

## Resident Perceptions of Public-Safety Consolidation

Justin Heinonen and Jeremy M. Wilson

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
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

*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
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

*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**

City of Oakwood (n.d.).Public Safety. As of August 13, 2013:  
[http://www.ci.oakwood.oh.us/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=25&Itemid=101](http://www.ci.oakwood.oh.us/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=25&Itemid=101).

Egan, P. (2011, March 22). Snyder lays out local government reforms: Consolidate and cuts costs or lose State aid: governor tells municipalities. *The Detroit News*.

Institute for Public Policy and Social Research (2012). *State of the State Survey-62(summer)*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University. As of September 11, 2013: <http://www.ippsr.msu.edu/SOSS>.

Michigan Association of Chiefs of Police (2008). *MACP 2006 public safety survey results*. Okemos, MI: Michigan Association of Chiefs of Police.

Matarese, L., Chelst, K., Fisher-Stewart, G., & Pearsall, A. (2007). *Public Safety Concept in the Post-9/11 World*. *Public Management*, May, Washington, DC: International City/County Managers Association.

Village of Grosse Pointe Shores (n.d.). *Village of Grosse Pointe Shores Department of Public Safety History*. As of August 13, 2013: <http://www.gpshoresmi.gov/index.php/public-safety/history>.

Wilson, J.M., Weiss, A., & Grammich, C. (2012). *Public Safety Consolidation: What is it? How does it work?* COPS Office: Washington, DC. As of August 13, 2013: [http://a-capp.msu.edu/sites/default/files/files/Consolidation\\_BOLO\\_august2012.pdf](http://a-capp.msu.edu/sites/default/files/files/Consolidation_BOLO_august2012.pdf).