

Intergovernmental Issues in Indiana: 1999 IACIR Survey

by

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Indiana Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations

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Intergovernmental Issues in Indiana 1999 IACIR Survey

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Intergovernmental Issues in Indiana (1999) is the third in a series of periodic surveys of elected officials designed to help the Indiana Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (IACIR) and the Indiana General Assembly understand the issues that are important to local governments. The 1999 IACIR survey included 27 questions and addressed a number of issues that were included in previous IACIR surveys or National League of Cities surveys, including local conditions and services, workforce development and employment, the relationship between school corporations and other local governments, local government finance, and responsibility for the provision of services. The survey also addressed "hot topics" affecting local governments currently, including methods of contacting state government, Y2K, annexation, planning and zoning, the 2000 Census, and information technology.

Methods and Response Rate

A mail survey was administered to 1,381 officeholders. Fifty-one (51) percent were returned. The sample population included all members of the Indiana General Assembly, county council presidents, county commission presidents, mayors, town council presidents, and school board presidents, as well as a sample of township trustees. Response rates varied by type of officeholder; township trustees had the highest response rate at 68 percent and state representatives had the lowest, 35 percent.

Findings

▪ *Officials Optimistic About the Futures of Communities*

More than 80 percent of officials indicated that they were optimistic about the future directions of their communities.

▪ *Most Community Services Believed to Meet Needs*

In assessing current levels of services relative to community needs, more than 75 percent of officials rated their services as good or very good.

▪ *Infrastructure, Economic Conditions, Affordable Housing and Education Quality Most Important Issues for Action*

A majority of elected officials indicated that conditions are stable within their communities. They reported improvements in Police-community Relations, Economic Conditions, Infrastructure, and Parks and Open Space during both the previous twelve months and the past five years. They expressed concern that conditions related to Youth crime, Substance abuse, Affordable housing, Gangs, Economic Conditions, Cable TV, and Infrastructure had deteriorated during the previous five years. They also believed that Cable TV service had deteriorated during the previous year. They identified Infrastructure, Economic Conditions, Affordable Housing, and Educational Quality as the most important issues to address over the next two years.

Economic Conditions and Infrastructure are identified as both improving and deteriorating. Both also are listed as priorities for action in the next two years. This likely reflects the critical nature of these issues and the variation in conditions faced by local communities.

- ***Prospects for Job Growth Considered Mixed***

Respondents reported mixed quality in terms of local employment prospects. Forty-nine percent reported prospects as good or very good; 51 percent reported them as fair or poor. Town officials indicated more often than other officeholders that the prospect for employment within their communities was poor.

- ***Retraining Resources Considered Lacking***

Most respondents reported that job-training resources within their communities were adequate but that retraining resources were inadequate. Town and township officials, however, reported more often than any other officeholders that training resources also were inadequate.

The identification of Economic Conditions generally as both improving and deteriorating further underscores the critical nature of economic and workforce development and the variation in conditions faced by local governments.

- ***Concern Expressed Over School Funding***

Funding various programs and services, particularly those required by the state and federal governments, pose challenges for local governments. Respondents were especially concerned about school funding. When asked about the most effective measures for local government finance reform, respondents chose Eliminate school funding from the property tax, Reform assessment practices, and Transfer welfare funding from local to state most often. To improve the local assessment process, respondents suggested education, elimination of elected assessors for small townships, and the restructuring of the Indiana State Board of Tax Commissioners to provide more effective training and assistance. Respondents generally favored continuation of tax increment financing and tax abatement as local economic development tools. School board presidents and township trustees were less supportive than respondents as a whole.

- ***State Customer Service Considered Satisfactory***

The Lt. Governor's office is studying options to improve customer service, particularly how to better serve citizens and local governments that contact state agencies with inquiries or problems. When asked about their previous contacts with state agencies, the majority of respondents were satisfied with their contact regardless of the type of contact. The methods of contact most often used were direct phone contact with a specific agency and referral from another agency. This probably reflects that most officials know or have an idea about which agency can best respond to their request or inquiry. When asked which method of contact they would prefer if they were unaware of the appropriate agency, most answered either an information specialist or a switchboard. Because the state information center is currently the method used least by local officials, augmentation of this function or addition of an information specialist function may require significant marketing and publicity to make them aware of the new service.

- ***Room for Growth in Use of Information Technology***

Respondents report moderate success in most areas of information technology included in the survey. The weakest area, according to these survey results, is in using information technology as a means of communication between citizens and government.

- ***Mixed Participation in Census Programs***

At the end of 1999, Y2K and census issues were among the issues faced by local communities. At the time of the survey, respondents indicated that most communities were preparing for technical failures that could result from equipment using a two-digit date format. Most officials indicated their communities had participated in the Boundary and Annexation Survey that establishes boundaries for the decennial census count. Less than half said that they had established complete count committees to promote citizen participation in the census.

- ***Communities Continue to Annex***

The IACIR published a study in 1998 reporting the number of annexations that occurred in 1996 and 1997. The survey asked municipal officials to report annexation activity for 1998 and 1999. The responses for 1998 reflect an increase in the number of communities that passed annexation legislation. The responses for 1999 show a precipitous decline from the previous three years. Both the increase for 1998 and the decrease in 1999 may be the result of the general prohibition against annexation in the year preceding a decennial census.

- ***Support Shown for Intergovernmental Cooperation***

Most officials, particularly school board presidents, were optimistic about the working relationship between local government and schools. Respondents also were asked to parse government responsibilities as primarily local, state, or shared responsibility. Respondents indicated most often that correction, health care, and welfare should be primarily the responsibility of state government. Drinking water, wastewater, police, fire, and emergency management services, and property tax assessment should be primarily the responsibility of local government. Other functions, like courts, economic development, workforce development, education, streets and roads, and tax collections should be shared responsibilities. Officials reported mandates regarding local tax levels, welfare funding, correction, health, and courts as having the most significant impact. Respondents reported environment, welfare, highways, court, health and safety (OSHA) and the American Disabilities Act as the most significant federal mandates.

Intergovernmental relations between the local, state, and federal levels will continue to be important in providing services to citizens, and improvements in these relationships are an ongoing process. As mentioned above, the most important issues to address in the next two years were: Infrastructure, Economic conditions, Affordable housing, and Educational quality. These issues are categories respondents said should be responsibilities shared between state and local government. This result further emphasizes the need for good intergovernmental cooperation and communication.

Introduction

Intergovernmental Issues in Indiana (1999) is the third in a series of periodic surveys of elected officials designed to help the Indiana Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (IACIR) and the Indiana General Assembly understand the issues that are important to local government. The 1999 survey was sent to legislators and officials from counties, townships, cities, and towns. At the request of the IACIR membership, the survey also was distributed to school boards.

The IACIR conducted similar surveys in 1996 and 1997. The original survey was modeled on periodic surveys of local elected officials conducted by the National League of Cities (NLC). The most recent edition of the NLC survey (January 1998) is documented in *The State of America's Cities: The Fourteenth Annual Opinion Survey of Municipal Elected Officials*. The 1999 IACIR survey included 27 questions and addressed a number of issues that were included in previous IACIR surveys or the NLC surveys, including local conditions and services, workforce development and employment, the relationship between school corporations and other local governments, local government finance, and responsibility for the provision of services. It addressed "hot topics" affecting local governments in 1999, including methods of contacting state government, Y2K, annexation, planning and zoning, the 2000 Census, and information technology.

This report summarizes the results of the 1999 IACIR survey. Following this introduction, the survey methodology and results are presented. National results as well as results from previous IACIR surveys are compared with the results of the current Indiana study when appropriate. The report closes with selected conclusions. For reference, the survey instrument, results by office, and additional comments from the respondents are provided as appendices.

Methodology

The survey process included four steps: development of the questionnaire, selection of sample populations, administration of the survey, and coding and analysis of results.

Questionnaire Development

The questionnaire was developed using the two previous IACIR questionnaires as a basis. Several questions were repeated to allow comparisons over time. Commission staff consulted with commission members regarding current issues for inclusion in the 1999 questionnaire. The survey instrument is provided in Appendix A.

Selection of Sample Population

The survey was administered to 1,381 officeholders (Table 1). The sample population included all members of the Indiana General Assembly, county council presidents, county commission presidents, mayors, town council presidents, and school board presidents, as well as a sample of township trustees. The sample population for township trustees consisted of 184 trustees, two trustees from each county. One trustee assessor and one trustee within each county were randomly selected from the list of each group in each county, using a random number generator. Names and addresses of the various officeholders were obtained using printed directories (Indiana General Assembly) or lists provided by the Indiana Department of Education, Indiana Association of Cities and Towns, Association of Indiana Counties, and Indiana Township Association.

Administration of Survey

The survey was administered by mail according to procedures recommended by Dillman (1978). Cover letters explaining the purpose of the survey, the questionnaires, and business reply envelopes were sent to all officials except township officials September 14, 1999, and to township officials September 21, 1999. Follow-up postcards were sent to all officials except township officials September 21, 1999, and to township officials September 28, 1999. All officials who had not yet responded were sent a replacement questionnaire October 5, 1999. Fifty-one percent (698) of officeholders returned surveys. Response rates are analyzed in greater detail in a subsequent section.

Coding and Analysis

All questionnaires were returned to the Center for Urban Policy and the Environment, staff to the IACIR. The results were coded in SPSS[®] (Statistical Package of Social Sciences) and checked for accuracy. All analyses were completed using statistical routines in either SPSS[®] or Excel[®] (spreadsheet software).

A few respondents returned questionnaires that were blank or partially completed. Questionnaires with at least responses to questions on the first several pages were coded and included in the results and analyses.

All respondents did not complete all questions. In order to account for nonresponses to specific questions and questions addressed to selected officeholders, the number of respondents is provided within the table or figure for each question.

Several questions provided respondents with the option of providing a written "other." In cases when these responses closely matched one option within the list provided, the response was grouped with that option. Interpretation is noted in Appendix C and the results section as appropriate.

Survey Results

The results of the survey are presented below in the order in which the questions appeared in the survey instrument. Generally, the responses from all offices are combined except in a few cases when the responses provided by one type of officeholder deviated from the remainder. For reference, Appendix B provides responses by office.

Response Rates

Of 1,381 surveys mailed, 698 were returned. The 51 percent total response rate compares favorably with the 1996 IACIR survey in which 375 of the 1,025 surveys were returned (37 percent). However, the 1999 response rate represents a drop in participation from 1997 (721 of 1,174 surveys returned, or 61 percent).

Question 1 addressed the office held by each respondent. Table 1 shows the number of surveys sent and returned by office held by the respondent. Thirty-three respondents indicated *other*. These responses were assigned to one of the eight categories based on the level and branch of government they represented, and are listed in the right-hand column of the table. For example, two respondents specified *Township trustee/assessor* as their office. These responses were coded as *Township Trustee*. Response rates varied by office. Township trustees had the highest response rate at 68 percent and state representatives had the lowest, 35 percent.

Table 1: Response Rates by Office (Question 1)

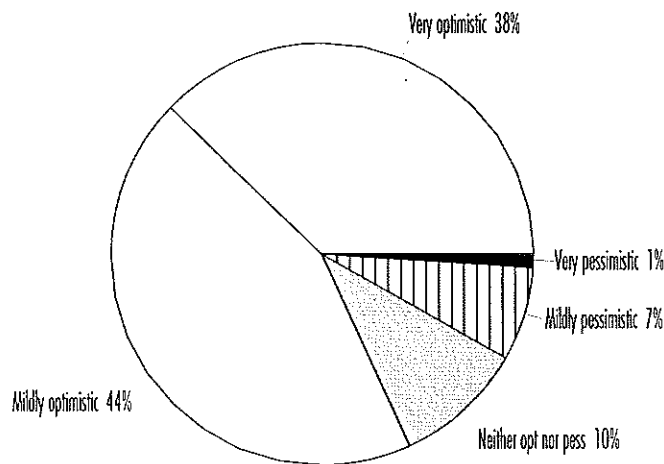
Office	Returned	Mailed	Rate	Included <i>Others</i> (number of respondents)
Senator	23	50	46%	
Representative	35	100	35%	
County Council President	56	92	61%	County Council (1)
County Commission President	55	92	60%	County Treasurer (1)
Mayor	71	116	61%	City Council (1), City Operations Manager (1)
Town Council President	197	451	44%	Town Council (10), Clerk-Treasurer (8), Town Clerk (1), Town Manager (2)
Township Trustee	125	184	68%	Township Trustee/Assessor (2)
School Board President	132	296	45%	School Board Member (1), School Superintendent (4), School Board Vice President/past president (1)
No response	4			
Total	698	1,381	51%	

Local Conditions and Services

Questions 2- 7 addressed local conditions and services. Question 2 addressed local conditions generally. When asked, *How do you feel about the general direction in which your community is heading?*, more than 80 percent of survey respondents said they were optimistic, representing a slight drop from the two previous surveys (86 percent in 1997 and 91 percent in 1996)(Figure1). Conversely, however, a lower percentage of respondents also reported feeling pessimistic than in previous years. Eight percent were pessimistic about the future of their community in 1999, whereas 14 percent and 9 percent were pessimistic in 1997 and 1996, respectively. In 1999, survey respondents were offered *Neither optimistic nor pessimistic* as a choice for the first time, which could explain the differences in results.

The only group of officeholders to vary far from this range was township trustees. Only 65 percent of trustees responding were optimistic and 17 percent were pessimistic. This group also selected *Neither optimistic nor pessimistic* (18 percent) most often.

Figure 1: Feelings About the General Direction the Community is Heading (Question 2; n=599)



Source: Indiana Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations 1999

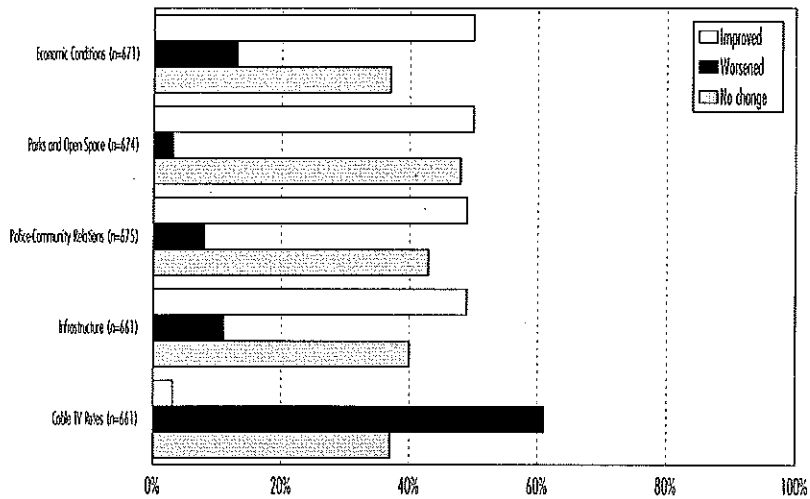
Questions 3 – 6 queried officeholders about the status of 25 community issues divided into five general categories: Health, Public Safety, Economics, Local Services, and Community Quality of Life. Question 3 asked specifically about whether conditions had improved, worsened, or not changed over the last year (Table 2). Generally, respondents reported no change in these conditions in their communities over the last 12 months. In only six of the 25 listed items did the percentage of respondents reporting *no change* fall below 50 percent. Even then, *no change* was the response selected most often (Unemployment – 49 percent) or second most often.

More respondents described their communities as *improved* in four of the five conditions for which *no change* was not the most common answer (*Police-community relations* – 49 percent, *Economic conditions* – 50 percent, *Infrastructure* – 49 percent, and *Parks and open space* – 50 percent)(Figure 2). The only category for which most respondents reported that conditions had worsened in their community was *Cable TV rates* (61 percent). In 1997 and 1996 more respondents also reported a worsening in *Cable TV rates* (57 and 61 percent, respectively). These results correspond with the national results, in which 72 percent of the respondents reported a worsening in this condition.

Table 2: How Conditions Have Changed in the Last 12 Months (Question 3)

		Improved	Worsened	No Change
Health	AIDS (n=629)	8%	4%	88%
	Healthcare (n=653)	32%	9%	59%
	Substance Abuse (n=652)	12%	26%	62%
	Teen Pregnancy (n=649)	17%	12%	71%
Public Safety	Gangs (n=646)	11%	20%	69%
	Police-Community Relations (n=675)	49%	8%	43%
	Violent Crime (n=664)	18%	9%	73%
	Youth Crime (n=668)	13%	29%	57%
	School Violence (n=667)	14%	13%	73%
Economics	Corporate Responsibility (n=654)	28%	10%	62%
	Economic Conditions (n=671)	50%	13%	37%
	Labor Responsibility (n=645)	21%	10%	68%
	Unemployment (n=668)	44%	7%	49%
	Workforce Development (n=649)	34%	6%	59%
Local Services	Cable TV Rates (n=661)	3%	61%	37%
	Infrastructure (n=661)	49%	11%	40%
	Solid Waste Management (n=671)	37%	10%	53%
Community Quality of Life	Race-Ethnic Relations (n=665)	14%	6%	80%
	Air Quality (n=665)	13%	7%	80%
	Water Quality (n=670)	24%	9%	67%
	Poverty (n=664)	20%	8%	72%
	Vitality of Neighborhoods (n=667)	34%	8%	58%
	Educational Quality (n=663)	39%	8%	53%
	Affordable Housing (n=672)	27%	21%	52%
Parks and Open Space (n=674)	50%	3%	48%	

Figure 2: Conditions That Have Changed Most Over Last 12 Months (Question 3; n=689)



Source: Indiana Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations 1999

In Question 4, officials were asked to choose the three conditions that had deteriorated the most in their community during the past five years (Table 3). As mentioned above, some respondents provided other responses outside the list of identified community issues. Where appropriate, decisions were made to include answers among the listed choices. Appendix C lists the *other* responses given by respondents and to which condition they were assigned for analysis. Also, some officials used the five broad categories (Health, Public Safety, Economics, Local Services, and Community Quality of Life) rather than the more specific conditions listed. These are reported as separate categories.

Table 3: Percent of Respondents Ranking Condition as One of the Three That Have Deteriorated the Most in the Last 5 Years (Question 4; n=561)

Health	Health (General)	1%
	AIDS	2%
	Healthcare	8%
	Substance Abuse	25%
	Teen Pregnancy	7%
Public Safety	Public Safety (General)	3%
	Gangs	13%
	Police-Community Relations	6%
	Violent Crime	7%
	Youth Crime	25%
Economics	School Violence	9%
	Economics (General)	1%
	Corporate Responsibility	8%
	Economic Conditions	12%
	Labor Responsibility	5%
	Unemployment	6%
	Workforce Development	5%

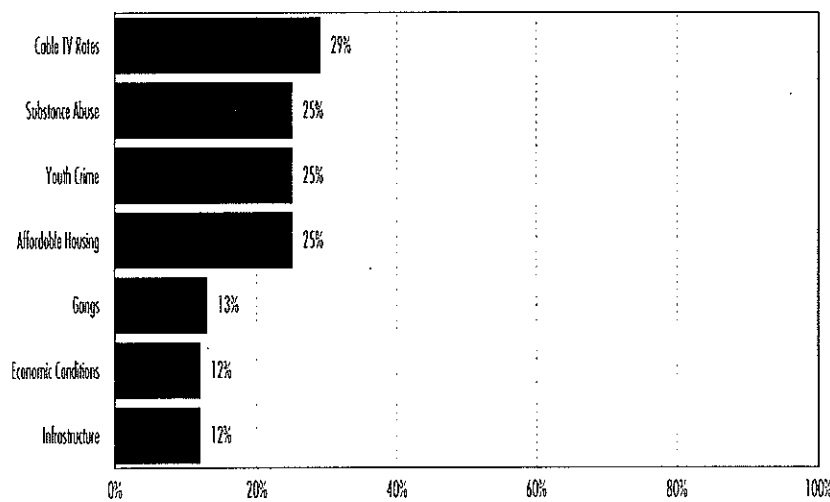
Table 3: Percent of Respondents Ranking Condition as One of the Three That Have Deteriorated the Most in the Last 5 Years (Question 4; n=561) (continued)

Local Services	Local Services (General)	2%
	Cable TV Rates	29%
	Infrastructure	12%
	Solid Waste Management	8%
Community Quality of Life	Community Quality of Life (General)	1%
	Race-Ethnic Relations	5%
	Air Quality	6%
	Water Quality	7%
	Poverty	6%
	Vitality of Neighborhoods	7%
	Educational Quality	8%
	Affordable Housing	25%
	Parks and Open Space	2%
	Other	1%

The conditions that respondents said had deteriorated the most in the last five years were: *Cable TV rates*, *Youth crime*, *Substance abuse*, and *Affordable housing* (Figure 3). The respondents selected these four conditions nearly twice as often as any other. More than ten percent of respondents also indicated that *Gangs*, *Economic Conditions*, and *Infrastructure* had deteriorated. *Youth crime* and *Substance abuse* also were in the top three in 1997 and 1996.

Several officials either stated that none of the conditions had deteriorated, that they did not have enough information to make this judgment, that their community was too small for any of the items to be relevant to them, or did not specify any items for this question. All of these surveys were grouped together for this question as *no response*.

Figure 3: Conditions that Have Deteriorated Most in the Last Five Years (Question 4; n=561)



Source: Indiana Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations 1999