



Michigan local government officials report improved fiscal health after a year of COVID-19, but not yet back to pre-pandemic levels

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This report presents Michigan local government leaders' assessments of their jurisdictions' fiscal conditions and the actions they plan to take in the coming year given their financial situations. The findings are based on responses from 13 statewide survey waves of the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) conducted annually each spring from 2009 through 2021. The Spring 2021 wave of the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) was conducted between April 5 – June 7, 2021.

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 2021 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 1,364 jurisdictions across the state.



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Key Findings

- After a year of the COVID-19 pandemic, Michigan local governments report improvement on many fiscal health measures, as of spring 2021. Overall, 27% of local governments say they are better able to meet their fiscal needs compared with last year, up from 15% in 2020, but still below the 36% that said the same in 2019. Meanwhile, 21% say they are currently less able to meet their needs (down from 34% last year), and 48% report no change from last year.
 - » By population size, the state's larger jurisdictions tended to report the biggest declines in this measure of fiscal health last year, but they now report the largest rebounds. Also, by jurisdiction type, counties report the strongest rebound on this measure since last year.
- However, another MPPS summary indicator that appears to capture more fundamental and less transitory aspects of fiscal health—the 10-point Fiscal Stress Index—shows much less change in fiscal health over time. As of Spring 2021, 65% rate their governments' fiscal stress as relatively low (at 4 or lower on the 10-point scale), while 7% say it is high (at 7 or higher on the scale), both of which are essentially unchanged from last year.
- Reflecting these mixed signals on fiscal health, more jurisdictions report increasing revenue from property taxes and state aid now compared to prior years. However, concerns about jurisdictions' general fund balance remain largely unchanged since 2020, and the largest jurisdictions now report a three-year trend of increasing concerns.
- On the spending side, jurisdictions report increased infrastructure (55%), human services (37%), and public safety (36%) needs, but also predict corresponding spending increases for infrastructure and public safety. Meanwhile, 18% of jurisdictions plan to increase overall service provision in the next year, up from 10% that said the same in 2020.
- Looking ahead, optimism about local economic conditions rebounded significantly in 2021, with 42% of local leaders predicting “good times” financially in their local communities in the coming year—up from 13% last year—while just 16% predict “bad times” today.
- However, officials are more cautious about their jurisdictions' abilities to meet fiscal needs in the coming year. Statewide, 29% predict their jurisdiction will be better able to meet its fiscal needs in the next year, while 19% say they will be less able.
- Looking farther down the road, 59% of local officials predict low fiscal stress five years from now, down from 65% who report low stress today. However, the percentage predicting particularly high levels of stress five years down the road (11%) is unchanged compared to last year, when COVID-19 concerns were high.

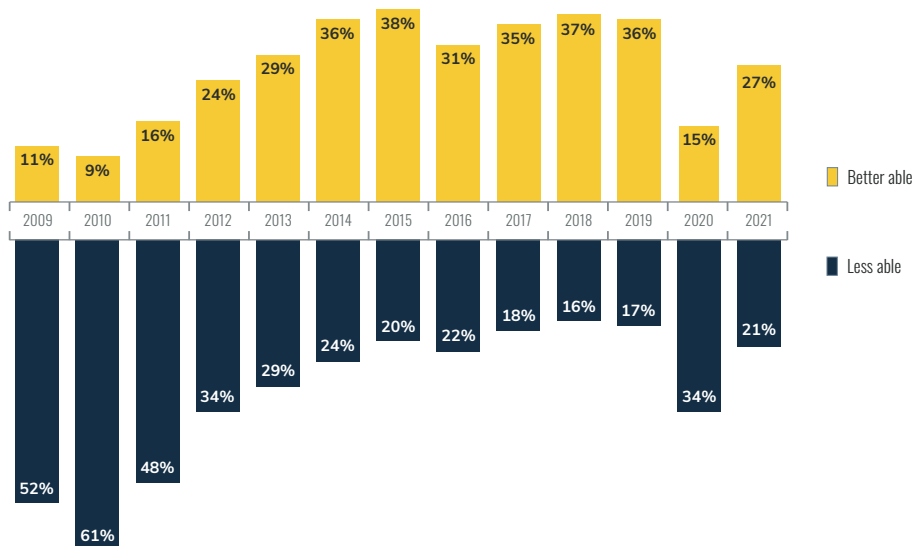
Improved, but still mixed, reports of changes in fiscal health

Since its launch a decade ago, the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) has reported on trends in fiscal health among Michigan local governments by asking local officials about a variety of measures, from general assessments of overall fiscal improvement or decline, to changes in specific types of revenues and expenditures, and more. CLOSUP’s own research suggests that these kinds of opinion data—local leaders’ own assessments—can be a valuable supplement to other kinds of standard financial audit and economic measures, because local officials can contribute “forward-looking, context-specific, and difficult-to-quantify insights about local economic and political conditions” that otherwise might be missed.¹

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in the winter of 2020, the pending repercussions of the public health crisis and accompanying economic shut-down were unclear, including potential impacts on the fiscal health of Michigan’s local governments. The Spring 2020 wave of the survey launched just after the pandemic arrived in Michigan, and it found local government leaders apprehensive about the effects the pandemic would have on their jurisdictions.² After a year’s experience coping with COVID-19’s impacts, local leaders now report on the Spring 2021 MPPS that many local governments across the state have been able to weather the storm, which much external assistance of course. While Michigan local governments statewide are beginning to return to pre-COVID levels on many measures, in most cases they are not yet back to 2019 levels of overall fiscal health.

One of the key measures the MPPS tracks each year is a summary question regarding changes in overall fiscal health: whether jurisdictions are *better able* or *less able* to meet their financial needs at that time, compared to the previous year. Since 2011, after the Great Recession, the percentage of jurisdictions each year saying they were better able to meet their needs either increased or held steady (with the exception of 2016). Then last year, during the initial arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in the state, this metric declined sharply among Michigan local jurisdictions. As of Spring 2021, however, many local governments report a rebound. While only 15% of local governments statewide reported improved fiscal health in early 2020, 27% now report improvement in 2021 (see *Figure 1a*). Similarly, a third (34%) of jurisdictions last year said they were less able to meet financial needs, and this has decreased to 21% today. Meanwhile, almost half (48%) say they are simply holding steady, reporting no significant change in their fiscal health from 2020 to 2021.

Figure 1a
Percentage of jurisdictions reporting they are better or less able to meet their fiscal needs in current year compared to previous year, 2009-2021

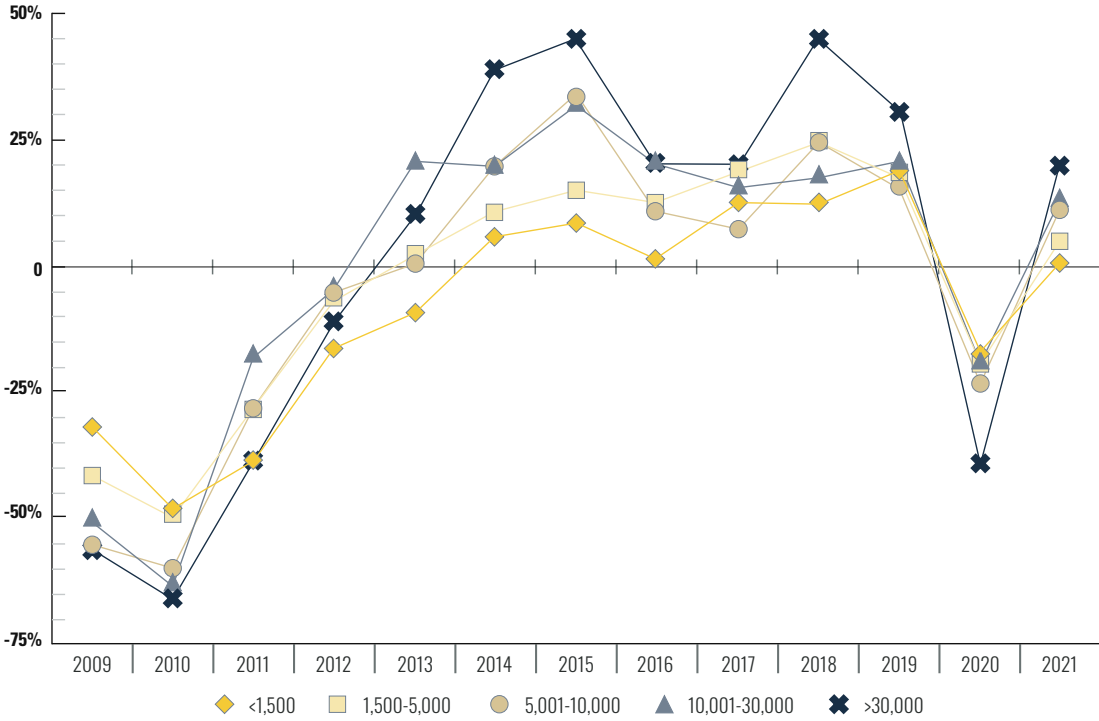


Note: responses for “neither better nor less able” and “don’t know” not shown

Figure 1b presents the changes in local fiscal health over the last decade broken out by jurisdiction population-size category. It shows “net” fiscal health in each population category: the percentage of jurisdictions that were better able to meet their needs minus the percentage that were less able. A data point below the zero-axis shows that more jurisdictions in that population category reported declining fiscal health than reported improving health in that year. Conversely, a data point above the zero-axis shows that more jurisdictions in that category reported improving fiscal health than reported declining health.

This year, 27% of local officials overall report improving fiscal health for their jurisdictions, while 21% say it is declining. Therefore, the statewide “net” calculation is 27%-21%=6% (e.g., small improvement overall). Looking at the different jurisdiction-size categories in Figure 1b, net fiscal health among jurisdictions of all sizes has rebounded from the steep declines of 2020. The decline in 2020 was particularly steep among Michigan’s largest jurisdictions—those with more than 30,000 residents—but these are also the jurisdictions that report the most improvement this year. They have gone from -38% net fiscal health in 2020 to +20% in 2021. Among the state’s smallest jurisdictions—those with fewer than 1,500 residents—the rebound is less pronounced, with 22% better able to meet fiscal needs this year, 21% less able, and over half (51%) reporting no significant change.

Figure 1b
 Net fiscal health yearly change: percentage of jurisdictions reporting improving fiscal health minus percentage reporting declining health, 2009-2021, by population size



Looking by jurisdiction type, Michigan’s counties report the most dramatic change in fiscal health compared with 2020. As shown in *Figure 1c*, net fiscal health this year among counties improved to 31%, compared with -31% a year ago. Townships also have moved back to a positive net fiscal health score (6%). Meanwhile, although 31% of cities say that they are better able to meet fiscal needs in 2021, another 31% report they are less able, for a net score of 0%. Finally, villages have not gained back all of the ground lost at the beginning of the pandemic, with village officials still reporting negative net fiscal health in 2021 (-2%).

Figure 1c
 Net fiscal health yearly change: percentage of jurisdictions reporting improving fiscal health minus percentage reporting declining health, 2009-2021, by jurisdiction type

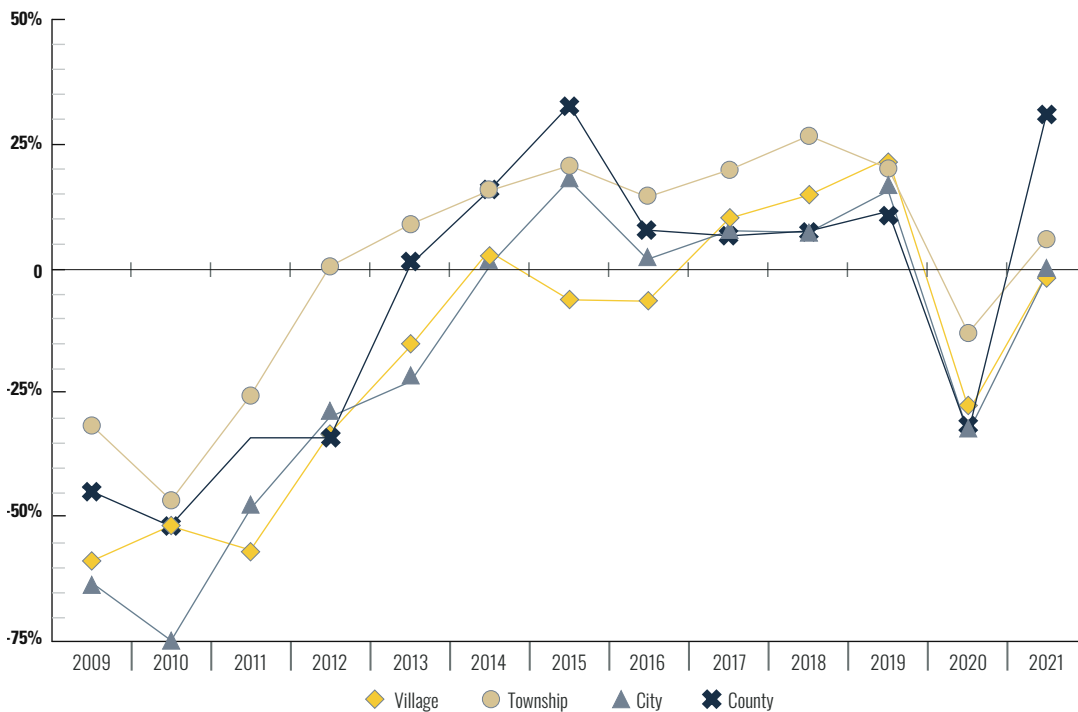


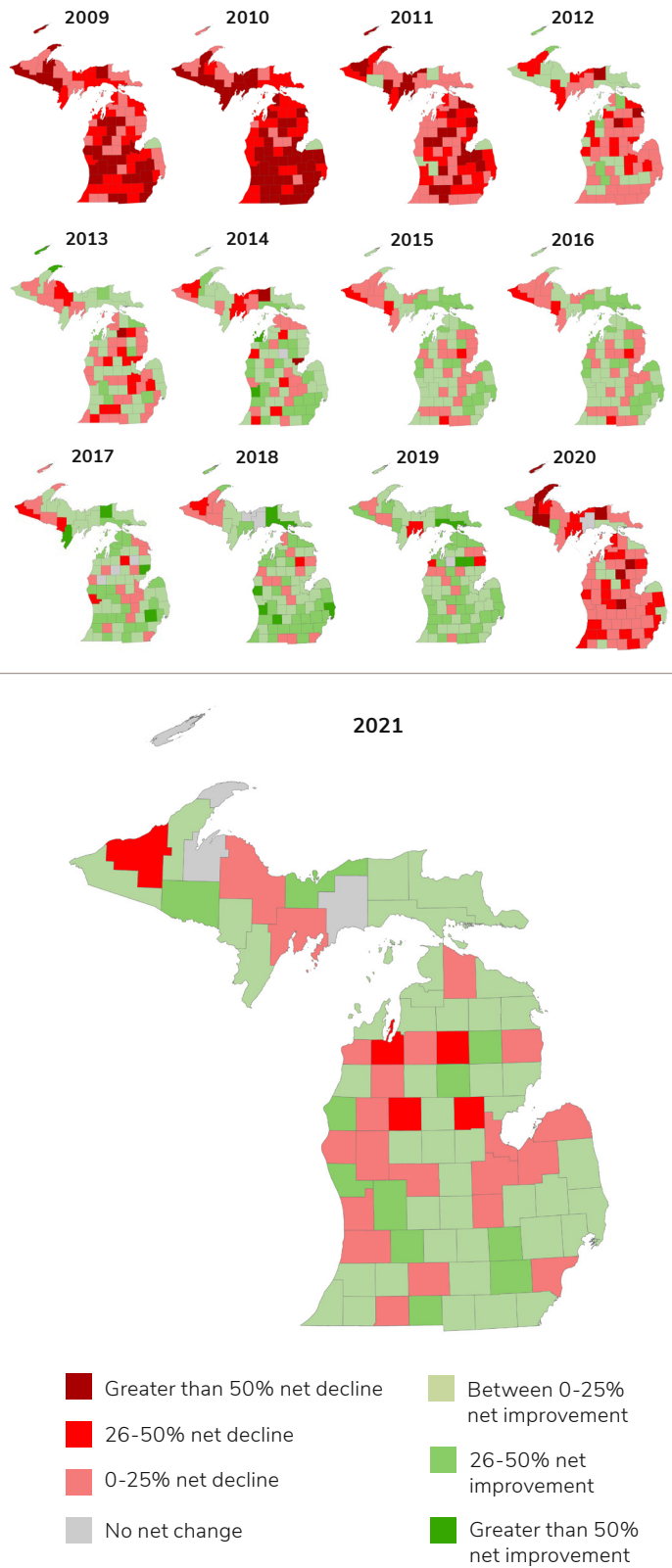
Figure 1d displays the same “net fiscal health” for jurisdictions across Michigan aggregated at the county level. The thirteen annual maps contrast those counties (in shades of red) where more jurisdictions are suffering fiscal decline than are experiencing improved fiscal health (e.g., “below the zero axis”), compared with those counties (in shades of green) where more jurisdictions are experiencing improved fiscal health than decline (e.g., “above the zero axis”). Counties where there are equal numbers of jurisdictions experiencing improvement and decline are shaded grey.

The color shades are scaled by the magnitude of the county-wide aggregated fiscal changes, with three categories (shades) each for improving (green) and declining (red) conditions. The darkest shades of green and red show where the net calculation of jurisdictions improving minus those declining is greater than 50% (positive if green, negative if red), the middle shades show where the net calculation is between 26% and 50%, and the lightest shades show where the net calculation is between 0 and 25%. For example, if 76% of jurisdictions in a county are improving, while 24% are declining, the net calculation is $76\% - 24\% = 52\%$ improving, which results in the darkest shade of green. Or, if 27% of jurisdictions in a county are improving while 33% are declining, the net calculation is $27\% - 33\% = -6\%$, which results in a light pink-shaded county. It should be noted that for 34 counties in 2021, a majority of their local jurisdictions report no change in their fiscal health, so it may be the case that only a small number of jurisdictions in those counties are included in the net calculations.

At the low point during the Great Recession in 2010, the map was almost uniformly red, showing widespread fiscal decline across the state. This gradually improved over time, and by 2019 most counties showed net improvement for their local jurisdictions, with just 14 counties showing net declines. In 2020 this trend reversed, with 71 counties reporting year-over-year net decline among their local governments. Now, in 2021, many areas of the state have turned green once again. A majority of Michigan counties (51) report net improvement in fiscal health among their local jurisdictions this year, including eight that saw a net improvement over 30%. Meanwhile, 26 counties report continuing net declines, including three with a worse than -30% net score.

Appendix A at the end of this report displays the actual percent net change reported for each of Michigan’s 83 counties for 2021.

Figure 1d
Net fiscal health yearly change: percentage of jurisdictions reporting improving fiscal health minus percentage reporting declining health, 2009-2021, by county



In snapshot of current health, most jurisdictions still report low stress levels overall for 2021, but little improvement over last year

Whereas the year-over-year data described above focus on *change* in the near term (i.e., if a jurisdiction is currently *better* or *less able* to meet its fiscal needs than it was last year), they don't indicate actual *current* levels of fiscal health or stress. They only describe *changes* in whatever those levels may be. Therefore, in 2014 the MPPS added a new Fiscal Stress Index (FSI) question to capture a snapshot of local officials' estimates of fiscal stress levels in the current year. The FSI uses a 10-point scale, where 1 indicates perfect fiscal health and 10 indicates a fiscal crisis.

In 2021, as shown in *Figure 2a*, 65% of Michigan's local leaders rate their jurisdiction's current level of fiscal stress on the FSI as relatively low (at 4 or less on the 10-point scale). This is essentially unchanged from 2020 levels (64%) though still down slightly from before the pandemic in 2019, when 69% reported relatively low levels of fiscal stress. For the lowest point on the scale, only 9% report currently having "perfect fiscal health" (1 on the 10-point scale), compared with 13% that assessed their health as "perfect" last year, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and 11% in 2019.

Meanwhile, a quarter of the state's local governments (25%) currently report medium levels of fiscal stress (scores of 5 or 6 on the 10-point scale) and 7% report high levels of stress (scores of 7 or higher), essentially unchanged since last year. Another 4% are unsure about their current level of fiscal stress.

To examine change over time in these annual snapshots, *Figure 2b* shows annual "net" assessments of current fiscal health: the percentage of local officials who say their jurisdiction has low fiscal stress (1-4 on the 10-point scale) minus the percentage that have either medium (5-6) or high (7-10) stress. Higher data points indicate better statewide fiscal health. Between 2014 (when the MPPS began tracking this indicator) and 2018, this measure showed a clear trend of declining fiscal health for jurisdictions as a whole across the state. And although in 2019 the trend of decline on the FSI was broken by an uptick in fiscal health, last year net current fiscal health scores statewide returned to the prior trend of decline, with a net score of 33%. Now, in 2021, reports on this measure show no improvement, with a statewide net fiscal stress score once again at 33%.

Figure 2a
Officials' assessments of their jurisdiction's current fiscal health, via the MPPS Fiscal Stress Index, 2021

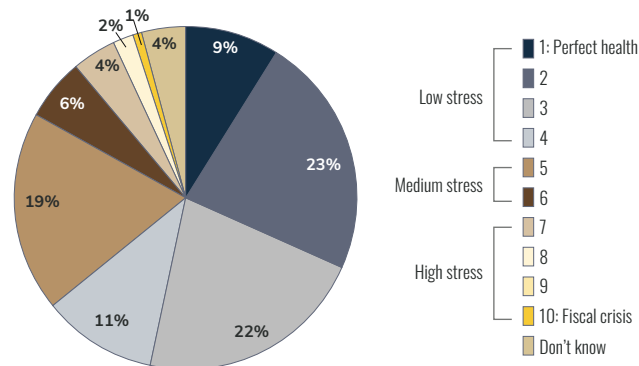


Figure 2b
Net current fiscal health, via the MPPS Fiscal Stress Index: percentage of jurisdictions reporting low fiscal stress minus percentage reporting medium or high stress, 2014-2021

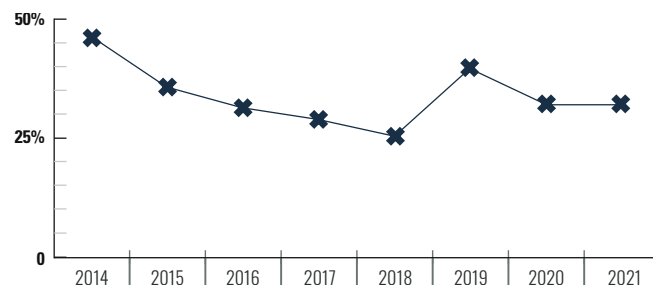


Figure 2c shows the trend in FSI scores broken down by jurisdiction population-size category, with more volatility over time than when all jurisdictions across the state are combined as in Figure 2b. This year, jurisdictions with 1,500-5,000 residents report substantial net decline (from 45% net fiscal health in 2020 to 37% in 2021). By contrast, jurisdictions with between 5,001-10,000 residents show the most improvement in net FSI scores, and indeed 71% of this size jurisdiction are reporting low fiscal stress (4 or lower on the scale) in 2021.

Starting with the Spring 2017 wave, the MPPS has also asked local officials each year to characterize their jurisdictions on an urban-rural spectrum: rural, mostly rural, mostly urban, or urban. As shown in Figure 2d, this year the net FSI scores for each group of jurisdictions along that spectrum show less volatility and remain relatively unchanged, with just small declines from 2020 in each group. Meanwhile, jurisdictions that identify as fully urban continue to report significantly lower net FSI scores (13% in 2021) compared with other jurisdiction categories. Indeed, only 57% of urban jurisdictions say they currently have low fiscal stress (1-4 on the 10-point scale).

Looking at differences in net fiscal health by jurisdiction type, Michigan counties report significant increases in net health, while villages report some improvement, and townships decline, but only slightly (see Figure 2e). Cities report more substantial declines in net FSI scores, after the increases they had made in the previous two years. When it comes to low fiscal stress, townships lead the way, with 69% reporting scores of 1-4 on the 10-point scale, compared with 57% of counties, 56% of villages, and 55% of cities in 2021.

Figure 2c
Net current fiscal health, via the MPPS Fiscal Stress Index: percentage of jurisdictions reporting low fiscal stress minus percentage reporting medium or high stress, 2014-2021, by population size

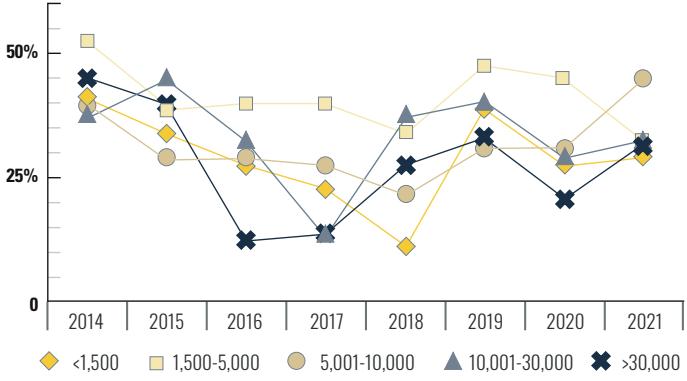


Figure 2d
Net current fiscal health, via the MPPS Fiscal Stress Index: percentage of jurisdictions reporting low fiscal stress minus percentage reporting medium or high stress, 2017-2021, by urban-rural self-identification

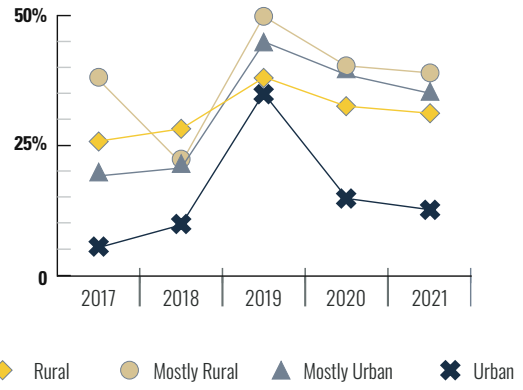
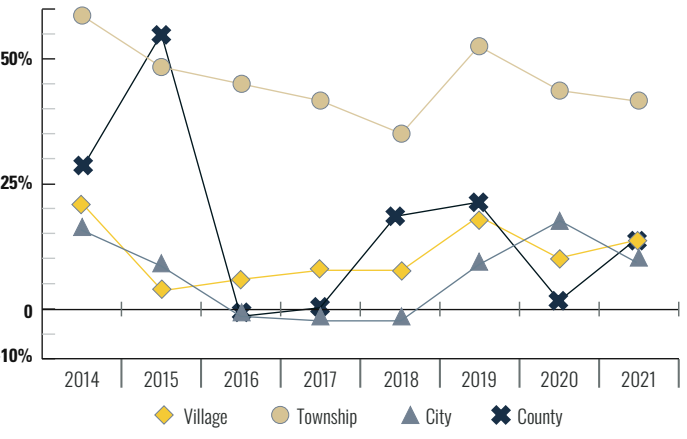


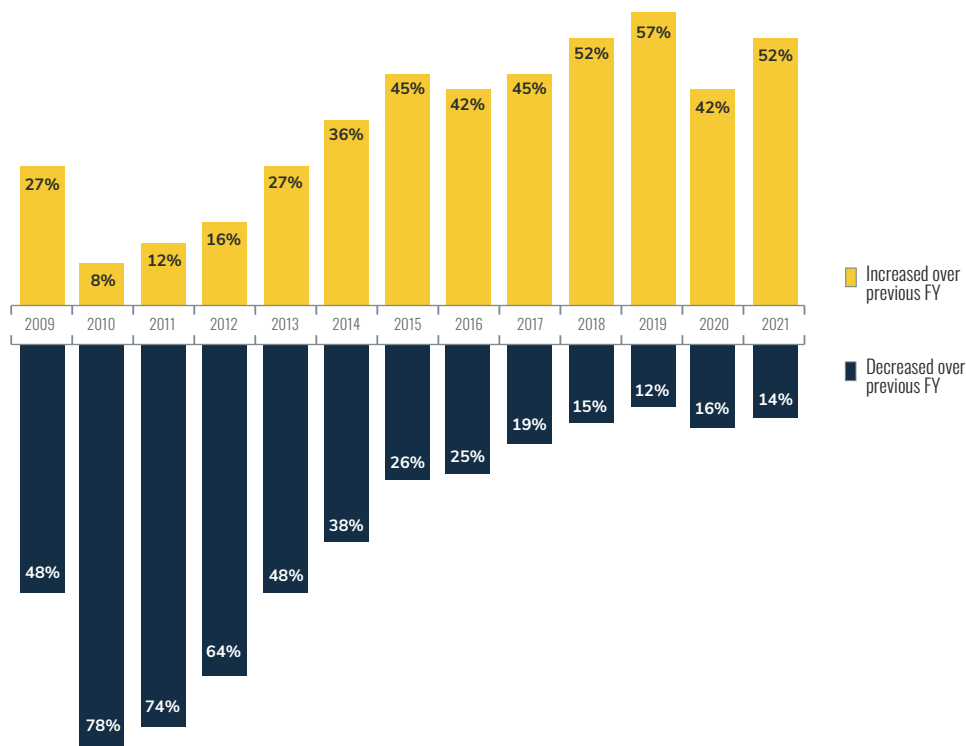
Figure 2e
Net current fiscal health, via the MPPS Fiscal Stress Index: percentage of jurisdictions reporting low fiscal stress minus percentage reporting medium or high stress, 2014-2021, by jurisdiction type



Local governments also report rebounds in property tax revenue, and state and federal aid

Property taxes are the most important source of revenue for most Michigan local governments, and at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 there was hope across the state that real estate values, and thus property taxes, would not plunge as they did during the Great Recession.³ However, as shown in *Figure 3a*, the percentage of jurisdictions reporting increases in property tax revenues did drop from 57% in 2019 to 42% in 2020, accompanied by a slight bump in the percentage reporting outright property tax revenue decreases (16%, compared to 12% in 2019). In 2021, the percentage of jurisdictions reporting property tax increases has recovered almost to 2019 levels, with over half (52%) reporting increases. Still, it is important to note that almost no local governments say these revenues increased “significantly” (51% say they increased “somewhat”), so it is likely most changes were relatively modest for individual jurisdictions.

Figure 3a
Percentage of jurisdictions overall reporting changes in property tax revenue compared with previous fiscal year, 2009-2021

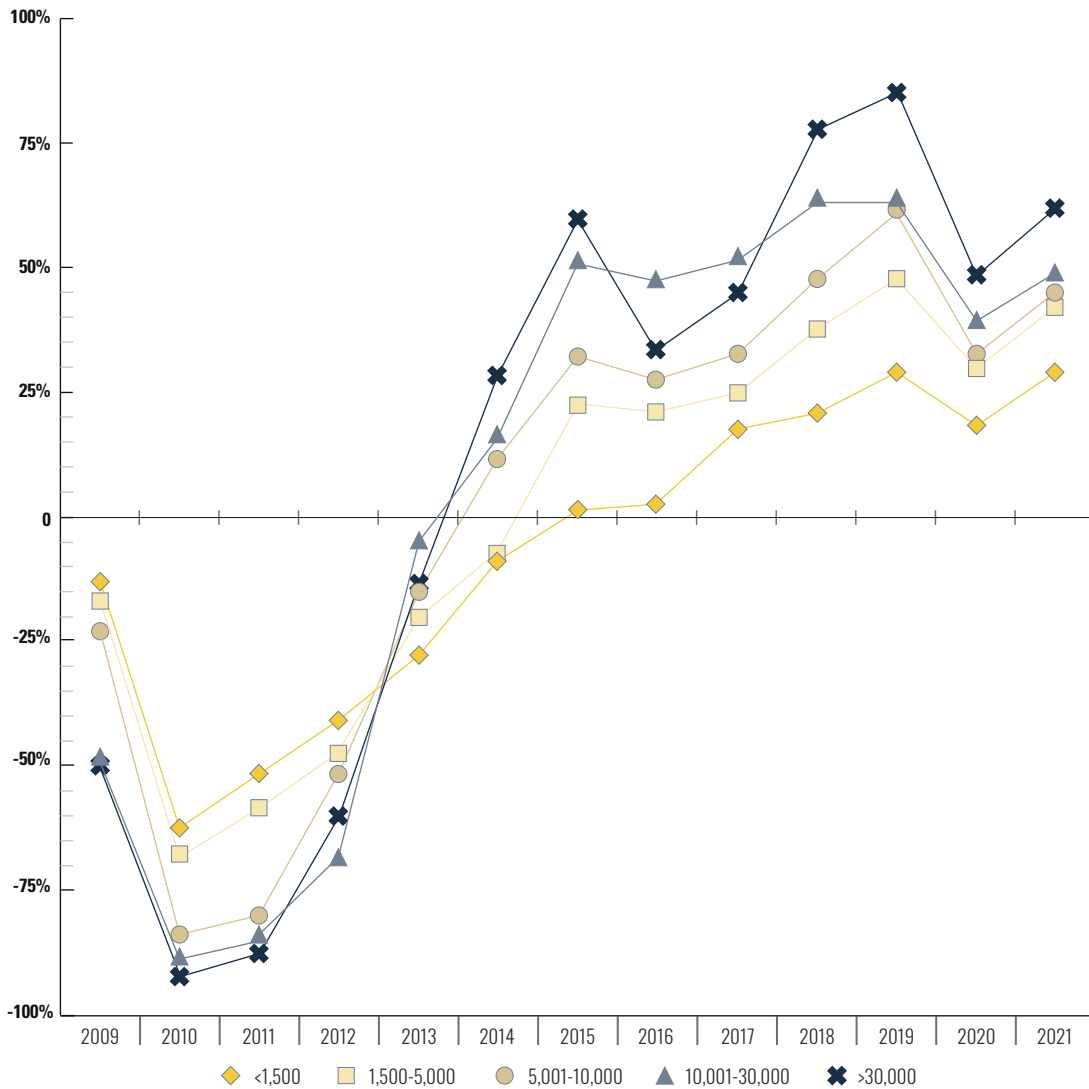


Note: responses for “no change,” “not applicable,” and “don’t know” not shown

Jurisdictions of all sizes show an increase in the net property tax calculation (the percentage of jurisdictions reporting increases in property tax revenue minus the percentage reporting decreases in property tax revenue). The rebounds among smaller jurisdiction sizes meet or nearly meet back with their pre-COVID-19 levels (see *Figure 3b*). However, the state’s mid-sized and larger jurisdictions are still below 2019 levels. For example, in jurisdictions with over 30,000 residents, the current net calculation of 62% is better than last year’s (48%) but still well below the high point reported in 2019 (85%).

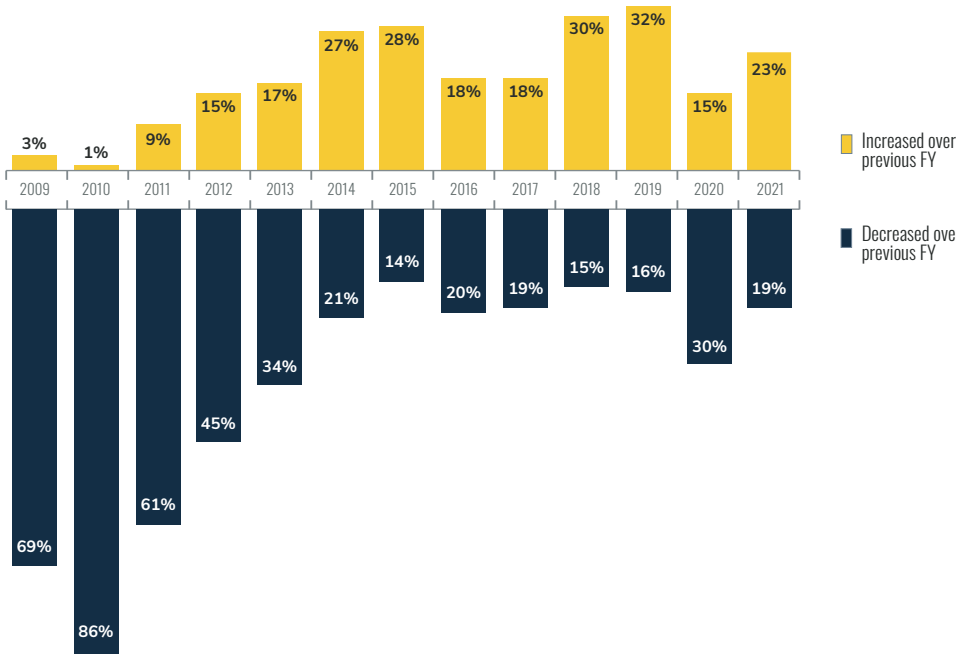
Figure 3b

Net property tax yearly change: percentage of jurisdictions reporting increases in property tax revenue minus percentage reporting decreases in property tax revenue, 2009-2021, by population size



Another important source of funding for local governments is state aid, and the COVID-19 pandemic saw both the federal and state governments providing much-needed emergency funding to local governments.⁴ As shown in *Figure 4a*, nearly a quarter (23%) of jurisdictions statewide report an increase in state aid received this year compared to the last fiscal year, while 19% say there has been a decrease. This may or may not take into consideration federal dollars distributed by the State of Michigan (for example, Michigan’s Coronavirus Relief Local Government Grants (CRLGG) program, which was funded by the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, Public Law 116-136).⁵

Figure 4a
Percentage of jurisdictions overall reporting changes in state aid compared with previous fiscal year, 2009-2021



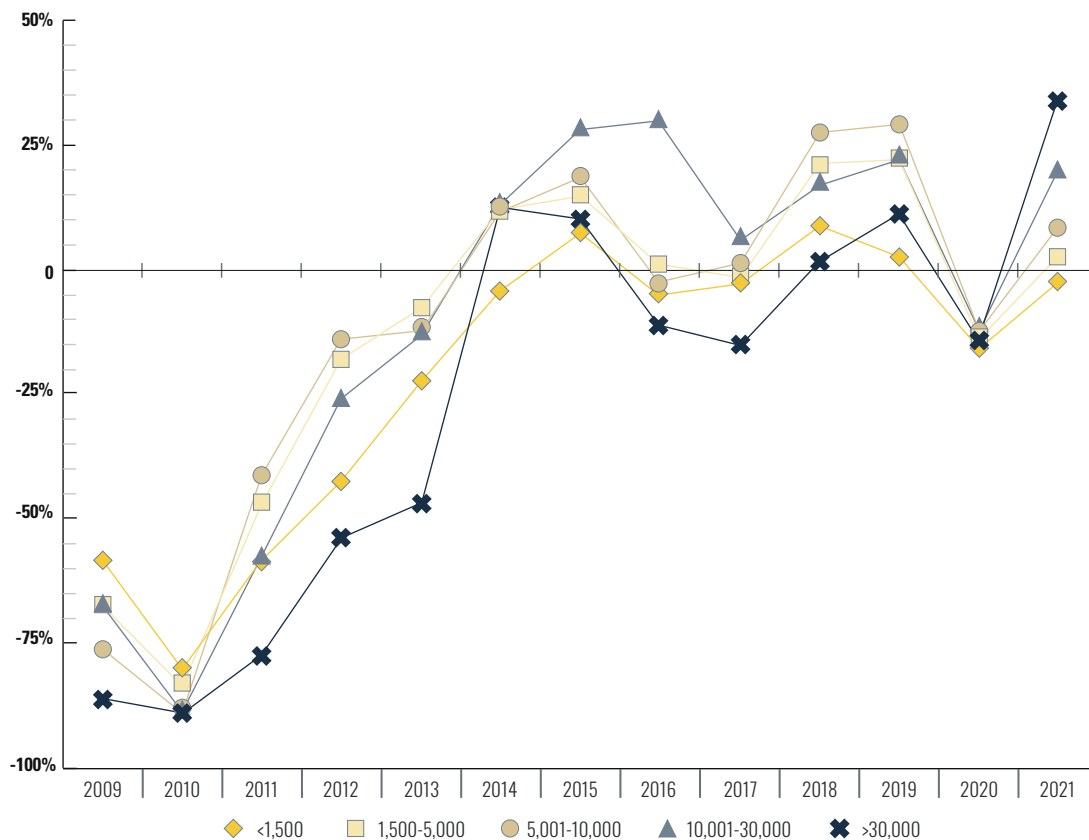
Note: responses for “no change,” “not applicable,” and “don’t know” not shown

Looking at net state aid calculations (the percentage of jurisdictions reporting increased state aid minus the percentage reporting decreased state aid) by population category, increases are found among jurisdictions of all sizes as of spring 2021 (see *Figure 4b*). However, among the smallest jurisdictions, net state aid is still underwater (-3%) with 14% of their leaders saying that state aid has increased in 2021, while 17% say it has decreased. By contrast, the net change in state aid among Michigan’s largest jurisdictions is 34%, with 49% reporting increases this year, compared with 15% reporting decreases.

Although in normal years, the change in the amount of federal aid to jurisdictions has been quite low, this past fiscal year during the COVID-19 pandemic was clearly an exception. Statewide, 31% of local officials report an increase in federal aid to their jurisdictions, including 84% from the state’s largest jurisdictions. By comparison, the last time the MPPS survey asked about changes in federal aid was in 2017, when just 6% of jurisdictions reported increases.

Figure 4b

Net state aid yearly change: percentage of jurisdictions reporting increases in state aid minus percentage reporting decreases in state aid, 2009-2021, by population size



Some increasing concern about general fund balances among larger and more urban jurisdictions

The MPPS also tracks local governments’ general fund balances each year, asking whether the balance is too high, about right, or too low to meet their jurisdiction’s fiscal needs. As of spring 2021, 71% of local officials statewide say their general fund balance is about right, up from 66% in 2020, when twice as many local officials said they were unsure whether they had the right level of fund balance to survive the pandemic (see *Figure 5a*). Meanwhile, this year about one in five (19%) say their balance is too low, approximately equivalent to those who said the same in 2020.

However, as shown in *Figure 5b*, only the state’s smaller jurisdictions (with 5,000 or fewer residents) are holding steady on fund balance concerns. Among the state’s mid-sized jurisdictions with between 5,001-10,000 residents, the percentage that say their general fund balance is too low has increased from 12% last year to 18% this year. And among the largest jurisdictions, almost a third (30%) say their fund balance is too low. Similarly, 35% of county officials and 42% of officials from urban jurisdictions believe their current general fund balance is too low.

The MPPS also asks about the status of cash flow, a particularly sensitive indicator of fiscal stress. Again, the percentage of jurisdictions overall saying cash flow is “not a problem at all” is essentially unchanged from last year, but at 62%, that remains down from the 70% who said cash flow was no problem in 2019. Of greater concern, fewer than half of counties (47%) or urban jurisdictions (41%) report that cash flow is currently “not a problem at all” in 2021.

Data from 2009–2021 on changes in local government finances and operations this year compared to the last year are available in *Appendix B*.

Figure 5a
Percentage of officials saying their general fund balance is too high, too low, or about right, 2010-2021

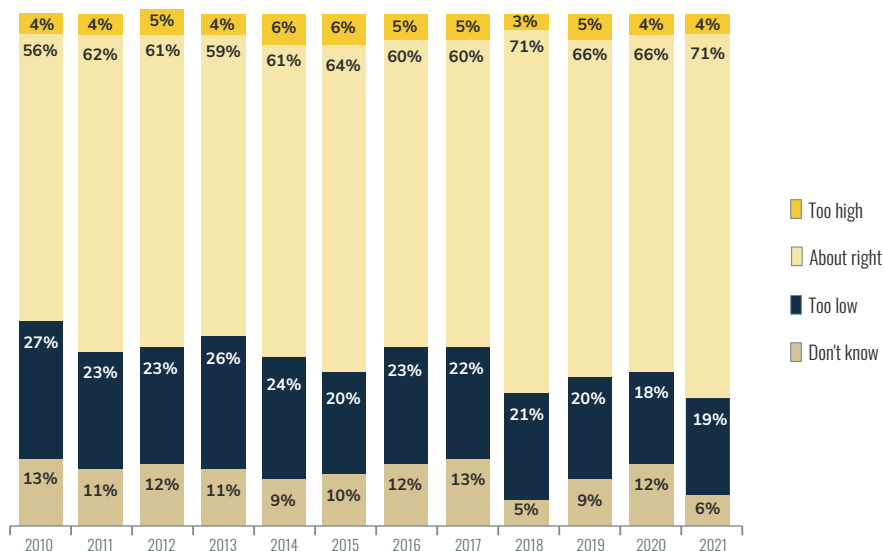
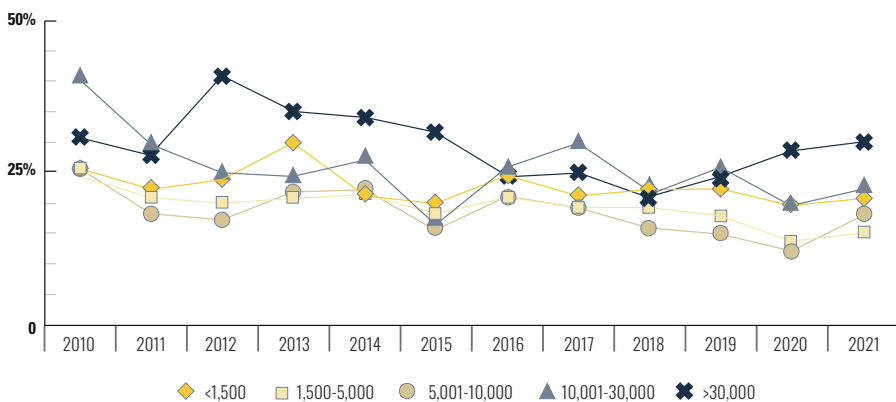


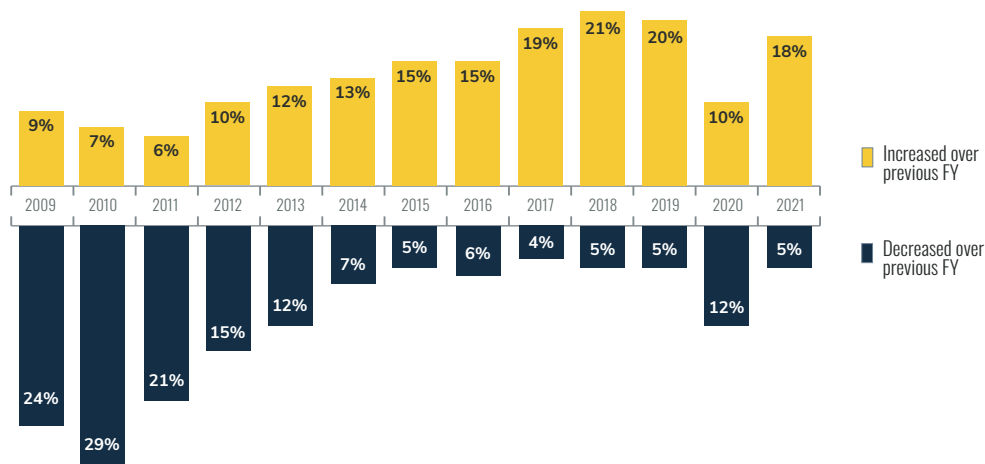
Figure 5b
Percentage of officials saying their general fund balance is too low, 2010-2021, by population size



Looking ahead, plans for increased service provision rebound

When it comes to the provision of public services, there is a bounce in the percentage of jurisdictions that expect to increase service levels in the year ahead, from 10% on the 2020 MPPS back up to 18% in 2021 (see *Figure 6*). Additionally, although 12% of jurisdictions statewide expected cuts to their overall level of services in 2020 (the largest percentage since 2013), this year the percentage expecting to cut services has dropped to 5%. And while the state’s largest jurisdictions were the most likely to report plans to cut overall service provision (31%) last year during the first wave of the pandemic, now in 2021 they are the most likely to be planning increases (36%). It is worth noting, though, that many of the smallest jurisdictions provide a very limited set of services in the first place, and so have fewer offerings to increase.

Figure 6
Percentage of jurisdictions reporting planned changes in overall service provision in the coming year, 2009-2021



Note: responses for “no change,” “not applicable,” and “don’t know” not shown

Jurisdictions plan to allocate funds to meet increased public safety and infrastructure needs, but may fall short on human service spending

After record-low reports of increased infrastructure and public safety needs in 2020, over half (55%) of local officials on the 2021 MPPS now report increased infrastructure needs, while 37% report increased demands for human services and 36% do so regarding public safety (see *Figure 7*).

Looking ahead to the next fiscal year, the MPPS also asks whether local jurisdictions are planning to increase or decrease spending in these service areas. For many years in the MPPS time series, local government spending appeared to fall short of reported needs, but now, for the second year in a row, there appears to be a better ability for local governments to increase spending to match increased demands. For example, while 36% of jurisdictions report increased public safety needs in 2021, 40% plan to increase spending on public safety in the next fiscal year (see *Figure 8*).

Figure 7
Percentage of jurisdictions reporting increases in infrastructure, public safety, and human service needs compared with previous fiscal year, 2009-2021

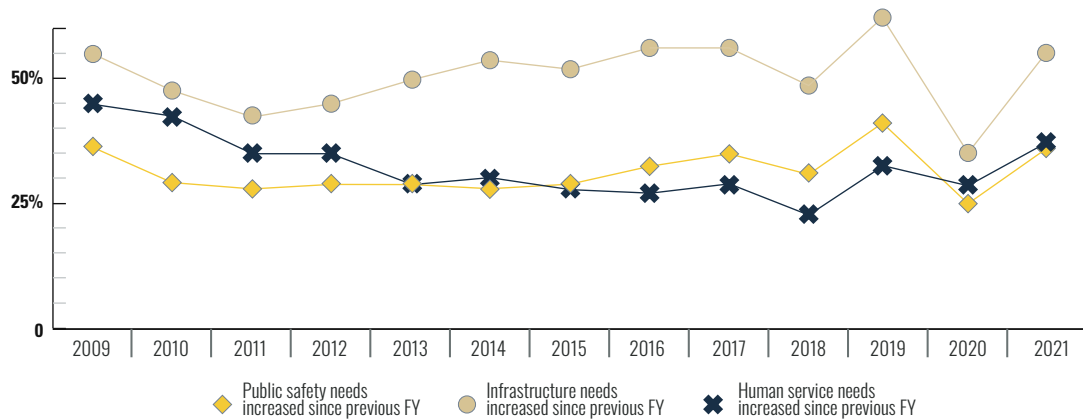
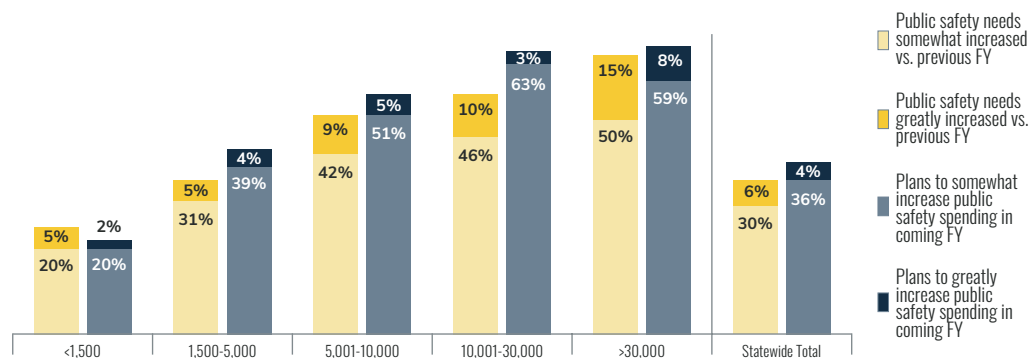


Figure 8
Percentage of jurisdictions reporting increases in public safety needs and planned increases in actual public safety spending in the coming year, 2021, by population size



Looking at infrastructure needs, predicted spending in this area is also largely expected to match increasing needs. Over half (55%) of Michigan jurisdictions report increased infrastructure needs in 2021, and 54% plan to increase spending (see *Figure 9*). However, this data was collected prior to Congress’ passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act in November 2021, which will provide funding for local government infrastructure projects across the state.⁶ With the opportunity to tap into this additional federal funding, increases in infrastructure spending for the coming year might be even higher.

Meanwhile, relatively few jurisdictions expect to increase human services spending next year, at least not in pace to meet increasing needs. As shown in *Figure 10*, more than a third (37%) of jurisdictions report increased human services needs this year, but only 11% anticipate increasing their human services spending. Notably, 75% of Michigan’s largest jurisdictions report increases in human services needs, including 23% who say those increases are significant. However, only 54% predict they will increase their human services spending in the coming year. These shortfalls are reported across all population groups, and reflect a persistent pattern reported on prior waves of the MPPS going back to 2010. Meanwhile, presumably the significant direct federal and state aid to individuals through much of the pandemic has helped address many human services needs in communities across the state since spring 2020.

Data from 2009–2021 on local officials’ plans for the coming year on a range of topics are available in *Appendix C*.

Figure 9
Percentage of jurisdictions reporting increases in infrastructure needs and planned increases in actual infrastructure spending in the coming year, 2021, by population size

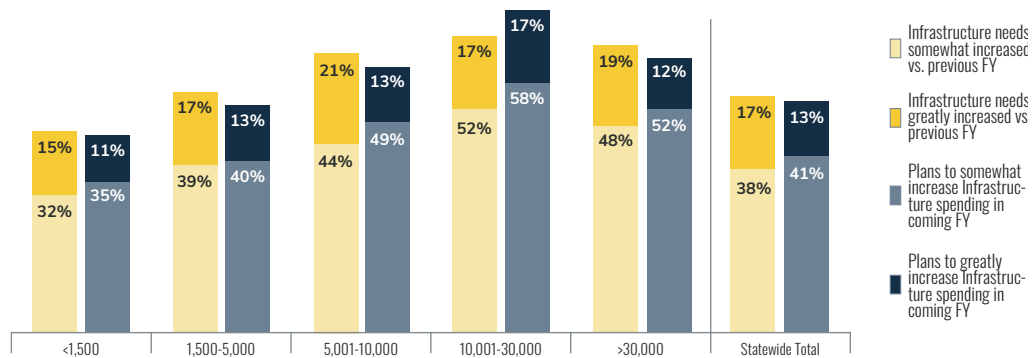
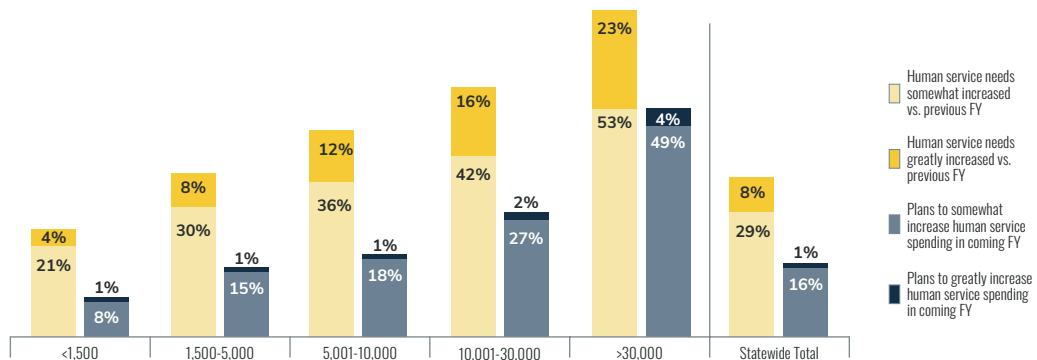


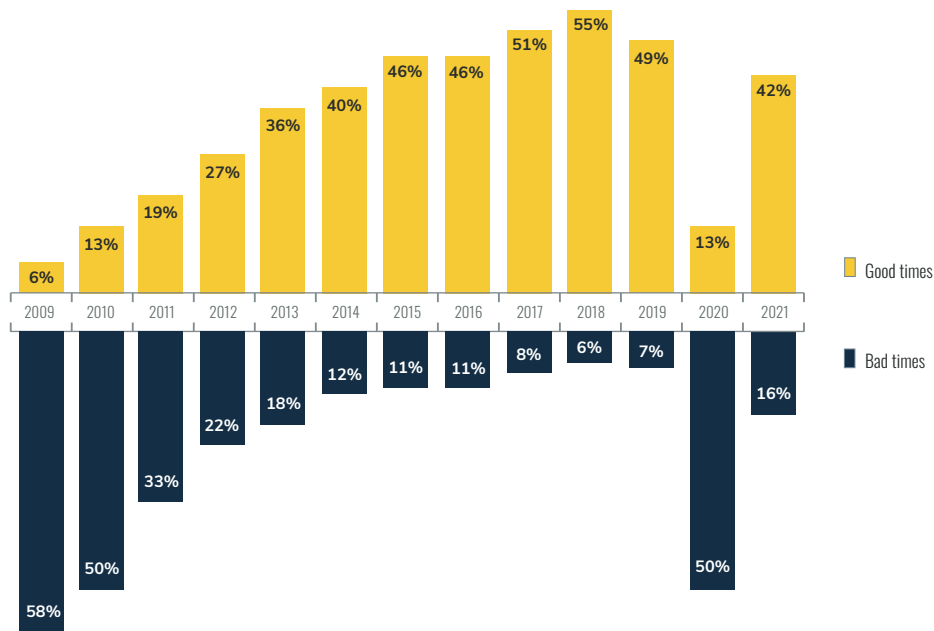
Figure 10
Percentage of jurisdictions reporting increases in human services needs and planned increases in actual human services spending in the coming year, 2021, by population size



Looking ahead, guarded optimism about the health of local economies

Beyond questions about the fiscal health of local governments themselves, the MPPS also asks local leaders to think about general business conditions in their communities, and to predict whether there will be good times or bad times financially in the coming year. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the state led to a great deal of pessimism about the economy in 2020. However, after a year spent enduring shutdowns, public health crises, and changes in the labor market, optimism in 2021 about local economic conditions rebounded significantly. Statewide, 42% of local leaders predict good times financially in their local communities in the coming year, while just 16% predict bad times (see *Figure 11*).

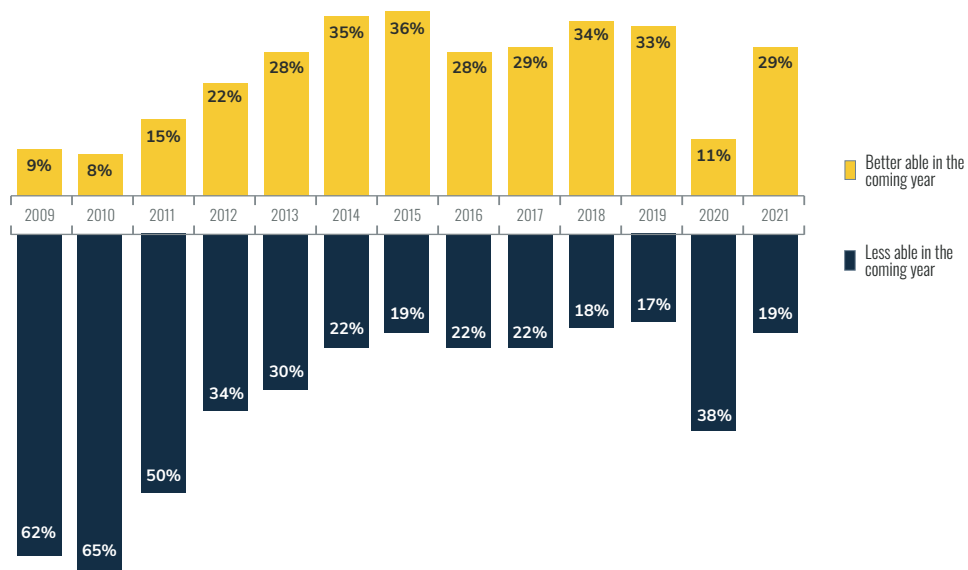
Figure 11
Percentage of jurisdictions overall predicting their community will have good or bad times financially, 2009-2021



Note: responses for “neither” and “don’t know” not shown

Thinking specifically about near term future changes in their local governments' fiscal health, Michigan local officials' optimism is more restrained, but once again almost back in line with pre-COVID assessments. In 2021, 29% predict their jurisdiction will be better able to meet its fiscal needs next year compared with this year (see *Figure 12*). By comparison, only 11% said the same last year. Meanwhile, approximately one in five (19%) local leaders believe their jurisdictions will be less able to meet fiscal needs next year, compared with 38% who said so last year. Statewide, in 2021, 43% are expecting no change between this year and next year, and 10% are uncertain what their fiscal status may be next year.

Figure 12
Percentage of jurisdictions predicting they will be better or less able to meet their fiscal needs in next year compared to current year, 2009-2021

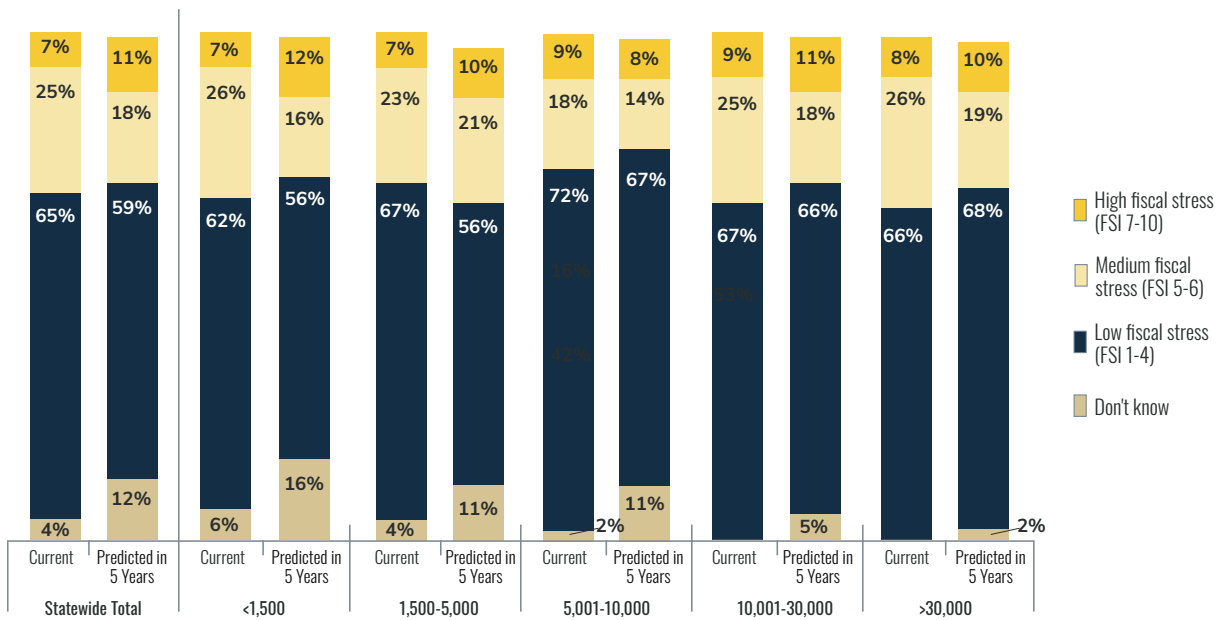


Note: responses for "neither" and "don't know" not shown

Increased concern and uncertainty about long-term fiscal stability

Looking farther down the road reveals additional concerns among local officials about long-term fiscal health. Even though local officials report a rebound on many fiscal metrics from the concerns introduced by COVID-19 last year, 11% now predict they will have high fiscal stress in five years, compared to 7% who say they are experiencing it now (see *Figure 13*). Meanwhile, 59% expect low fiscal stress five years from now, down from 65% who say they have low stress today.

Figure 13
Officials' predictions of their jurisdiction's fiscal stress in five years, 2021, by population size



Conclusion

After suffering through the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic in Michigan, local government leaders report a welcome easing of near-term fiscal health concerns that many expressed at the beginning of the pandemic. Yet, the full picture is mixed. Although there is increasing optimism among local officials about the future of the economy in their communities, their rebounding fiscal health, as tracked through numerous indicators, has not been particularly strong and many local governments report they are simply holding steady.

Statewide, over a quarter (27%) of local jurisdictions in 2021 say they are better able to meet their fiscal needs compared with last year, which is up from 15% who said the same in 2020. However, this increase is still below the 36% that reported year-over-year improvement in 2019. At the same time, 21% of jurisdictions this year say they are currently less able to meet their needs (down from 34% in 2020), and 48% report no change since the pandemic began.

Meanwhile, 65% of local governments self-rate their current levels of fiscal stress as relatively low, a percentage essentially unchanged from last year. As with year-over-year changes in fiscal health, this measure remains down slightly from 2019 levels. And despite efforts by the federal and state government to provide rescue funding and aid to local governments, 7% say they are experiencing high levels of fiscal stress, essentially unchanged from recent years. Perhaps these percentages would be even worse in the absence of that aid.

Local officials—particularly in larger jurisdictions—continue to report growing service demands. However, when it comes to infrastructure and public safety spending, they also predict their jurisdictions will increase spending to meet those needs. They do not, however, expect to increase spending enough to meet growing human service needs.

Looking ahead, 42% of local officials forecast good economic times for their community in the coming year, up from only 13% last year at the beginning of the pandemic. Still, this growing optimism has not yet rebounded back to 2019 levels. Looking even farther down the road, 11% predict they will have high fiscal stress in five years, compared to 7% who say they are experiencing it now, while 59% expect low fiscal stress in five years, down from 65% who say they have low stress today.

Notes

1. Leiser, S., & Mills, S. (2019). Local government fiscal health: Comparing self-assessments to conventional measures. *Public Budgeting and Finance*, 39(3), 75–96. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pbaf.12226>
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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 2021 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 2021 wave was conducted from April 5 – June 7, 2021. A total of 1,364 jurisdictions in the Spring 2021 wave returned valid surveys (67 counties, 208 cities,

173 villages, and 916 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: closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey

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.

Appendices

Appendix A

Net fiscal health yearly change: percentage of jurisdictions reporting improving fiscal health minus percentage reporting declining health, 2020-2021, by county

County Name	% Less Able to Meet Fiscal Needs	% Neither Better nor Less Able	% Better Able to Meet Fiscal Needs	% Don't Know	Net Yearly Change for 2020
ALCONA	26%	65%	9%	0%	-17%
ALGER	0%	63%	37%	0%	37%
ALLEGAN	25%	49%	18%	8%	-7%
ALPENA	17%	50%	17%	17%	0%
ANTRIM	7%	51%	27%	16%	20%
ARENAC	25%	47%	28%	0%	3%
BARAGA	33%	33%	33%	0%	0%
BARRY	7%	54%	39%	0%	32%
BAY	32%	38%	31%	0%	-1%
BENZIE	22%	60%	6%	12%	-16%
BERRIEN	27%	25%	40%	7%	13%
BRANCH	6%	50%	38%	6%	32%
CALHOUN	20%	58%	18%	5%	-2%
CASS	14%	60%	27%	0%	13%
CHARLEVOIX	7%	65%	28%	0%	21%
CHEBOYGAN	25%	46%	20%	10%	-5%
CHIPPEWA	17%	38%	28%	17%	11%
CLARE	6%	63%	24%	7%	18%
CLINTON	20%	51%	24%	5%	4%
CRAWFORD	57%	28%	14%	0%	-43%
DELTA	41%	34%	25%	0%	-16%
DICKINSON	0%	68%	20%	11%	20%
EATON	11%	73%	16%	0%	5%
EMMET	14%	65%	14%	7%	0%
GENESEE	20%	44%	32%	4%	12%



GLADWIN	39%	39%	14%	7%	-25%
GOGEBIC	11%	57%	33%	0%	22%
GRAND TRAVERSE	36%	54%	9%	0%	-27%
GRATIOT	28%	43%	28%	0%	0%
HILLSDALE	22%	35%	43%	0%	21%
HOUGHTON	30%	23%	38%	8%	8%
HURON	27%	49%	24%	0%	-3%
INGHAM	11%	54%	29%	5%	18%
IONIA	24%	42%	34%	0%	10%
IOSCO	28%	28%	44%	0%	16%
IRON	18%	31%	51%	0%	33%
ISABELLA	8%	69%	23%	0%	15%
JACKSON	22%	49%	29%	0%	7%
KALAMAZOO	22%	48%	25%	5%	3%
KALKASKA	30%	50%	10%	10%	-20%
KENT	12%	50%	38%	0%	26%
KEWEENAW	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
LAKE	22%	57%	7%	14%	-15%
LAPEER	23%	47%	30%	0%	7%
LEELANAU	7%	71%	22%	0%	15%
LENAWEE	13%	65%	14%	8%	1%
LIVINGSTON	5%	50%	38%	7%	33%
LUCE	14%	54%	32%	0%	18%
MACKINAC	15%	51%	17%	17%	2%
MACOMB	19%	44%	36%	0%	17%
MANISTEE	6%	67%	26%	0%	20%
MARQUETTE	42%	37%	22%	0%	-20%
MASON	17%	24%	58%	0%	41%
MECOSTA	18%	56%	25%	0%	7%

MENOMINEE	15%	54%	24%	7%	9%
MIDLAND	25%	34%	27%	14%	2%
MISSAUKEE	20%	26%	42%	13%	22%
MONROE	20%	53%	27%	0%	7%
MONTCALM	25%	47%	24%	4%	-1%
MONTMORENCY	28%	43%	29%	0%	1%
MUSKEGON	12%	44%	39%	5%	27%
NEWAYGO	34%	42%	25%	0%	-9%
OAKLAND	16%	53%	30%	0%	14%
OCEANA	35%	36%	28%	0%	-7%
OGEMAW	20%	48%	32%	0%	12%
ONTONAGON	57%	25%	18%	0%	-39%
OSCEOLA	39%	50%	5%	6%	-34%
OSCODA	0%	67%	33%	0%	33%
OTSEGO	10%	60%	20%	10%	10%
OTTAWA	32%	41%	27%	0%	-5%
PRESQUE ISLE	12%	67%	21%	0%	9%
ROSCOMMON	9%	53%	38%	0%	29%
SAGINAW	30%	43%	26%	0%	-4%
SANILAC	22%	49%	29%	0%	7%
SCHOOLCRAFT	20%	40%	20%	20%	0%
SHIAWASSEE	30%	65%	6%	0%	-24%
ST CLAIR	16%	52%	32%	0%	16%
ST JOSEPH	37%	44%	13%	6%	-24%
TUSCOLA	19%	64%	17%	0%	-2%
VAN BUREN	23%	31%	32%	14%	9%
WASHTENAW	9%	52%	39%	0%	30%
WAYNE	38%	34%	29%	0%	-9%
WEXFORD	23%	41%	8%	28%	-15%

Appendix B

Conditions in the current fiscal year compared to the previous fiscal year, 2009-2021

		2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Revenue from property tax	Increased	27%	8%	12%	16%	27%	36%	45%	42%	45%	52%	57%	42%	52%
	Decreased	48%	78%	74%	64%	48%	38%	26%	25%	19%	15%	12%	16%	14%
Revenue from fees for services, licenses, transfers, etc.	Increased	7%	4%	7%	10%	13%	17%	18%	19%	21%			15%	18%
	Decreased	54%	59%	47%	34%	26%	18%	13%	12%	10%			25%	23%
Amount of debt	Increased			12%	12%	14%	12%	15%	14%	16%		17%		13%
	Decreased			18%	21%	22%	21%	20%	21%	19%		18%		16%
Ability of jurisdiction to repay its debt	Increased			7%	12%	14%	15%	18%	13%	14%	14%	18%	8%	11%
	Decreased			7%	7%	6%	4%	4%	6%	3%	2%	3%	8%	3%
Amount of federal aid to jurisdiction	Increased	9%	8%	3%	5%	4%	5%	6%	4%	6%				31%
	Decreased	38%	39%	29%	22%	21%	14%	11%	13%	14%				9%
Amount of state aid to jurisdiction	Increased	3%	1%	9%	15%	17%	27%	28%	18%	17%	30%	32%	15%	23%
	Decreased	69%	86%	61%	45%	34%	21%	14%	20%	19%	15%	16%	30%	19%
Number of tax delinquencies	Increased		46%	47%	40%	30%	23%	20%	19%	16%	15%	16%		25%
	Decreased		20%	12%	12%	13%	15%	16%	17%	15%	15%	14%		6%
Number of home foreclosures	Increased		60%	56%	41%	29%	18%	15%	13%	10%				
	Decreased		16%	10%	17%	25%	31%	33%	29%	26%				
Public safety needs	Increased	36%	29%	28%	29%	29%	28%	29%	33%	35%	32%	41%	25%	36%
	Decreased	9%	6%	3%	3%	3%	2%	1%	2%	2%	5%	4%	7%	2%
Infrastructure needs	Increased	55%	47%	43%	45%	50%	54%	52%	56%	56%	48%	63%	35%	55%
	Decreased	12%	7%	5%	5%	3%	2%	2%	2%	4%	7%	4%	10%	3%
Human service needs	Increased	45%	43%	35%	35%	29%	30%	28%	27%	28%	23%	33%	28%	37%
	Decreased	8%	6%	3%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	2%	8%	2%
General government operations needs	Increased						34%	34%	34%	36%	37%	42%	28%	42%
	Decreased						1%	1%	2%	3%	3%	2%	9%	2%
Number of employees	Increased		2%	2%	3%	4%	8%	10%	10%	13%	14%	14%		10%
	Decreased		27%	23%	19%	16%	9%	7%	6%	5%	5%	5%		7%

Pay rates for employee wages and salaries	Increased	36%	20%	21%	27%	39%	46%	53%	51%	57%				59%
	Decreased	15%	13%	10%	7%	5%	3%	1%	1%	2%				1%
Cost of employee pensions	Increased	40%	30%	22%	21%	24%	25%	26%	28%	30%	25%	26%	25%	28%
	Decreased	4%	4%	3%	4%	3%	3%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	1%	1%
Cost of current employee health benefits	Increased	51%	47%	35%	32%	31%	34%	34%	33%	36%	35%	34%	31%	32%
	Decreased	6%	8%	7%	8%	8%	4%	5%	4%	2%	2%	3%	2%	2%
Cost of retired employee health benefits	Increased	31%	24%	17%	16%	16%	17%	15%	16%	18%	15%	16%	15%	16%
	Decreased	4%	4%	3%	3%	4%	2%	3%	2%	1%	2%	1%	3%	1%

Notes: Responses for "no change," "don't know," and "not applicable" not shown. Percentages are based on all responding jurisdictions (not just those that selected an option other than "not applicable"). The "not applicable" response option was added in 2011, so direct comparisons with earlier waves may be compromised. Question text for "pay rates for employee wage & salaries" changed slightly between 2010 and 2011. See web tables for exact question text.

Appendix C

Predicted actions for the coming fiscal year compared to the current fiscal year, 2009-2021

		2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Property tax rates	Increase	18%	10%	15%	15%	22%	23%	27%	22%	26%	25%	28%	18%	31%
	Decrease	17%	32%	19%	15%	12%	7%	5%	6%	5%	4%	4%	8%	4%
Charges for fees for services, licenses, etc.	Increase	23%	22%	20%	19%	21%	18%	18%	18%	23%			16%	23%
	Decrease	7%	7%	3%	2%	2%	2%	1%	1%	1%			5%	2%
Reliance on general fund balance	Increase		49%	36%	34%	30%	27%	26%	30%	28%	30%	32%	36%	32%
	Decrease		8%	8%	5%	6%	5%	6%	5%	5%	4%	5%	4%	3%
Reliance on "rainy day" funds	Increase		38%	25%	21%	19%	17%	17%	17%	17%				
	Decrease		7%	4%	4%	5%	5%	5%	5%	6%				
Amount of services provided	Increase	9%	7%	6%	10%	12%	13%	15%	15%	19%	21%	20%	10%	18%
	Decrease	24%	29%	21%	15%	12%	7%	5%	6%	4%	5%	5%	12%	5%
Actual public safety spending	Increase	26%	22%	20%	22%	27%	33%	34%	34%	33%	35%	39%	26%	40%
	Decrease	18%	22%	16%	9%	7%	4%	3%	4%	4%	3%	4%	7%	2%
Actual infrastructure spending	Increase	28%	25%	23%	32%	34%	42%	43%	42%	45%	49%	51%	32%	54%
	Decrease	30%	34%	21%	10%	10%	7%	5%	6%	5%	5%	5%	14%	3%
Actual human services spending	Increase		6%	5%	6%	8%	9%	9%	8%	10%	11%	11%	11%	17%
	Decrease		17%	10%	6%	4%	2%	1%	2%	2%	2%	1%	5%	1%
Actual general government operations spending	Increase						39%	40%	39%	38%	39%	39%	27%	39%
	Decrease						6%	6%	5%	5%	5%	3%	14%	3%
Funding for economic development programs	Increase	14%	12%	8%	11%	13%	12%	13%	12%	14%				17%
	Decrease	17%	20%	12%	9%	8%	5%	5%	4%	4%				3%
Amount of debt	Increase	21%	18%	11%	14%	15%	13%	15%	15%	17%		17%	17%	19%
	Decrease	12%	13%	15%	16%	17%	18%	17%	15%	16%		13%	9%	12%
Sale of public assets (i.e., parks, buildings, etc.)	Increase		5%	5%	6%	6%	7%	7%	7%	9%				
	Decrease		1%	1%	1%	1%	0%	1%	1%	1%				

Privatizing or contracting out of services	Increase	16%	18%	15%	12%	12%	10%	10%	10%	11%	13%	14%	11%	
	Decrease	4%	2%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	2%	3%	
Number and/or scope of interlocal agreements or cost-sharing plans	Increase	32%	38%	40%	40%	34%	30%	22%	18%	18%	17%	21%	13%	
	Decrease	2%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%	2%	
Jurisdiction's workforce hiring	Increase	3%	1%	2%	2%	4%	8%	8%						
	Decrease	20%	22%	14%	8%	8%	3%	3%						
Jurisdiction not filling vacant positions	Increase	22%	23%	16%	10%	9%	7%	5%						
	Decrease	3%	3%	2%	2%	1%	1%	1%						
Number of employees	Increase								9%	11%	11%	12%	6%	12%
	Decrease								4%	5%	4%	3%	8%	4%
Employee pay rates	Increase			21%	30%	40%	47%	53%	48%	56%	61%	63%	44%	56%
	Decrease			6%	4%	3%	2%	1%	1%	1%	0%	1%	2%	0%
Employees' share of premiums, deductibles, and/or co-pays on health insurance	Increase		33%	30%	30%	27%	26%	22%	17%	17%	17%	15%		12%
	Decrease		2%	1%	0%	1%	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%		0%
Employees' share of contributions to retirement funds	Increase		15%	14%	13%	13%	11%	11%	11%	12%	10%	11%		9%
	Decrease		1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	1%	0%	0%		0%
Retirees' share of premiums, deductibles, and/or co-pays on health insurance	Increase		22%	18%	15%	15%	14%	13%	11%	10%	8%	8%		
	Decrease		1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%		

Notes: Responses for "no change," "don't know," and "not applicable" not shown. Percentages are based on all responding jurisdictions (not just those that selected an option other than "not applicable"). The "not applicable" response option was added in 2011, so direct comparisons with earlier waves may be compromised.



Previous MPPS reports

- Michigan local officials' assessments of American democracy at the state and federal levels decline sharply (November 2021)
- The lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Michigan communities and local governments (October 2021)
- Michigan local governments report fewer economic challenges one year into the COVID-19 pandemic, and describe efforts to support local businesses (September 2021)
- Local leaders' views on Michigan's initial COVID-19 vaccine rollout in Spring 2021 (August 2021)
- Local leaders' concerns about Michigan's direction spike, while evaluations of state leaders sink over the past year (July 2021)
- Michigan local leaders' views on state's new approach to electoral redistricting (February 2021)
- COVID-19 pandemic sparks Michigan local leaders' concerns for fiscal health (December 2020)
- The functioning of democracy at the local level: a compendium of findings from the Michigan Public Policy Survey of local leaders (December 2020)
- Energy Issues and Policies in Michigan Local Governments (October 2020)
- Michigan local leaders expect increased challenges for the 2020 election, but are confident about administering accurate elections (October 2020)
- Michigan Local Energy Survey (MiLES): Intergovernmental collaboration on sustainability and energy issues among Michigan local governments (September 2020)
- Confidence in the accuracy of Michigan's 2020 Census count among local leaders was not very high, slips further (August 2020)
- Michigan local leaders expect mixed impacts from expanded voter registration and absentee voting reforms (July 2020)
- Local leaders' evaluations of Michigan's direction and Governor's performance during the COVID-19 pandemic's arrival (July 2020)
- The initial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Michigan communities and local governments (June 2020)
- Energy policies and environmental leadership among Michigan's local governments (January 2020)
- Mixed signals continue for Michigan local governments' fiscal health, while future outlooks worsen (December 2019)
- Michigan local officials' views on the next recession: timing, concerns, and actions taken (October 2019)
- Michigan local government preparations and concerns regarding the 2020 U.S. Census (September 2019)
- 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)
- Despite sustained economic growth, Michigan local government fiscal health still lags (November 2018)
- 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)
- 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)

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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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