



Gateways for Growth

Welcoming New Americans
Survey and Focus Groups Report

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Gateways for Growth
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Background

Gateways for Growth Introduction

We know how important a broadly diverse population is for the success of our state. Immigration is key to increasing diversity in our population and boosting our economy. Without immigration growth, the state of Michigan would be poised to lose population for the second census in a row. Perhaps even more impressive, the economic power of Grand Rapids' immigrant community alone grew by more than \$100 million in just one year, and immigrants in Grand Rapids hold nearly \$1.5 billion in spending power. At the core of this initiative is the belief that Grand Rapids and Kent County are home to everyone who lives here, and it should feel like it too.

Creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for New Americans in Kent County is not only the right thing to do, it also contributes economically to the area's wellbeing. We want New Americans to stay in the area; they'll stay if they feel welcomed, included, and valued.

In 2018, Samaritas, along with the City of Grand Rapids, the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce, The Right Place, and the West Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, applied for and received a research award from Gateways for Growth II, a national initiative focused on helping communities develop multi-sector plans to be more welcoming to immigrants and refugees. This effort collaboratively developed a report on the economic impact of New Americans in Kent County, released September 12 through two community events.

We determined to continue our momentum, and through a strategic planning process, we developed a local Welcome Plan for greater Grand Rapids. Because of that effort, we have again been selected as a Gateways for Growth community, this time receiving technical assistance in strategic planning and a small grant of \$12,500 for help with the process. This new initiative will help us think more proactively about how to create an environment that sends a message of inclusion, maximizes contributions of all residents, and gives community members the tools they need to thrive.

Progress Report

Being selected as a Gateways for Growth awardee twice demonstrates our community's commitment to building strategic and concrete plans in order to foster an even healthier, more welcoming community.

Communities across the United States have approached this work in several ways with efforts led by mayors' offices, city and regional councils, and local chambers of commerce. In most cases, a multi-sector task force and steering committee is appointed to lead this process and is tasked with providing concrete recommendations on what the community should do to promote immigrant integration. Recommendations range from economic development strategies to encouraging workforce talent recruitment and a positive public narrative around immigration. To address this work in Grand Rapids, we decided to

assemble a multi-sector task force called the Welcome Plan Task Force and to hire a Welcome Plan Coordinator.

The Welcome Plan Task Force consisted of 36 multi-sector members with key representatives of health care, education, government, business, law enforcement, housing, and immigrants and refugees, and the Welcome Plan coordinator oversaw the advancement of Gateways for Growth in our community. Together, these members of our community gathered the voices of New Americans to identify top priorities for the Welcome Plan and ultimately to move toward the goal of creating a community that is welcoming to all.

Throughout this process, a Steering Committee composed of representatives from the City of Grand Rapids, Kent County, the Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce, the West Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and Samaritas worked with the Project Coordinator to maintain forward progress at developing a Welcome Plan.

Because the goal of Gateways for Growth is to create a Welcome Plan that promotes welcoming, belonging, and overall immigrant integration, our Welcome Plan needed to come from New Americans, allowing their voices to guide the process and recommendations. As a result, beginning in January 2019, two different research initiatives helped identify New Americans' top priorities and barriers they face to achieving those priorities. These results were then articulated into a Welcome Plan in late 2019 and early 2020.

In the spring of 2019, the Calvin University Center for Social Research developed a survey and distributed it across the county with the help of the Welcome Plan Task Force. Through nearly 800 survey respondents, the top five priorities identified by New Americans were:

1. Freedom to work in my desired profession
2. Freedom to maintain my culture, religion, and traditions
3. Achieving desired level of English
4. Being actively involved in my children's education, safety, and future
5. Having Americans understand my culture, religion, and circumstances

Through 25 focus groups organized and executed by the Welcome Plan Task Force, New Americans identified the barriers they face at achieving their priorities. Barriers varied across demographics, but each could be categorized in at least one of the following:

1. Education
2. Civic Engagement
3. Safe and Connected Communities
4. Equitable Access to Services
5. Economic Development

The Welcome Plan was then structured to address each barrier within these five categories. Throughout the fall and winter of 2019 and into early 2020, the Welcome Plan Task Force

worked to articulate findings into a series of community recommendations in the Welcome Plan that will be launched in early 2020.

Survey

Survey Content Development

The survey was initially developed through a collaborative effort with representatives from Samaritas, The Right Place, The Greater Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce, and researchers at the Calvin University Center for Social Research (CSR). The team incorporated content from Gateways for Growth surveys administered in other cities, and the task force of 36 community partner organizations in Kent County reviewed questions and design as a group, aiming to be thoughtful, sensitive, and careful in wording of questions for New Americans. The task force provided helpful feedback and edits before the final survey was launched.

Survey Distribution and Responses

Survey results were visualized using Tableau and are available publicly online at www.calvin.edu/go/g4g-kent-viz. The survey was distributed and translated with the help of 36 community partners.

Table 1 summarizes the top partner organizations who administered surveys to the most respondents. Organizations with fewer than 19 responses are combined in the “Other partner organizations” category to protect respondents’ anonymity. Respondents who did not identify with a particular organization are totaled in the Gateways for Growth (catch-all) category.

Table 1 Participant by Partner Organization

Participants by Partner Organization	<i>N</i>
Organization	
Bethany Christian Services	93
West Michigan Asian American Association	79
Kent Intermediate School District	73
Hispanic Center	61
West Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce	41
Kentwood Public Schools	33
Literacy Center of West Michigan	32
Marvin Law Office	25
Fifth Third Bank	23
Bosnian Community	19
Gateways for Growth (catch-all)	71
Other partner organizations	54

The survey was available online in English and Spanish. The survey was available on paper and through in-person translation in the following languages:

- English
- Spanish
- Swahili
- Bosnian
- Burmese
- Nepali
- Vietnamese

Participant Demographic Characteristics

Individuals who identified themselves as “New Americans” were invited to take the survey. This could include recent immigrants and refugees, second-generation Americans, or anyone else who self-identified as a New American. Over forty organizations distributed the surveys through their individual email servers or listservs and on paper in their centers. In total, 602 participants completed the full survey.¹

Respondents were asked to provide demographic information about themselves, including their age, education, gender, income, religion, country of origin, and ZIP code.

Table 2 presents respondent demographic characteristics collected by the survey. N represents the total number of participants in each age range, and the percentage is the total percent of respondents in that age range. As with most surveys, some respondents opted to not answer certain questions, resulting in the totals at the bottom of each section titled “no answer.”

¹ A total of 785 adults started the survey; however, only 602 completed it. This means that 183 participants opened the online survey but did not complete it. This may occur if individuals are just curious about the survey contents or realize the survey is not relevant to them.

Table 2 Respondent demographic characteristics

Demographic Characteristics	<i>N</i>	%
Age range		
18-29	126	20.9%
30-39	159	26.4%
40-49	145	24.1%
50-59	74	12.3%
60 years or older	50	8.3%
No answer	48	8.0%
Education		
No high school	67	11.1%
Some high school	83	13.8%
Diploma, GED, or equivalent	86	14.3%
Some college/some technical school	57	9.5%
Technical/vocational school degree	7	1.2%
2-year college degree	44	7.3%
4-year college degree	87	14.5%
Graduate degree	89	14.8%
No answer	82	13.6%
Gender		
Female	321	53.3%
Male	236	39.2%
Other	7	1.2%
No answer	38	6.3%
Income		
Under \$20,000	88	12.6%
\$20,001 - \$40,000	156	25.9%
\$40,001 - \$60,000	78	13.0%
\$60,001 - \$80,000	52	8.6%
\$80,001 - \$100,000	43	7.1%
Over \$100,000	50	8.3%
No answer	135	22.4%
Religion		
Christian	218	36.2%
Roman Catholic	88	14.6%
Muslim	54	9.0%
Buddhist	39	6.5%
Hindu	39	6.5%
Agnostic	21	3.5%
Atheist	17	2.8%
Other	29	4.8%
No answer	97	16.1%

Figure 1 shows the distribution of housing situations among the respondents with percentage of total respondents represented by blue dots and percentage totals and N totals in grey.

Figure 1 Housing

Which of the following apply to your housing situation?

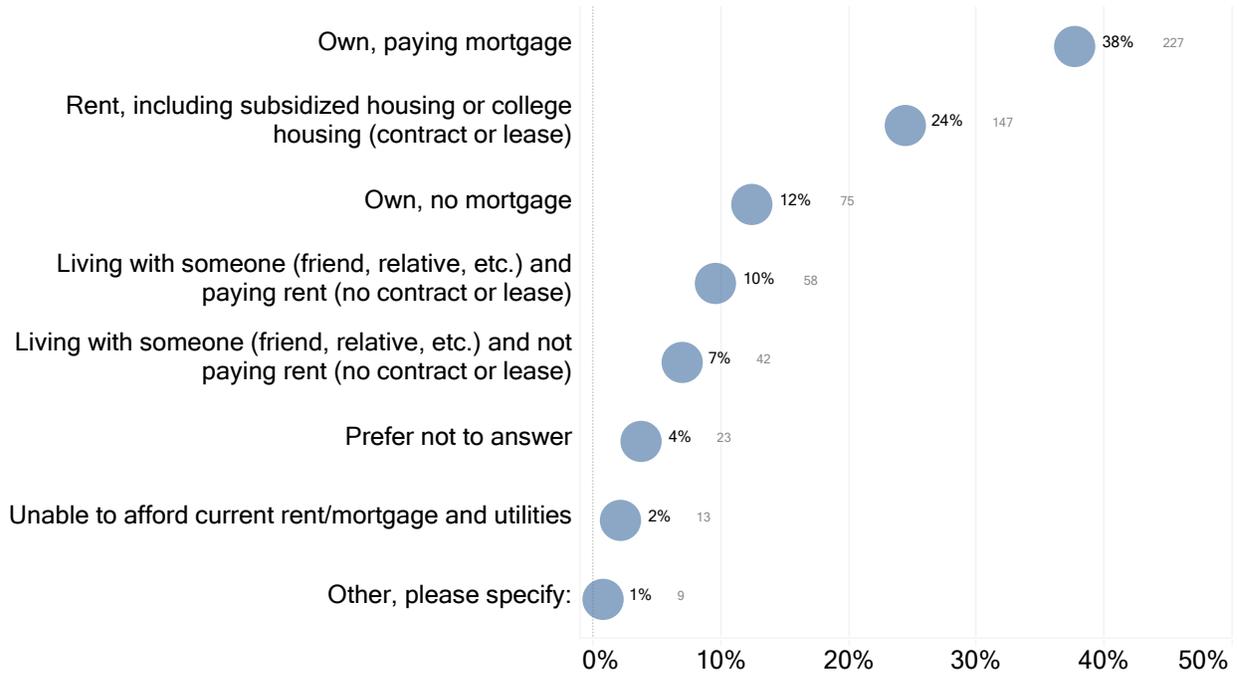


Figure 2 shows a map of the 64 countries of origin of respondents. The five countries with the most responses were Mexico (12% of total responses), the United States (9%), Myanmar (7%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (6%), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (6%). Because the survey was distributed to both first- and second-generation immigrants, it is understandable that the United States has the second greatest respondent count.

Figure 2 Respondents by Country of Origin

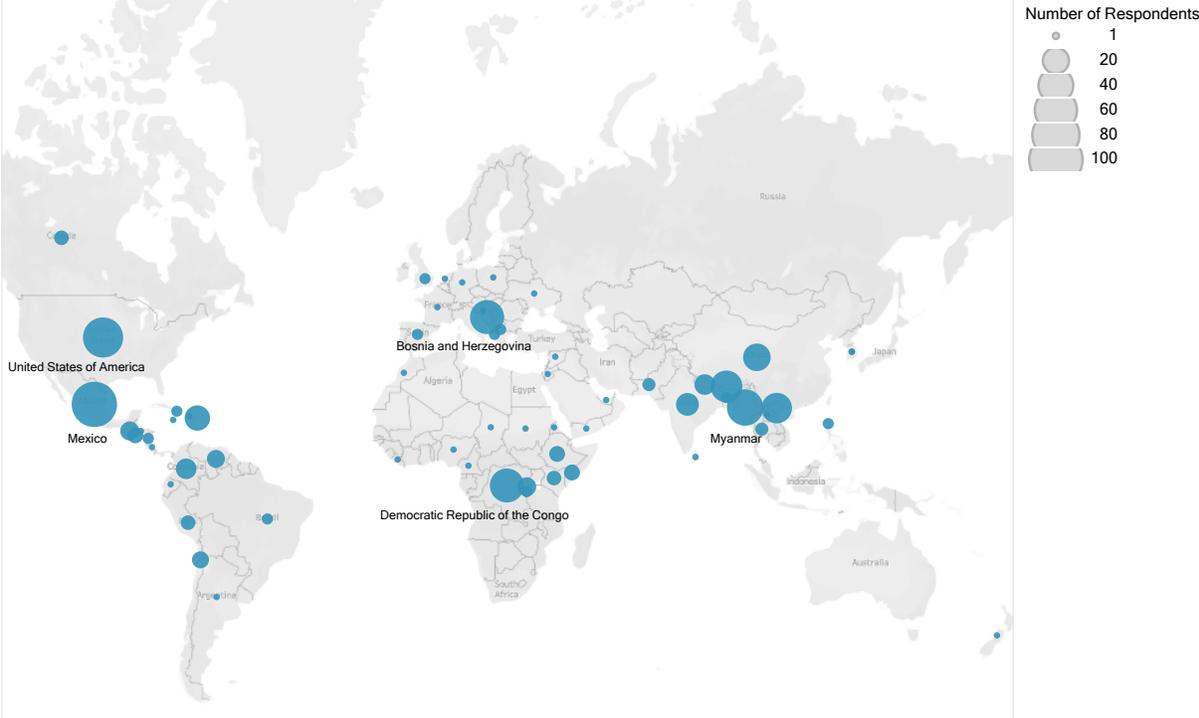
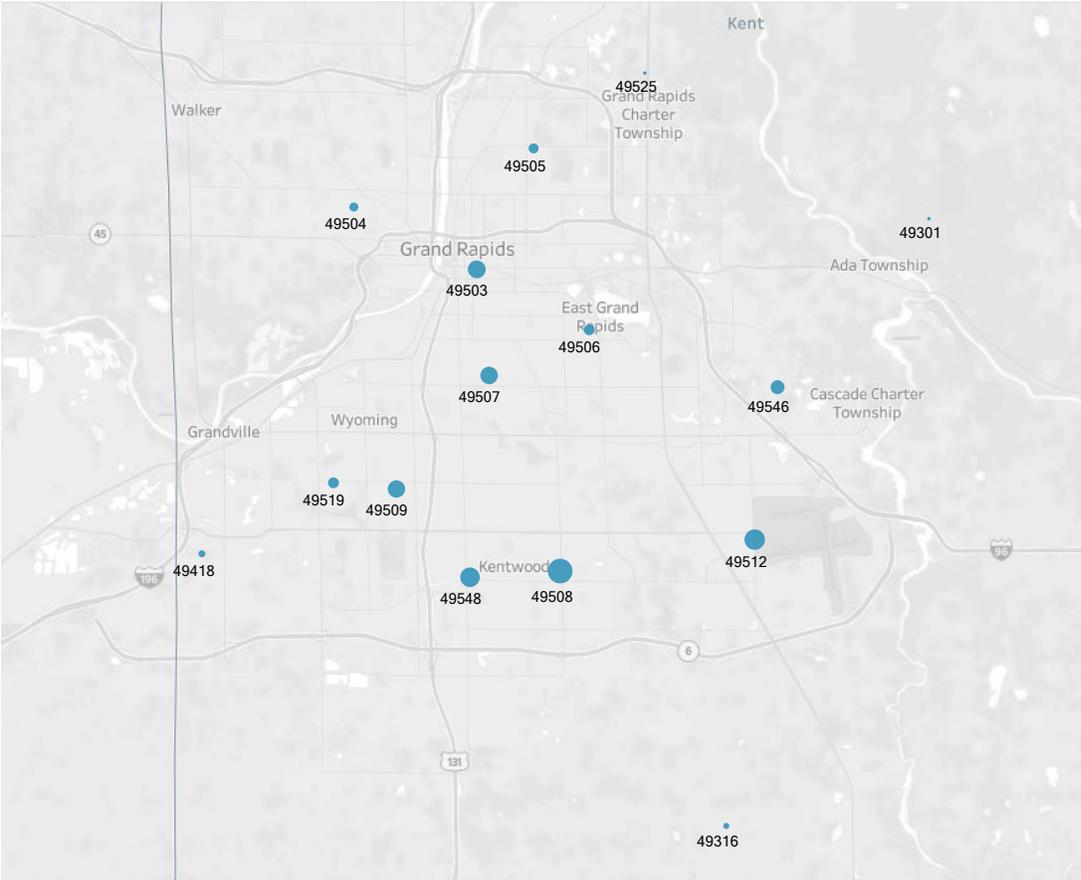


Figure 3 shows a map of ZIP codes where respondents currently reside. A total of 47 unique ZIP codes were reported, but not all 47 were valid U.S. ZIP codes. There were 23 ZIP codes with at least two responses within that ZIP code; however, only the 14 ZIP codes with the most respondents are displayed on the map to protect anonymity of areas with fewer respondents.

Figure 3 Respondents by ZIP Code



Survey Key Themes

The survey helped identify key themes in the categories of belonging, opportunity, accessibility, and obstacles. The most relevant questions from each category are presented in this report. When doing so provides additional insight, we compare results by cross-tabulating respondent characteristics, such as English language proficiency or Net Promoter Score.

Net Promoter Score (NPS)

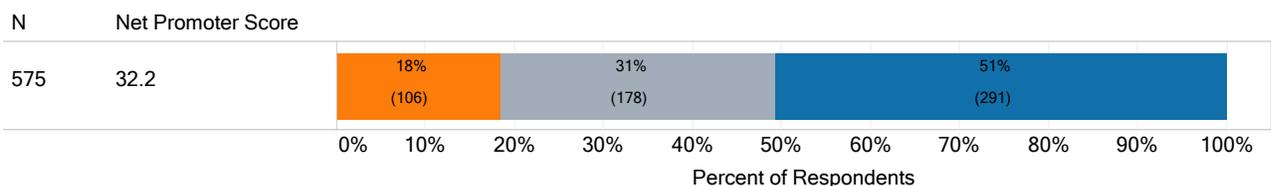
Respondents provided an overall rating of the greater Grand Rapids area by answering the question, “On a scale from 0-10, how likely are you to recommend the greater Grand Rapids area as a place to a friend or family member?” This question was used to calculate a [Net Promoter Score \(NPS\)](#), a widely-used metric developed by the consulting firm [Bain & Company](#). People who give an organization, product, or service a rating of 9 or 10 are “promoters,” who are likely to make public endorsements and encourage others to try or join. People who give a rating of 7 or 8 are “passive;” they are satisfied but are unlikely to recruit others. People who give a rating of 0-6 are “detractors,” who are likely to tell others about their negative experiences or deter others from trying and joining.

An NPS score is calculated by subtracting the percent of detractors from the percent of promoters; theoretically, NPS scores could range from -100 (everyone is a detractor) to +100 (everyone is a promoter). Bain & Company’s guidelines state that an NPS score that is positive (more promoters than detractors) is considered good. An NPS score of +50 is considered excellent.

As illustrated in **Figure 4**, 51% of respondents were promoters, 31% were passive, and 18% were detractors, yielding an NPS score of +32.2. This score puts the greater Grand Rapids area in what is considered the good-to-excellent range. While this is encouraging, the fact that nearly one of five respondents were detractors highlights opportunity for improvement.

Figure 4 Net Promoter Score

On a scale from 0-10, how likely are you to recommend the greater Grand Rapids area as a place to live to a friend or family member?



Belonging

One of the goals of the survey was to measure respondents' sense of belonging in the greater Grand Rapids area. In the first survey question about belonging, respondents reported how long they lived in the area until they felt like they belonged in Grand Rapids. Respondents selected from a range of "I felt like I belonged right away" to "I still don't feel like I belong."

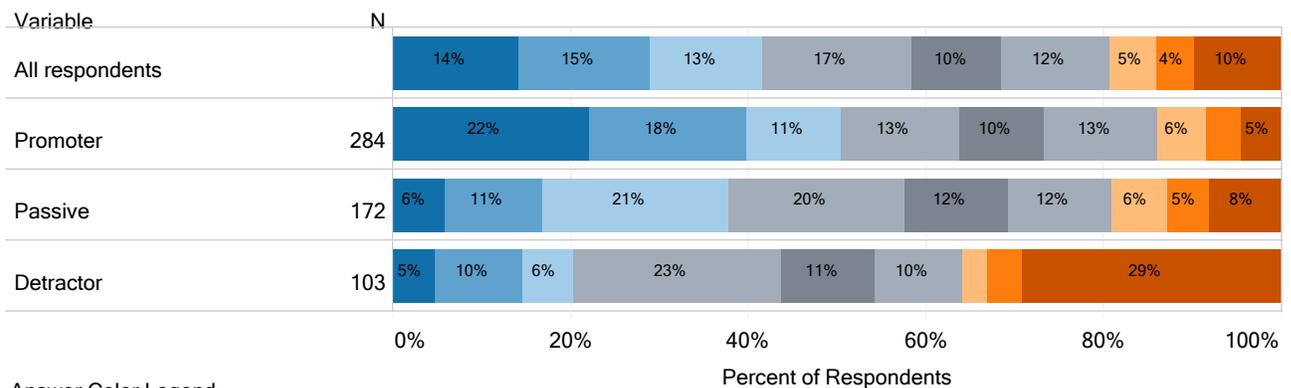
The first row in **Figure 5** presents the overall response for all respondents. Important to note for Figure 5 and other figures in the report is the color legend in the bottom left corner. This legend shows the answer options ranging from dark blue to dark orange. Shown in the first row in dark blue, 14% of all respondents felt like they belonged right away with a total of 40% reporting that in less than a year they felt like they belonged. In dark orange, 10% of respondents continue to feel like they still do not belong.

The next three rows in the visualization show these responses by respondents' Net Promoter Scores. Respondents in the Promoter category who tend to actively promote Grand Rapids also reported higher rates of belonging in shorter periods of time, totaling 51% reporting they felt like they belonged in less than a year.

Not surprisingly, respondents in the Detractor category had the highest rate of feeling like they still do not belong (29%).

Figure 5 Belonging in Grand Rapids by Net Promoter Score

About how long did you live in greater Grand Rapids before you felt like you belonged?



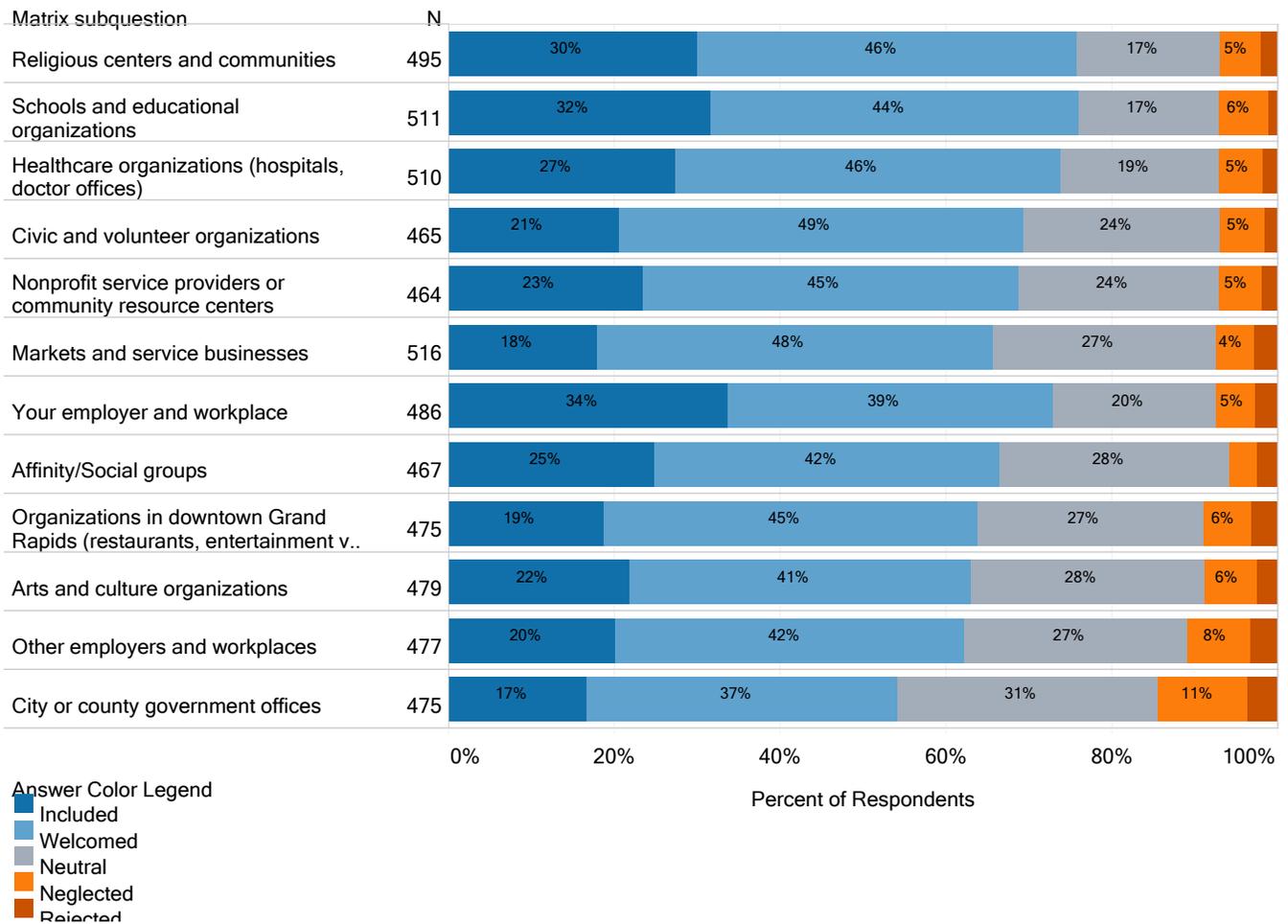
- Answer Color Legend
- I felt like I belonged right away
 - Less than 6 months
 - 6 months to 1 year
 - 2 to 3 years
 - 4 to 5 years
 - 5 to 10 years
 - 11 to 20 years
 - More than 20 years
 - I still don't feel like I belong

Figure 6 shows the responses to the question, “How do you feel you’ve been treated by the following types of organizations in greater Grand Rapids?” Respondents rated each type of organization as making them feel included, welcomed, neutral, neglected, or rejected. The organizations that appear first received the highest ratings for being inclusive and welcoming, while the organizations that received the lowest ratings are at the bottom.

The light blue color in **Figure 6** indicates a rating of feeling welcomed by an organization. While every organization received over 50% ratings of feeling at least welcomed, differences appear in respondents’ sense of being included versus being welcomed. Represented in dark blue, respondents felt most included in their own workplaces, followed by schools and educational organizations. City or county government offices were perceived as the least welcoming and least inclusive organizations, noted in orange with 11% feeling neglected and 4% feeling rejected in dark orange.

Figure 6 Treatment by Organizations

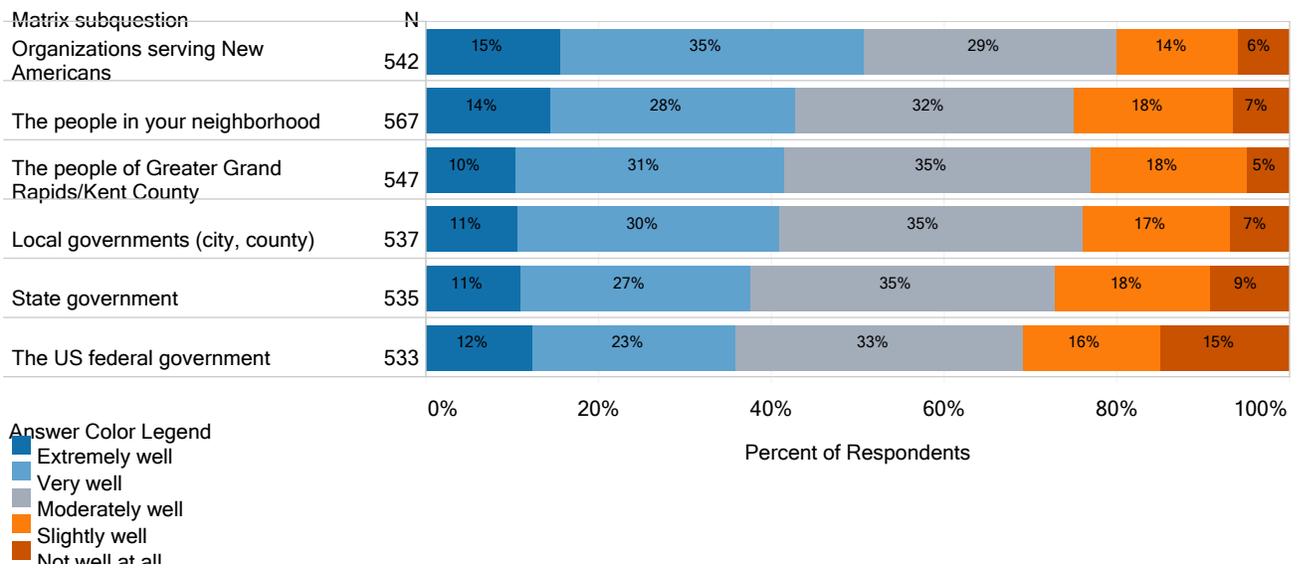
How do you feel you've been treated by the following types of organizations in greater Grand Rapids?



Respondents were asked to rate a list of different organization types and groups on how well these groups value respondents' cultural traditions and practices. Ranging from extremely well to not well at all, **Figure 7** shows the distribution of responses for various groups. Not surprisingly, the groups that New Americans perceived to value their traditions and cultures the most are organizations specifically serving New Americans. Half of respondents said these organizations value their culture very well or extremely well, and 42% of respondents said that neighbors value their culture very well or extremely well. Federal government received the lowest ratings, with only 35% of respondents indicating that the federal government values their culture very well or extremely well. These ratings of valuing culture and traditions are lower than feelings of welcome and inclusivity in **Figure 6**.

Figure 7 Value Cultural Traditions and Practices

How well would you say that the following groups value your cultural traditions and practices?



Opportunity

A portion of the survey measured respondents' perception of opportunities in Grand Rapids.

Respondents rated the question, "How well does available work match your skills and education?" from extremely well to not well at all. The first row in **Figure 8** shows the overall responses to this question. The following rows show the responses broken down by respondents' English proficiency. A pattern emerges in the blue sections, showing that individuals who speak English proficiently feel like the available work matches their skills and education. For individuals who do not know any English, 77% indicated that the available work only matches their skills and education slightly well or not well at all.

Figure 8 Work Availability and English Proficiency

How well does available work match your skills and education?

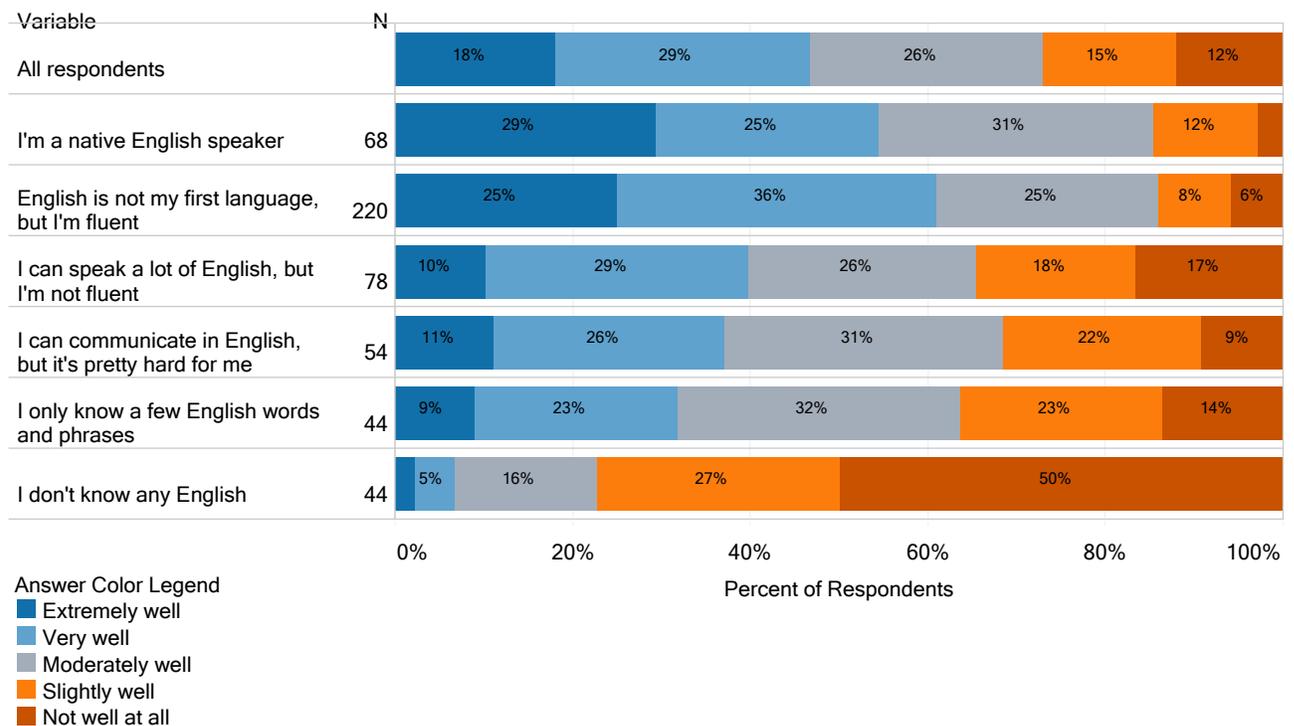


Figure 9 shows respondents' top barriers to finding a lasting job. From a list of options, respondents selected categories that applied to them. While 34% of respondents selected language as the greatest difficulty in finding a lasting job, 18% selected skill level. The remainder of the categories listed have just under half as many respondents (13% or fewer) indicating them as barriers. Language is clearly the greatest barrier to finding a lasting job.

Figure 9 Barriers to a Lasting Job

Which of these issues have made it difficult to find a lasting job?

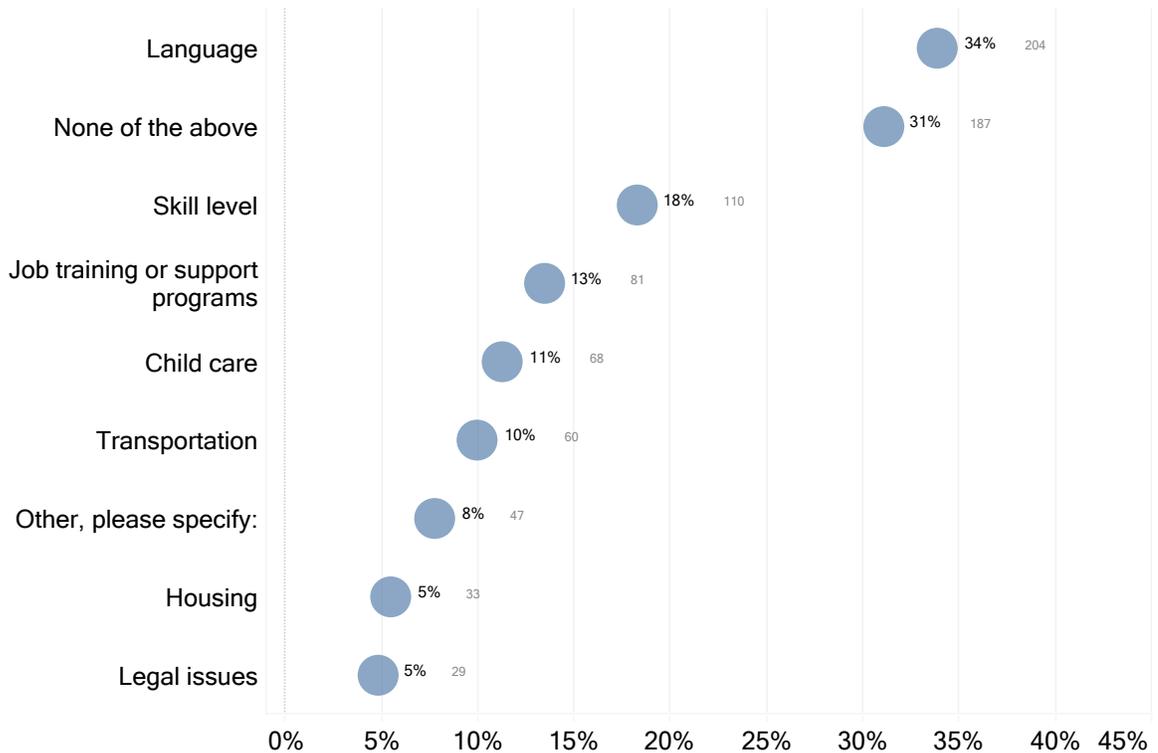
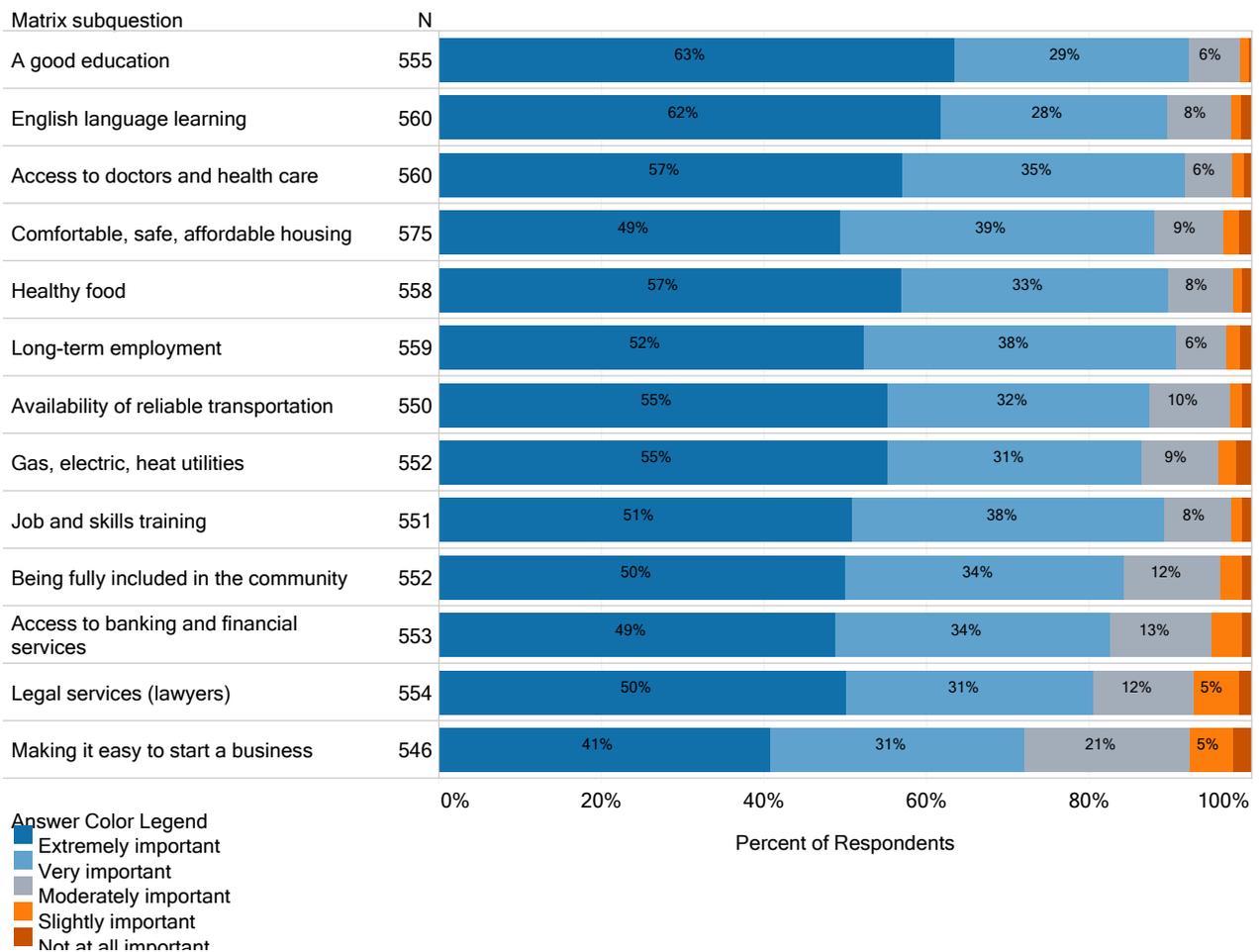


Figure 10 shows the responses to the question, “How important is it to you and your family that the greater Grand Rapids area increases opportunities for New Americans in these areas?” Respondents were given 13 choices, including a good education, healthy food, and English language learning, which they rated from extremely important to not at all important. In Figure 10, responses are sorted from most important to least important. There is a little variation in responses, but it is apparent that respondents believe an increase in opportunities in all the listed areas is very important. Only a small percentage of respondents indicated that increasing opportunity in any of these areas is only slightly important or not important at all. Increased opportunities for a good education and English language learning were the most important for respondents.

Figure 10 Increasing Opportunities for New Americans

How important is it to you and your family that the greater Grand Rapids area increases opportunities for New Americans in these areas?



Accessibility

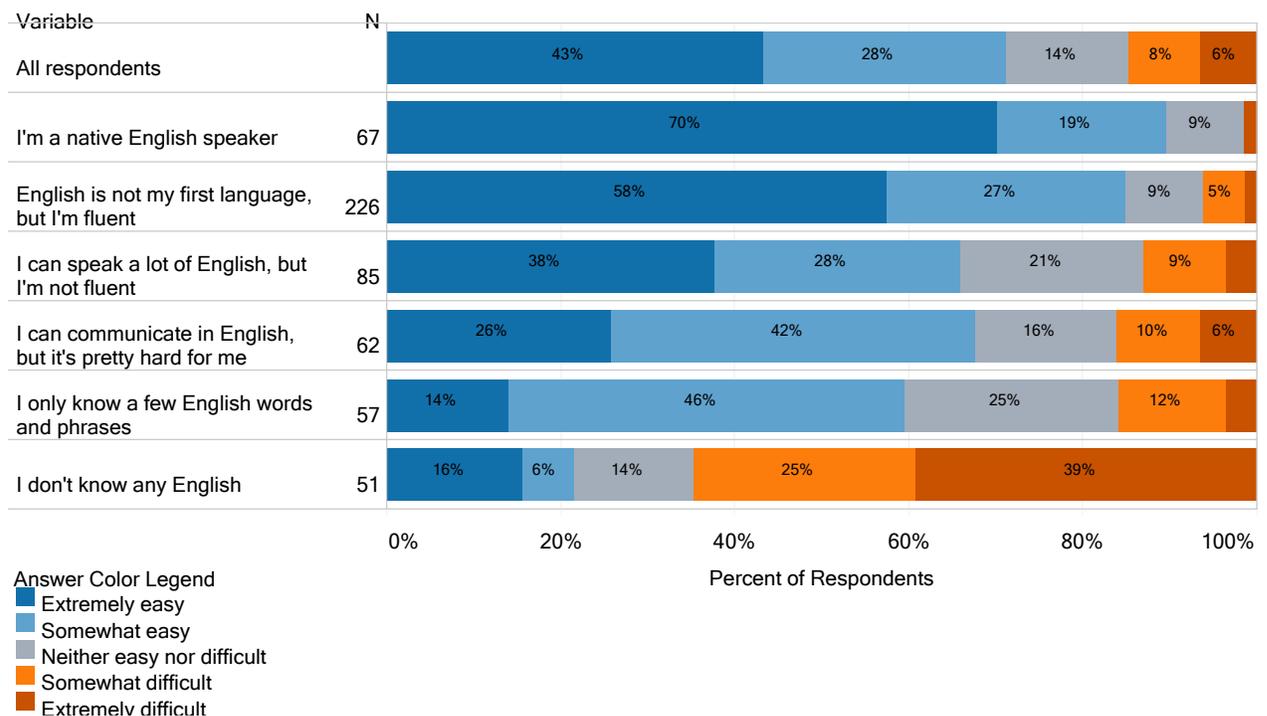
Various questions on the survey aimed to measure New Americans' access to different resources and services.

Figure 11 shows the responses to the question, "How easy is it to get places like your job, the doctor, and grocery stores?" The first row of Figure 11 shows the overall responses, with just under half of respondents indicating that it is extremely easy to access these services and only 6% indicating extreme difficulty.

However, when this question is broken down by English proficiency, the ability to speak English emerges clearly as a differentiator in respondents' access. A total of 89% of native English speakers found it somewhat easy or extremely easy to reach these locations. Only 22% of respondents who do not speak any English found it somewhat easy or extremely easy to access these locations, whereas 64%, shown in orange in the bottom row, found it somewhat or extremely difficult to access these spaces. As English proficiency decreases, so does the ease with which people can access jobs, doctors, and grocery stores.

Figure 11 Accessing Locations by English Proficiency

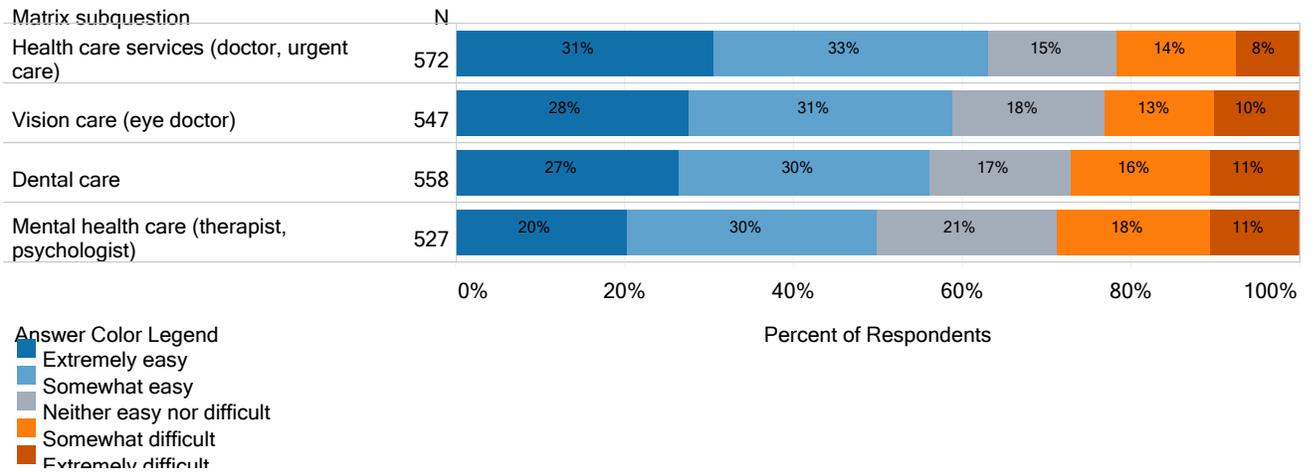
How easy is it to get to places like your job, the doctor, and grocery stores?



Respondents were also asked to rate the accessibility of health-related services from extremely easy to access to extremely difficult to access. **Figure 12** shows the overall accessibility of the four services: health care services, vision care, dental care, and mental health care. The services are ordered by most accessible to least accessible, with health care being the easiest to access and mental health care being the hardest to access.

Figure 12 Access to Health Care Services

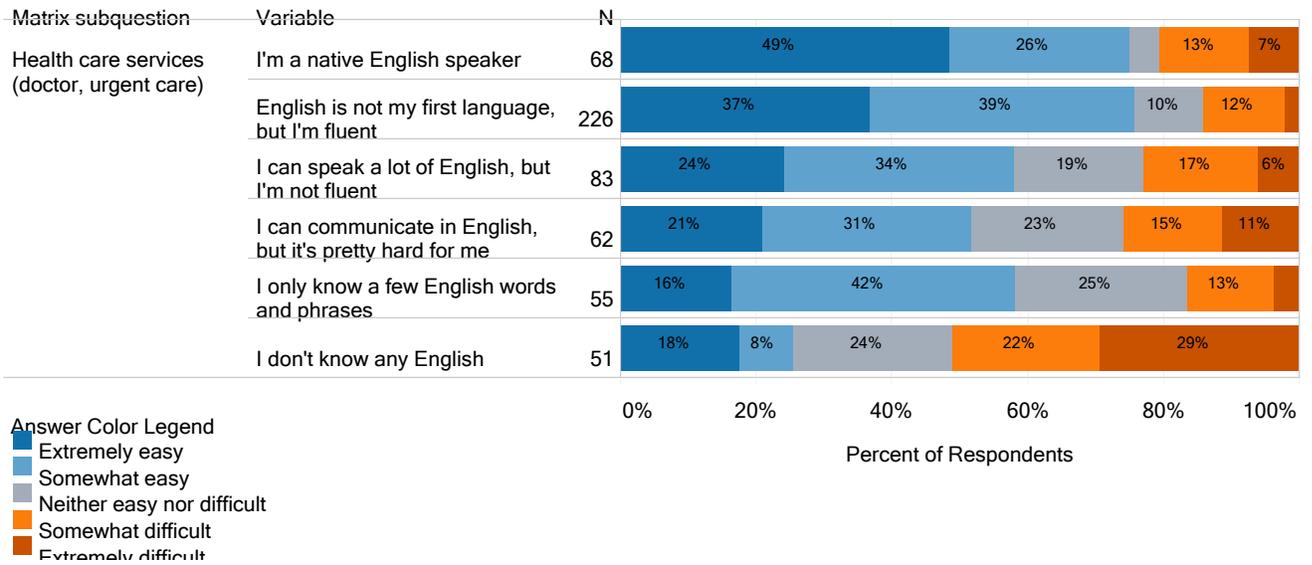
Please rate how easy is it for you or your family to access the following services:



Answers about access to services varied widely based on respondents' English proficiency. **Figure 13** shows the first item from the previous figure, health care services, broken down by respondents' English proficiency, with 75% of native English speakers indicating that access to health care services was somewhat or extremely easy. However, only 26% of respondents who do not know any English reported ease in access, while 51% reported that it was somewhat or extremely difficult to access healthcare services.

Figure 13 Access to Health Care Services by English Proficiency

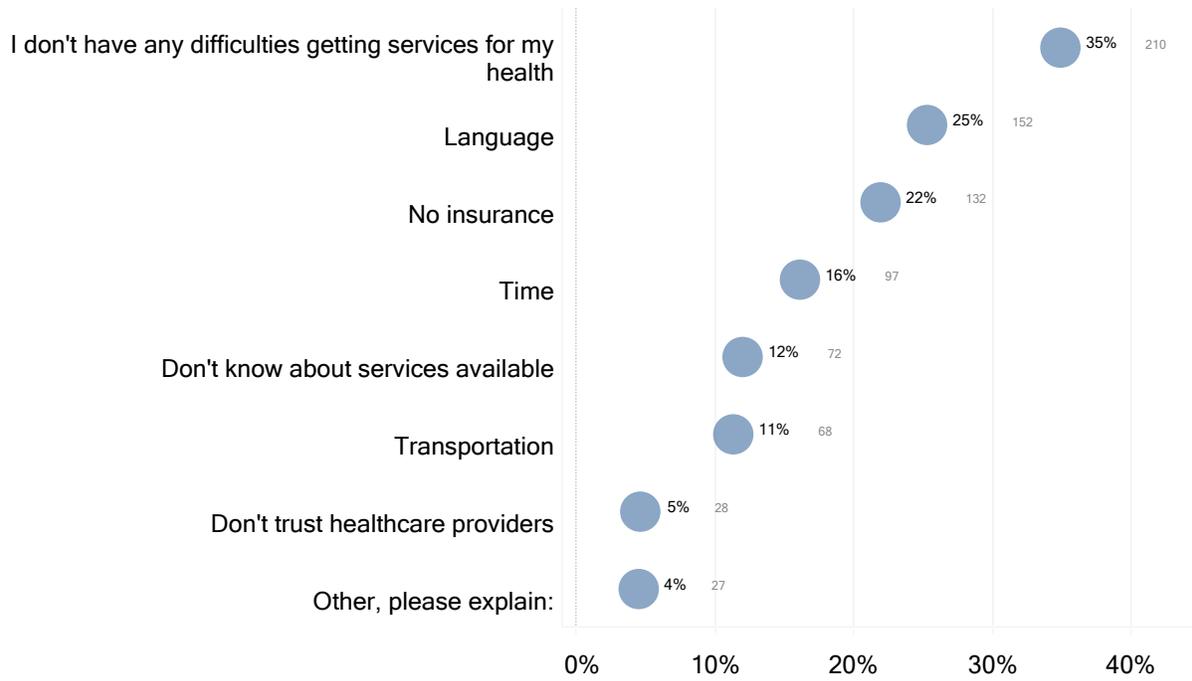
Please rate how easy is it for you or your family to access the following services:



This same trend of easier access to services for respondents who are more proficient in English continues with vision care, dental care, and mental health care. While Figure 13 combines two survey questions to explore language barriers to health care access, **Figure 14** shows respondents' self-identified barriers. A little over one-third of respondents did not identify any barriers to accessing health care, and one-fourth indicated that language was one of the major barriers. The second-most identified barrier after language was lack of insurance (22%), the third-most was time (16%), and the fourth-most was lack of awareness of available services (12%).

Figure 14 Barriers to Health Care Services

What makes it difficult to find services for your health?

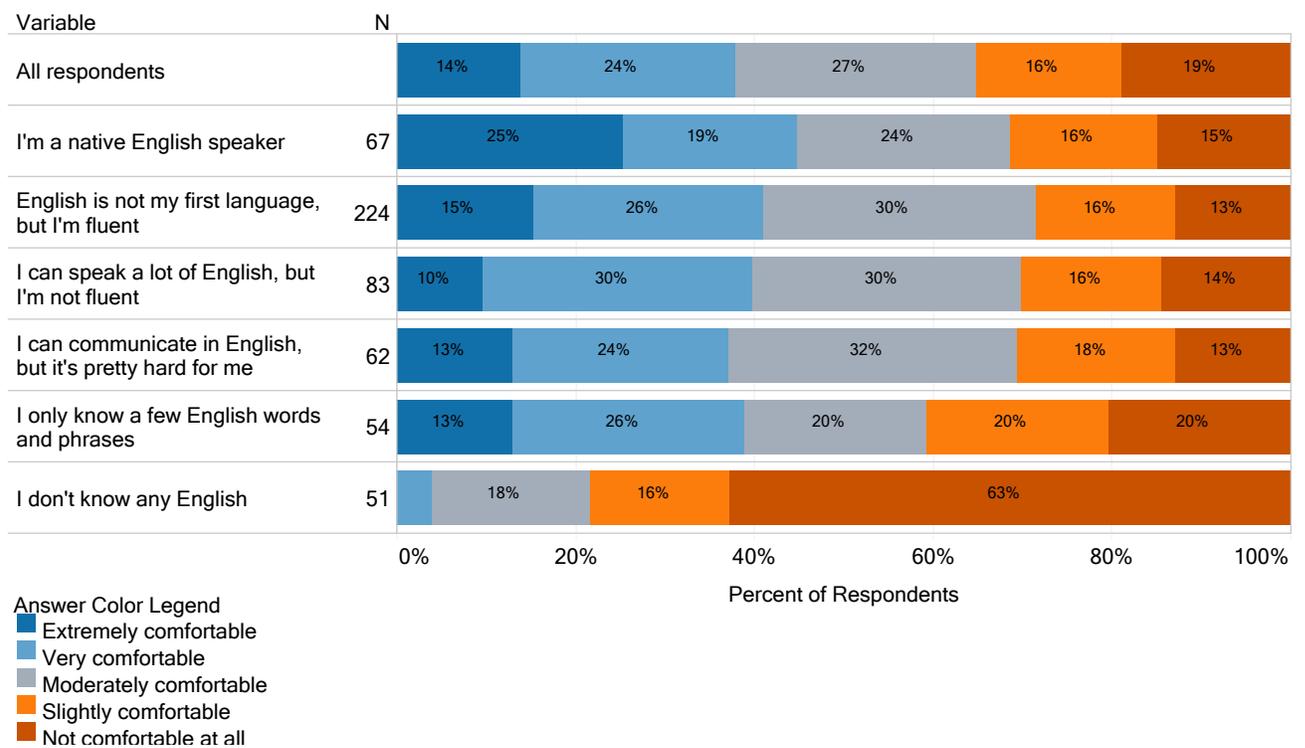


Obstacles

The survey explored various obstacles New Americans might face. One question asked about respondents' levels of comfort interacting with public safety officers. The first row of **Figure 15** shows the overall responses to this question, with 14% of respondents feeling extremely comfortable interacting with public safety officers and 19% feeling not at all comfortable. The next rows in Figure 15 show this same response broken down by English proficiency. Levels of discomfort with public safety officers increase drastically when respondents speak no English: 63% of non-English speakers indicated that they did not feel comfortable at all.

Figure 15 Police Interaction by English Proficiency

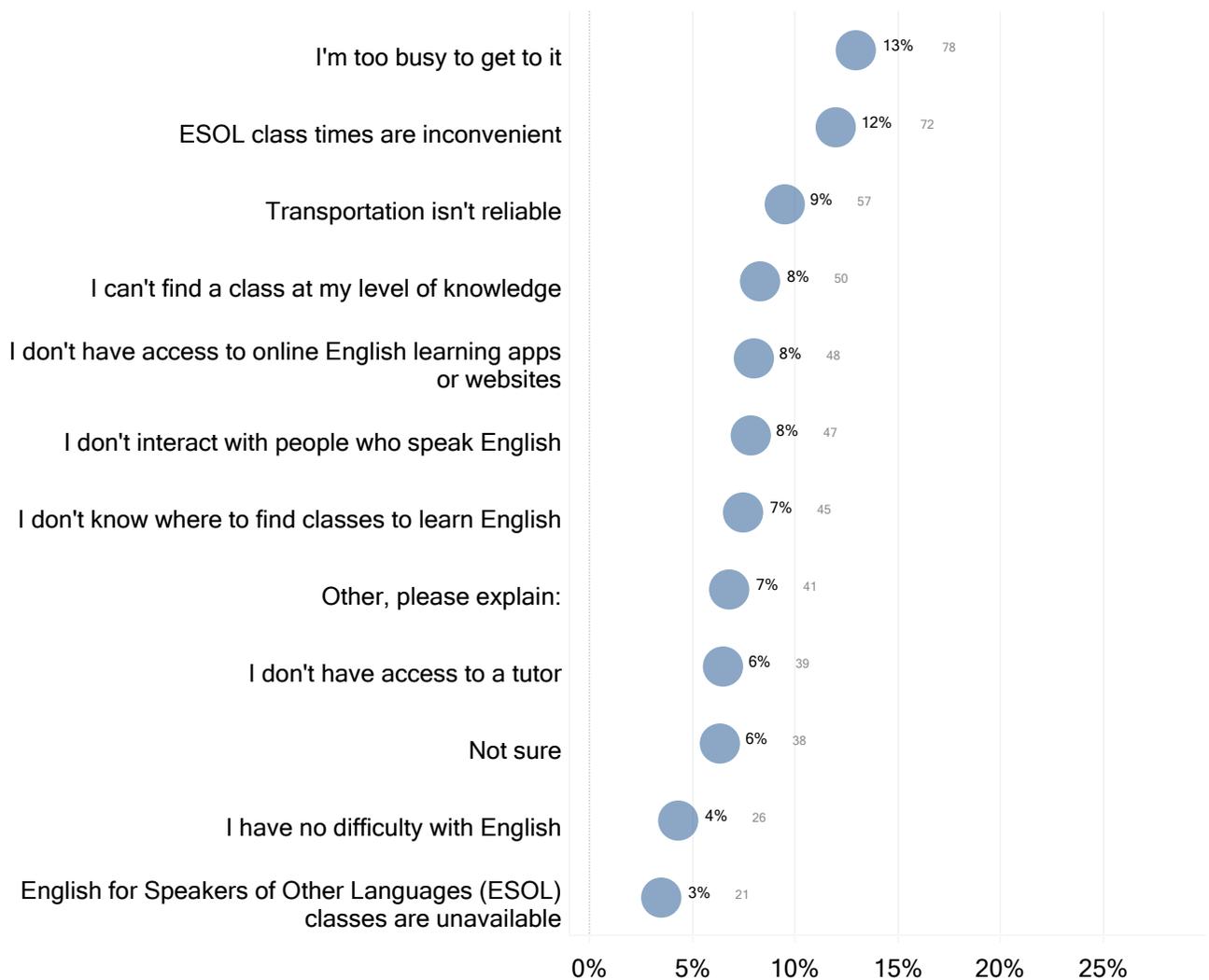
How comfortable do you feel interacting with a police officer or other public safety officer?



As seen in many of the previous questions, English proficiency is a major factor in New Americans' sense of belonging and inclusion. **Figure 16** measures respondents' barriers to learning English. The highest rated barrier is time, followed by only a 1% difference with inconvenience of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) class times. These two are followed by problems with transportation (9%), difficulty finding an appropriate class (8%), and lack of access to resources (8%).

Figure 16 Barriers to Learning English

What makes it difficult for you to learn English?



Priorities

Finally, respondents selected their top five priorities for themselves and for their children or grandchildren from a list of 15 choices. **Table 3** shows the top 5 choices for each question.

Table 3 Top 5 Priorities for Self and Children or Grandchildren

Priorities	<i>N</i>	%
Priorities for myself		
Continue to work in my profession (39%)	126	20.9%
Maintain my culture, religion, and traditions (38%)	159	26.4%
Achieve desired level of English (37%)	145	24.1%
Be actively involved in my children’s education, safety, future (32%)	74	12.3%
Have Americans understand my culture, religion, circumstances (30%)	50	8.3%
Priorities for my children and grandchildren		
Achieve desired level of education (59%)	67	11.1%
Make friends, play, laugh, enjoy childhood (38%)	83	13.8%
Maintain our culture, religion, and traditions (37%)	86	14.3%
Integrate into American society and be valued as contributing members of American society (30%)	57	9.5%
Have Americans understand our culture, religion, circumstances (28%)	7	1.2%

There were many similarities between these priorities, the open-ended responses in the survey, and the key themes collected from listening sessions.

Table 4 illustrates the major priorities New Americans expressed broken down by data collection method across five themes. For each of the five top priorities identified within each method of data collection, the ranking of that priority is identified.

Some priorities, such those around professional opportunities and cultural openness, were expressed in all three data collection methods. However, some priorities were only expressed in one or two modes of research, such as fear of the police, which was only expressed in the focus group conversations. For more information on these discrepancies, see **Cross-Analyzing Data**.

Table 4 Survey and Focus Group Theme Similarities

Themes	Survey multiple choice questions	Survey Comments	Focus group conversations
Professional opportunities	1. "Continue to work in my profession"	1. Opportunities	5. Inability to continue in profession
Cultural openness	2. "Maintain my culture, religion, and traditions, & 5. "Have Americans understand my culture, religion, and circumstances"	4. Acceptance & 5. Respect	2. Respect
English help	3. "Achieve desired level of English"	3. Education (ESL)	
Children	4. "Be actively involved in my children's education, safety, future"		4. Balancing cultures between 1st and 2nd generation
Resources		2. Resources	1. Lack of access to existing resources
Safety			3. Fear of police

Listening Sessions

Overview

The Welcome Plan Task Force was created with multi-sector organizations who each had a unique reach to New Americans in our community. Each organization was highly encouraged to organize a focus group to understand the barriers New Americans faced. The Welcome Plan Coordinator facilitated the member organization with the process.

In the span of a month and a half, organizations carried out 25 focus groups. Interpreters and facilitators received a stipend and a meal as necessary. Most groups consisted of ten to 15 participants, but participation ranged from one-on-one meetings to groups of twenty to forty. The Welcome Plan Coordinator facilitated most of the focus groups. All focus groups centered on the key questions of, “What is your own top priority?” and “What is holding you back from achieving that priority?” with the goal of focus group participants proposing ideal solutions to be articulated in the Welcome Plan.

Demographics

Throughout this process, we emphasized trying to organize groups of diverse participants in terms of country of origin, professional occupation, education, status, level of English, and age. Throughout the 25 focus groups, we convened participants from 33 different countries (**Table 5**) including from the top five country of origins for New Americans in Kent County (Mexico, Guatemala, Vietnam, Bosnia and Canada).

Table 5 Participant Countries of Origin Represented in Listening Sessions

Bhutan	Dominican Republic	Kosovo
Bosnia	Egypt	Mexico
Burma	Ethiopia	Nepal
Burundi	Germany	Netherlands
Cameroon	Guatemala	Nigeria
Canada	Guyana	Pakistan
Chad	Haiti	Palestine
China	Italy	Rwanda
Columbia	Ivory Coast	Togo
Congo	Jordan	United States
Cuba	Kenya	Vietnam

Focus Groups Major Themes

Civic Engagement

- Lack of a feeling of belonging
- Need for mentorship
- New Americans being and feeling alienated, needing to combat that sentiment

Equitable Access to Services

- Lack of (public) transportation
- Mental and general healthcare available, but appointments are costly become burdensome with work schedules
- A desire for a centralized location for New Americans to have simpler access to resources
- Need to address mental health in New Americans and their families

Economic Development

- Foreign education and work experience not viewed as legitimate in the U.S.
- Difficult and costly to become re-education, re-certified, and/or relicensed

Education

- Not enough continued support from refugee resettlement agencies leaves New Americans struggling after the initial “knowledge dump” from agencies and subsequent discontinued service
- Not being able to advocate for oneself because of a lack of knowledge of laws and customs
- Going to ESL classes becomes a financial burden because takes away time from work and/or interferes with work schedules
- Lack of attention to the academic success of New American children
- Relying on social capital to get information of services in the community
- Technological barriers
- Emphasis on celebrating diversity at a young age in schools

Safe and Connected Communities

- New Americans struggle to find their own communities
- New Americans feel unwelcome in populations different from their own communities, leading to feelings of isolation
- Fear of police and lack of faith or trust in law enforcement to protect New Americans

Conclusion

Cross-Analyzing Data

Throughout the research process, it was integral to focus on diversity in participants and research methods. While the survey reached a wide range of individuals, the Welcome Committee recognized that identifying priorities for New Americans through the survey was not enough and decided to conduct focus groups predominantly led by New Americans, creating an opportunity to discuss topics that may not have appeared in the survey.

Between the survey, survey comments, and focus group conversations, participants identified priorities and barriers that may not have otherwise been recognized. **Table 4** illustrates the relationship between the top priorities identified through each mode of data collection. Because of the different foci of the survey and focus groups, some differences appeared in the identified priorities.

English Language Learning, Economic Stability, and Prosperity

Despite lack of English proficiency being a top priority throughout the survey, the desire to work in one's profession and to maintain one's culture, religion, and traditions were prioritized above achieving one's desired level of English in a separate survey question.

Focus group conversations around English language learning reiterated the notion that English proficiency opens doors for New Americans. As one participant explained, "Language is the door for everything. You can do anything and go anywhere. You can do many things."

When facilitators asked participants why they did not pursue community-wide ESL classes, they explained that other barriers stood in their way. One such barrier is the difficulty of finding employment upon arriving in the United States. While economic stability is a priority for New Americans and their families, it is often difficult to transfer foreign education, experience, licenses, and other qualifications. This leads to more time spent negotiating employment or re-credentialing, which means less time to pursue English language learning and other extra-curriculars. This indicates that English language learning is an added responsibility on top of securing and maintaining employment and economic stability. As one participant expressed in a listening session, "The American Dream goes away and is replaced with worries about paying the rent and work, work, work."

Barriers Particular to Specific Groups

Certain barriers emerged that appeared to be specific to different demographics. One barrier identified in focus groups was the fear of police and law enforcement, raised largely by Latinx and Bhutanese participants. Latinx focus group participants particularly expressed their fear and lack of faith in law enforcement system and officials. They stressed safety, specifically for Latinx community members, and access to driver's licenses for all as priorities.

African and Asian refugees more often voiced the issue of familial safety and security. While this group felt more comfortable interacting with law enforcement, many expressed that refugee parents were often antagonized by their children, who threatened their parents. One participant remembers their children saying, “You are African, and I am American. I will call 911, and you will be punished.”

College-educated African immigrants expressed that their top priorities were to maintain their own culture, religion, and traditions and transfer foreign education and professional experience to their lives in the United States. They expressed the challenges in balancing pride in their heritage with pride in being an American. One participant shared, “There’s no book to tell you how to be African in the U.S. Is there a correct way to act?” And moreover, “When you assimilate, it’s like giving someone permission to treat you badly; it’s about losing a part of yourself. If you get rid of it, you’re trying to get peace here, but it’s affirming that it’s something to get rid of.”

New American Immigrants and New American Refugees

Top priorities and barriers also varied between New American immigrants and New American refugees. Immigrants predominantly focused on trying to transfer foreign experience and education, while refugees predominantly focused on navigating a new life in the United States. These concerns with adjusting to their new lives including accessing existing resources and English language learning, difficulty attaining upward economic mobility, and wanting better for their children.

Overlap between the two subgroups namely occurred around the issues of upward economic mobility; balancing and maintaining their culture, religion, and traditions while being an American; desiring to be welcomed as an American; and feeling like they belonged in the community.

Next Steps

Gateways for Growth in Kent County and Grand Rapids is a community-led initiative spearheaded by 36 multi-sector community organizations who value the diversity of the community and the need to celebrate and welcome all community members. Throughout the initiative, we constantly focused on uplifting New American voices. As such, the Welcome Plan Committee is currently crafting a Welcome Plan that that upholds their priorities and addresses their barriers based on solutions brainstormed by New Americans during focus group conversations. This process reinforces that this plan is built by them, not simply for them.

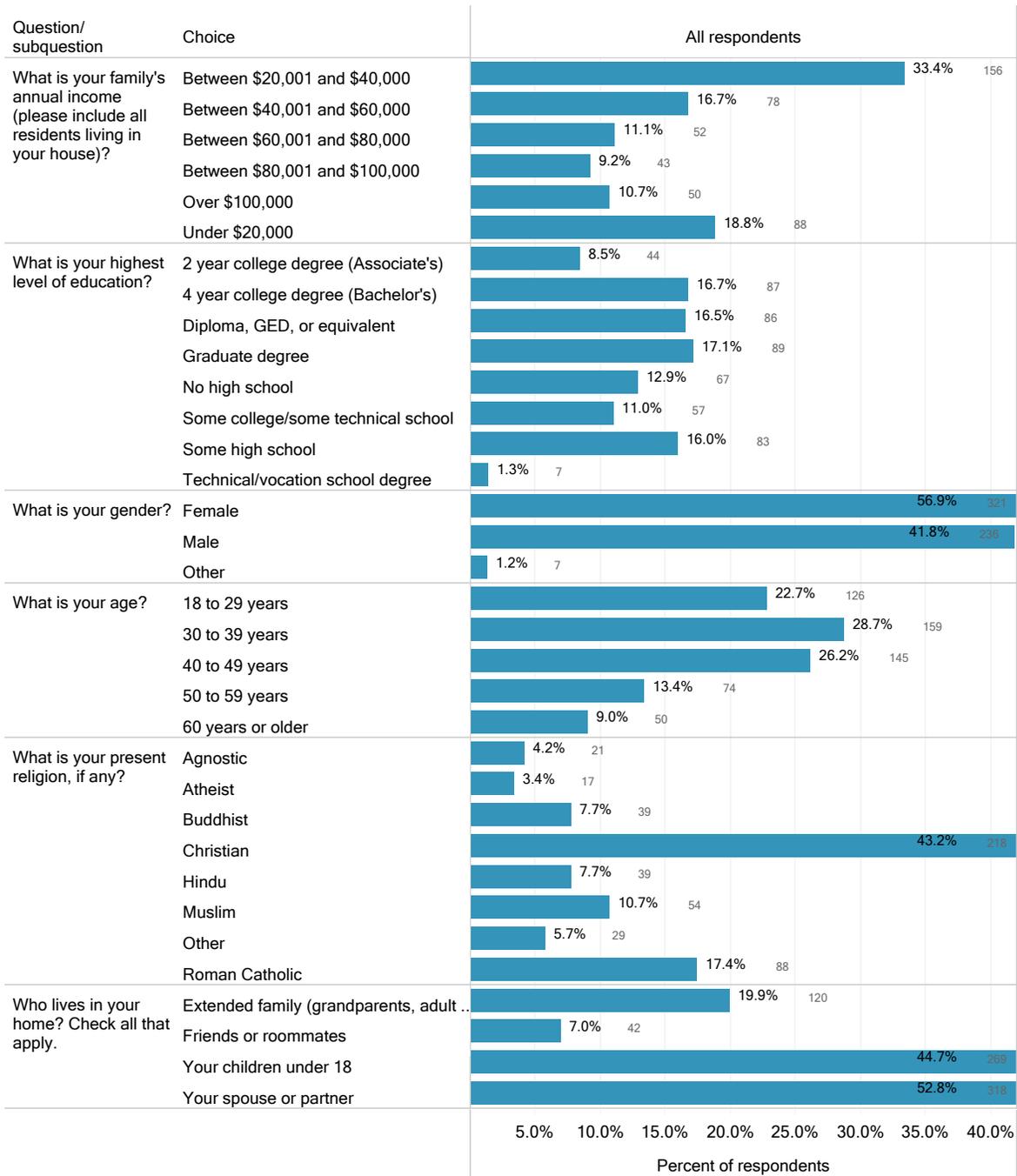
This Welcome Plan is not a solution to all the systemic barriers that New Americans face in our community, but it is a living document, able to be reviewed and revised according to its success and needs. Above all, this Welcome Plan is a testament to our community's commitment to welcoming New Americans from the start.

The Welcome Plan is scheduled to be launched in early spring of 2020.

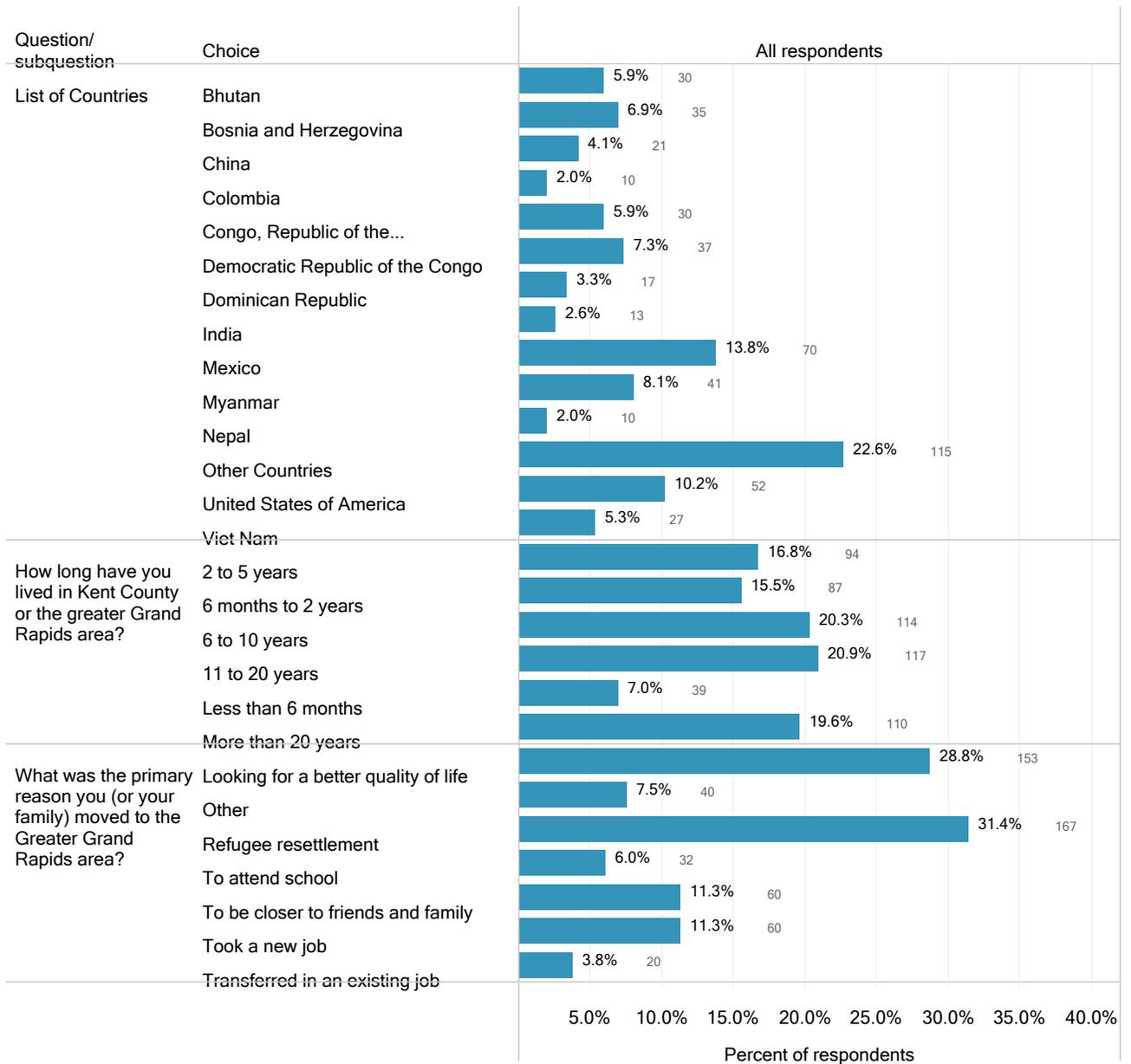
For any questions, comments, or concerns, please contact the Welcome Plan Project Coordinator: Elvira Kovachevich, ekova@samaritas.org.

Appendix 1: Full results

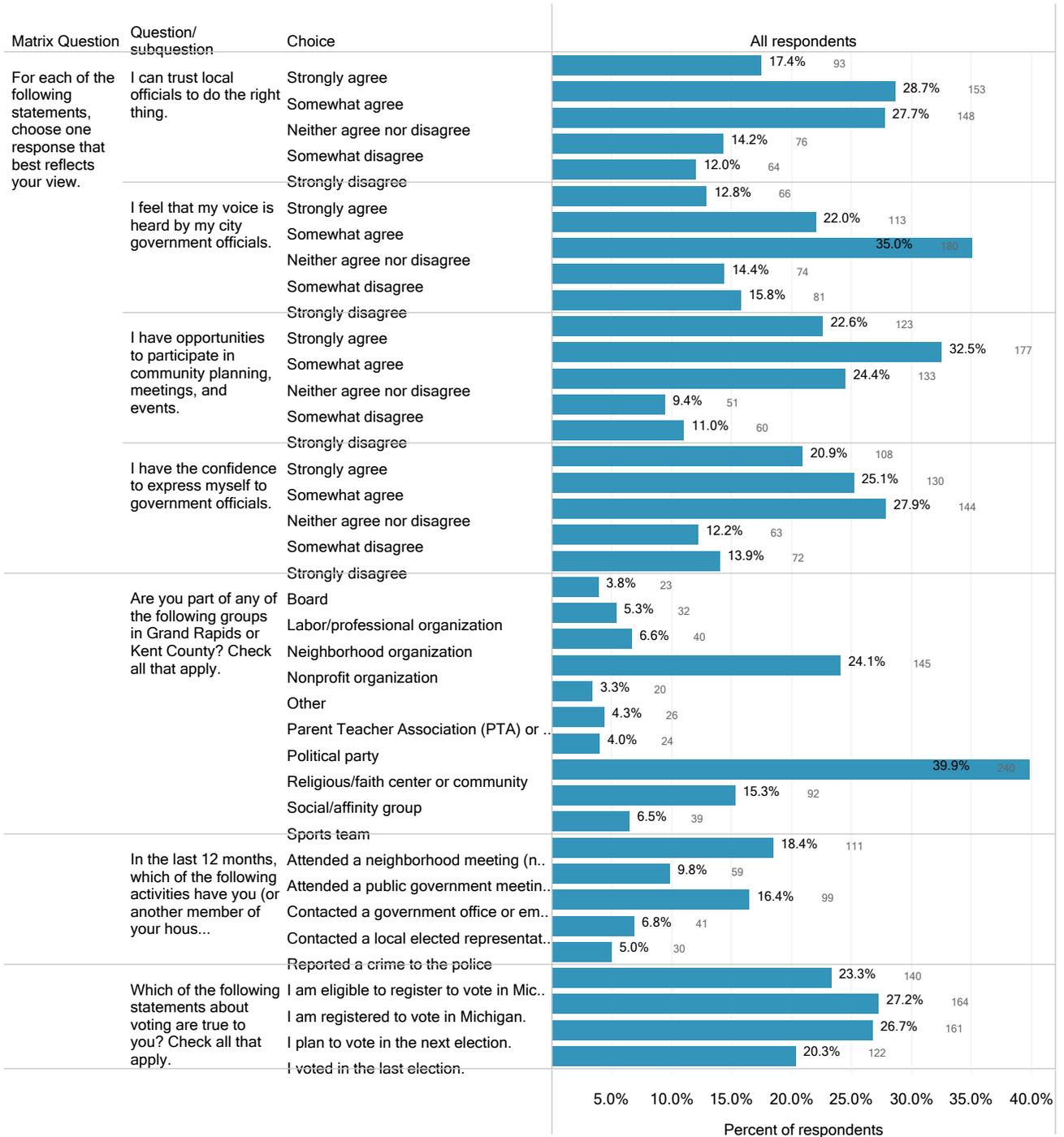
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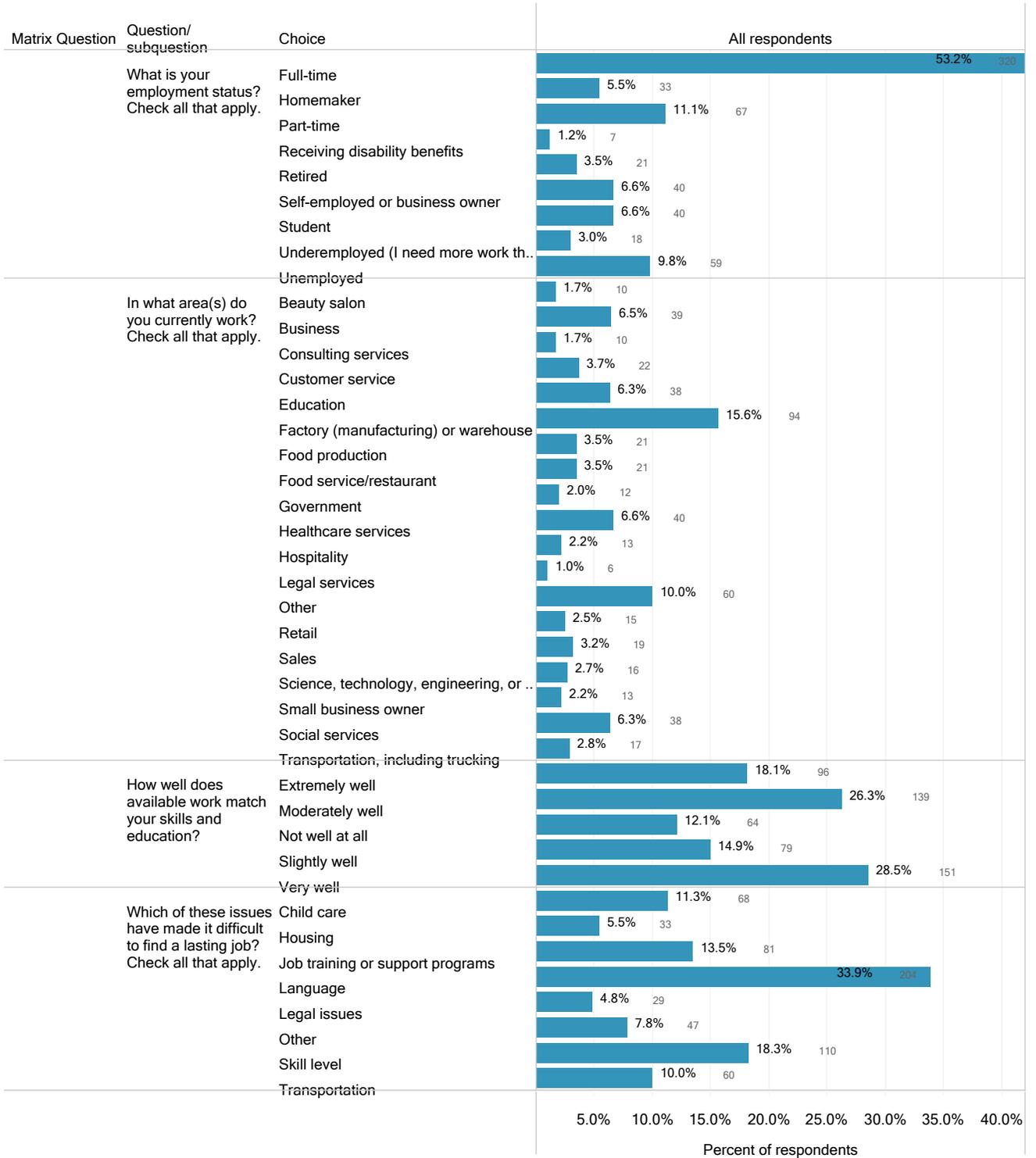
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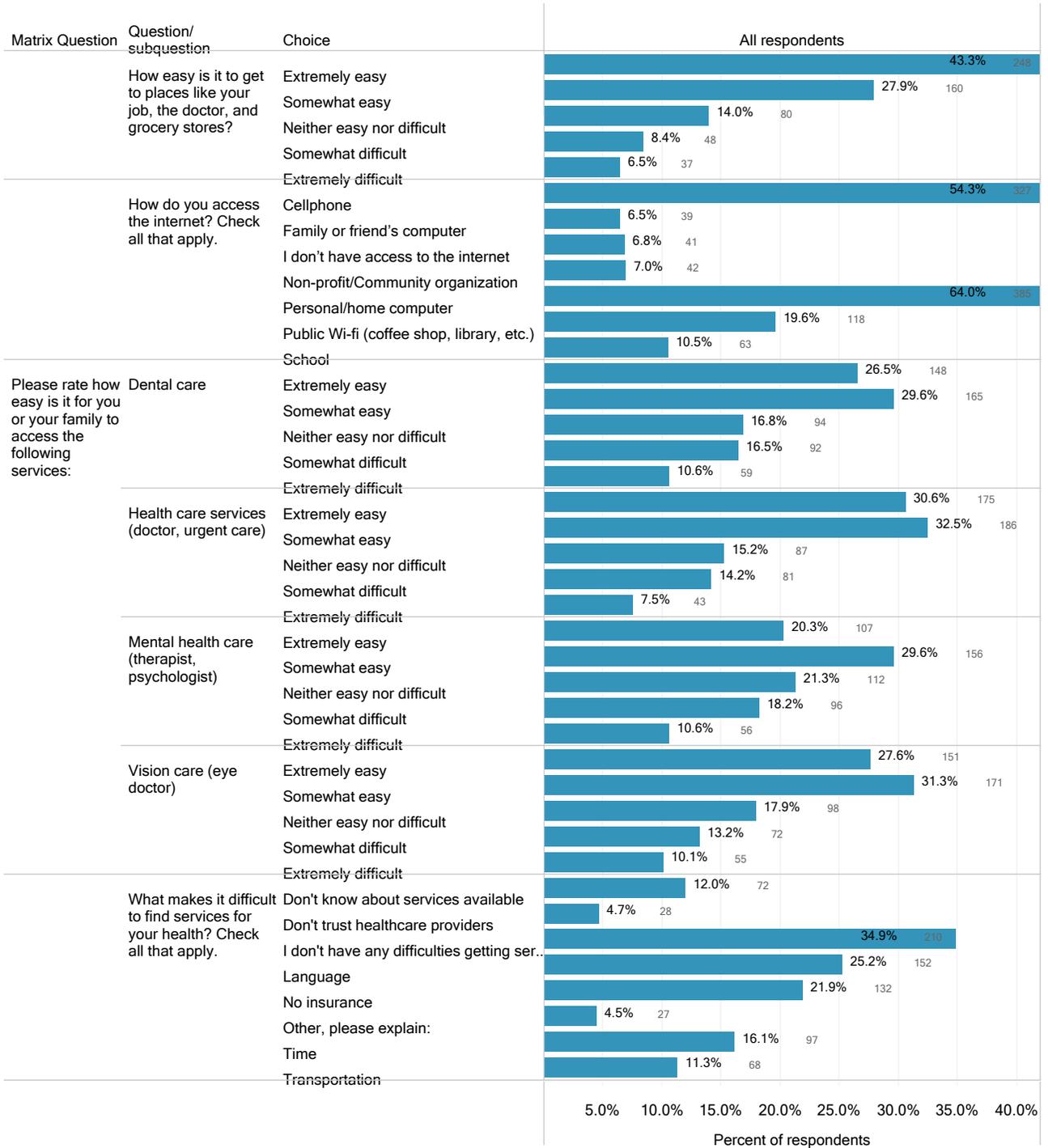
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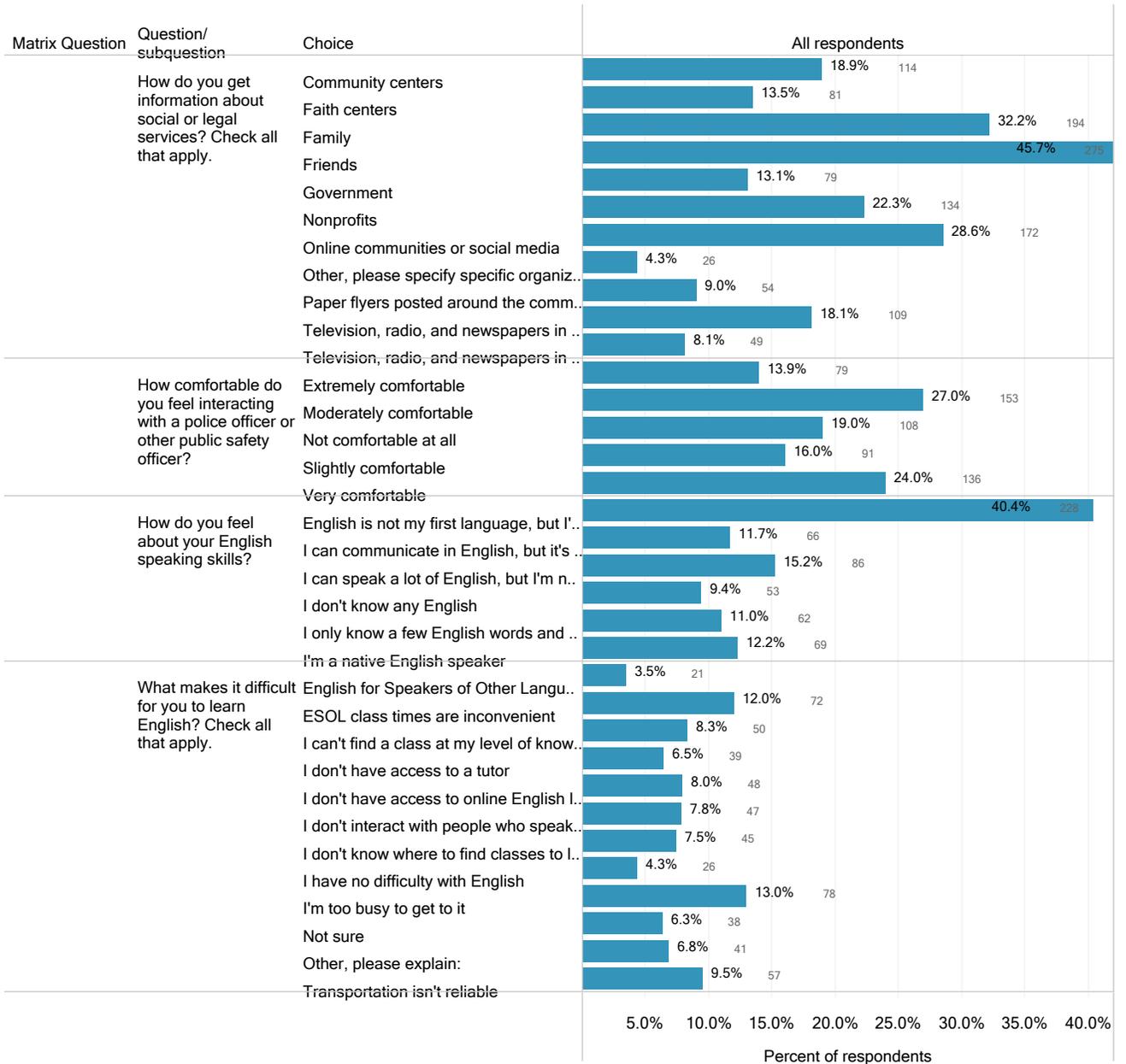
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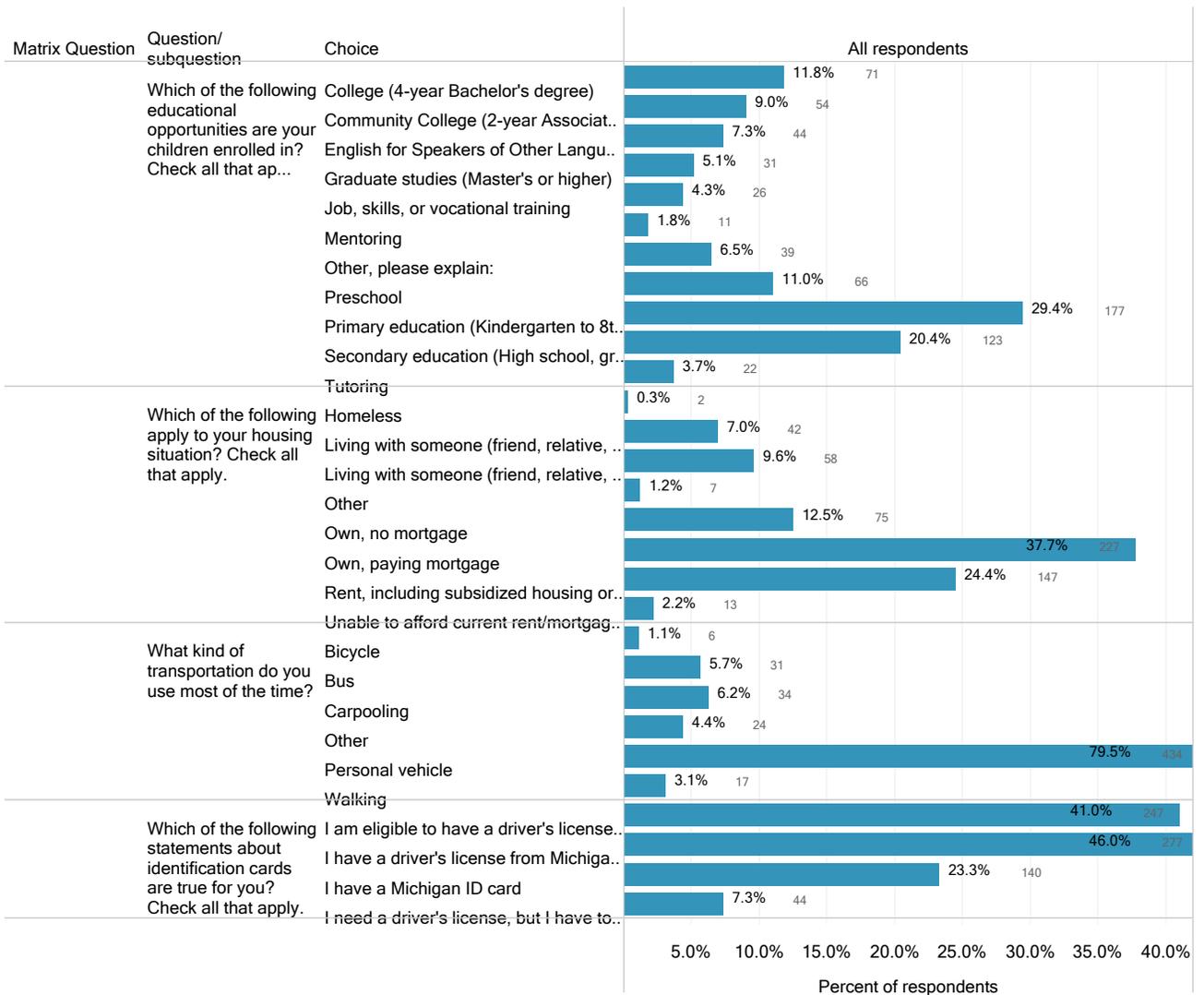
Topic: Obstacles and Opportunities



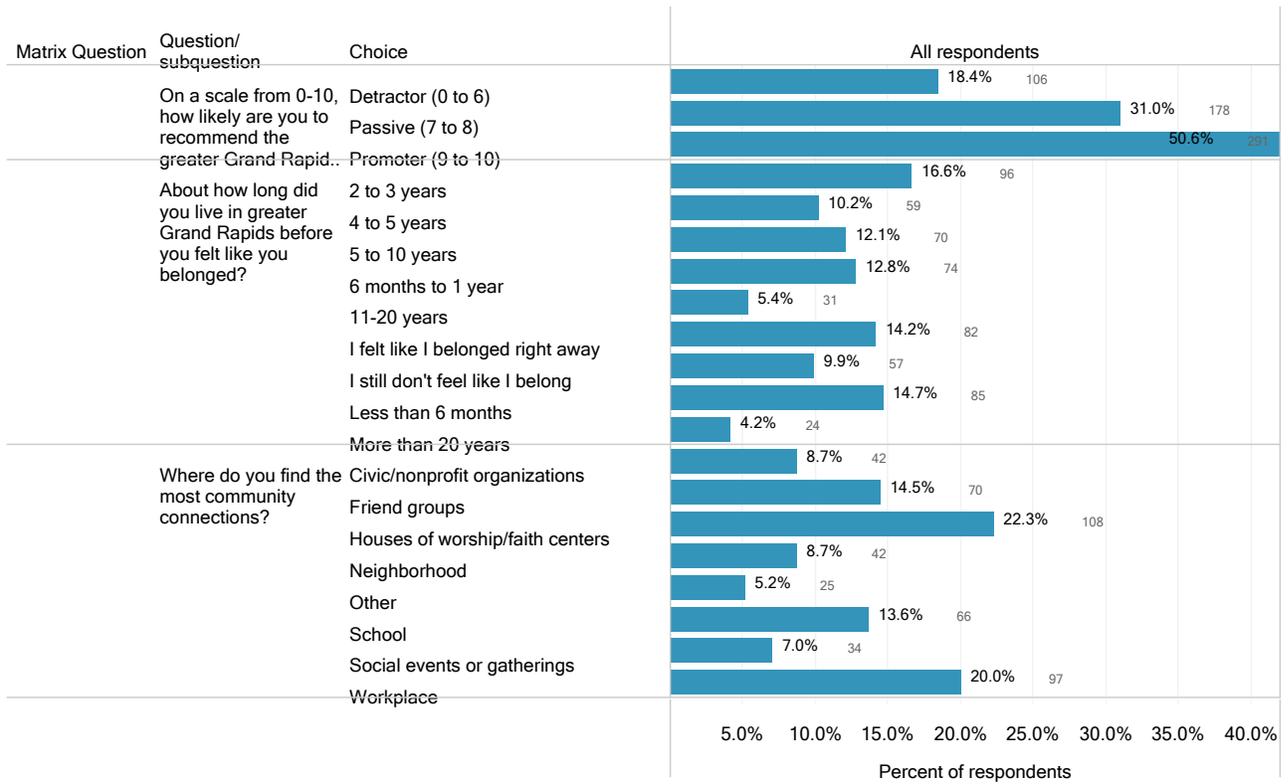
Topic: Obstacles and Opportunities 2



Topic: Obstacles and Opportunities 3



Topic: Overall Belonging



Topic: Priorities

