2023

The People Lab
Annual Report

The People Lab

From the Faculty Director

This is an exciting time for government. Legislation like the American Rescue Plan Act and the Inflation Reduction Act present a unique opportunity for governments to shift from "satisficing" with limited resources to redefining what it means to deliver. At the same time, government workers are still experiencing the impact of interrelated public health, economic, and political crises, and are called on to rebuild trust in government, while meeting the changing needs of residents equitably and effectively.

The People Lab is uniquely positioned to support public sector agencies in meeting this moment. Our partners are eager for evidence-based approaches to tackling fundamental challenges like how to retain frontline staff, but are also excited to reimagine the relationship between residents and their government. Our largest challenge as a team is also our greatest motivation: the demand for the work we do continues to grow. We are looking to the future to increase our impact by delivering more rigorous research projects that are co-designed with our partners, while training and deploying a generation of scholars who will use their skills to answer questions that governments ask.

Dr. Elizabeth Linos
Emma Bloomberg Associate Professor for Public Policy and Management
Harvard Kennedy School of Government

The People Lab
Fiscal Year 2023 Overview

July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023

The People Lab brings together public management scholars, behavioral economists, political scientists, and public policy experts to answer questions that those in government are asking but don't have the political support or the bandwidth to answer rigorously. In so doing, The People Lab plays a critical role in filling policy-relevant gaps in the academic literature while also being responsive to immediate government priorities.

This year, we continued to hone our model of collaborative, rigorous research, while also **moving to Harvard Kennedy School** following Faculty Director Elizabeth Linos' appointment to the faculty in July 2022. In addition to being a significant organizational transition, the move offered our team an important opportunity to revisit and refine our mission.

We are excited to expand our work in our new home at the Kennedy School by continuing to build the infrastructure needed to implement our vision at scale and to train the next generation of scholars to do collaborative, policy-relevant research.

Since 2017, The People Lab has aimed to empower the public sector by producing cutting-edge research on the people of government and the communities they are called to serve.

Using evidence from public management and insights from behavioral science, we study, design, and test strategies that can solve urgent public sector challenges in **three core areas:**

1

Strengthening the government workforce

How to recruit, retain, and support diverse talent in the public sector that can effectively and equitably respond to the changing needs of residents.

2

Improving resident-government interactions

How to mitigate the burdens that residents face when they interact with their government and increase trust and satisfaction in those interactions.

3

Reimagining evidence-based policymaking

How to better include excluded voices in the design, implementation, and evaluation of government innovations, and support the policy adoption of evidence at scale.

FY 2023 Research Highlights

Photo credit: photo by SJ Objio on Unsplash

Strengthening the government workforce

- In collaboration with the Talent for Good Community and five fellowship organizations, we launched a study that will use administrative and survey data to determine how fellowship participation affects fellows' career trajectories as well as their views of government, government workers, and public service, compared to similarly motivated non-fellows. Results are forthcoming, but we anticipate being able to track at least 3,000 fellows and comparable non-fellows as part of this study.

- Following four roundtables with academics, policy leaders, and advocates, we released a proposed research agenda on the federal workforce that aligns with the President's Management Agenda Learning Agenda and identifies feasible and impactful demonstration projects that target specific challenges defined by federal agency leaders. These priorities include making recruitment processes easier for candidates and refocusing on diversity and inclusion at more senior levels of the civil service. As a result of this work, we have now launched a collaboration with the Veterans Health Administration that will test strategies to fill healthcare worker vacancies more quickly across the country.
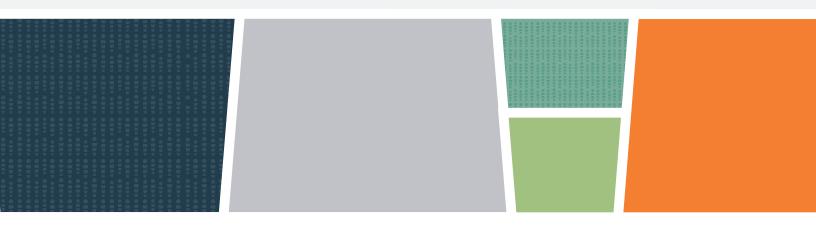
Research Priority 1: Strengthening the government workforce (continued)

- We completed a collaboration with the Office of Management and Budget, the Office of Personnel Management, and the General Services Administration to support the design and implementation of three rounds of government-wide pulse surveys. In each round, two million employees were sent an online survey on one of three topics: (1) re-entry to in-person work; (2) engagement and burnout; or (3) inclusion and equity. The results of the pulse surveys have been used to create public dashboards on employee perceptions; by agencies to design improved strategies to support employees; and by local government agencies who are eager to replicate a pulse survey approach for their own workforce.

In the next two years, we will build on our existing research agenda on the government workforce by:

Developing and evaluating new approaches to training and development of career civil servants.	Evaluating ongoing strategies to improve equity and inclusion in the workplace.	Conducting studies that link investments in the workforce to service delivery outcomes.

Improving resident-government interactions

- We continued our collaboration with the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and Code for America to design and test methods of encouraging take-up of economic impact payments among low-income households. We estimate that our first campaign directly resulted in the disbursement of up to $10.6 million in additional refunds. Results are forthcoming from subsequent evaluations that focus on the impact of targeted text messaging (relative to mass outreach), and the use of a newly-created hotline service that both receives calls from residents and conducts proactive outreach.

- Expanding our work on the impact of stigma on take-up of social welfare programs, we launched a partnership with the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority to better understand and reduce barriers to landlord participation in the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program. We found that beliefs about the characteristics of tenants who use vouchers may be more consequential than logistical barriers in landlord decision-making. To inform future interventions, we are now conducting more than 60 qualitative interviews with Minneapolis landlords and tenants. We are also launching a partnership with the Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities to co-design and evaluate a statewide outreach campaign to more than 100,000 landlords aimed at increasing participation in the HCV program.

- Given the critical role of written government communication in outreach about public services, we released a study, in collaboration with co-authors from the US and the UK, which documents how the design of government communication impacts resident behavior. Contrary to expert predictions that informal, colorful designs are most effective, we show that residents are more likely to engage with more formal government communications. These findings have immediate implications for government outreach efforts and we have been contacted by numerous organizations, as well as myriad government agencies, which are now using these findings to shape their communication strategies.

In the next two years we plan to expand our work on how to improve government-resident interactions by:

Launching a series of projects to quantify the magnitude and impact of stigma on public benefits programs, measuring how stigma varies by program and population and how stigma impacts the decision-making of prospective beneficiaries.

Developing and testing meaningful measures of trust in and satisfaction with public services and systems to supplement existing measures of efficiency as outcome measures for service delivery.

Photo credit: City of Austin Public Works Department

Re-imagining evidence-based policymaking

2023
Highlight

Public sector leaders from local governments to the White House are building infrastructure to infuse data into day-to-day operations. This shift has opened the door for rigorous evidence production—not in ivory towers alone, but also in federal agencies, through community-led efforts, and across cities and states. In response to these changes, we have now formalized a third research priority: re-imagining evidence-based policymaking. We aim to build a body of work that pays closer attention to what happens before and after the production of rigorous "evidence." On the front end, we are focusing on developing scalable systems where those most impacted by programs are involved in their design and selection of success metrics. On the back end, we are studying how to shift from one-off demonstration projects to adoption of evidence at scale.

- We conducted a study in collaboration with Stefano DellaVigna and Woojin Kim at UC Berkeley to begin to address the question of how often and why evidence is incorporated into policymaking. Across 73 randomized controlled trials run by cities in the US, in collaboration with the Behavioral Insights Team, we find that about 27% ultimately adopted the innovations they tested at scale. Importantly, the strength of the evidence

Research Priority 3: Re-imagining evidence-based policymaking (continued)

in favor of a program did not predict whether it was adopted. Rather, the single most important predictive factor was whether the tested strategy was a tweak to a pre-existing process, as opposed to an entirely new process developed for the specific innovation. Some 67% of strategies built into pre-existing processes were adopted, compared to just 12% of strategies based on new innovations.

◼ With the Crown Prince Frederik Center for Public Leadership at Aarhus University, we are launching a project to address a dire shortage of nurses and nursing assistants in Denmark. While we have conducted many projects related to recruitment of frontline workers, here we are innovating on the process of developing evidence-based strategies to test. Rather than relying on academic expertise or the literature, we are testing strategies that have been developed through focus groups and interviews with nurses as well as hiring managers. This project seeks to document how interventions (and hopefully results) shift when those with lived experience are directly involved in the research process.

In the next two years we plan to expand this body of work by:

Designing and evaluating strategies to overcome hurdles to evidence adoption at scale.

Developing and evaluating scalable tools and strategies government can use to regularly and equitably include residents' perspectives and needs in policy design and evaluation.

Evaluating the link between trust in government and feeling included and represented in the process of policy design and evaluation.

FY 2023 Organizational Highlights

Photo credit: Los Angeles Fire Department

In July 2022, The People Lab moved from the Goldman School of Public Policy at UC Berkeley to Harvard Kennedy School. The move offered the Lab an exciting opportunity to raise our profile and expand our reach through executive education with public sector leaders and increased opportunities for partnership at the state and federal levels as well as internationally.

Transitioning the Lab's portfolio, operational infrastructure, core staff, and students to Harvard also led to significant structural change. At Harvard, the Lab is no longer responsible for paying student tuition, which means we have more financial flexibility to support a greater number of staff and students. The Lab also shifted from relying on full-time staff for finance, operations, communications, and development functions to relying on university-provided resources. This change has had mixed results and we are evaluating which pieces to bring back into the Lab over the coming year.

> In July 2022, The People Lab moved from the Goldman School of Public Policy at UC Berkeley to Harvard Kennedy School.

Despite the organizational shifts, the People Lab continues to expand our partnerships with government agencies and nonprofits to incorporate rigorous evidence and evaluation into their operations.

New partnerships include :

- County of Miami-Dade, Florida
- Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities
- New York City Office of the Mayor
- Crown Prince Frederik Center for Public Leadership at Aarhus University
- Baltimore Corps
- Foster America
- Coding it Forward
- City of Boston
- Veterans Health Administration
- United States Citizens and Immigration Services

Continued partnerships include:

- Office of Evaluation Sciences at the General Services Administration
- Office of Management and Budget
- California Department of Social Services
- City of San Diego, California
- Denver Fire Department
- Minneapolis Public Housing Authority
- Denver Mayor's Office
- Denver Sheriff Department
- Govern for America

The move to Harvard Kennedy School afforded our team the opportunity to codify our commitment to the following core beliefs:

Investments in government infrastructure and the government workforce are essential components to helping solve systemic challenges.

Academia can play a more direct role in responding to pressing public sector challenges without sacrificing scientific rigor.

Consciously focusing on equity and involving excluded voices in program design and evaluation measurably improve service delivery.

We are building a team, project selection process, and portfolio of projects that reflect our commitment to these values. We are also taking steps to formalize our research model and training process so that we can mentor greater numbers of students and staff interested in gaining on-the-job experience doing policy-relevant randomized controlled trials in collaboration with public sector agencies.

This year we also expanded our capacity-building efforts. Elizabeth directly trained more than 120 government leaders via executive education modules and workshops, and presented insights from TPL projects to more than 1,000 government employees at the global, national, and local levels. We handed over code, surveys, and how-to documents to government partners to empower them to scale up pilot projects. We also provided prior partners with light technical support as they designed and conducted their own independent evaluations that expanded the reach of our collaborations. In the coming year we plan to continue to prioritize capacity building and evidence adoption as a key outcome for our partnerships.

The Lab is building internal systems, policies, and staffing structures to enable responsible growth over the next five to 10 years. To this end, we plan to supplement Harvard's services and personnel by hiring an additional senior administrator. This person will build the systems and infrastructure needed to work at the pace our projects require within the university system, while the Lab's work teaching, training, and mentoring students continues. We will establish a replicable model, building an organizational infrastructure that, with additional funding, could continue to be scaled in the years ahead.

Photo credit: Taylor Flowe

"Govern For America's partnership with The People Lab allows us to measure what works to recruit, develop, and support effective leaders in government and make data-informed decisions about how to improve the GFA Fellowship and deepen our impact."

- Octavia Abell, Co-Founder & CEO Govern for America

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