

MODULE 8 – USING NUMBERS IN RESEARCH AND POLICY

Professors: Bruce Lubotsky Levin, DrPH, MPH & Ardis Hanson, PhD

Using Numbers in Research and Policy. In policymaking, a problem is often defined when the causes are described. In research, a hypothesis or problem is created, which defines a problem and states possible causes.

In both policy and in research, facts, that is evidence and expert knowledge, are gathered. Facts to identify something as a problem, to show why a goal is laudable, and which solutions may be the best.

Stone suggests one common way to define a policy problem is to measure it. This is important since in both policy and research numbers are strategically selected, as well as strategically presented around a policy issue.

Numbers are used in policy debates to show that a problem is relevant. We agree with Stone who believes the fundamental issues of any policy conflict are always contained in the question of how to count the problem. We also believe that the counting of a problem establishes boundaries.

These boundaries then tell us the scope of the problem, what things are defined as part of the problem, or are affected by the problem, and what things are not part of the problem. Boundaries also tell us if a problem is frequent enough to bother counting.

The same is true when we look at the importance of numbers in research. Numbers are used in research to establish the significance of a research project, to document what is known about a problem, and to describe a sample. And here is where we run into trouble with looking at numbers for policy.