

Assessing the benefits of community human services ^[1]

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Executive summary:

This literature review was undertaken on behalf of the Community Human Services Network of Alberta. The Network is composed of representatives of 20 networks and coalitions representing nonprofit human services in Alberta.

The Caledon Institute was asked to identify the benefits of community human services. 'Benefits' were broadly defined to include a positive social and economic impact on individuals, families and communities.

Early on, a decision was made in association with the Community Human Services Network to organize the research into eight areas of human service: early childhood education and care, child welfare, supports for families, family literacy, disability supports, home care, crime prevention and supports for at-risk youth. The literature review was supplemented by conversations with 35 selected key informants from across Canada considered expert in their respective fields (see Appendix A).

While benefit studies were found in each of the eight areas, there is not a robust set of results within each category. The overall findings and associated literature summaries are presented in eight separate appendices. Certain areas, such as early childhood education and care as well as crime prevention, have an extensive list of relevant studies. Other areas, such as disability supports, are relatively thin.

The primary challenge in carrying out this work was in finding results considered to be reliable and valid benefits of community human services. In fact, the evaluation field itself is in considerable flux with a number of significant developments challenging the assessment methods formerly used. While new and promising approaches are emerging, they have not yet produced the substantial body of results sought by this research project.

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i. Early childhood education and care

High-quality early care programming has been shown to have both short- and long-term benefits for children, families and their wider communities. Analyses of the famous US project Head Start, for example, show that 3-year-old children performed better than did control children in cognitive and language development, displayed higher emotional engagement of the parent and sustained attention with play objects, and were lower in aggressive behaviour. Compared with controls, Early Head Start parents were shown to be more emotionally supportive, provide more language and learning stimulation, read to their children more and spank less [Ludwig and Phillips 2007].

Evaluators of the Abecedarian program reported that participants in the preschool treatment group scored significantly higher on intellectual and academic measures as young adults, attained more years of total education, were more likely to attend a four-year college and had lower rates of teen pregnancy. In addition, they found that preschool treatment was associated with educationally meaningful effect sizes on reading and math skills that persisted into adulthood [Campbell et al. 2002].

Longer-term benefits tend to be easier to measure, quantify and use as the basis of cost-benefit calculations. For example, reviews of the Perry Preschool Program assessed benefits as gains in earning, reductions in crime and changes in welfare receipt. The Perry Preschool group earned significantly higher salaries than the control group. For the wider tax-paying community, the program effected a \$12.90 improvement per dollar invested, realized in the areas of higher tax revenues, lower criminal justice system expenditures and lower welfare payments. Differences were also found in schooling and adult education costs. Evaluators noted that the bulk of the program's financial gains came mainly from reduced crime by males [Belfield et al. 2006].

It is noteworthy that the Belfield evaluator group remarked that cost-benefit frameworks place less emphasis on cognitive impact, focusing instead on general economic and social outcomes.

Reviews of the Chicago Child-Parent Center found that the longer children were associated with the program, the more significant the

impact on school performance. Children whose participation increased into second and third grade demonstrated significantly better academic performance than children whose association ended in kindergarten. Evaluators theorized that program activities likely helped boost long-term cognitive advantages and family support [Reynolds 1997].

A follow-up study done 19 years after their involvement with the Child-Parent Center found that participants had higher rates of school completion and college attendance, and more years of education. They were more likely to have health insurance coverage; less likely to be arrested, convicted or incarcerated; and showed fewer depressive symptoms (ultimately needing less out-of-home placement). Participation in both the preschool and school-age Child-Parent Center interventions was associated with higher rates of full-time employment, higher levels of educational attainment, fewer arrests for violent offences and lower reported rates of disability [Reynolds et al. 2007].

Region: Canada ^[3]

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