Setting the Stage: Building Strong Evidence in Challenging Contexts

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Evidence matters

- Anyone disagree?
- Many programs are implemented without evidence (and without adding to evidence base)
- Some can do harm
- Many can waste resources
- Optimism is not enough
Evidence is lacking – for certain groups, for many contexts

Case in point – Home Visiting

- Original HomVEE report – 19 EBPs for home visiting
- Original Tribal HomeVEE report – 0 EBPs for tribal home visiting; 2014 updated Tribal HomeVEE – 1 EBP
The lack of evidence widens disparities gaps

- If we don’t know what works, we can’t intervene to reduce disparities.
- Groups for whom evidence is (relatively) easy reap the benefits of EBPs = better outcomes
- Groups for whom evidence is hard to build continue without EBPs = static outcomes
  - Researchers shy away from doing this work – process is harder and slower and riskier (for publication and academic promotion)
  - EBPs tied to funding – so less funding
  - Communities lack guidance on choosing among potential approaches and programs and have few (if any) proven strategies to access – so they have to wing it

- Widening disparities
Research inequities feeding health and developmental inequities – in pictures

Inequity

“Easy” Evidence

Growing evidence – informed practices – better outcomes

Design Challenges

Stagnant evidence – guesswork practices – persistent disparities
Why do we lack evidence when we have such good protocols for building evidence?
Why do we lack evidence?

Standard practice – RCTs – can be problematic and even impossible in many communities and contexts.

Forcing RCT can undermine rigor if it is employed without recognition that its essential components are not viable within a particular context or question.
Data that can be trusted to answer questions that are important about interventions designed to improve outcomes and reduce risk.

**Rigor at the highest level** is about the kind of data the study produces, not about the particular design used.

A narrow focus on “rigorous methods” risks privileging standard approaches (e.g., RCT) that can undermine **rigorous data** in specific contexts.
Defining Rigor

Good Data

Appropriate design

Rigorous data collection methods

Scientific considerations

Well-defined population

Ethical practice

Cultural considerations

Contextual considerations

Appropriate analytic methods

Appropriate interpretation of data

All reflected in ACF’s evaluation policy

Researcher-Community Partnership
Some contextual and cultural considerations that make design challenging

Small populations and small samples
Community-level interventions
Ethical concerns
Roadblocks
Culture in intervention and evaluation
Small populations and small samples
Small populations and small samples

Strategies for when N can’t be large

- Tribal population of 1,000
- Small urban neighborhood communities
- Specific risk groups
Community-level Interventions

When individual outcomes are embedded

- Place-based initiatives
- Multi-level interventions
- Randomizing at the level of community with small populations of communities?
Ethical concerns
“Denying services” to create a comparison group – where need is great
- Value of comparison often not enough
Cultural values that preclude randomization
- Fairness, allocation based on need
Roadblocks
Contamination across groups in tight-knit communities – especially with proclivity to share

- Basketballs
Feasibility

Lack of resources in communities
- Technology, staff, facilities
Overcoming research history
- Fishbowls, anthropologists, and Havasupi

Overcoming research apathy
- Priorities in a hierarchy of need
Culture in intervention and evaluation

Added challenge of articulating and evaluating cultural components

- Adaptations vis-à-vis fidelity to parent EBP
- *Culture as intervention*
- Mechanisms of impact
- Sacred spaces
- Reductionism
This conference
Exploring solutions to some of the challenges of study design in these contexts

- Small samples
  - single subject
  - optimization
  - Bayesian analyses

- Alternative randomized designs
  - stepped wedge and other roll-out designs
  - preference trials
  - leveraging information from school lotteries

- Alternatives to randomization
  - comparative regression discontinuity
  - simulated instrumental variable
  - comparative interrupted time series
  - Innovative matching