THE WHITE HOUSE

THE EVIDENCE FORUMS

Measuring and Assessing the Use of Evidence

Urban Institute Federal Evidence Forum[1] and White House Year of Evidence for Action

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Event Background and Synopsis

One purpose of conducting rigorous evaluations and building a base of strong evidence is to improve operations and results. For that to happen, evaluations and other evidence-building activities, such as performance measurement, should ideally be co-developed with the end users; and the findings and results of evidence must be disseminated to and applied well by the users and practitioners. How do governmental agencies know if the evidence they are supporting is reaching the intended users? Is it being used and if so, how?

On August 18, 2022, the Urban Institute's Federal Evidence Forum and the White House Year of Evidence for Action team co-hosted a public virtual forum, addressing how evidence gets transmitted to appropriate users (e.g., policy makers, program administrators and staff, communities and people who are affected by policies and programs); how evidence use can be measured and assessed; and tools and strategies that can be used to support a variety of evidence-driven processes (e.g., measurement tools, strategies for integrating users and practitioners early to ensure study relevance, accessing evidence, understanding evidence, absorption of evidence, adoption of evidence-based practices).

The event featured a diverse array of speakers, including opening remarks from the Urban Institute's Demetra Nightingale and Diana Epstein of the Evidence Team at the U.S. Office of Management and Budget; presentations from Lauren Supplee of the W.T. Grant Foundation and Kathryn Oliver of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine; and a panel facilitated by the Urban Institute's Rekha Balu featuring Natalie Palugyai,

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Secretary of the California Labor Agency, Brittany Borg of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, and Calvin Johnson of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Key Insights

Speakers at the forum highlighted their efforts to increase and measure the use of evidence in their own practice. They also discussed challenges and opportunities from their perspectives. Here, we highlight a few key insights speakers shared.

Types and purposes of evidence use vary significantly. Speakers noted that there are several discrete uses of evidence, each of which could, or should, be measured. Kathryn Oliver pointed to conceptual frameworks of evidence for policy, including one from Weiss (1979), which involves six different and complementary uses of evidence, ranging from practical ad hoc decisions to strategic planning to broadly contextualizing and working on intersecting issues at an operational level. Panelists discussed their uses of evidence in making individual policy and program decisions, in addition to thinking about long-term policy strategies and goals. For example, Secretary Palugyai described analyzing evidence to understand how workforce system participants achieve success in finding and keeping a high quality job in order to determine where the Department should invest funding and what programs to support or change. Similarly, Dr. Johnson discussed using evidence to track program implementation for HUD grantees, in order to ensure that federal funding has the desired impact on local housing authorities.

Participants also highlighted that the same evidence may prompt different decisions from different people, which complicates measurement of the evidence's use. Different stakeholders likely have diverging goals, so they may interpret and use evidence differently. Evidence use may also differ depending on the circumstances – ranging from how a study may be directly cited and used in developing a policy, to how a group of program administrators may consider how a body of research and evidence can inform decisions about how to improve programs.

There are a number of distinct and complementary tools for measuring evidence use. Speakers also highlighted ways evidence use can be measured. Lauren Supplee discussed suggestions for mixed-methods research, including more objective but potentially time-consuming options like observation and document review along with more subjective but accessible measures obtained through surveys and interviews. She also introduced a [William T. Grant Foundation resource website](#) with specific details of various tools and methods to measure evidence use. Each of these methods have some benefits and drawbacks, but can be used in combination to get a fuller picture of evidence use.

Panelists also mentioned the importance of making sure that the tools are updated and accessible and that program and performance data systems incorporate ways to measure

the use of evidence. For example, some data collection tools have only been used one time and not updated, and some only focus on certain elements of use while neglecting others. Program information systems often include services or components for which there is evidence, and one should be able to analyze the extent to which programs are adopting and implementing evidence-based activities. Several panelists recommended improving information systems so that programs can better track their own use and implementation of the evidence. Speakers mentioned that both program staff and policymakers need improved access to these tools in order to better measure the use of evidence.

A culture of evidence includes understanding the use of evidence. Speakers noted the importance of broadening an organization's culture around evidence use. This includes incorporating the use and measurement of use of evidence early in the evidence-building process. Identifying early on what evidence will be useful for decision making will help policymakers and program administrators to collect the highest quality evidence, and be more mindful about priorities and results. Speakers also mentioned the importance of building inter- and intra-agency collaboration in government contexts around building, implementing, and measuring evidence use, to ensure that all staff are on board and engaged.

Several panelists mentioned that they would like to build in a more direct feedback loop with program participants, in order to ensure that those who are impacted by policy and program decisions have a say in how the evidence is collected, analyzed, and implemented. Many of the speakers emphasized the need to incorporate more diverse perspectives into measuring the use of evidence – thinking about how diversity shapes not only the design of studies but how we interpret and implement the resulting evidence. This also applies to deciding on which outcomes to focus – for example, evidence may suggest that a policy or program is improving outcomes for a particular goal, but it may be that participants actually have differing needs that are not being met by the existing goals. Incorporating participant perspectives ensures that measurement of the use of evidence is accurate and equitable.

Future Directions and Opportunities

Evidence use depends on the type of evidence and the perspective of the user; therefore measuring the use of evidence is not easy or straightforward. Evidence-based policy should aim to have multiple ways to measure the use of evidence. Three suggestions for actionable steps are offered:

- First, establish resources and tools that federal agencies can share with each other to encourage more agencies to routinely measure the use of evidence they produce. Using similar survey questions from agency to agency, for example, could ease the burden of developing and testing new surveys, and make it more likely that agencies could administer surveys more routinely. Sharing validated instruments could also be used in evaluations, facilitating the analysis of findings across studies.

- Second, consider ways to include use and measurement of use into study designs, along with different perspective of what "use" means. Obtaining input from program participants in advance on the relative importance of the outcomes being included may help inform how the results might be used in the future.

- Third, program management and performance information system and performance measures could be reviewed to ensure that key services and activities are accurately defined and consistently reported. Having more precise and consistently reported data on activities, services and measures enables analysis of performance improvement trends over time, and can determine whether interventions or services proven effective through rigorous evaluations are adopted or expanding in the system.

The video recording of the Forum and links to useful resources, presentations, and materials are available on the Urban Institute's Federal Evidence Forum webpage.