

DESIGNING AND EVALUATING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES

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Title: Designing and Evaluating Economic Development in Low-Income Communities

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Preferred Presentation Format: Roundtable

Research Method/Type: Program Evaluation

Topical Area: Research Design and Measurement - Intervention Research

Abstract:

From the seminal work of William Julius Wilson and many others, the disappearance of employment in urban neighborhoods and the difficult choices facing their disadvantaged residents have been well documented. It is also well known that poverty is connected to many negative outcomes for families and children. Although there are no easy answers to the consequences of years of disinvestment and growing inequality, there are some approaches that show promise. One approach is through comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) and another is asset-building strategies. CCIs are launched as comprehensive systematic attempts to create lasting improvements in circumstances by strengthening local capacity. Although several CCIs have been initiated over the past decade, evaluating their impact has proven difficult given the complex nature of activities and poorly conceived designs. Asset-building strategies are based on the assumption that social welfare should not be discussed only in terms of income and consumption but also in the development of long-term resources that can span generations. Although they are typically discussed as an individual strategy, there are also attempts to build community assets by investing in social and economic development. Both approaches have received national attention and external funding through philanthropic and government sources.

The roundtable will begin a dialogue around evaluating these approaches for initiating economic development in low-income communities, including neighborhood-based strategies and strategies that target individuals. Presenters will provide theoretical frameworks, implementation lessons, and evaluation models. Given that the various projects are unique in scope and at different stages of development, each presenter will emphasize different points. For example, two presenters will discuss offering child savings accounts—one to Head Start families in the United States and the other to children affected by HIV/AIDS in rural Uganda. Both have preliminary data

(from participants and controls) and will discuss how the projects were designed and implemented as well as lessons about the potential benefits of such child accounts. Additional presenters will discuss projects located in specific neighborhoods, some within the city of Detroit and another in the St. Louis metropolitan area. The two will provide contrasting perspectives on evaluation, as one is part of an ongoing foundation-sponsored community change initiative that works with multiple partners and the other is spearheaded primarily by a single community-based nonprofit organization, with affordable housing as its core business and utilizing asset and human capacity building to ensure sustainable change. Our goal is to stimulate conversation that illuminates the potential for economic development in low-income communities as well as challenges in the design and evaluation of these efforts. By discussing these projects together, we hope to encourage an understanding of innovative approaches and common themes that can help strengthen this type of work as well as improve scholarship.

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