

Communicating Demographic Results to Policy-Makers

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Communicating with policy-makers, like doing research, requires ...

- **Being a credible expert**
 - Know your area inside out, & provide relevant, detailed, objective, and persuasive information
- **Building and maintaining contacts**
 - Work hard to establish contacts, or work with others who have them
- **Flexibility**
 - Be open to opportunities and willing to accommodate them



I. Being a credible expert

- Policy-makers want to know who they are talking to.
 - Always have ready an up-to-date CV and a short bio (1-2 paragraphs) listing your current position, where you got your Ph.D., where you have published, honors or notable activities (NAS committees, awards, etc.).
 - If you have published a book or key article on the topic, mention that.
 - If you have relevant professional or practice experience, mention that too.



I. Being a credible expert: Providing relevant, detailed, objective, and persuasive information

- Policy-makers do not want to hear one of your papers:
 - You need to understand what questions they are asking and locate the relevant information.
- Policy-makers are uncomfortable with generalities:
 - They want details and documentation (even if provided separately).
- Policy-makers need to know you are objective:
 - Cite scientific studies (your own and others).
- Policy-makers may get overwhelmed by too much information:
 - Use graphs to tell your story.
 - And keep the punchline simple – pick 3 messages and stick to them!



II. Building and maintaining contacts

- If you are organizing an academic event, you contact people you know.
- Policy-makers are no different – they go back to the same people over and over again.
- So, if you are going to communicate effectively with policy-makers, you either have to work hard to cultivate and maintain those relationships, or you have to be connected to others who do so (knowledge brokers).



II. Building and maintaining contacts: The role of knowledge brokers

- Knowledge brokers straddle both worlds:
 - People from your discipline who are working in government (ASPE, Council of Economic Advisors, Congressional staff).
 - Researchers at Washington think-tanks/advocacy organizations (Urban, Brookings, Heritage, PRB, CLASP, CBPP).
 - Policy staff at professional organizations (PAA).
- These knowledge brokers can get you invited to talk with policy-makers, and they can help you prepare an effective talk.



III. Flexibility

- Academics are notorious for having busy schedules, set months in advance, but policy-makers operate on a different cycle.
 - Issues come up, and events get scheduled on short notice.
 - If we are going to engage with policy-makers, we have to be flexible and willing to accommodate that short notice.
- Our training encourages us to develop areas of expertise and stick with them, but policy-makers may ask about other areas.
 - A good question to ask yourself is not “do I know as much about this as I do about my main area of expertise?”, but “do I know enough to make a useful contribution?”.
 - Also ask “is this an opportunity that I shouldn’t pass up?”



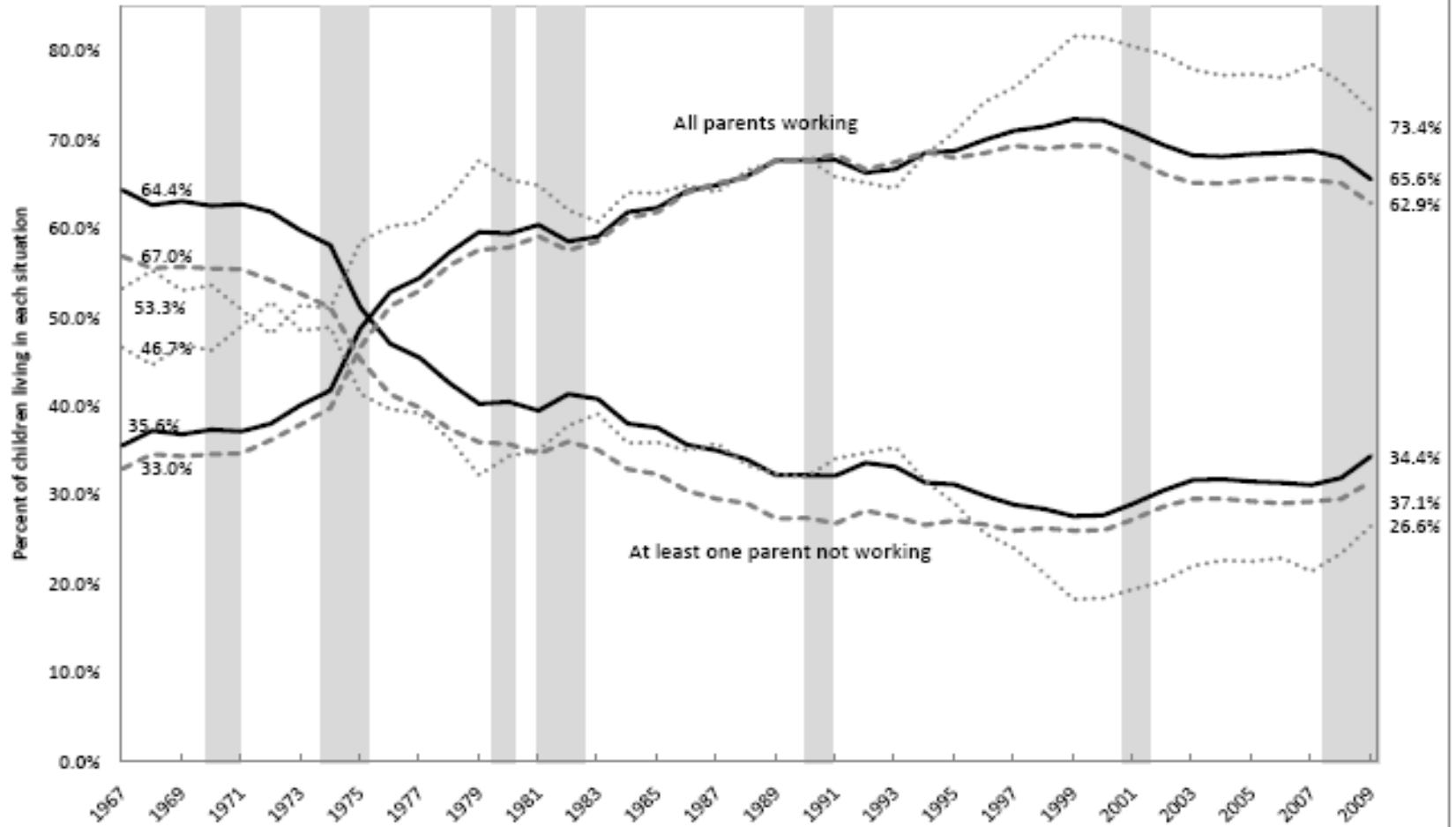
An example: Work-family policies

- A lot of the work I do relates to work-family policies: parental leave, other leave, flexible work arrangements, and child care.
- A typical presentation to policy-makers would have the following 3 messages:
 1. American families are changing, fewer children have stay-at-home parents (see graph) (Council of Economic Advisors, 2010; Fox et al., 2011).
 2. Our work-family policies need to change too, to help meet the needs of children when parents work, particularly in low-income families (Bernstein & Kornbluh, 2005; Bianchi, in press; Heymann, 2000; Shieler, 2003; Waldfogel, 2007, 2009, in press).
 3. Research provides guidance about current policies and what policy reforms would be most beneficial (Smolensky & Gootman, 2003; Waldfogel, 2006).



Figure 1: Trends in Work Patterns

Solid lines: All families, Dotted lines: Single parent families, Dashed line: Two parent families



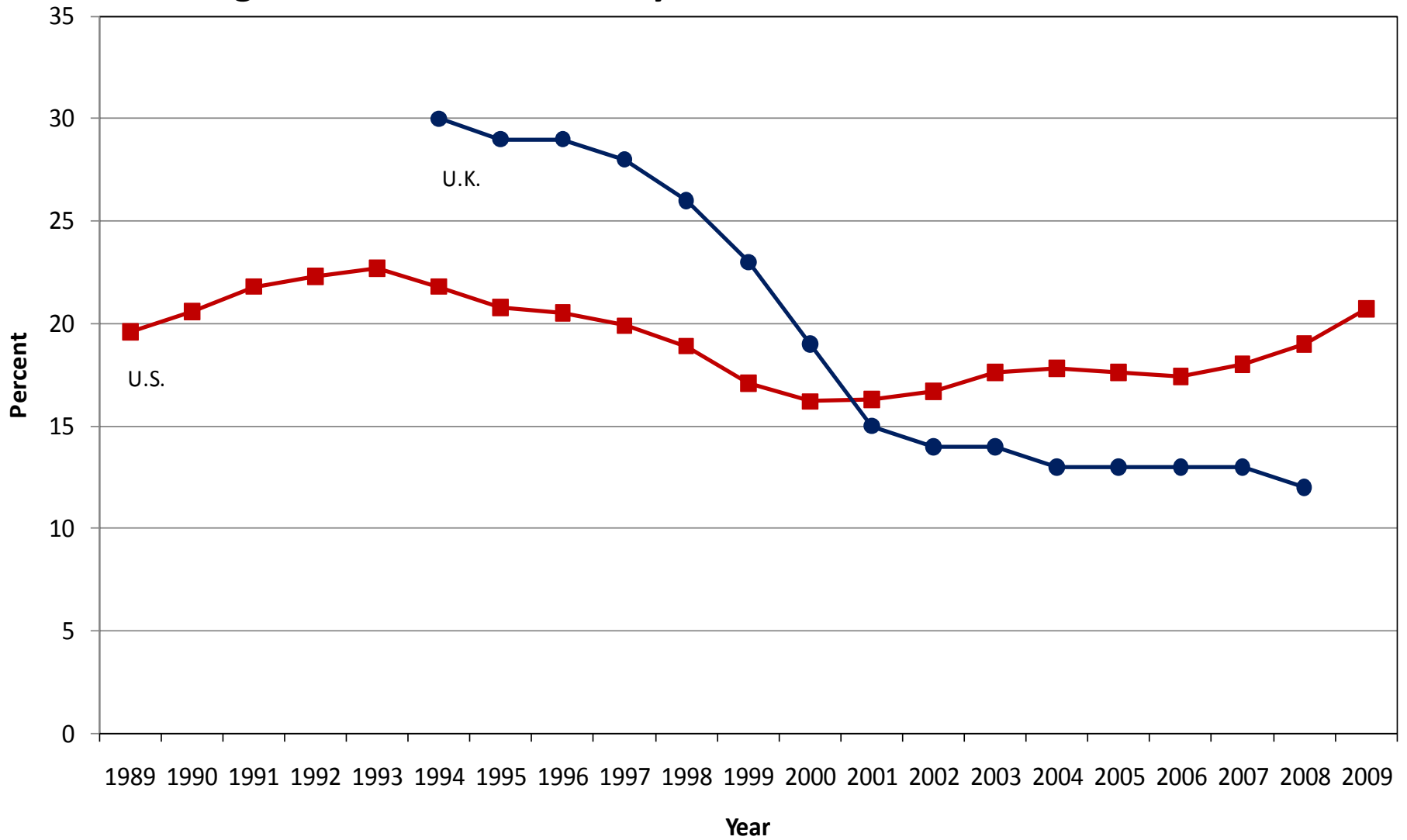
Note: Shaded bars are recessions as defined by NBER.
 Source: Authors' analysis of March CPS data, 1967-2009

Another example: Britain's war on poverty

- I've spent quite a bit of time studying the anti-poverty efforts of the Blair/Brown government (in office from 1997-2010) (Waldfogel, 2010a, b).
- When I talk with U.S. policy-makers:
 - I describe the three legs of the reforms – promoting work/making work pay, raising incomes, and investing in children -- emphasizing that many of the policies were based on US evidence (message 1).
 - I also show them that the reforms were successful in reducing child poverty (message 2) (see graph).
 - The bottom line (message 3) is that it is possible to make a serious dent in child poverty if you make a serious effort. We often think child poverty is intractable, but the British experience shows that is not the case.



Figure 1: Absolute Poverty in the U.S. & U.K. 1989–2009



■ U.S.: Percent all persons under 18 years below official US Poverty Line, 1989-2009 (about 35 percent of median income in 2000)

● U.K.: Percent of U.K. children below the absolute poverty threshold, 1989-2008 (about 60 percent of median income in 1998-99)

Conclusions

- Communicating with policy-makers involves many of the same skills and attributes we use in our academic lives:
 - Being a credible expert
 - Building and maintaining contacts, and
 - Flexibility.
- And, as with academic work, you do learn from experience. So, if you're invited to talk with policy-makers, say yes!



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