



PROCEEDINGS FROM THE

**EARLY CHILDHOOD
RESEARCH ROUNDTABLE**

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HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

CONVENED BY
EARLY CHILDHOOD
DATA CONNECTIONS

AN INITIATIVE OF THE
CHILD HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT
INSTITUTE OF CONNECTICUT



The Child Health and Development
Institute of Connecticut, Inc.

ABOUT THE EARLY CHILDHOOD DATA CONNECTIONS PROJECT

Early Childhood DataCONNECTIONS is a public-private partnership of the State of Connecticut's Department of Social Services (DSS) and the Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut (CHDI). The project mission is to promote well-informed decisions on policies and programs for young children by improving state agencies' research capability. As part of this effort, DataCONNECTIONS is bringing together state agency staff, researchers, community advocates, service providers and legislators to identify and address some of the needs for better information on key early childhood issues.

ABOUT THE CHILD HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

The Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut is a not-for-profit organization established to promote and maximize the healthy physical, behavioral, emotional, cognitive and social development of children throughout Connecticut. CHDI creates, supports and facilitates innovative primary and preventative strategies for children, and works to maximize the effectiveness of the institutions and systems that contribute to their well-being.

KEY TERMS

Policy research: Research that informs the development and improvement of public functions such as regulation and enforcement, education and public awareness, direct services and financing of services.

- It includes **baseline and trend information** that describes the status, condition or characteristics of a population, in this case, young children and their families or the providers of services.
- It also includes **program performance information** that may demonstrate the coverage of the population by the service, the referrals, intake, type of services, cost, providers and proportion of eligible clients who use the service. Most state reporting on services falls into this category.
- A third layer of policy research produces **evaluative information**. It is concerned with how well services meet their objectives. Outcomes attributed to the services are examined. Coordination and transitions between services and equity and quality are important to evaluative research. At its most complex, this research examines outcomes and attributes them to multiple conditions and interventions.

Policy research partnerships: The partnering of various stakeholders, including but not limited to researchers and state agencies, toward the goal of improving the strength, relevance and credibility of policy research. Partnerships take many forms, but are based in directing the capabilities and resources of the partners toward compatible research and policy goals.

Administrative data: Administrative data is collected by state agencies and used for:

- record-keeping and case management;
- monitoring and evaluating program performance; and
- ensuring agency accountability.

EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH ROUNDTABLE

INTRODUCTION

Sound public policy and program implementation requires reliable, relevant information. In order to produce this information, it is essential that research address key policy questions and that data quality and availability not undermine the effort. Unfortunately, in Connecticut as in most states, many critical policy questions regarding early childhood (birth to age eight) issues remain unanswered due to limited early childhood policy research activity; current shortcomings of state administrative databases for conducting policy research (e.g. data collection methods, database design, missing data); and barriers to accessing state data.

Bridging these research gaps requires a multi-faceted approach, which includes:

- ◆ Generating interest and commitment within the research community and state agencies for early childhood policy research
- ◆ Enhancing state administrative databases to support in-depth policy research
- ◆ Facilitating access to state data for those conducting research and analysis

To begin to accomplish these goals, it is necessary to establish strong policy research partnerships between those internal and external to state agencies.

Toward this end, the Early Childhood DataCONNECTIONS project of the Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut convened the first Early Childhood Research Roundtable on June 13, 2003 at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. The all-day meeting provided an opportunity for state agency staff, researchers and other stakeholders to meet and explore together strategies for developing policy research partnerships. The Roundtable assembled 40 enthusiastic participants, from state agency staff to researchers to child advocates and clinicians and was facilitated by Shelley Waters Boots, Acting Child Care Division Director at the Children's Defense Fund in Washington, DC.

ROUNDTABLE GOALS

DataCONNECTIONS established three primary goals for this Research Roundtable, geared toward building interest in and capacity for policy research partnerships.

- 1. Foster relationships between state agencies and researchers**
- 2. Link state agency research needs with researchers' interests and capabilities**
- 3. Explore opportunities for researchers to use state administrative data**

Significant progress was made during the meeting toward each of these goals. The progress summary that follows highlights key ideas and observations from the Roundtable participants and provides an initial framework for achieving meaningful partnerships and developing subsequent Roundtables and other activities to support this effort.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

“[The best thing about the meeting] was the ability to discuss the needs of both sides of the bridge – researchers and administrators – and to develop some next steps for making linkages to improve databases and subsequently, provide more population-based research to inform policy and practice.”

~Research Roundtable Participant

FOSTERING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STATE AGENCIES AND RESEARCHERS

The Roundtable clearly helped facilitate relationship-building between state agencies and researchers simply by bringing these two, often disconnected, groups together and engaging them in conversation around a common interest – early childhood research.

Understanding and Appreciating Different Perspectives

Recognizing that an understanding and appreciation of different perspectives is a critical component of any partnership or collaboration, the meeting began with a discussion of differing professional cultures (e.g. demands, operating principles, parameters). Inherent in the discussion was the identification of opportunities for and barriers to policy research partnerships. Some of the key themes that emerged were as follows:

In the world of State Agencies:

- ◆ The first priority is running programs and contract/grant management.
- ◆ Resources for system development, research and data analysis are limited.
- ◆ When information is requested for program and policy development, the need is immediate.
- ◆ There is little commitment from agency leadership for policy research.
- ◆ Frequent turnover among elected leaders leads to frequent changes in the policy agenda.

In the world of Researchers:

- ◆ Policy research is the least regarded endeavor in academia.
- ◆ Review and extension of a body of knowledge is valued and expected in the academic arena and creativity is generally challenged.
- ◆ Researchers desire longitudinal data and analysis to gain long-term perspective.
- ◆ They are always looking for quality datasets.
- ◆ There is constant pressure to publish.
- ◆ Researchers are continuously seeking research funding.

Obstacles Stemming from Differing “World Views”

Many of the barriers to forging solid policy research partnerships stem from general incongruities between the policy and research worlds, such as those highlighted above. **Low prioritization of policy research among state agencies is one of the biggest obstacles identified by Roundtable participants.** The need to focus on program administration and the paucity of resources, coupled with the lack of agency leadership commitment to policy research, significantly undermine progress. The inconsistency between researchers’ desire to conduct longitudinal studies and policymakers’ need for quick turnaround of information makes it difficult to find common ground. Further mediating against policy research is that for academic researchers, policy relevance is often a secondary consideration to the likelihood of publishing results in a respected journal.

Some researchers questioned whether policy research had any impact at all on policymakers' decisions. Knowing what research would be relevant to policymakers requires a commitment over time to collaborative work.

Recommendations for Fostering Relationships

1. **Establish trust among researchers and state agencies.** Trust is a critical foundation for any partnership. To foster this trust, an open dialogue between researchers and state agencies is necessary throughout any research collaboration, but especially before any findings are released to the public. Given that negative findings (e.g. a program is ineffective) could have significant political and budgetary repercussions, it is essential that researchers work with state agencies to ensure that a study's integrity is not compromised by misunderstandings about policies, programs or the populations they serve.
2. **Identify forums for sharing research findings and interests.** Research can play a critical role in shaping effective policies and programs. Inviting researchers to share relevant findings and identify ways in which they can become involved in policy research is mutually beneficial.

LINKING STATE AGENCY RESEARCH NEEDS WITH RESEARCHERS' INTERESTS AND CAPABILITIES

Despite the significant work that needs to be done to overcome the barriers, **the discussion among Roundtable participants revealed a strong foundation of common interest upon which to build mutually beneficial partnerships between state agencies and researchers.** First and foremost was a commitment to improving the health and well-being of children and families in Connecticut. In addition, participants were clearly in favor of exploring the potential efficiencies that could be achieved through collaboration. For example, state agencies saw that by sharing data with researchers they could benefit from new information without expending staff time to conduct the analysis. Likewise, researchers felt they could explore new research opportunities, if they could tap into state data, and save time and energy as well if the data procurement process was streamlined.

Roundtable participants developed some concrete ideas about how to address the obstacles and work toward mutually beneficial collaborations between researchers and state agencies. The feedback they provided on creating these linkages was based, in part, on their prior experiences with similar partnerships and emerging best practices.

Recommendations for Building and Sustaining Linkages

1. **Secure commitment for policy research from state agency leadership.** Without buy-in at the senior level and commitment of resources, moving forward is difficult, at best. Moreover, an enhanced expectation for information needs to permeate the agencies.
2. **Seek opportunities for research funding from the federal government or national organizations.** Drawing in outside revenues may help address some of the reluctance to engage in new research.
3. **Partner in policy and program improvement initiatives.** Involving researchers, as experts and sources of information on scientifically based practice, aids policymakers and program managers.
4. **Plan a research agenda together.** Agencies can identify their research needs and make it known to researchers. Even better, they can build the agenda together.

EXPLORING OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESEARCHERS TO USE STATE ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

An important component of building policy research partnerships is facilitating efficient access to quality state data. Roundtable participants acknowledged that this is currently a problem.

Data Quality Issues

Policy research using administrative data is tedious and can be less rewarding than designing and implementing a study based on new data collection. Because of the administrative purposes of these datasets, considerable data cleaning, reorganizing, creation of new fields and combining databases has to take place before the data can be analyzed. Specific problems include:

- ◆ **Missing variables.** In state agencies, data collection is driven by reporting requirements imposed by the state, the federal government or other funders and by operational needs to manage cases, establish eligibility or make payments to service providers, local governments or clients. As a result, data that is not directly required for the purposes regardless of its potential value to policy research is often not gathered. Lack of staff and financial resources for system design, additional data collection and analysis contribute to this problem.
- ◆ **Lack of common identifiers.** Without a common system of record identifiers, linking databases for longitudinal or other relational analyses is cumbersome or impossible.
- ◆ **Lack of common variable coding/definitions.** When databases within or across agencies have no standardized definitions of variables or format for recording data (e.g. actual age versus age ranges), researchers have difficulty making comparisons and conducting desired analyses.
- ◆ **Variable definitions are not clear.** In many cases, administrative databases are not accompanied by codebooks that clearly detail what variables are contained within a database and how those variables are defined. This significantly undermines the utility of a dataset, particularly for use by external researchers.

Data Access Issues

- ◆ **Confidentiality concerns.** Protecting client confidentiality is a top concern for state agencies, particularly in light of new regulations like HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) that seek to strengthen privacy safeguards. Although there are legal and safe ways for states to share information, to avoid missteps, states are generally hesitant to release data, even when it is supposedly in the public domain.
- ◆ **Various approval processes are required to access data.** Although review mechanisms are important to ensure the privacy and security of clients and provide for researcher accountability, a laborious or slow approval process for research can be a significant deterrent.

Recommendations for Addressing Quality and Data Access Issues

One overarching recommendation that bears repeating is securing commitment for policy research from agency leadership. With high-level support, many of the specific recommendations presented below for enhancing state administrative databases are more likely to achieve implementation.

1. **Include researchers in database development.** To ensure that key data is collected and all data is recorded in a way that supports program administration and research, it is important all critical stakeholders are involved. This includes state agency program and information technology as well as researchers and other relevant community stakeholders.

2. **Develop and disseminate data codebooks.** To both encourage and enable researchers to access state data, it is important to circulate descriptions of existing data, including details on variable definitions and coding so researchers can evaluate the content of the dataset and the feasibility of working with it.
3. **Create common identifier systems and standardize data coding format.** To link databases and track clients or cases over time, it is essential that state agencies collectively develop and implement a common identification system. It is also critical that within and across agencies variable definitions and coding formats are standardized. Without these key structural elements, administrative databases will continue to fall short in terms of data quality and, consequently, research utility.

CONCLUSION

In the course of just one all-day meeting, Roundtable participants made significant progress toward developing a strategic plan for realizing and sustaining early childhood policy research partnerships. Although the group could not offer detailed solutions for all the challenges they identified, they clearly agreed that several elements are critical to building a foundation upon which policy research partnerships can thrive: trust between state agencies and researchers; commitment from agency leadership; plentiful opportunities for information sharing; data quality and access improvement; and recognition by both state agencies and researchers that policy research is mutually beneficial. To further address these issues and begin to build this important foundation, DataCONNECTIONS has begun planning subsequent roundtables, based on positive feedback from the first roundtable.

This document may be downloaded from www.chdi.org. For more information on future Research Roundtables or the Early Childhood DataCONNECTIONS project, contact Sue Wilson at swilson@uchc.edu or (860) 679-1524.

For additional information on building and sustaining policy research partnerships, see “Creating Research the Informs State Child Care Policy: Building and Maintaining Child Care Research Partnerships,” available at <http://www.hhs.oregonstate.edu/familypolicy/occrp/>.