Evaluability of Community Dispute Resolution Programs: Effecting Change or Maintaining the Status Quo?

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Evaluability of Community Dispute Resolution Programs:
Effecting Change or Maintaining the Status Quo?

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of the
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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Public Administration

By
Rebecca Gourde
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Abstract

Between the 1960s and the 1990s, dozens of programs and organizations arose throughout the United States designed to bring peaceful resolutions to emerging community disputes, following in the conceptual footsteps of the federal Community Relations Service. Many of these community dispute resolution programs have encountered calls for reduced funding in recent years, as economic hardships force public administrators to parcel out limited public monies to those services that can demonstrate the most benefit. This study is a content analysis that examines the public-facing web content of 20 representative community dispute resolution programs in the United States. The researcher found that the most commonly mentioned goals within the analyzed content included elements of saving costs or maintaining peace, with only six of the 20 agencies referencing goals related to justice or equity. Of the 163 total data points touching on program outputs, 32.5% dealt with the number of cases managed, 23.3% dealt with case resolution rate, and 23.9% dealt with the number of trainings completed. Only six total data points involved discussions of outcomes, and only one of these was tied to a major category of goals. Based on the findings from the sample, the researcher concludes that many community dispute resolution programs are not currently designed or implemented in such a way as to be evaluated easily. Additional forethought and planning could help programs better assess the effectiveness of their services and steer practitioners toward approaches with the most potential for serving the public interest.

*Keywords*: community dispute resolution, mediation, evaluation, evaluability assessment
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Chapter 1: Introduction

As civil rights reforms gained traction in the early 1960s, policymakers expected resistance from conservative Americans and feared the political backlash from a firm implementation. Described as “America’s Peacekeeper,” the Community Relations Service (CRS) was established as a federal agency by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. President Lyndon B. Johnson spearheaded the creation of the agency to complement the other elements of the act, maintaining that a focus on voluntary, peaceful mediation could be a politically safe approach to enforcing civil rights reforms (Levine, 2005; Rogers, 2015). The CRS specialized, and continues to specialize, in deploying mediators and negotiators to communities experiencing unrest in response to hate crimes and civil-rights conflicts. CRS has no authority to enforce decisions, and it doesn’t take sides or assign blame. Interventions can range anywhere from helping to prevent incidents at demonstrations to going back and forth between parties in a dangerous stalemate to organizing city-wide planning sessions over the span of months to years (Scott, 2016).

In the decades following the establishment of the CRS, dozens of local and regional institutions were similarly founded in the hopes that peacemaking and mediated dialogue could mend social fractures within their communities (Rogers, 2015). Both public and private agencies focused on community dispute resolution (CDR) have been recipients of public funding, often designed to save tax dollars elsewhere, such as the legal system, or to strengthen the economic or social conditions of a municipality, such as through reduced citizen discontent (Carlson & Anderson, 2014; Monroe, 2018; Rogers, 2015; Van Epps, 2013). Local and regional offices are capable of maintaining relationships with key leaders and provide long-term support beyond individual points of conflict (Van Epps, 2013). CDR programs, and their promise not only to de-escalate violence but also to help build social cohesion over time, have been an enticing route for
politicians looking to take action on immediate discord without necessarily committing to systemic changes (Garsd, 2021). CDR agencies saw a period of growth through the 1970s and 1980s, with the expansion tapering in the early 2000s (Carlson & Anderson, 2014; Van Epps, 2013).

Almost 60 years after the beginnings of the CRS, however, it would be difficult to make the claim that a commitment to diplomatic resolution of social conflict now dominates the American landscape. Recent years seem to suggest an increase in social discord throughout the United States, with echoes of the environments that bred the need for the Community Relations Service in the first place. Many white Americans are also struggling to accept the changing demographics of the country and are violently resisting the prospect of becoming a racial minority (Levine, 2005). The year 2019 saw the highest number of hate crime incidents since 2008 (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2020), and hate crimes rose another 13% from 2019 to 2020 (Choi, 2021). Nationwide, three times as many unarmed black people than unarmed white people were shot by police between 2015 and 2020 (Penn Medicine, 2020). Widespread protests and counterprotests have likewise illustrated inequity in the type of official response. In 2020, US law enforcement agencies used force against leftwing protests such as Black Lives Matter demonstrations at a rate three times higher than rightwing protests (Beckett, 2021). The right to peaceful protest is increasingly challenged, with 235 anti-protest bills having been proposed at the federal and state level between January 2017 and early January 2022 (ICNL, 2022).

Meanwhile, there may even be a perception that communications among neighbors, acquaintances, and families have deteriorated rather than improved over time. A large majority of Americans report that conversations involving political issues have become less respectful and more negative in recent years (Pew Research Center, 2019). Some scholars point to trends such
as shifting technology and differences in neighborhood amenities as reasons behind generally reduced social capital in recent decades (Rogers, 2014). Experts in civic discourse observe that the election and administration of President Donald Trump contributed to a prevailing culture of negotiation in the United States marked by adversarialism, intimidation, and short-term gains, exacerbating the polarization of groups (Menkel-Meadow, 2019). With perpetrators of bigotry and violence becoming more outspoken, hate groups may feel emboldened to carry out their agendas without as much fear of social or legal consequences (Monroe, 2018). The high-level rejection of “truth” or “fact” has been particularly damaging to collaborative discourse on public issues and policymaking (Ebner, 2019), detracting from negotiators’ attempts to promote models of joint problem-solving (Menkel-Meadow, 2019).

The economic and social stressors accompanying the COVID-19 pandemic have likely exacerbated existing tensions (Closson, 2021). Far from uniting Americans around a common cause, the long-haul nature of the COVID-19 crisis has in many ways intensified existing disputes and spawned new hostilities. Bonotti and Zech (2021) discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic has threatened Americans’ capacity for both politeness and public-mindedness, with vulnerable groups often bearing the brunt of the social, economic, and human costs. Fear associated with COVID-19 and anger over its consequences exacerbated racism and xenophobia in the United States (Elias et al., 2021); because COVID-19 emerged during a time of heightened exclusionary nationalism, Elis et al. (2021) contend that the resulting xenophobia has been more severe than that seen in similar situations in history.

The transition to new political leadership has yet to mend broken relationships. The attack on the US capitol on January 6, 2021, by supporters of President Trump kicked off the Biden era with oppositional violence and continues to divide Americans. A year into the
presidency of Joe Biden, 43 percent of US voters have reported that political civility has
decreased since Biden took office, and 67 percent have reported that the political environment
has gotten worse since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Georgetown University,
2022). The public’s trust in the government remains near historic lows, with 24% trusting
government to do the right thing in 2021, compared to 77% in 1964, the year of the original Civil
Rights Act (Pew Research Center, 2021). According to a Public Agenda/USA TODAY report
(Schleifer, Friedman, & McNally, 2021), 72% of Americans want to reject political hostility in
favor of focusing more on commonalities.

While the CRS and similar organizations have now been in place for decades, it remains
unclear whether the implementation and expansion of community dispute resolution has
ameliorated social strife, has exacerbated it, or has made no difference (Rogers, 2015; Scott,
2016; Sturm & Gadlin, 2007). By mediating hundreds of intense conflicts over the decades, they
have undoubtedly prevented a great deal of bloodshed, damage to private property, and
economic disruption. But beyond the immediate conflicts addressed by their interventions, have
CDR programs—marked by common principles of neutrality, de-escalation, voluntary
discourse—contributed to long-term social progress? Would the social conditions of the United
States be in a worse state today if not for the interventions of CDR programs over the past
several decades?

The first step in tackling these questions might be to explore what these agencies’
evaluation data tell the public about the impact of CDR activities within society. If the data
suggest that the field of CDR holds the key for Americans’ self-navigation out of entrenched
social conflict and into constructive problem-solving, citizens would likely benefit from devoting
more public resources toward these chronically underfunded programs. If data suggest that CDR
activities have had little long-term impact or have even resulted in unintended negative consequences, citizens would likely benefit from devoting public resources toward new or modified approaches.

However, at present, there are several challenges in using CDR program data to come to many conclusions about their overall effectiveness. Discussions of outcome-level data are rare among CDR agencies, due to both the confidential nature of many case details as well as the difficulty of operationalizing goals. In fact, there tends to be a lack of clarity surrounding the field’s vision of long-term success. The complex social factors involved in the theory of change make it difficult to identify appropriate measures of success, yet alone design evaluations robust enough to provide meaningful data (Laue & Cormick, 1978; Levine, 2005; Newcomer, 2015; Smith, 2005). Partly due to this lack of performance data, public administrators are reluctant to continue funding community dispute resolution programs, as the new economic and political environment puts more pressure on the efficiency of state and local budgets (Carlson & Anderson, 2014; Van Epps, 2013).

Administrators are thus faced with the question of whether, or how, they can better evaluate the field of community dispute resolution according to its intended public goals. Such an undertaking would first involve articulating those goals, a task that may prove difficult even among practitioners; not only do underlying goals tend to vary from program to program, but goals often remain implicit at best. This dissertation concentrates on the evaluability of community dispute resolution programs throughout the United States. In Chapter 2, the literature review explores the background of community dispute resolution and the various elements at play in conceptualizing its potential impacts. Chapter 3 introduces the methodology of the study, which is organized as a content analysis of the public-facing website content of 20 representative
CDR agencies. Chapter 4 includes the presentation of findings from the content analysis, aiming to clarify agencies’ intended goals and identify which types of data they share externally. Chapter 5 provides a series of recommendations for CDR programs and agencies to begin more robust evaluation activities and strengthen organizational sustainability. The dissertation concludes by discussing the implications of the findings within the field and next steps for related research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The following sections review the extant literature on concepts relevant to community dispute resolution. First, the overview will define community disputes and the circumstances leading to their emergence. Intervention activities are then explored, with their roots in participative governance and their dependence on highly trained personnel. The paper then gives a brief history of the Community Relations Service and the development of the dispute resolution field more broadly. The discussion next turns to the topic of evaluation and its significance as an accountability mechanism in the public sector, as well as many unique barriers to effective evaluation among dispute resolution programs. Finally, the literature review examines potential breakdowns of theory that may be keeping the field from having the intended effects.

Community Disputes

Laue and Cormick (1978) define community disputes as social conflicts involving two or more parties representing diverging sets of goals on issues that are relevant to all sides, often relating to a number of different system levels. In periods of increased civic hostility, a particular egregious or high-profile event can sometimes cause community tensions to spill over the brim, forcing public recognition of an underlying social issue (Rogers, 2015). Community stability also tends to break down when traditional governance or social mechanisms can no longer maintain the perception of legitimate authority and fair resource distribution (Laue & Cormick, 1978). Even when critical issues present themselves via a discrete event or relationship between specific parties, they more than likely are driven by an underlying systemic problem (Sturm & Gadlin, 2007). By the time of the trigger event, the community discord may have been building for years based on systemic disparity accompanied by ineffective options for redress. It is often this
feeling of helplessness that drives groups to expose the problem and demand change (Rogers, 2015).

Rothman (2012) uses the image of an iceberg to explain how all conflicts, even those that emerge as disagreements over the allocations of resources, rest upon identity-based conflicts lying under the surface, such as those driven by race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. When left unmanaged, conflicts tend to follow a spiral of dysfunction in which one side refuses to acknowledge a problem, other parties resort to increasing degrees of escalation, and then all groups become adversaries trying to win the battle (Carpenter & Kennedy, 2001).

**Intervening in Disputes**

**Changing old patterns.** Speaking broadly across fields, Kelman and Warwick (1978) define social interventions as “deliberate attempts by professionals to change the characteristics of individuals or groups, or to influence the pattern of relationships between individuals and/or groups” (p. 4). Interventions can come in the form of mediation, negotiation, group dialogues, training, or other de-escalation or collaboration techniques (Monroe, 2018). Rogers (2015) uses the term intervenors to represent the professionals who guide participants through an intervention process, encompassing the related roles of mediator, facilitator, or peacemaker. Beginning an intervention process can slow or stop the worsening of the spiral until the conflict can be more fully addressed (Carpenter & Kennedy, 2001). In some cases, however, direct government intervention can actually increase animosity among discontented groups rather than provide relief (Rogers, 2015), such as poorly handled crowd control activities at a protest. Though government plays a key role in offering the tools, laypeople are ultimately the ones empowered to become problem solvers through the dispute resolution process (Carcasson, 2010).
Interventions are often designed to create a foundation for building understanding, making it possible to negotiate an action plan for a particular conflict. According to contact theory, structured contact between opposing groups with opportunities for positive problem-solving can help improve the broader relationships between groups and their attitudes toward one another (Menkel-Meadow, 2018). Beyond helping residents navigate problems that have risen to the surface, many interventions are thought to help communities rebuild social ties, thereby improving their ability to address future issues among themselves (Rogers, 2015). Based on their experiences in a dispute resolution process, some organizational participants go on to voluntarily make additional changes in their operations so as to better address issues upstream before they become problems in the future (Carlson & Anderson, 2014). Building relationships among parties through the process often holds as much importance to the future well-being of the community as does a negotiated agreement itself (Laue, 1992).

**The psychology of intervening.** Intervenors often must be equipped to deal with the many psychological and emotional factors that prevent individuals’ behavior from following patterns of rationality. Biases related to worldviews, religions, economics, politics, families, experiences, memories, emotions, and a host of other factors all make it difficult simply to present a reasoned argument and expect listeners to be persuaded (Menkel-Meadow, 2018). Parties often become increasingly isolated to avoid unpleasant personal encounters. When opposing parties do communicate, they often misunderstand one another out of defensiveness and pent-up frustration (Carpenter & Kennedy, 2001). Many types of values remain implicit in the actions and preferences of individuals; group negotiation and dialogue allow these values to become explicit (Laue, 1992). Another psychological obstacle to effective negotiation, known as reactive devaluation, occurs when people reject or criticize ideas only because they are offered
by opposing groups. Especially when it comes to matters of politics, individuals tend to filter new information through their existing assumptions, making it more difficult to change opinions (Podziba, 2014). By working through an intervenor who can collect and present ideas objectively, participants are better able to focus on the merits of a proposal (Menkel-Meadow, 1997).

It should be noted that interventions are not designed to suppress conflict. Conflict is recognized by intervention professionals, and many other experts, as serving a constructive purpose in defining issues, creating pressure to address them, and achieving justice (Rogers, 2015). It also must be noted that mediations or interventions are not intended to serve as opportunities to “start afresh” with a clean slate by disregarding the past. Polarized conflicts typically stem from long histories of systemic oppression, exclusion, and/or violence directed toward minority groups. Interventions must acknowledge these wrongs as part of the problem and address them in order to move forward (Rogers, 2015; Rothman, 2012c). Failing to confront a history of systemic racism and violence will stand in the way of developing adequate solutions to disparities (Monroe, 2018).

Interventions as participative governance. Many scholars and observers make the case that the modern era displays more instances of wicked problems—that is, highly complex problems that stem from a wide range of interrelated variables and that are not easily solvable—than ever before (O’Leary, 2015). From this perspective, diverse partnerships are valued for their ability to draw from the expertise of a wide range of stakeholders who each hold a piece of the puzzle (O’Leary, 2015). In the new approaches to public administration taking hold in the 21st century, such as the New Public Service articulated by Denhardt and Denhardt (2011), the norms of traditional government have shifted toward a more inclusive conceptualization of governance,
suggesting the decentralization of power and participative decision-making. In this light, effective administrators are those who create opportunities for citizens to collectively identify and act upon the public interest (Salamon, 2002).

Most intervention activities in community disputes align with the priorities of participative governance. By empowering citizens to engage in coordinated efforts to improve social conditions, intervenors offer the tools and guidance for effective governance while avoiding dependence on overly bureaucratic channels to set goals or accomplish tasks. Participative approaches to governance can also generate greater buy-in among citizens and can improve problem-solving capacity (Bingham, Nabatchi, & O’Leary, 2005; Bryson, Crosby, & Bloomberg, 2014; Peters & Pierre, 1998).

**Strengths and limitations.** Community dispute resolution is often presented as an inclusive and peaceful solution to social problems with few other options for recourse. When conflicts involve protracted relationships among people, organizations, and governments, mediation-like interventions are often touted as a more cost-effective, more resilient, and fairer option than other legal recourses (Adler, 1992). Litigation may be limited in addressing issues of high complexity and may actually encourage adversarial approaches to problem solving (Sturm & Gadlin, 2007). However, the use of alternative dispute resolution does come with certain concessions. Unlike traditional court proceedings, the dispute resolution process is often subject to confidentiality, and external parties are therefore less able to hold participants accountable. This lack of opportunity for review makes it difficult for evaluators or citizens to assess outputs and outcomes.

Since dispute resolution is voluntary and nonbinding, it is not an ideal option in situations marked by significant wrongdoing that would call for a party to accept legal responsibility and
provide remedy to others; traditional legal structures with the power of coercion remain better suited to achieve fairness when wrongdoers are unwilling to comply (Sturm & Gadlin, 2007).

For this reason, a process that is fully voluntary may not appeal to marginalized groups seeking justice. In an intervention that took place after the Cincinnati riots of 2012, for instance, some participants remarked that they would never have agreed to engage with the process had the outputs not been linked to a federal court order (Rothman, 2012c). Without the promise of enforcement, victims of past exploitation may be wary of devoting more time to a lost cause.

**CRS and Local Centers of Dispute Resolution**

**The birth of the Community Relations Service.** Some of the first formalized instances of government involvement in community dispute resolution came as a result of the Community Relations Service (CRS). CRS was established as a federal office by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, based on the awareness that law enforcement and the traditional court system alone could not fully protect civil rights or bring about the types of social changes necessary for achieving equal opportunity (Monroe, 2018). At the time it was formed, President Lyndon B. Johnson and other proponents envisioned CRS as a force that could support the implementation of new civil rights laws, moving them along in a timely fashion while also reducing violent backlash. Johnson was convinced that racial conflicts could be negotiated and mediated, like labor disputes had been in the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (Levine, 2005). As a representative from Texas, Johnson avoided supporting initiatives that might alienate the conservative white base in his home state. The CRS, like other issues he vocally supported, was a non-confrontational approach to civil rights enforcement. In fact, others in Congress who wanted to take a stronger stance on protecting civil rights saw the idea of “mediation” as overly conciliatory. Ultimately,
both conservatives and progressives viewed the establishment of CRS as a minor proposal (Levine, 2005).

CRS was explicitly separated from law enforcement, and CRS employees remain prohibited from sharing most information about interventions to anyone outside of CRS. This assurance of confidentiality goes a long way in building trust with reluctant participants. CRS was first housed in the Commerce Department, perhaps to make the concept more palatable to Southerners, since the department was led by a former Southern governor at the time (Levine, 2005; Rogers, 2015). In 1966, President Johnson moved CRS from the Department of Commerce to the Department of Justice to allow for better coordination on related civil rights issues (Monroe, 2018). While some supporters feared that moving CRS out of Commerce would affect its relative independence and skew its goals, former CRS research director Bertram Levine (2005) maintained that the move to the Department of Justice was ultimately beneficial in garnering more attention from local officials and achieving a stronger reputation.

**CRS’s focus and activities.** The scope of CRS is limited to hate crimes and conflicts pertaining to civil rights (Rogers, 2015). Its staff can only provide services in a community when requested or welcomed, it has no authority to enforce decisions or require cooperation, and it does not take sides or assign blame when participating in interventions (Monroe, 2018). Communities in any U.S. state or territory are eligible to receive services from CRS. When the Civil Rights Act was amended in 2009 to include crimes based on gender, sexual orientation, and disability within the definition of federal hate crimes, CRS’s purview likewise expanded to allow for the initiation of cases based on these new categories, in addition to cases related to race, religion, and nationality (Scott, 2016).
CRS has undertaken efforts in thousands of communities and in virtually every major city in the United States (Levine, 2005). CRS currently staffs four field offices and 10 regional offices (Monroe, 2018). As of 2014, CRS operated with roughly 60 employees (Rogers, 2015). On average, according to recent annual reports, CRS handles roughly 600 to 700 cases each year (Monroe, 2018). Participants are not charged to receive services, and CRS operates on approximately $12 million annually (Scott, 2016). Judge W. Arthur Garrity, Jr. of the U.S. District Court in Massachusetts, who saw firsthand the work of CRS in Boston’s move toward school desegregation in the 1970s, pointed out that the small budget of the entire agency was dwarfed by the costs of paying police to protect a local high school (Levine, 2005).

Serving as the resident experts in de-escalating violence, CRS offers specialized skills that most local governments simply do not have the capacity to build internally. Being able to call upon CRS representatives to guide an intervention process allows city and state administrators to focus on the many other daily tasks associated with their jurisdictions (Monroe, 2018). Involvement from the federal level often changes the tone of opposing parties before any activities take place. This reaction can have a positive influence, such as improving behavior because the government is watching, or a negative influence, such as mistrust among vulnerable groups or resentment among local authorities. Therefore, the very decision to enter a community dispute will have consequences (Levine, 2005).

The Civil Rights Act requires CRS to engage in its community activities “without publicity” (Monroe, 2018). This measure is meant to maintain confidentiality and avoid public exposure of sensitive discussions. It is argued that, if the intervention process were to be reported upon in real time, representatives may be under more pressure from their constituencies to avoid compromises or shifts in perspective (Carpenter & Kennedy, 2001). In some situations, CRS’s
anonymity in providing preventive services to high-risk communities has helped to avoid self-
fulfilling prophecies, in which violence erupts because violence was widely expected to erupt
(Levine, 2005). At the same time, the secrecy may contribute to misunderstandings about the
nature of CRS’s work, reduce its accountability to the public, and prevent opportunities to
highlight its importance.

Rather than preventing conflict or disagreement altogether, CRS aims to reduce violence
and ensure the inclusion of marginalized voices in problem solving, ideally to support
communities in creating sustainable, productive, and peaceful relationships (Monroe, 2018).
Capacity-building opportunities include training for law enforcement in de-escalation and
cultural competency, training for community members in avoiding violence at events, and
training at educational institutions in strategies to address discrimination. For instance, when
CRS provided assistance to the city of Sanford, Florida, after the killing of Trayvon Martin, they
worked with local leaders and community members to design a long-term action plan addressing
many of the systemic factors leading to disparities, such as housing, employment, education,
healthcare, and police relations (Monroe, 2018). However, CRS does not seek to create these
solutions on behalf of communities or impose particular agendas upon participants. For changes
to be sustainable and effective, solutions must be developed by participants themselves;
intervenors provide the environment in which stakeholders can speak openly and safely (Scott,
2016).

From federal to local. Because of its narrow scope and limited resources, CRS is unable
to address many instances of conflict taking place in communities around the country (Rogers,
2015). As a result, many states or regions have established their own centers for mediation or
dispute resolution in the past several decades, sometimes focused on the legal system and
sometimes more centered on community relations. Local and regional centers display a great deal of diversity in their composition and agency location. Depending on the issues that drive their establishment and the unique political needs of an area, centers may be overseen by courts, governors’ offices, mayors’ offices, universities, or other agencies, or may even be freestanding (Carlson & Anderson, 2014; Rogers, 2015). Some centers employ permanent mediators, while other offices rely on contractors as needed (Rogers, 2015).

While CRS often opens cases based on its own monitoring and assessment activities, cases at local centers may be initiated through a number of means. If a center is affiliated with a court system, judges may refer cases to a dispute resolution center as an alternative to mandated judgments. An elected official may also reach out to a center if a community concern becomes problematic. Centers with established reputations in a community may also receive requests for assistance from residents who are a party to a community dispute (Carlson & Anderson, 2014; Monroe, 2018). Also, some centers or networks primarily exist to offer guidance and technical assistance for dispute resolution programs (Carlson & Anderson, 2014). For instance, Michigan’s Office of Dispute Resolution, located within the Michigan Supreme Court, does not provide direct services itself but makes funding available to community-based public and nonprofit agencies that provide dispute resolution throughout the state (Van Epps, 2013). While CRS is able to conduct a great deal of work at the federal level, local and regional centers are well equipped to understand the unique needs of the communities in their areas, build important relationships with elected officials and key organizational leaders, and maintain long-term support in an area more easily (Monroe, 2018).

The future of dispute resolution programs. In the early 21st century, the establishment of new centers slowed considerably, and many existing offices suffered budget cutbacks,
switched institutional homes, or changed their areas of focus to survive. Apart from funding restrictions, one of the major challenges that has led to the reduction or termination of state-level centers is the “[l]ack of research and data to demonstrate program impacts and benefits—without effective evaluation, there is no way to justify a program's existence” (Carlson & Anderson, 2014, p.13). Despite the recent decline in support, practitioners contend that local centers for dispute resolution remain more in demand than ever. Based on his experience establishing the Colorado State University Center for Public Deliberation, Carcasson (2014) argues that many communities are still desperate to have access to services in the area of deliberative problem-solving and recommends the further expansion of local centers. Rogers (2015) suggests a more systematized approach, calling for further development of public agencies at the state or local level to serve these roles in an official capacity.

To overcome shortfalls, administrators recommend diversifying funding streams and better promoting centers to the public, both of which rely on their ability to demonstrate value to the community (Van Epps, 2013). While centers that incorporate fee-for-service designs into their funding models may be taking steps toward self-sufficiency, it is often those with the least ability to purchase the services who are in most need of them. If too much emphasis is placed on selecting cases that can be privately funded at top levels, many marginalized stakeholders and struggling communities may again find themselves without access to justice. Meanwhile, citizens of means continue to have many options at their disposal, such as litigation, and do not necessarily have the incentive to devote money toward an intervention instead (Carcasson, 2010).

Similar pressures have been seen at the federal level. Unless a department or organization has a strong champion in its corner, it can easily become a victim of short-sighted
recommendations that appear on paper to save money (Levine, 2005). During President Carter’s administration, the Office of Management and Budget had suggested eliminating CRS over two years, a proposal which was only avoided by the attorney general’s fierce defense of the agency. A similar scenario played out in the Reagan era, when key leaders often recommended cutting CRS funding. CRS was preserved during the Clinton administration largely thanks to Attorney General Janet Reno, whose prior experience with CRS in Dade County, Florida, made her a strong supporter (Levine, 2005). CRS’s budget for staff was reduced from 58 full-time employees in 2017 to 34 full-time employees in 2020; even then, it operated without an acting director and with only a third of its intended regional directors (Thompson & Faturechi, 2020). President Trump’s proposed 2019 budget included no funding for CRS, and his proposed 2020 budget called for the elimination of CRS; Congress opted to continue funding the agency in both cases (Monroe, 2018; Thompson & Faturechi, 2020). CRS must re-justify its existence with every high-level political turnover, partly due to its low profile but also likely a result of scarce evidence demonstrating its value.

Evaluating the Field

Public accountability. While it may be easy to argue the theoretical importance of dispute resolution programs, it remains difficult to justify continued or increased funding for agencies that do not have explicit outputs and outcomes upon which to measure their value. Robust assessments of public services are a critical component of accountability in the public sector. In the context of dispute resolution, Sturm and Gadlin (2007) point out that accountability practices offer opportunities for evaluating outcomes, better aligning activities with goals, answering questions, recognizing problems, making adjustments, and applying learnings to other settings (p.48-49).
As local economies remain damaged from the Great Recession, many worthy public services go un- or underfunded, and those that persevere must present a strong case. Partly a side effect of the Reinventing Government movement enacted in the 1990s, citizens have come to expect business-like performance from public agencies with clear-cut evidence of results and frugality in achieving those results (Mitchell & Thurmaier, 2012; Newcomer, 2015). Public administrators are obligated to perform or oversee evaluations of their programming to help demonstrate to stakeholders that goals are being reached, that taxpayer funds are being used responsibly, and that the underlying policy theories are sound. In this way, evaluation increases the accountability of public agencies by collecting and communicating information about the effectiveness of their programs and using these results to inform future decision making (Denhardt, Denhardt, & Blanc, 2014).

**Evaluation in the social sciences.** Despite citizens’ hopes for business-like assessments of government work, however, the complexity of program interventions in the public and nonprofit sectors precludes a straight-cut approach. The multiple environmental factors that could influence causation make it difficult to attribute changes to any intervention with certainty (Newcomer, 2015; Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). In fact, Dahler-Larsen (2005) states that “the unquestionable identification of causal links is one of the most difficult endeavors the social sciences can take on” (p. 626). Many times evaluations are expected shortly after completion of a project or not long after a program has been implemented, whereas the types of social issues targeted by the public and nonprofit sectors often require longer time frames to shift (Budhwani & McDavid, 2017).

Community dispute resolution was one of many social programs advanced in the 1960s to address complex and interconnected social issues (Trevisan & Huang, 2003). The goals of
such programs were often articulated in ways that precluded effective outcome evaluations. In some cases, underlying political dynamics of policymakers and funders steered programs in certain directions, but the outward manifestations of those programs were disallowed from making those constraints explicit (Trevisan & Huang, 2003). Campbell’s (1969) influential writings on evaluation depicted the practice as a form of social experimentation: administrators and policymakers should continually test approaches to social change and make policy decisions based on what they discover. While others have been quick to point out that program evaluation necessitates adjustment from the traditional scientific method, the obligation remains to pursue evaluation results that are both meaningful and valid (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004).

Because the work of dispute resolution holds significant implications not only for the direct beneficiaries of the work but also for broader society as the effects ripple out, a careful cycle of monitoring and evaluation is especially vital in demonstrating impact and holding administrators accountable. As Rossi, Lipsey, and Freeman (2004) point out, the evaluation of a single social program has bearing on the perception of all related programs. For instance, even if an evaluation project were to target the delivery and subsequent effects of one particular CDR program or service area, the results are likely to influence stakeholders’ thoughts regarding other types of CDR programs.

**Unique challenges.** Many scholars and practitioners of dispute resolution acknowledge the inherent difficulty of demonstrating or even defining success. Because of the broad focus on alleviating social strife, it is difficult for intervenors to identify appropriate points of comparison in the interest of matching the intervention to a control (Rogers, 2015). Some insiders contend that it is impossible to determine whether interventions are responsible for preventing a violent conflict, let alone to measure the impact of this prevention (Laue & Cormick, 1978; Levine,
2005). Because intervention practitioners represent a wide range of fields with differing standards for evaluation, it can be even more difficult to come to a consensus on how to appropriately assess performance (Newcomer, 2015; Smith, 2005). Many altruistic administrators and staff would also prefer to see their limited funds devoted to reaching as many beneficiaries with their services as possible, rather than spending a portion on evaluation activities. At an international level, peace practitioners have also resisted attempts to assess effectiveness due to a concern that striving to “be effective” would come into conflict with their own drive to pursue an ethical path (Anderson, 2004).

Kelman and Warwick (1978) hold that one of the most important ethical considerations of an intervention process is the way in which an intervention’s consequences are assessed. CRS got by during its early years with providing anecdotal evidence of its impact, but the demand for greater accountability grew over time (Scott, 2016). Process-level examinations at the federal level can include annual numbers of closed cases in light of the numbers of alerts filed, assessments completed, or cases opened altogether (Scott, 2016). Another consideration of a dispute resolution program could be the percentage of initiated mediations resulting in agreements (Scott, 2016). Other common criteria in program appraisals include completion rates, cost per case, time spent per case, and participant satisfaction scores (Sturm & Gadlin, 2007). Past assessments have found that participants in legal-based mediation report high levels of satisfaction with the process (Edelman, 1984).

Assessors often point to the process of the intervention itself as the primary output, with the long-term social outcomes proving to be problematic as evaluation measures (Monroe, 2018). However, simply counting the number of cases handled in a year does little to measure the amount of violence prevented, the degree of relationships improved, or the social changes
hastened on as a result of interventions. As with many other fields, certain process-level evaluation data may actually encourage intervention operations that are less effective in the long term (Rogers, 2015). If centers are assessed based on the number of cases completed, for instance, intervenors may avoid the more complex, time-intensive cases—the situations in which intervenors are arguably more essential—in favor of less-intensive cases that may reflect better on the program, out of concern for institutional sustainability (Rogers, 2015). In striving to meet numbers, staff may deprioritize key values or lose sight of the overarching mission, ultimately leading to poorer outcomes.

Nevertheless, collecting and presenting data on process-level counts is tempting due to the promise of a quick feedback loop; the long-term nature of the intended outcomes of interventions serves as a major barrier to pursuing more meaningful evaluation. Not only is it difficult to invest in longitudinal research that tracks conditions over time, but it also leaves questions about effectiveness unanswered in the interim. When most agencies and departments must follow yearly cycles for budget requests, an inability to show quick results hampers the argument for future funding. If evaluation results suggest less-than-ideal performance, an organization’s political champions may wish to discontinue their vocal support, leaving programs more vulnerable to cuts (Weiss, 1997).

Even if a dispute resolution program has the funding and the discretion to undertake robust longitudinal evaluation, data privacy becomes another obstacle. Confidentiality requirements often reduce CRS’s or other centers’ ability to remain fully transparent to the public (Rogers, 2015). Centers typically are prohibited from tracking data on case progress due to risks of disclosure, which means that most case information must be swiftly destroyed. Practitioners acknowledge that these requirements restrict their ability to analyze aggregate data
or to consider case data retroactively for new insights (Sturm & Gadlin, 2007). Even when staff and supporters are able to keep track of non-confidential information and promote the results of their assistance, items celebrated as “outcomes” are still often at the output level (e.g., Levine, 2005, p. 98-99). Sturm and Gadlin (2007) suggest implementing special legal protections for intervenors so that data could be confidentially maintained into the future without the risk of subpoena.

Part of the difficulty in naming appropriate outcomes is the fact that dispute resolution programs often feature diverse, and sometimes conflicting, goal sets. Harrington and Merry (1988) formulated three general themes among the many expressed goals of community dispute resolution at the time. The first theme centers on the delivery of dispute resolution services itself, presented as an alternative to the court system and other means of redress. Another theme relates to the expectation of personal growth among those who participate in the process, holding that community dispute resolution can empower individuals and be more responsive to their needs than can other systems. The last theme of social transformation may include the most ambitious and lasting set of outcomes. Social transformation goals often involve increased community cohesion, improved societal structures, fewer instances of interpersonal violence, and community members’ greater capacity for handling their own resolution activities (Dukes, 1990).

**The Theory of Change**

Theory-based evaluation may provide a helpful starting point in addressing the needs of the community dispute resolution field. In theory-based evaluation, the program theory includes the impact theory, the service utilization plan, and the organizational plan (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). The impact theory, which may exist in a quite simple or informal form, refers to the assumptions in place about how the program will produce change and what those changes
will be. The service utilization plan involves the program’s approach regarding how the target population will enter the program, access services, and exit the program. The organizational plan encompasses the different resources and structures allocated for the program to carry out its functions. The service utilization plan and the organization plan combined form the program’s process theory (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004).

Theory-based evaluation offers a mechanism for providing well-informed recommendations (Dahler-Larsen, 2005). If the implementation of a program is sound but the expected results are not surfacing, theory-based evaluations can better isolate the faulty components in the causal chain underlying the program theory. Theory-based evaluations can also help align future program activities with outcomes, as performance indicators are often selected within a clear basis in how the improvement of that indicator will contribute to the targeted outcomes via theory (Dahler-Larsen, 2005). Theory-based evaluation methods may also be superior to other forms of evaluation in their capacity to iteratively contribute to the accumulated knowledge base. Meta-evaluations, for instance, can examine lessons from many contexts and even across different program theories in order to compare effects and arrive at more comprehensive conclusions (Dahler-Larsen, 2005).

Should the more technical challenges of evaluation in the field of dispute resolution be navigated, outcome-level evaluation efforts may reveal new insights into whether dispute resolution activities are contributing to social change. In the midst of the field’s growth period, Dukes (1990) voiced concern that too little research was being undertaken to clarify the relationship between community dispute resolution and the social problems they were intended to address. Not unlike in the implementation of other social programs, practitioners of dispute
resolution have often been anxious to engage in the activities that held promise for social change without devoting much thought or resources to studying their effects.

As Dahler-Larsen (2005) explains, it is not uncommon for policy architects to base their designs on certain observed links between problems and interventions while still being relatively unaware of the nature of the relationships at hand. However, Menkel-Meadow (2018), a conflict-resolution expert and long-time editor of *The Journal of Negotiation*, ventures that the field has thus far failed to bring about a society-wide shift in behavior or mindset, despite achievements at the individual case level over the years. There are many possible explanations for a possible breakdown between hope and reality. Even assuming a well-executed process of intervention, potential weaknesses in the underlying theory of change may be keeping all of this hard work from having the desired lasting impact.

**Temporary nature of effects.** When outsiders handle the mediation sessions and then move on to other needs when the crisis is over, participants still may not have the capacity to make progress on their own, and the same issues may remain unresolved over time (Rogers, 2015). If an agreed-upon action plan goes uncompleted or even ignored, the resulting frustration sensed among the participants may produce even more tension than existed before embarking on the process. If participants stop interacting with one another regularly, trust may gradually break down, and they may revert to their former antagonistic relationships (Carpenter & Kennedy, 2001). In the Cincinnati example mentioned earlier, despite widespread praise in favor of the initial process, much of the energy generated during the intervention was lost once the implementation phase began and oversight of the project moved from the intervenors to local groups. Participants became frustrated with the lack of progress (Rothman, 2012c).
Along a similar vein, even if individual interventions are considered successful by the involved parties, any resulting improvements may still not be significant enough to result in much noticeable change. In a 1999 venture among several international conflict resolution agencies, for example, investigators found that conflict resolution activities focused only at the individual level were unable to demonstrate an impact on peace (Anderson, 2004). Though individual participants may have benefitted from the activities personally and changed their attitudes as a result, those activities did not reduce conflict as a whole unless accompanied by institutional changes at the sociopolitical level (Anderson, 2004).

**Peace versus progress.** In other situations, critics have felt that the actions of intervenors actually slowed social progress. By preventing the disruption or disorder associated with protest, the less powerful may have their leverage removed from the equation. As a result, activists may be less able to drum up far-reaching supporters, and the demands for change may become less intense. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), for instance, often pursued conflicts that could draw widespread attention to injustices (Levine, 2005). CRS representatives worked diligently to avoid clashes between demonstrators and law enforcement during the second planned march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, narrowly reaching an agreement for the marchers to turn back to Selma to avoid a violent countermeasure (Levine, 2005). The decision damaged Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s reputation among his more militant supporters for years afterward, and some civil rights activists became more wary of CRS, which they viewed as an instrument of compromise rather than social justice (Levine, 2005).

While many civil rights leaders denounce riots as a potential tool for reaching equality, it is difficult to deny that riots often have succeeded in garnering attention, demanding a high-level response, helping the American public understand the extent of poor conditions, and prioritizing
the pursuit of social justice (Levine, 2005). From the perspective of some activists, any interventions aimed at reducing the pressure caused by the conflict run counter to progress and simply give power back to the powerful (Kelman & Warwick, 1978).

**Participants and neutrality.** It can also be difficult for intervenors and the involved parties to determine exactly which individuals should serve as representatives during discussions (Kelman & Warwick, 1978). While some activities can incorporate input from scores of different participants, certain conversations require a limited number of people to function properly. Due to cultural differences, the intervention process may still benefit the powerful more than the powerless. As Menkel-Meadow (1997) explains, the structure of alternative dispute resolution may have a tendency to benefit certain cultures over others. For instance, interventions often involve direct conversations about personal experiences and views, an expectation that can prove especially difficult for cultures that place special emphasis on humility and privacy. Racial and ethnic minorities may thus be put at an instinctual disadvantage in proceedings. Intervenors have also been criticized for holding conversations with all those who have influence in the situation, even if those groups represent hateful or racist stances (Rogers, 2015). The intervenors’ viewpoint is that discussions must be perceived as inclusive; a relevant party who was not involved in the process may derail the outcome down the road (Rogers, 2015).

In many ways, the work of an intervenor reflects an interpretive approach to the world. In conducting early assessments of a situation, intervenors seek multiple parties’ versions of the truth in order to gain a full understanding of the dynamics at play. Those who favor the status quo may see the problem as the state of disorder caused by disruptive instigators, while protestors may see the problem as social inequities that warrant immediate change (Kelman &
Warwick, 1978). Yet, suggesting the equivalency of all viewpoints may diffuse short-term tensions but do little to effect social change in the long run.

This approach to participant treatment can be traced to intervenors’ typical obligations to neutrality. In fact, the call to serve as neutral mediators may represent an ethical struggle for practitioners. Ondray Harris, former director of the CRS, mentioned in a 2013 interview that some employees may feel they bear more responsibility to protect discriminated groups than to uphold the mandate of neutrality (Scott, 2016). Some intervenors draw a distinction between neutrality in process and neutrality in ideology. They argue that interventions may involve compromises on all sides, but that almost all agreements achieved through interventions represent a step toward social progress (Levine, 2005). Other experts are critical of the notion of neutrality among intervenors. As put by Laue and Cormick (1978), “Since neutrality or claims to neutrality on the part of an intervenor in a community dispute almost always work to the advantage of the party in power, the intervenor should not claim to be (or worse, actually feel) neutral. Such a stance is evidence of the intervenor’s failure to make conscious, explicit, and (where possible) public decisions” (p. 221).

**Ethics and consequences.** Related to the issue of neutrality are the ethical priorities that intervenors must establish for their work. A common debate within the dispute-resolution field centers on whether intervenors should take measures to ensure that collaborative agreements reflect ethical standards and/or are equitable among stakeholder groups (Menkel-Meadow, 1997). While some see intervenors’ primary responsibility as upholding the collective choices of the participants without attempting to influence them according to external values, others see the intervention process as an opportunity for participants to be made aware of the long-term consequences of their decisions. According to Denhardt and Denhardt (2011), public
administrators have a duty to ensure that end decisions or results, even when formed in direct
response to citizen concerns, are consistent with democratic values and serve the common good.
From an evaluation standpoint, it is entirely possible that parties may agree to action plans that
enforce the status quo or do not pursue social progress. By staying absolutely neutral, an
intervenor’s work may not advance the ultimate goals of dispute resolution at the societal level.

Given intervenors’ experience with many groups and situations, one key role they can
occupy is helping parties understand the implications of various actions at higher levels beyond
the immediate situation. While it is still important for parties’ immediate needs to be met, a
broader perspective could help them arrive at better solutions for themselves as well as for
society at large (Williams, 1978). Any intervention will have both direct and indirect
consequences. In the short term and in the long term, some groups might benefit from the
pursued changes more than others, and the distribution of power may shift over time. Many
intervenors overlook the possible systems interactions of their efforts, especially those that may
run contrary to the intended goals (Kelman & Warwick, 1978). If the changes to be implemented
are overly ambitious, the intervention itself may have raised hopes among participants only to
have them dashed even lower when goals are not reached. Such disappointment could intensify
future disputes or make participants wary of engaging in new agreements (Kelman & Warwick,
1978).

According to Laue and Cormick (1978), any intervenor in a community dispute should
consider the following question at key decision points: “Does the intervention contribute to the
ability of relatively powerless individuals and groups in the situation to determine their own
destinies to the greatest extent consistent with the common good?” (p. 217-218). If a dispute
involves a significant imbalance of power among parties, they argue that an intervention should
enable the less-powerful groups to increase their levels of power, in order to advance their own interests and avoid wrongful treatment. To that end, a potential concern arises when a party that may seem less powerful is driven by unethical intentions. Laue and Cormick (1978) argue that intervenors should not only avoid lending their skills to discriminatory individuals or groups but should actively work against them. They hold that change in the direction of social justice—rather than simply settling the dispute, which sometimes results in strengthening the status quo—should be the ultimate goal of any intervention.

**Systemic approaches.** While considering systems interactions can guide the ethical analysis of proposed intervention activities, most models of dispute resolution are not capable of developing solutions beyond the particular scenario being addressed by the participants at that point in time. For this reason, some critics believe that dispute resolution fails to offer widespread value at the society level. Since the confidential results of dispute resolutions cannot contribute to precedent, as with traditional court cases, it is also arguable that an increase in the use of dispute resolution may reduce the public’s ability to compare across situations for fairness or to build successively upon past solutions (Sturm & Gadlin, 2007). To achieve broader social improvement, Sturm and Gadlin (2007) recommend that participants in individual cases implement analytical processes to consider the root causes of their issues and begin addressing them through their agreements. In fact, they contend that individual cases cannot be addressed effectively without linking them to their causes at the systemic level. Ongoing contact with related cases can enable intervenors to monitor systemic issues over time.

Many intervenors have recognized the need for this higher-level focus if conflicts are to be addressed in the long term, but funding obstacles and political tensions have often stood in the way of letting the field expand in this direction. Typically operating with highly restricted
budgets, intervenors are forced to make tough decisions about which services to provide and the priorities guiding those decisions. Any choice to spend time and resources on one area of need means that another area must go unaddressed in the interim (Levine, 2005). That being said, there have been attempts to look beyond short-term dealings to determine how to better handle the nation’s civil rights concerns. Roger Wilkins, director of CRS from 1966 to 1969, recognized the flaws of the conflict-by-conflict approach by the middle of his term. Levine (2005) describes the perspective of Wilkins at this time as follows:

For all the hundreds of instances of CRS intervention in local conflicts, despite the scores of settlements negotiated to resolve minority protests of unfairness in the schools, on the job, and in the justice system, the total impact seemed transitory and far short of the fundamental change required to help set America straight. [Wilkins] had a gut feeling that CRS would be more effective in dealing with racial conflict if its primary concern was social justice rather than group relationships. Conflict resolution struck him as too opportunistic, lacking precise goals and objectives. Limited to a peacekeeping role, CRS could only respond to situations of other people’s making, never initiating programs of its own. More troubling was the fact that peacekeeping was more likely to focus on symptoms than on root causes. It influenced change only at the margins, not at the core of the American dilemma. To play a role of consequence CRS would have to find a way to make its own direct contribution to speeding minority progress from equal opportunity to equal achievement. (p. 95)

Driven by this foresight, Wilkins’ staff designed a program to empower disadvantaged communities at the grassroots level by providing technical assistance in economic development, housing, education, mass communication, and the administration of justice. Some of these efforts
began to show early results, such as more opportunities in local police departments for racial and ethnic minorities and better representation of minorities on radio and television (Levine, 2005).

In 1973, however, the Bureau of the Budget brought about the end of CRS’s preventive program, citing two main reasons for its opposition. One, other government agencies were assigned to handle concerns such as economic development, housing, and education. Two, CRS had difficulty providing quantifiable evidence of its impact (Levine, 2005). As a result, CRS returned primarily to crisis response. In the years between the launch of the program in 1969 and its demise in 1973, only about one fourth of CRS’s resources had been devoted to conflict intervention (Levine, 2005). During the Carter administration, CRS was eventually able to implement new national and regional programs designed to improve training of police departments (Levine, 2005).

Conclusions from the Literature

The United States has experienced a significant degree of social evolution since the 1960s. The Civil Rights Act was mostly implemented as planned, and many other key pieces of legislation now ensure the rights of vulnerable groups. But, how much has the nature of community conflict truly improved? Many Americans feel that issues are more intractable than ever (Menkel-Meadow, 2018). It is possible that national and local community dispute programs have contributed to many of the positive developments, and that the inconsistencies can even be tied to fluctuations in program priorities or resource levels. Several inherent and imposed restrictions of the field have stood in the way of robust evaluation methods, however, so it is difficult to determine to what extent this may be the case.

Beyond the technical challenges, there are a number of potential weaknesses in the theories behind community dispute resolution that may be preventing practitioners from
demonstrating the intended outcomes of their activities. By relying on voluntary cooperation among hostile parties, interventions may lack the teeth that accompany more legally enforceable methods, and agreements can easily dissolve. A focus on de-escalation and compromise may successfully prevent short-term violence but could interfere with the impact of change efforts over time. The case-by-case approach of most dispute resolution programs may also distract participants from considering the systems perspective. Shifting priorities from crisis response to more comprehensive education and training programming could offer the long-lasting improvements being sought, but restrictions on budget and scope have often kept the field from evolving substantially in this direction. Without an accepted framework for outcome evaluation, intervenors and administrators may not be able to draw conclusions about which approaches are most effective, restricting the development of adaptive strategies and reducing public accountability. Should funders fail to be convinced of the field’s effectiveness and value, Americans may lose access to some of their most experienced and fearless advocates for peace.
Chapter 3: Methodology

To begin answering the research questions concerning the goals of the field and its potential for evaluation, the current study will follow the general format of an evaluability assessment, or EA, first introduced by Wholey (1979). There are three main components to an evaluability assessment: defining program objectives, assessing the evaluability of the program model, and identifying potential uses of evaluation findings among key stakeholders (Wholey, 1979, p. 136). In an evaluability assessment, evaluators consider the on-the-record presentations of program concepts but then take into account the perspectives of staff and stakeholders, who can communicate the issues as they stand in reality (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004).

Evaluability assessments grew in use through the early 1980s (Trevisan & Huang, 2003). Published accounts of EA dropped from 1986 to 1995, possibly due to the absence of EA champions in key federal positions, but increased again from 1995 to 2006, likely as a result of increased demand for accountability in government (Trevisan, 2007). The approach continues to be supported for its contributions to theory and practice, and recent literature indicates its application in diverse settings (Trevisan, 2007). The objective of an evaluability assessment is to pave the way for a commitment to a full evaluation undertaking. By defining key issues upfront and priming stakeholders for participation, an evaluability assessment can lead to the creation of an evaluation design that will be meaningful and robust (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004).

Qualitative in nature, the evaluability assessment process can help program administrators and decision makers determine the nature of program goals and any related consequences, the plausibility of goals, the ability or inability to collect corresponding data on performance, and the intended uses of the evaluation. The results of the assessment should indicate, first, whether a program as designed is even capable of being evaluated in a meaningful
way, and second, whether an evaluation has the potential to inform and influence future program decisions (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). The use of an evaluability assessment can also cut down on the expenses required for the evaluation process (Whooley, 1979). By completing the exploratory tasks in advance, evaluators and administrators can make adjustments and create an effective evaluation design that is less likely to expend costs toward an unused or poor-quality product.

The current study will focus on the first component of an evaluability assessment, centering mainly on artifacts in the form of written materials made available to the public on agencies’ websites. Because publicly available content has key influence over citizens' and decision makers' perceptions of community dispute resolution, focusing on these data at this stage of assessment will provide key insights into perceived priorities of the field. With this study as a springboard, agencies may be more supported in undertaking the second component of an evaluability assessment, by conducting interviews with staff and stakeholders, and then moving on to the appropriate next steps depending on their findings.

The full evaluability assessment process is often described as an exercise in ethnography, as an evaluator strives to construct or re-construct an accurate program model using data collected from key stakeholders (Trevisan, 2007). To a limited extent, the current study will rely on ethnographic techniques, especially with respect to developing knowledge of the field as seen from the viewpoints of participants. Given the current study’s focus on the initial portion—the collection and analysis of artifacts—of an evaluability assessment, however, the study aligns more closely with the practice of content analysis.

Content analysis involves examining a texts to better understand the prevailing patterns of thought within the selected group (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Patterns are considered in light of the
specific environments reflected in the textual examples as they relate to the research question at hand (Bazeley, 2013). Often, content analysis includes identifying the appearance and interaction of common ideologies that prevail among a subset of people (Hesse-Biber, 2017). In this vein, the current study seeks to identify the most common interpretations of the CDR field’s underlying goals and priorities among its administrators and practitioners. Collecting and analyzing public-facing web content of a sample set of agencies can provide insight into what topics are being highlighted, which types of words appear most often, and how success is described, which in turn can inform future evaluation efforts.

Kim and Kuljis (2010) demonstrate the utility of applying content analysis to web-based content. Due to the large volume of potential content, they emphasize that researchers must take care to select an appropriate sample size that addresses representativeness as well as efficiency (Kim & Kuljis, 2010). Herring (2010) points out that web content allows for a broader understanding of content analysis that can account for the interpretation of different features such as images, links, and comments from or conversations with other parties. However, the current study lends itself well to Herring’s description of traditional content analysis as applied to web content: developing a research question, selecting a sample, defining codes, applying codes to content, and analyzing the data. This study will focus primarily on text on the primary driver of stakeholders’ assessment of agency services, including transcriptions where possible of video, audio, and figures or charts.

This study also draws upon grounded theory in the development of the research process. Through a grounded theory approach to qualitative data analysis, components of data analysis take place as soon as data collection begins (Hesse-Biber, 2017). The grounded theory approach also involves a high level of transparency in demonstrating how the data have been collected and
analyzed (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). By engaging with the data through collection, analysis, and memo writing, the researcher can develop a theory that is truly grounded in the data itself, deriving meaning from the text through the identification of key themes and patterns (Hesse-Biber, 2017). As discussed by Corbin and Strauss (1990), the researcher has a responsibility, through the grounded theory approach, to consider the relationships among changing conditions, actors’ responses to those changing conditions, and the consequences of those responses.

**Concepts**

Because it is exploratory in nature, the goal of the current study is to begin isolating key components of dispute resolution program impacts for consideration in evaluation efforts. By giving thought to these central ideas across the field, practitioners may be better equipped to begin collecting, or to invest more heavily in collecting, data related to corresponding measurements. The below conceptual definitions provide a basis for exploration within the data analysis.

**Community disputes.** Laue and Cormick (1978) provide six characteristics that mark community disputes, four of which refer to the definition of a single conflict: (1) two or more parties are involved in the dispute; (2) the involved parties are driven by differing goals; (3) the issues involved with the dispute are relevant to all parties; and (4) the dispute is occurring within several system levels. Many of the cases handled by CDR agencies fall into the category of community disputes.

However, smaller disputes among disagreeing parties may serve as barometers of larger issues underneath the surface, and they also can provide intervenors with data and insights that can be applied toward future situations. Furthermore, private cases may play a key role in the financial sustainability of centers of dispute resolution (Van Epps, 2013). For these reasons,
while community disputes and their features over time are of primary interest for the current study, smaller-scale disputes will remain salient to the analysis.

**Intervenors.** This paper adopts the term intervenors as put forth by Rogers (2015) to encompass the wide range of roles fulfilled by practitioners in the dispute resolution field. Though Rogers does not provide an explicit definition, the concept can be understood to refer to any professional—alternatively deemed a mediator, facilitator, peacemaker, or conciliator—who takes a lead role in assessing community disputes, meeting with parties, and offering solutions or courses of action designed to address the disputed conditions. As such, intervenors represent a wide range of educational and professional backgrounds. Intervenors may work at the federal, regional, state, or local level. Intervenors may serve as independent contractors, be employed as specialists within agencies, or be employed by agencies focused solely on dispute resolution. Depending on the nature of employment and service, intervenors may be considered part of the public sector, or they may be primarily classified as private-sector professionals who complete work for or on behalf of communities or groups.

**Community dispute resolution (CDR) programs.** CDR programs are considered to be those that concentrate primarily on providing interventions and related services, and their funding streams are tied directly to this role, whether financed via public budget appropriation, public contracts or grants, private contracts or grants, or fee-for-service-based reimbursement. Evaluation efforts at standalone agencies carry a high level of significance in that their continued existence may be more closely tied to the ability to demonstrate outcomes. Entities that receive all or a portion of their funding from public sources constitute the primary focus of the study, but agencies that are entirely funded by private sources will not be excluded from consideration, as their insights into sustainability may prove valuable.
Program effectiveness. The notion of effectiveness has grown in emphasis within public administration over the last several decades, in response to the National Performance Review and the emergence of New Public Management principles. While performance-based management strategies have in some cases led to goal displacement, short-term planning, or dissatisfaction among citizens or public employees, a renewed focus on outcomes highlights the need to articulate and reach toward specific goals. Norman-Major (2011) defines effectiveness in public administration, at its core, as “being successful in producing a desired result or accomplishing set goals” (p. 236). However, defining these goals in a meaningful way has been a challenge for the field of dispute resolution, as reflected in the current study’s emphasis. In assessing effectiveness, Heinrich (2002) recommends that public administrators identify performance indicators that align with an agency’s stated goals, that are straightforward enough to measure with relative accuracy, and that do not require significant resources to collect. As suggested by Murphy and Cleveland (1995), public programs are influenced by many environmental factors beyond the program implementation itself, and assessments should therefore take these conditions into account when evaluating impact.

Social justice and social equity. Many intervenors have expressed that the underlying force driving the protection of civil rights is the pursuit of social justice or social equity. As Gooden (2015) explains, the notion of social equity is in fact intertwined with justice as a principle:

It is the concept of fairness applied to all, not just select groups. In some instances, achieving justice requires treating everyone the same; in other cases it means treating groups differently based upon current and/or past inequities. The implementation of
justice is context-based—determining what is fair is dependent upon understanding a complex array of historical, political, and social factors. (p. 13)

Beyond the guarantee of legal and constitutional rights, social equity indicates the fair distribution of resources, involving not just ethical implications but widespread economic implications, as well. Therefore, demonstrating progress toward social equity may offer an economic incentive for the consistent, long-term delivery of intervention activities across an area or nation. Due to the large role of race in U.S. public disputes, racial equity is a particularly significant factor for the dispute resolution field.

Recognizing its significance to the public sector, the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) has given social equity a place as one of the “four pillars” of public administration, alongside economy, efficiency, and effectiveness (Norman-Major, 2011). According to NAPA, social equity in governance can be defined as, “The fair, just and equitable management of all institutions serving the public directly or by contract; the fair, just and equitable distribution of public services and implementation of public policy; and the commitment to promote fairness, justice, and equity in the formation of public policy” (Johnson, 2012, p. 471). NAPA also offers four criteria for measuring progress in social equity: procedural fairness, distributional equity, process equity, and outcome disparities (Norman-Major, 2011).

Data Collection

Though no central database exists that details all CDR agencies in the United States, a number of membership and advocacy organizations serve as clearinghouses for agencies that self-identify according to certain criteria. For example, the National Association for Community Mediation, a “hub” offering resources for community mediation and dispute resolution and advocating for practices, lists 150 member locations on its website (NAFCM, 2022).
The researcher began the data collection process by collecting agency names listed on the websites of the National Association for Community Mediation and the Association for Conflict Resolution, both national associations, as well as several regional organizations such as the New York State Dispute Resolution Association, the Oregon Office for Community Dispute Resolution, the Nebraska Office of Dispute Resolution, Resolution Washington, Resolution Virginia, Community Mediation Maryland, the Maryland Program for Mediator Excellence, and Conflict Resolution Minnesota. The researcher also employed a snowball-like method of searching for additional agencies mentioned as partners of the agencies listed on these websites or appearing in similar search results.

The researcher then explored the individual websites of each agency to further examine the nature of their services and to collect basic organizational characteristics. Cases could be agencies focused entirely on CDR, agencies in which CDR comprised a primary portion of their services, or distinct programs of larger agencies. Agencies were excluded from the list if they did not provide direct services to the public (e.g., if they only provided technical assistance, offered resources/consulting, or conducted research, or if their services were only accessible to an internal group rather than to any resident of a service area), if they consisted of sole practitioners, if they did not engage in forms of community dispute resolution (e.g., if they were fully exclusive to business dispute resolution or family dispute resolution, etc.), or if they did not have any web presence beyond membership listings. Using this approach, the researcher created a master list of 202 agencies as potential candidates for inclusion in the study.

The researcher then selected a purposive, representative sample of 20 agencies from the created list to include in the full study. The sample number was chosen to provide for a range of organizational characteristics while maintaining a feasible workload for the researcher, given the
in-depth nature of the content analysis. Dukes (1990) cited a common issue among studies, when researchers collect data from only one agency or one type of agency and attempt to over generalize the findings. To help avoid falling into the same pattern, the researcher used a sample from a representative but diverse range of agencies. The sample was selected based on location, service area, organization type, and age of agency, all determined at a concurrent time of analysis. To protect the identities of the analyzed agencies, this report will refer to agencies by characteristics rather than by name or other identifying information.

The researcher collected the full website text for each agency in the sample. Apart from webpage content, text content from downloadable files made available on webpages was also collected. Collected content therefore included website copy, mission and vision statements, newsletters, annual reports, advertisements, video interviews, blogs, and press releases. Materials were limited to those produced by or for the agencies themselves rather than any created by other parties, such as articles written by journalists or videos produced by partner entities, because of the focus on the expressed goals and results of the particular agencies. Similarly, it was important for collected content to be freely accessible to members of the public, as through sanctioned websites, since the possible funders or supporters of CDR work—who will ultimately determine the future of the field—are represented in the public at large.

**Composition of sample.** Of the 20 agencies studied, 14 were nonprofit organizations, three were for-profit organizations, and three were public agencies. Two agencies were affiliated with a particular faith-based group, and one other agency was affiliated with a university. Two other agencies wholly or partially relied on the leadership of attorneys, similar in structure to a law firm. Table 1 outlines the basic characteristics of each agency included in the sample.
Table 1  

*Characteristics of Agencies in the Sample*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency #</th>
<th>Location (relative to US)</th>
<th>Service Area</th>
<th>Organization Type</th>
<th>Years in Existence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>25-34 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>25-34 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>Multi-County</td>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>10-24 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>35 years or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>25-34 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A6</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>Multi-County</td>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>10-24 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A7</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Multi-County</td>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>25-34 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A8</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>25-34 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A9</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>10-24 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A10</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>35 years or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A11</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>35 years or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A12</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>For-Profit</td>
<td>10-24 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A13</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>35 years or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A14</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Multi-County</td>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>25-34 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A15</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Multi-County</td>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>25-34 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A16</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>10-24 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A17</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>For-Profit</td>
<td>25-34 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A18</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>35 years or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A19</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Multi-County</td>
<td>For-Profit</td>
<td>Fewer than 10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A20</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Statewide</td>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>25-34 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In many cases, the structures of the studied agencies developed over time. For instance, what is now an independent 501(c)(3) organization may have initially begun as a joint program run collectively by three different groups. Because overall experience with providing CDR services is relevant to this particular study, longevity was considered in terms of the length of time the program or service had been in operation, rather than the length of time an organization may have been officially independent. According to these criteria, five agencies/programs were established 35 years ago or earlier. Nine agencies/programs were established between 25 and 34 years ago, and five were established between 10 and 24 years ago. One agency/program was less than 10 years old.
For the purposes of regional categorization, agency location was categorized according to three areas, as shown in Figure 1: West, Central, and East. Seven agencies were headquartered in the western United States, six were headquartered in the central United States, and seven were headquartered in the eastern United States. Nine agencies, including all three of the public agencies in the study, offered services to a location comprising a single county or metropolitan area. Six agencies had a multi-county service area, and one agency served an entire state. Two agencies, both for-profit, served clients at a national level, and two other agencies served at an international level. The two international agencies were both headquartered in the eastern United States; apart from this, there was no other pattern of service area size and regional location.

Figure 1

*Map of U.S. States According to West, Central, or East Regions*
Analysis

The questions guiding the data analysis considered were adapted from two sample interview formats documented by Smith (1989) for use in evaluability assessments:

- What is the program trying to accomplish?
- How are the goals of the program described?
- Who is served (or should be) by the program?
- How is the program implemented? What strategies and tactics are relied upon?
- What impact is the program having on participants or on the community?
- What negative effects, if any, might the program be having?
- Are the resources of the program adequate?
- What problems may be faced in performing program tasks?
- If the program were to undergo further evaluation, what questions should be answered? How would that information be used?
- What indicators of success could a full evaluation strive to measure?
- What questions or concerns about the program could be addressed by an evaluation?

The researcher gathered and analyzed data iteratively throughout the collection process, relying on inductive methods to build an understanding of the topic. Codes were not pre-established prior to data collection. Consistent with the grounded theory approach, the coding process was open ended, with codes representing the meanings derived from the segments of text according to the perceived intentions of the content creators (Bazeley, 2013; Hesse-Biber, 2017). Daily reflection memos throughout the data collection process supported the researcher in identifying key points and generating patterns of understanding. After the initial collection of content, the researcher considered the categorizations of data most critical to understanding the
main themes of the study and developed codes to help determine the frequency with which
certain topics were emphasized. The researcher used NVivo qualitative analysis software to
organize and code data. Coding was completed manually, with a reliance on context, rather than
automatically according to keyword usage. All content was reviewed for potential coding.
Analysis of codes took place in both NVivo and Microsoft Excel.

**Reflection memos.** The researcher engaged in daily reflection memos throughout the
processes of developing a sample, collecting data, and coding. Reflection memos lay the
groundwork for analysis and interpretation, as the researcher uses them to document key ideas,
summaries, concerns, and unique findings within the data (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Memo writing
allows the researcher the metaphorical space to process recently collected data and to deepen the
analytic approach (Bazeley, 2013), creating a system for tracking questions and hypotheses that
arise throughout research (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Memos can also serve as the connector
between data collection and the theories involved in the research question (Hesse-Biber, 2017).

The practice of writing reflection memos presented the researcher with a basis for
developing codes as well as areas of focus for the analysis process. Memos also proved to be
valuable when tracing the justifications for decisions made in the selection of the sample and the
parameters of agency eligibility. In the course of creating the sample, the researcher’s reflection
memos discussed the difficulty of determining whether individual agencies met eligibility
criteria for inclusion. Several reflection memos also highlighted the heavy reliance on volunteer
labor by many agencies, and the researcher speculated throughout data collection and coding
what the potential implications of this practice may be on the CDR field as a whole.

One observation noted that nonprofits appeared to be more adept at demonstrating impact
than did other agency types, perhaps because nonprofits may more accustomed to having to
EVALUABILITY OF COMMUNITY DISPUTE

justify their services to funders. However, a later detail brought a new light to this impression. While collecting website data from the sample agencies, the researcher observed that one particular agency in the sample illustrated proficiency in communicating output data across its wide range of services, with the exception of its CDR services, for which output data were absent from reporting. Even among social-impact programs, CDR appears to remain especially difficult to conceptualize in terms of effectiveness.

At around the halfway mark of the reflection memo by page, and around the halfway point of data collection, the researcher first outlined what would ultimately become the three primarily categories of goals being suggested by agencies: maintaining peace, saving costs, and achieving justice. Near the end of the coding process, the researcher noted the potential for bias while coding content that referenced the pursuit of justice, when that content suggested an understanding of justice different from that held by the researcher. This example of subjectivity further underscored the importance of and need for clearly articulated objectives for agencies within the field.

Codes. Across all 20 agencies, approximately 600,767 words were included in the analyzed web content, resulting in 1,999 code references. The researcher developed the codes below for more detailed analysis by content and content type. Some of these codes are descriptive codes, indicating a literal connection to the words appearing in the text, while other codes—such as those relating to the three main identified categories of agency goals—are more interpretive in nature (Hesse-Biber, 2017):
Table 2

*Codes and Sub-Codes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code/Code Category</th>
<th>Sub-Code (if applicable)</th>
<th>Sub-Code (if applicable)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Call to Donate/Volunteer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidentiality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content Source:</strong></td>
<td>Ad</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Annual Report</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blog</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Case Study</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>External Quote</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Homepage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mission/Vision/Values</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Newsletter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Press Release</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strategic Plan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Testimonial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event Promotion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expertise of Intervenors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Funding:</strong></td>
<td>Private</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Financial Breakdown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goals:</strong></td>
<td>Justice and Equity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cost Savings:</td>
<td>Individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peace</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutrality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Output Data</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome Data</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Service Fees:</strong></td>
<td>Flat Fee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sliding Scale</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No Fee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Service Type:</strong></td>
<td>Restorative Justice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Educating the Public</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Funding Management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IT Solutions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Mediation:</em></td>
<td>Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Debt</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Family</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Housing</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Real Estate</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Workplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Training Intervenors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 4: Results

Funding

Five agencies provided summaries of their revenue and expense figures for at least one year of their past operation. All five agencies that provided these financial breakdowns were nonprofit organizations. One of them was 35 years old or older, two were 25 to 34 years old, and two were 10 to 24 years old.

Twelve agencies referenced receiving funding from public sources, including 11 nonprofit agencies and one for-profit agency. Though none of the three public agencies in the study made reference to its specific funds, it is clear that the three public agencies operated using public funding. Thus, it can be confirmed that 15 of the 20 studied agencies relied partially or wholly on public funds. Ten agencies referenced receiving funds from private sources, including eight nonprofit agencies, one for-profit agency, and one public agency. Eight agencies mentioned both public and private funding sources, including two agencies 35 years old or older. Figure 2 displays the proportions of agencies mentioning public and private funding types.

Figure 2

Agencies Referencing Funding Sources
Nine agencies, all nonprofits, included a fundraising appeal to the general public within their web content. Eleven agencies emphasized the importance of their partnerships with other agencies or groups outside of funding relationships. This type of collaboration could indicate an awareness of the need to form symbiotic relationships with supportive groups in order to meet goals and maintain viability.

**Services**

Intervention services may take many forms, but CDR practitioners commonly describe standard intervention activities in terms of mediation, dialogue, or facilitation. Community mediation/dialogue may be the most direct depiction of CDR, and it may include responding to issues such as disputes between neighbors, disputes between a public agency and citizens, disputes between a public agency and private business interests, or disputes between public agencies as relevant to the public interest of a community. However, many smaller-scale disputes may quickly escalate to the community level, and so the promotion of more targeted areas of dispute does not indicate less of an emphasis on CDR as a whole.

Seventeen agencies made specific mention of providing services that would fall under the umbrella of community mediation. The three agencies that did not explicitly discuss community mediation included two nonprofit agencies and one for-profit agency. Sixteen agencies mentioned the ability to handle family-related disputes, and 15 mentioned handling disputes occurring in the workplace or places of business. Many agencies discussed disputes related to housing, with 11 agencies mentioning landlord/tenant disputes and four agencies mentioning other real-estate-related disputes. Ten agencies cited providing services within schools for conflicts among students and/or between staff and students or their families. Finally, 10 agencies
promoted services related to mediating matters of consumer or medical debt. These seven mediation categories are listed in Figure 3 according to the number of agencies promoting them.

**Figure 3**

*Types of Mediation Promoted by Agencies*

![Graph showing types of mediation promoted by agencies.]

Agencies cited an average of 4.3 of these categories and a median of 4 of these categories. Three agencies mentioned services falling within all seven categories. It should be noted that the categories of service types promoted by an agency do not necessarily represent the entire range of what an agency can undertake. It is likely that many agencies are able to provide assistance in most combinations of dispute types, as long as the disputes are good candidates for the intervention process.

Beyond intervention activities for existing disputes, CDR agencies engage in a number of activities that represent a more preventative approach. These types of activities are closely associated with the idea that CDR practitioners’ knowledge and experience with disputes can offer insights to all types of community members in improving their abilities to work through disputes constructively without the need for intervention. Sixteen of the studied agencies promoted services designed to educate the public, or demonstrated content with a goal of
educating the public, about handling disputes. Many of the services mentioned by these agencies also served the purpose of generating revenue for other operating expenses. Of the four agencies that did not include content related to educating the public, two were nonprofit agencies and two were for-profit agencies. Eight agencies promoted services centered on restorative justice, an alternative approach to addressing crime that seeks healing for victims as well as offenders (Gumz & Grant, 2018).

While public education efforts may work to improve the general public’s conflict management skills, many CDR agencies also engage more specifically in training activities designed to increase the number of intervenors in the workforce or volunteer base. Sixteen agencies mentioned self-managed events or programs for training individuals to become intervenors or to improve their skills as intervenors. This number includes all ten agencies that indicated a reliance on an all-volunteer pool of intervenors.

Apart from the common services offered by CDR agencies, several agencies in the study promoted the ability to provide more unique services. One agency served as a funding administrator for collaborative projects. Two agencies developed and made available IT solutions for related organizations or groups. Two agencies indicated their roles in conducting research activities. Non-mediation services promoted by sample agencies are displayed in Figure 4.
Agencies’ ability to maintain funding levels may depend in part on their ability to adapt to new situations and conditions. Twelve agencies highlighted ways in which they pivoted in the recent past to better meet the needs of their changing constituencies. For instance, 10 agencies shifted the way they provided interventions, or provided new types of intervention services, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. One agency also offered services specifically in response to the Black Lives Matter movement. Other types of changes involved shifting service focus in response to local cultural divides, expanding services from schools to the broader community, implementing new programs based on court needs, shifting away from a publicly facilitated program toward fully nonprofit delivery, investing in dedicated spaces to provide training and dialogue, shifting focus from only facilitating to play a large role in the building of solutions, and piloting restorative justice programs in response to legal changes in the age of criminal responsibility.

Thirteen agencies mentioned offering at least one type of service at no charge to the participant, including 11 nonprofit agencies and two public agencies. Eight of the 13 agencies
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offering services at no charge were agencies that promoted the use of volunteer intervenors.

Eight agencies mentioned offering at least one type of service on a sliding fee scale, such as providing discounts to participants with lower income levels. Seven of these eight had also mentioned offering at least one type of service at no charge as noted above; the only agency to only offer the sliding scale was a nonprofit agency with volunteer intervenors.

**Goals**

The objective of peace was commonly cited, with 16 agencies making mention of maintaining or achieving peace as an intended result of their services. Another common objective was cost savings, with 16 agencies referencing cost savings as a benefit to users or to the community at large. Of these, 15 promoted cost savings to the individual user, in the sense that participating in community dispute resolution is less expensive than alternative methods of resolving, or not resolving, disputes. Nine agencies mentioned cost savings in the form of reducing strain on other public services, and two agencies cited CDR services’ role in saving costs to society, such as by preventing unrest or violence. Finally, six agencies mentioned the concepts of equity or justice as a goal of their CDR work.

All 20 agencies made reference to at least one of these categories of goals. Four agencies made reference to all three categories. Only one agency, an over-35-year-old nonprofit with an international scope, mentioned the goal of justice and mentioned neither of the other two categories of goals. Figure 5 depicts a Venn diagram of the three goal categories, showing how many agencies mentioned them individually and in combination. The three public agencies included in the study all referenced both peace and cost savings as goals and did not mention justice. The three for-profit agencies all mentioned peace as a goal, and one of them also mentioned both cost savings and justice. Ten of the 16 agencies that touted cost savings also
promoted all-volunteer bases of intervenors. The agency that had operated for less than 10 years cited only the category of peace.

**Figure 5**

*Agencies Mentioning Goal Categories*

![Venn Diagram](image)

*Note:* Figure displays the number of agencies mentioning each category of goals solely as well as in combination with the other categories. Total Peace = 16. Total Cost Savings = 16. Total Justice/Equity = 6.

Though not a goal in and of itself, 16 agencies mentioned the significance of neutrality in their work. Fourteen of the 16 agencies that cited peace as an objective also highlighted neutrality, as well as five of the six agencies that cited justice.

Nine agencies made use of direct testimonials from service participants within their web content. Of 78 quoted statements from participants included in the analysis, the most frequently mentioned benefit was that the service(s) improved communication among the parties, which was included within 21 statements (26.9%). The next most frequently cited benefit was reaching a resolution, mentioned in 20 statements (25.5%). Nine statements (11.5%) mentioned being able to avoid court. The expertise of the intervenors was mentioned in 11 statements (14.1%). Six
(7.7%) statements mentioned being able to discover new information as part of the service(s), five (6.4%) mentioned building conflict resolution skills, and five (6.4%) mentioned cost/time savings. The occurrence of topic categories within participant testimonials is shown in Figure 6.

**Figure 6**

*Testimonials Included in Agency Web Content*

![Graph showing the number of total testimonials for each category](image)

**Outputs**

Thirteen agencies made reference to an output of some type, for a total of 163 output data points. Note that it was possible for a single data point to touch on more than one category of output. Ten output points referenced CDR services in general terms rather than discussing the outputs of the individual agency. Of these generalized outputs, only one of the ten included the source of the claim. The remaining output points centered on the outputs of the specific agency in question.

Output topics most commonly centered on the number of cases an agency undertook over a given time period and the percentage of those cases that led to agreement or resolution. Fifty-
three output points (eight agencies) included information about numbers of cases accepted or clients served. Thirty-eight output points (eight agencies) mentioned an agency’s case resolution rate. Fifteen output points, representing four agencies, further provided a breakdown of the types of cases handled by an agency over a given period of time, such as by client demographics or by the subject of the dispute.

Apart from intervention services, training and education represent another large portion of agencies’ activities. Unsurprisingly, therefore, many outputs centered on trainings. Thirty-nine data points (five agencies) dealt with the number of trainings an agency offered and/or the number of participants in the trainings. Client satisfaction was another common output mentioned by agencies, with 14 data points (six agencies) highlighting participants’ satisfaction with CDR processes in general or with the specific services provided by the particular agency.

Reflecting a more intermediate stage of output, two agencies mentioned a reduced chance of future court visits. This output in particular is closely associated with the CDR goal of cost savings. In fact, both agencies that referenced this output are also among the agencies that made mention more broadly to the goal of cost savings at both an individual level and a system level.

Similarly, four agencies referenced a connection between the provision of their services and an improvement in the interpersonal relationships or skills of the participants. However, none of these references included specific data or evidence to support the claimed connection. This connection can be seen at the heart of many widespread assumptions about the value of CDR.

One agency provided outputs in terms of the specific goals defined by each collaborative undertaking. For instance, for four of this agency’s main partnerships through which it provided intervention-related services, the agency promoted the results of those efforts to date. This client-
centered approach to outputs was unique among the agencies in the study. The agency is a nonprofit and works at the international level. Figure 7 displays the number of data points appearing within each common output category as well as the number of agencies that mentioned each category.

Figure 7

Categories of Outputs within Agency Web Content

Ten of the 14 nonprofit organizations studied included outputs of any type, while two of the three public agencies studied and one of the three for-profit organizations studied included outputs. Five agencies included outputs in annual reports.

Outcomes

Only four of the 20 agencies studied included any discussion of outcomes in their public-facing web content. Of the six total references to outcomes, five were related to CDR activities within K-12 school systems; the one non-school reference involved a brief discussion of cost
savings within a law enforcement group. Two of the six references to outcomes included specific outcome data from the respective CDR programs, though only in the form of a single figure, and both of these references related to school systems. One reference to outcomes discussed generalized outcomes associated with similar programs, though the sources of those generalized outcomes were not cited or mentioned. The final three references to outcomes made claims related to the outcomes of the particular agencies’ own programs but without any accompanying data or evidence to support the claims, either in a similar location or anywhere else in the available content.

Of the six references to outcomes, only the law enforcement reference was directly related to one of the three categories peace, justice, or cost savings goals. Though any of the discussed outcomes could have been implicitly associated with agencies’ intended goals, the connections were not made explicitly within the other six.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Very few young agencies/programs appeared in the master list of agencies to begin the study, and only one program was included in the sample that had been in existence for less than 10 years. This confirms the basic pattern of CDR agencies across the United States, in that many were launched in the decades following the Civil Rights Act, and due to market saturation and/or funding concerns, few agencies have begun new programs in recent years. However, the continued existence of so many after several decades suggests that not only are CDR services still in demand, but also that many agencies are finding ways to thrive for the long term. As 15 of the 20 studied agencies were either public agencies or agencies that received public funding, the sample demonstrates the importance of monitoring and making accessible the results of implemented programs and services.

The fact that 16 agencies explicitly promoted their preventative services, such as educational opportunities and skills-based training for community members, indicates an awareness among CDR practitioners that education plays a major role in reducing the occurrence and severity of community disputes. Such an awareness would therefore be a key ingredient of many agencies’ theories of change. As two of the three for-profit agencies included in the study did not emphasize or engage in public education activities, this might suggest that for-profit agencies have less incentive to empower the public to resolve their own disputes without coming to them for intervention services. This similarly supports the assumption that investing in public education has strong potential to reduce the incidence of community disputes over time.

Three of the studied agencies highlighted creative ways of generating revenue, such as developing IT solutions or participating in research. All three agencies had been in operation for at least 26 years. This approach to diversifying revenue streams might suggest an organizational
resilience allowing for continued CDR services even when community cases cannot be financially self-supporting. Organizational resilience is further underlined by the 12 agencies that discussed recent pivots in their services or operations.

However, it may be a concern that half of the agencies in the study indicated a reliance on an all-volunteer base of intervenors. If CDR agencies’ promise of cost savings depends heavily on the fact that their practitioners are paid less than practitioners of other public services, such a business model may not prove sustainable, or wise, in the long run. Another potential area of concern is that several (six) agencies highlighted confidentiality as a benefit to opting for CDR services in favor of other avenues for resolving disputes, particularly the court system. While many participants in the intervention process would likely prefer their conversations to remain private, this confidentiality prevents members of the public from holding participants accountable to standards of equity or ethics, unlike most court proceedings, for instance.

Given the strong emphasis on neutrality within the CDR field, it is perhaps not surprising that only six of the studied agencies cited equity or justice as a goal of their work. It is also somewhat expected that none of the three public agencies publicly expressed a goal of equity or justice; even if such a goal were an implicit commitment among practitioners or administrators, political connotations may create the perception that avoiding discussions of equity will help an agency maintain a nonpartisan reputation. However, it is interesting to note that four of these six agencies also cited the other two major categories of goals. Bearing in mind that the goal categories may be at odds with each other, it is possible that pursuing results in line with an emphasis on peace or cost savings may come to the detriment of equity or justice, or vice versa. Without a complete picture of outcomes or even outputs, it remains unknown to what extent these agencies are making progress toward which goals.
Based on the participant testimonials included in the analysis, it may be the case that agencies are in fact highlighting some of the outputs that are of most relevance to client satisfaction. For instance, resolution rate was mentioned in eight of the 13 agencies that referenced outputs of any type; being able to reach a resolution appeared in 25.5% of the testimonial statements, the second-most frequently cited benefit of participating in services. However, in other areas, there appeared to be a mismatch between what agencies’ clients stated about their experiences and what agencies use the most time and space to promote. Improved communication among participants was the most-cited advantage of CDR in the testimonial statements, but only four agencies made the claim (albeit unsupported) that participating in their services can lead to improved communication skills.

As agency-administered client surveys are often an attainable early step in gathering assessment data, it is surprising that only six of the studied agencies specifically mentioned client satisfaction in discussions of outputs. Though client satisfaction rates do not provide a full picture of effectiveness, they can indicate whether agencies are in fact offering the type and caliber of intervention that adequately meet participants’ expressed preferences.

Outcome-level information was rare within the available web content of the studied agencies. Of the mentions that did exist, actual data accompanied the references in only two cases. Notably, almost all of the outcomes discussions, including both references with data, centered on CDR activities within school systems. Perhaps this is an indication that programs related to K-12 education are more conditioned to collect and provide assessment data, or that school programs are more apt to embrace the identification of specific goals. Regardless of these brief standouts, it is clear that CDR agencies remain limited in their ability, or their willingness, to demonstrate the connections between their specific activities and the intended consequences of
those activities. Without broad access to data that explore the results of CDR services, funders and potential supporters have little ammunition with which to justify continued public investment.

**Recommendations**

There will continue to be more competing claims on public funds than can be awarded those funds. Though many of the agencies in this study have successfully stayed in operation for more than a decade, the continued emphasis on business-like efficiency and the recent pattern of defunded CDR programs suggests that not all existing agencies will be able to maintain services into the future without making adjustments. In light of the analyses summarized above, the researcher recommends that CDR agencies consider the following actions as part of their long-term sustainability efforts, both for organizational strength and for the effectiveness of the field itself.

**Recommendation 1: Develop a logic model.** It is clear that CDR agencies display considerable diversity in their overarching goals, which is not necessarily detrimental to the field. In fact, tailoring missions and services to best meet the needs of particular communities may be the most effective approach toward providing assistance in this vein. However, CDR agencies must articulate their goals and their theories of change. Engaging in the development of an organizational- or program-level logic model provides administrators and practitioners with a mechanism for determining an intended path toward goals (Jordan, 2010; Knowlton & Phillips, 2012). Logic models can help participants visualize the sequence of events that can lead from the specific services offered by an agency to the intermediate results of those services to ultimately the high-level conditions being targeted by the agency.
Apart from lending clarity to practitioners, a logic model is also a critical tool for providing funders with a straightforward summary of what an agency intends to achieve and how it intends to achieve it. Well-crafted visualizations of logic models can improve readers’ understanding of a program (Jones et al., 2020). Such instruments can be beneficial for decisionmakers with limited time to approve funding appeals and limited resources to allocate. Until an agency has begun a consistent regimen of evaluation activities, a logic model can provide support for its services by laying out intended inputs, outputs, and outcomes, which can later be accompanying by the related data.

Logic models also encourage agencies to look beyond the short-term intermediate results of their services, where many practitioners tend to get mired down, and consider the long-term effects of those combined results. A long-term, community-level vision can also help decisionmakers who need to focus on investing in services that can achieve the most impact for a wide range of constituents. Though the individual participants in CDR certainly derive benefits from the process, it should be articulated and understood the manner through which society at large benefits from the existence of CDR programs.

In holding goal-based discussions with stakeholders, agencies should gather insight from not just practitioners and participants but also from funding entities and officials. It is possible that funders or champions have been choosing to invest in CDR programs based on particular assumptions about long-term effects. If CDR program administrators settle on one set of goals based on how their practitioners view their mission, funders may have less interest in continuing the line of investment if those goals do not match their own assumptions. Identifying these potential discrepancies early on in the evaluability assessment process can give stakeholders a chance to narrow or broaden their program approaches based on a full range of input.
Recommendation 2: Create a system for collecting meaningful data. Once an agency has made clear what it is aiming for and how it intended to get there, it must collect relevant data at both the output level and the outcome level to assess its role in the system. This involves identifying measurable results of what each agency completes or achieves within a specified time frame and comparing these figures to what it had hoped to complete or achieve with the given resources. For instance, agencies aiming to save costs to the legal system could determine a local court’s typical operation costs and calculate how X number of diverted cases have helped bring annual costs down by X dollars. Importantly, agencies must also identify measures to represent adequately the right-most columns of their logic models and track these measures over time. Engaging in an evaluability assessment at the agency level could be a helpful early step in guiding agencies toward the most appropriate data to measure.

Recommendation 3: Commit to transparency wherever possible. In line with the expectations of other public programs (Bovens, 2005; Newcomer, 2015), CDR programs receiving any level of public funds must embrace transparency in their operations and their outcomes. The majority of the agencies examined in this study made little information readily available on their websites regarding their outputs and results, let alone information connecting their services to progress toward high-level goals. Online agency-managed content remains a major source of information for service users, partners, and funders, whether existing or potential (Lyrio et al., 2018). While specific details of specific cases must remain confidential according to program mandates, many forms of non-identifying, aggregated data may still be held for analysis purposes. As soon as agencies have developed the means to collect relevant output and outcome data, their evaluation plans must account for ways to make data available to the public (Dahler-Larsen, 2005).
Decisionmakers and funders have a key role to play in the transparency process, as well. Some mission-based organizations display hesitancy in tracking and reporting on evaluation data out of fear that it may suggest failure and therefore reduce support for services (Weiss, 1997). Funders must encourage the discovery of all insights from data and embrace a continuous cycle of adjustment among funded programs. In fact, creating the expectation that all funded programs must display consistently profitable results may foster an environment in which administrators skew their results in order to present findings in the best possible light (Rogers, 2015). All insights hold value to taxpayers; uncovering unexpected results with public dollars is just as constructive to long-term planning as is confirming expectations.

Recommendation 4: Consider equity. The fact that only seven of the studied agencies made explicit mention of equity or justice as a goal indicates that modern CDR agencies have likely strayed from the modus operandi of the original CRS and the influx of emulators in the decades that followed. As already suggested above, it is in fact likely that the wide range of potential goals among CDR agencies serves as an advantage to the field. However, practitioners must also be open to the possibility that their activities may in fact be contributing to inequity by reinforcing existing patterns of power (Menkel-Meadow, 1997).

If data are uncovered to suggest that CDR programs are not just failing to achieve social equity but may be hindering its progress, funders and administrators should take the opportunity to adjust available services so that these publicly funded programs are in a better position to advance the common good. As agencies develop plans for tracking outcome-level data, they must incorporate explorations into potential positive outcomes as well as potential negative outcomes of their work (Gooden, 2015). Only by becoming aware of the full range of
consequences of publicly funded services can administrators make decisions in the best interest of constituents.

**Recommendation 5: Ensure the viability of the profession.** Many CDR agencies rely partially or wholly upon volunteer hours. This volunteer base is often part of the reason why CDR programs boast cost savings over alternative methods of resolving or dealing with conflict. In contrast to, for instance, the court system, in which participating professionals receive high pay rates, the altruistic nature of CDR may allow agencies to recruit more volunteer professionals to help handle caseloads. In some situations, CDR agencies also tout volunteer work as a means to gain mediation experience for legal professionals. However, once this experience is gained, there are often no options for practitioners to secure a full-time paid role; skilled intervenors would have to apply their skills and expertise elsewhere in order to make a living.

In many situations, engaging in CDR allows participants, the public sector, and the community to save on costs that would otherwise be devoted to dealing with the conflict or its aftermath. A diligent system for tracking and monetizing related data would help agencies demonstrate these short-term and long-term savings. But if a primary cost difference is based upon using volunteers rather than paid professionals to handle this work, the field risks entrenching the perception of CDR practitionership as a nonviable career path adhering to an unsustainable business model.

While it is reasonable for some professionals to donate their free time to handling CDR cases, it should not be the expectation that all intervenors practice without compensation. CDR work is complex, involves high stakes, requires high degrees of skill and emotional intelligence, and can be stressful. Treating CDR practice as a true profession—in which one receives an
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appropriate wage for highly specialized work and receives tangible incentives for investments in training and development—would offer greater stability for the field and a more equitable organizational structure. A commitment to fair pay would also bring CDR into line with best practices in public personnel management, reflecting consideration for the retention of a skilled workforce (Riley, 2002).

**Recommendation 6: Advocate for public-sector reform when appropriate.** CDR practitioners are in a unique position to understand the consequences of many public services, public policies, and social issues. Through the nature of their work, they strive to understand what each party to a conflict has experienced and what their individual aims may be to achieve a level of stability. In fact, many CDR programs bill themselves as more effective alternatives to other types of public services, as direct or indirect criticism of existing systems.

Collecting and tracking outcome-level data will provide CDR agencies with even more insight into the patterns of interaction among public matters and social strife. Simply offering CDR services alongside the broken but necessary system under scrutiny may even prolong the issues, as the existence of an “alternative” may make the need for reform appear to be less urgent. Further, it is likely that CDR programs alone cannot achieve the level of intended progress toward high-level goals. Even with the existence of interventions and preventative training, a more systemic approach to reform is likely necessary to make a meaningful impact in many areas.

CDR programs should adopt a key role, if not a leading role, in facilitating collaboration among interdependent public service providers to realize intended benefits for a defined service area. Given their expertise in managing conflict and facilitating constructive, high-intensity conversations, CDR practitioners can help steer these collaborations in a direction that can
realize collective benefits. If CDR practitioners truly wish to pursue their defined goals in a way that justifies continued public investment, it will be key to embrace a system-level approach to effecting change.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

The Community Relations Service was established as a federal agency by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to provide mediation and negotiation services to communities in implementing civil rights reforms. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, many new organizations emerged throughout the United States to fulfill similar roles at the local and regional level. With an emphasis on neutrality and peaceful resolution of conflict, many of these programs became direct or indirect recipients of public funding, often owing to the assumption that community dispute resolution can prevent the need for more costly interventions elsewhere in the public system.

Given that the widespread use of CDR has been in place for several decades, policymakers and citizens should now have the means to determine how the prevalence of CDR services has influenced the status of social cohesion. However, few CDR programs make any evaluation data readily available to the public, and even fewer have been engaging in longitudinal tracking of relevant data over time. Meanwhile, the subjective experiences of many Americans seem to reflect a period of continued polarization and incivility. If CDR services and their values have been unable to achieve what they set out to achieve, the public interest may be better served by reallocating tax dollars to different or modified approaches. Conversely, if CDR programs have been preventing the further spread of violence and destruction, citizens would benefit from greater investments in these agencies.

This study explored the stated goals of CDR programs and the ways in which those programs present their effectiveness to the public. Based on the examination of public-facing web content of a representative sample of CDR agencies, there appear to be many opportunities for agencies to improve upon the caliber and the quantity of outcome-level data. Due to the
current scarcity of data as well as the unstated nature of many program goals, the researcher concludes that community dispute programs by and large are not yet designed or implemented in such a way as to lend themselves to more robust evaluation efforts. The analyzed web content does suggest that most CDR programs have drifted away from the field’s roots in civil rights and social justice. Though some agencies display a capacity for tracking and reporting basic outputs, few if any have developed systems for drawing connections between those outputs and their intended goals. To improve upon the sustainability and effectiveness of CDR programs, agencies could benefit from articulating their logic models and making the results of assessment efforts as transparent as possible.

The study’s reliance on published web content comes with limitations. The collected data do not reflect the entirety of an agency’s internal procedures and results, and generalized conclusions about the field based on the sample should be taken as preliminary. From the practitioner side, a customized evaluability assessment could help guide an individual agency through the process of determining gaps and charting a path forward. In particular, engaging in the stakeholder-interview portion of the evaluability assessment would provide practitioners and administrators with valuable insights into the nature of agency goals and the various applications of evaluation data.

From the research side, future studies could address the interview stage of evaluability assessment on a broader scale, conducting stakeholder interviews across a range of agencies to consider their results collectively. By interviewing practitioners, administrators, or beneficiaries involved in the field, a researcher could more deeply examine the interviewees’ own perceptions of the goals of the field, the goals of particular agencies, barriers to effectiveness, and the
perceived value of evaluation efforts. Continuing with the framework of an evaluability assessment, potential interview questions may include the following:

What do the people in your organization want to accomplish by providing these services?

How does your organization describe the goals of the program to the public? Is that different from the way goals are described internally?

Who is served by the program? Should the program be serving people who aren’t currently being served?

What impact is the program having on participants or on the community? How do you determine that it’s having that impact?

What negative effects, if any, might the program be having?

Are the resources of the program adequate?

What barriers do you face in operating the program?

What questions or concerns about the program could be addressed by an evaluation? How would that information be used?

Do stakeholders appear open to evaluation efforts?

If asked directly in an interview setting, practitioners may respond with personal interpretations of goals and indicators that differ from those presented in published artifacts. These discrepancies from the public-facing text would be important to note, as they may suggest that the messaging to funders and constituents is intentionally manipulated away from the deep-seated beliefs of the practitioners themselves.

At large, the field of community dispute resolution could note a shift toward a greater willingness to conduct evaluation activities, higher-quality evaluation data, clearer analyses of outcomes, and more effective approaches in light of these conclusions. The further exploration of CDR program evaluation holds immense potential for identifying the ways in which U.S.
communities have prioritized the various dimensions of conflict and which tactics are proving effective in realizing collective aims.
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Appendix

IRB Approval Letter

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs | West Chester University | Ehringer Annex
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Oct 7, 2021 10:01:29 AM EDT

To: Rebecca Gourde
Public Policy and Administration

Re: Expedited Review - Initial - IRB-FY2022-32 Evaluability Assessment in Community Dispute Resolution Programs

Dear Rebecca Gourde:

Thank you for your submitted application to the WCUPA Institutional Review Board. Since it was deemed expedited, it was required that two reviewers evaluated the submission. We have had the opportunity to review your application and have rendered the decision below for Evaluability Assessment in Community Dispute Resolution Programs.

Decision: Approved

Selected Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Sincerely,
WCUPA Institutional Review Board

IORG#: IORG0004242
IRB#: IRB00005030
FWA#: FWA00014155