

Place-based collective impact: an Australian response to childhood vulnerability

The early years provide a critical foundation for lifelong health, development and wellbeing, yet currently more than one in five Australian children begin school developmentally vulnerable. In some communities this extends to one in two – or every second child – placing them at greater risk of poorer social, emotional and economic wellbeing throughout their lives.

Collective impact, a relatively new way of tackling complex problems, shows promise as a response to childhood vulnerability in communities with high levels of disadvantage. Recent research has examined the evolution of place-based and collective impact approaches. This Policy Brief outlines the findings from the research and discusses the practice, policy and institutional changes required to realise the potential of place-based collective impact.

Why is this issue important?

One of the most severe, damaging and inexcusable blights on Australia's social landscape is the high number of children arriving at school developmentally vulnerable. In 2015 alone, almost 63,000 Australian children started school behind in one or more areas of their development (Australian Government, 2016). Developmental vulnerabilities emerge early, often persist into adulthood and become increasingly difficult and costly to address (Currie & Rossin-Slater, 2015; Shonkoff, Boyce, & McEwen, 2009).

Key messages

- Childhood vulnerability is a complex problem, particularly in communities with high levels of disadvantage.
- Collective impact shows promise as a way of tackling complex problems internationally, and a unique version is emerging in Australia: place-based collective impact.
- Australian experience and research indicates seven principles are needed for effective place-based collective impact.
- Place-based collective impact should be tested and adapted as our understanding of this approach evolves.

Childhood vulnerability is systematically linked to disadvantage (Hertzman et al., 2010; Goldfeld & West, 2014; Moore, McDonald, Carlon, & O'Rourke, 2015). The high level of disadvantage experienced by some Australian communities means that children who are conceived, born, grow and live in these communities are at risk of poorer outcomes throughout their lives (McLachlan, Gilfillan, & Gordon, 2013; Moore, Arefadib, Deery, & West, 2017). Improving child development prior to school entry can have long-lasting benefits for the individual (Feinstein, 2003) and flow on economic benefits for society. Traditional policy and service responses have not been able to overcome the current developmental inequities.



The Centre for Community Child Health is a national partner of Opportunity Child.

What does the research tell us?

The past four decades have seen the development of a variety of place-based responses, which typically involve people working together to address issues within a particular geographic space (Bellefontaine & Wisener, 2011). Over the years, Australian place-based approaches have been used to improve program or service delivery, build citizen engagement and participation in governance, decentralise government decision making, and address complex issues such as concentrated disadvantage in a community (Reddel, 2004; Department of Social Services [DSS], 2017; Wilks, Lahausse, & Edwards, 2015). Place-based approaches vary in: the extent of citizen involvement and ownership; breadth of local stakeholder involvement; focus on people versus place; and the number, type and complexity of issues being addressed (Moore et al., 2014; Wilks et al., 2015).

Recently, many Australian communities have adopted a particular type of place-based approach known as collective impact as an alternative to top-down policy making and intervention (Salignac, Wilcox, Marjolin, & Adams, 2017; Smart, 2017). Collective impact involves the commitment of a group of stakeholders from different sectors to a common agenda for addressing the complex problems experienced by a community such as childhood vulnerability and disadvantage.

As originally formulated by Kania and Kramer (2011), effective collective impact initiatives require five essential conditions or elements: having a common agenda, a shared measurement system, mutually reinforcing activities among all participants, continuous communication, and a dedicated 'backbone' organisation to support the work of the partnership. Since then, collective impact has expanded to consider 'readiness' for implementation such as adequate resources, influential champions and urgency of the issue, and phases of development (Hanleybrown, Kania, & Kramer, 2012; Kania & Kramer, 2011). More recent iterations include supplementary practice principles (Collective Impact Forum, 2016) and a shift from a management approach to community mobilisation. These changes are outlined in Table 1 (Cabaj & Weaver, 2016).

Table 1: Two North American models of collective impact

Kania and Kramer (2011)	Cabaj and Weaver (2016)
Management version	Movement building version
Common agenda	Community aspiration
Shared measurement	Strategic learning
Mutually reinforcing activities	High leverage activities
Continuous communication	Inclusive community engagement
Backbone	Containers for change

Source: Cabaj and Weaver (2016)

Collective impact's strength lies in its emphasis on broad cross-sector participation, the use of collaborative processes to build a shared agenda, and acknowledgment of complexity. It has, however, been criticised for the ambiguity and insufficiency of its five original conditions, particularly for its limited focus on citizen engagement and mobilisation, equity, broader structural influences, and the role of government policy (Himmelman et al., 2017; Smart, 2017; Wolff, 2016). Given the infancy of this approach, the evidence of efficacy is limited (Moore et al., 2014; Smart, 2017), however, an investigation into 25 North American collective impact initiatives concluded that well designed and led initiatives can result in positive population change (Spark Policy Institute & ORS Impact, 2018).

In 2016, more than 80 collective impact initiatives were estimated to be underway in Australia (Graham & Weaver, 2016). Comprehensive and robust design principles customised to the Australian context are needed to ensure maximum impact for these and future initiatives. Australia's rich history of place-based approaches (dating from the 1970s) and recent experience with collective impact, provides insight into the additional elements needed and has led to the development of a place-based collective impact framework for Australian initiatives (Hogan, Rubenstein, & Fry, 2018).

Place-based collective impact

Place-based collective impact combines a place-based focus on a geographic location, citizen engagement and local decision making with collective impact's emphasis on cross-sector collaboration, adaptive management and systems change. To tackle community-level childhood vulnerability and disadvantage (and potentially other complex problems), place-based collective impact strives to:

- promote citizen participation and cooperative decision making
- build social capital (trust, networks) and community capacity
- re-engineer service systems.

It is distinguished from other place-based approaches by its high degree of citizen involvement, broad stakeholder engagement, a focus on complex issues and a dual focus on people and place (DSS, 2017).

Australian practice and research indicates that seven principles form the basis of successful place-based

collective impact initiatives. These principles are highly interactive and offer lightly prescriptive guidance, with the understanding that they will need to be customised to local circumstances. See Figure 1.

- 1. Create and sustain a cross-sector decision-making partnership:** an inclusive and balanced cross-sector partnership comprised of citizens, community organisations, government representatives and service providers. The partnership should adopt and embed practices that demonstrate mutual respect, equity, inclusiveness and democratic processes. The partnership should focus on a specified geographical area, provide overall direction and have substantial devolved and legitimate authority for decision making, resourcing and accountability.
- 2. Establish and sustain skilled backbone support:** day-to-day organisational support for facilitation, coordination, deliberation, strategic learning, resource sustainability, reporting and accountability. The backbone support may be delivered by one or many organisations, but staff must have credibility and legitimacy with all key stakeholders.

Place-based collective impact effectiveness principles

- Create and sustain a cross-sector decision-making partnership
- Establish and sustain skilled, sustained backbone support
- Engage and mobilise cross-sector partners and networks
- Engage in co-design and robust planning
- Engage in continuous strategic learning
- Build capacity in all sectors
- Develop collaborative mindsets and practices

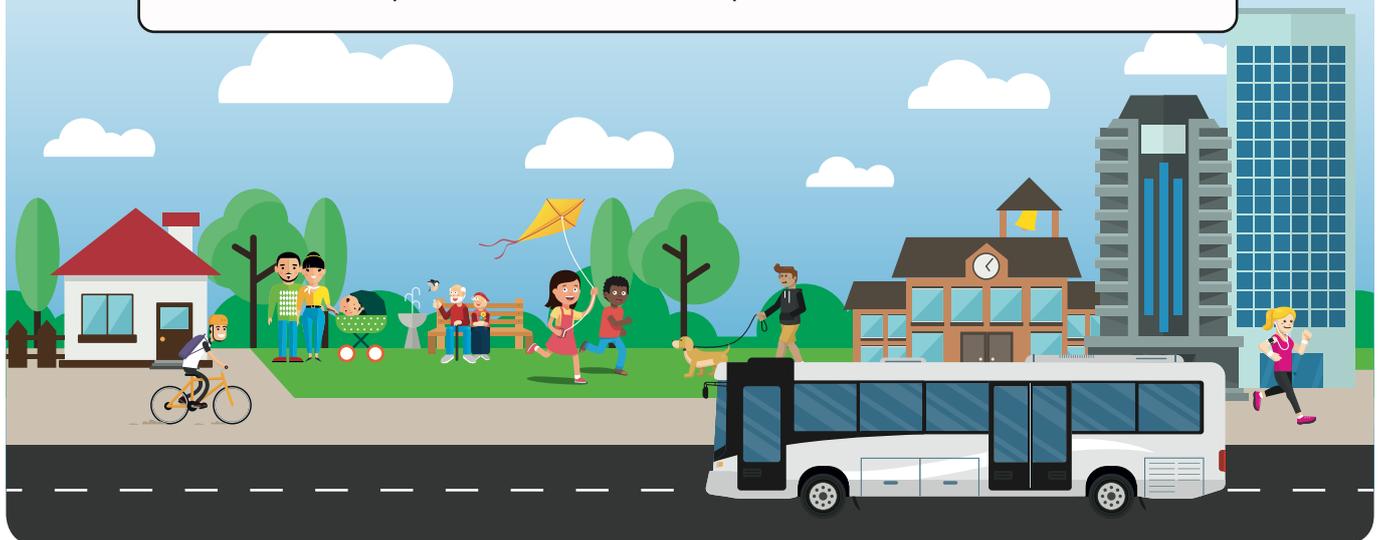


Figure 1: Place-based collective impact effectiveness principles.

3. **Engage and mobilise cross-sector partners and networks:** active commitment and participation of cross-sector stakeholders (citizens, service providers and government) to identify and deepen understanding of local issues, establish priorities, strengthen relationships and trust, and build collective efficacy.
4. **Engage in co-design and robust planning:** collaborative co-design processes, drawing on all forms of evidence (community values and knowledge, practice evidence and research evidence) to develop, operationalise and continuously review the initiative's theory of change, including the identification of high leverage and equity-focused strategies which seek to achieve the desired outcome(s).
5. **Engage in continuous strategic learning:** a system of robust measurement, monitoring and evaluation (including baseline data, causal factors and real-time data), accompanied by regular sense making, rapid iteration and adaptation.
6. **Build capacity in all sectors:** ongoing capacity building at the individual, organisational and community levels across all sectors to sustain partnerships, develop leaders, engage in co-design and governance, and strengthen community empowerment and government stewardship to achieve service system reform.
7. **Develop collaborative mindsets and practices:** attitudes and practices consistent with social governance, equity, inclusiveness, democratic citizenship, transparency and trust building are institutionalised across the broader community environment.

Together, implementation of these principles produces a series of outputs (see Table 2). While the full suite of outputs will vary, the place-based collective impact framework suggests six are key to success:

1. **A situational analysis** that defines the community's opportunities, key issues and their causes.
2. **An outcomes framework** that specifies the shared population-level outcomes, indicators and targets across the life course.
3. **A theory of change** that builds on the situational analysis and explains how outcomes are expected to occur.
4. **Investment and asset mapping** that identifies the community's assets, services, investments and relationships to inform action.
5. **A theory of action** that describes the action needed to activate the theory of change.

6. **Policy and investment recommendations** that advocate for system-wide reform of policies, priority investments and practices to help achieve the desired population changes.

Table 2: Key outputs

Key outputs	
1.	Situational analysis
2.	Outcomes framework
3.	Theory of change (problem specific)
4.	Investment and asset mapping
5.	Theory of action
6.	Policy and investment recommendations.

The community context and broader institutional environment will influence the size, shape and effect of a place-based collective impact initiative. For example, factors such as the policy environment, institutional rules and norms, community readiness, existing civic infrastructure, and the support from funding and authorising bodies should be considered in the design and implementation of the initiative and will influence how the principles are operationalised. Effects of the place-based collective impact initiative will also be mediated by implementation factors including implementation capacity and performance (Hogan, Rubenstein, & Fry, 2018).

What are the implications of the research?

A different type of approach is required to address the complex nature of childhood vulnerability in communities experiencing high levels of disadvantage. Place-based collective impact integrates the knowledge and lessons gained from Australia's long history of place-based approaches with the strengths of collective impact. Its focus on citizen engagement, and devolved, cooperative decision-making represents a fundamental shift in the distribution of power and authority away from government and service providers.

While service system change is important, place-based collective impact highlights that it is insufficient for overcoming the complex, institutionalised and socially exclusionary nature of disadvantage and childhood vulnerability. Building social capital and community capacity are also essential elements.

Place-based collective impact integrates the knowledge and lessons gained from Australia's long history of place-based approaches with the strengths of collective impact.

Place-based collective impact should be rigorously tested and evaluated alongside other alternatives to understand what works, why, how, for whom and under what circumstances. Successful implementation is reliant on substantial, thoughtful and long-term investment. In the short term, there needs to be a focus on capacity building in government, the service industry and community to develop the knowledge, skills and systems required to support change. In the longer term, it is important to focus on the legitimisation of collaborative practices and local governance.

Considerations for practice and policy

Place-based collective impact requires a commitment to ambitious system redesign and a revitalised approach to community development. It is reliant on a substantial shift in the distribution of power away from governments and service providers to cross-sector collective partnerships with substantial community membership and devolved authority. The potential benefits it has to offer are significant.

For government, it promises more efficient and effective services, more empowered communities and greater social equity and cohesion. For communities, it promises improved services, a much stronger community voice, greater trust and social networks, reduced social exclusion,

stronger community identity, enhanced civic infrastructure, development of community agency, and reduced disadvantage. For service providers, it promises a stronger role in the design and delivery of services in concert with community members and practice innovations to achieve better outcomes for children and families.

Source

This Policy Brief is based on Place-Based Collective Impact Principles: A Public Policy Response to Childhood Vulnerability (in press) prepared by Opportunity Child with Logan Together. The Centre for Community Child Health is a national partner of Opportunity Child.

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References

For a full list of references please visit:

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The Centre for Community Child Health is a department of The Royal Children's Hospital and research group of Murdoch Children's Research Institute. For over two decades the Centre has been at the forefront of early childhood research and policy.

The Centre contributes to improving the health and wellbeing of children by identifying synthesising and translating the best evidence to inform policy, service delivery, practice and parenting.

Our Policy Brief series aims to stimulate informed debate about issues that affect children's health development and wellbeing. Each issue draws on current research and evidence-informed practice.

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