

Building a better future
How to use policy
interventions to help address
key societal issues



from data to impact
helping agencies
harness data to
transform government
effectiveness

Introduction

Every child should be given the opportunity to grow up to become a happy, healthy, and productive member of society. Yet, with approximately 20% of children living under the poverty line,¹ 1 in 3 adults classified as obese,² and approximately 40% of students in big cities with high concentrations of low-income areas not graduating high school,³ this opportunity is at risk. Government and other organizations should do their part to impact these social outcomes.

We have seen multiple examples of effective interventions that have improved social outcomes, such as fluoridation, vaccinations, and seat belt laws. Fluoridation of drinking water prevents tooth decay for children and adults in a safe and inexpensive way, reaching almost 150 million Americans.⁴ The standard childhood vaccination series prevents approximately 10.5 million cases of infectious illness a year and 33,000 deaths in the United States.⁵ Seat belt laws and other traffic safety interventions have increased seat belt use from 11% in 1981 to almost 85% in 2010, saving hundreds of thousands of lives.⁶ These are only a few examples that illustrate how interventions can be used to promote positive social outcomes.

Today's other social issues could also benefit from these types of interventions. The issues identified above — poverty, poor health, and education challenges — are by no means easy to solve; however, intervening early in a child's life can have a positive impact on these issues. Early childhood intervention programs can produce positive outcomes related to social welfare program use, prevent or delay the onset of adult disease, and have a beneficial impact on academic achievement, delinquency and crime.^{7,8}

As government begins to tackle new sets of issues, government can use policy interventions to drive change on a large scale. In this paper, policy interventions are defined as legislative and regulatory actions that address issues facing large populations. To help government effectively plan and implement policy, we've identified three potential steps:

- 1. Use evidence to help identify effective interventions and start defining policy options:** A good first step to developing policy is to leverage existing data to define the scope of the problem and begin to identify effective and scalable interventions.
- 2. Consider and overcome implementation challenges to tailor interventions based on the context:** The second step requires thinking through common obstacles that can arise during policy implementation, such as barriers to enforcement and unintended consequences, and then developing plans to address them. These plans should address identified risks and include multi-sector collaboration to improve policy adoption, implementation, and sustainability.
- 3. Collect data to monitor success in achieving intended outcomes and adjust approach if needed:** A third step to effective policy implementation is to put mechanisms in place for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the intervention and allow for course corrections as needed.

¹Census: U.S. Poverty Rate Spikes, Nearly 50 Million Americans Affected - CBS DC. (n.d.). CBS DC. <http://washington.cbslocal.com/2012/11/15/census-u-s-poverty-rate-spikes-nearly-50-million-americans-affected/>

²Ogden, C. L., Carroll, M. D., McDowell, M. A., & Flegal, K. M. (2007). Obesity among adults in the United States—no statistically significant change since 2003-2004. NCHS data brief, (1), 1-8.

³Balfanz, R., et al. (2014, April) Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic. Annual Update. Civic Enterprises et al. http://gradnation.org/sites/default/files/17548_BGN_Report_FinalFULL_5.2.14.pdf

⁴Ten Great Public Health Achievements – United States, 1990-1999. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

⁵Zhou, et al. (2003, May). Economic Evaluation of Routine Childhood Immunization with DTaP, Hib, IPV, MMR and Hep B Vaccines in the United States. Pediatric Academic Societies Conference.

⁶CDC - Seat Belt Policy Impact Brief. (2014, January 21). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <http://www.cdc.gov/motorvehiclesafety/seatbeltbrief/>

⁷Campbell, F., Conti, G., Heckman, J. J., Moon, S. H., Pinto, R., Pungello, E., & Pan, Y. (2014). Early Childhood Investments Substantially Boost Adult Health. *Science*, 343(6178), 1478-1485.

⁸Karoly, L. A., Kilburn, R. M., & Cannon, J. (2005). Proven Benefits of Early Childhood Interventions. RAND Labor and Population Research Brief. http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_briefs/2005/RAND_RB9145.pdf

Use evidence to help identify effective interventions and start defining policy options

Identifying effective local interventions and scaling them to a larger population through policy implementation can help address some of our nation's greatest challenges. To do this effectively, first accurately define the problem and use available evidence to identify what might work.

Define the scope of the problem

Before developing a new policy, policymakers should set parameters for the problem that needs to be solved. One common pitfall is to define the problem too broadly. For example, imagine you are trying to improve school test scores. If children in low-income areas have lower test scores compared to other geographies, targeting this group may have a greater impact on improving outcomes and reducing disparities than implementing an intervention

How Do You Find What Works?

Examples of sources to help identify effective interventions include the What Works Clearinghouse, which reviews research on education-based policies and programs, and the Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative, which works with states to perform cost-benefit analyses that help them invest in policies and programs that are shown to work. Other sources include the Department of Justice's crimesolutions.gov, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Policies, and the Top Tier Evidence Initiative led by the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy. While these examples are focused on U.S. policy, there are also examples from the UK, such as the Alliance for Useful Evidence and the What Works Network.

with a broader focus. When defining the scope of the problem, government officials should consider if the policy will target a specific geography or population of interest. In addition, before moving on to the next phase, officials should ask if they have identified the root cause of the issue, as this is a common misstep. As an example, if children in low-income areas are less likely to graduate from high school than children in other areas, the issue may not stem from the quality of the education, but rather from stresses associated with growing up in poverty. Once these types of issues are thought through and the target population and root cause have been identified, government officials should finalize a clear and concise problem statement that is grounded in data.

Use data to identify what works

To identify effective interventions that will work on a large scale, Federal agencies and policymakers should use

⁹Kohli, Jitinder, Eggers, William D., Griffith, John. (2011, February 9). The Secret to Programs that Work. Center for American Progress. <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/open-government/report/2011/02/02/9147/the-secret-to-programs-that-work/>

existing data and research to understand what works in different contexts. Reviewing available evidence from local level interventions can increase chances that the chosen approach is the best option and that it is cost effective when compared to alternatives. The likelihood for success is higher if the chosen policy has been implemented effectively elsewhere, if the policy is expanding what worked on a smaller scale, and if there are plans to test the policy prior to large scale implementation.⁹ Using these criteria to identify what works helps to frame different policy options.

There are both government and non-government sources for evidence-based interventions, such as "what works" repositories that compile findings to help identify interventions that may be ripe for replication or expansion. In addition, policymakers should look to new outcome-based program designs, such as the ones outlined in the July 2013 Office of Management and Budget memo, that provide agencies with flexibility to use innovative program design and place more emphasis on evaluation to learn what works and share best practices.¹⁰ These changes aim to increase the available evidence base to help policymakers identify effective programs and policies for development and implementation planning.

Considering our early childhood intervention example, let's say we are trying to design a policy that will impact children's educational outcomes, which are linked to future success in school, employment, and earning potential. A potential source to consult is the Pew-MacArthur Results First Evidence Gateway. A central portal and database have been created to share evidence on what works in government programs to improve decisions on how to invest public dollars. The Results First Database has compiled information from other research clearinghouses to help find evidence-based programs related to early education, K-12 education, and child welfare in addition to other areas including adult criminal justice, juvenile justice, mental health, and substance abuse.¹¹ Using this type of resource to inform decisions lays the foundation for choosing effective, scalable interventions prior to implementation planning.

¹⁰Next Steps in the Evidence and Innovation Agenda, Executive Office of the President OMB Memorandum to the Heads of Departments and Agencies. (2013, July 26). Office of Management and Budget (OMB). <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/memoranda/2013/m-13-17.pdf>

¹¹Pew-MacArthur Results First Clearinghouse Database. (2014, September 12).

<http://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2014/09/results-first-clearinghouse-database>

Consider and overcome implementation challenges to tailor interventions based on the context

Too often policies fail because stakeholders are not properly consulted and bought in. Federal agencies must use the levers they have to overcome this and other common implementation challenges. To increase chances for effective adoption and implementation, policymakers and Federal agencies should consider how the policies will be enforced, think about unintended consequences, and involve multiple sectors throughout implementation.

Consider how policies will be enforced and implemented

One potential barrier to scalability of policy change is the capacity to implement across different jurisdictions. Once a policy is enacted, federal, state, local, territorial and tribal governments are often responsible for enforcing it.

These entities have varying levels of capacity to implement and enforce policies, so policymakers should consider the jurisdictions' ability to enforce policies and course correct so that intended outcomes are achieved. For example, some states have experienced mixed results when trying to enforce smoke free workplace laws, at times spending more money trying to enforce laws instead of recovering money through fines.

When designing plans for how the policy will be implemented, policymakers and agency officials should ask themselves if timelines are reasonable, if people responsible for implementation are in place, and if there are plans for fulfilling hiring, training, and technology needs.¹²

Think about unintended consequences

In addition to thinking about how policies will be implemented and enforced, agencies should also consider unintended consequences. For example, implementation of deinstitutionalization in the 1950s, which moved people with mental illness out of state institutions and closed many of those institutions, led to unintended consequences for states. The policy did not consider how

The Impact of Unintended Consequences

Illustrative of the unintended consequences of deinstitutionalization, Cook County jail "has been called the nation's largest treatment center for mental health." In a 2013 60 Minutes interview with Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart, he estimated that the jail housed 2,500 inmates with severe mental issues on the day of the interview.¹³

to make sure this population received proper treatment and medication, leading to an increase in the number of people with mental illness in jails or living on the streets.¹⁴

To address potential consequences, Federal agencies should consider criticisms of proposed approaches and build contingencies into policies to address criticisms where possible. This can help win over skeptics who have different opinions about a policy. Another consideration is whether the policy creates the right incentives, which should be aligned with policy goals. In addition, there should be an understanding of areas that may have increased risk for fraud, abuse, and waste, as policies should be designed to minimize these risks as much as possible. By asking the correct questions up front and using available data to examine possible outcomes, policymakers can identify interventions likely to have support in different jurisdictions. This helps create a network of advocates to increase the chance of policy adoption and decrease the influence of naysayers.

¹²Kohli, Jitinder, Eggers, William D., Griffith, John. (2011, February 9). The Secret to Programs that Work. Center for American Progress. <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/open-government/report/2011/02/02/9147/the-secret-to-programs-that-work/>

¹³Smith, Mitch. (2013, 29 September). In '60 Minutes' segment, Sheriff Dart calls jails 'the new insane asylums.' The Chicago Tribune. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2013-09-29/news/chi-in-60-minutes-segment-sheriff-dart-calls-jails-the-new-insane-asylums-20130929_1_asylums-60-minutes-jails

¹⁴Torrey, E. F. (1997). Out of the shadows: Confronting America's mental illness crisis. New York: John Wiley.

Involve multiple sectors in implementation

Implementing policy-level change impacts stakeholders from multiple sectors, including federal, state, local, nonprofit, education, and business. To have the greatest impact, these groups must work together to gain broad support and implement policy changes in their communities. Federal agencies play a critical role in identifying, analyzing, and disseminating policies and must continually develop and maintain partnerships with relevant stakeholders to increase buy-in and continued support of policy implementation.

As an example of multi-sector collaboration, recent childhood obesity interventions focus not only on healthy eating and increased exercise, but look specifically at how to increase exercise in schools, educate parents, and work with food manufacturers to reconsider marketing practices that target children. This approach recognizes that “it takes a village” to effectively implement policy, requiring reinforcement in multiple environments.

Cross-Sector Collaboration for Safe Routes to Schools

The Department of Transportation Safe Routes to Schools (SRTS) initiative was a multi-sector effort to encourage more children to safely walk and bike to school. This initiative provided funding to six local health departments that engaged a variety of partners to develop, promote, and implement this local-level intervention. Lessons learned from this pilot implementation highlighted the importance of bringing together partners from multiple sectors that have an interest in safe walking and biking. Partners included, but were not limited to police, principals, teachers, parents, traffic engineers, and health care professionals.¹⁵



¹⁵Public Health Led Safe Routes to School Programs: Experiences from Six Health Departments. (2009). Safe States Alliance (formerly STIPDA). Atlanta (GA). <http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.safestates.org/resource/resmgr/imported/SRTS%20FINAL%20Lessons%20Learned%20Report%20-%20rebranded%208.10.pdf>

Collect data to monitor success and adjust approach if needed

To determine if the policy is achieving intended outcomes, Federal agencies must monitor and evaluate policy outcomes. To monitor success and allow for potential course correction, government officials should develop plans to define key indicators of success, determine how timely and correct data will be collected, and determine how the data will be used to improve the way that policies are implemented. At times, it is difficult to accept that a policy is not meeting intended goals after dedicating time and resources to making the policy work. However, sometimes a course correction or shift in focus is needed to have a broader impact. For example, in the early 1990s, childhood lead poisoning programs focused primarily on treating children who were already sick from lead exposure instead preventing children from being exposed in the first place. More recent programs focus on preventing lead exposure from occurring to eliminate the issue of childhood lead poisoning. Federal agencies must establish mechanisms to allow for an honest and transparent review of whether the policy is on track or if the approach needs to be adjusted.

Formal evaluations can help determine the nuances and underlying factors that contribute to success. Thorough evaluations can help identify specific aspects of the policy that are effective or not effective and contributing factors for the success or failure. These evaluations should go beyond just performance metrics and provide a more in-depth view of whether the policy is achieving intended outcomes and should be continued or adjusted.

Developing policies that consider the perspectives outlined in this paper can enable a higher likelihood of success and align resources to overcome common obstacles. This focus can help government move the needle on its agenda and fulfill its priorities around using policy intervention to improve social outcomes. With an approach rooted in scalability, government can become better equipped to address the great social policy challenges in the 21st century and create an environment that gives all children and adults the opportunity to be happy, healthy and productive members of society.

Checklist for Policy Planning and Implementation

Use evidence to help identify effective interventions and define policy options	
✓	Define the scope of the problem, narrowly defining the target population and geography and determining root causes
✓	Use data to identify what works, considering “what works” repositories and other government and non-government sources
Consider and overcome implementation challenges to tailor interventions	
✓	Consider how policies will be enforced and implemented, including jurisdictions’ ability to enforce policies and considering if timelines are reasonable, if appropriate and qualified staff are in place, and if there are plans to fulfill remaining needs for hiring, training, and technology
✓	Think about unintended consequences, building contingencies into policies to address criticisms, reviewing incentives, and developing an understanding of areas that may have increased risk for fraud, abuse, and waste
✓	Involve multiple sectors in implementation, including stakeholders from federal, state, local, nonprofit, education, and business
Collect data to monitor success and adjust approach if needed	
✓	Use formal evaluations to identify specific aspects of the policy that are effective or not effective and contributing factors for the success or failure, which can lead to course correction as needed

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