Key Factors Enabling Research To Influence Policy

Conference on Advancing Social Policy-Making Through Benefit-Cost Analysis

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Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy


- **Mission**: To promote government policy based on rigorous evidence of program effectiveness.

- **Independent assessment found**: Coalition has been “instrumental” in advancing evidence-based reforms.

- **Coalition has no affiliation with any programs or program models** – thus serves as an objective, independent resource on evidence-based programs.

- **Funded independently**, by MacArthur, WT Grant, and Clark Foundations.
Coalition’s Board of Advisors

- **Robert Boruch** - Co-Chair, Campbell Collaboration
- **David Ellwood** - Dean, Harvard’s JFK School
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- **Robert Solow** – Nobel Laureate in Economics, MIT
- **Nicholas Zill** – Vice-President, Westat
Example of research findings having a major impact on policy: U.S. welfare reform

- **1980s & 90s**: Large, well-designed randomized trials showed superiority of welfare reforms emphasizing short-term job search assistance & training, and moving into workforce quickly.

- Benefit-cost results from these trials, particularly the showing of savings to government, may have been particularly persuasive.

- These findings were key to 1988 and 1996 welfare reform acts, and major subsequent reductions in welfare rolls and gains in employment.
An example at the state level: Welfare-to-work in California

- **Riverside GAIN Program** (to move welfare recipients quickly into workforce through short-term job search & training)
  - At 5-year follow-up, increased single-parent employment & earnings by ~40% vs control group
  - Large net gov’t savings (~$3 for every $1 invested)

- **L.A. Jobs-First GAIN:** (LA scrapped their ineffective program, and replicated key features of Riverside’s)
  - At 2-year follow-up, increased employment & earnings by ~30% vs. control group
Emerging example?: Evidence-based home visitation:

**Nurse-Family Partnership** (nurse home visitation for low-income, pregnant women)

- By age 15, produced 40-70% reductions in child abuse/neglect, and criminal arrests of children, compared to control group.

Led to creation of new evidence-based home visitation program at HHS (2008)
FY 08 Appropriations Act
(Public Law 110-161)

Created an evidence-based home visitation program at HHS, directing HHS to –

“ensure that States use the funds to support models that have been shown, in well-designed randomized controlled trials, to produce sizeable, sustained effects on important child outcomes such as abuse and neglect . . . [and] not to incorporate any additional initiatives that have not met these high evidentiary standards”
An example from Mexico: Poverty reduction efforts

Large RCT found conditional cash transfers are effective. At 2-year followup, Mexico’s PROGRESA:

- Increased high school enrollment by ~10%
- Reduced incidence of illness in children age 0-5 by 12%
- Reduced poverty rate by 17%

Program survived change of Administrations; has also been adapted and implemented elsewhere in Latin America and NY City.
A key ingredient?: random assignment studies showing sizeable, sustained effects

RCTs, conducted in real-world settings, tend to be particularly persuasive to policymakers

- Thoughtful policymakers readily grasp the value of random assignment.
- With complicated designs, policymakers may wonder about hidden assumptions or gaming.
- E.g., in welfare reform, policymakers understood the design and results without need for complex interpretations.
Possible Lessons for Benefit-Cost Analysis?:

- Keep methods simple and accessible to policymakers who are not researchers.

- If possible, use results of well-designed randomized controlled trials to estimate benefits and costs.

- Show results are robust to different assumptions.

- Report results and methods in clear, plain language, with little or no research jargon.