Arnold Ventures

Arnold Ventures' Approach to Funding Research

Using diverse, high-quality research for maximum impact

Across Arnold Ventures' issue areas, we seek lasting policy change that improves people's lives. Questions about policy change need to be informed by the best research and data. For example, what do we know about a particular social issue, and what remains shrouded in mystery? Where, how often, and among whom does the problem occur? What factors are correlated with the problem? What are the financial and human costs? What solutions have been tried, and what seems to work?
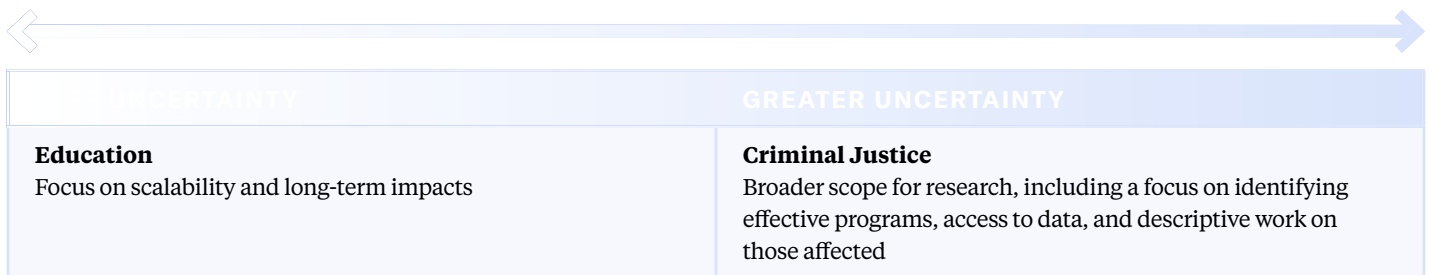
In order to answer these questions and drive meaningful, lasting change, Arnold Ventures funds research on the most pressing questions that affect policy. No matter what type of research we support – from descriptive work to randomized controlled trials (RCTs) – we look for the following traits:

- ✔ It tackles the most pressing questions or uncertainties that, if resolved, could actually affect an important policy decision.
- ✔ It is rigorous and independent.
- ✔ It can be part of a broad and systematic approach, rather than a series of one-off projects.

A range of issues with unique knowledge gaps

Our issue areas (such as criminal justice or education) fall along a spectrum of uncertainty, which can affect what studies we fund and how many. The *"most pressing uncertainties"* can differ vastly, depending both on the existing state of data/research and on AV's strategic goals. In our Education work, for example, we have supported charter schools as an option for urban education, an idea that has previously had success. The most pressing uncertainties – on which we continue to fund research – are less about whether charter schools work at all, and more about scale-up and long-term impacts on a school district.

But when uncertainty is greatest, even a small amount of new information can make a huge difference. In Criminal Justice, there are often many more uncertainties, including not just which programs or policies are effective, but often the most basic information (such as counting the number of people with criminal records in the U.S.). Because there are many unanswered questions that are relevant to our strategic approach, we currently have many times more research grants in Criminal Justice than in Education.

UNCERTAINTY	GREATER UNCERTAINTY
Education Focus on scalability and long-term impacts	**Criminal Justice** Broader scope for research, including a focus on identifying effective programs, access to data, and descriptive work on those affected

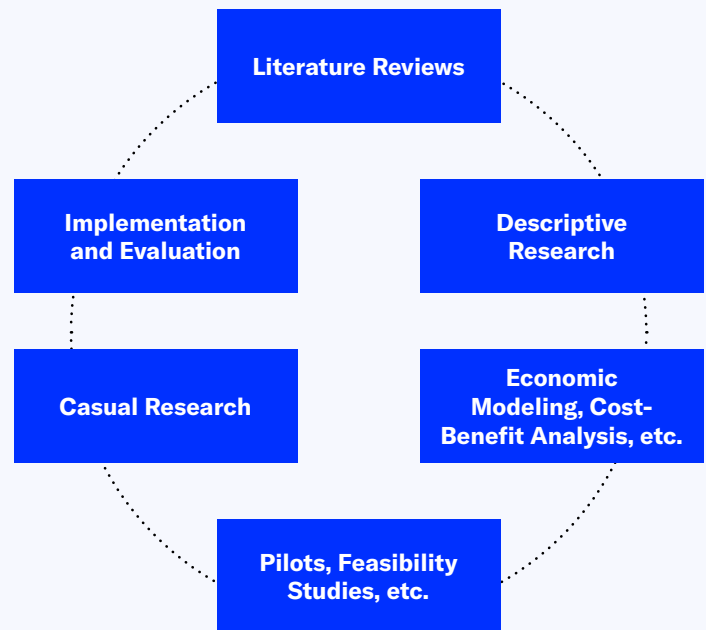## Our uncompromising drive for high-quality methods

While we hope that research can help drive policy change, the accuracy and independence of the research can never be compromised. When research is flawed or overly optimistic, it doesn't actually reduce uncertainty. It provides the illusion of doing so, which can sometimes be worse than no research at all.

We work to ensure the accuracy and independence of our research by requiring:

- ✔ preregistration
- ✔ open data
- ✔ open code
- ✔ full transparency about methods and results

If rigorous research shows that any of our policy views need a new direction, we will revise our approach and strategy accordingly.

Overview of the research types we fund:

Literature Reviews

Implementation and Evaluation

Descriptive Research

Casual Research

Economic Modeling, Cost-Benefit Analysis, etc.

Pilots, Feasibility Studies, etc.

Literature Reviews

In order for us to address the most pressing and policy-relevant questions in a given field, we first have to know what the prior literature says versus what remains shrouded in uncertainty. We often do that assessment ourselves, but we often fund literature reviews by independent academics. We are particularly interested in literature reviews that critically examine the underlying scholarship and the data, rather than merely taking the existing literature at face value.

Descriptive Research

In many fields, there are pressing uncertainties about basic descriptive facts, such as:

- Where, how often, and among whom does the problem occur? Does the problem affect some subgroups more than others?
- What has happened to the problem over time?
- What are the financial and human costs?
- What previous solutions have been tried?

Good descriptive work can drive the policy discussion, as well as set the stage for new hypotheses, new policies or interventions, and increased public awareness and accountability.

When we fund descriptive research, we are drawn to projects that will be broadly representative or that will focus on jurisdictions of national significance. A good example is the Misdemeanor Justice Project, which began as an effort to catalogue data on misdemeanors in New York City, and now has grown to a national Research Network on Misdemeanor Justice. We are less interested in a small and non-representative study on a single location; such studies are less likely to resolve any key uncertainties.

Economic Modeling, Cost-Benefit Analysis, etc.

Economic modeling and/or cost-benefit analysis (CBA) can substantially reduce policymakers' uncertainty by providing them with a range of projections as to the tradeoffs between different policies.

Pilots, Feasibility Studies, etc.

There are two types of pilot/feasibility studies: those that pilot or test the feasibility of a rigorous evaluation or RCT, and those that just describe the initial pilot of the program itself. We treat these differently. We often *expect* pilot/feasibility stages for RCTs and evaluations, as a way of making sure that the program or intervention is truly ready to evaluate and that the experiment is ready to launch. But when it comes to simply launching a new program for the first time, we have a higher bar for making a grant, and will do so only if the program is highly promising and the field is in need of innovation.

Causal Research

In far too many instances, no one knows the causal impact of what government is doing. If we want to make social progress, we have to know how well various policies and programs work (if at all), as well as for whom and where. This means research projects that answer questions like the following:

- Which approaches help solve the problem or its causes? With what effect size? Where and for whom? How? At what cost? And for how long?

- Is the evidence generalizable to other jurisdictions or populations? Has anyone engaged in "mechanism mapping" or other process-related work to help shed light on questions of context and implementation?

- Do any of the proposed solutions have significant side-effects or unintended consequences?

In many cases, we have sponsored randomized evaluations or RCTs, which – when well-conducted – are considered the most rigorous way to isolate the effect of treatment. We fund RCTs in three circumstances:

1. We need social programs that are backed by strong, replicated evidence of sizable effects on important life outcomes. That's why we prioritize funding for RCTs of programs that, based on prior evidence, have potential for such effects.

2. We will fund RCTs when a program, policy, or practice is widely implemented, but its effectiveness is currently unknown.

3. In emerging issues such as opioid addiction or super-utilizers, there are many programs or treatments that are growing in popularity because they're thought to be a promising solution, without necessarily having any prior evidence to speak of. RCTs can help guide such emerging fields toward more useful practices.

However, there are situations when an RCT is virtually impossible for logistical reasons (e.g., when an entire city or state adopts a new policy), for ethical reasons (e.g., handing out longer prison sentences to defendants), or for political reasons (e.g., randomizing eligibility for a given program would be too politically controversial). Beyond RCTs, we have funded a wide range of causal studies, such as the Seattle minimum wage study, Raj Chetty's Equality of Opportunity project, and an evaluation of selective admission public schools.

Policy at Scale: Implementation and Evaluation

Ultimately, we want to affect policy at scale. If enough evidence supports a policy reform or suggests an innovative reform is worth trying, we may advocate for that idea to be adopted by policymakers more broadly. Research and associated activities (such as technical assistance) can help evaluate the continued success of that policy reform or indicate when a change in course is necessary.

Thus, for example, our Moving the Needle initiative helps state or local jurisdictions to adopt social programs backed by strong RCT evidence, implement those programs at a larger scale, and determine, through a replication RCT, whether the large effects found in prior research are successfully reproduced so as to move the needle on important social problems. For another example, our National Partnership for Pretrial Justice is a national effort to scale up promising pretrial reforms, along with research and technical assistance.

Research can significantly resolve key uncertainties about the final stage in AV's overall strategic approach: seeking policy change at scale and ensuring that the change has a lasting impact on the problems we care about.