

Public Attitudes Toward Community Services: Implications for Policy

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In the past few years, urban policy makers have increasingly come to focus on service delivery issues and problems. Paramount among these is the need for local government officials to balance citizen service expectations with the fiscal capabilities of the city. Citizens are not only consumers of municipal services but also, by virtue of their tax dollars, the ultimate sponsors. As sponsors, they expect to receive their "money's worth"¹ and demand more and better services from their city. Moreover, Proposition 13 in California and similar referenda efforts in other states demonstrate that taxpayers will "revolt" if taxation becomes too burdensome.

Such citizen-based pressures, coupled with the growing financial problems facing many U. S. cities, have placed urban administrators in a difficult position. Not only must they strive to increase citizen satisfaction with the services provided, but they must also hold the line on local taxes. In short, they must do more with less.

As aids to help government officials assess the quality of service performance and allocate scarce revenues efficiently, public opinion surveys of citizen attitudes toward local services are growing in popularity.² While citizen responses to such surveys cannot be considered perfect indicators of service performance,³ they can help urban administrators identify sufficient and deficient areas of delivery.

This study examines public service evaluations in a medium size, southwestern community — Norman, Oklahoma. In addition to presenting citizen assessments of 12 services provided by the city, the study analyzes variations in service assessment based on citizens' neighborhood and social class characteristics.

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¹See York Willbern and L. A. Williams, "City Taxes and Services: Citizens Speak Out," *9 Nation's Cities* (August, 1971), pp. 9-24.

²For a discussion of citizen surveys and urban service delivery see David R. Morgan, *Managing Urban America* (North Scituate, Mass.: Duxbury Press, 1979), pp. 168-172.

³See Brian Stipak, "Are There Sensible Ways to Analyze and Use Subjective Indicators of Urban Service Delivery?," *Social Indicators Research* (October, 1979), pp. 421-438.

Data

The data upon which the study is based were collected as part of a survey of community attitudes commissioned by the City of Norman in 1978. The sample consists of 590 residents who were chosen according to techniques of random selection from the Norman population of 60,000 and interviewed in person. In addition to ascertaining the attitudes and demographic characteristics of the sample, the survey asked respondents to evaluate 12 services provided by the city:⁴ fire protection, water supply, libraries, police protection, sanitation and sewage, garbage collection, parks and recreation, street cleaning, animal control, street construction, storm drainage and food control, and street maintenance.

Public Service Assessments in Norman

Table 1 presents the service evaluations of the Norman sample. The table shows that over 50 per cent of the sample rated the level of service provision of eight of the services as "good." Thus, a majority of respondents seem satisfied with fire, water, library, police, sanitation, garbage, parks, and street cleaning services. Four services, however, received less favorable evaluations from the sample: animal control, street construction, storm drainage and flood control, and street maintenance. In fact, 25 per cent or more of the respondents rated these services as "poor." If these four services are considered collectively, they represent a key functional service area — street maintenance and construction.⁵ The results of the survey strongly suggest that Norman residents feel that this service area demands official attention.

Social Class and Neighborhood Differences in Service Assessments

Previous research suggests that service evaluations may vary according to certain "socio-spatial" characteristics of citizens such as social class and neighborhood. While prior studies have not been able to substantiate empirically the effect of socioeconomic status on service assessments, it remains a controversial topic in research.⁶ A strong linkage, however, has

⁴The text of the item reads: "The City of Norman currently provides several services to its citizens. As I read each service, could you tell me whether you think the service is good, fair, or poor."

⁵While intuitively storm drainage can be viewed as a street service, animal control is much harder to conceptualize. However, the most obvious effects associated with this service — for example, driving hazards, strewn garbage, animal waste, etc. — are readily observed by citizens from the street level. See J. Mitchell, "Animal Control in a Small Town," *Municipal Management* (Spring, 1979), pp. 154-156.

⁶See Roger Durand, "Some Dynamics of Urban Service Evaluations Among Blacks and Whites," *Social Science Quarterly* (March, 1976), pp. 698-706; John Pelissero, *Citizen Evaluations of Community Services in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Bureau of Government Research, 1978).

TABLE I
CITIZEN EVALUATIONS OF 12 MUNICIPAL
SERVICES IN NORMAN, OKLAHOMA*

Service	Evaluation			N
	Good	Fair	Poor	
Fire Protection	81	16	3	512
Water Supply	77	18	5	561
Library Facilities	74	21	5	501
Police Protection	68	28	4	541
Sanitary Sewer	68	25	7	535
Garbage Collection	66	29	5	574
Parks and Recreation	60	32	8	566
Street Cleaning	57	34	9	543
Animal Control	35	40	25	529
Street Construction	28	46	26	540
Storm Drainage and Flood Control	27	29	44	531
Street Maintenance	26	42	32	563

*All figures are per cents.

been found between neighborhood of residence and perceptions of service quality.⁷ Table II summarizes the results of analysis investigating possible differences in service evaluations in Norman based on respondents' social class and type of neighborhood (central business district, urban area, urban fringe).⁸

With respect to the effect of social class, Table II reveals findings similar to those of previous research: For most of the services, great differences in positive evaluations according to socioeconomic status are not observed. It is interesting to note, however, that high social class respondents evaluate water, police, and sanitation services more favorably than do other respondents, while those falling into the lowest category of social class evaluate street construction and street maintenance services more positively. In addition, respondents of medium social class seem noticeably less satisfied with library services than do the other two sub-groups. Although these results do not establish clear trends, they intimate that at least for some types of services, social class may make a difference in evaluation.

⁷See Nicholas Lovrich, Jr. and G. Thomas Taylor, Jr., "Neighborhood Evaluation of Local Government Services: A Citizen Survey Approach," *12 Urban Affairs Quarterly* (December, 1976), pp. 197-222.

⁸Social class is determined in this study by combining the two three-point income and education variables. Neighborhood is operationalized by recoding the 15 different map areas in the original survey into three generic types of neighborhoods: central business district, urban, and urban fringe. For the most part, the boundaries of the 15 map areas were citizen defined.

Neighborhood demonstrates a more pronounced effect on service attitudes. Table II indicates that in the aggregate, respondents residing in urban neighborhoods evaluate the services of fire and police protection, water supply, garbage collection, and animal control more positively than do those living in other types of neighborhoods by as much as 12 per cent. These results suggest that urban area respondents are more satisfied with the basic "health and safety" services provided by their city than are those who reside in other types of neighborhoods.

Little variation in citizen assessments by type of neighborhood is encountered with respect to four of the services: parks and recreation, street cleaning, street construction, and storm drainage and flood control. In general, regardless of neighborhood of residence, respondents gave poor ratings to these street-related services.

TABLE II
POSITIVE SERVICE EVALUATIONS* FOR COMMUNITY SERVICES
BY SOCIAL CLASS AND NEIGHBORHOOD

Service	Social Class			Neighborhood		
	Low	Medium	High	Central	Urban	Urban
				Business District		
Library Facilities	82	70	82	80	73	71
Fire Protection	77	82	83	75	81	71
Water Supply	68	77	86	73	80	68
Garbage Collection	67	64	75	64	69	58
Police Protection	61	68	80	60	72	61
Parks and Recreation	61	59	64	64	59	61
Sanitary Sewers	54	69	72	61	70	69
Street Cleaning	51	57	62	59	58	54
Street Construction	38	27	27	27	27	29
Street Maintenance	35	24	20	27	27	18
Animal Control	33	35	40	28	37	31
Storm Drainage and Flood Control	18	29	20	30	26	25
(Max N)**	(41)	(383)	(75)	(111)	(359)	(69)

*Only the single category of positive evaluations are reported. All figures are per cents.

**Maximum number of respondents.

Table II also shows that respondents living in central business district neighborhoods of Norman evaluated library services most positively, and those residing in the urban fringe evaluated street maintenance services most negatively. These findings support the general validity of the service evaluations. That is, the main public library in Norman is located in the central business district. In addition, *a priori*, one would expect that street

maintenance services in rural areas of the city would not receive the same priority as inter-city street repairs.

Summary

In general, Norman residents seem reasonably satisfied with the quality of local public services. The major exception to this finding pertains to street-related services, where citizens demonstrated a very low level of satisfaction with animal control, street construction, street maintenance, and storm drainage services. Unfortunately, this result is not unique to the Norman community. In a recent state-wide survey, Oklahoma residents rated the quality of "streets" lower than that of any other service.⁹

When this general trend was examined more closely, the two variables analyzed as potential sources of citizen evaluations, social class and neighborhood location, yielded some differences in assessments. Consistent with previous research, the effect of socioeconomic status on service attitudes was small to negligible. The impact of neighborhood location, however, was more pronounced. In both cases, citizen assessments varied by type of service.¹⁰ There was some degree of similarity in findings across social class and neighborhood, which is probably a consequence of the slight degree of overlap or association between these characteristics (Pearson product-moment correlation = .13).

Based on this study, some suggestions can be offered with respect to policy. Clearly, one of the primary goals of city officials should be to increase citizen satisfaction with street services in Norman. In these times of municipal fiscal scarcity and deferred capital spending,¹¹ this goal will undoubtedly be difficult to achieve. This is especially true in Norman since in the last several years city officials have been trying to economize through employee cutbacks and holding the line on service expenditures.

The results of this analysis suggest an additional tactic that Norman decision makers might employ in their efforts to do more with less: cutting funds from areas of high citizen service satisfaction and devoting them to areas of low satisfaction — street services.

⁹See David R. Morgan and John Pelissero, "Citizen Satisfaction with Local Public Services in a Southwestern State," *4 Review of Regional Economics and Business* (April, 1979), pp. 27-30.

¹⁰For a detailed discussion of why service assessments vary by types of service, see Jeffrey Brudney and Robert England, "Citizen-Based Indicators of Community Service Performance: The Case of Norman, Oklahoma" (Norman: University of Oklahoma, Bureau of Government Research, forthcoming).

¹¹For a discussion of the fiscal woes facing U. S. cities, see R. Bahl, ed., *The Fiscal Outlook for Cities* (Syracuse, N. Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1978).