

Virginia Knox



Director, Family Well-Being and Children's Development Policy Area

Knox brings 25 years of experience to the study and evaluation of social programs, with special expertise in how support services for low-income parents — including child support, financial incentives, and services to strengthen family relationships — affect families and children. Her methodological interest is in designing new approaches to implementation research that will inform the expansion of effective programs.

She is currently project director of the [Building Bridges and Bonds](#) evaluation, studying three innovative new components for responsible fatherhood programs. She is also co-project director of two evaluations of home visiting programs — the [Mother and Infant Home Visiting Program Evaluation \(MIHOPE\)](#), which is assessing the federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program, and [MIHOPE-Strong Start](#), which is examining the effects of home visiting on birth outcomes and maternal and infant health care use.

She previously directed the [Supporting Healthy Marriage](#) project, a federally funded evaluation of interventions aimed at improving child well-being by strengthening the relationships of married couples; the [Next Generation](#) project, a collaborative, multidisciplinary initiative to study welfare-reform programs' impacts on the well-being of children and families; and the evaluations of the [Minnesota Family Investment Program](#) and the [Parents' Fair Share](#) demonstration.

Knox has direct knowledge of welfare systems, having been special assistant to the executive deputy commissioner for income maintenance in New York City's Human Resources Administration, where her responsibilities included estimating the costs of welfare-reform programs.

The author of numerous reports and papers, Knox has a doctorate in public policy from Harvard University.



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Comments to the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking from Virginia Knox, MDRC

January 5, 2017

My name is Virginia Knox, and I am the Director of the Family Well-Being and Children's Development Policy area at MDRC. We're a nonprofit, nonpartisan education and social policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve policies and programs that affect low-income individuals and families.

The ideas I'll outline today are laid out at greater length in written comments that MDRC submitted to the commission in November. MDRC hopes to see the Commission use its mandate to recommend that the federal government put rigorous evidence at the center of policymaking.

My comments will briefly outline six of the elements we see as necessary to achieving that goal:

- Validate the role of third-party evaluations
- Create a culture of continuous improvement
- Build on tiered evidence strategies
- Embed evidence within existing funding streams
- Improve access to administrative data (while acknowledging its limitations)
- And protect data confidentiality.

First is to validate the role of independent evaluation of programs and policies in the federal government: Evaluation findings that are credible, relevant, accurate, and timely are critical for policymakers and practitioners to make informed decisions about how to spend the resources of government. This is an issue of particular urgency in a time of budget constraints and fiscal austerity.

Second -- Create a culture of continuous improvement: Rather than being focused on up-or-down judgments about programs or policies, government should continue to develop incentives for using research evidence to make programs more effective over time. A good example is the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program, a large evidence-based federal initiative that has several elements

worth emphasizing:

- Rigorous prior evidence is being used to influence how federal funds are spent, making it more likely that the funds will make a difference for families.
- The legislation recognizes that innovation is important for any field to keep advancing, and offers states a subset of funds to test new approaches.
- Funds were also set aside for research to make sure that learning continues under MIECHV and can influence future realizations of home visiting.

Third -- Build on the tiered evidence strategies embodied in the Investing in Innovation Fund at the Department of Education, the Workforce Innovation Fund at the Department of Labor, the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program at the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Social Innovation Fund at the Corporation for National and Community Service. These funds set clear guidelines about standards of evidence and provides incentives for both innovative new programs and for testing the scaling of models with evidence of effectiveness — which we see as truly the next frontier in the evidence-based policymaking agenda.

Fourth -- Embed evidence within existing funding streams: As the MIECHV example illustrates, when we have evidence of what works, we should build incentives into current funding streams to make sure that dollars follow the evidence. And while the innovation funds have been a source of effective new ideas for a given field, incorporating resources for research *within* major program funding streams would allow federal agencies to develop evaluation agendas that focus on continuous improvement of existing programs.

Fifth - Improve Access to Administrative Data

In evaluating the effectiveness of social programs, agencies and the researchers who evaluate their programs need ready access to administrative data. At the same time, access to administrative data is not a panacea, so we shouldn't dismiss the importance of surveys and other types of data.

There are at least four factors that affect the fit of administrative records for a given research study.

- Access – The process of gaining permission and approval to use the admin data may be cumbersome and expensive
- Standardization – if there are multiple sources of admin data and they are all in different formats, then the researcher will have to spend considerable time standardizing it before she can conduct the needed analysis
- Completeness - administrative records often do not include all the data required to answer important questions
- Data Lags - Federal data sets like the National Directory of New Hires or tax records can have very long lags before the data are assembled, cleaned, and available for use in a study. This has significant implications for timeliness and

limits the use of administrative data in quick-turnaround studies with multiple follow-up periods.

My sixth and final point is about protecting confidentiality.

There are a number of important tensions that underlie this high stakes issue. As an example, Congress is considering amending The Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) because of concerns over threats to the privacy of student data, originally prompted by public outcry over educational technology vendors and their use of children's information for advertising and commercial gain. Unfortunately, education researchers from academia and other nonprofit institutions have gotten swept up in the furor.

Under current federal law, education agencies can share data with researchers only for research projects designed to benefit students and improve instruction — and only under extremely strict privacy conditions. But some are suggesting that Congress should significantly scale back even that authority. Indeed, many states are interpreting FERPA to preclude the sharing of any individually identifiable data with researchers, even though that data would only be reported in aggregate form for policy purposes. Without access to student data, little education research could be conducted at all. The bottom line is that it's essential to continue to protect the security and privacy of student data, but we must be careful to not unintentionally end the analysis of student data for its original purpose: assessing and improving education.

This is just one example of how we need to protect the privacy of data for people who participate in studies, while still making it possible to use available data to improve social policy.

Thank you for allowing me this time to provide input from MDRC into the important work of the commission.

Sincerely,

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