Definition of Policy

What is policy?

"Policy" is a law, regulation, procedure, administrative action, incentive or voluntary practice of governments and other institutions. Policy decisions are frequently reflected in resource allocations. Health can be influenced by policies in many different sectors, e.g., transportation policies can encourage physical activity (pedestrian- and bicycle- friendly community design); policies in schools can improve nutritional content of school meals.

The policy-public health connection

Within the context of public health, policy development includes the advancement and implementation of public health law, regulations, or voluntary practices that influence systems development, organizational change, and individual behavior to promote improvements in health. Such policies can be executed within the health sector—for example, using Medicare conditions of participation or reimbursement to influence health care delivery, or using the tax code to encourage employer-provided health insurance. However, public health goals can also be achieved working in other sectors like education, agriculture, or employment, among others.

Why is policy important to public health?

According to the Institute of Medicine[1,2] policy development is an essential public health function. Further, policy development is included in three of the ten Essential Public Health Services[3]. Public health professionals play an important role in policy development by conducting policy-relevant research, communicating findings in a manner that facilitates action, developing partnerships, and encouraging the efficient use of resources through the promotion of policies based on science—such as the promotion of evidence-based[4,5] health interventions.

Policy professionals

CDC's policy professionals are guided by advanced training not only in public health, economics, and formal policy analysis, but also in medicine, law, nursing, life sciences, management, public administration, social work, international affairs, geographic information systems, quantitative and qualitative research methods, and related disciplines. Policy professionals provide knowledge of existing health systems, public health methods and approaches, and strategy development. Policy professionals at CDC evaluate the results of various public health efforts, make recommendations when change is warranted, and develop plans to address perceived or real gaps between stakeholder expectations and the agency's performance or commitments. CDC policy staff also assess opportunities and risks; analyze issues and trends, as well as programs and human, operational, and capital resource allocation; develop strategic partnerships; facilitate policy analysis, formulation, intervention design and evaluation; and conduct performance and impact evaluation.

1   Institute of Medicine (U.S.). The Future of Public Health. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press; 1988.
2   Institute of Medicine (U.S.). The Future of the Public's Health in the 21st Century. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press; 2002.
3   Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "The Essential Public Health Services" Retrieved February 29, 2008 from http://www.cdc.gov/od/ocphp/nphpsp/EssentialPHServices.htm
4   The Guide to Community Preventive Services : What Works to Promote Health? / Task Force on Community Preventive Services; edited by Stephanie Zaza, Peter A. Briss, Kate W. Harris. New York: Oxford University Press; 2005
5   Campbell KP, Lanza A, Dixon R, Chattopadhyay S, Molinari N, Finch RA, editors. A Purchaser's Guide to Clinical Preventive Services: Moving Science into Coverage. Washington, DC: National Business Group on Health; 2006