

2024



# The People Lab Annual Report



HARVARD Kennedy School



The People Lab

# The People Lab 2024 Overview

July 1, 2023 – June 30, 2024

**Over the past year**, The People Lab (TPL) has advanced its mission to conduct cutting-edge research on the people of government and the communities they are called to serve. By combining our government collaborators' expertise with our multidisciplinary team's scholarship, we've tackled increasingly complex projects; supported our collaborators in building their own capacity for innovation and experimentation; and created a training model that prepares students to address policy implementation and public management challenges in both academia and government.

In this report, we highlight our priorities and achievements over the past year, as well as our goals for making an even greater impact on policy solutions in the years to come.



# FY 2024 Research Highlights



## PRIORITY 1

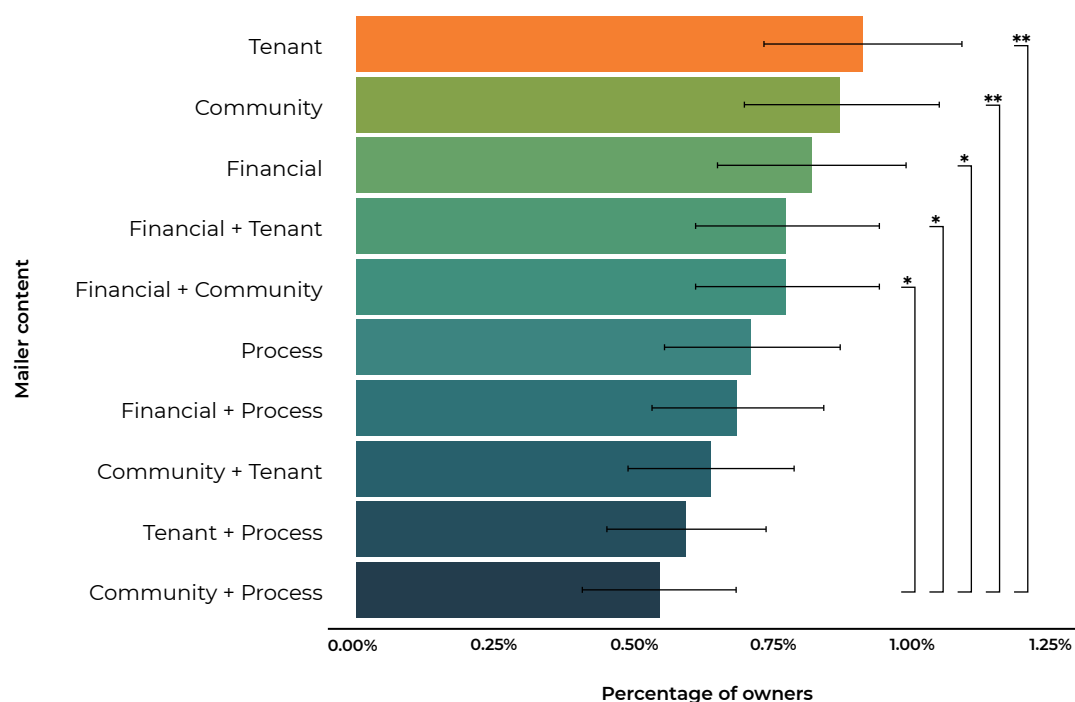
### Tackling More Complex Projects

This year, we have continued to build evidence on what works to strengthen the government workforce and improve resident–government interactions, with a particular focus on tackling harder and more complex challenges. Since The People Lab’s inception in 2017, we have built a foundation of evidence concerning the impact of light-touch solutions targeting “low-hanging fruit,” including simplifying **government outreach** to increase resident engagement with public programs and testing different language to increase **applications** for government jobs. Expanding upon this evidence base, we are now focusing our efforts on testing higher-touch solutions to increasingly challenging problems; understanding what works best for whom; and tackling different facets of the same challenge from a more systematic perspective.

- Building on our published research on **how to increase demand for rental assistance by targeting stigma**, we have expanded the breadth and depth of our research on housing, focusing on additional distinct, but interconnected, “pain points” low-income renters face when trying to secure safe and stable housing. For example:
  - In Minneapolis, we conducted more than 60 qualitative interviews with landlords and tenants to better understand the barriers each face to participation in Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) programs. Through these interviews, we documented the **extensive stigma associated with tenants who have vouchers**, which deters many landlords from renting to them and dramatically affects tenants’ experiences on the housing market. Additionally, we learned about landlords’ decision-making processes and their experiences interacting with the local public housing authority, suggesting potential points of intervention for our government collaborators.

- In Massachusetts, we collaborated with the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities to conduct a statewide randomized controlled trial testing different outreach modalities and messages aimed at **increasing landlord engagement with the state’s housing voucher programs**. We found that landlords were significantly more likely to engage with letters than postcards, and that—perhaps counterintuitively—outreach that included less content was more effective than outreach that included more content. Overall, the most effective message increased landlord engagement by 68% relative to the least effective message, though additional research is needed to understand the impact of different message content.

## Percentage of landlords who engaged with mailed communications, by message

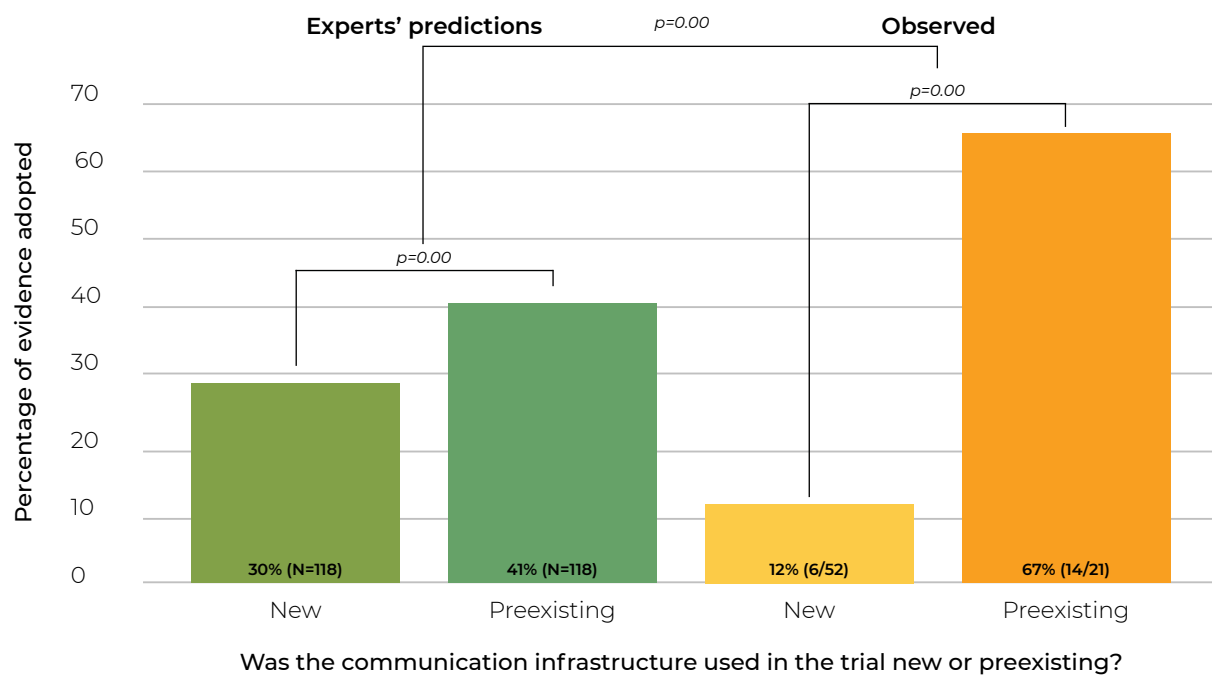


Estimated marginal means and 95% confidence intervals from an ordinary least squares model. Mailer content is as follows: The “tenant” message emphasized benefits of renting to tenants with vouchers; the “financial” message emphasized the financial benefits of participating in voucher programs; the “community” message emphasized how participating in voucher programs can benefit the community; and the “process” message aimed to correct common misperceptions about the process of participation. Each mailer condition included one or two of these messages, in addition to basic information about Massachusetts state voucher programs. Asterisks indicate significant differences: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

- In collaboration with the City of Boston, we are launching another randomized controlled trial to test the impact of different outreach messages on resident engagement with housing stability programs, service provision, and evictions. Evictions have been shown to have profound and far-reaching consequences on people's economic, health, and mental health outcomes. Importantly, evictions disproportionately affect Black households and families with children, thus exacerbating racial and socioeconomic inequities. The government offers many resources to help prevent eviction and mitigate its effects, including financial assistance and legal aid, but there is little rigorous evidence on how to increase use of these services, nor on their impact for Boston residents. This study is expected to begin in the summer of 2024 and run through 2025..
- Expanding our portfolio of projects on **recruitment** and **retention** of frontline workers, we are studying the impact of higher-touch interventions to bring talent into the public sector and target harder-to-reach and harder-to-move frontline workers. For example:
  - In collaboration with four public sector fellowship programs, we measured the impact of one- to two-year fellowships on the mindsets and career trajectories of both fellows and similarly motivated non-fellows ("finalists"). Fellowship programs, which place early-career professionals in government jobs, are often billed as a solution for recruiting diverse talent into the public sector. But empirical evidence on their impact is limited. In this ongoing study, we find that **fellows are 44 percentage points more likely to hold a public sector job** in the years following their fellowship than were "finalists." These results suggest that fellowship programs are an effective employment pathway into government but additional investments may be required to change mindsets and experiences within government.
  - In collaboration with the Denver Sheriff Department, we tested two different models of an employee wellness program among deputies: a peer-focused program and an individual-focused program. We found that the peer-focused wellness program, which aimed to foster social connection, significantly increased job happiness and feelings of being understood, compared with the individual-focused program. The peer-focused program also led correctional officers to shift their perspectives on the incarcerated population: **six months after the intervention period**, officers who had access to the peer program had more positive mindsets about incarcerated individuals and were significantly more likely to agree that the individuals under their care shared their values and beliefs. Relatedly, we conducted a series of "pulse" surveys with the fire department of a midsize city to measure how mindsets shift over time among new department recruits. We found that despite a focus on community relations in both hiring and training, over time new firefighters develop more negative perceptions about city residents and a more narrow view of their role in the context of public safety. We hope to continue to expand our work on the intersection of on the job experience, service delivery, and perceptions of the community served.

In a recent paper, **“Bottlenecks for Evidence Adoption,”** we analyzed results from 73 randomized controlled trials that were conducted by the Behavioral Insights Team in collaboration with city governments from 2015 to 2019 to better understand why only some of the tested policy innovations were subsequently adopted into practice. We found that the most significant predictor of adoption was not the strength of evidence or the characteristics of the cities, but rather whether the intervention modified an existing communication channel or developed a new one. Specifically, while the overall adoption rate was 27%, more than 67% of interventions that modified preexisting communications were adopted, compared with just 12% of those that required new communications. This result suggests that organizational inertia may be an important barrier to evidence adoption in the public sector and, thus, that targeting and reducing this barrier could substantially increase the real-world impact of tested innovations by increasing the number of cities that incorporate evidence into their day-to-day work.

## Adoption of experimental results by city departments



## Looking ahead

We will continue to pursue higher-impact and more complex projects focusing on harder-to-reach populations. Consistent with our core values, all of our projects aim to invest in government-led solutions to pressing challenges and to prioritize capacity building and evidence adoption as key outcomes of success. Accordingly, we are launching a larger program of work that aims to tackle one of the most critical challenges in the evidence-based policy-making community: **how do we increase adoption of rigorous evidence at scale?** We also continue to bring an equity lens to all of our projects, informing the projects we take on, and the analyses we conduct, as well as our approach to co-designing interventions and success measures with those who are most impacted by a program. We implement these equity practices with the understanding that authentic diversity, equity, and inclusion are critical to producing high-quality work, but also with the goal of advancing and normalizing these principles in academia more broadly.

### Over the next two years, we plan to further this vision in the following ways:

- Study the factors that underlie the stigma associated with poverty and the social safety net in the United States. We plan to develop and test strategies to shift this stigma and to evaluate whether doing so affects behavior.
- Evaluate new and existing strategies to improve equity and inclusion in the workplace, with a particular focus on retention and promotion practices.
- Measure how resident–government interactions affect residents’ trust and satisfaction, and how this relationship differs across demographic groups.
- Leverage the existing evidence base of effective social interventions gathered from stand-alone projects to build evidence on effective strategies for increasing the production, use, and adoption of evidence in the public sector. Expanding on our published work on the **bottlenecks to evidence adoption**, our goal is to test strategies that increase demand and capacity for, as well as adoption of, experimentation and evidence.





## PRIORITY 2

# Becoming an Academic Hub for Public Management and Policy Implementation Research

Recognizing the need for academia to be more responsive to real-world challenges, TPL seeks to become a scientific hub for public management and policy implementation research. With much of academia and government operating in separate silos, TPL's model of collaborative research with the public sector is still relatively rare, presenting both unique challenges and unique opportunities for our team. On one hand, it means that our work helps fill a clear gap in academic and policy research, is in high demand from public sector collaborators, and gives us meaningful opportunities to build capacity. On the other hand, it is difficult to find scholars or government collaborators who already have the expertise to conduct this type of research. Accordingly, we invest heavily in on-the-job training for students and full-time junior staff, and we approach all of our collaborations with a conscious focus on increasing government capacity for conducting research and scaling evidence-based insights.

Beyond continuing to build TPL's presence and credibility in academic and practitioner circles, **this year we have focused on supporting two forms of capacity building**. First, we are supporting our government collaborators in building their internal capacity for conducting rigorous research. Second, we have invested in building a pipeline of students and junior professionals who are trained in collaborative research with the public sector.



Our successes over the past year include the following:

- Presenting insights from TPL projects to more than **3,000 scholars** and **700 practitioners** at the global, national, and local levels, and training more than **450 government leaders** via executive education modules and workshops. This includes co-hosting a new weeklong talent management program with the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative that trained **58 employees** across **15 cities**.
- Training graduate and undergraduate **students from seven institutions**: Clark University, Harvard University, Howard University, Northeastern University, Princeton University, Spelman College, and UC Berkeley. During their time at TPL, students gain exposure to the full research cycle, from project scoping and design to implementation and analysis to results dissemination and writing. This gives students hands-on experience with a wide range of skills such as data cleaning, survey design, and policy writing, providing a solid foundation for those who wish to continue this type of work as students or practitioners. Importantly, it also provides opportunities to be of service to our public sector collaborators, thus helping students see that research that is interesting to academics can also be useful to practitioners.
- Supporting government agencies in designing and conducting their own independent evaluations. For instance, the Tucson Police Department is preparing to **launch its own study** to test different outreach messages aimed at recruiting new police officers. And after working with TPL on one statewide outreach campaign aimed at increasing landlord interest in the Housing Choice Voucher program, the Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities is now **designing and conducting its own experiments** to test the effectiveness of new outreach messages.
- Producing research that garners public and media attention. Our paper **“The Formality Effect”** has received attention and requests for more information from government players including 18F, the General Services Administration, and city leaders in DC and New York, among others. Our research on stigma has been featured in *Forbes*, *The Conversation*, and *The New York Times*. And our working paper **“Intersectional Peer Effects at Work,”** in which we document the impact on Black women’s careers of having an increased proportion of White coworkers, has been featured in *HuffPost*, *Essence*, *Black Enterprise*, and *The Electorette*.

The People Lab’s research on stigma was featured in *Forbes*, *The Conversation*, and *The New York Times*.

## Academic Publications and Public Working Papers

**“Intersectional Peer Effects,”** forthcoming in *Management Science*.

This study uses data from more than 9,000 new hires at a professional services firm to investigate how the racial composition of coworkers impacts the retention and promotion of Black women. We found that a 1-standard-deviation increase in the share of White coworkers is associated with a 15.8-percentage-point increase in turnover and an 11.5-percentage-point decrease in promotion for Black women employees.

**“The Formality Effect,”** published in *Nature Human Behaviour*.

In three large-scale field experiments, we find that, contrary to experts’ predictions, formal government communications are more effective than informal ones at shifting resident behavior. In three subsequent online studies, we show that formal communications are seen as more credible and important than informal ones, offering one possible explanation for the earlier findings.

**“Improving Delivery of the Social Safety Net: The Role of Stigma,”** published in *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*.

In two field experiments with two US cities, and two subsequent online experiments, we study the impact of reducing learning costs and reducing stigma on demand for rental assistance. We find that providing information about emergency rental assistance increased application requests by 52% and that making subtle framing changes aimed at destigmatizing rental assistance increased engagement by 36% and application requests by 18%.

**“Demystifying College Costs: How Nudges Can and Can’t Help,”** published in *Behavioural Public Policy*.

We evaluated the impact of an outreach campaign encouraging high school seniors to register for state aid in two large field experiments including 265,570 students. We found that simplifying the communication increased registrations by 9% and including language that affirms belonging increased registrations by 11%, but neither had any impact on receipt of financial aid. However, letters that affirmed belonging and made comparable costs more salient significantly changed decision making on the choice of school, as evidenced by increased enrollments at the most affordable college options.

**“When Perceptions of Public Service Harms the Public Servant: Predictors of Burnout and Compassion Fatigue in Government,”** published in *Review of Public Personnel Administration*.

This study surveyed more than 3,300 state and local employees to measure psychological distress during COVID-19. We found alarmingly high rates of burnout and compassion fatigue: one in three public servants surveyed reported experiencing burnout and one in five was experiencing compassion fatigue.

## Public-facing Policy Briefs

Aimed at reaching practitioner audiences and growing our media presence.

**How can we reduce the barriers landlords face to participating in the Housing Choice Voucher program?**

**Does the presentation of information affect residents' response to government communications?**

**Does reducing stigma increase the uptake of rental assistance?**

**What strategies can public safety agencies implement to improve well-being and retention among their workforces?**

**Can receiving regular text messages improve job seekers' employment outcomes?**

**How do we reduce burnout for 911 dispatchers?**

**What predicts policy makers' decisions to adopt evidence-based strategies?**

**What messaging strategies are most effective for outreach to landlords about voucher programs?**

## Over the next two years, we will focus on:

- Designing and delivering executive education modules and courses for public managers in key positions that focus on practical insights from TPL and other public management researchers.
- Hiring, fundraising, and developing training resources to support our model of training students and junior full-time research staff to conduct academically rigorous and practically useful research in collaboration with the public sector.
- Continuing to support our government collaborators in building their own internal capacity to conduct rigorous evaluations.
- Continuing to publish our research in top academic journals and present our work to academic audiences through conferences, workshops, and seminars.
- Building our communications capacity to expand our media presence through blog posts, policy briefs, presentations, and other media mentions.

# FY 2024 Organizational Highlights



## Things We Are Celebrating This Year

- TPL Faculty Director Elizabeth Linos received the prestigious **2023 David N. Kershaw Award and Prize** for distinguished contributions to the field of public policy analysis and management before the age of 40. She was also named one of the **Top 10 Influencers in Local Government** by Engaging Local Government Leaders.
- TPL Research Director Jessica Lasky-Fink **published a highly rated book**, *Writing for Busy Readers: Communicate More Effectively in the Real World*, with coauthor Todd Rogers.
- TPL's graduating students accepted positions in both government and academia, including:
  - Dawn Chinagorom-Abiakalam**, who is starting as a research associate at the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis;
  - Alice Heath**, who is joining the Office of Tax Analysis at the U.S. Department of the Treasury;
  - Woojin Kim**, who is taking a postdoctoral fellowship at the National Bureau of Economic Research; and
  - Max Saenz**, who is starting a predoctoral research fellowship with the Initiative for Policy Dialogue at Columbia University.

# About The People Lab



Based at the Harvard Kennedy School and housed at the Bloomberg Center for Cities, The People Lab aims to empower the public sector by producing cutting-edge research on the people of government and the communities they are called to serve. Using evidence from public management and insights from behavioral science, we study, design, and test strategies that can solve urgent public sector challenges in three core areas:

- **Strengthening the government workforce:** How to recruit, retain, and support diverse talent in the public sector that can effectively and equitably respond to the changing needs of residents.
- **Improving resident-government interactions:** How to mitigate the burdens that residents face when they interact with their government and increase trust and satisfaction in those interactions.
- **Reimagining evidence-based policy making:** How to better include excluded voices in the design, implementation, and evaluation of government innovations, and support the adoption of evidence-based policy at scale.

To do this work, our team brings together public management scholars, behavioral economists, political scientists, and public policy experts to answer questions that a government agency has asked. The vast majority of our research is conducted in direct collaboration with public sector agencies, thus filling policy-relevant gaps in the academic literature while also being responsive to immediate government priorities.



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# Thank You



We are grateful to our collaborators and funders!

## Select Collaborators:

- Baltimore Corps
- California Department of Social Services
- City of Boston
- City of San Diego
- Denver Department of Housing Stability
- Foster America
- Govern For America
- King Frederik Center for Public Leadership at Aarhus University
- Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities
- Minneapolis Public Housing Authority
- Office of Evaluation Sciences at the U.S. General Services Administration
- Public Rights Project
- United States Citizenship and Immigration Services

## Select Funders:

- Baltimore Corps
- Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
- Center for Public Leadership (Harvard)
- Hewlett Foundation
- Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL)
- Mind Brain Behavior Interfaculty Institute (Harvard)
- Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston
- Russell Sage Foundation
- Operational support from Bloomberg Center for Cities at Harvard University