

Lesson 4: Overcoming Challenges to Policy Evaluation

Lesson Overview

So far, you have learned what policy evaluation is and how important it can be in advancing public health outcomes. You learned how the CDC Evaluation Framework is used to conduct evaluation throughout the policy process. You are almost ready to begin evaluating policy. First, however, it's important to be aware of some common challenges you may face. This lesson will equip you to deal with those challenges.

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to

- List challenges of conducting policy evaluation.
- Identify methods to overcome common challenges to policy evaluation.

This lesson should take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Introduction

Evaluating policy is not without challenges. You may be faced with some complicating factors such as shifting timeframes around policy enactment and implementation, anti-lobbying guidance, lack of data, policy complexities, and contextual elements such as public opinion surrounding a policy or decision-makers' desire for immediate results. Keep in mind, however, that the toughest hurdles yield the highest leaps. In other words, the benefits of policy evaluation in advancing public health far outweigh the challenges.

Throughout this lesson, you will be presented with 10 challenges and asked to consider how they could be overcome.

Challenge #1

Concern About Allowable Participation in Policy Development Process

Challenge: As a federal employee, I'm not even allowed to participate in the policy evaluation process, am I?

What's your advice?

- A. CDC does not lobby for or against any legislation. That means, as a federal employee, you are not permitted to participate in any domain of the policy process—including evaluation. Any policy evaluations will have to be done by non-federal employees, such as nongovernmental partners, who are not bound by anti-lobbying restrictions.
- B. While CDC does not lobby for or against any legislation, that doesn't mean you can't conduct an evaluation or perform work in other domains of the policy process. When in doubt, ask for clarification of the rules. For some things, you may be able to identify key nongovernmental partners to evaluate areas best suited to their capacities and expertise.

Challenge #2

Fear of Evaluation and Lack of Familiarity with Policy Evaluation Methods

Challenge: I've never evaluated policy before. I'm not sure how to begin.

What's your advice?

- A. Start by determining the goal of your evaluation activities. This will shape how you approach the evaluation, the stakeholders you engage, and the methods and data that you will use to perform the evaluation.
- B. Policy evaluation really is no different from program evaluation, so just approach it in exactly the same way. Use the CDC Evaluation Framework for guidance and be sure to consider the evaluation standards.

Challenge #3

Lack of Control over Policy Implementation

Challenge: I don't have any control over when or how this policy is implemented. How am I supposed to evaluate it?

What's your advice?

- A. You should only conduct policy evaluation in situations where there is close control over the implementation of the policy. This is really the only way in which you can be confident in the policy impact evaluation results.
- B. Conducting a policy implementation evaluation can help with interpretation of impact evaluation results and provide insight into mid-course adjustments for improving implementation.

Challenge #4

External and Contextual Factors

Challenge: There are just too many external factors involved—the economy is weak, the public doesn't know enough about this issue—how are we supposed to measure policy outcomes?

What's your advice?

- A. When there are many external factors involved, evaluation can be challenging. Measure contextual factors to the extent possible, and develop an evaluation plan that measures short-term and intermediate outcomes that logically link to long-term outcomes.
- B. When there are many external factors involved, evaluation can be challenging and may be impossible. Since there are no ways to control or account for contextual factors, you should choose a policy to evaluate that is not influenced by contextual factors.

Challenge #5

Lack of Resources or Clear Responsibility for Evaluation

Challenge: I don't have the resources to do policy evaluation. I'm not even sure what my responsibilities are.

What's your advice?

- A. It's important to have adequate resources available before starting a policy evaluation. If you don't have the resources to conduct a high-quality policy evaluation, then you should not attempt to conduct an evaluation. Instead, you should rely on partners or stakeholders to do so.
- B. It's important to define roles and responsibilities early on, including what resources you will need and where you will get them, in a clearly written—and flexible—evaluation plan. Identify and partner with the stakeholder who has responsibility for monitoring the implementation.

Challenge #6

Conflicting Results

Challenge: All the results just seem to contradict each other. What's the point?

What's your advice?

- A. When weighing the results, consider whether appropriate methods were used, the extent to which data accurately represent the indicator or impact, and your confidence level in the logic model. Also consider the statistical significance and magnitude of the findings, the assumptions made by statistical tests, and the match between evaluation methods and evaluation questions.
- B. There are often contradictory findings with policy evaluations. It's hard to know what to believe. Sometimes there is just no way to determine whether a policy has an impact on public health.

Challenge #7

Rapid Pace of Policy; Political Scrutiny and Desire for Quick Production of Results

Challenge: Everything's moving way too fast! If that's not bad enough, we're under a lot of pressure to show results quickly. How do I keep up?

What's your advice?

- A. Some policies receive a great deal of attention from politicians and other decision-makers who want information as soon as possible. Even when you're not under this type of scrutiny, never underestimate the value of advance planning. If at all possible, strive to thoroughly develop the evaluation plan. Be sure to identify potential indicators upfront to plan for their collection, and don't limit yourself to long-term outcomes. Identify short-term and intermediate outcomes as well.
- B. If you are not able to plan the evaluation at the start of the policy process, then it will be difficult to conduct a comprehensive evaluation. You should only evaluate policies that are in the early stages of development so that you are able to track and evaluate every phase of the policy process. Otherwise, you won't have confidence in the results of the policy evaluation. Policy evaluation requires many years in order to show results. Unless you can start at the first phase of policy development, the evaluation will not be successful.

Challenge #8

Lack of Strong Evidence Base, Access to Appropriate Data, and Appropriate Measures

Challenge: The evidence base isn't very strong. I don't have access to the data I need, and there aren't any appropriate measures already developed. I don't know how I'm expected to work like this.

What's your advice?

- A. If the data you need are not readily available, you should consider developing a new surveillance system to collect as much data as possible on the policy. Use what data are available to make some logical assumptions that address important data gaps. Once you have several years of data, you will be able to identify some of the variables to use in the policy evaluation.
- B. Conduct a stakeholder discussion, or reach out to communities that have done similar evaluations. Although the right data may not be readily available to your agency, it may be accessible by partner organizations or agencies. Explore the linkage of multiple data sets to increase analysis possibilities.

Challenge #9

Lag in Availability of Data

Challenge: It's going to be a long time before any data will be available for the evaluation. Is there any way to get information sooner?

What's your advice?

- A. In order to ensure that you have data as soon as you need it, plan to collect the data yourself. This way, you will have the ultimate control over when data is available and you won't have to wait on external partners.
- B. Ensure that your evaluation plan factors in the availability of data. You can speed up the process by partnering directly with the agency that collects the data rather than waiting for the data to become publicly available.

Challenge #10

Challenges in Finding an Equivalent Comparison Group

Challenge: Everything about this policy is so new and specific; I'm sure I'll never be able to find an equivalent comparison group. I may as well not even bother.

What's your advice?

- A. Explore the content of the policy, the target population, and the level at which the policy is being implemented (e.g., community-, city-, or state-level). This will help in determining whether there are ways to find an equivalent comparison group. Consider alternative designs, including pre-post designs.
- B. Work closely with the parties responsible for implementing the policy to ensure that the policy is rolled out in a way that allows for an equivalent comparison group design.

Lesson Summary

In this lesson, you learned about some common challenges to conducting policy evaluation, and you identified solutions to those challenges.

Now that you have completed this lesson, you should be able to

- List challenges of conducting policy evaluation.
- Identify methods to overcome common challenges to policy evaluation

Proceed to the next lesson for a summary of the topics we've covered in this course. You'll be able to save and print each lesson summary, as well as a consolidated list of course resources.

How Did You Do?

Compare your responses to the expert responses listed below.

Challenge	Expert Advice
1.	B
2.	A
3.	B
4.	A
5.	B
6.	A
7.	A
8.	B
9.	B
10.	A