Community Priorities for City of New Orleans Investments: Big Easy Budget Coalition Survey Methods

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The Big Easy Budget Coalition (BEBC) Survey grew out of findings from "Community Visions of Safety," a 2022 community conversation facilitated by the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) and hosted by BEBC member organization St. Charles Center for Faith + Action. The more than 30 community members in attendance were asked, "What does safety look like? Feel like? Smell like?" Vera researchers analyzed the data from this discussion, and the findings inspired the themes for the survey questions. The community conversation and findings of the subsequent surveys show that for community members, safety is more than police; it is a function of social cohesion—feeling a sense of connectedness to one's community, knowing and trusting one's neighbors, and believing that people are willing to help one another. It is also a product of social infrastructure—resources, services, and opportunities for residents within reach in one's surroundings. As participants in the community conversation noted, safety includes "unlocked doors," "people walking at night," and "children playing outside."

Relying on crime statistics as the primary metric of safety fails to account for the ways community members experience safety and the limitations of police data in fully capturing harm. Research demonstrates that individuals and communities define safety in nuanced and experiential ways, often with an affirmative focus on access to social resources, health, economic opportunity, and autonomy, rather than a sole focus on the absence of crime.[1] Police data cannot provide a comprehensive picture of social harm and is informed by patterns of police activity as well as variation in community trust and willingness to report crimes. This data also does not capture broader harms that communities face—especially communities disproportionately impacted by systemic disinvestment, policing, and incarceration.

In addition to seeking understanding about what safety means to New Orleans residents, Vera set out to understand community priorities for city investments that address root causes of violence, fulfill community visions of safety, and support residents' ability to thrive.

Methods

Survey Design

Question domains in the BEBC survey included the following:

- Demographics: age, parish (county) of residence, race/ethnicity, gender, highest level of education, employment status, household income, living situation, zip code, neighborhood of residence, and city council district of residence.

- Perceptions of safety: five-point Likert scales for agreement with statements relating to feeling safe walking in one's neighborhood during the day, feeling safe walking in one's neighborhood at night, feeling connected to one's neighborhood, knowing one's neighbors, believing that people in one's

neighborhood are willing to help one another, believing that people in one's neighborhood can be trusted, seeing police daily in one's neighborhood, and seeing police rarely in one's neighborhood.

- What individuals and communities need to thrive: two open-ended prompts: (1) "To thrive, I need. . . ." and (2) "To thrive, my community needs. . . ."

- Perceptions of city spending: multiple choice selections of "too little," "the perfect amount," "too much," or "N/A" (not applicable), based on respondents' perceptions of the city spending money on different resources and services. These include police and courts; education and schools; safe, affordable housing; programs and services for low-income individuals and families; opportunities for youth; roads, streetlights, and drainage systems; mental health services; fire and emergency medical services; and public transportation.

    - The 2025 version of the survey included a bar chart displaying the major allocations across the city budget. The chart was included because, in previous years, several community members were reluctant to offer their perceptions of the city's spending without first knowing what the city spends on each category.

- Top three priorities for the city's expenditure of its tax revenue: an open-ended prompt.

- Perceptions of where more resources should be focused in the New Orleans criminal legal system: a multiple-choice question where respondents could choose more than one answer, with the following answer choices: "Prevention through early intervention," "Skills and employment training," "Treatment," "Arresting offenders," "Punishing offenders," "I'm not sure," and "Other, please specify."

Before the survey was launched in 2023, Fund The People—a collaborative of New Orleans–based organizers, lawyers, dreamers, artists, and community members, and a member organization of the BEBC— vetted the question themes and requested that the survey have positive framing. Reviewers of the survey did not want deficit-based framing or negative tones in the questions.

Recruitment and Eligibility

Researchers recruited survey participants by directly engaging community members at public meetings and events. The researchers also produced flyers with a web link and QR code that granted access to the survey and posted these in public spaces such as community centers, libraries, and post offices; sent email and text message blasts; and shared them on social media.

To be eligible for the survey, the respondent needed to consent to participation, be 18 years old or older, and be a current resident of Orleans Parish. If the respondent did not meet any one of these criteria, the survey's disqualification logic prohibited them from progressing with the survey and triggered a message to the respondent thanking them for their interest.

Survey Administration

Vera administers the survey using Qualtrics, an online survey platform. In 2023, Vera offered the survey and recruitment flyer in English only; Vera subsequently translated these into Spanish and, in 2024 and 2025, offered them in both languages. In direct encounters, researchers made tablets with web access available for respondents to access the survey and, when requested, assisted respondents with completing the survey (that is, by reading questions and answer choices aloud and entering responses on behalf of the

respondent). The survey did not record names or contact information, and no compensation was provided for participation.

Data Cleaning and Analysis

For each year of data collection, Vera researchers conducted a descriptive statistical analysis of the quantitative elements of the survey and a thematic analysis of the open-ended, qualitative elements.

To prepare the data for analysis, the researchers first removed surveys completed by ineligible respondents and surveys in which respondents did not answer any items beyond the opening demographics questions.[2] The researchers recoded race/ethnicity, employment status, and living situation—which all allow for selection of multiple responses, as well as inclusion of "Other" responses—into narrower categories. Vera created a student status variable due to the frequency of full- or part-time student status reported as responses to "Other" in the employment status question. Not all respondents were aware of the city council district they lived in; researchers therefore used information on zip codes, neighborhoods, and closest major intersections, if provided, to interpolate unknown or missing council districts.

In 2023, the research team analyzed the qualitative prompts of the survey (what individuals and communities need to thrive and top three priorities for city investments) using inductive coding, in which themes are derived from the data without preconceptions. The team then used deductive coding to analyze the 2024 and 2025 data, using the codes generated from 2023 as a frame for analysis. In most cases, codes directly matched a word or words used by respondents. However, some codes, like "Infrastructure," for example, grouped direct usage of "infrastructure" as well as any responses relating to the improvement of roads, drainage systems, blight remediation, and other needs/priorities related to the built environment.

Dissemination of Results

Each year, Vera summarized the survey results and shared them with the community and BEBC members for reactions and feedback. The researchers used this feedback to refine the talking points and/or presentation to be shared with the New Orleans City Council and the public.

Limitations

Researchers recruited respondents by means of convenience; therefore, the survey sample is not representative of the population demographics of New Orleans residents. There was neither an even distribution of respondents from each council district nor a proportional sampling of respondents from districts based on the number of residents therein. Additionally, as noted, the researchers interpolated city council district of residence from other data provided by respondents where missing or unknown. It is therefore possible that disaggregation of the sample by district is not entirely accurate, as some zip codes and neighborhoods are not exclusive to a single district.

Endnotes

[1] Lee Ann Slocum, Claire Green, Beth M. Huebner, et al., *Redefining Community Safety in Three US Counties* (Chicago: MacArthur Foundation, 2023), https://perma.cc/K43M-YVVH. See also Emily Rhodes, "In New Orleans from the Barbershop to the Bakery: What Makes You Feel Safe?," Safety and Justice Challenge, February 17, 2021, https://perma.cc/6JHL-PFRZ; and Barry Friedman, "What Is Public Safety?," *Boston University Law Review* 102, no. 3. (2022), 725–791, https://www.bu.edu/bulawreview/files/2022/04/FRIEDMAN.pdf.

[2] Disqualification logic prohibited progression of the survey if a respondent declined to consent to participate, indicated that they lived in a parish (county) other than Orleans, or was younger than 18 years old. Some ineligible respondents were able to proceed with the survey by endorsing consent, meeting the age criteria, and indicating they were an Orleans Parish resident; however, later in the survey, they reported a zip code or neighborhood information that was not within Orleans Parish. Vera excluded responses from these people from the analysis.