

Policy analysts:

Shaping society through research and problem-solving

by Sadie Blanchard

When Will Wilkinson decided to major in philosophy, his father wondered about the usefulness of the degree. “My dad asked if I was going to work in a philosophy factory,” says Wilkinson. “And now, I guess I do.”

Wilkinson is a policy analyst for a think tank in Washington, D.C. As his anecdote suggests, think tanks are, in a sense, idea factories. They employ policy analysts to research complex problems and recommend solutions. Issues range from education to healthcare to national defense.

In fact, the ideas for many current laws and policies originated with policy analysts in think tanks and other private organizations. Policy analysts—also called researchers, scholars, and fellows—work to raise public awareness of social issues, such as crime prevention, access to healthcare, and protection of the environment. And in the solutions they propose, these policy analysts hope to influence government action.

Policy analysts who work for governments create policy and evaluate program effectiveness; some help to

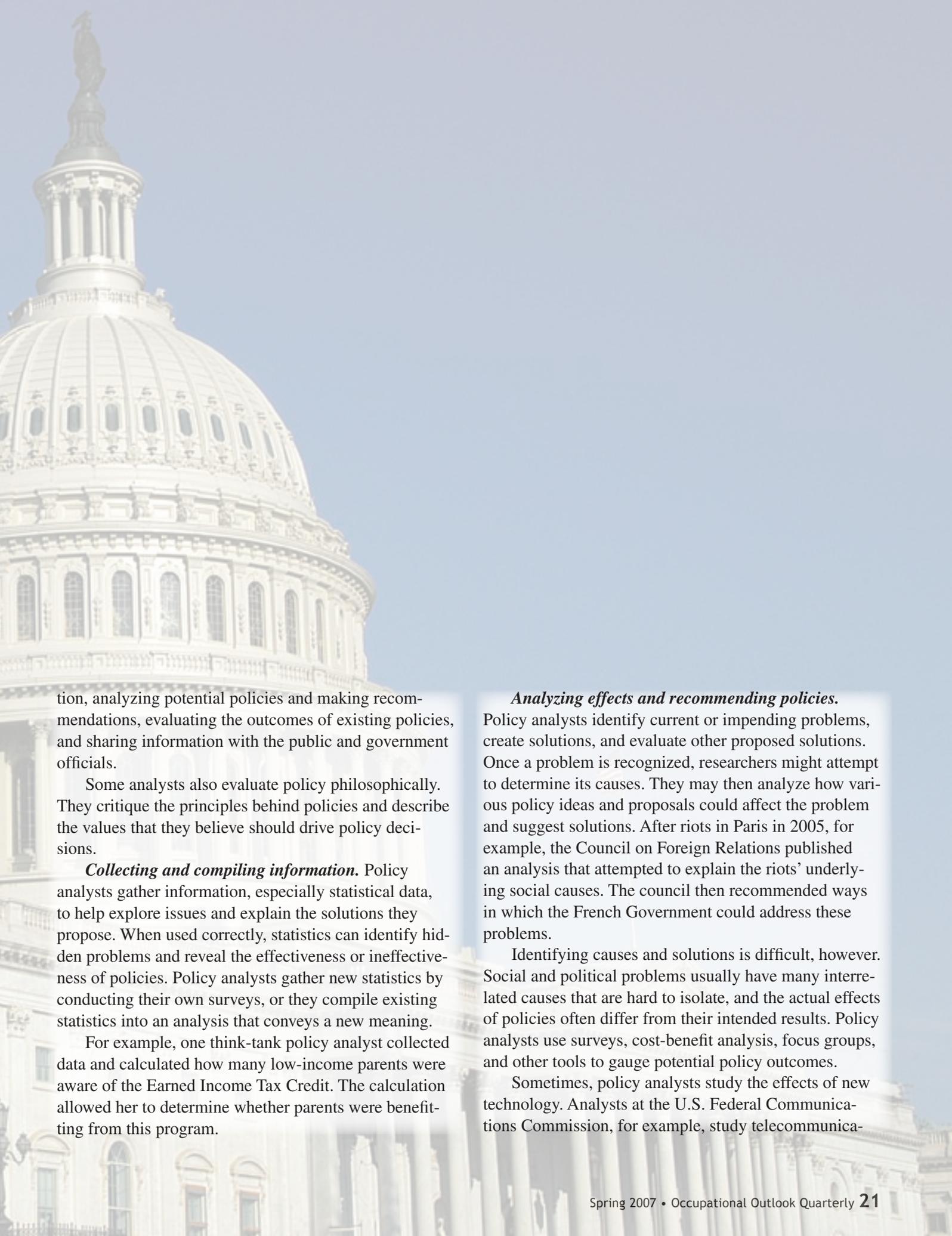
decide which private organizations should be awarded publicly funded grants. For example, policy analysts might suggest ideas for a county recycling plan, report on how well a State project met its objectives, or propose funds for relief organizations to aid rebuilding after a natural disaster. Analysts in government provide decisionmakers with data and hypotheses about the effects of different policies.

Keep reading to find out more about policy analysts’ work. For the purpose of this article, policy analysts are defined as workers who concentrate on researching, evaluating, and shaping public policy. You’ll learn what they do, how their research agenda is determined, what they earn, and how they train for these careers. You’ll also learn where to get more information about opportunities in this occupation.

How they shape policy

Policy analysts work to influence political and social decisions. Although their tasks vary, most policy analysts work in one or more of four areas: collecting informa-

Sadie Blanchard is an economist in the Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections, BLS, (202) 691-5262.



tion, analyzing potential policies and making recommendations, evaluating the outcomes of existing policies, and sharing information with the public and government officials.

Some analysts also evaluate policy philosophically. They critique the principles behind policies and describe the values that they believe should drive policy decisions.

Collecting and compiling information. Policy analysts gather information, especially statistical data, to help explore issues and explain the solutions they propose. When used correctly, statistics can identify hidden problems and reveal the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of policies. Policy analysts gather new statistics by conducting their own surveys, or they compile existing statistics into an analysis that conveys a new meaning.

For example, one think-tank policy analyst collected data and calculated how many low-income parents were aware of the Earned Income Tax Credit. The calculation allowed her to determine whether parents were benefiting from this program.

Analyzing effects and recommending policies.

Policy analysts identify current or impending problems, create solutions, and evaluate other proposed solutions. Once a problem is recognized, researchers might attempt to determine its causes. They may then analyze how various policy ideas and proposals could affect the problem and suggest solutions. After riots in Paris in 2005, for example, the Council on Foreign Relations published an analysis that attempted to explain the riots' underlying social causes. The council then recommended ways in which the French Government could address these problems.

Identifying causes and solutions is difficult, however. Social and political problems usually have many interrelated causes that are hard to isolate, and the actual effects of policies often differ from their intended results. Policy analysts use surveys, cost-benefit analysis, focus groups, and other tools to gauge potential policy outcomes.

Sometimes, policy analysts study the effects of new technology. Analysts at the U.S. Federal Communications Commission, for example, study telecommunica-

tions technology and market conditions. They might propose changes to existing regulations in response to a new technology, or they might identify benefits and drawbacks to a proposed change in telecommunications rules.

Evaluating outcomes. Often, analysts try to evaluate results by determining whether an existing policy has been effective. They might begin by asking whether the policy achieved its goal. Again, they might use statistics to answer this question. They also might use focus groups or try to identify any unintended consequences, as when analysts at the National Bureau of Economic Research studied whether a policy aimed at moving low-income families to middle-class neighborhoods affected the academic performance of children whose families had relocated.

Policy analysts might also address a policy's cost. They might ask if a program has cost more than expected and if its benefits have outweighed expenses.

The goal in these evaluations is to see how to improve a policy—or, perhaps, whether it should be expanded or scrapped.

Sharing information. To share their ideas and change public policy, think-tank analysts market their information to a wide audience that includes policymakers, the media, academia, and the public. Policy analysts write books, papers, briefs, and fact sheets. Some create electronic newsletters and send them to members of Congress to update them on subjects discussed on Capitol Hill. To cover some topics, analysts write issue guides that provide facts, answers to common questions, graphs, and links to relevant publications. Others write editorials for newspapers and magazines. In addition, writing for Web sites and Web logs, or blogs, is becoming increasingly widespread.

Analysts also write reports and speeches. Many give oral briefings that summarize their findings. And analysts working for either private institutions or government agencies are sometimes asked to testify before Congress, advise Government officials, speak at conferences, or appear as experts on television news programs.

Philosophizing. Some analysts debate the moral dimensions of the law. Exploring moral questions underlies many endeavors of policy analysts. For example, policy analysts must make a value judgment to define what is “good” before they can determine whether a policy has led to a good outcome. Ethics are sometimes

the crux of the debate. Policy analysts whose education or interest is in ethics or philosophy often focus on these philosophical dimensions of policy debates.

The research agenda

The type of research that policy analysts do depends on where they work. The mission of think tanks and associations sets the agenda for analysts who work there. For those working in government, research topics depend on the needs of the government agency.

At smaller, more specialized think tanks, analysts must be experts in their organization's niche. Larger think tanks may also hire policy analysts to specialize in a particular area, but they might have generalists on staff who research multiple areas.

Many think tanks try to avoid an ideological bias, but others promote specific social agendas or political philosophies. Usually, analysts who work for an organization with a particular viewpoint share that view.

Policy analysts often take the initiative when deciding what to work on. They might come up with topics on their own, or they might meet in groups to generate proposals. Wilkinson, for example, chooses his work by looking for gaps in research—issues that are important but that have not been covered.

In some organizations, analysts are constrained to topics for which they can find funding. A client or a donor might also suggest topics.

Once a researcher has an idea, he or she writes a policy proposal and submits it to a program leader for approval to undertake the project. Decisions about what to study are often driven by media and legislative interest, but that doesn't mean policy analysts pursue every current topic. Topics must be important to an organization or government program.

Policy analysts in government work on either broad or specialized issues, depending on their agency and position. These analysts must react to proposed changes in law, regulations, and policies. They also must respond to inquiries by government officials and the public.

Money matters

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) does not classify policy analysts as a separate occupation and, therefore, does not have data on their employment or earnings. Depending on their research specialty, workers who analyze policy might be counted as political scientists,

economists, sociologists, lawyers, urban and regional planners, or natural scientists, among other titles.

Workers who analyze policy for the Federal Government usually need significant expertise and experience. Many are at the GS-15 level, which currently pays about \$93,000 to \$145,000, depending on experience. Some people also work as lower-level Government analysts, helping more experienced workers or focusing on small projects. These workers, who usually have at least a master's degree, often begin at the GS-7 level, which currently pays about \$31,740.

Salaries for policy analysts vary widely at think tanks and other private organizations. Analysts' earnings depend on factors such as worker qualifications and the organization's size and budget. Earnings also depend on how the organization gets its money. Think tanks may be funded by endowments, individual and corporate contributions, contracts with public or private organizations, and grants from government agencies, universities, or foundations.

At think tanks that do not have fundraising departments or large endowments, analysts are often responsible for obtaining funding. "You have to be a combination of researcher and entrepreneur," says think-tank analyst Tom LaTourette. "You have to be enterprising in coming up with new initiatives and finding funding."

In search of funding, think-tank analysts often write grant proposals and negotiate contracts with government agencies and private organizations. Analysts first need to identify the issues that will be important to specific donors and clients, and then identify which donors and clients might be willing to offer funds. Finally, analysts must pitch their ideas to secure the funding.

Government analysts usually do not need to search for funding, although they may still need to write proposals about what they want to research and why.

Some policy analysts are hired as consultants by other organizations, including Federal agencies, State and local governments, and corporations. In such arrangements, analysts are paid to evaluate the hiring



organization's performance, identify strengths and weaknesses, and recommend changes or to help the organization make or analyze decisions about policy and procedures.

Getting started and moving up

Policy analysts must be able to do independent research, which requires reading and digesting complex information. They communicate effectively through speaking and writing. They must work well in groups but also be self-starters able to work alone on a project. And they need patience to study one subject for a long time.

In addition to these skills and traits, policy analysts need specific types of education and experience to start their careers.

Education. Most, but not all, policy analysts have a graduate degree, such as a law (J.D.), doctorate (Ph.D.), or master's degree. The required educational background depends on the employer, the subject being studied, and the analyst's work experience.

Common fields of study include economics, public policy, and political science. But other policy analysts

have a degree in education, business administration, philosophy, or psychology. And many analysts have a degree related to a specific area of expertise, such as when a healthcare analyst has a medical degree.

Analysts often choose to specialize in a field related to their degree and then later branch into other areas. Consider analyst—and geologist—LaTourette. He began by using his geology education to evaluate programs in mineworker safety. Later, he built on his experience in safety to help establish terrorism preparedness guidelines.

Policy analysts who don't have an advanced degree can sometimes gain expertise in another way, and then establish themselves through writing and publishing. For example, one policy analyst at a large D.C. think tank started as a Web administrator. He earned a good reputation as an expert in civil liberties issues by writing freelance articles and maintaining a popular blog. Persuaded by his growing reputation, the think tank eventually hired him as an analyst.

Experience. Some people begin working as policy analysts immediately after graduate school. But because



most employers seek analysts who are already experts on specific topics or in public policy in general, even entry-level analysts usually have some work experience.

Would-be analysts can start getting experience while still in school. Many college campuses have student organizations dedicated to particular public policy topics, and many offer open lectures and debates hosted by the public policy or political science department.

Some analysts get experience, and expertise, by working as college or university professors. In fact, many senior fellows at think tanks work as university professors at the same time, in part because much of the work at think tanks is similar to work in academia.

Other analysts gain expertise by starting in lower-level jobs related to policy. In some government agencies, for example, entry-level program analysts assist with policy work. Still other analysts have worked at nonprofit organizations, such as advocacy groups.

Advisory, policy, or executive experience at a government agency or on a Congressional staff is another common background for beginning analysts. Social scientists who do statistical or other kinds of analysis can also sometimes move into the policy arena. And working as a journalist or freelance writer covering current events has helped some analysts get their start.

Analysts interested in working for a policy organization that covers a particular sector often need more specific work experience. For example, the Urban Institute's International Housing and Finance Team requires policy analysts to have 5 years of legal experience in mortgage finance, real estate, banking, or a related field.

Advancement. Like workers in most occupations, policy analysts who succeed in their work are often promoted. Advancement is usually based on how much work has been published, the extent of public speaking at conferences and public forums, the ability to attract clients or funding, or the influence of the analyst's work.

Some policy analysts go on to a more politically focused career. After gaining experience, they might work for political campaigns, for political parties, or on Congressional staffs.

Next steps

To learn more about policy analysts, visit your local library to find books and periodicals on subjects such as policy analysis, public policy, and think tanks.

One of the resources available at most libraries is the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, which includes detailed information about occupations—including those mentioned in this article: political scientists, urban and regional planners, economists, psychologists, other social scientists, lawyers, and life and physical scientists. The *Handbook* is also available online at www.bls.gov/oco.

Many policy analyst jobs with the Federal Government are posted online. You can apply for these openings through the USAJOBS Web site, www.usajobs.gov. Some student internships are posted on a companion site, www.studentjobs.gov/e-scholar.asp.

You can also apply for jobs and internships by contacting individual agencies or the U.S. Office of Personnel Management
1900 E St. NW.
Washington, DC 20415
(202) 606-1800.

Possible job titles include policy analyst, program analyst, program specialist, social scientist, policy coordinator, and management and policy analyst.

The *Occupational Outlook Quarterly* has related articles that you might find helpful. For tips on finding and applying for Government jobs and internships, see "How to get a job in the Federal Government" in the summer 2004 issue; the article is available online at www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2004/summer/art01.pdf. And for more information about jobs in political and advocacy groups, see "Groupmakers and grantmakers: Jobs in advocacy, grantmaking, and civic organizations" in the fall 2005 issue; the article is available online at www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2005/fall/art04.htm.

You can also find policy-related internships through your school's career services department and at the Web sites of policy organizations. For an online list of, and links to, policy organizations, see www.c-span.org/resources/policy.asp.

To learn more about careers in policy analysis, including where to look for internships, contact: Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management
1029 Vermont Ave. NW., Suite 1150
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 496-0130
www.appam.org

