

Course 11.949
Harvard/MIT Advanced Seminar on Social Research and Policy

RE: Student name, "Why Does Good Research Go Unused? The Inertia of the Mandatory Arrest Policy for Misdemeanor Domestic Violence Offenders"

[name]:

The paper is a gem. You persuasively link political movement to the framing of an important social "problem" worthy of public attention (previously merely an unfortunate and taboo "condition" in Kingdon's terms) and suggest likely effects of early research on widespread mimicking of a policing policy. You then explore, in less depth, possible reasons for policy inertia. If one question of great interest to social researchers is "How can a promising idea *become* policy, and how can research help?" another should surely be this: "How does a questionable idea *remain* policy, particularly in the face of unsupportive (or very mixed) research evidence?"

The paper effectively balances recent policy and political history with attention the design and limits of the most significant, policy-relevant research. Here are a few things we think would strengthen an already solid inquiry into a fascinating and important question:

Content:

- **Explaining the policy change, including the effect of research:** this is a classic, thorny problem of attribution in political analysis. Since you cannot prove anything, clarify the basis for claim, and avoid resorting to "probably's." Do long-time observers of policy in this area attribute significant effects to the research?
- **Dealing with heterogeneity in the population.** The second wave of research you describe illustrates an important challenge to policy analysis and policymaking alike – namely that the same interventions can have different, and even wholly opposite effects, when applied to a heterogeneous population. Also, change over time can be misread if heterogeneity is not recognized (e.g., before reform, most people on welfare at any given time were short-termers, but most welfare subsidies were spent on long-termers – these were different subpopulations, and snapshots were often deceiving). You outline the implications for mandatory arrest policy concisely and quite appropriately – the very targets most likely to be arrested may also be the least likely to respond in the ways society would like – and you even introduce race in a helpful way. FYI only: population heterogeneity bedevils many a policy prescription. For more, see Stokey and Zeckhauser, *A Primer for Policy Analysis*.
- **Discretion and Trust.** One issue you mention but not explore is that of trust in the discretion of law enforcement officers (the front-line implementers in this instance). In effect, enforcement policy related to domestic violence (not to be confused with prevention policy or other interventions beyond enforcement per se) cannot help but reflect some lack of trust in offenders or potential offenders but also incomplete trust in the discretion of those to whom we cede authority and expect to protect us. You might have done a bit more with this, though your initial assessment seems reasonable. In general, mandatory arrest may not persist indefinitely, but it is still "young" in the context of society's long-time denial

of the problem (as problem) and excessive deference to males in intimate relationships as well.

Style:

- Another revision could cut some wordiness and improve references. For example, legal cases are not “called” by their names but rather named, so one of your sentences could simply read, “For example, a landmark legal case in 1965, *Griswold v. Connecticut*, established the principle ...”
- Likewise, page-specific standard citations generally do not include double parentheses, so “(Schneider 1994, p.34)” and not “(Schneider (1994), p. 34).”
- When using statistical references in text, try for consistency in direction to make it easy for the reader to follow. So a 1970 study indicated that 25% of men and 17% of women felt wife-slapping was OK (i.e., agreed with that). Assuming the same item was used in the second study, tell us, with the 1983 survey data, what these *same* %s became rather than reporting their complements (i.e., how many disagreed). If I read it right, the 1970 vs. 1983 comparisons for men are 25% vs. 14% and for women 17% vs. 9%. Point is, organize the data for us. These details distinguish a great piece of persuasive, evidence-based writing from a merely satisfactory one.

Again, very nicely done, and many thanks for your always thoughtful contributions in class.

-- Xav

Paper grade: A