

Use of Research Findings by Child and Family Social Services, Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services

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Abstract

Background

In Israel, applied studies are conducted every year to support decision-making and further policy. In recognition of the importance of using research findings in its work, the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services (MOLSA) commissions studies on key issues. These are conducted by MOLSA's Research, Planning and Training Division or by external parties such as research institutes, and academic or independent researchers, with the Division's support. Numerous other studies relating to MOLSA services and activities – while not commissioned by the Ministry – are carried out with its approval.

Study Goal

One of MOLSA's major concerns is whether decisionmakers and professionals utilize research findings effectively and in support of best practice. The topic is widely discussed in the international literature along with the various obstacles to the utilization of research findings. To learn how Israel's social service system may use research findings effectively and optimally, MOLSA commissioned a qualitative study from the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute on the major ways that policymakers and decision-makers at various levels in the child and family service system actually use the data.

Method

The study was qualitative, relying on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 18 staff members at MOLSA headquarters, situated at different levels and filling a variety of positions in the child and family social service system. The aim was to obtain a broad perspective of their experience and their insights regarding the use of research findings.

Findings

It is clear from the study that MOLSA headquarters staff attribute great importance to the utilization of research to underpin and improve planning and policy. The study indicated a range of factors that either encourage or inhibit the utilization of research findings. The former include a study's relevance and quality, and relations between researchers and the people commissioning the study. The latter relate to the time gap between the processes of setting policy and of conducting a study, to an organizational

culture that does not encourage the utilization of research findings, and the lack of a budget to implement recommendations. The findings apply to both MOLSA-commissioned and MOLSA-approved studies.

Conclusions

The study findings and review of the literature made it possible to formulate recommendations to improve and optimize MOLSA's accommodation and utilization of research data. Among other things, it was suggested that researchers strive to use a valid, reliable methodology suitable to the issues investigated, and present their studies in the best possible way along with clear, practical recommendations. As for MOLSA – it should endeavor to time its implementation of research findings with its ability to invest in policy development, improvement and/or re-examination, to train policymakers to work with researchers and rely on research, and to train national supervisors in the mediation of research findings.

Executive Summary

Background

In Israel, applied studies are conducted every year to support decision-making and further policy. In recognition of the importance of using research findings in its work, the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services (MOLSA) commissions studies on key issues. The aim is to improve the effectiveness of the service system and promote professional and administrative decision-making processes at different Ministry levels. Numerous other studies of MOLSA services and activities – while not commissioned by the Ministry – are carried out with its approval. These are conducted mainly by advanced-degree students and faculty at academic institutions.

Study Goal

One major concern of MOLSA's Research Division is whether decision-makers and professionals utilize research findings effectively and in support of best practice. To this end, MOLSA commissioned a study from the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute to examine major aspects of the use of study findings by policymakers and decision-makers in the child and family social service system. The goal was to formulate recommendations and programmatic directions to assist the Division in utilizing research findings more extensively and effectively, on the one hand, and researchers in upgrading their research and promoting its usability, on the other. The main study questions were:

How do policymakers at different levels utilize study findings (types of usage) and how does the use of study findings assist policy development?

What factors promote or impede the utilization of study findings?

How can the utilization of study findings be improved?

Method

The study relied on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with MOLSA headquarters staff responsible for formulating policy, supervising services for children, youth and families, and implementing programs at the national level. In number and identity, the interviewees represented the different Ministry levels and units in these areas, including the administrative director and division heads, service

directors, national supervisors and other officials. We preferred longstanding personnel who had been exposed to a relatively large number of studies throughout their work. The list of interviewees was compiled jointly by the researchers and the Research Division staff, to meet these criteria. In all, we interviewed 18 people, most of whom (15) are currently serving in relevant positions , and several (3) who had retired a year or two prior to the interview. The interviewees comprised 15 women and 3 men, and were conducted from August 2018 to December 2018. Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes and was supported by a manual developed on the basis of the literature, the experience of the researchers in the area of applied social research, on discussions in the study's steering committee and feedback from committee members. Among others, the interviews covered these topics:

- Extent and types of use of research findings by the interviewees, as an auxiliary tool in their work
- Type of relationship with researchers in commissioned studies and its effect on the extent to which the findings were used
- Examples of successful and unsuccessful use of findings of commissioned studies
- Factors promoting or inhibiting the effective use of research findings
- Ways to maximize the benefit derived from studies

Finally, we performed content analysis of all the interviews to identify major themes. This method of qualitative analysis is based on classification and categorization to detect repeating patterns, trends and conceptual categories. It begins with a thorough read-through of the material and a preliminary division into categories. Some of the categories of the study were pre-set, while others were added at a later stage, based on the interview content.

Findings

The main findings on staff perceptions of the use of research in MOLSA work appear below, in brief. A more detailed description, with illustrative quotes, is presented in the main body of the report. The findings are presented in two parts: (1) on MOLSA-commissioned studies that are generally more applicable; and (2) on MOLSA-approved or external, independent studies in which the applied component is generally secondary.

Main findings on MOLSA-commissioned studies

- 1. All the interviewees attributed great importance to using research findings to improve the Ministry's work and policies.** No differences of perceived importance were found between staff who used the studies extensively and those who did not. The differences in use thus seem to derive mainly from obstacles to usage.
- 2. At each stage of policy development, the interviewees used different types of studies:**
 - Prior to policy development, they used studies that identify needs and risk situations, e.g. broad population surveys.
 - During development, they used literature reviews of policy and the characteristics of best practice, as well as formative evaluation studies of experimental programs.
 - Following implementation, they used summary evaluation studies of national intervention programs, and studies to extract tacit knowledge and formulate professional theory.
- 3. The study findings were particularly used to develop policy processes:**
 - Establishing services while running a pilot and developing the service system in general: Developing both variations of existing services and new services to address unmet needs
 - Formulating policy more succinctly, and reformulating tenders for service implementation or even legal amendments, to render them more compatible with the needs
 - Convincing decision-makers in MOLSA, the Ministry of Finance or the Knesset
 - Enlisting the cooperation of program implementers to introduce national policy – a lesson learned from the evaluation of experimental programs
 - Making ad-hoc decisions by drawing on support (e.g. quoting studies as expert opinion in court) to support recommendations in specific cases.
- 4. Factors that particularly promote the use of research findings:**
 - *Relevance and quality of a study:* Relevance is tested by topic and timing; quality is tested, e.g. by the validity and reliability of the methodology.
 - *Good relations between study initiators and researchers:* Characterized by trust in the researchers' professionalism and good intentions, the ongoing relationship throughout, and sometimes, beyond the study, the ongoing processes of developing policy and conducting a series of studies

- *The quality of the study presentation.* A clear, accessible and consistent delivery with minimal use of professional jargon; a concise methodology and focus on findings; the use of visual props; a clear distinction between data and interpretation; relevant research and interpretation based on a broad view of reality; a good balance between detail and expansion; conciseness, and focus on the main points; and a clear, applicable formulation of the conclusions and recommendations.

5. Factors that inhibit the use of research findings (on top of “mirror image” parallels to the promoting factors):

- *Little exposure to research* of policymakers and professionals to studies conducted on the child welfare system. Occasionally there are studies of various services in which policymakers from other services might find an interest, but are not aware of their existence. It may also happen that professionals working in services examined by a study, are not exposed to its findings.
- *The time gap between processes of policymaking and of conducting a study* – on occasion, policymakers require study findings long before they are published. At other times, the opposite is true – a study is published long before its recommendations can be implemented.
- *An organizational culture insufficiently supportive of implementing* research recommendations
- *A lack of budget* to implement recommendations
- *A tendency of policymakers to ignore studies that do not support their agenda*

Main findings of studies not commissioned by MOLSA

The usability of findings of studies not commissioned by the Ministry is less obvious. They do not necessarily address questions of particular interest to MOLSA and, moreover, are often overly detailed. As a result, their insights are not always formulated in applicable form for policymakers.

Many interviewees noted that it is a constant struggle to keep track even of the studies that MOLSA does commission. Apparently, in many cases, the outputs (e.g. research reports, M.A and Ph.D. theses, articles) never reached the Ministry although researchers and authors had committed to submit them. Nevertheless, even when they were submitted and officially documented by the Ministry, MOLSA staff were not always able to track them down, nor, in other cases, was it clear that the studies had been concluded and the findings published.

The situation is better in the case of studies conducted by MOLSA staff, or staff in MOLSA-supervised services as part of a researcher's academic studies. Some interviewees reported that they had created an apparatus at their services to enable staff to present their studies and hold discussions on the findings. Further, they commended "researchers who care – who 'push' their agendas, discussion and continuity," at times, even impacting policy or gaining a commission for a follow-up study. These, however, appear to be the exception rather than the rule. Largely, it appears to depend on the researchers' own motivation to effect change rather than on a regulated mechanism or a MOLSA initiative to promote systematic learning of studies it approved.

The difficulties multiply in the case of studies conducted independently of MOLSA (without its approval), but relevant to its work. Without targeted follow-up resources, it is difficult to know of their existence at all, and virtually impossible to invest time and effort in selecting research reports or academic publications to extract the relevant information. To address this difficulty, some MOLSA units have commissioned comprehensive literature reviews of selected topics.

Recommendations and Future Directions

The interviewees offered several suggestions to improve MOLSA's use of study findings. The suggestions regarding both commissioned and non-commissioned studies are elaborated in the full report. An examination of these recommendations, integrated with insights from the literature, yielded several recommendations to help tap the potential of research findings in formulating and improving policy. Some of these are aimed at researchers, to help them conduct studies and present findings in a way that would increase their usage. Some are aimed at MOLSA, to help it better utilize research findings. These are the recommendations:

- 1. To enhance the feasibility of using research findings,** researchers should:
 - Ensure study relevance in both topic and timing, i.e. choose topics that are on the public or Ministry agenda
 - Use a valid, reliable methodology appropriate to the issues examined
 - Gain the trust of policymakers and maintain close, ongoing contact throughout the study and beyond, if conducting a series of studies

- Deliver quality presentations of the study, with special attention to:
 - consistency, clarity and simplicity, avoiding professional jargon
 - use of visual aids
 - presenting the methodology concisely and paying more attention to findings
 - differentiating clearly between data and interpretation
 - ensuring relevant research interpretations, based on a broad perspective of realities
 - ensuring a good balance between expansion/detail and conciseness/focus
 - Use of a variety of formats to present findings, e.g., academic papers or expanded presentations
- Provide clear, applicable recommendations
- Distribute findings to a broader and more diverse target population than the policymakers commissioning the study
- Expand expertise in behavioral sciences and examine ways to use behavioral interventions and “nudges¹” that may prevent cognitive bias by policymakers and encourage the intelligent use of study findings, such as reframing strategies.

2. To facilitate the use of research findings, it is recommended that MOLSA:

- Time its commissioned studies in coordination with its ability to invest in policy development, improvement and/or re-examination
- Create an in-service research position (at least in larger services), the duties of which would include initiating relevant studies, making findings of commissioned and/or approved studies available to policymakers in the service or in other services that may benefit from it, and encouraging them to adopt the recommendations
- Train policymakers to work with researchers and make use of Ministry-commissioned or -approved studies
- Train the national supervisors of services to communicate the findings of relevant studies to the service professionals, and add this component to the definition of their role
- Explore the possibility of reinforcing the validity of findings of commissioned studies through

¹ A nudge...is any aspect of the [choice architecture](#) that alters people's behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008)

peer review of research reports, similar to the process for published articles; at the same time, consider the effect of peer review on the time it would take for a study to be published

- Create a position for a professional at MOLSA to focus on promoting the use of findings of commissioned and approved studies – duties would be to monitor the use of the findings in the short and long term, with special attention to specific goals; promote the use of findings for other purposes as well; coordinate with relevant stakeholders; initiate processes to implement the recommendations; map obstacles, and plan ways to overcome them
- Pre-allocate a targeted budget to implement the recommendations of the commissioned studies, in addition to the study budget

3. To enhance the use of findings (of MOLSA-approved, non-commissioned studies), it is recommended that:

- Studies be encouraged on insufficiently researched topics or new approaches, e.g. by providing research grants
- Efficient policy be formulated to approve external studies relating to MOLSA services and databases, so as to balance the expansion of existing knowledge, on the one hand, with the reduction of the workload involved in approving and monitoring studies and findings, on the other
- Resources be allocated to make study findings more accessible to policymakers, i.e. presented clearly, consistently, in action-oriented terms, and available to relevant policy-makers