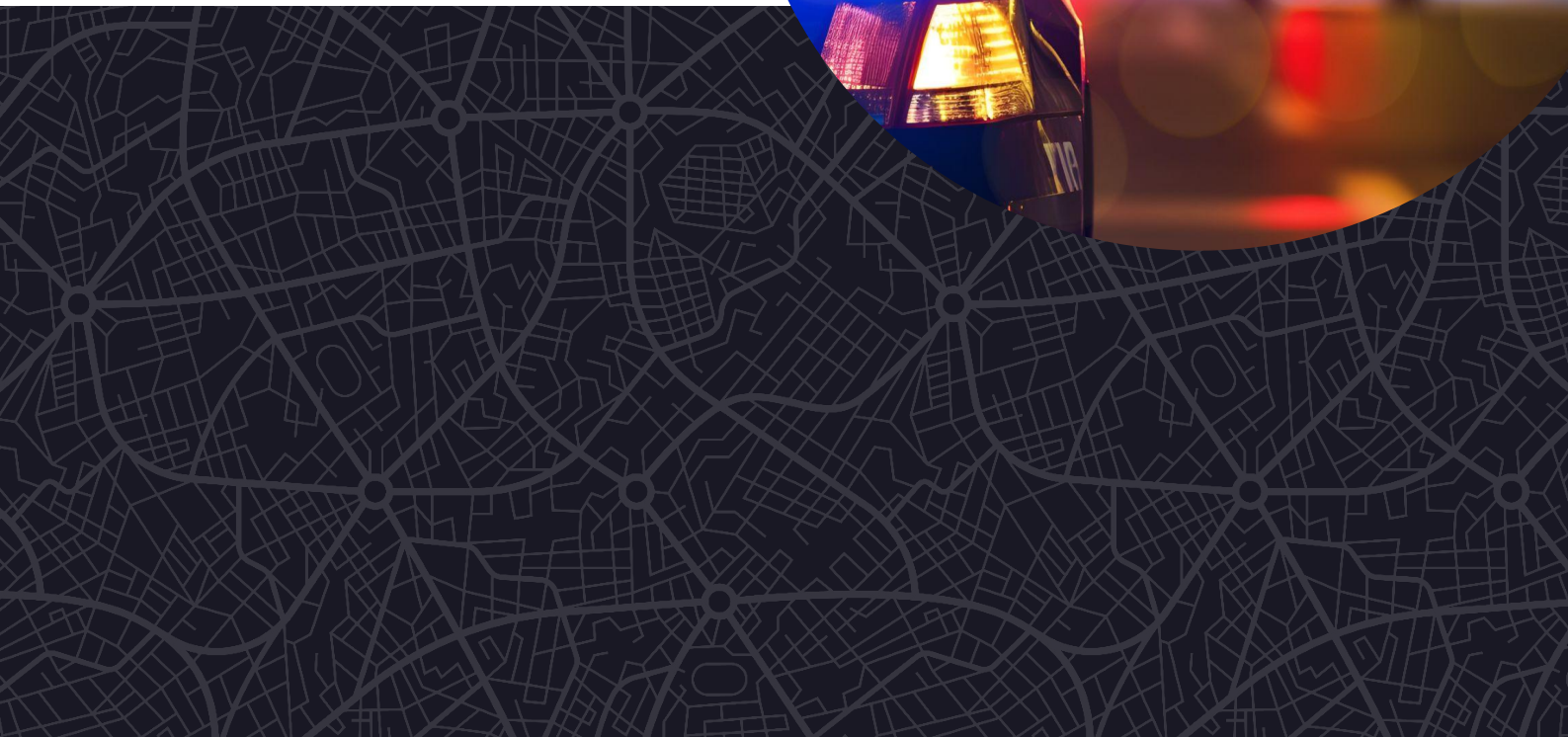




National Insights on Police Budgets

Power Your Agency's Work with Community Voices

Spring 2026
Survey Findings



Introduction



Context

Every year, police leaders face the same challenge: making the case for the resources their departments **need**. Crime data and operational metrics tell part of the story — but they rarely capture what community members actually expect from their police department, or where they feel their needs are going unmet.

To close that gap, Zencity gathered representative input from 5,197 Americans on how they experience public safety and what they prioritize from policing. Across five key budget areas, **the survey captured how community members view current policing services, where they see gaps, and what investments they believe would make their communities safer.**

The result is a set of nationally **representative, defensible benchmarks** that police leaders can use alongside their own operational data — to build a clear, evidence-based case during budget planning, council briefings, and performance management reviews, when it matters most.

How to use the data

This report is organized around five budget priority areas. For each, you will find:



A national baseline

Where public sentiment sits on key law enforcement priorities across the U.S.



A budget tool

Resident data to build an evidence-based case for resource decisions



A reference point

National findings that invite deeper exploration of what residents in your own community are saying

Budget Priorities

- 01 **Staffing Levels & Police Presence**
- 02 **Compensation and Retention**
- 03 **Technology and surveillance**
- 04 **De-escalation & Crisis Response**
- 05 **Community Policing & Engagement**

Staffing Levels & Police Presence

How adequate is current police staffing in meeting community?

Adequate staffing is foundational to everything a police department does — but making the case for staffing levels has traditionally relied on calls-for-service data and response times. These metrics capture workload. They don't capture what residents actually expect.

This data is intended to support decisions around patrol allocation

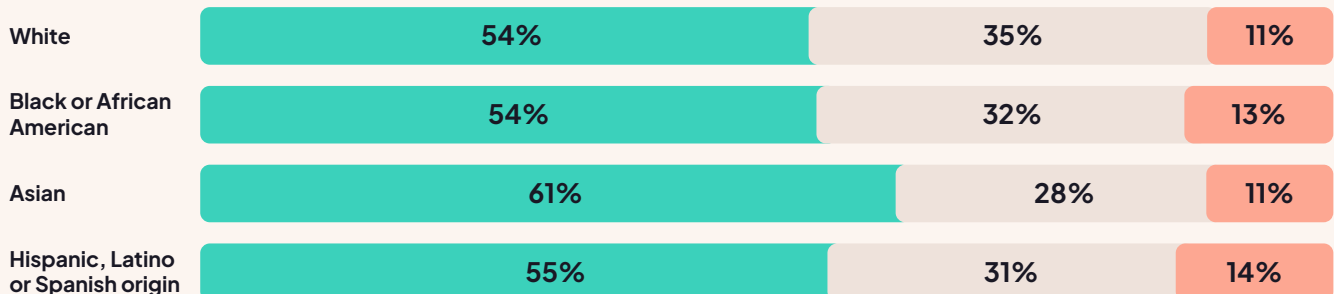
Most residents say increased police presence would make them feel safer, with support consistent across all racial and ethnic groups

How would an increased police presence in your neighborhood make you feel?
[Significantly more safe -> Significantly less safe] [Single select, N=5193]

Over half of residents (54%) nationally say that an increased police presence would make them feel more safe, compared to just 12% who say it would make them feel less safe. This support is consistent across racial and ethnic groups, with Asian respondents showing the strongest agreement at 61%, 7 percentage points above the national figure.



Support across racial and ethnic groups



Compensation and Retention

How can law enforcement agencies improve officer retention?

Officer recruitment and retention is one of the most pressing workforce challenges facing law enforcement today. Budget conversations around compensation can be politically difficult — it is not always easy to build a public case for increasing officer salaries.

This data is intended to gauge public support for increasing officer compensation

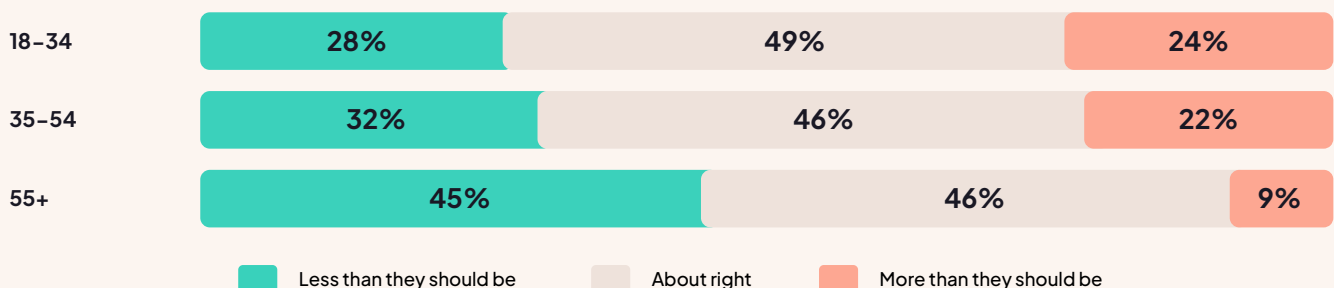
Nearly a third of residents believe police officers deserve higher pay, ahead of those who think they are overpaid

Do you think police officers in your community are currently being paid: [Much less than they should be->Much more than they should be] [Single select, N=4, 937]

Nationally, 31% of residents say police officers are paid less than they should be, compared to just 18% who say they are paid more than they should be. The remaining 47% consider current pay about right, meaning fewer than one in five residents actively oppose increased compensation. Support is most pronounced among residents aged 55 and over, where 45% say officers are underpaid, compared to just 9% who say they are overpaid.



Age breakdown



Technology & Surveillance

Do residents see a need for expanded use of technology and surveillance?

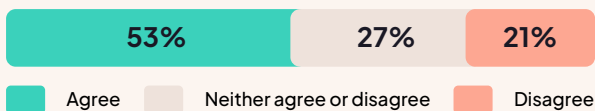
Technology investments — from license plate readers to real-time crime centers — represent some of the most significant capital expenditures a department can make. Securing budget approval often means demonstrating both community need and public support.

This data is intended to investigate public support for investment in technology and surveillance infrastructure

Most residents support police investment in drone technology, with the strongest support among those who have experienced crime

Over half of residents (53%) support their local police department investing in drones to help investigate crimes, compared to 21% who oppose. Support is highest among residents who experienced crime and reported it to police, reaching 66%, 13 percentage points above the national average.

To what extent would you support or oppose your local police department investing in the following technologies:
Drones to help investigate crimes [Single select, N= 5,162]



How recent crime experience shapes support for drone investment

Experienced and reported crime in the last 6 months

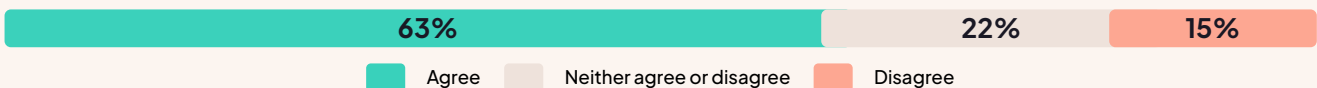


No crime experience in the last 6 months

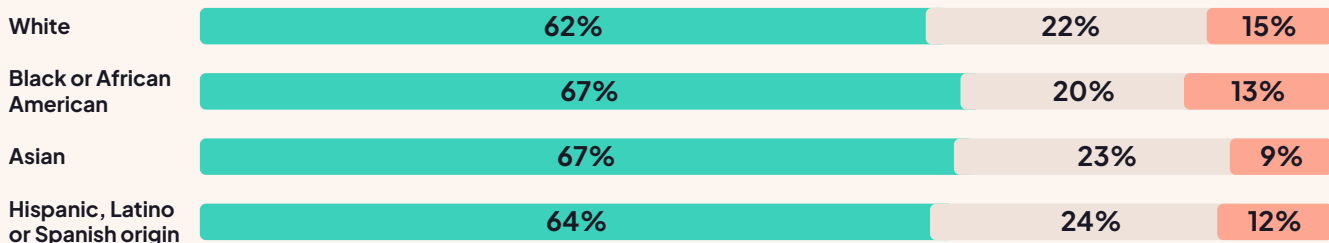


Most residents support police investment in license plate reader technology, with approval consistent across all racial/ ethnic groups

Nearly two thirds of residents (63%) support their local police department investing in license plate readers to help locate stolen vehicles and support investigations, compared to just 15% who oppose. This level of support exceeds that seen for drone technology and is consistent across all racial and ethnic groups, with Black or African American and Asian respondents showing the highest agreement at 67%.



To what extent would you support or oppose your local police department investing in the following technologies:
License Plate Readers (LPR) to help locate stolen vehicles and support investigations [Single select, N= 5,073]



De-escalation & Crisis Response

How do residents expect police to respond to crisis situations involving mental health

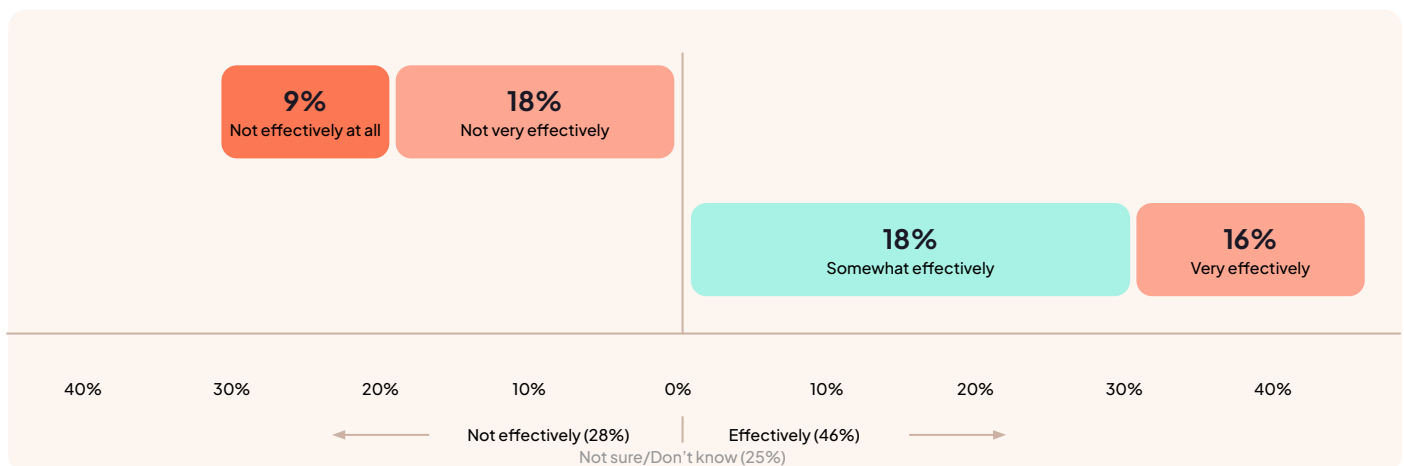
Police departments are increasingly being called upon to respond to situations that fall outside traditional law enforcement — from homelessness to mental health crises. These calls require specialized skills, dedicated staffing, and sustained training investment.

Justify investment in specialized training and crisis response personnel

Nearly half of residents think that police officers respond to calls involving someone experiencing mental-health crisis effectively

How effectively do police officers respond to calls involving someone experiencing a mental-health crisis? [Single select, N=5,182]

Nationally, 46% of residents say police officers respond effectively to calls involving someone experiencing a mental health crisis, compared to 28% who say they do not, with a further one in four saying they are not sure. These findings reflect a foundation of public confidence in police crisis response, alongside areas where continued investment in specialized training could strengthen that confidence further.



Community Policing & Engagement

How do residents assess their department's current community engagement efforts, and what types of programs would they most value?

Meaningful community engagement doesn't happen by accident. It requires dedicated time, staff, and often overtime — resources that can be difficult to protect when budgets are tight.

The findings give law enforcement leaders a resident-validated case for preserving or growing engagement budgets, grounded in what communities say they actually want.

Officer communication training and regular feedback opportunities emerge as residents' top priorities for improving community policing

Which of the following actions would most help your local police department work more closely with the community to understand residents' concerns and improve public safety? [Select up to 2 N=5,160]

Residents identify more training for officers in communication and relationship-building (43%) and more regular opportunities to share feedback such as surveys and town halls (41%) as the top priorities for improving community policing, well ahead of social media outreach (23%) and expanded community programs (17%). These findings reflect strong public support for investment in officer development and structured community dialogue.

More training for officers focused on communication and relationship building

43%

More regular opportunities for residents to share feedback (eg. surveys, townhalls etc.)

41%

More outreach through social media and online channels

23%

Expanded community programs and partnerships

17%

None of these

10%

Others

2%

Executive Summary



Staffing Levels & Police Presence

Over half of residents say increased police presence would make them feel safer, with support consistent across all racial and ethnic groups



Compensation and Retention

Residents are nearly twice as likely to say officers are underpaid as overpaid



Technology & Surveillance

Strong majorities support investment in both drone technology (53%) and license plate readers (63%), with support highest among residents with direct crime experience



De-escalation & Crisis Response

Nearly half of residents rate police mental health crisis response as effective, reflecting a strong foundation of public confidence.



Community Policing & Engagement

Residents prioritize officer communication training and regular feedback opportunities above all other forms of engagement



Perception and communication matter as much as allocation.

Confidence in budget decisions is uneven across the population, underscoring the role of transparency and lived experience in shaping trust.



Let's Connect



Zencity helps 400+ cities, counties, and agencies hear from more voices, understanding community priorities, and taking confident, defensible action on behalf of the residents they serve.



Power Your Agency's Work with Community Voices