

Research Brief

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Citizens' Perceptions Regarding the City of Jackson's Direction: Survey Results and Recommendations

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After seeing its population peak around 202,000 residents in the early 1980s, the City of Jackson's population has seen a steady decline while its surrounding suburbs have grown significantly (*MURC Digest, 2012*). Why are citizens leaving? So what has changed citizens' minds about Jackson living in Jackson? Could it be their perception of Jackson is negative or became negative? Although perceptions are not fact, they help shape public opinions and are very real to the persons experiencing them. Citizens' perceptions about their city and/or community are usually shaped by incidents and day-to-day experiences that city officials may have no control over. However, knowing citizens' perceptions of their city can enhance city officials and policymakers' understanding of their residents' needs and wants.

This current research brief highlights citizens' perceptions regarding the direction in which they think City of Jackson is moving. That is, whether citizens feel the city is moving in the right or wrong direction. The purpose of this research brief is to report findings from a survey of citizens' opinions on topics related quality of life in the City of Jackson. These findings will provide insight to city officials regarding citizens' perception of Jackson's direction, and into possible solutions that citizens feel could help move the city in the right direction. Due to the design and administration of this survey, additional research is recommended to delve deeper into the meanings and implications of survey results.

Design. This study used a non-experimental, quantitative exploratory research design to collect perceptual and attitudinal data via a survey instrument. A self-designed survey instrument was administered to Jackson residents by staff with the Mississippi Urban Research Center. Non-Jackson residents also had an opportunity to complete the survey instrument. The research period was from October 01, 2015 to February 28, 2016. Study participants consisted of persons responding to an invitation to complete an online or hardcopy survey questionnaire. A sample size calculation (www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm) indicated that 439 completed questionnaires would produce a 95% confidence level with a margin of error of +/- 4.67%.

To capture citizens' perception regarding the direction in which the City of Jackson is moving, the following scale: moving in the right direction, no movement but currently good; no movement and not so good; moving in the wrong direction; and unsure. Responses listed as "unsure" was excluded from the analysis. Scores for "moving in the right direction" and "no movement but currently good" were combined to create a composite score representing positive perceptions of movement. Scores for "moving in the wrong direction" and "no movement and not so good" were combined to represent negative perceptions of movement.

For statements of possible solutions that may improve the City of Jackson, respondents used the following scale: strongly agree; somewhat agree; somewhat disagree; and strongly disagree. To capture citizens' recommended solutions for moving the city in the right direction, "strongly agree and somewhat agree" were combined to represent a category called "generally agree". The categories of "somewhat disagree" and "strongly disagree" were combined to represent a category called "generally disagree".

Description of the Sample. The questionnaire was completed by $n = 578$ persons, however, $n = 439$ persons indicated that they live in Jackson, and $n = 98$ persons stated that they do not live in Jackson. Forty-one persons did not respond to the question "Do you live in Jackson?" Approximately 37.0% ($n = 201$) of the respondents were male and 63.0% were female ($n = 342$). Gender was missing for 35 respondents. Fifteen point nine percent ($n = 92$) were 15 to 24 years old, 12.8% ($n = 74$) were 25 to 34 years old, 15.2% ($n = 88$) were 35 to 44 years old, 16.1% ($n = 93$) were 45 to 54 years old, 19.6% ($n = 113$) were 55 to 64 years old, and 13.8% ($n = 80$) were 65 years old or older. Regarding race, 74.5% ($n = 404$) of the respondents were African Americans, 19.9% ($n = 108$), were White and those remaining were other race. Relative to total household income, 8.6% reported less than \$10,000; 5.1% reported \$10,000 to \$14,999; 9.7% indicated between \$15,000 to \$24,999; 11.3% received between \$25,000 and \$34,999, 17.3% reported between \$35,000 to \$49,999, 25.7% indicated between \$50,000 and \$74,999, 7.8% reported 75,000 to 99,999, 8.2% indicated between \$100,000 and \$149,999, 2.3% stated between \$150,000 and \$199,99, and 4.1% received \$200,000 or more into their household.

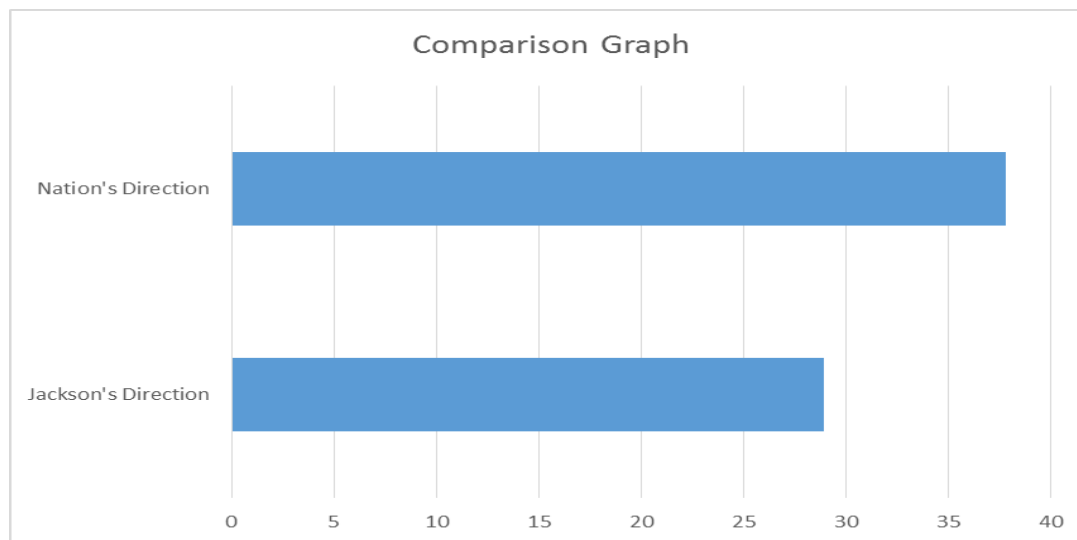
Results

National Comparison

Jackson State University's Institute of Government Polling Center conducted a national survey that released findings on perceptions of the nation's direction (2014). Results from that national survey revealed that 37.8% of Americans believed the nation is moving in the right direction. By way of comparison, results from the City of Jackson survey revealed that 28.9% of Jackson residents perceived the direction Jackson is moving as being in the right direction. As shown in graph 1 below, Jackson residents' perceptions regarding the direction of the city falls slightly below the national average of how American's perceive the direction that the nation is moving (See Graph 1).

Graph 1

Comparison of Positive Perceptions of the Nation's Direction to Jackson's Direction



Moving in the Right Direction

Of the 28.9% who perceived Jackson's direction positively, "quality of life is good" was selected as the number one reason that Jackson is moving in the right direction and/or no movement but currently good. A rank ordering of other perceived reasons is as follows: religious faith is strong ranked second; own your own home ranked third; personal standard of living is the same/improving ranked fourth; racial tensions are lower/race relations improving ranked fifth; infrastructure is improving ranked sixth; unemployment levels are declining ranked seventh; level of crime/feeling safe and home ownership levels are up ranked eighth; interest rates are low ranked tenth; and tax rate levels ranked eleventh (See Table 1).

Table 1

Listed Reasons for Moving in the Right Direction

Variables	Count	Percent
Quality of life is good or very good	79	62.2
Religious faith is strong	70	55.1
Own your own home	68	53.5
Personal standard of living is the same/improving	54	42.5
Racial tensions are lower/race relations improving	38	29.9
Infrastructure is improving	29	22.8
Unemployment levels are declining	27	21.3
Home Ownership levels are up	26	20.5
Level of crime/ feeling safe	26	20.5
Interest rates are low	24	18.9
Tax rate levels	19	15.0

Moving in the Wrong Direction

Of the 61% who perceived Jackson's direction negatively, 82.8% selected infrastructure not improving as the number one reason. A rank ordering of other perceived reasons is as follows: level of crime/feeling safe ranked second; tax rates are too high ranked third; unemployment levels are still high ranked fourth; racial tensions ranked fifth; personal standard of living is declining/same ranked sixth; home ownership levels ranked seventh; religious faith declining ranked eighth; job satisfaction poor ranked ninth; can't afford home ranked tenth; and quality of life poor ranked eleventh (See table 2).

Table 2
Listed Reasons for Moving in the Wrong Direction

Variables	Count	Percent
Infrastructure not improving	222	82.8
Level of crime/feeling safe	198	73.9
Tax rates too high	110	41.0
Unemployment levels are still high	105	39.2
Racial tensions	93	34.7
Personal standard of living is declining/same	83	31.0
Home ownership levels	65	24.3
Religious faith seems to be declining	51	19.0
Job satisfaction is poor	26	9.7
Can't afford home	22	8.2
Quality of life is poor	18	6.7

Possible Solutions

When asked for possible solutions that may help the City of Jackson move in the right direction, removal/restoration of abandoned houses/buildings was the number one solution selected by respondents. A rank ordering of other perceived solutions is as follows: maintaining city streets and roads ranked second; providing greater shopping opportunities ranked third; providing adequate parks and recreation facilities ranked fourth; providing affordable housing ranked fifth; and increasing taxes to assist with infrastructure ranked sixth (See Table 3).

Table 3
Response Percentage for Possible Solutions

Variables	Count	Percentage
Removal/restoration of abandoned houses	409	95.6
Maintaining city streets and roads	403	93.1
Providing greater shopping opportunities	371	84.5
Providing adequate parks and recreation facilities	369	84.1
Providing affordable housing	362	82.5
Increasing taxes to assist with infrastructure	191	43.5

Discussion

The results of this study reveal that there is a clear link between citizens' negative perceptions of the City of Jackson and the infrastructure not improving issue. As shown in Table 2, the number one reason residents expressed as proof that Jackson is moving in the wrong direction was the category "infrastructure is not improving". Somewhat surprisingly, despite the 1% tax increase approved in May 2015, Jackson residents (43.5%) generally agreed that they would be willing to pay more taxes to assist with infrastructure (See Table 3).

Level of crime/feeling safe ranked second as proof that Jackson is moving in the wrong direction. However, a clear majority of residents expressed that their neighborhoods and community's downtown area felt safe as mentioned in a previously published research brief (*Perceptions of Safety, Trust in Police Officers, Police Department, and the Judicial System Including Courts, March 2016*). These somewhat contradictory findings could indicate that residents perceive their own neighborhoods to be safe, but not Jackson as a whole.

As recently indicated in Research Brief No. 1 (*A Survey of Citizens' Quality of life Perceptions in Jackson, Mississippi, March 2016*), 67% of Jackson residents said their standard of living is improving and 94% said their quality of life is good, yet 61% of Jackson residents perceived Jackson's direction negatively (that is, selected the survey category of "no movement and/or moving in the wrong direction"). This could imply that while citizens currently perceive Jackson's direction negatively, that perception does not, or is not, directly affecting their standard of living and/or quality of life.

Conclusion

Clearly, results from this survey can clarify citizens' concerns when it comes to improving Jackson, and help city officials prioritize. As indicated by survey responses, fixing problems at the top of Jackson residents' list will definitely improve citizens' perception regarding the direction in which the city is moving. Removing abandoned houses/buildings is another category that can create a more desirable image for the City of Jackson. Also, improving the infrastructure will have positive outcomes. More citizens will perceive Jackson as going in the right direction, and more citizens will conclude the city officials hear them and care about their concerns. The solutions recommended by survey respondents offer insight and policy suggestions that respondents feel could help improve the city's image and move it in the right direction. The reasons cited by survey respondents regarding why Jackson is moving in the wrong direction also provide powerful policy insight regarding areas where city officials could intervene. Taking collectively, the results from this survey indicate Jackson has some positive attributes upon which it can build, and it has some negative attributes that require immediate attention from local policy makers.

Although not an official part of the survey findings, the following recommendations are being offered as potential interventions to augment the solutions recommended by survey respondents. They are being provided in the spirit of rallying citizen participation in support of the policy solutions recommended earlier. These recommendations include:

1. Although special attention and priority have been given to Jackson's infrastructure problems through the Mayor's "*Bold New Infrastructure Improvement Program*", Jackson residents listed 'infrastructure not improving' as the number one proof that Jackson is moving in the wrong direction. This conveys a flawed method of communication between city leaders and citizens. Perhaps if Jackson residents were aware of the city's improvement plan for infrastructure and any progress relating to the plan, citizens' perceptions of Jackson's direction would be more positive. We recommend greater media exposure (local news, newspaper articles, social media, etc.) to raise public awareness of the *Bold New Infrastructure Improvement Program*. Citizens should be made aware of all plans the city makes to improve infrastructure; however, *plans are only good intentions unless they immediately generate hard work*. The citizens of Jackson should be kept in the loop regarding the city's continued efforts and hard work to

improve the city's infrastructure. Infrastructure problems in Jackson cannot be solved overnight, thus, there is not a quick fix solution. However, a well-thought-out plan, and a project team devoted to progressively tackling Jackson's deteriorating infrastructure represent a good start. This plan should be communicated to Jackson residents.

2. Removal/restoration of abandoned houses had the highest percentage for improving the City of Jackson. Jackson's Community Improvement Division (which is now a part of the Jackson Police Department) has torn down approximately 200 abandoned/vacant properties since 2014 (MSNEWS). The city currently has a plan in place and is actively addressing the abandoned houses issue. The question is, are Jackson residents aware of these actions? We recommend greater media exposure (local news, newspaper articles, social media, etc.) to raise public awareness of the Community Improvement Division's purpose and accomplishments. If Jackson residents are aware of outcomes with abandoned properties, perception of the direction in which the city is moving might be more positive.
3. Encourage greater community involvement through activities such as a City-wide Neighborhood and/or Homeowners' Association Summit; and/or a City-wide Non-profit Organizations' Summit. The goal of both summits would be to mobilize and target these groups toward specific "city-improvement" measures derived from the groups themselves. Since government does not have the capacity to address all the critical issues facing Jackson, additional support will be needed from those individuals and organizations that have a direct interest in seeing the city prosper. Thus, it is necessary to get neighborhoods, homeowners, and local non-profit organizations involved.
4. Facilitate greater involvement from the approximately 7 colleges and universities located in the Jackson area via a Summit or conference. This summit or conference would be designed specifically to get input and possible solutions from the colleges and universities regarding best practices and interventions addressing critical city needs. Again, this is another way of expanding the capacity of the city to deal with pressing problems.
5. Expand upon existing crime prevention initiatives such as community policing, community outreach, and Joint City/County Taskforce Interventions. The goal is to increase police presence both physically and "perceptually" throughout the City. As identified in the survey findings, the perception of crime is very real among citizens. Thus, any expanded, highly visible crime prevention initiatives would help with the perception issue that exists in the city.

References

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