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AN EXPLORATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF EVIDENCE BASED PRACTICES IN COMMUNITIES OF COLOR



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BACKGROUND

In February 2015, the W. Haywood Burns Institute (the BI) and consultant John Morris, with the support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, convened a gathering of nationally recognized experts¹ to discuss the effectiveness of Evidence Based Practices (EBPs) in communities of color. The meeting included developers, researchers and practitioners in the youth justice system to gauge the state of the knowledge base on this topic and to provide guidance to the field on the positive and appropriate use of scientific studies in ways that improve outcomes for system involved youth. The discussion revealed a persistent gap between the intended use of EBPs as designed by the developers, the implementation of EBPs—a generic issue in the implementation of any best practice—and the unique challenges of serving individuals in the youth justice system, specifically young people of color.

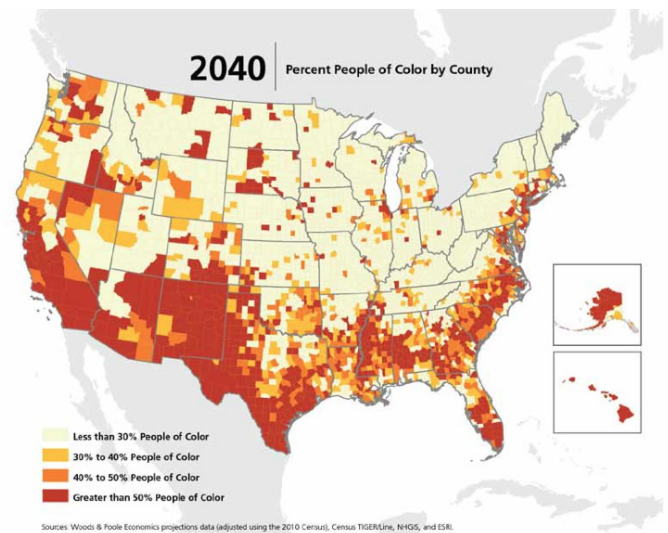
This subject is especially timely when one takes into account national demographic trends for young people being served by public systems.

For example, in California almost 70% of people under 25 years of age will be from communities of color.

At the same time as this major demographic shift is occurring, policy makers and systems professionals are increasingly demanding that dollars be efficiently and effectively used for goods and services. Indeed, some states are requiring that only services that are “evidence based” should be funded with public dollars. Many community programs that are getting positive results are concerned that these types of mandates will exclude them even though they are providing cultural and linguistically appropriate services. There is an additional concern that many community based programs will never be able to meet the gold standards of evidence required for limited dollars, further limiting access for youth of color.

It was in this context that we convened this conversation to engage the issues mentioned above to find common ground across various professional communities by sorting fact from fiction and seeking to

identify potential areas for improvement. This brief overview of the meeting seeks to capture the substantive discussion points raised by the participants. Specifically: (1) what the science says about the efficacy of EBPs in communities of color; (2) the limitations of EBPs within the communities of color and justice system context; and (3) emerging themes for further exploration and consideration.



At the outset, it is critical to reflect that this conversation can be complex in part for reasons that are distinct from EBPs themselves. That is, EBPs for justice-involved youth tend to involve services from multiple systems, of which behavioral health and youth justice systems are most prominent. Unfortunately, both systems are widely felt to be dysfunctional. Other systems that can come into play for justice-involved youth are education and child welfare. And this picture is further complicated by the Byzantine financing mechanisms that are often required to pay for EBPs. For purposes of this paper, we attempt to isolate the EBPs per se, when necessary including a reminder about the systems constraints in executing them.

INTRODUCTION

Every day in this country, too many young people find themselves ensnared in a youth justice system that consistently chooses to address what is often nothing more than youthful misbehavior by using confinement, rather than employing restorative and positive youth development principles. A disproportionate number of those young people come from communities of color and many have medical, psychological and social problems that the justice system is ill equipped to address.

While the most enlightened approach to addressing this overrepresentation of youth is to divert young people from entering the youth justice system in the first place, the reality is that there are young people in these systems now. Therefore, we should ensure that they are offered services that give them a realistic chance at success, or what this paper refers to as “effective” services. In order for any program or intervention to provide that chance, it must be built upon the successes that others have had and be scientifically tested to show that it can be used in a wide array of contexts with demonstrated efficacy (a narrower concept than “effectiveness,” as will be addressed below).

This rigor not only advances the field, but it also makes for significant positive impacts in the lives of young people, their families and communities. The potential for using EBPs for youth of color is appealing, given the challenges these young people face. And yet there continues to be resistance to their adoption in some quarters, and continuing questions about the scientific basis for their use in communities of color.

What we outline in this paper reflects a broad consensus by the meeting participants that science shows us that, if used correctly, EBPs are having success as interventions and they are not intrinsically antithetical to adoption in a range of cultural contexts. The organizers of this dialogue conclude that there is a case to be made that young people of color and their families should have access to the highest quality of care and supports and, absent evidence to the contrary, EBPs should be part of the arsenal of techniques brought to bear to serve all youth in contact with the youth justice system. Explicit references to the family are not accidental here, as some of the most promising EBPs are centered on techniques designed to strengthen the family (very broadly defined) and not just the individual, thereby improving the impact of the intervention.



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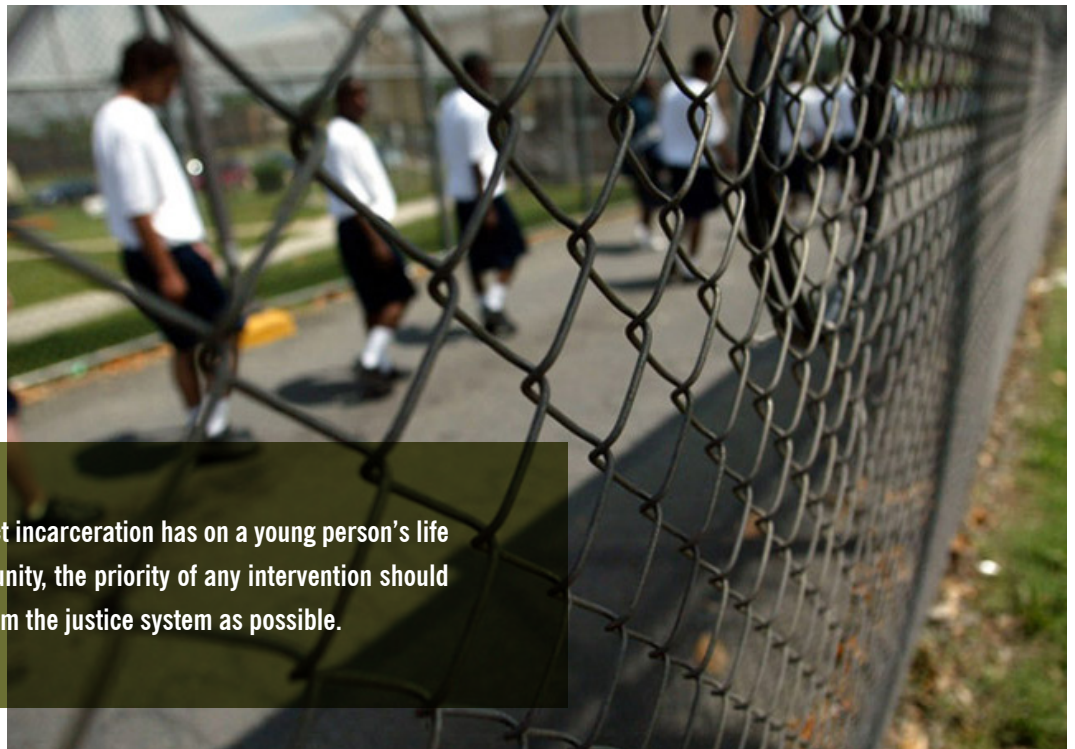
WHAT THE SCIENCE SAYS

EBPs are clinical/administrative practices that have been scientifically proven to consistently produce specific, intended results. Each practice must address a specific problem or symptom of mental health or substance abuse (or co-occurring conditions), and the practice has been subjected to clinical trials that are scientifically proven to achieve their intended results. Twenty years ago, EBPs were widely influencing psychotherapy and social science curricula and yet, as noted above, skepticism remains concerning the generalizability of such treatments for communities of color.

The thinking behind the skepticism was that prominent therapies were developed by white people for white people and their replication in communities of color was seen as de facto culturally incompetent. This mind-set has rendered analysis of the effectiveness of EBPs within communities of color difficult and communication between and among researchers, policy makers, and communities have often been less than productive. It is important that we address in this section the distinction between the technical definition of “efficacy,” which is the predictable results of a specific clinical intervention, versus the more general term “effectiveness,” which is used in the broader context of impacts outside of the confines of a scientific review.

Over time, receptivity to the adoption and implementation of EBPs for communities of color within the field of behavioral health has increased. To this end, the work group reviewed a major meta-analysis on the effectiveness of EBPs within communities of color, seeking to know whether or not people of color actually benefitted from EBPs and if cultural adaptations to therapies improved outcomes for people of color in treatment.

Ultimately, the science reviewed at the February dialogue suggests that there is positive evidence of the potential for the use of EBPs for communities of color (with the strongest evidence among African-American and Latino populations), however contextual matters seem to be crucial in the selection, adoption and implementation of EBPs. Additionally, the evidence suggests that some cultural tailoring to treatment approaches is useful, although it must be documented and monitored in order to avoid drifting too far from its core, science-backed practice.



Given the negative impact incarceration has on a young person’s life and on his or her community, the priority of any intervention should be with as little touch from the justice system as possible.

THE INCLUSION OF PEOPLE OF COLOR IN RANDOMIZED CONTROL TRIALS (RCTS)

Randomized Control Trials (RCTs) are the gold standard for research on the efficacy of psychotherapy treatments and/or interventions. The current data suggests that the field has significantly improved the inclusion of people of color in RCTs since the 1970's. Moreover, 25% of all participants in U.S.-based clinical trials are people of color. Therefore, the field is now able to demonstrate significant confidence in their efficacy for those populations.

However, there are cautions that must be considered seriously. For example, many of the RCTs that include people of color are HIV studies. Thus, analyzing the results of such studies and applying them to other contexts must be done with great care. Additionally, researchers are unable to conduct analyses on the efficacy of EBPs with the same confidence, since in some instances there were not enough people of color included in the sample size for a particular practice. Finally, over- or under-representation within different racial and ethnic subgroups continues to be an issue making analysis challenging. Interestingly, African-Americans are often over-represented in these trials, and other racial/ethnic groups tend to be under-represented.

In essence, the meta-analysis reveals that the field is doing a much better job of including people of color within RCTs, however, there needs to be a more consistent and intentional inclusion of communities of color. There was strong consensus among the dialogue's participants that contextual matters are crucial in the selection, introduction, adoption, and implementation of EBPs.

THE EFFICACY OF PSYCHOTHERAPIES FOR PEOPLE OF COLOR

A majority of participants in the dialogue, following the quantitative literature concerning the efficacy of psychotherapies within communities of color tested in RCTs, felt that effects for these groups are positive enough to counter the blanket assertion that “EBP’s don’t work in communities of color.” We should note that in this section we are addressing the scientific concept of “efficacy” (e.g., symptom reduction), a narrower term that the broader “effectiveness” (e.g., improved school attendance, reduced recidivism).

One of the remaining challenges is making explicit the demographic and cultural context elements of EBP research design and implementation in the real world, while maintaining the essential fidelity to the EBP being studied. First, with regard to the types of treatments that are most effective for use within communities of color, the data show that the most prominent modalities seem to be equally effective. Modalities that include family-inclusive treatments or individual settings have similar results although efficacy may vary depending on the particular type of behavior problem being addressed.

The portability of treatments from a lab-based, controlled setting remains an issue worth addressing and is of particular concern for community-based practitioners. Specifically, the question of whether or not a particular treatment will remain the same when it is transferred out of the lab into the hands of people in the real world is one that requires continuing attention, as we know from implementation science.

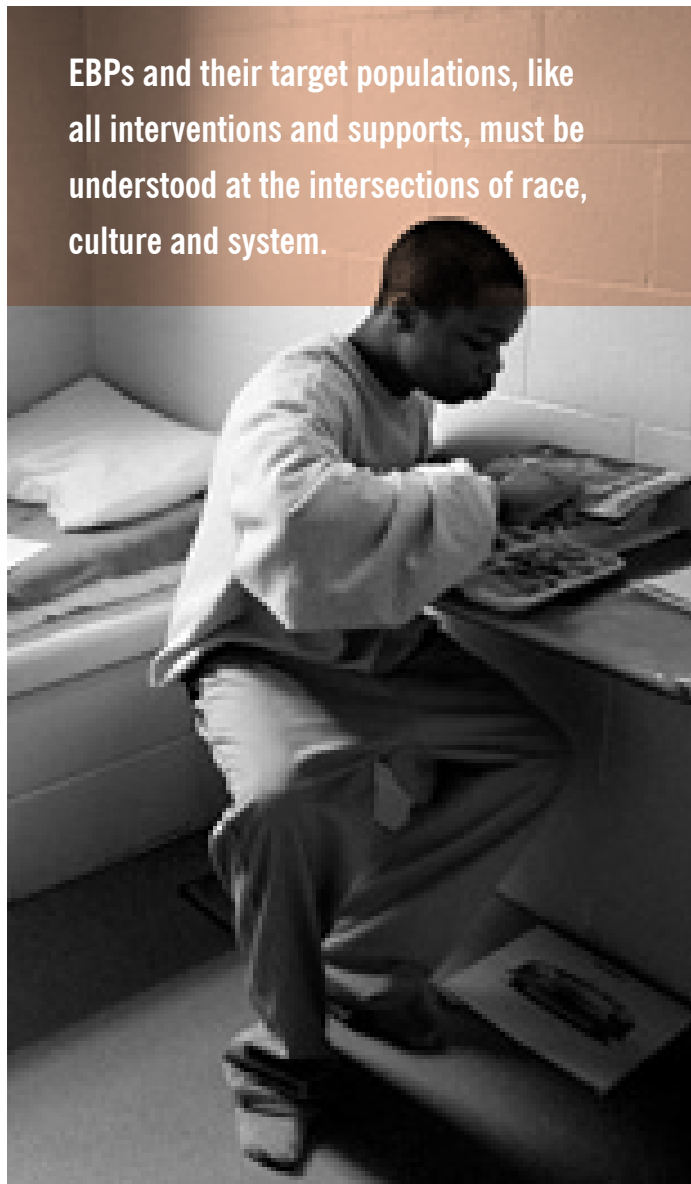
Additionally, in terms of racial and ethnic disparities with treatment outcomes, the science shows a mixed picture and is currently being explored further. While some interventions may have efficacy within communities of color, whites may



actually benefit more from those same treatments. At the same time, the meta-analysis of the data shows that race and ethnicity do not have a consistent enough effect on efficacy. Simply put, the effects of treatment for people of color populations may be underestimated due to sample size. However, they may also be overestimated because receiving some form treatment in a research project may be better than receiving no care at all due to structural, often historically race-based barriers to accessing supportive services.

Finally, the evidence shows a mixed picture of the use of cultural tailoring for the efficacy of EBPs with communities of color who may operate within a unique cultural context. When interventions focused on people of color have been compared to their generic counterpart, the findings of their efficacy demonstrate that the overall effect of cultural tailoring was negligible.

While some studies show that tailoring a specific intervention to be more culturally appropriate greatly enhances their work in communities of color, other studies demonstrate that a tailored approach can do more harm than good. In any case, whenever cultural adaption of an intervention is implemented, it is important to ensure that the delivery of the intervention is closely documented and monitored to ensure that it stays true to the scientifically backed method.



EBPs and their target populations, like all interventions and supports, must be understood at the intersections of race, culture and system.

THE CHALLENGES WITH EBPS IN COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

While science demonstrates there are evidence-based practices that are effective for certain behavioral problems regardless of race and ethnicity, this is not dispositive, because several challenges remain for the field. Two themes regarding these challenges emerged. The first focused on the practical implications of choosing and introducing an EBP into the community, while the second involved negative perceptions of EBPs' effectiveness (versus that of the status quo) by practitioners working with youth, especially youth of color in community settings.

PERCEPTIONS OF EBP EFFECTIVENESS IN COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

The perceptions of EBP effectiveness in communities of color have the potential to undermine their potential for adoption within systems serving youth of color. The negative perceptions of EBPs held by local communities can often be traced back to how they were introduced and implemented. Meeting participants expressed that EBP's were often introduced in an insensitive manner with a top-down set of mandates without adequate opportunities for community input, dialog or partnership. In order to reduce negative perceptions, EBPs should be nested in the local community context and owned by that community in order for them to be adopted without tensions or reservations. If there

is perceived to be too much of an umbilical cord that connects an intervention to the EBP developer or some external authority insensitive to or ignorant about the community's needs, then sustainability of the EBP and its ultimate effectiveness is threatened by feelings of mistrust.

A similar challenge to the adoption of EBPs in the context of communities of color relates to the perception of whether or not a given EBP is, indeed, adaptable to the service provider. This requires the service provider to take a very close look at the intervention at hand. In general, if a particular EBP is misaligned with the core philosophy and mission of the organization providing services, then its successful implementation over time will be weakened. This has been a particular problem when large systems, in effect, prescribe a particular EBP for a broad swath of the population without adequate analysis of the appropriateness of the intervention for all youth in that population.



Similarly, if the tools and materials of a given EBP fail to reflect the diversity of the communities being served by a provider, then successful implementation will be compromised as well. Additionally, attention must be paid to the details of any given EBP or else risk its failure. For example, if a particular EBP requires a core level of cognitive ability on behalf of the young person being engaged, and he or she isn't at that level, then the match between service provider and intervention will ultimately fail; an impact that that is unrelated to culture, race or ethnicity.



THE PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF INTRODUCING EBPS IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

Regarding the utilization of EBP's for youth and families of color that are involved in the justice system, there is another set of challenges because of the perception that all of these interventions have been largely developed by clinicians and have yet to be adopted and implemented competently by community practitioners. Notwithstanding this skepticism, EBP's are being widely used within the justice context.

However, youth justice professionals expressed that it is critical to note that the mission of the youth justice system is, in many cases, a radically different system context than the one in which EBP's were developed. In addition, practitioners working within the youth justice context are usually not clinicians or have not been clinically trained to administer EBPs competently.

Thus, the selection of the appropriate EBP and its implementation are too often mismatched, or clinicians brought in to implement EBPs are not well integrated into the culture of the service system. As noted above, it is critical in this context to separate out the characteristics of the EBP (the intervention itself) from the complex systems issues (child welfare/youth justice/behavioral health) that may complicate successful implementation.

A secondary challenge is the cost of implementing EBPs in communities of color with fidelity given that youth justice systems are chronically underfunded. There are challenges with overcoming the “sticker shock” that may come along with the costs of training and starting up a practice, but systems also often balk at continuing costs (fidelity monitoring, training and supervision updates, etc.) despite positive outcomes and eventual lower cost. Demands for short term return-on-investment in EBPs can often doom them to early demise.

In addition, capacity is required to recruit qualified practitioners to deliver the EBP with fidelity as well as providing ongoing support for staff training and supervision. This is critically important for monitoring the effectiveness of any program intervention and this is particularly true for interventions operating within the unique context of youth justice. Oftentimes, the potential sources of funding for EBPs will determine the specific intervention chosen for a community. For example, the federal government will fund certain interventions but not others, creating additional challenges for a mismatch of EBPs with the needs of the target population, as noted above.

Finally, the issue of “net-widening” is of great concern to justice system leaders who have a strong impetus to avoid referring youth into the justice system so that they may receive behavioral health interventions and supports. There is significant evidence that the justice system has become the “default” mental health system in many counties. The use of EBPs should never be the rationale for referring youth into youth justice systems.

In that regard, several studies show that the mere fact of a youth’s involvement in the justice system often has a negative impact on life outcomes. In fact, the more “touches” the youth justice system has, the greater the likelihood of that young person returning to the system. The justice system ultimately sees its role as a protector of public safety and therefore does not see itself as having the primary role in meeting the needs of young people of color and addressing the root causes of their youthful misbehavior (i.e. poverty, trauma, etc.). These variances in the professional cultures of large organizations should be recognized as contextual issues, and not conflated with the utility of using EBPs to address youth and family challenges.

This point is especially salient if the implementation of EBPs in the youth justice context is delivered with minimum fidelity. The result is that the justice system expects EBPs to deliver behavior changes that are unrealistic. Thus, while EBPs are created to address clinical issues, they may be used by the youth justice system to prevent delinquency - something for which most were neither designed nor proven to do. A detailed discussion of the importance of methodical implementation of EBPs is beyond the scope of this paper, but many resources exist to guide this process. The continued use of sub-optimal interventions in youth justice contexts heightens the potential for disproportionately negative impacts on youth of color.



CONCLUSION: CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FIELD

Three overarching themes emerged from this important and unique gathering:

- [1]** The need to frankly address the crucial role of cultural context and engagement in proposing, selecting and implementing EBPs, as well as the need to carefully consider organizational and structural elements such as sustainable funding;
- [2]** The need to minimize the involvement of most youth with the youth justice system and prevent deeper penetration in the system by those who have already been touched by it, while offering those who do come in contact with the system the most effective services possible; and
- [3]** The need for continuing research and data collection about the impacts and outcomes for all youth, with a focus on the differential impacts across youth populations.

EBPs have come a long way in understanding and acknowledging the role of cultural context and engagement in the proposing, selection, and implementation. The choice regarding the utilization of EBPs in communities of color versus a “status quo” intervention should not be an “either-or” proposition as no one wins in that framing. Rather, when engaging such a question of choice, the answer is much more complex and lies within the range of data-driven interventions that can be matched to a young person’s individual problems, in the unique community context in which they live. Thus, EBPs and their target populations, like all interventions and supports, must be understood at the intersections of race, culture and system.

Given the negative impact incarceration has on a young person’s life and on his or her community, the priority of any intervention should be with as little touch from the justice system as possible. To this

end, labeling children and youth as “delinquent” to enable them access to EBPs would be precisely the wrong conclusion leading to an increase in the adverse impacts of “net-widening” by sweeping youth unnecessarily into a system that may prove toxic. In order to begin addressing these challenges, youth serving systems (i.e. justice, mental health, and education) must be able to effectively communicate across systems about how to best serve the needs of young people in a given community.

Finally, a need continues for continuing research, in particular research that demonstrates the effectiveness of EBPs in real-world settings. In addition to greater data collection about the impacts and outcomes of all interventions for justice involved youth, research must allow for greater specificity and detail as to how different racial and ethnic groupings of young people are impacted.

[ENDNOTES]

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