

THE LOCAL INFORMATION NEEDS OF CHICAGOANS

An overview of new data from a survey of the views and actions of Chicagoans related to local news, education, and civic engagement.

DECEMBER, 2024



INTRODUCTION

A changing media ecosystem, including the collapse of local American print newspapers, has contributed to meaningful challenges — including increased local [government inefficiency and corruption](#), [polarization](#), and [civic disengagement](#). It has also created meaningful opportunities — including new ways to reach people and lower distribution costs.

A [new movement of civic information practitioners](#), supported by [a new coalition of funders](#), is stepping up to these challenges and opportunities. But both need new shared, actionable metrics to prioritize their collaborative efforts and track their impact.

The **Civic Information Needs Census (CINC)** is a tool designed to equip this movement and its supporters with essential data on local civic information needs, media engagement, and civic participation. It is both a community survey and a coalition-building practice designed to bring practitioners and funders together to take action.

This report is for the first **local** CINC, and summarizes the findings done in October 2024 on the civic info needs and engagement of Chicagoans. It is a part of a pilot that started with a national report and survey, and will next include a report and survey on New York City.

The national report can be [read here](#).

KEY USES

We hope that the data and analysis in this national report is useful to anyone working to serve their community's information needs.

It builds on and complements work studying information ecosystems, including the [Civic Information Index](#), Pew's [surveys on local news](#), and local surveys on information needs [like those done in Philadelphia](#).

Over time, we hope that studies like these are done in ways that are **consistent** (allowing comparison across populations), **persistent** (allowing for comparison over time), and, above all, **actionable** (informing actions by the field).

This survey's structure was informed by feedback from a coalition of Chicago civic information providers and researchers – leaders from major community news organizations, government, libraries, and academia. The findings were also shared with that coalition, and along with this report the full data is being made public.

We hope this report helps Chicago civic information providers think strategically and collaboratively about how they meet community information needs. And we hope it offers urgency and inspiration to Chicago civic information funders to support this critical work strategically and generously.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Throughout this report, we'll highlight some key takeaways. Here are a few of the big ones, which you'll see more on as you read.

- On all 7 topics essential for civic health, there is a 19 to 36% gap between the importance Chicagoans place in having local information and their satisfaction with what they have. **(PAGE 16)**
- Chicagoans are more likely than Americans overall to express an unmet need for local information on every topic surveyed, particularly transportation (27% difference), education (26% difference), and sports (24% difference). **(PAGE 19)**
- Chicagoans are most likely to turn to friends and family when they need quality information. **(PAGE 20)**
- Less than half of Chicagoans are satisfied with the information they have when making critical decisions like where to live or facing critical situations like a crime occurring nearby or changes in local law. **(PAGE 22)**
- Nearly 60% of Chicagoans have gotten involved in local civic life in some way in the last year, and 18% have advocated improved local institutions, services, and policies. **(PAGE 30)**
- Parents and educators are the Chicagoans most likely to get involved in trying to improve local schools **(PAGE 37)**

ABOUT US

CIVIC NEWS COMPANY is the publisher of **Chalkbeat**, **Votebeat**, and **Healthbeat**.

Our newsrooms and bureaus – including [Chalkbeat Chicago](#) – help people strengthen their communities with journalism that is rooted in local needs and subject matter expertise. Its reporting covers the critical, day-to-day work and life experiences of the people who fight to improve education, voting, and public health outcomes and the people affected by that work.

We are a part of a civic information movement working to rebuild the civic health of our communities that has been devastated by the collapse of for-profit local journalism.

ABOUT US

The **CIVIC INFORMATION NEEDS CENSUS** is the pilot project of a team working in and alongside Civic News Company.

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ABOUT THE SURVEY

EMBOLD research, a non-partisan, non-political data science and research company, led the national survey for CINC.

Excerpts from their report will appear in this report with **blue** or **white** background colors.

METHODOLOGY

On behalf of Civic News, Embold Research surveyed adults in Chicago, with a focus on parents and educators, to better understand information needs and media consumption habits of both the general population and civic catalysts. In addition to identifying if, where, and how people get the information they need, the research also focused on information satisfaction, and perception and awareness of key education sources.



Survey of n=1698 adults in Chicago, with an oversample of parents and educators, from October 14-23, 2024



Respondents were recruited via dynamic online sampling to obtain a sample reflective of the population.



Post-stratification performed on age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, and 2020 presidential vote.



The modeled margin of error is 2.7%

SAMPLE OVERVIEW



53% Women
45% Men
2% Gender non-conforming



39% White
29% Black
19% Hispanic
8% AAPI
4% Other



30% Under \$50K
26% Between \$50-\$99L
33% \$100K or more
12% prefer not to say



31% 18-34
26% 35-49
22% 50-64
21% 65+



8% current/former educators
92% non-educators



21% parents
79% non-parents

CHICAGO SURVEY RESULTS:
**OVERALL CIVIC INFORMATION
GAPS AND NEEDS**

CIVIC INFO TOPICS

The civic information portion of the survey is built around responses on 10 topics. We define topics 1-7 as “critical information needs”; they are based on the [2012 FCC Friedland Report](#) and [HHS’s Social Determinants of Health](#). Topics 8-10 fill out the breadth of what’s often in a general interest local news source.

Respondents were asked to rate:

1/ How important information is about each in their everyday life, and

2/ How satisfied they are with the information they have about each.

1/ Local Education

(including school programs, curriculum, and quality)

2/ Local Transportation

(including transit schedules, costs, and traffic)

3/ Local Health + Well-being

(including access to quality care, community needs and trends)

4/ Local Economic Opportunities

(including jobs, housing, personal finance, and business environment)

5/ Local Political Information

(including voting, elected officials, and public policy initiatives)

6/ Local Environment

(including air/water quality, sanitation, and access to recreation)

7/ Local Risks and Emergencies

(including crime/public safety and climate)

8/ Local Community Institutions + Gatherings

(including churches, libraries, clubs, and cultural events)

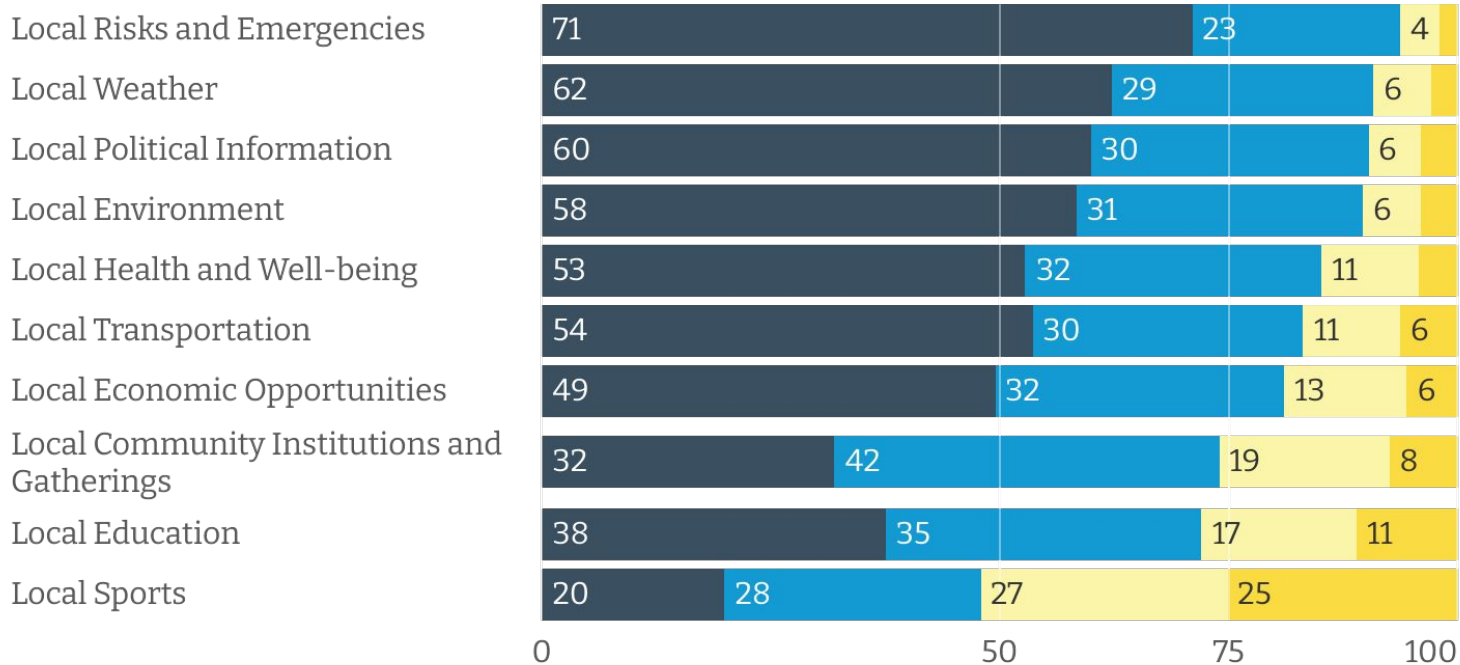
9/ Local Weather

10/ Local Sports

Chicago Local Information Importance

How important is it for you to get information about each of the following topics in your everyday life?

● Very important ● Somewhat important ● Not that important ● Not important at all

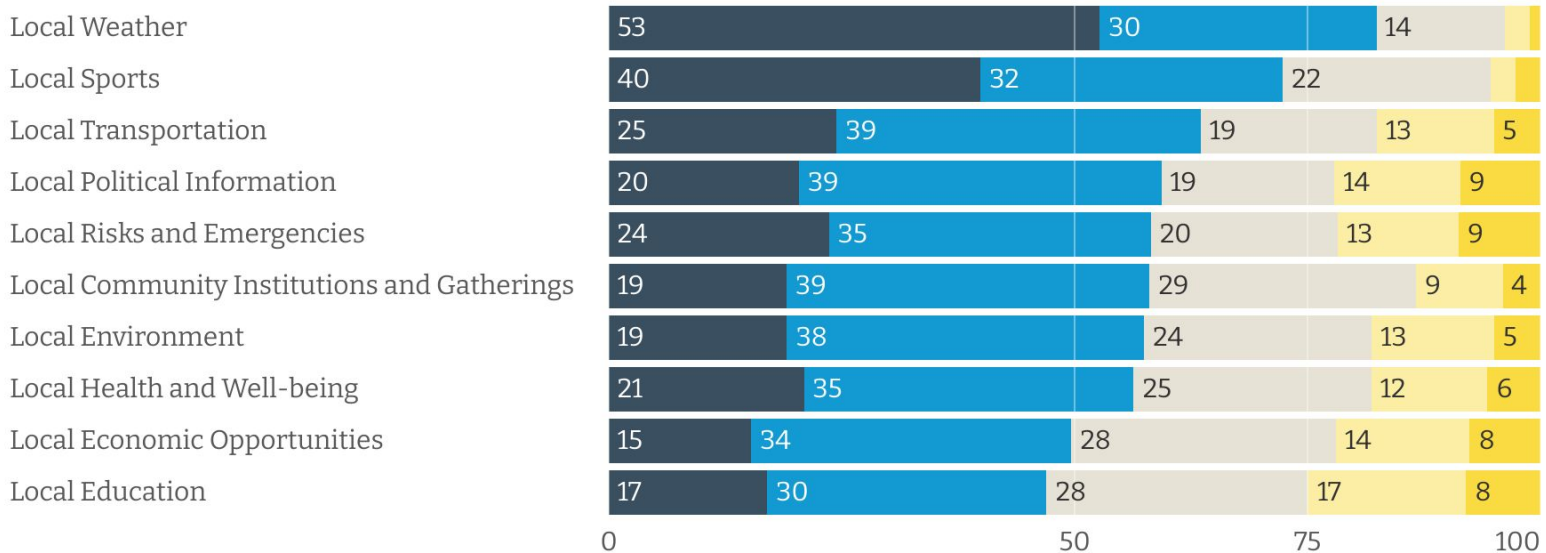


Chicago Local Information Satisfaction

When you seek out news and information about each of the following topics, how satisfied or unsatisfied are you with the information you are able to get?

[ASKED OF RESPONDENTS WHO SAID TOPIC WAS “VERY” OR “SOMEWHAT” IMPORTANT]

● Very satisfied ● Somewhat satisfied ● Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied ● Somewhat unsatisfied ● Very unsatisfied

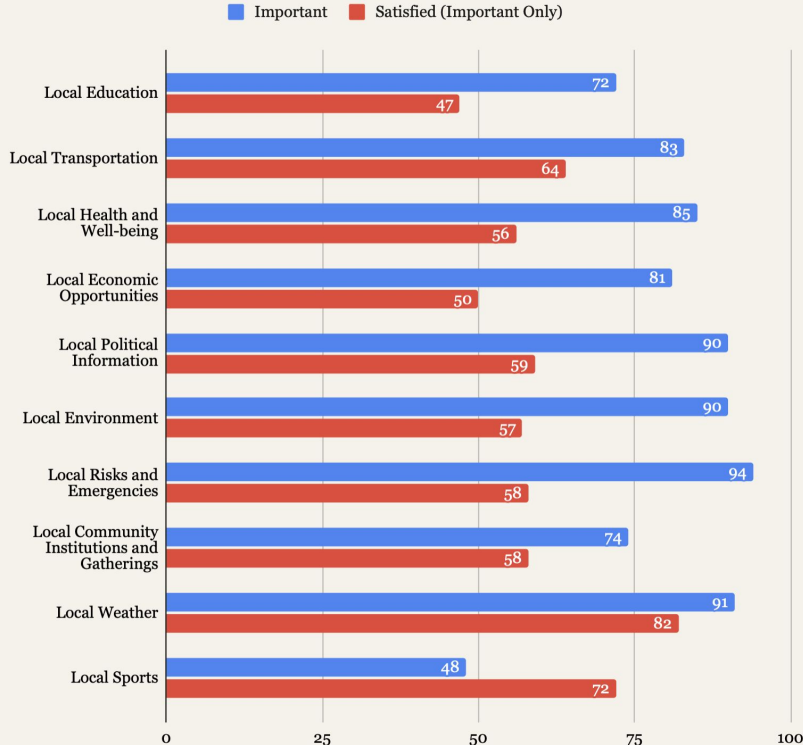


TAKEAWAYS

- Large majorities of Chicagoans (72 to 94%) view information about all but one local topic (sports) at least somewhat important.
- Half or more Chicagoans (49% to 71%) view the 7 topics critical to civic health as very important.
- While 95% of Chicagoans view information about weather as important, just 3% of that group were unsatisfied with what they have.
- And while fewer Chicagoans viewed sports as important, just 6% of that group said they were unsatisfied.
- Chicagoans were least satisfied with the information they have on economic opportunity and education, with more than 50% of those who viewed each as important saying they were even “somewhat” satisfied.

Chicago Local Info Satisfaction + Importance

Total importance (“very” and “somewhat”) and total satisfaction (“somewhat” and “very”) for those who said each topic was important.



IDENTIFYING INFO NEEDS

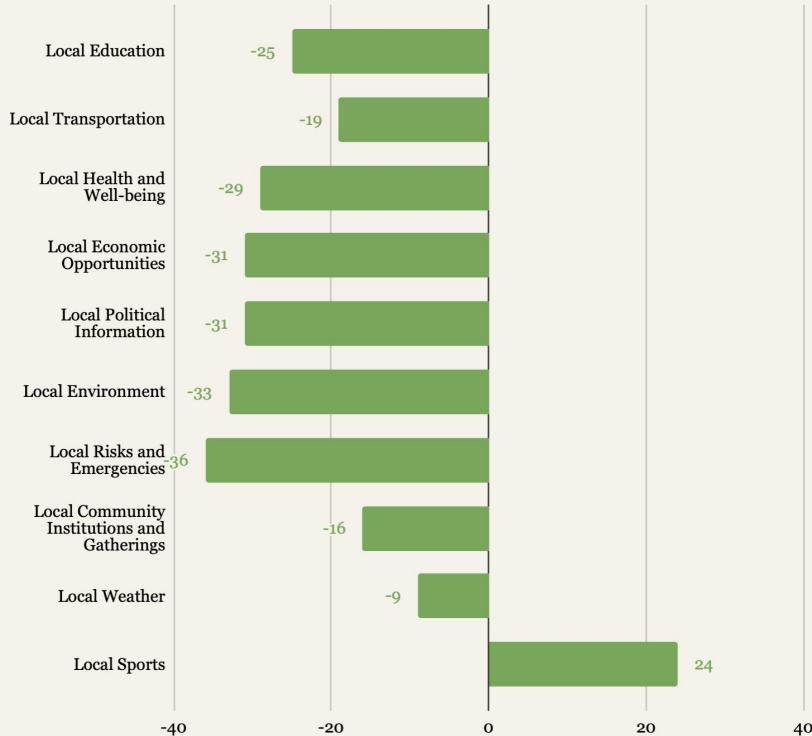
There are many valuable ways of assessing the information needs of a community.

We believe one is by simply turning to a community itself and comparing its views of information importance to views of information satisfaction.

In this look at the data, we see total importance (“very” and “somewhat” important) contrasted with total satisfaction (“somewhat” and “very” satisfied) specifically for those who said each issue was important.

Chicago Local Info Needs Across Topics

The gap between satisfaction with + views of the importance of info about 10 local information topics, where negatives represent more importance than satisfaction and positive numbers represent more satisfaction than importance.



IDENTIFYING INFO NEEDS

Simplifying further, we see the gap between overall importance and the satisfaction of those who view a topic as important for each. We interpret this gap as an indication of need.

Notice:

- There are gaps for all 7 topics critical for civic health, ranging from 19 to 36%.
- Chicagoans report the largest information needs on risks and emergencies, the environment, political info, and economic opportunity.
- For local sports, satisfaction far surpasses importance, indicating the absence of a need.

TOPIC NEEDS BY SUBGROUP

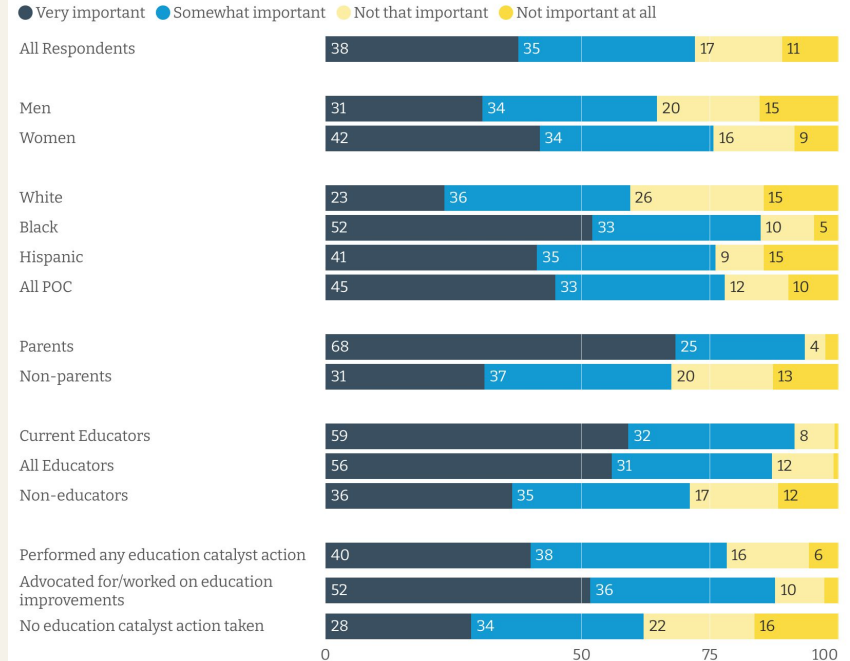
But the overall results paint an incomplete picture. Responses vary significantly on each topic between subgroups.

For example, the importance of education varies to different Chicagoans:

- Those directly engaged with education (parents, educators) are much more likely to view education info as important.
- Women and POC are also more likely to see local education as important.
- There is a correlation between viewing education as important and taking civic action related to it.

Chicago Local Info Needs Breakdown: Education

The importance of local education as a topic according to each subgroup.



CHICAGO vs. NATIONAL IMPORTANCE

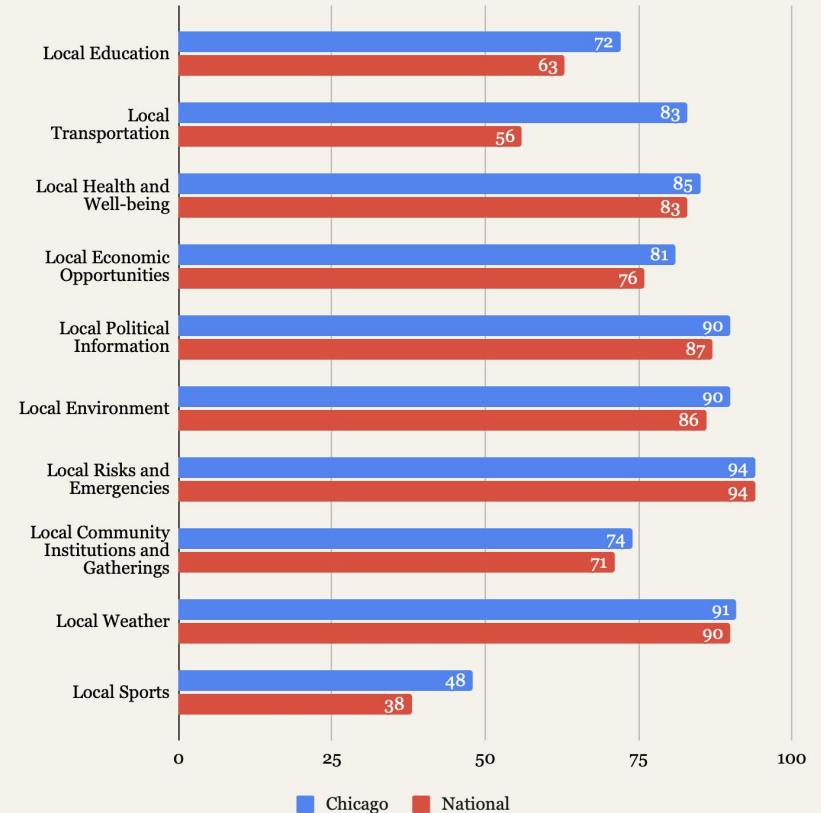
In [a national survey and report](#) done ahead of this Chicago work, we asked Americans overall about the importance of these local topics.

Notice:

- For 7 of the 10 topics, the difference is close to or within the 3% margin of error.
- Chicagoans were statistically significantly more likely to view local education (9% more) and sports information (10% more) as important.
- The largest difference is in transportation, where Chicagoans were *much* (27%) more likely to view the info as important.

Local Info Importance: Chicago vs. National

Total numbers of respondents who viewed each topic as “very” or “somewhat” important in Chicago and the country overall.



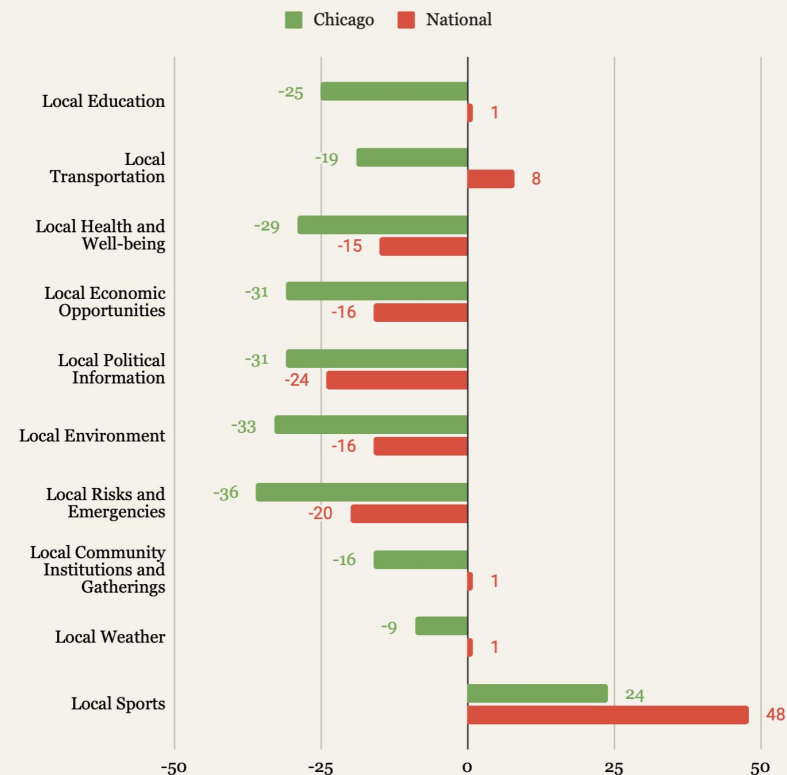
CHICAGO vs. NATIONAL INFO NEEDS

The info gaps (and therefore info needs) of Chicagoans also differ from the local info needs of the country more broadly. Comparing importance and the satisfaction of those who see each topic as important, we see:

- Chicagoans express larger info needs across every topic than Americans overall (10% to 27% differences).
- The largest differences between the info needs of Chicagoans and Americans generally are around transportation (27% difference), education (26% difference) and sports (24% difference).

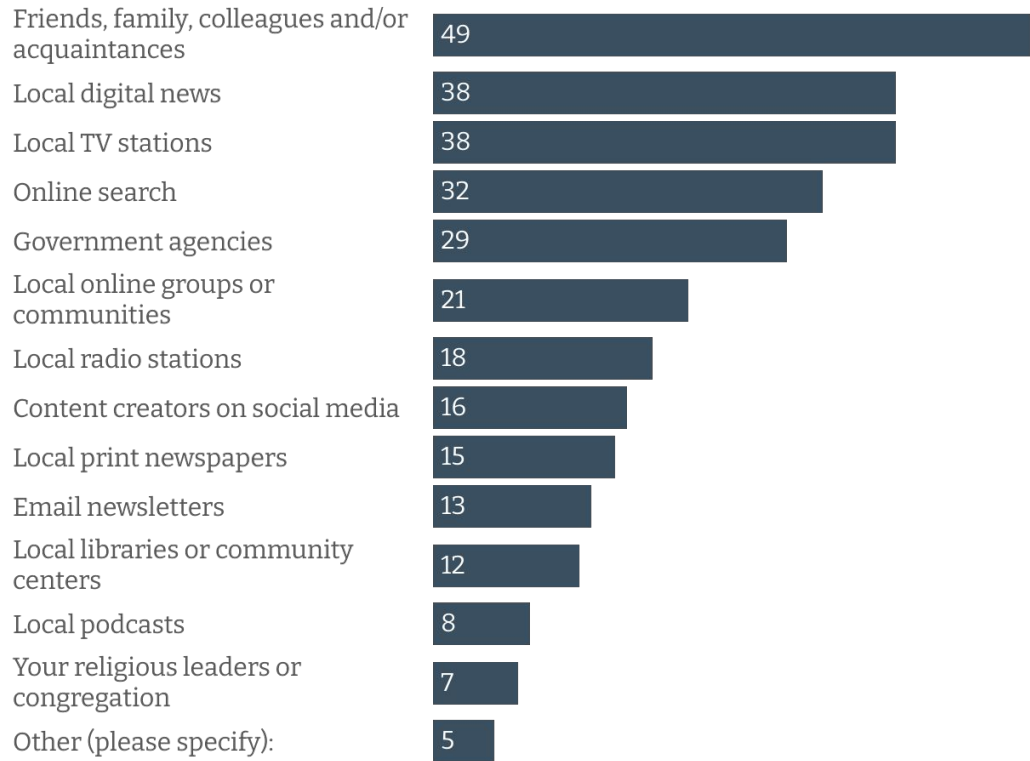
Local Info Gaps: Chicago vs. National

The gap between satisfaction with + views of the importance of info about 10 local information topics, where negatives represent more importance than satisfaction and positive numbers represent more satisfaction than importance.



When it comes to finding quality information, respondents primarily rely on word-of-mouth, followed by local digital news and local TV.

Top Useful Information Sources



Q: When it comes to the topics where quality information is the most important to you, which of the following sources do you find most useful? Select up to THREE.

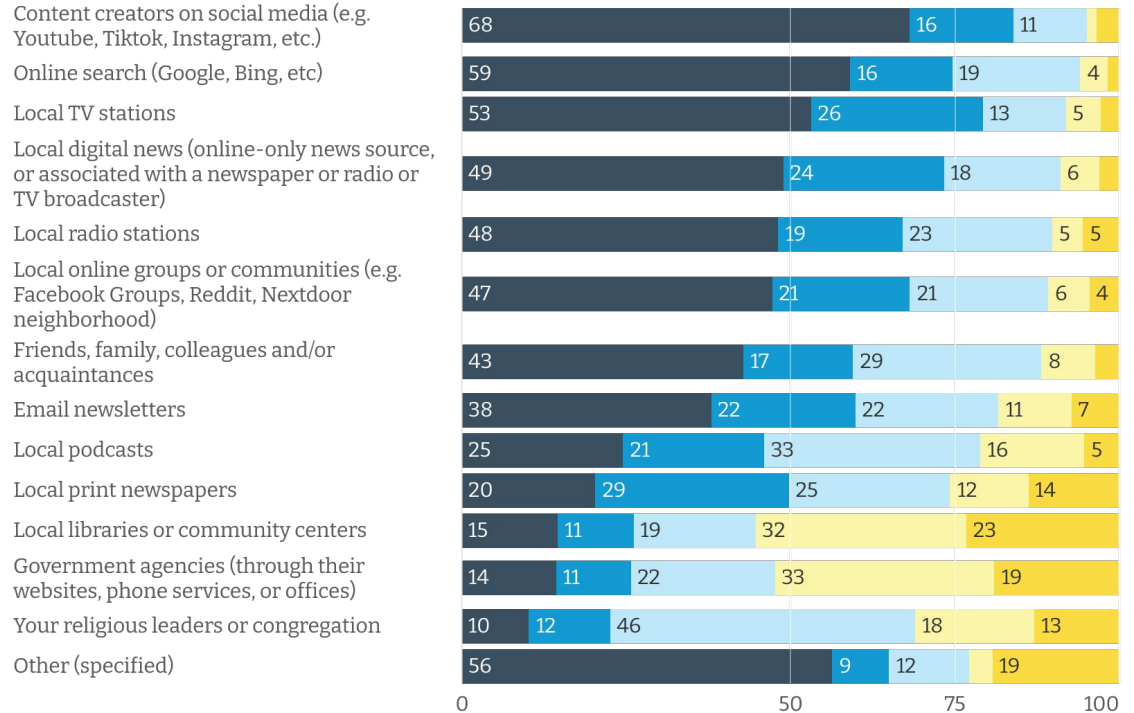


Digital sources and local news stations tend to be the sources respondents turn to the most frequently.

Frequency of Accessing Sources

Among sources considered "most useful"

● Multiple times a day ● Once a day ● A few times a week ● A few times a month ● Less often



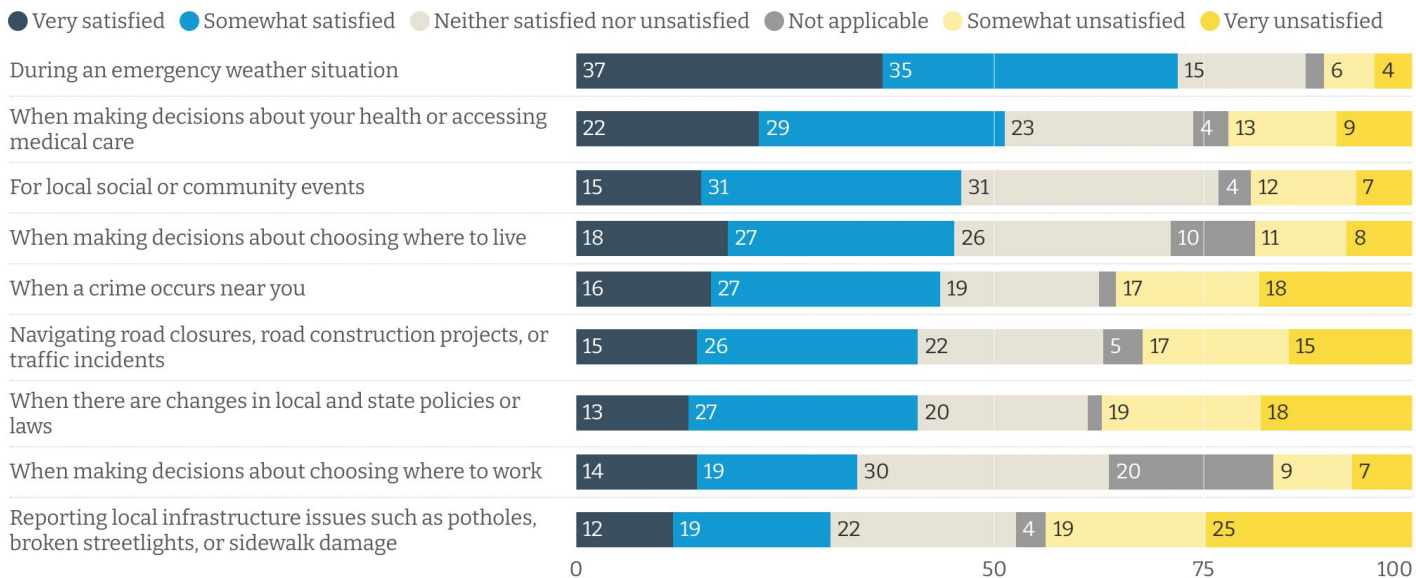
Q: How often do you access the following news sources:

Respondents were shown the 1-3 sources they selected as "most useful" in accessing quality information



While respondents are overwhelmingly satisfied with finding information during emergencies, respondents are more neutral or divided in other critical situations

Satisfaction with Critical Information



Q: How satisfied or unsatisfied are you with getting the information you need in the following situations?

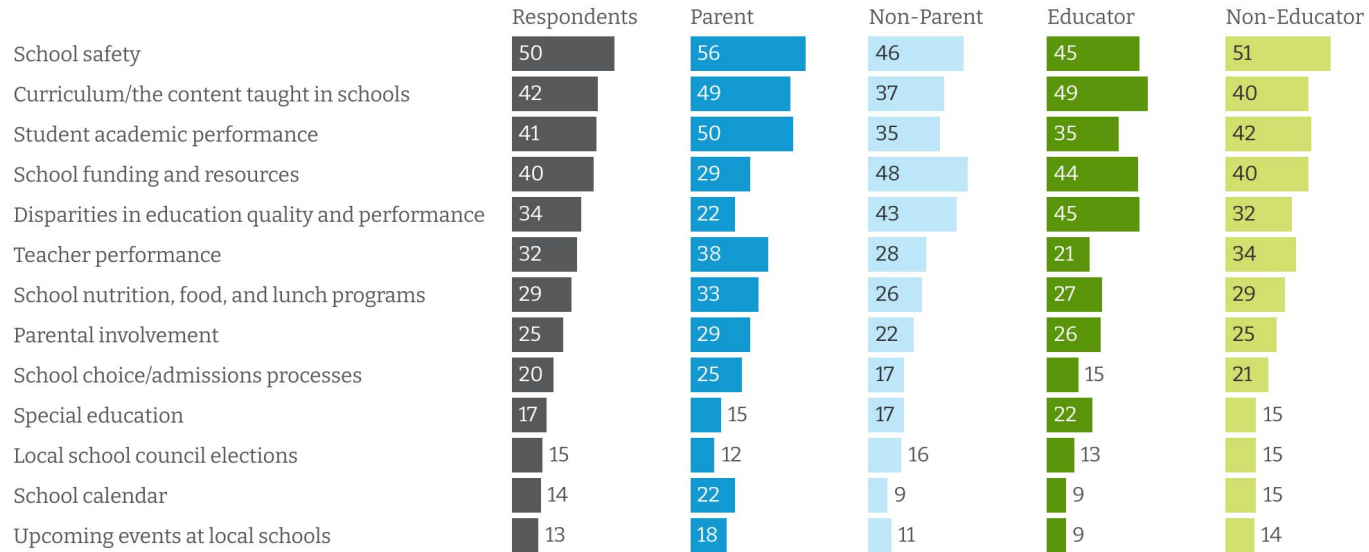


CHICAGO SURVEY RESULTS:
**EDUCATION INFORMATION
GAPS AND NEEDS**

School safety, curriculum, and student performance are most often selected as the most important education issues

Importance of Education Information by Subgroup

Asked only of parents, teachers, and those who have done at least one action to make changes in local or state public education



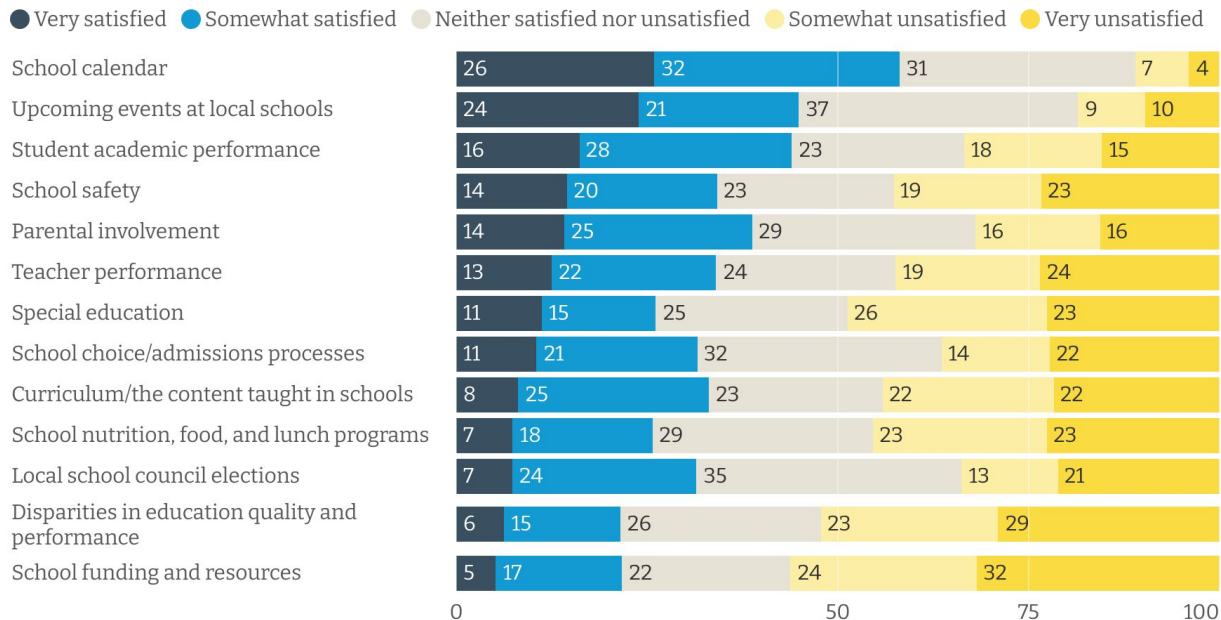
Q: Thinking specifically about schools and education, which are most important to you to get information about for your daily life? Select up to THREE.



With one exception, minorities of respondents are satisfied with the information they are able to get on priority education topics.

Satisfaction with Education Topics

Asked only of parents, teachers, and those who have done at least one action to make changes in local or state public education



Q: And how satisfied or unsatisfied are you with the information you are able to get on each of the following topics?

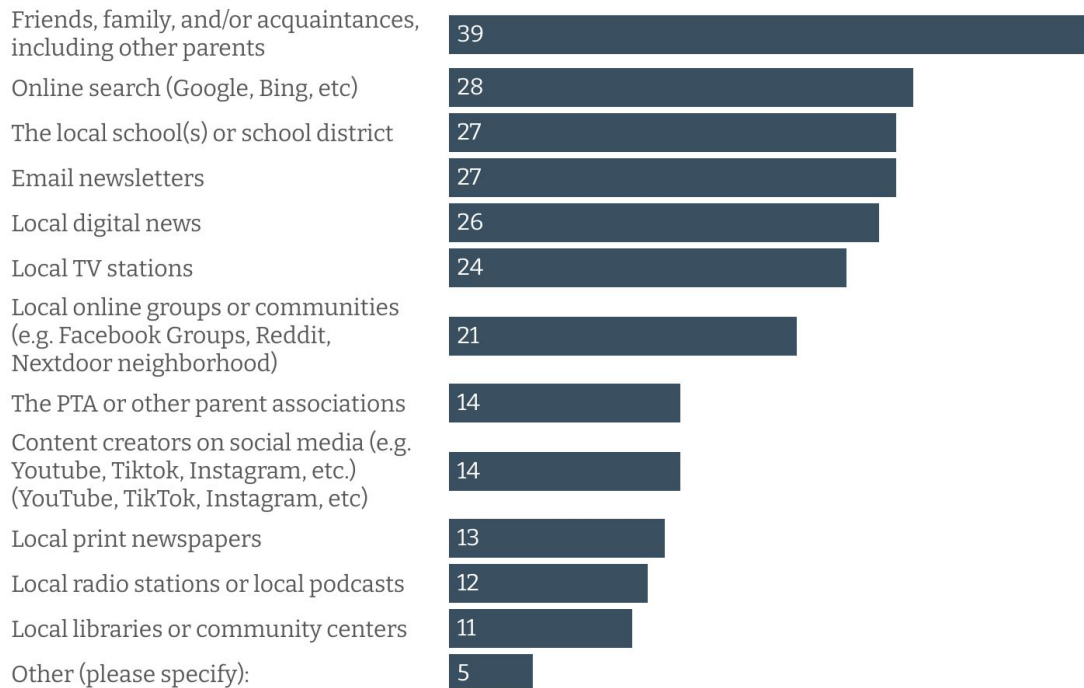


Similar to other types of news, respondents report primarily relying on word of mouth channels to get education and school-related information

Notably, parents are most likely to use email newsletters as a source of information, though word of mouth and the school district remain prominent channels

Frequently Used Education Sources

Asked only of parents, teachers, and those who have done at least one action to make changes in local or state public education



Q: When it comes to education- or school-related topics, which of the following sources do you use most often? Select up to THREE



Chicagoans feel that most education topics are not significantly covered, but the lack of information on school curriculum, funding, and disparities across schools are the most cited.

*When it comes to the way education- and school-related issues are covered in Chicago, what is one issue you wish was covered **more**?*

“Curriculum [sic] and funding” - Black woman, 50-64, parent, non-educator, potential education catalyst

“Curriculum choices and changes, especially when it comes to literacy and social studies.” - White woman, 35-49, parent, non-educator, potential education catalyst

“I want to know if these kids are being educated on the resources in this city that they and their families qualify for (free museum visits, meal programs, CTA cards, EBT, free school/art supplies, etc). There are so many resources that no one talks about and kids suffer as a result.” - White man, 18-34, non-parent, former educator, non-education catalyst



Chicagoans express marked frustration with the dominance of the CTU in school news, and related politicization of the city's public school system.

*When it comes to the way education- and school-related issues are covered in Chicago, what is one issue you wish was covered **less**?*

The drama between CTU /Brandon Johnson and Pedro Martinez. It's bias. It's polarizing and it does NOT reflect how the actual staff in the schools feel.." - *Hispanic woman, 50-64, non-parent, current educator, potential education catalyst*

"All I usually see is the political battle with the mayor. Maybe we should hear more about how issues will actually effect [sic] our children and not the a[*****] fighting about politics" - *White woman, 50-64, parent, non-educator, potential education catalyst*

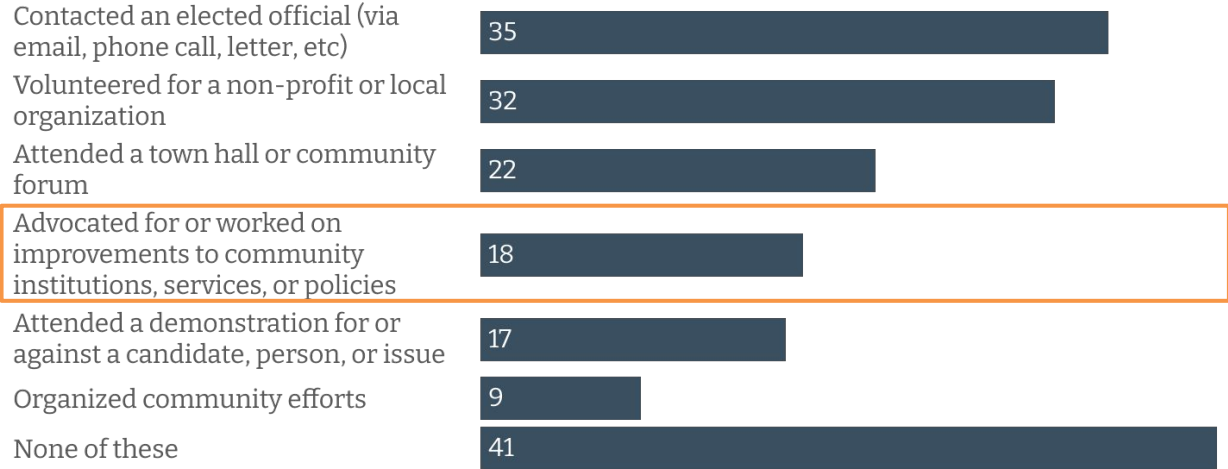
"The ever present strife between the teachers unions and the local governments. It's Important, but it usually overshadows everything else." - *White man, 18-34, non-parent, non-educator, potential civic catalyst*



CHICAGO SURVEY RESULTS:
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Although nearly six in 10 Chicagoans have gotten involved in their communities in some way, only 18% say they have advocated or worked on improvements to the community.

Catalyst Actions

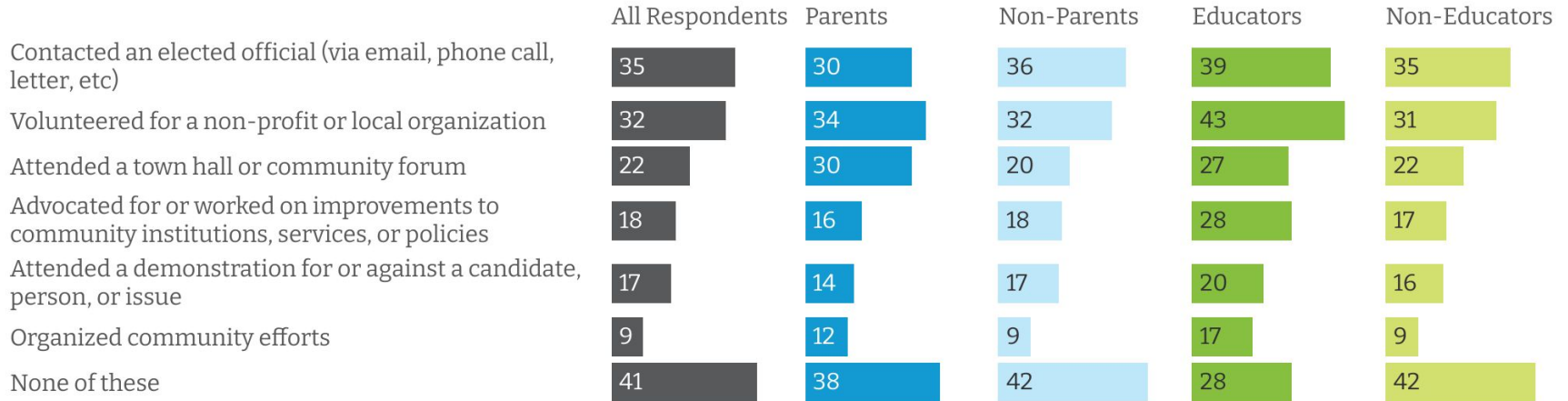


Q: These are some things that some people do to get involved and make changes in their community. Which of the following have you done in the last year? Select all that apply.



Both parents and educators are slightly more likely than their peers to be generally

Catalyst Action by Subgroup

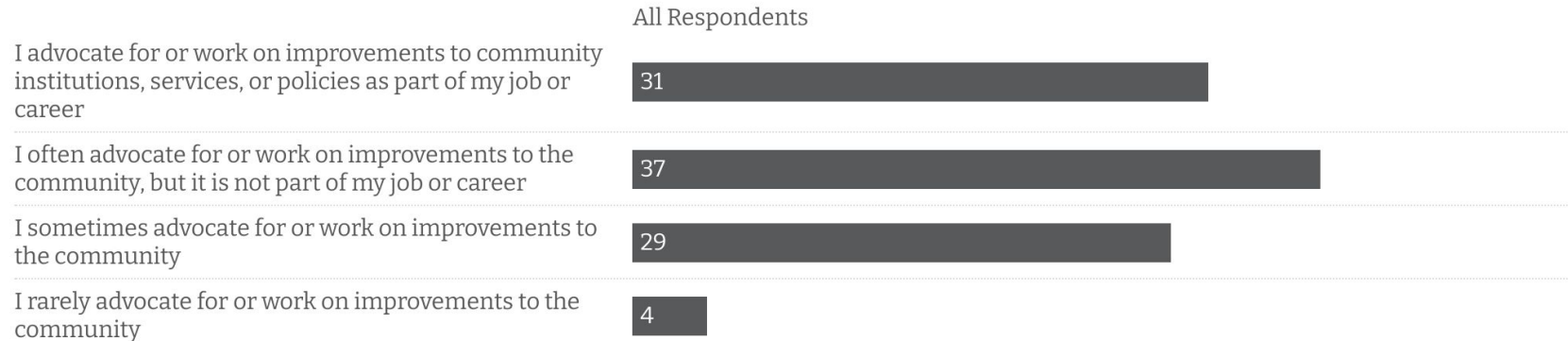


Q: These are some things that some people do to get involved and make changes at a local or state level. Which of the following have you done in the last year? Select all that apply.



Of those who have advocated or worked on improvements, the majority do so regularly.

Frequency of General Advocacy Efforts

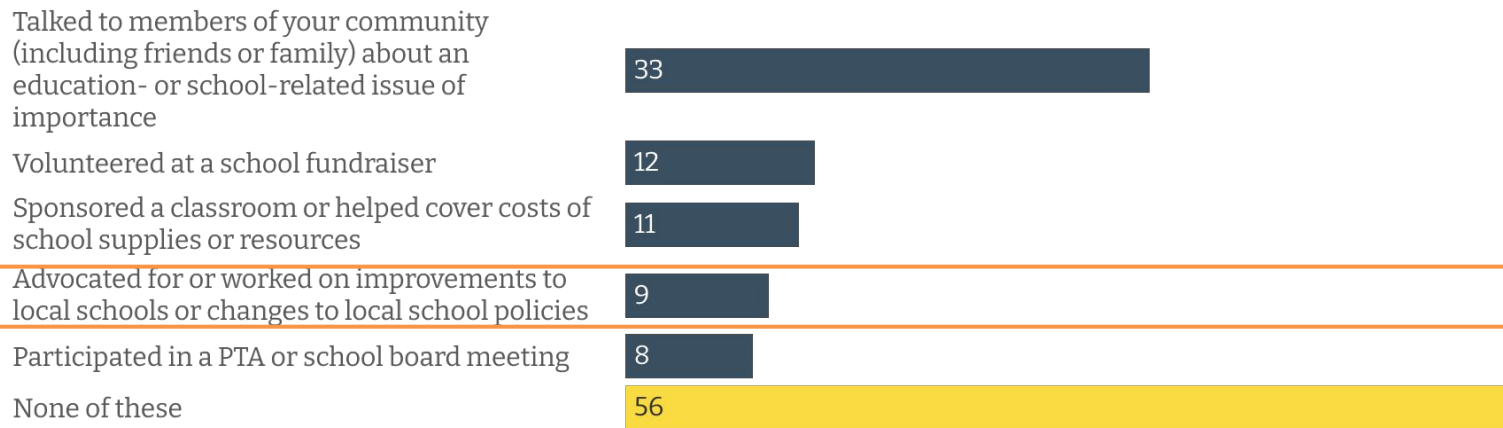


Q: [ASKED ONLY OF PEOPLE WHO SELECT "Advocated for or worked on improvements to institutions, services, or policies at a local or state level"] Which of the following best describes you?



Just under half of Chicagoans have gotten involved in local or state education in some way, with only 9% describing themselves as advocating or working for improvements.

Education Catalyst Actions

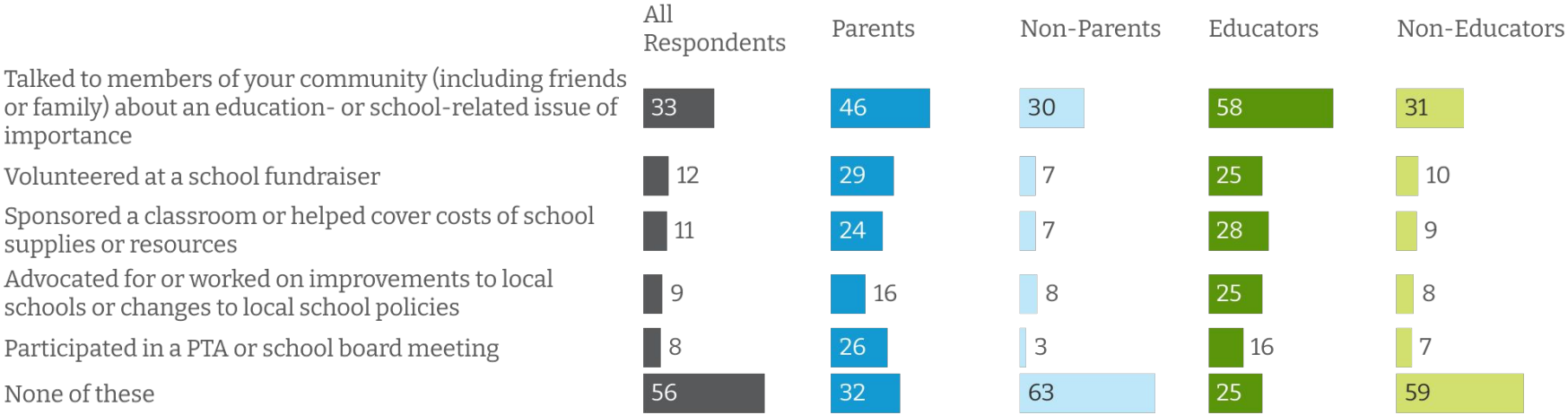


Q: These are some things that some people do to get involved and make changes in their local schools and state public education. Which of the following have you done in the last year? Select all that apply.



Just like in a non-education setting, parents and educators are more likely to be civically engaged.

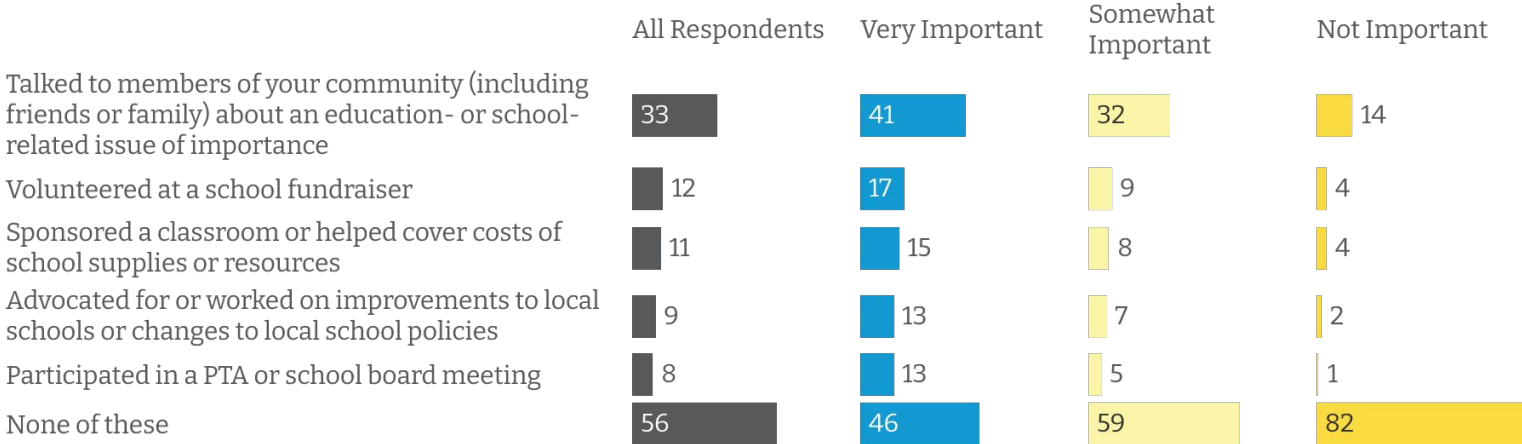
Education Catalyst Actions by Subgroup



Q: These are some things that some people do to get involved and make changes in their local schools or state public education. Which of the following have you done in the last year? Select all that apply.

When education is an important component of their day-to-day lives, respondents are much more likely to have engaged in education at a local or state level.

Education Catalyst Actions by Education Issue Importance

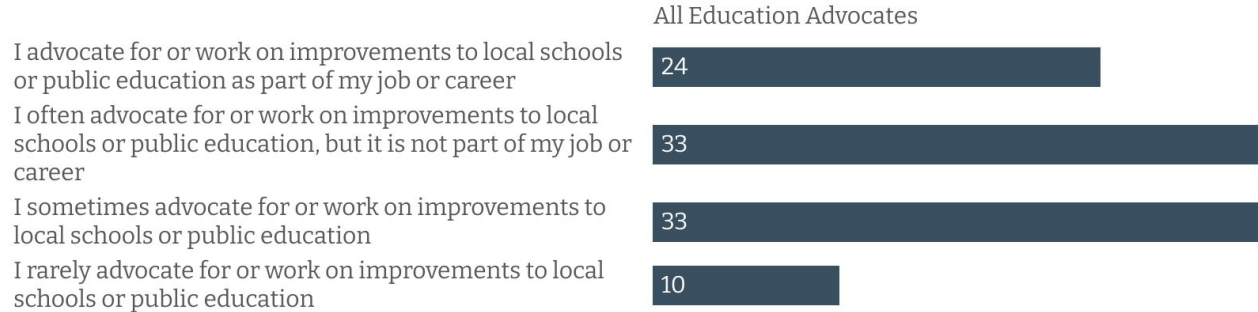


Q: These are some things that some people do to get involved and make changes in their local schools or state public education. Which of the following have you done in the last year? Select all that apply.



Similar to those engaged in general advocacy, of those who have advocated or worked on improvements in education, the majority do so regularly.

Frequency of Education Advocacy Efforts

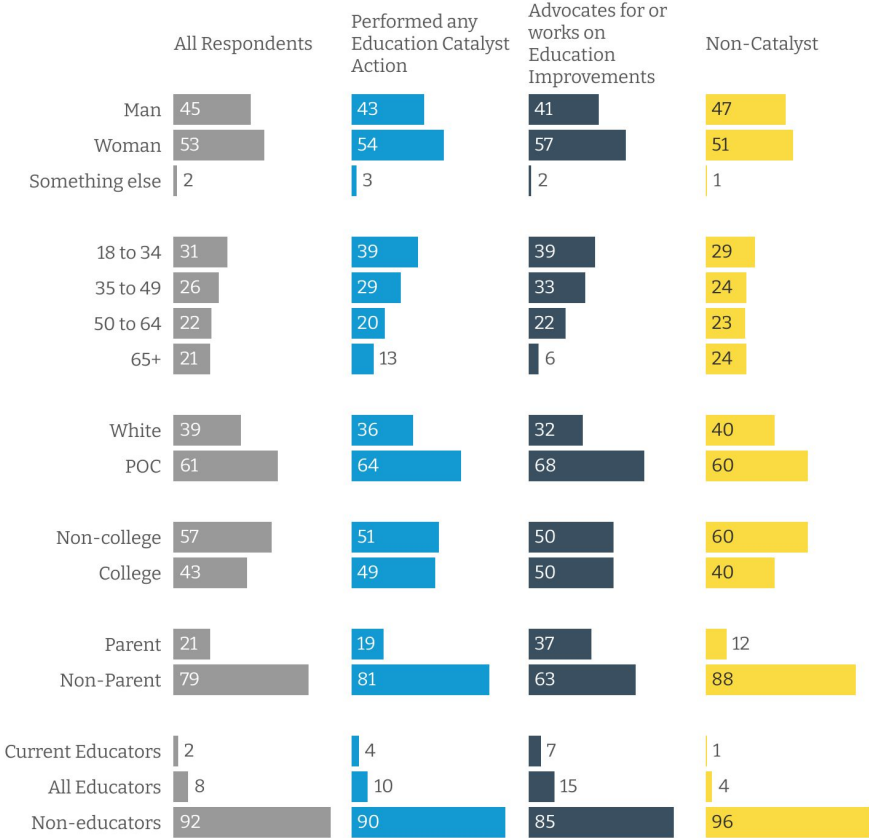


Q: [ASKED ONLY OF PEOPLE WHO SELECT "Advocated for changes or worked on improvements in local schools or in public education"] Which of the following best describes you?



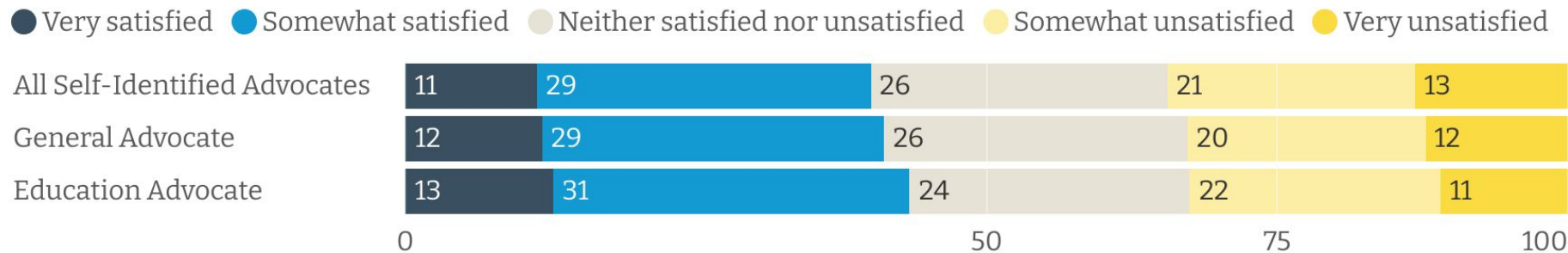
Profile of "Education Catalysts"

Respondents who are most likely to be "education catalysts" tend to be parents and educators, and are more likely to be college-educated.



Self-identified Civic Catalysts tend to be divided on their satisfaction with the information and tools they currently have for their advocacy.

Satisfaction with Information for Advocacy



Q: [IF “advocated for or worked on...” IN EITHER CATALYST QUESTION] How satisfied are you with the information and tools you currently have to help you advocate for or work on improvements at a local or state level?

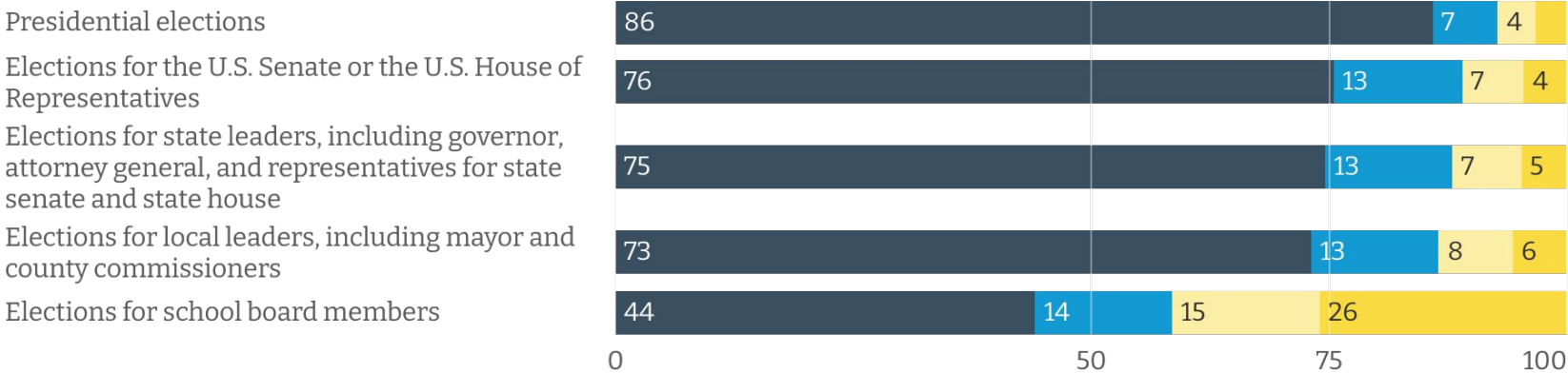


Among registered voters, substantial majorities say they always vote in presidential and local elections; however, voting participation drops significantly in school board elections.

Election Participation

Asked among registered voters

● Always ● Often ● Sometimes ● Rarely or never



Q: [If registered to vote] How often do you vote in each of the following types of elections?

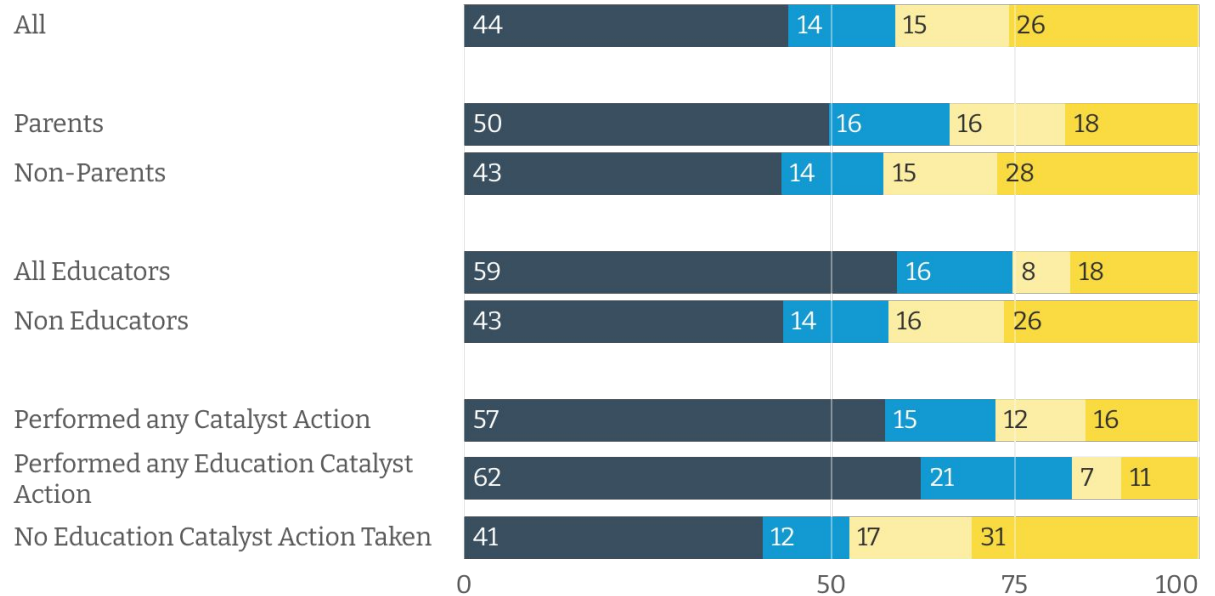


**Educators,
Parents, and
those who have
advocated for
Education
Improvements
are the most
likely to vote in
school board
elections.**

School Board Election Participation by Subgroup

Asked among registered voters

● Always ● Often ● Sometimes ● Rarely or never



Q: [If registered to vote] How often do you vote in each of the following types of elections?
Elections for school board members



CHICAGO SURVEY RESULTS:
CONCLUSIONS + NEXT STEPS

CONCLUSION

This analysis only scratches the surface of the insights that may be available in this data.

And we hope this is just a starting point: we believe that as more similar local surveys are done we'll be able to learn more about Chicago via comparison. A similar survey is being done in New York City, and its results will be available in early 2025. And we just release a national report and survey, and additional work can be done to draw conclusions about how Chicago may differ from the country more generally.

We also know that by repeating this research on a regular intervals in Chicago we'll be able to see how the community is changing and whether

efforts in Chicago are improving its civic information health. We hope this is just the first of many Chicago CINCs.

Chicagoans have distinct and urgent information needs. Media behaviors are changing and responses vary depending on life circumstances and background, but that core truth remains.

Civic information should be the fuel of our civic life. It should motivate and inspire us to improve our communities and its institutions, for our own sake and for our neighbor's.

We hope this work can help the people who care about Chicago fuel its civic health.

NEXT STEPS

You made it to the end and you're thinking: what now? We've got answers.

1/ Share this report and / or its data.

We want this to be in the hands of anyone who might find it useful. If you did, chances are you know someone else who will as well.

2/ Dig into the raw data.

You can find the [topline results of the survey here](#), the [full crosstabs here](#), and the [full survey and methodology here](#).

3/ Read the national CINC report.

You can [find it right here](#).

4/ Get ready for New York City.

The results of that survey are coming very soon. Follow [us on LinkedIn](#) or go to [the Civic News Company site](#) to make sure you don't miss them.

4/ Reach out.

Interested in doing this in your community? In comparing other data or adding analysis? Reach out to agolis at civicnews dot org.