

# State *Of the* State Survey

*Michigan Citizens and  
Non-Violent Offenders:  
What To Do When Offenders  
are Mentally Ill,  
Mentally Handicapped, or  
Addicted to Drugs*

*by  
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# *Michigan Citizens and Non-Violent Offenders: What To Do When Offenders are Mentally Ill, Mentally Handicapped, or Addicted To Drugs*

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## THE SURVEY

A telephone survey of 1151 adult residents of the state of Michigan was conducted by Michigan State University's Institute for Public Policy and Social Research between September 5 and October 11, 1996. This was the eighth quarterly MSU State of the State Survey (SOSS). The survey was designed to provide information on public perception of crime and the appropriate response to offenders. The overall sampling error is "3.0%. For questions discussed in this paper, which were asked of only a portion of respondents, the sampling error is "5.5%.

The sample is designed to provide representative information for respondents from major regions of the state: Detroit City, Southeast Michigan (excluding Detroit), Southwest Michigan, Central Michigan (West and East), northern Lower Michigan, and the Upper Peninsula. (See attached information sheet for list of counties included in each region.) The data reported here are weighted to make the results representative of the adult population of Michigan.

## KEY FINDINGS

**Many Michigan residents have family members or close friends in contact with the criminal justice system due to serious mental illness, mental retardation, or a problem with alcohol or drugs.** More than one out of every 10 Michigan residents said a family member or close friend had a mental handicap (15.8%) or a serious mental illness (15.6%), and nearly half (42.4%) said a person close to them had a problem with alcohol or drugs. (Questions 7-9*Question wording is given below.*)

Of Michigan residents with a family member or close friend who has a problem with alcohol or drugs, over half (60.1%) said that as a consequence, the person had been in contact with the criminal justice system. (Q. 9a)

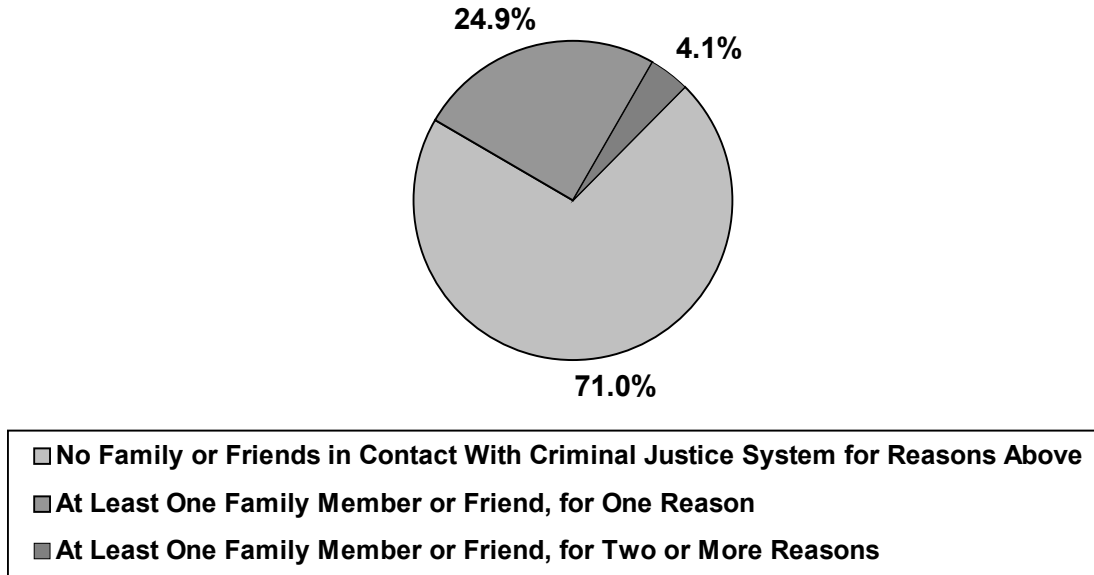
Nearly one-third (31.2%) of people with a seriously mentally ill family member or close friend said that as a consequence, the person had contact with the criminal justice system. (Q.8a)

One in five (20.3%) of those close to a person with a mental handicap said the person, as a consequence, had been in contact with the criminal justice system. (Q. 7a)

Thus, a large proportion of Michigan residents have a family member or a close friend who because of mental illness, mental handicap, or drug or alcohol problems has had contact with the police, courts, probation, or correctional system.

Figure 1 summarizes this finding, and shows that 29%, or nearly one out of every three Michigan residents, are close to at least one person who is in contact with the criminal justice system because of mental illness, a mental handicap, or drug or alcohol problems. There were no significant differences in this finding for regions of the state, racial or ethnic groups, or groups categorized as urban, rural or suburban.

**Figure 1**  
**Proportion of Michigan Residents with Family Member or Close Friend in Contact with the Criminal Justice System Due to Mental Illness, Mental Handicap or Alcohol or Drug Problem**



**The public favors a mental health system response to non-violent offenders with mental illness or a mental handicap.** The vast majority of people in Michigan feel that when a person with serious mental illness or who is mentally handicapped has contact with the criminal justice system for disturbing the peace or for repeated shoplifting, this should be handled through the mental health system rather than a sentence to prison or jail. This is true regardless of whether or not the individual has a family member or close acquaintance with a mental illness, mental handicap, or drug or alcohol problem. (See Qs. 1-6.)

**Disturbing the Peace**

Asked about the appropriate response to a "seriously mentally ill person who disturbs the peace," 93% of people think treatment through the mental health system is more appropriate than jail or prison. Just 5.4% of respondents choose jail or prison as the most appropriate response, and the remainder are uncertain about the best choice. Similarly, most people (95.4%) feel that the most appropriate response to a mentally handicapped person who disturbs the peace is treatment through the mental health system, and few (3.6%) favor the use of jail or prison (Q. 1; see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**  
**Proportion of Michigan Residents Preferring Incarceration for Disturbing the Peace**



MSU State of the State Survey (SOSS) Sep-Oct 1996, N=1151, Total Sampling Error=3.0%

There is a slight tendency for men to favor incarceration more often than do women. Of men, 9.1% vs. 2.0% of women think incarceration is more appropriate than mental health treatment if a person with mental illness disturbs the peace. Even with this difference, the vast majority of men do not favor jail or prison for the mentally ill offender. However, if the offender has a mental handicap, there is no gender difference in preferred response.

That a citizen is frightened by a public disturbance had almost no effect on public opinion about the appropriate response. For a subsample asked, "What if a citizen were frightened?" 88.9% still favor mental health treatment for seriously mentally ill offenders; and 95.5% favor mental health treatment for mentally handicapped offenders. (Q. 3)

The offender's addiction to drugs did result in an increase in public support for jail or prison as appropriate, but most people persisted in their belief that treatment through the mental health system was the best alternative. For seriously mentally ill people who had caused a disturbance and who were addicted to drugs, 77.7% favored mental health treatment, 16.6% jail or prison, and 5.7% did not know what should be done. For drug-addicted mentally handicapped offenders, 76.1% favored mental health treatment, 20.4% jail or prison, and 3.5% did not know what should be done. (Q. 2; see Figure 2.)

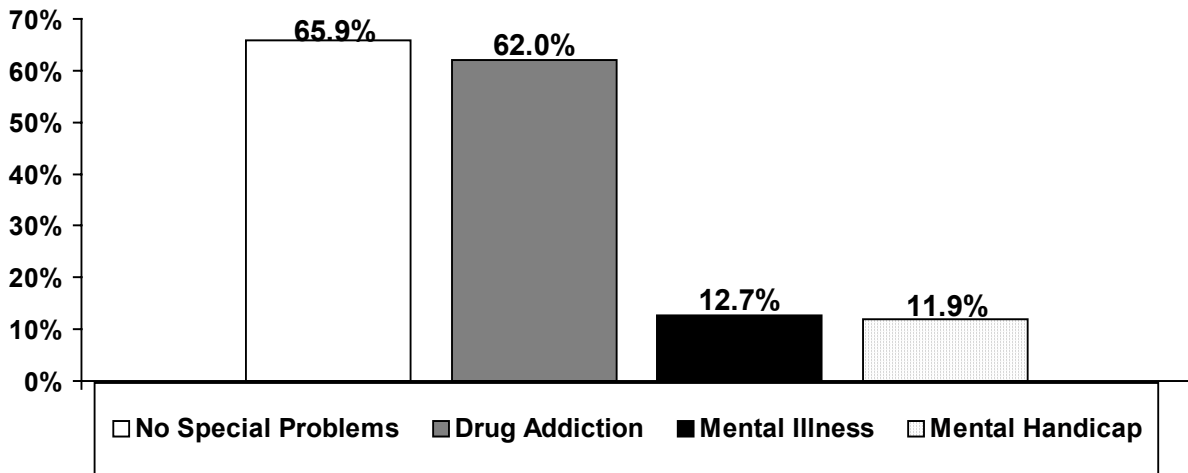
**Repeated Shoplifting**

Approximately two out of every three people feel that prison or jail is the best response to repeated shoplifting. Those favoring incarceration made up 65.9% of respondents, and those who chose probation combined with mental health treatment were 29.5%. (Q. 5; see Figure 3.)

The shoplifter's addiction to drugs did not alter public opinion: 62.2% of a subsample considered incarceration the best choice, and 35.9% chose probation with mental health treatment. (Q. 6)

Public opinion was markedly influenced by whether the shoplifter was mentally handicapped or mentally ill. For subsamples asked about mentally ill offenders, just 12.7% say that prison or jail should be used, and most 83.9% say that probation in combination with mental health treatment was best. Similarly, for those asked about mentally handicapped offenders, just 11.9% selected prison or jail, and 87.3% preferred probation with mental health treatment. Small numbers said they did not know what would be best when asked about mentally ill offenders (3.0%) or mentally retarded offenders (.7%). (Q. 6; see Figure 3.)

**Figure 3**  
**Proportion of Michigan Residents Preferring Incarceration for Repeated Shoplifters**



For repeated shoplifting, 72.2% of the men and 66.2% of women prefer incarceration rather than probation with mental health treatment. However, women and men do not differ when the shoplifter has a mental illness or handicap.

**Criminal justice system employees especially reject jail or prison for mentally ill, mentally handicapped or drug-addicted shoplifters.** A small proportion (5.7%) of the people surveyed work in the criminal justice system, for example as police or in corrections. They differ from other people in Michigan on one point. They are less likely than people who did not work in the criminal justice system to favor the use of incarceration in response to repeated shoplifting (48% vs. 70.4%).

## IMPLICATIONS

Nearly one-third of Michigan residents have a family member or a close friend affected by severe mental illness, mental handicap, or a drug or alcohol problem that they believe has been in contact with the criminal justice system because of this problem. The response to non-violent crimes by people with these difficulties, therefore, personally touches the lives of many people in Michigan.

Regardless of whether they know someone in contact with the justice system because of a drug or other mental health problem, or their own experience with victimization, Michigan residents by and large favor the use of alternatives to prison and jail for public order or repeated property crimes.

People who work in the justice system are especially likely to favor the use of non-incarcerative approaches; and women are somewhat more likely to favor those approaches than are men.

Citizens most often reject jail or prison as the best solution for offenders who have mental illness or a mental handicap. For drug-addicted offenders, a minority of people sees incarceration as more appropriate than for people with other mental health problems who are not addicted.

## SURVEY QUESTIONS

**NOTE:** The full wording of questions for the items discussed in this briefing paper is given below. The order of questions conforms with the order for the questions in the survey instrument. Some questions were asked of only a part of the sample in order to reduce the total time per interview. These questions consumed about three minutes of the 22-minute interview.

- Q. 1 Next, I would like to read you two situations that involve people who have broken the law and ask you what should be done with each person. *(One-half of the respondents are asked about seriously mentally ill people and the other half are asked about the seriously mentally retarded in the bracketed phrase below.)*

Let's suppose that a seriously mentally [ill/retarded] person created a disturbance of the peace in which the police were called to deal with the situation. Should this person be sent to jail or prison or should this person receive treatment through the mental health system?

*(Half the people who advocate treatment through the mental health system in Q. 1 are asked Q. 2; the other half are asked Q. 3. Everyone who advocates jail or prison in response to Q. 1 is asked Q. 4.)*

- Q. 2. What if the person (who has seriously disturbed the peace) also is a drug addict? Should this person be sent to jail or prison or should this person receive treatment through the mental health system?
- Q. 3 What if the person (who has seriously disturbed the peace) has also frightened citizens? Should this person be sent to jail or prison or should this person receive treatment through the mental health system?
- Q. 4 What if putting this person in jail or prison takes up space that would otherwise be used to house a more serious criminal?

*(Everyone is asked Q. 5.)*

- Q. 5 Next, let's suppose a person is repeatedly convicted of shoplifting. Should this person be sent to jail or prison or should this person be put on probation and receive mental health treatment?

*(All study respondents are asked Q. 6 below, but one-third are asked about each of the bracketed people.)*

- Q. 6 What if the person convicted of shoplifting [is mentally retarded?/ is addicted to drugs?/ has a serious mental illness?] Should this person be sent to jail or prison or should this person be put on probation and receive mental health treatment?

*(All study respondents are asked Qs. 7-9 below. Only those who answer yes receive the follow-up question.)*

Next, I would like to ask you about your experiences with family or friends that may have problems related to mental illness or substance abuse.

- Q. 7. Is anyone in your immediate family or among your close friends and acquaintances mentally retarded?
- Q. 7a. *(If yes)* Because of this, have they ever been in contact with the criminal justice system (the police, courts, prison or jail)?
- Q. 8. Does anyone in your immediate family or among your close friends and acquaintances have a serious mental illness, other than having a problem with alcohol or drugs?
- Q. 8a. *(If yes)* Because of this, have they ever been in contact with the criminal justice system (the police, courts, prison or jail)?
- Q. 9. Does any one in your family or among your close friends and acquaintances have a problem with alcohol or drugs?
- Q. 9a. *(If yes)* Because of this, have they ever been in contact with the criminal justice system (the police, courts, prison or jail)?