

Note from the Director—Barbara B. Blum

For decades, policymakers and practitioners have observed that achieving changes in social policy and practice depends on how and whether new mandates are implemented. Implementation can falter for many reasons, including poorly defined objectives, insufficient financing, inadequate staff training, and shifts in political philosophy. The study of factors influencing implementation is of relatively recent vintage and the development of implementation research activities has been far more *laissez-faire* than research efforts designed to measure impacts.

With the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), and the devolution of decision making concerning welfare and other social policies that the act engendered, far more attention has been focused on the

value of implementation evaluations. In order to clarify how important implementation questions can be answered, the Research Forum has been working with the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP) at the University of Wisconsin for the past two years to engage experts from the implementation research field in a careful examination of strategies and methods best designed to respond to the information needs of policymakers and practitioners.

This issue of *the forum* draws upon these discussions to provide background information regarding the value of implementation research. Also described, quite briefly, is a set of papers authored by seventeen of the participating experts from this burgeoning field. These papers are designed to become chapters in a volume scheduled for publication in 2000.

## Understanding How Change Occurs: Implementation Research in the TANF Era

by Ellen Winn

Implementation evaluations seek to understand *how* policies move from legislation to practice. Typically such evaluations describe how program rules are operationalized and the services are actually delivered. Knowledge of agency management and performance and staff and client behaviors and attitudes are key components of implementation evaluations that could not easily be addressed by traditional impact and outcome studies.

Implementation evaluations attempt to capture the essence of what programs *do*—the actions that make policy real. Understanding the experiences of the participants and workers can be crucial in this type of evaluation. Usually, implementation data are gathered by visiting program offices (often across multiple service delivery areas), interviewing caseworkers, talking to clients, surveying administrators, directly observing client and caseworker interactions, and reviewing individual case documents.

### Origins in Public Administration Research

Studying policy implementation became common in the early 1970s as a subfield of public administration. The publication of studies by Derthick that described federal government efforts to create model communities in a Washington, D.C. neighborhood and by Pressman and Wildavsky that analyzed the U.S. Economic Development Administration efforts to encourage the hiring of low-income African Americans in Oakland, California, contributed to the emergence of implementation research as an increasingly valid and critical method of analyzing and understanding policy.\* The heightened interest in implementation research, coupled with the rapidly increasing number of federally mandated social programs created under the rubric of the War on Poverty, helped secure a foothold for implementation research in the research and evaluation

\* Derthick, M. (1972). *New towns in-town: Why a federal program failed*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.

Pressman, J. L. & Wildavsky, A. (1973). *Implementation: How great expectations in Washington are dashed in Oakland; Or, why it's amazing that federal programs work at all, this being a saga of the Economic Development Administration as told by two sympathetic observers who seek to build morals on a foundation of ruined hope*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

fields. From its public administration beginnings, implementation research diversified to incorporate the study of public health organizations, the legal system, business administration, and now welfare reform.

### Emphasis on Process Behind Change

Recent changes in social welfare policy have greatly altered the ways in which aid to poor families is structured and delivered. Prior to the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA), federal oversight of the design and administration of income support programs permitted cross-state variation only in narrowly prescribed areas. PRWORA replaced an open-ended form of federal assistance with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which is a capped block grant. Within broad federal parameters, states were encouraged to exercise flexibility in constructing their own social assistance systems for impoverished families. This significant set of policy changes has caused a devolution of power from the federal government to the state and local levels, and even, in some cases, from the public sector to the private sector. The passage of PRWORA generated a great deal of controversy, most of which focused on several substantive provisions, such as time limits and work requirements. However, no single provision of this welfare law can explain the transformation of governance and social policy today that the aggregate provisions of PRWORA continue to engender.

These dramatic transitions challenge the research and evaluation community to document the location and extent of change, the organizational structures that are emerging, and the effects on client and staff attitudes and behavior. Better understanding of these matters is valuable in and of itself. For example, such information can be used by policymakers to revise programs in mid-course and by scholars to broaden their knowledge about the process of organizational change. Knowing what services are delivered, when, where, how, and to whom is essential to linking program participation outcomes to particular program operations. Understanding the effects of welfare reform on poor families requires knowing how welfare agencies manage and perform, as well as how staff members interact with their clients and disseminate critical information, and, ultimately, how clients interpret and absorb these interactions. These issues are not easily addressed by impact and outcomes evaluations, the traditional form of social program research.

Implementation studies enable researchers to represent and describe often over-looked and understudied dimensions of welfare reform and devolution. These types of evaluations may also be used for:

- ▶ *Administrative purposes.* Implementation studies are useful in assessing caseworker and administrator performance, determining whether specific policies are

actually being implemented, or giving examples of how services are provided in one area.

- ▶ *Enhancing understanding of program results.* Implementation research helps program evaluators understand how program design, administration, operations, and service delivery affect program results. Implementation studies may be used in conjunction with impact evaluations by linking the exposure individual welfare clients had to the program effects of policies.
- ▶ *Assessing the effects of welfare laws on other social welfare programs.* Implementation evaluations may unearth key program discrepancies, such as lack of consistency in: (1) referring cash assistance applicants or current recipients to other programs, such as Food Stamps, or even discouraging the receipt of any form of assistance; (2) explaining supplemental benefits, such as CHIP and Medicaid, to welfare recipients or not mentioning them at all.

### Research Forum/IRP Implementation Project

Even before the passage of PRWORA, concern about the broad implications of welfare and related reforms was growing within the research community. In February 1996, the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP) at the University of Wisconsin and the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP)—the Research Forum's parent body—organized a conference to bring together representatives of the evaluation community to rethink their mission and methods. That gathering and others that followed have led to the realization that implementation research is critical to understanding and documenting the changes in the structure and practices of the welfare system.

Evaluators, researchers, and policymakers have worked together for the past two years in order to advance the use and enhance the quality of implementation research. This working group has produced eleven papers, which will become chapters in a published volume in 2000 coordinated by the Research Forum and IRP. The papers examine the following issues:

- ▶ The broad parameters and goals of implementation research;
- ▶ How human service administrators rely upon implementation research to understand the actual shaping of public policy;
- ▶ How discrepancy analysis has been used to identify gaps between policy intent and program operation;
- ▶ The interactions within the welfare organization between welfare workers and clients using street level analysis;
- ▶ Field network studies focusing on political and administrative decision-making processes;

- ▶ The value of implementation research in explaining findings from impact research;
- ▶ Performance analyses to link program practices to outcomes;
- ▶ Ethnographic methods to improve understanding of clients' experiences;
- ▶ Evaluation of potential data sources for implementation research from quantitative and qualitative data; and
- ▶ The use of administrative data for implementation research, especially methods to ensure quality, reliability, and confidentiality.

A final chapter will highlight the major contributions of each research strategy and will suggest a future agenda for the field. A guidebook for users of implementation research is also being prepared.

Both of these volumes aim to: (1) articulate a general framework for planning and carrying out implementation evaluations, (2) develop a common terminology and language about these methods, and (3) advance general standards and strategies for answering key process questions. The papers will help researchers who design and carry out implementation studies as well as practitioners and policymakers primarily interested in the lessons implementation research may bring concerning the management and operation of their programs.

Practitioners and policymakers, who increasingly require accountability from public agencies, need timely information on what services are delivered, to whom, and at what cost. Researchers who are concerned with organizational structure and operations may be particularly interested in understanding how organizational players adapt to change. Implementation research is the primary tool for obtaining this information.

Hopefully, the efforts of the Research Forum and IRP will permanently embed implementation research within the spectrum of credible and useful welfare reform research methods. As reauthorization for PRWORA grows nearer, the research community will benefit from relevant and trustworthy research tools to provide policymakers and the general public with a comprehensive and accurate picture of the impact of welfare reform.

### Implementation Studies in the Research Forum's Database\*

Currently, 29 reviewed projects have implementation studies as a component of their evaluations. The following studies have released final implementation findings:

- Alabama ASSETS Demonstration
- Canada's Earnings Supplement Project (ESP) Evaluation
- GAIN Evaluation
- LEAP Evaluation
- National Evaluation of the Comprehensive Child Development Program
- New Chance Demonstration
- New York Child Assistance Program (NY CAP) Evaluation

The following projects have recently released interim implementation study reports:

- Jobs Plus Evaluation
- Florida Transition Program Evaluation

\* For more information on these studies, visit the Forum's web site: [www.researchforum.org](http://www.researchforum.org).

## Upcoming Volume on Implementation Research

Preface Barbara B. Blum

Introduction: Implementation Research in an Era of Devolution Mary Clare Lennon & Thomas Corbett

Chapter 1: Theoretical and Substantive Dimensions in Process and Implementation Studies on Welfare Demetra Nightingale & Pamela Holcomb

Chapter 2: A View from the Consumer or the Public Management Perspective Joel Rabb & Don Winstead

Chapter 3: Implementation Analysis: From Intention to Intervention Thomas Corbett & Thomas Kaplan

Chapter 4: Street Level Analyses Evelyn Brodikin

Chapter 5: Field Network Studies Irene Lurie

Chapter 6: What's Behind the Impacts: Doing Implementation Research in the Context of Program Impact Studies Kay Sherwood & Fred Doolittle

Chapter 7: Performance Analysis Lawrence Mead

Chapter 8: Approaches to Data Collection Leanne Charlesworth & Catherine Born

Chapter 9: The Use of Administrative Data for Implementation Research Robert Goerge

Chapter 10: The Close-Up Lens: What Client-Based Ethnographic Work Can Add Kathryn Edin

Chapter 11: Summary and New Directions Rebecca Maynard

## Publications on Children and Welfare Reform Available from NCCP

**ISSUE BRIEFS** [\$5.00 each / 4 for \$15.00]

Price includes postage and handling. Prepayment or purchase order required. Make checks payable to Columbia University and mail to NCCP, 154 Haven Avenue, New York, NY 10032-1180 or fax your purchase order to (212) 544-4200 or 544-4201 or e-mail to nccp@columbia.edu.

**Issue Brief 1: *How Welfare Reform Can Help or Hurt Children***

by Ann Collins and J. Lawrence Aber

Describes the research base for NCCP's framework to assess welfare changes from a children's perspective and points to lessons from current and welfare-to-work evaluations. (1997). 12 pp.

**Issue Brief 2: *Anticipating the Effects of Federal and State Welfare Changes on Systems that Serve Children***

by Ann Collins

Focuses on processes to assess how federal and state welfare initiatives will have an impact on state and community policies and systems that serve children and families. (1997). 12 pp.

**Issue Brief 3: *The New Welfare Law and Vulnerable Families: Implications for Child Welfare/Child Protection Systems***

by Jane Knitzer and Stanley Bernard

Examines the potential impact of P.L. 104-193 on vulnerable families already in or at risk of entering the child welfare/child protection system. (1997). 20 pp.

**Issue Brief 4: *Responsible Fatherhood and Welfare: How States Can Use the New Law to Help Children***

by Stanley Bernard

Outlines provisions in the welfare law related to fatherhood and offers states strategies to encourage responsible parenting by custodial and noncustodial fathers. (1998). 24 pp.

**Issue Brief 5: *Children and Welfare Reform: Child Care by Kith and Kin—Supporting Family, Friends, and Neighbors Caring for Children***

by Ann Collins and Barbara Carlson

Summarizes the research on kith and kin child care, examines traditional policies, describes eight innovative program strategies, and makes recommendations that states and local communities can use to reach out directly to these child care providers and the children for whom they care. (1998). 20 pp.

**Issue Brief 6: *Beyond Work: Strategies to Promote the Well-Being of Young Children and Families in the Context of Welfare Reform***

by Nancy Cauthen and Jane Knitzer

To achieve adult-focused welfare goals and benefit children, presents four general strategies that states and localities can use to strengthen basic family supports such as health care and child care, promote young children's health and development, and address specialized child and family needs, illustrated with examples of state and local policies, programs, and partnerships from around the country. (1999). 24 pp.

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## RESEARCH FORUM ON CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND THE NEW FEDERALISM

The Research Forum, an initiative of the National Center for Children in Poverty, hosted at the Joseph L. Mailman School of Public Health of Columbia University, encourages collaborative research and informed policy on welfare reform and vulnerable populations. The Research Forum's ultimate goal is to identify and promote strategies that protect and enhance the well-being of poor children and their families.

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