

A conversation with Professor Angela Hawken, March 30, 2016

Participants

- Angela Hawken – Associate Professor of Economics and Policy Analysis and James Q. Wilson Fellow, School of Public Policy, Pepperdine University; Founder and Director, BetaGov
- Helen Toner – Research Assistant, Open Philanthropy Project

Note: These notes were compiled by the Open Philanthropy Project and give an overview of the major points made by Professor Angela Hawken.

Summary

The Open Philanthropy Project spoke with Professor Angela Hawken of BetaGov as part of an update on two Open Philanthropy Project grants. Conversation topics included BetaGov's recent work and upcoming plans in criminal justice, education, and health and human services; its Pracademia webinar and conference series; and Professor Hawken's Washington urine project.

BetaGov's work

BetaGov helps policymakers, government agencies, and other practitioners to conduct randomized controlled trials (RCTs) in order to test the effectiveness of existing policies and new policy ideas. These RCTs tend to be inexpensive because much of the necessary data is already being collected. BetaGov offers its services free of charge and posts results of the trials on BetaGov.org.

Publishing new materials on BetaGov.org

Trial results

BetaGov is about to start publishing RCT results in journal articles written as a collaboration between practitioners and researchers. Since most trials are registered and detailed updates are posted regularly, it seems likely that the articles will be written quickly. BetaGov's statistician and newly-hired writer are working on publishing results.

In order to be able to publish details of as many trials as possible, BetaGov registers all trials that partner agencies consent to have registered. Details of all trials are entered into a repository, but are not made public without the partner agency's approval. Some polities' policies on publicizing information about pilot projects are stricter than others, and BetaGov is sensitive to their concerns.

Profiling trials and innovators

BetaGov will soon begin publishing profiles of innovative trials and the practitioners who created them, in part to keep readers and practitioners interested and to

demonstrate to agencies that results can be obtained in as little as 8 weeks. One of the trials profiled will be the text messaging trial in Oregon, which was led by a front-lines employee within the probation department who had no research experience but was trained in research skills through BetaGov's Pracademia webinar series. After she heard Professor Hawken discuss the idea of a text message reminder trial, she offered to conduct the trial and convinced others at her agency to support it.

Transparency

BetaGov is working to improve transparency by:

- Hiring a dedicated employee to register trials.
- Redesigning the trial map on its website to include links to the repository where details of each trial and progress to date are recorded.

Encouraging replication of successful trials

BetaGov does not endorse specific interventions, but encourages agencies to replicate trials that have been successful in other states. For example, a trial in Oregon that found that text message reminders successfully reduced failure to report to meetings with probation/parole officers has been replicated in many other states. The state-to-state replication rate of BetaGov-supported RCTs is fairly fast, and Professor Hawken expects it to increase significantly by the end of 2016. Technology trials in particular tend to replicate quickly.

Washington transition policy

An initiative in Washington state (led by BetaGov in collaboration with inmates, mental health professionals, and corrections staff) created a pilot to help inmates gently transition out of solitary confinement to reduce anxiety, which is a potential cause of violence, upon returning to the general prison population. The policy was spurred by an inmate who complained about the difficulty of reintegration. Because of the complexity of the issues involved, this pilot took over 6 months to create. BetaGov is now working on a similar replication in Pennsylvania and other states are expected to follow soon. Since learning of the transition pod, corrections leaders in Pennsylvania are working with BetaGov to create a transition into solitary confinement, wherein inmates are moved to a more restricted area and given a chance to be diverted away from solitary if through their behavior they are able to demonstrate that they can be safely housed outside of solitary. BetaGov is also working with states to improve the living conditions within solitary confinement and to provide more opportunities for socialization.

Criminal justice

BetaGov recently received a \$2.3 million grant from the Laura and John Arnold Foundation (LJAF) to fund 100 criminal justice RCTs in many states over the next 2

years. Based on progress to date, Professor Hawken estimates that the grant will cover hundreds of RCTs.

Soon after this funding was announced, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PADOC) submitted proposals for 77 RCTs, and has committed to running 100 trials in the near future. PADOC has been named as a "learning organization" and Professor Hawken expects that other states will use it as a model for how to learn about policy effectiveness.

BetaGov has also successfully collaborated with practitioners in states that are traditionally regarded as more difficult to work with. Practitioners in these states may be more inclined to work with BetaGov because BetaGov does not charge for its services or push particular policies.

Segregation Solutions

BetaGov is about to launch an initiative called Segregation Solutions to help states and counties/cities improve solitary confinement conditions in prisons and jails by empowering prison management and inmates to try new strategies to reduce the flow of inmates into solitary confinement and dramatically improve conditions there. BetaGov is currently supporting 26 active trials in this area, and Professor Hawken expects this area to grow quickly. Current trials include efforts to:

- Transform the appearance of cells to make them more respectful spaces, e.g., by adding murals.
- Improve relationships between corrections officers and inmates by testing strategies to improve inmate/officer rapport.
- Prevent inmates from being sent to solitary, e.g., by mapping episodes of violence in prisons and stationing corrections officers strategically to prevent offenses that lead to inmates being sent into solitary confinement. BetaGov plans to submit a proposal to the US Department of Justice (DOJ) to create Segregation Solutions pilot programs. This seems like a promising strategy, given that President Obama has prioritized this issue.

Education

BetaGov works with a nonprofit charter school operator and has an active portfolio of interventions that reduce the dropout rate of at-risk students. These interventions have a high social return and may reduce crime, given that students who are at high risk of dropping out of school are often also at higher risk of criminal activity. Teachers and principals have been supportive of BetaGov RCTs, in part because the short timelines make it possible for them to apply the results to their work.

BetaGov is currently soliciting funding for the education program; it has submitted a letter of intent and a proposal to one foundation and will present to the board of

that foundation in June. In the meantime, BetaGov is using its own discretionary funding to fund trials and slowly build up its work in this area.

Health and human services

BetaGov's health and human services (HHS) work involves many agencies in many different subject areas, including health services, criminal justice services, child protective services, and welfare agencies providing cash, energy, and unemployment assistance. BetaGov has started conversations between HHS agencies, which tend to work independently even though their work can significantly overlap, in order to encourage collaboration. Its HHS work is growing quickly, both in terms of the kinds of projects it is able to take on and the number of states in which agencies are expressing interest in conducting trials. Its team recently expanded to include a psychiatrist, which will enable BetaGov to conduct health trials it could not have done without access to an Institutional Review Board. The rapid rate of expansion was unexpected.

Professor Hawken believes that BetaGov's HHS work will have a high impact. BetaGov has hired a professional writer to write grant proposals for its HHS work, and is prioritizing expansion of HHS staff. HHS work is currently run by volunteer staff, due to the lack of funding and the perceived importance of the trials.

Pracademia training

Webinars

BetaGov's 90-minute Pracademia webinars offer training in basic research skills to enable practitioners who have little to no research experience to conduct RCTs of their own work. Several current BetaGov practitioners have been trained through Pracademia webinars, and now work with teams to generate high-quality research. Webinars cover:

- A brief history of RCTs.
- Key concerns, e.g., ensuring that trials are conducted ethically.
- Information about the support BetaGov provides, the communication strategy it uses with its practitioner partners, and introductions to key staff members.
- Profiles of 8–10 RCTs that attendees have run.

Facilitating communication in this way helps practitioners learn from each other and increases the rate of state-to-state trial replication.

The next Pracademia webinar will focus solely on trials conducted in Pennsylvania because so many trials are currently being conducted there, but webinars typically include profiles of trials from multiple states.

In-person Pracademia events

BetaGov will begin hosting in-person Pracademia training sessions at least twice annually wherein practitioners from many states who are running innovative trials will share the results of their research.

Washington urine project

The Open Philanthropy Project previously gave Professor Hawken a grant to test urine samples collected by the Washington State Department of Corrections in order to gain a better understanding of the effect of marijuana legalization in Washington on the use of marijuana and other illicit drugs. The last urine samples were tested in the first week of April, and Professor Hawken presented preliminary findings at a cannabis summit in New York in the third week of April. Some of the preliminary results were based on all 60,000 samples that were collected.

All Open Philanthropy Project conversations are available at <http://www.openphilanthropy.org/research/conversations>