From Evidence to Implementation: Closing the Gap Between Policy Research and Public Management

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Abstract

Evidence about what may work is indispensable to public policy, but evidence does not implement itself. Public programmes are translated into practice through organizations, budgets, administrative routines, intergovernmental relationships, frontline discretion, monitoring systems, and local interpretations of policy purpose. This editorial argues that the persistent gap between policy research and public management should be treated as an implementation problem rather than as a simple deficit of evidence. Implementation quality depends on both the credibility of the underlying evidence and the institutional capacity to interpret, resource, adapt, coordinate, and sustain action. The analysis connects policy-implementation research, street-level bureaucracy, evidence-informed policymaking, implementation science, organizational learning, and programme evaluation. Particular attention is given to fragmented responsibilities, resource constraints, implementation fidelity versus adaptation, frontline discretion, stakeholder resistance, and weak monitoring. Priorities include comparative implementation evaluation, administrative-data use, adaptive implementation, implementation-cost analysis, organizational learning, and systematic examination of why similar policies produce different outcomes across settings. Public-management scholarship should therefore evaluate policies as operating institutional systems, not merely as formally designed interventions.

Keywords: policy implementation; public management; evidence-informed policy; administrative capacity; street-level bureaucracy; implementation evaluation

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Context and Problem Framing

Public policy is often narrated as a sequence in which governments identify problems, select interventions, enact decisions, and then observe outcomes. Administrative reality is less orderly. The distinction between formulation and implementation matters because policies acquire operational meaning only when organizations assign responsibilities, release funds, interpret rules, coordinate actors, build information systems, and interact with citizens. The classic implementation literature demonstrated that formally authorized programmes can be transformed by long chains of decisions and interdependencies between central authorities and delivery organizations (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973; Elmore, 1979). Street-level work adds a further layer: frontline officials manage caseloads, conflicting goals, incomplete information, professional norms, and resource constraints, making discretion an unavoidable part of many public services (Lipsky, 1980). Implementation is therefore not the mechanical final stage of policy; it is a constitutive part of policy itself.

The contemporary emphasis on evidence-informed policymaking has strengthened the analytical foundations of policy design, but it can also encourage an overly linear assumption that stronger evidence should naturally produce stronger delivery. Research-use studies show that evidence enters policymaking through political, organizational, and interpretive processes rather than through a simple transmission mechanism (Oliver et al., 2014; Head, 2016; Parkhurst, 2017). Evidence may identify an effective intervention under specified conditions while saying comparatively little about whether implementing agencies possess the staffing, routines, authority, procurement capacity, data infrastructure, or leadership needed to reproduce those conditions. Cartwright and Hardie (2012) accordingly emphasize that evidence of causal effectiveness must be connected to the support factors required for an intervention to work in a new setting. The operational question is not only whether a policy has evidence behind it, but whether an administrative system can enact the mechanisms on which that evidence depends.

1.2 Why the Issue Matters

Implementation research has responded by moving beyond top-down compliance models toward frameworks that recognize ambiguity, conflict, learning, context, and adaptation. Matland's (1995) ambiguity-conflict model showed why implementation processes differ according to the clarity of goals and the distribution of contestation. O'Toole (2000) emphasized the continuing importance of multi-actor relations, while Hill (2003) demonstrated that implementers need interpretive resources as well as formal instructions. More recent implementation-science frameworks make context, implementation strategies, and iterative learning explicit objects of analysis (Nilsen, 2015; Damschroder et al., 2022). The central proposition of this editorial is that implementation performance is generated jointly by evidence quality and administrative capability. Closing the research-to-management gap requires studying the institutions that convert knowledge into routines, services, enforcement, and citizen-facing practice.

2.0 Current Landscape

2.1 Evidence Systems

The current landscape combines several traditions that historically developed in parallel. Public-administration research focuses on the structures, discretion, incentives, and interorganizational relationships through which policy is delivered. Implementation science, initially concentrated in health and human services, has developed explicit theories and frameworks for understanding how interventions are adopted, adapted, and sustained. Bullock et al. (2021) show that integrating policy implementation, knowledge translation, and implementation science produces a richer systems-level account of implementation than any one tradition alone. Nilsen and Bernhardsson (2019) similarly demonstrate that external context - including policy, financing, professional networks, and institutional environments - is central to implementation outcomes rather than a background variable.

2.2 Implementation Capacity

Administrative capacity has become a particularly useful bridge between evidence and delivery. Peters (2015) and Wu et al. (2015) distinguish analytical, operational, and political capacities that allow governments to diagnose problems, mobilize resources, coordinate action, and maintain support. These capacities are distributed across levels of government and organizations rather than residing exclusively in central policy units. May and Winter (2009), for example, show that frontline implementation is shaped by the interaction of political direction, managerial influence, professional knowledge, and implementer understandings. Sager (2024) extends this concern comparatively by examining how street-level managers respond to policy requirements across different institutional settings. Implementation performance is consequently an organizational and institutional outcome, not an attribute of policy text.

2.3 Frontline Management

The field has also developed more precise ways of examining implementation quality. Fidelity frameworks ask whether core intervention components are delivered as intended, while adaptation research recognizes that rigid replication can be inappropriate when settings differ. Carroll et al. (2007) provide a conceptual framework for implementation fidelity, whereas Chambers and Norton (2016) argue for approaches that treat adaptation and sustainability as dynamic rather than exceptional. Durlak and DuPre (2008) show across prevention and health-promotion programmes that implementation quality materially influences outcomes. Aarons et al. (2011) similarly place implementation within phases of exploration, preparation, implementation, and sustainment. The central methodological challenge is thus to identify which elements require fidelity, which can be adapted, and how adaptations change mechanisms, costs, equity, and outcomes.

2.4 Monitoring and Learning

Evidence-use institutions are evolving in parallel. Governments have invested in evidence units, evaluation functions, administrative-data systems, and evidence-informed policy capacities, but institutionalization remains uneven (OECD, 2020). Research-use scholarship emphasizes that organizational routines and relationships matter as much as the existence of studies: evidence becomes actionable when agencies can locate it, interpret it, integrate it with local knowledge, and revise practice in response to feedback (Nutley et al., 2007). Implementation should therefore be understood as an ongoing process of evidence interpretation and organizational learning rather than a one-off act of policy compliance.

3.0 Critical Challenges

3.1 Transferability

A first challenge is fragmented responsibility. Public programmes commonly cross ministries, agencies, levels of government, contractors, and nonprofit providers. Each actor may control only part of the implementation chain, making coordination failures difficult to diagnose and accountability easy to diffuse. Pressman and Wildavsky's (1973) insight that additional decision points multiply opportunities for delay remains relevant to contemporary networked governance. Sandfort and Moulton (2015) similarly emphasize that effective implementation requires alignment across policy fields, organizations, and service-delivery systems rather than isolated project management.

A second challenge concerns resources and incentives. Policies may be authorized without adequate staffing, training, information systems, or recurring budgets. Formal mandates can therefore coexist with implementation environments that reward competing activities. Frontline officials then cope through prioritization, routinization, rationing, or informal adaptation. Tummers et al. (2015) show that such coping mechanisms are systematic responses to demanding service environments, not simply individual failures. Evans (2020) further cautions against treating discretion as synonymous with noncompliance: the meaning and consequences of frontline judgment differ across professional and regulatory settings. Implementation evaluation must therefore examine workload, authority, incentives, and professional norms rather than attributing outcomes only to policy design.

3.2 Administrative Constraints

A third challenge is the tension between fidelity and adaptation. Standardization may protect causal mechanisms and equity, yet local adaptation may be necessary because organizations differ in workforce, population, infrastructure, law, and resource conditions. Implementation strategies therefore require explicit theories of what must remain invariant and what can change. Moullin et al. (2020) recommend deliberate use of implementation frameworks to make determinants and strategies visible, while Damschroder et al. (2022) update the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research to reflect the complexity of contextual determinants. Without such specification, evaluators may misclassify necessary adaptation as failure or, conversely, accept modifications that remove the intervention's active mechanism.

3.3 Incentives

Monitoring is a fourth challenge. Administrative systems frequently measure expenditure, activities, and compliance more readily than implementation mechanisms or citizen outcomes. Weak data systems make it difficult to distinguish a flawed policy theory from a weak implementation process. Peters et al. (2013) argue that implementation research should identify bottlenecks and explain how strategies work in context. Yet monitoring itself can distort delivery when indicators become targets or when frontline staff devote scarce capacity to reporting rather than service. Implementation metrics therefore need to be parsimonious, decision-relevant, and linked to causal and organizational theories.

3.4 Evidence-Use Failures

Finally, political and stakeholder conditions shape implementation even after formal adoption. Cairney (2016) demonstrates that evidence competes with values, institutions, networks, and political attention rather than entering implementation as a purely technical input. Implementation resistance may reflect distributional conflict, professional disagreement, legal uncertainty, or mistrust rather than simple ignorance of evidence. The unresolved task is to explain how evidence is negotiated within administrative systems without reducing implementation either to technocratic compliance or to unconstrained political bargaining.

4.0 Discussion and Priorities

4.1 Integrative Discussion

The combined literature indicates that evidence quality and implementation capacity are mutually dependent. Strong causal evidence cannot compensate for institutions that cannot procure inputs, coordinate actors, maintain staff, or monitor delivery. Conversely, administratively capable organizations can efficiently implement policies whose underlying theory is weak. The policy challenge is therefore to align evidentiary confidence with institutional readiness. Implementation planning should identify not only expected outcomes but also the actors, capabilities, resources, routines, data, and incentives required to generate them.

This perspective changes how implementation failure should be interpreted. Deviation from policy design may indicate weak control, but it may also reveal that formal rules were underspecified or mismatched to local conditions. Matland (1995) and Lipsky (1980) both imply that discretion becomes especially important where goals are ambiguous or operating conditions are complex. The appropriate response is not necessarily tighter central control. It may instead require clearer priorities, better information, professional learning, revised funding, or negotiated adaptation. Administrative evaluation should consequently examine the reasons for variation before classifying variation as noncompliance.

Organizational learning is the mechanism that can connect evidence, implementation, and adaptation over time. Evidence-informed systems need feedback loops through which monitoring data, frontline knowledge, evaluation results, and citizen experience can alter implementation strategies. Head (2016) argues for evidence-informed rather than narrowly evidence-based policy precisely because public decisions must integrate multiple knowledge sources. When implementation is treated as a learning process, policy design becomes revisable, frontline experience becomes analytically valuable, and evaluation shifts from retrospective judgment toward continuous institutional improvement.

Complementary scholarship informing this synthesis includes O'Toole (2000); and OECD. (2020). These works broaden the evidentiary base considered across the field.

4.2 Research and Practice Priorities

First, implementation evaluation should become a routine complement to outcome evaluation. Studies should measure whether intended components were delivered, how organizations interpreted policy, where bottlenecks occurred, and which adaptations were made. This requires combining programme indicators with organizational, qualitative, and administrative evidence rather than inferring implementation from final outcomes alone.

Second, comparative institutional analysis should investigate why similar policies produce different results across jurisdictions and organizations. Theoretical frameworks should specify relevant differences in capacity, governance, financing, professional structures, and political support. Cross-setting comparisons can identify which implementation conditions are transferable and which are context specific, addressing a limitation repeatedly identified in implementation scholarship (Bullock et al., 2021; Sager, 2024).

Third, governments and researchers should make greater use of administrative data while recognizing their limitations. Linked operational data can reveal delays, caseloads, geographic variation, service trajectories, and implementation costs, but these data were usually created for administration rather than research. Data-quality assessment, metadata, lawful linkage, and transparent missingness analysis are therefore necessary parts of implementation evaluation.

Fourth, adaptive implementation should be studied prospectively. Researchers should document planned and emergent adaptations, identify which mechanism they are intended to preserve, and test whether they improve feasibility without undermining effectiveness or equity. The distinction between core function and adaptable form should be explicit, building on fidelity and sustainability research (Carroll et al., 2007; Chambers & Norton, 2016).

Fifth, frontline perspectives and organizational learning should be integrated into evidence systems. Implementers often identify constraints before they appear in high-level metrics. Structured feedback, after-action review, learning collaboratives, and implementation coaching can convert this information into system improvement. Aarons et al. (2011) and Moullin et al. (2020) provide useful frameworks for treating implementation support as a deliberate activity rather than an informal expectation.

Finally, implementation-cost analysis should accompany claims of scalability. A policy that is effective in a well-resourced pilot may be administratively infeasible when extended across a national system. Costing should include training, supervision, information systems, coordination, compliance, adaptation, and monitoring, not merely programme inputs. Evidence of implementation readiness should therefore describe both the intervention and the administrative system required to sustain it.

4.3 Implications for the Journal's Scope

Research on public policy and public management is strongest when it connects policy design to the institutions that actually deliver public action. Scholarship should therefore welcome rigorous studies of implementation processes, administrative capacity, street-level behaviour, organizational learning, intergovernmental coordination, programme management, evidence use, and implementation evaluation. Contributions are especially valuable when they explain variation rather than merely documenting that implementation differed from plan.

Methodological pluralism is necessary. Quantitative administrative-data studies can identify patterns of delivery and performance; qualitative research can reveal how rules are interpreted; comparative case studies can identify institutional configurations; and mixed-method evaluations can connect implementation mechanisms with outcomes. The field should also value well-designed studies of implementation failure, adaptation, and null effects because these findings clarify the conditions under which policies can or cannot travel. The objective is cumulative knowledge about how public institutions translate policy intentions into reliable, equitable, and sustainable practice.

4.4 Conclusion

The gap between policy research and public management is not solved by producing stronger evidence alone. Public interventions operate through institutions whose structures, resources, routines, professional judgments, incentives, and relationships shape what policies become in practice. Implementation is therefore part of the causal architecture of policy, not an administrative afterthought.

A mature evidence-informed system must ask two questions simultaneously: whether an intervention is supported by credible evidence and whether the responsible institutions can implement its mechanisms under real operating conditions. Answering the second question requires implementation evaluation, comparative institutional research, frontline analysis, adaptive learning, and realistic assessment of administrative costs. The next stage of implementation scholarship should consequently be judged by its ability to explain not only what may work, but how evidence becomes organized public action, why that process varies across settings, and how institutions can learn to deliver more reliably over time.

5.0 Declarations

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5.2 Funding

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5.3 Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest or competing interests relevant to this editorial.

5.4 Data Availability

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5.5 AI Use Disclosure

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