

Innovation in Evidence

Evidence that Works

Building the Canadian evidence
infrastructure for social policy

BY ANNE WHITE

Mowat NFP
MOWAT'S NOT-FOR-PROFIT POLICY RESEARCH HUB

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OF GLOBAL AFFAIRS
& PUBLIC POLICY



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The author wishes to underscore that this paper reflects her own analysis and positions and in no way represents the views of the Government of Canada.

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“We recommend that the Government of Canada invest in an arms-length Social Innovation Evidence Lab to work with willing social purpose organizations, investors, funders and researchers to research and test best practices on impact measurement. This Evidence Lab could take stock of and share existing knowledge and lead partnership research on impact measurement methodologies and toolkits. The Evidence Lab could also develop and test metrics that capture how social innovation advances social progress, potentially including metrics to support measurement of Canada’s progress on the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The Evidence Lab would leverage impact measurement initiatives as they emerge in all jurisdictions and sectors and be a forum for discussion and debate on competing approaches to this question.”

*Recommendations of the Social Innovation and Social Finance Strategy
Co-Creation Steering Group, Inclusive innovation: New ideas and new
partnerships for stronger communities, September 2018*

1 WHAT WORKS? CANADA'S SOCIAL POLICY EVIDENCE ECOSYSTEM

Introduction

The landscape for evidence use in policymaking is changing rapidly in Canada.

Canadian governments and their service-provider partners are tackling increasingly complex social problems, from projecting what impact disruptive technology and automation will have on jobs, skills and wages, to helping people who are addicted to opioids seek treatment options.

New opportunities also flow with these challenges. Advanced data analysis and research techniques are now increasingly being used to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public programs and policies in a way that was not possible just a few decades ago.

The *Innovation in Evidence Conference* is a response to these challenges and opportunities. It brings together international leaders and innovators in evidence-informed policymaking to share emerging trends, discuss lessons learned and provide fresh insight into the challenges facing policymakers, practitioners, researchers and academics in their quest to understand “what works.”

This paper is the second in a series of papers prepared for the Innovation in Evidence Conference. It provides a brief overview of Canada's evidence ecosystem in social policy and identifies, based on a series of interviews with leaders in social policy and practice, some burning issues and opportunities for consideration to support evidence use in social policy in Canada. Coinciding with the conference, the goal of this paper is to stimulate discussion about where Canada's evidence infrastructure for social policy is currently, where it needs to be, and how to get there. As such, the paper does not provide an exhaustive inventory of this infrastructure or a rigorous assessment of it – though one of the takeaways of this paper is the need for such mapping and assessment.

To further this discussion, we have also compiled a number of examples of capacity-building organizations and multi-sector partnerships that are successfully learning and sharing what works to help improve outcomes for people in their communities. This initial listing of institutions, agencies, organizations and partnerships that are part of Canada's infrastructure for evidence-informed decision-making is available at mowatcentre.ca/canadas-evidence-institutions.

This listing includes examples that have come up during our work on this paper, and we have compiled some basic information about each example. We should note that this list is meant as a starting point, in need of review, correction and addition. We present it to the evidence community to help advance the effort of mapping Canada's evidence landscape, and welcome additions and corrections to it. If you would like to highlight an organization or partnership we are missing or share information that needs updating please use the link provided on the webpage.

A third post-conference paper will identify key lessons learned from the conference, next steps and opportunities for collaboration between Canadian and international partners.

Data and evidence use in Canada's social sector¹

At home and abroad, governments and foundations are investing in both internal and external research centers and support teams, to enable data-driven decision-making and implementation in different policy areas.

The aim of these initiatives is to broaden the use of evidence across policy sectors. In health and medical sciences, decision-makers partner with research centers that are continuously experimenting in the field, rapidly evolving medicine and providing highly rigorous scientific bases for policy and budgeting.

In the domain of social policy, however, evidence and experimentation do not influence decision-making as consistently.

Useful data and information about what works are not readily available to decision-makers. In many cases, policy informs evidence creation, not the other way around.

This report sheds light on the social policy evidence ecosystem in Canada. We define the ecosystem in this report to include four groups:

» **Government:**

Specifically departments focused on social policy including the operational arms related to social policy and any budget functions in this area.

» **Non-profits and charities:**

Organizations that influence policy and deliver programs and services - including education, health, housing and economic development - and help fill the gap for essential community services, like childcare, that may not exist in a community setting.

» **Foundations:**

Philanthropic funders who support Canadian non-profit and voluntary organizations.

» **Research partners and technical advisors:**

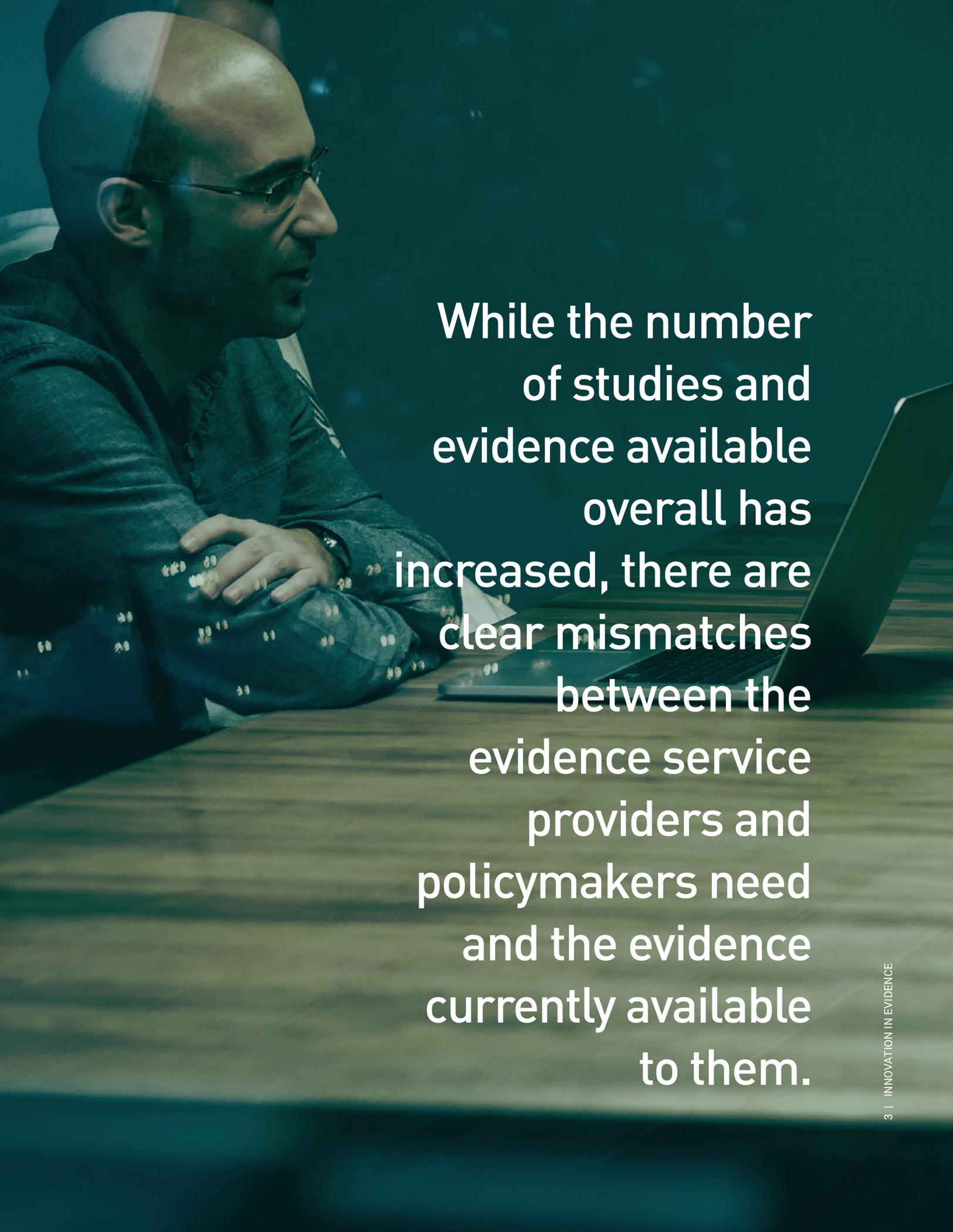
Organizations with technical expertise that help Canadian governments, non-profit and voluntary organizations, and philanthropic organizations to better collect and use data for decision-making and support evidence-informed process innovation and experimentation.

Research Approach

This paper draws on academic literature, non-academic literature and interviews with key informants. It also draws on the author's personal and professional experience working on evidence-building projects with government and non-profit organizations in both Canada and the United States. Through events and informal conversations, members of the Social R&D national community have helped inform and prompted reflection throughout much of the research process for this paper.

This paper is part of Mowat NFP's *Innovation in Evidence* series, which intends to identify opportunities to strengthen the national evidence ecosystem, to inform efforts nationally to improve the use of evidence in policymaking and program delivery and explore the potential for international collaboration on social policy issues.

¹ In this paper, the term "social sector" refers to non-profit and charitable organizations, social enterprises and cross-sector social impact initiatives. The term "non-profit organization" is meant to refer more specifically to organizations that are engaged in service provider relationships with governments.

A man with glasses and a blue sweater is sitting at a desk with a laptop, looking thoughtful. The background is a dark, teal-colored wall with some blurred lights.

**While the number
of studies and
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policymakers need
and the evidence
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to them.**

2 THE SUPPLY AND DEMAND FOR EVIDENCE IN CANADA

Contrary to the popularly held notion that policymakers and service providers are drowning in evidence, our findings suggest both groups need greater access to more – particularly more reliable and relevant – research. While the number of studies and evidence available overall has increased, there are clear mismatches between the evidence service providers and policymakers need and the evidence currently available to them.

Where evidence exists: the supply

Interviewees found it relatively easy to identify programs and policies that have had successful results. The challenge has been identifying data and evidence that is useful to their context.

We learned in our discussions that a common approach among policymakers and service providers is to start their evidence search with Google as the search tool. This means that people are often first directed toward sites and initiatives which are picked up by the algorithm and dependent on key search terms – regardless of how meaningful or relevant it is for the Canadian context.

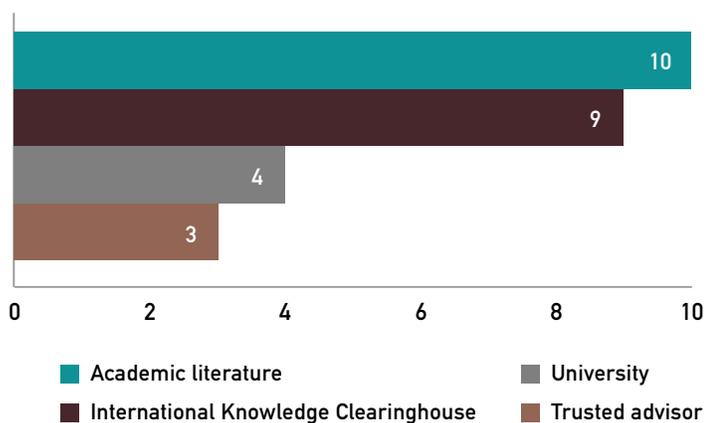
Figure 1 below provides an overview of top of mind sources of evidence for the Canadian social policy and practice leaders we spoke with. The two most common resources for finding evidence of what works are academic literature and international knowledge clearinghouse databases. These two show the power of Google’s search tool in directing people to evidence online. University centers of expertise and trusted advisors were noted next.

When timing allows, we heard that both policymakers and service providers attempt systematic analyses of academic literature. Often, a research intern is hired not only to focus on the question at hand but also to access academic journals located behind paywalls.

In Canada, US and UK evidence clearinghouses and other summaries or meta-analyses of research in academic institutions feature prominently in how policymakers and service providers find evidence to inform

FIGURE 1

Top of mind sources of evidence



policy and programming. While this evidence is valuable for identifying people to connect with to learn more about how they implement their services, the information alone is insufficient – and often dangerous – for a service provider or a policymaker to use as best practice without significant additional assessment.

Notably, our interviewees did not initially flag dedicated knowledge mobilization (KM) activities in Canadian universities as top of mind sources of evidence. Initiatives like Research Impact Canada² are important vehicles for supporting researchers to connect their work to policymakers and service providers and they often have a public face to further support those connections. However, we found that interviewees generally do not think of turning to these types of KM initiatives first for help when looking for expertise and evidence. Rather, some interviewees noted that they seek guidance directly from centers of expertise in specific areas of social policy or practice, like the University of Manitoba Centre for Health Policy and the McGill Centre for Research on Children and Families. Often, service providers and government officials discussed the use of Canadian university research centres as a source of evidence alongside US-based sources interchangeably.

Some service providers and government officials have cultivated relationships with trusted advisors (often academic researchers in Canadian universities and research communities) that they call upon when searching for a potential solution to a policy problem or service delivery challenge. These trusted advisors provide ad-hoc support and direction to relevant resources and experts, and help service providers identify sources of funds to engage in experimentation when appropriate.

How evidence is used: The demand

Government officials need evidence to inform different stages of the policymaking process. At the most basic level, evidence is sought to research and respond to a perceived social need: to define the problem, complete a jurisdictional scan and assessment of the Canadian context and identify potential solutions to the problem.

Although evaluations are completed on a regular basis for government programs, the function is often that of an audit – a point-in-time check on progress with a reliance on survey results – rather than a consistent approach to evaluation and improvement over time. Partnerships with academic experts and pilot projects with rigorous research provide additional quality information. But overall, the evidence that is accessible on most policies and programs is not curated for a government official making policy decisions.

Service providers we interviewed are primarily looking for evidence to inform their service provision and test a theory of change. This task, while more local and specific in context than the one government

“The problem is a centralized point of reference for this information – you have to look at and navigate all of the information independently. There is a first part of understanding the diversity of evidence generally and how suitable it is for different contexts. The second part is how to use it within a government context. When you are looking at high need populations across a country, you need generalizable evidence for the whole but with customization options that are adaptable to different contexts.”

SENIOR FEDERAL GOVERNMENT
OFFICIAL

² <http://researchimpact.ca/>

undertakes, is no less daunting. Information accessible online and within peer networks can be helpful for improving practice, but additional assessments of the data and best practices are required to determine if they fit with the service provider's needs.

Some service providers are embedding a culture of learning within their organizations and leading innovative initiatives in evidence-informed practice within their networks. The United Way of Greater Toronto (UWGT) is an impressive example of an organization working to understand the performance of its programs across member agencies. Together with Blueprint, their research partner, and member agencies, UWGT has co-developed a framework to generate evidence about the effectiveness of its Youth Success Strategy programs across 16 different agencies (see box).

Learning partnerships are rare and on the cutting edge of innovation within the social sector. The Social R&D Fellowship, a McConnell Foundation incubated leadership team on research and development in the social sector, projects that only five per cent of service providers are able to undertake continuous and deliberate research and development initiatives.

These organizations are actively exploring transformative options for evaluation and pursuing continuous improvement. The Fellowship categorizes 95 per cent of social sector organizations as limited or unable to innovate due to capacity constraints – human and financial (see Figure 2). To address this gap, the team has established a community of practice for social sector innovators and is launching a “Field Catalyst Program” to start normalizing basic research and development practices.

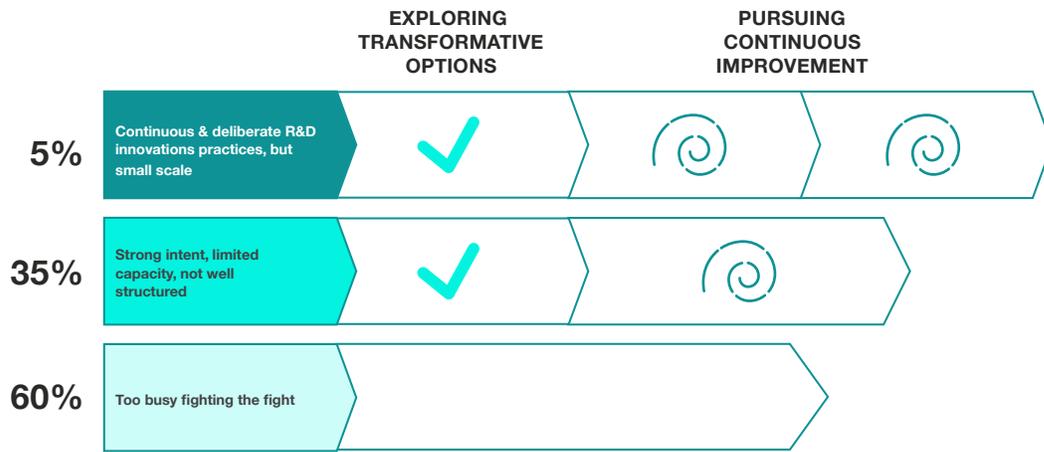
Evidence framework example

The Youth Success Strategy (YSS) is an ambitious initiative that seeks to reach youth who are farthest from the labour market and face multiple barriers including poverty, criminalization and mental health. It includes a range of programs and organizations across the greater Toronto region, including new and untested programs as well as evidence-informed models that are being implemented in new contexts. UWGT recognized the need for a rigorous, consistent monitoring and evaluation framework to capture the aggregate outcomes of YSS as well as the outcomes of individual models and funding streams.

The framework includes a centralized participant and employer database provides common indicators across programs to better measure the impact of the Youth Success Strategy as a whole, and to allow for better knowledge of what works for youth with different needs in each of the agencies. Participant profiles are dynamic and accessible by agencies to maintain participant engagement and track progress toward outcomes in real time. By giving agencies tools and know-how to collect data on their participants, agencies are better able to make evidence-informed programming decisions and continuously improve the way that they work with youth. The evaluation framework also supports and encourages knowledge sharing between partners and stakeholders to help youth-serving network learn from one another.

FIGURE 2

Social sector's innovation process



Source: Adapted from The Social R&D Fellowship.

3 CAPACITY-BUILDING INITIATIVES

Government efforts to improve evidence

Canada was early to recognize the importance of engaging in innovation and experiment research to strengthen the evidence base underpinning policy development. Over 25 years ago, the federal government was instrumental in the creation of the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC), an arm's length non-profit research organization, to implement long-term, multi-site demonstration projects. SRDC has since completed over 300 projects and studies in partnership with governments and other non-profit organizations to help improve policy and practice, particularly those aimed at improving outcomes for disadvantaged Canadians.

In recent years, innovation units and results-focused teams have increasingly been the norm within the public service to help governments improve their impact and deliver better outcomes for citizens. At the federal level, several initiatives within government have been created or bolstered in recent years. The Privy Council Office houses the Results and Delivery Unit and the Impact and Innovation Unit (IIU), which both helps government departments use their data to make better decisions and encourages the testing of new service delivery approaches. Each department has a "Chief Results and Delivery Officer" and trained data experts to help departments chart and visualize their progress on outcomes for key initiatives. IIU offers a fellowship program where experts in behavioural insights, impact measurement, pay for success and data science are matched with government departments that need help using new skills and approaches for a pressing policy challenge.

The President of the Treasury Board is tasked with improving the use of evidence and data in program innovation and evaluation.³ The Treasury Board Secretariat and the Department of Finance support this cross-cutting endeavour through the Policy on Results⁴, a requirement for consistent performance information and evaluation for federal programs through the budget cycle.

There is evidence that these initiatives are beginning to gain momentum across the public service. For example, initial behavioural insights experiments have shown the potential for increasing the uptake of the Canada Learning Bond by 20 per cent among lower-income families

"Efforts to innovate in the social sector in Canada so far focus on a few early adopters and their success. We want to shift the sector and to do so we need to support and motivate the middle. Moving the middle will have the biggest impact for Canadians."

JASON PEARMAN, SENIOR FELLOW - SOCIAL R&D, THE MCCONNELL FOUNDATION

3 Office of the Prime Minister (2015). "President of the Treasury Board of Canada Mandate Letter (November 12, 2015)". <https://pm.gc.ca/eng/president-treasury-board-canada-mandate-letter>.

4 Government of Canada (2018). "Policy on Results". <https://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pol/doc-eng.aspx?id=31300>.

These initiatives and dedicated teams are important first steps to building an evidence culture in government. Data literacy and analytical skills are further needed throughout the public service to help seed and expand these initiatives within departments.

saving for postsecondary education.⁵ Challenges aimed at sourcing novel evidence-based ways of improving health, mental health, accessibility and community well-being have been launched in multiple policy areas from Indigenous housing to a tech-focused “smart cities.” Importantly, demand is growing inside the federal government to try new approaches to solving difficult policy challenges, and communities are increasingly co-creating policy and programs alongside government.

At the provincial level, governments have also been experimenting with dedicated teams to support greater evidence use and better service design. The Government of Ontario launched its Results and Delivery Strategy in 2008 and took further concrete steps to solidify evidence-informed approaches in the budget process in 2015 with the creation of a Centre of Excellence for Evidence-Based Decision Making. The Government of New Brunswick followed suit with similar initiatives in 2015.

These initiatives and dedicated teams are important first steps to building an evidence culture in government. Data literacy and analytical skills are further needed throughout the public service – beyond the dedicated support teams – to help seed and expand these initiatives within departments.

The next phase for governments is one of improving data literacy and accessible tools for innovation to ensure that the evidence currently being generated is rolled up into useful knowledge that can inform policy. Perhaps most importantly for the continued momentum of the evidence movement in government, as data begins to underpin decisions more broadly, senior civil servants may need to get comfortable delivering advice that doesn’t support – or even contradicts – the policy preferences of elected officials based on the evidence before them.⁶

Philanthropic support and capacity-building initiatives

The philanthropic community is a source of consistent support and innovation in research and development. Recent initiatives of the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the McConnell Foundation, and an emerging coalition of philanthropic partners are noteworthy in their endeavours to help lead governments and service providers toward an evidence-informed approach. These targeted sparks of innovation across the Canadian social sector landscape help fuel new paths and opportunities for data and evidence in practice.

The Ontario Trillium Foundation has supported the province’s development of social impact bonds (SIBs) and, importantly, spearheaded the use of administrative data for these partnerships. Administrative data are not collected for research purposes but rather for record-keeping, typically tracking participants, registrants and transactions. These datasets are rich with information that can be useful for evaluating programs and validating the outcomes of experiments. The SIBs process provided an opportunity for government and service delivery organizations to evaluate

5 Government of Canada (2018). “Impact and Innovation Unit’s Annual Report 2017-2018”. <https://www.canada.ca/en/innovation-hub/services/reports-resources/2017-2018-annual-report.html#canada-learning-bond>.

6 Jarvis, M. (2016). “Creating a High Performing Civil Service Against a Backdrop of Disruptive Change”. Toronto: Mowat Centre. https://mowatcentre.ca/wp-content/uploads/publications/122_creating_a_high-performing_canadian_civil_service.pdf.

their services using data from across government, in a comprehensive manner.⁷ The Trillium Foundation's important work in setting a high bar for administrative data use and validating outcomes will help propel similar social program experiments and data-driven initiatives forward.

The McConnell Foundation is another leader in building the evidence ecosystem in Canada. The Foundation funds many of the grassroots initiatives focused on administrative data, open data, and social finance initiatives and plays a leadership role in convening leaders internationally and nationally on the evidence and social innovation agendas. One of the strongest pillars of the Foundation's capacity-building work is its Innoweave program, a suite of tools aimed at helping community organizations increase their impact. The program provides free webinars, workshops and coaching in ten modules, including experimentation and evaluation. A new module on data collection, analysis and sharing is under development.

Lastly, a new initiative focused on facilitating access to administrative data for evidence-informed policy and program decisions is emerging from a coalition of non-profits, charities and philanthropic organizations. Foundations Canada and the Ontario Nonprofit Network and capacity-building organizations Colour of Poverty-Colour of Change and Well Living House are working with Powered by Data to design a policy agenda to obtain access to administrative data for the non-profit sector. The group wants to identify relevant government administrative data across Canada — offender history data, job retraining programs information or social housing databases — and work with governments to share it with non-profit organizations active in those areas to help them better understand how their services are being used and what kind of

impact their various programs are having. The coalition is noteworthy in this space because it signals the growing maturity of the philanthropic community in Canada on issues related to data ownership and empowering the social sector around data use.

These targeted sparks of innovation across the Canadian social sector landscape help fuel new paths and opportunities for data and evidence in practice.

These developments follow earlier ones adopted by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, which delivered need-based student financial assistance across Canada between 2000 and 2009. While operating as a private foundation independent of government, the

Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation was created and funded by the federal government and delivered its benefits to students via provincial and territorial government programs. In order to better inform program design and implementation, the Foundation undertook a series of experimental research projects designed to test different approaches to improving access to, and success in, postsecondary education, including several randomized control trials and two experimental trials involving Indigenous students.⁸ In 2005, the Foundation created a new access bursary program for low-income and Indigenous students that was rolled out simultaneously alongside a comprehensive research evaluation designed to measure the program's impact — a first in the field of student financial assistance in Canada. In 2010 the Foundation's bursary program was rolled into the federal government's Canada Student Loans Program, though unfortunately without continuing the practice of experimental research or impact evaluation.

7 Government of Ontario (2015). "Piloting social impact bonds in Ontario: the development path and lessons learned". <https://www.ontario.ca/page/piloting-social-impact-bonds-ontario-development-path-and-lessons-learned>.

8 See for example the SRDC reports on the Millennium Pilot Projects at <http://www.srdc.org/projects/Future-to-Discover-Pilot-Project-FTD-details.aspx> and <http://www.srdc.org/projects/BC-Advancement-Via-Individual-Determination-AVID-Pilot-Project-details.aspx>.

Research partnerships and evidence resources in Canada's social sector

Close partnerships that enable evidence-informed policy in Canada are much more common in the health sector. Notable examples include the Ontario Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences (ICES) and the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy. Both are non-profit organizations that receive core funding to undertake research to inform health policy and practice and hold data repositories of provincial administrative health data to evaluate and monitor the health system and inform policy.

Outside the health sector, the receipt of core funding to allow an organization to generate evidence in a specific social policy area is less common. There are two notable exceptions in Canada: Employment and Higher Education.

The employment and training sector is one area of social policy where several non-profit organizations do receive ongoing funding to improve the delivery of employment services and the quality of labour market development programs. Provincial governments are supporting workforce innovation centres that work in partnership with labour market stakeholders, mostly non-profit organizations with a mission focused on employment services or labour market programming, to generate and collect evidence on innovative approaches in employment and training programming and service delivery. Both the Ontario Workforce Innovation Centre (OWIC) and the Newfoundland and Labrador Workforce Innovation Centre (NLWI), for example, set aside a large portion of their funding to support innovative demonstration projects proposed by labour market partners.

In the field of education, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) generates, assesses and shares evidence on a regular basis about the factors affecting outcomes for postsecondary education students, and partners regularly with academic and policy researchers, institutions and community organizations.

Pockets of innovation and data holdings also exist in different policy and program areas, though few benefit from core funding and are therefore reliant on time-limited funding tied to specific projects. This is one reason why the social policy landscape does not feature the same types of research partnerships as we find in health.

This also suggests that many research initiatives are generating evidence of program effectiveness more than they are aggregating results to inform policy. Health policymakers can plug into an existing evidence culture and dynamic ecosystem where organizations and researchers are continuously testing. Evidence in the non-profit and charitable sectors is not continuously generated, shared and mobilized at the same speed or in the same volumes as in the health sector. In the social sector, identifying “what works” to improve policy or programming often requires generating and synthesizing evidence to assess what has been tested in the field. Importantly, administrative data is not held or accessible by social policy researchers in the same way that health data is, thus limiting the types of analysis available for social policy in Canada.

Below we list a number of initiatives we found particularly interesting due to their innovations, reach or impact on the sector. The lack of public databases about evidence-informed programs and policy innovations means that it is currently difficult to produce a definitive list of innovative

research partnerships in social policy in Canada. Unsurprisingly, most interviewees struggled to name more than one example of evidence-building initiatives and programs in social policy. The lack of clarity only further underlines the lack of institutional support in this space in Canada. For this reason, we confine ourselves here to a series of indicative and interesting examples.

Help map Canada's evidence landscape

Alongside this paper, we have compiled a number of examples of capacity-building organizations and multi-sector partnerships that are successfully learning and sharing what works to help improve outcomes for people in their communities. This initial listing of institutions, agencies, organizations and partnerships that are part of Canada's infrastructure for evidence-informed decision-making is available at mowatcentre.ca/canadas-evidence-institutions.

This listing includes examples that have come up during our work on this paper, and we have compiled some basic information about each example. It is meant as a starting point, in need of review, correction and addition. We present it to the evidence community to help advance the effort of mapping Canada's evidence landscape, and welcome additions and corrections to it. If you would like to highlight an organization or partnership we are missing or share information that needs updating, please use the link provided on the webpage.

The research partnerships profiled here perform their development functions differently based on their unique circumstances, skillsets and preferred approach. Each partnership featured provides unique insight into how Canada's social sector engages in research and development activities.

Examples of research partnerships

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

PolicyWise for Children and Families (Alberta)

PolicyWise is a non-profit organization that collaborates with the Government of Alberta to develop research and evaluation strategies for child, family and community well-being policy. The organization manages several databases for province-wide longitudinal studies and research collaborations which enable it to use evidence to inform policy and practice in the province.

WHAT'S NOTABLE:

PolicyWise works with multiple Alberta ministries to access, analyze and interpret linked administrative data about children and youth.⁹ In 2013, the Government of Alberta passed the *Children First Act*, which named PolicyWise as the recipient of the anonymized data for the purpose of conducting research. This legislation was the first of its kind in Canada.¹⁰

9 PolicyWise for Children and Families (2017). "Annual Report 2016-2017". <https://policywise.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2017-09SEP-18-Annual-Report-2.pdf>.

10 Cave, J., Gyateng, T., Lalande, L. & Lumley, T. (2018). "Collaborating for Greater Impact: Building an Integrated Data Ecosystem". Toronto: Mowat NFP. https://mowatcentre.ca/wp-content/uploads/publications/161_EE_collaborating_for_greater_impact.pdf.

COMMUNITY SAFETY

Community Safety Knowledge Alliance (Saskatchewan)

Community Safety Knowledge Alliance (CSKA) is a non-profit organization that mobilizes, integrates and facilitates research and development to improve outcomes across the community safety spectrum. The organization bridges academic researchers with practitioners and government to enable evidence-informed practice and to explore how data and technology can drive better outcomes for communities in Saskatchewan.

WHAT'S NOTABLE:

CSKA is committed to independent evaluations of its activities and is building a knowledge sharing network of what works to promote the use of evidence-based practices across the community safety system in Canada.

EMPLOYMENT

BC Centre for Employment Excellence (British Columbia)

The BC Centre for Employment Excellence was operational from 2012 to 2017 and aimed to share best practices in employment services and training directly with employers and employment services organizations to improve outcomes in the province.

WHAT'S NOTABLE:

Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) managed the Centre and continues to maintain a Knowledge Clearinghouse that provides links to published research relevant to employment services organizations in BC.¹¹

EMPLOYMENT/SKILLS

Future Skills Centre (National)

The Future Skills Centre is a proposed approach to evidence-building, learning what works and mobilizing evidence to inform policy and practice in the skills and employment training sectors in Canada. The initiative is still under development but noteworthy in its scale, with a promised annual budget of \$75 million (importantly, as core funding). The Centre's proposed mandate is to synthesize existing knowledge, fund and support rigorous experimentation and research, share knowledge, and work with private and non-profit entities to improve services and support investment in the skills needed for the future.

WHAT'S NOTABLE:

If the Future Skills Centre is able to develop productive relationship with the provinces and territories responsible for skills training in Canada, its mandate and committed resources could make it the country's largest 'What Works' initiative to date.

11 BC Centre for Employment Excellence (2018). "Knowledge Clearinghouse". <http://www.cfeebc.org/knowledge-clearinghouse/>.

HOMELESSNESS

Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (National)

The Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (COH) is a non-partisan research and policy partnership between academics, policy and decision-makers, service providers and people with lived experience of homelessness in Canada. It is the largest homelessness-dedicated research organization in the world and supports service providers, policymakers and governments to improve their capacity to end homelessness. The Homeless Hub, an online knowledge repository, contains over 30,000 resources, reports, tools, templates and frameworks, designed to be accessible and useful to anyone working, researching or legislating on homelessness. The Homeless Hub houses the At Home/Chez Soi toolkit, a series of detailed guides for replicating the Mental Health Commission of Canada's award-winning Housing First solution.

The legacy of At Home/Chez Soi

The homelessness sector in Canada has a strong focus on evidence and a network of infrastructure and research partners across the country to support its efforts.

Interviewees noted that the sector made major strides in 2008 when the Government of Canada allocated \$110 million to undertake a research demonstration project on mental health and homelessness.

At Home/Chez Soi was developed as a four-year large-scale five-city demonstration project that aimed to provide practical and meaningful support to Canadians experiencing homelessness and mental health problems. The cross-country initiative proved to be a successful bridge-building exercise between academic partners, service providers and community resources in each site. The lead researcher, the late Dr. Paula Goering, was a highly respected professor and mental health advocate who dedicated her life to research and improving service provision. She worked closely with community partners across Canada to ensure the randomized controlled trial was successful, ethical and "kind" to individuals randomized into a control group.

The program's legacy is that the homelessness sector is more knowledgeable about evidence-informed practice and local planning, and more integrated and equipped to continue their work in a data-driven way.

CATALYST FOR ACTION:

The Mental Health Commission of Canada, and the At Home/Chez Soi team, leveraged political motivation to address homelessness during the 2010 Vancouver Olympics to launch a pan-Canadian project including sites in Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, Montreal and Moncton.

CHILD AND YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health (Ontario)

The Centre supports child and youth mental health service providers by promoting evidence-informed service planning and delivery and supporting research to close knowledge gaps. The organization helps agencies with the implementation and evaluation of evidence-based approaches to service delivery as well as process improvement and performance measurement strategies.

WHAT'S NOTABLE

The Centre offers a “mix and match” approach to evidence-informed services. It works with agencies and communities to identify what services they need and then draws on best practices to develop a customized approach that is appropriate to the organization’s context.¹²

EMPLOYMENT

Upskill (National)

The UPSKILL project was a large-scale demonstration project that rigorously measured the impacts of literacy and essential skills – LES – training in the workplace. The project was a collaboration between many partners, and used a random assignment design to measure the impacts of LES training on workers’ skills, their job performance and other outcomes like health and mental health for both workers and firms. Approximately 80-100 firms and 1,200 workers participated, half of whom received training; the other half served as a control group.

WHAT'S NOTABLE:

This unique study was the first in North America to document positive ROI (return on investments) in essential skills training not only for employees, but for employers and government as well.¹³

MULTIPLE PRIORITY AREAS

First Nations Information Governance Centre (National)

The First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC) is an incorporated non-profit organization that conducts data-gathering initiatives to build culturally relevant portraits of the lives of First Nations people and the communities they live in across Canada. The Centre is responsible for the development and administration of national First Nation survey initiatives with its regional partners which link into Statistics Canada work including the First Nations Regional Health Survey (FNRHS) and the First Nations Regional Early Childhood, Education and Employment Survey (FNREEES).

WHAT'S NOTABLE:

FNIGC developed a series of “Power of Data” stories that profile how data from their surveys improved services in First Nations communities.

¹² Ontario Centre for Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health (2018). <http://www.excellenceforchildandandyouth.ca/>.

¹³ Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (2014). “UPSKILL: A Credible Test of Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills Training”. <http://www.srdc.org/media/199770/upskill-final-results-es-en.pdf>.

It is worth emphasizing again that this list is not meant to be inclusive, but rather suggestive of some of the innovative research partnerships that are strengthening evidence about “what works” in social policy. Additional innovative research and demonstration projects have been conducted with the support of both the federal government (in areas such as employment, public safety, public health, and immigration) and provincial governments. Private philanthropic foundations are also becoming increasingly interested in instilling more research and evaluation criteria in their funding programs.

Intentional research and development support for the social sector

Despite these innovations and the endeavours of governments, foundations, non-profits and charities and supportive research partners, there is still a significant mismatch between the supply and demand for evidence in Canada’s social sector. The issue is more complex than a lack of data or too few quality experiments in one service area or another. It extends to the relationships and communication between organizations in the social sector and their perceived needs, differing incentives and timeframes for action.

Government policymakers need evidence at specific points in time in the policymaking process, and they need meta-level summaries of quantitative and qualitative research that can fit a provincial or national landscape. These needs differ starkly from the approach and longer-term timeframe academic researchers and social sector organizations follow in generating evidence.

The knowledge mobilization and dissemination activities of academic researchers and experts in various policy and program areas are not realizing their maximum impact. Importantly, government officials, academics, and social sector organizations are still too reliant on personal connections and trusted advisors to help them filter the available evidence.

Some research on how to mobilize knowledge for government decision-makers is beginning to emerge. For example, identifying risk factors and presenting outcomes by social groups and by local communities are shown to meet the needs of policymakers and help contribute to evidence-informed policymaking.¹⁴ These are helpful tips for researchers to keep in mind. A more comprehensive research initiative is needed to better understand how the different actors and institutions in the social sector work with evidence and how they interact with each other. Understanding these dynamics better would maximize connection points between those generating evidence and those needing it for decision-making. It could also serve as a foundational step to building practical research and development support for the social sector in Canada.

Internationally, external research and development supports help bridge the evidence and information gaps between governments, service providers, researchers and other interested stakeholders. In the UK, the “What Works Network” aims to improve the way governments create, share and use high quality evidence for decision-making.¹⁵ The Network is made up of seven independent “What Works Centres” covering policy areas from health to children to criminal justice. Two additional associate members of the network exist in Scotland and Wales,

14 Roos, N., Roos, L., Brownell, M., & Fuller, E. (2010) “Enhancing Policymakers’ Understanding of Disparities: Relevant Data from an Information-Rich Environment”. *The Milbank Quarterly* 88(3): 382-403.

15 UK Cabinet Office (2013). “What Works Network”. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network>.

respectively.¹⁶ Together, they aim to ensure that thorough, high quality, independently-assessed evidence shapes decision-making from program delivery to policymaking. To do this, one of the Centres' main functions is to assess the existing evidence base for their area of policy in a standardized way, applying a common currency for comparing the effectiveness of interventions, and to share that knowledge in an accessible way. Some of the Centres also help fill gaps in evidence by funding research and experimentation where it is lacking and by partnering with service providers and local governments to strengthen their research and evaluation capacity.¹⁷

In the United States, a growing network of “policy labs” at the state and local levels helps government officials collaborate with experienced researchers to study problems, learn about the effectiveness of existing programs and test new approaches.¹⁸ The Labs are an initiative of the Laura and John Arnold Foundation and aim to help states unlock the power of data analysis and advanced research techniques to integrate evidence into the day-to-day operations of governments across the United States. The labs maintain a secure data infrastructure for processing and linking administrative datasets within and across agencies while maintaining confidentiality. This allows them to learn more about the needs of people who are using public services, tailor programs to meet demand, and evaluate the impact of existing policies—providing a research and development function similar to that which has driven innovation in fields like health care for decades.¹⁹ The partnerships are structured to ensure governments commit to a process of continual evaluation and learning in order to build the evidence base for social interventions rather than focus on one-off pilot projects.

The Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Government Performance Lab is another American initiative, offering pro bono technical assistance to state and local governments to improve the results they achieve for their citizens. This work encompasses support for the Bloomberg Philanthropies' What Works Cities Initiative, Pay for Success (PFS) contracting projects, and performance improvement projects which aim to improve the results of core government spending – transforming existing contractual relationships with service providers across States. Similar to the network of Policy Labs, the HKS Government Performance Lab helps governments use advanced methods of data analysis and research to determine which programs are effective and which need to be improved or replaced at the local level.

The knowledge mobilization and dissemination activities of academic researchers and experts in various policy and program areas are not realizing their maximum impact.

16 A new Centre, the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care, is as of writing still in the incubation phase, and is an affiliate member of the network. The Money Advice Service (<https://www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk/en>) is also an affiliate member of the network.

17 UK Cabinet Office (2018). “What Works Network: Five Years On”. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/677478/6.4154_What_works_report_Final.pdf.

18 Laura and John Arnold Foundation (2016). “Policy Labs: Research Partnerships for More Effective Government”. <http://www.arnoldfoundation.org/policy-labs-research-partnerships-effective-government/>.

19 Laura and John Arnold Foundation (2016). “Policy Labs: Research Partnerships for More Effective Government”. <http://www.arnoldfoundation.org/policy-labs-research-partnerships-effective-government/>.

A woman with dark hair and glasses is looking down at a tablet device she is holding. The scene is dimly lit with a strong blue-green tint. In the background, there are blurred shelves with books or papers.

**“If our societies
are to thrive
in the 21st
century, we
will need to
make R&D
mainstream
in the social
sector.”**

GEOFF MULGAN, NESTA,
SEPTEMBER 2018, OTTAWA

4 BURNING ISSUES AND BIG OPPORTUNITIES IN CANADA'S SOCIAL POLICY EVIDENCE ECOSYSTEM

Interviewees generally agreed that Canada's culture of continuous improvement and long history of investments in research initiatives across the country have now reached a critical phase where greater coordination and support is needed to maximize impact. Four areas of focus were highlighted:

Building a knowledge clearinghouse

In the United States, the Results First Clearinghouse Database is a one-stop online resource that brings together information on the effectiveness of social policy programs from nine national clearinghouses. It applies colour-coding to the clearinghouses' distinct rating systems, creating a common language that enables users to quickly see where each program falls on a spectrum from negative impact to positive impact. Using the database is very easy and can help everyone - from policymakers and their staff to nongovernmental organizations, charities and researchers - to access and understand the evidence base for over 2,500 social policy programs.²⁰

While there is not one evidence clearinghouse in the UK, there are a number of overlapping evidence institutions performing similar roles.²¹ Each of the What Works Centres performs an evidence clearinghouse function for its area of expertise. The Centres also produce toolkits and help mobilize knowledge in a way that is useful for the unique needs of different audiences.

Canada has few comparable comprehensive knowledge repositories or evidence clearinghouses for the social sector. Independent research centres and short-term initiatives to understand what works for specific policy areas exist across the country in different formats. Outside of dedicated initiatives like the Community Safety Knowledge Alliance, programmatic evidence that has been collected to understand what works in one area of the country is generally not making a broader impact across the country – whether in that same policy area or in the same

FIGURE 3

Highlighted areas of focus

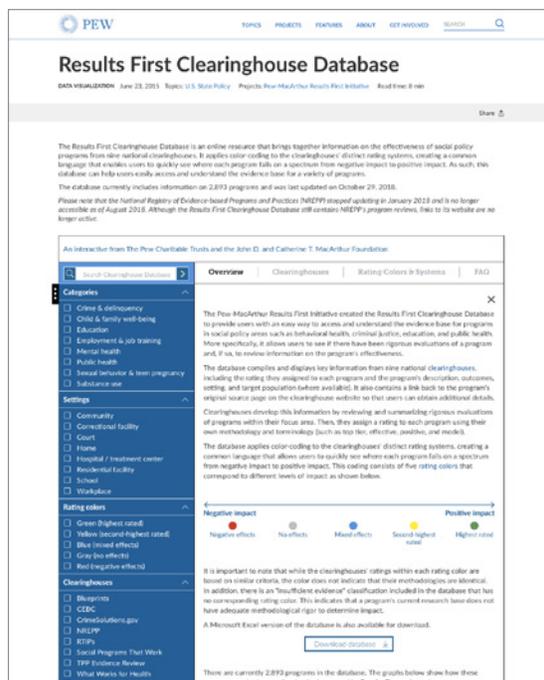


20 Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative (2015). "Results First Clearinghouse Database". <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/data-visualizations/2015/results-first-clearinghouse-database>.

21 For example, the Idox Information Service provides information services on public policy and practice to central government, public agencies, councils and universities, the Social Care Institute for Excellence houses a free online database of information and research on all aspects of social care and social work and at least one of the What Works Centres in education hosts a free online database which reviews the existing research on different programs, products, practices and policies - in education - with the goal of providing educators with the information they need to make evidence-based decisions.

FIGURE 4

Results First Clearinghouse Database



“We don’t have a data collection, data analysis, and programmatic center of expertise in Canada. It’s a gaping hole. CIHI (Canadian Institute for Health Information) is a good example of this – pulling data from across the country and providing an analytical frame for it. We don’t have this in social policy.”

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community across service providers. There is limited infrastructure to facilitate this kind of exchange in Canadian social policy and interviewees were quick to point to the need for a transparent online knowledge repository that identifies what is happening, what has worked, what is working and who is leading innovative work across the country in all areas of social policy.

Funding more technical support for research and development

Greater investment in technical support – for organizations to learn how to use their own data better, to try something new or to invest in rigorous experimentation – was a second area identified consistently as critical by government and social sector leaders.

Unlock data and improve literacy

Government and social sector organizations across Canada are beginning to use their own data for programmatic improvements both within their own organizations and more widely across organizations at the community and regional level. They need support and resources to do this well. Our interviewees shared stories of time lost trying to unlock data from client management, accounting and customer

relationship management (CRM) systems. The Government of Ontario’s recent line by line review of government expenditures raised a similar concern for both government departments and service delivery organization contracted via transfer payment agreements.²²

Streamlining data entry and optimizing workflow approaches need refinement as well. The lack of technical skillsets and sector-specific training opportunities mean help with data collection, analysis and sharing must be found within tight budgets. For example, investments in data literacy, training, and technical supports are needed to help non-profit and charitable organizations modernize and learn how to keep pace with the vast sums of data they are now

22 EY Canada (2018). “Managing Transformation: A Modernization Action Plan for Ontario”. https://files.ontario.ca/ey_report_2018_en.pdf.

producing.²³ Most importantly, greater investment would ensure non-profits make the most of their data – whether organizational or aggregated across several organizations or types of programs – to understand what works, where, why and for whom.

Government officials would benefit from training and technical support too. The focus on evidence-based policy and value for money in government has squeezed public servants to identify what works and where to put investments to “fix” social problems. Doing so requires analysis of multiple types of data – from program level data, to national surveys, to administrative data – to successfully assess and translate service-provider data and experience into useful standards of service. Policymakers have a suite of resources to help determine how best to make decisions but staff lack the training and experience to maximize the value of the information at their disposal.

“There is a lot of activity happening across Canada and there is a lack of coherence to this activity, a lack of cooperation and collaboration. There are pockets of innovation and evidence but the literacy with respect to evidence – how to access it, the capacity to assess it and use evidence-based practice at the organizational level and in government is low.”

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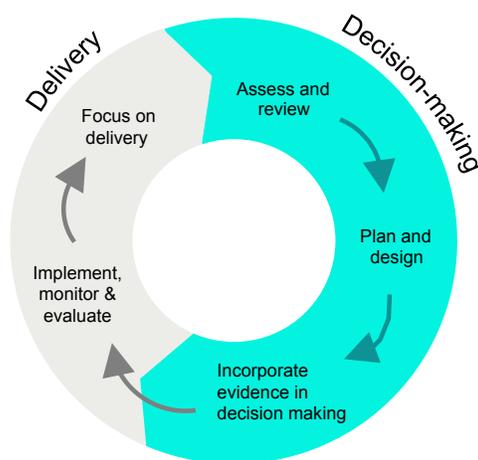
A pipeline of innovations

Conversations about evidence-based policy in Canada are often conversations about evidence-based programs. The focus is rarely about aggregating evidence from programs into frameworks customizable by service providers and even less so about how policymakers can use that evidence to inform social policy within a region, province or nationally. Evidence-based “policy” is seen to be optimized when details about interventions that work in a controlled environment are shared and organizations and decision-makers are seen to be using that evidence. Rarely

are the outcomes of those programs validated by governments or service providers when the “evidence-based programs” are scaled or replicated.

FIGURE 5

Evidence-informed decision-making and delivery cycle



Source: Blueprint ADE.

The focus on identifying, and rigorously evaluating, programs to identify what is working and improve outcomes is important. However, it is only one part of creating an evidence culture and helping to improve outcomes for services. A continual cycle of learning is the foundation of useful research and development in the social sector. Evidence-informed decision-making followed by an equally strong focus on delivery and testing is needed to create a dynamic learning approach that ensures quality evidence actually works for each community setting and is implemented and adapted to maximize

23 Cave, J., Gyateng, T., Lalande, L. & Lumley, T. (2018). “Collaborating for Greater Impact: Building an Integrated Data Ecosystem”. Toronto: Mowat NFP. https://mowatcentre.ca/wp-content/uploads/publications/161_EE_collaborating_for_greater_impact.pdf.

impacts for citizens in a customized way. This is what the most successful research partnerships we spoke with are striving to achieve. It requires a cycle of iteration that is continuous and connects service providers, government and other funders with data and advanced research and development approaches to keep improving.

The erosion of core funding to charities makes it difficult for all but the largest and well-funded organizations to focus on innovation. Investments in people, processes, and technology typically fall under the rubric of administrative costs and charities face a lot of pressure to keep administrative costs low, leaving little room to invest in anything that is not direct service delivery.

The MaRS Solutions Lab, the Ryerson Creative Destruction Lab and other supportive environments are helping to catalyze this pipeline of innovation by creating safe spaces to focus on mission goals and realign programs, processes and incentives among social sector partners. New policy tools like outcomes-based approaches and agile procurements²⁴ are further creating opportunities to rethink traditional approaches to delivery.

These are all important steps forward. More are needed to help lift the majority of social sector organizations and policy professionals that don't have time or resources to refocus toward an evidence-building approach. There are countless researchers and design and data analytics professionals throughout the country who want to further accelerate innovation and support continuous improvement in their communities. Some, like the Social R&D Fellowship and Data for Good, are trying to catalyze the sector and aiming high in hopes of bridging some of the enormous gaps that exist. They need a way to connect their skills in a meaningful way to social policy challenges, and non-profits and charities need a way to hire them. Funding more technical support that is focused on enabling an evidence-informed approach to new social research and development projects could help connect these potential partners and contribute to a pipeline of innovations across the social sector.

Create good, high quality, evidence often

Not all evidence is created equally. Technical support and evaluations funded by governments, foundations and non-profit organizations themselves must insist on good, high quality evidence and sound research partners. There must be transparency about research methods and established standards for how to interpret the different types of data used.²⁵ Evaluators must be credible, independent and provide a clear, step-by-step monitoring and evaluation plan before proceeding with any work. While major strides have been made by government and social sector organizations on all these fronts, there is still room for improvement.

Different approaches can be employed to ensure funding is allocated to building quality social research and development projects and generating useful evidence. In the United States, the federal government has used standards of evidence, a built-in hierarchy that places value on certain types of evidence above others (e.g. randomized controlled trials, which are frequently regarded as the gold standard of evidence) for allocating grant funding in some areas.²⁶ In the

24 Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (2018). "Government of Canada announces a new agile procurement initiative". https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/news/2018/01/government_of_canadaannouncesanewagileprocurementinitiative.html.

25 Kazimirski, A., Noble, J., Grewal, S. & Lumley, T. (2017). "Towards an Evidence-Led Social Sector". <https://www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/towards-an-evidence-led-social-sector/>.

26 U.S. Department of Health and Social Services (2018). "OPRE Report #2018-90 Home Visiting Effectiveness Review: Executive Summary". https://homvee.acf.hhs.gov/homvee_executive_summary.pdf.

UK, standards developed by Project Oracle and the Early Intervention Foundation focus more on the process and application of evidence (e.g. relevant for systems change).²⁷ Ultimately, the criteria applied must be relevant and appropriate to the research and development work required but a common approach is needed.

Too often governments and non-profits miss opportunities for learning and development. Standards of evidence may be a useful tool at the program and sector-wide levels to facilitate this learning and development, particularly when large funding envelopes and innovative projects fail to prioritize high quality research upfront.

Using people-centered approaches

Issues addressed by the social sector are more complicated and entrenched than ever before. There is greater recognition that, in the pursuit of long-term social change, organizations must address the root causes of social issues.²⁸ Sector leaders are shifting toward a systems perspective that moves beyond organization and sector-level analysis, but are still often working within siloed approaches to service delivery – where services are structured according to the department that funds them. These service provision arrangements are seen as contributing to poor outcomes and limited data-driven practices by both government leaders and service providers we spoke with.

“We have pockets of expertise in the social sector but that’s exactly the problem. We don’t look at things, communities or people “horizontally” – we just look at one symptom at a time. Put the individual first and then you can change the system.”

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Vertical policy silos are further replicated in service provision by narrowly focused administrative and reporting requirements for each funder – none of which join up through the reporting chain even where different departments of the same government are involved. The bifurcated nature of reporting is seen to further contribute to narrowly focused “interventions” and outcomes of interest which tick a box for the funder but make it challenging for service providers to see and meet the needs of the whole person, and often the whole family or whole community.²⁹

Putting the beneficiary first could also help broaden the perspective of funders and government policymakers

about what success looks like. Currently, government programs are typically set up with an expectation that you offer an intervention that leads to a clear result – you either fail to fix the problem or you solve the problem for that individual and then move on to the next person. This binary view of success hinders useful progress on improving programs which help reduce overall dependencies while improving well-being. An individual who graduated from a literacy program, for example, may face important socio-economic challenges and not be able to enter the workforce without additional support. Aligning funding and knowledge about what works to help subgroups of populations with specific needs would help improve service delivery, outcomes and longer-term impact for the clients served.

27 Cave, J., Aitken, K. & Lalande, L. (2017). “Bridging the Gap: Designing a Canadian What Works Centre”. Toronto: Mowat NFP. https://mowatcentre.ca/wp-content/uploads/publications/155_bridging_the_gap.pdf.

28 Cave, J., Gyateng, T., Lalande, L. & Lumley, T. (2018). “Collaborating for Greater Impact: Building an Integrated Data Ecosystem”. Toronto: Mowat NFP. https://mowatcentre.ca/wp-content/uploads/publications/161_EE_collaborating_for_greater_impact.pdf.

29 Lalande, L. & Cave, J. (2017). “Measuring Outcomes in Practice: Fostering an Enabling Environment for Measurement in Canada”. Toronto: Mowat NFP. <https://mowatcentre.ca/measuring-outcomes-in-practice/>.

It is also empowering for service providers to see which piece of the puzzle they are working on to help an individual with complex needs and to realize they must work with others to achieve success for the individual. Funding technical support and expertise to redesign services focused on clients facilitates the conversation among service providers who work with the same clients at different stages in their journeys and improves collaboration. One interviewee described the outcome of this type of program redesign work as transformative: “The clarity of expectations and ability to feel confident you can achieve what is being asked of you was invaluable to us all.”

Most importantly, the people who need services are better served. One case study that showcases the power of people-centered approaches is the collaborative risk-driven intervention model of the “Hub,” for short. Based on the Prince Albert Hub Model, the approach creates an avenue for human service providers from various sectors (e.g. police, probation, education, addictions, social work, mental health, outreach, and harm reduction) to meet one or more times a week to share limited information about their clients whose current situation meets a defined threshold of acutely-elevated risk. The intent of these discussions is to formulate a plan of intervention that involves multiple sectors collaborating to mobilize the appropriate services and supports around the composite needs of individuals or families. The goal of the Hub is to connect individuals-in-need to services within 24 to 48 hours – so as to mitigate risk before harm occurs.

The successful results of the Hub model have been replicated throughout Canada. In fact, three First Nations communities have enhanced the model and asked clients for consent to continue to share information and support those individuals after the acute risk period was over – turning the acute care model into an extended case management approach.³⁰ The approach is still being evaluated and results are unknown at this time but individuals are providing their consent for greater coordination of their care. Home outreach and intervention circles involving family, Elders and human service professionals help provide additional support to clients.³¹

Build a foundation of trust

Changing the culture toward continuous improvement and transparency requires credibility and trust. Service providers, government officials, foundation executives and academics all shared stories about misalignments of focus, personality, approach or skills making partnerships challenging.

Misaligned incentives within governments and between governments and the social sector further reduce opportunities for spontaneous collaboration and transparent data and evidence sharing.³² Trusted leadership was cited often by all interviewees as a necessary precondition for making progress in evidence-informed policymaking. Credible leadership with three key characteristics – strong communication skills, a technical skillset and political sensitivity – was identified as a means of overcoming the caution that exists in building a transparent evidence culture within governments, foundations, non-profits and charitable organizations and research and evaluation partners.

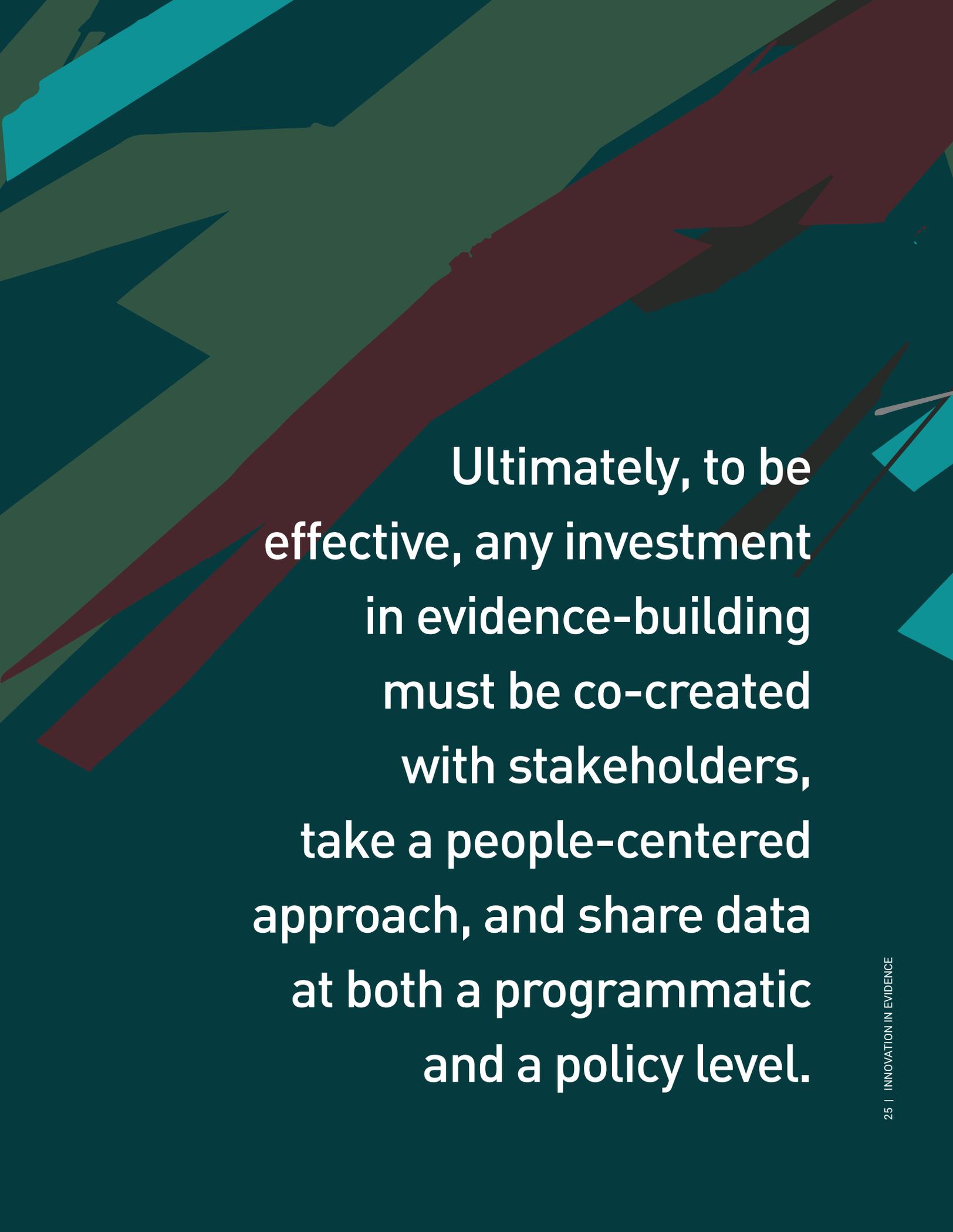
“With the right leader using data as the fuel for change, you could lead a revolution in the sector that has a high probability of success.”

SENIOR GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL

30 <https://www.usask.ca/cfbjsj/documents/CollaborativeRiskDrivenInterventionNilsonDec2017.pdf>.

31 <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/2016-s001/index-en.aspx>.

32 See Mowat NFP's Enabling Environment series (<https://mowatcentre.ca/enabling-environment/>) for further guidance on how to create an enabling environment for the non-profit and charitable sector in Canada.



Ultimately, to be effective, any investment in evidence-building must be co-created with stakeholders, take a people-centered approach, and share data at both a programmatic and a policy level.

5 POLICY AND PROGRAM AREAS

Policymakers, political leaders and social sector leaders will always need to consider public sentiment and local context in decision-making. The role of external supports, and evidence institutions internationally, is to elevate the role of evidence in decision-making and offer the best expert assessment available at the right time. Keeping this important context in mind, and building on the preliminary scoping work already conducted by Mowat NFP,³³ this section proposes several potential areas for further investments in evidence-building in Canada.

Prioritizing areas for investments in Canada

The following section aims to stimulate discussion about which areas of social policy might be prioritized for dedicated evidence-building initiatives. Without access to government data to help quantify need and without a comprehensive understanding of evidence-informed initiatives ready for scaling or replication in Canada, it is premature to attempt to quantify impact or the potential return on investment of an evidence institution in this paper.

The frame we applied to this question is integral to the answers received. If we had asked which area of social policy could deliver the greatest return on investment in five years, or which area needed the most investment, the list would certainly be different. Instead, we asked interviewees which areas they would prioritize to further the development of evidence use in Canada's social sector and to tell us why.

A summary of key points from those discussions are below.

Overall, three key points were made:

- » All areas of social policy and programming in Canada would benefit from support to help them use more evidence and data in decision-making.
- » A database of existing Canadian and international evidence, assessed for relevance and use by Canadian policymakers and by service providers, respectively, is needed.
- » Specific geographic locations and populations across the country may be ready to engage in cross-sector evidence-building initiatives. Identifying these communities is more important than choosing a policy area.

On the following pages we note the policy areas identified by interviewees in our discussions for the purpose of beginning a brainstorming exercise and a dialogue at the *Innovation in Evidence* conference and in Canada. Ultimately, to be effective, we believe any investment in evidence-building must be co-created with stakeholders, take a people-centered approach, and share data at both a programmatic and a policy level.

33 Cave, J., Aitken, K., Lalande, L. (2017). "Bridging the Gap: Designing a Canadian What Works Centre". <https://mowatcentre.ca/bridging-the-gap>.



Child Welfare

Perceived need: High

Existing evidence base:³⁴ Low – Some promising evidence-based models for specific family challenges are known (e.g. Functional Family Therapy, Incredible Years). Limited knowledge of what works best in foster care and group home settings.

Coordination need: High – Families, community services, educators, police, community organizations and other common touchpoints for children and youth must work together.

Time to results: Medium to long term – Short-term improvements in behaviour and education outcomes will be realized but long-term impact on employment and future life-course will take several years.

Notes: Interviewees shared a high perceived need for support in child welfare – particularly for Indigenous children and youth. The work required to learn what works and help stabilize families is complex and needs significant long-term investment.



Employment, Skills and Training

Perceived need: Medium

Existing evidence base: Medium – Many experiments have been completed in the areas of workforce development, adult learning and skill development across Canada.³⁵ Promising tools are known (e.g. Motivational Interviewing,³⁶ needs-based client pathways³⁷) and customized approaches to service delivery are becoming more common.

Coordination need: High – Improving services will require coordination among service providers, with government and employers.

Time to results: Variable – Depending on needs for services and dependencies on other supports.

Notes: Employment, skills, and training is an area of investment in Canada and has been funded with various pilot projects and evidence-building programs for several years.³⁸ Interviewees saw the area as ready for greater coordination and aggregation of existing evidence to move to the next phase of evidence mobilization and adoption. The Future Skills Centre, a pending \$225M initiative proposed by the Canadian federal government to focus on understanding how the

34 Little, M. (2017). "Relational Social Policy: Implications for Policy and Evidence". <https://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/ccchdev/Keynote%20Presentation%20-%20Dr%20Michael%20Little.pdf>.

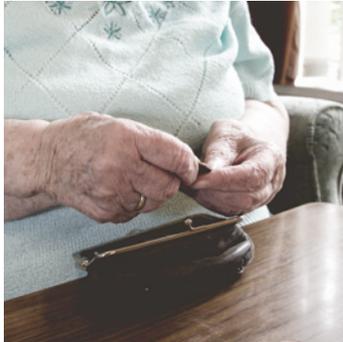
35 <http://www.srdc.org/policy-areas/employment-programs.aspx>

36 Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (2016). "Motivational Interviewing Research Findings". <http://www.srdc.org/media/199977/mi-evaluation-final-report.pdf>.

37 Blueprint ADE (2018). "Enhancing Manitoba's employment services". <http://blueprint-ade.ca/work/designing-manitobas-future-employment-services-model/#>.

38 BC Centre for Employment Excellence (2018). "Effective Practices". <http://www.cfeebc.org/resourcekeywords/effective-practices/>.

future of work and automation will impact Canadians,³⁹ could function as a national Policy Lab in this area if it is able to establish an approach to its governance and operations that is acceptable to provinces and territories.



Poverty

Perceived need: High

Existing evidence base: Many promising approaches to improving outcomes for social assistance recipients exist.⁴⁰ How to improve and coordinate needs-based approaches and programs that serve populations in poverty is less well understood but is an area of growing research.

Coordination need: Medium – High. The complexity of factors and need to address individual circumstances requires partnership and alignment of programming and policy among several community organizations, provincial and federal governments.

Time to results: Long term – Refocusing programs and financial supports to support individuals through their journey to greater self-sufficiency will require holistic, long-term planning.



Young Offenders/Juvenile Justice

Perceived need: High

Existing evidence base: Medium – Promising practices and evidence-informed programs have been developed and tested in Canada (Prince Albert Hub and COR model⁴¹). International collaboration focused on continuous innovation (ROCA⁴²) exists.

Coordination need: High – Service providers, community partners, educators and other common touchpoints for youth must work together.

Time to results: Short to long term – Impacts to education, law enforcement, community services may be short-term while long-term impacts on employment and future opportunities may take several years to evaluate fully. Promising and proven models exist in this area. Canadian leadership and research networks are strong in Saskatchewan and nationally through the Community Safety Knowledge Alliance.

39 Employment and Social Development Canada (2018). "Future Skills". <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/future-skills.html>.

40 Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (2018). "Social assistance recipients". <http://www.srdc.org/populations-we-work-with/social-assistance-recipients.aspx>.

41 McFee, D. & Taylor, N. (2014). "The Prince Albert Hub and the Emergence of Collaborative Risk-Driven Community Safety". Canadian Police College. https://www.usask.ca/cfbsjs/research/pdf/research_reports/ChangeAndInnovationInCanadianPolicing.pdf.

42 ROCA (2017). "Roca Ink – Issue 5, Summer 2017". https://rocainc.org/roca_ink/issue-5/.



Homelessness

Perceived need: Medium

Existing Evidence Base: High – Evidence-informed programs and case management approaches are well known. Knowledge mobilization toolkits and detailed implementation manuals are available for a variety of client needs.

Coordination Need: High – Service providers, health care workers, mental health supports, community services, police, addictions centres, businesses must work together.

Time to results: Medium to long term – Stabilizing individuals with complex needs requires several years but shorter term results are often seen in reductions in dependency on acute care.

Notes: The homelessness sector is seen to already benefit from a strong focus on evidence and supportive infrastructure that is helping improve outcomes.

Indigenous-led initiatives

Indigenous ways of generating and translating knowledge at the community level are increasingly recognized in social science, native studies and law.⁴³ Indigenous researchers and research organizations in Canada are leading data gathering and data generating initiatives that help to build culturally relevant portraits of their communities. They are working to adapt mainstream approaches to health and social policy evidence to the Indigenous community context. Through these activities, important innovations like First Nations principles of OCAP® (Ownership, Control, Access and Possession) are being established that help ensure principled research, data sovereignty and information governance that respects Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Greater support of these initiatives and of building the evidence ecosystem for Indigenous scholars must continue through any investment directed to improve outcomes for Indigenous peoples.

43 Smylie, J., Olding, M. & Ziegler, C. (2014). "Sharing What We Know About Living a Good Life: Indigenous Approaches to Knowledge Translation". *Journal of the Canadian Health Libraries Association* 35(1): 16-23.

6 RECOMMENDATIONS

Recent government commitments and investments in evidence initiatives to enable data-driven decision-making are promising. Instructive examples of innovation and evidence-building are growing in community safety, children and youth and other social policy areas with various levels of government and foundation support. The wheels of innovation are turning. Our analysis and interviews for this report indicate those wheels are not turning quite quickly enough to catch up with demand for social and community services in Canada nor are they able to effectively manage the increasingly complex challenges Canadian sector leaders are facing.

Canada also lags behind its international peers in providing supports and dedicated investments that enable evidence-based policy and programming in most social policy areas. Practitioners from government policymakers to frontline service providers often simply do not know enough about what works to improve outcomes, how to find evidence of what works that makes sense for their specific needs and how to use the evidence that does exist to move forward.

Invest in supports to build evidence across social policy

Governments, service providers and foundations agree that Canada's social sector innovations have matured to a point where additional support to build the evidence ecosystem is needed. As already noted, leaders in non-profits, government and foundations need help and technical expertise to harness the power of the data they collect, to make more evidence-informed decisions, to direct their resources to do more of what works and to maximize the impact of social and human services.

Supports are needed in all social policy areas – from child welfare to homelessness – and these must be viewed as long-term capacity-building investments in ongoing research and development for the sector, not as one-time pilot projects. Data-driven approaches do help to “right size” service delivery, improve outcomes and reduce dependencies on social programs, and reduced costs (or a more efficient allocation of resources) will follow for many services. To achieve this transformation, the focus of investments and intentions must be about achieving maximum impact and collaboration and be viewed through a lens of much-needed infrastructure modernization.

“We know there are a number of different variables that affect a person’s particular situation and a number of organizations need to come together to meet those disparate and complex needs.

How could we pool government funds to draw in other funders to solve some of these wicked problems with evidence and better coordination?”

SENIOR FEDERAL
GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL

We recommend three concrete initiatives – a knowledge clearinghouse, greater investment in technical supports for research and development, and prioritizing people-centered approaches to service delivery and social policy – to seed further research and development capacity in Canada’s social sector.

Establish a knowledge clearinghouse

Social sector leaders and government policy officials need access to the best evidence of what works to improve outcomes for citizens. Evaluators, research organizations, governments and social sector leaders across the country have useful evidence about their own initiatives that can help shed light on best practice in many areas. The information is often not public and needs to be collated, assessed and presented in an accessible way in both official languages for decision-makers in policy and practice to make use of it. Canada needs a knowledge clearinghouse (or at least a network of clearinghouses) that brings together information on the effectiveness of global and Canadian social policy programs in a simple, standardized way and in both official languages.

Fund technical supports

Greater investment in expert technical support is needed to help social sector leaders and government policymakers make sense of their data, undertake research and development initiatives and move toward evidence-informed practice.

» **Unlock data and improve data literacy:**

Service providers, funders, policymakers and researchers can benefit from additional assistance to unlock the power of the data at their disposal and to make decisions that will improve outcomes for people needing social services. Staff in each of these areas lack the training and experience to maximize the value of the rich information at their disposal.

» **Build a pipeline of innovation:**

Normalizing continual learning and investment in research and development in the social sector will help to create an evidence culture. Social sector leaders, governments and other funders must take time and create safe spaces to rethink and experiment with traditional roles and governance arrangements. This includes rigorous experimentation and testing of promising practices, but also includes testing new approaches and working together in different ways to try something new.

» **Create good, high quality evidence, often:**

Not all evidence is created equally. Technical support and evaluations funded by governments, foundations and non-profit organizations must prioritize good, high quality evidence and research partners.

People-centered approaches

Aligning funding and knowledge about what works to help people with specific needs helps “right size” service delivery, improve outcomes and longer-term impact for the clients served. Expertise is needed to redesign services based on people’s needs and to facilitate conversations and information sharing among service providers who work with the same clients at different stages in their journeys.

With sufficient investment, these three initiatives could help seed greater movement in evidence-informed social policy and programming in Canada.

Harnessing the expertise and experience of sector leaders empowers communities and ensures evidence is adding value in a practical way.

Multi-jurisdiction collaboration and local leadership

Federal, provincial, and local governments and agencies share policy and programming jurisdiction or interests in many areas of social policy in Canada. They must work together to invest in and build a strong foundation for the evidence ecosystem in Canada. Strong government support is needed to enable horizontal policy approaches and people-focused service delivery. Sharing information, aligning reporting, funding and retooling governance arrangements all require multi-jurisdiction collaboration to (re)focus on citizen needs and holistic outcomes improvements. While it is essential to have strong government support, local leaders, supported by experts and advisors, must be given the opportunity to lead these multi-jurisdictional evidence-driven initiatives and to ensure citizen perspectives and local knowledge remain the foundation of what

works for their communities. Harnessing the expertise and experience of sector leaders empowers communities and ensures evidence is adding value in a practical way.

These recommendations are the minimum steps needed to start to modernize a sector that is long overdue for research and development support. Service providers are still reporting to vertically siloed government departments and receiving bifurcated program-specific funding from different levels of government and foundations. Despite the talk and pressure for evidence-based policy and measurement of outcomes, funders have not provided the supports, and in many cases, have not done the internal work themselves, to align incentives or reporting in a data-driven way. A real focus on what works, and the dedicated supports and resources needed to get there, is the only driver that will create sustainable change.





An evidence ecosystem will only create impact if it brings meaningful value to local communities who are ready to try something new.

7 WAY FORWARD

This report provides a brief overview of the ecosystem for evidence in social policy in Canada. More research is needed to lay the groundwork for further investments.

First, a knowledge mobilization project focused on bringing together what we know works to help improve outcomes in social policy and programming in Canada is needed. This work needs to be completed by systematically identifying and working with social sector leaders and experts in all areas of social policy across Canada in both official languages to collect and collate the evidence that exists.

To help launch this work, we have compiled an initial listing of institutions, agencies, organizations and partnerships that are part of Canada's infrastructure for evidence-informed decision-making. As noted earlier, this list is available at <https://mowatcentre.ca/canadas-evidence-institutions>, and includes examples that have come up during our work on this paper. We welcome additions and corrections to it. If you would like to highlight an organization or partnership we are missing or share information that needs updating, please use the link provided on the webpage.

Second, a more granular understanding of what evidence means for decision-makers from frontline service providers to government policymakers is also needed. Practically, this means shedding light on the day-to-day decision-making approaches of government and of service providers and documenting how they each inform their work in different areas of social policy and programming.

Third, choosing areas of social policy to prioritize next for evidence-building initiatives requires a co-created approach with the social sector and support from government to facilitate conversations and assess potential impact. There are many different frameworks which could be used to identify where to invest support to build an evidence ecosystem. Unlocking government and service-provider data to inform those conversations and help quantify potential impact would be a useful step forward.

Lastly, it is important to remember that local leadership and willingness to use data and evidence in new ways to improve services for people is the goal of this work. An evidence ecosystem will only create impact if it brings meaningful value to local communities who are ready to try something new, and identifying partners who are ready and willing to lead the way is imperative. Let's start there.

ABOUT THE INNOVATION IN EVIDENCE CONFERENCE



NOVEMBER 15 -16 | UNIVERSITY OF REGINA

A National Conference Focused on Improving Evidence-Informed Policy Making

The Community Safety Knowledge Alliance and Mowat NFP are hosting a two day event, bringing together international leaders and innovators in evidence-informed policymaking to share emerging trends, discuss lessons learned, and provide fresh insight into the challenges facing policymakers, practitioners, researchers and academics in their quest to determine 'what works'.

More about the conference and other papers can be found at mowatcentre.ca/innovation-in-evidence.

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We would like to thank the following partners for their support of the *Innovation in Evidence* conference:



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