

FAS FEDERATION
OF AMERICAN
SCIENTISTS

THE CIVIC RESEARCH AGENDA ON

Economic Development

A NATIONAL STUDY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT
RESEARCH NEEDS ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT.

About Us

Lead author

↳ **Kate Burns**, Director, State and Local Innovation, Federation of American Scientists

Contributing authors

↳ **Andy Gordon**, Associate Director, State and Local Innovation, Federation of American Scientists

↳ **Rose Mische Commins**, Senior Manager, State and Local Innovation, Federation of American Scientists

↳ **Stefania Di Mauro-Nava**, Consultant, State and Local Innovation, Federation of American Scientists

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/>.

Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the Author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of Schmidt Futures, our Steering Committee, nor the entirety of the Federation of American Scientists.

FAS can be reached at 1150 18th St. NW, Suite 1000, Washington, DC, 20036, fas@fas.org, or through fas.org.

COPYRIGHT © FEDERATION OF AMERICAN SCIENTISTS, 2026. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

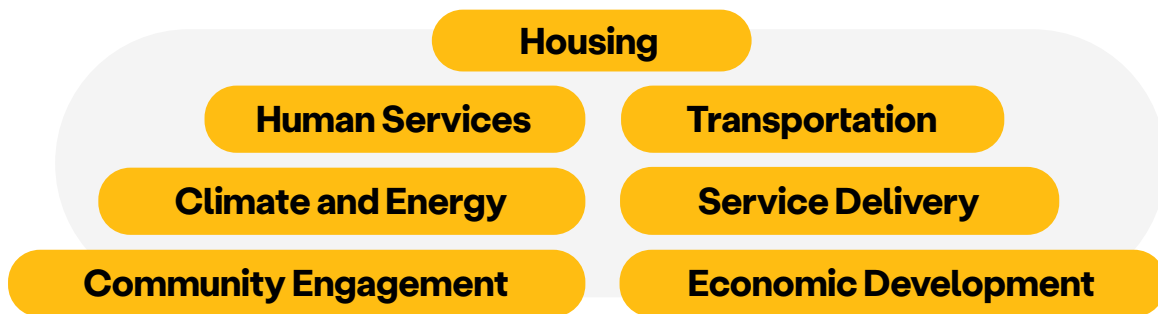
Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	1
METHODOLOGIES.....	2
METROLAB SURVEY	3
METROLAB-NLC SURVEY	3
IN-PERSON WORKSHOPS	4
PRIORITY RESEARCH QUESTIONS CONCERNING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT.....	7
ATTRACTING TALENT AND BUSINESS	8
CROSS POLICY	9
ECONOMIC TOOLS	10
VACANCIES, BLIGHT, AND DEVELOPMENT	11
WORKFORCE	12
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	13

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 economic development.

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

- ↳ **What is the right balance of tax incentive programs to attract talent vs. ensuring a healthy tax base to provide needed and desirable services?**
- ↳ **How can cities optimize land use planning to balance sustainability, resiliency, and economic competitiveness?**
- ↳ **What indicators or methods can help evaluate whether workforce development programs are reducing poverty and producing lasting economic mobility for city residents?**

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. Muñoz** | 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

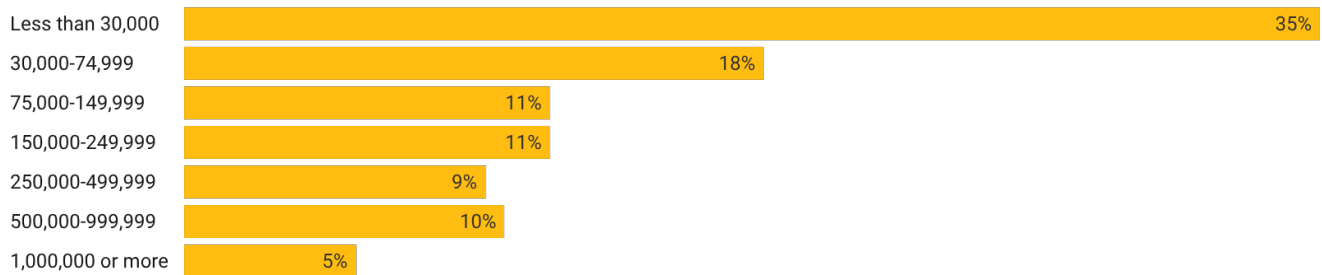
In an effort to further broaden outreach to cities, in June 2025 MetroLab partnered with NLC, which routinely sends "pulse" surveys via their platform to their network of municipalities to gather information about operations and best practices. To align with NLC's pulse survey structure, the Civic Research 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 Economic Development

Economic development, for purposes of this report, can be defined as **the policies and strategies local governments use to strengthen economic opportunity, fiscal health, and long-term community prosperity.**

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:

- ↳ **What is the right balance of tax incentive programs to attract talent (tax incentives) vs. ensuring a healthy tax base to provide needed and desirable services?**
- ↳ **How can cities optimize land use planning to balance sustainability, resiliency, and economic competitiveness?**
- ↳ **What indicators or methods can help evaluate whether workforce development programs are reducing poverty and producing lasting economic mobility for city residents?**
- ↳ **What do residents experiencing poverty see as the real levers for improving opportunity? What barriers affect access to jobs, higher education, or skill-building programs?**
- ↳ **What is the lifecycle cost of growth across jurisdictions (infrastructure, service delivery, schools, stormwater), and how does that change under alternative land-use scenarios?**
- ↳ **How are residents in mid- to small-sized communities' economic mobility shaped by childcare access, safety-net reductions, disability service cuts, and changes in federal and state funding?**

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.

Attracting Talent and Business

- ↳ What gaps exist in the local innovation ecosystem and how can they be addressed?
- ↳ How can urban design and infrastructure planning support new economic centers and business growth?
- ↳ What strategies most effectively support small businesses and entrepreneurs?
- ↳ What procurement, capital access, and support strategies strengthen inclusive small business ecosystems?



Cross Policy

- ↳ What are the local economic impacts of reductions in safety net support by state and federal programs?
- ↳ What policies create fiscally sustainable communities?
- ↳ What do investments in public education contribute to long-term economic development?
- ↳ What can cultural assets and historic preservation do to support tourism and creative economy growth?
- ↳ What branding and competitiveness strategies most effectively position regions for economic growth?
- ↳ What data on consumer spending, preferences, and retail leakage should inform local economic strategy?

Economic Tools

- ↳ What are the most effective levers of local government to drive economic development?
- ↳ What are the most effective place-based economic development strategies?
- ↳ How should local governments prioritize projects for funding based on projected return on investment?
- ↳ How can the effectiveness of specific economic development districts be evaluated against intended outcomes?
- ↳ How can public investments in parks and placemaking support economic development and build public support?
- ↳ How do mobility-focused strategies compare to place-based strategies in improving economic outcomes?
- ↳ What are best practices for economic development that are most transferable to similar communities?

Vacancies, Blight, and Development

- ↳ What strategies most effectively address vacant storefronts in downtown and neighborhood commercial districts?
- ↳ Which community ownership models have successfully mitigated displacement and built wealth for existing residents?
- ↳ What are the economic development implications of land restitution and land back policies?
- ↳ What policy barriers limit economic mobility and how can they be reformed?
- ↳ What is the current state of economic mobility in low-income communities, and what trends are emerging?
- ↳ What role can local government play in addressing systemic and generational poverty?
- ↳ What interventions most effectively improve economic outcomes for low-income individuals?
- ↳ What economic factors influence household decisions about where to live and where to invest?
- ↳ What are the economic outcomes associated with past public and private investments in targeted neighborhoods?
- ↳ What factors most strongly influence upward economic mobility?
- ↳ What conditions enable low-income families to relocate to areas with greater opportunity?

Workforce

- ↳ How can career ladder pathways be designed to support long-term advancement?
- ↳ How can AI support career planning and job matching?
- ↳ What is the scale and impact of the informal economy, defined as income-generating activity that is unregistered, untaxed, or outside formal labor protections, on employment and income?
- ↳ What workforce development strategies are most effective?
- ↳ What strategies most effectively close wealth gaps?
- ↳ How should workforce development systems adapt to AI, automation, and the future of work?
- ↳ What factors influence post-secondary students' interest in entrepreneurship?
- ↳ How should economic development spending be aligned with demographic trends and emerging industries?

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Schmidt Futures, who provided the funding for this program. Without their support, this effort would not have been possible.

We would also like to thank Kate Bender of PorchLight Insights for her help in conceiving, developing, distributing, and analyzing the information from our national survey, as well as Christine Baker Smith at the National League of Cities for amplifying our survey in their networks to help gather the data used in this report.

Additionally, a sincere thank you to our Steering Committee, whose insights and thought leadership were helpful in framing this report, as well as tremendous gratitude to our FAS colleagues, namely Dr. Jedidah Isler for her editorial support and leadership in reaching the finish line as well as our colleagues in the communications department who helped produce this material for public consumption.

Lastly, we would like to thank the following individuals from the nine communities we were able to visit in order to host in person workshops.

Allentown, PA

- ↳ The Honorable Matthew Tuerk, Mayor, City of Allentown
- ↳ Katharine Harring, 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

- ↳ Michelle Smirnova, Ph.D., Director of the Center for Housing and Neighborhoods and Associate Professor of Sociology, Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University
- ↳ 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
- ↳ Jeff Hemsley, Ph.D, Interim Dean, Associate Professor, School of Information Studies,
Syracuse University
- ↳ Carsten Østerlund, Ph.D, Professor and Associate Dean for Research, School of Information
Studies, Syracuse University

About the Federation of American Scientists

The Federation of American Scientists is dedicated to democratizing the policymaking process by working with new and expert voices across the science and technology community, helping to develop actionable policies that can improve the lives of all Americans. For more about the Federation of American Scientists, visit **FAS.org**.