



Editorial

The New Jersey State Policy Lab – introducing the special issue

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This issue of *The Journal of Policy Studies* includes several works that are products of the New Jersey State Policy Lab (NJSPL). This introductory piece explains the brief history of the NJSPL and its philosophy behind producing empirically driven, policy-relevant research that both can produce the types of academic works you see in the articles that follow, and reports that are of use to state decision-makers. The first author of this article is the Principal Investigator of the NJSPL, the second author is its Executive Director, and the third author, one of its summer interns who provided research support.

The NJSPL was created in April 2021. It is supported by a recurring grant from the New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education (OSHE). It is jointly operated by two schools at Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey: The Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, and the School of Public Affairs and Administration. Very early in its tenure, the NJSPL focused on understanding the role of other policy labs in the United States and made several critical decisions on its functioning. These decisions were made in consultation with OSHE and are largely responsible for the breadth and quality of work that you see in this issue.

Policy labs are relatively new entities in the landscape of the US policy process, generally growing prominent over the past few decades. Some are technically part of state governments, others are more independent. Similarly, some are funded by state or local governments, others are funded by foundations. Some focus on particular policy areas and others are more general. Most tend to be empirically driven but some focus on policy experimentation or stakeholder participation. All of these differences impact the outputs of the labs and have certainly impacted ours. A number of labs have been short-lived however, and durability is a constant concern.

The next section of this chapter describes the academic literature on the roles of policy labs. Subsequently, we describe the choices made by the NJSPL and how that has affected the nature of the outputs it has produced. Finally, we conclude with a description of those outputs and a brief summary of the pieces in this issue.

The Nature of Policy Labs

The creation of policy labs is a relatively recent phenomenon. Some have linked policy lab proliferation to New Public Management and reforms designed to “reinvent government” in the late twentieth century

(McGann et al., 2018). Others cite a “labification” of policy that began in the 2010s, attributed to design thinking, a product of the technocratic policy approach in the 1980s, experimentation in policy design, and collaborative governance, which values participation and transparency.

Olejniczak et al. (2020) define policy labs as, “entities that declare a public policy focus, for example, policy design, solutions for citizens or social impact, providing an open forum for new ideas and solutions to social problems.” Wellstead (2020) defines policy innovation labs as neutral organizations that create an innovative and evidence-based public policy using scientific “lab-like” principles and “creative, design, or user-oriented perspectives.” Perusing websites for policy labs,¹ it is clear that while differences exist, there are numerous commonalities. First, and most obviously, is the focus on public policy. Labs also almost uniformly work on empirical evaluations of policy solutions rather than the theory of policy analysis. Finally, most labs have some connection to government clients to whom the outputs of the labs are targeted.

Several researchers have categorized labs in partially overlapping ways. In thinking about the relationship with government sponsors, Lewis (2021) described four types of policy labs: government-controlled, government-led, government-enabled, and independently owned, and identified most as being either government-controlled or enabled. Wellstead et al. (2021) categorize policy labs based on three key characteristics: a design-based approach, innovation by scientific methodologies, and engagement with populations of interest. And in a separate piece, Wellstead (2020) notes that there are four types of policy labs: design-led labs, open government and data labs, evidence-based labs, and mixed labs, and also that some labs work across a variety of policy areas while others choose to focus on a particular policy domain.

Considering the role of government in policy labs, political support is important for sustaining the lab. A feature of these labs was autonomy, due to less oversight, which provided more opportunity for innovation and using various experimental methods compared to bureaucracies, which have more administrative policies constraining creativity (Lewis, 2021). This autonomy also makes it more likely that bureaucratic regulation will not restrict labs, encouraging flexibility and creativity to generate new knowledge (Westhead et al., 2021). Policy labs’ organizational structure, lack of a hierarchy, and collaborative processes are expected to break down public sector risk aversion and lack of expertise to generate evidence-based solutions to complex social and economic issues (Brock, 2021).

Promoting trust in policy labs requires diverse participants with differing values and experiences, allowing multiple solutions to be discussed and relationships to form. Policy labs that discuss problems early in the policy cycle maximize success, so policymakers have evidence when considering potential solutions (Hinrichs-Krapels et al., 2020). Additionally, policy labs promote open policymaking by working within and outside of government to learn from the expertise of different actors, including civil servants, community groups, and organizations, minimizing the role of the hierarchy (Kimbell, 2015). Policy labs within institutions provide one of the best ways for academics and policymakers to

¹ See for example the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab <https://coloradolab.org/>, The Policy Lab at Brown University <https://thepolicylab.brown.edu/> and the Georgia Policy Labs <https://gpl.gsu.edu/>. These are US examples but there are also many in the European Union (see e.g., https://policy-lab.ec.europa.eu/index_en). Only one of these projects was complete at the time of writing.

collaborate and inform evidence-based policymaking (Hinrichs-Krapels et al., 2020). This last fact has proven instrumental in generating the types of work in this volume.

Policy labs also face significant challenges in producing impacts. Many labs have been defunded and closed with relatively short lifespans. Their small size lends themselves to this as does excessive identification with a particular government (Lewis, 2021). One study found challenges in determining whether policy labs had a significant impact because they lacked publicized measuring tools and long-term goals and instead relied on stakeholder feedback (Olejniczak et al., 2020).

Policy labs external to government organizations were more likely to engage in innovative or radical solutions, yet risked their suggestions being disregarded, compared to labs in government that have a direct influence but are more likely to use a gradual approach to policy design. Labs had the most influence by generating and testing policy solutions, followed by defining problems (McGann et al., 2018).

Another challenge with the operation of policy labs is the role of political influence driving policy rather than nonpartisan analysis. A close linkage to a particular political ideology can threaten the sustainability of policy labs when there is a new political appointment. An additional barrier to policy labs fostering innovation is securing funding. The stage of the project can influence who will provide financing; early stages of research are likely to be supported by charitable foundations compared to the government, which funds projects once there are reliable results (Brock, 2021).

The success and challenges that policy labs face therefore produce a series of choices to a new lab like the NJSPL. While our original, and still primary, source of funding is the New Jersey OSHE, the agency gave us a great deal of flexibility to decide what to work on and what to focus on -- with the exception of a few projects specifically requested by OSHE or the Governor's Office (Gibson et al., 2022).²

These choices include whether to focus on particular policy areas or to generalize across areas. It included whether to build up our internal organization or to solicit work from the vast higher educational network across New Jersey. It also included decisions about the vigor with which to seek contract work for state agencies outside of OSHE and the New Jersey Governor's office. Finally, it included a number of choices that would directly affect the impact of our work. These decisions are detailed in the next section.

The New Jersey State Policy Lab

The first decisions that had to be made after we received the grant from OSHE were the focus of the lab and the means for generating research. From the initial grant application to OSHE to the development of a mission statement, the NJSPL centered equity and efficacy in our mission. The mission statement begins, "The New Jersey State Policy Lab assists the state of New Jersey and its many communities in the design, implementation, and evaluation of state policies and programs by conducting rigorous evidence-based research that considers equity, efficiency, and efficacy of public policies and programs in holistic and innovative ways." This focus on equity and on practical impact

² Only one of these projects was complete at the time of writing.

informed most of our subsequent decisions.

As part of our initial efforts to develop a solid foundation of compelling research, the NJSPL invited a robust network of multidisciplinary scholars from around the state to prepare research proposals on policy topics that impact New Jersey. The co-Principal Investigators and Executive Director of the NJSPL reviewed the proposals on an ad-hoc basis, giving preference to projects that permitted students to contribute. This model allowed us to take advantage of the diverse set of skills and interest of the many academics in New Jersey studying issues related to state policy. It also produced research reports and blogs addressing various policy domains, including education, the environment, transportation, economics, public health, women and children, housing, public administration, cannabis, and digital equity and other technology-related issues.

In all of our work though, researchers accepting funding from the NJSPL had to meet certain criteria and accept certain conditions. The work had to be relevant to current policy issues in New Jersey. It had to be empirical in nature. And in selecting projects to fund, the NJSPL gave extra weight to those projects emphasizing policies that reduced inequalities. Once a project was accepted by the NJSPL, grant recipients had to agree to a final report that was accessible to non-academic audiences. To make our reports more user-friendly, we encouraged and eventually required researchers to incorporate policy recommendations and to prepare executive summaries, rendering the most salient findings more accessible. The NJSPL helped edit reports to achieve this goal). Finally report-writers had to produce several blog posts over the life of the project, including one introducing it and one summarizing the results. The NJSPL has produced two blog entries per week virtually without fail since its inception.

Additionally, we created a template for all research reports to solidify the NJSPL brand, developed press releases to accompany report releases, and compiled a comprehensive list of researchers, policymakers, and media outlets whom we could target with emails and social media announcing reports. This has permitted us to target our communications, engaging with stakeholders focused on particular policy areas.

We have also taken advantage of social media to publicize the work done by our funded researchers. Schmidt (2022) looks at how the United States policy labs used Twitter to engage with stakeholders during the pandemic. Social media allows the diffusion of information in an accessible and cost-effective manner. However, Schmidt (2022) found that not all engagement was productive, such as mentioning a policy lab in a tweet irrelevant to policy or social issues. Nevertheless, considering policy labs are known for co-creation and co-design, using Twitter is an innovative strategy for engaging with the public and can be regarded as a resource for stakeholder engagement. We have attempted to follow this model.

The NJSPL has also conducted research commissioned by state agencies. For example, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJ DOE) contracted the NJSPL to examine how schools expended funds provided as part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, and to identify potential impacts of those expenditures. In a subsequent project, the NJ DOE invited the NJSPL to identify schools that successfully improved student learning outcomes during the COVID pandemic. Focusing on total student populations as well as historically underserved subgroups of students, the NJSPL is seeking to uncover promising practices for student learning acceleration

that could be replicated in other schools. Similarly, the New Jersey Division of Family Development commissioned the NJSPL to compare costs associated with enrollment-based and attendance-based models for childcare subsidy payments.

While we continue to research a wide range of topics impacting the state, the NJSPL has embraced research initiatives in order to focus our attention. The three initiatives we are currently pursuing are related to economics, education, and digital equity. The NJSPL has absorbed the Rutgers Economic Advisory Service (R/ECON) an economic advisory service which provides forecasts for the state of New Jersey. This will provide a service to the government and the broader New Jersey community regardless of who holds political power in the state. The NJSPL is also conducting research related to higher education attainment goals in New Jersey, which serves the need of our primary grantor, OSHE. Finally, in keeping with our intent to focus on equity, our third initiative on digital equity includes research to understand how technology can reduce learning costs associated with eligibility requirements for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

As the NJSPL has matured, we have been deliberate in our strategic review of processes and outcomes. We are striving to continuously improve our contributions to state policy development and to expand the reach of our work. In this spirit, we graduated from ad-hoc proposals to a more formal call for proposals. As part of this revision, we expanded the network of researchers we invited to submit proposals. This systematic call for proposals also permitted our leadership team to equitably review dozens of research proposals side-by-side and created economies of scale as we simultaneously initiated ten research projects. As we look ahead, we intend to release a call for proposals focused on program evaluations and/or best practices in other states.

This ever-evolving series of decisions has kept the NJSPL active and relevant as we begin our third year of existence. We have produced more than 35 reports. As noted above, these reports cover a wide variety of policy areas. With the development of NJSPL-specific initiatives and more structured calls for proposals, we intend to build on this base in a way that doesn't narrow but does sharpen our focus. That said, the work to date has been impressive as the rest of this volume will demonstrate.

The Work in this Volume

The works in this volume sprang from reports that were intended to be practical and useful to policymakers. But they also represent the work of rigorous academic works employing cutting edge research techniques. Collectively they represent coverage of a variety of policy areas and the priorities of the NJSPL. All are focused on pressing issues in New Jersey, and likely across the country. Administrative burden has come to the forefront of attention of researchers in public policy (Herd & Moynihan, 2019). Policymakers have responded by seeking ways to alleviate burdens on beneficiaries of public programs. But sometimes, those creative solutions don't work as intended. In their article, Astudillo-Rojas, Hetling, and Venancio-Rodriguez examine an effort in New Jersey to use swipe cards to record attendance for childcare subsidies. Conceived as an approach for reducing burdens, the swipe cards have actually imposed psychological costs and have not functioned as intended.

E-government initiatives have been widely adopted across both the federal and state levels of government. In addition to hopefully reducing administrative burden, the goal is that e-government

initiatives will also enhance trust in government. In this volume, Lee reports on the results of a survey in New Jersey on e-government effectiveness, trust in the state government, and digital literacy. It is encouraging to note that unlike the childcare swipe program, Lee finds positive associations between the e-government initiative and trust in government.

The NJSPL, as noted above, has focused much attention on education policy and disparities in educational opportunities. Disparities in opportunities in math and science are particularly important given the enhanced economic opportunities that come with STEM training (Walker & Zhu, 2013). Campbell traces the trajectories in math courses for New Jersey secondary school students and crucially finds that the path to a STEM education goes awry for many students as early as 8th grade, and this is particularly true for racial/ethnic minority and economically disadvantaged students.

New Jersey legalized cannabis in 2021. With forty percent of towns in the state following through by opting to allow cannabis-related businesses, a natural experiment presented itself on the impacts of legalization. Hayes and Kandel took advantage of this natural experiment and found that less affluent towns were more likely to allow cannabis businesses, particularly if other towns nearby had done so. They also found that home sale prices increase more in towns that make the decision to allow such businesses.

Finally, Younes, Noland, Iacobucci, and Zhang examine the newly crucial issue of who is working from home. The Covid-19 pandemic first forced many businesses and employees to figure out remote work and then convinced those same businesses and employees that such an arrangement had mutual benefits. They find that more affluent and educated workers are more likely to continue working at home, potentially introducing further economic disparities and holding implications for transportation systems and economic activity.

Collectively, these works demonstrate the breadth and depth of work being conducted with the support of the NJSPL. Hopefully they also indicate the potential that policy labs have and present a model for future labs.

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