



Leading the Way 2025 Tour

TRAVIS COUNTY REPORT

HIGHLIGHTING WHAT WORKS

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“For us to have real change things need to change above us. We can do as much as we can as a community but it won't change until things become accessible. People who need a second chance having access to resources.”

– SLIM







LETTER FROM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Public safety is not just about reducing harm, it's about creating the conditions where every young person can thrive. That belief drives the work of Cities United and fuels our Leading the Way Tour.

At Cities United, we know true public safety doesn't start with policing, it starts with people. It begins in communities where youth are nurtured, families are supported, and systems work together to create lasting change. That's the heart of the Leading the Way Tour: a national effort to advance comprehensive, community-driven public safety solutions by uplifting what's working and investing in the people making it work.

Each tour stop gives us a chance to listen, learn, and build with local leaders. It's our way of aligning national momentum with local progress: amplifying innovative practices, deepening cross-sector relationships, and helping communities move closer to a vision of safety rooted in care, opportunity, and equity.

In Travis County, that vision is already taking shape. Austin and the greater Travis County area have become a powerful example of what it looks like to redefine public safety through bold leadership, grassroots partnership, and public investment. The work of trusted organizations like ATX Peace, Jail to Jobs, Life Anew Restorative Justice, and the African American Youth Heritage Foundation has long been embedded in the fabric of the community. Their leadership, alongside cross-sector champions like District Attorney José Garza, signals a deep and growing commitment to a safety ecosystem grounded in healing and possibility.

Through the Leading the Way Tour, we had the privilege of supporting and learning from that momentum. The energy in Travis County reminds us what's possible when we prioritize youth, invest in communities, and center those closest to the challenge, and the solutions.



And while real progress is happening, we also recognize the ongoing challenges shaped by gentrification, disinvestment, and systemic inequity. That's why this work is urgent, and why it must be sustained. We left Travis County even more inspired by the clarity of its young leaders, who envision a future rooted in joy, healing, opportunity, and access. Cities United is proud to stand with them, and with every partner committed to building the infrastructure for lasting, community-led safety.

In community and solidarity,

Anthony Smith

Executive Director, Cities United

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

TRAVIS COUNTY SETS THE TONE

From April 22–24, 2025, Cities United launched its Leading the Way Tour in Travis County, convening young leaders, community-based organizations, system partners, appointed and elected officials for three days of shared learning, vision-building, and strategy development. The visit affirmed that Travis County is making meaningful strides toward a public safety ecosystem rooted in care, opportunity, and equity—while continuing to confront structural gaps in coordination, access, and accountability.

This report captures the story of a county on the verge of a fully integrated, community-centered public safety model. With a resilient nonprofit sector, trusted community violence intervention programs like ATX Peace, and strengthening cross-sector partnerships, Travis County is well-positioned to lead.

At the same time, stakeholders identified pressing challenges: fragmented coordination across city, county, and community efforts; underrepresentation of youth and frontline voices in decision-making; limited access to culturally responsive mental health care; and a need for long-term investment and policy alignment.

Organized across five key sections, the report offers a profile of current efforts, a data-informed view of the local safety landscape, a SWOT analysis of system readiness, and forward-looking strategic considerations. It concludes with five targeted recommendations—focused on co-creating a unified public safety strategy, strengthening infrastructure and investment, building young leader and community capacity, launching a values-driven narrative campaign, and expanding equitable access to shared data and evaluation tools.

Travis County has the foundation, leadership, and momentum to redefine public safety. What’s needed now is alignment, resourcing, and a coordinated strategy to fully realize a community-driven vision for safety, healing, and justice.



OVERVIEW & BACKGROUND

Travis County's Journey to Redefine Public Safety

Redefining public safety requires moving away from punitive, exclusionary systems—like those embedded in Austin's 1928 City Plan—and toward a model rooted in community, care, and structural repair.



Shifting from punishment to care unlocks new pathways to safety

Since 2019, Austin and Travis County have shifted toward community-driven safety by forming the Gun Violence Task Force, launching the Office of Violence Prevention, and investing in CVI strategies. Momentum grew with national partnerships, local funding, and the launch of ATX Peace.



Community-driven safety models are gaining ground and trust

By 2023, efforts expanded with major federal grants, city budget allocations, and the opening of the Harvest Trauma Recovery Center. In 2024, institutional support deepened with new hospital-based programs, expanded outreach, and the founding of One Safe Austin to strengthen collective impact.



Cross-sector investment is accelerating safety transformation

Building on the historical legacy of harm and exclusion as well as present-day mobilization for equity and safety, Travis County's current efforts collectively work to increase services and opportunities for individuals, families and communities most impacted by gun violence through prevention, intervention, outreach and re-entry.

Current Efforts Include:

- Citywide Violence Prevention through OVP
- Justice Planning & Reentry Services
- Community-Led Violence Interruption
- Alternatives to Incarceration & Community-Based Supervision
- Hospital-Based Intervention & Gun Violence Prevention
- Youth Engagement & Prevention Programming
- Firearm Safety & Public Awareness Campaigns



TRAVIS COUNTY PROFILE: PUBLIC SAFETY REDEFINED

Travis County is in the process of developing a community-centered approach to public safety, demonstrating notable progress; however, critical work remains to achieve a fully implemented strategy. Greater alignment is needed to reshape criminal and juvenile justice systems, implement asset-framed communication strategies, advance anti-racist policies, and create a collaborative public safety funding model.

In addition, Travis County representatives identified the need to further strengthen young leadership, institutionalize cross-sector partnerships, and secure sustainable investments. Current efforts must also more urgently address ecosystem-building, legislative advocacy, expanded mental health supports, and data-driven coordination to ensure lasting and equitable impact.

TRAVIS COUNTY'S PUBLIC SAFETY REDEFINED RATING:

73% (# of areas on the Travis County framework (11) versus the # on CU framework (15))

- Interrupting the cycle of violence = 5/6
- Dismantling systems of inequity = 4/5 (missing: Reshape Criminal and Juvenile Justice Systems)
- Investing in infrastructure = 2/4

EVOLVING PUBLIC SAFETY VISION STATEMENT

A just, equitable system rooted in trauma-informed care, access to mental health services, safe housing, and intergenerational healing. Safety must be measured by shared outcomes that reflect healing and opportunity, and supported by peer mentorship, economic incentives, and integrated solutions across transportation, education, and job access.



Community voices are shaping a bold and inclusive path forward

During the Leading the Way Tour, participants highlighted a blend of current strategies and aspirational goals that together reflect the county's evolving public safety vision. The areas below represent both what is actively underway and what community leaders, system partners, and young people named as necessary to strengthen and scale impact. Upcoming section “Understanding the Local Landscape” provides context for the areas presented below.



PRIMARY FOCUS AREAS OF TRAVIS COUNTY'S PUBLIC SAFETY STRATEGY

- Community Violence Intervention and Outreach
- Mental Health and Trauma Recovery
- Young Leader Engagement & Leadership
- County-wide, Multi-jurisdictional, Cross-Sector Approach
- Public Health & Mental Health Approaches
- Narrative Change & Public Awareness
- Data-Driven Strategy & Evaluation
- Alternatives to Incarceration and Justice System Reform
- Sustainable Funding & Policy Advocacy

SOCIAL AND SAFETY LANDSCAPE: DATA THAT INFORMS THE WORK

A shared understanding of who is most impacted, and how, is essential to building effective, community-centered safety strategies. The data that follows highlights key factors shaping risk, opportunity, and where targeted investment is most needed.

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These indicators underscore the need for solutions that are both place-based and people-centered—grounded in data, driven by community, and sustained through equity-focused investment.



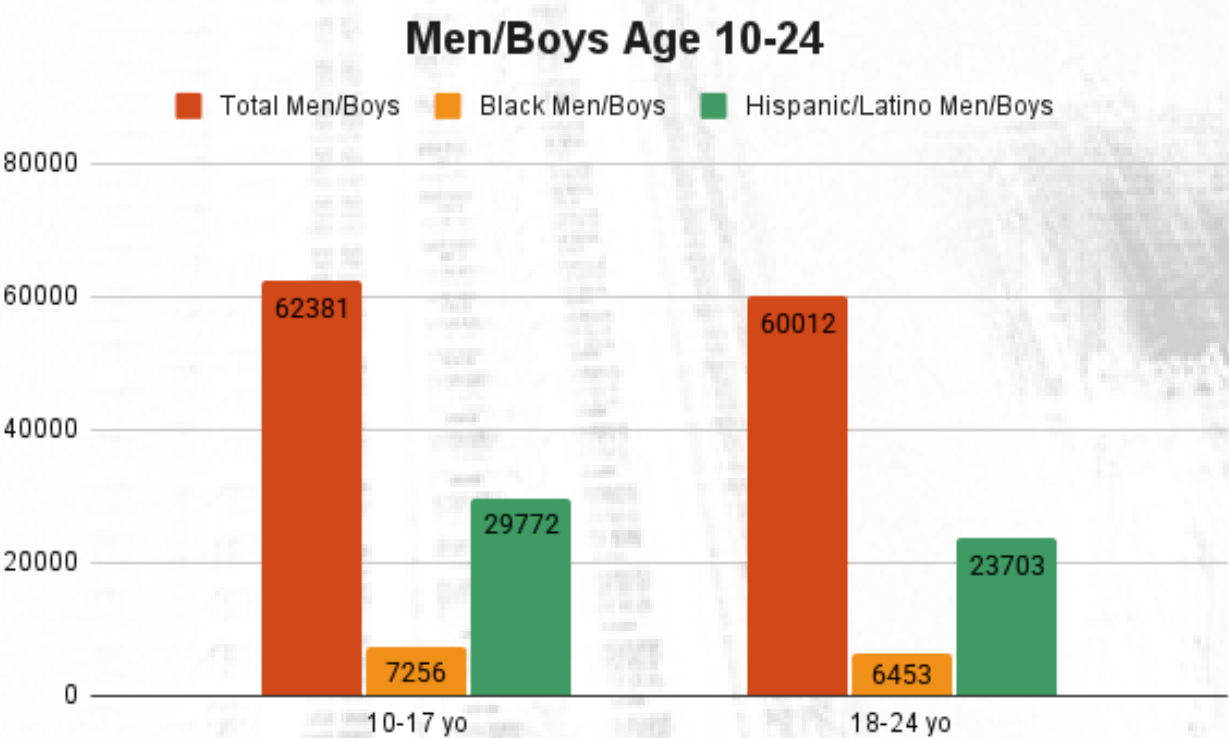
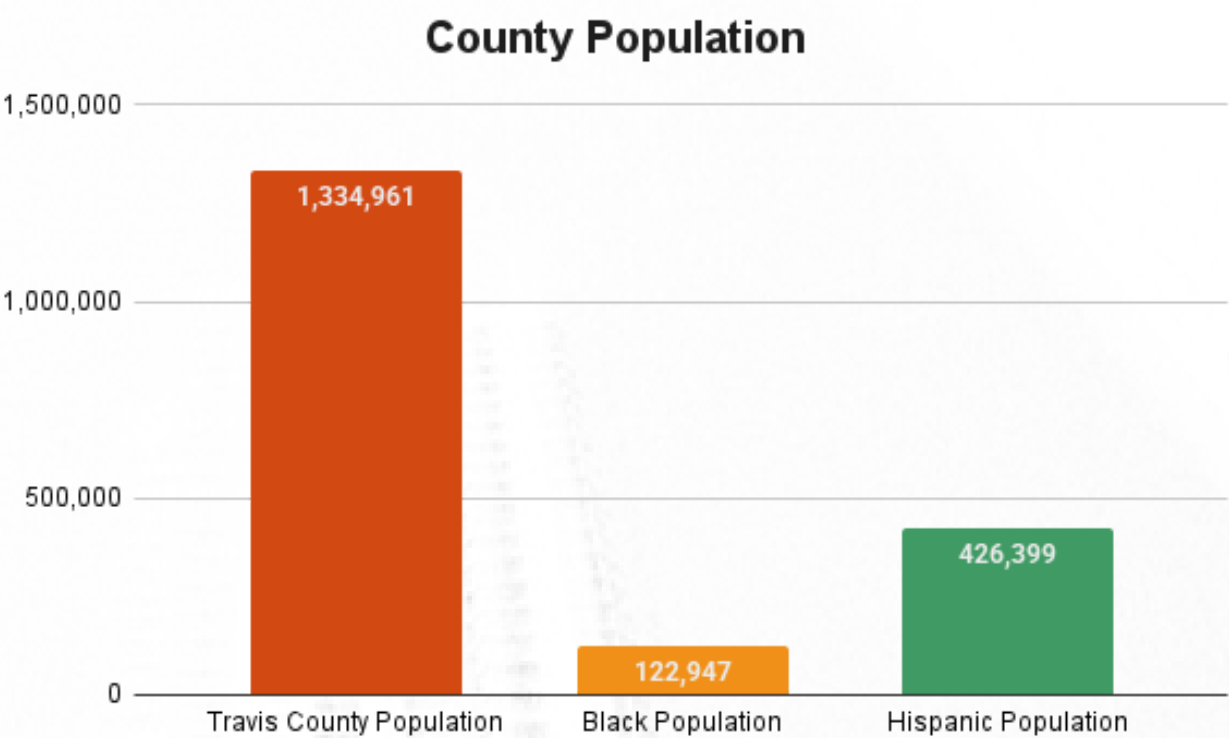
UNDERSTANDING THE LANDSCAPE: A DATA SNAPSHOT OF TRAVIS COUNTY

To build safe, healthy, and hopeful communities, we must begin with a clear understanding of the conditions shaping life in Travis County. This starts with data, not just on homicides, but also on the root causes of violence that disproportionately affect Black, Latino, and other historically marginalized communities. While homicide data offers an urgent lens into community safety, it does not tell the full story. Without comprehensive and disaggregated data on education, income, employment, housing, and health, we risk focusing only on outcomes instead of addressing the systems and conditions that create them.

This snapshot offers an entry point. It presents homicide trends over the past decade alongside key indicators related to population demographics, educational attainment, income, and unemployment. However, more robust and ongoing data collection is needed to reflect the full picture and align with the Cities United Public Safety Redefined framework. That includes tracking not only what is going wrong, but also what is working to prevent harm, promote healing, and strengthen local ecosystems.

To move this work forward, city and county jurisdictions must work together to ensure that public safety data is consistent, up to date, publicly accessible, and used to guide collective action. Collaboration across agencies and geographies is essential to understanding the landscape, interrupting cycles of violence, dismantling systems of inequity, and investing in the infrastructure communities need to thrive. This data page is only the beginning.

POPULATION DATA

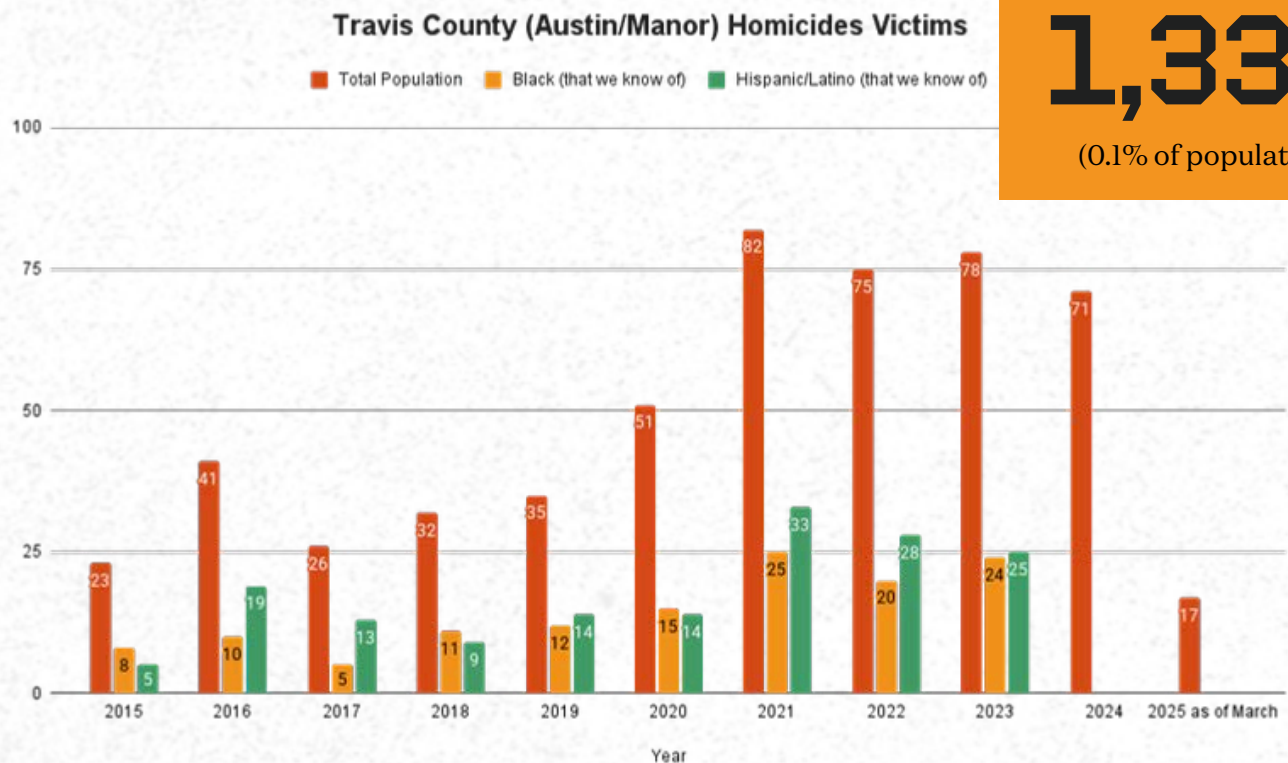


SOURCE: Census, 2023

HOMICIDE DATA

Number of people “At Highest Risk” of being directly impacted by gun violence

1,335
(0.1% of population)



Note: Data for race of homicide victims in 2024 and 2025 are not available yet.

Note: Black people make up
9.2% of the population
but are
29.34% of the homicide victims

Note: Hispanic people make up
31.9% of the population
but are
36.1% of the homicide victims

Number of
violent crimes

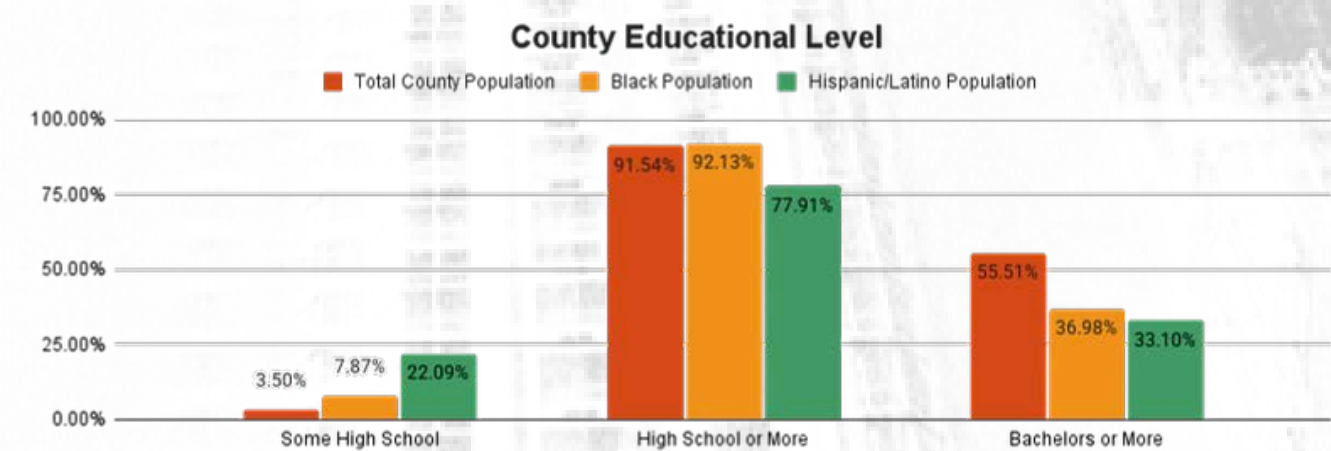
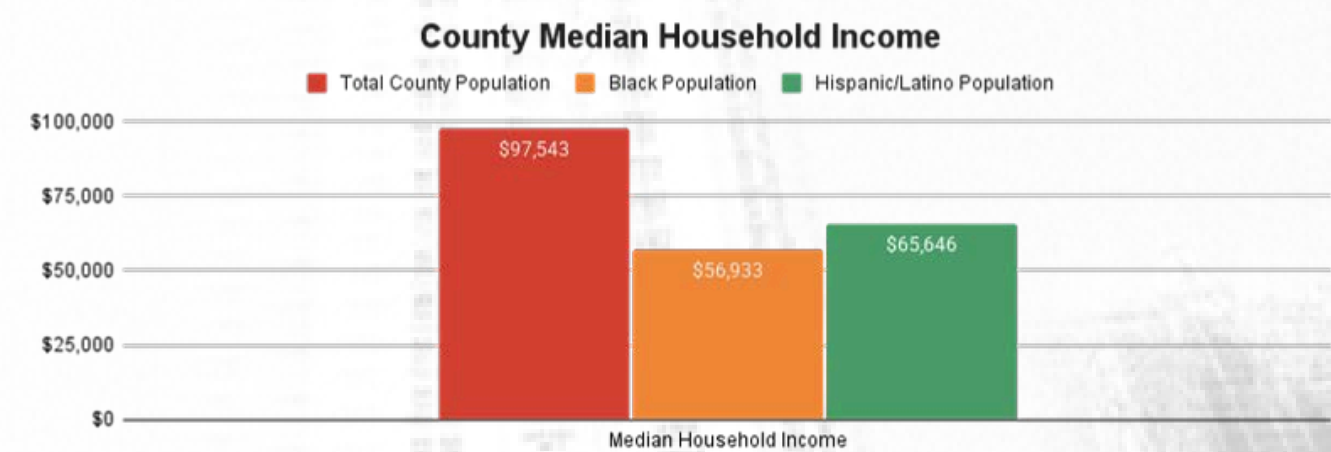
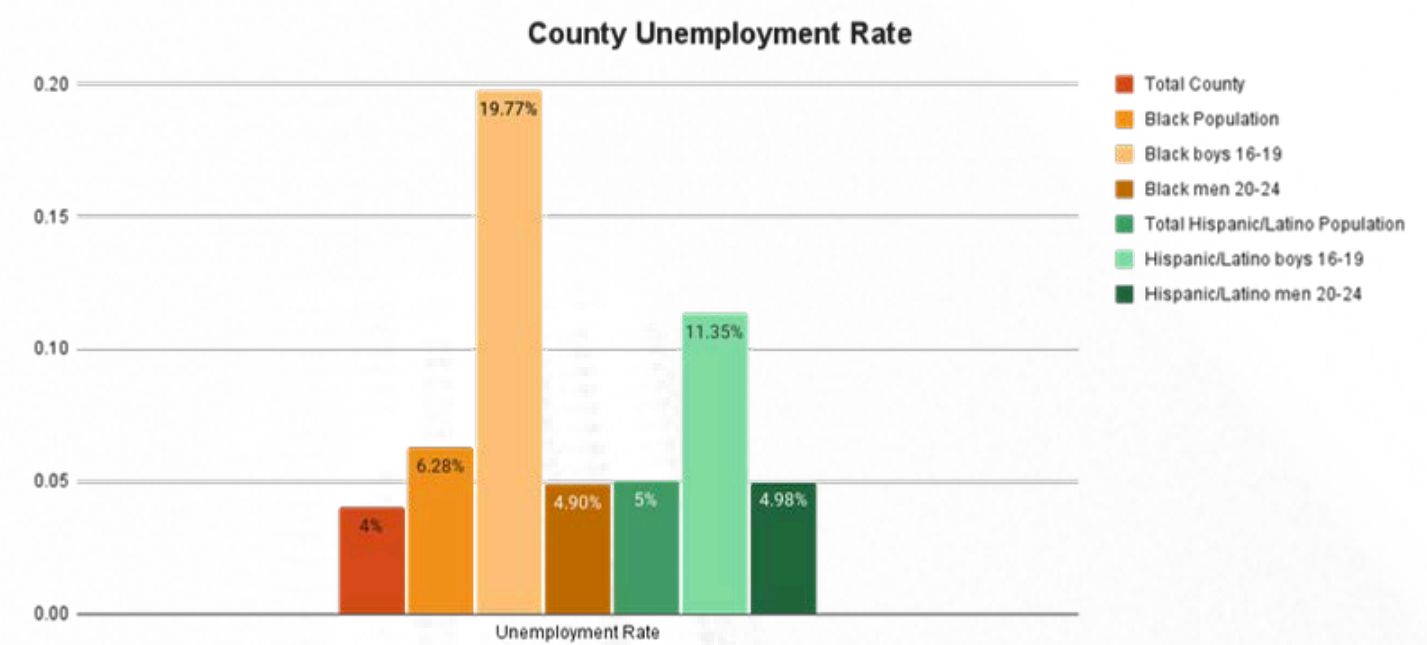
Violent crime
rate per 100,000
residents

Murder Rate
per 100,000
residents

County	5,096	382	5
State	123,856	406	6
Country	1,253,813	374	6

SOURCE: Austin Police Department, FBI UCR, and Neighborhood Scout

SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS DATA



SOURCE: Census, 2023/2021

UNDERSTANDING THE LOCAL LANDSCAPE: TRAVIS COUNTY

From April 22–24, 2025, Cities United launched its Leading the Way Tour in Travis County, bringing together community leaders, public officials, young changemakers, and advocates for three days of deep conversation, reflection, and action. Participants explored a shared vision for a safer, more equitable Travis County—celebrating local accomplishments, identifying persistent gaps, and outlining concrete actions to sustain and accelerate long-term progress.



Travis County is rich with innovation—but needs alignment to unlock its full potential

The engagement revealed a dynamic local landscape: one marked by committed leadership, promising programs, and strong community will—but also challenged by fragmented infrastructure, inconsistent young leader integration, and structural barriers to equitable investment. The themes below summarize key insights from the visit, organized across four SWOT-based dimensions that shape Travis County’s emerging public safety ecosystem and its readiness to advance a comprehensive public safety strategy.

Grounded Strengths:

What Travis County Is Building On

- Community-Led Violence Intervention
- Coordinated Prevention Infrastructure
- Trauma Recovery and Hospital-Based Response
- Shared Vision of Safety

Emerging Momentum:

Opportunities to Leverage

- Narrative Change and Public Awareness
- Regional Collaboration
- Data-Informed Strategy Development
- Political Visibility and Buy-In

Persistent Challenges:

Where Gaps Continue

- Young Leader Engagement and Integration
- Justice Reform and Alternatives to Incarceration
- Mental Health and Wraparound Gaps
- Limited Policy Advocacy
- Fragmented Coordination

Strategic Considerations:

Potential Barriers to Long-Term Progress

- Funding Alignment and Sustainability Pathways
- Ecosystem Structure and Coordination Mechanisms
- Policy and Advocacy Strategy Development
- Data Infrastructure and Shared Learning

GROUNDLED STRENGTHS: WHAT TRAVIS COUNTY IS BUILDING ON

Travis County's approach to public safety is anchored by community trust, credible messengers, and city-supported infrastructure. Programs like ATX Peace and Jail to Jobs demonstrate that community-led solutions are not just possible—they are already working. These efforts are supported by a growing investment in trauma-informed care and a shared local understanding that safety must include healing, housing, and opportunity.

KEY AREAS OF STRENGTH

Community-Led Violence Intervention Is Active and Trusted

Programs like ATX Peace and Jail to Jobs offer direct, relationship-based outreach, trusted by the communities most impacted by violence. Their presence reflects a significant step toward reimagining safety through credible messengers.

Citywide Coordination Through the Office of Violence Prevention

The Office of Violence Prevention (OVP) provides institutional coordination, policy development, and a growing network of cross-sector partnerships—laying the foundation for systems-level change.

Hospital-Based Trauma Recovery Efforts Are Established

Dell Seton and Dell Children's, along with the Harvest Trauma Recovery Center, are providing trauma-informed, hospital-based services for survivors. These programs close critical gaps between crisis response and long-term healing.

Shared Vision of Safety Across Stakeholders

Throughout the tour, participants named safety as access to mental health care, housing, education, and healing—not just absence of violence. This shared framing is a powerful anchor for strategy and alignment.

INSIGHTS

Travis County has invested in the people and places closest to the issue—demonstrating that public safety reimagined is already underway, even as deeper systems-building continues.

PERSISTENT CHALLENGES: WHERE GAPS CONTINUE

Despite progress, Travis County's safety ecosystem faces structural and systemic challenges that constrain its ability to scale impact. While community programs are working, they are not consistently integrated into strategy, policy, or funding infrastructure. Disparities in access to services, young leader integration, and mental health support surfaced repeatedly as areas in need of focused attention and sustained investment.

KEY AREAS OF CONCERN

Young Leaders Are Not Fully Embedded in Public Safety Strategy

Young people—especially young Black men and boys—participate in programs but are not consistently included in planning, decision-making, or leadership roles. This limits long-term sustainability and overlooks the insights of those closest to the issue

Justice System Reform Is Emerging but Uneven

While some diversion and reentry efforts are underway, broader system transformation remains limited. Traditional enforcement approaches continue to dominate, and community alternatives are often under-resourced.

Mental Health Services Remain Underdeveloped and Inaccessible

Participants consistently cited the lack of culturally competent, community-based mental health care—particularly outside of hospital systems—as a major barrier to prevention and healing.

Cross-Sector Coordination Is Not Yet Formalized

Collaboration exists in pockets but lacks formal infrastructure, shared metrics, or sustained strategy across agencies. This creates inconsistencies and limits the ecosystem's collective capacity to respond.

INSIGHTS

Travis County's challenge is not whether community-rooted safety is possible—but how to integrate it systemically, equitably, and at scale.

EMERGING MOMENTUM: OPPORTUNITIES TO LEVERAGE

The Leading the Way Tour surfaced clear signals of readiness across Travis County’s developing public safety ecosystem. While much work remains, community partners, local leaders, and young leaders identified several opportunities to deepen impact, strengthen alignment, and scale solutions that are already gaining traction.

KEY OPPORTUNITIES

Expansion of Trauma-Informed, Healing-Centered Care

There is strong momentum to grow culturally responsive mental health services, expand trauma-informed training for youth leaders, and increase access to community-based supports like public safety ambassadors.

Leveraged Political Will and Regional Community Buy-In

Elected officials, criminal justice leaders, agency leaders, and grassroots advocates have shown visible support for community-centered safety. This existing momentum can be further leveraged across jurisdictions to advance shared priorities and sustain long-term investment.

Community-Driven Mentorship, Workforce, and Youth Leadership

Place-based initiatives are linking mentorship with employment and civic leadership, especially for young people most impacted by violence.

Public Engagement Through Shared Spaces and Partnerships

Libraries, schools, and neighborhood hubs are increasingly used for dialogue, healing, and connection. Interagency partnerships across health, education, and justice offer opportunities to formalize shared strategies and align resources.

Narrative Shift Through Strategic Storytelling and Community Data

Local media and social norming campaigns are reshaping how safety is defined—centering healing, lived experience, and shared values. There is also growing interest in pairing storytelling with community-level data to build trust, demonstrate impact, and guide decision-making.

INSIGHTS

Travis County’s momentum is rooted in community leadership, youth vision, and institutional alignment. Advancing this progress will require coordination, investment, and a sustained commitment to shared strategies and storytelling.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS: POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO LONG-TERM PROGRESS

As Travis County's public safety ecosystem matures, several conditions could limit its ability to scale and sustain impact. These long-term risks require proactive planning, investment, and coordination to ensure durable, community-centered outcomes.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Funding Instability and Economic Investment

Many partners rely on short-term grants, leaving efforts vulnerable to political shifts and funding gaps. Long-term stability will require diversified, multi-year investments that embed community safety into broader economic and workforce strategies.

Lack of Formalized Infrastructure and Shared Accountability

Cross-sector coordination is emerging, but remains informal. A formalized infrastructure with shared governance, roles, and metrics would help sustain and scale collaborative work across agencies and communities.

Policy Lag and Stakeholder Education Gaps

Without coordinated education for decision-makers, Travis County risks policy inertia. A lack of clear frameworks for CVI and public health-based safety approaches may stall momentum and make advocacy efforts harder to scale or defend.

Data Gaps That Undermine Strategy and Sustainability

In the absence of shared indicators, evaluation standards, and integrated systems, it will be difficult to track outcomes, demonstrate value, or secure long-term support. Data strategy must move from program-level tracking to ecosystem-level learning.

Narrative Vulnerability and Public Confusion

Without clear, values-aligned messaging, public safety efforts risk misinformation and backlash—especially on issues like guns, outreach, and youth. Proactive narrative strategies are essential to build trust and support.

INSIGHTS

Travis County's progress to date offers a strong foundation—but future success will depend on how well it builds resilient infrastructure, aligns public understanding, and embeds equity-driven safety within broader economic and governance systems.



RECOMMENDATIONS: PATH FROM PROGRESS TO PLAN

To fully transition into the next phase of the Cities United framework, Travis County must move from promising practices to a formalized, coordinated public safety plan. The recommendations below reflect actionable next steps aligned with local momentum, identified gaps, and long-term sustainability needs.

1. Co-Create a Countywide Public Safety Strategy

Develop and formalize a county-wide public safety plan grounded in shared goals, community vision, and young leader input. Establish timelines, accountability structures, and alignment across city, county, and regional partners.

Opportunity for CU Support:

- Facilitate roadmap planning workshops with city, county and community partners
- Provide tools or templates for managing multi-stakeholder workplans

3. Expand Young Leadership and Mentorship Pathways:

Build young leader capacity through training, mentorship, and leadership roles that elevate lived experience and civic power. Integrate young leaders into public safety planning processes and decision-making committees or advisory boards.

Opportunity for CU Support:

- Support the county and partners in exploring intergenerational governance models
- Assist in designing a compensated young leader leadership body or fellowship
- Facilitate follow-up engagements that build on insights from the young leader session

2. Build Sustainable Infrastructure, Governance, and Community Investment

Establish a coordinating body with clear roles and resourcing plans. Map the cost of violence and redirect public and philanthropic funds to sustain healing, prevention, and community-based safety efforts integrated into economic and health strategies.

Opportunity for CU Support:

- Support in resource mapping exercises to determine costs/spending
- Share and support the development of a collaborative funding mechanism in the county

4. Launch a Narrative and Messaging Strategy

Develop a countywide communications plan that redefines safety, addresses misinformation, and uplifts the voices of youth, families, and community leaders. Include education for elected officials and other key stakeholders to build shared understanding of CVI and public safety approaches.

Opportunity for CU Support:

- Co-lead sessions to develop local storytelling mechanisms that uplift the work in Travis County to redefine public safety
- Develop a shared digital hub to house stories, and messaging from all partners in one centralied location



RECOMMENDATIONS: PATH FROM PROGRESS TO PLAN

5. Strengthen Community-Based Organization Capacity, Data Equity, and Ecosystem Readiness:

Provide technical assistance, shared data tools, and convening support to help community-based organizations grow their infrastructure and collaborate effectively. Prioritize access to disaggregated, community-informed data to guide decisions, drive accountability, and advance equity. Leverage public spaces—like libraries and schools—for community engagement, healing, and ecosystem-building.

Opportunity for CU Support:

- Facilitate a data mapping and capacity-building session
- Support local partners via data tracking and sharing technical assistance and success metric development
- Create tools or templates to support data access, sharing and accountability

Sustaining Momentum, Centering Community

Travis County's energy, leadership, and vision that surfaced during the Leading the Way Tour revealed a community ready to move beyond individual programs toward a cohesive, accountable ecosystem. What comes next must be collective: a shared plan, sustainable infrastructure, clearly defined roles, and continued investment in the people and places closest to the work. This is not just about programmatic change; it is about structural transformation.



In June 2024, the Austin City Council took a critical step by voting to explore the creation of an Office of Violence Prevention and invest in community-centered safety solutions. These actions reflect a growing local commitment to dismantling the harmful legacies of exclusion and underinvestment and to building a future grounded in equity and care.



Cities United is committed to walking alongside Travis County as it moves into the next phase of its public safety journey.

By centering young leaders, co-designing strategy with those most impacted, and aligning around a shared narrative of community healing and hope, Travis County has the opportunity to serve as a national model for reimagining safety through partnership, power building, and possibility.





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