

Crime

BACKGROUND

The Michigan State Police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) classify crimes as index or non-index. The eight index crimes are murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, arson, and motor vehicle theft. Because of their serious nature, these offenses are considered a better indicator of the crime situation than is total crime, which includes many minor infractions.

As the exhibit shows, the rate of index crimes (the number reported per 100,000 people) in Michigan dropped by more than 2 percent from 1995 to 1996, the last year for which statistics currently are available. This one-year drop continued a pattern of decline that has seen index crime rates in Michigan drop by 22 percent in the past five years. Over the five-year period, the overall rate for both index and non-index crime has dropped by almost 16 percent.

Murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, and larceny all dropped substantially over the one- and five-year periods. Cases of reported motor vehicle theft and arson were up substantially in 1996 over the previous year but not over the five-year period.

Among jurisdictions of more than 10,000 residents, Grosse Ile Township is the safest in Michigan, with a rate of one reported index crime per 100 residents (1996). Other jurisdictions with notably low crime rates are Grosse Pointe Woods, Beverly Hills, Berkley, Hamburg Township, Bridgeport Township, Trenton, Plymouth Township, Lincoln Township, and Davison Township. Benton Harbor has the highest rate of serious crime, 16.5 per 100 residents, and high rates are associated with some of Michigan's major cities, including Highland Park, Benton Township, Hamtramck, Detroit, Harper Woods, Flint, Muskegon, River Rouge, and Ypsilanti.

The crime-rate decline in Michigan over the past five years closely parallels that of the United States as a whole, for which the rate of serious crime declined every year from 1991 to 1996. Furthermore, the nation's law enforcement agencies report a 4-percent decrease in serious crime for the first half of 1997.

The dip in adult crime has been accompanied by at least some decline in juvenile crime. A study underwritten by federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention finds that in 1995 the juvenile arrest rate for violent crimes dropped for the first time in nearly a decade, although it still comprises nearly 20 percent of all violent crime. The Michigan State Police reports that juvenile

GLOSSARY

Community policing

Using such techniques as foot patrols instead of automobile patrols, to enable law enforcement personnel to be in closer contact with citizens.

Index crimes

Eight serious crimes—murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, arson, and motor vehicle theft—for which the rate of occurrence is believed to be a reliable indicator (index) of overall crime.

Juvenile crime

In Michigan, offenses committed by youths aged 16 and under.

Non-index crimes

All crimes not categorized as index crimes; many are minor infractions.

Michigan Crime Statistics and One- and Five-Year Trends

	1991	1995	1996	One-Year Trend	Five-Year Trend
Index offenses					
Murder	1,003	785	699	-10.9%	-30.3%
Rape	7,248	5,560	5,066	-8.9	-30.1
Robbery	22,574	17,365	16,288	-6.2	-27.8
Aggravated assault	43,378	38,983	35,762	-8.3	-17.6
Burglary	109,368	81,314	79,006	-2.8	-27.8
Larceny	317,248	256,958	248,571	-3.3	-21.6
Motor vehicle theft	62,636	57,895	62,930	8.7	0.5
Arson	4,739	4,004	4,547	10.1	-4.0
Total index crime	568,194	462,864	452,929	-2.1	-20.3
Index crime rate ^a	6,244	4,979	4,873	-2.1	-22.0
Index arrests	86,837	68,436	65,068	-4.9	-25.0
Non-index offenses					
Nonaggravated assault	98,184	113,576	114,353	0.6	14.1
Narcotics	29,937	35,405	34,529	-2.5	15.3
Driving under the influence	59,105	49,936	50,298	0.7	-14.9
Liquor law violations	20,146	12,628	16,598	31.4	-17.6
All other non-index offenses	517,644	452,405	442,667	-2.1	-14.5
Total non-index crime	724,116	663,950	658,445	-0.8	-9.0
TOTAL	1,292,310	1,126,814	1,111,374	-1.4	-14.0
STATE CRIME RATE ^a	14,203	12,122	11,956	-1.4	-15.8
TOTAL STATE ARRESTS	408,954	391,972	390,485	-0.4	-4.5

SOURCE: Michigan State Police, "Crime in Michigan: 1996 Uniform Crime Report."

^aRate = Number per 100,000 population.

arrests for violent crime declined by 22 percent over the past five years, from about 18,400 to 14,200. While analysts believe that juvenile violent crime may well have declined in Michigan, they stress that some of the apparent drop may be due to underreporting. (The FBI made several changes in the methodology in recent years, and some jurisdictions had trouble accommodating the changes and did not report; this also is true of adult crime.) According to the Uniform Crime Report (UCR), the FBI's standardized measure of reported crimes, Michigan juvenile arrests as a percentage of total arrests (about 10 percent on average) remain well below the national norm.

Despite this apparent good news, combating crime remains high on the public policy agenda. It still is the case that crime rates are relatively high and exact a substantial social cost. According to the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 1992 injury or other activities related to the crime directly cost U.S. crime

victims \$17.6 billion in property theft or damage, lost cash, medical expenses, and forgone pay.

Over the past decade Michigan legislators, in a major bipartisan effort, have adopted several hundred bills to combat crime and improve law enforcement. Among them are measures (1) requiring the court and prosecuting attorney to consent before allowing a defendant to waive a jury trial; (2) revising substantially the procedure for handling cases in which juveniles are charged with serious property or assault offenses or crimes for which the maximum sentence is life; (3) substantially strengthening the stringency of Michigan's drunk driving laws; and (4) creating a \$10 million grant program to encourage community policing (e.g., such efforts as foot patrols, to bring officers into closer touch with citizens).

Governor Engler and the majority caucus in the Democrat-controlled House each have a crime-fighting agenda for 1998. Although there is some com-

monality, their general approach is different. The governor—as he set forth in his 1998 State of the State message—takes a law-enforcement approach to crime control; the House majority proposes crime prevention and stronger community policing. Both the governor and the House leadership, however, have endorsed Senate Bills 825–27 (the “sentencing guidelines/truth-in-sentencing” package), which have passed the Senate.

An aspect of crime that has been attracting increasing public concern is gang activity. Although the extent of the problem is difficult to quantify precisely, the 1997 report of the Michigan Youth Gang Violence Task Force notes that while Michigan is “not experiencing an epidemic of youth gang violence,” there are gangs in all 83 counties. The task force recommends a number of law-enforcement and crime-prevention strategies to combat the emerging problem. The law-enforcement strategies include community policing, technological improvements, intelligence gathering, inter-agency cooperation, task forces, strong drug enforcement, and removing illegal firearms from the street. Recommended prevention strategies include risk detection, health promotion, family support, positive alternative activities, education, employment, and community organization.

DISCUSSION

Crime statistics should be viewed with caution. First, law enforcement practices can alter the number of crimes reported. Second, reporting is not necessarily uniform nation- or even statewide. Third, the number of incidents reported may reflect the current public attitude about certain kinds of crimes; for example, some observers speculate that the increase in the number of rapes may result from an increased willingness of victims to report the crime. Last, there always is a gap between reported and unreported crime.

Police and FBI statistics published in the Uniform Crime Report deal only with *reported* crime (and data are only as comprehensive as a local law enforcement unit’s capacity to collect and compile them). Because of this inherent limitation in the UCR, since 1973 the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics has con-

ducted the National Criminal Victimization Survey (NCVS). The NCVS samples households’ actual experience of crime, both reported and unreported, and it often reveals a different, although complementary, picture. For example, from 1971 to 1983 the number of agencies reporting in the UCR rose by 34 percent, and the number of reported crimes also rose sharply; however, the statistical methods used in the NCVS reveal that crime rates were not rising but actually were stable during that period (although this is old information, the point still is valid). Similarly, crime rates in Michigan may be underreported today because some jurisdictions have not adopted the new reporting system.

The general public’s perception of the crime rate often is swayed by factors other than the number of crimes committed. Many people believe that the tremendous growth in prison population is due to a continuing escalation of crime, but this is inaccurate. The prison population in both the United States and Michigan has soared over the past five years, even as crime rates have dropped. Similarly, the media’s appetite for crime stories can fuel the perception that a crime problem is more severe than it actually is.

While it is reasonable to suppose that the many “law and order” measures enacted in recent years have had some effect on crime rates, it also is true that a number of important factors associated with the incidence of crime are beyond the reach of public policy. For example, states—and areas within states—that have a higher rate of index crimes than others also have more people aged 16–39 (the most crime-prone group), a larger concentration of urban population, and pockets of poverty that are not benefiting from the current economic boom. Nevertheless, both the public and the legislature continue to be interested in anti-crime measures. Among other initiatives, Governor Engler calls for

- passing SB 245, the sentencing guidelines recommended in 1997 by the Michigan Sentencing Commission,
- constructing 5,400 new prison beds,

- eliminating prisoners' right to appeal parole denial, and
- implementing "Operation Nighthawk" whereby specialized teams of police officers and probation/parole agents would be formed to combat gang activity.

The House Democrats' "Safe Neighborhoods" agenda recommends

- directing available federal funds toward community policing to fight drugs and gangs,
- making it easier for local citizen groups to evict drug dealers from neighborhoods and apartment buildings (HBs 4267–69),
- toughening laws against gang-related crime (HBs 4144, 4145, and 4717),
- making it easier to remove derelict housing, often the site of gang and drug trafficking activity (HB 5344), and
- preventing juvenile crime, especially through "safe haven," after-school programs.

Legislators will be keeping in mind the cost of additional law-and-order legislation. State prisons are overcrowded from the effect of previous changes to the law, and expanding prison space is extremely expensive. For example, in FY 1999–2000, it will cost at least \$100 million to operate the 5,400-bed expansion that the governor has proposed—and even this won't solve the overcrowding problem for long.

According to the Michigan Senate Fiscal Agency and the Michigan Sentencing Guidelines Commission, in less than ten years—by 2007—laws already on the books will swell Michigan's prison population by 20,000, requiring 20 new prisons, annual debt service of \$156 million, and an annual operating budget of \$1.6 billion. Passing the sentencing guidelines/truth-in-sentencing package could require an additional five prisons, an additional \$40 million in annual debt service, and \$100 million more in operating expenses.

See also Casinos and Other Legal Gambling; Civil Rights; Corrections; Death Penalty; Domestic Violence; Firearm Regulation; Genetic Cloning and Testing; Substance Abuse; Traffic Safety.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Judiciary Committee
Michigan House of Representatives
P.O. Box 30014
Lansing, MI 48909-7514
(517) 373-0106
(517) 373-5791 FAX

Judiciary Committee
Michigan Senate
P.O. Box 30036
Lansing, MI 48909-7536
(517) 373-6920
(517) 373-2751 FAX

Michigan Council on Crime and Delinquency
300 North Washington Square
Lansing, MI 48933
(517) 482-4161
(517) 482-0020 FAX

Michigan Department of State Police
714 South Harrison Road
East Lansing, MI 48823
(517) 332-2521
(517) 336-6561 FAX
www.msp.state.mi.us

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