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Cross-Sector Connections in Rhode Island

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Abstract

The idea that cross-sector collaboration is necessary to address entrenched social problems such as high poverty, low employment, and health disparities has inspired a number of prominent interventions in recent years. For our purpose, collaboration is defined as participation in partnerships and cross-sector programs designed to reach a common goal. We sent 6,000 surveys to leaders in business, education, government, law enforcement, nonprofits, and religious organizations, and this issue brief highlights cross-sector collaboration patterns within cities and towns in Rhode Island. We find evidence of cross-sector collaboration but that it may be most often initiated by organizations in the nonprofit sector.

Key Data Items

- Nonprofit organizations reported engaging in the greatest number of collaborations, and, for the most part, other sectors reported collaborating most frequently with nonprofits.
- Organizations in the business sector reported very few collaborations with organizations in other sectors, and few organizations in other sectors reported collaborating with the business sector.
- The range of responses that participants provided suggests that leaders consider many activities to be collaboration that in fact do not conform to the rigid definition of cross-sector collaboration used by policymakers and funders.

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston or the Federal Reserve System.

Introduction

The belief that social problems such as high poverty, low employment, and health disparities are best addressed through cross-sector collaboration—partnerships involving government, business, nonprofits and philanthropies, communities, and/or the public as a whole—has inspired a number of prominent interventions in recent years. As part of a larger initiative focused on distressed small and midsize cities, we investigated the state of cross-sector collaboration in 20 cities and towns in Rhode Island by surveying organizational leaders in these sectors.¹

We sent 6,000 surveys to leaders in business, education, government, law enforcement, nonprofits, and religious institutions² across the state and received back 324 complete responses.³ In addition to 12 multiple-choice questions, the survey included an open-ended question, which 181 of our 324 respondents answered:

- Does your organization collaborate with organizations across the sectors to improve the quality of life in your community? If so, how?

Patterns of interaction

Here, we highlight some of the patterns we discovered in the 181 responses to that question. The findings give us some preliminary understanding of the scope and trends in cross-sector activities among respondents in the surveyed communities. In this brief, we describe the range of activities respondents considered to be collaborative, the number of such collaborations reported across sectors, and the topics of those reported collaborations.

¹ The mission of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston is to promote growth and economic development in six New England states: Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. To this end, the Boston Fed has launched the [Working Cities Challenge](#) in several New England states, including Rhode Island. The Working Cities Challenge is a grant competition that is designed to support cross sector, collaborative leadership and ambitious work to improve the lives of low-income people in small and midsize cities. In 2017, several Rhode Island cities and towns will receive awards ranging from \$300,000 to \$500,000, which will enable them to advance their collaborative vision. We gathered our data in conjunction with the rollout of the Working Cities Challenge in Rhode Island.

² These are the sector categories used in the social-policy literature (see Sampson, R. J. (2012). *Great American city: Chicago and the enduring neighborhood effect*. University of Chicago Press).

³ Our response rate from all the sectors but business was respectable. We received responses from about 25 percent of the nonbusiness organizations we surveyed, but only about 2.5 percent of the businesses we contacted (about 4,500 of the leaders invited to complete the survey came from the business sector and 1500 from the other five sectors).

Collaboration can be a vaguely defined concept with a “know it when you see it” quality. To combat that, our survey utilized a strict definition: *participation in partnerships and cross-sector programs designed to reach a common goal*. In describing what they considered to be collaborative activities, respondents listed activities that we could assign to one of six categories (see box), only two of which we consider to be representative of cross-sector collaborations consistent with the definition provided above. Those two are partnerships and programs. Some respondents listed collaborations that involved explicit partnerships with at least one organization in another sector. The most prominent of these was the Health Equity Zones initiative, discussed below.

Among those mentioning programs, one respondent described a jointly administered program that included “work to increase participation in the federal Summer Food Service Program with supermarkets, government, and other nonprofits.”

Activities participants describe that are consistent with definition of “cross-sector collaboration”

- Partnerships
- Cross-sector programs

Activities participants describe that are outside the definition of “cross-sector collaboration”

- Unspecified collaboration
- Convening, meeting, or space sharing
- Within-sector partnerships
- Direct service (without collaboration)

The other four kinds of activities that respondents mentioned do not qualify as cross-sector collaborations per our definition. Some respondents noted that they were generally collaborative but offered no substantiating details. For example, one respondent wrote that the organization collaborated “by partnering, organizing, and coordinating services together for a greater impact.” This response lacked specifics on the other sectors, organizations, topics, or initiatives involved, so we could not include it in our analysis. Other respondents indicated that they had ongoing meetings and other interactions, such as space sharing, with organizations in other sectors. One reported, for example, on hosting “a series of ‘Business Owners Meetings’ every other month that provide education, resources, and networking opportunities to the community.” Although this activity

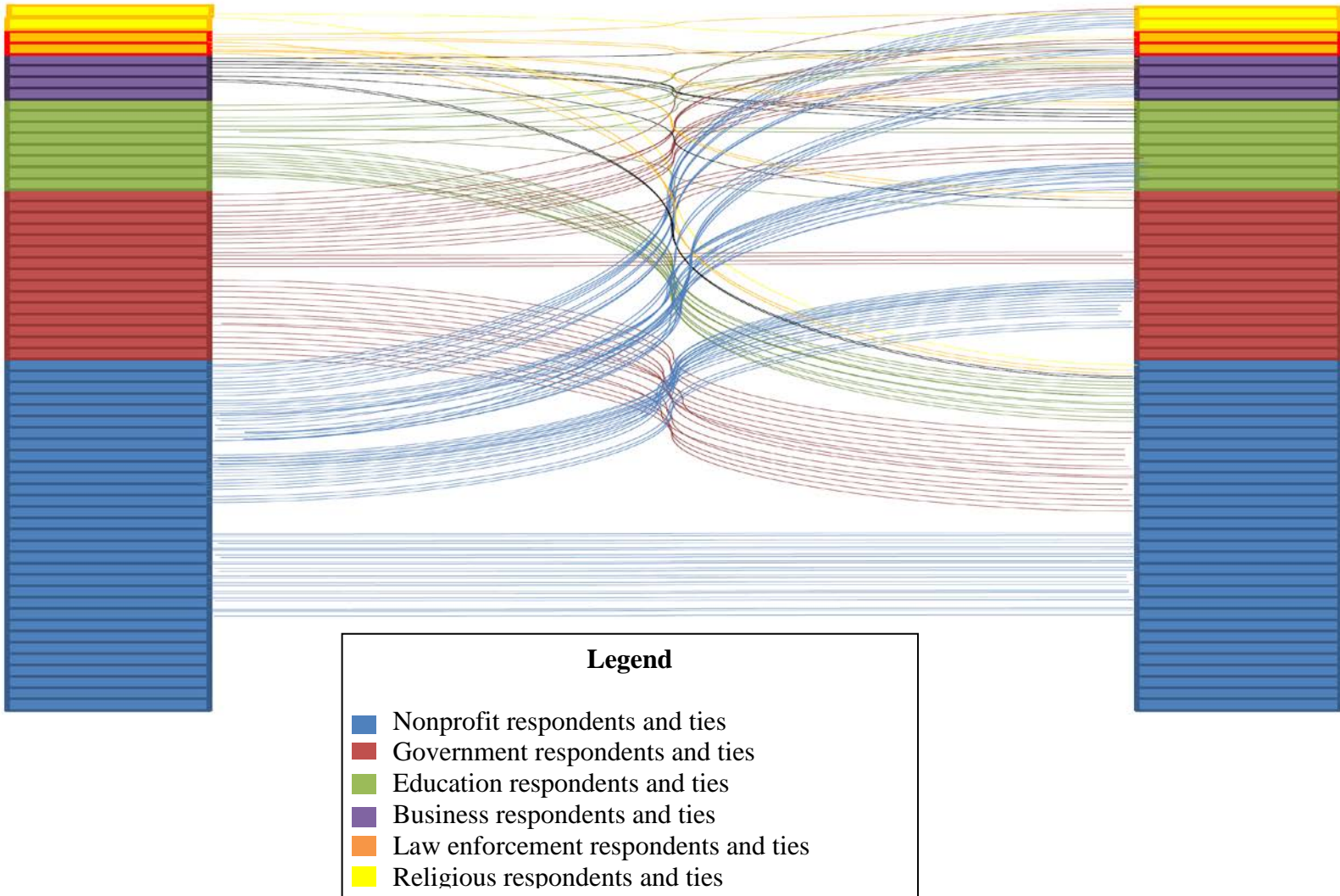
allows for information sharing, it lacks the element of action toward a shared goal that we require for it to qualify as collaboration.⁴

A third group of respondents noted instances of collaboration, but the collaborations were within their own sector. For example, one nonprofit organization responded, “As a performing-arts group, we collaborate heavily with our own sector.” A fourth and final group of respondents merely detailed their organization’s work in direct service. Organizational leaders listed activities that were core to their mission. One, for instance, noted that the organization provides “family support services to all within and outwith [sic] the State of Rhode Island during pediatric medical crisis.” Another leader explained that her organization provides “more than 13,000 meals annually to families in need.” These are valuable activities, but they do not involve cross-sector partnerships in service of a shared goal.

Interestingly, of the 181 leaders who responded to the question, 27 acknowledged that their organizations did not engage in cross-sector collaboration at all. One respondent admitted, “We attempt to secure funding in conjunction with other partners, [but] not very successfully.” The ranges of responses that participants provided suggests that leaders consider many activities to be collaboration that in fact do not conform to the rigid definition of cross-sector collaboration used by policymakers and funders.

⁴ Some respondents reported that they sat on the boards of directors of organizations in other sectors. While board presence is helpful, serving on a board does not require working toward a shared or common goal – qualities that define collaborations. Moreover, our question was how the organization is engaged across sectors, but an organization can’t sit on a board; only an individual can.

Figure 1. Map of Intra- and Intersector Ties



Source: Data compiled by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston.

The map of intersector ties visualizes the links that the respondents reported. The columns are mirror images of one another, with the column on the left reflecting outgoing ties, while the column on the right captures incoming ties. If a nonprofit respondent indicated—as one of our respondents did—that their organization shared a “grant with the local education department to support collaboration in parent and community engagement,” this relationship is represented as a blue line originating in the nonprofit section of the column on the left and connecting with the green education section on the right. As the relative size of the segments of the columns show, we received the greatest number of responses from the nonprofit sector. In total, organizations described 125 unique outgoing ties with organizations outside their sector. Every sector contained at least two organizations with outgoing ties to organizations in other sectors. The religious sector reported the fewest outgoing ties, with two, while the organizations in the nonprofit sector reported the greatest number of outgoing intersector ties (60).

Organizations in the business sector reported the lowest rate of outgoing ties. A business leader who was among the 27 respondents who reported no collaboration said, “We are a small business; we contribute when we can”—a response that suggests that this participant thought of civic engagement in terms of financial contributions. Eighteen nonbusiness organizations reported collaborating with the business sector, including one nonprofit group that said, “Our organization delivers technical assistance to businesses that provide workforce training to hard-to-employ residents.” Although the business sector did not have the lowest *number* of incoming ties, its low *rate* of ties suggests that business-sector interest in cross-sector collaboration may be quite low. We lack the comparison data to conclude whether this finding is particular to Rhode Island or is the case for other geographies as well.

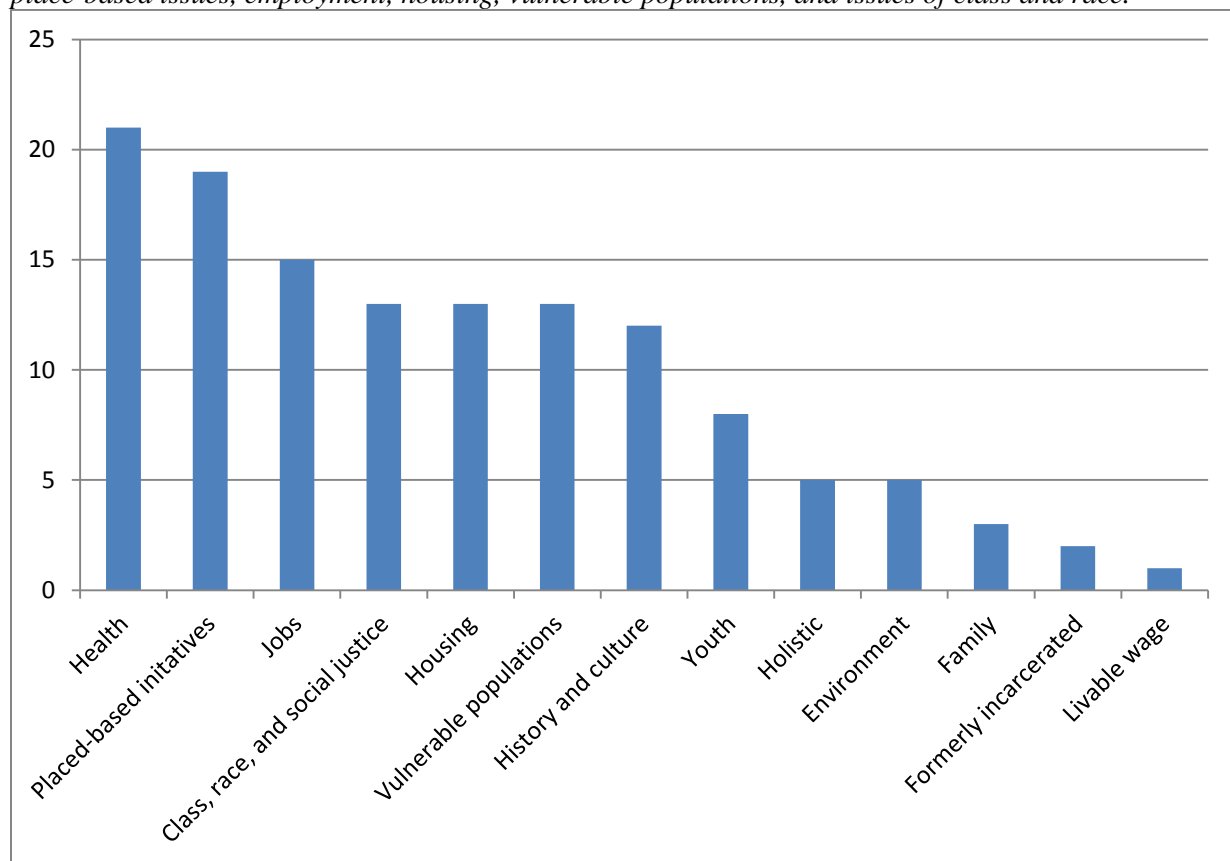
Organizations attempted to address a variety of issues through cross-sector activities. As shown in Figure 2, respondents most frequently listed health and well-being as their collaborative cause. The prominence of references to this in the survey is likely due to the implementation, beginning in 2015, of Health Equity Zones across the state. Health Equity Zones are “geographic areas designed to achieve health equity by eliminating health disparities using place-based (where you live) strategies to promote healthy communities.”⁵ Geography-based (e.g., neighborhood)

⁵ “[Health Equity Zones](#),” State of Rhode Island Department of Health, accessed May 9, 2017.

collaborations came in second, while collaborations focused on job training and job quality came in third. Among organizations concentrating on workforce issues, many were engaged in traditional workforce development, but others were taking innovative approaches: “We are trying to create opportunities for people to generate income through a collective enterprise. We are unifying efforts from different sectors; the public, private, and community/nonprofit sectors to improve the well-being and earnings of people in our community in a dignified manner. Through the cooperative, [we are] trying to create some job stability for people in our community,” reported one participant. Organizations also frequently mentioned housing issues, including one organization that “formed MOUs with affordable-housing developers to help our participating families into home ownership.” Another organization noted, “As a homeless- and housing-services provider, we strive to provide not only basic needs to individuals and families, but wraparound connections as well.”

Figure 2. Frequency of Collaborative Focus

Organizations collaborate across sectors primarily to address health and well-being, place-based issues, employment, housing, vulnerable populations, and issues of class and race.



Source: Data compiled by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston.

Conclusion

If cross-sector collaboration is necessary to solve entrenched social problems, then a deeper understanding of the level and kind of participation from public, private, and nonprofit actors will surely help to promote these joint initiatives. This brief offers an initial look at cross-sector collaboration in a selection of cities and towns in Rhode Island. Some of our findings were not surprising—for example, the fact that nonprofit organizations reported engaging in the greatest number of collaborations and the fact that, for the most part, other sectors reported collaborating most frequently with nonprofits. Conversely, organizations in the business sector reported very few collaborations with organizations in other sectors, and few organizations in other sectors reported collaborating with the business sector. Respondents representing businesses often stated that they felt they fulfilled their role in civic development through traditional approaches such as works of charity and presence on boards.

The responses also suggest that leaders have varying working definitions of collaboration. It is common in the literature to note that collaboration means different things to different people, but less thought has been given to the question of if and why those differences are important or whether it is possible to have a single definition. Would a consensus definition of collaboration lead to more effective collective action? At the very least, a consensus definition should make it easier to study activities falling under the collaborative umbrella. For example, it is possible that nonprofits and city governments are more responsive to the term “cross-sector collaboration” than other sectors are. Those other sectors may very well be engaged in activities that would be considered collaborative if a common definition were widely accepted, but without a shared definition, those sectors may not recognize that fact. If that is the case, leaders outside nonprofits and city government may be underreporting activities that would qualify as collaboration. Conversely, it is possible that nonprofit and public-sector participants are overstating their level of collaboration because they are being funded and evaluated by programs that require collaboration. Business and other sectors whose reputations—and very existence—do not depend on such programs for funding have less reason to overstate their collaborations. To test that idea, it would be useful to have information from places that do not have funded collaboration initiatives and compare how the various sectors in those places describe their levels of collaboration.

Importantly, the responses demonstrate that organizations also engage in many activities that are valuable but not collaborative, such as direct service. Organizations have limited resources and must make informed trade-offs about where to allocate their efforts. How should the relative value of deliberately collaborative efforts be compared with energy spent on other activities? Respondents to this survey reported that the greatest focus of collaboration was health. However, none of the responding businesses made reference to health-related collaborations. As noted above, perhaps businesses indeed are involved in health collaborations, but do not identify them as such. If Rhode Island makes progress on health indicators, it would be interesting to learn if the private sector contributed to this progress or if the programs made progress toward their goals without engagement from the business sector.

The survey results also raise questions about the role of various sectors in facilitating cross-sector collaboration. Some researchers argue that leadership in cross-sector efforts can originate from any sector, but our analysis shows a definite concentration of leadership in the nonprofit sector.⁶ People may be leaders within their own sector (for example, a mayor working well with a governor to get economic development done) but may be relying on nonprofits or other actors for leadership across sectors.

It may be the case that strong nonprofit leadership is needed to promote strong collaboration across the other sectors or, alternatively, perhaps leadership can originate from any sector, but strong nonprofits are necessary to create the conditions that sustain collaboration. The assumption that it is desirable to have equal inputs from all sectors may not be warranted. While our analysis showed less collaboration from the business sector, it is possible that broad business participation is not necessary for effective cross-sector collaboration and that the quality, not the quantity, of collaboration is most important. That is, a few key businesses may be all that is necessary to lead to robust cross-sector collaboration.

We are limited in the conclusions we can draw by the surveys returned to us: it is not within our power to say whether the trends observed here hold for all Rhode Island organizations.

⁶ Bryson, J. M., Crosby, B. C., & Stone, M. M. (2006). The design and implementation of cross-sector collaborations: Propositions from the literature, *Public Administration Review*, 66(s1), 44–55.

Moreover, this survey was only administered in certain cities in Rhode Island. The results might have been different in other cities or in states other than Rhode Island. We could learn more by testing other settings, including wealthier cities and towns and different states, including states that are not participating in the Working Cities initiatives, as well as by tracking how the responses change over time.