ISSUE BRIEF

DETROITERS' CAUTIOUS AND CONDITIONAL SUPPORT FOR ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

DETROIT METRO AREA
COMMUNITIES STUDY

OVERVIEW

This brief is part of a series of reports highlighting findings from a recent survey of the [Detroit Metro Area Communities Study](#) (DMACS) at the University of Michigan examining Detroit residents' views on the use of artificial intelligence (AI) by city government. The survey was fielded between August 6, 2025, and October 1, 2025, and it captures the views of a representative sample of 2,158 Detroit residents. Results have been weighted to reflect the population of Detroit. See full [results from DMACS surveys here](#). [Findings from the survey can be found here](#).

INTRODUCTION

Local governments deliver many of the services that residents interact with most directly, however, government often faces significant resource constraints, including limited staffing, aging infrastructure, and growing service demands. As a result, many governments across the United States are exploring the use of artificial intelligence to improve service delivery and operational efficiency, and questions about accountability, transparency, and equity have moved to the forefront of public debate. In Detroit— where residents have long experienced uneven policy

outcomes and differential treatment across neighborhoods— public trust in new technologies is closely tied to concerns about fairness, surveillance, and data use.

This brief examines Detroit residents' attitudes toward AI in local government. The survey asked respondents about their general perceptions of AI as well as their support for specific municipal AI applications, including managing water and wastewater systems, assisting residents in finding government resources, monitoring neighborhood upkeep, identifying crime suspects, and identifying missing children. Across these domains, residents were asked whether AI would improve efficiency, transparency, and accountability in government services, as well as whether it might increase harm, bias, or unfairness in service delivery. The brief highlights residents' cautious and conditional support for AI, emphasizing how trust, equity concerns, and data privacy shape public opinion. Rather than outright enthusiasm or rejection, findings show broad ambivalence, with support varying sharply by use case. Residents express greater comfort with AI when it is framed as protective or service-oriented and significantly more skepticism when AI is associated with surveillance, punishment, or personal data access. Since the City of Detroit has adopted—and plans to expand—the use of AI across various public services, this brief provides insights into how residents perceive these technologies and highlights the conditions under which public trust and support for AI applications may emerge.

BROAD AMBIVALENCE ABOUT AI OUTWEIGHS STRONG ENTHUSIASM OR REJECTION

- On the question of whether AI's benefits to society outweigh its risks, Detroit residents show more uncertainty than consensus, and that pattern carries through nearly all specific use cases.

- Only about 1 in 5 residents (22%) agree that the benefits of AI outweigh its risks, while more than one-third disagree.

- A substantial share of residents (41%) report neutral views or uncertainty on whether AI's benefits to society outweigh its risks, suggesting that public opinion on AI is still taking shape (30% of residents neither agree nor disagree and 11% don't know).
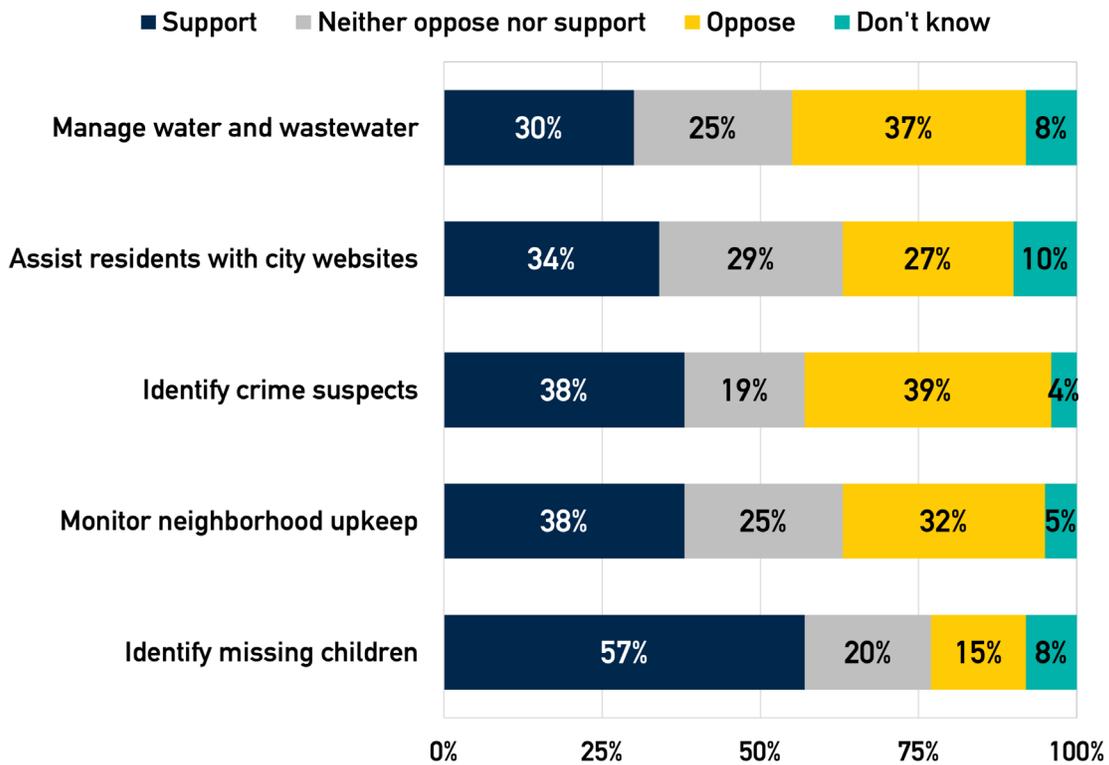
SUPPORT FOR AI IS HIGHLY CONDITIONAL ON ITS PURPOSE

- Residents distinguish sharply between protective/ humanitarian uses (missing children) and punitive/ surveillance uses (crime). This suggests AI legitimacy is tied to perceived intent, not just technical capability.

- Support for AI is strongest for identifying missing children, where a majority of residents (57%) express approval.

- Much lower support for AI exists for service-oriented applications such as monitoring neighborhood upkeep

(38%), helping residents navigate government resources (34%), and managing water systems (30%).

- Using AI to identify crime suspects receives the highest level of opposition (39%). This pattern may partly reflect that 55% of residents agree that this use of AI could harm some residents even if it helped others.

Figure 1: Support for Potential Uses of Artificial Intelligence by Detroit City Government

To what extent would you support or oppose the Detroit city government using AI to...

Legend: ■ Support ■ Neither oppose nor support ■ Oppose ■ Don't know

Use	Support	Neither oppose nor support	Oppose	Don't know
Manage water and wastewater	30%	25%	37%	8%
Assist residents with city websites	34%	29%	27%	10%
Identify crime suspects	38%	19%	39%	4%
Monitor neighborhood upkeep	38%	25%	32%	5%
Identify missing children	57%	20%	15%	8%

EFFICIENCY IS THE MOST PERSUASIVE BENEFIT—BUT STILL NOT OVERWHELMINGLY CONVINCING

- Across all use cases, pluralities of Detroiters—though rarely majorities—believe AI would improve efficiency by making better use of time, money, and resources.

- Perceived efficiency benefits are strongest for identifying missing children (52%) and investigating crime (41%).

- Nonetheless, sizable shares of residents (about 20-30%) remain neutral about efficiency gains, suggesting efficiency alone does not generate broad public buy-in.

TRANSPARENCY IS A CONSISTENT WEAK POINT ACROSS ALL AI APPLICATIONS

- Residents express limited confidence that AI would make government decision-making clearer or more open. This undermines arguments for AI as a way to increase government transparency and responsiveness to residents, even when residents see potential operational benefits.

- Neutral responses dominate across all use cases, clustering around 26–34%.

- Transparency expectations are especially low for AI used in water and wastewater management, with only about 23% of respondents believing it would improve clarity in government decision-making.

- Agreement that AI would improve transparency rarely exceeds one-third of residents.

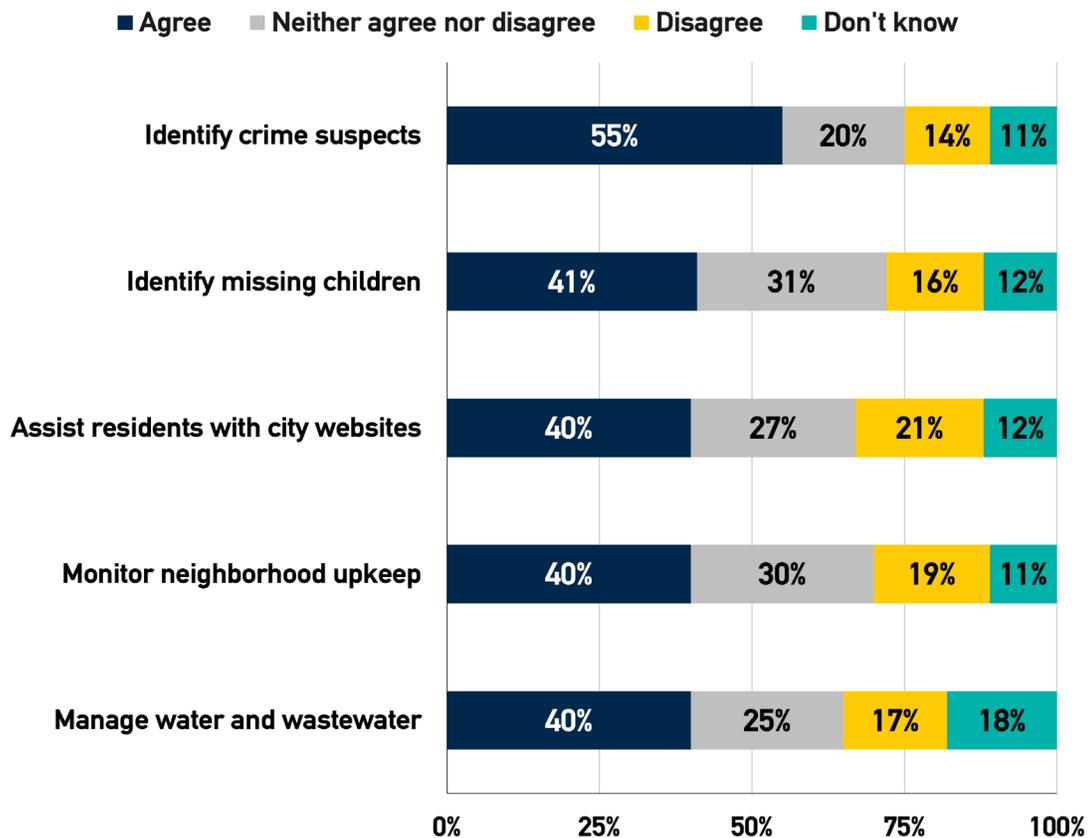## ACCOUNTABILITY GAINS ARE PLAUSIBLE—BUT NOT WIDELY TRUSTED

- While some residents believe AI could improve accountability to the needs of residents and neighborhoods, many remain unconvinced that it would meaningfully change how accountable City employees are to the public.

- Across the five use cases tested, roughly 30–45% of residents agree that AI could increase city government accountability to the needs of residents and neighborhoods.

- Perceived accountability benefits are the strongest for using AI to monitor neighborhood upkeep (43%).

- On average, across the five AI use cases tested, about one-quarter of residents neither agree nor disagree that AI use by city government would increase accountability, suggesting a sizable share remain uncertain or unconvinced.

- Roughly one-quarter of respondents disagree that AI could increase accountability. These beliefs were particularly pronounced for crime-related (32%) and web-based applications - such as translating government documents or using chatbots to help residents find resources on city websites (33%).

CONCERNS ABOUT HARM AND BIAS ARE PERSISTENT AND CONTEXT-SENSITIVE

- Detroit residents are highly attuned to unequal impacts, even in well-intentioned applications.

- Across all use cases, large shares (40-55%) of residents agree that AI could harm some residents even if it helps others.

- Concern is highest for identifying crime suspects, where 55% of residents agree that AI could harm some residents even if it helps others.

- Even for the AI-use case that was most supported, identifying missing children, concerns about bias remain substantial (41%).

Figure 2: Perceptions of Potential Harm from City Government Use of Artificial Intelligence

If the city government used AI to _____, it could harm some residents even if it helped others.

Legend: ■ Agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Disagree ■ Don't know

	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Don't know
Identify crime suspects	55%	20%	14%	11%
Identify missing children	41%	31%	16%	12%
Assist residents with city websites	40%	27%	21%	12%
Monitor neighborhood upkeep	40%	30%	19%	11%
Manage water and wastewater	40%	25%	17%	18%

# FAIRNESS CLAIMS ARE MET WITH SKEPTICISM

- Residents are unconvinced that AI will automatically produce more equal service delivery.

- Neutral responses dominate perceptions of fairness, with about 30-35% of respondents reporting that they neither agree nor disagree that AI will increase fairness and improve service delivery across use cases.

- Agreement that AI would increase fairness typically remains below one-third.

- "Don't know" responses are notably high, ranging from about 10-20% in most cases, indicating uncertainty rather than endorsement.

SUPPORT FOR ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE DROPS SHARPLY WHEN PERSONAL DATA IS INVOLVED

- Even where residents see potential benefits, trust collapses when personal data is involved.

- Nearly two-thirds of residents would not allow access to their personal data (64%, including 39% who said definitely not and 25% who said probably not).

- Fewer than one-quarter (22%) would be willing to permit access to their personal data in government records to help improve the accuracy of the new tool.

- This is a major constraint on any AI deployment strategy and likely reflects historical mistrust of government data use.

Figure 3: Willingness to Allow City Government Access to Personal Data to Improve Artificial Intelligence

To what extent would you be willing to allow access to your personal data from government records to help improve the accuracy of the new tool?

Legend:
- Allow
- Not allow
- Don't know

22%
14%
64%
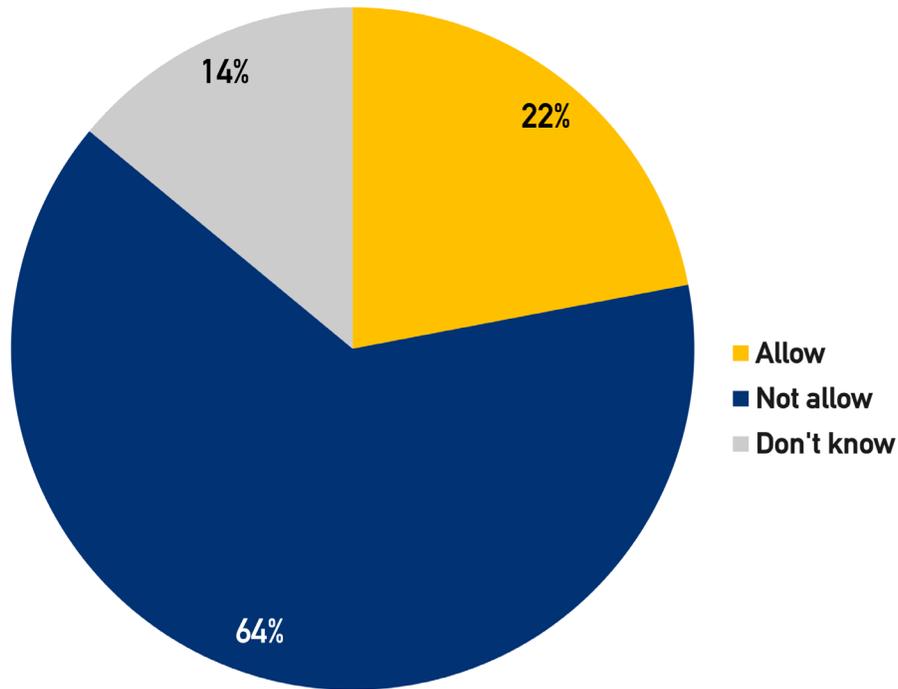
HIGH RATES OF "DON'T KNOW" RESPONSES ARE SUBSTANTIVELY MEANINGFUL

- High rates of "don't know" responses (ranging from 7-20% across use cases) suggest low information, low confidence, and/or unresolved judgment on the use of AI.

- Uncertainty is especially pronounced around transparency, fairness, and bias.

- Responses tend to cluster around "somewhat agree" or "somewhat disagree" rather than strong positions, indicating that many residents hold tentative or conditional views rather than firm opinions about AI use in government.

AUTHORS

Heonuk Ha is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Institute for Social Research and an AI Fellow at the Institute for Data and AI in Society at the University of Michigan.

Yucheng Fan is the Data Manager at the Detroit Metro Area Communities Study.

Mara Cecilia Ostfeld is a faculty co-lead of the Detroit Metro Area Communities Study, and a Research Associate Professor Center for Political Studies and the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information on DMACS, please contact
Sharon Sand, DMACS project manager, at
slsand@umich.edu.
Learn more at www.detroitsurvey.umich.edu