

Numbers

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The most common way to define a policy problem is to measure it.

- More than one way to measure
- Fundamental issue is how to count it
- What is the purpose for measuring
- Counting begins with categorization
- Opposite of symbols, not ambiguous – something is either counted or it isn't



Numbers as Metaphors

- Asserting a likeness where the measure finds a difference and insists on inclusion of something the measure excludes.

Examples - LSAT's,
Drinking/Voting rights based on age, Welfare eligibility based on income

- Asserting a difference where the measure finds a likeness and insists on the exclusion of something the measure includes.

Examples - 1960's –
Counting hospital beds, counting jobs for the purpose of employment policy

Numbers as Norms and Symbols

- Measures imply a need for action (we want to change them or change our behaviors in response to them)
- Some level of the measure usually becomes the norm
- As norms, numbers become part of a story of helplessness and control, middles and averages often become the norm
- Many measures are double-edged swords: Savings, Cost, Efficiency/Productivity
- How the measure is interpreted is more important than the actual number of the measure (politicians use numbers to support what they are arguing for or against)

The Hidden Story in Numbers

- First – Assert that the phenomenon is frequent enough to count
- Second – It is an identifiable entity with clear boundaries
- Third – To count something creates a community (things to be counted share a common feature)
- Fourth – The promise of conflict resolution through arithmetic
- Fifth – Symbols of precision, accuracy, and objectivity

Making Numbers in the Polis:

- When people know they are being measured they present themselves as they want to be seen... “reactive effects”
- The process of counting something makes it noticeable, record keeping stimulates reports
- Used to stimulate public demands
- When measurement is used for performance evaluation, people manipulate their scores
- Power to measure is the power to control – measurers hold the power to determine what and how to measure
- Creates alliances between measurers and the measured
- Numbers DON'T speak for themselves, people try to control how others interpret them

In conclusion...

- Numbers in policy debates cannot be understood without understanding how they were produced.
- If numbers (as artifacts) are metaphors, symbols, or stories are they “real” in any sense?