvenile justice problems (e.g., the National Forum for Youth Violence Prevention – see <http://ojp.gov/newsroom/youthviolenceforum.htm>). Preliminary research suggests that initiatives of this nature are promising.

Given their nature, these efforts pose unique challenges and opportunities from a research standpoint. Often, a research and evaluation process is not in place from the beginning of these efforts. As a consequence, it is often difficult to document the effects of such efforts and to examine changes over time. This evaluation challenge is compounded by the wide variety of goals locally informed efforts may identify; that is, by design local efforts will vary from one community to another and may not all be aiming to facilitate the same outcomes. Finally, by their nature, these efforts are often multi-faceted in their intervention efforts. They may involve many simultaneous activities making it difficult (if not impossible) to attribute change to a single place-based, collaboration-based initiative within a given community. These demands (among others) require us to consider questions and methods that are suited to the phenomenon of interest and to attend to research-related needs, to the extent possible, *prior* to the onset of the effort.

The aim of this advisory memo is to document a set of principles to guide research and evaluation on place-based and collaboration-based initiatives. Considering each of these principles will set the stage for useful evaluation efforts given the complexities of place-based and collaboration-based initiatives. Expectations based on these principles should be clearly detailed at the outset of the project (e.g., in the grant solicitation if there is one). Detailed evaluation plans that address these principles should be provided, particularly if an implementation and evaluation planning year is allowed.

## ***I. Building Infrastructure to Encourage Successful Efforts***

### **A. Establish Upfront Data Expectations and Performance Measures**

While locally-informed and -tailored by design, place-based/community collaboration-based initiatives frequently require OJP funded sites to utilize

performance outcome measures. This creates the opportunity to track desired processes and outcomes within sites (e.g., infrastructure changes, reductions in community violence), encourage attention to key change areas (e.g., requiring regular data gathering primes attention to desired changes), identify key features that may explain site to site variability (e.g., readiness for change, sustainability factors) and create potential common metrics for cross-site comparison. At the same time, such data gathering efforts have to be responsive enough to reflect variation from one place to the next.

*Recommendation 1: Create systems to insure that all place- and community collaboration-based initiatives have systematic data gathering processes in place from the start of the initiative.*

*Recommendation 2: Create a menu of performance outcome measures and have sites complete those that are highly relevant to their efforts. This allows for the review of performance metrics that are common across sites, but sensitive to site-to-site variation.*

## **B. Support Local Evaluation and Research Capacity**

The local capacity of agencies to provide data will vary from site to site. This may include sufficient staff time to manage data gathering, requisite knowledge and appropriate technology. In addition, sites will often have access to existing administrative data that may provide a critical source of information regarding change over time. Administrative data can come from the criminal justice system, but also from allied partners including child welfare, human service, public health, and education. Data sharing agreements may be a necessary part of project development to plan for which administrative data will be used and what permissions are necessary to access it. Given that place- and community collaboration-based initiatives may take considerable time to produce desired outcomes existing data may create the opportunity to take a “long view” and to capitalize on what is often a “natural” quasi-experimental design (i.e., interventions are introduced at particular points in time that may change important systems markers). Importantly, existing and new data sources should be structured with attention to the potential for unintended, but possibly predictable, consequences (e.g., crime moving from one locale to an adjacent locale).

*Recommendation 3: Require an evaluation plan that a) specifies research capacity with attention to adequate infrastructure (e.g., a data team; data sharing agreements; specific plans for data collection and analysis) and b) identifies potential unintended consequences.*

*Recommendation 4: Provide needed technical support in the development of data gathering and analysis plans and avoid unfunded mandates.*

*Recommendation 5: Foster research/practitioner partnerships and create local evaluation processes (e.g., data collection plans; data usage plans; data sharing agreements) to ensure (or encourage) higher quality evaluation in communities that do not have the opportunity to work directly with a researcher.*

*Recommendation 6: Require funded sites to identify existing sources of data and/or assist sites in inquiring about the use of those data in relation to their change efforts (including data sharing agreements).*

### **C. Ensure and Support Ongoing Data Use at the Local Level**

A common challenge in place- and community collaboration-based initiatives is making research and evaluation timely enough to inform ongoing practice. There is often a considerable lag between the implementation of a place-based/community collaboration-based effort and data-driven feedback regarding processes and outcomes that have implications for ongoing efforts. Practical and political decisions often have to be made before this point is reached.

*Recommendation 6: To encourage data-driven practice and continuous quality improvement, provide regular, accessible findings to funded sites regarding the data they provide and encourage sites to have identified data teams (e.g., with cross-partner representation) who will discuss findings and their local implications.*

*Recommendation 7: Create benchmarks (within or across site as appropriate) and track progress in relationship to those benchmarks.*

### **D. Require Clearly Defined Geographic Focus**

A core concept in place-based efforts is that they are directed to a particular locale. Locales can be defined in a wide variety of ways with many possible uses of geographic space. For example, efforts could target a 10-block area, a citywide effort, or a single county. Even within citywide efforts, implementation is likely to vary from one place to another. Tracking the boundaries of a particular “place” in a place-based initiative makes subsequent data analysis more useful given that it more clearly delineates where exactly an effort took place. Clearly defining place could encourage accurate cross-site comparisons capitalizing on existing administrative data. It is important that the definition of place reflect the issue being addressed. For example, one might expect important variation from neighborhood to neighborhood or county to county in arrest rates. Thus, comparing relative change within a given county or neighborhood may provide a more reliable metric than relying on comparisons across given neighborhoods or counties. The use of administrative data can become challenging when the data available do not align well with a particular place (e.g., when data are available at the level of county, but not for towns or cities within the county). Defining “place” is a critical step in planning, implementing and evaluating place-based initiatives.

*Recommendation 8: Require funded sites to define “place” in their applications. This could include a tool to draw intervention target areas.*

*Recommendation 9: Require funded sites to amend targets sites and/or account for where intervention efforts are ultimately concentrated.*

## **II. Methodology Considerations**

Given that place and community collaboration-based efforts are often aimed to create changes in systems and with attention to local contexts it is essential that methods are suited to the phenomenon of interest. For example, these initiatives are sometimes not single programs, but cross-sector partnerships (e.g., National Forum). Ideally, methods would pay attention to how the work is being done (i.e., collaborative processes) and what is resulting from the effort (e.g., outcomes). Typically, addressing both processes and outcomes in these efforts requires a comprehensive research approach employing multiple methods and standards of evidence. Essentially, evaluation methods need to fit the individual circumstances, settings and resources.

There is no one methodology that can be or should be universally applied. For example, in the study of community collaboration and its processes and outcomes, random assignment is often not possible at the level of communities. Further, equivalence is not easily established in so-called comparison communities. Rather, studies may be concerned with questions regarding a) the ways in which communities have changed since the formation of a collaborative with regard to desired outcomes (e.g., reduced crime, change in disproportionate arrest rate, increased interagency coordination); b) the ways in which the collaborative has contributed to those changes; and c) the features of the communities that facilitate or constrain the collaborative efforts. These research aims might be assessed using a variety of methods including, but not limited to, social network analysis, geographic information systems, survey methodology, interviews, and observation. These methods may be cross-sectional (for some questions) or employ repeated measures, if possible, at periods before, during, and after the intervention (if there is a clear end point).

*Recommendation 10: Identify a range of methodological strategies that reflect the complexity of place-based/community collaboration-based initiatives. Then match the methodology or methodologies to the specific situation assuring an understanding of the limitations that need to be acknowledged with the choices made.*

### **III. *Other Key Considerations***

#### **A. Commit to the Translation of Data and Findings for Stakeholders including Policy Makers, Community Members, and Practitioners**

OJP currently gathers a large amount of data from local sites across the country, and through grants and contracts, but these are not always made available to the public. Making data accessible has the potential to encourage usage to overcome silos of information within OJP, inform local action, facilitate research on place- and community collaboration-based efforts and guide policy decisions. In addition, coordinating with other non-OJP agencies to make data accessible

*Recommendation 11: Collect and prepare data in a usable and quality form and make it available to the public from OJP, and to the extent possible facilitate access to data from other relevant non-OJP agencies.*

#### **B. Assure Culturally and Contextually Responsive Implementation and Evaluation**

Place-based and community collaboration-based efforts require concerted attention to cultural and contextual variability. This could reflect issues related to race, ethnicity, class (e.g., concentration of poverty), and many other facets of local realities/history that are likely to affect the implementation of evidence-based practice, local disparities and disproportionality, and related research processes. This may also be reflected in local access to resources and undue burden with unfunded evaluation or data gathering mandates.

It is essential that the evaluation activities developed are culturally sensitive and competent. This may be reflected in the specific methods that are chosen, in the diversity of the research team (that the research team reflects the diversity of the community being evaluated) and in the use of appropriate measures (e.g., with regard to cultural relevance and linguistic appropriateness).

Administrative data may also reflect systematic bias that needs to be considered if it is part of evaluation planning or as indicators or outcomes. For example, administrative data from schools sometimes shows disproportionate representation of African American boys regarding disciplinary referrals. These data do not necessarily indicate that African American boys are engaged in more disciplinary violations relative to White counterparts. Rather, these data may reflect that teachers are more likely to engage in disciplinary referrals with African American youth. When looking for change over time, the rise and fall of these numbers may reflect change in youth behavior, but may also reflect changes in the behavior of the adults reporting this behavior. Thus, administrative data must be understood in the context in which it is gathered and with attention to multiple possible interpretations.

*Recommendation #12: Make awareness of local cultural and contextual realities a central, explicit facet of place-based/community collaboration-based implementation and evaluation efforts.*

*Recommendation #13: Ensure that planned evaluation activities are culturally sensitive and competent (e.g., linguistically and culturally appropriate instruments, diverse representation on evaluation team).*

### **C. Recognize Coalitions and Collaborations as an Essential Element of Place-Based Efforts**

OJP place- and community collaboration-based efforts occur in the context of other federally- and locally-funded efforts across multiple sectors. Some efforts emphasize cross-sector coalition building. These efforts can occur, as appropriate, at multiple levels to encourage a comprehensive approach to issues and a broader perspective on outcomes.

*Recommendation #14: Encourage multi-stakeholder coalition building at multiple levels (e.g., local, state, federal, as appropriate) to enrich OJP sponsored efforts (e.g., to reduce duplication of efforts, to pool resources).*

### **D. Make Use of Advanced Available Technology to Maximize Place-Based Efforts**

There are many ways that technology can support place- and community collaboration-based efforts. In particular methods that aim to reflect “place” including visualization and mapping (e.g., GIS). These methods capture place in a way that is accessible, visually compelling and helpful to local communities as they work to identify patterns in geographic space. In addition, such methods can illustrate how to more effectively link resources to community need, identify resource overlap for collaboration (across local and federal agencies), minimize redundancy of effort, and track resource investment.

*Recommendation #15: Utilize technology to enhance place- and community collaboration-based implementation and evaluation efforts.*

### **E. Provide Sufficient Time for the Development of Place-Based and Community Collaboration-Based Efforts**

A central question in any evaluation is how much time should elapse before changes should be observed. Often, place-based and community collaboration-based initiatives need sufficient time to develop. These grants may want to routinely allow for a planning year in advance of implementation. The development of an evaluation plan can also occur during this year. The intervention period should be sufficiently long for proposed changes to take place and, likewise, proposed

evaluation plans should focus on intermediate outcomes that could be produced in that time period if the initiative was successful.

*Recommendation #16: Choose outcomes that are realistic given the time within which observation will occur and allow sufficient time for these outcomes to emerge.*

#### **F. Ensure that Initiatives Build on Research Findings and Previous Efforts**

While it is the case that place-based and community collaboration-based initiatives are tailored to local places by design, there should also be an effort to ground these efforts in existing evidence regarding best practices. This can come from previous evaluation efforts employing the same general model and/or general theoretical and empirical models that aim to guide collaborative and place-based efforts (e.g., models of effective coalition building like the “Community Coalition Action Theory” and “Getting to Outcomes”). Efforts should be done to investigate these possibilities well before implementation.

*Recommendation #17: Ground decision-making regarding the structure, processes and aims of place-based and community collaboration-based efforts in best practices and existing evidence to increase the chance of success.*