Transforming Policy through Research: Challenges and Opportunities

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Pittsburgh Wage Study | University of Pittsburgh
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Engaging Policy through Research

- Broad based perspective on policy
- Policies and systems serving children, youth and families
- Tension over objectivity
- Production of research is not sufficient
- Action is necessary when guided by the research
- Policies and systems designed to support children, youth and families are too often bandaids

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Engaging in Policies on Low Wage Work

- Invited by the Pittsburgh City Council to testify at several hearings
- Consulted on sick days and other policies
- Asked by City Council to serve on the Wage Review Committee
  - Heard testimony from 100s of workers, experts and others
- Wage Review Committee issued several reports and disseminated findings
- Some action from large employers
- Policymakers continued to ask questions

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Do wage increases improve the well-being of hospital workers?

Worker centered focus

Multi-year mixed methods study of the experiences and challenges of hospital workers

Three waves of surveys and in-depth interviews

Additional survey in 2021 focused on Covid

Supplemental projects

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Take Away Points from Pittsburgh Wage Study

- Significant hardships → workers need to adopt a range of strategies
- Many do not use or are not eligible for public benefits
- Evidence that wage increases reduced hardships
- $15/hour still not enough
- Above $20/hour experience less material hardship and financial insecurity
- Material hardships, financial insecurity, and strategies are associated with higher levels of stress
- Stress is associated with health and mental health
- Significant mental health concerns among essential workers

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Hardships

- Housing Hardship: 64%
- Medical Hardship: 59%
- Food Insecurity: 59%
- Financial Insecurity: 89%

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Public Benefit/Private Strategies Use

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Do Wage Increases Help?

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Above/Below $15

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Wage Quartiles

A survey of hospital service workers in Western Pennsylvania (N=330)

Four groups based on hourly wage quantiles

1. Group 1
   Less than $12.56

2. Group 2
   $12.57-$15.15

3. Group 3
   $15.16-$18.765

4. Group 4
   $18.77 and above

Bivariate analyses to see differences between the groups

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Is $15 Enough?

Mean Hardships

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Above/Below $20

Housing Hardship

- Below $20: 21%
- Above $20: 6%

Food Insecurity

- Below $20: 43%
- Above $20: 17%

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Above/Below $20

Utility Hardship

- Below $20: 39%
- Above $20: 20%

Essential Expense Hardship

- Below $20: 34%
- Above $20: 13%

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Material Hardships, Stress, and Health

- Financial Insecurity
- Medical Hardship
- Food Insecurity
- Perceived Stress

Links:
- Financial Insecurity to Perceived Stress
- Medical Hardship to Perceived Stress
- Food Insecurity to Perceived Stress
- Perceived Stress to Mental Health
- Perceived Stress to Physical Health

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Strategies Increase Stress

Strategies to Make Ends Meet

Financial Insecurity

Stress

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What Does This Mean?

• Hardworking/essential workers
• High levels of mental health symptoms
• Evidence indicates that paying workers more will:
  • Reduce hardships
  • Reduce reliance on strategies to make ends meet
  • Reduce stress
  • Improve health and mental health
• Evidence also points to the importance of treating these hospital workers with dignity and respect

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Moving Forward: Role of Researchers

- Research briefs and reports
- Op-eds and other forms of media
- Participation in bargaining sessions
- Testimony at public hearings
- Direct engagement with policymakers and staff
- Continuing to develop relationships with other organizations
- Bringing the conversation to business groups and employers
- Showing up when asked