

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS' USE OF CITIZEN SURVEYS

Brian Stipak, *Pennsylvania State University*

Sample surveys of citizens are increasingly advocated as an important data-gathering technique for local public officials. Two articles describing the value of surveys for public managers appeared in 1979 and 1980 issues of the *Public Administration Review*.¹ Both the 1980 annual conference of the American Society for Public Administration and the 1980 annual conference of the American Society for Public Opinion Research featured panel sessions on the use of citizen surveys by local governments. According to the advocates of citizen surveys, urban administrators should use surveys to gather (1) factual information, such as data on crime victimization, (2) information on citizen needs and preferences, and (3) information on citizen satisfaction levels and subjective evaluations of governmental services. Publications of the Urban Institute have recommended that cities annually conduct such surveys,² and several prominent cities have institutionalized the use of regular citizen surveys within the performance monitoring process.

(Faced with the attention, advocacy, and praise given citizen surveys for promoting responsiveness and efficiency, urban managers may want to know more about how to implement surveys.) There is no shortage of advice. Unfortunately, the advice comes in such different forms that managers may have difficulty assessing its applicability and utility, and even whether the different types of advice are mutually compatible. (Also, little has been written describing the experience of those cities that have most successfully incorporated regular citizen surveys into the ongoing managerial processes. What, then, is the "state of the advice" as it currently exists in the literature, and what is the state of the art as it is currently practiced?)*

Rules for Using Surveys

Those giving advice have displayed a remarkable penchant for enumerating "rules." Whatever their merits, the rules provide a convenient vehicle for contrasting the different concerns and viewpoints of the rule-makers. (Four different sets of rules are presented below in a paraphrased, abbreviated form.)

* Hatry and Blair offer the following rules, which I shall call *rules for the practical manager*.³

- (1) Ask questions citizens can answer.
- (2) Obtain information relevant to governmental decisions, and information about respondents needed for analysis of the survey data.
- (3) To monitor change over time, use similarly worded questions.
- (4) Use professional survey help.
- (5) Analyze and use the data.

(As we see from these rules, the practical manager focuses on the technology of survey research. The technical help can be secured as necessary. The manager's oversight ensures that relevant data are obtained and mutually used.)

Swidorski provides us with the following set of rules, which are primarily *rules for the technological manager*.*

- (1) Determine what you want to know.
- (2) Take adequate time and get necessary assistance for designing the survey instrument.
- (3) Pretest the instrument.
- (4) Sample only citizens from the target population.
- (5) Use an accurate sampling frame.
- (6) Stratify the sample.
- (7) Obtain an adequately large sample for the desired level of statistical confidence.
- (8) Do not use statistical tests that are not appropriate to the data.

The rules for the practical manager are basically common sense, but experience has shown a need to emphasize these rules.

(In contrast to the rules for the practical manager, most of these rules focus on the technology of survey research. Thus, the technological manager believes that the value of citizen surveys depends primarily on careful attention to procedures for instrument design, sampling, and statistical analysis.)

A set of *rules for the critical manager* were provided by the author in another paper:*

- (1) Do not judge program effectiveness based only on the distribution of citizen responses to a subjective evaluation or satisfaction question.
- (2) Be alert for especially high or especially low citizen expectations for service levels.
- (3) Look out for factors, such as widespread publicity about the high cost of a program, that may cause citizens to give negative evaluations despite their perceptions that the program is effective.
- (4) When comparing groups of citizens, ask how actual performance may vary within each of the groups.
- (5) Use multiple regression analysis to compare evaluations of groups that differ on demographic characteristics.

Brian Stipak is assistant professor of public administration, Institute of Public Administration, Pennsylvania State University. He was formerly a postdoctoral fellow at the Institute of Public Policy Studies, University of Michigan, and prior to that was involved in evaluation research at System Development Corporation.

- (6) Recognize when confounded effects make it impossible to use citizens' subjective evaluations or expressed satisfaction to measure governmental performance.

Unlike the technological manager, the critical manager does not focus on the technology of survey research. Rather, the critical manager recognizes the necessity of looking beyond the technology of the data gathering process, and beyond the face validity of the data, in order to interpret survey results, especially data on levels of citizen satisfaction or subjective citizen evaluations. Therefore, the critical manager believes that the value of information obtained through citizen surveys depends on careful interpretation and analysis.

Finally, Camille Barnett has offered a set of rules for the politically astute manager.⁴

- (1) Know what you're doing
- (2) If you don't want to know, don't ask.
- (3) If you don't want others to know, don't ask.
- (4) Never underestimate the power of a survey.

In contrast to the primary concerns of the other managers, the politically astute manager's main concern is to incorporate citizen surveys successfully into the political process. Thus, the politically astute manager recognizes that surveys themselves can create expectations for action, that survey results can be used for specific political purposes, and that surveys can be a powerful way to initiate change. The value of citizen surveys therefore depends on the manager's competence not only in terms of technical oversight, but even more importantly, in terms of awareness of the organizational and political climate.)

Rules versus Proverbs

(The skeptical manager might wonder whether these rules are sage and valuable, or instead are like the once sacrosanct administrative principles that Herbert Simon's *Administrative Behavior* exposed as contradictory proverbs.)

In short, the skeptical manager would ask whether managers should follow any of the rules for being a practical manager, a technological manager, a critical manager, or a politically astute manager, and whether these rules are mutually compatible or contradictory.)

The rules for the practical manager are basically common sense, but experience has shown a need to emphasize these rules. For example, the need to emphasize the rule "ask questions citizens can answer" stems from the finding of past surveys that average citizens have little knowledge about most issues facing local managers. Similarly, experience has shown that there is often an over-zealous tendency to collect myriad quantities of data that go unanalyzed—hence, the need to emphasize rules 2 and 5. Finally, experience has shown that small changes in question wording can yield large changes in citizens' responses, and that because of the complexities of survey research technology, and because of the effect on the credibility of the results, the use of professional survey help is often desirable. Thus, these rules do offer some sage advice.

The rules for the technological manager are important in that the manager should realize that a highly developed technology of survey research exists which the staff involved in instrument design, data collection, and data analysis must utilize for the survey results to be credible. However, the technological manager goes too far in sanctifying the rules. For example, rule 4 admonishes managers to interview only the relevant citizens; however, constructing a sampling frame of a relevant subset of citizens is often impossible, and merely identifying the relevant citizens, such as victims of unreported crimes, may require an interview. (Rule 7 admonishes managers to obtain adequately large samples for the desired level of statistical confidence, but the appropriate confidence level to choose is usually unclear, and in practice that choice is almost always arbitrary.) Finally, rules such as rule 8, "Do not use statistical tests that are not appropriate to the data," are mechanical repetitions of common platitudes. These platitudes often should be violated, and are by sophisticated methodologists. Repetition of such admonitions perpetrates the misguided notion that technical soundness comes from following by rote a simple set of inviolate rules.

(The technological manager, who views the value of citizen surveys as dependent primarily on carefully following technical rules, suffers from believing in a simple, widespread proverb:

Scientifically conducted sample surveys tell us how the majority really feel and think.)

As Swidorski enthusiastically states, "It is possible to discover what people think about public institutions or programs, to allow people to rate government services and make comparisons among them, and to find out about citizens' priorities."⁵ (However, it is also possible for scientifically conducted sample surveys to produce "public opinion" data that are meaningless, artificial creations of the interview process.) The appropriate interpretation of even reliable and valid opinion data may be quite obscure. For example, a high percentage of favorable evaluations or satisfied responses cannot automatically be interpreted as a positive result, since past experience has shown that citizens and program clients almost always report high satisfaction levels and predominantly favorable evaluations, even for programs that are not effective.¹⁰ Also, careful statistical analysis may be required to extract information relevant to policy making.¹¹ A study conducted by the Office of Management Services, City of Dallas, reported that although non-white citizens consistently rated service quality lower than whites, multiple regression analysis showed this difference was attributable primarily to variables other than ethnicity, and no significant discrepancy in satisfaction due to race therefore existed.¹² (Thus, citizen surveys can aid in promoting responsive, democratic administration, provided that managers go beyond the technological orientation and become critical managers as well.)

The critical manager recognizes the need not only for technical competence, but also for rigorously considering what the survey data measure. The critical rules help in this task because they point out some of the important con-

siderations for interpreting and analyzing subjective survey data in order to gain useful information for decision making.

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(The rules for the politically astute manager bring the manager back to the reality that citizen surveys take place within the political process.) Failure to incorporate citizen surveys successfully into the ongoing political process negates any potential value that the manager could realize from surveys by following the practical, technical, and critical rules. Thus, although the rules for the politically astute manager may sometimes compromise the other rules—for example, by sacrificing some technical rigor to satisfy political pressure to cut costs—they necessarily take precedence.

The Current State of the Art

Having examined the available advice for using citizen surveys, interested urban managers would undoubtedly like to know about the state of the art as it is actually practiced. (Probably the most successful examples of local governments that use regular citizen surveys are Dayton, Ohio, and Dallas, Texas.) Dayton has used annual citizen surveys since 1970. Dallas has used annual surveys since 1974, with surveys in every other year employing especially large samples, and surveys in interim years employing smaller samples. St. Petersburg, Florida, has also used annual surveys since 1974, although budget constraints have now reduced the frequency to every other year. Unfortunately, detailed published descriptions of these cities' applications of citizen surveys are not available; however, managers desiring more detail than presented below can direct questions to those cities.¹³

(These cities contract with consultants, either market research firms or university-based researchers, for fielding the survey.) Questionnaire design is considered more politically sensitive than data collection, and is done by city staff, with a department of management services or an office of management and budget having primary responsibility. Sometimes consultants have provided help in questionnaire design, but once a city has initiated regular citizen surveys questionnaire design becomes less difficult, since the same set of core questions is used each time. (After the consultants provide the survey data to the city in machine-readable form, city staff do the analysis, although some analysis may sometimes be contracted out to consultants.) Analytical results can appear in a variety of city documents, including technical reports primarily used internally within the budget office and other departments, and non-technical summary reports used by city council members and available for general distribution.

The surveys collect a wide range of data. (Information is obtained on citizen contacts with city departments, including contacts resulting from citizen requests and complaints.) Information on the use of services—such as libraries, parks, and municipal transit—is also collected, as well as data on crime victimization. Demographic data and housing data derived from surveys have been used to update past census data; in fact, Dallas has found up-to-date demographic and housing data to be one of the most useful products of annual citizen surveys. Finally, these cities use surveys to obtain a variety of opinions, evaluations, and satisfaction ratings concerning the city, local services, tax levels, respondents' neighborhoods, and personal safety.

Special-purpose surveys are sometimes used to provide information that augments the information obtained from general citizen surveys. Besides the annual, general-purpose City Profile Survey, Dallas conducts a Business Profile Survey. Interviews with a stratified sample of managers from a variety of firms in the city are used to assess the effectiveness of city service delivery to the business community. In addition, surveys of users of city facilities, such as libraries and parks, are used to obtain information for evaluating specific programs.

(Managers in these cities appear to view citizen surveys as a way to link governmental performance more closely to government's "customers," the citizens.) As the city manager of Dallas has stated, "Nobody who is in business would think of doing anything if they did not understand their market."¹⁴ (In Dallas each department is accountable each year to show what was done to respond to the City Profile Survey, and salary increases for some department directors have been based partially on survey results.) Dayton has extensively used survey data to establish performance objectives. Performance objectives stated in annual budget and policy documents have included increasing the percentage of residents who rate their neighborhood as desirable, increasing feelings of safety, and increasing satisfaction with parks, streets, and other local public facilities. Even the city manager's office is not exempt from such performance objectives, since one stated performance objective of the city manager's office was to ensure 80 percent satisfaction with resolution of citizen complaints.¹⁵

(Besides using data on satisfaction levels and subjective evaluations for establishing performance objectives, satisfaction and evaluation data are used to compare services and to make comparisons over time.) A Dallas Office of Management Services report used averages on a ladder rating scale to rank 17 different city services, and to compare that ranking to the ranking obtained in the prior year.¹⁶ A St. Petersburg Department of Budget and Management report compared citizen ratings of 18 municipal services over a four-year period.¹⁷ Changes in ratings over time are typically interpreted as the result of city programs or of changes in service levels. A Dayton Office of Management and Budget document attributed improved feelings of safety to a local crime prevention program, reduced police response time, and other police department improvements. On the other hand, that document attributed a decrease in citizen satisfaction with street cleaning to the

growing out-of-service time of the old street sweeper equipment.¹⁸ (In this way, satisfaction data are used as evidence of program success and of the need for service improvements.)

In addition to their use for performance monitoring and for establishing performance objectives, data on citizen opinions, satisfaction, and evaluations are sometimes used in making specific policy decisions. (After the City Profile Survey discovered considerable citizen concern about deteriorating housing, Dallas officials designated more funds for code enforcement and instituted a home repair training program.) In another example, Dallas council members approved a rate increase for the local public utility after survey results showed city residents preferred higher rates to lower service. Sometimes survey findings have led to financial savings. In one case, lighting along major Dallas thoroughfares was reduced, and neighborhood street lighting was increased, after survey data showed greater citizen concern for street lighting in neighborhoods than on major thoroughfares. The result was a \$100,000 savings in operating costs, as well as a marked increase the next year in citizen satisfaction with neighborhood street lighting. In another case, Dayton had been spending large sums on upgrading and cleaning back alleys, but when survey results showed no perceived improvement from the point of view of citizens the program was terminated.¹⁹

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* (Officials in these cities do not, however, rotely follow citizen opinions as determined through surveys.) For example, although a Dallas survey found citizens wanted larger city expenditures for brush collection, the city manager's subsequent budget recommendation was to cut back city funds and to institute user charges. (Thus, managers in these cities recognize that survey data are only one input into the decision-making process, and that survey results cannot replace professional judgment that considers other factors as well.)

(The political uses of citizen surveys in these cities create both difficulties and opportunities for city managers. Sometimes interest groups use survey results to support their particular demands.) For instance, data from the Dallas City Profile Survey, which showed discrepancies among different groups' satisfaction with city services, was used as additional support for a lawsuit concerning the quality of services provided in minority areas. Another political reality managers face is the need to present survey results in a simple manner to the city council, which may constrain the scope of the statistical analysis. (On the other hand, managers use survey results to support their budget recommendations to the council, as well as to establish performance objectives to increase the accountability of city departments.) Also, survey data help managers in dealing with intergovernmental relations. Dallas has used up-to-date demographic data from the City Profile Survey to challenge revenue sharing allocations based on old census data, and

survey results have proved valuable for preparing applications for community development block grants and for meeting citizen participation requirements.)

The Future State of the Art

Based on the rules for the practical, technological, and politically astute managers, the current state of the art that exists in those cities having most successfully adopted regular citizen surveys is highly developed. Useful data are obtained following accepted procedures of survey research technology. Managers astutely use survey data, and citizen surveys are an accepted part of the ongoing political process. Given this success, the current state of the art in these cities is likely to be the future state of the art for other middle to large size cities that commit comparable financial resources to regular citizen surveys.²⁰

New advancements in the state of the art are most feasible for the analysis and interpretation of subjective survey data—the primary concern of the critical manager. Current procedures for analyzing citizens' opinions, evaluations, and satisfaction levels primarily involve comparing frequency distributions over time, across services, and sometimes across service areas or demographic groups. Inferences drawn from one or two year comparisons over time for the same service are probably least likely to be misleading, whereas longer-term comparisons and comparisons across service areas or demographic groups are more subject to spurious interpretations. (As the state of the art advances, analytical staff in those cities at the forefront of using citizen surveys will consider more critically the issues involved in interpreting satisfaction and evaluation ratings, and will employ statistical techniques for avoiding spurious interpretations.)²¹

Staff reports in those cities at the forefront today often do reflect considerable sophistication in interpreting survey data. A Dayton report investigated the reasons some residents do not feel safe while walking in their neighborhood, found that less than half of those residents attributed their anxiety to victimizations experienced by themselves or friends, and concluded that "concern for safety is often precipitated by a general fear rather than actual experiences."²² (Whether correct or incorrect, this interpretation does reveal an awareness of how the meaning of subjective indicators depends on their causes and on their relationship to objective conditions, such as actual experiences and actual service performance.)

Finally, the politically astute manager might want to remind us that interpretations and analyses of survey data take place in a political context and can serve political purposes—even the manager's. A Dayton report suggests that a decrease in citizen satisfaction with street cleaning "reflects how inadequate capital equipment stock can and will affect service quality,"²³ thereby bolstering arguments for capital outlays the city manager probably already considered necessary. (Managers should expect to encounter politically motivated interpretations of survey results; however, the analytical capabilities of their staff may sometimes help managers deal with troublesome *ad hoc* interpreta-

tions) In response to the lawsuit, mentioned earlier, that Dallas became involved in concerning service quality provided in minority areas, city staff undertook statistical analyses which reportedly found that no significant discrepancy in satisfaction existed due to race. Thus, new advances in the state of the art for interpreting and analyzing survey data will become embroiled in the occasional turbulence of the political process, but also will provide more valid and useful information for decision making.

Notes

1. Gregory A. Danek and Patricia Kolbus-Edwards, "Survey Research for Public Administrators," *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 39 (Sept./Oct. 1979); Carl Swidorski, "Sample Surveys: Help for the 'Out-of-House' Evaluator," *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 40 (Jan./Feb. 1980).
2. See Kenneth Webb and Harry P. Hatry, *Obtaining Citizen Feedback: The Application of Citizen Surveys to Local Governments* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 1973); and Louis H. Blair and Alfred I. Schwartz, *How Clean is Our City?* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 1972).
3. Harry P. Hatry and Louis H. Blair, "Citizen Surveys for Local Governments: A Copout, Manipulative Tool, or a Policy Guidance and Analysis Aid?" in Terry Nichols Clark (ed.), *Citizen Preferences and Urban Public Policy* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1976).
4. Swidorski, *op. cit.*, p. 70.
5. Brian Stipak, "Using Clients to Evaluate Programs," paper presented at a symposium, The Public Encounter: Delivering Human Services in the 1980's, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, January 9-11, 1980. Copies available from Brian Stipak, Institute of Public Administration, University Park, PA 16802.
6. Comments presented by Camille Barnett, assistant city manager, Dallas, Texas, to the panel on The Use of Citizen Surveys in Local Decision, annual conference of the American Society for Public Administration, April 13-16, 1980.
7. (Psychometricians, for example, routinely use interval-level statistics with ordinal attitude items) The rigid view that analysts should never use statistics that assume a higher level of measurement than the data is a good example of unsophisticated sanctification of rules. Because of the clear advantages of inter-level statistics, sophisticated methodologists often use interval-level statistics even when measurement is not strictly interval. For relevant literature citations and discussion of related issues see Carl Hensler and Brian Stipak, "Estimating Interval Scale Values for Survey Item Response Categories," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 23 (August 1979).
8. Swidorski, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
9. For a discussion of meaningless responses to attitude items see Philip E. Converse, "Attitudes and Non-Attitudes: Continuation of a Dialogue," in Edward R. Tufte (ed.), *The Quantitative Analysis of Social Problems* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1970).
10. For a review of evaluation studies that have found favorable client evaluations for programs that were not effective in achieving program goals see Mary Ann Scheirer, "Program Participants' Positive Perceptions: Psychological Conflict of Interest in Program Evaluation," *Evaluation Quarterly*, Vol. 2 (February 1978). Reprinted in Lee Sechrest (ed.), *Evaluation Studies Review Annual* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1979). For a summary of research showing a positive bias in citizens' satisfaction and clients' evaluations see Stipak, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-12.
11. See Brian Stipak, "Are there Sensible Ways to Analyze and Use Subjective Indicators of Urban Service Quality?" *Science Indicators Research*, Vol. 6 (October 1979), pp. 4, 7-135. Also see Brian Stipak, "Citizen Satisfaction with Urban Services: Potential Misuse as a Performance Indicator," *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 39 (Jan./Feb. 1979), pp. 48-51. Reprinted in Lee Sechrest (ed.), *Evaluation Studies Review Annual* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1979).
12. Management Services Research Report, "1978 Dallas City Profile: Ethnicity and Service Satisfaction," Office of Management Services, Dallas, Texas.
13. For information about the use of citizen surveys in Dayton contact Timothy Riordan or Paul Woodie, Office of Management and Budget, Municipal Building, Dayton, Ohio 45401 (phone 513--225-5078). For Dallas contact Camille Barnett (phone 214--670-3318) or Robert Winslow (phone 214--670-4854, City Hall, Dallas, Texas 75201. For St. Petersburg contact Gerri Mason, Department of Budget and Management, P.O. Box 2842, St. Petersburg, Florida 33731 (phone 813--893-7436).
For a description of the use of regular citizen surveys by county government in the Louisville, Kentucky, area see Stanley A. Murrell and Paul Schulte, "A Procedure for Systematic Citizen Input to Community Decision Making," *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol. 8 (February 1980).
14. Quoted in "701" *Planning and Management, Dallas, Texas: City Profile Survey*, International City Management Association and American Institute of Planners report, n.d.
15. For examples of the use of performance objectives based on citizen surveys see *1979 Program Strategies*, Office of Management and Budget, Dayton, Ohio.
16. *1978 Dallas City Profile: Results and Findings*, Office of Management Services, Dallas, Texas.
17. *1978 Multi-Service Citizen Survey for the City of St. Petersburg*, Department of Budget and Management, St. Petersburg, Florida.
18. *1978 Program Strategies*, *op. cit.*, pp. 23, 70.
19. Some examples are based on private conversations with city officials, and others are drawn from "701" *Planning and Management, Dallas, Texas: City Profile Survey*, *op. cit.*
20. The cost for Dayton's in-person home-inter-view survey of 600-800 respondents has been between \$8,000-\$15,000. In recent years the cost has been kept low by contracting with university researchers who use the survey for teaching purposes. Also, Dayton has staff personnel who do the questionnaire design and data analysis. Dayton administrators estimate that cities lacking such staff resources would have to pay \$20,000-\$25,000 to contract for all aspects of the survey effort. The cost for the current Dallas City Profile Survey is \$43,000 for a 2,400 respondent sample of mixed telephone (35 percent) and in-person (65 percent) interviews.
21. For discussions of these issues concerning interpretation and analysis see Brian Stipak, "Using Clients to Evaluate Programs," *op. cit.*, Brian Stipak, "Are there Sensible Ways to Analyze and Use Subjective Indicators of Urban Service Quality?" *op. cit.*, and to Brian Stipak, "Citizen Satisfaction with Urban Services: Potential Misuse as a Performance Indicator," *op. cit.*
22. *1979 Program Strategies*, *op. cit.*, p. 111.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 70.