Community efforts to understand and prevent youth violence take on many forms: collaborations, coalitions, prevention networks, community action networks, initiatives, task forces, partnerships, and so on. They also take on many tasks. Given the sheer number of these collaborative endeavors in the United States in recent years, it is not surprising to find considerable variation in the set of tasks they take on. In some cases, their main focus is strategic planning, whether as an ongoing process or to produce a comprehensive document (i.e., a community strategic plan for youth violence prevention). In other cases, their mandate is to develop a program or set of programs to be implemented following the planning phase. In still other cases, their activities are directed toward involving the entire community in an ongoing, synergistic violence prevention effort that is woven into the local ecology.

Given the time and dollars invested in building community youth violence prevention collaborations over the last several decades, there is also a keen awareness of the need to demonstrate their impact. The focus on impact is particularly critical in the area of youth violence prevention, because of the urgency of the problem and the finite (and often limited) resources available to address it. This need has resulted in a heightened sensitivity to the importance of evaluation in the collaborative process. Still, there is much variation in both the type and extent of evaluation being conducted at the local level.
In practice, integrating evaluation into the ongoing work of youth violence prevention collaborations poses several challenges.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore these challenges and suggest ways they may be overcome. A diverse literature is examined, including case studies of related community efforts. The author also draws on personal experience providing technical assistance to youth violence prevention strategic planning projects funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. Five major evaluation challenges faced by youth violence prevention collaborations are discussed:

- Determining the scope of the evaluation
- Confronting difficulties inherent in evaluating complex and flexible activities
- Differentiating information-gathering and needs assessment from evaluation
- Identifying measures, collecting assessments, and presenting data
- Selecting an evaluator

In addition to a discussion of these challenges, there is a suggested framework for evaluation that emphasizes monitoring, learning, and impact. That framework differentiates between evaluating activities and functions of the collaboration per se and evaluating the implementation and impact of selected youth violence prevention and intervention programs. The discussion covers how this framework can be helpful in addressing each of the challenges presented, and concludes with some general recommendations.

THE KNIGHT FOUNDATION INITIATIVE TO PROMOTE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND PREVENT YOUTH VIOLENCE

In 1995, the trustees of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation approved embarking on a comprehensive Initiative to Promote Youth Development and Prevent Youth Violence. Funds from this initiative were made available in all 26 communities served by Knight Foundation, for either a planning or an implementation project. Planning grants were awarded to 13 communities: Biloxi, MS; Boulder, CO; Bradenton, FL; Charlotte, NC; Columbia, SC; Columbus, GA; Detroit, MI; Grand Forks, ND; Lexington, KY; Macon, GA; Milledgeville, GA; Myrtle Beach, SC; and St. Paul, MN. These 1-year grants supported development of a comprehensive strategic plan to address youth violence, and required a collaboration and participatory process in the development and approval of this plan. Knight Foundation would then consider some of the programmatic recommendations for a possible implementation grant, although funding for these implementation projects was allocated through a separate process and was not automatic.

Planning grantees were required to conduct a local evaluation. In addition, the foundation commissioned a two-part external evaluation of the planning grants. The first part of the evaluation was an evaluability assessment, designed to assess progress by the 13 projects toward their goals and to assess difficulties encountered along the way, as well as to determine what additional evaluation activities would be appropriate (Backer, 2000). The results of the evaluability assessment included a plan for a modest cross-site evaluation that focused on three objectives: (1) assessing the impact and postplanning grant status of the 13 collaborations created for these planning projects; (2) exploring what uses had been made of the strategic plans that each project created; and (3) determining what happened to planning project staff after the end of the planning period, including their longer-term commitments to addressing youth violence in their communities.

CHALLENGES TO EVALUATION

The Knight Foundation planning grants were intended to build a collaboration structure that would produce a comprehensive community strategic plan for youth violence prevention. The defined and circumscribed nature of the tasks rendered evaluation more manageable. Still, the grantees struggled with many of the same evaluation concerns faced by collaborations with a broader mandate. These challenges are also similar to challenges faced by any type of collaboration focused on health promotion or prevention of social problems. The five challenges to be discussed here are:

- determining the scope of the evaluation
- confronting difficulties inherent in evaluating complex and flexible activities
- differentiating information-gathering and needs assessment from evaluation
- identifying measures, collecting assessments, and presenting data
- selecting an evaluator

The following discussions also include recommendations for how evaluators and community organizations may deal better with these five challenges.
Determining the Scope of the Evaluation

Just as there are many possible tasks for collaborations to take on, there are also many types and levels of possible evaluation. Often, the scope of the evaluation is fixed by the funding entity, and can range from almost nothing (except perhaps a brief report), to a “learning lab” approach, to a required comprehensive process and outcome evaluation. Collaborations that are locally funded typically have fewer evaluation mandates than those that are funded by foundation, state, or federal sources. When evaluations are required, their emphasis often depends on the funding agency’s approach to evaluation, as well as on the specific requirements of the initiative.

The statewide Colorado Healthy Communities Initiative, funded by the Colorado Trust from 1992 to 1998, is an example of a learning approach to evaluation, which characterizes the evaluation strategy typically used by the Colorado Trust. In this initiative, a total of 28 communities developed their vision of a healthy community and created strategic plans to move toward their goals. The Colorado Trust (1998) also invested in an evaluation of this multiyear, multisite process, which focused primarily on documenting “lessons learned.” Many of those lessons learned (e.g., collaboration leaders are essential to a successful project, offering implementation funding invariably affects the planning process, and significant change takes time) were then used to guide similar collaboration efforts, including a 26-community youth violence prevention initiative.

Alternatively, when a major focus of the collaboration process is to develop an implementation project in a community, the scope of the evaluation may focus on the success of the implementation project in impacting targeted outcomes. For example, during the mid-1990s, the National Funding Collaboration on Violence Prevention (NFCVP) used this type of approach. NFCVP was founded in 1995 as a type of collaboration across funding sources for community-based violence prevention. Nearly 30 funding sources (including federal agencies and foundations) were involved. With these funds, proposals were solicited from local community foundations to form violence prevention collaborations to address many different types of community violence.

The thinking behind this approach was that violence prevention required a comprehensive strategy that must be implemented by a collaboration of organizations and citizens working together. A major task of the collaboration was to design and implement comprehensive strategies that included specific programs. Eleven local collaborations across the United States participated in planning and implementing community-based violence prevention projects. Evaluation was not a part of the planning process, but was seen as a component of implementation. Indeed, a final planning activity was to select a local evaluator and develop an evaluation plan for the implementation phase of the initiative (COSMOS, 1997).

In some cases, the type and extent of evaluation are determined by state mandate. For example, the evaluation of the Rhode Island Substance Abuse Prevention Act, as reported by Florin, Mitchell, and Stevenson (1993), involved a mandate by the state legislature to conduct a process and implementation evaluation. This was accomplished via a contract to the Community Research and Services Team. The evaluation team worked with 35 community coalitions to assess progress with initial coalition-building tasks, quality of the strategic plans, implementation of activities designed to change individuals and communities and, ultimately, changes in substance-use behavior.

The Knight Foundation planning grants were required to conduct a local evaluation and to participate in a cross-site evaluation commissioned by the foundation. Projects were given considerable leeway in structuring the local evaluation. They were asked to emphasize documentation of activities and lessons learned. The cross-site evaluation provided an opportunity to collect additional information about the community strategic plan. Indicators of impact of the strategic plan included overall quality of the document, as rated by independent consultants, number of agencies using the strategic plan, after the planning process had been completed and at follow-up; and amount of additional monies for youth violence prevention generated as a direct result of the collaboration’s activities.

Even when evaluation guidelines are provided by a funding agency, collaborations often have trouble when it comes to the details of the evaluation. Requiring a process or outcome evaluation may provide some guidance regarding what is expected, but there is still much to be decided. This is exacerbated by the many difficulties inherent in evaluating this type of effort.

Confronting Difficulties Inherent in Evaluating Complex and Flexible Activities

The complexity and flexibility of collaborations make them difficult to evaluate. Rather than a circumscribed set of events with a beginning, middle, and end, and with specified and measurable activities, collaborations involve multiple players, multiple systems, and a changing series of activities. This is further complicated because no two collaborations unfold in quite the same fashion, making comparative studies even more problematic. For this reason, most evaluations of violence prevention collaborations provide a compilation
of case studies, with cross-site analyses aimed at identifying similar experiences and their impact (Backer, 2001; COSMOS, 1997).

In describing the challenges of studying comprehensive collaboration services, Knapp (1995) identifies a number of challenges that are relevant for evaluating community violence prevention collaborations. These include:

- Engaging divergent participants' perspectives
- Characterizing and measuring the elusive independent variable
- Locating and measuring the bottom line
- Attributing results to influences.

By definition, collaborations involve a diverse group of participants and stakeholders. For example, most youth violence prevention collaborations typically are comprised of representatives from the justice system, youth-service agencies, schools, faith community, health services, child protective services, city/county government, parents, youth, and others. Adequately representing each of these perspectives in an evaluation strategy is not an easy task. In addition, participants often differ significantly in their support of evaluation, in general, and in their understanding of what it takes to conduct an adequate evaluation.

As Knapp (1995) notes, characterizing the independent variable—those programmatic activities presumed to be responsible for individual or systemic change—is complex. In more traditional intervention research, the independent variable, typically equivalent to the treatment, is clearly specified, monitored, and delivered systematically. For youth violence prevention collaborations, the treatment can range from a minimal effort to coordinate services, to an intensive, highly integrated network of services that attempts to influence a range of individual and environmental risk factors for violence. Further, because collaboration activities involve multiple players in diverse settings, whose activities often change over time, precisely what has occurred is often difficult to document.

Just as defining the specific collaboration activities believed to influence desired outcomes poses distinct challenges, defining the desired outcomes, or the bottom line, may be equally elusive. Any number of plausible outcomes of youth violence prevention collaborations can be identified. Were new programs developed? Were additional funds for youth violence prevention brought into the community? Were positive community changes observed? Were members satisfied with the collaboration? Were community members satisfied? Was the strategic plan of high quality? Was it well received? Were changes in collaboration practices identified? Were changes in individual and/or community-level indicators of youth violence noted?

In practice, both funders and collaboration members are often eager to see their efforts result in reductions in levels of youth homicide and other types of serious youth violence. These concerns tend to grow exponentially as the work of the collaboration enters the political arena. Most politicians want to be associated with projects that work, meaning that they work to reduce violence, not work to get people to coordinate their services or like each other more. Thus, there is often spoken or unspoken pressure to achieve reductions in youth violence.

Even if changes in outcomes most linked to youth violence prevention are noted, how can collaborations determine whether these changes were brought about by their activities? Many factors contribute to youth violence at the individual, social contextual, and environmental levels (Tolan & Guerra, 1994). Youth violence prevention collaborations, including those that provide for a range of integrated prevention services, are still but one set of forces in a community. In practice, the journey from collaboration planning to reducing youth violence probably is one of a thousand steps that may take years to achieve. The collaboration's activities may also be a necessary but not sufficient component of an even broader response to youth violence.

Indeed, evaluations rarely document other equally plausible forces and their impact. This is particularly problematic in large communities or cities where the collaboration group may be but one of many strategies or activities focused on youth violence prevention. The collaboration may exist, in fact, because of a surge in funding for violence prevention, often in response to increased public awareness and concern after a killing or notoriously violent event. In some cases, there may also be more than one collaboration group. For example, one of the grants funded by the Knight Foundation went to a city youth violence prevention task force. However, within a few months (and using a different funding source), the school district linked up with a local hospital to form a different youth violence prevention planning group, with both groups operating in tandem for quite a while.

In addition to broad challenges, such as defining the scope of the evaluation and trying to demonstrate outcomes linked to a complex and flexible set of activities, youth violence prevention collaborations also face specific challenges related to the pragmatic aspects of their evaluation. These include challenges related to decisions about types and function of data to be collected, selection of assessments, and selection of an evaluator.

**Differentiating Information-Gathering and Needs Assessment From Evaluation**

Commonly, violence prevention coalitions (as well as substance prevention and other similar efforts) begin the collaboration process by focusing on
gathering community indicators. These indicators are used to determine the extent of the local problem; comparison to county, state, and/or national data; services available; gaps in services; associated risk factors; and other related information. Violence prevention collaborations typically gather data on indicators such as juvenile arrests by type of crime, child welfare data, and gang activity by location (e.g., census tracts). They also frequently compile rosters of violence prevention programs available and identify areas of most need (e.g., programs for very young children, programs in certain communities).

This type of information-gathering serves many purposes, including getting people past denial of the problem, providing a common information base, providing a model for collaboration, providing an empirically based needs assessment, and providing a basis for monitoring and evaluating change (Gabriel, 1997). However, in and of itself, providing a process or outcome assessment of the violence prevention collaboration is not sufficient, although these data may be used as baseline data for outcome assessment. Otherwise put, if the collaboration goes no further than collecting initial information on community indicators, it will have done little in the way of evaluation of the collaboration or its products.

This is not to say that the evaluator or evaluation team cannot be helpful in collecting these data. In fact, some models for evaluating community initiatives stress the importance of involving the evaluation team in all phases of coalition building. Consider empowerment evaluation, which has had a significant influence on the field (Fawcett et al., 1996). According to this framework, the evaluator works as part of a support team that is involved in all phases of the planning process, including collecting epidemiological data on incidence and prevalence of identified problems and assessing available resources. Still, within an empowerment framework, this type of data collection is part of a larger evaluation process, rather than a stand-alone activity.

**Identifying Measures, Collecting Assessments, and Presenting Data**

Access to instruments or assessments for gauging progress can greatly facilitate the evaluation process. These include simple logs to record activities (e.g., persons contacted, meetings, public forums, attendees), interview protocols for collecting process data, measures of community indicators, and individual assessments of risk/protective factors and behaviors linked to violence and other associated outcomes.

However, collaborations often do not know where to find these instruments. They often spend a fair amount of time developing forms, searching for assessments, and writing their own questionnaires. There are few resources that provide a compendium of needed measures for violence prevention collaborations or that help collaborations explore how to collect data and present information. Collaborations often rely on technical assistance providers or consultants to access this information for them.

The author's own experience with the Knight Foundation grantees involved searching various databases, Web sites, and reference listings for useful books or articles, and identifying only a few that were really helpful to grantees. An article by Francisco, Paine, and Fawcett (1993), "A Methodology for Monitoring and Evaluating Community Health Coalitions," was found to be particularly helpful by the projects.

Several of the Knight Foundation planning grantees decided to do community surveys to gather information on an assortment of indicators, to measure either current issues prior to planning or how communities were different after planning: citizen perceptions of youth violence and youth needs, beliefs about the causes of violence, familiarity with services available, perceptions of services needed, fear of crime, family supports, and changes in the community. To measure these (or whatever combination they chose) indicators, they often set about writing a list of questions for a community survey.

In one instance, the collaboration had developed a 122-item survey and planned to do a random mailing to 1,000 households. However, they were quickly overwhelmed by the sheer size of the survey and extent of the data that might confront them (assuming a decent response rate). When the consultants suggested to them that their survey was too long and too complicated for their purposes, they were actually greatly relieved. They were informed that focus groups would be a more manageable activity, if conducted at various stages of the planning process, and could serve as a source of both process and outcome information. Fortunately, their foray into survey research was short-lived.

**Selecting an Evaluator**

Ideally, an evaluator should be able to help collaborations navigate the complexities of evaluation, assist with multiple decisions along the way, and minimize the evaluation burden. However, many collaborations have trouble selecting an evaluator, for several reasons. In settings where evaluation is mostly left to the collaboration, there are often limited funds available. Given this restriction, members may have difficulty deciding whether to hire an outside consultant or to conduct the evaluation internally (e.g., by the coordi-
nator or a member of the collaboration). Even when funds are available to hire an external evaluator, there may be a shortage of local consultants with expertise in evaluation of collaborations, and even fewer consultants who are also knowledgeable about youth violence prevention.

Members of the collaboration also may not have the knowledge and/or leeway to select an evaluator whose approach is best suited to the group’s needs. Moreover, they may not have the experience to adequately assess the needs of the collaboration and how they will use information gathered. This is particularly problematic, given that there are many different models and theories of evaluation, each suggesting a different course of action and type of evaluator.

In many cases, evaluation is seen as an integral part of the collaboration process. Indeed, several popular models or typologies of evaluation emphasize the interconnectedness of planning and evaluation. These include utilization-focused evaluation, with its emphasis on intended use by intended users (Patton, 1978); developmental evaluation, with its role in program development (Patton, 1994); and empowerment evaluation, designed to promote participation in the evaluation process and use of results (Fawcett et al., 1996). When the evaluator is part of the project team, using evaluation to enhance the work of the collaboration is also important.

Indeed, most types of participatory evaluations are based on the notion of a continuous feedback loop, whereby data and other information are fed back to members of the collaboration on a regular basis, so that midcourse successes and needed corrections can be identified. In some cases, the evaluation is mostly an ongoing process of communication that can last for several years. As Patton (1994) notes in describing evaluation as a long-term partnership, “Developmental programming calls for developmental evaluation in which the evaluator becomes part of the design team helping to monitor what’s happening, both process and outcomes, in an evolving, rapidly changing environment of constant feedback and change” (p. 313).

Of course, this type of confluent process requires a high level of commitment to the evaluation process, including a mechanism for regular feedback from the local evaluator. Some evaluation models emphasize the role of the evaluator in program development and decision making about best practices. For violence prevention collaborations, this would require that the evaluator be skilled in program evaluation and have up-to-date knowledge of the violence prevention literature.

In practice, most evaluators are not experts in youth violence prevention, but tend to be generalists with knowledge of evaluation and research design. Further, their time commitments often are limited. Most of the changes that occur over the course of a collaboration’s work come from within, that is, from observations and discussions among members. In some cases, the members of the collaboration may even have difficulty communicating effectively with the evaluator, or vice versa.

One case in particular comes to mind, from the Knight Foundation projects. A planning collaboration had been struggling to find an identity and direction, in part, because of changes in staffing, the addition of new members, and changes in the local funding picture. All in all, the end result was a rather shaky level of self-confidence in their collective capabilities. In an attempt to rekindle their sense of direction, the collaboration hired a new evaluation consultant from the local university and made the evaluator part of the project team. At one meeting, the consultant presented an elaborate set of logic models with arrows going in almost every direction. Everyone from the collaboration was rather quiet, nodding occasionally in seeming approval. After the meeting, during a more informal lunch, one of the members was asked whether she was satisfied with the evaluation plan. She waited for a moment without answering, until told that others had found it almost impossible to follow what was presented, to which she replied, “Oh, thank goodness, I thought that I just didn’t understand research.”

Work with other Knight Foundation projects revealed that most groups had a difficult time finding evaluators, and generally chose someone they knew and liked, regardless of the match with project needs. In general, partnerships with consultants worked better than partnerships with university faculty who had regular academic commitments. This may have been because the academic evaluators chosen were not trained in community psychology or a related field and were more aligned with traditional experimental research methods. Such training may be more appropriate for evaluating implementation projects (or the implementation phase of planning projects). For example, the cross-site evaluation of the local projects funded by the NFCVP reported that collaborations recruited an “excellent cadre of mainly academically-based evaluators. The local evaluation plans were, for the most part, realistic and responsive to the conditions imposed by the local collaborations” (COSMOS, 1997, p. 30).

**FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATING COMMUNITY YOUTH VIOLENCE PREVENTION COLLABORATIONS**

The many challenges youth violence prevention collaborations face in designing and conducting evaluations suggest a need to set out guidelines that allow
us to address some of these challenges and to simplify the evaluation process. What follows is a proposed framework that emphasizes monitoring, learning, and impact, and differentiates between the planning and action functions of community youth violence prevention collaborations. It also allows for specification of data to be collected, including, for example, who should collect it and the type of measure. Clear specification of the scope of the evaluation and related tasks should also provide needed guidance in selecting the most appropriate evaluator.

The scope of any evaluation will depend to a great extent on the specific goals of the collaboration. These goals can be divided into two primary categories: (a) collaboration activities directed toward planning a specific violence prevention activity, set of activities, or strategic community response (planning phase), and (b) implementation of selected violence prevention programs or responses that are directly aimed at preventing or reducing youth violence (implementation phase). Collaborations may engage in planning only, implementation only, or both planning and implementation. They may also decide to focus their evaluation on only one particular phase, as illustrated by the emphasis on evaluation of implementation for projects funded by the NFCVP.

In addition, evaluations can serve multiple purposes. Three common purposes are monitoring, learning, and impact assessment. These represent increasingly more labor-intensive and time-consuming tasks. In other words, monitoring primarily requires record keeping of activities, events, and participation. Learning requires feedback about processes, including what is working well, what is not working well, possible changes, and how future endeavors might be done differently. This type of feedback tends to be both informal (e.g., discussions among collaboration members) and formal (e.g., consumer satisfaction surveys, interviews, focus groups). Finally, a focus on impact requires specification of desired goals and how they will be achieved and measured. An important component of an impact evaluation involves linking these goals with activities; thus, impact evaluations require adequate attention to monitoring and learning, as well. Table 6.1 provides examples of the type of information youth violence prevention collaborations might collect to address evaluation goals of monitoring, learning, and impact for both the planning phase and the implementation phase.

How might collaborations decide on a focus for their evaluation? First, this depends on whether they are involved in planning or some combination of planning and implementation. Second, they must identify which component is most important to evaluate and must specify the purpose of the evaluation (which may be determined a priori by the funding agency). Let us now turn

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Monitoring</th>
<th>Learning</th>
<th>Impact</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Collaboration activities directed toward planning a specific violence prevention activity, set of activities, or strategic community response</td>
<td>Members recruited</td>
<td>What is working well</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Number of youth recruited</td>
<td>How to increase attendance</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Diversity of membership</td>
<td>How to engage youth</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Number of meetings</td>
<td>How to best collect data on youth violence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Number of forums</td>
<td>How to engage community members</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Attendance at meetings and forums</td>
<td>How to involve hard-to-reach constituents</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Number and type of youth-led activities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>List of agencies contacted for needs assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Implementation</td>
<td>Implementation of selected violence prevention programs or responses that are directly aimed at reducing youth violence</td>
<td>What factors determine whether youth and families attend</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Number of youth and families served</td>
<td>Do clients represent diversity in the community; if not, how can others be reached</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Quality of implementation</td>
<td>What is working well and how can services be improved</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fidelity of implementation</td>
<td>How can services be better linked together</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Adaptations and changes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Monies spent per youth/family</td>
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<td>Consensus on vision</td>
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<td>Increased collaboration among members in community</td>
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<td>Increased sensitivity to diverse needs</td>
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<td>Additional monies for programs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Quality of strategic plan</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Agencies using strategic plan</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Policy changes</td>
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TABLE 6.1 Overview of Framework for Evaluating Youth Violence Prevention Collaborations
to a discussion of how this framework can be used to describe the evaluation activities carried out by the Knight-funded planning projects.

The Knight Foundation was interested in the monitoring, learning, and impact of the planning phase. The monitoring tasks (e.g., documenting participation, diversity, and community engagement) were left to the local evaluator. The learning tasks were included in the local evaluation and the cross-site assessment. The local evaluation information was integrated into a brief lessons-learned document, focused on how to enhance the work of the local collaborations (Guerra, 1998). The cross-site external evaluation was oriented toward impact assessment, with a particular focus on the quality and use of the community strategic plan (Buckner, 2001).

For example, there was wide variation in how strategic plans were formatted and disseminated to their communities. Some communities produced short documents with no artwork; others produced sophisticated print publications in several colors, with advanced graphics and pictures. In terms of dissemination, one community went door-to-door distributing its plan, another community printed 50,000 copies and sent it home with every school child in the community, and another project disseminated its plan on-line. Clearly, some strategic plans were better than others, both in terms of quality of the document and extent of its dissemination.

Although not directly linked to the quality of the strategic plan, the external evaluation noted several funded and unfunded spin-off projects that were clearly related to the work of the collaborations. These included a youth assistance program funded by the local Kiwanis Club, an increase in funding for school security from the local school district, a $1 million federal grant for early-prevention programming, and various grant submissions to local, state, and federal agencies. Other types of systems-change activities were also noted, including a regular community forum that provides opportunities for citizens to speak out; the addition of a mentoring component to an ongoing program, a change in funding priorities for a local foundation, to include an emphasis on youth violence prevention; and a new dialogue among local grantees, focused on how to enhance funding and programs for youth violence prevention.

Evaluation of the implementation phase of collaboration work is more complex. If collaborations are implementing one or more specific youth violence prevention programs, they need to evaluate each program separately. This raises a number of issues related to the difficulty in evaluating prevention and intervention programs in the field, which are particularly critical when trying to assess outcomes and link them to programming. In terms of monitoring, most programs keep records of number of clients served and service hours per client or family.

Using this information, calculating cost per client is also relatively easy. However, issues such as quality of implementation and implementation fidelity are often harder to document. Although some interventions are manualized and follow a detailed protocol, many programs involved services such as counseling and supervision, which may vary greatly from client to client and program to program. Learning about how to enhance the program often occurs informally via discussions among program staff. However, to the extent that this results in ongoing programmatic changes to enhance services, it renders evaluation of outcomes even more problematic.

As mentioned previously, most collaborations and agencies have a difficult time selecting appropriate indicators of impact and assessments to measure them. Evaluation consultants should be able to help with this task, and often do. However, all too frequently, consultants spend the bulk of their time helping agencies develop complex logic models that result in a type of evaluation paralysis. This is because evaluation based on these logic models require the assessment of multiple proximal outcomes (e.g., attitude change, family functioning) and distal outcomes (e.g., violence), and include a complex assessment and data analyses plan that could determine whether change in distal outcomes is indeed mediated by changes in proximal outcomes (according to the program’s theory of change). Even in the most sophisticated prevention research studies, these relations are difficult to demonstrate. Certainly, such designs are beyond the capacity and funding allocation for most projects implemented by collaborations. Rather than try to measure every possible outcome, projects would do well to select realistic (and easily measurable) indicators.

In addition to a focus on individual program outcomes, collaborations may also want to determine the synergy or collective impact of multiple programs, as is typically the case with violence prevention collaborations that are ongoing and responsible for creating and sustaining a range of programs. Indeed, when planning projects make the transition to implementation projects, they often include a range of prevention and intervention activities. For example, in the case of the NFCVP, prevention activities included media campaigns, enhanced police-community relations, leadership development, weapons abatement, comprehensive truancy prevention, multiparty gang mediation, housing rehabilitation, economic development, and employment.

Other collaborations may be less oriented toward planning and more focused on enhancing community-based services. One example of such an ongoing effort is the Violence Prevention Coalition of Greater Los Angeles, a public–private partnership founded in 1991, with more than 800 members. The coalition receives funds from various sources and engages in numerous
activities, including public awareness campaigns, engaging youth in dialogue about violence, providing challenge grants to local programs, and hosting a biennial violence prevention conference (for more information, see Little Hoover Commission, 2001). Frequently, indicators do not show corresponding changes, or get worse. Even when youth violence decreases, demonstrating (to any reasonable level of confidence) that these changes are linked outcomes is virtually impossible, because these multiprogram efforts typically focus on changes in community indicators of violence.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the complexities in evaluating the work of youth violence prevention collaborations, particularly as related to changes in youth violence, what can a collaboration do to assess its effectiveness? Clearly, this decision depends on local capacity, interests, needs, and priorities, as well as on requirements from the funding agency. Based on experience working with such collaborations, the following recommendations are offered:

- Be certain about the evaluation requirements for your funding agency (or oversight agency). In many cases, collaborations are asked to write an evaluation plan, but guidelines from the funding agency are vague and unspecified.
- Be careful to select an evaluator who shares your ideas about the scope of the evaluation and the role of the evaluator. Allow time for discussions about what type of evaluation is desired and what type of evaluator is best (e.g., someone who is very engaged from the start or someone who does a postplanning assessment only).
- Be realistic about what you can assess and what you will learn from that assessment. There is certainly nothing wrong with doing a good job of monitoring progress for planning or implementation projects, if that is all that is feasible. Problems typically arise when collaborations try to do more than they are capable of doing (given funding, availability of consultants, and types of activities).
- Understand that youth violence has many causes and that a single program or project is unlikely to have a sizable impact. Educating funders and policy makers about the difficulty in preventing youth violence is also important, in order for them to have reasonable expectations about program outcomes.
- Embrace qualitative methods that include feedback and suggestions from all parties involved. Given the difficulty in conducting scientifically rigorous evaluations of youth violence prevention and intervention programs, more attention should be paid to listening to the voices of those who are served and those who provide services. In addition to providing information about how to better serve youth and families, participants are the best judges of whether programs are meeting their needs and helping them stay away from violence.

REFERENCES