

Upstream Investments: An Examination of Policy that Supports Evidence-Informed, Prevention-Focused Practices

JOHN FONG

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The strategic plan set forth by the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors in 2007 presented findings that criminal justice costs comprised more than half of the discretionary general fund. As a result, the Board of Supervisors chartered the Upstream Investments Project to study the antecedents of criminal behavior. The Upstream Investments Project has since evolved into a community-wide policy framework with a set of principles and actions embedded in the organizational practices of county departments and community partners within Sonoma County. The focus of the project has grown from its early beginnings, now embodying a new downstream vision to eliminate poverty in Sonoma County with the use of “upstream” or prevention-focused practices. The

Sonoma County Board of Supervisors has been supportive and responsive to the recommendations set forth by the Upstream Investments Policy Committee. To date, the project has established an expansive Portfolio of Model Upstream Programs, which includes organizations that have all committed to provide evidence-informed services in Sonoma County. Through a collective impact approach, Sonoma County departments and community partners hope to move the needle as it relates to the incidence of poverty and related indicators in Sonoma County. This case study examines the evolution of the Upstream Investments policy and discusses implications for San Mateo County.

John Fong, Social Work Supervisor,
San Mateo County Human Services Agency

Upstream Investments: An Examination of Policy that Supports Evidence-Informed, Prevention-Focused Practices

JOHN FONG

Introduction

In recent years, prevention research has produced a body of work that suggests our society has the potential to dramatically reduce the incidence and prevalence of the most common and costly problems of human behavior. By identifying and implementing the most effective prevention practices, a wide variety of problems can be reduced, including but not limited to: depression, violence and delinquency, tobacco use, alcohol and other drug use, academic failure, risky sexual behavior, unemployment, injuries and accidents, and marital discord (Flay et. al., 2005). As such, there is increasing demand from policymakers, practitioners, and civic leaders for accountability as it relates to the use of public funds on interventions designed to promote health and well-being. The Society for Prevention Research suggests that it is in this context that policymakers, practitioners, and civic leaders will require standards to assess how well prevention-based programs and policies work, whether they are ready for widespread dissemination, and if not, what further research is needed to justify widespread dissemination (Flay et. al., 2005).

Upstream Investments, a Sonoma County strategic initiative, seeks to eliminate poverty in Sonoma County and ensure equal opportunity for quality education and good health in nurturing home and community environments. The mission is to facilitate the implementation of prevention-focused policies and interventions that increase equality and reduce monetary and societal costs for all residents of Sonoma County (Upstream Investments Policy

Committee, 2012). In 2010, the Upstream Investments Project made several recommendations to the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors, including expansion of the county's evaluation of existing and potential health and human service and criminal justice programs using published evidence, outcome monitoring, and cost-benefit analysis. Additionally, the project recommended the establishment of indicators that reflect "upstream" or prevention-focused principles, while exploring ways to coordinate and leverage the work of related county and community led initiatives. From an investment perspective, the project recommended seeking out new funding for upstream interventions, while ensuring that these prevention strategies were considered in ongoing budgetary and policy decisions. The final recommendation was to convene the Ad Hoc Upstream Board Committee to determine and carry out next steps in implementation (Upstream Investments Policy Committee, 2010). This case study examines the current status of Sonoma County's Upstream Investments Initiative, and how the model and/or related principles and policies might be applied to the prevention-focused work conducted in San Mateo County.

Background

The Upstream Investments Project was developed after the 2007 Sonoma County Strategic Plan found that criminal justice costs comprised over half of the discretionary general fund, and that these costs were growing. The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors chartered the Upstream Investments Project, and

set out to reach an understanding of the antecedents to criminal behavior, with the purpose to identify “upstream” prevention-focused interventions that reduce “downstream” criminal justice costs. Upon review of the literature, the project identified six factors as contributors to the onset of criminal behavior. Societal and economic factors included poverty and racial/ethnic disparities, community conditions, and public opinion, public policy and laws. Family and individual factors included family dysfunction, early anti-social behavior, and negative peer influences (Upstream Investments Policy Committee, 2010). The project continued to study the literature, and relied on data specific to Sonoma County, departmental and community partner information gathering, and a cost-benefit analysis, to find that the upstream interventions reviewed had not been effective in reducing downstream criminal justice costs to the general fund within a 10-year time frame. Despite these findings, Sonoma County moved forward with development and implementation of the project.

The lessons learned by Sonoma County through its process under the Upstream Investments Project are valuable to any organization hoping to make positive societal and fiscal impacts in response to common problems. San Mateo County has a long-standing commitment to prevention-focused practices, programs and policies. The examples are vast, including the Family Resource Center model implemented by the San Mateo County Human Services Agency; the use of intensive community-based case management services under a medical home model by the county health system; and the Service Connect Program, which is San Mateo County’s response to the AB109 re-entry population. Many similarities can be drawn between Sonoma County and San Mateo County in terms of the mindset in addressing downstream issues. The Upstream Investments Project has identified four goals and twenty-two indicators of success, which serve as a means to monitor the performance of the implemented interventions under the program. It is not the purpose of this case study to examine these goals and indicators in detail;

however, their similarities to the San Mateo County Shared Vision 2025 goals and indicators cannot be mistaken (*Figure 1*).

Clearly, there are some marked differences in the areas of focus for these two counties and their respective initiatives. This may be attributable to the broader scope and purpose of the Shared Vision 2025 initiative. As previously mentioned, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors initially chartered the Upstream Investments Project to investigate causality for the onset of criminal behaviors. San Mateo County Board of Supervisors chartered Shared Vision 2025 following a series of public meetings and community surveys, and was developed with the intent to reflect the expressed needs of the community. That said, even with differing intended purposes for each of these initiatives, there is much commonality in their respective indicators of success.

What sets Sonoma County and the Upstream Investments Project in a class of their own is the infrastructure that has been built to support a collective community effort to utilize evidence-informed practices. It is through this notion of collective impact that the Upstream Investments Project has cultivated a learning community; one that strives to consistently maintain a standardized methodology in its approach to the dissemination of effective services throughout the community. Although San Mateo County service providers thoughtfully engage the community with best practices, there is not a concrete and systematic process embedded to ensure that evidence-based practices are promoted, promising practices are evaluated, and emerging practices are provided technical assistance to strengthen the efficacy of the program. Herein lies the potential for growth and development in San Mateo County.

Program Description

Sonoma County has made significant strides since the Upstream Investments Project made initial recommendations to the Board of Supervisors in 2010. The project evolved from its early beginnings, realizing that the factors identified as contributors to criminal justice costs are also factors that contribute

FIGURE 1.1

Sonoma County Upstream Investments Project	San Mateo County Shared Vision 2025
<p>Goal: The whole community is engaged in supporting the healthy development of children</p> <p>Indicators: Child maltreatment, youth binge drinking, youth drug use, youth depression, youth tobacco use, teen births, obesity</p>	<p>Goal: Our neighborhoods are safe and provide residents with access to quality healthcare and seamless services</p> <p>Indicators: Violent and property crime rates, child maltreatment, obesity, youth physical fitness standards, health insured children, patient wait list</p>
<p>Goal: Community members have access to education and training and are adequately prepared for the challenges of the future</p> <p>Indicators: Preschool attendance, 3rd grade reading, 3rd grade math, high school completion, higher education</p>	<p>Goal: Our economic strategy fosters innovation in all sectors, creates jobs, and builds community and educational opportunities for all residents</p> <p>Indicators: Safety net program usage, housing affordability, unemployment, 3rd grade reading</p>
<p>Goal: All community members are well sheltered, safe, and socially supported</p> <p>Indicators: Housing affordability, homelessness, juvenile arrests, adult arrests, domestic violence, gang membership, youth connectedness to school</p>	<p>Goal: Our growth occurs near transit, and promotes affordable, livable connected communities</p> <p>Indicators: Public transit accessibility, library utilization, county website utilization, homelessness</p>
<p>Goal: Sonoma County has a thriving diverse economy that produces economic security for all</p> <p>Indicators: Poverty, unemployment, health insurance</p>	<p>Goal: Our natural resources are preserved through environmental stewardship, reducing our carbon emissions, and using energy, water and land more efficiently</p> <p>Indicators: Electricity usage, fuel economy for county vehicles, commute alternatives utilization, household hazardous waste diversion</p>
	<p>Goal: Our leaders forge partnerships, promote regional solutions with informed and engaged residents, and approach issues with fiscal accountability and concern for future impacts</p> <p>Indicators: Voter registration and turnout, increased county government responsiveness, effectiveness and collaboration</p>

to other costs such as public assistance dependency, child maltreatment, alcohol and other drug related issues, and poor academic achievement (Upstream Investments Policy Committee, 2011). The emphasis of the project shifted to building a learning community that focuses on community priorities, development of prevention-focused programs, utilization of evidence-informed practices, and cultivation of partnerships and collaborations. As such, this Sonoma County Board of Supervisors chartered “project” has developed into a community-wide policy framework

with a set of principles and actions that are embedded in the organizational practices of county departments and community partners.

The implementation of the policy has not come without its challenges. Outreach and engagement is an ongoing endeavor. The reach of the project is contingent upon the influence of designated Upstream Investments staff or other departmental staff, funders, community partners, or community members at large. Buy-in from county departments outside of the Human Services and the Health

Departments has not yet reached its fullest potential. Additionally, although there is a commitment by the Board of Supervisors to support Upstream Investments, finding alternative and/or additional funding for the project is imperative. The Upstream Investments policy relies on three primary strategies for implementation, and for overcoming the aforementioned challenges:

- **Invest Early:** Whenever possible, dedicate funding and other resources to prevention-focused polices and interventions.
- **Invest Wisely:** Ensure that upstream policies and interventions have the highest possible likelihood of success by selecting those that are backed by sound evidence. Programs that meet the criteria for the Portfolio of Model Upstream Programs have demonstrated this commitment to evidence-informed practice, and are designated to one of three tiers in the following categories: evidence-based practices, promising practices, emerging practices.
- **Invest Together:** Focus community-wide upstream policies and interventions on preventing six targeted factors and improving twenty-six indicators of success (updated February 2013) to achieve the Upstream Investments vision, mission, goals, and measureable impacts.

Implications for San Mateo County

It has yet to be determined if the downstream vision set forth by the Upstream Investments policy to eliminate poverty in Sonoma County is an achievable end. Sonoma County leaders and Upstream Investments stakeholders clearly articulate how, based on the literature and local wisdom and experience, poverty can be identified as the root cause of or contributing factor to many of the issues our communities face. Further, there is an undeniable relationship between poverty and racial and ethnic disparity. Despite fundamental differences in all communities, issues of poverty and racial and ethnic disparities remain a constant, persistently impacting many program areas and continuously contributing

to a multitude of complex societal, individual, and familial issues. The intent of this discussion is not to identify the ways in and degree to which poverty impacts the children and families of San Mateo County. Rather, the recommendation to San Mateo County is to begin to look at the implications of poverty on the communities within its county limits.

Based on United States Department of Agriculture data, the children of Sonoma County fall beneath the federal poverty level at a rate of 12.9 percent, which is about 8 percent lower than the California average. San Mateo County children experience poverty at an even lower rate, in fact at one of the lowest rates in California, at 9.5 percent (2012). However, the impact of poverty on families and the community cannot be determined by looking at the rate alone. This is illustrated by looking at the intersection between poverty and disproportionality. In 2009, 35.1 percent of all Black children, and 33.1 percent of Hispanic children in California lived beneath the federal poverty level, a much higher rate than their white counterparts at 17.7 percent. Sixty percent of poor children come from single-parent households. According to the Children's Defense Fund, 73 percent of Black single mother homes who did not attain a high school diploma or GED live in poverty (2009). The literature further suggests that children of single-parent households are less likely to complete high school or to attend college (Astone, 1991). The residual effects seem to be endless. In a 2010 report, the Alliance for Excellent Education studied the impact of an increase in performance on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) on the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). With the most modest of scenarios studied, a PISA score increase of 25 points over a twenty-year span equated to a 40.6 trillion dollar increase to the United States GDP over the lifetime of the generation born in 2010 (Amos, 2010). This is but one illustration of the relationship between poverty and its impact on families and the community.

The data related to the intersection between poverty and disproportionality are astonishing, and play a role in many societal issues. The recommendation

to San Mateo County is to follow the direction of Sonoma County recommendations from 2010, only to broaden the focus beyond reduction of criminal justice costs. Using Shared Vision 2025 as a platform, San Mateo County has an opportunity to build a supporting infrastructure for evidence-informed, prevention-focused work already taking place in the community. A thorough review of the literature to identify contributing factors to priority issues in San Mateo County is a necessary first step. Further evaluation of existing evidence-informed programs in the county and related aligned initiatives can serve as a baseline. A full cost analysis will need to be completed for San Mateo County, but based on the Sonoma County Fiscal Year 2012-13 budget, the program costs fall between \$430,000 and \$450,000, which includes sponsorship, project management, communications and outreach, website design and maintenance, project operations, data analysis and reporting, and program evaluation (Upstream Investments Policy Committee, 2011). Funding options for a similar program in San Mateo County will need to be identified, and potential for an advisory committee to the Board of Supervisors to guide the work should be explored.

Conclusion

Exploring the antecedents to poverty in San Mateo County as they relate to criminal justice, public assistance dependency, child maltreatment, alcohol and other drug issues, and poor academic achievement, would be a good starting point. Ann Chih et al. (2009) eloquently concluded how poverty and race intersect in contemporary society, in an excerpt from their January 2009 policy brief in the National Poverty Center:

[The]disadvantages in one area create new disadvantages in others. Conversely, advantages insulate, allowing those with fewer vulnerabilities to buffer themselves from cascading disadvantage. Simultaneous policies in multiple spheres are necessary to prevent cascades from occurring... The implication

of cumulative disadvantage is that racial disparities will be slow to yield to even overall improvements in equality. Meanwhile, the advantaged, who are most likely to see equality's benefits, are protected from realizing that racial disadvantage traps others in poverty. Correcting this state of affairs requires moving beyond a simple black-white paradigm, beyond the search for a single cause of poverty or a single policy solution (Chih et. al., 2009).

The Upstream Investments policy and San Mateo County's Shared Vision 2025 share the mindset that collectively, organizations can make a stronger impact on common issues seen in every community. The issues of poverty and disproportionality manifest in different ways in different communities. San Mateo County is charged with the task of investigating how poverty and disproportionality uniquely impact the communities within its county limits, and to develop and carry out policies that reflect an evidence-informed learning community.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to the staff members of the Sonoma County Human Services Agency who provided me with the opportunity to study the Upstream Investments Project. I would especially like to acknowledge Human Services Agency Director, Jerry Dunn, and Human Services Agency Deputy Director, Oscar Chavez, for their commitment to upstream principles and their guidance throughout this process. Additionally, I could not have completed this study without the assistance of the rest of the Upstream Investments Project team, including Angie Dillon-Shore, Cynthia King, Joni Thatcher, and Annette Walker. I would also like to thank the members of the Upstream Investments Portfolio Review Committee, the Policy Committee, and the Funders Circle, as well as Amber Twitchell and the youth of VOICES Sonoma, for allowing me to participate in this process. Finally, I would like to thank San Mateo County Human Services Agency (HSA)

Director, Iliana Rodriguez; former HSA Director, Beverly Beasley Johnson; Children and Family Services (CFS) Director, Loc Nguyen; Human Services Manager, Gary Beasley; and the rest of the CFS management team for their continued support, and for providing me with the opportunity to participate in the BASSC Executive Development Program.

References

- Amos, J. The High Cost of Low Education Performance. *Alliance for Excellent Education*. 25 January 2010; Web. 3 May 2014. <<http://all4ed.org>>
- Astone, N., McLanahan, S. (1991). Family Structure, Parental Practices and High School Completion. *American Sociological Review*, 56(3): 309-320.
- Chih, A., Harris, D. The Colors of Poverty: Why Racial and Ethnic Disparities Persist. *National Poverty Center*. January 2009; Web. 3 May 2014. <<http://npc.umich.edu>>
- Child Poverty. *Children's Defense Fund*. Web. 3 May 2014. <<http://www.childrensdefense.org>>
- Flay, B., Biglan, A., Boruch, R., Castro, F., Gottfredson, R., Sheppard, K., Moscicki, E., Schinke, S., Valentine, J., Ji, P. (2005). Standards of Evidence: Criteria for Efficacy, Effectiveness and Dissemination. *Prevention Science*, 6(3): 151-75.
- Upstream Investments Policy Committee. The Upstream Investments Report. *Upstream Investments*. 11 January 2010; Web. 19 March 2014. <<http://www.sonomaupstream.org>>
- Upstream Investments Policy Committee. Indicators of Success Report 2011. *Upstream Investments*. 19 January 2011; Web. 19 March 2014. <<http://www.sonomaupstream.org>>
- Upstream Investments Policy Committee. Indicators of Success Report 2012. *Upstream Investments*. 15 November 2012; Web. 19 March 2014. <<http://www.sonomaupstream.org>>
- Upstream Investments Policy Committee. Progress Report and Next Steps for 2014-2016. *Upstream Investments*. January 2014; Web 19 March 2014. <<http://www.sonomaupstream.org>>