

THE CIVIC RESEARCH AGENDA ON

Housing

A NATIONAL STUDY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT
RESEARCH NEEDS ON HOUSING.

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About the Federation of American Scientists

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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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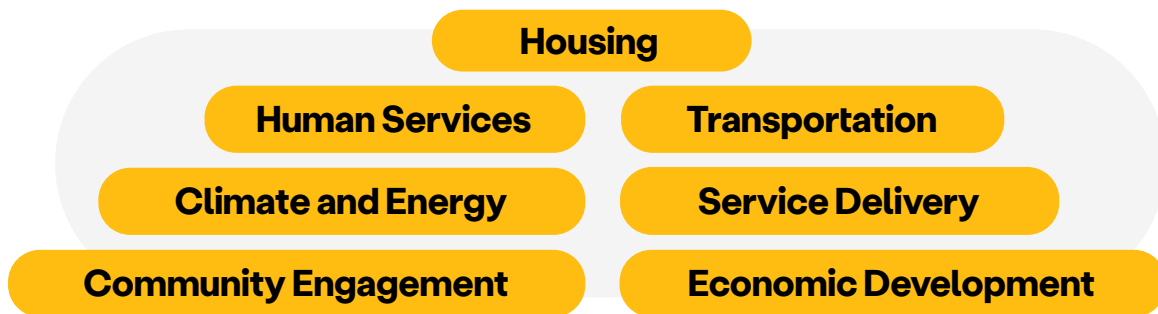
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Executive Summary

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 housing.

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

- ↳ **How can local governments improve housing affordability for those that are cost burdened?**
- ↳ **What are the long-term effects of affordable housing and permanent housing interventions on household stability, economic mobility, and community well-being?**
- ↳ **What structural, market, and policy factors most strongly drive housing affordability and shape economic mobility for individuals and families?**

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 Thongnopia** | 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

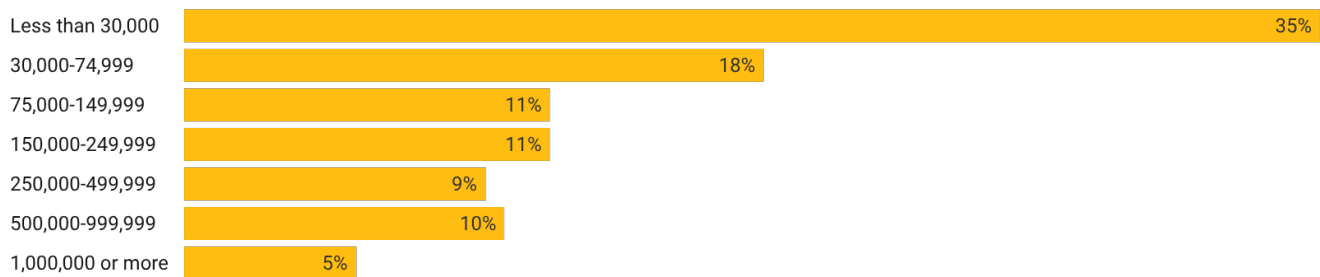
In an effort to further broaden outreach to cities, in June 2025 MetroLab partnered with NLC, which routinely sends "pulse" surveys via their platform to their network of municipalities to gather information about operations and best practices. To align with NLC's pulse survey structure, the Civic Research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

Housing, as defined for purposes of this report, refers to **the policies, market forces, financing tools, and service systems that shape the availability, affordability, quality, and stability of homes within a community**. Housing, as a policy area, brings together a significant amount of cross-policy considerations including economic well-being, zoning, supply chain, and more.

Thus, this topic covers a wide range of expertise that might need to be brought into the conversation.

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 can local governments improve housing affordability for those that are cost burdened?**
- ↳ **What are the long-term effects of affordable housing and permanent housing interventions on household stability, economic mobility, and community well-being?**
- ↳ **What structural, market, and policy factors most strongly drive housing affordability and shape economic mobility for individuals and families?**

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.

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.

Economic Development

- ↳ How have prior capital improvement plan investments and funding trends varied by neighborhood?
- ↳ What are the comparative public costs of homelessness interventions vs. leaving individuals unsheltered or incarcerated?
- ↳ What are recommended policies to have downtown residencies absorb people who have been displaced in adjacent neighborhoods?
- ↳ What are the community costs of tax exemptions?
- ↳ What are the long-term impacts of affordable housing?
- ↳ Within a specific jurisdiction, were any of the fears voiced in opposition to affordable housing realized? What can a “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) response tool tell us?
- ↳ What are the trackable impacts following shifts in U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funding?
- ↳ How can modeling of zoning reforms, displacement trends, and predictive analytics inform real-time equitable development policies, particularly in historically underserved neighborhoods?
- ↳ How do demographic shifts and policy changes influence neighborhood-to-neighborhood migration patterns, and what strategies most effectively stabilize legacy communities during periods of transformation?
- ↳ What is the impact on economic development and individual economic mobility due to increasing housing prices?
- ↳ What factors drive community opposition to affordable or supportive housing, and what are the measurable outcomes for neighborhoods where such developments are introduced?
- ↳ How do market forces and investor behavior affect neighborhood stability and health?
- ↳ How do housing investments affect health, safety, and education outcomes at the neighborhood and block levels?

Eviction

- ↳ How to best evaluate if policies and programs are mitigating unnecessary displacement?
- ↳ Does eviction diversion improve people's lives?
- ↳ Does temporary rent assistance work, and is it a question of housing stability? Is it effective at eviction prevention, and for how long?
- ↳ What is the eviction cost to a local government and savings related to eviction diversion?
- ↳ What are the true public-sector costs of eviction, including impacts on healthcare, education, homelessness services, and the legal system?
- ↳ What is the most effective eviction intervention? When and for whom will maximize those interventions?
- ↳ What is the impact of delaying eviction?
- ↳ What is the monthly data on evictions neighborhood by neighborhood?
- ↳ What are the costs-savings to society of eviction prevention?
- ↳ What are the long-term needs of households facing housing instability, and what enduring impacts do various housing and economic-support interventions have on individual and community outcomes?
- ↳ How effective are eviction-prevention strategies in reducing eviction filings, housing displacement, and downstream social and economic harms?
- ↳ Does temporary rent assistance work in providing actual housing stability? Is eviction prevention effective and for how long?
- ↳ What are the financial, social, and health impacts of eviction diversion programs and the long-term benefit of funding legal aid?

Homelessness

- ↳ What are the outcomes of providing persons experiencing homelessness direct financial assistance versus providing permanent supporting housing? Which support is more impactful?
- ↳ What is the effectiveness of permanent housing interventions over time, i.e. two years, ten years, etc?
- ↳ What data are available to demonstrate the qualitative and quantitative impacts on a city's homelessness response? What is the system's programmatic efficacy?
- ↳ What is the cost of leaving a person homeless to a specific jurisdiction?
- ↳ What are the cost savings from alleviating someone from being unhoused?
- ↳ What is the cost in cities due to hospital visits by the homelessness population of a jurisdiction?
- ↳ What are the true social, economic, and public-sector costs of homelessness compared with the costs of alternative interventions (e.g., permanent supportive housing, prevention, or rapid rehousing)?
- ↳ How effective are different homelessness-response strategies in reducing homelessness, improving individual outcomes, and lowering system-level costs?
- ↳ What housing solutions are most preferred by both residents and program participants experiencing homelessness, and how do these preferences affect housing stability and well-being?
- ↳ What are the long-term impacts of homelessness-response strategies on individuals' health, economic stability, and social integration, as well as on public systems such as healthcare, criminal justice, and housing?

Housing Inventory

- ↳ How can a university gather data on the housing conditions and quality of privately owned housing stock, and provide this data to a local government?
- ↳ What are the current and projected housing needs for capacity?
- ↳ What is demand for smaller units (1500 sq ft or less)?
- ↳ What is the impact of housing conditions on a resident's life span? What is the impact of housing conditions on children?
- ↳ What are residents experiencing with respect to various increases in housing costs (owners vs. renters)?
- ↳ Have various changes in federal policies impacted the ability to build new housing stock?
- ↳ What development of policies would lead to a framework for affordable housing?
- ↳ How do variations in the quality and availability of affordable housing affect housing stability, resident well-being, and local housing market dynamics?
- ↳ How could updates to land use policy and streamlining permitting processes help meet the needs of the future, and facilitate housing across urban, suburban, and rural jurisdictions?
- ↳ How can a local government use existing mechanisms or innovate to better measure housing conditions, vacancy risk, and building quality?



Individual Economic Wellbeing

- ↳ What are the drivers that are making housing unaffordable for individual residents or families?
- ↳ Disregarding local politics, how can tax increment financing funds be equitably used to ensure that underserved neighborhoods have access to housing resources?
- ↳ What are the results of evaluation on different housing approaches for outcomes and cost-effectiveness: single-family repair, multifamily rental, down payment, assistance, temporary rent assistance?
- ↳ What are the financial incentives to ownership?
- ↳ What type of housing assistance is most useful for those struggling with mental health, both in the short-term and for long-term success?
- ↳ Data request: regular data on housing affordability?
- ↳ What is the relationship between specific income levels and access to housing?
- ↳ What are recommended policy interventions to make housing more equitable across the city and reduce segregation in specific areas?
- ↳ What are the best ways to jointly address workforce development and housing development?
- ↳ What are the long-term impacts for interventions such as rental assistance, legal aid, etc?
- ↳ Evaluation request: what are the qualitative impacts of our housing programs and affordable housing policies?
- ↳ What does quantifiable data say about the value of affordable housing on life outcomes: education, employment, etc?
- ↳ Are there connections with community engagement and neighborhood outcomes regarding social isolation? Does this lead to better housing?
- ↳ What impact does transportation proximity to grocery stores and other daily services have on what is considered affordable housing? How do these impact monthly housing budgets?
- ↳ What housing programs do residents want? For example, is it building more housing, downpayment assistance, legal aid, homeowner education, etc.?
- ↳ How can you improve housing affordability for those that are cost burdened?
- ↳ How often do residents move within a specific jurisdiction and why?
- ↳ What are the true costs and relative cost-effectiveness of different housing strategies—including permanent supportive housing—when evaluated against resident outcomes and long-term public expenditures?
- ↳ What are current institutional ownership trends and how can alternatives like Community Land Trusts permanently address affordability as an intermediary between renting and owning?
- ↳ What are the economic, social, and community-level impacts of different housing patterns and development models?

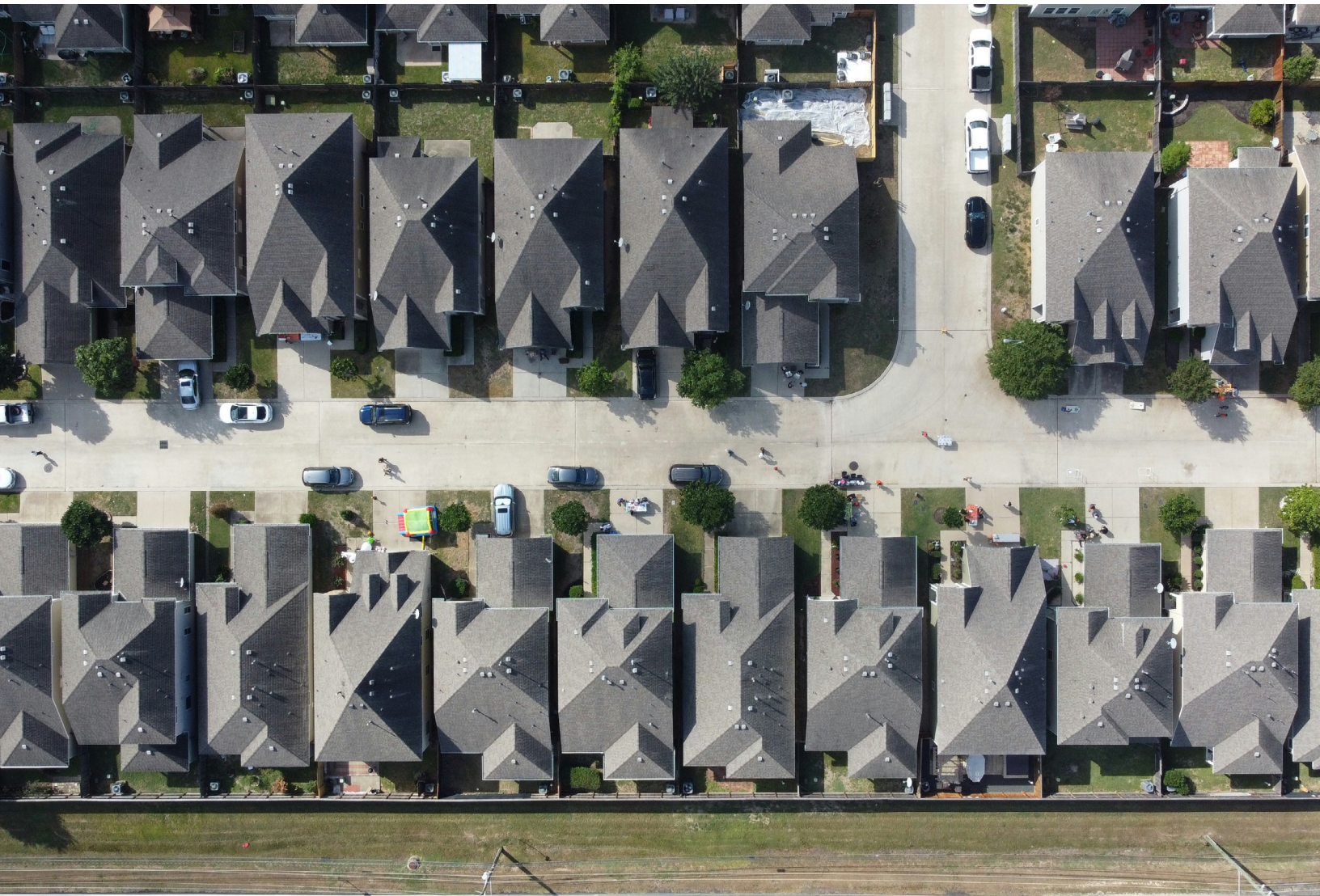
- ↳ Can we better identify affordability drivers such as data on market factors making housing unaffordable (e.g., property taxes, insurance costs) and the impact of non-housing costs (e.g., transportation, groceries) on the affordable housing budget?
- ↳ How do different models of housing investment influence equitable wealth distribution across racial, socioeconomic, and geographic groups?
- ↳ How do families' and communities' economic trajectories evolve over time in relation to housing stability, neighborhood conditions, and access to opportunity?

Permitting

- ↳ What is the most effective way to analyze the cost-benefit of local building codes?
- ↳ What changes could a jurisdiction make, including design standards, to reduce development costs and improve affordability, while still meeting the goals of livability and climate resilience?
- ↳ How can predictability be injected into the housing system (policy timelines, funding pipelines, consolidated incentives) so municipal governments and developers can plan?
- ↳ What are the costs and benefits of building codes and how might reimagining building code development and governance impact them?
- ↳ Renters/Tenants
 - ↳ What is the disaggregated data on age, location, and affordability for rental housing?
 - ↳ What incentives will motivate landlords to maintain properties well?
 - ↳ What is the inventory of rental properties, rent costs, and landlord profits?
 - ↳ What residence and rental housing services are most beneficial for different populations?
 - ↳ What are tenant experiences beyond affordability, especially regarding prevalence of habitability issues, fair housing/discrimination, landlord/tenant disputes, leasing, etc?
 - ↳ What is the true cost of permanent supportive housing (PSM), including the increase in cost to the landlord?

Zoning

- ↳ In the densest part of the city, where no- to minimal-parking regulations exist, how many housing units should be built in the next 10 years?
- ↳ What are suggestions to overcome resident opposition and support density?
- ↳ What evidence-based strategies can be identified for building public support for housing expansion in face of active opposition?
- ↳ What effect does zoning have on housing production in smaller cities?
- ↳ What is the fiscal cost of single family zoning to infrastructure?
- ↳ How do public engagement approaches and policy strategies influence the design, adoption, and effectiveness of housing and growth-related policies?
- ↳ What impacts do zoning reforms and upzoning have on small-city housing production, especially given the city's persistent unit shortage?
- ↳ Which zoning or regulatory reforms most directly unlock affordable housing production while protecting neighborhood stability?
- ↳ What communication and engagement strategies build early community buy-in for new housing so there are "no gotcha moments"?



Blight

- ↳ What are changes in property conditions and maintenance?
- ↳ What does optimal and strategic use or under-utilized land look like?
- ↳ What are the monthly foreclosures on properties under \$250,000?

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- ↳ Michaela Boyer, Chief of Staff, City of Allentown

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- ↳ 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

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