FEATURE ARTICLE . . . .

Suggestions to Increase the Impact of Your Research on Policy Decisions

by Jerry Lee and Jon Baron

Researchers in social and behavioral sciences sometimes complain that research findings rarely affect policy decisions, because policymakers are influenced more by politics and vested interests than by evidence. Policymakers, for their part, sometimes complain that researchers address esoteric topics that are not policy-relevant, produce ambiguous or conflicting research findings, and report their findings in jargon-filled papers that are accessible only to other researchers.

We have heard both of these perspectives in our work with U.S. policymakers, through the non-profit Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, to advance evidence-based policy reforms. Our main focus has been the policymaking community, where our work with key Congressional and Executive Branch policymakers has been "instrumental" in advancing important reforms, according to a recent independent evaluation. These reforms include, as illustrative examples: (i) key changes in the Office of Management and Budget's process for assessing the performance of federal programs government-wide, to incorporate our recommended criteria for what constitutes strong evidence of program effectiveness; and (ii) enacted legislation that increases funding and support for randomized controlled trials in education and other areas.

Based on our work, we also have a few suggestions on what researchers might do to increase the impact of their work on policy – suggestions that we summarize as follows:

1. Select research topics that can help build the number of highly-effective, research-proven interventions.

As most researchers recognize, there exist only a small number of social interventions shown, in well-designed randomized controlled trials conducted in typical community settings, to produce sizeable effects on important life outcomes. This leaves policymakers and practitioners with very few research-proven tools they can use to address crime, substance abuse, educational failure, poverty, and other major social problems.

Thus, there is a great need for research that focuses strategically on building the number of research-proven interventions, through either (i) the development of highly-promising interventions, or (ii) the rigorous evaluation of such interventions. Other frequent types of research – such as risk-factor studies – can be valuable in identifying hypotheses about what works that provide the fodder for subsequent studies. But generally such

earlier-stage research must be translated into well-defined, research-proven interventions before it can have a meaningful impact on policy.

Other things equal, research-proven interventions that are relatively easy to replicate will probably have a greater impact on policy and practice than more complicated interventions, for obvious reasons. And it is not necessary for an intervention to be grounded in theory or even to be scientifically interesting for it to be of policy importance, so long as there exists a rigorous demonstration that it works.

U.S. welfare policy provides an illustrative example of how research-proven interventions can have a major impact on policy. In the 1980s and 1990s, several large, well-designed randomized controlled trials showed that state-level welfare reform programs that emphasized short-term job-search assistance and training, and encouraged participants to find work quickly, could produce sizeable effects on participants' employment, earnings, and welfare dependence (e.g., improvements of 20-30 percent over a five-year period, compared to controls). The trials also showed that such programs could produce net savings in government expenditures. These research findings were a key to the bipartisan consensus behind the 1988 welfare reform act and helped shape the landmark 1996 welfare reform act including its strong work requirements. This legislation led to dramatic changes in state and federal programs, and helped bring about major reductions in welfare rolls and gains in employment among low-income Americans.

2. Recognize that well-designed randomized controlled trials tend to be more persuasive to policymakers than more complicated designs.

This is because most thoughtful policymakers readily grasp the value of random assignment – i.e., that with a sufficiently large sample it produces equivalent intervention and control groups, and that any difference in outcomes between the two groups can therefore confidently be attributed to the intervention. More complicated designs – such as comparison-group studies that use sophisticated statistical methods to match or adjust for differences between the intervention and comparison groups – tend to be less accessible and therefore less persuasive to policymakers. Policymakers may wonder about hidden assumptions and possible gaming of the study, and for highly-complicated designs may view the results as just a bunch of equations.

The Brookings Institutions' Ron Haskins, who was the U.S. House of Representatives' lead staffer for the major 1996 welfare reform act, cites random assignment as a key reason why the welfare reform studies had such a major influence on policy.[1] Members of Congress and their staff understood both the design and the results without the need for complex interpretation by researchers.

3. Report study results in plain language.

With enough effort, most research concepts used to report the results of a randomized controlled trial or other evaluation can be expressed in plain language that a thoughtful non-researcher would understand. In practice, this is rarely done. Instead, most study reports contain research and statistical jargon that greatly limits the potential audience, excluding most policymakers who might otherwise use the results in their decisionmaking.

Thus, we suggest researchers might usefully run their draft study reports by thoughtful non-researchers (e.g., a spouse, friend, or colleague) to ensure that the reports describe key items, such as the following, in clear, plain language:

- *The concrete elements of the intervention* that a person seeking to replicate it would need to understand (i.e., who did what to whom and for how long);

- *The main elements of the study design* including, in a randomized controlled trial, the number of individuals or groups randomly assigned, and the number for whom outcome data were obtained and analyzed; and

- *The intervention's effects on all outcomes measured, reported in "real-world" terms that enable the reader to gauge their practical importance* (e.g., reporting a reduction in students using illicit drugs from 20 to 14 percent, rather than reporting only the statistical significance, standardized effect size, odds-ratio, or the like).

Conclusion: Many policymakers are interested in basing their decisions on evidence. Steps such as the above, taken by researchers, might help them do so.

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[1] *Rigorous Evidence: The Key To Progress Against Crime and Substance Abuse? Lessons From Welfare, Medicine, and Other Fields? Proceedings of a national policy forum sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice, June 14, 2004*, pp. 30-36.

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