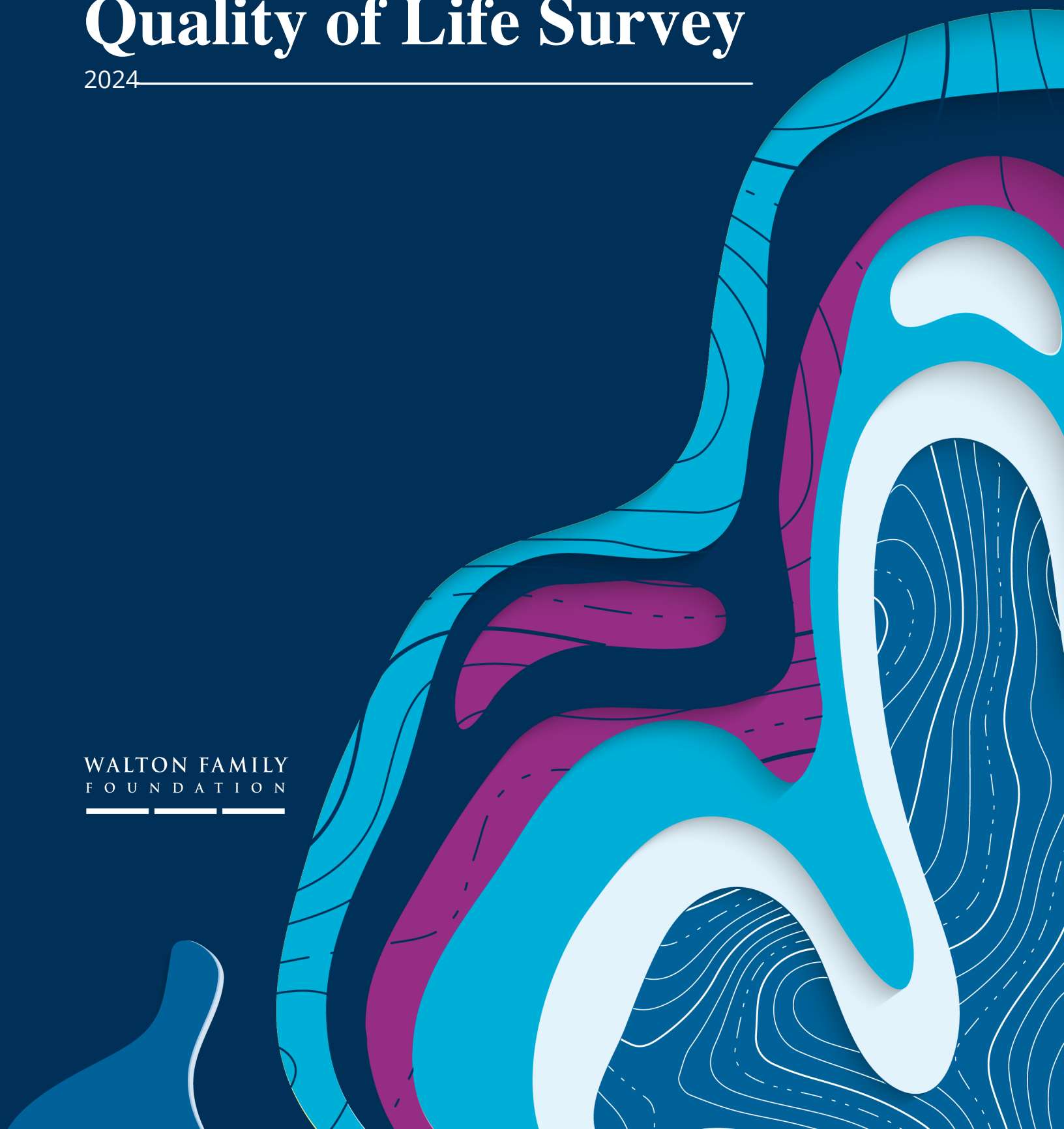


NORTHWEST ARKANSAS

Quality of Life Survey

2024



WALTON FAMILY
FOUNDATION





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

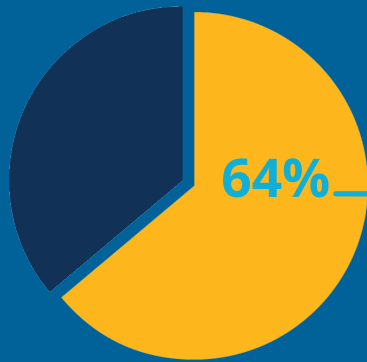
The Walton Family Foundation recently conducted the fourth iteration of the Quality of Life Survey in Northwest Arkansas. It found that the majority of residents continue to experience a good quality of life in the region.

Why it matters

-  The survey tracks the progress of the foundation's work and investments.
-  It helps identify new opportunities to further improve the quality of life for residents in the region.

What's new

-  The survey has been updated to align with the foundation's 2025 strategic plan.
-  While retaining core quality of life questions, new questions have been added to focus on inclusive growth and belonging.



Key takeaways

The majority of respondents (64%) rated their overall quality of life as **"excellent" or "very good."** There have been slight declines since the survey was last conducted in 2018.



BRIGHT SPOTS in the region include recreational amenities, arts and cultural activities and opportunities for economic mobility. In addition, most residents feel like they are a part of the community, trust others in the community and feel hopeful about the future.



CHALLENGES that residents identified include transportation, affordable housing, infrastructure and early childhood care/education. In addition, few residents feel they have influence over what the community is like or think highly of community leaders.

FOREWARD

Our area has evolved significantly in recent years, and we've welcomed folks from all walks of life. To keep pace with this evolution, we need to make sure everyone feels like they belong and can pursue their aspirations.

So, how do we do that? Well, we start by listening. We host official meetings and casual get-togethers to hear directly from our neighbors. Listening happens in big ways and small — At city hall or the coffee counter, or out on a trail or at a backyard barbecue.

Our Northwest Arkansas Quality of Life Survey is another way we gather insights from the community. This survey helps us track progress in areas like outdoor experiences, arts, culture, education, housing, and transportation.

This survey, now in its fourth iteration, tracks progress in several areas supported by the Foundation. In this survey, we asked our neighbors a simple question, "How's it going?" What we have learned helps us move forward and find new ways to push past barriers that stand in the way.

Here's what we have heard:

- Most residents say their quality of life is good. But fewer did so when compared to the last survey.
- Many worry whether the region's housing and transportation can keep up with rapid growth. They don't want infrastructure to hinder success.
- Most residents do say they feel a part of the community. They trust each other and are hopeful about their future.

There are a few areas where we can improve, but the good news is most people still have a strong sense of community, trust, and hope for the future.

The community aspect is especially important to me. I grew up here in Northwest Arkansas, and I know that this region is a special place where anything is possible. Our founders would agree. But we can't take that for granted. We need to work together to create a thriving, inclusive community where everyone feels like they belong.

So, let's all do our part to make Northwest Arkansas an even better place to live, work, and raise a family. Together, we can build a community where everyone has the opportunity to succeed.

In partnership,

Tom Walton
Chair, Home Region Program Committee



INTRODUCTION

The Northwest Arkansas Quality of Life Survey is a public opinion poll led by the Walton Family Foundation conducted every few years over the past decade. The purpose of this survey is to understand the impact of the foundation's efforts to improve the quality of life in Northwest Arkansas and assess progress in three strategic areas: economic and cultural vibrancy, inclusive growth and sense of belonging and community leadership and capacity building. The foundation uses the results to assess the impact of foundation giving in the Northwest Arkansas community and inform strategic decisions about future grantmaking. We hope these results prove valuable and insightful to others who are invested in improving the quality of life in Northwest Arkansas.

This survey looks a bit different from previous years. The instrument was revamped to bring it in closer alignment with the foundation's 2025 strategic plan. While it still includes the core questions about quality of life, a number of new questions were added to shed light on the new strategic focus on inclusive growth and belonging.

The survey was conducted in mid-2023 by the Survey Research Laboratory of Mississippi State University, which gathered responses from a representative sample of just over 1,000 residents of two Arkansas counties: Benton and Washington. The survey was administered by phone. Respondents were selected using a random-digit-dial method of sampling landline and cellphone numbers. A more detailed description of the survey methodology can be found in the appendix.

Why is quality of life important?

A high quality of life is important to sustaining a healthy, happy and prosperous community for all. A community that enriches quality of life for people from many different backgrounds and offers opportunities for personal and professional growth is more likely to continue growing and thriving.

Understanding Northwest Arkansas residents' perceptions of their quality of life and how that has changed over time can shed light on satisfaction with the region as a place to live and potential desirability of the region for attracting new residents.

FINDINGS

Key takeaways

Overall, the majority of residents in Northwest Arkansas continue to experience a good quality of life. There have been slight declines since the survey was last conducted in 2018.



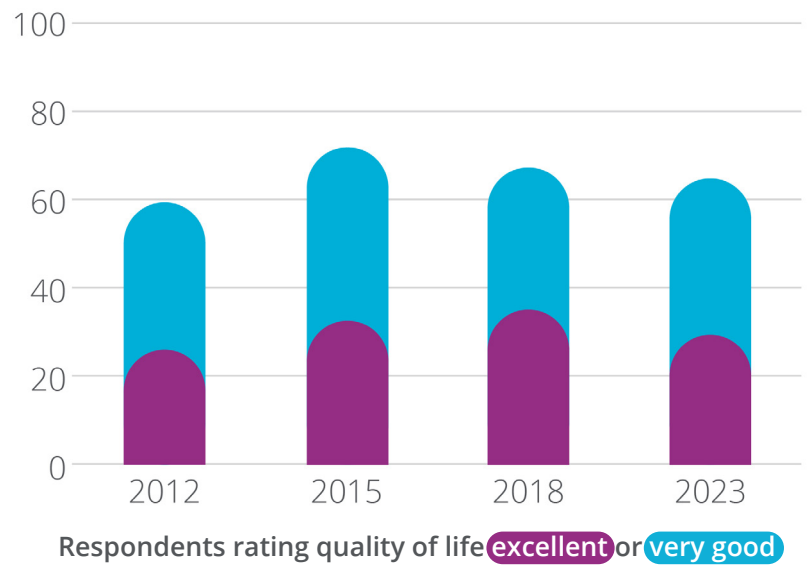
BRIGHT SPOTS in the region include recreational amenities, arts and cultural activities and opportunities for economic mobility. In addition, most residents feel like they are a part of the community, trust others in the community and feel hopeful about the future.



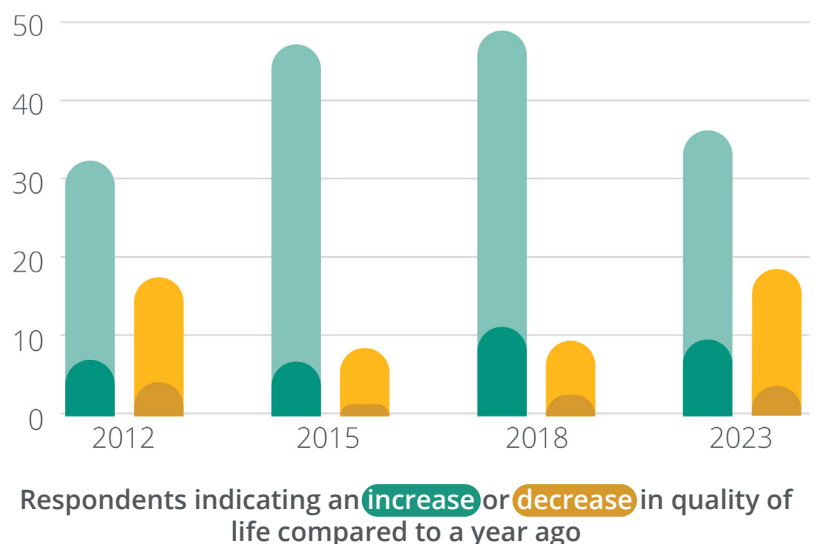
CHALLENGES that were identified by residents include transportation, affordable housing, infrastructure and early childhood care/education. In addition, few residents feel they have influence over what the community is like or think highly of community leaders.

Overall quality of life

Most residents continue to experience a good quality of life in Northwest Arkansas. The **majority of respondents (64%)** rated their overall quality of life as **“excellent”** or **“very good”** in 2023. While this remains above the 2012 level (59%), it represents a continuation of gradual decline from 2015 when 72% of respondents rated their quality of life as “excellent” or “very good” and 2018 when 67% of respondents did so.



When thinking about how their quality of life had changed over the past year, **37% of respondents** said it had **“increased”** or **“significantly increased”** compared to a year ago. This is down considerably from 2018 when nearly half of respondents (49%) said their quality of life had improved from the previous year but remains above the 2012 level (33%). At the same time, **19% of respondents** said their quality of life had **“decreased”** or **“significantly decreased”** compared to a year ago. This is well above the 2015 and 2018 levels and more in line with the 2012 results.



Many different factors influence residents' quality of life in Northwest Arkansas.

The top reasons respondents cited for driving quality of life improvements included things related to career progression (like a new job, completing a degree or retiring), better financial situation and improved health. On the flip side, the top reasons cited for a decrease in quality of life included rising cost of living, an unfavorable political climate and the perceived worsening state of the economy.

Similarly, when asked what single change would have the greatest impact on improving their quality of life, respondents cited changes that covered a range of personal circumstances and external factors. The most common responses were related to achieving a better financial situation (23%) and better health (10%), which is similar to previous years. Responses related to a lower cost of living were a close third (9%), which is more prominent than in previous years and could be a reflection of rapid inflation (the Consumer Price Index increased nearly 20% since 2020)¹ and/or rising housing costs (the median home price in Northwest Arkansas grew more than 50% since 2020.)²

Quality of life ratings are fairly consistent across various subgroups and showed little variation based on a respondent's gender, race/ethnicity, geography or length of residency in the region. However, considerable differences in quality of life ratings appeared based on a respondent's income level—higher-income respondents rated their quality of life more positively than lower-income respondents. In 2023, **85% of respondents making \$100,000 or more** in annual household income rated their quality of life as **"excellent"** or **"very good,"** compared to only **55% of respondents making less than \$100,000**. In fact, more than half of higher-income respondents rated their quality of life as "excellent," more than double that of lower income respondents (20%).



¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers: All Items in U.S. City Average [CPIAUCSL]*, retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.

² University of Arkansas' Center for Business and Economic Research, *Arvest Skyline Report: Residential Highlights, Second Half 2023, First Half 2020*.

Regional characteristics

A person's quality of life can be influenced by many different factors related to their personal circumstances as well as the characteristics of the community in which they live. To better understand residents' perceptions of the latter, respondents were asked to rate the quality of various amenities in Northwest Arkansas and how easy it is for them to access these amenities.

Recreational amenities, along with arts and cultural activities, were the highest rated in Northwest Arkansas.

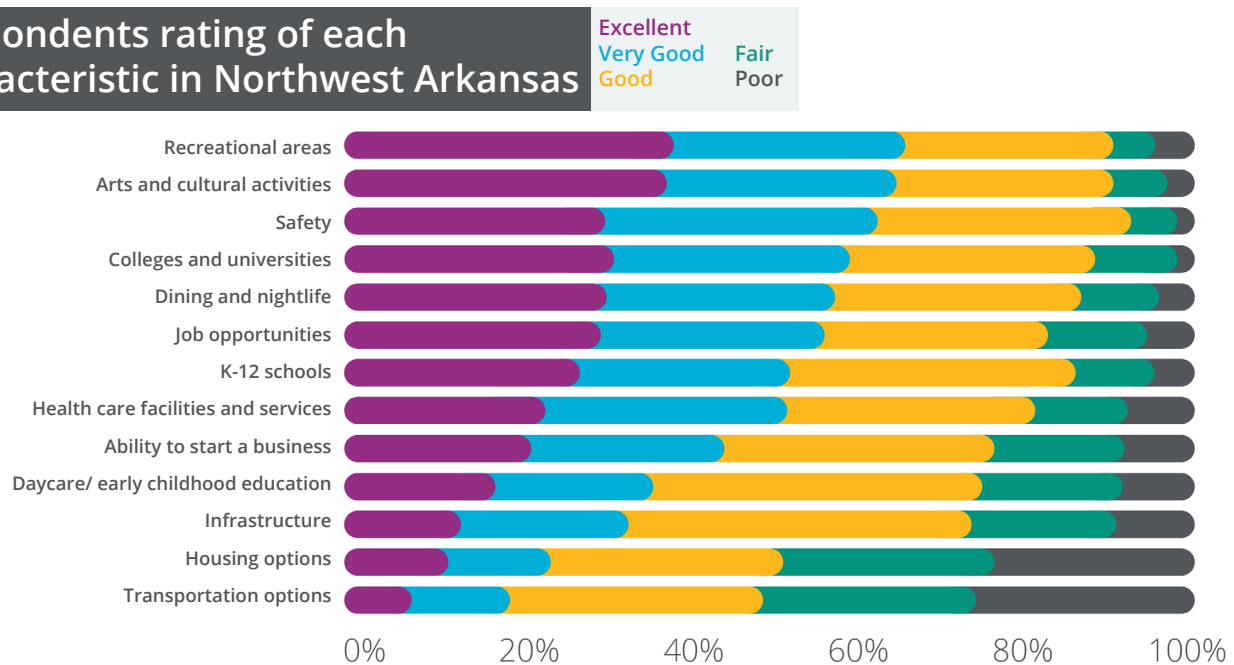
Nearly two-thirds of respondents (64%) rated these amenities as "excellent" or "very good" and 80% reported they can access them easily. Sixty-two percent of respondents rated safety in the region as "excellent" or "very good" and 79% indicated they have access to safe places to live and work.

Conversely, transportation and housing options were the lowest rated characteristics.

Less than a quarter of respondents rated transportation (18%) and housing options (23%) as "excellent" or "very good," and around half of respondents rated them "poor" or "fair." Further, just 29% of respondents consider affordable housing easy to access and only 39% consider transportation options easy to access.

Infrastructure and early childhood care/education were also near the bottom. Only around one-third of respondents rating them as "excellent" or "very good."

Respondents rating of each characteristic in Northwest Arkansas



These results suggest residents are mostly satisfied with the many amenities the region has to offer but not some of the more fundamental elements of the physical infrastructure. While these amenities are often touted as major assets in creating the region's great quality of life in recent years,

the growing challenges in housing, transportation and physical infrastructure may be starting to counteract and negatively impact residents' overall quality of life. It's not so much that these elements have gotten worse but that they are failing to keep up with the region's rapid population growth.

Community Connections

While the amenities and other features of the region are important, residents' sense of community and connection to one another also shape how they perceive their community.

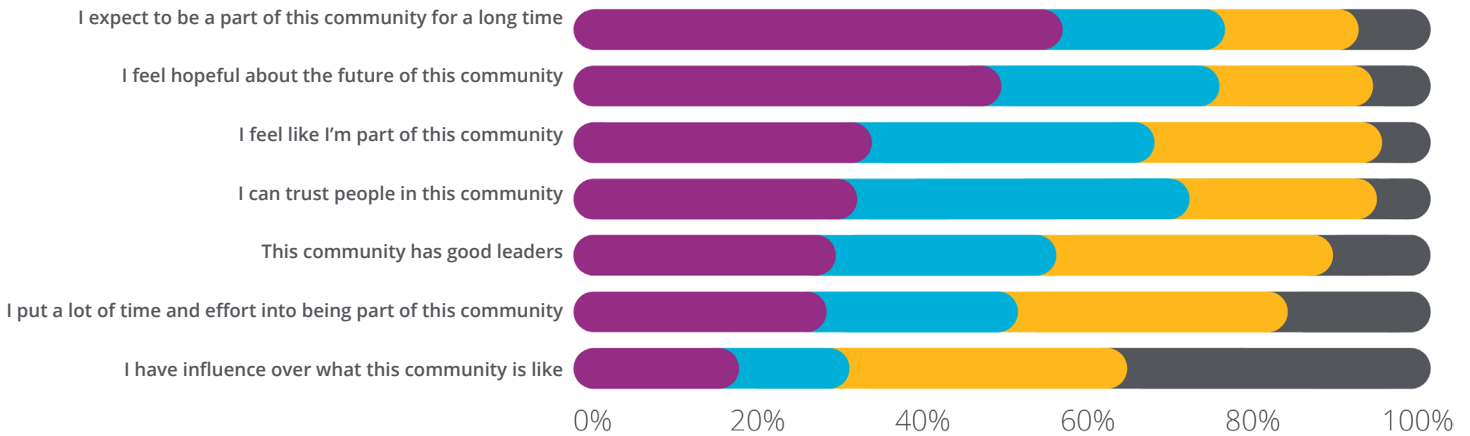
Northwest Arkansas residents experience strong community connections. The majority of respondents **"completely"** or **"mostly"** feel like they are a part of the community (66%) and trust others in the community (70%). A significant majority of respondents (74%) feel hopeful about the future of the community and expect to be part of it for a long time.

However, only about half of respondents (54%) think the community has good leaders. Even fewer (27%) feel they have influence over what the community is like. These sentiments may be related to the smaller share of residents who put a lot of time and effort into being part of the community (49%).



How true are the following statements for you?

Completely
Mostly
Somewhat
Not at all



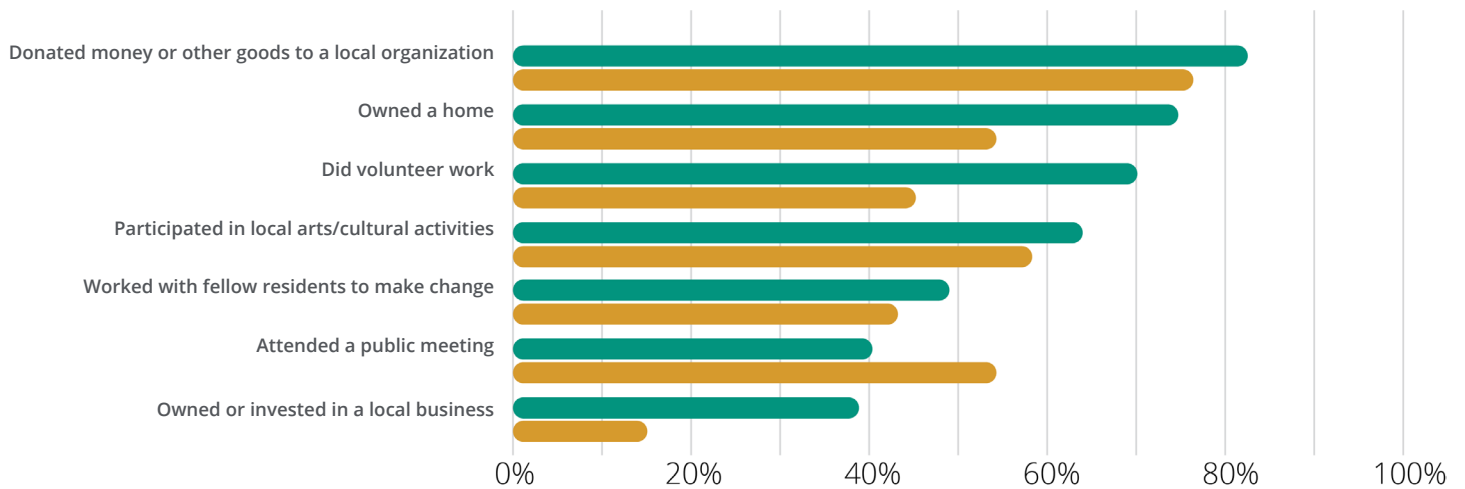
These sentiments are mostly consistent across different subgroups, with one exception. Higher-income residents seem to be more hopeful about the future of the community than lower-income residents. Eighty-three percent of respondents making \$100,000 or more in annual household income feel hopeful compared to 69% of respondents making less than \$100,000.

Northwest Arkansas residents are highly engaged and invested in their community.

Among the most common ways residents participated in their community were investing money and time in local organizations through donations (82%), volunteering (70%) and participating in events (64%) as well as owning a home (74%). All of these are above the national average as reported in a recent study by the Urban Institute.³

Respondents that did each at least once in the past year:

NWA
National
Average



Just under half (49%) worked with fellow residents to make change and 39% owned or invested in a local business. Although not as common as the items above, these were still higher than the national average. Attending a public meeting was the only area where Northwest Arkansas fell below the national average.



³ Urban Institute, *Community Ties: Understanding What Attaches People to the Place Where They Live*, May 2020.

Inclusion & Belonging



One of the overarching goals of the foundation's current strategic plan for Northwest Arkansas is to foster inclusive growth and a sense of belonging for all residents. To assess these sentiments among residents, respondents were asked a series of questions about their feelings and experiences in Northwest Arkansas.

Northwest Arkansas residents value living in a diverse, inclusive and equitable community. Inclusion had the widest support among the three with 82% of respondents affirming that living in a community that makes residents of all demographic and cultural identities feel included is important to them. That compares to 74% who said living in an equitable community is important to them and 71% who said living in a diverse community is important to them.

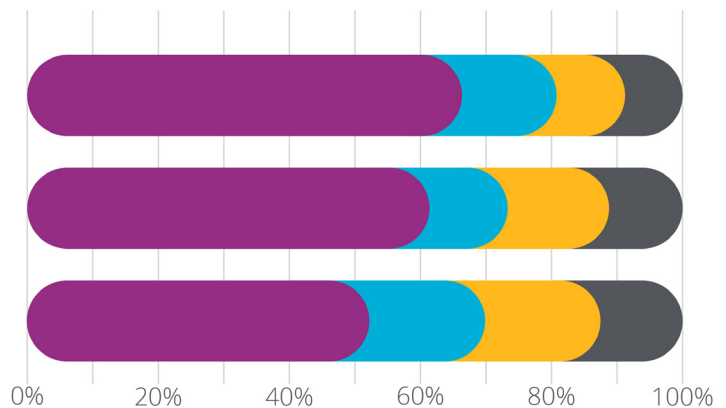
How true are the following statements for you?

Completely
Mostly
Somewhat
Not at all

Living in a community that makes residents of all demographic and cultural identities feel included is important to me

Living in a community that strives to identify and eliminate inequities among residents of different demographic and cultural identities is important to me

Living in a community that has residents of different demographic and cultural identities is important to me

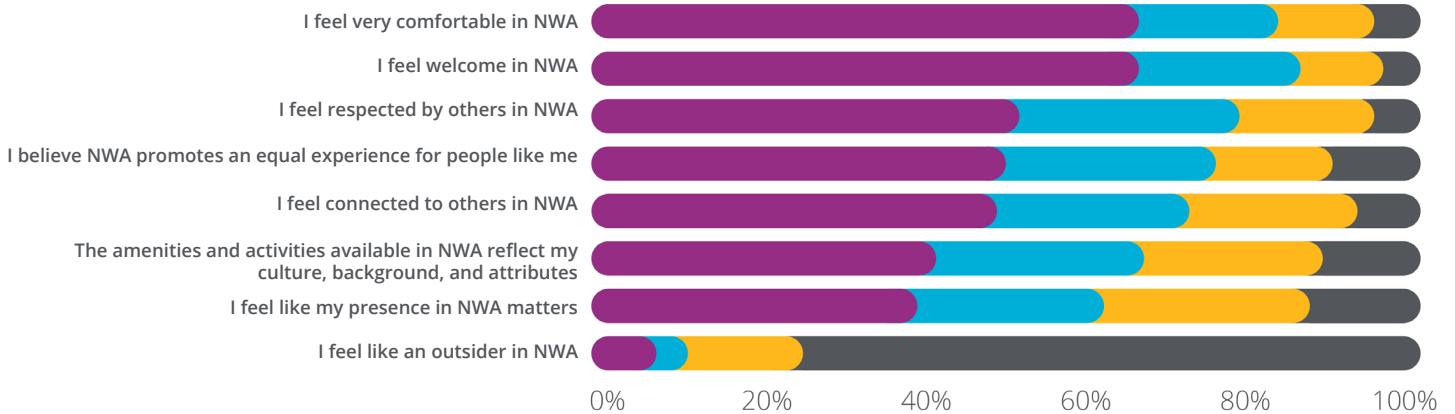


These sentiments are mostly consistent across different groups, with one exception. Demographic and cultural diversity was of greater importance among people of color than white (non-Hispanic) respondents. Eighty percent of people of color indicating living in a diverse community is important to them, compared to 67% of white respondents.

Most residents feel included and experience a sense of belonging in Northwest Arkansas. Specifically, **87% expressed they “completely” or “mostly”** feel welcome in Northwest Arkansas, and 84% feel very comfortable. Additionally, 80% feel respected by others in Northwest Arkansas and 73% feel connected to others. Only 10% expressed feeling like an outsider. Although these exact questions were not asked in previous years, similar sentiments came through in 2018, when 87% of residents said they felt accepted by people in the local community.

How true are the following statements for you?

Completely
Mostly
Somewhat
Not at all



These feelings are largely consistent across different subgroups, except for the perception of amenities and activities reflecting respondents’ culture, background and attributes. **Two-thirds of all respondents feel the amenities and activities in Northwest Arkansas reflect their culture, background and attributes.** Differences appeared based on respondent’s race, income level and length of residence in the region.

72% of white respondents feel this is “completely” or “mostly” true, compared to just **60% of people of color.**

75% of respondents making \$100,000 or more in annual household income feel this is “completely” or “mostly” true, compared to **63% of making less than \$100,000.**

70% of residents who moved to Northwest Arkansas 10+ years ago feel this is “completely” or “mostly” true, compared to **60% of those who have lived in the region for less than 10 years.**

These results suggest that most residents want to live in an inclusive, equitable and diverse community and that Northwest Arkansas is mostly living up to these expectations.

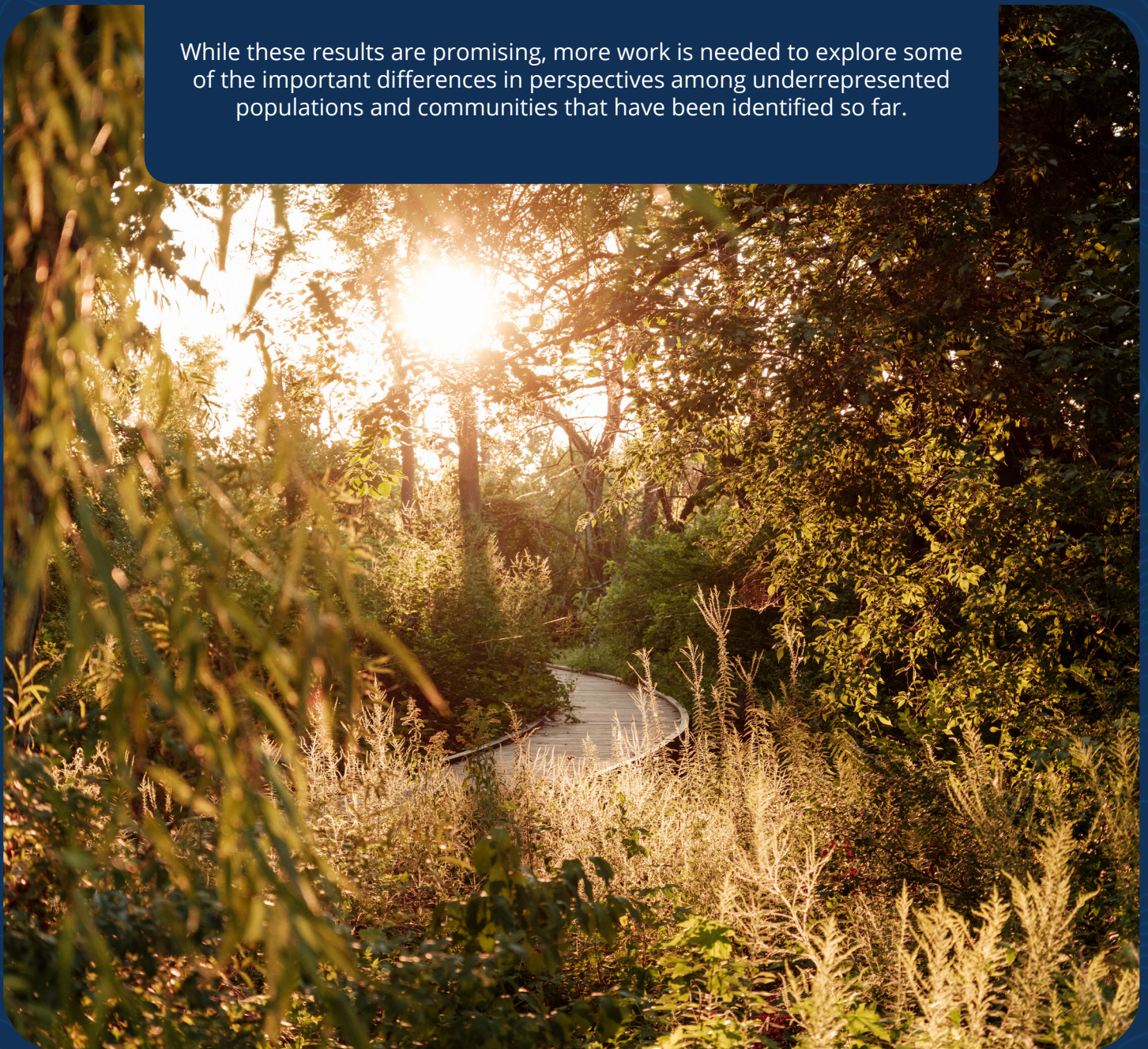


CONCLUSION

The Northwest Arkansas Quality of Life Survey was designed to provide a broad overview of residents' perceptions of quality of life in the region, with particular attention given to the foundation's key investment areas.

The results of this latest poll show that overall, the rate of positive perceptions about the quality of life in Northwest Arkansas is high, though not as high as it was in 2018 or 2015. Moreover, fewer residents reported increases in their quality of life over the past year and more reported decreases than in previous years. Even so, residents reported high levels of community engagement as well as strong community connections and feelings of inclusion and belonging.

While these results are promising, more work is needed to explore some of the important differences in perspectives among underrepresented populations and communities that have been identified so far.



APPENDIX

Survey design and collection

To investigate perceived quality of life in Northwest Arkansas, the Survey Research Laboratory at Mississippi State University conducted a telephone-based survey with adults (18 and older) residing in Benton and Washington Counties.

To maximize coverage of the general population, a dual-frame design was used that included both cellular and landline telephone numbers assigned to Benton and Washington Counties. To ensure that a reproducible and representative sample was obtained, independent probability-based samples were selected via random-digit-dial within each of the two frames.

Responses were collected from mid-April to early-October 2023 from a total of 1,003 residents.

Weighting procedures

Weights were computed to reflect the selection probability of interviewing only one adult per household and a higher chance of inclusion for those reachable by both cellular and landline devices.

Weights were then calibrated to the demographic distributions of the target population based on benchmarks from the 2021 American Community Survey. These calibration adjustments were carried out using the WgtAdjust procedure of SUDAAN to balance the distributions of survey respondents against multiple benchmarks simultaneously. This procedure relies on a constrained logistic regression to predict the likelihood of response vis-à-vis the explanatory variables used in the model (benchmark distributions). The resulting likelihood probabilities are then used to create adjustments that align respondents to the specified benchmark distributions.

The weights were examined to identify and ameliorate extreme values. Trimming extreme weights is a standard practice used to improve the efficiency of the weighting process and add stability to survey estimates. This important gain in precision, however, is achieved at the expense of introducing some minor diversions between weighted totals and their corresponding population benchmarks.

