ARE THERE SENSIBLE WAYS TO ANALYZE AND USE SUBJECTIVE INDICATORS OF URBAN SERVICE QUALITY?

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ABSTRACT. The application of subjective social indicators to evaluating local governmental services poses problems of interpretation and analysis. For several reasons, higher levels of subjective performance do not necessarily imply that in any other sense service performance is higher. Therefore, it may be erroneous to interpret an indicator such as expressed citizen satisfaction with a service as a measure of the quality of service government actually provides. Comparisons of average satisfaction levels can be especially misleading, as several simple simulation examples illustrate. This paper discusses some of the techniques and assumptions necessary for dealing with these problems, and offers some recommendations for using subjective indicators in local policy analysis.

Since research on subjective social indicators is in an early stage, existing work (e.g. Andrews and Withey, 1976; Campbell et al., 1976) has focused on developing measures and on understanding the dimensional structure of the measures. As subjective social indicator research progresses, one potential area of application is the evaluation of local governmental services. Unfortunately, attempts so far to apply subjective indicators to evaluating local services have tended to be simplistic in their assumptions about what the indicators measure, and to use inadequate statistical techniques for analysis. This paper examines the problems and possibilities of a more rigorous approach to the use and analysis of such indicators.

I. INTERPRETATION OF SUBJECTIVE INDICATORS OF SERVICE PERFORMANCE

Subjective indicators of urban service performance which have been used are typically based on survey items asking citizens how satisfied they are with a service, or asking citizens to express an evaluation of a service. A simplistic approach is to assume on face validity that indicators such as expressed citizen satisfaction measure some aspect of the actual quality of the service which is provided, and can therefore be used to rank the quality of service.
received by different individuals or groups. For example, some researchers (e.g. Shin, 1977, pp. 218–220) have used aggregate satisfaction data to compare the relative service quality citizens in different localities receive. Such inferences about service quality are valid only under a set of strong assumptions. In general, these types of comparisons and inferences can be misleading.

One reason such inferences can be misleading is that expressed satisfaction with a service may not be affected by any characteristics of that service. Clearly, if no link exists between service performance and citizen responses to an evaluation or satisfaction item, those responses are not an indicator of the quality of the actual service that government provides. A link between satisfaction and performance could easily be absent for services to which citizens pay little attention and therefore fail to perceive differences in service performance. Public opinion research has generally found citizens know little about government or public affairs, but nonetheless will express political opinions. Similarly, citizens may quite willingly provide evaluations of specific local services, despite a lack of knowledge or perceptions of service quality. Such responses might be meaningless ‘non-attitude’ responses of low temporal stability; alternatively, they could reflect real attitudes which either result from adoption of attitudes from reference groups, perhaps through the socialization process, or else derive from general evaluative orientations toward government rather than from perceptions of the specific services.

The most elaborate existing study which has empirically explored for effects of differences in service performance on expressed citizen evaluations of basic urban services was, in fact, not able to establish a linkage (Stipak, 1976). That study used a data base of merged individual, census, administrative, and other data from the Los Angeles metropolitan area to estimate models of citizen evaluations as a function of (1) service characteristics, (2) governmental characteristics, (3) neighborhood characteristics, and (4) individual characteristics. Subjective evaluation scales were created from survey items asking citizens to evaluate police, parks and recreation, refuse collection, and other basic services. A number of indicators for each service were used to measure different types of objective service characteristics—service outputs, service inputs, administrative workloads, and related community conditions. For example; the indicators examined for the police included clearance rates, property recovery rates, arrest rates, per capita expenditures, per capita employees, and crime rates. The statistical results