

LESSONS FROM THE J-PAL STATE AND LOCAL INNOVATION INITIATIVE

Case Study: South Carolina



How can one research project build momentum for evidence-based policymaking and make the next research project easier?

Designing and implementing a randomized evaluation requires close collaboration between government and research partners. Once that relationship has been formed, governments can draw upon the expertise of their research partners—and the expertise the government itself develops through an initial evaluation—to identify new opportunities and launch additional research projects with less time and effort. South Carolina’s Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) exemplifies how a jurisdiction with a commitment to rigorous evaluation and using evidence to inform policy can leverage one study to catalyze a pipeline of evaluations.

Before participating in the State and Local Innovation Initiative, South Carolina had embarked on an expansion and evaluation of the [Nurse-Family Partnership](#) (NFP) home-visiting program, with the goal of improving maternal and child health. Through the program, specifically trained nurses visit low-income, first-time mothers regularly from early pregnancy through the child’s second birthday, building trusted relationships in the process. The nurses advise and share expertise with the mothers to help them and their children achieve better health, well-being, and self-sufficiency. To expand the program statewide, South Carolina secured a Medicaid waiver to help cover the costs of home visits and established a pay-for-success contract. J-PAL North America is serving as the independent evaluator for the contract and is conducting a randomized evaluation to measure the impact of NFP on maternal and child health outcomes. The evaluation is currently being led by Katherine Baicker

(University of Chicago Harris School School of Public Policy), Margaret McConnell (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health), Mary Ann Bates (J-PAL North America Executive Director), Michelle Woodford (J-PAL North America Research Manager), and Annetta Zhou (Harvard University).

South Carolina’s [integrated data system](#), hosted by its Department of Revenue and Fiscal Affairs, facilitated the randomized evaluation. The integrated data system houses administrative data from multiple entities, including hospitals, emergency departments, and school districts. For the NFP evaluation, researchers will use linked data to understand the impact of NFP on a range of outcomes, beginning with pre-term births, birth spacing, and child injuries. Additionally, administrative data will allow researchers to track very long-term outcomes, such as the educational outcomes for the children of mothers who participate in the study.

The NFP evaluation brought many partners together and built experience within the state on how to leverage its integrated data system for research purposes to generate evidence and drive innovation. By the time South Carolina was selected to join the State and Local Innovation Initiative, the jurisdiction had already established a relationship with J-PAL North America, developed a concrete example of how its integrated data system could supply administrative data for a long-term evaluation, and created a vision for launching multiple research projects on key policy questions.

The starting point for South Carolina’s engagement in the State and Local Innovation Initiative was tailored to fit the advanced stage of the partnership. Rather than focusing on introductions, J-PAL North America convened a kickoff meeting for agency leaders, including South Carolina’s then-HHS Director, Christian Soura (now with the South Carolina Hospital Association), and researchers Craig Garthwaite (Northwestern University) and Matthew Notowidigdo (Northwestern University) to develop a list of potential research questions that could be explored over the year-long engagement. The preexisting relationship between J-PAL North America and South Carolina facilitated an open, candid discussion of challenges the state faces—an evaluation pitching session Soura endearingly referred to as “J-PAL shark tank.”

Because South Carolina had built a relationship not only with the NFP research team but also with J-PAL North America, the state gained an access point to multiple researchers through J-PAL’s network. South Carolina could explore multiple projects outside

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of any single researcher's area of interest, and it could continue exploring projects even when individual researchers no longer had bandwidth to take on new projects. Ideas pitched included evaluations to measure the impact of [Medicaid Managed Care Organizations](#) (MCOs), medication-assisted treatment delivered via telemedicine, and opioid treatment interventions intended to reduce recidivism.

The most promising evaluation opportunity that emerged from these conversations aims to assess the impact of assigning Medicaid beneficiaries to different Managed Care Organizations. Historically, when individuals did not either actively choose an MCO or were not assigned to an MCO based on prior or family enrollment, they were then assigned to an MCO according to a round-robin algorithm designed assign individuals to different plans. South Carolina worked with its Medicaid enrollment broker to shift from the quasi-random round-robin algorithm to a fully randomized process. Garthwaite and Notowidigdo will use historical Medicaid claims data and Medicaid claims data following implementation of the new random assignment protocol to estimate the relative impact of different MCOs on health care utilization.

Random assignment will allow them to distinguish the MCO's impact from any possible "cream skimming" effects—i.e., whether differences in health outcomes across MCOs is the result of different features of the MCOs, or the result of MCOs enrolling individuals who were more or less healthy to begin with. J-PAL North America's prior experience with South Carolina's integrated data system from the NFP evaluation made it easier to identify data sources for this project. Members of the NFP research team shared data dictionaries and insight on how to access health data with Garthwaite and Notowidigdo.

Beyond the MCO evaluation, South Carolina has continued working with J-PAL North America staff and researchers to identify future evaluation opportunities. As the year of technical support provided through the State and Local Innovation Initiative ended, J-PAL North America staff gave South Carolina a list of evaluation ideas of potential interest to both the state and J-PAL's affiliated researchers. Then-Director Soura weighed in on the list and identified ideas to continue exploring. Two ideas for evaluation have generated mutual interest between researchers and South Carolina, and these ongoing conversations hold potential to spur new research projects.

Overall, the time, effort, and social capital needed to pitch and scope each additional evaluation idea was reduced because a large investment in relationship building had already been made, and the state was already familiar with running a randomized evaluation. A clear takeaway from South Carolina is that research projects can build a pipeline such that as one project moves toward implementation, staff can leverage the existing relationship with researchers and external partners to begin scoping new projects.