

What is Policy?

When people hear the word “policy,” they often think of an ordinance made by a city council or a law made by a state legislature. However, both public institutions and private entities make policies. Contracts, organization or business policies, and agency regulations are also policies. For example, many communities have ordinances—made by the city or county council—that prohibit smoking in privately owned apartment buildings. In communities without these laws, landlords can choose to adopt smokefree policies for their properties.

In this example, the local ordinance is a **public policy** that applies to all apartment buildings in the community. The government adopts and enforces the law on behalf of residents. In places without a smokefree ordinance, landlords can adopt and enforce a **private policy** that affects only their apartment units and tenants. Whether public or private, a policy is 1) a written statement; 2) binding and enforceable; and 3) broadly applicable to a geographic area, type of institution or physical space, and/or group of people.

One way to identify policy is to understand what policy is not. Below are a few examples.

NOT POLICY	POLICY
Program: A local government creates a program that offers incentives to convenience stores that voluntarily sell fruits and vegetables.	A city council adopts a resolution offering funds to convenience stores in the community that sell a minimum amount of fruits and vegetables.
Education: A business puts up signs encouraging employees to walk more.	A business makes a policy that provides up to 2 hours of paid time per week for employees to exercise.
Education: A school includes information about the harms of smoking in its health class curriculum.	A school board adopts a policy requiring all schools to be tobacco free, both indoors and outdoors.
Practice: A church pastor promises the mayor that the church playground will be open to the community.	A church board adopts an open use policy that allows the public to use the church playground.

In these examples, policy has advantages over the non-policy strategies. The business policy providing paid time for exercise actually encourages employees to be active, whereas an informational poster only tells employees that walking is important. The church open use policy allows the church to establish a long-term commitment to sharing its facilities with the community. Without this official policy, a new pastor could stop letting the public use the playground, without accountability to the mayor or congregation.

In most of these examples, the non-policy strategies can support the policies. For instance, the incentive program for convenience stores can bolster the city council’s commitment to supporting stores that sell fruits and vegetables. The antismoking curriculum for students can help them understand why the tobacco-free campus policy is important and discourage them from smoking.

Why Policy?

Policy is a tool used to change physical environments, community norms, and the way organizations and systems operate. It has the potential to affect the decisions and behaviors of entire populations. Although policy is just one tool used to improve health outcomes, it often achieves significant results more efficiently, and at a lower cost, than other tools or interventions.

For example, public awareness campaigns have helped people better understand and recognize the importance of child safety seats. Correctly using child safety seats reduces a child's risk of being injured or killed in a car crash. Public education programs and safety seat distribution increase long-term child safety seat use by an average of 6%. However, laws that require children to be restrained in safety seats while riding in a car increase child safety seat use by an average of 13%.¹

Similarly, school programs that teach students about the harms of smoking don't significantly reduce smoking prevalence by themselves. But they may contribute to declines in smoking rates when combined with communitywide policies that make tobacco products more expensive or harder to find. By comparison, comprehensive smokefree indoor air laws may reduce smoking rates by 11%. And public education campaigns describing the dangers of smoking may enhance the impact of tobacco control policies.²

Policy in Action

SCHOOL: **School Wellness Policy**

Salida School District, Chaffee County, Colorado

In 2010, the Salida School District revised its wellness policy to improve school nutrition standards and support the use of locally produced fruits and vegetables, including produce from the school gardens, whenever possible. As a result of the policy and community engagement, the school garden initiative expanded into a 4-acre farm operated by a local nonprofit. An estimated 3,000 pounds of produce has made its way into school meals since the beginning of the initiative. The farm-to-school initiative and stronger nutrition policies have increased fruit and vegetable consumption among students by 12%.

BUSINESS: **Workplace Wellness Policy**

Jackson County Memorial Hospital (JCMH),
Altus, Oklahoma

JCMH adopted a formal wellness policy in 2014. The policy addresses nutrition, physical activity, and tobacco. It also includes provisions such as requiring healthy foods and beverages to be served at hospital-sponsored meetings and events, providing bike racks for employees, and prohibiting the use of tobacco products, including vapor products, on JCMH property.

GOVERNMENT: **Complete Streets Policy**

Town of Swanzey, New Hampshire

In 2015, the Town of Swanzey adopted a complete streets policy to ensure people who walk and bike are considered in transportation decisions. The policy directs the town to consider the needs of all people, regardless of age, ability, or mode of travel, when modifying or building roads. Swanzey also developed and adopted a set of planning and design guidelines to help town staff implement the policy. Since its adoption, the policy has led to several projects that have improved walking and bicycling conditions in key areas near schools and neighborhood centers.

COMMUNITY ORG: **Healthy Food Policy**

The Open Door, Eagan, Minnesota

The board of directors of the Open Door, a food pantry, adopted a healthy food policy in 2013. The policy commits the organization to offering more fresh, unprocessed foods to their clients and removing unhealthy products like sugary drinks. It also requires Open Door to provide healthy food choices at staff meetings and volunteer events. In 2014, the food pantry surveyed its clients and found that 86% were satisfied or very satisfied with the foods available and more than 75% supported the policy.

1. NHTSA. Seat Belt Use in 2010. Overall Results. *Traffic Saf Facts*. 2010;(September):4.

2. Levy DT, Chaloupka F, Gitchell J. The Effects of Tobacco Control Policies on Smoking Rates. *J Public Heal Manag Pract*. 2004;10(4):338-353. doi:10.1097/00124784-200407000-00011.