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FROM THE PUBLISHER

This year marks a significant milestone with the release of the 10th volume of *Illinois Municipal Policy Journal*. For an entire decade, the *Journal* has served as a bridge between academic research and the practical realities of municipal governance, offering timely, relevant and forward-thinking perspectives on the challenges and opportunities facing Illinois communities.

The *Illinois Municipal Policy Journal* began in 2016 as a collaboration between the Illinois Municipal League (IML) and DePaul University, with the goal of connecting academic insight to the everyday operations of local government. The partnership later transitioned to the University of Illinois Springfield, where the *Journal* continues to thrive as a trusted source of research-driven analysis. From the start, each volume has sought to foster collaboration between scholars, practitioners and policymakers – turning research into actionable ideas that help cities, villages and towns across Illinois better serve their residents.

During the past 10 years, the *Journal* has featured a broad range of topics reflecting both the enduring and evolving issues impacting local governments. Articles have examined subjects such as public pensions, the sharing economy, community electric aggregation, municipal fiscal responses in the post-recession era, sustainability and climate action plans, networked supply chains and the impacts of generational differences on economic development. Other volumes have addressed political civility, population and employment changes, public safety, video gaming, regulating the use of plastic bags and more.

Looking ahead to the next decade, IML remains committed to fostering innovation and dialogue between academia and local government. Future volumes of the *Illinois Municipal Policy Journal* will continue to explore complex issues such as emerging technologies, infrastructure investment, demographic changes and fiscal resilience – always with the goal of helping municipal leaders make informed decisions that improve the quality of life in every Illinois community.

As the publisher of the *Illinois Municipal Policy Journal*, IML is proud to commemorate 10 years of collaboration, partnership and progress. Together, we celebrate not only the pages of this *Journal* but also the enduring spirit of collaboration that strengthens every community across our state. Thanks.

BRAD COLE, PUBLISHER

FROM THE EDITORS

We are pleased to present the Volume 10 of the *Illinois Municipal Policy Journal*. This volume contains six research articles and two book reviews. The research articles herein examine the multifaceted responsibilities of municipal administrations—from local governments' taxing policies and revenue management to human trafficking, media literacy, and emergency management. Particular attention is given to survey results reporting how Illinois local governments interact with state government, manage their finances, and evaluate their progress. The book reviews cover essential and timely topics, including municipal fiscal conditions and homelessness.

In the first article, a team of researchers from Seattle University and Miami University examines the positive impacts of regular and special tax levies by local governments in the State of Washington on the local fiscal conditions measured through the county's total revenue and expenditure, as well as budget surplus. The authors carefully compare Illinois' and Washington's property tax systems to ensure that their empirical findings can be generalized to Illinois.

In the second paper, a team of researchers from the University of Colorado Denver examines the effect of each revenue source, i.e., property taxes, sales taxes, user fees, and user charges, on a municipality's total own-source revenue. Based on the premise that intergovernmental revenue from the upper levels, i.e., state and federal, is unstable, the authors find that an optimal mix of property and sales taxes has a significant role in stabilizing municipalities' total own-source revenue.

In the third article, a team of researchers from the Illinois Municipal League (IML) provides a report on the results of a repeated survey done in 2024 that was originally conducted by the Southern Illinois Mayors Association in 2009. The survey examines Illinois mayors' perceptions of their relationship with state government, their financial conditions, and the progress of local governments in Illinois. The authors also compare the 2024 findings to those of 2009.

In the following article, a graduate student and a faculty member at the University of Illinois Springfield, as well as an administrative practitioner from Saint Louis University, collaborate to understand how municipal and county governments in Illinois cooperate in managing emergency cases ranging from COVID-19 to natural disasters. Through interviewing approaches, they find

that effective emergency preparedness involves not only municipalities and counties' training and management but also networking and building work relationships with non-governmental organizations in the area.

In the fifth article, an independent researcher who has a law enforcement background, along with a faculty member from the University of Illinois Springfield, poses a research question, asking whether an alternative police investigation approach centered on supporting victims of human trafficking crimes is better than the traditional approach focusing on punishing human trafficking offenders. Using Canadian municipal cases, the authors offer insights for municipalities looking to improve and revitalize their citizens' perception of the local police workforce.

The sixth article is a research note that reports on the preliminary survey results obtained by a team of researchers at the University of Illinois Springfield. To understand how Illinois public high schools implement the recent state mandate, the State's Media Literacy Law, House Bill 0234, the authors conducted a paper-and-pencil survey in 2024. Based on these findings, the authors recommend alternative/auxiliary programs and financing strategies implemented by municipal governments to help alleviate the need to increase local property taxes to finance school programs.

We close this volume of the *Journal* with two book reviews. A doctoral student from the University of Illinois Springfield reviews the book, *Understanding Municipal Fiscal Health: A Model for Local Governments in the USA*. The book proposes 16 financial indicators to evaluate municipal fiscal health. In the reviewer's judgment, the value of the book lies in the real-world examples portraying how each indicator can reveal potential budgetary problems.

In another book review, two doctoral students from the University of Colorado Denver provide an excellent summary of the book *Homelessness, Liberty and Property*. The authors state that the book blends theories and evidence in arguing that law and society, together, will effectively address homelessness.

To summarize, this volume highlights the crucial role of municipal governments as both administrative entities and democratic institutions responsible for translating public policy into tangible outcomes. In an era marked by fiscal constraints, shifting demographics, and increasing demands for equity and responsiveness, local governments must navigate complex policy environments while effectively managing public programs with accountability, transparency, and efficiency. As editors, we invite readers to consider how municipal

governance not only reflects but also shapes broader societal trajectories. The insights offered here aim to inform scholars, practitioners, and policymakers committed to strengthening local institutions and advancing public sector innovation.

ARWI SRITHONGRUNG-KRIZ, D.P.A.
SUYANG YU, PH.D.

EXTERNAL REVIEWERS

As an editorial team, we would like to acknowledge the following reviewers for their contribution in reviewing the manuscripts in this issue. In addition to our editorial comments, inputs, and feedback, the blind peer-review by our external reviewers helps the authors improve the quality of their papers.

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THE POWER OF THE BALLOT: HOW VOTER-APPROVED SPECIAL PROPERTY TAX LEVIES SHAPE LOCAL FISCAL HEALTH

OLHA KRUPA, SEATTLE UNIVERSITY
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This study compares and contrasts Illinois' and Washington's property tax systems, examining the relationship between voter-approved property tax levies and basic measures of local fiscal health. Using Washington counties' financial data between 2005 and 2014, we illustrate how regular and special levies affect total revenues, total expenditures, revenue surplus/deficit over expenditures, and capital expenditures, all measured in per capita terms. Our study finds that voters support or reject special government spending proposals fairly rationally. Considering the relatively high reliance on property tax revenues in Illinois to fund municipal-level governments, our findings suggest that voter preferences, expressed through special tax levies, are reasonably representative of their jurisdictions' fiscal health.

INTRODUCTION

Property taxes contribute a significant portion of local tax revenues in the United States, accounting for 38% of all state and local tax proceeds in the first quarter of 2025, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. A key source of local government funding, with an immobile and identifiable tax base, they provide a stable and recession-proof revenue stream, allowing state and local governments to fund essential public services (Mikesell & Liu, 2013; Krupa & Kriz, 2021). These property tax systems are part of a larger representative democratic structure where voters elect local officials, and those officials impose regular property tax levies to fund local public services. For additional special property tax levies, the local officials seek direct voter approval via public referenda. This structure reinforces a connection between taxation and government accountability.

For taxpayers, property taxes are one of the most visible and impactful forms of taxation. The direct link between tax contributions and local public services makes property taxes a focal point of voter engagement. As Mikesell (2014) notes, "property taxes are visible, and the decisions made about them are close at hand, thus bringing people directly into the fiscal process, as should

be the case in a democracy" (p. 493). Property taxation rate transparency in collections is present in the billing by municipalities with the breakdown of various millage rates. The expenditure of funds at the local level allows for transparency in public spending. The majority of property tax revenue is allocated to public education, with nearly half (49.9%) supporting schools, while counties retain an average of only 23.7% for essential services (Griffith et al., 2016). This allocation underscores the fundamental role of property taxes in shaping local communities and service provision.

To prevent excessive tax burdens, many states impose legal constraints on property tax rates through caps on both the rate amounts and increases. Currently, 42 states limit county property tax increases through rate or levy caps, while 19 states require voter approval for exceeding these limits (Griffith et al., 2016). Additionally, 37 states allow counties to establish special-purpose tax districts to fund specific services, and in 22 of those states, voter approval is required before these districts can levy taxes (Griffith et al., 2016). These special districts, funded through voter-approved levies, provide targeted support for essential services such as public safety, infrastructure, and community programs. For example, South Carolina counties create special districts for medical care and economic development, while Texas uses them to complement existing municipal services. Similarly, Idaho relies on referenda-based districts to finance highways, firefighting, and libraries, whereas Washington employs special tax districts to fund school improvements, emergency management, and homelessness prevention.

Anchored in Tiebout's Pure Theory of Local Expenditures (1956), which describes Tiebout's theory of fiscal sorting behaviors by the local residents, this study examines the relationship between voter preferences, expressed through regular and special property tax levies, and county fiscal health measures. Our hypothesis is that voter service demand affects the county's fiscal health via two channels. First, by voters directly approving *special property tax levies*, and second, indirectly, by voters electing local government officials who then make fiscal decisions regarding *regular property tax levies*. To test our hypothesis, we analyze the relationship between the county-level financial health indicators from Washington (2005–2014) and Washington's voter-approved *special* and *regular* property tax levies. In doing so, we also exploit the regional differences of Eastern and Western Washington to assess how political and economic structures shape public service demand and fiscal outcomes. The State of Washington may be divided into two distinct

regions: Eastern Washington and Western Washington. Western Washington encompasses the majority of the state's property tax base, whereas Eastern Washington is predominantly composed of extensive agricultural areas, along with significant portions of federal and tribal lands. These regions exhibit marked differences in population size and density, property wealth, and political affiliation.

Considering the significant reliance on property tax revenues in the State of Illinois, exploring the connection between voter preferences and measures of local fiscal health may be particularly relevant to the state's legislators and local government officials. By examining how voter-approved and regular levies impact financial stability, this research provides insight into the rationality of voter behavior in public finance decisions. Our findings suggest that, regardless of regional or political differences, voters are acutely aware of the services they receive and make rational, informed choices about taxation. These insights can help Illinois county and local governments refine their fiscal strategies, ensuring that tax policies align with public service demands while maintaining financial sustainability. In addition, given the rational nature of the voter in our findings, Illinois local government officials can have faith in ballot objectives being rationally reviewed by voters.

This research is structured as follows: we first compare and contrast property tax systems in Illinois and Washington. Then, we anchor the study in Tiebout's (1956) theory of fiscal sorting and review relevant literature. Our econometric model connects property tax levies to four indicators of fiscal health, indicating that property wealth and levy amounts consistently influence county revenues and spending, with notable regional differences: Western Washington exhibits stronger associations between property tax features and fiscal outcomes—particularly through levy rates and capital spending—while Eastern Washington shows more mixed effects, especially in budget balance and voter-approved levies.

BACKGROUND: ILLINOIS PROPERTY TAX SYSTEM

The Illinois property tax system consists of more than 7,000 government units and more than 6,000 tax jurisdictions (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2024). Illinois' local governments demonstrate a significantly higher-than-average reliance on property tax revenues. For example, in 2021, 38% of total local revenues came from local property taxes as compared to the United

States average of 30%; Illinois local property tax levies produced 20.4% of *all* government revenues as compared to the U.S. average of 15.5% (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2024). The state ranks ninth by per capita property tax paid, well above the national average (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2024). This high tax burden indicates a heightened level of public awareness about the current and proposed property tax levies in the state, given the saliency and transparency of the property tax as a form of municipal revenue collection.

The state features two distinct property tax regions: (1) Cook County, where most of the state's property wealth is located; and, (2) the rest of the state. In Cook County, each of the 13 property classes is taxed at different percentage rates of market value, with residences taxed at a lower rate than commercial and industrial properties. Cook County employs a three-year mass reassessment system. The rest of the state is assessed uniformly at one-third of market value, except for land on farms. The State of Illinois offers homestead exemptions and circuit breaker property tax relief programs supporting seniors and homesteaders, as a way to lessen the property tax burden.

The Illinois voter-approved property tax levies are regulated by the Illinois Property Tax Code (Illinois General Assembly, n.d.). They help tax districts adjust their revenue streams for specific needs, as outlined in the Property Tax Extension Limitation Law (PTELL) (Illinois Department of Revenue, n.d.). Under PTELL, these taxing districts are limited in property tax amounts, capping tax increases at a lesser of 5% or the rate of inflation over the prior levy year. Through referenda, these taxing districts may seek voter approval to raise or extend tax limitations beyond these caps for one or more levy years. This process allows the districts to address funding requirements that surpass the standard limitations, ensuring that taxpayers have a direct say in property tax increases.

To initiate such a referendum, a taxing district must present a proposition to its electors, specifying the desired increase in the extension limitation. The ballot must include detailed information, such as the amount of taxes extended at the most recent limiting rate, the estimated amount that would be extended if the referendum passes, and the additional tax impact on the properties. If the proposed increase spans multiple years, the ballot should also provide estimates of the additional tax impact in subsequent years, based on a three-year average percentage increase in the district's equalized assessed value, excluding new

property. This transparency ensures that voters are well-informed about the financial implications of the proposed tax changes before casting their votes.

Recent instances demonstrate the application of voter-approved property tax levies in Illinois. For example, in November 2024, voters in DuPage, Lake, and Kane counties approved ballot measures to support local forest preserves (Eng, 2024). These measures aim to collect funds for preserving land, protecting waterways, planting trees, improving flood control, and expanding nature education. Collectively, they are expected to generate $609 million over the next 20 years, reflecting the community's commitment to environmental preservation and their willingness to support it through increased property taxes.

In sum, Illinois' property tax system is both complex and deeply embedded in the fiscal structure of local governance, marked by a high degree of fragmentation and a significant reliance on property tax revenues. The distinction between Cook County and the rest of the state underscores the geographic and administrative diversity in assessment practices and tax burdens. The state's legal framework, particularly the Illinois Property Tax Code and PTELL, provides mechanisms for local governments to adapt to evolving fiscal needs while maintaining transparency and voter engagement. Recent successful referenda, such as those supporting forest preserve initiatives, illustrate how these tools function in practice and reflect the electorate's role in shaping public investment through property taxation. Together, these features highlight both the challenges and opportunities inherent in Illinois' approach to property tax policy.

PROPERTY TAX SYSTEM IN WASHINGTON STATE

In the absence of state and local income taxes, Washington primarily relies on sales taxes for state tax revenue. In contrast to Illinois, its property tax burden ranks 34th out of the 50 states, generating $1,901 per capita in property tax revenues or 2.54% of all personal income (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2024). Its counties can be arranged in two distinct regions: Eastern and Western Washington, with Western Washington holding most of the state's property tax wealth and Eastern Washington consisting of vast farmlands and federal and tribal lands. These regions differ by population density and count, property wealth, and political party affiliation.

Just like in Illinois, Washington Code limits property tax rate and levy growth. Taxing districts may increase total *regular* levies by a higher of 1% or the rate of inflation (Washington State Legislature, RCW 84.52.043), except for new construction and property improvements. As a consequence, many fiscal initiatives are going on the ballot, seeking to approve *special* levies in support of new or renewed spending. By including the voters in local policy-making decisions, the local governments provide them with an opportunity to directly support (or reject) additional local spending. Proposed services range from emergency and rescue services to capital improvements, operations, and public school maintenance (Washington State Constitution, Article VII(2a)). Basic special levies require a simple majority vote (Washington State Legislature, RCW 84.55.050(1); Washington State Legislature, RCW 84.55.050(2)); excess levies raised for capital construction require a supermajority vote (60%) with minimum 40% turnout in prior election (Washington State Constitution, Article VII(2b)).

Washington voters have generally been in favor of more spending on law enforcement, public safety levies, new park districts, transit projects, and affordable housing; they disapprove of additional emergency management or government consolidation spending (Hawley, 2016). Remarkably, rural counties in Washington ask for lower total dollar amounts in levy requests and receive 95% approvals; in contrast, urban counties in Washington have a lower approval rate for their levies and a growing wish list of services that could be provided if the levies were approved (Hawley, 2016).

THEORY OF FISCAL SORTING, STUDY METHOD, AND DATA

Charles Tiebout's study "A Pure Theory of Local Expenditures" (Tiebout, 1956) is the theory anchoring this study. It presents a community where individuals "vote with their feet" by moving to communities that best align with their service demands. Unlike national allocation of public goods, which lacks direct market mechanisms, the local governments offer varied tax-service packages, allowing consumer-voters to select jurisdictions that best match their demands for education, parks, or police protection. Reflecting differences in public demand, these services lead to enhanced service efficiency and optimal resource allocation akin to a competitive market, assuming perfect mobility and complete information.

While Tiebout's model offers a compelling framework for understanding how individuals "vote with their feet" by choosing communities that best match their preferences for public goods and taxation levels, it is not without limitations. One major shortcoming is the presence of externalities between communities. For example, benefits or costs generated by one locality, such as pollution, traffic congestion, or access to regional parks and services, can spill over into neighboring jurisdictions, undermining the assumption that local governments operate in isolation. Additionally, the model assumes perfect mobility among residents. In practice, individuals face significant constraints, such as job immobility, housing shortages, or family obligations, which limit their ability to relocate freely. Finally, the Tiebout model presumes that communities can exclude individuals or adjust their policies to maintain homogeneity in resident preferences. This assumption can result in the exclusion of lower-income individuals from communities that offer superior public services, leading to socio-economic segregation and unequal access to quality education, infrastructure, and safety.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

We conjecture that voters are rational in their preferences for public service demands, which then translates to their indicators of fiscal health in their local jurisdiction. These preferences are expressed through regular and voter-approved special property tax levies, indirectly and directly. We hypothesize that higher-property-wealth counties will be associated with higher special property tax levies, and that low-property-wealth counties will primarily rely on regular tax levies, subject to property tax limits. If voters are rational in public service demands, their preferences will adequately reflect the revenue-raising and spending capacity of their counties.

Following the public finance literature on fiscal health, we explore several relevant measures of fiscal condition. A summary of key fiscal health variables may include revenue-generating capacity, local per capita spending, and a measure of "need-capacity" gap (Gorina et al., 2018). Fiscal health measures then may additionally be aggregated into a fiscal health index (Ladd & Yinger, 1989; Chernick & Reschovsky, 2006; Maher & Nollenberger, 2009, for example) to assist with the ranking of local governments. From this literature, we carefully employ four separate measures of county fiscal health: county revenues per capita, expenditures per capita, revenues minus expenditures, and capital expenditure per capita. In doing so, we wanted to isolate the impacts on

the selected individual components of fiscal health versus the overall impacts on a composite measure.

METHOD AND DATA

To test the research hypothesis, our econometric model will include four fiscal health indicators as dependent variables (DV_{ij}).

DV_{ij} = *f(Voter Participation, Property Tax Levy Rate, Interactions, Control Variables)*

Control variables in this model include assessed value per capita, total property tax levy, percent of land in federal ownership, and median income. The voter participation rate represents the percentage of county voters participating in the local election each year. As the rate of the levy may impact the willingness for voters to pass the levy, thereby adjusting the fiscal health of the county, the economic model contains variables for both the regular local property tax levy rate and special local property levy rates. The impact of changing the property tax levy rate may not be uniform across all jurisdictions—it could vary depending on how politically active the population is. For example, in areas with higher voter turnout, taxpayers may be more aware of tax decisions and hold officials more accountable. As a result, increases in the levy rate could have more positive or negative effects (e.g., on fiscal health) compared to areas with lower civic participation. Therefore, interaction terms were added to the model specification for both the regular property tax levy rate and the special property tax levy rate. The four dependent variables (DV_{ij}) are: (1) total revenues per capita; (2) total expenditures per capita; (3) revenue surplus over expenditures per capita; and, (4) capital expenditures per capita. The empirical specification employs a two-way fixed-effects panel data linear regression model (county, year).

THE DATA

This study draws from county-level data reported in Annual Comprehensive Financial Reports (ACFR) (previously Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports) obtained from the Washington State Auditor's Office (SAO) between 2005 and 2014. The data are organized in a balanced panel, into the state's two regions, Eastern and Western Washington, which are represented by 21 and 18 counties, respectively. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics.

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

	MEAN	STANDARD DEVIATION	MIN	MAX
PANEL A: WESTERN WASHINGTON				
PROPERTY TAX SYSTEM:				
Assessed Value, USD M	33,100	64,900	279	348,000
Assessed Value per capita, USD M	115	72	57	460
Total Levy, USD MM	357	681	2.91	3,240
Federally owned lands, percent	24	21	1.7	61
Median Income, USD	45,381	8,039	30,078	61,898
Voter Participation	38%	15%	0%	76%
Regular property tax levy rate, percent	4.65	0.91	2.14	6.53
Special property tax levy rate, percent	3.53	1.19	0.56	6.72
Population	287,782	455,166	3,867	2,017,250
FISCAL HEALTH VARIABLES, USD PER CAPITA				
Total Revenues	1,012	519	528	3,089
Total Expenditures	997	522	493	3,041
Revenues minus Expenditures	15	90	-406	342
Capital Expenditures	67	106	2	1,101
N=180				
PANEL B: EASTERN WASHINGTON				
PROPERTY TAX SYSTEM:				
Assessed Value, USD M	4,741	6,701	143	34,500
Assessed Value per capita, USD M	77	26	43	192
Total Levy, USD MM	57	85	1.8	423
Federally owned lands, percent	25.9	23.6	1.5	79.2
Median Income, USD	39,016	5,402	26,788	56,200
Voter Participation	34%	13%	0%	70%
Regular property tax levy rate, percent	5.1	0.7	3.1	6.3
Special property tax levy rate, percent	4.0	1.5	0.7	7.5
Population	70,879	105,253	2,240	484,500
FISCAL HEALTH VARIABLES, USD PER CAPITA				
Total Revenues	1,064	563	405	4,018
Total Expenditures	1,039	566	402	4,183
Revenues minus Expenditures	24	129	-497	1,069
Capital Expenditures	58	66	2	656
N=210				

Source: Authors' analysis based on Washington Office of Financial Management data for 2005-2014. N=180 for counties located in Western Washington and N=210 for counties in Eastern Washington. All USD figures are presented in real dollars (2005=100%).

The majority of property wealth, as defined by assessed value, is located in Western Washington. The western counties are more populous and dense, with an average of approximately 287,000 residents. Eastern Washington counties are less populated, with 71,000 residents on average. With four times more residents, western counties generate seven times more in property taxes than Eastern Washington counties. The levy rates are fairly similar, with eastern counties levying slightly (1%) higher property tax rates due to a low tax base. Although both regions' fiscal indicators are similar in scale, Eastern Washington has slightly higher per capita revenues, expenditures, and budget surpluses due to much lower population density (fewer dollars per capita as compared to Western Washington) and maintains a more conservative approach to taxing and spending. The median income is 10% higher in Western Washington. All fiscal health indicators are similar in both regions.

RESULTS

Table 2 presents the results of the four regression models, one for each dependent variable. The dependent variables are: (1) total county revenues per capita; (2) total expenditures per capita; (3) revenues minus expenditures; and, (4) capital expenditures per capita. The first two variables indicate revenue-raising and spending capacity, revenues minus expenditures indicate that counties stay on track with their budgeted programming, and per capita capital expenditure points to ongoing infrastructure investments.

Model 1 examines the effects of property tax features, including levies and levy rates, on total county revenues. In all four specifications, assessed values per capita positively affect total revenues: For a one-dollar increase in assessed value per capita (in thousands), total county revenues per capita will increase by 2.0 to 6.0 dollars. In both regions, counties with more land under federal ownership are associated with lower total revenues in three model specifications but not in Eastern Washington's capital expenditures model. Total levy amounts positively affect total revenues per capita, leading to an increase of 0.23 to 0.52 dollars in per capita revenues. However, levy rates—regular and special—are significant only in Western Washington. This finding speaks directly to this study's hypothesized relationship: the increased special tax levy rate leads to better fiscal health overall, measured by total revenues per capita. Voters act rationally in response to public service demands; their preferences reflect the fiscal capacity of their counties to raise revenue.

In Model 2, we observe the effects on total spending. Property wealth, expressed as per capita assessed value, positively affects public spending in Western Washington but not in Eastern Washington. Total levy effects are likewise positive in all four specifications. The significance of federally owned lands disappears in the Eastern region. Regular and special levy rates are significant and positive in Western Washington; the share of voter-approved levies becomes significant in Eastern Washington, but these results are mixed. Consequently, increases in the levy rate are associated with lower total expenditures in areas with higher civic participation than those with lower participation, as found in the negative interaction terms.

Model 3 examines the effect on revenues minus expenditures—this variable proxies for adequate programming and budget balance in the counties. The influences of property wealth, expressed as per capita assessed value, are significant: the results are mixed between the two regions. In Western Washington, more property wealth is associated with lower budget balance, suggesting budget gaps may be present. In Eastern Washington, property wealth is associated with higher surpluses. Total levy effects are positive in Western Washington and negative in Eastern. The effects of federal land ownership are, again, negative. The local levy effects—regular and special—are positive and significant in the Western region and in one specification from Eastern Washington.

An examination of capital expenditure-related effects in Model 4 presents these findings. Assessed values positively and significantly influence capital expenditures per capita. In wealthier Western Washington, property wealth drives the capital spending. There is no such effect in Eastern Washington. Although individual voter participation and regular levy rate variables have no statistically significant effects on capital expenditure spending, an interaction between these two variables is significant and positive in Western Washington. Higher voter turnout combined with an increase in regular tax levies means higher public infrastructure spending. All other coefficients are less significant, suggesting indirect effects between property tax systems and capital expenditure (Capex) spending. We ran models on several other dependent variables: debt per capita, net income, and tax-source revenues. The results were insignificant, so we do not report them here, but they are available upon request.

TABLE 2
PROPERTY TAX SYSTEM EFFECTS ON FISCAL HEALTH MEASURES

MODEL 1. **TOTAL REVENUES, USD PER CAPITA**	**WEST**	**EAST**	**WEST**	**EAST**
AV	2.291***	5.159***	2.054***	3.964***
	(0.764)	(1.280)	(0.718)	(1.363)
Total Levy	0.526***	0.234***	0.531***	0.330***
	(0.073)	(0.101)	(0.068)	(0.108)
Federally owned lands, percent	-1,419,371***	-155,518***	-1,017,740***	-166,236***
	(278,863)	(53,900)	(250,793)	(53,944)
Median Income per capita, USD	-1,478	199	-1,480	166
	(1,514)	(208)	(1,514)	(206)
Voter Participation	7,254,217*	-1,093,707	2,674,585	44,475
	(3,977,743)	(991,312)	2,345,988	(375,322)
Regular Property Tax Levy Rate	102,340,857***	-3,129,280		
	(32,921,346)	(6,068,163)		
Voter Participation Regular Property Tax Levy Rate	-3,332,801***	125,376		
	(997,197)	(186,008)		
Special Property Tax Levy Rate			139,799,445***	-189,489
			(30,338,307)	(3,026,479)
Voter Participation* Special Property Tax Levy Rate			-3,904,232***	-59,310
			(739,689)	(74,716)
Observations	180	210	180	210
Adjusted R2	0.982	0.950	0.984	0.950
F-Statistic	1,431.793***	570.825***	1,578.244***	575.406***
*p<0.1;**p<0.05;***p<0.01				

MODEL 2. TOTAL EXPENDITURES, USD PER CAPITA	WEST	EAST	WEST	EAST
AV	4.469***	0.905	4.215***	-1.000
	(0.631)	(1.175)	(0.596)	(1.234)
Total Levy	0.266***	0.492***	0.278***	0.648***
	(0.060)	(0.092)	(0.057)	(0.098)
Federally owned lands, percent	-1,165,336***	-68,515	-885,550***	-80,508
	(230,467)	(49,504)	(208,114)	(48,862)
Median Income per capita, USD	-873	376**	1,199	303
	(1,252)	(191)	(1,256)	(187)
Voter Participation	4,007,901	-2,245,587**	1,149,402	767,422**
	(3,287,649)	(910,446)	(1,946,756)	(339,960)
Regular Property Tax Levy Rate	72,742,352***	-11,858,632		
	(27,209,866)	(5,573,156)		
Voter Participation* Regular Property Tax Levy Rate	-2,143,758**	371,615**		
	(824,194)	(170,834)		
Special Property Tax Levy Rate			112,023,343***	-208,189
			(25,175,439)	(2,741,333)
Voter Participation* Special Property Tax Levy Rate			-2,930,104***	-129,869*
			(613,811)	(67,676)
Observations	180	210	180	210
Adjusted R2	0.986	0.947	0.987	0.948
F-Statistic	1,835.154***	531.366***	2,005.907***	551.477***
*p<0.1;**p<0.05;***p<0.01				

MODEL 3. REVENUES–EXPENDITURES, USD PER CAPITA	WEST	EAST	WEST	EAST
AV	-3.005***	5.145***	-2.979***	6.073***
	(0.401)	(0.833)	(0.394)	(0.884)
Total Levy	0.353***	-0.310***	0.344***	-0.387***
	(0.038)	(0.066)	(0.037)	(0.07)
Federally owned lands, percent	-331,982**	-118,432***	-169,670	-115,141***
	(146,237)	(35,091)	(137,672)	(34,972)
Median Income per capita, USD	-782	-92	332	-39
	(794)	(135)	(831)	(134)
Voter Participation	4,427,156**	1,324,997**	2,119,955	-935,292***
	(2,086,096)	(645,393)	(1,287,824)	(243,327)
Regular Property Tax Levy Rate	39,844,075**	10,349,080***		
	(17,265,345)	(3,950,674)		
Voter Participation* Regular Property Tax Levy Rate	-1,595,944***	-293,090**		
	(522,972)	(121,100)		
Special Property Tax Levy Rate			35,566,640**	409,176
			(16,654,139)	(1,962,112)
Voter Participation* Special Property Tax Levy Rate			-1,271,988***	80,609.850*
			(406,050)	(48,439.49)
Observations	180	210	180	210
Adjusted R2	0.629	0.516	0.631	0.523
F-Statistic	45.654***	34.088***	45.969***	35.086***

*p<0.1;**p<0.05;***p<0.01

MODEL 4. CAPITAL EXPENDITURES, USD PER CAPITA	WEST	EAST	WEST	EAST
AV	0.415***	0.614	0.401***	0.424
	(0.100)	(0.571)	(0.099)	(0.605)
Total Levy	-0.018	-0.012	-0.015	0.004
	(0.010)	(0.045)	(0.009)	(0.048)
Federally owned lands, percent	49,658	61,926**	9,313	50,694**
	(36,660)	(24,041)	(34,537)	(23,944)
Median Income per capita, USD	215	-799	-12	-824***
	(199)	(93)	(209)	(91)
Voter Participation	-1,314,797	773,959*	-636,869	171,310
	(522,955)	(442,142)	(323,073)	(166,593)
Regular Property Tax Levy Rate	-10,404,950	3,712,387		
	(4,328,183)	(2,706,502)		
Voter Participation* Regular Property Tax Levy Rate	380,673***	-108,284		
	(131,102)	(82,963)		
Special Property Tax Levy Rate			-9,381,456	-3,083,922
			(4,177,976)	(1,343,354)
Voter Participation*Special Property Tax Levy Rate			300,013***	60,184*
			(101,865)	(33,164)
Observations	180	210	180	210
Adjusted R2	0.78	0.332	0.78	0.344
F-Statistic	92.798***	17.146***	93.161***	17.926***

*p<0.1;**p<0.05;***p<0.01

DISCUSSION

In many ways, the findings of this research confirm the research hypotheses outlined in this study. Voters typically make rational choices about the public services they demand, and these choices are reflected in the financial condition of their local jurisdictions. Such preferences are conveyed directly and indirectly by approving property tax levies—special levies and regular levies, respectively. Counties with higher property wealth are more likely to rely on special levies. In comparison, those with lower property wealth depend more heavily on regular levies, which are typically constrained by statutory limits. Ultimately, voters' preferences mirror their counties' revenue-generating and expenditure capacity.

In Western Washington's wealthier counties, the strong and positive impact of voter-approved special levies suggests that residents are both willing and able to support additional funding for public services when given the opportunity. In Eastern Washington, however, the distinction between special and regular levies appears less pronounced, potentially reflecting more constrained fiscal environments due to low population density, lower property wealth (and thus lower taxing capacity), and a more conservative view on the role of governments in local service provision, though the overall positive association between total levies and fiscal health still holds.

In Western Washington, local governments frequently rely on voter-approved special property tax levies to respond to public service demands, reflecting residents' capacity and willingness to support additional funding through direct democratic mechanisms. In contrast, jurisdictions in the Eastern region are less dependent on special levies, potentially due to a combination of lower fiscal pressure, more stable baseline funding, or differing political and economic contexts that reduce the perceived need for supplementary tax measures.

County officials in Western Washington face a double-edged sword. Residents are willing to act in their rational best interests to support special property tax levies to support the fiscal health of their municipalities. However, the continued reliance on special levies to maintain fiscal health may be something for the officials to consider long-term, especially if citizens' willingness changes during economic downturns. Such a double-edged sword is not present in the eastern counties during our study period; however, future research should explore if these findings change during times of extreme economic stress.

CONCLUSIONS

Similar to Illinois, public service demands in Washington provide additional funding for schools and basic public services. More property wealth certainly helps grow public revenues and expenditures; total tax levies significantly and positively affect key fiscal performance indicators in these counties. The types of levies influence fiscal health measures differently, depending on the region: In wealthier Western Washington, special voter-approved levies significantly and positively affect fiscal health. In a more rural Eastern Washington, these effects on revenues and spending do not manifest themselves. One policy implication from these findings is that assessed valuations and property tax levies strongly define county fiscal health. Voter preferences are manifested more strongly in a more populous, densely populated region (similar to Cook County). The distinction between voter-approved special and regular levies is blurred in Eastern Washington, yet a positive total levy effect remains. And, finally, the linkages between property tax levies and debt levels, capital expenditures, and net incomes of the counties are less profound.

These findings are not without limitations. The models could have been strengthened by including a control variable capturing the political ideology of the county residents. The residents' political ideology would most likely impact their counties' fiscal revenues and expenditure preferences. In addition, the models fail to control for the demand for public services at the county level, such as the unemployment rate. Future research would benefit from controlling for additional factors that may influence how rationally voters respond to public service demands and the extent to which their preferences align with their counties' capacity to raise revenue and allocate spending. Regardless, local government officials can find solace in citizens voting in their rational best interests.

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MUNICIPAL REVENUE RECOVERY: A MATTER OF STABILITY AND EQUITY

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When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, local governments experienced revenue shortfalls. Intergovernmental funds, deriving largely from the federal government, provided relief to local governments. What can local governments do in advance to prepare for when federal funds dry up? How can local governments view revenue generation through an equity lens? This article asks: What are the drivers of post-COVID-19 municipal revenue recovery? An analysis of Colorado municipalities finds that own-source revenue, a stable revenue base, and certain municipal characteristics matter. The results suggest that when applied through an equity lens, a well-designed property tax remains an important municipal tool.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic set the stage for a unique case study to further understand how local governments react to acute fiscal crises. In the immediate wake of the pandemic, local governments experienced volatility in their own-source revenues as many parts of the economy shut down (Chernick et al., 2020; Government Accountability Office, 2021). Federal (and sometimes state) assistance helped buoy many local governments until the economy rightsized (Berube, 2022; Government Accountability Office, 2021; Schleicher, 2020). Local governments, however, now face the end of stimulus funds. As this happens, local governments throughout the country are simultaneously presented with the unique challenge and opportunity of creating a more resilient fiscal structure that can withstand future shocks.

In this context, municipalities are also confronting two realities. For one, residents are increasingly prioritizing equity and asking their local governments to do the same in an effort to redress gross inequalities and improve the lives of the less privileged. In reprioritizing equity, local governments must think through their revenue structures and the resulting fiscal burden. Second, local governments must grapple with the reality that their traditional revenue bases are increasingly unstable. For example, as residents spend more of their money on services as opposed to goods, local reliance on sales tax revenue

is jeopardized. These two shifts necessitate new ways of considering how to create a stable revenue base that reflects changes in resident preferences and the broader economy.

To help local governments undertake the task of rebuilding their finances, we examine which factors were associated with local government recovery in Colorado. Ultimately, we find that governments with greater own-source revenues, more stable revenue bases, and certain municipal characteristics were more likely to recover from the pandemic. Moving forward, this speaks to the priority local governments should place on cultivating own-source revenues that are designed for stability and equity.

MUNICIPAL REVENUES AND CONTEXT OF COLORADO MUNICIPALITIES

MUNICIPAL REVENUES

Municipal governments fund their activities with a number of revenue sources. Local governments rely on several own-source revenue sources—generated by property tax, sales and use tax, income tax, other taxes, charges, fees, fines and forfeitures, and licenses—as well as on intergovernmental transfers (Ross & Peng, 2023). In 2017, U.S. municipal revenues were comprised primarily of taxes (approximately 36%), charges and fees (43%), and intergovernmental transfers (20%), although there is considerable heterogeneity across the revenue structures of municipal governments (Ross & Peng, 2023).

The most commonly ascribed municipal revenue source is property tax. Though it is unpopular, property tax on real assets is thought to be a very stable and efficient tax due to its broad, immovable base (Musgrave, 1983; Alm et al., 2011; Youngman, 2023). Due to taxpayer revolts in the 1980s that resulted in property tax caps and inadequate revenue generation, local governments began to diversify revenues with local option sales taxes (LOST), other local taxes, fees, and charges (Bartle et al., 2011).

Sales taxes are levied on the consumption of goods and services. Sales tax revenues are more income-elastic and mobile than property tax revenues and, unlike property taxes, municipalities can export a sales tax burden to extra-jurisdictional users (Ross & Peng, 2023). They are more responsive to economic conditions, and municipalities that rely on them are vulnerable to revenue decline during economic downturns (Holcombe & Sobel, 1997). While

they are administratively and politically feasible, sales taxes can exacerbate fiscal disparities and inequity (Afonso, 2023).

Aside from tax revenues, municipal own-source revenues derive from non-tax sources, which the U.S. Census defines as current charges and miscellaneous revenue (U.S. Census, 2021). These categories capture a broad range of non-tax revenues, including "user charges, fees, and special assessments to the sale of government assets, interest earnings, and fines and forfeiture" (Su, 2023, p. 64). While non-tax revenues exhibit a wide range of adoption, design, and implementation across jurisdictions, as a group, they accounted for approximately one-third of general fund city revenue in 2019 (Su, 2023).

In addition to own-source revenues, many municipalities benefit from intergovernmental revenue (IGR) from state or federal governments. If designed well, this source of revenue has the property of improving equity and efficiency (Ross & Peng, 2023). Historically, states provided the majority of intergovernmental transfers (Ross & Peng, 2023), with state and federal aid contributing about 20% and 5%, respectively, to municipal coffers (Kass et al., 2023).

CONTEXT OF COLORADO MUNICIPALITIES

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted all parts of American life, including municipal government activities. During the early months of the pandemic, local governments struggled as the economy dipped and social inequities were exposed. Notably, as the economy struggled and unemployment rates rose, sales tax revenue, an important source of revenue for local governments, dropped precipitously before rebounding (Government Accountability Office, 2021). For example, in Denver, 2020 sales and use tax revenue fell by 11% over 2019 values, unemployment spiked at over 12%, the rates of homelessness skyrocketed, and the city approached the end of 2020 with a $211 million budget gap (Martell, 2021).

Recognizing the aforementioned challenges, the federal government provided an unprecedented flood of aid to local governments, reversing the post-1980s trend of decreasing municipal aid (Kass et al., 2023). The injection of federal aid from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act 2020) and from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA 2021) shored up support for local governments with allocations from the Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF) and the Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds

(CSLFRF), respectively, in the years following the pandemic's onset (Kass et al., 2023). Municipalities have benefited greatly from federal aid, especially from CSLFRF, which provided greater levels of fiscal support at $130.2 billion for county and city governments, provided guaranteed funds to many municipalities, and had fewer restrictions on their use (Kass et al., 2023). Densely populated cities benefited from higher incidences of support (Chernick et al., 2020). Data suggest that cities and counties used American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to combat economic disadvantages and inequities (Berube, 2022).

Figure 1 shows the revenue trends for Colorado local governments between 2017 and 2021, disaggregated by municipality type (metropolitan, micropolitan, or rural local government) and by source of revenue. Colorado governments earn most of their revenues through own-sources, regardless of municipality type. These own-source revenues dropped in 2020 during the pandemic, primarily for metropolitan municipalities, leading to a decrease in total revenues.

FIGURE 1

REVENUE PER CAPITA ($) BY MUNICIPALITY TYPE
INFLATION ADJUSTED (2017-2021)

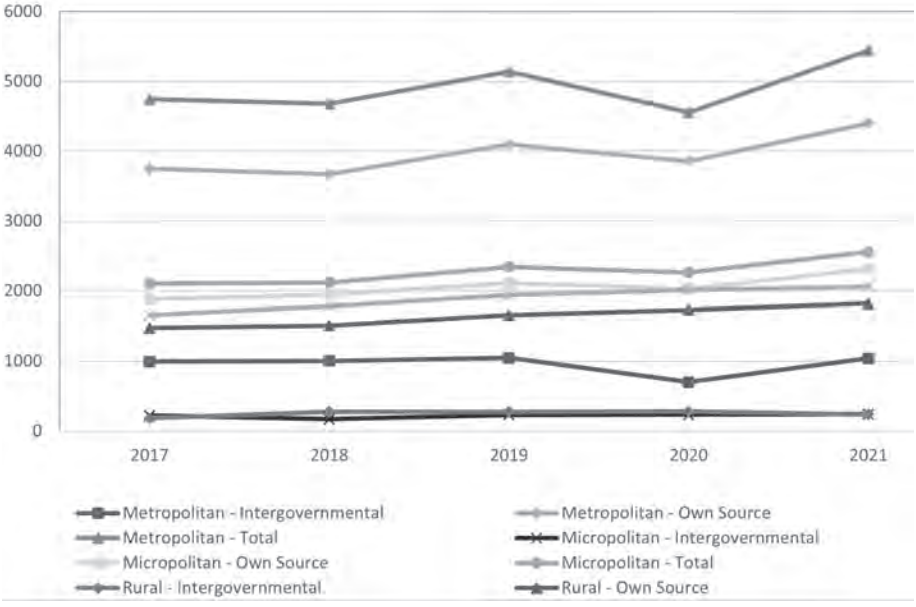
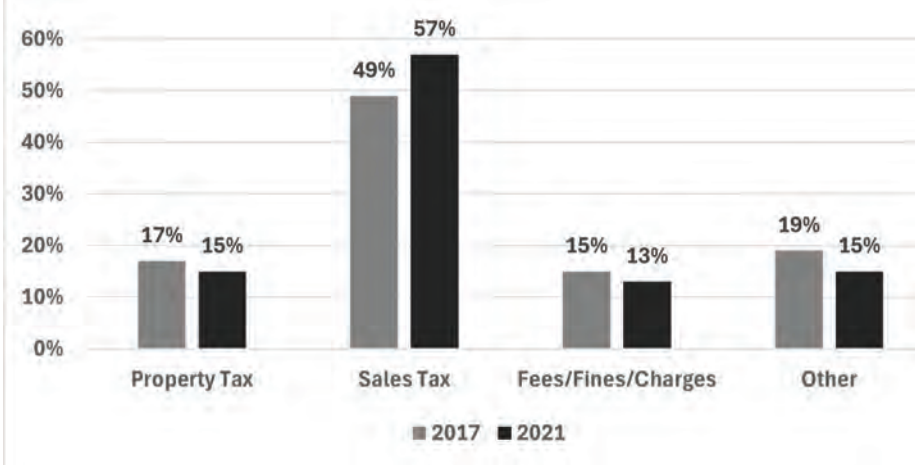


Figure 1 also shows that intergovernmental aid was relatively stable over the examined five-year period. However, specifically for municipalities in metropolitan areas, intergovernmental revenue noticeably declined between 2019 and 2020 but then rebounded between 2020 and 2021. This later spike is due to an influx of federal aid. In contrast, intergovernmental support for municipalities in rural or micropolitan areas remained relatively constant, including between 2020 and 2021.

In addition to looking at overall revenue trends, we also examined own-source revenue trends from 2017 to 2021. As seen in Figure 2, while relatively stable, the shares of revenue by source experienced a slight increase in sales tax revenue, increasing from 49% to 57% in 2017 and 2021, respectively. This increase counterbalanced declines in the share of property tax revenues, from 17% to 15% in 2017 and 2021, respectively. The increase also counterbalanced the declines in revenues from fees, fines, and charges from 15% to 13% in 2017 and 2021, respectively.

FIGURE 2

OWN-SOURCE REVENUE DISTRIBUTION: 2017 AND 2021



Given that sales taxes are notoriously income-elastic and regressive, the main own-source revenue streams local governments in Colorado rely upon are becoming less stable and less equitable. Over the past several years, the state has taken more control of property taxes. This has included placing a new cap on local government and school district property tax revenue collection,

designed to reduce revenue growth (Colorado General Assembly, 2024). Similarly, as consumers move away from purchasing goods and instead towards services, this jeopardizes the ongoing reliability of sales tax revenue (Government Financial Officers Association, 2021). These and other similar trends will require local leaders to look for transformative and forward-looking revenue options that can withstand an evolving economy.

METHODS

Our method is to estimate the factors associated with local government revenue recovery. We operationalized revenue recovery as the percentage change in own-source revenue (primarily property tax, sales tax, and fees, fines, and charges) per capita, for each municipality, between 2017 and 2021.

In our analysis, we explored several potential revenue recovery factors, including:

- *Change in revenue sources:* As different revenue streams have their own unique characteristics, we examined whether changes in specific revenue sources are associated with revenue recovery (Holcombe & Sobel, 1997; Alm et al., 2011). Specifically, we examined the impact of four different revenue sources, including intergovernmental revenue, property tax, sales tax, and fees/fines/charges, on revenue recovery.

- *Revenue diversification:* We also measured levels of revenue concentration within local governments for the year 2021 by using the Hirschman-Herfindahl Index (HHI). We specifically examined diversification amongst four own-source revenue sources: property tax, sales tax, other tax, and non-tax revenue. Notably, extant literature provides differing conclusions regarding the role of revenue diversity in insulating municipalities from revenue shocks (Carroll, 2009; Hendrick, 2019).

- *Revenue trends:* In order to understand the extent to which post-pandemic revenue trends are simply reflective of trends prior to COVID-19, we examined revenue change in municipal revenue before the pandemic. To do this, we looked at the per capita percentage change in own-source municipal revenue between 2017 and 2019.

- *Unemployment rate:* To control for economic pressures that can drive revenue trends, we included yearly unemployment rates for the county within which the municipality is located.

- *Metropolitan, Micropolitan, and Rural:* Recognizing that there may be different recovery trends based upon a municipality's proximity to a metropolitan area, we controlled for this characteristic. Based upon data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2020), a municipality is considered to be in a metropolitan area if it is an area with at least 50,000 people; a micropolitan area if it is an area with at least 10,000 people, but not more than 50,000 people; and rural if it is in an area with fewer than 10,000 people.

- *Tax and expenditure limits (TEL):* We also accounted for whether municipalities were subject to Colorado's tax and expenditure limitations under the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights (TABOR). Literature shows that upon being subject to state-wide TELs, local governments may experience shifts in the shares of revenue streams (Shadbegian, 1999).

- *Home rule:* Finally, we examined whether home rule status, which serves as one indicator of a municipality's level of fiscal autonomy, matters for economic recovery (Zhang & Nguyen-Hoang, 2023).

Our sample was 191 of Colorado's 272 general-purpose municipalities (70% of all municipalities in the state). The majority of excluded governments (57) were small municipalities and not required to complete an Annual Comprehensive Financial Report (ACFR). An additional 24 municipalities were excluded because neither their ACFR nor budget reported disaggregated sales and property tax revenue.

We collected data from a variety of sources, including yearly municipal ACFRs, municipal budgets, the U.S. Census Bureau, the Colorado Department of Local Affairs, and the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment. Upon collecting the data, we used standard Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models to understand which of these factors were associated with fiscal recovery following COVID-19.[1]

RESULTS

Upon running the regressions, three major findings became evident: own-source revenues are important for long-term fiscal stability, revenue stability matters, and certain municipal characteristics aided recovery. Appendix A details the full regression results.

IMPORTANCE OF OWN-SOURCE REVENUES

First, our results showed that own-source revenues are significantly associated with revenue recovery. For each of the revenue streams we examined (property tax, sales tax, and fees/fines/charges), we found that growth within each was correlated with overall own-source revenue recovery between 2017–2021. That is, revenue in 2021 was more likely to reach 2017 levels when each of these municipal own-source revenues grew.

This finding suggests that even though intergovernmental revenue can help municipalities absorb an immediate revenue shock, revenue recovery over longer periods relies on the sustained growth of own-source revenues. As will be discussed below, this finding becomes particularly poignant for local governments as federal COVID-19 aid ends and traditional own-source revenue streams continue to evolve.

REVENUE STABILITY MATTERS

Second, our results showed that greater revenue diversity in local government's own-source revenue was associated with less own-source revenue recovery. Revenue diversity hurts own-source revenue recovery when it is done in the absence of a stable revenue source, suggesting the importance to municipalities of having a stable revenue source. For every one-point increase in HHI, which indicates a decrease in revenue diversity, the per capita change in total revenue between 2017–2021 increased by 28%.

When local revenues are shocked, intergovernmental revenue plays an important role in post-shock total revenue recovery, especially when the municipal government does not have a stable and large revenue source. In this sense, intergovernmental revenue serves as a backfill to own-source revenue limitations.

CERTAIN MUNICIPAL CHARACTERISTICS MATTER

Finally, we found that certain municipal characteristics were associated with municipal revenue recovery for this sample. Tax and expenditure limits were not significant at all. However, home rule status and metropolitan status had statistically significant negative associations with own-source revenue recovery. More specifically, home rule municipalities and those in metropolitan areas experienced lower levels of revenue recovery than their statutory, non-metropolitan peers. Mamet (2018) notes that home rule jurisdictions can

end up with restrictive charters that limit the flexibility typically associated with home rule status. For this sample, economic pressure has no statistical relationship with revenue recovery.

In sum, these results suggest the importance of own-source revenue streams, particularly those that offer stability. This finding is despite the enormous infusion of intergovernmental aid that helped support local governments during the COVID-19 crisis. Our results suggest that this finding is of particular importance to home rule governments in metropolitan areas, which had more difficulties financially recovering from the pandemic.

DISCUSSION

Municipal fiscal recovery following COVID-19 showcases the need for governments to consider the strength of their own-source revenues, as intergovernmental support has a limited and short-lived connection to overall fiscal well-being. However, even with this reality, it is notable that traditional sources have become less reliable. For example, as noted at the beginning, the State of Colorado has played an increasingly large role over the past several years in adjusting property tax revenues. Most notably, to avoid political backlash and citizen pressure to reduce property taxes, recent legislation has established a new cap on the amount of revenue local governments can retain. Moreover, sales tax revenues are notably volatile and are at risk if the economy continues to move toward a more service-based, as opposed to goods-based, consumption.

With the backdrop that stable pre-shock revenue growth aids post-shock municipal revenue recovery, let us consider implications for revenue policy. While debate ensues regarding the optimal municipal revenue portfolio as municipal governments strive to attain desirable revenue generating properties of adequacy, stability, efficiency, equity (fairness), feasibility, and transparency (Bland, 2005; Bartle et al., 2003; Afonso, 2023), it is clear that the taxation on wealth and property tax should have an ongoing role in revenue stability (Moore & Prichard, 2020; Alm et al., 2011). There are many ways local governments can exploit property taxes. Municipalities can levy property taxes on movable, tangible, and intangible property (such as business personal property, vehicles, stocks and bonds, inheritance, and licenses or credits) to capture a broader array of wealth (Youngman, 2023).

Even if property tax revenue can be stabilized, can a property tax design be equitable? Economists traditionally think of equity along its vertical and horizontal dimensions as tax burden relates to income. More current scholarship considers equity along broader strokes, such as how tax burden affects people with different characteristics, namely race and gender (Rubin & Bartle, 2023). Challenges with measurement stem from the fact that, traditionally, governments calculate measures of equity on income, not on wealth or on demographic characteristics such as race and gender (Rubin & Bartle, 2023). However, we do know that tax structure can intentionally or unintentionally shift tax burdens in unfair ways (Rubin & Bartle, 2023). Ultimately, land value taxes can improve equity if designed well, such as by favoring owner-occupied housing and targeting property-tax relief to improve progressivity (Youngman, 2023) and through equitable administration (Berry, 2021).

Aside from securing property taxes, municipalities can consider other ways to bolster their own-source revenue streams with an eye toward building new revenue sources that are reflective of an ever-evolving fiscal environment and another eye toward enhancing equity. Tapping the service industries is one way to align economic generation with taxation, for example. Judicious use of fines, fees, and charges is another revenue source when done with equity in mind. For example, this might involve changing fees, fines, and charges structure to be on an ability-to-pay basis. By doing so, this would alter the burden of fees, fines, and charges on residents (Mughan, 2021). Importantly, this creates more equity, particularly for lower-income individuals, by bringing the rate structures into alignment with resident affordability, leading to a greater share of individuals who are able to pay and positive revenue benefits. In looking for these potential revenue-raising options, local governments can examine the work of the Government Finance Officers Association's (GFOA) recent *Rethinking Revenue* series (Government Financial Officers Association, 2021; Results for America, 2024). In their work, the association poses several options, including examining and considering the government's resources and potential assets for revenue generation. For example, there are opportunities to use government land and assets to generate new funds.

Local governments have good options to develop their own-source revenues and own-source revenue stability while they enhance equity in their jurisdictions. The first step is to create a revenue evaluation framework that highlights stability and equity among other revenue generation criteria. This entails identifying equity criteria and measurement (Government Financial

Officers Association, 2021; Results for America, 2024). The second step is to take inventory of the existing sources of revenue and the range of potential sources that are untapped (Kavanaugh, 2019). In doing so, local officials should be mindful of aligning revenue structure with local economic activity and of creating stability in their revenue base. Given the often-strong opposition to property and land-based taxes, any efforts to expand or enhance them should go hand-in-hand with public outreach and pathways for citizens to learn about the value proposition as it relates to revenue stability and equity. The third step is to consider equity in the design of each revenue source and across the revenue system. In doing so, governments may need to evaluate not only their measures of equity but also restrictive charters and tax and expenditure limitations that constrain equitable outcomes. Finally, when necessary, intergovernmental revenue should be aimed at two purposes: to support the development of a stable own-source revenue base and to improve equity across the revenue generation system. Outside the scope of this article, there are a number of non-revenue-generating efforts local governments can take to improve budgeting and revenue equity (Results for America, 2024). With these initiatives, local governments can set themselves up to better recover from future economic shocks and simultaneously reduce social and economic inequities.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic created a significant number of challenges for local governments across Colorado and beyond. In looking at what caused these challenges and the steps moving forward, there are important lessons for the long-term fiscal health of local governments. Importantly, findings from this study showed that own-source revenue, including that derived from stable property taxes, was associated with a long-term financial ability to move forward in a sustainable way.

To take advantage of these findings, local governments will need to balance revenue generation from stable sources with that from more volatile sources so that revenue generation is attentive to multiple principles, including adequacy, stability, and equity. Through a combination of revisions to existing revenue design and expansion into new revenue sources, municipal governments can shore up their own-source revenue base to be more resilient and more capable of rebounding after the next economic shock.

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APPENDIX

REGRESSION RESULTS

REVENUE RECOVERY REGRESSION RESULTS (2017-2021)					
	ALL REVENUE	INTERGOVERN-MENTAL REVENUE	PROPERTY TAX	SALES TAX	FEES, FINES, & CHARGES
REVENUE SOURCE					
Intergovern-mental Revenue	-0.01383	-0.008455	----	----	----
	(0.01358)	(0.024734)			
Property Tax Revenue	0.25356 ***	----	0.31969 ***	----	----
	(0.04414)		(0.05164)		
Sales Tax Revenue	0.21747 ***	----	----	0.26161 ***	----
	(0.03119)			(0.03865)	
Fees Fines and Charges Revenue	0.11301 ***	----	----	----	0.04673
	(0.02314)				(0.03962)
REVENUE DIVERSITY					
Revenue Diversity	28.27529 *	-26.196801	14.79701	17.27486	-17.27397
	(12.05962)	(21.509265)	(15.25268)	(14.78205)	(19.92781)

REVENUE TRENDS					
Pre-pandemic Revenue Change	0.41157 ***	0.903920 ***	0.70928 ***	0.76475 ***	0.65333 ***
	(0.08898)	(0.150748)	(0.10691)	(0.10336)	(0.15058)
ECONOMIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC PRESSURE					
Unemployment Rate	2.3838	2.671650	1.58757	1.10563	3.33932
	(1.90737)	(3.457813)	(2.40025)	(2.39476)	(3.24838)
Metropolitan	-9.66007 *	-6.798909	-8.00733	0.18137	-9.40582
	(4.55137)	(8.028810)	(5.70211)	(5.39942)	(7.34623)
Micropolitan	-2.90911	-1.562836	-0.90069	-0.82129	-1.11262
	(5.08324)	(9.222863)	(6.42341)	(6.32988)	(8.53323)
STRUCTURAL ARRANGEMENTS					
Tax and Expenditure Limit	-2.89238	-4.332014	-2.19140	-6.17559	-3.08256
	(1.90737)	(8.712816)	(6.00640)	(5.89123)	(8.02308)
Home Rule Status	-7.63186 •	-21.499958 **	-18.52673 ***	-7.43048	-22.20556 ***
	(4.09686)	(6.865507)	(4.76426)	(5.07272)	(6.37048)
Intercept	-8.32560	32.743114 •	14.40560	-2.00374	27.37689
	(10.72202)	(18.986480)	(13.10780)	(13.18527)	(17.87743)
r-squared	0.5671	0.2809	0.4573	0.4748	0.2432

*** 0.001; **0.01; *0.05; •0.1

Note: Coefficients are reported first for each variable; standard errors are included below in parentheses

ENDNOTE

[1] OLS regression is based on the standard assumptions of linearity in the model's error term and coefficients. The error term's population mean is zero, there are no correlations between the independent variables and the error term, each observation of the error term is independent of others, the error term's variance is constant, there are no independent variables that are perfect linear functions of other variables, and the error term is normally distributed.

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A REPEAT STATEWIDE SURVEY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT: HOW ATTITUDES HAVE CHANGED IN 15 YEARS

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In 2024, the Illinois Municipal League repeated a statewide survey of mayors, village presidents, and town presidents, which was first conducted in 2009 by the Southern Illinois Mayors' Association, to assess how local government perspectives have changed during the last 15 years. Using the same questions, the survey offers a direct comparison of attitudes toward state government, financial health and local leadership. The findings reveal both continuity and change, while highlighting regional differences and broader national trends that shape local governance in Illinois.

INTRODUCTION

In 2009, the Southern Illinois Mayors' Association (SIMA) published a survey to learn more about local government in Illinois.[1] The complete survey was a compilation of three individual surveys focusing on different aspects of local government and its relationship with the State of Illinois. The three individual surveys were drafted and mailed to 300 northern Illinois mayors and village or town presidents (presidents) and 100 southern Illinois mayors and presidents. The three surveys were: *Interaction of Local Government with Illinois State Government*, *Financial Position of Local Government*, and *Progression in Local Government*. Respectively, the goal of each survey was to determine the effect of state government authority on municipalities, to learn about the fiscal status of municipalities, and to examine trends in local government positions, specifically for mayors and presidents.

In August 2024, the Illinois Municipal League (IML) reissued the survey in an effort to examine how attitudes have changed in the last 15 years.[2] The original three surveys were sent via postal mail to a randomly selected sample of mayors and presidents in 2009. The 2024 survey, however, was sent to all 1,294 mayors and presidents via email, and participants were to complete the survey electronically. The survey was administered as one form, as opposed to being in three parts.

The following report details current trends identified by similar studies of local government, followed by the findings of the repeat survey and analysis of the 2024 results comparatively with the original 2009 results. This analysis aims to uncover how responses have changed during the past 15 years, as well as how 2024 responses varied by region.

BACKGROUND

Local governments across the United States continue to face a wide range of challenges, including workforce shortages, financial pressures, and evolving service demands and mandates. These broader trends provide important context for evaluating how Illinois municipal officials perceive their interactions with state government, their financial health, and the progression of municipal leadership through time.

Taken together, the following studies and reports described in this section illustrate the broader context in which Illinois municipalities operate. While the OpenGov and MissionSquare surveys focus primarily on large jurisdictions, many of the trends, such as workforce shortages, recruitment flexibility, technology risks, and financial uncertainty, are equally relevant to Illinois municipalities, even if they appear differently in small municipalities. Similarly, the National League of Cities' (NLC) *State of the Cities* report captures nationwide trends, which generally also apply to Illinois municipalities.

Reports from OpenGov, MissionSquare Research Institute, and the National League of Cities provide valuable national context that can help frame the findings of this statewide survey of municipal mayors and presidents. OpenGov is a technology company that offers cloud-based software to improve local government budgeting and operations. MissionSquare Research Institute is a nonprofit organization that conducts research on public sector workforce, retirement, and health trends. The National League of Cities is a national advocacy group representing municipalities across the country. Together, their reports highlight key trends and challenges in local governance, finance, and staffing, offering a useful backdrop for interpreting state-level survey data.

The 2024 repeat survey of Illinois mayors and presidents revisits many of these same themes, specifically addressing how municipalities perceive their financial health, relationships with the state, and ability to develop future leaders. By comparing responses from 2009 and 2024, this study captures how

some national trends have played out at the local level in Illinois, providing critical insights into how municipalities are adapting to an evolving local government landscape.

WORKFORCE TRENDS AND STAFFING CHALLENGES

The 2023 *State of Local Government Survey*, conducted by OpenGov, offers national insight into workforce challenges in local government, based on responses from 592 public sector agencies across leadership, finance, information technology, procurement, and development roles. While many survey participants represented large communities (36% served populations of more than 100,000) around the country, these workforce trends still have important implications for small municipalities in Illinois, nearly half of which serve populations of less than 1,000.

The OpenGov survey revealed an imbalance between population growth and staffing levels. Although 88% of respondents reported population increases during the last five years, 66% said staffing had not increased proportionally. This gap strains local governments' ability to meet community needs. Furthermore, hiring difficulties remain a top concern, with 61% of respondents identifying recruitment challenges as a major obstacle, and 54% cited staffing shortages as their greatest barrier to progress (OpenGov, 2023). These trends echo the experiences of many small and mid-sized Illinois municipalities, where limited applicant pools and competition for talent contribute to recruitment difficulties.

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION STRATEGIES

The MissionSquare Research Institute's 2023 *State and Local Workforce Survey* reinforces hiring and personnel concerns, particularly around retention. It found that 45% of respondents experienced a higher voluntary (non-retirement) turnover in 2023 compared to 2021. In response, 29% of governments reported dropping degree requirements for some positions, indicating a willingness to relax qualification standards to attract candidates (Young, 2023). Illinois municipalities, especially small communities, are likely experiencing similar pressures and may be adapting their hiring practices in comparable ways.

IML has taken steps to address these recruitment challenges. In 2024, IML developed a series of video kits designed to help municipalities promote careers in local government and highlight the important work of municipal

employees.[3] These initiatives align with the broader trend of municipalities across the United States recognizing the need to find unique, dynamic ways to market local government careers to develop a long-term, stable workforce.

TECHNOLOGY AND CYBERSECURITY CONCERNS

In addition to workforce issues, local government officials are increasingly concerned with technology and cybersecurity risks. OpenGov's 2023 survey found that only 8% of respondents from information technology departments felt their organization was fully protected against cyberattacks. This is particularly concerning given the growing reliance on digital platforms to manage municipal operations, communicate with residents, and deliver services (OpenGov, 2023).

Illinois municipalities, even the smallest, are not immune to these risks. Increasing reliance on digital tools to improve efficiency and enhance transparency makes them potential, and likely, targets for cyberattacks. Recognizing this vulnerability, IML has developed a range of cybersecurity resources to help municipalities strengthen their defenses and protect sensitive data.[4] These resources are increasingly relevant as municipal operations, such as permitting and billing, shift online.

FINANCIAL PRESSURES AND FUNDING PRIORITIES

NLC's 2023 *State of the Cities* report further highlights financial and infrastructure challenges facing local governments. Economic development, workforce support, infrastructure investment (particularly for aging water systems), roads, and public transit remain top priorities for municipalities across the country. Many of these priorities align closely with those of Illinois municipalities where infrastructure needs often outpace available funding.

Federal programs such as the American Rescue Plan Act and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law have provided funding to support local projects, but securing and managing these funds presents challenges for small municipalities. Fiscal and operational pressures are key factors influencing the financial outlook reported by Illinois mayors and presidents in both the 2009 and 2024 surveys.

GOVERNANCE AND LEGISLATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Another recurring theme in recent research is the evolving relationship between local governments and state legislatures. Many local leaders report feeling constrained by unfunded mandates, preemptions, and shifting state policies. These issues are particularly pronounced in small municipalities that lack the resources to absorb additional administrative and financial burdens; however, large municipalities also experience financial strain, particularly when state mandates limit revenue options or require costly infrastructure investments without corresponding funding. The growing interest in home rule authority, which provides greater local control, observed in Illinois municipalities (as shown by the 2024 survey results) is consistent with national trends, as communities seek more autonomy to tailor solutions to local needs and reduce dependence on unpredictable state policies (NLC, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

The original survey in 2009 was issued by mail as three separate surveys. To deploy the survey, IML provided SIMA with a list of addresses for all 1,299[5] mayors and presidents in Illinois at the time. In December 2008, a protocol letter was mailed to all Illinois municipalities to inform mayors and presidents of the SIMA survey project and to encourage their participation. SIMA divided the list of all 1,299 municipalities into northern (1,009 total municipalities) and southern (288 total municipalities) regions. SIMA identified southern-region municipalities as those with zip codes beginning with the numbers 622, 624, 628, and 629; all others were in the northern region. For each of the three surveys, 300 randomly selected municipalities from northern Illinois and 100 randomly selected municipalities from southern Illinois received the survey in the mail with postage-paid return envelopes. Each of the three original surveys had 151, 137, and 152 respondents, respectively. The average rate of response for each of the three surveys was 36.7% (147 out of 400).

In 2024, IML issued the survey electronically via email to all 1,294[6] mayors and presidents in an effort to increase the number of responses received. The survey was issued altogether in one form, instead of being sent in three separate parts. Since the survey was issued by email and not by mailing address, participants were asked to enter their zip code to allow for a regional analysis. The questions remained exactly the same as in the original 2009 survey. IML received 318 total responses (24.6%) in 2024.

It should be noted that the 2009 survey was administered using a paper-pencil format to a random sample of mayors and presidents, while the 2024 survey was distributed electronically to the full population of mayors and presidents. As a result, the 2024 survey had a lower response rate percentage (24.6%) compared to 2009 (36.7%), but a higher number of total responses (318 compared to an average of 147). This difference is largely attributable to the broader distribution in 2024 rather than a decline in participation. The shift to an electronic format may have improved accessibility and efficiency, allowing more officials to respond, even if the overall percentage was lower. However, it is possible that the electronic format introduced some self-selection bias, with those more comfortable with digital tools or more engaged in municipal issues being more likely to complete the survey. This potential bias should be considered when interpreting the 2024 results. After issuing the 2024 survey, the responses were divided two separate ways to provide for two different types of analysis. First, the responses were split into northern and southern Illinois using the same zip code method used in the 2009 survey to allow for a comparative analysis between 2009 and 2024 responses. Then, responses were split into four geographic sub-regions by county (central, north-central, northeast, and southern). It should be noted that the southern region identified using the zip code method and the southern region identified by county are not the exact same. A list of counties in each region can be found in Table 1 in the Appendix.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF 2009 AND 2024 SURVEY RESULTS

In both the original 2009 and the repeat 2024 surveys, the majority of respondents were mayors and presidents from municipalities with populations of less than 5,000. Currently, 74% of Illinois municipalities fall into this population category. However, in the 2024 survey, only 63.7% of survey respondents represented municipalities of this size, suggesting that small municipalities may be somewhat underrepresented in the survey results. The 2024 survey did see an increase in participation for respondents from both municipalities between 50,000 and 100,000 in population and municipalities with more than 100,000. The 2009 survey did not have any respondents representing municipalities with more than 100,000 in population; there are eight municipalities in Illinois in this population range.

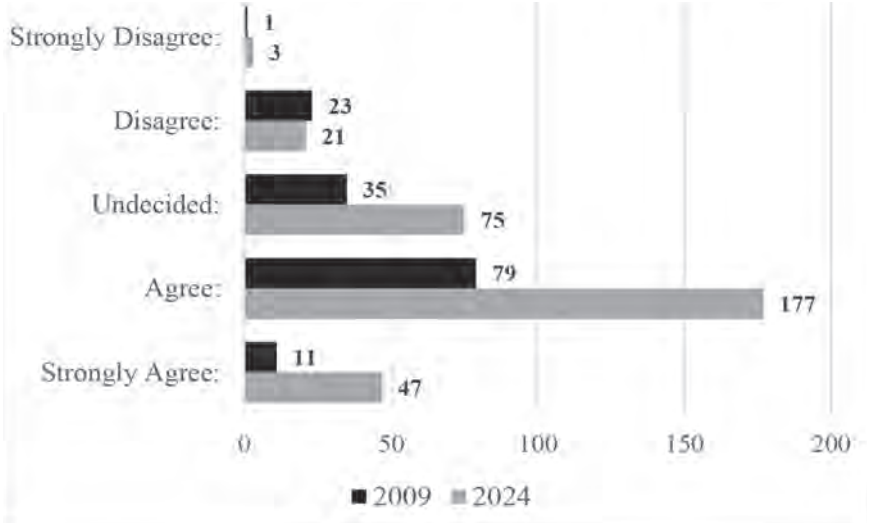
To organize the comparative analysis of the 2009 and 2024 surveys, the following sections are arranged in accordance with the three surveys that were issued separately by SIMA in 2009.

SURVEY ONE: INTERACTION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS WITH ILLINOIS STATE GOVERNMENT

From 2009 to 2024, there was an increase in respondents' indication of their knowledge of state legislation affecting local governments. In 2009, 60.4% of respondents indicated they were sufficiently knowledgeable (marking either "agree" or "strongly agree"), and in 2024, that number increased by nearly 10% with 69.4% of respondents indicating sufficient knowledge (Cole et al., 2009; IML, 2024). During the time between surveys, IML dramatically increased its educational resources for municipal officials. With the creation of more than 100 issue-specific fact sheets,[7] increased communication frequency through IML e-newsletters,[8] and the continuous addition of educational videos and publications to the IML website,[9] the increase in knowledge of state legislation affecting local governments may be attributed to IML's continuing outreach efforts to make sure all municipal officials are adequately informed. This increase is also likely to be linked to advancements in technology, leading to improved communication and rapid access to information.

FIGURE 1

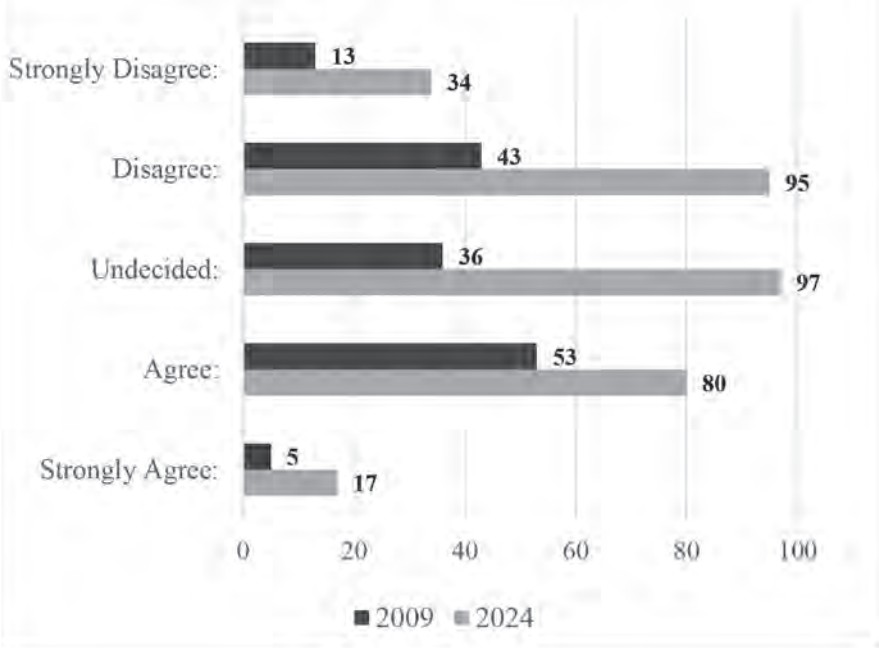
ARE YOU SUFFICIENTLY KNOWLEDGEABLE OF STATE LEGISLATION AFFECTING LOCAL GOVERNMENT?



Since 2009, there has been a decrease amongst respondents in their belief that they are able to influence state legislation affecting municipalities. In 2009, 38.7% of respondents felt that they could influence legislation, but only 30.0% of respondents felt that they could influence legislation in 2024 (Cole et al., 2009; IML, 2024). This decrease may be connected to municipal officials' increased awareness of state legislation affecting their municipalities, leading respondents to feel discouraged about their ability to stop unfunded mandates and preemptions of local authority.

FIGURE 2

DO YOU FEEL THAT YOU CAN INFLUENCE STATE LEGISLATION THAT AFFECTS MUNICIPALITIES?

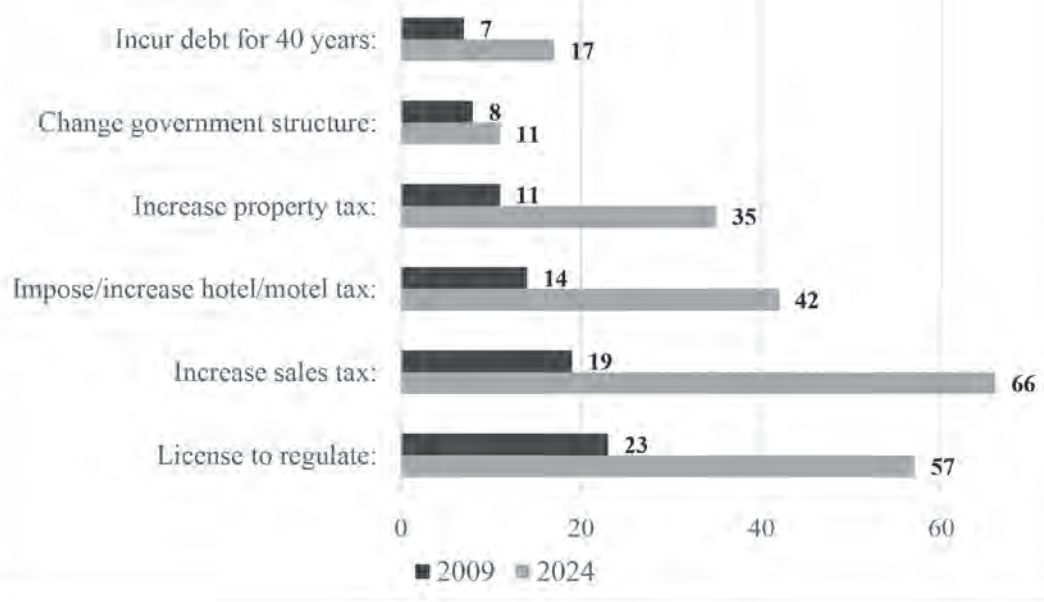


The number of responses from home rule municipalities increased from 21.1% in 2009 to 27.6% in 2024 (Cole et al., 2009; IML, 2024). Moreover, there was also an increase in non-home rule respondents' consideration of becoming home rule. In 2009, only 18.6% reported that they had considered becoming home rule, but that number rose to 23.3% in 2024 (Cole et al., 2009; IML, 2024). Since 2009, there has been an actual 12.0% increase in home rule

municipalities (200 in 2009 to 224 in 2024). Accordingly, IML has continued to encourage municipalities to consider obtaining home rule status because it allows for local solutions to local issues and problems. IML's continued encouragement may explain the increase in home rule municipalities and respondents' increased interest in obtaining home rule status. A municipality with home rule status can exercise any power and perform any function, unless it is specifically prohibited from doing so by state law. In contrast, a non-home rule municipality may only exercise powers for which express authority is provided by state law.[10] Home rule status can be achieved in one of two ways: (1) a municipality automatically achieves home rule status when its population exceeds 25,000 residents; however, if the municipality's population dips below this threshold, it continues to be home rule, but the clerk is required to certify the question of home rule status for submission to the voters at the next general election; or, (2) communities with fewer than 25,001 residents can become home rule by passing a local referendum.[11]

FIGURE 3

WHAT HOME RULE POWERS HAS YOUR MUNICIPALITY USED?



Furthermore, there was a shift in the reported use of home rule powers. In 2009, mayors and presidents of home rule municipalities indicated that the license to regulate was the most common use of their home rule powers (Cole et al., 2009). In 2024, the power to increase sales tax was the most utilized by home rule respondents (IML, 2024). This shift suggests that municipalities are placing greater emphasis on financial flexibility. While regulatory authority was previously the most common use of home rule powers, the increased focus on sales tax adjustments in 2024 indicates a growing need for locally controlled revenue. This change may reflect rising costs, shifts in state funding, and efforts to reduce reliance on property taxes.

Since 2009, there has been an increase in uncertainty surrounding how unfunded mandates interfere with the daily functions of municipal government. Unfunded mandates present significant challenges for municipalities due to the financial and resource burden they impose. State and federal governments frequently require municipalities to implement specific programs or meet specific standards, yet these mandates are often unfunded. Municipalities face difficulties in absorbing the additional costs of compliance, which result in a reallocation of limited resources. Local governments are often forced to cut their budgets, increase taxes, or reduce essential services to meet these mandated obligations. A recent example of an unfunded mandate that has had a large financial impact on Illinois municipalities is the 2021 Lead Service Line Replacement and Notification Act (Public Act 102-0613), which requires municipalities to identify and replace all lead service lines within their water systems without providing adequate funding.

In 2009, 73.3% of mayors and presidents agreed that unfunded mandates interfere with the daily functions of municipal government, 11.3% disagreed, and 15.3% were undecided (Cole et al., 2009). In 2024, these responses changed to 66.0%, 6.2%, and 27.9%, respectively (IML, 2024). Interestingly, mayors' and presidents' reported understanding of unfunded mandates affecting their municipalities increased from 46.6% in 2009 to 55.1% in 2024. In both 2009 and 2024, paying for unfunded mandates by taking money from the general fund/operating budget was the prevailing answer (Cole et al., 2009; IML, 2024). In 2009, more mayors and presidents reported that they cut projects and raised taxes or rates to cover the cost of unfunded mandates (Cole et al., 2009). Whereas, in 2024, more mayors and presidents selected "do not spend money we do not have" and "grants" as methods used to cover the cost of unfunded mandates (IML, 2024). This may reflect a shift in habit where municipal

officials are better prioritizing their budgets and cutting unnecessary spending as unfunded mandates become more common and more expensive.

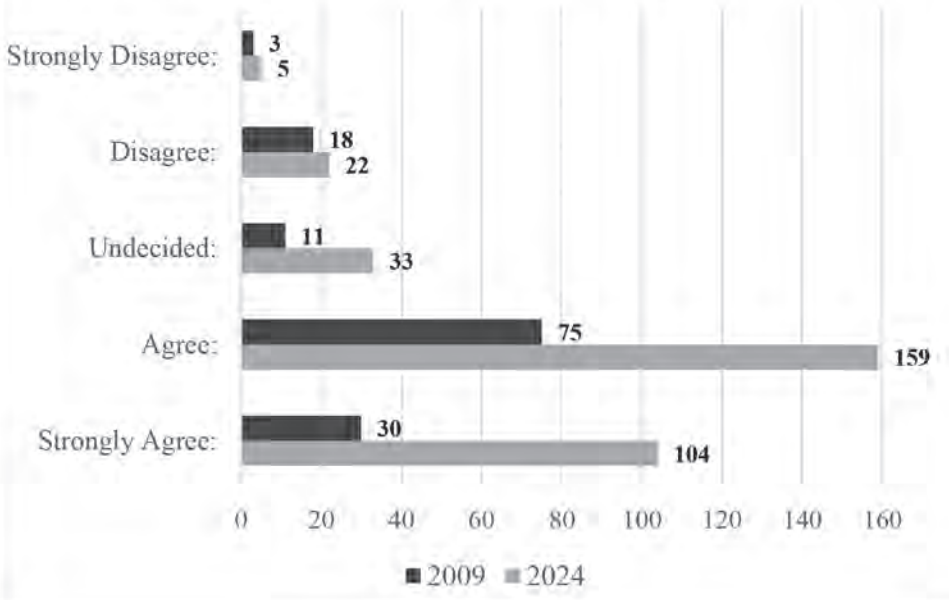
See Table 2 in the Appendix for the comparative results of Survey One from 2009 to 2024.

SURVEY TWO: FINANCIAL POSITION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

In 2009, most mayors and presidents responding to the survey believed that their municipalities were financially sound (76.6%), which slightly increased in 2024 (81.4%) (Cole et al., 2009; IML, 2024). Although in 2024, there was an increase in uncertainty surrounding the burden of public debt. In 2009, 24.3% of mayors and presidents agreed their municipality was burdened by public debt, 65.4% disagreed, and 10.3% were undecided (Cole et al., 2009). In 2024, these responses changed to 21.7% agreed, 58.8% disagreed, and 19.5% were undecided (IML, 2024).

FIGURE 4

IS YOUR MUNICIPALITY FINANCIALLY SOUND?



There was also more uncertainty and less disagreement in 2024 about whether municipalities were over-taxing or under-taxing for public purposes. In 2009, only 8.9% were undecided on whether their municipality was over-taxing, and 24.8% were undecided on whether their municipality was under-taxing. In 2024, 19.2% were undecided when asked whether their municipality was over-taxing for public purposes, and 34.1% were undecided when asked about under-taxing. In both categories, there was approximately a 10% increase in municipal officials who were undecided, which shows increased uncertainty in appropriate taxation levels. When asked what taxes their municipality imposes, mayors and presidents reported increased rates of nearly every taxation category from 2009 to 2024 (Cole et al., 2009; IML, 2024).

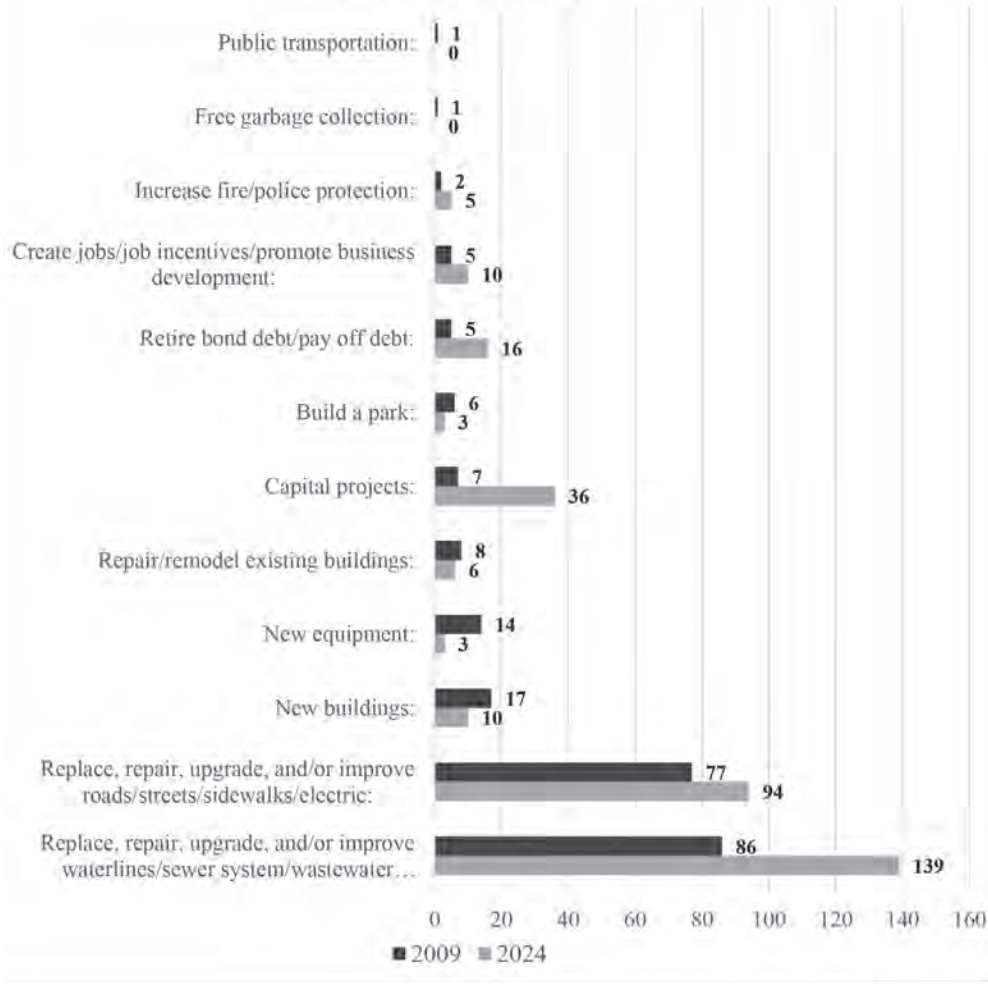
FIGURE 5

PLEASE RANK IN ORDER FROM 1-8 (1 BEING THE GREATEST) THE SOURCES OF REVENUE FOR YOUR MUNICIPALITY (numbers reflect the frequency of responses)

	2024							
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th
Sales tax:	97	43	30	32	17	18	25	49
Property tax:	84	54	38	28	27	19	28	34
Grants:	29	16	31	34	54	47	33	35
Intergovernmental transfers:	25	19	24	21	30	33	37	50
User fees (trash, water, permits):	44	31	39	37	33	28	20	45
Motor fuel tax:	22	19	48	61	53	50	27	19
TIF districts:	30	19	14	61	53	50	27	19
Other:	36	11	11	11	17	18	19	67
	2009							
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th
Sales tax:	36	34	24	14	7	6	0	0
Property tax:	41	35	20	16	3	0	1	1
Grants:	4	1	6	13	23	26	12	3
Intergovernmental transfers:	3	6	8	9	14	22	9	0
User fees (trash, water, permits):	26	15	22	16	18	7	4	0
Motor fuel tax:	3	22	33	34	20	3	5	2
TIF districts:	2	4	7	7	4	7	22	6
Other:	11	5	5	6	3	2	3	16

FIGURE 6

IF YOU HAD A $1 MILLION OPEN GRANT TODAY, HOW WOULD YOU USE IT FOR YOUR COMMUNITY?



From 2009 to 2024, the top-ranked revenue sources and expenditures remained consistent. In 2009, the top-ranked revenue sources, in order from first to third, were property taxes, sales taxes, and user fees.[12] In 2024, sales taxes were first, property taxes second, and user fees third, which can be seen in Figure 5 (Cole et al., 2009; IML, 2024). The rising cost of property taxes that has continued since 2009 is highly unpopular amongst municipal constituents, which may be

an explanation for the shift toward sales tax as a top revenue source. Likewise, in 2009, the top-ranked expenditures were infrastructure and public works, personnel costs, and payment towards existing debt. Whereas, in 2024, the order slightly changed with personnel costs first, infrastructure and public works second, and payment towards existing debt third (Cole et al., 2009; IML, 2024).

Spending priorities also remained similar between 2009 and 2024. When asked, "If you had a $1 million open grant today, how would you use it for your community," the top answer in both 2009 and 2024 was to "replace, repair, upgrade, and/or improve waterlines/sewer system/wastewater treatment/water tower." The next most popular answer, to "replace, repair, upgrade, and/or improve roads/streets/sidewalks/electric," also remained the same. The third, however, changed from "new buildings" in 2009, to "capital projects" in 2024 (Cole et al., 2009; IML, 2024). This similarity between the 2009 and 2024 prioritization of infrastructure spending indicates that it is consistently a top spending priority for municipal officials.

See Table 3 in the Appendix for the comparative results of Survey Two from 2009 to 2024.

SURVEY THREE: PROGRESSION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

In 2009, mayors and presidents disagreed (50.0%) that other units of government were the starting point for political figures in their municipality (Cole et al., 2009). In 2024, more mayors and presidents were undecided if political figures in their municipality started in other units of government (47.0%) (IML, 2024). In 2009, 59.2% of respondents reported that 0-10% of local government officials in their municipality have previously served in another capacity. Likewise, in 2024, 64.3% of respondents reported the same, suggesting that more people are getting into municipal government with no prior elected experience (Cole et al., 2009; IML, 2024). There was no significant change between 2009 and 2024 in responses regarding local government officials having family members who have previously held public office.

Mayors and presidents remained divided on whether their municipality is developing the next generation of local government officials. Mayors and presidents from southern-region municipalities in both 2009 and 2024 were less likely to agree than those from northern-region municipalities that their

municipality was developing the next generation of local leaders (Cole et al., 2009; IML, 2024). Amongst both regions, perceived political motivations as a factor for seeking public office increased from 19.9% in 2009 to 44.6% in 2024 (Cole et al., 2009; IML, 2024). This significant increase may indicate broader trends of increased political polarization and media scrutiny of local governments.

There was a decrease in the number of mayors and presidents who agreed that officials in their municipalities work in government to promote good government from 83.6% in 2009 to 74.2% in 2024 (Cole et al., 2009; IML, 2024). Also, there was a significant shift in reported motivations to work in public service. In 2009, most mayors and presidents reported they chose to work in public service because they were urged by members of their municipality (42.1%), had a strong interest in government work (27.3%), or nobody else wanted the position (14.0%) (Cole et al., 2009). In 2024, 52.8% of mayors and presidents reported that they chose to work in public service to give back to the community (IML, 2024). Knowing that more elected officials today are motivated by public service could be a powerful recruitment tool when recruiting the next generation of elected officials.

In 2009, the prevailing response for what needed to be done to develop the next generation of local government officials in municipalities was to promote youth involvement and generate youth interest (35.9%) (Cole et al., 2009). In 2024, the prevailing response was to encourage community involvement, develop community interest, and better communication with citizens (54.0%) (IML, 2024). Since the survey does not clearly define "youth," it is difficult to determine whether the approach to developing the next generation has changed significantly since 2009. However, both prevailing answers involve engaging with the public to generate interest.

See Table 4 in the Appendix for the comparative results of Survey Three from 2009 to 2024.

FIGURE 7

OTHER UNITS OF GOVERNMENT ARE THE STARTING POINT FOR POLITICAL FIGURES IN YOUR MUNICIPALITY

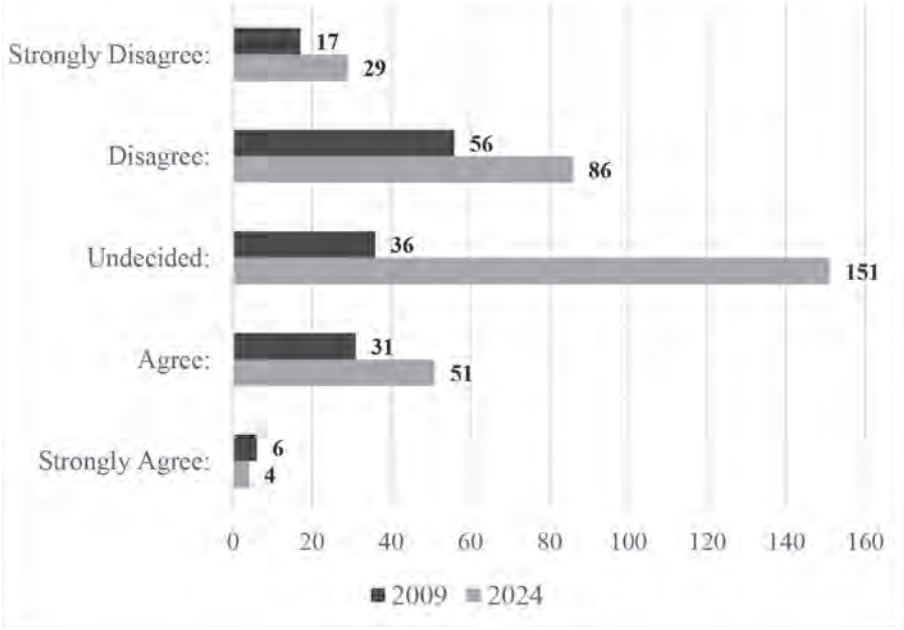


FIGURE 8

WHAT PERCENTAGE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS HAVE PREVIOUSLY SERVED IN ANOTHER CAPACITY (i.e., school board, park district)?

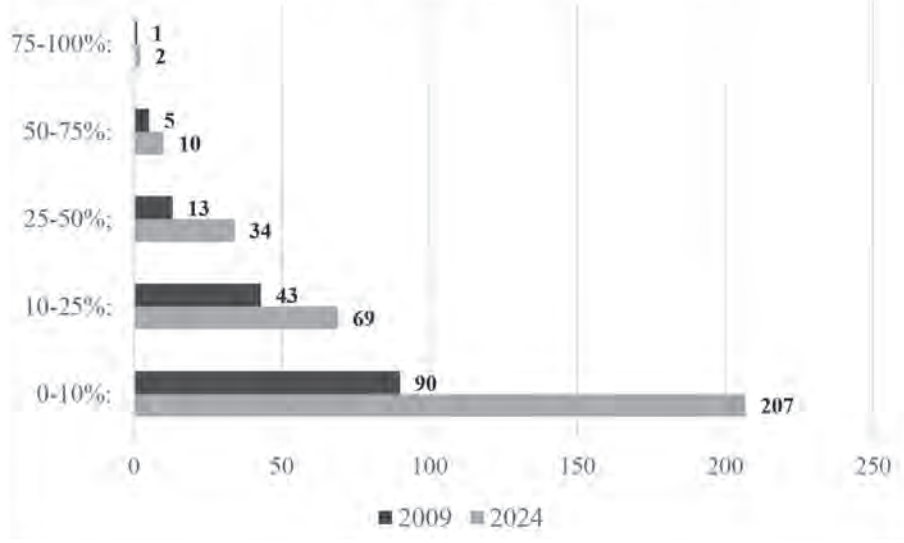
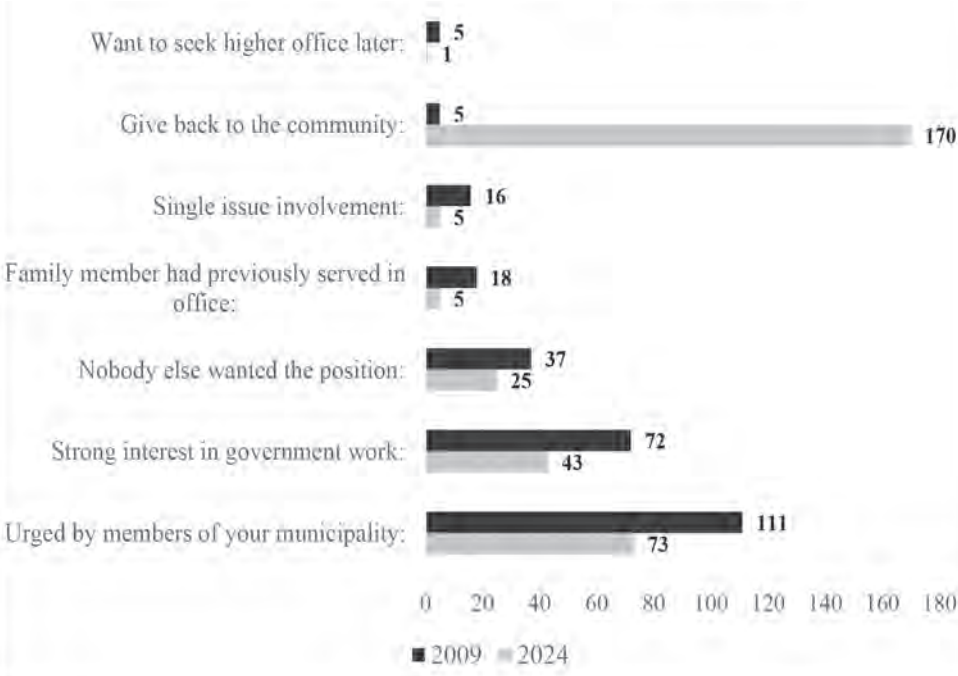


FIGURE 9

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO WORK IN PUBLIC SERVICE?



REGIONAL ANALYSIS OF 2024 SURVEY RESULTS

The 2024 survey reveals notable sub-regional differences in municipal size, governance, and legislative engagement. The respondents from the central, north-central, and southern regions were predominantly from municipalities with populations of less than 5,000, while a higher percentage of the northeastern respondents were from municipalities with populations between 10,000 and 25,000 (IML, 2024). This urban-rural split is reflected in responses to legislative influence. The northeastern region, for example, shows the highest familiarity with state legislation and the strongest sense of influence. Meanwhile, central and southern regions exhibited more uncertainty about their impact, with substantial portions of respondents undecided about their legislative influence.

In terms of governance structures, the northeastern region stands out with a significant proportion of home rule municipalities (41.8%), allowing for more local autonomy and flexibility (IML, 2024). Currently, 68.3% (153/224) of all

Illinois' home rule municipalities are located in the northeastern region. In the 2024 survey, 37.1%, or 33 out of 89, of the home rule respondents were from the northeastern region (IML, 2024). This concentration of municipalities with home rule authority contrasts with the other regions, where home rule municipalities are less prevalent, leading to more limited local power. The northeastern region had a high level of concern regarding unfunded mandates, where 54.4% of respondents strongly agreed that unfunded mandates interfere with the daily functions of local government. The central, north-central, and southern regions expressed moderate concern with only 26.7%, 29.1%, and 26.9%, respectively, selecting "strongly agree" (IML, 2024).

FIGURE 10

HOME RULE MUNICIPALITIES BY REGION (224 Total Home Rule Municipalities)

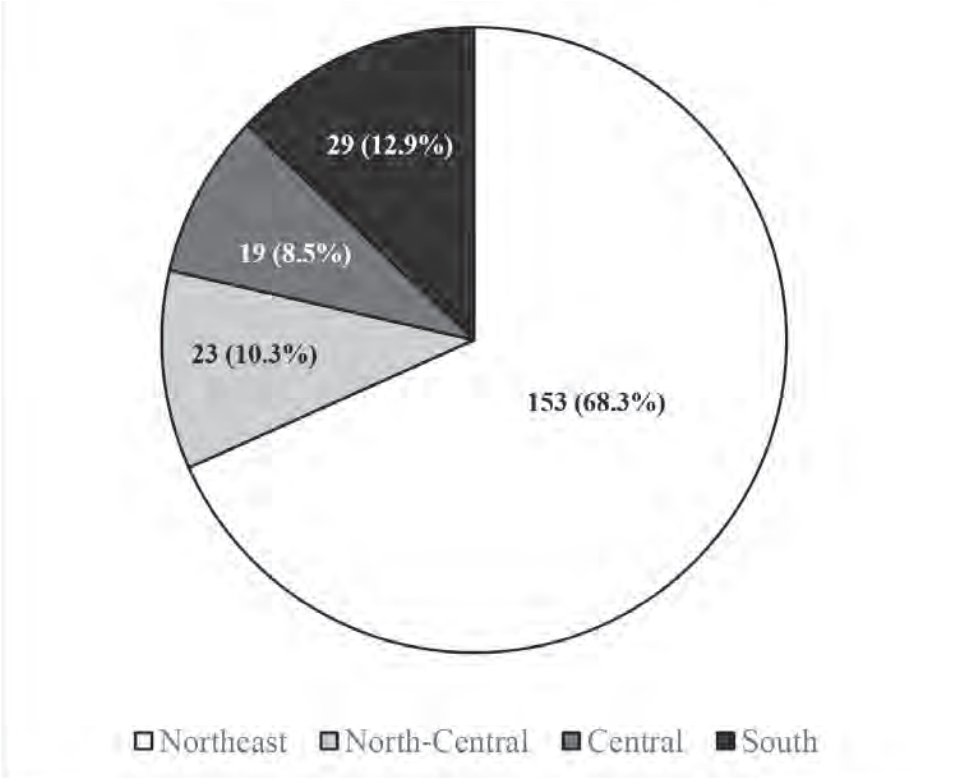
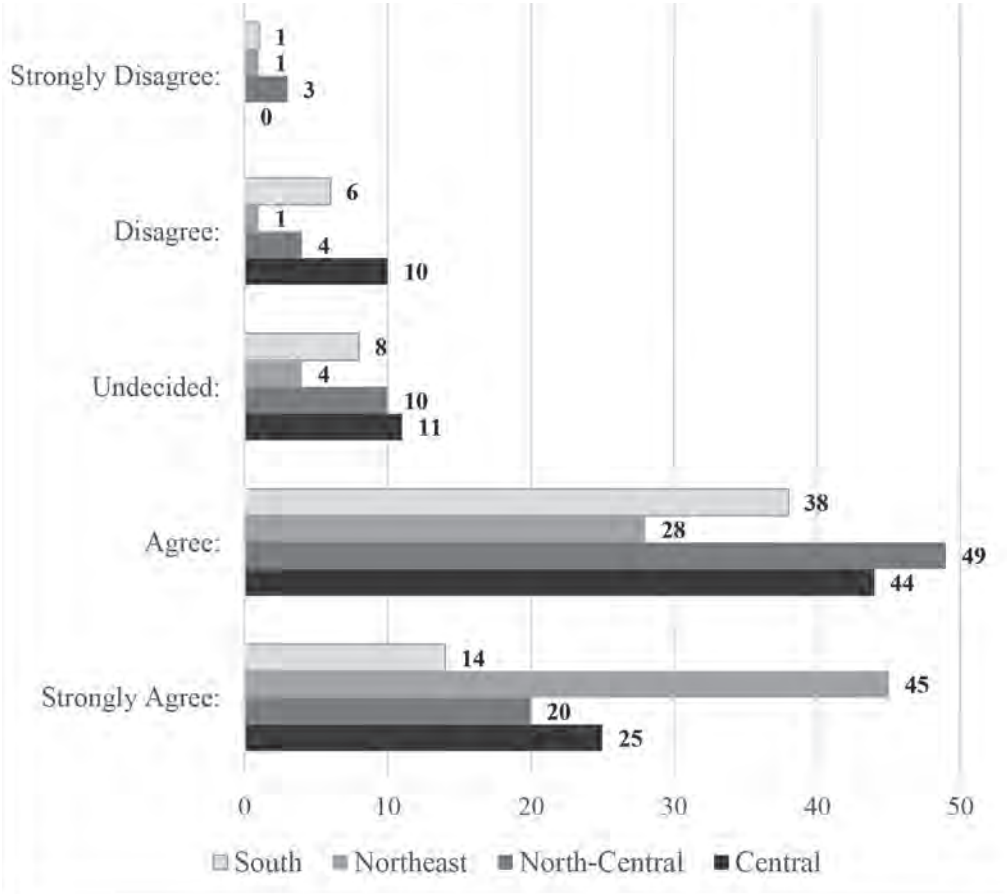


FIGURE 11

IS YOUR MUNICIPALITY FINANCIALLY SOUND?



Financial soundness and the burden of public debt vary by region. The northeastern region demonstrated the highest confidence in financial stability, with a large percentage (57.0%) of respondents strongly agreeing that their municipalities are financially sound (92.4% marking "agree" or "strongly agree"). This contrasts with the central, north-central, and southern regions, where financial confidence is more moderate (IML, 2024). However, the majority still feel financially secure (76.7%, 80.2%, and 77.6%, respectively, marking "strongly agree" or "agree"). When it comes to the public debt burden, the north-central and northeastern regions show the lowest levels of uncertainty (only 13.9% in both regions marking "undecided") when asked if

public debt is burdening their municipality (IML, 2024). This contrasts with the central and southern regions, where a higher percentage were undecided about the impact of public debt (24.4% and 25.37%, respectively) (IML, 2024). All four regions, however, marked "disagree" or "strongly disagree" at similar rates ranging between 56.7% and 63.3%, showing a majority of respondents statewide are not concerned with public debt burdening their municipalities.

Across all regions, revenue generation and spending priorities were mostly consistent. Municipalities in all four regions consistently rated sales and property taxes as their greatest sources of revenue. There was a close split in the ranking of their top revenue source across all regions. 31.2% of respondents ranked sales tax as their top revenue source, and 26.9% of respondents ranked property taxes first (IML, 2024). The level of expenditures was also fairly consistent across regions, the outlier being the northeastern region spending much more on personnel costs than the other regions, likely due to larger government structures and service needs or a higher salary schedule. A combination of both personnel costs and infrastructure spending were ranked highly across all regions.

When asked about potential spending with a hypothetical $1 million grant, all regions prioritized infrastructure improvements, particularly for water and road systems (IML, 2024). This highlights a common need for essential infrastructure maintenance across municipalities, regardless of size. However, all regions showed a slightly higher preference for water system improvements, which shows a statewide prioritization of improving water infrastructure. This is likely due to the state's Lead Service Line Replacement and Notification Act, enacted in 2021, which mandates total lead service line replacement in all community water systems on a structured timeline from 2042 to 2077.

Lastly, the approach for fostering future local leadership varies, with the northeastern region reporting the strongest level of agreement as to whether they are developing the next generation of local officials (IML, 2024). The central and north-central regions are more reserved on this front, with a mix of undecided responses and less emphasis on youth involvement. Motivation for public service also differs regionally. While community service is the top reason across all areas, the northeastern region sees a slightly stronger drive from an interest in governance, while many in the southern region choose to work in public service at the urging of members of their municipality.

Together, these regional insights demonstrate how population size, governance structure, and financial conditions actively shape the capacity, priorities, and strategies of local governments across the state. For example, northeastern municipalities, which are more likely to have larger populations and home rule authority, report stronger familiarity with state legislation and higher confidence in their financial stability. In contrast, small municipalities in central and southern Illinois are less likely to be home rule and report greater uncertainty about public debt (IML, 2024). As a result, they express less confidence in their legislative influence and take more conservative approaches to managing spending and development. These patterns illustrate how regional differences in size, home rule status, and financial confidence create distinct realities for Illinois municipalities, ultimately influencing how they navigate both local priorities and state mandates.

The regional results of the 2024 survey can be seen in Table 5 in the Appendix.

CONCLUSION

The 2024 repeat survey highlights important shifts in attitudes, challenges, and strategies among Illinois municipalities since the original 2009 survey. The findings indicate that while local officials report increased awareness of state legislation, they also feel they have less influence over the legislative process, a sentiment that aligns with broader national trends of local governments tackling state preemptions and growing regulatory complexities (NLC, 2023). This sense of diminished legislative influence may reflect the ongoing tension between state mandates and local autonomy, particularly in small municipalities that lack staff and resources to advocate effectively at the state level.

The survey also shows growing interest in home rule status, with more municipalities either becoming home rule or considering pursuing it. This mirrors national trends, as discussed in the background section, where local governments increasingly seek tools to tailor policies to their community needs. The desire for greater local autonomy reflects the broader push among municipalities across the country to assert more control over their finances, governance structures, and economic development strategies.

Financially, Illinois municipalities continue to report relative fiscal stability, but the 2024 survey reveals increasing uncertainty about appropriate tax levels and public debt burdens. This aligns with national research showing

that local governments face rising costs, growing infrastructure needs, and complex financial environments (OpenGov, 2023; NLC, 2023). The shift in top revenue sources, from property taxes to sales taxes, also reflects broader national trends, where communities increasingly rely on more flexible revenue streams, especially as state and federal funding becomes less predictable. This shift may be influenced further in coming years by recent changes to Illinois state law that now allow non-home rule municipalities to adjust sales taxes by ordinance.

Staffing and workforce challenges, a dominant theme in the background portion of this report, also surfaced in the 2024 survey, though indirectly. The survey does not directly measure staffing shortages, but the increased emphasis on conservative spending, delayed projects, and infrastructure maintenance all suggest that staffing constraints, highlighted in national surveys conducted by OpenGov (2023) and MissionSquare (2023), are shaping local priorities. These workforce pressures, combined with recruitment difficulties, are also reflected in the survey's findings about the challenges of developing the next generation of local leaders, particularly in small municipalities. This difficulty aligns with broader national concerns about leadership succession and the need for proactive efforts to attract and prepare new leaders for local office.

The survey's focus on infrastructure spending, with water and roads consistently being a high priority, further connects to national research showing that aging infrastructure is a universal concern for local governments, especially in small communities where financial resources are limited. Federal programs like the American Rescue Plan Act and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law provide critical funding, but the complexity of securing and managing these funds creates additional administrative burdens for small municipalities, reinforcing findings from the literature review.

Overall, the 2024 survey results show that Illinois municipalities are navigating many of the same challenges faced by local governments across the nation. Large, home rule municipalities in northeastern Illinois report greater fiscal confidence and legislative engagement, while small, non-home rule municipalities in central and southern Illinois report more uncertainty about finances, future leadership, and their ability to influence state policy. These regional differences highlight how population size, governance flexibility, and fiscal health collectively shape the operational strategies and policy priorities of Illinois municipalities.

Looking ahead, Illinois municipalities will need to balance fiscal responsibility, workforce challenges, and evolving service demands, all while navigating an increasingly complex state-local relationship. The combination of rising community expectations, recruitment struggles, cybersecurity threats, and aging infrastructure will require innovative solutions and proactive leadership development to ensure long-term stability.

Conducting surveys like this at regular intervals provides valuable insight into how local government officials adapt to changing political, economic, and social conditions through time. By comparing responses across different time periods, municipal leaders can better understand long-term trends and make informed decisions that support effective governance. Given the shifts observed in the past 15 years, repeating this survey again in another 15 years could offer a useful perspective on the generational evolution of local governments' relationships with the state, financial priorities, and municipal leadership.

Madison Ratliff is research coordinator for the Illinois Municipal League. Her role includes research and writing to assist the legal and legislative departments, as well as coordinating independent projects to develop solutions for municipal problems. Ratliff is a Summa Cum Laude graduate of Illinois State University with a Bachelor of Science degree in Mathematics and Political Science and is a current graduate student in the University of Illinois Springfield's Master of Public Policy program. Ratliff currently serves on the Illinois YMCA Youth and Government Program Board and volunteers as its Press Program Coordinator.

Brad Cole serves as Chief Executive Officer of the Illinois Municipal League, based in Springfield, Illinois, which is the statewide association of all 1,294 cities, villages, and towns. Cole previously worked as Downstate Director for Illinois U.S. Senator Mark Kirk; he served as Mayor of the City of Carbondale, Illinois, for two four-year terms, which followed one four-year term on the city council; and, he was Deputy Chief of Staff to Illinois Governor George H. Ryan. Cole is a graduate of Southern Illinois University Carbondale with a bachelor's degree in a double major of political science and biological sciences, and a master's degree in legal studies from the SIU School of Law.

APPENDIX

TABLE 1

COUNTIES BY REGION

NORTHEAST	POPULATION: 8,166,186			
Cook	DuPage	Grundy	Kane	Kankakee
Kendall	Lake	McHenry	Will	
NORTH-CENTRAL	**POPULATION: 1,334,750**			
Boone	Bureau	Carroll	DeKalb	Fulton
Henderson	Henry	Jo Daviess	Knox	LaSalle
Lee	Livingston	Marshall	McDonough	McLean
Mercer	Ogle	Peoria	Putnam	Rock Island
Stark	Stephenson	Tazewell	Warren	Whiteside
Winnebago	Woodford			
CENTRAL	**POPULATION: 935,913**			
Adams	Brown	Calhoun	Cass	Champaign
Christian	Clark	Clay	Coles	Crawford
Cumberland	De Witt	Douglas	Edgar	Effingham
Fayette	Ford	Greene	Hancock	Iroquois
Jasper	Jersey	Lawrence	Logan	Macon
Macoupin	Mason	Menard	Montgomery	Morgan
Moultrie	Piatt	Pike	Richland	Sangamon
Schuyler	Scott	Shelby	Vermilion	
SOUTHERN	**POPULATION: 736,407**			
Alexander	Bond	Clinton	Edwards	Franklin
Gallatin	Hamilton	Hardin	Jackson	Jefferson
Johnson	Madison	Marion	Massac	Monroe
Perry	Pope	Pulaski	Randolph	Saline
St. Clair	Union	Wabash	Washington	Wayne
White	Williamson			
ILLINOIS	**POPULATION: 12,812,508**			

TABLE 2

2024 AND 2009 TOTAL COMPARATIVE RESULTS, SURVEY ONE:
INTERACTION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS WITH ILLINOIS STATE GOVERNMENT

	2024		2009	
ARE YOU SUFFICIENTLY KNOWLEDGEABLE OF STATE LEGISLATION AFFECTING LOCAL GOVERNMENT?				
Strongly Agree:	47	14.55%	11	7.38%
Agree:	177	54.80%	79	53.02%
Undecided:	75	23.22%	35	23.49%
Disagree:	21	6.50%	23	15.44%
Strongly Disagree:	3	0.93%	1	0.67%
DO YOU FEEL THAT YOU CAN INFLUENCE STATE LEGISLATION THAT AFFECTS MUNICIPALITIES?				
Strongly Agree:	17	5.26%	5	3.33%
Agree:	80	24.77%	53	35.33%
Undecided:	97	30.03%	36	24.00%
Disagree:	95	29.41%	43	28.67%
Strongly Disagree:	34	10.53%	13	8.67%
LEGISLATION AFFECTING YOUR MUNICIPALITY IS PASSED FREQUENTLY.				
Strongly Agree:	29	8.98%	7	4.76%
Agree:	164	50.77%	69	46.94%
Undecided:	83	25.70%	35	23.81%
Disagree:	39	12.07%	33	22.45%
Strongly Disagree:	8	2.48%	3	2.04%
ARE YOU HOME RULE?				
Yes:	89	27.55%	31	21.09%
No:	234	72.45%	116	78.91%
IF NOT, HAVE YOU CONSIDERED BECOMING HOME RULE?				
Yes:	57	23.27%	21	18.58%
No:	188	76.73%	92	81.42%
WHAT HOME RULE POWERS HAVE YOUR MUNICIPALITY USED?				
License to regulate:	57	17.65%	23	28.05%
Increase sales tax:	66	20.43%	19	23.17%
Impose/increase hotel/motel tax:	42	13.00%	14	17.07%
Increase property tax:	35	10.84%	11	13.41%

TABLE 2 continued

Change government structure:	11	3.41%	8	9.76%
Incur debt for 40 years:	17	5.26%	7	8.54%
DO UNFUNDED MANDATES INTERFERE WITH THE DAILY FUNCTIONS OF YOUR LOCAL GOVERNMENT?				
Strongly Agree:	111	34.37%	52	34.67%
Agree:	102	31.58%	58	38.67%
Undecided:	90	27.86%	23	15.33%
Disagree:	18	5.57%	15	10.00%
Strongly Disagree:	2	0.62%	2	1.33%
DO YOU KNOW ENOUGH ABOUT UNFUNDED MANDATES AFFECTING YOUR MUNICIPALITY?				
Strongly Agree:	49	15.17%	17	11.64%
Agree:	129	39.94%	51	34.93%
Undecided:	94	29.10%	51	34.93%
Disagree:	40	12.38%	25	17.12%
Strongly Disagree:	11	3.41%	2	1.37%
HOW DO YOU COVER THE COSTS OF UNFUNDED MANDATES?				
Taken from general fund/ operating budget:	244	75.54%	46	30.46%
Cut projects/services/overtime; Layoffs:	75	23.22%	29	19.21%
Raise taxes/rates:	54	16.72%	23	15.23%
Grants:	91	28.17%	12	7.95%
User fees/impact fees:	55	17.03%	7	4.64%
Borrow/loans:	30	9.29%	6	3.97%
Proverbial “rob Peter to pay Paul”:	0	0.00%	5	3.31%
Cash reserves:	86	26.63%	3	1.99%
Complain to legislators:	65	20.12%	2	1.32%
Fundraisers:	2	0.62%	2	1.32%
Municipal bonds:	30	9.29%	1	0.66%
Monies in coffers:	13	4.02%	1	0.66%
Do not spend money we do not have:	97	30.03%	1	0.66%
My municipality is not affected by unfunded mandates:	25	7.74%	1	0.66%

TABLE 3

2024 AND 2009 TOTAL COMPARATIVE RESULTS SURVEY TWO:
FINANCIAL POSITION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

	2024		2009	
IS YOUR MUNICIPALITY FINANCIALLY SOUND?				
Strongly Agree:	104	32.20%	30	21.90%
Agree:	159	49.23%	75	54.74%
Undecided:	33	10.22%	11	8.03%
Disagree:	22	6.81%	18	13.14%
Strongly Disagree:	5	1.55%	3	2.19%
IS PUBLIC DEBT BURDENING YOUR MUNICIPALITY?				
Strongly Agree:	11	3.41%	5	3.68%
Agree:	59	18.27%	28	20.59%
Undecided:	63	19.50%	14	10.29%
Disagree:	138	42.72%	67	49.26%
Strongly Disagree:	52	16.10%	22	16.18%
IS YOUR MUNICIPALITY OVER-TAXING TO PROVIDE FOR PUBLIC PURPOSES?				
Strongly Agree:	7	2.17%	1	0.74%
Agree:	34	10.53%	13	9.63%
Undecided:	62	19.20%	12	8.89%
Disagree:	144	44.58%	74	54.81%
Strongly Disagree:	76	23.53%	35	25.93%
IS YOUR MUNICIPALITY UNDER-TAXING TO PROVIDE FOR PUBLIC PURPOSES?				
Strongly Agree:	8	2.48%	5	3.76%
Agree:	67	20.74%	35	26.32%
Undecided:	110	34.06%	33	24.81%
Disagree:	109	33.75%	51	38.35%
Strongly Disagree:	29	8.98%	9	6.77%
WHAT TAXES DOES YOUR MUNICIPALITY IMPOSE?				
Property/Real Estate:	271	83.90%	52	37.96%
Sales:	242	74.92%	42	30.66%
Electric/Utility:	133	41.18%	33	24.09%
Telecommunications:	151	46.75%	28	20.44%
Gas/Motor Fuel:	168	52.01%	10	7.30%
Hotel/Motel:	99	30.65%	6	4.38%

TABLE 3 continued

Food and Beverage:	96	29.72%	6	4.38%
State Income:	120	37.15%	5	3.65%
Police and Fire:	46	14.24%	5	3.65%
Amusement:	40	12.38%	4	2.92%
Replacement:	47	14.55%	3	2.19%
Water/Sewer:	129	39.94%	2	1.46%
IMRF/Pensions:	94	29.10%	2	1.46%
Library:	68	21.05%	2	1.46%
Building Permits:	161	49.85%	2	1.46%
Business Development/Corporate:	15	4.64%	2	1.46%
Municipal:	31	9.60%	1	0.73%
Rental Housing:	18	5.57%	1	0.73%
Billboard Inspection:	8	2.48%	1	0.73%
Storage Locker:	2	0.62%	1	0.73%
Infrastructure Maintenance:	36	11.15%	1	0.73%
Franchise:	41	12.69%	1	0.73%
School:	44	13.62%	1	0.73%
Liability:	16	4.95%	1	0.73%
TIF:	121	37.46%	1	0.73%
Wheel:	0	0.00%	1	0.73%
Parking:	12	3.72%	1	0.73%
Bond:	33	10.22%	1	0.73%
Parks and Recreation:	27	8.36%	1	0.73%
Trash Collection:	73	22.60%	1	0.73%

Please rank in order from 1-8 (1 being the greatest) the sources of revenue for your municipality. (numbers reflect the frequency of responses)

	2024							
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th
Sales tax:	97	43	30	32	17	18	25	49
Property tax:	84	54	38	28	27	19	28	34
Grants:	29	16	31	34	54	47	33	35
Intergovernmental transfers:	25	19	24	21	30	33	37	50
User fees (trash, water, permits):	44	31	39	37	33	28	20	45

TABLE 3 continued

Motor fuel tax:	22	19	48	61	53	50	27	19
TIF districts:	30	19	14	61	53	50	27	19
Other:	36	11	11	11	17	18	19	67
	2009							
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th
Sales tax:	36	34	24	14	7	6	0	0
Property tax:	41	35	20	16	3	0	1	1
Grants:	4	1	6	13	23	26	12	3
Intergovernmental transfers:	3	6	8	9	14	22	9	0
User fees (trash, water, permits):	26	15	22	16	18	7	4	0
Motor fuel tax:	3	22	33	34	20	3	5	2
TIF districts:	2	4	7	7	4	7	22	6
Other:	11	5	5	6	3	2	3	16

Please rank in order from 1-5 (1 being the greatest) the level of expenditures for your municipality.

	2024				
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
Personnel costs (salaries, benefits, retirement):	125	60	49	29	54
Infrastructure and public works:	83	98	49	42	39
Payment toward existing debt:	38	42	67	85	57
Non-salary operating expenses:	26	57	109	75	29
Other:	33	10	24	31	96
	2009				
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
Personnel costs (salaries, benefits, retirement):	53	35	23	8	0
Infrastructure and public works:	57	37	19	8	0
Payment toward existing debt:	9	37	19	8	0
Non-salary operating expenses:	5	26	43	44	0
Other:	1	1	0	1	21

TABLE 3 continued

	2024		2009	
IF YOU HAD A $1 MILLION OPEN GRANT TODAY, HOW WOULD YOU USE IT FOR YOUR COMMUNITY?				
Replace, repair, upgrade, and/or improve waterlines/sewer system/ wastewater treatment/water tower:	139	43.17%	86	37.55%
Replace, repair, upgrade, and/or improve roads/streets/sidewalks/ electric:	94	29.19%	77	33.62%
New buildings:	10	3.11%	17	7.42%
New equipment:	3	0.93%	14	6.11%
Repair/remodel existing buildings:	6	1.86%	8	3.49%
Capital projects:	36	11.18%	7	3.06%
Build a park:	3	0.93%	6	2.62%
Retire bond debt/pay off debt:	16	4.97%	5	2.18%
Create jobs/job incentives/promote business development:	10	3.11%	5	2.18%
Increase fire/police protection:	5	1.55%	2	0.87%
Free garbage collection:	0	0.00%	1	0.44%
Public transportation:	0	0.00%	1	0.44%

TABLE 4

2024 AND 2009 TOTAL COMPARATIVE RESULTS SURVEY THREE:
PROGRESSION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

	2024		2009	
OTHER UNITS OF GOVERNMENT ARE THE STARTING POINT FOR POLITICAL FIGURES IN YOUR MUNICIPALITY.				
Strongly Agree:	4	1.25%	6	4.11%
Agree:	51	15.89%	31	21.23%
Undecided:	151	47.04%	36	24.66%
Disagree:	86	26.79%	56	38.36%
Strongly Disagree:	29	9.03%	17	11.64%
WHAT PERCENTAGE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS HAVE PREVIOUSLY SERVED IN ANOTHER CAPACITY (I.E. SCHOOL BOARD, PARK DISTRICT)?				
0-10%:	207	64.29%	90	59.21%

TABLE 4 continued

10-25%:	69	21.43%	43	28.29%
25-50%;	34	10.56%	13	8.55%
50-75%:	10	3.11%	5	3.29%
75-100%:	2	0.62%	1	0.66%
MANY LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS IN YOUR MUNICIPALITY HAVE FAMILY MEMBERS THAT HELD PUBLIC OFFICE.				
Strongly Agree:	11	3.42%	2	1.32%
Agree:	69	21.43%	48	31.79%
Undecided:	68	21.12%	23	15.23%
Disagree:	124	38.51%	56	37.09%
Strongly Disagree:	50	15.53%	22	14.57%
IS YOUR MUNICIPALITY DEVELOPING THE NEXT GENERATION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS?				
Strongly Agree:	9	2.80%	4	2.65%
Agree:	95	29.50%	49	32.45%
Undecided:	119	36.96%	49	32.45%
Disagree:	74	22.98%	41	27.15%
Strongly Disagree:	25	7.76%	8	5.30%
LOCAL OFFICIALS IN YOUR MUNICIPALITY WORK IN GOVERNMENT FOR POLITICAL REASONS.				
Strongly Agree:	57	17.65%	6	3.97%
Agree:	87	26.93%	24	15.89%
Undecided:	52	16.10%	20	13.25%
Disagree:	80	24.77%	72	47.68%
Strongly Disagree:	47	14.55%	29	19.21%
LOCAL OFFICIALS IN YOUR MUNICIPALITY WORK TO PROMOTE GOOD GOVERNMENT.				
Strongly Agree:	99	30.75%	38	25.00%
Agree:	140	43.48%	89	58.55%
Undecided:	56	17.39%	14	9.21%
Disagree:	18	5.59%	6	3.95%
Strongly Disagree:	9	2.80%	5	3.29%
WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO WORK IN PUBLIC SERVICE?				
Urged by members of your municipality:	73	22.67%	111	42.05%
Strong interest in government work:	43	13.35%	72	27.27%

TABLE 4 continued

Nobody else wanted the position:	25	7.76%	37	14.02%
Family member had previously served in office:	5	1.55%	18	6.82%
Single issue involvement:	5	1.55%	16	6.06%
Give back to the community:	170	52.80%	5	1.89%
Want to seek higher office later:	1	0.31%	5	1.89%
WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE TO DEVELOP THE NEXT GENERATION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN YOUR MUNICIPALITY?				
Promote youth involvement/ generate youth interest (i.e., school programs, meetings, activities for youth):	58	18.01%	38	35.85%
Encourage community involvement/develop community interest/better communication with citizens (i.e., public meetings/ discussions, advisory committees, volunteer activities):	174	54.04%	27	25.47%
Better education for government officials/teaching ethics/leadership academies/job awareness seminars:	22	6.83%	18	16.98%
More job opportunities (i.e., more positions to increase population, higher pay, government expansion):	10	3.11%	12	11.32%
Long-range comprehensive planning/strong vision/set personal goals:	14	4.35%	5	4.72%
Take politics out of the equation:	30	9.32%	2	1.89%
Discourage single-issue candidacy:	6	1.86%	1	0.94%
More help from the court system:	1	0.31%	1	0.94%
Move toward professional management (city manager system):	2	0.62%	1	0.94%
News/media coverage must change:	5	1.55%	1	0.94%

TABLE 5

2024 REGIONAL RESULTS - TOTAL RESPONDING: 323

	CENTRAL		NORTH-CENTRAL		NORTHEAST		SOUTH		TOTAL	
WHAT IS THE POPULATION OF YOUR MUNICIPALITY										
Less than 5,000:	74	82.22%	66	76.74%	14	17.72%	50	74.63%	205	63.47%
5,000 – 10,000:	7	7.78%	4	4.65%	20	25.32%	11	16.42%	42	13.00%
10,000 – 25,000:	6	6.67%	11	12.79%	28	35.44%	5	7.46%	50	15.48%
25,000 – 50,000:	1	1.11%	2	2.33%	8	10.13%	1	1.49%	12	3.72%
50,000 – 100,000:	1	1.11%	2	2.33%	8	10.13%	0	0.00%	11	3.41%
More than 100,000:	1	1.11%	1	1.16%	1	1.27%	0	0.00%	3	0.93%
ARE YOU SUFFICIENTLY KNOWLEDGEABLE OF STATE LEGISLATION AFFECTING LOCAL GOVERNMENT?										
Strongly Agree:	9	10.00%	6	6.98%	26	32.91%	6	8.96%	47	14.55%
Agree:	46	51.11%	46	53.49%	43	54.43%	41	61.19%	177	54.80%
Undecided:	27	30.00%	26	30.23%	10	12.66%	12	17.91%	75	23.22%
Disagree:	7	7.78%	7	8.14%	0	0.00%	7	10.45%	21	6.50%
Strongly Disagree:	1	1.11%	1	1.16%	0	0.00%	1	1.49%	3	0.93%
DO YOU FEEL THAT YOU CAN INFLUENCE STATE LEGISLATION THAT AFFECTS MUNICIPALITIES?										
Strongly Agree:	2	2.22%	1	1.16%	9	11.39%	5	7.46%	17	5.26%
Agree:	15	16.67%	20	23.26%	29	36.71%	16	23.88%	80	24.77%
Undecided:	34	37.78%	21	24.42%	17	21.52%	24	35.82%	97	30.03%
Disagree:	28	31.11%	29	33.72%	18	22.78%	20	29.85%	95	29.41%

TABLE 5 continued	CENTRAL		NORTH-CENTRAL		NORTHEAST		SOUTH		TOTAL	
Strongly Disagree:	11	12.22%	15	17.44%	6	7.59%	2	2.99%	34	10.53%
LEGISLATION AFFECTING YOUR MUNICIPALITY IS PASSED FREQUENTLY.										
Strongly Agree:	4	4.44%	4	4.65%	16	20.25%	5	7.46%	29	8.98%
Agree:	40	44.44%	42	48.84%	49	62.03%	32	47.76%	164	50.77%
Undecided:	31	34.44%	24	27.91%	9	11.39%	19	28.36%	83	25.70%
Disagree:	12	13.33%	13	15.12%	4	5.06%	10	14.93%	39	12.07%
Strongly Disagree:	3	3.33%	3	3.49%	1	1.27%	1	1.49%	8	2.48%
ARE YOU HOME RULE?										
Yes:	18	20.00%	20	23.26%	33	41.77%	17	25.37%	89	27.55%
No:	72	80.00%	66	76.74%	46	58.23%	50	74.63%	234	72.45%
IF NOT, HAVE YOU CONSIDERED BECOMING HOME RULE?										
Yes:	12	15.58%	12	17.91%	24	52.17%	8	14.81%	57	23.27%
No:	65	55.56%	55	77.46%	22	47.83%	46	85.19%	188	76.73%
WHAT HOME RULE POWERS HAVE YOUR MUNICIPALITY USED?										
License to regulate:	7	7.78%	11	12.79%	25	31.65%	14	20.90%	57	17.65%
Increase sales tax:	13	14.44%	11	12.79%	28	35.44%	14	20.90%	66	20.43%
Impose/increase hotel/motel tax:	10	11.11%	6	6.98%	19	24.05%	7	10.45%	42	13.00%
Increase property tax:	8	8.89%	8	9.30%	12	15.19%	6	8.96%	35	10.84%
Change government structure:	2	2.22%	2	2.33%	5	6.33%	2	2.99%	11	3.41%
Incur debt for 40 years:	5	5.56%	4	4.65%	3	3.80%	5	7.46%	17	5.26%
Not applicable:	66	73.33%	58	67.44%	43	54.43%	45	67.16%	212	65.63%

DO UNFUNDED MANDATES INTERFERE WITH THE DAILY FUNCTIONS OF YOUR LOCAL GOVERNMENT?										
Strongly Agree:	24	26.67%	25	29.07%	43	54.43%	18	26.87%	111	34.37%
Agree:	26	28.89%	33	38.37%	24	30.38%	19	28.36%	102	31.58%
Undecided:	34	37.78%	21	24.42%	11	13.92%	24	35.82%	90	27.86%
Disagree:	5	5.56%	6	6.98%	1	1.27%	6	8.96%	18	5.57%
Strongly Disagree:	1	1.11%	1	1.16%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	2	0.62%
DO YOU KNOW ENOUGH ABOUT UNFUNDED MANDATES AFFECTING YOUR MUNICIPALITY?										
Strongly Agree:	7	7.78%	11	12.79%	26	32.91%	5	7.46%	49	15.17%
Agree:	29	32.22%	28	32.56%	43	54.43%	29	43.28%	129	39.94%
Undecided:	33	36.67%	28	32.56%	8	10.13%	24	35.82%	94	29.10%
Disagree:	19	21.11%	14	16.28%	2	2.53%	5	7.46%	40	12.38%
Strongly Disagree:	2	2.22%	5	5.81%	0	0.00%	4	5.97%	11	3.41%
HOW DO YOU COVER THE COSTS OF UNFUNDED MANDATES?										
Taken from general fund/ operating budget:	66	73.33%	64	74.42%	69	87.34%	45	67.16%	244	75.54%
Cut projects/services /overtime; layoffs:	17	18.89%	23	26.74%	26	32.91%	9	13.43%	75	23.22%
Raise taxes/rates:	12	13.33%	15	17.44%	18	22.78%	9	13.43%	54	16.72%
Grants:	15	16.67%	24	27.91%	29	36.71%	22	32.84%	91	28.17%
User fees/impact fees:	8	8.89%	13	15.12%	25	31.65%	9	13.43%	55	17.03%
Borrow/loans:	4	4.44%	13	15.12%	6	7.59%	7	10.45%	30	9.29%
Proverbial “rob Peter to pay Paul”:	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%

TABLE 5 continued	CENTRAL		NORTH-CENTRAL		NORTHEAST		SOUTH		TOTAL	
Cash reserves:	16	17.78%	20	23.26%	34	43.04%	16	23.88%	86	26.63%
Complain to legislators:	11	12.22%	15	17.44%	27	34.18%	12	17.91%	65	20.12%
Fundraisers:	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	2	2.99%	2	0.62%
Municipal bonds:	5	5.56%	9	10.47%	12	15.19%	4	5.97%	30	9.29%
Monies in coffers:	2	2.22%	3	3.49%	4	5.06%	4	5.97%	13	4.02%
Do not spend money we do not have:	26	28.89%	28	32.56%	24	30.38%	19	28.36%	97	30.03%
My municipality is not affected by unfunded mandates:	10	11.11%	6	6.98%	3	3.80%	6	8.96%	25	7.74%
IS YOUR MUNICIPALITY FINANCIALLY SOUND?										
Strongly Agree:	25	27.78%	20	23.26%	45	56.96%	14	20.90%	104	32.20%
Agree:	44	48.89%	49	56.98%	28	35.44%	38	56.72%	159	49.23%
Undecided:	11	12.22%	10	11.63%	4	5.06%	8	11.94%	33	10.22%
Disagree:	10	11.11%	4	4.65%	1	1.27%	6	8.96%	22	6.81%
Strongly Disagree:	0	0.00%	3	3.49%	1	1.27%	1	1.49%	5	1.55%
IS PUBLIC DEBT (BONDS FOR PUBLIC PROJECTS) BURDENING YOUR MUNICIPALITY?										
Strongly Agree:	5	5.56%	5	5.81%	0	0.00%	1	1.49%	11	3.41%
Agree:	12	13.33%	18	20.93%	18	22.78%	11	16.42%	59	18.27%
Undecided:	22	24.44%	12	13.95%	11	13.92%	17	25.37%	63	19.50%
Disagree:	37	41.11%	35	40.70%	35	44.30%	31	46.27%	138	42.72%
Strongly Disagree:	14	15.56%	16	18.60%	15	18.99%	7	10.45%	52	16.10%

IS YOUR MUNICIPALITY OVER-TAXING TO PROVIDE FOR PUBLIC PURPOSES?										
Strongly Agree:	2	2.22%	3	3.49%	1	1.27%	1	1.49%	7	2.17%
Agree:	10	11.11%	11	12.79%	5	6.33%	7	10.45%	34	10.53%
Undecided:	19	21.11%	20	23.26%	13	16.46%	10	14.93%	62	19.20%
Disagree:	38	42.22%	38	44.19%	33	41.77%	35	52.24%	144	44.58%
Strongly Disagree:	21	23.33%	14	16.28%	27	34.18%	14	20.90%	76	23.53%
IS YOUR MUNICIPALITY UNDER-TAXING TO PROVIDE FOR PUBLIC PURPOSES?										
Strongly Agree:	2	2.22%	2	2.33%	2	2.53%	2	2.99%	8	2.48%
Agree:	16	17.78%	13	15.12%	25	31.65%	13	19.40%	67	20.74%
Undecided:	39	43.33%	27	31.40%	16	20.25%	28	41.79%	110	34.06%
Disagree:	29	32.22%	34	39.53%	27	34.18%	19	28.36%	109	33.75%
Strongly Disagree:	4	4.44%	10	11.63%	9	11.39%	5	7.46%	29	8.98%
WHAT TAXES DOES YOUR MUNICIPALITY IMPOSE?										
Property/Real Estate:	77	85.56%	68	79.07%	69	87.34%	56	83.58%	271	83.90%
Sales:	68	75.56%	59	68.60%	70	88.61%	45	67.16%	242	74.92%
Electric/Utility:	27	30.00%	32	37.21%	52	65.82%	21	31.34%	133	41.18%
Telecommunications:	37	41.11%	36	41.86%	55	69.62%	23	34.33%	151	46.75%
Gas/Motor Fuel:	42	46.67%	42	48.84%	44	55.70%	39	58.21%	168	52.01%
Hotel/Motel:	22	24.44%	20	23.26%	43	54.43%	14	20.90%	99	30.65%
Food and Beverage:	23	25.56%	13	15.12%	37	46.84%	22	32.84%	96	29.72%
State Income:	30	33.33%	27	31.40%	38	48.10%	25	37.31%	120	37.15%
Police and Fire:	12	13.33%	12	13.95%	15	18.99%	7	10.45%	46	14.24%
Amusement:	5	5.56%	7	8.14%	18	22.78%	10	14.93%	40	12.38%
Replacement:	14	15.56%	11	12.79%	14	17.72%	8	11.94%	47	14.55%

TABLE 5 continued	CENTRAL		NORTH-CENTRAL		NORTHEAST		SOUTH		TOTAL	
Water/Sewer:	29	32.22%	42	48.84%	36	45.57%	22	32.84%	129	39.94%
IMRF/Pensions:	21	23.33%	25	29.07%	32	40.51%	16	23.88%	94	29.10%
Library:	22	24.44%	13	15.12%	19	24.05%	14	20.90%	68	21.05%
Building Permits:	39	43.33%	39	45.35%	61	77.22%	22	32.84%	161	49.85%
Business Development/Corporate:	3	3.33%	2	2.33%	10	12.66%	0	0.00%	15	4.64%
Municipal:	5	5.56%	6	6.98%	17	21.52%	3	4.48%	31	9.60%
Rental Housing:	2	2.22%	3	3.49%	11	13.92%	2	2.99%	18	5.57%
Billboard Inspection:	2	2.22%	0	0.00%	5	6.33%	1	1.49%	8	2.48%
Storage Locker:	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	2	2.53%	0	0.00%	2	0.62%
Infrastructure Maintenance:	6	6.67%	13	15.12%	12	15.19%	5	7.46%	36	11.15%
Franchise:	15	16.67%	7	8.14%	15	18.99%	4	5.97%	41	12.69%
School:	10	11.11%	11	12.79%	9	11.39%	14	20.90%	44	13.62%
Liability:	3	3.33%	5	5.81%	6	7.59%	2	2.99%	16	4.95%
TIF:	24	26.67%	30	34.88%	40	50.63%	27	40.30%	121	37.46%
Wheel:	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Parking:	1	1.11%	0	0.00%	10	12.66%	1	1.49%	12	3.72%
Bond:	6	6.67%	6	6.98%	15	18.99%	6	8.96%	33	10.22%
Parks and Recreation:	4	4.44%	6	6.98%	12	15.19%	5	7.46%	27	8.36%
Trash Collection	12	13.33%	22	25.58%	18	22.78%	21	31.34%	73	22.60%

TABLE 5 continued

Please rank in order from 1-8 (1 being the greatest) the sources of revenue for your municipality. (numbers reflect the frequency of responses)

	CENTRAL							
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th
Sales tax:	25	11	9	8	6	6	7	16
Property tax:	22	11	13	10	9	3	13	7
Grants:	11	5	7	10	12	12	7	10
Intergovernmental transfers:	11	5	4	6	8	8	10	13
User fees (trash, water, permits):	11	8	10	11	6	8	5	11
Motor fuel tax:	5	6	16	17	14	12	7	6
TIF districts:	5	4	9	3	6	7	4	24
Other:	7	2	7	5	5	5	5	16
	NORTH-CENTRAL							
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th
Sales tax:	27	11	6	14	5	5	6	8
Property tax:	23	12	11	9	8	6	4	10
Grants:	10	4	7	8	12	17	8	7
Intergovernmental transfers:	6	5	4	4	9	10	11	8
User fees (trash, water, permits):	14	8	11	12	6	6	6	12
Motor fuel tax:	5	4	13	18	17	7	11	4
TIF districts:	12	7	0	7	6	7	5	18
Other:	10	4	1	4	5	1	6	18
	NORTHEAST							
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th
Sales tax:	32	15	5	5	1	2	8	9
Property tax:	28	19	6	4	4	0	4	11
Grants:	3	3	14	9	15	7	12	9
Intergovernmental transfers:	4	3	12	9	6	11	3	18
User fees (trash, water, permits):	7	8	11	10	13	8	6	10
Motor fuel tax:	4	3	8	18	16	14	3	5
TIF districts:	8	7	2	6	13	5	10	18
Other:	9	5	3	0	3	7	5	18

TABLE 5 continued

	SOUTH							
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th
Sales tax:	13	6	10	5	5	5	4	15
Property tax:	11	12	8	4	6	10	7	6
Grants:	5	4	3	7	15	11	6	8
Intergovernmental transfers:	4	6	4	1	7	4	13	11
User fees (trash, water, permits):	12	7	7	4	8	6	3	11
Motor fuel tax:	8	6	11	8	6	17	6	3
TIF districts:	4	1	3	6	2	10	4	21
Other:	9	0	0	2	4	5	3	15
	TOTAL							
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th
Sales tax:	97	43	30	32	17	18	25	49
Property tax:	84	54	38	28	27	19	28	34
Grants:	29	16	31	34	54	47	33	35
Intergovernmental transfers:	25	19	24	21	30	33	37	50
User fees (trash, water, permits):	44	31	39	37	33	28	20	45
Motor fuel tax:	22	19	48	61	53	50	27	19
TIF districts:	30	19	14	22	27	29	23	81
Other:	36	11	11	11	17	18	19	67

Please rank in order from 1-5 (1 being the greatest) the level of expenditures for your municipality.

	CENTRAL				
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
Personnel costs (salaries, benefits, retirement):	29	15	17	10	16
Infrastructure and public works:	24	25	14	13	11
Payment toward existing debt:	15	13	14	23	16
Non-salary operating expenses:	6	19	31	21	7
Other:	11	4	6	5	26
	NORTH-CENTRAL				
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
Personnel costs (salaries, benefits, retirement):	29	21	19	8	9
Infrastructure and public works:	28	24	11	8	12

TABLE 5 continued

Payment toward existing debt:	10	8	17	27	14
Non-salary operating expenses:	6	16	21	22	12
Other:	9	2	10	10	20
	NORTHEAST				
	1st	**2nd**	**3rd**	**4th**	**5th**
Personnel costs (salaries, benefits, retirement):	46	9	3	5	15
Infrastructure and public works:	18	30	10	11	6
Payment toward existing debt:	5	13	16	25	14
Non-salary operating expenses:	5	13	37	14	5
Other:	5	2	4	6	29
	SOUTH				
	1st	**2nd**	**3rd**	**4th**	**5th**
Personnel costs (salaries, benefits, retirement):	21	15	10	6	13
Infrastructure and public works:	13	19	14	10	9
Payment toward existing debt:	8	8	20	10	12
Non-salary operating expenses:	9	8	20	18	5
Other:	7	2	4	10	21
	TOTAL				
	1st	**2nd**	**3rd**	**4th**	**5th**
Personnel costs (salaries, benefits, retirement):	125	60	49	29	54
Infrastructure and public works:	83	98	49	42	39
Payment toward existing debt:	38	42	67	85	57
Non-salary operating expenses:	26	57	109	75	29
Other:	33	10	24	31	96

TABLE 5 continued	CENTRAL		NORTH-CENTRAL		NORTHEAST		SOUTH		TOTAL	
IF YOU HAD A $1 MILLION OPEN GRANT TODAY, HOW WOULD YOU USE IT FOR YOUR COMMUNITY?										
Replace, repair, upgrade, and/or improve waterlines/sewer system/ wastewater treatment/water tower:	45	50.00%	36	41.86%	27	34.18%	30	44.78%	139	43.17%
Replace, repair, upgrade, and/or improve roads/streets/sidewalks/ electric:	27	30.00%	26	30.23%	19	24.05%	22	32.84%	94	29.19%
New buildings:	2	2.22%	1	1.16%	3	3.80%	4	5.97%	10	3.11%
New equipment:	2	2.22%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	1.49%	3	0.93%
Repair/remodel existing buildings:	0	0.00%	2	2.33%	3	3.80%	1	1.49%	6	1.86%
Capital projects:	6	6.67%	8	9.30%	20	25.32%	2	2.99%	36	11.18%
Build a park:	1	1.11%	2	2.33%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	3	0.93%
Retire bond debt/pay off debt:	4	4.44%	6	6.98%	3	3.80%	3	4.48%	16	4.97%
Create jobs/job incentives/ promote business development:	2	2.22%	4	4.65%	4	5.06%	0	0.00%	10	3.11%
Increase fire/police protection:	1	1.11%	1	1.16%	0	0.00%	3	4.48%	5	1.55%
Free garbage collection:	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Public transportation:	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
OTHER UNITS OF GOVERNMENT ARE THE STARTING POINT FOR POLITICAL FIGURES IN YOUR MUNICIPALITY.										
Strongly Agree:	2	2.25%	0	0.00%	1	1.27%	1	1.52%	4	1.25%

Agree:	15	16.85%	9	10.47%	19	24.05%	7	10.61%	51	15.89%
Undecided:	45	50.56%	39	45.35%	29	36.71%	38	57.58%	151	47.04%
Disagree:	23	25.84%	24	27.91%	24	30.38%	15	22.73%	86	26.79%
Strongly Disagree:	4	4.49%	14	16.28%	6	7.59%	5	7.58%	29	9.03%
WHAT PERCENTAGE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS HAVE PREVIOUSLY SERVED IN ANOTHER CAPACITY (I.E. SCHOOL BOARD, PARK DISTRICT)?										
0-10%:	50	55.56%	58	67.44%	52	65.82%	46	69.70%	207	64.29%
10-25%:	23	25.56%	20	23.26%	16	20.25%	10	15.15%	69	21.43%
25-50%:	13	14.44%	6	6.98%	7	8.86%	8	12.12%	34	10.56%
50-75%:	3	3.33%	2	2.33%	4	5.06%	1	1.52%	10	3.11%
75-100%:	1	1.11%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	1.52%	2	0.62%
MANY LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS IN YOUR MUNICIPALITY HAVE FAMILY MEMBERS THAT HELD PUBLIC OFFICE.										
Strongly Agree:	4	4.44%	4	4.65%	1	1.27%	2	3.03%	11	3.42%
Agree:	27	30.00%	21	24.42%	12	15.19%	8	12.12%	69	21.43%
Undecided:	17	18.89%	16	18.60%	15	18.99%	20	30.30%	68	21.12%
Disagree:	34	37.78%	29	33.72%	34	43.04%	27	40.91%	124	38.51%
Strongly Disagree:	8	8.89%	16	18.60%	17	21.52%	9	13.64%	50	15.53%
IS YOUR MUNICIPALITY DEVELOPING THE NEXT GENERATION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS?										
Strongly Agree:	2	2.22%	2	2.33%	5	6.33%	0	0.00%	9	2.80%
Agree:	24	26.67%	20	23.26%	40	50.63%	11	16.67%	95	29.50%
Undecided:	30	33.33%	31	36.05%	25	31.65%	32	48.48%	119	36.96%
Disagree:	25	27.78%	23	26.74%	9	11.39%	17	25.76%	74	22.98%
Strongly Disagree:	9	10.00%	10	11.63%	0	0.00%	6	9.09%	25	7.76%

TABLE 5 continued	CENTRAL		NORTH-CENTRAL		NORTHEAST		SOUTH		TOTAL	
LOCAL OFFICIALS IN YOUR MUNICIPALITY WORK FOR POLITICAL REASONS.										
Strongly Agree:	14	15.56%	15	17.44%	17	21.52%	11	16.42%	57	17.65%
Agree:	26	28.89%	23	26.74%	24	30.38%	14	20.90%	87	26.93%
Undecided:	15	16.67%	13	15.12%	11	13.92%	12	17.91%	52	16.10%
Disagree:	23	25.56%	22	25.58%	17	21.52%	18	26.87%	80	24.77%
Strongly Disagree:	12	13.33%	13	15.12%	10	12.66%	12	17.91%	47	14.55%
LOCAL OFFICIALS IN YOUR MUNICIPALITY WORK IN GOVERNMENT TO PROMOTE GOOD GOVERNMENT.										
Strongly Agree:	24	26.67%	19	22.09%	42	53.16%	14	21.21%	99	30.75%
Agree:	42	46.67%	45	52.33%	24	30.38%	28	42.42%	140	43.48%
Undecided:	15	16.67%	15	17.44%	8	10.13%	18	27.27%	56	17.39%
Disagree:	5	5.56%	3	3.49%	5	6.33%	5	7.58%	18	5.59%
Strongly Disagree:	4	4.44%	4	4.65%	0	0.00%	1	1.52%	9	2.80%
WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO WORK IN PUBLIC SERVICE?										
Urged by members of your municipality:	24	26.67%	18	20.93%	12	15.19%	18	27.27%	73	22.67%
Strong interest in government work:	8	8.89%	9	10.47%	15	18.99%	11	16.67%	43	13.35%
Nobody else wanted the position:	7	7.78%	11	12.79%	0	0.00%	7	10.61%	25	7.76%
Family member had previously served in office:	2	2.22%	2	2.33%	1	1.27%	0	0.00%	5	1.55%
Single issue involvement:	2	2.22%	2	2.33%	0	0.00%	1	1.52%	5	1.55%
Give back to the community:	47	52.22%	43	50.00%	51	64.56%	29	43.94%	170	52.80%

Want to seek higher office later:	0	0.00%	1	1.16%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	0.31%
MANY LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS IN YOUR MUNICIPALITY HAVE FAMILY MEMBERS THAT HELD PUBLIC OFFICE.										
Promote youth involvement/ generate youth interest (i.e. school programs, meetings, activities for youth):	16	17.78%	17	19.77%	15	18.99%	9	13.64%	58	18.01%
Encourage community involvement/develop community interest/better communication with citizens (i.e. public meetings/ discussions, advisory committees, volunteer activities):	55	61.11%	42	48.84%	40	50.63%	37	56.06%	174	54.04%
Better education for government officials/teaching ethics/ leadership academies/job awareness seminars:	3	3.33%	5	5.81%	9	11.39%	5	7.58%	22	6.83%
More job opportunities (i.e. more positions to increase population, higher pay, government expansion):	4	4.44%	1	1.16%	0	0.00%	5	7.58%	10	3.11%
Long-range comprehensive planning/strong vision/set personal goals:	3	3.33%	7	8.14%	3	3.80%	1	1.52%	14	4.35%
Take politics out of the equation:	5	5.56%	9	10.47%	9	11.39%	7	10.61%	30	9.32%

TABLE 5 continued	CENTRAL		NORTH-CENTRAL		NORTHEAST		SOUTH		TOTAL	
Discourage single-issue candidacy:	1	1.11%	3	3.49%	1	1.27%	1	1.52%	6	1.86%
More help from the court system:	1	1.11%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	0.31%
Move toward professional management (city manager system):	1	1.11%	0	0.00%	1	1.27%	0	0.00%	2	0.62%
News/media coverage must change:	1	1.11%	2	2.33%	1	1.27%	1	1.52%	5	1.55%

ENDNOTES

[1] Read the 2009 SIMA Survey report at iml.org/SIMASurvey.

[2] The survey data reported in this article are secondary data derived from the Illinois Municipal League (IML). Please see the original data source from: Illinois Municipal League. (2024). Statewide survey of local governments [Data set]. The data are available upon request. The *Illinois Municipal Policy Journal* and the University of Illinois at Springfield are not responsible for implementing the survey, as the survey project is solely authorized by the Illinois Municipal League.

[3] IML municipal employee recruitment resources are available at iml.org/recruit.

[4] IML cybersecurity resources for municipal officials are available at iml.org/cybersecurity.

[5] In the original 2009 survey report, the authors state that there were 1,297 municipalities; however, according to IML records, there were 1,299 municipalities at the time. This may have been a typo in the original report.

[6] Since 2009, five municipalities have adopted referenda to formally dissolve as a unit of local government.

[7] IML Fact Sheets are available at www.iml.org/factsheets.

[8] You can subscribe to the IML e-newsletters, the *Statehouse Briefing* and *Federal Focus*, and the *Review* magazine at www.iml.org/subscribe.

[9] IML education resources, such as virtual seminars and information for newly elected officials, are available at www.iml.org/education.

[10] Ill. Const. art. VII, § 6.

[11] IML has developed a home rule toolkit to help cities, villages, and towns navigate a home rule referendum. The resources include a timeline, proposed budget, FAQs, information session materials, social media outreach posts, graphics, and much more. More information about the IML home rule toolkit is available at www.iml.org/homerule.

[12] User fees are charges levied by municipalities for specific services or access to facilities, such as fees for garbage collection, water services, or access to recreation facilities.

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DISASTER MANAGEMENT THROUGH COLLABORATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT NETWORKS IN SELECTED CITIES IN ILLINOIS

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This study explores how local communities in Illinois implemented the "whole community" approach to manage both the COVID-19 pandemic and other types of disasters, such as floods, tornadoes, industrial fires, and power outages. Drawing on 19 in-depth interviews and a focus group with emergency managers, public health officials, nonprofit leaders, and university partners across six cities and one special fire protection district, we examine stakeholder roles, cross-sector collaboration, and challenges in disaster planning and response. Our findings reveal that successful emergency management—whether during a prolonged public health crisis or a sudden natural disaster—relies heavily on established local networks, flexible coordination, and trust-based relationships among public agencies, nonprofits, universities, and community-based organizations. While city and county emergency management agencies and public health departments played central coordinating roles, nongovernmental actors contributed essential resources, local knowledge, and services to meet urgent community needs. This study also identifies common challenges across disaster types, including resource limitations in rural areas, coordination gaps between agencies, and the emotional toll on frontline responders. By comparing the dynamics of COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 response networks, this research highlights the enduring importance of inclusive planning, shared leadership, and adaptive capacity in strengthening community resilience. These findings offer actionable insights for emergency planners, local officials, and nonprofit practitioners seeking to enhance preparedness and inter-organizational collaboration for future emergencies.

INTRODUCTION

Natural and human-made disasters and emergencies have caused severe damage to the economy and infrastructure and have threatened human life and public safety in the United States for decades (Ge et al., 2023; Santhiapillai &

Ratnayake, 2021; Yu & Welch, 2024). By March 2023, COVID-19 had caused 41,496 deaths and 4.08 million confirmed cases in Illinois (John Hopkins University & Medicine, 2023). In Champaign County alone, the pandemic led to 305 deaths and over 83,000 confirmed cases by July 2023 (USA Facts, n.d.). Beyond public health emergencies, communities in Illinois continue to face challenges from natural hazards. In 2022, extreme weather events, including tornadoes, floods, severe thunderstorms, and hail, caused nearly $16 million in property damage, 8 injuries, and 4 fatalities (CEMHS SHELDUS DATA, 2024). These numbers represent more than statistics; they reflect the real and ongoing strain placed on local infrastructure, emergency response capacity, and community resilience.

Recognizing these growing risks, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has advocated for the "whole community" approach, urging collaboration across sectors in every phase of emergency management: preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation (Simo & Bies, 2007; Yu & Gerber, 2025). Yet for many local governments, especially municipalities operating with limited capacity, there remains a practical gap: Who are the key partners in crisis response at the local level? What roles did nonprofits, private businesses, universities, and other nongovernmental organizations actually play during COVID-19? And how can these roles be better defined and coordinated in future emergencies?

This study seeks to generate actionable knowledge by focusing on three key areas:

(1) *Stakeholder Engagement* – Identifying which nongovernmental actors actively participated in the local COVID-19 response and how they became involved.

(2) *Resource Mobilization and Coordination* – Examining the types of support and services these organizations provided and how they collaborated with local, county, and state government agencies under crisis conditions.

(3) *Emergency Planning Practices* – Investigating how COVID-19 response plans were developed at the local level and how these plans differed from conventional emergency planning processes for other disasters like floods or snowstorms.

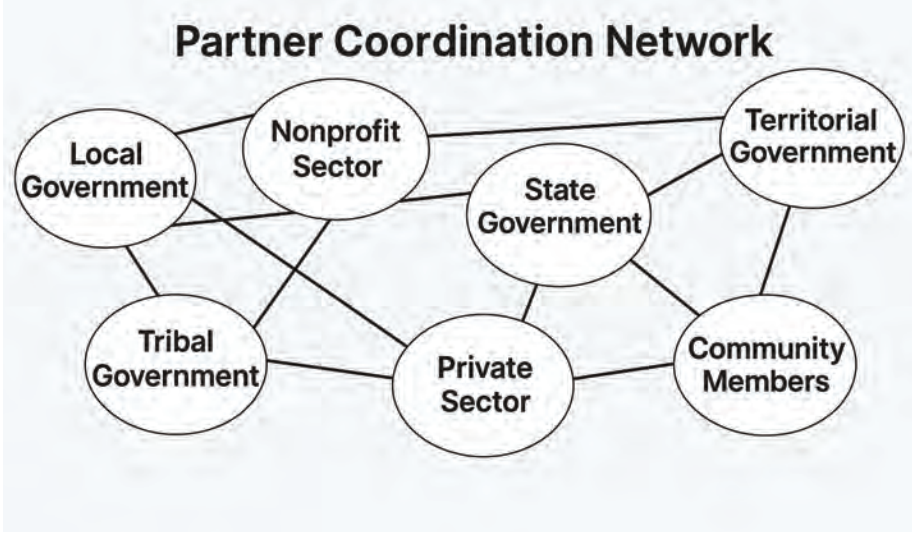
By addressing these questions, this study aims to offer grounded, real-world insights that can inform local disaster planning and enhance multi-sector collaboration. The goal is to equip emergency managers, local officials, and community-based organizations with practical lessons learned and insights that can be immediately applied to future preparedness efforts and used to strengthen the overall resilience of our communities.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE "WHOLE COMMUNITY" APPROACH

The "whole community" approach offers a practical shift from top-down disaster management to a more inclusive model—one that recognizes the critical role local emergency managers play alongside nonprofits, community groups, and private partners (Ahmad et al., 2021; Sobelson et al., 2015). No single agency or department can handle all aspects of a disaster. Effective response and recovery depend on shared responsibility and strong local partnerships (Flint & Stevenson, 2010; Uddin et al., 2020). Figure 1 summarizes partners typically involved in disaster management under the "whole community" approach.

FIGURE 1

A "WHOLE COMMUNITY" APPROACH TO DISASTER RESPONSE



Source: This figure was developed based on a document listed in this source: https://www.fema.gov/glossary/whole-community

Figure 1 shows a multi-level, cross-organization collaboration among public, private, nonprofit, and other stakeholders during disaster management. While federal frameworks like FEMA's National Incident Management System (NIMS) and the National Disaster Recovery Framework encourage collaboration (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2017; Rose et al., 2017), in reality, many responses still rely heavily on centralized decision-making (Guan & Zhuang, 2015; Xu et al., 2019). This often creates delays in getting resources to where they are most needed, especially in fast-moving or complex events (Liu & Mehta, 2021). Past disasters, from Hurricane Katrina to recent wildfires, floods, and winter storms, have shown how communication gaps and rigid command structures can hinder response at the local level (Lee et al., 2022; Nejat et al., 2022; The White House, 2006). Many community members want to contribute more during emergencies, but they are not always included in planning or response. At the same time, state and federal agencies often hesitate to share authority, fearing that local or informal groups may complicate operations (Boersma et al., 2021; Kapucu, 2008; Rawsthorne et al., 2022). These tensions are familiar to many local managers, but they also highlight a key opportunity: leveraging local knowledge and relationships to fill operational gaps and increase public trust.

Embracing a "whole community" model helps build stronger local networks. It means involving residents, churches, nonprofits, and businesses in both planning and response (Liu & Mehta, 2021; Rose et al., 2017). This approach can improve buy-in for preparedness efforts, increase compliance with public health and safety orders, and make resource coordination more responsive and efficient (Pearce, 2003; Wells et al., 2013). Most importantly, it allows local managers to shape plans based on what works in local communities, not just what was written in state or federal playbooks. Building two-way feedback channels between government agencies and local stakeholders is not just a good policy—it is a smart strategy. It fosters transparency, strengthens trust, and empowers a community to play an active role in its own resilience (Kaufman et al., 2015; Koch et al., 2017; Plodinec et al., 2014).

In this project, we interviewed the people who manage disaster response on the ground across six cities in Illinois, including emergency managers, public health officials, city leaders, and representatives from townships, villages, and community organizations. During the spring of 2024, we conducted a series of interviews and focus groups (both online and in person) with 19 municipal agencies, nonprofit organizations, mayors, and attorneys. Our goal was to

understand how community-based organizations and universities contributed to the COVID-19 response and other emergencies, such as floods or severe weather events.

What we learned was clear: While government agencies have well-established systems and training for handling natural disasters, many local officials told us that responding to COVID-19 would have been much harder without the help of community groups, higher education institutions, and student volunteers. These partners brought critical resources, local knowledge, skilled personnel, and flexible support to the table, filling gaps that public agencies could not address alone.

RESEARCH METHOD: IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

In this study, we examine how the "whole community" approach was put into practice across Illinois in response to COVID-19 and other disasters, focusing especially on what this looked like on the ground in city and community settings. This approach, promoted by FEMA, calls for collaboration across all sectors—governmental, nonprofit, private, and community-based—to build inclusive and resilient emergency management systems. But how does this actually play out in day-to-day operations? Our goal was to document and learn from the real experiences of local leaders and emergency professionals who were actively engaged in managing the pandemic and other emergencies. The interviewing protocol was reviewed and approved by the Internal Review Board of the University of Illinois Springfield (#24-035).

To examine the implementation of the "whole community" approach in Illinois, we conducted a series of in-depth interviews during March and April 2024 with a diverse group of frontline professionals and decision-makers in Illinois. These included representatives from city fire departments, police departments, public health departments, university emergency management teams, long-term care facility managers, and mayors themselves. Our questions focused on the key areas practitioners care most about: how COVID-19 impacted operations and staffing, what challenges were encountered during the early days of the pandemic, how response plans were developed, how information was gathered and shared, and how services such as testing and vaccination were coordinated across agencies.

In total, we interviewed 19 individuals, either in person or via Zoom, and conducted a focus group with seven additional participants in Peoria who had been directly involved in COVID-19 response work. One of the interviews was conducted in the office of a city mayor, reflecting our commitment to hearing directly from those leading the response at the local level. The conversations ranged from 27 minutes to nearly two hours, offering rich and detailed perspectives. Our participants were seasoned professionals with between five and 36 years of experience, and they represented a wide range of roles across five cities and one special fire protection district. Of the 19 interviewees, 10 identified as female and nine as male, further reflecting a diversity of voices and leadership experiences in the field.

Organizations represented in our study include city-level emergency management agencies, public health departments, mayors' offices, and community-based nonprofits such as United Way, which played a vital role in coordinating resources and volunteers. Through their stories and reflections, we gained a clearer understanding of how inter-agency coordination, flexible problem-solving, and community partnerships were crucial in navigating the uncertainties of a complex public health crisis.

By listening directly to these professionals, our study surfaces actionable insights and lessons learned that can help emergency managers, public health officials, and local leaders prepare more effectively for future emergencies, whether they are pandemics, natural disasters, or other public safety threats.

Our study employs a qualitative thematic analysis (Iii & Hagstrom-Schmidt, 2022) to examine the collaborative disaster response networks in Illinois, focusing on the similarities and differences between COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 disaster response networks. To ensure a systematic and rigorous approach, we first recorded all interviews with participants' consent, transcribed them verbatim, and coded the data based on our interview protocol. Transcriptions were cross-checked for accuracy and completeness. Second, we employed triangulation by collecting data from diverse sources, including interviews with personnel from emergency management agencies, public health departments, and nonprofits. Our analysis emphasized recurring themes supported by multiple participants' experiences to minimize overgeneralization. We also examined the urban-rural dimension of the sample in detail, revealing differences in resource access and collaboration dynamics across counties.

To help readers assess the findings' relevance, we provided detailed descriptions of participants' roles and organizational contexts. Our methodology ensured a credible representation of participants' perspectives.

ANALYTICAL APPROACH

To better understand how local communities responded to COVID-19 and other disasters, we carefully reviewed transcripts from our interviews and focus groups. Using a qualitative analysis approach, we looked for patterns in what people shared about their experiences. We organized the findings into two groups: one focused on COVID-19 and the other on more typical emergencies like floods or snowstorms.

In reviewing the COVID-19 responses, we identified several key themes. Participants described how different groups, such as government agencies, nonprofits, and private organizations, collaborated to manage the crisis. Many stressed how important trust and collaboration were, especially when daily challenges kept shifting. These findings highlight the critical role of strong partnerships, flexibility, and trust-building among a diverse set of stakeholders. They also show how the COVID-19 response differed from traditional disaster response in some ways, while sharing important similarities, especially around the need for quick coordination and clear communication.

FINDINGS: COVID-19 RESPONSE NETWORK IN ACTION

LEADING ORGANIZATIONS AND INFORMATION SHARING

During the pandemic, local governments—especially mayors' offices and health departments—were responsible for getting accurate, timely information to the public and across agencies. However, at the start of the pandemic, this was a major challenge. One local official shared that when public health websites went down, they lost their main communication tool. Others said that inconsistent or delayed guidance made it hard to act quickly.

Over time, cities and counties developed better systems. Weekly briefings and coordinated messaging across agencies and organizations helped ensure everyone, from nonprofits to schools to residents, received the same information about testing, masking, and vaccination.

> *We worked together to decide what to say, who would design the materials, and how to share it. Eventually, our whole response team got on the same page. – University Emergency Manager*

THOSE INVOLVED AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION

The COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented demands on local emergency response systems, and success depended on broad collaboration across sectors. Our findings show that diverse public and nongovernmental organizations, including public health departments, city and county governments, hospitals, universities, nonprofits, private businesses, and community volunteers, were deeply engaged in managing the crisis on the ground.

In both rural and urban areas across Illinois, public health departments and emergency management agencies (EMA) took the lead in coordinating local efforts. They managed contact tracing, testing sites, vaccine distribution, public messaging, and compliance with quarantine and lockdown policies. Their leadership was essential in connecting stakeholders, streamlining decision-making, and ensuring that services were deployed where most needed.

Universities played a surprisingly large role in supporting public health operations. The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, for example, used its scientific capacity to create COVID-19 testing kits that became standard tools for local governments and agencies across the state. Other university departments contributed personnel, facilities, and student volunteers to support local vaccination and testing sites.

Meanwhile, private sector partners stepped up to fill supply chain gaps. Small businesses such as breweries and apparel companies repurposed their operations to produce hand sanitizer and personal protective equipment (PPE). Nonprofits, including United Way, proved to be crucial in organizing local volunteers, securing and managing grant funds, and distributing essential items such as food, masks, and cleaning supplies.

In many cases, community organizations served as trusted messengers, delivering information and services directly to vulnerable populations. They worked with schools and food pantries to ensure children received meals during closures and helped seniors and immunocompromised residents access testing, vaccines, and other critical services.

Families themselves played a vital but often overlooked role in sustaining emotional and social support during lockdowns. In many communities, neighbors looked after each other, especially elderly residents or those with mobility issues.

These diverse contributions highlight the real value of a "whole community" approach. For practitioners, the key lesson is clear: building and maintaining strong cross-sector partnerships before a crisis is essential. During an emergency, the ability to activate those relationships quickly can significantly enhance the speed, reach, and effectiveness of local response efforts.

KEY CHALLENGES

Limited Resources in Rural Areas: Many rural counties lacked emergency stockpiles and had small EMA teams. Several had to wait weeks for PPE shipments from the state (Sun & Monnat, 2022). Storage costs and unpredictable demand made it hard to maintain supplies locally.

> *We just didn't have enough funding or storage to keep supplies on hand. Requests took 30 days or more to be filled. – Rural Emergency Manager*

Public Health Under-Preparedness: Some counties had to scramble to hire epidemiologists and response staff. Many of these new hires lacked relevant experience, which slowed down planning and response.

> *We didn't have a shortage of people, but most weren't trained for what we needed. – Public Health Director*

Emotional Burnout and Staffing Strain: Responders worked long hours, often without breaks. Even with temporary hires, many described feeling overwhelmed and emotionally drained. Staff with caregiving responsibilities were especially affected.

> *I was working nonstop—from the moment I woke up until I went to sleep. My husband had to take care of everything at home. – Health Department Employee*

Some organizations offered flexible scheduling and mental health support, but burnout remained one of the biggest hurdles throughout the pandemic response.

NON-COVID-19-RELATED EMERGENCIES RESPONSE NETWORK

Disasters such as derechos, tornadoes, and other extreme weather events cause extensive damage to infrastructure and property in Illinois (Flint & Stevenson, 2010). These disasters have resulted in significant economic losses and have highlighted the need for more comprehensive disaster management strategies that prioritize the protection of property and infrastructure in addition to human safety (Boustan et al., 2012; Etkin, 1999). These disasters also place major demands on emergency management offices, first responders, and state, county, city, and government infrastructure, which calls for the need to build disaster-resilient communities.

LEADING ORGANIZATIONS AND INFORMATION SHARING

Local government agencies are well prepared for routine emergencies or potential disasters given their regular training, simulation, and planning efforts. A typical disaster response network includes diverse actors such as local agencies, nonprofit organizations, community groups, volunteers, and the private sector. At the local level, the county- and/or city-level EMA plays a central role, coordinating efforts across various organizations during disaster response. It often serves as the primary source of information for both the public and partner organizations during and after crises.

In addition to the county EMA, other local agencies are essential for the operational functions of a disaster response network. For instance, fire departments play a key role in coordinating responses to fire-related emergencies.

HOW NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS STEP UP

Similar to the COVID-19 response network, various local nongovernmental organizations have participated in responding to other types of disasters (e.g., flooding, tornadoes, shootings, etc.) at the municipal level. For example, organizations like the Daily Bread Soup Kitchen supported vulnerable populations during prolonged power outages or heat waves by offering meals or basic supplies. Likewise, the local chapters of the American Red Cross of Central Illinois are activated during floods and other disasters.

Nonprofits such as United Way and the Salvation Army, along with private companies, community organizations, and volunteers, are instrumental in mobilizing resources such as clothing, food, and other necessities during crisis response. Community and faith-based organizations are often central to fostering engagement in disaster response networks, such as organizing volunteers and community members to clean up debris after a tornado.

> *So, the Red Cross was there. The Salvation Army was there. There was a Lutheran church organization that was there. Goodness, dozens of community volunteers, student groups, and University of Illinois students came up to help out. There were local service organizations like Rotary and Kiwanis. They all had volunteers. In the spring after that tornado, we planted like 100 trees, and gave them to replace trees that had been damaged. – Nonprofit President*

The type of disaster often determines the type of nongovernmental organization that can participate in the disaster response network. For instance, we found that disasters such as train derailments and mass shootings may not result in widespread participation from local nongovernmental organizations. Other disasters, like flooding and tornadoes, attract more participation from different local nongovernmental organizations.

Frequent participation in disaster response helps local nongovernmental organizations build credibility and trust within their local communities. Through their participation in disaster response, they network with other local stakeholders, including government agencies, emergency services, faith-based organizations, and community leaders. This networking facilitates the development of collaborative relationships that are crucial for effective disaster preparedness and response. Together, they share knowledge, pool resources, and coordinate efforts to address immediate needs and plan for future emergencies. The view of our respondent below summarizes this point:

> *I know how important it is with those non-governmental agencies to help a community in disaster. And you want to maximize as much effort. So, we always like to say disasters aren't a time to hand out business cards. So, trying to get them to the table before an event is paramount. You want*

> *to get to know them before the event. – City Emergency Manager*

CHALLENGES IN ROUTINE EMERGENCY RESPONSE NETWORK

Logistical Challenges: Non-COVID-19 disaster response presents multiple challenges, including logistical constraints, inter-agency coordination difficulties, and inadequate preparedness for emerging threats. Large-scale disasters often require extended operational efforts, leading to significant logistical difficulties. An interviewee reflected on his experience with such challenges:

> *Managing a six-day industrial fire was particularly demanding due to the prolonged nature of the response and the harsh winter conditions. It was in February, so the weather was cold and snowy, presenting logistical challenges. – Fire Chief*

Difficulties in Sustaining Operations: The need to sustain operations over an extended period while ensuring adequate resources and personnel poses significant challenges, highlighting the necessity for comprehensive logistical planning. Inter-agency coordination and resource constraints further complicate disaster response. Effective disaster management relies on the collaboration of multiple agencies, yet gaps in coordination often emerge.

Sharing her experience with a propane leak as an example, an interviewee described the necessity of working with various entities, including the fire department, the State Fire Marshal, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The interviewee reflected on the experience as "a significant learning event," acknowledging the gaps in preparedness and the complexities of managing such incidents effectively.

Lagged in Adaptation to Atypical Disasters: Beyond traditional disaster preparedness, agencies often struggle to adapt to emerging and atypical disasters. Many response frameworks are designed for conventional crises, such as fires or floods, and fail to address newer threats like climate-related disasters. A respondent pointed out this gap by stating that "public safety focuses on houses catching fire and crime, not on wildfires affecting air quality," indicating the outdated preparedness models that do not adequately address environmental and health-related crises. As disasters evolve, response

agencies must incorporate broader risk assessments and response strategies that account for non-traditional threats.

Overall, our findings reveal that the "whole community" approach, as shown in Figure 1, was implemented in both COVID-19 and other disaster responses in Illinois. During COVID-19, there was widespread collaboration among local government agencies, nonprofits, universities, businesses, and volunteers. In other emergencies, however, collaboration varies depending on the type of disaster. Hence, pre-existing partnerships and the ability to adapt quickly make a big difference. There is a need to build strong local networks, trust, and inclusive plans before a crisis happens to ensure more coordinated and effective responses.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic placed extraordinary demands on local emergency management systems in Illinois, requiring rapid cross-sector coordination and exposing longstanding weaknesses in public health infrastructure, communication systems, and workforce capacity. However, the lessons drawn from the pandemic response are not isolated. When viewed alongside the response to more routine disasters, such as tornadoes, flooding, industrial fires, and hazardous material incidents, a fuller picture of local emergency management emerges. This study highlights that while the scale and complexity of COVID-19 were unprecedented, many of the challenges and successes mirrored those found in traditional disaster response contexts.

In both COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 emergencies, the implementation of a "whole community" approach proved indispensable. Government agencies consistently led coordination, but their ability to respond effectively often depended on the active involvement of nonprofit organizations, faith-based groups, private businesses, and volunteers. During public health emergencies, hospitals and universities provided testing, vaccination, and research capacity. In weather-related or industrial disasters, community-based organizations played a more visible role in mobilizing volunteers, distributing essential supplies, and supporting recovery efforts such as cleanup and tree replanting. These examples underscore a core insight: the type of disaster shapes which organizations are most active in the response network, but the strength of prior relationships and local trust consistently determines the effectiveness of the response.

A major takeaway for practitioners is the strategic importance of pre-disaster networking and partnership building. Respondents across all contexts emphasized that disaster response is not the time to exchange business cards. Instead, trust and familiarity built in advance enable local actors to move quickly and coordinate efficiently when crises occur. In both health and weather-related emergencies, local nonprofits such as United Way and the Salvation Army were seen as essential conduits for resource distribution, grant writing, and volunteer coordination. Organizations that had participated regularly in previous disaster responses developed institutional memory and credibility, making them even more effective in future events.

Our findings also reveal that while local agencies are often well-prepared for routine emergencies due to regular training and drills, challenges persist, especially for atypical or prolonged crises. For example, managing a six-day industrial fire during winter presented serious logistical difficulties, including sustaining personnel and resources in adverse conditions. Similarly, emergency managers reported difficulty adapting existing plans to emerging threats, such as propane leaks or poor air quality caused by wildfires. This lag in preparedness highlights the need to modernize emergency response frameworks to account for evolving risks, including those linked to climate change and public health.

Furthermore, inter-agency coordination remains a perennial challenge. Respondents described coordination gaps between city agencies, fire departments, environmental regulators, and other actors, particularly during complex or multi-jurisdictional incidents. These operational silos can delay response and reduce overall effectiveness. Investments in joint training, shared platforms for information exchange, and standardized protocols can help bridge these divides.

The mental and emotional strain on responders emerged as a consistent theme across both COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 responses. Burnout, long hours, and emotional exhaustion were widely reported, particularly among public health staff and emergency personnel managing extended operations. While some organizations offered counseling or flexible scheduling, these supports were often reactive rather than embedded into agency practice. Building long-term workforce resilience must be prioritized through sustained investment in mental health resources and personnel support systems.

In conclusion, the findings from this study affirm that effective disaster response, whether for a pandemic, flood, or industrial accident, relies on sustained, trust-based collaboration across sectors. The adaptability and commitment of local actors—from fire chiefs to nonprofit leaders to student volunteers—were central to Illinois communities' ability to respond to crisis. To strengthen future preparedness, emergency planners and local leaders must formalize cross-sector partnerships, expand joint training programs, update response frameworks for emerging threats, and invest in the well-being of the public service workforce. Only through such inclusive, forward-looking strategies can communities enhance resilience and ensure equitable, timely responses to the diverse emergencies they face.

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A CASE STUDY OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING: INVESTIGATION INVOLVING MIGRANT WOMEN IN THE SEX TRADE AND THE SHIFT TO A VICTIM-CENTRIC APPROACH BY A MUNICIPAL POLICE DEPARTMENT

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This case study, based on a year-long complex investigation led by a Canadian municipal police department, examines the integration of a victim-centred approach (VCA) in efforts to combat human trafficking. Departing from a traditional punitive law enforcement-centric (LEC) model, this study demonstrates the benefits of interagency collaboration and trauma-informed practices in strengthening victim support. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and field analysis involving professionals directly engaged in supporting trafficking victims. Findings suggest that local governments can build greater trust with marginalized communities, enhance victim engagement, and facilitate more coordinated interventions with community partners. This research provides practical guidance for local officials and stakeholders on how implementing a VCA can help overcome systemic barriers and improve outcomes for vulnerable populations.

INTRODUCTION

Often hidden in plain sight within the community, human trafficking remains one of the most serious human rights violations of our time. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2009) refers to it as a modern form of slavery. Globally, an estimated 27.6 million people are subjected to forced labor, commercial sex acts, and other forms of exploitation (International Labor Organization et al., 2022). Between 244,000 and 325,000 youths across Canada, the United States, and Mexico are considered at risk for commercial sexual exploitation (Estes & Weiner, 2002).

Despite the widespread adoption of the United Nations Trafficking Protocol (2000), local governments continue to struggle with effective responses, often relying too heavily on reactive law enforcement strategies and fragmented approaches (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014). These approaches frequently neglect the

broader needs of survivors and fail to prevent re-victimization. To advocate for change, we urge governments to move beyond law enforcement-centric (LEC) models that emphasize punitive measures and shift to coordinated victim-centred approaches (VCA) that prioritize victims' recovery, foster interagency collaboration, reduce barriers, and redefine practices to provide sustainable support for survivors. Municipal governments and street-level bureaucrats are uniquely positioned to lead this shift, given their direct engagement with affected individuals and their deeper understanding of the specific circumstances in their communities.

This study not only demonstrates the critical role that municipal governments can play in addressing human trafficking but also illustrates a pragmatic approach to implementing a coordinated VCA framework. Drawing on interviews with those directly involved—police officers, victim services workers, and human trafficking survivors—this research demonstrates that meaningful interventions must be guided by victims' lived experiences, not just institutional mandates or political agendas. Our findings emphasize a humanistic approach and reinforce what other studies have suggested: when agencies adopt a trauma-informed, victim-centred approach, they improve stakeholders' engagement, build trust in the justice system, and achieve better outcomes (Clawson et al., 2008; Labriola et al., 2024). Even with limited resources, municipalities can still make a significant impact by cultivating interagency collaboration that protects the rights and well-being of vulnerable individuals when developing anti-trafficking strategies (U.S. Department of Justice, 2022; Winterdyk, 2017).

To inform this analysis, we interviewed five experienced individuals directly involved in supporting victims, conducting investigations, and advocating for systemic change. Participants included a police commander, a human trafficking police detective, support workers with lived experience, a sex trafficking advocate, and a migrant workers' rights advocate. Their diverse perspectives enriched our understanding of the challenges and opportunities in implementing a trauma-informed, victim-centred approach within local intervention efforts. Before exploring how this shift can reshape government responses, we first examine the key differences between a LEC model and a VCA.

REFRAMING ANTI-HUMAN TRAFFICKING POLICY

CONTRASTING LAW ENFORCEMENT-CENTRIC AND VICTIM-CENTRED APPROACH

LEC responses have long shaped how human trafficking cases are handled. In this model, the immediate focus is on identifying offenders, collecting evidence, and advancing prosecutions (Islam, 2023). Victims are often viewed primarily as informants in a criminal investigation, which means they may be brought into police facilities for questioning before their basic needs—like food, safety, or medical care—are addressed. While well-intended to disrupt human trafficking, it can unintentionally reinforce trauma, particularly when victims feel pressured to share deeply personal or painful experiences under stressful conditions. Further complicating the issue, law enforcement agencies often face systemic barriers such as limited resources, siloed operations, and ingrained biases that disproportionately impact marginalized communities (Task Force on Trafficking of Women and Girls in Canada, 2014; Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014). In many cases, the support for the victim is often inconsistent and secondary to the goal of securing a conviction.

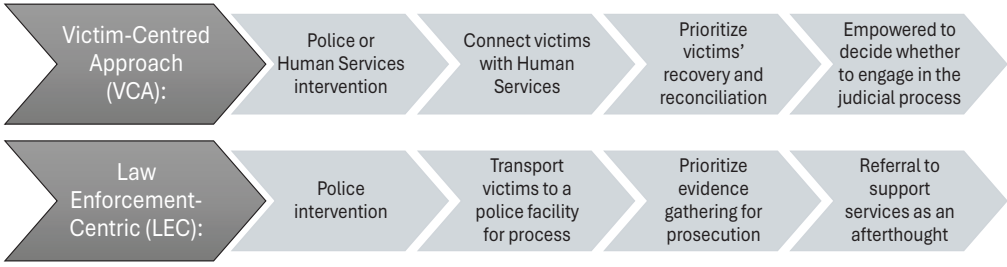
VCAs take a fundamentally different view. Rather than treating survivors as secondary to the prosecution, VCAs prioritize their immediate safety, recovery, and restorative justice (Clawson et al., 2008; Labriola et al., 2024). This approach emerged from grassroots advocacy among non-criminal justice professionals, who recognized that trauma-informed care must be central to any meaningful anti-trafficking or harm reduction strategy (Herman, 2015; Stolz, 2005). Under a VCA, victims are empowered to decide if, when, and how to engage with law enforcement. Initial interventions may involve taking the victim to a place of safety rather than a police station. From there, support services focus on empowerment and healing, whether that includes housing, trauma counseling, healthcare, or simply informing victims of their options. This shift prioritizes restorative justice over enforcement, acknowledging the complex realities faced by victims and reducing the risk of re-traumatization (Clawson et al., 2008; Winterdyk, 2017). It also helps build victims' trust with service providers and improves the chances of long-term recovery.

However, these two models are not a dichotomy but rather a clash in practice, with a shared goal of disrupting human trafficking. As research suggests, addressing human trafficking effectively requires more than just prosecuting offenders; it demands a coordinated, multi-sectoral strategy that integrates law

enforcement with community-based services (de Vries & Farrell, 2022; van Rij, 2023; Winterdyk, 2017). Since municipal governments are closest to the communities affected, they are well-positioned to lead the change by bringing together key stakeholders to develop shared protocols grounded in VCA principles. Doing so not only improves support for victims but also enhances the quality of life in the community by creating safer, more trusting environments in which people feel empowered to participate. For public administrators, adopting a VCA framework represents a shift toward a more compassionate, inclusive, and sustainable anti-trafficking policy that aligns with advancing human rights and local public values. Figure 1 summarizes the different approaches used by VCAs and the LEC model.

FIGURE 1

VCA VERSUS LEC PROCESS IN HUMAN TRAFFICKING INTERVENTION



Note: Figure 1 illustrates the difference between the victim-centred approach and the law enforcement-centric model.

CONNECTING PUBLIC VALUES WITH HUMAN TRAFFICKING POLICY

The term "law enforcement" is often used interchangeably with police or criminal justice, yet it conveys a narrow focus on enforcing legal acts, which may obscure the broader role of policing in public safety. This terminology may unintentionally downplay the important preventive and victim support functions carried out by police departments. Therefore, this study uses the term "police" to better reflect their broad responsibilities, such as supporting vulnerable populations and collaborating with stakeholders. Framing police work through this wider lens of public values highlights the profession's role not only in enforcement but also in advancing community well-being through restoration, protection, and procedural justice.

In Bozeman's argument (Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007), public value failure occurs when neither the market nor the state adequately delivers services that reflect the normative consensus of a society, particularly concerning fundamental rights, justice, and equity. The LEC model, with its emphasis on suppression and enforcement, may be seen as contributing to such a failure when it neglects the protection of vulnerable individuals. By contrast, VCAs seek to restore public value by prioritizing the rights, dignity, and safety of those impacted. This aligns with Bozeman's perspective that governments must not only achieve operational success and efficiency but also uphold legitimacy and procedural justice (Bryson et al., 2014; Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007). We argue that anti-trafficking efforts must be anchored in public values to ensure that policy and practice advance both effectiveness and social equity.

STUDY APPROACH

We employed a qualitative case study design to examine how a municipal police department adopted a VAC in its effort to dismantle a human trafficking network targeting migrant women in the sex trade. Following the qualitative research framework of Baxter and Jack (2015) and Yin (2018), this study focused on answering the "how" and "why" questions regarding the shift in anti-trafficking strategies, emphasizing the value of in-depth and context-specific inquiry.

This case study focused on a year-long, multi-agency human trafficking investigation led by a large municipal police department in Ontario, Canada, that involved several federal, provincial, and local law enforcement agencies, victim services, and non-government organizations (NGO). The investigation resulted in the successful rescue of several East Asian migrant women who were coerced into the commercial sex trade by an organized crime network. Due to significant barriers such as language, culture, and undocumented status, the investigative team had decided to integrate VCA principles for the first time in a major anti-trafficking operation, emphasizing trauma-informed engagement and partnership with NGOs. The case was selected for its practical significance, complexity, and potential to generate insight into the operationalization of a VCA by local actors.

PARTICIPANT SELECTION AND SAMPLING

Five participants were recruited using purposeful sampling to ensure rich, relevant, and diverse insights into the complexities of human trafficking investigations and trauma-informed practices (Baxter & Jack, 2015; Yin, 2018). As a result, the inclusion criteria required participants to have direct involvement in this particular human trafficking case, professional or lived experience with victim support services, and prior involvement in inter-agency collaborations. A detailed overview of the respondents is provided in Table 1. This study received an exempt determination from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Illinois Springfield (IRB file number 25-033). All participants provided informed consent to ensure their perspectives were captured while safeguarding confidentiality and privacy. Therefore, respondents have been identified using pseudonyms such as "Police Detective" or "Human Trafficking Support Worker."

TABLE 1

OVERVIEW OF PARTICIPANTS

ORGANIZATIONS	JOB & PSEUDONYM ID	EXPERIENCE
Municipal Police Department	Police Commander	24 years in policing, of those 7 years in charge of the Human Trafficking Unit
Municipal Police Department	Police Detective	15 years in policing, of those 5 years in the Human Trafficking Unit
Victim Services	Human Trafficking Support Worker	8 years of direct support and management with lived experience of being trafficked
Victim Services	Human (Sex) Trafficking Advocate	15 years of direct support and policy advocacy with lived experience of being trafficked
NGO – Advocate for Migrant Workers	Human (Migrant) Trafficking Advocate	5 years of direct involvement and advocacy for forced labor cases

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and field analysis to examine the integration of a VCA in a complex anti-trafficking investigation. To address an ethical concern, no human trafficking victims involved in this case were recruited to participate in this study. Instead, professional support workers with lived experiences of being trafficked were included to provide a voice and representation for these vulnerable populations. Interviews focused on operational strategies, stakeholder collaboration, and challenges in maintaining a victim-centred lens throughout the process. Interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed to identify recurring themes.

To ensure research rigor, we employed reflexivity and triangulation by acknowledging the researcher's background as a former police detective and incorporating observational data from multiple stages of the investigation to contextualize findings (Lub, 2015). We cross-referenced observations with interview data from non-policing stakeholders to balance potential bias and enhance the credibility of the analysis. This approach to sampling, data collection, and analysis enabled a nuanced understanding of a VCA in practical applications while upholding research and ethical standards.

FINDINGS

APPROACH TO INTERVENTION

In general, both police officials and human services workers agreed that investigating human trafficking cases requires sensitivity, ethical considerations, and a commitment to harm reduction. Compared to the traditional LEC approach, a VCA is an enhanced representation of public values in protecting victims and suppressing and punishing traffickers. During the initial stages of the police investigation, respondents emphasized the necessity of establishing trust and ensuring that victims feel safe and empowered throughout the process. While individual victims' narratives and experiences may be unique and difficult to unpack due to legal and ethical constraints, respondents unanimously agreed that prioritizing the well-being of those impacted is more important than risking re-traumatization by forcing victims to participate in the court process. Police officials acknowledged that delaying the interview with victims could

hinder evidence collection but ultimately accepted the compromises required by a victim-first approach.

Respondents generally agreed that any misstep by the police or support workers could risk re-traumatization or loss of trust. Furthermore, when dealing with racialized and marginalized populations, respondents highlighted the importance of considering the diverse social and cultural contexts of the victims. Additionally, respondents belonging to human services emphasized the importance of ensuring that interventions are guided by survivors' lived experiences, rather than being solely shaped by institutional perspectives or pre-existing protocols. They suggested such an approach could help reduce systemic barriers that victims may face.

> *There's an increasing effort to adopt a survivor-centered approach. Sometimes, police inform us in advance… so we can prepare to support foreign national victims. – Human (Migrant) Trafficking Advocate*

> *Many human trafficking victims—especially those involved in sex trafficking—have had negative experiences with the police, over a long period. These experiences may have started in their juvenile years due to issues at home and continued through encounters with frontline officers while working in the sex trade. – Police Detective*

> *Enforcement tactics were driving a wedge between us (police) and marginalized communities—not just sex workers but also racialized groups. It was clear we needed to rethink how we policed an increasingly diverse community. – Police Commander*

Observations suggested that an effective VCA begins with addressing the needs of victims rather than the objectives of the responding agency. For example, service providers noted that police interventions should directly contribute to victims' recovery rather than merely hold offenders accountable through punitive measures. However, given the complexity and sensitivity of human trafficking cases, balancing intervention practices, legal processes, and ethical considerations remains a critical challenge in this field.

INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION

Respondents elaborated on the importance of collaboration between police departments and non-government agencies in effectively combating human trafficking. One police detective distinguished between formal and informal coordination mechanisms. Formal partnerships are defined as structured agreements, such as interagency task forces and joint investigative units, that bring together law enforcement, social services, and victim advocacy groups. These frameworks ensure that resources, intelligence, and expertise are shared to enhance victim identification and support. Informal collaboration, on the other hand, occurs through direct communication between frontline responders, shelter providers, and legal aid organizations, facilitating rapid response to emerging cases. Regardless of the coordination mechanisms, respondents highlighted that continuous information-sharing between agencies is essential for improving victim-centred responses.

> *It's important that all involved organizations, including law enforcement and community services, are on the same page. We've seen cases where miscommunication leads to false promises. – Human (Migrant) Trafficking Advocate*

> *Police cannot combat human trafficking alone. We need robust partnerships with social services, NGOs, and legal professionals to support victims. – Police Commander*

> *On top of that, services don't always communicate or collaborate well. There can be territorial issues—services wanting the case under their jurisdiction to boost their stats rather than considering what's best for the survivor. – Human (Sex) Trafficking Advocate*

In many cases, local government agencies rely on NGOs to provide immediate and long-term support services for victims, such as emergency housing, trauma counseling, and legal assistance. Meanwhile, NGOs depend on police efforts to dismantle trafficking networks and ensure victim safety. However, at times, collaboration can be challenging due to differences in priorities, legal constraints, and varying levels of funding. Effective partnerships require trust-building through regular contact and the establishment of clear protocols for long-term partnerships.

> *Many victims have negative experiences with the police, whether here or in their home countries, and their willingness to engage with support agencies may be affected if those agencies are seen as too closely aligned with law enforcement. – Police Detective*

The researcher noted that collaboration should extend beyond reactive crisis response. To create a lasting impact and influence police organization culture change towards VCAs, NGOs and local governments must work on proactive measures. These measures could include community education, policy development and advocacy, and early intervention strategies for those at risk of being trafficked. Without ongoing engagement, efforts risk being fragmented, which limits their impact on both prevention and long-term victim support.

FROM BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTATION

Although all respondents recognized that every human trafficking case is unique and requires a tailored approach, structured planning is essential for effectively implementing a victim-centred response. In this case, agencies have established a memorandum of understanding that defines the roles of police, victim services, and community organizations to ensure that all stakeholders are aware of their responsibilities and the protocol when assisting victims. One advocate expressed frustration over law enforcement's lack of awareness regarding client confidentiality, noting that support workers are often bound by ethical obligations not to share certain details, even if that information could aid in prosecution.

> *Even if breaching confidentiality might seem in the survivor's best interest, we legally can't do it. And that lack of understanding from police can create tension. – Human (Sex) Trafficking Advocate*

> *From a legal perspective, maintaining clear boundaries between law enforcement and NGOs was essential to ensure that victims understood their conversations with support agencies were confidential and that police involvement was separate. – Police Detective*

> *One key thing I've learned is that safety is a personal definition. What I see as safe might not feel safe to someone in crisis. So instead of saying, "Come with me, I have a safe place for you," I focus on asking, "What does safety look like for you?" That approach makes a big difference in building trust. – Human Trafficking Support Worker*

According to police respondents, the operational success of victim-centred investigations relies heavily on coordination between police, social services, and NGOs. However, some participants noted that rigid protocols do not always align with the realities of human trafficking cases, as each victim's needs and circumstances vary. As a result, flexibility and ongoing collaboration are crucial to ensuring adequate victim support. A theme emerges that protocol often evolves through interagency training, case reviews, and post-investigation debriefs among stakeholders.

VICTIM-CENTRED APPROACHES IN PRACTICE

Beyond establishing intervention protocol, respondents emphasized that training and interagency dialogue play a critical role in preparing police officers and human services workers for a VCA. All respondents agreed that police officers should focus on trauma-informed and nonjudgmental interviews with the aim of increasing their competency in working with marginalized populations. More importantly, victim advocates stressed that one of the premises of a VCA is being transparent about the risks and benefits of cooperating with the police and should never pressure victims to testify. VCAs are an interdisciplinary intervention that should involve the police, victim service providers, and advocates working to refine anti-trafficking strategies while prioritizing victim well-being.

> *There are some officers who genuinely prioritize the survivor's experience and try to be trauma-informed, but that's not the norm. – Human (Sex) Trafficking Advocate*

> *Ongoing training is crucial. Understanding trauma-informed care, cultural sensitivity, and human trafficking should be a core part of policing education. Many officers*

> *still approach these cases with outdated enforcement mindsets, which can be detrimental to victim cooperation. – Police Commander*

> *Years ago, officers might have responded to a call that seemed like a domestic dispute when, in reality, it was human trafficking. Without proper training, it's easy to miss the signs. That's why ongoing education is so critical. – Human Trafficking Support Worker*

In this case, addressing the needs of migrant victims has led to refinements in future police practices. Observations from this case study highlight the role of external partners, such as healthcare professionals and immigration specialists, who could enhance a holistic response. This underscores the importance of fostering interagency cooperation and continuously evaluating intervention strategies within the local context.

> *We continue adapting our approach. We are always honest with clients (victims)… We don't want to mislead them. Instead, we present the available options, the risks, and potential benefits, allowing them to make an informed decision. – Human (Migrant) Trafficking Advocate*

Another key insight from field observations was the importance of real-time coordination during police operations. Upon the identification of trafficking victims, a designated victim services team was immediately mobilized alongside investigators. Rather than taking victims directly to a police facility for questioning, specially trained non-uniform officers escorted them to a secure victim support hub. Victims received immediate care, legal consultation, and psychological support at this neutral location before choosing whether to provide a statement to the police. Throughout the process, police and support workers ensured that victims' needs were met without unnecessary procedural delays or undue coercion.

EMERGING THEME TO ENHANCE FUTURE PRACTICES

Respondents identified the lack of coordination among agencies as a key challenge in providing seamless support to trafficked individuals. Sex trafficking is transient, with victims frequently being moved by their traffickers. Police respondents criticized that many agencies continue to operate in silos.

Therefore, this limits information sharing and disrupts victim assistance efforts. To address the issue of silos, all respondents agreed that strengthening interagency collaboration and implementing standardized information-sharing protocols are essential steps to enhance future practices.

> *Improving cross-agency collaboration is vital. Human trafficking is transient, with victims moving frequently between locations. Many agencies still work in silos, making it difficult to provide continuous support. – Police Detective*

> *Many (victims) don't even want to go through with it anymore or have been re-victimized in the process. We need to make these services more accessible and truly trauma-informed—reducing the need for survivors to repeatedly disclose their trauma to multiple people. – Human Trafficking Support Worker*

During observations, post-operation debriefings played a crucial role in strengthening the VAC. Following the major operation, participating agencies convened to discuss the challenges encountered, areas for improvement, and policy adjustments necessary to enhance future practices. These reflections often led to refinements in investigative protocols, better integration of victim services, and improved trust between police agencies and community organizations.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

REDEFINING POLICE PRACTICES

Although some law enforcement agencies may continue to favor the LEC approach, few have carefully considered ways to implement actionable frameworks to reflect their commitment to broader public values. Traditionally, crime suppression strategies have prioritized criminal investigations, intelligence gathering, and the prosecution of traffickers. Such an approach may neglect or knowingly engage in practices that compromise victims' well-being and dignity. More recently, shifting societal perspectives, especially the public's view on commercial sex trafficking, recognize the need for police

services to balance their efforts with a victim-centred trauma-informed approach.

At the federal level, law enforcement may focus on large-scale trafficking operations aiming at disrupting interstate activity or organized crime networks (U.S. Department of Justice, 2022). Federal investigations emphasize intelligence-driven operations, extensive use of task forces (e.g., the Human Trafficking Task Force Initiative), and coordination with international partners to dismantle trafficking rings. While effective in targeting large-scale criminal operations, it may limit their direct engagement with trafficked individuals. Therefore, there are fewer opportunities for federal law enforcement to develop firsthand insights into victim-centred practices.

On the other hand, considering that state and local officers are often the first responders to intervene and assist trafficking victims, state and local police departments are well-positioned to focus on community-based intervention, prevention, and victim support. Therefore, state and local agencies should develop a framework to help their personnel identify indicators during routine interactions with the public, such as traffic stops, responding to calls for service at businesses that are prone to human exploitation, and calls connected to gender-based violence. Failure to adopt such trauma-informed practices can result in victims being misidentified or, in some cases, even being treated as offenders (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2010; U.S. Department of Justice, 2022). Besides recognizing subtle indicators of human trafficking, officers should be equipped to engage victims in non-threatening ways while leveraging the support from other human services providers.

An example of such an approach is the Illinois Human Trafficking Task Force. The task force shifted its focus from punitive strategies to a mission of fostering collaboration among police departments, social service agencies, and legal advocacy groups (Department of Children and Family Services, n.d.). This task force highlights the importance of multi-disciplinary responses by ensuring stakeholders work together with police agencies to offer comprehensive support during investigations. Illinois also mandates cross-sector training initiatives to improve how officers interact with vulnerable populations, such as youth and immigrants, who are at higher risk of exploitation (Illinois Human Trafficking Task Force, 2018).

While police departments are mandated to concentrate on prosecution and the disruption of trafficking operations, departments should place a greater emphasis on democratic and constitutional values. This may include fostering an ongoing dialogue with marginalized communities affected most by human exploitation. Community policing initiatives have been instrumental in identifying potential trafficking situations that might otherwise go unreported (Farrell et al., 2008). Moreover, officers should receive training to avoid criminalizing trafficking victims, recognizing that many have been coerced into illegal activities. A VCA can help police agencies reduce prejudice and systemic barriers that might otherwise hinder the rehabilitation and reintegration of those affected.

Another critical consideration lies in resource availability and operational capacity. Some agencies may have greater access to funding, technology, and specialized units, which allows for long-term investigations and complex operations. In contrast, many police departments often operate within tighter budget constraints, relying on grants and partnerships with other entities to conduct more comprehensive operations. However, this case study has demonstrated that by adopting innovative strategies, such as victim support hubs, municipal police departments can still create a significant impact and provide assistance to trafficking survivors.

Although VCAs offer promising results, it is not without challenges. A significant challenge lies in balancing investigation priorities with the protection of victims' well-being. Particularly, criminal justice practitioners must navigate the tension between conducting thorough investigations and ensuring that victims feel safe and supported throughout the process (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014; Islam, 2023). To overcome this, public values can serve as the foundation of a VCA while being flexible in adapting to local contexts through ongoing assessment to meet the needs of victims.

VICTIM-CENTRED APPROACHES FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

According to the U.S. Department of Justice's National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking (2022), VCAs prioritize the protection and the rights of vulnerable individuals to be treated with fairness and dignity at every stage of the judicial process. VCAs acknowledge that trafficked individuals often experience significant trauma from being exploited. Victims' behaviors and substance dependence may stem from traumatic experiences and the lasting effects of physical violence or psychological abuse (Clawson et al., 2008).

Besides improving the knowledge, skills, and abilities of human services workers and police officers in recognizing and handling the trauma of trafficked individuals, a critical step forward is to avoid re-traumatization. Victims should be empowered to make an informed decision about their participation in support services and the judicial process.

At its core, a victim-centred approach represents a shift from seeing trafficking victims as passive recipients of services to recognizing them as active agents in their own recovery. This not only improves individual outcomes but also strengthens broader efforts to combat human trafficking by building trust-based relationships between service providers and survivors (Winterdyk, 2017; Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017). This approach emphasizes recognizing victims' needs, promoting trauma-informed practices, and working closely with community partners to ensure comprehensive support (Islam, 2023; Labriola et al., 2024). An essential element of VCAs is the proactive identification of victims (Farrell et al., 2008). Proactive identification involves training frontline workers to recognize signs of trafficking, such as psychological trauma or coercion, which may not be immediately apparent (Clawson et al., 2008; Wilson & Butler, 2014). This identification process is crucial for early intervention and the opportunity to prevent further victimization.

Another core aspect of local government response is to ensure that frontline workers avoid re-traumatization and prioritize the dignity and well-being of victims. Trauma-informed practices require training workers to understand the psychological impact of trafficking and adjust their intervention techniques accordingly (Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018; Wilson & Butler, 2014). Training sessions and scenario exercises have been shown to enhance staff's ability to respond empathetically and recognize trauma indicators during interviews. Moreover, the inclusion of victim advocates during interactions also ensures that victims have access to emotional support and legal resources (Clawson et al., 2008; Winterdyk, 2017).

As demonstrated in this paper, collaboration between the government and NGOs is a fundamental component of the local victim-centred approach. Effective responses to human trafficking require local government agencies, such as police departments and social services, to form meaningful alliances and develop coordinated policies with other public and private sectors. Local and state policies should aim to reduce barriers to information sharing, enhance resources, and ensure seamless care for at-risk or trafficked individuals.

CONCLUSION

This study illustrates the crucial role of stakeholder collaboration in the successful implementation of a VCA. Rather than being driven by institutional mandates, effective interventions must be informed by the victims' lived experiences. Systemic barriers often obstruct comprehensive support and victim reintegration. Findings indicate that practical victim support requires ongoing engagement between police departments and community organizations, moving beyond traditional punitive approaches. By adopting a holistic, survivor-focused model, agencies can enhance their capacity to combat human trafficking while ensuring that interventions reflect public values.

Moreover, this study answers the call put forth by the UNODC (2009) to generate the logical information needed for evidence-based anti-trafficking policy. As an emerging theme from the data, effective human trafficking interventions must incorporate ongoing interagency training and continued evaluation of strategy to augment structured protocols. This aligns with the work of Jørgensen and Bozeman (2007), who emphasize that in a complex and multifaceted society, public policy and governments must actively respond to the collective pursuit of shared public values, such as procedural justice, safety, and the dignity of all citizens.

While this case study offers policymakers and practitioners valuable insights into victim-centred approaches, it is important to acknowledge several limitations. First, the absence of direct victim narratives highlights the need for future research to explore ethical ways of incorporating survivor voices. Secondly, previous research suggests that context-specific factors may influence the effectiveness of a VCA (Farrell et al., 2008; Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014). We argue for the need to develop comparative studies across different legal and social environments. Lastly, one of the researchers' backgrounds as a former police detective offers practical insight but may introduce interpretive bias. Power dynamics within police organizations could further influence participant responses. To enhance understanding and validity, future studies should consider comparative and mixed-method approaches.

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RESEARCH NOTE

MEDIA LITERACY LAW: CURRENT ILLINOIS SCHOOL PRACTICES AND ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS BY MUNICIPALITIES

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This paper reports and discusses the preliminary results of Illinois' current practices in implementing the state's Media Literacy Law, House Bill 234. Using fiscal federalism as a conceptual framework, the authors discuss municipalities' benefits, roles, and responsibilities in providing public education, including media literacy instruction and training. Alternative practices and auxiliary programs are introduced to promote local media literacy, thereby avoiding cost overrun and the need to raise new revenue to finance the unfunded mandate.

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, the State of Illinois passed House Bill 234, which requires, starting with the 2022–23 school year, every public high school to "include in its curriculum a unit of instruction on media literacy" (Illinois General Assembly, 2021). At the time, the law made Illinois the nation's first state requiring such instruction at a public high school level. The law describes broad topics that lessons shall cover, including "how to access information and evaluate the trustworthiness of its source; analyzing and evaluating media messages; creating media messages; assessing how media messages trigger emotions and behavior; and social responsibility" (Hancock, 2021). The law allows individual school districts to design and incorporate this instruction. Currently, the law includes no state funds for teacher training and lacks a formal mechanism to monitor compliance (Cooper, 2022).

While this unfunded mandate is directly related to school districts, rather than municipalities, the benefits of having citizens with critical media skills spill over into municipalities' jurisdictions, making this outcome desirable for municipalities. An informed citizenry is an integral part of a responsible electoral

process and has always been a part of public high school civics and government classes. However, focusing on media literacy and identifying misinformation is a more recent requirement. A 2022 survey of 541 respondents aged 19 to 81 years of age across the United States reveals that 62% of the population did not have a chance to attend any media literacy education courses in their formal education (Media Literacy Now, 2022). The same survey, however, reports that 84% of the population wishes for media literacy courses to be implemented in formal education (Media Literacy Now, 2022). These statistics suggest that, although more than half of the survey respondents did not have an opportunity to receive training, media literacy training is desirable to the public.

In Finland, municipal policymakers view media education as a social responsibility of city governments since media education creates social inclusion and participation (Kanerva & Oksanen-Sarela, 2023). Finnish municipal policy makers view media education as integral since it provides a strong foundation for the overall well-being of people, smooth running in everyday life, and the ability and opportunity for all citizens to play a whole part in society (Kanerva & Oksanen-Sarela, 2023). As a stakeholder in media literacy law, municipalities should consider participating in media literacy implementation, along with school districts, to shape their communities' future direction. Municipalities' roles can range from supporting school districts in designing and selecting media literacy education models to facilitating media literacy training programs outside of public schools. Auxiliary programs outside of schools, with innovative financing strategies such as using external grants and local cooperation, may help society reach its own goal in civic development faster and better, especially in the program's inclusivity and accessibility to everyone in the communities.

This paper introduces media literacy, reports on the recent practices of Illinois high school implementation, and recommends alternative practices for Illinois municipalities. The paper is organized as follows: The following section provides a background on media literacy. The third section reports on current practices. The fourth section discusses the roles and responsibilities of municipal governments in providing public education and promoting media literacy. The fifth section recommends alternative practices. The final section concludes.

BACKGROUND

Media literacy is defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication (Bulger & Davison, 2018). Media literacy enhances not only critical thinking skills and individual responsibility but also communal sense-making and behavioral change (Bulger & Davison, 2018). During the 21st century, in which information technology and social media are integral to daily life, educators, policymakers, parents, and citizens call for media literacy (Schwartz, 2005). The benefits of media literacy can be viewed in a continuum. On one hand, media literacy can be used as a defense for fake news and propaganda (Schwartz, 2005). On the other hand, it empowers both younger and adult citizens to develop their critical thinking skills, enabling them to become active and high-quality, engaged citizens (Schwartz, 2005). The capacity to decide whether information is worthy and reliable is not only necessary for any individual but also for a democratic society, as it impacts public choices through voting systems.

Walkosz et al. (2008) assert that electronic communication forms, ranging from emails to social media, make interconnection between the world and local communities possible. In such situations, youth are impacted the most since they spend significant time interacting with media and often multitask across platforms such as television, social media, and mobile devices. According to Walkosz et al. (2008), interconnection between the global and local communities has occurred because international media outlets have adapted to local cultures and vice versa. Examples include global programs like Sesame Street and MTV, as well as the export of local content to international audiences, such as Bollywood films and Japanese anime. Pervasive media use can shape values, lifestyles, behaviors, and identity construction both in positive and negative ways (Walkosz et al., 2008).

Although providing media literacy education is essential to individuals and society in the 21st century, its implementation faces multiple challenges, both in the United States and elsewhere, ranging from a lack of policy directions and standardized program evaluation to a lack of funding. Thus, much more work remains to be done. In *Assessing the State of Media Literacy Policy in U.S. K-12 Schools,* DiGiacomo et al. (2023) analyze existing state-level legislation and find that while there is legislation across states, it lacks consistency in terms of substance, scope, and intended implications. Most legislation focuses on safety and civility in online environments but fails to adequately address

equity concerns. There is a notable lack of support in terms of funding, teacher training, and clear definitions of media literacy terms. DiGiacomo et al. (2023) underscore the need for comprehensive and coherent policy frameworks to effectively integrate media literacy education into the curriculum. Interestingly, the authors note that while focusing on safety and civility, most state laws fail to engage civic voices, especially in encouraging citizen participation through curriculum design and placement choices (DiGiacomo et al., 2023).

McNelly and Harvey (2021) analyze success in media literacy interventions from the teacher's perspective. This research investigates educators' understanding, confidence, and integration of media literacy education in classrooms. Through interviews with elementary and middle school teachers, librarians, and reading specialists, the authors find that teachers' confidence and knowledge about media literacy are closely tied to their integration of media literacy education (McNelly & Harvey, 2021). However, this emphasizes the necessity of professional development opportunities to enhance teachers' competence in effectively teaching media literacy skills to students. Hobbs et al. (2022) assess the implementation of media literacy education in Rhode Island schools and find significant disparities in integrating media literacy education across school districts. The authors identify various obstacles, such as technological limitations, academic priorities, and educator responses, that hinder the effective implementation of media literacy laws and policy. Echoing DiGiacomo et al.'s (2023) conclusion, Hobbs et al. (2022) note that local communities' understanding, championship, and facilitation are key for program effectiveness in media literacy.

Outside of the United States, media literacy program implementation has faced a series of challenges, including the lack of uniform guidelines and scope for curriculum design, instructional focus, and policy implementation in general. For example, in Baltic countries, while Estonian schools integrate media literacy into all subjects taught at all levels in secondary schools, Latvia and Lithuania have a stand-alone media literacy course (Balčytienė & Juraitė, 2017). Still, the course content of Latvia and Lithuania covers only digital literacy (Balčytienė & Juraitė, 2017). The media literacy programs in Baltic countries are ahead of those in U.S. school districts in the sense that other local and international organizations have long funded them, in addition to the local governments. Examples of their funders, operators, and cooperators include local news media corporations, the European Commission, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the Nordic

Council of Ministers. However, this management and funding strategy is not always failure-proof. Baltic countries found that media literacy education, partially funded through cooperation with these entities, can be influenced or tilted toward these third parties' agendas, making government funding a more ideal option (Balčytienė & Juraitė, 2017).

CURRENT PRACTICES BY ILLINOIS HIGH SCHOOLS

To understand current practices of Illinois high schools in compliance with the state's media literacy law, especially after two academic years in effect, the University of Illinois Springfield (UIS) distributed survey questionnaires to high school principals or other high school faculty in five Illinois regions. The school principal directory is publicly available on the Illinois State Board of Education website. On March 1, 2024, we emailed an online survey to 754 public high school principals, asking them to complete a 19-question survey, including quantitative and open-ended questions about how the media literacy education law is being implemented in their buildings.

Responses were anonymous, with the only identifying information being a question that asked which of the five Illinois regions the school is located in. Because of the flexibility provided to educators in how they implement the requirements of the law, we asked educators to report what types of classes were used to deliver media literacy lessons, what grade level(s) receive the instruction, how long a media literacy unit lasts, and how students are assessed on their knowledge. To provide qualitative depth, we asked respondents to share details of their assessment tools. We also included a space for educators to reflect on how/whether students are displaying better media literacy skills within everyday school activities. The survey was completed on May 1, 2024, with a 7% response rate (49/754). With this response rate, the survey results may not be suitable for inferential analyses; however, to obtain an initial insight into the implementation of the media literacy law in Illinois, the survey results are deemed valuable. Below are the preliminary results of Illinois media literacy education practices by public high schools throughout the state.

MEDIA LITERACY TEACHING BEFORE AND AFTER THE LAW

The survey results reveal that 73% of survey respondents state that their school had already taught media literacy concepts before the law took effect. Of those who responded that media literacy education had been provided in

their schools before the law's enactment, 36% reported their lessons are now "more comprehensive" compared to before the law. In contrast, the remainder reported their lessons "were about the same."

THE EMPHASIS OF THE MEDIA LITERACY CONTENT DELIVERED IN THE CLASSROOMS

To learn the focus of the instructional content for media literacy education, a survey question asked, "How much emphasis do you put on the five pillars of media literacy as outlined in the state law?" Respondents were instructed to select all that apply, and the results reveal that not all five pillars have been a focus in the responding schools' instructional content.

- 49% of respondents reported that their primary focus is on developing students' skills in assessing information.
- 33% of respondents reported that their primary focus is on implanting students' awareness of social responsibility.
- 27% of respondents reported that their primary focus is on exposing students to media creation.
- 27% of the respondents reported that their primary focus is on media consumption.
- 53% of respondents reported that their curriculum's focus is on analyzing and evaluating media messages.

From these results, Illinois high school educators view the capacity to assess media messages as the most important.

ASSESSMENT METHODS FOR MEDIA LITERACY LEARNING OUTCOMES

Since learning outcomes are an integral part of media literacy program evaluation, we asked survey respondents to list the assessment tools used in their media literacy courses. The results are as follows:

- 37% of school respondents solely use quizzes and multiple-choice tests.
- 35% of school respondents use quizzes and multiple-choice tests along with other types of assessment.
- 80% of school respondents conduct the tests as an in-class assignment.

- 47% conduct the tests as homework assignments.
- 49% require a class presentation.
- 29% require a research paper.
- 41% evaluate students' learning outcomes through assigning them a group project.
- 10% report that they do not conduct any learning outcome assessment.

MEDIA LITERACY COURSE/CONTENT PLACEMENT IN SCHOOLS' CURRICULA

In terms of media literacy course placement, 63% of respondents said they deliver media literacy lessons across multiple courses over an academic year. The most popular approaches are integrating media literacy content into English (53%), social studies/history (44%), business (26%), and literature (24%). Media literacy lessons delivered as a separate media literacy course are reported by 21% of schools.

THE SCHOOL YEAR IN WHICH MEDIA LITERACY CONCEPTS ARE TAUGHT

Media literacy lessons delivered to all four grades in high school are reported by 41% of schools (one grade, 26%; two grades, 21%; three grades, 12%).

THE DEFINITION OF A UNIT OF MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION

When asked how long a media literacy unit lasts: 33% responded that their media literacy unit lasts more than one class period but not more than one week; 29% report more than three weeks; and, 16% of schools surveyed discuss media literacy during a single class period over a whole school year.

ILLINOIS SCHOOLS' VARIATIONS ON HOW THEY HANDLE MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION

Less than 82% of teachers reported that high school freshmen received media literacy instruction at their schools. That percentage decreases as students get older. Seniors received the training at 63% of the schools. One-third of educators reported that a student who attends their high school for all four years will experience a media literacy lesson four or more times (Piscia & Strahle, 2025). Another one-third of teachers say their students will see just one lesson over their four years in high school (Piscia & Strahle, 2025).

The preliminary results suggest that while the local control part of the state law is considered an advantage in that it gives school districts authority to decide their method(s) of implementation, the drawback is that there is disparity in media literacy education across Illinois. This is especially apparent in the amount of instruction, the focus of the lessons delivered, the placement in the curriculum, and the school year in which the classes are offered. An interviewee stated that a deficiency in the law is a lack of statewide oversight to ensure compliance in classrooms throughout Illinois, which leaves many schools, including hers, implementing the law on a "hit or miss" basis (Piscia & Strahle, 2025).

The survey indicates that Illinois faces media literacy challenges like those seen nationally and internationally. Assessing the State of Illinois' Media Literacy Law implementation in early 2023, Cooper-Pierce (2023) reported an identical snapshot, noting that Illinois law lacks funding, oversight, and clear standards, creating uncertainties among educators as to how to implement it. The lack of clear directions, particularly in instructional design and course placement, combined with insufficient professional development and training, leaves educators and teachers feeling overwhelmed (Cooper-Pierce, 2023).

In the next section, we outline municipalities' roles, responsibilities, and alternative management practices in promoting media literacy.

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS' ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN K-12 AND MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION SERVICE

According to Richard Musgrave's (1966) fiscal federalism concept, public elementary and secondary education (K-12) is a shared responsibility among all government levels in the United States. However, some levels of government appear to be the major actors/funders depending on economic efficiency concepts. The main benefit of public education is to establish a regional workforce with specific skills (e.g., math and sciences) attractive to businesses and employers, thereby facilitating successful business attractions and economic development activities. Since the benefits are confined within state and local jurisdictions, the state and local governments have "local control" in designing and financing their public service programs tailored toward local needs. This arrangement is not only effective in terms of having a public service that is responsive to local needs, but also efficient. This is because public demand for educational program level and quality is well

aligned with the public service price and affordability of local constituencies, measured through local property tax rates and levies.

About 92% of school funding comes from state and local governments; 8% of school revenue comes from the federal government for targeted recipients and special educational programs (Allegretto et al., 2022). State and local governments share approximately half-and-half responsibilities in school funding (47% by state and 45% by local governments) (Allegretto et al., 2022). Using a variety of state revenue resources, such as income, sales, and property taxes, state governments have significant roles in reducing the disparity of school quality across state boundaries. State governments equalize school quality by awarding school equalization grants, setting statewide education standards, monitoring school performance, and evaluating public education service outcomes.

Local governments, including school districts, counties, and municipalities, are the actual implementers of public-school service. School districts operate school programs through a production process, ranging from designing curriculum to recruiting and retaining teachers and school staff. School districts and counties raise public resources through collecting property taxes, allocating and distributing funds to local school districts, and financing school facilities and infrastructure maintenance, while the state manages teachers' pension funds. By this description, school districts and other local governments are partners in producing and delivering public education. While school districts operate, other local governments manage, mainly in terms of raising revenue and financial management.

As is widely known by teachers, administrators, and media professionals, the state's media literacy law is an unfunded mandate passed down to local governments (Piscia & Strahle, 2025). Because the law's implementation and compliance require monetary resources, school districts will need to do more with fewer resources. Although the mandate is directed toward school districts, municipal governments will likely be impacted through local school finance. If school districts do not have sufficient resources to support new media literacy programs, property tax rates and/or levies will need to be increased, or other public programs at the local level will be shortchanged. In the former case, citizens will see the increase in property taxes as a unitary bill (i.e., city, county, and school district's property taxes all combined as one bill), which will shortchange municipal governments' capacity to create new taxes

or increase existing tax rates when other public service needs arise. For the latter case, other public service program priorities will be re-shuffled. Baicker & Gordon (2006) found that, on average, state mandates and funding on local educational programs result in losses of about $51 per capita in other non-education programs.

To mitigate undesirable consequences of cost overrun in complying with the state's media literacy law and to engage in civic development activities along with school districts, local governments may consider some alternatives and/or auxiliary programs in promoting media literacy in addition to formal education and training solely implemented by schools. Local governments' alternative/auxiliary practices are crucial for jurisdictions with limited revenue capacity, as they often face education disparities. When media literacy is added as another educational service responsibility, the disparity, especially in terms of civic development, will be even greater in these districts. Furthermore, due to their larger physical boundaries and authority, local governments tend to have greater potential than school districts in mobilizing political, financial, and social support from the local community.

ALTERNATIVE/AUXILIARY PRACTICES FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS TO PROMOTE MEDIA LITERACY

In addition to providing media literacy through formal education, alternatives and/or auxiliary programs for media literacy education are available. Their descriptions, examples, advantages, and disadvantages are discussed below.

CLEARING HOUSE FOR MEDIA LITERACY FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

Media literacy law and policy have multiple stakeholders in society. Major stakeholders include citizens, youth, media corporations and professionals, parents, elected officials, local private and non-profit organizations, and civil societies. Realizing that they can receive the benefits of this program, these policy stakeholders tend to provide support for its implementation. School districts should take advantage of external funding opportunities and grant availability. This can be achieved by establishing an online clearinghouse that lists potential grants and awards for activities related to media literacy education, such as teacher training, instructional development, curriculum design, and program evaluation.

For example, in 2019, the State of Washington created a $150,000 grant program for large school districts in the 2019–2020 academic year (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.). The grant was awarded to multiple local school districts to develop a shared curriculum and instructional design that can be used across the state. For non-governmental grantors, as an example, the Peggy and Jack Baskin Foundation (n.d.) calls for grant applications in financing media literacy program implementation, specifically in low-income communities with women and gender-expansive populations. This grant is available year-round. Within the State of Illinois, several grants and funding are available. To name just a few, below is a snapshot of grants and funding opportunities available in 2025.

- The Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) created a $13.5 million grant program named the Illinois Digital Equity Capacity (IDEC) Grant. The award ranges from $30,000 to $300,000 for activities tailored toward training and developing citizens' necessary skills in coping with the digital economy. The granting period is between May 2025 and February 2028 (Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity, 2025).

- The Illinois Reading Council (IRC) has awarded grants to local and special interest councils and individual council members for promoting literacy and or/providing professional development opportunities related to reading and writing instruction. The application deadline ranges from May to July each year (Illinois Reading Council, n.d.).

- The Illinois Arts Council (IAC) provides funding for individual artists, arts educators, and 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organizations in Illinois, as well as branches of government entities, including municipalities and public libraries, in implementing projects related to arts education and creative endeavors, potentially incorporating media literacy components (Illinois Arts Council, n.d.).

- ChangeX, a platform connecting local communities to proven ideas and funding, supported by the United Nations Sustainable Development Program, offers a mini-grant of up to $500 for each recipient in developing after-school programs related to digital literacy and media engagement. This mini-grant can support several community initiatives, such as youth participation programs engaging high-school students in local news production (ChangeX, n.d.).

- Act Now Illinois offers funding opportunities for after-school programs, which potentially could include media literacy education. The funding opportunities are year-round (Act Now Coalition, n.d.).

As shown above, funding opportunities exist for media literacy activities in Illinois. Information asymmetry may lead school administrators, teachers, and media professionals to believe that support is unavailable. Piscia & Strahle (2025) report a schoolteacher stating that:

> *"I mean, it's basically an unfunded mandate, right?"*
>
> *"There wasn't really any money put behind it. So, I think if you want a law that has some teeth, there has to be some money because you're gonna need to identify ability, the opportunities for professional development."*

To alleviate the information asymmetry problem, the clearinghouse will act as the central hub for funding opportunity availability and information, including a grant program's purposes, deadline, and application eligibility. For this activity, the local government is a facilitator, arranging and providing information. There will be a cost for this facilitator role, but it should be minimal compared to those of formal education programs. The cost will be incurred through hiring personnel to monitor and maintain information (mainly online); a grant writer may also be added to enhance the likelihood of receiving grants and funding.

While the benefit of this alternative practice is evident in the sense that local governments can act as facilitators rather than implementers in promoting local media literacy, it does not come without disadvantages. Given that grants are awarded to support sponsors' specific goals, local governments should not be distracted by funding opportunities; instead, they should be careful in choosing only the opportunities that are congruent with their own local media literacy goals. Furthermore, some grants, especially those from the upper levels of governments, may require matching funds. In this regard, local governments should ensure that the granted program received through the award does not alter its funding priority, thereby shortchanging other public service programs. Finally, local governments should conduct a full life-cycle cost estimation for every funded media literacy program to ensure that after the funding expires, it will not have to absorb the remaining costs.

LIBRARY-BASED MEDIA LITERACY MODEL

In 2022, approximately a year after the Illinois Media Literacy Law was enacted, the U.S. Department of State issued the *Media Literacy Design Manual*, providing a framework for developing and evaluating media literacy education programs. The goal of the manual is to assist state and local governments in planning and implementing media literacy education policy. Among its recommendations, the U.S. Department of State (2022) suggests the "Library-Based Media Literacy Training" model. In this model, local public libraries, financed mainly by municipal governments, are the main program executors.

To implement this model, municipalities will need to take a leadership role in choosing a library that has sufficient competencies and resources as a center for media literacy programs outside of formal schools. This aims to enhance the cost-effectiveness of program execution, as not all libraries have the same capacities and abilities to attract clients. The following factors should be assessed: (1) the level of political and financial support from constituencies; (2) the accessibility, competencies, and resources of the local libraries; (3) the librarian's motives and initiative for developing and delivering activities with different audiences; and, (4) the librarian's incentive structures. The manual recommends that training programs provided by the chosen library should be adapted to suit the librarian's needs with lower baseline media literacy competencies. This can be done through designing programs that spend more time on basic concepts, integrating pedagogical concepts into librarian training, extending the training session (relative to those provided "as a one unit" in formal school as found above), and finally including practical instruction. Other library-based activities include providing print media, such as a leaflet or brochure, containing key ideas in media literacy, so that library patrons and audiences can readily access them.

Municipal library-based training programs should be co-led by other organizations related to library professionals, including but not limited to local schools, public universities, local media news producers (e.g., National Public Radio), and media professionals. The chosen library should strengthen its librarians' networks with school-based librarians to exchange teaching resources, share program focus, and provide general support. According to the U.S. Department of State's manual, the networking approach not only strengthens media literacy instruction quality but also saves the entire

community's cost in establishing media skills through consistent instructional lessons and shared resources. For this reason, the networking approach reduces cost duplication between school-based programs and library-based programs.

In Finland, the library-based training approach led by municipal governments tends to be a cooperation between the local schools and the public libraries (Kanerva & Oksanen-Sarela, 2023). This approach enhances the consistency of instructional content, focuses on media literacy education for producers (i.e., libraries and schools), and reduces the teaching loads of school personnel. In Illinois, the teaching load challenge is realized by school personnel. Mike Havener, a library media specialist at Springfield High School, shared his experience with media literacy education. He arranges with other teachers to bring their classes to the library so he can offer sessions that cover media literacy. However, he mentioned that he doesn't reach every student with fidelity due to the large number of students.

Municipalities and libraries should publicize the library-based training program's success to mobilize local support from communities and other key stakeholders. In Finland, municipal governments add media literacy promotion activities to their action plans, not only requiring them in local curricula but also in library action plans and municipal culture promotion plans (Kanerva & Oksanen-Sarela, 2023). Furthermore, municipalities may offer small grants to city libraries for media literacy training programs, funding key materials and equipment for future training initiatives. To adopt this practice, municipal governments must become leaders, not only in terms of directing, assigning, and allocating budgetary resources to public libraries, but also in inspiring, navigating, supporting, and networking with other local interest groups and stakeholders.

The main advantage of this practice is that public librarians are often champions for media literacy. Hence, their motivations and commitments to the success of media literacy programs are relatively high. In addition, public libraries are trusted by local communities for disseminating knowledge and information; thus, citizens, library patrons, and clients will be convinced of the necessity of the training programs, resulting in local communities' political and social support. This practice is not without disadvantages. First and foremost, it requires top management support, particularly in allocating budgetary resources for training programs. This will impose some financial burden on municipalities. Still, compared to the formal approach where school

districts are the sole program executors in the community, expenditures for library-based training programs may be a worthwhile investment for human capital development. This is because the training program can be viewed as a proactive approach for civic development, assisting formal school programs, and being more inclusive.

COOPERATION WITH LOCAL UNIVERSITIES AND RELATED ORGANIZATIONS

Once again, for this practice, municipal governments may act as a facilitator, working with local universities and related organizations to implement media literacy education outside of public schools. This is not only to leverage public program resources, but also to engage major local organizations that share a common goal in human capital and regional workforce development. Potential partners for this approach are public and private universities, as well as related agencies such as the local public broadcasting service (PBS). This approach relies mainly on the cooperators' expertise, creativity, and resources. Bulger and Davison (2018) review the best practices of local cooperation in providing media literacy training and development within the United States. The authors assert that these approaches are, by far, practical in developing the youth's critical thinking skills. The examples of the cooperation practices are as follows:

- *Youth Participation:* in this program, local news media outlets engage students in local news production so that they can understand how news is made and distributed. An example of this approach is *PBS NewsHour Student Reporting Labs*, which paired high school students with local PBS stations in California, sponsored by local PBS stations, the University of California, Irvine, and the City of Irvine, California. Program implementers found that engaging youth in the news media production process empowers them to develop critical thinking skills. This is because the students have played the roles of both sides of communication, including the creator and receiver of the information.

- *Teaching, Training, and Curricular Development:* local advocacy groups implement these activities. This is a grassroots effort; there is no standardized curriculum or official funding. For example, the University of Rhode Island and Ithaca College provided platforms called *Media Education Lab* and *Project Look Sharp*, respectively. Platforms are designed to collect citizen input, such as topics teachers should focus on in media literacy courses.

Citizens' input is then distilled and incorporated into the teachers' training programs and curriculum development programs. Under this program, municipalities participate as citizen representatives, providing input regarding the contents and the direction of the media literacy instructional designs. Cities tend to have valuable insights regarding citizens' values and needs.

- *Parental Support:* in this program, parents receive education resources, such as lessons and evaluation tools, from local sponsors, which can be municipal governments or non-governmental organizations. Since parents spend time with young people outside of formal schools, they are helpful in teaching and training them on a day-to-day basis. As an example, the Center for Media Literacy, housed in Temple University, Pennsylvania, provides instructional materials for parents and educators on topics such as news literacy, media literacy, information literacy, and digital citizenship (p. 6). Municipalities cooperate with local universities by dedicating resources to support university programs in exchange for opportunities to shape local citizens' skills in media literacy.

The advantage of cooperation practices lies in sharing common goals among municipalities, local universities, and other agencies to develop human capital. This approach also leverages municipal resources to achieve program goals in collaboration with partners who specialize in media literacy training programs and activities. The disadvantage of this approach is that transactional costs arise from coordinating and managing cooperation. The price includes the time and compensation of municipal personnel, as well as direct spending on programming activities. However, like the other approaches mentioned above, budgetary resources spent on these alternative/auxiliary practices are considered worthwhile as compared to having school districts become the sole program implementer. With school implementation as the sole policy executor, the need to raise new revenue or sacrifice some other public programs to accomplish the media literacy policy's outcome is looming.

CONCLUSION

This research note reports on current media literacy educational practices by Illinois school districts across the state in early 2024. Through open- and closed-ended interview questions, UIS collected information regarding how Illinois high schools have implemented the media literacy law since its enactment

in 2021. Along with information regarding the public schools' current implementation, this article offers a background on media literacy. It also reflects thoughts on the roles and responsibilities of municipal governments, as well as recommends auxiliary programs. Municipal governments might consider adopting alternative practices to promote media literacy, thereby saving costs by not requiring schools to implement the program alone, and creating opportunities for local interest groups, such as universities and public libraries, to mutually shape the future of civic society.

In general, the data and information collected by UIS suggest that schools feel overwhelmed and have diverse implementation approaches, including instructional placement and focus across the state. Given such insights, this research note recommends that municipalities consider taking on a facilitating and leading role in the creation of auxiliary media literacy programs outside of public schools. This article suggests three auxiliary programs, including: (1) creating a clearing house for external grants and funding opportunities to raise more resources for media literacy programs outside of local schools; (2) adopting a public library-based training model to support school districts and reach out to the public in a more inclusive way; and, (3) cooperating with local public universities and related agencies/organizations to take advantage of their expertise, leverage municipal resources, and engage local interest groups more broadly. Given that the crucial benefit of media literacy program finance is to shape future civic society, local governments are major stakeholders in this program. And as such, local governments might want to consider these recommended practices to avoid the need to increase local revenue for media literacy programs, should public schools be the sole implementer. This will catalyze the program outcomes while having a high potential to save costs, especially for local governments located in rural areas facing a declining property tax base.

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BOOK REVIEW

UNDERSTANDING MUNICIPAL FISCAL HEALTH: A MODEL FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN THE USA BY CRAIG S. MAHER, SUNGHO PARK, BRUCE D. MCDONALD III, AND STEVEN C. DELLER (ROUTLEDGE, 2023)

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Municipal government is perhaps the most fascinating level of government to study. Decisions made at city halls often impact people's lives more directly than debates held in far-off state or national capitol buildings. Yet, while this reality places immense demands on municipal governments, it also leaves them in the weakest position, responding to local needs while subordinate to superior governments. Nowhere is this dynamic more evident than in municipal fiscal management, the context in which *Understanding Municipal Fiscal Health: A Model for Local Governments in the USA (UMFH),* by Maher, Park, McDonald III, and Deller (2023) is situated.

What this book brings to the table is an understanding that municipal finance is not simply an accounting activity, but a kaleidoscope of factors, or as Maher et al. (2023) define it, an "open system." Where some may wish to describe municipal finance as a technical exercise, *UMFH* explores complexities that extend beyond the "whats" and into the realm of the "whys." In this sense, *UMFH* provides readers with a more accurate picture of municipal finance than a simple budget office or bench manual.

In essence, what Maher et al. (2023) have done in *UMFH* is apply the concepts of program evaluation to the activity of budgeting at the municipal level. For that, they should be commended. Maher et al. point out that historical academic concepts of municipal fiscal health have often ignored smaller cities, yet their open system concept can be applied to cities of any size. However, it should

not be lost on readers that this approach is very applicable to the practice of governmental budgeting, regardless of the level or structure.

In Chapter 1, Maher et al. (2023) reframe traditional budgetary concepts to fit a program evaluation context. Inputs now become the environments in which municipalities operate, to include socio-economic conditions, external pressures, institutional structures, and internal dynamics. In this context, outputs are the more traditional (and more limited) scope of budgeting, revenue (traditional input), expenditure (traditional output), and debt, familiar to all budgeteers. From this new program evaluation context flows policy decisions and outcomes, and a feedback loop.

Having worked in public budgeting for almost two decades, including six years as a city council member in a small municipality, I find Maher et al.'s (2023) reframing of budgetary concepts to be accurate, necessary, and refreshing. This is what budgeteers actually experience, particularly in small jurisdictions. Revenue does not just magically appear out of nowhere; it is largely a product of the community in which a government is situated. Changes in the business climate or real estate market can and do have major implications for municipal budgets. Likewise, spending does not simply produce benefits; it must be applied appropriately and reviewed, and, when necessary, adjustments must be made. Overall, *UMFH* focuses more on the front end of this equation, though I would have liked more attention to be paid to the expenditure side. Nonetheless, in reframing how budgeteers understand the mechanics of municipal finance—a more holistic approach—*UMFH* sets the stage for a much richer understanding of local governments and the communities they serve.

Chapters 2 and 3 dive deeper into these components of municipal finance and health. The concepts are well thought out and would be useful to new practitioners or students and may also help more seasoned professionals understand municipal finance through a new lens.

Chapter 2 focuses on "inputs" (as defined above). In this chapter, the authors really begin to highlight that municipal finance is as much a reflection of the environment in which the municipality operates as it is a simple accounting of dollars and cents. For example, under the heading "Institutional Settings," Maher et al. (2023) inform readers that municipalities have a lot of independence because of their local autonomy. Nonetheless, Maher et al. argue that "there are

explicit and implicit relationships of interdependence between federal, state, and local governments," and "the divisions among governments, however, are not always clear-cut because of the functional and fiscal interdependence among different levels of government" (2023, p. 29).

Put simply, Maher et al. (2023) highlight that our system of federalism can create duplication and overlap but also leave gaps in responsibility, often leading to confusion. Though written in 2023, this is particularly relevant today, as many municipalities wrestle with what potential restructuring of the federal government under the Donald J. Trump Administration will mean for local governments. Will local governments be asked to do more with fewer resources? Will they be given more resources and fewer restrictions, or will changes simply occur, leaving municipal leaders to react without much guidance? *UMFH* does not provide an answer. Perhaps no one can—federalism has been evolving throughout our history. What *UMFH* does is raise the question and define the issue. By doing so, municipal leaders are left better off, at least insofar as they can expect change and uncertainty in the relationships between different levels of government.

In this same subchapter, Maher et al. (2023) explore the concept of fiscal preemption, discussing Tax and Expenditure Limits (TEL)—state-imposed limits on municipal autonomy. The authors also detail other municipal variables such as home rule, public-private partnerships, municipal government structure (mayor-council, council-manager, etc.), and variations in TEL regimes.

While the concepts introduced in this chapter are appreciated, one drawback is the overuse of data tables and charts. While some charts are helpful and informative, there are several charts noting variables among each of the 50 states, including regional differences. These charts appear more as filler than instructive—they are not general enough to draw broad conclusions and not specific enough to have applications to the reader's unique experience.

In Chapter 3, Maher et al. (2023) focus on "outputs" and present readers with the traditional concepts of budgeting and finance through a municipal lens. This chapter really adds value through the authors' discussion of how municipal finances have changed over time. For example, Maher et al. note that "municipal governments, on average, spent $16.9 per capita in 1972… yet by 2017 that number had grown to $1,170." (2023, p. 46).

These municipal spending figures are in constant 2017 dollars, demonstrating to readers the magnitude of municipal revenues and expenditures' changing landscape. Cities are being called on to do more and must draw on more diverse revenue sources in that pursuit. Maher et al. (2023) also draw a connection between how the size of a municipal population may affect these variables, which seems more useful than prior regional analyses. For example, readers can see from Table 3.8 (p. 66) that income taxes as a share of revenue appear to increase with population, and there is something of an inverse bell curve related to population and intergovernmental transfers. Disappointingly, this chapter is light on discussion of spending effectiveness, what potential feedback loops it can create, and how municipalities should study and evaluate such.

In Chapters 4 and 5, Maher et al. (2023) distinguish this book from other budgeting resources with their focus on fiscal health. These two chapters are perhaps the most valuable in the book. Chapter 4 focuses on methods of assessing a municipality's financial health. Initially, readers may be somewhat put off by the thorough discussion of the history of financial health measures, especially when the chapter begins with the Middle Ages in Europe. However, this robust tracing of fiscal analysis history leads readers to understand that "fiscal health" has no clear definition—it is an ongoing process of continuous improvement.

Readers learn how New York pioneered the concepts of municipal fiscal health monitoring in the United States during the Progressive era of the 1930s. Yet, the New York system failed to warn of New York City's near bankruptcy in the 1970s. This spawned new efforts to develop not just measures of fiscal health, but actual guidelines or tests. Chapter 4 does an excellent job discussing these tests, their flaws, and subsequent efforts to simplify and reform them. For example, Maher et al. (2023) discuss the logic and development of the Financial Trend Monitoring System and how its shortcomings led to the Brown 10-point test, which also led to later reforms.

Just like New York, Maher et al. (2023) give numerous examples of cities (some large, like Philadelphia, others small, like Red Oak, Texas) that appeared to be fiscally healthy but were not, and how these crises spurred reforms and new concepts in municipal fiscal health monitoring. Again, these examples highlight that there is no "right way" to measure fiscal health. Budgeteers need to be adaptive in their assessments of their own

situations. Budgeteers cannot rely on one test or method but need to be vigilant in applying many measurement concepts unique to their situation.

This is the main point of Chapter 4—and much of the book—which makes it somewhat curious that the chapter concludes with a recommended approach to measuring fiscal health, put forward by Maher and others prior to writing *UMFH*. This model relies mostly on ratios (debt per capita, debt-service to revenue, etc.) and is more insularly focused, specifically rejecting the earlier trend in tests to utilize comparative measurements (at least to some degree). This model is relatively simple: 16 measures across four categories. Perhaps the model's greatest value is for smaller municipalities that are not regularly under the microscope of bond and credit rating agencies.

The real-world examples of Chapter 4 feed into the concept of Chapter 5, which deals with assessing fiscal stress. While a short chapter, this chapter is one of the most important in the book and can be summarized as a warning against municipal fiscal complacency. Practitioners and scholars will benefit from this discussion of how external events can often plunge an otherwise financially healthy city into fiscal chaos. Maher et al. (2023) discuss certain stress tests' measures that various states have adopted to identify impending fiscal problems and, if necessary, intervene.

Much like the variances in self-evaluations covered in Chapter 4, states have developed their own unique triggers and interventions. Most measures of fiscal stress revolve in some way around the ratios of income to expenses, debt ratios (both long-term and short-term), and trends of frequent deficits or borrowing. Yet again, one size does not fit all—a set of factors that would put a municipality in conservatorship in one state may not in another. Unlike self-assessments, here, municipalities do not get to choose what to measure.

Chapter 6 is a rather lengthy chapter that discusses current municipal fiscal trends. While it is informative, it is dry and not particularly thought-provoking. Moreover, it would have been better placed after Chapter 3 or Chapter 8. Its placement here disrupts the natural flow from the concepts of Chapter 5 into Chapters 7 and 8.

Chapters 7 and 8 provide some real-world context for how cities and states address municipal fiscal difficulty. Chapter 7 focuses on municipal responses, while Chapter 8 addresses state responses.

Chapter 7 begins with a discussion of Sydney, Nebraska. Sydney is a relatively small town that was dominated by one major employer. The success of that employer directly correlated to the municipal government's fiscal health. As the employer expanded, housing demands and property tax revenues increased. However, the vulnerability of this arrangement became apparent when the employer was acquired by a competitor and slowly left the city. Sydney officials responded by adjusting their budgets as well as seeking to diversify their economy and the revenue streams that fund the government.

Of course, Chapter 7 is not limited to a case study of Sydney. Maher et al. (2023) also explore how municipalities react to signs of fiscal decline. The authors note that there are three components to addressing fiscal stress: identifying the problem, reacting to that problem, and establishing a longer-term solution. Municipalities that successfully navigate fiscal stress, such as Sydney, consider these parameters in a more comprehensive rather than sequential way. Maher et al. posit that municipalities that focus exclusively on disruptions, such as trying to "hold on to" a declining industry or a vacating employer, may not be prepared to address fiscal strain if their preservation strategy fails. It is important to be prepared—municipalities must be just as focused on "what comes next" as they are on "what is going on," and "what can we do about it."

Chapter 8 addresses what happens when states must step in to "right the ship." To highlight this, Maher et al. (2023) begin with Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Much like New York in the 60s, Harrisburg in the early part of the 21st century was consistently regarded as having a strong fiscal position. However, failure to recognize stressors led Harrisburg to the verge of fiscal collapse, with an unsustainable debt position. Once again, Harrisburg highlights the prudence of flexible fiscal monitoring.

In 2010, Harrisburg utilized state law to enter a conservatorship with the State of Pennsylvania. Maher et al. (2023) examine how, by the time states get involved, the situation is dramatically out of hand. Moreover, state interventions often require more severe actions than would have been required earlier on. Further, once a municipality is under state intervention, it cedes to state officials many of the political controls municipal officials once enjoyed. Local control is often only resumed when that state (or court in the case of bankruptcy) is comfortable withdrawing, which can be years longer than municipal officials may have anticipated.

Practitioners would be wise to pursue the courses of action described in Chapter 7 to avoid the situations noted in Chapter 8. The best ways to do that are to use a diversified "open system" of fiscal assessment discussed throughout the book (particularly in Chapter 4) and be cognizant of state standards (as discussed in Chapter 5).

Chapters 9 through 14 provide five different case studies in municipal fiscal stress, all viewed through the lenses of the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Certainly, these case studies provide some level of comparison through their reactions to similar events. Moreover, one can see how the same events can affect different municipalities in unique ways—relying on a military base for economic underpinnings is less disruptive than relying on tourism and a casino. However, these chapters largely deal with the same major national shocks and may not be informative for municipalities dealing with isolated shocks.

It would have been welcome to see more in-depth case studies of fiscal ills not caused by national shocks. Some of that is covered in earlier chapters, Sydney and Harrisburg, for example, but practitioners would benefit from more unique, dedicated case studies.

Chapter 14 distills the concepts of the "open system" approach to fiscal health as discussed throughout the book. Chapter 15 wraps up the book with some concluding remarks. While these two chapters could have been combined, they do no harm as separate entries.

Overall, *UMFH* makes a valuable contribution to the understanding of fiscal health at the municipal level and has applications at other levels of government. City managers, budget professionals, and students hoping to fill those offices in the future will find themselves much better prepared to identify unapparent fiscal stress and adapt to fiscal shocks by having read this book.

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BOOK REVIEW

HOMELESSNESS, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY BY TERRY SKOLNIK (CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2025)

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Homelessness, Liberty, and Property by Terry Skolnik (2025) contributes novel ideas about the state's relationship with and responsibilities toward people experiencing homelessness (PEH). Skolnik argues the state has a *fiduciary duty* to end homelessness and better legitimize the laws governing public property. These claims are not entirely new, but Skolnik's integration of legal-philosophical rationale toward a direct and specific argument presents unique insights into a topic with a broad impact on local governments, local actors, and community members. Skolnik believes the logic underlying these interdisciplinary perspectives demands improving the fiduciary relationship between the state and PEH without sacrificing public property rights. We find this argument strong and well-reasoned, although the book's impact is ultimately diminished by the policy solutions proposed in its final chapter.

This book review will first summarize Skolnik's (2025) philosophical integration toward a new conception of homelessness and the state's duty to address it. We then assess the book's strengths and shortcomings and conclude by interpreting its practical and theoretical implications and its value to municipalities.

Focusing on the United States and Canada, Skolnik (2025) first discusses the scope and impact of homelessness, including its disproportionate prevalence among domestic violence victims, veterans, and people of color. Skolnik then reviews governments' historical regulation of public spaces, which—from feudalistic vagrancy laws to modern-day municipal ordinances prohibiting camping—has largely fallen under the purview of local governance. Local governments are not the book's central level of analysis, but its argument about

the right to conduct basic human behaviors in public spaces is most visible at the municipal level. For example, Skolnik discusses the impact of broken windows theory and its notable translation to practice in New York City, as well as neighborhood-level social control perspectives on the development and refinement of laws relating to homelessness.

Skolnik (2025) then connects these local-level processes and outcomes to constitutional laws governing public property and their effect on PEH. Chapters 1 and 2 provide informative and concise overviews of the legal philosophies used to understand and govern homelessness for readers who may be interested in but unfamiliar with the topic. Skolnik provides preliminary insights from criminology, sociology, and legal philosophy. His connections are well-researched and well-argued, but they are not revelatory to subject-matter experts. These chapters prioritize breadth rather than depth. We find this decision sensible given the breadth of homelessness as a field of study and a societal issue.

Central to Skolnik's (2025) argument is the nonegalitarian impact(s) of public property regulation and disparate outcomes based on the presence or absence of property rights. Those possessing property have access to legal, safe, and private spaces to sleep, sit, and use the bathroom; they also have the legal right to exclude others from conducting the same acts on property they own. Laws governing public property preclude these behaviors, leaving PEH without a safe and legal capacity to engage in essential human acts. This discrepancy allows for substantial interference against PEH as they go about their daily lives, although Skolnik argues this interference is not the quintessential concept demonstrating the state and society's relationship with homelessness.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 synthesize concepts of freedom with the theory of republicanism. Sklonik describes republicanism as "not only a theory of freedom" but also "a theory of government" (p. 14), which prioritizes liberty in the form of freedom from non-domination. From this perspective, the liberty of PEH is restricted not primarily by interference but by domination. Domination can manifest through interference, but also through less direct mechanisms such as political inequality, access restrictions, and the psychological costs of depending on the goodwill of others to conduct biologically necessary acts without breaking the law. Skolnik argues that the republican perspective illuminates the disparate impacts of the lack of property rights. PEH do not

possess private property and are therefore uniquely vulnerable to domination from both fellow citizens (*horizontal domination*) and the state (*vertical domination*).

This book does not suggest solving homelessness by removing or compromising extant property rights. Instead, it describes a new legal and social approach to homelessness that maintains the essential societal roles of private property rights and public property laws. Currently, PEH face disproportionately adverse effects of such regulations because their lack of private property necessitates spending an outsized portion of time on public property and increases the difficulty of conducting necessary behaviors, such as legally sleeping or urinating. Skolnik (2025) argues this imbalance leads to *nonegalitarian coercion*—disproportionate exposure to legal consequences and expansive, mostly invisible police discretion in responding to violations of ordinances governing public property. These consequences include fines, fees, jail time, the loss of a driver's license, and adverse credit actions. Taken together, these punishments lead to what Skolnik terms *punitive entrenchment*, where the law and its punishments reinforce homelessness status. Skolnik's legal perspective is logically consistent, and it identifies specific mechanisms contributing to the cyclical nature of homelessness and criminal justice system contact.

Ultimately, throughout Chapter 7, Skolnik (2025) argues that the state must fulfill its fiduciary duty to PEH *and* protect public property. He believes the state must legitimize public property laws restricting basic human needs by recognizing the lack of culpability of law violators who do not hold private property rights. Instituting a private space for such activities would avoid entrapping individuals in homelessness and would increase their republican freedom from domination. The dimensions of legal legitimacy and republican freedom are mutually reinforcing. Increasing the freedom from domination further legitimizes laws governing public property and facilitates more effective law enforcement. In Chapter 8, Skolnik connects these ideals to public policies regarding shelters and public encampments, explaining how such policies can and cannot contribute to an improved fiduciary relationship between the state and PEH. The strength of this section is its synthesis. Skolnik incorporates several concepts that may appear distinct and develops a strong argument about the governmental duty and ability to end homelessness, as well as the prosocial effects of achieving this outcome.

The book concludes with a discussion in Chapter 9 of policy reforms to enable the state to better execute its fiduciary duty. These suggestions include expanding social safety nets, enhancing access to mental health support, street outreach, emergency shelter and rapid rehousing programs, limiting fines and jail time, and automatic criminal record expungement programs for PEH who violate public property laws. While these policies certainly have value in addressing homelessness and reducing domination, they are broadly discussed and unlikely to offer new insight. Given the strong and innovative synthesis of theory, statute, and practice that Skolnik (2025) provides, we anticipated more novel policy recommendations.

Many of Skolnik's (2025) policy recommendations are widely implemented. For example, he recommends Housing First policies, which emphasize providing housing without preconditions (such as mental health or substance abuse treatment). We support the concept of Housing First and recognize there is no single policy solution to homelessness. However, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD, 2024) has recommended this approach for its Continuum of Care (CoC) program—the largest U.S. federal homelessness services program—since the early 2000s and required it since 2013, yet it has not prevented a recent surge in homelessness. HUD's Point-in-Time count data reported an 18.1% increase in homelessness from 2023 to 2024, following an aggregate increase of 19.2% from 2007 to 2024 (HUD, 2024). Rapid rehousing and emergency sheltering programs have also long been a funding focus of HUD homelessness service grants.

Skolnik's (2025) suggestions might reasonably be interpreted as a call for the expansion of these programs where they exist. However, his recommendations could benefit from an explicit call for such expansion. Still, explicitness would not enhance the novelty of these solutions. Similarly, Skolnik suggests housing-choice vouchers, which are often associated with disproportionate outcomes based on race and source of income (see Freeman, 2012; Tighe et al., 2017, for example), and inclusionary zoning, which is prone to state preemptions (Goodman & Hatch, 2023). Overall, these interventions have reliably fallen short and hold little additional value without specific suggestions to improve their implementation. Skolnik's argument would be improved by clarifying whether he favors these types of policies at the local, state, or national level, to what extent he believes they are possible without federal government regulation in the United States and Canada, and how they may be impacted by economic market forces. Despite the shortcomings of his practical policy

recommendations, we find value in Terry Skolnik's contribution. He explores a multidimensional topic through the interdisciplinary lens it demands.

Homelessness, Liberty, and Property (2025) blends normative philosophical arguments, history, and scholarly evidence to produce a novel and valuable perspective on how law and society might better address homelessness. It yields insight into the persistence and increasing severity of homelessness despite significant policy attention. We find the book succinct, insightful, and digestible for scholars, policymakers, practitioners, and citizens interested in the topic, including those working at the local level.

Readers seeking an in-depth discussion of the theoretical orientations of homelessness, public perceptions of homelessness, the role of intersectionality in homelessness mitigation or proliferation, the influence of capitalism on homelessness, an explanation of creative alternatives to prevent homelessness, or a wider international focus will want to seek this information from other sources. Housing and homelessness scholars, however, might consider how Skolnik's inductive theorizing could lead to deductive hypothesis testing. Practitioners, students, and community members seeking an introduction to the laws affecting homelessness, as well as a compelling, novel approach to analyzing the relationships between the state, property, and PEH, will find it here.

Although municipal actors are not the book's focal audience, it includes lessons worthy of attention among local actors. Specifically, Skolnik (2025) argues in favor of a republicanist perspective of government, which is founded upon ubiquitous freedom from domination. In the context of homelessness, this freedom applies most notably at the local level. As Skolnik discusses, municipal ordinances prohibiting unauthorized camping have become increasingly popular and impose both vertical and horizontal domination on people experiencing homelessness. Skolnik argues that municipalities should combat homelessness by limiting or removing restrictions on biologically necessary actions that disproportionately, if not exclusively, affect PEH when a given community lacks sufficient shelter space and housing availability for its population.

Local contexts vary considerably in their strengths, needs, population sizes and demographics, policymaking processes, and political ideologies. For example, Skolnik's (2025) recommendation to bolster emergency shelter systems to support the well-being of people who fall into homelessness while

working toward longer-term, permanent housing solutions is logical and aligns with extant literature, though the book's broader scope risks overlooking the differences between municipalities. As discussed by Colburn and Aldern (2022), the need to bolster shelter capacity is much greater in Los Angeles than it is in New York City, and advancing general theories or policies across governmental levels may lead to mismatches that proliferate the problem. Local actors reading this book are well-served to consider the unique challenges of their environments and their relation to Skolnik's larger argument regarding the collective duty to end homelessness rather than fixate on the specific policies suggested.

One specific challenge to be considered is the presence of political will to address homelessness. Recent success in significantly reducing veteran homelessness (HUD, 2024) suggests that policies to reduce homelessness are currently operational, but comparable investment in the broader population is lacking. Altering public perceptions and fostering a desire to end homelessness is most feasible at the local level. Increasing engagement among government actors, community members, homeowners, renters, and people experiencing homelessness may dispel misconceptions of homelessness as an individual-level issue, illuminate shortcomings of extant policies, and shift discourse toward actionable solutions.

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