

Brief #8:**When Do Policymakers Seek Research? County-Level Evidence During COVID-19**

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Background: Across the United States county governments are on the front lines of our response to the COVID-19 crisis. As Michele Barry, Senior Associate Dean for global health at Stanford, said in March 2020, “We have a completely decentralized public health system...We don’t even work from the states up. We work from the counties up.”¹

That’s because county governments are vested with substantial authority on many issues that directly impact people’s daily lives, such as education, health, child care, and public safety. During the pandemic, many of the problems they face are unprecedented with no playbook. On the fly they’ve had to figure out things like how to provide child care to first responders amidst closing schools and how to provide services to residents who lack reliable internet access and are no longer able to visit an office in-person.

One useful source of policy information is what other local governments are doing, yet county leaders do not always have the staff to collect this information systematically.² Researchers, however, often have it and can share it, though they are frequently not in direct contact with county legislators.

Here we asked: When do county leaders want policy information from researchers? Do social cues increase demand?

Main Finding: In March 2020 we cold-emailed two COVID-related policy briefs to a set of county legislators in upstate New York. We varied whether the email message included *social cues* about how other upstate counties found the information valuable (see next page for more details). We found that a substantial number read our emails, and that providing social cues greatly increased this demand.

Information-Seeking Among County Legislators

<i>Overall percentage who sought new policy information</i>	<i>42.1% (16 of 38)</i>
<i>Percentage who sought new policy information after receiving a baseline message</i>	<i>27.8% (5 of 18)</i>
<i>Percentage who sought new policy information after receiving a baseline message with social cues</i>	<i>55.0% (11 of 20)³</i>

¹ Ellen Barry. “It’s Totally Ad Hoc’: Why America’s Virus Response Looks Like a Patchwork.” *New York Times*. March 15, 2020.

² Butler, Daniel M., Craig Volden, Adam N. Dynes, and Boris Shor. 2017. “Ideology, Learning, and Policy Diffusion: Experimental Evidence.” *American Journal of Political Science* 61: 37-49.

Einstein, Katherine Levine, David M. Glick, and Maxwell Palmer. 2019. “City Learning: Evidence of Policy Information Diffusion from a Survey of U.S. Mayors.” *Political Research Quarterly* 72: 243-258. (Especially see Figure A1)

³ Difference between the social cues and baseline groups is statistically significant ($p < .04$, one-tailed z test)

Supplemental Information: Further Details on What We Did

In late March 2020 we cold-emailed two policy briefs with information about COVID-response related topics to a well-defined population of county legislators: those who chair a committee with jurisdiction over family and/or health issues, who have personal email addresses available online, and who live in the seven regions of upstate New York that are not part of the New York City metro area: the Capital District, Central NY, Finger Lakes, Mohawk Valley, North Country, Southern Tier, and Western NY.

Overall, there were 53 leaders who fit the geographic and committee requirements, and of those 72% (38) had personal email information available online. All of the others either included a phone number or an online form to fill out, but not a personal email address. We opted not to include them because we wanted to be able to send one follow-up note and worried that it might be difficult to do that using either of these other contact methods.

In some counties there was only one committee with the relevant jurisdiction, and thus we only contacted one person, whereas in other counties there were multiple committees, and so we contacted more than one legislative leader (e.g. if children, family, and youth issues clearly straddled the jurisdiction of multiple committees, such as “social services” and “health”).

The briefs contained policy information about how other counties and local governments were responding to two new challenges during the crisis: (1) how to provide child care to first responders amidst closing schools and (2) how to use mobile services to reach populations without reliable internet access who are no longer able to visit an office in-person. While some counties may face these challenges more acutely than others, we expected that this information would be at least somewhat relevant to everyone on our list.

All emails contained a link to both briefs. Yet we varied the text of the emails. We randomly assigned some legislators to receive a *baseline* message, whereas others received a *social cues* message. To avoid spillover effects, and also produce more efficient average treatment effect estimates, we implemented a county-level clustered random assignment and blocked on whether there is a major city in the county or not. The subject line was the same in both cases: “research relevant to COVID19 response”. The “baseline” message read as follows:

We’re researchers at Cornell who help run research4impact, an organization that connects research, practice, and policy.

We’re reaching out to county legislators in upstate NY and offering to share research on families, children, and crisis communication that is helpful for responding to COVID19.

Here are some examples from this past week...

The last sentence included an individualized link to a webpage with the two policy briefs. We used Google analytics to track who clicked and also verify that they actually spent time reading rather than immediately closing the window (the latter would show up as a “bounce back” on Google analytics; in our case, there were no bounce-backs).

The other legislators were randomly assigned to receive a “social cues” message, which entailed the same introduction as the baseline group along with a short message indicating that we had created the briefs for other counties in upstate New York. Local leaders are often more interested in gathering policy information from similar localities, and being in the same state is one aspect of similarity (though not the only one; see the references in footnote 2 above). This email read:

We’re researchers at Cornell who help run research4impact, an organization that connects research, practice, and policy. We’ve recently helped legislators in Erie County and Monroe County with their COVID19 responses.

Now we’re reaching out to other county legislators in upstate NY as well, offering to share research on families, children, and crisis communication that is helpful for responding to COVID19.

Here are some examples of what we shared with legislators in Erie and Monroe County...

Once again the last sentence above included individualized link to a webpage with policy briefs.