



CHILD IMPACT ASSESSMENTS:

A Missing Piece to Spur Progress for U. S. Children

**An Action Brief for Cities,
Counties, and States**

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 **kidsimpact**
ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN

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Note: As part of this brief an [Executive Summary](#) and [Resources for Further Information](#) are also available.

OVERVIEW

This action brief is the next step in [Kids Impact Initiative's](#) work to support the U.S. child advocacy field. It advances our chief goal of elevating and promoting action that holds policymakers more accountable for children's well-being.

Our first report, "[Accelerating Policymaker Accountability for U.S. Kids' Well-Being](#)," identified multiple ways to strengthen accountability for how public policies affect children at every level of government. Based on research and interviews since issuing that report, this action brief promotes an accountability strategy we believe is especially promising: child impact assessments.

This strategy has been used successfully in other countries and other fields but has not yet been put to work in the U.S. to achieve shared goals for children. Child impact assessments can provide guidance and tools to the growing number of states and local communities that are taking action to improve children's well-being. The action steps recommended are equally relevant and important at the federal level and ought to be pursued there as well.

Using impact assessments could strengthen efforts already underway and help jumpstart others, to the benefit of millions of U.S. children. In addition, they can dramatically raise children up as a public policy priority by systematically incorporating the best interests of children into the structure of policy decision-making.

We find that this is an especially ripe time to advance child impact assessments in the U.S.

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Poisoned water in Flint is an egregious example of how we disregard children and their promise. If kid-focused measures like child impact assessments had been in place, maybe our crisis could have been prevented.”

Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha,
Flint pediatrician & whistleblower



COVID-19 Update

While most of the research and writing of this brief predates the coronavirus pandemic, its focus on accountability for children has taken on even greater urgency as governments develop pandemic recovery plans. Though it will be challenging for most governments to fully implement child impact assessments immediately, Phase I can be applied now. In fact, simple applications of impact assessments can keep kids' needs front and center as governments and institutions reinvent themselves during the recovery. See our [COVID-19 action memo](#) to get started.

Goals

The goals of this action brief are the following:

1. Demonstrate how child impact assessments—when accompanied by complementary activities—can help policymakers and advocates keep children's best interests at the center of public policy decision-making and result in better-informed policies;
2. Highlight relevant experience from other countries and U.S. counties and cities to inform more widespread use of child impact assessments; and
3. Provide action steps for government officials and non-governmental leaders who want to incorporate child impact assessments into their decision-making and advocacy activities.

Audience

This brief is written for two main audiences:

- Elected officials and staff at the city, county, state, and federal levels who make decisions every day that affect children and their families; and
- Civic leaders who work to improve children's lives—including child advocates, other nonprofit and business leaders, and the foundations that fund their efforts.

BACKGROUND

Policymaker Accountability for U.S. Kids' Well-Being

Elected officials and senior staff in government agencies at the local, state, and federal levels hold tremendous influence over whether our country's 74 million children have the opportunity to reach their full potential. These individuals decide how taxpayer dollars are spent and create the policies and programs that help families ensure their children are safe, healthy, and well-educated. They are responsible, for example, for health clinics, parks, sports and recreation programs, public schools, and even affordable housing.

Too often, children are shortchanged because they don't have a vote or a voice as our elected officials and government agency staff set priorities. As a result, too many parents rightly fear that their hard work won't add up to a better future for the next generation. And too many children in the U.S.—especially those who live in low-income families or are of color—are being robbed of the opportunities and resources to succeed in school and in life.

To respond to these unacceptable realities, Kids Impact Initiative identified holding policymakers accountable for how their decisions affect children as an especially high-impact strategy. It has the potential to improve outcomes for millions of children and, as our research shows, it is ripe for investigation and action. In addition, a field-wide focus on accountability can help many policymakers who already are—or want to become—champions for children make sure public policies are designed to help children reach their full potential.

As our first report documented, a host of tactics has been used to hold decision-makers accountable for children's well-being, starting with the first White



House Conference on Children in 1909. Such efforts include state and local report cards, special legislative caucuses, children's budgets, children's ombudsmen, local engagement campaigns, and more. But even with these valuable activities, leaders for children agree that the advocacy field currently lacks sufficient clout to motivate policymakers to consistently do what's right for kids.

To help tackle this persistent challenge, we have zeroed in on one approach to stronger accountability that has rarely been used on behalf of U.S. kids: child impact assessments. Like environmental impact assessments and fiscal impact assessments, child impact assessments apply a well-tested process used to advance priorities society considers important. We believe leaders for children ought to seriously consider using them because of their potential to achieve policy gains for children and prevent harm.

What Is a Child Impact Assessment?

A child impact assessment is a data and analytic tool—combined with awareness-building, training, and a structured reporting process—that summarizes the potential effects of any proposed or existing law, policy, program, or practice on children. Child impact assessments are used to focus policymakers’ attention on widely shared goals and analyze the implications of a proposal in relation to those goals.

Some localities call child impact assessments “child impact statements”; others call them “child rights impact assessments.” For this report we use the terms interchangeably.

To produce a child impact assessment, staff in government agencies or independent entities working with government (like a child ombudsman or child advocate) use a template to answer fundamental and agreed-upon questions designed to uncover how a proposal could benefit or harm children. For example, if county officials are considering closing a public hospital, a child impact assessment can surface whether there are other pediatric facilities nearby where parents in the community can take their sick child. Or if a change is proposed in a city bus route, city officials would consider how the proposed new route affects students who use the bus to get to and from school and after-school activities.

“When parents make decisions, such as changing jobs or buying a home, they ask themselves, ‘Is this good for our children?’ Through child impact assessments, public officials can do the same thing. They should always be asking, ‘Is it good for our children?’”

Dana Bunnett, Director,
Kids in Common, Santa Clara, California



Child impact assessments can be used by elected officials and agency staff at any level of government—city, county, state, or federal—to make better-informed decisions. They can also be used by public boards whose decisions have major impacts on kids’ lives, such as school boards. Likewise, they help non-governmental leaders ensure that public policies actually advance children’s interests and avoid inadvertently undermining them. Child impact assessments also ensure that the needs of children and youth are considered in governmental decisions where they otherwise have no voice.

This brief focuses on assessing the impacts of public policy decisions—including laws, budgets, and program rules—because they affect the lives of so many (and sometimes all) children in a community. Moreover, public entities are by definition accountable to the public, and this accountability ought to include children.

While our focus is on government decisions, other sectors—including private and nonprofit organizations—could also find value in analyzing the impact of their key decisions on children and families.

In this brief we concentrate on the needs of children from birth through age 18, as do many of the efforts analyzed for this report.

Case Study:

NEW BRUNSWICK, CANADA

Overview

In 2013, New Brunswick became the first province in Canada to use impact assessments for children. Called child rights impact assessments, they continue to be used in New Brunswick for cabinet-level policy decisions, a practice that has carried through three different governments. According to staff in the Child and Youth Advocate's Office who helped design the program and are still involved, "It's a game changer when all the child rights implementation pieces work together—including data collection, training in child rights, child rights impact assessments, and the independent advocate."

New Brunswick provides a good example of placing primary responsibility for impact assessments within government while also giving an independent entity, the Child and Youth Advocate, the authority to oversee them and conduct its own assessments. New Brunswick's story also demonstrates how important it is to have an institutional champion at a high level in government—and how multiple accountability elements rely on and strengthen one another.



Highlights

- **2006: New Brunswick legislature established the independent Children and Youth Advocate's Office** to advance children's rights and interests, make sure the views of young people are heard, ensure they have access to appropriate services, and provide information and advice to the government and communities.
- **2007: Advocate's Office began publishing annual "State of the Child" reports** which, later on, provided the evidence base that child rights impacts assessments would use to analyze proposals in relation to the current status of children.
- **2011: New Brunswick Department of Labour asked the Advocate's Office to help design a pilot child rights impact assessment** in order to update its policies about what kinds of work young people can undertake.
- **A champion in Department of Labour opened the door** for the Advocate's Office to work with the most senior executives in province government to design and implement child impact assessments across issue areas.
- **A working group drawn from across government designed the assessment tool**—a screen followed by a more detailed assessment if the screen found the proposal would impact children.
- **Roughly 200 staff across government departments (deputy ministers and legislative policy coordinators) received a full week of training** in child rights and how to address them through the impact assessments.



In Action

New Brunswick's Health Minister requested a child rights impact assessment to help in planning a new Center of Excellence for Youth with Complex Needs. On the basis of the impact assessment, the location of the new center was moved from its proposed location at a psychiatric facility in a remote part of the province to a city so that care could be provided nearer to where the children live.

New Brunswick's Education Superintendent recognized that a child rights impact assessment would be helpful in issuing new policy on search and seizure practices in public schools. Prior to this effort, there was no conformity or consistency in practices that different schools used. With input from the impact assessment, there is now a [consistent policy for all public schools](#) that attempts to balance student and school staff safety with students' privacy and human and legal rights.

Sources: Interviews with Norm J. Bossé, Christian Whalen, and Gavin Kotze, along with published resources at www.kidsimpact.org.

Photo: [New Brunswick Child & Youth Advocate](#)

Why Are Child Impact Assessments the Focus of Our First Action Brief?

Kids Impact’s earlier report identified a host of ways to accelerate policymaker accountability. In this brief, we focus on child impact assessments because we’ve seen what their use can accomplish for kids and because they are so underutilized in the U.S. We believe they can be especially powerful now, when millions of kids are not getting the strong start in life they need and deserve.

These especially challenging times for U.S. children call for bolder policymaker leadership and more effective independent advocacy. The COVID-19 pandemic is causing millions of children to experience trauma and deprivation addressing their basic needs for food, shelter, and schooling. In addition to that, partisan gridlock along with pressure from politically powerful interests has resulted, nationally and in some states, in the neglect of urgent problems that disproportionately hurt children: gun violence, the opioid epidemic, child and adolescent mental health, obesity, and traumatizing experiences, to name just a few. And child poverty, a factor strongly associated with children’s future health and well-being, is [growing among young children](#), while [children’s health coverage declines](#) at alarming rates. Based on multiple measures of child well-being, the U.S stands out as [37th worst of the world’s 41 richest countries](#).

We believe the proven and projected benefits of child impact assessments as an accountability tool and the process it entails justify the time and resources required by both government and philanthropy. Why?

1 First, this strategy has an outsized impact because it hard-wires consideration of children’s best interests into how consequential decisions are made.

Because attention to kids becomes a routine part of decision-making, this focus is sustained, protecting children from the shifts in priorities associated with new elections and government staffing changes.

2 Second, our research also shows that when used over time, child impact assessments can shift cultural values towards consistently making children a high priority. This culture change can, in turn, lead to adopting other child-oriented practices.

3 Third, a child-centered approach to decision-making leads to better-informed policy decisions that support children’s healthy development and make better use of taxpayer dollars.

For instance, a recent [university study](#) estimates that childhood poverty costs the U.S. slightly more than one trillion dollars each year, or 5.4 percent of the gross domestic product. These costs, many of which could be avoided by child-centered policymaking, result from lost “economic productivity, increased health and crime costs, and increased costs as a result of child homelessness and maltreatment.”

4 Fourth, child impact assessments help leaders outside of government keep a spotlight on kids’ needs and hold policymakers accountable.

The process of conducting the assessments and the information they provide equip civic leaders to become more effective advocates and support officials who make children’s best interests their priority.

5 Fifth, this is an especially ripe time to increase the use of child impact assessments because of the heightened interest and activity that can benefit from this approach.

A number of [states](#) have decided to place particular attention on children and are looking for guidance and tools to improve their performance. In addition, more states and some local communities are creating independent [child advocates and ombudsman offices](#) tasked with promoting children’s best interests.

This strategy has an outsized impact because it hard-wires consideration of children’s best interests into how consequential decisions are made.

At the community level, mayors, city council members, and community leaders in many parts of the country are taking proactive steps for kids through initiatives like the [National League of Cities' Institute for Youth, Education, and Families](#), [StriveTogether](#), [All Children Thrive](#), and [UNICEF USA's Child Friendly Cities Initiative](#). And because county officials and agencies oversee and control funding for many of the largest programs for children—including health, child welfare, and social services—they, too, can benefit from strategies to inform better decision-making and use their funding most effectively.

Along with the significant potential of child impact assessments, our analysis also found that they have potential downsides. If not part of an integrated, sustained advocacy strategy, they can become simply a box to check rather than a meaningful process that surfaces and addresses important issues. They can be put in place and quickly discontinued if there is not proper buy-in from key stakeholders. And they can be incomplete or of questionable quality without adequate staffing, training, resources, and technical support. These risks and ways to avoid them are addressed throughout the action brief.

Child Impact Assessments— Missing Piece in a Broad Strategy for Kids



Valuable as a child impact assessment can be, it is only one powerful tactic in a broader strategy to make children a priority. The following related but different child advocacy tools need to work in concert with child impact assessments for improved decision-making and effective accountability:

- A widely embraced, clear **agenda** for children—whether expressed as goals, rights, or commitments.
- A children’s **budget** analyzing how government funds are spent in relation to children’s needs.
- A **structure** in government responsible for promoting kids’ well-being—whether a children’s commissioner, children’s ombudsman/advocate, or children’s cabinet.
- Independent **advocacy** and oversight through nonprofit organizations and/or independent commissions.
- Regular **reports** to the public.

When this missing piece is added to the mix, it can increase the impact of these existing structures and activities and even inspire adding effective new ones. (See [Case Study: Santa Clara County, California](#).)

Case Study:

SANTA CLARA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

Overview

Santa Clara County, California, provides a good example of how a county elected official championed the creation of child impact statements and built support to pass a resolution instructing county agencies to use them. Established by the County Board of Supervisors in 2011 after ongoing conversations between child advocates and an elected official, child impact statements are still in use today. Other child-focused elements already in place—including a county child bill of rights, an annual data report on children, a children’s policy agenda, and independent child advocacy organizations—helped pave the way for the focus on child impacts. The child impact statements, in turn, helped spur the creation of an additional tool: a children’s budget.

County of Santa Clara
Board of Supervisors

Date: June 21, 2011



Recommended Action:

Approve the recommendation . . . to include a Child Impact Assessment in all Board transmittals . . .



Highlights

- 2005: **First Santa Clara Children’s Agenda** was developed and was [updated regularly](#). Led by [Kids in Common](#), an advocacy organization, and involving hundreds of community partners, the agenda was accompanied by 13 data indicators of progress.
- 2010: **Santa Clara County’s Board of Supervisors endorsed a [Bill of Rights for Children and Youth](#)**. The 10 provisions ranged from “a healthy mind, body and spirit . . . to a healthy attachment to a caring adult . . . to essential needs being met . . . to a voice in matters that affect them, and a sense of hope for their future.”
- 2011: **Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors approved then-President Dave Cortese’s proposal to implement child impact statements**. These assessments accompanied documents sent from county agencies to the County Board that require action—including issues that relate to children specifically as well as many others that don’t focus on children but affect them.
- **Guidance for these child impact statements said, “describe the direct impacts to children as a whole, not to child services only . . . (and) describe direct impacts to children in terms of positive, negative, or neutral and include . . . (when known) future direct impacts.”**
- Agency staff were expected to **align these impact statements with the Bill of Rights**. The Children’s Agenda with its indicators provided another important reference point for completing these analyses.
- 2019: **Santa Clara County released its first [Children’s Budget](#)**.



In Action

Leaders in Santa Clara County found it’s often hard to claim a direct causal effect from a child impact statement on a policy because so many factors influence policy decisions. However, everyone interviewed said using child impact statements resulted in greater attention to the needs of children and a shift in the culture of decision-making.

From county supervisor staff: *“It has changed the paradigm not because of the checkbox that says children must be considered but because of the values it inspires.”*

From child advocate: *“Child impact statements till the ground for other child-centric thinking. This year the county released its first children’s budget, and I don’t think this would have happened had the child impact statement not been in place.”*

Sources: Interviews with Laura Brunetto, Dana Bunnett, Amy Carta, Enrique Flores, Evelyn Ho, Rocio Luna, and Grace Meregillano, along with published resources at www.kidsimpact.org.



EXPERIENCE USING CHILD IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

Child impact assessments are simply a new application of a well-tested process used in other countries and fields. *Fiscal impact statements* typically accompany proposed bills in legislatures. *Environmental impact statements* accompany proposals for new building or development. ADA impact assessments are used to determine compliance with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act.

Health impact assessments have been [used in the public health field](#) for a long time. Recently, The Pew Charitable Trusts and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation looked at their effects and [found their use](#) can “build trust . . . between decision-makers and community residents, contribute to more equitable access to health promoting resources, . . . and protect vulnerable communities from disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards.” And though still fairly new, racial and ethnic impact statements are [starting to help](#) lawmakers evaluate potential disproportionate impacts of their decisions on particular groups.



Child Impact Assessments Around the World

The use of impact assessments focused on children began internationally about 20 years ago, as a way to make sure countries that ratified the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (now every country except the U.S.) observed those rights. They have been used primarily at the state and country levels, but some countries like [New Zealand](#) have piloted them in local municipalities.

First established by the parliament of Belgium in 1997, “child rights impact assessments” (as they are called

in other countries) then spread to other places including England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, New Zealand, Finland, Sweden, Canada, and Australia. Their use grew as the United Nations committee that oversees adherence to child rights recommended that countries use child rights impact assessments to demonstrate compliance. There is now enough activity that a [web-based global community](#) has developed to share tools and best practices.

As examples in this report show, there is considerable variation in how countries approach impact assessments. In some, government takes the lead implementing them. In others, independent oversight through a children’s commissioner or advocate/ombudsman is incorporated.

One feature these international efforts have in common is that children and youth themselves have had a voice as decisions that affect them are considered. Youth participation is required by the Convention on the Rights of the Child ([Article 12](#)), which says that young people have the right to express their views freely in all matters that affect them and that their views need to be given weight.

Countries and cities have used a variety of age-appropriate activities to incorporate young people’s voices. These include parents providing input on behalf of their infants and toddlers; children helping assess the quality of life in their neighborhoods; and schools and NGOs educating young people about their rights as well as supporting young people as they serve on school councils and youth parliaments. (For more specific examples and information, see [CFI Child and Youth Participation, Options for Action](#).)

What Difference Have These Global Efforts Made?

The results other countries have achieved for children offer a picture of how child impact assessments could benefit U.S. children. The impacts range from identifying areas where government action can ensure children their rights to essential services and protections, to relocating a pediatric medical facility to be nearer where children live, to making communities safer for kids by widening sidewalks. The case examples in this brief provide further details.

Observations from people who have been on the front lines using child impact assessments

“[The assessment] [makes children visible](#) in policy and other decision-making. . . . Even when outcomes are contested, . . . (the assessments) provide a basis for a more well-informed dialogue and discussion about issues affecting children. They also demonstrate that decision-makers are exercising due diligence in fulfillment of their obligations to children.”

Our impact assessment program “[combats working in silos](#), helps officials think about how what they’re proposing links in with other strategies, policy proposals and legislation—it feels much more joined-up.”

“[Using child rights impact assessments](#) for issues that are not seen as children’s issues is helpful to draw attention to indirect impacts that might otherwise be ignored.”

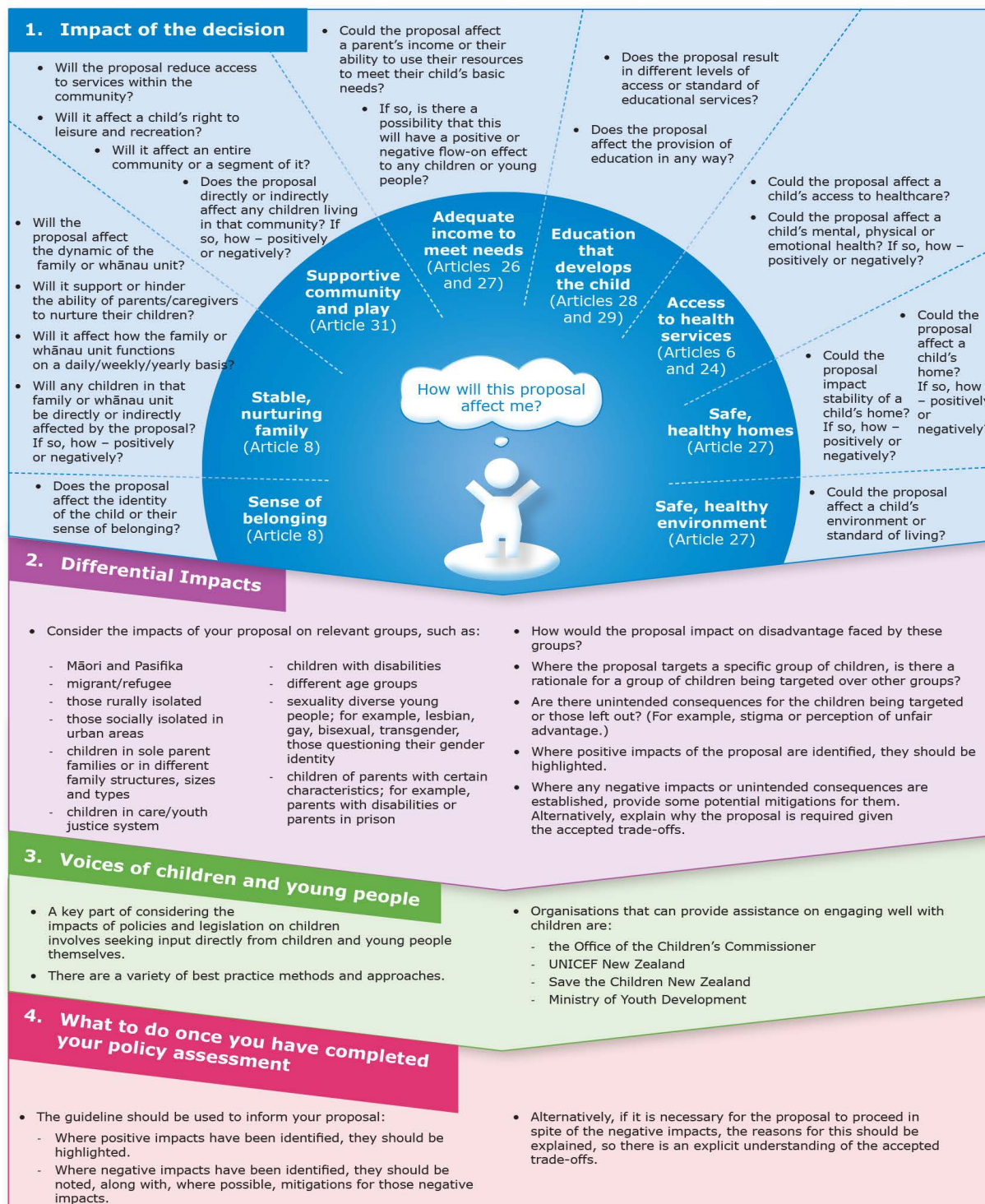
“(Child rights impact assessments) . . . [can be effective tools](#) for advocacy by non-governmental groups and thereby have an indirect impact for children.”

“We have been able to show government staff how these assessments help staff do their job better and achieve better outcomes for children. Once people in agencies see how these assessments can save time, embarrassment, and money and be better for children, they want to incorporate them into their work.” (Interview by Kids Impact)



New Zealand's Child Impact Assessment Guide

This tool has been designed to offer guidance to you as policy makers in New Zealand on how you can improve practice to consider the impacts of your advice on children and young people. The guideline has been designed in a way that makes it applicable to a range of policy settings and should be used in the way that is most appropriate for you and your organisation.



The graphic was produced by the New Zealand Ministry of Social Development. For more information, view the [Best Practice Guideline](#).

Child Impact Assessments in the U.S.

The early roots of child impact assessments in the U.S. can be traced back to the 1970s to when a broad approach framed around families became an accepted framework through which policy decisions that affect children could be considered. In 1981, the White House Conference on Families recommended that there be a family impact analysis for any relevant federal legislation. A small foundation-funded nonprofit think tank called the [Family Impact Seminar](#) organized briefings for staff of congressional offices, federal agencies, and policy organizations on the impact of certain proposals on families.

Today Purdue University houses the [Family Impact Institute](#), an outgrowth of those efforts. Although a handful of states have used family impact assessments to inform policy decisions, to our knowledge, states have not yet used assessments focused specifically on children.

Child-focused assessments in the U.S. were used at the local level for the first time by Shelby County, Tennessee, and the city of Memphis. In 2008 their county board and city council passed a resolution creating the Office of Early Childhood and Youth and directed it to develop child impact statements. Over 200 were created over the next few years. (See "[Case Study: Shelby County/Memphis, Tennessee.](#)")

Several years later (2011), through the leadership of a member of the Board of Supervisors, Santa Clara County, California, began using child impact statements. They are still in use. (See "[Case Study: Santa Clara County, California.](#)")

Feedback from Early Efforts in the United States

Because of their limited use in the U.S., information about child impact assessments' effects is anecdotal. Staff of the Santa Clara County Supervisor who drove their adoption described the role they now play in policy decisions:

"We've made huge strides in valuing children. Ten years ago, kids' issues were sidelined. Now, children come up on every issue our board considers. Now, what's good for children is part of our culture in everything we do—it's now normal."

Staff, Office of Santa Clara County Supervisor Cortese

Although there was no formal evaluation of Shelby County/Memphis's experience, one of its leaders said the following:

"Child impact statements provided our local children with unprecedented representation, while city and county officials received clear statements of potential impacts in time to inform their decisions."

Co-developer of the Shelby County/Memphis, Tennessee, Child Impact Statement Reporting System, University of Memphis

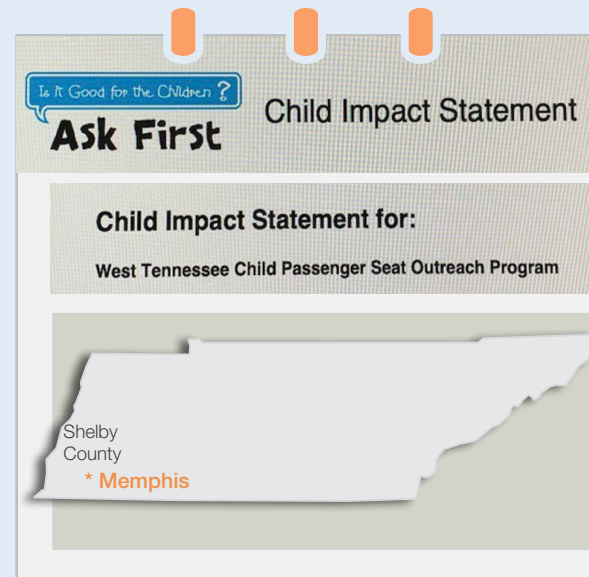


Case Study: SHELBY COUNTY/MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

Overview

Shelby County's impact assessment program started in 2008 and was, to the best of our knowledge, the first in the U.S. It began when a Shelby County Commissioner (a Republican) and the Mayor of Memphis (a Democrat) agreed that many of the problems they grappled with were largely the result of "poor childhood outcomes." In response, county and city officials created a new function in county government, the Office of Early Childhood and Youth, and directed it to develop a mechanism to produce child impact statements.

Child impacts were analyzed for all decisions that affected children—either directly or indirectly—including safety, land use, education, health, public works, and other community services. Analytic and technical support were provided through a partnership with the University of Memphis. Over its several years of operation, the initiative analyzed approximately 200 proposals and influenced the outcome of certain proposals significantly. Termination of the program due to lack of funding demonstrates the limitations of placing the function entirely within government, where priorities, political leadership, and political alliances frequently change.



Highlights

- 2008: County commissioner and mayor saw improving poor child outcomes as key to improving challenging economic and social conditions.
- They created a new Office of Early Childhood and Youth which partnered with University of Memphis to develop the child impact statement, a sophisticated analytic process and assessment tool.
- The main objective for the Child Impact Statement Reporting System was "to foreground children in policy planning and decision-making. This is accomplished by helping elected officials, county administrators, and citizen boards investigate the connections or conflicts between child well-being and the issues they are considering, thereby informing further planning and subsequent decisions on proposed resolutions and ordinances."
- University staff trained agency staff in how to produce high-quality assessments and were available for ongoing support.
- Funding for staff and building the analytic capacity was provided primarily by the county with some support from the city.
- Financial support from local government was withdrawn after several years. Analytic tools developed by the university remained available online to interested parties for several more years.



In Action

In 2010, Shelby County assessed the child impacts of a proposal to reduce state support for the safety-net hospital in Memphis. The analysis found that this proposal would save the state money only in the short-run and would likely result in increases in infant deaths, in complications from childhood diabetes and other chronic diseases, and in the spread of certain infectious diseases. This analysis helped prevent cuts in the state budget that would have caused the Regional Medical Center to close, and it helped bring about a needed management restructuring at the medical center.

Sources: Interviews with Michael Schmidt along with published resources at www.kidsimpact.org.



HOW TO GET STARTED USING CHILD IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

This section draws from our research about what does and doesn't work to make suggestions for getting started with child impact assessments. (Resources for further information are available at www.kidsimpact.org.)

This action brief is not intended to be a detailed how-to manual because there is no one-size-fits-all approach, and the field is still learning what will work best in the U.S. Just as the communities and countries that use child impact assessments each built their initiatives differently, U.S. efforts will work best if tailor-made community by community.

The lessons learned from new local experiences will inform not only other local efforts but contribute to moving a children's agenda at the regional, state, and national levels as well.

Three Models

There are three main approaches to consider as you get a child impact assessment initiative off the ground and into use.

1. Government Leads

One approach is that a government entity at the city, county, state, or federal level decides to conduct child impact assessments. Elected officials can establish use of child impact assessments in their city or county charter or through other laws that shape local government operations. Staff to the official or agency conduct the assessments or work with an outside partner like a university or foundation to do the analysis. Government officials report out their analyses to those tasked with deciding the issue—whether county boards, city councils, or governors' offices—and the public. (See [Case Study: Santa Clara County, California](#) and [Case Study: Shelby County/Memphis, Tennessee](#).)



2. Independent/Quasi-Independent Entity Leads

In situations where there is an official, independent or quasi-independent entity focused on children, such as a children's commissioner or a children's ombudsman or advocate, these offices can take the lead in establishing and implementing the child impact assessments initiative. The vast majority of states in the U.S. now have [child-focused offices](#), most of which were originally established to provide oversight on behalf of children in the child welfare system. Now, more of them are broadening their mission to represent the interests of all children as government carries out its various responsibilities.

These independent entities would work with government agencies and officials on child impact assessments because these agencies have relevant data; in addition, these government officials (elected, appointed, and career, depending on the type of policy) make the decisions that are informed by assessments. This model can also be led by a philanthropic organization or even a consortium of nongovernmental entities, working in partnership with government. (See [Case Study: New Brunswick, Canada](#).)

3. Outside Advocates Lead

Nonprofit child advocacy organizations can also lead in developing an impact assessment initiative. Although many advocacy groups already do some level of analysis on legislative and budget proposals, consistently using child impact assessments could add more structure, continuity, and rigor to their work. This role is a logical extension of the data gathering and analysis that state-based advocacy organizations have done through the [Kids Count network](#) over many years. The data in these Kids Count reports provide a springboard for advocates to shift greater focus to holding policymakers accountable for the actual impacts their decisions have on children.

Outside advocates can work with their legislature, council, or executive branch of government to establish this initiative. Alternatively, advocates can conduct independent child impact assessments—using a standard methodology that is data-driven and nonpartisan—as a way to build awareness among stakeholders and policymakers and lay groundwork for future incorporation by government.



Steps to Begin

This section presents the steps interested leaders can take to incorporate child impact assessments into decision-making, whether at the local, state, or national level.

1 Size up how a strategy using child impact assessments can help achieve your goals for children.

- Figure out the level of concern about what's happening to children in your community.
- Decide your primary purpose(s) and rationale: elevate consideration of children, inform better decisions, hold elected officials accountable, keep the public apprised about progress for kids, some combination? Identify why and how these translate into improved outcomes.
- Do a quick feasibility check on whether there is sufficient interest and capacity—both inside government and in the nonprofit and private sectors—for this effort to be successful.

2 Identify what guideposts you will use to assess impact. Consider these approaches:

- Follow the lead of a number of U.S. counties and some states that have adopted their own bill of rights for children. (For examples, see online resources at www.kidsimpact.org.)
- Define clear goals for children with targets and metrics that will be used to evaluate the impact of proposals.
- Use the four [key principles](#) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:

1. Making the best interests of the child a primary consideration in all actions that concern them;
2. Maximizing the survival and development of all children;
3. Non-discrimination and inclusion of all children; and
4. Listening to children and respecting their views.

3 Make sure that underserved children are a priority in designing your child impact assessment plans.

- Identify issues that disproportionately affect children in low-income families and other underserved populations; address these in the guideposts you use to assess impact.
- Analyze impacts for children as a whole as well as by factors that can be masked when looking at all children—such as income, race, age, ethnicity, and geography.
- Make use of data sources that focus on equity for children, such as <http://diversitydatakids.org>.
- Make sure that those with the greatest needs are equitably and authentically represented in designing and implementing the process.

4 Structure your initiative so it achieves maximum buy-in, credibility, and sustainability.

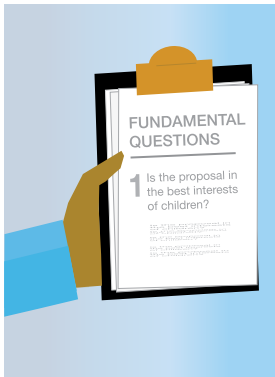
- Select an institutional “home” for leading and implementing your initiative that provides credibility—including involvement of key players and assurance that the findings are used in decision-making.
- Establish the initiative in a way that sustains it over time and as leadership changes—e.g., place it in law or in the city or county charter.
- Determine how best to integrate it with related strategies that reinforce the focus on children, such as a children’s agenda, a children’s budget, regular reporting to the public, structures in government focused on children’s well-being, and independent outside advocacy for children.
- Build in ways for youth to have a meaningful role/voice in designing the process and in the assessment itself.

5 Design its implementation features for success.

- Start with a tight focus that lets you show the value of assessments to key decision-makers and stakeholders, then build from there. Assessments could focus initially on government decisions with obvious consequences for children, like policies related to health and human services, housing, or the environment. Alternatively, you could start with areas not usually associated with children but with clear implications for them, such as zoning, transportation, housing, and infrastructure.
- Ensure that the procedures are streamlined enough to be workable and well-accepted, and that there is sufficient staff to perform high-quality work. Ways to address costs include building the analysis function into the ongoing work of government staff or partnering with a university, philanthropy, or nonprofit.
- Provide thorough training to staff and policymakers as well as ongoing support in how to conduct these assessments and incorporate the results into decision-making.
- Report out findings regularly to policymakers as well as to the public and include a summary that uses plain language and is easy to find.



6 Answer these fundamental questions in your child impact assessment, using the best data available and focused on the guideposts you choose. (Communities can add others as they see fit.)



1. Is the proposal in the best interests of children?
2. Will/how will the proposal affect children's ability to reach their full potential?
3. Will/how will the proposal have a disproportionate effect on certain groups of children or families?
4. Will/how will the proposal affect parents and families?
5. What do youth say about how the proposal will affect them?
6. What do other community residents think?
7. Will the proposal have positive impacts on children, and if so, what?
8. Will the proposal have negative impacts on children, and if so, how can they be avoided or mitigated?

7 Evaluate how this strategy is working and continue to improve it.

- At regular intervals, assess how the effort is working and make needed improvements.
- Include feedback and suggestions from the community and policymakers, as well as information about policy impacts.
- Exchange information with leaders in other communities doing similar work.



SUMMARY CHECKLIST:

Key Ingredients for Success Using Child Impact Assessments

✓ STRATEGY

Be part of a broad strategy to make sure children can reach their full potential.

✓ SUPPORT

Have a diverse base of support across sectors.

✓ DECISION-MAKING

Be hard-wired into decision-making.

✓ YOUTH INPUT

Include youth input and independent oversight.

✓ EQUITY

Make equity a priority.

✓ RESOURCES

Ensure adequate staff, resources, and ongoing technical support.

✓ REPORTING

Report regularly and transparently to decision-makers and the public.

✓ IMPROVEMENT

Build in evaluation & continuous improvement.



 kids impact
ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN

www.kidsimpact.org

LEADERSHIP TO MAKE CHILD IMPACTS A FOCUS IN THE U.S.

Virtually every sector of society plays an important role in asking this core question of all key policy decisions: “Is it good for our children?” Here’s how you can lead.

- **Governments** at the local, state, and federal levels can establish child impact assessments in law and work with stakeholders to do the needed analyses, then use the findings to guide decision-making.
- **Philanthropy** can convene government and community partners to plan such efforts. As the plan is implemented, philanthropy can continue to serve as a neutral convener and also provide technical and financial support to ensure governments, independent entities, and child advocacy organizations have the capacity to do a good job.
- **Youth** can use their voice and social media organizing skills to demand that child impacts be analyzed for key policy decisions and to provide their unique perspective as part of the assessment process.
- **Parents and other adults** can use their power at the ballot box to show they expect elected officials and governments to factor in children’s best interests as they carry out their responsibilities. They can also make clear they expect government to keep them informed about the child impacts of proposals and plans.
- **Business** can join with other community leaders to promote and champion the use of child impact assessments, underscoring the fiscal and business benefits of more informed decision-making and better conditions and outcomes for children.



- **School boards and other public boards** whose decisions have major impacts on children can use child impact assessments as they balance budget realities with the needs of children and the interests of teachers and administrators.
- **Advocacy organizations and independent commissions** can use their platform as a voice for children and their relationships with key government and elected officials to help shape and/or implement a child impact initiative. They can also use findings from child impact assessments in their advocacy. Plus advocates can help activate their local communities so there is a broader constituency pushing for policymaker accountability.
- **Children’s cabinets and ombudsmen/advocates** can be catalysts to promote the use of child impact assessments, represent children’s interests as a system is established, and provide independent oversight. Some might have the independence to conduct the assessments themselves.
- **Media** can educate the public and provide oversight, encouraging transparency in the impact assessment process and keeping the public informed about how important proposals affect children.

Networks That Can Provide Leadership

Many of these leadership groups belong to networks of organizations and of public officials that are well-positioned to expand and accelerate this work and share lessons learned. These include the following:

- Interested mayors, governors, and county-level elected officials through organizations like:
 - [National League of Cities](#)
 - [National Governors Association](#)
 - [National Association of Counties](#)
- Staff to government structures that focus on children such as:
 - [Local Children's Cabinet Network](#)
 - [State Children's Cabinet Network](#)
 - [State Children's Ombudsmen or Child Advocates](#)
- Non-governmental networks that have a direct interest in children or whose priorities are aligned, including:
 - [Kids Count grantees](#)
 - [Alliance for Youth Organizing](#)
 - [Chambers of Commerce](#), including ethnic state and local chambers
 - [The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading](#)
 - [CFLeads](#)
 - [Alliance for Early Success](#)
 - [United Ways](#)
 - [Partnership for America's Children](#)
 - [All Children Thrive](#)
 - [UNICEF USA Child Friendly Cities Initiative](#)
 - [StriveTogether](#)





LOOKING AHEAD

As a country, [we measure and are accountable](#) for what we consider important, including the strength of our economy, our military, and our environmental protections. These are all important priorities. We now have the know-how to do the same for our children. Child impact assessments are a powerful place to start.

We hope that leaders for kids across the country will strengthen and expand the use of child impact assessments. By adopting accountability measures such as these, we believe it can become a reality that policymakers routinely consider what's best for children when they make decisions. Kids Impact Initiative stands ready to be a thought partner and resource in the work ahead.



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Note: As part of this brief an [Executive Summary](#) and [Resources for Further Information](#) are also available.

ABOUT KIDS IMPACT INITIATIVE

Kids Impact Initiative is a California-based nonprofit project founded in 2017. Our mission is to improve the lives of the nation's 74 million children by strengthening public- and private-sector accountability and by helping develop and support the next generation of advocacy for children. Kids Impact works both nationally and in California, which is home to 9.1 million children.

Kids Impact's purpose is to develop and promote strategies to support and strengthen the child advocacy field as a whole. We are a team of seasoned advocates who have stepped away from the day-to-day running of organizations. Kids Impact analyzes trends and lessons across a broad range of issues and organizations in order to reinforce effective efforts already underway and ratchet up accountability and advocacy for children.

Kids Impact Initiative conducts independent research, publishes, develops advocacy strategies, and promotes action on topics relevant to child advocacy in the U.S. today. Kids Impact acts like a think tank to conceptualize and frame issues and then uses a networked approach to spark action—serving as a resource to leaders and networks. Kids Impact Initiative's work is developed specifically to offer high-impact, actionable ideas and support the diverse set of people and groups working to improve the well-being of America's children.

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