

# Local Government Capacity in Legacy Cities

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## Summary

This report explores the defining characteristics and persistent challenges of local governments in the legacy cities of the northeastern and Midwestern United States. Once thriving industrial hubs, these cities have suffered decades of population loss, economic disinvestment, and decline in stature. A central focus of the report is the issue of limited local government capacity, which impedes effective service delivery, innovation, and long-term revitalization. The report analyzes contributing factors such as fragmentation, staffing shortages, and technological gaps, and proposes solutions rooted in cross-sector leadership, collaborative governance, university partnerships, digital modernization, and federal support. It advocates for institutional reforms that can equip legacy city governments to meet the demands of the 21st century.

## Introduction

Cities have long stood as engines of civilization, cultural innovation, and economic exchange. As centers of population, infrastructure, and capital, cities increasingly shape global trends and national fortunes. Beyond their modern influence, cities are, at their roots, social and economic entities.<sup>1</sup> They represent a form of human organization grounded in collective activity, dense labor markets, and complex social networks. The change of the state of the American city over time, how it may rise, transform, and decline, reflects broader shifts in economic and governmental structure.

In many cities, especially smaller and economically distressed ones, the ability to craft and respond to these shifts has been constrained by limited local government capacity. As responsibilities for service delivery and economic development increasingly fall to local governments, many legacy cities lack the financial resources, technical expertise, and administrative personnel needed to adapt.

In academic literature pertaining to American cities, the concept of “legacy cities” has emerged as a unique category. While there is ongoing debate about the precise definition of a legacy city,<sup>2</sup> a general consensus defines them as a subset of distressed cities marked by persistent population loss over the last several decades.<sup>3</sup> Webster and Tighe define the legacy city category as “shrinking, Rust Belt, or post industrial cities... that have experienced sustained population loss and economic contradiction.”<sup>4</sup> Geographically, most legacy cities are concentrated in the northeast and Midwest regions of the United States. Many of them fall within the classification

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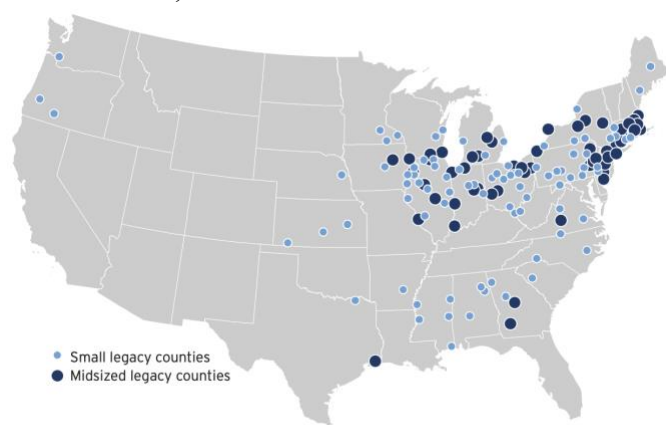
<sup>1</sup> Alan Mallach and Lavea Brachman, “The Condition of America’s Legacy Cities,” in *Finding New Forms for America’s Legacy Cities* (Cambridge, MA: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Mallach and Brachman, “The Condition of America’s Legacy Cities,” 6.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Mallach and Lavea Brachman, *Mapping America’s Legacy Cities: A Look at the Industrial Heartland* (New York: The J. Max Bond Center on Design for the Just City, City University of New York, December 2015), 74.

<sup>4</sup> Stephanie Ryberg-Webster and J. Rosie Tighe, “Introduction: The Legacies of Legacy Cities,” in *Legacy Cities: Continuity and Change amid Decline and Revival*, ed. Stephanie Ryberg-Webster and J. Rosie Tighe (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), 3–18.

of “small” and “midsize,” defined as cities with populations between 30,000 and 200,000 that were once economic engines for the middle class.<sup>5</sup> These are not college towns or suburban satellites of larger metropolitan areas, but distinct entities shaped by their own histories and infrastructures.<sup>6</sup> Their economies were built on manufacturing industries that provided accessible, unionized jobs for immigrants and rural migrants alike, offering pathways to upward mobility. In 1970, roughly 34 percent of jobs in legacy counties were in manufacturing. By 2016, this number had dropped to fewer than 11 percent.<sup>7</sup> This job reduction resulted in legacy cities losing between 20 to 60 percent of peak 1940-1970 era population numbers between 1970 and 2010.<sup>8</sup> Many of these cities failed to replace lost industrial employment with new jobs, adding jobs at a pace lower than the national average.<sup>9</sup> The loss of a core economic base has proven extremely difficult to overcome. These demographic changes and devastating losses in the job market are often accompanied by suburbanization and significant public disinvestment.<sup>10</sup> Patterns of segregation and racial exclusion persist.<sup>11</sup> Legacy cities now house a higher percentage of the nation’s poorest and least advantaged residents as compared to the region overall.<sup>12</sup> The term “legacy” captures not just a city’s past vitality, but also the lingering consequences of economic transitions that have left it behind. Although the severity of the decline varies, the trend remains consistent across many such places.



Source: Brookings analysis of Moody's and U.S. Census Bureau data

As these cities struggle economically, they must also confront the social effects of prolonged decline. In many cases, they experience a “brain drain” as younger, college-educated residents

<sup>5</sup> Torey Hollingsworth and Alison Goebel, *Revitalizing America's Smaller Legacy Cities: Strategies for Postindustrial Success from Gary to Lowell* (Cambridge, MA: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy and Greater Ohio Policy Center, 2017), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Hollingsworth and Goebel, *Revitalizing America's Smaller Legacy Cities*, 8

<sup>7</sup> Berube, *Small and Midsize Legacy Communities*, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Mallach and Brachman, *Mapping America's Legacy Cities*, 19.

<sup>9</sup> Berube, *Small and Midsize Legacy Communities*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Berube, *Small and Midsize Legacy Communities*, 19.

<sup>11</sup> Berube, *Small and Midsize Legacy Communities*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Mallach and Brachman, *Mapping America's Legacy Cities*, 45.

leave for opportunities elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> This demographic trend drains not only talent but also civic leadership and innovation. This stage has left a damaging feedback loop on legacy cities that undermines local government capacity. As skilled workers leave in search of better opportunities, population and economic activity decline, shrinking the city's tax base. With fewer resources, governments struggle to provide services, which further drives out remaining talent and deepens the cycle of decline. While most of the research focus on the decline of these legacy cities has been on private/ industrial factors, relatively little attention has been paid to the impact of local government capacity on the functioning of these cities.

Understanding the challenges facing legacy cities requires moving beyond economic statistics to examine the structural and institutional barriers that hinder their recovery. Revitalizing these communities demands more than just recognizing their decline, it requires addressing the capacity of local governments tasked with leading their recovery. Despite their proximity to the challenges at hand, many local governments in legacy cities lack the resources, staffing, and institutional strength necessary to respond effectively. As the next section explores, the issue of limited local government capacity, rooted in fragmentation, outdated systems, and human capital constraints, represents one of the most critical barriers to progress for legacy communities today.

### **The Issue: Limited Local Government Capacity**

A key challenge facing legacy cities today is the issue of limited local government capacity. Local governments in these communities are often expected to do more with less, and they frequently lack the staffing, institutional strength, and technology needed to respond effectively. Local governments play a critical role in addressing the everyday challenges that affect American communities, and surveys show they are consistently more trusted by citizens than their state or federal counterparts.<sup>14</sup> In fact, many argue that local governments are better equipped to respond to specific, place-based challenges and deliver results efficiently.<sup>15</sup> Yet despite this public trust and practical importance, local governments across the country are experiencing a growing crisis of capacity and effectiveness. While some scholars see local government as an independent and vital part of democratic governance, others note that it is often treated as subordinate and under-resourced.<sup>16</sup> This mismatch between expectations and resources has left many municipalities struggling to translate policy goals into action, a broader symptom of what some describe as a national “capacity” crisis.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Berube, *Small and Midsized Legacy Communities*, 18.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce J. Perlman, “The Illusion of Local Control: The Paradox of Local Government Home Rule,” *State & Local Government Review* 48, no. 3 (2016): 190.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Hendrix, “The Case for Local Government,” Manhattan Institute, March 4, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Perlman, “The Illusion of Local Control,” 189.

<sup>17</sup> Niskanen Center, “The State Capacity Crisis,” October 1, 2018.

## Staffing

Many legacy cities face the growing difficulty to recruit and retain qualified staff.<sup>18</sup> The vacancy-to-hire ratio in local government is nearly two and a half times that of the private sector,<sup>19</sup> and local governments often cannot compete with the private sector in terms of compensation and career development opportunities.<sup>20</sup> Between March 2020 and March 2022, local government employment declined by more than 300,000 workers.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, another report found that out of 17 answer options for the question, “looking ahead, which workforce issues are important to your organization?” over 80% of those surveyed answered “recruitment/retention of qualified personnel with needed skills for public service.”<sup>22</sup> This labor shortage threatens municipalities’ abilities to perform essential functions and deliver services to residents.

Deeper organizational challenges, such as compromised workplace standards, also exist within local governments. Findings report that 30% of respondents in a survey amongst local government workers answered that individuals working within their governments were acting “without integrity.”<sup>23</sup> Local government employees also expressed frustration towards board inaction and the board struggling to make legislative decisions or passing policy.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, workforce instability is worsened by uncertainty around employee financial preparedness. 43% of respondents answered “No” when asked if they felt their employees were financially ready for retirement.<sup>25</sup> The local government workforce is also aging. In 2019, 37 percent of employees in local government were at least 50 years of age, compared to just 28 percent in the private sector.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, only 8 percent of government employees are under the age of 30.<sup>27</sup> These issues are especially acute in legacy cities, where amenities that attract young professionals are often lacking, leading many to leave in search of better opportunities.<sup>28</sup> As a result, local

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<sup>18</sup> Hendrix, “The Case for Local Government.”

<sup>19</sup> Bob Lavigna, “Attracting and Retaining Talent in City Government: Become a Great Place to Work,” National League of Cities, October 21, 2024.

<sup>20</sup> KPMG Australia, *The Future of Local Government* (August 2021). Roland Dillon, Julia Klier, Megan McConnell, and Cedric Vandamme, “Shaping Tomorrow’s Talent Agenda for the Public Sector,” McKinsey & Company, March 21, 2024.

<sup>21</sup> National League of Cities, “Municipal Workforce Labor Shortage,” in *Improving Opportunities and Boosting Economic Mobility*, December 13, 2022, accessed July 22, 2025

<sup>22</sup> MissionSquare Research Institute (formerly Center for State and Local Government Excellence), *State and Local Government Workforce: 2017 Trends* (June 2017): 8.

<sup>23</sup> Lauren Dula, Maja Husar Holmes, Willow S. Jacobson, and Kristina T. Marty, “When Things Go Off the Rails: Leadership Derailment in Local Government,” *State and Local Government Review* 54, no. 4 (July 2022): 366.

<sup>24</sup> Dula et al., “When Things Go Off the Rails,” 367.

<sup>25</sup> MissionSquare Research Institute, *State and Local Government Workforce*, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Lauren Girardin, “Supporting an Aging Government Workforce with Mentoring and Offboarding,” *NEOGOV Blog*, October 5, 2018, accessed July 22, 2025.

<sup>27</sup> Zina Hutton, “How Local Government Can Recruit and Retain the Gen Z Workforce,” *Governing*, October 30, 2023, accessed July 22, 2025

<sup>28</sup> Hollingsworth and Goebel, *Revitalizing America’s Smaller Legacy Cities*, 12.

governments face aging workforces and persistent struggles to attract good candidates.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, nearly 80 percent of new jobs are now created in suburbia, pulling talent and investment away from urban cores.<sup>30</sup> These staffing and capacity issues not only undermine service delivery but also weaken trust in government. Many local governments also face strong pressures to privatize essential services, a trend that can further undermine internal capacity and accountability.<sup>31</sup>

### ***Fragmentation***

Fragmentation significantly undermines local government capacity by dispersing authority across multiple jurisdictions, creating inefficiencies and barriers to coordinated action. While dividing policymaking responsibilities among various governmental units can limit concentrated power and encourage competition and innovation, sometimes state or federal action can unintentionally burden local governments.<sup>32</sup> This is especially problematic when authority is split both horizontally across neighboring local governments and vertically among federal, state, and local agencies, resulting in increased costs, duplicated efforts, and intergovernmental conflict.<sup>33</sup> These dynamics give rise to what Feiock describes as functional collective action problems, where the interconnectedness of services, policies, and resource systems means that decisions in one area inevitably impact others, making coordinated governance difficult.<sup>34</sup> Although city-county consolidation has been proposed as a structural solution, such efforts have failed in most U.S. cases, leaving fragmentation largely unaddressed.<sup>35</sup> There have been at least 31 failed attempts at consolidations from 1990 to 2006, in part because transaction costs, such as coordination fees, increase with consolidation.<sup>36</sup> This suggests that mergers aren't a dependable solution for fragmentation, and the issue must be addressed through more politically feasible and adaptive mechanisms. In legacy cities, where capacity is already constrained, this fragmentation exacerbates inefficiencies, dilutes accountability, and impedes the implementation of coherent, large-scale solutions.

### ***Technology***

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<sup>29</sup> Bruce J. Perlman, "Governance Challenges and Options for State and Local Governments," *State & Local Government Review* 42, no. 3 (2010): 252.

<sup>30</sup> Steven Hayward, *Broken Cities: Liberalism's Urban Legacy*, Hoover Institution, accessed July 10, 2025.

<sup>31</sup> Mildred E. Warner, "The Future of Local Government: Twenty-First-Century Challenges," *Public Administration Review* 70, no. s1 (2010): s145–47,

<sup>32</sup> Richard C. Feiock, "Metropolitan Governance and Institutional Collective Action," *Urban Affairs Review* 44, no. 3 (January 2009): 356.

<sup>33</sup> Feiock, "Metropolitan Governance," 357.

<sup>34</sup> Feiock, "Metropolitan Governance," 358.

<sup>35</sup> Feiock, "Metropolitan Governance," 361.

<sup>36</sup> Rae W. Archibald and Sally Sleeper, "City-County Consolidations: History and Theoretical Rationales," in *Government Consolidation and Economic Development in Allegheny County and the City of Pittsburgh*, 1st ed. (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), 5, 11.

Local governments also frequently struggle to adopt efficient technologies. For decades, local governments have not kept up with evolving organizational structures, technologies, and operational approaches, especially in legacy cities.<sup>37</sup> In the words of Kimberly Roy Wilson, Director of the Office of Information technology and services for city of Cleveland, “local governments have had challenges in the past with regard to funding and the ability to adapt to technology because technology moves so fast.”<sup>38</sup> Being behind technologically means that local governments aren’t always equipped with the tools to conduct evaluations of the efficacy of their programs, search for reliable evidence about program evaluation, and implement evidence-based programs that have the highest chances of improving outcomes.<sup>39</sup> Work to evaluate data and policies takes the back seat to keeping up with immediate needs. In fact, 59% of local governments surveyed in a recent study cited “lack of time for rigorous evaluations” as a key obstacle to innovation.<sup>40</sup> Inefficient workflows due to outdated technology prevent the adoption of more effective programs.<sup>41</sup> Outdated technology not only hinders the efficiency of government operations but also exposes municipalities to significant cybersecurity risks. For example, in 2019, officials in La Porte County, Indiana, agreed to pay \$130,000 in bitcoin to dark web actors who had hacked their network.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, 44% of global ransomware attacks that took place in 2020 were aimed at municipalities.<sup>43</sup>

These challenges illustrate how limited local government capacity in legacy cities is not simply a matter of funding shortfalls or staff shortages, but a deeper, structural issue rooted in fragmentation, outdated systems, and a lack of institutional support for innovation. Despite being well-positioned to address local needs, these governments are constrained by systemic inefficiencies that limit their ability to adapt and deliver effective services. Without deliberate investment in human capital, technological infrastructure, and intergovernmental coordination, the local governments of legacy cities will continue to struggle with translating policy goals into meaningful, on-the-ground outcomes. This failure to implement solutions reinforces public distrust and that further harms local capacity and revitalization of these cities.

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<sup>37</sup> David Nuzum, Drew Erdmann, Sarah Tucker-Ray, and Trey Childress, “Capturing Performance Opportunities in U.S. State and Local Governments,” McKinsey & Company, April 25, 2025,

<sup>38</sup> Heather Dailey, “Public Sector Podcast: Ohio’s Local Government: Challenges and Opportunities in Innovation and Technology,” *Public Sector Network* (podcast episode), May 5, 2025, accessed July 22, 2025.

<sup>39</sup> Roseanna Ander, Laura Feeney, Anna Harvey, Elizabeth Linos, and Evan White, *Policy Experiment Stations to Accelerate State and Local Government Innovation* (Federation of American Scientists, July 11, 2024).

<sup>40</sup> Ander et al., *Policy Experiment Stations*.

<sup>41</sup> Ander et al., *Policy Experiment Stations*.

<sup>42</sup> Lauren Becker, “La Porte County Pays \$130,000 in Bitcoin as Ransom to Hackers,” *WSBT 22 News*, July 12, 2019, updated July 13, 2019, accessed July 22, 2025

<sup>43</sup> *Infosecurity Magazine*, “Local Government Targeted,” August 27, 2020, accessed July 22, 2025



## Addressing The Issue

### *Leadership*

To address these issues, key solutions must be examined. Strong, cross-sectoral leadership is essential for reversing these trends and supporting revitalization.<sup>44</sup> As the ICMA notes, while few quantitative tools exist to assess governance performance, effective leadership is often reflected in a leader's ability to resolve conflict, build trust, and lead a cohesive team.<sup>45</sup> This emphasis on leadership qualities aligns with the model of the professional city manager, an apolitical administrator whose primary responsibility is to ensure effective governance and service delivery. Cities that employ the city manager position have an administrator who doesn't play a role in policymaking, instead focusing on day to day operations.<sup>46</sup> This system allows cities to plan beyond election cycles and prioritize service over partisanship.<sup>47</sup> New Rochelle, NY has this system in place, leveraging its speed to approve an unprecedented 11,000 new housing units since 2015.<sup>48</sup> More legacy cities may find similar success in implementing this role within their governments.

Addressing these deep-rooted issues, such as the disconnect between governance and accountability, administrative capture, and rigid fiscal constraints, is key to unlocking the full potential of local government.<sup>49</sup> In this effort, transparency and open government initiatives offer promising pathways to restore legitimacy and civic trust.<sup>50</sup> One action item that may help is the implementation of neighborhood councils, a means to encourage citizens to advise the government on the issues that matter.<sup>51</sup> For example, in Tacoma, Washington, eight neighborhood councils operate under a larger community council to bring neighborhood concerns to the attention of the city. The councils are inclusive by design – any resident or business owner in the neighborhood is welcome to join – and they operate as non-profit organizations.<sup>52</sup> This system is an inexpensive way for legacy cities to include their communities to make more informed decisions and hear the priorities of their constituents. Additionally, participatory budgeting, where citizens are involved in the formulation and monitoring of

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<sup>44</sup> Hollingsworth and Goebel, *Revitalizing America's Smaller Legacy Cities*, 5.

<sup>45</sup> Charldean Newell, ed., *The Effective Local Government Manager*, 3rd ed. (Washington, D.C.: International City/County Management Association, 2004), 190.

<sup>46</sup> Newell, *The Effective Local Government Manager*, 32.

<sup>47</sup> Wilfredo Melendez, "The Form of Governance That Keeps Cities Moving Forward," *Governing*, July 16, 2025, accessed July 22, 2025.

<sup>48</sup> Melendez, "The Form of Governance."

<sup>49</sup> Niskanen Center, "The State Capacity Crisis."

<sup>50</sup> T.D. Beshi and R. Kaur, "Public Trust in Local Government: Explaining the Role of Good Governance Practices," *Public Organization Review* 20 (2020): 346.

<sup>51</sup> Newell, *The Effective Local Government Manager*, 176.

<sup>52</sup> City of Tacoma, "Neighborhood Council Program," Neighborhood and Community Services Department, content current as of June 6, 2025, accessed July 22, 2025,



municipal budgets, offers another promising way for direct constituent involvement.<sup>53</sup> These options provide local governments with more means to connect to their constituents and create policy that is more in line with what residents hope for their cities.

### *Attracting Talent*

While local governments may struggle to attract talent for reasons outlined above, there is no shortage of civic-minded people who might want a career as a public servant. One solution, then, is to connect those people with the right opportunities. Govern for America (GFA) is a fellowship program that aims to do just this, recruiting early-career professionals and placing them in full-time, two-year roles within government agencies. By positioning these opportunities as competitive and prestigious, GFA attracts top talent to public service roles that are often overlooked by ambitious graduates. The program not only fills critical staffing gaps but also provides fellows with leadership training, a professional network, and ongoing support through regular check-ins.

Whether through GFA, a partnership with a local college or university, or some other means, legacy cities should seek out innovative ways to recruit younger workers who bring fresh perspectives, technological fluency, and problem-solving approaches to local government.

### *Partnerships*

Beyond staffing, university–government partnerships offer another promising solution for legacy cities struggling with limited capacity to innovate.<sup>54</sup> Universities house experts with the skills to help local governments design, evaluate, and implement more effective public services. These collaborations can provide legacy cities with access to research, data analysis, and pilot program support, helping them modernize operations and build long-term capacity while also giving students and researchers valuable real-world experience. Ultimately, if legacy cities are to overcome their structural challenges and achieve long-term revitalization, strengthening local government capacity must be a central focus of policy, investment, and civic engagement.

When local governments have trouble providing services because of poor coordination, working together through collaborative efforts can offer a solution. Participating in regional organizations or developing informal networks can serve as bridges across jurisdictions.<sup>55</sup> The key piece for legacy cities is that the transaction costs associated with joining such groups or networks must remain low enough for the benefits to outweigh the costs.<sup>56</sup> Collaborative groups can help foster networks and social capital, which contribute to the development of self-organizing, sustainable

<sup>53</sup> Ardigó, Kukutschka, and Jackson, “Local Government Accountability Mechanisms,” 15.

<sup>54</sup> Anthony F. Pipa, “Building State and Local Government Innovation Capacity: Investing in University-Government Innovation Partnerships,” *Brookings*, May 20, 2025.

<sup>55</sup> Feiock, “Metropolitan Governance,” 366.

<sup>56</sup> Feiock, “Metropolitan Governance,” 368.

solutions to metropolitan challenges.<sup>57</sup> In legacy cities, where institutional capacity is limited, such collaborative mechanisms offer a promising path to overcoming fragmentation and achieving more coherent, efficient governance.

The success of the Hatch Act of 1887 offers a compelling model for strengthening state and local government capacity through federally supported research infrastructure. The Act established university-based Agricultural Experiment Stations in each state to increase agricultural productivity, with oversight provided by an Office of Experiment Stations within the U.S. Department of Agriculture. These stations proved highly effective; agricultural productivity near them increased by six percent, demonstrating the value of federally supported-locally implemented research partnerships.<sup>58</sup> Drawing on this model, some scholars propose the creation of federally funded “policy experiment stations” housed at universities in each state. These centers would collaborate with state and local governments to evaluate the effectiveness of public policies, adapt evidence from other contexts, and address the practical challenges of implementation.<sup>59</sup> Like the original agricultural stations, these policy-focused institutions could help bridge the gap between research and practice, offering state and local governments increased analytical capacity.



The Agricultural Experiment Station at Penn State <sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Feiock, “Metropolitan Governance,” 373.

<sup>58</sup> Ander et al., *Policy Experiment Stations*.

<sup>59</sup> Ander et al., *Policy Experiment Stations*.

<sup>60</sup> Penn State University Libraries, Special Collections: Agricultural History at Penn State, <https://guides.libraries.psu.edu/c.php?g=596329&p=4128857>.

## *New Tools*

On the other hand, with the future of local government expected to be digitally enabled, data-driven, and community-focused, it is important that legacy cities are catching up to speed now.<sup>61</sup> Technology has the power to overcome some of the barriers to entry existing for America's municipalities, or, if not embraced, to amplify those barriers. As global examples show, technological tools can dramatically increase civic engagement and accountability. Platforms like "Fix My Street" offer web-based reporting systems for street-level infrastructure issues and generate geo-referenced, public data to identify problem areas.<sup>62</sup> Such platforms have seen success in countries like Canada, Georgia, Germany, and South Korea. Because of the vast diversity of local government structures, no single model of technological reform will suit all communities.<sup>63</sup> However, when designed to meet specific local needs, technology can bridge the divide between local and national authorities, particularly where layers of bureaucracy hinder transparency.<sup>64</sup> These innovations demonstrate the urgent need for legacy city governments to embrace tailored digital solutions that empower citizens, increase transparency, and enhance service delivery. At the same time, digital systems must be built with privacy protections to maintain public trust.<sup>65</sup> Kimberly Roy Wilson, Director of the Office of Information Technology and services for the city of Cleveland, notes that implementing tech in municipalities is "more about aligning your capabilities with what is a good fit for your community," and while other cities that may be tech incubators are ahead, it is important to go at the pace of citizens.<sup>66</sup> An example of successful implementation of technology to a legacy city can be found in Gary, IN, where the University of Chicago helped the city survey more than 58,000 blight parcels via volunteers grading conditions of blighted properties through a mobile app.<sup>67</sup> Technology has the potential to not only help legacy cities catch up, but lead with innovation.

## **Questions for Future Consideration**

This report is just the beginning of the Institute's work studying local governance. The themes examined in this report warrant more study and development in academic and political fields. One step forward is the re-establishment of the Revitalizing Older Cities Program at the Northeast Midwest Institute, which will expand upon this work. Remaining questions are abundant, and a few are outlined below.

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<sup>61</sup> KPMG Australia, *The Future of Local Government*.

<sup>62</sup> Iñaki Albisu Ardigó, Roberto Martinez B. Kukutschka, and David Jackson, "Local Government Accountability Mechanisms," Transparency International, 2019, 9.

<sup>63</sup> Ardigó, Kukutschka, and Jackson, "Local Government Accountability Mechanisms," 5.

<sup>64</sup> Ardigó, Kukutschka, and Jackson, "Local Government Accountability Mechanisms," 3.

<sup>65</sup> KPMG Australia, *The Future of Local Government*.

<sup>66</sup> *Public Sector Network*, "Ohio's Local Government Challenges."

<sup>67</sup> Chris Bentley, "How Gary, Indiana, Got Serious About Tackling Blight," *Bloomberg*, February 26, 2015, accessed July 22, 2025,

1. Most broadly, how can legacy cities design local governments that deliver results for citizens in the face of the numerous challenges these cities face?
2. Even for legacy cities with similar population demographics, economies, and histories, solutions must necessarily be unique and tailored. Which components of policy ideas and best practices are universally transferable, and which must be adapted?
3. To what extent are universities and colleges in legacy cities engaged in local government already? What role can they play in long-term governance support beyond short-term pilot programs or research projects? And how can they play a bigger role in talent retention?
4. What lessons can be drawn from successful civic tech models at the local level, and how might they be tailored to the political, social, and economic conditions of U.S. legacy cities, particularly with regard to funding and implementation?

## Conclusion

Legacy cities in the Northeast and Midwest are at a moment of need. Once engines of American industrial power and opportunity, these communities now face the challenges of shrinking populations, disinvestment, fragmented governance, and weakened civic infrastructure. This report has identified limited local government capacity as a central barrier to recovery.

Fragmented systems, outdated technology, and human capital shortages prevent legacy city governments from responding effectively to the complex problems they face. Addressing these issues requires focusing on what local governance can be: digitally modern, community-oriented, and productive. Promising solutions, such as new technology, university partnerships, collaborative networks, and federal policy experimentation stations deserve to be embraced. Revitalizing legacy cities is about investing in public capacity to govern effectively in the 21st century. These cities house rich histories and resilient populations, but their future will depend on whether local governments are equipped to meet these challenges. Strengthening local government is a foundation for economic recovery and long-term urban resilience.

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