People-Powered Policymaking

Design | Pilot | Scale

About the Firsthand Framework for Policy Innovation

At the Possibility Lab, we believe that the people closest to social problems are also closest to their solutions, and that the policy process works best when policymakers, researchers, and those with lived experience work hand-in-hand.

Through our Firsthand Framework for Policy Innovation initiative, the Possibility Lab is working alongside a wide range of community organizations to integrate residents’ voices into policy design, implementation, and evaluation. The Firsthand Framework methodology provides a systematic way to understand and compile the rich and nuanced narratives that come from firsthand experiences, while also translating residents’ unique expertise into quantitative measures. These “firsthand indicators” can then be used to identify, pilot, and evaluate reforms, ensuring that outcomes authentically represent community perspectives and priorities.

Featured Project

Reimagining Public Safety in the City of Oakland

In the City of Oakland, the Possibility Lab team is working with our partners to produce and deploy community-sourced data for public safety reform. Together, we have collected over 500 “firsthand indicators” of community safety, drawn from 33 focus groups and community town halls across nine distinct communities. These discussions have brought together hundreds of residents representing many of the city’s diverse communities most directly affected by violence: Black, Latinx, and Asian-American, immigrant families and refugees, youth affected by crime and the criminal justice system, and more.

In addition to the traditional concerns of criminal justice policy like policing and violence, the firsthand indicators point to key themes that reflect a more holistic lens on public safety – addressing dimensions of social capital, health, the physical environment, and economic security. These are the parts of daily life that crime statistics can only measure indirectly, yet they are also what people look to in order to gauge safety in their everyday lives.
Evaluating New Approaches to Behavioral Health Crisis Response

Cities nationwide are embracing alternatives to traditional 911 systems and engaging specialized professionals like mental health specialists and social workers in response teams addressing behavioral health emergencies. However, current data collection falls short, focusing almost exclusively on hospital or jail admissions rather than the actual outcomes and experiences of those involved. These burgeoning alternative response teams require nuanced data and metrics to evaluate success and to drive training, procedural improvements, and performance enhancement. This year, Possibility Lab researchers partnered with Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute and UC Berkeley’s Risk Resilience Research Lab to understand the experiences of a range of stakeholders, in order to foster innovation in crisis response. By focusing on input from multi-disciplinary response team members (i.e., clinicians, medics, and law enforcement personnel), as well as individuals with behavioral health issues and their families, we aim to ensure that those who are most directly impacted by the current infrastructure play a central role in the design of response options, quality improvements, and evaluation of outcomes.

Understanding Conditions of Success in Permanent Supportive Housing

Research shows that Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) is one of the most promising strategies to address the needs of unhoused populations. However, funds for operating PSH properties over the long term – paying for everything from janitorial expenses and building maintenance, to resident services provided by social workers and mental health clinicians – are limited. Moreover, there is little understanding of which investments support the best outcomes. To explore this question, we partnered with UC Berkeley’s Terner Center and a coalition of Bay Area developers to better understand the experiences of residents living in PSH. Together, we held interviews and focus groups that brought together housing developers, staff, and residents at multiple Bay Area PSH properties to better understand the factors that lead to successful outcomes.
How the Firsthand Framework Can Be Used

Organizations
Organizations can use the indicators to better serve their communities. They serve as a needs assessment, can be leveraged for project planning, grant writing, and as an advocacy tool.

Academics
Academics can use the indicators to compare perceptions of community outcomes across communities and over time. The indicators themselves constitute a treasure trove of qualitative, descriptive data. In addition, they can inform the measurement of policy effects using a combination of observational data, survey data, and existing administrative data.

Policymakers
Policymakers can use the indicators to inform their measurement of community outcomes and to design and evaluate policy reforms.

About the Possibility Lab
The Possibility Lab at the University of California is a diverse team of policy researchers and practitioners who partner with government and community to design, pilot, and scale data-driven solutions for the public good. Through ongoing collaborations, the Lab is pioneering innovative ways to center community voices and perspectives in public policy, by working directly with diverse stakeholders to foster engagement, empowerment, and equity.

Learn more at PossibilityLab.berkeley.edu