

# So you want to work in Policy + Research?

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Social change is complex, and it takes significant focus to understand the nuances of social challenges, develop potential solutions, and advocate for more resources for those solutions. Policy and research play a fundamental role in shaping public discourse and influencing governments to invest in social impact. Many politicians and government officials rely on the research and ideas of policy researchers to implement new agendas or to raise awareness of critical social challenges. For example, several think tanks had advocated for decades to implement a more robust child tax credit, which was implemented in early 2021 and may cut child poverty in half in the US. Others continue to build the case for potential transformations in housing, healthcare, and education. Research and policy are critical to building the case for action and providing a roadmap for legislators, nonprofits, and businesses to follow towards social change.

If this career path sounds exciting to you, this guide will take you through everything you need to know about working in policy and research. To inform our work, Second Day has spoken to experts in the field and gathered the best information out there for upcoming and recent graduates. First, the guide will take you through the different entry-level positions to look out for in this field. Then, we'll provide tips on actually getting those jobs in policy and research. We'll finish with our next three steps: actionable items you can take to make progress towards finding your first job. Let's get started!

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## What types of jobs exist in policy + research?

### FIVE TYPES OF POLICY/ RESEARCH ORGANIZATIONS

ORGANIZATION	ENTRY-LEVEL ROLE TITLE	SKILLS AND CREDENTIALS REQUIRED
THINK TANK	Special assistant	Interest in research on the think tank's focus area; ability to learn quickly and manage projects.
MEASUREMENT & EVALUATION FIRM	Research assistant	Experience with Excel, Stata, and/or R. Prior research experience and ability to communicate insights broadly.
UNIVERSITY RESEARCH CENTER	Research assistant	Experience with Excel, Stata, and/or R. Demonstrated interest/ knowledge of the focus of the research center.
INGOS	Policy associate	Knowledge of the work. Internship experience with an INGO. Strong research synthesis and communications skills.
GOVERNMENT OR CAMPAIGNS	Policy associate	Deep issue area expertise and/or personal connection with the political office (often need to start as a staff assistant).

### Five types of organizations with policy + research roles

Whatever “cause” you are passionate about, there are organizations researching that topic. From the environment, to international development, to tax policy, to immigration reform, there are hundreds of research organizations with different political (or apolitical) angles. While many people come to this work particularly passionate about a certain topic, this guide breaks down the field based on the **types of entities doing this work**. In general, your role will be quite similar across different topics that you are researching.

#### Think Tanks

A think tank (or policy institute) is an organization that performs research and advocacy. Most think tanks are centered around [fundraising](#) for a specific purpose or agenda. Sometimes these goals are partisan, and sometimes they are nonpartisan. For think tanks, the two relevant roles are **Special Assistant/Staff Assistant** and **Research Assistant**. Both positions usually involve working with a specific team or senior leader on an initiative within the think tank. A Special Assistant often has a mix of administrative responsibilities such as scheduling, travel logistics, and meeting preparation along with support on research projects. As a Research Assistant, your

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position will be centered on (you guessed it) research: conducting interviews, analyzing data, and synthesizing key takeaways to support the senior leader, who is often busy speaking at conferences, events, and other meetings. Over time, the senior leader may trust you to play a more active part in speaking at conferences, proposing new reports, and building your own reputation as an expert in the field. **If you are passionate about a specific topic and want to take a research angle to it, think tanks are a great place to start!**

### Measurement and evaluation firms

Unlike think tanks, measurement and evaluation (M&E) firms often spend less time focusing on a specific agenda and more time using their research expertise on specific projects. **Measurement and evaluation firms are often contracted to produce a specific report for a foundation, university, or other entity.** As a result, their efforts are more centered on completing projects than working for a specific team or individual. The traditional job title hired for these firms is a Research Analyst. While there are a range of back end roles, it is less common to pivot into a research title from an administrative one. Research Analysts at M&E firms have fairly flexible hours. You are expected to bill a certain number of hours working on research projects, so the hours extend a bit beyond a typical 9-5 day. Over time, Research Analysts can build more specialized focuses on topics or research methods. If you want to become an expert at best practices for measurement and research, this is a great place to start.

### University research centers

Many universities house specific research centers on a range of topics. These research centers are more variable and often sit somewhere between a measurement firm and a think tank. Professors often lead or help set the agenda for these university research centers. Some fundraise for the **mission** of the center and are able to set a more flexible agenda, while others fundraise for **specific projects**. Common job titles are Special Assistant or Research Assistant. **One of the distinguishing characteristics of these research centers is that they are often considerably smaller than think tanks or measurement firms.** This means that there can be more mobility within roles at the center, but it often is difficult to transition into leadership positions at university research centers. If you enjoy being on campus and want the opportunity to manage student interns, working at a University research center can be a great place to start.

### International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs)

The policy and research teams at INGOs are more communications-focused than at the other institutions. INGOs are involved in global health and poverty reduction campaigns in countries around the world. As a Policy Coordinator or Research Associate for an INGO, your role is to make the case for the federal government and other global funders to invest more in your work. For example, if your organization is involved in programs fighting Malaria, a Policy Associate might work to develop talking points highlighting the 2 million preventable deaths that happen from malaria each year and make the case for global action. **Working in these roles has a stronger emphasis on communications and writing ability—synthesizing existing research rather than conducting deep research on your own.** Because there is such an emphasis on

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influencing USAID and congressional staff, the majority of these jobs are based in DC. See our [International Development career guide](#), if you are interested in other internationally-focused positions.

### **Government or campaigns**

Policy research is core to the teams working for elected officials and candidates for elected office. Most campaigns (even city council or mayoral races) will have a policy team. Once in elected office, most administrations will also have a policy team, often with positions focused on a specific type of policy (e.g., Economic Policy Associate or Foreign Policy Advisor) or working for a committee of the legislature. **These roles are incredibly competitive, so they often require building up specialized expertise or relationships with elected officials.** They also represent some of the most influential positions in shaping government activity. For more detail on government policy positions, check out the [Capitol Hill Guide](#) and the [State Government guide](#).

### **Policy + research positions**

One of the most common, entry-level roles in this field is **Research Associate/Assistant**. Research Associates are responsible for producing original research and working with senior team members to put together reports. While these positions are accessible for graduating seniors with relevant skills or experience (e.g., statistical programming such as Stata or R), a more generalist entry-level job is as a **Special Assistant or Staff Assistant** at a research-focused organization. This role is grounded in administrative support, often for a senior research leader, but also often includes elements of research or policy work. A very common path is to spend a few years as a Special Assistant in order to pivot into full-time research, although the ability to do that depends on the culture of your specific organization. Finally, some entities hire for **Policy Associates or Policy Analysts**. These titles generally reference an entry-level role that is identical to a Research Associate but with additional elements of public speaking and developing policy proposals. Therefore, it is more typically a job for someone that has already worked as a Research Associate and potentially gone to graduate school.

### **Policy by the numbers (pay and hours)**

Unless you are working on a campaign, policy roles are usually standard work hours. When getting to the finish line of a big report or turning something around for your boss you may need to work on weekends or stay up for some late nights, but generally the hours are around 9-6.

In terms of pay, there isn't much diversity. Working in policy for an INGO will range as low as \$35K and as high as \$45K. **Most research positions at think tanks, measurement firms, or university research centers will pay \$40K-\$50K.** Government policy positions are the most

variable in terms of pay depending on where you are working and whether it is a full-time or advisory position, but \$40K-\$50K is a reasonable expectation for those roles as well.

## How to get a job in policy + research

### Getting a job at a think tank, measurement firm, or university research center

**For a role as a Research Assistant at a think tank, measurement firm, or university research center, demonstrated skills are the most important thing to get a job.** Experience using Excel, Stata, and/or R to surface insights for research is often a prerequisite for these positions. Strong ability to understand and synthesize existing research and reports is a critical skill, as well as effectively articulating those insights in written memos and papers. If you are aiming to land a full-time research position right out of school, you generally will need to have interned in a research position previously or worked with a professor on a research project (fortunately, most of these opportunities are paid). For an entry-level role, it matters less that you have built up a deep expertise in any one particular policy focus, since it is assumed that most entry-level Research Assistants are generalists. If finding a Research Assistant position on campus or summer internship is hard, you can still demonstrate these skills by taking research focused courses. Many schools offer classes where you can learn to use R or Stata and apply those skills in developing a few papers that will serve as crucial work samples if you apply for these jobs.

If you have less research experience and are applying for jobs soon, Staff or Special Assistant roles often have lower research experience requirements. In those positions, you will often have the chance to build up your research skills over a few years and eventually pivot over into a full-time research role. **However, it is really important to ask questions about whether this is possible during the interview process, because centers vary widely in their capacity for internal mobility.**

**For both Special Assistant and Research Associate roles, networking can serve you well.** If you are at a university research center or think tank, the head of that research unit will often make hiring decisions. As a result, connecting with that person (or someone else on the team that can mention your name) can give you a big leg up in the application process. Many measurement and evaluation firms have a referral system where current staffers can flag your application to make sure HR notices you. This trend has been declining in regularity over time, however, in an effort to try to diversify hiring pipelines away from insular networks. When applying, it is critical to highlight your past research experience and skills very clearly on your resume. When writing a cover letter, show that you understand the focus of the research center you are applying to and how it aligns with your personal values and experience.

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Overall, **getting a generalist position at a think tank, measurement firm, or university research center should be possible if you have the relevant skills for the position.** Because most job openings get over a hundred applications for a few spots, securing these roles requires persistence and willingness to work on a range of different topics. While most graduating seniors have a generalist focus and skillset, it is worth noting that some people do take a more specialized approach. If you have a niche policy focus, there are likely only a few research centers focused on that area. If you read reports, do original research, and talk to experts in that field, you will often distinguish yourself as a top candidate. The downside of this approach is that, with a more specific focus, there are fewer opportunities at those policy centers available in a given year. You may end up needing to wait for a position to open up or be open to taking a role on a policy issue you are less passionate about at first.

- If you are interested in learning more about the range of **think tanks** out there, [this database](#) is a great place to start.
- There are ~10 large **measurement and evaluation firms** nationally ([Abt Associates](#), [MDRC](#), [Urban Institute](#), [Westat](#), [Mathematica](#), [NORC](#), [Pew Research Center](#), [CBPP](#), etc.) with many smaller or more specialized ones as well.
- There isn't a centralized database of **research centers** across the country, but most research universities have a list of all of their research centers in one place.

### Getting a job with an INGO

**Working in policy roles at an INGO is often quite competitive.** If you've interned at similar nonprofits in the past or worked on research, this can help to distinguish you as a candidate. Unfortunately, it is also a common path to start as an intern **after graduating** and use that foot in the door to convert into a full-time position at some point. This is very common and often works successfully within ~6 months of starting as an intern. But during that time, annualized salary can be as low as ~\$15K-\$20K per year. Another route into INGO policy roles could be taking a different entry-level job on the communications or development team and then pivoting within the organization over time into a more policy-focused position.

A list of the largest nonprofits in the US can be found [here](#) or [here](#). Many of these are internationally focused.

### Getting a job in government policy

**For government policy roles, there are generally two paths to getting your foot in the door.** One is to work in one of the research position listed above and begin to develop an expertise on a specific issue (military, housing, environment, etc.). Over time, you can build connections and a reputation that campaigns or elected officials might seek out for their teams. The other route is to join a campaign early and build relationships with the senior leadership of

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that campaign. Once the candidate is elected, you might still need to start out as a Staff Assistant because the policy jobs are so rare and sought after. However with time, there are often more and more opportunities to get involved in policy-making for that team. For more details on how to pivot into a research role, check out Second Day's [Capitol Hill career guide](#).

### Exit opportunities from policy + research roles

Starting your career in policy research leaves a lot of opportunities for you. **Some people choose to stay in research and climb the ranks**, building a more focused expertise on a certain topic. Over time, a role in research shifts from conducting original research to spending more time speaking at events, writing books/articles, and raising money to hire staff to conduct more research. **Another very common route is to transition from a research role into working for the government.** Often, there is a revolving door with many researchers developing policy ideas while the other party is in power and then joining the administration to help implement those ideas when their party takes over. If you want to advance to a more senior position in research or government, it is **very common** for people starting in research positions to go to graduate school. Whether you pursue a Master's in Public Policy (MPP), Master's in Economics, Master's in Social Work (MSW), Master's in Urban Planning (MUP), MBA, PHD, or some other degree, that choice is often a critical one in determining what route you want to take into the world of research. Of course, not everyone chooses to get an advanced degree, but **many entry-level research positions are explicitly scoped as 2-3 year positions** because most people choose to do so.

Beyond research-grounded jobs, people commonly exit into working at a nonprofit aligned with their interests, develop their own start up, or run for office. Some people also realize that research isn't something that they enjoy, and they pivot into a corporate role or another route entirely. No matter what direction you choose, **getting experience working in research and policy will serve you well throughout your career.**

### Next three steps

1. If you haven't already, seek out opportunities to **conduct research at your school or via internships.**
2. **Develop a research specific resume and cover letter template** with a stronger focus on your academic credentials over your other experiences.
3. **Reach out and talk to people doing research** that you are interested in, including the authors of reports that you find interesting.

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