

Part 6: The Obama Administration's evidence-based social policy initiatives: An overview

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Summary

This paper outlines the Obama Administration's plan to strengthen the evidence base for US social policy.

The Obama Administration has created the most expansive opportunity for rigorous evidence to influence social policy in the history of the US government.¹ No president or budget director for a president have ever been so intent on using evidence to shape decisions about the funding of social programs as President Obama and former Budget Director Orszag.² The Obama plan to create evidence-based social policy initiatives turns the normal relationship between policy decision making and use of social science evidence on its head. Instead of evidence being on the outside of the decision making process trying to get in, Obama brings evidence inside from the beginning. The Administration must still convince others that the use of evidence will improve policymaking and program outcomes, but the argument that evidence deserves a prime role in policymaking is being made by people inside the Administration and they are arguing to retain an evidence-based approach as a fundamental part of the President's legislative agenda, rather than fighting from the outside to insert evidence-based policies into the decision making process.³ Although less emphasized, the Obama plan for basing program decisions on rigorous evidence can be useful for cutting spending as well as funding new programs.

Even as early as his inaugural address, the President made it clear that an important goal of his Administration would be to expand programs that work and eliminate programs that don't.⁴ Based on interviews with Administration officials and advocates, it is clear that from the earliest days of the Administration senior officials at Office of Management and Budget (OMB) were planning several initiatives to advance the use of evidence-based program models and to generate high-quality evidence on new program models. When President Obama took office, career officials at the OMB, who are often the origin of ideas for increasing government efficiency, were already involved in a formal attempt to encourage federal agencies to conduct high-quality evaluations of their programs. Building on this effort, by the end of the second year of the Obama Administration there were six evidence-based initiatives underway.⁵

In the current age of fiscal austerity, cuts in many social programs are almost inevitable and opportunities for new program spending will be limited. In this environment, it will be far better for the national welfare if the President and Congress cut programs that have minimal or no (or even negative) impacts rather than successful programs or programs that show promise. The nation's social programs are unlikely to be improved until we learn to enact programs based on evidence-based models, to improve existing programs based on evidence, and to shut down failing programs, again based on evidence from high-quality program evaluations. Reliable evidence on program effects can be put to good use both in expanding and cutting programs.

But even when ineffective programs have been identified, it does not follow that the Administration or Congress will take action. According to Isabel Sawhill and Jon Baron, since 1990 there have been

ten instances in which a large-scale federal social program was evaluated by a scientific research design. In nine of these ten cases (including Job Corps, Upward Bound, 21st Century Community Learning Centers, and Head Start), popular programs were shown to have modest or no impacts on their participants.⁶ So far, only the evaluation of Head Start has resulted in significant program changes, and even here the changes are only in the initial stages of surviving the Washington policy maze and not a single Head Start program has been directly affected yet.⁷

These examples show that the federal government needs to find a better way to spend money on social intervention programs. The Obama initiatives for funding social programs are the most important attempts so far to find this better way and could have a major impact on how social programs are funded in the future by elevating the role of program evaluations in program expansion or contraction. Moreover, if the initiatives work, the average impact of social intervention programs on the well-being of children and families will increase and the nation will be better off.

Based on several interviews with members of the Obama Administration and others inside and outside Congress knowledgeable about the Obama initiatives, we think the following outline captures key components of the President's evidence-based initiatives (although all the initiatives do not follow every component of the outline):

1. Select an important social problem that would make individual citizens and the nation better off if the problem could be successfully addressed by social policy.
2. Identify model programs addressed to the problem that have been shown by randomized trials or other rigorous research to significantly reduce the problem.
3. Obtain funds from Congress to scale up evidence-based programs of this type that attack the problem in accord with the verified models.
4. Make the funds available to government or private entities with a track record of good performance to replicate the successful model programs and to develop new model programs.
5. Continuously evaluate the projects as they are implemented to ensure they are faithfully implementing the model program and producing good results.

The Obama team at the OMB came into office with strong views on the value of rigorous program evaluation. With a team of powerful OMB officials fully committed to the value of experimental evaluations, the Obama Administration lost little time in launching its initiative to expand evidence-based social programs.⁸ What follows is an overview of the major characteristics and state of play for the Administration's six evidence-based initiatives. Table 1 provides an overview and comparison of the major characteristics of the six initiatives.

- **Home visiting.** Home visiting is a service strategy to help families in one or more of three domains: maternal and child health, early childhood development, and family functioning.⁹ Several home-visiting model programs have been shown by random-assignment studies to produce significant impacts on a variety of parenting behaviors and, less often, child outcomes.¹⁰ The impacts on mothers include reduced smoking, increased employment, and improved child rearing practices. The Obama home-visiting initiative, for which Congress has approved \$1.5 billion over the 2010-2014 period, is awarding funds in a three-stage process. In the first stage, which has been completed, all states were eligible for a share of funding if they submitted proposals that met Administration requirements, primarily that they present a plan for conducting an assessment of the need for home visiting programs in their state. Forty-nine states, the District of Columbia, and five territories were awarded funds to enter the second stage. In the second stage, states are required to complete their needs assessment and submit the results. The specific requirements for the third-stage submission have not yet been published, but it seems possible that most or all states will receive some money and that the best applications will receive more money.
- **Teen pregnancy prevention.** The teen pregnancy prevention initiative has proceeded in almost complete accord with the components of the Obama initiative outlined above. Teen pregnancy

Table 3: The Obama plan for expanding evidence-based programs

Type of Information	Teen Pregnancy Prevention	i3 (Investing in Innovation Fund)	Home Visiting	Social Innovation Fund	TAA Community College and Career Training Program	Workforce Innovation Fund
Administering Agency	Health and Human Services	Education	Health and Human Services	Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS)	Departments of Labor and Education	Departments of Labor and Education (Administered through the new \$321 million Partnership for Workforce Innovation)
Review of Literature	Completed by Mathematica	Although there was no formal review of literature, the i3 evidence tiers were based on a process for reviewing evidence developed by IES over several years primarily through its work on What Works Clearinghouse and strengthened.	Completed by Mathematica	None	No	No
Amount of Awards	\$100 million awarded – \$75 million to replicate existing programs, \$25 million to test new strategies	Up to \$650 million across the three types of grants (development, validation, scale-up)	\$88 million awarded in year one, \$1.5 billion over five years	\$49.2 million awarded	\$500 million a year for four years	No funded appropriated yet. 2011 Budget requested \$321 million in the Departments of Education and Labor
Review Panel Selection	Panels included both expert peer reviewers and federal staff	315 peer reviewers were selected from 1,400 experts in both subject matter and research/evaluation; reviewers assigned to panels of five people	Applications were reviewed by grants management officials and program staff	A total of 60 experts were drawn from a pool of experts/professionals and the CNCS reviewer database of 2,300 people; reviewers assigned to panels of 2-4 people	Not public yet. Technical review panels will evaluate all applications against evaluation criteria provided in application materials	\$108 million
Selection of Proposals	75 applicants awarded grants to replicate existing programs; 27 grantees awarded grants to test new strategies	49 applications chosen as 'highest-rated.' All secured matching funds (20 per cent of grant amount)	49 state governments, DC, and 5 territories applied and were awarded funding for planning; second stage of funding to follow	11 grantees chosen; must designate subgrantees within six months	No	Undetermined

is not only a serious national social problem with demonstrated impacts on the mother, the father, the child, and society, it is also an area of intervention that has a long track record of creative and diverse programs. A comprehensive review of programs by Douglas Kirby published in 2001 found eight programs that had what Kirby called: “*Strong evidence of success.*”¹¹ The Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, by contrast, has identified only one program that meets its criteria for reaching the ‘Top Tier’ of evidence.¹² There is also a comprehensive review of the evidence published by the Campbell Collaboration in 2006 that identified successful evidence-based programs.¹³ Thus, the first two components of our outline – selecting a serious problem and ensuring that there are evidence-based model programs – have certainly been met by the Administration in the case of teen pregnancy prevention. Similarly, the Administration commissioned a literature review from Mathematica Policy Research that was made available to the public. The review identified twenty-eight program models that were supported by high-quality evidence.¹⁴ Based in part on the Mathematica review, the Administration issued its request for proposal in April 2010. The applications for funding were reviewed by a panel of experts based on review criteria published by the Administration. Seventy-five programs were selected for Tier 1 funding of \$75 million. In addition, \$25 million was awarded to 27 Tier 2 projects that have some, but not strong, evidence of success. These projects are now in various stages of implementation.

- **Investing in Innovation Fund (i3).** The i3 Fund and the Social Innovation Fund (see below) are very different from the home visiting and teen pregnancy reduction initiatives in that both fund a more diffuse set of programs. In the case of i3, virtually any K-12 intervention with evidence of success or promise could receive funding. Another difference is that the i3 fund recognized three levels of evidence-based programs. The top tier of funding, called scale up funds, were awarded for programs supported by evidence from random-assignment evaluations; validation grants were awarded to programs with some but less evidence of success; development grants were awarded to programs with a reasonable hypothesis but little or no evidence of success. In order to qualify for funding, the programs had to improve outcomes for pre-school children, help students qualify for or succeed in college, help students with disabilities or with limited-English proficiency, or serve schools in rural areas. At \$650 million, i3 is the second biggest of the Obama evidence-based initiatives. Awards for 49 projects were announced in August 2010 for all three categories of evidence-based programs.
- **Social Innovation Fund (SIF).** The President has said that solutions to America’s challenges: “*Are being developed every day at the grass roots.*” and that his Administration wants to support those grassroots efforts.¹⁵ SIF is one method by which the Administration intends to: “*Identify and grow high-performing nonprofit organizations.*” with experience at the local level.¹⁶ SIF funds are being awarded in a two-step process. The Administration first allowed ‘intermediaries’ to accept funds and then in turn to conduct competitions to determine which local organisations should receive funding. The intermediaries were organizations that had: “*Strong track records of identifying and growing high-performing nonprofit organizations.*”¹⁷ Eleven such intermediaries were awarded \$50 million in funding to go with another \$74 million they had raised in matching funds to be distributed to nonprofit organizations. The nonprofits, which are in the process of being selected now, will use the money to conduct evidence-based programs addressed to at least one of three broad areas of social policy: economic opportunity, youth development and school support, and promoting healthy lifestyles and avoiding risky behavior.
- **Community College and Career Training Program.** The US Department of Labor had only a modest commitment to rigorous evaluation at the beginning of the Obama Administration. Even so, the Administration was eventually successful in getting the Department to sign off on an evidence-based initiative to provide funds for training of displaced and unemployed workers and other young adults by the nation’s community colleges. On January 20, 2011 the Department of Labor, in conjunction with the Department of Education, announced a \$2 billion initiative (\$500 million a year for four years) for: “*The development and improvement of postsecondary programs of two years or less that use evidence-based or innovative strategies to prepare students for successful careers in growing and emerging industries.*”¹⁸ An important characteristic of the grants is that community colleges and other entities receiving the funds are to experiment with existing employment and training materials in order to adapt them for use with young adults who seek employment. Given the paucity of post-secondary strategies for career preparation that have a strong evidence base, it appears that this initiative will be one that focuses on developing new

curriculums and testing them with rigorous designs. The awards will be for between \$2.5 million and \$20 million and can be used to support projects using strategies that have been shown to have: *“Strong or moderate evidence of positive impacts on education and/or employment outcomes.”* Evaluation is a central feature of the Challenge Fund: 25 per cent of the assessment of proposals is based on the evaluation plan; all evaluations must include treatment and control groups; and the Department of Labor will select some grantees for rigorous evaluation using random assignment designs.

- **Workforce Innovation Fund.** This initiative is also being run by the Department of Labor in conjunction with the Department of Education. Five per cent of the 2011 budgets of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Adult program and the WIA Dislocated Worker program were set aside to create this fund of nearly \$108 million. The fund will be used to create competitive grants to states or localities to replicate proven practices in training, employment, and reemployment services, especially for vulnerable groups. Like the other evidence-based initiatives, the fund will also be used to test promising practices. As with community college training programs, there are relatively few program models for employment and training programs with young adults that have been shown by rigorous designs to produce impacts on student learning. It is anticipated that funds will be focused on ‘learn and earn,’ apprenticeship, and on-the-job training programs. This initiative is currently on hold because Congress did not pass any of the 2011 appropriations bills and instead enacted a ‘continuing resolution’ which funded programs at the 2010 level and suspended all the substantive changes (with a few minor exceptions).

In addition to these six initiatives, the Administration also included money in the President’s 2011 budget for program evaluation. Administration staffers estimate that there are enough funds in the 2011 budget to pay for 23 rigorous evaluations of: *“The most promising new programs”* being conducted by the various administrative departments. Indeed, the budget has well over \$60 million for the Department of Labor alone to: *“Continue to pursue a robust, Department-wide evaluation agenda.”* including rigorous evaluations of WIA performance measures, effects of job counseling, use of administrative data in workforce programs, incentives for dislocated workers, and effects of Occupational Safety and Health Administration inspections.¹⁹ In addition, the White House worked with the Department of Labor to create a new Chief Evaluation Office that will manage the new evaluations and work with other components of the Department to assist them in conducting rigorous evaluations of their programs.

These six evidence-based initiatives, plus the new funds for rigorous evaluation across the federal agencies, constitute the most sweeping and potentially groundbreaking emphasis on rigorous program evaluation ever pursued by the federal government.

Appendix 1: Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy’s mission and activities 2009-2010

Evidence-Based Reform

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

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.”

Problems we seek to address

Federal social programs, set up to address important US 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 US poverty over the past several decades. The official rate is now 13.2 per cent – 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 per cent and, for the most at-risk children, produced sizable gains in educational outcomes, such as 10 per cent higher GPA).
- **Carrera Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program** – a youth development program for low-income teens (at age 17, reduced girls' pregnancies by 40-50 per cent).
- **Career Academies** – a program for at-risk students in low-income high schools (increased average earnings by \$2,200 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 per cent 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.
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).
- **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).

Endnotes

1. Carol Weiss has recently called this "imposed" use of research. See Weiss, C.H., Murphy-Graham, E. and Birkeland, S. (2005) An Alternate Route to Policy Influence: How Evaluations affect D.A.R.E. 'American Journal of Evaluation.' 26. (4):12-30.
2. Orszag's take on the importance of evidence was succinctly summarized in a now-famous blog post that appeared in the midst of developing the administration's various evidence-based initiatives. See Orszag, P. Building Rigorous Evidence to Drive Policy. 'Office of Management and Budget.' Blog, June 8, 2009.
3. It would be possible for major players in the legislative branch on either committee with jurisdiction over particular social programs (either the authorizing committee or the appropriations committee) to try to enact evidence-based policies. Even the most powerful committee chairman, however, generally has less power and influence than the president. Nonetheless, powerful Congressional players could use a set of procedures, like the one we think summarizes the Obama evidence-based initiatives, to build their own evidence-based initiative.
4. Here is what President Obama said in his inaugural address: "The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works – whether it helps families find jobs at a decent wage, care they can afford, a retirement that is dignified. Where the answer is yes, we intend to move forward. Where the answer is no, programs will end."
5. Funds for an initiative called the Workforce Innovation Fund, which is a mix of systems reforms of the Department of Labor's employment and training programs and funds for high-quality evaluations of employment and training model programs, was in the Obama 2011 budget. However, when Congress was unable to pass the 2011 appropriations bills, all new discretionary funding (with a few modest exceptions) was suspended. It seems doubtful that the new Congress, with a Republican controlled House will enact any new appropriations bills for 2011. The Workforce Innovation Fund is included in the President's 2012 budget, but again Republican support is questionable.
6. Sawhill, I.V., and Baron, J. (2010) Federal Programs for Youth: More of the Same Won't Work. 'Youth Today,' May 2010, p.21.
7. Guernsey, L. (2010) Proposed Rules Will Shake Up Head Start. 'Early Ed Watch.' Blog. New America Foundation, Early Education Initiative, September 23, 2010, available at: http://earlyed.newamerica.net/blogposts/2010/proposed_rules_will_shake_up_head_start-37234.

8. See: www.whitehouse.gov/omb/blog/09/06/08/BuildingRigorousEvidencetoDrivePolicy
9. Stoltzfus, E. and Lynch, K.E. (2009) 'Home Visitation for Families with Young Children.' (R40705). Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.
10. Howard, K.S. and Brooks-Gunn, J. (2009) The Role of Home-Visiting Programs in Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect. 'The Future of Children.' 19, (2): 119-146, see especially Table 2.
11. Kirby, D. (2001) 'Emerging Answers: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy.' Washington, DC: National Campaign to Reduce Teen Pregnancy. p.179.
12. According to the Top Tier Evidence website maintained by the Coalition, the Carrera Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program is: "A comprehensive youth development program for economically disadvantaged teens, a key component of which is reproduction health care." The program was evaluated by a large, multi-site randomized control trial. The evaluation's key finding was that girls experienced a 40 to 50 per cent reduction in pregnancies and births three years after random assignment. Available at: http://toptierevidence.org/wordpress/?page_id=172
13. Scher, L., Maynard, R.A. and Stagner, M. (2006) 'Interventions Intended to Reduce Pregnancy-Related Outcomes among Adolescents.' Oslo, Norway: Campbell Coalition.
14. Given the fact that the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, after reviewing a host of teen pregnancy prevention programs, found only one to qualify as having 'top tier' evidence, it is clear that Mathematica used more flexible criteria for determining that a program model is supported by strong evidence. Under the approach to evidence being taken by the Obama Administration, the use of more flexible criteria seems appropriate because the Administration wants to develop new evidence in the case of models that have some but not top-tier evidence of success.
15. Obama, B.H. (2010) 'Social Innovation Fund.' Reprinted in Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation. Available at: www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/sicp/initiatives/social-innovation-fund
16. Corporation for National and Community Service 'Inaugural Social Innovation Fund Grants Awarded to Experienced Innovators.' Press Release, July 22, 2010, available at: www.nationalservice.gov/about/newsroom/releases_detail.asp?tbl_pr_id=1829
17. Corporation for National and Community Service, 'Social Innovation Fund.' (2010), available at: www.nationalservice.gov/about/serveamerica/innovation.asp
18. Department of Labor. News Release: 'US Labor Department Encourages Applications for Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training Grant Program.' January 20, 2011.
19. Department of Labor. 'Budget in Brief: FY2011.' p.3.