Bills with research language more likely to advance through legislative process

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Science can play a key role in whether a bill will ultimately reach its intended outcome, according to a new study from researchers at Penn State. The team found that the inclusion of scientific research language within bills, specifically language referring to the type of study or how a study was conducted, predicted bills’ progression out of committee and enactment.

According to the study, which published in the journal *Prevention Science*, research-type keywords (e.g., "clinical trial," "longitudinal study") were associated with a 65% greater likelihood of being passed out of committee, whereas methods keywords (e.g., "collect data," "conduct studies") were associated with a 32% greater likelihood of becoming enacted than bills without research evidence language.

The team analyzed more than 20 years of U.S. Federal-level legislation related to youth in the justice system. An in-depth review of legislation revealed instances of research being used to define problems, reinforce effective practices, generate knowledge through research and evaluation, and disseminate findings.

The focus on juvenile justice is the third study of its kind for the Penn State researchers. Previous papers on human trafficking and substance use prevention also found that research language played a key role. This series of studies has served two purposes, said Scott.

"Both policymakers and research translators seek legislative frameworks that can leverage research evidence for effective policymaking," she said, "and study findings have refined methods for future studies to quantify research use, which allows us to better evaluate the impacts of research translation efforts."

The team observed the need to bring the research and policy communities closer together, earlier in the legislative process, particularly around areas where data can provide the most insight.

"The research identified opportunities for our field to think about how we expand our reach on topics legislators should know about, such as risk factors and underlying causes," said Scott. Clarification around such topics "is something that we've seen a lot of traction on in practice," she added.

According to Scott, whose team regularly sends researchers to Capitol Hill to work with lawmakers, researchers and policy makers can work together to use data in ways that can ultimately impact the communities they serve.
"Call it the social side of how research gets used," she said. "If you're not at the table, then you're really missing an opportunity for influencing the discourse."

The team plans to continue research on the topic and is currently analyzing the use of research language in legislative content throughout the pandemic.


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