

A black and white photograph of a woman with dark, curly hair, wearing a white lab coat and clear safety glasses. She is looking down at a piece of equipment in a laboratory setting. The background is slightly blurred, showing other lab equipment and a bright light source.

COUNTY LEVERS TO DRIVE ECONOMIC MOBILITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | NOVEMBER 2021

COUNTIES BUILD ECONOMIC RESILIENCE AND VITALITY

County governments play an instrumental role in building the economic resilience and vitality of communities and supporting the economic wellbeing of residents. Community characteristics, such as: quality housing supply and safe and navigable neighborhoods; services like public health programs, early childhood education and workforce development training for job seekers; and connectivity to the marketplace through technology and information support the economic mobility for individuals and families. Counties and county leaders, through varied authorities and responsibilities, are well-positioned to have a direct impact on each of these characteristics and more.

In the United States, the concept of economic mobility centers around the ideal that each generation can do better than the last. Local conditions, community characteristics and even power and autonomy can affect opportunities for individuals' long-term economic success, and these aspects can be shaped by local policies.¹ That is, economic mobility is a highly local, connective and relational issue.² Because counties have power and authority to impact factors and conditions that influence long-term economic outcomes and boost upward mobility, county leaders can benefit from a comprehensive understanding of economic mobility and the intersections of related issues.

The report *County Government Levers to Drive Economic Mobility* focuses on the extent to which these elements drive mobility and identifies the ways in which county leaders use local authority to implement policy, planning and service delivery as levers to drive upward mobility. **A series of case studies accompanies the study to highlight the policy and programmatic approaches implemented in counties across the country.**

Read the full report at www.naco.org/county-levers

DRIVERS OF ECONOMIC MOBILITY



HOUSING



EDUCATION & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT



FINANCIAL SECURITY



HEALTH



JUSTICE & PUBLIC SAFETY



COMMUNITY & NEIGHBORHOOD DEVELOPMENT



TECHNOLOGY & INFORMATION ACCESS

COUNTY LEADERS LEVERAGE AUTHORITY TO DRIVE UPWARD MOBILITY

Economic mobility refers to changes in people's economic outcomes or status over a lifetime or across generations — usually measured in income. In one regard, economic mobility can be understood as comparing an individual's income as an adult relative to their parent's or grandparent's income (previous generations) — that is, inter-generational mobility. Alternatively, economic mobility can encompass looking at how groups of people, or generations move up and down the economic ladder over time, that is, it examines changes in an individual's income over their life — also known as intra-generational mobility. Inter-and intra-generational mobility can be measured based on absolute or relative differences. Absolute mobility examines individuals' upward and downward changes in their income over time that is, absolute mobility evaluates actual financial progress. On the other hand, relative mobility examines how individuals rank in the income distribution (or ladder) over their lifetime and in comparison to their peers (other individuals within a generation) or their parents.

There are two basic types of governing authority for counties: Dillon's Rule and Home Rule.

Within the authority granted by the state, most counties can enact policies (e.g., passing ordinances or resolutions), enact or administer programs and enter partnerships or interlocal agreements with nonprofits or other counties and municipalities. In some states, all counties are under the same authority level, while in others the state will permit a mix based on county population size or other factors. For example, under the Ohio Revised Code, most counties have the authority explicitly granted to them by the state, but the state grants limited Home Rule authority to some counties.

DILLON'S RULE

- Counties only possess powers granted by the state and can only take actions expressly implied in state legislation
- Must obtain state approval to make any changes to the government structure, function, fiscal organization or pass any law or ordinance not specifically permitted under existing state legislation

HOME RULE

- States grant counties authority that includes local autonomy or self-determination
- Have greater control over local affairs and flexibility in altering government structure, providing additional services, creating special districts, entering interlocal agreements and adjusting revenues and expenditures



COUNTIES LEAD IN SEVEN KEY AREAS IMPACTING MOBILITY

In the context of economic mobility, levers are tools which county governments wield to help residents move up the economic ladder. They include broad categories of policy and decision-making powers, enacting or administering programs and forming partnerships. The power to enact change is tied to the county's authority to perform duties in the structural, functional and fiscal domains of operations. When it comes to economic mobility, county levers can include allocating dollars to fund critical human services programs, policy resolutions or ordinances to meet the needs of minority and marginalized groups and forming impactful partnerships to better serve the needs of local communities. There are seven primary issue areas in which counties foster economic mobility:

1 HOUSING: Counties impact housing supply through regulatory oversight, oversee housing support services and invest nearly \$13 billion annually in housing and community development (See Palm Beach County, Fla., Waukesha County, Wis. and Howard County, Md. case studies in full report).

2 EDUCATION & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT: County programs (e.g., early care, education, home visiting, workforce development, employment services and others) and investments expand access to high-quality education and workforce development that boost the skills and opportunities of residents (See Tarrant County, Texas, Franklin County, Ohio and Coconino County, Ariz. case studies in full report).

3 HEALTH: From running local health departments, providing behavioral and mental health services to developing community health care programs and community investment, counties play a direct role in the health and well-being of residents (See Fulton County, Ga. and Pinellas County, Fla. case studies in full report).

4 COMMUNITY & NEIGHBORHOOD DEVELOPMENT: Each year, counties spend over \$56 billion on public amenities, housing and community development and transit, as well as convene business and community leaders to stimulate economic activity and tackle key economic issues (See Mercer County, W.Va., Loudoun County, Va., Nassau County, N.Y., Erie County, Pa. and Hennepin County, Minn. case studies in full report).

5 JUSTICE & PUBLIC SAFETY: Counties play a critical role in administering justice and public safety services supporting 91 percent of all local jails, investing \$28.7 billion in correctional facilities, incurring \$20.9 billion in court costs and legal services and retention of police and sheriff's departments to promote public safety (See Multnomah County, Ore. and Bernalillo County, N.M. case studies in full report).

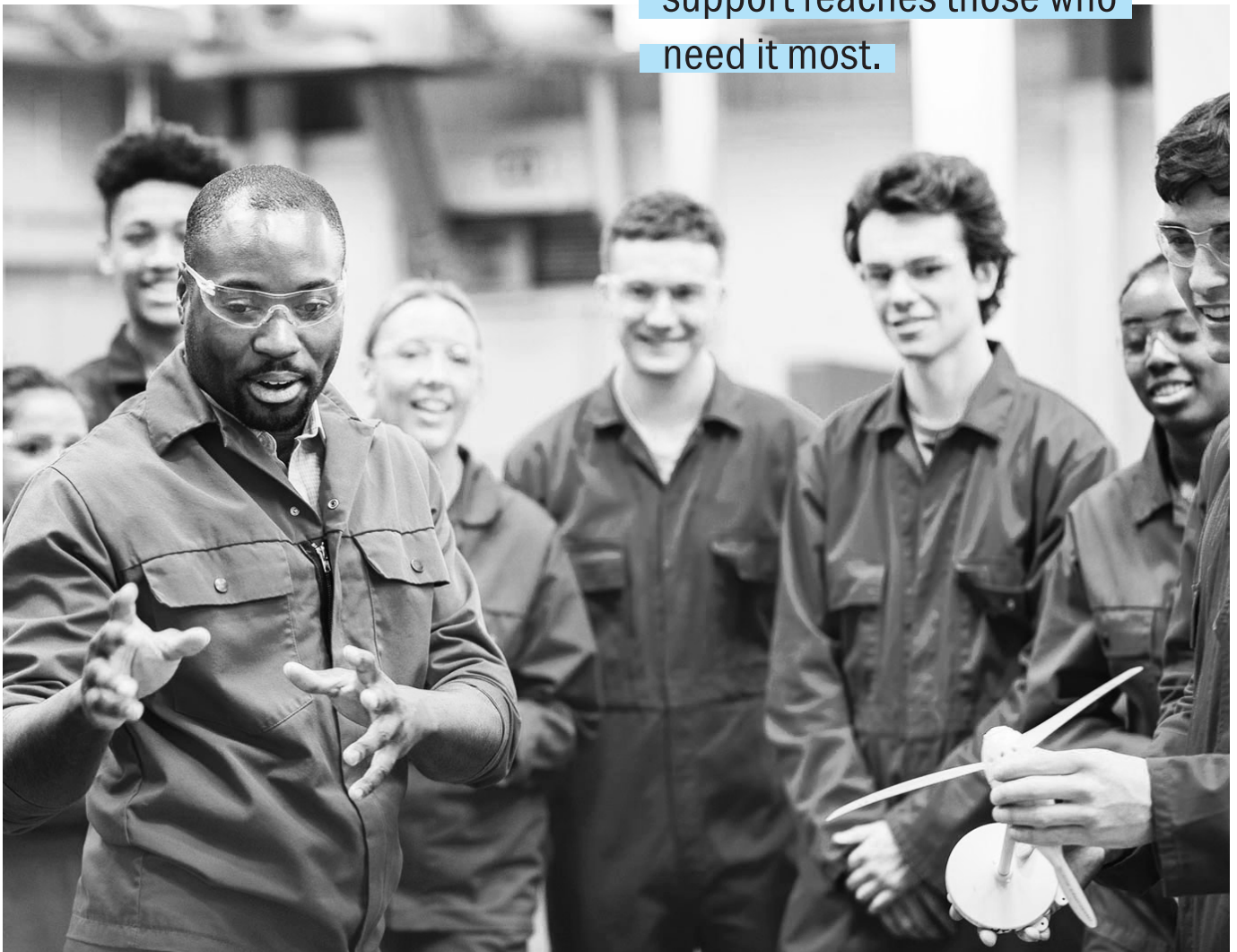
6 TECHNOLOGY & INFORMATION ACCESS: Counties work with the municipalities and cities to lead the way in broadband and technology investment with a focus on bringing broadband into rural areas through partnerships to expand access, and into underserved urban areas by working to increase the affordability of these tools (See Multnomah County, Ore. and Erie County, Pa. case studies in full report).

7 FINANCIAL SECURITY: Counties as employers and community stewards work to promote and educate residents on saving for emergencies or retirement, facilitate programs to promote homeownership and enact workforce development programs to increase earning potential (See Garrett County, Md., Mobile County, Ala. and Bernalillo County, N.M. case studies in full report).

COUNTIES ARE UNIQUELY POSITIONED TO ADVANCE MOBILITY

Because counties have distinct roles and authorities in these seven key factors, county policies and investments are particular effective solutions to uplift communities and residents and drive their upward mobility. Neighborhoods with high upward mobility levels possess characteristics, such as less residential segregation, lower rates of inequality by income and race, lower violent crime rates, better educational opportunities and access to well-paying jobs, to name a few.³ Counties working within the power and authorities defined by the state can leverage policy and decision-making powers, program enacting or administering authority and ability to form partnerships to strengthen equitable and inclusive economic mobility prospects.

Counties are one of the closest forms of government to people, uniquely positioning local leaders to develop approaches that improve individuals' and families' economic opportunity and ensure support reaches those who need it most.

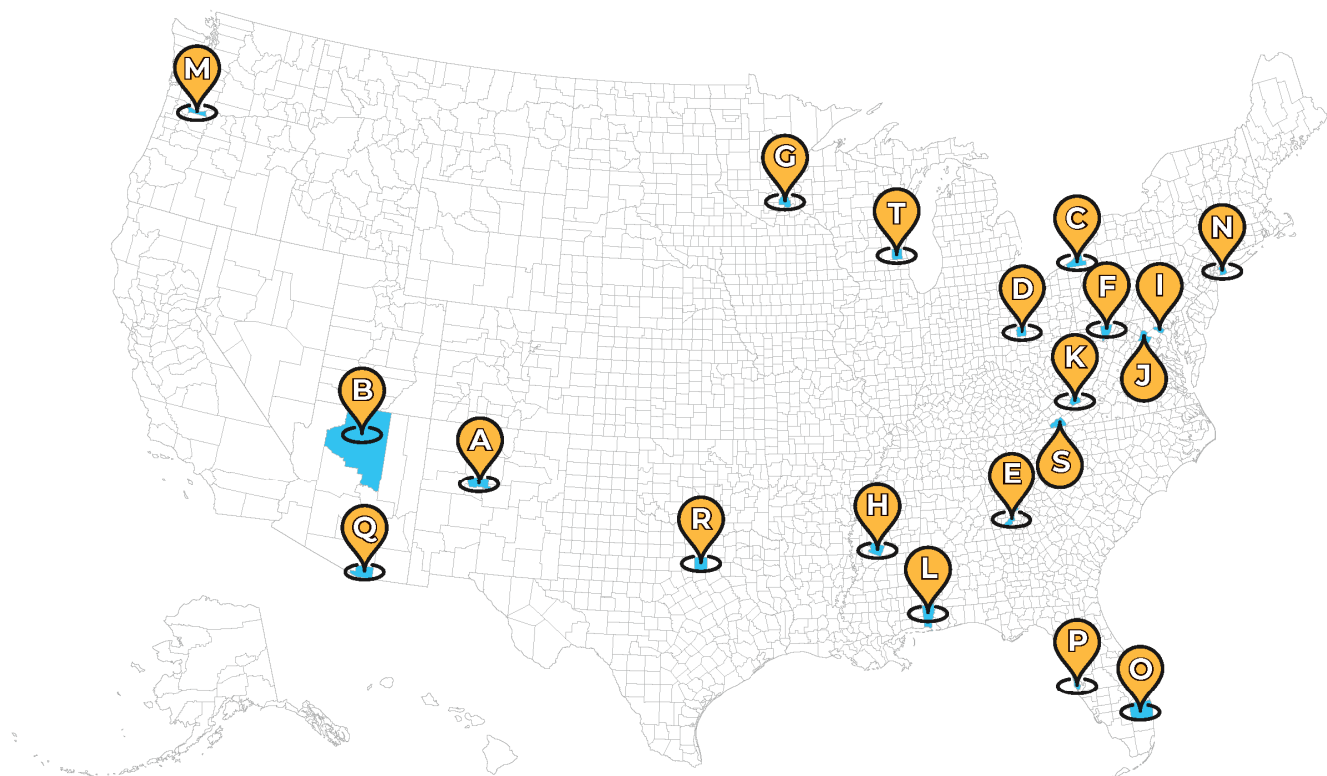


THE ECONOMIC MOBILITY LEADERSHIP NETWORK

The Economic Mobility Leadership Network (EMLN) is a cohort of county leaders that examines the range of complicated issues that comprise economic mobility, including housing and food insecurity and an overall lack of opportunity.

Original EMLN members were selected in 2019 based on geographic, demographic and political diversity. This report spotlights EMLN participants as examples of diverse communities that have implemented programs to address issues of economic mobility, which may be replicated in counties across the country.

2019-2020 NETWORK PARTICIPANTS



A. Bernalillo County, N.M.
B. Coconino County, Ariz.
C. Erie County, Pa.
D. Franklin County, Ohio
E. Fulton County, Ga.
F. Garrett County, Md.
G. Hennepin County, Minn.

H. Holmes County, Miss.
I. Howard County, Md.
J. Loudon County, Va.
K. Mercer County, W. Va.
L. Mobile County, Ala.
M. Multnomah County, Ore.
N. Nassau County, N.Y.

O. Palm Beach County, Fla.
P. Pinellas County, Fla.
Q. Santa Cruz County, Ariz.
R. Tarrant County, Texas
S. Washington County, Va.
T. Waukesha County, Wis.

**The National Association of Counties (NACo) and its Research Foundation (NACoRF) would like to recognize three counties who have contributed to the success of the EMLN throughout its existence but did not participate in 2020: Bernalillo County, N.M., Garrett County, Md. and Washington County, Va.*

METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

To prepare this report, NACo relied on three efforts:

- Results of a survey of EMLN participating counties.
- Several in-depth interviews with county officials and staff, as well as state association staff.
- Feedback from county officials and staff on county case studies.

In 2019, NACo administered a survey to county officials from 20 EMLN participating counties. The survey consisted of several questions related to economic mobility. This study used responses to identify programs to highlight in the county case studies. The one-hour in-depth interviews allowed research staff to understand the powers and authorities of county governments across various issue areas (i.e., health, financial security, education, workforce development, etc.).

Sources:

¹ Margery Austin Turner and others, “Boosting Upward Mobility: Metrics to Inform Local Action Summary” (Washington D.C.: Urban Institute, 2020).

² Aparna Mathur, Abby McCloskey and Erin Melley, “The American Dream in 2020: How to Strengthen It” (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 2020).

³ Raj Chetty and Nathaniel Hendren, “The Impacts of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility I: Childhood Exposure Effects,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 133 (3) (2018):1107–1162.

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660 North Capitol St. NW | Suite 400 | Washington, D.C. 20001 | 202.393.6226 | www.naco.org
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