

California is not alone in its housing crisis, survey of U.S. mayors shows

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Bay Area cities grappling with the soaring cost of housing are not alone.

In a new survey of 117 American mayors, “housing costs” — not public safety or schools or jobs — was the top reason they gave for why residents move away, with just over half of the cities’ leaders citing it as the reason.

“This isn’t just the story of the coastal cities feeling the housing crunch,” said Katherine Levine Einstein, an assistant professor of public policy at Boston University and co-author of the 2017 Menino Survey of Mayors. “Those numbers hold exactly the same when you look at the northeast, the southeast, the southwest and the northwest or when you look at rich cities or poor cities.”

The survey also found that only 13 percent of the mayors interviewed felt that local housing stock met their cities’ needs “very well” or “extremely well.” Mayors raised an array of concerns, most commonly a need to increase homeownership and to build more affordable housing for families.

Mayors rated their housing options more poorly in the West, where just 6 percent said it was a very good fit for their residents’ needs and 18 percent said it was not a good match at all. By contrast, no mayors in the Northeast or Midwest gave their housing stock the lowest rating.

The survey also touched on a political reality confronting elected officials: While 40 percent of mayors said their cities needed more affordable housing, 55 percent said that building even one affordable development for families would be controversial.

And 59 percent said that — unlike with public education or policing — a vocal minority with strong views wields more influence on local housing development than the views of the majority of their residents.