

Policy Work: Street-Level Organizations Under New Managerialism

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Street-level organizations are pivotal players in the making of public policy. The importance of these organizations is reflected in new public management strategies that aim to influence how street-level organizations work – in part, by "steering" discretionary practices through performance-based incentives. The underlying assumptions are that if performance indicators provide the equivalent of a bottom line and if incentives (or penalties) are attached to them, one can leave it to street-level organizations to determine how best to do policy work.

This article directly challenges the premise that how policy work is done does not matter so long as performance benchmarks are met. It brings a street-level perspective to bear on a growing debate that questions both the effectiveness and the political implications of new public management (NPM) strategies. I argue that these strategies are based, in part, on flawed assumptions about how street-level discretion interacts with performance incentives and how these strategies relate to policy politics.

In this article, I elaborate on an analytic framework for understanding the street-level logic of choice and constraint under new managerialism, and then turn to the case of welfare reform to examine how new managerialism and discretion interact in the everyday life of a major urban welfare agency. The analysis reveals that street-level practitioners do not simply respond to performance incentives; rather, they use their discretion to adjust to them, producing informal practices that are substantively different from – and more diverse than – what policymakers or managers tend to recognize. A street-level view illuminates dimensions of welfare reform's apparent "success" that performance metrics do not capture, arguably obscuring the very transparency they are ostensibly designed to provide. A better

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understanding of how street-level organizations do policy work reveals NPM's limitations and provides a foundation for developing alternatives to it.

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