

2026



The People Lab Annual Report



HARVARD Kennedy School



The People Lab

From the Faculty Director

Friends,

The past year has brought significant challenges for both government and academia: mounting pressures on public institutions and the people who work within them, widespread funding cuts, and increasing skepticism toward science. At the same time, our work gives us reason for optimism. We continue to see public servants innovating, adapting, and serving their communities despite immense constraints. We also see a renewed interest in actionable research that can improve people's lives.

For nearly a decade, The People Lab has partnered closely with public agencies to develop and rigorously test solutions to the challenges they face. That work remains at the heart of what we do. But over the past year, it has become increasingly clear that many of the questions confronting government cannot be answered by one agency or by one project at a time. How do we rebuild a public workforce after years of disinvestment? How do we strengthen resident-state interactions at a time of declining trust in government? How do we strengthen capacity within government that enables agencies to learn from one another and accumulate knowledge over time?

Answering these questions requires investments beyond individual partnerships. It requires building shared datasets, benchmarking tools, research networks, and other public goods that allow scholars and practitioners to learn across contexts and generate cumulative evidence. It also requires investing in the next generation of researchers and practitioners who can move seamlessly between rigorous scholarship and real-world problem solving.

This year, we have therefore pursued a dual strategy: continuing to conduct rigorous research with our government partners, while simultaneously investing in the infrastructure, evidence base, and scholarly community needed to tackle these larger systemic challenges.

You'll read more about these efforts in the pages that follow. Thank you for being a part of our community.



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

Introduction

The last year has seen unprecedented attacks on both the institutions and people of government, leading to a major upheaval in how services are delivered, how residents interact with and perceive the government, and what it means to be a public servant. In this changing landscape, The People Lab is committed to continuing to generate cutting-edge research on the public sector, while also helping governments build their own internal capacity to identify what works, and why, as real-world constraints evolve.

Over the past nine years, The People Lab has collaborated with over 50 government agencies and public-interest organizations across 15 U.S. states, as well as with several international entities, to address some of the most pressing challenges facing the public sector. While we continue to expand the impact and reach of our work through direct collaboration with government agencies, this fiscal year we have also prioritized investing in field-building initiatives that go beyond individual partnerships. Through conducting a new national survey of state and local government employees, building a portfolio of work around perceptions of public servants, and developing a PolicyBot that both synthesizes evidence and supports policymakers in using evidence effectively, we aim to build the public goods and foundational knowledge needed to tackle larger systemic challenges.

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.

Our framework

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 conduct rigorous research in each of these areas. Our research is guided by the belief that investing in government infrastructure and the public sector workforce is critical for solving systemic challenges, and that academia can play a direct role in responding to these challenges, without sacrificing scientific rigor.



PILLAR 1

Strengthening the government workforce

More than 22 million public servants work across federal, state, and local governments in the United States, delivering essential services from disaster response to trash collection. Yet, we still lack systematic, high-quality evidence on what public servants experience in their work—and, critically, what it takes to recruit, retain, and support them effectively.

For decades, public agencies in the United States have faced challenges with recruiting representative workforces, high burnout and turnover, and long hiring timelines.¹ Recent federal workforce reductions and weakening of government infrastructure have compounded many of these long-standing issues, with downstream consequences for state and local agencies that rely on federal funding, expertise, and partnerships. Amid rising anti-government rhetoric and growing workforce strain, understanding what works to support and strengthen the public sector workforce is more crucial than ever.

Traditionally, The People Lab works with individual agencies to address workforce challenges 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. Over the past year, we have expanded this approach to also incorporate work on how the public views government workers—and how this, in turn, may affect workforce outcomes and the employee experience—because it has become clear that broader narratives around public servants limit large-scale and lasting public sector reform.

Through new research initiatives and publications, we aim to provide public sector leaders with timely and actionable evidence, and to shift the conversation around how to strengthen and support the government workforce.

- **Launch of the Public Servant Project and Public Servant Pulse!** The [Public Servant Project](#) is a new national hub for documenting, translating, and generating knowledge about the public sector workforce. It will present new empirical insights on the experiences and challenges of public servants, provide comprehensive and accessible data on the state of the workforce, and synthesize evidence on what works to strengthen recruitment, retention, and workplace support.

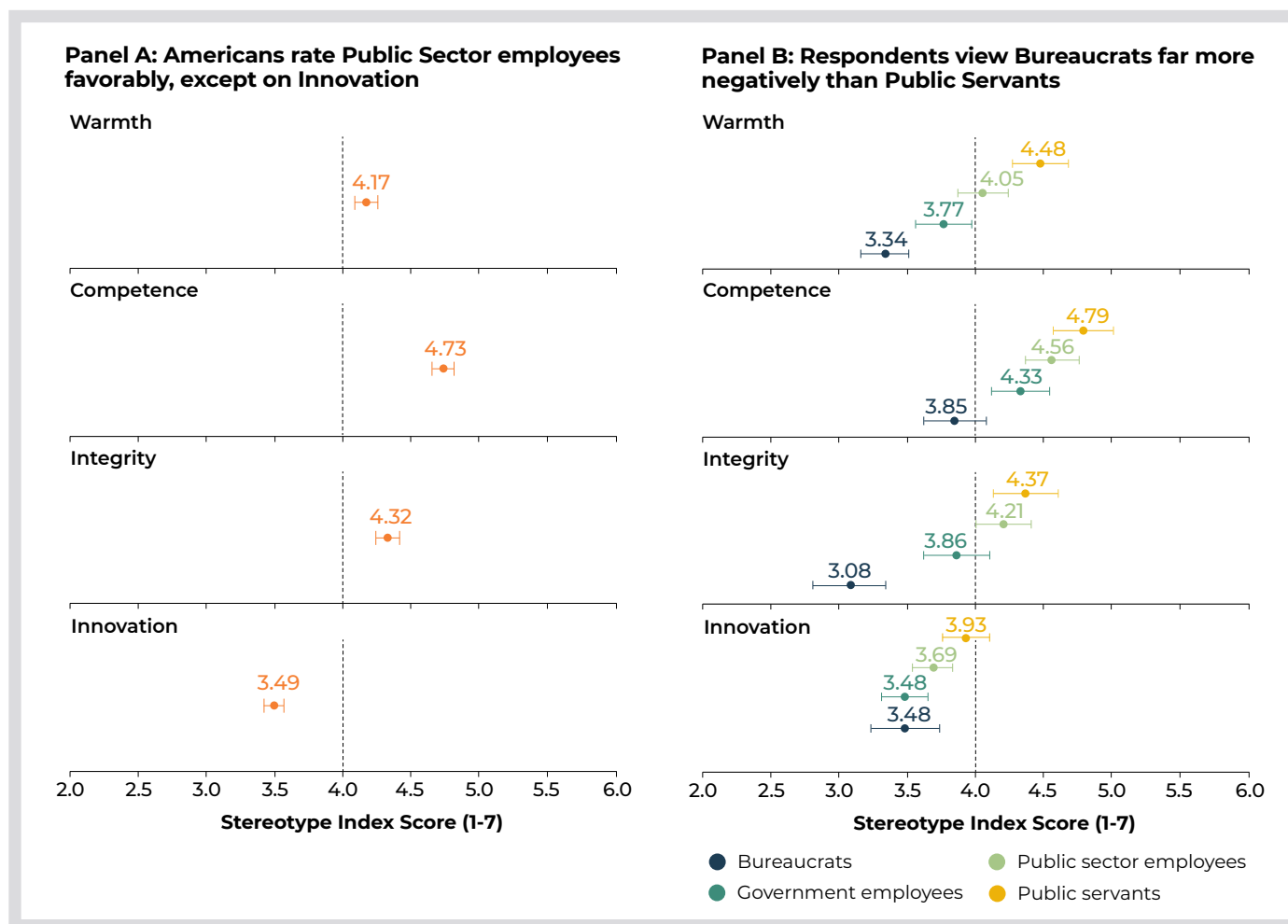
One of the project's core initiatives is [Public Servant Pulse](#)—a first-of-its-kind national survey of state and local government employees that seeks to better understand the experiences, perspectives, and challenges of U.S. public servants. By aggregating results nationwide, we will create national benchmarks for state and local workforces, giving public sector leaders a new tool to understand how their workforce compares with others nationally; identify emerging risks related to morale, retention, and service delivery; facilitate peer learning among local government leaders; and ground workforce strategies in national data and evidence-based insights. In addition to recruiting a national sample of public servants, we are also partnering with selected cities, such as Springfield, Ohio, and states, such as North Carolina, to disseminate Public Servant Pulse to their workforces. These more intensive collaborations will generate deeper, context-specific insights.

The first results are expected in fall 2026 and will be shared publicly on the Public Servant Project website, which will include an interactive tool that allows users to explore the data on their own.

- **New report on perceptions of public servants!** In December 2025, The People Lab launched Perceptions of Public Servants, a series of quarterly surveys and related survey experiments to measure stereotypes of and beliefs about public servants, as well as how and why these sentiments change. We report findings from the first set of surveys in a new white paper, [How Do Americans View Government Workers?](#) We measured Americans' stereotypes about public sector employees across four dimensions—warmth, competence, integrity, and innovation. We found that Americans hold broadly favorable views of public servants' warmth, competence, and integrity, but consistently rate them more negatively than private sector workers on the same dimensions. Stereotypes are highly polarized by party affiliation and vary by respondent characteristics and experiences. We also documented large variations in stereotypes across specific occupations, as well as the labels used to describe government workers. Importantly, stereotypes of public servants—particularly those about integrity—are strong predictors of trust in government, interest in public sector careers, and beliefs about broader government efficiency.

This work, which will continue through the next fiscal year, helps contextualize larger challenges, such as low trust in government and difficulty recruiting and retaining talented public servants, and reflects the inherent connection between government institutions, the people of government, and the communities they serve.

Figure 1
Perceptions of public servants



Note: In a series of online survey experiments, we measured stereotypes of U.S. public servants along four dimensions: warmth, competence, integrity, and innovation. Each dimension is a mean index of individual items measured on a 1 to 7 scale, where 7 reflects the most favorable view of public servants. Panel A shows averages of each dimension for public sector employees, measured among a nationally representative sample of Americans (N = 1,680). Panel B shows how stereotypes differ by label (e.g., public sector employees versus bureaucrats), measured among a separate nationally representative sample of Americans (N = 877).

■ **New working paper!** Countries across the world are facing a critical shortage of nurses, posing significant public health risks. In partnership with Aarhus University and the Danish Ministry of Health, we conducted a megastudy to encourage European nurses to consider new roles in Denmark, thereby supporting greater labor mobility across the European Union. As we report in [*What Works in International Health Worker Recruitment: A Megastudy*](#), we tested 10 different recruitment messages that were selected through a community-led intervention design process that involved academics, human resources practitioners, and nurses. Contrary to expert predictions and existing policy guidance, we found that recruitment messages emphasizing pay actually decrease engagement and subsequent applications relative to a baseline message—not because pay does not matter in job selection, but because emphasizing pay in a job ad seems to reduce message credibility and signal a less desirable job along other dimensions such as work-life balance or prosociality.



PILLAR 2

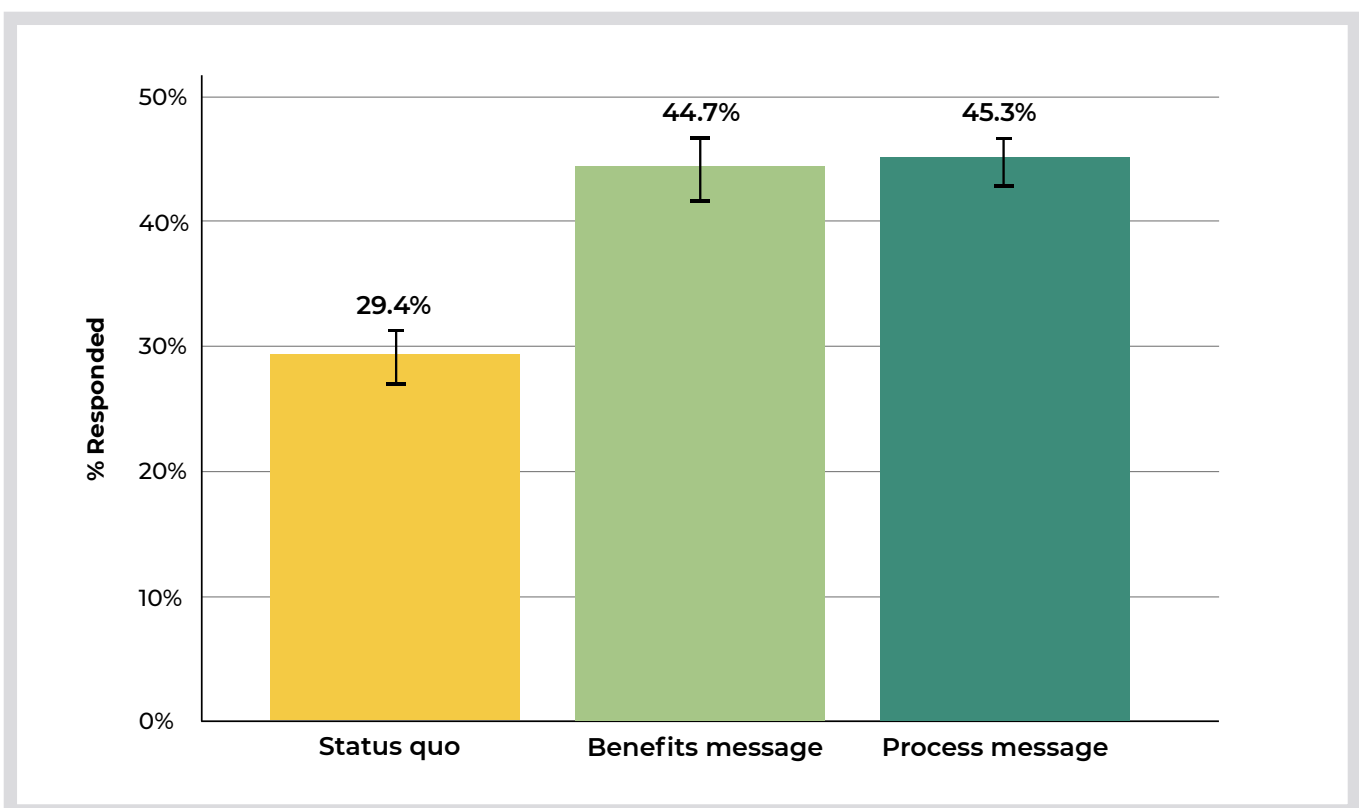
Improving resident–government interactions

Trust in government in the United States continues to decline²—reaching near historic lows in 2025. Against this backdrop, we are committed to providing evidence on how to improve the everyday interactions between people and their government and how these experiences shape trust in public institutions, as well as critical policy outcomes such as take-up of social benefits, civic engagement, and co-production of services.

Over the past nine years, The People Lab has conducted over 25 studies with government partners aimed at directly improving service delivery—especially for low-income households—while also advancing our theoretical understanding of how to reduce administrative burdens and increase equitable access to public programs. This year, we expanded this work further through new partnerships and publications.

■ **New field experiment!** More than 50 million workers in the United States do not have access to a workplace retirement savings program, exacerbating existing wealth and savings disparities. In [partnership with the Illinois State Treasurer's Office](#), we co-designed and conducted a randomized controlled trial in which we tested three different outreach messages aimed at encouraging small employers to register for Illinois Secure Choice—a state-facilitated retirement savings program. Employers in the state that do not offer qualified workplace retirement plans (e.g., 401(k) plans) and had at least five employees in the previous year must register for Illinois Secure Choice, but many businesses do not fully comply with the requirements. We found that simplified and behaviorally informed letters increase employer compliance by approximately 15 percentage points (51 percent) relative to the status quo letter. We also tested two specific messages—one that emphasized that the process of registering for Illinois Secure Choice is easy and costless, and one that emphasized the benefits of retirement savings for workers and employers alike—but found no meaningful difference in compliance rates.

Figure 2
Increasing employer compliance with state-facilitated retirement plans in Illinois



Note: In a large-scale RCT (N = 8,173), we co-designed and tested three different outreach messages with the Illinois State Treasurer's Office to encourage small businesses to comply with the requirements of the state-facilitated retirement savings program. Bars reflect the percentage of employers that took action after receiving outreach, either by registering for the program or reporting an exemption. Lines reflect 95% confidence intervals.

- **New working paper!** In a new working paper, *Stigma and the Social Safety Net*, we document how stigma may both directly and indirectly shape access to the social safety net. We started by creating and validating a new scale that captures three distinct dimensions of stigma: societal, internalized, and anticipated. Through a series of large, nationally representative surveys, we showed that stigma is significantly associated with willingness to apply for safety net benefits, and significantly associated with preferences for burdensome policies and program design features that could indirectly decrease access to benefits. In both cases, we showed that stigma explains more of the variation in policy preferences than any individual respondent characteristic, including political ideology. Notably, program design causally impacts stigma in competing ways: more expansive eligibility criteria reduce stigma, while implementation designs that would simplify access increase stigma. We hope these findings spur additional research and focus on the role of stigma as both an individual and structural barrier to social safety net participation that can also shape and be shaped by policy design choices.
- **Expansion of housing work!** In 2025, we launched a randomized evaluation of Denver County's Temporary Rental and Utility Assistance program, in collaboration with the Denver Department of Housing Stability. This fiscal year, we secured additional funding to extend the evaluation for a second year. We are on track to enroll over 14,000 households in the study, which will evaluate the effect of rental assistance on homelessness, evictions, housing stability, and socioeconomic outcomes. Preliminary results are expected in mid-2027.

This past year, we also concluded an 18-month randomized controlled trial with the Office of Housing Stability in Boston's Mayor's Office of Housing, in which we tested the effectiveness of behaviorally informed outreach aimed at connecting tenants at risk of eviction to available housing stabilization resources. Final results will not be available until spring 2027, but preliminary findings show that outreach significantly increases engagement with Office of Housing Stability services. We will track downstream effects on evictions over the next year.

Expanding our reach and impact

Beyond our academic publications, policy briefs, and white papers, our work has continued to reach a broad audience through conference presentations, technical assistance, social media, and media outlet and policy organization coverage and citations. Together, these activities reflect the growing reach of our research and its increasing influence on policy and practice.

- In the past year, members of our team have given over **50 presentations** for academic and policy audiences, including the American Heart Association, the Association for Public Policy Analysis & Management annual conference, the Boston Public Library, the Behavioral Science & Policy Association annual conference, Brown University, Cornell University, the Government of Estonia, the University of Oxford, the Public Management Research Conference, the Society for Judgment and Decision Making annual conference, and the University at Albany.
- We brought together academics and practitioners for a two-day convening to identify the most pressing challenges and priority research questions around reimagining evidence-based policymaking.
- We provided technical assistance to **eight governments** on topics that included designing communications to inform current Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program beneficiaries about upcoming policy changes; supporting A/B tests of outreach aimed at encouraging residents to use online services; redesigning communications for housing voucher recipients; developing resident surveys for library and police departments; and providing advice on workforce hiring reform.
- We reached over **4 million people** through social media and related communications around the launch of the Public Servant Project, and expanded our social media following by over **200 percent**.
- Our research has received media coverage and been cited by policy groups and think tanks in **10 countries** over the past year, including:
 - Our new research on perceptions of public servants has been covered by [*The Boston Globe*](#), the [*Harvard Kennedy School*](#), and [*Government Executive*](#).
 - Our work on [*Bottlenecks for Evidence Adoption*](#) was cited by the [*United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research*](#) and the [*Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean*](#).
 - Our research on [*increasing take-up of the Earned Income Tax Credit*](#) was cited by the Government of Spain's [*Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration*](#), the [*Urban Institute*](#), and the [*National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine*](#).



PILLAR 3

Reimagining evidence-based policymaking

Despite growing investments in evidence-based policymaking, a significant gap remains between the production of policy-relevant research and the use of evidence to impact policy. Understanding why this production-adoption gap persists and how to reduce it is essential for ensuring that the evidence-based policymaking movement meets its promise of improving societal outcomes.

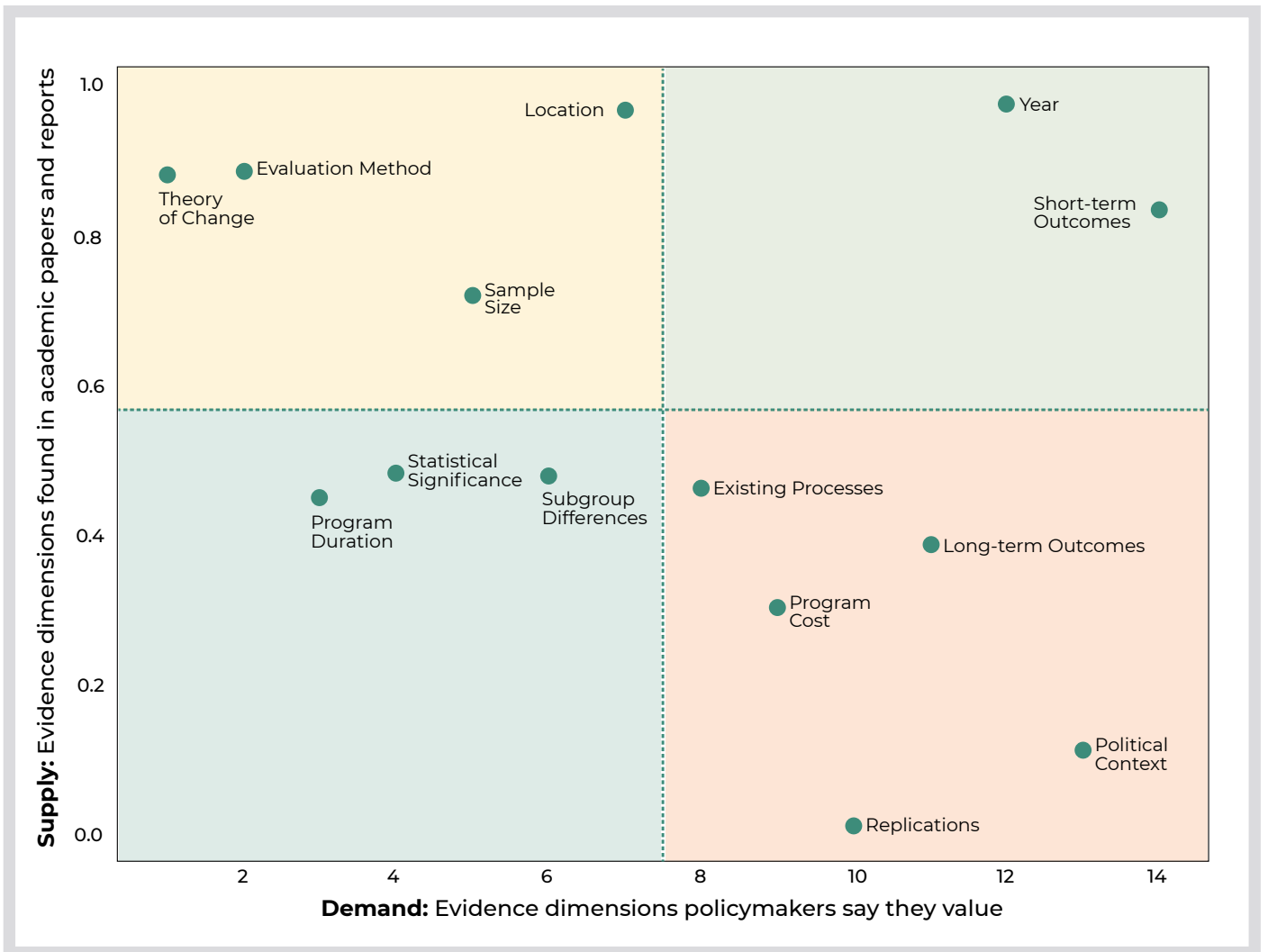
At The People Lab, we believe that we need to reconceptualize evidence adoption as a series of behavioral and organizational hurdles that determine whether evidence is *useful*, *usable*, and ultimately, *used*. Over the past year, we have focused on building out a rigorous research agenda around each stage, while still centering the governments and public servants who are tasked with using evidence under real constraints.

- **New working paper!** We collaborated with practitioners and other academics to outline a [forward-looking research agenda](#) that asks why moving from evidence production to evidence adoption remains so challenging. The paper develops a framework for conducting rigorous research on what it takes to ensure that evidence is useful, usable, and used. We highlight the behavioral and organizational bottlenecks that shape whether evidence can be adopted in practice, and identify key open questions about how to overcome them. Our goal is to encourage the field to apply the same level of rigor to understanding evidence adoption as we have brought to producing the evidence in the first place.
- **New white paper on the supply of and demand for evidence!** Policymakers are facing growing pressure to incorporate evidence into their decision-making to deliver measurable results. But are they able to find the evidence they need to make decisions? In a [new white paper](#), we show that a mismatch exists between the information that is typically reported in research papers and documents (even policy-oriented ones) and what policymakers want to know when making decisions.

First, in a large survey experiment, we measured how policymakers weigh and trade off different dimensions of a given program evaluation (e.g., cost, effects, methods), when making decisions about what to implement. We found that reported effect sizes shape policymakers' decisions more than any other factor, including statistical significance, sample size, location, and evaluation method. Political context and cost also influence decision-making more than traditional signals of rigor (e.g., sample size, method).

Using a corpus of nearly 16,000 research documents from 27 evidence clearinghouses focused specifically on evidence related to “what works” across a range of policy domains, we then examined which evidence dimensions are typically reported by researchers. We found a clear mismatch in that the most frequently reported dimensions—such as evaluation method, location, and statistical significance—are those that have the least influence on policymakers' decisions. Conversely, the dimensions policymakers look for—cost, political context, or replications—are not as commonly reported in research documents.

Figure 3
The supply of and demand for evidence



Note: The x-axis ranks the importance of different evidence dimensions in policymaker decision-making. The ranking comes from a large survey experiment (N = 1,713) in which we asked policymakers to recommend hypothetical programs for implementation, given information on 15 evidence dimensions. A dimension with rank = 1 was the most influential factor in decision-making. The y-axis is the proportion of papers from a landscape analysis of 15,995 research documents that report each evidence dimension.

- Developing and testing AI-powered tools for policymakers!** We are developing and testing PolicyBot, an AI-powered tool that both synthesizes high-quality evidence and supports policymakers in using it effectively. PolicyBot serves two complementary functions: As an *assistant*, it provides tailored answers to policy questions drawn from a curated evidence base; as a *coach*, it guides users through the strengths, weaknesses, and applicability of the evidence, helping them weigh trade-offs and assess rigor. We currently have a prototype that is being refined and tested with real users.

Looking ahead

As thrilled as we are about the progress we've made in the past year, we're even more excited about what's to come. Here are a few things on the horizon:

- **New collaborations:** We are building new partnerships with Durham, North Carolina; King County, Washington; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and San Diego, California, among others. In Durham, King County, and San Diego, we hope to co-design and evaluate strategies for supporting frontline workers, including public safety, transit, and library employees. In Minneapolis, we are working with the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority to examine the housing voucher recertification process and co-design solutions for reducing burdens on both staff and program participants.
- **New experiments on the access/fraud trade-off:** Narratives of fraud in the social safety net are increasingly being used to justify calls for imposing administrative burdens such as work requirements,³ but it is well known that these policies also negatively impact program access. Building on our portfolio of work on stigma and the social safety net, we are launching a new series of survey experiments aimed at quantifying and understanding the so-called access-fraud trade-off—the extent to which people are willing to trade off access to reduce fraud when considering burdensome policies.
- **Launching PolicyVal:** As commercial AI tools rapidly evolve, it is becoming increasingly important that we understand how to evaluate their performance. In other domains, including medicine and law, benchmarks like HealthBench⁴ and LegalBench,⁵ respectively, are used to evaluate the performance of frontier AI models on relevant policy questions (e.g., health queries). These benchmarks have become a standard method for quantifying how AI capabilities are advancing in a way that is independent of any single model or tool, but there is not yet an equivalent benchmark for the social sciences. PolicyVal will fill this gap by developing a set of benchmarks for evaluating and comparing the accuracy, grounding, and usefulness of AI tools on policy-relevant tasks across disciplines and domains.
- **New experiments on PolicyBot:** Leveraging our working prototype of PolicyBot, we are conducting survey experiments to increase effectiveness of the tool itself and to examine how it compares with traditional tools for communicating evidence. In particular, we will test how PolicyBot's presentation of information (e.g., how it communicates uncertainty) impacts trust in evidence, demand for both evidence and the tool, and willingness to use evidence. Additionally, we will evaluate the impact of PolicyBot compared to other forms of evidence communication, such as policy briefs and clearinghouses. Findings will both inform PolicyBot design and contribute generalizable evidence about what helps, and what hinders, evidence adoption.

Organizational updates



To generate high-quality, rigorous research, and maintain continuity of support for our government collaborators, our team consists of full-time research and operations staff, as well as students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Over the past year, we've been especially excited to:

- train seven undergraduates and five doctoral students from six universities (Aarhus University, Cornell University, Harvard University, Spelman College, Swarthmore College, and University of California, Berkeley),
- welcome a new Director of Operations to help build our operational infrastructure, and
- invite four visiting fellows to spend time in Cambridge to further their research and continue to strengthen our international policy and academic network.

Additionally, as of July 1, we moved to the [Taubman Center for State and Local Government](#) at the Harvard Kennedy School. The Taubman Center strives to support current and future public sector leaders, and to help develop, implement, and scale solutions at the state and local levels—a mission that is closely aligned with that of The People Lab. We're excited to continue expanding our team and our impact at our new home.

Looking ahead, we plan to (1) strengthen our internal operations capacity to ensure we can sustainably grow our team, and (2) continue to expand our impact and capacity for supporting governments by hiring additional research associates and project managers who can lead new projects, and bringing on new students to build the pipeline of future scholars trained in applied research.

Thank you



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

Select recent collaborators:

- Denver Department of Housing Stability
- Durham, North Carolina
- King Frederik Center for Public Leadership at Aarhus University
- Minneapolis Public Housing Authority
- Office of Housing Stability, Boston's Mayor's Office of Housing
- San Diego, California
- Springfield, Ohio
- State of North Carolina

Select recent funders:

- The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab
- Arnold Ventures
- Bloomberg Center for Cities at Harvard University
- Harvard Kennedy School Dean's Office
- James M. and Cathleen D. Stone Program in Wealth Distribution, Inequality, and Social Policy
- Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study
- William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
- William T. Grant Foundation
- Women and Public Policy Program of Harvard Kennedy School

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The People Lab



HARVARD Kennedy School

About The People Lab

The People Lab aims to empower the public sector by producing cutting-edge research on the people of government and the communities they serve. Using evidence from public management and insights from behavioral science, we study, design, and test strategies for solving urgent public sector challenges in three core areas: strengthening the government workforce; improving resident–government interactions; and reimagining the production and use of evidence.



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