



Civic Participation and Social Engagement among Immigrants and Refugees in the Twin Cities

Minnesota is home to more than 400,000 immigrants and refugees. The majority live in the Twin Cities. *Speaking for Ourselves: A Study with Immigrant and Refugee Communities in the Twin Cities* looks at the experiences of Hmong, Karen, Latino, Liberian, and Somali immigrants and refugees living in Hennepin and Ramsey counties.

With the guidance of our advisory group (see a list on page 15), we interviewed 459 immigrants and adult children of immigrants about their lives – their families, education, jobs, health, and engagement in their communities to learn: What are the biggest needs of immigrant and refugee communities in the Twin Cities? What are the issues that are of greatest concerns? What assets are available to address them? For more information about the study methods and participants, see page 11.

This summary highlights what *Speaking for Ourselves* participants had to say about civic participation and social engagement. It highlights common themes, and suggests potential strategies to support these communities. Other *Speaking for Ourselves* summary reports focus on education; employment; health, mental health, and health care access; personal money management; transportation, housing, and safety perceptions; and the immigrant experience in the Twin Cities. All of these reports can be found at wilderresearch.org.



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Cultural communities at-a-glance

The Latino population makes up the largest foreign-born population in Minnesota. About 7 percent of people living in the Twin Cities are Latino. The vast majority of these immigrants originate from Mexico, although Minnesota is also home to Latino immigrants from many other Central and South American countries. About 40 percent, or nearly 100,000, are foreign-born.

Hmong refugees began arriving in Minnesota in the 1970s and 1980s following the Vietnam War, with a smaller second wave arriving in the early 2000s as a result of the closing of a refugee camp in Thailand. The Twin Cities metropolitan area is now home to over 64,000 Hmong residents, making it one of the largest Hmong populations in the country. Karen refugees have recently begun to settle in Minnesota fleeing the violence of the Burmese civil war. At least 3,000 refugees have settled in the Twin Cities; 85 percent came to the U.S. within the last 10 years.

Somali and Liberian refugees came to the United States following civil wars in their countries. Somali refugees first started arriving in the U.S. in large numbers during the 1990s. An estimated 32,000 or more Somalis reside in Minnesota, which makes it the largest Somali community in the United States. Over 10,000 foreign-born Liberian refugees have settled in the Twin Cities. About 80 percent have arrived within the last 15 years.

What are some of the most important issues to remember when communicating the study results?

- Because each cultural community is unique, any and all comparisons made between or across communities should consider the unique historical, social, and economic contexts of these communities.
- Recognize the difference between perception data and incidence data. The *Speaking for Ourselves* study mainly focuses on perceptions of respondents from immigrant and refugee communities; this study does not provide representative incidence data.
- Because immigrant and refugee communities are smaller and close-knit (including, in some cases, the interviewers who worked on this study), and the questions may broach subjects that are sensitive, interpretation of findings must take social desirability bias into account.
- In order to ensure positive impact, data from *Speaking for Ourselves* should be used in conjunction with other data sources. Any policy or programming decisions should be made only in collaboration with affected immigrant and refugee communities.



Key findings

Almost two-thirds (63%) of all respondents reported they are not affiliated with any political party.

Most respondents are not affiliated with any political party, with the exception of respondents from the Somali community (Figure 1). Somali respondents are most likely to be affiliated with the Democratic or DFL Party (77%). All respondents from the Karen community said they are not affiliated with any political party. Respondents who reported affiliation with a political party most frequently said they are affiliated with the Democratic or DFL Party (27% of all respondents). A handful of participants reported affiliation with the Republican or Independence parties.

1. Political party affiliation

	All respondents (N=457)	Hmong (N=105)	Karen (N=101)	Latino (N=100)	Liberian (N=59)	Somali (N=69)
Not a member of any political party	63%	53%	100%	67%	53%	20%
Democratic or DFL	27%	24%	0%	17%	39%	77%
Republican	2%	3%	0%	2%	5%	0%
Independence	2%	2%	0%	4%	2%	1%
Other	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%
Don't know	7%	17%	0%	9%	2%	1%

About one-third (36%) of *Speaking for Ourselves* participants voted in the 2012 presidential election and slightly more (44%) are currently registered to vote. Across all cultural communities, the most commonly cited reason for not voting was not being eligible to vote due to immigration status.

Voter registration is highest among Hmong (81%) and Somali (73%) participants and lowest among Karen participants (7%), which could be attributed to the length of time in Minnesota (Figure 2).

Communities that are newer to Minnesota, such as the Karen, have had less time to apply for and attain citizenship in the United States.

2. Political party affiliation

	All respondents (N=455)	Hmong (N=103)	Karen (N=101)	Latino (N=101)	Liberian (N=58)	Somali (N=69)
Voted in 2012 presidential election	36%	63%	3%	14%	35%	67%
Currently registered to vote	44%	81%	7%	16%	36%	73%

Source: <http://www.mncompass.org/civic-engagement/voter-turnout#1-10409-g>

The majority of participants who did not vote or who are not registered to vote report they were not eligible to vote (Figure 3). Only a few participants indicated lack of interest as a reason not to vote (4%). It is likely that there was some confusion on the part of Karen respondents and possibly respondents from other cultural communities (or translation issues in the survey) related to their responses on why they are ineligible to vote; our Karen advisory board member indicated that most Karen community members are not eligible to vote because they are not citizens.

3. Reasons for not voting

	All respondents (N=252)	Hmong (N=20)	Karen (N=94)	Latino (N=79)	Liberian (N=37)	Somali (N=19)
Not eligible to vote in MN due to immigration status	57%	60%	14%	87%	89%	84%
Not eligible to vote in MN for reasons other than immigration	33%	15%	83%	3%	0%	0%
Not interested/don't want to vote	4%	5%	0%	6%	8%	5%
Don't know how to register	6%	10%	6%	5%	5%	0%
Not aware enough of political issues to feel comfortable voting	2%	5%	0%	0%	0%	5%
Other reason	4%	10%	0%	5%	0%	11%

Speaking for Ourselves participants are more likely to have heard about or visited a public library than other local arts, science, and cultural organizations.

Study participants were asked a series of questions about local arts, science, and cultural organizations – whether they had never heard of or visited, heard of but never visited, or had visited these organizations. Across measures, participants report being most connected to their local library. Participants are least likely to have heard of or visited the Minnesota Humanities Center (65%) and most likely to have heard of but never visited was the Minnesota History Center (40%) (Figures 4, 5, 6).

4. Arts, science, and cultural organizations participants had never heard of or visited

	All respondents (N=458)	Hmong (N=105)	Karen (N=101)	Latino (N=101)	Liberian (N=60)	Somali (N=68)
Local public library	6%	15%	1%	3%	2%	3%
Minneapolis Institute of Arts	49%	66%	66%	36%	25%	47%
Minnesota Humanities Center	65%	71%	79%	71%	50%	38%
Minnesota Children's Museum	30%	40%	37%	20%	30%	18%
Minnesota History Center	40%	50%	38%	41%	35%	35%
Science Museum of Minnesota	28%	32%	43%	25%	18%	16%



5. Arts, science, and cultural organizations participants had heard of but never visited

	All respondents (N=458)	Hmong (N=105)	Karen (N=101)	Latino (N=101)	Liberian (N=60)	Somali (N=68)
Local public library	19%	16%	33%	11%	8%	25%
Minneapolis Institute of Arts	37%	27%	31%	44%	53%	40%
Minnesota Humanities Center	28%	26%	19%	25%	40%	38%
Minnesota Children’s Museum	34%	24%	42%	24%	48%	44%
Minnesota History Center	40%	26%	45%	42%	50%	43%
Science Museum of Minnesota	38%	24%	42%	41%	47%	46%

6. Arts, science, and cultural organizations participants had visited

	All respondents (N=458)	Hmong (N=105)	Karen (N=101)	Latino (N=101)	Liberian (N=60)	Somali (N=68)
Local public library	75%	69%	66%	86%	90%	72%
Minneapolis Institute of Arts	14%	8%	3%	21%	22%	13%
Minnesota Humanities Center	7%	3%	2%	4%	10%	24%
Minnesota Children’s Museum	37%	36%	22%	56%	22%	38%
Minnesota History Center	20%	25%	18%	18%	15%	22%
Science Museum of Minnesota	35%	44%	16%	35%	35%	38%

Participants were then asked open-ended questions about how local arts, science, and cultural organizations could be more welcoming for their communities. The most frequently suggested themes include more outreach to cultural communities via radio or distribute brochures, advertise in multiple languages and/or with culturally specific media, hire bilingual staff from these cultural communities, and lower or discount ticket and membership costs. Participants said the following:

These organizations need to put themselves out there, especially at Hmong cultural events such as Hmong New Year... with vendors [and] booths displaying information. – *Hmong participant*

If they have a Karen representative at each of these organizations, it will be more comfortable and helpful for the Karen people to come. – *Karen participant*

Hire more Somali workers to make our people comfortable. By hiring Somali speaking workers, people will feel more comfortable coming to these places. – *Somali participant*

Take advantage of social media and engage people or influence people within the community. There has to be an interest... the use of social media to get to the young people. – *Liberian participant*

They could offer free passes to the museum. They could offer a free membership or a low-cost one. – *Latino respondent*

Specific program or service recommendations from participants include:

- Create community gathering spaces for specific cultural communities
- Provide culturally-based arts and language classes for specific cultural communities (e.g., music, dance, and theatre)
- Provide opportunities for physical activities that are popular in specific cultural communities (e.g., soccer).

Participants more commonly do informal volunteering such as helping a neighbor with yard work, running errands for elders, and helping a friend with child care than formal volunteering through an organization or program.

Seven out of 10 *Speaking for Ourselves* participants reported doing informal volunteering with neighbors, family, or friends (Figure 7). Participants from the Karen community report volunteering informally most frequently. Only about 2 out of 10 respondents formally volunteer through an organization or program. Participants from the Liberian community report volunteering formally through an organization most frequently. Among participants are the least likely to volunteer, both formally and informally.

7. Volunteering

	All respondents (N=452-459)	Hmong (N=104-105)	Karen (N=100-101)	Latino (N=98-101)	Liberian (N=60)	Somali (N=68-69)
Formal volunteering through organization or program	22%	11%	15%	28%	43%	17%
Informal volunteering (e.g., neighbor's yard work, errands for elders, child care for friend)	69%	57%	80%	66%	75%	71%



Participants who said they do not volunteer were presented with a list of reasons why they might not volunteer and were asked to indicate which reasons apply to them. For both formal and informal volunteering, being too busy with other commitments was the primary reason that respondents did not volunteer (Figures 8 and 9). Participants from the Karen community reported having no skills to volunteer more frequently than any other cultural community.

8. Reasons for not volunteering formally

	All respondents (N=357)	Hmong (N=94)	Karen (N=85)	Latino (N=72)	Liberian (N=34)	Somali (N=57)
Too busy with other commitments	55%	49%	27%	64%	59%	91%
No skills to volunteer	21%	23%	59%	0%	0%	5%
Not interested/don't want to volunteer	3%	4%	1%	7%	0%	0%
Don't know how to sign up to volunteer	22%	25%	26%	24%	32%	9%
Other reason	18%	25%	9%	32%	15%	0%

9. Reasons for not volunteering informally

	All respondents (N=137)	Hmong (N=44)	Karen (N=20)	Latino (N=32)	Liberian (N=15)	Somali (N=20)
Too busy with other commitments	53%	48%	20%	53%	60%	95%
No skills to volunteer	10%	14%	40%	0%	0%	0%
Not interested/don't want to volunteer	6%	7%	0%	13%	7%	0%
Do not know anyone who needs help	22%	18%	40%	28%	20%	5%
Other reason	19%	32%	0%	16%	20%	5%

Speaking for Ourselves participants hear about what is going on in their cultural communities through word of mouth, TV programs, and radio.

Speaking for Ourselves participants were given a list of communication methods and asked which methods they used to hear about what is going on in their cultural communities. Friends and family or word of mouth was most frequently cited, by two-thirds of participants, with TV programs and radio tied for the second most common way participants find out what is going on in their communities. Every cultural community reported word of mouth most frequently, with the exception of the Hmong community, where radio was cited most often (Figure 10).

10. How participants hear about what is going on in their cultural communities

	All respondents (N=457)	Hmong (N=104)	Karen (N=100)	Latino (N=101)	Liberian (N=60)	Somali (N=69)
Friends and family or word of mouth	65%	46%	75%	46%	80%	84%
TV programs	28%	32%	19%	44%	12%	26%
Radio	28%	68%	0%	37%	12%	17%
Community organizations	15%	7%	27%	16%	23%	4%
Websites	15%	17%	11%	12%	15%	19%
Local print news	15%	29%	0%	28%	0%	4%
Social media	14%	30%	2%	9%	27%	1%
Other source	12%	0%	10%	32%	10%	1%
I do not receive information	5%	9%	8%	4%	2%	1%



Issues to consider

It is important to note that Minnesota has paid special attention to increasing access to voting in recent years. State legislation that went into effect for the 2014 Midterm Elections established free public transit on election days and does not require riders to present identification or proof of voter registration. Minnesota's free transportation is the most inclusive in the country at present, as this kind of free Election Day transportation is only currently available in two other metropolitan areas of the country, and is only free to those who show proof of voter registration.

Additionally, for the 2014 Midterms, Minnesota joined 30 other states in allowing no-excuse absentee ballots. This allows voters to request a ballot in advance and cast their vote by mail when it is convenient for their schedule. Pieces of legislation like these begin the process of breaking down barriers to voting, particularly for those with difficult or irregular work schedules and those without access to consistent and affordable transportation.

Action steps and recommendations

Policymakers and advocates should find ways to address the barriers to voting and civic engagement for immigrant and refugee communities, particularly for those who are not eligible to vote due to immigration status. Becoming a United States citizen is the most important issue in immigrant and refugee communities when it comes to voter participation, so we should work to support programs that successfully prepare and graduate immigrant and refugees who are interested in becoming United States citizens. Citizenship efforts should also be paired with voter outreach and engagement. These should include increasing access to alternate-language voter registration forms and decreasing barriers to voting.

Regardless of citizenship status, provide opportunities for all members of immigrant and refugee communities to effectively be involved in the political process in other ways, especially if voter eligibility is especially challenging to overcome for specific individuals or communities. For example, community members and advocates could support members of immigrant and refugee communities to become more actively involved in the political process or sitting on boards and commissions. For example, Wilder Foundation and Nexus Community Partners already have initiatives underway to train members of under-represented communities to participate in civic processes.

To address the under-utilization among immigrant and refugee communities of public cultural amenities such as libraries, museums, and similar resources, policymakers and service providers should ensure that Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund (ACHF) dollars and other public funding for informal education and cultural amenities is used specifically to engage and address the needs and interests of immigrant and refugee communities in Minnesota. This could specifically include providing culturally and language appropriate marketing materials, hiring culturally and language competent staff, targeted discounted or free admission, and targeting outreach and programming to match the interests of these communities.

Authentic long-term collaborations and partnerships with community-based organizations in immigrant and refugee communities is key. In addition, service providers could also look to libraries for examples on how to do better outreach or make programming and places more welcoming to immigrant and refugee communities, as libraries were the most frequently visited of all the cultural amenities we asked about in this study. This could be because libraries provide free access to resources like the Internet. Organizations should also leverage social media to conduct outreach with specific immigrant and refugee communities.

Hiring and promoting qualified members of immigrant and refugee communities at informal education organizations is another strategy that could make these resources more accessible to immigrant and refugee communities. Transparency through data tracking and benchmarking for employee recruitment and retention should be used to indicate progress or to change strategies if progress is not happening. This information should be made publicly available to communities.

Regarding volunteerism, providers must meet immigrant and refugee communities where they are at and create opportunities in the broader community that align with traditional cultural practices of helping others. Understand that the informal ways in which immigrant and refugee communities help one another provides a strong positive good that is valid and could be better documented, understood, and built upon to enhance volunteerism by and for these communities.

Because word of mouth is still the most prevalent method for communication, outreach to communities is best done through social networks (including social media, such as specific Facebook groups geared toward specific cultural communities' interests). Each cultural community is unique in its approach to TV, radio, or newspaper; strategies must be tailored accordingly with consultation from community-based organizations.



Study methods

A community advisory board made up of individuals who are members of and/or work with one or more of the participating communities provided guidance throughout this study. Wilder Research designed the survey instrument, developed and implemented the data collection approach, and conducted the analysis and reporting after gathering input from the advisory board and directly from the community.

An innovative data collection approach called Respondent Driven Sampling was used to identify and recruit eligible community members to participate in the study. This approach involves randomly selecting a handful of “seed” respondents within each community and asking those respondents to refer up to three additional people from their community. Those respondents are then asked to refer other respondents, ultimately creating respondent referral “chains” that in some cases carried out as far as 11 “waves” (Figure 11).

Adults who were born outside of the U.S., or had a parent who was born outside of the U.S., who were from one of the cultural communities included in the study, and who live in Hennepin or Ramsey counties were eligible to participate. Respondents who were referred to the study could **not** be a biological family member or live at the same address as the person who made the referral.

Speaking for Ourselves **Buy-A-Question Partners**

The following partner organizations contributed to this study by funding one or more study questions and by committing to using the results to improve service access or delivery:

- Hennepin County Public Health
- Metropolitan Library Service Agency
- Minnesota Children’s Museum
- Minnesota Historical Society
- Minnesota Humanities Center
- Minneapolis Institute of Arts
- Science Museum of Minnesota
- Family and Community Knowledge Systems Project, Wilder Research, and Training and Development, Inc., with funding from the Kellogg Foundation

11. Respondent Driven Sampling: Number of seeds, referrals, and waves in the referral chains

Total number of:	All respondents ^a	Hmong	Karen	Latino	Liberian	Somali
Seeds	52	11	7	11	3	9
Referrals	407	94	94	90	57	60
Maximum number of waves	--	11	7	8	9	6
Total number of respondents	459	105	101	101	60	69

^a In addition to the five main cultural communities listed in the table, the “all respondents” group also includes 6 Lao, 7 Oromo, and 10 Vietnamese respondents. We did not obtain enough completed surveys from members of these cultural communities to be able to report data for these communities separately.

Wilder Research hired bilingual staff from participating communities to help with data collection; interviews were conducted in the respondents’ preferred languages, either over the phone or in-person. Respondents received \$20 for completing the survey and \$5 for each referral they made, up to three.

By using Respondent Driven Sampling, we were able to survey a group of study participants who are more representative of these cultural communities in the Twin Cities than if we had used convenience sampling methods (i.e., survey people who are all affiliated with one program, religious organization, housing site, neighborhood group, etc.) However, study participants are **not** statistically representative of their broader cultural communities because scientific random sampling was not used, and the full Respondent Driven Sampling method for weighting and analyzing data was not appropriate given these data.

Therefore, the data presented here should be interpreted with caution; we do not claim that the results exactly mirror the overall experiences of the broader community. Rather, we suggest that in many cases the data produced by this study are better than any other existing source of data about these immigrant and refugee communities in the Twin Cities. The key findings included in this report have been endorsed strongly enough by a wide enough range of study participants and community stakeholders to be considered valid and actionable for all practical purposes.

Differences among groups may be attributable to actual differences in their experiences, but may also be due to differences in survey responding patterns (e.g., some groups are more likely to give moderate responses, other groups are more likely to give extreme responses, regardless of the type of question). Therefore, as noted previously, comparison across communities should be done with caution and only with consideration of the unique contextual factors that influence these and any research findings.

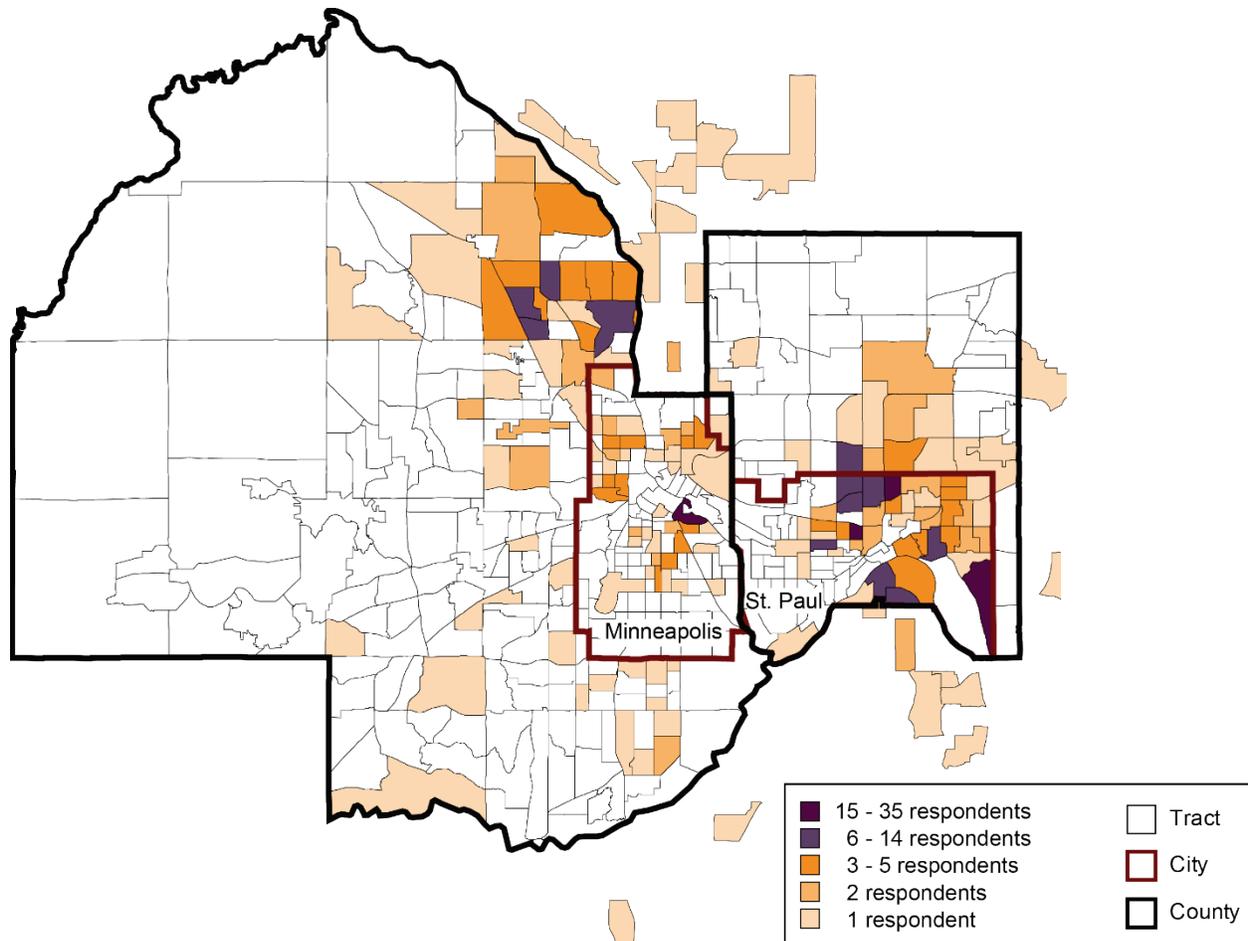
See the detailed study methodology report and data book for more information about the study methods and limitations (*Speaking for Ourselves: A Study with Immigrant and Refugee Communities in the Twin Cities Data Book*).



Study participants

A total of 459 immigrant and refugee community members participated in the study. Participants' locations (home address) generally reflect the geographical spread of these cultural communities in Hennepin and Ramsey counties (Figure 12). A few respondents live outside of the target counties.

12. Participants' locations in Hennepin and Ramsey counties



Most participants were born outside of the U.S. They are split nearly evenly between Hennepin and Ramsey counties, although some specific cultural communities are concentrated in one county or the other. Two-thirds of respondents are female; they are split fairly evenly across the age spectrum from younger adults to older adults. Although participants fall into all education levels, most have a high school diploma or less. Similarly, although all income ranges are reflected, over half have household incomes below \$30,000 annually (Figure 13).

13. Demographic characteristics of study participants

	All respondents (N=459)	Hmong (N=105)	Karen (N=101)	Latino (N=101)	Liberian (N=60)	Somali (N=69)
County of residence						
Hennepin	47%	40%	0%	58%	85%	57%
Ramsey	49%	51%	100%	40%	10%	35%
Other	4%	9%	0%	2%	5%	9%
Generational status						
1 st generation – born outside the U.S.	95%	87%	100%	92%	98%	100%
2 nd generation – born in U.S.	5%	13%	0%	8%	2%	0%
Gender						
Female	65%	61%	77%	81%	42%	55%
Male	35%	39%	23%	19%	58%	45%
Age						
18-29	25%	26%	24%	20%	37%	18%
30-49	54%	32%	68%	66%	48%	65%
50+ years	21%	42%	8%	14%	15%	18%
Education						
No formal education	17%	46%	21%	1%	0%	10%
Elementary/some high school (no diploma)	27%	21%	57%	30%	0%	33%
High school diploma or GED	27%	1%	20%	43%	17%	39%
Some college/Associate degree	21%	0%	2%	19%	62%	15%
Bachelor's degree or higher	9%	10%	0%	7%	22%	3%
Household income						
Under \$10,000	17%	10%	26%	7%	7%	33%
\$10,000 to under \$20,000	16%	5%	24%	22%	12%	17%
\$20,000 to under \$30,000	22%	8%	31%	28%	24%	22%
\$30,000 to under \$50,000	23%	20%	12%	31%	34%	26%
\$50,000 or more	9%	21%	1%	7%	9%	1%
Don't know or refused	13%	37%	6%	4%	15%	0%

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Wilder Research would like to thank the study participants and their communities who entrusted us with their perspectives and shared with us their time. The participation of the *Speaking for Ourselves* advisory board members, our partners, and the community members through each phase of the project, made this study possible and made its findings more meaningful. We would also like to thank our Wilder Research and Wilder Foundation staff who contributed to the completion of this study.



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For more information

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