

Consumerist Studies Garbage Removal Services

A 1981 survey in the Tucson area shows that people with garbage-removal service provided by the city government are more satisfied with the service than people served by a private garbage-removal company. Satisfaction with both sources is high.

Such consumer-satisfaction studies can supplement cost comparisons in considerations about how community services should be provided, says Dr. Julia Marlowe. She conducted the Tucson survey and teaches in the consumer studies program at the UA School of Home Economics.

In these budget-cutting times, many local governments in Arizona and other states are looking hard for ways to trim expenses. One move eyed by some is to let private enterprise handle some public services, such as garbage removal or fire protection.

These two services are already provided privately in some communities. Studies have shown that private provision is often more cost-effective than public.

"However," says Marlowe, "cost is not the only consideration." So she compared publicly and privately provided garbage collection in terms of consumer satisfaction with the service.

Tucson made a good location for her study because, while the city government provides garbage removal within city limits, private firms do the job in some comparable neighborhoods just outside the city line.

Of interest in light of the cost-effectiveness studies done elsewhere, Marlowe found that, in greater Tucson, public garbage removal satisfies consumers more than private removal does. Also, cost figures she got from providers of the service indicate that, in this case, public service costs less. Private garbage service in the Tucson area is provided on an individual-subscription basis rather than the city-contract basis that some studies have found more efficient.

For her survey area, Marlowe selected six pairs of census tracts according to their population density and income. For each type of neighborhood (for example, medium density with low income), two tracts were paired for comparison, one with public garbage service and one with private.

Marlowe and her helpers interviewed, by telephone, adults in 532 randomly chosen households in the selected neighborhoods.

The survey checked not just overall satisfaction with the service provided, but also satisfaction with some specific aspects of the service. Among the 13 separate aspects included in the questioning were: noise made during collection, size and weight limitations, cost of collection, frequency of collection, and cleanliness of the site after the pickup.



Dr. Julia Marlowe.

Lumping the results from all six types of neighborhoods shows that people with public garbage removal were more satisfied with their service than those with private removal in all 13 aspects of the service.

Taking each of the six types of neighborhoods separately, public removal got higher satisfaction ratings than private in every aspect in all but two of the neighborhood types. In high-density neighborhoods with medium incomes (the only type of high-density neighborhoods surveyed), and in low-density, low-income neighborhoods, private service got higher ratings than public in some aspects of service. However, none of these exceptions was statistically significant.

"In general, residents appear fairly satisfied with garbage removal service in the metropolitan Tucson area," says Marlowe.

The private firm serving the areas outside the edge of Tucson city limits is SCA, a company that provides sanitation services in many areas of the United States. Both SCA and the City of Tucson remove residential garbage with the same frequency: twice a week except holidays.

SCA offers private collection by subscription, with monthly rates, as of November 1981, of \$6.10 to \$8.85 (depending on where the customer agrees to leave garbage cans for pickups). Garbage collection by the City of Tucson is financed by general city revenues. City sanitation officials told Marlowe in November that garbage removal costs \$2.25 to \$2.50 per household per month, though that figure may exclude some expenses, such as gasoline.

Both the SCA fee and the city estimate are well below national averages for garbage removal costs, Marlowe points out. Also, SCA's costs include billings, taxes and profits that the city does not have to pay. In some U.S. cities where private firms provide garbage-removal service, the local government itself contracts with the firm for the service. Studies have found that, in general, this arrangement results in lower costs than the individual-subscription basis. Direct consumer billing is eliminated because the service is financed by taxes.

Marlowe notes that billing procedures might be related to consumer attitudes in her Tucson survey. "City residents do not associate their service with the cost of collection, but private residents do every month as they pay their garbage collection bill," she says.

However, even among the SCA customers, cost was not the aspect of service they rated most unsatisfactory. They rated it tenth out of the 13 aspects included in the survey. People served by the city rated cost about the same: eighth out of the 13 aspects. "If costs were greater, it probably would have been ranked lower," says Marlowe. Both groups rated noise as the least satisfactory aspect of service.

She suggests several reasons for the lower cost of garbage collection in the Tucson area than in most other U.S. cities: good weather, access to low-wage labor and the sense of competition provided by the presence of more than one provider.

Marlowe does not try to pull from her Tucson findings a generalization that public garbage removal is necessarily more satisfactory than private provision in any other situations. Rather, her project shows how consumer satisfaction can be measured, and suggests the value of such measurements in aiding public decision-making. Currently, she is analyzing results from a survey of consumer satisfaction with public and private fire-protection service.