



Michigan local leaders' views on policing co-response and alternative response teams

By Debra Horner

This report presents the opinions of Michigan's local government leaders, local chiefs of police, and county sheriffs on alternative approaches to traditional policing that might involve other professionals, such as mental health professionals or trained social workers. This includes evaluations of (a) co-response teams that involve mental health professionals but are led by law enforcement, (b) alternative response teams that involve mental health professionals led by other departments within local government (such as the fire department or public health department) but do not include law enforcement, and (c) alternative response teams administered by independent community groups. These findings are based on statewide surveys of local government leaders in the spring 2024 wave of the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS).

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 1,307 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

- Most Michigan county sheriffs (84%) and local police chiefs (82%) support some form of co-response or alternative response program.
 - » Approximately two-thirds of sheriffs (63%) and police chiefs (68%) statewide support co-response teams led by law enforcement for their communities. Support is highest among the state's larger law enforcement agencies (76%-79%), as well as among law enforcement leaders who rate crime in their community as "a significant problem."
 - » Fewer sheriffs and police chiefs support alternative response teams led by other local government departments without law enforcement presence (37%-38%) or alternative response teams administered by independent community groups (29%-36%).
 - » Only 11% of sheriffs and 9% of police chiefs say they oppose any type of co-response or alternative response team.
- Fewer local government officials (52%) support some form of co-response or alternative response program, with more uncertainty and outright opposition than among law enforcement leaders.
 - » Among local government officials, 43% support co-response programs led by law enforcement; however, this rises to two-thirds (67%) of leaders in jurisdictions with more than 30,000 residents.
 - » Substantially lower percentages of local government leaders statewide support response teams led by other local government departments (22%) or by independent community groups (16%).
 - » One in five (20%) local officials say they do not support any of these programs. However, more than a quarter (29%) say they don't know whether they would support co- or alternative response programs.
- A majority of police chiefs (58%), sheriffs (54%), and local government leaders (52%) believe implementing a co-response team in their community would be difficult, with around a quarter of each group predicting it would be very difficult.
- Many express concerns about the safety of civilian responders, the local availability of mental health professionals to serve as responders, and the negative impact that co-response or alternative response programs would have on law enforcement agencies' budgets.
- However, many law enforcement and local government leaders also believe their local 9-1-1 service receives too many calls for police that do not require law enforcement attention and that their 9-1-1 dispatchers could accurately determine the appropriate responder for crisis emergencies. A higher percentage of law enforcement leaders believe that community residents would like an alternative to call in a crisis compared with local government officials.

Strongest support is for co-response teams led by police

A growing number of communities across Michigan are turning to different approaches for responding to 9-1-1 calls beyond traditional police. In order to allow law enforcement to prioritize more urgent or violent emergencies, to focus expertise on mental health crises, and to give residents an alternative service to call, some local governments and community groups are launching programs that include social workers, mental health care providers, and other support specialists to help in circumstances such as substance abuse crises, domestic disputes, or wellness checks.¹

According to recent reports, over 100 local alternative crisis response units are in operation nationwide, with 62% of the largest 50 cities in the U.S. creating an alternative response program between 2020 and 2022.² This includes Detroit, which received over 16,000 mental health calls in 2024.³

The Spring 2024 MPPS asked Michigan local government officials, county sheriffs, and local chiefs of police statewide about their thoughts on approaches to policing that might involve other professionals, such as mental health professionals or trained social workers. They were asked to assess three common approaches to crisis intervention:

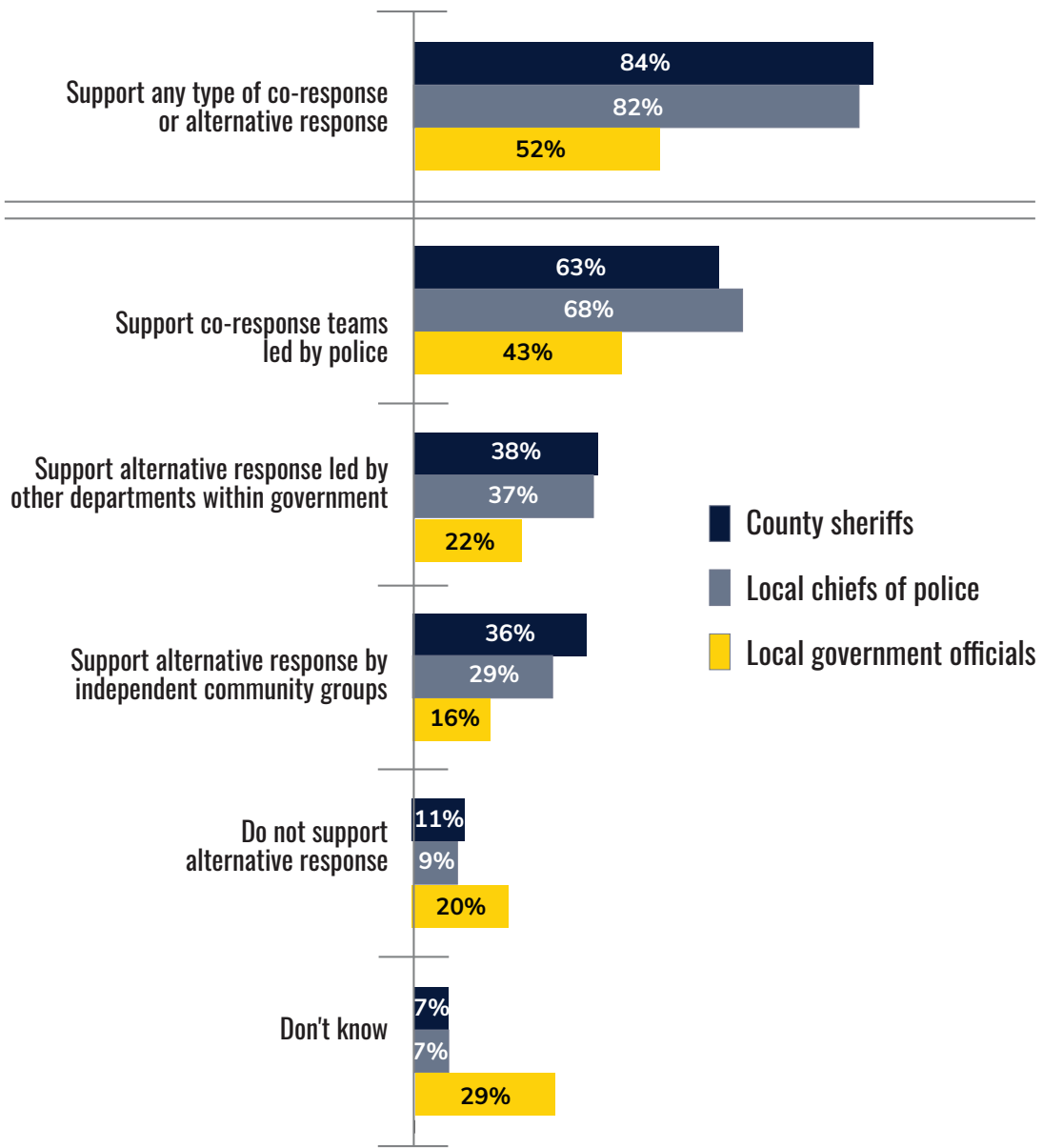
- Co-response teams that involve mental health professionals but are led by law enforcement officers;
- Alternative response teams led by other departments within local government that involve mental health professionals (for example, the fire department or public health department) but do not include law enforcement officers;
- Alternative response teams administered by independent community groups that involve mental health professionals and do not include law enforcement officers.

As shown in *Figure 1a* below, most sheriffs (84%) and local police chiefs (82%), as well as a majority of local government leaders (52%), support at least one of these three types of co-response or alternative response programs.

Approximately two-thirds of county sheriffs (63%) and local police chiefs (68%) statewide specifically support co-response teams led by law enforcement. Support among sheriffs and chiefs is lower for alternative response teams led by other local government departments or for those led by independent community groups. However, support for alternative response is still higher than outright opposition. Only 11% of sheriffs and 9% of police chiefs say they oppose these programs.

As noted, local police chiefs are more likely than county sheriffs to support co-response teams led by law enforcement. Conversely, sheriffs (36%) are more likely than chiefs (29%) to support alternative response teams administered by independent community groups.

Figure 1a
Support among local officials for various prospective police co-response and alternative response teams, by public office



Among local government leaders in Michigan counties, cities, villages, and townships, nearly half (43%) support co-response programs, while substantially lower percentages support either alternative response teams from within the local government (22%) or from independent community groups (16%). One in five (20%) say they do not support any of these programs. However, compared to sheriffs and police chiefs, there is significantly higher uncertainty among local government officials, with more than a quarter (29%) saying they don't know whether or not they would support co- or alternative response programs.

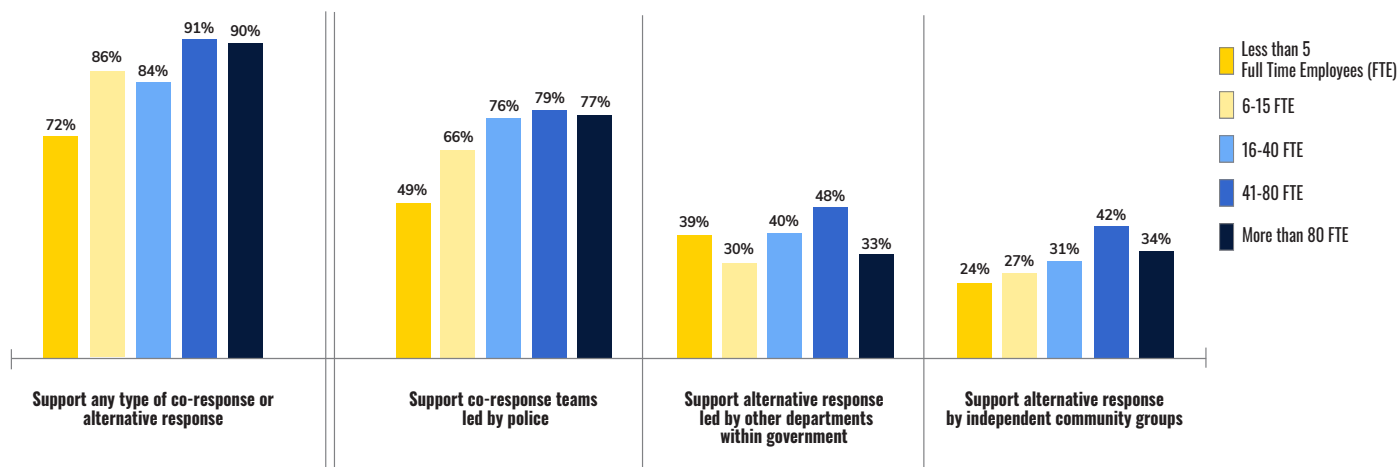
Levels of support among Michigan residents fall in between law enforcement and local government. In 2023, a survey funded by the Joyce Foundation found that, upon initial ask, 71% of Michigan residents support some type of co-response or alternative response program, while 22% say they oppose them, and 6% are unsure.⁴

Larger agencies express most support for co-response led by police, medium-sized most supportive of alternative response

Law enforcement leaders in larger agencies are more supportive of police-led co-response teams than those in small departments. Statewide, half of the police departments with fewer than five full-time employees (FTEs) and 66% of agencies with 6-15 FTEs support police-led co-response teams, while more than three-quarters of agencies with more than 16 FTEs support them (see *Figure 1b*).

There is much less variation in support by agency size for alternative response programs. Generally, law enforcement leaders from medium-size agencies (those with between 41-80 FTEs) are the most likely to support either alternative response from within the local government (48%) or alternative response provided by external groups (42%).

Figure 1b
Support among all law enforcement (sheriffs and police chiefs) for various prospective police co-response and alternative response teams, by agency size



There is considerable variation by region, with 81% of law enforcement leaders in West Central Michigan saying they support police-led co-response teams, compared with fewer than half (48%) in the East Central region. However, East Central law enforcement leaders are also most likely to support alternative responses by other government units (44%).

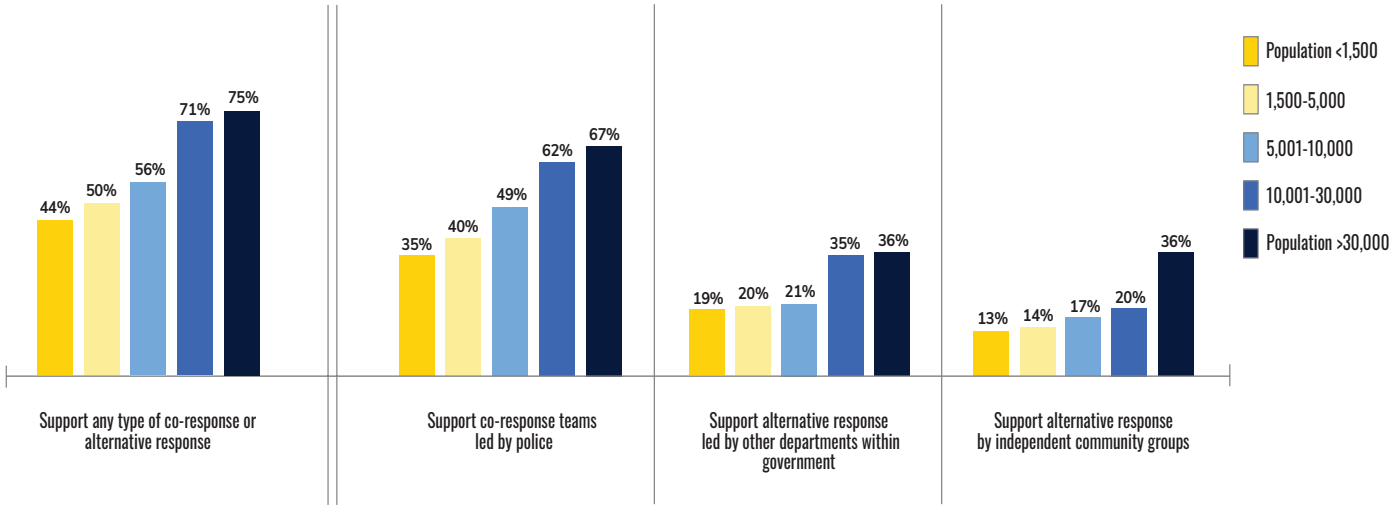
Law enforcement leaders in high-crime communities are particularly interested in more help from other sources. The MPPS asked sheriffs and police chiefs their views on whether crime is a problem in their jurisdiction. Among sheriffs and chiefs who rate crime overall in their community as “a significant problem” (11% statewide), over three-quarters (77%) of them support police-led co-response teams. This compares with 65% support among law enforcement leaders who say crime in their jurisdiction is “not much of a problem” or “not a problem at all.” There is also higher support for alternative response in communities where crime is a significant problem (43%-44%).

Larger governments express most support for all types

Among local government leaders, support for police-led co-response teams is also more common among officials from larger jurisdictions. Just over a third (35%) of local government officials in jurisdictions with fewer than 1,500 residents express support for co-response teams, compared with two-thirds (67%) of officials in jurisdictions with more than 30,000 residents (see *Figure 1c*).

Local officials from larger communities are also the most likely to support alternative response by independent community groups (36%), while those from jurisdictions with over 30,000 residents are most supportive of alternative response provided by other government departments, such as the fire department or public health department (36%).

Figure 1c
Support among local government leaders for various prospective police co-response and alternative response teams, by jurisdiction size



Local officials from Southeast Michigan are more likely to support all three types of co-response and alternative response compared with officials from other regions. In addition, local officials in jurisdictions that have their own police department or sheriff’s office are more likely to support each type of response program compared with officials from places that contract out for police services or simply rely on the Michigan State Police or their county sheriff for law enforcement services.

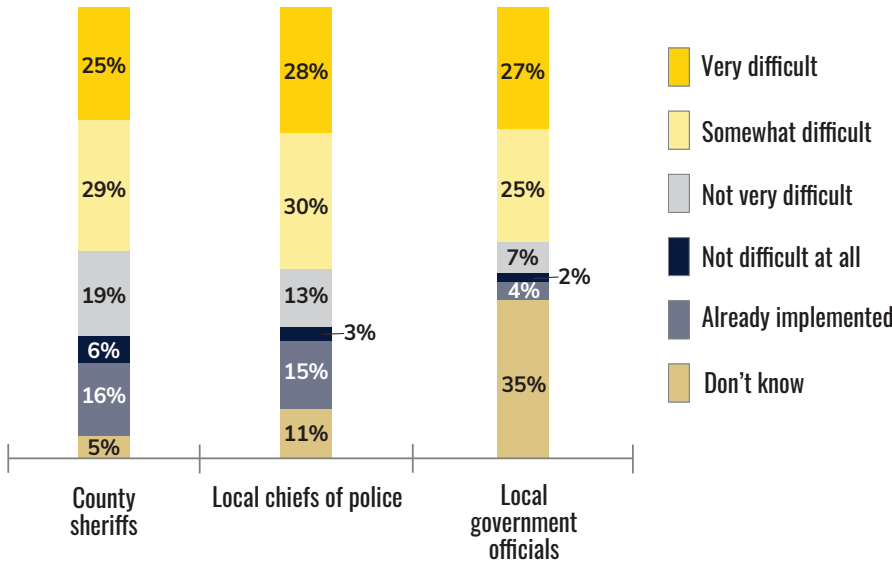
Finally, as with sheriffs and chiefs, local government officials who say that crime is “a significant problem” are more likely to express support for co- and alternative response programs than those who see less crime in the community.

A majority believe implementing a co-responder or alternative responder program would be difficult in their community

One major impediment to new co-responder or alternative responder programs is the perception of how hard it would be to develop them. When asked how difficult they think it would be to implement a co-responder or alternative responder program in their own community, 58% of police chiefs, 54% of sheriffs, and 52% of local government leaders say it would be difficult, with around a quarter in each group predicting it would be very difficult (see *Figure 2a*). Meanwhile, only 25% of sheriffs, 16% of chiefs, and 9% of local government leaders believe it would not be very difficult or not difficult at all.

Statewide, 15-16% of law enforcement leaders note their agency has already implemented a police co-response and alternative response program. Just 4% of local government leaders say the same. However, many who answer “don’t know” are in communities without their own police department (that is, where they either contract out for law enforcement services or simply rely on the county sheriff or state police to respond when there is a public safety issue) and so may not be familiar with these programs.

Figure 2a
Assessments of difficulty implementing a police co-response and alternative response program in local community, by public office

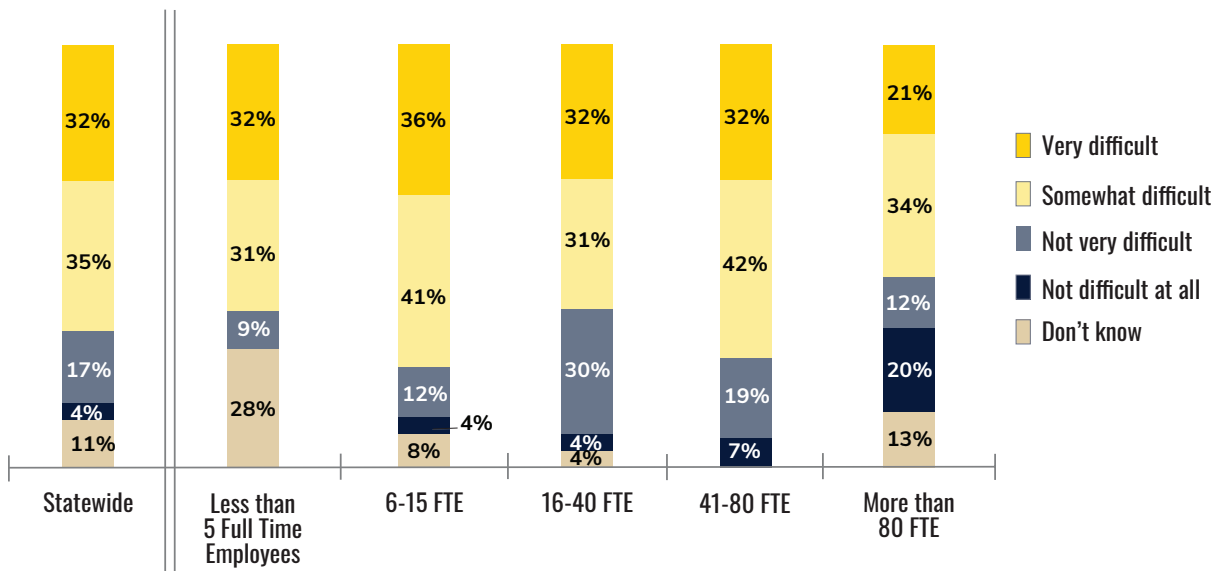


Leaders from larger law enforcement agencies are less likely to view implementation as difficult. Among law enforcement agencies with no current program, just 9% of leaders from the very smallest departments—those with fewer than five full-time employees—say implementing one would not be very difficult, while 28% are unsure (see *Figure 2b*). Interestingly, over a third (34%) of those from agencies with 16–40 FTE say implementing a program would not be difficult.

Meanwhile, 32% of the largest agencies that don’t currently have a co-responder or alternative responder program say starting a program would not be difficult, including 20% who believe implementing one would not be difficult at all.

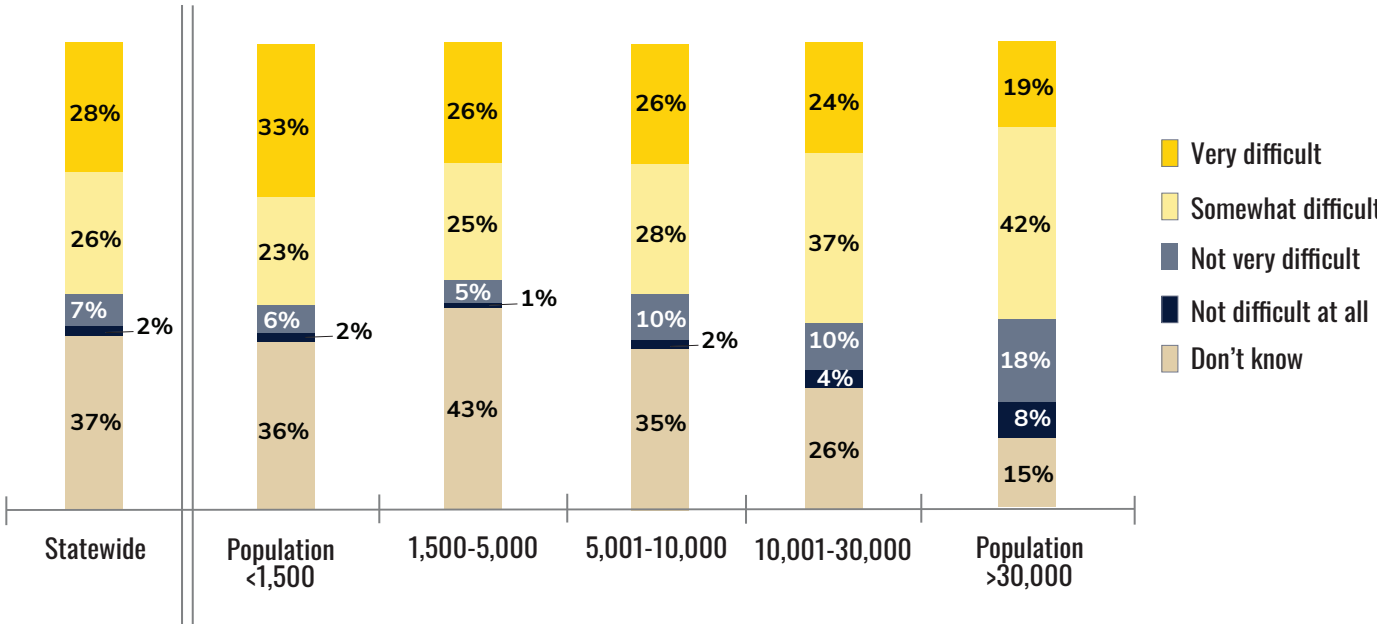
Figure 2b

Assessments of all law enforcement (sheriffs and police chiefs) of difficulty implementing a police co-response and alternative response program in local community (among those with no current program), by agency size



Among local government officials from communities where there currently are no co-response or alternative response programs, a high proportion of those from smaller communities are uncertain about how difficult implementation would be (35%-43%), and even in medium-sized and larger jurisdictions, a significant number of local officials are unsure how hard it would be to start up a co- or alternative response program (see *Figure 2c*). Officials from the largest jurisdictions with over 30,000 residents are less likely to say they don't know, with 61% saying it would be somewhat or very difficult to implement a program in their jurisdiction, compared with 26% saying it would be not very or not difficult at all.

Figure 2c
Assessments of local government leaders of difficulty implementing a police co-response and alternative response program in local community (among those with no current program), by jurisdiction size



Needs: Sheriffs and police chiefs generally believe too many 9-1-1 calls for police do not require law enforcement and that community residents would like an alternative to call in a crisis

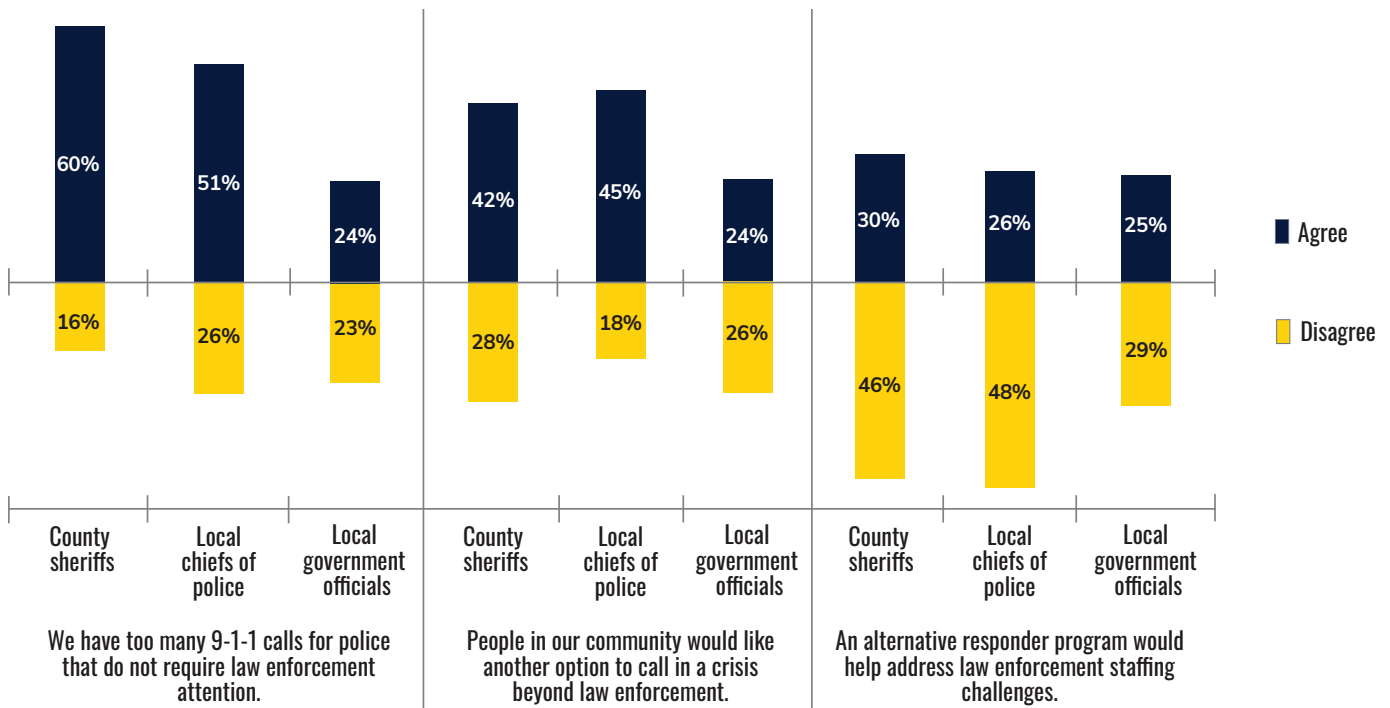
The MPPS asked local government officials, chiefs of police, and sheriffs a series of questions to evaluate various aspects of co- and alternative responder programs. Several of those statements related to whether they perceive a need in their community for alternatives to traditional policing.

As shown in *Figure 3*, a majority of sheriffs (60%) and police chiefs (51%) agree that their communities have too many 9-1-1 calls for police that do not actually require law enforcement attention. Sheriffs (42%) and police chiefs (45%) are also significantly more likely to agree than disagree that people in their communities would like another option beyond law enforcement to call in a crisis.

However, with law enforcement workforce shortages a serious and growing concern among agencies across the state,⁵ law enforcement leaders are not optimistic that a co-responder or alternative responder would lighten the workload of sheriff’s deputies or police officers. Statewide, 27% of law enforcement leaders agree responder programs would help address staffing challenges, compared with 48% who disagree.

Local government officials’ assessments are split on all three of these issues, with many currently expressing uncertainty.

Figure 3
Percent of local officials who agree or disagree with various statements regarding co-response and alternative response, by public office



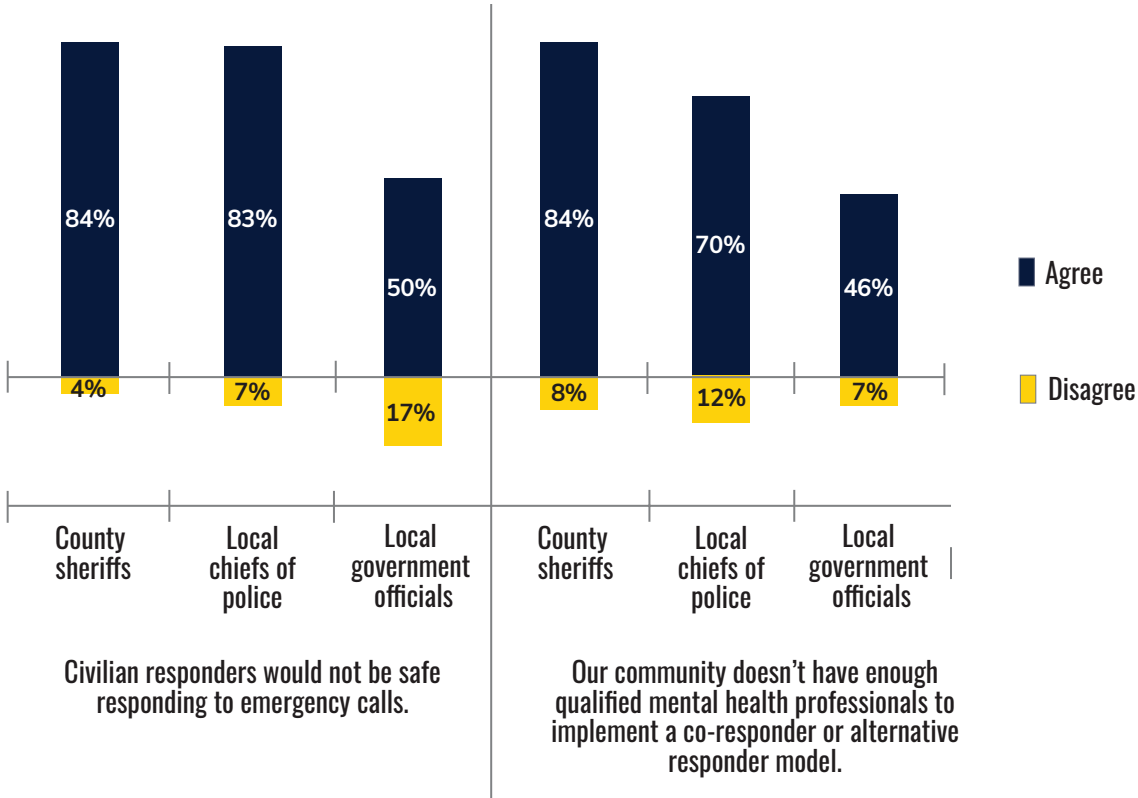
Note: Responses for “neither agree nor disagree” and “don’t know” are not shown.

Administration: Serious concerns over civilian responder safety and availability of mental health professionals; some confidence that 9-1-1 dispatchers can direct calls correctly

Local leaders were also asked about the potential challenges and benefits of administering these types of programs. When it comes to challenges, as shown in *Figure 4*, half of local officials (50%) and most sheriffs (84%) and police chiefs (82%) express concerns about civilian responders’ capability to handle emergencies safely. This may account for the overall lack of support for crisis response not led by police, compared with the much higher support for a co-response approach.

In addition, local leaders were skeptical across the board that their community has enough qualified mental health professionals to implement either a co-responder or alternative responder program.

Figure 4
Percent of local officials who agree or disagree with various statements regarding co-response and alternative response, by public office

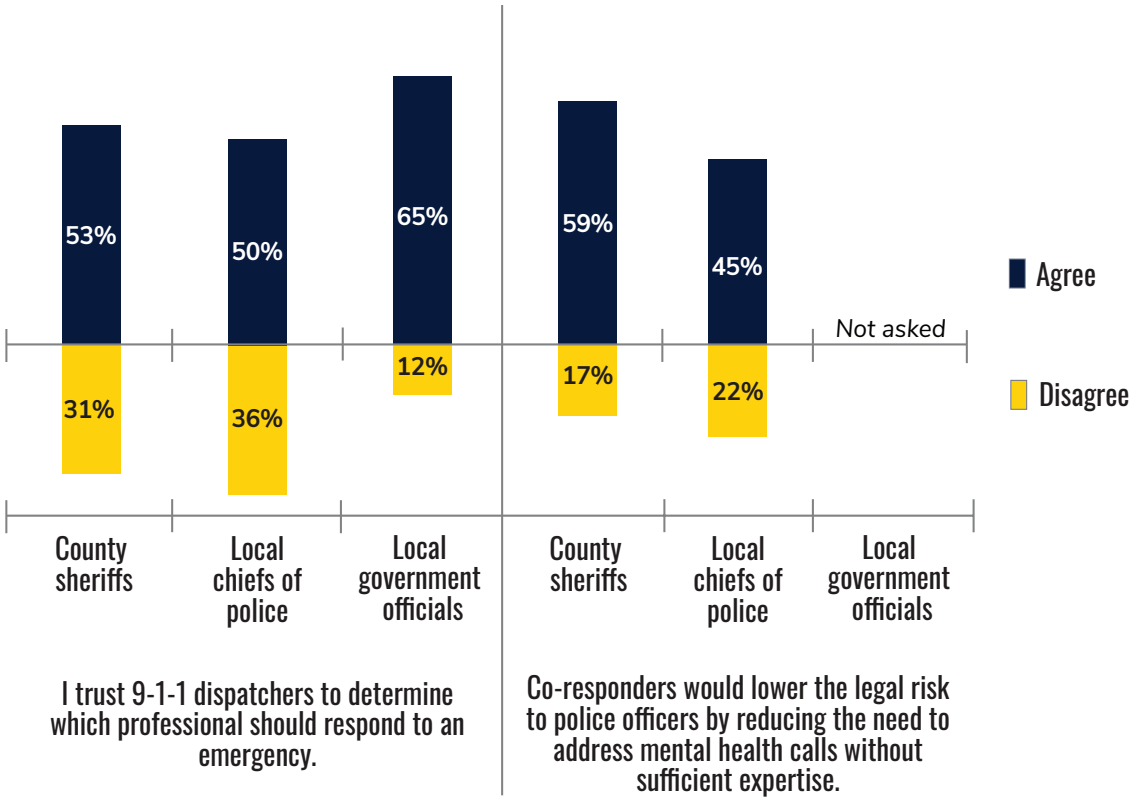


Note: Responses for “neither agree nor disagree” and “don’t know” are not shown.

One of the concerns around operating alternative response programs is whether emergency calls can be appropriately routed to either law enforcement units or alternative response teams.⁶ Most local officials (65%) and about half of law enforcement leaders agree that 9-1-1 dispatchers can accurately determine the appropriate responder for crisis emergencies (see *Figure 5*).

In addition, sheriffs (59%) generally agree that one benefit to a co-responder approach that includes mental health or social work professionals is that it might lower legal risk to law enforcement officers who are faced with crisis situations that they may not have sufficient expertise to address.⁷ Police chiefs are more uncertain, with less than a majority (45%) saying they agree (yet just 22% say they disagree).

Figure 5
Percent of local officials who agree or disagree with various statements regarding co-response and alternative response, by public office



Note: Responses for “neither agree nor disagree” and “don’t know” are not shown.

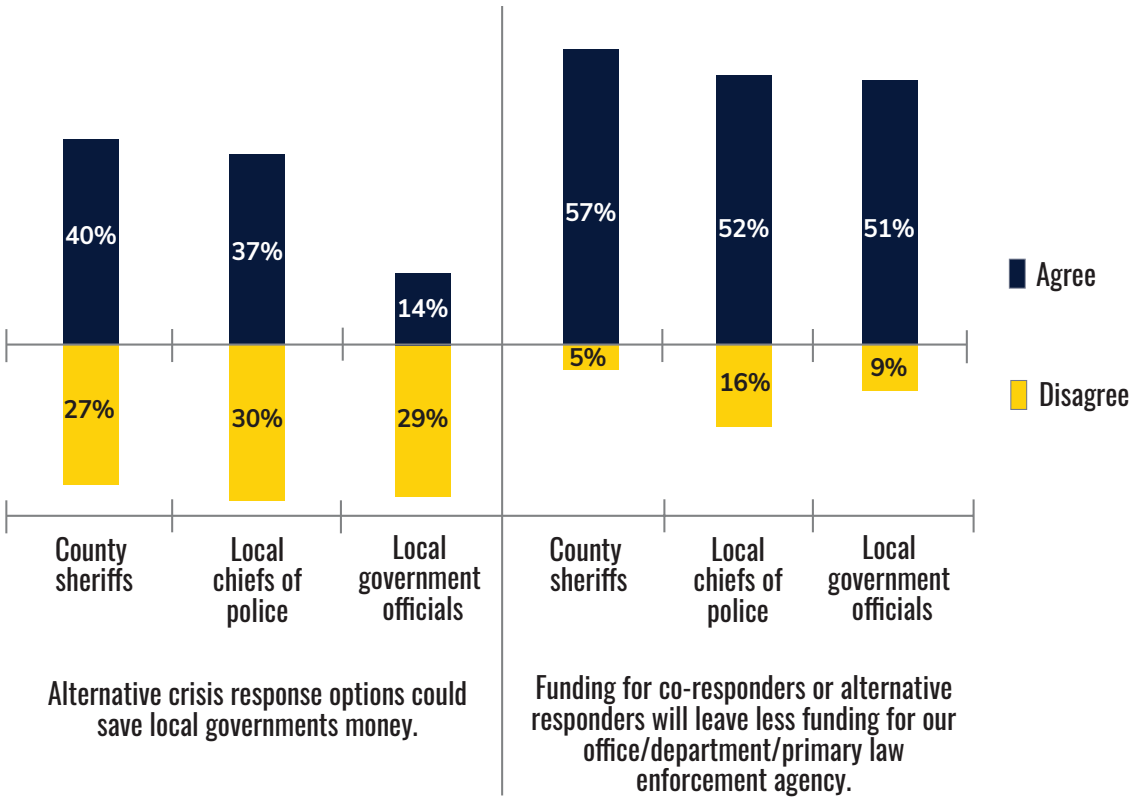
Funding: Officials divided about potential cost savings for local governments, most see alternative programs reducing budgets for police

Some cities that have implemented alternative response programs, such as Eugene, OR, and Denver, CO, have realized significant cost savings on mental health-related dispatches.⁸ However, there are concerns that in smaller communities, where 9-1-1 call volumes are relatively low, the expense of developing co- or alternative response may or may not yield short-term savings for local government or police department budgets.⁹

When asked whether they believe alternative response programs would save local governments money, many sheriffs (40%) and police chiefs (37%) agree, but there is also substantial disagreement (see *Figure 6*). Local government leaders are more likely to disagree (29%) than agree (14%). Perceptions of cost savings are higher in the state’s largest communities, with 50% of law enforcement leaders from agencies with over 80 FTE and 37% of local government leaders from jurisdictions with over 30,000 residents agreeing.

Meanwhile, a majority statewide believe that funding for co-responders or alternative response programs would leave less funding for the law enforcement agencies themselves.

Figure 6
Percent of local officials who agree or disagree with various statements regarding co-response and alternative response, by public office



Note: Responses for “neither agree nor disagree” and “don’t know” are not shown.



Among the Michigan local governments and law enforcement agencies who have already launched either co-responder or alternative responder teams in their jurisdictions, the MPPS asked whether those leaders had any advice for other local units that might be interested in starting their own programs. The several dozen local government leaders and law enforcement officials who offered advice are very positive about their programs. They recommend looking for partners (especially county mental health agencies), looking at existing programs for models, ensuring co-responder safety, and more.

Voices Across Michigan

What advice would you give to other local governments that might be interested in adopting a co-responder or alternative responder program?

Local government officials:

“If you start one, your department will see the benefit and want to expand it. Our model is one patrol officer and a social worker are teamed together (they always work together as partners). The other officers see how valuable the social worker is and ask that the program be expanded. The challenge is costs. Right now we only have one co-response team. We’d love to have four or five. We can’t afford to do that. The only reason we can afford it now is because of a grant. Overall, it has been a great success, and [we] will expand the program when we get the opportunity.”

“Make sure it's law enforcement-led. Mental health cases can be extremely unpredictable. Especially, in a non-controlled environment such as in the subject's home. It is not a safe environment for an unarmed counselor to respond to without law enforcement involvement.”

“... We had three communities share one co-responder, then added a fourth community and an additional full-time co-responder. Ease into it to establish demand...”

“Hire well. Define your desired outcomes. Track the program. Be prepared to commit to the program for a minimum of five years.”

“Reassure the police department this model is not and will not be a threat to them. Help them see the overall benefit to both the staff and community.”

“Share the burden with other communities. Make these regional. It is difficult getting people and funding over more than a year-to-year basis.”

“The best model is to do in partnership with your local Community Mental Health provider, in our case the county CMH. There is no shortage of Michigan examples of programs that work well and can adequately dispel myths or unrealistic expectations of what such a program can or should accomplish.”

Sheriffs and chiefs of police:

“[This is] one of the best programs that we have implemented. Ensure that the co-responder has an understanding of law enforcement practices.”

“Persons in crisis present the potential for being assaultive. Any such program should have a "make safe" element prior to non-law enforcement resources responding. Additionally, to be effective, those programs would have to be staffed to keep response times to incidents workable for the police.”

“Start listening to the community to hear the needs they express. Talk with your County mental health system to develop a program designed to bring them to the scene in emergency situations. The program may evolve into one that more regularly utilizes the special skills of a mental health provider.”

“Work closely with existing resources to ensure continuity. Co-responder programs tend to be labor intensive and costly thereby pulling funds from the existing resources.”

“We have a Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) trained officer who works closely with our Community Mental Health Agency and Crisis Response Teams. This is a no-brainer, the programs save officer time and tend to help get people the help they need.”

Conclusion

Across Michigan, there is a foundation of support among local government officials and law enforcement leaders for co-response and alternative crisis response options, though the degree of support varies. Notably, there is more substantial backing for police-led co-response teams than for programs led by other government units or independent community groups. Support for police-led co-response was high among both sheriffs and police chiefs. However, only 43% of local officials support police-led co-response, and many expressed uncertainty. Meanwhile, although 20% of local officials do not support any alternative response approaches, only 9% of law enforcement leaders say the same. Barriers to adopting these types of programs locally in Michigan include perceptions of how difficult they would be to implement, funding and staffing concerns, and concerns about civilian responders' safety. On the other hand, many law enforcement leaders recognize that community members may desire non-law enforcement response options. Around half of sheriffs and police chiefs acknowledge that many 9-1-1 calls might not require police involvement, and most trust 9-1-1 operators to be able to direct calls to the appropriate responders.

Notes

1. Corey, Samuel. (2023, May 18). *Mental Health Co-responders are Becoming a Part of Michigan Policing*. Hour Detroit. Retrieved from <https://www.hourdetroit.com/community/mental-health-co-responders-are-becoming-a-part-of-michigan-policing>
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9. Police Executive Research Forum. (2023, October). *Rethinking the Police Response to Mental Health-Related Calls: Promising Models*. Retrieved from <https://www.policeforum.org/assets/MBHResponse.pdf>

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 before 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. It is 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 email 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, as well as 430 local police departments and public safety departments. 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, are 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.

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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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