

Improving Municipal Service Delivery Through Diverse and Equitable Hiring

A review of racial and ethnic representation in the local government workforce

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As America grows increasingly diverse, more municipalities are prioritizing diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility (DEIA) in their decision-making processes. Implementing DEIA policies and practices for staff across the public sector workforce, including both elected officials and bureaucratic employees, enables municipalities to better serve their residents and communities. This brief explores the benefits of incorporating DEIA in local government workforce hiring practices through a race and ethnicity lens. Additionally, this brief provides an analysis of how representative local government employment is compared with its residents and highlights strategies for incorporating DEIA policies to boost municipal hiring and overall employee satisfaction.

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DEIA improves municipal service delivery

In recent years, America has grown increasingly racially diverse.* As demographics shift, communities are working to ensure the people elected and working in their governments represent the residents they are serving. To understand where a municipal workforce has opportunities for growth, leaders must understand the trends impacting their workforces in order to meet these demographic shifts. Currently, 61 percent of counties have an underrepresentation of BIPOC groups within their local government workforces. Additionally, BIPOC communities in NLC's sample are underrepresented in the local government workforce by 7 percent.

BIPOC communities have long been underrepresented in bureaucratic and elected governmental positions. Without representation in areas where decisions are made, these communities are less able to influence policies and practices that directly impact them. This lack of representation has, regardless of intention, led to racist and discriminatory policies that limit underrepresented communities' access to government services and amenities like transportation, housing, parks, and more.^{1,2,3}

* NLC's analysis reviews data on several races and ethnicities, including Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic/Latino, Native American and Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander, two or more races, and white.

Lack of representation is concerning not only due to its impact on policies and practices of municipal service delivery but also as it impacts accountability. Without accountability, communities have less power to influence decision-making, especially when local leaders are not directly tied to a community. While BIPOC communities are most often underrepresented in the local government workforce, many of the concerns raised by this underrepresentation — as well as the approaches to address them — can apply to any minority community.

One method used to address this issue involves employing individuals from a variety of backgrounds, whether through consultant positions, full-time roles or other paid opportunities. Taking steps to increase staff diversity can lead to several benefits for local leaders, their workforces and residents, including opportunities to improve:^{4,5}



**Organizational
performance**



**Organizational
culture**



**Employee
retention**



**Residents'
trust**



**Resident
services**

However, to attract diverse talent local governments must incorporate a diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility (DEIA) framework in their recruitment and hiring processes.⁶ When incorporating DEIA in municipal hiring policy and practice, decisionmakers must consider and acknowledge the historic and current biases around race and ethnicity that continue to harm communities of color. Additionally, local leaders must consider multiple underrepresented communities and how identities intersect with

one another in addition to racial factors. To receive a meaningful diversity of opinions throughout all decision-making stages, local leaders should engage with multiple minority communities not limited to those based on race but also including people with disabilities, members of the LGBTQ+ community, non-native English speakers and more.



Diversity seeks to ensure a range of people across demographics, experiences, identities, cultures, lifestyles, abilities and interests are represented.

Equity seeks to ensure equal opportunities, resources and information are provided to secure equal outcomes for all while considering historic and present services denied to traditionally excluded and underserved communities.

Inclusion seeks to ensure that traditionally excluded and underserved communities are brought into processes and decision-making while recognizing and appreciating the talents of all employees across backgrounds.

Accessibility seeks to design, develop and maintain services so that all people can fully and independently use them while modifying existing structures to ensure equal access by reducing or eliminating barriers.^{7,8}

When considering the municipal workforce, these policies will help guide the practices of supervisors and staff throughout the recruitment, hiring and retention employment processes. As municipalities continue incorporating a DEIA framework into their hiring procedures, understanding how the public sector workforce compares to the residents they serve is critical. Continuously reviewing how over- or underrepresented specific communities are across local government staff will allow local leaders to determine their next steps in building local government workforces more representative of the communities they serve.



How reflective are local government workforces of their communities?

Methodology

Using US Census estimates from 828 counties for which there was data, NLC researchers calculated BIPOC representation gaps to determine how representative local governments are of the communities they serve (see Appendix: Methodology for more details). BIPOC representation gaps demonstrate how overrepresented or underrepresented a county's BIPOC population is in local government jobs.

For this analysis, a county has a **normal representation** of BIPOC people in local government if its BIPOC representation gap is between -5 percent and 5 percent. A BIPOC representation gap of zero indicates that BIPOC people are perfectly represented in the county's local government workforce. A county has an **overrepresentation** of BIPOC people in local government if its BIPOC representation gap is greater than 5 percent. A county has an **underrepresentation** of BIPOC people in local government if its BIPOC representation gap is less than -5 percent.



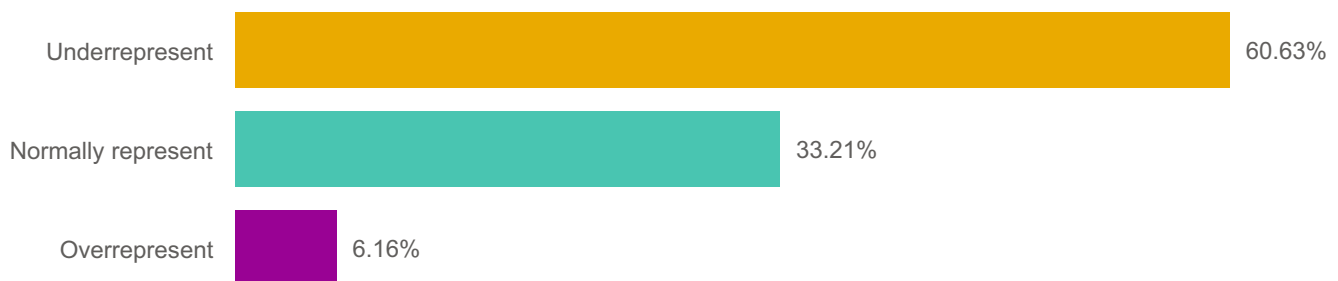
BIPOC underrepresentation within the local government workforce has led to policies and decisions that have, regardless of intention, historically disproportionately distributed benefits away from and costs onto BIPOC communities.

Analysis of local government representation by race and ethnicity

Most local government staffs underrepresent the BIPOC communities they serve. Of counties in the sample, 61 percent (502 counties) underrepresent BIPOC people in their municipal workforce (Figure 1, Figure 2). In the sample, 33 percent (275 counties) normally represent BIPOC people in their municipal workforces while 6 percent (51 counties) overrepresent BIPOC people in their municipal workforces.

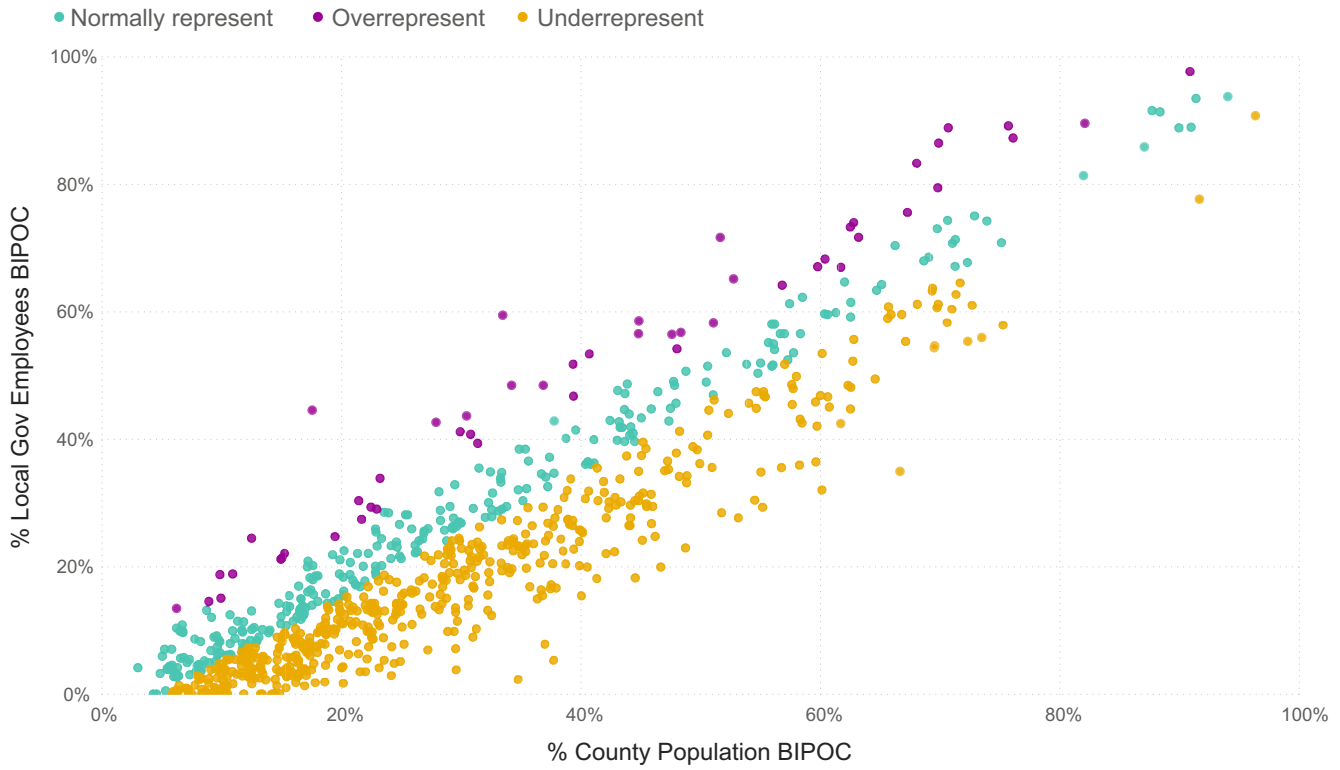
Figure 1: Most local governments underrepresent BIPOC people in their workforce

Percent of cities by representation level of BIPOC people



Source: 2019 American Community Survey Local Government Population Estimates by Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin (custom dataset); Annual County Resident Population Estimates by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2019 (CC-EST2019-ALLDATA).

Figure 2: Most local governments underrepresent BIPOC people in their workforce



Source: 2019 American Community Survey Local Government Population Estimates by Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin (custom dataset); Annual County Resident Population Estimates by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2019 (CC-EST2019-ALLDATA).

While most counties do not do so, some counties have an overrepresentation of BIPOC in their community. For example, Clallam County, WA, (26.91%) and Terrebonne Parish, LA, (25.90%) have the most positive BIPOC representation gaps, meaning that BIPOC people are the most overrepresented in these counties' local government workforces. Christian County, KY, (-32.46%) and Talladega County, AL, (-32.43%) have the most negative BIPOC representation gaps, indicating the greatest underrepresentation of BIPOC people in those counties' local government workforces.

While a BIPOC representation gap of zero indicates adequate representation of BIPOC people in a local government workforce, the average county in our sample has an underrepresentation of BIPOC people in its local government workforce (mean= -6.81%, standard deviation= 7.7%). Only 126 counties (15.22%) have a BIPOC representation gap of zero or above.

The underrepresentation of BIPOC communities within the local government workforce could lead to local government decisions that, regardless of intention, disproportionately distribute benefits and costs to different populations.



BIPOC people are, on average, underrepresented by 7 percent in the local government workforce.





Strategies for advancing DEIA in municipal government hiring

Inclusive hiring policies and practices play a critical role in ensuring a diverse municipal workforce. National and state laws establish minimum standards for anti-discrimination efforts in the public and private sectors. At the local level, some municipalities have safeguards to protect historically marginalized communities.⁹ However, city leaders have the ability to implement stronger local ordinances that promote equity in public sector employment. For example, approximately 225 US cities and counties have local ordinances that prohibit discrimination in employment based on gender identity.¹⁰ In addition to anti-discrimination laws, strategic policies and planning systems that establish DEIA efforts in the municipal workforce may help achieve active representation in the bureaucracy. These strategies include:

- ◆ **Advancing DEIA through a designated department and staff**
- ◆ **Ensuring diverse candidates apply for local government positions**
- ◆ **Being transparent about workforce data and trends**
- ◆ **Considering DEIA in compensation and employee benefits**
- ◆ **Looking for insights from employees of color**

Advancing DEIA through a designated department and staff

When advancing DEIA work across an organization, it is critical to create a designated DEIA department and/or leader, like a Chief Diversity Officer (CDO), that is compensated for their work in this space. Having a designated DEIA department and leader organizes DEIA coordination efforts across municipal departments, alleviating pressure for BIPOC staff to educate their peers on incorporating DEIA into their work.¹¹

Incorporating these roles in local government has come at the behest of resident demands for active representation.¹² Over the past few years, the incorporation of CDOs has grown, with approximately one in four of the nation's 250 largest cities now having a CDO on staff.¹³ This trend is likely to continue. Recently, **Oklahoma City, OK**, created its first diversity and inclusion officer position working to provide training, coaching, guidance and education for municipal staff.¹⁴

DEIA STRATEGIES IN PRACTICE



Columbus, OH

CDO Damita R. Brown of Columbus, OH, leads Mayor Ginther's Office of Diversity and Inclusion (ODI). Mayor Ginther established the ODI in 2016 when stepping into office.¹⁵ Workforce diversity is one of ODI's top management objectives that supports the mayor's vision for making Columbus "America's Equal Opportunity City."¹⁶ Columbus has taken several steps to achieve this objective, including:¹⁷

- ◆ Collaborating with city departments to collect data on workforce diversity
- ◆ Using a scorecard assessment to evaluate workforce diversity
- ◆ Implementing strategic recruitment practices
- ◆ Providing access to DEI training for all employees
- ◆ The city released a comprehensive DEI plan in 2021 detailing its intent to expand its capacity to capture municipal workforce trends for LGBTQ+ employees and those with disabilities.¹⁸

In addition to CDOs, local governments like **Lincoln, NE**, and **Santa Monica, CA**, are hiring specialists and forming staff-led committees to evaluate and update staff recruitment, hiring, evaluation and retention strategies. These specialists and committees provide training on topics like equal employment, cultural competency and implicit bias.^{19, 20}

Ensuring diverse candidates apply for local government positions

When searching for diverse talent, it is critical to recruit applicants through a variety of measures, some of which might reside outside of the typical recruitment platforms. Some local governments have focused on hiring diverse candidates for specific jobs. **Fremont, CA**, is actively recruiting more firefighters, paramedics and emergency medical technicians who are women and who represent culturally diverse backgrounds from across the city.²¹ **Oswego, NY**, is one of dozens of communities across the US and Canada participating in the [30x30 Initiative](#), a pledge to increase the representation of women in police recruit classes to 30 percent by 2030 while supporting the professional and personal development of female police officers.^{22, 23}

Additional measures to recruit diverse talent include allowing for flexibility in hiring requirements. Cities like **San Francisco, CA**, are creating efficient solutions that support disability diversity in the city's workforce through their Access to City Employment (ACE) program. ACE offers an alternative pathway for qualified, disabled individuals to apply for entry-level roles.²⁴ While ACE does not guarantee employment, it represents the kind of effort cities can take to create institutional change through intentionally inclusive hiring policies.

DEIA STRATEGIES IN PRACTICE



Buffalo, NY

Between 2006 and 2013, the City of Buffalo experienced 95 percent growth in its immigrant and refugee population.²⁵ In 2015, Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown established the Office of New Americans (ONA) in the city's law department. This initiative intends to bridge language gaps in the delivery of city services. As a part of this effort, the city produced guides in the following languages to support communities that recently migrated to the community:²⁶

- ◆ Arabic
- ◆ Nepali
- ◆ Spanish
- ◆ Karen
- ◆ Somali

Buffalo expanded several employment policies to attract more bilingual employees in support of Mayor Brown's initiative.²⁷ ONA Director Jessica Lazarin helped facilitate a Language Access Plan with the Buffalo Police Department in 2016. The plan sought to increase positive interaction between the police and new Americans.²⁸ Intentional recruitment of candidates from diverse backgrounds may demonstrate a positive association between representative bureaucracy and improved service delivery.



Being transparent about workforce data and trends

To understand where a municipal workforce has opportunities for growth, leaders must understand their current workforce trends. Only then can leaders take steps to plan their goals and implement measures for success. The following examples represent a few ways cities are striving for transparency in their workforces.

Municipal managers are implementing data-driven approaches to decision making to understand current workforce trends based on demographics. Cities like **Boston, MA**, have developed public dashboards that draw attention to the relative parity between its municipal workforce and the demographics of the community.²⁹ Other local governments are increasing transparency by widely sharing workforce metrics with partners, like libraries and public schools. Research conducted by the Public Library Association (PLA) found that not all libraries or local governments collect data on staff representation. Of the respondents that could not report the data, nearly 15 percent said the data was collected, but they did not have access to it — likely because the workforce data was collected at the city or county level and was not shared with them. Of libraries that had access to their data, researchers found that BIPOC are underrepresented in the library workforce, while white people (especially white women) are overrepresented.³⁰ Increased transparency may help promote accountability and trust among citizens, especially for those who rely on public resources like those provided at libraries.^{31, 32}

Check out NLC’s BIPOC Representation in the Local Government Workforce dashboard for a sample of what cities are doing to address these issues.

<https://nlc.org/Improving-Service-Through-DEIA-Hiring>

Several municipalities are measuring the success of their strategic DEIA plans and action steps. Other municipalities are conducting research on workforce diversity to better inform practices and evaluate program effectiveness over time. Since 2016, municipal managers in **Philadelphia, PA**, have conducted assessments of racial, ethnic and gender-based representation in the city's workforce.³³ Philadelphia's 2021 Workforce Diversity Profile and Annual Report found near parity in the workforce (60%) compared to the city's demographic population of people of color (66%).³⁴ The report uncovered positive trends in the employment of racially and ethnically diverse executive leadership. However, the analysis showed an overrepresentation of white people in executive roles (55%) compared with their relative population size (34%).³⁵

While municipal DEIA officers conduct assessments, they should incorporate their findings into policies and practices as a part of their overall strategic efforts. DEIA hiring policies may also supplement employers' retention efforts. Research indicates that 45 percent of state and local governments report using DEIA training in the workplace as a professional development tactic for employee retention.³⁶ Furthermore, state and local government employers that actively promote feelings of acceptance and belonging in the workplace report a 56 percent improvement in employee job performance.³⁷ Comparing trends over time may help illuminate strategic issues and signal areas for action. Consulting DEIA professionals beyond human resource (HR) managers may assist municipalities as they develop effective, systems-level inclusion efforts.

The [NLC Race, Equity and Leadership \(REAL\) team](#) provides a variety of tools to boost local leaders' awareness on racial inequities to create more equitable communities, including action guides and case studies for members. NLC-REAL provides direct contract services for NLC member municipalities and state municipal leagues in the form of racial equity workshops and workforce assessments.

Considering DEIA in compensation and employee benefits

Beyond workplace culture, municipal employees of diverse backgrounds may have other substantive factors impacting the length and quality of their tenures with public sector organizations. Providing and advertising competitive compensation packages may be one method for improving retention rates among diverse candidates. This method is not traditionally thought of as a policy to advance DEIA. However, the significance of employee compensation at the local level was demonstrated during the pandemic when cities allocated \$1.25 billion in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) toward municipal employee wages and hiring.³⁸ Historically, pension and health coverage made public sector work competitive when compared to the private sector, but continued efforts to increase compensation can further attract diverse candidates.³⁹

Beyond wages, active approaches to attracting diverse talent can improve recruitment and retention even more. These active approaches include programs like childcare, retirement savings, remote work, professional development, health coverage and public service loan forgiveness (PSLF). This is particularly germane considering the differences in student loan repayment difficulties between white people and people of color with similar educational attainment and income.⁴⁰

Cities allocated \$1.25 billion in ARPA SLFRF toward employee wages and hiring.⁴¹ Check out NLC's analysis of ARPA workforce investments for the [general municipal workforce](#) and [public safety workforce](#). For additional ARPA spending information, check out the [ARPA Investment Tracker](#).

Looking for insight from employees

Another strategy for advancing DEIA throughout municipal workforces is incorporating DEIA throughout the organizational review process, including during employees' exit interviews. These interviews can inform the practices of employers when developing processes for current and future employees. Those leaving the organization may be more likely to give a candid response on DEIA as it relates to reasons for the departure, such as difficult workplace cultures or specific negative experiences.



Conclusion

As communities across the country become increasingly diverse, DEIA municipal workforce initiatives will become even more critical to ensuring the equitable distribution of local government services. NLC researchers' analysis finds that BIPOC people in the US are highly underrepresented in the municipal workforce. BIPOC people are underrepresented in 61 percent of counties in the sample. While much work is needed to improve BIPOC representation in the local government workforce, many opportunities exist for local governments to improve DEIA within their bureaucracies. When focusing on municipal hiring practices, some strategies include:

- ◆ **Investing in staff, like CDOs or DEIA offices, dedicated to creating and implementing DEIA workforce initiatives**
- ◆ **Prioritizing outreach to diverse candidates**
- ◆ **Increasing transparency around municipal workforce trends**
- ◆ **Enhancing pay and benefits packages that attract diverse talent and promote equity**
- ◆ **Using data to evaluate staff diversity and improve organization culture around DEIA initiatives**

In addition to race and ethnicity, local governments should consider other demographics, like sexual orientation, gender identity, ability and age when considering DEIA workforce initiatives. An absence of consideration for all backgrounds, identities and abilities may lead to local government choices that inequitably distribute benefits and costs to different demographics, intent notwithstanding.

Appendix (Methodology)

Data and Limitations

There are limitations to the analysis of population representation in local government. While a sample of 828 counties is robust, researchers were missing data for more than 2,400 counties and county equivalents, failing to capture data for a substantial proportion of the US population.* Researchers were also unable to identify intersectional data (e.g., the proportion of Asian females or Black males in the municipal government workforce). For example, while males are underrepresented in the municipal workforce, white males may be overrepresented because white people are overrepresented. Additionally, this analysis fails to capture representation for other demographics, like sexual orientation, gender identity, ability and age.

Using population estimates from 828 counties, NLC researchers calculated how representative local bureaucracies are for the communities they serve. Data sources used for this analysis include the *US Census Bureau, 2019 American Community Survey Local Government Worker Population Estimates by Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin*⁴² and the *US Census Bureau, 2010-2019 Annual County Resident Population Estimates by Age, Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin*. Local government workers, as defined by the Census, include city, county and school district employees and are counted in the county where they live rather than the county where they work.⁴³

Race and ethnicity data were incomplete for all but 170 counties; however, all counties in NLC's sample had data on the proportion of white people in their local government workforce. Due to this issue, NLC researchers conducted the analysis comparing white versus non-white/BIPOC populations.

* According to the US Census, counties are functioning governmental units, whose powers and functions vary from state-to-state. County equivalents serve the same function as counties but exist in states like Alaska and Louisiana where they have parishes, boroughs, municipalities, and census areas instead.

Analytic Approach

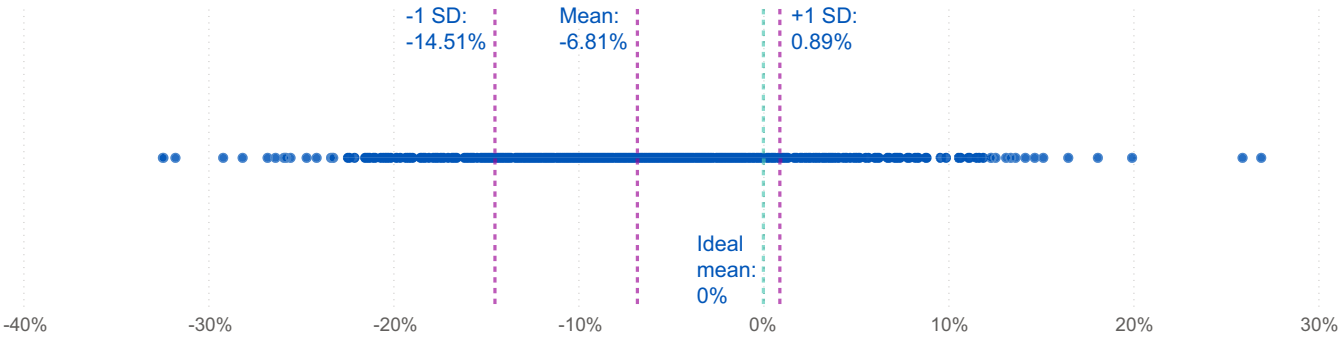
For this analysis, NLC developed BIPOC representation gaps to determine how represented each population is in local governments. Researchers calculated BIPOC representation gaps for each county by subtracting the proportion of the county resident population that is BIPOC by proportion of the county local government workforce. For example, if a county has a 17 percent BIPOC resident population but a zero percent BIPOC local government worker population, then that county would have a BIPOC representation gap of -17 percent. A BIPOC representation gap of zero means that BIPOC people are perfectly represented in the county's local government workforce.

BIPOC Representation Gap

$$= \% \text{ of Local Government Workforce}_{\text{BIPOC}} - \% \text{ of General Population}_{\text{BIPOC}}$$

For the main analysis, the mean BIPOC representation gap is -6.81 percent with a standard deviation of 7.7 percent as shown in the scatterplot below. Ideally the mean of cities' average BIPOC representation gap would be 0 percent (standard deviation= 5%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Distribution of full sample's BIPOC representation gaps



Source: 2019 American Community Survey Local Government Population Estimates by Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin (custom dataset); Annual County Resident Population Estimates by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2019 (CC-EST2019-ALLDATA).

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