

Evidence-Based Policymaking Primer

In the information age, the American public can increasingly access information to learn about new issues, change how they perceive problems and solutions, or validate their existing perspectives. Using this information can help individuals to make informed consumer and lifestyle choices:

- When purchasing a home, individuals can find out about the history, quality, size, and amenities because these data are collected and publicly available. Buyers can search online records, talk to a real estate agent, and tour the home to assess if the property meets their needs. An inspector may offer additional expertise about conditions that could affect how much the home is worth.
- When buying a new smartphone, consumers can survey the market to understand the options before making a selection to identify durability, battery life, camera quality, or memory. Sales representatives can help explain differences among options and online reviews enabling consumers to understand the experience of others.
- When driving a car, motorists rely on information about the fuel tank level to know how far they can drive and when they need to refuel to reach their destination. Routine check-ups by a mechanic can help reduce the uncertainty about other factors to ensure the car's effective operation.

These examples demonstrate how in our personal lives, data can be compiled to provide valuable information that we rely on to make decisions. Credible and valid information that is straightforwardly presented, including with the help of experts, allows us to focus our attention on making good decisions based on our needs and goals.

Why Base Policies on Evidence?

Just as individuals want to make the best decisions for activities in their own lives, government should also be expected to use information to operate effectively and efficiently. With technological advancements and more information available to understand issues, expectations for government's effectiveness are more widespread. Policymakers require accurate and reliable information, which is not always available, for making decisions in government. The increased application of evidence to policymaking can help ensure anti-poverty programs improve economic mobility, substance abuse treatment initiatives decrease the overdose death rate, and teaching and student retention policies improve student learning and career outcomes.

For policymakers and others to trust evidence, evaluations must avoid political motivations and be executed with valid research methodologies. Additionally, evidence should be fed into the decision-making process, rather than be collected afterwards to validate or support an existing decision.

DETERMINING EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS TO ADDRESS HOMELESSNESS AMONG FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

The Department of Housing and Urban Development launched the Family Options Study in 2008 to better understand the effects of different housing and services interventions for homeless families. The study was conducted nationwide in multiple sites using a random assignment experiment design, following more than 2,000 families for three years. Researchers collected information, primarily through surveys and administrative data, to assess the well-being of families and children at three different points in time. While the primary outcomes of interest related to housing stability and preventing families from returning to homelessness, researchers also examined other outcomes, including family preservation, well-being of children and adults, and self-sufficiency. The study concluded that permanent housing subsidies reduce subsequent stays for people in shelters and on the streets. This finding led researchers to conclude that for most families, homelessness is a housing affordability problem that can be remedied with permanent housing subsidies without specialized homeless-specific psychosocial services. This study produced actionable information that influenced how policymakers understand housing policies and homelessness.

What is Evidence-Based Policymaking?

Evidence-based policymaking is the process of using high-quality information to inform decisions that are made about government policies. It involves the systematic collection of high-quality data and analysis of those data with rigorous research methods, which creates evidence on which decisions can be based. Evidence can provide insights about how policies and programs operate, when and where they work effectively, or trends in performance over time. Evidence-based policymaking requires the use of evidence in the decision-making process, which means such evidence must be generated and available for policymakers to use.

- 1. DATA COLLECTION.** The collection of high-quality data underpins rigorous evidence. Data relevant for policymaking may include administrative information about routine program services and operations, known as administrative data. Data may also be collected specifically for the purpose of conducting research or evaluation, including through surveys, interviews, and observations. Increasingly, evidence-based policymaking requires securely connecting and combining data from different sources to produce information that answers complex questions, providing critical information for government to address challenges.
- 2. DATA ANALYSIS.** The design and type of analysis depends on the question being asked and resources available, including time frame, funding, personnel, specifics on what is being evaluated, and the type of intervention. At the most basic level, data can be analyzed to understand a situation through descriptive statistical information and trends showing how that data changes over time. For more complex questions, evaluation studies can be used to identify opportunities for improvements to program operations or determine the effectiveness of the program.
- 3. EVIDENCE USE.** Policymaking can be a complex, nonlinear process. How policies are enacted may depend on the specific issue, stakeholders, contexts, constraints, considerations, and politics. Once an issue has been identified and policymakers determine they would like to direct resources to address the problem, the formulation of a policy response can be crafted based on the relevant evidence base, the collection of research on a topic. Policymakers can use evidence at various stages of the policymaking process – from problem definition to identifying a solution.

Evidence-based policymaking leverages knowledge of what is effective to inform policy deliberations at all stages of the process. Whether determining which policies to advance, setting funding levels, or developing regulations, the evidence must be generated and available to meet this need.

IMPROVING CHILD WELFARE SERVICES USING ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

Administrative data collected by child welfare agencies can be analyzed to identify if there are particular neighborhoods (zip codes) with high rates of child abuse and neglect. If a high rate exists, additional resources can be deployed to the area identified to strengthen child abuse prevention efforts. A jurisdiction can use the initial analysis to strengthen coordination of services and information among local county departments of social services, law enforcement agencies, and education agencies. As an example, Nashville, Tennessee analyzed such administrative data to determine in which neighborhoods to target placement of parenting classes. Parenting classes have been shown through other research to reduce the risk of child abuse.

How is Evidence Produced?

The generation of evidence to inform government decisions is a collaborative process that requires participation from a range of experts, including researchers, evaluators, statisticians, information technology officers, data scientists, and program managers. Some of these individuals work directly for government agencies, but many work in private-sector firms, academia, think tanks, or non-profit organizations.

Much of the underlying data used to analyze government programs and policies are collected directly by governmental agencies, though may be supplemented with additional information through surveys designed to collect specific information or from the private sector. For example, in the federal government's executive branch, statistical units and program offices directly collect the majority of government data for such analyses. These routinely collected data can be aggregated to provide descriptive information and facts, which often provide information about trends in program services or information about program performance. In state and local governments, many relevant data are collected by programs directly and maintained in data systems that can be accessed by researchers for evidence building.

Evaluation units in government, on the other hand, conduct studies to evaluate specific agency programs and policies and monitor program performance. They may issue contracts to collect program-specific data or outcome data directly, to then combine with other available data sources in evaluating whether programs and policies achieve their intended goals. Key types of evaluations include the following:

- Implementation studies and program performance audits, which help determine whether programs and policies are carried out consistently with policymakers' original plans.
- Impact and outcome evaluations, which provide information about to what extent a policy can be said to have achieved its goals.

The different forms of evidence may apply somewhat differently to programs and policies based on whether there are discrete funding streams, whether the program is operated as a pilot, the history of a program, and whether comparisons are available to assess program impact.

COLLABORATING ACROSS GOVERNMENT TO IMPROVE NUTRITION PROGRAM OPERATIONS

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service and Food and Nutrition Service, along with the U.S. Census Bureau, together developed a collaboration with states to create the Next-Generation Data Platform. This project combines administrative and survey data about beneficiaries receiving food assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Food Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) to improve government's ability to understand how different nutrition programs interact and to make comparisons across state programs. Researchers provide information for program administrators to understand how members of various eligible demographic groups in certain geographies are using and receiving program services. Specifically, statistical information about gaps in service delivery is provided back to states and program operators to inform improvements and help the program achieve its goals.

How Does Government Signal What Evidence is Most Needed?

Historically, one major challenge in using more evidence in policy deliberations to inform key decisions is the lack of relevant, timely information. As the country's data infrastructure improves and the scientific enterprise evolves, the needed evidence is increasingly available for consideration. Policymakers have a key role to play in signaling what evidence is most needed for decisions. While the U.S. Congress is virtually never the producer of evidence, it has resources throughout the legislative and executive branches, or outside government, to support its objective information needs. Through appropriations and authorizing legislation, as well as oversight functions, Congress can mandate the generation of evaluations and reports on specific policies and programs. These approaches can signal to the evidence-building community what topics are most relevant for upcoming decisions.

While most congressional offices are not themselves responsible for generating evidence, certain congressional support offices—such as the Government Accountability Office and Congressional Budget Office—provide some forms of evidence to support Congress with analyses of government operations that can contribute to improving government performance and holding government accountable. In addition, Congress can set up processes to encourage the executive branch to use evidence in day-to-day decision-making about policy implementation and in support of evidence-based practices.

Increasingly, government agencies are conducting strategic and deliberate research, as well as clearly communicating to non-governmental organizations about the specific types of evidence and research that they are interested in. One mechanism for this communication channel that could also serve to better align the supply of evidence with the real demands from policymakers is through learning agendas. A learning agenda is a tool that outlines an agency-specific strategy for evidence building, including by identifying operational goals and the key questions that must be answered to determine whether the objectives of a program are met.

How Do Researchers and Policymakers Engage to Use Evidence?

The process of using available evidence to make decisions relies on knowledge of what evidence exists and, in many cases, may require interpretation by a “knowledge broker” to provide the most relevant information for a policy decision. This knowledge transfer is critical and involves government agencies, think tanks, and other intermediaries inside and outside government. Their involvement helps to ensure the most relevant information is conveyed in a timely, reliable, and credible manner. This may occur through direct channels like briefings to Congress of relevant studies in meetings or congressional hearings, or through indirect channels like the development of evidence briefs and clearinghouses of studies that summarize relevant research. Policymakers can then use evidence to directly influence views on a policy, to directly modify a policy, to create new policies, or for numerous other uses.

STRENGTHENING LITERACY EDUCATION THROUGH EVALUATION

In Connecticut, policymakers seeking to improve literacy, received preliminary information suggesting that the state's early literacy program was not having the positive effect on reading skills that were expected. To better gauge next steps, state policymakers commissioned an in-depth analysis that identified that reading specialists lacked sufficient training, contributing to the program's lower-than-expected impact. With this knowledge, policymakers strengthened teacher training programs, with a focus on literacy instruction, and reading scores improved.

How Can Evidence-Based Policymaking Become More Routine?

For the evidence-based policymaking process to become more routine, policymakers must recognize that evidence is an essential and necessary input into the policymaking process. The evidence-building community must also take steps to make evidence more useful for policymakers, and policymakers must simultaneously make their evidence and communication needs clearer within the rapidly changing policy process.

In 2017, the U.S. Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking presented key findings about the ongoing challenges for evidence-based policymaking in the U.S. government, finding that improvements could be made to secure data access, privacy and confidentiality practices, as well as the capacity to generate the amount of high-quality evidence needed to support policy decisions. While the commission's bipartisan recommendations largely focused on supply of evidence for the federal government, similar challenges are faced by state and local governments. The commission's findings and recommendations offer a starting point for improving evidence-based policymaking activities throughout the United States.

Conclusion

Effective government requires implementation of policies in a way that achieves the intended objective. With the ability to measure and monitor whether policies and programs achieve their intended goals, policymakers can be better positioned to assure taxpayers that their resources are being spent on what will most successfully solve the problems facing the country, state, or city.



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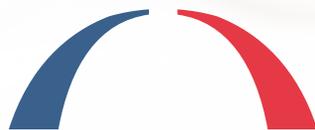
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