

Sacramento County Budget Focus Group Analysis

Key Findings from Focus Groups Conducted Nov. 1-2, 2022



OPINION
RESEARCH
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Methodology

- FM3 Research conducted four focus groups in Sacramento, California, on November 1 and 2, 2022.
- The groups were structured as follows:



- Quotes from respondents throughout this presentation correspond with the color of the boxes above.
- In each session respondents were otherwise recruited to reflect the demographic diversity of that segment of the population with regard to age, gender, level of formal education and income, owner/renter, race/ethnicity, and ideological perspective.
- Employees of Sacramento County, and those with an employee of the County in their household, were excluded.

CAUTION

- Qualitative research like focus groups does not measure directly the frequency by which opinions and attitudes may exist within a particular universe of people.
- Accordingly, the results of these groups may be considered suggestive of the attitudes of Sacramento County residents in these demographics but cannot be considered to represent their views with any kind of statistical precision – even on questions where their views are quantified.
- However, the discussion does provide helpful insights into language, core values and the “why” behind their opinions and will guide the development and interpretation of survey research.

Key Findings

1. Participants had extremely low levels of familiarity with what the County does or how its budget works.
2. Their central, top-of-mind concern was homelessness.
3. The cost of living (particularly housing) and crime closely followed as key concerns.
4. Poverty and food insecurity were not seen as urgent problems (even in the lower-income group, where housing costs were more central).
5. Infrastructure discussion and concern focused on roads, which they thought needed significant improvement.
6. Participants were generally satisfied with regional parks.



Views of Quality of Life, Governance and Budgeting

Participants enjoyed life in Sacramento County, though housing costs, homelessness and crime were key concerns.

- Participants said they enjoy living in Sacramento County for its location, diversity, economy and weather.
- Participants' top concerns about living in Sacramento County have to do with cost of living, and particularly housing. For many in the low-income group being able to afford housing was a central stress and challenge in their lives.
- Respondents near-universally cited homelessness as an intense concern, with connections to safety for many. In discussing challenges with homelessness, many focused on its connections to untreated mental health issues, substance abuse, and crime.
- Many also named increased crime and violence as a key concern.

It still has a hometown feel to me. Even though it is a larger city numbers-wise.

Everything is here, and if it's not, it's two hours away.

I hear gunshots often. It just feels really scary. My car has been broken into.

Everyone I know, their rent has gone up \$200, \$300, \$400. We're making the [money] to afford that where?

[Unhoused people] are all over, everywhere. ... It's a really bad crisis. [It] is a little scary when you are by yourself.

Awareness of the County's responsibilities and budget process was relatively limited.

- **Respondents had only a very general sense of the services the County provides.** In addition, few could name the person who represents them on the Board of Supervisors, though those in unincorporated areas were slightly more familiar.
- **Few even ventured a guess as to the process used to create the budget.** Some believed that each department submits a budget based on matching their spending from the year before; others felt strongly it was a process that took place behind closed doors, heavily influenced by political considerations.
- **Participants had no real sense of the scope of the County budget.** When asked to guess, most offered figures in the tens or hundreds of millions. As is often the case when talking about aggregate government spending outside the scale of a typical household budget, participants had little sense of the scale of spending necessary.

I believe it starts with the supervisors in a meeting somewhat like this. Everyone is jockeying for their money. Once they get it, they have to spend all of the money or they aren't going to get it again. It's like any budget that goes through a company.

I don't think they have a budget. It's just available when they need it.

Many felt budgeting was challenging when given a hypothetical budget of \$100 to allocate across six categories.

- Participants acknowledged that the budgeting exercise was difficult, primarily because of their desire to provide generous funding for nearly every item on the list.

Spending Category	Total Across All Groups	Average Per Respondent
Public safety, including law enforcement	\$795	\$22.71
Safety-net services for children, seniors and families	\$670	\$19.14
Reducing homelessness	\$640	\$18.29
Maintenance of infrastructure such as roads, bridges and public buildings	\$580	\$16.57
Economic development, such as job creation	\$490	\$14.00
Parks and environmental protection	\$335	\$9.57

Thinking Behind Participants' Budget Choices

In everyday life, I see seniors being left over, and the children, are dying younger, killing younger. That's why I chose safety-net for seniors and children.

A lot of our public safety services time is spent tending to homeless people.

- Public safety made it to the top of the list because respondents felt it was critical – without it, nothing else on the list would matter.
- The average respondent spent the next-most on safety-net services – particularly because of their sympathy for seniors and children.
- Although nearly all had said homelessness was their key concern, it was third-ranking among the investment priorities. Many argued that spending on public safety and safety-net services should help to address the issue, feeling that they overlapped.
- Some weren't quite sure of the County's role in "job creation" and "economic development," but others felt it deserved investment because good-paying jobs and a strong economy could reduce the need for safety-net spending.
- Given the choices they were forced to make by the exercise, some prioritized parks less because they viewed them as more of a "want" than a "need," and in some cases because they felt parks are in generally good shape.



Homelessness, Poverty, and Food Security

Homelessness was clearly and universally seen as getting worse – and respondents recognized a wide variety of causes.

- **Many reported specific incidents of feeling unsafe and intimidated in public by an unhoused person suffering from mental health issues and/or drug abuse.** There was a strong shared sense that increasing homelessness was at the root of many of the County's biggest challenges, and threats to its safety and quality of life.
- **Participants recognized a wide range of factors that drive more prevalent homelessness,** including the rising cost of living, drug use, and mental health challenges as root causes of homelessness.
- **Participants were also divided on the question of whether homelessness is ultimately solvable,** given the many roots of the problem and its increasing prevalence.
- **They were most enthusiastic about any program or service that would prevent people from becoming homeless,** including drug treatment and recovery programs.
- **In contrast, they had the sense that building or providing new housing was the most expensive alternative,** and many were convinced that unhoused people would choose to stay on the street rather than accept an offer of subsidized housing.
- **Participants wanted a focus on child and family homelessness.** as they perceived more long-term consequences for children who are homeless when they are young.

Respondents prioritized programs that support children and families.

The children suffer the most when the family is at risk.

A lot of parents are working and they're doing other jobs on the side, they're doing multiple things just to make ends meet. ... That gives kids time to be in the street, smoking, drinking, doing their own thing, because mom is working three jobs.

The government has a lot of food. I was that population many years ago, and there are a lot of programs that offer food.

- **Among County safety-net programs, respondents prioritized assistance programs that support children.**
- **Lower-ranking programs were ones where they could identify other means of support.** Some noted they ranked support for the food bank less important than other items since the food bank has their own network of donors. A few others also specifically said they ranked cash aid programs lower, because they had the sense that many jobs are available for people who are not truly disabled.
- **Low-income respondents in particular valued childcare,** recognizing that the lack of affordable childcare can keep people out of the job market and hold entire families back economically and otherwise.



Infrastructure

When asked about infrastructure, participants primarily focused on roads.

- **Most had no clear sense of which roads are maintained by the county;** those in unincorporated areas were modestly more familiar with the network and who is responsible for what. Participants were generally unhappy with the condition of roads across the county, saying they had too many potholes and many had traffic bottlenecks. There was a broadly-shared perception that wealthier areas of the county had consistently better-maintained roads.
- **Most felt parks were in good condition and a point of pride for the County.** As in most jurisdictions, there was a sizable amount of confusion between City, County, State and other parks.
- **Although some had concerns about homelessness on the American River Parkway, the conversation about parks was largely positive.** Many specifically named the variety of activities available at County parks that other parts of the country don't have, like biking, boating and wildlife viewing.

We have regional parks that you can drive to, and you never have to get out of your car to see deer or coyotes, the river, whatever.

Outside of the homeless camps, [parks] are in pretty good shape.



Conclusions

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- At the conclusion of each discussion, participants were asked to write some final thoughts about how they would like the County to focus when making decisions about the budget. **Opinions varied, but they prioritized public safety and social services.** Especially with regard to homelessness, they saw these issues as intertwined.
- **Children and families were prioritized by many** who named specific groups that could use additional help; investments in mental health were seen as a key, fundamental focus because it was seen as paying dividends over time for children, families and quality of life.
- **Participants did not have clear preferences on the best way to reach them with information about the County budget.** Most said they would turn to Google if they had a question about the County budget. While they found the conversation in the focus group informative, most did not seem eager to participate in future budgeting processes.
- More generally, participants said that they learn about issues affecting Sacramento County from local news, social media, through their children's schools, and from conversations with neighbors.

**For more information,
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