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Evidence for Policy in the Wake of COVID-19: Short – Medium – Long Term Impacts

*COVID-19 has rapidly and radically reshaped interactions between academics and policymakers and the kinds of evidence being used to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this post, **Vivian Tseng**, considers how research-policy relationships might develop in the short, medium to long term and how research funders might seize opportunities presented by COVID-19 to design equity-centred and transformative research partnerships.*

This post originally appeared on the Transforming Evidence blog as [Transforming Evidence for Policy in the Wake of COVID-19](#).

After September 11, during a period of intense conflict and uncertainty, my mentor Glenn Omatsu taught me that crises—while challenging—open windows of opportunity for change. In times of upheaval, people are more likely to question the status quo and to consider different ways of doing things.

This lesson resonates as the COVID-19 pandemic has forced so many of us to reckon with profound disruption, if not devastation, in our day-to-day lives. But the crisis has not had equal impact; it has widened the inequities in our communities. In video conferences and online chats, my colleagues and I have reflected on the consequential decisions practitioners and policymakers across sectors are facing as they navigate a new and far-reaching set of challenges.

With leaders, managers, and frontline providers striving to chart the proper course in an unsettled environment, we considered the ways the research community can be of service now and in the months and years to come. In this post, I offer my reflections as well as wisdom from colleagues on how researchers and funders, particularly in the social and behavioural sciences, can support equity-centered and evidence-informed decision making in the short, medium, and longer terms.

The Short Term

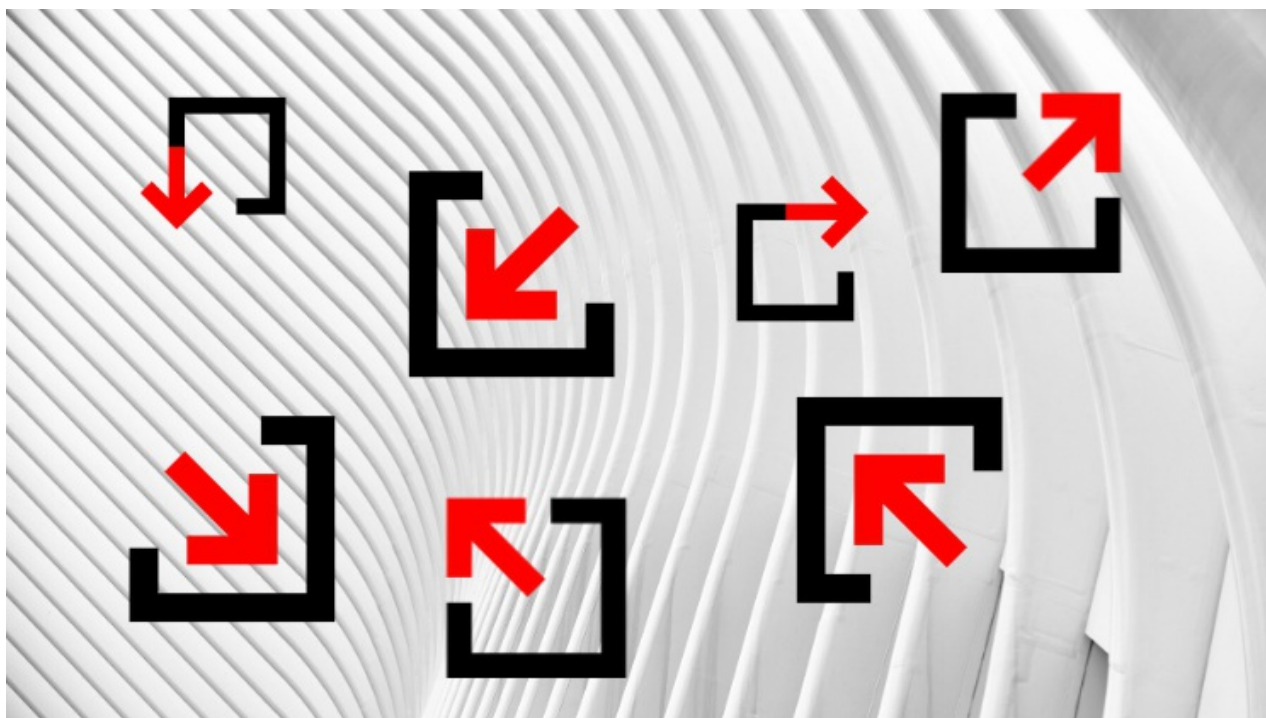
In a crisis, offers of help are not equal: Decision makers' time is always a precious resource, but it has been exponentially scarce in the midst of this pandemic. The individuals and organisations best positioned to be of service in crises are often those who already have trusted relationships with decision makers, deep understanding of their needs, and a track record of reliably delivering on them.

That's why [research-practice partnerships](#)—long-term, mutually beneficial collaborations—are particularly valuable in these moments. At a time when some districts are suspending work with external researchers for example, the Houston Education Research Consortium (HERC), a decade-long partnership between Rice University and the Houston Independent School District, is leveraging its deep knowledge of local schools and strong relationships with district officials to quickly step in to provide information on students with the greatest needs on matters such as food insecurity and homelessness.

For many, the initial response to any new challenge is to study it, but initiating laborious new research is not necessarily helpful to decision makers as they emerge from the thick of the crisis and map out next steps

For their part, funders can step up in the short-term by forging and deepening relationships between researchers, community organisations, and service providers. For instance, after Hurricane Harvey in 2017, the Greater Houston Community Foundation helped galvanise a community coalition to address the effects of the storm's devastating floods—relationships that have been reactivated in this crisis. Because HERC was part of that coalition, it is poised to step in again, this time to design a survey that will help decision makers assess and prioritise the needs of the local community as they develop responses to COVID-19.

To be responsive, funders should also consider the nature of their funding. In HERC's case, the swift pivot to meet emerging needs was only possible because of the general operating support provided by the Kinder Foundation and the Houston Endowment. Without that flexible support, HERC's staff would not have been able to translate their trusted relationships and research expertise into prompt action.



The Medium Term

Drawing on his experience governing through crises, former Governor of West Virginia Bob Wise writes that immediate crisis response is quickly followed by opportunities to “[restore, rebuild, and recreate](#)”. This is the stage we are now living through, and the one when researchers have more opportunities to be of service because decision makers, themselves, are better able to plan ahead.

Rather than focusing energy on launching new studies, researchers should be synthesising what we know from existing research in order to inform tomorrow's decisions. For many, the initial response to any new challenge is to study it, but initiating laborious new research is not necessarily helpful to decision makers as they emerge from the thick of the crisis and map out next steps. Decision makers do not have the luxury of time to await findings from a new study: They needed answers yesterday for the decisions they need to make today.

At the William T. Grant Foundation, we have begun funding Rapid Response Research Grants to address the limitations decision makers are up against as they seek to make informed choices. As part of these grants, researchers partner with policymakers and advocates to synthesise the best available research so that it is useful to specific decisions—whether it's helping school districts plan ways to make up for unequal learning loss across students based on race, class, and language and disability status, advising local officials on adapting summer programs for low-income youth, or supporting advocates to ensure that undocumented and mixed-status families are not left out of the relief and recovery efforts.

Of course, summarising existing research for rapid action is not enough to ensure impact. Leveraging research knowledge to inform decision making requires supporting those who render the research into action. This is not a relay race where researchers hand off the research and then move on: they need to continue being on hand to advise on questions of policy design; they need to provide their best judgement on implementation questions; and they can lend their voice to building credibility and political will for evidence-informed decisions.

Whether one is funding or conducting research, knowledge of real-time needs is invaluable and so we need to keep our ears to the ground and our minds open

Certainly new studies will also emerge from this crisis, and funders like us will surely look to support them. But our hope is that those studies will be designed to strengthen future policies and practices, and not merely document the impact of the pandemic. Documentation is important (especially documentation of unequal impacts), but as a research community, we should look to engage in solution-oriented research on policies, programs, and practices to mitigate the devastating effects we are likely to see. For example, which state and local policies have best addressed food insecurity during this crisis? What conditions enabled some districts to better support the social and emotional wellbeing of students when schools closed? What can we learn from the unexpected positive impact of the shutdowns on carbon emissions? So long as the research community continues to limit its imagination to the documentation of problems, we will continue to come in a day late and a dollar short in responding to policy and practice needs. We can do better.

Finally, just as researchers need to be nimble and responsive, so too do funders. We have to challenge ourselves to work much more quickly than usual and urge peer reviewers to do the same. Whether one is funding or conducting research, knowledge of real-time needs is invaluable and so we need to keep our ears to the ground and our minds open. For example, my colleague Jim Kohlmoos and I have been convening weekly briefings with policymakers, advocates, community organisations, and practice-focused researchers to educate ourselves and our funder colleagues about decision makers' pressing needs now and into the future. In addition, our senior program team at the William T. Grant Foundation has been reaching out to education, justice, and human service groups in order to understand how research can be brought to bear on the incredibly challenging decisions they face in mitigating inequality. In some instances, we are leveraging our networks to help them connect with researchers with the relevant expertise and collaboration skills to be good partners. If the research community is going to provide support that is commensurate with the challenges we face, it is essential that we prioritise the perspectives, contexts, and needs of decision makers.

The Long-Term

As we seek to build a better society emerging from this crisis, we face both an opportunity and a responsibility to support equity-centered and evidence-informed decision-making well beyond this pandemic. That will require building infrastructure.

A cornerstone of that infrastructure will be strong, productive collaborations between the research, policy, and practice communities that are rooted in public accountability. Researchers will need to see their roles as being as much about building new knowledge as synthesising existing research for tomorrow's decisions. And the new research cannot focus solely on documenting and interrogating the problems in our society; solution-oriented research agendas are needed. At least some researchers must be willing to expand their roles beyond evidence building to be active partners in evidence use.

We cannot continue the status quo of researching the questions of greatest interest to us and our academic colleagues. We must think more expansively about what evidence is needed, and not just right now, but in the months and years to come

An infrastructure for equity-centered and evidence-informed decision making requires changes in the academy. I suspect there will be (perhaps already is) considerable soul-searching among academics: For whom and for what goals does academia build knowledge? Academics often devote enormous time and energy to influencing other academics, and university incentive systems reinforce that goal. But research impact cannot just focus on citation counts by other academics. If we are to shift the goals of the academy to address the needs and interests of policy and practice communities, then tenure and promotion systems will need to reward research that informs those communities and the public they serve. The position most esteemed among academics will be not only their place among other academics, but their positions vis-à-vis policymakers, practitioners, and communities.

To the extent that research is influenced by funding, philanthropies and public funders need to support these institutional changes. This year for example, the Doris Duke, Spencer, and William T. Grant Foundations jointly supported three [Institutional Challenge Grants](#), through which Boston College, Northwestern University, and University of California, Berkeley will devise new ways of envisioning academic work so that it rewards partnership research with practitioners and builds the evidence use capacity of local nonprofit and government institutions. All of this work is centred on reducing the inequalities in our country for the next generation, and we believe this model provides a promising strategy for others tackling these institutional barriers.

In Conclusion

To meet the moment of the COVID-19 crisis and the challenges ahead, the research community will need to reimagine and restructure its work in relation to policymakers, practitioners, and communities. Social and behavioral researchers and the funders that support their work have a critical role to play in responding to this crisis and in building a more just and evidence-informed society in the longer term.

We will need to build relationships with decision makers and communities that are focused on our collective goals. We cannot continue the status quo of researching the questions of greatest interest to us and our academic colleagues. We must think more expansively about what evidence is needed, and not just right now, but in the months and years to come. We will need to institutionalise research-policy relationships and build the capacity for stronger collaborations and joint work. What we have learned about use of research evidence is that if we're going to build a more equitable and evidence-informed society, we need to invest now in the relationships and infrastructure to transform research systems and enable better, more inclusive use of evidence.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below

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