WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE?

Because It Can Improve Government Efficiency via Evidence-Based Policy

By Taylor Scott, Ph.D., Associate Director, Research-to-Policy Collaboration, Pennsylvania State University & Max Crowley, Ph.D., Executive Director, Research-to-Policy Collaboration, Assistant Professor of Human Development & Family Studies, Pennsylvania State University

Before explaining how social science is or could be used in policy, it is first important to think *why* it should be used. *Why do we do social science?* For most of us, our research goes beyond intellectual curiosity. We want to make an impact on the world around us—to observe and systematically report on conditions that affect society as a means for change and improvement.

Although researchers' work tends to have meaningful implications for policy, there is no direct, linear pathway from knowledge production to its use for public benefit. This can be frustrating at times for social scientists who wonder: why aren't policymakers using more research to inform their decisions? Although research is not always driving decision-making, key examples from the bipartisan evidence-based policy movement offer hope, such as the Maternal Infant Early Childhood Home Visiting program, which is backed by evidence and has received bipartisan support. However, policies like this contrast with others that appear to disregard science. So the real question is not why is research disregarded, but *under what circumstances is research used—and can we improve the rate it is used?*
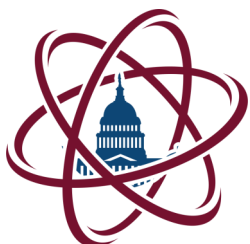
Understanding and Supporting the Use of Research Evidence

There is an emerging body of research that aims to respond to this challenge by understanding policymakers' research use. This has guided our work developing the Research-to-Policy Collaboration (RPC), an initiative to support policymakers' use of research. We aim to demystify the legislative process for scientists and engage them in supporting evidence-based policy. The RPC aims to build capacity for facilitating researcher-policymaker partnerships around current policy issues— reflecting best practices regarding how research is used. In this manner, the RPC seeks to become an evidence-based model for improving the use of research in order to achieve measurable social impact.

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Research is more likely to be used by policymakers when it is timely and relevant, and delivered in the context of trusting interpersonal connections. Therefore, there is a tremendous need for bridging not just information and decision-making, but to directly connect the knowledge producers and end users. Successful interactions between researchers and policymakers require the scientific community to adapt our responses in ways that are actionable in the policy process. Therefore, it is critical that we aren't just facilitating interactions, but improving the likelihood that those interactions are fruitful. At the RPC, we prepare social scientists using advanced training and coaching around how to communicate research in ways that correspond with the realities of lawmakers. We also actively facilitate policy engagement with congressional offices by matching policy opportunities and researchers' expertise. To do so, we conduct a needs assessment with congressional staff to understand their policy priority areas and how researchers may support their work— a contrast for legislative audiences who are constantly asked to do things for others, but rarely encounter those who want to understand and support their needs.

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These conversations often elicit initial research requests that are building blocks toward a richer, enduring partnership. Ongoing, collaborative activities are also the focus of face-to-face meetings between researchers and congressional staff facilitated by the RPC because enduring interactions are expected to inform both policy development and future research activities.

Getting Involved in the Research-to-Policy Collaboration

Our work in 2019 primarily involves child and family policy at the federal level (e.g. child maltreatment, service system coordination, and related issue areas like human trafficking). We are aiming to facilitate around 40-50 researcher-congressional partnerships this year in coordination with research institutions, professional associations, and individual researchers. The RPC can be adapted to a range of scientific disciplines and contexts, including to state legislative engagement. This work is supported by the William T. Grant Foundation, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, National Institute of Child and Human Development, and Michael and Susan Dell Foundation as well as the Penn State Social Science Research Institute and Center for Healthy Children.

Research Centers and Professional Associations can get involved in a number of ways:

- Discuss opportunities to support our 2019 work related to child and family policy or future work together in another implementation related to your issue areas (email Taylor Scott).
- Encourage child/family researchers to participate in our training and engagement process in 2019. You may find a template description for distribution on our website, which includes a link for researchers to enlist.
- Partner on events, which will both support the mission to support social science impact as well as enhance the national visibility of your organization. Such sponsorship is key to defraying the costs to researchers (particularly early career researchers) attending legislative events in person.

Individual Researchers can participate in RPC training and events by signing up for the Rapid Response Network. Not only does this provide an outlet for improving the impact of your work—and social science overall—we can also help you demonstrate your social impact and community-engaged scholarship (e.g., letters acknowledging policy contributions). Please provide more information about yourself here.

TAYLOR SCOTT earned her Ph.D. in community psychology in the Health Psychology Program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her research interests include broad-based promotion of well-being and success among at-risk children via community-based programs and public policy. She served for five years on the Community Research and Evaluation Team at UNCC, supporting evaluations in the context of local child-serving systems including mental health, child welfare, public housing, and education. Beginning in 2015, Taylor worked as the Policy Coordinator for the National Prevention Science Coalition (NPSC), working to support research translation on topics ranging from criminal justice to child welfare. She continued this work as Research Assistant Professor at the Pennsylvania State University by supporting the formalization of the Research-to-Policy Collaboration model and evaluating approaches for (1) reaching Congress with research messages, (2) writing research into legal language, and (3) enhancing policy training and engagement among researchers. Taylor now oversees the 2019 replication of the RPC and its evaluation.

MAX CROWLEY, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, and directs the Prevention Economics Planning and Research Program. He is an expert in economic evaluation and the financing of early childhood programs and is a member of the National Academy of Medicine's Committee on the Use of Economic Estimates to Invest in Children, Youth and Families. This work sits at the intersection of human development, economics and public policy. Dr. Crowley leads multiple efforts to increase the use of evidence in the early childhood and health space in a thoughtful manner that will protect children and the public while mobilizing new resources to support evidence-based programming. Dr. Crowley is a frequent consultant and invited speaker on the economics of prevention for initiatives around the country. This includes ongoing consultation to many Federal and State agencies. Additionally, Max's work involves utilizing advanced analytic designs, administrative data and technological solutions to optimize preventive strategies.

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