

EXPANDING THE FRAMEWORK IN EXAMINING A BENCHMARK APPROACH TO MEASURE WELFARE REFORM

John Tsutakawa*

INTRODUCTION

For my internship with Alameda County Social Service Agency, I wanted to examine the use of theory in social service practice. As I plan to promote theories as part of my career, I am interested in how ideas and theories can be implemented or promoted within public agencies. I met with Jill L'Esperence at Alameda County to discuss possible projects I could observe. Out of several options, I decided to work on a benchmark report measuring the impact of welfare reform. I felt this was an area in which I could test out ideas and that I could also assist the County.

The Alameda County Board of Supervisors Social Services Committee (the Committee) had requested that the Social Service Agency (SSA) produce a set of benchmarks to measure the impact of welfare reform. The Committee had suggested possible indicators but left the request fairly open. In my internship, I was able to help develop a framework for examining the benchmarks and develop a draft report.

In this paper, I would like to discuss the benchmarks as a concept, the process and framework I used to examine the benchmarks, the benchmarks themselves, and implications from my internship.

BENCHMARKS

Part of my efforts included examining benchmarks as a measurement tool that can take different forms

and serve different purposes. For the purpose of the Committee's request, the SSA had identified benchmarks as general indicators for Alameda County residents at the county level. While welfare reform directly impacts recipients the most, the SSA was focusing on the county level population. The types of indicators were later expanded to include some internal SSA data specific to welfare recipients.

Benchmarks can serve multiple purposes. The Committee's request was interpreted as looking at the impact of welfare reform on county residents, rather than as an evaluation of the SSA's performance. This is in the context of a trend within Alameda County to use benchmarks to examine the performance of public agencies.

The SSA also interpreted the focus of the benchmarks broadly, to include not only the actual impact of welfare reform, but also factors that might influence the SSA's welfare reform efforts. To some extent, the benchmarks were broadened even beyond welfare reform by including indicators about the well-being of county residents that were not directly connected to welfare reform.

PROCESS

I came fairly late into the process of developing the benchmarks. By the time I became involved, SSA staff, Mark Woo, Sydelle Raffe and Kristin Spanos, had already compiled a considerable list of possible measurements from background research and several meetings with various county and community

* John Tsutakawa is a Contract Manager in the Office of Contract Compliance of the San Francisco County Department of Human Services.

agencies. Rather than researching for more indicators or tracking information, I wanted to develop a more comprehensive framework with which to examine and select the benchmarks. I divide the approach I used into six steps.

Developing the Framework: The first step was to identify the elements of an analytical framework, separate from the actual benchmarks or indicators themselves. The elements in this framework included examining the Committee's and the SSA's purposes in developing the benchmarks, the possible uses of the information, predicting the general impact of welfare reform, identifying the populations to be examined (both general county and welfare recipients), the examining of benchmarks as only one type of measurement, listing the factors used in the selection of benchmarks, and identifying the areas where benchmarks would be useful. The first step also included explaining the significance of these steps to the process. For instance, the examination of the Committee's purposes and possible uses allows the Department to tailor the report to address the Committee's concerns. On the other hand, examination of the SSA's purposes and uses looks at how the reports might also benefit the agency. While many of these elements were considered by SSA staff, my approach was first to identify the issues within a report.

Developing specific elements: The second step was to explore each of these elements. While the exploration was not definitive, it provided a basis for staff to discuss these issues. While many of the elements are assumed by various participants, there are often differences on key points which specification can address. For instance, two staff developing the indicators had very different approaches to selecting the elements. Identifying the selection factors allowed different sets of factors to be incor-

porated.

Connecting indicators to welfare reform: As a list of possible indicators was already developed, the third step was to examine the connection between welfare reform and possible indicators. While at first there appeared to be a number of indicators available, many had little or no connection to welfare reform. There were statistics that on a county level may show little change as a result of welfare reform. For instance, median income is not likely to change due to shifts within the lower income ranges. Some indicators may be influenced in both directions as a result of welfare reform. For instance welfare reform may increase domestic violence incidents due to family stress but may show a decrease in reporting due to the increased dependency on an abusive spouse. A large part of this step was to describe the possible connection and also discuss intervening factors that dilute or obscure the relationship between the welfare reform significance and the data. Most of the connections I developed were brief statements. For instance, a Supervisor had suggested the county jail population as an indicator. The connection was probably that the decrease in income and options for welfare recipients would cause a rise in criminal activity resulting in increased incarceration. Of course, other factors would influence incarceration levels including jail capacities, the availability of jobs, and law enforcement trends.

Examining and selecting possible indicators: The fourth step was to consolidate the original list of indicators developed by county staff and to examine them across key selection factors. The consolidation was to make the list easier to read since it was detailed by government level source, ethnicity, and other factors. The selection factors included that the information had to be available on a county

level, the information had to be readily available, the information had to be within a relevant time frame, and included the discussion of the relevance to welfare reform. We used this table to narrow down and select benchmarks in meeting with the County Administrator's Office.

Drafting the report: Based on the benchmarks selected, the fifth step was to draft a report that explained the background, the predicted impact of welfare reform, the factors involved in selection, and the actual benchmarks used. This report was intended to give the Committee a background in how and why the particular benchmarks were selected as to explain where there might be a relationship to welfare reform. Many of the items identified in the initial framework were excluded.

Completion of the internship: Due to time constraints, I ended my internship at this stage. The staff would continue to develop and refine the draft report and also develop a separate report with the benchmarks and the data.

BENCHMARKS SELECTED

The information selected fell into three categories. The first category included general population data such as population size and median income that would provide a reference point for the other data.

General County Information

County population
Median income
Ethnic composition

The second category included data specific to the welfare recipient population. This information was to give the Committee the impact on the group most affected by welfare reform. There was disagreement

about the use of this data as it was already included in the SSA's quarterly report and whether these were really county indicators as requested by the Board of Supervisors.

SSA Data on AFDC/TANF Cases

Number of adults on AFDC/CalWORKs
Number of children on AFDC/CalWORKs
Number of adults dropped from TANF due to time limits
Number of families receiving food stamps
Number of TANF families requesting emergency housing assistance/shelter
Percentage of births with paternity established
Number of cases diverted from TANF

The third were the benchmarks or general county indicators. The general county benchmarks varied in their connection to welfare reform. Some, such as health data, were included simply because they were readily available and measured a significant component of resident's well-being.

County Benchmarks/Indicators

FBI total crime index
Violent crime index
Property crime index
Juvenile felony arrest rate
Juvenciles referred to probation
Percentage of students graduating from high school
Percentage of high school students dropping out from school
Unemployment rate
Job Growth
Births with no or late prenatal care
Low birth weight babies
Infant deaths
Teen births
Fair market rent as percentage of median income
Number of children in foster care

Number of child abuse/neglect reports
Children in poverty
Per capita income
Population in poverty
Number of domestic violence reports

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FOR SAN FRANCISCO DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

In some ways, my internship was an experiment to see the extent to which I could promote theory. Rather than focusing on gathering data, making calls, and researching, I focused on developing an analytical framework and developing my own thinking in writing.

There were specific benefits to this approach of the work. First, using this approach provided a basis for discussion and common understanding. It gave direction to the process. It gave a basis for the consideration and selection for the selection of benchmarks. It provides a basis to educate the Committee around the issues in the selection of the benchmarks and the limitations of benchmarks. A more deliberate framework would be useful in planning as well as in program decisions. Within my own work, I use it in developing contracts and request for proposals (RFPs).

While I believe there are benefits to a more comprehensive framework, it is not always practical. As an intern, I had time available that staff could not afford due to competing tasks. I initially saw my role as similar to an outside consultant working on a project. While I pushed a particular approach, at a certain point I had to be more practical and focus on producing the report rather than the continuous development of ideas. The limitation of staff time would suggest that this deliberate approach might

be used selectively on specific tasks where the benefits justify the cost in time and effort. It would probably be slow and cumbersome for many tasks.

Regarding the use of benchmarks for San Francisco Department of Human Services, I wouldn't recommend this approach as an ongoing measurement of welfare reform impact. While benchmarks and indicators may be useful for Board of Supervisors making decisions across service systems and communities, the indicators are not sufficiently linked to welfare reform to make specific program decisions. I would apply a similar framework in examining the use of internal measurements beyond those required by the state.