“DEVELOPING GOOD TASTE IN EVIDENCE”: FACILITATORS OF AND HINDRANCES TO EVIDENCE-INFORMED HEALTH POLICYMAKING IN STATE GOVERNMENT

KEY MESSAGES

- Knowing how to find, appraise, and apply research makes a significant difference to policy makers’ ability to use research in their decision-making.
- Political pressures, difficulty finding high-quality, relevant research, and a lack of research skills, resources and time can all impede evidence-based decision-making.
- Research evidence can be a powerful tool to help argue a point and weigh the financial costs of policy options, but it can also serve to give policy-making a human face by demonstrating how policy decisions affect people.

This is a summary of an article written by Christopher J. Jewell and Lisa A. Bero

Even though some barriers to using research evidence in policy-making seem insurmountable, other barriers can be broken down, according to a recent U.S. study. Researchers Christopher Jewell and Lisa Bero interviewed 28 American state legislators and public health agency administrators to discover the most common obstacles and solutions to using research in making decisions on state health policy.

Obstacles to research use

Administrators reported that limited resources for collecting and evaluating research, budget cuts, growing mandates, complex policies, and challenges in organizational culture are among the most difficult barriers to using research to inform policy and planning. Among legislators, the most prominent barriers included a lack of research skills, time, manpower and money to seek out relevant research. Prior political commitments and promises to constituents and lobbyist groups also interfered with the ability to change policy direction. Ongoing staff turnover and a concentration of power in senior political party members presented further challenges.

For both groups of policy makers interviewed, simply getting a hold of high-quality evidence is problematic. Part of the problem is the substantial amount of time and resources needed to sift through poor-quality or extraneous research findings. Another issue is that many policy makers have limited or no access to online
research databases and a limited ability to find research beyond the best-known research repositories.

Powerful anecdotes that favour particular policy options also wreak havoc with evidence-based decision-making, as do interest groups, political values, attacks on research, and public discourses that concern people’s rights.

**Improving access to research**

While the barriers can seem overwhelming, there are many initiatives and factors that can improve the appeal and accessibility of research evidence for informing policy. For example, research results can capture the effects that a policy can have on specific people, giving the policy a human face. Research can also demonstrate how much a policy option will cost.

One way to make evidence more accessible is to provide evidence-based skills training to policy makers, who may then champion evidence-based decision-making in their own offices. Having trusted resources to turn to on short notice for research data was frequently identified by the interviewees as a way to increase research use. Creating opportunities for officials to pull research from policy experts and from each other were also noteworthy initiatives.

Reframing policy issues to resonate with existing research is one tactic for improving research use, said interviewees. For example, rather than discussing whether soft drink vending machines in schools cause obesity (a topic that lacks directly relevant research), policy makers can dig up research that examines the link between children’s obesity and soft drink consumption.

**Bibliographic Reference(s)**


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