

Evidence-Based Reform:

Key To Major Gains in Education, Poverty Reduction, Crime Prevention, and Other Areas of Social Policy

Board of Advisors

Robert Boruch
University of Pennsylvania

Jonathan Crane
Coalition for Evidence-Based
Policy

David Ellwood
Harvard University

Judith Gueron
MDRC

Ron Haskins
Brookings Institution

Blair Hull
Matlock Capital

Robert Hoyt
Jennison Associates

David Kessler
Former FDA Commissioner

Jerry Lee
Jerry Lee Foundation

Dan Levy
Harvard University

Diane Ravitch
New York University

Howard Rolston
Abt Associates
Brookings Institution

Isabel Sawhill
Brookings Institution

Martin Seligman
University of Pennsylvania

Robert Solow
Massachusetts Institute of
Technology

Nicholas Zill
Westat, Inc.

President

Jon Baron
jbaron@coalition4evidence.org
202-683-8049

1725 I Street, NW
Suite 300
Washington, DC 20006
202-349-1130
www.coalition4evidence.org

The Coalition is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, whose mission is to increase government effectiveness through the use of rigorous evidence about “what works.” Since 2001, our work with Congressional and Executive Branch officials has helped advance important evidence-based reforms, described below. A recent independent assessment of our work, conducted under our grant agreement with the William T. Grant Foundation, found that –

“The Coalition has successfully influenced legislative language, increased funding for evidence-based evaluations and programs ... and raised the level of debate in the policy process regarding standards of evidence. The Coalition has established a generally positive reputation as a rigorous, responsive, honest, and impartial advocate for evidence-based approaches, primarily at the federal level.”

Problem We Seek To Address: Federal social programs, set up to address important U.S. problems, often fall short by funding models/strategies (“interventions”) that are not effective.

When evaluated in scientifically rigorous studies, government-funded social interventions in areas such as K-12 education, job training, crime prevention, and poverty reduction are frequently found to be ineffective or marginally effective. Interventions found to produce sizeable, sustained effects on important life outcomes do exist, as discussed below, but tend to be the exception. This pattern occurs in many diverse areas of social policy, as well as other fields where rigorous studies have been conducted (e.g., medicine and psychology).

Why It Matters: Improving social programs is critically needed. The United States has failed to make significant progress in key areas such as –

- **Poverty reduction:** We have made no overall progress in reducing U.S. poverty over the past several decades. The official rate is now 13.2% – slightly *higher* than in 1973.
- **K-12 education:** We have made very limited gains in K-12 achievement since the 1970s, according to the respected National Assessment of Educational Progress long-term trend.
- **Economic mobility:** We have seen no increase in the ability of youth to move up the economic ladder relative to their parents since about 1970, according to careful studies.

The Opportunity: Rigorous studies have identified a few highly-effective social interventions.

These interventions are backed by strong evidence of effectiveness – i.e., well-conducted randomized controlled trials, carried out in typical community settings, showing sizable, sustained effects on important life outcomes. Although rare, their very existence suggests that a concerted effort to grow the number of proven interventions, and spur their widespread use, could fundamentally improve the lives of millions of Americans. Illustrative examples include:

- **Nurse-Family Partnership** – a nurse visitation program for low-income, first-time mothers (in long-term studies, reduced child abuse and neglect by 50% and, for the most at-risk children, produced sizable gains in educational outcomes, such as 10% higher GPA).
- **Carrera Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program** – a youth development program for low-income teens (at age 17, reduced girls’ pregnancies by 40-50%).

- **Career Academies** - a program for at-risk students in low-income high schools (increased average earnings by \$2200 per year, sustained through eight years post-graduation).
- **Success for All in grades K-2** – a school-wide reform program, primarily for high-poverty schools (three years after program start, increased school-wide reading achievement in second grade by 25-30% of a grade level).

Such examples of proven effectiveness are rare in part because rigorous studies, such as well-conducted randomized controlled trials, are still uncommon in most areas of social policy. Meanwhile, careful investigations show that the less-rigorous studies that are typically used can produce erroneous conclusions and lead to practices that are ineffective or harmful.

Precedent From Medicine: Rigorous studies – particularly randomized control trials – have led to remarkable improvements in human health over the past 50 years.

Well-conducted trials have stunned the medical community by overturning widely-accepted practices, such as hormone replacement therapy for post-menopausal women (shown to increase the risk of stroke and heart disease for many women), and stents to open clogged arteries (shown no better than drugs for most heart patients). Such trials have also provided the conclusive evidence of effectiveness for most of the major medical advances of the past half-century, including vaccines for polio, measles, and hepatitis B; effective treatments for hypertension and high cholesterol; and cancer treatments that have dramatically improved survival rates from leukemia, Hodgkin’s disease, breast cancer, and many other cancers.

Our Specific Goal: Incorporate two main reforms into government social programs:

1. **Increased funding for rigorous – including randomized – evaluations**, so as to grow the number of research-proven interventions; and
2. **Strong incentives and assistance for program grantees to adopt research-proven interventions**, and put them into widespread use.

Accomplishments: The Coalition’s work with key Executive Branch and Congressional officials has helped inform and/or shape major new evidence-based policy initiatives, including –

- **The Office of Management and Budget’s (OMB) Program Evaluation initiative** (\$100 million in the FY11 budget for rigorous evaluations to determine what works across 17 federal agencies);
- **The Department of Health and Human Services’ (HHS) Evidence-Based Home Visitation program** for at-risk families with young children (\$1.5 billion over five years, enacted in 2010);
- **The Education Department’s Investing in Innovation Fund**, to scale up evidence-based K-12 educational strategies (\$650 million enacted in the 2009 Recovery Act);
- **HHS’s Evidence-Based Teen Pregnancy Prevention program** (\$110 million enacted for FY10); and
- **The Corporation for National and Community Service’s Social Innovation Fund**, to support public/private investment in evidence-based programs in low-income communities (\$50 million enacted for FY 10).

For Further Information: Please visit us at www.coalition4evidence.org, or contact David Anderson, the Coalition’s Vice President, at danderson@coalition4evidence.org, 202-239-1248.