

# Systems Evaluations for Place-Based Initiatives

## PD&R Expert Convenings Summary Report

October 2015



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Summary Report  
**Systems Evaluations for  
Place-Based Initiatives**

Prepared for:  
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## Introduction

On September 15, 2015, HUD's Office of Policy Development and Research (PD&R) convened a panel of experts to obtain insights on potential evaluation strategies for federal place-based initiatives such as the Strong Cities, Strong Communities Initiative; My Brother's Keeper; Sustainable Communities Initiative; the Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation Program; Choice Neighborhoods; and Promise Zones. An evaluation framework for the Promise Zones initiative was a particular focus of the convening.

Providing context for the discussion, PD&R staff noted that the place-based initiatives that HUD and other federal agencies are involved in share several common traits that complicate efforts to assess their impact. These are comprehensive initiatives often implemented in extremely distressed areas to bring about systems level change. The initiatives coordinate many different forms of assistance and are currently operating in a small number of communities (in some cases, concurrently). Additionally, many of the initiatives are focused in small geographic areas, often at the neighborhood level. Given the complexity, the conversation was framed around the challenge of evaluating "the cumulative impacts of a variety of interventions happening simultaneously," in contrast to the more traditional practice of testing a single intervention and controlling for other treatments and variables. While noting the importance of the latter type of research, PD&R staff pointed to limitations of such evaluations for policymaking — they may not be particularly helpful for understanding unintended consequences, intermediary factors, or *how* something works. Evaluations of the collective impact of multiple interventions could offer greater insight on these questions, but present their own challenges such as the difficulty in disentangling various factors, accounting for different combinations of interventions, and, in the case of Promise Zones, dealing with a relatively small number of cases.

## Promise Zones

For the purposes of the convening, discussion was focused on the Promise Zones initiative as a case study, with interest both in evaluating the initiative as a whole and evaluating the individual designated sites. HUD staff provided an overview of Promise Zones and evaluation efforts to date. Announced in 2013, Promise Zones involves coordination between local leaders in high-poverty areas and 13 federal agencies to accelerate community progress towards 5 goals: creating jobs, increasing economic opportunity, improving educational opportunities, reducing serious or violent crime, and leveraging private capital. Eligible communities are invited to apply for a Promise Zones designation, and those selected can choose to focus on three of the stated five goals, as well as three of their own locally-defined goals based on community priorities. Although no direct grant funding is available, designees benefit from the placement of a federal community liaison who can assist local leaders in navigating federal programs, the deployment of five AmeriCorps VISTA members to aid in developing relevant programs and coordinating with stakeholders and federal partners, technical assistance, preference points for specified competitive federal grant programs, and, if enacted by Congress, tax incentives.

To date, 13 communities have received the Promise Zones designation through 2 rounds of selections. The initiative is currently entering its third and final round of selections, in which seven additional communities are expected to be designated as Promise Zones.

HUD staff working on the Promise Zones initiative presented an evaluation approach they developed for Promise Zones, and potentially for other place-based initiatives, including a timeline for data collection and analysis, an outline of qualitative and quantitative indicators of community change, data sources, methods for obtaining, tracking, and sharing data, a list of methods for selecting comparison sites, and a variety of rigorous evaluation methods. PD&R staff invited the experts' input on the best questions to ask, what data to collect, and what would be appropriate units and methods of analysis. Staff noted that there would be special value in gaining transferable and actionable information, especially given limited resources both for interventions and evaluation.

## Participant Discussion

The following comments were provided by the invited experts and HUD staff:

### *Defining the Intervention*

- HUD staff stated that due to communities' ability to choose from a range of goals, as well as develop their own goals, Promise Zones includes a variety of interventions across sites. This variation has led some researchers to state that the intervention is not well defined or defined at all. However, a study of the first five promise zones shows that there is consistency among the locally developed goals of designees in the areas of health, housing, community infrastructure, and civic engagement. Staff also suggested that researchers could view the Promise Zones initiative as a collection of micro-interventions.
- One expert suggested that the intervention be locally defined, and many experts and HUD staff agreed that capturing and understanding local context would be important to defining and evaluating interventions and their implementation.

### *Timing*

- One of the experts highlighted the importance of factoring time into the evaluation, establishing a robust baseline, monitoring changes and progress, and having a sense of when to expect to see outcomes and changes.
- HUD staff noted that the Promise Zones initiative has a 10-year time horizon. In terms of the evaluation, project outputs, such as the number of workshops held and VISTA hours dedicated to the initiative, will be the focus of the first two years; staff expect to be able to study the earliest short-term outcomes between 1 and 3 years, mid-term outcomes within 3 to 5 years, and long-term outcomes between 5 and 10 years. HUD staff indicated that the range of years presented for outputs and outcomes is not definitive, but provides a general understanding of when staff expect the data to be useful.

### *Data Collection*

- HUD staff explained that in coordination with federal and local partners, they have identified sources of quantitative and qualitative data that will be captured over time to support the evaluation. Information included in the 128 applications submitted to date will serve as one source of data; and because 117 of the applicants have agreed to let HUD publish their information publicly, much of these data are available to outside researchers. HUD will also be tracking process and output data through the Operating Plan System (OPS)<sup>1</sup>, HUD's existing data management system for field staff, or a similar project tracking tool. National data sets will provide quantitative information, such as income, employment, and poverty statistics, at the census tract or a lower geographic level. HUD will also request access to local data sources to gather information on quantitative data that are not nationally available, such as crime rates and high school graduation rates. HUD will work with communities to gather indicators that are informed by local context, such as school quality and workforce development, and the agency will coordinate with federal partners to carry out micro-experiments to capture the impact of smaller-scale programs. Additionally, HUD will provide technical assistance to Promise Zones to conduct surveys where necessary, such as when measuring community connectedness and the perception of safety and neighborhood quality.
- HUD staff also noted that the small number of sites receiving the Promise Zones interventions (20 designees in total are expected at the conclusion of the third selection round) could provide the advantage of allowing HUD to gather more local context and qualitative data in each site. Participants agreed that collecting point-in-time data from before, during, and after the intervention in each designated area could help determine if positive changes occurred and whether those changes were sustained. According to HUD staff, gathering point-in-time data would be useful and efficient, as HUD has access to many sources that allow for retrospective data collection.
- Experts mentioned that selection bias could be a concern for the evaluation, as the designees are not just high-needs communities, but those with demonstrated capacity.
- Since OPS is used by HUD field staff across the country, the system's potential for allowing comparison of Promise Zones to other areas is an important consideration.

<sup>1</sup> OPS will not be funded in Fiscal Year 2016. However, HUD's Office of Field Policy and Management will continue to collect data through another system.

- An expert added that documenting and describing the initiative in itself would be valuable information. Recording what was done, by whom, and with what intensity is important, particularly given that the interventions and their goals are locally defined to a large degree.
- Other experts and HUD staff commented on the quality and usefulness of data that is already available through applications and suggested that the data be included in an ongoing database for place-based initiatives that could be institutionalized and could help inform future comparative time series evaluations.
- HUD staff noted that they are communicating with communities to determine whether they would be willing, and whether it would be feasible for them, to provide the kinds of information submitted in a Promise Zones application in the absence of a competition, in order to help HUD target technical assistance, conduct evaluations, and work more effectively in the field.
- HUD staff suggested that field staff who have knowledge of local conditions, but are not necessarily involved with the Promise Zones initiative, could potentially document conditions as a source of local data and information, if permissible. Experts recommended that field staff documentation should be descriptive of how things happen and information gained in this manner should be corroborated through conversations with community liaisons and interviews with local individuals.
- One expert stated that it might be useful for activities associated with the initiative to be geo-tagged by GPS coordinates or by census tract. HUD's current database does not consistently include geo-tagged information that is accessible to the public, but the department is asking communities to make this information available in the third round.

### ***Comparison Areas***

- HUD staff remarked that randomization, in the strictest sense, would not be possible in an evaluation of the Promise Zones initiative. The use of comparison areas would allow HUD to rigorously evaluate Promise Zones through quasi-experimental designs or difference-in-difference, regression discontinuity, or comparative time series analyses. However, challenges in establishing comparison areas include variation in the characteristics, benefits received, size, and number of jurisdictions included for each of the Promise Zones. Additionally, comparing Promise Zones to neighborhoods could prove problematic, as Promise Zones are often larger than neighborhoods and do not conform to neighborhood boundaries.
- HUD is considering several methods to identify comparison areas for each Promise Zone, such as using a statistical process to locate similar areas within the same metro area or creating a model to develop synthetic comparison areas. As with the Promise Zones, qualitative and quantitative data would be collected for these comparison areas over time to be included in the evaluation.
- Experts inquired about the potential of using “finalists,” communities that submitted applications, were eligible, and were considered for inclusion in the Promise Zones initiative but not chosen as designees, or other applicants as comparison areas. HUD staff noted that finalists, although not receiving the direct intervention, may be receiving some of the benefits of the promise zone designation, potentially hindering their use as a control group.
- An expert noted that selection bias could be a serious issue in the quasi-experimental design, if it were a simple cross-sectional, comparative type of model. Selection bias could be introduced through the methods for identifying comparison areas, which are based on observed characteristics although communities have many unobserved characteristics that could affect the evaluation. The expert stated that while a difference-in-difference model would account for baseline differences in and between Promise Zones designees and comparison sites, a combination of a comparative time series analysis and a regression discontinuity analysis would yield a much stronger evaluative approach. The expert noted that the comparative time series analysis would account for communities' preexisting conditions and preexisting trajectories. Because comparative time series evaluations control for many variables, the expert suggested that a large set of comparison areas, including the carefully matched comparison areas as well as other sites, could be used. Additionally, because Promise Zones applicants were assigned a score, they could be included in a regression discontinuity model. Using this model, researchers could account for the fact that finalists may be receiving some of the benefits of the Promise Zone designation by analyzing finalists and lower-scoring applicants and searching for a break point in the scores.
- Another expert suggested that cluster or latent class analyses might be appropriate for the Promise Zones designees and comparison areas.

- One expert also highlighted the potential for variation within Promise Zone designations, and suggested that comparison areas might be better matched at the tract level.

#### ***Other Evaluation Design Considerations***

- HUD staff stated that the evaluation design should address the need for timely, relevant, practical, and actionable information while considering the limited resources available. The design should also allow researchers to study the effects of the Promise Zone initiative even in the event of an external shock, such as a recession. Experts noted that comparisons to other sites, across designees, and over time could help mitigate the effects of external events.
- Experts questioned whether it was useful to try to separate the added impacts of Promise Zones from other place-based initiatives at work in the same community, or to provide a more comprehensive evaluation framework for place-based initiatives in general. HUD staff noted that they were specifically interested in determining whether the Promise Zones initiative worked, and, if outcomes indicated that the program was successful, why the initiative worked and whether it only works under certain conditions. The utility and possibility of evaluating the components of the Promise Zone intervention individually is also of concern to HUD.
- An expert suggested that the evaluation focus on identifying links between outcomes and implementation in each local context. These connections could then be analyzed comparatively to try to understand why some designees are doing better than others. The expert noted that this would require informed observers native to each context to conduct field research and monitoring, and pointed out that there is a great deal of neighborhood level data available to inform the research.
- Experts and HUD staff noted that studying networks, institutional behaviors, and coordination and alignment among federal and local agencies would be important considerations in the evaluation. There could potentially be changes in local strategies and capacity due to turnover among local political leaders during the 10-year evaluation period. Experts recommended that changes be documented and noted that evaluations do not require conditions to remain static.
- Experts recommended that the evaluation include methods and interview questions that capture the systematic learning by the intervention as a whole, as well as in the individual sites, over time. This information could prove extremely helpful in assessing Promise Zones, especially in the early stages of the program.
- One expert suggested that local teams be allowed to contribute to the research design and review research results to ensure that local conditions are accurately captured and the evaluation is rigorous.
- According to one expert, HUD's approach to evaluating Promise Zones involves a combination of two analyses: a quantitative analysis focused on whether the evaluation worked and what models worked, and a qualitative analysis of what occurred during the initiative.

#### ***Outcome Indicators***

- Included in the framework developed by HUD staff are several potential outputs and outcome indicators, including the number of people served by a program, new investment within the designated area, access to healthy food, new businesses developed, lower crime rates, higher rates of high school graduation, and a reduction in the number of households below the federal poverty level.
- To better understand the goals of evaluation, one expert raised the question of how HUD would define success for the place-based initiatives, particularly Promise Zones. Of particular importance in this regard is whether the goal is community change or individual change. Given the reality of geographic mobility in and out of designated zones, change could occur at the community level regardless of improvements to the lives of individuals. Evaluators would have to choose whether or not to track individuals as well as communities. HUD staff indicated that they were interested in the effect of place-based initiatives on both individuals and communities.
- One of the experts suggested that the success of the intervention should be defined especially by changes in global indicators. HUD staff indicated that success would be defined as accelerating communities' progress in meeting their goals such as creating jobs, increasing private investment, improving education outcomes, reducing crime, and improving health and wellness.
- Experts noted that evaluations should be attentive to whether the Promise Zones initiative is changing institutional behavior, breaking down silos between organizations to more effectively deliver interventions, and narrowing capacity gaps at the local level.



- Another expert recommended that the evaluation focus less on proving causality and more on methods for improving outcomes in the designated sites.
- Experts and HUD staff agreed that a complete evaluation should integrate qualitative and quantitative outcome indicators.

***Final Thoughts***

Convening participants raised a variety of questions and highlighted different information and methods to consider in designing an evaluation framework for federal place-based initiatives. A general consensus emerged that any evaluation should utilize quantitative data and global indicators to determine impact, and the evaluative approach should include qualitative data and rich process information to assess what occurred and whether certain local networks and efforts were more successful than others. It was suggested that the detailed process information should encompass the design and structure of the Promise Zones model, including allocation of points and technical assistance, and local implementation efforts.

- Experts supported HUD's plan to begin evaluating outcomes while the initiative is ongoing and recommended that evaluators share interim impacts with communities.
- Many experts also recommended using the evaluation to study gains in coordination and capacity among partners at the federal and local levels.
- Additionally, experts agreed that a comparative analysis should examine the communities against comparison areas and/or over time — before, during, and after the implementation — to help isolate the effects of the program from those of other variables.
- There were questions about the external validity of generalizing lessons from Promise Zones for application in other areas.
- Shortage of funding and resources available for process evaluation was a shared concern among the experts.

## Participants

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