What Is Public Policy?

You've heard the word "policy" many times:

"Honesty is the best policy."

"It's the store's policy only to give credit and not refunds on returned merchandise."

"Three tardies and I'll see you after school—that's the tardy policy."

Policies are established ways of doing things. You have ways of doing things and so do businesses and government. The policies that individuals and businesses adopt are private policies. Even so, these policies may affect the community. A fast food restaurant, for example, may have a policy of serving drinks in Styrofoam containers, which can harm the environment.

Public policies are those that governments adopt to address problems. For example, every state government has adopted the public policy of banning the sale of alcohol to minors. This public policy addresses the problem of teenage alcohol abuse. It is expressed in the body of laws, regulations, decisions, and actions of government.

Policies differ from goals. "Teenagers should not drink," "everyone should have a home," "people should be able to walk the streets at night safely." These statements are goals, not policies. Policies are the means of achieving goals. If the goal is to provide homes for people without homes, a policy might be a plan to build 1,000 units of low-income housing. If the goal is to fight crime, a policy might be to put 200 more police officers on the streets of the city.

Many policies are translated into law by government action. For example, to control drunk-driving deaths, a state may pass tougher drunk-driving laws. Or to improve the environment, the federal government may pass an air-quality law. Or to raise money for public libraries, a city may enact a tax increase.

When public policies go into effect, they can deeply affect people's lives. People can gain or lose significant things, such as jobs, services, and equal treatment. Changes in economic policies can affect whole countries or regions. Changes in education policies can affect whole generations.

Questions

1. What are some other examples of policies that you can think of? Which of these are private policies and which are public policies?

2. What are some institutions that create public policy? What levels of government are these institutions?

3. Read below different definitions of public policy written by political scientists. Which do you think is the best definition? Why? How would you define public policy?

Political Scientists Define Public Policy

Public policy is integral to the study of government. Scholars who study government are known as political scientists. In his book *An Introduction to the Policy Process*, political scientist Thomas A. Birkland outlines a few definitions of public policy from other texts on political science:

- Clarke E. Cochran, et al.: "The term public policy always refers to the actions of government and the intentions that determine those actions."

- Clarke E. Cochran, et al.: "Public policy is the outcome of the struggle in government over who gets what."

- Thomas Dye: Public policy is "Whatever governments choose to do or not to do."

- Charles L. Cochran and Eloise F. Malone: "Public policy consists of political decisions for implementing programs to achieve societal goals."

- B. Guy Peters: "Stated most simply, public policy is the sum of government activities, whether acting directly or through agents, as it has an influence on the life of citizens."