

Chapter 5

Chapter Objectives

- Explain how to describe, measure, and analyze public problems, and how to think about their causes and possible solutions.
- Describe how to find pertinent information about problems and governmental actions.
- Assess the policy tools that governments have available to address problems.
- Identify how to think creatively about which policy alternatives or tools are likely to work best for a given problem.

Policy for public problems. Immigration continues to be one of the most intractable public policy issues that the United States faces, and it is certain to be debated on the campaign trail, in state legislatures, and in Congress in coming years. The photo, taken in October 2011, shows a tomato farmer, second from left, talking with State Senator Scott Beason, R-Gardendale, in Steele, Alabama. Only a few of the farmer's field workers showed up for work after Alabama's new immigration law took effect the previous week. (AP Photo/Dave Martin)



Public Problems and Policy Alternatives

On September 29, 2011, the state of Alabama's new policy on immigration went into effect, but complaints about it quickly followed both within the state and nationwide. The law resembled the effort the previous year in Arizona, which approved a stringent and much-criticized anti-immigration law that sought to identify, prosecute, and then deport illegal immigrants. Like Arizona, Alabama wanted to impose tough new restrictions on illegal immigrants in the face of what it saw as federal inaction to address the problem of illegal immigration, a perennially controversial subject.¹ The Alabama law required proof of immigration status (such as citizenship or legal residency) for "any transaction between a person and the state or a political subdivision of the state." This included renewal of a driver's license, a business license, or a vehicle registration, but also, depending on who was interpreting the law, the provision of utilities such as electricity, water, and natural gas to illegal immigrants.

Some Alabama residents soon found themselves unable to cope with the new requirements because they could not locate a birth certificate or easily acquire other acceptable evidence of citizenship. Others had the necessary paperwork, but found that they had to spend hours in line to prove their citizenship for routine government services. Public officials who did not carry out the law's requirements fully could find themselves liable for civil or criminal penalties. Even observing a violation of the law and not reporting it to authorities was a crime, and a government employee who violated the law could be convicted of a felony offense, surely enough to encourage most to stick to the letter of the law. By November, an increasing number of state lawmakers were calling for changes in the sweeping measure

because of such effects, as well as concern in the business community that the law was harming the state's economy. As one lawmaker put it, "The longer the bill has been out, the more unintended consequences we have found." He concluded that "all of us realize we need to change it." Yet most of the Alabama public seemed to like the new law, making any fundamental changes in it politically difficult.²

Beyond the obstacles that state residents faced because of the new law and the predictable legal challenges to it, Alabama farmers learned that they might suffer substantial economic losses; they could no longer count on having sufficient numbers of workers, and the law went into effect just as their crops needed to be harvested. The workers they hired previously were hesitant to remain in the state for fear of arrest and deportation. In addition, many businesses that the state had aggressively recruited in recent years to strengthen its economy, including Mercedes-Benz, Hyundai, and Honda, had expressed reluctance to expand their presence in the state, and those companies still being recruited began to lose interest because of the new immigration law. Undocumented immigrants constitute only about 4 percent of Alabama's workforce, or about a hundred thousand people. Yet there was little evidence that Alabamians were eager to fill the sudden vacancies left by farm laborers, restaurant workers, retail service personnel, and others who accepted such low-wage jobs. The same is true nationwide. Of the nearly twelve million illegal immigrants estimated to reside in the United States, some seven million are in the workforce, but often in jobs that few Americans want even in times of high unemployment.³ Indeed, a comprehensive study of the overall societal costs and benefits of illegal immigration concluded that the difference was "close enough to zero to be essentially a wash." That is, illegal immigrants are not dragging down the U.S. economy, as is often assumed to be the case, even if some states and some industries are significantly affected.⁴

The growing national debate over immigration has been emerging for well over a decade, and it reflects the widespread belief that previous immigration control laws failed to deal effectively with the problem. More fundamentally, there was little agreement on what the problem of illegal immigration really was about. To some, it had been captured by reports that the number of illegal immigrants in the United States had increased in recent years and was continuing to grow, particularly in the West and South. Among other concerns, critics have focused on the cost to the states of providing education and medical care for undocumented workers and their families. Others worried that a high rate of illegal immigration suggested that U.S. borders lacked the security that is essential to prevent entry by potential terrorists. Still others, particularly business owners, were inclined to minimize the problem, saying that the health of the U.S. economy depended on immigrant workers and would suffer without their contribution, as many businesses in Alabama discovered. Some also cited the economic benefits to the immigrants' home countries of their employment here.

What should the United States do today about illegal immigration? To some extent, the problem diminished significantly from 2008 to 2012 with the souring U.S. economy, particularly within the construction industry, as immigrants found it difficult to secure work and returned to their home countries.⁵ Nonetheless, the long-term concerns remained. So should the nation provide for a selective guest worker

program to fill jobs for which there are no U.S. workers available, an idea favored by business and labor groups? Should it strengthen the borders, especially the 1,933-mile boundary with Mexico, and add physical barriers such as the 700 miles of fence that Congress authorized in 2006, or an electronic virtual fence that the government tried and then cancelled in early 2011? Should the government increase the number of Border Patrol agents to control illegal entry?⁶ Should it provide some kind of path to legal residency or citizenship for at least some illegal immigrants already in the nation if they meet specific requirements? There are few clear answers to any of these questions, in part because policy actors hold sharply divergent views on immigration, emotions on the subject often run high, and both Democrats and Republicans are acutely aware of the political risks of staking out a position on the issue. Congress struggled with immigration reform in 2013 and 2014, but could not resolve sharp differences between the Senate and House in an election year.

As we argued in earlier chapters, policy analysis is no panacea for a political system vulnerable to emotional and shortsighted decision making, all too evident in the history of immigration policy. Yet it can, under the right conditions, help to counteract such tendencies and push the policy process toward more thoughtful and effective actions. This chapter focuses on two elements in policy analysis: how to define and analyze public problems and how to think about possible solutions. It also suggests some strategies for studying public problems and for finding useful information.

Problem Analysis

The beginning of any policy study involves a description of a problem. Sometimes the problem—and perhaps even its causes—is obvious. For example, if the problem is teenage smoking and how to curtail it, one can find abundant information about the number of teenage smokers, why they choose to smoke, and the implications for lifelong smoking habits and the associated health problems that accompany them. Some states, most notably California, have used that information to adopt educational programs aimed at prevention and other policies that have successfully reduced the rate of teenage smoking.

The example of teenage smoking shows how simple some kinds of problem analysis can be. The problems may be relatively straightforward, and the information needed to make a policy choice is at hand, thanks to national or state surveys that collect it. Although few public problems are entirely without controversy, there are also many, such as this one, about which reasonable people from all political ideologies can agree on what actions to take. Such agreement is made easier when the facts about the problem are readily available and easily understood.

The Nature of the Problem

Most public problems are not so simple; nor is the path to policy action as clear as trying to reduce teenage smoking. Nevertheless, the first step in policymaking is the same whether the problem is straightforward or complicated: define and analyze the problem. Problem analysis involves trying to answer the basic

questions about the nature of the problem, its extent or magnitude, how it came about, its major causes, and why it is important to consider as a matter of public policy. At heart, addressing these kinds of questions requires students of public policy to think critically and creatively about the problem. What does it entail? What do we already know about it? What are the possible solutions? It also requires us to begin gathering the necessary information. We discuss the logic of information searches and useful strategies for them later in the chapter.

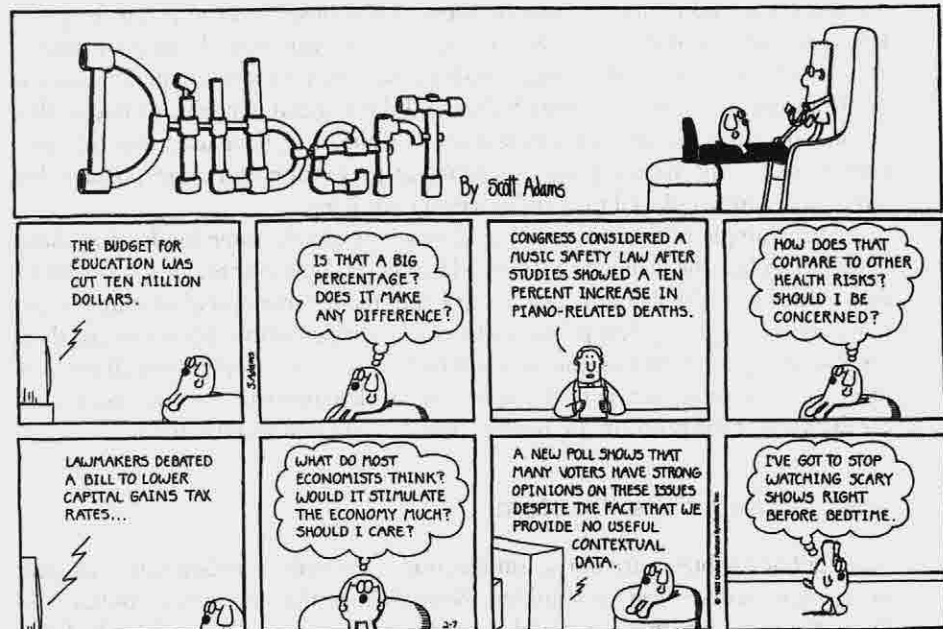
Public problems are often difficult to understand. The challenge is even more daunting given that we are bombarded daily with limited, biased, and conflicting messages in numerous electronic and print formats. Whether the sources are talk radio, partisan television news shows, Internet blogs, position statements issued by candidates or political parties, reports by interest groups, or serious policy studies by think tanks, one of the most vexing issues is how to interpret information that comes to us without a meaningful context. The “contextual data,” or background information, to which the cartoon refers is essential to make sense of a problem, to see how it compares to other concerns in our personal lives or in society, and to estimate what effects a proposal or action might have.

Definitions and Measures. An essential step in the policy process is to define the problem. The definitions enable those seeking a solution to communicate with one another with a degree of precision that otherwise might not be possible. For example, if analysts are studying the plight of the poor in the United States, they need to define what poverty means. Is being poor only a matter of having insufficient

The need for meaningful

context. Many public problems today are highly complex, and both analysts and the public may find them difficult to understand. The challenge is compounded when proponents of varying perspectives offer selective and conflicting data and interpret the data differently. The cartoon refers to the need to have a meaningful context for data interpretation. What it calls “contextual data” can help people put a public problem into a perspective with which they are familiar and encourage them to ask pertinent questions.

Source: DILBERT © 1993 Scott Adams. Used by permission of UNIVERSAL UCLICK. All rights reserved.



money or income, or does it include other characteristics, such as the lack of certain skills or abilities? Should poverty be defined in relative terms (poorer than others) or in absolute terms (unable to meet essential human needs)? In 2014, the U.S. government said that about forty-six million Americans were poor, or about 15 percent of the population, down from 19 percent when President Lyndon Johnson declared the War on Poverty in 1964. Yet this is still the largest number of people living in poverty in the more than fifty years that the government has collected such data. The rate would be even higher under a new and experimental measure of poverty that the government introduced in late 2011, over 16 percent.⁷ In 2014, the federal government placed the poverty line for a family of four in the forty-eight contiguous states at \$23,850 (it is higher in Hawaii and Alaska), and the number is important. It determines who is eligible for federal aid programs such as the Head Start preschool program, food stamps, and children's health insurance, among others. Real consequences result from this particular definition, which many students of poverty have long criticized as unrealistic.⁸ Sometimes a quick literature search, discussed later in the chapter, will reveal both the usual definition of the concept and any debate that surrounds it.

Public policy arguments also turn on operational measures, or quantitative indicators, of problems. As the previous example indicates, rather than refer to poverty in the abstract, analysts want to know how many people live in poverty, how the rate has changed over time, and how poverty affects different segments of the population, such as the elderly or minorities. If discussing educational quality in the public schools, analysts want to see test scores and other student evaluations to determine if a problem exists in the schools and how the schools in one community compare to those in another, or how U.S. schools compare to those in other nations. In recent years, Congress considered establishing an independent, web-based, and comprehensive national indicator system that would bring together high-quality data on the economy, society and culture, and the environment. Led by the National Academies, a consortium of two hundred institutions and individuals worked on a "State of the USA" document of this kind (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2004). The plan became a reality in 2008, with the establishment of a nonprofit and privately funded institution, The State of the USA, Inc., whose website was launched in 2009 (<http://stateoftheusa.org>). The organization promises a comprehensive collection of "credible, relevant data" on a wide range of public problems at an "easy-to-use and continually updated" site. Of course, such data already exist in many different locations, particularly government agencies.

Quantitative measures are abundant for most contemporary public problems, from energy use and population growth to economic growth, unemployment, and health risks, and using them can be enormously helpful for understanding the nature of a given problem (Lewis and Burd-Sharps 2010; Miringoff and Miringoff 1999). How much statistical information needs to be provided is a matter of judgment, but at a minimum, most issue papers or problem analyses would include some basic descriptive statistics. One is the frequency count, such as the percentage of the population at different income levels or the number of people in a survey who favor or do not favor a particular issue position. Another type is the

mean, or average, measure of a group or category, such as the average score on an examination. An alternative is the median of a variable, which is the point where one half of the group lies above and one half below. One such example is the median price of homes sold in different regions of the nation, a commonly used statistic on the state of the nation's housing market, which has been in significant decline for several years. Some idea of the range of variation (the standard deviation) or the correlation or relationship between two variables, such as race and income, may be useful as well.

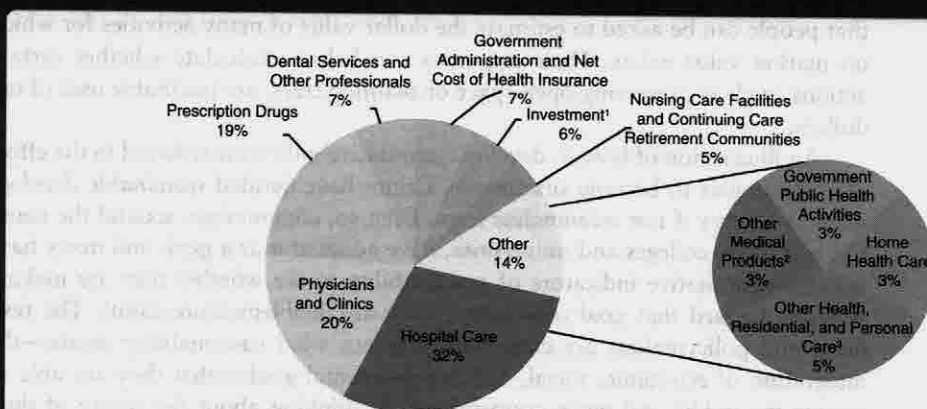
Statistical information can be displayed in many ways in a report. These include tables that show frequency counts or percentages of what is being studied, such as the percentage of different age groups in the population who smoke. Information can be superimposed on maps to show geographic variations such as rates of urban growth or the income levels for adjacent urban and suburban areas. Graphic figures—pie charts or bar charts—are common, as are line figures that show how the magnitude of a problem changes over time, such as the number of people without health care insurance from 1970 to 2013 (Ammons 2009; Berman and Wang 2012). Figure 5-1 shows the nation's health care expenditures for calendar year 2012 using two pie charts that clearly distinguish revenues and expenditures in a visually striking manner. Figures like this can help readers not only to understand the total costs of health care, which have been rising rapidly, but to see where the money comes from and where it goes.

There is an art to choosing how best to display quantitative information. At a minimum, reports should aim for clarity. But some visual displays are also more likely to capture the reader's attention than others. The use of computer-generated color graphics allows a range of different formats, both in written form and in PowerPoint or similar presentations. The best advice generally is to keep the audience and purpose clearly in mind when choosing the format of a report or presentation.

The use of quantitative data also carries some risks. Analysts need to be alert to the possibility of inaccurate or misleading data in a report or an invalid measurement that does not truly capture the problem (Eberstadt 1995). For example, we use the gross domestic product (GDP) to measure the sum total of goods and services produced in the economy. Politicians see the GDP as an indicator of public well-being, or the lack of it. They invariably applaud a rising GDP and express concern over a sagging GDP, but many critics argue that it is seriously flawed as a measurement. The GDP, for example, does not place a dollar value on work that a spouse may do at home, but it does if someone is hired to come to the home to do exactly the same work (e.g., to cook or clean the house). Environmentalists have long argued that the GDP does not account for the use or loss of natural resources, such as forests. Cutting down forests for timber production, for instance, adds positively to the GDP. But economists do not subtract the loss of value when forest ecosystems are lost or harmed by timber production. Some economists have proposed developing a new method called the genuine progress indicator (GPI) to substitute the GDP and more accurately reflect human well-being (C. Cobb, Halstead, and Rowe 1995; www.rprogress.org).

Naturally, not all human concerns, such as happiness or sense of well-being, can be reduced to quantitative measures. Analysts can, however, make use of

Figure 5-1 National Health Expenditure and Revenue by Category, 2012
The Nation's Health Dollar (\$2.8 Trillion), Calendar Year 2012: Where It Went



¹Includes noncommercial research (2%) and structures and equipment (4%).

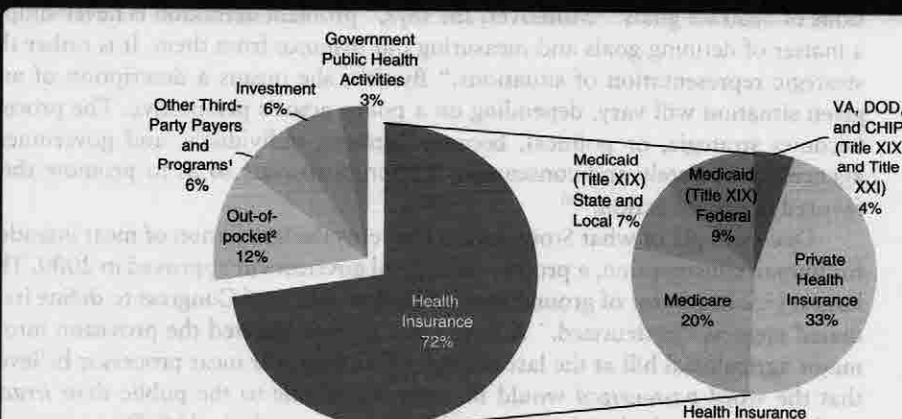
²Includes durable (1%) and nondurable (2%) goods.

³Includes expenditures for residential care facilities, ambulance providers, medical care delivered in nontraditional settings (such as community centers, senior citizens' centers, schools, and military field stations), and expenditures for Home and Community-Based Services Waiver programs under Medicaid.

Source: Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, Office of the Actuary, National Health Statistics Group. www.cms.gov/NationalHealthExpendData/downloads/PieChartSourcesExpenditures2012.pdf

Note: Sum of pieces may not equal 100 percent due to rounding.

The Nation's Health Dollar, Calendar Year 2012: Where It Came From



¹Includes work site health care, other private revenues, Indian Health Service, workers' compensation, general assistance, maternal and child health, vocational rehabilitation, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, school health, and other federal and state local programs.

²Includes co-payments, deductibles, and any amounts not covered by health insurance.

Source: Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, Office of the Actuary, National Health Statistics Group.

Note: Sum of pieces may not equal 100 percent due to rounding.

surveys that ask people whether they are happy, enjoy living in their communities, believe their children's schools are doing a good job, think the local environment is healthy or not, and so forth.⁹ Where public problems cannot be measured directly, this kind of survey data may be a useful substitute. Economists also say that people can be asked to estimate the dollar value of many activities for which no market value exists. Their responses can help to calculate whether certain actions, such as preserving open space or planting trees, are justifiable uses of tax dollars.

An illustration of how to develop quantitative indicators is found in the effort of communities to become sustainable. Critics have derided *sustainable development* as a fuzzy if not meaningless term. Even so, communities around the country, and many colleges and universities, have adopted it as a goal, and many have selected quantitative indicators of sustainability to see whether they are making progress toward that goal over time (www.sustainablemeasures.com). The residents and policymakers are clear enough about what sustainability means—the integration of economic, social, and environmental goals—that they are able to engage the public and work cooperatively in thinking about the future of their communities (Mazmanian and Kraft 2009; K. Portney 2013). The box “Working with Sources: Sustainable Development Indicators” provides further information about sustainable communities and sources of information for various indicators of sustainability.

The Politics of Problem Definition. Defining and measuring problems is not merely an exercise in analysis. People often disagree about a problem and what should be done about it. As Deborah Stone (2012) says, there are “no fixed goals” in the policy process; instead, policy actors fight over “competing conceptions of abstract goals.” Moreover, she says, “problem definition is never simply a matter of defining goals and measuring our distance from them. It is rather the strategic representation of situations.” By this, she means a description of any given situation will vary, depending on a policy actor's perspective. The process becomes strategic, or political, because “groups, individuals, and government agencies deliberately and consciously fashion portrayals so as to promote their favored course of action.”¹⁰

One example of what Stone means concerns the irradiation of meat intended for human consumption, a process the federal government approved in 2000. The largest U.S. irradiator of ground beef lobbied members of Congress to define irradiated meat as “pasteurized.” A farm-state senator inserted the provision into a major agricultural bill at the last minute. Obviously, the meat processor believed that the word *pasteurized* would be more acceptable to the public than *irradiated*. At the time the legislative language was proposed, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration had yet to agree that meat that is irradiated would qualify as pasteurized.¹¹ Similar political, or strategic, actions occur in nearly every major policy area, from Social Security and health care reform to energy policy.



Defining a problem. Energy use and climate change have emerged as significant issues, and the federal government has strongly encouraged development of alternative or renewable energy sources such as wind and solar power. Here, solar panels are in use at the Ivanpah Solar Electric Generating System in the Mojave Desert near Primm, Nevada. The 392-megawatt California plant, developed by Google, NRG, and BrightSource, began operation in February 2014. (Jacob Kepler/Bloomberg via Getty Images)

Some analysts might challenge Stone's view of the inherently political nature of problem analysis, but students of politics would probably agree with her. The evidence supports the observation that policymakers and interest groups will do whatever they can to set the policy agenda in their favor by defining problems their way. Political scientists refer to this practice as issue framing, and they see it as a key part of the process of agenda setting that is discussed in some detail in chapter 3. It is also pervasive in contemporary politics and policymaking as each side in a debate carefully selects language that puts its argument in the most favorable light. Hence we see opposition to certain regulations that are described as "job killing," which will likely attract more support from voters than would a stance against health and safety requirements. And we see health care reform described by its opponents as a "government takeover" of personal health care decisions even when that reform leaves in place a largely private health care marketplace and individual choice within it (see chapter 8).

Political scientists have thoroughly studied such issue framing and agenda setting (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Guber and Bosso 2013b; Kingdon 1995; Rochefort and Cobb 1994). Still, most analysts would likely argue that meaningful resolution of a public problem—homelessness, crime, poor-quality schools, urban sprawl, energy needs, access to health care services—depends at least in part on the ability to clarify the nature of the problem, collect the most pertinent data, and foster a public debate over what might be done about it.

Anticipating the Future. One other aspect of defining and measuring problems deserves mention. Any consideration of the present state of affairs must be grounded in an assessment of how it is likely to change over time. What will the problem look like in several years or decades? Forecasts, or projections, usually involve an extrapolation of current trends, but that is only one method for looking ahead.

Working with Sources

Sustainable Development Indicators

Analysts and activists have developed a collection of indicators that allow a community, region, or nation (or a college or university) to measure its progress toward sustainability. These indicators typically involve some commonsense measurements, such as the number of people and automobiles in the geographic area of concern, energy and water consumption, greenhouse gas emissions, and the like. Some less obvious but equally useful social and economic indicators include the percentage of households that can afford to buy an average-priced house, high school graduation rates, and extent of citizens' community involvement (Mazmanian and Kraft 2009). The availability of these kinds of statistics has allowed communities across the nation to convert the abstract concept of sustainable development into something that citizens and policymakers can easily understand. By developing quantitative measures, communities are able to compile a kind of sustainability status report and to track progress over time toward shared community goals. The following websites compile sustainability statistics:

www.aashe.org. Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), an association of colleges and universities in the United States and Canada working to promote sustainability in all sectors of higher education.

www.nextstep.state.mn.us. State of Minnesota Sustainable Communities Network, which includes definitions and measures of sustainability and state policies to encourage sustainable communities.

www.rprogress.org. Redefining Progress, an organization devoted to the use of new measurements of progress and environmental, social, and economic sustainability.

www.sustainablemeasures.com. Sustainable Measures, a unique and comprehensive collection of sustainability indicators, with clear explanations of why some are more useful than others. Includes a database of indicators and extensive links to work on sustainability.

The best way to understand the kind of information collected at these sites is to visit one and look for particular indicators. For example, go to the Sustainable Measures site and select the link to Indicators of Sustainability to see a description of the qualities of indicators the site's analysts think are important. Read their description of a "sustainable community indicator checklist" for a point-by-point review of what is important in selecting indicators to use for this purpose. Or visit the AASHE site to see what colleges and universities are doing to become more sustainable, such as becoming more energy efficient and trying to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. As you visit these sites, you might ask why some focus on some issues more than others. For example:

- Why does Redefining Progress emphasize the necessity to rethink conventional views of economic growth?
- Why does the state of Minnesota emphasize financial and technical assistance to communities, and public education?
- Why does the AASHE think that colleges and universities should try to become much more sustainable?

Examples of forecasting include economic projections (how large will the nation's deficit be in five, ten, or twenty years?), population estimates (how large will the U.S. population be by 2025 or 2050, or how many senior citizens will need to be covered by Social Security or Medicare in twenty or thirty years?), and

future energy needs (how much will we need, and on what sources are we likely to rely?). Such projections are especially helpful if they reveal how that change will likely unfold with or without policy intervention. For example, if the nation adopted significant tax cuts or spent more to stimulate the economy, what would be the impact on job creation and economic growth?

Such forecasting has become an integral part of the public debate over the anticipated rise in Medicare and Social Security benefits as the baby boom generation ages; economic policy, such as the assumptions made about government spending and taxation over time; and health care reform in light of projections of the rising costs of health care services. As with other forms of policy analysis, it is always necessary to look at the assumptions that lie behind the forecasts to judge their validity. Circumstances also change, and a forecast made one year may not be as useful in subsequent years.

Thinking about Causes and Solutions

Any assessment of a public problem requires thinking about its causes, how it came about, and why it continues. The answers make a big difference in whether and how public policy might resolve the problem. For example, consider the dramatic rise in prison populations in the United States over the past four decades, when they more than quadrupled to over two million inmates. The United States imprisons a larger proportion of its citizens than any other country in the world.¹² But why was there an increase of this magnitude in the prison population, especially at a time when crime rates generally were on the decline?

Part of the answer is that states passed tougher sentencing laws and the public was willing to continue building prisons—often at the expense of funding for higher education. In many states, the growth in the prison population can be traced specifically to new laws that put even nonviolent drug offenders in jail and to the adoption of “three-strikes-and-you’re-out” laws. These laws mandated long sentences, even life sentences, on conviction for a third-felony offense, even for a relatively innocuous crime.¹³ In one case, a California shoplifter charged with stealing \$153 worth of videotapes was sentenced to fifty years in prison because of his prior convictions. Many are questioning the wisdom of sentencing drug offenders to prison terms, in terms of both the justification for the harsh penalties and the cost of keeping them in prison. For example, former Republican governor Mike Huckabee of Arkansas noted that the long mandatory sentences were “good politics but bad public policy,” adding that the system is locking up “people we are mad at but not afraid of.”¹⁴ Nearly half a million drug offenders were in prison in the early 2000s, many on a first conviction for possession; that represented a tenfold increase since 1980.¹⁵

How might this trend be reversed? One way is to change the laws that led to the growth of the prison population in the first place. In 2000 in California, where one in three prisoners in the state was incarcerated for a drug-related crime, the voters did just that. They approved a state referendum requiring that first- and second-time nonviolent drug offenders be put into treatment centers instead of

prison, a move that is expected to reduce the prison population by about thirty-five thousand inmates a year; and in 2012, the state's voters approved yet another referendum that abolished life sentences for nonviolent offenders.¹⁶ Even so, California prisons remained so crowded that in 2011 the U.S. Supreme Court ordered the state to further shrink its prison population, and this after the state already began trying to reduce its prison population because of its ongoing budget crisis.¹⁷ Many states and private organizations also have endorsed "reentry programs" that are designed to help released prisoners readjust to society and avoid committing new crimes and returning to prison, with mixed results.¹⁸

As discussed in chapter 4, most policy studies focus on what can be called proximate, or immediate, causes of public problems, such as the reasons for rising prison populations. The greater challenge is to deal with the root causes of problems. Taking policy action might be more difficult than it was in California because of long-standing public attitudes and habits that are resistant to change. For example, consider urban traffic congestion. Why does it exist? The obvious answer is that large numbers of people are driving their cars on a limited number of roads at any given time. In addition, Americans are driving more miles per year—to go to work or school, to shop, and for other purposes. Is the solution to build more highways? Or is it to think about ways to reduce the use of automobiles in urban areas, where congestion is greatest? Some urban designers and environmentalists offer a more radical solution, at least for new communities: build cities with adequate mass transit and where people can live closer to where they work. Many states and communities are adopting "smart growth" policies with similar ambitions for managing anticipated growth over the next several decades. Use of such systems seems to depend on people's calculations of relative cost. When gasoline prices spiked to well over four dollars per gallon in 2008, mass-transit systems saw a substantial increase in ridership. People's preferences for housing also seem to have shifted from large homes in distant or fringe suburbs to smaller homes in inner suburbs and central cities, particularly in pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods that allow residents to rely more on walking and mass transit.¹⁹

Most public problems have multiple causes, not a single cause; therefore, people disagree over which is the most important and which ought to be the object of public policy. Liberals and conservatives may disagree about the causes of poor school performance, crime, environmental degradation, or anemic economic growth, and what might be done about them. Smart students of public policy learn how to deal with the politics and often overheated rhetoric that can sometimes cloud an objective review of the evidence.

Problem analysis can begin with making an explicit list of the goals and objectives of various policy actors and a determination of what might be done to reach them (Patton, Sawicki, and Clark 2013). The objectives may include a specific measure of what is to be achieved, such as improving access to health care services, reducing the rate of teenage smoking, or curbing drunk driving. When analysts think of potential solutions to public problems, they try to identify the opportunities for policy intervention. They attempt to imagine how a change in

public policy might affect the problem; for example, would raising the price of cigarettes reduce the rate of teenage smoking? Would a hike in the gasoline tax persuade people to use their cars less and therefore reduce the nation's reliance on imported oil?

Finally, sometimes analysts want to describe the benefits and costs of trying to solve the problem. They look at how the consequences of policy action, positive or negative, are distributed across population subgroups, such as those in certain regions, occupations, or social groups—in other words, who gains and who loses if the problem is resolved. Politicians and other major policy actors are sometimes very clever about addressing these kinds of distributive concerns. They are almost always interested in knowing about them. They may speak about solving public problems as though the entire nation will benefit equally, but the reality is that some segments of the population are more likely than others to enjoy the benefits of acting on a problem, and some are more likely than others to pay the costs. For example, members of Congress from states with a large number of defense contractors naturally would be concerned about how a decrease in defense spending would affect the economy and employment in their state or district, and they may seek ways to block such spending cuts. So students of public policy would be wise to think about how to present such information in any studies they complete. The box “Steps to Analysis: Major Components of Problem Analysis” summarizes basic elements in problem analysis. The list can also be a guide to what questions might be addressed in preparing a problem analysis or issue paper.

How to Find Information

To perform problem analysis and the other activities related to it, students of public policy need to collect reliable information. Indeed, good information is critical to successful analysis, but where does one find it? This chapter provides some guidelines. The websites listed at the end of each chapter and mentioned within the chapters are sources of extensive data on specific problems, as are articles in academic journals, books on the subject, and the better newspapers and professional newsweeklies. Because the substantive policy chapters in the book provide many particular examples about using the data in policy studies and arguments, the information here is intended to be fairly general.

Most university libraries have a variety of online databases that contain full-text articles and can be searched by subject matter, title, or author, as can the library's own holdings. One of the best search tools, however, is available to anyone. This is Google (www.google.com), which can return many useful links for specific public policy inquiries. The federal government offers a general portal for searches of government documents that is similar to the now-defunct Google Uncle Sam; it can be found at www.usa.gov.

Consider the example of cell phones and texting discussed in chapter 4. To identify articles or reports on the frequency of use of cell phones while driving or other aspects of distracted driving, use any search engine and type in the

Steps to Analysis

Major Components of Problem Analysis

Define the problem. If the problem is educational quality, what does that mean? In other words, what is the nature of the education problem under study? Has quality declined? Is it lower than many people believe it ought to be? Is it lower in the United States than in other developed nations?

Measure the problem. Find a way to measure the problem that is consistent with the way it is defined. This step is sometimes called “developing an operational definition.” What kinds of quantitative indicators are available from reliable sources? What is the best measurement to use for educational quality: Student scores on standard examinations? Other measures of student learning? Indicators of the quality of a school’s faculty?

Determine the extent or magnitude of the problem. Using available indicators, try to determine who is affected by the problem and by how much. Try to answer these kinds of questions: What groups in the population suffer from the problem being studied, how long have they been affected by it, and to what extent are they affected? For example, how does educational quality vary from one school district or state to another? From urban districts to suburban districts? From schools in less affluent neighborhoods to those in more affluent areas?

Think about the problem’s causes. How did the problem come about, and why does it continue? What

are the leading causes of the problem, and what other causes should be considered? Knowing the causes of a problem is critical to developing solutions to it. How has educational quality changed over the past several decades, and why? If students today are less well prepared for higher education or the workplace than in earlier periods, why is that so?

Set goals or objectives. What should be done about the problem, and why? Are certain goals and objectives of paramount importance, widely agreed upon, and economically or socially feasible? Over what period of time should the goals and objectives be sought? For educational quality, what goals or objectives are most appropriate? If quality is to be improved, how much progress should be expected for a given period of time?

Determine what can be done. What actions might work to solve the problem or to reach the specified goals and objectives? What policy efforts might be directed at the causes of the problem? What variables can be affected by such efforts? If the goal is improving educational quality to a certain extent, what needs to be done? Improving teacher quality? Reducing class sizes? Changing the curriculum? Increasing the school budget? Fostering competition through charter schools or voucher programs?

Sources: Patton, Sawicki, and Clark (2013) and authors. Patton, Sawicki, and Clark devote a full chapter to steps in defining a problem. For other treatments of problem diagnosis, see Starling (1988) and Bardach (2012).

keywords *cell phone*, *texting*, and *driving* to find a suitable list of studies and public opinion surveys. To vary the search—for example, to find material on whether younger drivers face greater challenges than older drivers or to examine other aspects of distracted driving—add or substitute keywords such as *young people*, *teenagers*, or *distracted driving*.

A good way to begin preparing issue papers and problem analyses is with an overview of a subject from sources such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *CQ Weekly*, or *National Journal*. These and similar newspapers and newsweeklies provide valuable information about current policy debates, particularly on a national level, and some background on the nature of the problem. For a broader historical perspective on public policy

actions to address the problem, CQ Press's annual *Almanac* and its quadrennial volume *Congress and the Nation* are invaluable. Similar sources can be consulted for information at the state and local levels, and most can be found in college and university libraries.

The main concern at this point of a search is to find enough information to understand the basics about a given policy problem. How much information is enough? If the initial search yields three or four high-quality articles that provide an idea of the history of the problem, describe the policy efforts and recent controversies, and cover the different points of view about desirable policy actions, that may be sufficient to proceed. At this point, the researcher should be able to determine what else he or she needs to know to complete the assessment and then seek more detailed sources of information. An intense literature search could be profitable at this stage because the researcher knows what to look for and can focus on the best sources.

Most college and university libraries have access to online sources, such as LexisNexis Academic, that include indexing and abstracting services. One of the most useful for public policy research is the congressional database ProQuest Congressional. It includes an index to, and abstracts of, nearly all congressional documents, from testimony at committee hearings to committee reports on proposed policies. Those documents are excellent sources for the most current analyses of public problems and policy actions. For example, the records of testimony by policy experts at committee hearings may also offer excerpts from their latest research findings before they are available elsewhere. LexisNexis Academic also covers documents that include statistical data, but this database is by no means restricted to statistical analysis. Rather, it covers any description of a problem that includes numbers, such as population trends, crime rates, or the success of welfare reform. LexisNexis also includes extensive databases for legal research. Major university and college libraries are also government depository libraries and have many documents on paper if they are not available online.

Another way to locate pertinent information is to visit the website for the government agency most directly related to the issue. For example, the Department of Defense is the first place to look for information about U.S. defense strategies, the Department of State for U.S. foreign policy, and the Environmental Protection Agency for most major environmental issues. For health and welfare issues, see the Department of Health and Human Services, and for national security issues at home, such as airport screening procedures, see the Transportation Security Administration in the Department of Homeland Security. At the state and local levels, the same logic applies: visit the websites of the local or state government agencies that deal with the subject matter. In addition, the websites for the major interest groups active in the policy area often have extensive reports and commentaries, as do the sites for policy think tanks. Many of those websites also incorporate search engines that allow you to quickly locate important documents. Comprehensive websites such as www.publicagenda.org and others listed at the end of chapter 4 offer a portal to many of the most useful public policy sites.

In addition to LexisNexis, other indexing and abstracting services are available to help locate articles, government reports, and other major documents. Which are most useful depends on the subject being studied. For most of these sites, users need to gain access through a library with a subscription to the service. Among the most helpful for public policy in general are Academic Search Complete (EBSCOhost's database of more than seven thousand full-text periodicals and abstracts from eleven thousand periodicals), OmniFile Full Text Mega (a multidisciplinary database providing the full content from six of the Wilson company's full-text databases, and now part of EBSCO), Worldwide Political Science Abstracts, JSTOR (a database of major scholarly journals), and ProQuest Newsstand or Newspaper Source Plus (each of which covers over a thousand state and local newspapers). Some similar services are available without a subscription, such as the Catalog of U.S. Government Publications and the Government Printing Office access to online services (www.gpo.gov) and the congressional Internet services site, which offers extensive links to both governmental and non-governmental sites, particularly those dealing with congressional activities (www.congress.gov). Most libraries have research guides that outline these services and discuss how best to use them.

If possible, students should arrange visits to government and other offices to obtain information and interview policy actors. At the local level especially, policy-makers and other actors often welcome a visit by someone who is interested in what they are doing because they only rarely hear from the press and are often eager to discuss their work. Advance preparation is essential for this strategy. Students should know what information they are seeking and who is most likely to be able to provide it. Reading local newspaper coverage of the issue is a good place to begin.²⁰

Beyond conducting a search and locating the documents, one of the most challenging aspects of a literature review is the interpretation of the information gathered. As the text has emphasized throughout, policy analyses vary greatly in quality and are often prepared as ammunition in policy debates, with selective and sometimes highly misleading summaries and commentaries. Just because a statement appears in print or on the web is no guarantee that it is true. It is always essential to find out the source of the information, the reliability of the author or organization, any critical assumptions that are made in a study or report (such as what is included or omitted), and any interpretations that might not be justified. At a minimum, the student researcher will want to determine whether the facts are current and accurate.

This description of how to find pertinent policy information is intended to be a general introduction to policy research. The real excitement in policy studies comes from having a strong interest in a particular policy area and learning where to find the information about it. For example, the student who is passionate about equal pay for women in the workforce will find the search for appropriate data and studies exhilarating. For the researcher worried about the rising costs of college education and students' burden of debt upon graduation, the hunt for information about the costs of attending specific colleges and the availability of student loans will be easy and a real learning experience.

Constructing Alternatives

After problem analysis has yielded a good sense of what the problem is, how extensive it is, why it occurs, and what the goals are for resolving it, the next step is to think about courses of action. Chapter 6 introduces a range of relevant criteria for evaluating policy options and some of the tools of analysis that can provide the requisite information to evaluate the policy alternatives. This section focuses on how to develop the list of alternatives that merit such further consideration. It emphasizes learning how to think creatively about public policy, particularly when ineffective policies and programs need to be replaced.

What Governments Can Do

So how do analysts know which alternatives to consider? As we discussed in chapter 3, the starting point is to see what governments are doing or can do. Among their options, governments can regulate, subsidize, ration, tax and spend, contract out, use market incentives, privatize, charge fees for service, educate, create public trusts, and commission research (J. Anderson 2015; Patton, Sawicki, and Clark 2013). Figure 5-2 summarizes these activities and illustrates them with examples.

If current policies are not working well enough and a change is needed, analysts might suggest modifying the present policies or trying a different policy approach or strategy. Present policies could be strengthened; for example, the federal government could raise standards and penalties for clean air or water policies or toughen regulation of Wall Street banks. Or policymakers could fund programs at a higher level, which might permit improved research, better enforcement, and better public information campaigns. Analysts and policymakers also consider alternatives to conventional regulatory policies, as was done for many environmental policies during the 1980s and 1990s (Mazmanian and Kraft 2009; Vig and Kraft 2013). These might include a combination of market-based incentives, public information campaigns, and various forms of what the Bill Clinton administration called “regulatory reinvention,” which are more flexible and efficient policy reforms.

For some policies and agencies, policymakers might try different institutional approaches, such as a new way to organize the bureaucracy in charge. Reorganization was proposed in 2002 for the much-maligned Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), widely considered to be one of the least effective federal agencies. The George W. Bush administration endorsed a plan to replace the INS with three new agencies, one for customs and border protection, one for immigration services, and one for immigration and customs enforcement. All three agencies were incorporated into the new Department of Homeland Security. Along with agency reorganization, the present federal-state relationship, some form of which pervades most policy areas, can also be changed. For example, many policies during the 1980s and 1990s were further decentralized, giving the states greater authority to make decisions and allocate funds.

Figure 5-2 What Government Can Do

ACTION	ILLUSTRATIONS
 Regulate	Licensing, inspection, enforcement of standards, application of sanctions Specific examples: environmental, health, and workplace safety regulations; corporate financial regulations
 Subsidize	Loans, direct payments or benefits, tax credits, price supports Specific examples: student loans; subsidies to farmers or oil companies; dairy price supports; low-interest loans for disaster recovery
 Ration	Limit access to scarce resources Specific examples: permits for backpacking in national parks; the Oregon Health Plan's limitations on coverage of health care services
 Tax and spend	Tax an activity at a level that encourages or discourages it Specific examples: allowing home mortgage deductions to encourage home ownership; imposing cigarette taxes to discourage smoking Spend money on preferred program Specific examples: defense weapons, prisons, AmeriCorps, public higher education
 Contract out	Contract for government services from the private sector or buy products for government agencies Specific examples: contracts for defense weapons procurement and for economic rebuilding efforts after wars; purchase of computers and fleet vehicles for federal or state governments or public schools
 Use market incentives	A special category of taxation or imposition of fees that creates incentives to change behavior and achieve goals and objectives Specific examples: raising gasoline taxes to encourage conservation of fuel and reduce carbon dioxide emissions; tax rebates for purchasing hybrid vehicles or installing solar or wind power sources
 Privatize	Transferring public services from government to the private sector Specific examples: turning over management of public schools or correctional institutions to private companies
 Charge fees	Fees for select services Specific examples: hunting and fishing licenses; requiring students to pay to ride the school bus; college tuition
 Educate	Provide information to the public through formal programs or other actions Specific examples: formal public meetings; public education services; food safety labels; information on toxic chemical releases; automobile fuel efficiency labels
 Create public trusts	Holding public property in trust for citizens indefinitely Specific examples: local land conservation trusts; state and national parks and recreation areas
 Conduct research	Conduct or support research and development Specific examples: National Science Foundation support for academic studies; defense and environmental research; medical science research funded through the National Institutes of Health

Many state and local governments are trying another interesting institutional reform option. They make routine government services available online, from providing tourist information to supplying government forms that can be filled out by computer. Governments report improved efficiency, and the users say they are more satisfied with the results and think more highly of the agencies than before.²¹ The federal government is also moving in this direction and has instituted an Internet portal for all federal information at USA.gov (www.usa.gov).

For many policy areas, actions are rooted in one of two views of the problem being confronted, what might be called supply and demand perspectives. If analysts believe a problem such as energy scarcity results from an insufficient supply of energy, they will likely recommend the policy alternative of increasing supply. They will consider actions to boost supplies of energy, whether from fossil fuels (oil, natural gas, and coal), nuclear energy, or alternative energy such as wind or solar power. The actions may include changes in rules that control exploration on public lands, various tax credits and incentives, and support for research that could speed up the introduction of new energy sources. The Bush administration took this position in its national energy policy proposal of 2001, much of which was approved by Congress in 2005. But what if the problem is too much demand for energy rather than too little supply? Policymakers may consider energy conservation and efficiency measures, such as increasing fuel economy standards for cars or providing tax credits for high-mileage hybrid or electric vehicles. The most likely scenario will be a combination of the supply and demand perspectives.

In addition to considering which policy options will work best or be more efficient or fair, policymakers have to think about the philosophical and ideological aspects. Conservatives and liberals, and Republicans and Democrats, differ significantly in the kinds of policy solutions they favor. For example, Republicans in Congress were unanimous in opposing the Obama health care reform proposals that were approved in 2010 because they opposed such a far-reaching extension of the federal government's authority and in particular its mandate for individuals to purchase health care insurance. As noted in chapter 2, many states under Republican control sued the federal government in an effort to have the act declared unconstitutional or at least substantially modified. Democrats generally favored the act.

Policy Typologies as Analytic Tools

Chapter 3 introduced a typology that analysts can use to consider whether another kind of policy might be appropriate if the previously adopted policy or the one being given the most attention proves to be unsuitable. For example, if a regulatory policy is not working or is no longer politically feasible, the policymaker could consider either self-regulation or distributive policy actions, such as subsidies or incentives.

In a related effort, Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram (1997) developed an intriguing typology as part of their work on policy design. The term refers to the

careful consideration, during the policy formulation stage, of the role of government “agents” and the “target population”—those who receive benefits or who are the objects of government regulation. Schneider and Ingram argue that, for public policies to stand a chance of working, they must be thoroughly grounded in an understanding of the attitudes and motivations of the policy actors who will decide how the policies are implemented and whether they have the desired effects. Underlying this view of policymaking is a variation of rational choice theory: if policy actors are rational beings who respond to the incentives and disincentives incorporated into a given policy, then the policymakers should be able to design policies that encourage people to behave in the way that is needed.

Viewed from this perspective, policy tools, according to Schneider and Ingram (1997, 93), are “the elements in policy design that cause agents or targets to do something they would not otherwise do with the intention of modifying behavior to solve public problems or attain policy goals.” The choice of such tools, they say, reflects different views of how people behave and what might lead them to change their behavior. They distinguish five such policy tools, which are summarized in the box “Steps to Analysis: Policy Design Tools.” Governments can invoke their authority and ask for compliance, provide incentives or inducements to elicit compliance, apply sanctions or penalties for noncompliance, try to inform and enlighten the public and promote learning, and exhort people to change their behavior. The choice of which tools to use and how depends on the analysis of a given case and the process of political deliberation and debate that usually occurs at the stage of policy formulation and adoption.

Although it may seem an abstract exercise in rational choice theory, this policy design approach offers many insights into human behavior that can help analysts and policymakers figure out what kinds of policy action will likely succeed. Consider a situation that was unfortunate for California in 2001. Electricity prices in the state rose dramatically in 2000 and 2001 as a consequence of a poorly conceived state energy deregulation policy and a short-term shortage of electricity, which was brought about in part by the power companies’ manipulation of the energy supply. As one solution, state policymakers adopted the nation’s largest energy conservation program, with a strong focus on incentives for individuals to conserve energy. In this example, these individuals are the “target population.” Those who cut their previous electricity use by 20 percent or more would earn a special rebate of 20 percent on their 2001 energy bills in addition to the direct savings they enjoyed from using less electricity. The state called this a “pay-to-conserve” program.

State policymakers were counting on individual incentives to alter the behavior of this target population; it had been difficult to change in prior attempts. California’s policy is a good example of what Schneider and Ingram mean by offering inducements that persuade individuals to adjust their behavior because they realize they will be better off by doing so. In this particular case, hortatory tools—the governor and news media urging people to conserve energy—probably also made a difference, as Californians were determined to break out of their energy crisis. The policymakers had calculated that 10 percent of the public would take advantage of the pay-to-conserve program, but by November 2001, more than one

Steps to Analysis

Policy Design Tools

Policy design is the consideration of a variety of possible approaches, instruments, or tools that may be appropriate for a given policy problem. The tools described here derive from anticipating how different policy actors are likely to respond to what governments attempt to do. They are similar to the list we provide in Figure 5-2 for what government might do to address any public problem. This typology, however, seeks to categorize different policy tools in a way that highlights key differences among them.

Authority tools. Governments use their authority to urge or require people to behave in a certain way. The use of such tools, not always effective or democratic, depends on the perceived legitimacy of government. These tools may be particularly suitable during times of crisis, when favorable responses by the public are more likely.

Inducements and sanctions. Governments provide incentives or penalties to appeal to individuals' rational pursuit of their self-interest. Inducements encourage people to act in a certain way because they will gain from doing so. Sanctions are negative incentives or penalties that are thought to discourage behavior that is inconsistent with policy goals.

Capacity-building tools. Governments make available training, education, information, and technical assistance, and they can aim to inform or enlighten and thus empower people, either those in the target population or policy agents.

Hortatory tools. Governments invoke images and values through speeches, proclamations, and other communication to exhort people to behave in a certain way.

Learning tools. Governments can encourage policy agents and target populations to participate and learn, for example, through citizen advisory panels and collaborative processes.

- How might government use these different tools? Which seem to be the most useful?
- Consider a specific problem, such as the use of cell phones or texting by drivers, discussed in chapter 4. Which of these tools might be the most effective in reducing cell phone use or texting by drivers?
- How about the use of seat belts in cars? Which of these tools is most likely to encourage drivers and passengers to "buckle up" and thus reduce their risk of injury or death in the event of an accident? Why do you think so?
- Or consider the case of immigration reform discussed at the beginning of this chapter: which of these tools can help to reduce the rate of illegal immigration or to address another component of the problem?

Source: Adapted from Anne Larason Schneider and Helen Ingram, *Policy Design for Democracy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997).

third had done so. The financial inducement worked in part because rising energy prices provided a powerful financial incentive for individuals to save energy.²²

Many other public policies are equally dependent on assumptions about how those affected by policy rules will behave. Traffic laws, for example, depend on drivers' willingness to stop at red lights and to abide by the posted speed limit. When people do not respond as expected, additional sanctions may be necessary. Jurisdictions impose substantial fines and other penalties for driving under the influence of alcohol as a way of discouraging this behavior. Some states maintain the death penalty for severe crimes in hope that it will deter criminals. Here too the assumption is that a person contemplating a criminal act would adjust his or her behavior with the understanding of the possible punishment.

These examples show that policy typologies, such as that proposed by Schneider and Ingram, can be useful when thinking about a government's possible courses of action. In conjunction with other analytic techniques, typologies like these can help analysts focus on the condition they are trying to bring about and what changes in human behavior may be necessary. Then they can consider various policy actions that may provide the necessary incentives.

Thinking Creatively about Policy Action

Beyond considering policy typologies or variations on existing policies, students of public policy can try other techniques to expand the list of alternatives. Patton, Sawicki, and Clark (2013) offer a pertinent discussion of how to apply creative thinking to policy action. Among other strategies, they suggest the following: no-action analysis, quick surveys, literature reviews, comparison to real-world situations, passive collection and classification, use of analogies and metaphors, brainstorming, and comparison with an ideal.

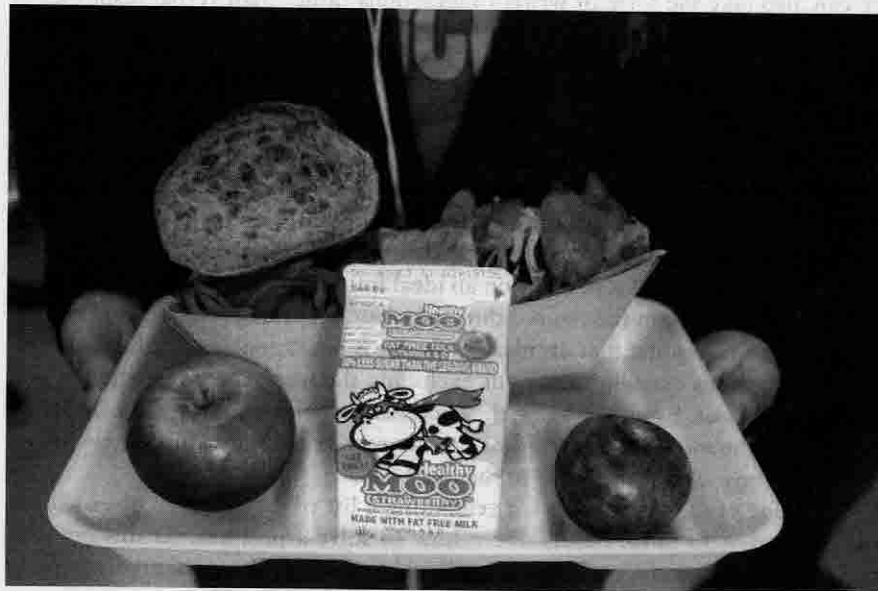
No-action analysis begins with the status quo, or present policy, as a kind of baseline. It suggests not that governments do nothing about a given problem, but that keeping present policies or programs, or defending them, may be a viable option. Many will favor this strategy during times of budget constraints, when programs are vulnerable to cutbacks or elimination. A clear example is the idea of keeping Amtrak, the national railroad passenger corporation, alive by continuing its government subsidies because the passenger train system is an alternative to travel by car or airplane. The no-action option may also be a useful point of departure for considering other alternatives. One advantage of such choices is they are *not* the status quo, which may be unacceptable to critics of the current program. The greater the dissatisfaction with the status quo option, the more likely policymakers and the public are to favor a search for alternatives and give them serious consideration.

Quick surveys involve talking with people in a particular policy network or searching through hearing transcripts, minutes of meetings, newspaper accounts, and the like for pertinent information about a problem and policy alternatives. The idea here is that people familiar with the issues have probably raised many alternatives, and interviewing them, distributing questionnaires to them, or reviewing what they have written or said on the issues should produce a shortlist of possible policy alternatives. This technique could be particularly useful at the local level, where gaining access to principal policy actors is a real possibility.

A literature review is an examination of books, journal articles, Internet sites, and other sources. The purpose here is to look for policy alternatives that have been proposed or considered previously. This kind of search could extend to a survey of the options that policymakers have considered or adopted in other policy areas as well. Consider an intriguing law that Congress enacted in 1986, the False Claims Act Amendments, which encourages whistle-blowers to air their concerns about improper actions such as fraudulent contracts with the government. The

law provides that those who blow the whistle, or come forward with such accusations, may receive up to a quarter of the money that the government recovers. After three decades, the act—which imposes triple damages on companies that commit fraud—has produced over \$12 billion for the federal treasury. It also provided over \$1 billion for hundreds of whistle-blowers who reported the abuses. One individual, a former Swiss banker, was awarded \$104 million for helping the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) locate overseas tax cheats. A Justice Department spokesperson has said the law has been “highly effective in ferreting out individuals and companies that commit fraud.”²³

Rather than think only about abstract ideas, analysts might ask what has worked well in specific or real-world situations, and therefore what might be considered an effective alternative to the present policy. Analysts would also want to know which alternatives have been tried elsewhere and found wanting. This kind of information is likely to be available because one of the great virtues of the U.S. federal system is that the fifty states and their approximately eighty thousand local governments often demonstrate great creativity in addressing public problems. As Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis observed long ago, “A single courageous State may, if its citizens choose, serve as a laboratory; and try novel social and economic experiments without risk to the rest of the count.”²⁴ Today, states frequently engage in innovative public policy actions. If several states have experimented with welfare reform, then other states or the federal government might look to them for ideas about what to consider. Indeed, the federal welfare reform measure of 1996 was based largely on what Wisconsin and a few other states were already doing.



Creative policy action. In recent years, hundreds of public schools across the nation have tried to discourage students from eating junk food and encourage the eating of healthy food as one way to deal with rising levels of childhood obesity. In this photo, a Naugatuck (Connecticut) High School student displays his lunch under the new federal guidelines, which say students must take one cup of fruit or vegetables, a cup of milk, two ounces of whole grains, and two ounces of meat or other protein. (AP Photo/Laraine Weschler/Republican American)

Similar to the quick survey approach, **passive collection** means finding out what others have suggested in a given policy area. Analysts might speak with a program's clients or administrators, advocates of various positions, and organizations that have taken a position on the issues. Do they offer creative ways of dealing with the problem that depart from present practices? Do those closely associated with a given policy area believe that some policy alternatives are politically infeasible because they have been raised and rejected earlier? Finding out these answers now can save analysts time and effort later.

Another approach is to look at **parallel situations** in other policy areas for ideas about what might be done. What seems to be a new problem may present many of the same issues as an earlier one. Analysts need to be alert to possible analogies. By listing and thinking about the attributes of the present problem, they may see its relationship to other problems. For example, measures to deal with the rights of disabled persons have borrowed concepts and language from analogous civil rights legislation from the 1960s. Another approach to using analogies is to imagine oneself in the position of a client served by a given program. As a client, how do you respond to present policies? What would you like changed?

A popular technique to encourage creative thinking in public policy or in organizational change is **brainstorming**, which usually takes place in an informal meeting of people who share an interest in finding solutions to a given problem. In the brainstorming session, the participants bounce ideas around with the goal of producing a list of possibilities. Ideas are offered and recorded as they are made, with no attempt to criticize or evaluate them. The freewheeling discussion of the issues should produce creative thinking and numerous suggestions. In the second phase of the meeting, the participants pare down the suggestions to come up with a shorter list of alternatives worthy of further consideration. Brainstorming can also take the form of written suggestions rather than verbal responses in open meetings. Some variations on the brainstorming theme suggest that creativity is enhanced when some structure is introduced into the discussions (Goldenberg, Mazursky, and Solomon 1999).

Sometimes analysts compare policy alternatives with an **ideal situation**. For example, as part of smart growth planning or sustainability efforts, many communities hold "visioning" meetings in which residents are encouraged to think about the community they want for the future: What kind of residential neighborhoods would it have? What kind of downtown? What kind of recreational opportunities? The goal is to envision an ideal future and use that vision to generate ideas for moving in the desired direction. Too often in public policy debates, the participants assume that an ideal situation is unattainable and therefore not worthy of serious consideration, but excluding the ideal guarantees that it will never come about. By encouraging the expression of an ideal, analysts can ensure that at least the more pragmatic ideas that do receive consideration are evaluated in terms of how close they come to the ideal.

Any one of these strategies for generating a list of policy alternatives should help an analyst to think clearly about how to solve a problem. At this point in the process, neither the cost nor the political feasibility of a particular option is

the primary concern; rather, it is to think critically about the problem and try to imagine the various ways to address it. Chapter 6 suggests methods for evaluating the various policy options. In this chapter, however, the emphasis is on fostering the most creative thinking possible, especially if conventional policy action is thought not to be working well and alternatives are needed.

Consider this example. Studies have shown that the rate of obesity among children and teenagers has risen substantially over the past two decades, as have rates of early-onset heart disease and type 2 diabetes. Chapter 8 discusses the serious health consequences for individuals and the significant costs to society if these conditions persist. So what might be done beyond encouraging people to eat healthier diets? Some states have thought about what public schools can do to reduce the availability of foods that contribute to the problem. They proposed restrictions on fast-food franchises in public schools and the imposition of a tax of several cents per can on soft drinks, which are loaded with sugar and calories. Predictably, soft drink makers oppose such initiatives, and they often point instead to a sedentary lifestyle as the culprit. Other schools, especially in states like California where state law demands it, began trying to eliminate junk food from the school premises, a move applauded by public health officials. But are these kinds of responses the right way to act, and will they be effective? Would you favor such a move? If not this kind of action, what else do you think might reduce the high levels of obesity among children and teenagers?

Conclusions

John Gardner, the founder of the nonprofit organization Common Cause and a longtime political reformer, once said, "What we have before us are some breathtaking opportunities disguised as insoluble problems."²⁵ That is a fitting thought for this chapter on problem analysis and the creation of policy alternatives. It conveys a sense of optimism about how to face any public problem, from inadequate performance of public schools to an inability of local governments to deal with urban sprawl. Rather than complain, analysts, policymakers, and citizens could try to figure out just what the problem is and why it exists, gather some basic information about it, and think about what might be done. As challenging as many public problems are, they are also opportunities to consider the role of government—and the private sector—in fresh ways and to imagine possibilities for changing unsatisfactory circumstances.

This chapter provides an overview of problem analysis. It explains how to describe and measure public problems, and how you go about finding the information you need to do that. It also discusses how to think about the various causes of public problems and possible solutions to them, and it reviews the various policy tools that governments might use to address public problems. Finally, it offers a number of strategies for thinking creatively about which policy alternatives or tools are likely to work best in solving a particular problem. The chapter also makes clear that an analysis of public problems takes

place within a political context that often leads to a proliferation of competing diagnoses and recommendations and sometimes to outright misleading and inaccurate portrayals of the problems faced. The skillful analysts learn to deal with the situation. They know how to conduct a critical review and appraisal of whatever studies and reports they find on a subject. Developing a healthy sense of skepticism, however, need not mean a loss of idealism or the willingness to think creatively about public policy change.



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Consider the case of illegal immigration presented at the beginning of the chapter. What is the nature of the immigration problem? What kinds of evidence would you want to see to decide how best to deal with the problem? Where would you go to get that evidence?
2. Think about the example of seat belt use, which varies greatly from state to state as well as among groups in the population. Young drivers tend not to use seat belts as frequently as older drivers do. What actions would you recommend to increase seat belt use, especially by young drivers? Why do you think those actions would be successful? Can you think of any creative solutions that have not been tried so far?
3. How would you determine whether a particular source of information on policy issues is reliable or not? What would you look for that could distinguish a solid, professional analysis of an issue from one that is weaker or biased?
4. What kinds of measures do you think would be the most accurate in determining whether public high schools are performing well or not? The SAT or ACT scores of graduating seniors? National achievement test scores in a variety of subject areas? State test scores? Something else?

KEYWORDS

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SUGGESTED READINGS

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———, *Policy Design for Democracy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997). One of the best treatments of policy design, with particular attention to incentives that policies provide to government officials and target populations to achieve policy success.

SUGGESTED WEBSITES

www.congress.gov. One of the most comprehensive public sites for legislative searches.

www.fedstats.gov. A site that provides easy access to a vast amount of federal data on policy problems, organized by agency as well as substantive policy area.

www.gao.gov. U.S. Government Accountability Office, a treasure trove of reports on government agencies and programs, especially evaluation studies.

www.gpo.gov. Access to the federal government's printing office site for location of government documents.

www.publicagenda.org. Nonpartisan briefings on policy and polling; a digest of news, legislation, and studies; and research sources.

www.usa.gov. Portal for federal government websites.

NOTES

1. For a description of the Arizona law, see Randal C. Archibold, "Arizona Enacts Stringent Law on Immigration," *New York Times*, April 23, 2010.
2. Campbell Robertson, "In Alabama, Calls for Revamping Immigration Law," *New York Times*, November 16, 2001.
3. Ibid. See also an editorial, "The Price of Intolerance," *New York Times*, November 27, 2011; and a second editorial, "How Alabama's Immigration Law Is Crippling Its Farms," *Washington Post*, November 3, 2011. The estimates of illegal immigrants come from the Pew Research

- Hispanic Trends Project: www.pewhispanic.org, and Julia Preston, "Number of Illegal Immigrants in the U.S. May Be on the Rise Again, Estimates Say," *New York Times*, September 23, 2013.
4. See a summary of the study in Bill Keller, "The Good Newt," *New York Times*, December 11, 2011. The study was conducted in December 2009 by Gordon Hanson, an economist at the University of California, San Diego, and is available at <http://irps.ucsd.edu/assets/037/11124.pdf>.
5. Julia Preston, "Decline Seen in Numbers of People Here Illegally," *New York Times*, July 31, 2008.

6. The construction of the border fence drew considerable criticism. See Randal C. Archibold and Julia Preston, "Despite Growing Opposition, Homeland Security Stands by Its Fence," *New York Times*, May 21, 2008, 1.
7. Pam Fessler, "New Measure Shows Higher Poverty Rate in the U.S.," National Public Radio, November 7, 2011.
8. The federal government's guidelines for who qualifies as poor can be found at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/14poverty.cfm>. On controversies over the poverty measures, see Jason DeParle, Robert Gebeloff, and Sabrina Tavernise, "Older, Suburban, and Struggling, 'Near Poor' Startle the Census," *New York Times*, November 18, 2011.
9. For one example of such a study, see Lora L. Warner, David Wegge, and Ashley Heath, *Brown County LIFE Study* (October 2011), available at www.lifestudy.info. The study of Brown County, Wisconsin, is part of a larger study of the Fox River Region *LIFE* study completed in 2011.
10. The quotation comes from the 2002 edition of Stone's *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making* book, p. 133. We cite the new third edition elsewhere in the text.
11. Elizabeth Becker, "Bill Defines Irradiated Meat as 'Pasteurized,'" *New York Times*, March 5, 2002.
12. Adam Liptak, "Inmate Count in U.S. Dwarfs Other Nations," *New York Times*, April 23, 2008.
13. "Nation's Inmate Population Increased 2.3 Percent Last Year," *New York Times*, April 25, 2005, Associated Press release. As of 2012, the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics estimated that the nation's jails and prisons held over two million people, mostly in state and local facilities. Despite a falling crime rate, the prison population remains high, in part because of the tough policies enacted in the 1980s and 1990s.
14. *The Diane Rehm Show*, National Public Radio, February 18, 2003.
15. Ironically, the longer sentences and the increase in the prison population are not deterring people from committing crimes. The recidivism rate rose in part because, to save money, state governments cut back on rehabilitation programs such as drug treatment, vocational education, and classes that help prepare convicted criminals to return to society. See Fox Butterfield, "Study Shows Building Prisons Did Not Prevent Repeat Crimes," *New York Times*, June 3, 2002.
16. Evelyn Nieves, "California Gets Set to Shift on Sentencing Drug Users," *New York Times*, November 10, 2000; and Linda Greenhouse, "Winds of Change," *New York Times*, September 18, 2013.
17. Adam Liptak, "Justices, 5-4, Tell California to Cut Prisoner Population," *New York Times*, May 23, 2011; and Randal C. Archibold, "California, in Financial Crisis, Opens Prison Doors," *New York Times*, March 23, 2010.
18. See Mike Dorning, "Michigan Lets Prisoners Go—and Saves a Bundle," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, December 5-11, 2011, 37-38; and Sam Dolnick, "Pennsylvania Study Finds Halfway Houses Don't Reduce Recidivism," *New York Times*, March 24, 2013.
19. Clifford Krauss, "Gas Prices Send Surge of Riders to Mass Transit," *New York Times* online edition, May 10, 2008; and Christopher B. Leinberger, "The Death of the Fringe Suburb," *New York Times*, November 25, 2011.
20. For an overview of methods that can be used to obtain policy information, see Patton, Sawicki, and Clark (2013), chapter 3; and Janet Buttolph Johnson, H. T. Reynolds, and Jason D. Mycoff, *Political Science Research Methods*, 7th ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2012). Patton, Sawicki, and Clark offer a helpful guide for arranging and conducting interviews with policy-makers. Any recent social science methods text will discuss how to construct and use questionnaires as well as how to conduct interviews. See, for example, Earl Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research*, 13th ed. (Independence, Ky.: Cengage, 2013).
21. Rebecca Fairley Raney, "From Parking to Taxes, a Push to Get Answers Online," *New York Times*, April 4, 2002.

22. See Timothy Egan, "Once Braced for a Power Shortage, California Now Finds Itself with a Surplus," *New York Times*, November 4, 2001.
23. See Associated Press, "For Some Whistle-Blowers, Big Risk Pays Off," *New York Times*, November 29, 2004; and Associated Press, "Whistle-Blower Awarded \$104 Million by I.R.S.," *New York Times*, September 11, 2012. A nonprofit organization called the Taxpayers Against Fraud Education Fund maintains an extensive website on the False Claims Act at www.taf.org.
24. *New State Ice Co. v. Liebmann*, 285 U.S. 262, 311 (1932).
25. Quoted in a *Science* magazine editorial by Donald Kennedy, March 22, 2002, 2177.