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EVIDENCE-BASED POLICYMAKING INITIATIVE

Evidence in the 2019 Trump Budget

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The annual release of the president's budget provides insight into the administration's policy priorities, including how the Trump administration might use evidence for policymaking in the upcoming year. Leading up to the release of President Trump's 2019 budget proposal, BPC experts suggested the administration's stance on the use of evidence [needed clarification](#) and outlined [key areas to watch when the budget was released](#) to determine whether science, evidence, and statistical activities were prioritized. So how does the Trump budget proposal stack up against those key areas?

1. Does the budget include recommendations from the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking?

One key sign of support for evidence-based policymaking was whether recommendations from the [Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking](#) were included. Unfortunately, few explicit references are made in the Trump budget documents to the commission's [recommendations](#). The administration stops short of endorsing the recommendations or the [Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act](#), sponsored by House Speaker Paul Ryan and Senator Patty Murray.

The budget does include language supporting the commission's goals. A [chapter](#) deep in the budget's digital only volume states that "evidence-based policymaking is a cornerstone of effective and efficient government."

While not explicit, many details throughout the budget align with some of the commission's recommendations. One key recommendation of that commission was that "sufficient resources" be provided to ensure federal agencies have the capacity to generate the evidence necessary to make evidence-based decisions.

The administration's budget proposal is a mixed bag in providing sufficient funding for evidence-building capacity in federal agencies. While not as high as some groups would advocate, the administration requests a [substantial boost](#) necessary for a fair and accurate 2020 census count. On the other hand, not all the [federal statistical agencies](#) fare as well as the Census Bureau. Nine of the 13 principal statistical agencies would receive either flat

funding or proposed budget reductions in this proposal. The Institute for Education Sciences is reduced by about 25 percent, largely for the elimination of Statewide Longitudinal Data System grants, a funding stream held up by the commission in its final [report](#) as relevant for enabling data cooperation between the federal government and states.

In other areas the budget does include some proposed funding flexibilities for generating evidence, which were recommended by the commission. Consistent with past budget requests, the [Office of Justice Programs](#) in the Department of Justice requested a three percent funding set-aside to be used for research and evaluation. Other previously available flexibilities re-emerged from past budgets such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development's authority to reuse funding that would otherwise expire to support research

Beyond funding, the budget [documents](#) offer some supportive statements of commission recommendations, including agencies developing learning agendas, identifying senior officials to support evaluation, and expressing the need for greater interagency coordination. There are also proposals to make better use of data for evidence-building activities, including opening the National Directory of New Hires for research and evaluation. These are good signs.

Rated against an outright endorsement of the commission's 22 recommendations—10 of which are addressed by the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act—for sweeping changes to evidence-building capacity in government, the budget comes up short.

2. Does the budget use evidence as a tool, not a weapon?

For evidence to be regularly used by government program managers, they need to trust that isolated negative results of their programs could be used as a tool for program improvement, not just as an excuse for reducing or eliminating program funding. If evidence is used primarily to justify program funding cuts, it is in effect being weaponized, which can lead to ineffective uses of evidence to improve programs and also cause program managers and political champions to become wary of generating evidence at all.

While the budget makes conceptual references to using evidence for program improvements, in practice there are numerous instances where evaluation findings were suggested as the basis to propose terminations of selected programs. The Major Savings [Volume](#) of the Trump budget lists programs for termination based on the conclusions of one or more studies, or where limited or incomplete evidence was perceived (see Table 1).

Other programs seem to include support for generating evidence, and assume that the results of future studies and research will be used for subsequent budget cuts. For example, the Social Security Disability Insurance program includes a proposal with an up-front investment of \$500 million over the next 5 years to be followed immediately by \$49 billion in program cuts, presumably determined based on the conclusions of those studies. Such a heavy-handed tactic does not reflect evidence-based decision-making. Instead, the approach assumes that findings of future evaluations will provide conclusive evidence that justify large program cuts. In this instance, the budget prospectively suggests decisions based on findings that do not yet exist.

Table 1: Select Programs Listed for Termination in the President’s Budget, Citing Evidence

Program Title	Reference to Evidence in the President’s Budget
Education’s Comprehensive Literacy Development Grants	One study found “. . .no discernible effects on reading achievement.”
Education’s Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP)	An existing evaluation did not “report on high school graduation or college enrollment outcomes.”
Education’s Supporting Effective Instruction (SEI) State Grants	“. . .there is limited evidence that. . .[the program] has led to increases in student achievement.”
Education’s Technical Assistance Programs	“. . .little evidence that the Comprehensive Center program increases student achievement in partner districts.”
Health and Human Service’s workforce programs	The “programs that lack evidence of significantly improving the Nation’s health workforce.”
Health and Human Service’s Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)	The program is “unable to demonstrate strong performance outcomes.”
Labor’s training grants for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration	The agency has “no evidence that the program is effective.”

Other areas do see prioritization of funding toward areas described as increasingly evidence based, including some post-secondary education programs, medication assistance options in Medicaid, and community treatment strategies for mental health, among others. In multiple places the Trump budget documents describe evidence-based decisions were made, though they do not describe the evidence or the decision.

On the one hand, it is positive to see that the administration has identified and described potential uses for evidence, including identifying that in cases where evidence does not exist programs may not be operating as effectively as possible. On the other hand, the programs listed above represent a small list of proposed eliminations or program reductions on the back of assertions about evidence, and all also happen to be in federal agencies recognized as leaders in supporting approaches to generate evidence about policies. Such an approach must make program managers across the country wonder why they should even bother producing evidence when it can selectively be used to cut program funding.

3. Does the President's Management Agenda include an evidence theme?

While few details were released in the budget about the forthcoming President's Management Agenda expected in March, there is sufficient detail to say definitively that the Trump administration will include data infrastructure as a theme in the agenda. According to a [fact sheet](#) that accompanied the Trump budget plan, the administration aims to develop tools for data, accountability, and transparency to achieve better results in government. The administration plans to announce a "21st Century Framework" related to the theme. Further elaboration was not provided, but overall the presence of a data and results-driven theme in the agenda is a positive sign.

4. Does the budget contain innovative approaches to generating evidence?

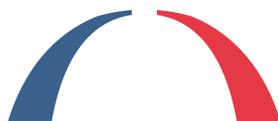
In line with previous recent administrations, the Trump 2019 budget documents do suggest the administration plans to continue pursuit of some innovative approaches to generating evidence.

One major area highlighted by the budget proposal is reforms for welfare programs that encourage state innovation. It is promising to see the plans include the use of waiver authorities that require evaluations that could be used to understand impacts of the approaches and future larger-scale reforms.

However, emphasis on tiered evidence approaches, pay for success, social impact bonds, and rapid cycle evaluation appear to be less emphasized than in the past. In fact, none of those phrases even appear in the Trump budget's [chapter](#) on evidence.

Conclusion

Overall there are some positive signs in the budget document about the generation and use of evidence. But the signals remain mixed. The budget did include an indication that a data strategy will be important for the President's Management Agenda. But the budget proposal did not endorse the recommendations of the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking, applied evidence as a weapon while noting its ability to serve as a tool, and stopped short of advocating for innovative approaches to evidence and science.



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