

## Policy Brief 2009:02

By Michael Hattery and JoAnn Lindstrom

## Local Governments in New York State: A Profile of Chief Elected Officials

### Introduction

In the summer of 2009 the Center for Local Government at Binghamton University conducted a survey of New York State's chief elected officials. The survey was sent to town supervisors, village and city mayors and the chairs of county governing boards. All 1,604 chief elected officials in New York State were included in the survey. Five hundred and sixty-six responded resulting in a 35% response rate<sup>1</sup> (for more information about the survey and survey respondents see *2009 Survey of New York's Local Chief Elected Officials: The Details*).

The survey was designed to collect information in four key areas: (1) the characteristics of local elected officials, (2) local policy issues of importance to local elected leaders, (3) the training needs and preferences of these leaders, and (4) local government capital planning practices. This policy brief, the first in a series on the survey results, focuses on the first area and provides profile information about New York State's chief elected officials.

### Chief Elected Officials: Who Are They?

The survey results provide insights into five important characteristics of local elected officials: (1) length of tenure in office, (2) previous local government experience, (3) their status as a full or part-time government employee, (4) compensation for their service and (5) the age distribution of those serving as chief elected officials.

### Tenure in Office

Figure 1 shows the years of experience of current chief elected officials in New York State. Almost half (46%) have served in their current office for less than five years. Thirty percent have served five to ten years and the remaining 24% have served more than ten years.

<sup>[1]</sup> Polling results are often reported with a qualification noting the degree of accuracy or margin of error. Based on the respondent sample size of 566, the total percentage estimates reported in this policy brief have a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5% (at a 95% level of confidence) around the reported percent figure. The margin of error for reported subgroups (e.g. village mayors) are generally larger and depend on several factors including the size of the subgroup and the size of the subgroup total population.

Figure 1: Tenure in Current Office, 2009

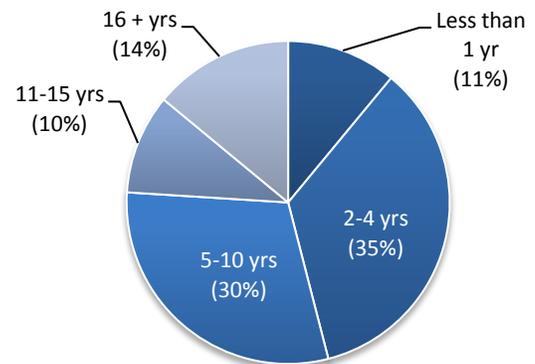
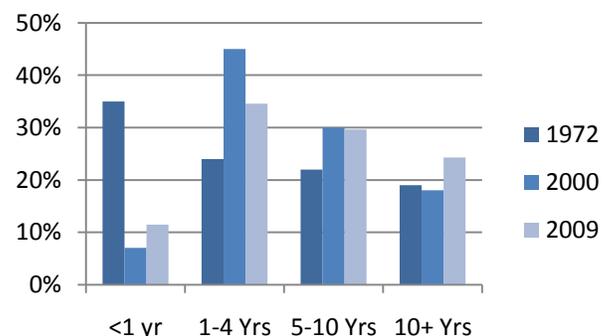


Figure 2 compares the current profile of years of experience for chief elected officials with figures from two earlier surveys conducted in 1972 and 2000.

In 1972 the number of newly elected office holders with less than a year of experience in their current office was much larger than in 2000 or 2009. Data from all three time periods indicate that, over time, at least half of our chief elected leaders have been in their leadership position for less than five years. The percent of more experienced cohorts (serving more than 5 years) appears to be increasing over time.

More chief elected officials have stayed in office longer than reported in 2000. The total number of individuals who have served more than ten years in their current position increased 6% since 2000.

Figure 2: Years of Experience in Current Office, 1972-2009

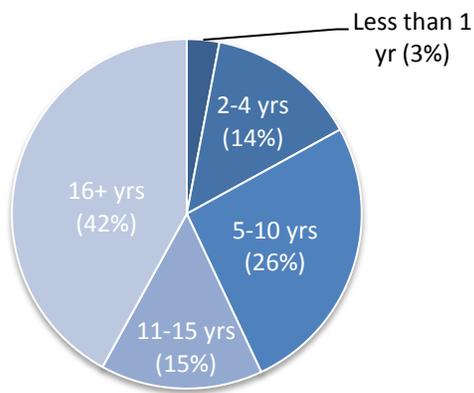


Sources: Hiser, M. (1972), Hattery, M. (2001).

## Previous Local Government Work

In general, chief elected officials bring a wealth of previous experience to their current position. While nearly half (46%) have served for less than five years in their leadership position (see Figure 1) only 17% of the leaders in our sample have less than five years of total local government experience as an elected or appointed official (see Figure 3, below). At the other end of the spectrum, while only 14% of local chief elected leaders have served in their current position for 16 or more years, 42 percent have 16 or more years of total experience.

Figure 3: Total Years in Government Service



Many of those surveyed have previously held an appointed local government office (46%). A smaller number (26%) had served specifically as appointed members of planning or zoning boards of appeals. If we look separately at county, city, town and village respondent officials, the percentage of those previously holding appointed positions vary, but not substantially.

## Full-time or Part-time

A strong majority (77%) of local chief elected officials consider their elected role a “part-time” position. Among the different municipal types, a higher proportion of city mayors and county board chairs (38%) view their work as full-time. Town supervisors (26%) and village mayors (8%) responded in substantially lower percentages that their municipal work was a full-time endeavor.

		Full-time	Part-time	Refused
Municipal Type	City & County	38%	62%	0%
	Town	26%	73%	1%
	Village	8%	90%	2%
Total		22%	77%	1%

If we look at this response by the size of the municipality, we find that as population size increases, the percent of officials who view their position as full-time increases as well.

Population Categories	Full-time	Part-time
0-2,499	11%	87%
2,500-4,999	18%	82%
5,000-9,999	23%	77%
10,000+	55%	42%

## Compensation of Chief Elected Officials

Local officials were also asked to indicate their level of annual compensation for their local government service. Table 1, below, indicates that about one-fifth (21%) of local chief elected officials receive less than \$5,000 for their service and over a quarter receive more than \$20,000. More than half (55%) receive somewhere in between five and twenty thousand dollars. The population categories in the table provide more detail regarding how this compensation varies as the size of local government increases. In general, compensation increases with population size. For example, 71% of officials serving municipalities with fewer than 2,500 residents receive \$10,000 or less and 79% of officials serving local governments with populations exceeding 20,000 residents receive \$20,000 or more in annual compensation.

Population Size	Annual Local Government Compensation			
	Under \$5,000	\$5,000 to \$10,000	\$10,000 to \$20,000	Over \$20,000
0-2,499	38%	33%	20%	9%
2,500-4,999	10%	31%	47%	12%
5,000-9,999	10%	12%	36%	42%
10,000-9,999	2%	5%	21%	72%
20,000 or more	0%	0%	21%	79%
Total	106 (21%)	119 (24%)	145 (29%)	136 (27%)

Table 2 provides detail on how compensation varies by municipal class. Chief elected officials in cities and counties on average receive higher compensation than towns and villages. This pattern is related in large part to the general differences in population size across the municipality types or classes (See Table 3 in *2009 Survey of New York's Local Chief Elected Officials: The Details*).

Municipal Type	Annual Local Government Compensation			
	Under \$5,000	\$5,000 to \$10,000	\$10,000 to \$20,000	Over \$20,000
City	7%	7%	27%	60%
County	0%	0%	43%	57%
Town	10%	25%	32%	33%
Village	53%	25%	18%	5%
Total	106 (21%)	119 (24%)	145 (29%)	136 (27%)

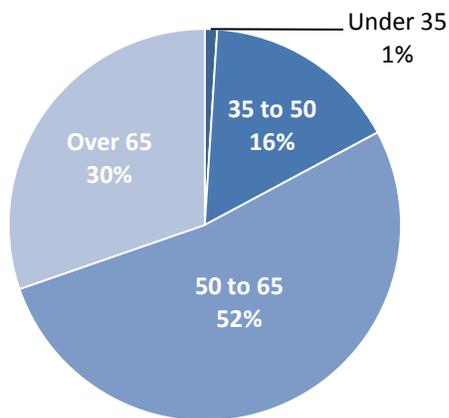
Higher levels of compensation for chief elected officials are strongly related to their status as full-time elected officials as shown in Table 3. Of the 112 officials indicating that their position was full-time, more than three quarters (76%) indicated that their annual compensation was over \$20,000.

	Annual Local Government Compensation				Total
	Under \$5,000	\$5,000 to \$10,000	\$10,000 to \$20,000	Over \$20,000	
Full-time	4%	7%	13%	76%	112 (100%)
Part-time	26%	29%	34%	12%	388 (100%)
Refused	50%	0%	0%	50%	6 (100%)
Total	106 (21%)	119 (24%)	145 (29%)	136 (27%)	506 (100%)

## The Age of Chief Elected Officials

While 17% of the state's total adult<sup>2</sup> population is over the age of 65, 33% of all chief elected officials fall within this age group. An overwhelming majority (82%) of the local chief elected officials are over 50 years of age, including 85% of all Town Supervisors. Figure 4 shows the breakdown of age for chief elected officials. This general pattern of age distribution is not substantially different when specific municipal type (county, city, town or village) or population size is considered.

Figure 4: Age Distribution of Chief Elected Officials in New York State, 2009



## Summary

While almost half of surveyed chief elected officials have served for less than five years in their current office, most of these officials bring a wealth of other experience with them. In comparing with two previous surveys, we found that at least half of chief elected leaders in all three surveys have held their position for less than five years. A strong majority (77%) of our chief elected officials view their position as part-time public service. Those who view their role as full-time tend to come from larger municipalities, particularly cities and counties. The compensation received by chief elected officials varies substantially and tends to increase with the population size of the municipality they serve in. More than half (55%) of chief elected officials receive between \$5,000 and \$20,000. An overwhelming majority of the local chief elected officials are over 50 years of age.

<sup>2</sup>Adult population is defined as individuals over the age of 18.  
Source: U.S. Census 2000

## References:

Hattery, M. (2001). *2000 Survey of New York's Local Government Leaders: Policy Issues, Training Needs and Technology Use*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Local Government Program.

Hiser, M. (1972). *Survey of Training Needs of Local Governing Board Members in New York (Counties, Cities, Towns and Villages)*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Local Government Program.

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