



Michigan local governments report increased challenges with law enforcement recruitment and retention

By Natalie Fitzpatrick and Debra Horner

This report presents the views of Michigan's local government leaders, county sheriffs, local chiefs of police, and county prosecutors regarding recruitment and retention of law enforcement personnel, including police officers, sheriffs' deputies, and assistant prosecutors. These findings are based on statewide surveys of local government leaders in the spring 2024 wave of the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS), with some comparison to data collected on the fall 2015 MPPS wave.

The Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) is an ongoing census survey of all 1,856 general purpose local governments in Michigan conducted since 2009 by the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP). Respondents for the Spring 2024 wave of the MPPS include county administrators, board chairs, and clerks; city mayors, managers, and clerks; village presidents, managers, and clerks; and township supervisors, managers, and clerks from 1,304 local jurisdictions across the state, as well as responses from 54 county sheriffs, 234 chiefs of police or directors of public safety, and 55 county prosecutors.

Key Findings

- In 2024, nearly three-quarters (72%) of Michigan local governments that provide or contract for law enforcement services report that the primary law enforcement agency serving their jurisdiction has problems with recruiting qualified law enforcement personnel, including 39% that say they have *significant* problems. Meanwhile, 48% report problems with retaining current officers.
 - » This represents an enormous increase since 2015, when fewer than a quarter (22%) of local government leaders reported problems with law enforcement recruitment and/or retention.
 - » These recruitment and retention problems are more widespread in larger jurisdictions, but even in the smallest jurisdictions that have or contract for police services, a majority report problems with recruitment.
 - » In the Upper Peninsula, almost all (90%) local governments involved in law enforcement say recruitment is a problem, including 52% that say there are significant problems.
- A parallel survey of county sheriffs and local chiefs of police raises further concern, with more than 80% reporting problems with deputy or police officer recruitment. In addition, 70% of Michigan sheriffs say retention is a problem for their office.
- County prosecutors' offices also face significant challenges with recruitment and retention of their assistant prosecutors, and many also say they do not have sufficient support staff to cover their case workload.
- Approximately half of Michigan's police chiefs (49%) and county sheriffs (51%) say their workforce size is insufficient to deliver the needed law enforcement services in the community. However, local government leaders who are responsible for these agencies' budgets are more likely to believe that staffing is adequate.
- A majority of local government leaders, county sheriffs, and local chiefs of police say that increasing pay rates and benefits, along with non-traditional incentives such as paid time off or flexible schedules, would help with recruiting additional personnel and/or retaining current personnel, if they had the resources to provide them.

Background

Ensuring the safety, health, and welfare of citizens is one of the fundamental functions of government, with local governments and local law enforcement agencies at the heart of Michigan public safety. Michigan’s local law enforcement services are provided at three different levels: through the state police, by county sheriff’s offices and county prosecutors’ offices, and by many local units of government (cities, villages, and townships) with their own police departments or departments of public safety.

In recent years, law enforcement agencies nationwide have faced significant staffing challenges,¹ and the shortages that Michigan police departments are seeing has been called “unprecedented” by veteran law enforcement leaders.² The Michigan Commission on Law Enforcement Standards (MCOLES) reported that the number of working officers dropped from 23,000 in 2001 to 18,500 in 2023.³ Michigan’s county prosecutor offices face similar staffing problems,⁴ and many report being critically understaffed.⁵

To learn more about the state of local law enforcement services in Michigan, and local officials’ views on policing and criminal justice, the Spring 2024 MPPS surveyed local government officials and law enforcement leaders statewide. Responses came from local leaders at the county level (county sheriffs, county prosecutors, and county administrators and county board chairs) as well as from local chiefs of police and local government leaders in Michigan cities, townships, and villages.

Statewide, 28% of Michigan’s local governments report they are directly involved in providing law enforcement by running their own police departments or participating in a joint police department with another jurisdiction, and 24% report indirect involvement by contracting for law enforcement services. Just under half (48%) of Michigan local governments report they have no role in law enforcement, and they simply rely on the county sheriff or state police to respond when there is a public safety issue.

Please see *Appendix A* for descriptions of local law enforcement service delivery arrangements, broken down by jurisdiction size and region.

Concerns about law enforcement recruitment and retention widespread among Michigan local government leaders

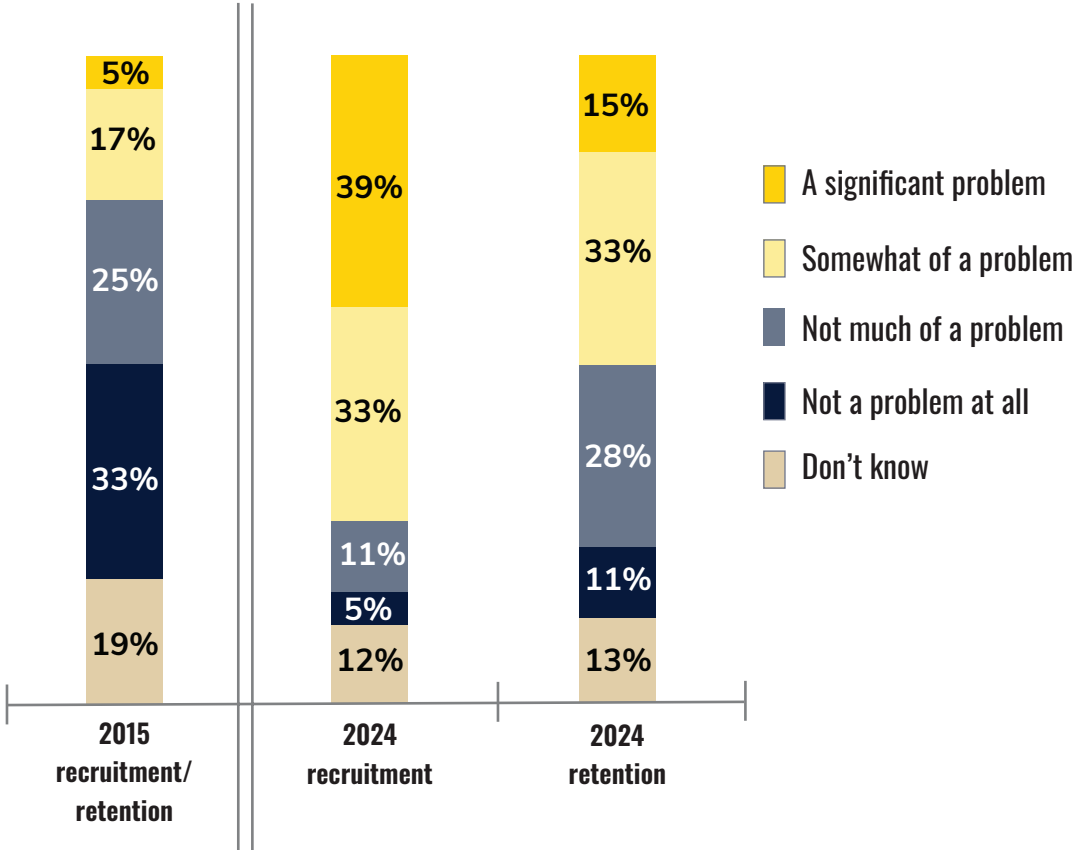
Over the past nine years, concerns with law enforcement personnel recruitment and retention have skyrocketed in the 52% of Michigan local jurisdictions that provide law enforcement services (directly or indirectly).

As shown in *Figure 1*, in 2015, 22% of counties, cities, villages, and townships involved in law enforcement services reported on the MPPS that personnel recruitment and/or retention was a problem, including 5% saying it was a significant problem. Meanwhile, a third (33%) said recruitment and/or retention of law enforcement personnel was not a problem at all in their jurisdiction in 2015.

In 2024, 72% of jurisdictions involved in law enforcement services—more than triple the percentage in 2015—say they have problems with recruitment, with 39% saying it is a *significant* problem and just 5% reporting that recruitment is not a problem at all. In addition, 48% report problems with current officer retention (15% saying it is a *significant* problem), while 11% say it is not a problem at all.

These challenges mirror increased problems with recruitment and retention of Michigan’s broader local government workforce, as reported in the MPPS in spring 2022.⁶

Figure 1
Local officials’ assessments of difficulties with local law enforcement officer recruitment and/or retention (among those directly or indirectly providing law enforcement services), 2015 vs. 2024



Note: In 2015 local officials were asked about recruitment and retention combined in a single question, whereas in 2024 they were asked separately.

Local governments of all sizes and in all regions face recruitment and retention challenges

As shown in *Figure 2a*, recruitment and retention of law enforcement officers are problems in jurisdictions of all sizes involved in law enforcement services, although they are most common in larger jurisdictions. In the smallest jurisdictions (those with fewer than 1,500 residents), 59% say recruiting qualified officers is a problem, and 42% say retention of current officers is a problem. Meanwhile, among the largest jurisdictions (those with more than 30,000 residents), 86% say recruitment is a problem—including nearly half (46%) who say recruitment is a *significant* problem—and 57% say retention is a problem.

Again, this represents a huge shift since 2015 across the board. Nine years ago, only 20% of local government leaders in the smallest townships and villages involved in law enforcement services identified recruitment and/or retention as a problem, and fewer than a third (30%) in the largest jurisdictions said the same.

Figure 2a

Percentage of local officials reporting problems with local law enforcement officer recruitment and/or retention (among those directly or indirectly providing law enforcement services) in 2024, by population size



Problems with recruitment are also widespread across geographic regions of Michigan, but they are particularly severe in the Upper Peninsula, where 90% of jurisdictions say recruitment is a problem, including 52% who say there are significant problems (see *Figure 2b*). Even in the West Central region, which reported the lowest level of concern, 65% of jurisdictions say recruitment is a problem.

Figure 2b

Percentage of local officials reporting problems with local law enforcement officer recruitment and/or retention (among those directly or indirectly providing law enforcement services) in 2024, by region

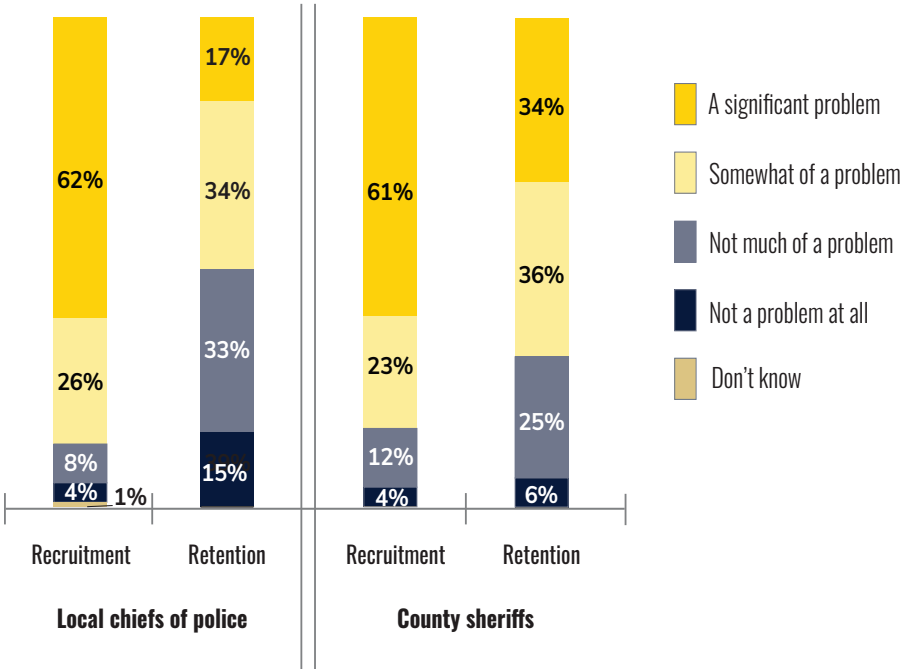


Law enforcement leaders sound even louder alarms over officer recruitment and retention

In addition to gathering perspectives from local government leaders like city managers and mayors, the Spring 2024 MPPS also asked local chiefs of police and county sheriffs about personnel issues in their agencies. Compared to local government officials, these law enforcement leaders are even more pessimistic about recruitment and retention. As shown in *Figure 3*, 88% of chiefs of police and 84% of county sheriffs say recruitment is a problem in their agency, including nearly two-thirds among both groups who say it is a *significant* problem for their department or office.

County sheriffs are considerably more likely to say that retaining current officers is a problem (70%) compared to police chiefs (51%) or other local government leaders (48%).

Figure 3
Percentage of law enforcement agency leaders reporting problems with local law enforcement personnel recruitment and retention



One source of retention problems is the issue of poaching (i.e., other agencies hiring officers away from their current post). More than half of local leaders (52%), chiefs of police (59%), and sheriffs (81%) say poaching is a problem for their jurisdiction/agency.

Appendix B contains details on additional, less common personnel problems facing some law enforcement agencies, including officer morale, negative interactions with the public, lack of professional development and ongoing training opportunities, and an excess of required training.

Law enforcement and local government leaders have different perceptions of agency staffing needs

When it comes to overall personnel levels in Michigan’s police departments, approximately half of all chiefs of police (49%) report that they have insufficient law enforcement officers to deliver needed services, and 46% say they have insufficient support staff (see *Figure 4*). Local government leaders are less likely to perceive these shortages, with half as many (26%) saying the agency that serves their jurisdiction is understaffed.

Meanwhile, 51% of sheriffs say their office has insufficient deputies to meet public safety needs, and 38% say they have insufficient support staff. By contrast, 33% of local government leaders in jurisdictions that provide or contract for law enforcement services believe their sheriff’s office is understaffed, including 31% of county board chairs and administrators (see *Figure 5*).

Figure 4
Local chiefs of police vs local government leaders’ assessments of local police department staffing

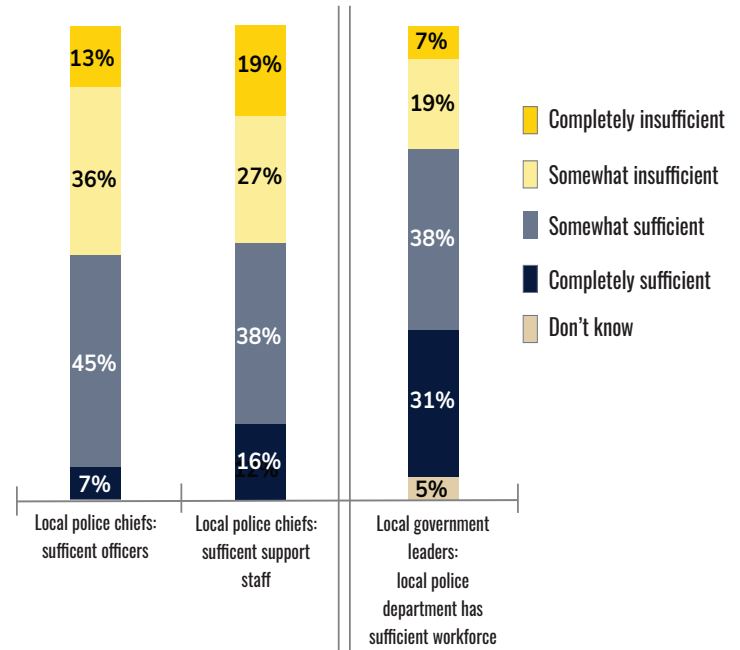
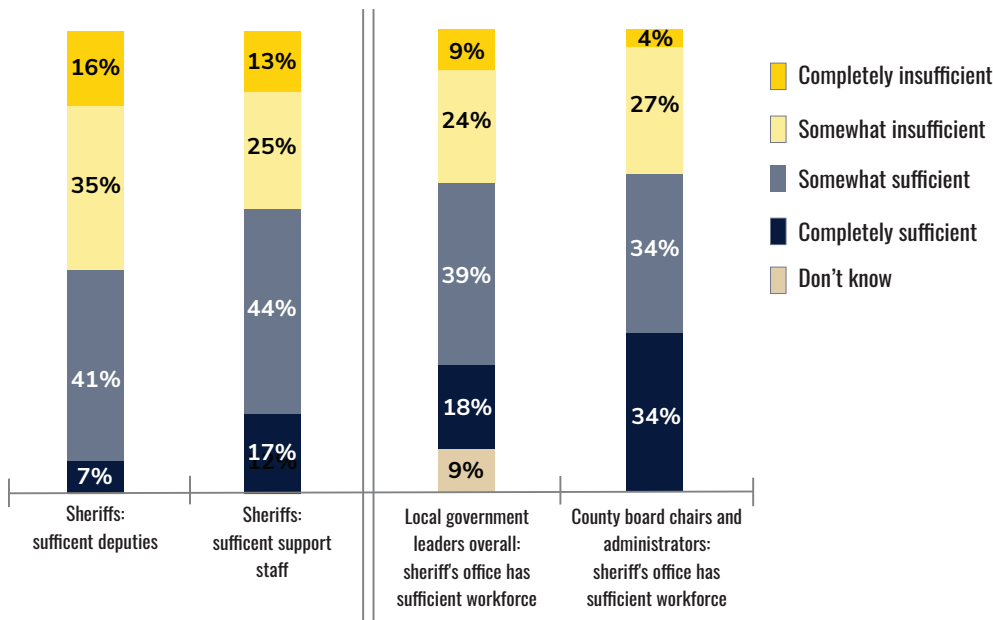


Figure 5
County sheriffs’ vs local government leaders’ assessments of sheriff’s office staffing



County prosecutors also face severe recruitment and retention challenges

Michigan’s 83 county prosecuting attorney’s offices are another key unit in Michigan law enforcement. Elected county prosecutors report that hiring and keeping assistant prosecuting attorneys (APAs) is a widespread problem in their offices, with 85% reporting problems with recruiting qualified APAs (including 73% saying recruitment is a *significant* problem) and 80% reporting problems with retaining their current APAs (see *Figure 6*).

Additionally, as shown in *Figure 7*, almost three quarters (71%) of county prosecutors say they have an insufficient number of attorneys, and over half (54%) say they have insufficient support staff to cover their workload, for example, to have an attorney present at and prepared for all court hearings. However, only 28% of county government leaders (Board chairs or county administrators) believe the workforce in their county prosecutor’s office is insufficient.

See *Appendix B* for additional information about personnel problems facing county prosecutor’s offices, particularly concerns with office workload.

Figure 6
Percentage of elected county prosecutors reporting problems with recruitment and retention of staff attorneys

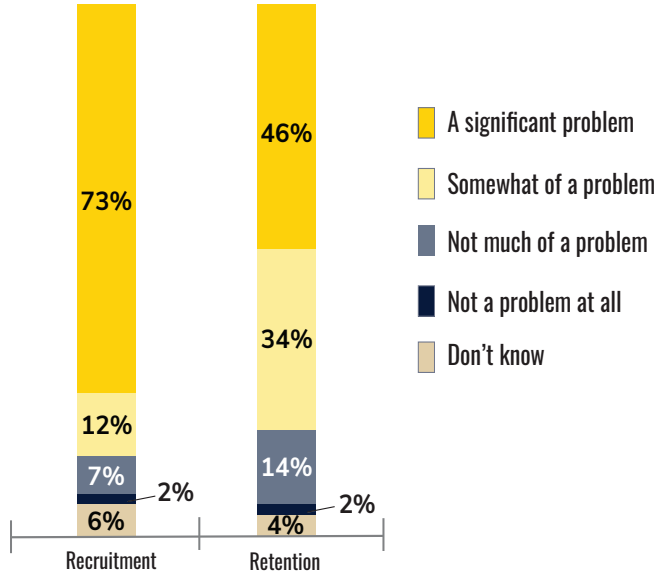
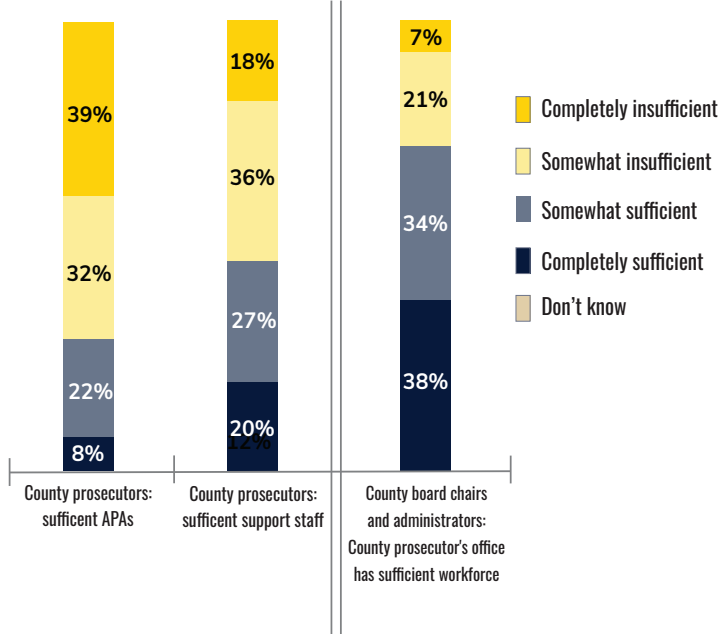
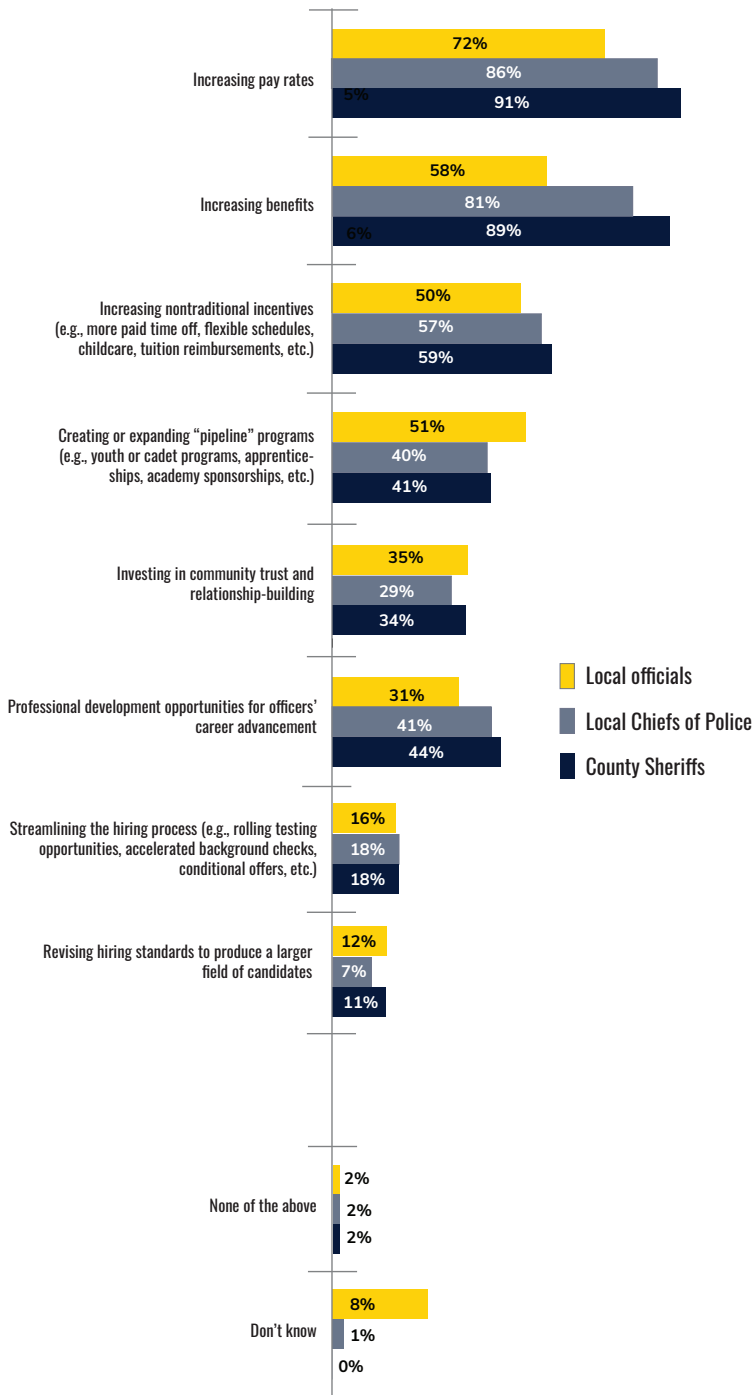


Figure 7
Elected county prosecutors' vs. county government leaders' assessments of prosecutor's office staffing



Increased pay and benefits, as well as pipeline programs, may help address recruitment and retention issues

Figure 8
Assessments of what would most help law enforcement agencies recruit additional personnel and/or retain current personnel, if more resources were available



Both local government and law enforcement leaders indicate that additional resources would help them address these problems through a variety of approaches (see *Figure 8*). Among all types of leaders, increasing pay rates is the most commonly-selected solution, followed by increasing benefits, and increasing nontraditional incentives (such as paid time off, flexible schedules, childcare, tuition reimbursement, etc.).

Notably, local governments that provide or contract for law enforcement services are less likely to say that increasing pay rates and benefits would be helpful (72%) compared with local chiefs of police (86%) and county sheriffs (91%). However, government officials are more likely to believe that "pipeline" programs (e.g., youth or cadet programs, apprenticeships, academy sponsorships, etc.) and investing in community trust and relationship-building would be helpful compared to chiefs of police.

Note: Respondents were asked to check all that apply, so categories may sum to more than 100%.



County prosecutors were also asked about what would be effective for addressing personnel problems for their office's APAs, if new resources were available. All county prosecutors said that increasing pay rates would be somewhat (14%) or very (86%) effective, and 90% said that increasing benefits would be effective. Large majorities also said that increasing non-traditional incentives (86%), loan repayment assistance programs (87%), creating or expanding pipeline programs (86%), increasing opportunities for professional development (83%), formal mentoring programs (80%) and work from home opportunities (66%) would be effective.

Local government and law enforcement leaders were also asked about any particularly successful strategies their jurisdiction or agency have taken to address personnel problems. Across both groups, two of the most frequent strategies discussed are increases to pay and/or benefits, including some who noted the importance of defined benefit retirement programs (as opposed to defined contribution). Another frequently discussed strategy is academy sponsorships (including retroactive payment). Others highlight the importance of a positive work environment and community relationships.

Voices Across Michigan

Local government officials' examples of approaches their jurisdiction is currently pursuing that have been particularly successful in addressing law enforcement personnel issues:

"Contract pay negotiations were the strong influencer in improving our retention of public safety officers. The surrounding departments for other cities and counties are where the competition comes from. Some are able to offer more or are closer to [officers'] homes."

"1) We have streamlined the hiring process. 2) We have eliminated the educational requirements. 3) We had to sponsor recruits in the academy. This was only made possible through the grant funding offered by the state. Our agency, like most, has to create their own police officers rather than hiring certified officers."

"We have kept the employee contribution to health care to \$0. This is a significant piece to our recruiting process."

"As a small city, we recruit recent retirees from larger departments who are looking for an environment of public support and more opportunity for positive community engagement."

"We are sponsoring candidates through MCOLES, as it is nearly impossible to find experienced officers. Our pay and benefits are competitive, and we have a good entry exam and interview process to vet candidates and decrease attrition. We also offer cross training with our Fire/EMS Department, and bonus opportunities for further certifications. Continuing education can also be reimbursed 100%."

Police Chiefs' and Sheriffs' examples of approaches their department or office is currently pursuing:

"Attempting to attract retired or out-of-state candidates who can be certified or re-certified easily through MCOLES has been more successful than trying to attract young candidates. Our most pressing need is seasonal officers for the summer season."



“As a small agency we cannot go after candidates outside of the office i.e., job fairs, etc. We are fortunate to have an ISD Law Enforcement class that sends students to work in our facility and with our officers. We have recruited several from these students. They also have a tendency to stay with the department.”

“Having a retirement DB pension plan. My officers have given up pay increases to keep their DB pension plan.”

“Our deputies are our best recruiters. Create a healthy culture word will get out it’s a good/great place to work, the applicants will come. Make sure leadership is seen and willing to walk the walk alongside both corrections and LE deputies.”

“We have had to pay for officers to attend a police academy. That is the only way we can hire people as there simply are no qualified candidates that have been to a police academy.”

“As we are a very small agency with a limited tax base (mostly residential) it is difficult for the city to pay competitive rates. We attempt to counter this with advanced training that most agencies near us do not provide.”

Prosecutors’ examples of approaches their office is currently pursuing:

“I have found that when your office has a reputation for not only having good morale, but also a quality work environment which takes the time to recognize personal achievements but also has events such as luncheons and group events for birthdays... word travels throughout the court system and professional communities making it easier to recruit and retain personnel.”

“We have tried to work within the county's policy to allow employees time to work from at home or leaving early for school, other appointments, etc. to make up for working after hours or on the weekends to prepare the cases.”

“...Every [APA] can leave and make WAY more money on defense (like 25-50% more). It is hard to compete with that.”

“Finding additional funding to sufficiently fund our office is the only way to solve the problem.”

Conclusion

Staffing challenges continue to be a significant problem for Michigan law enforcement agencies across the state. Among local governments that are involved in the provision of law enforcement services for their community, almost three-quarters (72%) say recruitment of officers is a problem for the primary law enforcement agency serving their jurisdiction, and almost half (48%) say retention is a problem. County sheriffs and police chiefs are even more likely to raise concerns about these issues, and to say that their agency is understaffed. County prosecutor's offices are experiencing similar problems with staffing. Raising pay, increasing benefits, and the development of pipeline programs may help address these problems.

Notes

1. International Association of Chiefs of Police. (2020). *The State of Recruitment: A Crisis in Law Enforcement*. Alexandria, VA: IACP. Retrieved from https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/239416_IACP_RecruitmentBR_HR_0.pdf
2. CBS Detroit. (2022, August 25). *"It's just unprecedented": Michigan law enforcement agencies impacted by nationwide officer shortage*. Retrieved from <https://www.cbsnews.com/detroit/news/its-just-unprecedented-michigan-law-enforcement-agencies-impacted-by-nationwide-officer-shortage>
3. French, R. (2023, July 24) *Michigan's police officer shortage becoming dire: 'Where did everyone go?'* Bridge Magazine. Retrieved from <https://www.bridgemi.com/michigan-government/michigans-police-officer-shortage-becoming-dire-where-did-everyone-go>
4. Topiwala, A. (2024, March 8). *Justice moves slowly in rural Michigan, thanks to prosecutor shortage*. Bridge Magazine. Retrieved from <https://www.bridgemi.com/michigan-government/justice-moves-slowly-rural-michigan-thanks-prosecutor-shortage>
5. Schoenherr, D. (2024, July 12). *New state funding not enough to solve shortage of prosecutors, counties say*. Bridge Magazine. Retrieved from <https://www.bridgemi.com/michigan-government/new-state-funding-not-enough-solve-shortage-prosecutors-counties-say>
6. Horner, D., Ivacko, T., & Fitzpatrick, N. (2023, February). *Michigan local government leaders report increased problems with workforce recruitment, retention, and other issues*. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan. Retrieved from <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/110/michigan-local-government-leaders-report-increased-problems-workforce-recruitment>

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, conducted by the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) at the University of Michigan in partnership with the Michigan Municipal League, Michigan Townships Association, and Michigan Association of Counties. 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 policy questions and designed to build up a multi-year time series.

In the Spring 2024 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. In addition, surveys were sent to all 83 county sheriffs and county prosecutors, and 430 local police departments and departments of public safety. More information is available at <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/mpps-2024-spring>.

The Spring 2024 wave was conducted from April 1– June 10, 2024. A total of 1,307 local jurisdictions returned valid surveys (67 counties, 216 cities, 171 villages, and 853 townships), resulting in a 70% response rate by unit. A total of 343 law enforcement leaders returned valid surveys (54 sheriffs, 234 police chiefs, and 55 county prosecutors) for a 58% response rate across various agencies. Quantitative data are weighted to account for non-response. 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. “Voices Across Michigan” verbatim responses, when included, may have been edited for grammar and brevity.

See CLOSUP’s website for the full question text on the survey questionnaires. Detailed tables of the data in this report, including breakdowns by various jurisdiction characteristics such as community population size, region, and jurisdiction type, will be available at <http://mpps.umich.edu>.

Acknowledgement and Disclaimer

This material is based upon work supported by a grant from The Joyce Foundation. 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 Joyce Foundation, the University of Michigan, or of other partners in the MPPS.

Appendix A

Primary service delivery arrangement for law enforcement, by population size

	Fewer than 1,500 residents	1,500-5,000	5,001-10,000	10,001-30,000	Over 30,000 residents	Statewide total
Directly	13%	24%	49%	62%	82%	27%
Indirectly	19%	22%	30%	35%	18%	22%
None	66%	53%	19%	4%	0%	49%
Don't know	2%	1%	2%	0%	0%	1%

Primary service delivery arrangement for law enforcement, by region

	Upper Peninsula	Northern Lower Peninsula	West Central	East Central	Southwest	Southeast	Statewide total
Directly	17%	13%	20%	25%	32%	51%	27%
Indirectly	9%	18%	28%	20%	29%	24%	22%
None	73%	66%	51%	53%	37%	24%	49%
Don't know	1%	4%	1%	1%	1%	0%	1%

Appendix B

Percentage of local government leaders reporting various personnel problems for the **primary** law enforcement agency serving their jurisdiction (among jurisdictions directly or indirectly providing law enforcement services)

	Recruitment	Retention	Poaching	Officer morale	Negative public perceptions/ interactions	Lack of professional development/ ongoing training	Too much required training
A significant problem	39%	15%	20%	6%	4%	1%	1%
Somewhat of a problem	33%	33%	32%	22%	20%	11%	7%
Not much of a problem	11%	28%	19%	34%	44%	36%	40%
Not a problem at all	5%	11%	8%	17%	21%	37%	28%
Don't know	12%	13%	21%	21%	11%	15%	23%

Percentage of local chiefs of police reporting various personnel problems for their department

	Recruitment	Retention	Poaching	Officer morale	Negative public perceptions/ interactions	Lack of professional development/ ongoing training	Too much required training
A significant problem	62%	17%	28%	4%	7%	5%	2%
Somewhat of a problem	26%	34%	31%	24%	19%	23%	17%
Not much of a problem	8%	33%	22%	49%	50%	45%	53%
Not a problem at all	4%	15%	18%	22%	24%	28%	28%
Don't know	1%	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	1%

Percentage of county sheriffs reporting various personnel problems for their office

	Recruitment	Retention	Poaching	Officer morale	Negative public perceptions/ interactions	Lack of professional development/ ongoing training	Too much required training
A significant problem	61%	34%	47%	7%	6%	4%	0%
Somewhat of a problem	23%	36%	34%	19%	19%	19%	12%
Not much of a problem	12%	25%	13%	50%	52%	56%	61%
Not a problem at all	4%	6%	6%	24%	23%	21%	25%
Don't know	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%

Percentage of county prosecutors reporting various personnel problems for their office

	Recruitment (assistant prosecutors)	Retention (assistant prosecutors)	Office morale	Negative interactions with judges	Negative interactions with defense council	Lack of ongoing training	Workload
A significant problem	73%	46%	11%	8%	9%	4%	47%
Somewhat of a problem	12%	34%	26%	25%	25%	19%	44%
Not much of a problem	7%	14%	45%	51%	60%	59%	9%
Not a problem at all	2%	2%	18%	17%	6%	17%	0%
Don't know	6%	4%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

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The Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP), housed at the University of Michigan's Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, conducts and supports applied policy research designed to inform state, local, and urban policy issues. Through integrated research, teaching, and outreach involving academic researchers, students, policymakers and practitioners, CLOSUP seeks to foster understanding of today's state and local policy problems, and to find effective solutions to those problems.

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