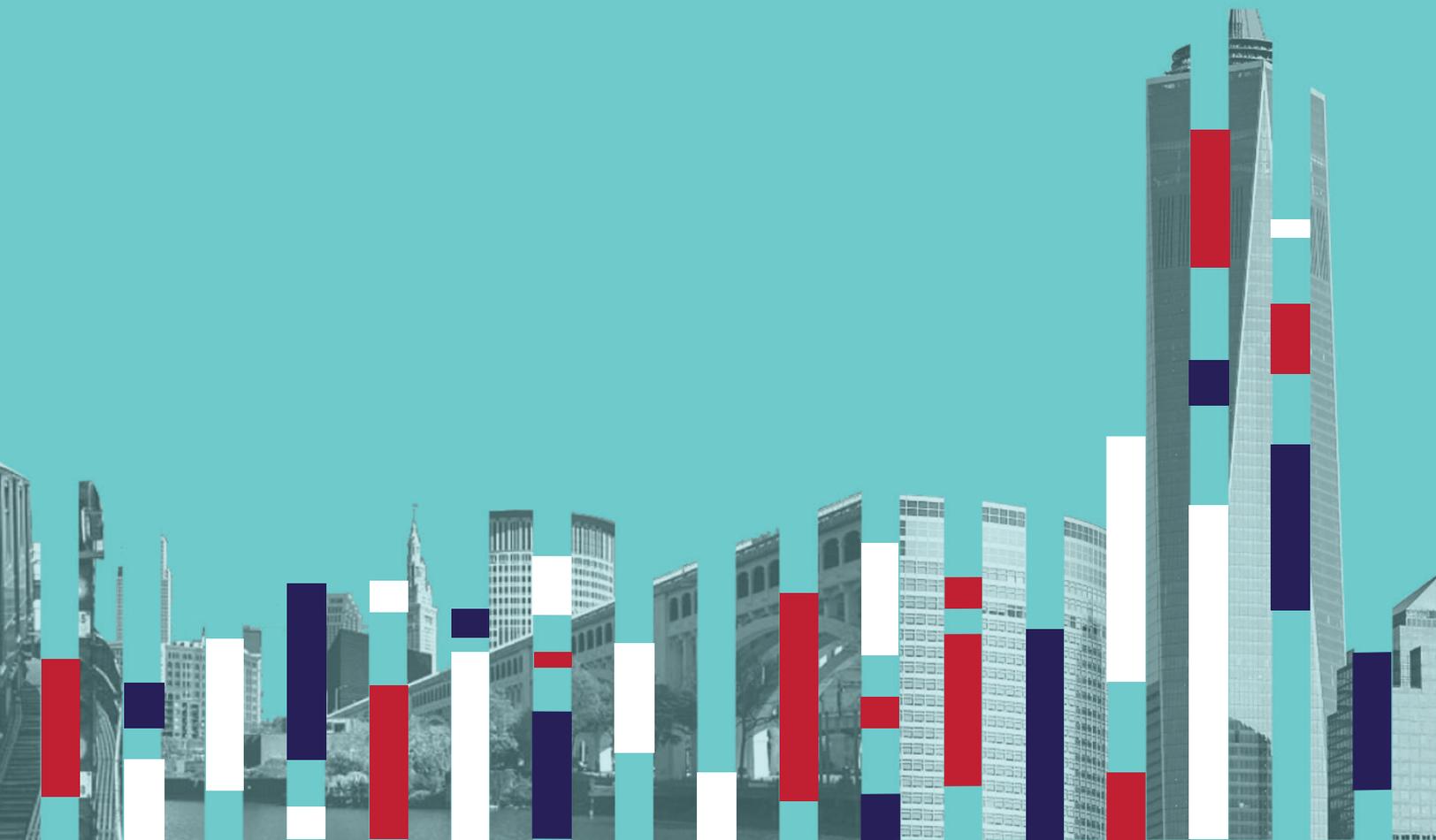


RESEARCH REPORT

# Visiting 300-plus cities in nine weeks

What we shared and learned in the first phase of the  
2017 U.S. Mayors Challenge

October 2017



# The Challenge

The Mayors Challenge has been an integral part of Bloomberg Philanthropies' strategy to help city leaders generate innovative solutions since 2013. After successful runs in the United States (2013), Europe (2014), and Latin America and the Caribbean (2016), the foundation brought the Challenge back to the U.S. this year as the first investment in Michael Bloomberg's \$200-million American Cities Initiative, a recently announced suite of new and expanded offerings that will strengthen U.S. cities.

The Mayors Challenge aims to help city leaders think big, be bold, and uncover inventive—and ultimately shareable—ideas that tackle today's toughest challenges. A record 555 cities have entered this year's Challenge and will submit their initial applications by October 20. From there, 35 "Champion Cities" will be named in January 2018, each winning up to \$100,000 to test their ideas. In the fall of 2018, Bloomberg Philanthropies will select five winners; one will receive a \$5 million grand prize and four others will win \$1 million each to bring their ideas to life.

A new component was added to this year's competition: "Idea Accelerator" sessions. These one-day innovation workshops, held in the city halls of the first 300-plus cities to sign up for the Challenge, were designed to help city leaders identify the top problems they face and, with the help of residents, better understand those problems, along with their causes and effects. The foundation held Idea Accelerators in 308 cities between July 31 and September 29, a nine-week period.

The Idea Accelerators produced unique data about the challenges America's cities face, the ambitions of their leaders, and the ways cities are addressing pressing concerns. This bottom-up portrait of America reflects deep challenges and great optimism. This research brief shares highlights of what we found.

**This year's Mayors Challenge added a new component: Idea Accelerator workshops, which were held in 300-plus city halls and produced unique data about the challenges America's cities face, the ambitions of their leaders, and the ways cities are addressing their top concerns.**

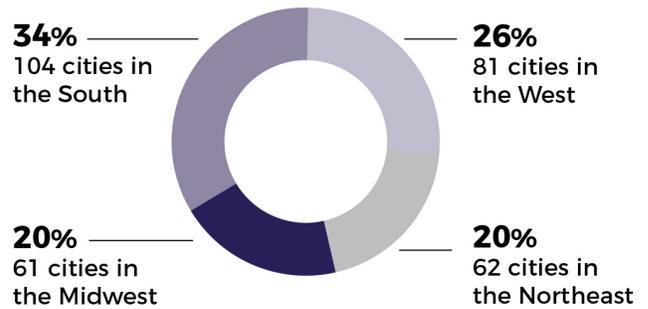
# Where we went

We conducted 308 Idea Accelerator workshops, providing an estimated 4,000 city leaders in all 50 states (and Washington, D.C.) with more than 2,000 hours of training.

**Nearly half of participating cities were small in population size.**



**The greatest number of participating cities were in the South.**



**California held the most trainings.**



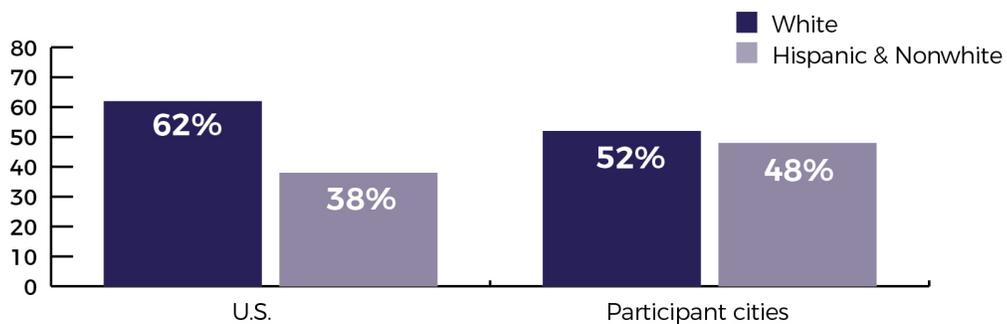
**Blue States and Red States were evenly represented.**



**50.3%** of cities were from states that voted for Donald Trump in 2016

**49.7%** of cities were from states that voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016

**These cities are more diverse than the nation as a whole.\***



**Poverty is higher in participating cities.\***



\* This data is from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2015 American Community Survey, 5 Year Estimates.

# The issues cities face

The scale of this effort—a coast-to-coast proliferation of in-person innovation training sessions—provided Bloomberg Philanthropies with a unique opportunity to talk with city leaders in their communities. From surveys conducted with each of the thousands of participants and activities held during the sessions, the foundation also learned a lot about the state of American cities today.

**Economic and Workforce Development:** Since the recession—and, in many communities, long before that—finding good jobs and growing the local economy has been a challenge.<sup>1</sup> This struggle is reflected in recent polls where people say that the country's best days have passed.<sup>2</sup> But amid anxiety and anger over economic changes, civic leaders are focused on finding new and innovative ways to catalyze local opportunity. Thirty percent of participants named economic challenges (e.g., economic revitalization or urban renewal) as the top concern in their community. And of those, more than half emphasized the need to grow the economy or create jobs as a top priority.

**Income Inequality and Social Inclusion:** Issues of equality or equity were not regularly raised by previous U.S. Mayors Challenge participants during the 2013 competition. But those issues are more salient this year, likely reflecting the national dialogue around demographic change, widening economic disparity, and the desire for greater social cohesion. Twenty-six percent of participants raised issues regarding social cohesion when asked about top challenges in their community. Of all the topics falling under the category of income inequality and social inclusion (e.g., poverty or racism), challenges associated with demographic change in the community were mentioned most often.

In a first for the Mayors Challenge in the U.S., a large number of city leaders (26 percent) identified income inequality and social inclusion among their top concerns.

**Thriving and Surviving:** These surveys revealed that “thriving” and “surviving” cities both have strengths and challenges. Thriving cities tend to be growing: Entrepreneurs are opening businesses; people are moving to the community; and the local economy is strong. But these communities face their own set of concerns: Congestion on the roads (mentioned by 20 percent of participants), rising inequality as some residents are swept up in the boom and other left behind, and a lack of affordable housing (raised by 22 percent of participants).

At the other end are cities that could be classified as “surviving.” These cities tend to be shrinking: Communities where the population has plateaued or declined; economic growth has stagnated; and vacant properties are often plentiful. These communities face their own set of challenges: Less local tax revenue to pay for city services; good jobs are hard to find; and drug use and crime are on the rise.

Despite these differences, both types of communities are seeking innovative solutions to help solve their most pressing problems.

1. Economic Innovation Group, 2017 Distressed Communities Index. Available at: <http://eig.org/dci>.

2. Betsy Cooper, Daniel Cox, Rachel Lienesch, and Robert P. Jones, “The Divide Over America’s Future: 1950 or 2050? Findings from the 2016 American Values Survey,” Released October 25, 2016. Accessed October 2, 2017. Available at: <https://www.prii.org/research/poll-1950s-2050-divided-nations-direction-post-election/>.

# How cities work

Cities actively seek innovative ways to solve problems. The workshops were in high demand. Participation in the trainings was limited to 15 people per city, with an average of 13 participants per session. In 94 percent of cities, 10 or more participants attended the workshops and in more than 60 percent of cities the mayor, city manager, or equivalent was among the attendees.

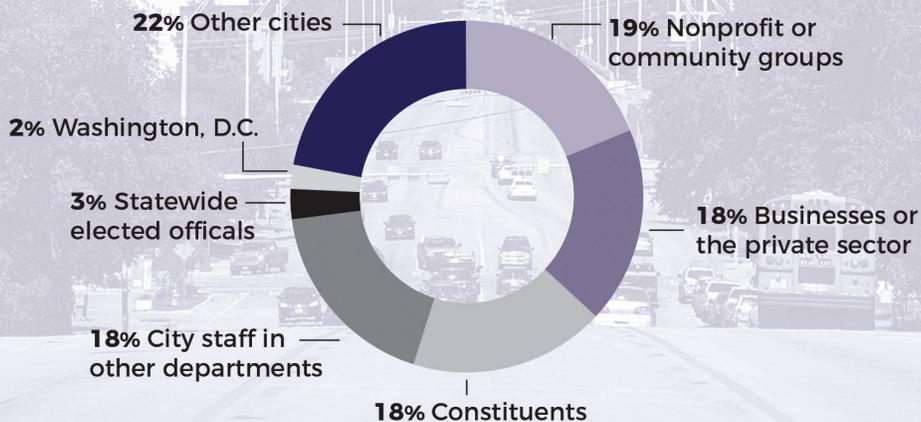
These cities already **use innovative tools**, but deepened and expanded their skills. Prior to the innovation workshop, leaders in half of the cities reported that their city “regularly” **engages citizens**, with another 41 percent saying they do so “sometimes.” After the sessions, 82 percent of participants said they had a clearer understanding of why it is essential to engage stakeholders, and 79 percent said they now have clear and applicable ideas to improve their city’s approach to working more closely with residents. Many city leaders reported that they were already successfully engaging residents but that the sessions taught them new techniques for gathering insights, such as talking to residents on the street and observing people as they use various city services. In one city, participants reported wanting to engage stakeholders in a more innovative way and brainstormed an idea to use the “speed dating” model.

Many city leaders encouraged their fellow residents to get involved in planning for the Mayors Challenge and the Idea Accelerator

workshops. Several mayors, including [Mayor Megan Barry](#) of Nashville, Tenn., [Mayor Andy Berke](#) of Chattanooga, Tenn., [Mayor Richard Berry](#) of Albuquerque, N.M., [Mayor Jackie Biskupski](#) of Salt Lake City, Utah, [Mayor Rosalynn Bliss](#) of Grand Rapids, Mich., [Mayor Bob Crowell](#) of Carson City, Nev., [Mayor Karen Freeman Wilson](#) of Gary, Ind., [Mayor Kim McMillan](#) of Clarksville, Tenn., [Mayor Hillary Schieve](#) of Reno, Nev., [Mayor Nan Whaley](#) of Dayton, Ohio, [Mayor Heidi Williams](#) of Thornton, Colo., and [Mayor Sharon Wolcott](#) of Surprise, Ariz., among others, took to social media to solicit ideas from—and share ideas with—constituents. And while participants reported that 22 percent of their ideas for innovation come from other cities, 38 percent say they rely on their fellow constituents or community groups to shape their thinking when tackling challenges.

Cities are also increasingly **applying performance-based measures** in order to deliver services and manage city hall. Before these sessions, 43 percent of the cities reported that they regularly use data in making decisions, with another 47 percent saying they sometimes use data. But after the workshop, 76 percent of participants reported that they better understood how data could help them think through the challenges their residents face. For example, participants in one city expressed excitement about harnessing already-available data from things like smart lights and smart thermostats to aid deployment of city services.

## Where do cities find inspiration?



# What we learned

**Optimistic about the future:** Ninety percent of participants said they are energized to confront the challenges their community faces. Despite recent data showing that economic opportunity is shifting to fewer and fewer of what urban studies theorist Richard Florida calls “winner take all cities,” these Mayors Challenge participants, from “thriving” and “surviving” cities alike, see promise and opportunity in their community. Nearly half (48 percent) see the resilience and determination of their fellow residents as key to solving local problems. In reflecting on their sessions, participants said the workshop “opened my eyes on how to approach stakeholders” and finally came to recognize that “collaboration is powerful.” So many of these city leaders believe in their cities’ future.

**Eager for more innovation:** While there are many innovation networks that exist for the benefit of cities—and some cities are actively involved in one or several of these networks—most cities are not actively engaged. Of the 308 cities that signed up for Idea Accelerators, 216 (70 percent) have never received aid from Bloomberg Philanthropies’ Government Innovation programs—meaning they are newly expressing interest in gaining expertise and support. The workshop facilitators found that more than 80 percent of the cities were highly engaged in the process and 96 percent of participants felt the session and materials provided invaluable training. That’s a big reason why so many are looking at their existing set of tools and resources and wanting more. These local tinkerers and innovators want more creative ways to engage stakeholders, more methodical ways to leverage data to understand what’s happening, and more ways to collaborate with peer cities in other places. They loved bringing diverse group of people together for this session and felt transformed in the way they will do things moving forward.

**Wanting to network and plug into the national conversation:** Participants also want to be heard and accounted for. They see each other as a source of innovative ideas, with 22 percent of participants telling us they get new ideas from other cities. And they are optimistic about learning from other city halls in the future, with 32 percent seeing growing opportunities to share ideas and solutions with other mayors as key to solving problems in the future. The challenges these cities face are great, and city leaders can’t afford to wait for a savior. From the trickiest issues, such as community-police relations, income inequality, and demographic change, to those issues that are often perceived to be largely outside of municipal control, such as infrastructure and climate change, city leaders across America are striving for new answers and show great interest in working with their peers.

## What makes cities most optimistic about their ability to solve problems

**34%**

Advancing applications of data & technology

**36%**

The determination of constituents

**25%**

Opportunities to share ideas & solutions with other mayors

**5%**

The likelihood of increased support from the federal government

For more information visit [mayorchallenge.bloomberg.org](https://mayorchallenge.bloomberg.org)