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An executive briefing on trends and issues in criminal justice

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Survey of Illinois criminal justice agencies identifies workload problems

Overview

Domestic violence and child abuse are the top concerns of police chiefs, judges, state's attorneys, and public defenders in Illinois when it comes to workload problems created by violent crimes. That is one finding of a needs assessment survey of criminal justice agencies commissioned by the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority (Figure 1).

Survey results showed that agency heads are especially concerned about violence — particularly domestic violence, juvenile violence, and child abuse — as well as drugs and firearms. More than three-fourths of responding police chiefs, judges, state's attorneys, and

public defenders stated that drug possession offenses contributed to workload problems within their agencies.

The report, "Needs Assessment Survey of Illinois Criminal Justice Agencies," gives the results of an assessment of the problems and needs of criminal justice agencies in Illinois as identified through a survey of police chiefs, state's attorneys, judges, jail administrators, public defenders, and probation directors. Surveys were sent to 1,128 agency heads, and 651 completed surveys were returned (Figure 2). The Institute for Law and Justice, Inc., in Alexandria, Va., conducted the survey and wrote the report, which was completed in June.

Figure 1: Percent of respondents who said these violent crimes contributed to workload problems

Type of violent crime	Police chiefs	Judges	State's attorneys	Public defenders
Homicide	15.4	58.3	53.1	50
Rape	30.6	75	67.3	61.1
Aggravated assault	58.4	58.3	61.7	64.9
Domestic violence	92.6	100	97.9	97.3
Child abuse	70.1	91.7	93.7	88.9

Figure 2: Survey response rate

Respondent group	Surveys mailed	Surveys returned	Response rate
Police chiefs	705	434	62%
State's attorneys	102	49	48%
Judges	26	14	54%
Jail administrators (Sheriffs)	94	45	48%
Public defenders	97	37	38%
Adult probation office directors	104	72	69%
Total	1,128	651	58%

In general, those responding to the survey indicated that problems with violence have worsened over the last year. As for solutions, most respondents favored a mixture of approaches, including more youth prevention programs, better employment opportunities, and more severe punishments.

The survey also addressed problems and needs within agencies on issues such as operational programs, information systems, and training. One of the more interesting results in the area of information systems was the response from state's attorneys, who identified a greater number of needs than the other groups.

More than two-thirds of state's attorneys who responded to the survey indicated they had information system needs for prior criminal histories of defendants, information on codefendants, victim/witness names, speedy trial status, defendant tracking information, caseload report analysis, and bail/jail status of defendants. Interestingly, the majority of those in need indicated that the systems needed to be *developed*, rather than improvements made to existing systems.

Violence

Respondents to the survey indicated that domestic violence, child abuse, and juvenile violence were major concerns. Respondents often linked these crimes to drug and alcohol abuse, availability of firearms, and breakdown of family structure and societal values.

Domestic violence was the primary concern of four groups. More than 90 percent of police chiefs, state's attorneys, and public defenders, and 100 percent of judges indicated that domestic violence contributes to their workload problems. Child abuse received the next highest rating as a contributor to workload problems for all four groups (Figure 1). Respondents also frequently cited gang and youth violence as contributing to workload problems. The increase in these problems was attributed in part to the availability of alcohol, drugs, and firearms; and the inadequacy of the criminal justice system.

All groups in the survey believed juvenile violence was getting worse to a greater degree than other kinds of crime. Respondents felt that not only was there an escalation in juvenile violence, but that the degree of violence was also increasing. The rise in juvenile and other violence was largely attributed to a breakdown of societal and family values and structure. Drug and

alcohol abuse, and portrayal of violence in the media were also often cited as contributing factors.

All groups except probation directors felt that more youth prevention programs and better employment opportunities would be most effective in reducing violence. Probation directors most often said more severe punishments and better educational opportunities were needed to reduce violence. Police chiefs, judges, and public defenders gave the lowest rating to more severe punishments as a means of reducing violence, while state's attorneys and jail administrators gave more drug treatment availability the lowest rating.

Drugs

More than 80 percent of police chiefs, judges, state's attorneys, and public defenders indicated that drug possession contributed to their workload problems (Figure 3). More than 90 percent of judges and more than 80 percent of public defenders cited drug sale offenses as contributing to workload problems. Among jail administrators, about 90 percent indicated that drug possession arrests contributed to jail crowding, and 87.5 percent said arrests for drug sales contribute to jail crowding.

At least half of all respondent groups indicated that more drug treatment, more youth programs, better employment opportunities, and better educational opportunities would help reduce illicit drug use.

Respondents also noted a need for improved approaches to law enforcement, especially in the areas of computer systems for intelligence information, directed patrol activities for drug enforcement, and Neighborhood Watch efforts focusing on illicit drug use. Respon-

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About the survey

The "Needs Assessment Survey of Illinois Criminal Justice Agencies" was based on a national survey conducted by the Institute for Law and Justice in 1994 for the National Institute of Justice, the research arm of the U.S. Department of Justice. For the national effort, surveys were sent to police chiefs, jail administrators, prosecutors, judges, public defenders, and probation office directors across the country. The aim of the national survey was to identify problems and needs at the local level in order for NIJ to establish priorities for research and technical assistance.

For the project in Illinois, the national survey instruments were revised so they were applicable to the criminal justice system in Illinois. Six different survey instruments were developed, to be sent to police chiefs, judges, state's attorneys, public defenders, jail administrators, and adult probation directors. The survey instruments were divided into major sections on workload, staffing, and operations and procedures.

Throughout the survey instrument, open-ended sections were included for respondents to write comments about their problems and needs in particular areas as well as experiences with programs already established. Those comments were important for interpreting the statistical results and numerous comments were included in the final report to highlight certain themes or issues.

Figure 3: Percent of respondents who identified drug crimes as contributing to workload problems

Type of drug crime	Police chiefs	Judges	State's attorneys	Public defenders
Drug possession	82.8	91.7	83.7	80.2
Drug sales	59.6	91.6	75.5	83.3

dents indicated that a lack of resources, a lack of information sharing, and the ineffectiveness of the criminal justice system often prove to be obstacles in effective drug enforcement.

Firearms

More than 91 percent of judges reported crimes committed with firearms contributed to their workload problems. Among state's attorneys and public defenders, more than 60 percent cited crimes committed with firearms as contributing to their workload problems. In contrast, only 34.7 percent of police chiefs said the same. Crimes committed with firearms were considered a factor in jail crowding by 55 percent of jail administrators.

Operational and training needs

In terms of operational and training needs, police chiefs strongly supported community policing and problem-solving efforts. Many chiefs indicated that they believed community policing and problem-solving could help combat juvenile crime and drug problems, reduce fear of crime in the community, as well as decrease calls for service. But a lack of resources and manpower often hindered implementation of community policing or expansion of community policing efforts. Other problems identified included getting officers to accept the community policing philosophy and motivating the community to participate.

Several chiefs, in their comments, mentioned shortages of personnel and other resources as blocks to efficient investigations.

Police respondents also indicated several areas that were less critical in terms of problems and needs. These included coordination with private security companies (general satisfaction by 75.7 percent of respondents), diverting minor calls for service from patrol response (53.7 percent satisfaction), and strategies to reduce firearms' availability (49.7 percent satisfaction).

Respondents indicated a significant need for the development of information systems, rather than improvement of existing systems. This was particularly true with state's attorneys and their needs for tracking defendants and other aspects of cases.

Respondents provided an extensive list of training needs. Police listed problem solving, report writing, conflict resolution, emerging legal issues, civil liability prevention, and juvenile issues as training needs.

For more information, or a copy of the report, "Needs Assessment Survey of Illinois Criminal Justice Agencies," contact the Authority's Research and Analysis Unit: (312) 793-8550.

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