ABSTRACT. Subjective indicators of life quality are used frequently in the planning and decision making process. The limitations inherent in the use of subjective indicators often go unnoticed among those most likely to use such data in the context of planned change. We direct attention to a potential source of error in subjective evaluations of community services and facilities. Specifically, we utilize repeated measures to test for response bias that results from placing items in alternative sections of the same survey instrument. Evidence concerning the hypothesized presence of systematic bias was mixed. When overall service evaluation items were embedded within a section devoted exclusively to that service, considerable systematic bias was observed. The findings indicate that the choice of question format depends upon the ultimate use to which the data will be put.

Although subjective indicators can serve as useful guides for planning and decision making (Andrews, 1974; Stuby, 1979), certain problems associated with their use can lead to misinterpretation. Most importantly, the limitations of survey research that are generally well known among researchers often go unnoticed among planners and decision makers who are less familiar with survey methodologies. For instance, the use of subjective indicators in planning is frequently premised on the overly simplistic assumption that such indicators provide valid measures of service quality. Stipik (1979) points out that subgroup characteristics, geographical location, and lack of service salience among respondents are factors that can systematically bias subjective evaluations of local services. These and other sources of bias demand attention before information provided through subjective social reporting is utilized in the planning and decision making process.

To mitigate disparities between responses to attitude items and their use in planned change, we focus on one potential source of error in subjective evaluations of community services and facilities. Specifically, we utilize repeated measures of satisfaction with the public school system and available medical services to test for response bias resulting from placing items in different sections of the same survey instrument. As Schuman and Presser (1981, p. 24) point out, the context in which questionnaire items appear may influence observed responses. We refer to such bias as context effects.
Surveys asking respondents to evaluate community attributes typically use either of two question formats. On one, respondents are presented with an array of available services and facilities and asked to rate their adequacy. This checklist format has the advantage of examining a large number of community attributes within limited space and time. It frequently is used in statewide surveys to compare residents' evaluations by factors such as community size, type of economic base, and demographic composition (Dillman and Dobash, 1972; Brooks et al., 1974; Carpenter, 1975; Christenson, 1976). The second format limits entire sections of the survey instrument to a single issue; several questions are devoted to one topic and breadth of information is sacrificed for increased detail on specific services or facilities. We refer to this as the "specific" format; it is frequently adopted in surveys of single communities where local agendas dictate the substantive issues of concern.

Schuman and Presser (1981) distinguish two types of relationships among items in questionnaires. Part-part relationships involve questions at the same level of specificity. An example is what we have labeled the checklist format in which each item focuses on a separate community attribute. Part-whole relationships, on the other hand, involve questions where a general item is intended to summarize more specific items that are included in the same questionnaire. Part-whole relations are exemplified by what we refer to as the specific format where a general item summarizes satisfaction with specific components of a community service. Schuman and Presser (1981) report the results of experiments in which the order that questions were presented to respondents was reversed. They indicate that question order effects are more likely to be observed when survey items exhibit part-whole relationships than part-part relationships. They also suggest that when question order effects are observed for part-part relationships, respondents are often guided by a norm of fair play.

A potential source of question order bias may become evident by comparing overall evaluations of the same services within these two formats. We refer to such bias as context effects because the observed responses are anticipated to be conditioned by the format adopted. With a checklist format, context effects are likely when individuals rate the adequacy of one service by making mental comparisons with the other services presented in the list. Factor analytic studies have provided evidence that respondents, when