

# VOICES OF THE COMMUNITY: DC, MARYLAND, VIRGINIA

VOICES  
DMV



GREATER  
WASHINGTON  
COMMUNITY  
FOUNDATION



URBAN  
INSTITUTE

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*URBAN INSTITUTE*



### About the Greater Washington Community Foundation

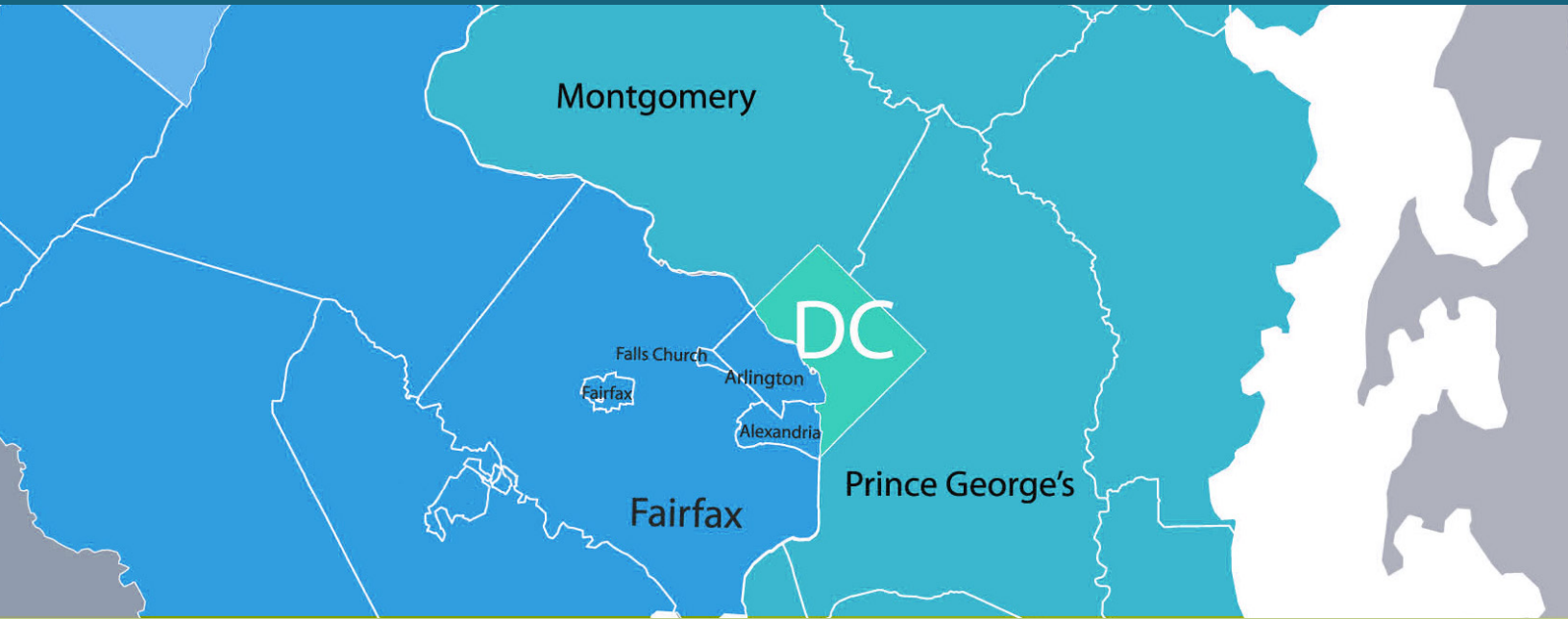
The Community Foundation works to ensure equity, access, and opportunity for all residents of the Greater Washington region. For more than 40 years, The Community Foundation has provided leadership on critical issues in our community, guided strategic philanthropy that responds to community needs, and made grants to effective nonprofits. As the region's largest local grantmaker, with annual grants of \$70 million, we are a community of givers dedicated to strengthening the Greater Washington region and beyond.



### About the Urban Institute

The nonprofit Urban Institute is dedicated to elevating the debate on social and economic policy. For nearly five decades, Urban scholars have conducted research and offered evidence-based solutions that improve lives and strengthen communities across a rapidly urbanizing world. Their objective research helps expand opportunities for all, reduce hardship among the most vulnerable, and strengthen the effectiveness of the public sector.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AOTA CREATIVE GROUP FROM COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS IN DC, MONTGOMERY COUNTY, NORTHERN VIRGINIA, AND PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY.



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## FOREWORD

The Greater Washington Community Foundation, in partnership with the Urban Institute, is pleased to share key findings from our newest initiative, **Voices of the Community: DC, Maryland, Virginia** (VoicesDMV). Through this initiative, we engaged a broad cross-section of people in our region, reflecting diverse demographic characteristics, to capture a snapshot of attitudes and perceptions of daily life here.

As a community foundation, having a finger on the pulse of the community is central to who we are and our ability to deliver on our mission. To effectively galvanize philanthropy and invest where the needs are greatest, we must continually refresh our understanding of and direct connections with the communities we serve. Of course, we are engaged with our donors and the nonprofit sector through our day-to-day activities, and we deeply value these relationships, but it is important that we find new and deeper ways to connect directly with our communities so that we better understand our neighbors' experiences in their neighborhoods, in their jobs and schools, with local government, and with each other—and the role our philanthropy might play in enhancing and improving those experiences.

As a trusted resource for policymakers and community leaders, the Urban Institute believes that decisions shaped by facts, rather than ideology, can improve public policy and practice, strengthen communities, and transform people's lives for the better. We work closely with community members, local government, nonprofits, philanthropy, and the private sector to evaluate what works, advise our partners, and generate solutions. Our partnership with The Community Foundation has been an extraordinary opportunity to help elevate the voices of the people who live in the region we call home.

VoicesDMV tells the story of a region in which, while separated by jurisdictional boundaries, all of us share similar hopes and dreams. We want a better overall quality of life for ourselves and our children and the opportunity to live in a safe environment, earn a living wage, and build assets for a secure future. We yearn for a region that is free of discrimination and preordained disadvantage based on race, income, gender, or

zip code. We want to be deliberate and intentional about creating diverse and inclusive spaces that foster human connection, facilitate participation by all, and support the most vulnerable.

We launched this initiative recognizing that although our region is data rich, few efforts systematically capture the voices, experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of people who live here, especially across jurisdictions. We hope VoicesDMV fills that gap. This brief and the accompanying materials are the result of framing conversations with a broad range of people and organizations, including funders; regional associations; local government leaders; representatives from business, nonprofit, and community groups; and several thousand of our neighbors. This effort is also the result of hard work by staff at the Greater Washington Community Foundation and the Urban Institute, who are committed to ensuring a timely, relevant, and impactful contribution to the public good.

We are grateful to all who inspired and helped frame this important initiative. And, we thank our community for offering us your voice. We look forward to engaging with you on what we've learned and our next steps.

*Sincerely,*



BRUCE MCNAMER,  
President and CEO  
Greater Washington  
Community Foundation



TONIA WELLONS,  
VP Community Investment  
Greater Washington  
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SARAH ROSEN WARTELL,  
President  
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## BACKGROUND

Perception and reality are powerful forces that often shape each other in dynamic ways. Although data from such sources as the US Census Bureau or the Bureau of Labor Statistics provide valuable information on demographics and economic conditions, they do not capture the richer aspects of how people see their lives.

Voices of the Community: DC, Maryland, Virginia (VoicesDMV), is a community engagement initiative from the Greater Washington Community Foundation, in partnership with the Urban Institute, designed to lift up residents' stories and perceptions of the quality of life in the Greater Washington region. Over eight months, the Greater Washington Community Foundation surveyed more than 3,000 respondents, held seven focus groups with special populations throughout the region, and engaged residents in four community conversations in Prince George's County, Northern Virginia, Montgomery County, and Washington, DC. The result is a collection of rich, local data that provide a road map to drive civic engagement, community-driven development, policy considerations, and more effective grantmaking in our region.

The Community Foundation offers these data to the DMV community as a public good—this year and in future years—to create a collective vision for change and to galvanize philanthropy, government, business, and other sectors to make more strategic investments of time, funding, and talent to improve the lives of all people throughout the DMV.

### Methodology

The Washington, DC, metropolitan area spans parts of Maryland, Virginia, the District of Columbia, and West Virginia, but this initiative focuses on these jurisdictions: the District of Columbia (DC); Montgomery County and Prince George's County, Maryland; Fairfax County, Virginia; and the Northern Virginia areas of Arlington County and the cities of Alexandria, Fairfax, and Falls Church. References to “jurisdictions” are to one of these five areas. This smaller region comprises 4.1 million people, about 67 percent of the population in the larger metropolitan area. All elements of VoicesDMV used this same geographic framing, which we refer to as “the DMV.”

## VoicesDMV collected data in the following ways:

**Survey.** Drawing upon existing survey panels, the Urban Institute and its survey partner, GfK Group, conducted an online survey asking more than 80 questions covering community attachment; civic engagement; community conditions and change; perceptions of government; well-being, inclusion, and discrimination; and economic mobility. More than 3,000 people responded to the survey in July and August 2017. The survey sample was designed to give reliable estimates for the DMV’s population and separate estimates for the five DMV jurisdictions and particular subpopulations. We followed the Census Bureau practice of creating mutually exclusive racial (white, black, Asian or Pacific Islander, and all other races) and ethnic (Hispanic and non-Hispanic) groups, that is, non-Hispanic white (referred to in this brief as “white”), non-Hispanic black (black), Hispanic, non-Hispanic Asian or Pacific Islander (Asian or Pacific Islander), and non-Hispanic people of all other races (other races). Other breaks included education level (people with four-year college degrees or higher and those with lower levels of education), income, gender, age, and households with and without children. A detailed survey methodology report is available at: <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/methodology-report-voicesdmv-survey>.

To facilitate further exploration of the survey data, detailed tables that summarize every survey question for the DMV, jurisdictions, and the breakout groups listed above are available online. The survey data will also be accessible through an interactive page on the Greater Washington Community Foundation’s website.

**Focus groups.** Seven focus groups conducted throughout the region offered a closer look at the perspectives of specific subpopulations. The focus groups were designed to gather data from people who might be underrepresented in the survey or were of special interest, including self-selected middle-class residents; two groups of young adults, including “disconnected youth” (youth who are not currently connected to either school or work); Muslim immigrants; Latino immigrants (in Spanish); Asian and Pacific Islanders; and the LGBTQ community. Community organization partners recruited participants and hosted the focus groups. The Urban Institute designed and conducted the focus group conversations, which were structured around questions related to neighborhood involvement, economic mobility, inclusion, and civic participation. In all, 110 people participated in the focus groups.

**Community conversations.** The Community Foundation convened four community conversations, hosted in Prince George’s County, Montgomery County, Northern Virginia, and DC during the summer of 2017, to elicit perspectives from a broader range of participants than the focus groups. The sessions included a mix of polling questions and small-group conversations, covering health, education, housing, transportation, crime, and community well-being. About 250 people participated in the community conversations.



## Overview

This brief is organized around four major themes that emerged from the VoicesDMV data. These themes are summarized below, along with high-level findings from the survey, focus groups, and community conversations. The rest of this brief explores the four themes in detail, presenting VoicesDMV data relevant to each theme. Where results appear statistically reliable, we highlight important differences between jurisdictions or subpopulations.

- **Well-being and satisfaction with the DMV.** People are generally happy with their quality of life, the diversity of our region, and the amenities available to residents, but many are concerned about traffic and congestion, crime and safety, and the high cost of living. And although change has become a constant, the flurry of new development can leave many residents and their families wondering whether those changes will benefit them or people like them.
- **Economic security and inclusion.** Despite an abundance of wealth in the Washington region, shared prosperity remains an aspiration. Faced with the threat of displacement, many households are making the difficult decision to move away from their close-knit communities to find security elsewhere. Our region has work to do to remove structural barriers that have created racial inequities and to ensure everyone benefits from our economic growth.
- **Social inclusion.** The Washington region is one of the most diverse places in the country, and many people feel they fit in here. Although our region is generally viewed as more accepting of people of different backgrounds, discrimination in the community and workplace remains a concern for many residents, particularly people of color.





- **Making change happen.** People emphasized basic services when ranking priorities for their local governments, but a majority also felt public officials should address environmental and social issues. Although many people trusted their local governments to handle local problems, few thought they had much influence over local government decisionmaking. People also looked beyond typical helping sectors, such as government, nonprofits, and faith communities, and saw businesses and universities playing a vital role in addressing our region's economic and social challenges.

### What's Next

The Community Foundation will use the VoicesDMV data to inform decisionmaking and strategic priority setting to establish a road map for future investments. The data collected for VoicesDMV represent a baseline against which we can measure regional progress. In the years ahead, The Community Foundation will collect updated survey data and conduct focus groups and community conversations with different people who represent the region's diversity to build upon the information provided here. The challenges facing our region may be great, but so are the strengths that a united region can bring to bear to move us forward together. Future iterations of VoicesDMV will help our region gauge whether it is making progress toward providing equity, access, and opportunity for all.





## WELL-BEING AND SATISFACTION WITH DMV

On economic measures, our region is successful. But economic success alone does not capture the quality of people's lives or express their feelings of life satisfaction. VoicesDMV revealed this sense of personal well-being, finding that, overall, people in the DMV had high satisfaction and happiness, though people with lower incomes and some communities of color have lower life satisfaction. Yet while many people liked

living in our region and appreciated the amenities their communities provided, there were things people disliked and struggled with, such as traffic, crime, and the high cost of living.

“You can find a bit of the world here. It's why my wife and I chose to live here. It's a great place to be.”

—Middle-class  
focus group participant

People are conscious of the changes going on in our region and the places where they live but did not always think those changes were good for them or people like them. Well-being and satisfaction with the area are high now, but continued increases in costs, traffic, and congestion could push people and employers out of the region.

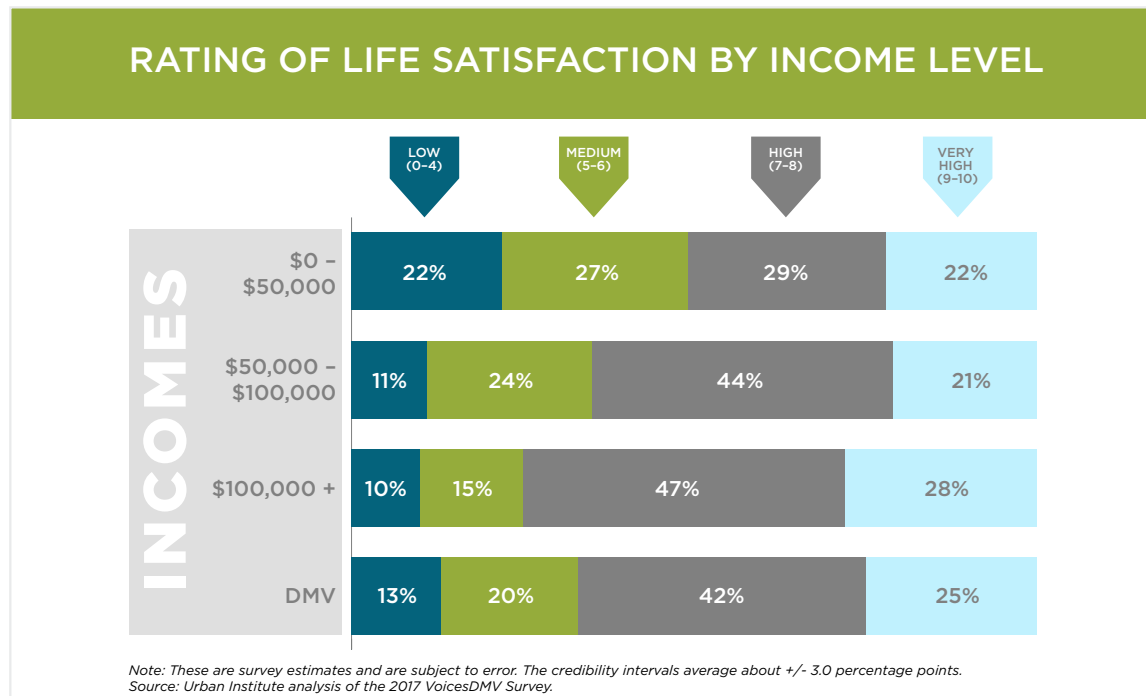
### Personal Well-Being and Satisfaction

Countries all over the world use the concept of well-being to understand the quality of life people experience.<sup>1</sup> In the VoicesDMV survey, we included three complementary measures to assess people's well-being: life satisfaction, happiness, and current and future life outlook.

Life satisfaction can be a summary measure of well-being across different domains. People's incomes, health, employment status, and quality of their social interactions and relationships influence their perception of satisfaction (Boarini et al. 2012). In the DMV, two in three people expressed strong overall satisfaction with their lives, rating them 7 or higher on a scale of 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied). Seventy percent of people in the DMV also had high levels of “happiness.”

Although life satisfaction was similar regardless of where people lived in the DMV, people with higher incomes tended to have greater satisfaction and happiness (figure 1). Hispanics

FIGURE 1.



and people of other races were more likely to report low life satisfaction (21 percent each) than whites and Asian or Pacific Islanders (8 to 11 percent), but Hispanics and people of other races were not different from other groups on ratings of happiness.

When people rated their current life circumstances and future outlook, the findings were positive for most in the DMV, with 56 percent categorized as “thriving.” Nevertheless, 42 percent of people were “struggling,” and 2.5 percent were “suffering.”<sup>2</sup> These current and future life ratings for the DMV were similar to those found in national surveys using the same measures. Consistent with the happiness and life satisfaction data noted above, people with less income were less likely to be thriving and more likely to be struggling or suffering, than those with higher incomes. As a group, Hispanics were also more likely to be categorized as struggling (54 percent) than whites (36 percent) or blacks (44 percent).

Another factor that influences well-being is how much people feel like they have the support of friends and family and high-quality social connections. In addition to having basic necessities such as food and shelter, people need to feel that they have meaningful connections to others to enjoy a good quality of life (Myers 1999). About 9 in 10 people in the DMV had relatives or friends they could count on for help when they needed them. And feelings of having support rise as age, incomes, and education levels increase. Homeowners were also more likely (91 percent) than renters (81 percent) to have friends or family they could count on.



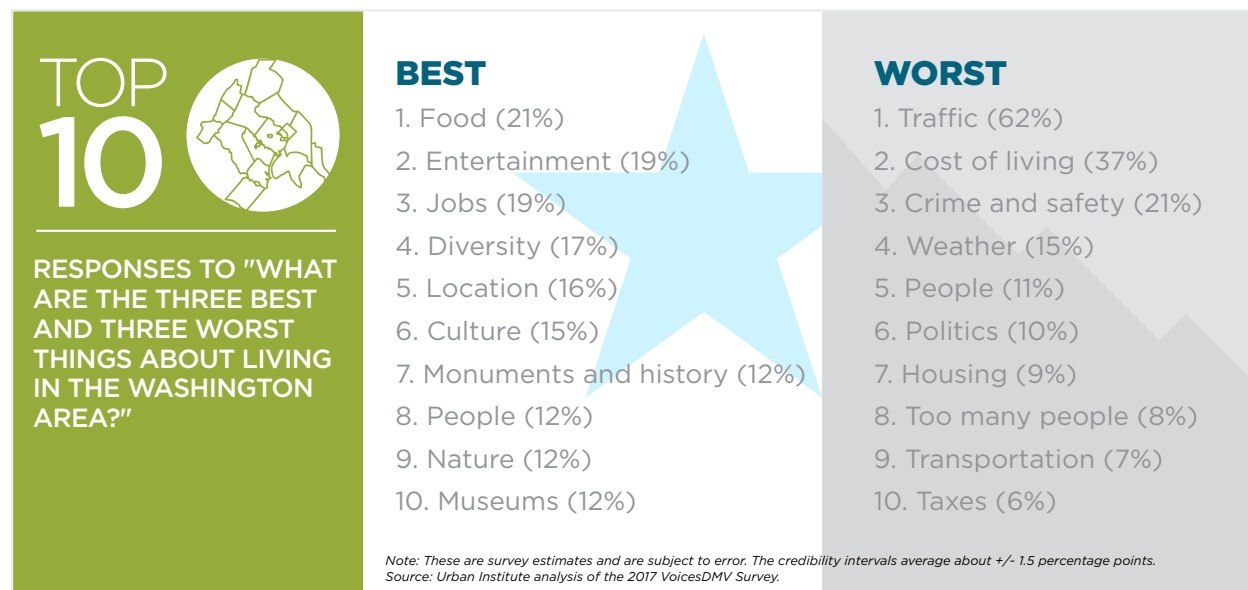
## Satisfaction with Living in the DMV

Along with personal satisfaction with their lives, most people (81 percent) rated the Washington region as a “good” or “excellent” place to live and, if given a choice of where to live, would choose to remain in the area (76 percent). Residents of the suburban jurisdictions were more likely to say they would leave the DMV (23 to 30 percent), compared with people in DC (14 percent), if given the opportunity to live anywhere they wanted.

When asked to identify the three best things about living in our region, people consistently highlighted several aspects of life here that gave them the most satisfaction (figure 2). Food was the most frequent positive response, a reflection of our region’s evolving food culture and diversity of cuisines.<sup>3</sup> Across racial and ethnic groups, there was agreement on food being one of the DMV’s best aspects. People living in DC were more likely to mention food as something they liked about the region (29 percent), however, than those in Montgomery and Fairfax Counties (17 percent each).

The availability of jobs and the location of the region—that is, its geographic position and accessibility—were also highly valued and, although mentioned less often than food, were more likely to be the first response people listed. Jobs were more likely to be among the three best things in suburban jurisdictions (19 to 23 percent) than in DC (10 percent). People in households with incomes below \$50,000 were less likely to list jobs in the top three (13 percent) compared with people with more income (18 to 21 percent).

**FIGURE 2.**



Entertainment and cultural amenities also ranked highly for residents, as did the region's diversity. The positive feelings focus group members expressed about the DMV also reflected the value they placed on our region's diversity. Despite personal experiences with discrimination, Muslim focus group participants, for instance, thought that the relative sophistication and inclusivity of residents here made our region one of the best places in the country for Muslims to live. A participant in the middle-class focus group also shared, "You can find a bit of the world here. It's why my wife and I chose to live here, it's a great place to be."

On the other side of the coin, people had strong agreement on the worst aspect of living in the DMV: traffic. They overwhelmingly mentioned traffic (62 percent) as something they least liked, with 44 percent listing it as their first response. This perception is confirmed by recent traffic studies that rated the DC area as the sixth-most-congested area and home to the worst traffic hot spot in the US.<sup>4</sup> Traffic was by far the top complaint in the suburban jurisdictions, but in DC, people ranked traffic, crime and safety, and the cost of living more evenly as the worst things.

Across jurisdictions, people were consistent about rating the cost of housing as a challenging aspect of life in the DMV. Regardless of income, everyone rated the cost of living and cost of renting or owning a home among the worst aspects of our region. Members of the disconnected youth focus group in Maryland discussed several challenges connected to cost of living and access to quality jobs and affordable housing. As one respondent described the situation, "In this area you have to commute, so if you don't have a car, you're done. Here, close by, there isn't really much. Even to be a server you need to be in DC to make good tips." Another young woman discussed her challenges with the high cost of housing, stating, "If you want to live in a nice neighborhood, they want an arm and a leg. My mom and brothers live in an area that is rough, and I would live there, too, if I didn't have a son. I moved to Montgomery County to be safer. But, where my mom lives, \$1,100 gets you a two-bedroom, and, in Montgomery County, that could maybe get you a studio."

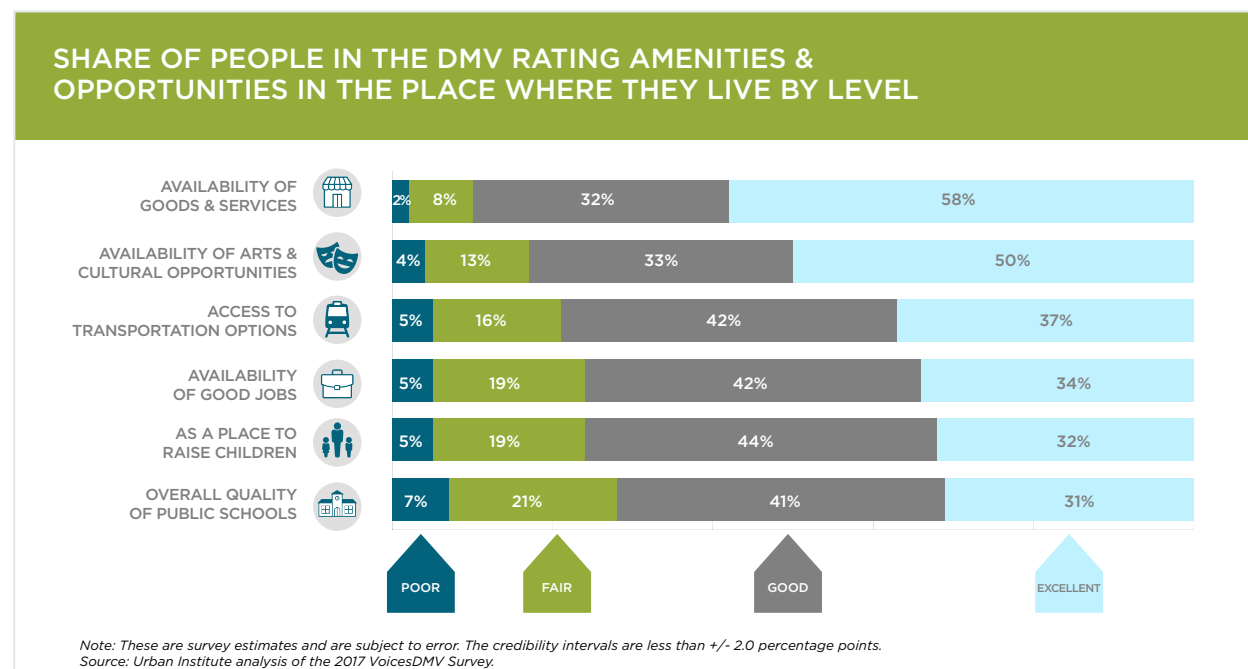
Safety was a greater concern for residents in DC and Prince George's County (33 and 40 percent) than the other jurisdictions (9 to 14 percent). Interestingly, people in suburban jurisdictions were more likely to list "too many people," revealing concerns about congestion, overpopulation, and overdevelopment (8 to 11 percent) than DC residents (4 percent).

## Satisfaction with the Places People Live

Despite the things they disliked, people in the DMV were generally satisfied with the specific places where they lived. Nearly three in four people were “likely” or “extremely likely” to recommend their jurisdiction to a friend or coworker as a place to live. If given a choice to live anywhere they wanted, 64 percent of people would choose to stay in their jurisdiction, and 46 percent would stay in their neighborhood. Satisfaction with the location of residence varied by jurisdiction. Fewer people in Prince George’s County were extremely likely to recommend their jurisdiction as a place to live (22 percent), compared with the DMV overall (33 percent). Residents of DC were most likely to want to remain in their current neighborhood (59 percent), if given the choice.

As reflected in their responses about the best aspects of life in the DMV, people also had favorable views of services and amenities in the places where they lived. Over 80 percent of people rated the quality of goods and services (e.g., grocery stores, restaurants, and doctors) and arts and cultural opportunities as “good” or “excellent” (figure 3). As one Asian/Pacific Islander focus group participant stated, “I think Northern Virginia is great. It is ethnically diverse. [You are] exposed to [people with] different backgrounds, cultures, food. A lot of resources in the DC area. Museums and government, they are readily available. It is a big city, but not too big. Great parks. Nice suburbs. People are accepting, and the school system is great.”

**FIGURE 3.**





Compared with other amenities, people gave less positive ratings of where they lived as being good places to raise children or of the overall quality of schools, but still, over 70 percent thought these were good or excellent. People in Montgomery County, Fairfax County, or Northern Virginia were more likely to rate their local schools as excellent, however, than people in DC or Prince George's County. People in Prince George's County also had lower ratings of the availability of good jobs (63 percent excellent or good) relative to people in the region overall (76 percent), but more than 6 in 10 residents would recommend Prince George's County as a place to live. One focus group participant shared feelings of pride in the DMV and county: "The great thing about living in the DMV is that it's not just ethnically diverse, but there is opportunity here. I live in Prince George's, and I am proud to be here."

Although people like the places where they live now, they see these places changing, a fact reflected in the latest demographic data. The Washington, DC, metropolitan area's population grew 16 percent from 2000 to 2010, and jurisdictions in the DMV are forecasted to grow an average of 28 percent between 2015 and 2045.<sup>5</sup> More than a third of people in the DMV said the places where they lived were changing "a lot." This perception of change held across our region, but people living in DC were more likely to say where they lived was changing a lot, with more than half the city's residents expressing that view. Furthermore, no matter how much money they had or what racial or ethnic group they belonged to, people were uncertain about what these changes will mean. While 41 percent of people in the region thought changes in the places where they lived generally benefited everyone, 29 percent believed the changes benefited people different than themselves. Others were more pessimistic, with 8 percent saying the changes benefited no one.





## ECONOMIC SECURITY AND INCLUSION

The DMV's prosperity is unmistakable. In economic terms, our region has outpaced national averages in growth and job creation.<sup>6</sup> The Brookings Institution recently identified the Washington metropolitan area as one of only four “booming” large regions that had at least 5 percent real growth in median household income between 1999 and 2016. This is even more notable given that the US median household income fell 5 percent over the same period.<sup>7</sup> Per the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Washington metropolitan area's September 2017 unemployment rate was 3.6 percent, below the national rate of 4.2 percent. And the DMV is home to one of the country's most-educated populations. According to the latest American Community Survey, 53 percent of adults in our region are college graduates, compared with 30 percent nationally.

“The rich are going to get richer...the poor poorer, and some of us in the middle can go either way.”

—Youth focus group member

In spite of an abundance of wealth within the Washington region, shared prosperity remains an aspiration. Our region has work to do to remove structural barriers that have created racial inequities and to ensure everyone benefits from our economic growth. Although two-thirds of people in our region report they are thriving financially, rising housing costs and lack of access to jobs that pay living wages prevent many hardworking people from participating in the region's economic boom. Residents struggle to cover basic necessities such as placing food on the table and securing affordable housing in neighborhoods with quality schools, transportation, and employment opportunities. The VoicesDMV survey also confirmed what many have long known: the high cost of living is forcing people to move, even outside of the region entirely.

**STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO RACIAL EQUITY.** The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change defines structural racism as “a system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity” (Lawrence et al. 2014). This framework highlights how generations of white Americans have benefited from access to good educational institutions, decent jobs, and the ability to accumulate wealth through institutional retirement benefits and homeownership. Americans of color, in contrast, have often come from backgrounds of slavery or exploited labor, were limited by institutional segregation and discrimination, and excluded from many professions and homeownership opportunities.

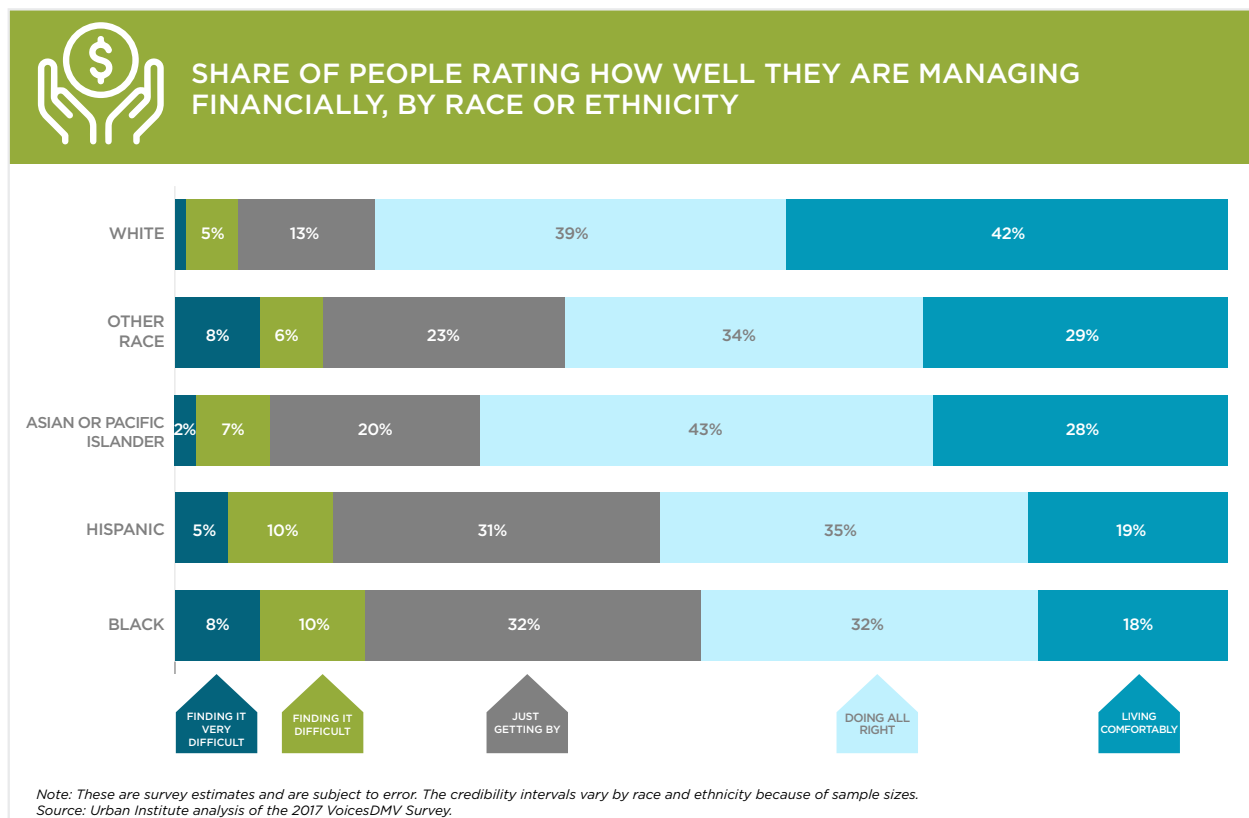
### Financial Prosperity

When asked how well they were managing financially these days, the results were good for many, with two-thirds of people saying that they were “living comfortably” (30 percent) or “doing alright” (36 percent). Nevertheless, another 22 percent reported they were “just getting by,” and 12 percent said they found managing “difficult” or “very difficult.” Given that many well-paying jobs with good benefits, both nationally and in our region, now require training and education beyond high school, it is not surprising that college graduates were more than twice as likely to say they were living comfortably (41 percent) than people with less education (18 percent). These data also reveal racial differences in prosperity, with whites more than twice as likely to say they were living comfortably (42 percent) than blacks (18 percent) or Hispanics (19 percent) (figure 4). In addition, people living in Prince George’s County were notably less likely to say they were living comfortably (18 percent) than those in other parts of the DMV.

To further measure prosperity, the VoicesDMV survey asked people to compare their financial well-being today with that of their parents when they were the same age. Fifty-three percent of people in our region believed they were better off financially than their parents, 22 percent thought they were worse off, and 25 percent said they were doing about the same. Asians and Pacific Islanders (59 percent), whites (57 percent), and people of other races (57 percent), were the most likely to think they were better off than their parents, while blacks (49 percent) and Hispanics (40 percent) were least likely to think they were better off than the previous generation.



FIGURE 4.



This pessimism for the future, especially about breaking the cycle of poverty, was echoed by focus group respondents who identified as young people ages 18 to 24 seeking their General Equivalency Diploma (GED). One young person addressed the issue this way: “Housing, education, they all affect one another. And if you don’t have transportation, you can’t get a job. It all effects everything else, [without any one piece] you get stuck in a cycle. I think for me, there is a slight chance for me to break the cycle—but overall, it will get worse for people in our area—the rich are going to get richer, and the poor poorer, and some of us in the middle can go either way.”

## Economic Challenges

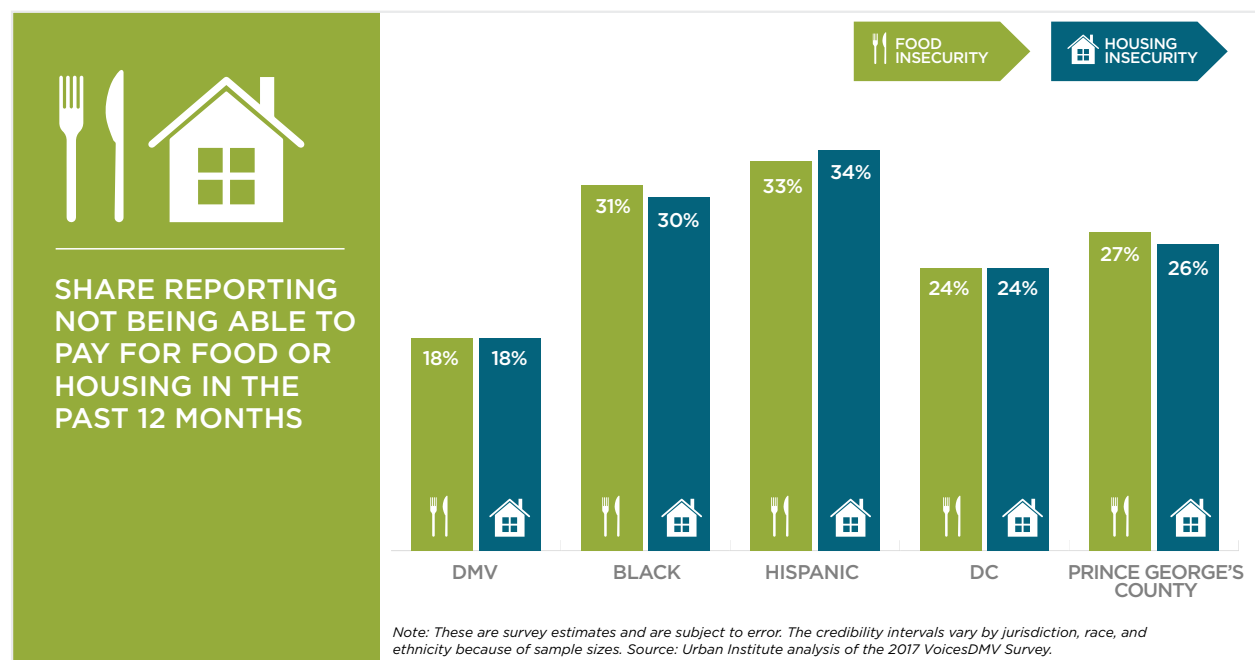
Our region’s growth and prosperity have meant the cost of living can be high, making life challenging for people who do not have jobs that pay a living wage (roughly \$15 an hour for a single adult and \$22 an hour for two working adults with two children),<sup>8</sup> people who cannot work, or people on fixed incomes. At the extreme, people reported they were vulnerable to economic shocks and at times found it difficult to afford basic needs. When asked what would happen if they lost their current sources of income, one in three people said that they would not have enough money to continue to live as they do today for more than two months. This share rose to 46 percent for people

without a bachelor's degree and more than half of people with household incomes below \$50,000. The shares of people who could not get by for more than two months were highest in Prince George's County (45 percent) and DC (35 percent) and lowest in Montgomery County (28 percent) and Fairfax County (25 percent).

Structural barriers to wealth building by people of color play a role in these results. *The Color of Wealth in the Nation's Capital* report found that white households had a net worth 81 times that of black households in the Washington region, and that home values for blacks were two-thirds those of white and Hispanic homeowners, a situation that can be traced back to generations of systemic denial to people of color of opportunities to build wealth (Kijakazi et al. 2016).

Paying for necessities such as food and housing can also be a challenge for many, raising concerns for health, safety, and well-being. *The Housing Security in Greater Washington* report, commissioned by The Community Foundation in 2014, found that almost half of renter households in the region have struggled with high housing costs, including more than 150,000 households with severe housing cost burden (i.e., households that pay more than half their income on rent and utilities).<sup>9</sup> Although most people in the VoicesDMV survey reported they were doing well enough to not have to worry about basic needs, 18 percent said they did not have enough money for either food or housing at some point in the past 12 months. Food and housing insecurity were higher for Hispanics and blacks and for people living in Prince George's County or DC (figure 5).

**FIGURE 5.**





Focus group and community conversation participants identified the increasing cost of living as a significant challenge for many. One participant in the LGBTQ focus group described the issue this way: “The region can be a great place to live once you have a certain income. People have to have \$60,000 before you can feel comfortable and live and go out on the weekends. We’re lucky to have free events and entertainment. Housing and food is expensive.”

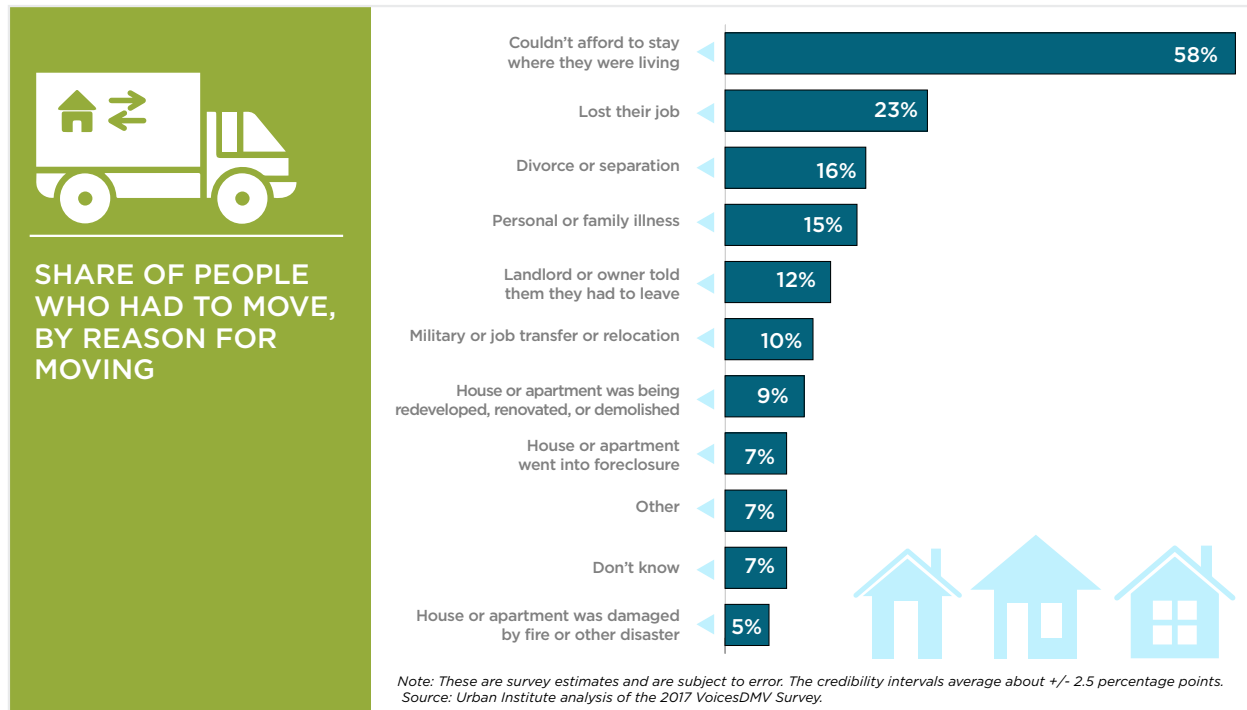
The issue of housing was especially salient to community conversation attendees. In all four events, attendees ranked affordable housing as an important issue for our region. This sentiment was echoed by the respondents in the Prince George’s County focus group, with one respondent highlighting how home foreclosures and a lack of affordable housing may be a long-term problem for the county: “There’s a façade that we have a wealthy infrastructure in the region, but we also have a high number of foreclosed houses... In the long term, Prince George’s is going to look like DC—no affordable housing even for the middle class.”

### Threat of Displacement

The DMV has undergone dramatic changes in the past two decades. Economic prosperity has drawn people to our region, spurring a boom in commercial and residential development that has brought a renewed energy and revitalized communities. A consequence of these larger changes, coupled with the financial insecurity that many feel, is that people who have lived, worked, and raised families in our region may no longer be able to stay and benefit from the new prosperity. The terms gentrification and displacement have often been used to express these fears, which are real for many in our region.



FIGURE 6.



Data from the VoicesDMV survey and focus groups confirmed that concerns about displacement are genuine. When asked, 29 percent of people said they knew someone in the past two years who had to move from their jurisdiction for a reason other than their own choice. Although displacement rates were not statistically different between jurisdictions, reported displacement increased to 4 in 10 for Hispanics and people of other races. In addition, people ages 18 to 34 were more than twice as likely (39 percent) to have known someone who had to move than people ages 65 and older (15 percent). These data likely underestimate actual displacement because people could have moved without others knowing the reasons, so those moves would not be reported.

For people who knew someone who had to move for a reason other than their own choice, the biggest reason why they had to leave was that they could not afford to stay where they were living (figure 6). This finding is consistent with the *Housing Security in Greater Washington* report, which documented affordable housing gaps in all jurisdictions, especially for households with the lowest incomes (Hendey, Tatian, and MacDonald 2014). The second most-cited reason was loss of a job, followed by divorce or separation and personal or family illness. This pattern was consistent throughout the region, although affordability challenges and job loss were mentioned more often as reasons for forced moves in DC compared with other jurisdictions.

For people who moved for a reason other than their own choice, where did they end up? According to survey respondents, 34 percent of people who were forced to move left the Washington region. Another 18 percent went to another jurisdiction within the region, and 34 percent moved somewhere else in the jurisdiction where they had been living. A further 13 percent said they did not know where the person moved to, so the numbers of people moving within or out of the region could be higher. Finally, people who moved from Fairfax County, Northern Virginia, and Montgomery County were more likely to leave the region altogether than people who moved from other jurisdictions.

Respondents from several focus groups discussed displacement and its effects. Housing instability, particularly for low-income households, can be a barrier to economic and educational success and can adversely affect health, safety, and overall well-being (Galvez et al. 2017). LGBTQ focus group members who live in DC noted the challenge of constantly having to move because of increasing housing costs. One respondent described the experience, stating, “Like a lot of people who grew up [in DC], I was pushed out [of my neighborhood], and that’s been the series for the past three years: finding a place you like, sticking it out while it’s a little rough, and then once everyone finds out that [the neighborhood] is a good place, you are being pushed out again because the rent goes up. Or pushed out because [my apartment] building was bought by someone else.”

In Prince George’s County, one focus group member described the county’s challenge providing enough services for the increasing population of former DC residents moving to Maryland. “Although Prince George’s is [one of] the richest black [counties in America], we also have a lot of poor people moving here. Especially now because they are pushed out of DC. I don’t think we have the social services infrastructure to support services that poorer residents need and that they used to get in DC and are no longer getting. We can’t support them the way they should [be supported].” In the Muslim focus group, respondents felt that many new immigrants could not afford to live in the DC region and that moving into more rural areas farther from DC heightened experiences of discrimination. “Unfortunately, the cost of living pushes new immigrants out into [more] rural areas [just outside of the region]. I would much rather those of us who have been born and raised here face that difficulty because [immigrants] are facing more barriers. We would be able to handle [the higher levels of discrimination and lower levels of services in those places] but, unfortunately, it’s the immigrants being pushed out.”



## SOCIAL INCLUSION

The Washington region is one of the most diverse places in the country.<sup>10</sup> Although our region is generally viewed as more accepting of people from all walks of life, and most people feel they fit into their communities, discrimination in the community and workplace remains a concern for many residents, particularly people of color.

“I’ve experienced discrimination since I was born—stereotypes and people being judgmental because of how I look.”

—Youth focus group participant

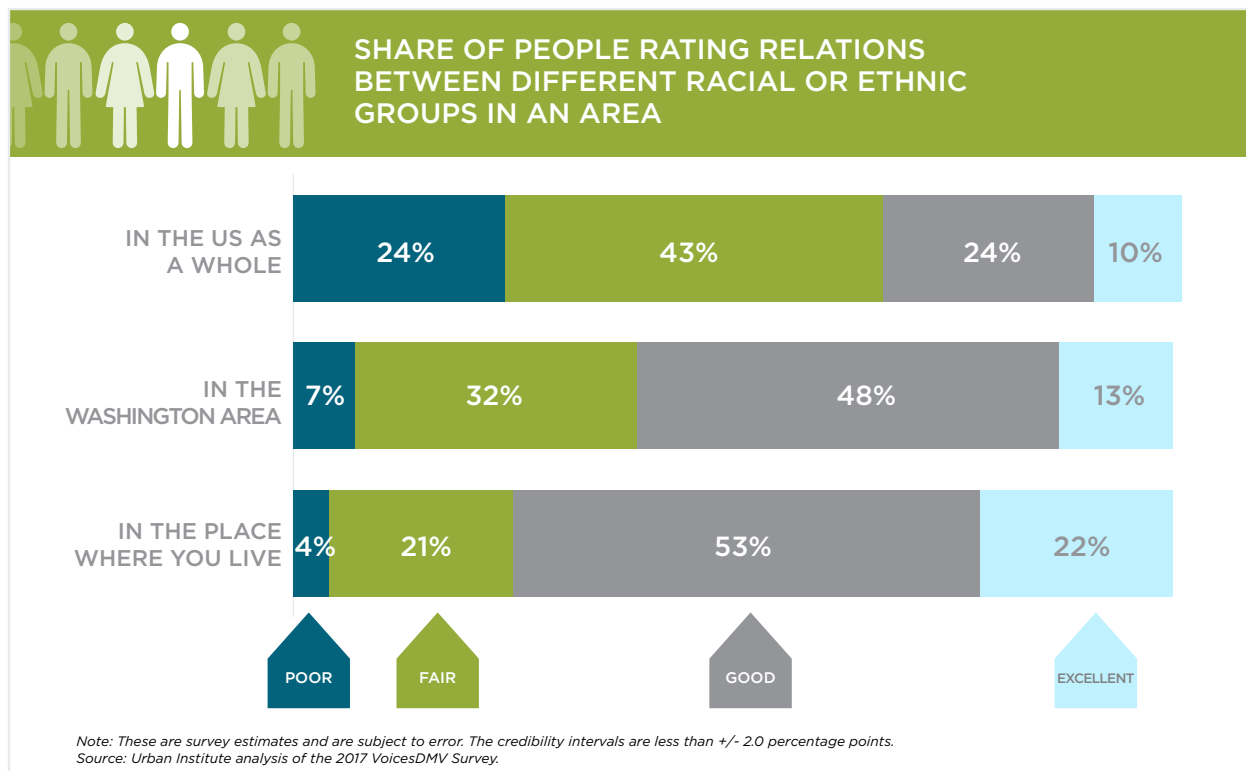
Some discrimination occurs in ordinary social interactions, but other barriers to greater social and economic inclusion, such as workplace discrimination and residential segregation, are systemic. The Washington, DC, metropolitan area remains segregated despite decreases in black-white segregation and residential isolation.<sup>11</sup> These segregation patterns may influence people’s sense of belonging and the quality of their interactions with people from different groups. Our region must better understand these dynamics and explore ways to reduce and prevent discrimination.

### People Generally Feel They Fit In

Two-thirds of people in the DMV felt that they fit in “completely” or “mostly” in the places where they lived, with another 22 percent saying they fit in “somewhat.” Only 12 percent of people felt they did not fit in. This general pattern held across most groups, although whites were more likely to feel they fit in completely or mostly in their communities (72 percent), compared with other racial groups, and Asians and Pacific Islanders were more likely to say they only fit in somewhat (32 percent).

This sense of inclusion was also evident in people’s views that the relationships between people of different races and ethnicities were better in this region than in the US as a whole and even better in their own communities (figure 7). Even though only 34 percent of people in the DMV said relations between racial or ethnic groups were

**FIGURE 7.**



“excellent” or “good” across the entire country, 62 percent gave relations a high rating for the Washington area, and 75 percent said the relationships among different races or ethnicities were excellent or good in the places where they lived, with more than one in five rating relationships as excellent. This generally positive view of racial relations in the region was fairly consistent across racial or ethnic groups, although blacks and people of other races were more likely (47 to 49 percent) to rate relations as “fair” or “poor” compared with other populations (33 to 35 percent).

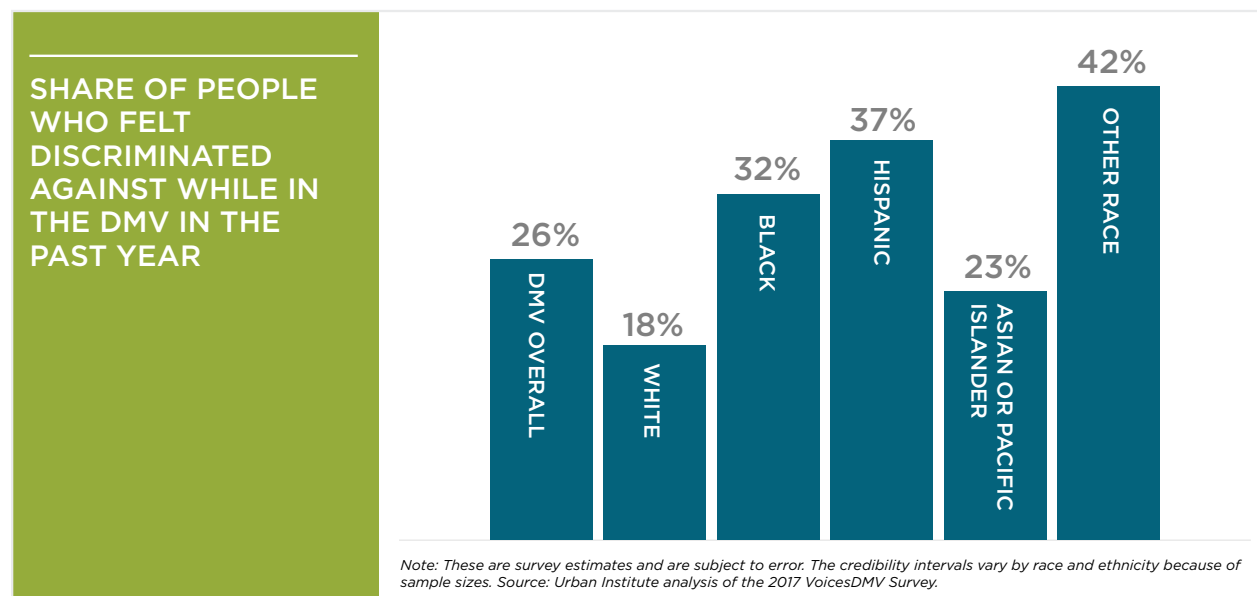
Focus group participants echoed this general impression of our region being a good place for many groups. In the Muslim focus group, one participant remarked, “My mother lives in central Pennsylvania. It’s rural, so not a lot of diversity. You feel threatened because you look out of the norm. That’s why I had to move away, because I didn’t feel comfortable living in that environment. If you raise kids in a diverse area [like DC], they are more protected.” Many focus group participants noted the region’s diversity as one of its strengths.



## Problems with Exclusion and Discrimination Persist

Despite the sense that the DMV is more inclusive than other places, survey data and focus groups confirmed that many people still face discrimination. One youth focus group participant said, “I’ve experienced discrimination since I was born—stereotypes and people being judgmental because of how I look.” One in four people in the survey reported they had felt discriminated against while in the Washington area in the past year. Although the highest rates of discrimination were for blacks, Hispanics, and people of other races, Asians and Pacific Islanders and whites all said they experienced bias of some kind (figure 8).

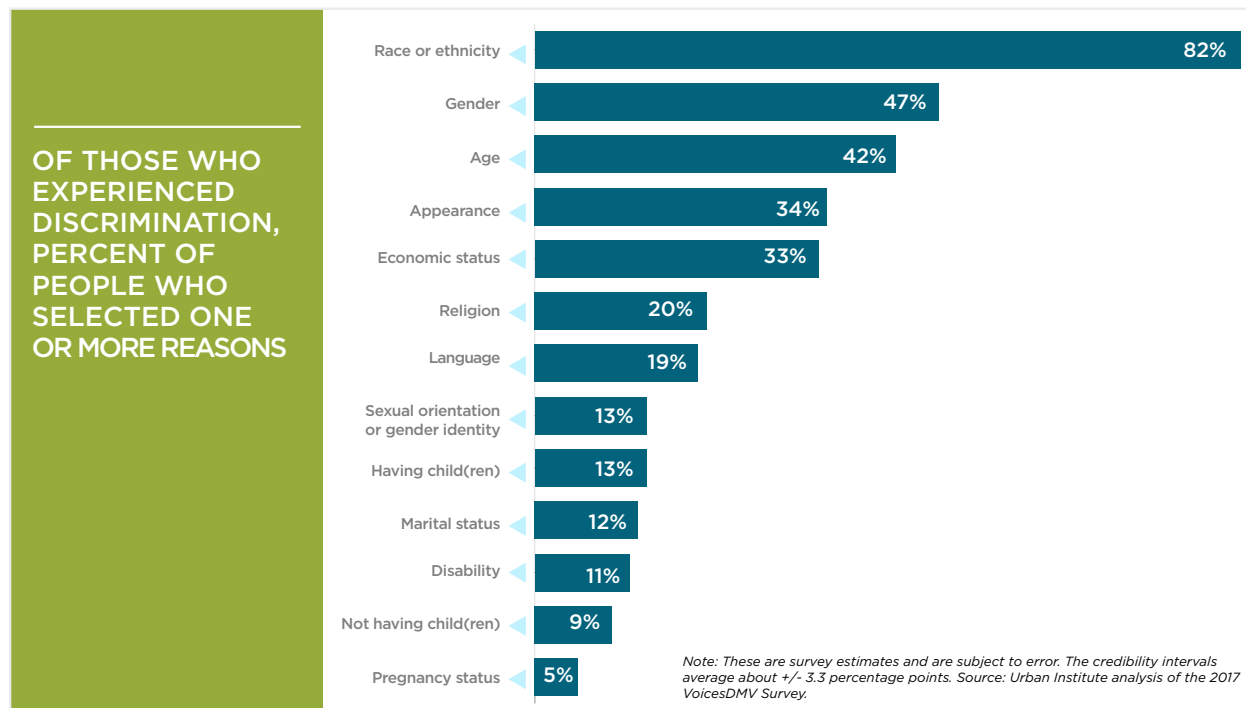
**FIGURE 8.**



For most people who experienced discrimination, it was not a regular occurrence (less than once a month), but 19 percent said they felt discriminated against on a weekly or daily basis. Asians and Pacific Islanders who experienced discrimination did so less frequently (74 percent said less than once a month) than other groups.

By far, the most common reason people felt discriminated against was because of their race or ethnicity (82 percent of people experiencing discrimination), followed by gender (48 percent), age (42 percent), personal appearance (34 percent), and economic status (33 percent) (figure 9). Among those experiencing discrimination, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians or Pacific Islanders were more likely to mention race or ethnicity as the cause (88 percent or more) than were whites (64 percent). These results are in line with a recent national survey that found most people believe discrimination against their own racial or ethnic group exists in the US today.<sup>12</sup> Blacks and Hispanics more frequently

**FIGURE 9.**



attributed discrimination to their economic status than whites, and Hispanics were the most likely to mention language discrimination (42 percent). Relative to other groups, whites more often complained of age or religious discrimination.

By jurisdiction, all ranked discrimination because of race and ethnicity as most common. For people experiencing discrimination, gender discrimination was more common for people living in DC or Northern Virginia (61 and 68 percent) than across the region (48 percent). Discrimination based on appearance (49 percent) and sexual orientation or gender identity (25 percent) was also more often reported in DC than across the region.

When asked about the situations or systems in which people said they experienced discrimination, people reported it was most common in social interactions with strangers (70 percent). Second most common was in situations involving employment (49 percent), followed by social interactions with someone they knew (38 percent). Focus groups also reinforced employment discrimination as an issue, particularly for immigrant communities. A Latino immigrant remarked, “If you look Hispanic, they won’t treat you right. Employers think that immigrants like us don’t have rights in the US, and they try to take advantage of that. In some cases, they won’t pay you at the end of the day if you are working under the table.” A Muslim immigrant shared, “Some places you do not hand in a résumé with a Muslim-sounding name, not that they would

say that out right, but you know that. Some workplaces, anyone who's name starts with Muhammad, they will at one point get blocked. One of my clearances for work, the guy kept losing it. I filed it 21 times. It was on purpose."

“Some places you do not hand in a résumé with a Muslim sounding name...”

– Muslim focus group participant

Feelings of unfair treatment were also reflected in perceptions about law enforcement expressed in the survey and focus groups, which echoed national debates on these issues. The survey asked people whether they thought the police in their communities treated people of color differently than white people. Overall, 38 percent felt that people of color were treated less favorably by police, though, 54 percent of blacks felt this was true. Seventeen percent of residents in the DMV reported their daily life was “somewhat” or “a lot” affected by the fear that they themselves or a loved one would be arrested or questioned by police. This rating increased to 35 percent for blacks in the DMV and more than a quarter of residents each in DC and in Prince George’s County.

Several focus group participants discussed their frustrations with the police. A member of the disconnected youth focus group in DC described many negative encounters with the DC transit police, saying, “I’ve seen big problems with the transit police. They will take a person [of color] off the bus to arrest them but leave their kids on the bus after they took off the mom or dad. And then these kids are left riding the bus by themselves and don’t know what to do.” In the Latino focus group, many participants were frustrated with the lack of bilingual officers in Prince George’s County: “We need more police that speak Spanish. I called and asked for someone who spoke Spanish, and they said sorry, they didn’t have anyone who spoke Spanish to come to my area—no one could understand me when I needed help.” The experiences of the focus groups and the data from the survey highlight the crucial need to look at strategies that might help improve the relationship between the police and the communities they serve and ensure efforts are made to make all residents feel safe and secure.





## MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN

Given our region's role as the nation's capital, data from the VoicesDMV survey, focus groups, and community conversations offered some surprises when it comes to how citizens think about their role in local problem solving and the priorities for various sectors, such as government. People emphasized basic services when ranking priorities for their local governments, but most felt local governments should address environmental and social issues. And although many people trusted their local governments to handle local problems, others were not so sure. One of the more surprising findings is that few people thought they had much influence over local government decisionmaking. And many people thought businesses, universities, and faith communities can engage more deliberately—in partnership with local governments and nonprofits—in addressing the DMV's economic and social challenges.

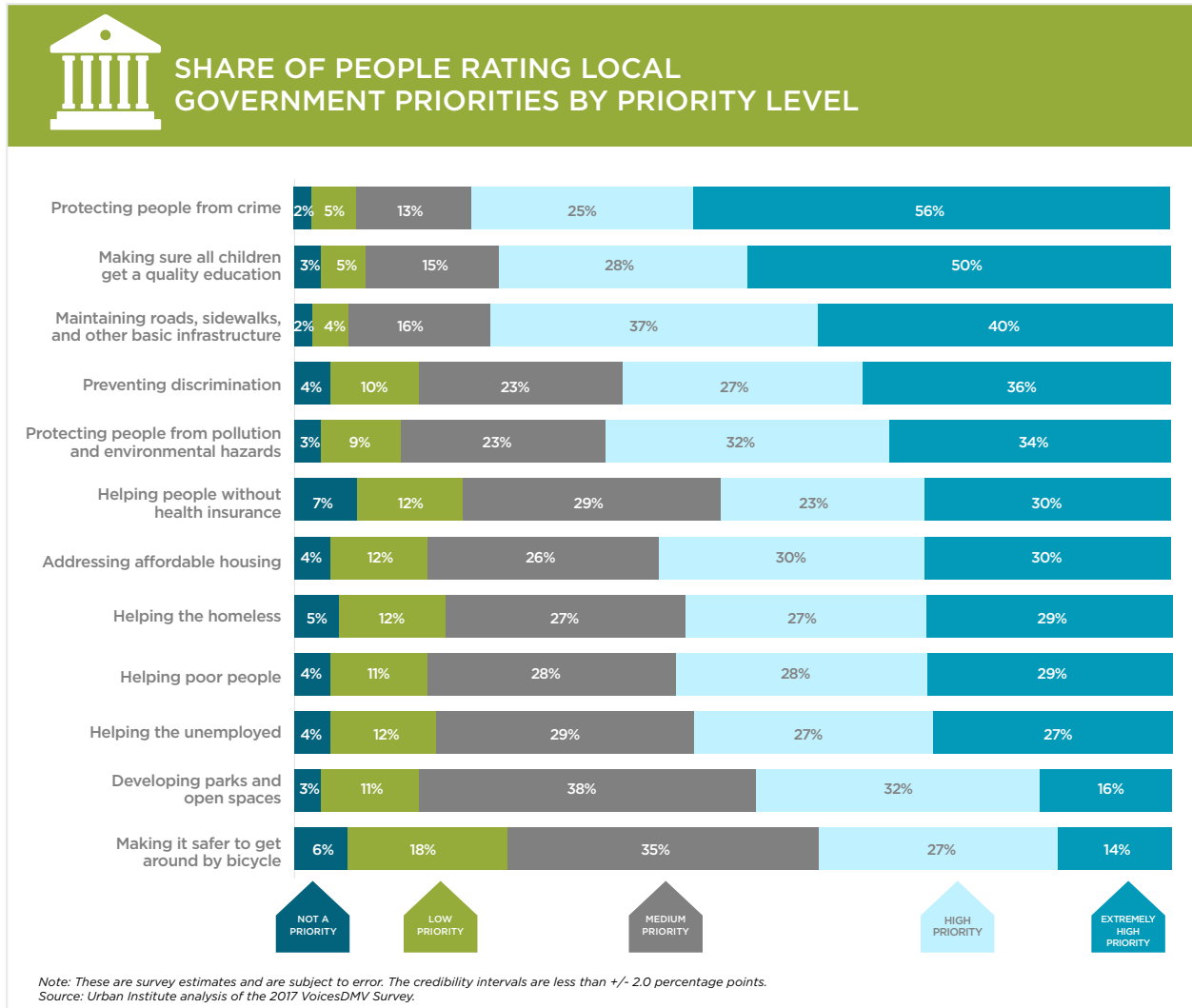
### The Role of Government

When it comes to who should address the needs and challenges discussed above, the role of government figured prominently across survey, focus group, and community conversations data. When asked to rate a list of possible priorities, people in the survey assigned the highest urgency to the bread-and-butter functions of local government that generally affect all citizens. More than three-quarters of people ranked responsibilities such as protecting people from crime, making sure children get a quality education, and maintaining roads, sidewalks, and other infrastructure as “high” or “extremely high” priorities for local officials (figure 10). Across the general population, there was agreement, regardless of race or ethnicity, that crime and infrastructure should be high priorities for local governments. DC residents, however, felt that preventing discrimination should be equal to maintaining infrastructure on the list of local government priorities.

Although ranked lower, most people in the DMV felt that protecting people from pollution, preventing discrimination, and assisting people struggling to meet basic needs, such as through affordable housing or helping people without health insurance, should be high or extremely high priorities. People from DC and Prince George's County were more likely than people from other jurisdictions to say that issues such as helping people with basic needs and employment should be high or extremely high priorities

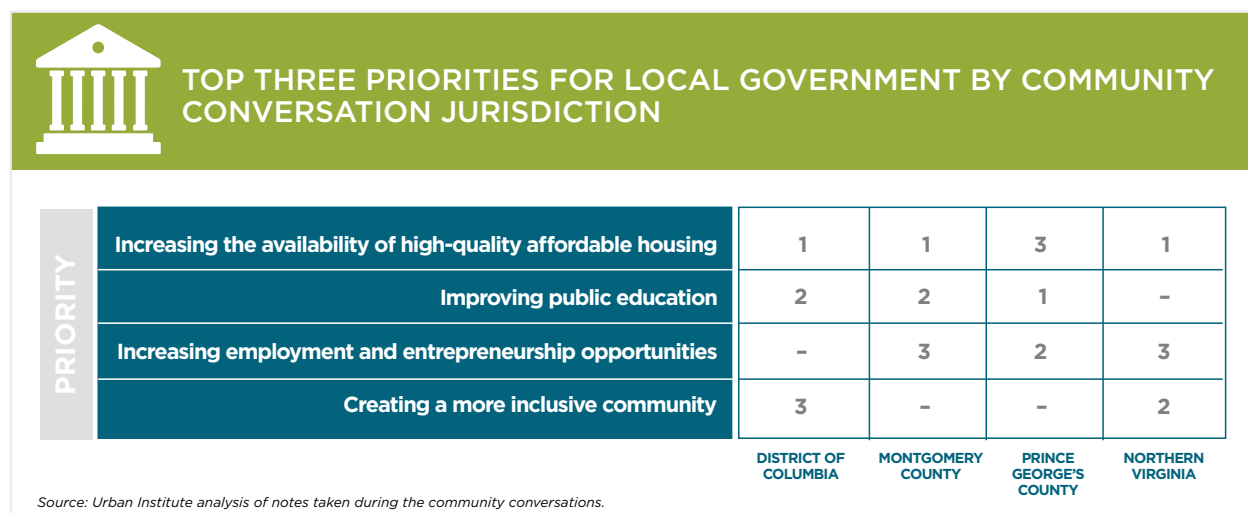


FIGURE 10.



for local government. Interestingly, participants from the community conversations across all four jurisdictions—who self-identified as more civically engaged than the general population represented in the survey—suggested that issues concerning social and economic inclusion, such as jobs, entrepreneurship opportunities, and affordable housing, should sit at the top of the priority list for local governments (figure 11).

**FIGURE 11.**



Relative to other issues presented in the survey, at the bottom of the priority list in all jurisdictions were developing parks and open spaces and making it safer for bicyclists to get around. But residents of DC exceeded all other jurisdictions in saying that green issues such as protection from pollution and bike safety should be “extremely high” priorities for local government.

A plurality of people trust local government to make good choices, but do not think they have much influence over those decisions. Over 60 percent of people said they had confidence in, and trusted, local governments in the DMV at least “a fair amount” in handling local problems. Conversely, 40 percent did not trust local government “very much” or “at all.” Trust in local government was similar across jurisdictions.

Surprisingly, for a region that has such prominent government roots, few people thought they had much influence over local officials. Seventy-nine percent felt they had “little” or “no” influence over local government decisionmaking, while 21 percent thought they had “great” or “moderate” influence. People living in DC (26 percent) and Prince George’s County (25 percent) were the most likely to think they had great or moderate influence.

## The Role of Nonprofits

Nonprofits also play an important role helping people address needs and challenges, but their impact is not perceived evenly across groups or jurisdictions. Four in 10 people reported using nonprofit services at least once in the past year, and 1 in 10 reported using services at least once a month. People living in DC were most likely to say they used nonprofit services, with more than half the population doing so at least once in the past year. Whites were more likely to say they never used nonprofits (65 percent) than blacks (53 percent) or Hispanics (56 percent), and about 13 percent of blacks and Hispanics used nonprofits at least once a month.

Among people who never used nonprofits, whites were more likely to say the reason was that they did not need any services (89 percent), compared with blacks (61 percent) and Hispanics (70 percent). Blacks were more likely to say they did not know of any nonprofits that would meet their needs (37 percent). People with incomes below \$50,000 were more likely say nonprofits do not meet their needs (36 percent) than those with higher incomes (21 to 26 percent).

Concerns about the uneven geographic distribution of nonprofits came up in conversations with the LGBTQ community and with middle-class residents of Prince George's County. Many participants in the LGBTQ focus group lamented that, even though many members of their group now live outside the historic "gayborhood" of DC's Dupont Circle, most nonprofits that serve LGBTQ people remain in that area and are relatively inaccessible to LGBTQ people who have moved to places like Alexandria or Montgomery County.

Residents of Prince George's County were more likely than residents from other DMV jurisdictions to say they did not know of any nonprofits that met their needs. A respondent from Prince George's County had this to say: "In Prince George's, there is a lot of duplication of services and not enough collaboration between organizations that do the exact same thing. [I think nonprofits] need



to pull their resources together so the funding doesn't get spread so thin between groups." Attendees of the Prince George's County community conversation noted that not everyone was well informed about what services were available in the county, with one attendee stating that "this is a great place to live because of an abundance of resources, but people need to be better informed of those resources."

Among users of nonprofits, however, satisfaction with services provided was high. This sentiment was echoed in focus group data, with one respondent from the Latino focus group describing access to nonprofits as one of the benefits of the DMV: "[I] think the region is better than others for getting better services and help; health care, education, more programs for kids, organizations [that help immigrants]; we have a lot."

Nonprofits may also play an important role in shaping citizens' sense of influence over local government. Hispanics (32 percent) and blacks (26 percent) were the most likely racial and ethnic groups to say they could influence local decisions. Focus group data suggest the efforts of community-based organizations may be one source of this perceived political clout among groups that experience high levels of discrimination. One participant in the Latino focus group said, "I learned about my rights under US law at [a local nonprofit], so now I know that the police can't be used to intimidate me, and I have the right to get help. The law can be used for lots of things—we are equal under the law, and we have rights, and the government should protect that." The Muslim community's proactive engagement with political representatives across all levels of government also came through clearly. One Muslim focus group participant said, "At [my congregation], our strategy [is] to reach out to law enforcement, school systems, so they know what we are doing, how we move in the community, and are giving back.... We also train them on Islamic issues. If they have questions, they can set up meeting with the Imam." Another focus group participant offered, "We had Eid prayers, and each [place of worship] had politicians come. We had 26 sites in four hours. So, lots of different politicians know when Eid comes, they come, they say, 'Eid Mubarak.' [My congregation] is big on civic engagement and makes sure politicians know we are part of the community and they have to represent us."

Other groups held up congregations as a vital source of intragroup organizing, support, and belonging. Members of the middle-class and Asian and Pacific Islander focus groups, as well as respondents from all the community conversations, emphasized the important role their places of worship and other institutions play in community well-being. One participant in the middle-class focus group said, "All we have come from black churches, and we need to [be] responsible for that. Our civil rights came from that, our universities come from [the church]. And we are losing our historic universities because we are not supporting them. We need to have a consciousness and start supporting each other."



## The Role of All Sectors, Working Together

Focus group and community conversations data point to a general sense that leveraging community strengths, bridging divides within jurisdictions, and putting more priority on economic development—with responsibility taken across all sectors, not just government—should be emphasized in the search for solutions.

Sharing our regional strength within and across groups and neighborhoods was a theme that ran throughout the focus group and community conversations. One Asian and Pacific Islander focus group member summed up this fairly common sentiment: “I would like to see all people in our community have access to the great things we have talked about, like public resources, affordable housing, all the good things we [in this focus group] have. I think some of the negative issues in the area are tied to the fact that some people don’t have the same access [as others].”

Developing more unity within jurisdictions was also a theme that ran through many of the conversations. Many respondents expressed concern that income differences often separate people by neighborhood and create divides that go beyond geographic distance. One resident of Montgomery County said, “There has been an explosion of population in the I-270 corridor. But many services are still concentrated in Silver Spring. Although population is growing, [services like] health care [are] slow to follow. There are a lot of kids from low-income families in the northern area of the county. I think it is [about] equity issues—health equity, affordable housing—[that the county needs to address].”

Finally, focus group and community conversation participants were vocal about the need for such sectors as business and education to work with government and nonprofits to lift the skills of all DMV residents so people can attain living-wage jobs in our region’s growing technology and health fields. A comment from a member of the middle-class focus group was emblematic of this view: “I go to University of Maryland, and I see a lot of [high school] students not prepared to take classes in science and tech. As a young person getting a degree in computer science, I look at examples of how other states invest in tech education, like in California, where lots of counties work with the state universities and private companies to invest in education for the people who live [in the state] so students can get good jobs.”





## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS FROM THE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

The DMV has undergone enormous changes that challenge many who live and work here. Unlike much of the country, the DMV has the resources to handle many of the changes confronting our region. VoicesDMV makes clear that most people in our region value the area's diversity, economic strengths, and wide-ranging amenities. They feel their lives are and will be better because of living here.

Most residents—across race, ethnicity, gender, religion, income, sexual orientation, and place—also expressed deep concern for the roughly one-quarter to one-third of our neighbors who are being left behind as high-skills jobs and high-end lifestyles burgeon. Some groups face a greater risk of being marginalized or driven out of our region.

What also comes through in VoicesDMV data are the generosity and sense of shared obligation most residents of this region feel for one another. Though focus group and community conversations were infused with concerns about economic and social distress, no jurisdictional or subpopulation group claimed priority for their needs over others' needs. Rather, calls for fairness, equity, shared prosperity, and engagement with new ideas and people prevailed as a central theme in these findings.

### What's Next: Considering the Path Ahead

Connecting with community residents, nonprofit partners, local government, and regional leaders through VoicesDMV was important and strategic for the Greater Washington Community Foundation. We engaged with people who care, people who are doing their best to make it, and people who are proud to call this place home. We had many aspirations for VoicesDMV but gave priority to refreshing our own understanding of “the community,” in particular, peoples' attitudes and perceptions of well-being, their barriers to and opportunities for achieving goals, and how they considered priorities for the future. We also prioritized creating a process and a set of tools that would serve the public good.

“ I feel like we all have to unite—stop the negativity and have more love. There are lots of selfish acts going on—[people think] as long as me and my family get it, forget everybody else. It can’t be like that—if we come together we have more power.”

—Member of a youth focus group

VoicesDMV confirmed many of our region’s ongoing challenges and illuminated new opportunities. Although there is overall satisfaction with life here, the persistence of poverty for many residents—often predicted by zip code and race or ethnicity—remains the biggest problem for us to solve. Shoring up our commitment to the most vulnerable—people experiencing homelessness, unstable housing, underemployment—and creating pathways for equity, access, and inclusion for all who call our region home, remain core priorities for our ongoing efforts.

As we consider how best to address disparities—between rich and poor, black and white, and geographic access—alongside the rising cost of living, we are even more convinced of the need for bolder and more innovative strategies and investments that are people centered, racially equitable, time bound, and measurable. Imagine creating industry-sector partnerships that yield higher living wages or instigating new opportunities for creating wealth through entrepreneurship and seed funding in communities where needs are greatest. How might we further leverage all our human, financial, and social capital in support of a more equitable approach to affordable housing and high-quality public education? These are just some of the strategies we may explore because of VoicesDMV. Regardless of the paths we ultimately follow, we recognize we must be even more deliberate and intentional in our own investment strategy and in our guidance to donors to disrupt cycles of poverty and outpace the region’s current trajectory with more favorable results.

In philanthropy, we push our partners to focus on improved outcomes, which we affirm as the central purpose of our investments. VoicesDMV reminded us that the process of effective community engagement—asking powerful questions, deliberately bringing together people who always show up with those who are never invited—is not only a pathway to achieving improved outcomes but an outcome itself. As we look ahead, VoicesDMV will inform what we do and be an organizing principle for how we do it—through community engagement. Our unique position as a regional community foundation comprising individual and institutional donors committed to investing in this community gives us the opportunity and responsibility to stay connected in ways that enable us to capture both the anecdotal and the statistically significant.

Finally, we hope that people and institutions seeking regional and jurisdictional-level information on needs or well-being will consider this resource as a baseline for benchmarking and setting goals. We hope it will inform strategy and investments that are centered in community. Ultimately, we aim to refine both the process and data tools based on stakeholder feedback for even greater utility in the years ahead.

Like our community foundation partners in other cities, we intend to translate key findings into our own clear articulation of goals or priorities at the jurisdictional level, against which we can more effectively measure our progress over time. This is just the beginning of efforts to reshape our community investment strategy to be even more responsive to the true needs of our communities and to be the most effective stewards of our donors', partners', and public resources to strengthen the Greater Washington region.





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- Prince George's County Social Innovation Fund
- Public Engagement Associates
- Sasha Bruce Youthwork
- United Way of the National Capital Area
- Whitman-Walker Clinic

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