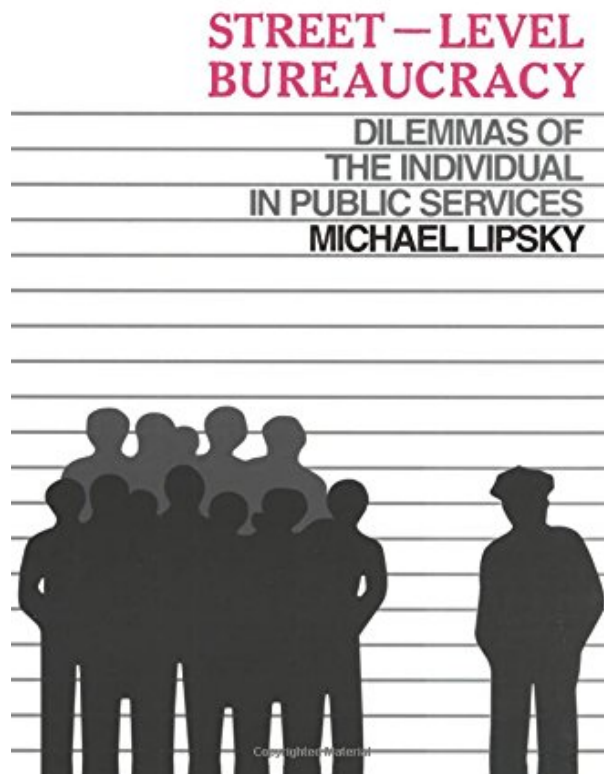


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MICHAEL LIPSKY is senior program director of Demos, a non-partisan public policy research and advocacy organization, and an affiliate professor at Georgetown University.

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# **STREET LEVEL BUREAUCRACY: DILEMMAS OF THE INDIVIDUAL IN PUBLIC SERVICES BY MICHAEL LIPSKY PDF**

Street-Level Bureaucracy is an insightful study of how public service workers, in effect, function as policy decision makers, as they wield their considerable discretion in the day-to-day implementation of public programs.

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MICHAEL LIPSKY is senior program director of Demos, a non-partisan public policy research and advocacy organization, and an affiliate professor at Georgetown University.

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5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

Street Level Policymakers!

By Hannah Page

Lipsky's "Street-Level Bureaucracy" offers an authoritative description of the gap between those that make policy and those that implement policy on the ground every day, the street-level bureaucrats. Further, he describes the gap between "capabilities and objectives" of the two groups and described the often neglected disparities that exist between the two. He argues that policymakers often forget that street level bureaucrats are out of necessity subjective and must use discretion because of their diverse human clientele and thus cannot act robotically in their actions.

He offers helpful examples to help readers understand this phenomenon, such as bureaucrats who have to make split second decisions with little time for thoughtful consideration of the full situation and the rules given to them by policymakers. Police officers do not have time for such deliberation in the face of an

unexpected violent confrontation. Similarly, teachers cannot implement training verbatim from workshops when spontaneous events happen in a classroom.

As applied to teaching, Lipsky's ideas help readers understand the processes that might lead a teacher to burn out or become jaded in their practice, which (in my experience) seems increasingly common and correlated with more of a top-down policy approach to education. As individual autonomy of a classroom teacher decreases, the teacher's motivation correspondingly decreases. More generally, when expectations exceed the workers capabilities, they often withdraw from the work as a means of coping and become jaded and much less effective. Interestingly, he uses this reasoning to explain why idealists are not equipped to remain in these situations.

When accountability mechanisms overrule all discretion practiced by street level bureaucrats, workers will not perform. It is this balance that policymakers must hold when developing policy. I would encourage "street-level bureaucrats" and policymakers alike to read this book.

36 of 36 people found the following review helpful.

Street-level Bureaucrats as Policy Makers

By TD

In this book, Lipsky examines the critical role of street-level bureaucrats in the policy-making and/or policy implementation process. The traditional model of public policy theory assumes that policy choices are made by the elected political executives and the implementation of those choices are left to the jurisdiction of bureaucrats. Lipsky challenges this line of argument/belief on the basis that since street level bureaucrats have a wide area of "discretion" when they perform their jobs they must be seen as the persons who actually make the policy choices rather than only implement those choices.

Public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work are called street-level bureaucrats (p. 3). And, public service agencies that employ a significant number of street-level bureaucrats in proportion to their work force are called street-level bureaucracies (p. 3). Teachers, police officers, intake workers in social security offices are some examples of street-level bureaucrats.

Based on the acceptance that those officials, so-called street-level bureaucrats, have a great autonomy from organizational control and the resources to resist any kind of top-down control/pressure (with the help of civil service laws that make it very difficult, if not impossible, to fire any worker) the author focuses his attention on how these human service workers behave under the conditions of their work context. The conditions of the work in which street-level bureaucrats find themselves surrounded are characterized with as follows:

1. Resources are chronically inadequate relative to the tasks workers are asked to perform.
2. The demand for services tends to increase to meet the supply.
3. Goal expectations for the agencies in which they work tend to be ambiguous, vague or conflicting.
4. Performance oriented toward goal achievement tends to be difficult if not impossible to measure.
5. Clients are typically non-voluntary; partly as a result, clients for the most part do not serve as primary bureaucratic reference groups. (pp. 27-8).

The above-enumerated conditions are of critical importance because they affect largely the policy formation (not formulation) in "reality". The first two conditions force the street-level workers to "ration" services in such a way so as to reduce the excessive demand on services that increase with the increase in supply, a very similar rationing mechanism to that of being assured by the "price" mechanism in the profit sector. With this rationing in mind, discrimination becomes an inseparable part of the job of street-level bureaucrats in that since the resources available for distribution are not limitless, some clients are or should be served at the expense of exclusion of others. The third condition forces the street-level bureaucrats to define their jobs in such a way that reduces the role conflict for them and provides a foundation on which to define their

mission. The last two conditions make it very difficult for street-level bureaucrats to change their behavior patterns in the short run-the fourth condition allow street-level bureaucrats to avoid any allegation regarding their performance and the fifth condition helps them to shut their eyes to the demands of clients, because clients have "nowhere" to go if they are unsatisfied with the service they receive. This is the general framework of the book.

Having demonstrated how street-level bureaucrats behave, Lipsky concentrates his attention on the reform propositions. First of all, the author tries to explain why reforms that bring new performance measurement/control devices for street-level bureaucracies are highly subject to failure. Lipsky demonstrates how street-level bureaucrats change their behaviors in order to satisfy new performance criteria although not necessarily to the benefit of policy objectives, mainly based on Peter Blau's (1955) analysis. What Lipsky offers, instead, is that the structure and context of the work must be changed or reformed in order to produce expected results. Also, strengthening the citizens (setting the conditions that will make the citizens one of the reference groups for street-level bureaucrats, rather than clients to be processed) is one of the considerable offers of the author.

Published originally in 1980, this book has received a great deal of attention in the field. Some authors, for example C. Goodsell (1983), attacked on the arguments of Lipsky, especially on those related to the alleged "discrimination" made by street-level bureaucrats. It should be kept in mind that Lipsky does not attack on the street-level bureaucracy and bureaucrats, but he tries to explain the "background" that motivates the behavior patterns of street-level bureaucrats. I found the arguments very coherent and, having compared the theory with my own experiences, I agreed in many points with the author.

Whether you would agree or not with the line of arguments of the author, I believe this book is worthy of reading, especially for students and practitioners of the public policy. Highly recommended.

19 of 21 people found the following review helpful.

Street-Level Bureaucracy

By A Customer

The book "Street-Level Bureaucracy" describes the process whereby lower ranking employees of human service agencies utilize some level of discretion to determine actual public policy. Lipsky calls such workers "street level bureaucrats" and defines them as "those who directly interact with the public and have substantial discretion in the execution of their work" (Lipsky, pp. 3). They would include teachers, police officers, social workers, judges, public interest lawyers, unemployment counselors, and some health workers. Lipsky argues that these relatively low-level employees ought to be viewed as policy makers, rather than implementers of policy. As Lipsky puts it, the "decisions of street level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with pressure, effectively become the public policy they carry out" (ibid., pp. xii). The quality of street-level bureaucracy-as operationalized below-is thus dependent upon the somewhat complicated interplay of eleven general factors. The (simplified) causal chain consequently looks something like this: (not available here) 1. Level of employee Discretion 2. Resources for Resistance 3. Budgetary Resources 4. Agency Goals 5. Personal (employee) Goals 6. Measurement Criterion 7. Relationship to Clients 8. Current Political Climate 9. Client Demand for Services 10. Political Power of Clients 11. Estimated Probability that Clients will benefit from Services

Quality of street-level bureaucracy ? Client Satisfaction with the Service ? Fairness of Service Decisions ? Openness of Service Decisions ? Efficiency of Service ? The Bureaucrat's job

With the above independent variables, Lipsky endeavors to explain why current human service agencies tend to experience (1) extremely low levels of client satisfaction, (2) high levels of (wrongful) bias in decision making such as favoritism and/or stereotyping, (3) low levels of accountability, (4) high levels of inefficiency, and (5) high levels of employee burnout. Several of the factors which contribute to-or are related to-the problem are not of the sort that Lipsky would recommend addressing. Rather, he holds that the most important source of problem is the structure of street-level bureaucrat's work. The scientific validity of this approach, Lipsky explains, "can only be tested in seeking to understand whether what seem to be

common features of the work lead to common behavioral outcomes" (ibid., pp. xvi). In this respect, 14 of the main reforms that Lipsky suggests are as follows: 1. agencies must know what they want workers to do (ibid. pp. 161) 2. agencies must know how to measure worker performance (ibid. pp. 161) 3. agencies must be able to compare workers to one another (ibid. pp. 161) 4. agencies should have incentives and sanctions to discipline workers (ibid. pp. 161) 5. client autonomy must be increased (ibid. pp. 193) 6. street-level bureaucracies must be made more accountable to clients (ibid. pp. 195) 7. clients must be encouraged to organize and obtain control over service provision (ibid. pp. 196) 8. job-discretion that leads to discriminatory treatment of clients must be eliminated (ibid. pp. 197) 9. current budgetary resources must be maintained (ibid. pp. 200) 10. street-level bureaucrats must be provided with assistance in job problem solving (ibid. pp. 200) 11. street-level bureaucrats must be provided adequate salaries (ibid. pp. 205) 12. peer support mechanisms must be developed and encouraged (ibid. pp. 207) 13. management must be committed to "the new orientation" (ibid. pp. 209) 14. there must be a broad (societal) movement for social and economic justice (ibid. pp. 210)

In his conclusion, Lipsky asserts that "the quality of street-level practice will change only when an effective coalition develops that harnesses public concerns for service costs and effectiveness, respects clients involvement in service procedures, and recognizes the needs of the work place, where the fate of innovation will ultimately be decided" (ibid., pp. 210-211). Finally, given the reality of American politics, Lipsky predicts that any successful reform will take place "agency by agency and issue by issue" (ibid., pp. 211).

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