

Most US lawmakers don't look to universities for behavioral health research

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When trying to inform their decisions on behavioral health policy, almost three-quarters of state legislators choose not to use universities, where most research is undertaken, as a primary source.

Jonathan Purtle, DrPH, an assistant professor in Drexel University's Dornsife School of Public Health, surveyed 475 state [legislators](#) and found that just 27 percent seek research from [sources](#) in higher education.

Why so few lawmakers get their research directly from universities may have to do with the questions each side is most concerned with.

"Historically, university researchers have mainly asked research questions that are of interest to themselves and other university researchers. These are often different than the questions that are of interest to policymakers," said Purtle, whose study was published in *Psychiatric Services*. "I think legislators don't turn to university researchers because they don't think they'll have information that is relevant to the policy decisions they face."

Disconnects such as those are why Purtle pursues research into how policymakers get their [public health](#) information, what they think of it, and how it affects their actions. The hope is to demystify how policies get made—and show researchers what channels are most effective in influencing them.

To that end, this study broke down survey responses by political party and found some significant splits.

Thirty-four percent of Democrats identified universities as a primary source of behavioral health research information, while just 19 percent of Republicans did.

Another stark difference was found in the source that was most popular in the study: [behavioral health](#) advocacy organizations. With 53 percent of legislators, overall, citing them as sources, it broke down to 65 percent of Democrats compared to 40 percent of Republicans.

"I was surprised that a significantly higher proportion of Democrats than Republicans reported turning to advocacy organizations," Purtle said. "There are liberal/Democrat-leaning advocacy organizations, as well as conservative/Republican-leaning ones. I'm not sure what explains this difference. It could be that 'advocacy' is perceived as a left-leaning term."

State agencies were another top research source, Purtle's team found, with 48 percent of all legislators naming them. The breakdown there was a bit more even, with 45 percent of Democrats and 52 percent of Democrats answering that they get research from them. Additionally, legislators' own staff were another top source, coming in at 51 percent (56 percent Democrats and 45 percent Republican).

When legislators were asked what factors about research were most important to them, both Republicans and Democrats rated "budget impact" and "cost-effectiveness" at the top. There was a significant difference between the two parties, but at least 76 percent of both sides rated these as "very important."

That shows the importance of including estimates of both in their work

when researchers are doing economic evaluations, according to Purtle.

Political feasibility rated out at the bottom of importance, with just about 51 percent of Republicans and Democrats saying it was very important.

Overall, the study points to a variety of sources where researchers can try to get policymakers to see their work.

"We're seeing that researchers have a variety of channels—such as the advocacy organizations and state agencies—that they can reach legislators through," Purtle said. "We must branch out from the traditional avenues we use for exposure and communicate the message of our research in an appealing way."

More information: Jonathan Purtle et al, Legislators' Sources of Behavioral Health Research and Preferences for Dissemination: Variations by Political Party, *Psychiatric Services* (2018). [DOI: 10.1176/appi.ps.201800153](https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201800153)

Provided by Drexel University

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