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Contact: [Diane.Shinn@dc.gov](mailto:Diane.Shinn@dc.gov), 202-727-8991

## D.C. Residents Give Thumbs Up on Delivery of Government Services

*Schools, affordable housing are top priorities; a sizable portion of residents are concerned by high cost of living in D.C.*

**WASHINGTON, D.C., November 4, 2019**—The District government gets an overall positive report card from D.C. residents on its delivery of services, and when compared to perceptions of those same services back in 1997—when the city was close to financial collapse—people’s attitudes have dramatically improved, according to a new public opinion survey released today by the Office of the D.C. Auditor.

The city-wide survey on government services asked 1,210 residents ages 18 and older, to rate their satisfaction first with city services overall and with 26 individual city services, and to then indicate their priority for each specific service.

ODCA conducted the survey to assess the progress D.C. has made in the two decades since that difficult period of the city’s history and help inform the D.C. Auditor’s future work. Many of the new survey’s questions were repeated from a similar survey conducted in 1997 and can be used for comparison.

“In 1997, residents’ top priorities for improvement were schools and crime,” said D.C. Auditor Kathy Patterson. “These are still on a list of high priority concerns in 2019, though ratings of these services have improved substantially and concerns about affordability now outpace both issues.”

In addition, other concerns such as services for the homeless and mental health care have emerged as high priorities. While the issues facing the city have changed, there is more consistency than divergence across subgroups in the city.

Researchers found some modest distinctions by age, gender, race, and ward, there was a significant degree of consistency on priorities and on the quality of District services across demographic categories as well as across those new to the District compared to long-time residents.

### Demographic changes in D.C. since 1997

Since 1997, the District’s population now includes:

- A higher proportion of non-Hispanic White (now 36%, 27% in 1997) and Hispanic residents (11% now, 5% in 1997) and a smaller proportion of African-American residents (47% now, 65% in 1997).
- A higher proportion of high-income households (median household income in 2017 was roughly \$83,000; in 1997 it was just under \$50,000 in current dollars).
- A higher proportion of residents with a college education, although the District was even then a high-education community (56% now, 44% in 1997).

\*Current data are from the 2017 ACS 5-year estimates; the 1997 estimates for race and education are from our surveys; the 1997 median adjusted household income is from the Census.

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### **Satisfaction with specific services**

In the 2019 survey, residents rated the quality of each service as excellent, good, fair, poor, or very poor. In analyzing these data, researchers looked at the percentage rating the service as excellent or good versus those who said poor or very poor. For example, public libraries are rated excellent or good by 76% of residents and poor or very poor by 4%. The difference between the positive and negative ratings for public libraries is +72.

Satisfaction is highest for:

- Public libraries +72
- Fire protection +63
- Art and cultural programs +58
- Bus service +51

Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (Metro) is the only service where the percentage of residents rating it good or excellent has decreased from 1997, while the percent calling Metro an extremely high priority has increased—a sign that Metro’s troubles are noticed by the District’s residents. Still, 52% continue to rate Metro positively, down from 79% in 1997.

### **Satisfaction with services overall**

The survey results indicate that residents are mostly satisfied with the quality of city services overall.

- About half the adult population in the District rates services generally as either good or excellent (50%), while only one in eight say the services are poor or very poor (13%).
- Another third is more equivocal, rating government services only fair (36%).
- Although some groups are more satisfied than others, in all of the demographic categories examined, residents are far more likely to express positive views than negative ones.

These results suggest a District population that is considerably happier with its local government than it was in 1997, when Belden & Russonello conducted a similar survey for the D.C. Financial Responsibility and Management Assistance Authority. Then, only 15% of the public rated government services on the whole as excellent or good, 35% said fair, and 48% rated services generally poor or very poor.

### **Priority of services**

Residents rated how high a priority 26 city services are to them personally. The following services are most likely to be rated extremely high priorities:

- The quality of public schools across the city 45%
- Providing affordable housing for residents 45%
- Safe drinking water 43%
- Police protection against crime 42%
- Services for people experiencing homelessness 39%
- The quality of public schools in your neighborhood 38%

The survey asked about public schools in two ways to understand how perceptions of public education in one’s neighborhood compare to perceptions of schools citywide; both are high priorities.

Some other significant takeaways from the new survey, conducted by Belden Russonello Strategists and Emma White Research from July 13 to August 12, include:

- In 1997, crime dominated responses about the most important problem facing the city, but the next highest response—offered by more than one in 10—was that the D.C. government itself was the top problem (11%). This year the District government did not register as a problem or an issue.

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- On the same question in 2019 the top issue cited was a combination of affordable housing and gentrification at 33 percent—and that issue did not register for respondents in 1997.

### **Interaction with the D.C. government**

A closer examination of attitudes toward three city services among direct users of those services reveals a mixed view of their success.

- Among the 26% of survey respondents who have called 911 in the last year, three-quarters judge the service they received as good or excellent.
- Over half of respondents have contacted the DMV, and two-thirds of them rate the service as excellent or good.
- The one in seven who have contacted the D.C. government regarding their taxes, however, have been somewhat less satisfied, as 40% say the service they received at the tax office was good or excellent and 35% rated it poor or very poor.

For more information or to download the report, visit [www.dcauditor.org](http://www.dcauditor.org).

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