2025

The People Lab
Annual Report

HARVARD Kennedy School

The People Lab

From the Faculty Director

This is a critical moment for both government and academia. The role of government is being questioned and the very foundations of a functioning public sector are being threatened. At the same time, academia is being asked to do more to demonstrate its relevance and impact in the real world. The People Lab works at the intersection of these two challenges—with an unwavering belief that government works better for everyone when it is grounded in evidence, and that academic research is more meaningful when it is practically useful.

Over the past several years, we've built a model designed to generate actionable evidence for the public sector through close, sustained collaborations with government partners, and a dedicated team of full-time researchers, staff, and students. For our students, this allows for hands-on training in how to design and conduct research within the real-world constraints of public institutions. For our government collaborators, this approach translates into building state capacity that outlasts any one study. While we continue to run large-scale randomized evaluations in government, we're also investing in broader public goods for researchers and practitioners alike. These include: a validated tool to measure stigma in the social safety net; the first-ever national survey of city employees to benchmark and track city workforce trends over time; and an AI-powered platform to help public leaders access and apply relevant research to their own challenges.

You'll read more about all of this in the pages that follow. We're so proud of what we've accomplished this year—and even more excited about what lies ahead.

Dr. Elizabeth Linos
Emma Bloomberg Associate Professor for Public Policy and Management
Harvard Kennedy School of Government

The People Lab
2025 Overview

July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025

The solutions to many of the world's greatest social challenges depend—directly or indirectly—on a well-functioning public sector. While legislation, policy design, and democratic accountability determine what government is tasked with, its ability to deliver on those promises rests on **three interdependent pillars:**

1

A skilled and representative workforce with the support required to implement programs and policies

2

Efficient and equitable processes that reinforce (and rebuild) resident–state trust through each interaction

3

The strategic use of data and evidence so agencies can learn, adapt, and adopt evidence-based solutions

At The People Lab, we are committed to generating cutting-edge research on each of these pillars while also helping government agencies build their internal capacity to identify what works—and why—within their own constraints.

Over the past eight years, The People Lab has collaborated with over 30 government agencies and public-interest organizations across 10 U.S. states, as well as with several international entities, to address some of the most pressing challenges facing the public sector. This fiscal year, we prioritized producing new evidence on field-wide challenges; training a new generation of scholars in collaborative, applied research; and laying the groundwork for large-scale initiatives that will generate public goods for scholars and practitioners alike.

This annual report highlights the progress we've made in the past year—and outlines the longer-term goals that guide our work to strengthen the public sector for the future.

FY 2025 Research Highlights

Strengthening the government workforce

Government workers touch nearly every aspect of our daily lives—from tracking disease outbreaks and delivering vital social services to collecting waste and responding to emergencies. Yet, across sectors like public safety, child welfare, education, and cybersecurity, public agencies face persistent workforce challenges, including high turnover, long hiring timelines, and an aging workforce. [1,2]

In many jurisdictions, the public workforce also does not reflect the communities it serves—a gap that can erode trust, reduce responsiveness, and compromise service delivery.[3,4,5] While the benefits of a diverse and representative public workforce are well documented, there is still surprisingly little evidence on what actually works to attract, support, and retain talented people in government.

At The People Lab, we adopt a behavioral public administration approach to understanding and addressing these challenges. That means we examine behavioral barriers at every stage of the employee life cycle—from motivating individuals to apply for government jobs, to supporting them through complex hiring processes, to fostering long-term retention in mission-driven roles.

Figure 1
A behavioral approach to recruiting, retaining, and supporting government workers
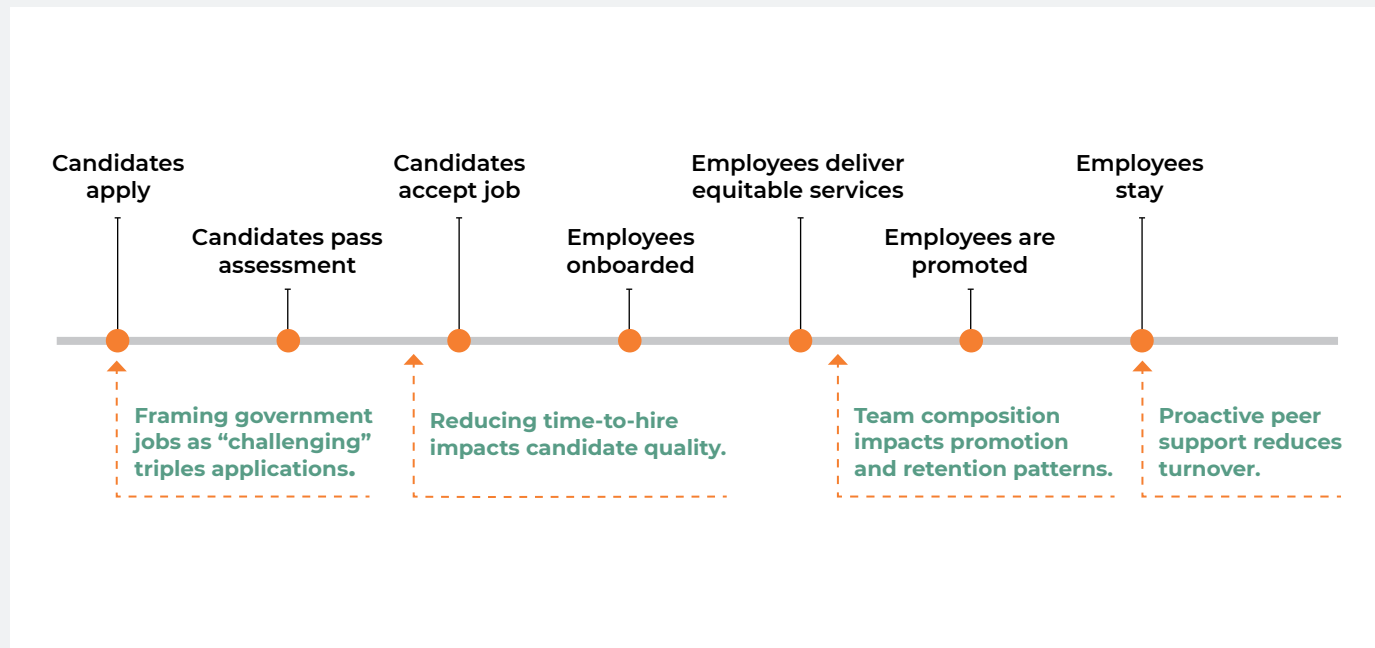
Note: Figure 1 shows the lifecycle of the public sector workforce, starting from hiring and recruitment of government workers to onboarding, promotion, and retention. Each step in the cycle entails potential behavioral bottlenecks.

While we continue to support individual agencies in addressing recruitment and retention challenges, this year we also advanced projects that tackle broadly applicable questions.

- **New paper!** One longstanding challenge in the U.S. public sector is creating effective, sustainable pathways that bring top early-career talent into government. In a **new study published in *Public Administration Review***, we evaluated four fellowship programs—Foster America, Govern For America, the Presidential Management Fellows (PMF) program, and the Public Rights Project—that place early-career professionals in federal, state, and local agencies for 18–24 months. We measured whether fellowship participation increases subsequent government service, comparing fellows to similarly motivated applicants who did not participate. The results are striking. Fellows are about 30 percentage points more likely to continue working in government after the end of their program, with statistically significant effects that persist for up to eight years. This evidence suggests that structured fellowship pathways can improve both recruitment and retention in the public sector.

- **New experiment launched!** In partnership with Aarhus University and the Danish Ministry of Health, we launched a first-of-its-kind megastudy to encourage tens of thousands of nurses to consider new roles in Denmark—supporting greater labor mobility across the European Union.

Like other megastudies, we're testing 10 different interventions against a common control group. But this project also introduces a new approach to designing interventions: Each recruitment message was selected through surveys and co-design workshops with three groups—academics, HR professionals, and nurses themselves—each representing a different form of expertise. This design allows us to test how well different experts can predict effective messaging approaches and whether this collaborative process increases the likelihood of adoption by government partners. In addition to generating evidence on how to motivate cross-border applications, this study contributes to the growing literature on how to design and scale megastudies in real-world settings. Results are expected in 2026.

How Is The People Lab Thinking About Current Challenges with the U.S. Workforce?

Cuts to the U.S. federal workforce and budget over the past six months have created unprecedented challenges across all levels of government. Professor Elizabeth Linos has helped elevate public understanding of these developments with **commentary on NPR's *Fresh Air***, a **co-authored piece with Octavia Abell in *Government Executive***, a **conversation with Michael Lewis on C-SPAN**, and **reflections for the Harvard Kennedy School**, among others.

In parallel, The People Lab is launching a series of new initiatives that respond directly to these shifting conditions:

- **Understanding and shifting stereotypes of public servants:** Through a series of surveys and survey experiments, we will (a) track trends in perceptions of public servants over time, and (b) test strategies for shifting public narratives. One current project explores whether giving residents a chance to thank government workers influences public mindsets—and improves morale among public servants themselves.

- **Building multi-agency cohorts to test "what works" to improve employee well-being:** Many state and local agencies are navigating serious budget constraints and hiring freezes, which limit the available tools for improving workforce outcomes. To support them during this critical time, The People Lab is launching multi-agency projects that will focus on employee morale and allow governments to pool resources and test promising interventions together. Our goal is to help individual agencies benefit from shared scale while contributing to field-wide learning about how to support employee well-being under these constraints.

- **Launching the first-ever national survey of city employees:** Despite their essential role in shaping resident trust, service delivery, and civic engagement, there is no national effort to systematically measure the experiences of city employees. The People Lab is launching the first-ever national survey of city workers to understand their needs, motivations, and mindsets; to track trends over time; and to generate data and benchmarks that can inform both policy and academic research.

Improving resident–government interactions

From using city parks to applying for building permits to taking the bus, people interact with the government every day—often without realizing it. These everyday experiences are not only essential to government effectiveness but also shape how residents perceive and trust public institutions. Each touchpoint is an opportunity to build—or erode—trust.

At The People Lab, we work to expand the evidence base on how to improve these interactions, particularly from a customer experience perspective. Much of our work focuses on the social safety net, where the stakes are highest for low-income families. Despite widespread need, up to 50% of eligible individuals miss out on government benefits—often due to complex processes, lack of awareness, or the stigma associated with receiving public assistance.[6, 7, 8, 9]

Through more than 20 field experiments and studies with state and local governments across the country, we have rigorously tested behaviorally informed strategies to reduce these take-up gaps. Our goal in each project is twofold: to directly improve outcomes for low-income households, and to advance our theoretical understanding of when, for whom, and how behavioral interventions can reduce administrative burdens and increase equitable access to public programs.

- **New paper!** To offset the economic consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, the government expanded the Child Tax Credit (CTC), issued multiple rounds of stimulus payments, and launched a simplified filing portal to help families claim these critical benefits. This moment created a rare opportunity to test which behavioral strategies are most effective at improving government outreach and increasing access to benefits for the most vulnerable. In collaboration with the California Policy Lab, California Department of Social Services, and Code for America, we conducted four large-scale randomized trials to evaluate the impact of outreach, messaging, and proactively offering benefits claims navigation assistance to very low-income Californians. We found that low-cost outreach strategies—such as text messages, emails, and robocalls—effectively motivated families to claim the expanded CTC and stimulus payments, resulting in millions of dollars disbursed to low-income households. These interventions were also highly cost-effective. In contrast, more intensive approaches—like outbound calls and personalized navigation support—yielded only modest improvements in take-up and were significantly more expensive. These findings suggest that to fully close take-up gaps, we must move beyond one-time outreach and explore what makes navigation assistance more effective, while also investing in long-term strategies that build durable trust between residents and government.

- **New experiment launched!** This year, we launched two large-scale randomized controlled trials to examine different aspects of the affordable housing crisis. These studies expand our work in housing policy and contribute to a growing evidence base on how to strengthen housing supports for low-income residents. With the Boston Office of Housing Stability, we are testing the effectiveness of behaviorally informed outreach aimed at connecting tenants at risk of eviction to available housing stabilization resources. We will examine the effect of outreach, as well as message content, on engagement with the communication, use of city services, and, ultimately, eviction outcomes. With the Denver Department of Housing Stability, we are evaluating the effect of Denver County's Temporary Rental and Utility Assistance program on housing stability, homelessness, evictions, and socioeconomic outcomes. Both studies are ongoing, with preliminary results expected in 2026.

How Is The People Lab Thinking About Administrative Burden and Stigma?

The People Lab has contributed substantially to the evidence base on reducing administrative burdens—particularly for low-income and vulnerable populations. But one area where the literature remains underdeveloped is in understanding the role of stigma in shaping access to government programs. While stigma has been well-documented in qualitative work, quantitative evidence has been mixed. We believe this is due, in part, to a lack of clarity about how to define and measure stigma, and how it affects not just potential beneficiaries but also public attitudes and policy design.

In response, The People Lab has launched a set of new initiatives aimed at deepening our understanding of stigma in the context of the social safety net:

■ **Developing and validating new measures of stigma:** We created and tested a new scale that captures three distinct dimensions of stigma: societal stigma, internalized stigma, and anticipated stigma. We hope this framework will serve as a public good for researchers, advocates, and practitioners seeking to design more inclusive policies and programs.

■ **Running large-scale survey experiments to study stigma and burdens:** We conducted five nationally representative survey experiments—three of which oversampled low-income populations—to measure stigma across different government programs, identify its predictors, test its causal drivers, and evaluate potential strategies to reduce it. Our findings suggest that stigma not only contributes directly to take-up gaps but may also influence how programs are designed by shaping societal tolerance for administrative burdens placed on low-income families.

■ **Contributing to international measurement efforts:** Professor Linos is serving on an expert advisory panel for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which is working to develop new tools for measuring administrative burden and "sludge" across OECD countries.
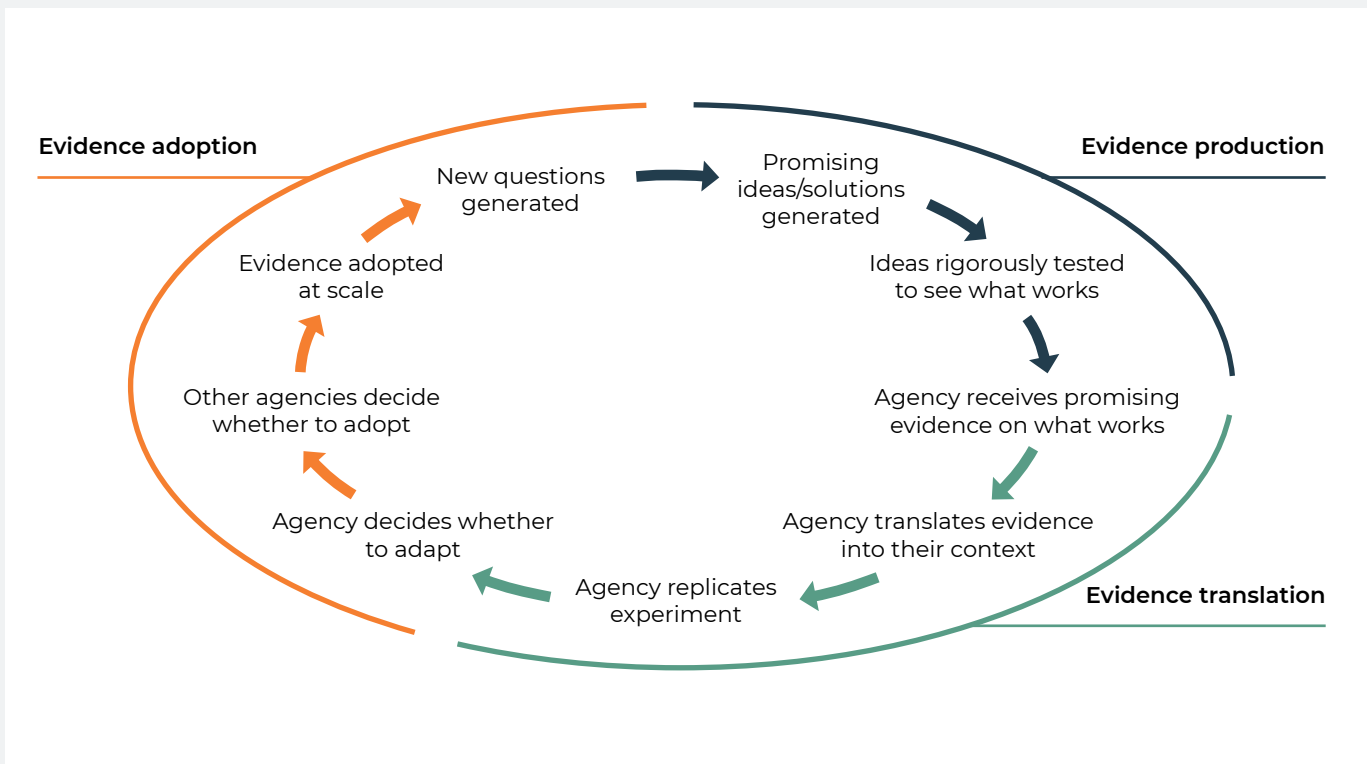
Reimagining evidence-based policy making

The promise of evidence-based policy making hinges not only on producing policy-relevant evidence but also on ensuring that evidence is ultimately adopted and taken to scale. This raises a set of critical questions: how can we ensure that evidence is *useful*, *usable*, and actually *used* by government decision makers? We view these as fundamentally behavioral questions; answering them requires rethinking the entire evidence-to-impact pipeline—from how studies are designed and implemented to how their findings move through the people, processes, and systems of government. In previous work, we identified critical **barriers and bottlenecks that limit the adoption of evidence at scale**. Our current research builds on those insights to study how to design research projects that are integrated into the everyday work of government, how to support governments in using findings under real constraints, and how to build systems for live synthesis—so that when we find what works, it is easier to disseminate, easier to use, and more likely to shape policy at scale.

Figure 2
A behavioral approach to evidence-based policy making

Evidence adoption

Evidence production

New questions generated

Promising ideas/solutions generated

Evidence adopted at scale

Ideas rigorously tested to see what works

Other agencies decide whether to adopt

Agency receives promising evidence on what works

Agency decides whether to adapt

Agency translates evidence into their context

Agency replicates experiment

Evidence translation

Note: Each step in this cycle entails potential organizational and behavioral bottlenecks that need to be better understood and overcome for evidence-based policy making to be effective.

■ **New experiments launched!** Through a series of survey experiments, we are examining how different types of decision makers weigh dimensions of evidence when deciding whether to adopt a program or policy. We are testing more than 100 possible attributes that might influence those decisions—ranging from expected effect sizes and confidence intervals to implementation costs, equity considerations, and employee buy-in. We're also exploring how to frame and present research findings in ways that capture policy makers' attention and support real-world decision making. We have found that effect sizes and statistical significance alone are rarely enough. Decision makers may prioritize attributes like feasibility, cost, or long-term impact when deciding what type of evidence to act on— yet few academic papers or policy briefs include the information needed to assess those dimensions. By identifying what matters most and how best to communicate it, we aim to improve how evidence is presented and increase the likelihood that it will be used.

- **Developing new tools for policy makers!** In collaboration with AI specialists, we are designing and piloting PolicyBot—an AI-powered tool that helps public sector decision makers quickly access, interpret, and apply relevant research to their own challenges. The tool is designed to serve two key functions: as an *assistant*, it helps users find research that matches their needs, prioritizing accuracy and surfacing the information they value most; as a *coach*, it supports users in understanding what makes evidence rigorous, credible, and appropriate for their specific context. Early prototypes will allow us to observe how users engage with evidence in real time, helping us identify gaps in information, trust, and usability. If proven effective, PolicyBot could eventually serve as a virtual research fellow embedded within government, expanding access to high-quality evidence for a much broader set of agencies and leaders.

How Is The People Lab Thinking About Taking Evidence to Scale?

The People Lab is focused on closing the persistent gap between identifying what works and ensuring that proven practices are implemented and scaled in real-world government settings. This requires more than good research—it demands systems, partnerships, and support structures that make evidence easier to adopt and sustain.

To meet this need, The People Lab is launching a set of new initiatives aimed at understanding and accelerating evidence adoption at scale:

- **Testing what helps evidence get adopted:** We are laying the foundation to launch one of the first large-scale randomized studies to test what kinds of technical support help governments adopt evidence-based practices. The findings will guide how future investments in capacity building should be structured for greater real-world impact.

- **Replicating what works across contexts:** Far too few proven programs are tested rigorously beyond the original setting in which they were developed. We are designing projects that test whether effective interventions can be replicated across different agencies, locations, and populations—so we can learn not just *whether* something works, but *when*, *where*, and *for whom* it works best.

- **Shaping the research ecosystem for scale:** We are also helping lead and convene communities of practice aimed at reshaping how researchers think about their role in driving evidence use. Specifically, we are working to build a culture and an infrastructure that allow scholars to see scale and adoption as part of their role—designing studies with implementation in mind and collaborating with government partners to ensure evidence is not only generated but used.

Our research is being used!

Beyond our academic publications, policy briefs, and white papers (all available on our website), we celebrate when our research is cited organically—by policy leaders, practitioners, and in popular media—showing that it's reaching the people who can put it into practice. For example,

- Our work on **front line worker burnout** has been cited in the **2022 Surgeon General's report on Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being**; the **2023 State of Maryland's Strategic Plan on Behavioral Health and Public Safety**, **OECD reports**, and government-oriented media including **Route Fifty**.

- Our work on **bottlenecks to evidence adoption** has been cited by the **UNDP Human Development Report**, the **OECD**, and the **Stanford Social Innovation Review**.

- Our research on the **Formality Effect** in government communications was cited in the **World Health Organization's policy briefs**, in **articles by GovTech**, and in **local governance frameworks**.

- Our research on the **effects of team racial composition on Black women's promotion and retention outcomes** was cited by the **World Bank** and widely covered in media outlets including *Forbes*, **BlackPressUSA**, and the **Huffington Post**; it reached over one million views on **social media**.

- Our research on **stigma in the social safety net** has been cited in *The New York Times* and *Forbes*, and by **New York State's Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council** and the **Wales Center for Public Policy**.

- Our research on how to **reduce take-up gaps for the Earned Income Tax Credit** (EITC) has been cited by **NPR**, **the Office of Management and Budget** (OMB), the **International Monetary Fund** (IMF), the **United Kingdom's Nesta**, and the **Institute for Fiscal Studies** (IFS).

Organizational Highlights

Our team is structured to train students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels while maintaining continuity of support for our government collaborators through a growing team of full-time staff scientists. We're so thrilled with how our team has grown over the past year:

- We've worked directly with nine undergraduates and four doctoral students from six universities (Boston College, Cornell University, Harvard University, Howard University, Macalester College, and the University of California, Berkeley).

- We welcomed a new Associate Director of Operations to strengthen our operational infrastructure and three visiting scholars to build out our policy and academic network.

- We celebrated the college graduation of three students—Amy Liu (Harvard University), Giovanny Martínez Rodríguez (Macalester College), and Ellison Richardson (Howard University)—as well as an assistant professorship for Woojin Kim (Stanford Graduate School of Business) and the launch of a Ph.D. for Karalyn Lacey (Aarhus University).

Looking ahead, our goal is to formalize a process for onboarding new research fellows and continue growing our full-time staff by hiring additional research associates and project managers who can lead new projects and expand our capacity for impact.

Thank You

Thank you to our collaborators and funders who make this work possible.

Select Collaborators:

- Boston Office of Housing Stability

- California Department of Social Services

- City of San Diego, CA

- City of Durham, NC Public Safety Departments

- 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

- Public Rights Project

Select Funders:

- Bloomberg Center for Cities at Harvard University

- Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL)

- Women and Public Policy Program (Harvard University)

- James M. and Cathleen D. Stone Program in Wealth Distribution, Inequality, and Social Policy

- Arnold Ventures

- The Hewlett Foundation

- The Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston

- The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

- Russell Sage Foundation

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