

## Crime Prevention Stressed in New Forum Study

### *Citizens Show Perception-Reality Gap, Willing to Pay Higher Taxes*

With reported crime rates declining and costs for criminal justice rising, a new Forum study has found that taxpayers favor preventive approaches to combating crime and are willing to pay higher taxes for programs aimed at improving the overall public safety.

Ameritech funded the survey research project at a time when the public response to crime has become a significant social, political and financial concern. In Milwaukee County, spending for corrections went from less than \$4 million in 1979 to \$24 million this year. Spending for the sheriff's department went from \$10 million in 1979 to \$44 million this year. In the City of Milwaukee, public safety concerns have led to increased police spending -- from just over \$20 million in 1970 to more than \$160 million today.

The Forum surveyed 800 metropolitan Milwaukee households. Among the key findings:

- ❑ There is a gap between perception and reality about crime. Fifty-three percent of Milwaukee area residents believe crime is rising even though rates have declined. Fewer than half are unaware that the number of police officers and jail cells have increased.
- ❑ Crime is underreported in the metro Milwaukee area. Of 303 separate incidents of crime victimization, including 257 property and 46 violent crimes, 45% were not reported to the police. Crimes were less likely to be reported in the suburbs than in the city.
- ❑ Citizens prefer preventive — rather than punitive — approaches to crime. Most people say they are willing to pay higher taxes for a wide variety of programs aimed at improving the overall public safety.

#### *Methodology*

*In order to measure public opinion and perception about crime, as well as personal experience with crime, The Forum developed a two-part questionnaire: (1) 76 questions about personal safety and crime policy and (2) a crime experience section, patterned after the US Justice Department's National Crime Victimization Survey. For the Forum survey, 800 adults living in the four-county Milwaukee area were selected at random and interviewed by telephone in December 1998. The sampling margin of error is four percentage points. The project was funded by:*

*Ameritech*

#### Public Policy Implications

- ❑ **Reporting.** An annual survey to determine the extent of crime would help complete the picture painted by Uniform Crime Reports.
- ❑ **Crime Perception.** Closing the gap between perception and reality could start with an annual tracking survey on crime perception.
- ❑ **Crime Prevention.** Policy promoting a comprehensive approach to crime would be more popular than an approach emphasizing just arrest, prosecution, conviction and incarceration.
- ❑ **Criminal Justice Spending.** The vast majority said they would be willing to pay higher taxes for crime prevention: youth diversion, prison alternatives, drug/alcohol treatment, economic development, education and social services.
- ❑ **Criminal Sanctions.** There appears to be strong preference for a punitive approach to violence but an attitude of prevention and rehabilitation when it comes to non-violent crime.

# Crime Perception

Respondents were asked an array of questions about the extent and direction of crime, both locally and nationally. The results suggest a gap between perception and reality. Some questions were compared to responses from a similar survey conducted in 1994. Among the findings about crime perception:

- ❑ The majority of residents of the Milwaukee metropolitan area perceive that crime is on the rise across the nation (55%) as well as within the City of Milwaukee (53%). Yet most (79%) perceive that their own neighborhoods have the same or less crime than a year ago (Table 1).
- ❑ Fewer than 30% of metro residents believe that theft, burglary, drugs, graffiti, juvenile delinquency or violence are a problem in their neighborhoods (Table 2).
- ❑ 95% feel safe in their homes and walking alone in their own neighborhoods in the daytime, but 32% fear walking alone in their neighborhoods at night (Table 3).
- ❑ Because of fear of crime over the past five years, 40% limit the places or times they go by themselves, 32% improved their home security, 19% stay in their homes more often and 12% say they have moved. Each of those percentages, however, is down from 1994 (Table 4).
- ❑ 52% perceive that the murder rate is higher in the City of Milwaukee than it was five years ago. Actually, the number of murders in Milwaukee has gradually declined about 20% since peaking at 163 in 1991 (Table 5).
- ❑ Fewer than half (47%) perceive that the numbers of police officers and jail cells have increased over the past five years -- even though both increases are long-term trends (Table 5).

Table 1

Crime Perception			
Do you think there is more crime, less crime or about the same amount of crime in ... than there was one year ago?			
	The US	City of Milwaukee	Your Neighborhood
More	55%	53%	16%
Same	26%	29%	67%
Less	13%	11%	12%

Table 2

Perception of Neighborhood Problems		
Which of the following are real problems in your neighborhood?		
	Dec-98	Jun-94
Theft and burglary	27%	28%
Lack of racial diversity	24%	21%
Juvenile delinquency	23%	28%
Drugs	23%	25%
Upkeep of houses and yards	18%	17%
Inadequate police protection	16%	14%
Graffiti	13%	15%
Violent crime	11%	17%
Garbage collection	8%	8%

Crime has been proven to be an area in which perception and reality do not always match. It is somewhat troubling that residents are unaware of the efforts made by policy makers over the past decade to improve public safety by sharply increasing expenditures for criminal justice -- especially in the areas of law enforcement and prisons. This mismatch between action and perception should not go unnoticed.

To the extent that perception drives public policy, it can be argued that the gap between perception and reality needs to be closed. The fact that we do not have adequate measures of crime and public safety impedes the ability of local governments to make sound decisions about criminal justice policy. At the local government level, the only data available on public safety are police and court records on reported crime, arrests, prosecution and incarceration. Data used in FBI Uniform Crime Reports distort year-to-year comparisons because the percentage of crimes that are reported varies. Furthermore, there is no systematic measure -- either locally or on a national level -- of perception about public safety. Regardless of the incidence of crime (reported or not), in what ways do people *feel* safe or unsafe? The answer can be documented and tracked through an annual, systematic survey.

The perception problem also underlines the need for responsible and dispassionate reporting about the emotional issue of public safety. If the message in the media is that the public is unsafe, then it may be reasonable to assume people will act on that perception regardless of the reality.

# Public Safety Views

Table 3

<b>Perception of Neighborhood Safety</b>		
<b>Is there any area in your neighborhood where you would be afraid to walk alone?</b>		
	...during the day*	...at night*
All respondents	5%	32%
City of Milwaukee	9%	42%
Homeowners	3%	29%
Renters	9%	38%
Married	4%	33%
Single	8%	28%
White	3%	28%
African American	14%	48%
Men	4%	21%
Women	5%	42%

\*Percent responding "yes"

Table 4

<b>Behavioral Changes Because of Fear of Crime</b>		
<b>Has concern about crime in the past five years caused you to...</b>		
	1998	1994
...limit the places/times you will go by yourself	40%	53%
...improve your home security	32%	37%
...stay inside your home more often	19%	22%
...move to a different neighborhood	12%	13%
...change your means of transportation	7%	na
...avoid contact with people of another race	6%	9%
...purchase a handgun	6%	9%
...enroll in a self-defense class	4%	4%
...change jobs	3%	5%

Table 5

<b>Perceptions of Criminal Justice</b>			
<b>Compared to five years ago, do you think the ... has increased, decreased or stayed the same?</b>			
	Increased	No change	Decreased
...murder rate in Milwaukee...	52%	16%	27%
...number of jail cells in your county.	47%	31%	5%
...number of law enforcement officers that serve your community...	47%	37%	7%

Table 6

<b>Perceptions of Safety</b>		
<b>Would you feel safe or unsafe going to these places in the middle of the afternoon?</b>		
	Dec-98	Jun-94
The City of Milwaukee's north side	47%	48%
The City of Milwaukee's south side	21%	24%
The Milwaukee lakefront	14%	24%
Downtown Milwaukee	13%	22%
Marquette University	11%	19%
Summerfest	11%	14%
The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee	9%	na
Downtown Waukesha	5%	5%
The Milwaukee County suburbs	4%	6%
The Milwaukee County Zoo	2%	3%

\*Percent responding "unsafe"

## Why Criminal Justice Public Policy is at Center Stage

Over the past generation, concern about public safety has led to a significant shifting of resources toward public safety functions. According to the US Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics, criminal justice spending at all levels of government went from \$36 billion in 1982 to \$94 billion in 1992, the latest year for which complete data are available.

The US correctional population went from 1.8 million in 1980 to 5.5 million in 1996. At current rates, 9% of all men will serve time in a prison during their lives. Fewer than half of prison inmates were sentenced for a violent crime. More than a third have physical, mental or emotional disabilities. The number of prisoners on death row increased from 134 in 1973 to 3,335 in 1997.

At the state level, the average daily population of state correctional facilities was about 4,000 in 1980 and is projected to be 25,823 in 2001. The number of Wisconsin residents on parole and probation was 19,842 in 1980 and is expected to reach 89,833 in 2001. The state budget for 1999-2001 proposes a 10.8% increase in corrections spending in the first year of the budget and another 10.2% increase in the second year. The new budget calls for 1,278 added state employees, of whom 954 would be corrections department workers.

Trends are similar when it comes to local government. At the municipal level, police departments have expanded while most other services have been downsized. In county governments, expansion of public safety services has undercut the ability to provide public funds for other public services, such as parks.

# Crime Prevention

Our survey confirms that incarceration is a popular response to crime. The general public favors longer prison sentences and mandatory sentences for gun, sex and other crimes. Moreover, the majority professes the willingness to pay higher taxes for more prison cells. The survey found a general belief that the purpose of prison is punishment more than rehabilitation. In short, most people believe that punitive responses to crime work to reduce it.

Even so, there is a reluctance to view prison as *the* answer to crime. Most people would prefer to have their tax money go toward a range of crime prevention measures. This suggests that public policy that promotes a comprehensive approach to crime, including incarceration, would be more popular than an already-popular approach emphasizing arrest, prosecution, conviction and incarceration.

## Criminal Justice Spending

Public safety is one area in which the general public appears to have very high tolerance for government spending. As many as 80% of adult respondents to our survey told interviewers that they would be willing to pay higher taxes in order to pay for public services intended to reduce crime (Table 7). Among ten types of public safety programs, just two of them failed to attract a majority of respondents willing to pay higher taxes for them: restricting handgun ownership and punishment for minor offenses.

The tolerance for increased taxes to support anti-crime spending is highest for preventive programs. The vast majority said they would be willing to pay higher taxes in order to provide youth diversion programs (80%), hire more law enforcers (74%), create more alternatives to prison (67%) and provide more drug and alcohol treatment (66%).

These findings suggest strong public support for a comprehensive approach to public safety that would involve all levels of government and several departments within each level of government beyond the criminal justice functions traditionally associated with public safety.

## Criminal Sanctions

Our survey found a contradiction in the public's attitude about criminals that appears to arise because of a clear distinction between violent and non-violent criminals. Because safety is a core concern of citizens, the general public tends to favor punitive, long prison sentences for violent offences.

At the same time, there may be even stronger public sentiment -- along with the willingness to pay higher taxes -- for preventive measures to combat violent crime. This suggests that the public-safety-minded citizenry is most supportive of a comprehensive approach to crime that emphasizes economic opportunities for the poor, treating drug and alcohol abuse as a health problem, job training, strong law enforcement, alternatives to incarceration for non-violent crimes and harsh punishment for violent crimes.

Table 7

Willingness to Pay Higher Taxes					
Would you be willing to pay higher taxes in order to...					
	All Adults	White	Black	Men	Women
...provide youth diversion programs to discourage gang activity	80%	80%	86%	80%	80%
...hire more police officers	74%	75%	72%	71%	77%
...create more alternatives to jail and prison for non-violent offenders	67%	66%	72%	67%	67%
...provide more drug and alcohol treatment for people who get in trouble with the law	66%	65%	75%	65%	67%
...provide job training for law-breakers	64%	64%	70%	65%	63%
...fight white collar crime	61%	61%	60%	65%	57%
...build more prison cells	59%	60%	54%	61%	56%
...construct super maximum security prisons	55%	55%	57%	54%	55%
...prosecute and punish people who commit minor offenses	49%	52%	39%	47%	51%
...restrict handgun ownership	47%	46%	55%	39%	55%

\*\*"Yes" responses

# Crime Victimization

Our first attempt to measure crime victimization (reported and unreported) in metropolitan Milwaukee was patterned after the annual National Crime Victimization Survey. Important differences between our survey and the national survey prevent precise comparisons.

Table 9 shows that crime tends to be underreported both at the national and local levels. For this table, the results of our survey and of the National Crime Victimization Survey were converted to incidence for every 1,000 residents to make comparisons possible with FBI Uniform Crime Reports, which are based on major crimes reported to police. For every 1,000 residents in

1997, for example, there were 49.2 crimes reported to police in the nation and 55.4 in metropolitan Milwaukee. However, the national victimization survey -- which measures both reported and unreported crimes -- found the rate to be 109.9 in 1998. Our survey, based on a much more limited sample, found a somewhat higher incidence of crime. As the national surveys have concluded on the national level, our survey found that crime is underreported in metropolitan Milwaukee as well (Table 8).

Respondents to our survey reported 376 separate incidents of crime victimization: 257 property crimes (burglaries, car thefts and thefts), 24 violent crimes (robbery, aggravated assault and sexual assault), 22 assaults and 73 incidents of vandalism.

Among the victims, 78% identified themselves as Milwaukee County residents (whereas 71% of the survey respondents are Milwaukee County residents); 59% are City of Milwaukee residents (vs. 41% of the respondents), 62% are homeowners (vs. 68% of the respondents), 63% are employed (vs. 56% of the respondents), 26% are African American (vs. 15% of the respondents).

In addition, 22% were younger than 30, 26% were in their 30s, 25% in their 40s, 13% in their 50s and 11% were older than 59. Victims were proportional to the general population in terms of gender, income, education level and size of household.

Table 8

Percentage of Crimes Not Reported to Police*		
	Metro area outside	City of Milwaukee
Burglary	0%	0%
Attempted burglary	86%	36%
Car theft	0%	6%
Attempted car theft	50%	0%
Theft	48%	56%
Attempted theft	33%	33%
Robbery with injury	0%	0%
Robbery without injury	0%	0%
Aggravated assault with injury	0%	0%
Aggravated assault, no injury	50%	40%
Simple assault	83%	60%
Sexual assault	0%	50%
All Crimes	48%	43%

\*based on 303 crime incidents in Forum survey of Dec. '98

Table 9

Metropolitan Milwaukee and US Crimes Per 1,000 Residents								
	Public Policy Forum 1998 Crime Survey			NCVS* 1998	FBI Uniform Crime Reports -- 1997 Crimes Reported			
	Metro Milwaukee	City of Milwaukee	Suburban Milwaukee	United States	City of Milwaukee	Suburban Milwaukee	Metro Milwaukee	United States
Burglary	17.0	27.7	8.2	16.0	11.1	5.5	7.8	9.2
Motor Vehicle Theft	12.5	20.8	5.8	12.5	13.5	2.4	7.0	5.1
Theft	99.0	137.4	65.1	67.7	42.4	29.6	34.9	28.9
<b>Property Crimes Total</b>	<b>128.5</b>	<b>186.0</b>	<b>79.1</b>	<b>96.2</b>	<b>67.0</b>	<b>37.6</b>	<b>49.8</b>	<b>43.1</b>
Aggravated assault	17.5	21.0	15.0	8	4.3	1.2	2.5	3.8
Robbery	7.5	15.0	2.1	4.2	5.8	0.8	2.9	1.9
Sexual Assault	5	6.0	4.3	1.5	0.5	0.1	0.3	0.4
<b>Violence Crimes Total</b>	<b>30.0</b>	<b>42.0</b>	<b>21.4</b>	<b>13.7</b>	<b>10.6</b>	<b>2.1</b>	<b>5.6</b>	<b>6.1</b>
<b>Crimes Total</b>	<b>158.5</b>	<b>228.0</b>	<b>100.5</b>	<b>109.9</b>	<b>77.6</b>	<b>39.6</b>	<b>55.4</b>	<b>49.2</b>

\*National Crime Victimization Survey

# Crime Policy

Survey respondents were asked to share their views about a range of public policy alternatives aimed at crime prevention and crime reduction. In general, the survey found a high degree of satisfaction with law enforcement efforts currently in effect, strong support for several criminal justice alternatives and a willingness to pay higher taxes for programs aimed at improving the public safety.

Two general policy questions that were posed to respondents, along with the responses, follow:

- Do you want more of your tax money to go toward crime prevention or prisons and jails? Crime prevention, 71%; prisons and jails, 15%; both equally, 9%; neither, 4%
- When it comes to dealing with violent criminals, do you want more of your tax money to go toward punishment or rehabilitation? Punishment, 53%; rehabilitation, 33%; both equally, 9%; neither, 2%.

Taken together, these findings suggest that a philosophical preference for preventive over punitive responses to crime is accompanied by skepticism about the effectiveness of prison rehabilitation.

Responses to more specific crime policy reveal that a large majority of adults supports both

Table 10

<b>Public Views on Violent Crime Measures</b>					
<b>Would each of the following be effective in preventing violent crime?</b>					
	<b>All Adults</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
Improving economic opportunities for poor people	86%	85%	94%	85%	87%
Alcohol treatment programs	83%	82%	83%	78%	87%
Providing job training for people who get in trouble with the law	81%	80%	90%	80%	82%
Hiring more police officers	77%	77%	77%	72%	81%
Strict enforcement of minor offenses	72%	73%	66%	64%	79%
Longer prison sentences	70%	71%	69%	69%	72%
The death penalty	57%	61%	40%	57%	56%
Treating drug abuse as a medical problem	50%	47%	63%	49%	52%
Allowing law-abiding citizens to carry concealed weapons	18%	17%	20%	27%	11%
<b>Percent Responding "Yes"</b>					

Table 11

<b>Public Opinion on Anti-Crime Legislation</b>					
<b>Do you favor or oppose...</b>					
	<b>All</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
Sending Wisconsin offenders to prison out of state	57%	60%	44%	58%	56%
Requiring judges to impose mandatory sentences on certain crimes rather than using their own judgment	65%	67%	55%	66%	64%
Greater use of electronic surveillance rather than prison	39%	38%	49%	43%	35%
Sentencing people to life without parole for sex offenses involving children	81%	82%	74%	78%	84%
the death penalty	57%	61%	38%	60%	54%
Mandatory sentences for crimes committed with guns	88%	91%	74%	86%	89%
Creation of a crime victim rights board	70%	70%	65%	68%	71%
<b>Percent responding "Favor"</b>					

punitive and preventive measures (Tables 10 and 11). Even so, preventive measures lead the list of suggestions that the general public views as effective in preventing violent crime. Specifically, these are improving economic opportunities (viewed as effective by 86%), alcohol treatment programs (83%), and job training for lawbreakers (81%). Solid, but somewhat smaller, majorities also view the following as effective: hiring more police officers (77%), strict enforcement of minor offenses (72%) and longer prison sentences (70%). Of nine suggested crime-prevention measures, just one was viewed by the majority as ineffective: allowing law-abiding citizens to carry concealed weapons.

Table 11 shows widespread public support for a variety of potential anti-crime measures. The survey found overwhelming support for long and mandatory sentences, especially for sex offenses involving children and for crimes committed with guns. The majority supports the death penalty and sending offenders to prison out of Wisconsin. The majority also supports creation of a crime victim rights board. However, there are significant differences on the basis of race and gender, with African Americans much less likely to favor the death penalty and use of out-of-state prisons.