

2017

# Writing & Disseminating Policy Briefs

A Communications Guide  
For Injury and Violence Researchers and Practitioners



THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

**IPRC** INJURY  
PREVENTION  
RESEARCH  
CENTER

Dear Reader,

The University of Iowa Injury Prevention Research Center ([UI IPRC](#)), funded by the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control ([NCIPC](#)) at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), aims to reduce the burden of injury and violence. We conduct interdisciplinary research, train students and professionals, develop and evaluate intervention programs and policies and translate research to practice with the help of our many national, state and community partners.

To develop this guide, we pulled information from both academic articles and agency/organization guides and “how-tos.” This is not meant to be exhaustive of the literature on policy briefs. Rather, we aim to provide a summary that can help guide you and your agency in the development of briefs that can inform policy decisions.

Providing information to policymakers so that they better understand the burden of injury and violence and the evidence-based strategies to reduce this burden is a very promising approach. We hope this guide has some ideas that encourage you to communicate with policymakers.

This is a working document, and we appreciate feedback about how to improve it (please email [ann-saba@uiowa.edu](mailto:ann-saba@uiowa.edu)).

*A special thank you to the [RUPRI](#) Center for Rural Health Policy Analysis at the University of Iowa College of Public Health for input into this guide.*

Best regards,

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*Cover photo: Capitol building in Des Moines, Iowa*

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## Introduction

Throughout the injury and violence field, we have seen that laws and public policies are often the most effective ways to reduce the burden of traumatic injury and violence.<sup>1</sup>

Think about the impact of policies related to the following two examples, among the top ten great public health achievements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:<sup>2</sup>

Motor-Vehicle Safety	Safer Workplaces
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Legislated implementation of improved engineering efforts to make motor vehicles and highways safer</li><li>• Increased use of seat belts, child safety seats, motorcycle helmets</li><li>• Decreased drunken driving</li><li>• Urban planning to make roadways and pedestrian areas safer</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Occupational Safety and Health Act establishing federal oversight</li><li>• Lock-out-tag-out safety procedures to reduce machinery injuries</li><li>• Less severe injuries and deaths in mining, manufacturing, construction and transportation</li><li>• Less work-related health problems</li><li>• Labor laws protecting the health, safety and rights of workers</li></ul>

We as injury researchers and practitioners continue to produce evidence that can lead to safer lives with less injuries and violence. And it is essential that our best available science be part of the policy making process. However, research in general is often not fully utilized by policy makers,<sup>3</sup> and we often do not inform the policy decision-making process consistently and effectively.

Because of the impact that policies can have, we need to develop strategies to minimize barriers between ourselves and policy makers and put greater emphasis on the translation of research to practice -- a priority for the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control ([NCIPC](#)), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The **policy brief** is one method of communicating to policymakers and stakeholders to help raise awareness about injury and violence issues, provide information about best practices for different types of safety-relevant policies, analyze policy approaches, and communicate about effectiveness and impact of different types of policies.

The purpose of this guide:

(Part one) Describe the goals of the policy brief and provide some guidance on ways to prepare one.

(Part two) Describe the steps of dissemination, how to make the policy brief more useful to policy makers, and how to help bridge the gap between researchers and policy makers.

*This guide is targeted towards those working in the injury and violence prevention field. The examples provided are injury-related, but the approaches are easily generalized to other topics.*



Researchers from the University of Iowa and IPRC meet with injury practitioners and Iowa Governor Terry E. Branstad at the 2016 Drowsy Driving Summit

## Part 1: The policy brief

### What is a policy brief?

A policy brief is a stand-alone document<sup>4</sup> and communication tool with the following features:

- A succinct presentation of a problem along with its context,<sup>5</sup> the implications of existing and/or proposed policy, and recommended actions (when appropriate)
- A focus on a single topic<sup>6</sup>
- Evidenced based research<sup>7</sup>
- Typically one to six pages, though length varies

The term “policy brief” has been applied to many types of communication tools supporting policy decisions and geared to policy makers.<sup>8</sup> This guide discusses the policy brief as described above.

### Who are policy makers?

Policy makers have authority to determine policies. Examples:

National	State/region	District/local
President Members of Congress Federal agencies	Governor State representatives Members of state legislature State agencies State governing bodies (i.e. Board of Regents)	Mayors City councils Local school boards

### What is the end goal of the policy brief?

#### **To facilitate policy making and prompt change**

A policy brief is similar to an academic research paper only in its use of evidence to support its points.<sup>9</sup> The goals of a research study and a policy brief are different: An academic paper aims to contribute to a body of knowledge, while a policy brief aims to stimulate action to solve problems.<sup>9</sup>

Examples of change that can be addressed through a policy brief:<sup>5</sup>

- Laws (at all levels of government)
- Administrative policies/regulations
- Agency funding priorities
- Organizational practices
- Program implementation

How do policy briefs seek to prompt change?

**Policy briefs distill a large amount of sometimes complex detail to increase understanding of an issue<sup>10</sup>**

Information overload creates mental stress and often hinders those who are charged with making frequent and timely decisions, like policy makers.<sup>11</sup> By summarizing the details, writers of policy briefs help policy makers understand the issues. Policy briefs are brief and narrow in focus, but still include relevant details. They are not exhaustive; rather, they give targeted summaries.<sup>12</sup>

Policy briefs act as information brokers, and can be used in a variety of communications without much repackaging.<sup>13</sup> Policy briefs can also be produced quickly, compared to time intensive primary research, and can therefore help policy makers identify how to move forward.<sup>8</sup>

**Policy briefs weigh findings and explain what they mean to inform policy decisions**

Policy briefs specifically guide policy makers on the implications of research evidence and findings for potential policy decisions.<sup>14</sup> Sometimes policy briefs synthesize findings from numerous studies, outlining both what is known and not known, and what research evidence should be given greater weight.<sup>14</sup>

**Policy briefs provide options and can make recommendations, when appropriate**

Policy briefs can prompt change by making policy recommendations based on the best available evidence or educated guesses about the future. For example, some policy briefs will document what types of policies have had the biggest impact – providing “best practices” guides.

Some policy briefs prompt change by providing options to the policy maker to choose from, but let the policy maker decide for him/herself about the best course of action. The aim is to improve the knowledge and understanding of the evidence for more informed decision making, rather than trying to influence a particular decision.<sup>14</sup> Sometimes policy makers request policy

analyses from researchers. In this case, a very detailed description of policy approaches, viewpoints, and anticipated impacts is synthesized.

There are conflicting viewpoints about whether or not recommendations on specific policy language should be included in a policy brief, and this depends on the reason and source for the brief. Specific recommendations may become lobbying (see next section), which is often restricted for researchers and practitioners. However, recommendations about which policy elements have the best impact – based on the research findings – are often desired by policy makers.

This guide is developed to help researchers determine if recommendations should be included in their policy briefs, and which type.

## Policy briefs: advocacy verses lobbying

Researchers use policy briefs to advocate, not lobby. Here is the difference:

**Advocacy** is broad in meaning. It means pushing for some kind of change in society, like persuading people to change their behavior or the government to change policies and laws<sup>7</sup>



*Advocacy is “conveying the value of using policy to protect the public’s health, such as providing data or stating supported arguments such as ‘using seat belts saves lives.’” -- Safe States*

**Lobbying** is narrow in meaning. It means trying to influence decisions made by legislators in government, like a *specific* piece of legislation.<sup>16</sup> Lobbyists usually work for a group, industry or and organization, and use information to support their clients’ interests.<sup>15</sup>

*\*You should always follow your agency or organization’s policies regarding lobbying and advocacy efforts.<sup>16</sup> Many government employees have restrictions on activities in which they are allowed to participate.<sup>16</sup> These restrictions do not apply when you represent yourself as a constituent.<sup>16</sup>*

## Categories of policy briefs

We identified four categories of policy briefs based on some specific goals that provide evidence for policy action. These different goals can help guide you in creating an outline for your policy brief. There are other goals not mentioned in this guide.

### The Issue Brief

#### ***What is going on right now?***

The goal of this policy brief is to raise awareness of a public health problem and to demonstrate a public health burden. It can also be used to help identify you or your agency as an information resource to policy makers. This policy brief can be helpful when the target audience does not have the issue on its radar screen as a priority.



Examples include informing policy makers about:

- Increasing opioid overdose deaths in your state
- The burden of farm vehicle crashes on public roadways
- The impact of childhood trauma on long-term physical and mental health
- The cost of youth violence to the community

Here are some possible questions that can get you thinking about your policy brief or help you lay the framework (not necessarily in order):

- What is the issue? Is the issue well understood?
- What is the magnitude of the problem?
- What are the risk factors? Who is most affected?
- What are the most important findings?
- What background information is necessary to put these findings in context?
- What data will you include? Does it show the public health burden?
- How will you present your data so that it is accessible?
- What policies or policy directions are suggested by the findings?
- What are the available interventions, strategies and policies to address this problem?
- What is the geographic relevance of the finding?

## The Policy Landscape Brief

### ***What do existing policies look like?***

The goal of this policy brief is to show evidence of a policy approach that may not be on the public's or policy makers' radar screen. The issue also may or may not be known to the policy maker. This policy brief introduces the notion that evidence-based policy approaches are available or could be improved.



Examples include informing policy makers about:

- A neighboring state's use of a mandatory and enhanced Prescription Drug Monitoring Program (PDMP) and decreasing opioid overdose deaths
- Comparisons of how one state's injury related policies compare with other states, like "[The Facts Hurt](#): A state-by-state injury prevention policy report" by Trust for America's Health
- The impact that an organized trauma system can have on improving trauma outcomes
- Comprehensiveness of anti-bullying legislation in your state compared to other states
- Occupational deaths in one county compared to other counties in the state
- Motor vehicle crashes resulting in death in your state compared to other states

Here are some possible questions that can get you thinking about your policy brief or help you lay the framework (not necessarily in order):

- What is the burden of the problem you are addressing?
- Who is affected by the problem? Does it affect the constituent audience?
- What types of approaches have been used? Did they succeed/fail? Why?
- What kinds of challenges were encountered by others addressing this problem?
- How common are policies addressing this problem? What do we know about how effective they are?
- What can the decision-maker expect to happen if they address this problem?
- What are the benefits and costs (and to whom)?

## The Modelling Brief

### ***What is the cost and/or benefit of adopting a specific policy?***

The goal of this policy brief is to provide specific evidence about the anticipated impact of a potential policy, such as through a policy analysis. It can present findings from one study or multiple studies, with the goal to move towards best practices in a policy approach.

This policy brief can include recommendations, such as what elements of a policy are likely to lead to the biggest anticipated impact. However, they can also be powerful simply by providing the findings from policy evaluations. Whether or not to include recommendations depends on rules from the author's agency, the reason the brief is being written (for example, a stakeholder agency might request recommendations), and the strength of the evidence warranting specific recommendations.



Examples include informing policy makers about:

- How schools implemented a state anti-bullying law and the impact the introduction of the law had on rates of bullying
- Cost savings to the state from implementing sexual violence prevention programs
- Potential deaths and head injuries that could be prevented from strengthening a weak motorcycle helmet use law

Here are some possible questions that can get you thinking about your policy brief or help you lay the framework (not necessarily in order):

- What is the history of the policy approach?
- What is known about the policy approach and where it has been used?
- What are the successes and challenges of the policy approach?
- What outcomes, intended or unanticipated, occurred?
- How did the policy impact different groups?
- How do the results in your state/county/locality differ from others nationally or regionally?
- What makes a comprehensive policy and how does your state/county/locality fall short of this?

## The Policy Analysis Brief

### ***What are the recommended actions?***

The goal of this policy brief is to give a thorough analysis or input on a specific policy or policies. This policy brief is the most likely to include specific recommendations, and often goes into detail about specific policy language. This type of brief does not rely on empirical data. Researchers most often prepare this policy brief at the request of a stakeholder agency.

Examples include:

- Discussing implications of increasing the speeding limit on interstate highways
- Comparing expected impacts of implementing and enforcing different DUI levels
- Discussing coverage gaps in a policy, like age restrictions for equipment operation and operational environments

Here are some possible questions that can get you thinking about your policy brief or help you lay the framework (not necessarily in order):

- What is the extent of the problem? What is the underlying problem?
- What has been tried before to reduce/solve this problem?
- How effective were these?
- What are the options for change, or to address this problem?
- What are the policy implications?
- What are the pros and cons of policy options?<sup>11</sup>
- Is the option of not changing also an option?
- What is the input of the stakeholders on this issue?
- What are the key implementation considerations?<sup>8</sup>
- What general directions are implied by the results?<sup>14</sup>
- Based on your evidence, what policy option rises as the best solution to the problem?
- What additional information would increase confidence in this direction?<sup>14</sup>
- What are the costs of a proposed intervention?
- Who benefits/who pays?



Former IPRC Deputy  
Director and Coralville, IA  
Mayor John Lundell meets  
with Iowa Representative  
Dave Loebsack and his  
wife.

## Preparing to write a policy brief

### Who is your audience?

One of the first steps is to identify the audience for your policy brief.<sup>17</sup> A policy brief is more likely to be read, understood and acted upon when it is written for a clearly identified audience.<sup>9</sup> As researchers, we need to carefully select key messages emerging from our research, and tailor the information to the intended audience.<sup>17</sup>

Policy briefs usually target decision-makers, often policy makers and/or their staff at the local, state and federal levels, but also agencies and industry.

For broader advocacy initiatives, your audience could include groups such as journalists, state agencies, community organizations, donors, practitioners, interest groups and/or your dissemination partners (those who can help share your brief with their stakeholders).



In some cases, your audience may be your organization's funder.

All these audiences are the end users of your policy brief—the ones you hope will be reading it. It is very important to know as much about your audience as possible.

### Answer these questions about your audience:

- What is their technical knowledge?<sup>5</sup> (mechanical, legal/political, economic, statistical, demographic?)
- What language (from lay to scientific) should you use?<sup>17</sup>

*Example: Journalists may not have technical knowledge about the parts of the tractor in your farm crash study. They may not know much about statistical methods and terms (like what a spaghetti plot is!). They also write for large lay audiences and have limited space to summarize your work. There is also the risk that they could misconstrue a finding or emphasize the wrong one. Lay language is more appropriate.*

- What political or organizational constraints are they working under,<sup>5</sup> and what are their priorities?

- How likely will they be open to the message?<sup>5</sup>

*Example: Legislators often have reasons for not supporting safety legislation. They may have a goal to minimize governmental regulation (i.e. they may be generally against laws that require people to do things). It is important to identify and respect the audience's viewpoint. Your information may help put issues in perspective: If you can demonstrate that their constituency is in favor of an approach, or unaware of a problem, they may be more interested in learning about its impact.*

- What is the best "hook" for them (what will catch their attention)?<sup>5</sup>

*Example: A famous state university athlete dies from an overdose of prescription opioid pain killers, and many in the community are distraught and concerned about his cause of death. Your opioid surveillance research may be timely. Policy makers may be more likely to take notice, and your dissemination partners may take greater efforts to share your work with their stakeholders.*

*Example: If there is no timely hook, you can bring your audience in with statistics to show the magnitude of the problem,<sup>9</sup> like a spike in ATV deaths of children under the age of 15 in your state, or an anecdote showing this disturbing trend. Stories about personal impact can be a very powerful hook.*

- What is the right amount of information they need (not too long or short)?<sup>5</sup>

*Example: Your state representative is on the transportation committee, and you have met with her previously to discuss your teen driving work. She may not need extensive background on this subject, so too much information describing the issue could make it long and not as useful. Something short with current data may increase the chances that she will actually read it.*

- What do they need to understand about your research and its implications?

- Do they need to understand your study methods?<sup>17</sup>

*Example: It might be useful to your representative to state your sample size in your survey of mothers of injured children, but not that you gave study subjects a small monetary incentive for participating, or that you used the Dilman method to collect information. The latter information may be useful to a researcher intending to repeat your study, but not necessary to this audience. You could instead emphasize your findings rather than your methodology.<sup>9</sup> Keep in mind that the brief must still provide good science, so that the methodology is not perceived to have influenced the outcomes.*

## Starting out: Organizing your brief

\*See examples on our website [www.uiiprc.org](http://www.uiiprc.org) (forthcoming)

There is not one way to write an effective policy brief.<sup>9</sup> Depending on the goal of your brief, you may devote different amounts to outlining a problem, describing a policy approach, providing a policy update, evaluating the options, or making recommendations.

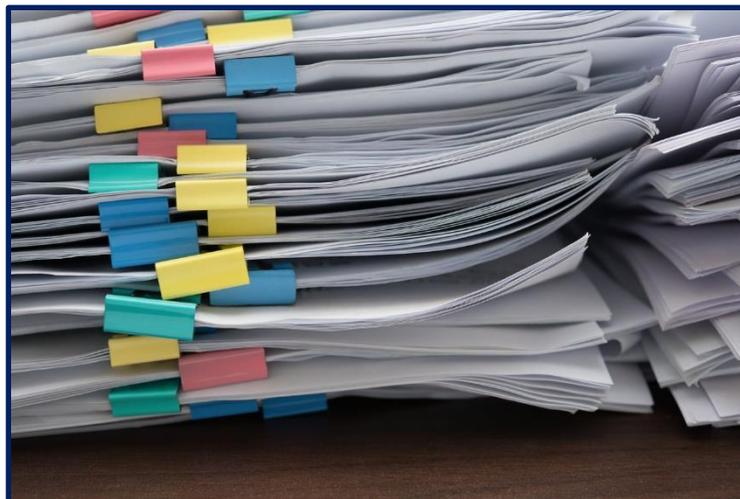
Policy briefs are a relatively new way researchers are packaging their research evidence, and developing one is a process that evolves with practice.<sup>8</sup>

There is also not one way to organize and write your policy brief.<sup>7</sup> In the next section there is a potential outline of different parts of a policy brief, in a potential order. These can be reordered based on your needs. For example, if recommendations are given, they can be highlighted at the beginning, the end, or throughout the brief near relevant text.<sup>7</sup> What is most important is that they are easy to find and stand out.<sup>7</sup> For those who are not permitted to advocate for a specific policy option, the policy recommendation section can be left out.

Some policy makers may not read the whole policy brief, or will just skim it. For this reason, some suggest starting with your conclusions<sup>5</sup> or putting your findings in the beginning.<sup>13</sup> So if you have main points you want them to walk away with, put them higher in the policy brief.

Try to keep a logical flow by piecing together your facts and analyses to build your case for your recommendation,<sup>9</sup> if applicable. And use visual cues to show where you are going.<sup>5</sup>

Whenever possible, demonstrate points using images, such as figures, pictures, or charts. Make sure your policy brief is visually appealing and easy to read (see section, *Making your policy brief visual*).



<b>Potential outline for your policy brief</b>	
<b>Title</b>	Identifies topic and inspires interest, is short and to the point, <sup>7</sup> and may also include authors and a brief number (like “Brief No. 2016-2”) and masthead (if in a series).
<b>Introduction</b>	Creates curiosity (hook) for rest of brief. May include: <sup>4</sup> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ A clear statement of the issue/problem</li> <li>○ Purpose of your policy brief/ study</li> <li>○ Some key findings or recommendations</li> <li>○ A brief mention of research methodology (“A survey showed..., We evaluated...”)</li> <li>○ An anecdote or story<sup>3</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Body</b>	Covers the details. May include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Context and background of the issue/problem (like legislative history, statistics, demographics and other things that will take policy maker up to the present<sup>11</sup></li> <li>○ A brief (two to three sentences) research methodology. If a longer description is needed, consider an appendix.</li> <li>○ Presentation and discussion of your research findings, including any visuals of your data</li> </ul>
<b>Policy implications</b>	Discusses why the policy maker should care, why it is relevant, and the options available <sup>17</sup> May include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Political realities and dimensions of the issue<sup>11</sup></li> <li>○ Actions available to the policymaker<sup>11</sup></li> <li>○ Pros and cons of each approach/solution<sup>11</sup></li> <li>○ Descriptions of how changes will improve situation</li> </ul>
<b>Recommendations</b>	Gives evidence to support one alternative/option. This option should be: <sup>9</sup> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Actionable (achievable)</li> <li>○ Feasible (practical and affordable)</li> <li>○ Culturally-appropriate (respectful of the cultural and political context)</li> </ul>
<b>References</b>	May also include notes, acknowledgements, additional resources and/or information about your organization

## Writing for impact

Writing succinctly is important because you have a lot of information that needs to be packaged within a few pages. And writing effectively is important because you want your end user to understand your work and come away with the intended message. Policy makers have shown a strong preference for short, easy to digest information.<sup>18</sup>



Some tips:

- Use one sentence to explain one idea.<sup>4</sup>
- Put one point per paragraph.<sup>4</sup>
- Use plain, lay language, and don't use technical or academic jargon.<sup>7</sup>
- Use simpler, shorter or less words that don't change the meanings (like "about" instead of "with regard to"<sup>5</sup>).
- Spell out acronyms the first time they are mentioned.<sup>4</sup>
- Use the active voice.<sup>5</sup>

*The parents gave permission to the teens* instead of *The teens were given permission by the parents.*
- Use "You" for readers and "We" for authors.<sup>4</sup>
- Provide a link to the full report (if available), or links to references (if sending electronically<sup>13</sup>).
- Create a short, attention-grabbing subject line (if sending electronically<sup>13</sup>).
- Be direct.<sup>4</sup>

*\*Note: Most peer-reviewed publications won't publish something that you've already published in a policy brief format. Also, most funders frown upon producing briefs that are simply a shorter version of a published paper. This, however, does not mean that you can't produce complimentary policy briefs and papers from the same body of work. For example, the peer-reviewed publication could focus on novel methodology or findings from multi-variate analysis, and the brief could just provide simple variable distributions or overall summary estimates..*

## Making your policy brief visual

A visually appealing policy brief goes a long way.

Some tips:

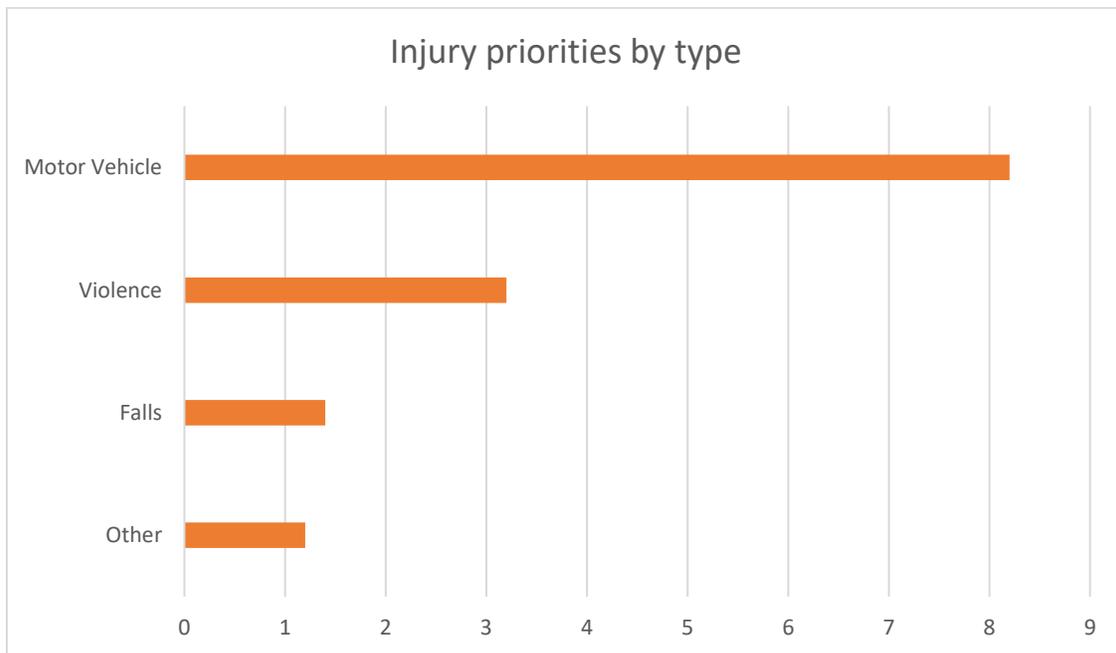
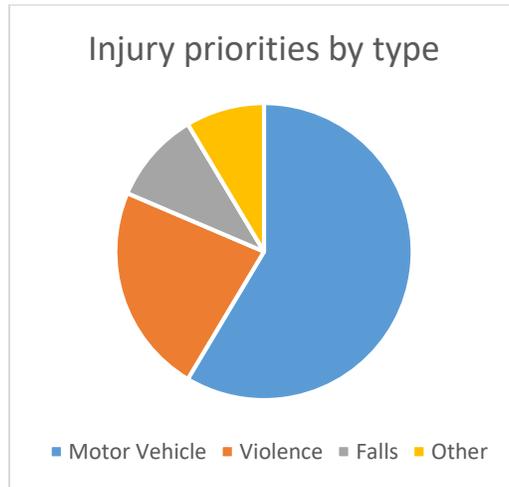


- Check with your organization/institution for required formatting, logos, etc.<sup>7</sup> This is important for branding.
- Use headings and subheadings as signposts.<sup>7</sup>
- Use a minimum of a 12-point font.<sup>13</sup>
- Use charts, tables, and graphs to convey large amounts of information<sup>9</sup> and simplify comparisons.
- Consider graphics, photos and quotations, if appropriate.
- Use text boxes and side bars with information.

*These can help you tell stories that connect to the issue, call attention to bullet points, or add information not critical to the main text.*<sup>4</sup>
- Use the same masthead, if policy briefs are part of a series.<sup>7</sup>
- Don't duplicate info on graphs and charts (legend or label, but not both<sup>5</sup>).
- Make sure all visuals are properly referenced, and copyright is respected.<sup>7</sup>
- Make sure the policy brief prints well in both color and black and white.<sup>13</sup>
- Use bar graphs instead of pie graphs (bar graphs are easier to compare proportions<sup>5</sup>).
- Give round numbers<sup>7</sup> (20,000 not 19, 898).
- Do not use statistical significance levels<sup>7</sup> ( $p < 0.05$ ), or use them sparingly (policy makers may recognize that less than 0.05 is important).
- If the policy brief has a high resolution photo or graphic, it may be too large to send via email. Instead, put it on your website and email the link.<sup>13</sup>
- Use bulleted lists for your recommendations<sup>5</sup> or key findings, rather than wrapping everything into a paragraph.
- Make sure your graphics provide all necessary information and can "stand alone," so they be taken out of your document and used in another.



**Visual Example:** Which is easier to compare injury priorities?



*\*the bar graph should be easier to compare injury priorities*

## Part 2: Dissemination

*“Dissemination is targeting research findings to a specific audience.”<sup>19</sup>*

Once you’ve written your policy brief, the next step is to figure out how to get it out to your intended audience(s). Dissemination is equally important to developing your policy brief, yet often less thought is given to the dissemination strategy. If the information does not get to the audience in an effective way, there is little chance that action will result.

Knowledge translation is a goal of dissemination. Although knowledge translation has different definitions, the common element is to “the move beyond simple dissemination of knowledge to use of knowledge.”<sup>20</sup>

The following [Dissemination Planning Tool](#) was developed by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ).<sup>21</sup> It was designed to help researchers create a dissemination plan that gets their messages out in ways other than the traditional peer reviewed publications and conference presentations. Below is a summary of some of the tool’s highlights.



**1) Research findings and products—** *What is going to be disseminated?*

List your major findings and products to select for dissemination. For this policy guide, the product is the policy brief. Other products could include final reports, fact sheets, press releases, presentations, etc.

**2) End users—** *Who are your end users, the target audience of your dissemination efforts?*

Specify your target audience and identify what may be useful to them and what their needs are. This will provide focus for your dissemination plan and help you tailor your product to their needs. For policy briefs, the end users are policy makers, but could also include journalists, community organizations, interest groups, state agencies, etc., for broader injury prevention advocacy initiatives. End users can also be individuals or organizations that might benefit from your research results.

3) **Dissemination partners**— *Who can help you disseminate your product(s)?*

Think about who you can work with to reach your end users. You do not have to try to reach them alone! It can be opinion leaders in your academic or professional community who have influence. It can be informal networks and colleagues or organizations and agencies and other groups working in the same or similar field.

Ask yourself:

*How will your product advance the mission and goals of these partners?*

*What characteristics of your product or your product’s findings will appeal to them?*

*How can you develop your relationship with them, and have your product in their communication channels?*

Example:

**UI Injury Prevention Research Center’s bullying research findings in Iowa**

<b><i>End users</i></b>	<b><i>Individuals, organizations &amp; networks</i></b>	<b><i>Importance to end users</i></b>
Local health departments	Iowa Department of Public Health	Authority on public health in the state
Local school districts	Iowa Department of Education	Authority on education in the state
Teachers and parents	Some local school districts	Apply state policies on bullying
Social workers and mental health workers	Central Iowa ACEs Steering Committee	Leader in ACEs (adverse childhood experiences) research
Some local leaders	Dr. Marizen Ramirez	Professional credibility and trusted resource
The public, other organizations working in child welfare	Prevent Child Abuse Iowa	Advocacy on initiatives and programs to reduce violence against children

4) **Communication** — *What methods can bring your product to your end users or dissemination partners?*

Consider also what methods your dissemination partners regularly use to reach their constituencies, and how you can tailor your product to their ways of communicating with your end users. Effective dissemination uses various channels to ensure that the widest possible audience is exposed to your product. Such channels can include websites, social media, conferences, media, listservs, and more, as well as person-to-person communications. Take advantage of the connected world we live in: Tweet about your briefs (and get re-tweeted). Post your brief on your website and use links within the brief to point to more detailed maps, tables, information, etc.



5) **Evaluation**— *How will you know if your dissemination efforts worked?*

Think about how you may evaluate how effective your dissemination effects were in getting your product (findings, message) to your end users and dissemination partners. Dissemination is not a one-time activity, but rather an ongoing relationship with your end user/partners, who ideally could provide some feedback about the product, its usability or perhaps what more is needed to translate your research findings into practice.

Other ways you could evaluate dissemination impact are other measureable indicators such as:

- Number of products disseminated
- Media coverage
- Number of requests for information from policy makers
- Evaluations from conference presentations
- Twitter Analytics
- Number of website visits/ Google Analytics

6) **Dissemination work plan**— *What are your short and long action items? What is your timeframe? What resources are needed? Who is responsible?*

Use your responses to organize a dissemination strategy. Some ideas: Ask partners to circulate products for broader reach, integrate your products into social media outlets, and write an op-ed that points to the policy brief on your website.

## Things to consider: researchers verses policy makers

A communication gap exists between researchers and policy makers.

Here's why:

### **Lack of understanding of the policy process**

Typically researchers do not have relationships with policy makers or understand in depth the policy making process,<sup>14</sup> which is complex.

### **Different decision making processes**

#### Researchers

Have specialized knowledge and rely on studies<sup>22</sup>

Tend to focus on answerable questions, which may not be correlated with policy agenda<sup>12</sup>

Produce research findings often address research questions, not policy concerns<sup>12</sup>

#### Policy makers

Work with policies built on a history of related policies<sup>23</sup>

Work with policies influenced by the demands from stakeholders<sup>23</sup>

Have shorter-term interests that are tied to an election cycle<sup>22</sup>

Make decisions often as a result of compromising<sup>22</sup>

Need responsive, timely and usable information<sup>12</sup>

### **Different reward structures**

Researchers are usually rewarded for producing new findings and not evaluating evidence and making sense of what is known.<sup>14</sup> Being involved with policy development as a researcher takes time, and this time in an academic setting does not contribute to career development, like tenure or compensation.<sup>22</sup> Also, their findings are often not sent to information channels that policy makers use.<sup>14</sup> Policy makers are rewarded with reelection or reappointment.

## A problem of timing

Even with the most sound evidence available, some issues are not ready for policymaking because of lack of public support or other competing issues.<sup>22</sup> Also, research studies are not always in a position to influence policy decisions because of timing.<sup>24</sup> Research can take several years, while public officials are elected every two to six years.<sup>22</sup> The political and social climates may not be receptive to change by the time research findings are adequate to support change.<sup>22</sup> Researchers also need sufficient time to conduct good research.<sup>25</sup>

## Ways to bridge the gap

Focus on agenda.

### **Design a research agenda with greater relevance to the current policy debate.<sup>12</sup>**

Policy makers listen to academic researchers most when their analyses are directly related to problems on their policy agenda.<sup>26</sup> One survey found that nearly 50% of the information policy makers received was not relevant to their current work.<sup>18</sup> This does not mean that researchers should work on unanswerable questions, but rather, could report on other types of evidence such as descriptive, correlational, and qualitative ones.<sup>12</sup> Correlation does not show causation, but could still be of value to policy makers wrestling with a problem.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes policy makers can use the simple information in more effective ways than complicated statistical analyses.

*For example:*

*A study examined the distance that rural women had to drive to reach a Domestic Violence Intervention Program – the closest place where victims could receive intervention and shelter services. The study used a complicated and impressive geomapping and analytic approach. Its findings included some estimates with a range of standard errors, and provided different estimates based on the population density of the residence of the victim. Even though the complicated analysis and results were the focal point of the research, the policy makers were interested in just one number and question: What was the average distance that rural women lived from the closest shelter?*



Context matters.

### **Help policy makers see their communities in the results<sup>12</sup>**

While policy makers look to national studies, they are mostly convinced by studies with a local context.<sup>12</sup> These studies can only fully account for the context of the community they are charged to serve.<sup>12</sup> The downside to this is that it may increase confidence in causal relationships, but may make results less generalizable.<sup>12</sup> For systemic reviews of a particular topic, local applicability of the findings should be commented on.<sup>8</sup> Policy makers also desire economic data that will help them assess the costs of problems and the different policy solutions.<sup>27</sup>

### **Use maps that allow policy makers to do a visual comparison<sup>12</sup>**

Although policy makers are interested in local data, they also like to see breakdowns of results by things like geography, urbanicity, or district.<sup>12</sup> This allows them to compare their performance and progress with other states, for example.<sup>12</sup>

You can also do all this in collaboration with policy makers, as this will ensure that your agenda is aligned with theirs.<sup>12</sup> This does not mean that new research can't draw significant attention and reset the public debate—or that policy makers shouldn't sometimes think beyond their immediate policy concerns to understand the broader context of certain problems.<sup>12</sup> It may be that your research can be the spark for policy maker ideas for the future.<sup>12</sup>

The Why is important.

### **Study implementation, not just outcomes<sup>12</sup>**

Policy makers want to know if policies are working and why.<sup>12</sup> Policy makers get frustrated when academic research tells them something worked, but not why.<sup>12</sup> This is especially important when a policy is found not to have the desired effect. Was this because the policy was not implemented correctly? Was it not enforced? Did the policy itself not influence the desired changes?

A multitude of questions can be raised by statistically significant results, such as:

*There are differences, so what is causing this difference?<sup>12</sup>*

*Example 1:*

*An evaluation of a state's helmet law found that helmet use among motorcycle riders did not increase after implementation of the law. An analysis of the law helped identify why: The law itself required only riders under the age of 18 to wear helmets. Thus, one would expect helmet use to increase only in this age group. However, observational studies found that motorcycle*

*helmet use did not increase for any age group, including those under 18 and required by law to wear a helmet. Evaluation of enforcement of the law found that law enforcement agencies were not issuing tickets to riders without helmet. Qualitative studies found that traffic officers were not likely to pull riders over when they could not tell if they had to wear a helmet or not (because they could not assess age visually). Thus, the law was not effective because it was not written in a manner that could be enforced.*

*Example 2:*

*Researchers evaluated a state law that required medical care providers to report victims of domestic assault to law enforcement, with the intent of increasing arrests of domestic abuse offenders. The evaluation found that reports of domestic abuse from medical facilities did not increase following the law. It found that medical care providers were not comfortable reporting on their patients without their patient's involvement. Thus, they were not adhering to the reporting requirements.*

Policymakers want such questions answered in an accessible way. More studies on implementation could help this, and early feedback could help those improve and sustain their work.<sup>12</sup>

Your guidance helps navigate findings.

### **Weigh evidence and draw conclusions<sup>12</sup>**

Policy makers want help from researchers in understanding the research evidence and drawing appropriate conclusions.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes a body of research has conflicting findings.<sup>25</sup> Researchers can use their judgment and experience to draw clearer conclusions about the policy implications of their studies by:<sup>12</sup>

- Emphasizing consensus in the field
- Identifying areas where evidence is less solid
- Putting results into their proper context
- Stating when evidence does not support a conclusion
- Including actionable recommendations (if applicable)

Researchers can also identify different viewpoints of the population, to answer the questions:

- *Who is likely to be supportive?*
- *Who is likely to be supportive?*
- *Who is likely to benefit?*

## Policy briefs are not the final word

### Reach out beyond policy briefs.<sup>28,12</sup>

Researchers need to think beyond just sending out copies of the policy brief to policy makers, and make themselves available to policymakers as a resource.<sup>12</sup> Personal contact between researchers and policy makers is helpful in moving research to policy.<sup>29</sup> Such contact will increase the likelihood that the research results will be used, and will give the opportunity for the researcher and the policy maker to collaborate to determine policy implications and future research needed.<sup>12</sup> A researcher's work may carry more weight if it begins as a question from the policy maker or other targeted audience. Such researcher-policy maker relationships are rare.<sup>12</sup>

Despite your best efforts to write an effective policy brief, you cannot assume the policy maker will conclude the things you want him/her to from your research.<sup>12</sup> Other ways to engage with the policy maker that increases collaboration include:<sup>12</sup>

- In-person briefings (request an opportunity to share your study)
- Special analyses for a policy maker or agency
- Participation as an expert where policy makers are present
- A briefing to the policy maker ahead of a public release of results (in the case of findings countering commonly held beliefs, to give them time to ask questions and prepare a response)

Questions to ask:

- *Where do we have overlapping interests?*
- *How can we help?*



## How to request a visit with your congressional representative

Congressional members spend time in their home districts throughout the year, but have an extended stay every summer during the August recess. This is a good opportunity to meet with them as they are often eager to hear from their constituency.<sup>30</sup> However, you can request a meeting at other times of the year. You don't need any specialized skills for this meeting, but these tips will help make it go more smoothly:<sup>30</sup>

- Call the district office closest to you to schedule a meeting with the member or his/her staff.
- Keep in mind that the member is very busy and reach out as soon as possible to schedule.
- Be clear about the purpose of the meeting.
- Identify yourself at the beginning of the meeting.
- Give out no more than two to three handouts/briefs/information sheets.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, say so, and follow up with an answer.
- Invite the member or staff member to visit your program or attend an upcoming event.
- Thank him/her for taking the time, and follow up with a thank you email.
- Ask for a schedule of town hall meetings the member may be visiting (for other opportunities to talk to him/her).
- Be persistent.
- Participate at "Hill Day" in Washington DC and tell your member which staff member you met in his/her office at home.

Click [here](#) for additional tips from the Safe States Alliance.

Note: You may not be able to get a meeting with your representative. Don't overlook the importance of staff members as they present information to the member.<sup>16</sup>

[Find](#) your US representative.

Credibility matters.

**Be a trusted source of information.**

Policy makers need to trust their source of information, and have a desire for unbiased data.<sup>27</sup> Researchers should ensure the credibility of information they give and be responsive and timely.<sup>27</sup> Relationships between researchers and policy makers develop best through interpersonal interaction, but trust can also develop through electronic communication.<sup>31</sup>

Trust is important even if you are only going to do a single policy brief. If you are going to do a series of policy briefs, then your reputation can be everything.

Being a researcher from a respected academic institution alone can certainly help your credibility, but there are ways to make sure your work is transparent. Ask yourself:

*Do you describe your methods to identify, select and assess your research evidence?<sup>8</sup>*

*Are you methods systemic and described in an understandable way?<sup>8</sup>*



Both long and short formats are useful.

**Consider giving policy makers options for reading less or more.**

There are a few studies on the format preferences of policymakers that reveal a need for a “graded-entry” format<sup>8</sup> —like a one-pager with take home messages, a three-page executive summary that summarizes the full report, and a 25-page report.<sup>32</sup> Many policy makers prefer something easy to skim for main points, but legislative staff also want longer reports for more detailed information on the research.<sup>18</sup> Having both options available ensures that policy makers with different levels of technical sophistication and amounts of time get the same information.<sup>14</sup> This also applies to their staff.

Policy makers use the Internet.

**Maintain current data and up-to-date websites.<sup>27</sup>**

When policy makers are searching for health information for policy work, they often turn to the internet to begin their searches, like websites of federal, state and local health agencies.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, it is important that you keep your most relevant and current data and information on your website<sup>27</sup> and make your research products produced in paper form electronically available.<sup>31</sup> Some policy makers report their preferred delivery modes are verbal and electronic communications.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

We hope this guide is helpful in translating your research to influence policy. Increasingly, scientists are called upon as experts in defining how their research informs policy and practice, and getting involved in the potential policy impact of your work can be very rewarding.

However, it is also important to communicate research findings ethically and accurately. Having people review your policy brief is important. Especially focus on getting feedback from people who have different viewpoints than your own. Ultimately, you are in the best position to understand what your research means. And by working with teams and coalitions and disseminating communication products such as the policy brief, you can help maximize the impact of your research.

## Additional resources

[Simply Put](#): A guide for creating easy-to-understand materials. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). April 2009, third addition

The [2016 Associated Press Stylebook](#) and Briefing on Media Law

The [Purdue Online Writing Lab](#) (OWL)

Rural Health Research and Policy Centers (RHRC). 2010. [A Communications Toolkit for Health Researchers](#).

## [Safe States Policy Tools & Materials](#)

John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, The Women's and Children's Health Policy Center. Video Lecture: The Art and Craft of Policy Briefs: Translating Science and Engaging Stakeholders.

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