

INDICATORS OF CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

Social Indicators Research Series

Volume 27

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The titles published in this series are listed at the end of this volume.

INDICATORS OF CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

Understanding Their Role, Usage and Policy Influence

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This book is dedicated to our friends and colleagues
at the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago
and the National Council for the Child in Israel—
they taught us the power of research in advocating for child well-being.

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Preface

ROBERT C. GRANGER

William T. Grant Foundation

During the past 10 years or so, a number of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners have made important progress on the identification and use of indicators of children's well-being. The United States federal government, via the Department of Health and Human Services and the National Institutes of Health, as well as such private funders as the Annie E. Casey Foundation, have supported many of these efforts. During this time, the William T. Grant Foundation, who was not a primary funder of such activities, was nevertheless one of the many institutions benefiting from the work.

Fortunately, Asher Ben-Arieh, Larry Aber, and Bob Goerge persuaded us to support a working conference on how to assess the effects of indicator usage on policies and programs. This volume is the result of their talents and the clear thinking of many of their colleagues. It is my pleasure to introduce the volume with a few thoughts about its contributions and the questions that remain.

Through the 1990s, the work on social indicators created consensus on several points. For those who are relatively new to this topic, this volume includes chapters that reprise these important areas of consensus, such as the offerings by Tom Corbett, Asher Ben-Arieh and Bob Goerge, and Kristen Moore and Brett Brown. For example, people agreed that indicators could be used in several different ways—to describe the state of children's well-being; to monitor that well-being over time, place, or groups of children; or to serve as a vehicle for accountability and evaluation. This work was important because it asked all involved to consider an indicator's use as an important referent for judging its merits. Indicators are not good or bad in some abstract sense. Rather, specific indicators are more or less useful for particular purposes. Most also agreed that it was productive to have indicators of child strengths and assets in addition to those that indicated problems and needs. Such indicators drew political and practical attention to what we all desire for young people beyond the avoidance of various problems. Further, there was agreement that it was important to consider indicators in multiple child areas (e.g., health and school achievement) simultaneously and to have some indicators for the settings that shape children (e.g., indicators for family and community well-being in addition to indicators for child well-being). Although there was agreement that having too many indicators could be paralyzing, the call for some breadth helped users monitor both planned and unplanned effects of policy changes. Examples might include the need to balance data on welfare case closings with an eye toward avoiding increased rates of child poverty, or monitoring rising educational achievement levels as well as dropout rates.

Beyond the conceptual work on indicators, the last 10 years have seen significant progress in the use of indicators by practitioners and policymakers. Examples in the U.S. include the Kids Count work supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the Child Indicators Project led by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and coordinated by the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago. Lisa Klein describes the Child Indicators Project in this volume. Her chapter is a clear account of the project's components, the indicators each state focused upon, and lessons learned. Vermont was one of the states involved in this project, and Con Hogan was Secretary of Vermont's Human Services Agency at that time. Con's chapter describes several benefits of using indicators. A major one is the ability of an indicator to mobilize activities and resources across agency and organizational boundaries. For example, many government agencies have a stake in "getting all children ready to succeed in school."

Having such case examples is important as this field moves from a conceptual discussion of potential uses to the implementation of actual efforts in practice. In that vein, the volume also includes examples of the use of indicators for shaping antipoverty policy in England (Jonathan Bradshaw), childcare in the southern U.S. (Sarah Shuptrine), and an examination of the details of cross-cultural comparisons using Canada and Norway (Shelly Phipps). Each of these authors derives lessons from his or her experience using indicators, and in summary, each suggests measuring a few things well and taking the data seriously.

Perhaps because I too have a bias toward parsimony, I particularly liked Tom Little's chapter on how to use indicators effectively with policymakers. Tom's conclusions—that policymakers are very busy, all politics is local, and that advocates working for better social policy should be brief, honest, and build relationships with policymakers—constitute strong advice.

With considerable agreement on the uses of indicators, and some case examples of actual use, it is worth addressing the question of what difference indicators make in advancing child well-being. This was the overarching theme of the conference and several chapters moved my thinking along. Jim McDonell's chapter on the use of indicators in Comprehensive Community Initiatives reminds us that any social intervention is likely to be embedded in a complex social setting, like a city, and is likely to have many moving parts. In such situations, it is never easy to get clear estimates of causal effects. This point is made in different ways in the chapters by Jeff Cappizano and Matt Stagner, and Pamela Morris and Lisa Gennetian. Both chapters begin with a brief discussion of the stages of the policy process: agenda setting, specification of policy alternatives, policy choice, and policy implementation. Then the authors discuss how indicators might affect each stage and how one might design an evaluation to discern such effects. To estimate the effects of an intervention, I always start with the hope for a true experiment. Each of these chapters contains careful thinking about the potential use of both experimental and quasi-experimental evaluation designs. Any readers of this work will come away with a better understanding of the possibilities for various designs for different purposes. But they will also come away somewhat sobered about the ability to use field experiments to determine the effects of indicators.

As Asher Ben-Arieh and Julian Tittler note in their concluding chapter, there are important questions that remain in front of this volume. Because the William T. Grant Foundation wants to understand how to improve policies and programs, I favor more work on the use and effects of indicators. For example, do policymakers and practitioners use indicators to make important choices or are these decisions rarely shaped by data? If “what gets measured, gets done,” what are the intended and unintended consequences of using indicators in high-stakes ways? Is it important to assess particular indicators, or is it more important just to measure something? Although the volume does not resolve these issues, it has much to offer those who share these interests.