



MPPS Policy Brief

Michigan local government leaders' views on their employee unions: few changes in relationships or impacts as Right-to-Work comes and goes

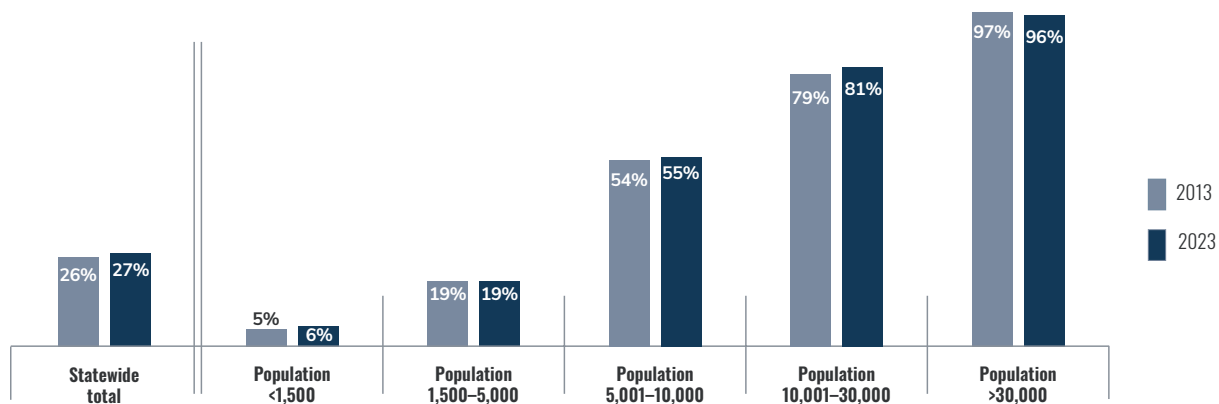
By Debra Horner and Thomas Ivacko

In the early 2010s the Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS) asked Michigan local government leaders about their local governments' employee unions.¹ The questions were repeated in 2023, focusing on the impacts of Right-to-Work laws, the governments' relationships with their employee unions, and whether their unions are assets or liabilities to local government performance and fiscal health.

In 2023, just over one-quarter (27%) of Michigan's 1,856 general purpose local governments (counties, cities, townships, and villages) report having employee labor unions, essentially unchanged over the past decade (see *Figure 1*). This percentage is essentially unchanged since the last time the question was asked on the MPPS in 2013, a decade which saw the passage of "Right-to-Work" legislation in 2012 and subsequent federal court cases that prohibit requiring public sector employees' financial support of a union.²

Reports on local government union presence have remained remarkably consistent among jurisdictions of all sizes over this period. Just 6% of the state's smallest jurisdictions (those with fewer than 1,500 residents) currently report having one or more employee unions, compared with 5% in 2013. Meanwhile, 96% of Michigan's largest jurisdictions (those with more than 30,000 residents) report having a union in 2023, compared with 97% a decade ago.

Figure 1
Percentage of jurisdictions reporting they have one or more employee labor unions, by population size, 2013 vs. 2023



Police unions are the most common type of local government union in Michigan, reported by 80% of jurisdictions in 2023 that have a public sector union of any kind (see *Figure 2a*). Next most common (64%) are unions for Department of Public Works (DPW) employees, followed by fire department unions (41%). Meanwhile, miscellaneous other types of unions are reported by 50% of local governments overall. These percentages are also essentially unchanged since 2013, with some growth only in the percentage with fire department unions, at 41% in 2023 compared to 36% in 2013.

Figure 2a
Percentage of jurisdictions with specific types of employee unions (among jurisdictions with any employee labor unions), 2013 vs. 2023

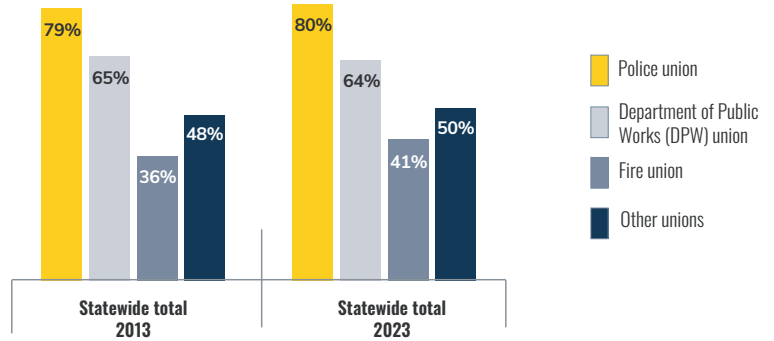
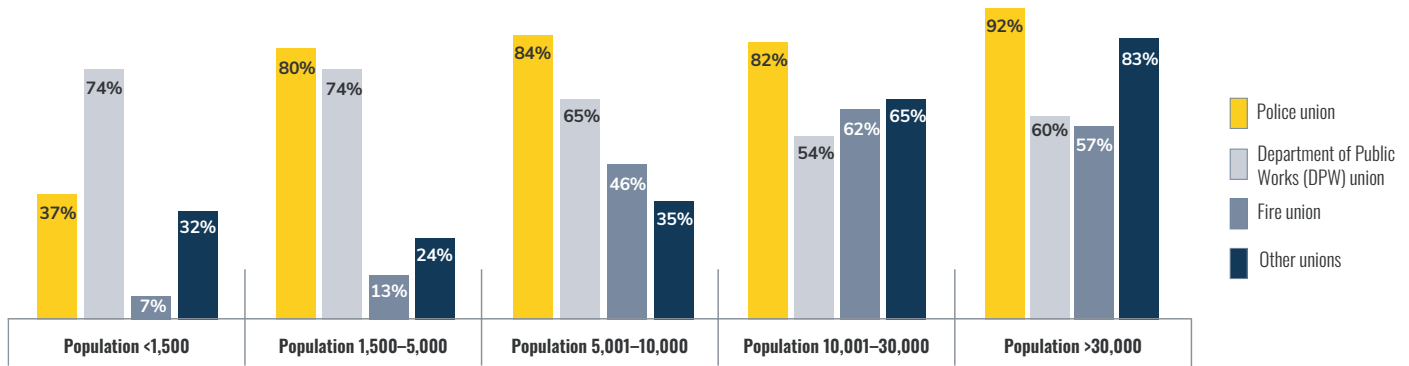


Figure 2b shows how common these different types of unions are when broken down by jurisdiction size. For example, in 2023, police officers’ unions are found in 92% of the state’s largest jurisdictions that have any kind of union, compared to just 37% of the smallest jurisdictions with unions. By comparison, DPW unions are much more common in smaller jurisdictions than in larger ones, where workers may be more likely to be broken out into various other kinds of unions.

Figure 2b
Percentage of jurisdictions with specific types of employee unions (among jurisdictions with any employee labor unions), 2023, by population size



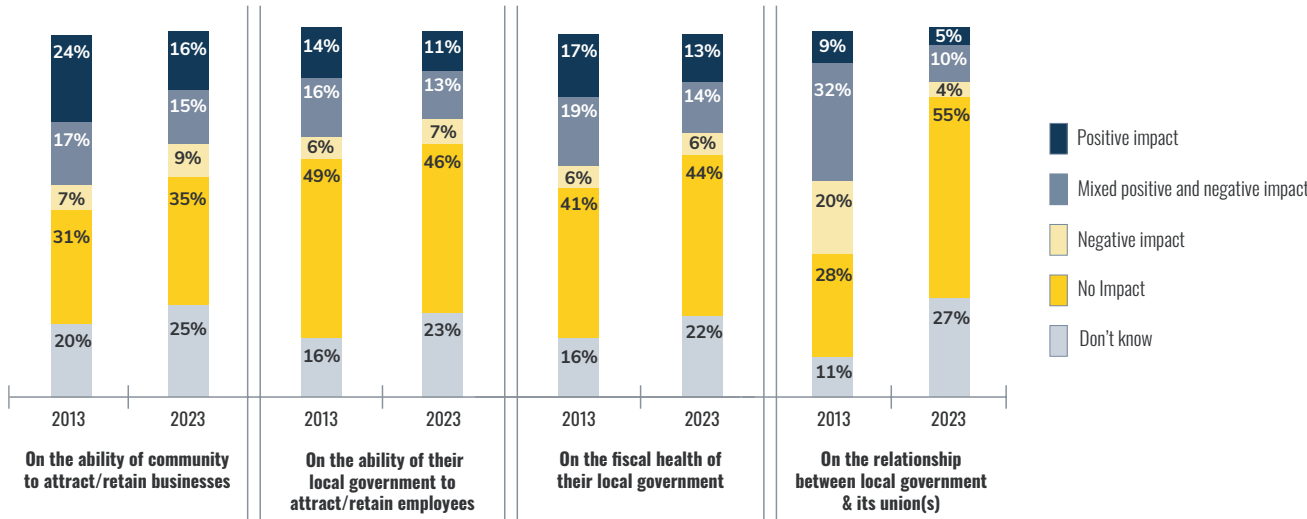
Local leaders' 2013 predictions about limited impacts of Right-to-Work laws generally match their retrospective evaluations in 2023

With the repeal of Right-to-Work related to private sector unions in Michigan in March 2023,³ a decade after its implementation, questions about the laws' impacts on Michigan's economy and workforce have been widely debated.⁴ In 2013, Michigan local government leaders anticipated limited local impacts by Right-to-Work; now in 2023 their assessments are generally in line with those predictions. As shown in *Figure 3*, when asked in 2023 for their assessments of the impacts of the law, local government leaders across the state most commonly say Right-to-Work has had no impact on issues such as community business growth (35%), the ability of the local government to attract or retain public sector employees (46%), or the fiscal health of their local government (44%). These percentages are similar to the predictions made by local officials in 2013 about the potential local impacts of Right-to-Work.

The biggest change over the past decade in attitudes about Right-to-Work's impact regards the relationship between the official's local government and its unions. In 2013, 28% statewide predicted the laws would have no impact on local government-union relations, while in 2023 a majority (55%) report there has been no impact. On the other hand, the percentage of officials saying they didn't know how to evaluate this issue more than doubled, from 11% to 27%, perhaps reflecting the complications introduced with the federal court rulings that essentially retain the effect of Right-to-Work status for public sector employees today.

While 10-15% of local leaders in 2023 report Right-to-Work's impact has been mixed across all of these areas, more officials report positive than negative effects on community business growth, public sector employee hiring and retention, and the fiscal health of their local government. Relatively few believe it has had either a positive (5%) or negative (4%) effect on their local government's relationship with its unions.

Figure 3
Local officials' predictions regarding the impact of Right-to-Work laws and subsequent assessments of its impacts (among those jurisdictions with employee labor unions), 2013 vs. 2023



Local leaders remain generally positive about the relationships between their local governments and employee unions

Indeed, a large majority of Michigan’s local leaders currently express positive views about the relationship between their jurisdiction’s government and its employee labor unions. Statewide, 80% of local leaders from jurisdictions with unions believe their relationship is either “excellent” or “good” (see *Figure 4*). These positive assessments again are similar to views of the relationship between local governments and their unions a decade ago, with a slight increase among those who say relationships are excellent (27% in 2023 compared with 22% in 2013).

Assessments of excellent relations with employee unions have increased in jurisdictions of all sizes except the largest places, where those assessments have simply held steady (see *Figure 5*). Officials from the state’s smaller jurisdictions with unionized employees are much more likely to report excellent relations with their unions today (42%), compared with their views in 2013 (20%).

Figure 4
Local officials’ assessments of the relationship between their jurisdiction’s administration and unions (among those jurisdictions with employee labor unions), 2013 vs. 2023

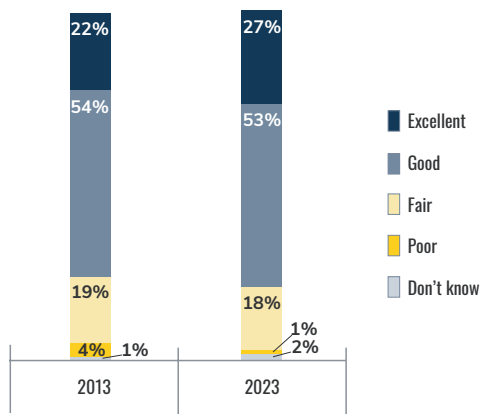
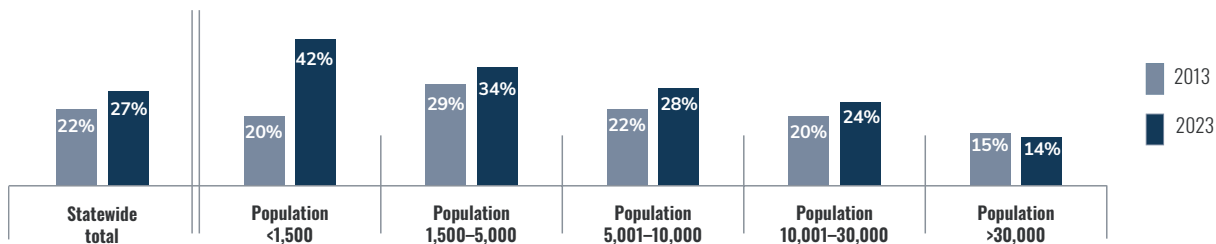


Figure 5
Percentage of local officials who say the relationship between their jurisdictions’ administrations and unions is “excellent” (among those jurisdictions with employee labor unions), 2013 vs. 2023, by population size

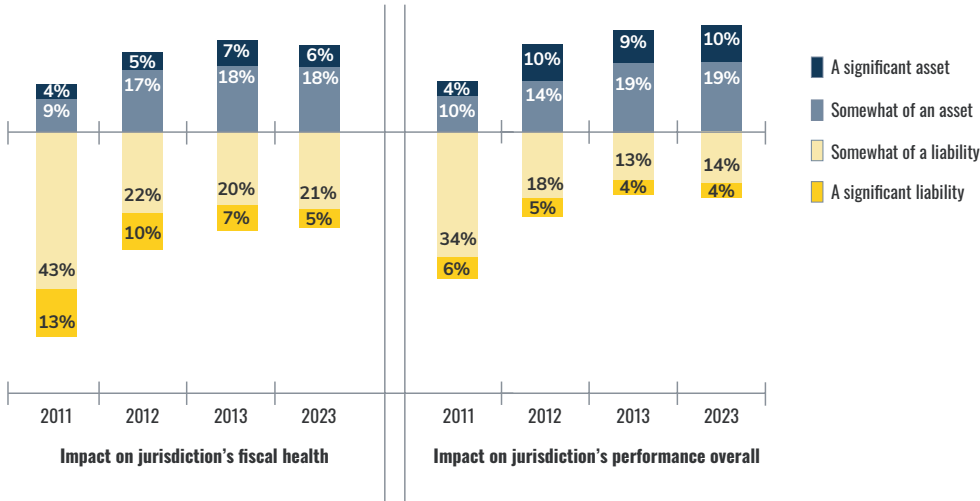


Local leaders continue to be split on whether employee unions are more of an asset than a liability for fiscal health, while more likely to see them as assets to government performance

In 2023, around a quarter (24%) of Michigan local officials say their employee unions have been assets to their jurisdictions' fiscal health over the past 12 months, remarkably consistent with the 25% who said the same in 2013 (see *Figure 6*). Meanwhile, 26% of officials feel their employee unions have been a liability to the jurisdiction's fiscal health in 2023, essentially equal to the 27% who said the same in 2013.

Local leaders also continue to express more positive than negative assessments when it comes to the unions' effects on the jurisdiction's overall performance. In 2023, 29% of local leaders say their employees' unions have been assets to overall jurisdiction performance over the past year, while 18% say they have been liabilities. Again, this is equivalent to the percentages that said the same in 2013. Attitudes toward local government unions' impacts on fiscal health and performance were significantly lower in 2011, with improvements in 2012 and 2013 possibly due both to the gradual easing of challenges imposed by the Great Recession as well as to a series of union concessions in contract negotiations during that time period.⁵

Figure 6
Local officials' assessments of the impacts of unions on fiscal health and jurisdiction performance (among local jurisdictions with employee labor unions), 2011-2023



Note: responses for "neither asset nor liability" and "don't know" not shown

Notes:

1. Ivacko, T. & Horner, D. (2013, October). Michigan local governments continue seeking, and receiving, union concessions. Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan. Retrieved from: <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/28/michigan-local-governments-continue-seeking-and-receiving-union-concessions>
2. Wilkinson, M. (2023, March 9). What is Michigan Right-to-Work: How law impacted wages, jobs, unions. *Bridge Magazine*. Retrieved from: <https://www.bridgemi.com/michigan-government/what-michigan-right-work-how-law-impacted-wages-jobs-unions>
3. Hendrickson, C., (2023, March 24). Whitmer repeals right-to-work, reinstates prevailing wage in Michigan. *The Detroit Free Press*. Retrieved from: <https://www.freep.com/story/news/politics/2023/03/24/michigan-right-to-work-prevailing-wage-law-gretchen-whitmer/70042340007/>
4. Beggin, R. & Grzelewski, J. (2022, December 8). Right-to-work: A decade later, law's impact on Michigan remains murky. *The Detroit News*. Retrieved from: <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/business/2022/12/29/right-to-work-a-decade-later-laws-impact-on-michigan-remains-murky/69745714007/>
5. Ivacko, T. & Horner, D. (2013, October).

Survey Background and Methodology

The data presented in this policy brief come from the Spring 2023 Michigan Public Policy Survey (MPPS). The 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) at the University of Michigan's Gerald R Ford School of Public Policy.

The program is a partnership with the Michigan Municipal League, Michigan Townships Association, and Michigan Association of Counties. The Spring 2023 wave was conducted February 6 – April 17, 2023. 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 1,307 jurisdictions across the state, resulting in a 70% response rate by unit. More information is available at <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/mpps-2023-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 jurisdiction characteristics such as community population size, region, and jurisdiction type, will be available soon 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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