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Study Title: Accountability Management at the Street-Level: The impact of formal and informal accountability on the child welfare program performance in Virginia

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Summary or Abstract:

Performance management is prevalent in public organizations and public services, but the push for performance may harm genuine accountability. One critical reason for this is that little [is known] about the scope and effect of actual accountability requirements in the public management field. This dissertation furthers our understanding of accountability and performance by distinguishing them as different dimensions of public management. Building on this distinction, the effect of accountability (A) on performance (P) and accountability management's (M) mediating role in the relationship between accountability and performance were investigated empirically in child welfare service [agencies] in Virginia. The study had two stages: interviews and a survey [administered to child welfare services case workers and supervisors in local departments of social services]. The qualitative content analysis of the interviews provides several noteworthy findings. Accountability can be understood more with the terms: explanation, expectation, people/society, action/decision, and values. Conversely, performance can be considered more in line with the terms: productivity/outcome, timely work, team playing, learning, and strategy. The incompatible characteristics found between accountability and performance highlight problems behind performance-driven accountability. The survey portion of the study, built upon the interview data, also presents notable findings: (1) Accountability affects performance both directly and indirectly, and (2) accountability management matters in the relationship between accountability and performance. While the empirical literature on the A → P link focuses on the effects of competing accountability requirements, [this] study examines dimensions of the accountability requirements' impact. Formal (e.g., legal) as well as informal (e.g., ethical) accountability requirements are critical for ensuring higher performance. Compliance strategies implicitly connect informal accountability requirements with work performance. The findings support the study's argument that accountability should be stressed for better performance and highlight the need for the careful design of accountability mechanisms in social services. Ultimately, this study may serve as a foundation for future efforts to establish more appropriate accountability and performance arrangements.

Abstract and Dissertation: <http://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/handle/10919/23743>