

2nd
EDITION

Public Policy Writing That Matters

David Chrisinger
Foreword by Katherine Baicker

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That Matters

Second Edition

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Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers.

—George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language”

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Foreword*Dr. Katherine Baicker*

We knew we were trying to answer an incredibly important policy question and that our results were going to get a lot of attention, but none of us knew quite what we were walking into. I was helping to lead a landmark study of the effects of health insurance coverage for low-income adults—a randomized controlled evaluation of Medicaid that had never been done, even though the program had been around since the mid-1960s. We published our results in leading academic journals—from the *New England Journal of Medicine* to *Science* to the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*. We were experts in constructing robust scientific findings and conveying them to experts, but connecting to a broader audience requires a different kind of expertise.

The results we found were nuanced. After comparing health care use, health, finances, and other outcomes for more than 6,300 adults who were randomly selected to apply for Medicaid coverage with another group of more than 5,800 who were not, we found that Medicaid coverage in the first two years generated no significant improvement in the physical health outcomes we measured. For example, we saw no detectable effect on blood pressure, cholesterol, obesity, or diabetic blood sugar control. At the same time, we found an increase in the use of health care across settings, a reduction in financial strain, lower rates of depression, and higher rates of diabetes detection and management.¹

These much-anticipated findings generated a flurry of stories from leading newspapers, magazines, and think tanks of various political persuasions. Annie Lowrey in the *New York Times* led with “Medicaid Access Increases Use of Care, Study Finds,”² and Ezra Klein, writing for the *Washington Post*, noted that “Medicaid works as health insurance.”³ Writing for the Oregon Center for Public Policy, Chuck Sheketoﬀ concluded that the lesson from our study was clear: “Medicaid works.”⁴ On the other side of the political spectrum, Michael F. Cannon of the Cato Institute wrote that “the nation’s top health economists released a study that throws a huge ‘stop’ sign in front of ObamaCare’s Medicaid expansion.”⁵ Michael Tanner, also of Cato, relied on the study to advocate against expanding Medicaid in Kansas.⁶ Avik Roy wrote in

Clear Thinking Leads to Clear Writing

When I coach students one-on-one at the Harris School, many of them seek me out because they don't think they're talented writers. For some, English isn't their first language. For others, quantitative analysis comes easier than writing, which they'd avoided doing as much as was possible while in college. Nine times out of 10, though, they're dead wrong about their abilities as writers. What they struggle with is not the writing; it's the thinking *behind* their writing. When students come to me for help with a policy memo, for example, I'll start the coaching session by asking them what they want to recommend. They'll tell me something like "I want to recommend that the country pass a mandatory voting law with the goal of increasing voter turnout."

The next question I'll ask is about the causes of low voter turnout: Why don't people turn out to vote? Is it because they don't have to? That's when I start to see the wheels turning behind their eyes. There are, after all, many reasons why people may decide not to vote. If they're a journalist, for example, they may choose not to vote to appear more neutral or independent. Or maybe someone doesn't vote because they cannot get time off from work. Or maybe they live too far from their polling place and have no access to reliable transportation. We could probably spend the entire coaching session brainstorming reasons why someone wouldn't vote; it's like other types of policy challenges—*incredibly complex and nuanced.*

After we've established that there may be many reasons why something is happening, I'll ask them about the evidence they've collected. What does it tell us is happening? Is what is happening something

desirable or undesirable? How do you know, I ask, what is desirable? This line of questioning is what good policy analysts do. They think before they write. They think about what questions need to be answered so that the reader can take those answers and solve a problem or address an issue.

In early summer 2020, soon after George Floyd was tragically tortured to death by a police officer named Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis, Minnesota, there was one policy question that had everyone talking: Should police departments be defunded? Those who advocate defunding argue that procedural tweaks—such as mandating that police officers complete implicit-bias training, hosting police-community listening sessions, creating civilian review boards, and updating use-of-force policies—won’t be enough to fix policing in America, as evidenced by the fact that the officer who killed George Floyd had received 17 misconduct complaints over nearly two decades on the job, and not one of the procedural tweaks instituted by the Minneapolis Police Department had inspired him to improve his behavior or resulted in his removal from the force.

How can a policy analyst like you or me help inform this debate? First, we would need to define our terms. Then, we’d need to conduct rigorous data analysis that can inform our recommendations for reform. For some, defunding the police means making it easier to identify and prosecute police misconduct like Chauvin’s. One way to do this, according to Peter Suderman, is to reform police unions, which, Suderman argues, “exist to demand that taxpayers pay for dangerous, and even deadly, negligence. And although they are not the only pathology that affects American policing, they are a key internal influence on police culture, a locus of resistance to improvements designed to reduce police violence.”¹ Labor contracts negotiated by police unions around the country, for instance, generally impede accountability measures, according to the Police Union Contract Project, which collects and compares police union contracts. These contracts often prevent officers from being questioned soon after they are involved in an incident, require cities to pay legal fees and any financial settlements related to officers’ misconduct, and limit disciplinary measures that can be taken against officers who abuse their power.²

In June 2020, prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba wrote an op-ed in which she argued unequivocally that the police cannot be reformed.

“The only way to diminish police violence,” she claims, “is to reduce contact between the public and the police.” Police officers, according to Kaba, “don’t do what you think they do.” Instead of chasing down violent criminals and making felony arrests, most of their time is spent “responding to noise complaints, issuing parking and traffic citations, and dealing with other noncriminal issues.” If the number of police officers currently serving was cut in half, along with a similar-sized cut to their departmental budgets, she continues, police officers would have less power, which would result in fewer opportunities for them to “brutalize and kill people.” It would also result in health care, housing, education, and employment training programs finally receiving the funding they need to be effective, which, Kaba argues, would ultimately lead to an entirely different social and economic order characterized, in part, by less crime and much less need for police. “We can build other ways of responding to harms in our society,” she says. “Trained ‘community care workers’ could do mental health checks if someone needs help. Towns could use restorative-justice models instead of throwing people in prison.”³

On the same day that the *New York Times* published Kaba’s op-ed, a columnist for the *Washington Post*, Leana S. Wen, wrote about the need to reimagine public safety through what she called public health partnerships: “Instead of using the inflammatory language of ‘defunding the police,’ what if we consider a new approach to policing through partnering with public health efforts?” Thinking along these more constructive lines, where the vital role of the police is recognized and public health plays a larger role, Wen says, could lead not only to a reduction in crime but also in violence perpetrated by police officers.⁴

Only after we understand the terms of the debate can we formulate policy questions that can be answered. Figuring out what the right questions are—and providing persuasive answers—is *the* purpose of public policy writing that matters.

THE PURPOSE OF POLICY ANALYSIS

At the University of Chicago’s Harris School of Public Policy, there is a large maroon banner with cream-colored bubble letters that greets all new students when they walk through the front doors of the building. It reads, “Your impact story starts here.” At Harris, we talk a lot

about impact. We want students to impact the world. We tell them we will teach them the quantitative skills they'll need to have impact. We promise them that once they graduate from the program, they'll be ready to change the world. Let that sink in for a moment. We're here to change the world. The expectations couldn't be higher.

Every time I see that sign, I get an anxious lump in my throat. And when I'm asked to teach first-year students how to write a policy memo that's "going to change the world," that anxious lump morphs into something much closer to panic. How can I even attempt such a thing in 90-minute workshops that students aren't even required to attend? The only thing that reduces this panic, I've found, is to set aside the goal of changing the world with policy writing and to reduce the purpose of policy communication to its simplest terms. If I were in charge of designing another banner for the Harris School, I'd consider a much bigger one that read,

Your impact story starts with learning how to ask the right questions AND answer them with the most convincing evidence that rigorous data analysis can provide. Try not to worry so much about making an impact and changing the world . . . yet. That will come in due time. And when it comes, you'll be ready.

Too wordy, I know. I'm sure I could capture my internal monologue more concisely, though I'm not convinced a more concise version would have more of a punch. The point is that to be valuable policy analysts, we need to divorce ourselves from the idea that we're here to change the world. That's not to say our work *won't* change the world. Rather, we need to focus on what we can control and worry less about what we can't. What we can control are the questions we ask and the answers we provide. Think of it this way: Your readers have unanswered questions. Generally, they don't really know what's happening. They don't know why it's happening. And they don't know what to do to make a positive change.

That's where we come in. If we're able to figure out what questions we can answer for the readers and answer them with convincing evidence based on rigorous data analysis, we can help our readers solve a problem. Our readers taking the answers we give them to solve a

problem is what will lead to impact. And if we're fortunate, that impact will change the world for the better.

THE THREE TYPES OF POLICY QUESTIONS

There are three types of policy questions that analysts need to answer to help their readers solve pressing problems:

1. What's happening?
2. What's working?
3. What should be done next?

That's it. In all my years working as a policy analyst and communicator, I have yet to encounter a policy question that wasn't some variation of one of these questions. I've also found that the most persuasive policy stories will answer all three.

Let's return to the question of whether police departments should be defunded by focusing on the city of Chicago. What are the questions readers might need answered before they can solve the policy problems posed by policing?

1. What's happening?

Before we get into more evaluative and prescriptive kinds of stories, we first need to understand, and clearly communicate to our readers, what is happening, who the key stakeholders are, and how we got to where we are today. Two questions about the Chicago Police Department immediately come to my mind:

1. How much funding does the Chicago Police Department receive each year?
2. How does the police department's annual budget compare with those for public health and social services provided by the city?

In answer to these questions, you'd find that for fiscal year 2020 (which began on January 1 in Chicago), the city allocated \$1.7 billion to police

the 2.7 million people who call Chicago home (17.2 percent of the city's \$9.9 billion budget). That \$1.7 billion is nearly double the amount of money the city spent on the fire department, public transportation, public libraries, and public health services combined.⁵ One way you might interpret these numbers is to say that Chicago has decided to invest a significant sum of money in policing and has, in turn, deprioritized the public health and social services it could provide to help address potential root causes of crime and the need for police.

To put these figures into context, let's compare Chicago's budget to decisions made in New York City, the largest city in the United States with the largest police department in the country. For fiscal year 2020 (which began on July 1), New York City allocated \$5.9 billion to its police department (6.7 percent of the city's \$88.2 billion budget). At the same time, the city planned to spend

- \$2.1 billion on services for people experiencing homelessness,
- \$1.9 billion on public health,
- \$1.3 billion on housing,
- \$988 million on youth and community development, and
- \$382 million on jobs programs.⁶

Next, we may want to ask questions about what happens when police officers respond to “calls for service,” which include 911 calls, alarms, police radio dispatch, and nonemergency calls:

- What do police officers in Chicago encounter when they respond to calls for service?
- How are police officers generally deployed throughout the city?
- How are their districts staffed?

The data required to answer all three questions for Chicago do not exist or are not available to the public. We do know, however, that in three other American cities that post data online showing how their police officers spend their time, only about 4 percent of officers' time is spent handling violent crime, according to crime analysts Jeff Asher and Ben Horowitz. Police officers in New Orleans, Montgomery County (Maryland), and Sacramento spend about half their time responding to

“noncriminal calls” and controlling traffic, and that's not even factoring in how much time is spent investigating, training, and completing administrative duties. “As experts continue to debate how best to improve the performance of law enforcement,” Asher and Horowitz conclude, “it's helpful to first have a clear understanding of how the police spend their time interacting with the public, including how little of it revolves around responding to violent crime.”⁷ That's not to say, however, that police work is not inherently dangerous, regardless of whether officers are called to a violent crime. On some occasions police officers are called to a situation seemingly nonviolent that quickly devolves into violence through no fault of the officers.

We also know that, in the United States, the police arrest over 10 million people every year. Of those 10 million arrests, 80 percent are for relatively minor offenses such as drug possession or drinking in public. According to Christian Davenport, a professor at the University of Michigan, “People believe that the police are deterring violence . . . And that's highly questionable.” In June 2020, he told Vox that there is plenty of research that suggests police officers are “having no influence whatsoever” on deterring violence. In addition, police officers are generally the first responders to emergencies related to mental health, and one in every four deaths from police shootings is of someone diagnosed with mental health problems. “I can literally imagine,” he continues, replacing an armed officer “with someone who will actually sit down on the ground with them and talk. Not throw them on the ground and sit on top of them or lay on top of them. But someone who will take them wherever they are, listen to their situation and then try to figure out, diagnose their problem.”⁸ Some in the law enforcement community agree, such as former Dallas police chief David Brown: “Every societal failure, we put it off on the cops to solve. Not enough mental health funding, let the cops handle it. Not enough drug addiction funding, let's give it to the cops. Schools fail, give it to the cops. Policing was never meant to solve all those problems.”⁹

As far as staffing goes, in 2016 the City of Chicago laid out a plan to hire an extra 516 officers, 92 field-training officers, 200 detectives, 112 sergeants, and 50 lieutenants over a two-year period.¹⁰ When asked by the *Chicago Sun-Times* why the city needed so many new officers, Eddie Johnson, then police superintendent, said the mayor based the

decision on a staffing analysis conducted by the department. “We did an overall analysis of the department . . . and this is what I think we need to make Chicago safer,” he said.¹¹ By the end of summer 2020, however, the Chicago Police Department had not yet released a copy of this analysis, which makes it impossible for independent analysts to test the veracity of the department’s findings. In early July 2020, after conducting a “good faith and reasonable search” of the department’s files, the city said it could not find the staffing analysis. Shortly before this admission, according to a June 2020 independent monitoring report filed in court, the Chicago Police Department hired the University of Chicago Crime Lab, the Civic Consulting Alliance, and other experts to perform a new staffing analysis.¹² Before we can know how to move forward, policy analysts need these data and analysis.

2. What’s working?

Once we have a sense of what the problem looks like on the ground, we can look to various interventions that have been tried and glean important lessons learned. One benefit of the United States having such a decentralized system of law enforcement is that we have thousands of “laboratories” (between 12,000 and 18,000 law enforcement departments across the country, depending on how you count them) where reforms can be piloted, evaluated, and iterated. While we don’t have many—if any—definitive studies that specify what’s working and what isn’t, there are plenty of good studies we can draw inferences from and use to advocate for defunding police departments or for more traditional reforms. We might want to ask, for example,

- How effective is the current public safety model in Chicago?
- What other public safety models have been implemented around the country, and how effective have those models been?

Again, we would need to define what we mean by *public safety model*, and we’d also need to be clear about how we were going to evaluate effectiveness. Are we going to look at public satisfaction surveys? The number of calls for service that result in arrests? The number of officer-involved shootings? We could probably come up with dozens of indicators to

measure that would help us show whether the police are operating effectively. I cannot tell you which indicators are best. That’s something you as the analyst need to decide and communicate clearly.

As for other models of public safety that depart from Chicago’s, there are plenty we could analyze. In 2007, for example, the health department in Baltimore, Maryland, developed a program called Safe Streets. The city hired people—many of whom had served time in prison—to mediate conflicts in their communities. In 2014, these mediators (also known as “violence interrupters”) helped quell more than 880 conflicts, the vast majority of which were deemed likely to have resulted in gun violence. In one neighborhood where the mediators were active, homicides dropped by 56 percent. In another, they dropped by 26 percent.

As part of a national effort called Cure Violence, more than 50 communities in over 25 cities, including Chicago, have implemented a similar approach to violence prevention that does not depend on law enforcement.¹³ In 2014, researchers found that in two neighborhoods in Chicago these interventions had resulted in a 31 percent greater decrease in killings and a 19 percent greater decrease in shootings.¹⁴ “Violence does not happen randomly or in isolation,” Leana S. Wen and M. Cooper Lloyd wrote in 2016 of Baltimore’s public health initiatives. “It is one tragic, final result of inequities that continually build if left unaddressed. By treating it as a public health issue, it can be prevented—and, perhaps one day, even cured.”¹⁵

In 2017, the City of Denver tried something new in the way it ensures public safety, and early evaluation results show this novel approach may work. The city created Crisis Intervention Response Units that pair police officers with mental health professionals. When someone in mental health distress in Denver calls 911, one of these units responds and treats the people they encounter more like patients than criminals. In 2018, the units encountered 1,725 people across the city. Police officers arrested only 3 percent of them; 2 percent were issued tickets. What was far more likely to happen was that these units connected the people with the Mental Health Center of Denver, where they received mental health support.¹⁶ The units also connected people to housing resources and substance abuse disorder treatment.¹⁷ “All of the folks involved in this program view this to be instrumental” to diverting people in a behavioral health crisis from going to jail, the

Crisis Intervention Response Units’ spokesperson, Jeff Holliday, told the city’s safety committee in December 2019.¹⁸

In August 2020, the RAND Corporation published a report on various policy options for reforming the way public safety is maintained in the United States. The common thread that ties them together is that they ask police to solve fewer of society’s problems—especially those that law enforcement officers may not be well suited for. “The United States,” the authors of the report claim, “has many societal problems that have very different (often complex and overlapping) causes and for which effective solutions require responses from practitioners with very specialized training, expertise, and resilience.” Proponents of defunding the police, they continue, argue for allocating funding to service providers that can address both the “symptoms *and* the root causes” of homelessness, mental health crises, and substance abuse disorders, among other societal issues (table 1.1).¹⁹

The key here seems to be this: what those who call for defunding the police are really advocating is a reimagining of public safety and a re-prioritization of funding to pay for services that can help the people who are most likely to be harmed during interactions with law enforcement. This is key because if the police are defunded without such reimagining and re-prioritization of funding, the results could be disastrous. A case in point: In 2008, officials in Vallejo, California, defunded their police department by half after filing for bankruptcy during the Great Recession. “Far from ushering in a new era of harmony between police and the people,” Peter Jamison wrote in the *Washington Post*, “the budget cuts worsened tensions between the department and the community and were followed by a dramatic surge in officers’ use of deadly force. Since 2009 the police have killed 20 people, an extraordinarily high number for such a small city. In 2012 alone, officers fatally shot six suspects. Nearly a third of the city’s homicides that year were committed by law enforcement.” One thing Jamison initially failed to mention was that when Vallejo officials cut police funding in half, they did not provide additional funding for public health and social services agencies. “Defunding the police,” then, must be a policy of presence, not just of absence.

It’s also important to note that reallocating funds to public health and social services agencies may not necessarily lead to a less deadly

TABLE 1.1. The RAND Corporation’s examples of policing functions that could be reallocated

Policing issue	Strategy with lesser enforcement role	Examples
Homelessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homeless outreach teams • Law enforcement-assisted diversion (LEAD) • Housing interventions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chula Vista Homeless Outreach Teams; Seattle Navigation Teams; Community Outreach Resource Program, Indio, California • Seattle LEAD Program • Permanent supportive housing programs
Behavioral health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-based behavioral health crisis response • Police-assisted substance use treatment • Police-mental health collaboratives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets • Police-Assisted Addiction and Recovery Initiative and angel initiatives • Crisis intervention teams’ co-responder programs
Community violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violence prevention initiatives • Community development • Advance counseling and mentoring for at-risk youth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cure Violence • Local nonprofit organizations • Becoming a Man
School safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early intervention and prevention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive behavioral interventions and supports • Threat assessment and prevention
Dispute resolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinated community response models 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Domestic Violence Enhanced Response Team, Colorado Springs, Colorado
Traffic enforcement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shift responsibility to civilian departments of transportation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transportation Alternatives, New York; Berkeley, California, Department of Transportation

police force. Jamison quotes Danté R. Quick, the pastor at Vallejo’s Friendship Missionary Baptist Church, who said, “Our police department is woefully ‘defunded,’ which has led to overworked, underpaid and therefore underqualified police officers.” Quick continued, “Do I really want a man or woman who’s worked 16 hours straight, with a gun in their hand, with state-sanctioned ability to take my life, who is tired—do I want that person authorized to police me? The answer to that is no.”²⁰ The effects of maintaining a smaller force in Vallejo—both positive and clearly negative—should give policy makers pause.

When we ask evaluative questions rooted in the present (*What’s working? What’s not working?*), we inevitably discuss values. The interventions we implement to reform policing in the United States are all rooted in values. If we require police departments to diversify by focusing on the recruitment of Black and Hispanic officers, we’re saying that we value diverse police departments and believe diversity will help solve some issues we see with the over- and under-policing of predominantly Black and Hispanic neighborhoods. If we require that police departments pair their officers with mental health professionals, we’re saying that we value treating people experiencing homelessness or a mental health crisis as people who are in need of help, not as criminals.

3. What should be done next?

Once we’ve figured out what’s happening and what’s working (and what may not be working), the next logical question to ask is what now should be done to address the policy problem we identified:

How could the City of Chicago best ensure that its residents’ public safety needs are met as effectively as possible?

Asking questions about the future (*What should be done next?*) focuses attention on choices, which allows people of different political persuasions to arrive at a shared vision of what things could look like if they worked together. “If you want to make a joint decision,” writes Jay Heinrichs in his book *Thank You for Arguing*, “you need to focus on the future. A future focus is what Aristotle saved for his favorite rhetoric. He called it “‘deliberative,’ because it argues about choices and helps

us decide how to meet our mutual goals.”²¹ If focusing on the past risks leading to disagreements about who is to blame, and if focusing on the present can incite passionate arguments about good and bad, asking questions about the future forces people to make a joint decision dependent on particular circumstances informed by—but not dominated by—cold facts and indelible values. Once we can agree on the future we’d like to see, we can take deliberate steps to build that future. We can figure out a way to make it happen, together. “Most arguments,” Heinrichs continues, “take place in the wrong tense. Choose the right tense. If you want your audience to make a choice, focus on the future.”²²

One group in Chicago thinking about the future along these lines is the Workers Center for Racial Justice, which has proposed a \$900 million cut to the city’s police budget, spread out over three years. According to its Proposal for Equitable Public Safety Reinvestment, about \$700 million could be reinvested in housing, public health, and family and support services. The rest could be used to establish units like Denver’s Crisis Intervention Response Units. These units would be staffed by traffic responders, crisis workers, mental health providers, and human services employees who are better equipped to respond to the calls for service that make up the bulk of 911 calls—and don’t necessarily require police officers—such as traffic incidents, mental health crises, and the filing of crime incident reports. Such cuts, according to the proposal, would bring the city’s per capita spending on policing “just under the current average spent among the nation’s top ten most populous cities.”²³

Notes

Foreword

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Suggested Further Reading

My journey as a writer, editor, and teacher has been greatly influenced by some fantastic books. Here is a list of books I continue to reference in my day-to-day work.

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