

# INTRODUCTION

## Why the Use of Evidence Matters

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The use of information in daily life to make decisions is common. Information is perceived to be easy to understand and useful. To purchase or rent a new home, for example, people use web listings to compare different properties and seek out the expertise of realtors for advice; to buy a vehicle, people search the internet to learn about car safety features or to research prices before visiting a dealer.

Decision-making about government policies is no different. It involves making decisions about how to allocate resources to meet goals. Those charged with effectively using taxpayers' dollars for the benefit of society need solid information to make decisions. They need information to fulfill the goals of programs and policies, and to ensure that actions align with expected results.

The concept of evidence-based policymaking has gained attention in the United States in recent years. In short, the idea is to use evidence to inform how policymakers go about reaching decisions. In this context, "evidence" is specifically defined as high-quality information constructed by systematically collecting data, analyzing data with rigorous research methods, then developing conclusions that are valid and reliable about groups of people, households, families, or organizations. This definition does not include hunches or haphazardly compiled information. The term "evidence" here also does not mean the same thing that it does in a courtroom. The data and methods for evidence-based policymaking are built on efforts to understand trends in performance, gain insights about how policies and programs operate, and acquire knowledge about impacts on outcomes and results. The evidence described here typically comes from statistical analysis, policy research, data science, or program evaluation.

Most of the American public will probably respond to the concept by asking, "Don't we already do this today?" or "If we don't do that, what *do* we do today?" The reality is that policymakers use a vast array of information to make decisions—case studies, constituent priorities, electoral consequences, personal values, and evidence. These inputs are important in a democratic society. But today, unfortunately, evidence is not always the priority—or even present in some policy debates.

One goal of the evidence-based policymaking movement is to encourage decision-makers to increasingly use rigorous evidence to guide their actions. Achieving this goal does not mean evidence will exclusively be how decisions are made. In fact, rarely can a portfolio of evidence itself dictate what decisions should be made. But evidence can reduce uncertainty about the effects of a decision, can help policymakers understand the range of benefits for different policy options, and can assure the American public that officials aren't basing decisions on faulty beliefs or misguided theories. In short, evidence can ensure that decisions rely on facts, truth, and reality.

A central tenet of evidence-based policymaking is that evidence should always have a seat at the table of inputs available for decision-makers. Proponents also conclude that it should have a prominent place at that table. It's not that policymakers don't want to make good decisions—they do. But policymakers may have different incentives for making decisions,

may not have access to needed information, or may have to simply interpret what is available to them, recognizing gaps and limitations. Often, policymakers must find evidence, translate existing evidence, and judge the credibility, validity, and reliability of evidence—all under the real-world time constraints of policy decisions and public administration.

In recent years, experts have focused a vast amount of attention on the supply of evidence, including how to reduce barriers to accessing data and strategies for enhancing the capacity to conduct policy research and program evaluation. At the same time, much evidence already exists, and the premise of building a supply is that the evidence will be useful to policymakers and, therefore, used.

But exclusive attention on supply poses challenges for the field. For example, even if we build a vast body of evidence on a given topic and make it available for use, but it is not used, there could conceivably be negative repercussions. One consequence could be that funders do not allocate future resources to building knowledge at all. In practice, this could very well be the greatest threat to the concept of evidence-based policymaking: that authorities perceive existing evidence to be unusable or see that it is going unused—meaning their decisions would come predominantly from other inputs. As a result, future evidence-building activities may be reduced or eliminated. If such a sequence of events took place, it would potentially undermine effective governance across-the-board.

To address this risk, policymakers will need to understand why evidence-based policymaking is worthwhile in the long run. The movement must prove itself, its value, and its usefulness.

The over-attention to supply issues in evidence-based policymaking also means that the strategies for transferring, disseminating, and sharing knowledge most effectively may be underdeveloped. The existence of evidence does not guarantee the usefulness, availability, style, or timeliness that policymakers require. There are many factors that can ultimately affect evidence use.

In fact, evidence-based policymaking itself should be, well, evidence-based. Policymakers can learn to be more effective at using evidence, generating the most useful evidence, and applying new evidence to calibrate, enhance, or improve decisions.

## WHY DISCUSS SUCCESS STORIES OF EVIDENCE USE?

Policymaking occurs in an imperfect system. Human beings are fallible. They have limited capacity for knowledge, preexisting value systems, and a range of priorities. Even with perfect information, evidence-based policymaking doesn't guarantee that policymakers will choose the best solution to a problem; regardless, they rarely have the luxury of perfect evidence. But if the availability of evidence can be calibrated to match and fulfill the demand from policymakers who want to make the most of it, the benefits seem clear.

Successful use of evidence can lead to better decisions that are more likely to achieve public policy goals, to produce intended benefits for the American public, and to ensure that taxpayers' resources are being used as effectively as possible.

Does evidence really matter for decision-making? This statement can and should be evaluated.

*Evidence Works* is a compilation of case studies that demonstrates how evidence really did matter in reaching a policy decision. The text focuses on applying evidence explicitly to policies—as opposed to decision-making more generally, where evidence can inform decisions about individual practices or activities. Policymaking, however, is a distinct type of decision. It can include a group of practices but is ultimately characterized by the application of evidence to a government program as a legal or formalized action, such as an act of Congress, a regulation, or some other formal decision that applies broadly to a program's stakeholders, beneficiaries, or users.

The case studies included in *Evidence Works* were selected because they each tell a story of success—one that program administrators, policymakers, and elected officials can learn from as they apply the information at hand toward better decision-making. The case studies offer unique insights about the challenges that decision-makers face as they grapple with uncertainty, prioritize competing information inputs, and weigh the quality and credibility of available information. Policy decisions are varied and multifaceted—so too are policymakers' informational and evidentiary needs, which the case studies describe in detail. But success does not always mean that the solution preferred by policymakers based on the evidence came to fruition or was ultimately unchanged as further evidence came to light. Success comes in many forms, highlighting the different approaches to using evidence.

While the case studies cover a wide range of policy issues—they all have one common feature: some evidence existed before officials made a decision. The evidence used had to exist prior to the decision in order to inform the decision. In fact, if evidence hadn't existed already, these cases would be instances of policy-based evidence-making rather than evidence-based policymaking. That subtle distinction is what this volume seeks to capture: what was the evidence available to policymakers, and how did they use it to reach a decision? To the extent possible, some of the cases even delve into the issue of why, that is, the motivation for decision-makers in using evidence as a predominant driver of their decision.

As it turns out, these questions are difficult to answer. The government's deliberative decision-making processes (which can be something of a black box) are complex, and details about how decisions are made can be forgotten over time. The documentation for any given decision may be weak or nonexistent. In some cases, those most involved in the decision-making may be limited in what they can say publicly, even years after a decision is reached. Needless to say, there are a great many reasons more case studies are not currently available about the use of evidence in policymaking.

Given the complexities inherent to developing case studies, some of the cases in this volume delve deeper into the subject than others. The authors of each case study offer a summary of

their experience, then they discuss the availability of the evidence and how it was ultimately used. The cases vary in style. Some are academic, bureaucratic, technocratic, and even political. For the reader and potential user of these case studies, the variations in style, prose, and substantive detail also offer some insights and perspective about how different actors in the real-world policy system approach the issue of using evidence. The volume embraces these various styles to help bring the stories to life, many for the first time in the public domain.

The Bipartisan Policy Center did not compensate the authors for their contributions to the volume; each author generously volunteered time, energy, and experience. The authors of each case study participated out of a desire to tell the story and contribute to strengthening the field of evidence-based policymaking in the United States. Notably, some of the authors have conflicts of interest in writing the case studies, but their unique experiences also add to the rich context around evidence-based policymaking. Because these cases are from individualized experiences, they may not align with any specific political or ideological lens. BPC in no way endorses each author's characterizations or narratives, nor does BPC intend to suggest that any one approach explored by the authors is the exclusive way to address a policy issue or interpret the evidence. Similarly, the authors themselves do not necessarily endorse the perspectives of any other case study author. Each case study only reflects the perspective of its author or authors.

We identified cases for the volume through knowledge of the policy community; awareness of recent, relevant, and important evidentiary issues; and discussions with members of the evidence community. While we selected 20 case studies for this volume, we explored many more as possibilities—and with unlimited time and pages, thousands more could have been included. The cases included are not an exhaustive list; they are merely the tip of the iceberg.

Similarly, the project could have made an entire volume about cases where the evidence didn't work, where it wasn't available, and even where it was disregarded, untranslated, or unused. The project also could have mixed and matched successes with failures. Certainly, much can be learned from failure. But in the nascent world of evidence-based policymaking in the United States, the need to facilitate, nurture, and explain successful uses is paramount. Successes offer useful and constructive insights about what enabling conditions facilitated effective and meaningful use. A study of failures, while valuable, simply cannot offer the same insights.

## THE EVIDENCE ABOUT THE USE OF RESEARCH EVIDENCE

*Evidence Works* is also a volume that contributes to the body of academic research about evidence use and what it means. Although there are existing gaps in use when it comes to policymaking, because uses are actually widespread, a great deal is already known about the use of research evidence today. One widely accepted typology to explain evidence use suggests numerous types: instrumental, conceptual, imposed, and political.<sup>1</sup>

Instrumental uses are those that lead to direct action resulting from research, a common expectation in society. For example, researchers or evaluators produce evidence, it directly provides a solution to policymakers' specific questions, and policymakers immediately take the recommended action such as increasing spending or revising a certain program activity. While instrumental uses are intuitively obvious, in practice, they are difficult to observe and realize. These uses are realistically challenged by the presumption that evidence will directly and completely answer policymakers' questions, even if incomplete information. This is not to say instrumental use is irrelevant, but to be useful, policymakers need additional contextual information.

Conceptual uses are those where users apply information to help define problems and outline the contours of potential solution sets or possibilities, recognizing the uncertainties of the public policy process. In practice, conceptual uses emerge when policymakers and decision-makers engage with information to define problems and clarify or frame their goals. This is often based on descriptive information, trend analysis, and other framing information found in implementation studies. Take for example, the unemployment rate in Cass County, Missouri, compared with the national unemployment rate over time. This basic trend analysis offers comparative information that a decision-maker can apply to understand whether a problem is relatively high or low compared with some norm.

While conceptual uses make it easier to understand programs and policies, these types of uses are not completely devoid of individual interpretations about whether an analysis is positive or negative. For example, if the unemployment rate is 4 percent, is that too high or too low? Such a judgment, while key for determining the use of the information, must be based on other inputs, values, and knowledge.

Imposed uses are those that drive actions based on evidence. Approaches to decision-making that use criteria that demonstrate a preference for evidence—even when from an unrelated context—fall within the imposition category. Imposed uses may emerge as mandates about applying some form of knowledge or even as direct methodological preferences in the creation of evidence such as “tiered-evidence” grant structures.

Political, or tactical, uses are those in which policymakers apply evidence to garner support for or opposition to a policy or issue. Practically speaking, political uses are widespread and viewed as legitimate by society, though often such uses are politically charged. Assertions of the misuse of evidence often also fall into this category. Misuse is when policymakers apply information to an argument in a manner that one political faction believes inaccurately reflects the evidence.

With political uses, policymakers can suggest the termination of programs that do not work, though no experimental evaluation alone can objectively justify resource reallocations. Political uses can also help policymakers to garner support, motivate constituencies, elicit buy-in from stakeholders, or even improve an argument for policy change. Political use may even be what drives an issue onto the policy agenda in the first place.

Taken together, each of these types of uses may be transparent and observable—or not. Much government decision-making occurs through deliberative processes that may include decisions not made public or otherwise disclosed. This issue has been one of the historical challenges for the research field examining evidence use—research relies on observable characteristics. When policy decisions are not observable, researchers may feel compelled to draw their own conclusions about the prevailing type of evidence use. This guesswork may even lead to erroneous suggestions about uses that did not occur.

Evidence use may also take the form of a mixture of the categories in the typology, because of the interconnected relationships and nature of decision-making processes. The same information could be political, conceptual, imposed, and instrumental. As a result, we consider the typology of uses only as a framework for understanding, not one to force or dictate a narrow lens about what use does or does not occur. What is a “good use” is still a values-based determination.

Rather than having an expectation of direct action, perhaps “good use” is simply a change in perspective—one that is paired with arguments about policy.

## Conditions for research evidence use

Much has been written about evidence use regarding enabling and disabling conditions.<sup>2</sup> The enablers tend to focus on (1) the role of brokers to communicate and engage in knowledge sharing; (2) the capacity and infrastructure for individuals in organizations to prioritize evidence; (3) transparency mechanisms that foster a supply of information and public incentives to encourage accountability; and (4) trusted relationships between producers and users.<sup>3</sup>

Enabling conditions recognize that multiple factors work in concert to facilitate use, which encompasses dissemination, sharing, and system-based approaches.<sup>4</sup> In many ways, enabling conditions reflect ideas that may also be at the heart of effective policymaking, such as explaining concepts clearly, addressing context, maintaining credibility, promoting leadership, offering support, integrating systems, engaging stakeholders, and reflecting on lessons learned to improve.<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes unexpected characteristics can constrain evidence use—or at least add to the perception that the evidence is constrained. Overt partisanship through imposed political decision-making could be one such characteristic; it may appear as a lack of trust between policymakers. Within administrative agencies, litigation risks related to regulatory actions are also a potential reason for some limits to use.<sup>6</sup> There may also be negative incentives or benefits for programs and policies with unknown outcomes—particularly, if there’s a perception that a policy is more effective than it actually is. Other barriers include clarity, relevance, reliability, timing, opportunities, costs, or even the skill sets and capabilities of the policymakers themselves.

Policymakers often perceive evidence as going unused. Gaps in the research-policy framework certainly exist. The William T. Grant Foundation, among others, has invested serious time and energy to identifying these gaps and building knowledge about strategies for better evidence use. Yet big questions remain, such as whose responsibility is it to foster use? The policymaker? The researcher? The American public? These questions are even more complicated when it comes to U.S. federated democratic governance, which has multiple policy systems and varying conditions that may affect use. Congressional decision-making processes differ from the executive branch agencies. State and local governments often must consider changes in federal laws and policies, which affect their decisions at the subnational level, often dictating certain limits or policy prescriptions that enable or constrain use.

The policy system is adaptive, interconnected, and highly complex. However, the use of research evidence is not only possible; it also actually happens to create effective public policy.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE VOLUME

*Evidence Works* is a compiled volume of evidence use case studies that readers can either examine independently or in their totality. The goal is to provide a useful resource that informs practitioners and policymakers about how they might go about applying evidence to decisions, the relevance for a range of policy domains, and the prevalence of evidence use today.

The first section of case studies focuses on federal policies. Cases 1 to 4 focus on actions that required the involvement of policymakers in both Congress and the executive branch. Case 1 outlines how information acquired over decades about the Earned Income Tax Credit affected various proposals to expand the policy and offers insights about how this information influenced the 2017 tax reforms. Case 2 describes a major debate about the Social Security Disability Insurance program and how Democrats and Republicans viewed evidence in developing a consensus recommendation for program improvements and sustainability in 2015. Case 3 examines key reforms to the country's workforce and employment training provisions, which have been subject to impact evaluations for decades. Case 4, delves into the intricacies of the Family First Prevention Services Act, which offered the first major national reforms to the country's child welfare system in 40 years, shifting resources and attention from service delivery to preventative services.

Cases 5 to 9 consider major reforms undertaken in the executive branch or initiated by federal agencies based on decisions driven by political appointees or through formal regulatory processes. Case 5 describes an overhaul of the country's child-support enforcement regulations, applying evidence to ensure children not living with both of their parents were able to get the support they needed. Case 6 features a discussion of reforms the Department of Defense put in place to promote early education and childhood development centers at bases around the world for the benefit of families of military personnel. Case 7 outlines the process and decision points for a proposal to transform the national energy assistance subsidies for low-income households. Case 8 examines how the federal housing

department applied insights from a major study about different housing strategies to propose reshaping its budget. Case 9 describes how studying the 2009 health care reforms led to Medicare changes, generating substantial cost savings for American taxpayers.

Cases 10 to 12 involve policy decisions led by career program managers, key decision-makers within government agencies who can often make administrative changes to programs. These decisions occurred with support and backing from agency political appointees, but they were largely driven by managers. Case 10 presents a narrative about how policymakers used a compelling set of descriptive analyses to reform program measurement and ultimately improve the environmental clean-up activity associated with legacy contamination at many closed gas stations around the country. Case 11 covers a data analysis across agencies that led to stronger insights about how effectively public housing serves the American public, including by fostering improved public health outcomes. Case 12 describes how policymakers built evidence on food-assistance programs to ensure that payments to new mothers are most efficiently allocated in order to maximize the number of clients it serves.

The next section of case studies focuses on state and local government decisions. While the previous sections offer valuable lessons that may generalize to other contexts, state and local decision-makers are faced with different constraints and more localized constituencies. Case 13 highlights how Seattle and King County, Washington, developed a strategy to modify food-safety inspections and communications to the public. Case 14 describes the process of adopting an evidence-based policy, and modifying it, to reduce incidences of child neglect in Colorado. Case 15 demonstrates how policymakers applied evidence to improve early literacy programs and help children prepare for academic success in Tennessee. Case 16 explores an innovative approach to policing policies and community interactions in Washington, D.C., where officials assigned body cameras to the police force, highlighting what happens when evaluation findings do not validate preconceived notions.

The final section of case studies offers a completely different mix of stories about evidence use—they each include programs specifically designed to promote evidence use. Even using an evidentiary approach, policymakers still grappled with certain policy reforms. But each case offers a different strategic lens to encourage evidence use in policymaking, so that it ultimately affects practices and program activities. Cases 17 through 19 describe applications of a tiered funding framework to allocate resources based on the level of knowledge about an intervention and how it affects decision-making for the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program, Nurse Family Partnerships and Home Visiting, and competitive education grants. A final case study delves into another approach that connects the demand for evidence with use, followed by policy action. Case 20 tells the story of how the creation of the U.S. Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking produced evidence that reformed national policies about the use of data, program evaluation, and the federal statistical infrastructure.

The volume concludes with a brief cross-case analysis, teasing out major themes and lessons relevant when looking across the cases. The aim of the concluding chapter is to present useful information for policymakers, to encourage better use of evidence, and to advance

insights for the research community as it considers strategies and approaches that more effectively enable evidence-based policymaking in the future.

## OUR VISION FOR MOVING FORWARD

In the Information Age, providing insights to make better decisions must be recognized as a prudent practice. But does the information make a difference? Does the evidence available for important decisions matter? Does it result in better decisions?

This volume of case studies explores questions about the use of evidence in a salient and accessible way. The cases in *Evidence Works* demonstrate how decision-makers can meaningfully apply and use evidence while addressing important policy questions.

By beginning to better tell successful stories of evidence use across a range of types of rigorous evidence and decision styles, we hope others will come forward to tell their stories as well. As a result, the field will increasingly become better at explaining not just how to go about using evidence to inform decisions, but also why the activity is far more common than many realize. As the knowledge about successful evidence use increases, policymakers will become better positioned to truly evaluate evidence-based policymaking and to determine whether the lofty ideal is achievable and worth the cost. ■

- 1 Carol H. Weiss. "Have We Learned Anything New About the Use of Evaluation?" *American Journal of Evaluation*, 19(1): 21-33, 1998.
- 2 D.H. Gitomer and K. Crouse. *Studying the Use of Research Evidence: A Review of Methods*. William T. Grant Foundation, 2019. Available at: <http://wtgrantfoundation.org/studying-the-use-of-research-evidence-a-review-of-methods>.
- 3 Nick Hart, Sandy Davis, and Tim Shaw. *Evidence Use in Congress: Challenges for Evidence-Based Policymaking*. Bipartisan Policy Center, 2018. Available at: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/library/evidence-in-congress-volume-1/>.
- 4 Annette Boaz, Huw Davies, Alec Fraser, and Sandra Nutley. *What Works Now? Evidence-informed Policy and Practice* (Bristol, United Kingdom: Policy Press, 2019).
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Nicholas Hart. *Evaluation at EPA: Determinants of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Capacity to Supply Program Evaluation*. Dissertation, George Washington University, 2016.