unicef USA

for every child

YOUTH VOICE: CHILD-CENTERED GOVERNANCE STRATEGIES

Introduction

Child-centered governance is an emerging approach to public decision-making that places the well-being, rights, and voices of children at the center of government policy and resource allocation. Drawing on UNICEF's decades of global experience through the Child Friendly Cities Initiative, this framework centers five interconnected governance strategies: child ombuds offices, children's cabinets, youth councils, child impact statements, and children's budgets. Together, these structures provide governments with practical mechanisms to ensure that children and young people meaningfully participate in decisions that affect them, that public budgets reflect their needs and priorities, and that independent advocates can elevate their perspectives within government systems. Early research from international contexts suggests these strategies hold significant promise for improving child health, well-being, and equity outcomes, while rigorous evidence from the United States remains limited.

In the United States, many child-centered governance structures are prevalent, however, their adoption has been varied in design, scope, and implementation quality. This heterogeneity raises important questions: which models are operating where, what constitutes best practice across each of the five governance strategies, and when these structures are implemented well, what impact do they have on children and communities? UNICEF USA seeks to answer these questions through a systematic examination of child-centered governance in the American context, with the goal of identifying the models and conditions most likely to produce meaningful, lasting improvements in children's lives.

Methodology

Project leadership at National League of Cities included Dr. Christine Baker-Smith, Director of Research and Brandis Stockman, Program Manager of Education and Workforce Success. At UNICEF USA, the project was led by Dr. Anne Day Leong, Senior Director of Research, Evaluation and Research Partnerships, and Dr. Kelsey Corallo, Research Scientist.

UNICEF USA commissioned a national survey of child-centered governance structures across the U.S. in partnership with the National League of Cities (NLC) to better understand the prevalence of child-centered governance structures in the U.S. Drawing on NLC's national network of municipal members and research expertise, the survey produced a nationally representative dataset on youth governance structures across the United States.

SAMPLING

NLC has over 2,700 members made up of cities, towns, and villages across the United States and represents the more than 19,000 cities, towns, and villages across the United States in partnership with the 49 State Municipal Leagues

(Hawaii does not have a State Municipal League) which represent the local governments in each state and Puerto Rico. The final sample (see limitations below for details) represents 384 unique municipal governments based on responses from 770 municipal staff.

To ensure a nationally representative sample, NLC first identified a distribution of municipalities across two categories: NLC geographic region and population size, as determined by the U.S. Census 2020. We then fielded the survey to all NLC members but focused additional efforts on specific groups of cities following the initial fielding to ensure representativeness across each of the 16 region and population size categories. Table 1 below displays the final sample distribution of city respondents represented in the database based on each region/population category.

CITY SAMPLE DISTRIBUTION BY REGION AND POPULATION SIZE CATEGORIES

	Region									
	Midwest		Northeast/Mid-Atlantic		South		West		Total	
Population Size	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
10,001-50,000	36	45	13	43.3	57	37	36	30.5	142	37.2
50,001-200,000	26	32.5	7	23.3	36	23.4	40	33.9	109	28.5
<10,000	7	8.8	5	16.7	31	20.1	19	16.1	62	16.2
>200,000	11	13.8	5	16.7	30	19.5	23	19.5	69	18.1
Total	80	100	30	100	154	100	118	100	382	100

Table Note: Population size determined via U.S. Census data. Regions based on NLC service regions. As a note, n = 2 Puerto Rican municipalities were included in the dataset and are not reflected in this table.

FIELDING

In collaboration with UNICEF USA, NLC subject matter experts developed a survey that reflects UNICEF USA's definitions of youth governance structures.

In September 2025, NLC invited its members to complete the survey through its regular member communication channels over four weeks. An initial invitation followed by three reminders was sent, for a total of four communications. Additionally, NLC's constituency groups distributed the survey to its members via QR code during the NLC Annual City Summit in November 2025. NLC staff members also administered the survey as part of the end-of-conference evaluation. In December 2025 and January 2026, NLC sent targeted emails to city members in region/city population categories that had not yet met the sample goal of over 1,000 cities. Overall, we sent more than 5,000 emails with a response rate of approximately 11 percent. The full survey completion rate was approximately 65 percent; however, full and partial survey responses were included in the database.

Definitions of Youth Governance Structures

To support consistent interpretation of survey responses, the following definitions reflect the child-centered governance strategies included in the survey instrument. Cities were asked to indicate whether and how these specific structures, processes, and policies were present in their local context.

BUDGET ALLOCATIONS FOR CHILDREN:

The city tracks and reports public spending on children and youth within its budget. This may include producing a dedicated children's budget, identifying child- and youth-related expenditures in the broader city budget, or maintaining a dedicated fund for children and families. At a minimum, the city is able to show and share how public resources are allocated to support children's well-being, whether the effort is led internally or carried out in collaboration with a nonprofit, research institution, or other external partner.

CHILD IMPACT STATEMENTS:

The city uses a formal or informal process to consider how a policy, budget decision, or other action may affect children and youth, even if the primary issue is not focused on children. This could be a question, checklist, form, or standard practice used by departments or decisionmakers to assess potential impacts on child well-being. The process may be codified or implemented as a routine practice.

YOUTH COUNCILS:

The city provides a structured, ongoing opportunity for youth to engage with local government. This may take the form of a youth council, advisory board, youth commissioners, or another formal body, regardless of what it is called. These groups may focus on educating youth about how local government works, gathering their perspectives on community issues, or offering input into city programs, services, policies, or budgets. At a minimum, the group is convened by the city and regularly connects young people to civic life and local leadership. The structure may or may not have formal decision-making power.

CHILDREN'S CABINETS:

The city has an established group that brings together leaders from multiple departments or agencies that serve children and youth to coordinate planning, programs, or investments. This group is focused on improving services and outcomes for children and families through cross-departmental collaboration. While the group may also include community partners, it is city-led or facilitated.

YOUTH OMBUDS OFFICES:

The city has a designated individual, or office that is an independent entity or office within government that is responsible for advocating for child wellbeing. Typically, these offices are empowered to receive and investigate complaints or concerns related to child wellbeing and their welfare, access to services, or overall well-being. This office may serve specific populations — such as youth in foster care, juvenile justice, or early childhood systems — and has the authority to make recommendations for corrective action. The ombudsperson may operate within city government or as an independent or contracted entity.

Limitations

This dataset does not represent a census of all municipal governments, only a sample which is largely nationally representative (see Table 1). Importantly, we invite municipal government representatives to explore this inventory for their city and notify us if they are not included and would like to be or have updates to the information provided here.

Responses with no municipal government identified (e.g., where only a state was identified [n = 13]; a county was identified [n = 5]; or a state was not identified [n = 2]) were removed from the sample.

These data include information only on the five structures identified by subject-matter experts preceding the fielding of this survey and relied on municipal government staff to identify these structures. Among staff from the same

municipality, there were discrepancies in which structures they reported are present, how they are governed, and what they do. Once the survey was closed, we dropped survey responses in which none of the five main questions were answered (n = 106). There were 311 responses wherein multiple individuals from a single municipality responded. In these duplication cases, we created a single city-level observation retaining all affirmative answers, reasoning that a respondent is unlikely to assume a structure exists when it does not but may be unaware of one that does. This yielded 384 unique municipal responses.

A key limitation of self-reported survey data is that respondents may be unaware of all programs and structures operating within their government. We did not verify individual responses. However, there is no theoretical or empirical basis to expect that awareness would vary systematically across the five governance structures examined here. Because this potential for non-awareness is equally plausible for any of the five structures, any resulting measurement error is likely distributed evenly across items rather than concentrated in a way that would bias comparisons between structures. We use this approach for the purposes of creating an inventory of structures; however, it also highlights an evolving awareness and definition of child-centered governance structures. As the field of research and practice in this area grows, we encourage further exploration beyond the scope of this project, and we invite fellow scholars to reach out to collaborate on this work.