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GrantWatch Report

Research Glut And Information Famine: Making Research Evidence More Useful For Policymakers

The RWJF’s Synthesis Project aims to help bridge the gap between research and policy making—without pushing an agenda.

by David C. Colby, Brian C. Quinn, Claudia H. Williams, Linda T. Bilheimer, and Sarah Goodell

ABSTRACT: The gap between the two worlds of researchers and policymakers renders the use of research in the policy-making process problematic. Policymakers have three primary needs in their use of research evidence: clear translation, accessible and easy-to-use information, and relevance to the policy context. These needs are sometimes at odds with the priorities of the research community. This paper describes the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Synthesis Project, which aims to strengthen links between research and policy making by synthesizing evidence on pressing health policy questions. [Health Affairs 27, no. 4 (2008): 1177–1182; 10.1377/hlthaff.27.4.1177]

One of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s (RWJF’s) key grant-making tools is funding research that “both policy-makers and practitioners in the field will find useful.”1 This focus inspired the development of the Synthesis Project, which aims to produce thought-provoking and concise briefs and reports that translate complex research findings into a form that can be readily used by the policy community. By synthesizing what is known, while weighing the strength of the research evidence and exposing knowledge gaps, the project gives decisionmakers reliable information and new insights on pressing health policy issues.

The project started with a question: “Why aren’t research results more useful to policymakers?”2 The question is important for applied researchers and has received increased attention in the literature in recent years.3 This report describes the RWJF’s efforts to answer this question and the strategy it developed to make research results more accessible to and usable by the policy community.

In initial interviews, federal policy analysts, policymakers, and foundation staff identified three requirements for improving the use of research evidence in policy making: the need for clear translation, accessible and easy-to-use information, and relevance to the policy context. These needs are sometimes at odds with the priorities of the research community. This paper describes the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Synthesis Project, which aims to strengthen links between research and policy making by synthesizing evidence on pressing health policy questions.

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translation, accessible and easy-to-use information, and relevance to the policy context.

**What Policymakers Need**

**Translation.** Policymakers sometimes find people more helpful than reports for bringing information and evidence to bear on policy decisions. Those people, who might be executive branch analysts, health policy experts, or lobbyists, act as intermediaries, synthesizing and translating the evidence needed for the specific policy questions at hand. Without this help, policymakers are faced with a body of research that is diffuse and contradictory, with no tools available to organize and make sense of diverse results.

Although researchers might play an intermediary role, several factors conspire against them. First, they typically do not have relationships with policymakers or an in-depth understanding of the policy process. Second, researchers are typically rewarded for producing new findings and not for evaluating bodies of evidence to make sense of what is known. Third, their results are not usually fed into information channels that policymakers use.

Of course, the translation needed for a technically oriented analyst at the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) and that for a Capitol Hill committee staffer differ. The CBO analyst is looking for the detailed methodology necessary to determine which research findings to include in models. The Hill staffer, by contrast, wants “bottom-line” findings, stated in a clear and unambiguous manner.

**Accessible and easy-to-use information.** For the busy policymaker, time is the scarcest resource. Reports and policy briefs that can make sense of an important issue concisely and objectively are likely to be used, while those not meeting this standard—most notably, journal articles written for an academic audience—probably will not.

Researchers’ practices, often slow and exacting, are out of sync with policymakers’ need for responsive, timely, and usable information. Rather than providing short and skimmable products focused on policymakers’ questions, journal articles lead with discussions of previous literature, theoretical approaches, and data and methods. Results are buried at the ends of articles. Findings are often qualified and structured around answering research questions, not addressing policy concerns.

**Relevance.** To make research results more relevant to and usable by policymakers, researchers must recognize the decision orientation of the audience and the fact that some policy choices are more amenable to evidence than others are. With much information or little, with unresolved questions or with ready answers, policymakers often must act. Their pressing concern is not to identify what additional (but currently unavailable) information would be helpful in making decisions, but rather to identify the choices that the available information suggests would be most productive or effective. This does not mean that Synthesis Project products should make policy recommendations; doing so might raise questions about the products’ objectivity. Rather, they should guide policymakers on the implications of the findings for potential policy decisions. The products should help policymakers answer the following types of questions: What decisions are affected by the evidence? What general directions are implied by the results? What additional information would increase confidence in this direction?

**The RWJF’s Synthesis Project**

The Synthesis Project began with the idea of helping policy analysts from organizations such as the CBO sort through masses of information, evidence, and data on key health policy issues. It quickly expanded its target audiences to include others in the federal government (including executive branch decisionmakers and staff from congressional committees) and think-tank and other researchers, with a belief that different audiences would want and need different types of information.

Weighing and translating research corresponds to the idea that policymakers need to make sense of large bodies of information. Making products user-friendly and skimmable takes into account the constraints and competing demands on policymakers’ time.
Finally, including the policymaker perspective at various steps increases the relevance and utility of findings to the policy context.

The project now aims to produce and disseminate three “Synthesis pairs” annually—a Synthesis Report of roughly twenty pages paired with a four-page Policy Brief. Developing each pair involves identifying a researcher who can evaluate and translate the evidence on the topic into a report, matching that author with a policy analyst who produces the companion policy brief; and complementing this team with input and feedback from an advisory group, which includes both researchers and former policymakers.

The availability of both longer and more detailed reports and more concise Policy Briefs with a summary ensures that policymakers with different levels of technical sophistication and amounts of time get the same information, but in different forms. Content for policy analysts, presented in the longer Synthesis Report, is more technical, with detailed tables and reviews of research methodologies to inform estimates and analyses. Policy briefs respond to demands from Hill staff and executive branch decisionmakers for information that can be grasped quickly, whether or not a person has statistical training, and can be used to frame policy discussions.

- **Weighing and translating.** The Synthesis model is based on the idea that research results should be brought together, organized, and synthesized for a policy audience. A good synthesis is not a “he said, she said” literature review. Rather, the products analyze and evaluate information, by outlining what is known and not known and what evidence should be given greater weight. Syntheses put the studies and their results on equal footing and compare competing methods and approaches.

- **Making products easy to use.** Synthesis products were designed with busy policymakers in mind. This is reflected by the following principles.

  **Start with policy questions.** Information is framed around policy questions, not the nuanced, complex body of research.

  **Focus on findings, not methods.** The body of the Synthesis Report focuses on the substantive findings; only a brief overview of the methods is included. Methodological information is detailed in appendices.

  **Create a “skimmable” format.** Synthesis Reports have a consistent, simple, and easy-to-use format, offering multiple ways to navigate through information. They are concisely written, using clear headings and bullet points, as well as key summary tables and figures to make them “skimmable.” The main conclusions can be grasped in a minute or two.

  **Represent the policymaker’s perspective.** The project is mindful of the policymaker’s view at several stages of the publication process, especially in selecting topics and developing outlines.

  The project team, using interviews and scans of legislative activity, solicits suggestions on topics from policy audiences. In collaboration with the project’s advisory group of researchers and former policymakers, the team discusses and narrows the list using these questions: (1) Is the topic a pressing policy issue? (2) Is there a robust body of evidence to evaluate? (3) Does the topic have shelf life (that is, will it still be relevant in a year or two)? (4) Is the scope of the topic sufficiently focused to be addressed in a twenty-page report?

  Compared with the well-known systematic reviews produced by the Cochrane Collaboration, which examine the efficacy of specific clinical and public health interventions, our syntheses have a different aim. They seek to improve knowledge and understanding of the evidence on an issue as the basis for more informed decision making in general, instead of attempting to influence a particular decision. This “knowledge-support” focus directs topic selection. Ideal Synthesis topics address broad, foundational issues that are of policy concern. A Synthesis Report on crowd-out of private insurance, for example, explores the relationship of private and public coverage. Instead of pointing to a particular “solution,” the report discusses the trade-offs in balancing the need for coverage and the risk of crowd-out and the implications for a variety of policy decisions from how to support employer-sponsored insurance to what measures might
reduce the risk of crowd-out resulting from public coverage programs.

**Developing the Synthesis story.** Like picking topics, developing a Synthesis Report is an iterative process. The authors, project director, RWJF staff, and advisory group discuss and shape the report at three key stages: the concept brief, the narrative outline of findings, and the fully developed Synthesis Report. At each stage, four key questions shape the discussion: (1) Why is this of interest to policymakers? (2) What “story” does the evidence tell? (3) What choices does the evidence suggest would be most effective? (4) What are the implications for policymakers?

Each Synthesis Report undergoes rigorous peer review by a panel comprising selected members of the advisory group, and by the project team. These reviewers represent a wide range of expertise and philosophical views. A dual focus on maintaining analytic rigor and policy relevance is a hallmark of the process.

The Policy Brief, a report summary, is drafted by a policy analyst on the project team, not by the report’s author; thus, it tests whether the report’s findings can be clearly distilled into a few pages and discussed in the appropriate context.

Since the Synthesis Project began, twelve reports have been completed (Exhibit 1). The topics range from the impact of state insurance market reforms to the effect of the built environment on physical activity.

**Lessons Learned**

As we have assembled and disseminated Synthesis products over the past six years, several lessons on making research relevant to policymakers have emerged.

**Authors’ experience.** Authors begin work on a Synthesis Report with the sense of a familiar task. A review of past literature is a routine part of researchers’ work and is often summarized briefly at the beginning of a journal article to establish how the findings will fill a gap or validate previous evidence. But the Synthesis process is different from the typical literature review. Authors are asked to critically weigh and evaluate the entire body of evidence, bringing together diverse findings, placing those findings on the same footing, and trying to make sense of what is known.

This is not an easy task, as it turns out. “Intellectually delightful and surprisingly difficult” is how one author describes her experience. The project is still searching for the best ways to support authors in this task and simplify the process without risking the loss of scholarly rigor. A longer-term concern is how to create incentives within academia for synthesizing and weighing research evidence. Although intellectually demanding and rigorous, this work is not often rewarded in academic settings, where promotion and tenure are linked to publishing new research findings.

**Evaluating the evidence.** How authors are asked to weigh evidence has evolved over time. The project started with the idea of a clear bar: evidence not meeting specific standards for quality and rigor would not be included in a Synthesis Report.

Although this decision made sense, the concept had several problems in practice. First, poor-quality evidence can and does influence policy making. Most bodies of literature contain studies that are poorly designed or use inappropriate research methods. It is important that those findings still be discussed and assessed alongside other evidence.

Second, the nature of the evidence, and even what constitutes sufficient or the best evidence for policy making, varies from one topic to the next. Although they come from the gold standard of study design, the results of small-scale, randomized controlled trials might be less helpful to a policymaker designing a policy intervention than findings from a well-designed program evaluation that tracked the results of an intervention in a natural setting.

Responding to these problems and recognizing the need for greater transparency in the evidence-weighing process—even in the absence of a clear-cut evidence bar that cuts across syntheses—we now ask authors to summarize the details of the main studies in tables indicating which results are the strongest and to describe the standards used for evaluating the quality of the evidence.
Extending the dialogue. A recent informal and internal assessment of the project revealed positive audience reactions to the Synthesis products. Users felt that the project takes on difficult topics and synthesizes the evidence in a clear, helpful, and unbiased way. Yet this review also found low awareness of the project among some key target audiences. Although the project seems to be using appropriate tools for effective dissemination—pairing e-mail alerts with in-person briefings and “Webinars”—these findings suggest that the project does not have the impact it could. One reason for the “disconnect” is that timing of product releases does not always coincide with intense policy debates. To combat this,
we plan on rereleasing our reports to take advantage of future policy “windows.”

As we look to the future, a key question is whether and how the Synthesis Project can find ways to build more-effective bridges between the research and policy worlds while maintaining policy neutrality. One approach we have used is to invite policymakers to serve as reactors at briefings when findings are released. Reactors are asked to comment on and foster discussion about how Synthesis Project evidence might shape future policy choices. These discussions are informed, but not limited, by the research evidence. The project’s experience with these discussions suggests that the policy-making process would benefit from more ongoing and less formal interaction between the research and policy communities.

The Synthesis Project provides one potential model to use in translating research for policy making. Internal assessments of the program and anecdotal feedback suggest that it has been successful. A full external evaluation of the program is to be conducted in 2008.

An underlying strategy of the Synthesis Project is to find ways to join the views of policymakers and researchers at each stage of the effort. Other effective models exist for doing this. One example is the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation’s Listening for Direction process. The Synthesis Project and such models share the idea that policymakers should be involved at the earliest stage in the research process to help set the research agenda and frame questions. They should remain involved as the research develops and can play an important role in outlining policy implications.

Increasingly visible problems and growing public support for change virtually guarantee that there will be major debates over health and health care reform over the next few years. Whether the discussions focus on the uninsured, health care quality or its cost, or obesity, lawmakers must have reliable, timely, and clear information and evidence at their disposal. We believe that both public and private funders should help bridge the gap between research and policy making, paving the way for evidence-based policy approaches.

These findings and conclusions are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or Markle Foundation.

NOTES

4. Twenty-six semistructured interviews were conducted over a two-week period in late 2000 and early 2001 to aid in strategic planning for the project. Researchers and RWJF staff, as well as current and former policy analysts and policymakers at institutions such as the Government Accountability Office, Congressional Budget Office, and Medicare Payment Advisory Commission, were interviewed.
5. Note that we use the term policymakers broadly to include a range of actors in the policy process, such as legislators, staffers, and policy analysts.