



Lessons from Abroad for an Inclusive Recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Methodological Note

Matthew Eldridge, Justin Milner, and Isabella Remor

October 2021

With support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Urban Institute set out to study how innovative policies and programs from abroad could inform state and local efforts in the United States to build an inclusive recovery from COVID-19. This work began with two analyses: a demand analysis to identify the priorities of top state and local policymakers for an inclusive recovery and a comparative analysis to identify countries that could provide the best opportunities to find relevant examples. This methodological note describes the project’s underlying rationale and the project’s approach and methodology for the demand analysis, the comparative analysis, and the five policy research briefs.

On the basis of findings from these analyses, the Urban research team identified five topical areas that would be the focus of policy briefs, surfacing policy insights from other countries.¹ The five policy domains are child care, broadband access, local economic development, parks and public space, and housing stability and affordability. By sharing this note, we aim to clarify the methods we used and offer a replicable model for future comparative international policy analysis.

Rationale for the Project

The social and economic impacts of COVID-19 have been widespread and profound. The pandemic has exacerbated existing systemic inequities, with Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and low-income communities being hit hardest. The fragility of our social safety net and the inequities of our economic framework—from health care delivery to access to technology to supports for unemployment, housing, and more—

have been clearly exposed. Nonetheless, the postpandemic recovery does not have to follow the same harmful path.

Policymakers and community leaders across the country are working to build a recovery that is inclusive and sustainable. To do so, they will need to identify, adapt, and implement policies that address systemic inequities and expand access to opportunity.

This project's goal is to support these efforts and best position the United States for an inclusive recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic by lifting up innovative policy ideas that address real challenges and priorities. Although many of the policy solutions will be homegrown, evidence and inspiration can and should be taken from other countries. This project is premised on the belief that good ideas have no borders and that promising innovations from across the globe can inform and be adapted to support efforts here in the United States.

The project recognizes that solutions cannot simply be uprooted from one country and deposited in another. Effective adaptation—of a policy or a program in whole or in components—requires careful analysis and understanding of the source policy, including its key elements, motivations, operational structure, and impacts, as well as a clear understanding of the US policy landscape, including the current and historical context, existing and emerging funding streams, and policy levers and actors. As such, this project focuses on a thorough understanding of both the US policy landscape and the design and implementation track record of each innovative policy, to extract relevant takeaways and considerations for US policymakers.

Demand Analysis

The first stage of the project was selecting challenges that state and local policymakers in the United States identified as top priorities for an inclusive recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite stakeholders having significant demands on their time during this period, we were able to gain feedback from a wide range of experts. To determine priorities, the project team launched a demand analysis first by reviewing available literature on needs and priorities for recovery from the pandemic. The team then identified individuals and organizations well positioned to provide insights on state and local policy priorities. Focus group-style discussions were conducted in January and February 2021, with 16 experts from eight national organizations that represent and advocate on behalf of state and local government officials (a response rate of 84 percent). We spoke with representatives from organizations such as the National League of Cities, the National Association of Counties, the National Black Caucus of State Legislators, and the National Recreation and Park Association. Discussions covered various topics, including the pandemic's immediate impacts on communities and state and local governments, emerging policy and program responses, and reflections on what communities need to recover from the pandemic and its impacts.

To supplement these discussions, our team tracked emerging policy approaches and strategies from across the United States and followed new releases of blogs, policy and practitioner reports, and academic articles pertaining to the impact of, response to, or recovery from the pandemic. Our team

curated this information into worksheets for each policy domain to highlight the range of policy issues emerging as communities respond to the pandemic.

On the basis of these efforts, our team identified 10 broad policy domains for further exploration:

1. Housing stability
2. Local economic development
3. Broadband infrastructure and access
4. Parks, open space, and recreation
5. Unemployment, or the future of work
6. Education and youth
7. Public health infrastructure
8. City operations and governance
9. Sustainability, climate, and energy
10. Food systems and security

To help prioritize among these policy domains, we developed a matrix that included key variables: input from local experts through interviews, links from each domain to broader inclusion and resilience, a subjective measure of each area's ability to integrate innovations from abroad into the US policy landscape, and the expertise and capacity of subject matter experts at the Urban Institute. On the basis of this matrix, we identified five domains and topics for closer analysis:

1. Child care
2. Broadband access
3. Local economic development
4. Parks and public space
5. Housing stability and affordability

Comparative Analysis

Complementary to the demand analysis, we engaged in an effort to identify countries with contexts and structures most similar to the United States. Our motivation was to identify places with the greatest likelihood of providing adaptable policy lessons for the United States. While researchers were encouraged to identify and explore promising policy solutions from any country, this effort was meant to guide them to where the most adaptable solutions might exist.

The team understood two key limitations of the analysis:

1. The analysis would be a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. The analysis used metrics that allowed for easy comparison and were based on decisions the team made. Different metrics or weighting could lead to different results. As such, the list is not presented as authoritative and was used as guiderails for researchers rather than as prescriptions.
2. The dynamics of inequity and structural racism in the United States manifest in unique and fundamental ways. As such, we believed that it was not appropriate to use inequality or inclusiveness metrics to assess comparability. Instead, we encouraged research teams to carefully examine inequalities in their chosen country and consider the equity implications of their chosen policy domain.

The Metrics

Our analysis included three comparative metrics: political structure, economic structure, and government structure:

1. To assess alignment of *political structure*, our research team employed the Democracy Index, which measures the institutionalized political structure of countries, capturing five dimensions: the electoral process and pluralism, the functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties (Economist Intelligence Unit 2020).²
2. To assess alignment of *economic structure*, our team used the Index of Economic Freedom, which compares countries on the basis of their economic systems. This index focuses on economic openness, which has multiple implications for economic efficiency and social vulnerability. The Index of Economic Freedom focuses on 12 factors across four areas: rule of law, government size, regulatory efficiency, and market openness (Heritage Foundation 2020).³
3. To assess alignment of *government structure*, we used data from a 2019 report from the World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment to determine whether countries had unitary or federal structures and to capture fiscal decentralization, which is measured by subnational revenue as a percentage of total revenue in a country.⁴

The Methods

Building on the metrics above, our research team created a consolidated “score” to assess countries’ relative comparability to the United States. Because each index was on a different numerical scale, our team normalized all data points to make the range of difference the same. In this case, we scaled the values from 0 to 1 so that each was given equal weight. Because the goal was to determine how different a given country is from the United States, the United States value was always set to 0. Then, the research team found the absolute value of difference between each country’s data point compared with the same data point from the United States. Researchers then determined the Euclidian (planal) distance between each data point for each country in relation to each data point from the United States.

This was crucial in ensuring that each index remained independent from the others within the consolidated score. To find this distance, the team used the Pythagorean theorem to assess all three indexes independently in relation to the individual data points from the United States.

The comparative analysis ranked all countries with available data (101) and identified the top 40 countries sufficiently similar to the United States to offer reasonably adaptable policies. Ultimately, the briefs identified solutions from Australia (#1 most similar), Germany (#2), Spain (#4), Sweden (#5), Canada (#6), the United Kingdom (#16), and France (#30) (one brief identified policies from more than one country) (table 1).

TABLE 1
Countries with Policy Contexts Most Similar to the United States

Country	Euclidean distance from US	Country	Euclidean distance from US
1. Australia	0.11	21. Mexico	0.40
2. Germany	0.12	22. Italy	0.40
3. Switzerland	0.14	23. Estonia	0.41
4. Spain	0.19	24. India	0.41
5. Sweden	0.21	25. Indonesia	0.41
6. Canada	0.24	26. Latvia	0.42
7. Austria	0.24	27. Peru	0.42
8. Finland	0.24	28. Colombia	0.42
9. Belgium	0.24	29. Lithuania	0.43
10. Denmark	0.25	30. France	0.43
11. Japan	0.30	31. Poland	0.44
12. Korea, Dem. Rep.	0.30	32. Chile	0.45
13. Norway	0.30	33. Luxembourg	0.47
14. Netherlands	0.31	34. Slovenia	0.47
15. South Africa	0.33	35. Romania	0.47
16. United Kingdom	0.37	36. New Zealand	0.47
17. Iceland	0.37	37. Israel	0.48
18. Argentina	0.39	38. Mongolia	0.48
19. Brazil	0.39	39. Malaysia	0.48
20. Czech Republic	0.39	40. Portugal	0.48

Source: Urban Institute comparative analysis of political structure as measured by the Democracy Index [Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2019: A Year of Democratic Setbacks and Popular Protest* (London: Economist Group, 2020)]; economic structure as measured by the Index of Economic Freedom [Heritage Foundation, *2020 Index of Economic Freedom* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 2020)]; and government structure as measured by the World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment [2019 Report: *World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment—Finance and Investment, Country Profiles*. (Barcelona and Paris: World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment, 2019)].

Note: Countries are numbered from most comparable with the United States to least comparable.

Policy Research Briefs

With the priority policy domains identified and a list of countries that would offer the best likelihood of providing adaptable policy lessons, the project assembled five research teams with technical expertise in their specific policy area and strong policy analysis skills. While each brief varied its approach based on the policy chosen and the expertise of the team, all followed a broadly similar approach:

1. Identify specific challenges within each domain that state and local policymakers might address in the context of inclusive recovery.
2. Conduct a literature review, interviews with experts, or both to identify promising policies from abroad that could offer useful lessons for US policymakers for the identified policy challenge.
3. Explore a subset of policies from abroad to better understand their efficacy, the availability of evidence, and potential adaptation to the United States.
4. Select a policy or program from abroad to focus on, clearly specifying the rationale.
5. Review available literature and interview (through a process approved by the Urban Institute Institutional Review Board) US and source-country policy experts to better understand the policy, its context, and its implementation successes and challenges. Work to understand which elements or lessons of the innovation are most relevant and useful for US policymakers wrestling with this issue.
6. Share a draft brief with policy and communication experts to review and revise the briefs in order to improve quality and clarity.

The briefs follow a similar structure that includes the following elements: overview of the policy challenge, discussion of the policy innovation from abroad, lessons for US policymakers, and a discussion of how to translate the policy to the US. All briefs were designed with the primary audience in mind: state and local policymakers in the United States interested in designing innovative policies and programs that address a particular priority for an inclusive recovery.

Notes

- ¹ The briefs are available at <https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/research-action-lab/projects/lessons-abroad-inclusive-recovery-covid-19-pandemic>.
- ² More information on the Democracy Index is available at <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/>.
- ³ More information on the Index of Economic Freedom is available at <https://www.heritage.org/index/>.
- ⁴ More information on the World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment is available at <https://www.sng-wofi.org/>.

References

- Economist Intelligence Unit. 2020. *Democracy Index 2019: A Year of Democratic Setbacks and Popular Protest*. London: Economist Group.
- Heritage Foundation. 2020. *2020 Index of Economic Freedom*. Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation.
- World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment. 2019. *2019 Report: World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment—Finance and Investment, Country Profiles*. Barcelona and Paris: World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment.

About the Authors

Matthew Eldridge is a policy program manager in the Urban Institute's Research to Action Lab. His research and technical assistance work focuses primarily on government innovation, results-based financing, impact investing, and international development.

Justin Milner is acting vice president of the Research to Action Lab and is the host of Urban's Critical Value podcast. His work centers on the intersection of research, policy, and practice; supporting efforts to engage effectively with policymakers and practitioners in applying research findings; and developing new evidence.

Isabella Remor is a policy assistant in the Research to Action Lab, where she works on various projects in the fields of inclusive growth, housing, and upward mobility. She works with philanthropic organizations, local government agencies, and nonprofit agencies to provide technical assistance and translate research into practical insights for policymakers.

Acknowledgments

This brief was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples.



500 L'Enfant Plaza SW
Washington, DC 20024

www.urban.org

ABOUT THE URBAN INSTITUTE

The nonprofit Urban Institute is a leading research organization dedicated to developing evidence-based insights that improve people's lives and strengthen communities. For 50 years, Urban has been the trusted source for rigorous analysis of complex social and economic issues; strategic advice to policymakers, philanthropists, and practitioners; and new, promising ideas that expand opportunities for all. Our work inspires effective decisions that advance fairness and enhance the well-being of people and places.

Copyright © October 2021. Urban Institute. Permission is granted for reproduction of this file, with attribution to the Urban Institute.