

THE CIVIC RESEARCH AGENDA ON

Community Engagement

A NATIONAL STUDY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT
RESEARCH NEEDS ON COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT.



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About the Federation of American Scientists

The Federation of American Scientists (FAS) works to advance progress on a broad suite of contemporary issues where science, technology, and innovation policy can deliver transformative impact, and seeks to ensure that scientific and technical expertise have a seat at the policymaking table. Established in 1945 by scientists in response to the atomic bomb, FAS continues to bring scientific rigor and analysis to address national challenges. More information about FAS's work at fas.org.

The State and Local Innovation (formerly MetroLab) team within FAS aims to take good ideas from the lab to local governments through intentional, regular and impact-driven policy alignment. This mission is twofold: to put science in cities and to understand, support, and enable transformative partnerships between cities and universities. More information about the State and Local Innovation team's work at <https://fas.org/issue/metrolab/>.

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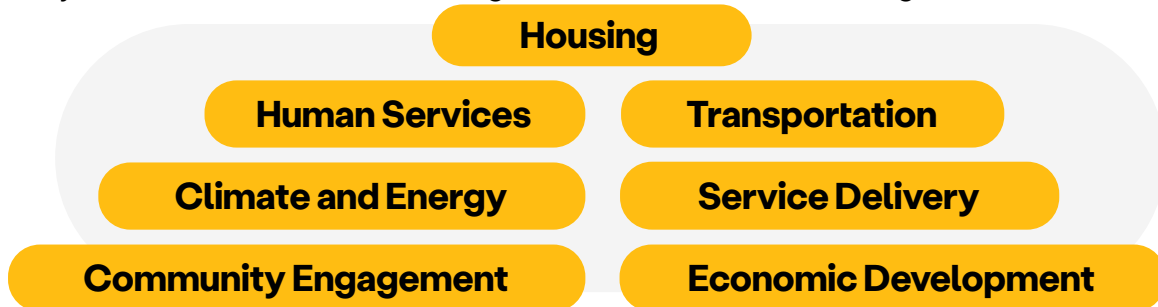
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Executive Summary

The Civic Research Agenda is a culmination of several years of study, partnerships, and intelligence gathering that is the first comprehensive reporting on the priority research needs of American cities and counties. It considers the demand and supply of research: what are the research needs of local governments, and how can research outputs improve to “supply” or provide answers to better serve that audience?

The priority research needs for U.S. local governments are the following:



Beyond any specific policy domain, local governments expressed the desire for support from the research community in three overarching areas: 1) **evaluation**; how can the research community measure and provide evidence that a policy intervention has achieved desired (or negative) impacts; 2) **efficiency**; how can the research community help local governments do more with less; and 3) **data generation**; how can the research community create and provide access to useful data that do not currently exist.

This report provides the research needs specifically for community engagement.

Based on demonstrated demand across national survey responses and in-person workshops, the top research questions representing priority needs from cities and counties on community engagement are:

- ↳ **How do different populations, including non-English-speaking and historically underserved residents, receive and respond to City communications, and which outreach methods most effectively reach each group and allow for two-way communication?**
- ↳ **Are there ways to show city government values and effectiveness in order to build trust in our communities and increase civic engagement in our city?**
- ↳ **What strategies most effectively build and maintain public trust in government, particularly when communicating the need for increased costs of services or policy changes that require trade-offs?**
- ↳ **What does effective community engagement look like in under-resourced neighborhoods, and how can engagement be sustained over time?**
- ↳ **How do residents define “well-being” and what indicators (subjective and objective) best capture those definitions across neighborhoods?**

Methodologies

In 2024, the Civic Research Agenda project created a steering committee to support this endeavor. The purpose of this committee was multifaceted: 1) to provide guidance and assist MetroLab in selecting cities in which to conduct workshops; 2) ensure the agenda is representative of the diverse and dynamic needs of local governments across the country; 3) ensure that the agenda is appropriate in scope; an exhaustive research list doesn't necessarily reflect the priorities and urgency of local government research needs; and 4) review the final R&D agenda to ensure it is an actionable document that translates to the scientific ecosystem. The Steering Committee included the following individuals:

- ↳ **Hana Passen** | Director of Innovation & Partnerships, Stanford Impact Labs
- ↳ **Terri Matthews** | Director of Town+Gown:NYC @ NYC DCC
- ↳ **Joda Thongnopnua** | Directorate for Technology, Innovation and Partnerships (TIP), National Science Foundation
- ↳ **Justin Kits** | Assistant Vice President for Economic Development, The University of Tulsa (formerly Tulsa Innovation Lab)
- ↳ **Kevin Cooke** | Assistant Vice President, Research Policy, Association of Public and Land-grant Universities
- ↳ **Alvaro J. Muñiz** | Director, International, Community, and Economic Engagement, Association of Public and Land-grant Universities
- ↳ **Mark Ritacco** | Senior Advisor, Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, LLP (formerly Chief Government Affairs Officer, National Association of Counties)

Acknowledgement of these individuals demonstrates the collaborative and comprehensive nature of this effort. It does not, in any way, indicate that these individuals or their organizations condone this report and should not be taken as “sponsorship,” legal advice, or approval of its contents.

For the purpose of this report, “local government” is considered to include U.S. cities and counties, and “research” refers to the use of data, analysis, and evidence to inform local government decisions, policies, and implementation.

The Civic Research Agenda is informed by three primary sources, as described in detail below:

- ↳ A MetroLab-produced digital survey
- ↳ In partnership with the National League of Cities (NLC), a MetroLab-NLC digital survey
- ↳ In-person workshops hosted at nine locations

MetroLab Survey

The Civic Research Agenda Survey was developed in order to gather feedback from a broader range of cities. MetroLab contracted with PorchLight Insights, a local government consulting firm based in Kansas City, MO, to manage survey development, administration, and analysis.

The survey instrument was developed with feedback from the Steering Committee, and sought to gather information about: 1) cities' experiences with research collaboration with university/college partners, including frequency and barriers; 2) priorities for research collaborations with university/college partners and feedback on specific ideas; 3) preferences for research reporting/communications; and 4) basic demographics about jurisdictions to allow for comparison (type, name, state, population). The survey was designed to primarily consist of multiple-choice or ranking questions to support a high rate of completion, with a few key open-ended questions. The survey was built in the Survey Monkey platform and tested for ease of use and readability with select local government staff.

While contact information was gathered in the survey to ascertain survey completion (particularly if multiple people from the same city or county took the survey), survey participants were informed that all individual responses would be kept confidential and not included in any reporting. Survey reporting was at the aggregate level, and any information that is attributable to individual answers was anonymized to exclude the participant name and the name of the jurisdiction.

The target survey audience was cities and counties across a range of population sizes and geographies that had some experience or opinion about local government research. To reach this audience, we partnered with other organizations that support local government research and innovation, including Results for America, the Alliance for Innovation, the Bloomberg Center for Government Excellence at Johns Hopkins University, and state municipal leagues. MetroLab and PorchLight Insights also distributed the survey through their respective contact channels. Outreach began in early April 2025 and continued through early July 2025 and each partner used their own distinct URL to allow targeted tracking of outreach. As this invite was sent to a network of local government representatives over several channels and over the course of several months, the total number of surveys "sent" are unknown. After cleaning the data, a total of 47 responses from local government staff were received through this survey outreach.

MetroLab-NLC Survey

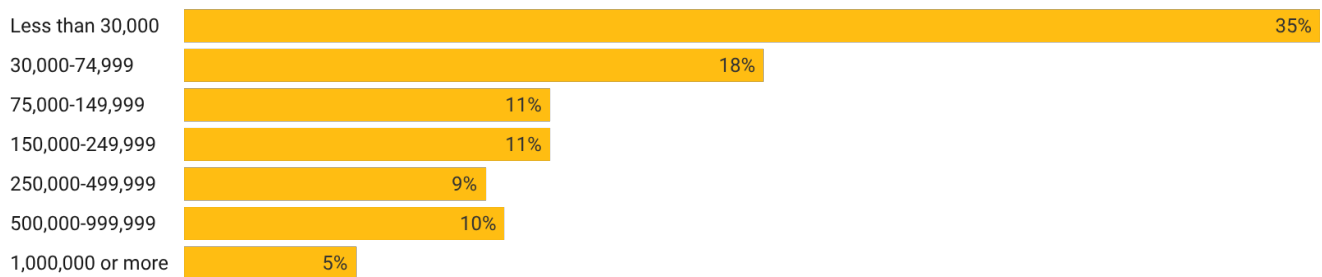
In an effort to further broaden outreach to cities, in June 2025 MetroLab partnered with NLC, which routinely sends "pulse" surveys via their platform to their network of municipalities to gather information about operations and best practices. To align with NLC's pulse survey structure, the Civic Research Agenda Survey was modified to include just five key questions, in addition to collecting basic demographic information. These questions all aligned with

questions from the full survey and included: 1) frequency of collaboration with university/college partners on research projects; 2) barriers to collaboration (open-ended); 3) priorities for research collaborations with university/college partners; 4) feedback on specific ideas for collaboration; and 5) research they would like to get from a college/university (open-ended).

NLC cleaned and provided the data to the project team, after which it was integrated into the previous survey with cross-cutting results reported. A total of 120 survey responses were received through the NLC survey process.

In total, combining the MetroLab-NLC survey and the MetroLab survey, this analysis includes a total of 167 survey responses. These responses represented 152 distinct jurisdictions and 37 states (plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico). The results primarily came from cities and towns (92%), representing a broad range of population sizes.

Share of MetroLab-NLC Local Government R&D Survey responses by city population



In-person Workshops

This initiative also included in-depth workshops with nine communities. MetroLab aimed to target cities and counties that represented a wide range of compositions. Ultimately, the nine workshops that were hosted showcase a mix of urban vs. rural, small vs. medium vs. large population, strong university partnerships vs. virtually non-existent, and geographic diversity.



Working collaboratively with mayors, county leaders, and university partners, these workshops allowed us to better understand best practices in creating actionable research, identify existing barriers, and to locally grow these ecosystems. The audience consisted of local government department leaders and staff, university faculty, and key community partner organizations (i.e., local community foundations, housing groups, and chambers of commerce).

TOTAL WORKSHOP ATTENDEES	
TOTAL NUMBER OF INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANTS AT THE IN-PERSON WORKSHOPS	366
TOTAL NUMBER OF COMMUNITY PARTNERS	81
TOTAL NUMBER OF LOCAL GOV REPRESENTATIVES	139
TOTAL NUMBER OF UNIVERSITY REPRESENTATIVES	146
TOTAL NUMBER OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS REPRESENTED	12
TOTAL NUMBER OF UNIQUE LOCAL GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS REPRESENTED	85
TOTAL NUMBER OF UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONS REPRESENTED	42
TOTAL NUMBER OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS REPRESENTED	59

The “bucketing” of policy domains and sub policy domains were based on the following:

- ↳ Survey results
- ↳ Confirmation received across the workshops of including specific research questions were grouped with suggested policy domains

- ↳ The discretion and expertise of the FAS State and Local Innovation team. The policy domains align more closely with how local governments are structured (i.e. typical departments that sit within a local government, Department of Housing, Public Works, etc), versus typical academic structures (i.e. School of Engineering, Geography and Environment, Public Policy, etc).

Priority Research Questions Concerning Community Engagement

Community engagement, as defined for purposes of this report, refers to **the local government policies, practices, tools, and partnerships used to communicate with residents, build trust, gather representative input, and incorporate community perspectives into decision-making.** This includes city tools for community engagement, methods for increasing engagement, strategies for messaging and storytelling, and methods for gathering resident feedback.

Based on demonstrated demand across national survey responses and in-person workshops, the top four research questions representing priority needs from cities and counties in this domain are:

- ↳ **How do different populations, including non-English-speaking and historically underserved residents, receive and respond to City communications, and which outreach methods most effectively reach each group and allow for two-way communication?**
- ↳ **Are there ways to show city government values and effectiveness in order to build trust in our communities and increase civic engagement in our city?**
- ↳ **What strategies most effectively build and maintain public trust in government, particularly when communicating the need for increased costs of services or policy changes that require trade-offs?**
- ↳ **What does effective community engagement look like in under-resourced neighborhoods, and how can engagement be sustained over time?**
- ↳ **How do residents define “well-being” and what indicators (subjective and objective) best capture those definitions across neighborhoods?**

If you are in the research community and have a report or publication addressing a specific question listed that has been published after March 2025, please fill out [this form](#).

FAS aims to support this community and support the responses/answers to this report will include it in a repository.

Building on this set of priority questions, the following additional research needs and knowledge gaps were raised during in-person workshops. These do not include the top research questions identified above.

City Staff Tools

- ↳ What capacity, skills, and training does a local government need to effectively understand and engage its community?
- ↳ What behavioral strategies improve compliance with municipal billing and collections policies?
- ↳ What can a local government learn from other cities that have developed durable engagement structures to keep communities involved beyond one-time consultations or public meetings?
- ↳ How can the city better understand resident expectations for services and their perceptions of safety, quality of life, and neighborhood belonging?

Increasing Engagement

- ↳ How can the research community help a local government in furthering their efforts to understand and address community needs?
- ↳ How can a local government increase the diversity of respondents while collecting feedback? How can a local government use diverse models in collecting and analyzing data?
- ↳ How do we get the community bought into the new policies and programs?
- ↳ Partnership request: strengthening civic engagement courses in school so that public engagement can improve.
- ↳ What community engagement strategies reduce negative behaviors and promote collective responsibility?
- ↳ What are ways to get non-English-speaking residents access to city government services (where do they get information and what misconceptions exist?)
- ↳ How to sustain neighborhood associations OR - how to get or keep people involved in neighborhood associations?
- ↳ Models for incentivizing and enabling community engagement?
- ↳ How do we build common ground across differences to achieve common goals? What levers need to be pulled locally?
- ↳ How can a local government design engagement models that sustain participation over time, ensuring residents remain involved throughout multi-year planning processes such as the Comprehensive Plan and Climate Action Plan?

Messaging and Storytelling

- ↳ What communication strategies most effectively build public support for taxes that result in better safety nets?
- ↳ What are the most effective ways to reach constituents where they are?
- ↳ What are the least burdensome and most effective approaches to public priority setting?
- ↳ What drives civic apathy, disengagement, or distrust, and how can the city rebuild civic identity and pride?



Resident Feedback

- ↳ What single thing should a city address that would make you more proud to live here?
- ↳ How can the city better involve community members in government decision making to improve the services we offer and improve our community?
- ↳ How to listen: what are insights from communities about what they think needs to be fixed and collaboration with communities to address them sustainably?
- ↳ How can community-driven research models be structured to ensure accountability and relevance?
- ↳ Research on residents/community members satisfaction and needs, what do they want from their community?
- ↳ What methods most effectively produce representative and actionable community input?
- ↳ What do residents expect of their local government?
- ↳ What makes someone identify with a city beyond “This is where I live?”
- ↳ How do residents currently receive city information, and which communication methods best reach multilingual and digitally disconnected communities?
- ↳ How can community engagement be improved around infrastructure projects to build trust and improve outcomes?
- ↳ What core services are most important to residents and contribute to resident attraction and retention?

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- ↳ Katharine Haring, Ph.D., President, Muhlenberg College
- ↳ Laura Furge, Ph.D., Provost, Muhlenberg College
- ↳ Michaela Boyer, Chief of Staff, City of Allentown

Baltimore, MD

- ↳ Ralph O. Mueller, Ph.D., Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost, University of Baltimore
- ↳ Amanda Phillips de Lucas, Ph.D., Director Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance – Jacob France Institute, University of Baltimore
- ↳ Dartanion Swift-Williams, Chief Data and Performance Officer, City of Baltimore
- ↳ Jason Howard, Ph.D., Deputy Director, Analytics, Mayor's Office of Performance and Innovation, City of Baltimore

Columbus, OH

- ↳ Dave Dixon, Director of Data Analytics & Strategy, Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission
- ↳ Harvey Miller, Ph.D., Director, Center for Urban and Regional Analysis (CURA) at Ohio State University
- ↳ Jessica Kuenzli, Chief Regional Planning Officer, Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission

Guilford County, NC

- ↳ Victor Isler, County Manager, Guilford County
- ↳ Alice Mahood, Director of Integrated Services, Guilford County Manager's Office

Houston, TX

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- ↳ Caroline Cheong, Ph.D., Associate Director of Housing and Neighborhoods, Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University
- ↳ Ruth N. López Turley, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology and Director, Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University

Kansas City, MO

- ↳ The Honorable Quinton Lucas, Mayor of the City of Kansas City
- ↳ C. Mauli Agrawal, Ph.D, Chancellor, University of Missouri - Kansas City
- ↳ Troy Lillebo, Associate Vice Chancellor for External Relations, University of Missouri - Kansas City
- ↳ Gavriel Schreiber, General Counsel, The Office of Mayor Lucas
- ↳ Nataniel Addington, Director of Community Engagement & Outreach, University of Missouri - Kansas City

Lincoln, NE

- ↳ The Honorable Leirion Gaylor Baird, Mayor of the City of Lincoln Rodney D. Bennett, Ph.D, Chancellor, University of Nebraska - Lincoln
- ↳ Nathan Meier, Associate Vice Chancellor for Research, Capacity and Competitiveness, University of Nebraska - Lincoln
- ↳ Kim C. Morrow, Chief Sustainability Officer The Office of Mayor Gaylor Baird
- ↳ Riley M. Slezak, Senior Advisor to the Mayor, The Office of Mayor Gaylor Baird

Little Rock, AR

- ↳ The Honorable Frank Scott, Mayor of the City of Little Rock
- ↳ Marquis Willis, Chief Data Officer, City of Little Rock
- ↳ Emily Cox, Vice Chancellor for University Affairs, University of Arkansas at Little Rock

Syracuse, NY

- ↳ The Honorable Ben Walsh, (former) Mayor of the City of Syracuse
- ↳ Lois Agnew, Ph.D, Interim Vice Chancellor, Provost and Chief Academic Officer, Syracuse University

- ↳ Katherine McDonald, Ph.D, Associate Vice President for Research, Syracuse University
Office of Research
- ↳ Sevgi Erdogan, Ph.D, Associate Professor, School of Information Studies, Syracuse University
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Syracuse University
- ↳ Carsten Østerlund, Ph.D, Professor and Associate Dean for Research, School of Information
Studies, Syracuse University

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