



Center for Community Studies Surveys North Country Residents Regarding Current Issues

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; Food Security and Access; Housing; Recreation; Services in One's Community; and Workforce and the Economy

North Country residents express significant concern with housing, childcare, workforce issues, and food security – both access and affordability, while voicing support for government and community involvement in the improvement of many local aspects of recreation and community services.

May 4, 2023

The Study:

The Center for Community Studies at Jefferson Community College completed their second annual North Country Current Issues survey in April 2023. In the study a total of 1,402 adult residents from the tri-county region were surveyed, including 646 residents of Jefferson County, 347 from Lewis County, and 409 from St. Lawrence County. For the past 24 years, the community-based research center located in Watertown has completed annual surveys that have longitudinally trended quality-of-life community indicators in all three of Jefferson, Lewis, and St. Lawrence Counties. The current study in 2023, however, has a primary focus that is *not* an exercise in trending community characteristics over time. Rather, this 2023 current-issues survey is an assessment of important and emerging issues in the North Country, right here and right now. To address this current-issues research objective, the professional staff at the Center for Community Studies enlisted leaders and representatives of all three counties to assist in the creation of the survey instrument by identifying a wide variety of current local issues. This survey development group included individuals from the College, local government, county leadership, education, healthcare, non-profit agency heads, and the local media. The brainstorming and reduction process of identification of important local issues for surveying resulted with a very wide variety of topics (survey questions) which should support the data needs of an associated wide variety of community leaders and agencies. The determination of a singular most important survey question or theme in this study would be an impossible task. The overall goal of this exercise is to scientifically sample and measure local public opinion to assist local leaders and elected officials in making best data-informed decisions.

The interviews for the study were largely comprised of a collection of approximately 30 statements regarding current issues, with each participant indicating their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement. Further there were approximately 10 binary (Yes/No) questions posed to participants. Finally, approximately ten demographic characteristics were recorded for each participant. Approximately 25 of the 40 non-demographic survey questions were included for all 1,402 participants, while the remaining survey items were county specific. Each of the three counties had blocks of questions that were exclusive to only their residents, in addition to the core of 25 region-wide questions. The group of approximately 40 non-demographic survey questions for this study can be categorized into the six overall themes or subsections shown to the right.

1. **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)**
2. **Food Security and Access**
3. **Housing**
4. **Recreation**
5. **Services in One's Community**
6. **Workforce and the Economy**

Topline Summary/Observations:

The many public opinions studied among North Country residents in this project provide a wide variety of findings that could be very useful for a wide array of local leaders. The results of this public opinion study are reported in detail in the following pages of this report, as well as in further granular cross-tabulation detail in the appendix. However, for those readers who only have a few moments to inspect the findings of this tri-county study, below are the topline themes that have emerged from the 2023 data.

Food Security – Inflation in food prices remains a challenge in the North Country, and food pantries, farmers markets, and home gardens are common activities that residents currently report to (or, plan to) utilize.

Housing – Dissatisfaction with both rental properties, and available house stock to purchase, are expressed very commonly among North Country residents, and strong sentiment has been expressed that homelessness needs continued attention by North Country communities and governments.

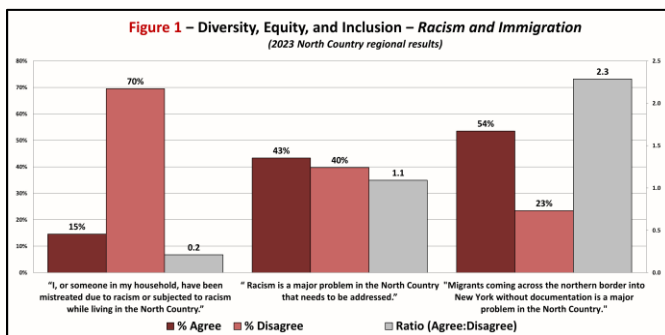
Recreation – Strong interest in supporting a wide variety of recreational aspects and activities is present in the North Country.

Senior Community Centers – Tremendous support exists among North Country residents for local government financial support for senior community centers in their counties.

Childcare – North Country residents unquestionably recognize that childcare services supported by employers are important factors in one's choice for employment and believe that public employers should voluntarily opt in to offering this support.

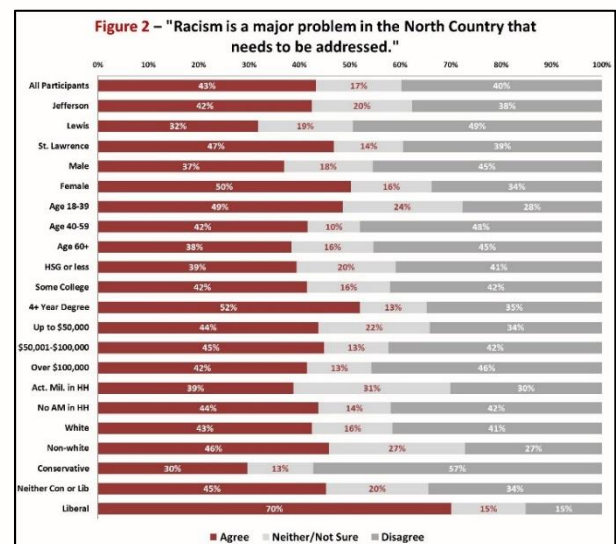
Detailed results:

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion – The DEI questions included in this 2023 version of the North Country related to two issues – racism and immigration.



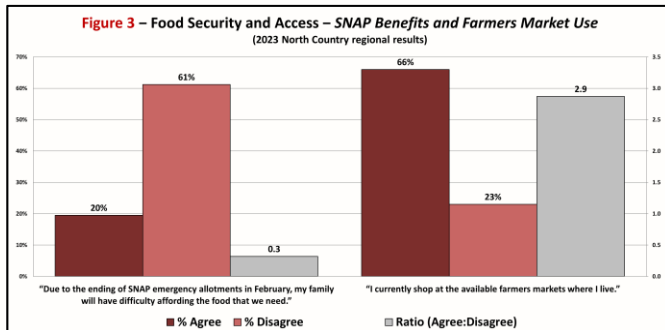
Each of the two racism-related questions included in 2023 were also measured in the first annual current issues study in April 2022; and results have remained quite consistent. It continues to be the case that approximately one-in-six residents (15%) indicate that they, or someone in their household, has been mistreated due to racism or subjected to racism while living in the North Country (the rate was 13% in 2022). This rate of experiencing racism increases to 36% among those who self-identify their race or ethnicity as non-white.

More than two in five residents in 2023 (43%) agree that racism is a major problem in the North Country that needs to be addressed (the rate was 46% in 2022). Interestingly, this rate of perceived severity of racism as a problem does not differ when those who self-identify as white are compared to those who self-identify as non-white (43% agree, and 46% agree, respectively, among these subgroups). By more than a two-to-one ratio, participants agree rather than disagree that migrants coming across the northern border into New York without documentation is a major problem in the North Country (53% agree, while only 23% disagree). Those who identify politically as conservative are unquestionably the study subgroup who are most likely to agree that this type of migration is a major problem locally, 68% of conservatives agree. A geographic difference also emerges regarding undocumented immigration, with residents

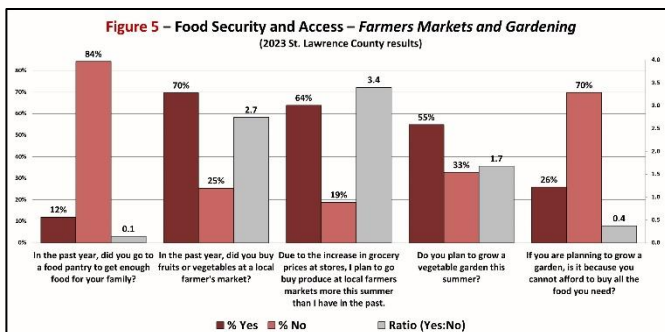
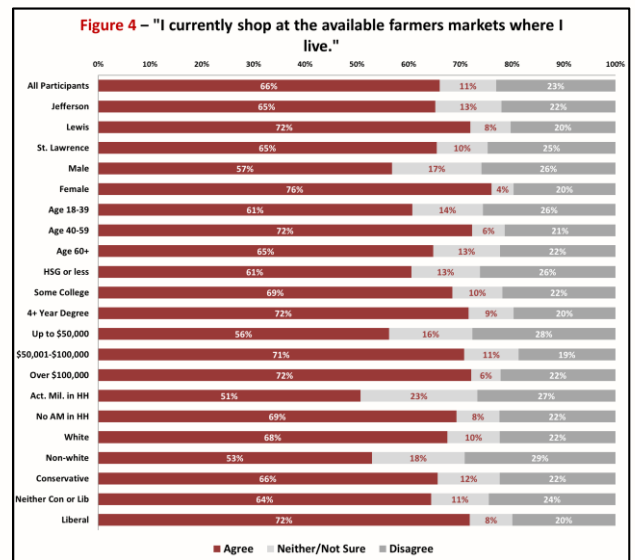


of St. Lawrence County more likely to agree that migrants coming across the northern border into New York without documentation is a major problem (61% agree) than are residents of either Jefferson or Lewis Counties.

Food Security and Access – Recent increases in food prices have motivated local leaders to have heightened interest in measuring North Country participants’ opinions and behaviors related to food security and access. The four primary aspects of food security and access studied in 2023 involve: difficulty in food access caused by increased food prices; home gardening to access food; utilization of food pantries; and utilization of farmers markets.

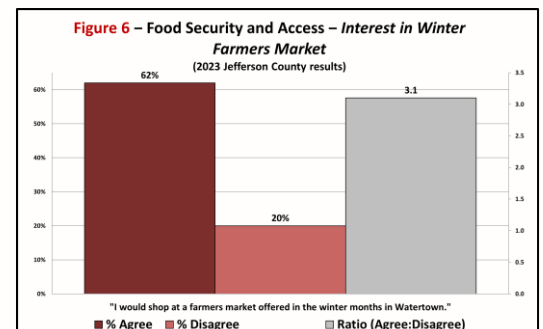


North Country residents commonly have relied on the SNAP emergency allotments with one-in-five participants (20%) agreeing that due to the ending of these allotments in February 2023, their family will have difficulty affording the food that they need. Two-thirds of North Country residents indicate that they currently shop at available farmers markets in their community, with significant correlations discovered including that females, Lewis County residents, and residents who have higher educational attainment and higher household incomes most likely to shop at farmers markets.

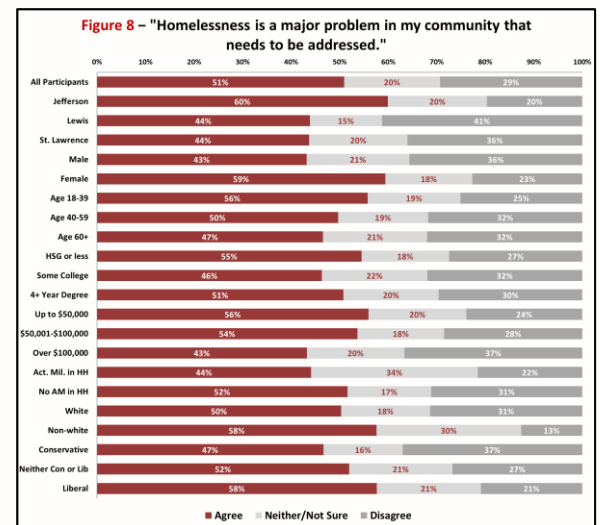
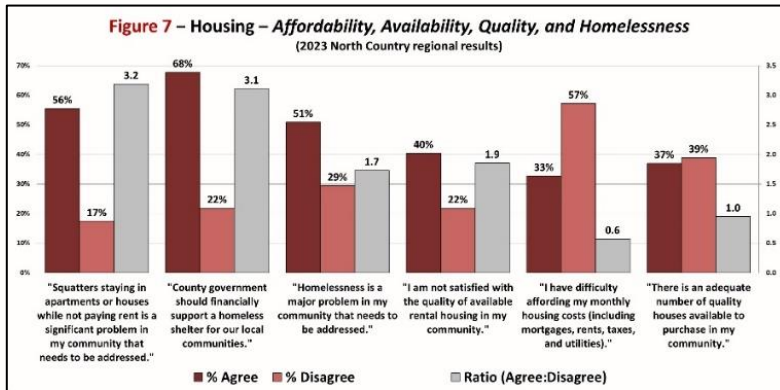


buy produce at local farmers markets more this summer than they have in the past.

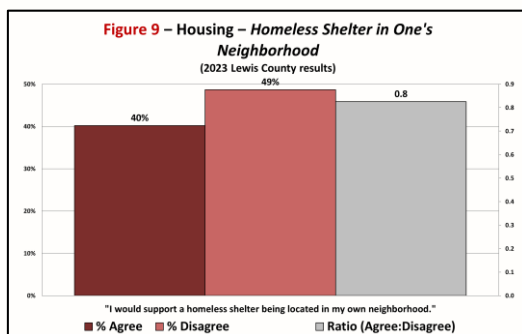
Jefferson County community leaders included one further food-security-and-access survey question for their residents; it is common that residents of the county would shop at a farmers market offered in the winter months in Watertown (62%).



Housing – Housing is a major issue for residents of the North Country in 2023. Participants express significant concern with availability, affordability, and quality of housing, and with local homelessness issues.



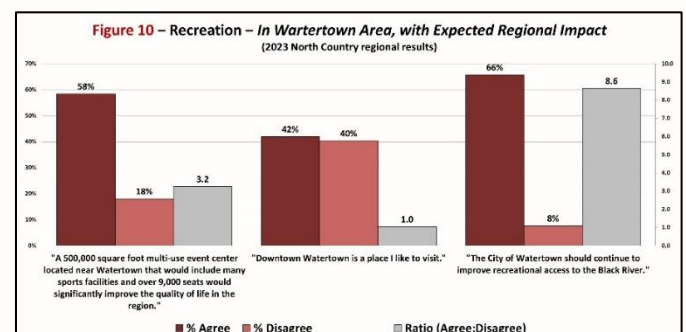
North Country residents report significant concern with many aspects of local housing. One-in-three residents (33%) report that they have difficulty affording monthly housing costs. Residents are twice as likely to be dissatisfied rather than satisfied with the quality of available *rental* housing in their community, and a majority (56%) express agreement that squatters staying in apartments or houses while not paying rent is a significant problem in their community that needs to be addressed. Regarding single-family homes, only 37% feel that there are adequate numbers of quality houses available to *purchase* in their community. North Country residents feel that homelessness is an issue that should be further addressed locally, with 51% of participants agreeing that "Homelessness is a major problem in my community that needs to be addressed", while only 29% disagree with this statement. Female participants, Jefferson County residents, and residents who have lower educational attainment and lower household incomes most likely agree with the severity of the local homelessness issue. North Country residents by more than a three-to-one ratio tend to support County government financially supporting a homeless shelter for their local communities (68% agree, while only 22% disagree).



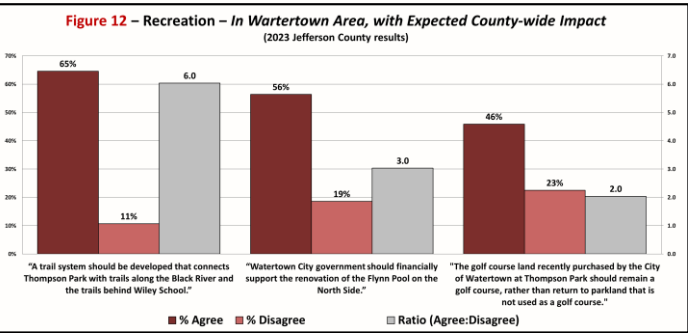
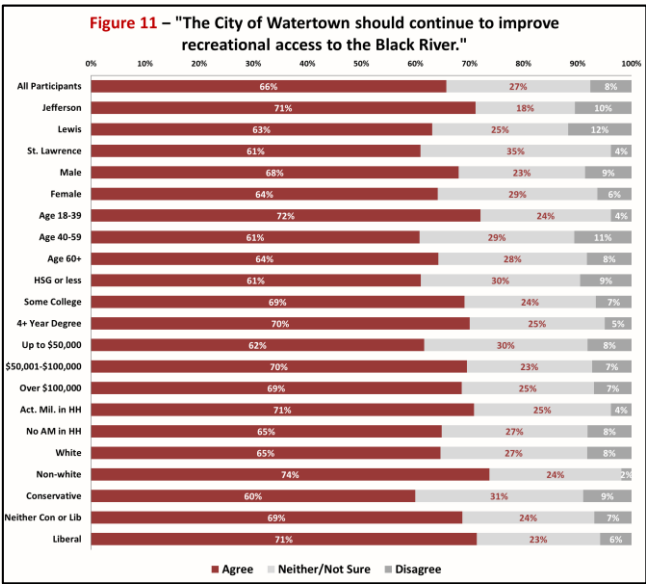
Lewis County community leaders included one further housing (homelessness) survey question for their residents – more disagreement than agreement was expressed in 2023 among Lewis County residents with the statement "I would support a homeless shelter being located in my own neighborhood" (40% agree, while 49% disagree). These rates of agreement and disagreement in Lewis County in 2023 have not changed significantly from the rates found in the county in 2022.

Recreation – Post COVID pandemic in the North Country, there has been tremendous interest by local community leaders in all three participating counties to assess and address issues related to recreation. Recreation topics investigated in this 2023 annual study include aspects of: tourism, parks, festivals, event center, trails (both motorized and non-motorized), public pool, municipal golf course, and river/whitewater development.

Three recreation items were studied for the entire population of the tri-county due to the expectation that these items might have a more regional level of familiarity and interest. The remaining recreation-related items were all posed only to specific county residents. Each of the three participating counties generated county-specific recreation-related survey items. Very strong support for the City of Watertown continuing to improve recreational access to the Black River has been found among residents of the tri-county region, 66%

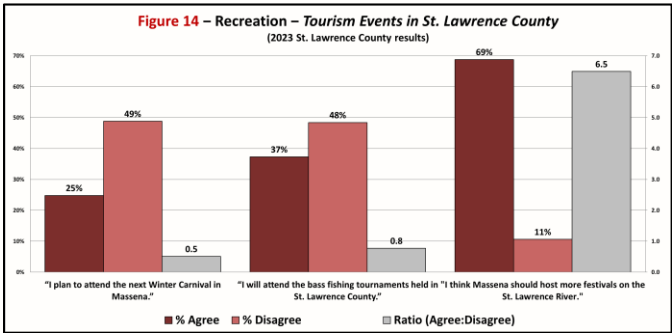
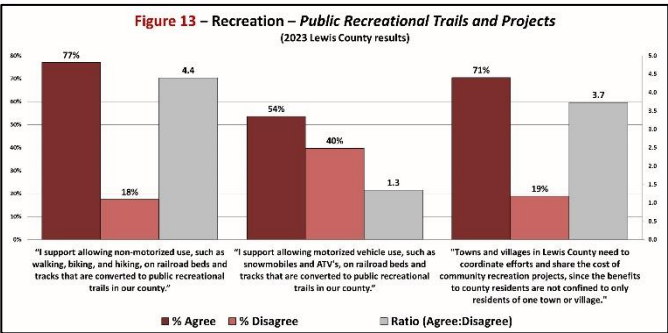


agree with the notion of this continued support, while only 8% disagree. Level of support for further development of Black River recreational opportunities is highest among residents of Jefferson County (71%), younger adults (72% among those age 18-39), and those who identify their race/ethnicity as non-white (74%). North Country residents also very commonly agree that “A 500,000 square foot multi-use event center located near Watertown that would include many sports facilities and over 9,000 seats would significantly improve the quality of life in the region” (58% agree, while only 18% disagree). More than two-in-five residents across the three-county region agree that “Downtown Watertown is a place I like to visit.”



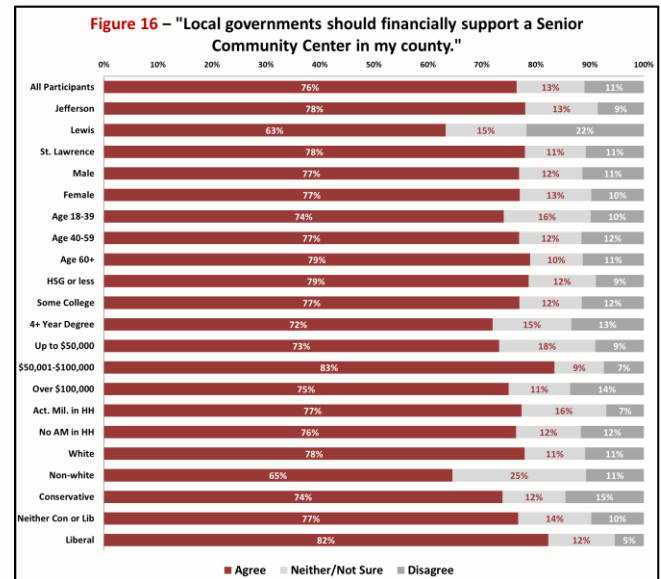
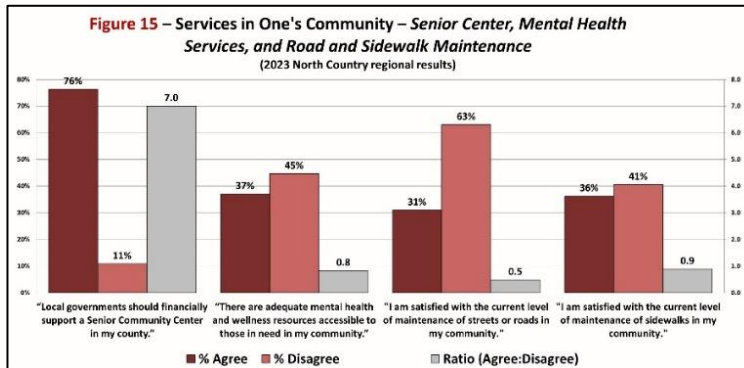
recently purchased by the City of Watertown at Thompson Park should remain a golf course, rather than return to parkland that is not used as a golf course” (46% agree, while only 23% disagree).

Lewis County community leaders included three further recreation-related survey questions for their residents – far more agreement than disagreement was expressed among Lewis County residents with each of the statements: “I support allowing non-motorized use, such as walking, biking, and hiking, on railroad beds and tracks that are converted to public recreational trails in our county” (a very large 77% agree, while only 18% disagree), “I support allowing motorized vehicle use, such as snowmobiles and ATV’s, on railroad beds and tracks that are converted to public recreational trails in our county” (54% agree, while only 40% disagree), and “Towns and villages in Lewis County need to coordinate efforts and share the cost of community recreation projects, since the benefits to county residents are not confined to only residents of one town or village” (71% agree, while only 19% disagree).

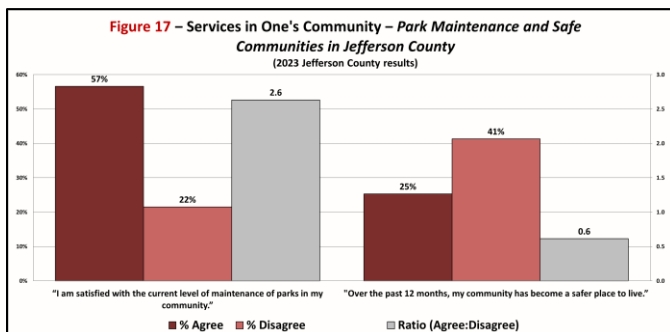


Finally, St. Lawrence County community leaders included three further recreation-related survey questions for their residents that all directly related to attendance and interest in local tourism – one-in-four county residents “plan to attend the next Winter Carnival in Massena” (25%), almost two-in-five (37%) “will attend the bass fishing tournaments held in St. Lawrence County”, and there is large support for expansion of recreational opportunities in that 69% of St. Lawrence County residents agree that “Massena should host more festivals on the St. Lawrence River,” while only 11% disagree.

Services in One's Community – Public opinion regarding services provided in North Country communities is of importance currently to leaders in the decision-making regarding these community services. The specific community services studied in 2023 span: senior services, property maintenance (roads, sidewalks, and parks), mental health services, and safety.



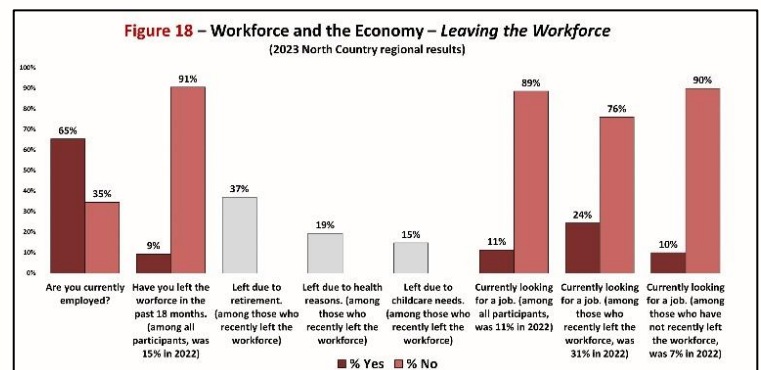
One very strong dominant opinion that has emerged in 2023 is the need for senior community centers. By almost a seven-to-one ratio (76% to 11%, respectively) North Country residents are more in agreement than disagreement that "Local governments should financially support a Senior Community Center in my county." There is less support for a senior community center that is county funded in Lewis County than is present in the other two studied counties, however, a large majority support is present even in Lewis County (63%). A minority of North Country residents (37%) agree that there are adequate mental health and wellness resources accessible to those in need in their community. Regarding community property maintenance service, North Country residents tend to be dissatisfied with local maintenance of roads and streets (only 31% satisfied) and sidewalks (only 36% satisfied).



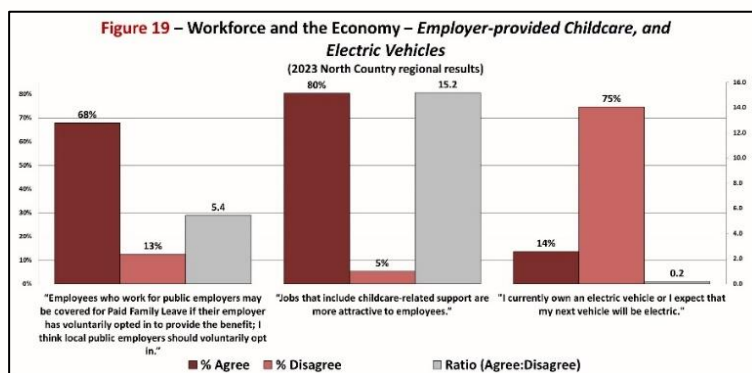
Jefferson County community leaders included two further community service survey questions for their residents – park maintenance and sense of safety. Jefferson County residents are far more satisfied with park maintenance than they are satisfied with street, road, and sidewalk maintenance (57% in the county agree that "I am satisfied with the current level of maintenance of parks in my community", while only 22% disagree). Finally, one-in-four Jefferson County adults agree that "Over the past 12 months, my community has become a safer place to live", while 41% disagree with this statement.

Workforce and the Economy – The rate of leaving the workforce has decreased significantly between 2022 and 2023, and currently North Country residents recognize that childcare services supported by employers is an important factor in one's choice for employment and believe that public employers should voluntarily opt in to offering this support.

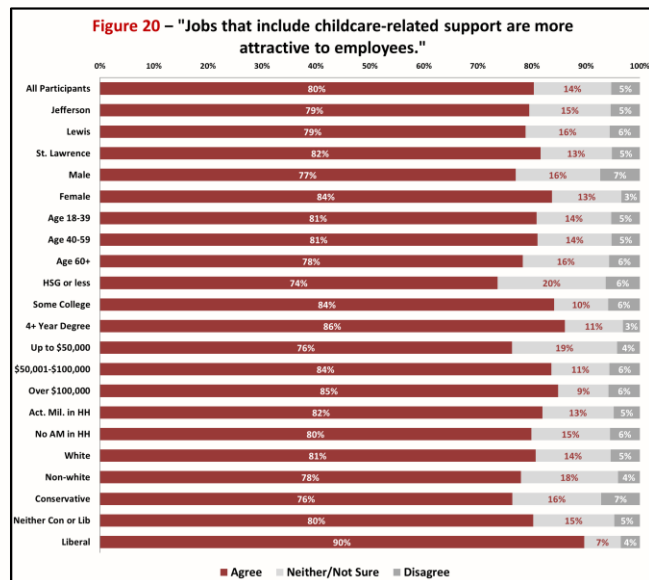
Two-thirds of North Country adult residents (65%) indicate that they are currently employed (includes both part and full time). One-in-eleven North Country adults in 2023 (9% among all participants) have left the workforce in the past 18 months, which is a significant decrease from 15% found in the region in 2022. More than one-third of those who have left the workforce did so due to retirement (37% in 2023, was 32% in 2022). Among all participants, including those who are employed currently and those who are not, one-in-nine (11%) is currently



looking for a new job, a rate that is the same as was found in 2022. Among those who *have* recently left the workforce 24% are currently looking for a new job (was 31% in 2022); while among those who have *not* recently left the workforce only 10% are currently looking for a new job (was 7% in 2022).



The link between jobs and childcare was studied in 2023 and overwhelmingly adults in the North Country express support for the importance of employer-provided childcare support – 80% of residents agree that jobs that include childcare-related support are more attractive to employees, while only 5% disagree. This tremendous level of support may be observed in Figure 20 to be rather ubiquitous, at least 74% agree among every demographic subgroup studied within these data. Further, considering public/government jobs – by more than a five-to-one ratio (68% to 13%) adults in the North Country tend to agree that public employers should voluntarily opt in to provide coverage for Paid Family Leave for their employees.



Detailed Cross-tabulations:

Complete analyses of all cross-tabulations for this study are included and will be posted along with this summary at the Center for Community Studies website (www.sunyjefferson.edu/community/community-studies/). These cross-tabulations allow readers to investigate county comparisons, and demographic subgroup comparisons, for every survey question used in this study. Additionally, these tables report both the 2022 and 2023 results for the seven individual survey questions that were used in both study years, allowing for trend analyses.

Methodology:

The Center for Community Studies at Jefferson Community College is one of approximately 100 colleges, universities, and polling businesses in North America that has been granted membership to the Transparency Initiative (TI) of the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). AAPOR is the leading public opinion professional association in the world. As a member of the TI, the Center for Community Studies pledges to utilize best practices in the industry in both data collection methodology and data analytics techniques. The methodology used in this study of current issues includes a mixed-mode sampling methodology using a combination of live interviewer telephone interviews of residents on cell phones and landlines, random email invitation of residents to complete the survey online via a nonprobability panel, and intercept surveying of the difficult-to-access subpopulation of military members and their dependents on Fort Drum. All interviews were completed between April 5 and April 14, 2023. To adjust for sampling nonresponse error, the data were weighted within county for gender, age, education, and race, with further weighting for military affiliation in Jefferson County. A further weight for county population size was applied to generate North Country estimates as a region. The data were calibrated for sampling modality, and finally weights were trimmed to minimize the design effect, generating a final design effect for the study of 2.0. After all data compilation, cleansing, transforming, weighting, calibrating, and trimming the overall approximate margin of error for this study when analyzing three-county region-wide results for 1,402 participants is $\pm 3.0\%$. When investigating on a county-specific basis the margin of error is greater due to smaller county-specific sample sizes. The approximate margins of error within each county are $\pm 4.4\%$ in Jefferson County, $\pm 6.0\%$ in Lewis County, and $\pm 5.5\%$ in St. Lawrence County. Investigation of demographic subgroups, such as only male participants, will also result with margins of error of greater than $\pm 3.0\%$. The margin error is a measurement of random error, error due to simply the random chance of sampling. When surveying humans there are other potential sources of error, sources of

error in addition to random error (which is the only error encompassed by the margin of error). Response error, nonresponse error, process error, bias in sample selection, bias in question-phrasing, lack of clarity in question-phrasing, social desirability bias, acquiescence bias, satisficing, and undercoverage are common sources of other-than-random error. Methods that should be, and have been in this study, employed to minimize these other sources of error are: maximum effort to select the sample randomly, piloting and testing of utilized survey questions, extensive training of all data collectors (interviewers), thorough cleansing of data, calibration of data, and application of post-stratification algorithms to the resulting sampled data. Hence, when using this study data to make estimates to the entire North Country adult populations, as is the case in standard survey research practices, the margin of error will be the only error measurement cited and interpreted. Finally, in the reporting of study findings, percentage points are rounded off to the nearest whole number. As a result, percentages in a table column may total slightly higher or lower than 100%. In questions that permit multiple responses, columns may total substantially more than 100%, depending on the number of different responses offered by each respondent.

Acknowledgements:

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