Preparing Indicators for Policymakers and Advocates

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Indicators are the focus of intense interest in the policy community, particularly economic indicators. For example, indicators about the state of the economy, such as the unemployment rate, the poverty rate, housing starts, and inflation, are not only tracked over time but are awaited with anticipation and urgency and reported in headline stories in the media. The state of the economy affects the outcomes of elections, and the decisions made by government, including decisions made by the Federal Reserve, Congress, and the executive branch. Moreover, the data available for economic indicators are very up-to-date—for example, unemployment in the preceding month.

Many citizens and policymakers would argue, though, that the state of the economy is not the only marker of a successful society (Hauser et al., 1997). The well-being of children would also rank high among the factors that signal the health and future prospects of a society. Indeed, we would suggest that indicators of child well-being represent an important and complementary strategy for monitoring the success of a society.

Though not as fully evolved or up-to-date as economic indicators, the field of child and youth well-being indicators has come a long way in recent years. For example, the United States Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2001) produces an annual report, America’s Children: Key National Indicators of Well-being, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation has produced Kids Count to provide data at the state level for more than a decade. Given this progress, it is valuable to consider how indicators can be used correctly and effectively to inform public policy and program development by policymakers and advocates, as well as by the public.

In the following sections, we highlight five hierarchical purposes of indicators and discuss the benefits and risks of using indicators for each of these purposes. We also suggest a number of criteria for using indicators so that they are both accurate and understandable, and briefly identify some presentation strategies that might help to communicate indicators of child well-being to policymakers.

The Uses of Indicators

Despite their popularity and wide use, indicators are easily misunderstood and can be misused. It is critical to know the purposes of indicators and to use them appropriately. Brown and Corbett (2003) have defined five purposes:

1. Description
2. Monitoring

3. Goal setting
4. Accountability
5. Evaluation

Description
Indicators enhance our understanding of what children’s worlds are like. For example, what proportion of children eat a healthy diet and what proportion is obese? What proportion of children has mental health problems? What proportion engages in binge drinking, and what proportion attends religious services regularly?

Descriptive information provided by such indicators can represent crucial background information for planning. For example, officials in the state of Kentucky conducted a census of all of the children in foster care. One of the many important findings from this work was the high incidence of mental health problems among both children and caregivers. This information made state officials think differently about, not just the needs of children in foster care, but about whether their Kentucky university system is preparing enough, and the right kinds of, mental health professionals to address the needs of children in foster care.

This kind of descriptive information is very useful to policymakers who benefit from knowing about the level of performance or need overall or within particular subgroups or geographic areas.

Monitoring
Indicators can also be used to assess and track need. Using indicators for the purpose of monitoring takes indicators up a notch from simple description. Here the goal is to track trends in indicators over time. Monitoring helps policymakers or advocates answer the question: Are things getting better or worse or staying the same?

When they know trends in the level of need, policymakers and advocates can identify the resources they might require to address the need, or the resources saved because trends are getting better.

Trends in economic indicators, such as the unemployment rate or the inflation rate, are obviously extremely important to policymakers and citizens. Economic trends can decide elections and precipitate changes in public policies. These data are relevant to policy discussions, though, primarily to the extent that they are up-to-date and objective. They provide a critical and common platform for policy discussions. Policymakers may not agree about policy directions; but they share a set of economic indicators that are generally accepted measures of trends.

The public health field has also done an excellent job of developing and monitoring indicators. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention see indicators as surveillance tools, and work to provide up-to-date state and local indicator data, which is crucial for monitoring the nation’s health. For example, CDC’s disease surveillance systems track SARS, HIV/AIDS, West Nile disease, hepatitis, and other diseases, and public officials at the national, state, and local levels act upon this information to deploy resources and address public health issues. Indeed, the reaction is often very rapid because the public health system actually