

THE CIVIC RESEARCH AGENDA ON

Human Services

A NATIONAL STUDY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT RESEARCH NEEDS ON HUMAN SERVICES.



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.

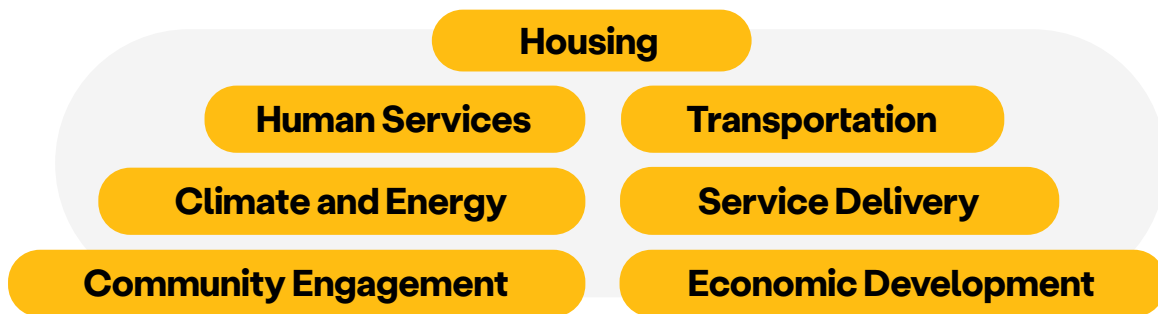
Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
METHODOLOGIES	2
METROLAB SURVEY	3
METROLAB-NLC SURVEY	3
IN-PERSON WORKSHOPS	4
PRIORITY RESEARCH QUESTIONS CONCERNING HUMAN SERVICES	7
CHILDCARE/CHILD-SPECIFIC	8
EDUCATION	9
SENIOR POPULATION	10
HEALTH	11
MENTAL HEALTH	12
POVERTY	13
PUBLIC SAFETY	14
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	15

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 human services.

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

- ↳ **How can local governments better determine early childcare needs and capacity; how many families need childcare (specific to the local government generally and by neighborhood)?**
- ↳ **What are the non-academic, outside-of-school barriers that prevent students from getting the most out of school?**
- ↳ **What changes in fire prevention and response practices are needed to manage hazards associated with lithium-ion batteries and other modern power storage technologies?**
- ↳ **How can local governments develop tools to track and mitigate public health risks linked to extreme weather events, aging infrastructure, and other climate-related hazards?**

- ↳ **Which community-level barriers (transportation, language, childcare, stigma) prevent access to mental health and primary care, and where are these barriers concentrated?**
- ↳ **How should health and social indicators be integrated into regional planning decisions (housing, transport, energy, etc.)?**

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.

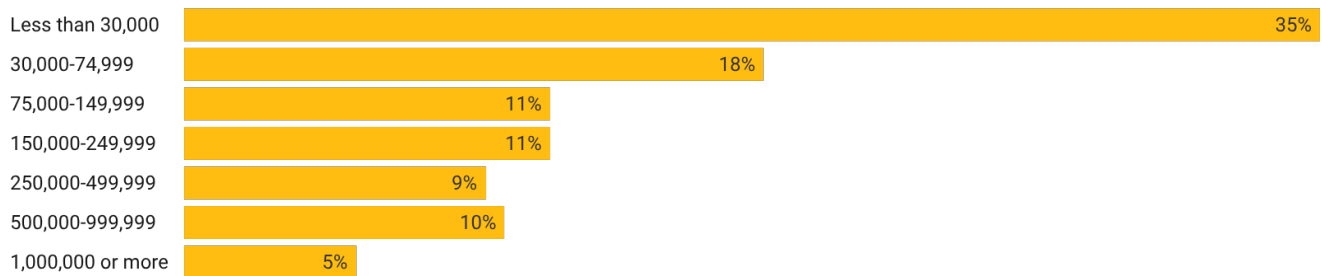
MetroLab-NLC Survey

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 Human Services

Human services, as defined for purposes of this report, includes **the policy domains that shape residents' health, development, stability, and safety**. These include childcare and youth development, education, senior population support, food access and public health, mental health, poverty interventions, and public safety.

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 better determine early childcare needs and capacity? How many families need childcare (specific to the local government generally and by neighborhood)?**
- ↳ **What are the non-academic, outside-of-school barriers that prevent students from getting the most out of school?**
- ↳ **What changes in fire prevention and response practices are needed to manage hazards associated with lithium-ion batteries and other modern power storage technologies?**
- ↳ **How can local governments develop tools to track and mitigate public health risks linked to extreme weather events, aging infrastructure, and other climate-related hazards?**
- ↳ **Which community-level barriers (transportation, language, childcare, stigma) prevent access to mental health and primary care, and where are these barriers concentrated?**
- ↳ **How should health and social indicators be integrated into regional planning decisions (housing, transport, energy, etc.)?**

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.

Childcare/Child-specific

- ↳ What strategies most effectively reduce child poverty and hunger?
- ↳ What playground designs and equipment most effectively increase physical activity among children?
- ↳ What are the impacts of reduced state or federal funding on rapid response in early childcare services?
- ↳ What is the true demand for high-quality early childhood services, and what sustainable funding models can support it?
- ↳ What are the health, workforce, and quality-of-life savings associated with early disease screening and intervention?
- ↳ What cradle-to-career education and youth development strategies most effectively improve long-term outcomes?
- ↳ What are the childcare needs of local industries, and how do they affect workforce participation?
- ↳ What are peer cities with similar populations and disparities doing with respect to systems-level interventions they have done with respect to infant mortality?
- ↳ How best can a local government improve school readiness for children not in formal/early childhood systems?
- ↳ What cross-sector strategies are most effective in reducing child poverty and household instability, and how can a local government measure progress toward these goals over time?
- ↳ What factors drive youth violence, and how do school indicators, social stressors, or online influences contribute?



Education

- ↳ What strategies can state and local governments use to strengthen education systems amid reduced federal oversight?
- ↳ What policies and case studies demonstrate improved educational outcomes?
- ↳ How do school performance indicators correlate with youth offenses?
- ↳ What targeted support strategies improve outcomes in underperforming school environments?
- ↳ What partnership models most effectively strengthen youth and education systems?
- ↳ What cross-sector best practices improve outcomes in youth development, education, and early childhood?
- ↳ Why has absenteeism risen since COVID and what targeted interventions reduce chronic absenteeism?



Senior Population

- ↳ What data on older adults, including Social Security reliance, Medicare participation, hospital admissions, and mortality, should inform local planning?
- ↳ What comprehensive data on older adults, including diagnoses, disability, and limitations in activities of daily living, should guide service planning?



Health

- ↳ What are the impacts of SNAP benefit changes on residents, food pantries, grocery retailers, and local food systems?
- ↳ What level of nutritional insecurity exists among residents age 60 and older, and what interventions are most effective?
- ↳ How can local governments improve health literacy among English and non-English speakers?
- ↳ What is the landscape and prevalence of ADA-related barriers across mobility, transportation, health, housing, social and digital systems?
- ↳ What are the lived experiences of residences participating in safety net programs, and where do they identify opportunities for improvement?
- ↳ What are the impacts of decreased state or federal funding for disability services?
- ↳ What supports growing public trust in local public health institutions?
- ↳ Data request: what are the most common health conditions among residents neighborhood by neighborhood?
- ↳ What is the biggest return on investment in local government policy intervention to improve overall population health most effectively?
- ↳ What strategies most effectively reduce overdose risk following incarceration?
- ↳ What wellness and health indicators should local governments track to measure positive outcomes rather than solely morbidity?
- ↳ How do we engage the community as a member of the process of health related research?
- ↳ How do insurance limitations, transportation, language access, and stigma shape public health outcomes?
- ↳ Which environmental exposures (air quality, asthma drivers, chronic disease factors) are most affecting a local government's residents, and where are high-risk clusters?
- ↳ How can city and regional health partners develop shared data systems to understand needs across hospitals, schools, and service providers?
- ↳ How can a local government improve public trust in health and science, especially around vaccines, prevention, and emerging health threats?
- ↳ What are proven methods for reducing overdose risk, particularly for post-incarceration?
- ↳ How do food insecurity, childcare gaps, and safety-net funding cuts influence household health and stability?
- ↳ How can recreation programs, park access, and youth engagement interventions reduce crime and improve wellbeing?

Mental Health

- ↳ How can a local government improve access to mental health care?
- ↳ How do outcomes compare when individuals with mental health conditions are diverted from jail to alternative interventions?
- ↳ How can subclinical mental health conditions be identified and addressed?
- ↳ What neighborhood-level interventions most effectively improve mental health outcomes?
- ↳ What strategies improve health equity and access to mental wellness services?
- ↳ What mental health indicators should a local government track to guide policy decisions?
What are recommended partnerships to ensure specific data is available while protecting privacy and Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) requirements?
- ↳ What community-level barriers prevent residents from accessing mental health, substance use, and primary care services?

Poverty

- ↳ How can a local government reduce poverty while minimizing displacement?
- ↳ What sustainable and equitable human development strategies most effectively mitigate the long-term impacts of poverty?
- ↳ How can a local government strengthen family stability as part of poverty reduction efforts?
- ↳ What outcomes do individuals experience after exiting homeless assistance programs?
- ↳ What factors contribute to system poverty at the hyper-local level?
- ↳ What integrated strategies most effectively break cycles of poverty linked to rising costs of living, housing stability, and homelessness?

Public Safety

- ↳ What are helpful community-led strategies to prevent violence?
- ↳ Generally, what are evidence-based strategies to prevent violence?
- ↳ What technologies or specific data sets enable early detection and prevention of fires?
- ↳ What is the relationship between public safety outcomes and quality of life? What are specific metrics or data to look to that can support causal analysis?
- ↳ What data can show more information with respect to the relationship between investing in recreation programs and crime reduction?
- ↳ How does school time relate to youth violence?
- ↳ What factors influence crime rates in communities where basic resource needs are met?
- ↳ What factors most influence residents' perceptions of safety?
- ↳ How can AI enhance public safety service delivery?
- ↳ What crime prevention models, including focused deterrence and behavioral health integration, most effectively reduce violence?
- ↳ What are "broken window" strategies to reduce public disorder?
- ↳ What are new interventions to reduce youth violence?
- ↳ What public safety programs are proven to be most effective outside of police department activities?
- ↳ How can a local government modernize its fire suppression methods to better address emerging risks from new building materials, energy systems, and dense urban environments?
- ↳ How can predictive modeling, Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping, and sensor technology be used for early detection and faster response to fires and other public safety incidents?
- ↳ What alternatives to enforcement and arrest can reduce violence and improve safety?
- ↳ How can data systems across police, health, schools, and nonprofits be connected to understand root causes of violence?
- ↳ What do residents perceive as making them feel unsafe, and how can those perceptions inform prevention strategies?
- ↳ How can the city systematically evaluate whether policing strategies, data practices, and community engagement approaches are effective?

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 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

- ↳ 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](https://fas.org)**.