

# HOUSTON, TEXAS LOCAL GOVERNMENT R&D AGENDA WORKSHOP

A MetroLab Network Report Out  
November 5, 2025



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## Executive Summary

Community leaders, local government representatives, and housing advocates discussed the growing tension between rapid economic expansion and rising poverty. At a convening to discuss the research-to-impact pipeline in the service of addressing housing policy priorities, housing affordability, stability, and resilience were emphasized as foundational to ensuring that economic growth benefits everyone. Local agencies are beginning to coordinate more closely to plan for affordability, mitigate the impacts of recurring natural disasters, and address the age and disrepair of much of the housing stock.

Officials highlighted the need to use limited public dollars effectively, find additional funding streams, and focus on homelessness prevention. Participants noted that historically under-resourced neighborhoods often contribute great effort and creativity to community solutions, whereas more affluent neighborhoods frequently resist change.

The conversation surfaced several structural challenges, including recurring natural disasters, aging housing, lack of zoning but rigid deed restrictions, geographic sprawl, limited transit, and environmental burdens that disproportionately affect lower-income communities. Participants stressed that transportation, environmental health, housing, and economic opportunity must be addressed in a holistic way. Additionally, there is growing concern about older adults on fixed incomes unable to maintain homes or access supportive housing.

Some of the research needs that bubbled up during this conversation included understanding the economic impact of underserved neighborhoods, evaluating which community interventions truly work, identifying job growth areas, and developing better dashboards for land, workforce trends, and healthcare cost-saving potential of stable housing. There is interest in studying both logical and “illogical” factors that prevent programs from realizing intended outcomes.

One major challenge in this work is around communicating findings. Our panel stated that research needs better storytelling and trusted messengers, including influencers and political leaders. They emphasized the need to speak about communities respectfully, avoid deficit framing, and provide clear, accessible information to decision-makers and the public.

After our panel discussion, participants identified six recurring domains where applied research could directly support policy and operational decision-making:

- Homelessness
- Eviction
- Climate Disasters and Resilience
- Individual Economic Mobility
- Economic Development
- Tenant and Multifamily Housing

## Introduction

Cities are often at the forefront of tackling complex social, economic, and environmental challenges, balancing the need for innovation with the realities of limited budgets and political constraints. Houston, TX, is no exception and it sits at a pivotal moment of renewal.

In 2024, MetroLab Network received philanthropic support to develop a national, local government research agenda. The goal of this work is to identify and disseminate the research needs of cities across the country. This effort includes in-person convenings with multiple stakeholders to home in on knowledge gaps and policy priorities.

We are grateful for our strong partnership with the Kinder Institute, leading to an in-person workshop with a specific focus on housing. Recognizing that progress depends on strong partnerships between local government and research institutions, MetroLab convened a workshop with leaders from the Kinder Institute for Urban Research, the City of Houston and Harris County, TX to identify priority research areas, specifically around housing and explore new ways to collaborate. The session aimed to strengthen the bridge between evidence and action, aligning academic expertise with the City's most pressing policy questions.

Together, participants explored where research could directly support Houston's work around affordable housing. Discussions surfaced not only about specific research topics but also on how to best use what data and resources they currently have to amplify current research and better turn that information into context that policy officials can use.

This report captures the November 5, 2025, workshop with those findings, identifies ripe research projects, and highlights the recommendations shared to strengthen collaboration across these stakeholders.

# Houston's Research Needs to Further Housing Policy Priorities

## Topic 1: Homelessness

- 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?

## Topic 2: Eviction

- How effective are eviction-prevention strategies in reducing eviction filings, housing displacement, and downstream social and economic harms?
- What are the true public-sector costs of eviction, including impacts on healthcare, education, homelessness services, and the legal system?
- Does temporary rent assistance work, is it a housing stability question. Is eviction prevention effective and for how long?
- Legal Aid/Eviction Prevention: Research on the financial, social and health impact of eviction diversion program and the long-term benefit of funding legal aid.
- How do we know what is working and what isn't? How can we collect long term data on rent relief? Did we kick the can down the road? Did it work?

## Topic 3: Climate Disasters and Resilience

- How do disaster and flooding policies affect housing stability, displacement, and recovery outcomes for affected communities?
- What is the relationship between community resilience strategies and housing affordability, particularly in areas vulnerable to climate-related disasters?
- How does road infrastructure impact housing and neighborhood issues, including the impact of flooding, heat, air pollution, and pedestrian fatalities? What are solutions to these issues?

## Topic 4: Individual Economic Mobility

- How do different models of housing investment influence equitable wealth distribution across racial, socioeconomic, and geographic groups?
- What structural, market, and policy factors most strongly drive housing affordability and shape economic mobility for individuals and families?
- How do families' and communities' economic trajectories evolve over time in relation to housing stability, neighborhood conditions, and access to opportunity?
- 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?
- What we need for data: looking at where are the jobs that we should be investing in work training for and where we should be focusing on to help people move their income up to stay in the City?

## Topic 5: Economic Development

- How can housing, employment, and transit systems be integrated to promote equitable economic growth and access to opportunity?
- Can we identify equitable economic development plans that successfully mitigate displacement and create wealth for existing residents?
- What are the economic, social, and community-level impacts of different housing patterns and development models?
- What are the long-term effects of affordable-housing and permanent-housing interventions on household stability, economic mobility, and community well-being?
- Can we better identify affordability drivers (i.e. 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 public engagement approaches and policy strategies influence the design, adoption, and effectiveness of housing and growth-related policies?

## Topic 6: Tenant and Multifamily Housing

- 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?
- How do variations in the quality and availability of affordable housing affect housing stability, resident well-being, and local housing market dynamics?
- What factors drive community opposition to affordable or supportive housing, and what are the measurable outcomes for neighborhoods where such developments are introduced?

# How to Strengthen the Ecosystem for Research Collaboration

We asked workshop attendees about ways in which universities can support policy development and the programmatic needs of the City of Houston, and how the City can support University innovation and economic growth. Barriers to research partnerships that arose from the discussion included cost, time, scale, and difficulty translating data into actionable strategies. The participants noted that there is a need for support in using data for implementation and concerns were raised about ethical data use, avoiding stigmatization, and navigating political climates resistant to public investment.

In short, barriers to collaboration:

- Cost for research.
- Time: it takes a long time.
- Scope and scale: there are so many individual small initiatives.

Specific suggestions for how to strengthen the ecosystem for research collaboration include:

- Creating a shared, action-oriented agenda: this would reduce duplication and focus the limited number of resources that are available to tackling priority areas. Indeed, this very document could/should serve as a starting point.
- Agreeing to data-sharing agreements: this would reduce the amount of siloed data that already exists and create better linkages across data sources.
- Building translation and communications capacity into research efforts: this would help with storytelling and visualization for non-practitioners to better understand what the research is saying. This would also help translate research into policy.
- Establishing place-based “living labs” for research: several neighborhoods in Houston were described as microcosms of the greater region; by creating living labs, government, researchers and community partners could learn if their interventions are working and what needs to pivot. This could also help alleviate survey fatigue that many communities face.

Themes + Bodies of Work

- Data Analytics and Data Sourcing
  - We look at the data all the time. But how do we use it to get to the solutions we need for the community? How do we use it toward implementation that will bring about change that we are looking for? We need practical use of the data and to feel comfortable to apply the data to solutions for our communities
- Creating benchmarks and developing a strategy around what services communities need.
- Systems Change
  - How can the research community connect dots across different departments, jurisdictions, and services? How do we study the intersection of these components that create a system change
- Evaluation and understanding impacts in the short, medium, and long term.

## Observational Takeaways from Workshop

- Despite the different roles represented in the room, participants consistently asked the same questions around cost, effectiveness, equity and sustainability.
- Practitioners, government officials and community partners are aware of the gap between research timeframes and policy implementation – there is an opportunity here to work through these partnerships.
- Most everyone agreed that there is a plethora of data. What is lacking is translating all that data into concepts and visuals that can be shared with laypeople.
- Research that takes the political environment into account is more likely to be used and implemented.
- Overall, the workshop revealed that the ecosystem in Houston is robust – it is data-rich and there is eagerness amongst all the parties to collaborate more closely.

## About FAS and the Local Government R&D Agenda

Cities are often on the front lines of solving difficult and complex social issues such as affordable housing, mental health, and digital equity. Universities can serve as a key partner, producing cutting-edge research, ideas, and technology that could help cities solve some of these complex issues.

And yet, there is a disconnect between research and local government programs and policies. Why? We believe for two primary reasons: 1) research is often pushed, not pulled from local government and 2) research output doesn't necessarily align with how cities and counties work – and so it's difficult to adopt.

MetroLab aims to equip cities with science and research. And with philanthropic support, MetroLab is producing a national body of work called the Local Government R&D Agenda: a list of identified priority research areas that can address local governments' complex issues and needs. MetroLab aims to do this by working with a select number of cities and hosting workshops with nearby universities and colleges to ask the question "if you could get research on [blank], what would you want."

By intentionally bringing these key stakeholders together, we can produce actionable research addressing complex challenges. For example:

- What if R&D efforts reduced the cost of affordable housing in half?
- What if city councils received draft policy language to make starting a business as easy as getting a driver's license?
- What if we discovered ways to expedite recovery funds delivery to low- to moderate income neighborhoods, reducing wait times after a disaster event?

At the conclusion of the city-hosted workshops, MetroLab will work with federal agencies and congressional stakeholders to fund projects that would directly support and address the Local

Government R&D Agenda. We hope to bring those projects back to cities, with MetroLab serving as a matchmaker of research and programmatic outcomes back to the local communities we partner with.

- Models that sustain participation over time, ensuring residents remain involved throughout multi-year planning processes such as the Comprehensive Plan and Climate Action Plan?
- 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?

# Appendix: Notes Captured During the Workshop

## Workshop Question Responses

During the workshop, several interactive questions were asked of the participants. Those answers informed the summary above and are listed in full below.

### **For local government, what is one word you think of when you hear “research”?**

- Surveys (x3)
- Verification
- Power
- Funding (x2)
- Fun
- Theoretical
- time/time-consuming
- Data (x5)
- Intelligence
- Evaluation
- Not actionable
- Messaging
- Detail
- Guidance
- Evidence
- Opportunity
- Grant funding
- Planning
- Inaccessible
- Questions & answers
- Thoughtful
- Trends
- Future
- Overwhelming
- Academic
- Proof
- Analysis
- Helpful

### **For university participants, what is one word you think of when you hear public policy?**

- Change
- Politicking
- Means to an end
- One-sided
- Hierarchical
- Top-down
- Solution
- Important
- Narrow
- Static
- Slow
- Problem solving
- Negotiation
- Impact
- Application
- Deliberated
- Use of tax-payer money
- Rules + regulations

### **In five words or less, how do you know who to work with from the other institution?**

*For local government:*

- Make phone calls
- Asking around for recommendations
- Look up on internet/website/AI
- They come with hope and humility not pre-packaged solutions
- Reading newsletters
- Who are active and reaching out
- Reading newspaper articles
- Ask the people I already know
- There is no roadmap!
- Look at their website and ask around

- Who our friends know
- Requested meetings or attending events
- Word of mouth
- Historical information and internal connections
- From past interactions
- Through events and public notices
- Truthfully, quite often we don't
- Networking
- Kinder institute
- Referrals from cohorts
- Google!

*For university participants:*

- Job titles/departments
- I don't! Whoever asks!
- Public registry
- Quoted in news articles
- It's a guess!
- Ask my supervisor
- Meet at events
- Networking
- Googling
- Asking my network
- Through trial and error
- Informal conversation from outside events
- Cold call
- Referrals from other partners
- Networks
- Based on the goal of our campaign
- Websites
- Ask my supervisors and colleagues
- Google
- Reach out to my network

### **What myth do you want to bust to the other side?**

*For local government:*

- We don't always have hidden agendas
- Myth: You can't do good things in Texas
- Open to ideas and solutions
- That it is cheaper to jail people than to move them into supportive housing
- Departments within local government operate in silos
- Myth: downtown redevelopment authority only cares about downtown data; Truth: regional trends are essential to our housing policy
- That housing and homelessness is a "do good" role rather than economically driven
- That housing and homelessness dollars are fiscally irresponsible

- Local governments cares or understands what affordability means
- You can filter out the “noise” - complaints for complaining sake vs real issues that need attention
- We are pragmatic and data driven
- Not one-sided
- A job is not the answer to everyone’s problem
- Has to be slow
- Has to have red tape
- That homelessness is a choice
- Truth: it’s worth doing hard things in Texas
- That government resists academic insight. Often, it’s the political cover needed to support necessary but costly or unpopular policies.
- That community quarterbacks are worthy funding partners that reflect community needs
- Short-term perspective
- Practitioners don’t care about research
- Government can’t get things solved or solve big problems
- We can't work together

*For university participants:*

- That nonprofits are just “do gooders”
- Good research takes time
- Good research isn’t cheap
- Data does not equal research
- Myth: all researchers are selfish/self-serving
- We are not a waste of time
- We want to make change!
- Students and faculty want to learn from communities and practitioners
- The data prep and cleaning are what takes the vast majority of research work time/labor
- Data is only as valid as its equation (what is it measuring, what is let out?)
- It really does make sense
- It’s for the people
- Research is not a means to an end, it should be a part of the entire plan
- Funding/staff/labor is usually very constrained or in short supply
- Our work is theoretical rather than practical
- We want to contribute to the solution
- Myth about academics: we all think quantitative data matter. Numbers aren’t that important; science isn’t real

**For local government, if you could get research on [blank], what would you want?**

- In depth “cost” of tax exemptions PFC/HFC; historic tax credit and “benefit”
- Quantify the value of affordable housing on life outcomes: education, employment, health, divorce, etc.
- Outcomes on mobility programs vs. place-based strategies
- Historic knowledge on prior community investments, CIP and private funding trends for housing in each neighborhood

- I want an equitable economic development plan that verifies which community ownership models nationally have successfully mitigated displacement and created wealth for existing residents
- Loss of the tax credit in housing vs mezz (?) financial grants
- Total cost of leaving person homeless on streets of Houston
- Comparative outcome results of sending persons with mental health issues to jail to another alternative
- True cost of homelessness/cost savings associated with solutions
- Comparative outcome results of 1. giving a person experiencing homelessness, cash to solve housing versus 2. permanent supportive housing
- Top three ways to change/impact low income, individuals' life
- What housing programs do residents want? I.e. building more, down payment assistance, legal aid, homeowner education, or counseling, etc.
- Longitudinal data (qualitative plus quantitative) on our homeless response: system program efficacy
- What is the cost in cities due to hospital visits by the homeless population of Houston correctly?
- Does eviction diversion improve people's lives?
- Why is the default rate so high?
- Eviction cost of government and savings related to eviction diversion
- What happens to tenants after their hearing?
- Why does FEMA allow changes to floodway and flood plains when there is a lot of land available even after so many flood events?
- How many lots were created in the flood plain after Harvey?
- Long-term cost of being impacted by disaster in Houston on families
- How can our disaster-prone city work smarter on leveraging resilient infrastructure to offset high insurance costs for housing? Examples?
- What is the impact of delaying their eviction?
- What is effective intervention when and for whom to maximize eviction prevention impact? Lower rates of eviction?
- Disregarding local politics, how can TIRZ funds be equitably used to ensure that the poor ZIP Codes have access to housing resources?
- Data on market affecting affordable, housing and drivers making housing unaffordable
- What helps people become economically mobile? Constraints – all the cost; opportunities – systems – neighborhood
- What are economic development factors on how families are making decisions in their neighborhood?
- For the city, how many people can we expect to retire in the next 10 years? How much senior-only housing exists? What is the expected need for senior housing development over the next 10 years?
- How can wealth be distributed in Harris County to ensure that the poor ZIP Codes have housing resources?
- Perception: those in permanent supporting housing have free tickets. Data on the lives of those programs and there are efforts towards stability and difficulty of that program

- Research on current economic mobility potential in low-income communities. What has already occurred in the third ward?
- What has been invested in the third ward? What economic movement has resulted?
- How to close the gap between those receiving different forms of financial aid, and then losing those supports, because the jump is too far to make
- Long-term impacts of interventions – rent assistance, legal aid, low income, housing, etc.
- Where have low-income families been able to move to improve economic mobility? What enabled them to move?
- The impact of cost like transportation proximity to grocery stores, etc. have on what is considered affordable housing. How do these impact monthly housing budgets?
- Housing ownership, i.e. heirs' property
- Research question: how can we create affordable housing goals with consideration of number 1. rate of displacement, 2. concentration of jobs and, 3. existing transit infrastructure
- Economic impact to Houston because of drive time
- How to marry workforce development and housing development
- How can transit in our urban core be leveraged for multifamily feasibility?
- Impact of workforce housing on neighborhood stability
- Long-term impact of affordable housing
- Long-term impact on social mobility for the poorest neighborhoods in Houston/Harris County
- Effective messaging to compel voters to raise taxes for social safety nets
- Effectiveness of permanent housing interventions overtime, i.e. two years 10 years more
- In the densest part of the city, where there are zero minimum parking regulations, how many housing units should be built in the next 10 years?
- How should our downtown absorb displaced people from gentrifying, adjacent neighborhoods?
- Loss of building single-family home in Houston after Trump policies (immigration tariffs) versus before
- Landowners – investors who are buying/gentrifying inner city neighborhoods
- Connection between transit access, and neighborhood and job opportunities taken/available
- Impact of raw on affordability of outlining housing stock
- True cost of PSM housing, including the increase in cost to the landlord
- Evaluation on different housing approaches for outcomes and cost-effectiveness: single-family repair, multifamily rental, down payment, assistance, temporary rent assistance
- NIMBY response tool – Houston specific were any of the fears voiced to oppose affordable housing actually realized?
- I want to find out what is the demand for smaller units 1500 ft.<sup>2</sup> or less (mainly owner occupied)
- What is the quality of Houston's naturally occurring affordable housing? Are they slums?
- Identify NOAH in the city and provide location, age, and general agreement of condition

- Residence services and rental housing: what services are most beneficial for different populations?
- Tenant experience beyond affordability: prevalence of habitability issues, fair housing/discrimination, landlord/tenant disputes, leasing, scams, etc.

**For university participants, what research do you think local governments need?**

- “Downstream” flood impacts of new construction, inside and outside their jurisdiction
- Elected officials
  - Who gets funded by whom
  - What people who fund elected get subsidies?
- Owners
  - Connection between institution owners, evictions and conditions
  - Institutional ownership trends
  - Accountability processes in UHTC
  - Turnover rate of owners/reason for turnover, and impact on tenants
  - Tenant impacts based on owner model (REIT(?), investment)
- Property Tax
  - Percentage and funds being deferred annually and by who/where
  - Percentage and dollars homes lost after deferment ends
  - Amount of loss in city revenue by tax exemptions in MF
- Rental Mobility
  - How often are units turning over, geography
  - Renter movement post disaster
  - discrimination/segregation through housing, economic development
- Vacancies
  - How many units are vacant, where and rent prices
  - How long are units vacant
  - How long are damaged units vacant or offline
  - Ebb of housing post disaster; number of units offline, timeline to build back up
- Housing Subsidies
  - What business getting public dollars
  - What properties get recurring or layered funding
  - Vendors hired repeatedly
- Rental Properties
  - Conditions
  - Evictions
  - Rising rates
- Research on the history of economic inequalities and barriers: historical deed restrictions, past lack of city services, destruction of housing for public infrastructure (civic, transportation, parks, etc.)
- Figures from research to persuade population expertise in subject areas (consultancy services) for problem solving
- How their policies can have disproportionately negative impacts on vulnerable communities
- Topics where there is funding + political will to make change

- Not regional but neighborhood-scale \*playbook\* and needs assessment to empower local government entities + local actions in addition to the city and county
- In Houston: how car dependency is Bad; walkability = good
- In Houston: the role value of culture in economic development
- In Houston: value of placemaking and preservation
- Networking with other researchers
- Historically what programs have been successful in reaching intended goals from a quantitative and qualitative perspective
- It depends
- Info on something they are willing to use
- Qualitative research on people's living situations, including relationships with landlords or homeownership experiences. Not everything needs to be quantitative
- What is the moment at which giving funds to people living in poverty is more likely to create change than giving funds to nonprofits to do programs for those people
- How long does it take for intervention X to show up in data at the systems/community level?
- Pilot projects and evaluation success (e.g.: for green stormwater infrastructure - address flooding and justice issues)
- Livable neighborhoods through transit, walkability, safety perception
- Research that can be easily implemented
- Local governments need funds to harmonize their datasets and data from social service providers
- Household-level homeowner insurance data
- How does homeowner insurance influence housing affordability?
- Research that anticipates data needs and plans for collection
- How alternatives to a financialized housing market-like community land trusts- can permanently address housing affordability and displacement issues
- Community based participatory research (CBPR) about the needs of the community longitudinally (inform policy)
- Long-term trends/on lots of intersecting issues
- What is the long-term benefit of funding legal aid
- Long term economic benefits of short-term housing interventions
- Better research on revenue collection resources, closing tax loopholes, IDing property tax fraud
- Local governments don't just need research, they need funding to modernize it and data collection infrastructure
- Data on homelessness and mobility post evictions; the people in the gaps!
- Economic impact of new housing development in the area for government and other
- Rate, cause and cure for dollar circulation or lack thereof in community

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