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William P. O'Hare

Data-Based Child Advocacy

Using Statistical Indicators to Improve the Lives of Children



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Introduction

Within the broad field of child advocacy a subset of advocates has emerged in recent years, who focus on using statistical data and scientific evidence to promote better lives for children. At the same time there are growing numbers of researchers and scholars who are using statistical data to provide a deeper understanding of children’s lives. I call the intersection of data, statistics, and scientific evidence on the one hand and explicit efforts to improve the quality of life for children on the other hand, as “Data-Based Child Advocacy,” which is the theme of this publication. As defined here, data-based child advocacy includes any activity where at least one central component is focused on improving the lives of children using statistical data. A more complete and detailed description of the term is offered in Chaps. 2 and 3.

There are four key points I try to make in this publication. First, growing numbers of individuals and organizations are combining data and advocacy to try and improve the lives of children. Second, there are many different activities combining data and advocacy that fit into the data-based child advocacy framework. Third, the development of data-based child advocacy is closely connected with several other recent trends. Fourth, combining communication expertise and data expertise is critical for successful data-based child advocacy.

I suspect much of what I present in this publication is not new to many readers. Most people who have an interest in this topic are already engaged in some way. What is new, I believe, is the way material is combined and conceptualized here as part of a larger framework called data-based child advocacy.

The conceptualization of *Data-Based Child Advocacy* offered in this publication provides a framework that will help identify which activities should be included as part of data-based child advocacy as well as the roles played by data experts and child advocates. Hopefully, such recognition will facilitate productive interaction between scholars, researchers, and child advocates and will ultimately improve the quality of life for children.

I think of advocacy and science as being ends of an activity continuum. At one end, some advocates pay no attention to data or scientific evidence. At the other end of the continuum, some scientists pay little attention to the social

consequences of their research and make no attempt to get their findings before the public or policymaking audiences. However, there are many points along the continuum where scholarship and advocacy can be combined in ways that enhance both.

In this publication, I focus largely on statistical data or social indicators in discussing data-based child advocacy, though the term often reflects more than that. For example, the results of scientific evaluations of public policies and programs would be considered part of data-based child advocacy as would research results from scientific journals and textbooks. Efforts to collect and summarize scientific work and make such summaries available to broad audiences also fit into the data-based child advocacy conceptual framework. The focus on the use of descriptive social indicators of child well-being in this publication is partly due to space available, but it is also due to the fact that a discussion of statistical analysis and research publications in the context of data-based child advocacy is more complex. In addition, I believe that descriptive data provided by data books, report cards, and websites are at the heart of data-based child advocacy.

This publication includes information from around the world, but focuses on the United States more than other parts of the world. I focus on the United States partly because it is the landscape I know best. Also, I think data-based child advocacy is more advanced in the United States than in many other areas of the world. While a few points discussed here are particularly relevant to the United States' sociopolitical environment, I suspect most of the points discussed in this publication can be easily translated to other countries and other cultures.

The audience I hope to reach with this publication is diverse. There are many professionals, for example, in the areas of education and public health, who use data to reach nonscholarly audiences on a regular basis. I hope this publication helps them see how their work fits into a broader field of data-based child advocacy and I hope they may find information in this publication that will help them do their job more effectively.

One audience I hope to reach with this publication is those individuals who have been trained in quantitative social science methods, but have little or no experience or understanding of advocacy. In my experience, many scholars and researchers involved in mainstream academic research would like to see their work have a bigger impact on public discussions and/or public policy. Some of the lessons from this review of *Data-Based Child Advocacy* may be helpful in that regard.

Chapter 2 provides a detailed description of data-based child advocacy and a rationale for why data-based child advocacy is important and growing. In this chapter, the relatively unique situation of children with regard to advocacy is discussed.

Chapter 3 provides a list of six distinct uses of child indicators in advocacy-related activity with multiple examples given in each of the six areas. The level of detail provided in this chapter will help readers gain a deeper and richer understanding of *Data-Based Child Advocacy*. The material presented in Chap. 3 may also help some readers more clearly see how their work fits into the broader data-based

child advocacy movement. Also, the material in this chapter underscores the extent to which data-based child advocacy is emerging in many different forms and contexts.

Chapter 4 provides some discussion of how the data-based child advocacy movement has developed. In this chapter, the connections between several other trends and the increase in data-based child advocacy are explored. Some of the reasons that data-based child advocacy is not more widely recognized are also covered in this chapter.

A section on communication, Chap. 5, is included in this volume because combining data and effective communication is critical for successful data-based child advocacy. Communication norms are perhaps the biggest differences between writing for scholarship and writing for public influence. In this chapter, I contrast styles and techniques that are different in public settings than they are in academic or scholarly settings.

It is often useful to know authors' background in order to understand their approach to a field and better understand potential biases. I am a demographer by training and I have spent nearly all of my work life in the nonprofit sector where I was writing for public audiences. I was also a contributing editor to the *American Demographics* magazine for about a dozen years. The material presented here is drawn partly from my 25-year involvement with the KIDS COUNT project in the U.S. (O'Hare 2013). While this experience is largely in the context of the United States, my thoughts have also been heavily shaped by my participation in the founding and development of the International Society for Child Indicators.

Reference

- O'Hare, W. P. (2013). A case study of data-based child advocacy: The KIDS COUNT project. *Child Indicators Research*, 6(1), 33–52.