



Mayor to Mayor: Taking the lead on police accountability

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During a recent series of interviews, we asked 26 local elected officials about the challenges and opportunities they face in advancing police accountability. Mayors, city council members, and police chiefs described the enormous pressure they are under to deliver safety, support law enforcement officers while holding them accountable, and respond to community calls to combat racist practices and eradicate police brutality.

To our surprise, mayors spoke most passionately during the interviews when we asked them, “What advice would you give a new mayor on how to approach police accountability?” Mayors poured out personal experiences, both victories and stinging failures. They described meeting with communities torn by violence, addressing calls to defund or abolish police, attending funerals, navigating state preemption laws, battling inflammatory press, overhauling hiring processes, redesigning police academy trainings, and negotiating union contracts. They shared the hard-won insights that they wished they had on their first day in office, the perils of inaction, the best counsel they received from other mayors, and the pitfalls they wished they could have avoided.

Mayors told us over and over that when they found themselves facing difficult decisions in police accountability, the most valuable resource they had was the support they received from other mayors. Several mayors told us, “When that tragedy occurs, there is no one else in the world who can understand what you are going through except another mayor who has gone through the same thing.” In that spirit, this report shares peer-to-peer advice and insights from experienced mayors across the country—often in their own words—to aid leaders in reimagining public safety.



A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Gloria Gong".

Gloria Gong

Executive Director
Harvard Kennedy School
Government Performance Lab

We heard seven common insights from experienced current and former mayors, elected officials, and field experts about what they have learned on how to be effective leaders on police accountability that are of particular significance to new and incoming mayors.

1 Create a vision for public safety in your jurisdiction 5

Overwhelmingly, mayors expressed their view that public safety is the primary factor that residents will use to judge their performance. Mayors should develop a plan for public safety that extends beyond police and addresses system-level factors, including racial and economic inequality, that contribute to widely disparate experiences with police among residents.

2 Invest in key relationships 8

To make progress on strengthening police accountability, mayors need a broad coalition of supporters. To foster these relationships, mayors should solicit community input, form a tight bond with the chief of police, familiarize themselves with the day-to-day practices of police officers, and commit early to working alongside activists to advance accountability-focused policies.

- Invest in community relationships
- Make your chief a close partner
- Personally get to know officers and their perspectives
- Align with activists

3 Step up to the podium 12

For mayors and elected officials, the ability to connect with a large audience is a valuable asset to drive conversations on police accountability. Mayors should utilize their large bully pulpit to promote accountability measures, should expect and prepare for outspoken pushback (especially from police unions), and must publicly acknowledge the role of racism and racial bias in their police departments.

- Use your platform
- Anticipate opposition messaging
- Be as transparent as possible

4 Define what police should be doing and measure whether they do it 16

Mayors and elected officials identified overreliance on police as a key challenge to advancing accountability. Mayors should clarify the scope of police’s responsibilities through developing

alternatives to policing, like unarmed first-responder teams, and collecting meaningful metrics on their department that align with their public safety priorities.

- Invest in alternatives
- Measure what matters

5 To change the culture within the police department, hire, train, and promote the right people22

Mayors and elected officials identified cultural impediments within their police departments to accountability. Mayors should take concrete steps to address problematic culture within their police departments over time through selecting a chief that shares their vision for public safety, revamping how they recruit and staff officers to select candidates with a “guardian”—rather than “warrior”—mentality, and reforming officer training and promotion pathways to incentivize desired behaviors, such as forming close relationships with community leaders.

- Selecting the chief
- Staffing the department
- Training and promotion

6 Own the difficult decisions29

Mayors must do everything within their power to prevent officer misconduct and prepare to respond to incidents if police violence occurs under their leadership. Mayors should know which powers are in their authority and what state-level laws may preempt their action, bring in external oversight and assistance before an incident occurs, and have desired accountability policies ready to deploy when policy windows open.

- Know your authority and its limits
- Proactively bring in external resources
- Prepare policies and relationships to manage crises

7 Remember why police accountability matters to your community33

Mayors and elected officials frequently shared the personal experiences and ardent beliefs that drove them to run for office and to tackle police accountability as a policy issue. Mayors can draw on their personal call to service to remain focused on advancing accountability measures. These motivations gave leaders the courage to take difficult political stances.

Methodology35

Create a vision for public safety in your jurisdiction

In this section:

- Ultimately, mayors are held accountable for public safety in their jurisdiction, even when laws or political opposition limits their formal power.
- Public safety extends beyond law enforcement; it includes investing in historically underserved communities. Better-resourced communities can reduce crime and limit police-resident interactions.

“Mayors have the whole shebang. They don’t have just police. They’ve got mental health, housing, all those different services, and they need to be thinking about how all those things come together because **everyone has a role in creating community safety, not just police. This is more than just getting bad guys off the street. It’s way beyond that.**”

Charles Ramsey, former police commissioner of Philadelphia, PA, and police chief of Washington, DC

“Public safety has been ruled by rhetoric and never by outcomes, but **my assumption is that mayors have a real heart for better outcomes.** The reason they’re in this space is that they want even better outcomes for their community. We have to detach ourselves and **unhitch our train from the rhetoric wagon in order to focus on the outcomes we’re producing.**”

Melvin Carter, mayor of Saint Paul, MN

“**As mayors, we don’t have the luxury to govern in black or white scenarios.** Everything is nuanced, and we have to just show results and support law enforcement, but also ensure that the values of justice and equity are operationalized in how we do policing in our respective communities.”

Justin Bibb, mayor of Cleveland, OH

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, the killing of Breonna Taylor by Louisville police officers, and other killings of unarmed Black people by police, local government leaders across the country are answering calls to reimagine their approach to public safety. This includes assessing the role of local police departments and confronting histories of racial violence against Black and other communities of color. Local leaders, though varied in their formal authority over police, are held to account by the

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We have to unhitch our train from the rhetoric wagon in order to focus on the outcomes we're producing.

Melvin Carter, mayor of Saint Paul, MN

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public for public safety and police action. Police accountability is one tool that local leaders can leverage to shape and define what responsibilities police should have, if any, in creating public safety in their communities. They can decide how police should be evaluated on meeting those responsibilities and what should happen if they fail to—or worse, when police actions result in harm or violence that threatens the safety of residents they are supposed to serve.

With an estimated 18,000 police departments operating across the country, police accountability remains a highly localized issue. Mayors, county leaders, and other elected officials are at the forefront of advancing police accountability, testing new interventions, and strengthening oversight systems. As incidents of police brutality and killings of unarmed residents continue to devastate communities across the country, residents and activists are pushing local leaders to demonstrate more progress on meaningful change. In describing their role in strengthening systems of police accountability, mayors spoke to opportunities to leverage core aspects of their office as **visionaries, bridgebuilders, spokespersons, change agents, and voices of authority.**

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We have to show results and support law enforcement but also ensure that justice and equity are operationalized in how we do policing in our communities.

Justin Bibb, mayor of Cleveland, OH

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It's like having all the responsibility but not necessarily all the authority.

Rick Blangiardi, mayor of Honolulu, HI

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Mayors are held to account for creating and holding a broad vision of safety that includes making positive investments in community wellbeing, setting and messaging priorities for their police chiefs, acknowledging and taking action to prevent police misconduct, and bringing in external resources to examine their own departments. **How mayors own their responsibility for leading on public safety while responding to crises involving police violence is a test of their leadership, and the choices they make have lasting repercussions in their communities.**

“We can’t let the conversation about policing override a much larger issue of under-resourcing and systemic racism for generations. If you don’t have a healthy community, you won’t have a safe community. We need to ask, ‘Are there good schools? Are there Black and brown-owned businesses? Do we have the things that would make police less necessary?’ Every dollar you invest will come out on the other side.”

Former mayor

Former Mayor Greg Fischer of Louisville, KY, who was in office when Louisville police officers killed Breonna Taylor, warned other mayors to proactively plan to prevent police violence. Mayors should not wait for a tragedy or an egregious violation to occur to spur their efforts to curb police misconduct.

“When I was thinking about running for a third term, one of the mayors who was not in a term-limited city asked me, **‘Have you had a problem with police yet?’ And I said, ‘No,’ and he says, ‘Well, you’re going to.’** Just the nature of policing opens the police department, the city, the citizens up to issues. For example, our police department has 500,000 interactions with citizens every year, so that’s a lot of possibilities for things to go right—and wrong. You’ve got to think about that going in as a mayor and how are you going to deal with the inevitable challenges. **Know there will be problems and take them on quickly and openly.** Involve the community.”

Greg Fischer, former mayor of Louisville, KY

The GPL interviewed **26** local leaders, including current and former mayors, police chiefs, city council members, county officials, and leadership staff about their **direct experience with police accountability** in their communities.

Local leaders from jurisdictions of all sizes, governance structures, and state political landscapes spoke to a **common responsibility to the public to lead on public safety** as key to their ability to advance police accountability.

“If you’ve never been in a neighborhood and never talked to a mom who’s lost a kid, you’ve never been to a funeral, you’ve never talked to young folks, you just don’t have instant credibility to go and talk to law enforcement.”

In this section:

- **Invest in community relationships:** Mayors recommended forming strong relationships with and centering the input of residents, especially leaders from the Black community and others disproportionately subject to police violence.
 - Mayors said that having a direct relationship with many of their constituents strengthened community-driven pushes for police accountability.
- **Make your chief a close partner:** Mayors recommended meeting directly with your chief at least weekly, ideally daily, and clearly sharing your expectations for police accountability early in the relationship.
 - One mayor with a strong bond with their chief felt that the partnership successfully countered some of the police union’s political power.
- **Personally get to know officers and their perspectives:** Mayors recommended acquiring an intimate knowledge of your police department through taking ride-a-longs, learning department operational policies, and speaking directly with officers.
- **Align with activists:** Several mayors who succeeded in enacting accountability measures credited their positive relationships with community organizers.
 - To be powerful, these relationships require sustained investment and cultivation.

Invest in community relationships: “It is the community that makes government do good things”

To identify meaningful opportunities to increase police accountability, mayors must invest in building genuine relationships with the people most impacted by policing, including Black and other communities of color. Former Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty of Portland, OR, explained her rationale for investing time with various community groups: “Bring the community along first. Because in my experience, government is not brave. They’re not forward-thinking. **It is the community that makes government do good things.** It’s important to have a broad base of community. One of the things I learned early in politics is that there are no permanent friends or permanent enemies. You have to look for a shared interest because that’s what moves policy.”

“You have to have some credibility in the community. You can’t just show up if you’ve never been in the community and tell them how to fix things or speak on their behalf to law enforcement. **If you’ve never been in a neighborhood and never talked to a mom who’s lost a kid, you’ve never been to a funeral, you’ve never talked to young folks, you just don’t have instant credibility to go and talk to law enforcement.**”

Current mayor

When mayors make a long-term commitment to building relationships, directly engaging impacted communities can be a powerful tool to bring people to the table and provide political tailwinds. Mayor Melvin Carter described how using community engagement to build his community safety strategy helps him create a spirit of inclusivity and respond to criticism. He says, “It gives us a broader political license to drive. I’m able to say with that plan we rolled out last week, literally probably a couple thousand city residents have had their fingers in that. I’m able to say, ‘It’s not me you’re mad at.’ It gives us the ability to bring people to the table.”

Make your chief a close partner: “We talk probably almost daily”

“We have formal weekly conversations, but we talk probably almost daily. I’m a sounding board for him, and he’s a sounding board for me. I think that is critical. **I don’t understand how mayors farm out that reporting relationship. I think that’s a mistake.** Because stuff gets lost in translation, and he needs to know what I’m expecting.”

Malik Evans, mayor of Rochester, NY



Have a weekly coffee with your chief so you can get on the same page.

Sam Liccardo, former mayor of San Jose, CA

More than half of mayors interviewed identified their relationship with their chief as a crucial priority, describing frequent communication, expectation setting, and alignment on public safety priorities as key tools to their ability to advance accountability. Mayor Malik Evans continued, **“My relationship with the chief is important, but even more important was me setting the table to make sure that the police department saw themselves not on an island or operating in a vacuum, but a part of the overall administration** and that they worked well with law, human resources, and communications. I restructured my reporting

structure to make sure that those folks were in sync.” Another current mayor shared, “I talked to our current chief and said, **‘When I come on as mayor, I want to see you at every invitation that I send you,** which will maybe not be specifically related to police, but it’s a community event. I want people to see you and I together so that they know that we’re communicating and working together. **I want to build that relationship so that when a problem happens—because**

it will happen—we will have let people know who you are.” Mayors also described how a strong partnership with their chief can help counter the often-immense political pressures that police unions wield.

“Have a weekly coffee with your chief so you can get on the same page. I find a lot of chiefs that I’ve had the good fortune of working with tend to be generally pro-reform because they’re tired of dealing with bad cops, and they’re frustrated by the unions as well. Clearly understanding their perspective and figuring out what you can work on together is important and obviously requires having the right chief.”

Sam Liccardo, former mayor of San Jose, CA

Personally get to know officers and their perspectives: “There is a hill to climb there in terms of trust”

In addition to developing relationships with police leadership, the majority of mayors and elected officials noted the importance of building strong, trusted relationships with front-line officers and a deep understanding of how one’s police department operates. Mayors suggested spending time learning about the experiences of police officers rather than assuming knowledge of their role by participating in ride-a-longs, building personal relationships, and listening carefully.

They also noted that mayors should take the time to learn how their police departments function, familiarizing themselves with department hiring practices and learning directly from police officers where other city resources can be used to support public safety outcomes. For example, mayors and police chiefs cited suggestions made by police officers on opportunities to enhance trash removal in neighborhoods experiencing increases in crime and on calls suitable for alternative 911 emergency response that officers did not feel equipped to respond to. These actions can demonstrate good will to police officers and ease their misgivings about a new administration, but forming these relationships takes dedicated effort. A current mayor noted, “Despite 20 years of supporting law enforcement when they’re right and speaking out when they’re not, there is a hill to climb there in terms of trust... There’s a resistance there, and you have to work through it and have an honest conversation.”

Align with activists

Several mayors and elected officials who made headway in implementing accountability interventions described the importance of working closely with community groups to sustain political pressure and urgency for change, particularly in countering opposition efforts from political interest groups and police unions. In the absence of a coordinated strategy, mayors run the risk of losing momentum on policy changes that require a broader base of constituent support outside of government.

One former city council member described how they leaned on their deep relationships with activists at key moments in advancing police accountability measures: “It took a lot of one-on-one time and education. It took also pushing my emergency button, my world of immigrant advocates that I’m surrounded with who got me elected to say, ‘This one is really important, and **we need to rally around it and create the community conversation and pressure.**’ It took organizing the community, not just telling people to come and talk but educating them on what’s happening and what we’re looking for so they can speak in detail.”

“Relationship building isn’t just about knowing people—it’s recognizing them for who they are. I don’t know how many times I’ve heard, ‘Oh, yeah, I know your brother. Oh, yeah, I work with him over there. I know your uncle or nephew.’ They know who I am, and I can’t be phony about it. **If you don’t build that trust, everything else is just a card you’re waving.**”

Current mayor

“For the most part, the most effective tool I have is just the biggest megaphone.”

In this section:

- **Use your platform:** A mayor’s public platform is a powerful tool to garner support for police accountability measures. Elevate the perspectives of others with less access to traditional media coverage, like victims of police misconduct.
- **Anticipate opposition messaging:** Mayors described needing to prepare for influential messaging by groups opposed to police accountability, particularly unions. This opposition includes negative advertisements, social media campaigns, and activation of an energized political constituency.
 - One mayor successfully opposed fear-based public messaging surrounding a police accountability-related ballot measure through partnering with an advertising company to launch a pro bono support campaign.
- **“Be as transparent as possible”:** Mayors described success in public messaging through acknowledging their jurisdiction’s history of racism and racial bias in policing and by highlighting personal stories.
 - One mayor described how sharing personal stories from residents who had contact with the criminal justice system has helped combat unfounded and fear-provoking arguments against police accountability.

Use your platform

Mayors are uniquely positioned to communicate their public safety reform agendas and build support for police accountability measures. Mayors and elected officials commonly described their communication role in messaging public safety priorities, responding during times of crisis,

More than half of interviewees identified intentional messaging as an important tool in advancing police accountability.

and addressing fear-based narratives about crime used to oppose accountability efforts. Even when constrained in their authority to directly enact reforms, mayors are visible and powerful spokespersons. As one current mayor said, **“I have the biggest bully pulpit, so it’s easier for me to command media attention than my colleagues, but I am a member of the council and have one vote, just like all of my other colleagues.”**

To advance police accountability, mayors must lean into their role as a public messenger by building a clear and compassionate communication approach that recognizes both the experiences of people who have been impacted by crime as well as those who have been harmed by encounters with police. This recognition includes understanding the damage caused by pervasive stereotypes on criminality used to target communities of color and justify police

expansion of power. A former city council member said, **“It is very hard to talk in public about what you’re going to do about crime and to be confronted with the victims of crime in a way that is simultaneously compassionate to people who have gone through something hard and doesn’t validate a racist narrative.”**

Local leaders also spoke to their personal experiences with police as a part of their motivation to make full use of their platform. Former Commissioner Jo Ann Hardesty said, **“I realized in that moment what an incredible burden it is to be a Black person in America accused of a crime when most of us don’t have the ability to hold a press conference to say immediately, emphatically, ‘It wasn’t me.’** I take that very seriously because I hear all the time that people have been set up by the police—‘I’m not comfortable calling for the police. I would call fire or alternative response.’”

Mayors who use their role to facilitate communication and learning can lay the groundwork for greater accountability measures. Mayor Melvin Carter noted, **“You don’t have to be the idea factory. What you have to do is create the platforms for people to share their passions, their hopes, their dreams.** And share them not only with you. You have to bring together the venues for people to hear each other across the table. That is painful and hard, yet it’s the most important work.”

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Quite frankly, in a lot of respects, it really wasn’t about us. It wasn’t about whether we defunded police. It wasn’t about whether we were safe. It wasn’t about any of that. It was more the national political narratives, the state political narratives that were being run, almost without regard to what was real here or not.

Current mayor

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Anticipate opposition messaging

“Why can’t we frame police accountability as being pro-public safety?

Everybody wants to live in a safe neighborhood. Everybody wants their children to be able to walk to the park and be safe. No one wants to be concerned about hearing gunfire. There are all these things we agree on, but **the minute you talk about police accountability, everybody thinks that you are anti-police.”**

Current mayor

Mayors should expect to encounter intensified messaging on crime in their cities as a tactic to oppose police accountability measures. Mayors and elected officials described the prevalence of tactics such as false crime reports from political opponents, targeted slowdowns in police response time, and accusations of being “anti-police” deployed to discredit their accountability efforts and create political risk. Several mayors spoke specifically to the strength of police unions, which exert consistent political and financial power through political action committees,

negative advertising campaigns, and social media presence. When experiencing targeted attacks, mayors should draw on their established relationships with community residents and use the visibility of their office to communicate accurate information that neutralizes fear-based rhetoric.

Former Mayor Daniel Lee of Culver City, CA, said, “We have a text message notification system that sends out messages from the police department. But the police department also, in times when changes are possibly afoot, often **sends out more messages about crime happening, and it makes people think that crime has significantly increased.** Myself and one of my other colleagues are the only people who questioned the rate at which the texts go out because they do seem to increase when we’re considering budget cuts.”

One elected official described a creative strategy for countering intense messaging on crime in the run-up to a vote on a ballot measure related to police accountability. They recruited an advertising agency to launch a pro bono campaign, which used billboards across the city to highlight the need for a more limited role and narrowed responsibilities for the police. This official credits the campaign as being a vital part in the passage of the ballot measure.

Police unions

Many interviewees brought up the strength of police unions in launching opposition campaigns to accountability measures. Police unions function as a passionate, active interest group with deep connections to elected officials and substantial financial resources. Through political action committees, advertising campaigns, state lobbying power, and social media presence, police unions can foment formidable opposition. When proposing policies that limit police authority or impose external oversight, mayors must prepare for intense pushback from police unions by aligning with police chiefs and internal champions for change, getting ahead on messaging the need for reform, and countering inaccurate representations of crime increases.

“A public safety framework has been built that draws a circle and protects the people inside it from the people outside it at all costs, which means pushing the people on the outside farther to the outside. This cycle perpetuates racism, which ends up constraining the work with our city council, with our state legislature, with folks who think that any demand for accountability is anti-police or feel threatened by anything that they perceive to limit the police officer’s ability to enforce the lines of the circle.”

Melvin Carter, mayor of Saint Paul, MN

“Be as transparent as possible”

“Be as transparent as possible. It is easy in politics to be involved in closed door conversations, and maybe a decision is made out of the public eye. That doesn’t fly. People can see right through that. **You have to be honest all the time, and that accountability and transparency is appreciated; it will serve you well.**”

Current mayor

Transparency and centering lived experience are two tools that mayors and elected officials identified to establish a reputation as credible messengers for reform and to address tensions in police-community interactions head on. In the absence of an explicit acknowledgement of past harm, communities impacted by police violence will continue to be skeptical of accountability efforts. However, when paired with concrete action to increase transparency and community participation in shaping policing policies, mayors described open communication as a tool to begin to address public mistrust in police and government. As one mayor said, **“Tell personal stories from diverse storytellers. I think that always works because everyone has someone in the family, someone they know who has been impacted. If this can happen to my family and if it can happen to that person, then they’re more open to an approach other than just locking folks up.”**

Engaging in consistent and genuine communication also sets the tone for other government and police leaders to speak openly about histories of racism, violence, and misconduct in police departments. Modeling transparency and recognition of past harms is a crucial first step for leaders to signal the depth of their commitment to accountability and generate buy-in across police and resident stakeholder groups.



Even though we recognize that there are other things that influence outcomes, you still need to say, ‘We are racist’—that recognition. I’ve never heard anybody in policing say, ‘We are racist.’ We are. Let’s take this on. Let’s do something about it.

Former city council member



Define what police should be doing and measure whether they do it

“How are you going to be accountable to someone if you don’t know what’s expected of you?”

In this section:

- Police have a large set of responsibilities and respond to an array of 911 calls, many of which do not pose an imminent threat to public safety.
- **Invest in alternatives:** 60 percent of interviewees listed alternative (non-law enforcement) 911 response as a priority for improving police accountability.
 - Mayors with operating alternative systems reported promising initial results, including positive constituent response and uptake.
- **Measure what matters:** Many traditional metrics used to evaluate officers (e.g., number of arrests) do not align with mayors’ priorities for their police department. By developing meaningful metrics, mayors can incentivize desired behaviors and establish clear standards to which officers can then be held accountable.
 - Do not rely solely on metrics generated by the police department to assess accountability; include measures of trust from community members.
 - Many mayors are trying to develop methods to collect resident feedback that are not resource-intensive; they emphasized that outreach should occur in multiple languages and be sensitive to immigration status and communities that are distrustful of police and government.

One of the most important steps in holding police accountable is more clearly defining what police should be doing. Many mayors noted that police have been asked to take on sprawling sets of responsibilities that overburden officers while also making it difficult to hold them accountable for any particular outcome.

Invest in alternatives

“Number one, I would put alternative emergency response in place. It’s an immediate solution. Don’t send someone with a gun. Send someone whose first response is ‘How do I resolve this problem this person’s having?’ It’s not a solution to internal officer misconduct. It’s not a solution to lack of transparency. **It is a solution to the big, horrible police-civilian interactions that send everybody off the rails.**”

Former mayor

One of the most commonly cited suggestions for clearly defining the role of police was **investing in alternatives to police, with 60 percent of interviewees identifying this as a top priority** for police accountability. Many mayors noted that police are asked to respond to too many types of concerns.

The majority of mayors and elected officials interviewed identified developing alternatives to policing as a top priority to advance accountability, with alternative 911 emergency response as the most frequently cited approach.

“If we’re calling police because someone is having a mental health issue, if we’re calling police because someone is suffering in housing they can’t afford to live in, if we’re calling police because someone is hungry, **that is the wrong first responder and the most expensive first responder we could possibly send.** And sometimes that leads to deadly outcomes because they are not trained to really engage in things other than a law enforcement response.”

Jo Ann Hardesty, former commissioner of Portland, OR



If we were able to move forward with a mobile crisis response unit, then the police could move forward with addressing actual crimes.

Daniel Lee, former mayor of Culver City, CA



Mayors whose alternative response teams are already delivering services reported that they are working. One mayor’s jurisdiction has launched an alternative response pilot that at the time of the interview had served 6,000 calls for response. Describing community response to the pilot, the mayor said, “Now folks actually call in and ask for our alternative response teams specifically. They respond to suicide, mental health, truancy, homelessness—all these issues where you really don’t need a law enforcement response. You need a response that can help folks get to where they

need to be. **Alternative response has really worked. It’s common sense that you don’t send a cop out with a gun to solve all these problems.**”

Former Police Commissioner and Chief Charles Ramsey shared how his understanding of public safety has evolved and grown over the years to encompass non-traditional safety interventions, like mental health practitioners: “I no longer think of public safety in the traditional sense. When you say ‘public safety,’ you tend to think of police, fire, emergency, medical, maybe emergency management. **I think in terms of community safety—when you think of community safety, you think about mental health, housing, homelessness issues, all these things that impact the safety and security of a neighborhood.** Right now, police are doing things that they are never going to be as good at as the people who have been properly educated and trained for it are. Mental health is a perfect example of that.”

Alternative 911 emergency response (A-9ER)

Jurisdictions across the country are increasingly investing in A-9ER, an approach to dispatching teams of trained unarmed responders, such as clinicians or social workers, to select 911 calls that can be resolved without a traditional law enforcement or emergency medical response. The Government Performance Lab provides technical assistance to local jurisdictions to plan, launch, and expand A-9ER teams through its [implementation cohorts and community of practice](#).

Mayor Melvin Carter also noted that despite a general resistance to change, police officers acknowledged the array of safety-related calls to which they must respond and welcomed support from practitioners outside the department to address behavioral- and mental health-related concerns. He shared, “When we actually bring our officers to the table, they go, ‘Yeah, the way we’re going about this historically does not work for us. This looks like it could be helpful.’ Optimal response is a perfect example. **Not a single one of them became an officer thinking they would be staying up all night helping someone with a mental health crisis.**” Both mayors and police chiefs pointed out that investments in alternative response allow limited law enforcement resources to be targeted more effectively.

Measure what matters

Reinforce accountability to a proactive vision for law enforcement by measuring what matters.

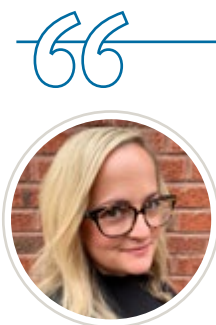
“One thing overall in government we need to do better is data tracking on everything we do, and I think it’s something that we under invest in, and we don’t train enough in. Bloomberg always says, ‘If you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it.’ If you don’t have the data, it’s hard to uncover where the gaps are, where there’s misconduct taking place, and where we can make improvements. You hear things anecdotally but without that comprehensive data, it’s hard to make policies that are going to be effective and make improvements.”

Current mayor

Clearly define what law enforcement should be doing well

“As a mayor, you can set the direction for standards you want for the types of community policing efforts you want to see. Those are all things you can do as a mayor as part of your budget authority, but also as part of just having the bully pulpit to be able to set those standards with your chiefs around your expectations.”

Current mayor



A lot of times, police are tasked with fixing every social ill, and really, they’re only supposed to enforce laws.

Elena Gottreich, deputy mayor of public safety, Chicago, IL

Mayors advised other mayors to **clearly define and communicate a proactive vision for the police department**. John Harrington, former commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Public Safety and chief of the St. Paul Police Department, advised mayors, “**You need to decide what the mission of your department is.** That’s a challenge that I’ve had with several chiefs and several mayors, where they say, ‘Well,

what do you mean the mission? You serve and protect' or 'You arrest bad guys.' That's not a mission. That's a description of the tactics."

Both mayors and police chiefs noted that clearly **articulating a positive vision for law enforcement** could reduce police fears about being held accountable to unclear standards after the fact.

"This protects everybody and at least gives them a road map. You've got to have a road map for things; otherwise it's just everyone for themselves, and everyone can do whatever they want. **How are you going to be accountable to someone if you don't know what's expected of you?**"

Malik Evans, mayor of Rochester, NY

Measure and incentivize positive police behaviors

Once mayors have clearly defined what police ought to be doing, they must find a way to measure and manage towards that definition. Many mayors have systems in place to conduct regular reviews of data with their police chiefs. However, several mayors flagged that the focus of typical law enforcement data systems is on "productivity" measures, such as conducting traffic stops, issuing tickets, and making arrests. Collecting and focusing on those metrics reinforces incentives to generate more of these interactions, irrespective of whether they are contributing to public safety. Conversely, traditional data does not include measures of the community policing interactions that many mayors and police chiefs described as the core of good policing. Community policing can range from developing partnerships with residents and key neighborhood groups to building positive relationships between officers and residents in an effort to improve trust and address challenges that give rise to crime.

Former Police Commissioner Charles Ramsey described the benefits of community policing approaches, including his personal experience requiring officers to spend more time on foot early in their careers so they could interact directly with residents of neighborhoods with high crime rates: **"There are more decent, law-abiding people living in that neighborhood than criminals. You don't know that when you're driving up and down the street 30-miles-an-hour, windows rolled up, going from one hot call to another.** But when you're out there walking, you see Miss Jones out on the street and kids out there that just want to go play. It's not a gang standing there at the bus stop—it's the basketball team that just left practice. You know that when you know the kids, and you get to know the kids when you're out there and you can have that kind of casual interaction."

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If I'm a patrol officer, I get no benefit from stopping and chatting with a kid on the street in terms of how I'm evaluated at the end of the day.

Former mayor

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A former mayor said, “I have not seen anybody who has completely figured out a way to value the community interactions that create the bonds that make policing better. Much of how a patrol officer is evaluated is based on what I would call a ‘productivity’ measure. If I’m a patrol officer, **I get no benefit from stopping and chatting with a kid on the street in terms of how I’m evaluated at the end of the day.**”

One police chief described the challenges of over-relying on traditional metrics of productivity in officer promotions—the actions commonly measured to assess police productivity did not tell the chief whether the police officer was undertaking any of the important but difficult-to-measure work of building trust with community.

One former police chief in a non-civil service agency described his approach to using training and promotion to steer the agency’s culture toward community-oriented policing. He started with empowering a group of staff to develop a new, community-oriented mission and then revamped the police academy and promotion process to align with this new mission. As part of employees’ performance reviews for promotion, they had to demonstrate how they advanced this mission through forming community partnerships. This change in promotion criteria altered leaders’ incentives and trickled down throughout the department. Another police chief described implementing a system in which

new officers would conduct follow-up phone calls with residents who had reported crimes. He noted that this system not only allowed the department to gather direct feedback from residents about their experience interacting with police officers but also instilled the expectation of oversight among officers early in their careers.

Community-based measures of public safety

Communities subject to the most violence and over-policing are often those least involved in setting the public safety agenda for their city. In recent years, several cities and counties have launched Offices of Neighborhood Safety, in an effort to reverse this paradigm and coordinate investments in public safety that sit outside of law enforcement. By closely engaging with, and hiring from, neighborhoods most impacted by violence, these offices run or invest in initiatives such as community violence interruption programs. One potential contribution of these offices is the redefinition of public safety by identifying indicators of safety in collaboration with impacted residents. This approach would allow cities to focus safety interventions on evidence-based indicators arising from communities most impacted rather than on fear-based subjectivity, often arising from outside these communities. The Government Performance Lab has worked closely with Saint Paul, MN, to launch their Office of Neighborhood Safety and explore approaches to generating community-based measures of public safety.

Measuring what police should be doing

How can elected officials hold police accountable for doing what they should be doing if they don’t have the ability to measure, manage, and incentivize that behavior? One of the key insights to emerge from interviews with mayors and police chiefs is that many leaders have a strong vision for making policing in their jurisdiction more community-centered, responsive, and fair. However, when asked, they also noted that current data and accountability mechanisms make it difficult to reinforce and reward this type of policing. Measurement and management towards community policing and other positive police behavior emerged as an area for needed innovation.

Don’t rely only on police metrics; find ways to generate data directly from the community

Data generated about police productivity do not reflect some of the concerns most pressing to elected leaders. In order to hold police accountable for improving public safety and not causing harm, mayors are experimenting with innovative ways to generate data directly from community members.

“Do you feel safe? Do you trust the police? If you had a problem, would you feel comfortable calling the police? I think a community survey will help us get the data on how people actually feel even though we have the statistics and the crime rate is low right now. We haven’t had a number of serious crimes this year, but **I think it’s important that people feel safe because that is so connected with wellness, mental health, civic engagement, all those important indicators to have a healthy, thriving community.**”

Current mayor

When seeking feedback from community members, several mayors noted the importance of paying attention to populations that might be commonly overlooked or wary of interactions with local government. For example, they emphasized the need for outreach in different languages and sensitivity to how an individual’s immigration status and previous interactions with the police may have eroded trust of law enforcement.

“If I went to a community meeting, and the Black or Somali community members didn’t know the names of any of my cops, that was a sign that my cops were not engaged enough to actually get known. Same thing in the Native, Asian, and Latino communities. **At some point, if you’re doing this right, the community should have more to say than simply, ‘Yeah, there was a cop that showed up at a meeting.’**”

John Harrington, former commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Public Safety

Include race and equity metrics

Mayors noted that in order to identify and address racially inequitable outcomes, jurisdictions and departments must not only include race and equity measures in their data but ensure that the collection process is sustainable. One former mayor noted of their police department’s federal consent decree, “Lack of data on race and inadequate record-keeping on use of force was a significant impediment to the investigation.” The consent decree resulted in greater clarity in the definition of “use of force” and generation of data on use of force incidents that allow for the detection of patterns of racial disparities in use of force. However, these gains would not be of use unless the data was complete and accurate, requiring work by the mayor to ensure that race and equity data was actually collected and reported. “A lot around data collection changed with the consent decree, but we had to make it realistic for an officer to do in real time; we had to make it more sustainable. For example, someone had proposed a 5-page form, and I knew that wouldn’t work.”

To change the culture within the police department, hire, train, and promote the right people

“Culture eats policy for breakfast.”

In this section:

- **Shifting mindsets:** Elected leaders and police chiefs described departmental culture as a barrier to police accountability. Several interviewees expressed the need to shift the internal mindset from one of a warrior to a guardian.
- **Changing departmental culture:** Some interviewees successfully shifted departmental culture through changes in personnel and the training academy.
- **Selecting the chief:** Selecting a chief of police who is bought into your vision for public safety sets you up for a successful partnership.
- **Staffing the department:** One police chief urged mayors to pay attention to the composition of the department, in addition to the selection of chief.
 - Chiefs know who drives problematic attitudes and misconduct in their department, and they need help from external leaders to remove these individuals through buyouts or early retirements.
- **Training and promotion:** Chiefs identified a gap in training between new officers and senior leadership, which can be filled and leveraged to strengthen mid-level managers’ ability to enforce accountability protocols.

“There is this culture in this police department that we’re trying to chip away at, and that culture is related to so many aspects of the city itself. We have a history of structural racism and economic disparity that goes back to the 1800s, and policing did function as an arm of that throughout history. When you talk about keeping police accountable, you have to take into account the context of the city and the community as a whole and also the fact that police officers themselves— I think we often think of them in a vacuum—but they’re also part of the community. They live in neighborhoods. A lot of them grew up here.”

Elena Gottreich, deputy mayor of public safety, Chicago, IL

The insular culture of police departments was consistently cited as one of the major barriers encountered by local leaders when pursuing accountability, particularly those aspects of police culture that foster suspicion of external oversight and repudiation of authority outside the department. Mayors and chiefs attributed this us-versus-them attitude in part to the makeup of the force. Across jurisdictions, leaders described how historically their police officers have

differed substantially from their residents—in where they reside, their demographic makeup, and their political ideology.

“How do we shift away from this enforcement, militaristic culture and style to more of a—as my chief puts it—a guardian mentality, a partnership mentality that having a safe community requires all of us to be at the table? In my opinion, that is where the field should go and needs to be driven by the chief. I’ve learned over my time in this role that **I can say a lot of things that I’d like to see happen from where I sit, but it doesn’t really get anywhere unless you have somebody internal at the department driving it who also wears a uniform.”**

Current mayor

Mayors described changing the composition and training of the police force as an important tool to shift culture, when coupled with broader changes in the mission, scope, and oversight of the police department as a whole.

Selecting the chief: “The most important decision the mayor has to make is who the chief is”

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Go to the National Latino Peace Officers Association, National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives, and International Association of Women Police to hear about the next wave of police chiefs.

Former police chief

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Mayors identified police chiefs as key partners in advancing police accountability and spoke to the significance of recruiting, vetting, and forming relationships with their chiefs to align on public safety and police accountability priorities. A current mayor said, **“I try to make sure that others learn the lessons I learned—that they need to take responsibility for the police department, that the relationship with the chief is a critical one, and that they need to have a chief they trust.** I think as a new mayor in particular, you really have a mandate to hire a great chief. If this is a goal of yours, I think there are people. I would say, ‘Take responsibility.

Understand that this is a core part of your job. Hire a police chief that’s committed to this re-engineering, this different vision of policing and accountability.”

As John Harrington, former commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Public Safety, said, “If you as the mayor don’t know where you’re going, you’re (likely) going to hire someone that’s not going to get you there.”

Several mayors also spoke to the importance of having police chiefs as allies with influence in the police department to counter pushback from police unions. A current mayor reflected, **“I think some people don’t understand what a critical role the mayor can play in getting a chief**

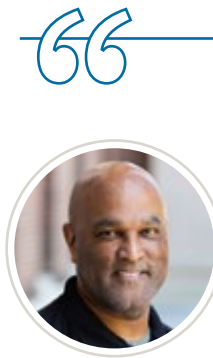
that buys into these goals and that is a partner in trying to achieve them, as opposed to a force of resistance.”

Staffing the department: “The chief is not the culture—the culture is driven by informal leaders in line staff, the bottom-up”

“Quite often, when there’s an incident involving the police—negative, nationally-recognized, nationally-televised incident involving the police—if the chief gets fired, which they usually do, especially if law enforcement does something to a Black person, they’ll bring in a Black chief. The issue is you bring in a Black chief, but you don’t change the department under that chief. The chief may support the culture or ignore the culture, but they don’t create it. The chief is not the culture—the culture is driven by informal leaders in line staff, the bottom-up.”

Current police chief

To shift the culture of police departments, mayors must also be willing to use their position of authority to engage in staffing and disciplinary decisions. As one current police chief described, local leaders can work in collaboration with their chiefs to overhaul departments—**“Police chiefs need fearless leadership outside the department that says, ‘Yes, we need change. This department’s a recurring problem. Tell me what we can do to help.’ And if I then come to you with the names of ten people driving the problematic culture in the department, then I need you to do everything you can to make sure those ten people are gone.”**



When I was a deputy, we used to say, ‘Deputies run this department. The sheriff is just there. He’s a politician.’ You entrust a lot of responsibility and power on the individual cop.

Victor Clay, chief of the Harvard University Police Department

“This has happened to me three times. I showed up at the department, and they had left every single person in the department in place for me to clean up. If you want to change a department that is struggling or refusing to change, then leadership outside of the department should say, ‘We want to bring in a new person, but we’d also like to know how we can change this quickly.’ **Dollars aside, you are going to end up paying anyway. So let’s create some buyouts or early retirements to get rid of people who are part of the problem and start from scratch.”**

Current police chief

“We’ll know real change has occurred when the peer pressure to do the job properly and not cut corners doesn’t come from the sergeant, it comes from the men and women in the department, in locker room talks, saying, ‘Hey, we don’t do that stuff here.’ Courage is part of the policing culture. We think about running down the alley after an armed defender and locking up some murderer. But it takes a totally different kind of courage to intervene if you see an officer acting inappropriately.”

Charles Ramsey, former police commissioner of Philadelphia, PA, and police chief of Washington, DC

Even when faced with barriers to firing officers, mayors and chiefs noted much of their ability to change the composition of their police departments was in officer recruitment, hiring, and promotion. Several mayors and police chiefs described how hiring and promotion criteria were misaligned with their vision for change. One former mayor reflected, “One of the challenges is a lot of the recruitment is former military. It’s great that they are disciplined, focused, and understand the chain of command. But they have the exact wrong mindset for a police officer, and it takes a long time to train that out of them. **‘We are here to fight the enemy’ is the exact wrong mindset.**” A former police chief noted that many police departments say that they want to hire ‘community-oriented’ officers but then use recruitment videos that show SWAT teams, bomb squads, and high-speed boats, leading to a mismatch in the interpersonal skills the department is seeking and the candidates who apply.

“We have to tap into that population of people that may have never thought about policing as a career, but if you describe it properly, could be something that they would really consider. I’m a perfect example of that. In college, I was studying to become a doctor, but I formed a relationship with a couple of cops who used to come into the grocery store where I worked. One day, one of the officers asked, ‘Have you ever thought about being a policeman?’ and told me about the Cadet Program. My dad and I got on a bus, and I signed up, and once I got in it, I fell in love with it. Here I am, 50-some-odd years later still involved.”

Charles Ramsey, former police commissioner of Philadelphia, PA, and police chief of Washington, DC

These recruitment questions have become particularly pressing as jurisdictions struggle to hire enough officers. Several mayors noted their cities had hundreds of vacant positions. Acknowledging the pressure mayors and police chiefs often face to fill empty law enforcement positions, former Police Commissioner Ramsey warned about the long-term consequences of hiring the wrong candidates, noting, “It’s not about filling slots. If you’ve got 100 vacancies, you’re better off getting 20 quality recruits than getting 100 whose temperament and ability to do the job properly are questionable. **These are people that you’re going to have for the next 20 or 30 years, so it’s not just filling an immediate need; you have to think about the future as well.**”

“If my community does not trust the police, then that community will not want to be a part of the department. We must market and do a better job of showing, particularly communities of color, that they reflect and are a part of our department. They are what we want. They have to see themselves in this work we’re doing to change the culture of the department.”

Justin Bibb, mayor of Cleveland, OH

Several mayors and elected officials spoke about the importance of recruiting women and officers of color in improving community relationships and in some instances reducing the likelihood of misconduct. One chief shared that complaints fell dramatically after they successfully increased their force’s diversity by a factor of 10. Other mayors and police chiefs shared strategies for and successes of increasing diversity within their department, including being specific about the type of diversity the department is seeking and targeting recruitment to candidates from those backgrounds, considering lateral transfers from other agencies to bring in people of color at the command level, removing barriers to hiring, and identifying sustainable funding for professional recruitment and marketing resources. However, recruiting applicants from diverse backgrounds is not enough to achieve lasting accountability changes. Several mayors and police chiefs spoke to the way in which the insular and change-resistant culture of police departments discourages people of color from applying and noted that state laws can restrict how significantly jurisdictions can change hiring practices.



If my community does not trust the police, then that community will not want to be a part of the department.

Justin Bibb, mayor of Cleveland, OH



“We now have a cadet class that just graduated. **It’s really encouraging to see a class that sees themselves as change agents.** They really understand the difference between the guardian function and the military function. It’s changed the class in that part of the academy is now out in the community and with people in the community. **But not everybody teaching in our academy has bought into our reimagining police yet.**”

Current mayor

Training and promotion: “You’re only as good as your staff, and you’re only as good as your teachers”

“You’re only as good as your staff, and you’re only as good as your teachers. If you have instructors who are genuinely and earnestly interested in ethical policing and can explain why that’s important, how to do it, and how to interact with the public in a meaningful way, **that’s how you breed the next generation of police officers that are going to feel that way.”**

Elena Gottreich, deputy mayor of public safety, Chicago, IL

In addition to overhauling hiring, the training and promotion of officers in line with a specific departmental mission was identified as a key point of leverage to transform culture within the department. Former Chief of Police John Harrington shared his theory of change, which included hiring and promoting based on character and proactively training leadership—“When you don’t necessarily have a character-based group of rookies at the bottom and there’s no direction at the top, **the folks in the middle get to set policy**, and I don’t know that they’re necessarily setting policy based on any particular piece of wisdom or information other than whatever old stories they were told by the veterans of the department when they came on, **which means you don’t get a lot of change.**”

Train mid-level managers in addition to top leadership

Chiefs of police identified mid-level managers, like sergeants and lieutenants, as crucial to their department’s functioning and ability to sustain reforms. They described these positions as being chronically overlooked for training and professional development opportunities by leaders. Chief Deputy Mike Lee said, “I think we do a fairly good job of bringing new hires on, putting them through a pretty robust training academy, but then there’s this fall off with the rank of sergeants and lieutenants when it comes to professional development training.

Honestly, I think every chief will tell you those two roles are actually the key to a high-performing law enforcement agency. But I think those are the two positions we actually invest the least in.”

One former police chief of a non-civil service agency shared their success increasing racial diversity within their police department by starting with an analysis to identify barriers to a linguistically and culturally diverse force. Through this analysis, the chief identified and reformed three obstacles to hiring diverse candidates:

- **Written exam:** Applicants who scored above the 90th percentile were typically advanced to the next round of the hiring process, but upon closer examination, that arbitrary cutoff mainly advantaged those who had taken the test several times, and had the effect of excluding promising candidates from proceeding. The department changed the scoring to a pass-fail system and eventually to an oral exam, as verbal communication was most aligned with officers’ day-to-day job responsibilities.
 - **Background check:** Background checks that included criteria unrelated to candidates’ ability to fulfill officer duties, such as a low credit score, penalized candidates from less privileged backgrounds. The department started conducting background checks in-house, rather than through contract, to shrink the scope of the search and receive a full report of potential disqualifying information to consider on an individualized basis.
 - **Psychological evaluation:** The psychological evaluation was normed decades ago on a non-diverse population, and disproportionately screened out people of color who now make up a significant portion of the jurisdiction. The department updated the evaluation to be more culturally relevant.
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Sergeants and lieutenants are the key to a high-performing law enforcement agency, but I think those are the two positions we invest least in.

Mike Lee, chief deputy of the Harris County Sheriff's Office, TX

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Chiefs recommended encouraging mid-level officers, not just top leadership, to pursue training opportunities and participate in professional development organizations—like the Police Executive Research Forum and the International Association of Chiefs of Police—that enhance their leadership capabilities and expose them to promising practices in other jurisdictions.

“If you really want the young, next generation of managers to be ready when they hit the ground, at what point in their development do you start sending them to senior management programs? In most departments, the answer is you never do. What we do is have them pass a test, then they suddenly become senior commanders of a district, and you hope for the best.”

John Harrington, former commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Public Safety

“I think what the public really doesn’t like is someone who can’t make decisions, and that loses the troops’ confidence.”

In this section:

- **Know your authority and its limits:** State-level protections, like qualified immunity and penalties for jurisdictions that reduce police budgets, can restrict mayoral authority on matters related to police accountability. Understand these limitations early in your tenure to craft an effective plan to manage your police department.
- **Proactively bring in external resources:** Proactively request external support and resources to increase police accountability and prevent misconduct and violence.
 - One mayor engaged the Department of Justice when their police department’s officer-involved shootings increased.
- **Prepare policies and relationships to manage crises:** Have desired legislative and other policy changes ready for when policy windows open, and plan ahead for what you will do if an incident of police misconduct or brutality occurs.

“As leaders, if you want to change the culture, you can’t tolerate wrongful behavior and make excuses. How many times have you heard a police chief say, ‘Well, it’s just a few bad apples’? **If you’re walking through an orchard, and you see a bunch of rotten apples laying on the ground, you better check the tree** because there could be something that’s more systemic going on.”

Charles Ramsey, former police commissioner of Philadelphia, PA, and police chief of Washington, DC

“I try to tell mayors, ‘Have a close relationship with your chief. **Respect the men and women out there—they are risking their lives every day.** If someone makes a mistake, and they followed their training, back them up. **If someone crosses a line, you have to discipline or possibly fire them, and you can’t take forever with it.** The longer that fish is out there, it’s going to smell bad. **Just make a decision.** Sometimes it will be right; sometimes it will be wrong. **I think what the public really doesn’t like is someone who can’t make decisions, and that loses the troops’ confidence.**”

Michael Nutter, former mayor of Philadelphia, PA



“If you’re walking through an orchard, and you see a bunch of rotten apples laying on the ground, you better check the tree.”

Charles Ramsey, former police commissioner of Philadelphia, PA



Know your authority and its limits

Mayors and elected officials frequently described their state laws as both a significant barrier to local progress and a resource-intensive process to change. They cited state-level protections such as qualified immunity, policies that allow officers to live outside of the city they patrol in, union contract provisions that empower arbitrators to have final say in discipline cases, limitations on the scope of oversight entities, and penalties for jurisdictions that decrease police budgets. For mayors, learning

the legal landscape of their state and creating a strategy that can be achieved at the local level will save time and political capital while helping them prioritize reforms that they can sustain.

Mayors can invest long-term in creating alliances with peer mayors and statewide coalitions to effect broader change at the state level. As one mayor shared, “I think we need to change state law when it comes to arbitration rules. I’ve talked to mayors throughout the state, and it’s interesting to me because it’s one of those issues that a lot of elected officials don’t want to take on. I’ve done a lot of research on messaging and language, but I haven’t been as effective in finding allies to help take this on at the state level.” Mayors can also push for additional oversight measures in union contracts in the next collective bargaining process. One former police chief urged mayors, “**The next time you go to the bargaining table, stop giving away management rights. Start sitting down and actually bargaining** and have a contract that protects the rights of employees but at the same time gives you the ability to manage your agency and hold people accountable. I have cops that I fired more than once for different infractions.”

Leverage external voices to strengthen local accountability mechanisms

The majority of mayors cited significant structural barriers to effectively overseeing police departments, including limited authority of civilian review boards and the strength of police union collective bargaining agreements. A few mayors elevated specific local approaches to overcome these challenges that offer promising strategies for other leaders. Several mayors spoke to city policies that required union contract negotiations be open to the public, allowing advocates and residents to sit in on police union negotiations and create public pressure around the extent of the protections afforded to police. Other mayors spoke to the value of selecting a neutral, independent stakeholder with legal expertise to help steer and expand the authority of civilian review boards by navigating local law and pushing back on police department resistance to oversight without seeming politically motivated. Specifically, mayors spoke to the value of an independent leader that is not a part of the city’s own legal team to keep the interests of the city separate from that of the review board. Mayors spoke to their role in publicly supporting these strategies, which empower others to apply pressure to advance accountability.

Proactively bring in external resources

Mayors advancing police accountability can expect to encounter resistance and skepticism from both police and community residents that will only intensify in moments of crisis. To demonstrate leadership ability, mayors should proactively take action to assess, support, and discipline their police departments by seeking help from other government leaders,

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We called the feds on ourselves to ask for outside help and resources.

Michael Nutter, former mayor of Philadelphia, PA

peer jurisdictions, experts in the field, technical assistance providers, and federal agencies. As former Mayor Michael Nutter said, “**When we saw our officer-involved shootings going up, we called the Department of Justice. They didn’t call us.** We said, ‘We have an issue. We need you to come look at our departmental trainings and other things that could be happening.’ We called the feds on ourselves to ask for outside help and resources.”

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“Cities are very proud. But I think people could come to a place where they say, ‘You know what, we’re not embarrassed to say we can benefit from continuous improvement.’ **How do you get people to not have to wait until they are under consent decree to start asking for help?** I look at it like an internal auditor. **The internal auditor is not there to get you in trouble—they’re there to keep you out of trouble. And I think that’s a paradigm shift that we need when we talk about policing reform and accountability.** That’s the best way to do it. **But often, you only have these reforms when you have these tragedies.**”

Malik Evans, mayor of Rochester, NY

Prepare policies and relationships to manage crises

“We expanded the scope of review for independent police auditor work to include things like investigating all uses of force whether there was a complaint or not, very modest expansions. Because state law is so confining in labor relations, we actually had to get police union agreement to do that much. **If it weren’t for the murder of George Floyd, I don’t think we would have gotten that. Bluntly, we did it because the union had their back against the wall, and they had to agree to something because it was untenable to agree to nothing, politically.**”

Sam Liccardo, former mayor of San Jose, CA

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How do you get people to not have to wait until they are under consent decree to start asking for help? I look at it like an internal auditor. The internal auditor is not there to get you in trouble—**they’re there to keep you out of trouble.**

Malik Evans, mayor of Rochester, NY

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One of the mayors asked me, ‘Have you had a problem with police yet?’ And I said, ‘No,’ and he says, ‘Well, you’re going to.’

Greg Fischer, former mayor of Louisville, KY

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Windows of opportunity to increase police accountability are often short-lived and followed by swift backlash. To leverage brief surges of political support for police reform, mayors must always be ready with a strategy to roll out concrete policy changes and manage pushback. One mayor recalled an effort to reallocate unused funds within their police department at the same time as passing another controversial bill. The

mayor shared, **“These issues, which became conflated, became the city’s number one priority, and pretty much took all the oxygen out of the room for work on anything else.”**

Another current mayor described, “My entire career has been about relationship building for anticipation of needs in the future. I know that as much as we do to help improve things, there’s going to be something that causes a disruption in our community that we’re going to hopefully be prepared for. **And that preparation goes down to not just the policies and procedures in place, but in the relationships that you cultivate in the community and within your organization. They can stand with you and be there to help work through the problem.** When the problem shows up and you haven’t spent any time doing that, it’s a little too late.”

“Policing is at an inflection point in America right now because of all these high-profile killings. They’ve been going on forever, but now we just see them. So how does policing respond to this? **Will it continue to go on or are we going to fundamentally hold this profession accountable** and then have improvement mechanisms in place to move forward?”

Greg Fischer, former mayor of Louisville, KY

Remember why police accountability matters to your community

“I ran for this seat because I thought we could be better.”

In this section:

- Many interviewees attributed their leadership on this issue to their values, their roots in the community, and their prior experiences with police or violence.
- Holding strong principles allowed elected leaders to pursue police accountability with a sense of urgency and take difficult political stances.

“What I’ve learned a lot over the years is that government likes to speak in ways that are disconnected from the community they serve. **I ran for this seat because I thought we could be better.** I want to put into practice what I’ve learned as a community organizer and a community volunteer over 30-some years of advocacy and city rights work. **I’m still a child of the civil rights movement.** I still remember vividly watching on black-and-white TV people looking like me being brutalized trying to go to school and trying to just be. **So that’s what drives me.**”

Jo Ann Hardesty, former commissioner of Portland, OR

In responding to “What advice would you give a new mayor on how to approach police accountability?” mayors and elected officials shared deeply personal stories to illustrate the source of their motivations and call to public service. The experiences spanned a wide range of perspectives—they or their family members had been victims of crime, victims of police misconduct, served in the police force, or came from marginalized communities that had deep mistrust of police.

“I still live a mile from where I grew up. My mom still lives in the house she lived in. I’m still in the community. That’s what keeps me engaged, the issue of poverty. You got to be part of the community and truly concerned about it. You can’t have the mindset of doing a job and going home to the safer community that’s not impacted.”

Current mayor

Mayors' personal connections were integral to shaping their interest in creating better public safety outcomes for residents and compelling their leadership in the face of resistance. Mayors described drawing on these connections to align with residents impacted by crime and community groups advocating for reform as partners in developing public safety solutions. They used those relationships to remain focused on the values guiding their work. Former Commissioner Hardesty said, "When you stand firm with your values and you stand firm with your community, you get rewarded for that because people see the work that you're doing." As new mayors step into their roles leading a vision for public safety and preparing to navigate resistance, these connections can serve to ground them in the urgency of police accountability and the opportunity to make a difference in their communities.

This publication reflects interviews on police accountability conducted with 26 participants across the country, including current and former mayors, police chiefs, city council members, city and county commissioners, and leadership staff. The Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab (GPL) also conducted interviews with nine experts in the field of police accountability, including researchers, practitioners, and community organizers, in addition to engaging in landscape research, reviewing more than 100 studies, investigations, and other forms of literature to understand the efficacy of top interventions and constraints to their implementation. In interviews with policymakers, the GPL loosely defined police accountability as any policy or structure in place to ensure that police officers fulfill their roles appropriately and are held responsible when they do not, often with the goal of deterring misconduct and enhancing or restoring public trust ([United Nations Office On Drugs & Crime, Handbook on Police Accountability, Oversight and Integrity, 2011](#)). Interviewees were invited to offer their own definition and speak directly to their experience with various mechanisms related to accountability.

Key characteristics of local leaders interviewed include:

- Regional representation from cities and counties across the West, Midwest, Southeast, and Northeast regions within jurisdictions ranging from small, (population of less than 50,000) to large (upwards of 4 million).
- Demographic diversity that includes a third of interviewees identifying as women and almost half as people of color. Several interviewees also identified as LGBTQ+. Many of these policymakers have noted personal motivation to advance police accountability and challenges they've encountered with police based on their personal identity and connection to communities that have been over-surveilled but underserved by police and local government agencies.
- Various forms of political and ideological representation. The majority of interviewees were Democrats, although many shared differing views on the need for police accountability. A third of interviewees lead cities in states with Republican governors. Several elected officials interviewed have prior experience working in law enforcement, including federal or local prosecutor offices and local police agencies, as both officers and in other civilian positions.

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The Government Performance Lab

The [Government Performance Lab](#), housed at the Harvard Kennedy School Taubman Center for State and Local Government, conducts research on how governments can improve the results they achieve for their citizens. An important part of this research model involves providing hands-on technical assistance to state and local governments. Through this involvement, we gain insights into the barriers that governments face and the solutions that can overcome these barriers. By engaging current students and recent graduates in this effort, we are able to provide experiential learning as well.

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