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# **PROBING THE LIMITS OF COUNTY REFORM IN AN ERA OF SCARCITY: A NATIONAL SURVEY OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATORS AND EXECUTIVES**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Modern county government is beginning to display the achievements of a reform movement that began a century ago. While municipal reform progressed rapidly, spurred on by the missionary zeal of a few dedicated reformers, change in county government has been sluggish, apparently ensnared in confusion over the nature of county government and indifference concerning its importance. In recent times, however, the increased complexity of local government generally, suburban growth, and the need for service consolidation have generated renewed interest in county reform (Snider, 1952, Duncombe, 1966, Cape, 1967, Murphy, 1970, ACIR, 1982, Jeffery, Salant, and Boroshok, 1989, DeSantis, 1989).

This research effort seeks to update county reform efforts by examining the current status of county government management and evaluating the prospects for further reform. The primary method is a mail survey of county administrators and executives. While the study can only be considered exploratory, it offers some insight into an area where scholarly attention has been sparse.

## **ROOTS OF COUNTY REFORM**

Probably the most quoted author on the subject of county government is Henry Gilbertson (1917) who, cynically though probably rightly, referred to county government as "the 'dark' continent" of

American politics Interestingly, Gilbertson wrote his book at the urging of Richard Childs, one of the key proponents of the municipal reform and the council-manager plan of government In a more obscure publication, Childs (1926) referred to county government as the "plague spot of American politics" and lamented the lack of professional county management

Critics of county government have focused their most ardent attacks on the commission form of government (Gilbertson, 1917, Childs, 1926, Snider, 1952), the "oldest" and "most traditional" county organizational structure (DeSantis, 1989: 59), which relies on an executive board with from three to five members who share authority The lack of a competent chief executive and fragmented authority have been commonly noted failings As Childs (1926: 3) stated, "As a form of government--if indeed so formless and ramshackle a thing can be said to be a form--it is distinguished from customary practice in other jurisdictions by the lack of any executive "

Although the pace of county government reform has been slow in comparison to municipal government, progress has been made toward alleviating some of the more glaring weaknesses For example, many modern county governments have abandoned the commission form of government and adopted forms similar to those commonly found in municipalities These counties typically possess either an administrator who serves at the pleasure of a legislative body or an executive who is elected at large and shares power with a legislative body Appointed administrators and elected executives typically possess significant control over budget development and implementation, the power to hire and fire department heads, and the authority to recommend policy to the legislative body (Jeffery, Salant, and Boroshok, 1989, DeSantis, 1989)

County governmental forms have yet to achieve the level of uniformity found in municipal governments but many authors have made clear distinctions between counties with traditional commission governments and those that have made the transition to the council-administrator and the council-elected executive forms (Cape, 1967, Zeller, 1975, DeSantis, 1989) At present, the most complete data base on county governmental forms is maintained by the National Association of Counties (NAC), and this data base was used by the present study to identify all of the appointed county administrators and elected county executives in the nation These individuals can be expected to possess a unique perspective on the progress of county reform because they play a prominent leadership role in

approximately one-third of the nation's counties and because the counties where they serve tend to be highly urbanized and contain the majority of the nation's population <sup>1</sup>

The appearance of centralized authority in county governments clearly marks a watershed in the history of county government reform but does not assure that the task has been completed. This study will explore the current status of reform efforts by seeking the viewpoints of some of the nation's most powerful county leaders. The issues covered by the survey were drawn from the literature on local government management and cover a number of areas where additional reforms could be expected

### AN AGENDA FOR FURTHER REFORM

With only a small amount of crystal ball gazing, three main areas can be identified where energies for county reform might best be directed, which will be termed intergovernmental relations, the enhancement of internal management capacity, and professional development. Support for the importance of each of these areas can be found in the local government literature. Counties are like other units of local government in that they are "essentially creatures of the states" (DeSantis, 1989: 56). Increased authority for changes in structure, functional responsibility or fiscal administration all require state approval (Duncombe, 1966, Cape, 1967, Zeller, 1975, ACIR, 1982, Jeffery, Salant, and Boroshok, 1989, DeSantis, 1989). The speed of change has led some to charge that the states have perpetuated a "stage-coach form of county government" (Cape, 1967: 16) which fails to meet "areawide needs" (ACIR, 1982: 240).

While the very existence of county administrators and executives testifies to increased county autonomy, there is evidence that these changes fail to address the fundamental problems in the relationship between states and counties. Waugh (1988), for example, demonstrated that the directors of state county associations harbored "distrust" of state government which seemed to result from the perception that state governments have failed to offer adequate financial support for county governments. In Waugh's view, the New Federalism initiated by the Reagan administration placed counties in a vulnerable position and created a need for increased state leadership. It is likely that these pressures have only added to those caused by societal changes and the movement of large segments of the population from urban cities into the once rural counties.

Given the importance of the relationship between states and counties, it is not possible to discuss the improvement of county management without some reference to the role of the states in granting the necessary authority for self-government and as a funding source. To a great extent, further county reform would be impossible without state cooperation.

The use of management tools and skills in county governments has received little direct attention but authors such as Sanford (1967) and Elazar (1974) have emphasized the importance of county management capacity. Also, survey evidence on association directors from Waugh (1988) and county officials (Streib and Waugh, 1989) indicates that county governments highly prize their level of management capacity.

The minimal attention to county governments contrasts sharply with efforts to assess and improve municipal management capacity (Rapp and Patitucci, 1977, Gargan, 1981, Mead, 1986) and foster expanded use of municipal management tools (Hatry, 1981, Poister and McGowan, 1984, Streib and Poister, 1989, Poister and Streib, 1989). Though it could be argued that much of the work on municipal governments can be easily transferred to county governments, the lack of direct references to county government and the special challenges found within the county government environment attests to the fact that county government management capacity is in need of increased attention. It is reasonable to believe that management capacity is an area of county government reform which will generate increased interest in the future.

### *Professional Development*

Municipal government has been frequently praised for the level of managerial skill which has developed, primarily as a result of the city manager plan of government (Stillman, 1985, Denhardt, 1985, Newland, 1989) since the early days of the municipal reform movement (White, 1927, Ridley and Nolting, 1923, Stone, Price, and Stone, 1940, Mosher, 1940). While it has been noted by a number of authors that local government management does constitute a profession (Bollens and Ries, 1969, Kline and Blanchard, 1973, Schott, 1976, Ammons and King, 1982, 1984), it does not meet standards such as those developed by Frederick Mosher and Richard Stillman (1977: 632) who defined a profession as

a more or less specialized and purposive field of human activity which requires some specialized education or training (though this may be acquired on the job), which offers a career of life's work, and which enjoys a relatively high status in society. It normally aspires to a social, not selfish, purpose. Usually, but not always, it requires a degree or credential of some kind. Often its members join in a professional organization, local, state or national, which enunciates standards and ethics of professional performance, sometimes with powers of enforcement.

To date, no studies have been conducted of the extent to which county executives and administrators meet existing definitions of professionalism, but it is likely that county managers will follow in the footsteps of their counterparts in city governments, suggesting that concern for county government professionalism is likely to increase.

## METHOD

A series of questionnaire items dealing with issues relevant to county management reform were developed during the Winter and Spring of 1989. Making use of a computerized address list provided by the National Association of Counties (NAC), the questionnaire was mailed to all of the county executives and administrators in the nation during the Summer and Fall of 1989. To insure that all respondents were actually county executives or administrators, the survey required both the name and title of the responding individual. All respondents were matched with the original mailing list and phone calls were used to settle any questionable responses. The responses of deputies and assistants were used only if the responding individuals worked directly under the administrator or executive and possessed significant responsibilities. A total of 598 usable surveys were returned, which is 51 percent of the total population of 1169.

Given the fact that the distribution of county administrators and executives varies dramatically across the nation, it is especially important to establish that the respondents are representative of the total population. Table 1 compares the survey respondents with the national distribution of county administrators and county executives across different population groupings and geographic regions. As the table shows, the survey respondents closely match the total population on these important variables, although the response rate was slightly lower for administrators and executives in counties with

TABLE 1  
SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDING COUNTIES

	ADMINISTRATORS		EXECUTIVES	
	Overall Total	Total Responding	Total	Total Responding
<b>Subgroup Totals</b>	<b>1169</b>	<b>389</b>	<b>383</b>	<b>209</b>
<b>Population</b>				
Over 1 Million	18	9	8	5
500,000-999,999	46	17	23	13
250,000-499,999	70	34	20	17
100,000-249,999	138	65	25	23
50,000-99,999	213	82	45	27
UNDER 50,000	684	182	262	124
		(53.6%)	(68.4%)	(59.3%)
<b>Regions,*</b>				
Northeast	83	22	28	25
		(7.0%)	(7.3%)	(11.9%)
North Central	133	69	18	13
		(14.6%)	(8.6%)	(6.2%)
South	745	214	313	149
		(54.9%)	(81.7%)	(71.2%)
West	208	79	24	15
		(23.4%)	(6.2%)	(7.1%)
Missing		5		7
		(1.2%)		(3.3%)

\*Geographic regions: Northeast - Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont; North Central - Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin; South - Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia; West - Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.

populations under 50,000 and among county executives in the South. The existence of only minimal differences suggests that the respondents to the survey are representative of the total population of county administrators and executives.

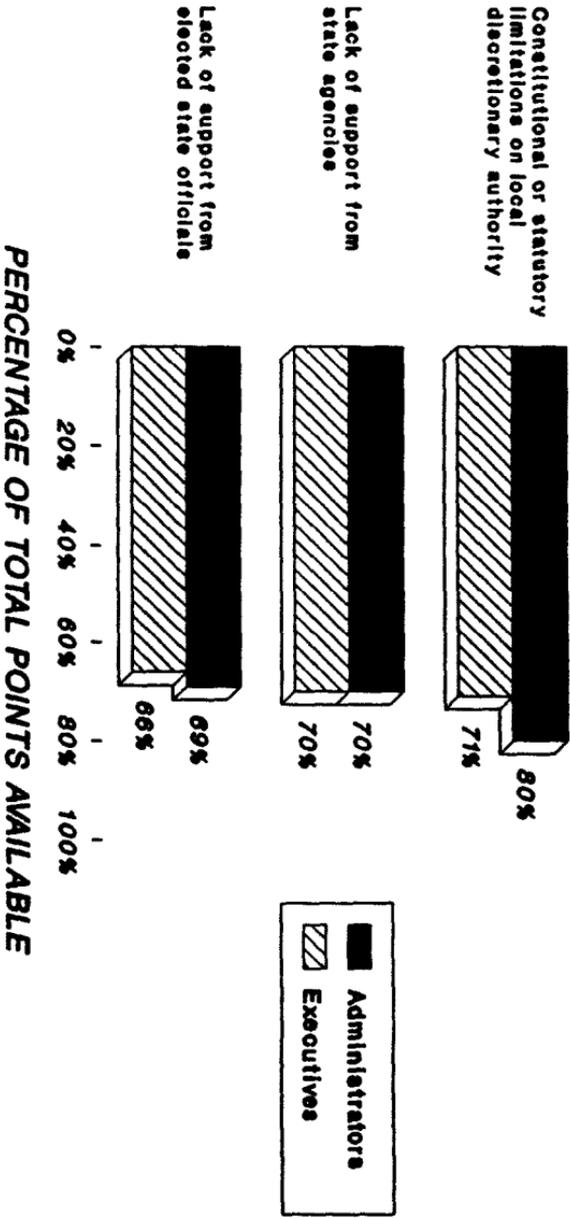
## FINDINGS

The respondents were presented with a series of statements dealing with county government management and asked to assign values from one for "little or no importance to your county" to five for "great importance to your county." The points for each statement were summed and then divided by the total number of points available for each statement (which varied with the response rate and the type of respondent). The resulting score obtained for each statement can be interpreted as a percentage of the total available points and the higher the number of points, the greater the percentage of the total available points, and the higher the number of points, the greater the importance of a particular statement. The use of percentages facilitates comparisons between the administrators and executives.

On the whole, the respondents assigned the highest level of importance to statements dealing with grants of authority, state-county relations or financial matters. The findings strongly convey a picture of county government struggling for the legal authority and financial resources to meet perceived local needs. The fundamental need for increased resources cuts across all three areas of the agenda for reform.

The pressures created by limited grants of authority from the states stand out clearly in Figure 1 which shows that the administrators gave 80% of the available 1,860 points to the statement dealing with the importance of limits on local authority. This is the highest score received on any statement from all three areas of the agenda for reform. The executives displayed strong concern but gave this statement only 71% of the total 1,005 points available. The remaining two statements in the figure indicate that the respondents also gave high importance to a lack of support from state agencies and a lack of support from state officials, with both groups giving at least 65% of the available points to these statements. Overall, these findings are consistent with arguments that pressures of New Federalism (Waugh, 1988; Waugh and Streib, 1990) and population shifts (Jeffery, Salant, and Boroshok, 1989; DeSantis, 1989) have increased

FIGURE 1  
IMPORTANCE RANKINGS GIVEN BY ADMINISTRATORS AND EXECUTIVES  
FOR STATEMENTS DEALING WITH INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS



**county responsibilities**

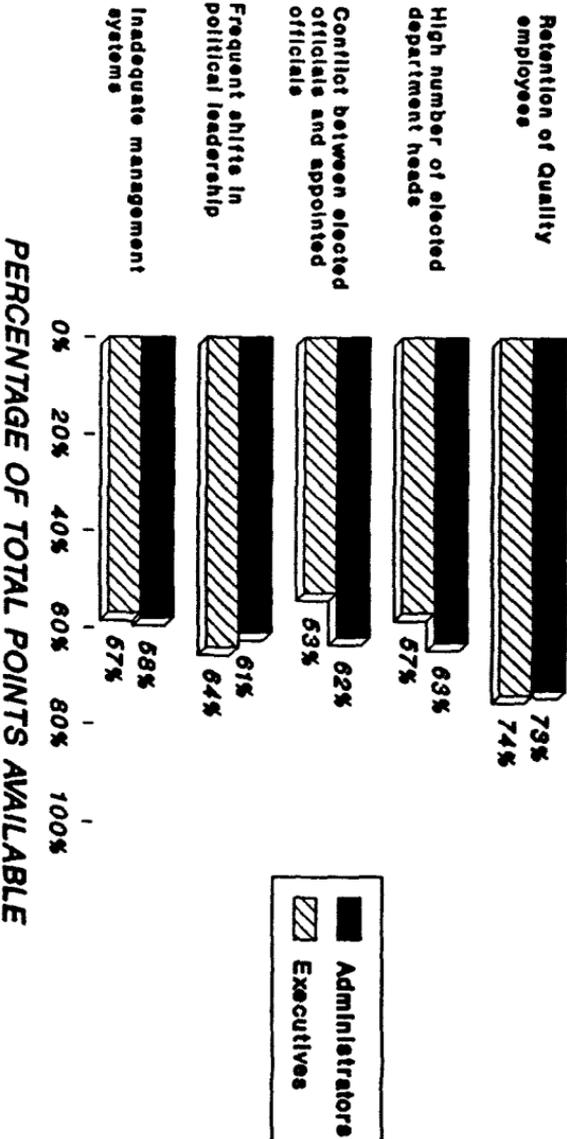
The dissatisfaction of the respondents is easier to understand when some additional survey items are examined which dealt with the growth of administrative and policy authority. For example, a full 93% of both the administrators and the executives felt that administrative responsibilities in their county had increased in the last five years. Forty-two percent of the administrators and 54 percent of the executives felt that policy responsibilities had increased over the same period. Furthermore, 80 percent of both groups maintained that their county had not experienced an increase in taxing authority over the last five years. Similar percentages reported that their county had not received an increase in debt authority. The higher proportion which noted a growth in administrative responsibilities may explain why the administrators felt most strongly about limits on local authority.

A number of control variables were entered into the analysis of the intergovernmental variables in an effort to determine if any intervening or suppressor variables were at work (Rosenberg, 1968). The variables population, population change, government expenditures per capita, per capita income, percent black, region, and a variable dealing with the respondent's perceptions of political competition were chosen since they had been identified as important by previous studies of county (Streib and Waugh, 1990) and municipal governments (Sayre, 1954, Kessel, 1962, Banfield and Wilson, 1963; Stillman, 1985).

None of the above variables proved to have any substantive impact, though some relationships were uncovered which met the minimal standards for statistical significance.<sup>2</sup> For example, both administrators and executives from the West displayed a greater need for support from state agencies and state elected officials as well as greater dissatisfaction with limits to authority. This finding may reflect the additional pressures generated by rapid growth. Also, executives from smaller counties gave more importance to the lack of support from elected state representatives, suggesting a greater reliance on support from the state legislature among these respondents.

It is unlikely that there are additional control variables which would further elaborate on the relationships uncovered by the present analysis. The scarcity of intervening variables most likely reflects the fact that dissatisfaction with state government performance is virtually universal among county government officials. This

FIGURE 2  
IMPORTANCE RANKINGS GIVEN BY ADMINISTRATORS AND  
EXECUTIVES FOR STATEMENTS DEALING WITH MANAGEMENT CAPACITY



fact considerably restricts the amounts of variance that might be explained by any additional statistical manipulation

Responses to the statements dealing with management capacity were more mixed than those dealing with intergovernmental relations. As can be seen from Figure 2, concerns for retention of quality employees clearly outweighs all other concerns. This finding is particularly striking since this statement was seen as more important than the statement dealing with the high number of elected department heads, an administrative dinosaur which can be traced back to the Populist reforms of the Jacksonian era (Stillman, 1974, Zeller, 1975) and has been a lightning rod for critiques of county organizational structure (Gilbertson, 1917, Childs, 1926, Snider, 1952, Zeller, 1975). It is likely that the importance given to retaining quality employees reflects financial concerns.

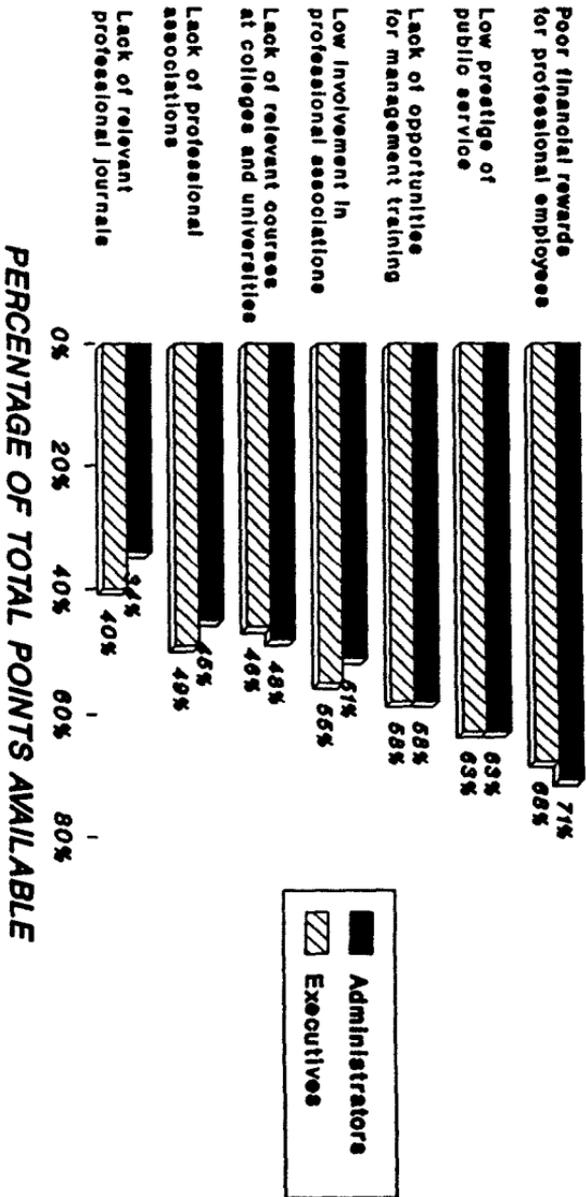
It is also worth noting that the importance rankings differ for the administrators and the executives. The executives place frequent shifts in political leadership in second place, rather than fourth, placing it ahead of the high number of elected department heads and conflict between elected and appointed officials. Although the difference is small, it may suggest that the wide variety of political actors common in county government is more of a problem for the appointed administrators than the elected officials.

Again, the control variable analysis did not offer any great revelations, but there were some minor differences which tended to support the more general conclusions. For example, both administrators and executives from smaller and lower income counties tended to be more concerned about employee retention, suggesting that financial shortfalls have hit smaller counties the hardest.

Concern with conflict between elected officials and appointed administrators was closely related to perceptions of political competition among the administrators, although this relationship did not hold for the executives. Also, conflict between elected officials and appointed administrators was much less of a problem for administrators from the Northeast. This emphasizes a trend throughout the findings that relations between administrators and executives seem to be more satisfying for respondents from the Northeast.

For both administrators and executives, political shifts were less of a problem when a county was large or had a high per capita income. As might be expected, administrators were less concerned with political shifts when political instability was low. Although neither the administrators nor the executives indicated a great deal

FIGURE 3  
IMPORTANCE RANKINGS GIVEN BY ADMINISTRATORS AND EXECUTIVES  
FOR STATEMENTS DEALING WITH PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



of concern for inadequate management systems, this issue was of great importance to both administrators and executives from small counties as well as counties with low per capita income

As Figure 3 shows, the concern demonstrated on the professional development statements was much lower than the statements dealing with intergovernmental relations and management capacity, except for the statements dealing with poor financial rewards and low prestige of the public service which overshadowed virtually all of the remaining professional development statements. This suggests that either the respondents felt that there was no great need for professional development or that further development would be attenuated by a shortage of financial rewards

Once again the control variable analysis did not reveal many notable patterns although it was clear that mechanisms for professional development were more of a problem for administrators in smaller counties. This finding was particularly true for the statements dealing with professional associations, relevant journals, and college courses. The lack of opportunities for management training did not appear in any way related to county population among the administrators. On the issues of prestige and poor financial rewards, county population seemed related to the perception that rewards were a problem among the administrators, and concerns for the prestige of the public service were lower in the Northeast than in any of the other three regions. The highest scores on this statement were from the North Central region

With only two exceptions, there was a great deal of uniformity in the responses of the executives to the professional development statements. The first exception involved executives from the South who were more likely to see the lack of professional associations as a problem. This perception may well arise from the high number of county executives in this part of the country. In the second case, executives from the West demonstrated heightened concern about the "low prestige" of the public service. It is impossible to tell if this concern was driven by lower levels of prestige in this region or a higher level of sensitivity

## CONCLUSIONS

As a research technique the mail survey is often viewed with disdain. Apart from the unavoidable hindrance of response rate, in such research efforts, the exact nature of the relationship between

the researcher and the subject is always a bit mysterious. One can never be fully certain that the proper questions were asked, that those questions were properly understood, and that honest, informed answers have been provided. Given these liabilities, the findings of survey research are generally presented in such a way as not to allow interpretations to tower too highly above what might best be called a flimsy foundation.

The present study cannot claim immunity from the challenges which survey research presents but, given the usual disclaimers, the findings make some important points concerning the status of county government generally as well as the progress of county government reform. First, there is a need to give strong consideration to the relationship between county governments and the states. Needless to say, this is a tired refrain but its endurance should not lessen its impact. Put simply, county governments cannot be expected to function effectively without the requisite authority. In addition, county governments require strong and consistent support from both appointed and elected state officials.

One limitation of the present study is that it looks at states from the perspective of county leaders. It is probably safe to assume that state leaders would give a less critical assessment of their present level of performance. While this issue is yet to receive systematic study, research to date clearly supports the argument that states have been slow to respond to county needs.

The findings of the present study also call into question the health of the public service as well as the future of county government in the context of a declining government sector. The report of the National Commission on the Public Service (1989 ix) made a clear assessment of present circumstances when it stated that "too many of the best of the nation's senior executives are ready to leave government, and not enough of its most talented young people are willing to join." While the commission focused its attention on the upper levels of the federal system, it maintained that the so-called "quiet crisis" affected all levels of government.

The findings of the present study demonstrate that the agenda of county reform is largely dominated by financial concerns. While the present study does not provide a great deal of information on the financial status of county governments, it does indicate that the retention of quality employees and rewards for professional employees generate a great deal of concern among county leaders, more than a number of key issues in the areas of management capacity.

and professional development

Quite obviously, if the present findings are given any credence whatsoever, the reform agenda of county government is seriously marred by the general downward spiral of the public service. While it may be argued that advances at all levels of government have been attenuated by the disinterest of recent years, county governments may well have suffered the most because this form of government has yet to mature fully. In comparison to municipal governments, the capacities of county governments are greatly underdeveloped. This type of weakness is most certainly a problem during this era of scarcity and it will force serious limits on any additional efforts at county reform.

## NOTES

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1. Data on the use of the county-administrator and council-elected executive forms of government were provided by the National Association of Counties and these figures were compared to county population distributions available from census documents. This conclusion is also supported by a survey conducted by DeSantis (1989).

2. Space considerations prevent the display of the numerous tables prepared as part of this analysis. Readers who wish to know more about this portion of the analysis should contact one of the authors.

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