Academic, health, and social inequalities are pervasive for children, youth, and families in cities across the United States. Changing this situation and improving the conditions of success for young people requires a wide variety of supports both in school and throughout the broader community.

Locally organized, multi-sector collaborations have become an increasingly popular avenue for building a community’s capacity to coordinate resources, improve service delivery, and ultimately lead to better outcomes for all young people in a city. Models for such systemic interventions are described by several different terms, such as cradle-to-career initiatives, collective impact, and comprehensive community initiatives.

Despite the variation in terminology, all employ the philosophy that improved population-level outcomes for children, youth, and families can only be achieved by engaging multiple community systems, structures, and constituencies that coalesce around a common goal and work in concert to achieve that goal. For this research brief, summarizing a systematic review conducted by the Center for Promise, comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) is used.

Local-level decision-makers, philanthropists, and policymakers increasingly realize the promise of initiatives that work across institutional “silos” to provide the full set of supports that all children and youth need to thrive. Because CCIs are locally owned and driven, the structure and goals of a CCI will inevitably vary depending on the community it is serving. Over the last decade, both researchers and practitioners have made a concerted effort to document the “how” of CCIs—describing and recommending effective methods for optimizing the ways that decision-makers and organizations collaborate. Linking CCIs to population-level change has not been as expansive.

Given the increasing popularity of CCIs, along with the significant investment of time and public and private resources, understanding the state of the evidence for CCIs is timely. Thus, CfP conducted a systematic review of CCIs to bring together all of the existing evidence of their impact. This review is designed to provide guidance to decision-makers about whether to make investments in time and resources to implement similar initiatives.

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Focus of the Systematic Review
The authors sought to answer two questions:

1. Have CCIs impacted population-level outcomes for children, youth, and/or families?
2. If CCIs impact population-level outcomes, what are the promising elements among effective CCIs that other CCIs could use in their efforts?

Previous reviews have primarily focused on how the CCI functions (e.g., coalition functioning, governance structures, trust, and communication among stakeholders) and how the CCI strengthened the capacity of a community (e.g., increased financial, structural, social, or material community resources). The present review contributes to the literature through a focus on outcomes pertaining to children, youth, and families (e.g., reduced risk behaviors among teens, improved graduation rates).

Key Results
From an initial list of nearly 2,000 articles, a final list of 25 articles representing five CCIs met the inclusion criteria and was used for the analysis. Initiatives include Communities that Care, PROMoting School-community-university Partnerships to Enhance Resilience (PROSPER), Kentucky Incentives for Prevention (KIP) Project, New Directions, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (SAMHSA-CSAP) Community Partnership Program.

Child and youth-focused CCIs use an (often implicit) theory of action that if a locally-organized, multi-sector collaboration comes together to define a common goal for all of its children and youth, and the CCI can build local capacity and coordinate resources to provide the necessary supports to all children and youth to achieve that goal, then a community will attain population-level impacts for their children and youth.

Broadly, these five CCIs have been found to help communities improve population-level outcomes in areas related to public health, including the following:

- Strengthen protective factors that together lead to more positive outcomes for children, youth, and families, and reduce risk factors that would promote engagement in delinquent behaviors and substance use in multiple contexts (e.g., peer, family, community);

WHICH STUDIES ARE INCLUDED?
From a broad search of scholarly databases, studies were included if they were:

- Reported to use empirical methods that could validly show a causal link between the CCI and population-level outcomes for young people;
- Published between 1990 and 2017, in order to limit the review to CCIs that are likely to be similar in function and structure to contemporary efforts; and
- Conducted on communities within the United States, given the importance of context for CCIs.

In order to include CCIs focused on postsecondary and college outcomes (e.g., cradle to career initiatives), and to remain consistent with lifespan developmental theory, the population of interest included all young people ranging from birth to 26 years of age and their families. The authors included CCIs regardless of geographic unit (e.g., neighborhood, city, county).
• Delay initiation and reduce substance use across an array of substances, including alcohol, marijuana and tobacco use, and at various points in time;
• Reduce likelihood of and delay engagement in violent and/or delinquent behaviors such as attacking someone with intent to harm, stealing cars, or selling drugs.

**Structures and Processes of Effective CCIs**

Understanding the structures and processes that help CCIs achieve positive outcomes will inform implementation efforts in additional communities. The authors analyzed characteristics and components of the six CCIs that appear to drive change. These include:

- **Collaborative governance structures** that are both representative and communicative.
- **Comprehensive planning** that takes into account the needs and strengths in a community.
- **Evidence-based prevention programming** that leverages existing assets.
- **Resources and sustainability** that addresses financial and human needs.
- **Monitoring implementation** of programs to ensure fidelity.
- **A culture of inquiry** throughout multiple stages of implementation.

**Considerations for Conducting CCIs**

When contemplating implementation of CCIs, decision-makers should consider the population size, community dynamics, and severity of social problems in their communities alongside those of the communities included in the studies reviewed. These considerations are critical to inform the extent to which a given community can expect to achieve similar results on similar outcomes with similar populations. For example, CTC and PROSPER were largely conducted in small-to-moderate sized towns and cities and therefore might not produce the same levels of impact in large urban cities.

Decision-makers should also consider the primary outcomes that a CCI is intended to produce—from public health to educational outcomes—when determining the best fit. For example, CTC, the only CCI in this review that reported an educational outcome, did not lead to any significant impact on school dropout likely because education was not the primary domain of focus. Given the limitations discussed in these examples, extrapolating findings to predict the effectiveness of these initiatives in other American cities should be done with caution, as each may have different profiles than the cities included in the study.

Notably, no studies were found to use methodologies that could validly assess causality with regard to educational outcomes (although CTC did assess school dropout rates). With the proliferation of education-focused CCIs, such as Promise Neighborhoods, Purpose Built Communities, Say Yes to Education, and StriveTogether (among many others), the implementation of more systematic evaluation strategies is necessary to assess both the processes that unfold in the implementation of CCIs and the impacts that CCIs could have on improving outcomes for children, youth, and families.

**Conclusion**

With substantial federal and private philanthropic resources invested in CCIs and hundreds of communities implementing them in some form, knowing the efficacy of these initiatives is important and timely. The findings from this systematic review provide cautious optimism that CCIs can impact population-level child and youth outcomes, particularly in CCIs focused on risky behaviors.
About this summary

This research brief was prepared based on the systematic review entitled The Impact of Comprehensive Community Initiatives on Population-Level Children, Youth, and Family Outcomes: A Systematic Review, released in January 2018.

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For the full review, visit www.weissinstitute.org.


Endnotes

5. A systematic review is a comprehensive review of the literature on a given topic that organizes existing empirical evidence in relation to a specific identified research question. In contrast to a typical literature search, systematic reviews endeavor to minimize bias in the search, retrieval, review, and interpretation of a given body of literature.