# WHEN COLLECTIVE IMPACT HAS AN IMPACT

A CROSS-SITE STUDY OF 25 COLLECTIVE IMPACT INITIATIVES

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Acknowledgments |** This study required an extraordinary amount of engagement from participants at all levels. We are especially appreciative of the hundreds of people who submitted their initiatives as possible participants in the study; those who participated in the early interviews; and those engaged in the data collection during site visits and deep-dive equity dialogues. Their generosity of time was incredible, as was their willingness to have their work explored in such depth and shared so widely. The study team strove to do justice to the data and stories of the initiatives, their accomplishments, and their lessons learned. Any inaccuracies or misrepresentations are the responsibility of the authors.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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# INTRODUCTION

In 2011, John Kania and Mark Kramer published an article in the Stanford Social Innovation Review laying out "collective impact" as an approach for solving social problems at scale. For some, the introduction of a defined framework for cross-sector collaboration provided a useful way to focus new and existing partnerships toward a common goal and, hopefully, greater impact. Based on its promise, many resources have been directed toward use of the approach for creating population-level change in a variety of areas. But, until now, the approach has not been rigorously assessed. To solve the entrenched social problems that still plague too many people and communities, it is crucial to continue deepening the sector's understanding of what can be understood about the results collective impact initiatives are achieving, challenges they face, and lessons they have learned.

In early 2017, the Collective Impact Forum (Forum), an initiative of FSG and the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions (Aspen Institute), hired ORS Impact (ORS) and Spark Policy Institute (Spark) to address these questions. They sought a fieldwide study that could help answer a fundamental question:

## To what extent and under what conditions does the collective impact approach contribute to systems and population changes?

*Click here to access the full report.*

This study is not intended to be promotional for collective impact as an approach, nor for FSG, the Aspen Institute, any of the Forum partners, or the funders of this research. The partnership of Spark Policy Institute and ORS Impact brought knowledge and experience with collective impact (Spark), experience with other community change models (both), as well as a healthy skepticism and more "arm's length" relationship to the approach (ORS).

This study was designed to address five primary questions oriented around when and how collective impact approaches lead to systems and population changes *(see Figure 1)*, as well as secondary questions exploring how collective impact was being deployed (including conditions and principles) and the contexts, challenges, and barriers experienced by collective impact initiatives.

Figure 1 | Primary Study Questions

## PRIMARY STUDY QUESTIONS

1) To what extent and under what conditions does the collective impact approach contribute to population level outcomes?

2) What systems changes have contributed to the population level outcomes being achieved?

3) What are the other positive or negative impacts, intended or unintended, on the community and system?

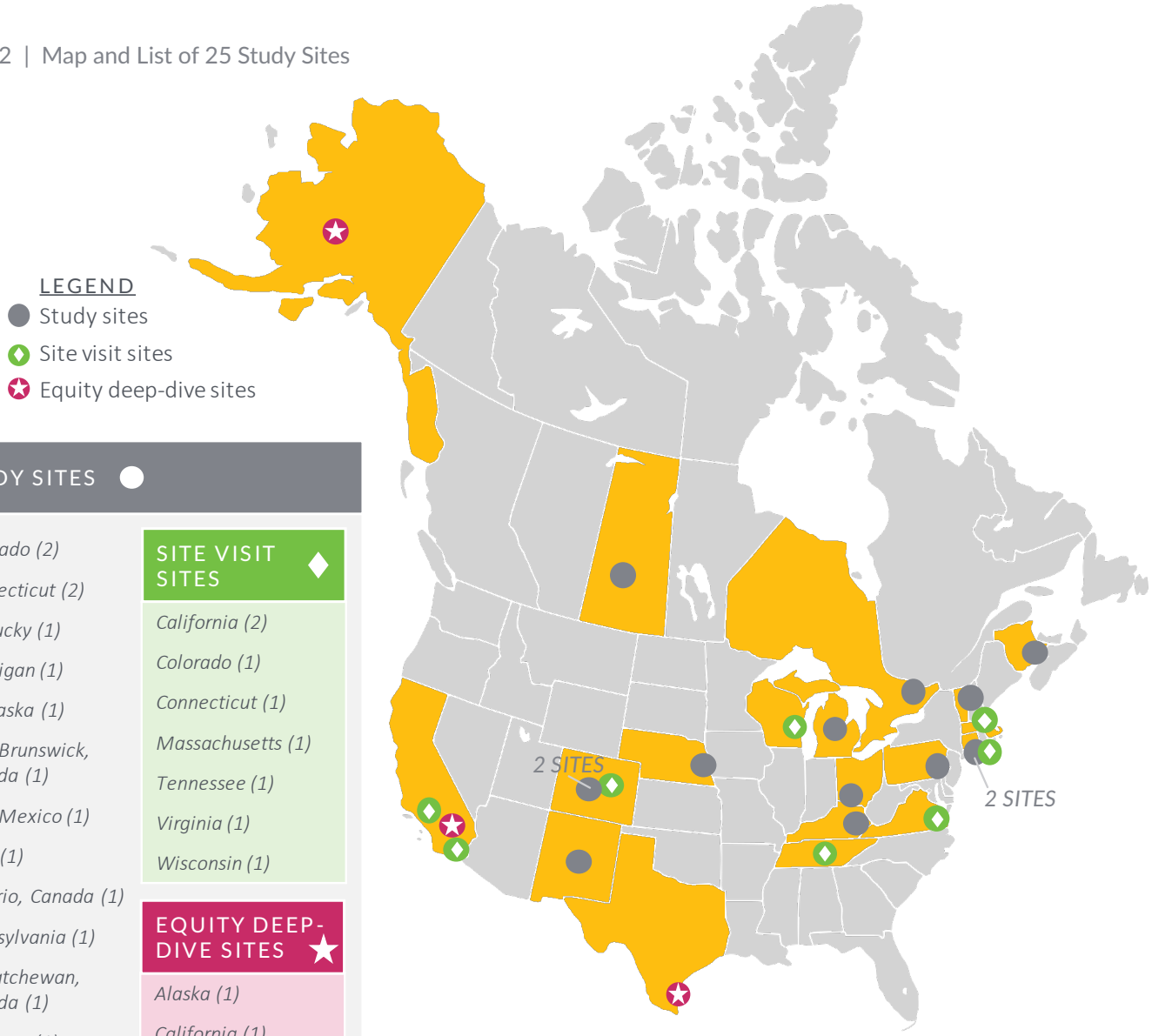
4) What evidence is there that the collective impact effort has contributed to these systems and population changes?

5) What evidence is there that the population changes would not have been achieved if the collective impact approach hadn't been used?

To address these questions, the study: explored trends across 25 collective impact initiatives via interviews and document review; examined eight initiatives via site visits and process tracing to rigorously test the approach's contribution to demonstrated population changes; and conducted virtual focus groups with three equity deep-dive sites to better understand equity work in the collective impact context.

*See the full report for more details on research study design, including the study sites and their selection, data collection methods, analytic methods, and study oversight.*

Figure 2 | Map and List of 25 Study Sites




**STUDY SITES**

*Colorado (2)*
*Connecticut (2)*
*Kentucky (1)*
*Michigan (1)*
*Nebraska (1)*
*New Brunswick, Canada (1)*
*New Mexico (1)*
*Ohio (1)*
*Ontario, Canada (1)*
*Pennsylvania (1)*
*Saskatchewan, Canada (1)*
*Vermont (1)*

**SITE VISIT SITES**

*California (2)*
*Colorado (1)*
*Connecticut (1)*
*Massachusetts (1)*
*Tennessee (1)*
*Virginia (1)*
*Wisconsin (1)*

**EQUITY DEEP-DIVE SITES**

*Alaska (1)*
*California (1)*
*Texas (1)*

# KEY CONCEPTS

## COLLECTIVE IMPACT CONDITIONS AND PRINCIPLES

According to the original description by John Kania and Mark Kramer and used to this day, collective impact is the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem at scale. Collective impact initiatives are distinct from other forms of collaboration in their cross-sector composition and their implementation of the five conditions of collective impact *(Figure 3)*.

Figure 3 | Five Collective Impact Conditions

Many collective impact initiatives also deploy eight additional principles of practice, which are increasingly recognized as important to achieving population change.

### PRINCIPLES OF PRACTICE

1) Design and implement the initiative with priority on equity
2) Include community members in the collaborative
3) Recruit and co-create with cross-sector partners
4) Use data to continuously learn, adapt, and improve
5) Cultivate leaders with unique system leadership skills
6) Focus on program and system strategies
7) Build a culture that fosters relationships, trust, and respect across participants
8) Customize for local context

## TYPES OF CHANGE

A major goal of this study was to understand the relationship between collective impact approaches and systems and population changes. The study also assumed early changes would precede the systems changes and were important to document *(see inset for definitions)*.

| | |
|---|---|
| EARLY CHANGES | Changes to the environment that lay the foundation for systems and policy changes, such as increased partnership quality, collaboration, and awareness of the issue. |
| SYSTEMS CHANGES | Changes to core institutions within the initiative's geographic area that (1) may be formalized and likely to sustain or more informal experiments that could lay the groundwork for future formalized changes, and (2) may happen in a single organization, multiple organizations with a common purpose (both in terms of issue area and sector), or multiple organizations with multiple purposes. |
| POPULATION CHANGES | Changes in the target population of the initiative, which may be specific people within specific systems, geographic areas, or with specific needs. |

## PROCESS TRACING

The study used a method called process tracing to determine the degree to which collective impact contributed to making population-level change in solving the problems initiatives set out to address. We worked with different stakeholders during each of the eight site visits to untangle how they understood conditions, early changes, and systems changes to have contributed to a documented population change for their initiative. These data were used to create hypotheses about the presumed connections between prioritized components (e.g., which conditions led to which early changes).

Using data from multiple sources, the study assessed the **inferential strength** of the hypothesized relationships based on two facets: the **certainty** that the hypothesized relationship exists and the **uniqueness** or sufficiency of the elements of the hypothesized relationship for fully explaining the outcome compared to plausible alternative explanations.

The inferential strength of each hypothesis was categorized as one of the following four levels:

| | |
|---|---|
| Plausible but neither proven or disproven | Evidence is suggestive of a relationship but insufficient to draw a definitive conclusion as to the contribution to the outcome relative to other rival explanations |
| Certain but not unique | Evidence is sufficient to conclude that a relationship exists, but not to rule out the possibility that the outcome would have also occurred due to rival explanations |
| Plausible and unable to be explained by a rival explanation | Evidence is sufficient to conclude that a relationship exists and that the outcome would not have occurred due to rival explanations |
| "Doubly decisive" | Evidence provides high certainty of contribution and there is no alternative explanation. This level of strength is extremely unlikely when talking about complex systems change initiatives |

# KEY FINDINGS

## CONTRIBUTION & OUTCOMES OF COLLECTIVE IMPACT

### For all eight site visit sites, collective impact undoubtedly contributed to the desired population change.

Across the 25 study sites, 20 had demonstrated population changes. The study more deeply explored the question of contribution among eight initiatives. Based on use of the process tracing method, the study found that, in the eight cases, there is a strong contribution relationship between the implementation of the collective impact model and the observed changes. For seven of the eight site visit sites, there was strong or compelling data linking new or expanded programs/services or practice improvements to the population change. Sometimes programmatic and practice changes result from policy changes, something true for five of the site visit sites. For other site visit sites, finding ways to collectively leverage resources was a key contributor to achieving population changes.

CASE EXAMPLE

**MILWAUKEE TEEN PREGNANCY PREVENTION INITIATIVE** achieved early and systems changes, contributing to a reduction in teen birth rates among girls aged 15 to 17 in Milwaukee. The **systems changes** included

1) Implementation of modified Human Growth and Development Curriculum in Milwaukee Public Schools for grades K-12, including expanded capacity of school leaders and teachers to implement the curriculum.

2) Expanded implementation of aligned comprehensive sexuality education programming available in school and in afterschool settings.

3) Increased availability, accessibility, and acceptability of contraception. The **early changes**—increased awareness of the issue, political will, and commitment to achieving a shared goal to reduce teen pregnancy—made it easier politically to implement the strategies that created the systems changes.

## Three site visit sites had compelling evidence that the collective impact approach had a strong contribution to population changes, with low plausibility of an alternative explanation for how that change could have otherwise occurred.

In each case, we had strong evidence that change had occurred, strong evidence linking the different components of the initiatives' work to the change, and no plausible alternative hypotheses to better explain or augment our understanding of how change happened (the third level of inferential strength).

CASE EXAMPLE

For HOME FOR GOOD, the specific focus on a targeted homeless population (veterans who are homeless and people who are chronically homeless), the alignment and coordination of funding and services across multiple partners in the county, and the widespread adoption of a common system went beyond what federal requirements or other external conditions could have wrought without the benefit of the backbone infrastructure, common agenda, shared measurement system, and mutually reinforcing activities.

## Five site visit sites' data provided compelling evidence that collective impact had been a necessary element of the population change story, but that collective impact alone was insufficient for explaining the population change achieved.

In these site visit sites, there was clear data of population change that had occurred and strong evidence that collective impact made a difference. However, unlike the previously-mentioned site visit sites, a combination of other external drivers along with supportive external factors made the unique contribution of collective impact less certain. Another way of understanding this level of contribution is that collective impact contributed to and was necessary for achieving early and systems changes that contributed to population change but that it was not sufficient for explaining the population change seen.

CASE EXAMPLE

The COLORADO CONSORTIUM FOR PRESCRIPTION DRUG ABUSE PREVENTION seeks to address the opioid epidemic at large. The common agenda, mutually reinforcing activities, and the backbone (including the coordinating committee) have led directly to a number of systems changes, including: (1) public awareness campaigns, (2) provider education efforts, (3) permanent takeback/safe disposal locations, and (4) support to increase the availability of Naloxone. These systems changes have contributed to decreases in overdose deaths from prescription opioids. The initiative has emerged amidst a national epidemic, so some of the systems changes are driven by factors outside the initiative, such as national clinical guidelines as well.

## *Important Note*

*Distinguishing between the three initiatives in which the collective impact approach had a strong contribution to population changes with low plausibility of an alternative explanation and the five initiatives in which it had been a necessary but insufficient element of the population change story* ***does not suggest that one type of contribution is more optimal or qualitatively better than the other.***

Indeed, the role of the collective impact initiatives in contributing to population change alongside other efforts or enablers is a critical and valuable aspect of social change.

## Among the eight site visit sites, the three with no strong plausible alternative explanations were more likely to have a focus on data and on resources, whereas the five where collective impact was necessary but insufficient for achieving population change were more likely to focus on political will and policies.

Site visit sites with no plausible alternative explanation for change more frequently: (1) implemented data strategies, (2) included the shared measurement system in their explanation for how change happened, and (3) prioritized data-related changes as a critical part of how they understood population change to occur. While there was usage and inclusion of data among the other five site visit sites, it was less consistent. The three site visit sites with a unique causal relationship had a stronger focus on implementing strategies related to resource allocation and funding (e.g., developing collaborative funds, engaging diverse funding sources such as private, local, federal, philanthropic dollars) and more frequent inclusion of hypotheses about how collective impact directly contributed to more resources for the work. Only one of the three site visit sites with no plausible alternative explanation for change focused on policy strategies, building political will, and seeing policy changes as key parts of understanding the contribution. Yet among the other five site visit sites this focus was more likely.

CASE EXAMPLE

The work of CONNECTICUT JUVENILE JUSTICE ALLIANCE focused on early changes around building legislative champions as part of their efforts to get successful adoption and implementation of policy change, including the Raise the Age legislation.

CASE EXAMPLE

ALIGNMENT NASHVILLE'S backbone and initiative partners engaged in intentional communication strategies designed to build buy-in and public will to support both the goals of increasing graduation rates and college/career readiness, and the vision of supporting the district's own strategic initiative and changing the negative public narrative around the district's performance. These communication strategies resulted in more influential champions for the work and increased community partner engagement.

## There are strong relationships between collective impact conditions and early changes among site visit sites.

All site visit sites referenced the critical role the backbone played in achieving early changes. Specific aspects of the backbone role included convening, facilitating, relationship-building, and communicating, which were seen as leading to greater trust and commitment among partners. For six of the eight site visit sites, their hypotheses at this stage also named mutually reinforcing activities and/or common agenda as critical to the early changes they influenced.

When applying the tests to assess the strength of the 14 hypothesized connections between the collective impact conditions and the early changes cited, the strength of data and unique contribution of collective impact resulted in high ratings of confidence in these connections. The relationships described by site visit sites in this stage of their contribution story had the highest degree of certainty and a very low level of likelihood of an alternative explanation.

## Changes in services and practices are the most common systems changes achieved across sites; formalized systems changes were also frequently seen in site visit sites.

Most of the systems changes prioritized by the site visit sites represent formalized changes (82% of 33 systems changes cited, cited by each site visit site) across similar or multi-sector organizations (48% and 30%, respectively). New and enhanced services (6 of 8) and improved practices (6 of 8) are the most frequent systems changes resulting from early changes. This pattern held true across the full set of 25 study sites. While they identified a wide range in the number of systems changes they directly influenced (as few as two to nearly 20), more study sites achieved expansions or changes to services (96%) than any other type of change.

CASE EXAMPLE

In the ELIZABETH RIVER PROJECT, engaged and committed partners led to new alliances and programs, including citizen-led programs, such as resident engagement in seeding oyster beds, shoreline restoration projects, and support for voluntary practices undertaken by schools and businesses.

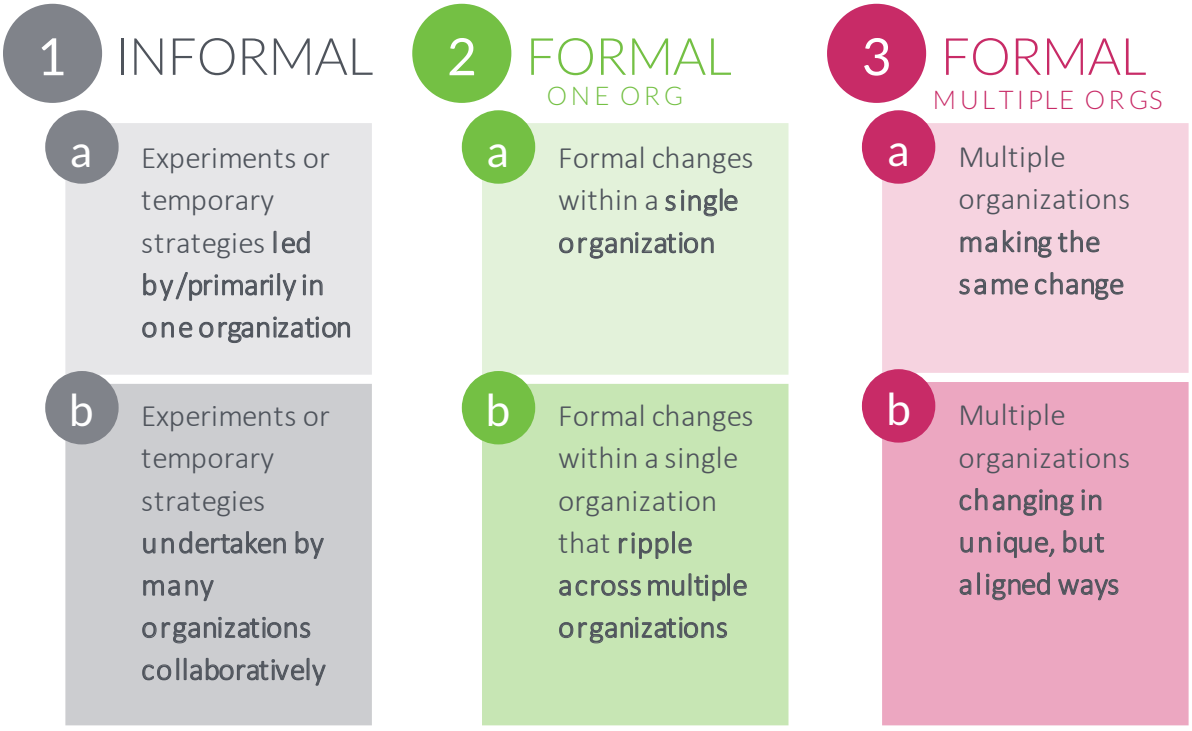
## There are strong relationships between initiative efforts and prioritized systems changes among site visit sites.

Among the site visit sites, key drivers of systems changes were most commonly early changes related to partnerships, including the deepening of the relationships, the expansion of the relationships, and the degree of commitment and engagement. Three site visit sites did not have explicit hypotheses about the connection between early changes and systems changes and instead had hypotheses about how collective impact conditions directly led to systems change, specifically related to receiving funding to support their work. When the process tracing tests were applied to assess the strength of both types of hypothesized relationships, the majority of the 10 hypotheses had data that made them compelling and unlikely to have an alternative explanation, resulting in a high assessment of the contribution of the early change or collective impact condition to the systems change described.

## A variety of types of systems changes can advance study sites' work over time.

Most study sites reported a variety of different systems changes that fell into one of six categories reflecting variation in formality of the systems change, the number of organizations involved, and key aspects of uptake and impact (see Figure 4). It's important to note that both types of informal changes can be valuable—without them, it can be difficult to make the case for institutionalized changes. They can also lay the groundwork for cross-sector systems changes that can otherwise be difficult to initiate.

Figure 4 | Types of Systems Change



## Population changes generally stemmed from changes in services and improved practices and policies.

Overall, 20 of the 25 study sites showed evidence of population changes based on reliable and valid data. Eighteen study sites had changes in one issue area (e.g., an education outcome or an employment outcome) while two study sites saw improved outcomes in two different issue areas. The most common type of population change was in education (8 sites), followed by outcomes related to health (4 sites), homelessness (3 sites), economic (2 sites), environmental (2 sites), food (2 sites), and justice (1 site).

The types of systems changes considered critical for explaining how population changes were achieved most frequently included changes in services (new or expanded), true for seven of eight site visit sites. Five of the site visit sites had systems changes associated with improved practices and/or policies and four site visit sites included outcomes related to workforce development. Only two site visit sites had infrastructure changes, and two included changes in communications as key elements driving population change. No site visit sites had direct relationships between data-related systems changes and population change.

## The strength of relationships between systems changes and population changes was variable.

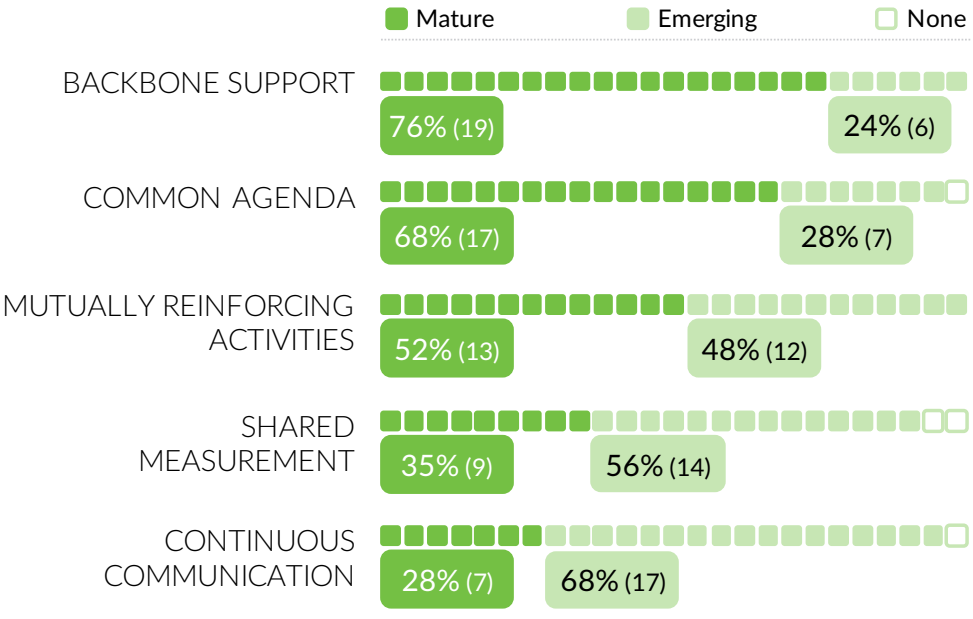
Each of the site visit sites had one specific hypothesis that connected their systems changes to their population change. All of the hypotheses described how the suite of systems changes that had been achieved resulted in the observed population change. When the process tracing tests were applied to assess the strength of these hypothesized relationships, a range of strengths of contribution were found. One site visit site's hypothesis was plausible but the data did not clearly prove or disprove the relationship. Three site visit sites had evidence that is sufficient to conclude that a causal relationship exists but not to rule out the possibility that the outcome would have also occurred due to rival explanations. Four site visit sites had data that made the relationship between the system change and the population change compelling and unlikely to have an alternative explanation. This differs from the overall assessment of initiative contributon which looked at the strength of contribution across the *entire* understanding of contribution rather than the individual linkages in the hypothesized changes.

# DESIGN & IMPLEMENTATION OF COLLECTIVE IMPACT

Study sites generally demonstrated stronger implementation of the backbone support and common agenda conditions of collective impact and emerging or no implementation of the shared measurement and continuous communication conditions.

Initiatives were considered to have mature implementation of a collective impact condition if they have all of the critical elements of that condition; and they were deemed to have emerging implementation of a condition if they have some, but not all elements, or are beginning to develop all elements, but are not strong in them yet *(see the full report for a detailed explanation of the rubrics used to make these assessments)*. As shown in the figure below, study sites generally had stronger implementation of the backbone support and common agenda and emerging or no implementation for shared measurement and continuous communication.

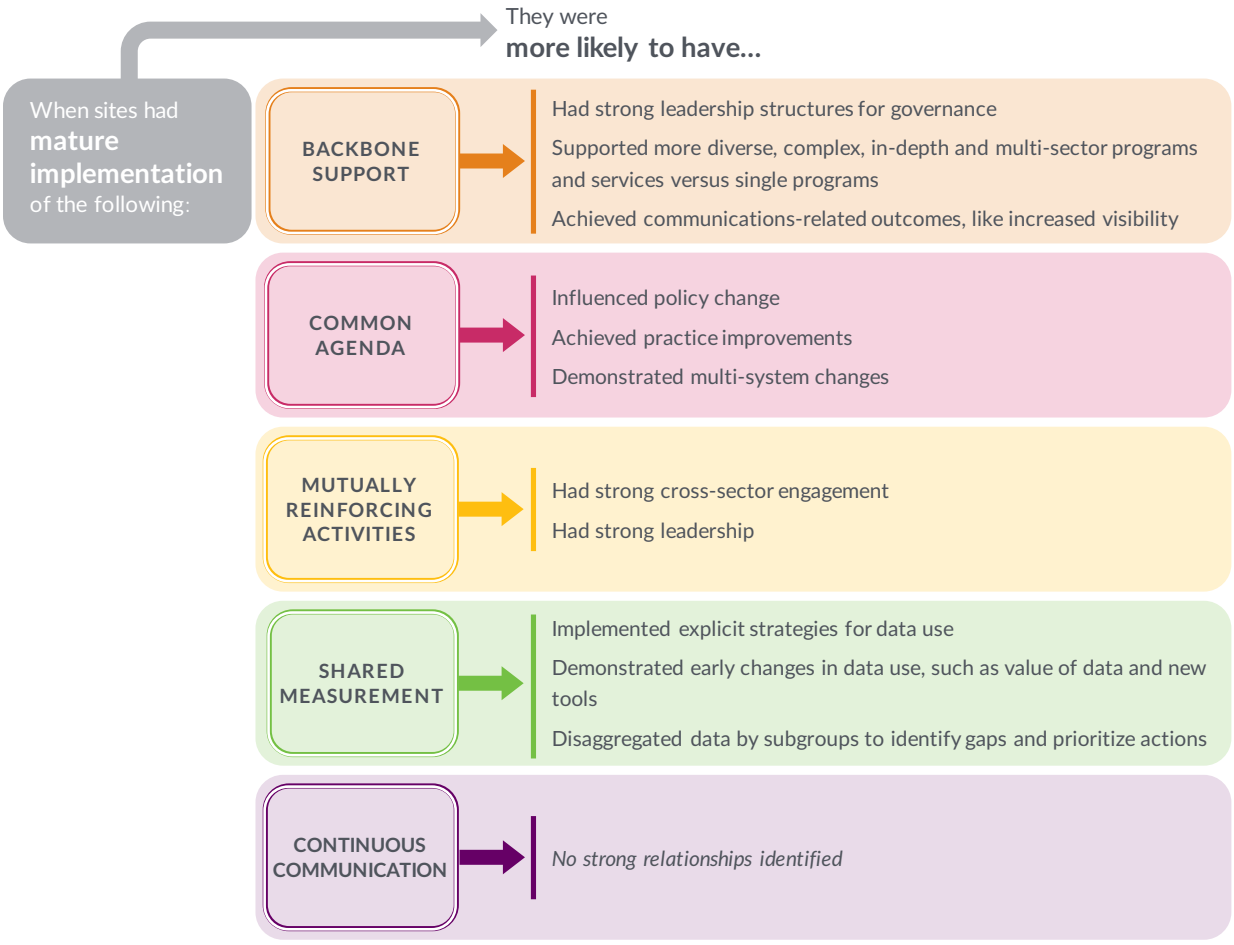
Figure 5 | Proportion of sites that either have mature or emerging collective impact conditions (N=25)



## Sites with more mature implementation of the collective impact conditions tend to show differences in strategies and outcomes.

Maturity of implementation within four of the five conditions was associated with differences in action reflecting the collective impact principles, strategies, and types of early changes and systems changes achieved *(see Figure 6)*.

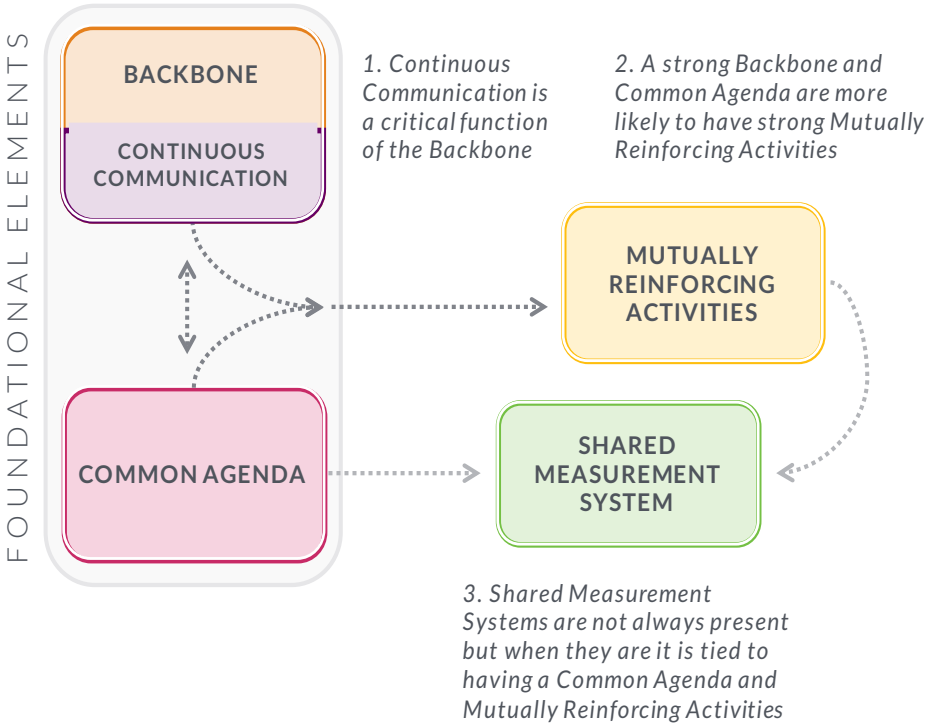
Figure 6 | Summary of Mature Collective Impact Practices and their Relationships to Strategies and Outcomes



## Evidence suggests a refined understanding of the interplay between the five conditions of collective impact.

The five collective impact conditions are often presented as equal in importance, whereas data from the study sites suggests a slightly refined understanding *(see Figure 7)*. Backbone support and the common agenda were fundamental to the study sites: maturity in these two conditions was related to having achieved a variety of outcomes (early, systems, and population change). Mature backbones are often engaged in the initiative from the beginning and play a role in convening partners to develop a common agenda. Furthermore, backbones often play a critical role in making sure initiative activities align with the overarching common agenda. Mutually reinforcing activities benefit from backbones that play facilitative roles, either directly or by building capacity and providing behind the scenes support to others who are facilitating workgroups and moving activities forward. Backbones are often responsible for implementing communication activities, including internal communication between partners and initiative structures, as well as external communications through websites, newsletters, media presence, networking, and outreach. Shared measurement systems was least likely to be implemented fully, and sometimes this condition was simply not present. However, when it was present, it was identified as important and often had many data strategies related to it. Continuous communication was generally less of a focus among study sites, where they treated it largely as a function fulfilled by the backbone, but not a central element of their work.

Figure 7 | The Relationship Between the Collective Impact Conditions



## Exploration of the collective impact principle "Cultivate leaders with unique system leadership skills" confirmed the criticality of leadership from the backbone and among partners.

The site visit sites reported on the importance of leadership among backbone staff and partners in the initiative, describing strong leadership as values-based, stable, committed, and collaborative. Leadership is also responsible in some initiatives for clearly articulating the nature of the problem, creating space for the public discourse, and, in essence, holding the urgency and importance of the work of the initiative front and center for the other participants. Many initiatives identified the importance of leaders having a deep understanding of the problem and issue.

Additionally, initiatives described the growth in leadership over time, either in terms of the strength of the leaders or the diversity and representation across leaders. They also describe specific roles their leaders take on, from governing roles (e.g., chairing committees or running the backbone) to influential actions (e.g., advancing legislation) to being the face of the work in the broader community. While leaders in some initiatives are also leaders in major institutions (e.g., state partners, school districts) other initiatives also have leaders who are from their community and/or are directly affected by the problem. Challenges related to leadership included turnover, mismatch between leadership roles and leadership styles, lack of particular skills, and lack of diversity in leadership.

CASE EXAMPLE

VERMONT FARM TO PLATE'S backbone originally provided a lot of direct support, which absorbed much of their available capacity. To address this, they established a new structure where workgroup chairs come together and receive training and capacity building support from the backbone, have signed contracts, and receive stipends for their roles, which include tracking accountability and facilitating meetings.

## Exploration of the collective impact principle "Recruit and co-create with cross-sector partners" supported the importance of specific and meaningful engagement by partners from different types of organizations for effectiveness.

Evidence suggests that cross-sector involvement in initiative leadership and change efforts supports achievement of early changes and systems changes. Notably, there were clear examples of many partners implementing the plan together, rather than one or only a few organizations doing the majority of the work, in study sites with strong action plans. Challenges to cross-sector alignment include: differences among aligning parties in their respective purposes (e.g., education vs. law enforcement, for-profit vs. non-profit, prevention vs. treatment); difficulties engaging community members, youth, and some community-based organizations; limited capacity of local government partners; limited capacity and time to devote to cross-sector engagement; and the changing nature of engagement needs across time.

## Exploration of the collective impact principle "Use data to continuously learn, adapt, and improve" surfaced a multitude of ways that collective impact initiatives use different kinds of data.

Shared measurement systems represents a critical element of collective impact initiatives' data infrastructure. Shared measurement systems for many initiatives included either a set of agreed upon indicators, tracked consistently over time or a common data collection tool. The nine initiatives with a mature shared measurement system used their data: (1) as an accountability tool; (2) to measure, report on, and improve progress; (3) to drive changes in practice, including making decisions on which programs or investments to make; (4) to help describe the scope of the issue and build partnerships; and (5) to inform and influence policy.

Initiatives supplemented shared measurement systems data with data from other sources to understand their problem better or program evaluation results to understand potential solutions. All three of the site visit sites with strong, mature, and consistent implementation of shared measurement systems developed their own systems for data collection, affording the initiatives some flexibility in identifying the most important types of information.

Some initiatives have been able to staff their backbones to include data expertise, such as coordinators and analysts. Others rely on partners to lead data and research workgroups, even if the data is compiled and communicated by the backbone. Sites also recognized the importance of capacity among stakeholders to use data effectively, for which some initiatives provide trainings.

Challenges to data use included: having access to data (particularly true—but not always—for initiatives that relied on secondary data); having data on nearer-term measures (vs. ultimate outcomes, e.g., systems changes) or drivers of the problem; and having access to data that is at the right level and/or covers an entire population of interest. Study sites also noted struggles to use the data due to lack of focus on or framework for data-driven learning, or a lack of necessary skills.

## When looking at how initiatives approach equity in their work, about a third had equity capacity/intent and focused actions, but many struggled with meaningful inclusion.

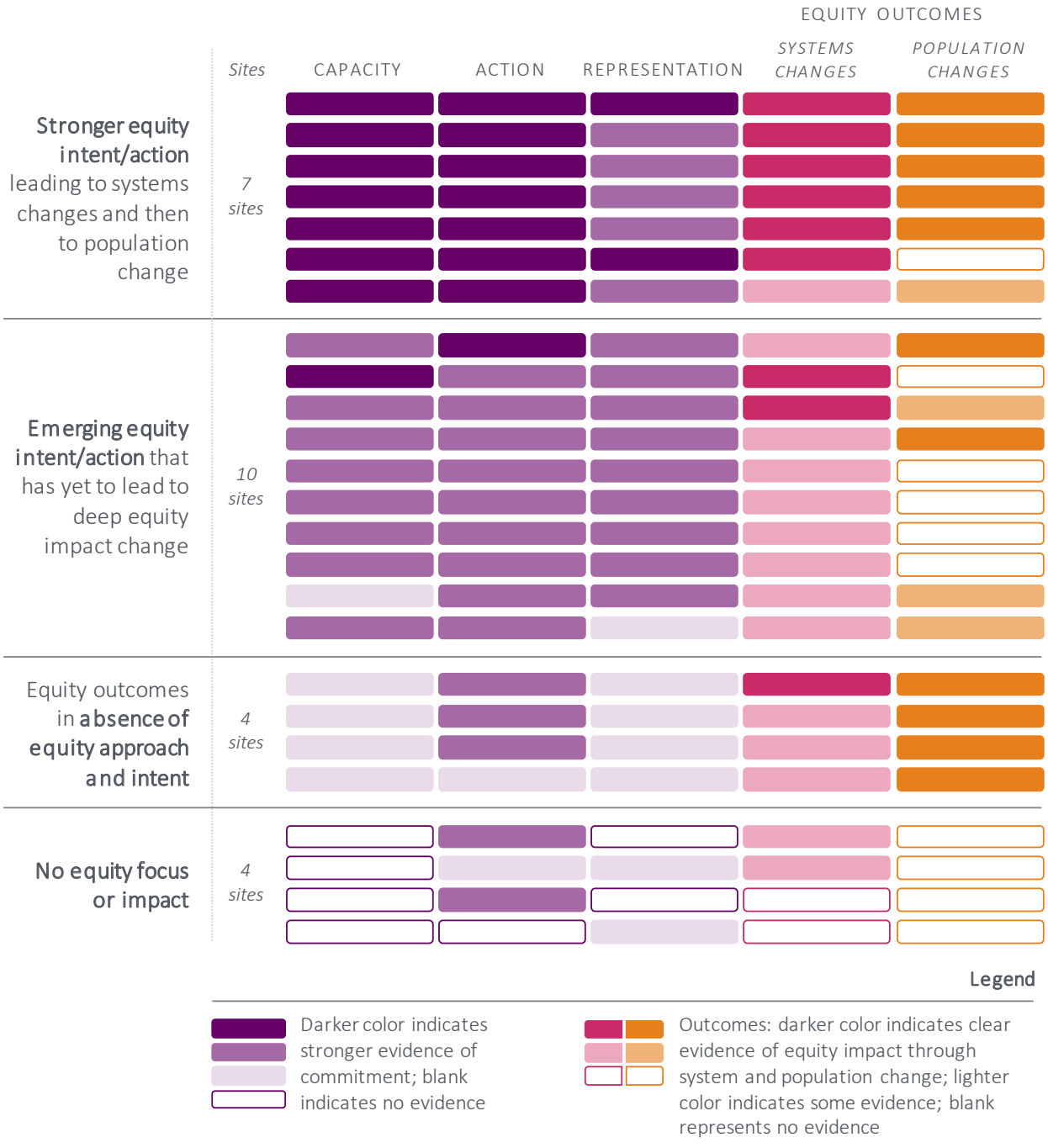
The study defined equity to observe indicators of an equitable collective impact approach based on the Forum's discussions *(see inset for definition)*.

*"Equity is fairness achieved through (1) systematically assessing disparities in opportunities and outcomes caused by structures and systems and (2) by addressing these disparities through meaningful inclusion and representation of affected communities and individuals, targeted actions, and changes in institutional structures and systems to remove barriers and increase pathways to success."*

| FOCUS | FINDINGS |
|---|---|
| **Capacity to engage** in equity action, including explicitness of intent or focus, capacity-building activities, shared language, and credibility of the initiative backbone and leadership with the community. | **About a third of the sites (8 sites) have strong equity capacity,** while another third (8 sites) are emerging in building their capacity to take on equity work. Sometimes this focus came early on; for others, the focus was a newer way of approaching their work. |
| **Equity-focused actions** including using locally relevant and disaggregated data to understand disparities, targeting actions to greatest need, building on community strengths and assets for solutions, and engaging in deep structural analysis of inequity root causes. | **Many with stronger focus in this area use data strategies and communications.** Few are specifically focused on root causes. |
| **Representation and meaningful inclusion,** including those with lived experience being adequately represented in leadership, governance, and initiative work, shifting of power to those affected most by the problem being addressed, and successfully engaging those who typically do not participate. | **Two sites with strong ratings use a grassroots organizing approach;** most struggle to ensure adequate representation and shift power to the communities being affected. |

In addition to assessing initiatives' equity capacity, actions, and inclusion, the study also looked at the degree to which study sites achieved systems and population changes that addressed structural barriers and closed gaps.

Figure 8 | Effect of Capacity, Action, and Representation on Equity Outcomes



## Initiatives with strong and emerging equity focus showed promise in their equity outcomes; those with no focus typically did not see results that advanced equity, with a few exceptions.

As shown in Figure 8 on the previous page, stronger implementation of equity intent and actions seems to lead to some achievement of equitable systems and population changes, with stronger results among those with the strongest equity focus. Not surprisingly, those with no focus typically see no equity outcomes. There are a few exceptions among a few sites with narrowly defined populations that are considered "high risk," such as veteran and chronic homelessness and workforce development and economic growth in Appalachia—a geographic region negatively impacted by the decline of coal and manufacturing jobs. The key for these initiatives appears to lie in actions and systems changes across the initiative that naturally focus on high-need populations experiencing inequities, and thus their programmatic and policy solutions have a disproportionate benefit to those groups. While these study sites do not have an explicit focus and/or attend deeply to issues of representation and inclusion, they are achieving impact that could be described as equity-focused, in that better systems and outcomes appear to be benefitting high-risk populations. However, equity, as defined for this study, goes beyond simply achieving outcomes for particular groups. Equity implies other outcomes are equally as important, such as shifting the power dynamic, empowering communities to make decisions, and implementing solutions that build on strengths.

## Sites without demonstrated population changes differed in some key ways.

Among the study sites, five sites had no population change. These sites had less strong implementation of the collective impact conditions, had significantly fewer early changes related to partnerships, and had significantly fewer policy changes, practice improvements, and systems changes within one or similar organizations. Importantly, they had also been implemented for less time. They had also faced some specific challenges, including: difficulties establishing a common agenda; more difficulty measuring impact; some site-specific challenges with internal processes like staffing or the backbone; or external challenges due to political constraints, transitions, and competing initiatives.

# IMPLICATIONS

## IMPLICATION 1

### Collective impact is a long-term proposition; take the time to lay a strong foundation

Many of the study sites achieving population-level change have been around for more than a decade, and none for fewer than three years. Not surprisingly, the study confirms the often-stated belief that collective impact is a long-term play, not a quick-win game. The findings also clearly indicate that there are specific steps initiatives can take up front to increase their likelihood of success over the long-term, including:

- **Recognizing it is worth the time upfront** to clearly define the problem and target population.
- **Not rushing to get the five conditions in place,** but rather first investing thoughtfully in the two that are most foundational: backbone and common agenda.

In practice, this suggests:

- **Taking the time to find a credible, skilled, and ready backbone** (composed of one or more organizations) who can build trust, convene the right people, and apply the technical skills needed to maintain an effective collaborative environment focused on systems change.
- **Taking the time to develop a strong common agenda** using an inclusive, effective process, even if the stakeholders are struggling with "process fatigue." This is likely to pay off in the future with the scope and scale of change that is possible and lays the groundwork for continued engagement in mutually reinforcing activities.

# IMPLICATION 2

## Systems changes take many forms; be iterative and intentional

The opportunity to look at how 25 different initiatives approached systems change is powerful. It builds an understanding of the many different combinations of formal and informal changes that have occurred, as well as the variability in the changes occurring in one organization and across many. The study found many different routes to driving change, such as informal partnerships leading to formal changes across organizations, formal changes in one organization leading to changes across organizations, and changes in one system leading to changes across multiple systems.

There was not one path or a simple pattern that can be replicated. In fact, the pattern that was found is as simple as:

Systems change is iterative and not fully predictable, with a wide variety of systems changes playing valuable roles toward population changes.

Some of the changes that occur may or may not be directly tied to population-level change, and yet hold value for other reasons (e.g., building will to keep the work moving, creating greater visibility, establishing partnerships, etc.). Some changes may be hard to envision upfront, and others may be in response to an emergent environmental dynamic.

# IMPLICATION 3

## Equity goes beyond achieving a set of outcomes; it requires intent, shifting power, and meaningful inclusion along with targeted problem definition and action

The study findings suggest that equity is broader than simply targeting actions toward a specific group. For collective impact to achieve its full and lasting potential, it is necessary to re-think the systems and structures that produce inequity to begin with. As such, equity in collective impact requires capacity to reflect on and drive an equity perspective, sharply target interventions that will address the greatest need, and shift power from system leaders to the communities who are direct beneficiaries of the work.

Successful equity outcomes stem from capacity for equity work with the backbone and throughout the initiative partners. Backbones who have equity capacity are staffed by individuals with lived experience in leadership and the work, and are engaged in reflective practice about their own power within the system. Initiatives with strong equity capacity have an explicit and shared lens of social justice to guide action.

Bringing community stakeholders to the table and shifting power to their voices, assets, and solutions can drive change at a very different level than system partners speaking on behalf of the community. Strong equity sites are intentional about representation, inclusion, and empowerment.

# IMPLICATION 4

## Collective impact initiatives take on different roles in driving change; be open to different routes to making a difference

As shown through the site visit sites, the collective impact approach made a difference in a diverse set of circumstances, sometimes as a driver of change, sometimes leveraging existing regulations and conditions and going further, and sometimes as a meaningful support to other critical efforts happening within communities.

Some of the collective impact critics describe collective impact as always taking a driving role, drowning out other efforts and community voices, lacking humility, disrupting other work and networks, and advancing a structure (the backbone) that is inherently top-down. The findings from this study provide a more nuanced understanding of the broader set of roles that initiatives can and do take, all of which have led toward population level impact among the site visit sites. A more explicit effort to identify the role that is the right fit, given the environment the initiative is implementing within could help strengthen its ability to leverage and contribute to early and systems changes needed to achieve population change. It could help better define what kinds of measures are most important to track, who should be at the table, and how to think about success relative to other efforts in play. It could also ultimately establish the initiative as an important presence in the community, filling a critical and problematic gap, rather than risking replacement of otherwise effective structures and voices.

Click here to read how these implications play out differently for different types of stakeholders: funders, implementors, community participants, and evaluators/researchers.

# CONCLUSION

In the end, the data clearly showed cases when the collective impact approach meaningfully contributed to documented population changes, clarified ways that systems changes occur to support collective impact common agendas, largely reinforced the importance of four of the five conditions, and provided a better understanding of what equity approaches and outcomes can look like. The study also provides fodder for collective impact funders, implementers, community participants, and evaluators and researchers, raising considerations and concepts that can be applied to ongoing, on-the-ground collective impact initiatives.

While this research study is an important contribution to the field, it is not—and cannot be—the final word on collective impact's effectiveness. Every study has its limitations and questions that are out of scope. Many critical questions remain around getting to equity, comparing collective impact to other models of change, learning from failed initiatives, and more. Ongoing exploration will continue to help those in the social sector who spend time, money, and social capital in their pursuit of resolving—sustainably and at scale—deeply entrenched and complex social problems.

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