

Informing the Debate

Michigan Applied Public Policy Brief

Resident Perceptions of Public-Safety Consolidation

Authors

Justin Heinonen
Jeremy M. Wilson



About the Michigan Applied Public Policy Briefs

Informing the Debate

The paper series, *Informing the Debate*, is generated out of grant-funded, policy-relevant research sponsored by the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research (IPPSR).

The IPPSR program, Michigan Applied Public Policy Research Program or MAPPR, generates research on current issues held in urban communities with special attention to Michigan. Policy researchers author summary briefs of their research outcomes and their implications. The funded research projects and related policy briefs focus on main headings of discussion being held in the policy arena.

When developing the paper series initiative in 1992, the topics of the papers were submitted following a two-day meeting with leaders from the business sector, nonprofit agencies, foundations, and university faculty and staff. That group evolved into the Urban Research Interest Group.

The Urban Research Interest Group recognized the pressure on urban core leaders to make critical decisions that continue to impact people long into the future. A commitment to generating background research to add to the core of debate on possible solutions to complex, urban problems was made.

The expected outcomes of the paper series include discussion that fosters and strengthens multidimensional connections between the policy, academic, and practitioner community. The series continues to cultivate research interest in policy-relevant issues for consideration of decision makers in urban communities.

Additional information about IPPSR, the Michigan Applied Public Policy Research (MAPPR) Program, and related publications as well as call for proposals is available on the website, www.ippsr.msu.edu.

Informing the Debate

MAPPR Policy Research Brief

Resident Perceptions of Public-Safety Consolidation

Authors

Justin A. Heinonen
Formerly School of Criminal Justice
Michigan State University

Jeremy M. Wilson
Director
Center for Anti-Counterfeiting and Product Protection
Michigan State University

Sponsor

The Institute for Public Policy and Social Research
Matthew Grossmann, Ph.D.
Director
Michigan State University

Series Editors

Ann Marie Schneider, M.S.
Institute for Public Policy and Social Research
Michigan Applied Public Policy Research (MAPPR) Grant Program Manager
Michigan State University

Emily Stanewich
Institute for Public Policy and Social Research
Communications Assistant
Michigan State University

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Research Brief

September 2013

Preface

The Program on Police Consolidation and Shared Services (PCASS) of the Michigan State University (MSU) School of Criminal Justice develops resources to assist communities as they explore their options for delivering public safety services. These resources do not advocate any particular form of service delivery but rather are designed to help communities determine for themselves what best meets their needs, circumstances, and desires.

PCASS resources include reports, journal articles, presentations, books, commentary, and policies regarding, among other topics, police mergers, regionalization, contracting, shared services, contracts, and, the topic of this research brief, public-safety consolidation of police and fire services. MSU work on public-safety consolidation is ongoing. This research brief highlights some ongoing work by MSU researchers regarding resident perceptions of public-safety consolidation.

This research was supported by a Michigan Applied Public Policy Research Grant from the MSU Institute for Public Policy and Social Research.

Overview of Public-Safety Consolidation

Public-safety departments combining police and fire services have existed for more than a century. The first such department was created in 1911 in Grosse Pointe Shores, Michigan (Matarese et al., 2007; Village of Grosse Pointe Shores, n.d.), and the second in Oakwood, Ohio, in 1924 (City of Oakwood, 1924). Other public-safety departments more than a half-century old include those in Butner, North Carolina, Oak Park, Michigan, Beverly Hills, Michigan, and Sunnyvale, California.

Public-safety departments take a variety of forms (Wilson, Weiss, and Grammich, 2012), including

- *Nominal*, with executive functions consolidated under a single chief executive but no integration of police and fire services
- *Partial*, with partial integration of police and fire services, cross-trained public-safety officers performing both police and fire duties working alongside separate functional personnel, and consolidation within administrative ranks
- *Full*, with full integration of police and fire services, cross-trained public-safety officers, and consolidated management and command.

Altogether, Michigan State University (MSU) researchers have documented nearly 140 public-safety departments of varying forms in 27 states. Nearly half, or 61, of these are in Michigan. Interest in public-safety consolidation in Michigan has increased as Governor Rick Snyder has told municipalities to consolidate services and cut costs or face losing state aid (Egan, 2011). Subsequent inquiries and requests from police chiefs and sheriffs throughout the state led the MSU School of Criminal Justice to hold several discussions, presentations, seminars, and workshops on consolidation and related topics, including at conferences of the Michigan Association of Chiefs of Police and the Michigan Chapter of the FBI National Academy Associates. MSU researchers are continuing their work on documenting the extent of public-safety consolidation, advantages and disadvantages to the model, and why units of government adopt or abandon it.

Surveying Perceptions

Research on police-fire consolidation is scarce and mostly outdated. Those considering the public-safety model have few empirical lessons to guide their decision making and have called for more information (Michigan Association of Chiefs of Police, 2008). One fundamental gap in knowledge is public perceptions of police-fire consolidation.

Accordingly, MSU researchers developed questions for the State of the State Survey, asking a representative sample of Michigan residents in 2012 their ratings of local police, fire, and emergency medical services, as well as how consolidation might affect the quality and cost of public safety services (see Institute of for Public Policy and Social Research, 2012, for more on the survey methods).

Irrespective of how public safety services are organized, most Michigan residents rated their police, fire, and emergency medical services favorably. As Table 1 indicates, nearly one in three rated all these services as excellent in their local communities, with most rating them at least as above average. Fewer than one in ten rated them below average or very poor.

Table 1. Ratings by Michigan Residents of Local Police, Fire, and Emergency Medical Services

Rating	Type of service		
	Police (n=1,010)	Fire (n=987)	Emergency medical (n=998)
Excellent	30.1	34.9	34.4
Above average	29.6	30.3	25.0
Average	31.2	30.4	35.0
Below average	3.6	2.3	3.6
Very poor	5.6	1.0	2.1
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Values indicate valid percents

Most Michigan residents also express some concern about the public-safety model. As Table 2 indicates, nearly two in three believe that public-safety consolidation would reduce the quality of their police, fire, and emergency medical services. Yet, as Table 2 also indicates, a little more than two in three also agree that such consolidation could save money.

Table 2. Perceived Impact of Public-Safety Consolidation on Service Quality and Costs

Rating	Type of impact	
	Reduces quality (n=998)	Saves money (n=997)
Strongly agree	27.2	13.4
Agree	35.0	54.6
Neutral	2.2	1.3
Disagree	22.7	23.3
Strongly disagree	12.9	7.5
Total	100.0%	100.0%

Values indicate valid percents

Many Michigan residents are aware of this explicit tradeoff: about two in five agree both that public-safety consolidation would save money and that it would reduce the quality of services, as Table 3 shows. Yet there is considerable diversity of opinion on these questions as well. About one in four agree that public-safety consolidation would save money but disagree it would diminish quality. About one in five agree it would reduce quality but disagree it would save money. About one in ten disagree both that it would save money and that it would reduce quality. Very few Michigan residents have neutral opinions on how public-safety consolidation might save money or affect quality.

Table 3. Michigan Residents’ Opinion on the Effects of Public-Safety Consolidation

		Public-safety consolidation saves money		
		Strongly agree/agree	Neutral	Strongly disagree/disagree
Public-safety consolidation reduces quality of services	Strongly agree/agree	41.3%	0.5%	21.0%
	Neutral	1.3%	0.2%	0.4%
	Strongly disagree/disagree	25.2%	2.1%	9.5%

Values indicate valid percents

Implications and Future Directions

Clearly Michigan leaders who may be considering public-safety consolidation must confront a wide variety of opinions on the topic, very few of which are neutral. Most Michigan residents are satisfied with local police, fire, and emergency medical services, so officials should consider how public-safety consolidation might affect this assessment. Many residents do perceive a tradeoff, but many others see public-safety consolidation improving services or costing more money without improving them. Officials should evaluate the perceived and actual impact of public-safety consolidation in their community and, if considering it, examine similar communities that have sustained or abandoned the model.

MSU researchers are also probing further issues pertaining to a variety of consolidation, regionalized and contracting models. Future research will address types of models, aspects of implementation, perspectives of stakeholders, advantages and disadvantages that differing communities have found with various models, media exposure, and related issues.

References

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