# Lesson 2: Advancing Public Health Through Policy Evaluation

## Lesson Overview

The previous lesson provided some basic information about how evaluation is applied to the policy process. This lesson will go into more depth about the value of policy evaluation throughout the policy process.

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

- Explain how policy evaluation can be used to advance public health goals.
- Identify opportunities for policy evaluation throughout the policy process.

This lesson should take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

## The Value of Policy Evaluation

### Benefits of Public Health Policy

As mentioned in the previous lesson and exemplified in the report, *Ten Great Public Health Achievements—United States, 2001–2010*, policy has been instrumental in many public health achievements over the years, including the following:

- Vaccine-Preventable Diseases
- Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases
- Tobacco Control
- Maternal and Infant Health
- Motor Vehicle Safety
- Cardiovascular Disease Prevention
- Occupational Safety
- Cancer Prevention
- Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention
- Public Health Preparedness and Response

### Benefits of Public Health Policy Evaluation

How do we know that policy had anything to do with a reduction in tobacco use, or prevention of childhood lead poisoning? The answer is, of course, policy evaluation. Evaluation not only lets you know how effective a policy is; it can also lead to the development of more effective policies and better public health outcomes.

If policy development, implementation, and outcomes are never evaluated, you may miss out on an opportunity to demonstrate how the policy was implemented and whether it was effective in improving public health. Formative and process evaluation can inform needed adjustments and improvements during the course of a policy effort so that intended public health outcomes are achieved.

### Examples of Public Health Policy Evaluation Benefits

How do we know whether the right stakeholders were engaged during the development of a policy? How do we know if the policy is achieving its intended outcomes, or whether there are unintended outcomes (positive or negative)? Again, the answer to all these questions is policy evaluation.

Following are examples of some of the benefits of advancing public health goals through policy evaluation. Note that the purpose of the policy evaluation may vary based on the policy domain being examined.

### Contributions to the Evidence Base

Evaluating the health outcomes of a policy contributes to the evidence base and could lead to the documentation of additional policies that could benefit public health beyond what was originally envisioned. In addition, the evaluation can sometimes uncover unintended outcomes—whether positive or negative. For example, secondhand smoke policies were originally intended to reduce lung cancer and other respiratory conditions. However, reductions in heart attacks were also documented when secondhand smoke policies were implemented, pointing to the need to consider a wide range of health outcomes when evaluating policies. Impact or outcome evaluations assess the effectiveness across the domains of the policy process on one or more public health outcomes.

### Determining Which Policies May Be Most Effective

Evaluation can help you identify policies that are likely to be the most effective in addressing a particular public health problem. This usually occurs within the Policy Analysis domain of the policy process. For example, through the "Together We Can" initiative, the Central Michigan District Health Department used a specific process to choose evidence-informed strategies to improve the overall health of people in the district and promote wellness. The department hosted a public health summit, during which participants were updated on the results of a community needs assessment and participated in a brainstorming session to identify priority areas.

Staff at the health department then took the suggestions from the summit and examined evidence of their effectiveness using recommendations from:

- What Works for Health
- CDC's The Community Guide
- Healthy People 2020

Next, they categorized strategies based on stakeholder support and evidence of effectiveness.

For strategies suggested that didn't have strong evidence, the staff performed research to determine whether other health departments in the nation were doing similar work. They found articles, toolkits, and websites for professional organizations. The categorization was then presented to a council of stakeholders and, through consensus, they chose strategies to include in their Community Health Assessment and Improvement Plan.

### Helping to Triage Policy Options

Evaluation can help you prioritize policy options based on effectiveness, feasibility, and other factors. As with identification of potential policy options, this usually occurs during the Policy Analysis phase of the policy process.

For example, when selecting evidence-based obesity prevention strategies, the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment worked with external stakeholders to prioritize and rank strategies using five criteria (selected by staff at the department).

These criteria included:

- The likelihood of population impact (adjusted by level of evidence)
- Capacity to implement
- Impact on health disparities
- Political and community support
- Ability to measure policy options

For more information about prioritization, see Tools for Implementing an Evidence-Based Approach in Public Health Practice, located in the course Resources.

## Preparing for Windows of Opportunity

Sometimes various factors combine to make conditions ripe for policy enactment and adoption. Under these circumstances, policy may need to be made before all variables are certain or known. This can happen within the Strategy and Policy Development domain of the policy process. For example, decision-makers in one state may be considering passing a law similar to one implemented a few years ago in another state. Although the decision-makers may have requested data about the health impacts of the policy, there may be few studies at this point to provide reliable data.

This type of situation opens a policy "window of opportunity," and the issue may call for partial evidence available to inform the decision. In such circumstances, one strong study that evaluates the effects of the policy may be considered promising enough to present preliminary data to inform decision-makers.

In the absence of a window of opportunity, public health practitioners can continue research to expand the evidence base for policy recommendations so that additional data is available when an opportunity is presented.

According to John Kingdon, open policy windows can occur when policies:

1. Are congruent with the national mood.

2. Enjoy interest group support.

3. Lack organized opposition.

4. Fit the orientation of the prevailing legislative coalition or administration.

5. Are technologically feasible.

6. Have budget workability.

Source: Kingdon, John W. (2010). *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies, Update Edition, with an Epilogue on Health Care* (2nd ed.). New York: Pearson, Longman Classics in Political Science.

## Documenting and Informing Implementation

Evaluation data not only contribute to the evidence base for the effectiveness of policy interventions, but they also contribute evidence on the processes for implementing policies across different contexts. Such evaluation data can inform how a particular policy option can be implemented in a specific context or jurisdiction. Using evaluation data in this manner can happen within the Strategy and Policy Development domain of the policy process.

For example, the Center for Training and Research Translation (Center TRT) disseminates the findings from both research and practice evaluations of policy interventions related to nutrition, physical activity, and obesity prevention to inform

how specific policy options may operate when implemented in certain contexts and jurisdictions. The information that Center TRT disseminates includes data on intervention reach and outcomes, the extent to which a policy was implemented as designed, modifications made, barriers to implementation, and keys to success. Some examples of the information available from Center TRT include descriptions of Hawaii's Complete Streets Policy and West Virginia's School Nutrition Standards.

### Identifying Factors Affecting Enactment

Evaluation can help identify the factors that affect enactment, such as potential barriers or facilitators. For example, a study of the Massachusetts Tobacco Control Program (MTCP) found that "state funding of local boards of health serves as a catalyst for local policy enactment" and that "very small towns may require additional state resources or innovative approaches . . . to stimulate policy action."

For more information, read the full article:
http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1447489/.

### Identifying Gaps in Implementation and Enforcement

Evaluation can help you identify gaps in implementation and enforcement. This usually occurs within the Policy Implementation domain of the policy process. For example, in 2001, Texas passed Senate Bill 19, requiring students in publicly funded elementary schools to participate in physical activity. The bill also requires schools to implement a coordinated school health program.

In order to examine awareness of and adherence to Senate Bill 19 in a sample of elementary schools and two public health regions, a team conducted statewide, structured interviews with principals. The team also identified differences by region, which suggested that Senate Bill 19 was not being implemented consistently across the state, and that certain regions required additional support around implementation. The results also illustrated the importance of monitoring implementation of enacted legislation in order for policies to have their intended impact.

### Demonstrating Value of Policy and Accountability for Resources Used

Evaluation can be used to estimate the benefit of a policy and calculate a return on investment. These economic evaluations assess the effectiveness across the domains of the policy process using various economic indicators. As an example, the Decade of Vaccines Economics (DoVE) project demonstrated substantial health and economic benefits from increased access to new and existing vaccines.

The researchers showed that increasing the use of six vaccines over a ten-year period could save the lives of 6.4 million children in some of the world's poorest countries (based on the Lives Saved Tool and projections of immunization coverage from the Global Immunization Vision and Strategy).

Using these health impact projections, another team of researchers was then able to calculate the economic value of these health gains—approximately $231 billion. Read more about this research in the Resources section.

For more information about using evaluation to demonstrate the value of policy, read the Guide to Analyzing the Cost-Effectiveness of Community Public Health Prevention Approaches.

## Opportunities for and Value of Policy Evaluation Within and Across the Policy Process Domains

### Case Study: Smoke-Free Ordinance

Let's look more closely at the example of a community that wants to limit exposure to secondhand smoke because of concerns about health hazards of secondhand smoke and increased complaints from their citizens about public smoking. View the slideshow to learn about the policy evaluation opportunities throughout the policy process, and the value of the evaluation.

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### DOMAIN: Problem Identification

**Community Policy Process Activities**
- Assess where and when community members are exposed to secondhand smoke, particularly those at greatest risk for poor health outcomes (e.g., children with asthma, older adults).
- Develop a statement of the problem.

**Opportunities for Policy Evaluation**
- Evaluate the problem statement according to the evidence base.
- Evaluate whether the problem can be addressed through policy.
- Assess stakeholder engagement in problem identification.

**Value of Policy Evaluation**
Can lead to a more effective problem statement to guide policy analysis and development.

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### DOMAIN: Policy Analysis

**Community Policy Process Activities**
- Convene stakeholders.
- Identify, assess, and compare potential policy options for reducing exposure to secondhand smoke.

**Opportunities for Policy Evaluation**
- Assess stakeholder engagement.
- Determine whether the data review is sufficient to inform policy development.
- Identify criteria that will be used to assess the policy options and the process used to compare policies.

**Value of Policy Evaluation**
- Can lead to more effective stakeholder engagement.
- Can help in identifying the policy or set of policies likely to have a positive impact on the problem.
- Can help identify additional data that can inform policy development.

## DOMAIN: Strategy and Policy Development

**Community Policy Process Activities**
- Prioritize getting an ordinance to prohibit smoking in recreation areas.
- Develop draft language for the ordinance.

**Opportunities for Policy Evaluation**
- Evaluate the viability of this prioritization based on evidence.
- Assess stakeholder engagement and to what extent stakeholder concerns were "translated" into draft language of the ordinance.
- Assess the drafted ordinance. Is it based on evidence? Is the language strong enough to enforce? Is it consistent with model policy guidance?

**Value of Policy Evaluation**
- Can lead to more effective prioritization if needed.
- Can inform the development of draft language that meets stakeholders' identified needs and is based on evidence and model policy guidance.

## DOMAIN: Policy Implementation

**Community Policy Process Activities**
- Engage stakeholders.
- Identify or collect baseline data.
- Create an implementation and monitoring plan.
- Implement the policy (e.g., no smoking signs, policy and procedure guidance).
- Work with police and local leaders to enforce the ordinance.
- Identify and collect data during the policy implementation process.
- Report evaluation findings.
- Continue raising awareness.

**Opportunities for Policy Evaluation**
Evaluate enforcement, implementation, and outputs.

**Value of Policy Evaluation**
- Can complement outcome evaluation to inform the evidence base.
- Can lead to improved implementation and enforcement.
- Can inform development of a modified ordinance.
- Can help in identifying unintended outcomes.

| **DOMAIN: Overarching Activities** |
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| **Community Policy Process Activities** <br> • Engage stakeholders. <br> • Identify or collect baseline data. <br> • Identify or collect interim data and/or follow-up data <br> • Report evaluation findings. <br> • Continue raising awareness. |
| **Opportunities for Policy Evaluation** <br> • Evaluate short-term,  intermediate, and long-term health outcomes <br> • Evaluate costs and benefits <br> • Evaluate cost-effectiveness |
| **Value of Policy Evaluation** <br> • Can build the evidence base. <br> • Can identify the policy's impacts on public health. <br> • Can provide return-on-investment data. <br> • Can identify unintended outcomes. |

## Lesson Summary

In this lesson, you learned about opportunities for advancing public health goals through policy evaluation.

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

- Explain how policy evaluation can be used to advance public health goals.
- Identify opportunities for policy evaluation throughout the policy process.

The next lesson will explain how to use the CDC Evaluation Framework within each domain.