

ACTION INSIGHTS | RESEARCH FINDINGS FOR CITY LEADERS

When Residents Report

Hidden Insights in City Hotline Data

Summarizing peer-reviewed original research published in the academic journals

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH
AND PUBLIC HEALTH; JUSTICE QUARTERLY


RESEARCHERS (IJERPH)

Katharine Robb, Pablo Uribe, Eleanor Dickens,
Ashley Marcoux, Jessica Creighton,
and Jorrit de Jong

RESEARCHERS (JUSTICE QUARTERLY)

Eleanor Dickens, Noah Greifer, Katharine Robb,
Ashley Marcoux, Jessica Creighton, Charles Allegar,
and Jorrit de Jong

September 22, 2025



What does it mean when a neighborhood's emergency calls to 911 and service requests to 311 go up? Research published in the [International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health](#) and [Justice Quarterly](#) finds it may not be a sign of worsening neighborhood conditions. In fact, it could be the opposite.

Imagine this: You're at city hall, looking over health and safety data for different neighborhoods in your city. And something in the numbers about 911 emergency calls and 311 service requests jumps out at you: Residents' complaints are going up in an area known for drug dealing and distressed properties.

What does that mean?

At first glance, it may seem obvious that reports of crime and unsafe buildings would be higher in areas with those challenges. Viewed that way, the growing numbers of calls to 911 and 311 may be a sign of worsening conditions in the area.

But could there be another explanation? What if residents in the area are becoming more willing to report concerns in their community? In that case, more calls to 911 and 311 might actually be a good thing—not at all an indicator of a downturn, but rather of a growing belief and sense of hope that city authorities will take action to address issues facing the neighborhood.

What does an uptick in calls to 911 and 311 mean? It could be that residents are more willing to report crime and service needs.

A pair of studies from the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative explore this and other questions around residents' reporting behavior. The results can help inform how city leaders design and measure the impact of interventions aimed at building communities' trust in local government.

Researching Impact in Buffalo

The two studies look at a long-running program in Buffalo, N.Y., called the [Clean Sweep Initiative](#). Clean Sweep aims to improve quality of life in low-income areas of Buffalo. Once a week from April through October, dozens of city staff and community partners take their work to the streets in a two- or three-block area. They go door-to-door meeting with residents to hear about concerns, while work crews trim trees, remove graffiti, haul trash, board up vacant homes, and perform other cleanup activities. The program has inspired other cities to implement their own versions. ([Read this Action Insight](#) to learn more about how Clean Sweep encourages collaborative innovation across city departments and community organizations.)

Clean Sweep operations aim to repair the fractured relationship between local government and historically underserved communities by producing visible neighborhood improvements that residents can feel right away. They also introduce residents to community police officers, city staff, and nonprofit groups who can help them address neighborhood challenges, from landlord issues to weatherization to pest control.

We wanted to see if Clean Sweep not only meets its goals of improving quality of life but also impacts how residents see local government as a partner in making their neighborhoods safer and healthier. To do that, we looked at residents' reports of crime and service needs using Buffalo's 911 and 311 hotlines. [Research shows](#) that people are generally less willing to report problems where trust in and responsiveness of authorities is low. An increase in reporting behavior could therefore be a sign of improvement in both.

In a quantitative analysis [published](#) in *Justice Quarterly*, we looked at Buffalo's 911 and 311 data to assess the effects of the Clean Sweep. Advanced statistical techniques helped us compare reporting behavior between similar properties that had received a Clean Sweep and those that did not. These methods enabled us to estimate the causal effects of the Clean Sweep program on reporting behavior over 11 years of data. We also held focus groups with residents whose neighborhoods had received a Clean Sweep and interviewed city staff involved in the operations. Through qualitative analysis, we sought to understand factors influencing changes in residents' reporting behavior.

A Rise in Reporting

The analysis of 911 and 311 data showed a clear trend. Residents of properties that received a Clean Sweep were 42 percent more likely to report drug-related crimes via 911 over the following six months compared to similar properties that did not receive a Clean Sweep. And they were 9 percent more likely to report service needs such as trash or graffiti removal via 311. An analysis of these results supports the conclusion that reporting of crime and service needs—not actual crime and service needs—went up.

In Buffalo, residents who benefited from a Clean Sweep were more likely to use 911 and 311 than those who did not.

But why? Our qualitative study, [published](#) in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, found three reasons for the increase in residents' reporting:

Responsiveness

Some residents who previously felt neglected by city authorities said that seeing a Clean Sweep address long-standing problems made them feel that city authorities could be partners with whom it was worthwhile to engage.

Trust

Some residents who previously were not inclined to trust local authorities felt encouraged by respectful and reciprocal interactions with police and other city staff during Clean Sweep operations.

Self-efficacy

After a Clean Sweep operation, some residents felt a greater sense of ownership in their community and willingness to take individual and collective actions to improve neighborhood safety and quality of life.

Takeaways for Practitioners

These results have implications not just for cities that have their own version of a Clean Sweep initiative, but for all cities that are actively trying to repair relationships with historically underserved communities. A few takeaways for city leaders include:

Reporting data contain valuable insights.

When a resident calls 911 or 311, they're not just reporting a problem. They're also on some level expressing faith in local authorities to do something about it. Reporting behavior can be used as an indicator of a community's trust in local government.

Examining changes in reporting behavior from residents in neighborhoods where the relationship with local government is strained can be particularly insightful.

Neighborhood context matters.

Changes in reporting behavior are particularly relevant in neighborhoods where the relationship between residents and local authorities is strained, as is common in historically underserved areas. As governments implement programs to repair the relationship with communities, a jump in 911 and 311 calls may mean trust is rising—but this should be confirmed with residents and additional data before drawing conclusions.

Unlocking 911 and 311 data is key.

Our analysis in Buffalo combined call-center data from the city's 911 and 311 hotlines with parcel information in ways that unlocked new insights. This relied on the [Open Data Buffalo](#) platform, where data are available for public use. Cities can prioritize open data protocols and data-sharing agreements across government to enable research, allowing them to look for patterns in their own communities.

Call volumes at a city's 911 and 311 centers are not perfect reflections of crime and other challenges in a community. Many factors influence whether residents report matters to authorities, including how much residents trust local government or perceive it to be responsive to their needs. But these calls are crucial; without them, residents miss out on essential services, and communities already lacking investment face increased isolation and neighborhood decline. Historic disenfranchisement, racism, and exclusionary policies have left many communities feeling deeply apprehensive about engaging with government as a partner. Local leaders who seek to rebuild these relationships through Clean Sweep or other initiatives with similar goals can use data on changes in reporting behavior as an indicator of how these efforts are working.

Reporting behavior can be used as an indicator of how efforts to build trust with residents are working.

Further Reading

[“The Impact of City-Led Neighborhood Action on the Coproduction of Neighborhood Quality and Safety in Buffalo, NY”](#)

International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health

[“The Effects of a Place-Based Intervention on Resident Reporting of Crime and Service Needs: A Frontier Matching Approach”](#)

Justice Quarterly

[“Breaking Down City Hall’s Silos: Collaborative Innovation in Practice”](#)

Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative

[“Using Data to Solve Urban Problems”](#)

Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative

[“Connecting the Dots: Using Big Data to Understand Mobility Gaps in American Cities”](#)

Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative

[“More than the Sum of the Parts: Integrating Housing Inspections and Social Services to Improve Community Health”](#)

Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative

Action Insights summarize findings from academic research. They offer management and leadership guidance you can put to use in your work, and they link to the underlying studies.

The Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative, located at the Bloomberg Center for Cities at Harvard University, is a collaboration between Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard Business School, and Bloomberg Philanthropies to equip mayors and senior city officials to tackle complex challenges in their cities and improve the quality of life of their residents.

The Initiative advances research and develops new curriculum and teaching tools to help city leaders solve real-world problems. By engaging Harvard graduate students in research and field work, the Initiative supports current city leaders while investing in future generations. The Initiative also advances the field of city leadership through teaching, research, and new curricular materials that help city leaders drive government performance and address pressing social problems.

This Action Insight summary was authored by Katharine Robb, Eleanor Dickens, Ashley Marcoux, Noah Greifer, Pablo Uribe, Jessica Creighton, Charles Allegar, Christopher Swope, Jorrit de Jong.



Scan to read this
document online.



**BLOOMBERG
CENTER FOR CITIES
HARVARD UNIVERSITY**

**BLOOMBERG
HARVARD** | City
Leadership
Initiative

A publication of the
Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative
79 JFK Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 02138 USA

cityleadership.harvard.edu
cityleadership_research@harvard.edu