

The Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy

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Michigan Public Policy Survey November 2014

Most Michigan local officials are satisfied with their privatized services, but few seek to expand further

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This report presents Michigan local government leaders' assessments of privatizing—or contracting out—public services or government operations in their jurisdictions. These findings are based on statewide surveys of local government leaders in the Spring 2014 wave of the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS).

>> The **Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS)** is a census survey of all 1,856 general purpose local governments in Michigan 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**. The MPPS takes place twice each year and investigates local officials' opinions and perspectives on a variety of important public policy issues. Respondents for the Spring 2014 wave of the MPPS include county administrators and board chairs, city mayors and managers, village presidents, managers and clerks, and township supervisors, managers and clerks from 1,344 jurisdictions across the state.

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Key Findings

- Overall, 65% of Michigan local governments currently contract out (“outsource”) one or more public services or government operations, including 84% of the state’s largest jurisdictions.
 - » Among jurisdictions that currently outsource one or more services, the most frequent areas of service or operations privatized include attorney/legal services (83%), engineering (51%), waste/recycling (45%), property assessing (43%), and inspections (42%).
- There is widespread satisfaction with privatization. Overall, 73% of officials from jurisdictions with outsourced services say they are satisfied with their experiences.
 - » Over three-quarters of local leaders are satisfied with contractor responsiveness and both the timeliness and quality of service delivery, and 64% are satisfied with cost savings from privatization efforts.
 - » Satisfaction with outsourcing is high among local leaders of all party identifications: Republican, Independent, and Democratic.
- Few jurisdictions (25%) conduct systematic evaluations of their outsourcing. Larger jurisdictions are more likely to formally evaluate their privatized services, but even among the state’s largest jurisdictions, less than 40% do so.
- Among jurisdictions that outsource services today, officials say the top factors that encourage privatization are the desire to decrease costs (58%) and a lack of in-house expertise among the jurisdictions’ personnel (52%). Among jurisdictions that do not outsource any services currently, the most commonly cited factors that discourage privatization are unexpectedly high costs of contracting out (18%) and a lack of private providers in their areas (17%).
- When it comes to the overall levels of their outsourcing today, 69% of officials say they are doing the right amount, while 12% say they are not doing enough.
 - » While debates about privatization at the state and national levels sometimes follow partisan lines, this does not appear to be the case at the local level. Local leaders’ views on privatization are not strongly correlated with partisanship. Overall, 11% of local officials who self-identify as Republicans say their jurisdictions are not doing enough outsourcing today, compared to 16% of Independents and 14% of Democrats.
- In 2014, just 10% of Michigan jurisdictions are planning new or expanded privatization efforts, the lowest level since the MPPS’s tracking began in 2009. Plans to increase outsourcing peaked (18%) overall in 2010 at the height of the statewide local government fiscal crisis.

Background

Given the fiscal challenges facing many local jurisdictions across Michigan during and after the recent Great Recession, local leaders have been active in investigating a variety of ways to balance their budgets while still supplying desired services to their citizens.¹ One alternative approach to governments' traditional service provision is the practice of "privatization," commonly pursued by municipalities across the country.²

Government privatization can involve policies that include, among other things, contracting out public service delivery to private firms that are overseen by the government, franchise arrangements where private firms are given exclusive rights to operate a public service or asset, or even the sale of public assets directly to private entities.³ Here in Michigan, privatization efforts at the state level in a variety of sectors—from Michigan's schools to its prisons—have recently been in the spotlight. However, many Michigan local governments have also long been engaged in privatization of their service provision.

In fact, privatization has an extensive history in the U.S. and around the world. Previous research is mixed on the outcomes of privatization, finding that private sector delivery of public services may or may not boost efficiency, cost savings, and service quality. These outcomes often depend on a variety of factors, such as the types of services being privatized, the level of competition among potential service providers, and the amount of monitoring and evaluation conducted by the governments that are contracting out services.⁴ In addition, research has found that "in-sourcing"—that is, bringing privatized services back into the government for public service delivery—is also a common practice among local governments.⁵

To learn more about outsourcing at the local level, the Spring 2014 MPPS asked Michigan local leaders a range of questions about the history of privatization efforts in their jurisdictions, current privatization efforts, and levels of satisfaction with the outcomes of privatization. For this survey, the MPPS defined "privatization" as formal arrangements or contracts for the provision of government services or operations—in whole or in part—by a private company, non-profit organization, or independent contractor.



Almost two-thirds of Michigan’s local governments are contracting out public services

Privatization is a common practice among Michigan local governments. Overall, almost two-thirds (65%) of Michigan local officials report that their jurisdictions currently contract out one or more services or governmental operations (see *Figure 1a*). In addition, a small fraction (3%) say they had privatized services or operations sometime in the past, but no longer do so. Meanwhile, just over a quarter (27%) report that their jurisdictions have never privatized any services or government operations.

Local government privatization varies by jurisdiction size, with larger jurisdictions being more likely to say they currently contract out one or more services. This may not be surprising since larger jurisdictions provide more services than small jurisdictions, and therefore have more opportunities to outsource some of them. Among the state’s largest jurisdictions—those with more than 30,000 residents—84% report outsourcing one or more services (see *Figure 1b*). While smaller jurisdictions are much less likely to outsource any services, nonetheless a majority (52%) of even the state’s smallest jurisdictions—those with fewer than 1,500 residents—also report currently outsourcing at least one service. Similarly, cities (83%) and counties (71%) are more likely to have privatized services than are villages (66%) or townships (61%).

Among those Michigan jurisdictions that currently outsource any services, the most frequent services or operations contracted out include attorney/legal services (83%), engineering (51%), waste/recycling (45%), property assessing (43%), and inspections (42%).

See *Appendices A and B* for a full list of privatized service areas and operations included on the Spring 2014 MPPS. *Appendix A* displays breakdowns of differences in outsourcing of particular services by jurisdiction population size, while *Appendix B* shows differences in outsourcing by jurisdiction type (county, city, village, and township).

Figure 1a
Percentage of jurisdictions reporting they contract out any services or governmental operations

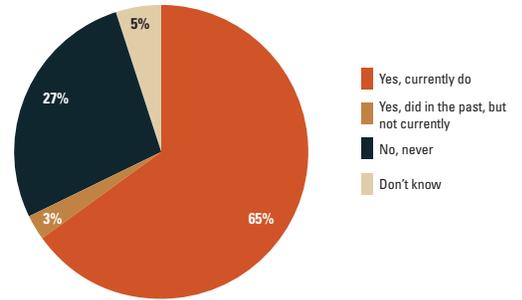
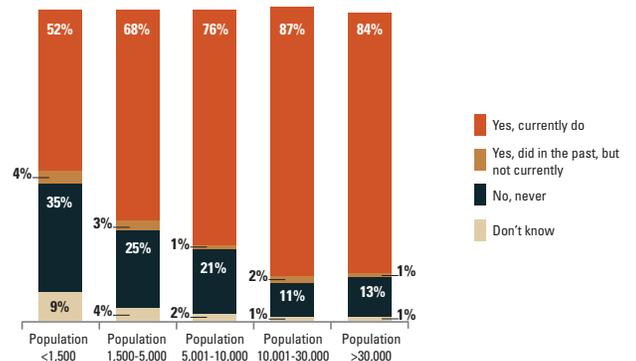


Figure 1b
Percentage of jurisdictions reporting they contract out any services or governmental operations, by population size



Widespread satisfaction with privatization efforts overall, including on service quality and cost

Michigan’s local officials report high levels of satisfaction with their jurisdictions’ privatization efforts. A third of all local officials (33%) with current privatization efforts in their jurisdictions say that, overall, they are “very satisfied” with current efforts, and another 40% say they are “somewhat satisfied” (see *Figure 2a*). Only 4% report they are generally dissatisfied with their governments’ privatization efforts.

When it comes to overall satisfaction with their outsourcing efforts, there are few differences among local officials based on jurisdiction size. And when broken down by partisanship, despite some variation in levels of satisfaction, what stands out are the high levels of satisfaction among all groups. Among Republican local officials, 73% say they are somewhat or very satisfied with their jurisdictions’ privatization efforts overall, and only 5% say they are dissatisfied (see *Figure 2b*). Officials who self-identify as Independents report similar levels of satisfaction. Meanwhile, Democratic officials are somewhat less likely (65%) to say they are satisfied with their jurisdictions’ privatization efforts, but are no more likely to say they are dissatisfied (4%).

The MPPS also asked officials to rate their satisfaction on a number of specific aspects of their privatization efforts, including contractor responsiveness, service quality, timeliness, and cost. In jurisdictions that currently outsource one or more services, 78% of officials report they are somewhat or very satisfied with their contractor(s) responsiveness (see *Figure 3*). Officials also give high marks to quality of service delivery (77%) and timeliness of service delivery (77%). And while fewer officials say they are satisfied with the cost savings their jurisdictions see from their privatization efforts, overall, almost two-thirds (64%) say they are generally satisfied on the cost savings that comes from privatization.

Figure 2a
Local officials’ satisfaction with their jurisdictions’ current privatization efforts overall, among those with privatized services or operations

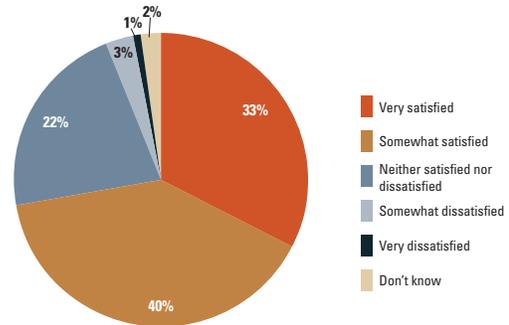


Figure 2b
Local officials’ satisfaction with their jurisdictions’ current privatization efforts overall, among those with privatized services or operations, by partisan identification

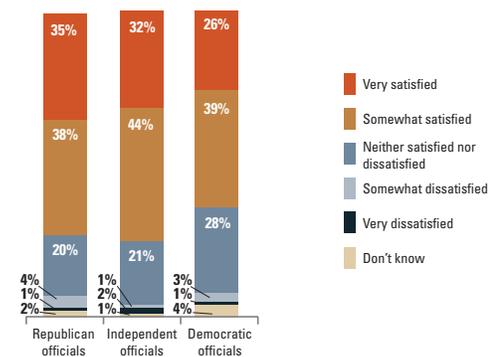
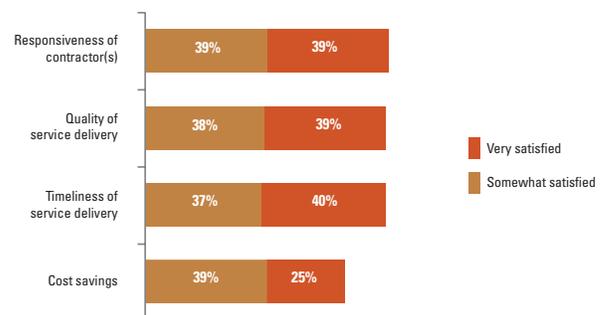


Figure 3
Local officials’ satisfaction with various aspects of their jurisdictions’ current privatization efforts, among those with privatized services or operations





Only a quarter of local jurisdictions formally formally evaluate their privatization efforts

While local leaders express high levels of general satisfaction with their outsourcing experiences, few jurisdictions have any processes in place for systematically evaluating privatization outcomes. Only one-quarter (25%) of officials who report having privatized services or operations say that their jurisdictions have techniques for formal evaluation. Larger jurisdictions are more likely to report systematically evaluating their privatized services or operations, but even among the state’s largest jurisdictions, less than 40% report taking these actions (see *Figure 4*). By comparison, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA)’s most recent study on “The Profile of Local Government Service Delivery Choices”—which typically looks at a sample consisting mostly of counties with populations of 25,000 and over and cities with populations of 10,000 and over—reports that in 2012, about 37% of local governments nationwide that outsource services conduct some kind of systematic evaluation of the outcomes.⁶

Among jurisdictions that do systematically evaluate their privatization efforts, by far the most common metric analyzed relates to potential cost savings, with 92% of these jurisdictions reporting techniques for evaluating costs. Overall, 68% of jurisdictions with evaluation processes in place look at contractors’ compliance with service delivery standards. This is particularly prevalent among larger jurisdictions, including 90% of jurisdictions with 10,000 or more residents (see *Figure 5*). Many jurisdictions also measure citizen satisfaction with privatization efforts, with mid-sized jurisdictions being most likely to report efforts to evaluate their privatization programs based on citizen satisfaction.

Figure 4
Percentage of jurisdictions that systematically evaluate private service provision, among those with privatized services or operations, by population size

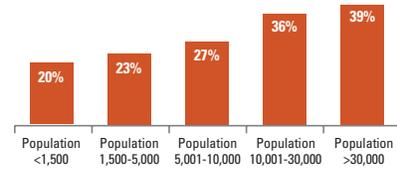
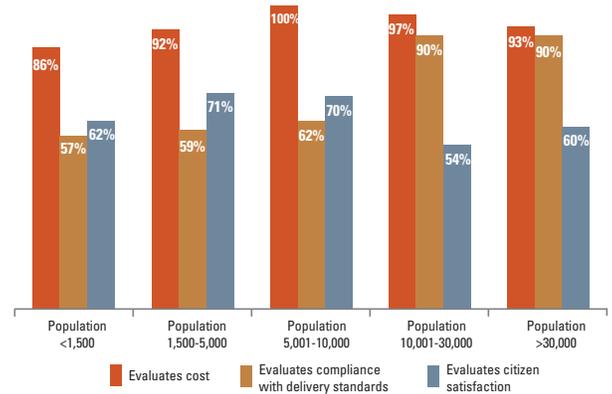


Figure 5
Percentage of jurisdictions that evaluate various aspects of private service provision, among those that systematically evaluate private service provision, by population size



Among jurisdictions with privatization efforts, 15% have brought services back in-house

Among jurisdictions that currently outsource one or more services, the MPPS also asked whether the local government had brought back in-house any services or operations that were previously contracted out. Statewide, 15% of officials from those jurisdictions reported bringing some service(s) back in-house at some point previously. Larger jurisdictions were more likely to report reversing their privatization programs, including 27% of those with over 10,000 residents (see *Figure 6*). By comparison, ICMA reports that in 2012, nationwide, 18% of jurisdictions that had outsourced service delivery brought one or more services back in-house.⁷

For those Michigan jurisdictions that did bring services back in-house, lack of cost savings was the most common reason given, with 51% of officials saying that it played a part in their decisions (see *Figure 7*). Unsatisfactory service quality (48%) and improvements in local government efficiency (33%) were also key factors for many jurisdictions that brought services or operations back in-house after they had been privatized earlier.

Figure 6

Percentage of jurisdictions that report bringing previously privatized service(s) back in-house, among those with privatized services or operations, by population size

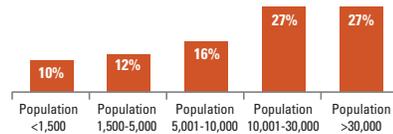
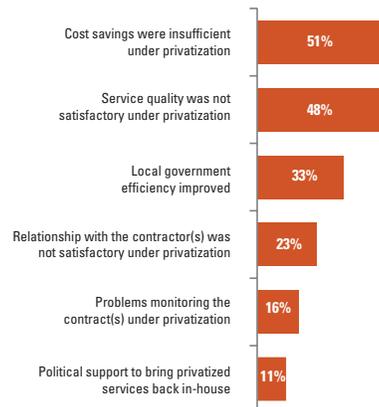


Figure 7

Percentage of jurisdictions that cite various factors for stopping privatized efforts, among those that brought service(s) back in-house





Potential cost savings are the most common reason local jurisdictions privatize services, but lack of savings also the most common factor discouraging more outsourcing

Among jurisdictions that currently outsource one or more services and among those that do not, officials were asked to identify factors that encourage their government to privatize services or operations. As shown in *Figure 8*, among jurisdictions that do outsource services today, the most common factors that encouraged them to do so are cost savings from privatization (58%), a lack of in-house expertise among the jurisdictions’ personnel to deliver a particular service (52%), and a desire to improve service quality beyond what the jurisdiction may have been able to provide internally (40%). By comparison, among jurisdictions that do not currently outsource any services, the top factors that might encourage them to do so in the future are a desire to decrease service costs (27%), fiscal pressures such as decreased revenues (17%), and a lack of in-house expertise among the jurisdictions’ personnel to deliver a particular service (16%).

As shown in *Figure 9*, the most common factors that are reported to discourage further privatization among jurisdictions that currently outsource one or more services are unexpected high costs of private service delivery (34%), sufficient in-house expertise among the jurisdictions’ personnel to deliver the service (25%), and the influence of elected officials who may oppose outsourcing a service (20%). Meanwhile, among jurisdictions that do not outsource any services currently, the most common factors they say discourage them from doing so are high costs from private service delivery (18%), a lack of private providers available to their jurisdiction (17%), and sufficient in-house expertise among their own staff (13%).

Figure 8
Local officials’ reports of factors that encourage privatization of services, among jurisdictions that outsource and those that do not

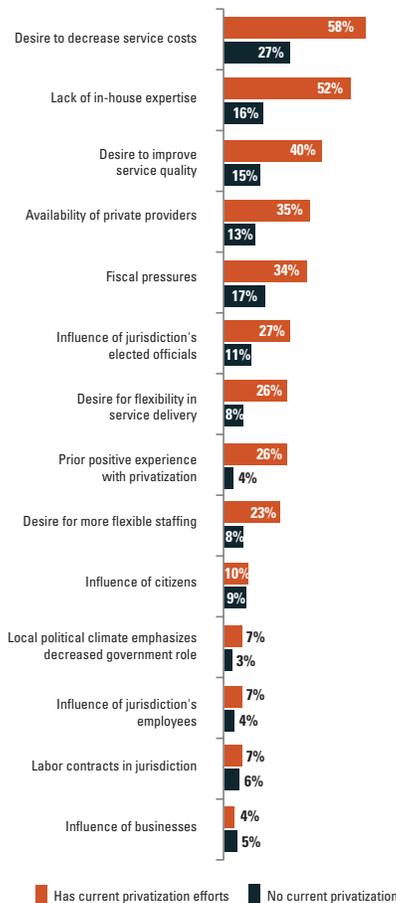
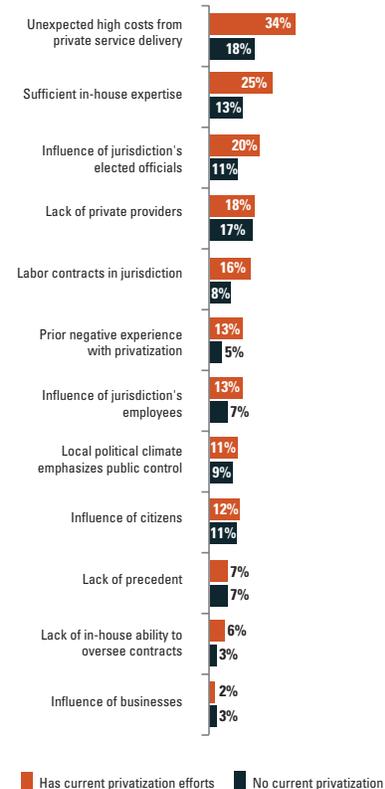


Figure 9
Local officials’ reports of factors that discourage privatization of services, among jurisdictions that outsource and those that do not



Most local officials believe they're doing the right amount of privatization currently, and few are looking to expand further

When it comes to the amount of privatization of government services, most local officials are satisfied with what their jurisdictions are doing right now. Overall, 69% of local leaders believe their jurisdiction's current level of privatization is the right amount (see *Figure 10a*). Only 12% say they are not doing enough, and even fewer (4%) believe they are doing too much outsourcing.

While most local leaders support their current levels of outsourcing, there are some differences in these views based on the size of Michigan's jurisdictions. In the smallest jurisdictions, just 8% of local leaders think their local governments are not currently doing enough outsourcing. By contrast, about a quarter of officials from jurisdictions with more than 5,000 residents think they should be doing more outsourcing (see *Figure 10b*).

In addition, appointed officials (14%) are somewhat more likely than elected officials (5%) to say their jurisdictions are not doing enough when it comes to privatization.

And while debates about privatization can sometimes follow partisan lines at the state and national levels, among Michigan's local leaders there are few differences in these opinions based on party identification. Overall, 11% of local officials who identify themselves as Republicans say their jurisdictions are not doing enough outsourcing currently, compared to 16% of Independents and 14% of Democrats (see *Figure 10c*).

Figure 10a
Local officials' assessments of the level of their jurisdictions' current privatization efforts

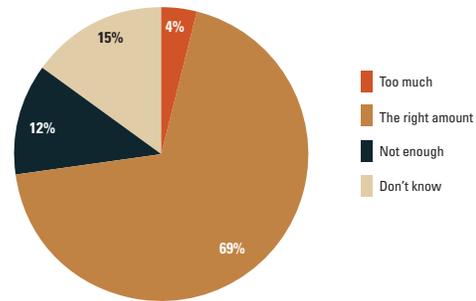


Figure 10b
Local officials' assessments of the level of their jurisdictions' current privatization efforts, by population size

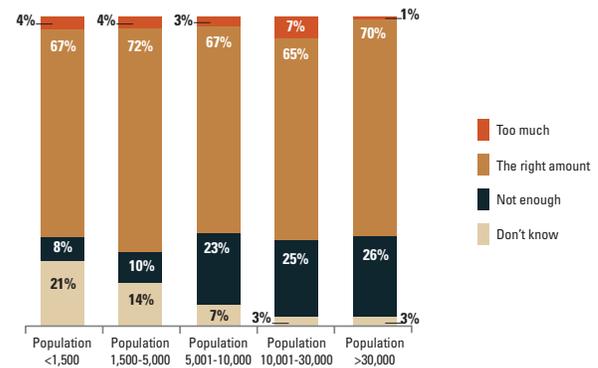
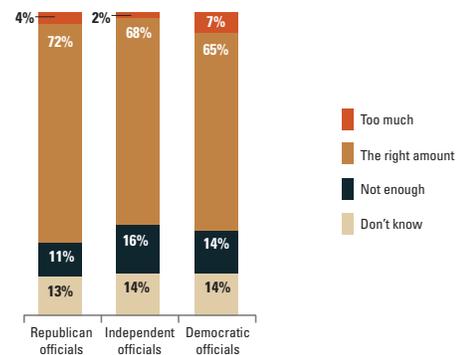


Figure 10c
Local officials' assessments of the level of their jurisdictions' current privatization efforts, by partisan identification





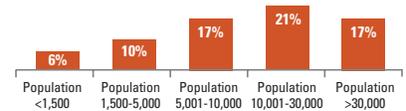
Each year since the first wave of the MPPS in 2009, local officials have been asked to look ahead and predict whether their jurisdictions planned to increase or decrease the amount of privatization or contracting out of services they would undertake in the coming year. Plans to increase outsourcing peaked in 2010, at the height of the statewide fiscal crisis for Michigan local governments, and have slowly decreased each year since then (see *Figure 11*). As of 2014, only 10% of jurisdictions overall plan to increase their levels of outsourcing within the next year.⁸

While the percentage of jurisdictions planning to boost outsourcing in the next year is low among all types of Michigan local governments, nonetheless there are still differences by population size, as seen in *Figure 12*. Increased outsourcing this year is most likely among jurisdictions with between 10,001-30,000 residents at 21%. Not surprisingly, it is least likely in Michigan’s smallest jurisdictions, where just 6% of local governments expect to increase privatization this year.

Figure 11
Percentage of jurisdictions that report plans to increase privatizing or contracting out of services in the next fiscal year, 2009-2014



Figure 12
Percentage of jurisdictions that report currently studying or planning new or expanded privatization efforts, 2014, by population size



Conclusion

Privatization, or outsourcing of public services, has a long history among local governments. The practice is common in Michigan, with 65% of jurisdictions reporting that they currently outsource one or more services, including 84% of the state's largest jurisdictions. Overall, the most common services outsourced are attorney/legal services (reported by 83% of jurisdictions that outsource at least one service), engineering (51%), waste/recycling (45%), property assessing (43%), and inspections (42%).

Although conventional wisdom might predict differences in attitudes about privatization efforts among local officials based on partisanship, the MPPS finds general agreement among Michigan local leaders—Republican, Independent, and Democrat—when it comes to privatization in their jurisdictions.

Among jurisdictions that outsource any services, the overwhelming majority (73%) of local leaders say they are satisfied overall with their experiences. When asked about specific aspects of privatization, they also report high levels of satisfaction in terms of contractor responsiveness (78%), the quality (77%) and timeliness (77%) of service delivery, and cost savings (64%) achieved through outsourcing.

Although local leaders are satisfied with the outcomes of privatization in general, most jurisdictions do not conduct systematic evaluations regarding the privatized services. In fact, only 25% of jurisdictions that outsource services today say they also conduct systematic evaluations of this privatization, although this increases to 39% among the state's largest jurisdictions.

While most local leaders are satisfied with the outcomes of their outsourcing, relatively few think they should privatize more services. Overall, 69% of local leaders think their jurisdictions are doing the right amount of outsourcing now, and just 12% think they are not doing enough.

And looking forward, only 10% of Michigan local jurisdictions expect to boost outsourcing further in the coming year, the lowest percentage since the MPPS began tracking this question in 2009.



Notes

1. Ivacko, T., Horner, D., & Crawford, M. (2014, October). *Michigan local governments finally pass fiscal health tipping point overall, but one in four still report decline*. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan. Retrieved from <http://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/37/michigan-local-governments-finally-pass-fiscal-health-tipping-point-overall-but-one-in-four-still-report-decline/>
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6. Saywitz, R. (2013, October 25). *Is privatization the answer?* Washington, DC: ICMA. Retrieved from http://icma.org/en/icma/knowledge_network/blogs/blogpost/1818/Is_Privatization_the_Answer
7. Ibid.
8. Ivacko, Horner, & Crawford, 2014.

Survey Background and Methodology

The MPPS is a biannual survey of each of Michigan's 1,856 units of general purpose local government, conducted once each spring and fall. While the spring surveys consist of multiple batteries of the same "core" fiscal, budgetary and operational policy questions and are designed to build-up a multi-year time-series of data, the fall surveys focus on various other topics.

In the Spring 2014 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 and managers, and township supervisors, clerks, and managers) from all 83 counties, 277 cities, 256 villages, and 1,240 townships in the state of Michigan.

The Spring 2014 wave was conducted from April 8 to June 10, 2014. A total of 1,344 jurisdictions in the Spring 2014 wave returned valid surveys (67 counties, 211 cities, 175 villages, and 891 townships), resulting in a 72% response rate by unit. The margin of error for the survey for the survey as a whole is +/- 1.4%. 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. 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—will soon be available online at the MPPS homepage: <http://closup.umich.edu/mpps.php>

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.

Appendix A

Services privatized or contracted out by Michigan local governments, among those with privatized services or operations, by jurisdiction size

	Jurisdiction Population Size					Total
	<1500	1500-5000	5001-10000	10001-30000	>30000	
Attorney/legal services	79%	84%	88%	84%	79%	83%
Engineering	36%	48%	76%	71%	60%	51%
Waste/recycling	38%	44%	56%	52%	48%	45%
Property assessing	52%	46%	34%	28%	18%	43%
Inspections (electrical, plumbing, building codes, etc.)	33%	44%	54%	57%	28%	42%
Snow plowing and salting	36%	41%	32%	35%	37%	38%
Surveying	32%	34%	50%	56%	31%	37%
Groundskeeping/custodial/general facility maintenance	30%	37%	37%	45%	38%	36%
Information technology	21%	37%	54%	56%	35%	36%
Streetlights (installation, maintenance, etc.)	33%	31%	44%	40%	19%	33%
911 emergency services (dispatch, ambulance, etc.)	33%	32%	34%	32%	24%	32%
Printing and document services	24%	30%	31%	41%	35%	30%
Street repair/road maintenance	29%	32%	28%	26%	20%	29%
Land use planning	10%	20%	33%	35%	18%	20%
Utilities/water/sewer	16%	18%	26%	27%	12%	19%
Vehicle towing and storage	9%	12%	23%	40%	52%	18%
Fleet management/vehicle maintenance	8%	10%	18%	26%	23%	13%
Economic development services	7%	11%	14%	30%	25%	13%
Parks and recreation	7%	8%	15%	8%	15%	9%
Other administrative functions (payroll, purchasing, etc.)	6%	5%	13%	12%	15%	7%
Health and human services (child welfare, foster care, etc.)	7%	4%	5%	5%	10%	6%
Tax collection	5%	2%	4%	1%	6%	3%
Parking structures/parking meters	0%	1%	1%	1%	10%	2%



Appendix B

Services privatized or contracted out by Michigan local governments, among those with privatized services or operations, by jurisdiction type

	Jurisdiction Type				Total
	County	Township	City	Village	
Attorney/legal services	71%	80%	87%	91%	83%
Engineering	31%	37%	84%	77%	51%
Waste/recycling	21%	38%	68%	52%	45%
Property assessing	10%	43%	45%	50%	43%
Inspections (electrical, plumbing, building codes, etc.)	30%	36%	59%	50%	42%
Snow plowing and salting	43%	48%	15%	18%	38%
Surveying	37%	26%	62%	52%	37%
Groundskeeping/custodial/general facility maintenance	26%	41%	35%	15%	36%
Information technology	37%	28%	55%	42%	36%
Streetlights (installation, maintenance, etc.)	0%	32%	40%	40%	33%
911 emergency services (dispatch, ambulance, etc.)	9%	31%	37%	36%	32%
Printing and document services	28%	28%	37%	30%	30%
Street repair/road maintenance	2%	34%	22%	28%	29%
Land use planning	12%	18%	32%	16%	20%
Utilities/water/sewer	2%	18%	22%	25%	19%
Vehicle towing and storage	14%	7%	57%	21%	18%
Fleet management/vehicle maintenance	29%	10%	20%	13%	13%
Economic development services	41%	7%	24%	15%	13%
Parks and recreation	9%	8%	12%	5%	9%
Other administrative functions (payroll, purchasing, etc.)	4%	7%	12%	6%	7%
Health and human services (child welfare, foster care, etc.)	10%	4%	9%	10%	6%
Tax collection	0%	2%	4%	7%	3%
Parking structures/parking meters	4%	1%	4%	0%	2%

Previous MPPS reports

Michigan local governments finally pass fiscal health tipping point overall, but one in four still report decline (October 2014)

Beyond the coast, a tenuous relationship between Michigan local governments and the Great Lakes (September 2014)

Confidence in Michigan's direction holds steady among state's local leaders (August 2014)

Wind power as a community issue in Michigan (July 2014)

Fracking as a community issue in Michigan (June 2014)

The impact of tax-exempt properties on Michigan local governments (March 2014)

Michigan's local leaders generally support Detroit bankruptcy filing despite some concerns (February 2014)

Michigan local governments increasingly pursue placemaking for economic development (January 2014)

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