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Finding and Evaluating Data to Inform the Policy-Making Process

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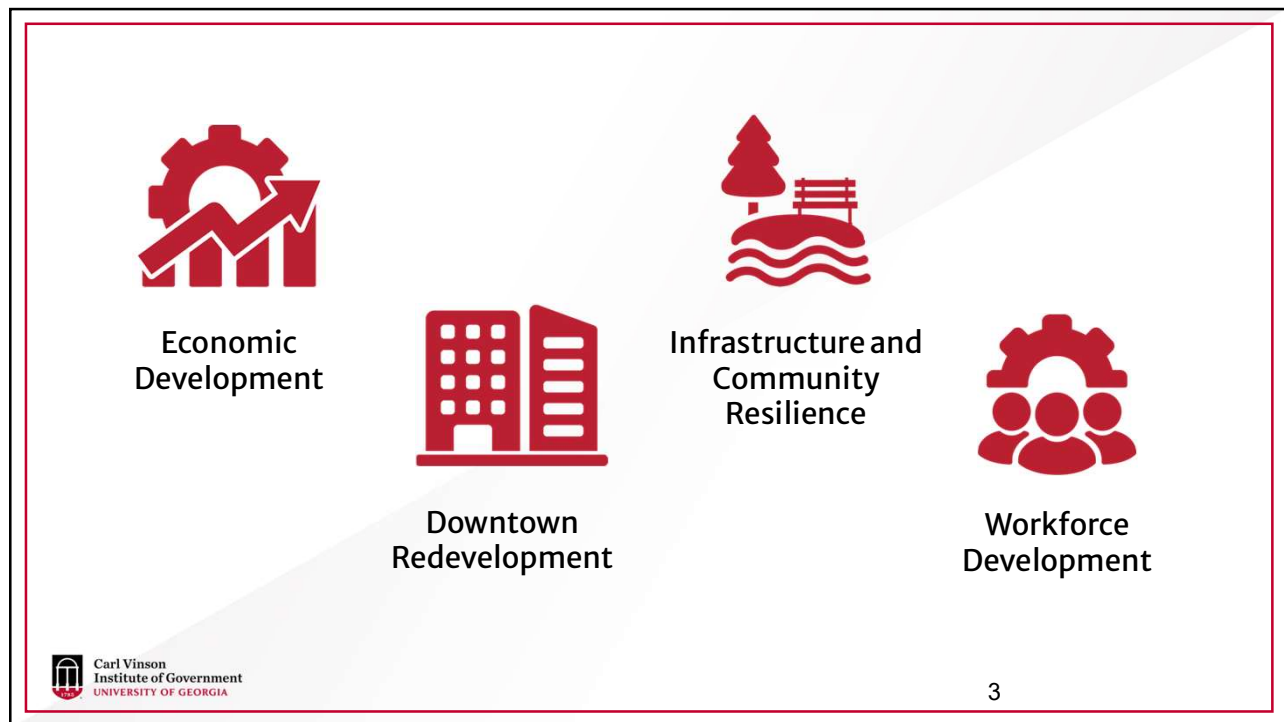
We **inform**, **innovate**, and **inspire** so that governments, large and small, can be more efficient and responsive, address current and emerging challenges, and serve the public with excellence.



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Roadmap for Today

By the end of today we will practice how to:

- 1) Turn a broad policy question into answerable questions for analysis.
- 2) Identify measures and data sources that fit the question.
- 3) Recognize common data limitations and tradeoffs.
- 4) Communicate what the data can and cannot support.

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We have more data than ever, why does it sometimes make our work harder?



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Think of a time when someone asked you for data and the answer was more complicated than simply finding a number.

What made it complicated?

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Refine the Policy Question to Drive Analysis

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How bad is the affordable housing challenge in Alabama?



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A Framework for Turning Policy Questions into Action

Initial Policy
Question

Refine into
Question/s for
Analysis

Identify
Measure/Data
Source

Interpret the
Data

Share and
Communicate



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Refining the Question Starts with Drawing People Out

Before selecting data, clarify what the person really needs to know.

To do this:

1. Paraphrase the speaker's statement
2. Ask non-directive, open-ended questions:
 - Can you say more about ...
 - What do you mean by...
 - Tell me more
 - What matters to you about that
 - How so?



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Adapted from *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making* 3rd Edition

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Housing Example

Initial Policy
Question

Refine into
Question/s for
Analysis

Identify
Measure/Data
Source

Interpret the
Data

Share and
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How bad is the affordable
housing challenge in Alabama?

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Housing Example cont.

Initial Policy
Question

Refine into
Question/s for
Analysis

Identify
Measure/Data
Source

Interpret the
Data

Share and
Communicate

Are more renter households
cost-burdened?

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Housing Example cont.

Initial Policy
Question

Refine into
Question/s for
Analysis

Identify
Measure/Data
Source

Interpret the
Data

Share and
Communicate

Share of renters spending more
than 30% of their income on
housing. ACS 5-Year Estimates

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Housing Example cont.

Initial Policy
Question

Refine into
Question/s for
Analysis

Identify
Measure/Data
Source

Interpret the
Data

Share and
Communicate

Explore factors like age, sub-
state geography, income groups,
and change over time

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Housing Example cont.

Initial Policy
Question

Refine into
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Identify
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Interpret the
Data

Share and
Communicate

Explain ACS sample, margin of error, and limitations.
Communicate through charts, maps, and takeaways

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Exercise #1: Refine the Policy Question

You will receive a broad policy question.

Your task is to identify:

1. What decision/s might this question inform?
2. What specific questions for analysis might fall under the initial policy question?
3. What measures and data might help to answer the specific questions for analysis?
4. What might the data not tell us?

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Exercise #1: Report-Out

Be ready to share:

- One refined question for analysis.
- One possible data source.
- One limitation or caveat.

Assessing and Understanding the Data Sources



How will the “demographic cliff” impact our state’s education budget?

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No Dataset is Perfect. Does it Fit the Question?

As you consider a data source, you need to assess if it is:

- Credible
- Relevant
- Timely
- Precise
- Comparable
- Explainable

Evaluate the data source in context of the question being considered

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Data Checklist for Evaluating Sources

Question	Why Consider This?
Who produced it?	Credibility and motivation
What does it measure?	Definition and relevance
How was it collected?	Methods and reliability
What/who is missing?	Coverage and bias
When was it produced?	Timeliness
At what geography is it available?	Ability to answer detailed geographic questions
Can we compare it?	Comparison over time
Could it be misinterpreted?	Communication clarity

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Common Data Tradeoffs

Tradeoff	Example
Timeliness vs. accuracy	Preliminary labor or education data may be revised during future reporting cycles
Granularity vs. reliability	Small-area survey estimates may have large margins of error
Simple vs. complex	A statewide number for families in poverty may mask large regional or local differences
Precision vs. explainability	A complex model may yield new or expanded insights but could be difficult to quickly explain
Availability vs. completeness	Readily available data may be incomplete; a more complete dataset could take weeks or months to assemble.

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The *Best* Data Depends on the Policy Use

Policy Question: Is child care affordability affecting workforce participation?

Quick Briefing for Policy
Maker

Study Committee Report

Fiscal Note

Public Presentation

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Application Activity 2

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Let's put it all together

You are a legislative staff team preparing a quick response to a member's policy question. Your job is not to find the perfect dataset. Your job is to make a defensible recommendation about what the available data can support.

Your goal is not consensus on the *right* answer. Instead, make your reasoning defensible and logical.

Your Assignment

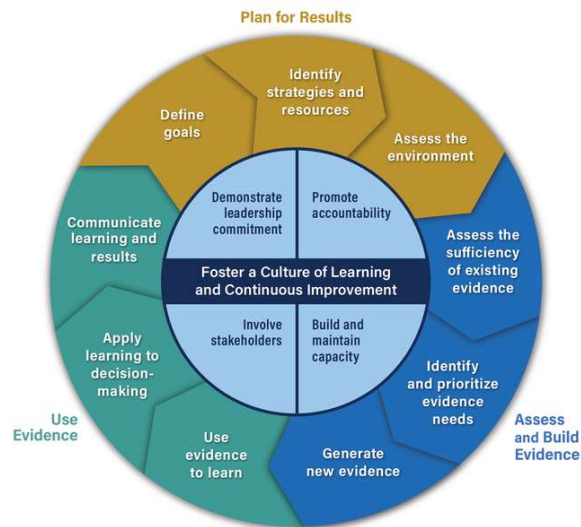
As a group, review the scenario and possible data sources.

Then prepare a brief staff response that answers five questions:

- What is the more precise analytical question you would answer?
- Which data source or sources would you use first?
- What tradeoffs or limitations would you flag?
- What claim would you be comfortable making?
- What claim would you avoid making?

Be prepared to share a 60-second briefing with the full group.

How do we build a culture of evidence in our practices?



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THANK YOU!

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