July 28, 2018

Voices of North Hill:
The North Hill
Listening Project

The International Institute of Akron
North Hill: Bringing the World to Akron

At the International Institute of Akron (IIA), promoting public awareness of the value of ethnic diversity and international communication is essential to our mission of serving refugees and immigrants coming to our country and the greater Akron community. The ethnic diversity of North Hill’s residents is a characteristic that not only distinguishes this community from other Akron neighborhoods, but it also offers long-term and new residents the opportunity to experience other cultures and shape solutions to ethnic tensions.

Race and Ethnicity in North Hill, 2015

North Hill is home to residents from a wide variety of backgrounds and cultures. Residents of North Hill speak over 26 languages and hail from over 14 nations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commonly Spoken Languages</th>
<th>Most Common National Origins</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepali</td>
<td>Burma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burmese</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Nepal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon</td>
<td>DRC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chin</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindi</td>
<td>Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>Italy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dari/Farsi</td>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Venezuela</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Taken from the International Institute of Akron website, [https://www.iiakron.org/what-we-do/](https://www.iiakron.org/what-we-do/)
The North Hill Listening Project

The IIA is committed to hearing the voices of all residents in and around North Hill, and understands that building a multidimensional community is not always easy. Differences can have negative social impacts such as misunderstandings, mistrust, and isolation. The North Hill Listening Project was inspired by Rural Southern Voices for Peace (RSVP)’s Listening Project, a tool designed to understand communities’ concerns and bridge divides. The North Hill Listening Project was designed to create a platform for residents to hear and be heard by each other through a series of interviews by and of North Hill community members.

January 20, 2018: the IIA and its partners held a full-day training for twenty-four “Listeners”—community members and stakeholders who later conducted interviews with residents of North Hill. The training included building skills such as active listening, de-escalation, and ethics, as well as sections on cross-cultural hospitality norms and customs.

Forty-eight community members were interviewed between January and July 2018. Seven interviews were conducted in a language other than English, including: Spanish, Arabic, Swahili, and Nepali.

Questions about participants’ relationships within the community, challenges encountered, and visions for North Hill were asked.

Participant Demographics

![Citizenship/Immigration Status Graph]
- US Born: 56%
- Refugee: 7%
- Naturalized US Citizen: 32%
- Visa/Green Card Holder (non Refugee): 5%

![Race Graph]
- Latino/a/x: 18%
- Black/ African-American: 26%
- Middle Eastern/Arab: 13%
- Multiple Represented: 8%
- South Asian: 24%
- White/ Caucasian: 11%

![Religion Graph]
- Muslim: 38%
- Hindu: 22%
- Buddhist: 6%
- Christian: 2%
- Jewish: 2%
- Other: 2%

![Age Graph]
- 18-25: 27%
- 26-40: 27%
- 41-60: 14%
- 61+: 11%

Main Themes

4 To learn more about RSVP and the history and purpose of Listening Projects, see: https://listeningproject.info/
Analysis was conducted to understand the main themes that emerged across those interviewed. These themes fell broadly into 6 categories: physical neighborhood conditions, community economic conditions, health and safety, racial and ethnic relations, cross-cultural understanding, access to institutions, and hopes for the future of North Hill. Whenever possible, residents own words are used to illustrate these themes.5

**Neighborhood Conditions**

Interviewees mentioned several concerns regarding the physical and built environment of North Hill, including the conditions of the roads and need for cleanliness. According to one resident, “I want to see the development in our city, specifically, the roadway.” Many echoed concern for potholes and need of street repair.

Eight residents also expressed concerns about litter and the impact such trash has on the appearance and condition of North Hill, wanting a clean, beautiful, accessible space. Residents have also expressed concern regarding the cleanliness of local stores. One resident stated, “There's a lot of frustration with people's businesses needing to be clean and respected.”

Residents found positive outcomes from helping each other improve the neighborhood. One resident recounts, “When I moved here, I was still fixing my house and they saw the difference from the old house that I bought and what we did. They started talking to us like, 'I want to know what you did.' That's how we help her to fix her bathroom, her stairs and the same with the lady there. With this guy, we talked to him but he likes what we do like fixing the house, the backyard, that's how we've got close...When my house looks nice, she start fixing her outdoor. Then, everybody started fixing their outside so their house looks better. I think it did an impact.”

Several residents expressed the desire for more accessible fresh food and grocery stores. Multiple residents showed interest in more space for widespread and inclusive community gardens. One resident stated, “I just want accessible healthy food for people you know don’t drive.”

**Economic Conditions**

Poverty: Almost 1/3 of respondents discussed poverty as a significant challenge for them or others in the community. In particular, many residents were concerned with seniors in need. One resident noted “[It] depresses me how many people have to walk a mile to SaveALot and then turn around and walk back with two bags. I know they have to do it every day because there's no way those one or two bags are going to get them through more than one or two days.”

Food banks and community organizations, particularly those run by religious institutions, were mentioned as important resources. One resident and volunteer shares, “Life isn't always easy. I was blind to that at one time until I had to give back. I didn't give back because I had to. I gave back because I wanted to because I remembered when I was sick and I had no where to go and this community church was here for me.”

**Housing:** Nine participants raised issues around housing, including maintaining home values, fairness in rentals, and housing sale/prices.

---

5 Interviewees quoted with permission.
Empty lots and improper upkeep of homes were some of the most common causes of concern. However, several said they were encouraged that more people had moved to the neighborhood in recent years. One resident was excited for new a development. “The first new apartment complex that's going to go in, in like 20 years or something. It's going to be down off of Main Street. Those kinds of things, I think, not only did they revitalize some of the buildings and things that are obviously in need of repair. It's nice to see new things that are coming as well.” Many described affordable housing prices as an incentive to move to North Hill.

Discrimination by landlords, sellers and/or realtors was also echoed, with conflicting accounts and views of what groups suffered from discrimination. According to one resident, “People are coming here and they're not being able to rent these homes or they can buy the homes instead of us selling them to the investors... A lot of the people want to buy them and fix them up.”

Health and Safety
Residents cited several concerns regarding crime, addiction, and mental health care.

Crime including theft, breaking and entering, trespassing, street violence, harassment, gang activity, and gun violence was mentioned in interviews. Residents recounted stories such as: “My shooter did get caught. He is in prison now for 18 years. Before I was the victim, they also had shot a Vietnamese man and killed him. It was a gang.”

Twenty-one of those interviewed expressed that they have felt unsafe within the community; an equal number expressed feeling safe.

Multiple participants expressed that they felt they could trust their neighbors in an emergency. One resident stated, “My neighbors on either side, I pretty much trust to keep my house from burning down. Generally, if there was a zombie apocalypse, they would help fight them off.”

Substance Abuse/Addiction was a concern for many for their fellow community members. Residents spoke of fear and mistrust of neighbors due to possible drug or alcohol use. Youth addiction and substance use was particularly concerning for many. One resident summarized this saying, “They've chosen to take a path that's going to destroy them. They're going to not finish school and they're going to be on drugs. They're going to be selling drugs.”

Mental Health in the community was a concern for seven participants. Concerns for the elderly, especially elderly refugees becoming isolated due to challenges with language and US cultural norms, was repeated. One resident speaks from personal experience: “Just because of the language, when we can't communicate well, then we feel loneliness sometimes.”

Concerns for youth mental health due to difficult transitions into American culture were also brought up. One young adult shared: “Yeah, it was challenging cause I didn’t know who to talk to or how to start that friendship. Cause I didn’t know like, what would I say? Like if I go up to them, what would I want to say?”

Race and Ethnic Relations
Interviewees from every ethnic demographic acknowledged ethnic/racial tensions between community members. Hate speech, harassment, desire for opportunities to engage with other groups, and concerns about demographic changes were raised by participants.

The following are percentages of respondents who have experienced hostile, racially charged behavior directed at them or someone of their ethnicity.

- 100% of African American respondents
- 89% of South Asian respondents
- 66% of Latinx respondents
- 50% of Middle Eastern respondents
- 20% of white American respondents

Hate speech and harassment, such as the use of derogatory slang, was experienced by Black, Asian, and Latinx people. Multiple Latinx residents said hostile strangers have assumed they were undocumented. Other participants knew someone who was harassed for wearing traditional clothing. In some cases, harassment escalated to violent attacks or families leaving their home.

Multiple participants also noted that long-running American social prejudices towards minorities have been picked up by newer community members. “Foreign people are learning how to discriminate by getting discriminated on. They learning what we going through, actually putting us through it, too.”

Desire to Engage: Almost all our participants expressed a desire to have closer relationships with their neighbors and open, respectful interactions between people of different backgrounds. Multiple American-born residents felt discouraged when efforts to reach out to neighbors of other cultures were not reciprocated. One such resident noted he felt this might be due to prior negative cross-cultural interactions. One resident contemplated, “I might be projecting... I don't know if this is a thing or not. I wonder how much of it is their fear that they don't want to interact with us because they maybe had bad experiences.”

This resonated with many refugees and immigrants, who said interactions with people of other ethnic backgrounds is limited because they are afraid of being judged, rejected, or harassed.

Many residents cited faith groups and jobs as their primary contact to people of other ethnicities. Sharing food was one of the most common ways that people of different backgrounds found to get to know each other and develop relationships. One resident said, “Now we know most of our neighbors, if we have some kind of celebration at our house, something like that, if we make something, then we take it to their house and we’re like “hey do you want some food?” or stuff like that, so yeah, we feel like a family. We know most of our neighbors now.”

Demographic changes were a concern for about 40% of the American-born participants interviewed. These residents said they or someone they know felt afraid of being displaced as the community changes. Multiple participants noted that recent community programs meant to engage people of diverse backgrounds have not included African Americans. Some participants drew parallels between the experiences of African American, Italian, Polish, Hispanics, and various refugee and immigrant communities as neighborhoods change. One
resident noted, “It may not sound exotic now but Polish and Italian people were exotic.” Another said, “I had a neighbor up the street. He asked me, ‘When you moving?’ ‘What do you mean, when I'm moving?’ He said, ‘They're taking over.’ ‘Who is taking over?’ He said, ‘The immigrants.’ I said, ‘I'm not moving out of my neighborhood just because you're coming in.’ I said, ‘We'll live together... when the black folks, moved in the white folks said, ‘When are we moving?’ The white folks were ‘When are we moving?’ Said, ‘He's probably moving out.’ That's what the white folk answered. We're doing the same thing.”

**Cross-Cultural Awareness and Experience**

Many participants remarked on different ways new and longstanding residents understood or misunderstood the norms, language, experiences or culture of their neighbors.

Lack of education and preparation for US driving norms were mentioned by several interviewees- specifically a need for the education programs that teach U.S. driving laws to be more comprehensive. This linked for many to an issue of health and safety, including a concern for hazardous driving in the neighborhood that could put pedestrians in danger. According to one resident, “There’s still too many cars being down the streets and not paying attention to the children, things like that.”

Language barriers were mentioned by twenty-three participants. The challenge of the language barriers has been felt by all residents, leading to lack of communication, miscommunication, and shame for some non-native English speakers. One resident explains, “We don't feel we know anybody. We don't really feel welcome here. Later, when we start to know the language, the culture, we feel like very welcome here by our neighbor, communities.”

Misconceptions of the refugee/immigration process were mentioned repeatedly. 43% of American-born residents interviewed had or knew others with misinformation about migration. One resident explained how this has fueled conflict, “They think they just come, get some money. Get free housing, get free this, get free that. Everything is dandy and they're living swell. We've been here all our life and we're not getting anything. Education would be what they need, on what the process is because they don't know. All kinds of things are being made up.”

Awareness of and empathy for the experiences of others from different racial or ethnic backgrounds was expressed by 60% of participants. Within this, white Americans more often expressed understanding of immigrant experience than American born minority co-resident experiences. 100% of African-American participants voiced empathy with immigrants’ experiences, and most immigrants expressed understanding of other immigrant groups’ experiences. One resident said, “I believe that there are a lot of common things between me and some other cultures... I read their testimony. I heard the sufferings... A friend of mine, he also from Congo. He almost seen the people killed by the armies... Somehow, he scared and he could able to come here... It wasn't easy for him to get here.”

**Access to Institutions**
The International Institute of Akron (IIA) was discussed as a community resource. Many participants said they could go to the IIA for help. However, some Latinx immigrants felt disconnected from IIA’s services. Many participants felt that the IIA’s education efforts are not sufficient to help immigrant community members adapt to life in the United States, but numerous participants said the International Institute was a valuable resource for immigrants.

Law enforcement was discussed as a resource. The majority of participants who mentioned the Akron Police Department said they felt they could trust the police. However, some expressed the need for other resources and relied on police to resolve non-criminal neighborhood disputes because they do not have another authority. Multiple participants said they knew someone who felt afraid to engage with law enforcement due to their immigration status or language barriers.

Government was mentioned by twenty-six participants. Local government was often cited as an important resource and funding for the IIA, schools, food bank and other programs were deemed important to the community. Critiques centered around wanting additional access, diversity in government, structural improvements and involvement from and with local institutions. Residents felt one reason for some disconnection was due to program underutilization due to communication challenges. One resident said, "The information, I don't know, it's just not getting to the people and it's very sad because people are living in conditions they don't have to live in."

While eleven residents felt represented, fourteen did not feel fully represented. Participants mentioned local community leaders' support of programs as key to feeling represented. Residents expressed feeling connected and represented with face-to-face meetings and direct relationships with officials. Refugees expressed gratitude to the federal government for allowing them entry into the U.S. and local government and programs that help them join American society.

Schools were a point of concern for residents. Many recognized the challenge of meeting K-12 students’ diverse needs and wanted balance between tailored programming and inclusive, communal education. Several were concerned about students being separated by language ability and not having a common space. Others had positive experiences with diversity in schools. Many of the young adults interviewed had made cross-cultural friendships through school and school programs. Multiple people mentioned teachers who protected students from harassment.

Respondents wanted more support for perusing higher education. Many were concerned by ability to pay, lack of understanding the process of applying for and attending a university, and how immigration status might impact their education- at least initially. One resident and student said, “Yes, I couldn’t go in the beginning, in the university I really wanted to, but I didn’t have my green card. So I had to wait until I received my green card, after one year and few months, I got my green card, and then I started college.”

Youth engagement in institutions was discussed by many. Participants noted the importance of activities, such as theatre, sports, scouting, programs at the public library, and music programs. Many said these activities gave youth a positive role in the community, allowed them to access opportunities, and started to break down ethnic divides. Many residents still feel that youth need more opportunities to engage, particularly in community recreational spaces.

**Going Forward: Visions for North Hill**
The visions expressed by residents for North Hill include improvements in the physical development and structures of North Hill, an increase in economic opportunities, and building positive community relationships.

Physical development examples included: building common spaces to socialize such as community centers or coffee shops, improving roadways, and creating inclusive, widespread community gardens.

Economic development examples included: attracting more and more diverse businesses to North Hill, attracting new residents and homeowners, and improving access to targeted economic development programs, for example bringing jobs or job trainings to North Hill.

Community development examples include inter-personal goals such as building closer relationships with neighbors. Visions for programming include community theatre, art and music shows and opportunities to learn about other cultures, such as cultural food festivals. Residents expressed desire for ways to collectively help migrants integrate into American culture, increase the safety of all children, and find ways to live with other cultures harmoniously. One resident expressed, “The diversity in the neighborhood is lovely. My kids get to go to school with people that we wouldn't have dreamed of going to school with. I didn't see my first Asian person until I was an adult. I love every second of that.”

While participants shared both positive and negative experiences, one common theme stood out: more than anything, participants wanted more relationships with their neighbors of all backgrounds. They wanted a way to start breaking down barriers, and in each interview, the importance of community and the vision of neighbors helping neighbors carried through. One resident described a path forward: “Change is gradual. It comes from person to person showing up a better brighter side. A more caring side, a more loving side, a more compassionate side. I think that's how the real change is going to come about. It's not going to come because I could say I'm a part of this group and we're going to have this meeting and talk about what we need to do about this problem... It has to do with our inner connections with each other and our ability to bring the best out of us especially when we really need to do it.”

Next Steps

Based on the community visions and feedback received regarding this listening project, the North Hill Community Dialogue, welcoming all members of the community, has been scheduled for October 13th, 2018. During this community dialogue, we hope to continue this conversation, continue to listen to each other, and make plans for specific projects we will accomplish together to move toward our community vision.6

Voices of North Hill

6 Thanks to Division 48 of the American Psychological Association for awarding this gathering a Small Grant for Peace Psychology Research, Education, or Community Projects. This grant will fund facilitation, space, evaluation and food for our Community Dialogue.
July 28, 2018

For the residents of North Hill

The North Hill Listening Project was overseen by Susan Berg-Herman, M.P.A. International Public and Non-Profit Management and was led by IIA Consultant Liz Schmidt, IIA interns Amanda Schwaben and Jenna Lada.

Special thanks to Jacquelyn Bleak, Joseph Bocchicchio, and Patricia Wyatt for their instrumental roles in the Listener Training, as well as Akron-Summit County Public Library North Hill Branch and Patterson Park Community Center for providing essential spaces.

Analysis and authorship of this report is by Liz Schmidt, Amanda Schwaben, Jenna Lada and Johanna Solomon. We also thank Dr. Solomon and Kent State University’s School of Peace and Conflict Studies for guidance throughout this project.

The North Hill Listening Project was supported by United Way of Summit County.

Thank you, Susan Berg-Herman, for your love, guidance, and belief in the North Hill Community and in us.

Thank you to the staff of the International Institute of Akron for your support.

Thank you to our Listeners for your dedication to the North Hill Community. You are the heart of this project.

Haroon Afghan  
Noorulbari Afghanmal  
Matilda Agyekum  
Bayanne Alkhalilee  
Dondreya Allen  
Rebecca Aronhalt  
Sima Arshadi  
Maya Biswa  
Alma DeBlasio  
Kathy DuBose  
Alyssa Dziurlaj  
Sylvia Gage  
Zainab Haidary  
Liza Henriquez  

Sharon Irwin  
Abdulraouf Lamoshi  
Gisore Mwiyersetse  
Dennis Ngoy  
Janice Radl  
Ka Thi Sa  
James Satrape  
Christin Sheetz  
Peter Simionides  
Gera Snelling  
Christina Staats  
Megan Swoger  
Neema Tamang

Thank you to our interpreters:

Amit Baniya  
Caleigh Harris  
Elsa Barletta Gonzalez  
Safa Shubbar

Cover photo credit: Yatin Parkhani 2018