

Linking to Public Policy

What Is Public Policy?

Policy: A principle, plan, or course of action, as pursued by a government, organization, or individual.

Public policies: The policies that governments adopt to solve problems.



Policies are established ways of doing things. You have ways of doing things, and so do businesses and government. We all adopt policies to solve problems.

A policy can be:

- A principle, e.g., a company pledges to make a special effort to use less water or energy.
- A plan, e.g., an individual creates a budget plan to save \$50 a month.
- A course of action, e.g., a city develops a program to feed homeless people at a shelter.

Many policies are translated into law by government action. For example, to control drunk-driving deaths, a state may pass tougher drunk-driving laws. These laws in turn may require administrative action, such as enforcement by police.

What does the problem have to do with policy?

Civic Action Project provides you with flexibility in connecting your project to policy. You may not see it right away, but for most public problems, there is a policy implication. Take a look at these examples:

Enforcing Existing Policy

Let's say you are concerned about cars speeding in your neighborhood. Even though drivers are supposed to know the speed limit for a residential street, you notice that there is no posted speed limit on any of the streets in the area. Your CAP project is about getting the city to better enforce the policy on your street by posting a speed-limit sign. If just posting it isn't enough, a next step might be to get the city to take further measures to enforce the policy by installing speed bumps.

Creating New Policy

You notice that huge amounts of paper are in the trash cans at school. You want your school to create a new recycling policy and place recycling cans next to the regular trash cans.

Modifying Existing Policy

Your city has a curfew ordinance that applies to people under the age of 16. You and many people you know have summer jobs that require you to be out after curfew. You want to try to persuade the city to change the existing policy to make exceptions for teenagers who are working at night.

Eliminating Existing Policy

In one of the CAP lessons there is an example of students working with school administrators to eliminate the policy of locked restrooms during the school day.

Using Policy to Leverage Change

This one is a little more subtle, but very useful. Let's say a local business runs its sprinkler system four or five times a day, and you and others in the community think this is a waste of water. You check and find no city ordinance about watering lawns. You do find that there are incentives for businesses to conserve water, like installing low-flow toilets. You've heard the mayor and other public officials talk about conserving water, so you know it is on the public agenda (CAP Lesson 11).



Even though it's not against the law, you want the business to be more responsible in its use of water, so you leverage (use to your advantage) the information you have found to persuade the business that cutting back is the right thing to do. You could also see if you could get public officials to support your cause by contacting the business owner themselves. Though you are not trying to create or change policy, you are using government, the public agenda, and policy to *leverage* change.