



Beyond Crime Stats:

Local Leaders Look to Signs that Residents Feel Safe to Track Progress on Public Safety Goals

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Letter From Our Executive Director

Dear Reader,

Mayors across the country have told us that public safety is one of their top priorities. In October 2024, we brought a group of mayors and state leaders to the Harvard Kennedy School to discuss public safety and police accountability. When we asked them about their visions for public safety, they talked about an expansive definition of resident safety that stretched far beyond crime to include whether their residents felt comfortable going out in their cities, including gathering, socializing, and moving freely in public spaces. These mayors agreed that making residents feel safer was one of the most important parts of their roles as leaders — yet they had no reliable way to measure it.

What struck me most was how young people impacted by violence described a sense of safety in their neighborhoods in ways similar to the mayors' insights: the ability to play freely outdoors and engage in social activity without feeling on guard. What we've learned from leaders and young people alike is that traditional crime metrics fail to capture whether people actually feel safe. If government leaders can't measure how safe people feel, how can they manage to it?

This publication elevates insights from government leaders who are exploring innovative approaches to measuring progress on public safety by tracking signs that residents feel safe. Our goal is to help more leaders identify and test these kinds of community-focused safety metrics. We hope to inform the development of responsive tools to meaningfully track improvements in public safety by answering two questions:

1. How do government leaders know if residents feel safe in their city?
2. How can leaders track changes in how safe residents feel over time?

We encourage leaders to explore these types of measures as they develop and refine public safety strategies in their own jurisdictions.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gloria Gong".

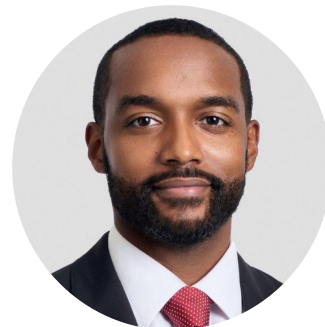
Gloria Gong

Executive Director
Harvard Kennedy School
Government Performance Lab

Introduction: *How do government leaders know if residents feel safe in their city? How can leaders track changes in how safe residents feel over time?*

“It became very clear to me as mayor that official crime statistics did not align with how people perceived safety in Shreveport. I unfortunately did not have the tools or the skill set among my personnel to be able to track resident activity.”

— *Adrian Perkins, former Mayor, Shreveport, Louisiana*



“When I was in the mayor’s office, our primary data point week-to-week, even day-to-day, was essentially data generated by the police department about calls for service, reports of shootings, arrests, gun seizures, etc. So, day-to-day we were not focusing, for example, on foot traffic in and out of parks or utilization of library programs for youth. These figures may have existed somewhere. But they were not being pulled together in a conscious way.”

— *Walter Katz, former Deputy Chief of Staff for Public Safety, Office of the Mayor, Chicago, Illinois*

“Public safety is really about residents’ attitudes toward the neighborhood. As leaders, we have to try and understand whether or not residents feel safe and why they feel that way.”

— *Eduardo Martinez, Mayor, Richmond, California*



“Overall crime statistics alone won’t capture public sentiment or explain people’s fears. What you need to determine — though it’s challenging — is how to develop strategies that address these specific concerns. The key is to identify exactly what’s driving fear in your community rather than simply assuming it’s directly correlated with crime rates.”

— *Marcos Soler, former Director of Criminal Justice, New York City, New York*

Our Framework: The Need for New Measures



Traditionally, mayors and police chiefs have measured public safety using crime statistics, such as the number of shootings and arrests. These data reflect reported crimes and law enforcement action, but reveal little insight into residents' experiences and their perceptions of safety. So how do government leaders know if city residents **actually** feel safe?

During the GPL's Executive Workshop on Police Accountability and Public Safety,¹ the team asked participating leaders to:

Imagine you were visiting a new city for the first time. If you could not rely on traditional crime metrics or police input, how would you determine if that city was safe for residents?

Here are some of the challenges and needs leaders shared:

Challenge #1: Leaders discussed using qualitative methods such as community surveys and town hall listening sessions to capture resident sentiment. However, these tend to be expensive, time-consuming, and capture only a subset of the community's perspectives, often leaving out residents who face a higher risk of violence.

Need: Leaders want more direct measures of resident perception in order to understand whether residents feel safe in their communities, which can broadly capture behavior in a way that is practical and inclusive of all residents.

Challenge #2: Leaders are also deeply concerned by the gap in actual safety and perceived safety, as illustrated by studies that show even in areas that have become statistically safer, residents may not always report feeling safer.^{2,3}

Need: Leaders said that when residents feel unsafe, they report changing their behavior. During interviews with mayors about their efforts to improve public safety, mayors and other leaders said they wanted to measure this change in behavior.

For more information about the methodology and topics explored during the Executive Workshop, please see the [Appendix](#).

1. Following an initial research project developing community-based indicators of safety in Saint Paul, the GPL expanded this research to collect insights and recommendations from local leaders who attended the Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab's Executive Workshop on Police Accountability and Public Safety in October 2024. Learn more about the GPL's work [exploring community-based public safety solutions](#).

2. Fan Zhang, Zhuangyuan Fan, Yuhao Kang, Yujie Hu, Carlo Ratti, "Perception bias": Deciphering a mismatch between urban crime and perception of safety, *Landscape and Urban Planning*, Volume 207, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2020.104003>.

3. Leaders also hypothesized that complex factors might be at play such as the potential connection between disorder and perceptions of safety and the role of social media in increasing the salience of crime.





Four Ways to Measure Signs that Residents Feel Safe

Building on insights from leaders in the Executive Workshop and also from Saint Paul youth (see Case Example on page 3), the Government Performance Lab proposes a new set of measures that focus on residents' perceptions of safety as expressed through their actions and behaviors — which we will refer to in this report as **signs that residents feel safe**. These signs are not intended to measure whether residents are safe, but rather their perceptions of safety, such as considerations a resident might make when deciding whether to jog outside at dusk or take public transit.

To help mayors, neighborhood safety department staff, and other local public safety leaders meet the challenges they named, this publication provides:

- **A framework** explaining why leaders need new measures of perception of safety, including **four key areas** where these measures can supplement traditional public safety metrics.
- **A set of potential behavioral measures** that rely on cellphone, tax revenue, and public transit ridership data to provide nuanced, real-time information about residents' sense of safety.
- **Case studies** from real-world examples illustrating how other jurisdictions have designed and tested similar measures along with a checklist of recommended implementation strategies.

We encourage leaders to select one metric from a topic of interest to integrate into existing public safety dashboards and data-sharing strategies.

	Key Areas	Signs that residents feel safe
	Do residents feel safe in their neighborhoods?	Residents moving freely in their neighborhoods , including residents going outdoors to conduct daily activities without being on guard or avoiding particular areas of the neighborhood when alone or at night.
	Do young people feel safe using public spaces and services?	Young people accessing public spaces and services , including young people taking advantage of social and recreational activities alone or with peers, in different parts of the city, and moving between their homes and these spaces without fear of violence.
	Do residents and visitors feel safe downtown?	Residents and visitors spending time downtown , including residents and visitors frequenting the downtown area to shop, dine, and enjoy local attractions.
	Do residents feel safe using public transit?	Residents comfortably riding public buses and trains , including residents taking advantage of all available public transit options whenever they need to use them, and at all hours of the day.



Case Example: What We Learned from Saint Paul Youth

In 2022, public safety leaders in Saint Paul, Minnesota, wanted to understand how young people experienced safety. With support from the GPL and World Youth Connect, the newly established Office of Neighborhood Safety launched an innovative, community-based participatory research project to gather insights from 50 young people from Saint Paul who self-identified as highly impacted by violence. We asked them to answer questions about their sense of safety, such as:

Tell me about your neighborhood.

"During the day, the neighborhood is mostly quiet, but at night, you can hear gunshots every night. It's a usual thing for everyone now, like they're just so used to it, and you just think about it like a normal gunshot even if someone is getting killed. And then the next morning you find out that, 'Oh, someone is getting killed in your neighborhood.'" — 20-year-old participant

What activities would you do with your friends if you lived in a safer neighborhood?

"Especially for me and my identity, I would love to see [the] Pride [parade]. The Cinco de Mayo parade, too. We would love to actually go again. I've never gone to a Pride parade, but again, my family is afraid of violence, but I would love to see the West Side. ... I've never seen it as much as I think I should." — 17-year-old participant

These insights were used to generate a list of activities that might indicate youth feel safe in their neighborhoods, which we called community-based indicators of safety. Leaders could use these indicators to measure progress on public safety goals, such as improving transit safety to encourage more youth to ride the train to get to work and see friends. Leaders could then measure youth train ridership. Please see the **Appendix** for additional examples, or read the [full report here](#).



1 – Do Residents Feel Safe in Their Neighborhoods?

Key Area 1: Do Residents Feel Safe in Their Neighborhoods?



Many leaders said it was important to understand where residents feel comfortable moving freely in their neighborhoods, and to learn more about their sense of safety completing day-to-day activities such as shopping at local stores, walking, or exercising outdoors.



Table 1. Leaders have tracked or would want to track residents moving freely in their neighborhoods

Signs that residents feel safe <i>Trends in...</i>	Example data sources <i>Measured over time and adjusted for seasonality</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Routes students take to and from school• Young people moving through outdoor areas without adult supervision	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anonymized, aggregate cellphone location data or street view camera footage• Observations conducted by school, recreational, or government staff <p><i>Note: Where possible, we recommend conducting semiregular surveys or interviews with residents to validate whether the observed behavioral data is consistent with residents' self-reported experiences.</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Residents outside moving freely, such as walking or running in their neighborhood or exploring new areas	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Residents attending events in their own neighborhood	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Crowd counts or event programming attendance
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Residents visiting local businesses, such as corner stores or grocery stores	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anonymized, aggregate cellphone data on foot traffic at or around local businesses by time of day, particularly capturing evening hours and residents out alone• Sales records by category of items and time of purchase

Case Example: Identifying Signs of Safety on a Neighborhood Level

Adrian Perkins, former mayor of Shreveport, Louisiana, was one of several leaders from the Executive Workshop that spoke about the significance of residents moving freely as a potential sign that residents feel safe. He said, “if you see joggers, that’s a pretty safe bet that it’s a safe area.”



Perkins reflected on his first year in office. Some residents voiced concerns about feeling unsafe, despite police data showing an overall drop in crime rates citywide. To help understand this disconnect, his administration began looking at neighborhood-level activity in Shreveport to identify signs that residents felt safe.

“Some behaviors stood out, like residents jogging with headphones or people feeling safe to go to their favorite barbecue place. These were small signs that residents felt comfortable. That insight led us to create an informal, tangible checklist to better understand how residents perceived safety. As we began tracking this, we noticed that those signs were absent in areas with higher crime rates.”

Voices of Saint Paul Youth and Local Leaders

Saint Paul youth raised the importance of moving freely outside of the home as one of the strongest indicators of their sense of safety. In Saint Paul, many young people said that if they lived in a safer neighborhood, they would more freely move around between spaces like home and school or visit their neighborhood stores.

During the Executive Workshop, several leaders also suggested that people learn to avoid certain street corners or neighborhoods in response to previous exposure to violence or other unsafe conditions in those spaces. This suggests that residents moving freely signals their ability to explore certain parts of a neighborhood or community without fear of violence.

“I would love to just be able to go outside without worrying that something will happen to me, when someone else will just do something violent, and yeah, having walks without worrying.”

— 17-year-old participant in a youth focus group in Saint Paul

“Traditionally, in urban communities, there are areas where people simply don’t go — you might be from one block or housing development and learn not to venture into another. My interest was in observing the places where people actually go and how this changes over time.”

— Marcos Soler, Former Deputy Secretary for Public Safety, Office of the Governor of New York



Mayors and other public safety leaders expressed concern about youth pedestrian safety, particularly about how youth navigate between home, school, and local youth centers in their neighborhoods. One local leader said they would be able to tell if a neighborhood was safe or not by measuring how kids feel about walking from home to school. By examining whether children regularly traveled along specific streets or steered clear of them, the leader intended to use these movement patterns as a sign of community members' sense of safety.

Relatedly, two leaders shared that their jurisdictions developed safe passage programs⁴ in response to the unique safety challenges that make it unsafe for youth to travel between places like home and school. A parent signing their child up to participate in this program may reflect not only the child's own perceptions of safety, but parental and guardian perceptions of safety. As such, children's walking behavior in their neighborhoods may be a particularly sensitive sign of whether residents feel safe.

4. [Safe passage programs](#) are community-based initiatives designed to create safer routes and environments for students traveling to and from school, often in response to concerns about violence, traffic, and other dangers in urban neighborhoods. These programs were created to ensure students' safety and support community development by fostering collaboration among schools, law enforcement, and local organizations.



2 – Do Young People Feel Safe Using Public Spaces and Services?

Key Area 2: Do Young People Feel Safe Using Public Spaces and Services?



In addition to measuring whether residents feel safe moving freely in their neighborhoods, local leaders noted that tracking how — and how often — people, especially **young people, use public spaces and services** can provide unique insight into community perceptions of safety. Unlike adults, youth are often more vulnerable to risks and less able to protect themselves. Their patterns of engagement in public spaces like libraries, parks, and schools depend not only on their personal perceptions of safety but also on the decisions of parents or guardians, who may limit their participation if they feel an area is unsafe. For this reason, observing whether and how youth actively use public spaces may offer a particularly sensitive indicator of local safety, potentially reflecting both the actual and perceived risks experienced by families in the community.

Both the Saint Paul youth and the local leaders at the Executive Workshop suggested that how often and in what ways residents, and youth in particular, engage in public and outdoor spaces can reveal important information about public safety and quality of life.

Table 2. Leaders have tracked or would want to track young people accessing public spaces and services (e.g., parks, libraries, schools)

<i>Signs that residents feel safe</i> <i>Trends in...</i>	<i>Example data sources</i> <i>Measured over time and adjusted for seasonality</i>
Young people spending time at the park	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Youth park utilization at different times of day• Anonymized, aggregate cellphone location data
Young people playing in an outdoor area or utilizing public spaces without immediate adult supervision	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Number of youth present at selected outdoor areas <p><i>Note: Leaders may need to identify staff to collect this observational data manually at regular intervals</i></p>
Young people utilizing public services such as the library; attending group activities organized by school, religious, or community-based organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Youth program registration and attendance rosters• Book checkout rates and library programming attendance
Young people attending school	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• School attendance or truancy rates <p><i>Note: Existing state or district school safety survey data, disaggregated by location, can also provide context for youth experience and safety concerns without requiring additional survey resources and youth time.</i></p>
Young people attending after-school or summer programming	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• After-school programming attendance, adjusted for other childcare options and local activities

Former Deputy Secretary Soler described measuring engagement with public spaces as a process of “deepening,” where people become more committed or consistent in their activities. This may look like a resident signing up and attending a physical recreation program consistently at their local community center. This willingness to participate is a behavior that may suggest comfort, connection, and a growing sense of community trust and safety.

Voices of Saint Paul Youth and Local Leaders

Both Saint Paul youth and local leaders at the Executive Workshop linked the concept of safety in public spaces to whether residents behave in ways that suggest comfort rather than fear or avoidance due to violence. In Saint Paul, youth said their ideal of a safe community would include frequently using parks and recreation areas, emphasizing common use of public spaces as a sign of safety.

If you were mayor, what would you do to keep everyone safe?

“Investing in communities. We start actually allocating resources to communities that really need it. I mean, you go down Payne or Arcade, what the f* is there? ... There’s that one community center that’s being built up on Rice, but what about the kids over off Mount Airy? There’s nothing over there.”**

— 23-year-old participant in a youth focus group in Saint Paul

Case Example: Collaborating Across Youth Service Agencies to Identify Signs that Children Feel Safe in Chicago

Walter Katz, former deputy chief of staff for public safety in Chicago, Illinois, discussed the origin story of the “triangle of safety” concept. During his tenure as deputy chief of staff, children aged 0 to 19 made up 15% of all violent crime reported in Chicago.



Katz recalled attending multiple meetings with directors from youth-related city departments where they would discuss their unique solutions to address child victimization using data, such as the Safe Passage Program, to help keep children safe on their route to school. After several of these conversations, he began to see a new path forward, or the “triangle of safety.”

“When I was in the mayor’s office, we would have these separate meetings with the [Chicago] Parks Department about their recreational sports programming. We would also meet with Chicago Public Schools about the various programming and the school safety plan, and then we would have some conversations with libraries about their programming. But for the most part, we did not consider putting data from all three spaces together.”



3 – Do Residents and Visitors Feel Safe in the Downtown Area?

Key Area 3: Do Residents and Visitors Feel Safe in the Downtown Area?



In many cities across the country, downtown areas contribute to local economies, shape culture, and attract residents and visitors. Many local leaders view activity in their downtown areas as a sign that residents and tourists feel safe. Underlying these observations is an assumption that visible and family-oriented activities — such as dining out or shopping — reflect a baseline level of comfort and safety among residents.

Conversely, as people feel less safe, they may be inclined to change their behavior, potentially avoiding downtown areas altogether. This insight demonstrates the value of monitoring signs that residents feel safe as a way for local leaders to assess and respond to shifts in public perceptions of safety.



Table 3. Leaders have tracked or would want to track residents and visitors spending time downtown

<i>Signs that residents feel safe</i> <i>Trends in...</i>	<i>Example data sources</i> <i>Measured over time and adjusted for seasonality and special events</i>
Residents frequenting downtown	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anonymized, aggregate cellphone data on the volume of people entering business districts, including length of time spent in the area during peak hours• Dollars spent in downtown commercial districts measured by fluctuations in sales tax revenue
Tourism and non-resident visits to downtown	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anonymized, aggregate cellphone data in downtown areas analyzed by nonresident place of origin• Hotel pricing and occupancy rates• Museum admission rates and program attendance
Open and active businesses downtown	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Commercial business vacancies and relocation rates, adjusting for market trends

Voices of Saint Paul Youth and Local Leaders

Both Saint Paul youth and local leaders at the Executive Workshop expressed interest in addressing safety in downtown areas or business improvement districts. The GPL's research in Saint Paul found that when young people felt unsafe, they reported being “on guard” and constantly monitoring their surroundings for signs of danger.

When asked to describe their neighborhood or a recent incident when they felt unsafe, 25% of Saint Paul youth focus group participants (8/32) said they go home or inside a safe place as soon as they can to protect themselves, often avoiding downtown or other hubs of activity.

Similarly, leaders said that public sentiment often included an aversion to being downtown due to fear of harm or seeing visible signs of disorder such as homelessness and drug use. Mayor Brett Smiley of Providence, Rhode Island, shared that he “most often” receives feedback on safety issues in the downtown area from suburban residents. As such, mayors and other local leaders may need new measures to balance feedback from a subgroup of residents to create a more complete picture of residents' perceptions of safety.

Several local leaders also said that the physical environment — such as the type and appearance of stores or the presence of needles or encampments — could impact residents' feelings of safety. For instance, areas with a diverse set of stores with visible facade improvements may attract more visitors and provide an appearance of safety. By contrast, leaders said that areas with several liquor stores, tire shops, and stores with metal grates or barred windows may attract less foot traffic as they signal disinvestment, which residents might take as a sign that an area is unsafe.⁵

This reasoning is consistent with findings from randomized controlled trials where researchers have identified a link between public space design and improvements in public safety. Such studies include the effects of remediating blight in vacant lots to reduce the number of shootings⁶ and the impact of street lighting improvement to reduce serious crime at night.⁷

Leaders said that acknowledging how signs of disorder impact behavior is an important step to designing measures to understand if residents feel safe. Youth in Saint Paul mirrored this concern, citing cleanliness or lack of sufficient street lighting as reasons they avoid the downtown area.

If you were mayor, what would you do to keep everyone safe?

“I would probably start by making it cleaner, ... like just putting trash cans on the train so that people have a place to throw their trash away instead of just on the floor. ... I feel like if it's a cleaner environment, people feel less entitled to take advantage of the space.”

— 18-year-old participant in a youth focus group in Saint Paul

5. Many [criminal justice researchers](#) argue that signs of physical and social disorder — such as abandoned buildings, graffiti, and visible drug paraphernalia — can increase residents' fear of crime and perceptions of neighborhood insecurity.

6. A [randomized trial](#) in Philadelphia found that greening or cleaning vacant lots reduced shootings causing injury or death by 7-9%, with no increase in shootings in nearby areas.

7. A large-scale [randomized trial](#) in New York City public housing found that adding bright, temporary street lighting led to a substantial reduction in outdoor nighttime “index” crimes — including serious incidents like robbery and felony assault — by approximately 36%, illustrating how improvements to the physical environment can signal and deliver greater public safety.



Case Example: Analyzing Cross-Agency Data to Validate Signs that Residents Feel Safe in Burlington, Vermont's Commercial District

Kara Alnasrawi, director of business and workforce development in Burlington, Vermont, works to ensure residents and businesses thrive in the city. Under former Mayor Miro Weinberger's administration, Alnasrawi led a project to combine cellphone and parking data with traditional metrics, such as drug use-related 911 call data, to measure whether areas with high rates of drug use were correlated with declining foot traffic in the marketplace district. To help identify more nuanced insights, Alnasrawi worked across departments to support her analysis.



"We do compare cellphone data with other sources. Recently, we have been using police data to track specific issues like intravenous drug use in parking garages. Our garage staff report on things like the number of used needles collected. From there, we can also look at the parking data to see if there has been less traffic and compare that to street parking or other garages less impacted by this behavior. This helps us understand if people are avoiding certain areas and can inform where we focus our attention."



4 – Do Residents Feel Safe Using Public Transit?

Key Area 4: Do Residents Feel Safe Using Public Transit?



Public transit systems are lifelines in many cities, shaping residents’ daily mobility and access to opportunities. However, the confined spaces of public transit vehicles can also make unsafe conditions feel more intense or inescapable. While disorder in many public spaces can be ignored, avoided, or walked around — disorder on a bus or train often becomes unavoidable. In jurisdictions with transit networks, leaders said that someone’s decision to use or avoid public transit can serve as a sign that they feel safe.

Table 4. Leaders have tracked or would want to track residents comfortably riding public buses and trains

<i>Signs that residents feel safe Trends in...</i>	<i>Example data sources Measured over time and adjusted for seasonality and special events</i>
Residents riding the bus or train	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Public transit ridership as measured by ticket purchases, camera footage, or entry/exit logs, disaggregated by time of day, location, and transit type
Residents sitting in their preferred seat and train car for the duration of their trip	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Camera footage on rider movement between seats and train cars, supplemented by available rider survey and qualitative data on overall experienceObservational data from front-line staff or community outreach teams conducted at regular intervals

Mayors and other local leaders shared that when residents feel unsafe due to real or perceived threats on buses, trains, or at transit stations, they may adapt their travel behavior to avoid certain stops, switch cars, or exit earlier than needed. Tracking these patterns offers insight into whether residents feel safe enough to use transit as a part of their daily life.

Residents’ experiences with disorder on public transit, such as drug use or verbal aggression, may not align with law enforcement thresholds for taking action, which makes these signs more reflective of or sensitive to disorder than traditional crime statistics (e.g., issuing a citation or making an arrest). Studying ridership data may allow leaders to identify areas to target public safety improvements, regardless of what traditional crime statistics report about those areas.

For example, if residents under-report harassment, verbal abuse, or other low-level disorder experienced on public transit, then rider behavior — such as choosing to ride the train during certain hours or exiting at certain stations — could inform whether residents feel safe and could be easier to measure than the disorder itself.

Voices of Saint Paul Youth and Local Leaders

Both Saint Paul youth and local leaders from the Executive Workshop acknowledged that small, persistent stressors diminish residents' perceptions of safety on public transit, such as exposure to substance use and unwanted encounters with unhoused people and people with apparent mental health challenges. In Saint Paul, youth frequently described transit as necessary to their daily life but often unsafe. Their feelings mirrored national trends that some local leaders expressed concern about, where public exposure to disorder and violence, particularly [reported assaults](#), disrupted rider behavior.

"If [the METRO Green Line train] were safe, if it were fun to ride and there weren't people using drugs or people saying unwanted things, I would probably ride it every day."

— 14-year-old participant in a youth focus group in Saint Paul

"I care about ridership and how people use public transit, more than simply if crime is up or down. It tells me a lot about whether or not people feel safe using this service."

— Marcos Soler, Former Deputy Secretary for Public Safety, Office of the Governor of New York



If you were mayor, what would you do to keep everyone safe?

“Investing in safer public transportation, investing in more transportation for people to get access to well-paying positions. ... You have to go all the way over to Midway to get a decent paying position for kids, you know? And then, you know, we’re having kids work at the Burger King off Snelling Ave., where there’s literally robberies every other month. ... It’s like damn, parents are having to choose between giving their kid a job and maybe them not coming home.”

— 23-year-old participant in a youth focus group in Saint Paul

Some leaders said that measuring public transit usage could serve as a sign that residents feel safe. For example, if riders abandon a route due to disorder, it may be a sign that the transit system is failing to meet basic expectations of safety even if crime rates remain unchanged. One leader even shared that residents informally identify certain transit lines and stops as seeming unsafe, often giving them colloquial nicknames to indicate that activity in those areas should be avoided. In this example, measuring rider behavior and comparing that to transit-related crime might reveal patterns and help leaders validate whether resident behavior aligns with safety trends.

Another reason understanding safety on public transit is important is because transit reliance is not uniform. In metropolitan cities, lower-income people and youth are often most dependent on public transportation and least able to access other modes, such as rideshares and personal vehicles. Leaders looking to resolve transit safety concerns may consider which residents are most affected when trust in public transportation breaks down.

Case Example: Using Time-Disaggregated Transit Data to Validate Safety Concerns in New York

Marcos Soler, former deputy secretary for public safety, Office of the Governor of New York, and former director of the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice in New York City, discussed his work analyzing ridership and subway crime data. Soler made strides to understand data trends related to passenger safety in the city’s subway system.



After obtaining the data on crime and ridership in the subway, Soler set out to find creative ways to segment the data to better understand the story of public behavior related to safety. He divided the ridership data by time, analyzing the findings by the hour instead of as one large block.

“Looking hour by hour, I was surprised to discover that the 7-11 p.m. period was often more dangerous than midnight, despite common perception and complaints reported by riders. When connecting crime data to ridership patterns, you gain significant insights.”

Implementation Strategies for Measuring Signs that Residents Feel Safe



Local leaders from the Executive Workshop shared several strategies and lessons learned from implementing new measures to track public safety using signs that residents feel safe in their jurisdictions.

Identify opportunities to combine data sources to uncover nuances in safety trends.

Leaders could identify where different data types can complement each other to add greater clarity or generate more meaningful insights about what shapes resident behavior. For example, leaders could use cellphone data to compare trends in evening foot traffic in specific neighborhoods, paired with geographic data

on areas that receive frequent requests for better street lighting to understand to what extent the built environment corresponds with resident activity. These intersections may help reveal points for intervention or uncover less understood dynamics influencing residents' perceptions of public safety.

Formalize data sharing agreements and establish practices to facilitate information sharing across government agencies responsible for public safety.

Sourcing existing data from different government departments can be an effective way to measure signs that residents feel safe. However, many jurisdictions lack formal agreements to share even basic datasets across departments in the same jurisdiction, for example between police and park agencies. Without these agreements in place, leaders may experience bureaucratic delays in accessing complete information on safety trends that could slow down the pace of designing new solutions. To address this, leaders can proactively authorize cross-departmental coordination as part of their safety agendas to encourage communication and data sharing between departments — such as those responsible for economic development, transportation, or parks and recreation — as partners in the process of developing and testing new measures.

Pressure test new measures and control for external factors that could influence resident behavior.

While signs that residents feel safe may help leaders capture snapshots of resident behavior, leaders advise against claiming that a measure is strong without first validating it as a useful indicator. Leaders should seek to validate any measures of interest for gathering signs that residents feel safe, to ensure that changes in resident activity are indicative of perceptions of safety and no other causes. For example, if attempting to measure outdoor activity, a leader might need to factor weather and seasonality into their analysis.

In another example, one leader from the Executive Workshop cautioned against the use of school attendance data as a proxy for children's sense of safety at school because attendance has become more complicated to understand since the pandemic as parents allow children to miss school more often than before. In this case, there may be value in using qualitative data to back up your findings. This might look like surveying parents about the driving factors behind school attendance.

Build the right data analysis team to work with your data and align recommendations with public safety priorities.

Leaders said that measuring signs that residents feel safe may require the city to have the capacity to synthesize new data sources, such as GPS mobility data, with existing administrative records. However, aligning these datasets is complex, especially for staff that may have previously been siloed according to expertise (e.g., geographic information systems vs. education reporting). Leaders can address this by cross-training analysts to better understand how residents use public spaces and services. Some leaders said that designating public safety staff responsibilities in two categories — acute needs (urgent responses) and strategic needs — can be a useful way to improve capacity for nonurgent work.

Additionally, with limited in-house data analysis capabilities, leaders may consider issuing requests for bids from vendors that specialize in collecting and analyzing the types of data needed to measure these behaviors.

Consult with experts and review data use parameters to maintain privacy protections.

Leaders currently measuring signs that residents feel safe describe limitations that arise when analyzing anonymized, aggregate data. For example, it may be helpful to measure foot traffic by gender and age to understand the impact of identity on feelings of safety. However, disaggregating data too finely runs the risk of inadvertently exposing someone's identity.

In some cases, visitors from different states or countries may have legal protections related to the types of data localities can access, such as cellphone data or disaggregated data on sales tax receipts. Review these constraints while designing your measures to ensure you can collect the data you need. Also consider issuing a request for information to identify experts in your area with whom you can consult on these matters.

Final Thoughts

Relying solely on traditional measures of crime is not sufficient to understand if residents feel safe. Police reports and crime data, while still relevant, offer an incomplete picture of how residents experience and respond to issues of safety in their daily lives. Instead, mayors and other local leaders can increasingly work to measure signs that residents feel safe by measuring actions taken in their everyday lives, such as riding public transit, visiting a public library, or jogging outside.

When residents feel unsafe, they report changing their behavior. Whether it is a young person avoiding a downtown area after school or a commuter choosing to exit a transit line earlier to avoid a known problematic stop, these individual decisions — when viewed in aggregate — can provide local leaders with valuable data on shifts in perceptions of safety in their communities.

Methodology

This report reflects findings from the GPL's Executive Workshop on Police Accountability and Public Safety and follow-up interviews conducted by the Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab (GPL) with public safety officials and experts engaging innovative solutions to solve public safety problems.

Key characteristics of all local public safety leaders included:

- Representation from cities from across the West, Midwest, Northeast, and Southeast regions.
- Representation of local jurisdictions ranging in population from 96,000 (Lawrence, Kansas) to 8.48 million (New York City).
- Two leaders who have served in both state and local government positions.
- Demographic diversity, including more than half of participants identifying as people of color.

The Executive Workshop on Police Accountability and Public Safety

We convened a group of seven local public safety leaders, including current and former mayors and executive staff in mayors' offices. Before the participants convened, the GPL conducted pre-workshop interview calls with each participant. Some details from these one-on-one interviews were used in the report to provide additional context that was not raised in the group sessions.

During the convening, the GPL used a hybrid of focus group and executive session methods. The workshop was divided into three sessions across two days.

- **Session 1:** Pressure test opportunities and challenges
- **Session 2:** Refine promising solutions
- **Session 3:** Design effective tools and supports to advance accountability

Based on our previous report, [Mayor to Mayor: Taking the Lead on Police Accountability](#), we developed a hypothesis to guide our research; that concerns about public safety disincentivize local leaders from adequately checking police power. If local leaders had a way to actually measure and manage improvements in public safety overall, they could use specific safety outcomes to hold police accountable. Based on this hypothesis, we developed two priority research questions for the group:

- What metrics have local leaders used to measure improvements in public safety and police accountability? What are the characteristics of metrics that make them more likely to be implemented?
- What types of expertise and support (e.g., legal and technical) have local leaders leveraged to navigate common barriers to police accountability?

Discussion topics explored during sessions:

- Generating insight on public safety from residents
- Using other agencies and responders to meet residents’ needs
- Holding police accountable to positive actions
- Holding police accountable after negative actions
- Tools and resources needed to advance accountability

Post-Executive Workshop Follow-up Interviews

After the Executive Workshop, we conducted four follow-up interviews. For three of the interviews, we spoke with leaders who attended the workshop to ask them to elaborate on or describe programs or activities previously raised in the group discussion. We also spoke with one former employee of one of the Executive Workshop attendees, who directly led that jurisdiction’s initiative to capture resident behavior related to safety.

Questions asked during follow-up interviews:

- What were some of the challenges you faced when implementing these new measures?
- What results did you see after implementing these new measures?
- What metrics would you want to see on a safety dashboard that does not currently exist?
- Do you have any advice for other leaders who are interested in pursuing similar projects in their jurisdiction?

Table A. Saint Paul Community-Based Indicators of Safety

Themes	If their community were safer, participants said that they would do _____ more frequently:
Being on guard. Nearly two-thirds of participants said they constantly monitor their surroundings in their neighborhood for signs of danger.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Play outside, including biking, running, or taking walks• Move freely without worry, including visiting nearby stores• Socialize with others, including hanging out with family and friends• Attend social gatherings, such as fairs or cultural events• Go outside at night, including visits to a park or grocery store
The police. Nearly half of participants said they avoided interacting with the police due to fear of harm, while only one quarter said they feel safe around the police.	
Social media. More than half of participants said they encounter violent or disturbing content on social media that negatively impacts their well-being and sense of safety.	
The train. One-third of participants said riding the local train exposed them to drug use and that they prefer to avoid riding the train in favor of other transit options.	

The [Government Performance Lab](#), housed at the Taubman Center for State and Local Government at the Harvard Kennedy School, 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 also able to provide experiential learning.

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