

THE LOCAL INFORMATION NEEDS OF AMERICANS

An overview of new data from a national survey of the views and actions of Americans 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 summarizes the findings of a national survey on local civic information needs done in August of 2024. Its findings are meant to establish a baseline for two local Civic Information Needs Census pilots being done in Chicago and New York City. Those results will also be published when they are available.

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).

In the coming weeks, this data will provide a foundation and point of comparison for future community-specific CINC projects, including pilots being done in Chicago and New York City this year.

We also hope it will inspire civic information practitioners in communities across the country to think strategically and collaboratively about how they meet community information needs, including with a CINC of their own.

And we hope it offers urgency and inspiration to 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 5 topics critical to overall civic health – health, economic opportunity, politics, the environment, and risks and emergencies – there is a 16 to 26% gap between the importance Americans place in having local information and their satisfaction with what's available. **(PAGE 16)**
- For American parents there is a 27% gap between importance and satisfaction on education information, larger than any other topic. **(PAGE 18)**
- 34% of Americans 18 to 34 turn to creators on social media when they are looking for quality information on the local issues that matter to them. **(PAGE 20)**
- Within education, Americans have the largest information needs (~30% gaps between importance and satisfaction) on issues that require system-wide analysis **(PAGE 26)**
- 15% of Americans say they've worked to improve local community institutions, services, or policies in the last year. We call these people Civic Catalysts. **(PAGE 30)**
- These Civic Catalysts working to strengthen their communities report larger information needs across every topic, with gaps between importance and satisfaction as much as 15% larger than respondents overall. **(PAGE 35)**

ABOUT US

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

Its newsrooms 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.

It is 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.

We are:

Kang-Xing Jin

Board Member, Civic News Company

Andrew Golis

COO, Civic News Company

Anika Anand

Commoner Company

Lindsay Green-Barber

Impact Architects

Darryl Holliday

Commoner Company

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 in **blue** or **white**. On methodology:



Survey of n=2,110 adults nationwide, with an oversample of parents and educators, from August 20-29, 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 2.6%



ABOUT THE SURVEY

The sample of educators and parents allowed for additional insights in follow-up questions on civic information and education.

SAMPLE OVERVIEW



52% Women
46% Men
2% Gender non-conforming



64% White
12% Black
12% Hispanic
7% AAPI
4% Other
1% Native
0% MENA



22% Midwest
18% Northeast
38% South
23% West



25% 18-34
24% 35-49
24% 50-64
26% 65+



9% current/former educators
91% non-educators



21% parents
79% non-parents



ABOUT THE SURVEY

In addition to gathering demographic data for analysis, the national survey had three sections:

Overall Civic Info Gaps and Needs

Importance and satisfaction across 10 topics of local civic info, as well as info source and platform usage and satisfaction.

Education Civic Info Gaps and Needs

Importance and satisfaction across 12 topics of education-specific local civic info, and education-specific info source and platform usage and satisfaction.

Civic Engagement

Questions about local civic actions taken both broadly and specifically on education-related community topics.

NATIONAL 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)

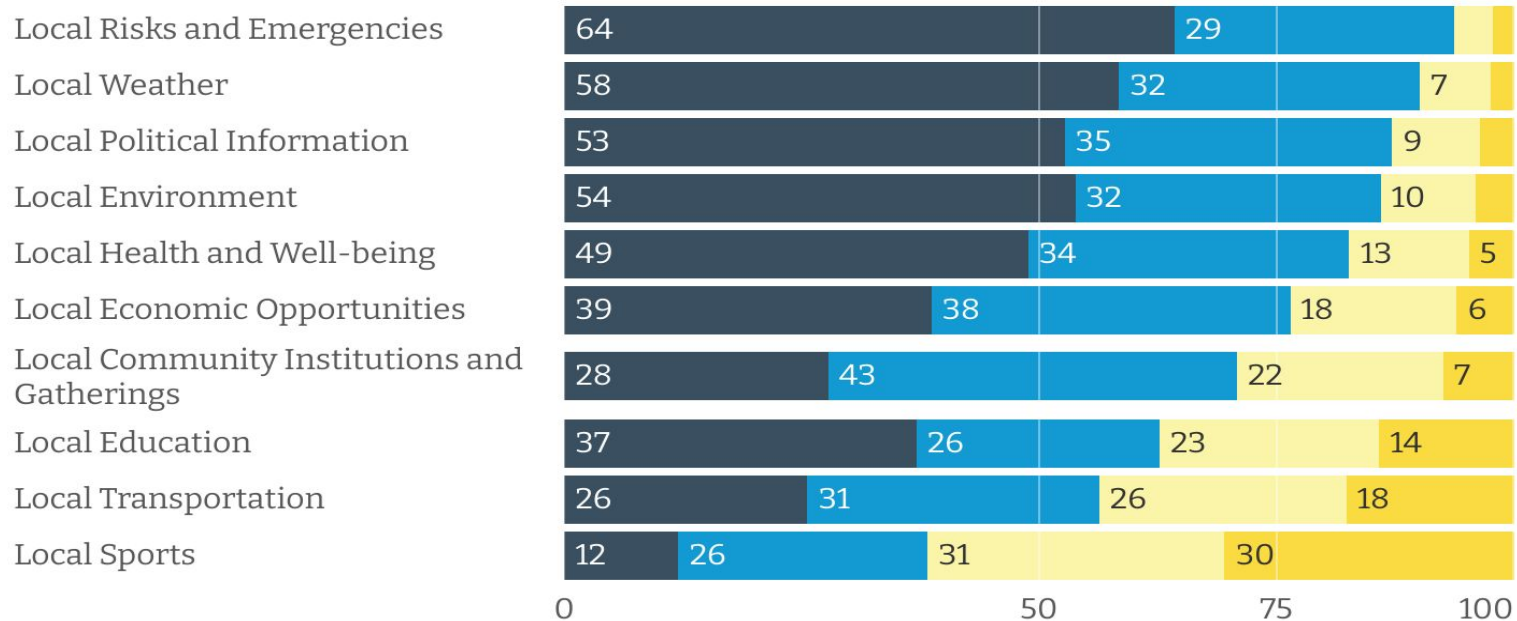
9/ Local Weather

10/ Local Sports

Local Information Importance

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

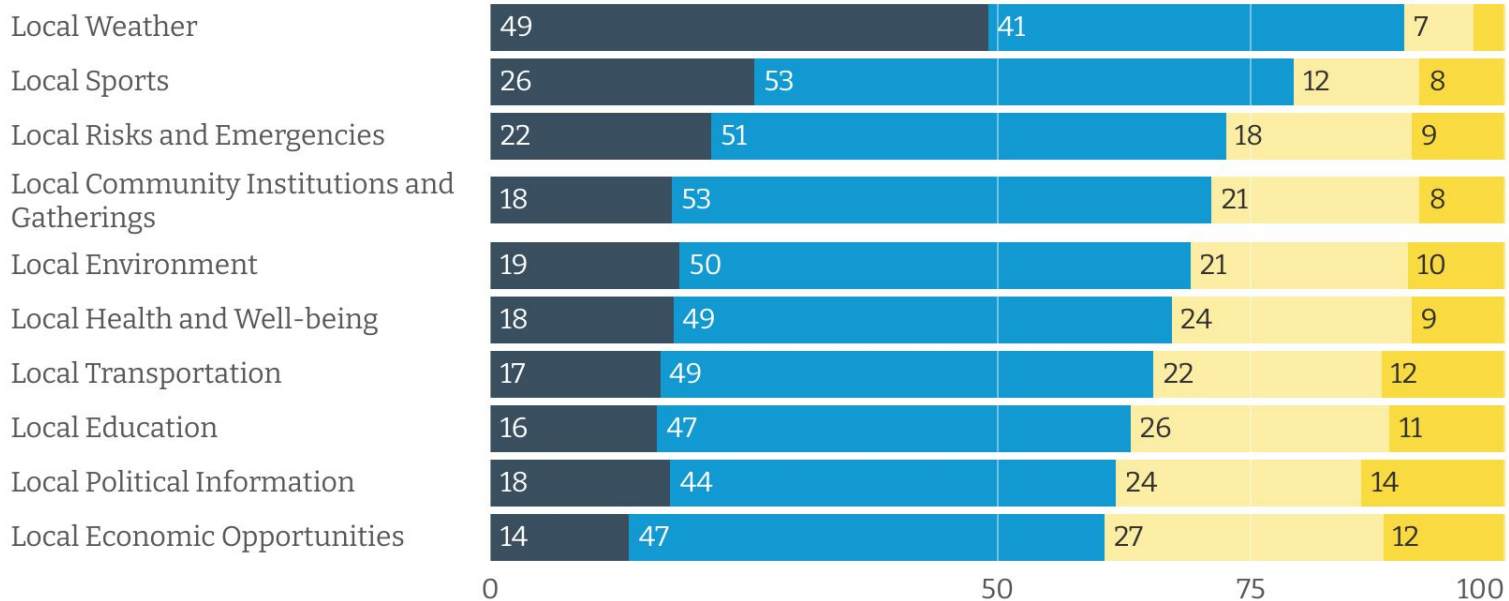
● Very important ● Somewhat important ● Not that important ● Not important at all



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?

● Very satisfied ● Somewhat satisfied ● Somewhat unsatisfied ● Very unsatisfied

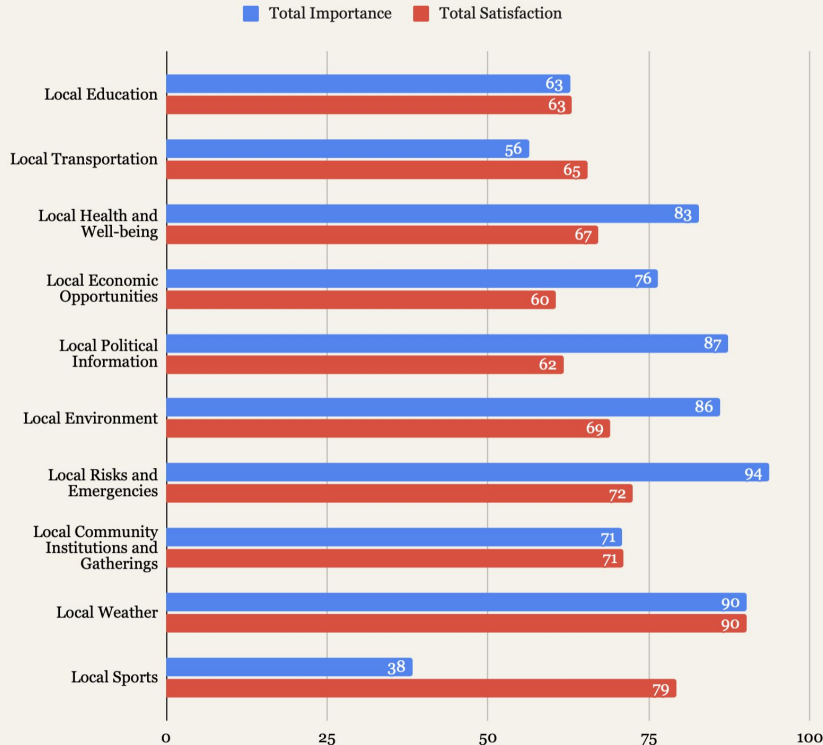


TAKEAWAYS

- Information about 5 of the 10 topics were viewed by about half or more respondents as “very important.”
- For 8 of the 10 topics, less than 1 in 4 respondents were “very satisfied” with the information they’re able to get, including for all 7 critical for civic health.
- Despite their popularity, local sports were least likely to be seen as important, and respondents were satisfied with the information they get.
- While they see it as very important, respondents were also satisfied with the info they have on the weather.
- Respondents were least satisfied with the information they have about local economic opportunities.

Local Info Satisfaction + Importance

Total importance (“very” and “somewhat” important) contrasted with total satisfaction (“somewhat” and “very” satisfied) across 10 topics.



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) across all 10 of the topics.

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 satisfaction on each. We interpret this gap as an indication of need.

Notice:

- ➔ On 5 of the 7 topics critical for civic health, there is 16 to 26% gap.
- ➔ On 3 topics, there is no overall gap indicating an information need. (Although more to come on that education number.)
- ➔ 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.

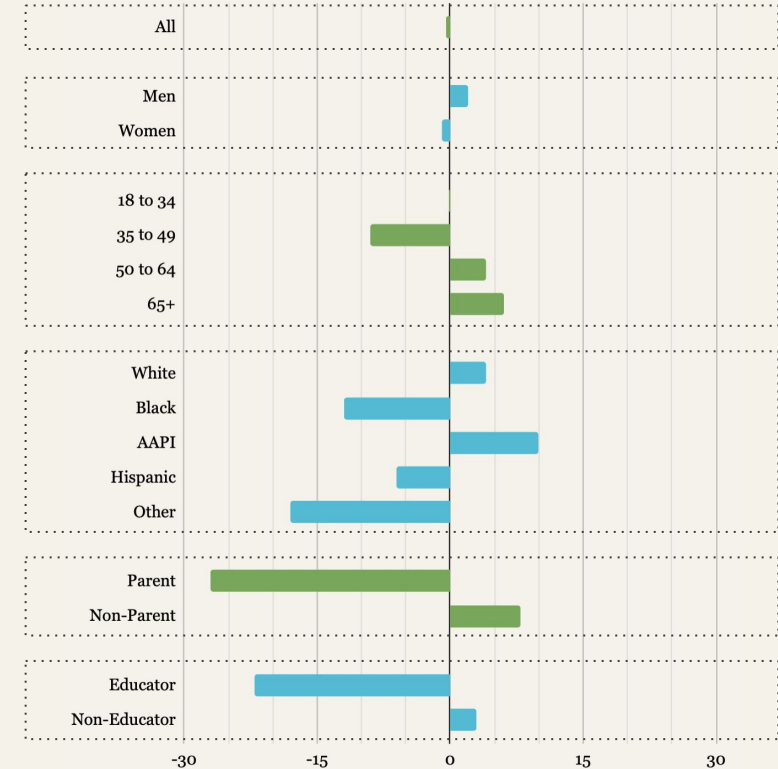
For example, while there is no gap for respondents overall on education:

- Those directly engaged with education (parents, parent-aged adults, educators) report a *significant* information need.
- Those less likely to be directly engaged (non-parents, older adults, non-educators) report a negative need.

*Versions of this chart for each topic can be found in the index.

Local Info Needs Breakdown: Education

The difference between satisfaction with + views of the importance of info about "Local Education (including school programs, curriculum, and quality)," where negatives represent more importance than satisfaction and positive numbers represent more satisfaction than importance.



SUBGROUP NEEDS BY TOPIC

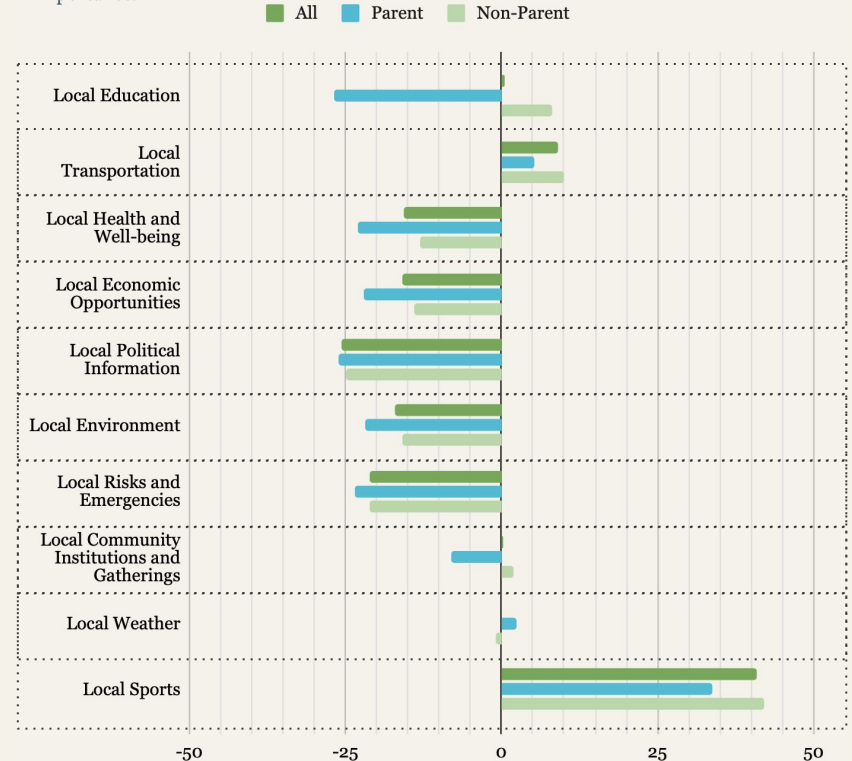
We can also compare the information needs of specific subgroups across topics. Staying with the parents vs. non-parents example we saw within education, for example:

- In addition to education, parents are also report a larger information need than non-parents on health and well-being, economic opportunities, and local community institutions and gatherings.
- While education info is one of least significant needs for respondents overall, it is the most significant need for parents.

This chart can be generated for every subgroup.

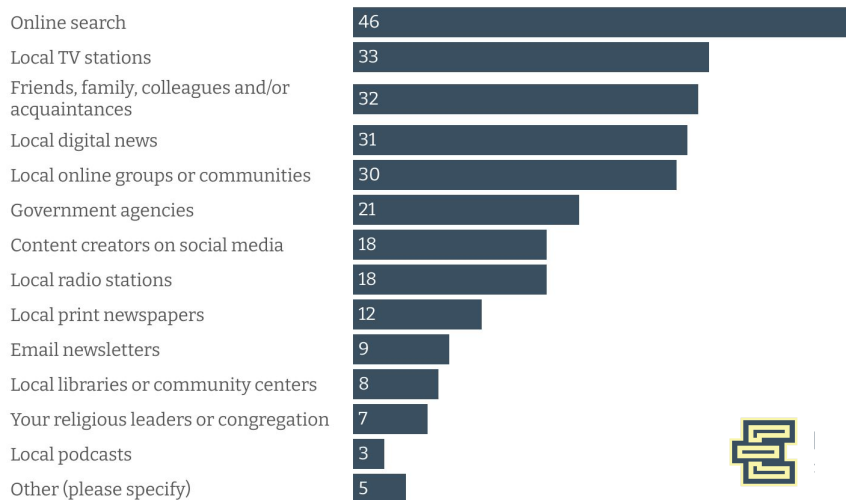
Local Info Needs: Parents + Non-Parents

The difference between satisfaction with + views of the importance of info about education for all respondents, parents, and non-parents, where negatives represent more importance than satisfaction and positive numbers represent more satisfaction than importance.



Sources of Quality Info

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.



INFORMATION SOURCES

Asking about information importance also allowed us to dig deeper on information sources. We asked respondents which they find most useful specifically on local topics they prioritize:

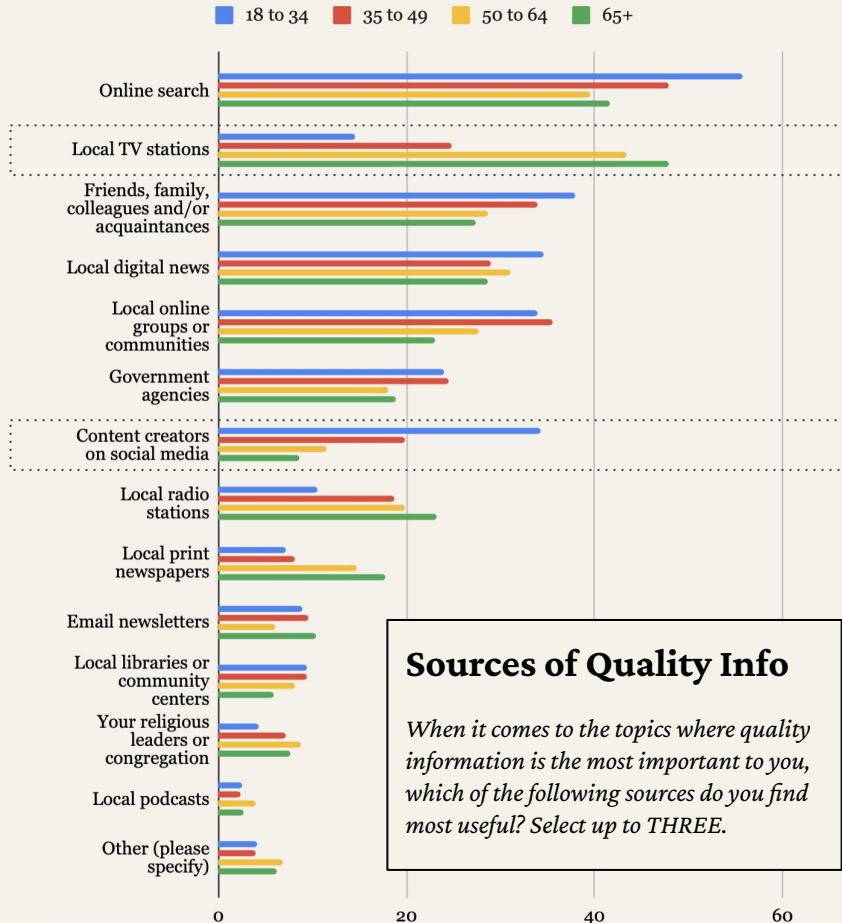
- Online search was cited by almost half of respondents as a go to source.
- Despite cord-cutting, local TV remains the second most cited source.
- 4 of the 6 most cited sources were not journalism organizations (although each may ultimately be sourcing from them).
- Print newspapers were just the 9th most cited source.

INFORMATION SOURCES

Like with info needs, subgroup responses varied on info sources. Age subgroups varied the most:

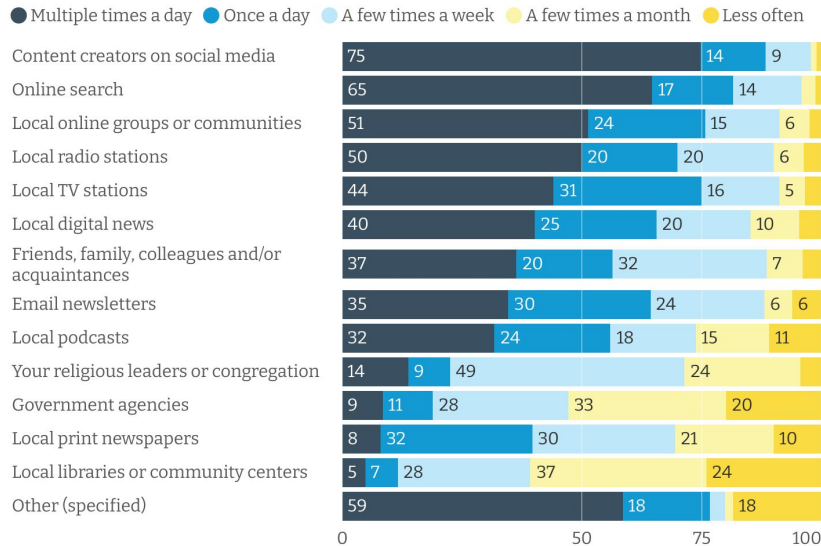
- ➔ Respondents 50+ were more than 3 times as likely to cite local TV as those 18 to 34.
- ➔ 34% of respondents 18 to 34 cited media creators, more than 3 times the frequency of respondents 50+.
- ➔ Three major digital sources – search, digital news, and online groups – were cited by more than 20% in every age subgroup.

These findings sharpen and reinforce our understanding of a fragmented and shifting information landscape.



Source Use Frequency

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.)



INFORMATION SOURCES

Engagement with sources also varied. Respondents were asked how frequently they access the sources they find “most useful”:

- ➔ 89% of those turning to creators on social media accessed them at least once per day.
- ➔ Broadcast is still habitual: 75% of those who turn to TV said they do so daily or more, and 70% of those who cited radio.
- ➔ Most (61%) of those who cited newspapers tend to read them less than once per week.
- ➔ Community / civic institutions (religious, government, libraries) are even less frequently engaged.

NATIONAL SURVEY RESULTS:
**EDUCATION CIVIC INFORMATION
GAPS AND NEEDS**

EDUCATION SUBTOPICS

The education civic information portion is a deeper dive into the views of those most connected to the topic: **parents, educators, and those who answered that they viewed it as either “somewhat” or “very” important in the overall civic info section.**

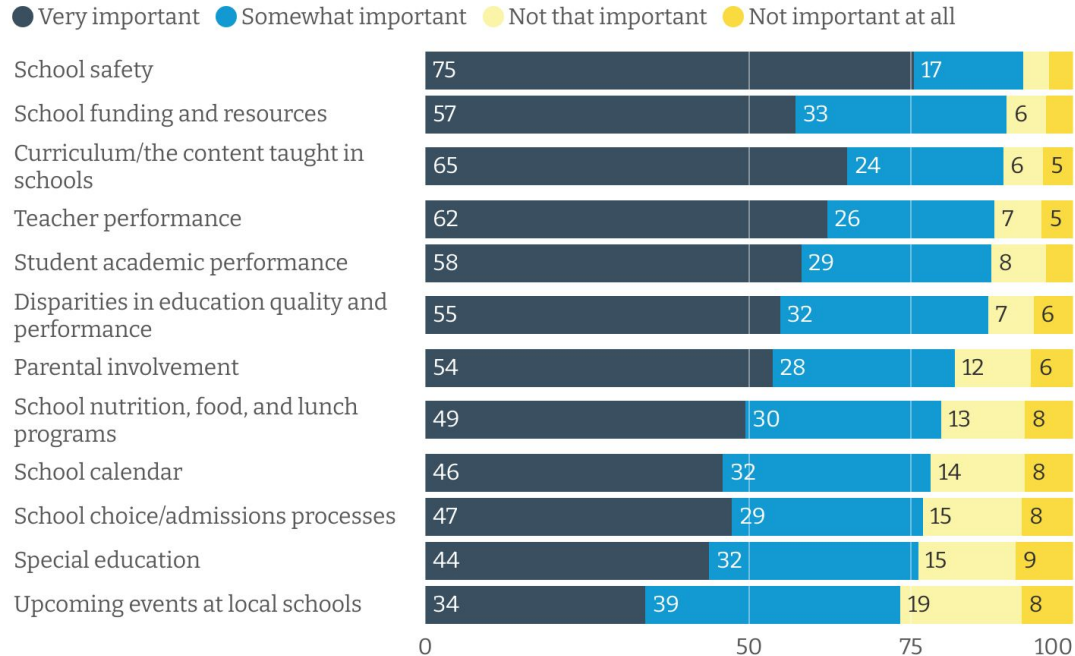
This subset of respondents was asked to rate the importance of and their satisfaction with information on 12 education-specific topics.

- 1/ School choice/admissions processes
- 2/ Curriculum/the content taught in schools
- 3/ Parental involvement
- 4/ School funding and resources
- 5/ School calendar
- 6/ School nutrition, food, and lunch programs
- 7/ Upcoming events at local schools
- 8/ Disparities in education quality and performance
- 9/ Teacher performance
- 10/ Student academic performance
- 11/ Special education
- 12/ School safety

Local Education Info Importance

Thinking specifically about schools and education, how important is it for you to get information about each of the following topics in your everyday life?

Asked only of parents, educators, and respondents who consider education news “very/somewhat important”

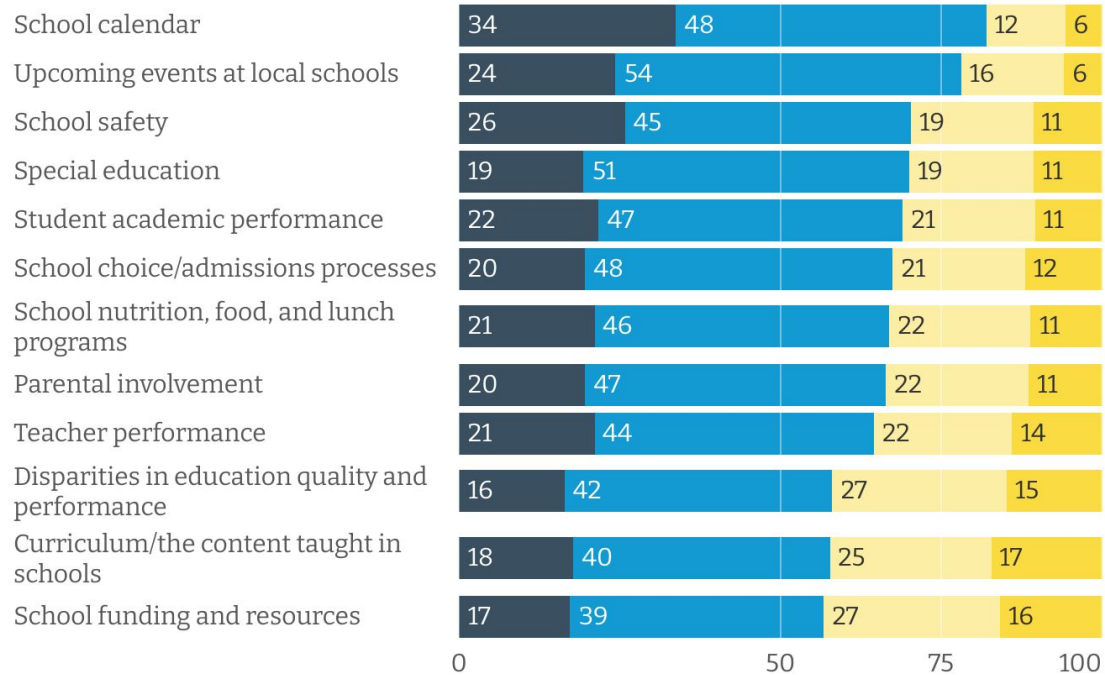


Local Education Info Satisfaction

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

Asked only of parents, educators, and respondents who consider education news “very/somewhat important”

● Very satisfied
 ● Somewhat satisfied
 ● Somewhat unsatisfied
 ● Very unsatisfied



Local Education Topics Info Needs

The difference between satisfaction with + views of the importance of info about 12 local information topics for parents, educators, and respondents who consider education news “very/somewhat important”



EDUCATION INFO NEEDS

Here we see information needs across the topics and come away with takeaways:

- This education-focused subset of respondents does not report a significant info need on logistical information about schools like calendar and events.
- The group reports significant needs (29 to 33% differences) on 3 topics that require a system-level view and might be challenging to understand as an individual: funding and resources, curriculum, and disparities in education quality.
- 10 of the 12 topics show a need.

EDUCATION INFO SOURCES

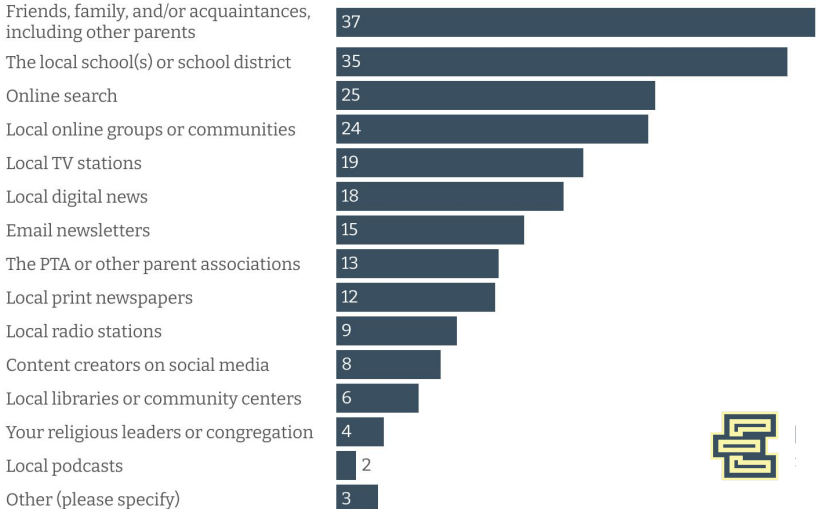
This subset of respondents (parents, educators, and those who viewed education as “somewhat” or very” important) was also asked which sources it finds most useful for education info:

- “Friends and family” and schools themselves were the most frequently cited, each by more than 1/3 of respondents.
- Digital sources (search, online groups, local digital news, newsletters) were also frequently cited.
- The PTA (which was not listed on the general information sources question) was more cited than local newspapers, local radio stations, and social media creators.

Sources of Quality Education Info

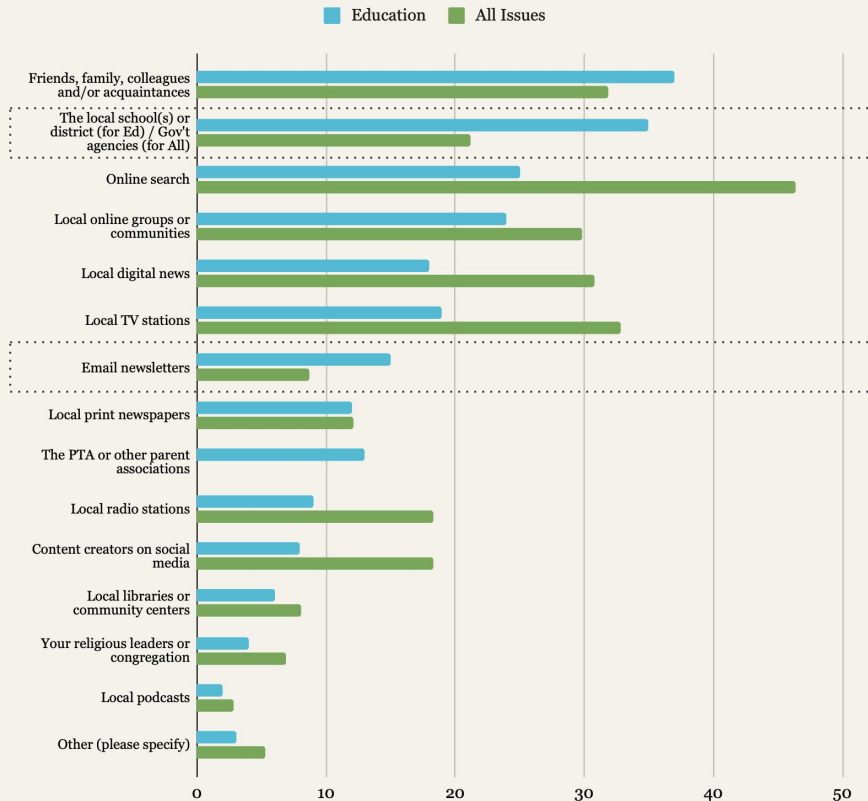
When it comes to the education or school-related topics that you most need information on, which sources do you find most useful? Select up to THREE.

Asked only of parents, educators, and respondents who consider education news “very/somewhat important”



Useful Sources on Education v. All Topics

Sources selected by education audiences on education information compared to sources selected by all respondents across topics.



ED v. GENERAL INFO SOURCES

Comparing this subgroup's most useful sources of education info to all respondents most useful sources on their important topics, we can see ways education info use may differ from other types:

- Local schools / districts are viewed as much more useful (cited by 35%) than government agencies in general (cited by just 21%).
- While most categories dropped in %, friends and family went up (37% vs. 32%), online groups dropped less, and the PTA was frequently cited, suggesting an overall shift in reliance from impersonal to personal info sources.
- Newsletters were much more cited in education than all topics (15% v. 9%).

NATIONAL SURVEY RESULTS:
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

OVERALL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

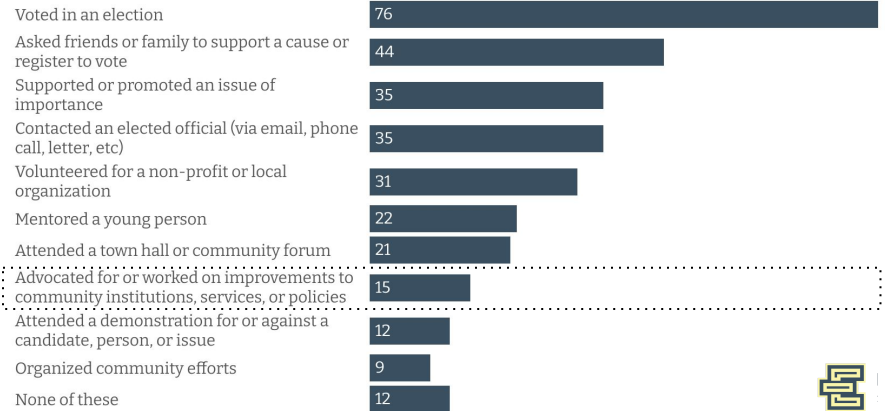
This section of the survey asked respondents about their civic engagement in the last year.

- A significant majority (76%) said they'd voted in an election.
- More than 1/3 said they'd taken steps to ask someone else to get involved (44%), supported an issue (35%), or contacted an elected official (35%).
- 1 in 7 had taken on systemic work to improve community institutions, services or policies (15%).

*At Civic News Company, we call this last group “civic catalysts.”

Overall Civic Engagement

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.



SUBGROUP CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

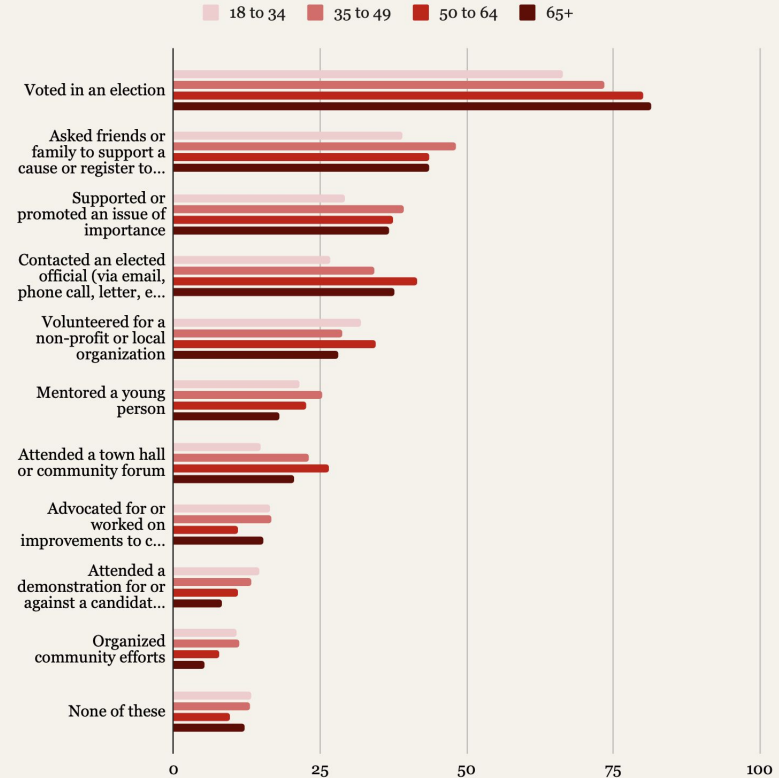
Civic engagement varied within age subgroups.

- The youngest subgroup (18 to 34) was least likely to have voted, supported an issue, or asked someone else to, but...
- The youngest subgroup (18 to 34) was as or more likely to have taken more significant steps like community organizing or advocating to improve institutions.
- Older respondents (65+) were most likely to say they'd voted, but often just as or less likely to have taken other steps.

These correlations (and those to come) may be as much about time / opportunity as anything else.

Civic Engagement - By Age

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.



SUBGROUP CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

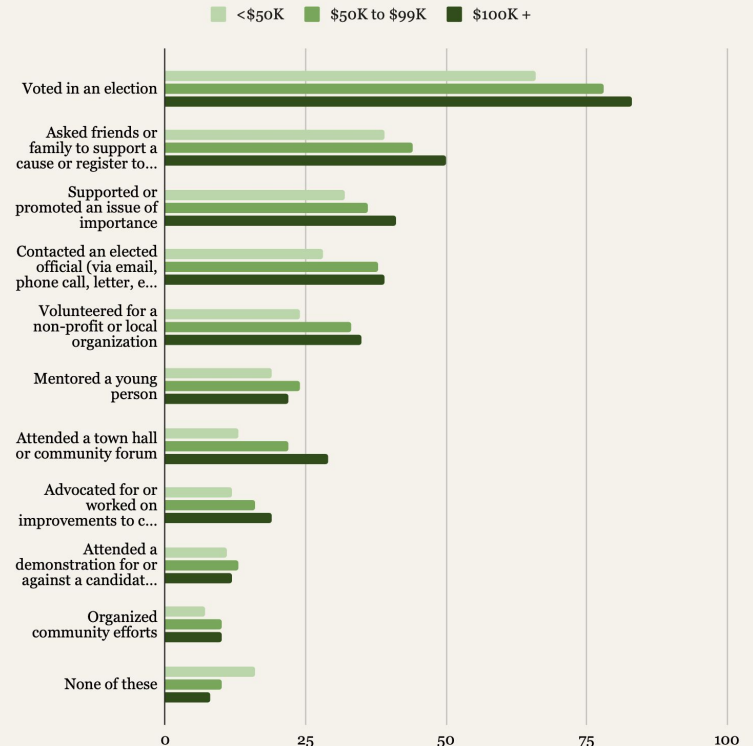
There was a more consistent trend across civic engagement categories when it came to income.

- Across every category, those making less than \$50k were less likely to say they'd engaged in these civic activities.
- Across most activities, those making \$100k or more were most likely to say they'd engaged in these activities.
- In many cases, the correlation between income and civic engagement decreased for more intensive civic activities.

Again, correlations may be as much about time / opportunity as anything else.

Civic Engagement - By Income

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.



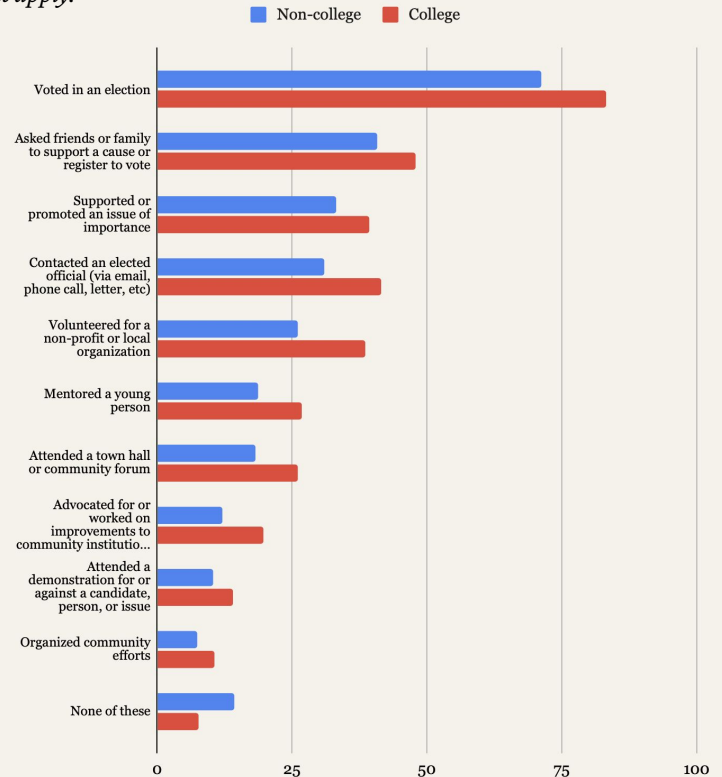
SUBGROUP CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Increased levels of civic engagement were also closely correlated to education level.

- Across every category, those with college educations were more likely to say they taken these civic activities.
- Those with a college degree were 17% to 19% more likely to have voted, supported an issue, or asked someone else to.
- That gap grew even larger with significant steps like community organizing (college 42% more likely than non-college) or advocating to improve institutions (college 64% more likely than non-college).

Civic Engagement - By Education

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.



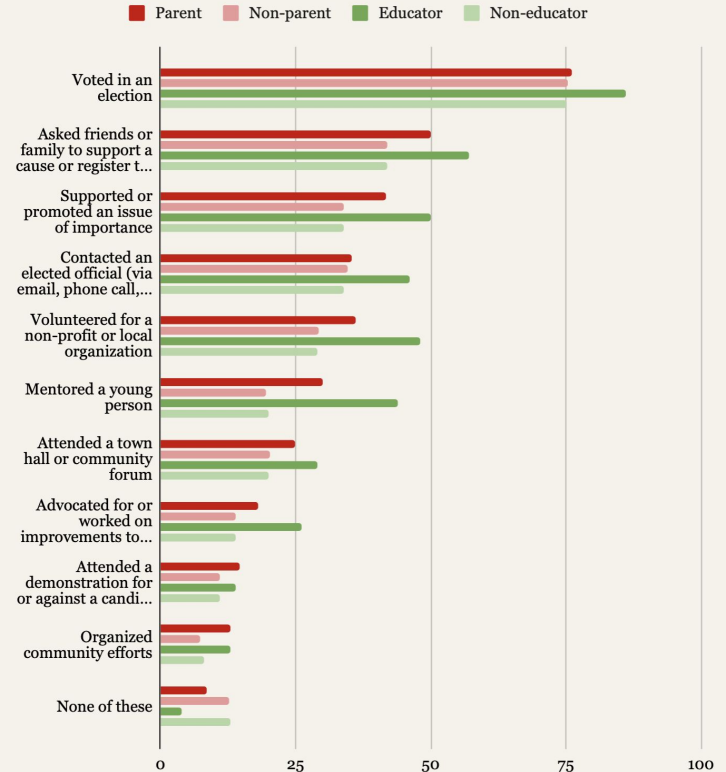
SUBGROUP CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

One final set of comparisons: parents v. non-parents and educators v. non-educators:

- Across every category, parents and educators were more civically engaged.
- Educators were 66% more likely to have volunteered, 120% more likely to have mentored, 86% more likely to have advocated for improved institutions, and 63% more likely to have organized in their community than non-educators.
- Parents were 23% more likely to have volunteered, 52% more likely to to have mentored, and 72% more likely to have organized in their community.

Civic Engagement - Parents and Educators

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.



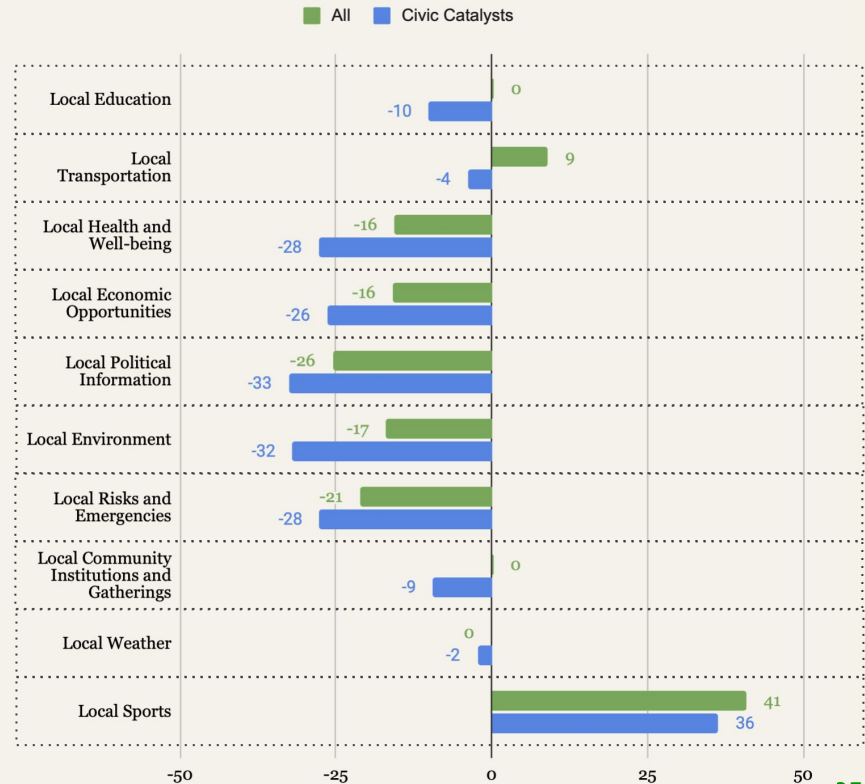
INFO NEEDS + CIVIC CATALYSTS

We can also compare the information needs of subgroups defined by levels of civic engagement. Here, we see the needs (defined as the difference between satisfaction and importance levels) of what we call “civic catalysts,” the people working to improve their communities.

- Across every category, civic catalysts report larger needs than respondents overall.
- In 5 cases (education, transportation, health, economic opportunity, and the environment), the information needs of civic catalysts are 10 or more percentage points larger than respondents overall.

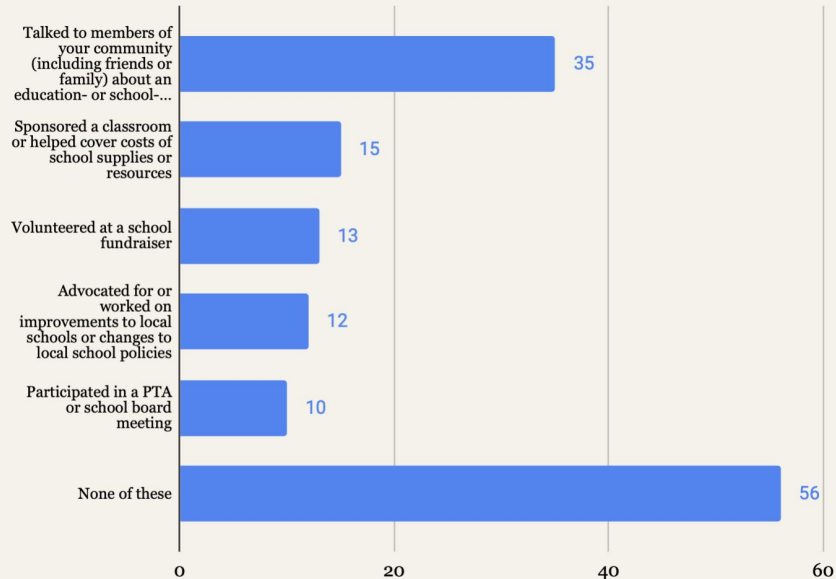
Local Info Needs - Civic Catalysts

The gap between satisfaction with + views of the importance of info about 10 local information topics for all respondents and “civic catalysts,” where negatives represent more importance than satisfaction and positive numbers represent more satisfaction than importance.



Civic Engagement - Education

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.



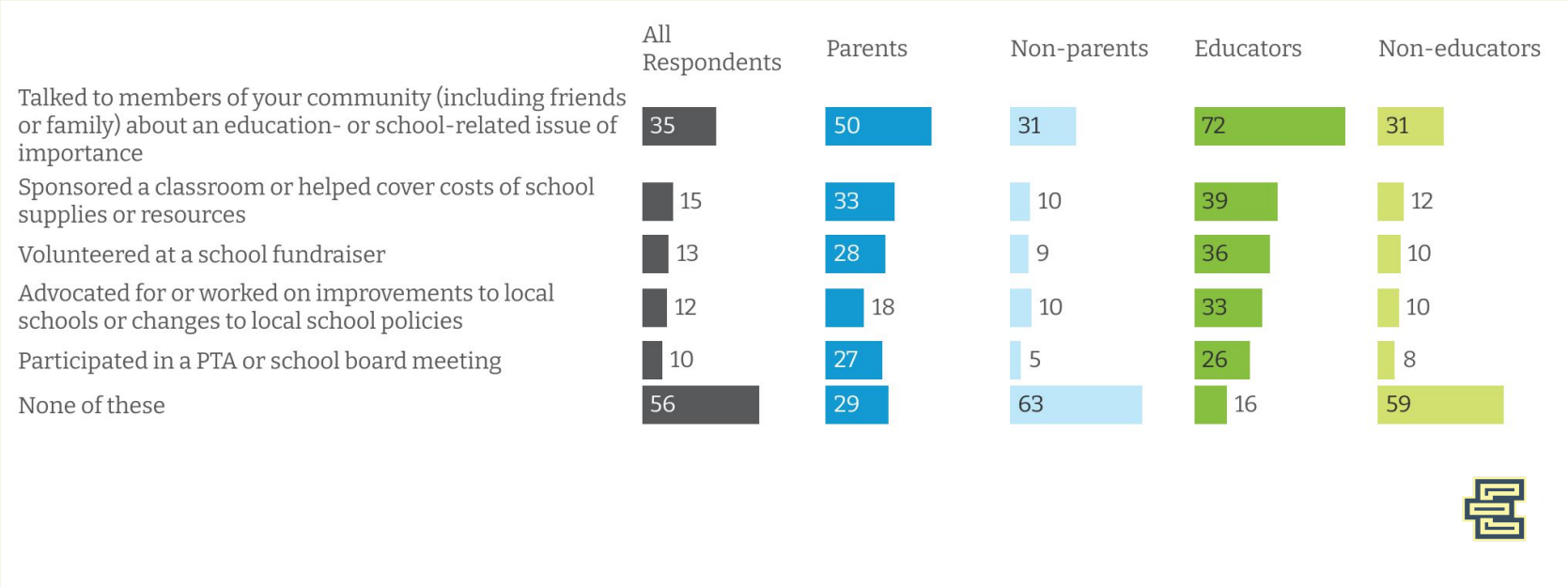
EDUCATION CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Finally, we asked respondents about their civic engagement related to education.

- 44% of respondents said they had participated in at least one of the activities.
- More than 1 in 3 (35%) said they'd spoken to a member of their community about education issues.
- Smaller numbers said they had sponsored a classroom (15%), volunteered at a fundraiser (13%) or participated in a PTA or school board meeting (10%)/
- 12% of respondents said they had advocated for improvements to local schools.

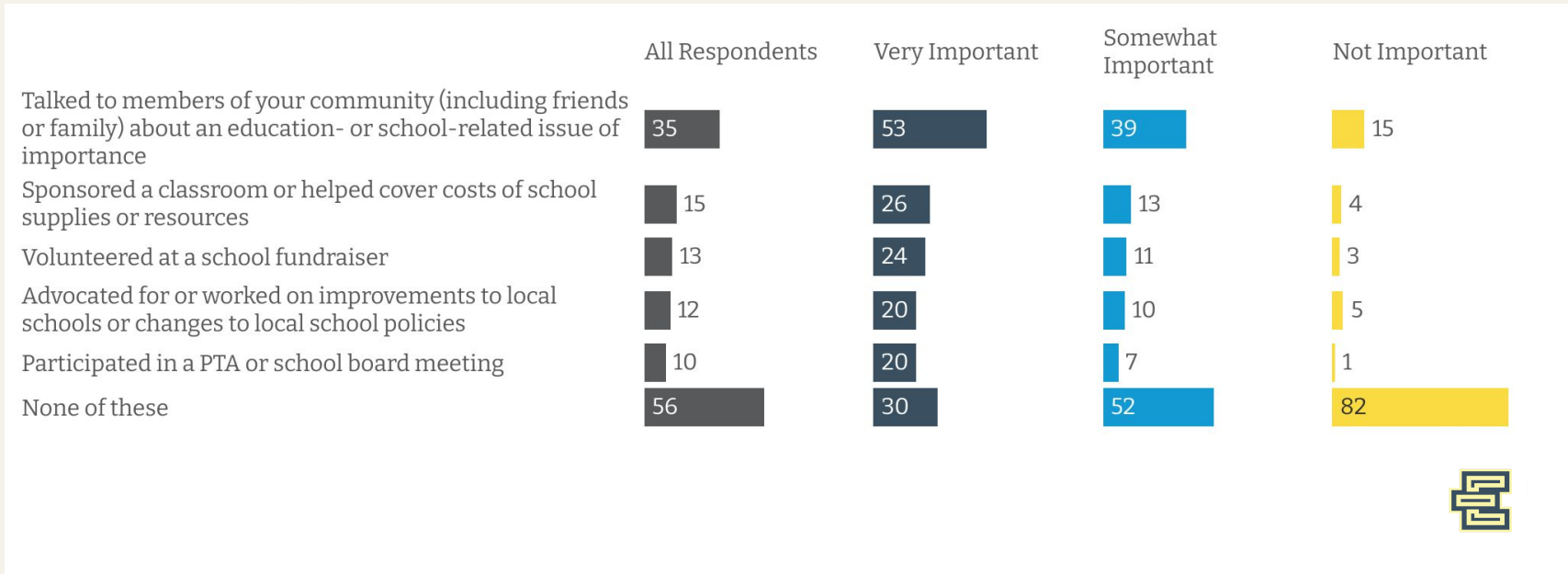
EDUCATION CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Unsurprisingly, parents and educators were *much* more likely to be civically engaged on education as a topic.



EDUCATION CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

And those who viewed education as a “very” or “somewhat” important topic were also much more civically engaged on it.



NATIONAL SURVEY RESULTS:
CONCLUSIONS + NEXT STEPS

CONCLUSION

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

And these national data are just a start: a foundation and point of comparison for the local surveys that we believe should and can be the most urgent, actionable, and unique aspects of this work.

But even with just this starting point, we can see in the responses confirmation and details of a story many of us already know too well: America's communities are in crisis. On the topics most essential for civic health, we see significant gaps between the importance Americans place on the information they need

and their satisfaction with the information they have. 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.

To meet America's local civic information needs we need new data, and we need it to be taken up by this new movement of practitioners and those who support them.

We hope this work can help.

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/ Get ready for Chicago and New York City.

Our first *local* info needs reports are coming very 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.

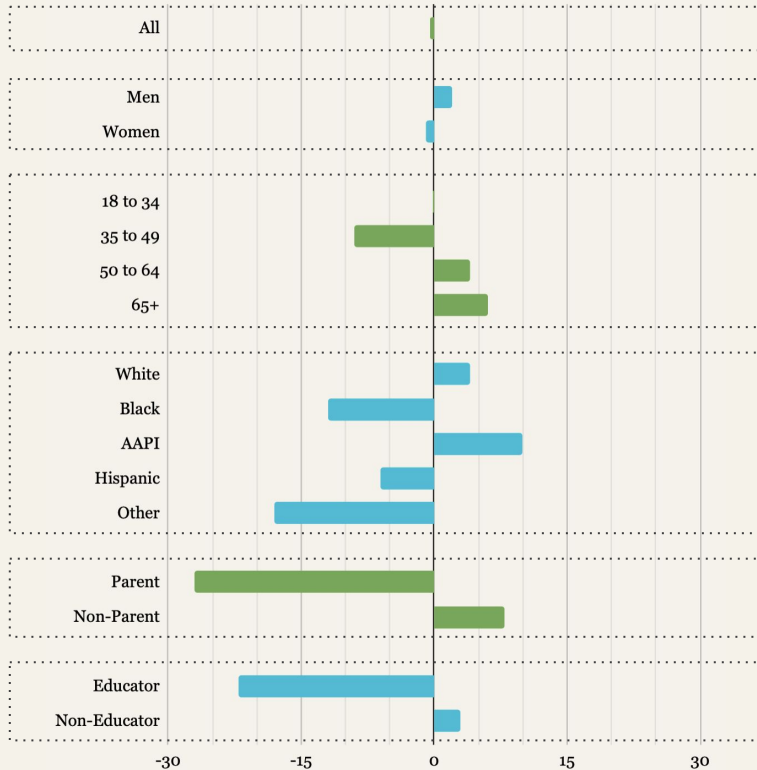
Interested in doing this in your community? In comparing other data or adding your analysis? Reach out to agolis at civicnews dot org.

INDEX:

INFO NEEDS BREAKDOWN SLIDES

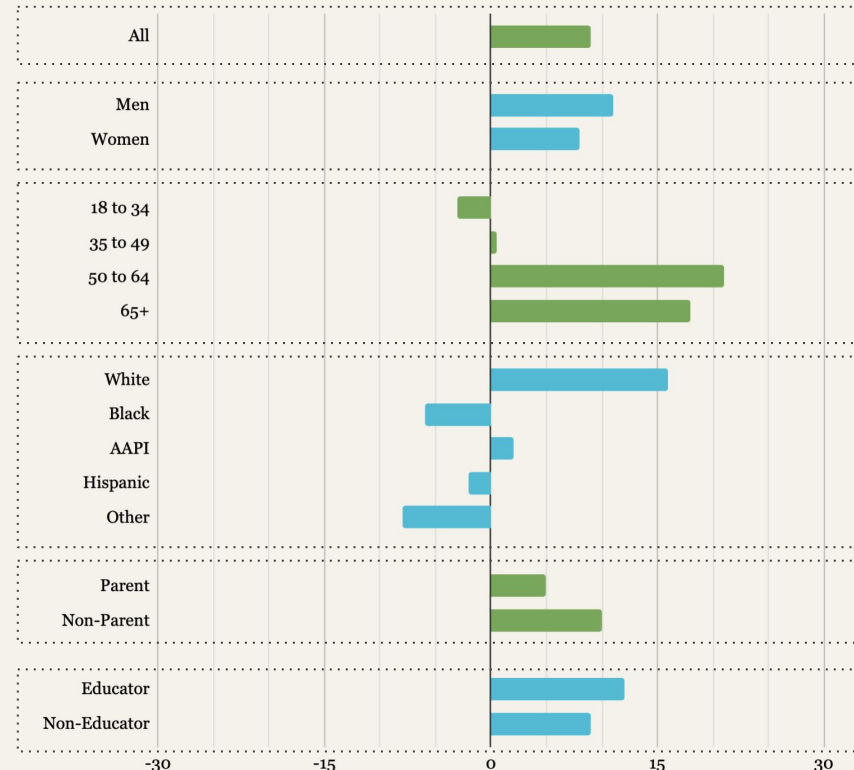
Local Info Needs Breakdown: Education

The difference between satisfaction with + views of the importance of info about "Local Education (including school programs, curriculum, and quality)," where negatives represent more importance than satisfaction and positive numbers represent more satisfaction than importance.



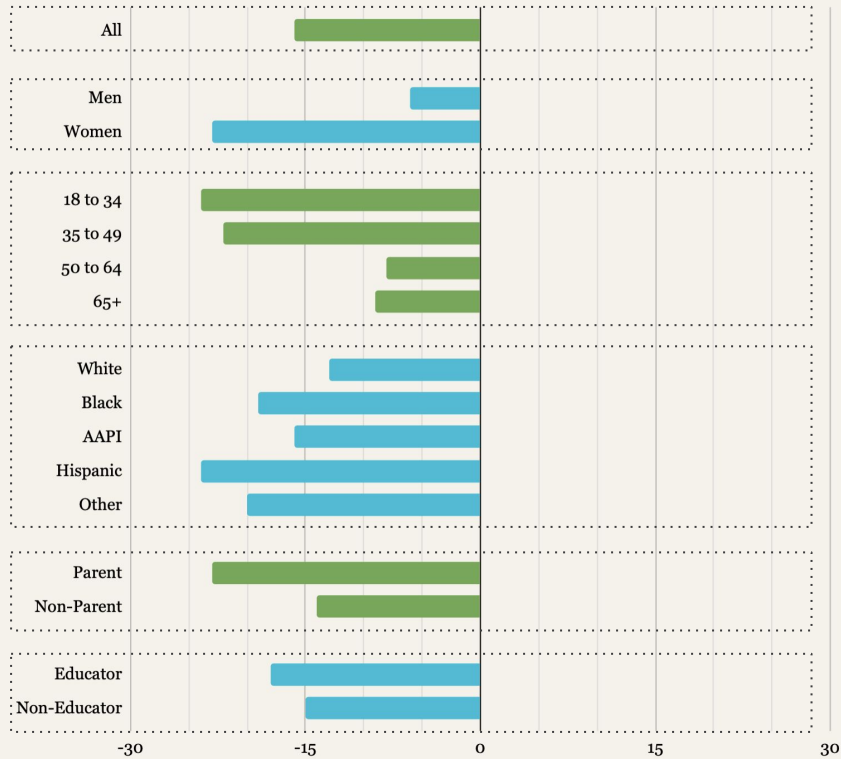
Local Info Needs Breakdown: Transportation

The difference between satisfaction with + views of the importance of info about "Local Transportation (including transit schedules, costs, and traffic)," where negatives represent more importance than satisfaction and positive numbers represent more satisfaction than importance.



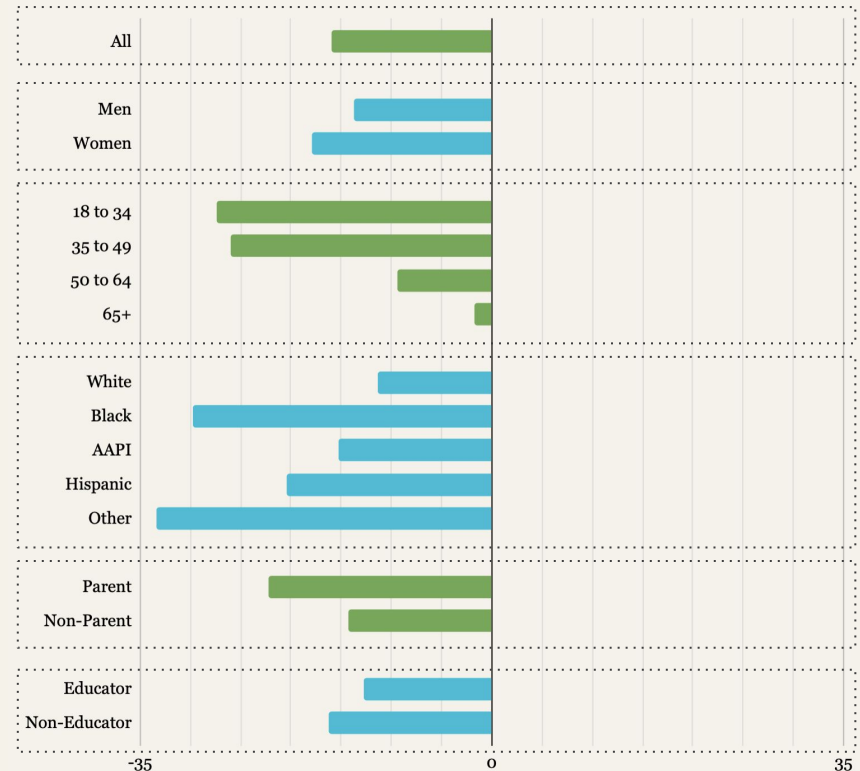
Local Info Needs Breakdown: Health

The difference between satisfaction with + views of the importance of info about "Local Health + Well-being (including access to quality care, community needs and trends)," where negatives represent more importance than satisfaction and positive numbers represent more satisfaction than importance.



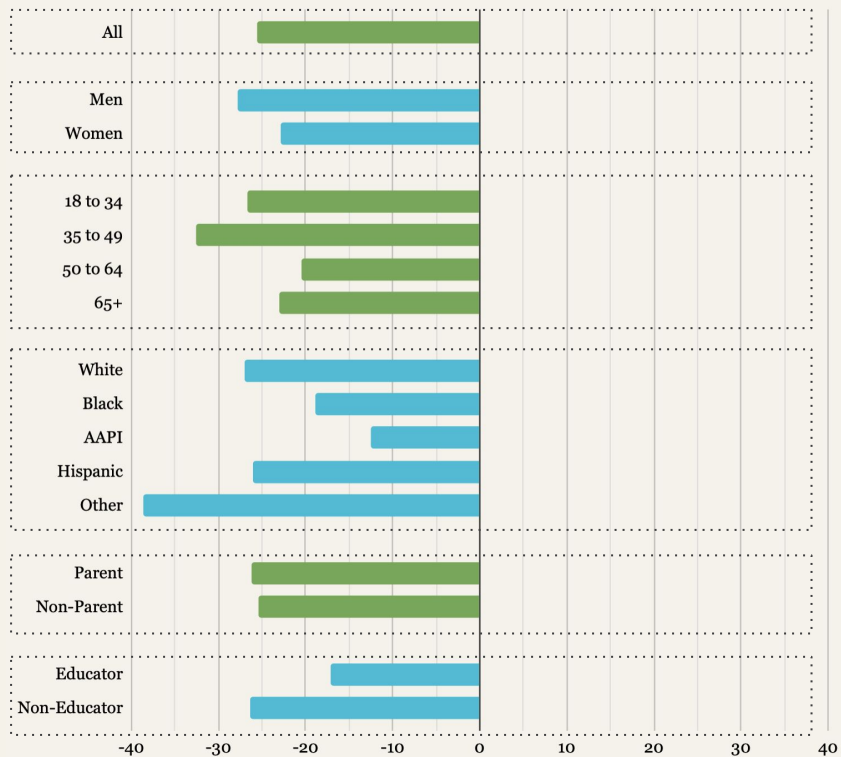
Local Info Needs Breakdown: Economic Opportunity

The difference between satisfaction with + views of the importance of info about "Local Economic Opportunities (including jobs, housing, personal finance, and business environment)," where negatives represent more importance than satisfaction and positive numbers represent more satisfaction than importance.



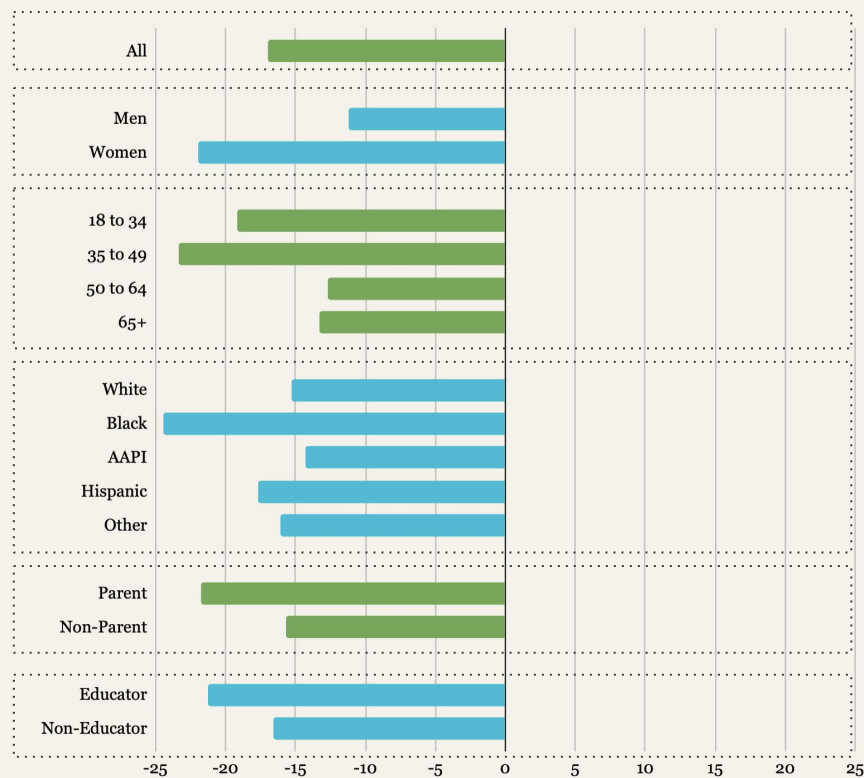
Local Info Needs Breakdown: Political Information

The difference between satisfaction with + views of the importance of info about "Local Political Information (including voting, elected officials, and public policy initiatives)," where negatives represent more importance than satisfaction and positive numbers represent more satisfaction than importance.



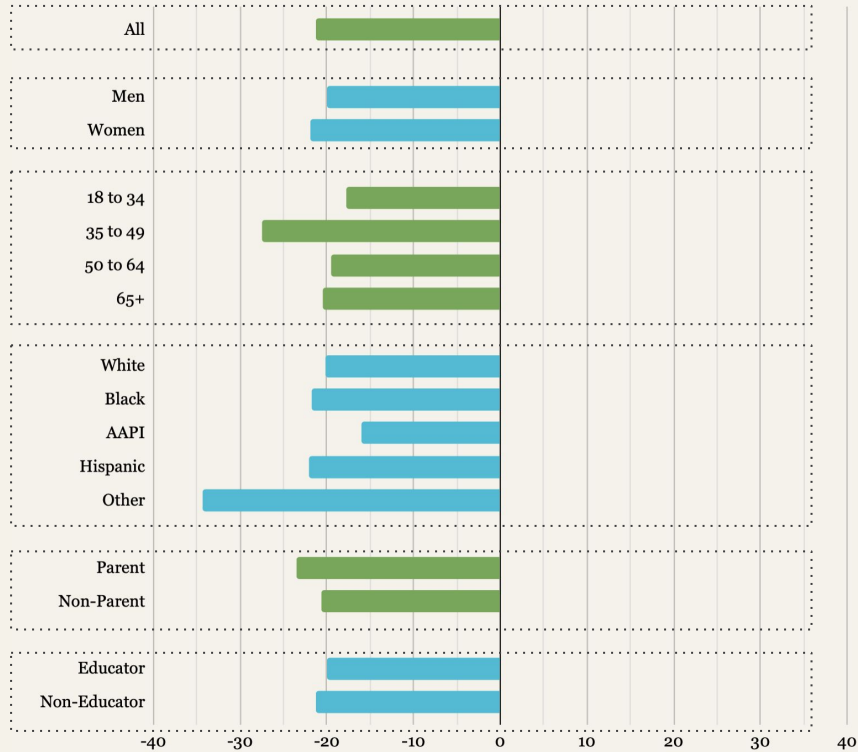
Local Info Needs Breakdown: The Environment

The difference between satisfaction with + views of the importance of info about "Local Environment (including air/water quality, sanitation, and access to recreation)," where negatives represent more importance than satisfaction and positive numbers represent more satisfaction than importance.



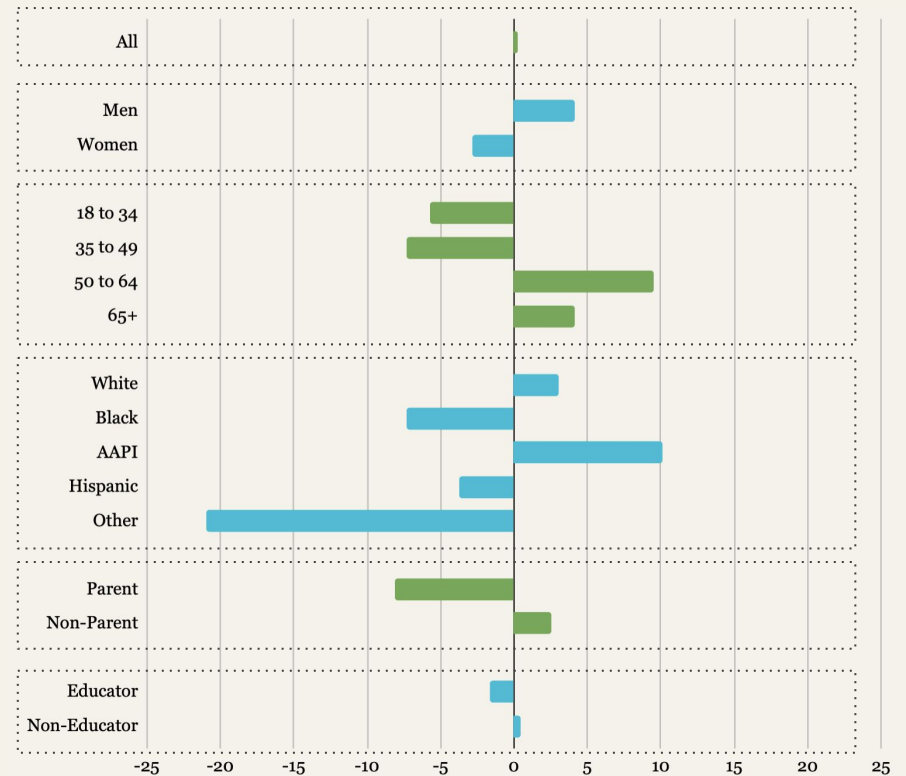
Local Info Needs Breakdown: Risks + Emergencies

The difference between satisfaction with + views of the importance of info about "Local Risks and Emergencies (including crime/public safety and climate)," where negatives represent more importance than satisfaction and positive numbers represent more satisfaction than importance.



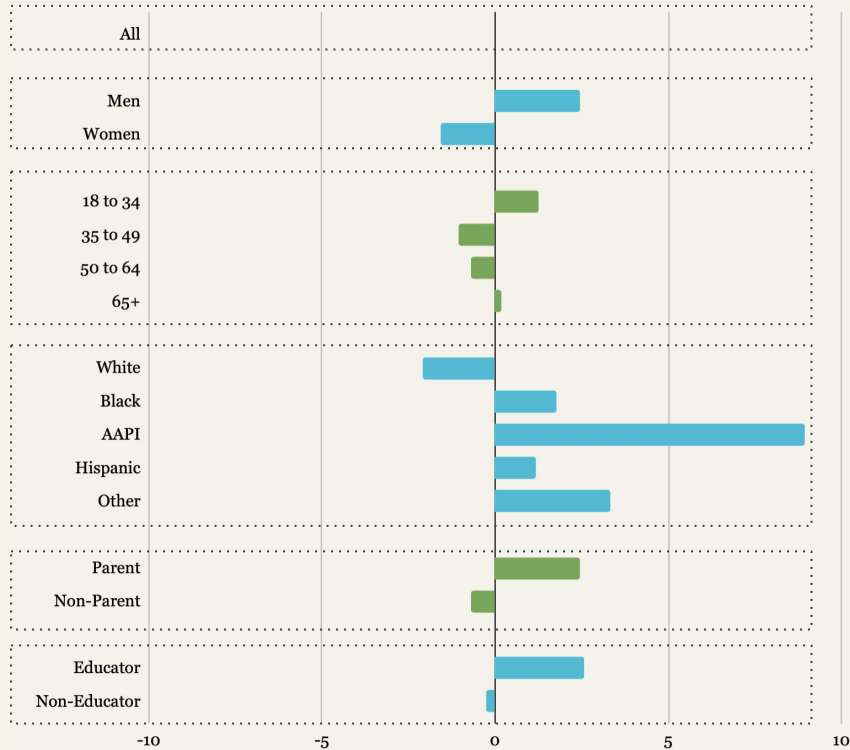
Local Info Needs Breakdown: Community

The difference between satisfaction with + views of the importance of info about "Local Community Institutions + Gatherings (including churches, libraries, clubs, and cultural events)" where negatives represent more importance than satisfaction and positive numbers represent more satisfaction than importance.



Local Info Needs Breakdown: Weather

The difference between satisfaction with + views of the importance of info about "Local Weather" where negatives represent more importance than satisfaction and positive numbers represent more satisfaction than importance.



Local Info Needs Breakdown: Sports

The difference between satisfaction with + views of the importance of info about "Local Sports" where negatives represent more importance than satisfaction and positive numbers represent more satisfaction than importance.

