Summary Highlights: Using Content Analysis
To Identify JO CO Citizens' Public Safety Values: 2012 - 2015
(Public Outreach 5.4)

Justice System & Public Safety Services Study Design: 2015 (Study Design)
Appendix A. Issues, Supporting *Study Design*
Appendix A3. Measures Representing Public Opinion
Appendix A3.1 Letters To The Editor As A Measure of Crime Salience
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Public Outreach 3.1 Publicly Identified Problems/Issues
All the above publications, the basis for this publication, are web published at the following web page:
http://www.hugoneighborhood.org/justicesystemexploratorycommittee.htm.

Mike Walker & Jon Whalen, Members
JS&PSS Exploratory Committee (Committee)
Hugo Neighborhood Association & Historical Society

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For the last four years the authors of *Study Design* have been reading letters-to-the-editor (LTTE) in *The Grants Pass Daily Courier* (TGPDC) on the Josephine County (JO CO) Justice System & Public Safety Services (JS&PSS) Problems/Issue. Their conclusion is that LTTE in the TGPDC represent legitimate public opinion on the public safety issue, including several other informal public opinion mechanisms.

- Registered JO CO Voters Voting.
- LTTE in the TGPDC.
- Guest Opinions in the TGPDC.
- News Articles in the TGPDC.
- Special Interest Groups.
- Public Written Communications (i.e., informal public comments on the evolving Study Design and formal public comments on the Analysis of the Public Situation).
- Arguments in the JO CO Voters' Pamphlets.
- Informal Telephone Interviews.

What Is Public Opinion? Public opinion is recognized for its power, but it is ever changing, hard to measure, harder to predict, and nearly impossible to control. Public opinion is the aggregate of individual attitudes or beliefs about certain issues or officials, and it is the foundation of any democracy.

The formal academic study of public opinion is relatively new but the practical study of public opinion is not new at all. Governments have paid attention to public opinion as long as there have been governments. The methods of learning public opinion fall into two general classes: informal and formal methods. The informal are very important but they do not involve any formal explicit research methodologies, in the sense of random surveys of targeted populations.

Study Design focuses on how opinions held by members of the public get translated into public policy - primarily through the "informal" methods. Initially, the authors were a bit uneasy because in general they thought there was a preference for formal survey designs to determine public opinion. This was because of the public's greater acceptance of "scientific" findings, and funding sources' preference for proposals that reflect "rigid," "scientific" procedures, including

for the selection of data sources. However, research found scientific controversy on both sides of the issue, and that there were a number of advantages in utilizing LTTE as a data source.

Newspapers have experienced a significant increase in the number of LTTE they receive, providing a good source of information about citizen concerns. Unlike most formal and informal survey questionnaires, which provide data from specific responses via fixed-alternative or closed-ended items, content analysis (CA) of LTTE provide data from subjects who have utilized an open-ended format to volunteer their concerns. LTTE can provide first hand insights into one's attitudes and perceptions regarding the saliency of crime as a central concern of their immediate environment. Since the task of writing a letter involves an expenditure of time and effort, a LTTE should reflect a reader's strong concern about a particular matter. Most citizens have an opinion about crime and justice, and LTTE provide insights regarding the prioritizing of community issues, as well as the identification and articulation of specific crime concerns among letter writers.

The concerns raised about using LTTE as a data source have been considered in *Study Design*. The authors found that studies focused on several areas of concern: the demographic representativeness of letter writers; the representativeness of letters as a barometer of public opinion; the motivational components of letter writing; and the potential screen of newspaper editors in publishing LTTE. In response to these criticisms it was observed that an explanation for these concerns may lie with the narrowness of the studies, many of which focused on politically orientated letters. Moreover, assessments of information validity have been based upon the degree of writers' conformity to mainstream political ideologies. They also found that mindfulness of a self-selection process in writing LTTE and the demographic bias of letter writers has not discouraged use of letters as a data source. Finally, more recent studies have challenged earlier contentions that letter writers are emotionally and politically extreme, and that LTTE are an unreliable measure of public opinion.

LTTE are not intended to be representative measures of public opinion; rather, they were measures representing public opinion.

Content analysis is a research tool used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within texts or sets of texts. Researchers quantify and analyze the presence, meanings and relationships of such words and concepts, then make inferences about the messages within the texts, the writer(s), the audience, and even the culture and time of which these are a part. Texts can be defined broadly as books, book chapters, essays, interviews, discussions, newspaper headlines and articles, historical documents, speeches, conversations, advertising, theater, informal conversation, or really any occurrence of communicative language. To conduct a CA on any such text, the text is coded, or broken down, into manageable categories on a variety of levels--word, word sense, phrase, sentence, or theme--and then examined using one of CA' basic methods: conceptual analysis and/or relational analysis.

Conceptual Analysis And Relational Analysis (from *Appendix A. Issues*, Supporting Study Design, & *Appendix A3. Measures Representing Public Opinion*). Two general CA categories are conceptual analysis and relational analysis. Conceptual analysis can be thought of as establishing the existence and frequency of concepts most often represented by words of phrases in a text. For instance, say you have a hunch that your favorite poet often writes about hunger.

With conceptual analysis you can determine how many times words such as hunger, hungry, famished, or starving appear in a volume of poems. In contrast, relational analysis goes one step further by examining the relationships among concepts in a text. Returning to the hunger example, with relational analysis, you could identify what other words or phrases hunger or famished appear next to and then determine what different meanings emerge as a result of these groupings (i.e., in this case, the JO CO JS&PSS Problems/Issues).

The authors conducted two pilot experiences identifying the JO CO JS&PSS Problems/Issues with a rough informal conceptual and relational CA. Their analyses were narrower than the final CA analysis, which will be on both the pros and cons associated with the four county levies, and one city sales tax from 2012 - 2015. The pilot analyses were the focused identification of the preliminary issues for why the four county levies failed (i.e., con), as a standalone summary of the problems/issues as viewed by the majority of JO CO citizens.

The preliminary June 14, 2015 JS&PSS issues and July 15, 2015 JS&PSS issues are identified in *Appendix A. Issues* and *Public Outreach 3.1*. The author's July 15, 2015 CA analysis includes the actual portion of LTTE reasons for the 11 issues identified. As an example, the following are six example LTTE reasons (i.e., conceptual analysis) for one of the 11 issues (i.e., relational analysis): *Mistrust in Government Growing: Honesty, Transparency and Accountability.*

- **Mistrust in Government Growing: Honesty, Transparency and Accountability**

- Lack of trust in our elected officials is the greatest single factor affecting Josephine County. Trust is built on truth-telling, transparency and accountability. "Can you trust the government? Ask an Indian?"
- Brought up a great idea to solve our public safety problems other than raise property taxes. . . At a recent budget committee meeting, a commissions said that he feels that our roads are more important than our safety issues. . . I do believe that this is the commissioners' way of punishing homeowners for voting down the levy.
- Transparency. Ideally, people make decisions based on facts. Facts to support levies are in short supply.
- I believe this means that the money collected under this measure may or may not do what has been "promised." I believe many others feel as I do: We're tired of politicians' promises and tired of their using our money at their discretion. Our county taxes may be low, but they do not include fire protection – and it's not cheap.
- To promote a more palatable funding source for public safety consider taxing methods that will "even the load" rather than relying on homeowners to shoulder the entire burden. . . . A multi-faceted approach to spread the burden will improve the chances of public approval. During promotion of a new levy, be honest on how the money will be spent. If it's to go into the general fund in any way, forget it! This is public safety money and must be restricted to that use. Additionally, what happens to the money currently being allocated to public safety? After a levy passes, does this money get reallocated to other uses, therefore becoming a windfall for the county to use elsewhere? It's OK, but if so we need to know. Educate us honestly about byproduct benefits from a successful levy.
- But today, many poor people of Josephine County are tired, they are more than poor and they are unable to breathe free because the county fat cats and all of their deep-pocketed buddies harass and threaten the poor with levy measures year after year. Then when we can't pay the new taxes which they impose on us, they then threaten us with property seizure.

The July CA analysis is being updated with vetted baseline facts/inventories of public opinion. Understanding is made more difficult with all those noisy facts when truth isn't always something as clear and unquestionable as desired. It is believed that a step in the right direction is for different publics, that don't trust each other to share vetted, or checked, information. This is one of the purposes – for citizens to speak a common language, to solve problems, not to spend

valuable time and energy discussing potential conflicting facts. For that purpose, a web page of "*listening*" to baseline information, vetted facts, and disputed facts, has been started for consideration in *Study*. Three sets of this baseline information will be used in the new CA being developed by a graduate student at Oregon State University (OSU; see JS&PSS Press Release 2015-1, *What Do Josephine County Citizens Really Think about Public Safety?*).

Data Set 1. Over 800 LTTE from 2012 - November 7, 2015.
Data Set 2. 10 guest opinions covering, pro and con, the 4 county levies and 1 city sales tax from 2012 - 2015.
Data Set 3. All the arguments, pro and con, published in the 5 voters pamphlets for the levies and tax proposal.

After four failed public safety levies and one sales tax, in as many years, the public could be excused if it feels exhausted. What does the public really think about public safety?

On November 7, 2015 Nathan Davis, a 2nd year graduate student at OSU, formally settled on tiering his Master's of Public Policy (MPP) Essay research paper to the JO CO JS&PSS) public safety issue. Davis is in the OSU School of Public Policy which is part of the OSU Rural Studies Program. The focus on citizens as the decision-makers will be the core of his MPP paper, which is recording and analyzing the public's opinions, pro and con, across their range of values, through a CA research method. The OSU CA is scheduled for completion in the Spring of 2016.

The Committee mightily wanted to assist Nathan in the CA conceptual analysis, or the coding of words, from the three data sets, and in the relational analysis of identifying the range of issues. However, vetted independent research is the goal of *Study Design,* and to eliminate any unintended bias from the Committee, it has not been involved in the CA research project, and has no idea how close the new list of public safety issues will be to its July 2015 list of 11 preliminary issues. It has to have major differences, for no other reason then that the task was different.

The criticism of using LTTE as a major element of understanding public opinion, because of potential newspaper bias in screening, is legitimate. However, the bottom line is that, if it occurred, little can be done. It is history; it is hoped this bias was minimal. However, the major reason for confidence is the relatively large data base over a period of four years, and the CA focus on all sides of the problems/issues, pro, con, and in between, minimize the potential of missing LTTE written, but not published.

In summary, the authors identify LTTE, guest opinions in the TGPDC, arguments in voters pamphlets, and quotes of public opinion in news paper articles as the most credible source for informal public opinion reasons identifying the JO CO JS&PSS Problems/Issues.

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