



Leading the Way 2025 Tour

JACKSON REPORT

HIGHLIGHTING WHAT WORKS

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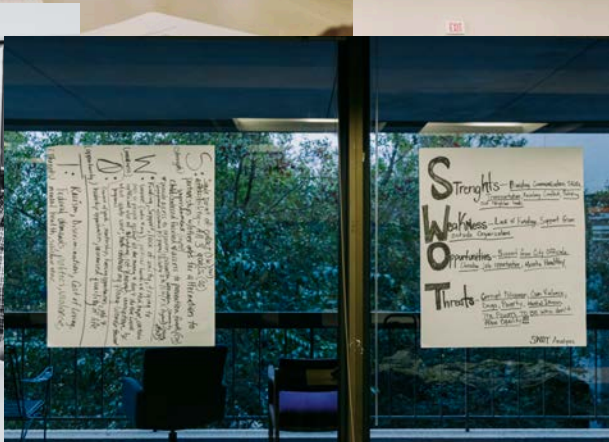
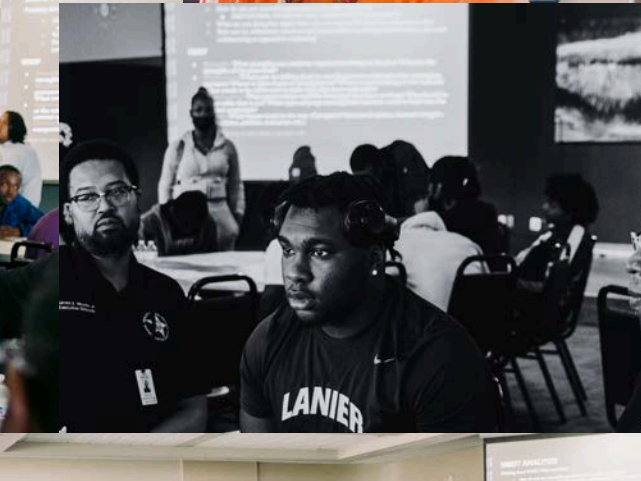
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LETTER FROM CITIES UNITED EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: **AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Dear Jackson Partners, Community and Young Leaders,

Cities United came to Jackson because we know this work matters, and we know the people closest to it carry insight that cannot be understood from a distance. During our Leading the Way Tour stop in February 2026, we spent time with local leaders, community-based organizations, public-sector representatives, and young leaders to listen, learn, and better understand what it will take to strengthen Jackson's efforts to build a safer, healthier, and more hopeful community. What we heard across the stop was clear: Jackson is not starting from scratch, but the next phase of this work will depend on whether its existing strengths can be organized into a more trusted, coordinated, and durable public safety ecosystem.

What emerged from the stop is a picture of a jurisdiction that appears to be moving through Phase 2 of the Cities United Roadmap: Constructing a Multi-Year Plan of Action. In practical terms, that means there are already important pieces in place, but more work is needed to bring them into stronger alignment. Jackson has active and engaged community leadership, young leaders with a clear and grounded vision for safety, and existing efforts that provide a real starting point for more coordinated action.

We heard from community partners who continue to show up, advocate, and provide direct support despite limited resources and uneven support. We also heard from young people who spoke with honesty and urgency about what safety should feel like, what is missing, and what kinds of relationships, spaces, and opportunities they need to see more of in the city.

At the same time, the stop surfaced several challenges that continue to hold the work back. Jackson's ecosystem is still marked by weak alignment, fragmented ownership, and strained trust across key stakeholders. ONSA is being asked to hold significant responsibility while operating with limited capacity, and too many young people are still being reached too late or not consistently enough. Participants spoke candidly about the need for clearer roles, stronger coordination, more stable support, and greater trust between local government and community-based organizations. That honesty matters. It is difficult to build something stronger if the real points of friction stay unnamed, and in Jackson they did not.

Even with those challenges, the stop also revealed real signs of momentum. We saw openings among some public-sector leaders to think about public safety more broadly. We saw young leaders who are ready for deeper engagement, not just one-time participation.

AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We also saw that Jackson already has enough activity, relationships, and intervention touchpoints in motion for stronger coordination to feel achievable rather than out of reach. Those openings are important, but they will require follow-through. Momentum alone will not be enough. The next phase of this work will depend on whether trust can be strengthened, roles can be clarified, and the city's prevention, intervention, and community engagement efforts can be brought into stronger alignment.

The recommendations in this report are meant to support that next phase. In the near term, Jackson would benefit from structured trust-building between ONSE and community-based partners, clearer role definition, stronger briefings for elected and appointed officials, ecosystem mapping, and more durable next steps for young leaders. Over time, the work will require a more stable structure around ONSE, a stronger funding and sustainability strategy for community-based partners, a trusted approach to data and storytelling, and deeper alignment across the actors expected to carry this work forward. This is not about doing everything at once. It is about making a smaller set of choices with greater clarity and stronger follow-through.

What stayed with us most in Jackson was the level of truth-telling in the room. Community partners were honest about what has caused harm. Young leaders were honest about what they are carrying and what they need. Public-sector representatives showed some signs of openness that could matter if followed by action. Jackson has enough leadership, insight, and community-rooted effort to move this work forward. The challenge now is to organize those assets into something more connected, more credible, and more durable over time.

Cities United remains committed to supporting Jackson as it transitions from developing a multi-year plan of action to implementing one.

In solidarity,

Anthony D. Smith
Executive Director, Cities United



INTRODUCTION

In February 2026, Cities United brought its Leading the Way Tour to Jackson, Mississippi to listen, learn, and support Jackson’s efforts to build a safer, healthier, and more hopeful community. Through a series of meetings and engagements with local leaders, community-based partners, public officials, and young leaders, the tour was designed to better understand Jackson’s current public safety landscape and the conditions needed to strengthen it.

THE LEADING THE WAY TOUR SEEKS TO:

- Highlight effective, comprehensive public safety practices and models.
- Foster cross-sector collaboration.
- Amplify community-led solutions.
- Enhance local capacity.
- Evaluate progress and impact using the Cities United Roadmap Framework.
- Assess and foster meaningful young leader engagement.

The tour came as Jackson’s public safety efforts were being reshaped in real time. Local discussions reflected a jurisdiction with visible commitment, community-rooted leadership, and a growing recognition that public safety must extend beyond enforcement alone. They also pointed to a broader need for stronger alignment, clearer ownership, and a more connected strategy across the public safety ecosystem. In this context, the work of the Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement, alongside community-based leadership from partners such as Operation Good and Strong Arms of Mississippi, helped frame both the progress already underway and the opportunities still ahead.

Across the materials reviewed and discussions held during the tour, Jackson appears to be operating in Phase 2 of the Cities United Roadmap: Constructing a Multi-Year Plan of Action. The jurisdiction has important elements of a broader public safety ecosystem in place, including committed partners, emerging infrastructure, and signs of forward movement. The tour also made clear that Jackson is still working to bring these efforts into a more fully aligned, coordinated, and sustainable approach. The next phase of work will depend on how leadership, community partners, young leaders, and public systems come together around shared direction, clearer roles, stronger communication, and long-term investment.

This report reflects what Cities United heard, observed, and learned during the Jackson stop. The sections that follow offer a high-level synthesis of Jackson's grounded strengths, persistent challenges, emerging momentum, and strategic considerations, followed by immediate action steps and recommendations to support stronger coordination and long-term progress.

UNDERSTANDING THE LOCAL LANDSCAPE

Young leaders in Jackson offered a powerful lens for understanding what public safety means in practice. Their reflections described safety not only as freedom from violence, but also as access to opportunity, stability, trusted relationships, and spaces that support connection, hope, and well-being. They also spoke candidly about the conditions that make safety harder to experience, including disinvestment, limited activities and resources, and the “survival mindset” that can take hold when young people do not see clear pathways forward. Their definitions help ground this section’s understanding of the local landscape and provide an important frame for considering how Jackson’s public safety ecosystem is currently functioning.

That framing was echoed and expanded throughout the broader tour discussions. Across multiple sessions, participants reflected on where Jackson’s public safety efforts are showing promise, where gaps remain, and what conditions will be necessary to build a stronger and more connected path forward. During the Roadmap session in particular, participants were asked to reflect on the pillars and goals of the Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (ONSE)—Prevention, Intervention, and Community Engagement & Collaboration—and to consider how their organizations align with those priorities, what they are currently doing to support the work, and how the broader ecosystem can encourage clearer ownership, stronger partnership, and less competition.

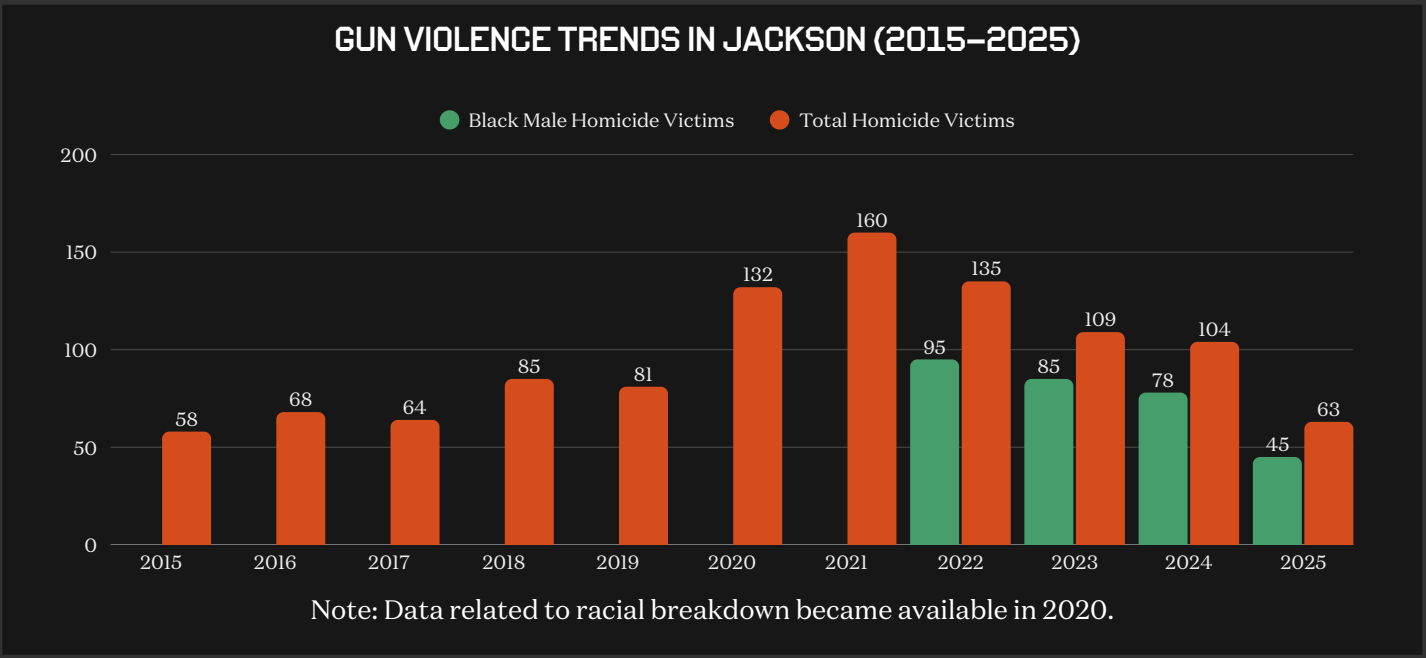
The pages that follow synthesize those reflections across the tour stop. They highlight the assets participants see within Jackson’s public safety ecosystem, the challenges that continue to complicate coordination and execution, the signs of movement that suggest real opportunity, and the broader considerations that may shape whether current efforts can translate into stronger alignment and long-term impact.

Grounded Strengths: Community Assets to Build From

Jackson has meaningful assets already in place that can support a stronger and more coordinated public safety ecosystem. Across the tour, participants pointed to the leadership, insight, programs, and partnerships already present in the city as evidence that Jackson has real building blocks to work from.

One of the clearest strengths is active and engaged community leadership. Community partners and young leaders described local leaders and organizations that continue to show up, advocate, and provide direct support despite political instability, limited resources, and uneven support. Participants repeatedly described community leaders as strong advocates for Black men and boys and emphasized that their commitment to Jackson is deep and sustained. As one reflection noted, “the community

leaders in Jackson are dedicated to their work and strong advocates for Black men and Boys,” while another observed that “the will to support their community is immeasurable.” This leadership matters because Black men and boys continue to be among those most impacted by gun violence in Jackson. From 2022 to 2025, total homicides in Jackson declined from 135 to 63, yet available disaggregated data show that Black male victims still accounted for an average of 73.7% of homicide victims over that same period. That leadership is visible in organizations like Operation Good, which participants described as building bridges and supporting residents relentlessly in South Jackson, and in Strong Arms’ mentorship work with students at Lanier High School. Together, these examples suggest that one of Jackson’s strongest assets is not simply the presence of organizations, but the depth of leadership, trust, and persistence already rooted in the community.



Another important strength is **young leaders with a strong vision for safety**. The presence of 25 young leaders in a candid and engaged dialogue brought clarity, honesty, and direction to the tour’s broader conversation about public safety in Jackson. They described safety in ways that were both immediate and expansive, connecting it to staying alive, protecting family, being known in the community, and having access to relationships, activities, jobs, and hope. Their reflections helped define not only what safety means, but what a stronger public safety approach should actually create for young people and families. As one young leader shared, “You need a better relationship with the community, you’ll feel real safe... building a bond with your community and relationship with people, that means a lot, if people know you, you are safe.” Young leaders did not simply respond to the conversation; they helped shape it by naming a vision of safety rooted in connection, opportunity, and belonging.

Another strength is **growing alignment around a more comprehensive public safety approach**. Discussions throughout the tour stop reflected an emerging understanding that Jackson’s public safety work must extend beyond enforcement alone. When participants were asked to consider how their organizations align with the Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement’s pillars of Prevention, Intervention, and Community Engagement & Collaboration, they identified a broad set of people, supports, and institutions that already contribute to that work, including teachers, parents, mentors, return-to-school efforts, counseling, wellness resources, transportation, conflict resolution, and community-based organizations.

One local participant made the prevention case directly: “By the time you get to me, it is already too late. So how I can help is the community engagement part... speaking to high school students... let’s get back to the basics.” That broader framing was also echoed in conversations with local law enforcement representatives, where building an inclusive economy was described as an anchor of public safety work and mentor programs and credible messenger approaches were lifted up as important parts of the solution. What emerged from these conversations was a wider view of public safety—one that depends on earlier intervention, stronger community connection, and clearer alignment across the broader ecosystem.



MOMENT THAT MATTERED

One young leader captured the connection between opportunity, support, and safety in a way that resonated across the stop: “I was smoking weed, sleeping in class, not caring. Once I was in football and had something to do it changed my whole perspective. Now I am going to college with a full ride. Football was the reason.” That reflection underscored a broader theme heard throughout the tour: **when young people have structure, belonging, and something meaningful to move toward, public safety becomes not only about reducing harm, but also about creating pathways forward.**

A fourth strength is the **presence of existing programs and partnerships** that can be built on over time. As one participant reflected, Jackson already has “credible community-based assets operating,” including mentorship, school-based workforce partnerships, and ONSÉ coordination. Current efforts highlighted also included Operation Good’s work with young people disconnected from school through GED support, workforce development, employment assistance, and basic-needs support.

Participants also highlighted Strong Arms’ mentorship and internship connections through Jackson State, hospital-based violence intervention, and school-based partnerships tied to prevention and youth support. Another reflection put it more directly: “The work Operation Good has done in South Jackson is incredible. Despite clear divestment and neglect in that part of the city - the OG teams are on the ground, building bridges, supporting residents, engaging with people relentlessly.” These efforts matter in a city where Jackson Public School District’s 2025 four-year graduation rate was 83.7%, while dropout rates remained above 20% at both Provine High School and Wingfield High School. In that context, existing programs that reconnect young people to school, stability, and opportunity represent an important base to build from.

Other strengths participants identified through the SWOT activity included:

- Voice, guidance, and speaking up as forms of community support
- Strong communication and relationship-building skills
- Transportation support that helps connect residents to resources
- Conflict resolution capacity within the community
- Counseling, wellness, and mental health supports already present in the ecosystem
- Neighborhood patrolling and visible community presence

2025 Jackson Public School District Data	N-Count	4-Year Graduation Rate	Dropout Rate
Total	1415	83.7%	13.9%
Callaway High School	210	86.7%	13.3%
Forest Hill High School	212	85.4%	10.4%
Jim Hill High School	230	86.5%	11.7%
Lanier High School	131	87.8%	7.6%
Provine High School	183	74.9%	20.8%
Murrah High School	311	85.9%	13.5%
Wingfield High School	135	76.3%	20.7%



PERSISTENT CHALLENGES: BARRIERS TO COORDINATION, TRUST, AND EARLY REACH

Jackson's public safety ecosystem has important assets to build from, but the tour also surfaced several persistent challenges that continue to limit coordination, trust, and long-term progress. Across the SWOT activity and broader discussions, participants described a landscape where strong community commitment exists alongside weak alignment, strained relationships, and limited infrastructure to sustain the work at the level the moment requires.

One of the most consistent challenges was **limited alignment and fragmented ownership across the ecosystem**. Participants described a landscape where not all of the right actors are consistently connected to the work, and where roles, responsibilities, and decision-making pathways remain underdefined. That concern surfaced in calls for “a clear strategy and defined stakeholders at the table” and for an action and accountability structure to guide the work. It also appeared in broader discussions that pointed to “lack of cohesion/collaboration” and the need to “map the ecosystem and identify roles and responsibilities” so organizations are clearer about how they support one another.

Discussions during the stop also pointed to missing education and government actors at the table, which further illustrates how uneven participation continues to complicate coordination. Taken together, these reflections suggest that Jackson does not lack activity; it is still working to connect that activity through clearer ownership, stronger coordination, and a more shared operating structure.

A related challenge is **strained trust and inconsistent relationship-building across key stakeholders**. Participants did not describe this as a minor communications gap. They described community leaders whose work has often “gone unheard,” leading to “some resentment (rightful) toward local government,” and noted that partnership “does not come naturally and is hindered by historical harms.” That strain was made even more concrete in reflections that said the city needs to “mend its relationships” with organizations such as Operation Good and Strong Arms in order to move forward.

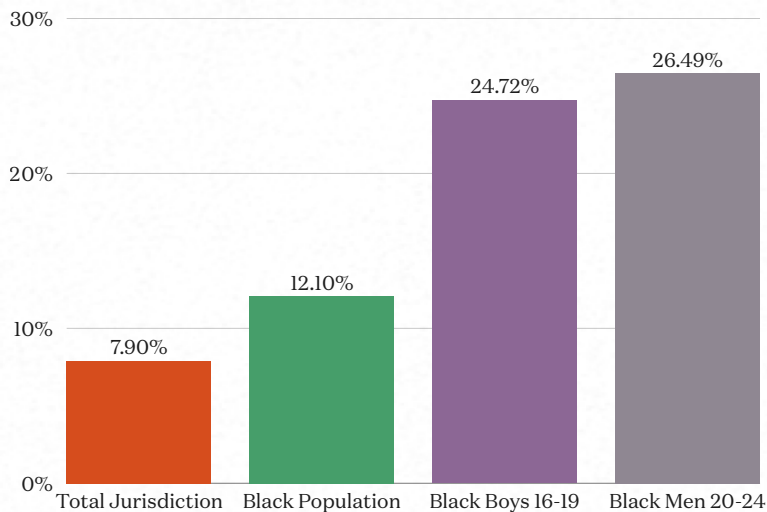
Tour discussions also pointed to a broader breakdown between local government efforts to address and reduce public safety challenges and community-based organizations, limiting coordination and shared strategy. This challenge matters because even where the will to collaborate exists, the ecosystem cannot function well without stronger trust, more intentional convening, and clearer communication norms.

Tour participants also made clear that Jackson faces **gaps in sustained investment, capacity, and infrastructure**. Participants repeatedly described a level of need that exceeds the formal staffing, funding, and systems support currently available. In tour discussions, ONSE was described as a one-person office, while broader reflections emphasized that the work still lacks the kind of stable support needed to move from discretionary backing to sustained institutional investment.

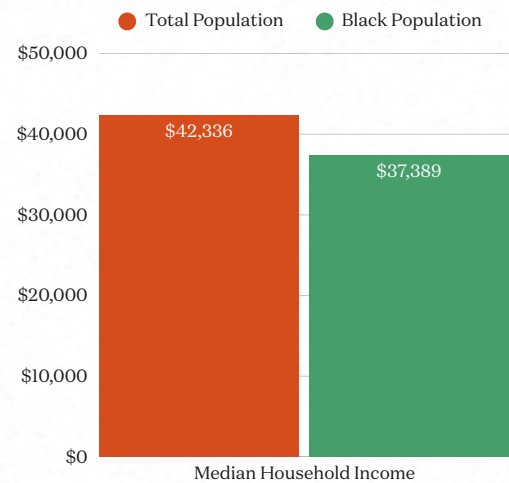
As one reflection noted, “the need for support and funding is immense.” Another called for support “codifying ONSE within formal city structures and budgeting processes to move from discretionary funding to sustained, institutional investment.” Tour notes also pointed to practical barriers in accessing resources, including identified youth-engagement funds that were not released and were instead reallocated elsewhere. Collectively, these conditions suggest that while Jackson has momentum and committed actors, its prevention and intervention infrastructure remains comparatively thin and vulnerable to delay, turnover, and shifting political will.

A fourth challenge is that **prevention and intervention are still not reaching enough young people early or consistently enough**. Participants described school systems that are not consistently retaining or reengaging students. They also pointed to re-entry barriers that make it difficult for young people to return once they have left. More broadly, discussions surfaced concern about a population of youth who are simply “not being accounted for.” Young leaders connected those gaps to daily life in direct terms, noting that “if it ain’t nothing to do it gonna make a person just want to go rob something” and that “the mindset in Jackson [is] survival,” because too many young people do not see enough to live for. The data reinforce that urgency. Unemployment stands at 24.72% for Black boys ages 16–19 and 26.49% for Black men ages 20–24. In that context, Jackson’s challenge is not only whether prevention and intervention models exist, but whether they are reaching young people soon enough and broadly enough to interrupt deeper disconnection.

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE



MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME



⚠️ MOMENT THAT MATTERED

During the young leader session, one participant described Jackson's current reality by saying, **"The mindset in Jackson is survival. Put more things in the city to show people there is more to live for."**

Others immediately built on that point by calling for less competition, more collective support, and a stronger sense of shared responsibility for the next generation. Together, that exchange captured both the weight young people are carrying and the kind of collective response they believe Jackson needs.

Other challenges participants identified through the SWOT activity included:

- Weak or inconsistent communication across the ecosystem
- Transportation barriers that limit access to services and opportunity
- Limited mental health and wellness access relative to need
- Competition across organizations rather than collaboration
- Limited faith-leader integration despite strong church presence in impacted neighborhoods

EMERGING MOMENTUM: SIGNALS OF GROWING READINESS

Despite the challenges that surfaced during the stop, the tour also revealed several signs that Jackson may be better positioned than before to strengthen its public safety ecosystem. Across the discussions, those signs of momentum appeared less as full alignment and more as openings—evidence that some conditions for stronger coordination, deeper participation, and more intentional action are starting to take shape.

One area of momentum is **new openings among public-sector leaders**. While participants were candid about uneven political alignment, the stop also surfaced signs that some public-sector actors may be more open than before to a broader public safety approach. In the elected and appointed officials meeting, ONSSE was described as “the prevention and intervention infrastructure for the city of Jackson” with a role to “design, align, and strengthen the ecosystem.” That framing was reinforced by local law enforcement representatives, who described building an inclusive economy as the anchor of public safety work and affirmed mentor programs and credible messenger initiatives as highly successful. Other discussions pointed to public-sector interest in workforce and youth opportunity strategies, including support for reconnecting summer jobs and school-based pathways to the city’s broader safety goals. These signals suggest that, while broader alignment remains incomplete, some public-sector leaders are beginning to engage the work through a wider prevention and intervention lens.

A second sign of momentum is that **young leaders are ready for deeper engagement**. Their participation reflected more than turnout; it reflected clarity, consistency, and readiness to help shape the conversation. Their comments made clear that they are prepared to contribute more than reaction. One young leader said, “It’s hard to reach out if you aint never had nobody to reach out to,” underscoring the kind of relational support they believe is needed. Another added, “Us, as a whole, we the next generation,” framing young people not only as those affected by the work, but as part of its future direction. Jackson does not need to create young leaders’ voices from scratch; it already has young people ready to contribute insight, urgency, and direction when given meaningful opportunities to stay engaged.

Another sign of momentum is that **existing efforts create a stronger launch point for coordinated action**. Discussions during the stop pointed to emerging interest in stronger data-sharing to better “connect the dots” across systems and supports. Participants also described a broader set of efforts already aligned with ONS’s pillars of Prevention, Intervention, and Community Engagement & Collaboration. These included GED and workforce support, mentorship, school-linked engagement, hospital-based violence intervention, wellness programming, and TANF-supported prevention work. In the workforce discussion, one participant noted, “These are some of the people that we need to have in these conversations,” underscoring that the challenge is not a total absence of programs, but the need to connect existing efforts more intentionally. What makes this momentum is that Jackson already has enough activity, relationships, and intervention touchpoints in motion for stronger coordination to feel achievable, not theoretical.

MOMENT THAT MATTERED

As participants discussed what support looks like in practice, one community-based representative described how families already move across multiple kinds of help at once: **“They need something, they call us, we give it to them. Like clothing, food, a little something on the bills, or a ride somewhere to a doctor’s appointment, take the kids to school, we do that.”**

That moment mattered because it showed that Jackson’s momentum is not only in ideas or plans. It is also in the practical, relationship-based supports already operating across prevention, intervention, and community engagement—supports that could become even stronger if better connected through a more coordinated ecosystem.

Other signs of momentum participants and materials highlighted included:

- Growing interest in jobs, trades, and summer employment as part of the public safety response
- School- and community-based mentorship supports already reaching some young people
- Early openings for stronger county and state partnership
- Interest in stronger data-sharing and system connection around prevention efforts
- Wellness and prevention programming already operating alongside intervention efforts
- Community willingness to name gaps and engage in more concrete problem-solving around coordination and roles

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS: TURNING OPENINGS INTO STRUCTURE

The stop suggested that Jackson's next phase of work will depend less on starting over and more on making a clearer set of strategic choices. Across the tour, participants pointed to three connected priorities: clarifying ONSE's role within the broader ecosystem, building a more visible continuum of resources and opportunity for young people and families, and aligning public safety strategy with the spaces, conditions, and investments residents can actually see and experience in their neighborhoods.

One strategic consideration is **clarifying ONSE's role as the lead coordinating entity** without expecting it to carry the full ecosystem alone. Across the stop, participants pointed to the need for ONSE to function less as a stand-alone program office and more as a convener, coordinator, and backbone for the broader strategy. They named "an action and accountability structure" as a starting point for the work ahead. Broader tour findings also emphasized that ONSE should be positioned to convene, align, and resource the work, while allowing community-based partners to lead in the areas where they already hold strength and credibility.

Additional discussions highlighted related structural gaps, including no clearly defined governance model, no cross-agency accountability framework, and no formal integration between prevention, intervention, and enforcement. The task ahead is to define ONSE's role clearly enough that it can stabilize the ecosystem, support what it cannot do alone, and give others something concrete to organize around.

A second strategic consideration is **building a broader continuum of resources, relationships, and opportunity for young people and families**. Participants described a city where too many young people still fall between systems. Core leadership notes referenced students being pushed out, barriers to re-entry, and a population of youth "not being accounted for." Young leaders and community partners pushed the conversation further, making clear that the response cannot stop at crisis alone. As one young leader put it, "People need hope." Other discussions pointed to the need for stronger pathways into trade options, school connection, mentorship, and trusted adult support. The challenge now is to shape those pieces into something young people can actually find, enter, and stay connected to over time.

A third strategic consideration is **aligning visible community reinvestment with Jackson's public safety strategy**. Throughout the stop, participants connected safety not just to services or systems, but to what young people and families can actually see, access, and experience in their neighborhoods. In the young leader's conversation, one participant said, "South Jackson building a prison, they could have built a library." Another called for "more things... to show people there is more to live for." Together, those comments pointed to a deeper concern about what the city visibly prioritizes and what kinds of futures are being made available to young people. That same thread appeared in broader discussions about blight, abandoned properties, closed community spaces, and the need to align built-environment work more intentionally with violence prevention and neighborhood well-being. For Jackson, this means making safety tangible in the places, conditions, and investments that shape everyday life.

MOMENT THAT MATTERED

During the young leader session, participants were talking about what safety would require beyond enforcement and crisis response. In that exchange, one young leader said, "South Jackson building a prison, they could have built a library."

The comment opened up broader discussion about closed pools, missing youth spaces, and the absence of places that signal care, opportunity, and belonging. What stood out in that moment was how quickly one sentence widened into a broader picture of what young people are noticing around them—and what they believe would need to change for safety to feel real.

Other strategic considerations surfaced during the stop included:

- Whether the county may be a stronger or more trusted convener for parts of the work
- How to embed young leader voice more structurally rather than episodically
- Whether faith leaders can be intentionally integrated into the ecosystem through defined partnership pathways
- How built-environment work, including blight and abandoned properties, can be aligned with violence prevention strategy
- How to improve data sharing while addressing community distrust around who holds and reports the data

JACKSON: SAFETY & EQUITY SNAPSHOT

Jackson is a mid-sized Southern city navigating both recent reductions in violence and persistent structural conditions that continue to shape risk and exposure. While overall homicides have declined, violence remains concentrated among specific populations and driven by identifiable underlying factors.

- **Population:** ~143,633 residents
- **Black Population:** ~91.25%
- **Poverty Rate:** ~27% of residents live below the federal poverty line
- **Median Household Income:** ~\$42,336 vs. ~\$37,389 Black Population
- **Education:** High school graduation rate $\geq 90\%$ Overall, with disparities by race, income, and neighborhood (VERIFY)
- **Homicide Trend:** Record high in 2022 (135 homicides) followed by a steady decline in 2024 (104 homicides), with continued decreases reported into early 2025
- **Violent Crime:** Overall violent crime has declined. Although exposure remains uneven across neighborhoods
- **Geographic Concentration:** Violence and safety concerns remain concentrated in specific neighborhoods experiencing historical disinvestment, with repeated exposure affecting young people and families in those areas
- **Economic Context:** A substantial share of households earn below \$40,000 annually, with economic instability closely intersecting with safety, housing, and workforce access
- **Governance & Coordination:** Jackson's public safety coordination is led by the Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (ONSE), which convenes city agencies and community-based partners across prevention, intervention, and engagement efforts. While key organizations are actively involved, coordination remains in development, with opportunities to strengthen alignment, role clarity, and shared accountability across the ecosystem.
- **Young Leader Engagement:** Young leaders are increasingly present in engagement spaces related to safety, prevention, and community wellbeing. During the LTW Tour, young leaders participated as contributors rather than observers, signaling growing interest in more formalized roles within the city's public safety ecosystem.
- **Community Assets:** Community-based organizations and grassroots leaders with deep neighborhood presence; trusted local partners providing mentorship, workforce support, and direct services; emerging outreach and engagement efforts; school- and community-linked supports; and the Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (ONSE) serving as a coordinating anchor alongside community partners.
- **Data & Equity Considerations:** Local data and tour insights highlight persistent disparities in who is impacted by violence, particularly among Black men and boys, as well as gaps in access to opportunity, employment, and consistent support. Patterns of concentrated harm and youth disconnection reinforce the need for more targeted, coordinated strategies that reach those most at risk earlier and more consistently across prevention, intervention, and community engagement efforts.

Sources: City of Jackson Comprehensive Community Safety Plan (2025–2030); Jackson Police Department; U.S. Census Bureau (ACS); Jackson LTW Tour materials.

IMMEDIATE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Leading the Way Tour surfaced a focused set of priorities to support Jackson as it works to strengthen trust, clarify roles, and build a more durable public safety ecosystem.

These recommendations are organized across two horizons: immediate action steps that can help improve alignment and coordination over the next three to six months, and longer-term priorities that can strengthen infrastructure, sustainability, and shared ownership over time.

The recommendations below reflect the strongest themes that surfaced during the stop: rebuilding trust between ONSE and community-based partners, clarifying ONSE's coordinating role, strengthening political and stakeholder alignment, creating clearer next steps for young people, and building a structure that can hold beyond a single office or moment.

IMMEDIATE ACTION STEPS (3-6 MONTH PRIORITIES)

1. PRIORITIZE STRUCTURED TRUST-BUILDING BETWEEN ONSE AND KEY COMMUNITY-BASED PARTNERS.

One of the clearest near-term priorities is rebuilding trust between ONSE and the community-based organizations already leading much of the intervention and prevention work. Conversations during the stop repeatedly pointed to distrust, frustration, and the need for more honest conversation between ONSE, Operation Good, and Strong Arms of Mississippi. In the near term, Jackson would benefit from structured trust-building that creates room for clearer expectations, more direct communication, and a stronger working relationship across these three primary entities.

2. CLARIFY ONSE'S ROLE AS CONVENER, COORDINATOR, AND FUNDING LEVER.

A second immediate priority is clarifying ONSE's role in the ecosystem. Discussions during the stop made clear that the office does not currently have the staffing or funding to run multiple programs directly, and that trying to do so could further strain relationships with partners already doing the work. In the short term, this points to defining ONSE more clearly as a convener, coordinator, and resource connector while community partners continue leading in areas where they already hold credibility and expertise.

3. MAP THE ECOSYSTEM AND IDENTIFY ROLES, GAPS, AND PRIORITY CONNECTIONS.

Jackson also needs a clearer picture of who is doing what and where the gaps are. Participants pointed to the need for ecosystem mapping and for understanding where prevention, intervention, and related supports already exist. In the near term, a mapping process could help clarify roles, reduce duplication, and identify where the city should support, convene, or fill gaps rather than recreate existing work.

4. BRIEF ELECTED AND APPOINTED OFFICIALS MORE INTENTIONALLY.

The stop also revealed a need for stronger internal alignment among city leadership. Participants noted that some elected and appointed officials appeared unaware of key data, unfamiliar with ONSE's work, and disconnected from community partners already active in the ecosystem. A near-term priority is establishing more regular and intentional briefings so city leadership has a clearer understanding of the work, the local landscape, and the role they are being asked to play.

5. CREATE CLEARER NEXT STEPS FOR YOUNG LEADERS AFTER ENGAGEMENT

Young leader participation was a major strength of the stop, but the conversations also raised the question of what happens next. In the near term, Jackson should identify a more durable next step for young people who are already engaged, whether through leadership development, advising, workforce pathways, or other structured roles. The immediate opportunity is to make sure strong engagement does not end with a single session or event.

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

1. STABILIZE ONSSE THROUGH MORE DURABLE CITY SUPPORT AND STRUCTURE

Over the longer term, Jackson will need to move ONSSE beyond a fragile or minimal operating model. The stop made clear that the office has never really had the chance to become a fully functioning office and is operating with very limited capacity. Long-term progress will depend on whether Jackson can build a more stable structure around ONSSE so that coordination does not depend on one person or on shifting political conditions.

2. BUILD A LONG-TERM FUNDING STRATEGY FOR COMMUNITY-BASED PUBLIC SAFETY WORK

Conversations throughout the stop pointed to sustainability as a major concern, especially for Operation Good and Strong Arms of Mississippi. Longer-term progress will require more than one-off support. Jackson will need a strategy for helping community-based organizations access funding, leverage grants the city can pursue, and sustain intervention and prevention work over time.

3. INSTITUTIONALIZE A CONVENER STRUCTURE THAT CAN HOLD THE PRIMARY PARTNERS TOGETHER

Participants were clear that ONSSE, Operation Good, and Strong Arms of Mississippi may not keep meeting or coordinating without an outside force helping hold the space. Over time, Jackson will need a more durable convening structure that can keep these primary partners in regular conversation, strengthen alignment, and reduce the likelihood that the ecosystem fractures again when conflict or turnover occurs.

4. DEVELOP A TRUSTED APPROACH TO DATA, REPORTING, AND STORYTELLING

The stop also surfaced tension around data ownership, reporting, and who gets to tell the story of community-based work. Over the longer term, Jackson will need a more trusted structure for collecting, sharing, and using data in ways that support community-based organizations rather than expose or blame them. This may require a third-party or intermediary model if trust in city-held data systems remains weak.

5. STRENGTHEN COUNTY AND CROSS-SYSTEM PARTNERSHIP OVER TIME

The stop pointed to possible openings with county actors and other system partners who may be better positioned to strengthen or broaden the work. Over time, Jackson should explore how county representation, juvenile justice actors, and other adjacent systems might support a more durable ecosystem, especially where city leadership remains uneven or limited.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CITIES UNITED SUPPORT

Cities United is well positioned to continue supporting Jackson as it works to strengthen trust, stabilize coordination, and build a more durable ecosystem. The opportunities below reflect areas where Cities United can add value through facilitation, coaching, technical assistance, and strategic connection.

1. TIME-LIMITED VIRTUAL CONVENING SUPPORT FOR THE THREE PRIMARY ENTITIES

Provide virtual convening support for ONSSE, Operation Good, and Strong Arms of Mississippi for a defined period while trust, coordination, and next steps are stabilized.

2. RESTORATIVE OR TRUST-BUILDING FACILITATION

Facilitate restorative conversations that support trust-building and stronger working relationships among key partners.

3. PUBLIC SAFETY ECOSYSTEM MAPPING AND ROLE CLARIFICATION

Support Jackson in mapping the ecosystem, identifying gaps, and clarifying how prevention, intervention, and coordination roles connect.

4. COACHING FOR ONSSE'S CONVENER ROLE

Provide coaching and strategic support to help ONSSE clarify and grow into its coordinating role within the ecosystem.

5. BRIEFING AND ALIGNMENT SUPPORT FOR CITY LEADERSHIP

Support materials or facilitated sessions that help strengthen alignment among elected and appointed officials and other city leaders.

6. WORKFORCE PATHWAY CONNECTION THROUGH PEER EXAMPLES

Connect Jackson to peer models such as PowerCorps to inform employment pathways for justice-impacted young people.

7. YOUNG LEADER NEXT-STEP PATHWAY SUPPORT

Support the design of a more durable pathway that moves young leaders from one-time engagement into ongoing leadership, advising, workforce, or other structured roles.

8. TRUSTED DATA AND STORYTELLING SUPPORT

Support exploration of third-party or intermediary options for data collection, reporting, and storytelling.

9. SUSTAINABILITY AND FUNDING STRATEGY SUPPORT

Support exploration of third-party or intermediary options for data collection, reporting, and storytelling.

10. CONVENING SUPPORT IN JACKSON AND COUNTY-LINKED STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

Support a follow-up convening in Jackson and exploration of county-linked strategy opportunities.

Conclusion:

A Call for Aligned Action

The Jackson stop made clear that the city is not starting from scratch. **There is already meaningful work underway, trusted community leadership in place, and a clear desire among many participants to move toward a stronger and more coordinated public safety ecosystem.** Young leaders described what safety should feel like. Community-based partners pointed to the relationships and supports already carrying the work. Public-sector representatives signaled openings that, while still uneven, suggest there is space to build something more connected than what exists today.

At the same time, the stop also surfaced a central truth: **momentum alone will not be enough.** Jackson's next phase will depend on whether trust can be repaired, roles can be clarified, and the city's prevention, intervention, and community engagement efforts can be brought into stronger alignment. It will also depend on whether young people see a more visible continuum of opportunity, support, and reinvestment in the places where they live.

The path forward is not about doing everything at once. It is about making a smaller set of strategic choices with greater clarity and follow-through. That means strengthening ONSE's coordinating role, supporting community-based partners without displacing them, creating more durable pathways for young leaders, and building a public safety ecosystem that residents can experience as credible, connected, and worth trusting.

Jackson has the relationships, insight, and community-rooted leadership to move this work forward. The challenge now is to convert those assets into a more durable structure—one that can support coordination, sustain trust, and hold progress over time.

APPENDIX

REFERENCED QUOTES & ATTRIBUTION

- “The community leaders in Jackson are dedicated to their work and strong advocates for Black men and Boys.” *Source: CU team reflections and internal debrief materials.*
- “The will to support their community is immeasurable.” *Source: CU team reflections and internal debrief materials.*
- “By the time you get to me, it is already too late. So how I can help is the community engagement part... let’s get back to the basics.” *Source: Meeting discussion with local participants.*
- “I was smoking weed, sleeping in class, not caring. Once I was in football and had something to do it changed my whole perspective. Now I am going to college with a full ride. Football was the reason.” *Source: Young leader session.*
- “The mindset in Jackson is survival. Put more things in the city to show people there is more to live for.” *Source: Young leader session.*
- “South Jackson building a prison, they could have built a library.” *Source: Young leader session.*
- “People need hope.” *Source: Young leader session and related tour discussions.*
- “It’s hard to reach out if you ain’t never had nobody to reach out to.” *Source: Young leader session.*
- “Us, as a whole, we the next generation.” *Source: Young leader session.*
- “They need something, they call us, we give it to them...” *Source: Community-based program representative during tour discussions.*
- “A clear strategy and defined stakeholders at the table.” *Source: Core leadership and elected/appointed official discussions.*
- “Lack of cohesion/collaboration.” *Source: SWOT and related tour discussions.*
- “Map the ecosystem and identify roles and responsibilities.” *Source: SWOT and related tour discussions.*
- “The need for support and funding is immense.” *Source: Internal debrief transcript.*
- “Codifying ONSE within formal city structures and budgeting processes to move from discretionary funding to sustained, institutional investment.” *Source: Internal debrief transcript and CU team recommendations.*

APPENDIX

KEY DATA POINTS REFERENCED IN REPORT

- From 2022 to 2025, total homicides in Jackson declined from 135 to 63.
- From 2022 to 2025, Black male victims accounted for an average of 73.7% of homicide victims in Jackson.
- Jackson Public School District's 2025 four-year graduation rate was 83.7%.
- Dropout rates exceeded 20% at both Provine High School and Wingfield High School.
- Unemployment stood at 24.72% for Black boys ages 16–19 and 26.49% for Black men ages 20–24.
- The young leader session included 25 young leaders.
- ONSE was described during the stop as operating as a one-person office.

SOURCES OF CU TEAM & LTW JURISDICTION MEMBER FEEDBACK

- Jackson Leading the Way Tour stop agenda and session materials
- Meeting transcripts from the Jackson stop
- Young leader session notes and transcript excerpts
- Core leadership meeting notes
- Elected and appointed officials meeting notes
- Roadmap Academy Bootcamp notes and SWOT sheets
- Community tour notes
- CU internal debrief transcript and debrief notes
- Jackson running notes and compiled Jackson notes
- Pre-tour briefing materials, including narrative scan, political analysis, funding scan, and data summary
- Supporting local media/articles reviewed during the stop





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