Brief 3: Evaluating Policy Content

This brief focuses on the implementation of Step 3 of the Framework (focusing the evaluation design) as it applies to the first of the three main phases of policy evaluation: policy content evaluation.
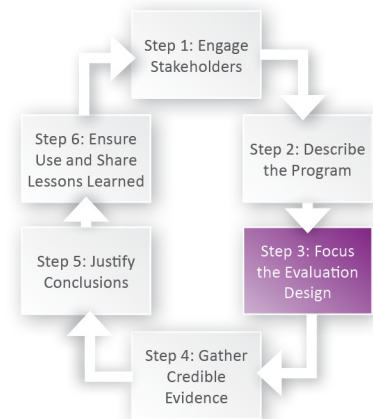
Purpose of Policy Content Evaluation

Policy content evaluation can have multiple aims or purposes, including:

- Identifying the extent to which the content of the policy clearly articulates requirements.
- Comparing policies across communities to identify key similarities and differences.
- Understanding the process by which a policy is selected and passed.
- Improving policy implementation and future policy development.
- Informing development and interpretation of implementation and impact evaluations.

Policy content evaluation may focus on a number of different aspects of policy content including:
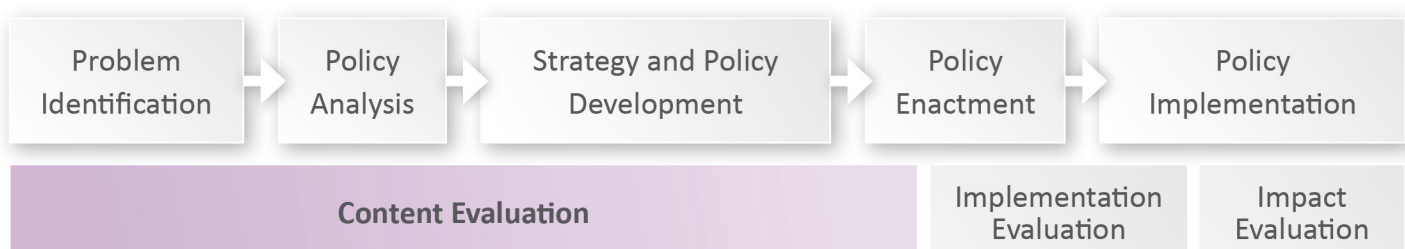
- The core components and implementation requirements of the policy.
- The evidence base supporting the policy's strategy.
- The context of the policy's development and passage.
- The stakeholders' roles and responsibilities.
- The content of similar policies.

Step 1: Engage Stakeholders
Step 2: Describe the Program
Step 3: Focus the Evaluation Design
Step 4: Gather Credible Evidence
Step 5: Justify Conclusions
Step 6: Ensure Use and Share Lessons Learned

Policy Content Evaluation: What are the Core Components of the Policy?

Policy content evaluation examines the substantive information and material contained within a policy in relation to the policy's requirements, its similarity to other policies, the context in which it was developed, or some combination of these.

Figure 1. illustrates where in the policy process content evaluation is focused.

Problem Identification	Policy Analysis	Strategy and Policy Development	Policy Enactment	Policy Implementation

Content Evaluation	Implementation Evaluation	Impact Evaluation

Sample Content Evaluation Questions

Once the purpose and focus of the evaluation are determined, you should identify specific evaluation questions. Ideally policy evaluation is built into the entire policy process; however, achieving this ideal is not always feasible. It is important to assess the best point for beginning content evaluation on the basis of the circumstances of the particular policy. The following are some sample policy content evaluation questions. It is important to determine whether your evaluation questions examine the policy in isolation or in comparison to other policies. The evaluation questions you choose will guide the selection of an appropriate evaluation design.

- Does the policy clearly state the goals or objectives?
- Are the evidence-based components of the policy clearly articulated?
- Are the components of the policy consistent with those of model policies?
- Are the requirements for implementation clearly stated in the policy?
- Are the requirements feasible given available resources?

- Does the policy articulate the mechanism for monitoring implementation?
- Does the policy identify indicators for assessing program success?
- Which major stakeholders played a role in the policy's development?
- What type of resistance or opposition exists?
- Were any key changes originally proposed to the policy's content?
- How is the content of the policy similar to or different from that of other policies?

Evaluation Design Considerations

Evaluating Content

Articulating the relevant dimensions and components of the policy being evaluated is a critical step in content evaluation.[1] Many policy characteristics should be considered and included in the description of the policy. There are also a number of variables to consider when examining policy content. Assessment of the following can inform the implementation and influence your choice of evaluation designs.[1]

- Interpretation of policy language.
- Consistency or conflict with similar policies at other levels.
- Complexity of policy, including number of different components.
- Steps and timeline between policy enactment and implementation.
- Potential for influence of policy in surrounding communities.
- Adjudication, enforcement, and compliance requirements.
- Political and stakeholder influences.

When policies contain multiple components, you may need to evaluate each component separately, depending on its similarity to other components.

Sources of Policy Content Information

Ideally, relevant content information is clearly stated or available within the policy itself. However, this ideal is rarely the case. Additional sources of information include legal documents, regulations, amendments or court rulings, committee hearings, legislative databases, and stakeholder interviews.[1] Consider any changes to the policy over time by examining policy revisions, amendments, revised regulations, court rulings, or other formal changes to the policy. Legislative or policy databases are a vital tool in comparing policies across jurisdictions (including international, national, state, and local). A list of several such databases can be found in **Appendix N**.

The level of specificity or detail in a policy can have a strong influence on how a policy is implemented and on how much impact it has. For example, many sports concussion laws require that a "medical professional" must clear an athlete before the athlete is allowed to return to play. If the policy language is unclear as to what it is meant by a medical professional, the law will be implemented in varying ways. This lack of specificity can result in less-than-ideal implementation of a law or create the need for further education and direction for stakeholders and implementers.

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1   Tremper, C., Thomas, S., & Wagenaar, A. C. (2010). Measuring law for evaluation research. *Evaluation Review*, 34, 242–266

Evaluating the Policy Development

It can also be valuable to document and evaluate the process by which a policy was developed. For example, an evaluation could examine the impact of particular activities or variables in the development and enactment of a policy by using a design that can demonstrate changes in certain key variables over time. These designs measure target indicators before and after the particular activities occurred. If it is not possible to obtain pre and post data, a more appropriate design may be a non-experimental descriptive design, such as a case study. Understanding the process by which a policy was developed can be helpful in fully understanding the policy and interpreting the results of future evaluations.

A variety of measures can be used for evaluating the process of developing and enacting a policy. Ensure the types of measures and indicators used will tie back to the evaluation design and evaluation questions. A logic model specifically for the initial phases of the policy development process may assist in identifying the aspects of the policy that are of greatest interest (see Brief 2).

Comparing Policies on the basis of Key Components

To conduct a nationwide review of graduated drivers licensing (GDL) legislation, The Bloomberg School of Public Health at Johns Hopkins University obtained information on the components of GDL programs in each state in 1996 and again in 2005, enacted and effective dates, and any amendments or changes. Using specified criteria, researchers assessed whether seven GDL components were present or absent in each state. They also examined variations in when changes in the components occurred. This content analysis of GDL legislation allowed them to compare legislation between states as well as to look at the relationship between the components and subsequent crash data.[2]

Examples of Policy Development Measures and Data Collection Methods[3,4]	
Stakeholder interviews	Focus groups
Surveys assessing attitudes and priorities	Meeting observations
Self-assessment of capacity	Partnership integration assessment
Public involvement activity logs	Media tracking
Legislative process tracking	Policy tracking
Activity outputs	Case studies

A number of available resources provide suggestions for measuring the policy development process; several are listed in **Appendix V**. If your agency or organization has any restrictions related to involvement in the policy development process, it is important that you consider these restrictions early on to ensure that your evaluation does not violate any of them.

Evaluating Similarities and Differences Between Policies

Although it is tempting simply to explore differences between jurisdictions *with* or *without* the policy, doing so ignores many important variables within each policy. Even simple policies can be deceptively complicated. Unfortunately, evaluators often compare communities only on whether or not they have a particular policy

2   Baker, S. P., Chen, L.-H., & Li, G. (2007, February). *Nationwide review of graduated driver licensing*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Center for Injury Research and Policy. Retrieved from http://www.aaafoundation.org/pdf/NationwideReviewOfGDL.pdf

3   Reisman, J., Gienapp, A., & Stachowiak, S. (2008). *A handbook of data collection tools: Companion to A Guide to Measuring Advocacy and Policy*. Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

4   Harvard Family Research Project, Harvard Graduate School of Education. (2007). Advocacy and policy change. *Evaluation Exchange, 13*. Retrieved from http://www.hfrp.org/evaluation/the-evaluation-exchange

in place.[1] However, it is important not to ignore the key differences between the policies in each community. This is where content evaluation can be useful. When comparing the content of different policies, you may find it helpful to use a subset of policies to construct a categorization schema.[4] This is done by evaluating the components of the policies (as discussed above) and then looking for different categories or components occurring across the different policies. Once the proposed schema is identified, it can be tested on the remaining policies. This process should be reiterative and involve ongoing discussion between legal and policy experts.[1]

Comparing Policy Content

To compare the content of various antibullying statutes to evidence-based model policy components, Srabstein and colleagues developed an Anti-bullying Public Health Policy Criteria Index. The Index was based on antibullying research and elements of effective policy. The evaluation reviewed state laws dealing with school bullying, harassment, or intimidation and compared them using the Index. The analysis revealed that only 16 of the states had statutes incorporating comprehensive basic public health antibullying principles, as measured by the Index.[5]

Potential Policy Content Evaluation Challenges and Solutions	
Challenges	**Solutions**
Lack of access to appropriate data	▪ Identify available pre-existing data sources and explore the possibility of data linkage to increase analysis possibilities (see Brief 6).
Lack of appropriate measures	▪ Conduct a stakeholder discussion to assist with identifying or developing appropriate measures. ▪ Reach out to communities that have done similar types of evaluation.
Concern about allowable participation in the policy development process	▪ Request clarification of rules. ▪ Identify key nongovernmental partners to evaluate areas best suited to their capacities and expertise.

Action Steps

▪ Create a list of state injury prevention policies that have recently passed and prioritize the ones you are most interested in evaluating.
▪ Select one of the high-priority policies and identify evaluation questions related to the content or development of the policy.
▪ Do a brief search to see if other states have similar policies and compare the content of the policies to identify major similarities and differences between them.

Additional Resources

Methods Guides from Public Health Law Research, a program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Available from http://publichealthlawresearch.org/methods-guides

5   Srabstein, J. C., Berkman, B. E., & Pyntikova, E. (2008). Antibullying legislation: A public health perspective. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 42, 11–20.