


Policy Surveillance (and Parallels to Evidence Synthesis)

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Abstract

Description: Policy surveillance and evidence synthesis methods, while developing out of two distinct silos of inquiry, have parallel stepwise characteristics that make them comparable as approaches.

Purposes: The purpose of this Methods Moment is to provide an introduction to policy surveillance, which is more specifically known as “legal mapping”. The resource can be utilized to cross-sectionally or longitudinally to understand the characteristics/intricacies of statutes, administrative regulations, executive orders, and other forms of law (within or across jurisdictions) regarding various aspects of health (e.g., insurance, task force creation, education).

Approach: This article uses the inter-methodological comparison/contrast to connect a typically unfamiliar method (policy surveillance) to a familiar method (evidence synthesis), further using the connection as a point of departure for teaching/learning specifically about policy surveillance.

Overview

Policy surveillance is a step-by-step method by which policies (e.g., state laws, administrative regulations, local ordinances, university policies and regulations) are searched for, collected, analyzed, and presented¹. Policy surveillance and evidence synthesis, while siloed in terms of their disciplinary and developmental lineages, are similar methods. Evidence synthesis is a step-by-step (but sometimes iterative) method by which scientific literature (primarily, refereed journal articles) are searched for, collected, analyzed, and presented². Policy surveillance and evidence synthesis use parallel stepwise techniques to search for, analyze, and present findings from multiple data sources.

While the differences between policy surveillance and evidence synthesis are manifold (e.g., in terms of data type [policy versus literature], purpose [understanding policy landscapes versus summing extant empirical evidence], epistemological approach), both have similar steps that seem to mimic each other^{1,2}. Such mirrored steps hold the potential to translate methods from discipline to discipline—specifically, to translate a more familiar method (evidence synthesis) to a less familiar method (policy surveillance). The current Methods Moment compares/contrasts policy surveillance and evidence synthesis, while using such comparative insights to provide health information professionals with a gentle introduction to, and example of, policy surveillance. In this way, it is hoped that connecting policy surveillance with a more familiar method (i.e., evidence synthesis) can serve as a point of departure for more easily learning about policy surveillance. Table 1 provides a side-by-side comparison of elements of policy surveillance and evidence synthesis methodology, including: (a) study conceptualization; (b) identifying relevant information; (c) organizing information; (d) making sense of the information; and (e) presentation, interpretation, and usage of results.

Table 1: Tabular Comparison of Elements of Policy Surveillance and Evidence Synthesis Methodologies

Component/Step	Methods		Comparative Description
	Policy Surveillance	Evidence Synthesis	
1. Pre-Study Conceptualization	Establishing goals of the study/exercise.	Establishing the research question.	This common element features doing pre-study work to identify the reasoning behind the need for the method.
2. Developing Search Strategies to Identify Relevant Information	Developing keywords and search phrasing, as well as using legislative codes and secondary sources.	Developing keywords and search phrasing, as well as using academic databases and search engines.	This element features the preparatory work that needs to be done to extract needed information from existing data or literary sources.
3. Organizing Information	Using spreadsheets and other tools (e.g., Excel).	Using citation managers and other tools (e.g., EndNote).	This element features the use of electronic tools to organize and detail information extracted from existing data or literary sources.
4. Selecting Appropriate Information and Making Sense of the Information	Applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, coding laws and regulations, and checking for consistency.	Applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, extracting information from journal articles, and checking for consistency.	This element features the use of different methodological techniques to narrow down relevant information and develop ways of categorizing information found in the data or literary sources.
5. Presentation, Interpretation, and Usage of Results	Tabulating policy characteristics and/or connecting policies with other data to examine impacts.	Collating and summarizing characteristics across studies.	This element features a point of departure for dissemination of information resulting from studying policy or literature.

The value associated with health sciences librarians' learning policy surveillance is manifold. First, policy surveillance is used frequently in the public health field³. Thus, equipping health science librarians with the tools to study policy can strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration with public health researchers who use policy surveillance. Moreover, decision-making authorities (e.g., professional associations dedicated to health and health sciences) are not divorced from policy and have the power to make policy statements themselves. Furthermore, librarians and other health information professionals, particularly with their insights into

evidence synthesis and other research methodologies (e.g., particular software traditionally used in such work), would be of great methodological benefit with collaboratively developing ways to sharpen policy surveillance methodology.

Mock Application

Smith is a public health researcher tasked with collaboratively working with external organizations to develop targeted health interventions for minoritized communities. Smith has been reviewing literature and finds out that sickle-cell causes many adjacent health complications for those who have it⁴. They wonder if there are policy provisions in existing state laws that provide support for those with sickle cell, particularly to see if such laws impact rates of poor/fair/good/excellent health among specific minoritized groups across states. Smith would like to conduct a policy surveillance study on the characteristics of statutes targeting sickle cell across the 50 United States. In employing policy surveillance, Smith hopes to achieve an intermediate step (identifying state policy characteristics in the format of a numerical dataset) that would allow connecting policy data with epidemiologic data (i.e., health outcomes). Smith takes the following steps:

1. *Conceptualize and operationalize the study.* Their research question is: Does variation in sickle cell-related policies impact rates of fair/good/excellent health across the 50 United States? They know they will need: (a) information sources; (b) strategies to extract the statutes from the information sources; (c) ways to stay organized; (d) selecting appropriate statutes for analysis; (e) analyzing the data; and (f) presenting/interpreting what they find.
2. *Identify search tools.* They know that statutes are found on legislative websites of states, so they develop a spreadsheet/matrix to identify, organize, and keep track of their legislative websites. Figure 1 below shows how this spreadsheet/matrix could look. The matrix is a strength in the policy surveillance process by way of being an organization tool.

Figure 1. Matrix for organizing policy surveillance information

	A	B	C	D	E	F
1	Record	State	Legislative Database/Website Name	URL of Database/Website	Keyword	Number of Search Hits
2	1	AL	Alabama Code	https://alison.legislature.state.al.us/code-of-alabama	[Insert key word or search term]	[Insert number of search results]
3	2	AK	...	...	...	...
4	3	AZ	...	...	...	...
5	4	AR	...	...	...	...

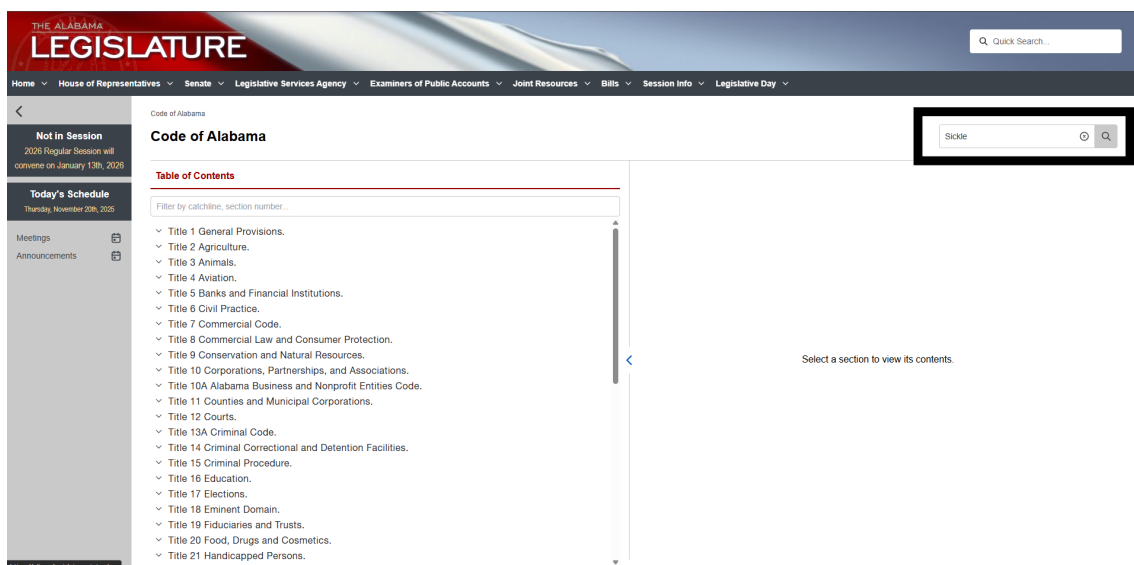
3. *Further specify the search tools by filling in the information in the spreadsheet.* For example, “AL” is the state abbreviation; “Alabama Statutes” is the legislative database/website name; the keyword will be “sickle”; there should also be a column in the matrix for the date of the search. Figure 2 below shows how this updated matrix could look. To maximize accuracy and minimize noisy results, Smith must be cognizant in the creation of search keywords and phrasing.

Figure 2. Matrix for organizing policy surveillance information, with Alabama information input

	A	B	C	D	E	F
1	Record	State	Legislative Database/Website Name	URL of Database/Website	Keyword	Number of Search Hits
2	1	AL	Alabama Code	https://alison.legislature.state.al.us/code-of-alabama	Sickle	[Insert number of search results]
3	2	AK	...	...	...	...
4	3	AZ	...	...	...	...
5	4	AR	...	...	...	...

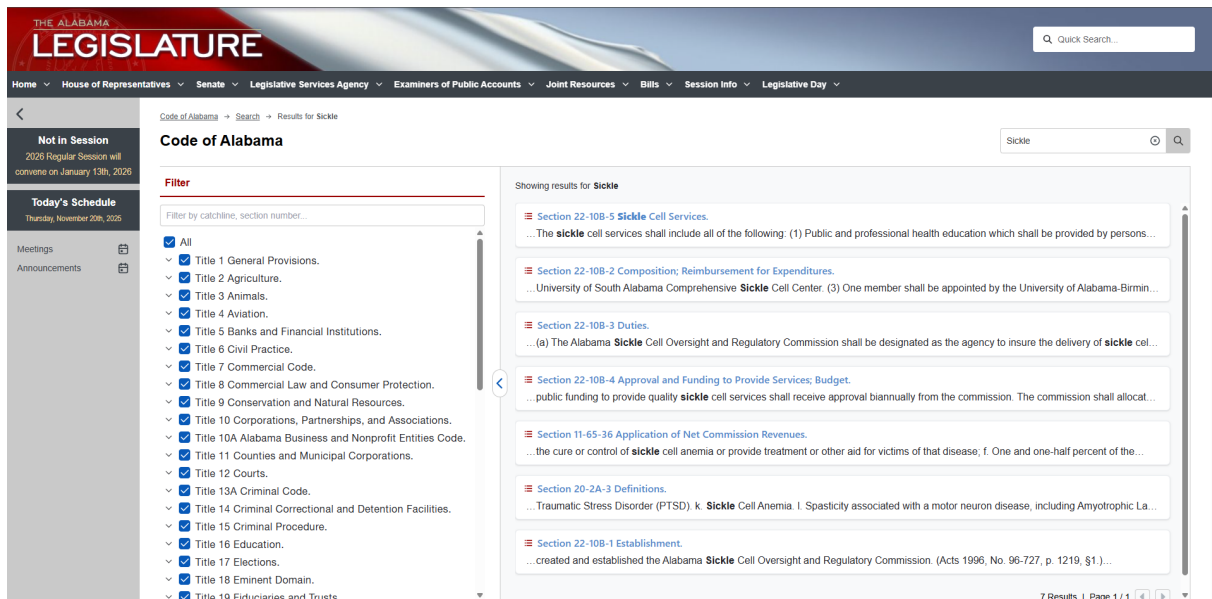
4. Enter the keyword from the matrix into the database found in the URL in the matrix for a state. They then must start searching by state. Figure 3 shows a screencap of the platform hosting the Alabama Code. In the upper righthand corner is a “Search Statute Content” function, where the term “sickle” can be input. Smith should be cognizant of the fact that, like academic databases, each state may have a different search function with differential sensitivity to different keywords and search phrasing.

Figure 3. Screen capture of Alabama’s statutory database with the keyword “sickle” in the search function (as of November 20, 2025)



5. Enter “sickle” into the search function, resulting in seven hits (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Screen capture of database post-keyword entry (as of November 20, 2025)



6. Enter the number of search hits into the spreadsheet (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Matrix with search hits count entered

	A	B	C	D	E	F
1	Record	State	Legislative Database/Website Name	URL of Database/Website	Keyword	Number of Search Hits
2	1	AL	Alabama Code	https://alison.legislature.state.al.us/code-of-alabama	Sickle	7
3	2	AK	...	...	...	...
4	3	AZ	...	...	...	...
5	4	AR	...	...	...	...

7. Create a new matrix with all statutes found across states, identifying: (a) the statute name/number; (b) whether it should be excluded from the final list of statutes; and (c) the reasoning for exclusion from the final list (if applicable). Smith would then define characteristics across included statutes iteratively, using (for example) binary Yes/No signifiers to guiding questions, as shown in Figure 6. While coding by one person may provide preliminary information, consistency checking with additional coders may provide more robust support for the reliability of the information produced by Smith’s policy surveillance study.

Figure 6. Separate matrix with exclusion process and characteristic coding

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	Record	Statute Name/Number	Exclude?	Exclusion Reason	Does the statute concern funds?	Does the statute create a task force or similar?	Does the statute offer a definition of "sickle cell"?
2	4	Ala. Code § 22-10B-4	NO	N/A	YES	NO	NO
3	5	Ala. Code § 11-65-36	NO	N/A	YES	NO	NO
4	6	Ala. Code § 20-2A-3	NO	N/A	NO	NO	YES
5	7	Ala. Code § 22-10B-1	NO	N/A	NO	YES	NO

8. *Tabulate the characteristics and present them in narrative, graphical, tabular, geospatial, or some other format* (See Table 2). Smith should be cognizant of their audience in terms of which format is “best” for communicating preliminary (and final) findings.

Table 2. Tabular presentation of results of policy surveillance example, statutes, Alabama, 2025 (n = 4)

Characteristic	n	%
Concerns funding	2	50.0
Creates a task force or similar	1	25.0
Defines "sickle cell"	2	25.0

Resources

Web Content

Note: For practitioners who may not be familiar with policy surveillance, Website 1 below provides a beginner-friendly introduction. Websites 2 and 3 below provide background information on evidence synthesis, which may be a more familiar method to use to understand policy surveillance.

1. Law Atlas. Learn scientific legal mapping. Available from: <https://lawatlas.org/learning-resources>
2. PRISMA. Prisma 2020. Available from: <https://www.prisma-statement.org/prisma-2020>
3. JBI. JBI manual for evidence synthesis – 2024 edition. Available from: <https://jbi-global-wiki.refined.site/space/MANUAL>

Articles

Note: Articles 1, 2, 3, and 4 below provide in-depth conceptual and methodological information for learning about policy surveillance.

1. Burris S. The advantages of scientific legal mapping. *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*. 2025;53(1):134-6. Doi:[10.1017/jme.2025.47](https://doi.org/10.1017/jme.2025.47)
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3. Montanez, J. Unified Search, Analysis, and Reporting Protocols in United States Policy Surveillance: A Guide and Call-to-Action. *Journal of Legal Research Methodology*. 2025;4(1):1-25. Doi:[10.19164/jlrm.v4i1.1547](https://doi.org/10.19164/jlrm.v4i1.1547)
4. Gutman, A, Moran-McCabe, K, Ghorashi, A, Campbell, A, Could, L. Data Shop: Law as Data: Using Policy Surveillance to Advance Housing Studies. *Cityscape*. 2019;21(1):203-13. Available from: <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/periodicals/cityscpe/vol21num1/article8.html>

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1. Presley D, Reinstein T, Webb-Barr D, Burris S. Creating legal data for public health monitoring and evaluation: Delphi standards for policy surveillance. *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*. 2014;43(S1):27-31. doi:[10.1111/jlme.12210](https://doi.org/10.1111/jlme.12210)
2. Arksey H, O'Malley L. Scoping studies: Towards a methodological framework. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*. 2005;8(1):19-32. doi:[10.1080/1364557032000119616](https://doi.org/10.1080/1364557032000119616)
3. Hahn, EJ. Smokefree legislation: A review of Health and Economic Outcomes Research. *Am J Prev Med*. 2010;39(6):S66-S67. doi: [10.1016/j.amepre.2010.08.013](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2010.08.013)
4. Tsaras G, Owusu-Ansah A, Owusu Boateng F, Amoateng-Adjepong Y. Complications associated with sickle cell trait: A brief narrative review. *Am J Med*. 2009;122(6):507-12. doi:[10.1016/j.amjmed.2008.12.020](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amjmed.2008.12.020)