

2020 MENINO SURVEY OF MAYORS



COVID-19 RECOVERY AND THE FUTURE OF CITIES

SUPPORTED BY





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1. INTRODUCTION

In March of 2020, COVID-19 upended life in American cities. It tragically claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. It devastated families, economies, jobs, and routines. It also did so in manifestly unequal ways. Non-white and lower income residents were much more likely to die of COVID-19.^{1,2} Renters, especially non-white renters, were much more likely to face economic hardship, job losses, and severe economic burdens than homeowners.³ While nearly all small businesses faced serious threats, the threats varied by business type and business owner. Again, minorities were especially vulnerable.⁴

From the beginning, cities and mayors have had to deal with COVID-19's immediate consequences and its impact on their futures. They have had to make public health and economic decisions in an unprecedented public health and economic crisis. As part of the 2020 Menino Survey of Mayors, between June and August of 2020 we asked a nationally representative set of 130 mayors about the COVID-19 pandemic, their responses to it, and their expectations about its consequences. In this report, we outline mayors' a) responses to the global pandemic, b) perceptions of its impact, and c) expectations for the future of their cities.

While COVID-19 is an ongoing health, economic, and social crisis, much of this report is forward looking. Many of the questions are about mayors' expectations for the future. Thus, given the centrality of COVID-19 and related issues to cities and mayors, much of this report can be read as a summary of mayors' views on priorities and challenges in the coming months and years as they consider urban life beyond the pandemic.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mayors connected with each other, and especially with colleagues in nearby cities, in response to the unprecedented challenges posed by COVID-19: Mayors reached out to their colleagues in a wide variety of cities in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic to coordinate responses, identify best practices, and check in on each other. These connections included one-on-one calls, weekly meetings, group texting chains, and more structured talks coordinated by organizations. Mayors tended to connect with and look to their colleagues in nearby cities, leaders of professional organizations, and cities that were hit early by COVID-19.

Mayors expressed support (with some polarization) for potential state and federal policies that could strengthen the social safety net or address the economic fallout from COVID-19. They noted limitations with the amount of CARES Act money that was made available for their businesses: Mayors support a variety of

1 Wigglesworth, A. "Institutional racism, inequity fuel high minority death toll from coronavirus, L.A. officials say." Los Angeles Times (May 11, 2020): <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-05-11/institutional-racism-inequity-high-minority-death-toll-coronavirus>

2 Moore, J., et al. "Disparities in Incidence of COVID-19 Among Underrepresented Racial/Ethnic Groups in Counties Identified as Hotspots During June 5–18, 2020 — 22 States, February–June 2020." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (August 21, 2020): <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6933e1.htm>

3 Airgood-Obrycki, W. "The Impact of COVID-19 on Renters and Rental Markets." Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University (September 4, 2020): https://live-jchs-harvard.pantheonsite.io/sites/default/files/media-files/2020-09/JCHS_covid19_researchseminar_final.pdf

4 Dua, A., K. Ellingrud, D. Mahajan, and J. Silberg. "Which small businesses are most vulnerable to COVID-19—and when." McKinsey & Company (June 18, 2020): <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/americas/which-small-businesses-are-most-vulnerable-to-covid-19-and-when#>



state and federal policies as potential or ongoing COVID-19 responses. The most popular was residential eviction moratoriums, which is supported by 93 percent of Democrats and half of Republicans. Other policies, such as universal paid sick leave, are popular overall because of Democratic support, but are not supported by majorities of Republican mayors. Only 13 percent of mayors believe there was enough CARES Act money for small businesses in their cities, while 46 percent said there was a “large gap” between what was available and what was needed.

In the absence of sufficient federal support, mayors turned to local financial support and regulatory relief to support their small businesses: Two-third of mayors fear non-white small business owners will be feeling a lot of economic harm into next summer, while half believe the same to be the case for white small business owners. In response to an open-ended question about ways to protect vulnerable small businesses, mayors most often discussed the creation of new grants (36 percent) and loans (28 percent), along with regulatory relief (30 percent). Nearly all mayors (92 percent) created additional outdoor dining space to enable these types of establishments to continue to operate safely.

Mayors are most worried about the long-term economic impact on minority residents and renters, and are most pessimistic about the education, transportation, and arts and culture sectors returning to normal: Roughly, two in three mayors said that Latinos, renters, immigrants, and Black residents would still be feeling at least “a lot” of economic harm next summer, while far smaller proportions worried about homeowners (25 percent.) Half of mayors think it will not be until after next year (2021) that arts and culture “returns to normal.” More than 40 percent say the same about public schools, colleges and universities, and mass transit. In contrast, majorities of mayors say that real estate and banking and lending have either already returned to normal or will do so by the end of *this year*.

Mayors are worried about dramatic budget cuts to schools: In spite of the unprecedented adverse impact COVID-19 has had — and continues to have — on K-12 learning throughout the country, 45 percent of mayors expect to make or see “dramatic” cuts to school budgets. Thirty-eight percent expect dramatic cuts to parks and recreation funding, while approximately one in three mayors expect dramatic cuts to transit, roads, and social services. However, the financial consequences of the pandemic have not been universally felt — at least as of summer 2020 when mayors were interviewed. Roughly, 30 percent of mayors could not name any area where they anticipate dramatic cuts.

Mayors expect COVID-19 to permanently change some resident behaviors like working from home and shopping at stores: 90 percent of mayors say that after a vaccine is available, their residents will still work from home more than they did before COVID-19. Three in four say the same about visiting parks, and two in three say it about walking. On the other hand, more than half expect long-term negative effects on how often their residents go to public events like concerts and shop at stores relative to pre-COVID-19 levels. Sixty percent of mayors agree that downtown office buildings will become “less desirable.”

Mayors as a group mix optimism and pessimism when thinking about the future of American cities: Over 80 percent of mayors expect racial health disparities to widen in the future — they do not expect the attention COVID-19 is bringing to the issues to lead to progress. They are also pessimistic about small businesses. Just 36 percent expect that small businesses that close due to the COVID-19 economy will be quickly replaced by new ones — signaling the possibility of a dramatic upheaval to the local small business landscape. On the other hand, over 70 percent of mayors believe that cities will offer more opportunities to more people in the future. In contrast to their views on racial health disparities, a majority disagrees that the racial wealth gap will widen.

Mayors do see the potential for long-term improvement in cities coming out of 2020, and are especially focused on economic impacts: 48 percent of mayors talked about the ways that 2020 will “transform” their cities using positive language more consistent with seeing opportunities coming out of struggle. Only 14 percent described 2020’s long-term impact as a threat that would transform their cities for the worse. Forty-five percent mentioned the impact of COVID on the economy when discussing long-term positive or negative transformation. One in three mentioned race and policing.



3. METHODOLOGY: 130 SURVEY INTERVIEWS

The 2020 Menino Survey of Mayors uses a combination of open- and closed-ended questions to explore myriad, salient local issues and policy priorities. This year, 130 mayors discussed everything from COVID-19 recovery and implications, to policing and protests, to parks and greenspace, to the 2020 Census. [For related and forthcoming reports on the 2020 Menino Survey findings, please visit surveyofmayors.com.]

To generate a systematic sample, we invited all mayors of cities with 75,000 or more residents to participate. Each mayor received an email invitation from the Boston University Menino Survey of Mayors team at their official email account, and follow-up phone calls. The vast majority of interviews were conducted over the phone. This systematic sampling and recruitment effort yielded a representative sample of mayors of American cities with populations over 75,000. Table 1 compares the demographics of participating cities to all cities with over 75,000 residents.

Table 1. Demographic Comparison of Sample Cities to All U.S. Cities with Populations >75,000

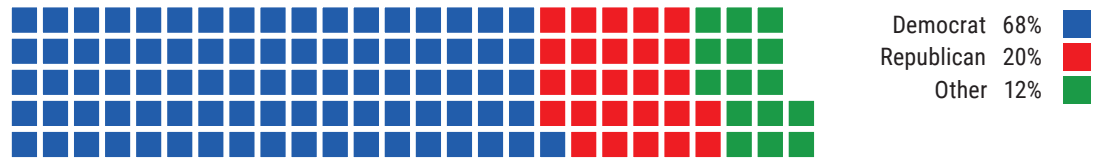
	Surveyed Cities	All Cities
Number of Cities	130	489
Average Population	215,619	223,815
Average Percent White	51%	49%
Average Percent Black	16%	14%
Average Percent Hispanic	22%	25%
Average Median Housing Price	\$273,673	\$295,960
Region	% of Sample	% of Cities
Midwest	20%	16%
Northeast	15%	9%
South	32%	34%
West	33%	40%

Source: 2018 American Community Survey (ACS), published by the US Census Bureau.

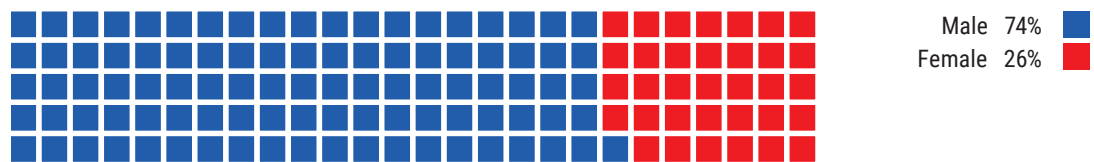


Figure 1. Demographics of Surveyed Mayors

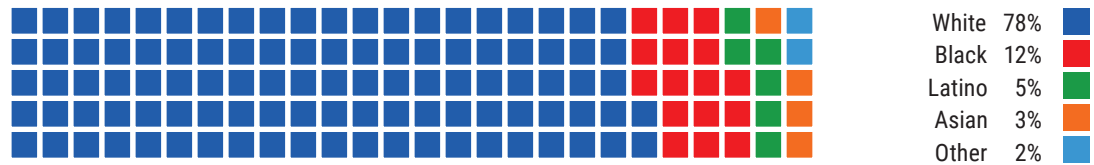
Party



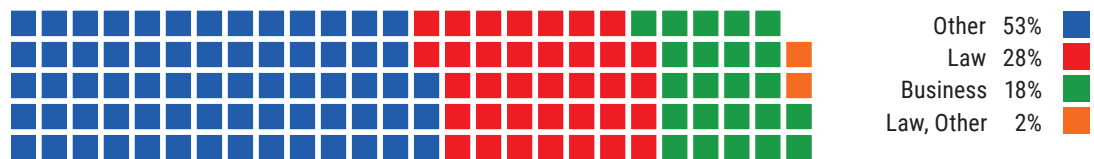
Gender



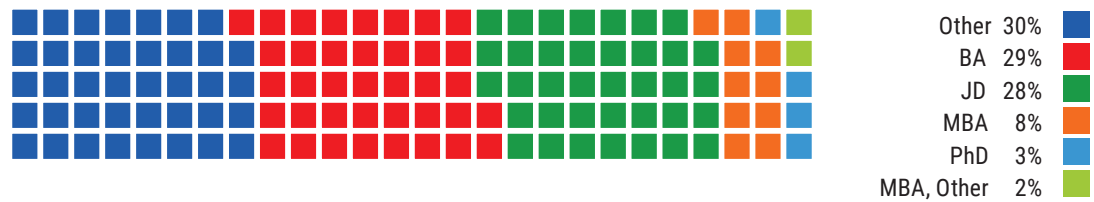
Race



Professional Background



Highest Degree





4. ADDRESSING AN UNPRECEDENTED CHALLENGE

4.1 LEADERSHIP, RESPONSE, COLLABORATION, AND INFORMATION

COVID-19 forced mayors across the country to quickly figure out how to respond. Facts, understanding, and events were all evolving rapidly, and every mayor had to make decisions for his/her city and residents with limited information. We know from previous Menino Surveys of Mayors that mayors frequently see each other as valuable sources of information⁵ and look to and talk to each other when facing policy challenges or considering policy innovations.⁶ The early days and months of the COVID-19 crisis provide new insights into how mayors connect with each other to learn and solve problems together.

In the early days of COVID-19, mayors talked to and texted with their peers in other cities, and participated in conference calls and presentations led by other mayors. Some told us about text message group threads, regular check-in calls, and other ways that they worked together, coordinated, and just supported each other as colleagues.

Two things stand out when examining communications between mayors. The first is how little convergence there was on any particular cities or mayors. The mayor mentioned the most was Eric Garcetti, the Mayor of Los Angeles, yet he was only mentioned by nine out of roughly 120 mayors — and each mayor could name up to three. The other most frequently mentioned mayors included Nan Whaley in Dayton, OH, Greg Fischer in Louisville, KY, Stephen Benjamin in Columbia, SC, and Martin Walsh in Boston, MA. They were only named by a small fraction of their colleagues. A very large number of mayors were mentioned once or twice. Indeed, rather than focusing on a clear set of mayors as national leaders or experts, most mayors listed those leading neighboring or otherwise proximate cities. Moreover, mayors frequently listed their county government even though we asked about other mayors, which speaks to this conclusion as well and highlights the fact that most health agencies exist at the county rather than municipal level. Notably, despite its status as an early pandemic epicenter, the mayor of New York City was not among the more frequently mentioned, listed only by one mayor.

This focus on nearby mayors rather than convergence to a few national leaders speaks both to the fact that this was too new an issue for any clear leaders to emerge early on, and to the fact that geography was very relevant to COVID-19. Its severity varied greatly by geography, different state governments took dramatically different approaches in response, and many mayors sought to coordinate responses as best they could with nearby cities. As one mayor explained her calls with mayors nearby: *“we operate under the same set of legal constraints, and have the same state government.”* Others more explicitly focused on the need to coordinate. One said, *“we need to coordinate and have the same policies across cities.”* Another said that he *“wanted regional perspective on COVID response. ‘What are you seeing? How are you handling?’”*

In many cases, including those in which mayors focused on their nearby colleagues, familiarity and long-standing relationships were important. One explained his choices of out-of-state mayors as *“folks he works with regularly and has an ongoing relationship with.”* He also provided a more forward-looking rationale, which is that he wanted to see how other governors’ policies — that his governor had not yet instituted — affected cities. Other mayors spoke of calling friends and colleagues to check in just as people in other walks of life did. One big city mayor described his calls with another as *“two big cities, friends, general checking to see how things are going.”* Interestingly, some mayors described how their collegial calls (and messaging groups) became events and institutions. One spoke of Sunday

5 Einstein, Katherine, D. Glick, and K. Lusk. 2014 *Menino Survey of Mayors*. Boston University Initiative on Cities: <https://www.surveyofmayors.com/reports/Menino-Survey-of-Mayors-2014-Final-Report.pdf>

6 Einstein, Katherine and D. Glick. 2015 *Menino Survey of Mayors*. Boston University Initiative on Cities: <https://www.surveyofmayors.com/reports/Menino-Survey-of-Mayors-2015-Final-Report.pdf>

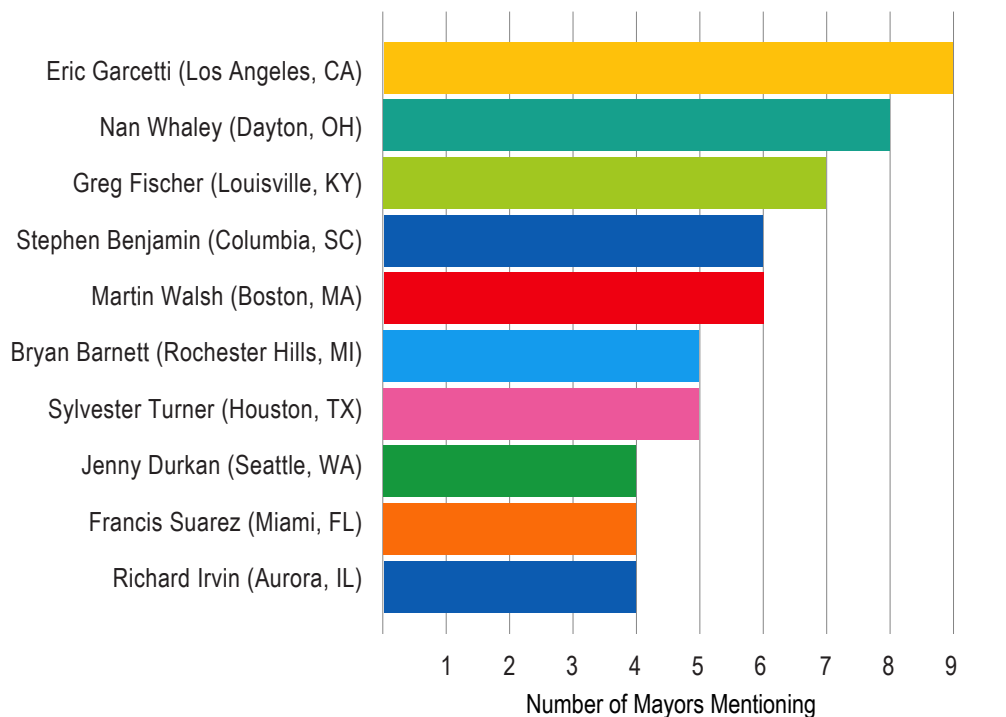


calls with all of the big city mayors in the state that were still going in the summer. Another said: “we had no mechanism to communicate regularly before. Due to COVID, we set up weekly calls with mayors of the largest cities in the state to compare notes.”

The second thing that stands out is how much current and recent formal leaders in the mayoral community are also at the center of less formal networks of mayors. The mayors of Dayton, Louisville, Columbia, and Rochester Hills (all on the most mentioned list) are all recent Presidents or Vice Presidents of the US Conference of Mayors (USCM). Moreover, a number of mayors spoke more about the mayors they heard from on calls organized by USCM, the Bloomberg/Harvard Leadership Initiative, and regional associations rather than ad-hoc ones with other colleagues.

Figure 2. Outreach to Other Mayors on Addressing COVID-19

In the first few weeks of the pandemic, which other mayors, if any, did you reach out to, to talk about addressing COVID-19? Please name up to three that come to mind.



Beyond directly talking with their peers, mayors may also look to other cities as effective models. In the case of COVID-19, no cities had time to build up a reputation for excellence or innovativeness in a particular area. In addition to being asked about colleagues they personally connected with, mayors were asked about cities they generally perceived as leaders in their COVID-19 public health response. The most commonly mentioned city was New York. Notably, all of the most mentioned cities were those that were hit hard and early by COVID-19. As one mayor said (perhaps not entirely accurately given the responses) “we’re all watching the state of NY and NYC. They were first hit.” Another, speaking of a city that was affected early, said, “Seattle seemed to handle it well.”

Thirteen mayors mentioned New York’s public health response as a model, though some of these mayors combined or conflated the city and state.⁷ For example, one, who mentioned New York State, colorfully said, “I thought I was dating Cuomo for a bit. It was annoying at first but it grew on me.” More generally, a number of mayors

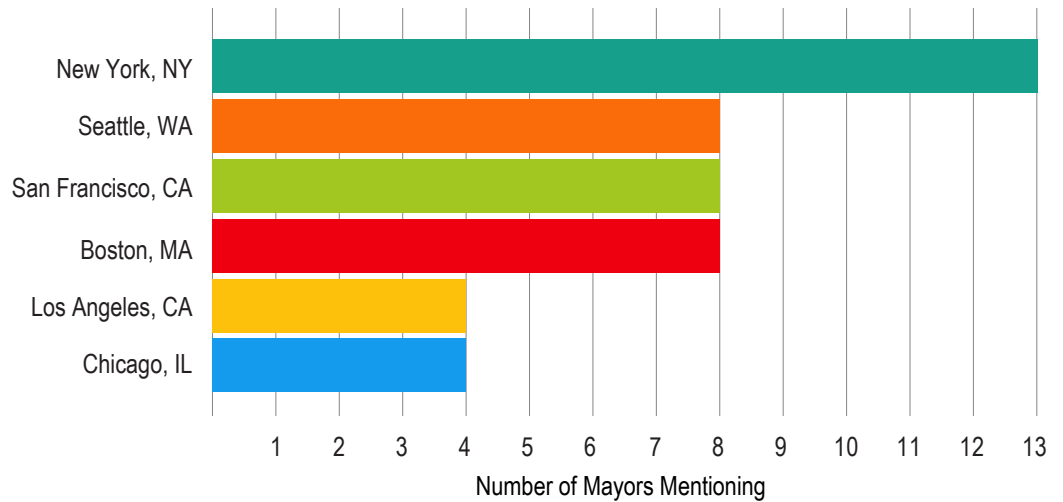
⁷ We tried to parse them, but some were interwoven that the number of New York mentions could be slightly inflated.



emphasized looking to state government (NY and others) or county government rather than other cities as models even when directly asked about other cities. Additionally, some also focused on responses in other countries and foreign cities citing a lack of effective US models.

Figure 3. Drawing on Other Cities Public Health Responses

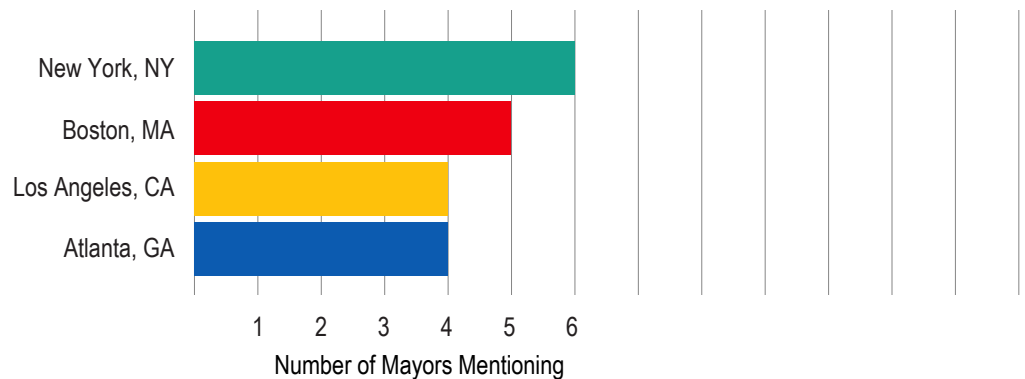
As the COVID-19 challenges developed, which cities' public health responses did you draw on as potentially effective models? Please name up to two.



There was even less consensus on potentially effective models on the economic recovery side. New York, Boston, Los Angeles, and Atlanta were the only cities mentioned more than three times, and the most mentioned was only named six times. This is likely because the economic challenges were so new and there were few concrete policy interventions attributable to a particular city to draw on.

Figure 4. Drawing on Other Cities Economic Responses

As the Covid-19 challenges developed, which cities' economic responses did you draw on as potentially effective models? Please name up to two.



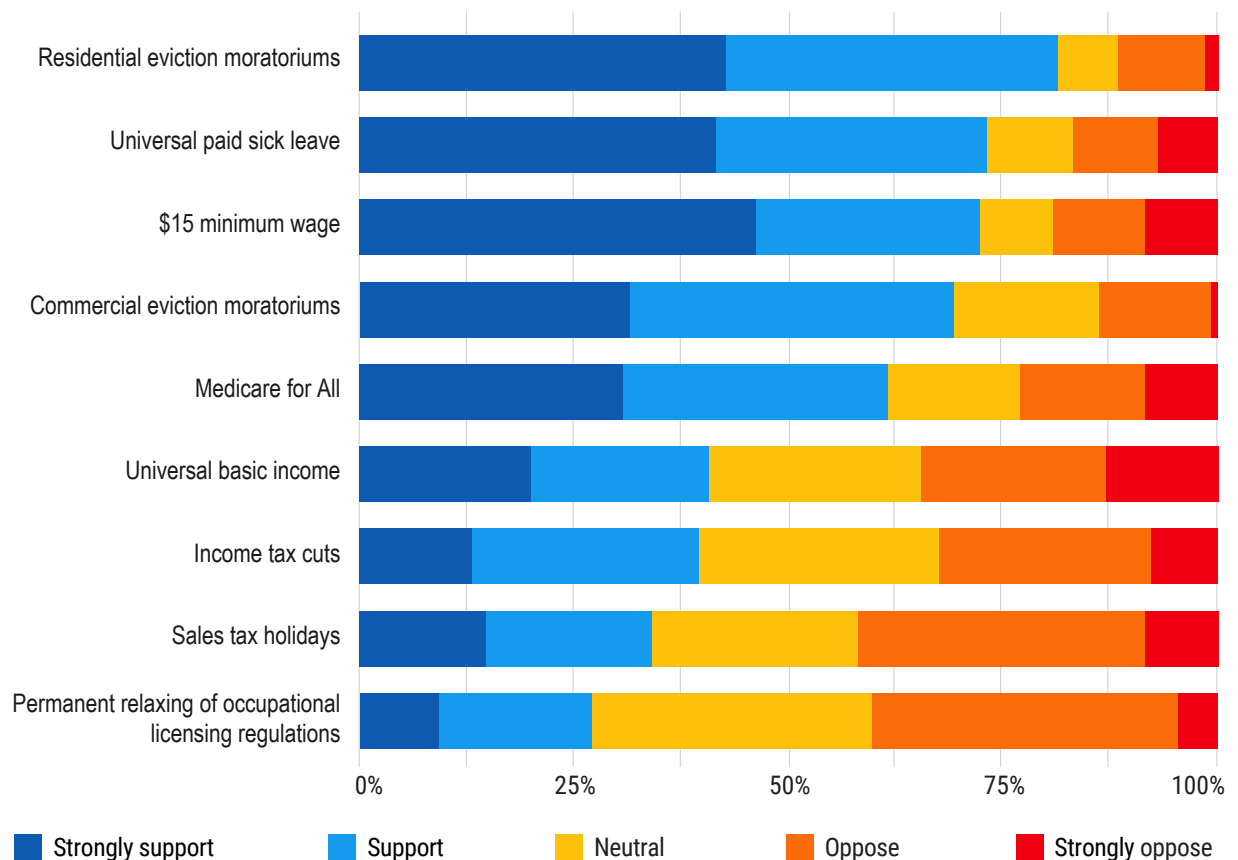


4.2 STATE AND FEDERAL POLICY RESPONSES

Majorities of mayors support a variety of state and federal policies designed to mitigate the effects of COVID-19, particularly its economic effects on low-income Americans. Some of these policies have become immediately salient in response to COVID-19 (e.g., eviction moratoriums), while others have been on the agenda long before it (e.g., \$15 minimum wage.) The single most popular policy was residential eviction moratoriums — supported by 81 percent of mayors. Indeed, residential eviction moratoriums were, by far, the most popular local policy housing response to the pandemic: a striking 56 percent of large cities and 45 of 50 states put in place a residential eviction moratorium in the immediate months after the pandemic’s onset.⁸

Figure 5. State/Federal Policy Responses

Polymakers have debated a variety of social policy programs to support those suffering the economic consequences of COVID-19. How strongly would you support the implementation of the following policies at the state or federal levels?



Other policies that were popular with mayors include universal paid sick leave, \$15 minimum wage, commercial eviction moratoriums and “Medicare for All.” Nearly three in four mayors support paid sick leave, a \$15 minimum wage, and commercial eviction moratoriums respectively. Three in five support “Medicare for All.” Mayors were more skeptical about relaxing occupational licensing regulations, cutting sales and income taxes, and universal

⁸ Einstein, K. et al. “COVID-19 Housing Policy Report.” Boston University Initiative on Cities: <https://www.bu.edu/ioc/2020/10/13/new-report-on-covid-19-housing-policy/>

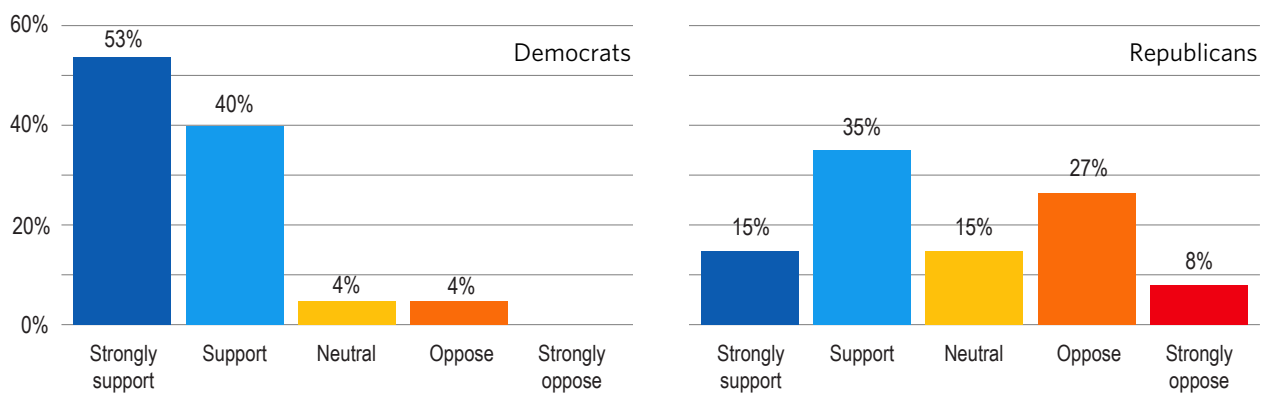


basic income. Two in five support income tax cuts and one in three sales tax holidays. One in four support relaxing licensing requirements and two in five universal basic income.

The widespread support for residential eviction moratoriums masks some underlying concerns. While some mayors are enthusiastic supporters, others see moratoriums as merely better than doing nothing, or as a necessary short-term response. They expressed concerns about how long such policies would be viable. They also worried about income losses for landlords and mortgage payers. For example, one Democratic mayor of a mid-sized city who expressed support for residential eviction moratoriums said, “[we] need to deal with the banks. If landlords aren’t getting paid, they’re not paying mortgages and then we have foreclosures run by banks and that ripple is horrible.” Another called them an “incomplete solution.” A third said, “moratoriums are ok, but they do not solve the problem. Solving housing is the bigger issue.” Indeed, solving the broader crisis facing renters is much more challenging and costly. While almost all states featured eviction relief programs during the ongoing pandemic, only 54 percent provided rent relief programs. Without such programs, renters are left with mounting bills (and landlords with unpaid debts).⁹

Many of the policies mayors weighed in on have clear connections to national partisan positions. Mayors’ responses largely reflect the national divides on them. Eviction moratoriums were the most popular item overall largely because Democratic mayors overwhelmingly supported them. Ninety-three percent of Democrats supported residential eviction moratoriums. Republicans were more mixed: half expressed support and a third expressed opposition. The pattern for commercial eviction moratoriums was similar, though they were a few percentage points less popular for mayors of both parties.

Figure 6. Residential Eviction Moratoriums at State/Federal Level, by Party

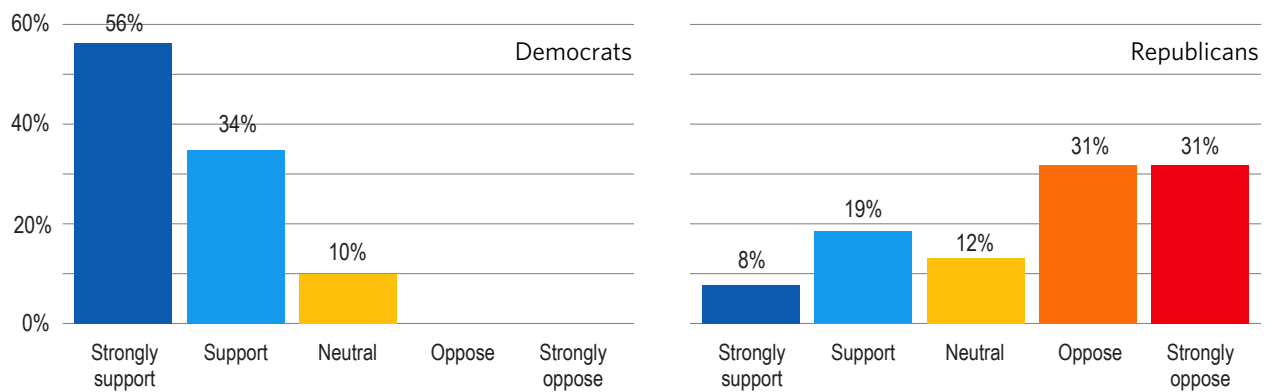


Three policies that are all highly nationalized — the \$15 minimum wage, “Medicare for All,” and paid sick leave — were strongly polarized along party lines. Universal paid sick leave was supported by 90 percent of Democrats. None opposed it. In contrast, 62 percent of Republican mayors opposed it and only 27 percent expressed support. The partisan splits for a \$15 minimum wage and “Medicare for All” were similar — though Democrats supported the latter by about 10 fewer percentage points (79 percent support.)

⁹ Einstein, K. et al. “COVID-19 Housing Policy Report.” Boston University Initiative on Cities: <https://www.bu.edu/ioc/2020/10/13/new-report-on-covid-19-housing-policy/>

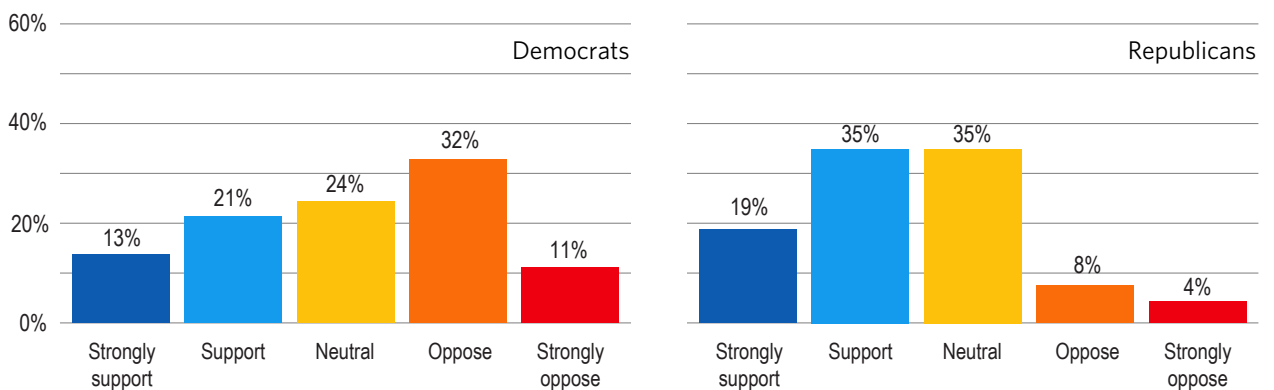


Figure 7. Universal Paid Sick Leave at State/Federal Level, by Party



Policies typically associated with the Republican party — deregulation and tax cuts — were more popular with Republican mayors than Democratic ones. However, views on these policies were less polarized, because Republican support for them was considerably more muted. For example, 54 percent of Republicans supported income tax cuts compared to 34 percent of Democrats. Sales tax cuts were more popular with Republicans; still, they only garnered support from 44 percent of Republican mayors. Support for relaxing occupational licensing requirements was similar. Some mayors explained their opposition to tax cuts by focusing on the fiscal crunch facing their cities. For example, one explained opposition by noting, *“this year we took a big hit, but I like the concept in general.”* Another simply said, *“we’d go broke.”*

Figure 8. Income Tax Cuts at State/Federal Level, by Party



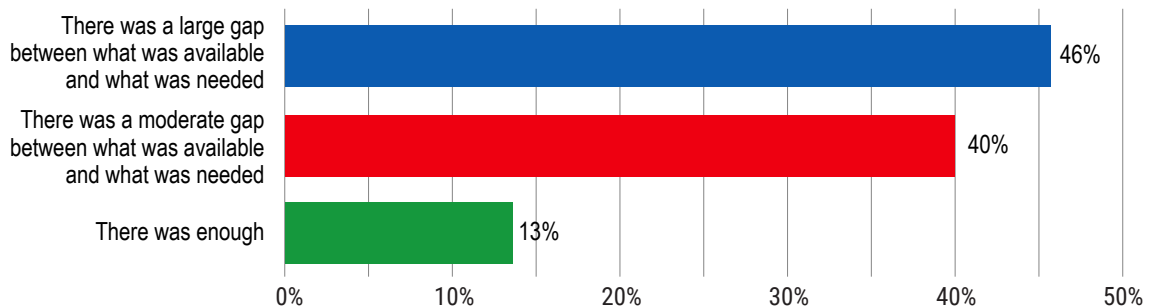
Mayors also weighed in on the major federal effort to respond to the COVID-19-induced economic crisis. Mayors gave the federal Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) mixed reviews at best. Only 13 percent said it provided enough money to meet the needs of their small businesses. Forty-six percent said there was a “large gap between what was available and what was needed.” In mayors’ views, federal economic support largely fell short of need.



One mayor of a mid-sized southern city said, “it was bad for everyone” and suggested a category below “a large gap.” Others, somewhat more supportively, explained that certain types of businesses had a hard time accessing an otherwise promising program. One said, “the idea was phenomenal, but not accessible to sole proprietor, mom & pops, especially in minority communities. They had to go through banks, which have their own biases.” Another similarly said, “large national banks have been terrible at serving non-white small businesses, but locals [banks] have done well.” Yet another expressed concerns about the structure of the program: “the issue wasn’t the amount [of money], it was the conditions and eligibility.” A few mayors saw the program as a great success. One called CARES “spectacular for the city.”

Figure 9. Federal Small Business Relief

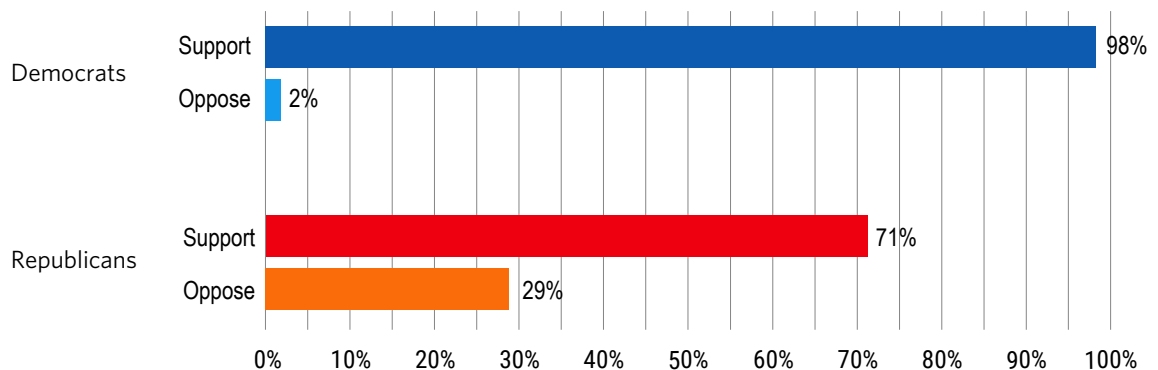
To the best of your knowledge, how well did the amount of federal small business relief available through the CARES Act (e.g. PPP loans) match the needs of businesses in your city?



A final timely and salient issue of local, state, and national concern was how to administer an election during a pandemic. Mayors were, to a remarkable degree, unified in support of vote by mail for November’s election. Overall, 91 percent supported it. This includes 98 percent of Democrats and 71 percent of Republican mayors. Thus, while there is a large partisan gap, there is also consensus across party lines in support of vote by mail.

Figure 10. Voting by Mail, by Party

COVID-19 has led to debates about how to administer elections. Do you support or oppose voting by mail? This means that instead of going to the polls in-person on Election Day, voters would fill out their ballot at home and then mail it in.





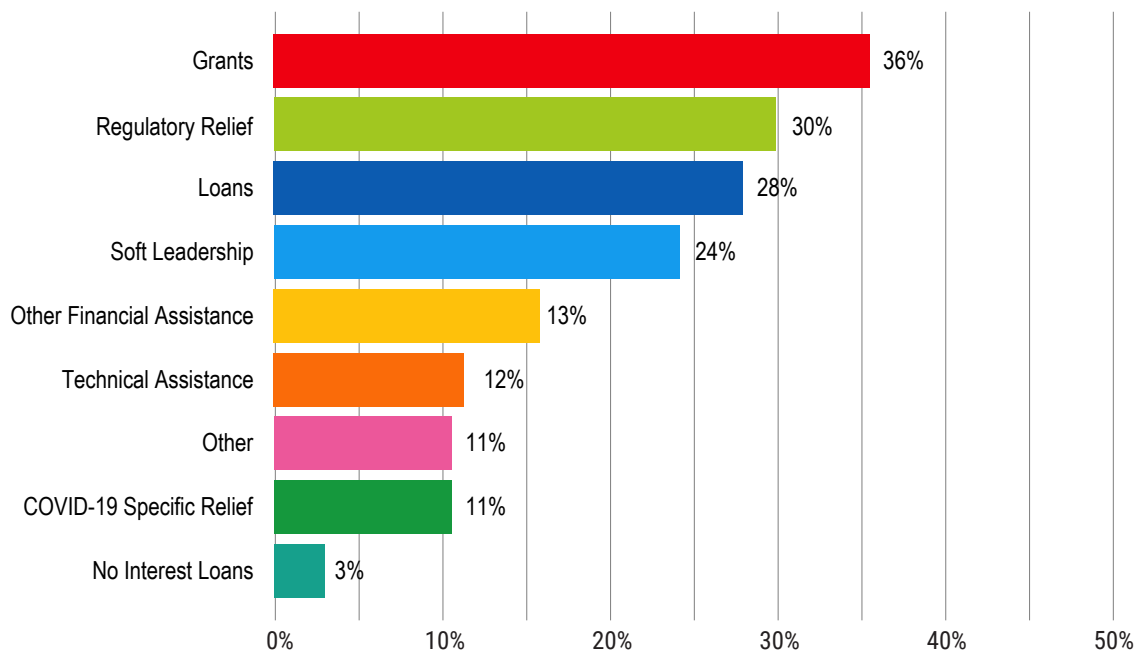
4.3 TARGETED LOCAL ACTIONS

Cities and mayors also pursued a variety of targeted local policies to combat the health and economic consequences of COVID-19. One key area of concern is their small businesses, which were struggling to make payroll or pay for major expenses like rent. In response to an open-ended prompt, mayors indicated a variety of approaches to mitigating the threats that COVID-19 poses for their small businesses. The most commonly cited things mayors said they should do or were doing at the local level to help vulnerable small businesses (they could list as many as they wanted) was provide direct financial support (51 percent of mayors). Thirty-five percent of mayors mentioned grants in response to our open-ended prompt, often citing new dedicated grant programs they created together with private sector and nonprofit partners. Another 16 percent mentioned some other form of direct assistance such as utility bill or tax forgiveness (“other financial assistance” on the figure.) Financial assistance in the form of loans was also popular. One third mentioned loans in general and a few more explicitly focused on interest-free loans. One mayor noted the need to do both — setting up grants for smaller businesses for whom more loan debt would be burdensome, and a revolving loan fund for businesses with a certain minimum revenue threshold.

The most popular approach outside of financial assistance was regulatory relief. Thirty percent of mayors listed actions that fell into this category, which included general relief (e.g., faster permitting) and things like allowing outdoor dining or take-out alcohol. Technical assistance and COVID-19 specific support (e.g., providing PPE) were mentioned by about 10 percent of mayors. Finally, one-quarter of mayors said something that fell into a “soft leadership” category. These included things like bringing leaders together, forming committees, or organizing public campaigns such as “shop local.”

Figure 11. Local Support for Small Businesses

Setting aside the federal and state responses for a moment, what, if anything, can and should you do at the local level to mitigate the long-term threats to your most vulnerable small businesses from COVID-19.



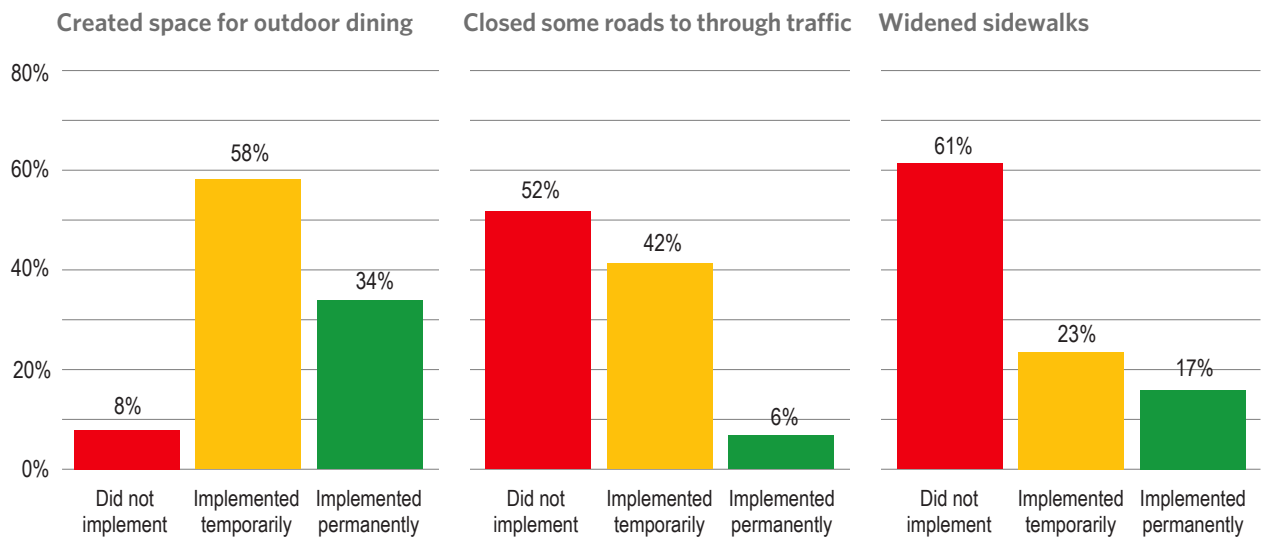


While many mayors expressed more concern over minority-owned businesses in response to a closed- ended question, very few of them emphasized targeted programs or a special focus on such businesses in response to the open-ended small business query. Fewer than 10 percent of mayors’ responses were coded as distinguishing between minority-owned small businesses and all small businesses.

While the open-ended question evinces variety in what mayors believe to be the best ways to support small businesses, a closed-ended question focused on reconstituting public space like streets reveals consensus about facilitating outdoor dining. Nearly all mayors — 92 percent — said they created new space for outdoor dining. One third planned for such changes to become permanent. Fewer mayors, but still a substantial minority, shifted at least some street space previously allocated to drivers. Forty-eight percent closed at least some streets to through traffic, and 40 percent widened sidewalks. Mayors generally saw pedestrian and cyclist-oriented changes as temporary ones that will be undone once the COVID-19 threat has subsided.

Figure 12. Creating More Space Outside

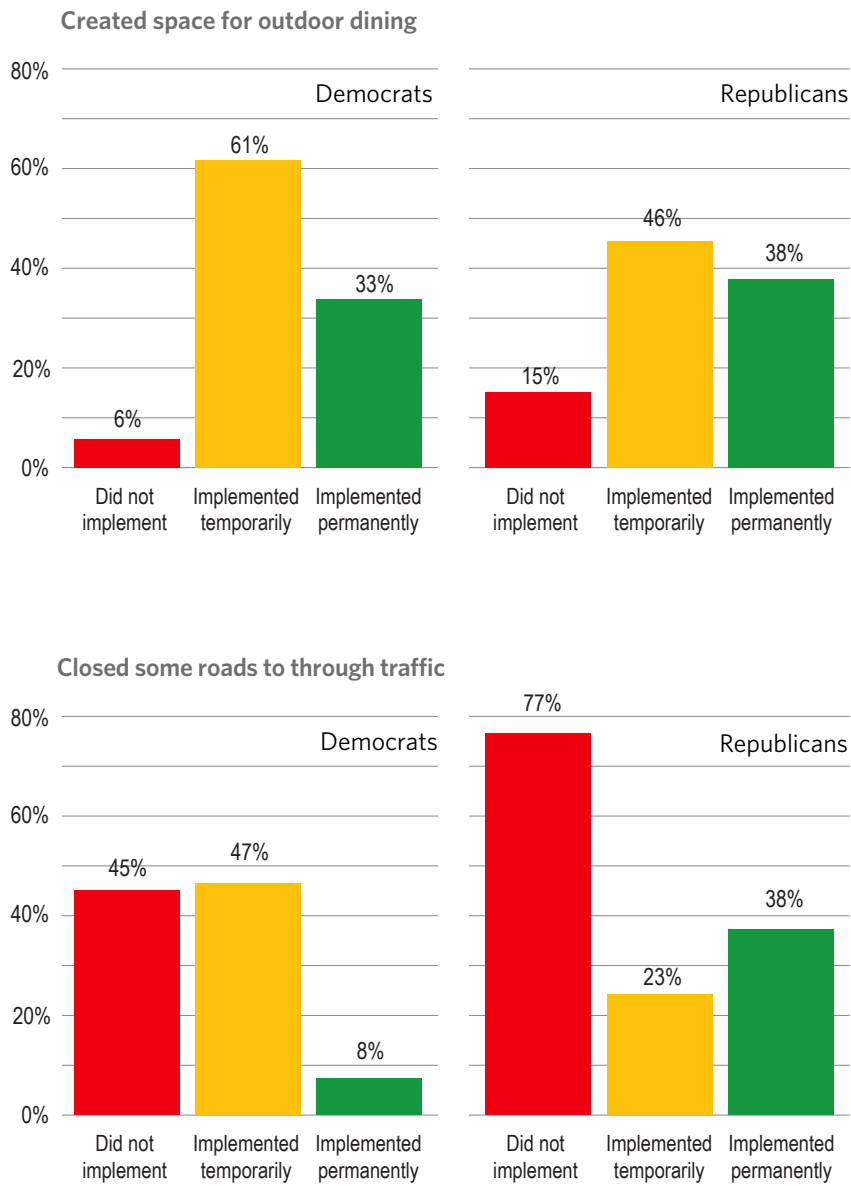
Many cities have responded to the COVID-19 crisis by creating more space for people outside. Which of the following, if any, have you implemented in your community? Do you anticipate any of these changes becoming permanent?



Creating new space for outside dining was consistently popular across party lines. Only 15 percent of Republicans and 6 percent of Democrats said they did not implement it. Reallocating street space, however, was less bipartisan. Fifty-five percent of Democrats said they closed some streets to through traffic compared with only 23 percent of Republicans. Democrats were also much more likely to say they extended sidewalks, though still less than a majority did so.



Figure 13. Creating More Space Outside, by Party





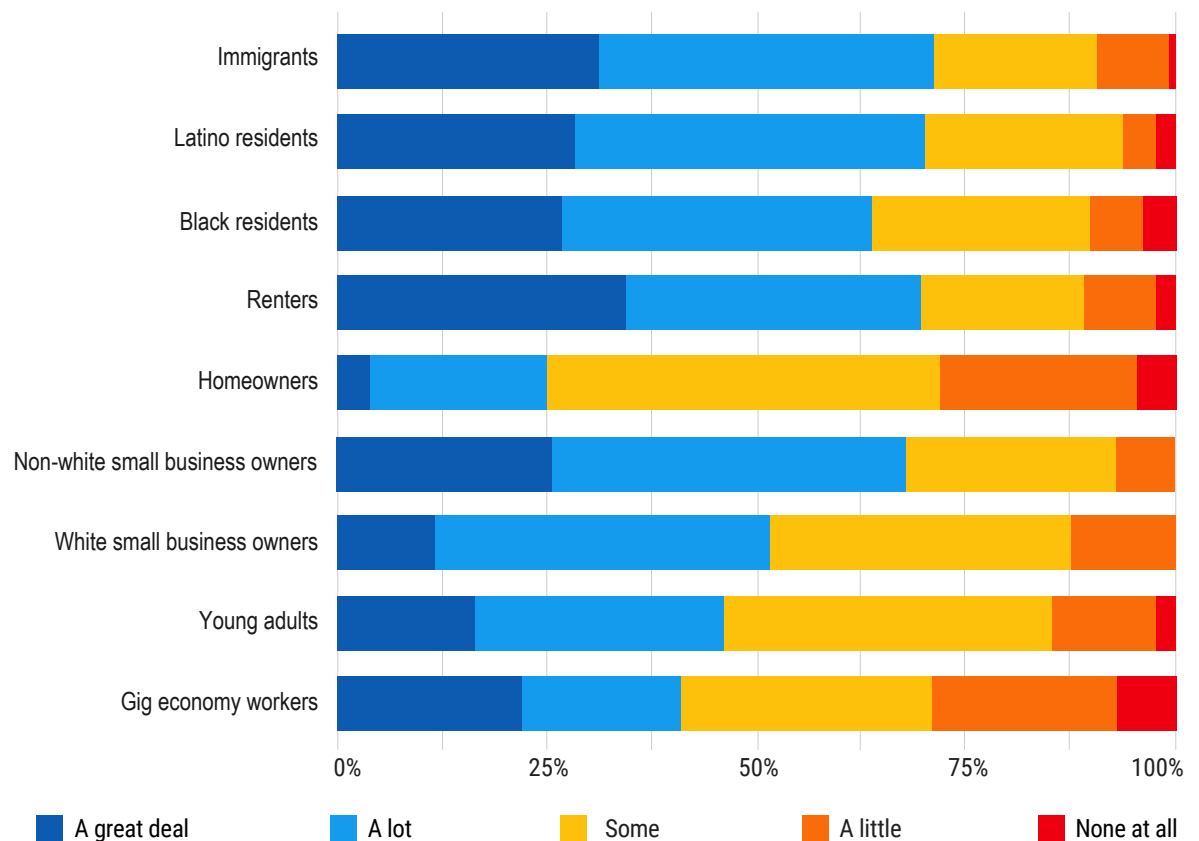
5. LOOKING FORWARD: RECOVERY AND ONGOING CHALLENGES

5.1 INDIVIDUAL AND INSTITUTIONAL RECOVERY

Mayors' expectations for individual and institutional recovery help illuminate what the coming years may hold for cities. Large majorities of mayors, at least two thirds, believe that Black and Latino residents, renters, and immigrants will still feel a lot of economic harm from COVID-19 next summer. A majority of mayors also do not expect a quick recovery for their small business owners. Notably, while mayors are concerned about all small business owners, they are 20 percentage points more likely to believe that non-white small business owners will experience long-term harm relative to white small business owners. These concerns are closely connected to their perceptions, summarized above in the CARES Act section, that minorities and minority-owned businesses have had a harder time accessing federal resources.

Figure 14. Economic Harm, by Resident Group

In a year from now, how much will members of each of the following groups in your city be feeling economic harm from COVID-19?



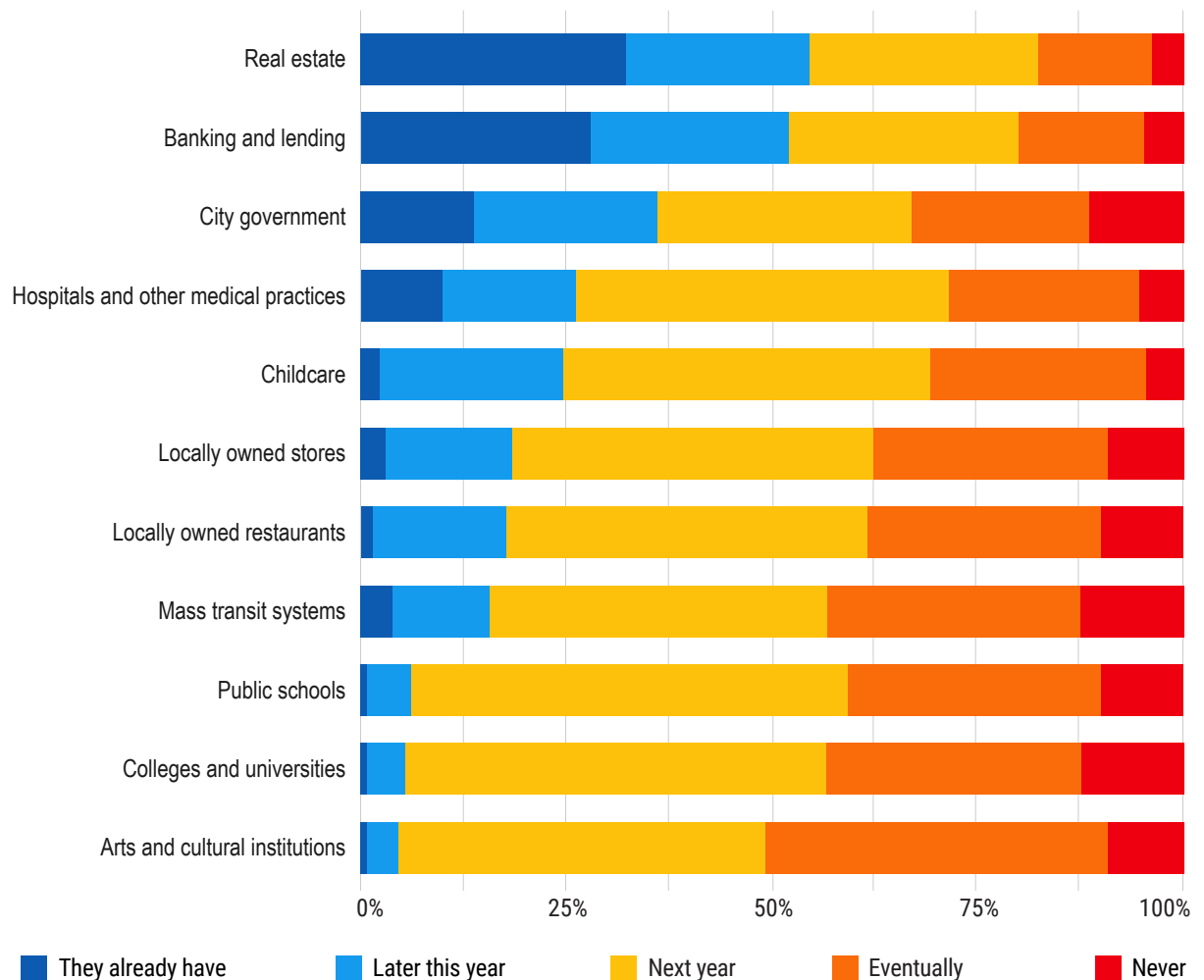


The group that mayors are least concerned about is homeowners. Only 25 percent expect them to feel “a lot” of economic harm in a year, and almost none expect them to feel “a great deal” of it. Other groups that mayors are relatively unconcerned about, or for which they are expecting a relatively quick recovery, are gig workers and young adults. Critically, however, this is only relative optimism. A considerable minority of mayors expects each of these groups to be feeling a lot of harm in a year.

Mayors are also, not surprisingly, expecting many institutions in their cities to take a long time to “return to normal.” They are worried about the education and childcare sector. Very few mayors expect a return to normal before next year at the earliest for childcare, public schools, and higher education. For public schools and higher education, sizable minorities (approaching 50 percent) only expect a return to normal “eventually.” They are somewhat more optimistic about childcare returning to normal next year. They are at least as pessimistic about arts and cultural institutions. In fact, those garnered the most “eventually” or “never” responses out of all of the options. When considering the responses to this question, and what they imply about mayors’ views about returning to normal, it is important to keep in mind that they answered in July and August of 2020.

Figure 15. Returning to Normal, By Industry/Institution

When, if ever, will each of the following industries and institutions in your city “return to normal” after COVID-19?





Mayors similarly anticipate a slow return to routine economic activity. Very few expect shops, restaurants, or transit to return to normal until at least next year, and over one third pushed normalcy back beyond that for each. However, as we show below, they were reasonably optimistic that their residents would dine, and to a lesser extent use transit, once a vaccine was available. Consistent with ongoing activity, mayors expect banking and real estate to bounce back much quicker. As of the summer of 2020, over 25 percent said each “already had” returned to normal, and another 25 percent expected a return later this year.

For each of these sectors, few, but more than zero, mayors do not ever expect a return to normal. While the differences are very small, the sectors that got the most “never” responses were higher education and mass transit.

5.2 BUDGET CUTS AND FINANCIAL PRESSURES

Not surprisingly, mayors are concerned about making and facing budget cuts as COVID-19 disrupts revenue streams. We asked them about the areas in which they were making or expecting to see “dramatic” cuts. They took the “dramatic” part seriously — in many cases noting they expected wider cuts, but limited their selections to the dramatic ones. For instance, one mayor of a mid-sized midwestern city said, “[those two] are the dramatic cuts, but expect to see cuts on many others.” Another midwestern mayor said, “everything is going to be cut, but unsure of which cuts will be ‘dramatic.’ It all depends on the state.”

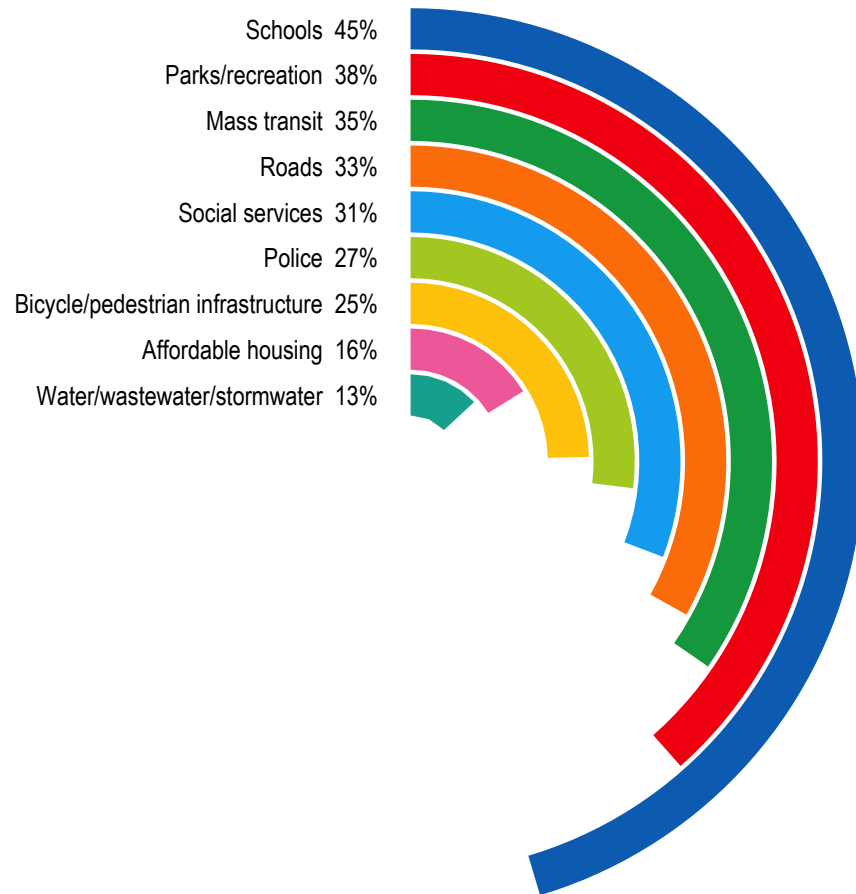
“Schools” was the most commonly cited area in which mayors expect to make or see dramatic budget cuts. Nearly half (45 percent) of mayors selected this option (note that they could select all that apply). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that mayors expect schools to face a slow recovery. Together these data points are alarming and suggest the need for a coordinated financial and health response to support schools, given the central role education plays in a functioning society. Other areas in which at least one-third of mayors expect to see cuts include parks and recreation, mass transit, and roads. Fewer mayors anticipate cuts in areas like water infrastructure and affordable housing.

Finally, COVID-19 related budget pressures and other COVID-19 effects will inevitably claim some initiatives mayors had in the pipeline. In response to an open-ended prompt, many, but not all, mayors noted initiatives that they can no longer pursue because of COVID-19. Such initiatives are another marker of the pandemic’s toll on cities. By far the most common responses concerned infrastructure or other capital projects — ranging from road maintenance and renovating parks to new public buildings, police stations, and schools. While many mentioned capital projects, the list of initiatives affected by COVID-19 is wide and long. Mayors mentioned initiatives ranging from after-school programs, to financial literacy, to free Wi-Fi, to giving city staff a raise. Notably, some, but not many, mayors said that as of summer 2020, the pandemic had not claimed any planned programs or initiatives. Others focused on delays, but pushed back on the idea of anything being cancelled.



Figure 16. Dramatic Budget Cuts

In which of the following areas, if any, do you expect to make or see dramatic financial cuts in your community?



6. LONG-TERM CHANGES TO CITIES AND CITY LIFE

6.1 RESIDENT BEHAVIOR

Beyond the immediate health and economic crises, 2020 has the potential to transform life in cities more permanently. Mayors expect COVID-19 to induce many long-term changes to their residents' lives. Nearly all mayors expect COVID-19 to permanently change working patterns. Ninety percent of mayors expect the shift toward remote work to persist.

Mayors also expect that shifts toward outdoor activities will last. Large majorities expect more walking, cycling, and visiting parks and greenspace after COVID-19 than before it. Almost none expect residents will do less of these things. At least some of these changes will be substitutes for riding transit. About 40 percent expect less

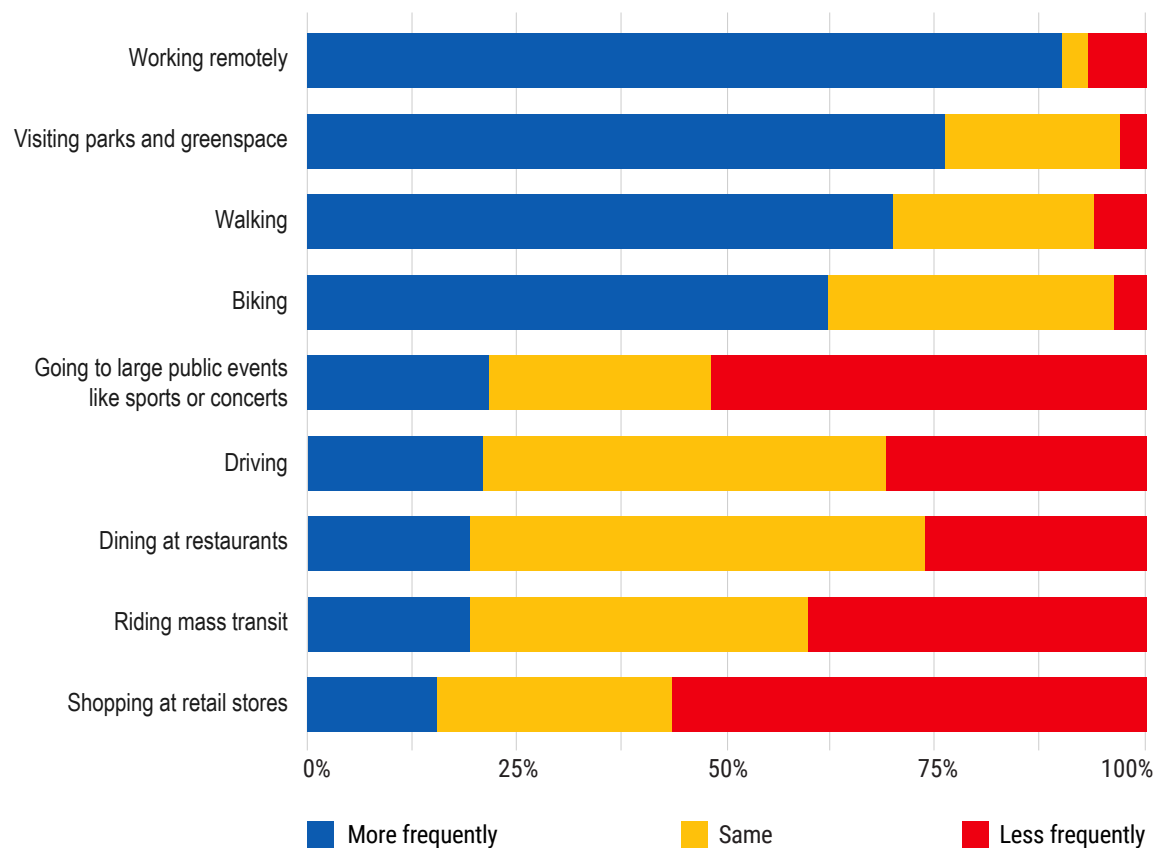


transit use in the future. Views on future transit ridership are mixed, though: another 40 percent expect the same amount of transit ridership relative to pre-pandemic levels, and 20 percent expect more. Mayors, as a group, do not expect COVID-19 to reshape residents' reliance on cars — contra the hopes of those who saw an opportunity to reduce car dominance.¹⁰ A majority of mayors expects the same amount of driving in the long run, while approximately equal numbers expect more and less.

Mayors also expect long-term shifts away from some leisure and economic activities. Over half of them expect a long-term decline in residents attending large public events like sports and concerts. Sixty percent expect a permanent reduction in in-person retail shopping. This would accelerate a long-term trend. In contrast, mayors see the threat to restaurants as a more temporary one. Fifty-four percent of mayors expect the “same” amount of dining-out after COVID-19, and roughly equal proportions expect more and less.

Figure 17. Resident Behavior Post-COVID-19

Once an effective vaccine is available, do you believe that residents in your city will be doing the following with more, less, or the same frequency than they were just before COVID-19?



¹⁰ Davies, A. “The Pandemic Could Be an Opportunity to Remake Cities.” *Wired* (April 13, 2020): <https://www.wired.com/story/pandemic-opportunity-remake-cities/>; Crawford, A. “The Coronavirus Shows It’s Time to Remake The American City.” *Huffington Post* (April 27, 2020): https://www.huffpost.com/entry/coronavirus-remake-cities-cars-pollution-walking-cycling_n_5e9eb1e5c5b63c5b587419a3

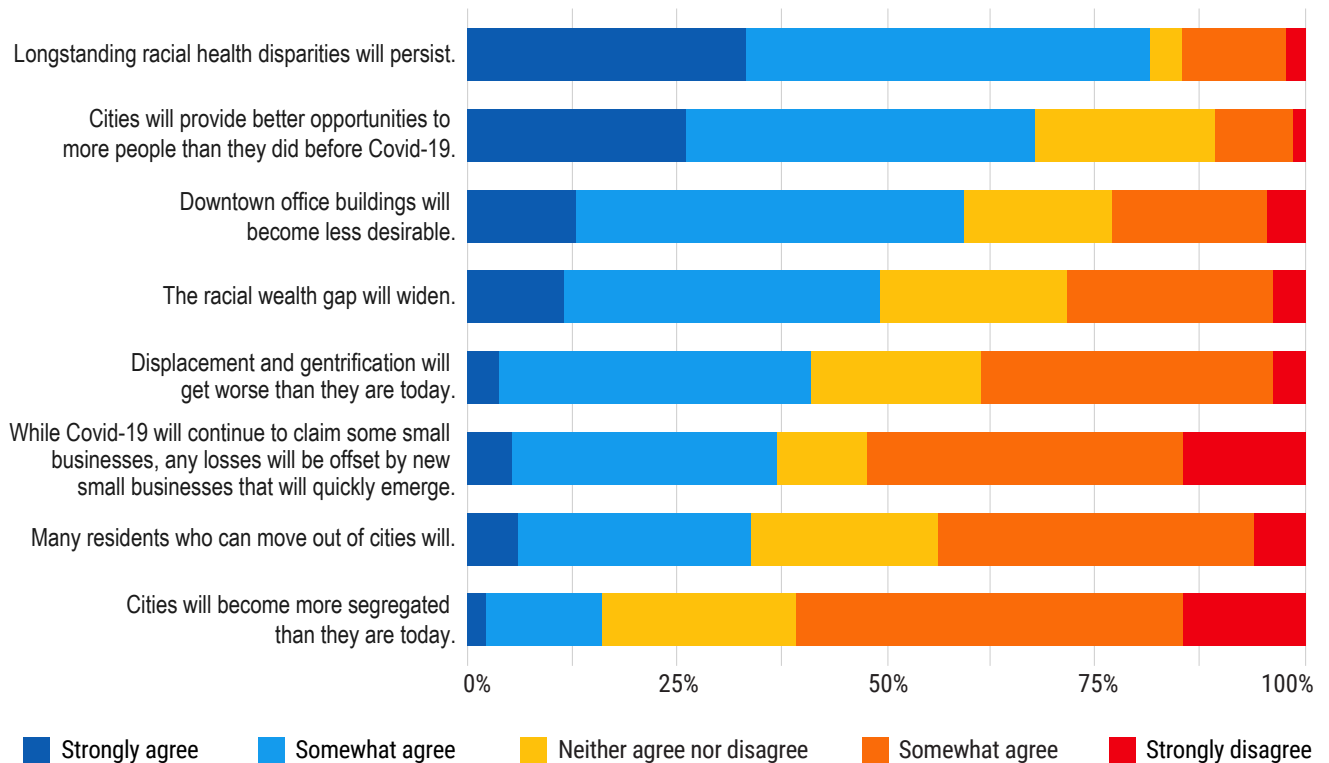


6.2 BIG STRUCTURAL EXPECTATIONS

Mayors also took positions on big picture questions about the future of cities, long-standing problems, and structural changes. Their responses to these questions evince a mix of optimism and pessimism about race, residents, equality, and economics. They are sometimes consistent with, and sometimes contradict, some prominent prognostications.¹¹ More generally, they speak to mayors' views on some big questions people were asking about cities as the magnitude of COVID-19 became clear. Such predictions and theories include optimism that cities will bounce back as people search for opportunities (Richard Florida), that COVID has the potential to motivate progress in addressing vast inequalities in cities (Maimunah Mohd Sharif), and that serious improvement for small businesses after COVID requires major institutional change (Bruce Katz). They also address the likelihood of increasing gentrification and segregation,¹² and whether people will move out of cities.¹³

Figure 18. Future of American Cities

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the future of American cities in general?



¹¹ Florida, R. et al. "How Life in Our Cities Will Look After the Coronavirus Pandemic." *Foreign Policy* (May 1, 2020): <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/01/future-of-cities-urban-life-after-coronavirus-pandemic/>

¹² Jan, T. "A new gentrification crisis." *The Washington Post* (July 31, 2020): <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/07/31/ethnic-enclaves-gentrification-coronavirus/?arc404=true>

¹³ Grabar, H. "Will COVID Push People Out of Cities for Good?" *Slate* (July 11, 2020): <https://slate.com/technology/2020/07/covid-people-leaving-cities-exodus-suburbs.html>



Interestingly, mayors were most optimistic about the overarching issue of cities and opportunity, while at the same time being pessimistic about progress on systemic inequality. Two out of three mayors agreed that “cities will provide better opportunities to more people than they did before COVID-19.” Most mayors disagree with those who see COVID-19 as a long-term threat to urban life. Largely consistent with this positive sentiment, only one-third of mayors agree that people who can move out of cities will. When it comes to racial and socioeconomic equity on the other hand, mayors are more pessimistic in general, but with variation across issues and mayors. Mayors do not believe COVID-19 will exacerbate residential segregation: just 16 percent think cities will become more segregated than they were in the summer of 2020. Mayors are evenly split on whether “gentrification and displacement will get worse.” Forty-nine percent of mayors believe racial wealth gaps will widen, while 28 percent disagree. Most pessimistically, mayors do not expect that COVID-19, which has tragically underscored long standing racial health disparities, will ultimately lead to progress. Eighty-one percent of mayors agree that “long standing racial health disparities will persist.”

Consistent with many of the answers summarized above, mayors were also relatively pessimistic about economic threats from COVID-19. Sixty percent agree that downtown office buildings will become “less desirable” — reflecting a long-term shift in the nature of work. Thirty-six percent agree that new small businesses will quickly emerge to replace those that are claimed by COVID-19 and its recession. Fifty-two percent disagree, suggesting most expect their small business community to be dramatically and permanently reshaped by the pandemic.

6.3 SEEING OPPORTUNITY? 2020 AND THE FUTURE IN MAYORS' OWN WORDS

How do mayors see COVID-19, protests over policing, and the rest of 2020 affecting their cities into the future? An open-ended question about how this year will “transform” their cities “in the long run” suggests that many of them have found reasons for optimism.

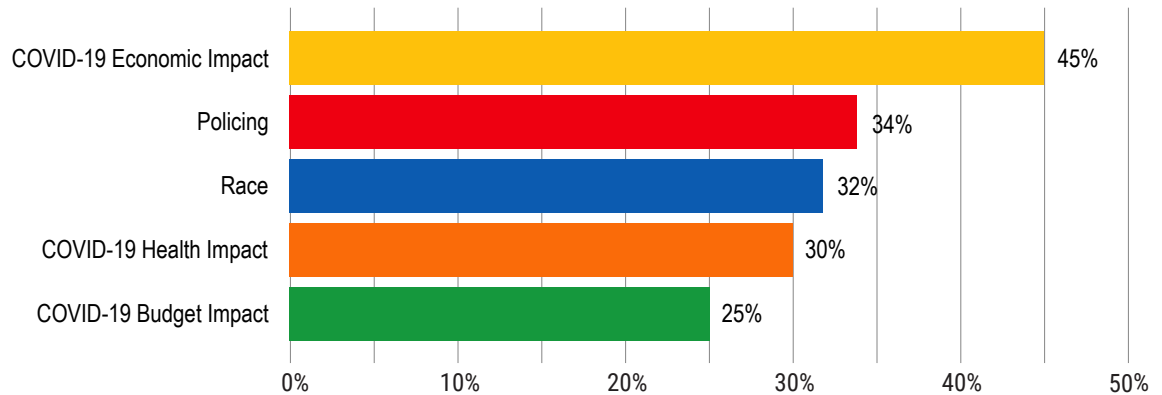
Substantively, mayors regularly brought up the issues one would expect them to — health, the economy, race, and policing. The thing the most mayors (nearly half) discussed was COVID’s effect on their local economies. Thirty percent of mayors discussed COVID’s health impacts and 25 percent focused on its impact on city budgets and finances. Thus, not surprisingly, mayors see COVID-19 shaping their cities in multiple ways, but tend to focus on its long-term economic impacts. One in three mayors discussed policing and race respectively — in many, but not all, cases they were discussed together.

For the most part, the issues mayors brought up are consistent across city types. Democrats and Republicans were similarly likely to focus on COVID’s impact on the economy, health, and budgets. Democrats, however, were more likely to talk about race (37 vs. 19 percent) and policing (38 vs. 23 percent). Mayors of bigger cities mentioned health impacts, economic impacts, race, and policing about 10 percentage points more frequently than smaller city mayors. City size had no relation to expressing concerns about budgetary impacts. Mayors of more and less expensive (by housing prices) cities gave similar sets of responses.



Figure 19. City Transformations in Long Run

In 2020, cities have faced historic crises, both acute and long standing. Briefly, in what ways, if any, will this year transform your city in the long run? [Substantive focus of comments]

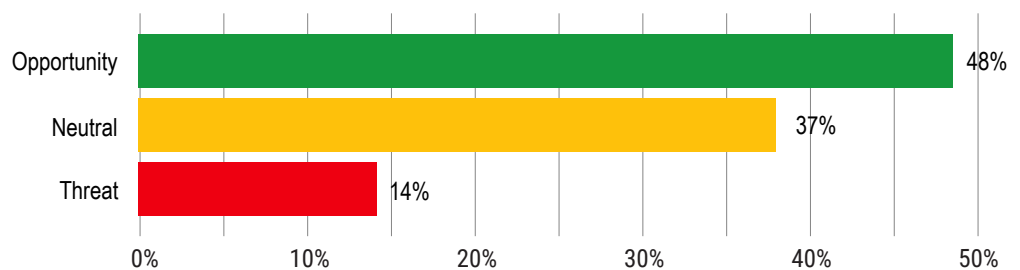


Many mayors see long-term opportunities coming out of 2020. While they spoke of bleak topics and deep current challenges, many mayors did so using language more consistent with seeing long-term opportunities than long-term threats.

Half of mayors spoke of these challenges and the ways that 2020 would transform their cities in language consistent with opportunity. For example, one mayor explicitly said that the pandemic and racial unrest “gives us an opportunity to improve those areas of weakness.” Another said, “we’re making historic commitments to improving racial justice and public health infrastructure.” Only 14 percent described them as threats that could transform their cities for the worse in the long run. One was “not sure how we come out of it,” and said it is “clear that a lot of small businesses won’t survive [...] want to get back to normal ASAP, but that’s not going to happen.” Similarly, another saw a long slow recovery at best saying: “[the] pandemic will set our local economy back, and it will be some years before we get back to where we were.” There were no clear patterns in what types of mayors saw threats or opportunities. The tenor was similar across city sizes, partisanship, and city housing costs.

Figure 20. City Transformations in Long Run: Opportunities vs. Threats

In 2020, cities have faced historic crises, both acute and long standing. Briefly, in what ways, if any, will this year transform your city in the long run? [Tenor of comments]





7. CONCLUSION

At the time of publication, the COVID-19 pandemic has claimed the lives of more than 212,000¹⁴ people in the United States and case numbers are continuing to rise. Every city in the country is grappling with unprecedented threats to the health and wellbeing of their residents. With the 2020 Menino Survey, we wanted to understand how mayors are looking down the road — past the immediate health crisis which as yet has no conclusion — to consider how the pandemic might fundamentally reshape American cities.

Seven years of surveys have shown us that mayors are optimists. So when this group of elected officials sounds the alarm — in an anonymized survey with no political agenda — there's generally good cause for it. While mayors point to 2020 as a moment of reckoning, they are also deeply concerned about the impact COVID-19 will have on schools, small businesses, renters, and others far into the future. Sadly, mayors also believe that racial health disparities will endure, despite the spotlight COVID-19 has shone on health disparities through its disproportionate impacts on Black and brown communities. Future presidential administrations will be dealing with the repercussions of this pandemic — and they would do well to listen to local leaders and pay attention to the looming potential crises facing our education system and small businesses, while also considering the ways in which the shift to remote work and possible retreat from mass transit will transform our downtown urban centers. To date, the federal response to COVID-19 has included very little direct investments in cities and prioritized only those with more than 500,000 residents — representing less than 0.5% of all municipalities and only 14% of the country's total population.¹⁵ More help that addresses the many looming concerns is needed.

¹⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Daily Updates of Totals by Week and State." National Center for Health Statistics (October 28, 2020): <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/covid19/index.htm>

¹⁵ National League of Cities and US Conference of Mayors. "The Economy and Cities: What America's Leaders Are Seeing." April 14, 2020: <https://www.usmayors.org/2020/04/14/the-economy-and-cities-what-americas-leaders-are-seeing/>

Boston University Initiative on Cities

The Initiative on Cities at Boston University seeks to research, promote, and advance the adaptive urban leadership strategies and policies necessary to achieve more sustainable, just, and inclusive urban transformation. Founded by a proven urban leader, the late Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino, and a highly regarded academic, Professor Graham Wilson, the Initiative serves as a bridge between world-class academic research and the real-life practice of city governance.

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