



## Crafting accountability policy: Designing offices of inspector general

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### Abstract

Offices of Inspectors General (OIGs) promise increased accountability from governmental actors. OIGs do so by monitoring governmental programs and operations and providing their findings to legislative or executive decision makers and/or the public. These offices have enjoyed a particular popularity in the United States in the last 40 years; however a close examination of these OIGs demonstrates that, particularly on the state and local levels, there is vast variation in their designs. Using both original qualitative and quantitative data this paper examines the extent to which OIGs on the state and local levels vary from an archetypal OIG. The paper demonstrates that while design variations occur as the new institution is adopted in new places, sometimes deviations from the archetype are attributable to an intentional effort, based on a recognition of and reaction to the potential power of an OIG structured according to a theoretically ideal model, to restrict the office in ways that have the potential to undercut effectiveness.

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In the United States, government accountability has become a constant concern, or even an “obsession” (Dubnick & O’Brien, 2011) of elected officials, citizens and public managers alike (Dubnick & Frederickson, 2011a). Offices of Inspector General (OIGs) have emerged as one solution many policymakers have gravitated toward in order to address this concern. This bureaucratic unit, originally established in a military context, has spread across the country and through federal, state, and local levels of government. While virtually none existed in a civilian context before 1976, now two-thirds of the 50 states and many localities have these offices.

Given this explosion in numbers of OIGs, one might assume that policymakers are committed to increased government accountability. Yet a close examination of these OIGs, particularly on the subnational level, demonstrates a wide variation in how they are organized, what authority they have, and which activities they pursue. This variation demonstrates policymakers’ ambivalence to issues of accountability, as data collected by the author show that design components deemed essential for an archetypal OIG are often altered. In some cases, there appears to be a deliberate debilitation of the structure of new OIGs, which reveals that policymakers may be of two minds about the OIG concept and accountability in general.

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## 1. Materials and methods

This study employs a mixed methods approach, using both quantitative and qualitative data to inform the conclusions. The preliminary step was to identify existing state and local OIGs, as this data had not yet been compiled by any source. The OIGs were identified through a series of database and internet searches, including Lexis Nexis (looking for any state statute or regulation that mentioned an IG), state websites (such Kansas.gov), Google and Bing (searching for the name of the state and the term “inspector general” in the same document), and the membership lists of the National Association of State Auditors, Comptrollers, and Treasurers, and of the Association of Inspectors General (AIG).<sup>1</sup>

A search for OIGs yielded a total of 159 of these units, including 109 (69%) at the state level, 47 (29%) OIGs at the local level, and three (2%) multijurisdictional OIGs. From each of these OIG, data was collected through a combination of an on-line survey, using Qualtrics electronic survey software, follow-up telephone interviews, and a review of OIG websites. In the online survey, a number of questions about the offices’ formation, activities, and evolution were asked.<sup>2</sup> A total of 59 OIGs responded to the survey, for an overall 37% response rate, comprising 42 (71% of 59) responses from state-level OIGs (including the OIG for Washington, DC), 16 (27% of 59) responses from local-level OIGs, and one (2% of 59) multijurisdictional OIG. The survey data was supplemented with website reviews and telephone calls to the OIGs that had not responded to the survey; however, not all of the information addressed via the survey was collected, but rather, just basic facts about these OIGs, such as the date of their creation and their key design features, were captured. This resulted in basic information for 91 OIGs, which, when combined with the 55 full survey respondents, yielded data from 150 OIGs, or 94% of the total, including 103 (69% of 150) state OIGs (including the Washington, DC, OIG), 44 (29% of 150) local OIGs, and three (2% of 150) multijurisdictional OIGs.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews, both in person and by phone, were conducted of 35 IGs, two deputy IGs, and one general counsel to an agency subject to OIG oversight. These interviews were conducted in eight states: Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Virginia. States were selected to maximize variation on key variables of: (1) corruption, measured by the average annual number of federal public corruption convictions from the state from 2002 to 2011; (2) size of government, measured by state and local FTE per 1000 of state population for the year 2010 from the [US Census’s Census of Governments \(2010a, 2010b\)](#); and (3) political culture, measured by the Ranney index of partisan dominance in each state’s governing institutions ([Ranney, 1976](#)). The data obtained from each interview was augmented with a review of the following: the OIG’s website, any statutory provisions and legislative history, and a review of related news articles, collected from the America’s News database, the *New York Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. These documents along with the transcripts of the interviews were coded in Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis software.

### 1.1. What is an office of inspector general?

In order to understand what an OIG is and its role in government accountability, it is important to understand government accountability itself. Accountability, as the term will be used in this research, is “a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgment, and the actor may face consequences.” ([Bovens, 2007](#)). In the governmental context, the actor is a government official, and the forum is an entity, or entities, with authority to direct the actor or otherwise impose consequences, such as a chief executive, a legislative body, a court, or the public.

An OIG is a bureaucratic unit dedicated to helping hold governmental actors accountable by providing unbiased information about the governmental actor’s conduct to the relevant forum. OIGs typically are set up to oversee a particular government agency or, sometimes, multiple agencies within a designated jurisdiction. Commonly, OIGs are independent of the agencies they are charged with overseeing, so that their oversight is not influenced by the agency being overseen. (As we shall see, state and local OIGs vary considerably in this degree of independence.) An OIG provides accountability by monitoring the agency or agencies under its jurisdiction and producing reports about

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that although each office included in the data set uses the term “inspector general” in some way, not all offices are officially titled Office of Inspector General. For example, in the data set, there is an Office of Inspector General Services and an Office of Legislative Inspector General. For the purposes of this paper, each of these offices is referred to as an OIG and the head of the office as an IG.

<sup>2</sup> The survey was pretested by two former IGs, but not cognitively pretested ([Willis, 2004](#)), and as such, survey questions may be open to looser interpretation than is ideal.

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