# THE BELLINGHAM PLAN
# COMMUNITY VISION SURVEY SUMMARY REPORT


February 2024

# Contents

# Executive Summary

The Bellingham Plan will serve as an updated version of the City's existing Comprehensive Plan established in 2016. Mandated by the State, Comprehensive Plans define guidance for implementation, such as zoning and development regulations, capital financial investments, and other specific actions or programs. To ensure the plan aligns with community needs, the City of Bellingham relies on public input to inform and guide updates to the Comprehensive Plan.

One such piece of community input is the Community Vision Survey, which will serve to "set the stage" for the next phase in community engagement. The survey gave Bellingham residents an opportunity to share aspects of the community they deem most crucial, and which ones require improvement. The survey questions were thoughtfully crafted to encompass elements from the existing Comprehensive Plan and community interactions on various projects in recent years. To ensure widespread participation, the survey was made accessible in Spanish and distributed to the community through diverse channels and community outreach events. Distribution methods included paper mail-back copies with website URLs, paper copies and QR codes at tabling events, community presentations, open houses, and email blasts. The Community Vision Survey remained open from August 10, 2023, through November 20, 2023, with the printed survey reaching mailboxes at the end of September. Through these methods, we received a total of 4,287 valid responses.

Notable trends and significant insights from the survey point at the community's values and prioritizations:

The **biggest identified weaknesses** predominantly center around **affordability**, encompassing **challenges related to housing accessibility and job stability** in a shifting economy. This aligns with the **overarching priority**, with **housing for all income levels** topping the list for all demographic groups.

Notably, Bellingham places high value on the outdoors, particularly on aspects related to the environment, recreation, and public open spaces. **Neighborhood parks and trails** emerge as **top priorities**, offering the most significant recreational opportunities for residents. While **lack of access to water recreation** was a common response and remains **a priority (both outdoor and indoor activities)**.

Though not among the most significant weaknesses, the responses underscore a **need to address safety downtown**.

**Access to food** emerges as the **foremost priority in close proximity to home**, followed closely by **healthcare and childcare**.

Interestingly, people expressed **little interest in discouraging businesses of any kind**, but there is **consistent support for actively promoting local businesses**, **childcare**, **education** and **green industries**.

Residents express robust **support for arts and culture**, recognizing it as a **unique and valuable asset**.

The **most underrepresented demographics** were those **ages 18-24**, **students**, **renters** and **Hispanic and LatinX** residents.

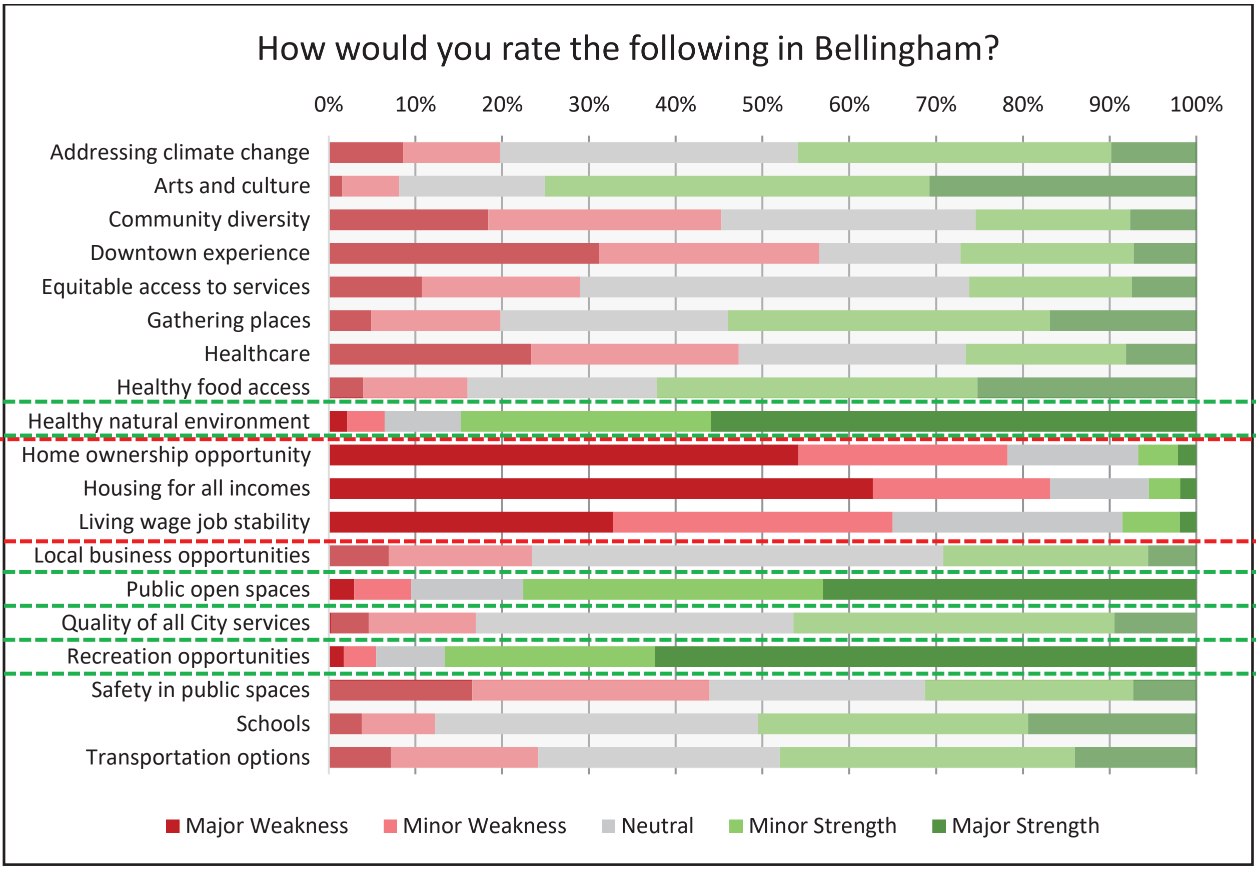
With a better understanding of the community's values and priorities from the survey findings, the next phase in the update process will be shaped by a commitment to addressing the needs identified by the community. As we move forward to the next phase, continued community input remains pivotal, so stay informed at **engagebellingham.org**. Continue reading for more detailed survey results.

# Survey Results

## Strengths & Weaknesses:

Bellingham **remains attractive** to residents for being **outdoorsy** and for **cherishing shared open spaces**.

However, residents are definite about rising **affordability concerns** related to **housing access**, **home ownership opportunities** and **job stability**.



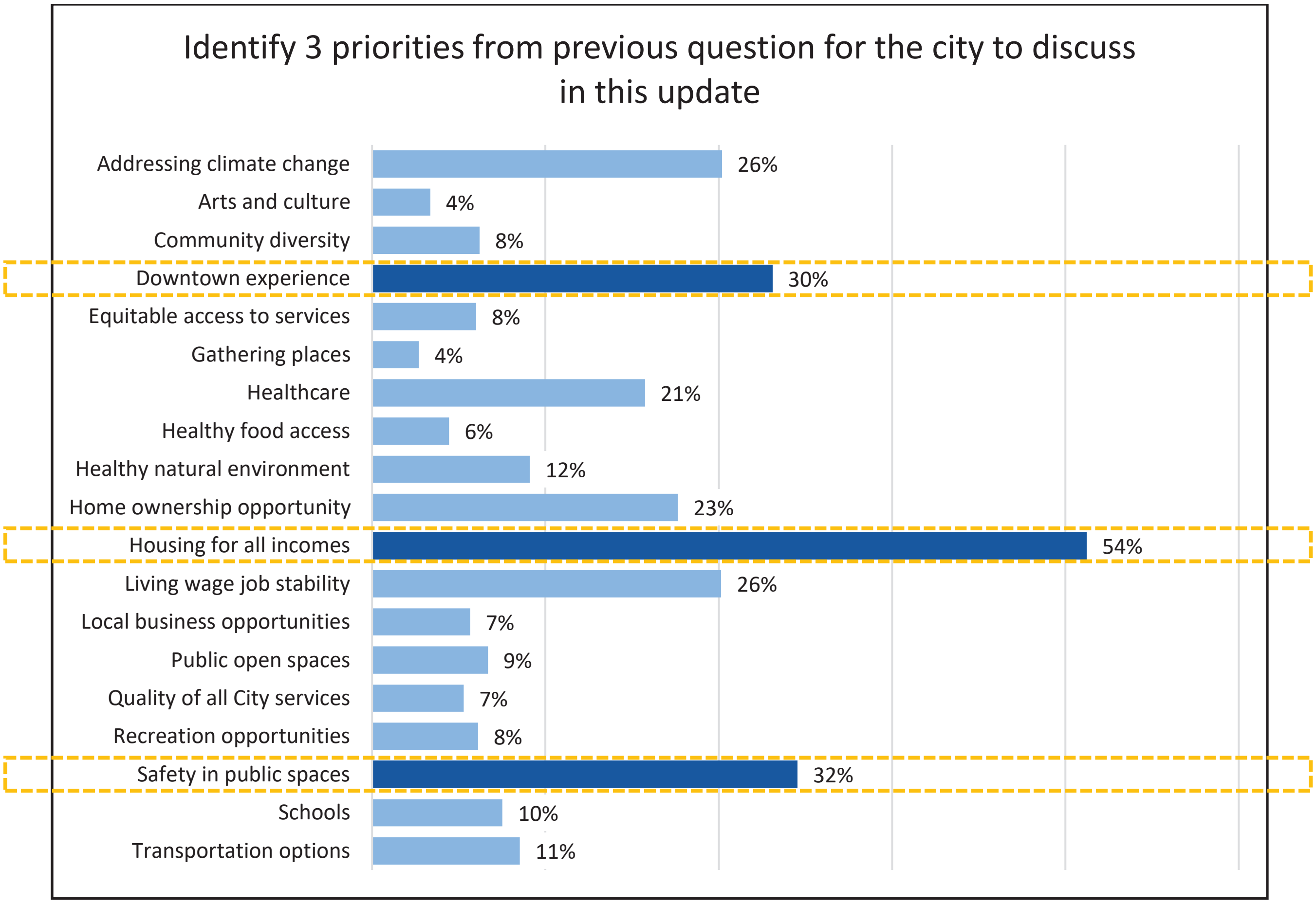

Survey respondents voiced an appreciation for Bellingham's "recreational opportunities" and commitment to nourishing a "healthy natural environment" so that we can enjoy it together. This sentiment was generally shared by respondents who also felt a recognition of local "arts and culture" as a source of dignity. It is clear that Bellingham is a special place and living here is attractive to many.

However, respondents strongly identified affordability as our community's biggest weakness. These strengths and weaknesses may be connected as Bellingham's uniquely attractive natural and recreational comforts could be a factor in rising housing costs—a challenging issue to have.

## Prioritization:

Residents are **vocal about** the City addressing **access to housing for all incomes**—paralleling concerns about affordability.

Additionally, residents are **concerned with feeling safe in public places**, in particular **downtown**.

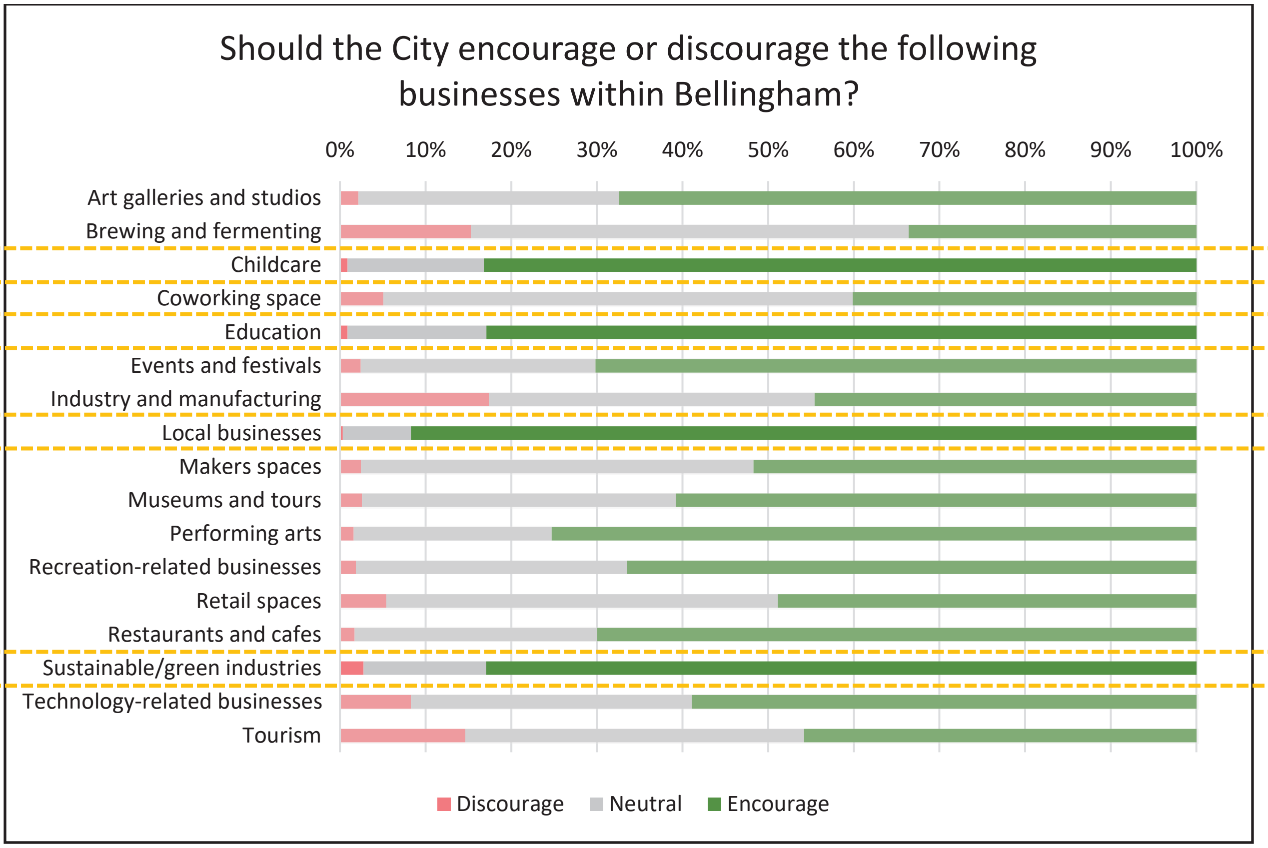



Some responses highlight weaknesses from the previous question, “housing for all incomes” being the most selected. However, we've also noticed that some priorities don't necessarily reflect weaknesses, but instead underscore the significance of strengths. For example, survey participants emphasized their focus on proactive measures for well-being such as “addressing climate change,” “healthcare,” “healthy food access” and “healthy natural environment” (all identified strengths in the previous question).

Similarly, we observed that many respondents who prioritized the "downtown experience" were emphasizing both economic vitality and the preservation of existing safety measures, which they identified as strengths in the previous question.

## Encouraging or Discouraging Industries:

Respondents demonstrated little interest in discouraging most industries. However, they expressed **strong support for local businesses**, **sustainable industries**, **education** and **healthcare**.

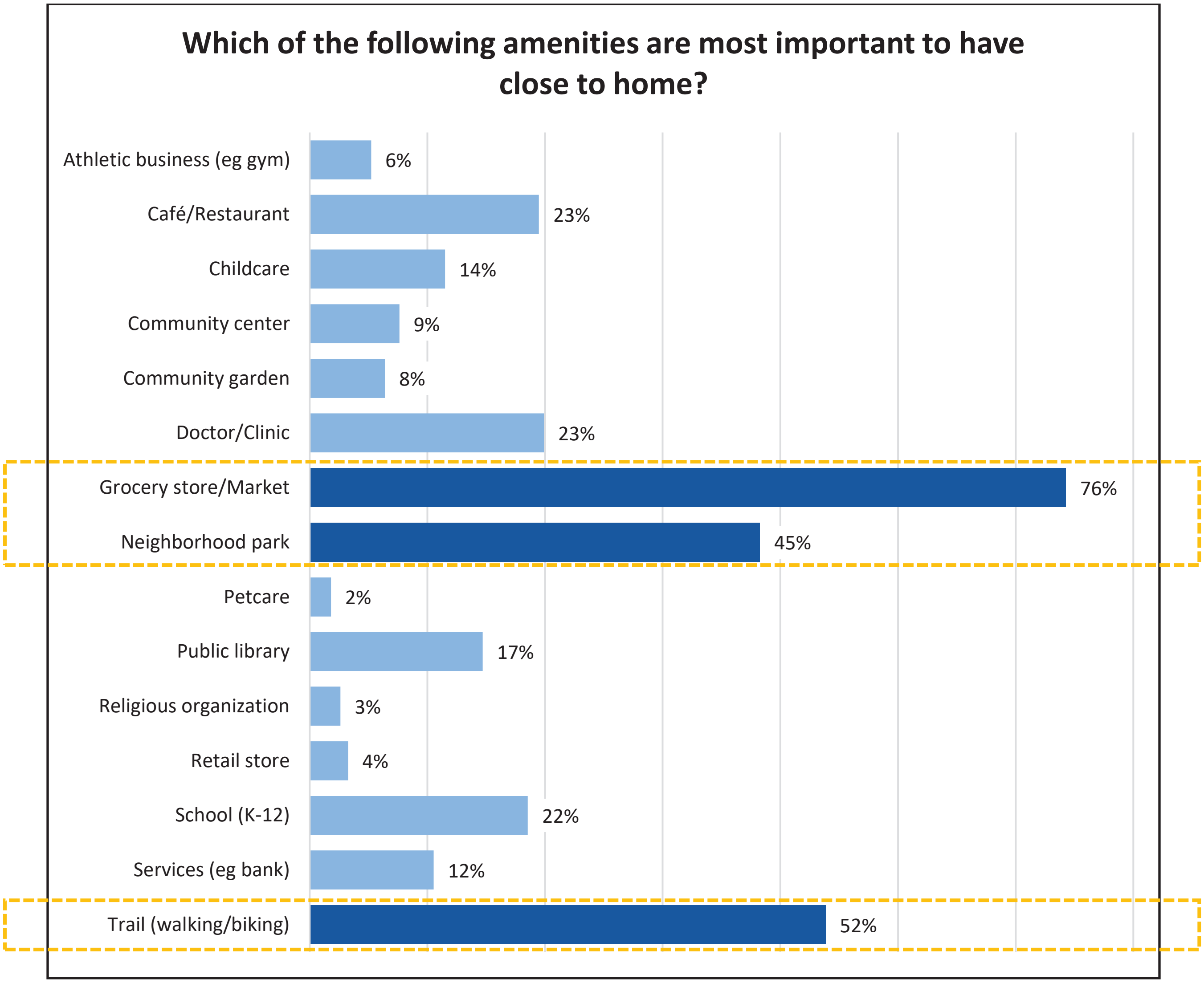



The majority of responses demonstrate overall positive encouragement for most industries. Mainly, survey respondents strongly encouraged industries linked to economic prosperity such as "local," "sustainable/green" and "technology-related" industries. Notably, the results show "tourism," "brewing/fermenting" and "manufacturing" are the most debated industries. This could indicate a desire to move away from Bellingham's industrial past and instead pursue a more diversified economic direction.

## Most Important Amenities:

### Amenities Close to Home

Respondents **prioritized well-being amenities** close to home—**grocery stores/markets**, **neighborhood parks** and **trails** for walking and biking.

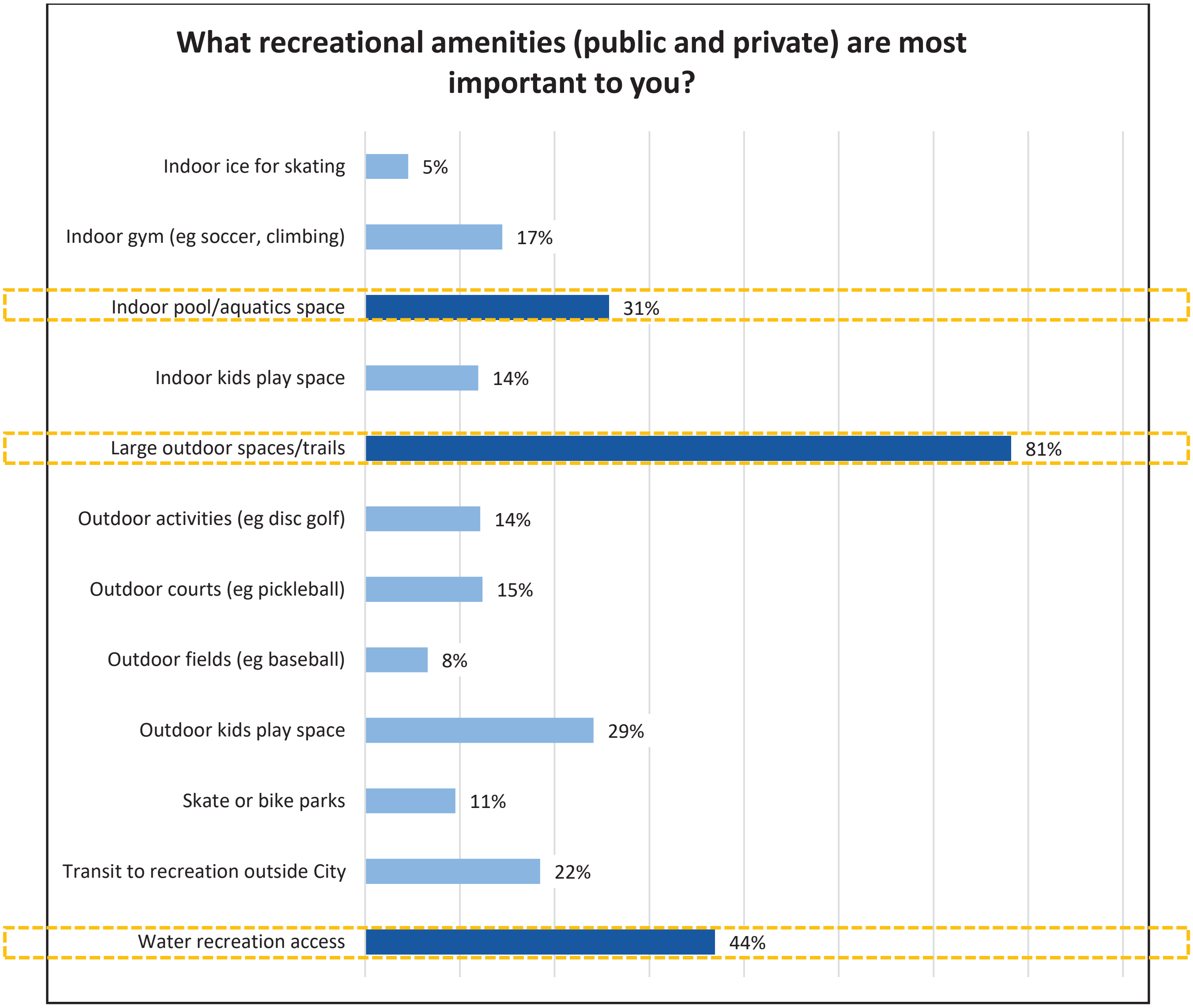



It is worth noting that for this question, respondents could only select their top three amenities close to home. The results revealed that the vast majority prioritized "neighborhood park" and "trail," indicating Bellingham's strong emphasis on outdoor spaces. However, access to food emerged as the top concern, highlighting an ongoing challenge. Interestingly, "retail store" was one of the least preferred, but "café/restaurant" and "doctor/clinic" were popular responses. This is particularly noteworthy given the consideration of the *distributed nodes** growth concept under consideration in the Comprehensive Plan update. Additionally, education-related amenities such as schools, public libraries, and childcare facilities were also popular choices.

**The distributed nodes growth concept was explored in a Phase 1 exercise and garnered interest from the community. It was described as "similar to a "15-minute city" concept" and "would allow small-scale commercial services to locate inside neighborhoods within walking distance of where people live."*

### Recreational Amenities

Respondents **prioritized outdoor space** and indicated a **gap in water-related** and **indoor recreation activities**.




For this question, respondents were also asked to choose their top three recreational amenities. The results highlight an emerging theme of desiring more access to water recreation in Bellingham.

Additionally, we noticed in the open-ended question that respondents would like more waterfront public access. Respondents also emphasized recreational opportunities for kids, and specifically identified a lack in indoor activities—a sentiment also recorded in the open-ended question.

## Bellingham in 20 Years

While the majority of the Vision Survey prompts asked respondents to select from multiple pre-set choices, one question allowed them to respond in their own words. This question asked, "What 3 words describe the Bellingham you'd like to see in 20 years?" Three separate answer boxes were provided. This question produced 11,577 single-word responses that have been compiled into the below word cloud. Some respondents either inserted two words in one box or tried to create a sentence or phrase by using all three boxes; these types of responses were not generally retained as combination phrases, but the most common intentions, such as "less homeless," were retained.

The words below represent the frequency with which each word or sentiment was expressed. Similar words with the same root, such as "diverse" and "diversity" were combined as a single concept. The size of the word is directly proportional to the frequency of the concept, with "safe" and its related words as the most common, followed by "affordable."

**What 3 words describe the Bellingham you'd like to see in 20 years?**

## Analysis: Variation across Demographics

The data described above represents the overall results when combining all 4,287 responses. It is also important to understand how responses change when looking at different demographic groups, allowing an understanding of how trends vary across demographics. This is particularly important when looking at the demographics that are not equally represented in this survey, such as the **under-representation** of:

- Those who rent their homes.
- 18-24-year-olds.
- LatinX individuals.
- Those in households earning under $25,000 annually.

See Appendix A for charts indicating variation between the demographics of survey respondents and census data for Bellingham as a whole.

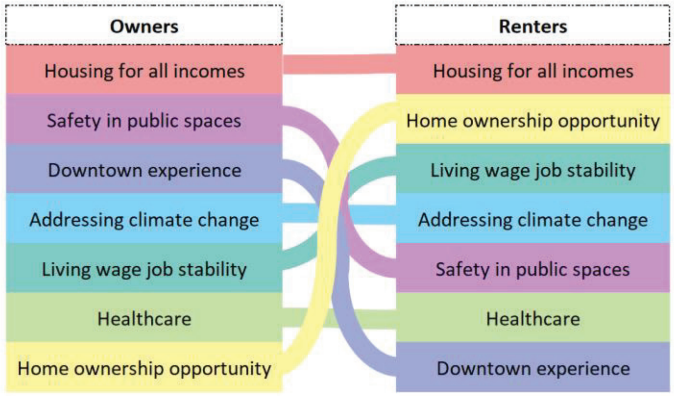
Crosstabs were used to compare responses along demographic lines, highlighting where variation exists between different demographic groups. Those that indicated significant variation are described here. While significant variation existed in the priorities question, all crosstabs showed that “Housing for all incomes” remained the top priority for every demographic group analyzed.

### Housing Tenure (renter/owner) of Respondent

One of the most significant demographic impacts on responses was found in respondents’ housing tenure (whether they own or rent their home). The following chart indicates the seven most common priorities identified by owners as they compare the same priorities identified by renters. Renters were under-represented in the overall results and should therefore be particularly of note. Here, their stronger prioritization of home ownership opportunities and living wage job stability is evident.

***Identify 3 priorities for the City to discuss in this update*** *(by housing tenure)*

(top 7 shown here)




Renters and owners also identified slightly different preferences for which amenities should be close to home. While they agreed on most items, it was clear that renters did not prioritize schools quite as highly, but did prioritize community gardens, doctors/clinics, and petcare somewhat more highly. The below diagram shows all options for this question as identified differently by owners and renters.

***Which of the following amenities are most important to have close to home?***

*(by housing tenure)*

## Age of Respondent

Preferences and priorities shift dramatically as an individual ages. The crosstabs for age showed the most variation for this survey. Some follow a linear trend as residents age, such as the importance of "**Living wage job stability**" and "**Community diversity**" decreasing while both "**Safety in public spaces**" and "**Healthy natural environment** increases. Others vary over life stages, such as "**schools**" which tend to be more important for parents (often aged 25-44) and grandparents (often aged 65+). The chart below shows the change in priorities for respondents of different ages. All options are shown here due to the large variation found. 18-24-year-olds were under-represented in the overall results and should therefore be particularly of note here.

*Identify 3 priorities for the city to discuss in this update (by age)*


In addition to differently prioritizing topics, respondents of different ages rated various characteristics of Bellingham with different strengths and weaknesses. The charts below represent those areas in which a significant and generally linear trend existed between the youngest and oldest respondents' answers, with those two demographic groups used for comparison. The youngest residents provided more negative ratings as a group, particularly in areas known to be important to younger generations, such as in environmental and equity issues. Younger residents also face different challenges than older ones, so they tended to rate wage and health issues worse as well. Perhaps in contrast, the Downtown experience was rated much worse by the oldest demographic than by the youngest.

*Major Variation in Rating of City Weaknesses by Age*

| **Weaknesses** (minor or major) | **18-24** | **65+** |
|---|---|---|
| Addressing climate change | 29% | 18% |
| Community diversity | 23% | 11% |
| Downtown experience | 38% | 61% |
| Equitable access to services | 48% | 24% |
| Healthy natural environment | 17% | 5% |
| Healthcare | 56% | 37% |
| Healthy food access | 35% | 10% |
| Housing for all incomes | 91% | 79% |
| Living wage job stability | 44% | 24% |

## Race/Ethnicity of Respondent

Bellingham residents include those from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. 81% of residents identify as White only, with 19% of the population identifying as Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC). About half of the BIPOC population identify as Hispanic or Latino. 89% of survey respondents identified as White only, meaning that BIPOC individuals were significantly under-represented. BIPOC respondents rated city strengths and weaknesses significantly differently from White respondents in several key areas. Generally, they identified more weaknesses than White respondents. BIPOC individuals were under-represented in the overall results and should therefore be particularly of note here.

While White and BIPOC respondents generally prioritized issues in a similar manner, the table below shows where differences occurred. All options are shown in order to highlight some of these differences. Of particular note is the tendency for BIPOC individuals to prioritize "**Community diversity**" much higher than White respondents. They also prioritized "**Healthy food access**" noticeably higher and "**Recreation opportunities**" lower.

### *Identify 3 priorities for the City to discuss in this update (by Race/Ethnicity)*

| White/Caucasian Only | All other Races/Ethnicities |
|---|---|
| Housing for all incomes | Housing for all incomes |
| Safety in public spaces | Safety in public spaces |
| Downtown experience | Living wage job stability |
| Addressing climate change | Downtown experience |
| Living wage job stability | Home ownership opportunity |
| Home ownership opportunity | Addressing climate change |
| Healthcare | Healthcare |
| Healthy natural environment | Community diversity |
| Transportation options | Healthy natural environment |
| Schools | Transportation options |
| Public open spaces | Equitable access to services |
| Recreation opportunities | Schools |
| Equitable access to services | Healthy food access |
| Community diversity | Local business opportunities |
| Local business opportunities | Public open spaces |
| Quality of all City services | Quality of all City services |
| Healthy food access | Recreation opportunities |
| Arts and culture | Arts and culture |
| Gathering places | Gathering places |

White and BIPOC respondents also had notable differences in responses to several strengths and weaknesses questions. While the vast majority (78%) of White respondents saw arts and culture as a strength in Bellingham, BIPOC residents were more split, with only 66% seeing it as a strength and a larger portion rating it as a weakness than White respondents.

***Arts and Culture Rating by Race/Ethnicity***

| | White or Caucasian | BIPOC |
|---|---|---|
| Major Weakness | 1% | 3% |
| Minor Weakness | 6% | 11% |
| Neutral | 16% | 21% |
| Minor Strength | 46% | 38% |
| Major Strength | 31% | 28% |

Some other categories showed noticeable differences between White and BIPOC responses. BIPOC individuals were slightly more likely to identify home ownership opportunities and housing for all incomes as a strength, though very few of either demographic group agreed.

***Minor Variation in City Strengths/Weaknesses by Race/Ethnicity***

| **Weaknesses** (minor or major) | | |
|---|---|---|
| | White or Caucasian | BIPOC |
| Healthy food access | 15% | 18% |
| Healthy natural environment | 6% | 9% |
| Quality of city services | 15% | 25% |
| Recreation opportunities | 4% | 9% |
| Schools | 11% | 20% |

| **Strengths** (minor or major) | | |
|---|---|---|
| | White or Caucasian | BIPOC |
| Home ownership opportunities | 6% | 10% |
| Housing for all incomes | 5% | 9% |

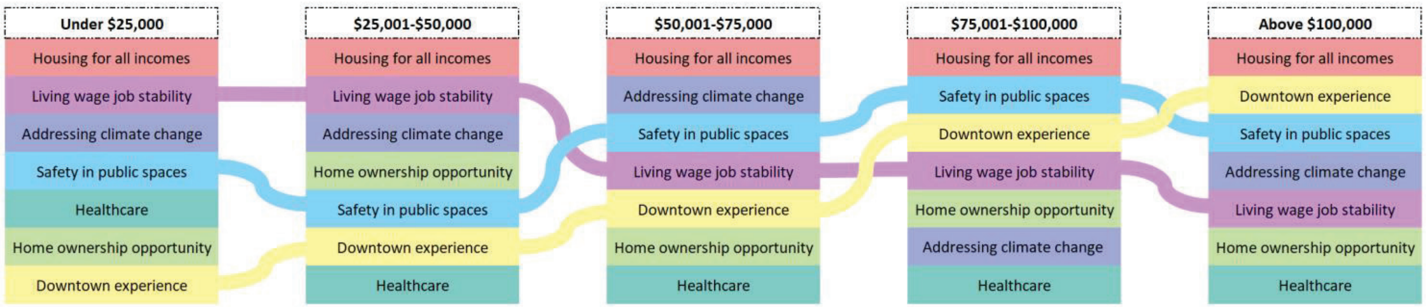
## Household Income of Respondent

Income can be a significant indicator of changing priorities. The chart below shows the variation in priorities for those from different income brackets. It is important to note that the top seven priorities remain the same across all income brackets, despite there being 19 options to prioritize. This indicates general agreement about the overarching priorities facing the city.

While housing for all incomes remains the number one priority for all income brackets, other topics vary significantly. Downtown experience in particular shifts dramatically, from the bottom of the top seven priorities for those households earning under $25,000 to second priority for those earning the most. Living wage job stability shows the inverse prioritization trend, going from second to fifth when traveling from the lowest income bracket to the highest.

***Identify 3 priorities for the city to discuss in this update (by income)***

(top 7 shown here)




There are also several economic questions that produced significant variation across income brackets. While all demographics showed very little interest in discouraging businesses of any kind, some demographics showed more interest than others in doing so. Those demographic trends that follow a generally linear and significant trend between the lowest and highest income brackets are identified below, with those two groups used for comparison.

*Interest in Discouraging Various Types of Businesses*

| | <$25,000 | >$100,000 |
|---|---|---|
| Industry and Manufacturing | 26% | 14% |
| Retail Spaces | 11% | 3% |
| Technology-related businesses | 17% | 6% |
| Tourism | 23% | 10% |

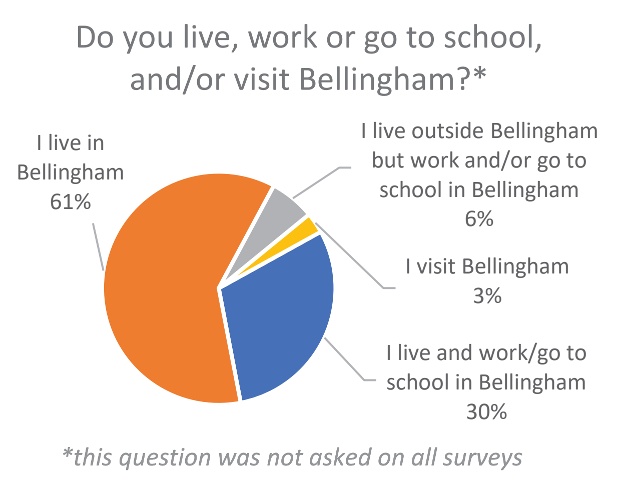
*Interest in Encouraging Various Types of Businesses*

| | <$25,000 | >$100,000 |
|---|---|---|
| Makers Spaces | 63% | 51% |
| Recreation-related businesses | 63% | 75% |
| Restaurants and Cafes | 64% | 79% |
| Technology-related businesses | 40% | 69% |
| Tourism | 37% | 55% |

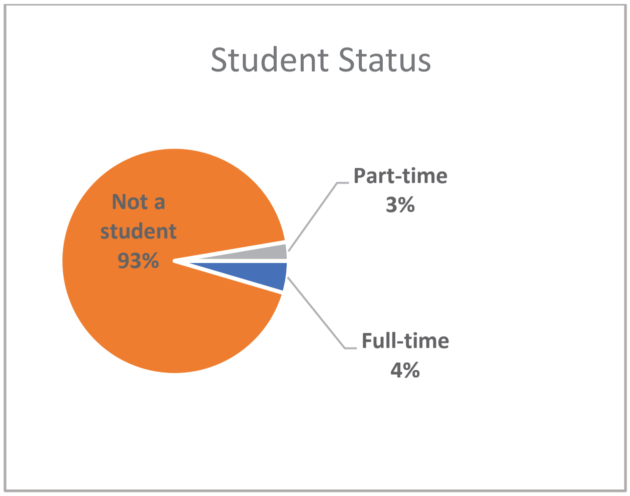
# Appendix A: Demographic Data

*The following two charts include information about those who responded to the survey.*

Residency

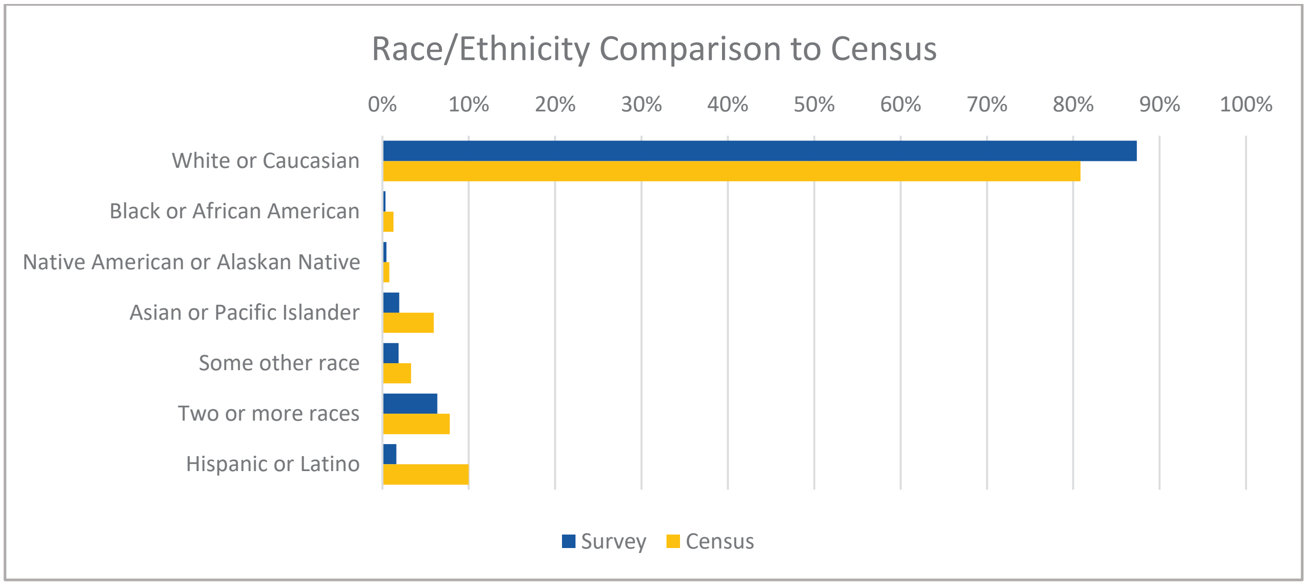



Student Status

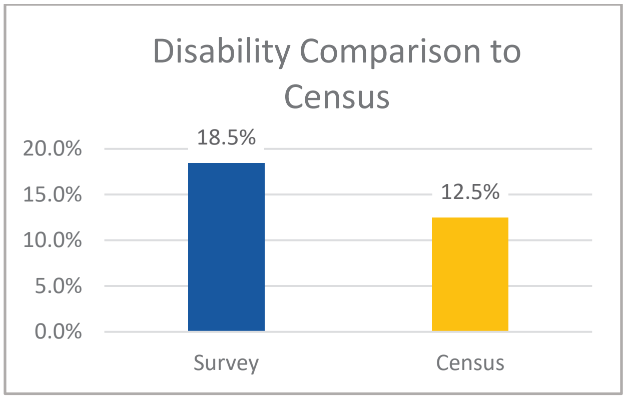



*The following charts indicate the demographic responses of those who responded to the survey as they compare to census figures for the city of Bellingham as a whole.*

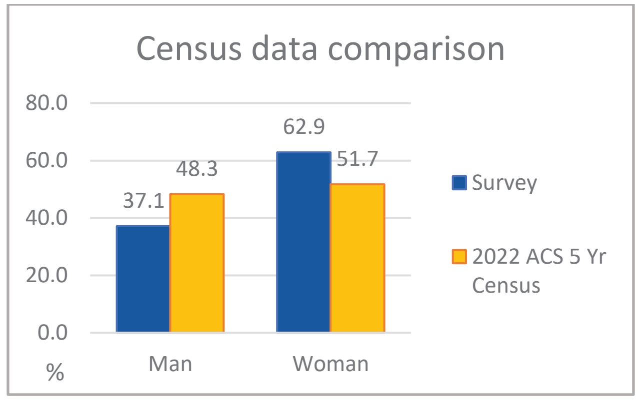
Ethnicity



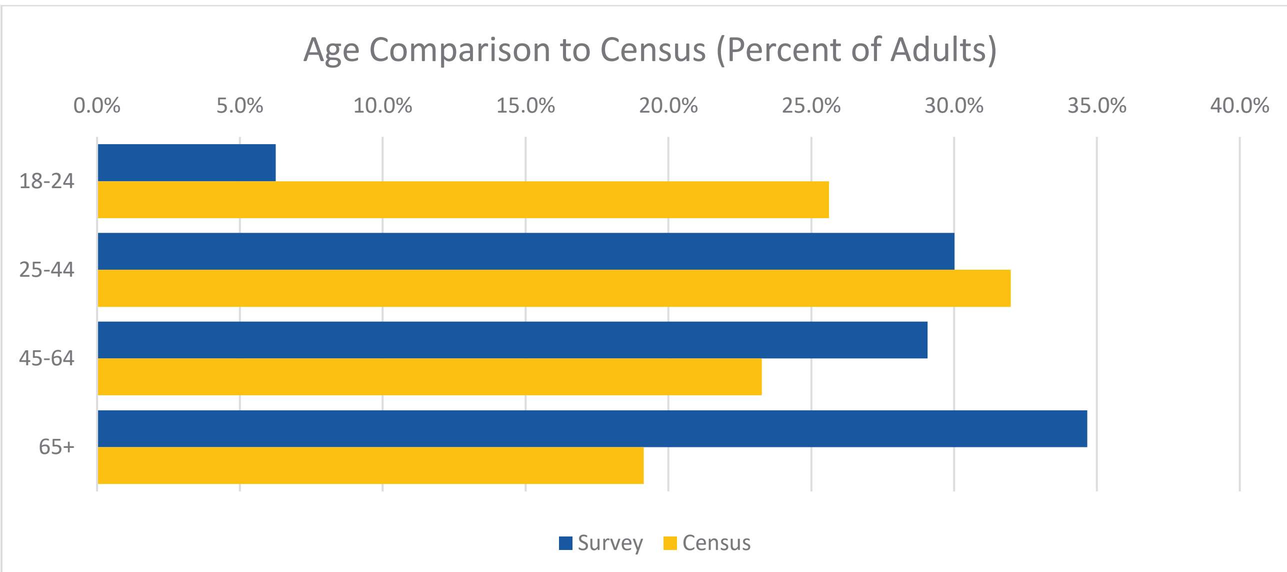
Disability Identity



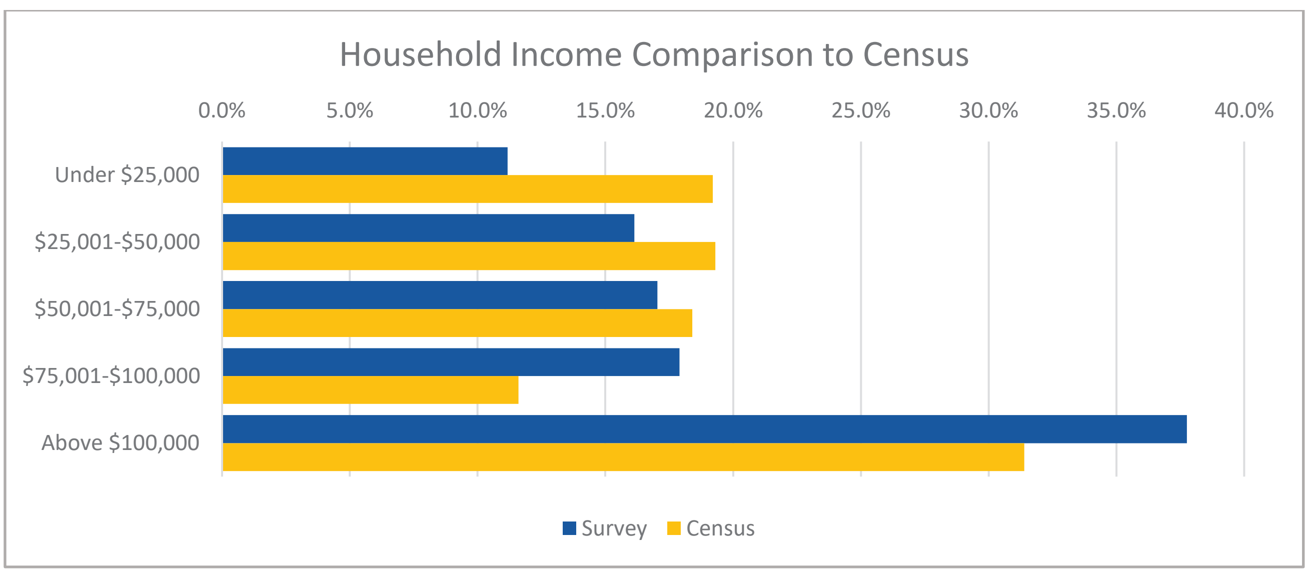

Gender Identity




Age




Household Income



Home Ownership