EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Using Social Network Analysis in Evaluation: A Report to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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Social network analysis (SNA) is an evaluation tool that is valuable for understanding data on the relationships between actors. Like any tool, it is not applicable in all contexts and its use should be driven by the evaluation questions and the characteristics of the program being evaluated. To better understand when to utilize SNA it is useful to know what evaluators can learn from this methodology.

Social network analysis can help evaluators to:

- Understand the network embedded within a program or initiative, in terms of its density, connectedness, balance, and/or centralization
- Identify subsets within the network, such as cliques or key nodes
- Identify important characteristics about the actors in the network, such as gatekeepers and isolates (outliers with few connections)
- Measure the degrees of centrality and similarity of actors within the network

It is important that the tools used in an evaluation match the questions that the evaluation is attempting to answer. There are certain questions that SNA is particularly useful in addressing, including:

- Who is talking to or working with whom?
- Who gives and seeks advice or mentors others?
- Who gives resources to whom?
- Who has access to whom?

Social network analysis for evaluation is not without its challenges. Key challenges associated with SNA include:

- Data collection: To be accurate, SNA requires extremely high response rates and complete data, and that may place too high a burden on people within the network.
- Size and scope: Given the data collection burden associated with SNA, managing the size and scope of the evaluation can be problematic.

• Capacity: SNA requires a unique skill set and training and it may be difficult to find the right contractor or consultant with this expertise.

A number of best practices should be employed in order to address the challenges associated with SNA and to make the SNA have the greatest impact. They fall into a number of areas:

- **Timing:** When evaluating the formation of connections and expansion of networks, plan and implement the SNA at the beginning of the process, during the planning phase. Implementation early in the process also allows for the utilization of repeated measures. Time should be allocated at the front and back ends of any evaluation utilizing SNA for the contractors to explain the methodology and educate stakeholder groups about the purpose of the venture and secure buy-in and participation at the front end, and for debriefing and sharing of findings with stakeholder groups at the back end.
- **Data collection:** Create opportunities to maximize participation, such as having a survey be part of a reporting mechanism that is already being used, offering incentives, or making funding contingent upon data completion. Think about ways of collecting data other than surveys, such as, resumes, meeting minutes, and electronic records of communications between network members.
- Contractor selection: When screening potential contractors, require them to provide
 references and a sample evaluation report illustrating their ability to do SNA. Include
 contract language that specifies how final deliverables should focus on the use of the
 findings, next steps, and plans for dissemination—in addition to simply reporting the
 findings of the SNA.

SNA, with its ability to provide insight into relationships and connections, is a useful evaluation tool that is growing in popularity. To maximize the usefulness of SNA in evaluation, it is important to know the contexts where SNA is appropriate, to consider the challenges associated with SNA, and to follow best practices in implementing SNA.