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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study reported here was to assess the various decentralization efforts as they occurred in different services and in different cities. The study reviewed decentralization's record in terms of five outcomes: (1) Increases in the flow of information between servers and served; (2) Improvements in service officials attitudes; (3) Improvements in client attitudes; (4) Improvements in services delivered; (5) Increases in client control. The study was based on an assessment of 215 previously written case studies of decentralization, collected from published sources as well as from federal agency records. The case studies covered such innovations as police-community relations programs, team policing, neighborhood health centers, new neighborhood multiservice facilities, little city halls, ombudsmen and complaint procedures and district control of schools. The Community Action and Model Cities programs prepared the groundwork for urban decentralization. However, each of these federal programs emphasized only one of the two dimensions of decentralization. The first dimension of decentralization, coming mainly from the Community Act Program, involves a client imperative. A second, equally important dimension coming more from the Model Cities experience invokes a territorial imperative. (Author/JM)

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STREET-LEVEL GOVERNMENTS:
ASSESSING DECENTRALIZATION AND URBAN SERVICES
(EXECUTIVE SUMMARY)

PREPARED FOR THE NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION

ROBERT K. YIN AND
DOUGLAS YATES

R-1527/1-NSF
OCTOBER 1974

Rand
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STREET-LEVEL GOVERNMENTS: ASSESSING DECENTRALIZATION AND URBAN SERVICES

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PREFACE

This report serves as the executive summary for *Street-Level Governments: Assessing Decentralization and Urban Services*, R-1527-NSF, October 1974. The summary presents the basic findings from a recently completed study, but the interested reader should refer to the full report for further discussions of the research methods, service contexts, and more detailed discussions of such topics as citizen participation.

An adapted version of this executive summary will appear as a special article in *Nation's Cities Magazine*.

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STREET-LEVEL GOVERNMENTS: ASSESSING DECENTRALIZATION AND URBAN SERVICE

INTRODUCTION

In the 1960s, decentralization suddenly became a major and much debated innovation in urban administration. Advocates claimed that decentralization would dramatically revitalize the urban scene, while critics believed that it would do great damage to the orderly process of government. In most cases, the goal of decentralization was either to improve services or to provide the recipients of services with a greater measure of control over service delivery. Where government was unresponsive or did not provide a needed service, decentralization also included the call for new neighborhood institutions to serve public needs--institutions that did not necessarily have to be built within the municipal bureaucracy. But whatever the form of decentralization, its central theme was to bring government closer to the people being served, and the consequent focus of decentralization was on the social relationship between those providing urban services and those receiving them.

The purpose of the present study was to assess the various decentralization efforts as they occurred in different services and in different cities. The study reviewed decentralization's record in terms of five outcomes:

1. Increases in the flow of information between servers and served. Decentralization often improves information and communication, so that those providing services know more about service needs and those using services know more about services provided. The calling of frequent meetings and distribution of printed materials would be examples. However, in the long run this outcome actually becomes a means for achieving the next four, and hence it is not considered as important as the next four.

2. Improvements in service officials' attitudes. Decentralization can lead to service officials having a more positive view of their own role, of the service being provided, or of clients and their needs.
3. Improvements in client attitudes. Decentralization can similarly lead to clients having a more positive view of their role, of the services being provided, or of the server group and its problems.
4. Improvements in services delivered. Decentralization may produce better services, as judged by output (e.g., higher reading scores) or by input (e.g., more teachers per student).
5. Increases in client control. Finally, decentralization can result in clients having the power to implement their own ideas in service delivery. For example, a local school board can be client-dominated and act as a governing body for the school district.

The study was based on an assessment of 215 previously written case studies of decentralization, collected from published sources as well as from federal agency records, and was supported by the Research Applied to National Needs program of the National Science Foundation.[1] The case studies covered such innovations as police-community relations programs, team policing, neighborhood health centers, new neighborhood multiservice facilities, little city halls, ombudsmen and complaint procedures, district control of schools, and community development corporations.

DEFINING DECENTRALIZATION

The Community Action and Model Cities programs prepared the groundwork for urban decentralization. However, each of these federal programs emphasized only one of the two dimensions of decentralization, and the federal activities themselves were not the main subject of the current study.

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[1] The full study is reported in Robert K. Yin and Douglas Yates, *Street-Level Governments: Assessing Decentralization and Urban Services*, The Rand Corporation, R-1527-NSF, October 1974. In all, 269 case studies were originally gathered, but 54 were discarded because they did not meet our criteria for research quality.

The first dimension of decentralization, coming mainly from the Community Action Program, involves a *client* imperative. Decentralization thus focuses on the status, rights, responsibilities, and powers of client groups served by public programs, regardless of residential location. *Decentralization here has meant the transference of responsibility and power to those very people who are affected by the program or innovation in question.* The client dimension of decentralization has led to a general association between any decentralization attempt and the increase in responsibility and power of those being served, especially low-income and disadvantaged groups.

But the client dimension has not been the only one. A second, equally important dimension of decentralization coming more from the Model Cities experience invokes a *territorial* imperative. That is, the target of decentralization is also a particular neighborhood--its physical assets and resident population. *Decentralization here has meant the expenditure of new resources and efforts, from whatever outside agency or level of government, to a small geographic area.* The territorial dimension of decentralization has led to a general association between any decentralization attempt and improvement in the physical and social conditions of specific neighborhoods. Thus, decentralization has come to be associated with specific neighborhoods such as Harlem, the Lower East Side, Hough, Watts, Hyde Park-Kenwood, Roxbury, and the like.

Both of these dimensions of decentralization were found in varying degrees in each project or innovation. In some cases, such as decentralization to local school boards, both the territorial and client dimensions were maximally decentralized, and the innovation was intended to produce both increases in client control and improvements for the neighborhood. In other cases, as in a city-wide grievance procedure that gave a larger role to clients or in the strict physical redeployment of services or facilities, decentralization was really occurring along one dimension but not the other. The fact that these

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two dimensions have generally not been explicitly contrasted in the past may account for some of the confusion over the term "decentralization." For some observers decentralization automatically connotes the client dimension and raises one set of expectations regarding the transference of political power; for other observers decentralization automatically connotes the territorial dimension and raises another set of expectations regarding neighborhood issues.

These two dimensions allowed us to categorize the decentralization efforts into three groups:

- Those that were *weak* forms of decentralization because significant decentralization was not intended on either territorial or client dimensions (physical redeployment, administrative decentralization, and grievance mechanisms were the weaker forms, with community relations being the weakest of all);
- Those that were *moderate* forms because some decentralization along both dimensions was intended (indigenous employment and new neighborhood institutions were the moderate forms); and
- Those that were *strong* forms because substantial decentralization along both dimensions was intended (political decentralization).

The terms "weak," "moderate," and "strong," in other words, were applied throughout the present study as descriptions of the intended degree of decentralization and did not refer to the effects of decentralization. In total, 66 case studies fell into the weak category, 56 into the moderate category, and 93 into the strong category.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHOD

The study dealt with the following major questions:

- What have been the outcomes of the decentralization innovations, as reported by the case studies?

- What was the relationship between these outcomes and the attempt to implement weak, moderate, and strong decentralization strategies?
- What was the relationship between these outcomes and other factors such as the type of service being decentralized, the availability of federal funds to support the innovation, and the role of the mayor in supporting the innovation?
- What have been the lessons and effects of the decentralization experience?

The answers to these questions were based on the aggregation of 215 case studies of urban decentralization efforts in five service areas: public safety, health, multiservice programs, education, and economic development (see Figure 1 for a sample list of studies). The application of a *case survey method* provided the means for aggregating the characteristics from these case studies. The case survey called for a reader-analyst to answer the same set of questions, or checklist, for each case study of decentralization, with a case study being defined as *any description of a site-specific organizational change in an urban area.*[1] These checklist data then served as the basic body of evidence resulting from our review of the decentralization literature.

OUTCOMES OF URBAN DECENTRALIZATION

In the aggregate, what were the decentralization outcomes reported by the case studies? Five different checklist questions served as the keys to the five decentralization outcomes. An affirmative answer to any

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[1] The checklist questions were closed-ended, allowing the answers to be aggregated in a simple manner. The questions covered the major characteristics of decentralization, divided into four sections: the nature of the case study, the background characteristics for the innovation, the characteristics of the decentralization innovation, and the outcomes of the decentralization innovation. In all, there were a total of 118 questions that the reader-analyst had to answer.

Fig. 1 -- SAMPLE LIST OF CASE STUDIES REVIEWED

Published

Donald Norris, *Police-Community Relations: A Program That Failed* (1973).

Lawrence W. Sherman, et al., *Team Policing* (1973).

Marilyn Gittell, *School Boards and School Policy* (1973).

Melvin Zimet, *Decentralization and School Effectiveness* (1973).

Seymour Bellin and Jack Geiger, "The Impact of a Neighborhood Health Center on Patients' Behavior and Attitudes Relating to Health Care: A Study of a Low Income Housing Project" (1972).

Eric Nordlinger, *Decentralizing the City: A Study of Boston's Little City Halls* (1972).

George Washnis, *Municipal Decentralization and Neighborhood Resources* (1972).

Nels Ackerson and Lawrence Sharf, "Community Development Corporations: Operations and Financing" (1970).

Unpublished

Rita M. Kelly et al., "The Pilot Police Project" (American Institute for Research, 1972).

Raymond Bauer et al., "Urban Education: Eight Experiments in Community Control" (Arthur D. Little, 1969).

Franklin D. Chu and Sharland Trotter, "The Mental Health Complex" (Center for Responsive Law, 1972).

Abt Associates, "A Study of the Neighoorhood Center Pilot Program" (Cambridge, 1969).

Leonard D. Goodstein, "An Evaluation of the Dayton Ombudsman" (University of Cincinnati, 1972).

Abt Associates, "An Evaluation of the Special Impact Program" (Cambridge, 1972).

Westinghouse Learning Corporation, "An Evaluation of FY 1968 Special Impact Programs" (Bladensburg, Maryland, 1970).

one of these questions meant that a positive outcome was tallied. (See Figures 2-6 for examples of the case study evidence.) Individual studies could obviously report more than one outcome or none at all.

Based on these tallies, the two [illegible] outcomes were improved services and increased flow of information. About 66 percent of all the studies reported an association between decentralization and an improvement in services, whether of a major or minor sort, and about 61 percent of the studies reported an association between decentralization and an improved flow of information. The other three outcomes each occurred in less than 25 percent of the studies (see Figure 7). These rates of outcomes, especially of improved services, suggest that *the case studies have on balance reported a fairly positive picture of the decentralization experience.* Certainly the results do not warrant any of the strongly negative interpretations of the overall decentralization experience, a point to be discussed further at the end of this report.

The five outcomes were also examined for potential tradeoffs. That is, a prevailing question about decentralization is whether certain outcomes tend to occur only at the expense of other outcomes. In particular, increased citizen control may occur to the exclusion of improved services, or vice versa. To test this and similar hypotheses regarding the relationship among the five outcomes, cross-tabulations were carried out for the 215 case studies, with each paired combination of the five outcomes being examined. The results showed the following statistically significant relationships:

- o Increased client control, as an outcome, was *positively* related to improved services; and
- o Improved agency attitudes were *positively* related to improved client attitudes.

None of the other cross-tabulations among the five outcomes showed a significant relationship, in a positive or negative direction, indicating that there were no negative tradeoffs among any of the outcomes as the only significant relationships were positive.

Fig. 2 -- INCREASED FLOW OF INFORMATION

One question in the checklist dealt with increased social contact or passage of information between servers and served. Examples of evidence from specific case studies were:

> "The Public Information Office handles some 4,000 complaints and 8,000 walk-in requests for information annually."
>
> "During the first three months, the paraprofessional receptionists served 20,000 clients."
>
> ". . . outreach workers helped clients to complete forms and prepare letters on the client's behalf . . ."
>
> ". . . the health education aides carried out a community survey to determine residents' perceived health problems . . ."
>
> "The school . . . produced a widely acclaimed community information manual which was distributed to every parent or family . . ."

A total of 132 or *61.4 percent of all the studies indicated that an increase in information had occurred* as a result of the decentralization innovation.

Fig. 3 -- IMPROVED SERVICE OFFICIALS' ATTITUDES

A second checklist question dealt with any evidence that service officials had a more positive attitude toward either the service being rendered or the clients as a result of the innovation. Examples of evidence of positive and negative outcomes were:

> "[As assessed on a questionnaire], teachers and administrators perceived [the decentralized schools] to have a stronger, freer intellectual atmosphere and a more growth-inducing climate."
>
> ". . . police officers responded 'yes' when asked whether they thought [the unit] had improved police-community relations."
>
> "The [new decentralized police] teams never became popular with non-team members, . . . and [there were] recruiting difficulties."
>
> ". . . [survey results show] agencies which work within little city hall facilities generally feel the program has helped them relate to the city and reach citizens more effectively by their proximity."

A total of 27 or *12.6 percent of the studies indicated that service officials' attitudes had improved* as a result of the decentralization innovation.

Fig. 4 -- IMPROVED CLIENT ATTITUDES

A third question dealt with changes in client attitudes, either toward service officials or the services rendered. Examples were:

> ". . . [A majority of the] residents surveyed expressed agreement with the statement, 'I believe the program makes my neighborhood safe.'"
>
> "Citizens view branch city halls as a convenience to them in those areas where service is good. The branches reinforce community identity . . ."
>
> ". . . students [in the decentralization program] responded positively to forty statements about the police, requiring responses from favorable to unfavorable on an 11-point scale . . ."
>
> "Community board members surveyed gave a high rating for the community officer program . . ."
>
> "Patients were asked to rate their satisfaction with services and to note whether they knew the staff person who had served them . . ."

A total of 53 or *24.7 percent of the studies indicated that client attitudes had improved* as a result of the decentralization innovation.

Fig. 5 -- IMPROVED SERVICES

The fourth outcome concerned improvements in public services that could be attributed to the decentralization innovation. Examples were:

> "Over a three-year period roughly $2 million [in loans] have been provided to forty-eight local firms."
>
> ". . . more than 1,450 houses have been renovated in a program that has employed over 900 formerly unemployed and unskilled youths."
>
> "[Before the clinic was expanded, there were] 350 patients per month. Afterwards, the average was 550 patients per month."
>
> "1,000 patient visits were analyzed for the average number of diagnostic and treatment actions, and the results compared with those of three non-poverty clinics."
>
> "For calendar 1970, 1,887 individuals were registered at the center and participation [in its service activities] totaled 47,438."
>
> "[The program has resulted in] . . . 135 ditches being cleaned, 55 streets repaired, 45 lots cleared, . . ."

A total of 142 or *66.1 percent of the case studies indicated an improvement in services* attributable to the decentralization innovation.

Fig. 6 -- INCREASED CLIENT CONTROL

The fifth and last outcome was reflected in the checklist question on the clients' ability to implement their own ideas in organizing services. An affirmative answer to this question meant that the case study had pointed to some decision that had been made or heavily influenced by the clients. Examples of this evidence were:

> "When the School Board proposed that a community school coordinator should have a salary of $14,000 and academic requirements that would have eliminated [neighborhood] residents from consideration, the [local board] came in with a counterproposal. Finally, a compromise was reached that there should be a $10,000 coordinator and a $6,000 assistant coordinator as a resident-in-training for the job."
>
> "Residents helped to develop the neighborhood youth center and the drug abuse and new careers programs."
>
> "The [citizen board] chose the site . . . and reviewed staff appointments for the new health center . . ."
>
> ". . . the community boards won the right to appoint their own local superintendent to either 2- or 4-year contracts. Previously the local superintendents were named, virtually for life, by the central board."
>
> ". . . forty [neighborhood] residents elected in neighborhood elections and seventeen appointed agency representatives serve on the . . . board, which plans and governs the . . . program."

A total of 48 or *22.3 percent of the case studies indicated an increase in client control* as a result of the decentralization innovation.

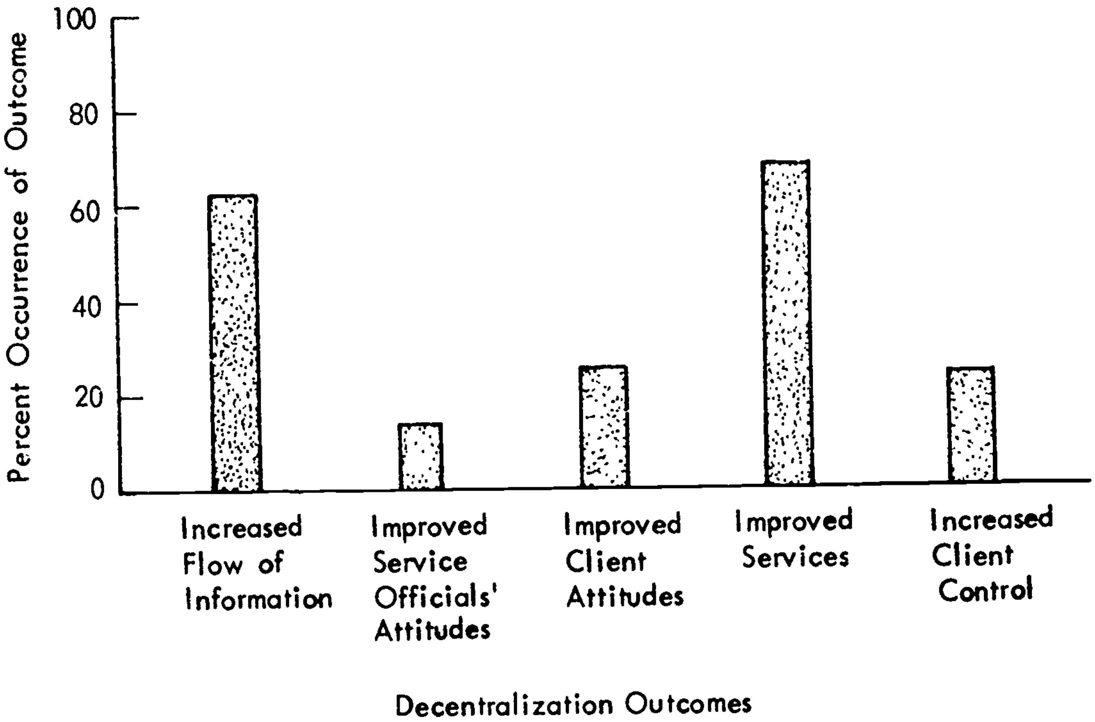


Fig. 7 -- Results for Five Decentralization Outcomes (n = 215)

Finally, when the weak, moderate, and strong categories of decentralization efforts were compared in terms of the frequency of the five outcomes, the results (see Figure 8) showed that:

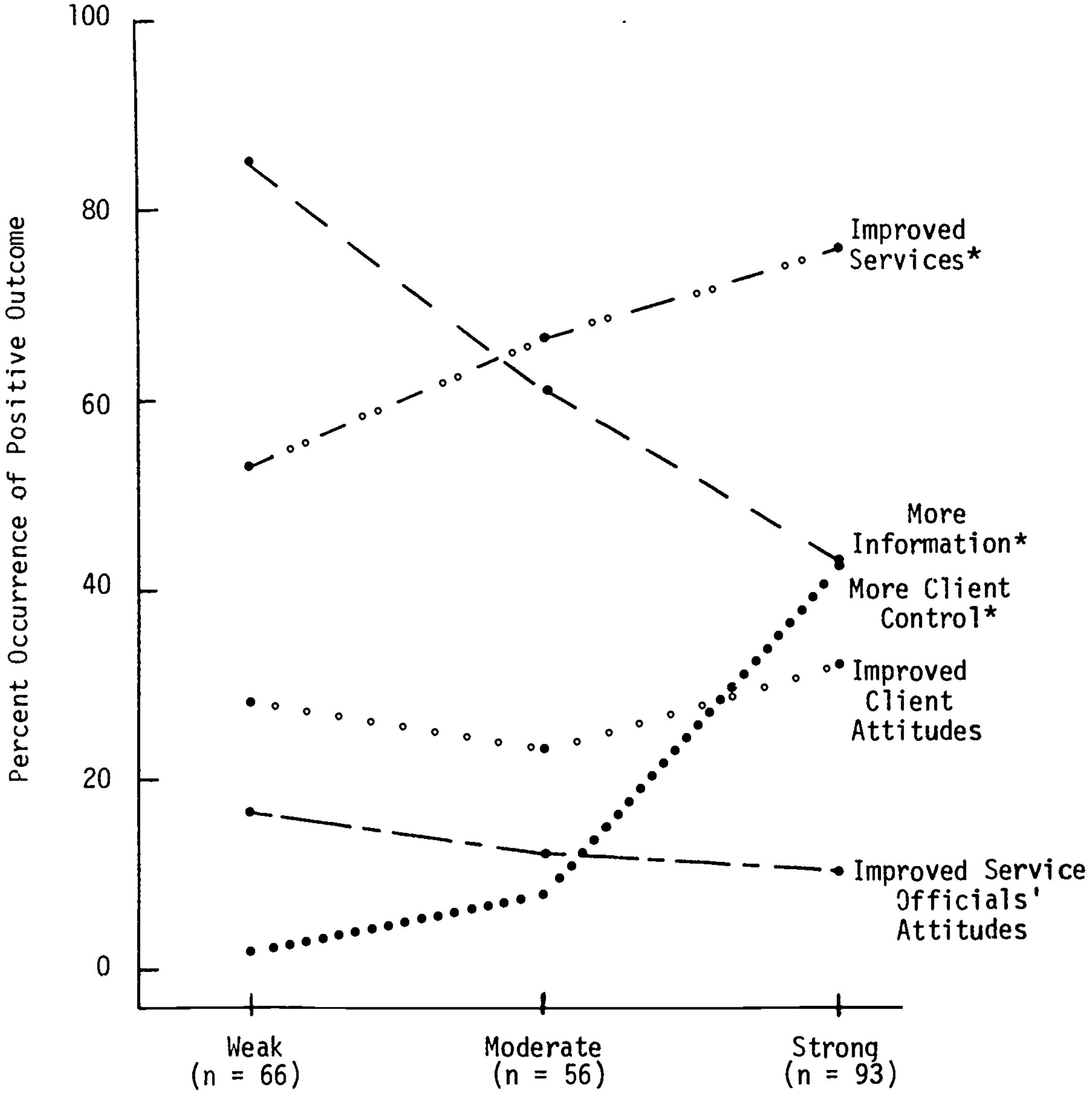
- *Strong forms of decentralization were associated with higher frequencies of improved services and increased client control;*
- *Weak forms were associated with increased information; and*
- *No significant differences were observed for improved agency attitudes and improved client attitudes.*

In other words, strong decentralization was more successful in achieving *both* the service improvement and client control outcomes.

The lack of any relationship between the strength of the decentralization strategy and either service officials' or clients' attitudes is consistent with a theme found in the past--that decentralization innovations probably have little effect on attitudes about government. Such attitudes appear to be based on many factors, not merely those concerned with specific local service, and cannot be expected to be changed on the basis of innovations in a specific service. Media coverage, national and even foreign affairs, and simple awareness of local events and service changes are all as likely as the innovation itself to be important in shaping attitudes toward a specific local service such as police protection, education, or health services.

STREET-LEVEL GOVERNMENTS: THE SERVICE HYPOTHESIS

If strong decentralization strategies were so clearly related to positive outcomes for improved services and increased client control, then it is important to understand the conditions under which strong decentralization took place. One of the most important factors here appeared to be the nature of the service bureaucracy and the specific service being decentralized. In other words, urban decentralization can occur only within the context of a specific municipal service--for example, police or fire protection, education, and social services. Each



*p < .01.

Fig. 8 -- Weak, Moderate, and Strong Decentralization Strategies, by Five Outcomes

service has different traditions and ground rules, and these affect any decentralization innovation attempted in that service.

The problems of service delivery at the street-level are not the problems of a single governmental structure, but are those of different street-level governments. For instance, the police service is a separate entity that operates rather independently of and in a different manner from the school system or the health care system. These street-level governments differ in their decisionmaking processes, their internal relations of authority, their ethnic, age, and sex composition of employment, and, most important, in their openness to the participation and demands of the governed in influencing service policies.

Police protection and health services are dominated by highly professional server groups that set the rules for service delivery. Clients have traditionally had little policy influence over these services, even though considerable discretion may be exercised in individual police-citizen or doctor-patient relationships. In multiservice programs, there is no dominant professional server group, but there have also been no traditional mechanisms available for clients to participate in policymaking, as a strong bureaucracy has traditionally minimized client influence. In contrast, in education and economic development, clients have had greater opportunities to influence policymaking. In education, the traditional openness of the service to parents and the establishment of joint parent-teacher organizations and activities have provided a basis for an exchange of ideas and for the potential influence by parents over school policy. In economic development, the public service is fairly new on the urban scene, but the basic tenet of organization has been an even stronger sharing of responsibility between servers and served.

In contrasting these services, there are two important elements at work: the degree of professionalism and the scope of bureaucratic control. The more a service area possesses both of these elements, the more *closed* it is to client influence; the less a service possesses them, the more *open* it is. Given these two elements, the five services in our study were ranked as shown in Table 1. The service hypothesis is therefore that this basic nature of the service bureaucracy not only affects the outcomes of any decentralization, but also affects the types of decentralization innovations tried in the first place.

Table 1

RANKING OF FIVE SERVICE AREAS BY SERVER-SERVED RELATIONSHIP

	Degree of Server Control over Policies	
Service	Professional	Bureaucratic
Safety	High	High
Health	High	Moderate
Multiservice programs	Low	High
Education	Moderate	Moderate
Economic development	Low	Low

The case survey revealed that each of the five services was marked by characteristically different strategies and outcomes. In particular, the safety, health, and multiservice areas had high occurrences of weak decentralization strategies, whereas the education and economic development areas had high occurrences of strong strategies. Table 2 summarizes the frequency of occurrence of weak, moderate, and strong strategies for each service area and shows that the relationship between services and type of strategy was highly significant. In this relationship, the more open the service in terms of the degree of professional and bureaucratic control, the more frequently strong decentralization strategies were tried; conversely, the more closed the bureaucracy, the more frequently weak strategies were tried.

Because of these service variations in strategies attempted, it was not surprising that the five services also varied significantly in the frequency of positive outcomes. Figure 9 shows the success rates for each outcome by service area. The safety and multiservice areas had high rates of increased flow of information but low rates of increased client control. Education and economic development showed distinctively high rates of increased client control. Health had

Table 2

WEAK, MODERATE, AND STRONG DECENTRALIZATION STRATEGIES
BY SERVICE AREA
(n=215)[a]

Service Area	Total Number of Studies	Type of Decentralization Strategy		
		Strong	Moderate	Weak
Safety	38	4	10	24
Health	48	13	21	14
Multiservice	41	8	10	23
Education	34	26	3	5
Economic development	54	42	12	0
Total	215	93	56	66

[a] $\chi^2 = 92.09$, df = 8, $p < .001$.

moderate outcome levels in comparison with the other service areas for all the outcomes. For each outcome, the service variation was statistically significant.

These findings fit into a single general explanation for the decentralization outcomes. The first part of the explanation is that stronger decentralization strategies were more successful than weak ones in improving services and increasing client control because the stronger strategies (new institutions, employment, and political decentralization) put greater political and economic resources in the hands of service deliverers and clients, and constituted potent instruments for reshaping the service relationship. By contrast, the resources and administrative leverage provided by the weak strategies (community relations, grievance mechanisms, physical redeployment, and administrative decentralization) were less substantial. Thus, one might simply conclude that the stronger the decentralization strategy, the more successful it was for improving services and increasing client control.

The second part of the explanation, however, concerns the service conditions for decentralization. Here, the thesis is that there was

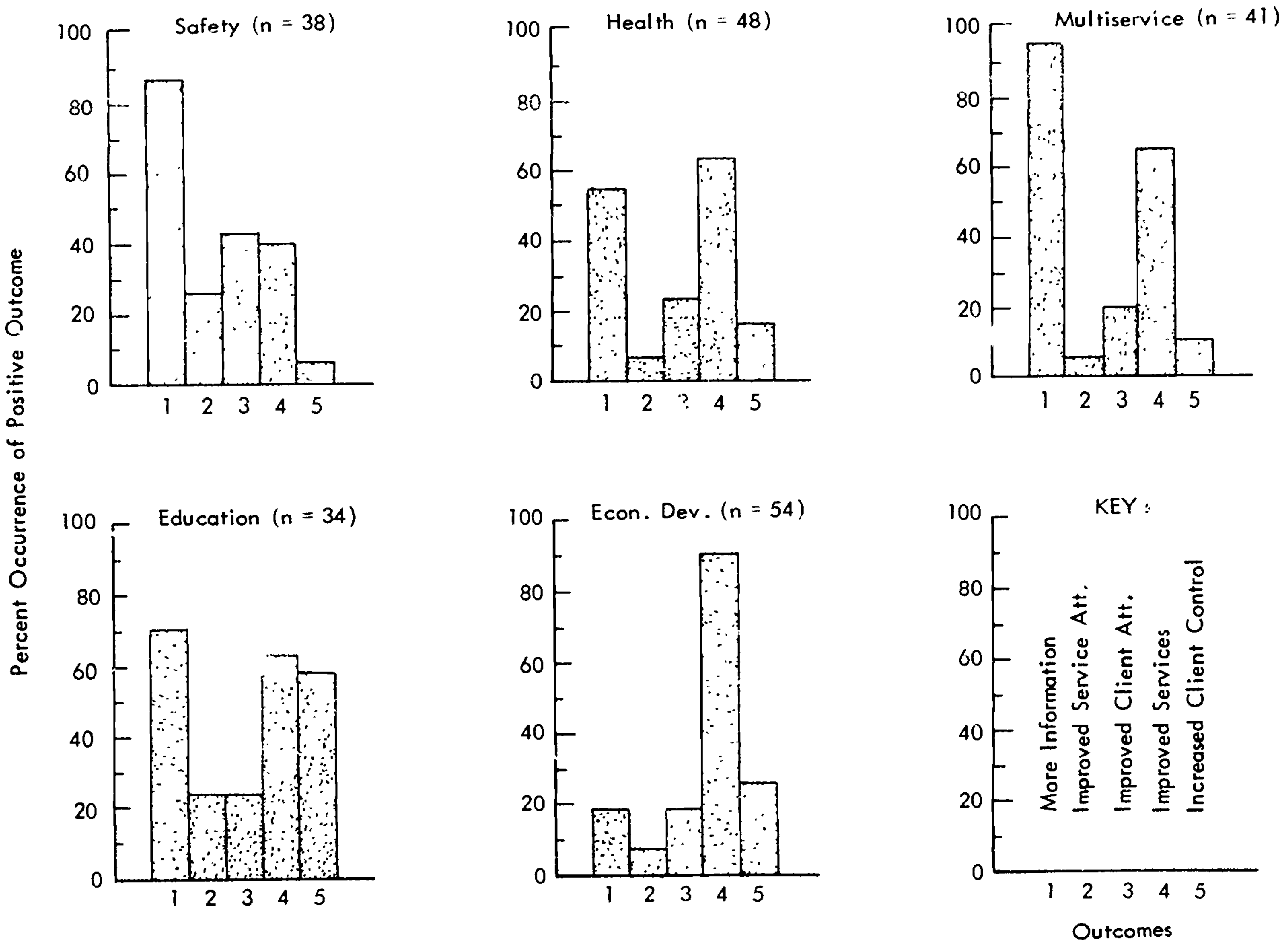


Fig. 9 --Decentralization Outcomes, by Service Area

an obstacle to decentralization that hinged on the openness or closedness of the service bureaucracy. Any decentralization strategy will encounter opposition in the more bureaucratic and professionalized (and hence closed) services. Closed bureaucracies therefore tended to permit only weak strategies to emerge. Conversely, strong strategies emerged and were successful in such open bureaucracies as education and economic development. In sum, the success of decentralization depended on *two* factors:

(1) *Successful decentralization was directly related to the strength of the decentralization strategy;* and

(2) *Successful decentralization was inversely related to the degree of professional and bureaucratic control over service policies.*

THE NON-SERVICE VIEW: INFLUENCE OF EXOGENOUS FACTORS

In contrast to the interpretation that successful decentralization was determined in part by the strategy and in part by the service, other analysts have frequently cited exogenous, non-service-specific factors as being most highly associated with success. These factors deal primarily with the preconditions for decentralization. Two preconditions in particular have been thought to be related to successful decentralization experiences:

- o Financial support of the innovation by the federal government; and
- o The support of the innovation by the mayor or municipal executive.

The case survey showed that these factors did not account for the pattern of decentralization outcomes and hence could not be used to negate the strategy-service interpretation.

Figure 10 shows the decentralization outcomes in relation to the presence of federal support. The results indicated that there were no significant differences for any of the five outcomes, and hence *the*

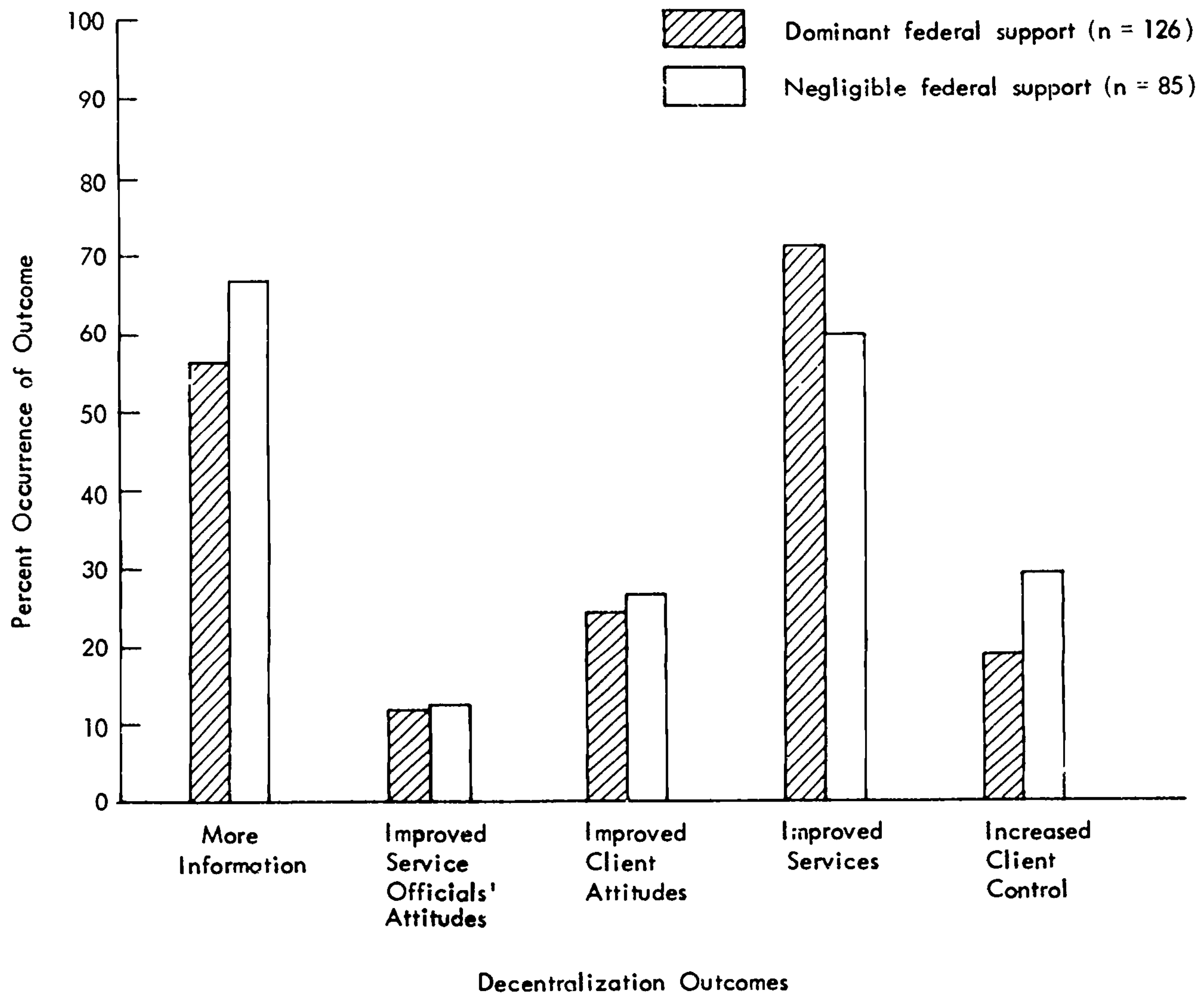


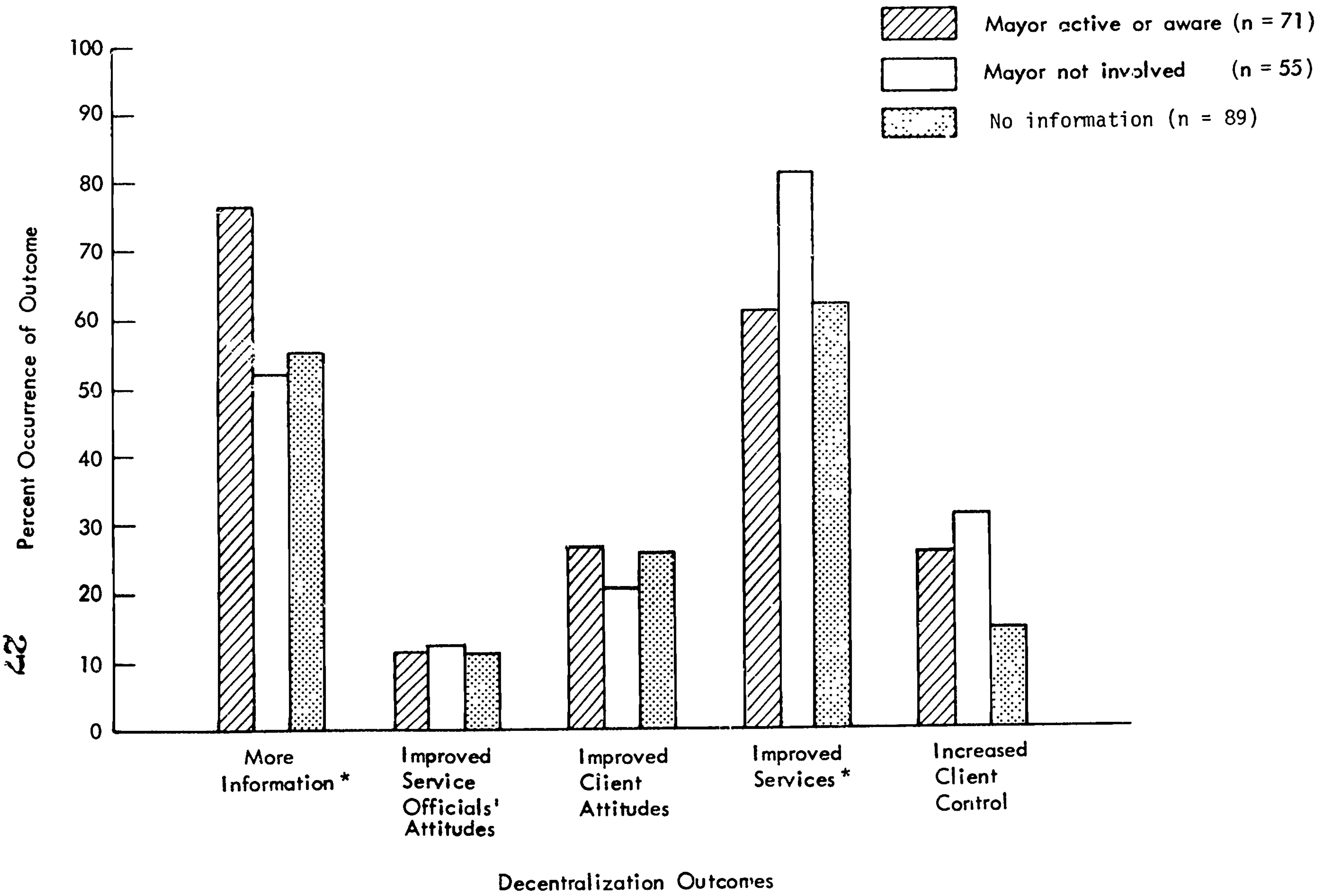
Fig 10 -- Relationship of Federal Financial Support to Decentralization Outcomes

presence of federal support made little difference for the decentralization outcomes. These results do differ from those reported by others, but the explanation of the difference appears quite simple. Previous studies have focused primarily on CAP and Model Cities efforts, whereas our study focused on decentralization in specific urban services. Thus, although the proportion of federal funds may be an important factor in building citizen participation in new programs such as CAPs and Model Cities, the presence of such funds did not influence and should not be expected to have influenced the outcomes of decentralization in existing service bureaucracies.

A second factor that has been considered very important to successful decentralization is the active participation of the mayor or municipal executive in the innovation. The interpretation has been that a mayor's commitment to an innovation may mean the availability of more local resources; but at a minimum, his support means that city hall will probably not try to undermine the innovation.

The case survey included a question regarding the role of the mayor or municipal executive. However, the answers were quite sensitive to the completeness or focus of the original case study, and there were 89 studies, or over 40 percent of the cases, in which "no information" was given as the answer to this question. This "no response" rate was much higher than that of any other question reported throughout this entire study, and the results should therefore be interpreted with extreme caution.

The results showed that the only decentralization outcomes for which mayoral or municipal executive activity appeared to make a difference were increased flow of information and improved services (see Figure 11). Mayoral activity was *not* related to increased client control. The interesting aspect of these findings is that mayoral activity was inversely related to improved services and positively related to increased information, suggesting that mayoral participation was associated with weak decentralization strategies. In general, *the case survey, with a high "no response" rate on this question, showed no positive relationships between mayoral activity and improved services or increased client control.*



*p < .05

Fig. 11 -- Relationship of Mayor's Role to Decentralization Outcomes

Similar analyses were carried out with two other exogenous conditions, the size of the target population and the occurrence of pre-implementation conflict within the community. However, only a moderate- to small-sized target population appeared to have any relationship to both the improved services and increased control outcomes. Except for this finding, the exogenous factors did not account for the pattern of decentralization outcomes. In other words, the availability of federal funds, the active participation of the mayor, and the occurrence of pre-implementation conflict did not have the requisite relationships to the outcomes. As a result, our interpretation of the importance of strategy and service factors remains as the main conclusion regarding urban decentralization.

INTERPRETING THE DECENTRALIZATION EXPERIENCE: ITS SUCCESS AND FAILURE

Where these findings provide room for viewing decentralization innovations as a partial success given the nature of the different services, the general view held by *reformers*, *participants*, and the *majority culture* has been that decentralization has failed to produce the anticipated changes. An attempt to reconcile this seeming contradiction between the apparent success and failure of decentralization provides an opportunity for summarizing the major lessons to be learned from the urban decentralization experience.

The *reformist critique* is straightforward: Except for a very few cases, decentralization innovations have not given clients substantial authority. It is not surprising, then, that substantial client control has not occurred either, and thus, for the reformists, decentralization has simply not yet been put to a full test. This view of the decentralization experience is certainly a valid one. A significant shift in power from servers to served, for instance, would not only result in the emergence of new and powerful client-dominated organizations, but also in the waning of existing provider-dominated organizations; and such changes in the institutional balance of power have not occurred. What the reformers have themselves failed to demonstrate, however, is whether there are any viable means of achieving their goals.

The problem varies considerably by service area, and only in education has there been any evidence of frequent (though not necessarily substantial) increases in client control. Even in education, however, no successful reform strategy has emerged; the current guidelines still do not adequately assure that new decentralization attempts will not also be accompanied by a more than compensatory surge of union or centrist power. For other service areas, the lack of a viable strategy is an even greater deficiency. There are no demonstrable mechanisms for substantially increasing client control, for instance, over such closed bureaucracies as the police or fire departments. The only alternative would appear to be the establishment of new organizations that would provide the same services and be client-controlled. However, this alternative must be discarded on the basis of the experience with the economic development cases. The reformers have failed to address the question of why substantial community control did not emerge even here, but one suspects that the development of a new institution may not be the phase during which client control can work effectively.

In short, the reformers have not developed a strategy for creating client-controlled urban services in the variety of organizational circumstances in which such services are delivered. Given the lack of such a strategy, the reformists' critique of the decentralization experience has been somewhat utopian. The failure of decentralization has been a judgment based on the failure to attain unachievable goals.

The *participants' critique* stems from the fact that most people who have participated in decentralization innovations, whether as service officials or as consumer representatives, tend to have negative feelings toward decentralization. The personal or collective benefits from decentralization have failed to justify the heavy personal "costs" of participation. The "costs" include the endless hours spent, emotions invested, and conflicts and frustrations produced.

The participants' critique is valid and cannot be discarded. Most of the benefits from decentralization that our study uncovered were minor and certainly were not likely to justify heavy participant "costs." So although in our terms decentralization may have succeeded, in the participants' terms it did not succeed nearly enough. And future decentralization efforts must keep this implicit calculus in mind: Whatever the projected benefits, they must outweigh the costs of participation.

Finally, the *majority critique* is captured by the declining public interest in decentralization. The critique is implicitly based on a certain view of the city of the 1960s, which was that the city was burdened with increased crime and drug addiction, declining quality of inner-city education and health, high rates of unemployment and welfare dependency, and residential abandonment and decay.

Many of the proposals for decentralization stemmed from a desire to deal with these urban problems and the quality of life. In fact, decentralization today is still associated with vague but important expectations that one's city or neighborhood will become a more pleasant place in which to live. The majority critique of decentralization, then, is that decentralization failed to produce visible changes in the quality of urban life. Obviously, our own results have not dealt with this level of outcome but have focused on less visible service changes. However, the majority critique is based on one important and, we feel, unproved assumption. Although there is some evidence that the *business* of both the federal government and local governments can affect the quality of urban life, we know of little evidence that suggests that the *organization* of government, at either level, can have such effects. Decentralization, after all, has to do with the reorganization of political procedure, whether entirely within the bureaucracy or involving external citizen control mechanisms. Such reorganization can rightly be expected to have administrative effects (shifts in power, greater efficiency, more pluralistic decisionmaking, or changed physical location of governmental offices), but one has to withhold judgment about its potential quality-of-life effects (increased safety, health, and economic opportunity). Thus, the matter of the relationship between the organization of government and quality-of-life effects is a topic for further research. Whether a mayor is building superagencies, inducing massive horizontal integration and services coordination, or decentralizing offices, there is a need for some evidence that any such organizational changes make a difference beyond purely operational effects.

THE LASTING EFFECT OF DECENTRALIZATION

This discussion of success and failure does not provide a full assessment of decentralization. That is, it is important not only to see what decentralization has achieved to date but also to consider albeit in a more speculative way, decentralization's potential future effects. The urban decentralization experience may influence urban and national policymaking in four ways.

The first effect lies in the improved understanding of neighborhood institutions and citizen participation. Decentralization has shown that intricate and dynamic political forces continually operate in the neighborhood and between neighborhoods and city government, and that attempts to install major organizational changes inevitably lead to secondary effects that may offset the initial changes. Nowhere is this "balance of power" notion more relevant than at the neighborhood level. An improved understanding of neighborhood institutions is extremely important because the institutions provide a persistent opportunity and point of entry for citizen participation. To move beyond erratic protest efforts, citizens need institutional structures through which they can channel their energies and in which they can find a ready vehicle for expressing their views. Thus, building new neighborhood institutions or replacing old ones will be of continuing concern, whether government is involved in the building process or not.

A second potential effect of urban decentralization is that it may serve to sustain a strong, human service orientation in urban policy. Only in recent years has the quality of municipal service delivery in general received more than sporadic attention from policymakers both in the city and in national government. Decentralization, along with other organizational innovations, has helped to call attention to the intricacies of service delivery. But the distinctive contribution of decentralization is to emphasize the street-level relationship between the servers and the served. Since this human relationship lies at the heart of urban services, a solidification of the service focus through decentralization will perform the useful function of anchoring urban administration to specific social relationships.

A third effect of decentralization bears directly on the relationship of the servers and the served in urban services. Although one would probably not go so far as to claim that client participation has been institutionalized in the sense that formal mechanisms for participation will always be provided, the decentralization experience has probably counteracted the previous trend in which service bureaucracies were becoming increasingly accountable to themselves alone. And what may have become institutionalized is the notion that clients have a right to significant influence over service delivery, as well as the ever-present threat that client power can be called upon to act as a curb whenever service bureaucracies become unresponsive.

Finally, one of the most significant implications of decentralization is that it has brought the analysis of service problems down to the street-level. That is, decentralization entails a view of urban problems that is unusually sensitive to block and neighborhood needs and problems. Such a street-level analysis of service problems is a rare element in public planning and policy analysis. Typically, the dominant concern in public policymaking has been to increase the planning and analytical capacities of city hall or of the federal government. By contrast, decentralized service delivery makes the particularity of neighborhood services its central concern, and it highlights the important variations in the supply of and demand for services between neighborhoods.

In summary, our study suggests the following choices for future decentralization efforts: First, given a choice between a federally or a locally initiated policy, the results support locally based policies. On the one hand, federal support was not a major condition of success and, on the other hand, the complexity of the neighborhood service setting calls for a hand-tailoring of an innovation to its local environment. Second, given a choice between comprehensive and service-specific strategies, our findings indicate that decentralization strategies must be tailored to fit particular services. Decentralization should not be thought of as a single policy instrument but as an array of instruments, some of which are better suited than others to particular services. Finally, given a choice between strong and weak strategies, no decisive answer or policy recommendation can be given. Strong strategies produce a higher rate of positive outcomes, but they may also meet intensive resistance in "closed" service environments. This does not mean that strong strategies should not be tried in closed environments, but rather that the probabilities of their working are low and the cost of making them work high. A more confident conclusion is that both strong and weak strategies do work, although in different ways, and therefore a combination of strategies might be tried in most neighborhoods and service areas.