Evidence-Based Policy: A Path to Progress on Major U.S. Social Problems

Arnold Ventures

We know from the history of rigorous program evaluations that surprisingly few social programs and practices produce meaningful positive impact on people's lives in areas such as education, poverty reduction, and crime prevention.

However, exceptional interventions that produce important improvements in people's lives do exist. The surest way to build the body of proven-effective interventions across the spectrum of social policy is to conduct randomized controlled trials (RCTs) of interventions whose prior evidence shows potential for sizable effects on educational achievement, earnings, crime, and other important outcomes.

80-90%
of social interventions are found to produce weak or no positive effects when evaluated in a high-quality RCT.[1,2,3]
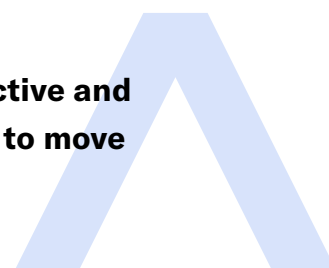
FEWER THAN 20
social interventions currently have strong, replicated evidence of important improvements in people's lives, but the number is growing.[4]

20% PER YEAR
gain in long-term earnings of low-income workers can be achieved through effective job training programs, as found by recent high-quality RCTs.[5,6]

Without a credible way to identify the interventions that are truly effective and put them into widespread use, spending on social programs is unlikely to move the needle on longstanding national problems.

Surprisingly few rigorously-evaluated social interventions are found to produce the hoped-for effects. Over the past 40 years, the federal government has commissioned 13 large RCTs to evaluate Congressionally-authorized programs such as the Job Training Partnership Act, Upward Bound for disadvantaged high school students, and Abstinence Education. Eleven of the 13 RCTs found that the programs produced small or no effects on the key targeted outcomes. More generally, 80 percent or more of high-quality RCTs of social interventions have found that people receiving the intervention do little or no better over time than people who don't. A similar pattern occurs in other fields where rigorous evaluations are common, such as medicine and business.

However, effective interventions that produce important improvements in people's lives do exist, showing that success is possible. Illustrative examples, with sizable effects replicated in two or more high-quality RCTs include:

- *Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP):* A comprehensive community college program for low-income students that increased the graduation rate by 10 percentage points six years after study entry.
- *Nevada's Reemployment and Eligibility Assessment (REA) Program:* A brief, low-cost program for unemployment insurance claimants that increased earnings by 15 percent over the three years after study entry and produced net savings to the government.

Such examples of proven effectiveness are still uncommon, and those that do exist are under-utilized because the government rarely ties funding to effectiveness. Most government social spending programs disburse funds through a formula or other mechanism that pays little or no heed to which funded activities are effective. Thus, social interventions with weak or no effects may receive support in perpetuity under these funding streams, whereas highly-effective interventions are not prioritized for funding and may never receive support.

Build the body of social interventions backed by strong, replicated evidence of important improvements in people's lives. To optimize the chances of success, we prioritize funding for RCTs of interventions that have promising prior evidence, suggesting they could produce sizable impacts on outcomes of recognized policy importance. We award RCT grants through a streamlined Request for Proposals process and report all findings on the *Arnold Ventures website*.

Disseminate important findings from the evaluation literature. Our *Social Programs That Work* website identifies social interventions shown in rigorous studies to produce sizable, sustained benefits to participants and/or society so that they can be deployed to help solve social problems. Our *Straight Talk on Evidence* website provides an easy-to-read, no-spin digest of recent program evaluation findings. It aims to explain in plain language why certain findings are credible or not, and whether they are presented accurately or exaggerated, so that readers can understand the findings themselves.

Work with policy officials to incorporate evidence-based reforms into government social programs. This includes (i) increasing funding for rigorous — including randomized — evaluations to grow the number of research-proven interventions, and (ii) providing strong incentives and assistance for program grantees to adopt such interventions and put them into widespread use. We have worked closely with Congressional and Executive Branch officials to develop and advance a series of federal "tiered evidence" grant programs that have been enacted into law, incorporating the above two components. These programs include, for example, the U.S. Department of Education's Education Innovation and Research (EIR) program and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Family First foster care prevention services program.

1. https://www.straighttalkonevidence.org/2018/03/21/how-to-solve-u-s-social-problems-when-most-rigorous-program-evaluations-find-disappointing-effects-part-one-in-a-series/
2. https://www.straighttalkonevidence.org/2018/06/13/when-congressionally-authorized-federal-programs-are-evaluated-in-randomized-controlled-trials-most-fall-short-reform-is-needed/
3. https://www.straighttalkonevidence.org/2019/06/18/evidence-based-policy-lite-wont-solve-u-s-social-problems-the-case-of-hhss-teen-pregnancy-prevention-program/
4. https://evidencebasedprograms.org/
5. https://evidencebasedprograms.org/programs/per-scholas-employmenttraining-program-for-low-income-workers/
6. https://evidencebasedprograms.org/programs/project-quest/

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