

ROUTE FIFTY

Critical Priorities for Local Government

A Candid Survey of Local Government Officials and Agency Leaders

Research by



In collaboration with



Underwritten by



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Overview

Purpose

There is no shortage of challenges facing local government. Tight budgets and staff limitations force public sector officials to make difficult decisions among the significant array of obstacles and competing priorities they face every day.

With collaboration and support from the U.S. Conference of Mayors, *Route Fifty* set out to identify what local government officials rank as the highest priorities when it comes to the future success of their communities. To that end, *Route Fifty's* research arm, Government Business Council (GBC), conducted an in-depth study on the priorities of city- and county-level government employees, including a large number of senior staff.

Methodology

Route Fifty and GBC asked the U.S. Conference of Mayors for input and advice in the lead-up to the survey; their advice was critical in shaping the key priorities.

Our survey was released between April and May 2018 to a random sample of local government employees in city and county agencies. A total of 181 respondents completed the survey through a statistical instrument known as 'MaxDiff' or 'best-worst' scaling. Using the [MaxDiff approach](#), GBC was able to achieve a robustly determined rank for each of the local government issues that was measured.

In alphabetical order, the issues that GBC measured are **Affordable Housing, Diversity/Inclusion and Civic Engagement, Economic Development, Education/Job Training, Environment and Resiliency, Infrastructure/Transportation, Innovation/Technology, Public Health/Health Care, Public Safety/Crime, Social Services, and Taxation, Finance, and Budget.**

Executive Summary

Traditional, core government functions are the highest priority for local officials

When forced to decide, public servants at the local level responding to our survey consistently prioritized core government operations and services as the most vital to the future success of their jurisdiction. These included: **“Taxation, Finance & Budget;” “Economic Development;”** and, **“Infrastructure/Transportation.”** **“Public Safety/Crime”** also consistently ranked as a high priority for our respondents.

“Infrastructure/Transportation” ranked as the highest concern for career officials, unlike political appointees who placed it fourth overall. Respondents from larger cities (over 150,000 residents) valued the priority of **“Infrastructure/Transportation”** as their highest priority, while their counterparts in smaller jurisdictions were more concerned with **financial and economic development issues.**

Social programs, Citizen-facing services and engagement are lower priorities

Our respondents ranked **“Social Services”** last, with **“Public Health/Health Care”** and **“Environment & Resiliency”** also ranked as lower priorities for the future success of their jurisdiction.

The highest priority direct citizen service among our respondents was **“Education/Job Training,”** though it still received a negative score (meaning more respondents weighed it as less of a necessary priority for the future success of their jurisdiction).

Public officials in larger cities were more likely to prioritize **“Affordable Housing,”** with jurisdictions over 150,000 in population ranking it positively (indicating those large jurisdiction respondents generally indicated it was a more necessary priority for future success than the average issue).

Career respondents generally ranked **“Diversity/Inclusion & Civic Engagement”** substantially higher than political appointees. Our results found career officials as a whole ranked this issue as seventh out of the eleven concerns, while political officials ranked it tenth.

Innovation and technology is practically neutral from a priority perspective

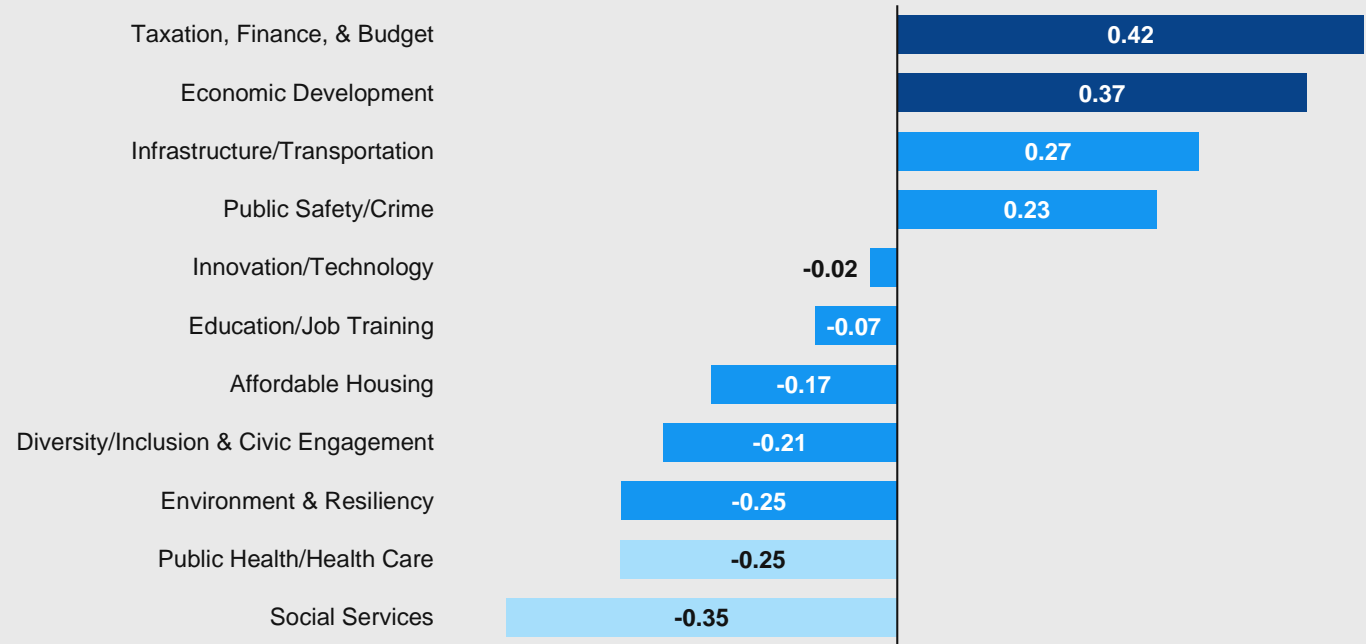
Respondents to our survey continuously ranked **“Innovation/Technology”** as an issue that is almost completely neutral as a priority—not a high or low priority. This remained the case across all the demographic cross-sections we tested.

Topline Findings

For success, Taxation, Finance, and Budget biggest priority; Social Services are lowest priority

Which of the following represent the most and least important issues your city/county must prioritize to be successful in the future?

All Respondents



Numbers represent 'max-diff' scores weighted by the number of times each option was shown; n=181.

Across the study, respondents identified (1) taxation, finance, and budget, (2) economic development, and (3) infrastructure/transportation as the three most highly prioritized issues in local government.

The rank order displayed above reflects respondents' prioritization of issues with an eye towards future success. Issues ranked higher should be seen as more closely linked to perceived future success and those ranked lower should be seen as less closely linked.

The three issues ranked as least important for future success are (1) social services, (2) public health/health care, and (3) environment and resiliency.

Taxation, Finance, and Budget

was identified as the top priority for local government in 2018.

Summary of Demographic Findings

Jurisdiction Size

Jurisdiction size accounts for some of the largest differences between the study's demographic groups. While Affordable Housing was the lowest priority for those in jurisdictions with less than 25,000 residents, it was fifth-highest for those in cities/counties with more than 150,000 residents. Similarly, whereas respondents in jurisdictions with more than 150,000 residents ranked Infrastructure/Transportation as their top priority, it was only third-most and fourth-most important for those in mid-sized cities (25,000 to 150,000 residents) and smaller cities (less than 25,000 residents), respectively.

Large States vs. All Other States

Respondents in the nation's largest states – that is, the ten states with the largest populations in the United States – rank Infrastructure/Transportation more highly than their counterparts in smaller states. They are also much more likely to prioritize Environment and Resiliency: Individuals in the ten most populous states rank this issue even above Public Health/Health Care, whereas those in smaller states rank it below all other issues in the study.

Political vs. Career Respondents

Despite some similarities, the priorities of individuals in career government positions differ considerably from those of elected/appointed officials. While Infrastructure/Transportation is just the fourth-most prioritized issue for officials, those in career positions rate it as their top priority. Similarly, while Diversity/Inclusion and Civic Engagement is given considerable weight by career respondents, those in elected/appointed official capacities see it as the second-least important issue after Social Services.

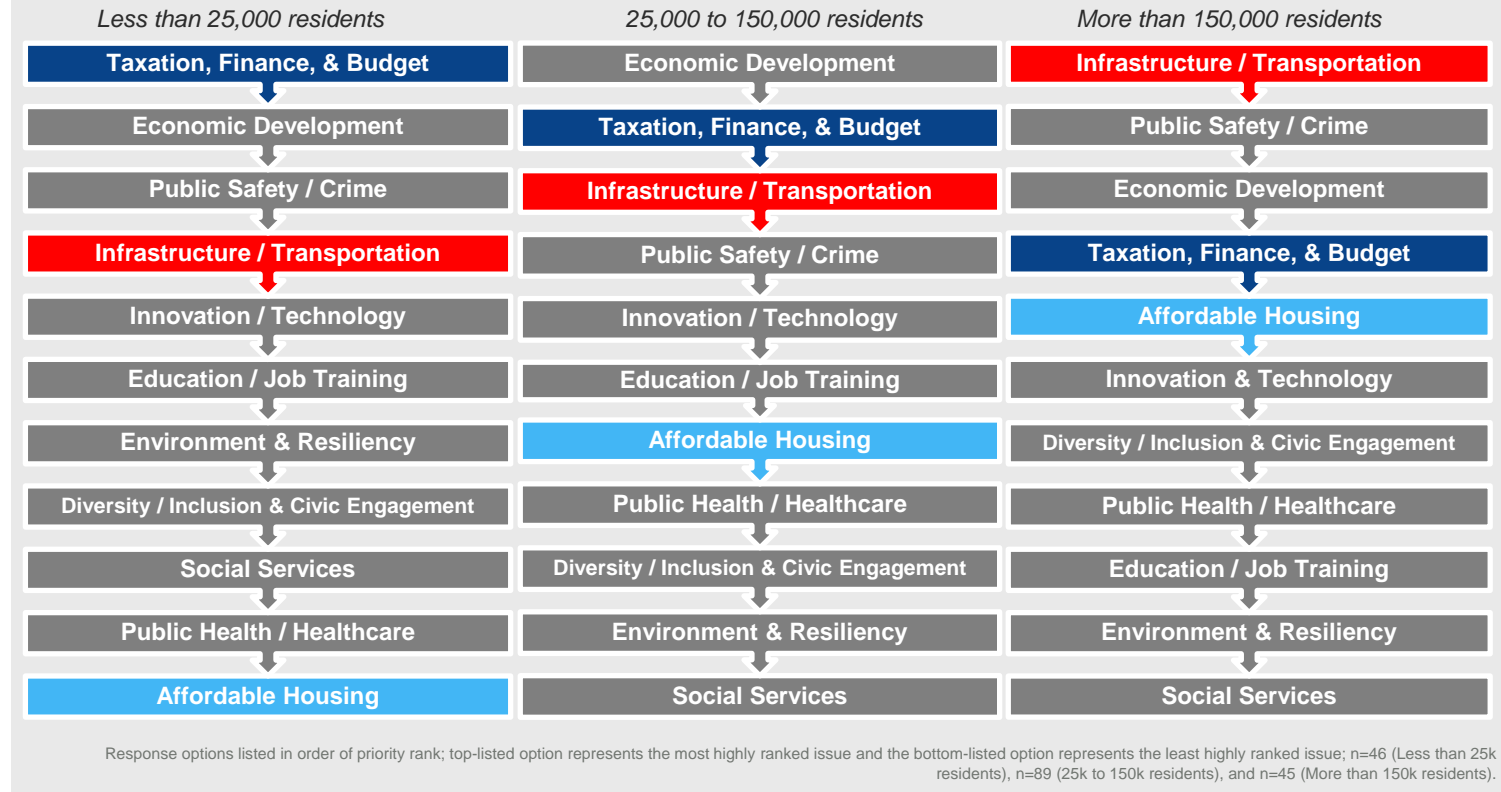
Primary Mission Area

Along with Economic Development and Infrastructure/Transportation, individuals in executive/legislative office functions and those in other primary mission areas prioritize Taxation, Finance, and Budget. Respondents in non-executive/legislative office mission areas prioritize Public Health/Health Care significantly higher than those in executive/legislative office roles.

Jurisdiction Size (1/4)

Officials in larger cities are more likely to prioritize Affordable housing; those in mid-sized cities place focus on Economic Development

Which of the following represent the most and least important issues your city/county must prioritize to be successful in the future?



The rank-order of issues varies considerably across jurisdiction size categories. While taxation, finance, and budget is among the two most highly ranked priorities for respondents in small- and medium-sized cities, those in larger cities tend to see infrastructure/transportation as a higher priority.

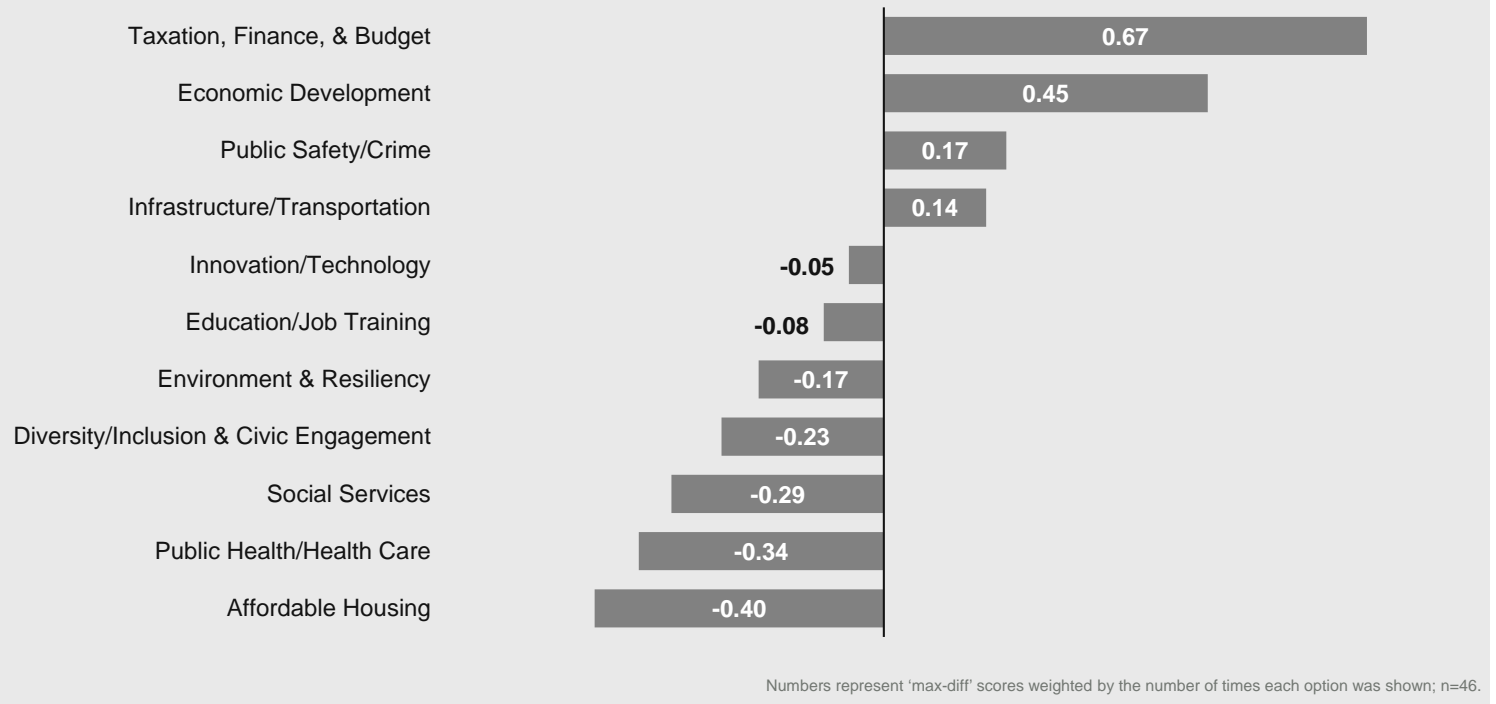
Similarly, affordable housing is a larger priority for larger cities. Respondents in small cities (i.e., those with fewer than 25,000 residents) do not prioritize this issue at all; conversely, individuals in the largest cities (i.e., those with more than 150,000 residents) place affordable housing in the same realm as taxation, finance, and budget.

Jurisdiction Size (2/4)

Officials from smaller cities prioritize Taxation, Finance, and Budget.; do not see Affordable Housing as major issue

Which of the following represent the most and least important issues your city/county must prioritize to be successful in the future?

Respondents from Cities with <25,000 Residents



Of the three jurisdiction sized-based groups, respondents from smaller cities prioritized taxation, finance, and budget most highly; they were also the only group not to include infrastructure/transportation among their top three priorities.

Taxation, finance, and budget

Similarly, while public health/health care and affordable housing were middle-tier and top priorities for those in medium- and large-sized cities, respondents from smaller jurisdictions rated both issues among their lowest priorities.

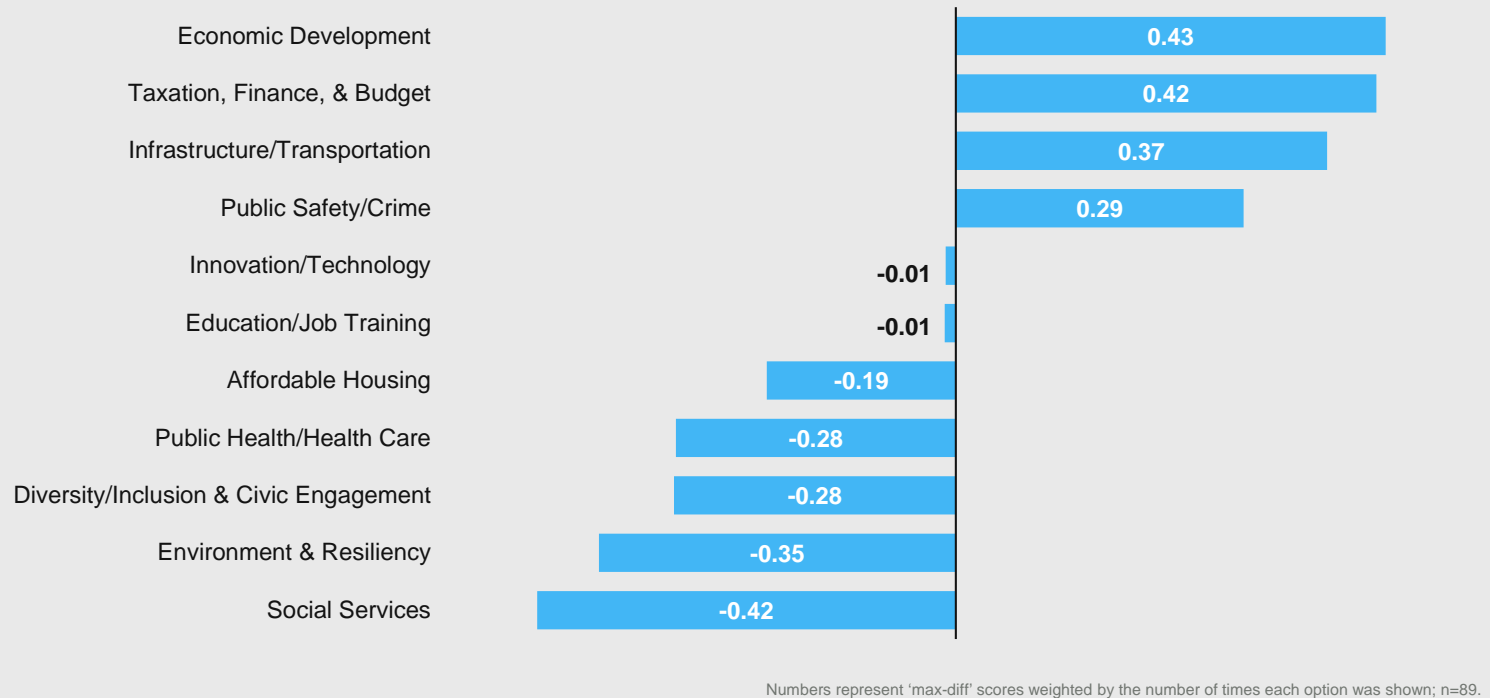
is the top-ranked issue for respondents in cities with fewer than 25,000 residents.

Jurisdiction Size (3/4)

In addition to Taxation, Finance, and Budget, mid-size cities concerned with Economic Development and Infrastructure/Transportation

Which of the following represent the most and least important issues your city/county must prioritize to be successful in the future?

Respondents from Cities with 25,000 to 150,000 Residents



For respondents that work in mid-sized cities (i.e., those with 25,000 to 150,000 residents), economic development and taxation, finance, and budget are the biggest points of focus. They also see infrastructure/transportation as an important factor in the future success of their jurisdictions, but rate it less highly than respondents in larger cities.

Economic development

While not in the ranks of the most highly rated issues for individuals in mid-sized cities, affordable housing is notably more important for this group compared to those in smaller cities.

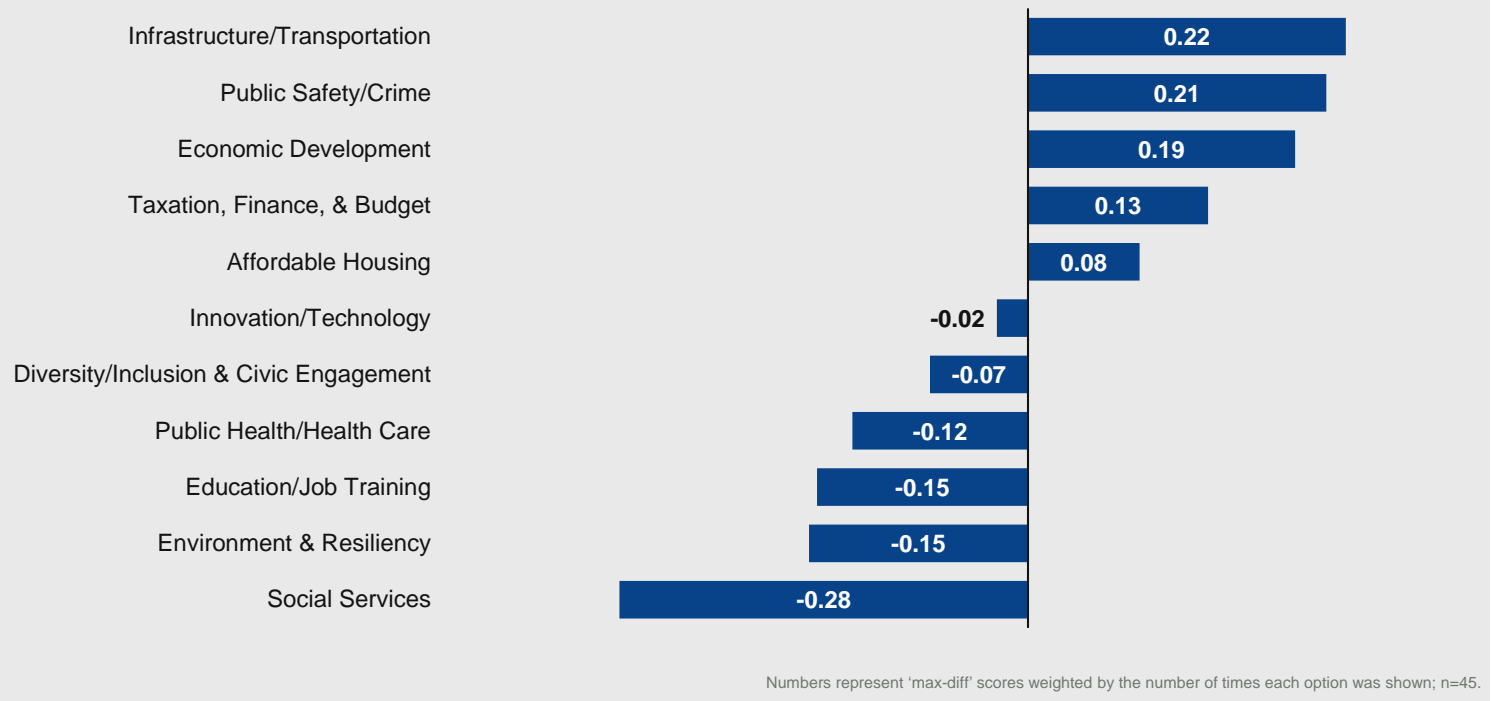
was the top priority for local government employees in medium-sized cities.

Jurisdiction Size (4/4)

Respondents from largest cities prioritize Infrastructure/Transportation, Public Safety/Crime, and Economic Development

Which of the following represent the most and least important issues your city/county must prioritize to be successful in the future?

Respondents from Cities with >150,000 Residents



Infrastructure/transportation and public safety/crime are the largest priorities for respondents from larger cities. According to those in jurisdictions with more than 150,000 residents, economic development is another front-of-mind concern. Conversely, social services, education/job training, and environment and resiliency are relatively low priorities.

Individuals in larger metropolitan areas are also least likely to prioritize education/job training, assigning this issue the lowest rank of any jurisdiction size-based demographic group.

Infrastructure / Transportation

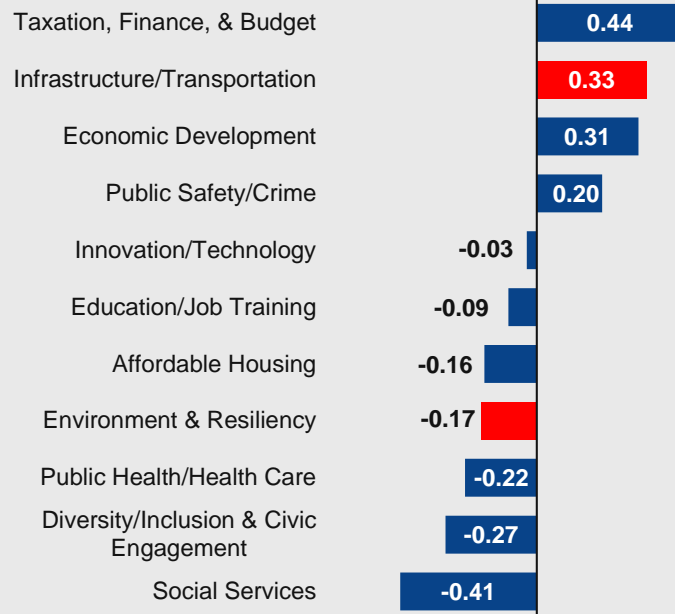
was the top priority for local government officials in cities with more than 150,000 residents.

Large States vs. All Other States (1/3)

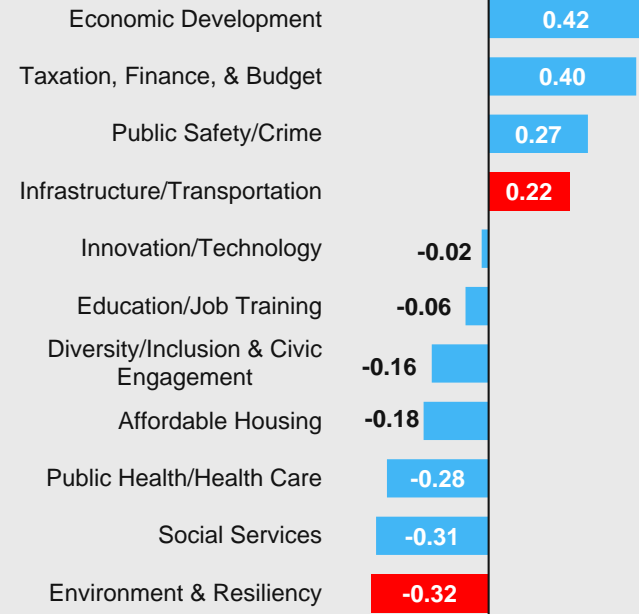
Respondents from large states are more likely to prioritize Infrastructure/Transportation, Environment and Resiliency

Which of the following represent the most and least important issues your city/county must prioritize to be successful in the future?

Large States (Top Ten in U.S. by Population)



All Other States



Numbers represent 'max-diff' scores weighted by the number of times each option was shown; n=84 (Large States) and n=97 (All Other States).

Individuals in larger states (i.e., the ten most populous states in the US) differ from their counterparts in smaller states in a few important ways. For example, while respondents from the ten largest states largely discount diversity/inclusion and civic engagement as one of their lower priorities, those in smaller states rate it ahead of issues like affordable housing and public health/health care.

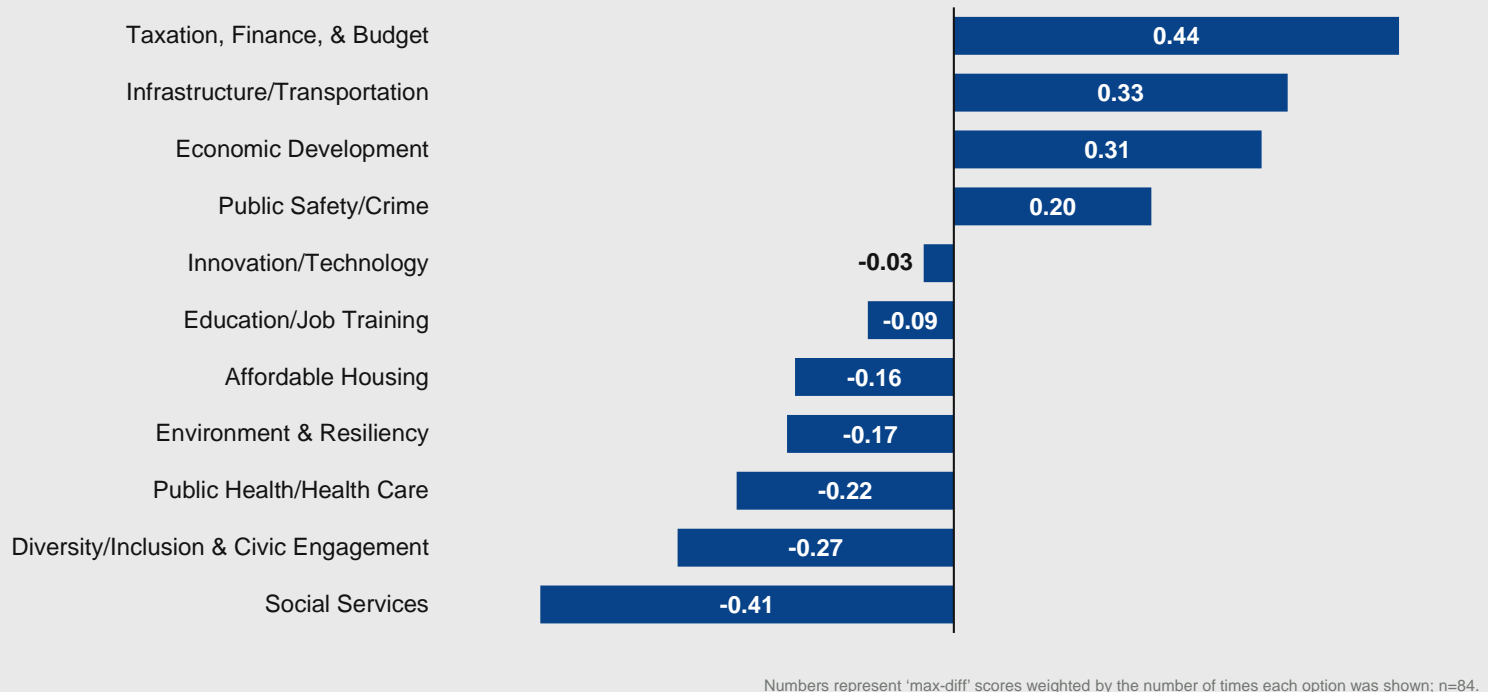
Similarly, while public safety/crime is in the top three priorities for individuals in smaller states, local government respondents in large states are more acutely concerned with infrastructure/transportation. Those in larger states also rate environment and resiliency much more highly than their small-state counterparts, who place this issue at the very bottom of their priority lists.

Large States vs. All Other States (2/3)

Respondents from the largest states care most about Taxation, Finance, Budget; also prioritize Infrastructure/Transportation and Economic Development

Which of the following represent the most and least important issues your city/county must prioritize to be successful in the future?

Large States (Top Ten in U.S. by Population)



Taxation, finance, and budget tops the list of concerns for respondents from large states. They are also likely to prioritize infrastructure/transportation and economic development.

This cohort is fairly similar to the typical respondent in this study, except that they are somewhat more likely to prioritize public health/health care and environment and resiliency.

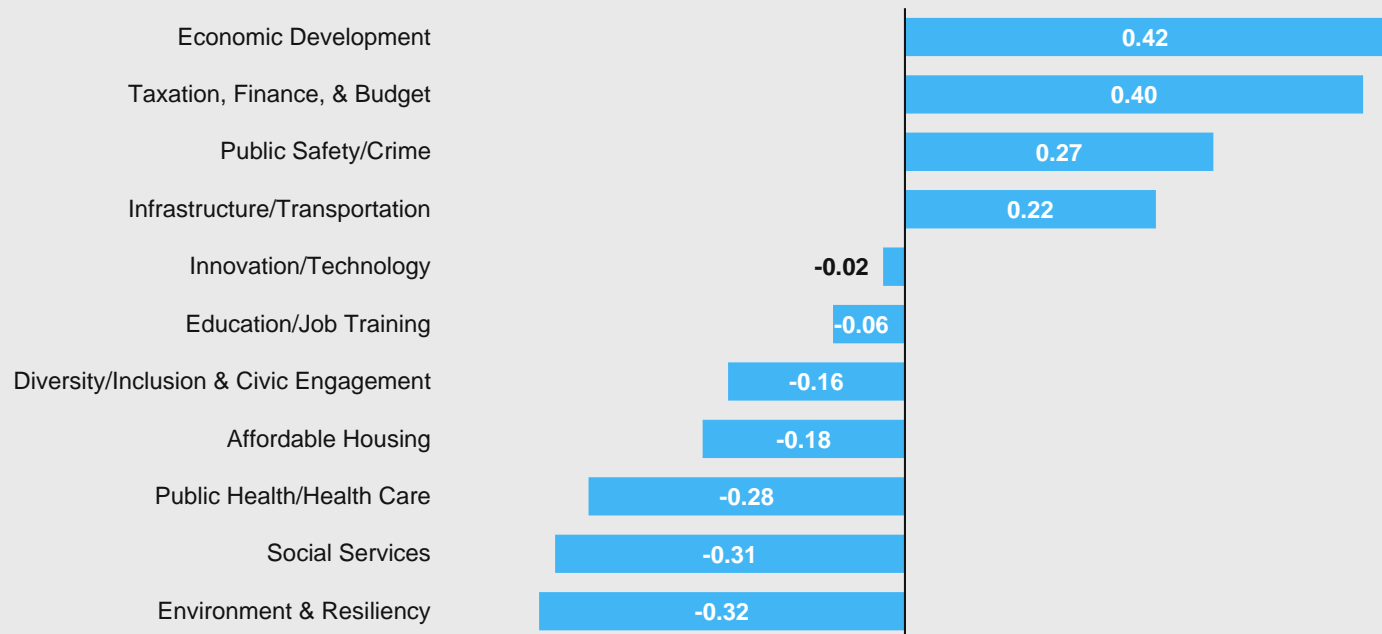
Public health/health care, environment and resiliency are more highly ranked among respondents from large states compared to the typical respondent in the study.

Large States vs. All Other States (3/3)

Respondents from smaller states also prioritize Taxation, Finance, and Budget; add Public Safety/Crime to the list of top concerns

Which of the following represent the most and least important issues your city/county must prioritize to be successful in the future?

All Other States



Numbers represent 'max-diff' scores weighted by the number of times each option was shown; n=97.

Economic development and public safety/crime appear towards the top of the priority list for local government in smaller states, in addition to taxation, finance, and budget. Conversely, these respondents place relatively little emphasis on environment and resiliency, social services, and public health/health care.

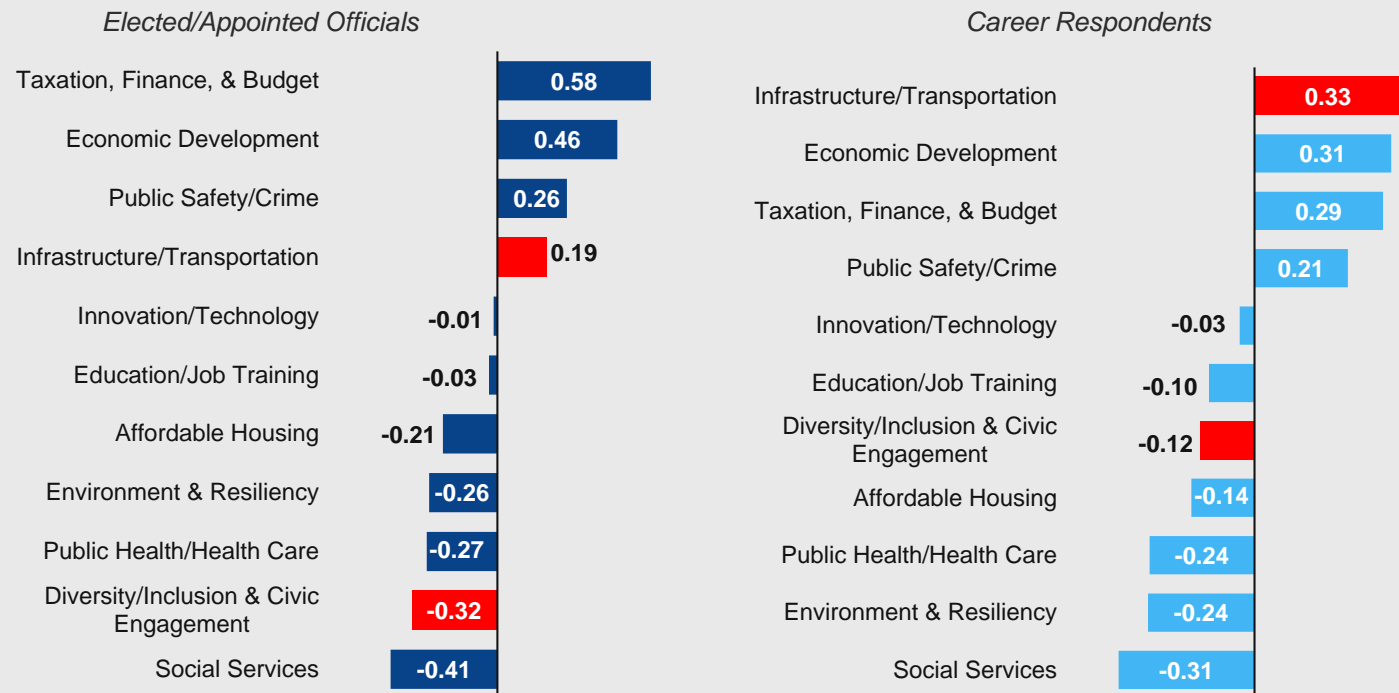
Economic development

is the top priority for future success among respondents in smaller states; taxation, finance, and budget is also key.

Political vs. Career (1/3)

Elected/appointed officials more likely to prioritize Taxation, Finance, and Budget; Economic Development follows as the second-highest priority

Which of the following represent the most and least important issues your city/county must prioritize to be successful in the future?



Numbers represent 'max-diff' scores weighted by the number of times each option was shown; n=79 (Elected/Appointed Officials) and n=102 (Career Respondents).

Elected/appointed officials were significantly more likely to prioritize public safety/crime, mostly ranking this issue highly in lieu of infrastructure/transportation. Conversely, infrastructure/transportation was the top-ranked priority for respondents in career positions within local government.

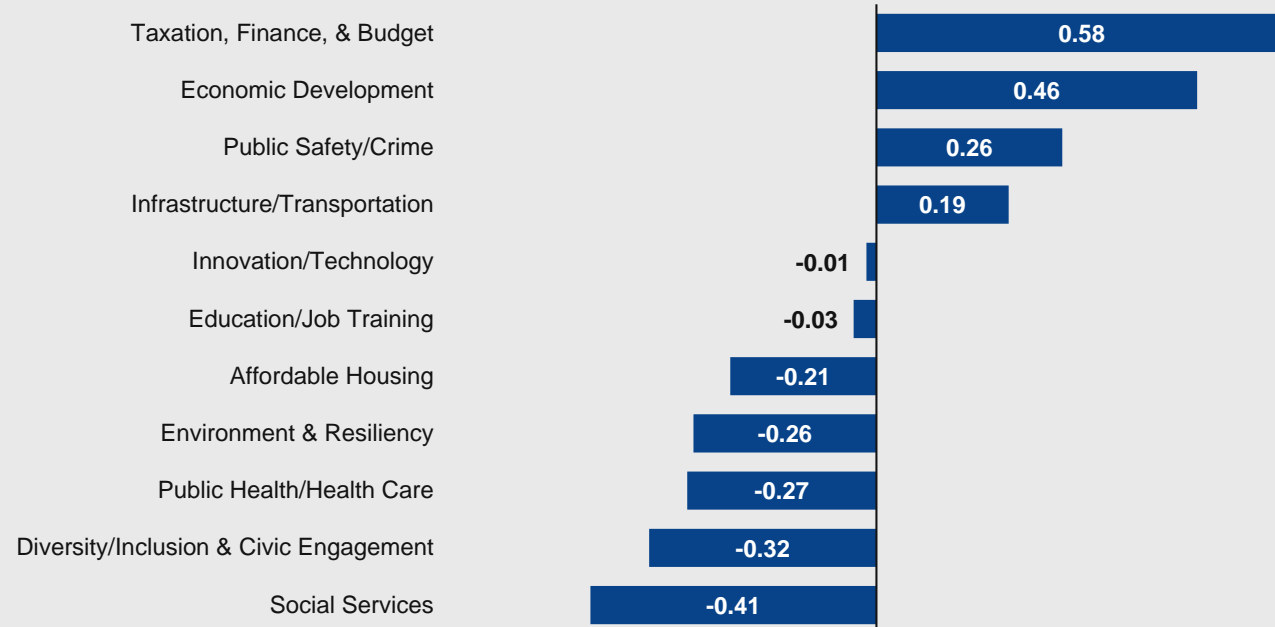
Still, these two groups have more similarities than differences: Both elected/appointed officials and career government staff rank economic development and taxation, finance, and budget among the top three priority issues for their jurisdictions. Additionally, they both rank social services and public health/health care towards the bottom of their issue lists.

Political vs. Career (2/3)

Elected/appointed officials prioritize Taxation, etc.; Economic Development; Public Safety/Crime

Which of the following represent the most and least important issues your city/county must prioritize to be successful in the future?

Elected/Appointed Officials



Numbers represent 'max-diff' scores weighted by the number of times each option was shown; n=79.

As with other demographic groups segmented in this study, elected/appointed officials in local government rated taxation, finance, and budget as their top priority. Economic development and public safety/crime were also included in the top three priorities for elected/appointed officials, which is especially noteworthy given the low ranking that public safety/crime received from other groups.

Public safety/crime

Additionally, elected/appointed officials ranked public health/health care – an issue receiving at least moderate priority for other demographic groups – lower than typical. Like other groups, social services and diversity/inclusion and civic engagement were in the bottom three for this respondent group.

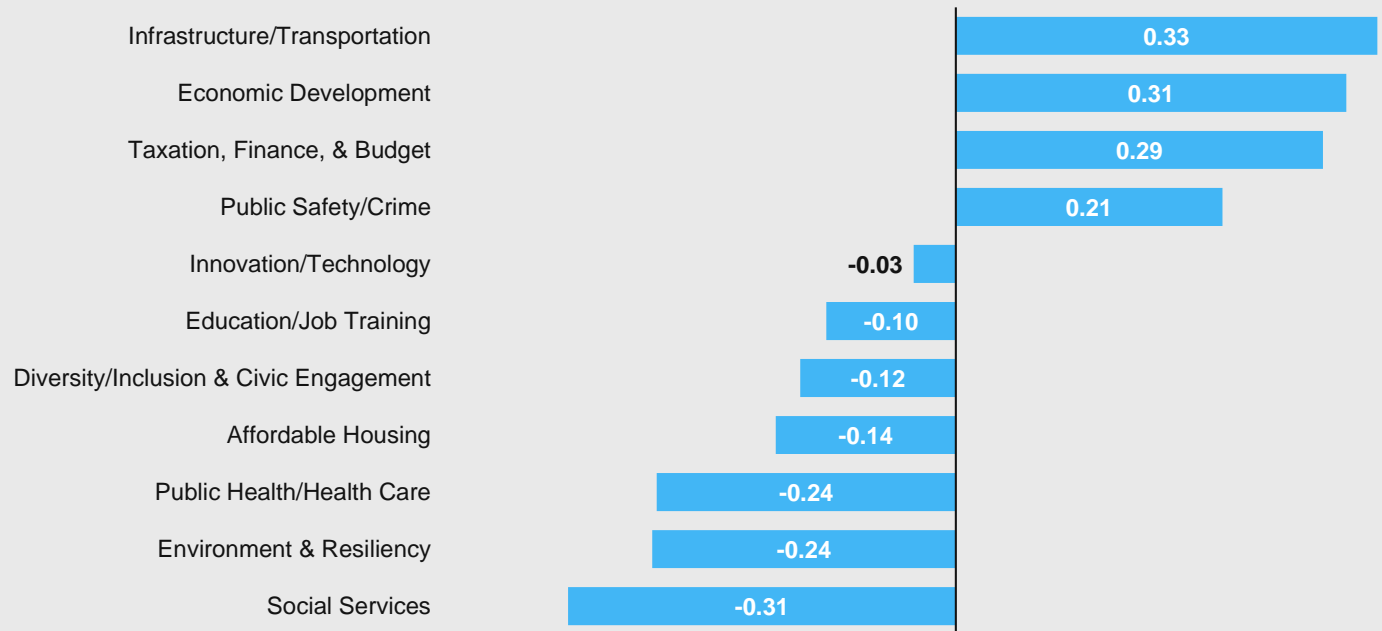
was among the three most highly ranked priorities for elected/appointed officials in local government.

Political vs. Career (3/3)

Career respondents prioritize Infrastructure/Transportation; Economic Development; Taxation, etc.

Which of the following represent the most and least important issues your city/county must prioritize to be successful in the future?

Career Respondents



Numbers represent 'max-diff' scores weighted by the number of times each option was shown; n=102.

Infrastructure/transportation is the top priority for respondents in career staff positions in local government. While this is the most highly ranked issue, individuals in non-official positions also see economic development and taxation, finance, and budget as keys to their jurisdiction's future success.

**Infrastructure /
Transportation**

Diversity/inclusion and civic engagement ranks more highly for this demographic group than for others, perhaps indicating a unique component of these individuals' government roles. As with other respondent segments, social services, public health/health care, and environment and resiliency are ranked low.

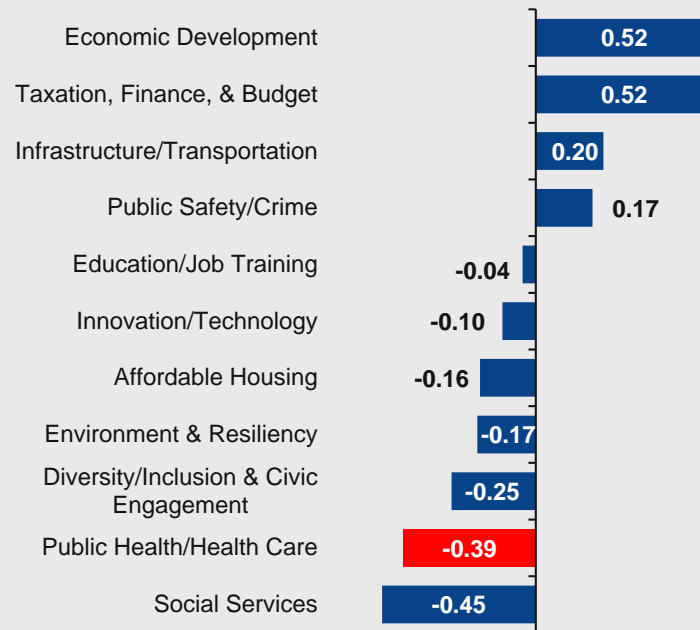
was ranked most highly by local government respondents in career staff positions.

Primary Mission Area (1/3)

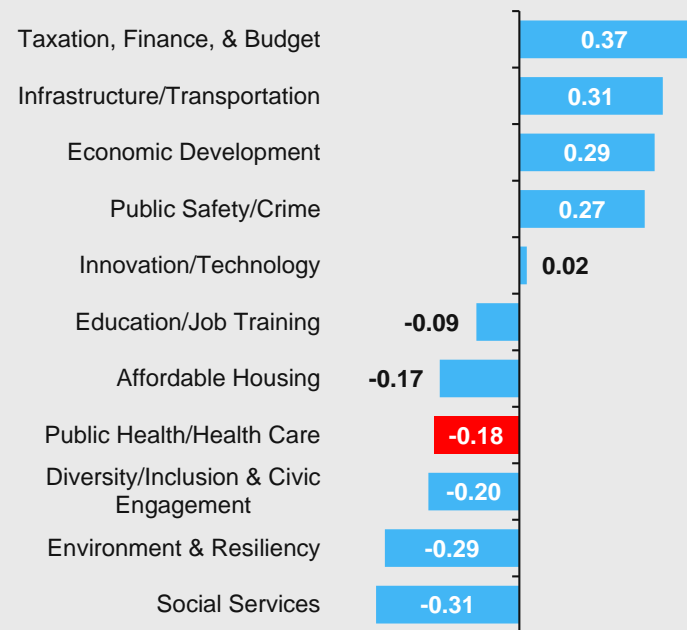
Respondents in executive/legislative office roles more likely to prioritize Taxation, Finance, and Budget; also see Economic Development as key

Which of the following represent the most and least important issues your city/county must prioritize to be successful in the future?

Executive/Legislative Office Respondents



All Other Mission Areas



Numbers represent 'max-diff' scores weighted by the number of times each option was shown; n=61 (Executive/Legislative Office Respondents) and n=120 (All Other Mission Areas).

While the top three priorities (economic development; taxation, finance, and budget; and infrastructure/transportation) were the same for both groups, the orders differed. Whereas those whose organizations are oriented towards executive/legislative office missions rank economic development as their top priority, it is only the third-most important priority for respondents in other mission areas.

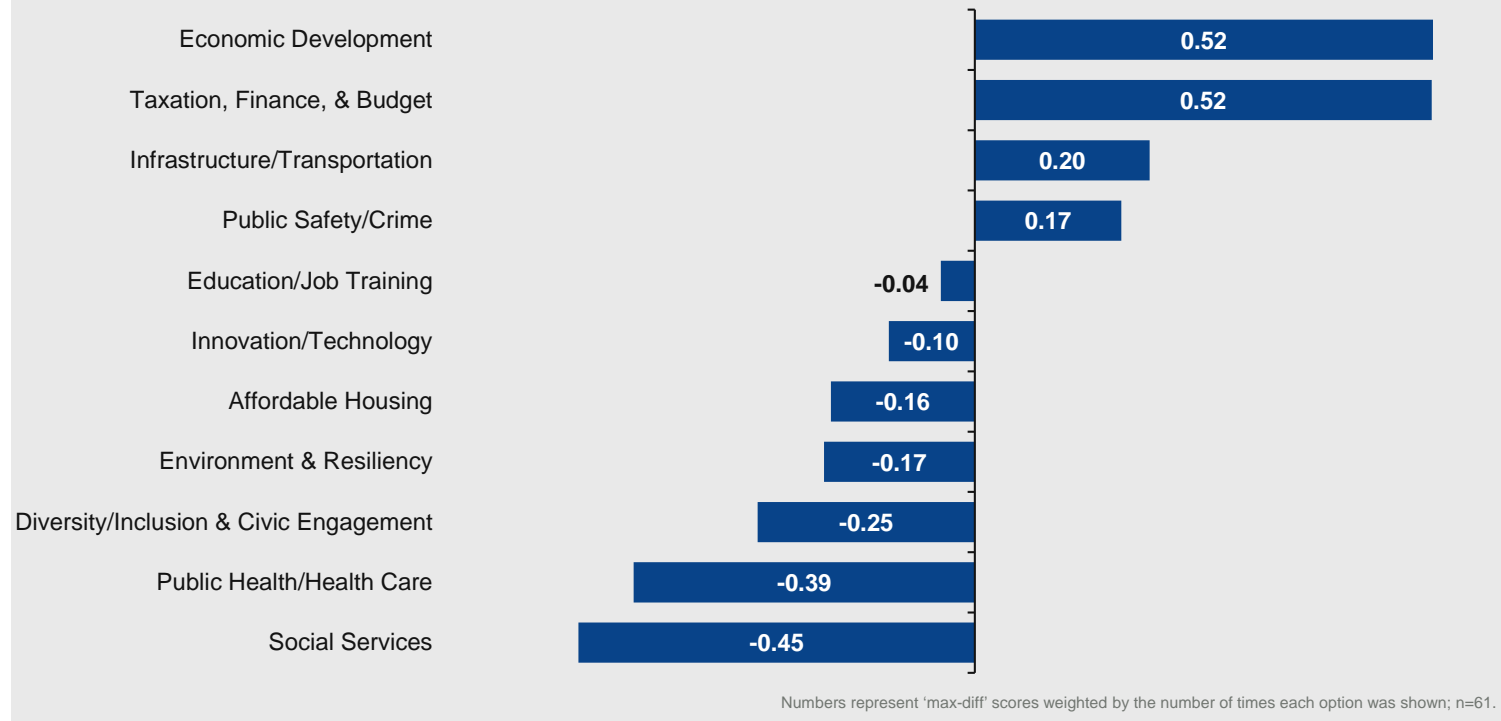
Similarly, there were differences in the issues ranked least important. While individuals in non-executive/legislative missions rated environment and resiliency as their second-least important option, this was staunchly in the middle tier of concern for their counterparts executive/legislative missions. Public health/health care was also a higher priority for those in non-executive/legislative office mission areas.

Primary Mission Area (2/3)

Economic development and Taxation, Finance, and Budget were the top priorities for individuals in executive/legislative office mission areas; Infrastructure/Transportation a distant third

Which of the following represent the most and least important issues your city/county must prioritize to be successful in the future?

Executive/Legislative Office Respondents



Economic development and taxation, finance, and budget were tied for the most highly prioritized issue for local government officials in executive/legislative mission areas. Concern about infrastructure/transportation was also ranked highly by these respondents.

Conversely, social services, public health/health care, and diversity/inclusion and civic engagement are the lowest priorities.

Economic development

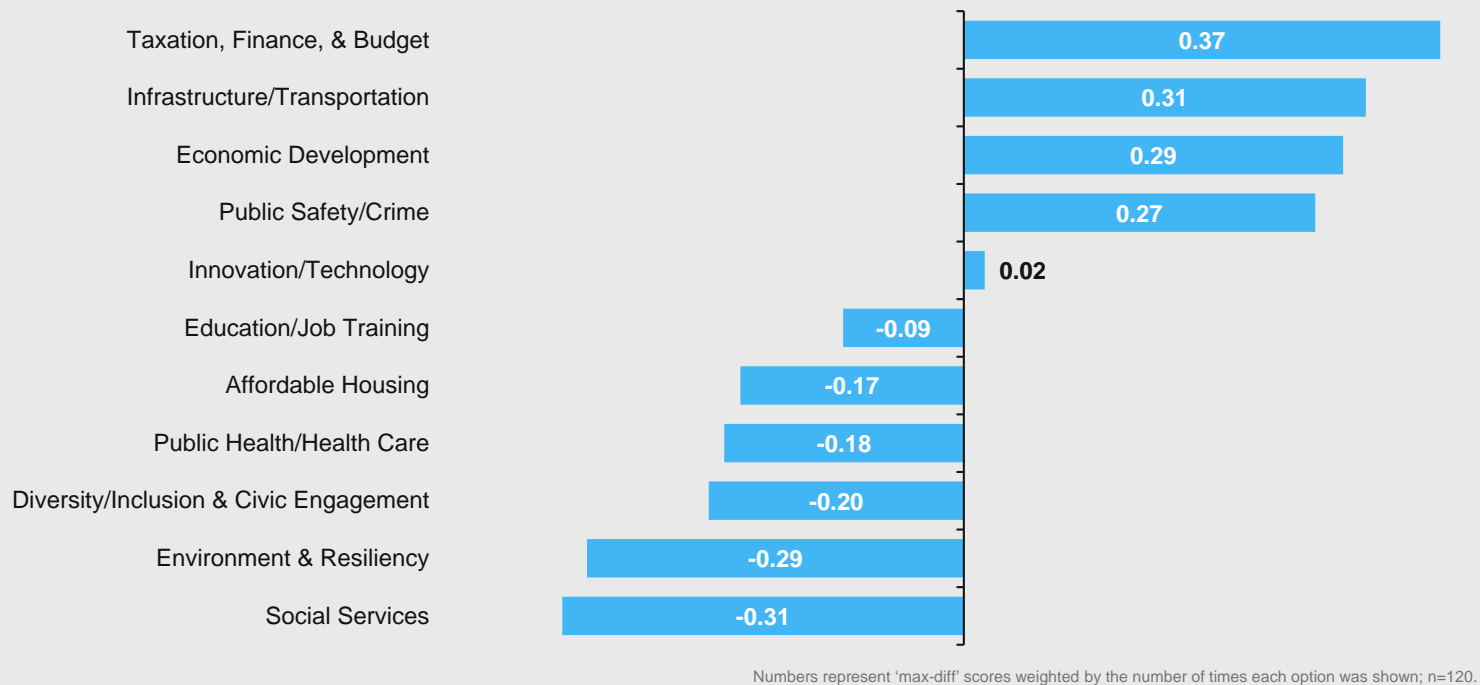
was the top issue identified by respondents serving in executive/legislative mission areas.

Primary Mission Area (3/3)

Respondents in other mission areas still prioritize Taxation, Finance, and Budget; more likely to prioritize Infrastructure and Transportation

Which of the following represent the most and least important issues your city/county must prioritize to be successful in the future?

All Other Mission Areas



Individuals in mission areas other than executive/legislative offices were most likely to care about taxation, finance, and budget. Though infrastructure/transportation and economic development were ranked lower, they were still highlighted as priority issues for these local government respondents.

Taxation, Finance, and Budget

Like those in executive/legislative mission areas, the respondents identified here are considerably less likely to prioritize social services and diversity/inclusion and civic engagement; environment and resiliency was also not a notable priority in this study.

was the top issue identified by respondents serving in non-executive/legislative mission areas.

Final Thoughts

Local officials' priorities mirror the national environment

Concerns about the job market, economic growth and financial stability seem to be a priority for most leaders. Earlier this year, *Route Fifty* found that only 35 percent of state and local government employees believed that their partners at other levels of government provided predictable financial support for their mission.

National League of Cities' City Fiscal Conditions Report from late last year also showed "the start of fiscal contraction in the municipal sector following several years of post-recession growth." That may be reflected in the high prioritization of economic drivers and financial stability.

National infrastructure needs are felt acutely at the local level

As federal and state funds for infrastructure dwindle, infrastructure investment and maintenance has become increasingly burdensome for local governments. Despite being vital to economic development, infrastructure remains in a dire state across the country. In 2017, the American Society of Civil Engineers rated our nation's infrastructure as a "D+" on a A to F scale. The report [warned](#) that "Deteriorating infrastructure is impeding our ability to compete in the thriving global economy, and improvements are necessary to ensure our country is built for the future."

Career public officials are particularly concerned, as the signs of rot in our infrastructure are less visible to the average citizen. However, the prioritization of infrastructure should be a warning to all levels of government.

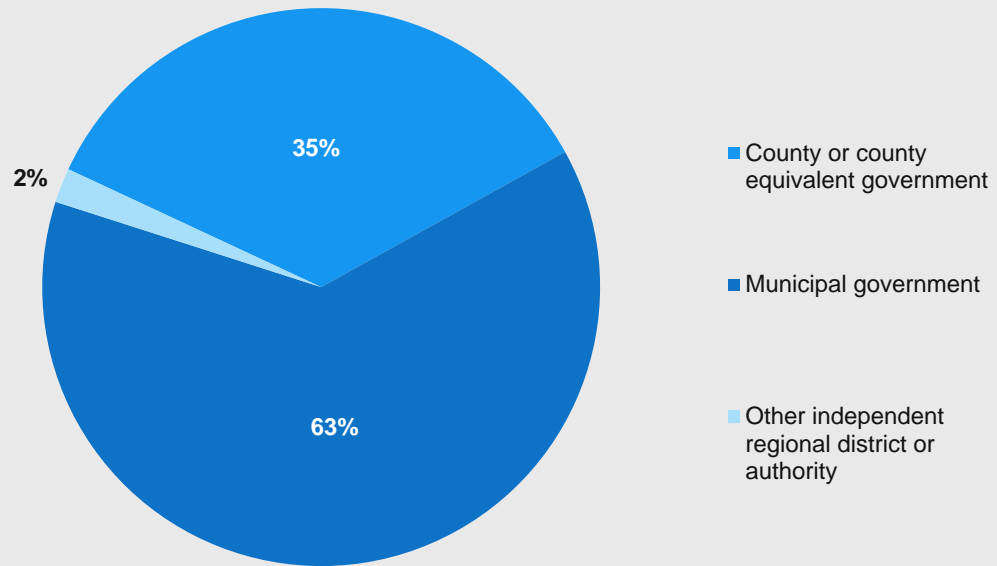
Champions of social programs, citizen-focused services, environmental resilience and equity must be vocal about their prioritization to local leaders

In a time of increasing inequity, our survey results show less of a focus on prioritizing citizen-focused services among local government officials. This comes at a time when Congress, the Trump administration and some states have looked at new requirements—and rollbacks—for key programs that help the neediest people.

The prioritization gap between the financial welfare of the government, economic development and support for policies that lift up those who may have been left behind by economic success should raise some red flags for those who believe such programs are vital to the nation's future success. Education of officials on how these programs fuel economic vibrancy and sound fiscal conditions may be necessary for those that are concerned by these results.

Respondent Profile

Which best describes your employment situation?



Percentage of respondents, n=181
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

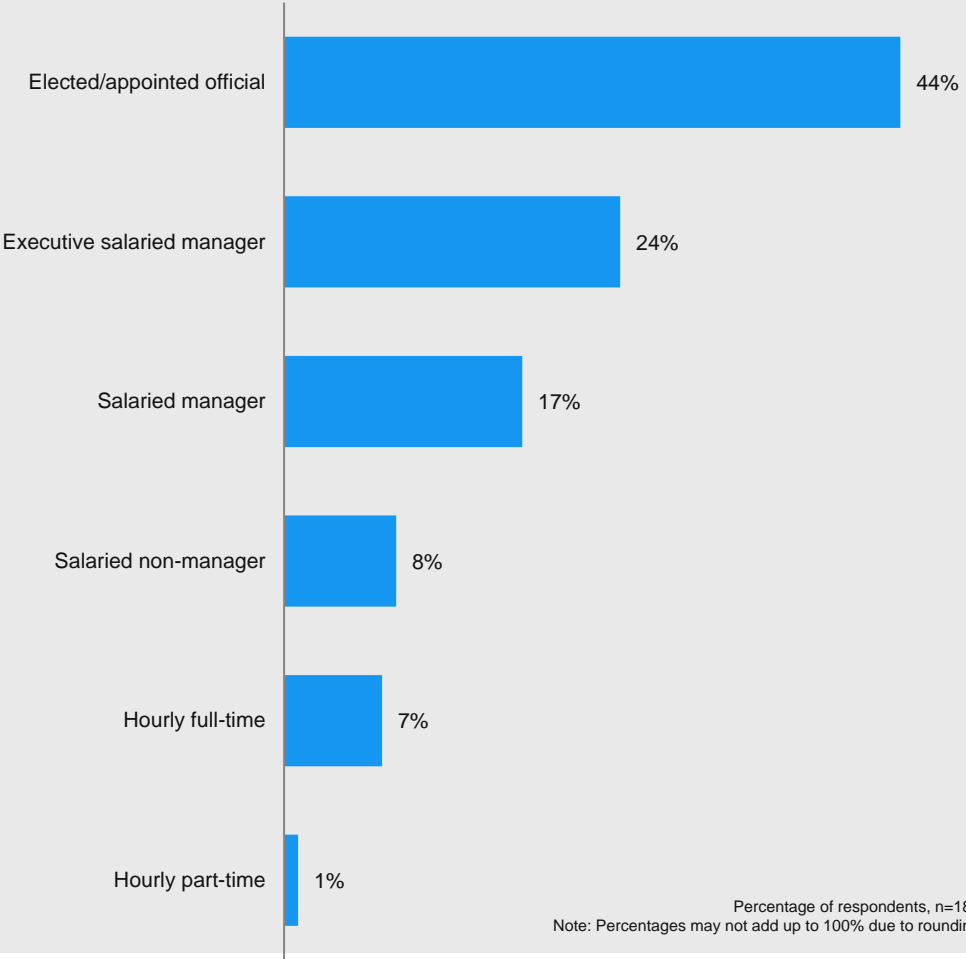
While most respondents work in municipal government, those in county or county equivalent government are also well-represented.

Nearly two-thirds

of respondents work in municipal government; 35% report serving in county or county equivalent agencies.

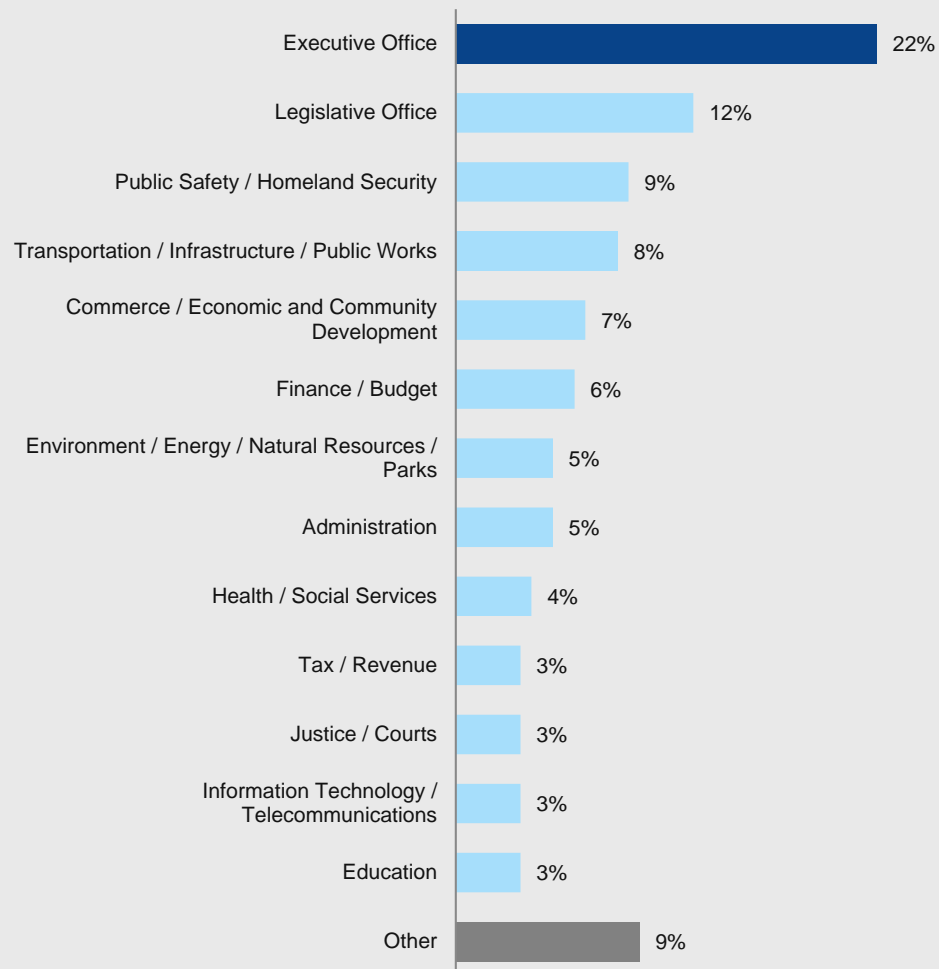
Respondents were primarily elected/appointed officials or senior career government staff

Which best describes your role within your organization in your current job?



Respondents represent a variety of mission areas; executive/legislative offices are most common

Which of the following best describes your organization's primary mission area?

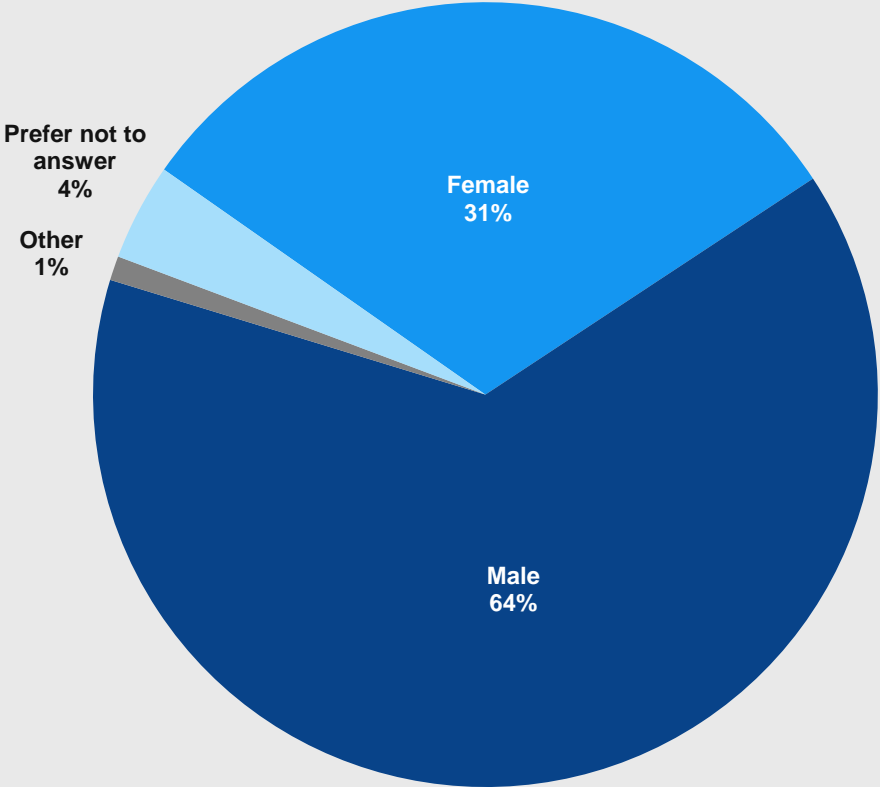


Percentage of respondents, n=181
 Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

More than one-third

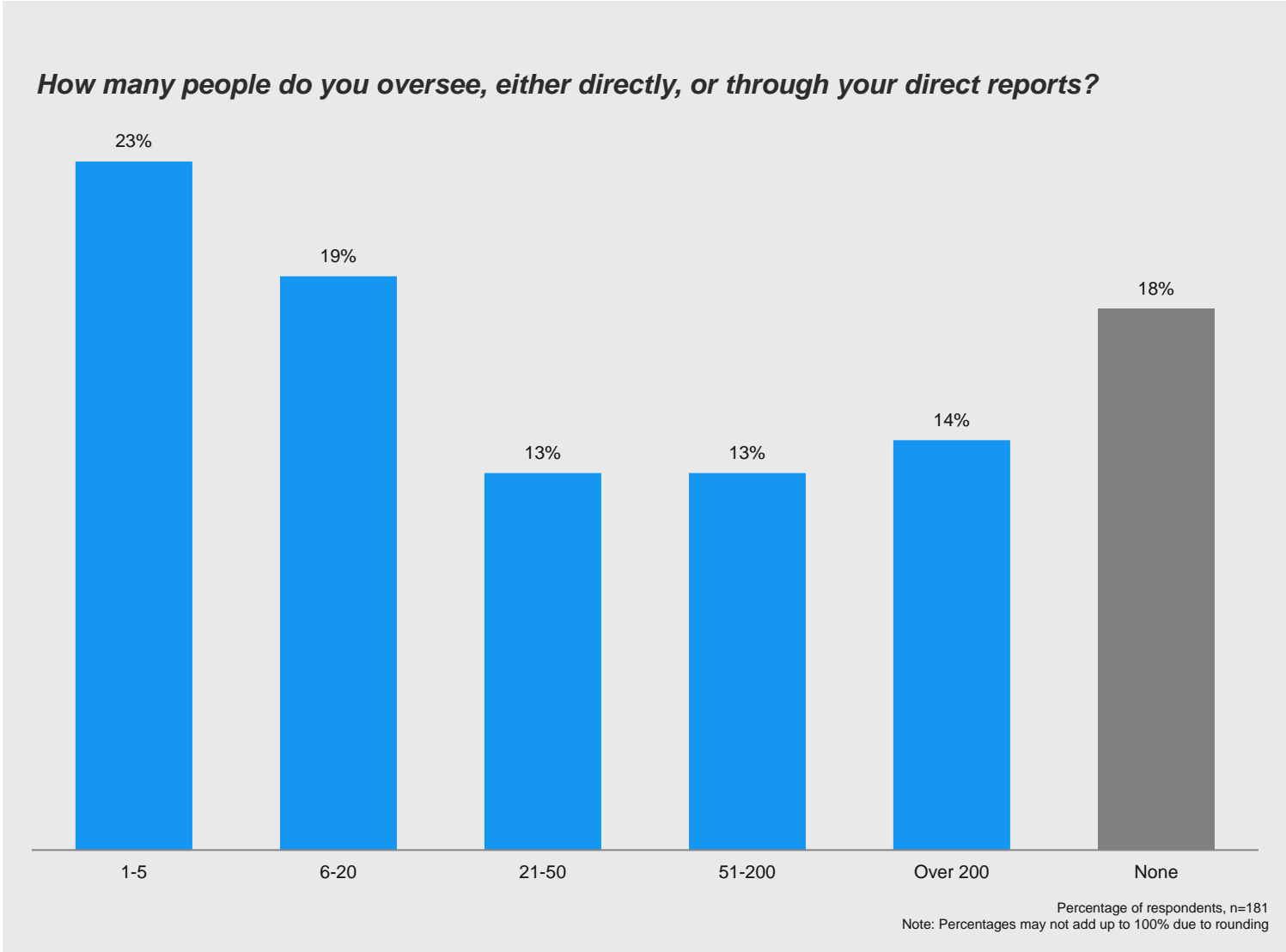
of respondents reported working in executive or legislative offices.

Please indicate your gender.

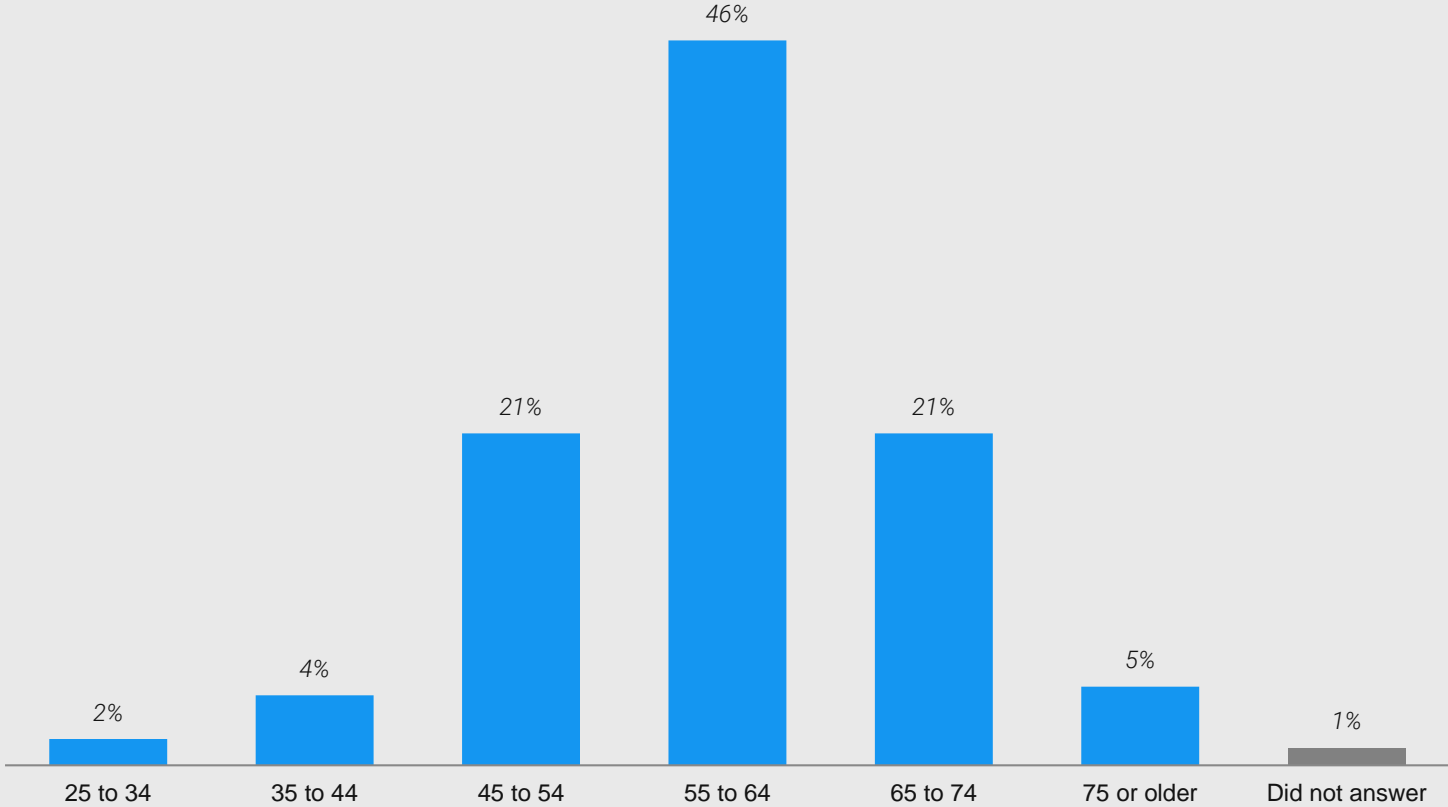


Percentage of respondents, n=181
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Respondents are primarily in junior- or senior-level managerial positions



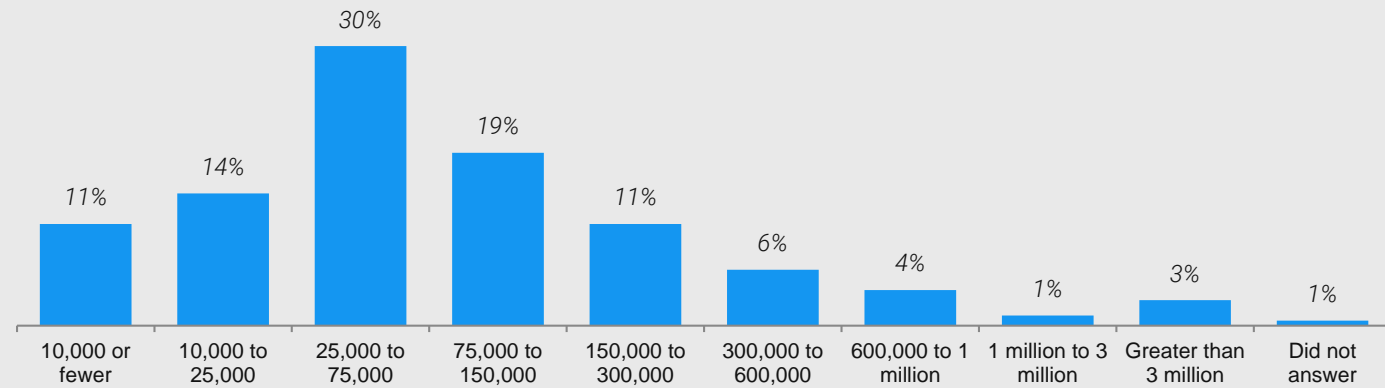
What is your age?



Percentage of respondents, n=181
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

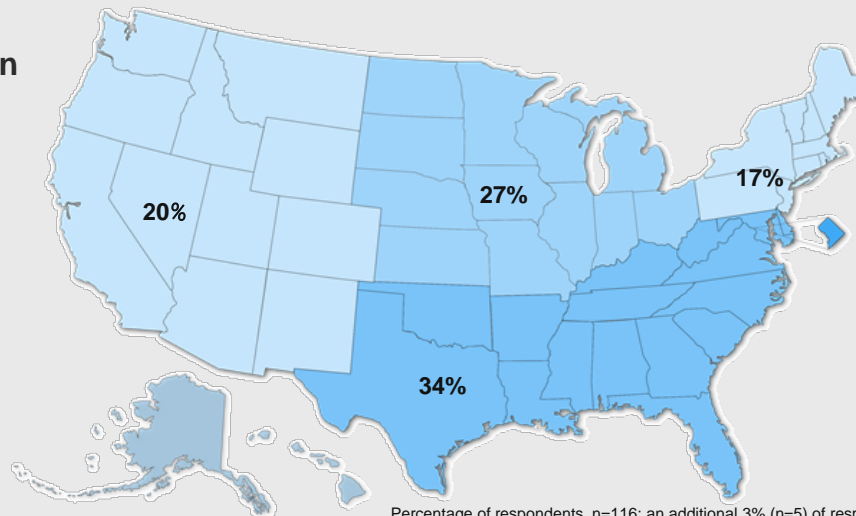
Individuals surveyed for this study represent a variety of jurisdiction sizes and geographic regions

Approximately how many people live in your jurisdiction?



Percentage of respondents, n=181
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Census-based region



Percentage of respondents, n=116; an additional 3% (n=5) of respondents did not answer this question.
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Respondents originally provided state of residence and were aggregated into the Census-designated regions above.

Appendix

Demographic Segmentations

Primary Mission Area

Respondents were asked to select which of the following best describes their organization's mission area:

- **Administration (e.g., Procurement, HR, Building/Fleet Management)**
- **Commerce/Economic and Community Development**
- **Education**
- **Environment / Energy / Natural Resources / Parks**
- **Executive Office (e.g., Governor, Mayor)**
- **Finance / Budget**
- **Health / Social Services**
- **Information Technology / Telecommunications**
- **Justice / Courts**
- **Legislative Office (e.g., Council, State Legislature)**
- **Public Safety / Homeland Security**
- **Tax / Revenue**
- **Transportation / Infrastructure / Public Works**
- **Other**

Demographic Segmentations

Large States vs. All Others

The study used secondary population data to identify the ten most populous states in the US. These ten states were categorized as 'Large States' and the remaining states as 'All Others.'*

The largest states, in order from most populous to least:

- **California**
- **Texas**
- **Florida**
- **New York**
- **Pennsylvania**
- **Illinois**
- **Ohio**
- **Georgia**
- **North Carolina**
- **Michigan**

*These rankings are based on 2017 estimates of the resident population of each state, which is the most recent year of data.

Demographic Segmentations

Size of Jurisdiction

Respondents were asked approximately how many people live in their jurisdiction. They were presented with the following options:

- **10,000 or fewer**
- **10,000 to 25,000**
- **25,000 to 75,000**
- **75,000 to 150,000**
- **150,000 to 300,000**
- **300,000 to 600,000**
- **600,000 to 1 million**
- **1 million to 3 million**
- **Greater than 3 million**

Political vs. Career Respondents

Respondents were asked which best describes their role within their organization at their current job. They were presented with the following options:

- **Elected / appointed official**
- **Executive salaried manager**
- **Salaried manager**
- **Salaried non-manager**
- **Hourly full-time**
- **Hourly part-time**

About



Route Fifty

Route Fifty is a digital publication from Atlantic Media's Government Executive Media Group connecting the people and ideas advancing state, county and municipal government across the United States. It's focus on innovation and best practices in governments, as well as news and policy, is read by thousands of state and local leaders around the United States.

Report Author: Mitchel Herckis

Government Business Council



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Research Support: Igor Geyn



United States Conference of Mayors

The United States Conference of Mayors (USCM) is the official non-partisan organization of cities with populations of 30,000 or more. There are 1,408 such cities in the country today. Each city is represented in the Conference by its chief elected official, the mayor.



Amazon Web Services (AWS)

Amazon Web Services (AWS) Worldwide Public Sector helps government, education, and nonprofit customers deploy cloud services to reduce costs, drive efficiencies, and increase innovation. With AWS, you only pay for what you use, with no up-front physical infrastructure expenses or long-term commitments. Public Sector organizations of all sizes use AWS to build applications, host websites, harness big data, store information, conduct research, improve online access for citizens, and more. AWS has dedicated teams focused on helping our customers pave the way for innovation.

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