FEDERATION OF AMERICAN SCIENTISTS

FAS Background

FAS and MetroLab Network



Origins

Federation of American Scientists (FAS): National nonprofit advancing science, tech, and innovation to solve society's toughest challenges.



Joining Forces

In June 2025, FAS acquired MetroLab Network, creating FAS's State and Local Innovation Team.

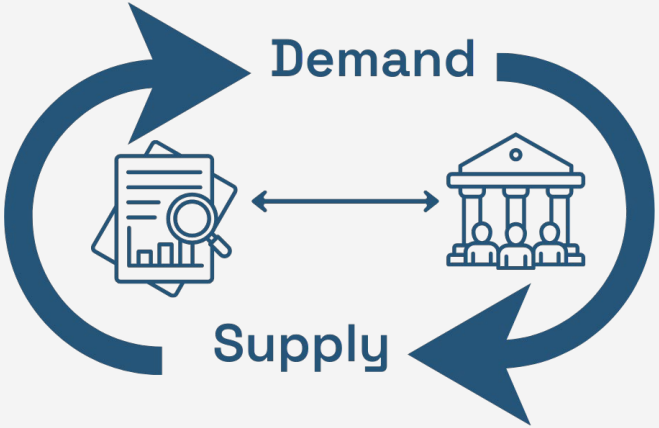


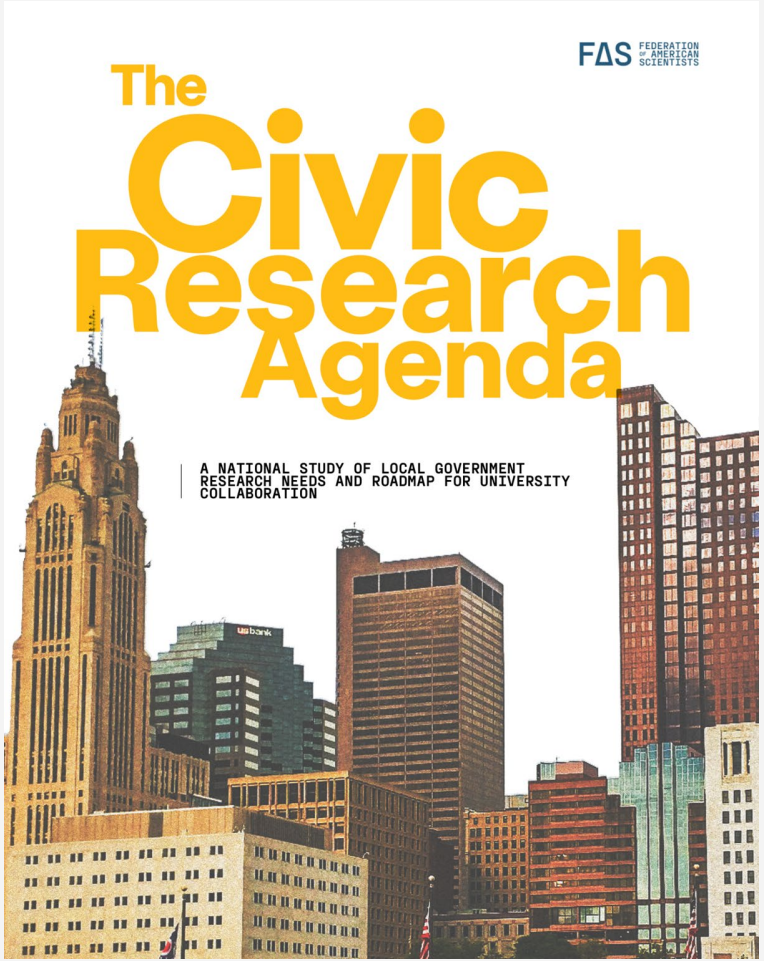
What We Do

Deliver science-based solutions to urgent challenges (climate, mobility, workforce, data governance).

Bridge federal policy to local implementation, ensuring innovation reaches communities.

Developing a Civic Research Agenda





Why a Local Government R&D Agenda?

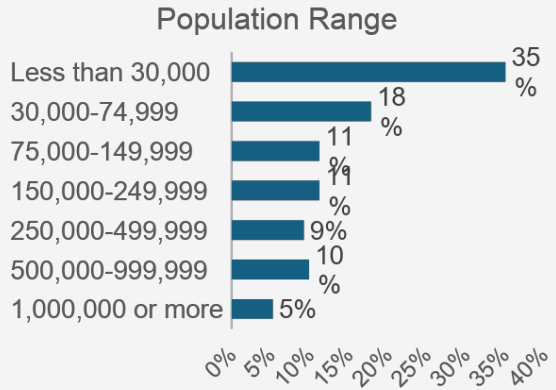


Methodologies: In -person Workshops

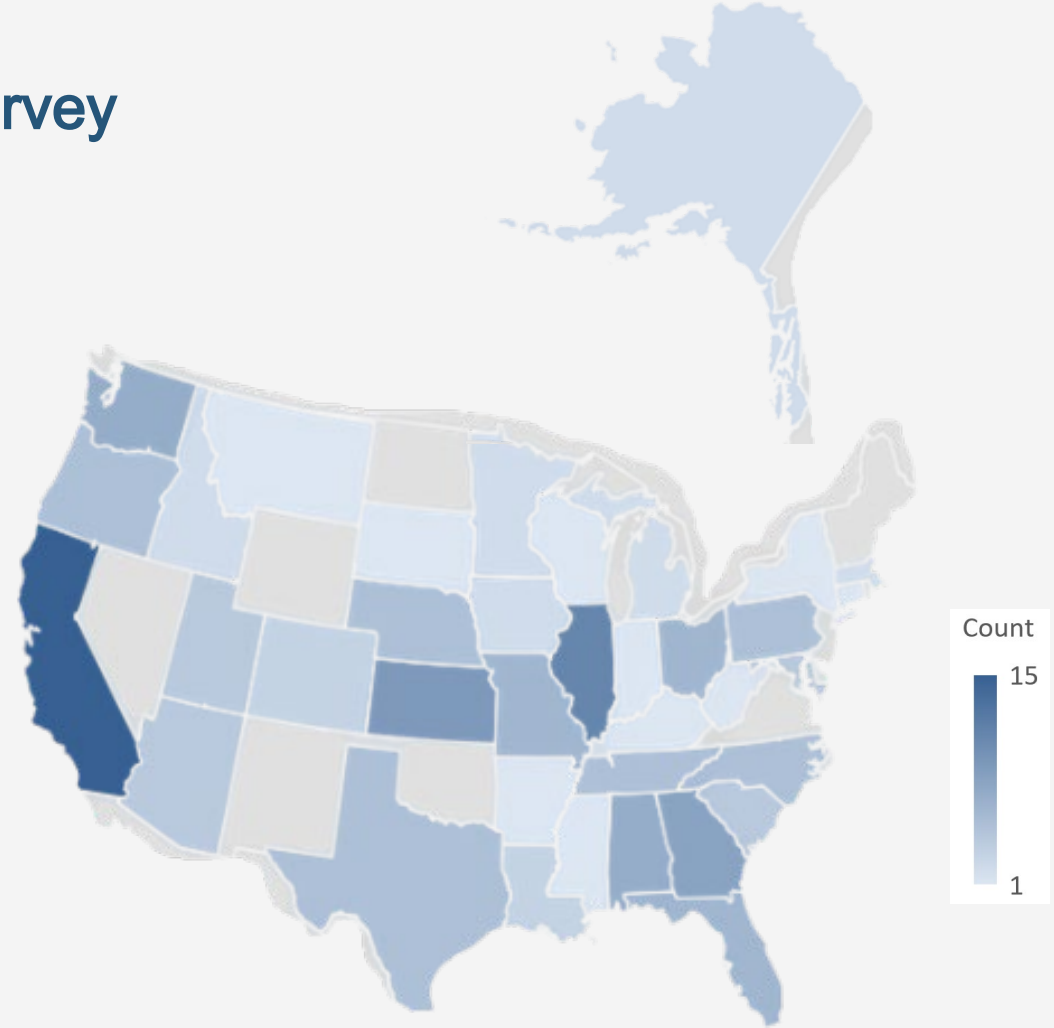


Methodologies: National Survey

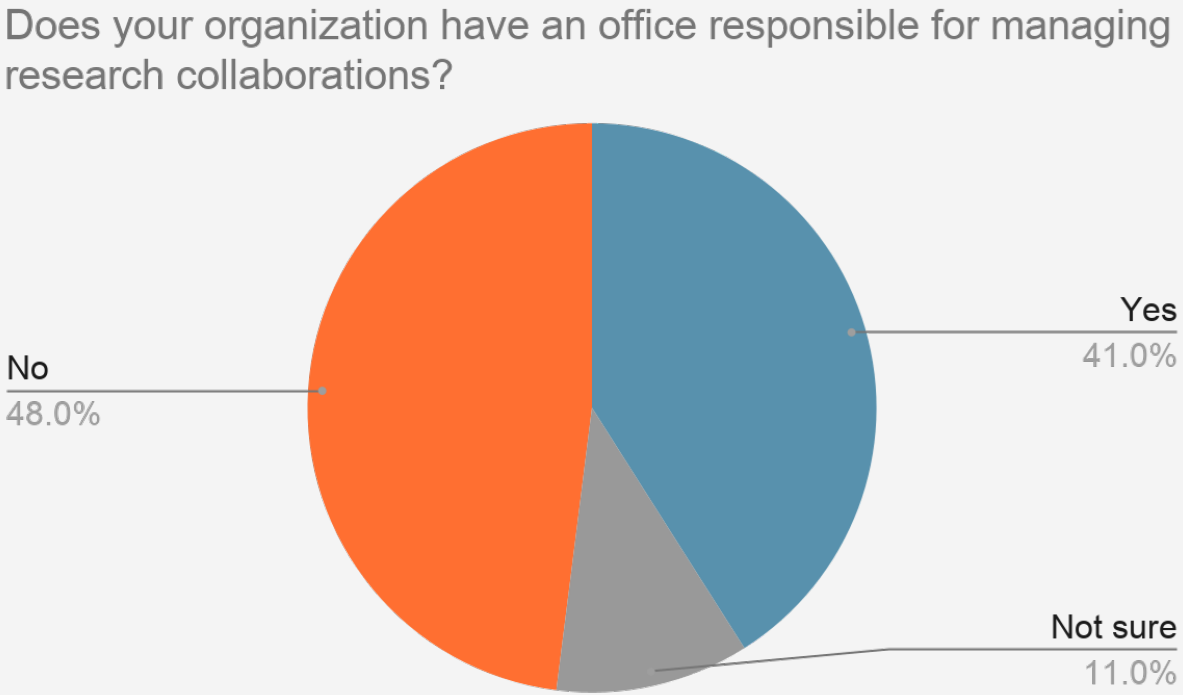
167 survey responses
152 distinct jurisdictions
37 states (plus DC and PR)
92% cities/towns



For crosstabs, population has been summarized into small (<74,999), medium (75,000-249,999), and large (>250,000).



A minority of cities have a central office coordinating research activities

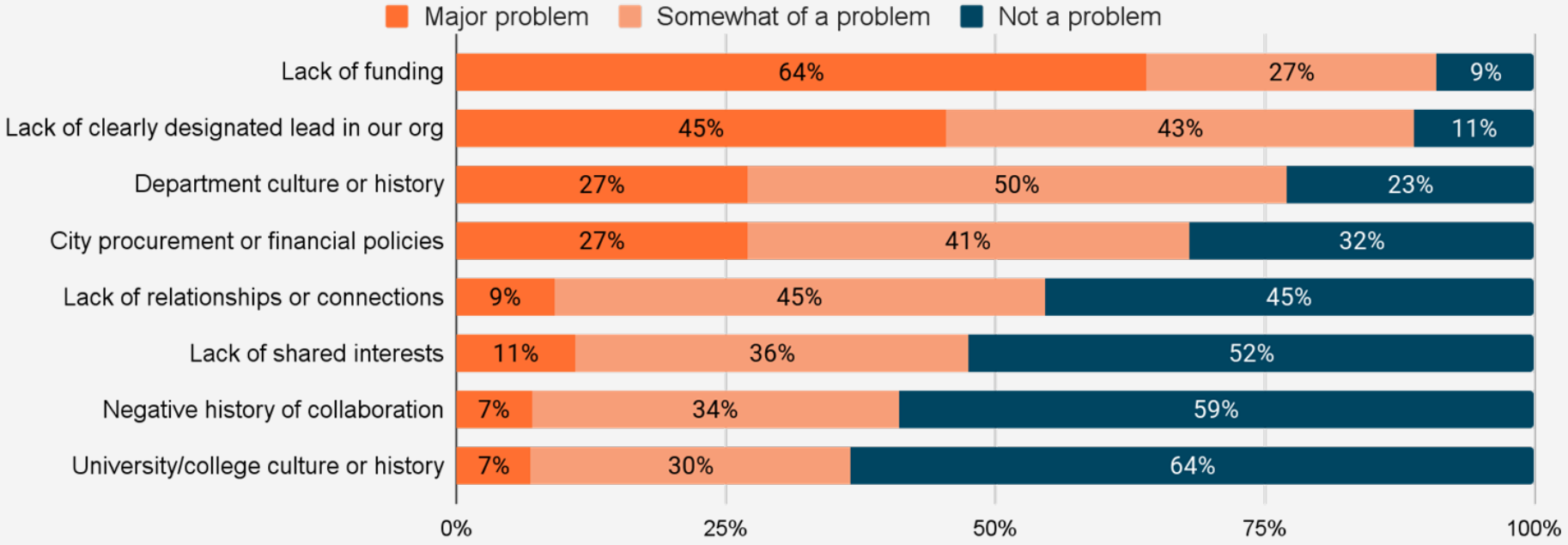


- Larger population cities were not more likely to say “yes” (43%) but medium and large cities were more likely to say “not sure”
- The most common answer to a central office was a list of multiple departments
- Other common answers: data/ innovation office, city administration office and mayor’s office

Source: R&D survey, n = 44

Most frequent barriers to research collaboration are funding, internal city structure, culture, and policies

Over the past three years, to what extent have the following barriers hindered research collaboration between your organization and university/college partners?



Source: R&D survey, n = 44

Other barriers emerged from an open -ended question

Limited staff capacity / time

- "Limited staff resources to work with university/college partners"
- "Staffing including both people to manage a research project as well as time to give to students"

Not priority for leadership / politics

- "In the past, politics have prevented a healthy working relationship"
- "It is not a priority of City Council to build those collaborations"
- "prior City Managers did not find value in these types of partnerships"

Location constraints

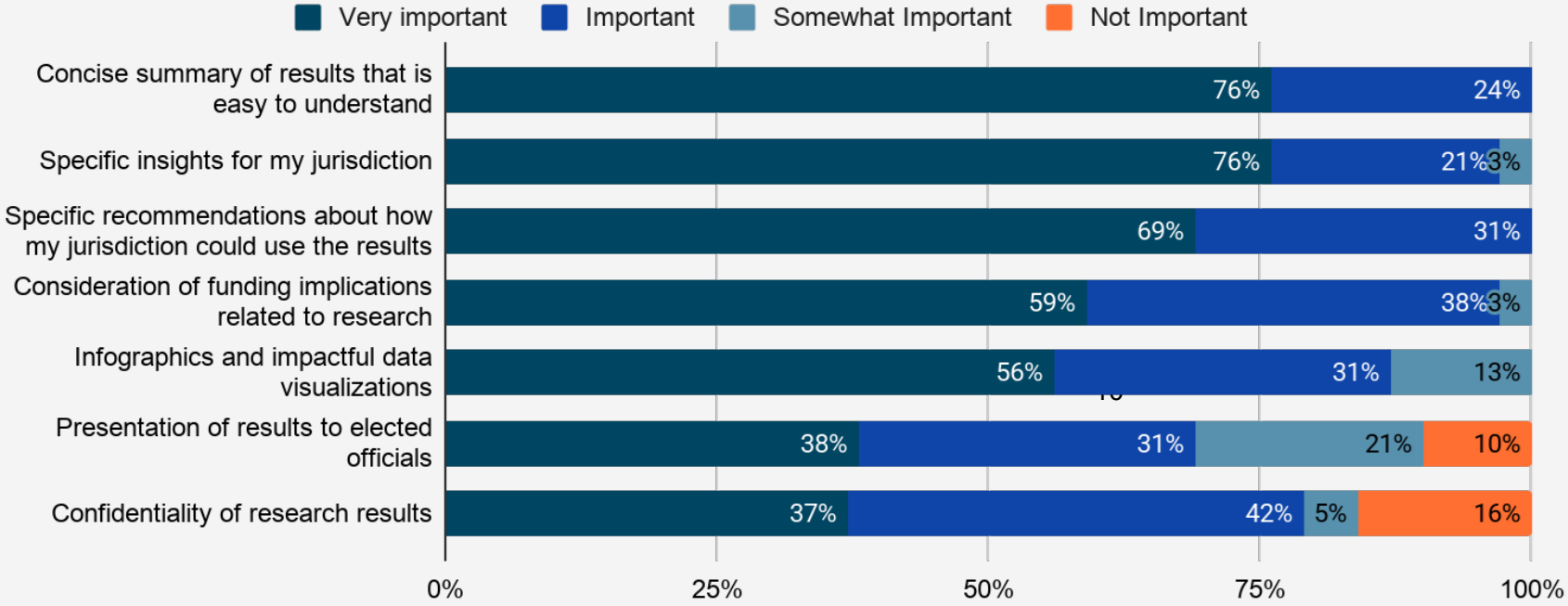
- "Our local urban research university is in another state. They don't have the mandate to work with our city. Our state's research universities are hours away from our city making collaboration more difficult."
- "we don't have an in city university, the largest one usually partners with our largest city"

Other notable comments: timelines don't align between City and university; no collaboration to do regional projects/studies

Source: R&D survey + NLC survey, n = 58

Jurisdictions are seeking research that is specific, actionable and easy to understand

Thinking about how research results are communicated, how important is it to your organization that the research reporting include the following?



Source: R&D survey, n = 39

Publication Results

Civic Research Agenda: By the Numbers

432 Total local government research questions

32 Priority research questions over **7** policy domains

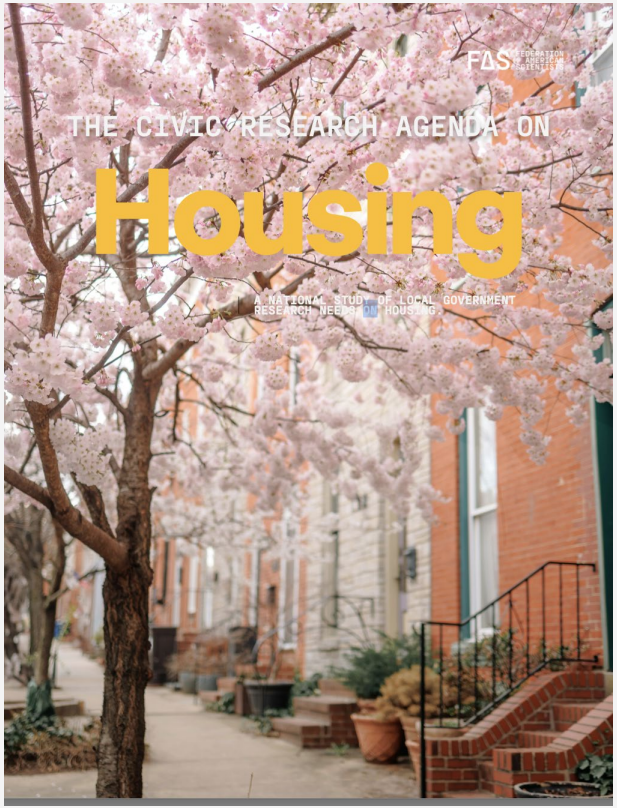
9 Community-specific reports

1 Report on the research-to-impact ecosystem

8 Recommendations for local governments + university projects

The number one research needs of cities across the country is on housing.

The Civic Research Agenda on Housing



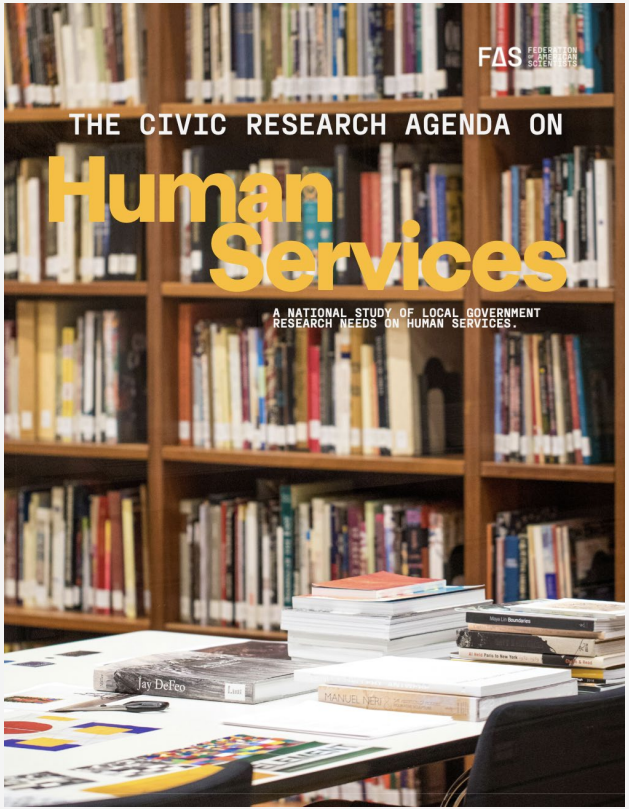
- How can local governments improve **housing affordability** for those that are cost burdened?
- What are the long-term effects of affordable housing and permanent housing interventions on household stability, economic mobility, and community well-being?
- What structural, market, and policy factors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

The Civic Research Agenda on Economic Development



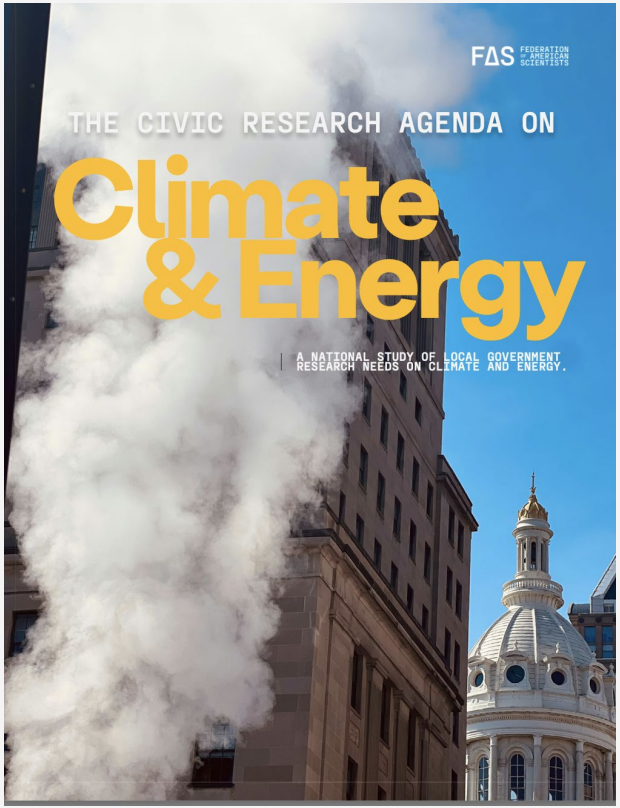
- What is the right balance of tax incentive programs?
- How can cities optimize land use planning to balance sustainability, resiliency, and economic competitiveness?
- What do residents experiencing poverty see as the real levers for improving opportunity?
- How are residents in mid- to small-sized communities' economic mobility shaped by childcare access, safety-net reductions, disability service cuts, and changes in federal and state funding?

The Civic Research Agenda on Human Services



- How can local governments better determine early childcare needs and capacity?
- What are the non-academic, outside-of-school barriers that prevent students from getting the most out of school?
- How can local governments develop tools to track and mitigate public health risks?
- How should health and social indicators be integrated into regional planning decisions (housing, transport, energy, etc.)?

The Civic Research Agenda on Climate and Energy



- How do disaster and flooding policies affect housing stability and displacement?
- What smart systems, maintenance strategies, or predictive technologies can strengthen infrastructure resilience and reduce vulnerability to severe weather events?
- How should environmental hazards in locations where a cluster of hazards are present be prioritized for mitigation?

The Civic Research Agenda on Transportation



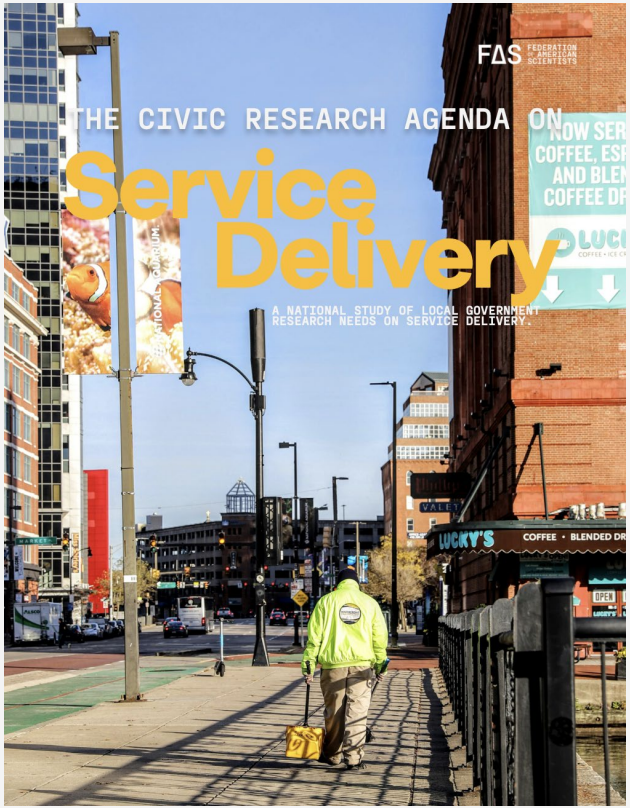
- How can a local government better understand the economic return on investment (ROI) and social health ROI for active transit and transportation networks?
- How will artificial intelligence (AI) impact transit authorities? How will local operations be impacted, and how will users be impacted?
- What data should be prioritized when creating policy to improve sustainability and efficiency (across all modes of transportation)?

The Civic Research Agenda on Community Engagement



- How do different populations receive and respond to City communications?
- Are there ways to show city government values and effectiveness in order to build trust in our communities and increase civic engagement in our city?
- How do residents define “well-being” and what indicators (subjective and objective) best capture those definitions across neighborhoods?

The Civic Research Agenda on Service Delivery



- 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?
- What innovative approaches have other cities adopted to attract and retain skilled municipal employees?
- How can a local government evaluate government performance, track return on investment, and adopt continuous improvement practices?
- How can cities stabilize revenue while accounting for resident financial hardship?



So you've published an agenda. What happens next is just as as important.



The Research-to-Impact Ecosystem | Perceptions, Points of Friction, and Recommendations

Perceptions between cities and universities

Perceptions between cities and universities

Local Governments' Description of Research :

- By far and away, the word "data" appeared most frequently; suggesting a perception of quantitative information.
- Trends of academic framing such as "white paper" and "abstract."
- Words describing efforts that are time intensive and slow.
- Descriptions of high costs were also included, such as "money," "expensive," and "grant funding."
- Positive descriptions included "objectiveness," "opportunity," and "knowledge."

Perceptions between cities and universities

Universities' Description of Public Policy:

- The most common response to describe public policy typically had a reference to rules and lawmaking, including words such as "rules," "guardrails," and "structure."
- University attendees recognized the political nature of it with words like "politics," "One-sided," or "negotiation."
- Words describing efforts that are time intensive and slow.
- Positive descriptions included viewing public policy as an opportunity to create change, including words such as "change-maker" and "innovation."

Perceptions between cities and universities

When comparing the answers to both of these questions, ultimately, research is seen as **producing knowledge** , and public policy is seen as **exercising power** .

Local Governments Describing “Research”	Universities Describing “Public Policy”
Data-heavy	Rule-heavy
Academic	Governmental
Slow and expensive	Political and negotiated
Abstract	Consequential
Objective (ideally)	Power-driven
Knowledge-producing	Action-directing

Perceptions between cities and universities

“What is a myth you want to bust to the other side”

Myths that **local government staff** want to bust:

- [21%] that local governments have a lot of money available, are themselves adequately resourced, and have ample time to read large amounts of research
- [20%] that local government staff are uninformed, not smart, or not resourceful
- [16%] that local government staff lack motivation, are lazy or don’t care, and want to preserve bureaucracy
- [13%] that local governments cannot innovate and adapt
- [13%] that local governments are hard to work with, and in particular, they resist academic insight
- [6%] that local governments are not data-driven

Perceptions between cities and universities

“What is a myth you want to bust to the other side”

Myths that **university faculty** want to bust:

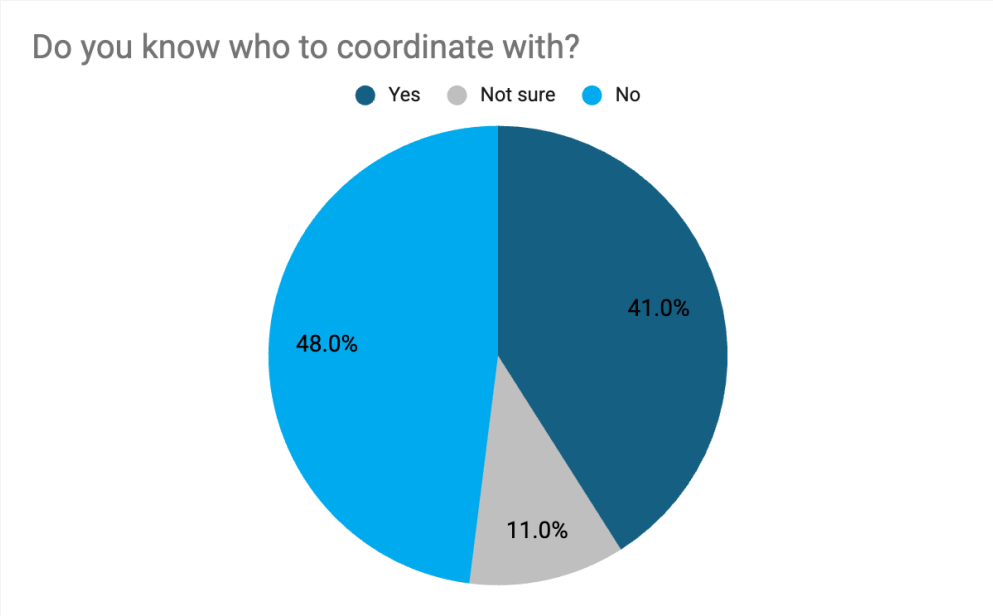
- [25%] that universities are elite; faculty live in an ivory tower
- [19%] that universities produce research that is impractical, only theoretical, or not client-driven
- [15%] that universities only care about publishability, and faculty/staff do not care about their community
- [11%] that universities are slow, research takes a long time, and they can’t work quickly
- [11%] that universities have a lot of money and funding is not constrained
- [11%] that research only takes into account quantitative data

University faculty and staff fear being seen as too intellectual and disconnected.

Local government staff fear being seen as not intellectual enough.

Barrier: Knowing who to work with

- The survey found that only a minority of cities and counties have a central office to coordinate research activities.
  - Larger population cities were not significantly more likely to say “yes” (43%) but medium and large cities were more likely to say “not sure”
  - The most common answer when asking if there is a centralized office was offering a list of multiple departments
  - Another common answer when asking if there is a centralized office coordinating research projects was a data/innovation office, followed by the Administration Office of the Mayor’s Office.



Barrier: Knowing who to work with

Between the two institutions, the answers are almost identical, suggesting there is **no clear structural discovery system on either side**.

Both are operating informally, and often, only by direct relationships. This also presents evidence that **the research demand/supply ecosystem is deeply relationship-dependent**, creating high barriers for newcomers, inequity of access, and bottlenecks around well-connected individuals.

Making Research Actionable

- One hundred percent of respondents cited that a concise summary of results that is easy to understand is very important or important.

- Additionally, one hundred percent of respondents cited specific recommendations about how their jurisdiction could use the results as very important or important.



Importantly, local governments noted that for research to be as actionable as possible, **it needs to go beyond observational and include recommendations.**

Making Research Actionable

- Other critical elements considered “very important” or “important” included:
    - [97% of respondents] consideration of funding implications related to research
    - [87% of respondents] infographics and impactful data visualizations
    - [69% of respondents] presentation of results to elected officials





National Policy Recommendations

Federal funding requires projects that are considered scientifically novel. The research needs of local government decision makers are not necessarily at the frontiers of research.

Philanthropic funding (which is often in support of local government priorities) is not included in the "R1" point system. It was suggested that federal agencies change policies around what may be considered in the R1 point system in furtherance of this type of work (including to add philanthropic funds to the point system, for example).

Tenure track requirements do not emphasize community engagement as a consideration. How can translation research activities be better accounted for at the university/institution level?

Academics do not like to provide recommendations which contain degrees of certainty, yet government decision makers desire higher levels of certainty when making a decision.

Research Outputs: Increasing Accessibility

1. Provide a one-page executive summary
    a. No jargon, and preferably the summary is not above an 8th grade reading proficiency level
2. Toolkits and program designs should be included in publications
3. Eliminate research paywalls and create centralized repositories

Observations of Note

University “centers” are the most agile and interdisciplinary part of the research community, the closest we see academia serving a client

Success in partnership is incredibly relationship based

Master agreements are helpful, as are data sharing agreements

Top Three Needs from Local Governments:

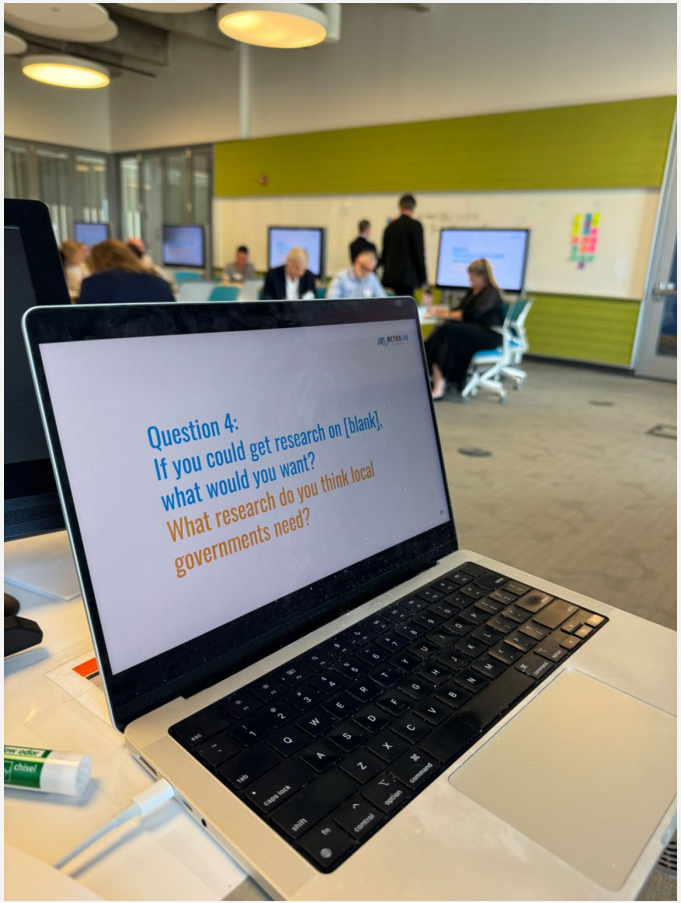
1. Evaluation
2. Support to become more efficient
3. New sources of data (that students could potentially generate)
4. Benchmarks for the purpose of external studies.

The main barrier isn’t misaligned goals, but coordination and infrastructure for collaboration.

These are solvable problems that if addressed, can unlock policy innovation for communities across the country.

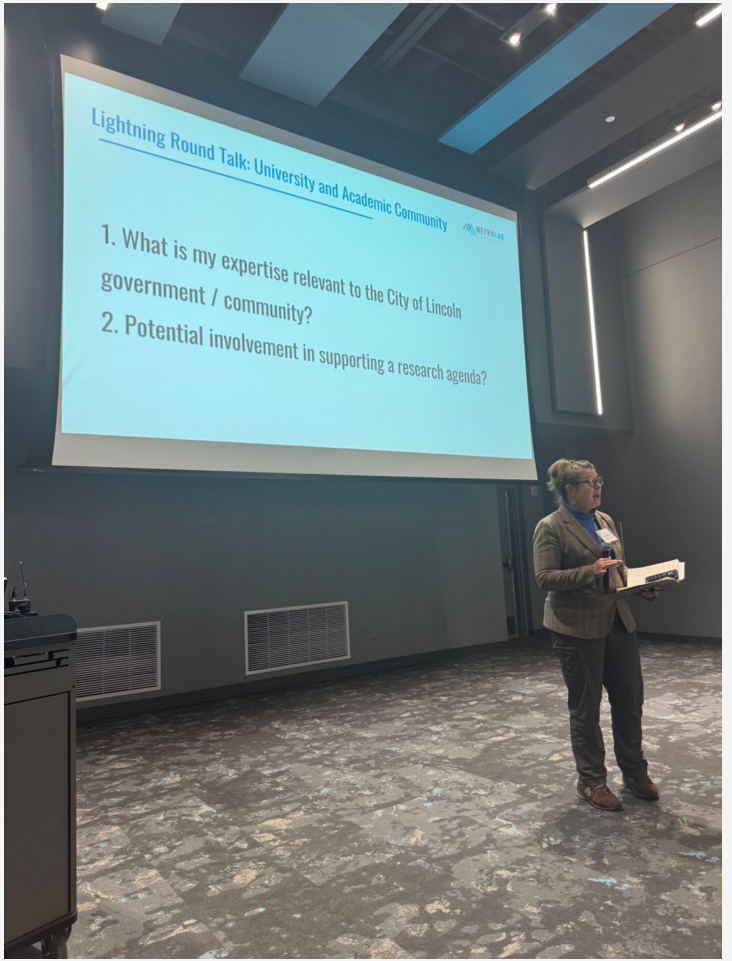
Core takeaways.

Local governments want universities to function as applied research partners, not just knowledge generators. **You can ask for this.**



Core takeaways.

- Faculty want local governments to bring them real problems to solve.
- Collaboration structures are needed, not just individual relationships.



What's Next



Research Agenda Workshops for Cities or Counties

The Local Research Agenda Workshop is a structured, facilitated half-day convening — designed exclusively for local government leaders — that opens a direct dialogue with your regional academic research community.

Delivered by FAS staff, the workshop guides your team through a proven process to surface your most pressing research questions and connect them to university researchers who can help answer them.

Outcomes

- Curated report summarizing your priority research questions
- Strengthened relationships with local academic researchers
- A platform for future collaboration and a shared Research Agenda

Sign up to learn more

What's Next

Digital Survey: University Leaders

- Building on the CRA, this effort will generate new primary data on how universities engage with local governments, where friction exists, and what changes could enable more responsive use-driven research.

Research Repository

- FAS has started to collect a repository that connects research demand and supply. The platform will allow local governments to surface research needs, either publicly or anonymously, and enable researchers and practitioners to contribute relevant work.

Already answered a research question? Add it here to help build the repository!



Digital Survey: University Leaders



Research Repository

Ultimately, we are rooting for science.

And hoping to democratize research.


Let's
do some
good
METROLAB NETWORK