Comprehensive Community Initiatives: Principles, Practice, and Lessons Learned

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Abstract

Comprehensive community initiatives strive to improve the lives of children and families in neighborhoods characterized by extreme and concentrated poverty. The initiatives use multifaceted approaches to strengthen communities and improve the provision of social and other services to children and families. Early examples include the settlement houses at the beginning of the twentieth century, the neighborhood programs of the 1930s, and the war on poverty efforts of the 1960s. Using specific examples, this article describes key features of current comprehensive community initiatives, the limitations of efforts to evaluate them, and factors contributing to their success or failure.

Fewer than one in five poor families live in urban areas characterized by extreme and concentrated poverty. Yet, the multitude of problems (joblessness, out-of-wedlock births, substance abuse, crime and violence, poor schools) faced by inhabitants of these neighborhoods presents one of the most serious challenges to U.S. social policy today. Social programs for poor children and their families (as described in the article by Devaney and colleagues and the article by Plotnick in this journal issue) attempt to address many of these problems, but most have been organized to focus on one type of problem at a time. This article, however, describes comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) designed to improve the lives of children and families in poverty through multifaceted, coordinated approaches to strengthening communities and integrating the provision of social and other services.

The principles espoused by comprehensive community initiatives are often cited as the best hope for improving the life circumstances of poor
What Are Comprehensive Community Initiatives?

Comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) encompass a variety of programs that use multifaceted approaches in their efforts to better the lives of poor children and families.2

Some comprehensive community initiatives emphasize community building, on the premise that a strong community provides jobs or access to jobs, decent housing, supports for families, and a sense of civic engagement. In these initiatives, efforts are made to strengthen the community through neighborhood governance, economic development, housing rehabilitation and construction, neighborhood beautification, and the strengthening of community organizations and institutions.

Other comprehensive community initiatives focus on creating a system of comprehensive services (including health care, social services, education, and housing) for poor families within a community. Traditional service systems for poor children and their families typically include a set of narrowly focused services, each delivered in isolation from other services and responsive to problems rather than oriented toward prevention.4 In an attempt to solve some of the problems caused by a fragmented service system, this second type of CCI might collocate different services in one building or merge several sources of funding to give communities greater flexibility in spending on services for families.

Both CCI approaches assume that the needs of poor families result not from a single problem, but from a conglomeration of many different but related problems. This multifaceted approach to family poverty makes it difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of CCIs; evaluators struggle to measure the effects of specific program activities versus the impact of broader contextual factors on particular outcomes.6 Despite this difficulty and the lack of hard evidence verifying the success of this approach, comprehensive community initiatives have a long history in American social policy.

Previous Initiatives

The first comprehensive community initiatives in this century were settlement houses established in the early 1900s by social reformers. Settlement houses provided a
wide range of services to local residents, from counseling and legal assistance to after-school programs, sewing classes, and advocacy for community change such as improvements in public sanitation.7

Though many neighborhood residents benefitted from these services, settlement houses were problematic in several ways. Because settlement house staff members attempted to respond to the interests of everyone in a neighborhood—including the business community, local government officials, and residents—it was difficult for them to serve as advocates for the residents. In addition, settlement houses were typically funded and operated by individuals from outside the community who often failed to include key community organizations, such as churches, in their plans for the neighborhood.8 The settlement house model became less popular in the 1920s with the emergence of specialized fields of social work that shifted the focus of services to poor families from multifaceted support to treatment of the specific problems of individuals.9

Neighborhood programs reemerged in the 1930s10 and again with the war on poverty in the 1960s.11 The war on poverty had two major objectives: enhancing neighborhood employment opportunities and preparing poor children, youths, and adults to take advantage of the new opportunities. Neighborhood-based initiatives, spearheaded by community action agencies (CAAs), were a major part of the federal strategy to accomplish these objectives.12 Like the settlement houses, CAAs were successful in providing new services to neighborhoods and families, yet experienced difficulty working with service agencies while simultaneously trying to empower residents to demand service agency reform.13 More important, CAAs were not able to attract the business investments needed to increase neighborhood employment opportunities.

Although there is little formal evaluative information regarding these early initiatives, reviews of their successes and failures provide a base of knowledge for consideration in the development of more recent models.14

**Current Initiatives**

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, concern for the deterioration of inner-city neighborhoods increased, and a new wave of comprehensive community initiatives was spawned. These new CCIs share certain attributes with their predecessors, for example, an emphasis on community participation and the provision of a wide variety of services. The new CCIs strive to be:

- **Comprehensive**—multifaceted, addressing many issues at once;
- **Coordinated, integrated, and collaborative**—not operating in isolation;
- **Accountable**—focusing on improving the outcomes for children and families, not simply providing services;
- **Flexible**—having the ability to use funds to address the locally determined needs of poor families;
- **Preventive**—focusing on prevention and early intervention to lessen the need to deal with crises;
- **Family- and/or community-focused**—focusing on children as individuals and as part of a family and on families as part of neighborhoods and communities;
- **Inclusive of citizen participation**—encouraging active participation by community residents, clients of the service system, and other community stakeholders in planning, designing, and implementing initiatives;
- **Strength-focused**—building on the strengths of the families and communities;
- **Responsive to individual differences**—responsive to the needs of individuals with disabilities and of culturally, ethnically, linguistically, and economically diverse populations; and
- **Universally available**—making services available to anyone in the community who wants or needs access to them.15-19

*New CCIs share certain attributes with their predecessors, for example, an emphasis on community participation and the provision of a wide variety of services.*
Despite these common principles and assumptions, there are also substantial differences among CCIs. Today’s local initiatives vary in their approaches to problems, the outcomes they seek to effect, the nature of their participants and decision-making processes, and the financing structures they use. Summary information on six current initiatives is presented in Table 1. The following discussion explores these distinctions.

The Approaches of CCIs
As discussed above, approaches taken by comprehensive community initiatives fit into two broad categories. At one end of the spectrum is an emphasis on solutions to poverty at the community level through the strengthening of the capacity of neighborhood residents, associations, and institutions to make their own communities safer and healthier places for children and families. This neighborhood transformation may include improving the physical and economic infrastructure, strengthening the social fabric and the sense of community among residents, and building the capacity for neighborhood governance.\(^{15,20,21}\)

An example of this approach is the Comprehensive Community Revitalization Program (CCRP) in the South Bronx, an initiative that has assisted five community development corporations (CDCs) in becoming “organizers, catalysts and implementors of strategies designed to fully recreate their neighborhoods.”\(^ {22}\) The CDCs undertake a range of different projects, including building new primary health care centers or establishing micro loan funds for neighborhood residents.\(^ {22}\)

At the other end of the spectrum is a primary focus on responding to the challenge of fragmented social services for poor families by better coordinating and making more accessible the existing set of services. One way to accomplish this goal is by uniting services that address individual problems (such as housing and employment) in one physical location but leaving intact the separate structure, financing, and operations of these services. The Beacons Initiative, which creates safe havens for children, youths, and families in New York City neighborhoods, is an example of this approach. It transforms schools into community centers that provide activities for children and families and brings existing programs, including education, job training, family counseling, and substance-abuse prevention together in these schools.\(^ {23}\)

Other efforts to develop comprehensive services reorganize financing structures to create more flexible funding for service provision. For example, the California Youth Pilot Program, a state program to support the creation of local CCIs, authorizes six California counties to combine existing child and family services funds to create strategies for providing comprehensive, integrated services for children and families. Under this program, county boards of supervisors are required to establish coordinating councils that determine the needs of high-risk, low-income families in their counties, decide which services to provide, and identify sources of funding. This funding is then combined so that the counties can use it flexibly to provide the targeted services, which may include mental health, child welfare, probation, education, substance-abuse treatment, and other services.\(^ {24}\)

Increasingly, as CCIs realize the need to broaden their scope, they are using a combination of community strengthening and comprehensive services approaches.\(^ {25}\)

Results Sought by CCIs
Some CCIs comprehensively address narrow outcomes, such as reducing teen pregnancy rates or increasing the number of babies born in good health. Frequently, initiatives address multiple poverty-related problems and attempt to accomplish several objectives at once. Examples include building human capital through investments in education and social services, improving neighborhood capital by building the physical and economic infrastructure, and enhancing social capital by increasing citizen participation in the governance of programs, strengthening the sense of community, and improving the responsiveness and quality of public services.
### Table 1: Examples of Current Comprehensive Community Initiatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Funding</th>
<th>Contact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive Community Revitalization Program (CCRP)</td>
<td>South Bronx, New York</td>
<td>To help five community development corporations (CDCs) become institutional bases and catalysts for broad neighborhood renewal</td>
<td>CCRP provides the CDCs with support to plan and develop physical and programmatic infrastructure in the communities</td>
<td>$3 million in initial grants from the Surdna Foundation. Sixteen other funders have joined the project.</td>
<td>Anita Miller, Program Director (212) 557-2929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beacons Initiative</td>
<td>New York City, New York</td>
<td>To support positive outcomes for youths through individual development opportunities and communitywide support</td>
<td>An initiative of the New York City Department of Youth Services, managed by community-based organizations working with local schools</td>
<td>$450,000 from the Department of Youth Services, city, state, federal, and foundation funds</td>
<td>Michelle Cahill, Fund for the City of New York (212) 925-6675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California Youth Pilot Program</td>
<td>Six California counties</td>
<td>To support the implementation of innovative strategies to provide comprehensive, integrated services to children and families</td>
<td>County coordinating councils, including local officials and service providers, are established by county boards of supervisors and service recipients</td>
<td>Counties are authorized to combine funding from categorical programs</td>
<td>Sarah Graeber Chesemore, California Health and Welfare Agency (916) 654-0658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Investment Commission (LINC)</td>
<td>Kansas City, Missouri</td>
<td>To improve the lives of children and families</td>
<td>Directed by a 36-member citizen commission, with advice and support from a professional cabinet</td>
<td>State funding, private foundations, private donations</td>
<td>Gayle Hobbs, Executive Director (816) 889-5050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Building in Partnership (CBP)</td>
<td>Baltimore, Maryland</td>
<td>To transform systems of support that are not now working for residents</td>
<td>Partnership among neighborhood residents, city government, and the Enterprise Foundation</td>
<td>$5 million in seed money; ongoing support from foundations, corporations, and government</td>
<td>Joan Thompson, Enterprise Foundation (410) 727-8535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood and Family Initiative (NFI)</td>
<td>Four communities across the country</td>
<td>To revitalize and empower communities by combining economic and community development at the neighborhood level</td>
<td>“Neighborhood collaboratives” are the primary management; community foundations assist the collaboratives</td>
<td>Launched by the Ford Foundation with $1 million to each site</td>
<td>Roland Anglin or Janice Molnar, Ford Foundation (212) 573-5000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Information compiled by the authors on the basis of information supplied by individual members of the program staff. For additional information, contact the programs directly.
Participation

Because CCIs inherently focus on whole communities, there is the potential for the involvement of many and varied participants. Some initiatives begin from a single existing organizational unit and attempt to establish collaborations with other organizations. For example, the Beacons Initiative originated at the New York City Department of Youth Services. This department recognized a need for community centers for young people and contacted the schools about using their facilities after school hours.23

Other initiatives begin with the creation of a new entity. This type of initiative brings the relevant participants to a neutral table and gives community residents a large voice. One example, the Local Investment Commission (LINC) in Kansas City, Missouri, is a citizen commission, appointed by the state, whose members do not include government officials or social service providers. The commission both develops programs for the community and makes recommendations to the state regarding the implementation of a range of policies, including welfare reform and Medicaid managed care.26

Another example, the Neighborhood and Family Initiative, uses neighborhood collaboratives that include residents to assess the neighborhood’s needs and strengths, develop a shared vision for the neighborhood, and devise short-term and longer-term strategies for realizing that vision.17,21 Under this program, Hartford, Connecticut’s collaborative identified five main areas of need: education, employment, community empowerment, economic development, and family and individual health and well-being. Strategies for addressing needs in these areas include building collaborative programs with other neighborhood organizations, investigating ways to make purchasing a home available to low-income residents, and organizing the community and disseminating information so that community members can better advocate on their own behalf.17

Financing

Most comprehensive community initiatives finance their activities by combining several sources of funding. Some bring together existing stakeholders in the community and service system who have authority over funding and policy and assist them in working toward common community goals. These CCIs do not try to change the basic administrative or funding structures of existing community programs. The Community Building in Partnership initiative in the Sandtown neighborhood of Baltimore, for example, pulled together funding from more than 75 city, state, and federal government and private sources to transform programs in housing, education, health and human services, employment, public safety, and community building.27

Other CCIs bring existing stakeholders together, but ask each program or service
sector to give up its authority over particular funds to create joint decision-making authority over a larger pool of funds. Kansas City’s LINC administers the Caring Communities Fund, created by pooled funding from five different state departments (social services, mental health, health, labor, and education), which is used to support schools as loci for delivering services.26

Factors Affecting Success
As stated above, evaluation of the effects of comprehensive initiatives on poor children and families has proven difficult.28,29 The complex goals, structures, and mechanisms of comprehensive initiatives present significant challenges to determining whether they are successful and which elements of programs were instrumental in their success or failure. Many initiatives seek to influence a broad range of outcomes that are frequently not well defined or easily measured, and because they are designed for local circumstances and expected to change over time, prospectively designed evaluations may not fit the evolution of the program well. In addition, some initiative participants are suspicious of evaluation and have limited capacity to conduct or participate in evaluations.4

Experience suggests that, for CCIs to succeed, they must delicately balance short-term and long-term goals.30 Accomplishing small goals during the planning stages can provide the momentum necessary to continue when difficulties in the collaborative process arise.32 Early short-term successes build support and maintain funder and community interest in the long-term goals. CCIs must also maintain both strong services in each of their specific program components (such as high-quality after-school tutoring and recreational activities) and strong organizational capacity (such as effective coordination across different service agencies).32

Flexible funding is important for the development and sustainability of CCIs.33 Often CCIs begin with a single source of flexible funding provided by a private foundation, the state, or the federal government, which enables them to combine several categories of funds and leverage funding from other sources.32 The Comprehensive Community Revitalization Program, for example, used $6 million in flexible funding for staff, technical assistance, and the start-up of projects to leverage an additional $32 million for the implementation of other program strategies.22 One of the challenges for CCIs is to create flexible financial support that will remain available once the start-up funding is gone.

The first observation is that launching and sustaining a comprehensive community initiative is difficult.30 Participants who have not traditionally worked together do not cooperate easily, especially when money and power must be shared. Turf issues and differences in level of commitment between agencies and/or constituency groups are common.4

The establishment of a new collaborative organization by a CCI has both advantages and disadvantages. An advantage is that a new entity is not beholden to any particular community group. However, because it is new, it may lack credibility and power. To gain credibility with established groups and win their respect and support, a new collaborative institution needs to serve a clear and necessary purpose, such as providing neutral information to other groups in the community.31

Because of currently renewed interest in CCIs, the program evaluation–social science research community is focusing increased attention on developing better evaluation strategies.29 However, most completed evaluations of major comprehensive community initiatives still focus more on describing initiative activities than on assessing the success of the initiatives in achieving their stated goals. What emerges is a collection of the experiences of key program personnel, which may still be useful in planning future initiatives. The following are some observations based on reviews of these experiences.
Conclusion

Data about the effectiveness of comprehensive initiatives are scarce. The evidence that is available indicates that many past efforts have achieved only modest successes. However, for those who believe that ultimate solutions to the problems of concentrated poverty can come only when basic structural, economic, and social issues are addressed in a broad social context, CCIs remain a promising strategy. The successes and failures of older initiatives have informed current efforts. Similarly, the struggles of current comprehensive community initiatives can provide guidance for improving continuing and future initiatives. Better evaluations will enhance future efforts to improve the effectiveness of CCIs.

The future of comprehensive community initiatives will be influenced by several trends. First, a variety of federal and state efforts are giving local communities more flexibility in designing programs and combining funds from different sources. The devolution of decision-making authority in some social programs from the federal government to the states—and from the states to localities—may bring with it increasing demands that programs be held accountable for achieving specific outcomes.

Second, while attention continues to focus on work and individual responsibility as central features of antipoverty policy, comprehensive community initiatives may serve important roles as vehicles to engage poor families in the responses to the problems of poverty. By attempting to rebuild communities, comprehensive community initiatives also hold the promise of providing environments in which individual initiative can succeed. Thus, despite the lack of solid evaluation evidence to support the use of comprehensive community initiatives, localities are likely to continue to attempt these initiatives in the coming years.

The views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views or policy of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The authors wish to thank Sandra Danziger, staff of the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, and many others who read and commented on earlier drafts.

3. This article is not intended to be a survey of all CCIs currently in operation nor does it include findings from all of the programs described.
6. Similar difficulties arise in attempts to evaluate cash transfer programs because families can use the funds in many different ways. See also the article by Currie in this journal issue.
9. See note no. 7, Halpern, p. 44.
10. See note no. 7, Halpern, p. 49.
11. See note no. 7, Halpern, p. 106.
12. See note no. 7, Halpern, p. 54.


