The Intersection of Social Science Research and Federal Policymaking: Is Anyone Listening?

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Tonight I’d like to talk about what I call the intersection of public policy and research. By that I mean the way in which research can be used to influence, or to try to influence, public policymaking.

For the seven years I worked as a staff member in for the Congress of the United States I was a regular consumer of social science research. And while I found the things that were sent to me often to be interesting in their own right, my goal in reading them was usually to help me do the right thing – or more precisely, to help me help my bosses to make a decision as fully informed by the facts found through research about the issue in question as was possible. And a lot of materials came across my desk – publications, testimony, issues summaries from CRS, letters. But even so, at times I lacked the knowledge I needed about important issues. I found this to be true of Members and other staff as well.

For the last nine years of my career I’ve been thinking more about this intersection of research and policymaking -- first in the Justice Department and then at the Sentencing Commission. As deputy director and later acting director of the National Institute of Justice, I had a role in deciding what research would get funded and, what completed research was brought to the attention of policymakers in the Department of Justice, at the White House, and in Congress. There was not enough time for all of NIJ’s funded research to be presented to policymakers, and so we had to pick what we thought was the most relevant. Even so, at times I found that policymakers were not as informed on an issue as I thought they should be, even though research was available about it.

At the Commission, I continue to work to guide the presentation of staff research to the Sentencing Commissioners, and also to Congress, the Courts, and DOJ. We do a tremendous amount of analysis. But the hard part is deciding what to present, and what to leave out.

All of these experiences have led me to conclude that at this intersection of policy and research, although many people are talking, not many of them are listening to one another.

Who are the people I’m talking about? I know the most about the federal policymaking and so will talk about that level of government tonight. There it occurs primarily in Congress, and principally in the two judiciary Committees and their subcommittees. The people who most influence policymaking are the Members of Congress of course, but also the professional staff who work for them. These people spend most of their day working in a particular area – such as crime policy. They know issues at a much deeper level than even the Members of Congress can, because they have the time to devote solely to that issue. To a much lesser extent, this may also
include the staff who work in the offices of individual Members. Policymaking also happens in
the Executive Branch, of course, at the senior levels of DOJ and DHS, usually at the level of
those who are appointed to their positions by the president directly or indirectly, and also among
the President’s advisors in the White House (e.g., the staff of the Domestic Policy Council).

The research these policymakers encounter are familiar to all of you. Much of it comes
in the mail: research published in peer-reviewed journals; research from research agencies
(Vera, Urban, Abt, RAND); research from think tanks (Sentencing Project, Heritage
Foundation); research from the National Academy of Sciences; research sponsored by the
government (NIJ and BJS). And there are a great many publications churning out product. And
now that law reviews have begun to publish work that is more social science in nature, there are
dozens of other publications that potentially could be involved in this process.

The problem is that policymakers are inundated with information. You’d think that this
would lead to more informed decision-making but, in fact, it leads to the opposite. There is too
much information and not enough time understand it. To many policymakers, the cacophony of
information coming from the research community is so hard to cut through that they don’t even
try. As a result, a lot of good research never gets used.

But my experience has been that, even so, (most) policymakers are anxious to know what
to do and (many) researchers are anxious to tell them what they have learned through research.
So why aren’t policymakers listening more? I’d like to offer a few reasons for this, and then
suggest some ways by which the research community can help this be different.

Some of the problem comes from the myths that each groups holds about the other.
Policymakers hold many myths about researchers. I won’t spend time with this audience telling
you that these are, in fact, myths, but I hope you’ll all agree that they are:

You only write to get published or to get tenure.
You only want to study what’s interesting to you, not what’s helpful to me.
You only want to put out something that’s designed to get you more research funding. In
other words, there’s never a bottom line.

Researchers also hold myths about what policymakers think about research:

My work will never get to them. They are too busy.
They won’t read it even if I get it to them.
They’ll never understand the nuances of my work.
They’ve made up their mind anyway.
They don’t care about anything other than getting re-elected.

I’ll address each of these in turn –

My work will never get to them. Well, some of it won’t. Staff filters everything and
none of them have Ph.Ds in criminology. These are young people in their 20s and 30s, usually
with just a college degree. For those Members on a committee, like the Judiciary Committee,
these materials get forwarded (or are sent separately) to Committee staffers, usually always lawyers who work for the committee (in the House) or for particular Members (in the Senate). They get a lot of things to read. They can’t read all of it. The easier your work is to understand the more likely it will get through this filter and to the policymaker.

They won’t read it even if they get it. Staff will put some items in front of a member. Most members have a “read file” for the plane ride back to their districts on weekends or to take home. There is a lot in there. Members will try to get to everything. So just about everything gets an equal amount of time, which is to say not much. So there is an opportunity for research results to be received, as long as the results don’t require too much time to be received.

They’ll never understand the nuances of my work. This one may actually be true but, nuance isn’t what they want. They want the big picture. Members are much smarter than they are depicted by the press and public. Many of them are lawyers or hold some other advanced degree. Many of them have worked on certain issues for a long time and so have learned through that experience. But if all they get is nuance they won’t find what they need. They’ve made up their mind anyway. Not really. It just seems that way at times. Policymakers don’t have the luxury of saying “I don’t know.” Constituents demand answers to problems and “I don’t know” usually isn’t satisfactory to them. And the legislative process can’t slow down for Members to do a little more reading on an issue. So they get their information where they can (constituents, the press, their own personal experiences) and run with it. Their mind isn’t made up so much as there is no other information readily available to them to change it.

They don’t care about anything other than getting re-elected. Well they do care about getting re-elected. But I found that most of them also care about making people’s lives better. And these two concepts aren’t as mutually exclusive as you might think.

As I hope you can see, there is a big problem here. So, what is the solution?

I believe the researcher community has to change the way its tries to be heard at this intersection of research and policy. I think it requires a change in the way that researchers think about disseminating the results of their work. And policymakers have to become more receptive to using research to help get the policy right. But I think they will if research results are presented to them differently.

So what am I suggesting?

1. Write less. That is, write shorter. Academic pieces just don’t get read very often by policymakers. They and those who work for them just don’t have the time to read a 50-page article. So, at the very least, always have an executive summary. (And I’ll mention that the abstracts that are often found in social science literature are not long enough to be helpful). But really, the entire publication vehicle needs to be re-thought. I’m not saying do away with academic journals. They have an important role. Just realize that they will have little effect on policy. Researchers have to find some other way to communicate their research findings.
At NIJ we would often release two publications about a piece of research. The long version for researchers and a short one for policymakers. I think the academic community should adopt something like this as well. Schools of criminology should create a policymaker publication series – very short, clear, and direct – that summarizes larger research findings.

Alternatively, it would be helpful to have a publication that briefly summarizes the works of scholars from different institutions. Something like the NIJ Journal. In fact, I wish some of you would join together to develop a vehicle to disseminate current research in a short, summarized version. I envision a quarterly periodical with summaries of the key points from current research on criminal justice, perhaps pulling a graphic or two from the publication.

2. **Answer the questions they need answered.** Basic research has its place, but it isn’t very helpful to policymakers in knowing what to do. And studies with very small sample sizes or which occur in out-of-the-way places don’t provide national policymakers with sufficient information to make an informed decision about national policy.

So what are the things that policymakers want to know? If you don’t know, ask them. Watch a hearing (many are webcast). Attend a hearing. Visit your congressman and ask him. I’m surprised at how many researchers have no idea what issues are currently before national policymakers. But generally, what they want to know falls into a few broad categories: what is the current nature and extent of crime, how is it changing, and what seems to work to lower it (whether through crime prevention, crime detection, the best applications of resources for incarceration or post-release supervision, or rehabilitation)? Research in criminal justice has to be able to answer those questions.

In my view also, action research is quite undervalued. While the focus of that research is to assist practitioners to solve a problem, much learning can come from it for policymakers.

3. **Write in ways they can understand.** Be clear, be direct, and be brief. Most policymakers do not know statistics or calculus. But then they don’t really need to. What they want, and I think what you really want, is for them to understand the phenomenon that was studied. Anything can be described in words and pictures. And that’s how research should be presented to them – in clear, straightforward English with understandable charts and graphs. Anything with a mathematical formula appearing on the pages of the publication has the kiss of death.

4. **Tell them what to do.** To borrow the title from Larry Sherman’s important work of a decade ago, policymakers want to know what works, what doesn’t and what’s promising. What they often get though is unclear findings or suggestions for more research. Nothing that goes to a policymaker should have a section that reads “Implications for further research.” But they should all have a section that says “Implications for policy.” You have to answer their question: “What should I do?” If your work does not have any real implication for policy, then it should never be sent to a policymaker. It’s simply not right for that audience.
5. *Get a seat at the table.* Research results should be presented in ways other than lectures at ASC.

Meet with your own Member of Congress and staffer one on one to tell them what you have found. This is especially so if they sit on the Judiciary Committees or the Appropriations Committees that fund crime fighting programs.

Offer to give them or their staff briefings on your research findings (and then make it direct, short and useful). I think that major research universities especially should do a much better job of making their faculty available as experts to policymakers.

Offer to be a witness on topics at hearings. (NAS should be more engaged in this)

Be a SME to the local paper or TV station. Often, policymakers and their staff do not know who to ask. If they see you on TV they might just call you up.

Do action research. Policymakers often look to practitioners for advice. If a practitioner has trust in a researcher from having worked together, then the practitioner may recommend that researcher when the policymaker is looking for an expert.

I believe that if the research community were to embrace these five suggestions that it would lead to policymaking that is much more informed and, of course, much more likely to be right.

All of this matters because it is at the intersection with policymaking that the research community has its opportunity to have its work used to make people’s lives better. What a shame it would be if that work were to continue to be underused. I hope that some of you will help to change the old way of presenting results to new ways that are much more likely to get noticed – and to get used.