



In Their Own Words: Threats and Harassment Facing Local Officials

"I don't regret it for a minute, but it came at a heavy price."

Executive Summary

This report offers preliminary insights and reflections on the experiences of local municipal officials experiencing threats and harassment, in their own words, through conversations with 30 elected officials from across a broad range of locations, demographics, and ideologies.

Four Key Findings:

1. Local officials interviewed experienced a range of threats and harassment, including physical violence (both threatened and actualized), psychological violence, sexualized or gendered abuse, racialized abuse, partisan harassment, and online harassment, threats, and doxxing.

- Almost every interviewee described receiving “hostile behavior and abuse intended to cause fear and/or emotional damage.” Women and people of color bore the brunt of this abuse, mirroring national trends. Of the three local officials we spoke to who did not seek re-election due to harassment, all of them are women.
- Threats and harassment were not in response to any one issue or isolated to one political party, but an “emboldened” climate with a “new level of permission to be publicly vile.”
- Interviewees saw social media and Covid-19 as specific drivers of harassment.

2. Local officials interviewed described how threats and harassment impacted them, including community isolation, fear of public spaces, invasion of home privacy, disruption of community meetings, and threats to family, loved ones, and businesses.

- Officials overwhelmingly reported feelings of isolation and loneliness.
- One elected official reported that she did not “even want to be in public in her community,” driving to the next town over to run errands.

3. Interviewees largely described two categories of response currently available to them amid the disorienting and unsettling experience of receiving threats and harassment: personal behavioral changes or legal and law enforcement action.

- Almost all respondents indicated at least some level of “behavioral change” following an instance(s) of threats and/or harassment. This includes relatively small measures, such as deleting social media accounts, as well as more drastic ones, such as no longer inviting people over for social gatherings, acquiring a concealed-carry firearms permit, or changing normal activity in their community.
- Interviewees’ assessment of law enforcement and legal effectiveness (from actions like restraining orders, police “drive-bys” or reporting) was not uniform across gender, racial, or party lines, with some reporting satisfaction and others dissatisfaction.

4: Local officials identified gaps in support for fellow elected officials experiencing threats and harassment, including building support, training, and understanding current and new response options.

- As one local official put it, “how do we encourage good actors to help shape our future?”
- Identifying and improving potential resources and support for local officials will continue to drive the next year of participatory research by Princeton BDI, in partnership with [CivicPulse](#) and the Brennan Center for Justice.

Introduction

This report offers preliminary insights and reflections on the experiences of local officials experiencing threats and harassment, in their own words, through conversations with 30 elected officials from across a broad range of locations, demographics, and ideologies. Much of the existing work on threats and harassment of officials [looks outside](#) the United States and focuses mostly on [national](#) and [high-profile](#) elected officials. This report centers on local officials, with many of them serving in small communities, often missed in national-level conversations. In interview conversations with BDI researchers, local officials often described more incidents of threats and harassment that did not appear in their initial response to a [survey](#) conducted by [CivicPulse](#), validating the need for high-quality, sensitive engagement with officials. This created an opportunity for local officials to paint a full picture of their experience and surface appropriate policy responses.

Methodology

As part of a broader research agenda on [threats and harassment](#), BDI partnered with CivicPulse to pilot a [survey](#) on threats and harassment of local elected officials in Fall 2022.¹ The sample pool of electeds “draws on a continuously updated contact list of government officials from counties, municipalities, and townships with populations of 1,000 or more.” Of the 438 survey respondents, about 150 indicated their willingness to participate in follow-up, semi-structured conversations with BDI researchers to share more about the threats and harassment experienced and how interviewees sought to address it.

From December 2022 to February 2023, BDI researchers contacted all opt-in survey respondents, with 30 local officials across the United States responding and scheduling interviews with BDI researchers. Demographic data on these 30 individuals included even splits between men and women (53.3% women and 46.7% men) and relatively even splits across the U.S. by region (33.3% Midwest, 26.7% South, 20% West, and 20% Northeast). 20% of interviewees identified as Republican, with an additional 20% identifying as Independent or a third party. The remaining 60% identified as Democrats.² Researchers made a specific effort to speak with elected officials of color, who make up 20% of interviewees, through multiple rounds of outreach, due to [existing data](#) indicating higher targeting of local officials representing marginalized communities. Finally, our interviewees cross a several decade age range: 3.3% are 37-41, 23.3% are 42-46, 10% are 47-51, 13.3% are 52-56, 13.3% are 57-61, 16.7% are 62-66, 13.3% are 67-71, and 3.3% are 72-76.

Some potential bias in the selection approach could occur as officials had to opt-in to participate in interviews. Therefore, it is possible that officials who did not experience threats or harassment would not opt-in; conversely, some individuals may not have felt comfortable talking more about the threats or harassment. To mitigate these potential

¹ For a full summary of the survey results, see the complete benchmarking report [here](#).

² In the initial CivicPulse [survey](#), 162 respondents self-identified as a Democrat, 86 as an Independent, and 180 as a Republican.

biases, BDI researchers spoke with any local official who responded to our request for an interview — even if they reported receiving no threats or harassment — to create as holistic an interview pool as possible. As this report centers on the expressed experiences of interviewees, individual statements are not fact-checked per event but rather collected together in overall trends. Even with these mitigation measures, given these 30 interviews represent a non-random sample, this initial report purposefully avoids finite percentages to quantify responses, in favor of combining future analysis through additional rounds of interviews and other robustness checks.

The semi-structured interviews focused on surfacing experiences and needs of each official via five questions: 1) what specifics, if any, you felt comfortable sharing about the threat or harassment you received? 2) how did you respond after receiving the threat or harassment? 3) what kind of help did you seek out, if any, and how effective was it? 4) what kind of resources would you have wanted to be connected with? and 5) how did the threat or harassment impact your life?

I. Findings: Threats and Harassment Experiences

Of the 30 total interviewees, 22 indicated experiencing harassment. Harassing and threatening behavior took a variety of forms, which map onto identified [types](#) of violence experienced by elected officials, with about half of all respondents reporting receiving verbal threats.

Threats and harassment emerged from a wide range of contentious issues across communities. Local issues like infrastructure projects — such as repairing roads and building affordable housing — could be incredibly contentious issues in communities, with housing access in particular resulting in threats and harassment to those interviewed. Local officials also described receiving threats and harassment around issues of police brutality or COVID-19 restrictions. When those occurred, officials reported issues like mass spamming of their emails and phones, demonstrations at homes and offices, and a concern for the physical safety of friends and family. In short, no one issue drew threats and harassment but instead emerged from the “hot button” issues of the particular community the elected serves. As one local official put it: “people feel more emboldened now than they did ten years ago.”

Physical Violence - Threatened and Actualized

Over a third (11) of those we interviewed received death threats or threats of physical violence. Physical threats came in person, over the phone, email, or via social media, across multiple platforms. Local officials received specific death threats to shoot them or their homes, run them over, “slit their throats,” commit “acts of terror” against them, and “hang them from nooses.” While much of the activity was online, several respondents also reported offline acts of violence and intimidation: one mayor reported finding a bullet hole in a window at their house while other respondents reported harassment in public spaces like coffee shops and grocery stores and around “routine” activities - like going on a run.

Psychological Violence

Almost every interviewee described [receiving](#) “acts likely to harm the psychological well-being of individuals or their families by inducing fear or harm to their sense of self-worth or well-being.” This behavior ranged from one-off comments in-person or online to targeted harassment campaigns. Nearly all respondents who reported harassment knew the perpetrator as a member of the community. At least three separate female local officials described targeted harassment campaigns against them that included creating websites, photoshopped images, and memes.

Sexualized or Gendered Abuse and Violence

Of the sixteen women elected officials interviewed, all but one reported receiving threats or harassment. In addition to facing physical and psychological abuse reported by most interviewees, elected women also reported experiencing forms of gender-based violence. One woman reported that she and another elected official serving on the city council received messages threatening rape. Another local official - during her run for sheriff - reported receiving sexualized comments and harassment in person and online. Some respondents - all of which were women - reported harassment of a family member, most often of a spouse or child. Of the three local officials interviewed who did not seek re-election due to threats and harassment they faced, all are women. Beyond those already planning not to run, another woman elected reported considering leaving office and several others described trepidation at the prospect of going through another election cycle. These sobering experiences highlight the heightened and unique burden faced by elected women in public service.

Racialized Abuse

Some respondents of color reported racist abuse directed towards them while in office, which most often affected women of color. One local official - a Black woman - reported being called a racial slur repeatedly during a council meeting. A Latina elected official reported constant racialized abuse and harassment throughout her term in office, including questioning her competency in office, threats to the physical safety of her and her family, death threats (including receiving pictures of nooses and lynchings on social media), and political retaliation from other councilmembers. Other women of color electeds described more subtle patterns of racism and exclusion like [micro-aggressions](#). Three out of the four women of color BDI researchers spoke to described racialized harassment, while all described navigating misogynistic behavior. In contrast, two men of color, while reporting less direct racialized harassment, nevertheless described how race played into navigating local politics. One local official - the first Black person elected in his town - serves in what used to be a [Sundown Town](#), “[all-white communities](#), neighborhoods, or counties that exclude Blacks and other minorities through the use of discriminatory laws, harassment, and threats or use of violence,” even as he described his presence on the council as “moving the dial in a positive way.”

Partisan Harassment

Local officials across the political spectrum described partisan harassment. This harassment included threats specifically invoked political parties, such as a death threat a local official received: “I’ll slit your throat if you start sounding like a Democrat.” While not always directly invoking political parties, local officials described behavior that felt like partisan harassment, even when they ran for nonpartisan offices. Many local officials expressed frustration when constituents identified them with a particular party, even when they ran in nonpartisan seats and as they put it, worked on largely nonpartisan issues. As one local official, who received both gendered and partisan harassment, commented “we’re supposed to be nonpartisan, what are we doing here?” Troublingly, local officials across the ideological spectrum reported climates of partisan harassment by other elected officials - sometimes from members of their own party. As one right-leaning local official described, “I thought [harassment] would be ultra-left, but it [turned out to] be ultra-right.” Other local officials described threatening comments from members of their own party for “not [being] progressive enough.”

Online Harassment, Threats, and Doxing

A total of 11 interviewees reported receiving online threats, i.e., threats received through social media or email, with many interviewees subjected to both verbal and online threats. Almost all local officials attributed an increasingly hostile environment of threats and harassment to social media and the possibility of anonymity. Several local officials we spoke to served before the “social media era” and pointed to this as a serious driver of harassment. As one local official, who served in the early 2000s before serving again in 2016, put it, “no one would have addressed [us] how they do now.” Interestingly, local officials identified “known” platforms like Twitter and Facebook as sites of harassment, but also included Nextdoor as a prominent site of harassment of local officials. However, multiple local officials noted that while social media played an important role, they specifically cited COVID-19 as making people “angrier.” During the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, one elected official put it “things got warmer...people were angry and scared.”

II. Impact of Threats and Harassment

Isolation from Community

Officials overwhelmingly reported feelings of isolation and loneliness in response to the threats and harassment, feeling regularly unable to count on support from fellow local officials who at times even participated in the threats and harassment. As one elected official put it, the harassing experience “took the joy out of [serving] for me... [it was] unnecessary and destructive to the fabric of the community.” Respondents reported former friends avoiding them, and at times, “constant levels” of anxiety and fear. Particularly for local officials serving in small communities, the experience made them feel isolated from communities they once felt comfortable in: one official reported that

since his election, he reports to his family his daily routines and location out of concern for both his safety and for people coming by his home when he is not there. However, many local officials resisted the characterization that experiencing threats and harassment would change their relationship with their community. Some interviewees described their refusal to change their routines or to “retreat,” instead describing their efforts to maintain community ties.

Fear of Public Spaces

A total of 13 respondents reported receiving threats in public spaces. Respondents repeatedly expressed unease while in public spaces, with grocery stores mentioned on multiple occasions. One elected official reported that while shopping, a constituent approached her and stood between her and her vehicle, preventing her from leaving. Local officials reported additional tense “uncomfortable” interactions in public spaces including coffee shops, restaurants, and bars where they experienced harassing behavior as they went about their days or socialized. One elected official reported that she did not “even want to be in public in her community,” reportedly driving to the next town over to visit the drug store, as opposed to her regular neighborhood location. In the words of one elected official, the experience of receiving threats and harassment led to “eerie feelings” when they were in their community.

Invasion of Home Privacy

Five respondents reported explicit threats to their home, while more expressed unease and fears around people showing up to their home. Elected officials reported efforts to get their addresses taken down from public websites and precautionary security measures including security systems and law enforcement drive-bys. Multiple elected officials reported attempted and actualized breaches of their homes, including one individual jumping over a wall to gain access to a local official’s home. Local officials also reported harassment on home phones and anonymous notes dropped off at their home. Additionally, one elected official reported people watching her house and then reporting when she would leave on social media. In one of the most extreme incidents described by respondents, one mayor reported over forty nights of protests at his home including about 70 demonstrators “shining strobe lights in windows, drive-bys, and writing obscenities.”³

Contentious Issues and Meetings

Some elected officials reported fears about potential violence during meetings of elected officials including city council and commissioner meetings. Elected officials expressed fears about individuals who behaved erratically and made threats during meetings. One elected official described a meeting that included almost 800 attendees that devolved into “jeering,” with “a lot of hate in the room” as people wanted their “pound of flesh.” However, many other elected officials described meetings as “civil” affairs with respectful civic debate. Local officials reported some of the highest tension

³ For more on demonstrations at homes, see [“BDI Issue Brief: Trends in Demonstrations at Homes, May-December 2020.”](#)

environments - particularly in meetings - around issues of affordable housing: nearly a third of respondents specifically highlighted housing as a high-tension issue. Other local infrastructure issues like roads and bridges, and funding for specific programs also produced high tension situations.⁴ Additionally, these threats did not just impact the respondents of these interviews - half of the respondents reported a threat to a fellow public official.

Threats to Family, Loved Ones, and Businesses

As noted above, over a quarter of respondents reported threats to family members, including children. Even more reported fears of harassment and violence directed towards family, with many expressing relief that older children lived out of state. One elected official reported that she told her daughter to go “far away for college,” stating that as much as it hurt, distance would keep her children safe. “No one knows me [elsewhere] - they cannot track you back to me.” Other local officials reported moving their children into private schools in different districts to reduce potential harassment. Particularly for local officials that identified serving in “small towns,” they expressed fears of the impact of their service on the economic livelihood of themselves or their family. Multiple elected officials reported how a climate of hostility affected the businesses of spouses, particularly after the spreading of “misinformation” and “lies” about the elected official on social media. Spouses remained a particular point of concern - both in worrying about the safety of their spouse, and their spouse worrying about their safety while serving the community. Some spouses even advised that local officials resign or consider not running again.

III. Responses Taken and Recourse Desired

Interviewees largely undertook two kinds of response - making personal changes to try and mitigate harassing behavior or seeking legal responses, sometimes doing both. Officials pursued a range of legal options after receiving threats or harassment, including involving law enforcement or considering or taking legal action. However, many interviewees reported dissatisfaction with the options available to them - or the recourse they chose. 21 of all respondents indicated at least some level of “behavioral change” following an instance(s) of threats and/or harassment. This includes relatively small measures, such as deleting social media, as well as more drastic ones, such as no longer inviting people over for social gatherings or acquiring a concealed-carry firearms permit.

Legal and Law Enforcement Responses

Over half of those interviewed contacted law enforcement in response to levied threats and/or harassment, with at least five respondents considering or eventually taking

⁴ As noted in “I. Threats and Harassment,” the identification of housing as a major issue by interviewees likely also reflects the level of elected officials and policy areas within their purview. Work by the [Brennan Center for Justice](#) and others highlights the threats election officials face due to election fraud narratives. This report does not contend that housing, infrastructure, etc. are necessarily more contentious issues, but rather that in an increasingly enabling environment for violence and threats towards elected officials, they face threats and harassment on a range of issues.

some sort of legal action, usually in the form of court-issued restraining orders. Nearly every respondent reported the presence of law enforcement at open civic governance meetings. Interviewees reported personal or death threats to law enforcement and asked for more police presence such as “drive-bys” of homes after threats, and for advice on personal security. Some respondents reported satisfaction with the response of law enforcement and positive working relationships with police in their community. However, many did not, citing law enforcement ineffectiveness, dismissiveness, and disinterest in supporting local officials experiencing threats and harassment. Interestingly, interviewees’ assessments of law enforcement and legal effectiveness was not uniform across gender, racial, or party lines. After reporting threats, many local officials received the response from law enforcement that they could not act unless a threat turned into violent action, and that these actions were “not prosecutable” which as one official put it “is not comforting at all.” Several local officials specifically cited law enforcement as part of the problem in refusing to take threats against local officials seriously.

Several interviewees considered and sought legal action and advice. Multiple reported after seeking legal advice receiving the response that there was “absolutely nothing you can do as an elected official,” with several specifically using the phrase that they are “fair game.” However, some local officials reported that harassment of city administrators or other unelected officials did result in legal cases, particularly for slander.

Personal Responses

Officials highlighted a range of personal actions they took in response to threats and harassment, including changing their routine, receiving therapy or taking personal protection courses, obtaining concealed carry permits, installing security cameras - specifically Ring - at their home, and seriously restricting their use of social media. However, many local officials reported a resistance to any sort of behavioral change as “giving in” to “haters.” As one official put it, “your lived experience has a huge impact on your ability to manage the threats.” Multiple local officials reported the futility of trying to satisfy those harassing them - as one official put it, “if I caught a child falling out a third-story window, they’d complain I didn’t wash my hands.” Many of the women and people of color local officials noted that this reflected the daily realities of racism and sexism they experience, just intensified by the office and what seems to be a “new level of permission to be publicly vile.”

IV. Initial Assessment of Needs and Avenues for Additional Support

As part of our conversations with local officials, we asked them what resources or support they would have liked to receive after experiencing threats or harassment. Local officials often expressed uncertainty about what support could have looked like or what would have helped them in the situations they faced. Other officials expressed their willingness to share strategies they employed to combat threats or harassment they experienced, especially to envision what solutions could look like.

Fostering Support for Elected Officials

Multiple officials reported harassment coming from fellow elected officials and many reported a lack of support from fellow elected officials when these incidents took place. However, stories of creative resilience and more robust support also emerged. For instance, after a local official received a death threat during their first meeting, the official filed a workplace harassment complaint and received support from his supervisor. His supervisor - who was not from the same political party - actively investigated the claim and, as the elected official who received the death threat put it, he “had a lot of respect for that and it made [his wife] feel much more safe in the community.” Even though it was not in the supervisor’s “political interest, he did the right thing.” One local official recounted the importance of creating a community climate of support for civility - they recounted while performing at an outdoor concert, someone began heckling. Other community members stepped in to support the official.

Critically, almost every elected official we talked to - regardless of political party or their experience with threats or harassment - hoped that by sharing their story, they could help someone else. As one elected official put it, “I want to help other people manage through these situations.” This support for one another appeared essential to interviewees, especially in the effort to encourage “good actors” to run for office and participate in civic processes.

Training for Elected Officials in Their Role

Multiple elected officials described frustrations with the lack of support for dealing with threats and harassment once they were in office. Local officials described a range of training they would like to receive including threat training from law enforcement, onboarding procedures, and social media preparation, which many advocated occurring in a bipartisan fashion for any interested public servants.

In particular, women elected officials expressed resentment about being encouraged to run by some national organizations but not supported once they got in office. As one official put it, “if you’re going to get them elected, why aren’t you supporting them once in office?” Particularly for local officials, interviewees reported that national-level resources - financial, training, and mentorship when they do exist - also do not reach them in smaller communities. Many questioned how they were supposed to deal with targeted harassment campaigns and wished for specific training to support them in “crisis situations.” Some local officials worried that this environment would not encourage civic participation in the future; as one official put it, in this reality, “how do we encourage good actors to help shape our future?”

Lack of Clarity on “Best Practices”

Local officials across the political spectrum reported frustration with the options for recourse available and understanding what options would work for their situation. Through conversations with interviewees, a vicious cycle facing local officials emerged.

After receiving threats or harassment, officials felt isolated and were unsure of where to turn. Without guidance on possible recourse, officials appeared trapped in a cycle of isolation and confusion about how to address the threats and harassment, waiting uneasily for the next threat or harassment.

Local officials, as documented above, considered an array of legal, law enforcement, and community options, but repeatedly expressed frustration with the lack of clarity around which options they should use in their situation and which may be most effective. The murkiness of response options resulted in local officials falling back on their own personal skill sets - for instance, those with previous law enforcement experience or relationships contacted local police and those with legal backgrounds assessed their options through that lens.

One local official reported wishing she had a “decision tree” - “how do we respond or not respond to them? What can you let go? And what choices do we have?” Interviewees had particular questions about what resources the town, city, or state can bring to bear to support local officials and what rights local officials have that they can exercise in threatening and harassing situations.

Looking Forward

Threats to and harassment of local officials continue to present a significant challenge to American democracy, discouraging civic engagement and undermining the critical work of public servants. As we move into the 2024 election cycle, there is a resounding need for more action at the local, state, and federal levels to support local officials and take action to counter threats and harassment.

Building on the activities outlined above over the last six months, BDI will continue to grow our research into understanding and countering threats and harassment, focusing on centering the voices of those most impacted and building a multi-method and collaborative approach. BDI will work with our partners to continue engaging officials directly in the work of tracking both negative and positive trends over time, to not only [maintain new data](#) to fill critical gaps but also provide a regular platform for solidarity, support, and pushback against the isolation that threats and harassment can foster among local officials.

This initial report represents the first qualitative findings from a [broader two year research agenda](#), including work to:

- **Elevate locally-driven solutions informed by those most impacted:** Building on the above data collection and survey, BDI will continue to conduct trauma-informed, in-depth interviews on a quarterly basis. Regular public summaries will highlight officials’ stories and their responses to threats, to build a broad catalog of needs, resources, and solutions from the ground up.
- **Monitor trends in local threats and harassment across the country:** BDI and [Civ-icPulse](#), with input and support from the Brennan Center, are conducting quarter-

ly [representative surveys](#) of local elected officials to better understand the scope, scale, and trends of threats and harassment over time. As outlined above, these surveys also feed individual interviews on an ongoing basis and feed back findings to officials themselves.

- **Maintain a longitudinal event dataset on specific threats and harassment**, in open partnership with [ADL](#), the [Brennan Center](#), the [National League of Cities](#), the [Prosecution Project](#), and a growing list of collaborators, BDI kicked off a new national dataset documenting threats and harassment to local officials in 2022. Along with ongoing original data collection, we are proactively working to include new self-reported data such as data from the [National League of Cities' tool](#) and other partners.
- **Setting a strong policy foundation ahead of 2024:** Getting the right data into the hands of communities and policy makers can drive research-informed interventions in advance of election season. BDI will continue to work with local officials, data partners, policy partners, and others to elevate proactive solutions in the run-up to the 2024 elections.