

Sponsored Supplement to *SSIR*
We Need More Scale, Not More Innovation
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We Need More Scale, Not More Innovation

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Solutions to urgent social problems are all around us. To broaden their impact, support community organizing and advocacy.

Innovation has been critical to economic and social progress since the invention of the wheel. But innovation isn't everything. In fact, when it comes to addressing today's urgent social problems, from education and public health to civil and human rights, innovation is overrated.

The greatest impediment to solving these problems is not a lack of innovation. Rather, it is our inability to scale up solutions that we know work. Grantmakers that want to see social solutions take hold need to focus less on finding the next great idea and more on helping grow the impact of ideas that are already working.

Consider the example of Homeboy Industries. This 25-year-old community-based nonprofit was birthed in East Los Angeles, Calif., and now serves a broader geographic community. Homeboy has achieved national acclaim for giving former gang members and felons a second chance by providing them with meaningful employment. The founder and executive director, Father Greg Boyle, coined a now-famous motto to explain his theory of change to confront the thorny, complex matter of



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gang violence in urban America: "Nothing stops a bullet like a job."

The California Endowment has provided financial support to Homeboy for several years. The organization's innovation comes in the form of a collection of community-based, integrated, one-stop support services cobbled together over time, from workforce training and mental health services to tattoo removal. Father Boyle describes what the organization does as engaging in unconditional "hope, love, and compassion" for a throwaway population of young people.

Homeboy has a clear, well-structured program supported by research that demonstrates its effectiveness. The success rate of the program's graduates is three times better than a comparable population of ex-offenders emerging from the Los Angeles County juvenile detention system. Homeboy saves taxpayers between \$60,000 and \$120,000 for every young person who gets a job, keeps a job, and stays clear of "la vida loca," the violently crazy, prison-destined gang life.

Missed Connections

Ironically, Homeboy is located about 15 blocks from the downtown offices of the Los Angeles County government, including its

juvenile justice and probation systems. Despite being under continuous fire from the courts for its failure to implement meaningful systemic reforms, the county probation system has rarely incorporated any of Homeboy's innovations into its programs. Homeboy's lessons for reform are celebrated worldwide but ignored in its own county.

Local probation departments are not the only ones asleep at the switch. The California state government is currently undertaking extensive restructuring of its criminal justice and incarceration systems. Billions of dollars are being moved from state criminal justice oversight to local and county systems, creating a significant opportunity to reform sentencing and rehabilitation practices, expand community-based approaches, improve recidivism outcomes, and lower costs. There's a real chance to end the incarceration super-highway that traps so many black and brown young men. Homeboy, and similarly effective community-based innovations, should emerge as a focal point of reform efforts.

But no. The juvenile justice and criminal justice systems trudge along, engaging in business as usual and all but ignoring the evidence-based practices that are staring them in the face—programs that cost less and keep communities safer.

A Power Shortage

The Homeboy case is a quintessential example of the Sisyphean challenge of social change philanthropy. We keep pushing innovation up a hill made too steep by the force of political stasis. We fund an innovation, publish data on its effectiveness, and hope that little elves will magically appear to—presto!—transform our evidence-laden innovation into scaled-up programs that lead to positive social change.

But our hopes of transformation are dashed by our inability to foster the social and political power to demand, convince, cajole, and even force these larger systems to change.

To stick with the Homeboy example, multiple forces are impeding the progress of juvenile justice and criminal justice system reforms in California. The growing for-profit prison industry, for example, wields significant lobbying and political power. Another opposing force is the law enforcement lobby, including the correctional officers union, one of the most powerful labor unions in the state.

Reforms that reduce prison populations

run counter to the interests of for-profit prison companies and some of these unions. The voices of reform-minded advocates, innovators, and community leaders are drowned out by well-financed, politically connected forces.

But the problem is not just about political power and money. There's often a values disconnect that reformers must overcome. The people running juvenile probation systems and many of our elected leaders sometimes see things differently from Father Boyle. Too many officials view the young offenders as a throwaway population and design the system to be a revolving door that keeps these young men out of our schools and off our streets.

Those of us in philanthropy are guilty as well, because we allow the imbalance of power to persist. Our fascination with innovation has a high price: We treat social problems as if they require primarily a technical fix: "If we can just find the next systems upgrade, or killer software app, we'll solve the problem." This focus diverts our attention from the underlying social structures that perpetuate the problem. By obsessing about the technical, we can avoid being political and dodge the messy fights that social change and social justice require.

Joining the Fight for Scale

So what's a private foundation committed to social change to do? The answer: fund advocacy and organizing. We need to focus less on the search for new ideas and more on funding the community's fight to scale up known solutions.

A few years ago, The California Endowment's board of directors visited a Fresno nonprofit focused on creating health-promoting environments for young people in 14 economically distressed communities across California. During this visit, we heard directly from youth leaders about a burning issue that was not on our radar screen: schools' over-reliance on suspensions.

Little did we know that school suspensions had reached epidemic proportions, not only in Fresno but across the United States. The civic response to the Columbine High School shootings, along with the 1980s-fueled War on Drugs, has resulted in a zero-tolerance culture in our nation's public schools. One in nine US middle school and high school students was suspended during the 2009-10 school year. For African Americans and Latinos, suspension rates

have doubled since the 1970s.

What began as a well-intended effort to make sure schools are safe has, in practice, evolved into something that is unnecessarily imperiling the life chances of countless young people every year. Just a single suspension in ninth grade doubles a student's chances of dropping out, according to a recent study by the University of California, Los Angeles.

The following are some of the comments we heard from that group of 16- to 21-year-olds in Fresno.

- "We want you to help us get rid of these overly harsh zero-tolerance policies."
- "They are pushing our young black and brown men out of school."
- "These suspensions criminalize and stigmatize us."
- "There are better ways to hold people accountable, and maybe even get them some help."

A few grantees were already working on this issue. Our job was to fuel the fire that many others had started. We worked with grantee organizations to get more data, and in the process we learned that the state of

course. Newspaper editorials and op-eds began to appear. School boards in Los Angeles, Fresno, and Oakland announced policy changes on suspensions. The California legislature created a Select Committee on Boys and Young Men of Color. Bills on school discipline reform made their way to Governor Jerry Brown's desk, and he signed five of them into law.

The message was powerful and simple: Stop the wanton practice of suspending and expelling kids from school. Discipline and accountability are important, but there are healthier and smarter measures that work.

Standing Up to Power

In the fight against zero-tolerance policies in California schools, innovative practices, data, and research were important. But social innovation without advocacy and organizing would have been in vain. It was the mobilization of the community, and in particular young people, that paved the way for the innovation to break through.

Funding advocacy and community organizing may not be as glamorous, neat, or tidy as supporting the next great program or orga-

Philanthropy has to recognize that community power, voice, and advocacy are, to use a football analogy, the blocking and tackling of winning social change.

Texas had just completed a study showing that, on average, half of its high school students had been suspended at least once.

Further research showed that alternative practices to zero-tolerance suspension policies had emerged as well, including "restorative justice" approaches that require students who've just had a conflict to talk it out and make amends. Also emerging are teen courts, and even meditation in the classroom. Each is demonstrating better results than quick-trigger suspensions.

After youth leaders connected with each other across several cities in the state, The California Endowment funded their coordinated advocacy efforts. They met with or testified before school boards, city councils, and state officials. They blogged, tweeted, made videos, wrote plays, and spread the word however they could. They demanded change.

The school suspension issue began to make its way into the civic and political dis-

nization. It's difficult to capture the results in a glossy bar graph or pie chart, and it doesn't necessarily lead to easy photo opportunities like stocking a neighborhood food bank. But philanthropy has to recognize that community power, voice, and advocacy are, to use a football analogy, the blocking and tackling of winning social change.

We must find our way, as a field, to focus on scaling up solutions—and doing this requires us to engage in power politics. We need to help build the voice, engagement, and power of those living in the most distressed communities. We need to throw our weight behind long-term social change efforts and the movements for social justice. We are not just one killer app away from solving poverty, improving public education, or ending homelessness. As the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass stated, "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has, and it never will." ✨