

**Mayoral  
Accountability  
and Control**

**2023 MENINO SURVEY OF MAYORS**

SUPPORTED BY



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## INTRODUCTION

Elected officials often grapple with the gap between the policy issues within their *control*, and for those which their constituencies hold them *accountable*. For example, at the national level, voters use the national economy's performance as a critical indicator in choosing whether or not to re-elect a President (or a member of the President's party).<sup>1</sup> Yet, the President has limited control over the economy; insofar as policies they pass shape economic performance, the effects can take years to materialize.

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These accountability challenges are even more pronounced for local officials. While local governments have a wide array of powerful policy tools at their disposal, they are also buffeted by an array of external forces over which they have limited control. Indeed, a mayor cannot single-handedly shape unemployment, crime, racial wealth gaps, and homelessness — issues that all are impacted, at least in part, by national policies and broader macroeconomic trends.

Over the years of the Menino Survey, we have examined mayors' perceptions of their *control of* and *accountability for* a range of policy domains, including municipal government performance (2015 and 2023), cost of living (2022), and public health (2018 and 2022). In this report we examine how mayors view their control and accountability over a variety of elements of local government, and how these perceptions have changed in recent years. We also analyze mayoral perceptions of accountability and control over managing public disorder in their cities, and how they may shape their preferred policies for managing social disorder.

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<sup>1</sup> de Benedictis-Kessner, J. and C. Warshaw. "Accountability for the Economy at All Levels of Government in United States Elections." *American Political Science Review* 114.3 (August 2020): 660-676, <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/accountability-economy-all-levels-government-united-states-elections>

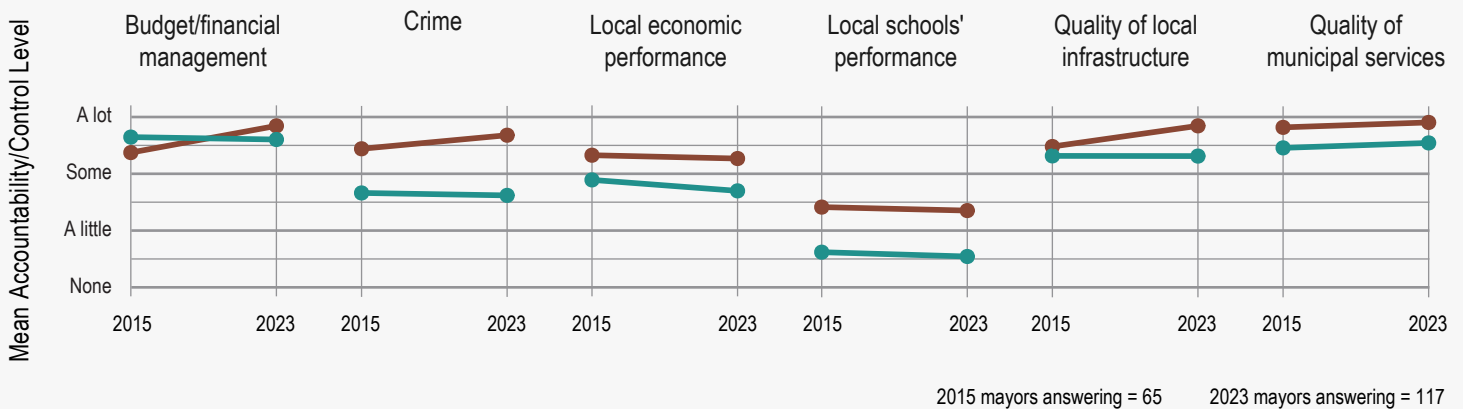


## PERCEPTIONS OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND CONTROL ACROSS A DECADE OF THE MENINO SURVEY

In 2015 and 2023, we asked mayors about their perceived levels of accountability and control on six dimensions. Figure 1 shows the average reported levels of accountability and control for each across the time period. Mayors generally see themselves as being held highly accountable by their constituents for a variety of issues, while wielding relatively little control. For example, on crime, there is more than a one-point difference on our scale for accountability and control over crime. If a mayor reports that they have “some” control over crime, they are likely to say that their constituents hold them accountable for crime “a lot.” On crime, budget/financial management, and quality of local infrastructure we find statistically significant differences in the reported level of perceived constituent accountability from 2015 to 2023; in all three areas, mayors in 2023 are more likely to describe themselves as being held accountable than in 2015. However, mayors do not report any meaningful changes in their levels of control over this period.

**Figure 1. Perceived Levels of Accountability and Control**

- As mayor, how much do your constituents hold you accountable for each of the following areas?
- As mayor, how much control do you have over each of the following areas?



We see significant differences in the gap between perceived accountability and control across these policies and social issues. Perhaps unsurprisingly, mayors perceive the largest gaps when asked about local schools' performance and crime. Most mayors do not control their local school systems, which are instead governed by separate school boards. Few constituents, however, are aware of the complexity of overlapping local jurisdictions shaping local policy. For example, one mayor noted that their constituents did not understand that their city was a “weak mayor” institutional structure, with limited mayoral authority over a variety of policy areas. Consequently, mayors may believe themselves to be held accountable for the performance of an institution over which they exert little or no direct control.

Similarly, local crime is highly visible to constituents; residents may believe that mayors, through their administrative control over the police, can shape local crime rates. While public policy choices certainly impact crime, it is also driven, like so many issues, by broader social and economic forces outside the control of local



government. One midwestern mayor noted, “I say that we have little to no control on crime and behavior because so much of it is based on humanity, which we obviously can’t control. We adequately fund them, we provide mental health services, we provide community-based policing and school resource officers. But we had a homicide just yesterday, and it was a drug deal gone bad. We’ve arrested this guy ten times before and the criminal justice system let him out early and he killed someone. I have no control over the criminal justice system. I’m in charge of the cops. So, there’s a lot of pieces to crime, of which policing is just one of them. So that’s just one small piece of the pie that a mayor really has responsibility for.” Another mayor challenged the notion that their office had control over the police: “I don’t directly oversee police. When there’s a shooting, for example, goes to DA’s Office. I have less legal control.” As with schools, when it comes to crime, mayors believe that they are rewarded or punished for a social issue on which they can have a limited impact.

We find little variation in perceived levels of accountability and control across different types of cities and mayors. Most notably, we might expect mayors in strong mayor cities to have more control and accountability than weak mayors in council-manager cities. However, we do not find such differences. Mayors report the same levels of control and constituent accountability regardless of government structure.

## HOMELESSNESS AND PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC DISORDER

One of the areas where we consistently find the biggest gaps between accountability and control is on addressing homelessness. Homelessness — especially unsheltered homelessness — is a growing crisis in many American cities.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, in cities where a large share of the homeless population is unsheltered, it is a highly visible issue, which brings associated problems like public drug use and urination. These challenges may lead members of the public to perceive high levels of public disorder. Indeed, in response to an open-ended question about mental health challenges in their cities, a striking number of mayors raised unsheltered homelessness and associated perceived public disorder. One mayor noted that “*mental health comes up*” as a policy challenge because of homelessness and its associated challenges. Another mayor connected mental health struggles with “*homelessness and public disruption*.” One mayor observed that their city did not have high levels of visible mental health struggles because “*We’re very intolerant of homelessness. We don’t have people like in San Francisco taking over our city, like with drugs or what have you in Portland, Oregon, or anything else.*”

In 2021, we asked mayors about their perceived accountability for and control over this issue. Seventy-three percent of mayors believe that constituents hold them “a great deal” or “a lot” accountable, but only 19 percent report having “a great deal” or “a lot” of control [Figure 2]. Seventy percent of mayors reported a higher level of perceived accountability than control; only six percent reported a higher level of control than of accountability.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the interrelated nature of the issues, mayors also see a large gap in accountability and control when it comes to public disorder. In 2023, we asked mayors about their levels of accountability and control over this issue. Only 40 percent of mayors reported having “a lot” or “some” control over disruptive behavior in public spaces, but 81 percent reported having “a lot” or “some” accountability on this issue.

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2 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. “The 2023 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress: Part 1: Point-In-Time Estimates Of Homelessness.” Office Of Community Planning And Development (Dec. 2023) via <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2023-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>

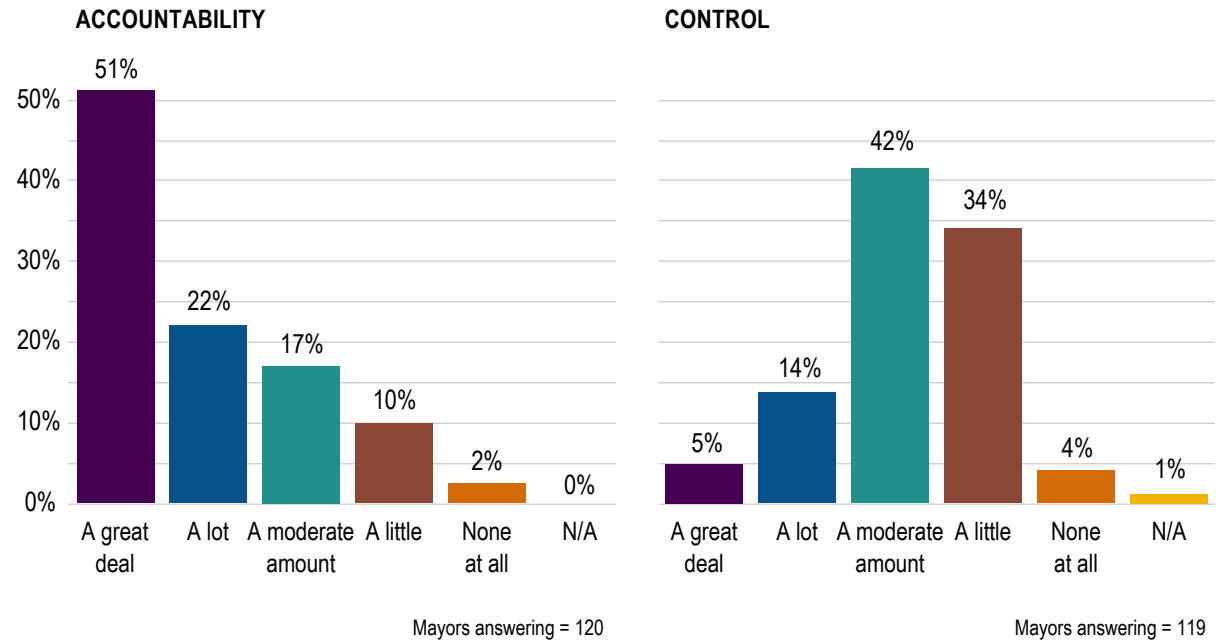




**Figure 2. Perceived Accountability for and Control over Homelessness**

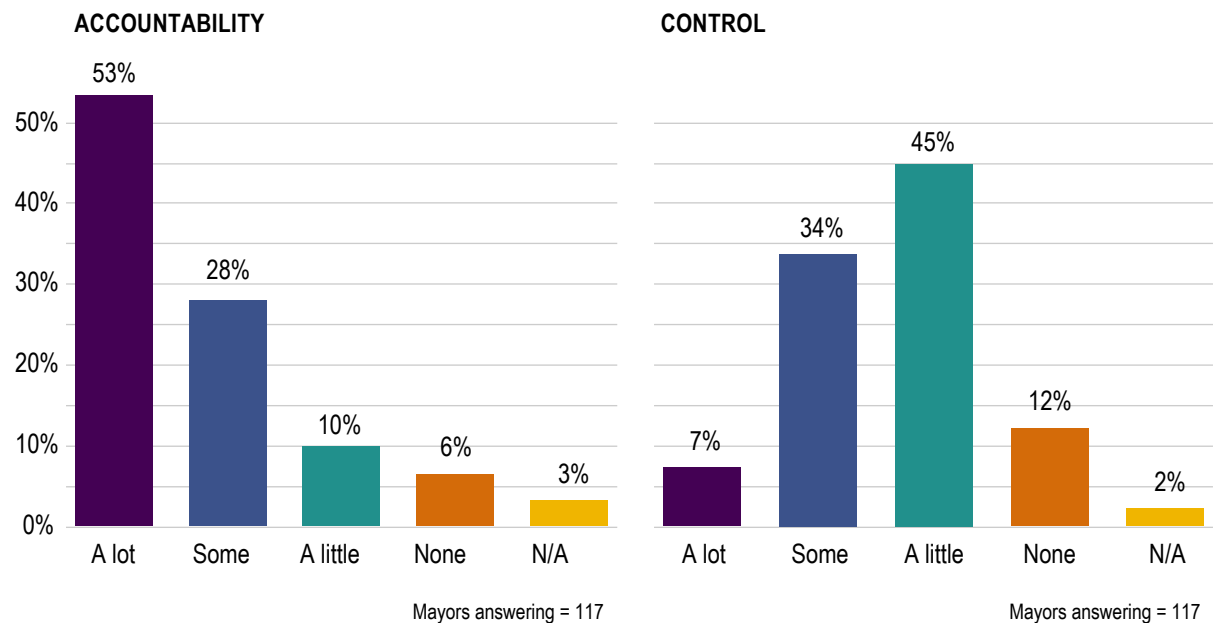
*How much do your residents hold you accountable for addressing homelessness in your city?*

*How much control do you have over addressing homelessness in your city?*



**Figure 3. Perceived Accountability and Control over Public Disorder Issues**

*As mayor, how much control do you have over outcomes in each of the following areas? [Disruptive behavior in public spaces]*



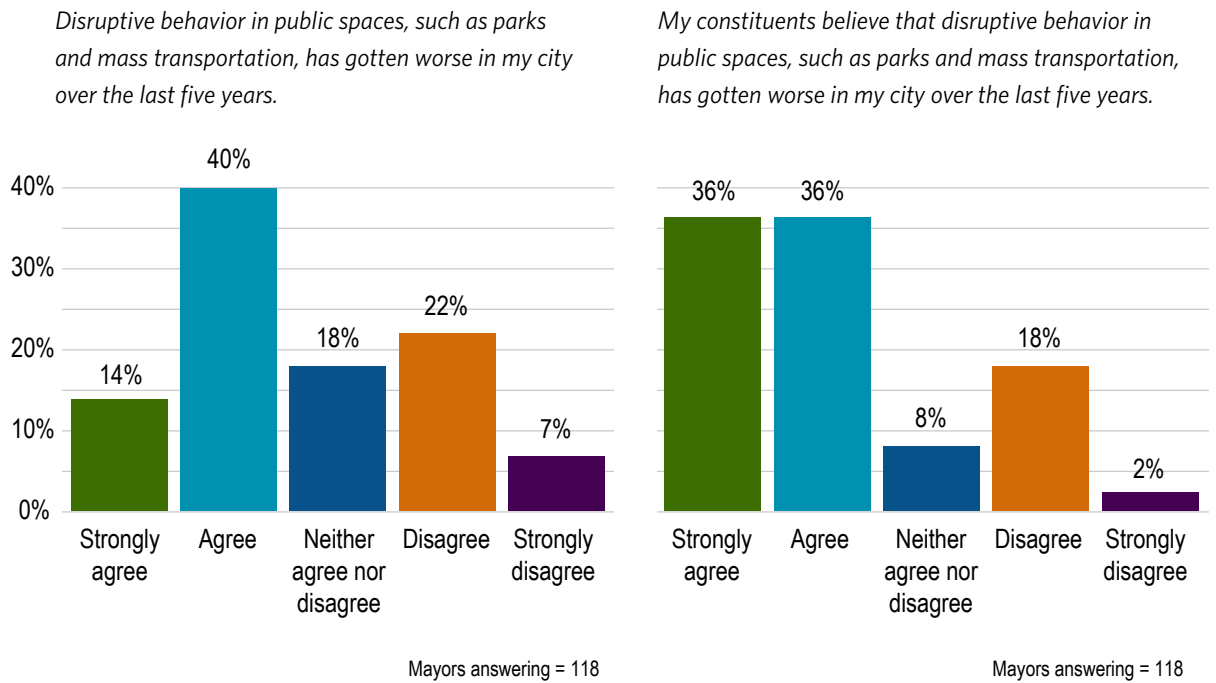


Republican mayors were more likely to report having “a lot” or “some” control (59 percent) compared to Democratic mayors (38 percent). However, Democratic mayors reported higher levels of “a lot” or “some” accountability (84 percent) compared to Republicans (68 percent).

Part of this sizable gap in views of accountability and control may stem from mayors and constituents perceiving the prevalence of public disorder differently. Slightly more than half of the mayors we interviewed agreed that public disorder in their cities has gotten worse over the past five years. However, more than 70 percent of mayors agreed that their constituents believed that public disorder has gotten worse. This perception mismatch is substantial: among the mayors who disagreed that public disorder had gotten worse, one-third said their constituents believed it had gotten worse. In contrast, among the mayors who agreed that public disorder had gotten worse, all but one thought their constituents shared that perception.

**Figure 4. Perceived Prevalence of Public Disorder in City**

*Please rate how strongly you agree/disagree with the following statement.*



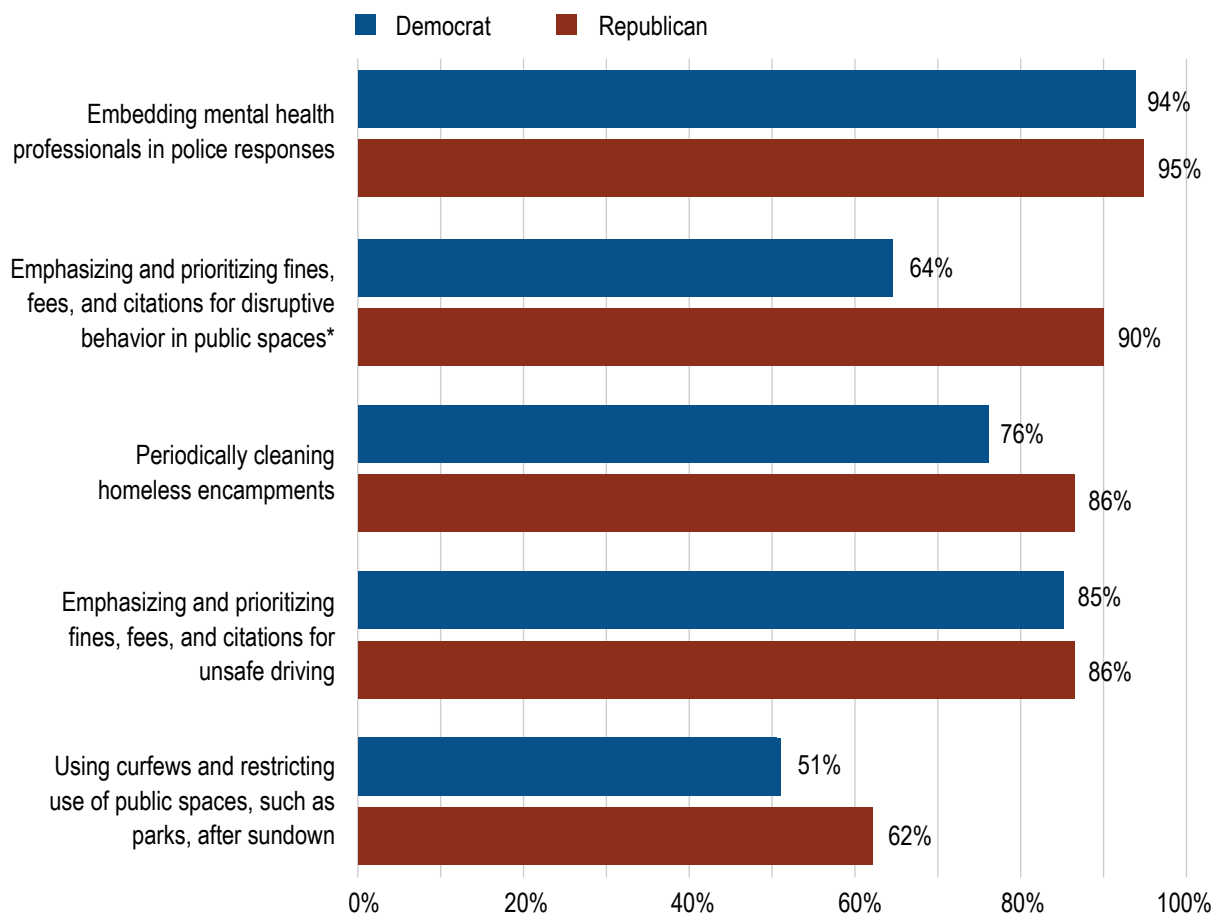
How do mayors approach the challenges associated with unsheltered homelessness and public disorder in a context where they believe that they have little control — and where their perceptions of the problem may differ substantially from their constituents? We also asked mayors about five different potential strategies to maintain public order: embedding mental health professions in police responses; policing disruptive behavior in public spaces; clearing homeless encampments; policing unsafe driving; and using curfews or restrictions on public spaces at night. A majority of all mayors agreed with the inclusion of all five strategies for maintaining public order. Republican mayors were more supportive of using all of these strategies than Democrats, but at least half of Democratic mayors agreed with all of the strategies as well. Large majorities of Democratic mayors (76 percent) and Republican



mayors (86 percent) agreed with periodically clearing homeless encampments. The greatest partisan difference was on disruptive behavior in public spaces using fines, fees, and citations, where 64 percent of Democratic mayors and 91 percent of Republican mayors agreed with this strategy. Overall, though, there is strong bipartisan support for more punitive measures targeting public disorder.

**Figure 5. Potential Strategies to Maintain Public Order**

*Please rate how strongly you agree/disagree with the following statements. Part of a city’s strategy to maintain public order should include:*



\*Such as urinating in public parks or drug use on mass transportation

Mayors answering = 117





## CONCLUSION

Mayors believe their constituents hold them accountable for a wide array of economic and policy outcomes. Yet, for many of those areas, mayors also believe that they have little control. In no policy area is that gap bigger than in homelessness and public disorder. Mayors see themselves as being held highly accountable for outcomes in those arenas, despite having little control. They also, in many cases, believe that their perceptions of the prevalence of public disorder differ significantly from their constituents'. In this policy context, they are largely supportive, across party lines, of policies that punitively target public disorder and behaviors associated with unsheltered homelessness.

## METHODOLOGY

First initiated in 2014, the Menino Survey of Mayors is an annual project to understand the most pressing needs and policy priorities of America's mayors. We invite mayors of all cities over 75,000 residents to participate and each mayor receives an invitation at their official email account, as well as follow-up phone calls. The vast majority of interviews are conducted in person or over the phone. Mayors' responses and participation remain anonymous, to ensure they can speak freely about a wide range of issues. Each year, the sample of participating cities closely mirrors the broader population on traits including size, racial demographics, housing prices, and geographic distribution. In 2023, we spoke with 118 mayors between June and September about a variety of topics ranging from land use and permitting, to clean energy and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), to government accountability and control.

## Boston University Initiative on Cities

To learn more about the Menino Survey of Mayors, visit [surveyofmayors.com](https://surveyofmayors.com)

The Boston University Initiative on Cities leads research in, on, and with cities in pursuit of sustainable, just, and inclusive urban transformation. We marshal the talents and resources of wide-ranging disciplines across Boston University spanning the social, natural, computational, and health sciences. The Menino Survey is named for the late Mayor Tom Menino, who co-founded the Initiative on Cities in 2014 following 20 years as Mayor of Boston.