



The Local Government Perspective on COVID-19

A CivicPulse¹ Special Issue Report

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Local governments are on the frontlines of public health crises: they manage implementation of state and federal policies, distribute critical information to their residents, and respond to the unique concerns of their local community members. And yet, most attention is given to state and federal governments during such times. For this special issue report, CivicPulse polled over four hundred elected and top managerial officials in municipal, county, and township governments across the United States — between March 18 and March 23, 2020 — to better understand how local government leaders are handling the unfolding COVID-19 epidemic.

In our brief report, we break down the data into the following **five key findings**:

1. **High Levels of Concern.** The vast majority of local officials are seriously concerned with COVID-19, even where there are not yet documented cases in their communities.
2. **Majority Support for Current State/Fed Policies.** Despite the impacts on their local communities, most local officials view state and federal policies as “appropriately aggressive.”
3. **Reliance on Information from State/Fed Agencies.** Local officials tend to trust information from their state health departments and the Centers for Disease Control.
4. **Mixed Satisfaction with Level of Coordination.** Local officials vary in their satisfaction with the degree of coordination they are receiving from higher levels of government.
5. **Local Economy is a Top Concern.** Local officials’ number one concern is economic distress. They also express concerns about healthcare capacity (particularly lack of testing) and disruption to public services.

¹ CivicPulse is a nonprofit organization which runs a national survey platform of local government officials. Our mission is to promote information-sharing between local governments and elevate the voice of local governments in national policy discourse. To learn more about our work, please visit civicpulse.org. To download the data used in this report, please visit: civicpulse.org/data.

Finding 1: The vast majority of local officials are seriously concerned about COVID-19.

Despite the large numbers of cases in places like Seattle, New York City, and the Bay Area, at the time of writing most local communities in the United States are not facing large numbers of hospitalizations or fatalities due to COVID-19. Nonetheless, we find that the vast majority of local officials are taking COVID-19 very seriously. When asked whether COVID-19 presents a serious problem for their communities, 75.2% of local officials said yes. By contrast, only 10.2% of respondents thought that the virus does not pose a serious problem to their communities.

This pattern is consistent across different types of local communities, regardless of population size, level of urbanicity, or even the presence or absence of documented cases. Likewise, both officials who hold elected positions (e.g., councilmember) and officials who hold appointed positions (e.g., city manager) view COVID-19 as a serious problem. (You can see these analyses in Figures A1.1 to A1.5 the Appendix.)

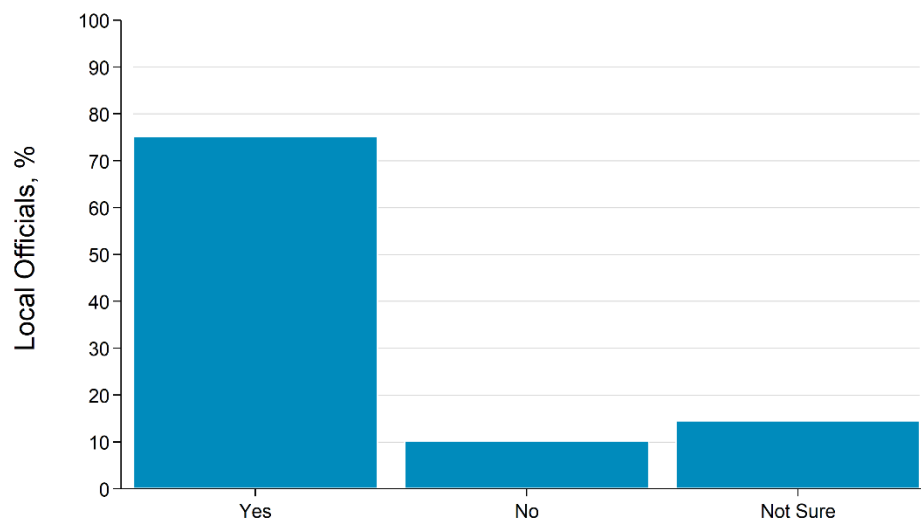


Figure 1: Do you think that COVID-19 is a serious problem for your local community? The vast majority of respondents (75.2%) answered ‘Yes.’ By comparison, only 10.2% answered ‘No’ and 14.6% answered ‘Not Sure.’ In the appendix to this report, this question is broken out by different types of local communities and local officials.

Finding 2: Most local officials view current state and federal policies as “appropriately aggressive.”

Another key issue in the public debate on COVID-19 is whether governments are doing enough, or doing too much, in responding to the outbreak. Local government officials, when asked about the state and federal response thus far, generally believed that policies have been “appropriately aggressive” (58.9%). Meanwhile, a sizable minority believe that the response has not been adequate enough (33.9%). Only a small but nontrivial number of officials viewed policy responses thus far as excessively aggressive (8.3%).² When focusing specifically on local officials with documented cases in their county, the responses were more evenly split between “not aggressive enough” and “appropriately aggressive” (see Figure A2.4 in Appendix).

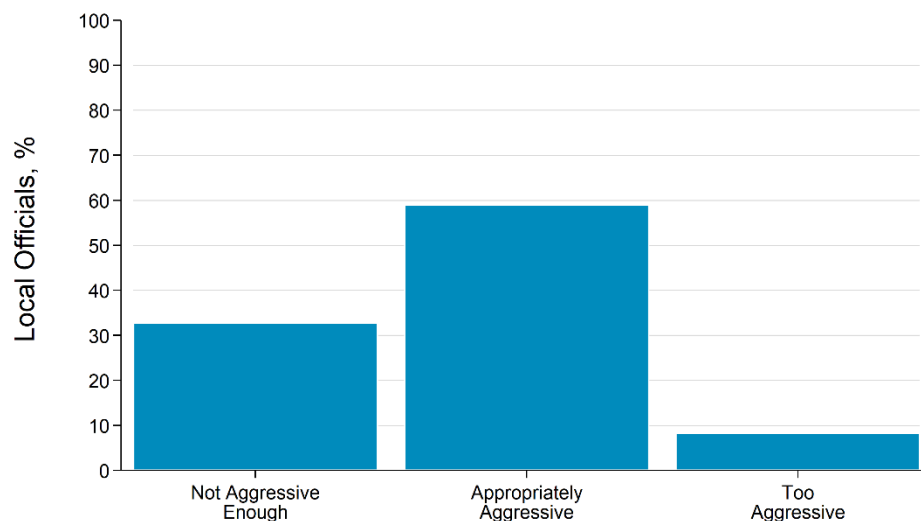


Figure 2: How would you characterize the state and federal response to COVID-19? A majority (58.9%) of local officials believed that higher levels of government have been responding appropriately, while a significant minority (33.9%) view current responses as not adequate enough. Only a small minority (8.3%) view current policies too aggressive.

² Exemplifying this group’s view, officials from Kansas and Maine worried that state and federal actions might “usurp the constitution” or be “running over civil liberties.”

Finding 3: Local officials vary in their satisfaction with the degree of coordination they are receiving from higher levels of government.

While most local government officials felt that the state and federal government were responding appropriately to COVID-19 (Finding 2), there is more disagreement when it comes to whether they feel included in the process. When asked whether they feel the state and federal government are coordinating effectively with local governments, 44.6% said yes, while 33.9% said no.³ In this latter group were many local officials who were frustrated that they were not notified about important policies in advance of the media and general public. A city manager in Texas, for example, wanted “[t]o have regular, private briefings as they become available... Before they hit the media.” Such notifications, respondents said, would give them time to prepare a response to their community members.

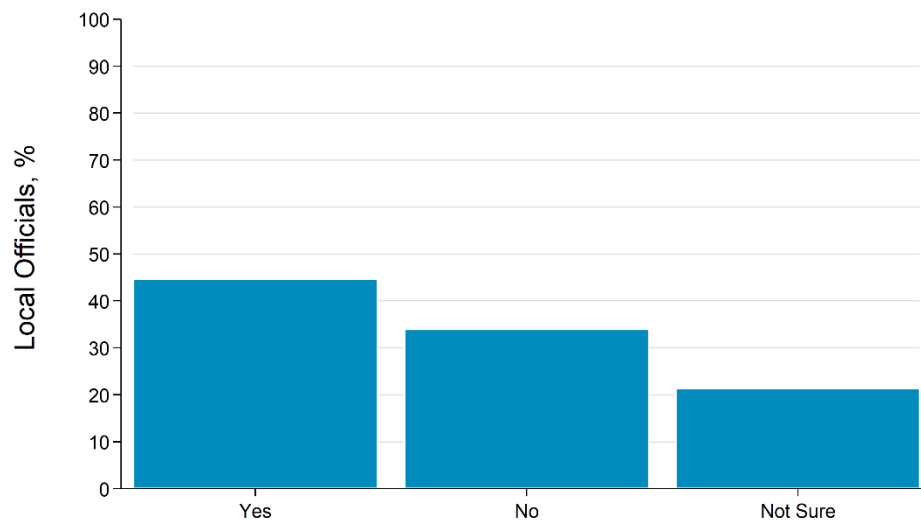


Figure 3: Do you feel that the state and federal government are coordinating effectively with local governments? A plurality of respondents found coordinating with the state and federal government to be effective (44.6%), though almost as large a group were not satisfied (33.9%).

³ Among the states which were represented in our survey by five or more local officials, the highest level of satisfaction was found in North Carolina (85%) and Tennessee (80%), while the lowest level of satisfaction was found in New Hampshire (17%) and Pennsylvania (9%).

Finding 4: In their response to COVID-19, local officials generally found information from the CDC and state health departments to be most helpful.

A crucial component of effective local governance during a public health crisis is reliable information transmission. When asked which information sources they found useful in responding to COVID-19, local officials favored information from state and federal government, especially their state health department and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). For example, one official from a town in Maine said, “[t]he CDC is providing the information and their website is very helpful.” Even respondents who answered that they sought “other” information sources wrote in government-related agencies or offices such as the Texas Municipal League, the governor’s office (Idaho, Michigan, and Illinois), and the League of Oregon Cities. Fewer officials, on the other hand, found news media sources to be helpful, whether they be television, newspaper, or social media.

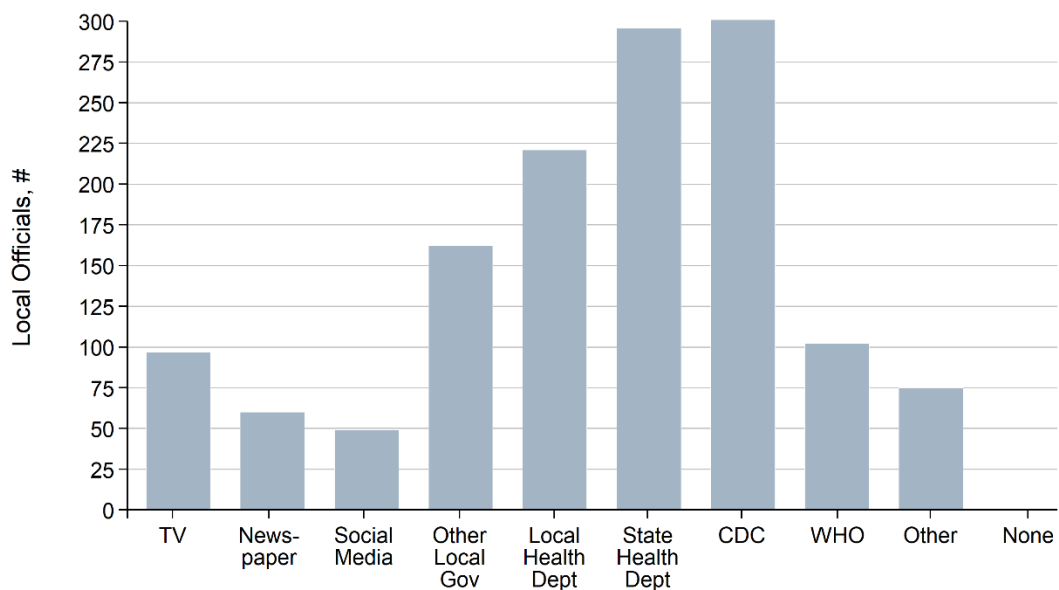


Figure 4: What have been the most helpful sources of information about how to respond to COVID-19? Please select all that apply. Respondents were asked to select all the sources of information they found helpful. On the whole, local governments favored sources from state and federal government agencies within the United States, compared to news media sources or international sources like the World Health Organization.

Finding 5: The most commonly cited concern local officials mention about the impact of COVID-19 on their communities is local economic distress.

Local officials were asked what they wished their state and federal government knew about how COVID-19 has been impacting their communities. Their comments covered a wide range of issues. To illustrate their responses, our team read and classified each response into one or more concerns. The most commonly cited concern was about the local economy. These comments ranged from concerns about lost jobs, to small businesses, to local government revenue.⁴

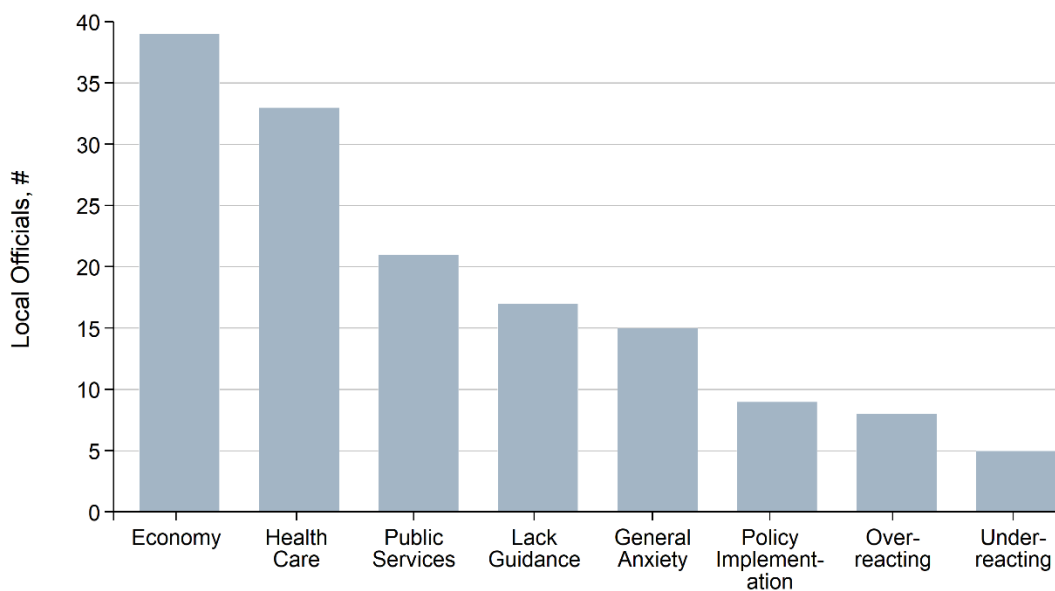


Figure 5: What is the one thing you wish your state and federal government knew about how COVID-19 is (or isn't) affecting your community? Survey-takers were asked to write-in their answers. Our team then categorized each answer into one or more of eight concerns. The description of the label associated with each of these concerns is provided in below in Table 1.

⁴ For example, one county official in Minnesota said, “[t]he impact on the economy is tremendous and likely to have deep impact in our consumer-oriented economy.” Another official in Virginia also worried that “[l]ocal government revenues will be severely negatively impacted as well.”

Topic	Description
Economy	Economic impact on citizens, businesses, budgets, etc.
Healthcare	Need for more testing, other health supplies, and understanding of the virus.
Public Services	Concerns about impact on ability to provide public services like education and hold upcoming elections.
Lack Guidance	Expressing need for clearer, more consistent, and stronger guidance.
General Anxiety	Expressing general anxiety and fear over the issue, especially over the future and how long the situation will last.
Policy Implementation	Concerns about how to and the capacity to implement policies, sometimes from higher government.
Overreacting	Concerns about overreacting to the issue.
Underreacting	Concerns about not taking the issue seriously enough.

Table 1. Classification of open-ended responses to “What is the one thing you wish your state and federal government knew about how COVID-19 is (or isn’t) affecting your community?” Our team categorized each answer into one of eight issues topics, with the potential for one answer to include multiple topics. Responses that did not fit into any of the eight categories that were classified in an “other” category.

The second most cited concern was about local healthcare capacity and, in particular, the lack of ability to test for the virus. Another common health concern was that the community lacked a clear understanding about how the virus spreads. Aside from economic and health concerns, local governments also worried about their ability to provide public services, like education, and the difficulty they face in implementing the variety of policies being handed down to them. They also worried about the general state of fear and anxiety in their communities. Finally, a small number of officials expressed concern about the impact of leaders over- or under-reacting to the crisis.



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About CivicPulse

We generate insights about local government through national surveys of local officials across the nation, often partnering with researchers and other experts. Our surveys consistently sample a diverse representation of leaders from all 50 states and from small towns to large cities. We're proud that—because of our commitment to generating useful knowledge and our respect for the officials who participate—over 80 percent of first-time survey participants agree to join our ongoing survey panel. CivicPulse also produces academic papers and policy reports on critical issues facing local governments, and works diligently to deliver these insights back to local governments and their communities.

CivicPulse was founded in 2018 by classmates in Stanford's political science department. In starting CivicPulse, we aspired to build a collaborative platform for generating shared insights for both researchers like ourselves but also the broader civic community.



Description of Methodology

CivicPulse uses Power Almanac's dynamically updated contact list of the appointed and elected officials associated with all townships, municipalities, and counties in the United States with populations of 1,000 or more (98% coverage). Each survey includes a random sample of officials from this list. In this survey, we emailed 12,231 officials between March 18 and March 20, of which 424 had completed the survey by March 24, amounting to an initial response rate of 3.5%. This report is based on these 424 responses. Table A1 breaks the sample out by government position and Table A2 by the type of local government.

Table A1. Survey Respondent Composition By Position.

Position	Respondents
Top Managerial Official	214
Governing Board Member	153
Top Elected Official	57

Table A2. Survey Respondent Composition By Type of Government.

Type of Government	Respondents
Township	91
Municipality	270
County	63

To characterize the geographic representativeness of our surveys, CivicPulse geocodes all respondents using the FIPS system and subsequently matches these respondents to the U.S. Census. In general, our samples modestly over-represent localities that are more populous and more urban. For this reason, we provide readers the opportunity to examine all of our findings broken out by different population sizes and levels of urbanicity. Importantly, none of the central findings in this report are sensitive to these dimensions. Overall, the sample included respondents from 45 states.

Analysis by Subgroups

Description of Subgroups

The analysis below reports the main findings by different subgroups of officials. Those subgroups are:

- **Population Level** splits respondents into equal tertials depending on the population size of their locality: Low, Medium, or High.
- **Urbanicity** divides respondents into two equal groups (median split) depending on the urban coverage of their location: Less Urban or More Urban.
- **Position** distinguishes the position of the respondent: Appointed versus Elected.
- **Government Type** distinguishes the level of government of the official's office: Township, Municipality, or County level government.
- **Existing Case** splits respondents based on whether they reported a "documented case" of COVID-19 in our survey: Documented Case or No Documented Case. A small proportion of respondents who replied "Not Sure" or "No Testing Available" are not included in the subgroup analysis.

Finding 1 (Perceived Seriousness of Problem) by Subgroups

Do you think that COVID-19 is a serious problem for your local community?

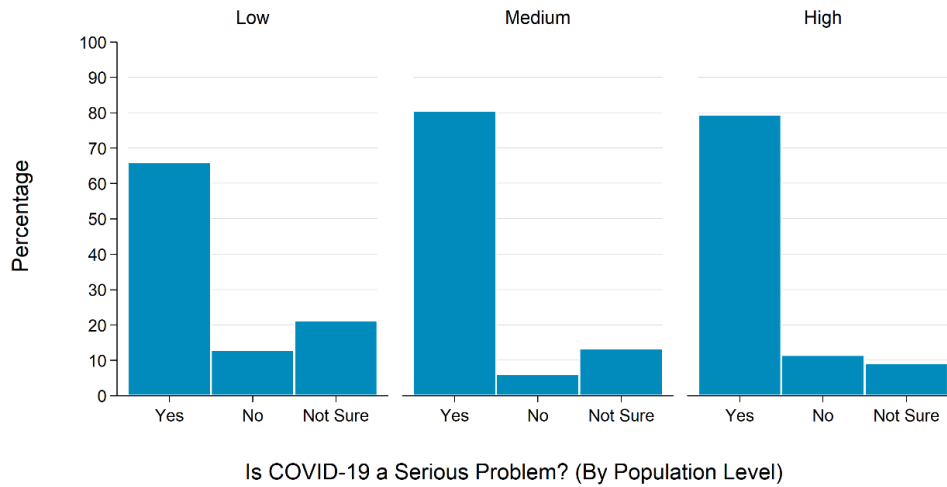


Figure A1.1

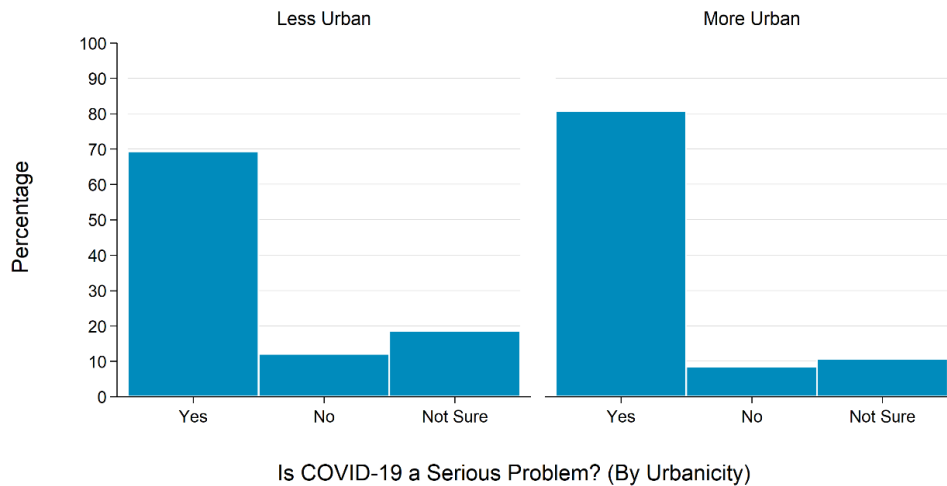


Figure A1.2

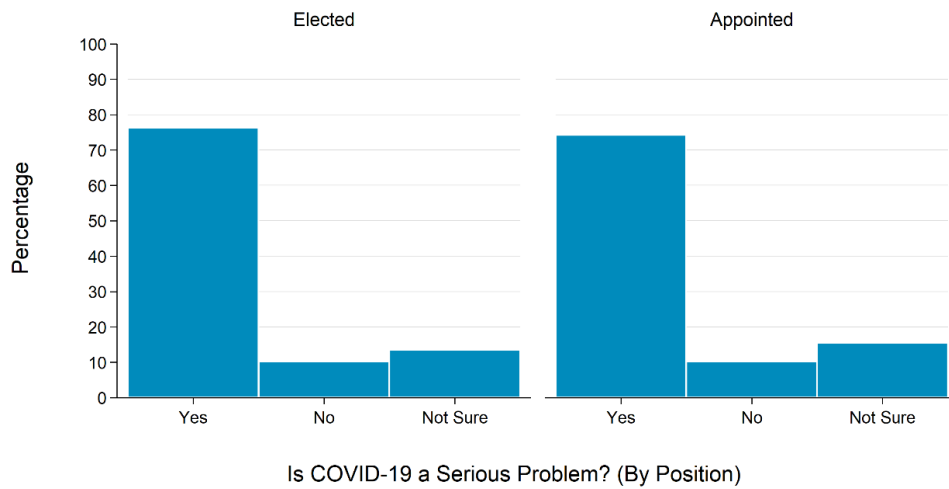


Figure A1.3

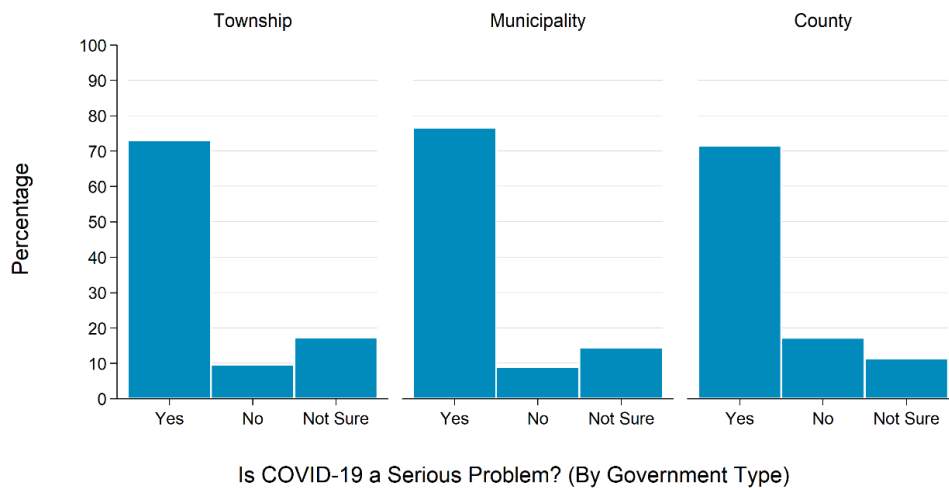


Figure A1.4

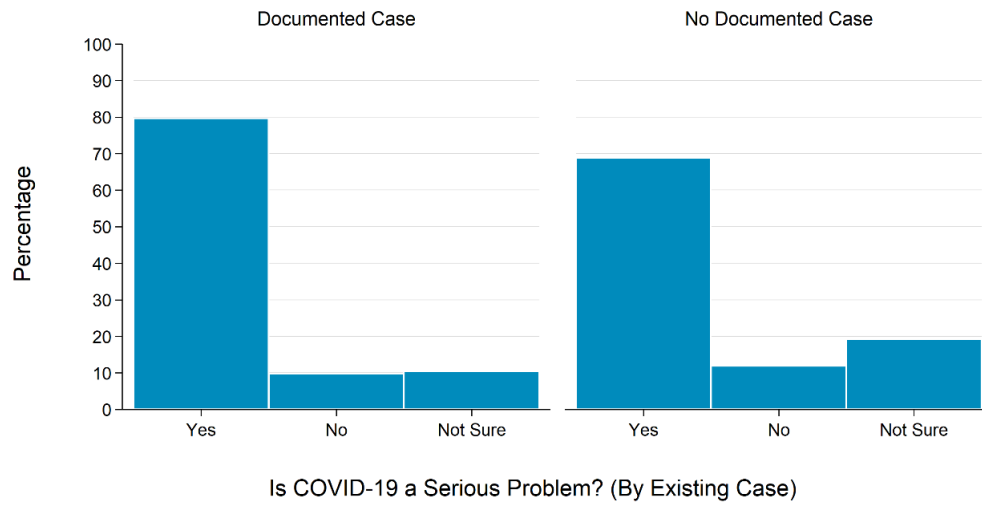


Figure A1.5

Finding 2 (Support for State/Fed Response) by Subgroup

How would you characterize the state and federal response to COVID-19?

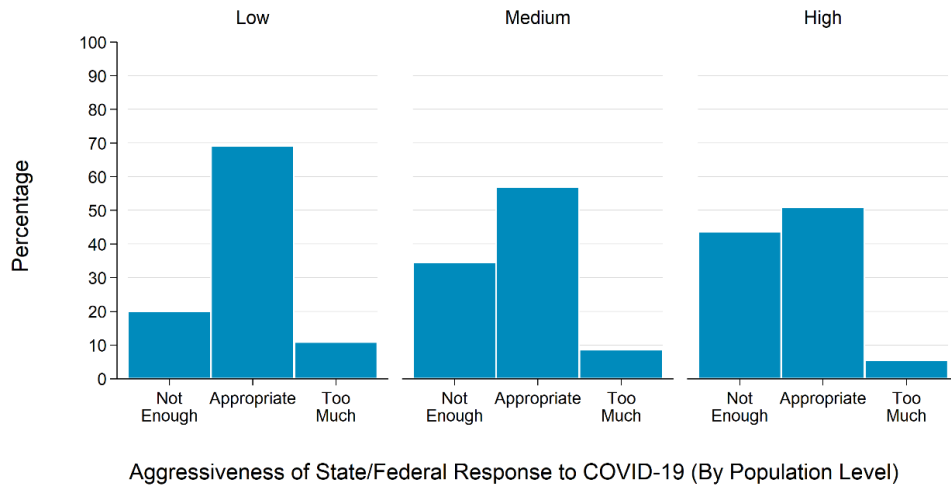


Figure A2.1

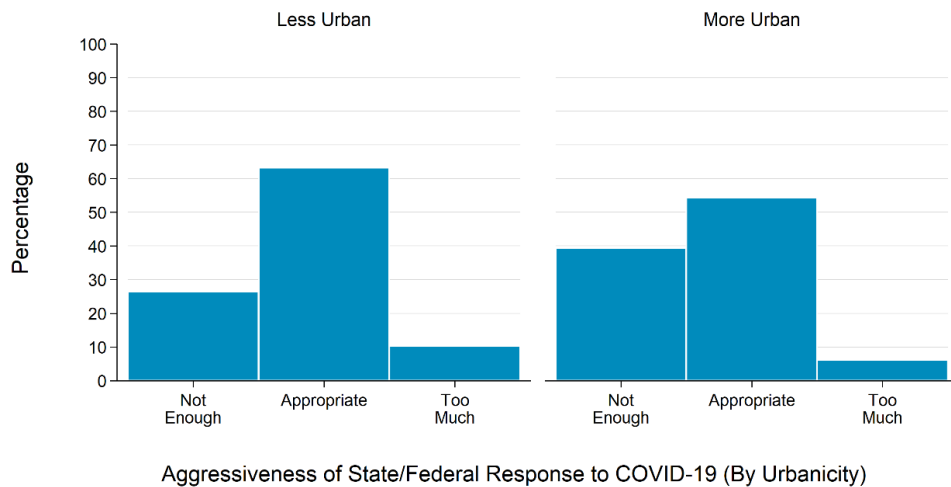


Figure A2.2

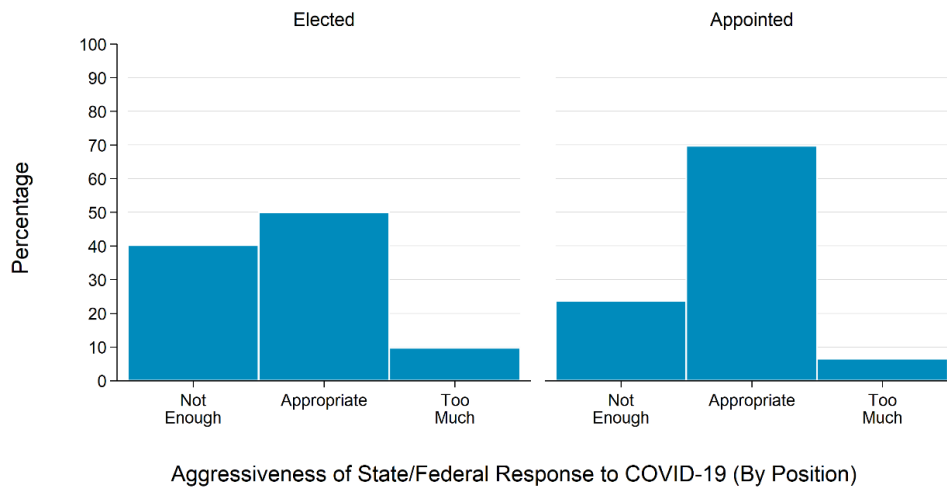


Figure A2.3

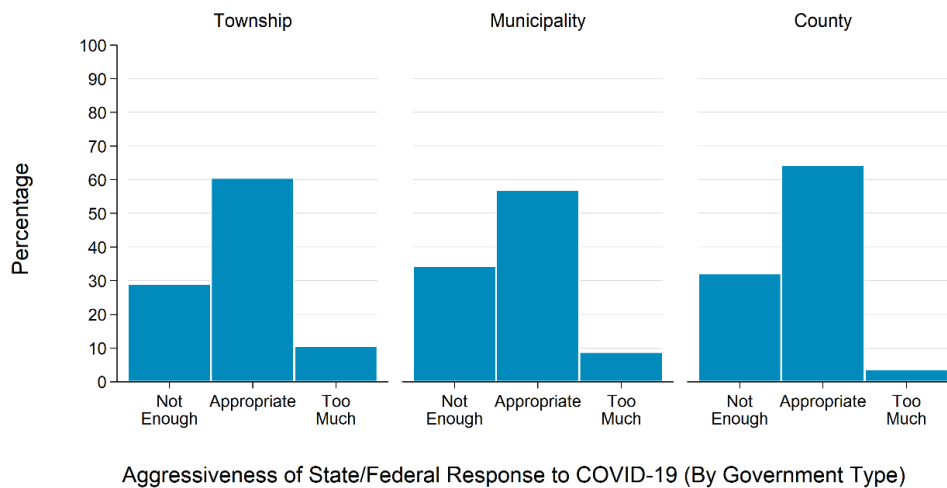


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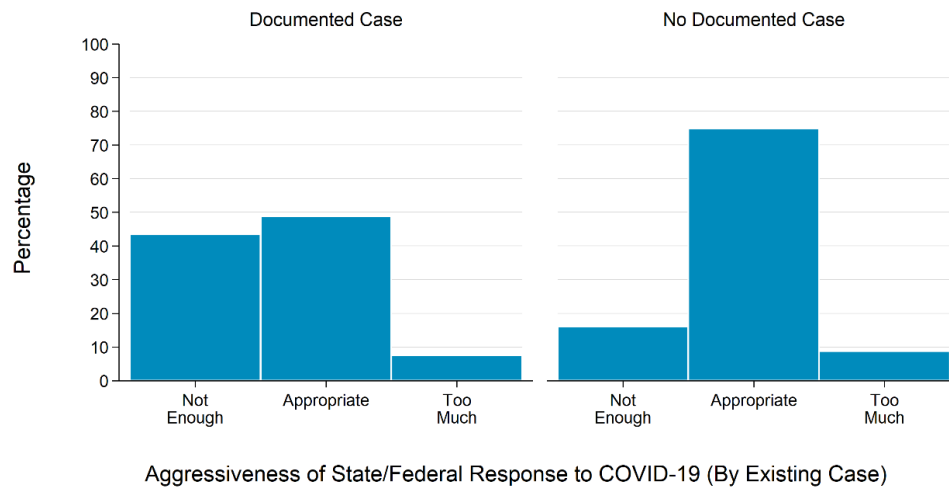


Figure A2.5

Finding 3 (Effectiveness of State/Fed Coordination) by Subgroup

Do you feel that the state and federal government are coordinating effectively with local governments?

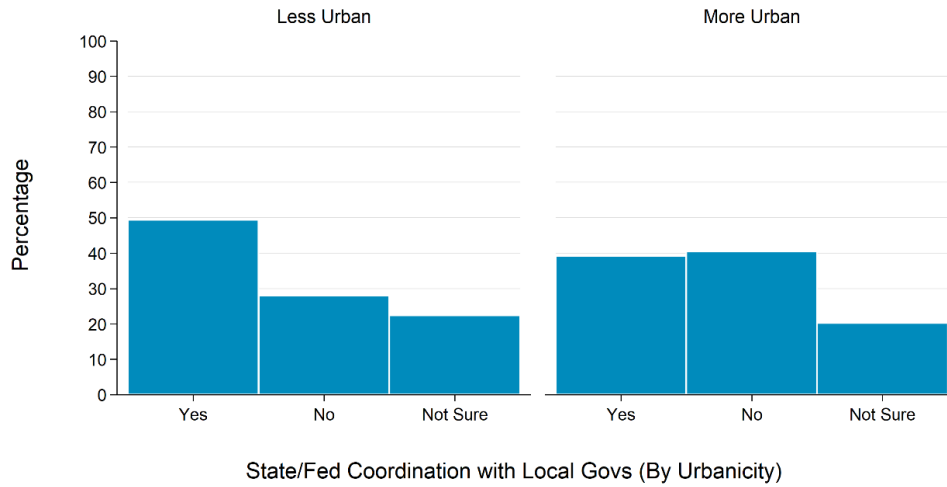


Figure A3.1

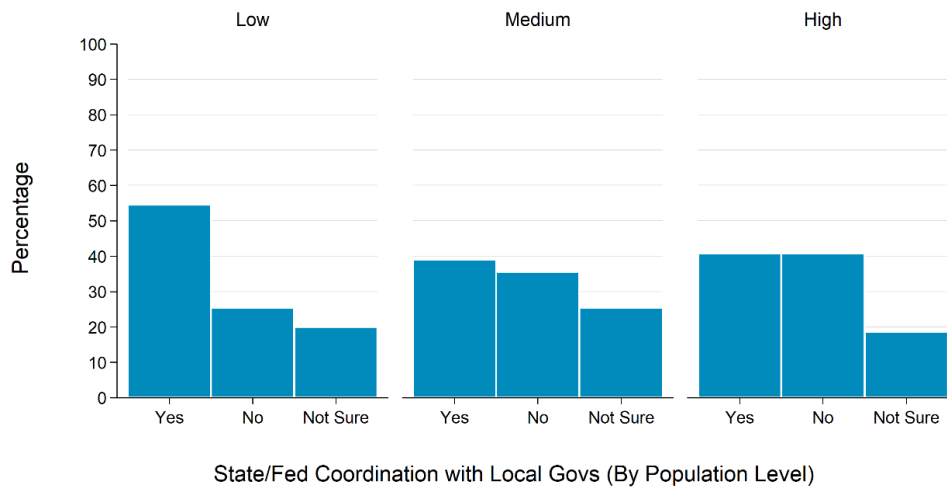


Figure A3.2

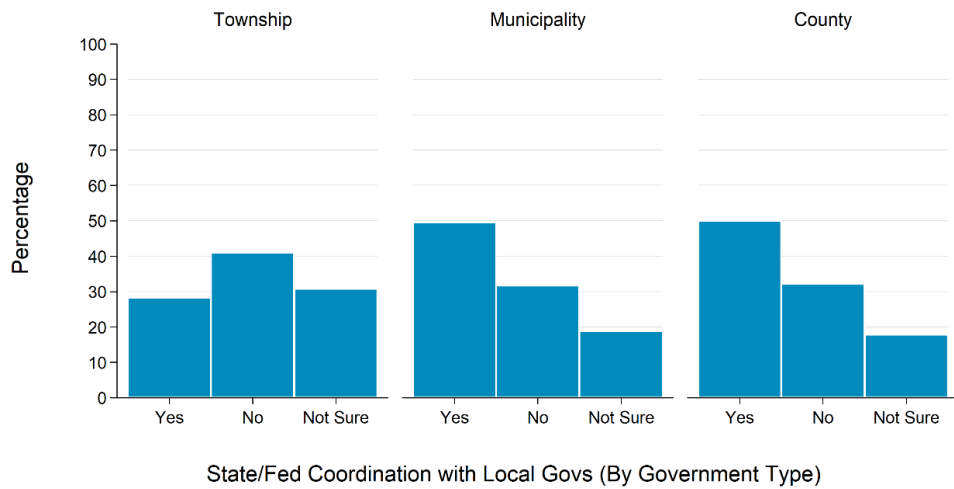


Figure A3.3

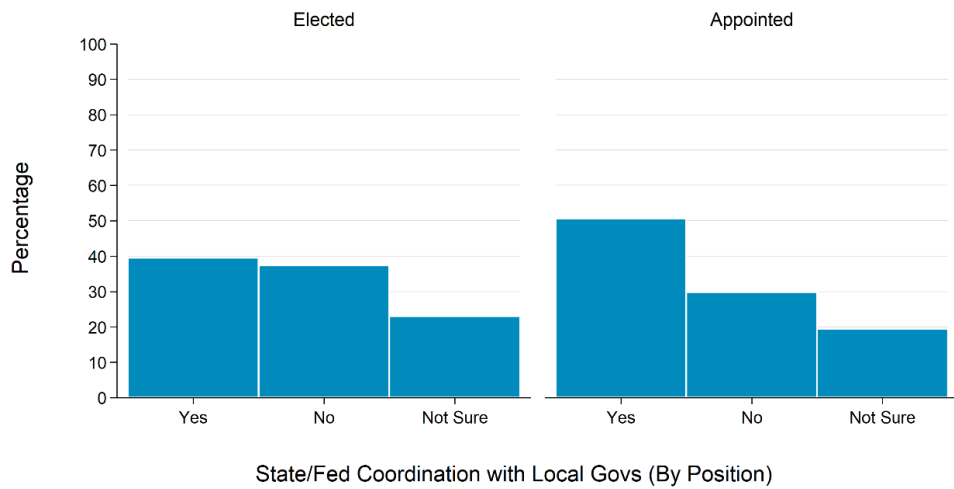


Figure A3.4

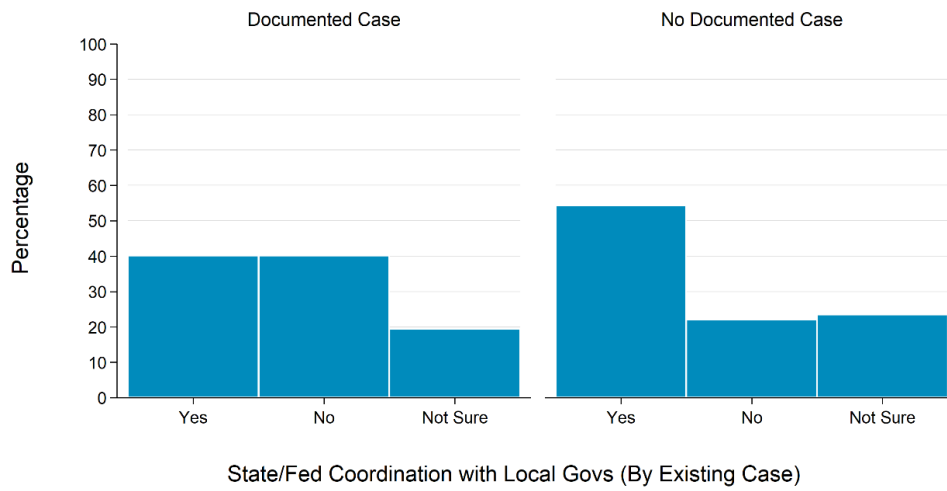


Figure A3.5

Finding 4 (Sources of Information) by Subgroup

What have been the most helpful sources of information about how to respond to COVID-19? Please select all that apply.

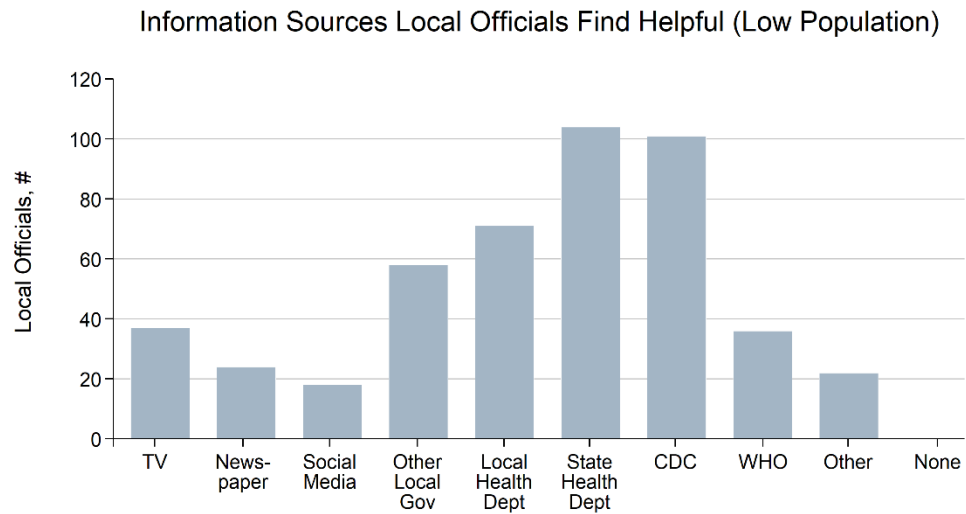


Figure A4.1

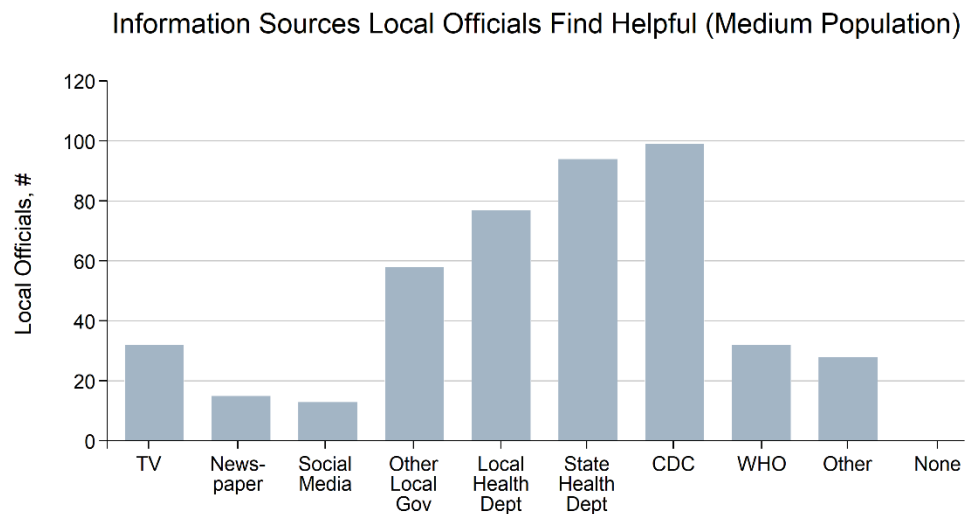


Figure A4.2

Information Sources Local Officials Find Helpful (High Population)

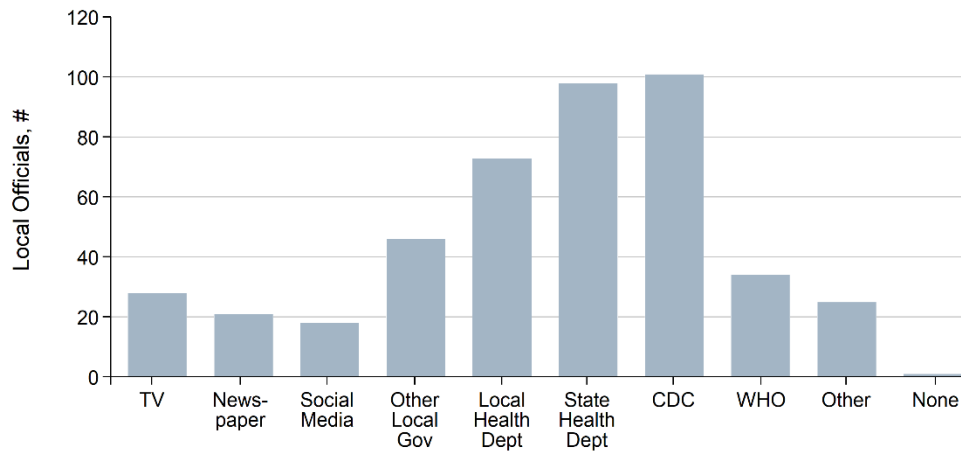


Figure A4.3

Information Sources Local Officials Find Helpful (Less Urban)

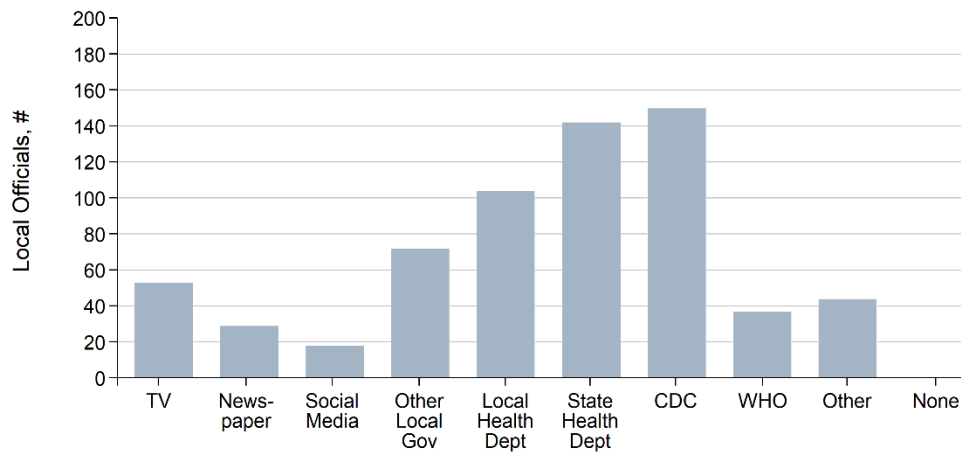


Figure A4.4

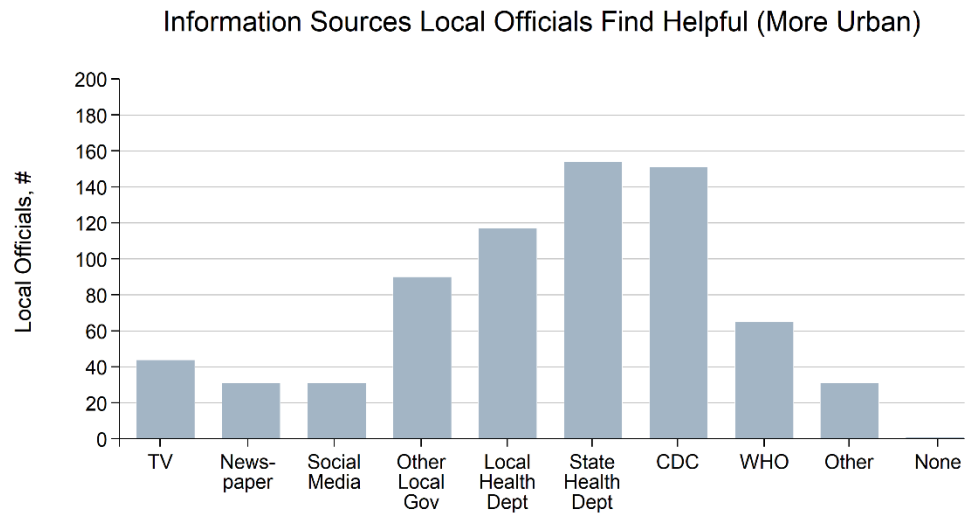


Figure A4.5

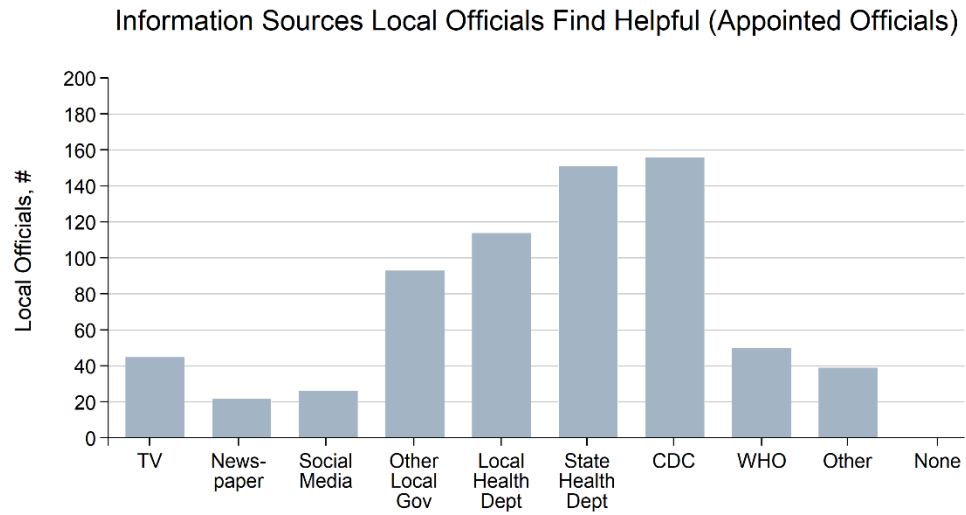


Figure A4.6

Information Sources Local Officials Find Helpful (Elected Officials)

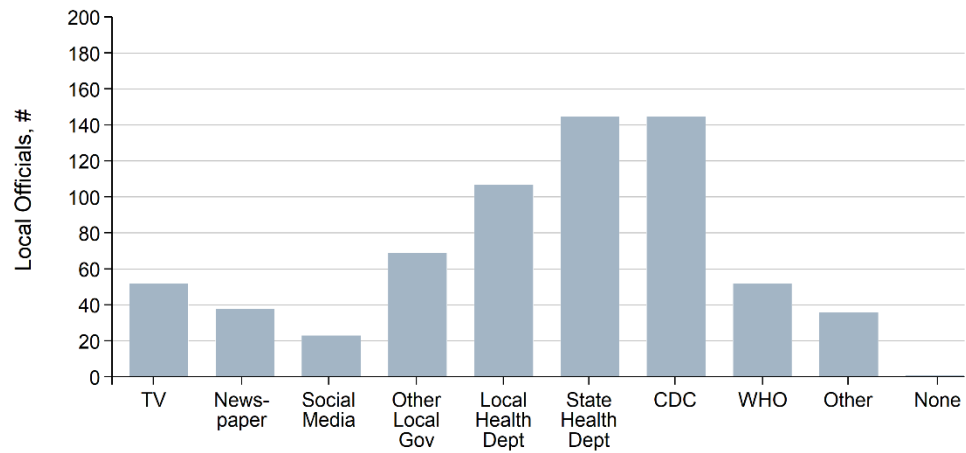


Figure A4.7

Information Sources Local Officials Find Helpful (Counties)

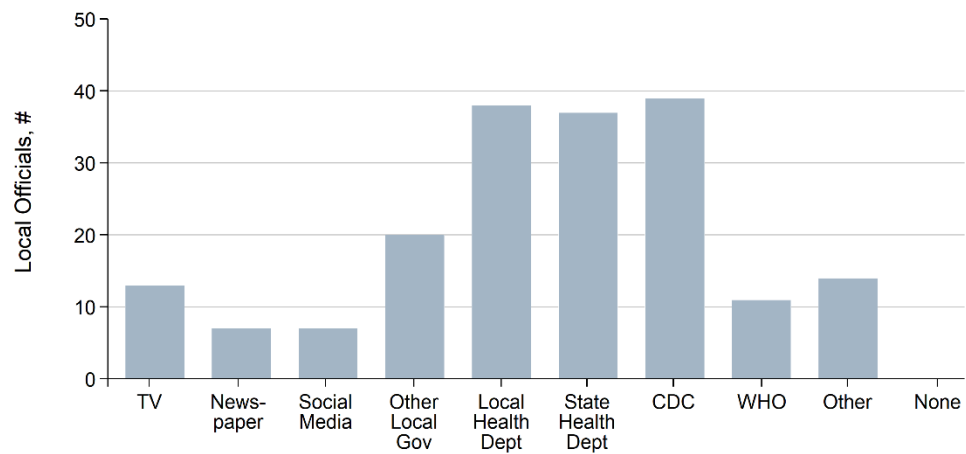


Figure A4.8

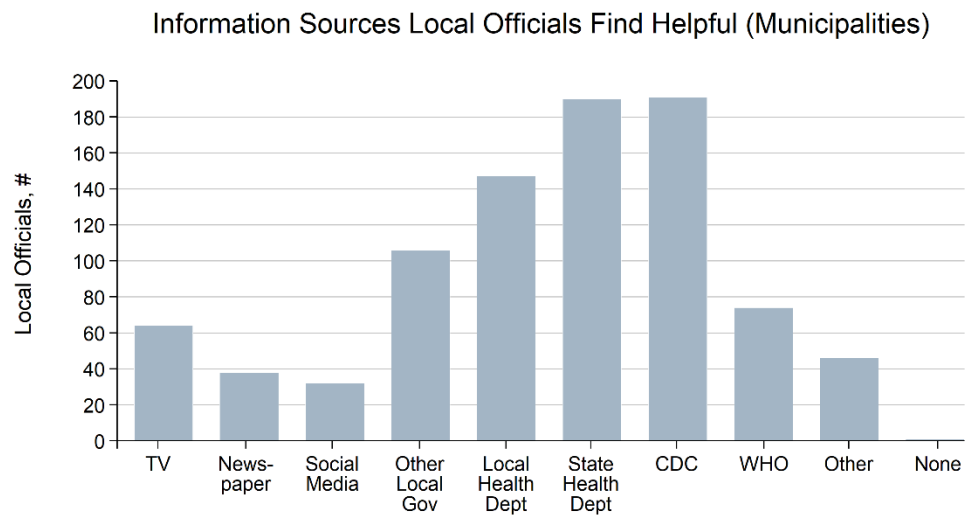


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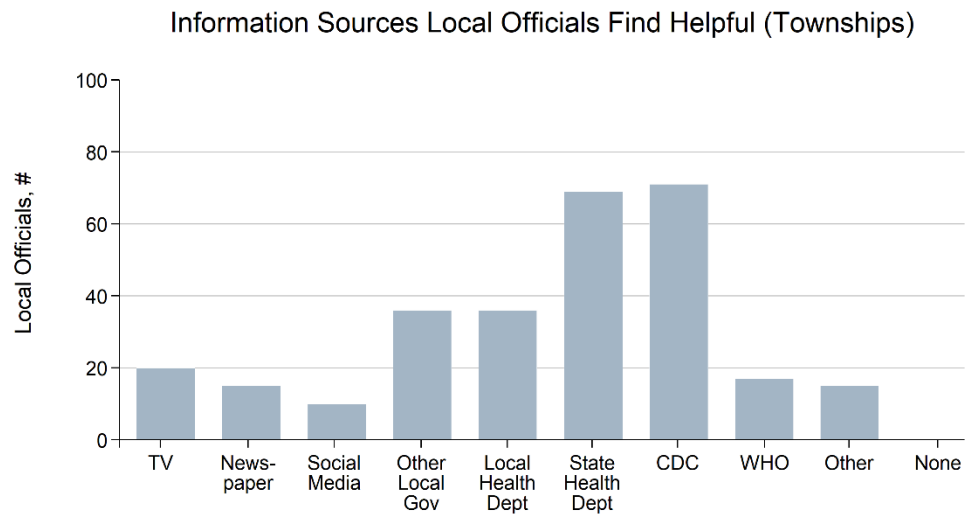


Figure A4.10

Information Sources Local Officials Find Helpful (Documented Case)

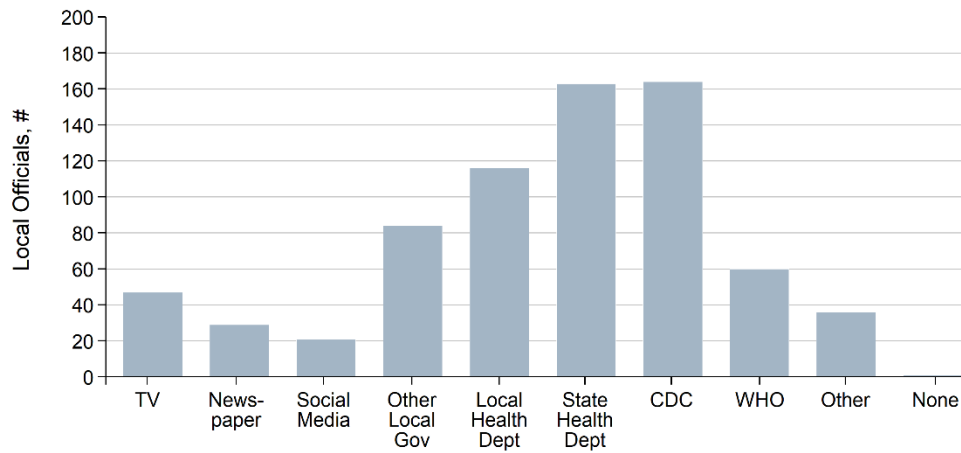


Figure A4.11

Information Sources Local Officials Find Helpful
(No Documented Case)

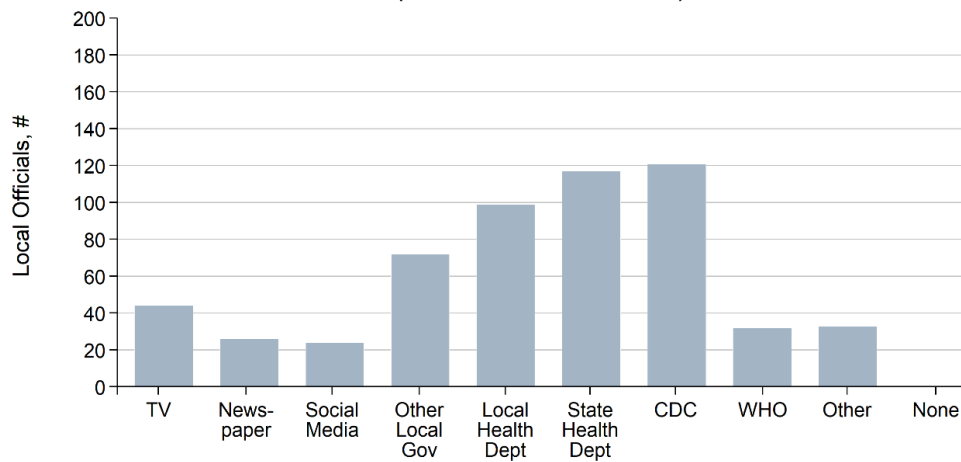


Figure A4.12

Finding 5 (Impacts on Community) by Subgroup

What is the one thing you wish your state and federal government knew about how COVID-19 is (or isn't) affecting your community?

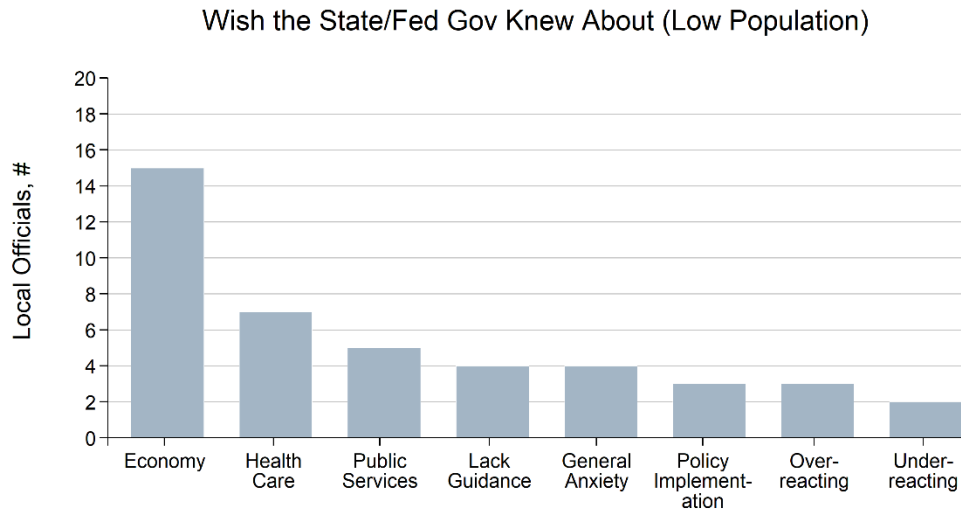


Figure A5.1

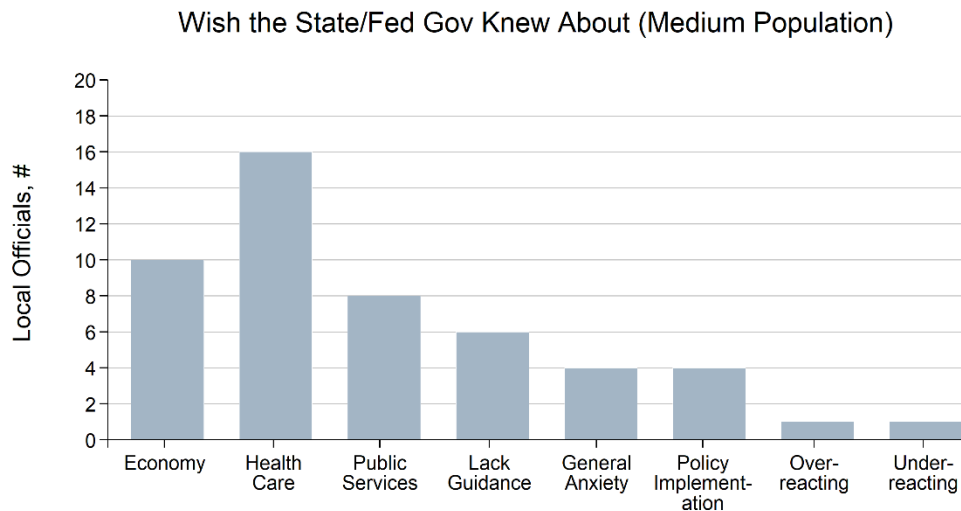


Figure A5.2

Wish the State/Fed Gov Knew About (High Population)

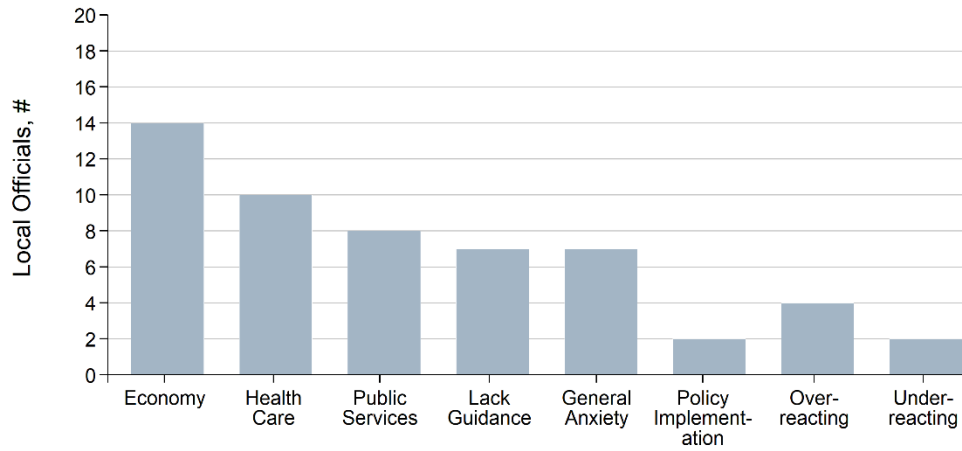


Figure A5.3

Wish the State/Fed Gov Knew About (Less Urban)

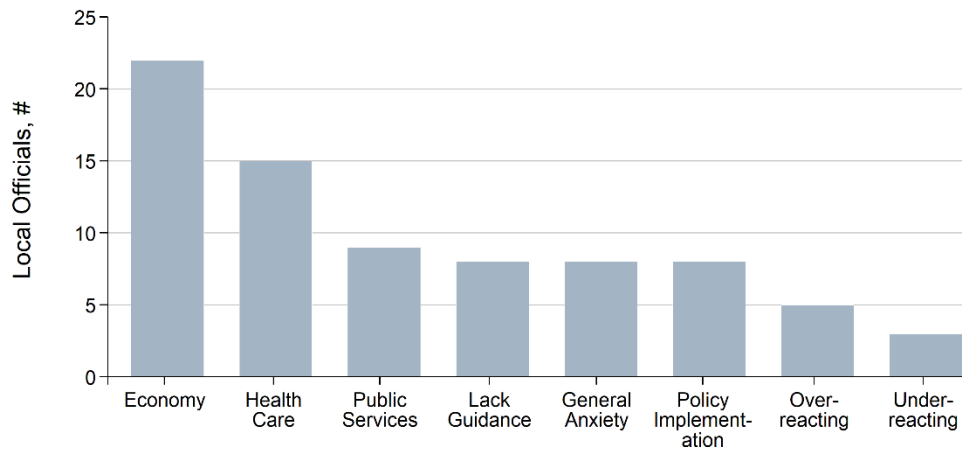


Figure A5.4

Wish the State/Fed Gov Knew About (More Urban)

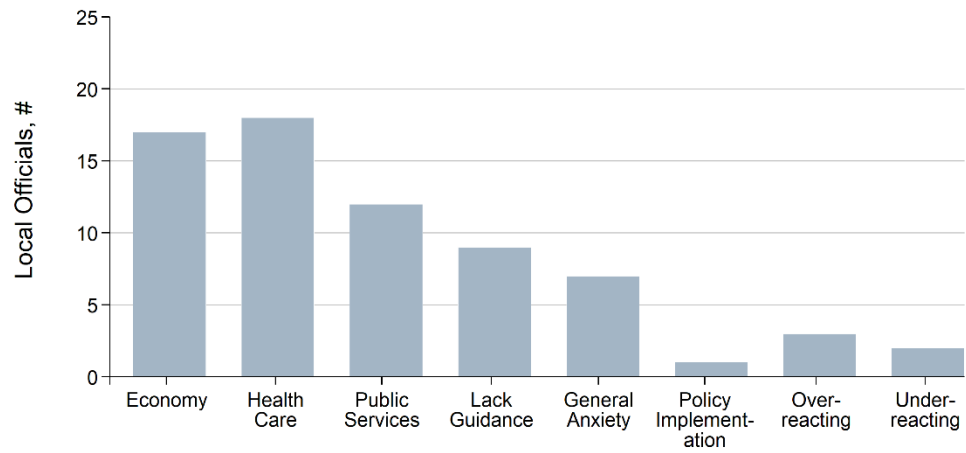


Figure A5.5

Wish the State/Fed Gov Knew About (Appointed Officials)

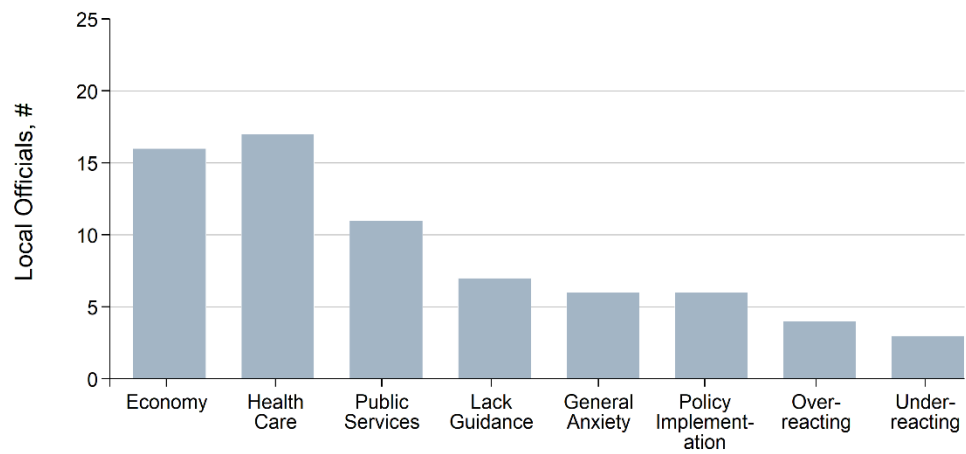


Figure A5.6

Wish the State/Fed Gov Knew About (Elected Officials)

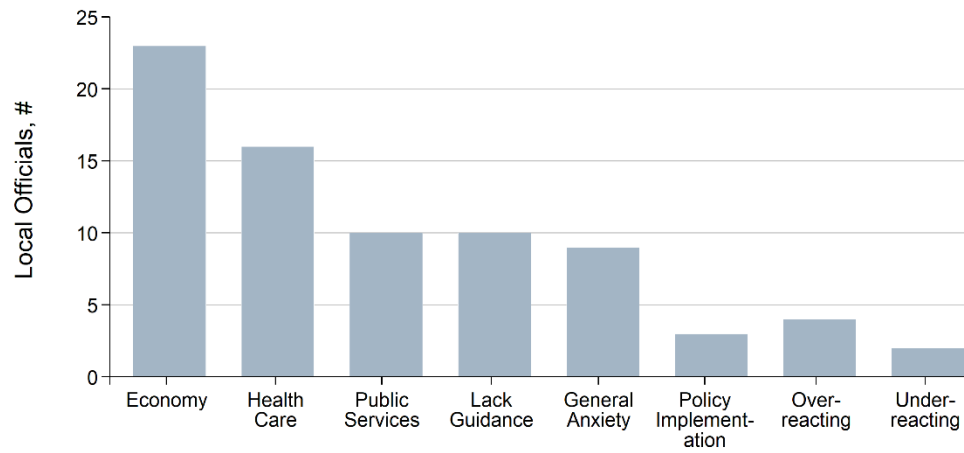


Figure A5.7

Wish the State/Fed Gov Knew About (Townships)

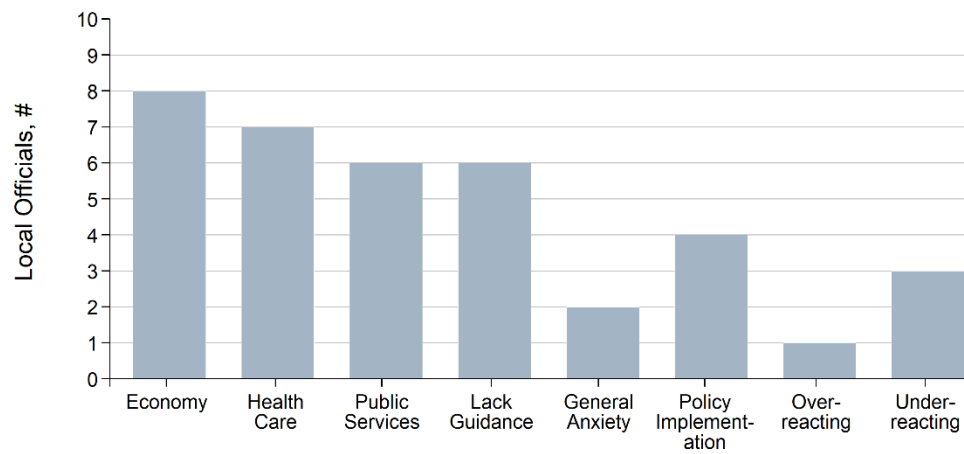


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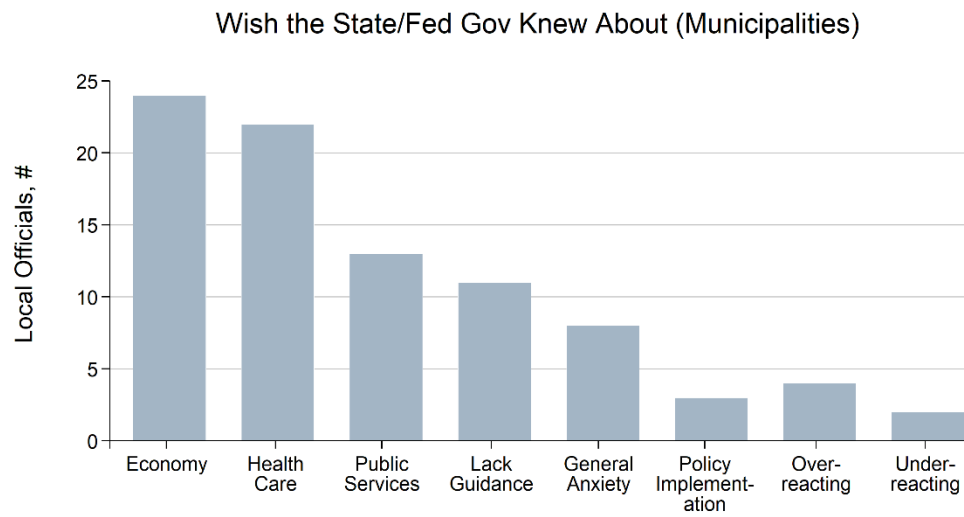


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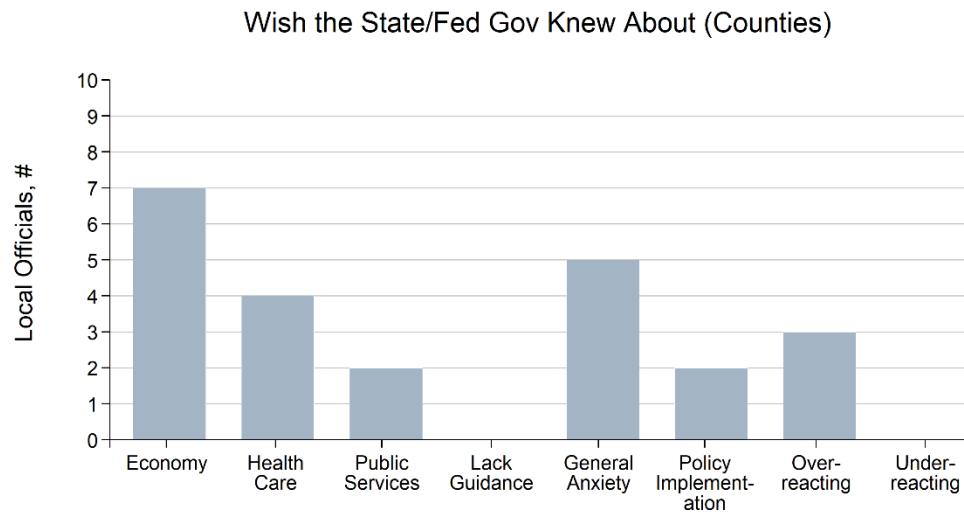


Figure A5.10

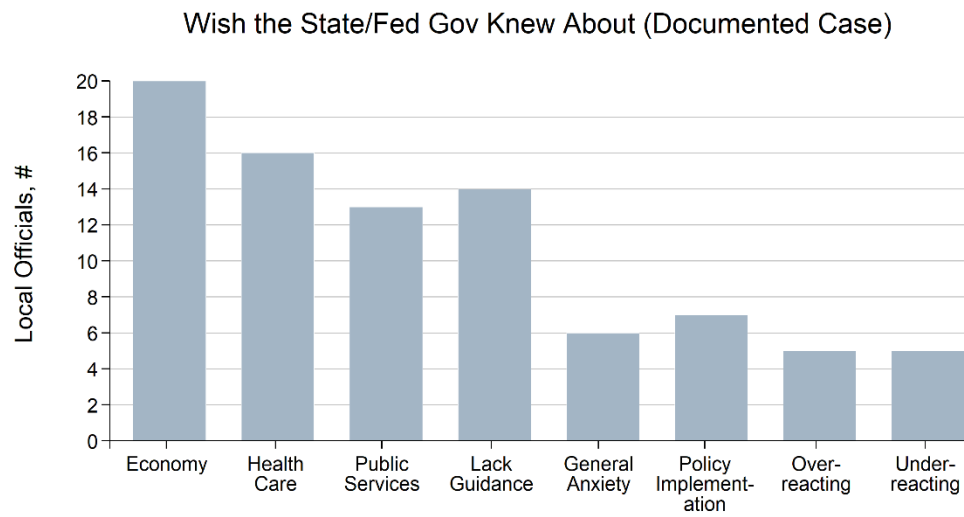


Figure A5.11

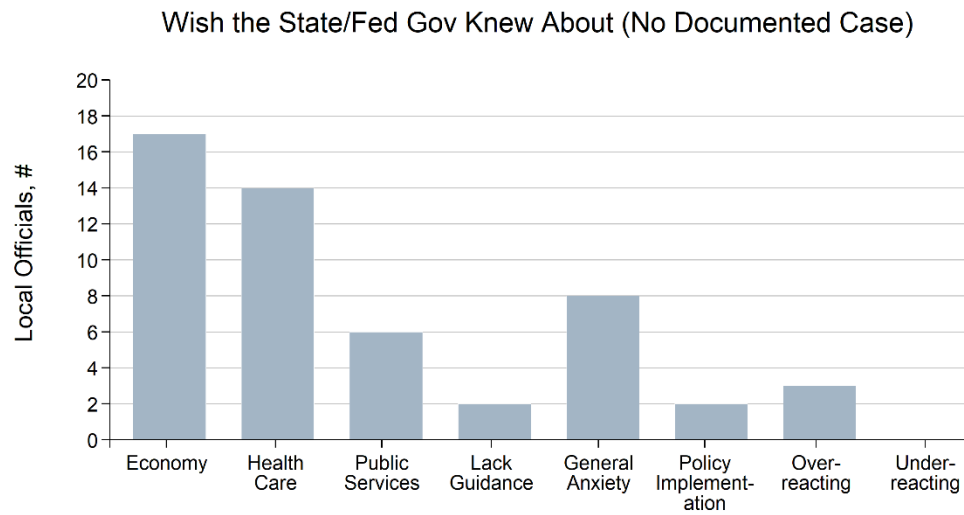


Figure A5.12