What Works Cities Brief:

The City Hall Data Gap

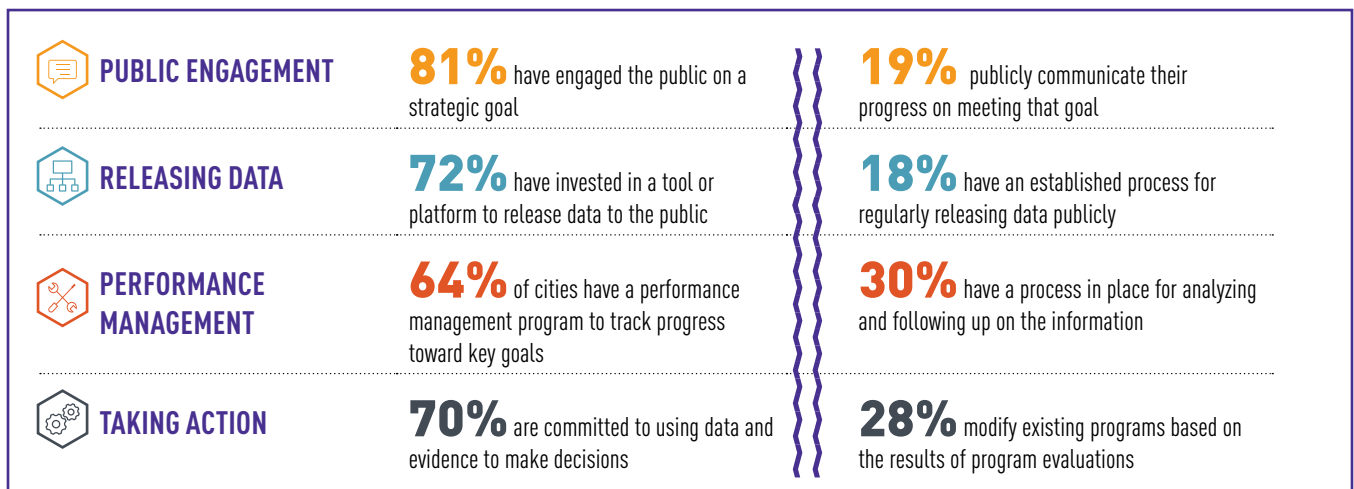What Works Cities | Bloomberg Philanthropies

Yes, Using Data Can Help Cities Drive Change—But Cities Need Help To Overcome the Hurdles

Executive Summary

Unlocking the potential of data and evidence to inform decision making is key to ensuring cities thrive in the 21st century. Through What Works Cities' early efforts, we've learned that cities across the country are sold on the value of using data and evidence to make informed decisions for their communities; the demand is robust. But a wide gap exists between cities' desire and their ability to implement evidence-based practices. This brief quantifies cities' current practices around the use of data, based on an analysis by The Bridgespan Group of What Works Cities applicants. The analysis is focused on information from the 39 cities visited by What Works Cities and supported by surveys from all 115 applicant cities. Consider that 81% of cities have engaged the public on a strategic goal, yet only 19% of cities publicly communicate their progress towards meeting that goal. And while 70% of cities are committed to using data and evidence to make decisions about city programs, only 28% modify existing programs based on the results of data and evaluations.

Cities are telling us that they need tools and expertise to close the gap between their intention to use data in decision making and their actual capacity to do so. The good news is that resources and best practices in this work are advancing every day. WWC is preparing cities for success by establishing a roadmap for doing this work, providing strategic guidance and specific tactics for helping cities overcome hurdles, and deepening cities' culture of using data and evidence. This roadmap, the WWC standard, defines steps local leaders can take to create a strong foundation for using data and evidence effectively within city government. Experience and evidence show that when cities from Jackson, MS to Las Vegas, NV have the resources, tools, and expertise to effectively execute on data, they are able to increase the effectiveness of government and improve residents' lives. What Works Cities is excited to engage with local leaders to advance practices in all cities and realize a brighter future for residents around the country.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT	**81%** have engaged the public on a strategic goal	**19%** publicly communicate their progress on meeting that goal
RELEASING DATA	**72%** have invested in a tool or platform to release data to the public	**18%** have an established process for regularly releasing data publicly
PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT	**64%** of cities have a performance management program to track progress toward key goals	**30%** have a process in place for analyzing and following up on the information
TAKING ACTION	**70%** are committed to using data and evidence to make decisions	**28%** modify existing programs based on the results of program evaluations

Introduction

In a time of increasing citizen expectations, decreasing government budgets, and changing demographics, cities are under pressure to provide high-quality services to residents in cost effective ways. Increasingly, cities are looking for new and innovative ways to provide more with fewer resources. One answer is using data and evidence to determine the programs and services that work best for their residents. Through these efforts, city leaders are transforming local government: engaging residents, making government more effective and meaningfully improving people's lives. This brief shares the data behind cities' current state of practice, including barriers and opportunities for driving change.

Today, many city mayors and leaders are forming what's become a national movement to double down on the use of data. They believe that by harnessing the power of data, their cities can foster innovation and solve problems. We now have tangible examples of cities using data and evidence in decision making to improve the quality of services and, in turn, the lives of residents. As success stories emerge from leading cities that are using data to realize powerful changes, more and more cities want to get on board—and are asking for help with this hard work.

But the hurdles to expanding the use of data to inform decision making are high: many cities lack the policies, performance management systems, organizational culture of using data and evidence, and know-how to turn data into action. Cities need additional resources, tools, and expertise to close this gap. Consider the fact that 72% of cities we visited have invested in tools for releasing data to the public, but only 18% have a process for actually releasing data to residents. Indeed, this city hall data gap is wide.

Significant Demand, As Well As Obstacles

Bloomberg Philanthropies launched What Works Cities (WWC) with the aim of helping U.S. cities make better use of data and evidence to serve their residents. An important component of WWC is offering cities with populations between 100,000 and 1,000,000 residents a chance to apply for expert technical assistance to improve how data is used in city hall decision making. Within six weeks of its launch, 115 of the 286 eligible U.S. cities (40% of eligible cities) applied for WWC support. Of those 115 cities, WWC visited 39 cities in 2015 to learn more about their needs and determine how to provide the most effective technical assistance.

Through our initial work, we've learned that many cities are sold on using data and evidence to make informed policy decisions. They are looking to use data to drive economic development, improve public safety, enhance social services, increase citizen engagement, and more. Newly elected city leaders are particularly eager to use data and evidence to understand the effectiveness of current services and set goals for the future. Moreover, decreasing budgets are catalyzing cities' interest, as they are forced to provide equivalent and even more services for residents with less revenue.

Though the demand is great, so is the gap between desire and ability to execute. This gap is created by a number of barriers to using data in city government, including: lack of staff and financial resources (41% of applicants), limited knowledge and expertise in this area (31%), lack of trust in the data currently generated by city systems (22%), old and incompatible systems for data collection and analysis (17%), and challenges communicating the importance of this work to stakeholders (15%).[1] Cities want to tap into expertise in how to use data and seek access to a network of like-minded cities to share learnings on how to overcome the barriers and close the city hall data gap.

The What Works Cities Standard: A Tool for Closing the City Hall Data Gap

WWC has worked with experts and partners to develop the WWC Standard, a series of steps that local public leaders can take to create a strong foundation for using data and evidence effectively within city government. The WWC Standard seeks to break down barriers by establishing a clear and tactical roadmap for doing this work. The WWC Standard pushes cities to: (1) Commit, (2) Measure, (3) Take Stock, and (4) Act. WWC provides participating cities with the tools, technical expertise, and peer learning opportunities necessary to take these steps, which will ultimately allow cities to make more evidence-based decisions and improve city services.

WWC's first step in partnering with a city is to conduct an in-depth analysis of that city's strengths and weaknesses across the WWC Standard. The Bridgespan Group analyzed data from the first cities WWC engaged in 2015.[2] This analysis is helping us understand whether and how cities are carrying out the WWC Standard and where they need assistance. The numbers indicate that cities are more advanced in the earlier steps of the WWC Standard than they are in the later steps of the process.

1. Commit.

City leaders must define and share strategic goals with the public, as well as commit to using data and evidence to get better results for their residents.

Data from our sample shows that participating cities are the furthest along in this area. A full 70% of applicant cities are ready to commit to using data and evidence, including setting strategic goals and publishing progress toward those goals. As many as 84% of cities have at least one strategic goal and 81% of cities have engaged the public on their strategic goal(s).

Nonetheless, cities struggle to make their commitment concrete. Less than half of cities have assigned targets, metrics, and a timeframe for achieving at least one strategic goal. Further, just

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1. Gathered from open ended question to cities; respondents could provide more than one answer.

2. Data in this brief is from The Bridgespan Group analysis of all application materials, focused on information from the 39 cities visited by What Works Cities and supported by surveys from all 115 applicant cities. Not all 39 cities responded to all questions. This is a group of cities interested in What Works Cities and not selected at random, though it provides a meaningful representation of the state of practice in mid-sized cities.

19% of cities publicly communicate their progress on meeting the strategic goal on which they engaged the public. And only 30% of cities have an open data policy to codify and institutionalize how they will share data with the public in the long term.

2. Measure.

Measuring involves collecting data, tracking progress, identifying results, and sharing impact openly to engage residents in the services they receive. Ultimately, measurement promotes a culture of government transparency and accountability.

Measurement is harder for cities. While 72% of cities have invested in a tool or platform to release data to the public and 61% of cities have an open data portal, just 18% have an established process for regularly releasing data publicly as part of an open data program.

What's more, while 79% of cities track output indicators for city services (e.g. homeless individuals sheltered each year), about half of cities track important outcome indicators (e.g. homeless individuals moved to permanent housing). Only 34% of cities develop goals for service providers and procurements.

3. Take Stock.

City leaders must consistently review and reflect on city performance, measure progress, learn, and make corrections and improvements. Taking stock includes the difficult work of honestly evaluating impact, often through in-depth comparative analysis.

Conducting an honest assessment of a program or service is hard – both implementing a rigorous analysis and using its results to make decisions. 64% of cities have a performance management system in place to track progress toward key goals, though only 30% have a process in place for analyzing and following up on the information collected. Only 27% of cities compare relative performance across service providers. 46% of cities monitor outcomes in specified contracts, but only 27% of cities actively review outcomes data during the term of the contract.

4. Act.

Once cities have performed the first three steps, they must use the resulting data and evidence in a comprehensive way to inform major decisions and take action to create new programs or improve existing ones. Cities that are strong in this area are empowered to redirect resources from programs that don't show meaningful results to those that do.

Acting on data can bring the greatest challenges and rewards. Cities are most novice in this capacity. Given data-related and political constraints, cities struggle to use data to take clear action in ways that can maximize the impact of taxpayer dollars and improve people's lives. Among participating cities, 70% are committed to using data and evidence to make decisions, but just 28% actually modify existing programs based on the results of program evaluations. Further, only 25% have re-

directed budget allocations based on measurable impact. When it comes to making procurement decisions, similar challenges persist. 38% make at least some contract decisions based on the past performance of vendors and just 12% of cities consistently use data to inform contract decisions, both during the contract period and at the end of the contract period. The data speaks for itself. Cities are beginning to do this work, though their practices are nascent.

Early Signs of Success

Indeed, a number of cities are using data and evaluation in meaningful ways. Consider the following everyday victories that any city could see with the right tools.

- In **Jackson, Mississippi**: The city analyzed its process for addressing blighted properties. This analysis led Jackson to transfer oversight of this task from the city's Planning and Development Department to the Police Department because violations could be managed together and enforcement could be enhanced. As a result, the city saw the demolition of 107 vacant houses in 2015 (versus five in the previous 12 months) and realized $525,792 in savings in 2015.

> *"Our commitment to make city processes seamless and effective is paramount to us in building a city system centered on data-driven decision making. [To] fix the system in which we function, we must understand, adapt, and be willing to admit our flaws."*
> *– Mayor Tony Yarber, Jackson, MS*

- In **Mesa, Arizona:** City officials used data to determine that, rather than sending a fire truck and a four-person crew to every emergency call, it could respond to low-level medical emergencies more cost effectively with a smaller vehicle and two person community response team.

> *"In today's technologically driven world, data and evidence are the fuel that powers the innovation and efficiency of our city services."* –
> *Mayor John Giles, Mesa, AZ*

- In **Las Vegas, Nevada**: City officials analyzed data to identify investments that could help mitigate traffic congestion. Through strategic interventions, the city reduced accidents by 26% at 50 of the city's most dangerous intersections. It also reduced left-turn accidents by 61%.

> *"By using the right data, we are able to address where the need is most critical in our community."*
> *– City Manager Betsy Fretwell,*
> *Las Vegas, NV*

These stories and more are proof positive that data and evidence can reveal invaluable insights everyday into the complex problems cities face and how to solve them. However, for every success story, there are a dozen more cities that would like nothing more than to turn data into decisions—if only they had the tools and resources to move forward.

A Call to Action: Join the National Conversation

With more successes being documented by the day, increasing numbers of cities are enthusiastically beginning to use data to improve residents' lives. While the gap between the desire to use data and the ability to execute is wide, experience and evidence show that when cities have the resources, tools, and expertise to effectively execute on data, residents' lives improve.

Suffice it to say, the opportunity we have to realize critical changes for our cities and their citizens is great. Bigger than WWC or any one of the cities we assist, this is a chance for us to change how City Halls across the country meet their residents' needs.

When Bloomberg Philanthropies' What Works Cities (WWC) initiative launched in April 2015, 115 cities quickly reached out, all wanting to harness the power of data to better serve their residents, but many face significant challenges in doing so.

Less than a year later, WWC is partnering with 27 cities (and growing) to improve city services through the use of data and evidence. WWC is establishing a roadmap for doing this work, providing expert technical assistance and strategic guidance, and helping cities overcome hurdles. Over the coming months, we will begin to share our learnings about how cities can and are accelerating their progress, so that together we can establish best practices that cities around the country can learn from.

Cities are the driving engine of economic development and prosperity across the globe. And city governments are where policies are translated into action that affects the everyday lives of residents around the world. We believe cities can achieve improved outcomes for their residents and communities by using better information to guide investments. What is *your* vision for a world in which data drives change in our cities? WWC invites you to join this national conversation and help build toward our collective vision together. Please email us at info@whatworkscities.org or tweet your ideas to us at @whatworkscities.

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