



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**SYDNEY**

# **Researching the Researchers:**

Policy Research in Non-Government Organisations in the  
Human Services Sector

**Research Report 2011**

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## Policy Research in Non-Government Organisations in the Human Services Sector

### Introduction

In recent years, Australian non-government human service organisations (human service NGOs<sup>1</sup>) have increasingly allocated resources to policy research through the establishment of policy research units or policy research positions. This development signals a further way in which the role of NGOs in Australia has broadened, in addition to increasing their activities as welfare service providers and advocates for social change, they are increasingly involved in the production of knowledge for social policy development.

*Researching the Researchers* reports on a study of policy research activities in the non-government human services sector. Undertaken in 2010, the study identified over 50 human service NGOs across Australia that had policy research units or policy research positions. The study involved a detailed survey of 27 policy researchers located in 21 of these organisations, and the focused questioning of 8 policy researchers who provide commentary on key survey findings.

*Researching the Researchers* sheds light on the nature and scope of NGO policy research, including the types of NGOs that undertake policy research; the key areas researched; the research methods and research dissemination processes used; and the levels of organisational support and resources provided for policy research. The report also captures policy researchers' perceptions of the drivers for the growth of policy research and their perceptions of the factors that enable and constrain the impact of their research on policy development. It is hoped that the data presented and the discussion of the findings will be of interest to those concerned with the relationship between NGO research and policy development and with the role of NGOs in

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<sup>1</sup> NGO is a highly contested term as there are many other possible ways of describing human service organisations. However, NGO was the chosen term in this research because for the past decade it had gradually crept into the governmental lexicon and had become a widely used term by the Australian third sector. Although it is noted that in a strategy to distance itself from the Coalition Government, the Labor government has recently adopted 'not-for-profit' as its preferred term.

contemporary social policy knowledge production.

*Structure of the Report*

The report is divided into three parts: Part One provides the background to the study and an overview of the study, Part Two provides a description of NGO policy research activities and research capacity and Part Three is concerned with themes and issues about the contemporary role of NGO policy research in knowledge production. In reporting the research we have included responses from survey participants, some of whom also provided responses to focused questions on the survey data. We refer to this subset of participants as ‘researcher commentators’.

## **PART ONE:**

### **Background and Study Overview**

#### **Background**

The broadening of the role of NGOs in Australia as both providers of the human services that are an integral part of the welfare state and as lobbyists or advocates and agents of social change has been widely acknowledged in the literature (Fawcett et al, 2010; Lyons, 2001; Melville 2001; Perry & Imperial 2001; Casey 2002; Earles 2003; Onyx 2003; Dalton & Lyons 2005). A recent Productivity Commission report claimed that total government funding to the NGO human service sector increased from \$10.1 billion in 1999-2000 to \$25.5 billion in 2006-07 (2010: 300-362) and it has been suggested that human service NGOs increased their presence as significant stakeholders in welfare state politics during the past decade (Melville 2003; Mendes, 2006; Phillips 2006; Phillips 2007; Schmid et al. 2008). It appears that research capacity within NGOs expanded during the same period and the number of research units located in NGOs grew (Egan, 2008; Keen, 1993, 1996, 2009). Yet the literature on research activity in human service NGOs in Australia is sparse.

In the Productivity Commission report, it was clearly stated that there was a research and innovation role for the third sector in addressing what they described as ‘wicked problems’ (Productivity Commission, 2010: 243). In addition, the Commission received submissions from human service NGOs calling for more support for innovation and research (Productivity Commission, 2010: 245). In its report the Commission acknowledged a legitimate space for considering the role of human service NGO research, emphasising the need for self-sufficiency and research collaborations by NGOs to do their own research (Productivity Commission, 2010: 245).

In 2010, the Commonwealth Government signed a National Compact with the third sector and consequently established the Office for the Not-for-profit Sector and the Not-for-Profit Sector Reform Council. The Australian government’s agenda for the Council is to “help drive the Government’s plans to reform the sector” by examining

the option of a “national one-stop-shop regulator, provide advice on streamlining tendering and contracting processes for Government-funded not-for-profits, consider harmonisation of federal, state and territory laws on fundraising and support the implementation of the National Compact: *working together*” (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2-11). The National Compact contains a big agenda for cooperation with the third sector and for improvements in that cooperation. However, it includes only a single line of reference to research. This is under the section titled ‘Aspirations for a more sustainable sector’ where it states, “we will ...foster research and innovation” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010: 6).

In the international literature, two important ideas are related to the conduct of research in NGOs. One is that new requirements for ‘evidence’ and ‘evidence-based’ policy and practice are seen as a good fit with conducting research in NGOs. The other is the notion that knowledge production at the site of service delivery is important.

In the United Kingdom, Nutley, et al. (2009) attribute state interest in third sector participation in social policy research to the turn towards evidence-based policy-making that emerged under the influence of a ‘third way’ political framework during the late 1990s (Nutley et al. 2009). In the USA, Kerner and Hall also made connections between NGO research and the assumption that evidence-based approaches to health and social service programs will ‘increase the likelihood of improved outcomes’ (2009: 519). They suggest, for example, that improved outcomes for scientific research applications could be generated if greater collaboration took place between sectors, with particular emphasis on new and expanded research/practice partnerships with the third sector in particular (Kerner & Hall 2009). Thus the focus on evidence-based approaches may have contributed a rationale for increased NGO participation in and capacity to do research.

Walsh and Davies (2010) argue for a shifting of research towards ‘investing in combined knowledge creation and use’, bringing researchers into a domain of ‘detailed and nuanced understandings about local organisational contexts’ and transforming research into actionable change by taking it to the point of service delivery, where managers of services ‘actively engaged with the ideas, theories, insights and critiques that come from research’ and are participants in the research

(Walsh & Davies, 2010: 110). Claims such as these provide a further rationale for human service NGOs contributing to knowledge production through research practices.

The research undertaken for this report aimed to provide some detail about the nature and scope of one particular type of research being conducted by human service NGOs in Australia: policy research. The focus on policy research, rather than research more broadly, flows out of a recognition that there is differentiation in the research activities that human service NGOs may be involved in. A key distinction is between research that is focused on general explorations and ‘finding answers’ through the production of knowledge, and ‘evaluation’ research produced for more specific interventions for greater program effectiveness (Gardner and Nunan 2007, p. 337). This important distinction differentiates the range of research activities that human service NGOs may be involved in. In particular, evaluation and monitoring research concerns producing evidence to develop services and programs and maintain funding. In contrast, social policy research can be viewed as related to the pursuit of social change and moral or political goals of human service NGOs. Thus, for the purposes of the study, policy research was defined as “research that asks policy questions, explores existing government policies or aims to change government policy”. In general, this definition was well understood by study participants: organisations were able to identify if they undertook ‘policy research’ as part of their activities and were also able to identify people in their organisations who were ‘policy researchers’.

The themes and issues explored through this study are also related to wider questions about the extent to which social science research affects or influences social policy. This is a key area of theorisation and debate in social policy scholarship. The role of social science research in the policy process is, however, contested from the perspective of an increasingly accepted analysis of the policy process as often complex, ‘messy’, political and unpredictable. Social policy scholars such as Carol Weiss (Weiss & Bucuvalas 1980; Weiss 1986, 1989, 1990, 1991, 2000), Martin Bulmer (1986) and Nadia Auriat (1998) have explored a range of possible models for measuring the impact of research on social policy and dominant approaches to researching policy influence involve a range of methods. The assessment of the policy impact of policy research in NGOs is well beyond the scope of this study, however,



the study captured researchers' *perceptions* of the role and influence of NGO research in the development of social policy.

In sum, in Australia there is a dynamic and important relationship between human service NGOs and the Australian welfare state. The role of NGOs includes: the delivery of services to meet social needs, participation in processes to politicise social needs, and, it appears, the production of knowledge about social needs. The development of the knowledge production or research role is situated with a range of other trends: the popularising of 'evidence-based' decision-making (Pawson, 2006; Nutley, et al 2009a); the legitimisation of services as sites of knowledge production; the development of new distinctions within human service research; and prevailing ideas about the influence of research on policy. It is in this context that this study of the policy research role of human service NGOs was developed.

## **The Study**

As the field of NGO policy research in Australia had not been previously been systematically mapped, NGO human service organisations with policy research positions were identified in two ways. First, NGO human services with policy research positions were identified through existing human service NGO research networks. The second process was through a systematic review of national human service conference programs, over a ten-year period from 1999 to 2009, in order to identify researchers presenting social policy research conducted within their NGOs. Using these two approaches, 50 organisations across Australia were identified as having policy research units or policy research positions.

This 'mapping' of policy research cannot, however, be regarded as exhaustive. The methods for identifying NGO policy research positions relied on organisations being part of networks, known to other policy researchers, or having contributed policy research papers at key national conferences. Information about the research was, however, distributed through key channels of information to human service NGOs, including the Australian Council of Social Service, so we suggest that the mapping undertaken provides a reasonable approximation of the number of NGO human service organisations that have designated policy research positions in Australia.

Research participants were recruited through the executive officer, director or CEO of each of the identified organisations, who were asked to assist with the study by distributing recruitment circulars to policy researchers in their organisations. These circulars invited policy researchers to contact the researchers directly if they wished to be part of the study. Twenty-seven policy researchers, 19 females and 8 males, from 21 organisations agreed to participate in the first stage of the study.

In the first stage, a survey was administered mainly over the telephone, however some policy researchers chose to participate in face-to face interviews. The survey involved both closed and open-ended questions covering four key areas. In addition to participant responses, corroborating information about organisational size, history and remit was obtained from organisational web sites. The survey produced both quantitative data and qualitative data on the nature and scope of policy research in NGOs, which was collated and presented in an initial findings report.

The second stage of the study involved gathering feedback from policy researchers on key questions about the initial findings. This stage was designed to provide an opportunity whereby policy researchers could insert their views on the initial analysis of the survey and to expand on key themes and issues. The nature of the sample - people with an understanding of and commitment to the research process - provided a unique opportunity to involve participants in an analytic discussion of the survey results. All survey participants were asked if they would like to participate in this second stage, and 8 policy researchers either attended a focus group or responded by email to a set of focus questions. The data gathered in the second stage added significantly to our understandings of the nature, scope and context of policy research in NGOs. The material collected in the second stage of the study is represented in this report as 'Policy Researcher Commentary' on each of the key sections of the report.

## **PART TWO:**

### **NGO Policy Research Capacity and Activity**

#### **2.1 The characteristics of organisations involved in policy research**

##### *Size*

Policy researchers were asked about the size of their organisation. In this study, size was a ‘relative’ concept as participants were asked to compare the size of their organisation to other NGOs. However, participant perceptions of the size of each NGO was corroborated by the examination of the NGO’s website information on budget and staffing. The majority of policy researchers interviewed indicated they were from very large NGOs (10) or large NGOs (8). 4 indicated they were from medium sized NGOs and 4 from small organisations.

##### *Location*

A majority of the participants were located in Sydney and Melbourne, and were from the ‘head offices’ of NGOs with multiple services and multiple sites. Three participants were located in the ACT, where they worked in the head offices of national organisations. Three participants were located in Queensland, and one in South Australia. The study identified policy researchers located in organisations in WA and the NT, but these organisations did not participate in the study. Only two NGO policy researchers were located in non-metropolitan areas.

<b>NSW</b>	<b>Vic.</b>	<b>ACT</b>	<b>QLD</b>	<b>SA</b>
11	10	3	2	1

**Table 1: NGO Locations Across States**

##### *Areas of service provision*

In order to gain a sense of the policy research areas of interest within the NGOs, the participants were asked about key areas of service provision in the NGOs they worked for. However, the NGOs were not distinguishable as specific ‘sectors’ of service but rather had broad missions to address needs of service users. All of the NGOs hosting policy researchers delivered multiple human services, as reflected in the table below:

SERVICES	# OF NGOs
Youth Support	15
Individual and Family Support	15
Training and Employment	12
Support in the home	12
Independent Community Living Support	11
Refugee support	9
Foster Care Placement	9
Indigenous support	7
Information Referral and Services	5
Emergency accommodation	5
Drug and Alcohol services	5
Domestic violence support services	4
Sexual Assault services	1
Health Services	1

**Table 2: Services provided by NGOs**

### *Auspice*

Of the twenty-one NGOs, fifteen were faith-based organisations. Here, ‘faith-based’ refers to NGOs established under the auspices of Christian churches, which have historically played a significant role in charitable and welfare service provision.

### Researcher Commentary on Organisational Size Data

In response to a focus question about the characteristics of organisations that have policy researchers, some commentators suggested that there might have been an over-representation of participants from large organisations in the sample. For example, it was suggested that policy researchers from large organisations might possibly have had more time and more support from their organisations to participate in the study.

Other commentators suggested that there possibly *is* a relationship between organisational size and the conduct of policy research. One commentator suggested, for example, that organisations “*need a network or critical mass of researchers to achieve a persistent level of research promotion*” and that organisational resource levels are related to policy research. This commentator argued, “*The NGO needs to fund the position of researcher adequately to attract quality researchers*”.

In contrast, another commentator thought **priority** rather than size was the key issue and suggested that not all NGOs have research as a central pillar or directive of their organisation. This commentator compared a large NGO (with 200 plus employees),

which only employs a single researcher on an ad hoc basis, with a small NGO that had a small team of researchers. This commentator further suggested “*A way for a small NGO to ‘punch above their weight’ can be to have research as central within their organisation*”.

### Researcher Commentary on Organisational Auspice Data

One commentator suggested that there may be a relationship between having a faith-based auspice and the conduct of policy research, suggesting that because faith based organisations are part of a network that share similar values (such as the poverty alleviation), they may be more inclined to undertake policy research. Another commentator suggested that the distinction was probably one of size, rather than auspice, pointing out “*most large NGOs are faith based*”.

## **2.2. Refining the concept ‘policy research’**

Policy research was defined in the survey as **research that asks policy questions, explores existing government policies or aims to change government policy**. Participants were asked if their organisation undertook ‘policy research’ defined in this way, and all participants responded that they did. However, the qualitative responses provided additional information about ‘policy research’ as a concept in practice.

### *The interrelation of policy research and practice research*

Most participants emphasised that policy research is undertaken *alongside* other forms of research and referred to ‘evaluation research’, ‘practice research’ or ‘organisational research’. The terms evaluation research, practice research and organisational research all related to research focused on improving the services provided by the organisation.

The significance of the interrelation of practice and policy research was raised in many participants’ descriptions of policy research. For example, one participant explained that their organisation “*prepared policy positions from service data*” and others described policy research as drawing on program evaluations. Another participant described the interrelation in the following way:

*“Policy and practice are not separate spheres but are closely linked – indeed they cannot be separated.”*

However, in two cases practice research was described as the more dominant research activity of the organisation. One participant responded that the organisation conducted policy research: *“to some extent – most research is around improving services but we also aim to contribute to the sector which means contributing to public policy”*. Another participant made a similar point: *“we carry out social policy research to a small degree. It’s not an absolute priority as a whole.... Most of the research in the organisation is monitoring and evaluation of programs which, in turn, contribute to research projects on policy”*.

### *Distinctions in policy research*

Participants also suggested that policy research in human service NGOs could take a variety of forms. For example, one participant characterised the policy research conducted in terms of assessing the *impact of policy decisions*, particularly the impact of policy decisions on disadvantaged people and communities. This was in contrast to another participant who characterised the policy research conducted in their organisation as *‘strategic’* rather than *‘reactive’*. This participant went on to explain that the policy research undertaken was based *“on the NGO’s strategic plan and goals, and responds to the political environment rather than be driven by it”*. Another participant explained that because many of their policy questions emerged from the evaluation of practice, policy research involved putting *issues on the government agenda*.

In sum, policy research in NGOs is considered as:

- Almost inseparable from practice research

Policy research can take a number of forms, including:

- Reactive or impact research, and;
- Strategic or agenda setting research.

## **2.3 Areas of Research**

Participants were asked about the areas of research that were the focus of their work or the units they worked in. The table below shows the areas of research that policy researchers indicated they or their research units had been involved in.

<b>Areas of research - from most to least frequent:</b>	
Homeless people and people at risk of Homelessness	13
Children	13
Families	12
Young people and their families	10
People with mental illness	9
Young people	8
Indigenous people	8
Unemployed people	8
Aged people.	7
People in social housing	7
Women	7
People with physical and intellectual disabilities	5
Carers	5
People affected by drugs and alcohol	4
Domestic Violence	3
People with chronic or acute health conditions	3
Criminal justice	2
Sexual Assault	2

**Table 3: NGO Areas of Research**

The most frequent areas of research appear to reflect two key factors. First, they largely correspond with services delivered by the NGOs, particularly in the broad areas of children, families and young people. Second, frequently researched areas appear to correspond with high priority social policy areas of the Federal and State government during the period of the study, such as homelessness and people with mental illness.

However this table does not fully reflect the diversity of the research undertaken. Indeed the notion of ‘areas of research’ was problematised. As one participant stated:

*It is often difficult to clearly delineate research areas because even though we may not particularly address one social policy research area on its own, it could be covered as a corollary of our focus social research area such as mental health.*

In the extended responses a range of diverse research projects were detailed. Some of the specific research projects indicated were: breastfeeding and workplace policies; mental health recovery principles; food security; gambling; poverty; unemployment services; refugees, emergency services; conditional welfare and the role of the third sector.

## 2.4 Research Methods

Participants were asked to indicate how frequently they employed a variety of research methods in their policy research projects. While it is clear that policy researchers employ a range of methods in their research, some methods were used very frequently, and others rarely. The tables below illustrate the methods used frequently, and those used rarely:

Research Method	Never	Sometimes	Mostly	Always
Literature reviews	0	9	8	10
Case Studies	1	15	9	2
Interviews	1	10	13	3
Analysis of secondary quantitative data	2	13	12	0
Self-report questionnaires	3	12	8	4
Focus groups	3	18	6	0
Service data mining	5	12	9	1
Action Research	7	15	3	1

**Table 4: Most frequently used research methods -from most used to least used.**

Experimental Studies	21	4	1	0
Behavioural observation	13	10	3	0
Systematic reviews or meta-analyses	13	7	6	0

**Table 5: Least frequently used research methods -from least used.**

It appears that participants tend to use conventional social science methods rather than methods dominant in the natural sciences, often associated with modes of amassing large amounts of data or conducting random trials or experiments. Literature reviews, interviews and case studies featured strongly, whereas it was reported that systematic reviews and experimental studies were rarely undertaken.

‘Literature reviews’ are suggestive of engaging with academic research and reflects engagement with an ‘asking questions’ approach to policy research. The regular use of service data shows a clear relationship between evaluative and monitoring research and policy research. The availability and utilization of data from the services delivered by the NGOs in the conduct of policy research, supports Nowotny, et al’s proposition that ‘Mode 2’ knowledge production is ‘produced within the context of application’ (2003, pp. 186-188) and is a significant and legitimate form of research that may enable researchers to apprehend the lived experience of service users (Nowotny, 1990).



### Researcher Commentary on Methods Data

A focus question on research methods was included in the second stage of the study, in order to probe ideas about the popularity of evidence-based policy in the conduct of research in the NGO sector. This question was prompted by a theme in the US and UK literature suggesting that social service researchers are under pressure to demonstrate ‘what works’ using methods such as randomised trials and systematic reviews. The initial survey analysis suggested that policy researchers in Australian continue to employ traditional social science methods in their projects.

In response to the focus question, one commentator suggested that the popularity of evidence based policy is having some impact on the sector in that it is prompting discussion amongst NGO researchers about their research methods. *“I think there are more conversations being had about the meaning and implications for our ways of working”*. Commentators provided a number of important points about the factors that inform decision-making about research methods that are specific to the NGO sector.

One of these was that, unlike in the natural sciences, NGO research had a different focus, stating, *“The research has to be conducted in a way that means the client/worker benefits from their participation – not just those conducting or funding the research”*. The commentator emphasised that this was a consistent requirement of NGO research. There was, however, a suggestion that natural science methods were not often used due to the lack of resources for *“gold standard”* research. It was also pointed out that the benefit of small local studies were important as local services had to be understood in the local context.

## **2.5 Research capacity**

### *The Researchers*

The key resource for policy research in the NGOs appears to be the researchers themselves. The profile of the policy researchers demonstrates a high level of academic qualification and research training, representing a depth in research capacity in the organisations. All participants had university qualifications or were currently enrolled in university courses.

- 7 participants had Bachelor Degrees, 9 had Master level degrees, and 10 had PhDs.
- 7 were currently enrolled in research higher degrees.

Many of the policy researchers had extensive experience either as researchers or in other roles in the sector:

- 13 had been in their position for over two years.
- 2 had been in their position for a long term – 12 years & 23 years
- 11 had worked for some time as researchers in other contexts
- 10 had previous experience working in other capacities within human service NGOs.

#### *Support and resources for policy research*

Most policy researchers indicated that they felt that their organisation placed a high (12) or very high (11) priority on policy research.

Scale	1= very low	2 = low	3=neutral	4=high	5 = very high
Occurrence	0	1	3	12	11

**Table 6: Priority given to policy research in the NGO.**

The survey also elicited information about the level and type of support and resources that were provided by the organisations associated with developing and maintaining policy research capacity in the NGOs. The closed questions suggested that most organisations provide research training, administrative support, technical support, and provide adequate time to conduct research. Most organisations have research facilities, such as libraries, and provide opportunities for policy researchers to engage with other researchers outside of the organisation.

Support for Policy Research	YES
Research Training	20
Administrative Support	21
Technical Support	24
Adequate Time to Conduct Research	20
Research Facilities	23
Opportunities to engage with researchers outside the NGO	27

**Table 7: Support and resources for policy research**

However, the responses to the open questions on support and resources raised a number of issues relating to the provision of support and resources.

### *Research training*

‘Research training’ varied significantly between organisations. One participant described training as *“only the informal conversation with other qualified colleagues and that which is derived from our various qualifications”* whereas others nominated specific courses, such as data analysis courses and training courses provided by the Institute of Public Administration. Other participants included funding to attend conferences as an example of support for research training and one participant gave the example of the organisation paying for staff to complete postgraduate degrees. The range of understandings of what constitutes training makes it difficult to assess levels of support in this area.

In one organisation research training was provided, particularly to young researchers, as a way of retaining staff. As a participant from this organisation explained, salaries in the NGO sector are not particularly competitive so another way of rewarding the *‘group of very talented researchers’* was through the provision of professional development opportunities. This participant also suggested that *“one of the benefits of university partnerships is they (young researchers) get experience through working on these projects”*.

### *Administrative support*

Responses to the question about whether there was adequate administrative support for policy research suggest that most participants referred to the general administrative support available to all staff within the organisation, rather than research specific administrative support. For example, one participant explained that while there was administrative support *“it is more support for the administration of the unit overall not really for things like editorial support or preparation of publications”*. Only two policy researchers indicated that their organisation provided relatively extensive research specific administrative support:

*“We have funded research assistants for analysis and data entry”*.

*“We have a good level of administrative support within the research budget. It is appropriate and includes costs for research assistants”*.

### *Technical support*

Diverse comments were made about the availability of technical support available, particularly the provision of IT resources and support. In most cases there was no dedicated IT support for policy research activities, beyond access to data analysis programs such as Nvivo and SPSS. However, two participants, from two different organisations, described having access to the services of statistical officers within the organisation who could provide technical advice and support. Another indicated that the organisation was able to employ people with technical expertise ‘for number crunching’ when required.

### *Adequate time to conduct research*

In response to the closed question on time, 20 participants indicated that their organisation provided adequate time to conduct research (see Table 7 above). However this response was qualified in more than half of the open-ended responses to this question. It appears that while these researchers were allocated enough time to undertake core research tasks, time constraints placed limits on the nature of their research activities. For example, one participant commented that while there was enough time to undertake evaluation research, there was inadequate time to undertake longer-term research or longitudinal studies. This participant suggested that they spent a great deal of time educating the organisation about the importance of undertaking research over a period of time, because, in the past, *“there had been a culture in the past of a quick turn around for research”*.

Other participants raised concerns about quantity over quality, suggesting that the pressure to increase the volume of research had the potential for reducing the quality. One participant stated *“it would be better to say no more often – and do less research projects – more intensively or of a better quality”*.

Perhaps most significantly, the question of adequate time for research needs to be considered in relation to policy researchers working hours. Unfortunately policy researchers were not asked directly about the length of their working days or the wider conditions of their employment. The following comment suggests that policy

researchers may be accomplishing their tasks by working long hours, under considerable pressure:

*“The work environment of the organisation is quite chaotic and the hours worked by staff are very long. In one sense there is adequate time to conduct research but this is always set against a range of other competing tasks....There is also considerable downward pressure from the organisation in terms of responding to the external environment. For example, policy submissions that often have a one or two week deadline that management says they must respond to.”*

### *Research facilities*

While most participants indicated that research facilities, including libraries, were provided in their organisations, there were a number of suggestions about ways in which research facilities could be improved. Of particular concern was the number of participants who did not have access to online databases. Those who did enjoy this access did so through informal means such as via friends, associates or PhD students on the research team. Only one participant commented that the organisation itself had access to online databases, and this was through an organisational arrangement with a University.

### Researcher Commentary on Research Capacity Data

A focus question on research capacity was included in the second stage of the study, and some of the commentators suggested that the sample may have had an over-representation of well-resourced organisations and therefore the study may not have captured the variety between organisations. One commentator suggested that there might be differences between large and small organisations in relation to support and resources available.

The commentators agreed that policy researchers in the sector are highly trained and well qualified, but suggested that the lack of parity between NGO sector salaries and the absence of a defined career track for policy researchers in NGOs presented problems for recruiting and retaining researchers. They also repeated issues around the adequacy of training, time, technical and administrative support and access to databases that were raised in the survey. One commentator suggested that, rather than

trying to represent research capacity across the sector, it would be more useful to focus on specific organisations. This researcher suggested the following:

*“I think the point you can make more strongly is that where organisations are able to, or choose to invest, they do it well.”*

## 2.6 Research Partnerships

Partnership research is a key feature of NGO policy research activity. It appears that NGO policy researchers bolster their research capacity through the formation of partnerships with other organisations. Universities are the most common research partners for policy research in human service NGOs, and the Australian Research Council Linkage model appears as a significant determinant for these collaborations. There is also evidence of regular partnering with other NGOs, with 21 of the researchers indicating that their organisation had been formed alliances or networks with other NGOs to undertake research projects. NGOs also formed partnerships with government agencies and private foundations or businesses.

Research Partnerships	Yes
Universities	26
Other NGOs	21
Government Agencies	17
Private Foundations or Businesses	11

**Table 8: Research Partnerships**

While research partnerships with all three levels of government, NGO partnerships with government were most frequently with state government agencies. This is not surprising, given that most of the issues and areas researched by the NGO are heavily determined at the level of state government social policy.

Commonwealth & State	Commw. Only	State Only	Local State &	Local, State & Commw.
1	3	8	2	2

**Table 9: Profile of Partnerships with government agencies**

When asked about partnerships with the private foundations or businesses, 14 participants indicated that their NGO had not been involved in research with any such partners. The remaining participants named a range of partners, as listed below.

### **Partnerships with Private Foundations or Business**

- *Myer Foundation*
- *Helen McPherson-Smith Trust*
- *Portland House Foundation*
- *ANZ Bank*
- *Ian Potter Foundation*
- *Ted Noffs Foundation*
- *Chambers of Commerce*
- *Kincare*
- *Westpac*
- *Un-named law firm*
- *Other un-named foundation*

### Researcher Commentary on Partnership Data

In responding to a focus question on the drivers for forming research partnerships, several common reactions emerged. Commentators suggested that partnerships were formed to strengthen research, that they worked with others where there was a shared interest in particular social problems, and that partnering was directly related to availability of research funding. In particular, partnerships with universities were seen as a means of securing funding. For example, one commentator suggested that such partnerships are one of the only ways for NGOs to secure research funding, pointing out that “*Aside from ARC Linkage there isn’t really any research money*”.

Other key points reflected various imperatives for forming research partnerships. For example, one commentator explained:

*Collaboration is informative, strengthens research networks and credentials, and informs the research - of benefit to organisations, but also to individual researchers. It allows you to access and benefit from content and skills expertise that may not exist to the same degree internally.*

Thus, NGO research capacity could be scaled up through partnerships including access to researchers with quantitative research skills.

Another suggestion was that partnering was particularly important for NGOs as it provided an objective viewpoint - '*external eyes*' - to the research, which can be difficult to achieve when the research focus is the organisation's own programs.

Commentators suggested that partnerships with university researchers are formed because they can enhance the legitimacy of NGO research with funding bodies and policy makers, but also in order to enhance the relevance and quality of university research. For example, it was suggested that research partnerships with university researchers was a way of ensuring that "*the academic research agenda focuses on the most relevant contemporary issues*". The point was also made that often NGOs are the gatekeepers for university researchers gaining access to research participants, and NGO involvement in research is a way of ensuring that research is conducted in appropriate manner. This included adapting methodologies so they are appropriate for clients with complex histories or experiencing acute disadvantage. As one commentator explained:

*"Agencies provide a pool of potential participants for academics' research. The involvement of NGOs in the research means they can protect the interest of their clients and help ... navigate participants through the research jargon and practices which to them often seem unusual."*

One commentator expressed surprise at the extent of NGO research partnership with government agencies, as their organisation had never partnered with government. The ARC Linkage funding program often produces partnerships between NGOs, universities *and* government agencies, so it may be that organisations not involved in Linkage Grants are less likely to have partnered with government. One interesting rationale for partnering with government was that it was one way of ensuring that policy research actually reaches the public domain, "*In other words, it is not shelved because the government doesn't like the findings*".

## **2.7 Research Dissemination**

The study explored how completed research was disseminated both within the organisation and outside the organisation. The internal practices can be seen as important mechanisms for affirming ideas, strategic directions and knowledge



generated from research as part of the organisational ‘culture’ or identity with particular social issues or areas of service delivery and with the broader mandate of social justice. External dissemination practices can be seen as closely related to ideas about policy influence. How policy research is disseminated outside of the organisation is also a key indicator of the target of the research: who or what the research is asking questions of, presenting research to, or proposing changes for.

#### *Internal dissemination practices*

Policy research conducted in NGOs is presented to organisations orally and in written forms. The following table illustrates the most used practices of imparting research results within organisations.

<b>Internal Dissemination Practice</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Often</b>	<b>Always</b>
Organisational Briefing Notes	0	7	7	8
Organisational Research Reports or discussion papers	2	11	7	6
Oral Presentations	6	6	10	6

**Table 10: Internal Research dissemination practices - most used**

Apart from the three practices presented in the above table, there were many additional forms of dissemination according to the researchers, reflecting a high level of interest and participation in discussions about research, and integration of research into the day-to-day communications within the organisations. Eight researchers mentioned staff meetings as a means of dissemination and eight mentioned the use of the intranet communication system. Other practices of internal dissemination mentioned were: sponsoring body websites; extra-ordinary meetings; board meetings; informal corridor conversations; publishing in the organisation’s policy magazine; the annual report and internal review/signing off processes for the research.

#### *External Dissemination Practices*

NGOs disseminate their research findings to a range of external audiences, including to government agencies and ministers, policy communities, the field, academics and the general public. The following table illustrates the most frequently used methods for disseminating policy research to stakeholders outside the organisation.

External Research Dissemination Practice	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
Submissions to Public Inquiries or Royal Commissions	0	9	11	4
Publicly available research reports	1	4	7	11
Conference papers and seminar presentations	3	10	7	4
Oral presentations to ministers or government agencies	4	10	9	1
Media releases	4	4	12	4
Journal articles	5	15	3	1
Publicly available research summaries	7	5	3	9

**Table 11: External Research dissemination Practices - from most to least used \***

\*NB only 24 participants were able to answer this question.

In addition, participants raised a number of other dissemination practices and emphasised what they saw as strong forms of dissemination. For example, it was suggested that non-refereed practitioner journals and newsletters have a wider audience than academic journals and may be a preferred form of publication. Publishing journal articles was seen not so much a research dissemination practice but as a means of building research ‘credibility’ for the NGO. The use of social media such as ‘blogging’ and ‘twittering’ and other ‘E-resources’ such as Internet fora was also mentioned. Discussions with politicians, government advisors, backbenchers and public officials were also mentioned, and “*face to face promotion of research*” and “*direct dealings with ministers and public servants*” were regarded as powerful ways of imparting findings. One participant pointed out that building networks with policy decision-makers was crucial in the process of bringing about policy change as this appeared to rely very much on relationships with key people.

Participants also discussed the use of the media for research dissemination. Comments implied a very active engagement with the media related for research dissemination that went beyond the issuing of media releases. For example, one participant indicated that they initiate interviews with various media, and others mentioned the role of their organisational media units in organizing events such as launches of research specifically for media attention. Radio interviews and writing opinion pieces that incorporate research findings were also mentioned.

## **PART THREE: NGO Policy Research and Knowledge Production**

### **3.1 The Establishment and Development of Policy Research in NGOs**

Establishing the emergence of policy research in NGOs needs to be approached with caution as many of the participants were unsure of the exact year policy research positions were established, and two of the participants were unable to provide any information about the establishment of research positions. From the information provided, only three organisations had established policy research positions prior to the 1990s - one in the 1930s, one in the 1950s and one in 1987. Five of the organisations established positions during the 1990s and the remaining seven established positions in the 2000s. Given that all but two of these organisations, which had been in operation since at least the 1920s, and given that all of the organisations had witnessed significant growth in policy research positions over the past five years, it is fair to argue significant growth in policy research in human service NGOs in Australia occurred in the 2000s. In addition, during this period, 'social justice units', 'social justice positions' and 'policy units'/'policy positions' began to include policy research as a central activity and policy researchers as key personnel.

In the second stage of the study, the participants were asked to comment on why policy research may have 'taken off' in the 2000s. One suggestion raised was that developments in the NGO sector might well mirror developments in the government sector, where an emphasis on research activities '*with a policy message attached*' had become increasingly prominent. Another suggestion relates to changes that had occurred in the NGO sector, whereby organisations had become increasingly professionalised during this period. The more regular employment of staff with research backgrounds or research degrees may have promoted the establishment of research positions and units. Two other changes in the social policy and human services environment occurred during the 2000s and were related to the establishment and development of policy research in NGOs. One was the de-legitimising of alternative forms of 'advocacy', such as feminist advocacy, creating a need for alternative ways of influencing policy processes. The other was the increasing

contracting out of service provision that occurred during this period. As one commentator explained:

*Prior to contracting out, the departments used to do evaluations of their programs. For example, government had the data to ask questions such as whether training or work experience is more effective in moving people into the workforce. Once services were contracted out, they could no longer ask these questions because they weren't providing the services....the fact that the government is no longer producing evaluation research ... has created an opening for other players.*

### **3.2 Explanations for the growth of policy research in NGOs**

Participants identified a range of drivers for the development of policy research in their own NGOs and in the sector more broadly. A distinction emerged between internal and external drivers for the development of policy research. *Internal drivers* were related to changes in the mission and culture of the NGOs and the expansion of their role in the delivery of human services. Internal drivers included: the organisational mission/mandate (for example, a stated focus on 'social justice' for service users and advocacy on behalf of service users); a changing culture where 'evidence' had become a core value; and new organisational imperatives to enhance organisational reputation with funders, donors, or other constituencies.

Perceptions of *external drivers* for the development of policy research were related to the increasing inclusion of NGOs in formal policy development processes, such as calls for submissions by parliamentary committees and invitations to participate in public enquiries and policy development collaborations with government departments. Major reorientations of social policy, such as the introduction of the 'Mutual Obligation' framework and income management were also seen to be driving the development of policy research. In addition, a growth in University partnerships research (ARC Linkage Grants) with the sector provided new opportunities for organisations. Two other key developments regarded as external drivers for research included changes in the funding environment and that the more competitive environment placed pressure on organisations to gain reputational advantage through research production. Finally, the popularly discussed institutional culture of 'evidence-

based policy-making' was identified as a significant external driver.

Internal drivers for the development of policy research roles	External drivers for the development of policy research roles
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organisational mission/mandate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased inclusion in formal policy processes</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CEO/Board commitment to research activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Growth in University partnering with NGOs</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organisational culture of 'evidence'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Major reorientations in social policy</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organisational commitment to enhancing reputation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Competitive funding environment</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>External culture of 'evidence'</li> </ul>

**Table 12: Internal and External Drivers for development of Policy Research Roles**

### *Policy Research and 'Legitimacy'*

The internal and external drivers described by the participants support the notion that significant shifts have occurred in the way human service NGOs are organised and operate and in the way the welfare state (including welfare politics) is organised and operates.

The politics of knowledge - what knowledge for social policy is and how it is constituted - is also a part of these shifts. However, the importance that policy research has assumed in human service NGOs in Australia suggests that policy research plays an important legitimising role in the context of these shifts, and this may have become a driver in and of itself. Some participants suggested that NGOs were compelled to be involved in policy research *"to defend themselves"* and to *"ensure they did not lose funding"* and emphasised the 'cachet' that policy research had with sponsors, donors and funders. Policy research was seen as important for *'branding and reputation for marketing and sponsorship of the NGO'*. The significance policy research has assumed might be a driver for doing policy research, with one participant suggesting that the organisation did policy research because *'everyone else in the NGO sector is doing it'*.

### **3.3 NGO Policy Research and working for social justice**

Throughout the study, policy research was represented as closely connected to working for social justice. Most participants framed the mission or 'vision' of their organisation in 'social justice' terms. Thus participants began their explanations of

why they do policy research with statements such as *“Its part of our vision to improve the lives of vulnerable people”* or *“Our organisation has a strong commitment to social justice”* and *“Because of a commitment to social justice that come out of the links to (a particular) Church”*. Yet a relationship between social justice and policy research cannot be regarded as automatic, as many of these organisations had social justice missions prior to undertaking policy research. Participants expressed the connection through three key ideas: the need for NGOs to work at a systemic level; the ‘advocacy’ role of the organisations; and the need for ‘evidence-based policy’.

### *Systemic work and policy research*

Some participants expressed the view that the achievement of social justice (or the redress of disadvantage or promotion of social change) requires interventions at a level beyond service delivery practice, and this level was described as the ‘systemic’ level. For example, one respondent explained, *“Practitioners can’t always focus on, or have time to consider the systems framework – that is, the bigger picture within which their individual programs are situated”* and another explained that although service providers *“could provide one-on-one assistance, disadvantage occurs in the context of systemic issues”*. Policy research was thus positioned as a tool for intervening at a systemic level.

### *Advocacy and policy research*

Most participants made links between social justice and policy research through the concept of advocacy. Advocating for social policy change on behalf of clients was seen as a significant component of the role of the organisations, and policy research was regarded as a key mechanism by which human service organisations could influence government, therefore a as form of advocacy. For example, one participant explained, *“We research policy to advocate for change, to identify areas where change is needed”* and another explained, *“Research is a way of trying to engage with government and other stakeholders for policy change”*. One participant suggested that the linking of social justice with advocacy was in fact a new development in the organisation, explaining, *“The new bit for us is the social justice advocacy where we speak for people who are at a disadvantage”*. In turn, other responses suggest that the significance of policy research in advocacy and influencing government has grown in recent years. For organisations committed to advocating on behalf of clients, policy

research is thus used as an advocacy tool. As one participant explained, *“Another reason (we do policy research) is advocacy: research leads to a higher presence in the media and better representation at a policy level”*.

#### *Social justice and ‘evidence’*

The value of policy research as an advocacy tool, or as a means for working for social justice was described by most participants in terms of a heightened need for having an ‘evidence base’ in dealings with government and other key stakeholders, such as donors, sponsors and funders. This kind of organisational motivation is summed up most succinctly in the following response, *“My position was created out of a strategic plan for achieving a social justice agenda, not just through advocacy but through evidence-based change”*. Some participants regarded the linking of evidence and advocacy as straightforward, in that an evidence base is *“needed”* if organisations are to advocate for their clients, whereas others were more reflexive about this development. For example, one participant referred to *“a broader culture of responding to evidence for what works, driving the push for policy research”*.

These findings suggest that NGO policy research fits with the key social justice goals of these organisations, particularly when achieving social justice is understood as involving systemic interventions, including policy advocacy. This approach to social justice, however, has emerged in concert with the privileging of ‘evidence’, both by governments and by other stakeholders such as sponsors and donors who are keen for information about ‘what works’. In turn, there are new demands on human service NGOs to demonstrate their commitment to, and capacity to produce ‘evidence’.

### **3.4 The Importance of NGO Policy Research for Social Policy Knowledge Production**

Participants unanimously agreed that NGO policy research is important for social policy knowledge production, and many suggested that policy research conducted by human service NGOs had advantages over university-based policy research in particular, but also over policy research produced by governments and for-profit organisations, such as consultancies. Two themes dominated the comments on the importance of NGO policy research: *‘positionality’* and perceived *power*.

### *Proximity to service users*

The first theme of ‘positionality’ relates to the proximity of the organisations to those directly affected by policy - clients and service providers. Organisations were seen to be “*in touch*” with clients and providers and to have an ability to “*bring client’s voices to the table*”. A typical response was the, “*NGOs have direct contact with service users and direct contact with people who are affected by policy at the ground level*”. All of the participants referred to the ‘uniqueness’ of this position. They also underlined close contact with services and clients as significant not only because of the easy access to “*rich sources of data*” but also because they were regarded as “*having the best interests of the client in mind*”.

Here proximity to people directly affected by government policy was regarded as central to the production of both more relevant and ‘better’ social policy knowledge. Two participants also reflected on how “*academic rigour*” and “*objectivity*” could be maintained by policy researchers embedded in service provision organisations. More attention to policy research “*standards*” and the development of policy research “*expertise*” and “*rigour*” was thus seen as important for maintaining the legitimacy of human service NGOs policy research. In expressing the need for academic rigour and quality research there was no mention of epistemology or canons of research perhaps suggesting a tension between research practice that presents as social constructivist or framed by social justice principles and ‘lived experiences’ and the pressure to ‘collect evidence’ as a type of pragmatic modernist research practice.

### *NGO - Government relations*

The second theme of ‘power’ relates to the view that NGO policy research is important for social policy knowledge production because “*governments listen to NGOs*”. Some participants related the influence of NGOs on government to the expansion of the sector in human service delivery. For example, one participant argued that “*the not-for-profit sector is recognized as an essential deliverer of services and has a good history and a reputation and therefore it needs to have a commensurate say at the table*”. Others linked rising influence back to the proximity NGOs have to people affected by social policy, suggesting that government is increasingly recognising the benefit of engaged social policy production. One participant suggested that “*government realises that NGOs are close to the ground in terms of day-to-day*



*impact of social policy*” and another suggested that NGOs had more “*respectability*”. In addition, the development of policy research in the organisations and the “*growth of research expertise*” were seen to add to NGO legitimacy. Not all participants imagined this favoured status with government would necessarily continue. One, for example, made the following observations,

*“It is getting harder because the field is more crowded now and more services are making comment and more NGOs are doing research. And the government requires that you provide more evidence for your position, more arguments than it did previously.”*

Participants referred to universities and for-profits (such as research consultants) as competing producers of social policy knowledge, but there was little mention of other producers, such as government agencies, unions, peak bodies, social movements or think tanks. The lack of discussion of these bodies suggests that the field of social policy knowledge production in Australia, while hosting new players in the form of the human service NGO policy researchers, may have changed significantly in other ways. Changes such as the ‘hollowing out’ of the state through contracting out of services and the shift away from policy development modes that include unions, peak organisations and social movements may therefore be relevant to the position of NGOs in the social policy arena.

### **3.5 Facilitating NGO policy research impact on policy**

An assessment of the policy impact of policy research in NGOs was well beyond the scope of this study, however the study captured researchers’ *perceptions* of the role and influence of NGO research in the development of social policy. Participants were able to identify a range of instances where research processes and outputs had influenced social policy development. Out of their experiences, they were also able to identify a range of factors that either facilitated or constrained the impact of NGO policy research on policy.

The key factors that participants perceived as facilitating the impact of their research included the legitimacy of the research, which relied on notions of the rigour and was clearly linked to collaborations with universities. Here the emphasis was on external *perceptions* of research quality, rather than the actual quality of the research. There was separate mention of the significance of the actual quality of the research for policy

impact, and participants commented that ‘poor quality research’ worked against policy impact. Quality was related to choice of methodology, depth of analysis, presentation of findings and the skills and competencies of the researchers.

Another key factor affecting policy impact related to the political environment, particularly the alignment of party politics with NGO policy objectives. Participants perceived that the impact of their research depended on a fit with the political orientations of the government in power. One participant suggested that the political reputation of an NGO could work against the impact of their research. These comments indicate that the relationship between ‘evidence’ and policy is not regarded as neutral, and that political factors will intervene in the take-up of NGO policy research.

In a similar vein, ‘who you know’ was regarded as significant for the impact of NGO policy research. Strong and positive relationships with government agencies, ministers and bureaucrats were seen as particularly important. Access to decision-makers was shaped by the reputation of the NGO, the leadership of the NGO, networking practices between NGOs. Poor networking could constrain the impact of policy research.

Participants also discussed the importance of how research is communicated, not only what is communicated, but when and to whom. For example, one participant suggested that timing of the release of research findings was crucial, particularly timing in terms of the budget or electoral cycles. Another participant suggested that influencing policy requires persistence, and at times research results need to be presented and re-presented to decision-makers before it has an impact. Participants also described ways in which research results were communicated strategically – either through the targeting of key decision-makers or through the use of media coverage and media contacts to create public and political interest in the research. Lack of a media profile or media networks was seen to constrain the policy impact of research undertaken in some NGOs.

## **Conclusion**

Section Two of this report, ‘NGO Policy Research Activity and Capacity’, provides evidence of solid policy research capacity within the NGO human service sector. It

also demonstrates significant engagement with key social policy areas that are not limited by areas of service delivery. The range of research areas indicated responsiveness to prevailing 'high' agenda issues for the state as well as innovative research seeking to meet a range of needs in various communities. It appears NGO policy researchers take a blended approach to policy research, drawing on evaluation or practice research. NGO policy research is thus distinctive in its links to, or emerges out of, the experiences of service users connected to the services the NGOs deliver. It also appears that there are distinctions in the *types* of policy research conducted by NGOs, in particular between reactive policy research and strategic policy research. Research methods utilised by the participants were predominantly qualitative social science methods, and decision-making about methods was related to the research training strengths of the participants, the applicability of methods for the research context and the availability of resources.

The study also revealed that NGOs value policy research activities highly and provide a wide range of support for the research including training, administrative and technical support and opportunities to engage with other researchers. However there were some concerns over limited time frames for research and a hefty demand on researchers' time due to demand for quick turn-around research. The NGOs appeared to have strong research connections to government and universities as research partners. The ARC Linkage scheme provides an important source of funding for NGO policy research, as well as an incentive for forming research partnerships with universities. The private sector appears to play a significantly smaller role in research partnerships. The final part of Section Two shows that NGOs actively disseminate their policy research findings through a variety of means. Dissemination within the NGOs appears to add depth to a lively culture of engagement, and many avenues are sought to disseminate the results of the research to government and into the public domain.

Part Three of this report, 'NGO Policy Research and Knowledge Production' presents an analysis of the growing role for policy research within NGOs and a more complex or nuanced set of participant perceptions about why they do policy research, its role in policy production and the broader role for NGOs in knowledge production in the contemporary Australian social policy landscape. A key way of describing policy

research was as a form of working for social justice, and the relationship between policy research and advocacy was highlighted. NGO researchers' *proximity* to human service users or clients was reported by the participants as providing authority to their research and providing legitimacy to NGOs as key contributors to social policy development. The participants also indicated a sense of *power* in political influence, linked to their organisations' roles in the delivery of services on behalf of the state, and a strengthening of their inclusion as a voice in social policy decision-making by governments. While the study was not designed to assess the impact of NGO policy research on policy, factors were identified that are seen to facilitate policy impact. Synergy with governmental cycles of decision-making, government political agendas and adequacy of resources influence the impact of knowledge produced by NGOs. The authority of NGO policy research in policy processes was achieved via four key pillars of legitimacy: ensuring credibility and quality of research; emphasising connections to service users; maintaining political connections; and effective communication strategies, including the media.

In conclusion, the findings of the research are in keeping with the two key ideas that emerged from the international literature on NGOs and social policy research. First, the idea that new requirements for 'evidence' and 'evidenced based policy' are clear motivations for the growth of NGO policy research. Second, the notion that knowledge for policy development that is produced at the site of service delivery is important, is central to NGO policy research developments. These rationales provide the impetus for continuing to develop NGO policy research within human service NGOs in Australia. The NGO policy research workforce consists of highly skilled researchers who are optimistic about human service NGOs' role and legitimacy in producing knowledge in order to influence policy.

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