


# Mack Center on Nonprofit and Public Sector Management in Human Service Organizations

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## Abstract

This invited set of reflections upon the research carried out under the auspices of a school of social work is part of a series featuring research centers. It reflects 25 years of scholarly work related to both public and nonprofit human service organizations at the only university-based research center in the United States devoted to research on the management of human service organizations. Organized in the predefined categories of center history, structure, past projects, and current projects, it features current and past research in the areas of welfare services, child welfare services, adult and aging services, organizational support for evidence-informed practice, sustainability of nonprofits, international human services, and practice research methodology. Dedicated to the principles of team science by including graduate students, postdoctorate fellows, and consulting researchers, the Mack Center features the processes of practice research in which practitioners play a major role in the research process.

## Keywords

child welfare, field of practice, welfare, qualitative, outcome study

While there is a long history of promoting research in schools of social work, the establishment of research centers or units emerged dramatically in the 1960s in partial response to the flood of social legislation on major social problems. New research funding became available in connection with the War on Poverty, the expansion of community mental health and community health programs, the attention to diversity related to the passage of civil rights and voting rights legislation, and the focus on urban problems reflected in the model cities programs. Leading schools of social work began establishing research units to support faculty research interests in many of these areas. Over the past 50 years of social work education, research has taken on increased prominence as doctoral programs prepare increasingly competent researchers and schools seek to expand university supports for scholars capable of competing for federal research grants. The specialized interests and competencies of faculty provide the major incentive for developing organizational units to support their research activities.

This is a story of one type of research center that differs from many of the others due to its local funding, its focus on practice, and its cultivation of community partners invested in applied research for use in practice.

## History of the Center

The Mack Center can trace its origin to the founding of the Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) in 1987 that is celebrating its 30th anniversary in 2017 (Austin et al., 1999).

This group of San Francisco Bay Area (California) county human service directors, five deans/directors of university social work education programs, and one foundation representative meets 5 times per year to discuss issues impacting publicly supported social services (child welfare, welfare to work, and adult protective and support services). Out of these discussions emerged a consensus that much of the research that was being done in their public sector agencies involved providing client data to state and federal officials. Very little of this information was useful for local program planning and decision-making. Several large counties decided to expand their annual BASSC dues by providing additional financial resources to support a regional Research Response Team which has now been in existence for over 20 years. The initial exploratory research projects covered a wide range of topics (Austin, Dal Santo, Goldberg, & Choice, 2001). These studies were followed by a major focus on conducting structured literature reviews (somewhat like systematic reviews) in order to inform the practice community with regard to innovations and promising practices (Anthony & Austin, 2008). Many of the

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projects that reflect the early and later period of research are noted below in the sections on past completed projects.

In 2006, the BASSC projects became part of a newly endowed Mack Center on Nonprofit and Public Sector Management in the Human Services. Based on the generosity of an alum of the School of Social Welfare, this US\$3½ million endowment provided funds for an endowed chair in nonprofit management, doctoral and postdoctoral fellowships, and seed funding for the Center to engage in applied research that benefited nonprofit human service organizations. It provided the resources to study organizational change across nonprofit and public sector human service organizations. This research center proved to be unique among universities in the United States (Sommerfeld & Austin, 2014). A consortium similar to BASSC was developed in 2007 to include executive directors of major nonprofits serving families and children (often contractors with county human service organizations) to provide a think tank and support group on priority issues that often related to their efforts to work with public sector organizations.

### **The Center's Organizational, Staffing, and Funding Structure**

The Mack Center is physically located in the Center for Social Service Research in the School of Social Welfare at the University of California, Berkeley. Office space is provided for doctoral and postdoctoral fellows along with offices for full-time project staff. The Center for Social Services Research began in 1992 with a designated director and was then led by a faculty committee of active researchers. This structure changed again with administrative oversight provided by a staff member with a grants and finance background. Today, project directors work actively with the assistant dean for administration and report to the dean for major staff appointments and financial issues.

The staffing of the Mack Center includes a part-time Center director who is a tenured member of the faculty, a full-time research director (nontenure track), a full-time postdoctoral fellow, several predoctoral fellows, and multiple summer MSW (Master of Social Welfare) fellows. The Center includes a part-time administrative coordinator and multiple external faculty and practice consultants serving in various roles on research teams (senior Mack Center fellows).

The annual research funding for the Mack Center on Nonprofit and Public Sector Management in the Human Services (as distinguished from another Mack Center devoted to mental health and social change located in the Center for Social Service Research) includes internal annual endowment funds for fellowships and center operations along with external contract research funding derived from the annual dues coming from 12 Bay Area county human service organizations. The total annual research funding averages US\$350,000 per year.

### **Past Completed Projects**

The Center's completed projects are described chronologically to reflect the fact that all research topics emerge from

collaboration with our practice partners and often reflect the challenges and opportunities of the evolving policy and practice environment in which they operate.

### **Welfare to Work Services**

The BASSC research program began in the midst of the national debate about welfare reform and the passage of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Particular attention was given to the policy implementation process since most of the national administrative data focused on caseload dynamics and not the service innovations associated with the use of incentive funds provided to the states for reducing caseloads (Austin, 2004; Austin & Carnochan, 2002; Prince & Austin, 2001, 2003). In addition, survey research was carried out to assess both staff and client perceptions of the process of welfare reform implementation (Austin, Chow, Johnson, DeMarco, & Ketch, 2008; Austin, DeMarco, & Chow, 2009; Johnson, Ketch, Chow, & Austin, 2006). As our county partners struggled with policy development to envision postwelfare reform options, there was a call for a literature review on the latest research on low-income families since many poor families were not eligible under the welfare reform legislation along with a continuing interest in policy options to address child poverty (Anthony, King, & Austin, 2011; Austin, Lemon, & Leer 2006; Chow, Johnson, & Austin, 2006; Hastings, Taylor, & Austin, 2006; Lemon & Austin, 2006). The continuing impact of welfare reform on vulnerable populations during the Great Recession of 2008–2012 raised more questions about the role of subsidized employment and President Obama's efforts to address both corporate and individual needs led to a study of employers participating in county subsidized employment programs (Carnochan, Taylor, & Austin, 2014; Taylor, Carnochan, & Austin, 2016).

### **Child Welfare Services**

While the Center initially focused on welfare reform, it also launched research in the area of child welfare beginning with a major study of child welfare and the courts, published in the new *Journal of Public Child Welfare* (Carnochan et al., 2007; Han, Carnochan, & Austin, 2007). Similar efforts were made to understand the career trajectory of foster children in the school system (Stone, D'Andrade, & Austin, 2006). Following these regional exploratory studies, there was growing interest in other child welfare issues that led to structured literature reviews related to the disproportional representation of children of color in the child welfare system, substance abuse treatment, risk assessment, family assessment, outcome assessment, and other areas that appeared in a special issue of the *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work* (2008) and in book form (Austin, 2010). Based on some pioneering work in the United Kingdom on developing child welfare pointers to inform practitioners regarding national service outcomes, the research underlying the outcomes, and related promising practices, a comprehensive literature review was conducted on six

of the major U.S. child welfare outcomes (recurrence of maltreatment, timely reunification, foster care reentry, timely adoption, exits to permanency, and placement stability) and published as a special issue of the *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work* (Carnochan, Samples, Lawson & Austin, 2013; Carnochan, Rizik-Baer, Lawson, & Austin, 2013a; Carnochan, Rizik-Baer, Lawson & Austin, 2013b; Carnochan, Lee, Lawson, & Austin, 2013a; Carnochan, Lee, Lawson, & Austin, 2013b; Carnochan, Moore, & Austin, 2013; Carnochan, Moore, Lawson, & Austin, 2013).

### **Adult and Aging Services**

In addition to developing case studies to capture innovative practice in the area of adult and aging services (Austin, Malks, & Schmidt, 2002), several literature reviews were conducted at the same time that child welfare reviews were being completed related to risk assessment and long-term care policy development (Anthony, Lehning, Peck, & Austin, 2009; Lehning & Austin, 2010).

### **Organizational Support for Evidence-Informed Practice**

Prior, during, and following the Great Recession of 2008–2012, there was growing interest in exploring the different ways that evidence from research could inform contemporary practice in human service organizations. This interest led to documenting current agency practices that utilized evidence to inform decision-making and program development (Austin, Dal Santo, & Lee, 2012; Lee & Austin, 2012). At the same time, there was interest in reflecting on the organizational lessons learned from managing public sector human service organizations in the midst of the Great Recession (findings related to financial literacy, organizational communications, and organizational restructuring in the context of the expanding role of technology) and a case study of the role of the nonprofit sector of community partners seeking to rebuild the safety net (Graaf, Carnochan, Radu, & Austin, 2016; Radu, Carnochan, & Austin, 2015). Always include the period in et al.

The case-based exploratory research led to an expanded interest in identifying the dimensions of organizational support for implementing evidence-informed practice through the use of survey research. These efforts included a survey of managers in human service organizations (Carnochan, McBeath, & Austin, 2017; McBeath & Austin, 2015; McBeath, Jolles, Carnochan, & Austin, 2015) as well as a search internationally to identify promising organizational structures (Graaf, McBeath, Lwin, Holmes, & Austin, 2017).

### **History and Sustainability of Nonprofit Human Service Organizations**

To balance the heavy focus on public sector human service organizations, a new line of research was opened during the Great Recession that focused on the nonprofit partners of the county human service organizations. It began with an extensive

piece of historical research to document the organizational histories of pioneering nonprofit human service organizations in the Bay Area (Austin, 2013; Kimberlin, Schwartz, & Austin, 2011). With this historical foundation that included budget histories, the focus shifted from the factors that helped to explain sustainability over time to an interest in the accountability demands associated with government-funded services (Carnochan, Samples, Myers, & Austin, 2014). In this work, a central focus was on the performance measurement–related processes, structures, and challenges experienced by nonprofit human service organizations, including the dominant role played by funders in defining key service outcomes.

### **International**

Given the Mack Center's focus on comparative analysis, engaging with practitioners and researchers internationally represents an ongoing interest. Early in its history, videoconferencing between county human service directors and their counterparts in England provided an important exchange of ideas related to child welfare and adult/aging services. Given that welfare reform in the United Kingdom followed soon after implementation in the United States, more comparative data were collected and shared (Austin, 2002). Similar data collection occurred when local authority social care departments were reorganized in order to identify implications for the United States (Goossen & Austin, 2017; Thompson, White, Carnochan, & Austin, 2013). With the arrival of the Mack Center endowment, new initiatives were developed to identify lesson learned from managing nongovernmental organizations in the Global South (Murtaza & Austin, 2011, 2015; Srivastava & Austin, 2012; Srivastava, Austin, & Murtaza, 2013). And most recently, the pioneering work in Norway on service user involvement was captured by a Mack Center Work Group in a 2015 special issue of the *Journal of Evidence-Informed Social Work* (Carnochan & Austin, 2015). Some of the most significant work of the Center is connected to the meetings of the International Conference on Practice Research that involve researchers from around the world focused on the engaging researchers, practitioners, and service users in the conduct of practice research.

### **Practice Research Methodology**

The past 25 years of Mack Center investments in practice research provide an opportunity to reflect on the methodology of practice research which is also gaining increased international attention with the Fourth International Conference on Practice Research (Hong Kong, 2017). As noted in the Oxford University Press Social Work Bibliography (Fisher et al., 2016), practice research builds upon the recognized methods of applied research by featuring the following principles and methodologies: (1) deriving the research questions from practice with the involvement of practitioners, (2) recognizing that research is a negotiated process between practitioners and researchers with a central role to be played by service users,

(3) shared roles and relations permeate the entire research enterprise from topic selection to data interpretation and dissemination, (4) building upon existing knowledge includes both existing literature and the tacit knowledge of practice, and (5) attention to balancing the two perspectives of theory-informed practice with practice-informed theory (Austin, 2017—conference keynote). In addition, the principles of “team science” have always guided our work, especially giving authorship prominence to graduate students.

## Current or Ongoing Projects

### *CW Data Mining and CW Teaching and Learning—A Casebook*

The focus on child welfare (CW) continues with current work related to data mining of the qualitative data contained in child welfare case records (Henry, Carnochan, & Austin, 2017). The Center has developed innovative methods to code and summarize narrative data contained in child welfare automated data systems (e.g., court reports, case contact notes, and case plan and assessments) to address questions about child welfare clients and practice. Current projects include a study in two counties of child welfare involved caregivers who use controlled substances, in which we are examining (1) the service needs of families with one or more caregivers who use controlled substances, (2) how child welfare agencies meet these service needs, (3) how caregivers respond to these services, and (4) how these service responses, combined with family characteristics and caregiver engagement, influence child welfare outcomes. A second project underway in a third county examines the intersection of child welfare and child mental health, including (1) child characteristics and mental and behavioral health needs, (2) family characteristics, (3) multisystem collaboration, (4) child outcomes, and (5) promising practices and practice challenges. In a related effort drawing on qualitative administrative data from multiple child welfare agencies, the Mack Center is developing a casebook that will provide teaching cases illustrating a broad array of practice issues, accompanied by tools for educators working in a range of educational and training settings. Building on the extensive qualitative data coding that has been conducted for specific analyses, “big data” strategies are now being designed that will employ automated text analysis to analyze qualitative case record data.

### *Family Stabilization*

Building on the Center’s past efforts to expand our understanding of those receiving welfare to work services, we are currently studying the implementation of a recently enacted statewide policy initiative related to family stabilization for CalWORKs participants (California’s Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program; Carnochan & Hengeveld-Bidmon, 2016; Stanczyk, Carnochan, & Austin, 2017, Stanczyk, Carnochan, Hengeveld-Bidmon, Austin, 2017). The family stabilization program provides families experiencing a

crisis with intensive case management, services to all family members, and access to a diverse array of community resources. Planning is in progress for a second phase of the study that will examine client perspectives related to their experiences in the program, including (1) client strengths and challenges, (2) specific services clients receive through participation in family stabilization, (3) client perceptions of services and their progress in addressing challenges as well as finding and maintaining employment, and (4) differences in experiences by client case and demographic characteristics and agency context.

### *Human Service Contracting*

Given that the funding of nonprofits by county human service organizations relies heavily on contracting, the current stage of research related to public–nonprofit relationships focuses on contractual relations and the perceptions of managers in both nonprofit and public sector organizations (McBeath, Carnochan, Stuart, & Austin, 2017). This line of research inquiry involves comparative case studies of three county–nonprofit human service dyads and a five county survey of county and nonprofit managers involved in managing contract relationships. Most recently, the Center has embarked on an analysis of over 800 human service contracts from six counties to examine resource allocation priorities and assess performance measurement strategies and capacity.

### *Structured Literature Reviews*

There is continuing interest voiced by our practice research partners in the community for literature reviews to capture the latest research and identify future practice and research implication. Current projects include research related to low-income men, adult offender community reentry, and the health determinants of social well-being. As in the past, journal publication will be pursued for each of these projects.

### *Practice Research Methods Textbook*

With encouragement from the Oxford University Press Series of Social Work Research Pocket Guides, a research methods textbook is being prepared that draws upon the past several decades of agency-supported practice research.

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