Michigan local government preparations and concerns regarding the 2020 U.S. Census

By Natalie Fitzpatrick and Thomas Ivacko

This report presents the opinions of Michigan’s local government leaders regarding the upcoming 2020 U.S. Census, including their confidence in the potential accuracy of the count both locally and at the state level, assessments of groups within their jurisdiction that may be difficult to count, and any local actions currently being taken to boost census participation among residents. These findings are based on statewide surveys of local government leaders in the Spring 2019 wave of the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS), with a comparison to the Spring 2010 wave of the MPPS.

Key Findings

- Based on responses to the Spring 2019 wave of the MPPS, only 15% of Michigan local officials are very confident the 2020 U.S. Census will produce an accurate count in their own jurisdiction, although another 64% are somewhat confident.
  - Confidence in the upcoming census count is lower in rural jurisdictions than in more urbanized places, and is lower in jurisdictions with larger minority populations compared to those with less racially-diverse communities.
- Local officials’ confidence in the statewide accuracy of the pending census is even lower, with just 5% very confident it will be accurate for Michigan overall.
  - Even among officials who are very confident there will be an accurate 2020 Census count in their own jurisdiction, only 28% are very confident in the statewide count.
- Thinking about specific types of residents in their own jurisdiction, more than one-third of local officials are concerned about counting non-homeowners (43%), residents with a second home (39%), and residents with little or no internet access (34%).
  - About a quarter are concerned about counting elderly residents (29%) and residents living in poverty (24%).
  - About 60% of local officials from Upper Peninsula and Northern Lower Peninsula jurisdictions are concerned about counting residents with a second home.
- As of spring 2019, just over one-third (35%) of Michigan local governments report they are currently planning actions to encourage their residents to complete their census forms in 2020.
  - This relatively low number may be due in part to the timing of the survey, which was fielded a year before the 2020 Census is set to launch; previous reports from the MPPS during and after the 2010 Census were substantially higher.
  - As of spring 2019, the most commonly-planned actions among local governments for 2020 are direct communications to residents (17%) and collaboration with other organizations (17%) to boost resident participation.
Background

The upcoming 2020 U.S. Census includes a number of changes to prior census processes, which have led to some increased concerns about the possibility of undercounts. For the first time, the census will rely primarily on online responses. As a result, the Census Bureau also plans to hire fewer enumerators, expecting to hire 350,000–375,000 enumerators, compared to over 500,000 during the previous decennial census in 2010. Some stakeholders worry that these changes, combined with demographic shifts that may make the U.S. population harder to count, could increase the risk of miscounts, particularly among historically undercounted populations (e.g., African-Americans, Hispanics, children under the age of 5, non-homeowners, etc.). In addition, the proposed addition of a question about citizenship (which was ultimately disallowed by the U.S. Supreme Court) added to the concerns about potential undercounts when this issue was under consideration during the spring of 2019.

Here in Michigan, the Urban Institute estimated that the undercount statewide could be up to .56% (approximately 56,000 residents), with undercounts among African-Americans and Hispanics as high as 3.5%, and among young children as high as 5.6%. The consequences of an undercount could include the loss of one of Michigan’s 14 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, as well as decreases in federal aid for various programs such as Medicaid, Medicare, food stamps (SNAP), and Community Development Block Grants, as well as infrastructure and education funding.

In June 2019, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer established a statewide “Complete Count Committee,” which will include the Governor, Lt. Governor, and state senators and representatives, as well as officials from nonprofits and community groups. This committee will work to ensure all Michigan residents participate in the 2020 Census, and will include outreach to specific “hard to count” communities.

At the local level, the City of Detroit, which had the lowest 2010 Census participation rate among major cities nationally (64%), plans to hire hundreds of workers to canvas neighborhoods and encourage census participation. Other local governments are also beginning preparations to ensure their residents are accurately counted, including educating residents, creating or joining a “Complete Count Committee,” helping to recruit local census enumerators, and building partnerships with other leaders and organizations.

To learn more about how these issues impact communities across Michigan, the Spring 2019 MPPS asked local government leaders across the state about their jurisdiction’s preparations, if any, for the census, and about their current confidence in the accuracy of the 2020 Census count.
Few Michigan local officials are very confident about how accurate the 2020 Census count will be in their own jurisdiction

The Spring 2019 MPPS asked local officials how confident they are that the 2020 Census count will be accurate in their jurisdiction. Given the importance of the census for political representation, redistricting, and allocation of federal resources across and within states (estimates show that Michigan could lose $1,800 in federal aid for each person not counted), the goal should be very high confidence. However, just 15% of local officials statewide are very confident that there will be an accurate count in their jurisdiction (see Figure 1a). Meanwhile, 64% are somewhat confident, 12% are not very confident and 2% are not confident at all.

Confidence in the accuracy of the upcoming census count is significantly higher among officials who describe their jurisdiction as urban, where 31% are very confident and 53% are somewhat confident. Among those who describe their jurisdiction as mostly urban, 21% are very confident and 63% are somewhat confident. By comparison, among officials from mostly rural jurisdictions, 15% are very confident while 67% are somewhat confident. Finally, confidence is lowest (and uncertainty highest) among officials from rural jurisdictions, where just 13% are very confident and 65% are somewhat confident.

In addition, local leaders from jurisdictions with larger minority populations are less likely to be very confident there will be an accurate 2020 Census count in their jurisdiction, compared with officials from less racially-diverse jurisdictions. Based on 2010 U.S. Census data that groups Michigan communities by their racial composition, only 12% of local officials from jurisdictions with large minority populations (greater than a 30% non-White population) are very confident the 2020 Census count will be accurate in their jurisdiction, while 64% are somewhat confident, and 21% are not very confident or not confident at all (see Figure 1b). High levels of confidence are most common among officials from jurisdictions with a 10%-30% non-White population, where 20% of local officials are very confident. In jurisdictions with a very small non-White population (0-10%), 15% of local officials are very confident and just 12% are not very confident or not confident at all.

Looking by jurisdiction size, officials from mid-sized jurisdictions (those with 5,001–30,000 residents) are most likely to be very confident (about 22%) that the 2020 Census will be accurate in their community. Meanwhile, officials from smaller jurisdictions, as well as from the largest jurisdictions (those with more than 30,000 residents) are less likely to be very confident (see Figure 1c).

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a Because the U.S. Census allows residents to select multiple races, for the purposes of this analysis, only residents who did not select “White” are categorized as non-White.
Many Michigan local officials are concerned about accurately counting non-homeowners and residents with a second home in the 2020 Census

Past research has shown that certain groups are more likely to be undercounted in the decennial census, including Black people, Native Americans living on reservations, Hispanic/Latinx people, children under the age of 5, adults ages 30 to 49 years old, people renting households, and others. With the shift towards online self-response in the coming 2020 Census, there is also increased concern nationwide about accurately counting people who lack internet access.

The MPPS asked local officials whether they were concerned or not about specific groups of residents that might be hard to count in their own jurisdiction. As shown in Figure 2, more than one-third of local officials statewide are concerned about accurately counting non-homeowners (43%), residents with a second home (39%), and residents with little or no internet access (34%). In addition, about a quarter are concerned about counting elderly residents (29%) and residents living in poverty (24%).

Statewide, fewer local officials are concerned about counting non-citizens (17%), people with limited English proficiency (15%), and children under the age of 5 (12%). However, a relatively high 25% of local officials are unsure which groups in their communities may be hard to count.

The types of residents that local officials are most worried about counting vary by population size of the local officials’ community. For example, among officials from jurisdictions with 10,001-30,000 residents, 65% are concerned about counting non-homeowners, compared to 38% of officials from jurisdictions with fewer than 1,500 residents (see Figure 3).

Officials from larger jurisdictions are also more likely to be concerned about counting residents with limited English proficiency and residents living in poverty compared to other jurisdiction sizes. Meanwhile, among officials from jurisdictions with fewer than 1,500 residents, 44% are concerned about counting residents with a second home, compared to about 36% of officials from larger jurisdictions.

There are also some regional differences. For example, officials from Upper Peninsula (57%) and Northern Lower Peninsula (60%) jurisdictions are much more likely to be concerned about counting residents with a second home compared to officials from other regions. Officials in Southeast Michigan jurisdictions are particularly likely to be concerned about undercounting in a number of other groups, including non-homeowners, elderly residents, and residents with little or no internet access.

For full breakdowns by population category, region, and urban-rural self-identification, see Appendix A.
As of spring 2019, most Michigan jurisdictions had not yet started planning actions related to the 2020 Census

As of spring 2019 (when the MPPS was fielded), 41% of local officials statewide say their jurisdiction is not planning any actions related to the 2020 Census to boost resident participation, and another 24% are unsure (see Figure 4). These numbers, particularly the high percentage who say they don’t know, may reflect the timing of the Spring 2019 MPPS, several months before census data collection is scheduled to start. By comparison, the Spring 2010 MPPS took place during and immediately after the decennial census of that year, and asked local officials whether their jurisdiction had taken any actions related to the 2010 Census. At that time, 53% of local officials said their jurisdiction had taken some kind of action, while 43% said they had not, and only 3% were unsure. This suggests that, currently, at least some of the jurisdictions where the local official is unsure about taking any actions as of spring 2019 are likely to indeed take some actions by the time the census takes place in spring 2020.

As of spring 2019, as shown in Figure 5, the most commonly-planned actions among Michigan local governments to boost resident participation in the 2020 Census include direct communications to residents (planned by 17% of jurisdictions) and collaboration with other organizations (17%). In addition, 14% report they are planning to provide space in local facilities in which census workers can work or be trained, 12% are planning to run and/or participate in “Complete Count Committees,” and 11% are planning to boost the number of local residents working as census enumerators. Despite concerns about counting residents with little or no internet access, just 5% of jurisdictions indicate they are currently planning to provide or facilitate kiosks/laptop stations, etc., for residents to use in filling out their census forms.

Michigan’s larger jurisdictions are more likely to report already planning each of these actions. For example, among the largest jurisdictions, 46% are planning to collaborate with other organizations and 44% are planning to run or participate in a “Complete Count Committee.” Conversely, half of the smallest jurisdictions are not currently planning any actions, compared to just 17% of the largest. This is not surprising, because larger jurisdictions are more likely to have staff and resources to devote to these types of activities. For breakdowns of actions planned by community population size, see Appendix B.

Jurisdictions that are currently planning actions to encourage residents to complete their 2020 Census forms are significantly more likely than others to be very confident that the census count will be accurate in their jurisdiction. Among these jurisdictions, 23% are very confident there will be an accurate count, compared to just 12% among jurisdictions that have no actions planned (see Figure 6).
Local officials have even lower confidence that the 2020 Census count will be accurate for Michigan statewide

Thinking more broadly about the accuracy of the 2020 Census count statewide in Michigan, local officials’ confidence is even lower than it is for the expected accuracy within their own jurisdiction. As shown in Figure 7, just 5% of local officials are very confident the statewide count will be accurate, while almost a third (30%) are not very confident (26%) or not confident at all (4%).

Confidence in the statewide count is closely correlated with confidence in the count within the local officials’ own jurisdiction. However, even among officials who are very confident there will be an accurate 2020 Census count in their jurisdiction, only 28% are very confident in the pending statewide count.
Conclusion

As the 2020 U.S. Census approaches, the Michigan Public Policy Survey finds that just 15% of local leaders are very confident that there will be an accurate count in their jurisdiction, and only 5% are very confident in the pending statewide count. In particular, local officials are concerned about specific hard-to-count populations, particularly non-homeowners (43%) and residents with a second home (39%).

The MPPS finds that, as of spring 2019, many jurisdictions (41%) haven’t yet started planning any actions to encourage residents to fill out their census forms, and a large number (24%) are unsure whether they are planning actions. However, based on similar data collected by the MPPS during the 2010 U.S. Census, many of these jurisdictions may end up taking some kind of action closer to the census period. Among those who are already planning specific actions to boost the accuracy of the count, the most common actions are direct communications to residents (17%) and working with other organizations to increase resident participation (17%).

Notes


Survey Background and Methodology

The MPPS is an ongoing survey program, interviewing the leaders of Michigan’s 1,856 units of general purpose local government. Surveys are conducted each spring (and prior to 2018, were also conducted each fall). The program has covered a wide range of policy topics, and includes longitudinal tracking data on “core” fiscal, budgetary, and operational policies designed to build-up a multi-year time-series.

In the Spring 2019 iteration, surveys were sent by the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) via the internet and hardcopy to top elected and appointed officials (including county administrators and board chairs; city mayors and managers; village presidents, clerks, and managers; and township supervisors, clerks, and managers) from all 83 counties, 280 cities, 253 villages, and 1,240 townships in the state of Michigan.

The Spring 2019 wave was conducted from April 8 – June 10, 2019. A total of 1,364 jurisdictions in the Spring 2019 wave returned valid surveys (68 counties, 225 cities, 186 villages, and 885 townships), resulting in a 73% response rate by unit. The margin of error for the survey for the survey as a whole is +/- 1.37%.

The key relationships discussed in the above report are statistically significant at the p<.05 level or below, unless otherwise specified. Missing responses are not included in the tabulations, unless otherwise specified. Some report figures may not add to 100% due to rounding within response categories. Quantitative data are weighted to account for non-response. “Voices Across Michigan” verbatim responses, when included, may have been edited for clarity and brevity.

Contact CLOSUP staff for more information.

Detailed tables of the data analyzed in this report broken down three ways—by jurisdiction type (county, city, township, or village); by population size of the respondent’s community, and by the region of the respondent’s jurisdiction—are available online at the MPPS homepage: http://closup.umich.edu/mpps.php.

The survey responses presented here are those of local Michigan officials, while further analysis represents the views of the authors. Neither necessarily reflects the views of the University of Michigan, or of other partners in the MPPS.
## Appendix A

Percent of local officials who are concerned specific groups of residents may be hard to count in the 2020 Census, by jurisdiction size, region, and urban-rural self-assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Population &lt;1, 500</th>
<th>Population 1,500-5,000</th>
<th>Population 5,001-10,000</th>
<th>Population 10,001-30,000</th>
<th>Population &gt;30,000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-home owners</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>65%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Residents with a secondary home</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residents with no/little internet access</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>41%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elderly residents</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Residents living in poverty</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-citizens</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People with limited English proficiency</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children under the age of five</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>24%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Upper Peninsula</th>
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<th>West Central Lower Peninsula</th>
<th>East Central Lower Peninsula</th>
<th>Southwest Lower Peninsula</th>
<th>Southeast Lower Peninsula</th>
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<td>Residents with no/little internet access</td>
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<td>30%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>33%</td>
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<td>38%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elderly residents</td>
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<td>24%</td>
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<td>27%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>22%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Residents living in poverty</td>
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<td>22%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-citizens</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>24%</td>
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<tr>
<td>People with limited English proficiency</td>
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<td>19%</td>
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<td>Children under the age of five</td>
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<td>11%</td>
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<td>10%</td>
<td>14%</td>
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<td>25%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>28%</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Rural</th>
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<td>37%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>58%</td>
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<td>Residents with no/little internet access</td>
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<td>11%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People with limited English proficiency</td>
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<td>9%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children under the age of five</td>
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<td>8%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>15%</td>
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</table>
### Appendix B

Percent of local governments that are planning to take actions to encourage residents to complete their census forms in 2020, by population size

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Population &lt;1, 500</th>
<th>Population 1,500-5,000</th>
<th>Population 5,001-10,000</th>
<th>Population 10,001-30,000</th>
<th>Population &gt;30,000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jurisdiction not planning any actions related to 2020 Census</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Direct communications to residents</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborating with other organizations</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing space in local facilities for Census workers/training</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning to run/participate in Complete Count Committee</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>44%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Working to boost number of local residents working as enumerators</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing or facilitating kiosks/laptop stations, etc., for residents</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Previous MPPS reports

New Governor, new evaluations of the direction Michigan is headed among local leaders (August 2019)
Positive working relationships reported among Michigan’s local elected officials (June 2019)
Community poverty and the struggle to make ends meet in Michigan, according to local government leaders (March 2019)
The state of community civic discourse, according to Michigan’s local government leaders (December 2018)
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Michigan local government leaders’ views on medical and recreational marijuana (September 2018)
Rising confidence in Michigan’s direction among local leaders, but partisan differences remain (July 2018)
Seasonal special: Michigan local government officials weigh in on housing shortages and related issues (June 2018)
Approaches to land use planning and zoning among Michigan’s local governments (May 2018)
Workforce issues and challenges for Michigan’s local governments (January 2018)
Local leaders’ views on elections in Michigan: accuracy, problems, and reform options (November 2017)
Michigan local government officials report complex mix of improvement and decline in fiscal health, but with overall trend moving slowly upward (October 2017)
Michigan local leaders want their citizens to play a larger role in policymaking, but report declining engagement (August 2017)
Michigan local leaders’ views on state preemption and how to share policy authority (June 2017)
Improving communication, building trust are seen as keys to fixing relationships between local jurisdictions and the State government (May 2017)
Local leaders more likely to support than oppose Michigan’s Emergency Manager law, but strongly favor reforms (February 2017)
Local government leaders’ views on drinking water and water supply infrastructure in Michigan communities (November 2016)
Michigan local leaders say property tax appeals are common, disagree with ‘dark stores’ assessing (October 2016)
Local officials say Michigan’s system of funding local government is broken, and seek State action to fix it (September 2016)
Michigan local governments report first declines in fiscal health trend since 2010 (August 2016)
Michigan local leaders’ doubts continue regarding the state’s direction (July 2016)
Hospital access primary emergency medical concern among many Michigan local officials (July 2016)
Firefighting services in Michigan: challenges and approaches among local governments (June 2016)
Most local officials are satisfied with law enforcement services, but almost half from largest jurisdictions say their funding is insufficient (April 2016)
Local leaders say police-community relations are good throughout Michigan, but those in large cities are concerned about potential civil unrest over police use-of-force (February 2016)
Report: Responding to budget surplus vs. deficit: the preferences of Michigan’s local leaders and citizens (December 2015)
Michigan’s local leaders concerned about retiree health care costs and their governments’ ability to meet future obligations (October 2015)
Fiscal health rated relatively good for most jurisdictions, but improvement slows and decline continues for many (September 2015)
Confidence in Michigan’s direction declines among state’s local leaders (August 2015)
Michigan local government leaders’ views on private roads (July 2015)
Few Michigan jurisdictions have adopted Complete Streets policies, though many see potential benefits (June 2015)
Michigan local leaders have positive views on relationships with county road agencies, despite some concerns (May 2015)
Michigan local government leaders say transit services are important, but lack of funding discourages their development (April 2015)
Michigan local leaders see need for state and local ethics reform (March 2015)
Local leaders say Michigan road funding needs major increase, but lack consensus on options that would raise the most revenue (February 2015)
Michigan local government leaders’ views on employee pay and benefits (January 2015)
Despite increasingly formal financial management, relatively few Michigan local governments have adopted recommended policies (December 2014)
Most Michigan local officials are satisfied with their privatized services, but few seek to expand further (November 2014)
Michigan local governments finally pass fiscal health tipping point overall, but one in four still report decline (October 2014)
Beyond the coast, a tenuous relationship between Michigan local governments and the Great Lakes (September 2014)
Confidence in Michigan’s direction holds steady among state’s local leaders (August 2014)
Wind power as a community issue in Michigan (July 2014)
Fracking as a community issue in Michigan (June 2014)
The impact of tax-exempt properties on Michigan local governments (March 2014)
Michigan’s local leaders generally support Detroit bankruptcy filing despite some concerns (February 2014)
Michigan local governments increasingly pursue placemaking for economic development (January 2014)
Views on right-to-work legislation among Michigan’s local government leaders (December 2013)
Michigan local governments continue seeking, and receiving, union concessions (October 2013)
Michigan local government fiscal health continues gradual improvement, but smallest jurisdictions lagging (September 2013)
Local leaders evaluate state policymaker performance and whether Michigan is on the right track (August 2013)
Trust in government among Michigan’s local leaders and citizens (July 2013)
Citizen engagement in the view of Michigan’s local government leaders (May 2013)
Beyond trust in government: government trust in citizens? (March 2013)
Local leaders support reforming Michigan’s system of funding local government (January 2013)
Local leaders support eliminating Michigan’s Personal Property Tax if funds are replaced, but distrust state follow-through (November 2012)
Michigan’s local leaders satisfied with union negotiations (October 2012)
Michigan’s local leaders are divided over the state’s emergency manager law (September 2012)
Fiscal stress continues for hundreds of Michigan jurisdictions, but conditions trend in positive direction overall (September 2012)
Michigan’s local leaders more positive about Governor Snyder’s performance, more optimistic about the state’s direction (July 2012)
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