

Using Data to Make (More) Social Programs Work (Better)

By Chelsea Farley, March 2011

Throughout its history, P/PV has focused on using data to understand and continuously improve on-the-ground practice—something that can only be achieved by cultivating *strong, longstanding partnerships with practitioners and their funders*. Such partnerships have allowed us to make significant contributions to the development of a number of fields, including mentoring and sectoral employment¹. In both of these cases, and with the long-term support of private funders, we conducted multiple studies over many years, building deep knowledge about how programs were implemented and improving practice along the way. Both fields ultimately benefitted from carefully timed Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) that showed powerful impacts for participants, but only after years of prior formative and implementation research.

Because of our close working relationships with programs in each of these fields and our understanding of relevant practice issues, we have been able to mine the results of these RCTs and identify broadly applicable lessons that have benefitted programs, funders and policymakers. Our deep partnerships with practitioners have helped to establish a “safe” environment for evaluation, where organizations can trust that we will work with them to improve their programs and craft next steps if an evaluation produces less-than-expected results.

P/PV is perhaps best known for its work in the [mentoring](#) field. Over several decades, we have partnered with Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS), the country’s premier provider of mentoring services, to not only evaluate BBBS programs but to improve them as well. In the mid-1990s, we completed an influential RCT [study](#) showing that BBBS’ high-quality mentoring had tangible and significant effects, including a lower likelihood of participants starting to use drugs or alcohol, enhanced peer and parent-child relationships, fewer absences from school and improved confidence about school work. Ten years later, we completed a similar [study](#) of BBBS’ school-based mentoring, which highlighted both the promise of this rapidly expanding model as well as areas that should be strengthened. P/PV continues to work with Big Brothers Big Sisters of America to guide BBBS agencies nationwide in implementing recommendations from that study.

P/PV’s research on BBBS and other mentoring programs (including one-on-one and group mentoring models) has examined not only whether youth benefit but also what qualities characterize effective mentoring relationships and which practices and administrative structures facilitate their growth. We’ve worked hard to disseminate this knowledge to providers, funders and policymakers via much-accessed reports, targeted technical assistance, presentations and testimony at public hearings. We have created a variety of tools for mentoring practitioners—which are downloaded from

¹ Sectoral employment programs are industry-specific training programs that prepare unemployed and underskilled workers for skilled positions and connect them with employers seeking to fill such vacancies.

our website tens of thousands of times each year—including guides for [recruiting mentors](#), [building relationships](#) and [measuring the quality](#) of mentor-youth relationships.

We have also extended our look at mentoring to examine its potential for various populations of youth and young adults and in the context of different programmatic approaches. This includes the development of the [Amachi](#) initiative, which provides mentoring to children of incarcerated parents. Amachi was launched in Philadelphia in 2000. Under the leadership of former Mayor W. Wilson Goode, Sr., Amachi has spread rapidly; there are now at least 350 Amachi-modeled programs in more than 200 U.S. cities and all 50 states, serving more than 300,000 children. P/PV continues to encourage new mentoring-children-of-prisoners programs to apply established, research-based best practices. The Amachi Training Institute has held 141 sessions, and Amachi staff regularly visit programs to provide on-site technical assistance. In September 2009, P/PV was awarded \$17.8 million by the US Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) to further our work with Amachi programs around the country.

Mentoring components were also integrated into two large-scale P/PV demonstrations: the Ford Foundation- and OJJDP-funded [National Faith-Based Initiative for High-Risk Youth](#), which showed that mentoring may stave off depression for youth involved (or at high risk of involvement) with the juvenile justice system, and [Ready4Work](#), a 17-site prisoner reentry demonstration, funded by the Annie E. Casey and Ford Foundations and the U.S. Departments of Labor and Justice. Ready4Work programs provided mentoring as part of a comprehensive set of reentry services (education, employment and case management) for juveniles and adults returning from incarceration. Outcomes from Ready4Work were promising, with recidivism rates among participants significantly below the national average, and our analyses showed that participants who met with a mentor fared better than those who did not. Based on these promising early results, P/PV published a [guide](#) to help programs develop and implement a mentoring component as part of larger reentry efforts.

P/PV’s recently released [RCT study](#), which showed strong impacts for [sectoral employment programs](#), is also the result of long-term and multifaceted investment in a field. For more than a decade, P/PV partnered with the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation to explore the promise of sectoral strategies. This work included a nine-site demonstration and implementation study that showed solid outcomes for sectoral programs (findings that were echoed in a similar study by the Aspen Institute). Importantly, the demonstration provided insight into the day-to-day operations of sectoral programs, which look quite different in different contexts. Our RCT study was launched on the basis of this early work, and when the findings were in (program participants earned \$4,500 more than controls over two years and earned higher wages, worked more and had better access to benefits), P/PV’s deep knowledge of sectoral programs helped contextualize the results, so we were able to articulate a set of common elements that likely contributed to the programs’ success.

The sectoral study has served as a basis for a number of research and demonstration efforts funded by the Obama administration’s Social Innovation Fund (SIF). This spring, P/PV will publish the results of a five-year [study](#) focused on the start-up of two sector-focused training programs in New

York City; several implementation and outcomes studies of Philadelphia-based efforts are also under way. Together, this work will shed more light on what it takes to run effective sectoral programs.

While the BBBS and sectoral impact studies provided invaluable learning for P/PV, our experience makes it clear that RCT studies are not always the answer. In our work with [Boys & Girls Clubs of America](#), for instance, an alternative to RCT was needed. An important characteristic of the Clubs is that they welcome all young people who wish to attend (and thus have no waiting lists), and traditionally they have not required youth to arrive at particular times or attend particular activities. Given these qualities, an RCT study would have changed the very character and mission of the Clubs. Prior evaluations had focused on the outcomes of discrete Club programs, but none had taken a broader look at “the whole Club experience.” P/PV developed a national longitudinal study to test the degree to which participants’ overall experiences might prove to be more than the sum of the Clubs’ programmatic parts. Our study drew on several sources of data—surveys, Club attendance records, and in-depth interviews with youth and staff—to investigate the relationship between participation and outcomes. The findings showed that teens who had higher levels of participation in the Clubs experienced greater positive change on 15 of 31 outcomes examined. Qualitative data bolstered these findings, providing insights about effective practices. The evaluation offered a promising picture of the role Clubs play for youth and generated valuable lessons for the larger out-of-school-time field about how to effectively engage teens, especially in underserved, low-income communities.

P/PV has done considerable work in the [out-of-school-time](#) field, much of it focused on the use of data for continuous program improvement. The James Irvine Foundation’s Communities Organizing Resources to Advance Learning ([CORAL](#)) initiative is a primary example. This \$58 million effort to improve student achievement in five California cities had been in operation since 1999. After disappointing outcomes were identified in a midpoint review, in 2004 the Foundation asked P/PV to help reorient the initiative’s focus by integrating literacy instruction into the CORAL sites’ existing after-school enrichment programs, and to evaluate the results. The five communities that participated in CORAL—Pasadena, Long Beach, San Jose, Fresno and Sacramento—each developed a multiyear plan and worked to boost student achievement through out-of-school programming. P/PV studied CORAL’s effectiveness in enrolling children in these programs and in improving young people’s academic performance. P/PV also provided technical assistance and training, and supplied the sites with ongoing feedback to help them strengthen their programs.

The results were notable: CORAL participants showed greater reading gains and performed better on standardized tests when they were exposed to more consistent and higher-quality literacy activities, and higher levels of engagement in CORAL were related to positive changes in children’s attitudes toward reading as well as attitudes and behaviors in school. P/PV worked with the Foundation to produce several practical resources based on the CORAL experience and findings. These included guides for funders, practitioners and policymakers about what each could do to promote high-quality out-of-school-time programming.

P/PV's use of data for program improvement has been central to our work in other fields as well. Philadelphia's [Youth Violence Reduction Partnership \(YVRP\)](#) is an early example. Beginning in 1999, P/PV helped local partners, including law enforcement, city agencies and nonprofits, use data to inform and improve this challenging and highly collaborative violence reduction effort. YVRP's goal is to steer young people in Philadelphia, ages 14 to 24 and at greatest risk of killing or being killed, away from violence and toward productive lives. To accomplish this, each participant is assigned to a team that includes a probation officer and a community streetworker, who maintain intensive contact with the young person to make sure that he (and less often she) not only stays out of trouble but starts on a path toward responsible adulthood. P/PV has undertaken several studies of the YVRP model: an implementation [study](#), a study of streetworkers and a formal impact study with a comparison group composed of similar youth from high-risk Philadelphia police districts that are not currently implementing YVRP. Results of this last study are set to be released in 2011; they point to important lessons for other cities interested in launching similar violence reduction efforts.

P/PV's replication of proven models has also involved the careful use of data to inform programming. We worked closely with the [Nurse-Family Partnership](#) for more than a decade, supporting its national replication. The program, which pairs trained nurses with low-income, first-time mothers for one-on-one home visits, has been tested through a succession of three clinical trials and found to produce substantial and enduring improvements in the health, well-being and self-sufficiency of participating parents and their children. P/PV played an integral role in the program's early expansion in the northeastern United States, actively managed the site selection process and provided extensive technical assistance and training to sites. We worked closely with sites to assess how well they were implementing the program and whether their results were in line with those of the proven model. These efforts have helped Nurse-Family Partnership expand to 385 counties in 32 states. In December 2010, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services awarded P/PV a Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration 2010 Science and Service Award, which recognizes "exemplary implementation of evidence-based interventions," for our work with Nurse-Family Partnership sites in Pennsylvania.

We have recently sought to build on our experience helping individual programs and initiatives use data for performance improvement to explore ways that data might be pooled to provide insights about the performance of entire fields of practice. Most notable is [The Benchmarking Project](#), which we developed in partnership with the Annie E. Casey Foundation (and which is also supported by a variety of local funders). To date, almost 175 organizations from around the country have submitted aggregate performance data on 250 workforce development programs. Participating organizations are able to partake in "learning community" activities and receive reports that allow practitioners to understand their performance, as compared to other similar types of programs. This approach offers practitioners and funders alike an alternative way to understand their performance and provides a base for identifying programs that might warrant more rigorous evaluation. We are currently working to increase the number of workforce programs that participate in The Benchmarking Project, and we are exploring its potential to be expanded to other fields.

P/PV also has years of experience providing targeted technical assistance to organizations seeking to improve their performance. We have provided substantive guidance around effective practice in a range of areas. We've also helped organizations create and use data collection systems, establish continuous improvement efforts and prepare for expansion. P/PV's work has taken many forms, including leading topic-specific trainings and workshops; conducting conference calls, webinars or on-site meetings; and establishing learning communities for organizations to share challenges, insights and successful strategies.

One notable example is P/PV's [Working Ventures](#) initiative, which aimed to draw on the wisdom of seasoned workforce professionals to identify and advance effective practice. Through this initiative, we disseminated a number of hands-on tools and guides that have been distributed to thousands of workforce programs around the country. We developed a series of workshops and conferences and worked with citywide intermediaries that in turn have delivered training to hundreds of job developers. We have also created several yearlong programs ([Workforce Leaders Academy](#), [Sector Strategies Practicum](#) and, in cooperation with the Aspen Institute, the [Sector Skills Academy](#)) designed to help practitioners understand the evidence base and current practice in the workforce field. Through all these efforts, we have become skilled at helping practitioners exchange knowledge about effective practice against the backdrop of existing research—and we have seen, again and again, the need for a stronger connection between evaluation and on-the-ground practice.

For this reason, we've worked hard to ensure that [all our publications](#)—from detailed research reports to policy briefs to practical guides and tools—are accessible and useful for practitioners. In fact, the most consistently positive feedback we receive relates to the high quality and accessibility of our reports. Philanthropedia, an online charity-rating website that aims to improve effectiveness by recognizing “expert recommended, high-impact” nonprofits, recently surveyed more than 121 foundation professionals, researchers, nonprofit managers, consultants, journalists and policymakers; they indicated that P/PV has a “strong communications arm that is good at communicating lessons learned...to the field, policymakers, and the public at large”; that our “tools/products are strengths”; and that our “research on best practices is unparalleled.” We maintain a robust website, where these publications are available, that receives more than half a million visits each year—largely from practitioners. We also present our work at conferences and meetings and engage the media to share our findings and recommendations with a wide audience. Recently, our work has been covered in *The New York Times*, *TIME*, *Newsweek*, *The Huffington Post*, *Youth Today*, CNN.com, WNYC and *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, among other outlets.

