



# **Ideas for Increasing the Impact of Your Research on Policy Decisions**

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Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy

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# Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy

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# The Problem: Little progress in many areas of social policy

- ◆ U.S. has made no significant progress versus drug/alcohol abuse since 1990.
- ◆ U.S. has made very limited progress in raising K-12 achievement over past 30 years.
- ◆ U.S. poverty rate today is higher than in 1973.



Rigorous evaluations have identified interventions that are ineffective/harmful:

◆ **Vouchers for disadvantaged workers, to subsidize their employment**

Well-designed randomized trial found large negative effects on employment.

◆ **DARE**

Ineffective in preventing substance use, according to randomized trials (is now being redesigned).

◆ **Such findings are fairly common in other fields too** – e.g., medicine, psychology, crime prevention.

## Rigorous evaluations have identified a few highly-effective social interventions:

### ◆ Nurse-Family Partnership

By age 15, results in 40-70% reductions in child abuse/neglect, and arrests of children and mothers.

### ◆ Good Behavior Game

Produces 25-60% reductions in school suspensions, diagnosed conduct disorder, and substance abuse in middle school and beyond.

### ◆ High-Quality Tutoring for At-Risk Readers in K-2

SMART Program raises reading ability to ~30<sup>th</sup> percentile vs 20<sup>th</sup> for controls; LIPS Program reduces grade retentions and severe reading failure by 50%.

We seek to incorporate two evidence-based components into social programs:

1. An allocation of funds for rigorous evaluations, to build the number of research-proven interventions.
2. Strong incentives and assistance for program grantees to adopt the research-proven interventions.

## Our work with Key Federal Policymakers Has Advanced Concrete Reforms:

- ◆ Congressional Education and Judiciary Committees
- ◆ Office of Management of Budget (OMB)
- ◆ U.S. Department of Education leadership

# Researcher Perspective

- ◆ Research findings rarely affect policy decisions because policymakers are influenced more by politics and vested interests than by evidence.

## Policymaker Perspective

- ◆ Researchers address esoteric topics that are not policy-relevant, produce ambiguous findings, and report results in jargon-filled papers accessible only to other researchers.

## Suggestion 1: Focus strategically on building highly-effective, research-proven interventions

- ◆ There's urgent policy need for interventions shown, in well-designed RCTs, to produce sizeable, sustained effects on important life outcomes.
- ◆ Research-proven interventions that are easy-to-replicate are likely to have a greater policy impact.
- ◆ A research-proven intervention need not be scientifically interesting to be of policy importance.

## Example of how research-proven interventions can influence policy: U.S. welfare reform

- ◆ 1980s & 90s: Large, well-designed RCTs showed superiority of welfare reforms emphasizing short-term job search assistance & training, and moving into workforce quickly.
- ◆ These findings were key to 1988 and 1996 welfare reform acts, and major subsequent reductions in welfare rolls and gains in employment.

## Suggestion 2: Recognize that well-designed RCTs tend to be more persuasive to policymakers than more complicated designs

- ◆ Thoughtful policymakers readily grasp the value of random assignment.
- ◆ With complicated designs, policymakers may wonder about hidden assumptions or gaming.
- ◆ E.g., in welfare reform, policymakers understood the design and results without need for complex interpretations.

## Suggestion 3: Report study results in plain language.

- ◆ Most research concepts used to report results of an RCT can be expressed in plain language.
- ◆ In practice, however, most reports contain jargon that make them inaccessible to policymakers.
- ◆ Suggestion: Run draft study reports by a spouse or friend to ensure key elements of the study are described in clear, plain language.

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