



# WOMEN MAYORS NETWORK

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## **Intersectional Psychological Violence, Threats, and Physical Violence against Mayors in 2021**

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On March 3, 2022, Boise, Idaho Mayor Lauren McLean released a statement about the alarming abuse and violence that she and her family have faced since 2020. In the form of mail, email, and social media threats, online tracking of her children, protests at her home with people carrying torches, and more, Mayor McLean and her family have endured what public servants should never confront. Her city has had to provide a security detail to keep her safe. What is more, she has reached out to other women mayors and learned that the threat is widespread. Among the mayors from whom she heard, some have felt unable to remain in public service. At this writing, Mayor McLean and her family have decided to continue to serve their community despite the grave danger they face as evidenced by thwarted plots to harm her and her family.

An important question about Mayor McLean's experiences is whether they are part of a larger pattern of violence against women officeholders. If so, a consequence may be that women and women of color mayors decline to continue to serve in public office. Moreover, the pipeline of candidates for office may be narrowed. If so, this is of grave concern to democracy as we may reduce our pool of diverse public servants and depress the representation of diverse interests.

To answer this question, we present the findings from new research that focuses on the experiences of U.S. mayors in 2021 in cities of 10,000 in population and above. Overall, we find that violence against mayors is prevalent and that overlapping identities affect experiences of violence in these significant ways:

- **Women mayors experience more psychological violence than men mayors.**
- **Women mayors, particularly women of color mayors, suffer more threats of violence than men of any race.**

- **Women mayors face more violence critical of their gender than men mayors.**
- **Women mayors experience more sexualized violence than men mayors.**
- **Mayors of color, particularly women, face more violence that is critical of their race than non-Hispanic white mayors.**
- **Violence against mayors affects their ability to concentrate on the job and depresses the willingness of Americans to serve.**

### What is Political Violence?

In recent years, scholars have sought to expand definitions of political violence<sup>1</sup> to ensure that they are inclusive of as wide a range of behaviors as possible, and that psychological violence and violence based on gender and race are recognized. Following this work, the definitions we used to convey the experiences of U.S. mayors are:

**Psychological violence** involves acts likely to harm the psychological well-being of individuals by inducing fear or harm to their sense of self-worth or well-being.

**Threats** are a particular type of violence that often merges psychological and physical violence in that they threaten to—but fall short of—causing physical harm. Yet, they are likely to cause psychological harm.

**Physical violence** involves activities that directly harm one’s physical well-being or property.

**Gendered violence** involves violence that is critical of mayors’ sex or gender.

**Sexualized violence** is related to gendered violence but involves violence that sexualizes the mayor by depicting the person in a sexual way.

**Race-based violence** is violence critical of mayors’ race.

**Gendered, sexualized, and race-based violence** can take any of the underlying forms (psychological, threats, physical) captured in our survey.

See Appendix A for more specific information on the way these experiences are measured.

### Building on What We Know So Far

U.S. research about violence against women politicians shows that, among mayors and state senators, psychological and physical violence are common and detrimental to politicians, and that gender differences are

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<sup>1</sup> Bardall, Gabrielle, Elin Bjarnegård, and Jennifer M. Piscopo. "How is political violence gendered? Disentangling motives, forms, and impacts." *Political Studies* 68, no. 4 (2020): 916-935

apparent.<sup>2</sup> A key question that has not been sufficiently addressed is the extent to which intersectional identities affect the levels and types of violence faced by women in politics. How do women of color in politics experience violence? How does that differ from non-Hispanic white women, non-Hispanic white men, and men of color? Our goal here is to illuminate intersectional experiences of U.S. mayors in 2021.

### How We Did Our Research

In the fall of 2021, we conducted a survey of all mayors of cities with populations of 10,000 and above. The first contact was made September 27, 2021, and the last November 29, 2021. The survey focused on questions about violent experiences that fit the definitions delineated above. For each type of violence, mayors were asked to use a scale to indicate how frequently they encountered specific acts of violence. To learn about race and gender of mayors, we asked them to self-identify. For race, the categories that emerged from the data were: African American, Latinx, Asian-American, Indigenous Americans, and mixed race. Of the 3,151 mayors contacted, 971 responded which results in a 30.8 percent response rate. To estimate race and gender differences in levels of violence, we report differences that are statistically significant accounting for numerous controls but use examples of specific types of experiences to illustrate our findings.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas, Sue, Rebekah Herrick, Lori D. Franklin, Marcia L. Godwin, Eveline Gnabasik, and Jean R. Schroedel. "Not for the Faint of Heart: Assessing Physical Violence and Psychological Abuse against US Mayors." *State and local government review* 51, no. 1 (2019): 57-67.

Herrick, Rebekah, Sue Thomas, Lori Franklin, Marcia L. Godwin, Eveline Gnabasik, and Jean Reith Schroedel. "Physical violence and psychological abuse against female and male mayors in the United States." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* (2019).

Herrick, Rebekah, and Sue Thomas. "Not just sticks and stones: psychological abuse and physical violence among US state senators." *Politics & Gender* (2021a):1-26.

Herrick, Rebekah, Sue Thomas, and Kate Bartholomy. "Gender, Power, and Colleague Aggression in US State Senates." *Political Research Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (2022): 134-146.

Herrick, Rebekah, Sue Thomas, Lori Franklin, Marcia L. Godwin, Eveline Gnabasik, and Jean Reith Schroedel. "Physical violence and psychological abuse against female and male mayors in the United States." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* (2019).

## Results

### Levels of Violence against Mayors

In 2021, violence against mayors was common. Among all mayors, 94.5 percent reported psychological violence at least once, 24.2 percent reported at least one threat, and 15.8 percent suffered physical violence. However, with the exception of physical violence, non-Hispanic white women (NHWW) and women of color (WoC) mayors faced higher levels of violence than men of color (MoC) mayors and non-Hispanic white men (NHWM) mayors. While women mayors also reported more physical violence than men mayors, the difference was not statistically significant.

Breakdowns of these trends are as follows:

- 45.7 percent of WoC mayors reported being harassed at least monthly; 39.7 percent of NHWW mayors, 36.2 percent of MoC mayors, and 23.4 percent of NHWM mayors reported the same.
- NHWW mayors faced the most psychological violence. Sixty-five-point two percent of NHWW experienced at least one type of psychological violence monthly, compared to 63.2 percent for MoC, 57.1 percent for WoC and 55.4 percent for NHWM.
- WoC mayors received the highest rates of threats: 8.6 percent of WoC were threatened monthly in contrast to 1.5 percent of NHWW, 6.3 percent of MoC, and .8 percent of NHWM.
- More specifically mayors of color received more threats of death and beatings than other groups.
- 5.7 percent of WoC mayors reported at least monthly threats, all were weekly.
- 6.5 percent of MoC mayors reported at least monthly threats, 1.1 percent were weekly.
- 1.5 percent of NHWW mayors reported at least monthly threats, none were weekly.
- .8 percent of NHWM mayors reported at least monthly threats, .2 percent were weekly.

### Content of violence – Intersectional Results

Psychological violence, threats, and physical violence can be gendered, sexualized, and/or race-based. When mayors were asked to share the forms of violence they experienced, WoC mayors reported the highest levels of violence critical of their race followed by MoC mayors. And both groups experienced significantly higher rates than NHWM. More specifically:

- 17.8 percent of WoC mayors and 18.1 percent of MoC mayors were criticized monthly about their race.

- 7.1 percent of WoC mayors and 3.6 percent of MoC mayors were criticized weekly based on their race.
- 4.7 percent of NHWW mayors and 4.0 percent of NHWM mayors were criticized monthly based on their race.
- NHWW mayors were criticized the most of any group because of their gender: 20.1 percent reported such criticism at least monthly.
- 14.3 percent of WoC mayors were criticized monthly based on their gender compared to 3.7 percent for MoC mayors.
- 2.3 percent of NHWM mayors were criticized monthly based on their gender.

NHWW mayors and WoC mayors reported the highest rates of sexualized violence. Specifically:

- 17.1 percent of WoC and 10 percent of NHWW mayors experienced some form of sexualized violence at least monthly.
- 2.1 percent of MoC mayors and .8 percent of NHWM mayors reported the same.

### **Reactions to Violence**

Our survey also addressed the costs associated with violence. Our first finding concerns the effects on mental health and well-being of mayors overall. Thirteen-point one percent of mayors who experienced violence reported that the violence was very upsetting, and 42.4 percent said it was somewhat upsetting. 21.2 percent of mayors experienced intrusive memories, nightmares, or similar effects. Forty-one-point three percent reported increased levels of irritability, sleep disturbance, problems concentrating, or exaggerated startle responses. Thirteen percent of mayors reported that violence diverted their attention from work and family quite a lot, and 36.9 percent reported that it did so at least a little.

The wider effects on representation are also apparent. Sixty-nine-point eight percent of mayors knew someone who chose not to run for office due to these issues. And 32.2 percent thought about leaving office themselves. In short, the concerns of Mayor McLean and others with whom she consulted, are shared by the wider population of mayors.

Gender and race-based differences in reactions to violence are also apparent among our mayoral respondents. WoC mayors and NHWW mayors were more likely than their counterparts to have reported intrusive thoughts about the violence to which they were exposed and to have reported those experiences as upsetting. NHWW mayors were more likely than those in other groups to have faced irritability and to have had their attention diverted from work. MoC mayors were least likely to have reported these symptoms.

With regard to thoughts of leaving, NHWW mayors were more likely than others to have done so. And WoC mayors and MoC mayors were less likely than their counterparts to know of someone else who has been deterred from running due to hostility in politics.

### Summary

Overall, mayors experience high rates of violence, and overlapping identities affect experiences of violence in meaningful ways. Our results show that WoC mayors were the only group to have experienced heightened levels of both gender and race-based violence. Additionally, they reported higher levels of threats than their peers. And WoC mayors and NHWW mayors both faced higher rates of sexualized violence than men. Further, NHWW mayors reported higher levels than their counterparts of psychological violence, and violence based on gender.

### Implications

The research study makes clear that intersectional analysis on psychological violence, threats, and physical violence among mayors with a focus on gender and race-based measures is important. Overlapping identities, especially officeholders from marginalized groups, affect how mayors experience their public and professional worlds.

The implications of these findings for women mayors are serious. Women are under-represented in mayoral positions nationwide, and this treatment may exacerbate the problem. When women of color are attacked because of their race, and all women face sexualized violence and harassment, they may be discouraged from running for or staying in office. As Boise Mayor [Lauren McLean](#) noted:

*“As a public servant of 20 years, I’m incredibly disheartened to see good people stepping down from public service because of the impact that threats – very real threats – have on their sense of security, on their families, on their ability to serve their communities and fulfill their duties.”*

Even if women decide to enter or stay in politics despite their experience of political violence, the personal costs of their service are different than for other groups of mayors. Also, exposure to gendered, sexualized, and race-based attacks can dampen voters’ perceptions of individual officeholders and fuel existing biases within the political system, making it more difficult for women of color and non-Hispanic white women to win elective office.

In the end, it is only when democracies representatives “look like America” that they can be seen as fully legitimate. And only when

democracies are diverse can they provide a full array of symbolic, process, and policy benefits.

Acknowledging this, in 2020, U.S. Representative Rashida Tlaib introduced [House Resolution 1151](#) “Recognizing Violence against women in politics as a global phenomenon and supporting women's full and meaningful participation in political life”, which she [reintroduced it in 2021](#). Said Representative Tlaib:

*“Receiving constant death threats – including against my family – hasn’t stopped me from speaking truth to power, but such hate and risk should not be the inherent cost of any woman participating in politics, regardless of her race, creed, sexual or gender identity, or any other defining quality of who she is. We so often hear the future is female—and I introduce this resolution as a means of securing it. Our future is so much brighter if we can build a world in which women and nonbinary individuals are free to fight for their communities and serve in government without fear of violence and abuse.”*

### **Taking Action**

We hope that these results will generate a shared understanding of the challenges facing current elected officeholders and a commitment to addressing them.

**The [Women Mayors Network \(WMN\)](#), launched in 2020, builds connections among women mayors, increases their visibility, and promotes equity in women’s leadership.** WMN provides safety training for mayors to address these issues. Other organizations of elected officials may do the same. Similarly, candidate training programs should include important information about staying safe, such as using post office boxes for campaigns instead of physical home addresses.

### **Action to address political violence can also come from government.**

The federal government can assist local elected officials through the Secret Service’s [National Threat Assessment Center](#), a center within the Secret Service with expertise in assessing and combating political violence. State legislatures can enact legislation to mandate that home addresses of local elected officials are kept private. State and local governments can also engage in public conversations about safety risks to elected officials and devote resources to addressing safety concerns.

The existence of political violence, including that specific to women, is not new. But it is the knowledge about and attention to it that will spur effective solutions.

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## Appendix A:

### Survey Items from the 2021 Mayoral Survey:

Mayors were asked to indicate how frequently they experienced each type of violence in their role as mayor. Scales were dichotomized to depict the number of mayors who experienced psychological violence and the number who did not, and, similarly, the number of mayors who experienced physical violence and those who did not. The specific question was “Although mayors may have generally positive interactions with the public during their service, we are interested in knowing to what degree they have negative interactions. Below is a list of types of negative experiences that some politicians have reported. Please indicate if you have experienced any of these experiences as mayor by putting a check mark in the appropriate box.”

For *psychological violence*, the experiences were:

- Harassment (exposure to insistent and uninvited behavior, attention, or verbal contact)
- Saw disrespectful content about you on social media
- Saw or heard disrespectful content about you in traditional media
- Was disrespected at a public meeting
- Received threat(s) of death, beating, abduction, or similar action
- Received threat(s) of rape or other sexual assault
- Someone in your family received threat(s) of beating, abduction, or similar act
- For *physical violence*, the experiences were:
- My property was harmed
- I was physically harmed
- I was harmed enough to require medical care

For gender and race-based violence, we asked the following question: “If you indicated you had any of the above experiences please answer the following questions.... Please indicate how frequently the actions noted earlier took the following forms.”

***Race-based Violence.*** Directly criticized because of your race.

***Gendered violence.*** Directly criticized because of your sex or gender. Mentioned your appearance.

***Sexualized violence.*** Depicted you in a sexual way. Made inappropriate sexual comments about you or advances toward you. Were touched inappropriately in a sexual way.