

COMMISSION ON EVIDENCE-BASED POLICYMAKING

MEETING MINUTES

JULY 22, 2016 PUBLIC MEETING

The Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking convened its first meeting on July 22, 2016, at the National Academy of Sciences, 2101 Constitution Avenue NW, Washington, DC.

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Katharine G. Abraham, Chair
Ron Haskins, Co-Chair
Sherry Glied

Robert Hahn
Hilary Hoynes (phone)
Jeffrey Liebman (phone)
Bruce Meyer
Paul Ohm
Allison B. Orris
Kathleen B. Rice
Latanya Sweeney
Kenneth R. Troske
Kim Wallin

COMMISSIONERS NOT PRESENT:

Robert Groves
Robert Shea

Speakers Present:

Mary Bohman
Raj Chetty (phone)
Ted McCann
Jeri Mulrow
Devin O'Connor
Nancy Potok
Gerry Ramker
John Righter

The meeting opened at 8:35 AM

Welcome and Introductions

Chair Katharine Abraham and Co-Chair Ron Haskins delivered opening remarks.

Commissioners introduced themselves. Staff and members of the public shared names and affiliations.

Perspectives on Commission Purpose and Significance

Mr. Devin O'Connor (Associate Director for Economic Policy at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB)) delivered opening remarks and gave an overview of the Obama Administration's views of evidence-based policymaking. The Administration encourages the Commission to find ways to use, grow, and invest in capacity for evidence building. O'Connor indicated that data needs to be easier to access and more affordable, and that administrative data, in particular, offers a chance to gather more data, more efficiently.

Mr. John Righter (Deputy Staff Director for the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions) provided background on the Evidence-Based Policymaking Commission Act, and read a statement from Sen. Murray. Righter encouraged that the Commission focus on architecture, quality, and utility of the data. Righter also identified that collaboration with the administration and outside parties is important.

Mr. Ted McCann (Assistant to the Speaker for Policy, House of Representatives) talked about the bipartisan process of creating the Commission. He emphasized protecting privacy while improving data access as important considerations. The Commission will provide valuable expertise in this area.

The speakers took questions. The Commissioners asked how efforts will continue into the next administration. Mr. Righter and Mr. McCann indicated that Senators Ryan and Murray will support the Commission's work into the next administration, and it will remain a high priority for them. Mr. Richter and Mr. McCann also intend to support Commission recommendations from the report .

Chair Abraham asked about the bill's intended boundaries for the commission's scope. Mr. Righter and Mr. McCann both answered that the purpose is open and not meant to be overly prescriptive. Mr. Righter added that the work should include state and local government, not just federal.

Co-Chair Haskins suggested a joint hearing to present the recommendations to make the results more visible to Congress.

Ms. Nancy Potok (Deputy Director of the U.S. Census Bureau) gave remarks, on behalf of the Federal Statistical System. Ms. Potok described current issues facing the statistical system, including how to contain costs, reduce respondent burden, and lower levels of geography, while maintaining quality. The statistical agencies are increasingly focused on data dissemination instead of just collection. Ms. Potok described that analysis of data offers an opportunity to promote open government, to better understand society, and to assist communities in improving service delivery. The Commission can explore ways to link data in a curated and secure way, eliminate barriers and encourage data sharing.

The Commissioners asked Ms. Potok about collaboration between the thirteen statistical agencies and why no central statistical agency currently exists. Ms. Potok answered that the Federal Statistical System is currently moving toward a virtual statistical system that each agency agrees to, and the Commission's work can help facilitate this.

Co-Chair Haskins suggested a list of specific barriers that each agency deals with would be helpful to understand the range of issues.

Other items discussed after the speakers:

- Technology and linked data—determining which data should be de-identified.
- Reaching out to user communities outside of government and discussing their barriers—economists, academia, political scientists, etc.
- Sharing the importance of linked administrative data with respondents/the public.

Break at 10:20

The meeting reconvened at 10:32 AM.

Evidence in Action Panel: Federal Perspectives

Ms. Mary Bohman (Director of the Economic Research Service (ERS)) presented on a joint collaboration between ERS, Census, and the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), comparing data from the Supplementation Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to the American Community Survey (ACS) data to better estimate SNAP program participation. Ms. Bowman cited three significant lessons learned from the project: forming partnerships, demonstrating mutual benefits, and sharing valued results.

Ms. Jeri Mulrow (Acting Director of the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS)) presented on a project sharing data with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

Following the presentations, Ms. Bohman and Ms. Mulrow took questions from the Commissioners. The topics discussed were:

- The uniformity of state records. There are differences across records, as well as the IT infrastructure to make data available. Having FNS as a partner allowed insight into state records. FNS is investing in more harmonization of the records and improving their quality. ERS will follow up with the commissioners with more details.
- Whether the mission of agencies should be expanded to include policy research in addition to collecting data. All agencies are charged with providing relevant information, but their mission depends on their individual authority and appropriations law.
- Why does a federally funded program have to negotiate states for data—should it be required? States also collect data based on their own authority, which often does not include research.
- Is research a part of program administration? OMB work on statistical directive provides some guidance, but still need to look at individual statutes. Chair Haskins suggests consulting with a legal counsel on this issue.
- The privacy protections for BJS accessing FBI's data. Have to go through IRB process for access. Control is necessary when you can't 100% deidentify.

Evidence in Action Panel: Researcher Perspective

Professor Raj Chetty presented on his research that analyzed tax data over long periods of time. He identified several barriers for the Commission to consider based on his research: limited bandwidth and locations, outdated technology (e.g. storage space) due to scarce resources, and difficulty linking datasets. Dr. Chetty suggested that international efforts, such as in Denmark, provide a model for improving data access in the U.S. Dr. Chetty suggested that the creation of a centralized data warehouse that links datasets could improve research capabilities. He also encouraged a focus on collecting information not already available in administrative data and providing secure access to data with simplified access protocols. Dr. Chetty also expressed support for a broad range of methods in research and evidence-building activities.

Dr. Chetty discussed questions from the Commission. The Commissioners discussed the importance of researchers having access to data, including later researchers having data that was used in a previous important study (such as Moving to Opportunity). Dr. Chetty described that replication is an important issue and a clearinghouse would help facilitate.

Closing

Chair Abraham delivered final remarks.

The meeting adjourned at 11:45 AM.