



OPPORTUNITY *in the Queen City*



Community Outreach and Engagement
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
SEPTEMBER 2022

Opportunity in the Queen City was initiated by the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo in early 2022, with support from the John R. Oishei Foundation, in an effort to further a vibrant and inclusive Greater Buffalo region with opportunity for all.

This community engagement effort took shape to update the findings of a 2017 report that was produced for the Empire State Poverty Reduction Initiative (ESPRI). Convened locally by the Community Foundation and United Way of Buffalo and Erie County, ESPRI was a State-seeded effort to reduce financial hardship in 16 high poverty communities across the state, that eventually transitioned into the THRIVE Buffalo effort.

In addition, this previous report helped to inform the Community Foundation (CFGB) and the Greater Buffalo Racial Equity Roundtable on the opportunities and needs within the city and region, as defined by those most impacted by the disparities present within Western New York.

As with the previous effort, this outreach effort intentionally and strategically sought the voices of community members who have experienced or are experiencing financial hardship as well as those living in high poverty neighborhoods. By taking a multi-pronged approach, the project team and its consultants sought input on three primary questions:

- 1) What is the current state of the challenges and obstacles that individuals, families and communities face to financial stability?
- 2) What are the underlying causes of the financial hardship faced by community members?
- 3) What changes need to be made in order to alleviate financial hardship within the community?

A history of long standing policies and practices has contributed to racial and economic segregation in Buffalo on a scale matched by few other regions.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated economic disparities and laid bare challenges disproportionately faced by systemically disinvested communities, including communities of color, New Americans, and working class communities of all races and ethnicities. One of the goals of this initiative was understanding how these communities have been impacted by the pandemic.

The Opportunity in the Queen City survey was launched in early May, 2022, just weeks before the horrifying white supremacist attack on Jefferson Avenue on May 14, 2022.

This attack thrust the legacy of unchecked racism in the region and across the country into the national spotlight.

But after the cameras and media had receded, community members remained and endured. While grieving over loss — of loved ones, neighbors, elders, and leaders — these communities did what they have always done. They came together to fill the gaps and address the most pressing needs of their neighbors, despite the odds and systems stacked against them.

This cowardly attack once again revealed the resiliency of Buffalo's communities. The responses and insights that follow within the report are borne of this long context of systemic disinvestment and the acute specter of racialized threat and harm.

Through a series of community forums, attendance at community based events, community pop ups including in person and on-line survey collection, once again more than 950 individuals submitted feedback. This report would not have been possible if not for the generosity of this time and the commitment to improving the city and region on the part of these community members.

This feedback once again revealed a complex picture of financial hardship, and a nuanced view of the causes of — and opportunities to address — these interwoven challenges.

Context

Thirty percent of Buffalo's residents — and fourteen percent of those who live in the Buffalo Niagara Metro Area — live below the poverty line.

When this number considers those who are financially insecure (living with incomes less than 200% of the poverty level), more than half of Buffalo's residents (51%) and 29% of the region's residents struggle financially.

Despite the progress that has been touted in the city and region, these percentages remain unchanged over the past decade.¹ In fact since 1980 income inequality in Buffalo has grown every ten years,² and the most recent data available do not yet represent the changes and challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Those living in poverty in the region and in the city continue to be disproportionately women, children and people of color.

People of color comprise 57% of the population in the city of Buffalo (23% in the region), but because of the impacts of segregation and systemic disparities, they represent 71% of the people in poverty in Buffalo (50% in the region).³

In observing national level data, it is clear that lingering effects of segregation and racism impact outcomes for Black and African American, Latinx/e/o/a populations, Native Americans, multi-racial populations, and Asian Americans. Concentrated poverty (living in neighborhoods where the poverty rate is higher than 30%) disproportionately impacts these groups. These are neighborhoods that have faced systemic disinvestment — like government sanctioned redlining — and continue to have disproportionately low access to opportunity drivers like high performing schools, high environmental quality, healthy food options, and health care services.

¹ National Equity Atlas 2010, 2019 ACS 5-year estimates.

² IPUMS USA | National Equity Atlas. Income Inequality is represented as the 95/20 ratio (95th percentile income divided by 20th percentile income). The ratio grew from 8.6 in 1980 to 11.6 in 2019 — from \$15,354 vs. \$131,808 in inflation adjusted dollars 1980 to \$12,900 vs. \$149,000 in 2019.

³ 2020 ACS 5-Year estimates, US Census Bureau, Population for whom poverty status is determined. For these purposes, People of Color is defined as those responding within the Census categories of Black or African American alone, American Indian and Alaska Native alone, Asian alone, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone, Some other race alone; Two or more races, and/ or Hispanic or Latino origin (of any race).

Even in comparison to national disparity statistics, in Buffalo Niagara racially concentrated poverty is extreme. The percentage of people living in high poverty neighborhoods is more than double that of national trends for every racial and ethnic group except those who are white identified. For white populations in the Buffalo Niagara area, the rate living in concentrated poverty is 5.7%, which is only 1.4% points higher than the national average for white identified Americans. Every other racial and ethnic group in the region is at least five times higher than this rate (see chart below).

As in 2017, the outreach component of this initiative was structured to reach community members with experience confronting financial hardship. This report represents a moment in time analysis which provides this important community level perspective.

These perspectives are critical input to informing strategic investments, policy changes, and priority initiatives that are appropriate, applicable, and accessible to these populations. Ongoing engagement of impacted communities, as always, will remain necessary to ensure planned interventions will have their intended impacts and outcomes.

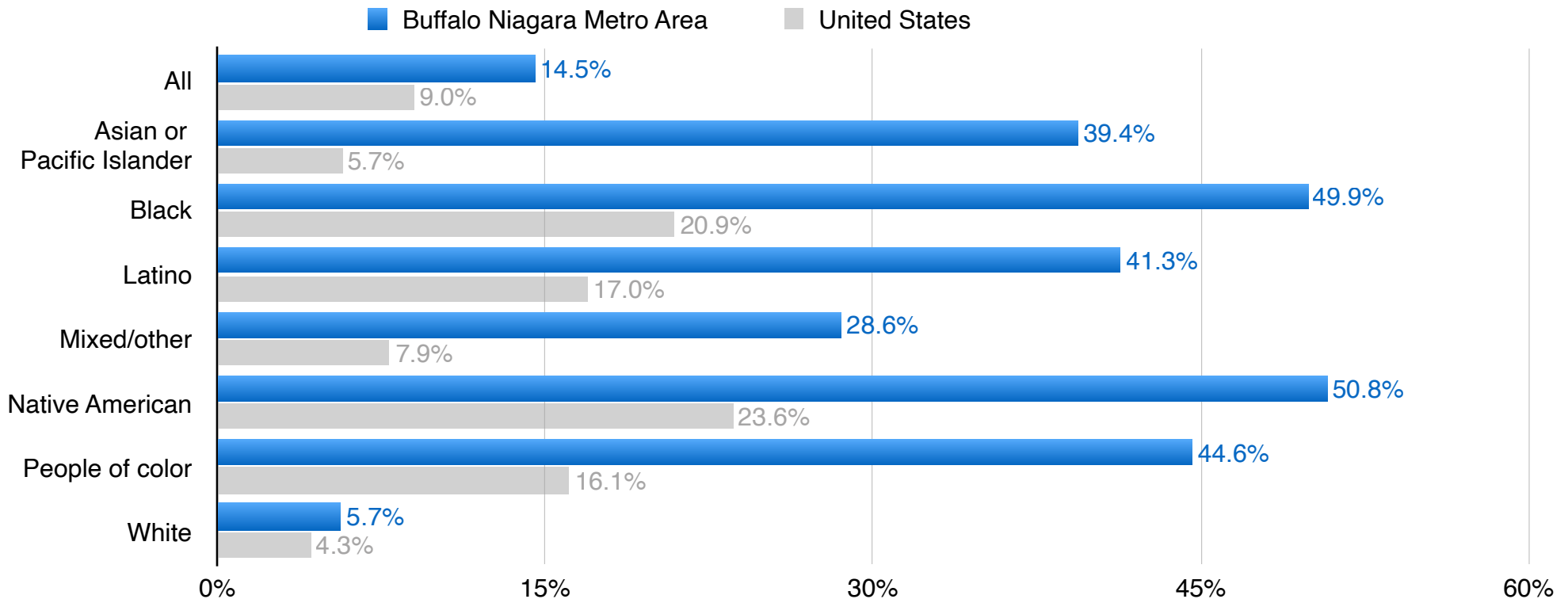
What is the current state of the challenges and obstacles that individuals, families and communities face to financial stability?

What are the underlying causes of the financial hardship faced by community members?

What changes need to be made in order to alleviate financial hardship within the community?

Nighborhood Poverty in the United States vs. Buffalo Niagara

Percent living in high-poverty neighborhoods (30 percent or higher) by race/ ethnicity 2019



Data source: American Community Survey; GeoLytics, Inc. | National Equity Atlas

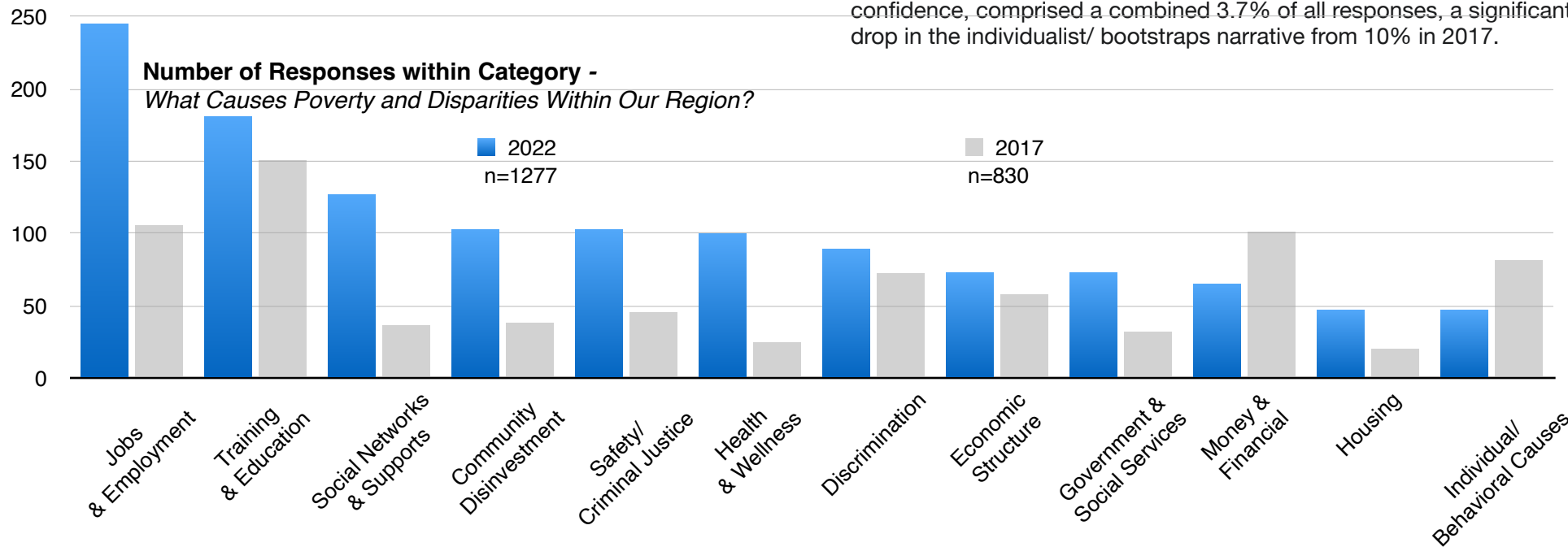
Community Input Summary and Themes

Community members provided valuable and varied input through surveys and focus groups revealing a breadth and depth of understanding, both of lived experience and of underlying systemic causes of disparity and financial hardship.

Survey respondents were asked to name what causes the poverty and disparities within our region.

Many listed more than one factor and from 733 respondents to the question, 1277 causes were collected. Many of these aligned with the frameworks designed for the forums and the survey (i.e., training and education, or health and wellness, for example), but many additional systemic causes were mentioned. While most named systemic causes, a very small percentage of respondents (3.7%) attributed poverty and disparities to personal or individual behavior.

At a high level, the most frequent explanations for poverty named in the survey involved either the unavailability of or the barriers to accessing jobs (n=245/ 19.2% of responses). This was followed by the non-attainment of training and education (n=147/14%). Though these two factors were ranked #1 and #2 in 2017, they were in reverse order, with 18% for education and 13% of all responses fell under the heading of jobs and employment.



Various forms of inadequate social supports and networks (resources, youth or senior supports, a lack of unity amongst residents or between neighborhoods) accounted for roughly 10% of responses (n=126/ 9.9%, up from just 4% in 2017).

Fourth most frequent were community disinvestment responses (structural/ generational poverty, gentrification, lack of opportunity, development patterns and sprawl) (n= 103/ 8.1% - up significantly from 5% in 2017), followed closely by community safety (violence/ crime, police and police reform, drugs and alcohol at n=102/ 8.0%).

Discrimination — racism, sexism, ageism, and language barriers accounted for 7.0% of responses (n=89); followed by economic structural issues (cost of living, classism/ power & decisions controlled by wealthy, income inequality, greed, and capitalism at 5.7%, n=73).

5.6% of responses pointed to disfunction or ill aligned government + social services (n=72, up from 3%). 5.1% of responses pointed to money and financial categories, primarily in the form of low wage jobs, but also in the need for financial literacy (down substantially from 14% in 2017). Housing increased from 2% of responses in 2017 to 3.7% in 2022, while transportation and childcare each fell to less than 1% of responses.

Myriad causes that placed root problems as the fault of individuals, from attributing a lack of desire to improve one's situation to a lack of confidence, comprised a combined 3.7% of all responses, a significant drop in the individualist/ bootstraps narrative from 10% in 2017.

Survey respondents were also asked to name what needs to change in order for people in their community to have financial stability.

690 ideas for what changes need to be made were generated. As with root cause responses, many of these responses fit within the engagement categories framework. Others aligned with the additional systemic causes identified by community members through the survey. Once again, a small percentage of responses pointed to individual behavioral changes as the route to community financial stability (n=25/ 3.6% – down from 6% in 2017).

Jobs & Employment was the top response, representing 22% of all answers (up from 17% in 2017). Training & Education was second with 20% of responses (level with 2017). Calls for more available jobs were most common (n=127), with better jobs representing the next highest occurrence in the category (n=22). For education and training, more educational opportunities (n=79) outpaced better (fee-free or paid) job training (n=55).

Next in order of response volume was money/ financial with 11.7% of responses. Subcategories included better paying jobs and a higher minimum wage (n=55), as well as financial literacy classes (n=26).

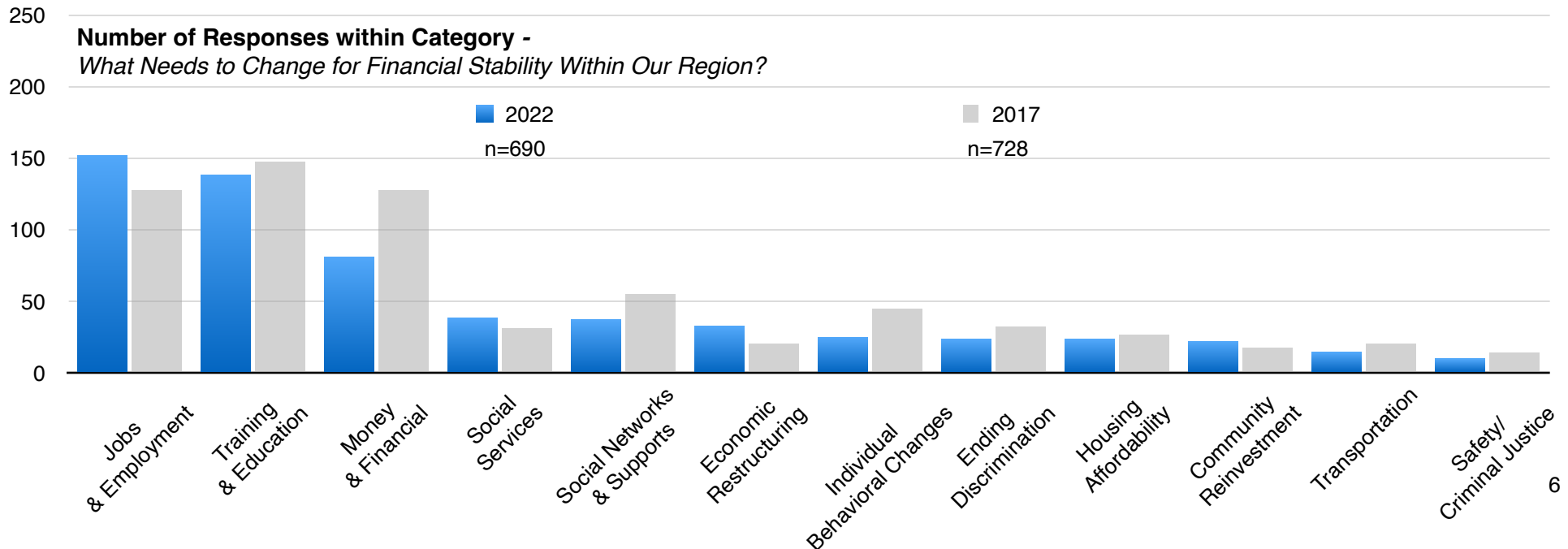
Social services was next (5.7%) with calls for increased levels of support and funding. Social supports and networks was next at 5.4%, followed by economic restructuring (4.8% – including cost of living reductions and price controls on necessities, as well as investments in families with low and moderate incomes, and reducing income disparities).

Ending discrimination, including racism and providing equal opportunity, represented 3.5% of responses.

Affordable housing, homeownership, and landlord accountability changes accounted for 3.3% of responses, and community reinvestment produced 3.2% of responses.

Transportation accounted for 2.2%, safety and criminal justice 1.4%, and health and wellness (0.9%), child care (0.3%) and youth opportunities (0.3%) each accounted for less than 1%.

11.7% of responses (n=81) were not within these categories but included calls for additional policy presence (n=13); calls for governmental changes: political, electoral, structural (n=12); small business investment (n=7); food access (n=6), ongoing community meetings and input (n=6), and fair loan/ credit practices (n=5).



Barriers to Opportunity

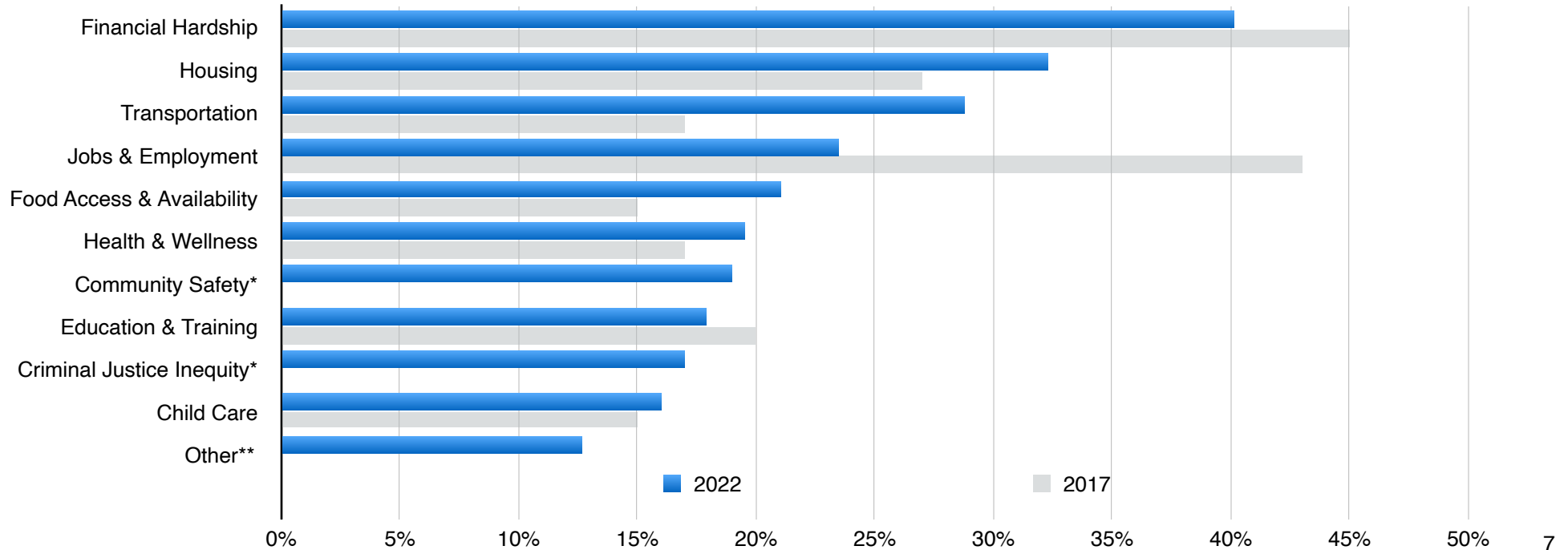
According to participants, there are notable barriers to be overcome to achieve equitable opportunity for education, job access, and advancement.

40% of respondents said that financial hardship was among the most pressing challenges faced by their community, and 23% of respondents said that jobs and employment were among the most pressing challenges in their community.

While both of these represent decreases from 2017, these challenges are still in the top five in the survey. However, transportation and housing saw significant increases in the percentage of responses in which they were included. Transportation saw the most significant increase in response frequency, increasing from 17% in 2017 to 28% in 2022, while housing increased 5%, to 32%. Food access and availability was the fifth most frequent response and it also saw an increase from 2017 to 21% of responses (up from 15%).

The findings reiterated some common themes that were present in the 2017 version of the survey. Yet, some new trends also emerged. For example, when disaggregating by income bracket, some straight line associations remain. For instance, the percentage of respondents who reported receiving income from salary/ wages went up for each successively higher income level, as did the presence of other people in the household with income and the percentage of respondents who believe jobs and other opportunities are easily accessible from their neighborhood. However, other trend lines saw new variations and suggested increasing challenges to advancement for residents in the \$35,000 - \$74,999 income bracket. These included challenges in health and wellness, including the ways that personal and/or familial health can inhibit economic opportunity.

Respondents Identifying Issue as a Pressing Challenge



* Category Not Listed in 2017 Survey.

** 2017 Percentage Not Available.

Barriers to Opportunity (continued)

Financial Hardship

While most higher income households reported deriving their incomes from salary and wages, households in lower earning strata reported a greater mix of financial sources. Less than one quarter of respondents with incomes less than \$15,000 per year reported income from wages or salary. More than a third reported Social Security Insurance (SSI), and roughly one in five reported Social Security Disability (SSD) income. Only 7.1% reported TANF and 3.1% reported NYS Emergency Rental Assistance. For respondents in the next highest income bracket (\$15,000 - \$24,999), the number reporting wages or salary increased by 15 percentage points and continued to increase for each successive income bracket.

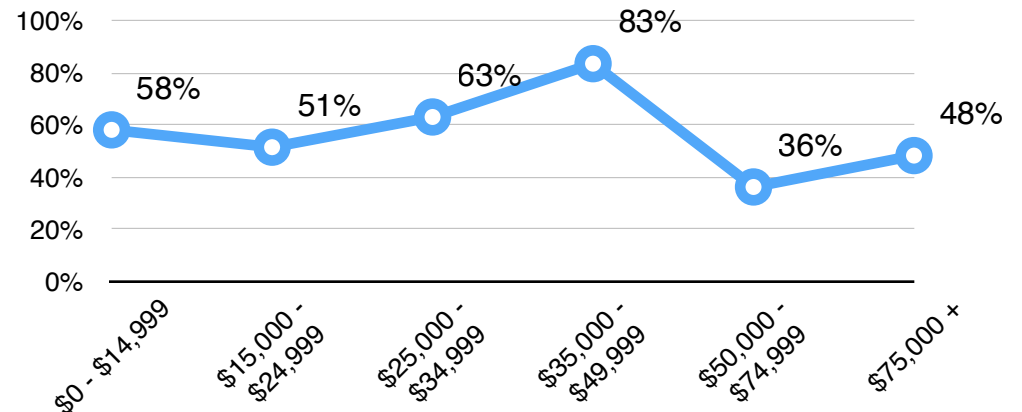
In general, barriers to work fell into two categories:

- 1) direct barriers to employment (education, training, work experience, job awareness and availability); and
- 2) secondary barriers to employment (transportation, incarceration or criminal history, childcare, health, language, digital literacy or connectivity)

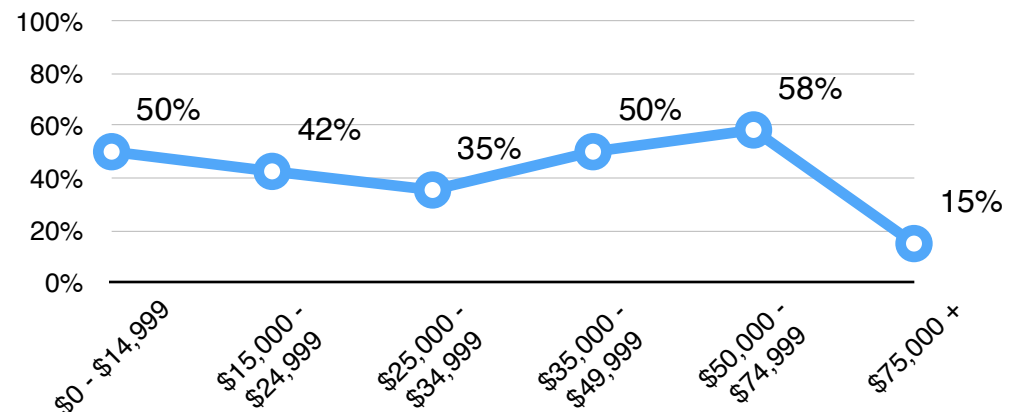
For barriers within both of these categories, direct challenges peaked in the \$35,000 - \$50,000 income bracket, which may suggest a lack of advancement opportunities within up skilling and/or education, as well as the absence of career ladders.

Secondary barriers to work drop between the lowest income bracket and \$34,999, only to rise again for the \$35,000 - \$74,999 brackets before dropping significantly for those earning \$75,000 or more. This rise is in part attributable to child care and transportation challenges. There is also an increase in barriers created by a lack of internet and the presence of prior incarceration. This further suggests a potential earnings ceiling for many respondents in the \$35,000 - \$49,999 household income bracket.

Reports of Direct Barriers to Work
Per Respondents, Per Income Level



Reports of Secondary Barriers to Work
Per Respondents, Per Income Level

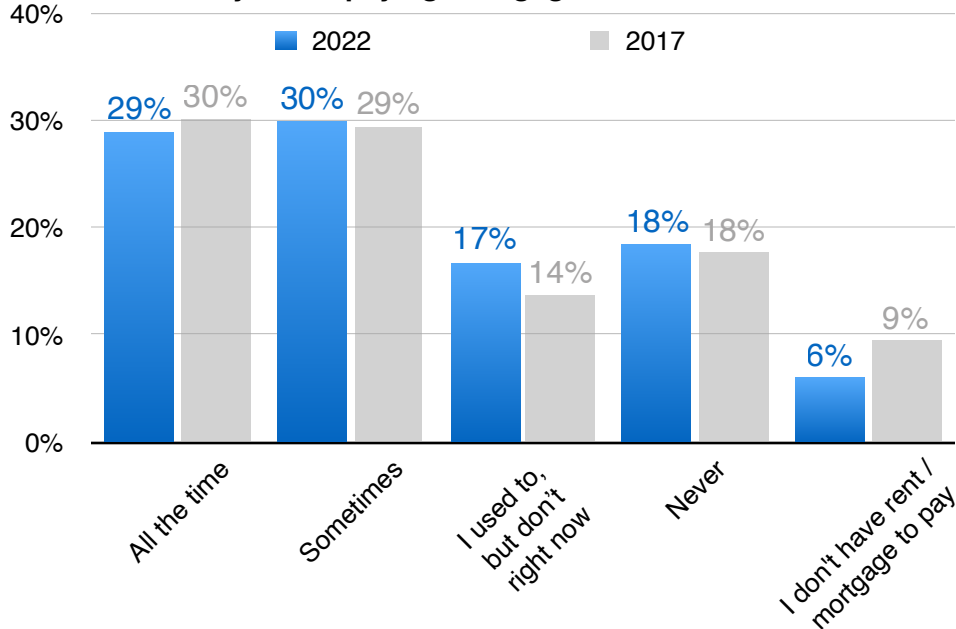


Barriers to Opportunity (continued)

Housing

5% more respondents flagged housing as a pressing challenge in 2022 than in 2017, though only 3.7% cited it as a root cause of financial hardship. Despite increases of homeownership rates at the regional level since 2017, survey respondents were much less likely to own homes at every income level — and less than 12% of respondents overall reported home ownership. Racial and ethnic disparities rooted in legacies of disinvestment and differential access are present. 20% of white identified respondents own their homes, the highest of any racial and ethnic group. Meanwhile 36% of Latine/o/a/x respondents reported worrying about paying their rent or mortgage all the time, followed by Black/ African American respondents (29%) and white identified (24%) respondents.

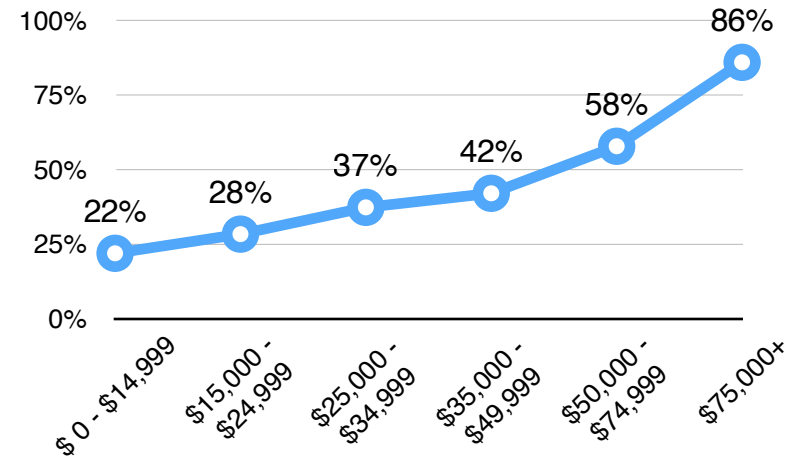
Percentage of Respondents with household incomes <\$75,000 who worry about paying mortgage or rent, 2022, 2017



Transportation

Transportation was seen as only the 5th most pressing challenge by survey respondents in 2017, but moved up to third in 2022. Yet transportation was cited by less than 1% of respondents as a root cause of poverty and inequity, but it was in the top four for barriers to work. Since 2017, the percentage of auto usage as primary transportation (both personal vehicle usage and ride sharing) has gone down significantly among respondents with incomes less than \$75,000 (from 30% to 19%). Only 10% of those in households with less than \$15,000 annual income and 12% of those in households \$15,000 - \$24,999 reported using a personal car as their primary means of transportation. Roughly 13% of those in this combined income bracket rely on walking as their primary means of transportation, but a large plurality of these respondents primarily really on public transit (50% and 43%, respectively). Much qualitative feedback focused on the challenges of transportation expense and lack of accessibility/ availability of options.

Percentage of Respondents who believe jobs and other opportunities are easily accessible from their neighborhood per income level. 2022

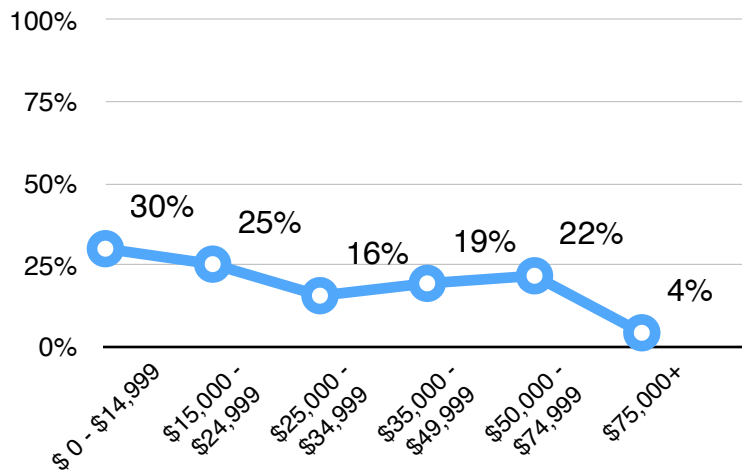


Barriers to Opportunity (continued)

Food Access & Availability

There was an overall slight decrease in percentage of respondents who reported skipping meals in the last year because of an inability to afford food. However, there was a large increase for those in the \$50,000 - \$74,999 income bracket (from 6% in 2017 to 22% in 2022). Reflecting a history of disinvestment in communities of color, racially and ethnically large gaps were revealed in food access. 63% of White/ European American respondents reported “There are places in my neighborhood to access healthy food”, while no other racial or ethnic group reported this more than 36% of the time.

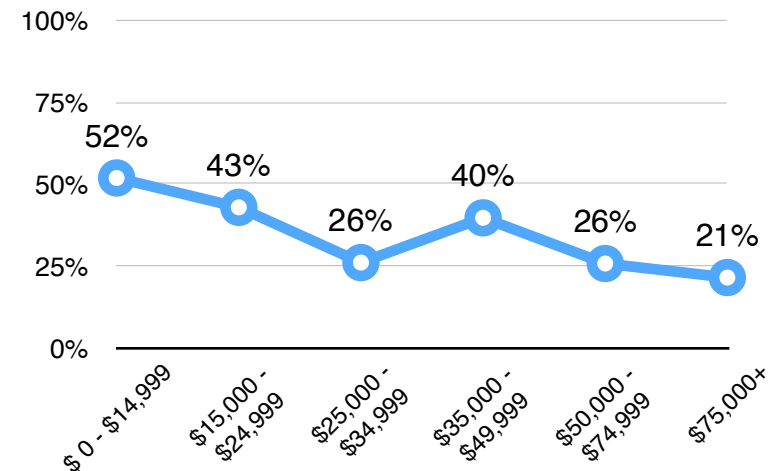
Percentage of Respondents who reported they or someone in their household skipped meals because of an inability to afford food in the past year per income level, 2022



Health & Wellness

More than half of respondents in households of less than \$15,000 reported either they or a household member had a chronic illness or disability. Almost 30% in this income bracket reported that they had lost a job or been unemployed because of a medical issue experienced by themselves or someone close to them. Between 10% and 16% of respondents in each of the lowest three income brackets reported having no health insurance. This number fell to 7% for those with incomes \$35,000 - \$49,999, 3% for \$50,000 - \$74,999 and 0% of respondents with incomes \$75,000+. For those in households with incomes less than \$75,000 per year, since 2017 — though most sources of insurance have remained relatively steady — respondents report a higher incidence of receiving health insurance through Medicaid and a lower incidence of receiving health insurance through employers.

Percentage of Respondents who reported themselves or a household member having a chronic illness or disability per income level, 2022



Conclusion

This data is presented as part of an intentional effort by the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo and the John R. Oishei Foundation to include community voices and experiences in priority setting and strategy formation to further a vibrant and inclusive Greater Buffalo region with opportunity for all.

The survey responses were collected at a very challenging time for Buffalo, and in particular for Black, African and African American residents who continue to be acutely impacted by the white supremacist fueled massacre on May 14th, 2022. The magnitude of that attack, carried out by a lone individual but built on an enduring infrastructure of white supremacist thought and action — highlighted both the fragility of systems strained by decades of external disinvestment as well as the resiliency and strength of generations of community members who have survived and even thrived despite the absence of resources, amenities, and access that many Western New York residents take for granted.

This report provides a snapshot into the interrelated challenges that ongoing disparity has created and perpetuates. Community members' support in spring and summer of 2022 has shown the kind of empathy and generosity that have inspired Buffalo's title as The City of Good Neighbors. But the true test of this designation rests not in the immediate aftermath of tragedy, but in the long term commitment to ensure opportunity and prosperity for every family in Buffalo and Western New York.

We will never truly be neighbors — let alone good neighbors — if we allow segregation and disparity to persist. To make real and lasting change requires a clear eyed, and often painful, recognition of the places and spaces we have collectively failed to live up to this idea.

It requires a new paradigm and commitment to not just hearing, but listening to and involving community members who have been pushed to the margins in the systems and structure that impact their lives.

This report is presented in the spirit of contributing to commitment to lasting change.

Prepared for:



Community Foundation
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Make Communities with
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Open Buffalo

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Summaries of the various types of community input (forums and surveys) are included in the Opportunity in the Queen City Community Outreach and Engagement Full Report where more in-depth and nuanced responses can be found. Demographic information, outreach methodology, and a striation of many response factors by income are also available.

