

THE CIVIC RESEARCH AGENDA ON

Service Delivery

A NATIONAL STUDY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT RESEARCH NEEDS ON SERVICE DELIVERY.



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About the Federation of American Scientists

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

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

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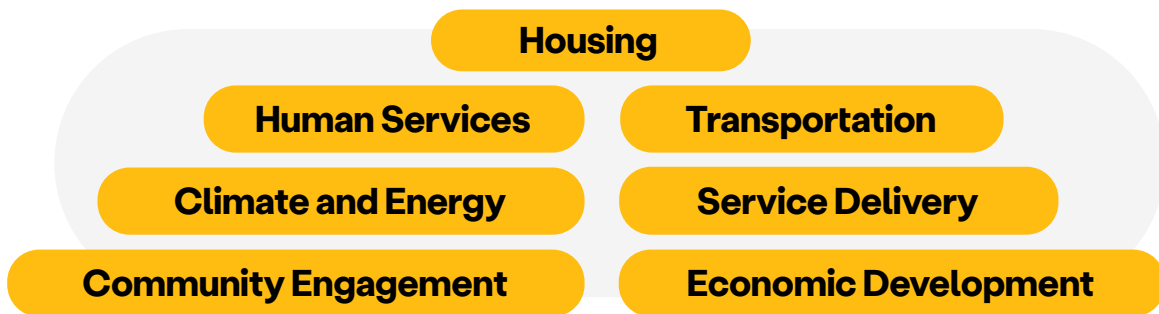
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Executive Summary

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

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



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

This report provides the research needs specifically for service delivery.

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

- ↳ **How can a local government understand who is missing from data collection which causes biases in the output, and then how do they correct for this?**
- ↳ **How can a local government develop a comparative benchmarking framework that uses peer city data to assess return on investment, staffing levels, and service efficiency across departments?**
- ↳ **What innovative approaches have other cities adopted to attract and retain skilled municipal employees, particularly non-salary strategies that improve things like workplace culture, flexibility, and professional development?**
- ↳ **How can the city measure whether key services (e.g., public works, code enforcement, permitting, health, data operations) are effective and equitable?**

- ↳ **How can a local government evaluate government performance, track return on investment, and adopt continuous improvement practices?**
- ↳ **How can the region better understand the ecosystem and flow of resources and collaborations (government, not-for-profits, for-profits, etc.) and make services more efficient through that understanding?**
- ↳ **How can cities stabilize revenue while accounting for resident financial hardship?**

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.

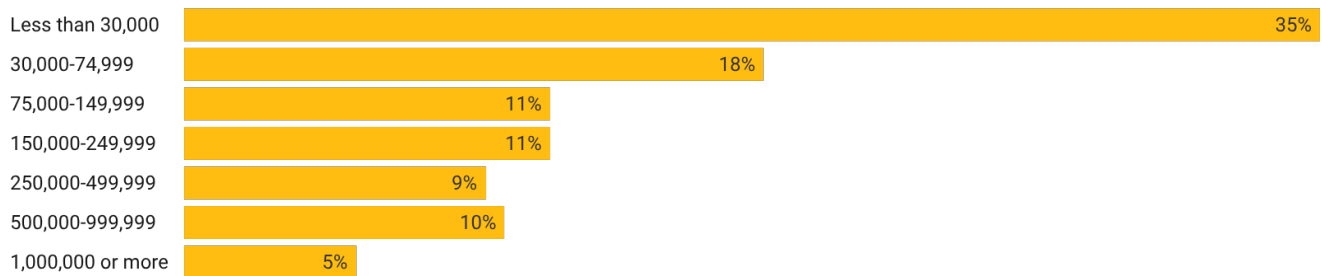
MetroLab-NLC Survey

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 Service Delivery

Service delivery, as defined for purposes of this report, refers to **the systems, workforce, data infrastructure, technology, financial management, and operational practices through which local governments administer public services**. This includes data needs and uses, application of AI and other technologies, attracting and retaining a skilled city workforce, evaluation, operations, partnerships, and taxes and finances.

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

- ↳ **How do we understand who is missing from the data collection which causes biases in the output, and then how can we correct for this?**
- ↳ **How can a local government develop a comparative benchmarking framework that uses peer city data to assess return on investment, staffing levels, and service efficiency across departments?**
- ↳ **What innovative approaches have other cities adopted to attract and retain skilled municipal employees, particularly non-salary strategies that improve things like workplace culture, flexibility, and professional development?**
- ↳ **How can the city measure whether key services (e.g., public works, code enforcement, permitting, health, data operations) are effective and equitable?**
- ↳ **How can a local government evaluate government performance, track return on investment, and adopt continuous improvement practices?**
- ↳ **How can the region better understand the ecosystem and flow of resources and collaborations (government, not-for-profits, for-profits, etc.) and make services more efficient through that understanding?**
- ↳ **How can cities stabilize revenue while accounting for resident financial hardship?**

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.

Data Needs

- ↳ What does data analysis look like when coupled with specific strategies developed in collaboration with local governments?
- ↳ What are best practices for data management? What are best practices for data use and privacy?
- ↳ How can data drive human issues?
- ↳ How do local governments use data to make decisions under uncertainty?
- ↳ What are incentives for data-driven decision making in a political environment (best in class examples showing ROI)?
- ↳ What metrics can demonstrate the effectiveness of local government to the community (in an informative & persuasive way)?
- ↳ Is there a single authority for address data?
- ↳ What is the best way and formats to share data with partners and promote interoperability?
- ↳ What are innovation frameworks for local governments, and how can we build a culture that embraces innovation, data-driven decision-making, and ultimately creates lots of change champions in our organization?
- ↳ What are regionally accurate resident demographics?
- ↳ How do we understand who is missing from the data collection which causes biases in the output, and then can and how do we correct for this?
- ↳ How do resident perceptions of service quality compare to administrative data and where do gaps emerge (e.g., 311 complaints vs. resolutions, perceptions on crime vs. crime data)?
- ↳ What alternative data sources can supplement census data for planning purposes?
- ↳ What can data tell us about parks usage? Who is using parks?



AI and Technology

- ↳ How can AI support municipal legal departments?
- ↳ How can local governments best develop internal capacity to execute projects, develop technology solutions, etc. rather than relying extensively on contractors?
- ↳ How can technology address the human condition?
- ↳ How can a local government establish a cross-departmental data dashboard auto populated from multiple software systems?
- ↳ How can modeling tools, prototypes, and pilots be used to improve service design?
- ↳ What are peer city results or frameworks for technology adoption?
- ↳ What are guidelines for providing comps for large change management efforts like payroll modernization?
- ↳ What are the resilient and fragile aspects of systems audits, and what are recommendations to approach them?
- ↳ What are safe uses of AI for cities, specifically when addressing policy issues and risk management? What are the most effective ways to build internal capacity for AI understanding? How can AI be utilized across all City departments?
- ↳ What technical research and data systems most effectively support municipal asset management?
- ↳ What are AI applications on land use planning? Can it be used for fiscal impact analysis for rural communities?
- ↳ What data governance frameworks are required to responsibly deploy AI in local government?
- ↳ What are the ethical, equity, and operational implications of AI adoption, and how can data-driven approaches using AI to reduce access disparities and inform poverty-related policy interventions?
- ↳ Are there 3D renderings that could be easily accessible at a command post or emergency scene that could benefit scene management?
- ↳ Which technology modernization strategies have demonstrated strong returns in comparable cities, and how could a trusted third-party validation process help a local government strengthen legislative and public confidence in these investments?
- ↳ What strategies help modernize city systems, speed up government processes, and improve resident experience?
- ↳ How can shared data systems allow departments to collaborate more efficiently and avoid duplication?
- ↳ How can a local government train large language models (LLMs) to surface trends and best use cases for policy interventions in other communities?

City Workforce

- ↳ What supports effective change management in a highly unionized workforce?
- ↳ How do you successfully change culture within an organization?
- ↳ What are the best ways local governments can recruit new talent?
- ↳ What are ways to effectively staff an agency?
- ↳ What are best practices for job retention and employee satisfaction for local governments given budget constraints?
- ↳ What innovative approaches have other cities adopted to attract and retain skilled municipal employees, particularly non-salary strategies that improve things like workplace culture, flexibility, and professional development?
- ↳ How can workload analysis improve staffing models and service delivery?
- ↳ What studies are available that focus on city workforce management?
- ↳ What labor market trends and graduate employment preferences should inform local economic development strategy for attracting and supporting employers that align with those preferences?
- ↳ What organizational culture, staffing, or recruitment barriers limit the city's ability to deliver services effectively?

Evaluation Support

- ↳ What is the actual dollar impact of changing regulatory decisions?
- ↳ In what ways does racism (structural/systemic) continue to perpetuate the very disparities we claim/seek to address?
- ↳ Which programs are most effective? Which programs can be merged, streamlined, etc.?
- ↳ How can a local government evaluate service delivery performance across departments to identify improvement opportunities?
- ↳ How do waste contracts compare across peer-cities or peer-counties?
- ↳ What process improvement methodologies most effectively increase operational efficiency in local government?
- ↳ What is the cost/benefit analysis on “overhead” departments? Is there a way to capture investing in these functions as key operational services or efficiency services?
- ↳ How can we be more effective as a government?
- ↳ How can the city measure whether key services (public works, code enforcement, permitting, health, data operations) are effective and equitable?
- ↳ How can a local government evaluate government performance, track return on investment, and adopt continuous improvement practices? What organizational or process barriers limit effective service delivery?
- ↳ How can a local government design evaluation frameworks that support faster and more sustainable operational decisions, including using university involvement for evaluation plan development before implementation?
- ↳ What services and resources do residents prioritize, and how do they value trade-offs (e.g., increased services vs. tax/investment costs)?

Operations

- ↳ What do cost-benefit analyses reveal about the benefits of maintaining old IT systems versus investing in modernization?
- ↳ What cost-benefit approaches can simplify approval processes and reduce state and federal regulations?
- ↳ What can be done to avoid funding stupid stuff?
- ↳ How can a local government evaluate and balance policy tradeoffs in a transparent, inclusive, and democratic way?
- ↳ What are best practices for organization structures and inter-department communication? What are best practices for organizational theory that fosters cross department collaborations?
- ↳ What should be done to improve decision making processes?
- ↳ What does research on 311 data say about complaints vs. resolution?
- ↳ What programs should we fund at higher levels?
- ↳ What coordination and governance structures most effectively support long-term capital planning?
- ↳ What public sector innovation strategies most effectively improve operational efficiency, interagency collaboration, and transparency?
- ↳ What data systems and governance frameworks are needed to support effective service delivery in a unique multi-jurisdictional or regional context?
- ↳ How can a local government develop a comparative benchmarking framework that uses peer city data to assess return on investment, staffing levels, and service efficiency across departments?



Partnerships

- ↳ What approaches can be used to map capacity and expertise for partnership development?
- ↳ What does a cost-benefit analysis say about rapidly growing nonprofit (NPO) sectors?
- ↳ How to distill research into compelling stories that policymakers and the public believe?
- ↳ What frameworks are most effective at measuring outcomes with external partners?
- ↳ What procurement and partnership models most effectively facilitate collaboration between local government and universities?
- ↳ How can peer city working groups accelerate policy adoption and knowledge sharing?
- ↳ What are quick/best practices to build out relevant literature reviews when needed?
- ↳ How can a local government facilitate scientifically rigorous and unbiased evaluations of potential solutions?
- ↳ What are ways that local philanthropy has made a difference?
- ↳ What impacts do international relations and global relationships have on local governments?
- ↳ Where can higher education institutions support data collection, program evaluation, and grant management to fill capacity gaps?
- ↳ How can the region better understand the ecosystem and flow of resources and collaborations (government, not-for-profits, for-profits, etc.) and make services more efficient through that understanding?
- ↳ How can research outputs be better translated into implementable tools for city staff, or even include researchers through the implementation of recommendations from research outputs?

Taxes and Finances

- ↳ What methods can effectively collect tax revenue without relying on tax sales? What alternatives to tax sale can address delinquency without displacement and what are peer cities doing that has worked to address tax delinquency?
- ↳ How are debt and other metrics for peer cities reflected (or not) in credit ratings?
- ↳ How does subsidized development affect municipal fiscal health and budget performance?
- ↳ How do land value tax-based jurisdictions in the US and around the world fare?
- ↳ How do property tax heavy jurisdictions vs. income tax heavy jurisdictions compare in outcomes?
- ↳ What are politically possible investments that strengthen the tax base?
- ↳ What private funding models can support public assets that are difficult to finance through traditional means?
- ↳ What does research on comparative fees for common services across cities reveal?
- ↳ What are best practices for approaching property tax parity in a community with so much tax exempt property?
- ↳ What is the comparative tax burden across cities?
- ↳ What are new innovative income generating streams for local municipalities?
- ↳ What additional funding resources can be used to support capital investment needs? What funding resources can support operations and maintenance?
- ↳ What do different cities do for their reserve funds?
- ↳ How can behavioral science improve compliance with delinquent water bill payments?
- ↳ How can cities stabilize revenue while accounting for resident financial hardship?
- ↳ What are the avoided public costs associated with coordinated investments in public health, housing, transportation, and environmental systems?

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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
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