

Honing Youth Fishing Programs to Create Avid Anglers

by Outdoor Stewards of Conservation Foundation
with support from Southwick Associates and DJ Case & Associates



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Key Findings

Opportunity

6% of adult Americans wanted to fish as kids but did not, or 15.5 million adults. 45% of these have not fished as adults, or upwards of 7 million adult Americans who might be anglers today if fishing was available to them in their younger years.

- These 'lost' anglers represent a possible 18% increase in angler numbers, if all of them who would have fished had an opportunity to learn and accessible fishing had been available.
- With an annual average spending of \$2,941, they represent upwards of \$17.4 billion in lost annual fishing expenditures.

Youth Angling Programs Have Potential

Youth angling programs serve to help people discover if fishing is right for them and help turn beginning anglers into capable anglers.

- While half of the participants consider themselves anglers, nearly 20% had no interest in fishing before attending a program and a third were interested but did not consider themselves to be “capable” anglers and needed support.

Target Youth in their Elementary Age Years

- The greater the exposure to fishing as a youth, the more likely they will participate as an adult (Asah, 2012).
- Three quarters of first-time youth anglers tried it prior to their twelfth birthday (USFWS, 2016).
- Of adult anglers who participated in a youth program, 84% did so before the age of 14.



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Key Findings

Social Networks

- Many people participated in youth fishing programs because they did not have access to fishing partners, information or other means of support. Youth fishing programs help fill this gap by providing the support roles many youth are missing from their own social networks.
- Considering many lapsed anglers have reported in previous studies that not having someone to personally show them how to fish is a major reason for quitting, youth fishing programs help fill this critical gap by allowing new anglers to meet and learn from experienced anglers.
- It takes an angler to make an angler. Boosting fishing participation in part will rely on incorporating fishing into kids' existing social networks which will help potential new anglers find a friend to fish with.
- Having someone to fish with and support them is a major gap. A family member or the entire family unit is ideal. Youth fishing programs could consider requiring at least a parent or responsible adult to participate with each kid to help build the bonds and support needed by kids to fish independently.

Promotion

- Over half of today's adult anglers who did not participate in a youth program were not aware of any when they were young. Youth fishing programs need promotional support. Whether in-person or online, programs that help encourage and teach youth to fish need advertising and marketing support from the greater sportfishing community and others championing physical and mental health for youth.
- Primary messaging for youth programs should include the fact that fishing is fun and that someone can experience catching a fish regardless of their interest in fishing to start with.



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Recommended Actions

- Target elementary school-aged youth to achieve the greatest short- and long-term success from youth fishing programs.
- Youth are social and need friends to fish with. Therefore, implement fishing programs within their existing social networks (e.g., scouts, summer camps, school) versus stand-alone programs.
- Help youth fishing programs overcome promotional and material limitations by partnering retailers and their suppliers with those who can best introduce youth fishing programs locally such as state agencies, scouts, summer camps, etc.
- Local youth fishing programs need educational materials. Videos and handouts covering basics such as knots, bait and rigging, casting skills, cleaning fish and similar are needed.
- Support local youth fishing programs by providing the means to promote their availability to the local community. Position fishing and the local events as fun and as an opportunity to catch a fish.
- Host youth events in which family members are not only encouraged to attend but actually participate with their children.
- Collect contact information for youth's parents or guardians to allow for evaluation efforts intended to track effectiveness of youth programs and to identify improvements.



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Introduction and Background

- While adult-onset R3 programs may provide greater short-term returns to states (WMI/Chase & Chase, 2022), fishing participation as an adult may be dependent on some level of exposure to fishing in one's younger years.
- Considering the significant investments by states and industry in adult and youth angler recruitment efforts, a better understanding of when and how to field youth fishing programs is needed.
- This project incorporates focus groups and surveys to examine longtime anglers, adults who recently started fishing, and past participants in youth fishing programs to understand if and how early exposure to youth fishing programs factors into eventual adult participation and license buying.
- The results are intended to help guide the design and focus of current and future youth fishing programs and how to structure these programs to maximize both short- and long-term returns on state R3 investments.



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Methodology



Focus Group Methodology

Target Audience

- 28 U.S. residents, across the U.S. age 18 or older;
- Two focus groups were set up for each of the two target audiences:
 - Audience 1 - Anglers Who Started Fishing as Youth
 - Audience 2 - Anglers Who Started Fishing as Adults

Session Dates

- Focus groups were conducted between April 23rd and April 30th, 2024.

Logistics

- For this project, DJ Case and Associates conducted four online focus groups via video conferencing technology. The team used Itracks' proprietary online focus group software based on its ability to manage participant recruitment.

Survey Methodology

Target Audience

- U.S. residents, age 18 or older;
- Anglers from a representative panel of the U.S. population (survey 1) and adults involved in fishing organizations that operate youth fishing programs (survey 2)

Fielding

- August 17th – November 18th, 2024

Completed Responses

The study yielded 2,206 completed responses:

- 1,159 from the survey to general population
- 1,047 from the survey administered to fishing organizations

Statistical Reliability

- Results with a sample size of at least 400 responses represent a 95% confidence interval at $\pm 5\%$; a sample size of at least 1,000 represent a 95% confidence interval at $\pm 3\%$; and this sample size of 2,206 responses represent a 95% confidence interval at $\pm 2\%$.



Supplemental Survey

A basic question pertinent to this study needed to be presented to the general U.S. population who have never fished:

“How many U.S. adults were interested in fishing as kids but never did so?”

To answer this question, Southwick Associates fielded a third survey to a panel reflecting the general U.S. population using the 1Q market research platform. This survey was fielded in November 2024 to a final sample size of 400 representing a cross section of the national population based on demographics and geographic dispersion. This additional research helped the research team frame the potential opportunities inherent from youth fishing programs.

Audience Makeup

Due to the legal, social, and methodological difficulties associated with youth research, this project was designed to ask adults about their past youth fishing experiences. Researchers wish to point out that the time between a participant's first fishing experience to the present day may have introduced recall errors in the respondent's results. That said, we can be reasonably sure that the trends and findings that we present in this report are accurate and methodologically sound. The findings that revealed the need for further research appear in the *Further Research Needs* section of this report (Slides 25-27).

Youth Fishing Programs

General Insights



Investing in Youth Fishing Programs has Merit

- Per the survey of the general U.S. population, 6% of adult Americans wanted to fish as kids but did not.
 - With 258.1 million Americans 18 or older, this equals 15.5 million people.
- 45% of these people have not fished as an adult, which equals 7.0 million Americans.
 - Assuming all of these people would have fished if exposed as a youth, the sportfishing community could be missing upwards of 7.0 million more anglers.
 - This is a maximum number given not all likely would have done so.
 - Given there were 39.9 million anglers in 2022 (USFWS, 2022), if these individuals had taken up fishing, today's angler population would be at the most 17.5% greater.
- At \$2,491 in annual spending per angler (USFWS, 2022), these missing anglers represent up to \$17.4 billion in lost sales.



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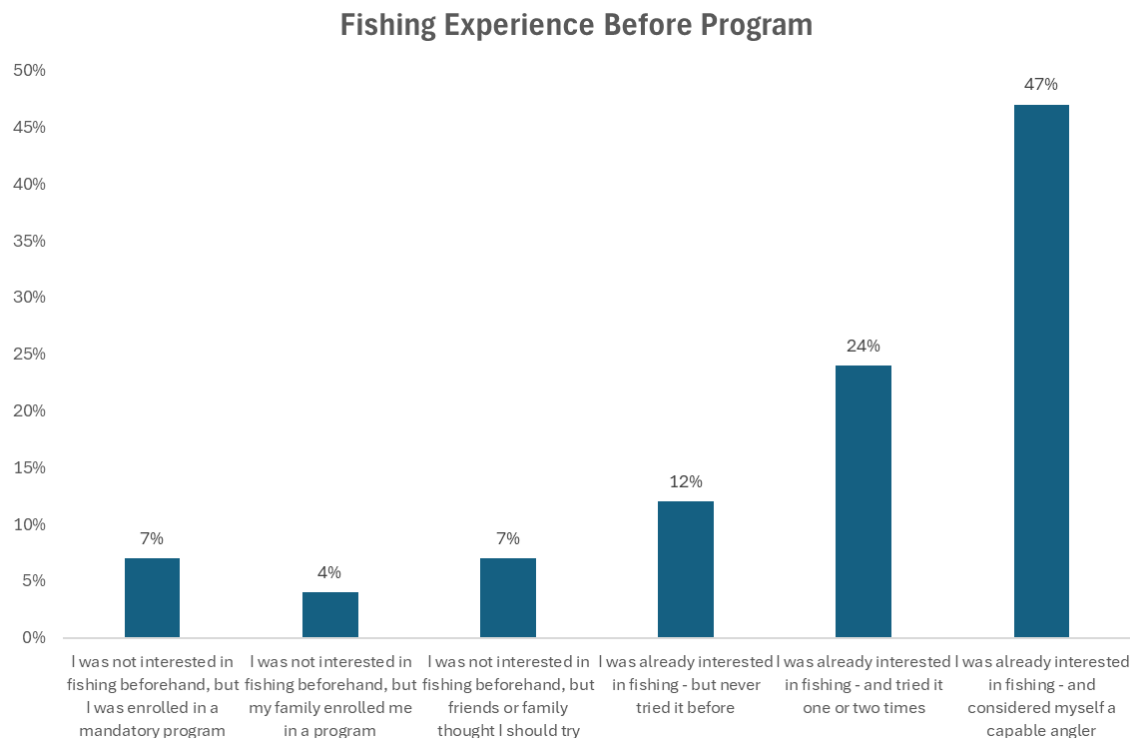


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Youth Angling Programs Have Potential

Finding: While almost half of program participants consider themselves capable anglers, nearly 20% of anglers who were former youth program participants had no interest in fishing before attending a program. Another 33% were already interested in fishing but did not consider themselves to be “capable” anglers before attending the program.



Youth angling programs serve to help people discover if fishing is right for them and help turn beginning anglers into capable anglers.

Q30. Please describe your fishing experience before you attended the youth fishing program.

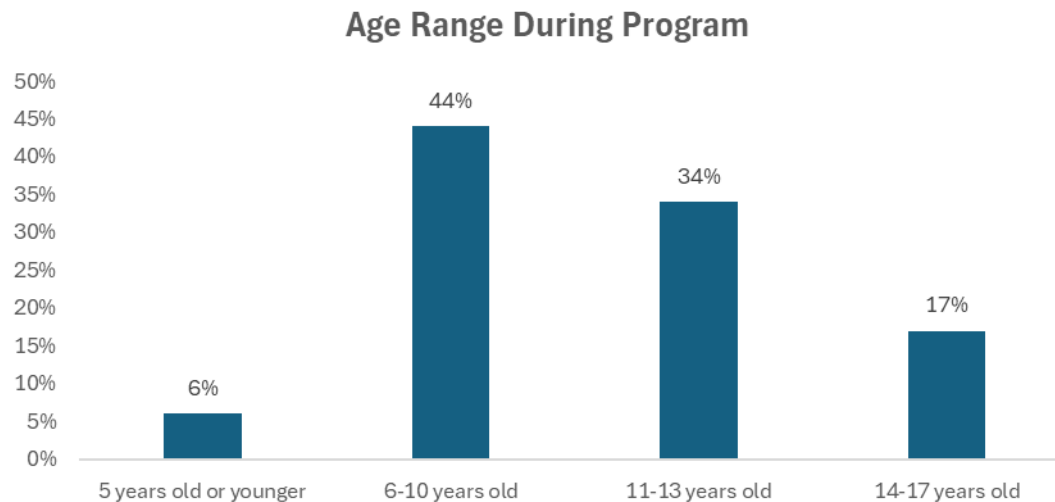
*Shown only to respondents who indicated that they learned how to fish through a program or attended a program before 18 years old

Target Youth in their Elementary Age Years

There is additional evidence indicating youth programs have greater influence on younger anglers:

- The more people participate in a nature-based activity such as fishing in their youth, the more they will find ways to overcome barriers to participation (Asah, 2012).
- Of the 1.336 million youth 15 years or younger who first fished in 2015, three-quarters of them were under 12 years of age (USFWS, 2016).
- Additional research by Southwick Associates (Southwick Associates et al., 2024) found that 89% of experienced millennial anglers first fished at 10 years of age or younger, while only 76% of millennial onset anglers had an initial fishing experience before 10 years of age.

Finding: Of today's adult anglers who participated in a youth program, half did so before the age of 11. In total, 84% of the anglers who did a program participated in one before the age of 14. This may relate to fewer programs being available to older youth but matches the insights above from previous research.



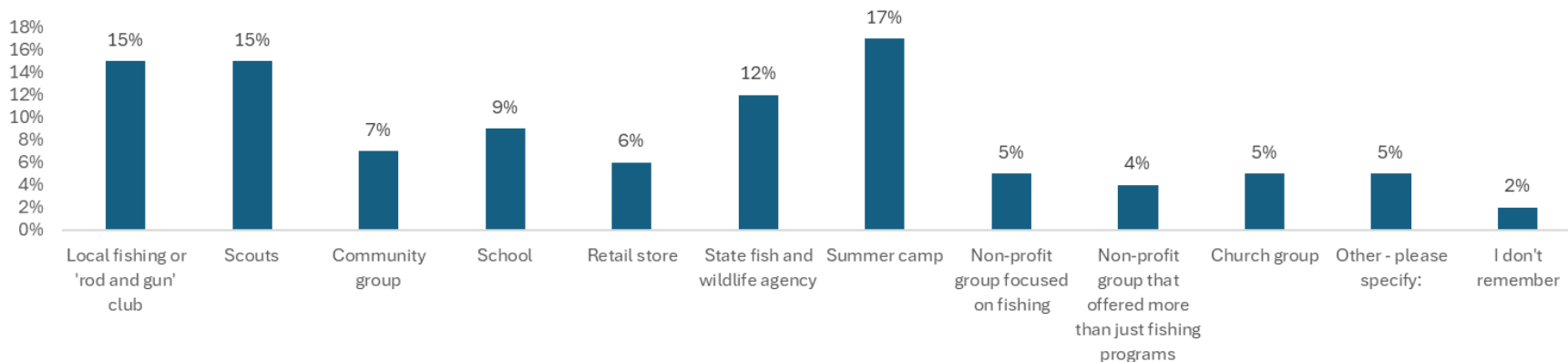
Q32. Please select your age range when you participated in the fishing program.

*Shown only to respondents who indicated that they learned how to fish through a program or attended a program before 18 years old

Most Common Youth Fishing Program Providers

Finding: No one type of organization is a primary provider of youth fishing programs. Summer camps were mentioned the most often (17%). Local fishing or “rod and gun” clubs and scouting programs were both rated at 15%. State fish and wildlife agencies were fourth at 12%. Schools accounted for 9% of respondents' host programs.

Who offered the fishing program that was most beneficial to you?



Future efforts to support youth programs will need to maintain flexibility in their approaches. While state fish and wildlife agencies can be a primary provider of youth angling programs, limited resources to scale efforts suggest that state youth angling initiatives can be supported through partnerships with summer camps, fishing/rod and gun clubs, and scouting to expand collective reach.

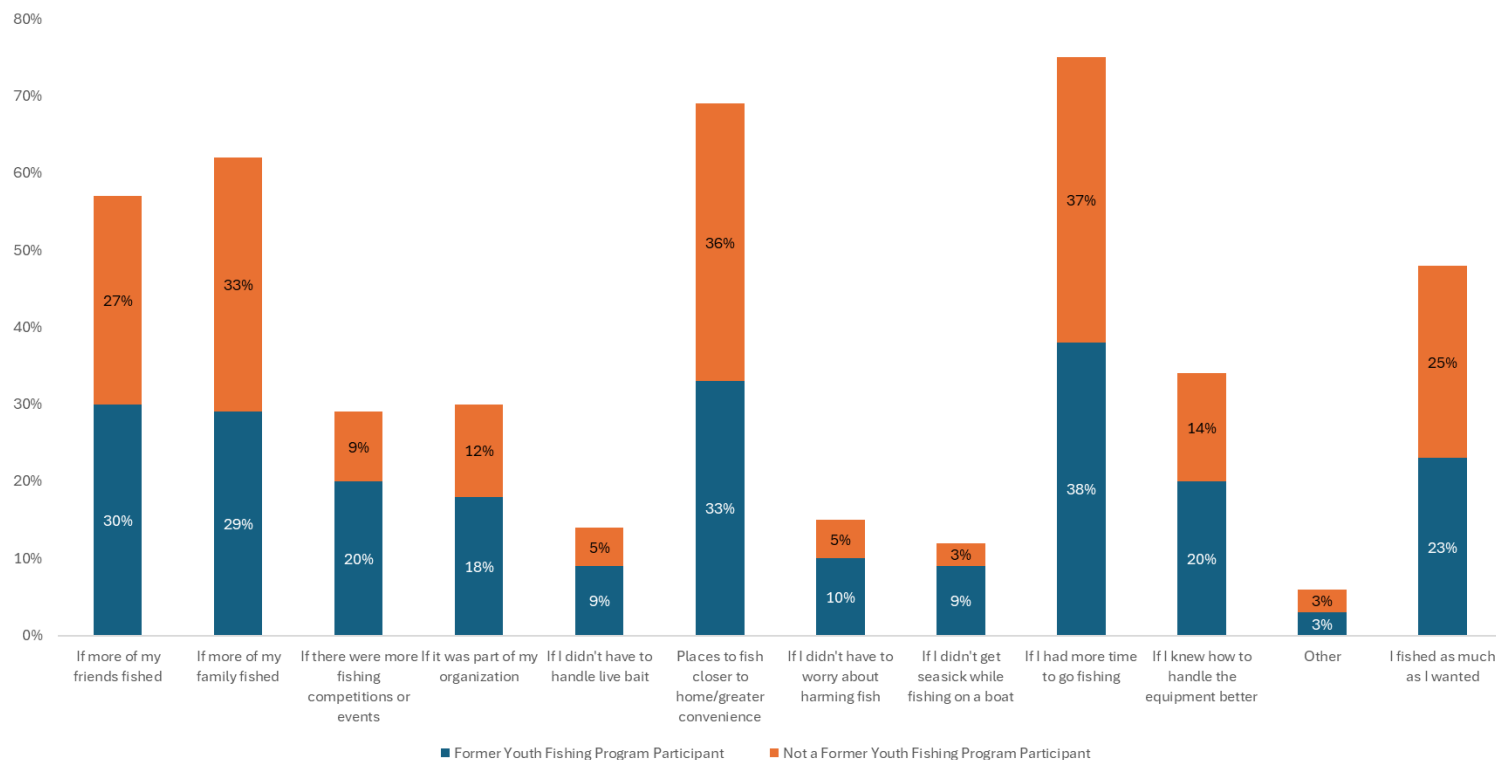
Q33. Who offered the fishing program that was most beneficial to you?

*Shown only to respondents who indicated that they learned how to fish through a program or attended a program before 18 years old

How to Encourage More Youth to Fish

Finding: Former youth fishing program participants were slightly more likely to say that something could have helped them fish more as a child compared to anglers who did not participate in a youth program.

Factors That Would Have Helped Youth Anglers Fish More as Children



This may be an indication that people joined youth fishing programs because they did not have necessary knowledge and other means of support. This table also highlights the importance of social support in youth angling and how youth angling programs can fill support gaps.

Q18. What would have encouraged you to fish more as a child? Please select all that apply.

*Shown only to respondents who recalled fishing for the first time before 18 years old



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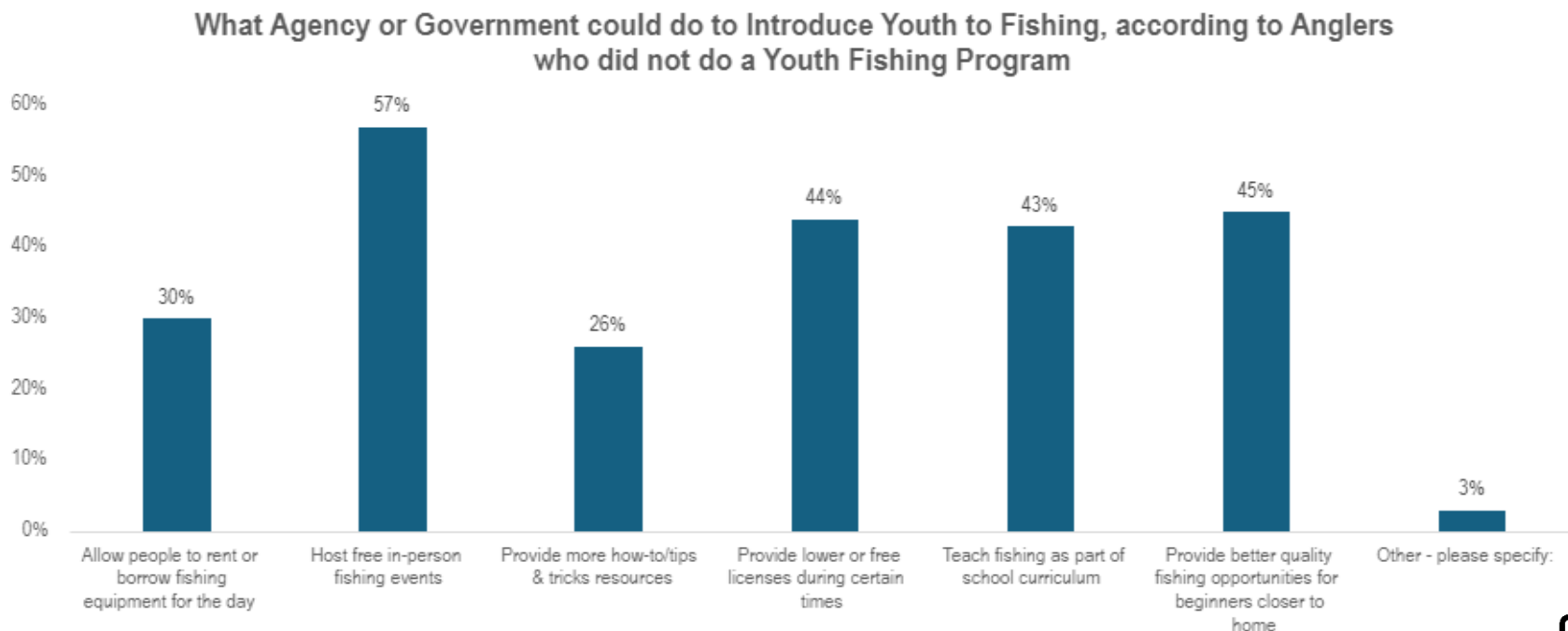


Promoting Programs



Preferred Types of Programs and Content

Finding: Only one action to help introduce youth to fishing was noted by a majority of anglers who did not participate in a youth fishing program: host free in-person events to teach youth how to fish. Other approaches include loaner gear and more convenient opportunities, with none receiving lower than 25% support from this subgroup of survey respondents.



State fish and wildlife agencies or local governments can implement these ideas to introduce youth to fishing. While the respondents were adults who were asked ways to introduce youth to fishing and not the youth themselves, understanding adult perspectives on youth participation may help uncover important factors contributing to the delivery of youth programming.

Q43. What could your state fish and wildlife agency or local government do to help introduce youth to fishing? Please select up to three items.



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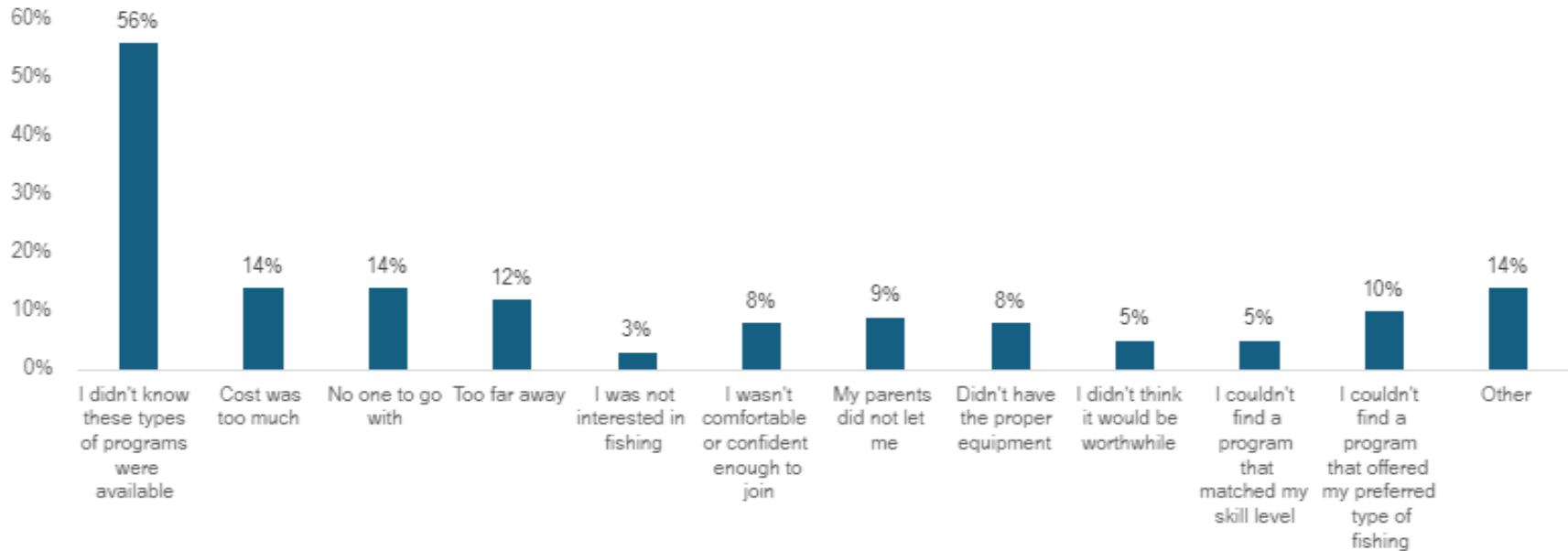
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Youth Fishing Programs Need Promotional Support

Finding: The majority of anglers (56%) who did not participate in youth events said they did not join the program because they were not aware such opportunities existed.

Reason to Not Join Youth Fishing Program



Many times, youth programs are not available locally. However, given youth programs are very limited on resources, providing such programs with effective promotion and communication support may be key to boosting participation.

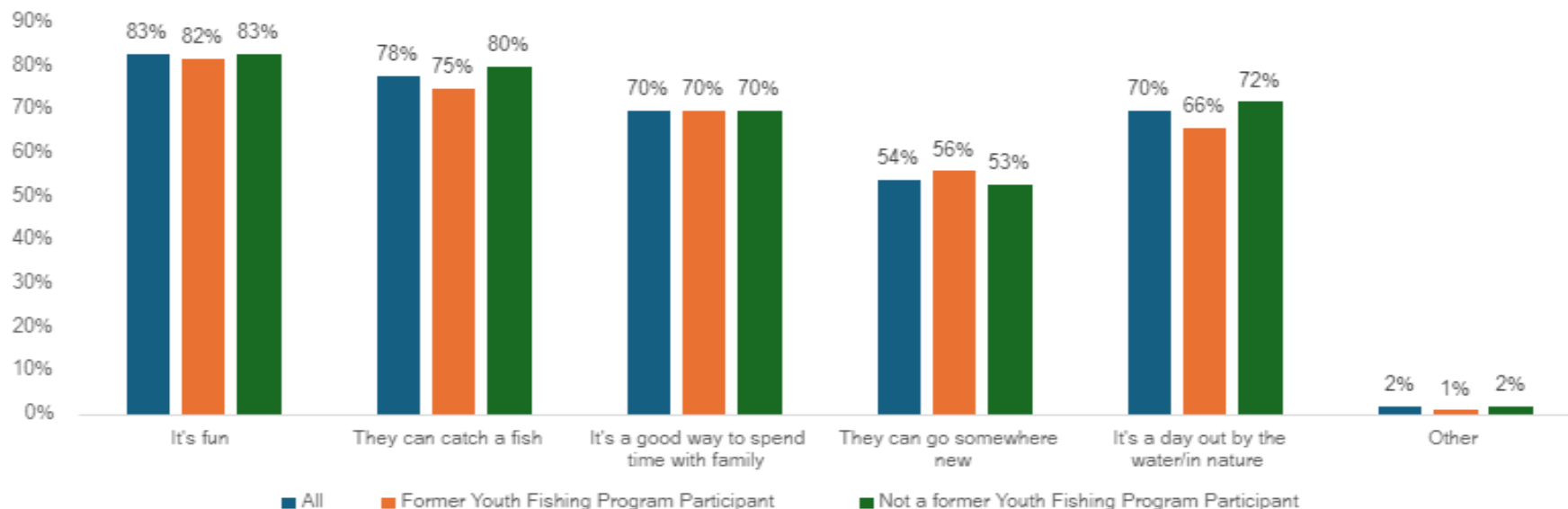
Q44. What was the reason you didn't join a youth fishing program as a child? Please select all that apply.

*Shown only to respondents who indicated that they did not learn how to fish through a program or did not attend a program before 18 years old

Motivations for Attending

Finding: The top two reasons that people think would interest kids in trying to fish (whether they themselves participated in a youth program or not) are that fishing is fun and that they can catch a fish.

What would Interest Kids in Fishing



These two points - the fact that fishing is fun and that someone can experience catching a fish – should be the central focal points when marketing and advertising youth programs.

Q56. What about fishing do you think would interest other kids in trying it? Please select all that apply.

*Shown only to respondents who are planning to take the children in their family fishing in the next 12 months



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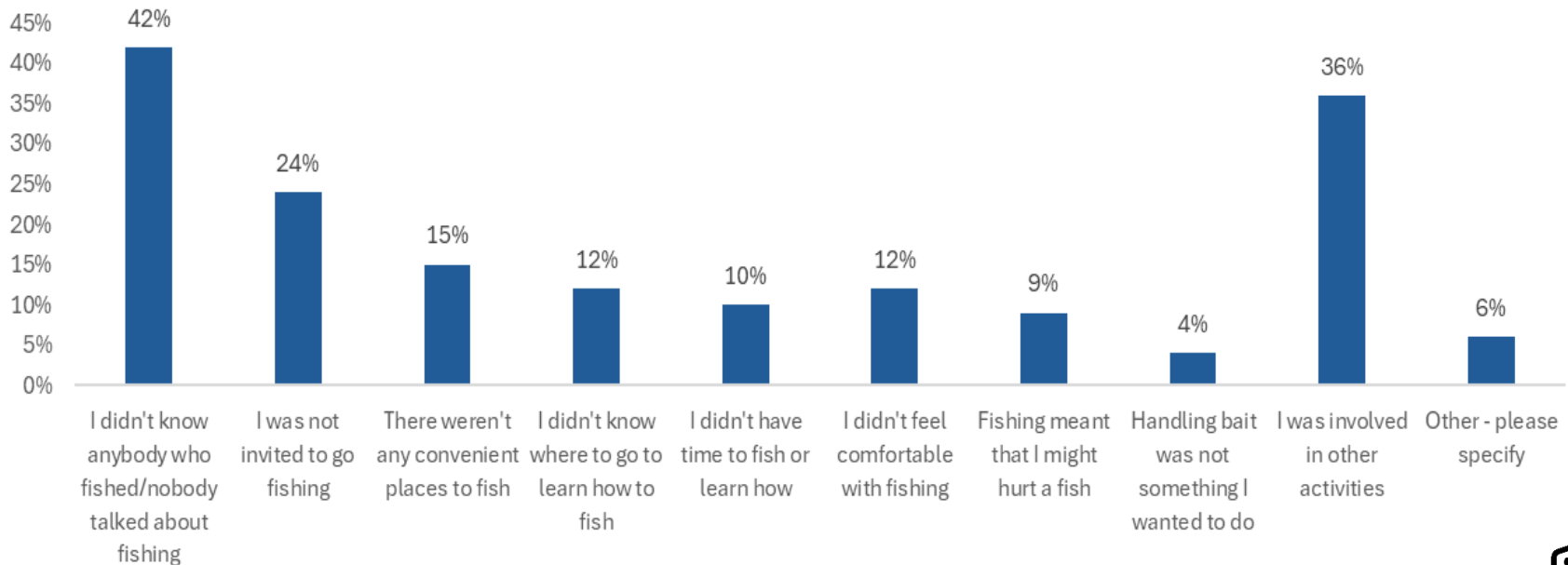
Importance of Social Network for Youth Fishing



The Need to Increase Fishing in Everyday Discussions

Finding: Many people wanted to try fishing as children (under 18 years old) but didn't. 42% of people who started fishing as an adult did not know anybody who fished or nobody talked to them about fishing when young.

Why didn't you fish as a child?



Although the sample sizes for these findings were low, the results support many past projects documenting people need someone to take them fishing or to invite them to go fishing. This is the idea that it takes an angler to make an angler. Boosting fishing participation in part relies on incorporating fishing into youth's social networks and discussions to elevate interest in fishing.

Q19. Why didn't you fish as a child (<18 years old)? Please select all that apply.

*Shown only to respondents who indicated that they fished for the first time when they were at least 18 years old



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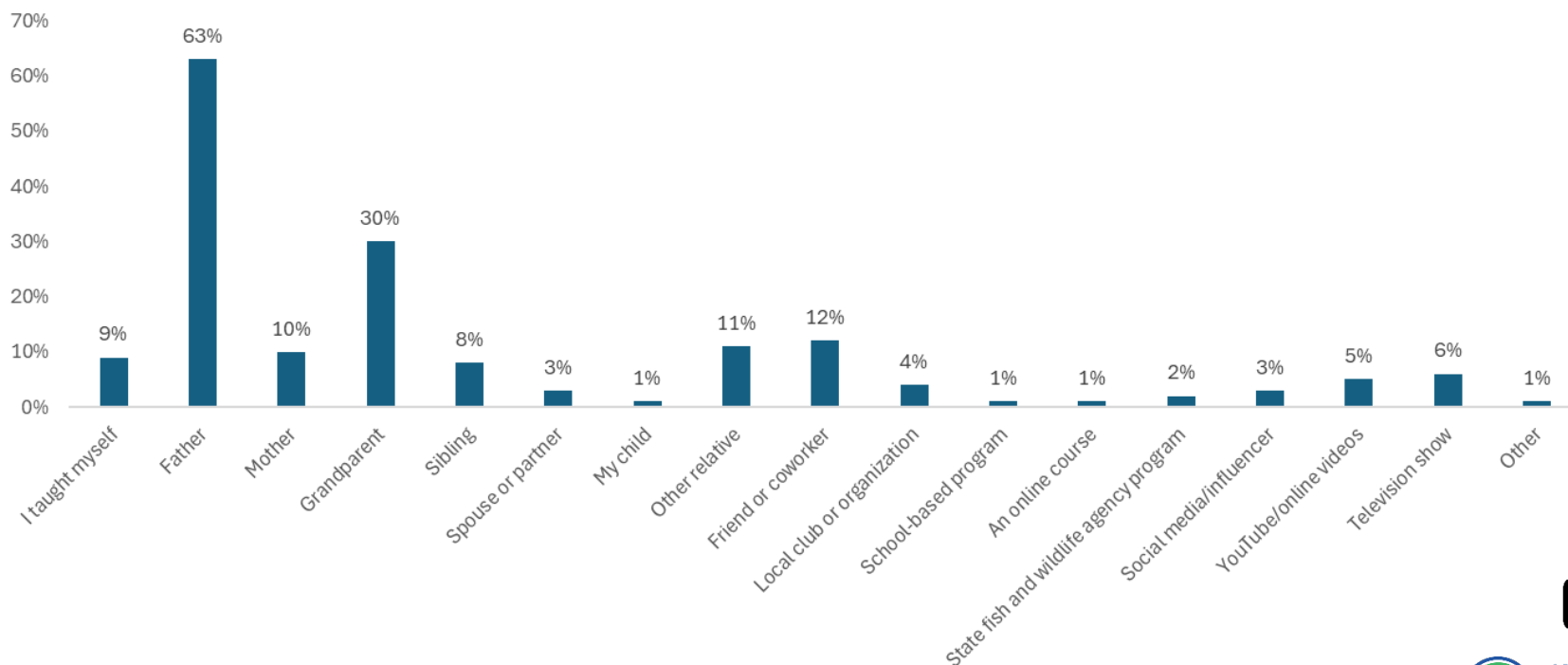
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Family Involvement in Youth Fishing

Finding: The majority of participants (63%), regardless of whether they participated in a youth fishing program or not, said they first learned to fish from their father. The second most likely individual for all participants was a grandparent at 30%. The rest of the highest-scoring individuals, in order, were friends or coworkers, other relatives, mothers, self, and siblings.

First Learned to Fish



According to the findings in this project, family involvement is clearly important in youth angling. Maybe require parents and/or other influential adults in each child's life to participate with each kid in youth events to build fishing bonds and interest in fishing of their own.

Q14. How did you first learn to fish? Please select all that apply.



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Findings Prompting Further Research Needs



Further Research Needs

Friends Are Important

Potential Finding: Being invited to go fishing by a friend had similar effects on anglers who did and did not participate in a program, as it contributed to people's interest in fishing for the first time.

This is an area that deserves further research. This project asked these questions of adults. However, although it makes intuitive sense that being invited by a friend to go fishing would contribute to a person's interest, researchers were not able to confirm to what extent this is motivating for youth. If this is significant, programs could potentially have "Invite a buddy" days to increase interest and participation in fishing events and, in general, fishing. How and when to word and present such invitations is also unknown and untested.

Improved Fishing Skills

Potential Finding: Former youth fishing program participants are slightly more likely as adults to rate themselves as expert anglers than anglers who did not participate.

This is an important finding; however, this project cannot confirm whether the program or some other factor contributed to the likelihood that an individual rated themselves as an expert angler. There appears to be a connection, but further research is needed to confirm this finding and to better understand the interaction of youth programs with other fishing-related experiences towards creating new and life-long anglers.



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Further Research Needs

Increased Importance of Fishing

Potential Finding: Former youth fishing program participants place more importance on fishing than those who didn't participate in one of these programs.

Whether the programs elevated the importance of fishing or if youth with a greater interest in fishing are more likely to participate in such programs is not known. This is a potential avenue for future research.

Differences in Information Sources for Fishing

Potential Finding: Anglers who did not participate in a fishing program in their childhood were more likely to select 'conversations with people who fish' and YouTube as an impetus for being interested in trying fishing as adults compared to other anglers. Also, former youth program participants were more likely to select social media, an outdoor show, a podcast, and the state agency website as a source of information that piqued their interest.

Adults who responded to this question reported they had been fishing for less than 5 years. Thus, the media sources are representative of this adult group but not necessarily of today's youth. More research is needed to understand the media habits of today's youth, especially as they pertain to angling media and content. According to a study performed by the Pew Research Center titled "[Teens, Social Media and Technology 2024](#)", the most used social media platforms are, in order, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook. Whether youth angling program communications will be effective on these platforms is not yet known.



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Conclusion

Overall, youth angling programs appear to have a significant role in helping many people become anglers. This project discovered a few key takeaways and confirmed others that not only paint a better picture of the importance of youth fishing programs for the future of fishing participation but also helps show how to structure and promote these programs. The results also indicate areas for additional research.

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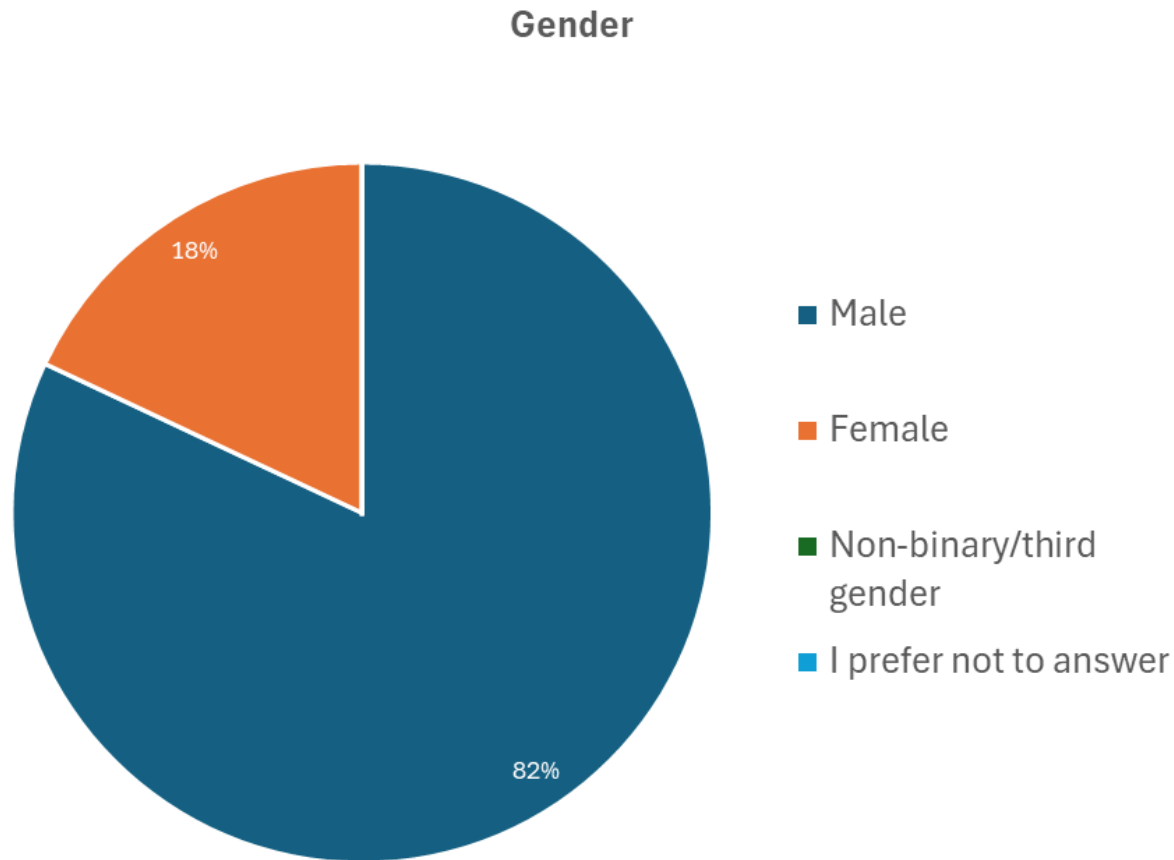
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APPENDIX I: Sample Demographics

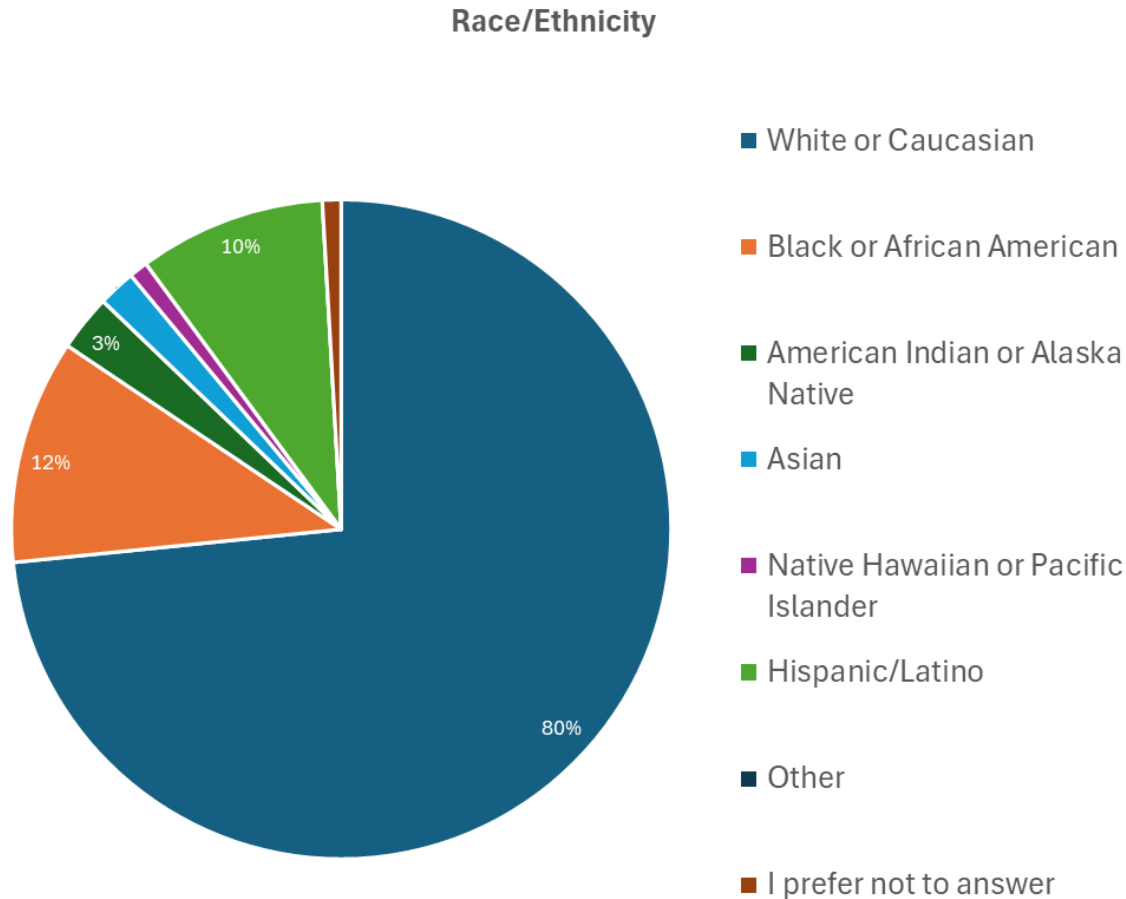


Sample Demographics



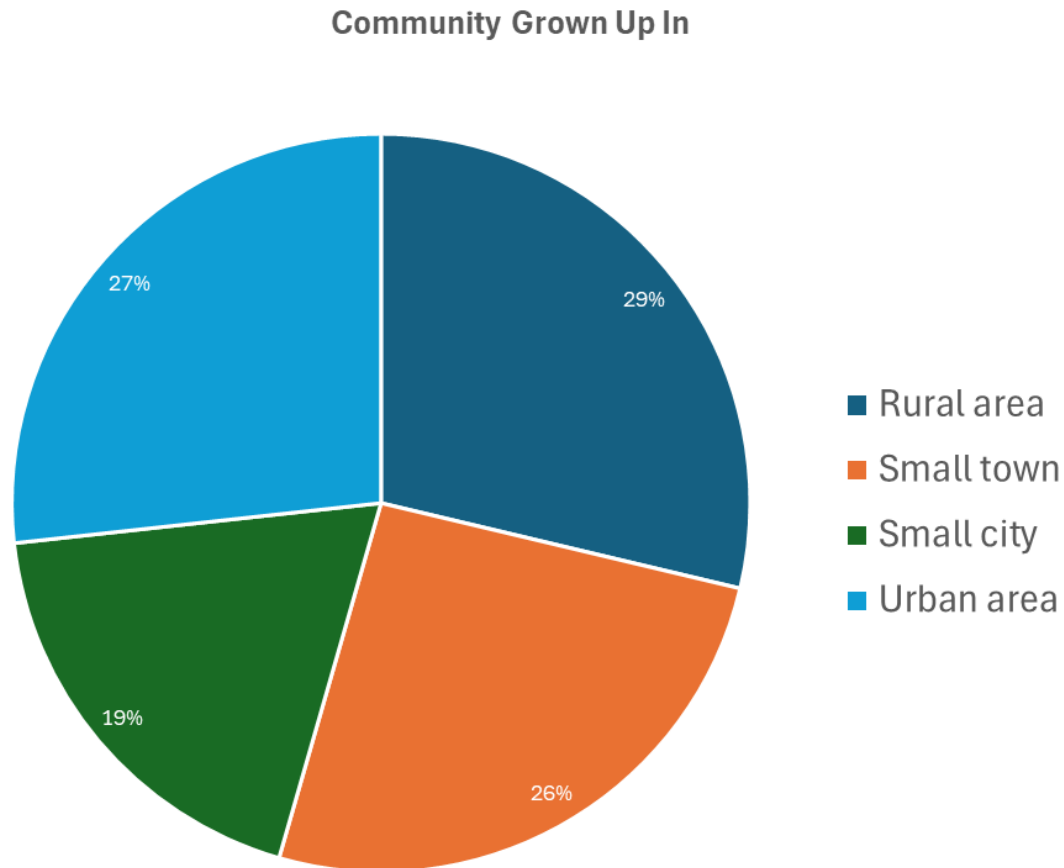
Q4. What is your gender?

Sample Demographics



Q5. What is your race/ethnicity? Please select all that apply.

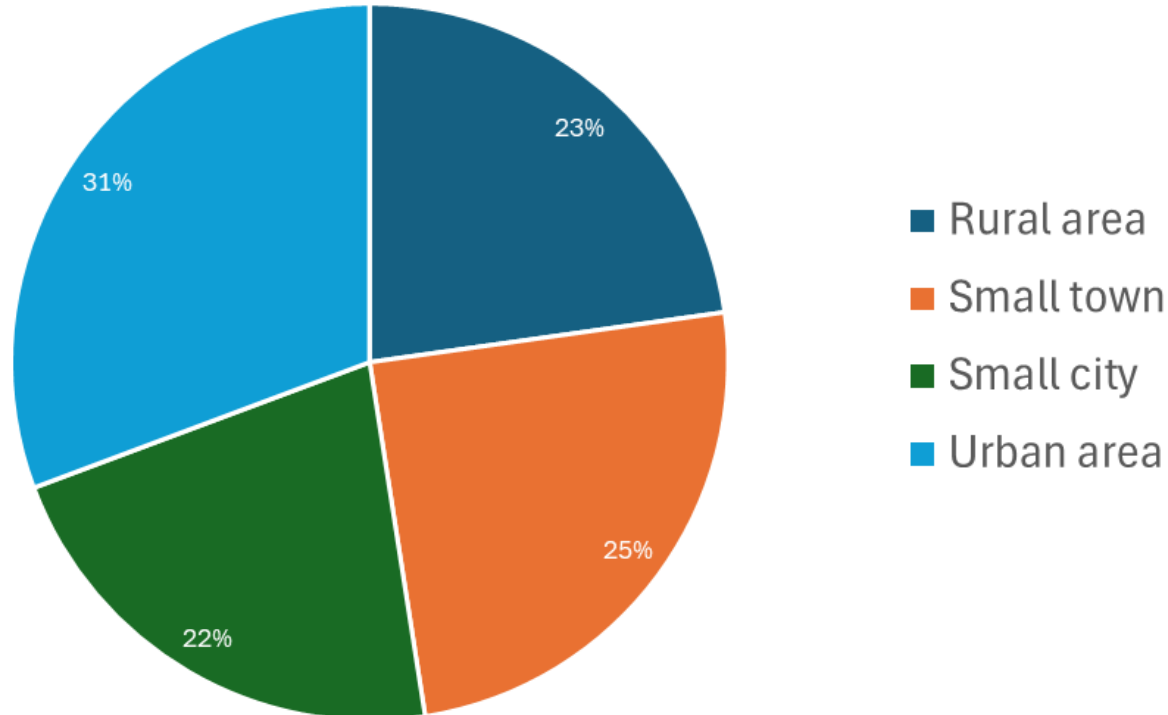
Sample Demographics



Q61. Which of the following best describes the community where you grew up?

Sample Demographics

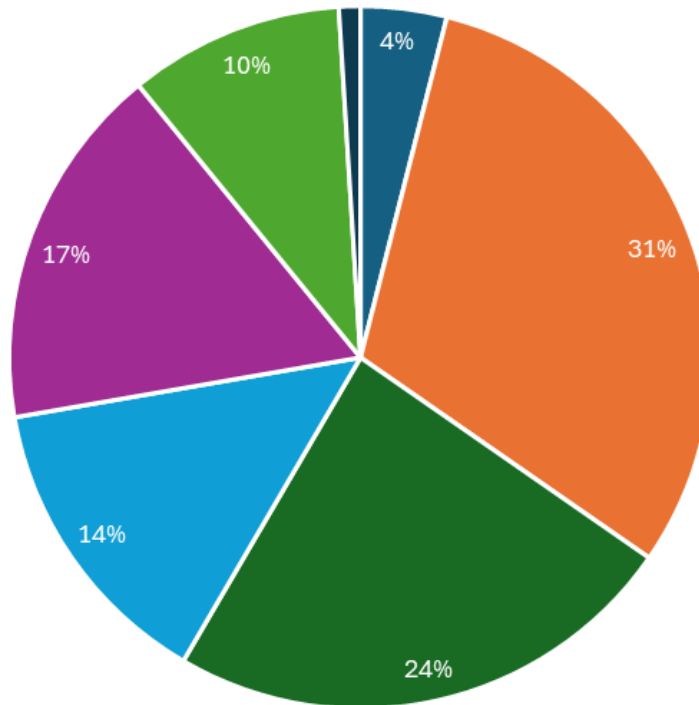
Community Currently Live In



Q62. Which of the following best describes the community where you currently live?

Sample Demographics

Education Completed



- Some high school or less
- High school diploma or GED
- Some college, but no degree
- Associates or technical degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Graduate or professional degree
- I prefer not to say

Q63. What is the highest level of education you have completed?