



# NY/NJ Intergovernmental Audit Forum Participatory Audit

NEW YORK STATE COMPTROLLER'S OFFICE  
DIVISION OF STATE GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY  
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# Participatory Audit

- ▶ Also known as “Social Audit”
- ▶ Encourages public participation in government through the audit function as a means to strengthen democratic governance, transparency and accountability
- ▶ Our challenge: meaningfully engage members of the public in auditing while maintaining independence required by audit standards

# Our Approach to Participatory Audit

- ▶ Identify subject of audit
- ▶ Determine extent and mode of public participation
- ▶ Conduct outreach to public
- ▶ Engage public, establish needed MOUs or contracts
- ▶ Joint planning involving auditors and public
- ▶ Develop audit plans
- ▶ Disseminate audits, data, studies

# Surveys

- ▶ Commonly used by government, universities, business
- ▶ Methodical collection of information a study population
- ▶ Most useful where existing data are insufficient
- ▶ Similar to audits, surveys follow documented procedures
- ▶ A survey provides a medium to learn from the public about risks associated with potential audit topics

# Benefits of Conducting A Survey

Supplements available administrative data

Provides verifiable information about municipal agency performance

Reveals risks that are otherwise not visible through interviews of agencies and analysis of readily available data

Raises the confidence of the public in government's responsiveness and accountability

Increases public knowledge about the operations of government agencies



# Getting Started

- ▶ Our topic: Noise in New York City
- ▶ Topic offered mutual benefits for auditors and for the public
- ▶ High level of interest in noise
  - ▶ New sound study team at the Center for Urban Science and Progress, a public-private research venture affiliated with New York University
  - ▶ Repeat coverage in the media
  - ▶ Voluminous international studies on the health effects of noise
  - ▶ Noise is a serious and under-regulated public health issue
  - ▶ Noise is a frequent complaint made through New York City's 311 system

# Initial Data Collection

- ▶ Sought qualitative and quantitative data to aid in designing questionnaire
- ▶ Limitations
  - ▶ Existing community noise surveys last conducted by local, state and federal governments in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s: survey data too old for use for our purposes and likely unobtainable
  - ▶ Surveys and research studies more often focused on vehicle and air traffic noise, and some focus on noise in specific types of workplaces
  - ▶ Congress determined that noise had adverse health consequences that could be costly, including but not limited to hearing loss, but after the Nixon administration, funding to states and local governments to regulate and mitigate noise dried up

# Initial Data Collection

- ▶ Options
  - ▶ New York City's 311 data
    - ▶ Free data available at <https://data.cityofnewyork.us/data>
    - ▶ Updated regularly
    - ▶ Downloadable in multiple formats
    - ▶ Some history available onsite
    - ▶ Can be filtered, sorted, mapped, and graphed onsite



# Initial Data Collection

- ▶ Challenges in Using Open Data
  - ▶ Modified significantly by third party from original administrative data and cannot be independently reconciled to source administrative data
    - ▶ Definitions of data categories differ
    - ▶ Counts differ between agency administrative data and contractor data
    - ▶ Not easily imported into our analytic software due to format
    - ▶ Data legally required by local law in report format not readily accessible
  - ▶ Requires engaging agency responsible for 311 data to understand changes in the data, a time-consuming process
  - ▶ Bias in 311 data: who is calling; are they representative of citywide population; are their complaints accurate

# 311 Background

- ▶ 311 is an FCC established abbreviated dialing code that is used nationwide by local governments for non-emergency government services; other abbreviated codes include 211 for community services and 511 for transportation and travel information.
- ▶ Back in 1992, the FCC had proposed regulations requiring local exchange carriers to provide abbreviated dialing codes. Some local governments opened 311 call centers in the 1990s; New York City's was initiated in 2003.

# 311 Background

- ▶ 311 is a gateway to New York City government and operates 24-7, supposedly translates calls into 180 different languages. Most frequent subject of complaints to 311 by New York City residents concerns noise. In City Fiscal Year 2015, City residents made more than 21 million calls to 311.

# 311 Background

- ▶ New York City Local Law 47 of 2005 requires the New York City Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications to issue monthly reports to the City Council, the Public Advocate, Community Boards and the public regarding data collected by the 311 Customer Service Center
- ▶ In 2012, New York City enacted its Open Data Law, known as Local Law 11, which required each City agency to identify and publish all of its digital public data for citywide aggregation and publication by 2018. The City has an Open Data plan that provides annual progress updates.

# 311 Noise Complaints in Open Data

- ▶ Noise complaints appear to be increasing annually
- ▶ 84,000 noise complaints in 2010
- ▶ 177,000 in 2015, more than double
- ▶ 700,000 complaints in NYC Open Data for calendar years 2010 - 2015



# Analysis of 311 Data in Open Data

- ▶ Analysis of Open Data helped to identify noisy neighborhoods in New York City and types of noises and hours noises were experienced
- ▶ Analysis of Open Data gave a picture of how NYC government responded to noise complaints

# Designing the Questionnaire

- ▶ Survey Monkey
- ▶ Questions translated in-house in Chinese, Spanish, Russian
- ▶ Survey questions developed based on:
  - ▶ Analysis of Open Data; reviews of research on the health effects of noise, available questionnaires used in other urban noise surveys conducted in other countries; summaries of relevant laws and regulations
  - ▶ Guidance from government and academic sources on constructing questionnaires
  - ▶ Feedback from test survey takers and people with experience in using Survey Monkey

# Disseminating the Survey

- ▶ Engaged the 59 NYC Community Boards, the lowest level of City government, which serve primarily as neighborhood advisory councils, but do have some power to influence zoning changes and licensing of entities seeking to sell alcoholic beverages
- ▶ Community Boards make recommendations about neighborhood needs to City and State government and elected officials. Community Boards consist of appointed members of the public who live or work in the area. The Boards are deeply engaged in anything happening in their geographic jurisdiction and many can communicate with thousands of people via email.

# Disseminating the Survey

- ▶ Sent emails to Community Board Chairs, called Community Board District Managers, visited Community Boards and spoke about the survey at their general and committee meetings
- ▶ Sought Board cooperation in sending the survey links out to their email distribution list. Some Boards not only do not have websites, they also do not use email to communicate with local stakeholders. Also, some Boards were more responsive and receptive than others. Nearly half of the Boards agreed to distribute the links via email; the survey links also were published on a few Board websites and in a few online community news sites.

# Analysis of Survey Responses

- ▶ 4,300 responses, some written responses and call-ins
- ▶ Mostly unhappy with City management of noise
- ▶ Identified other noise not reported in 311 Open Data
- ▶ Suggested ways to make government more effective
- ▶ Analyzing responses has been low-tech, clunky



## Plans for Reporting Results

- ▶ A Citywide study to be published and 59 Community District profiles
- ▶ Multiagency audits
- ▶ Audits and study will make management recommendations to improve oversight of noise complaints

# Benefits of Using Surveys in Planning and Conducting Audits

- ▶ Received insight about how government officials and agencies operate that could not be derived by studying regulations, reviewing agency documents and interviewing agency representatives
- ▶ Enhanced insight informed audit steps and audit objectives
- ▶ Future surveys will be better structured so that the study population will be representative. For example, we could seek confidential information from agencies and disseminate a survey to the target population.

# Contact Information

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