



MPPS Policy Brief

Statewide survey finds a majority of Michigan local governments experiencing harassment or other abuse

By Natalie Fitzpatrick, Debra Horner, and Thomas Ivacko

Michigan's top local officials report personally experiencing harassment themselves over last few years

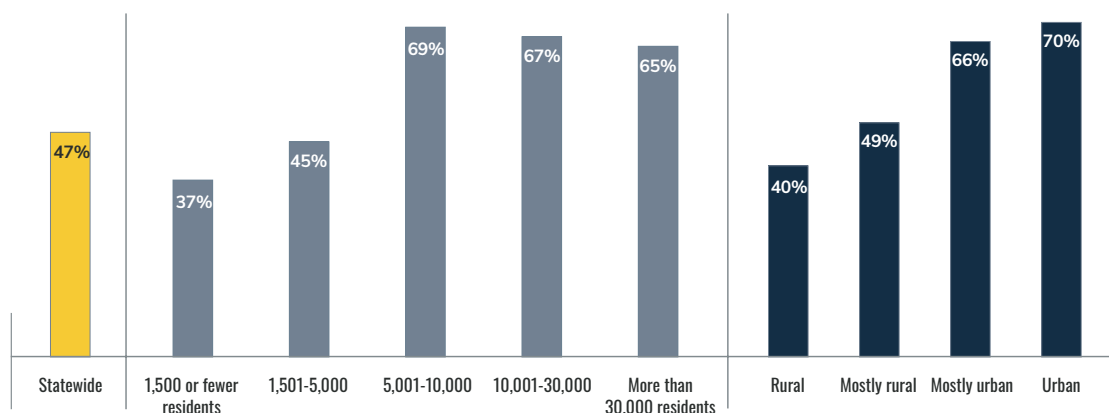
Statewide, 47% of Michigan's top elected and appointed local officials from counties, cities, townships, and villages report personally experiencing online or in-person harassment over the last few years as part of their role in local government, including disrespectful or hostile comments, graphic language or slurs, shouting, and rude or aggressive gestures (see *Figure 1*). Harassment is even more common in jurisdictions with more than 5,000 residents, where about two-thirds of top officials report such problems. Meanwhile, officials from urban or mostly urban jurisdictions are significantly more likely to report harassment than those from rural places, though four in ten rural leaders report these problems as well.

Local officials are less likely to report being subjected to actual threats (15% of jurisdictions statewide), or violent actions such as destruction of property or physical assault (3%). However, in the largest jurisdictions—those with more than 30,000 residents—one-third (33%) report experiencing threats and 7% report violent actions.

Statewide, top officials from 50% of jurisdictions say they have not personally experienced any harassment, threats, or violence as part of their role in local government.

Figure 1

Percent of jurisdictions where top officials report experiencing harassment over the last few years as part of their role in local government, by population category and urban-rural self-identification



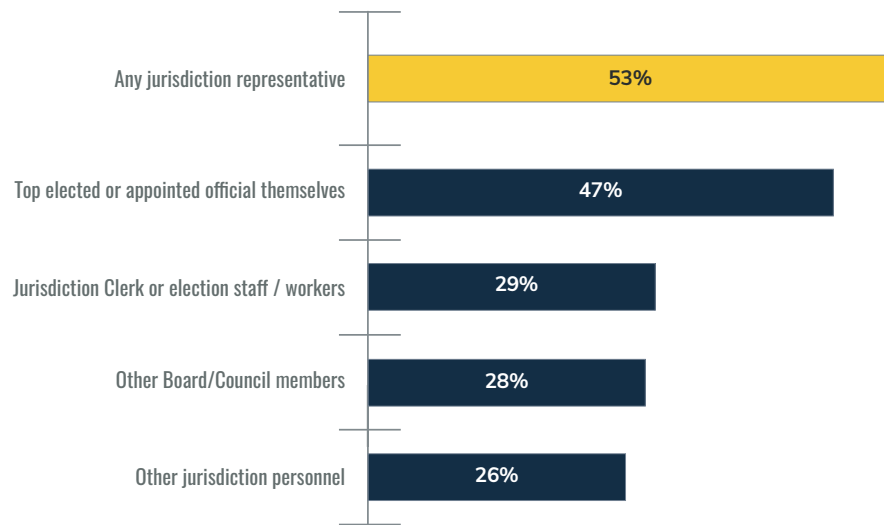
Outright majority report abuse such as harassment, threats, or even violence against at least one member of their local government

The chief elected and appointed leaders are not the only ones subject to abuse as part of their role in local government. Statewide, a significant proportion of MPPS survey respondents are also aware of abuse perpetrated against other individuals within their local government. This may involve harassment, threats, or even violence, including destruction of property. As shown in *Figure 2*, these include reports of abuse against the County, City or Township Clerk, their election staff, or other election workers (29%), other members of their Board or Council (28%), and other jurisdiction employees or volunteers (26%). Meanwhile, 16% are unsure of abuse towards other jurisdiction representatives beyond themselves.

Overall, officials from 53% of jurisdictions report harassment, threats, or violence against any members of the local government, including themselves.

Figure 2

Percent of jurisdictions reporting various members of the local government that have experienced harassment, threats, or violence over the last few years as part of their role in local government



Note: responses for "none" and "don't know" are not shown; responses from village officials not included in calculation for election staff/workers as villages in Michigan do not administer elections; the calculation for election staff includes both self-reports from clerks themselves and reports from other respondents.

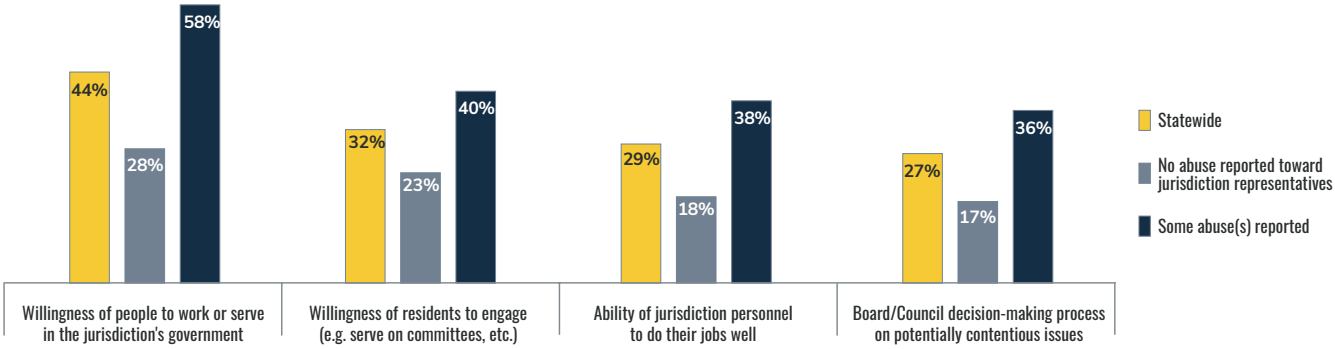
Most Michigan jurisdictions report negative impacts from general climate of harassment and threats

Officials from 44% of Michigan local governments report negative impacts from the worsening political climate on the willingness of people to work or serve in the jurisdiction’s government (see *Figure 3*). Even in jurisdictions where officials do not report harassment, threats, or violence, more than a quarter (28%) say simply the possibility of abuse is having a negative effect.

Statewide, 32% also report that the climate of abuse toward local government personnel is having a negative impact on residents’ civic engagement—such as speaking at meetings and serving on committees—including 23% in jurisdictions that have not reported harassment, threats, or violence. In addition, 29% of local leaders statewide say abuse affects the ability of jurisdiction personnel to do their jobs well, and 27% say it affects their Board’s or Council’s decision-making process on potentially contentious issues such as public health policy, local planning and zoning issues, and so on.

Overall, 53% of local leaders report that abuse has had at least one type of negative impact on their local government functions. This includes 70% of jurisdictions where some abuse has occurred in the last few years, but also 33% of jurisdictions where none is reported.

Figure 3
Percent of jurisdictions reporting negative impacts from harassment, threats, and violence on local government functions, by experience of jurisdiction personnel



Note: responses for "other," "none," and "don't know" not shown.

Survey Background and Methodology

The findings reported here come from the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS), 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) at the University of Michigan's Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy. The program is a partnership with Michigan's local government associations. The Spring 2022 wave was conducted April 4 – June 6, 2022. Respondents include county administrators, board chairs, and clerks; city mayors, managers, and clerks; village presidents, managers, and clerks; and township supervisors, managers, and clerks from 1,327 jurisdictions across the state, resulting in a 71% response rate by unit. More information is available at <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/mpps-2022-spring>.

See CLOSUP's website for the full question text on the survey questionnaire. Detailed tables of the data in this report, including breakdowns by various community characteristics, will be available at <http://mpps.umich.edu>.

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.



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