

# WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE ?

## Because It Adds Value, Even When You Don't See It

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*By Wendy Naus, Executive Director, Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA)*

*Why Social Science?* was launched in 2017 as a project of the Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA) aimed at getting social science findings and impacts out to the general public. Our goal has been to talk about our sciences in new and interesting ways, making them feel more accessible and relevant to our everyday lives. The 22 interesting and diverse pieces published in 2017, I think, did just that. I am excited for the stories that will be told through *Why Social Science?* in 2018.

To kick the year off, I would like to speak directly to social science researchers and shine a light on an important, though often overlooked contribution made by the social and behavioral sciences—serving as resources to government officials. Policy makers are an important segment of the public audience we hope to reach through *Why Social Science?*, but working with them directly is just as—if not more—important.

As an advocacy organization, [COSSA](#) often talks about the need for social scientists to engage directly with their elected officials—at all levels—and to offer themselves as issue experts to policy makers. The politicians who represent you and your community need to know that you have information that can help them do their jobs better and deliver the best results for their constituents.

Unfortunately, there is a major disconnect between the information and data policy makers need and their ability to access it in a timely and reliable manner. Studies have shown that “academics” and “issue experts” are among the most trusted sources of reliable information by Congressional staff. However, when Congressional staff are asked what sources they *actually* consult, their behavior mirrors just about everyone else in this country: they search the internet. This finding underscores the need for all social scientists to connect with their elected leaders. In short, policy makers (and policy implementers) want the type of information you can provide; they just don't know where to find it.

As I talk to social scientists around the country, I am encouraged to hear about new and innovative ways researchers are broadening their reach beyond the “lab,” so to speak. One fairly new phenomenon we are seeing across the country is the incorporation of social scientists into the functions of local government, including as informal “advisors” and as employees within so-called “social science units.” Local, state and federal governments have jumped on the evidence-based policymaking bandwagon in recent years and are finding that local social scientists can help in program evaluation and use science-backed experimental methods like randomized controlled trials (RCTs) to test potential new programs or interventions that address the needs of the most vulnerable.

One such example is a new team of social scientists working right here in Washington, DC. [The Lab @ DC](#) works across District of Columbia agencies “to test and improve policies and provide timely, relevant, and high-quality analysis to inform [the DC government's] most important decisions.” Among The Lab's projects are assessing the impacts of police use of body-worn cameras on crime and police behavior and of flexible rent programs in addressing the needs of DC's homeless population, among others. According to The Lab's website, “DC residents deserve a government that asks questions, tests policies, and iteratively improves how it serves the community.”

And Washington, DC is not alone—there are units like this popping up across the country. Are you engaged with one in your community? We would love to hear about it.

Your expertise is also needed at the federal level, namely, with the United States Congress. To see for yourself the tangible contributions of social scientists to national policymaking, one need only skim a list of the countless hearings held by Congressional committees in the House of Representatives and Senate each year. Rarely (if ever) is a hearing held specifically to discuss social science; but make no mistake—our sciences are there lending evidence to a myriad of issues before federal policy makers. Below is a small sample of Congressional hearings that occurred just in the last year featuring social science expert witnesses:

- **Psychology:** [\*Aging Without Community: The Consequences of Isolation and Loneliness\*](#), Senate Special Committee on Aging
- **Sociology:** [\*What We Do Together: The State of Social Capital in America Today\*](#), Joint Economic Committee
- **Child Development/Education:** [\*Investing in the Future: Early Childhood Education Programs at the Department of Health and Human Services\*](#), House Appropriations Committee
- **Law/Policy:** [\*Food Waste from Field to Table\*](#), House Agriculture Committee

Let me be clear, I am not suggesting that you make a leap from sharing evidence derived from social science studies to asserting a policy claim that goes beyond the scope of your findings. Instead, what if you took a step outside of your comfort zone, went beyond simply sharing your work at your professional society's annual conference or in your field's main journal, and made your expertise available to those tasked with making policies and allocating millions and billions of dollars to government programs that have the utmost impact on our everyday lives? COSSA can help you reach new audiences. If your organization or university is already a [COSSA member](#), make sure you are receiving our [materials](#) directly into your email inbox. We are launching a new policy-related training program later this year that will provide useful information and tips for getting your research to resonate with policy audiences. The program will be free to our members.

The words I offered in the very first *Why Social Science?* post just over a year ago bear repeating:

*Chances are you have never stopped to fully consider all of the ways social science is impacting your life at this very moment, from the device you are using to read this (and the cybersecurity keeping it secure), to the food choices you make when heading out for lunch, to the decisions investors are making for your retirement accounts. What if you were asked to explain the latest scientific findings surrounding a question of national importance, like homelessness or child nutrition or international affairs? Would you say yes? I hope you would.*

**So why social science? Because it adds value, even when you don't see it.**



**WENDY NAUS** became the fourth Executive Director of COSSA in 2014 following a decade of lobbying for the federal research and policy interests of scientific societies and U.S. universities. Over her career, she has worked to shape legislation, programs, and regulations important to the research community and has advocated for increased research funding across federal agencies. In her role at COSSA, Wendy serves as the lead advocate for federal funding and policy that positively impact social and behavioral science research across the federal government, representing the breadth of the social science research enterprise. She is also responsible for the day to day operations of COSSA and member engagement. A native of Buffalo, New York, Wendy holds a B.A. in political science and urban studies from Canisius College, graduating magna cum laude from the All-College Honors Program.



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