

Community Priorities for City of New Orleans Investments: Community Survey Results, 2023

Vera INSTITUTE
OF JUSTICE

Kim Mosby, PhD

Jakevia Wheeler

Connor Burruss

OCTOBER

2025

Introduction

The Big Easy Budget Coalition (BEBC) is a diverse, growing group of more than 30 social justice organizations across New Orleans. BEBC advocates for city budget investments that address root causes of violence and support safe, thriving communities.¹ The Vera Institute of Justice (Vera), the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice, and the Louisiana Fair Housing Action Center established the coalition in 2022. They did so in response to the city's plan to appropriate much of its federally awarded \$388 million in American

The Big Easy Budget Coalition's mission is "to advance budget equity—the just and fair allocation of government resources—to create the conditions for all New Orleanians to participate and thrive."

Rescue Plan Act funding toward policing—despite the funding's stated purpose of "[fostering] a strong, inclusive, and equitable recovery" from the COVID-19 pandemic.² BEBC developed and proposed the Big Easy Deal, a set of requests for budget investments in public health, community safety, youth and families, housing, infrastructure, food access, labor, and economic development that would better support the community's health, safety, quality of life, and recovery. Vera, a member organization of BEBC, supported the refinement of the Big Easy Deal and the coalition's continued advocacy by conducting survey research to identify the community's priorities for how the city invests its financial resources, which include public tax dollars.

Survey Design, Recruitment, and Analysis

The community survey poses a series of questions across themes vetted by Fund The People, a member organization of BEBC.³ Themes include perceptions of neighborhood safety, what individual people and communities need to thrive, perceptions of city investments, and priorities for city investments.⁴ The survey collects demographic information but does not collect names or contact information.

Vera administered the survey in English using Qualtrics, an online survey platform. Researchers recruited survey participants by engaging community members at public meetings and events; circulating flyers with QR codes in public spaces such as community centers, libraries, and post offices; sending email blasts; and posting to social media.

In 2023, 379 people consented to participate in the survey, and Vera analyzed 296 responses from residents from across all five New Orleans City Council districts. The analytic sample (N=296) included only

Figure 1

Survey respondents by race/ethnicity and gender, 2023

n = 296

Group	Count	Percent*
White	158	53%
Woman	106	36%
Man	38	13%
Gender nonconforming/nonbinary	14	5%
Black/African American	112	38%
Woman	75	25%
Man	33	11%
Gender nonconforming/nonbinary	4	1%
Latino/Latina/Latinx	11	4%
Woman	7	2%
Man	4	1%
Asian	8	3%
Woman	8	3%
Native American or Native Alaskan	4	1%
Woman	2	1%
Man	1	<1%
Prefer not to answer	1	<1%
Prefer not to answer	2	1%
Man	1	<1%
Woman	1	<1%
Other	1	<1%
Woman	1	<1%

* Note: All percents use the total sample population as the denominator.

the responses of people who met the eligibility criteria (people who were 18 years old or older and current residents of Orleans Parish) and completed questions beyond the initial demographic section of the survey. To summarize the data, Vera researchers conducted a descriptive statistical analysis of the quantitative elements of the survey and a thematic analysis of the open-ended, qualitative elements.

The survey sample was not representative of the population characteristics of New Orleans and the number of respondents from each district was not proportional to the share of residents therein. More than half of respondents were white (53 percent), despite more than half of the population of the city being Black, and an overwhelming majority were women (68 percent).⁵ (Figure 1.) Respondents ranged in age from 19 to 82 years old (median age: 40). (Figure 2.) Residents from New Orleans City Council Districts A (Uptown), B (Central City, Central Business District), C (Algiers, Bywater, French Quarter, and Marigny), and D (Seventh Ward, Gentilly, and St. Roch) each had shares of the total sample population from 19 percent to 26 percent of respondents. (Figure 3.) Only 10 percent of respondents were sampled from District E (Lower Ninth Ward and New Orleans East). (Figure 3.)

Findings

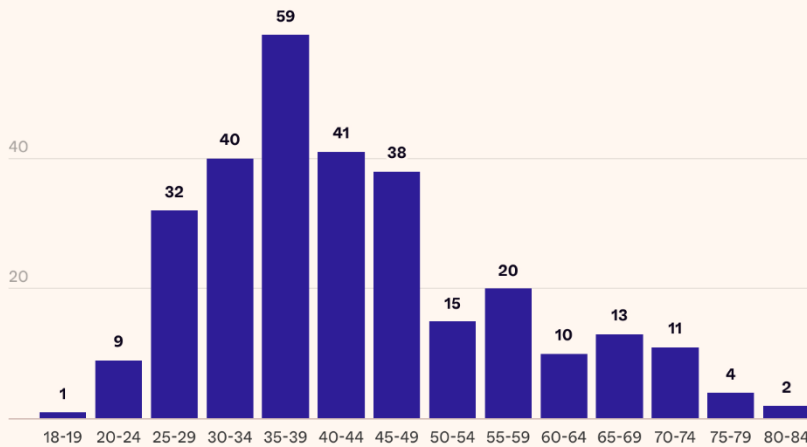
Most people felt safe in their neighborhood, even at night

Everyone deserves to be safe, and New Orleans has more to do to ensure the safety of all residents. Nearly 90 percent of respondents reported feeling safe walking in their neighborhood during the day, and more than half felt safe walking at night. (Figure 4.) The researchers discovered slight disparities when examining perceptions of safety by district and intersections of race and gender. Ninety-three percent of respondents from District A, which has the highest concentration of wealth in the city, felt safe walking in their neighborhood by day compared to 79 percent of residents from District E, which has the city's highest concentration of poverty and high incidence of community violence.⁶ Compared to their white and male counterparts, Black women respondents had the lowest perceptions of safety—76 percent reported feeling safe walking in their neighborhood during the day, compared to 90 percent or more of Black men, white women, and white men.

Figure 2

Age of distribution of survey respondents, 2023

n = 295



NOTES:

Participants ranged in age from 19-82. Median age was 40.

Most people felt connected to their neighborhood. Respondents perceive safety as coming from the programs and services that support a high quality of life and social connectedness.⁷ Four out of every five respondents reported feeling connected to their neighborhood. (Figure 4.) More than 80 percent of white respondents and 70 percent of Black respondents felt connected to their neighborhood. Black men reported feeling least connected to their neighborhood compared to their white and female counterparts—66 percent felt connected versus 74 percent of Black women, 86 percent of white women, and 90 percent of white men.

To thrive, people in New Orleans said their communities need investments in accessible and affordable resources and services, infrastructure improvements, jobs and economic development opportunities, and housing

Eighty-four percent (n=250) of the analytic sample of survey respondents responded to the open-ended prompt, “To thrive, my community needs. . . .” The top five themes in people’s responses were the following:

“To thrive, my community needs real investments so the quality of life in the city isn’t based on your zip code, income, or race.”

- 1. Accessibility of resources and services** that improve health and quality of life.
- 2. Infrastructure improvements** such as street and sidewalk repairs, more parks and green space, neighborhood revitalization and blight remediation, and drainage.
- 3. Job and economic development opportunities** along with livable wages that will allow people to provide for their families.

Figure 3

Survey respondents by city council district, 2023

N = 296

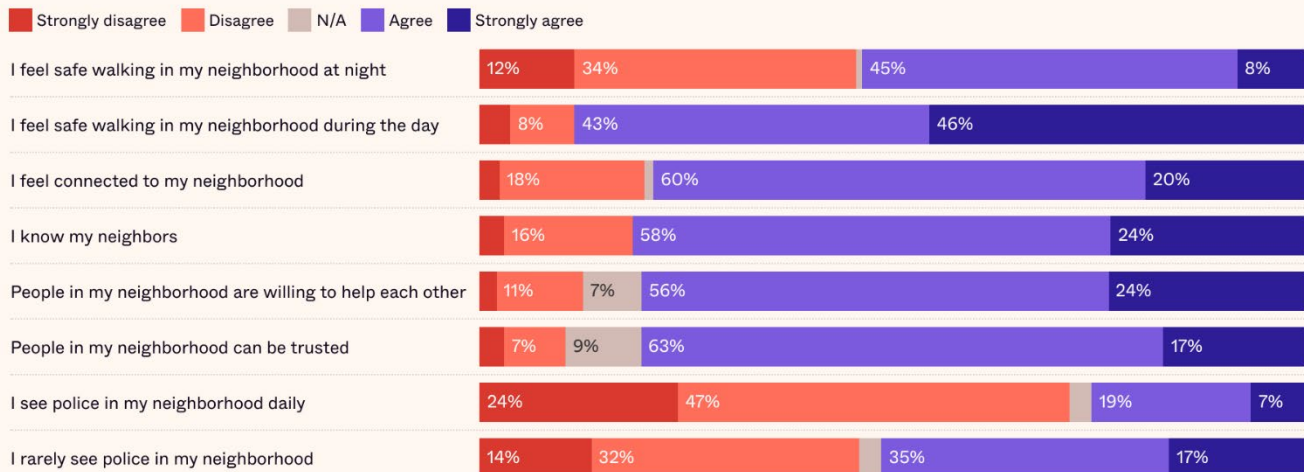
District	Count	Percent
A	77	26%
B	61	21%
C	55	19%
D	74	25%
E	29	10%

4. **Housing** that is available and affordable so that residents are not pushed or priced out of their homes and neighborhoods.
5. **Affordability** of things such as utilities, insurance, and general cost of living.

Figure 4

Perceptions of Neighborhood Safety, 2023

n ≈ 296



Note: Proportions <5% are not visible in the graph above.

The top five community priorities for city investments were safe, affordable housing; infrastructure; education; health; and opportunities for youth

Ninety-three percent (n=274) of the analytic sample responded to the open-ended prompts asking for their top three priorities for where they wanted the city to spend its tax revenue. The top five priorities identified by respondents were the following:

Priority: “Everything low income–related like housing costs/availability, bill/food support, [and] professional development opportunities.”

1. **Housing** (n=172, 63 percent) that is safe and affordable for all residents.
2. **Infrastructure** (n=101, 37 percent), including road and street repairs and maintenance, streetlights, building maintenance, drainage, and bike lanes.
3. **Education** (n=126, 46 percent), including investments in schools, after-school programs, community colleges, tutoring, and out-of-school learning and enrichment opportunities for children and families.
4. **Health** (n=91, 33 percent), especially mental health services.
5. **Opportunities for youth** (n=93, 34 percent), including education, workforce development, activities, and programs.

Most people believed that the city spent too much on police and courts and not enough on the resources and services they need to thrive

“To thrive, my community needs intentional funding for programs that promote community safety (NOT more police/enforcement). . . .”

“To thrive, my community needs investments in young people and education, an end to police and prisons.”

When respondents were asked about their perceptions of the city’s expenditures on an array of public resources and services, “Police and courts” was the sole category where most respondents—more than 70 percent—perceived the city spends “too much” money. (Figure 5.) Respondents believed the city spends “too little” on fire and emergency services (58 percent); roads, streetlights, and drainage (87 percent); opportunities for youth (94 percent); programs and services for low-income people (94 percent); mental health services (95 percent); safe, affordable housing (95 percent); and education and schools (95 percent).

Residents believed that the criminal legal system should focus more resources on nonpunitive, rehabilitative interventions that prevent and address violence

The survey asked respondents to identify areas where they believe the criminal legal system should focus more resources. Of those who responded to this question (n=285), the majority prioritized crime prevention through early intervention (85 percent), skills and employment training (76 percent), and treatment (69 percent). (Figure 6.) Only 11

percent wanted to see more resources go toward arresting people, and 8 percent of respondents believed the criminal legal system should focus more resources on punishment.

Conclusion

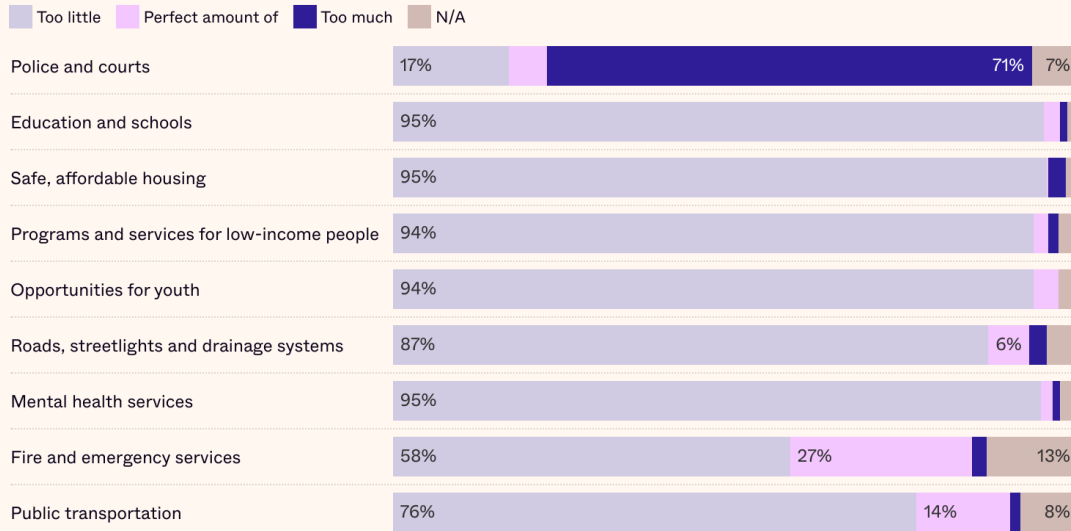
Although most respondents reported feeling safe and connected to their neighborhood, community members prioritized resources and services that make for a safer, more thriving city—safe, affordable housing for all; improvements to city infrastructure; educational opportunities for youth and families; health services; and opportunities for youth. The BEBC used the survey results to create talking points that coalition members and supporters drew on when providing public comments in support of allocations toward community resources and services during the October 2023 budget hearings.

As a result of sustained advocacy and community pressure, the mayoral administration proposed—and the city council approved—a 2024 budget that included more than \$43 million in investments in affordable housing construction, community violence prevention and intervention, programs combating food insecurity, and data infrastructure to monitor youth-engagement services.⁸

Figure 5

Perceptions of City Spending, 2023

Prompt: "The city spends _____ money on:"



n ≈ 283

Note: Proportions <5% are not visible in the graph above.

Figure 6

"Which of the following areas do you think New Orleans' criminal legal system needs to focus more resources?"

Response	Count	Percent
Prevention through early intervention	241	85%
Skills and employment training	217	76%
Treatment	199	69%
Arresting offenders	31	11%
Other, please specify	63	22%
Punishing offenders	24	8%
I'm not sure	7	2%
Number of responses	285	

Endnotes

¹ The Big Easy Deal, "About Us," <https://perma.cc/NW85-PMV5>.

² The Big Easy Deal, "Who We Are."

- ³ What became the Big Easy Budget Coalition Survey in 2024 was a community survey originally conceptualized in 2023 by Fund The People. The survey sought understanding of the health and safety needs of New Orleanians as well as community priorities for city investments. Those involved in designing the survey did not want deficit-based framing or negative tones in the survey prompts.
- ⁴ Regarding perceptions of neighborhood safety, 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. Community members have expansive definitions and perceptions of safety that include more than policing and an absence of crime. For more, see Kim Mosby, Jakevia Wheeler, and Connor Burruss, “Community Priorities for City of New Orleans Investments: Big Easy Budget Coalition Survey Methods,” (New York, NY: Vera Institute of Justice, 2025).
- ⁵ For demographic breakdowns of neighborhood statistical areas, Orleans Parish, and the country, see the Data Center, “Neighborhood Statistical Area Data Profiles,” <https://www.datacenterresearch.org/data-resources/neighborhood-data>. The Data Center analyzed data from United States Census 2000, 2010, and 2020; American Community Survey 2019–2023; and 2022 Local Employment Dynamics. The Data Center reports a population of 376,035 for Orleans Parish from the American Community Survey 2019–2023: 54.7 percent Black, 30.1 percent white, and 53.1 percent female.
- ⁶ See The Data Center, “Neighborhood Statistical Area Data Profiles.” Several characteristics of neighborhood statistical areas, including housing and housing costs, income and poverty, and race/ethnicity, are provided from United States Census 2000, 2010, and 2020; American Community Survey 2019–2023; and 2022 Local Employment Dynamics. According to the American Community Survey 2019–2023, most neighborhood statistical areas (NSA) in District A (Planning Districts 3 and 5) have an average household income well above \$100,000, and one NSA’s average household income is above \$230,000. Conversely, all neighborhood statistical areas in District E (Planning Districts 8, 9, 10, and 11) have average household income levels between \$30,000 and \$92,000.
- ⁷ 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>. In the New Orleans Safety and Justice Challenge Community Advisory Group’s findings from residents’ responses to “What makes me feel safe?,” answers included “learning [from] others and doing for others,” “music,” “hope,” “family,” and reflections on religion and spirituality.
- ⁸ This figure includes money allocated by the city to a wide range of programs and services including food security, community crisis intervention, housing, and restorative approaches to school conflict—among many others. A more detailed accounting of this number is on file with the authors and is available on request from Cameryn Okeke, program manager, at cokeke@vera.org. For more on the Big Easy Budget Coalition, see <https://perma.cc/EZ8U-V2CV>.

© 2025 Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.

The Vera Institute of Justice is powered by hundreds of advocates, researchers, and policy experts working to transform the criminal legal and immigration systems until they’re fair for all. Founded in 1961 to advocate for alternatives to money bail in New York City, Vera is now a national organization that partners with impacted communities and government leaders for change. We develop just, antiracist solutions so that money doesn’t determine freedom; fewer people are in jails, prisons, and immigration detention; and everyone is treated with dignity. Vera’s headquarters is in Brooklyn, New York, with offices in Washington, DC, New Orleans, and Los Angeles. For more information, visit vera.org. For more information about this fact sheet, contact Dr. Kim Mosby, associate director of research, at kmosby@vera.org.