Perceptions of
Public Safety Issues
in Central Indiana

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Central Indiana's Future:

Understanding the Region and Identifying Choices

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Citizen perceptions of crime levels are distinct from actual crime levels, and can be vastly different. There are reasons, then, for measuring citizen perceptions and fear of crime as well as collecting real crime statistics to respond to actual and perceived levels of crime in a community (Warr 2000). In addition, citizen perceptions of the effectiveness of public safety agencies can help policymakers distribute limited resources for law enforcement, fire, and emergency services. More specifically, citizen perceptions of crime in their communities are important for implementation of community and problem-oriented policing strategies. All of these sources—perceptions of the effectiveness of agencies, the level of crime, and fear of crime—can provide a baseline of information by which to gauge the effectiveness of public safety agencies over time. By assessing the extent to which residents in various areas take measures to protect themselves, we also may grade the effectiveness of public agencies in making citizens feel safer.

The Center for Urban Policy and the Environment (Center) conducted a survey of over 6,400 households in Central Indiana (a 44-county region defined by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis) during the summer of 2000 regarding perceptions of various quality of life dimensions, including public safety. Several questions regarding levels and types of crime were asked in the survey. Survey respondents also were asked about protection measures they have taken in their homes and how satisfied they are with community public safety services. The report describes citizen perceptions of:

- levels and types of crime in their communities,
- level of fear of crime,
- effectiveness of public safety agencies, and
- self-protection strategies.

Most respondents did not consider crime to be the biggest problem in their community and believed that the level of crime had not changed in the previous six months. Nearly one-half of those respondents who did state that crime was a problem in their community cited property crimes (vandalism, auto theft, etc.) most often.

Similar questions were asked through a survey of the Indianapolis Police Department (IPD) service district in 1995 and 1996. The results to the previous survey are compared to the household survey results for the same geographic area. Satisfaction levels for IPD have increased between 1995 and 2000. Respondents feel safer walking alone after dark (40 percent reported very safe compared to 19 percent in both 1995 and 1996) and even though the crime rate has declined within the IPD service district since 1996, respondents were slightly *more* likely to feel that crime had increased during the previous six months (16 percent in 2000, and 14 percent in 1996) than they had in previous years.

Map 1: Central Indiana

Map 1: Central Indiana

Legend:
- Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs)
- MSA Counties
- Non-MSA Counties

Labeled MSAs: Lafayette, Kokomo, Muncie, Terre Haute, Indianapolis, Bloomington

County labels: WHITE, CASS, MIAMI, BENTON, CARROLL, HOWARD, WARREN, TIPPECANOE, CLINTON, TIPTON, DELAWARE, RANDOLPH, FOUNTAIN, MONTGOMERY, BOONE, HAMILTON, MADISON, HENRY, WAYNE, VERMILLION, PARKE, PUTNAM, HENDRICKS, MARION, HANCOCK, RUSH, FAYETTE, UNION, VIGO, CLAY, OWEN, MORGAN, JOHNSON, SHELBY, DECATUR, BARTHOLOMEW, SULLIVAN, MONROE, BROWN, JENNINGS, GREENE, LAWRENCE, JACKSON, ORANGE

PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC SAFETY IN CENTRAL INDIANA, 2000

There is an extensive history of using surveys of citizens to gauge aspects of public service delivery, particularly in support of community policing and problem-solving strategies for police. Citizen perceptions can be used as a report card for various agencies (e.g. police, fire, emergency) and as a strategy for identifying real or perceived public safety problems in specific areas. Surveys also give respondents the sense that their perceptions and opinions matter. This is a critical first step towards creating partnerships between police and communities and neighborhoods. As programs are implemented and resources allocated, citizen surveys also establish a baseline of information from which to assess the effectiveness of these strategies.

During the summer of 2000, the Center for Urban Policy and the Environment (Center) surveyed 6,448 Central Indiana households about their perceptions of various quality of life dimensions (including public safety issues) and public services in their community.[1] This report analyzes survey responses for Central Indiana as a whole, and the six Central Indiana MSAs regarding perceptions of crime according to Central Indiana households.

The Center analyzes Central Indiana as defined by the Bureau of Economic Analysis based on commuting and media patterns. It consists of 44 counties (see *Central Indiana: Visions of A Region*, Center for Urban Policy and the Environment, 2000, for a discussion of Central Indiana definitions). A MSA describes a geographic area consisting of a central city with a population of at least 50,000 surrounded by a densely populated area that is socially and economically integrated. The core county of the MSA includes the central city and the non-core counties are all the other counties within the MSA. These non-core counties are included in a MSA if they meet requirements such as population density and minimum urban population.

The Central Indiana region includes six MSAs that consist of a total of 18 counties. The other 26 counties in Central Indiana are non-MSA counties (see Map 1).

Survey respondents were asked open-ended questions about the most important problems in the community, followed by specific questions about crime. Questions also were asked about the perceived trend in the level of crime: whether or not crime was increasing, decreasing, or staying the same in the community over the previous six months. The survey also measured the level of satisfaction with police, fire, and emergency services; the level of fear of crime, personal safety and home protection measures used by the respondents (see the Appendix for public safety questions from the survey).[2] When possible, comparative results are presented where data are available from previous surveys conducted in the Indianapolis Police Department (IPD) service district in 1995 and 1996.

Crime is Not the Most Important Problem to Central Indiana Households

Respondents were asked what was the most important problem in their community. This was an open-ended question—respondents were not prompted by any suggestions and the majority of responses given about the most serious problem in their community were not

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[1] For survey methodology refer to *Central Indiana Household Survey 2000: An Overview*, available from the Center.

[2] For the purpose of this report, all "don't know" and "refused" answer responses were excluded from the analysis.

crime-related.[3] As illustrated by Figure 1, while uncontrolled growth/lack of planned development and concerns about schools and education (which tied with drugs with 9 percent of the answers) ranked as the top community problems by those that had an opinion, there also was some concern (although relatively little by specific problem) about various crimes. Only 7 percent of respondents said crime in general was the most important problem, corresponding with recent national findings. Seven percent of respondents in a 1998 national survey said that crime was a problem in their neighborhood (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1998). Less than 1 percent of Central Indiana respondents reported gangs as the most serious problem in their community.

One of the major tenets of community policing is that neighborhood disorder is a precursor to crime and fear of crime (Wilson & Kelling 1985, pp. 29-38). Only 2 percent of Central Indiana respondents were concerned about their neighborhood not being kept up. In total, less than one in five Central Indiana respondents mentioned crime in general or specific crime issues as the most important problem in their communities. As has been the case in other studies, females were significantly more likely to mention crime as a problem than were males, and Blacks were statistically more likely to mention crime as a problem in their communities than were Whites. [4]

Figure 1: What do you think are the most important problems in your community today? (first response only, n=5,670)
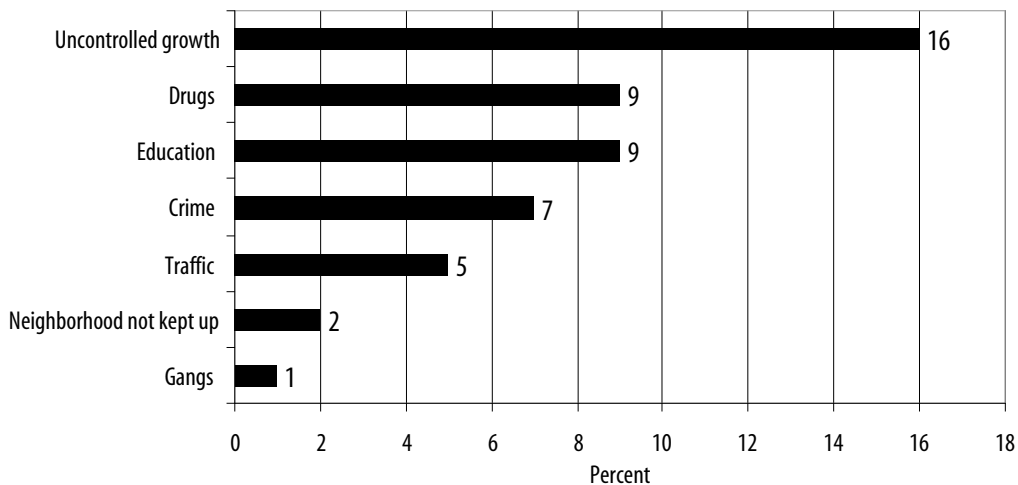
The survey also asked multiple questions about crime as a problem in the community. After allowing for open-ended responses from respondents, the next question specifically asked whether or not crime was a problem in the community. As illustrated by Figure 2, 30 percent of respondents in Central Indiana considered crime to be a problem in their community. Thus, while citizens generally did not consider crime as the *most important problem*, a substantial proportion still considered crime to be an issue in their community. Furthermore, there were statistically significant differences among the individual MSAs when compared to Central Indiana as a whole.

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[3] Although some respondents provided more than one answer, only the first problem mentioned is included in the analysis.

[4] T test result significant at the .01 level.

While less than one in every three participants in the Lafayette and Indianapolis MSAs reported that crime was a problem, more than 40 percent of respondents in the Kokomo and Muncie MSAs answered that crime was a problem.[5] In the Bloomington MSA, trends resembled that of Central Indiana overall.

Figure 2: Is crime a problem in your community? (n=6,376)
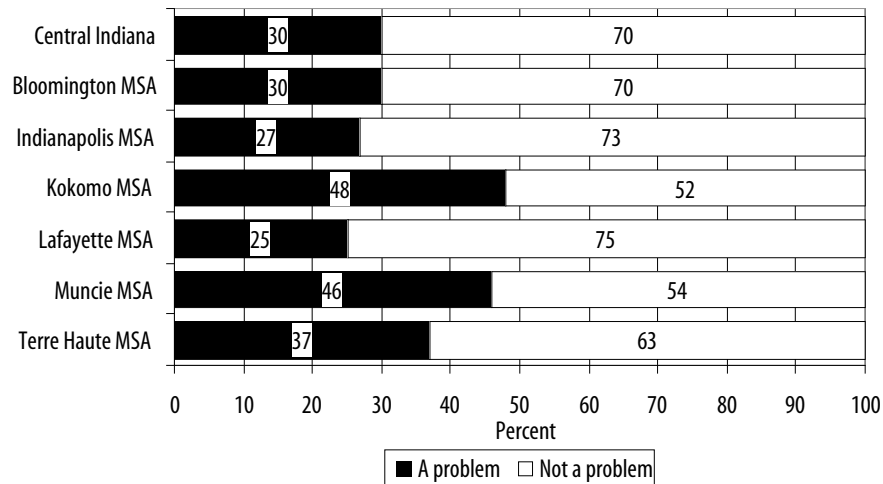
As illustrated by Table 1, residents in Central Indiana who did feel crime was a problem were asked to specify the type of crime. Again, there were a number of different crimes mentioned, but the most common answer by far was property crime (48 percent). It was identified as a problem more than twice as often as any other specific crime types.[6] This trend was observed across all MSAs with the exception of Kokomo, where respondents were more likely to identify drugs and alcohol as the biggest individual problem in their community. For the rest of Central Indiana, drugs and alcohol were ranked second, while robbery and assault followed.[7]

Table 1: Specific Crime Problems for Central Indiana (percent of responses) (n=1,918)

	Central Indiana	Bloomington	Indianapolis	Kokomo	Lafayette	Muncie	Terre Haute
Property crime	48	42	57	20	38	33	45
Drugs and alcohol	20	8	15	42	20	26	23
Robbery	8	7	7	6	9	14	10
Assault/ Domestic violence	2	4	2	2	7	2	3
Other	22	40	20	30	27	24	19

[5] T test result significant at the .01 level, with the exception of Lafayette, which was significant at the .05 level.

[6] Property crime includes such offenses as burglary, auto theft, breaking and entering, and vandalism.

[7] In some cases it was unclear that respondents knew the difference between robbery and burglary and may have used the terms interchangeably. We reviewed all responses to this question and only coded robbery where it was clear that the respondent meant taking something from someone by force or threat of force.

May not equal 100 percent due to rounding.

The respondents were asked if they felt crime in general had increased, remained the same, or decreased in their community over the previous six months. An overwhelming percentage of respondents (80 percent) stated that the level of crime had not changed. The results were similar among the individual MSAs, with the exception of Muncie, where residents were more likely than the overall Central Indiana sample to perceive that crime had decreased.[8]

Figure 3: Perception of the Change in the Level of Crime over Past Six Months (n=6,095)
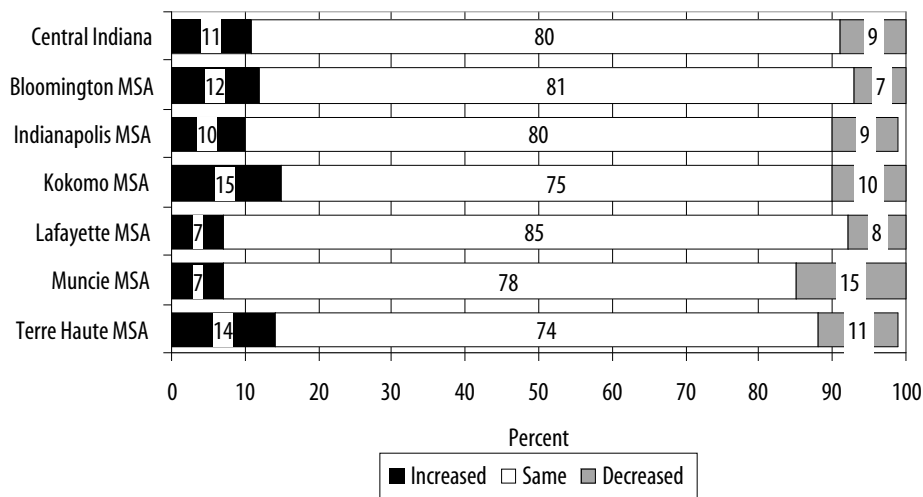
A recent national Gallup Poll found that 34 percent of U.S. residents thought there was more crime in their area, 46 percent thought there was less, and only 15 percent thought the level of crime in their area had remained the same in the previous 12 months (The Gallup Organization 2000). These national results are perplexing since crime has decreased dramatically by as much as 30 percent in the last five to six years across the country. Perceptions of the level of crime in Central Indiana correspond much more closely to actual levels of crime than do national perceptions, as Central Indiana residents are much less likely to think crime is increasing than are national respondents.

Regarding perceptions of crime trends in Central Indiana, there were statistically significant race differences: Blacks were more likely to perceive that crime was decreasing than were Whites.[9] This result mirrors national trends, as it is in areas with higher concentrations of minorities that have experienced the most dramatic recent declines in actual crime levels.

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[8] T test result significant at the .01 level.
[9] T test result significant at the .01 level.

Central Indiana Households Report High Satisfaction Levels with Public Safety Services

Survey respondents were asked about their satisfaction levels with public safety services including police, fire, and ambulance. As illustrated by Table 2, for all of Central Indiana, 97 percent of respondents were either somewhat or very satisfied with their fire department, 95 percent with ambulance services, and 89 percent with police services in their community. A higher percentage of Lafayette MSA respondents reported being satisfied with all three services than the other MSAs or Central Indiana as a whole, while Terre Haute MSA respondents had the lowest rating for ambulance and fire, and Muncie MSA respondents were the least satisfied with their police services. Whites were more satisfied with police services than were Blacks but there were no racial differences regarding the quality of ambulance or fire services.[10]

Table 2: Percent of Citizens Very or Somewhat Satisfied with Public Safety Services

	Central Indiana	Bloomington	Indianapolis	Kokomo	Lafayette	Muncie	Terre Haute
Fire (n=6,164)	97	97	97	98	99	95	95
Ambulance (n=5,972)	95	97	95	97	99	96	89
Police (n=6,287)	89	87	90	86	92	81	85

Respondents Feel Safe in their Neighborhoods

Respondents were asked whether or not they felt safe walking alone in their neighborhood after dark (see Figure 4, page 8). A large majority (88 percent) of the respondents felt very (62 percent) or somewhat (26 percent) safe walking alone in their community. Compared to the overall Central Indiana sample, residents of the Indianapolis MSA felt safer than residents in the other MSAs, residents of the Terre Haute and Bloomington MSAs felt less safe, and the residents of the Muncie and Kokomo MSAs felt the least safe at night in their neighborhoods.[11] National survey results asking a slightly different question (Is there anywhere near where you live —that is, within a mile —where you would be afraid to walk alone at night?) find 34 percent of residents reporting fear (The Gallup Organization 2000). This result is in contrast to 12 percent of Central Indiana residents that reported feeling very or somewhat unsafe walking in their neighborhoods after dark. There were statistically significant differences by race and gender. Blacks felt less safe than Whites and women felt less safe than men.[12]

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[10] T test result significant at the .01 level for race differences for satisfaction of police.
[11] T test result significant at the .01 level, with the exception of Terre Haute, which was significant at the .05 level.
[12] T test result significant at the .01 level.

Figure 4: How safe would you feel walking alone in your neighborhood after dark? (n=6,389)
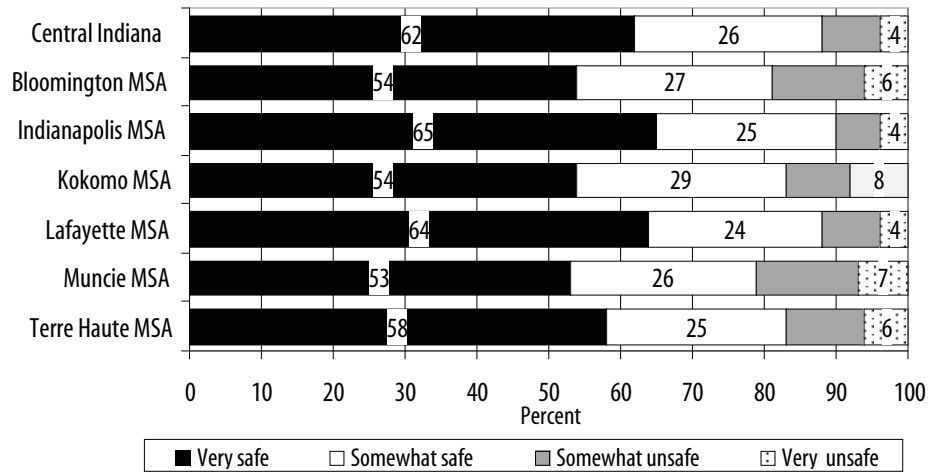

Table 3 presents responses regarding measures taken to increase safety in the home. Respondents were asked about seven different security measures, including having a dog for protection; installing an alarm system, locks, or bars on windows; owning a gun; owning a weapon other than a gun; and joining a neighborhood watch. The installation of locks was used most frequently (42 percent). Installing bars on windows was the method least likely to have been implemented by residents (2 percent). Again, there were some significant race and gender differences. Blacks were more likely to install bars and alarms and join neighborhood watches than were Whites.[13]

Table 3: Have you or anyone in your household done any of the following things to make you feel safer in your home? (percent yes by MSA)

	Central Indiana	Bloomington	Indianapolis	Kokomo	Lafayette	Muncie	Terre Haute
Strong locks (n=6,422)	42	40	42	48	41	6	45
Gun (n=6,323)	34	29	34	37	27	34	37
Alarm (n=6,397)	17	9	21	11	12	13	16
Dog (n=6,429)	16	11	15	15	11	19	20
Other weapon (n=6,346)	15	15	14	18	13	16	17
Neighborhood watch (n=6,388)	11	7	13	7	8	11	8
Bars (n=6,432)	2	2	2	3	2	2	2

A total of 2,161 (34 percent) of respondents reported that they owned a gun. National figures on gun ownership vary depending on the source, but range from 41 percent of households reporting the presence of at least one firearm to 29 percent of adults responding

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[13] T test result significant at the .05 level.

that they personally own a gun (Cook & Ludwig 1996). For Central Indiana, those who did possess a gun were asked to state its primary function: protection, recreation, or both. The primary function named most often was both (46 percent), followed by protection only (28 percent) and recreation only (26 percent). Regarding race, there was a significant difference in the likelihood that Whites owned a gun more often than Black respondents. This result agrees with national statistics that find Blacks less likely to own guns than Whites.[14] Also, in Central Indiana there were significant differences by race regarding why Blacks and Whites own guns. Blacks were significantly more likely to report owning guns for protection only (62 percent versus 26 percent of Whites), and Whites were much more likely to report gun ownership for recreation only (27 percent versus 5 percent of Blacks).

[14] T test result significant at the .05 level.

INDIANAPOLIS POLICE DEPARTMENT SERVICE DISTRICT COMPARISONS, 1995-2000

The Center for Urban Policy and the Environment conducted surveys in the Indianapolis Police Department Service District in 1995 and 1996, which were used to establish a baseline of information about citizen perspectives to inform the mayor of Indianapolis and the chief of the Indianapolis Police Department regarding the need for change in the neighborhood-level distribution and type of police resources (Parks et al., 1996). Some of these questions were the same as questions included in the Central Indiana Household Survey. Figure 5 shows the changes in public opinion in the IPD service district for 1995, 1996, and 2000.

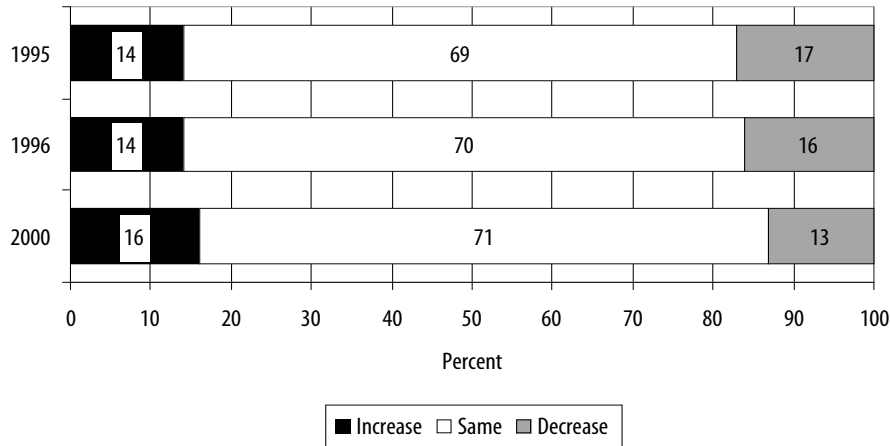Figure 5: Citizen Satisfaction with the Indianapolis Police Department Services
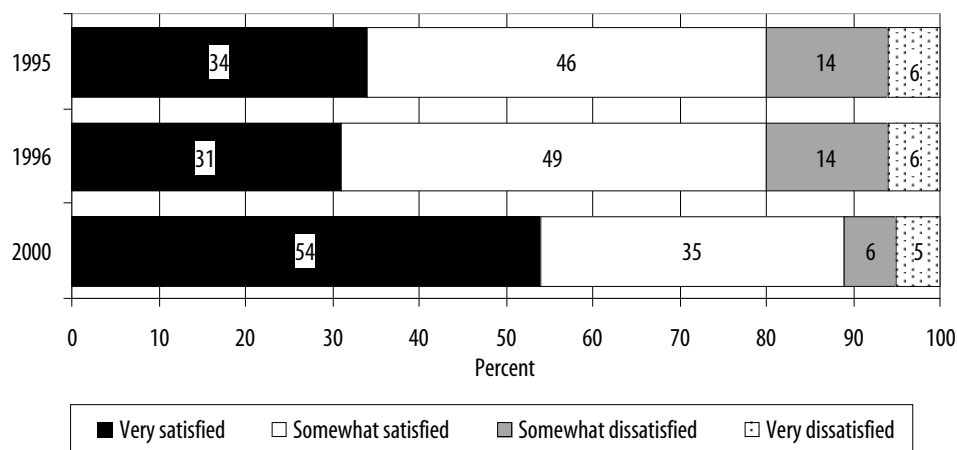
In 1995, 34 percent of respondents were very satisfied with IPD, 31 percent were very satisfied in 1996, and by 2000, 54 percent of respondents reported that they were very satisfied with the IPD. The earlier satisfaction levels found in 1995 and 1996 were above most of the satisfaction levels reported about other police departments across the United States. The increasing satisfaction level with IPD services continues to be a national anomaly, albeit a positive one.

The actual number of crimes reported to the IPD is published annually and allows for an assessment of the degree to which citizen responses concerning the level of crime match police data. Although there was some fluctuation in crime trends in the early nineties, the crime rate steadily increased beginning in 1993, peaked in 1996, and has progressively declined since, dropping by more than 20 percent from 1996 until 2000. The trend of citizen perceptions has not corresponded with the significant declines in crime in Indianapolis—in the year 2000, 13 percent of citizens thought crime was decreasing in the IPD service district, whereas 17 percent thought crime was decreasing in 1995—a year before the decline actually began (Indianapolis Police Department 2000).
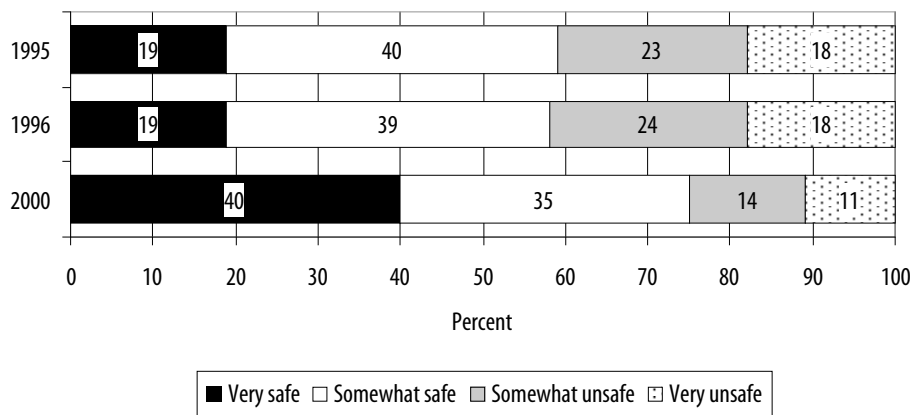
Figure 6: Crime Level Perceptions in IPD Service District

Year	Increase	Same	Decrease
1995	14	69	17
1996	14	70	16
2000	16	71	13

Percent

■ Increase □ Same ▨ Decrease

The surveys allow a comparison of the responses from the IPD services district over three data collection periods. As shown in Figure 7, a significantly higher number of people feel safe in their community after dark in the 2000 survey than in the previous years. Whereas the perception of feeling very safe was 19 percent for both 1995 and 1996, it more than doubled to 40 percent by 2000.[15] This may be in part because of the many community-policing initiatives in the IPD service district over the past several years.

Figure 7: Walking Alone in Your Neighborhood After Dark, IPD Service District

Year	Very safe	Somewhat safe	Somewhat unsafe	Very unsafe
1995	19	40	23	18
1996	19	39	24	18
2000	40	35	14	11

Percent

■ Very safe □ Somewhat safe ▨ Somewhat unsafe ⬚ Very unsafe

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[15] T test result significant at the .01 level.

CONCLUSION

Although crime in general is a concern for some citizens of Central Indiana according to the Central Indiana Household Survey, few consider it the most important problem. Uncontrolled growth has surpassed all specific crime issues. Property crimes were the primary specific crime concern. Even when asked directly if crime was a problem, less than one-third of respondents felt that crime was a problem in their community, and only 11 percent of those surveyed believed that crime had increased. However, this result varied by MSA.

The satisfaction levels for all public safety services throughout Central Indiana were very high, suggesting that those who felt crime was a problem were still satisfied with their law enforcement, fire, and emergency services. Nonetheless, many Central Indiana residents still have taken steps to make them feel safer in their homes. The primary modes were installing strong locks or owning a gun.

Although the Central Indiana MSAs are in fairly close geographic proximity to each other, they show evidence of differences from the Central Indiana region overall. For example, when asked if crime was a problem, the residents in Kokomo, Muncie, and Terre Haute said yes significantly *more* often than the rest of Central Indiana, while Indianapolis and Lafayette responded yes *less* often than the others. Regarding whether the level of crime has changed over the previous six months, only Muncie was different from the region with fewer respondents replying that crime has increased, and a greater percentage feeling crime had decreased in their community. In addition, respondents in the Bloomington, Kokomo, Muncie, and Terre Haute MSAs felt less safe overall walking alone in their neighborhood after dark, while residents in the Indianapolis MSA felt safer than the trends for the Central Indiana region. The differences found across the MSAs may represent the extent to which the local public safety agencies, primarily police, are able to effectively communicate the actual level of and trends in crime in the area as well as their ability to implement a model of problem solving that includes information that trickles down to the neighborhood level—a fundamental tenet of community policing.

Earlier surveys of the Indianapolis Police Department Service district that included some of the same questions as the Household Survey provided comparisons for analysis across time. The results indicate that significant changes in opinion have occurred since 1995 and 1996. Indianapolis residents are more satisfied with the police department and feel safer walking alone at night. Somewhat paradoxically, they are more likely to believe that crime has increased, even in light of the fact that crime statistics in Indianapolis show crime rates are declining.

At a minimum, these results suggest that resources could be targeted towards those few areas in Central Indiana that have reported crime or public safety related problems in their communities. In addition, police agencies could use civic engagement, primarily neighborhood watch groups, to communicate with the public. The present findings now provide a baseline of information concerning the public perception of the effectiveness of public safety agencies and this report card can be used to gauge the effectiveness of future programs in Central Indiana. Personal safety and protection of property are critical to residents regardless of where they live. Citizen perceptions of current conditions and services provided by protective agencies not only help create a starting point for those interested in improving conditions, but also suggest ideas about how to increase communication between the policy makers and the citizens to encourage investments by all the stakeholders of communities.

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APPENDIX
Public Safety-Related Questions from the Central Indiana Household Survey, 2000.

8. What do you think are the most important problems facing your community today? (this was an open-ended question, and no options were given following the question)

10. Please tell me if (crime) is a problem or not a problem in the community where you live?
      1. A problem **WHAT TYPE OF CRIME PROBLEM?**_____
      2. Not a problem
      3. Don't know
      4. No answer/refuse

14. I'm going to read a list of local institutions and organizations. For each one, please tell me overall how satisfied you are with the quality of services in your neighborhood. Would you say very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied?
b.Your local fire department
      1. Very satisfied
      2. Somewhat satisfied
      3. Somewhat dissatisfied
      4. Very dissatisfied
      5. Don't know
      6. No answer/refuse
c.Your local ambulance/rescue department
      1. Very satisfied
      2. Somewhat satisfied
      3. Somewhat dissatisfied
      4. Very dissatisfied
      5. Don't know
      6. No answer/refuse
d.Police services in your neighborhood
      1. Very satisfied
      2. Somewhat satisfied
      3. Somewhat dissatisfied
      4. Very dissatisfied
      5. Don't know
      6. No answer/refuse

15. How safe would you feel walking alone in your neighborhood after dark? Would you say very safe, somewhat safe, somewhat unsafe, or very unsafe?
      1. Very safe
      2. Somewhat safe
      3. Somewhat unsafe
      4. Very unsafe
      5. Don't know
      6. No answer/refuse

16. Overall, would you say that crime in your neighborhood has increased, remained about the same, or decreased in the last six months?
      1. Increased
      2. Remained about the same
      3. Decreased
      4. Don't know
      5. No answer/refuse

17. We hear a lot about people's concerns for safety in their homes. Have you or anyone in your household done any of the following things to make you feel safer in your home?

a.Bought a dog for protection
>1. Yes
>2. No
>3. Don't know
>4. No answer/refuse

b.Installed strong locks on doors
>1. Yes
>2. No
>3. Don't know
>4. No answer/refuse

c.Installed bars on windows
>1. Yes
>2. No
>3. Don't know
>4. No answer/refuse

d.Keep a gun or firearm
>1. Yes
>2. No
>3. Don't know
>4. No answer/refuse

Is the gun primarily for protection, recreation, or both? (if answered yes to previous question)
>1. Protection
>2. Recreation
>3. Both
>4. Don't know
>5. No answer/refuse

e.Keep a weapon other than a gun or firearm
>1. Yes
>2. No
>3. Don't know
>4. No answer/refuse

f.Joined a neighborhood crime watch
>1. Yes
>2. No
>3. Don't know
>4. No answer/refuse

g.Installed a security/alarm system
>1. Yes
>2. No
>3. Don't know
>4. No answer/refuse

18. Do you have any smoke detectors in your home?
>1. Yes
>2. No
>3. Don't know
>4. No answer/refuse