



www.unc.edu/depts/welfare
University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill

**Patterns of Perspectives on Second-Order Devolution:
County Officials, Welfare Reform, and County-State Relations in North Carolina***

Christine Kelleher
cak@email.unc.edu

Susan K. Webb
swebb@email.unc.edu

Deil S. Wright
dswright@mindspring.com

Department of Political Science
(27599-3265)

and

Odum Institute for Research in Social Science
(27599-3355)

University of North Carolina
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

*Paper presented at SECOPA (Southeast Conference on Public Administration) Greensboro, NC, 5-7 October 2000. The authors acknowledge and express appreciation for support from the Office of the Vice-Provost for Research at UNC-CH, the Earhart Foundation of Ann Arbor, Michigan, and the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation of Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Devolution (n.), a passing down through successive stages; a delegating of authority or duties to a subordinate or substitute. (The American Heritage Dictionary)

I. INTRODUCTION: A DEVOLUTION REVOLUTION?

Has a devolution revolution occurred in the United States? Nathan (1996) suggests “major changes” in devolution that may rival the Great Society are occurring while Kincaid (1998) observes that the centralization “hare” greatly outruns the decentralization “tortoise.” Ignoring for the moment whether actual changes justify either of these interpretations, both the Nathan and Kincaid analyses address what is usually referenced as first-order devolution, namely the shifting of authority and discretion from the National government to the States. By way of contrast, this paper centers attention on second-order devolution, the delegation of authority from a state government to its respective county governments.

First-order devolution hit the front pages following the Republican takeover of the Congress in 1994. A centerpiece of congressional devolution was the welfare reform legislation passed and signed by President Clinton in August 1996. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-193) created block grants in support of the TANF program (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families).

For about forty American states first-order devolution, such as it was, marked the end of the devolution “line.” In these states full and total responsibility for administering TANF rested with the state-level welfare agency. But for ten American states, including North Carolina, local governments (primarily counties) play significant roles in administering welfare and other human service programs. In these states first-order devolution resulted in the following query: How much state-to-local second-order devolution should be permitted or promoted?

In 1997, the North Carolina General Assembly grappled with this question. The legislative process was long, arduous, and contentious. One result, among many, was the presumptive granting of authority to exercise greater discretion in the implementation of TANF, which has been termed Work First in North Carolina.

The statute (Senate Bill 352) creating second-order devolution contained two means or methods of anticipated devolution. One was the authorization of "block grant" funds to all 100 counties implementing the TANF (Work First) program. The second and politically polarized form of devolution was a pilot program that created two categories of counties. One set of counties was called "electing" and another set was termed "standard."

The details by which this legislation passed and the methods by which a small number of counties (21) became "electing" counties are far too complex and convoluted to describe here (Wright, Cartron, and Webb, 1999). Suffice to say that electing counties were authorized, for all practical purposes, to create their own independent welfare (TANF/Work First) programs, including the determination of eligibility, benefit levels, time limits, etc. Virtually the only official constraints on electing counties were that they could not modify or violate national legal or administrative regulations. Thus, the background was set for a statewide "experiment" in second-order devolution.

Given the formal disposition of the North Carolina General Assembly to allow or foster a greater degree of authority in the hands of county officials, what has been response of North Carolina counties?

II. RESPONDENTS, METHODS, AND DATA

This paper is part of a projected long-term research agenda to trace one state's implementation of welfare reform over several years. The *Tracking County Responses to*

Welfare Reform project's research and information gathering for this undertaking took place in two phases. The *first phase* was a questionnaire survey completed in all 100 NC Counties in June, July, and August of 2000. Four county actors have been contacted for their views and opinions. These include: Members of the County Board of Commissioners, County Managers, Chairs of the County Social Services Board, and the County Social Services Directors (DSS Directors). A similar questionnaire will be used to contact County Work First Managers later this fall. These survey results provide critical and previously unexplored information concerning how county-state relationships have changed as a result of welfare reform and the intended devolution of authority to North Carolina counties.

The *second phase* involved 23 in-depth county reports conducted by Faculty Associates from 11 UNC institutions across North Carolina. These studies complement the survey data with a rich, contextual look at the dynamics of "devolving" power to counties. The reports discuss a number of topics related to welfare reform, including the "electing" versus "standard" choice, the differing goals of county officials, the changing county-state relationships, and the shifting responsibilities and workload of county DSS. The in-depth reports were completed in June, July, and August of 2000.

This paper draws primarily on our survey results from the four types of North Carolina county officials. Appendix A provides a copy of the survey instrument. This is an initial overview of the survey data, and therefore we will rely chiefly on descriptive statistics to show patterns in county responses. However, these preliminary results should not be used to infer statistical significance of the variables. The majority of the survey items were evaluated on a 0 to 7 point scale with 0 indicated "none", 1 indicating "low", and 7 as "high." There was also a "Don't Know" option. Two techniques were employed to conduct the surveys. First, we

contacted County Commissioners, County Managers, and County Social Services Board Chairs by mail. We performed at least two mail follow-ups and received response rates of 26% for Commissioners, 59% for Managers, and 65% for Social Service Board Chairs. We contacted the DSS Directors through a web-based version of our questionnaire. Here our response rate was 56%. This information gathering phase is largely completed, but we are still finishing mail and web-based follow-ups of County Managers and DSS Directors. We have county coverage of at least one actor in 99 of the 100 NC counties.

III. WELFARE REFORM: IMPORTANCE, INNOVATION, AND INFLUENCE

The 1997 North Carolina welfare reform legislation was a “devolution experiment” of major proportions. The authority for welfare policy-making was ostensibly shifted from the state to the 100 North Carolina counties. Elected county officials and administrators were faced with the critical challenges of both innovation and implementation. As a result, one might argue that the 1997 reforms have had an enormous and irreversible impact on the provision of social services in the state of North Carolina. Only time will confirm or contradict this contention.

Questions related to this claim were directly explored in the *Tracking Welfare Reform* project. How much attention was welfare reform given in each of the 100 counties in North Carolina? Who was involved in the creation of innovations and the fostering of new ideas for welfare policy and programs? Which county actors were most influential in deciding whether the county would opt for standard or electing county status? Which actors were generally most influential during the entire welfare reform process? Our results demonstrate that not only was welfare reform a pressing issue on the local county agendas in 1997, but that it continues to be an important focal point today. Each set of officials surveyed (Commissioners, Managers, DSS

Directors, and DSS Board Chairs) has had and will continue to have important roles to play in the implementation of North Carolina welfare reform. This section uses the county-level survey data to explore empirically and descriptively the importance, innovations, and influences of welfare reform in North Carolina.

Importance of Welfare Reform

As previously stated, 1997 was a year of paramount importance for welfare in the state of North Carolina. However, even prior to 1997, welfare-related issues were on the minds of many governmental officials. According to aggregate survey responses (see Table 1), prior to 1997, the County Board of Commissioners assigned a moderate level of importance to welfare reform – 4.4 on a 7-point scale. During 1997, when the North Carolina General Assembly passed its major package of reforms, welfare clearly became a more prominent issue on county agendas, rising to a 5.7 level of importance. It is both interesting and significant to note that since 1997, welfare reform has remained an important issue in North Carolina. The assessed level of importance of welfare reform from 1998-2000 was 5.5, only a slight decrease from the heightened awareness during the 1997 peak period.

(Insert Table 1 about here)

An interesting corollary to these findings can be explored by parsing the results by county actor. These figures also are provided in Table 1. Prior to 1997, DSS Directors believed, quite understandably, that welfare reform was more important (at 5.6) than was the case with any other set of county officials. During the 1997 reforms, all groups noted an increased level of importance for welfare reform. DSS Directors again accorded the highest level of importance, but the greatest increase in importance occurred among DSS Board Chairs (from 4.4 to 6.3). All respondents have accorded a continued high level of importance for welfare reform. The

average level of significance given welfare reform in 1997 and before produced two clusters among the four sets of county officials: Commissioners and Managers constituted one pair; DSS Directors and Board Chairs were another pair.

The higher scores of the DSS Directors and Board Chairs can undoubtedly be attributed to their formal positions. Welfare is both a constant and relevant concern for them. We would therefore expect them to be aware of state governmental activities that influence policy formation and implementation. On a more general note, the results reveal that all four sets of actors believe that the County Board of Commissioners, by and large, has taken welfare reform quite seriously. During 1997, however, welfare reform importance was at its peak among all actors. It is interesting to note that this trend did not drop significantly following its 1997 prominence. Even **after** the events of 1997, the assessed importance of welfare reform remained high and substantially above the pre-1997 period.

Innovations and Welfare Reform

To what extent did devolution (North Carolina style) provide opportunities for innovation? In the previous section, our results confirm that welfare reform has been established in North Carolina among major county actors as an important issue. An ensuing logical question is: Have county officials demonstrated the significance of welfare reform by developing new and innovative policies?

A second battery of questions on the *Tracking Welfare Reform* survey enables us to gauge how different county actors judged the state welfare legislation as a springboard for launching innovations. Did devolution lead to innovation, and by whom? Table 2 organizes our survey results. It reports the mean scores in evaluating the extent to which other actors were the source of innovations.

(Insert Table 2 about here)

The general consensus among all respondents is that innovations in welfare reform policy mainly originated from DSS Directors (5.5), DSS Board Chairs (5.4), and Work First Managers (5.5). This is not surprising. These persons are the primary officials directly responsible for implementing welfare policies on a day-to-day basis. The innovation contributions of Commissioners and Managers were smaller at 4.1 and 4.2, respectively. It might be noted, however, that these mean scores are well above the midpoint on the rating scale (0-7). Thus, Commissioners and Managers were not on the fringes or outside “the loop” so far as new ideas and innovation are concerned. Apparently, these two key sets of actors were quite clearly “on stage” in the county welfare reform “play.”

Survey responses by each individual actor confirm these findings. For example, both County Commissioners and County Managers credited the DSS Directors, DSS Board Chairs, and Work First Managers as being greater sources of innovation in welfare reform. They rated their own status in the innovation process to be significantly lower. DSS Board Chairs and DSS Directors, in assessing *their* own innovation levels, responded that they both were more significant sources of new ideas and innovations than Commissioners or Managers in the realm of policy formation and implementation.

Table 3 creates a matrix showing these relationships. If one set of officials (on average) reports another set of officials as being a greater source of innovation than themselves, it is denoted in the chart with a “+” sign. For example, County Commissioners reported that County Managers, DSS Directors, DSS Board Chairs, and Work First Managers were greater sources of innovation than they (Commissioners) were. DSS Directors indicated (on average) that no one else initiated innovations to an extent greater than themselves. County Managers believed three

other actors provided more innovation than they did (DSS Directors, Board Chairs, and Work First Managers), while DSS Board Chairs believed DSS Directors and Work First Managers were the most important source of innovations.

(Insert Table 3 about here)

These results have implications for any discussion of devolution. Devolution, it seems, reaches well beyond the more generalized governmental actors such as County Commissioners and County Managers. Not unexpectedly, it penetrates to and impacts on specialized agencies and officials (such as DSS Directors and DSS Board Chairs) within local jurisdictions. These policy specialists are evidently leaders in generating new ideas and innovations for welfare reform. Elected and generalist administrators tend to defer to or expect that the officials who are most familiar with the programs will be the primary sources of new ideas. This is confirmed by the evident consensus on the locus of the origin of new ideas among the policy specialists – namely, DSS Directors, Board Chairs, and Work First Managers.

Influence on a Welfare Reform Decision: Electing v. Standard

The decision to be a standard or electing county was at the core of the debate associated with welfare reform implementation in North Carolina. We posed a set of questions about the extent to which various actors played influential roles in this important 1997 decision. Recall that only a limited number of counties could choose the electing option, and the choice had to be made within the span of 3-4 months. These results are provided in Table 4, where the mean scores indicating levels of influence are reported. The first column indicates that DSS Directors were the most influential actors in the decision process (6.0), followed closely by DSS Board Chairs (5.7), and then by the County Commissioners (5.6).

(Insert Table 4 about here)

When we separate the responses for the four different actors, it is clear that while the aggregate results suggest that DSS Directors had the greatest level of influence, the self-evaluation by DSS Directors was somewhat different. They did not see themselves as the dominant force in the standard versus electing county decision, but instead as more of a peer player in the choice process. They viewed the Commissioners as exercising the greatest influence (5.9). The DSS Board Chairs, County Commissioners, and County Managers, however, all rated DSS Directors as the most important force in the standard versus electing county decision.

Our results suggest that the standard versus electing county decision was not easy. Each actor had distinct perceptions about who had the greater influence on the decision-making process. Commissioners, Managers, and DSS Board Chairs all responded that DSS Directors had the greatest influence. DSS Directors, however, slightly disagreed, evaluating themselves as slightly lower forces of influence. The relationship between actors might be considered as an interactive, multi-actor exchange where influence is broadly distributed and variously perceived.

Continuing Welfare Reform Influences

The “peak” moment of welfare reform importance came in 1997 following the General Assembly legislation and the consequent county decisions on standard versus electing status. An assessment of the **ongoing** influences by various actors on welfare reform since that time offers a unique opportunity to explore further dynamics of policy implementation. We asked county officials to judge the normal influence that various actors have had on welfare reform during the past two years. Table 5 reports our descriptive findings in the form of mean influence scores.

(Insert Table 5 about here)

Clearly, the DSS Directors were perceived by all, as well as each set of respondents, to have had the greatest continuing influence on welfare reform. The mean scores for DSS Director influence ranged from 5.8 (by County Commissioners) to 6.7 (by DSS Board Chairs). The DSS Board Chairs had the second greatest influence over welfare reform in the past two years. County Commissioners and County Managers were viewed as having relatively *low* levels of general influence on welfare reform at 4.4. These results provide further evidence for the argument that devolution is often carried out by the policy specialists (as opposed to policy generalists) who are directly responsible for the day-to-day implementation.

When we separate our respondents by position, some interesting patterns emerge. County Commissioners and County Managers again seem less directly connected to the on-going process of welfare reform. In a pattern similar to innovation scores, Managers and Commissioners uniformly rated themselves as the least influential actors in the ongoing welfare reform process. DSS Directors and Board Chairs both acknowledged that their own levels of influence were substantially higher and accord lesser influence to Commissioners and Managers. Indeed, the DSS Directors and Board Chairs assigned average levels of influence to Managers and Commissioners that were at least as high (if not higher) than the Managers and Commissioners allocated to themselves. In brief, the “specialists” in welfare perceive the two sets of “generalists” as having as much or more influence than the generalists confer upon themselves.

Further Observations about Importance, Innovation, and Influence

The survey questions probing levels of innovation and influence *also* asked respondents to assess the impact of various other external governmental and non-governmental actors such as

the public-at-large, the business community, non-profit organizations and associations, and members of the General Assembly. The responses are outlined in the following table.

	1997 Standard v. Electing Decision	1998-2000 Continuing Influence
Public at-large	3.3	3.3
Business Community	3.3	3.6
General Assembly	4.2	3.9
Non-Profit Organizations / Associations	3.3	3.6

Note: Values represent means. Responses were scored from 0 to 7, with 0 = no influence, 1 = low influence, and 7 = high influence.

It is interesting to note that almost uniformly, wherever such actors were mentioned, the assessed level of influence for each was significantly lower than the influence levels for the previously discussed governmental actors. It is also surprising to see how uniformly unimportant the impact of the general public seems to be as a source of innovation and influence to the implementation of welfare reform. This result is one avenue for further exploration and more detailed research.

The *Tracking Welfare Reform* survey identified importance, innovation, and influence as three specific areas for detailed analysis. Across the board, the results indicate that DSS Directors and DSS Board Chairs were the **leaders** in implementing the “devolution revolution” as it occurred in North Carolina counties. First, DSS Directors and Board Chairs believed more than anyone else that the County Boards of Commissioners gave welfare reform a high level of importance before, during, and after the 1997 reforms. Second, DSS Directors, DSS Board Chairs, and Work First Managers were generally credited with being the greatest sources of new ideas and innovations for welfare reform. Third, survey respondents claimed that DSS Directors,

DSS Board Chairs, and County Commissioners were the most influential actors in the standard vs. electing county decision.

Finally, the results from the general assessment of influence during the past two years on welfare reform reveal the central roles of both DSS Directors and DSS Board Chairs. Clearly, these two actors, in cooperation with many others, gave operational meaning to welfare reform in North Carolina counties. As perceived leaders in innovation and influence on welfare reform, they were key actors in giving second-order devolution the focus, shape, and content that it took in North Carolina. It is to that devolution topic and county-state relations that we now turn.

IV. COUNTY-STATE AUTHORITY RELATIONSHIPS

The 1997 welfare reform legislation in North Carolina provided a unique opportunity to view changing county-state relationships. In particular, we are interested in whether state legislative changes resulted in any real decentralization of policymaking authority to the counties. We first examine the past, present, and future desired level of county policymaking authority. Next, we discuss the level of state welfare reform mandates. Finally, we assess, from the perspective of county-level elites, whether their county did or did not gain greater authority to make welfare policy decisions.

Past, Present, and Future Authority

Before North Carolina's Work First program began (in 1995-96) the average level of welfare-related county policy-making authority was judged at the midpoint – 3.4 on a 0-7 scale. As depicted in Figure 1, this general perception of county officials rose about a point to 4.6 by the summer of 2000. Thus, county elites, in the aggregate, viewed the 1997 state legislation as providing more decision-making authority in the hands of county officials.

Equally or more interesting are the results from a question that asked county officials whether they desire additional welfare-related policy-making authority in the future. Here, the mean for all actors surveyed increased to a preferred level of 5.4. This moderately high mean score suggests that county officials desire more welfare-related policy autonomy in the future and that officials feel the past shifts in policy-making authority have not gone far enough. Figure 1 puts these questions together and presents the stair-step pattern from past to present to future in terms of actual and desired authority. From an overall standpoint, then, county officials across the state express progressively expansionist views about the exercise of authority involving welfare.

(Insert Figure 1 about here)

Dividing aggregate responses by type of county official reveals somewhat different perspectives on county welfare-related authority. Figure 2 charts the mean responses of the County Commissioners, County Managers, DSS Directors, and Social Services Board Chairs for past, present, and future authority. All seek additional welfare-related policymaking power in the future and rank this desire higher than their past degree of policy making authority. DSS Directors, however, show an exceptional pattern. On average, the DSS Directors are less desirous of additional authority than other county actors. They are the only set of actors we surveyed who, on average, do not opt for expanded authority from the state.

This cautionary stance by DSS Directors, which is also apparent in the 23 case studies, poses several interesting questions concerning preferences for additional policy making authority. For example – how much authority is too much for policy specialists at the county level? How do current levels of county resources (both personnel and monetary) play into a policy specialist's desire for additional policy making authority? Figure 2 also highlights a

divergence of DSS Directors and Social Services Board Chairs concerning future authority. As suggested earlier, DSS Directors and Board Chairs were considered leaders in the implementation of welfare devolution; however, these results suggest that the groups diverge concerning the degree to which they seek additional county policy-making power. More generally, the average responses of DSS Directors highlight the mixed and possibly ambivalent viewpoints that different actors bring to bear on questions surrounding second-order devolution.

(Insert Figure 2 about here)

We previously indicated that County Commissioners and Managers, as policy generalists, hold similar views on many welfare related issues. This conclusion holds true in queries about past, present, and future desired level county policymaking authority. Both of these county officials perceived their past policy-making authority as moderate, but well below that of DSS Board Chairs and DSS Directors. Figure 2 displays the sharp upward and precisely parallel pattern in the averages for Commissioners and Managers' responses over the present and future time periods.

Do county officials want more policy-making authority for programs other than Work First? The mean for all respondents is moderately high – at 5.7. County Commissioners showed the strongest support – at 5.9 – for additional policy-making authority followed by the County Managers (5.6), County Social Services Board Chairs (5.6), and then DSS Directors (5.2). From these results we conclude that county officials would like to expand their policy-making capabilities and would seek additional “devolution” of policy authority from the state. The moderately high support for more authority indicates that county officials have not been dissuaded by their county’s experience with welfare reform. This suggests that the “costs” associated with additional county authority are worth the “benefits” to county officials.

Interestingly, the breakdown of the electing and standard counties on these same questions provides few differences. One would expect to find significant differences in the descriptive statistics of the electing and standard counties, especially concerning the present and future levels of policy-making authority in their counties. After all, electing counties were allowed the most authority to change, innovate, and use new county authority in the experiment devised by NC's state legislature. However, on average, the differences in the present level were quite small with electing counties at 4.6 and standard counties at 4.5.

These responses are surprising and support the notion that electing and standard counties perceive their present level of policy-making authority as essentially the same. For future levels, electing counties scored a 5.5 and standard counties a 5.4. In addition, electing and standard counties scored similarly, on average, concerning their desire for more policy-making authority on other issues. The project's 23 in-depth reports throw some light on this conundrum. These reports indicate that the welfare plans and implementation of welfare reform in many electing counties ended up quite similar to the standard counties. As a result, we would expect similar scores on perceived policy-making authority.

State Mandates

State mandates generally and unfunded mandates in particular have often been called the bane of local government officials' existence. Like border or range wars in the old Wild West, the battle over the "boundary" between state and local authority has generated many "wars," of which state mandating is one that has gained recent prominence. At the national level the Unfunded Mandates Reform Act of 1995 (P.L. 104-4) was intended to constrain what might be termed "first-order" mandating. No such constraint exists, of course, to restrict second-order or state-to-local mandating.

We now turn to the topic of state mandates, or requirements, attached to welfare reform. The tie between increased policy-making authority and state mandates is an intriguing one that raises several questions. Does the state (or state officials) fear diversity among county policies when authority is devolved? If this question can be answered by looking at the level of mandates accompanying new county policy-making authority, then it seems the answer to this question is “Yes”. Two-thirds of all respondents (67%) claimed that over the past five years there has been an increase in state mandates on Work First programs in their county. This indicates that the state devolved new authority to counties but it came with mandates attached. During a meeting of the executive board of the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners in March 2000, several Commissioners commented about the restrictions placed on county policies and policy makers by mandates.

We probed the mandate issue one step further and asked the individuals who felt there was an increase in mandates, the degree to which these mandates were unfunded by the State. The aggregate mean was 4.8 and there were no notable differences in the means for each set of officials. These preliminary results indicate that a high percentage of county officials perceive that the mandates are largely unfunded by the state. If these results hold, they indicate that a fiscal burden appears to accompany increased county authority in policy making. The same March (2000) meeting of the Commissioners’ Association Board of Directors highlighted concerns about the state shifting (“devolving”) financial obligations onto county budgets. This points to an important avenue for future research. We plan to investigate the distribution of monetary costs that accompanies new welfare-related policy-making autonomy at the county level.

We further questioned the county officials to explore if there was a link between increased mandates and increased county flexibility to adjust to the mandates. We found moderate support (4.1), on average, for the notion that county-level flexibility has helped the counties adjust to state mandates. Thus, as Table 6 displays, these new mandates are, to a certain degree, easier to accommodate due to increased county-level flexibility.

(Insert Table 6 about here)

Table 6 also reveals that the results concerning county flexibility differ considerably by actor. DSS Directors are a full two points higher, on average, than County Commissioners and Managers in their assessment of county flexibility. As policy specialists, DSS Directors may be the best judge of changes in welfare and it is possible that Commissioners and Managers are less aware of the impact of new county authority in the day-to-day business of making welfare decisions. We conclude, in general, that county officials view their flexibility at a level higher than would be expected. County actors generally feel their options are significantly constrained by state mandates, but concede that greater flexibility has allowed more adjustments to mandates than would be typically anticipated.

Assessment and Attribution of Authority Shifts

Did the General Assembly devolve any meaningful policy-making power to the counties? Our analysis shows mixed results. We asked the county actors if, in their judgment, their county had gained greater authority in making welfare policy decisions during the past three years (1997-2000). We found a total of 165 (51%) of the respondents claimed more authority, while a surprisingly high 118 (36%) respondents answered that there has been no real gain in policy-making authority since the welfare reform legislation of 1997. These results raise several questions. Did the legislature not go far enough in its devolution efforts? Were county welfare

plans too similar to the state DSS's implementation guidelines so that no devolution was experienced? Is there a relationship between perceived devolution (greater county authority) and electing county status? Is there a relationship between perceived devolution and innovation(s), especially the locus or source of innovations? We plan to further explore this topic in future research.

Authority is not automatically, autonomously, or anonymously devolved. Someone or some set(s) of officials must act to change the power and authority configurations between the state and counties. We therefore furthered questioned the 51% of all respondents who reported devolved authority to identify the actors who contributed to the county's increased authority. The raw frequencies are shown in Figure 3. The highest number of respondents pointed to the NC General Assembly, followed by their County DSS Director, and then State DSS. Ranking lower were the County Commissioners, Work First Managers, and County Managers. Table 7 divides responses by county official and provides further leverage in understanding and assessing who pushed for more county autonomy on welfare issues. These results highlight the paired similarities in responses between the Commissioners and Managers and between the DSS Directors and Board Chairs. DSS Director and Board Chairs gave higher marks to the General Assembly, County DSS, and State DSS. Commissioners and Managers were scored uniformly low in securing greater autonomy.

(Insert Figure 3 and Table 7 about here)

The predominance of the General Assembly in these questions was expected because the most vocal proponents for the electing and standard county experiment were, at least initially, several key state legislators. However, the relatively low placement of the County Commissioners does not match our expectations or the analyses provided by our project's

several case studies. These reports pointed to the importance of Commissioners in pushing for more welfare autonomy, especially among the electing counties. This issue merits careful further analysis.

V. CONCLUSIONS and FURTHER RESEARCH IDEAS

Devolution (n.), a passing down through successive stages; a delegating of authority or duties to a subordinate or substitute. (The American Heritage Dictionary)

Has a devolution revolution occurred in North Carolina with respect to county-state relations? The 1997 decentralization of welfare policy-making authority has provided an appropriate venue for an empirical assessment of the degree that devolution, as defined above, has occurred in North Carolina. The *Tracking Welfare Reform* Project collected opinion data from county officials to track not only the perceived success of devolution, but also the desire for additional policy-making authority as well as more general effects of the 1997 legislation on welfare implementation. While the findings in this paper are only preliminary, they have challenged us to explore further the many implications of devolution. The concept of devolution is not as simply understood as the above definition might lead one to believe. We plan to turn our immediate attention to an analysis of the complexities of this definition, including such topics as the effects of organizational change, policy formation and implementation, and the connection between county officials and policy outputs.

In this paper, various other themes surfaced that merit additional attention and research. First, a definitive distinction emerged between policy “specialists” (DSS Directors and DSS Board Chairs) and policy “generalists” (County Commissioners and County Managers). The policy specialists seemed to be most salient to and involved with welfare reform, while the policy generalists seemed somewhat more removed from the process. A further dissection and

explanation for these trends would be quite interesting, especially since little work has focused on the roles of Social Service Board Chairs and Directors in North Carolina.

Second, since welfare reform exploded onto the political agenda in 1997, its importance in the counties of NC has remained quite high. Currently, welfare reform is almost at the **same** level of importance as it was when the reforms were being pushed through the General Assembly. What has enabled it to remain such a salient topic for county officials? Providing an answer to that question has extremely important implications for all areas of public policy implementation. Perhaps it is the continued importance of welfare reform that has been a driving force behind its observed successes.

A third area of future research involves a more detailed examination of the differences between standard and electing counties. While one would probably assume that sharp differences exist between these counties, our first glances at the data have revealed less significant distinctions than originally hypothesized. With sharper analytical foci, however, it may be possible to better examine the influence of standard versus electing counties with response to authority relationships and policy outcomes.

A more general question that needs to be explored in great detail involves an assessment of whether or not devolution really did occur in North Carolina with respect to welfare reform. From our basic descriptive statistics and in-depth case studies, it appears that devolution did occur. However, much more of a systematic approach must be taken in order to examine not only devolution, but perceptions and proposals regarding county-level authority.

Various other broad research questions can also be raised with respect to our analysis, including issues related to public opinion, the state of the economy's impact on welfare caseload reduction, poverty, and the transition from welfare to work. Clearly, many avenues have yet to

be explored. In the coming months, we plan to investigate these and other topics of interest as we struggle to understand the complexities of devolution in North Carolina.

V. APPENDIX A – THE SURVEY INSTRUMENT

VI. REFERENCES

(Surveys available at panel and references available upon request)