



Tensions and Opportunities in Evaluating Place-based Interventions

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We are in the midst of a decades-long focus on the “results” of community and social change efforts and a recent trend emphasizes lasting, measurable, and causally-identified impacts. This prioritization exists in government, philanthropic, and nonprofit sectors. Performance is now largely defined by the outcomes of social programs and investments (e.g., the number of trainees who get a job) and their longer-term impacts on well-being (e.g., economic self-sufficiency), rather than through inputs and outputs (e.g., the numbers of grants administered, qualified staff, and training sessions provided to consumers). Demand for meaningful evidence of impact is well-intended, but it also raises tensions within the community development field regarding measurement and evaluation. Rather than

road blocks, we see these tensions as opportunities. In this article, we identify some of these tensions surrounding impact evaluation in the context of place-based change efforts and offer guiding principles to sharpen the focus of conversation on the use of evidence in policy making and practice.

Growth in Place-based Community Development Strategies

While public and policy attention to place is not new, a distinctive comprehensive and geographically targeted approach to community change emerged in the 1990s, primarily through large philanthropic initiatives. More recently, a new wave of place-based initiatives has emerged through locally-embedded family and community foun-

dations, social investors, health conversion foundations, and the federal government.

Broadly speaking, place-based initiatives are efforts to change public systems and policies to address the health and social problems affecting poor communities. While these initiatives are wide-ranging, they share a number of distinguishing characteristics: they seek to change a targeted geographic area; they work across sectors and policy domains, and across multiple levels of the community (such as individuals, families, and the surrounding community and systems); they are flexible and adaptable to a locality and they are based on community-building principles.

Given the varied nature of these efforts, the universe of stakeholders is wide. These stakeholders can be categorized into four groups: (1) practitioners, such as the leaders, staff, and initiative partners who are central to the planning and execution of place-based strategies; (2) funders, including the public and philanthropic sectors; (3) evaluators who conduct impact measurement and research; and (4) community members, including residents and businesses within the targeted geographic area.

Challenges of Assessing the Impacts of Place-based Initiatives

The features that make comprehensive community interventions so compelling are the same ones that create challenges for evaluating their impacts.¹ For example, unlike “people-based” programs that focus on individuals, place-based initiatives consider an entire community. Research designs that randomly assign individuals to “treatment” and “control” groups are often deemed inappropriate or infeasible at the community-wide level. Additionally, place-based efforts are multi-faceted and integrated, working across different sectors, such as economic and community development, health, and education. As a result, disentangling the effects of each strategy and the value-added of their integration is particularly challenging for evaluators.

Another major challenge has to do with the dosage or “touch” of the strategy into the community. First, these models are largely non-prescriptive and assumed to evolve over time in response to changing local conditions. This raises particular challenges for assuming consistency of the treatment or dosage over time. Second, the reach of some interventions may not be evenly distributed throughout the target community; dosage may vary across residents, neighborhoods, or organizations. Meanwhile, individuals and businesses may move into and out of the targeted community, further complicating the issue.

Given these challenges, the demand for gauging program impacts creates several tensions across stakeholder groups when it comes to evaluation, funding, and im-

plementation of place-based initiatives. We observe three main categories of impact tensions as elaborated below.

1. Tensions within the Evaluation Field about How to Measure Impacts

There is an internal conflict among evaluators regarding the best way to design research that can estimate causal effects. Re-ignited by a 2003 statement by the Department of Education’s Institute for Education Sciences (IES), the debate about methods has created divides within the diverse field of program evaluators. Specifically, IES came out in strong favor of using experimental designs, with random assignment of treatment and control units in the evaluation of educational innovations. Opponents argued that such randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are not the best or lone way to establish whether an intervention causes change, and instead aimed to advance what are known as “quasi-experimental” methods.

Our view is that one size does not fit all—while experimental designs allow for causal estimation, they are not necessarily best utilized in all places at all times. A classic evaluation text organizes the evaluation process into a hierarchical series of activities, which involves the assessment of: (1) need for the program; (2) program design and theory; (3) program process and implementation; (4) outcome/impact; and (5) program cost and efficiency. Each of these steps is critical, and their order matters.² The first three levels involve questions about program operations, not impact, and are better served by non-experimental evaluation methods. To avoid “premature experimentation,” impact assessment must follow successful evaluation of program development and implementation, underscoring the importance of different approaches across the hierarchy.³

Moreover, one should not assume that the design challenges posed by place-based initiatives render quasi-experiments the only option. It is hard to know how the impacts of a program diffuse across neighborhood residents, which argues for the extensive and expensive data collection we see in most place-based evaluations. However, these challenges are present whether the evaluative approach is experimental or non-experimental. At the very least, the fact that an intervention involves community saturation is not a sufficient argument to dismiss using an experimental design to evaluate its impacts. As Bell and Peck further suggest, “The entire endeavor of evaluating community-wide change efforts would be a prime candidate for an experimental design: The U.S. is a very large nation, with thousands of local communities that could be randomly assigned into or out of a particular policy or intervention.”⁴ A particularly creative design might even embed an RCT within a place-based initiative’s larger evaluation.

The evaluation field also struggles with the relative importance of “internal” and “external” validity. The internal validity of an evaluation design refers to its ability to support claims that the program caused the changes we observe. Generally, stronger designs have greater internal validity. One of the strengths of RCTs is that they effectively minimize rival explanations for the impacts observed, earning them a higher status among some evaluators. External validity refers to whether an evaluation’s results are generalizable and can speak to other populations, settings and times. Some argue that there is a tradeoff between an evaluation’s internal and external validity: one cannot have both. This does not need to be the case and, recently, scholarly work has considered how to increase the external validity of social experiments.⁵ Of course impact evaluation largely aims to capture the effects of a program most immediately in its place and time and among its targets; but knowing whether results could be replicated elsewhere is of considerable value. Given the very local nature of place-based strategies, understanding how impacts are achieved in one community can provide useful lessons when similar strategies are enlisted in other communities.

2. Tensions between Evaluators and Practitioners – Achieving Impacts and Measuring Them

Community development practitioners want to move the needle as quickly as possible. Success, even small and early, is particularly important to the cross-sector collaboration at the heart of place-based initiatives.

Unfortunately, changes in neighborhood-level conditions targeted by place-based initiatives can take upwards of ten years to observe – a difficult message often carried by evaluators. Some important changes may be hard to detect: practitioners may believe that impacts exist, but evaluators are hard pressed to measure them. Increased community capacity is a valued achievement for many place-based initiatives; however, no consistent measures of “capacity” exist, and evaluation options are therefore time- and resource-intensive, including community surveys, for instance.

This conflict between action and research may not be productive to successful comprehensive community change efforts. Today’s initiatives require attention to dynamic conditions in the community and management tools for real-time learning and mid-course strategy change. They are highly emergent and locally specific, rather than based on prescribed and replicable models. Both evaluators and practitioners have grown to appreciate the importance of time and maturation towards achieving and measuring change. Given the scarcity of time and resources, however, place-based practitioners may still see investments in such learning infrastructure and capacity building as compromising the work itself, rather than strengthening it.

3. Tensions between Evaluators and Funders about Balancing Involvement and Objectivity

Another area of tension in evaluating place-based initiatives is objectivity. The principle of objectivity calls for researcher independence from the subject under study in order to see clearly and to eliminate the potential for (or appearance of) bias when drawing conclusions. This creates challenges for place-based evaluators, who are tasked with conducting independent, neutral research, but are often drawn into various roles with the interventions themselves, potentially compromising their objectivity.

Across all program areas, it is best to incorporate evaluation frameworks into the early stages of program development, enabling an accurate assessment of the starting point for observing later changes. In addition to this engagement at the onset, evaluators of comprehensive community change efforts are increasingly called upon throughout an initiative’s life-cycle. For example, evaluators can and do facilitate program development with tools for articulating program theory (e.g. using a theory of change approach). They also often provide technical assistance with using and interpreting the explosion of micro-level data, as part of the local quality-of-life planning process often central to comprehensive community change initiatives. Further, evaluators also continue the more traditional formative and summative evaluation activities to assess how a program unfolds and what it achieves.

The many roles that evaluators play often bring them close to the action of planning and implementation. Given the coalition-driven and community building nature of many of these efforts, this includes regular work with lead agencies, coalition partners, and communities as they wrestle to prioritize issues, develop strategies, and learn while doing. Place-based evaluation strategies and team members thus become part of the interventions themselves as they emerge and evolve over time.

Funders may become appropriately anxious about the objectivity of evaluators, whose expanded roles bring them close to an initiative’s practitioners and communities. At the same time, funders may be unfamiliar with how to assess the quality of evaluation studies or navigate the cautions from their evaluators about the particular challenges of impact measurement in comprehensive community change efforts, perhaps exacerbating these quality concerns.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

These tensions provide opportunities to make recommendations for evaluating place-based programs. We start from the assumption that tensions are good. Raised voices bring wider attention to a shared problem or agenda and can also clarify the areas of dissent that, ultimately, can be reconciled through new strategies or

Table 1. *Moving from Tensions to Opportunities in Impact Evaluation*

Tension	Consensus	Difference	Opportunity
Social scientists disagree on methodology of impact evaluation	Rigorous evaluation designs are best able to provide actionable evidence of the impacts of social programs	Appropriate evaluation designs	Creatively develop and assess impact designs, in light of evaluation context, rather than a one-size fits all approach
Practitioners want to achieve results; evaluators want to measure them	Results-orientation strengthens efforts to achieve sustained, community change	The relative importance of evaluating impacts and achieving them	Weigh and enable the joint contributions to change made by programmatic and evaluation activities
Evaluators must balance involvement and objectivity	Evaluation is an integral part of the change process	The relative risks and benefits of expanded and integrated evaluation role	Address the politics of evaluation by evaluators and stakeholders

definitions. Table 1 organizes these tensions in terms of the consensus and differences they reveal, as well as the opportunities they create for improving impact evaluation.

Within the evaluation community, an opportunity exists to creatively develop and impact evaluation designs for each place-based initiative. A step forward would be to counter broad judgments about appropriate designs and instead call for all options to remain on the table, allowing evaluators to align the most appropriate measurement strategies with the specific context of individual initiatives.

Both practitioners and evaluators want to bring their tools to the challenge of improving communities. Therefore, this second tension provides an opportunity to combine programmatic and evaluation efforts in a complementary, rather than supplementary, manner (or in ways that they could be perceived as such). In particular, we need a means for weighing and selecting among evaluation alternatives across the life of a program, in a way that considers the immediate and longer-term learning needs they serve (following the evaluation hierarchy reviewed above) and the demands they place on practitioners to support and benefit from them. This would also serve to reinforce the critical role that practitioners play in generating practical lessons for themselves and others as they incorporate evaluation findings into their own knowledge base.

While the expanding evaluation role raises fresh concerns about objectivity in research, it represents a broader call for attention to the politics of evaluation. Funders, practitioners, host communities, and the universe of prospective allies anxiously await evaluation findings, which can sustain successes after an initiative ends. The evaluation community has recognized these realities and advanced strategies in an evolving evaluation “politics toolkit.”⁶ Strategies in the toolkit include systematic as-

essment of stakeholders and the creation of formal evaluation advisory committees representing a breadth of perspectives. A next step would be to develop a politics tool kit specific to place-based initiatives, perhaps including expanded evaluation planning activities and increased evaluator skills for managing politics while improving evaluation quality and use.

Conclusion

In this article, we have summarized the challenges in evaluating the effectiveness of place-based programs, identified some important tensions regarding evaluation, and used the intersection of these to suggest a fresh perspective on impact evaluation. Anywhere that tension exists, so too does energy. We hope those of us involved in evaluating place-based initiatives might capitalize on this energy to renew our commitment to quality evaluation. These tensions urge us to consider how we might tweak prior evaluation designs to make use of new or less frequently used methods and how to effectively balance research and practice. We urge consideration of new and blended methods going forward, including the possibility of employing approaches that were previously deemed unsuitable or undesirable. We also want to ensure that evaluation continues to assess what is going on “inside the black box.” Rich process evaluation and other diverse methods are needed to ensure that we pay joint attention to learning opportunities for each initiative and the field, and the political realities specific to each initiative.

All stakeholders want to ensure that scarce resources are well spent. Therefore, calls for quality evaluation will remain part of our programmatic demands, particularly as we remain focused on what works, how it can work better, and how it can create better communities for all. **CI**

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