

IMPLEMENTING SEISMIC SAFETY POLICY:
THE CASE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN CALIFORNIA

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Accomplishing seismic safety policy objectives requires the successful implementation of action oriented programs. While there remains some disagreement about specific relationships between earthquake generated forces and the subsequent performance of certain structures, there is no disputing the general proposition that the severity of damage and the extent of human loss from an earthquake is affected by the way in which seismic safety policies are implemented prior to the event. It is evident from a growing body of academic literature that public policy implementation is almost always problematic.¹ Mere adoption of public policies does not guarantee the consummation of the envisioned goals. Many intervening factors stand ready to block, delay, or detour implementation efforts. Seismic safety policies are as prone to these implementation problems as any other public policy. Indeed, it is at least arguable that seismic safety policies are more susceptible than many other policies.

This paper focuses on some important aspects of efforts to implement seismic safety policies in California. The process by which seismic safety policies are adopted, as well as the substance of the policies, will be accepted as a given in this paper. More specifically, this paper draws upon research conducted in thirteen local California communities. The thirteen jurisdictions were chosen so that they would include areas that had suffered damage from a recent (within ten years) earthquake as well as those areas that have not had a damaging earthquake within the adult life of those persons currently holding positions of influence within the local government. Small cities, suburbs, and large central cities were chosen.²

For several reasons, local governments are an appropriate focal point in an examination of seismic safety policy implementation. Although local governments have no formal standing in the American constitutional structure, they have assumed a vital place in the arrangement of governments. Not surprisingly, the initial growth of local government importance coincided with the dramatic population growth of cities in the first several decades of this century. Suburban development after World War II accelerated efforts to increase local independence--financial and political--from state governments; these efforts were moderately successful. To some extent, the increased financial independence from state government has been achieved only by an increased financial dependence on the federal government. Today most cities function within a constitutional and political structure in which the states (and the federal government) establish boundaries or outlines for what is acceptable policy. Within these boundaries some policies must be adopted by local governments, while others remain subject to local discretion. Local governments always