



ON THE FRONTLINES  
OF TODAY'S CITIES:

**TRAUMA,  
CHALLENGES  
AND SOLUTIONS**





About the National League of Cities

The National League of Cities (NLC) is the voice of America’s cities, towns and villages, representing more than 200 million people. NLC works to strengthen local leadership, influence federal policy and drive innovative solutions.

NLC’s Center for City Solutions provides research and analysis on key topics and trends important to cities, creative solutions to improve the quality of life in communities, inspiration and ideas for local officials to use in tackling tough issues, and opportunities for city leaders to connect with peers, share experiences and learn about innovative approaches in cities.

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# FOREWORD

**P**ERSONAL attacks. Physical assaults. Cyber bullying directed at themselves, their children and families -- all the while having to manage multiple crises for those in their communities. In the past year and a half, protests have moved from City Hall to local leaders' front doors. Insults have moved beyond the media and into homes, sometimes needlessly extending to loved ones.

**This is what it means to be a public servant in 2021.**

Local officials work at the level of government closest to the people and with this comes great honor and great challenge. Our local leaders are the ones we know – they are the ones we run into at the grocery store and the ones we see around our neighborhoods. And while partisanship and bickering may be an unwelcomed feature of state and federal politics, we are now seeing this trickle down to the local level unlike ever before. I have witnessed and heard about this change through my own personal interactions in meetings with local leaders across the country. It is clear that the environment has changed since my time as mayor of South Bay, Florida a little more than a decade ago.

While disagreement and debate are a healthy part of a functioning democracy, civil discourse in America has been increasingly in decline – we see it in the media and more frequently, we’re seeing it more in our own communities. And as politics becomes increasingly hostile, so too has the severity and quantity of threats and harassment towards our local officials. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed many things to the extreme and vitriol towards local leaders is no exception.

Our local leaders have become easy targets for frustration, anger and disillusion. With the combined impact of social media and political polarization, the work of governing has often come at the cost of public officials’ physical and mental well-being.

Local leaders have faced everything from racist slurs to physical assaults and death threats. Recent media reports from the New York Times and Kaiser Health Network, among others, highlight how many local public officials — mayors and those working in the areas of public health, elections and the school board — are choosing to resign or not run for re-election.<sup>1,2</sup>

From taking anti-anxiety medication, to seeking therapy and even utilizing police protection, we learned throughout development of this report that our local leaders are doing what they can to protect themselves while getting the jobs for their communities done. But it is not enough. Our local leaders can't and shouldn't do this work alone.

It is all-too easy to forget that they are also human. There is much more to our local officials than their titles of “mayor,” “councilmember” or “commissioner.” They are also “parent,” “daughter”, “son”, “sister,” “brother,” “friend” and “neighbor.”

From enacting immediate-term protections focused on the physical and mental well-being of public officials to developing more long-term solutions to bridging the divisions between parties and people – the time to take act is now.



**Clarence E. Anthony**  
CEO and Executive Director  
NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES



Parents Protest Mask Mandates At Florida School Board Meeting  
(By Octavio Jones via Getty Images)

# INTRODUCTION

AMERICAN culture has coarsened in the last few years, with people increasingly resorting to anger, vitriol and violence rather than dialogue to share their problems and express differences. The deep entrenchment of political ideologies into the core of who we are as a nation has taken us to a place in society where, rather than viewing those with opposing viewpoints as our friends, neighbors and fellow Americans, a growing segment of society views one another as enemies. This is dangerous for democracy, and it creates a powder keg environment where the smallest spark can suddenly explode.

Over the last several years there have been several incidents that have ignited this spark, but the pandemic has served as a tinderbox that has accelerated existing trends and supercharged anger, abusive behavior and even violence against local officials.

Local officials have seen attacks against them grow as what should have been a moment of common cause to fight back against a global pandemic has devolved instead into a partisan divide over whether to get lifesaving vaccines, wear facemasks in schools to protect children or give local officials authority to keep community members safe.

“I believe in public service... I am very committed to doing as much as I can in the moment, even in the midst of this chaos.”<sup>3</sup>

Baton Rouge, LA Mayor **Sharon Weston Broome**

Even in this environment, mayors, councilmembers, school board members and other local officials have one very big thing in common: they ran for office to serve and give back to their communities. And our local officials continue to serve and do their job on behalf of all of us. This call to service – a duty to serve one’s country and community members – comes with grueling schedules of late-night meetings, constituent calls and a near constant availability to the community members that they work on behalf of every single day.



(By Paras Griffin/Getty Images for ESSENCE via Getty images)



Public service is not a solely public endeavor, though. Those who run for office understand that putting themselves in the public light shines a light on the good, the bad and the ugly of their private lives. This scrutiny is one thing, but the domains of public life that once stayed private – one’s family, hearth and home – are increasingly extended into the public realm. Elected officials’ children and spouses have been targeted and harassed as City Halls have turned into the front lawns of city officials’ homes, with no areas out of bounds in the madness of our current political culture. This is an existential challenge to our communities, our society and our democracy that needs to be abated.

The nationalization and associated radicalization of politics in America started at the federal level and first made its way to statehouses but has now seeped down into our towns and cities. Unlike their state and federal counterparts, local officials are held in much higher esteem because they are closer to the people they govern, they are often in nonpartisan positions and consistent polling data shows them receiving much more favorable results.<sup>4</sup> Even so, growing hostility in politics has impacted the environment local officials engage in more and more dramatically.

While COVID-19 accelerated existing trends, this nationwide lack of civility has been heightened due to the arrival of social media, growing animosity between political parties, the spread of mis- and disinformation, systemic racism, sexism and homophobia. A contentious national election, years of leadership that did not seek to stem the coarsening

discourse, an insurrection at the Capitol and the fight for racial justice in response to the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor among countless others, have elevated the challenges faced by public officials in our country.

The impact on our local leaders has been enormous. Our local officials are hard at work on the ground in cities every day, and during this last year and a half they have been supporting community members in a time of need, all while keeping government operations going during tumultuous times. As verbal threats – both online and in person – have grown and as some local leaders have even been physically assaulted, the impact on our nation’s mayors, councilmembers and local leaders is understandably immense. Many elected officials are burnt out. Mayors and councilmembers are people too, and their physical and mental well-being is threatened.


Beyond the obvious impacts this harassment has on government and the layered difficulties it creates to get the public’s work done, it has a real human impact on these local leaders. It is not what most people signed up for when they ran for local office, and the impact is being felt by potential candidates choosing to run for re-election or even run at all, which is a factor that negatively impacts our communities. We lose institutional knowledge in City Halls as people leave public office. Potential candidates are asking themselves, “Is it worth my safety to run again?” and “Is it worth my safety – or potentially my family’s safety – to be in this job?”

Furthermore, the budgetary impact on localities is very real if police must get involved or public officials require security details due to these threats. The disproportionate victimization of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), women, members of the LGBTQ+ community and other underrepresented groups may also hinder efforts to diversify government and create more equitable communities.

Cities must focus on protecting the safety and well-being of public officials in the immediate term while working to mend the root causes of this growing resentment across the country. That said, it is difficult for local officials to face this alone.

“To all the local leaders, just remember you don’t have to do this alone, there is an incredible network through the National League of Cities where elected officials can come together.”<sup>5</sup>

Atlanta, GA Mayor **Keisha Lance Bottoms**





(By Elijah Nouvelage/Getty Images via Getty images)

Public officials at all levels must unite to elevate – rather than denigrate – the political conversation.

*On the Frontlines of Today’s Cities: Trauma, Challenges and Solutions* **lays out and recommends a three-pronged approach to keep our local officials safe from mental and physical threats to their well-being. This approach includes securing physical safety, promoting mental health and well-being, and improving civil discourse.**

**FIGURE 1.** Types of harassment, threats and violence.

	ONLINE 	IN-PERSON 
HARASSMENT	Disrespectful comments, berating and unfounded criticism through traditional or social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.)  Hateful speech  Online trolling	Disrespectful comments, berating and unfounded criticism in-person, both on and off the job  Hateful speech
THREATS	Threats to target, hurt or attack a public official or those in their immediate circle (staff members, family members) through traditional or social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.)  Hateful speech online with intent to harm	Statement of an intention to inflict pain, injury, damage or other hostile action (death threats, threats of physical or sexual violence, etc.) to a public official and or those in their immediate circle (staff members, family members, etc.)
ASSAULT OR VIOLENCE		Destruction of property  Physical, sexual or armed assault  Unauthorized possession of firearms or other weapons



# BACKGROUND

CIVIL behavior and speech are critically important to a healthy, functional and respectful society. The capacity of the American public to engage in meaningful and civil discourse has eroded rapidly over the last few years. In the Allegheny College Survey of Civility and Compromise in American Politics, researchers found that nearly half of Americans believed there had been a decline in civility in American politics since the election of President Obama.<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Michael McCullough, a psychology professor at the University of Miami, argues that **civility** can be thought of broadly under two definitions. One that describes behavior — politeness, courtesy; and one that depicts the orderliness of a society wherein the absence of civility there is anarchy and disorder — creating a fragmented society.<sup>7</sup>

Results from a 2019 survey conducted by Weber Shandwick, a public relations consultancy, found that 93 percent of Americans believe that incivility is a problem, with 68 percent identifying incivility as a major problem.<sup>8</sup>

Local officials are on the frontlines of the public sector as they are the most connected and accessible to their communities. **While the proximity of local officials to community members is important for public service, this same proximity often exposes local officials to incidences of incivility — which have increasingly escalated into harassment, threats and violence.**

A 2019 nationwide survey and article published in the journal State and Local Government Review, found that four-fifths of surveyed mayors had experienced some type of psychological abuse — much of it through social media.<sup>9</sup> Much has changed in the political environment since 2019. In the last 18 months, local leaders have had to navigate a pandemic, address protests for racial equity and the role of policing in communities and work through heightened political tensions during an election year.



For this report, NLC conducted nine interviews and surveyed 112 local public officials to learn about their experiences with harassment, threats and violence. **Eighty-one percent of surveyed local public officials reported having experienced harassment, threats and violence** (Figure 2). Eighty-seven percent of surveyed local public officials also reported that they have observed an increase in attacks on public officials during their time in office (Figure 3). Many surveyed local officials anecdotally shared that this behavior by residents had been heightened for a few years but has gotten dramatically worse since the start of the pandemic.

**FIGURE 2.** More than 8 in 10 surveyed local officials reported experiencing harassment, threats and violence

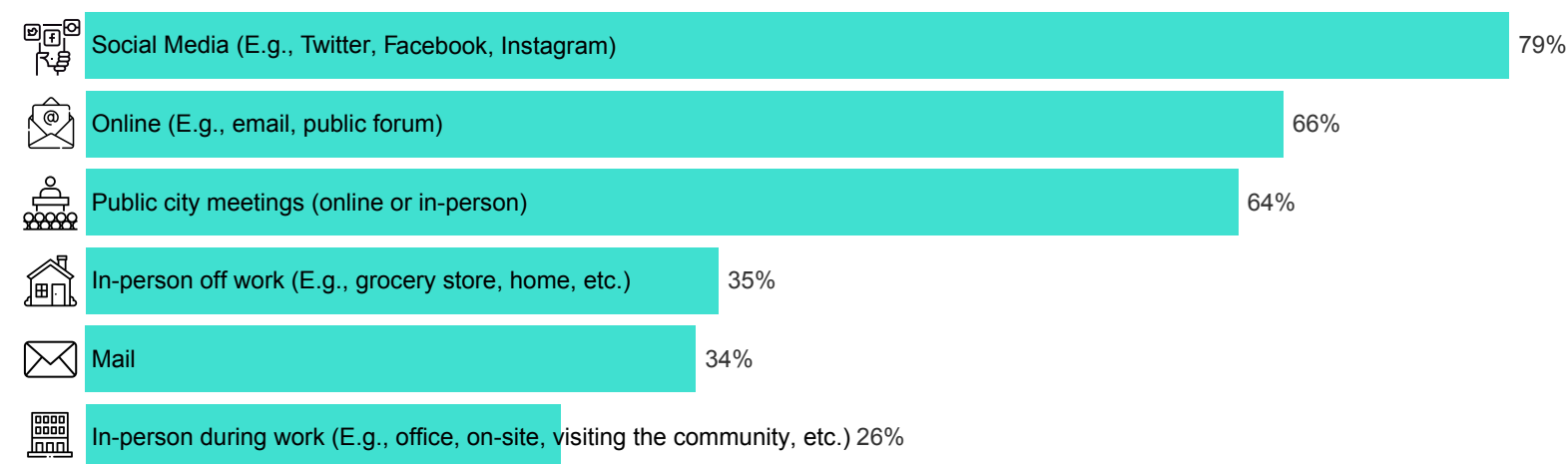


**FIGURE 3.** A vast majority of surveyed local officials have noticed changes in the levels of harassment, threats and violence during their time in office



Additionally, results indicate that social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram), public city meetings (online or in-person) and other online venues (e.g., email, public forum) are the most common settings for incidences of harassment, threats and violence against local public officials to occur (Figure 4). Harassment and threats of violence are incredibly hard to combat on social media given users' shroud of anonymity and freedom to say almost anything on social media platforms.

**FIGURE 4.** Local officials cited social media most commonly regarding where they experience incidences of harassment, threats and violence



Surveyed local officials' response to where they have experienced harassment, threats and violence.

In NLC's research and discussions with local officials, many disturbing incidences of harassment, threats and violence were raised. Minnetonka, MN Councilmember Deb Calvert and her fellow councilmembers received hundreds of emails and phone calls threatening and verbally abusing them in the run-up to and after a vote on mask mandates.<sup>10</sup> Anchorage, AK Assemblymember Christopher Constant, a member of the LGBTQ+ community, was subjected to homophobic remarks and even death threats.<sup>11</sup> Assemblymember Constant also found a game camera, used for hunting, mounted on a tree outside pointed at his house (Figure 5).<sup>12</sup> Bolingbrook, IL Mayor Roger Claar had his home vandalized and was likened to a Nazi because of his support for former President Trump.<sup>13</sup>

**FIGURE 5.** Picture of the game camera mounted on a tree outside Assemblymember Constant's home





**Public health officials** have become more frequent targets of harassment, threats and violence during the pandemic. A survey from the Colorado Association of Local Public Health Officials found that 80 percent of the state’s local health directors said that they or their personal property had been threatened since the pandemic began.<sup>14</sup> Eighty percent of local health directors responding to that same survey also said they had encountered threats to pull funding from their department or other forms of political coercion and pressure.<sup>15</sup> In Maryland, Montgomery County’s former top public health official resigned in September 2021 following a series of threats, racist and homophobic emails and social media attacks that occurred throughout the pandemic.<sup>16</sup>

**Public school officials** have also become more frequent targets of harassment, threats and violence during the pandemic. School board meetings have devolved into screaming matches between school board officials, parents, educators and students divided over mask mandates. Facing unprecedented levels of hostility, many school board members, who are often unpaid volunteers, have resigned.<sup>17</sup> The Associated Press reported that one Nevada school board member had thoughts of suicide before resigning due to the threats and harassment they faced.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, **local election officials** experienced harassment, threats and violence during the most recent election cycle. According to a spring 2021 survey by the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU Law and Benenson Strategy Group, one-third of local election officials feel unsafe because of their job and one-fifth worry about receiving death threats.<sup>19</sup> Philadelphia, PA City Commissioner Al Schmidt received death threats after defending the integrity of Philadelphia’s election and was called a traitor by his own party.<sup>20</sup>

As shown in the previous examples, mayors, councilmembers, public health officials, school board members, election officials and other local leaders require additional support to combat the rising levels of harassment, threats and violence they experience. While many local leaders believe that the surge in harassment, threats and violence they face is “a moment in time” due to the pandemic, other underlying factors have been pushing community members to demean their local officials. To meaningfully address the issue of rising harassment, threats and violence against local officials, it is important to understand the underlying drivers of such behavior.

# ROOT CAUSES

**T**HE decline in civility and growth of harassment, threats and violence against public officials has been underway for decades. There is a complex network of causal and influential factors at play including polarization, spread of mis- and disinformation and the growing influence and power of social media.

## Polarization

The Pew Research Center defines political polarization as “the vast and growing gap between liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats.” While differences and disagreement in ideology and policy — ideological polarization — are normal and healthy in a democracy, the growing antagonism between people and parties is not. In response to the question “What do you think influences or explains this behavior [harassment/threats/violence]?,” many NLC survey respondents cited factors such as partisan politics, partisan allegiance, political divide and polarization.

Partisan identification is no longer contingent on policy views; instead, it has morphed into a sorting across racial, religious, educational, generational and geographic lines.<sup>21</sup> As a consequence, other party members are more likely to say the opposing party is hypocritical, selfish, close-minded and unwilling to socialize across party lines.<sup>22</sup> This alignment with political leanings has led to more than half of Republicans and more than 40 percent of Democrats to think of the other party as “enemies” rather than “political opponents,” according to a CBS News poll conducted in January 2020.<sup>23</sup>

According to a study from the University of Virginia, labeling policies as “Democratic” or “Republican” can influence policy support itself, eroding the ability for citizens and government officials to have productive conversations about policy.<sup>24</sup> For example, while a majority of Republicans agreed that climate change is happening, support declined when policy solutions were presented as associated with Democrats.<sup>25</sup>

(Photo by Dan Kitwood/Getty Image News via Getty Images)



This inability to see those with different affiliations as people, and subsequent increase in adversarial relationships, has led to a rapid decline in civility. A majority of Americans said that other Americans were the greatest threat to the country, according to a January 2021 CBS News poll.<sup>26</sup> According to a recent Politico survey, **more people than ever view violence as justifiable for political means.**<sup>27</sup> Lilliana Mason, associate professor of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland, College Park and author of *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* says of partisan identity strength: “As identity grows stronger, and conflict intensifies, people will begin to approve of violence.”<sup>28</sup>

Since the 2016 election, Americans are more likely to actively endorse the idea of intergroup violence — aggressive behavior committed by one group against another that is intended to cause physical and/or psychological harm.<sup>29</sup> Many local leaders surveyed specifically pointed to how political rhetoric from our national leaders has become more extreme and hostile in the last five years, and that many citizens have modeled this kind of behavior when engaging with their local leaders.

“As things on the national level started to get more divisive and more painful, that’s when I started to receive threats.”

West Wendover, NV Mayor **Daniel Corona**



# Pushback Against Inclusive Political Participation

This is not the first time our country has experienced a surge in polarization. In response to the 1960s civil rights movement and 1970s women’s rights movement, polarization grew around changing group status.<sup>30</sup> As America diversifies across religion, gender and race/ethnicity, this too has become an additional polarizing issue in U.S. politics.<sup>31</sup> As the most recently released Census suggests, this growing diversification is not slowing down.<sup>32</sup>

Despite growing calls for more representative government at the local, state and federal level, the U.S. is far from reaching gender and racial parity among those who hold office. According to Brian Schaffner, author of *Hometown Inequality: Race, Class, and Representation in American Local Politics*, African American and Latinx officials are elected to office at a lower rate than their share of the population in cities and towns.<sup>33</sup> Across communities, White officials tend to make up more of local city and town councils than they should if their representation was proportional to population share.<sup>34</sup>

Although somewhat dated, research from Demos in 2014 showed that more than 1.2 million African Americans in 175 communities across the country have councils that are not representative of their share of the population.<sup>35</sup> The Center for American Women and Politics released a survey in 2021 showing that nationwide, women hold only 30.5 percent of municipal offices – mayoral offices, city councils and other similar bodies.<sup>36</sup>

NLC survey results highlight that surveyed local officials feel opposition to more inclusive and representative political participation. Numerous local leaders NLC surveyed felt targeted due in part to their varying identities as part of the LGBTQ+ community, as people of color and/or as women. These groups are being disproportionately targeted, and perpetrators of harassment, threats and violence capitalize on the identities of public officials.

NLC survey results highlight that surveyed local officials **feel opposition to more inclusive and representative political participation.**

In response to the question  
**“What do you think influences or explains this behavior?”**  
surveyed members said:

“Not knowing someone personally who is LGBTQ+, a lack of education and bias.”

“The polarization of our politics, as well as feeling that it is easier to push women around.”

“I think the community feels triggered by me being LGBTQ+ and a person of color.”

“I think part of it is that I am a woman; my male counterparts haven’t experienced the level of aggression I have experienced and I have heard from my female colleagues. I also think people don’t like the change in leadership (more women) and the direction the city is moving. When power structures change it no longer serves the dominant culture (males).”

*Some of these survey responses have been shortened or edited for clarity with permission.*

In response to the question  
**“What do you think influences or explains this behavior?”**  
surveyed members said:

“I have received numerous threats about my identity. I am a person of color and LGBTQ+. They often point these out and say disgusting and hurtful things about me.”

“On a few occasions a couple community members made anti-LGBTQ+ hate language attacks at a few public meetings.”

*Some of these survey responses have been shortened or edited for clarity with permission.*

## Spread of Mis- and Disinformation Online

### SOCIAL MEDIA

Growing polarization and pushback against changing demographics and power dynamics is sustained by the proliferation and power of social media. While social media may be viewed as an equalizing force for disenfranchised individuals, its negative impacts can be insidious as these platforms have evolved into spaces for fake news and have empowered harmful voices, ideologies and messages.<sup>37</sup> In many cases, social media has been faulted for stimulating or exacerbating political polarization by creating echo chambers, wherein people not only seek out information to confirm their existing biases but are not exposed to information that contradicts their preexisting beliefs.<sup>38</sup>

A number of public officials surveyed also pointed to this fact, highlighting  
**What influences or explains harassment, threats and violence?**

“...the political divide or chasm between the parties, social media conspiracy theories, the pandemic driving us into isolated echo chambers, sexism and misogyny.”

“We were like lobsters in a pot, not recognizing the coming impact of the growing online rhetoric and extremism. They were stoked, emboldened, and incited by leaders, conspiracies and the times.”

“Misinformation.”

*Some of these survey responses have been shortened or edited for clarity with permission.*




Sources of Information

Another important trend to consider is the decline in nonpartisan and local media sources. According to a study from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, more than one-fourth of the country’s newspapers have disappeared, leaving residents in thousands of communities in news deserts.<sup>39</sup> Local news traditionally plays an important role in informing the community about local government and helps shape community views around common values and belief – creating a sense of unity and shared purpose. In many ways, the pandemic and ensuing recession served as the nail in the coffin.<sup>40</sup> Without trustworthy local news sources, community members often get their news from social media, where mis- and disinformation can spread quickly and exacerbate political and affective polarization.<sup>41</sup>

“The democratization of information access has been one of the great leaps forward. And the reality of that is it makes it hard for you to get information out there that is fair, accurate and balanced.”<sup>42</sup>

St. Louis Park, MN Mayor **Jake Spano**



According to a recent study from the Pew Research Center, “Americans who mainly get their news on social media are less likely to get facts right about the coronavirus and politics and more likely to hear some unproven claims.”<sup>43</sup> The news sources that do exist are moving towards one-sided broadcasts that appeal to partisan viewers.<sup>44</sup> These consumers then receive information that confirms their existing ideologies.<sup>45</sup> With over half of Americans report getting their news on social media at least sometimes, a large swath of Americans are exposed to unproven claims (Figure 6). Of those who utilize major social media platforms, the highest percentage of Americans report consuming news regularly through Facebook (Figure 7). A 2020 study from the German Marshall Fund of the United States found that the number of interactions on Facebook with manipulative outlets in the second quarter of 2020 alone — leading up to the election — was greater than the number of interactions in all of 2017.<sup>46</sup>

FIGURE 6. About half of Americans get news on social media at least sometimes

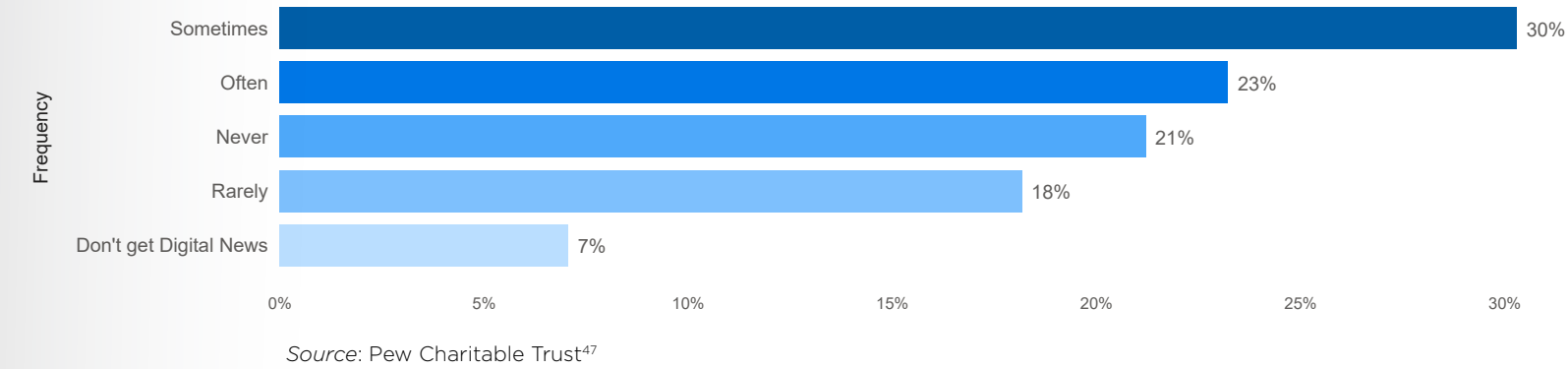
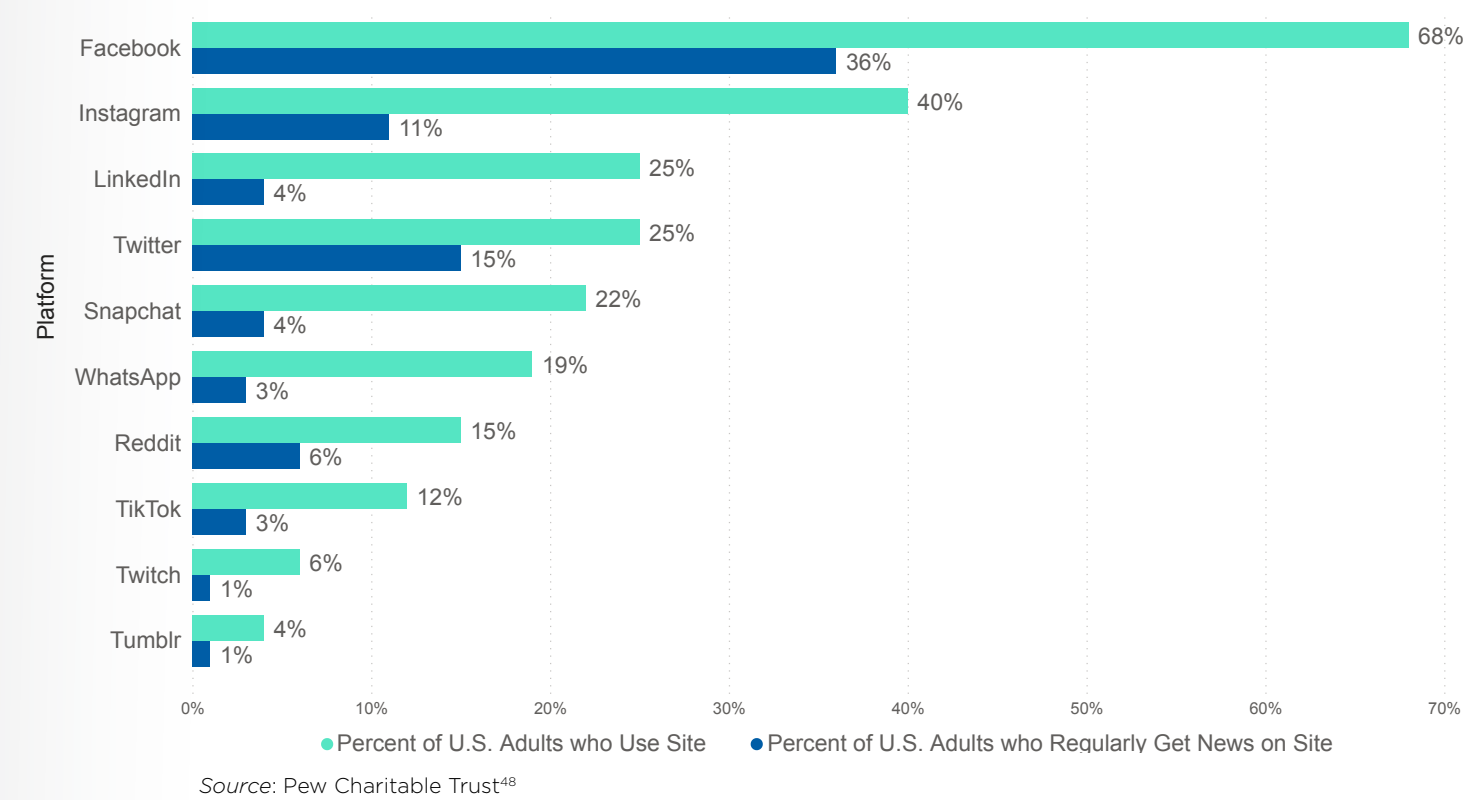


FIGURE 7. Facebook stands out as a regular source of news for Americans





## Growing Platform for Animosity

Social media not only allows mis- and disinformation to spread, but the level of abstraction between the individual and the screen emboldens people. A study found that vitriolic rhetoric online does not change attitudes, but rather emboldens individuals to express and act on pre-existing views.<sup>49</sup> One such way that social media incites violence is through increasingly violent rhetoric that is used to demonize political opponents. Research from the Network Contagion Research Institute highlights that violent rhetoric is used in large part by right-wing violence groups, although it has been seen in left-wing groups as well.<sup>50</sup>

The growth of vitriolic rhetoric spurs violent action. A recent and clear result of growing polarization and the spread of mis- and disinformation is the public and political response to the pandemic. The public health crisis has been aggravated by polarization, with dangerous consequences for public health, democracy and vulnerable groups.<sup>51</sup> Heated partisan divisions have jeopardized public health by hindering a unified response to the crisis; tensions between local and national governments have also undercut the ability of local officials to contribute fully to pandemic response.<sup>52</sup>

## The Need for Regulation

Mis- and disinformation around the pandemic and the election leading to U.S. Capitol insurrection are evidence of the growing and detrimental power of unregulated social media to spread false and misleading information. While local officials can monitor their use of social media, there is an important role for large-scale regulatory action to build a safer internet. However, regulation is not enough to adequately address the issues at the heart of a business model that aims to maximize scroll time, which incentivizes more customized and polarizing content.<sup>53</sup>



Bell, CA Residents Demand Resignation Of City Officials At City Council Mtg. (Kevork Djansezian/Getty Image News via Getty Images)



# WHY DOES IT MATTER?

## Threatening the Safety and Well-Being of Local Officials

First and foremost, harassment and violent behavior against public officials is a threat to the safety of those who have committed themselves to public service. Several public officials shared that they have elected to take anti-anxiety medication and pursue therapy in response to the harassment, threats and violence they experienced. In addition to the personal health and safety of local officials, those in the immediate circle of local officials, including family members and staff, are put at risk too. Below are some snapshots of the impact these incidences have had on public officials.

“Greatly increased my stress level and nearly wiped out the joy in the work. It’s been hard to continue to serve.”

“I’m quitting.”

“Some days it makes you not want to serve anymore.”

“Feeling of unease and concern because my home address is public.”

“I feel nervous and worried when I am walking around the city. I also feel constant anxiety when there is an opportunity for public comment in our meetings. I have had many days of feeling so emotionally exhausted and feeling like I am unable to do my job or live in this town.”

“...threats to me and my family’s safety.”


“It has gotten to the point that my kids have been getting harassing text messages on their telephones... There clearly is a line that has been crossed.”

Some of these survey responses have been shortened or edited for clarity with permission.

In some cases, local leaders have felt compelled to take extraordinary steps to protect themselves in response to the harassment, threats and violence they face.

“I acquired a concealed carry license and handgun after members of my community threatened my life and posted my address online. I have to protect myself, my family and my kids.”<sup>54</sup>

New Bern, NC Alderwoman **Jameesha Harris**



## Interrupting Local Officials’ Ability to do Their Jobs

Local officials surveyed expressed that incidences of harassment and attacks make it difficult for them to do their job, citing challenges such as mental fatigue/burnout, not wanting to answer phone calls from constituents in fear of verbal harassment and not wanting to use social media platforms to engage with their constituents.

“I think in the last year or so, things have become uglier, more difficult and more divisive, I’m worried about our city in the current political climate, where we’re seeing people’s behavior driven by politics rather than how we can make our community better. That certainly makes it harder for those of us who are local leaders to do our jobs.”<sup>55</sup>

Pensacola, FL Mayor **Grover Robinson**



Photo by Josh Brasted/Getty Images)

In response to the question  
*“How have these experiences impacted your job?”*  
surveyed members said:

“Made leadership of city government more arduous.”

“We are now having to look to investing substantial sums of money to upgrade our security infrastructure.”

“It’s made me more cautious of my surroundings and I keep a better watch with social media posts.”

“I became more guarded when working with the public, often deferring to email rather than call or in-person interaction...”

*Some of these survey responses have been shortened or edited for clarity with permission.*

## Hindering the Diversification of Government

Beyond the general increase in attacks against local leaders, these attacks on our systems and institutions are also a targeted attack against the voices of historically marginalized groups – women, people of color and the LGBTQ+ community. These targeted attacks may push people to leave their jobs and discourage future leaders from serving their communities. In turn, this threatens the push to diversify government leadership and consequently reduces the ability of government to properly represent all people – regardless of socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or ability.

## Losing Institutional Knowledge

While no comprehensive nationwide data exists, articles from platforms such as the New York Times<sup>56</sup> and Washington Post<sup>57</sup> are bringing to light that public officials — mayors, election officials, public health officials and school board officials — are, in some cases, choosing to resign or not run for re-election. Mayors have cited everything between pandemic fatigue, inability to campaign while working to respond to the public health crisis, conflicts over policing and racial justice and politicized reaction to health directives.<sup>58</sup> According to Lori Freeman, CEO of the National Association of County Health Officials, many health officials are leaving and “the top reason was politics.”<sup>59</sup> In a survey by Reed College and the Democracy Fund in April 2020, more than one in six of 850 surveyed election officials said they planned to retire before the 2024 election.<sup>60</sup>

This was a sentiment echoed by Mayor Lance Bottoms of Atlanta, GA, who said in an interview, “I think you’re seeing a lot of people choosing not to serve in public office anymore. People are choosing emotional and mental health and well-being over public service, and that is a dangerous point for us to be in as a country.”<sup>61</sup>

## Budgetary Impact on Municipalities

The growing incidences of harassment, threats and violence against local officials also have a significant budgetary impact. Numerous cities have already put extra safety precautions in place in city buildings to protect staff, such as installing ballistic glass, hiring extra security and developing safety plans specifically for the prospect of an active shooter in the building. Having a safety plan in the case of a fire or earthquake is a normalized part of any job. Hiring a security detail due to credible death threats should not be.

If local law enforcement investigates threats or offers security protection to those who have been credibly threatened, already strained budgets and staffing may be further impacted. Some local leaders face credible threats and have hired security personnel in response to protect themselves and their family but have received backlash from the community in response, amid growing calls to defund the police. For example, Former Mayor Jackie Biskupski of Salt Lake City, UT, was recommended by the chief of police to appoint two personal bodyguards in the wake of the Pulse nightclub massacre. Other mayors, such as those in Atlanta, Seattle, Kansas City, Phoenix, San Antonio, Chicago and Tucson, have elected to do the same.<sup>62</sup>



# WHAT CAN CITIES DO?

**P**UBLIC officials are human. They deserve to feel safe and should be protected from abusive and violent behavior. The recent uptick in harassment, threats and violence against public officials makes supporting the physical safety of public officials a top priority.

Unfortunately, three-fifths of surveyed local officials indicated that their office does not have a strategy or action plan in place to respond to or mitigate incidences of harassment, threats and violence (Figure 8). If needed, there are strategies that cities can employ to prevent, mitigate and respond to these incidences. The following section details various strategies based on interviews with NLC members and experts, survey data and additional research.

## Securing Physical Safety

In the event of harassment, threats and violence, cities must be swift in evaluating and, if needed, improving public safety measures to prevent violence against local officials and ensure the safety of their staff. Cities should coordinate with their local police departments to develop emergency procedures and improve intervention training for security officers in case a violent incident occurs. Several cities have increased security presence at council meetings, installed metal detectors at entrances and install ballistic glass in their city halls’

**FIGURE 8.** Fewer than half work in an office with a strategy to handle incidences of harassment, threats and violence



(By Joe Raedle/Getty Image News via Getty images)

dais to protect local leaders from gun violence and other physical violence. In cases where there is a reasonable fear of violence occurring, public meetings may be held virtually.

Unfortunately, many local officials have experienced harassment, threats and violence off the job. Thirty-five percent of surveyed public officials shared that they have experienced incidences of harassment, threats and violence in-person when they were off work. In case of these incidents, cities should be ready to coordinate with their local police department or other security or protection services to arrange escorts and security when needed.

Preventative strategies are important; however, when incidences of harassment, threats and violence against local officials do occur, it is crucial that cities are equipped to respond. First and foremost, cities and individuals must take legal action when appropriate and necessary. Many constituents who harass and threaten public officials walk the line between protected and unprotected speech — especially online. While local officials, especially elected officials, may feel unable to take action against certain harassment because of First Amendment rights, it is important to also focus on their individual rights to safety and security. Local leaders should consult with legal authority to determine whether harassment can be considered unlawful.

Some members who were interviewed for this report have had to take legal action against community members. Winston-Salem, NC Mayor Pro Tempore (MPT) Denise Adams was harassed and threatened for years by a former employee who worked on her 2018 bid for U.S. Congress. As a part of our interview, MPT Adams expressed that she was initially hesitant to file charges with the police, but ultimately legal action needed to be taken to end the onslaught of threats and other verbal harassment she experienced.



## Promoting Mental Health and Well-Being

Supporting traumatized individuals' emotional and mental well-being is incredibly important. Psychological trauma is a state of profound distress caused by the losses and memories of exposure to an extraordinary, life-threatening individual or large-scale event.<sup>63</sup> It may be advisable that public officials who have or are currently being singled out as targets for harassment, threats and violence seek individual help from a mental health professional. In the event of a large-scale incident that involves multiple city staff, cities need to be able to effectively manage trauma. Effective trauma management is important for supporting morale, preventing turnover and connecting individuals with mental health resources.<sup>64</sup>

## Improving Civil Discourse

Local leaders can be trailblazers for fostering a more civil society. At all levels of government, officials need to reevaluate and possibly change the ways in which they engage with each other. Local leaders can take many steps to improve civil discourse in their communities. They can exemplify civil behavior and denounce offensive and violent rhetoric. Cities can also adopt a code of conduct for public meetings and events. One local official interviewed shared that their city has a code of conduct that is posted visibly outside the chamber, posted inside the chamber and is read aloud before each meeting. There can be a notice for removal upon violation, but there needs to be an enforcer such as a security or police officer present. In addition to a code of conduct for city meetings and events, local officials could adopt a code of conduct for social media use which requests officials not use offensive or violent rhetoric and not unintentionally spread mis- and disinformation by fact-checking sources to improve civility online. Cities can also explore building relationships with community groups to encourage and promote civil discourse. Additional resources on de-escalation and improving civility are referenced in Appendix II.

*See Appendix for further resources.*



Activists Rally At Baltimore City Hall (Andrew Burton/Getty Images News via Getty images)



# RECOMMENDATIONS

THE following recommendations outline some safety measures local leaders can take to address incidences of harassment, threats and violence.

## Securing Physical Safety

These recommendations provide high-level guidance on how local leaders can better plan for and mitigate potentially tense public meetings and events.

**PLAN IN ADVANCE AND FOCUS ON DE-ESCALATION:**

Improve training for police and security offices focused on de-escalation. Train key staff on key principles and strategies for de-escalation. Where possible, connect with community groups and members to encourage de-escalation training. Work with local law enforcement and other key stakeholders to develop a plan should a violent incidence occur.

**CONSIDER SECURITY PROTECTION:**

Consider having protection such as local law enforcement or security present at council meetings and public city events. It is important to recognize that the presence of law enforcement may heighten tensions in some situations, particularly given the history of policing in some communities, so be prepared to consider alternative arrangements. If appropriate for your community, consider unarmed civilian protection. Alternatively, consider moving a potentially contentious meeting online, particularly if an appropriate protection plan is not in place.

**MAKE INFRASTRUCTURE ADJUSTMENTS:**

Consider making infrastructure adjustments to meeting spaces to keep public officials and municipal staff safe. If there is likely to be a large showing, try keeping groups separate within the meeting space. Other infrastructure adjustments could include installing metal detectors or ballistic glass.

**DEBRIEF AFTER EVENTS:**

Following meetings, make sure that relevant stakeholders engage in debriefing conversations. Identify lessons learned from each meeting and incorporate these into existing plans of action. As necessary, liaise with local law enforcement or other appropriate groups to determine whether filing civil or criminal charges is appropriate. Regardless, local officials should report threats or perceived threats to law enforcement to examine further.



## Promoting Mental Health and Well-being

These recommendations provide high-level guidance on how local leaders can better support the mental health and well-being of public officials and city staff who may experience incidences of harassment, abuse and violence.

**INSTITUTE A TRAUMA MANAGEMENT STRATEGY:**

Develop a workplace trauma management strategy if not already in place, with a specific focus on how public harassment, threats and violence may impact public officials and city staff.

**PRIORITIZE MENTAL HEALTH:**

Connect staff to mental health professionals and resources for individual treatment emphasizing the importance of prioritizing mental health and confidentiality of treatment.



## Improving Civil Discourse

These recommendations provide high-level guidance on how local leaders can better model civil discourse online and in-person.

**MODEL CIVIL DISCOURSE:**

Local leaders and their staff should avoid offensive language and violent rhetoric and encourage civility both in-person and online engagement with the community. Where possible and safe to do so, condemn offensive language and highlight the importance of constructive and respectful discussion.

**ENGAGE WITH THE COMMUNITY:**

Repairing civil discourse will require a whole community approach. The city should strategically work and correspond with community groups to begin to mend points of tension where and when safe to do so.

**INSTITUTE A CODE OF CONDUCT:**

Develop and clearly communicate a code of conduct outlining what is and is not allowable behavior by officials and constituents during public city meetings and events, emphasizing specific rules and norms for everyone. Frame the code of conduct as important to ensuring a comfortable and inclusive space for everyone.

**DEVELOP SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDELINES:**

Develop a social media guideline or code of conduct for public officials to limit the spread of vitriolic language online and combat the spread of mis- and disinformation.

# CONCLUSION

**E**IGHTY-ONE percent of surveyed local public officials experienced harassment, threats and violence. It is unacceptable for elected officials to face attacks ranging from vitriol on social media to threats against family members and even gun violence. This is where we are right now as a society though, and counteracting these challenges will take hard work, solid planning and a broad culture shift that values civility over coarseness.

For years, growing polarization, intolerant bigotry, the rise of mis- and disinformation and the proliferation of online animosity have created a divisive culture wherein people have lost the ability to engage with each other and our local public officials meaningfully and appropriately. Particularly during the last year and a half, there has been an uptick in the most extreme incidences of harassment, threats and violence against local public officials. This has led to an environment of fear and uncertainty, as concerns over safety and well-being make it harder for public servants to do their jobs and provide vital services to their communities.

City leaders need a plan to counteract these challenges. The impact that this environment and incidences themselves have on the ability of local governments to effectively provide services is enormous. Even with these challenges, only 40 percent of surveyed local public officials indicated that their city had a strategy or action plan to respond to or mitigate harassment, threats and violence from community members. This mismatch exists for a range of reasons, from size and lack of capacity within city governments to officials prioritizing community members over themselves to some leaders simply not knowing how best to respond.

These results indicate a gap in municipalities' preparedness to promote the physical, emotional and mental well-being of local officials in the event of harassment, threats and violence. This report outlines various steps that cities and individuals can take to secure physical safety and promote the mental well-being of impacted officials. However, it is

crucial that cities explore long-term solutions aimed at calming the political environment and improving civility to drive down attacks against public officials.

NLC is here for our local leaders and is committed to combating the increase in harassment, threats and violence against local officials. We will always support our local leaders, who are on the frontlines of today's cities, and need help dealing with the outsized challenges of our highly tense political climate. Local leaders serve their communities, give back to society and go out of their way to create better towns and cities. We owe it to these leaders – who are our friends and neighbors – to be there for them as they are there for us, and build a stronger, more civil society so that we can all flourish and solve the big problems of our time.

Mayor Spano said it best when he said, “The time I have spent building relationships with colleagues has been more indispensable than ever. It is so critically important that local leaders are there for each other.”<sup>65</sup>





# APPENDIX I:

## Additional Resources

[Bridging Differences Playbook by the University of California, Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center](#)

The University of California, Berkeley Greater Good Science Center's Bridging Differences initiative put together a playbook to help readers learn about research-based strategies to promote positive dialogue and understanding. The playbook synthesizes 14 skills and briefly explains the main steps involved in how to practice a given skill, why it may be useful and includes a list of additional resources.

[De-escalation Resources by Princeton University's Bridging Divides Initiative](#)

Princeton University's Bridging Divides Initiative provides resource guides targeting elected officials, law enforcement agencies and members of the public with concrete strategies to prepare for potentially contentious local community meetings and to recognize and de-escalate conflicts. This resource specifically focuses on guidelines for de-escalation and communication around contentious meetings for local elected officials.

[Resources for Civil Discourse by Chatham University's Pennsylvania Center for Women and Politics](#)

Chatham University's Pennsylvania Center for Women and Politics provides a toolkit to improve civil discourse. Included in this toolkit is a guide on how to properly engage in a civil conversation.

[Safety Planning Tool for Women by National Democratic Institute](#)

National Democratic Institute's #think10 is an innovative safety planning tool for politically active women. This tool helps assess a woman's political participation risk based on a self-assessment questionnaire. Using this tool, women can develop a safety plan relevant to their personal and professional profile and their political context.

[Employer Assistance Programs Guide by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#)

SAMHSA provides a toolkit for employers to develop an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). EAPs can help employees with issues affecting their job performance. EAPs can identify and address a wide range of health, financial and social issues, including support for individuals traumatized by harassment, threats and violence.

[Tips for Survivors of a Disaster or Other Traumatic Event: Managing Stress by SAMHSA](#)

SAMHSA provides a factsheet on stress management for survivors of traumatic events. The factsheet details how to identify when you are having a physical, emotional or mental response to stress or trauma before offering practical tips for relieving stress.

[Trauma in Organizations—Workplace Strategies for Mental Health by Canada Life](#)

Canada Life provides many actionable recommendations for organizations and managers to respond to traumatic incidents at work under three buckets: organizational strategies (e.g., hosting information sessions with qualified speakers), leader strategies (e.g., meeting regular to regularly discuss challenging issues) and supporting employees (e.g., encouraging employees to reach out for support).

# APPENDIX II:

## About the Survey and Results

For this report, NLC conducted nine interviews and surveyed 112 local public officials to learn about their experiences with harassment, threats and violence. NLC dispersed this survey in two distributions. The first distribution of this survey was sent to NLC’s Constituency Groups (groups of members that offer a space for traditionally marginalized voices in local government to connect and collaborate) and received 72 responses. The second distribution of this survey was adapted to become part of NLC’s Member Survey and received 40 responses.

To view the full survey results, please contact the authors.

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