

ISSUE BRIEF

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A Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking: A Step in the Right Direction

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The effectiveness of federal programs is often unknown. Many programs operate for decades without ever undergoing thorough scientific evaluations. One such example is Head Start, the pre-K education program for disadvantaged children. A large-scale evaluation using random assignment demonstrated that almost all the benefits of the program disappear by kindergarten.¹

Far too frequently, the amount of money spent to alleviate social problems is considered a measure of success. Instead, success should be measured by the degree to which the programs actually reduce the problems. While continually spending taxpayer dollars on government programs may symbolize the compassion of program advocates, it does not mean that actual social problems are being alleviated.

To plug this information gap, the evidenced-based policy movement seeks to inform and influence policymakers through scientifically rigorous evaluations of the effectiveness of government programs.² In other words, the movement provides tools to figure out what works and what does not work.

Evidence-based policymaking, based upon scientifically rigorous impact evaluations, is necessary to determine whether federal tax dollars are spent wisely. Rigorous impact evaluations provide

policymakers improved capability to exercise oversight of government programs and be more effective stewards of the federal purse. There is little merit in continuing programs that fail to ameliorate their targeted social problems.³ Programs that are not known to work or that do not work at all do not deserve continued funding.

The Commission

With the enormous federal debt increasingly shaping policy debates in Washington, DC, Congress should subject all federal programs to rigorous evaluations to determine what works and what does not work. To help remedy this problem, Representative Paul Ryan (R-WI) and Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) introduced the Evidence-Based Policymaking Commission Act of 2014 (H.R. 5754) in the 113th Congress. Within a few weeks, Representative Ryan and Senator Murray are expected to introduce a revised version of the bill for the 114th Congress.

The Evidence-Based Policymaking Commission would be made up of 15 unpaid members. The 15 commissioners would be composed of academic researchers, data management experts, and program administrators appointed by the President and Majority and Minority Leaders in the Senate and House of Representatives. Each appointing official would have three nominations.

Over the course of its 15-month lifespan, the commission's main objective is to advance evidence-based policymaking within the federal government. To accomplish this objective, the commission has two main goals.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at
<http://report.heritage.org/ib4363>

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- Expand the use of data to evaluate the effectiveness of federal programs and tax expenditures.
- Protect the privacy rights of individuals who participate in federal programs or benefit from tax expenditures.

In order to accomplish these goals, the commission is charged with three tasks:

1. Perform a study of the federal government's data inventory, data infrastructure, and statistical protocols in order to facilitate program evaluation and policy-relevant research. With this task in mind, the commission is required to "make recommendations on how best to incorporate outcomes measurement, institutionalize randomized controlled trials, and rigorous impact analysis into program design."⁴

2. Explore how to create a clearinghouse of program and survey data to increase the use of evidence-based policymaking.
3. Submit a report to the President and Congress detailing the commission's findings and recommendations.

Changing the federal government's emphasis on measuring success by the amount of spending will not be easy. However, the creation of an Evidence-Based Policymaking Commission would be a step in the right direction for changing the culture in Washington towards funding programs that work and defunding those that do not work.

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1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, *Head Start Impact Study: First Year Findings*, June 2005; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, *Head Start Impact Study: Final Report*, January 2010; and Mike Puma et al., *Third Grade Follow-Up to the Head Start Impact Study: Final Report*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, *OPRE Report 2012-45*, October 2012, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/head_start_report.pdf (accessed March 5, 2015).

2. See Karen Bogenschneider and Thomas J. Corbett, *Evidence-Based Policymaking: Insights from Policy-Minded Researchers and Research-Minded Policymakers* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

3. David B. Muhlhausen, *Do Federal Social Programs Work?* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013).

4. Evidence-Based Policymaking Commission Act of 2014, H.R. 5754, 113th Cong., 2nd Sess., Sec. 4 (a)(3).