Community Perceptions of the City of Albany's COVID-19 Response Among People of Color

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THE CITY OF ALBANY OFFICE OF AUDIT & CONTROL |

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Foreword

The purpose of this report is to assess community perceptions of the City of Albany's COVID-19 response among People of Color (POCs) and to identify potential policy opportunities for the City's ongoing response. This report is *not* a formal audit, nor is it meant to provide a comprehensive description or evaluation of the City's response efforts to date.

Some participants may not be fully aware of all of the City's initiatives in response to COVID-19. This report does not seek to assess the adequacy of the City's response itself, but rather to highlight potential gaps in service and the community's awareness.

The report seeks to capture the perceptions of a segment of the Albany population through the following channels:

- **Interviews with community leaders** (i.e., leaders of community-based organizations serving POCs) which were focused on their perceptions of their community members' needs during the pandemic, their awareness of the City's efforts to address those needs, and any potential opportunities for the City to continue to support their organizations and the members they serve.
- **The community survey** which honed in on specific areas of need among POCs that were identified by City and community leaders and that also appeared to be areas the City could feasibly tackle, on its own or in partnership with other entities (e.g., the County). The survey was designed to gather actionable information to inform the City's response moving forward rather than to evaluate the City's current response efforts. The survey was open to the public for one week from August 26th to September 1st, 2020.

Due to resource constraints, the Office of Audit & Control (OAC) was limited to an online survey format, which limited OAC's ability to capture a truly representative survey sample. Engaging POCs in government surveys can be challenging for a number of reasons, which may require additional financial and human resources to overcome. OAC acknowledges there is more work to be done to gain a fuller picture of perceptions of the City's COVID-19 response among POCs.

However, while the individuals who participated in the interviews and survey comprise only a segment of the full population, inferences can be drawn from the data that suggest how the broader population (and sub-populations) may be experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic. Inferences drawn from the interviews and survey, combined with research on promising practices from other city, county, and state governments, were used to identify potential policy opportunities for the City of Albany. This report aims to provide ideas for consideration.

It is also important to underscore that the governmental response to COVID-19 in Albany is led by multiple entities, including the City, County, State, and federal governments. At the local level, public-sector entities such as the City School District of Albany are also involved, separate from the City. Each of these entities have authority over different parts of the overall public COVID-19 response; for instance, public health functions are held at the County level since the

City does not have a public health department itself.

Executive Summary

Background

COVID-19 and the economic fallout have disproportionately affected People of Color (POCs) across the United States, as well as in the City of Albany. In an effort to gain a better understanding of the implications for POCs residing in Albany, from July to September 2020, the City of Albany Office of Audit & Control (OAC) was awarded a Bloomberg Harvard COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fellow to conduct a project with the following goals:

- To assess community perceptions of the City of Albany's COVID-19 response among POCs; and
- To identify short- and long-term policy opportunities for the City to address the disparate health and economic impacts of COVID-19 among POCs.

Methods

The project consisted of three phases:

1. **Landscape scan** to summarize the strategies other city, county, or state governments in the U.S. are taking to address the needs of POCs in their COVID-19 response, to evaluate the effectiveness of their efforts, and to address equity in general.
2. **Key informant interviews** with 27 interviewees, including representatives from the City of Albany government and community organizations, as well as representatives from other cities identified as having promising practices.
3. **Online community survey** to gain a better understanding of how community members are experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic, especially POCs, as well as to inform policy opportunities for the City of Albany's future response efforts. The analysis included 445 responses in total.

Key Findings

1. In general, community leaders noted that the City of Albany has put in a lot of effort to address the needs of POCs given the resources and authorities that were available. Some had suggestions to strengthen the City's response even further:

   - Community leaders stated that their organizations and community members would benefit from the City providing **more proactive communication and strategic coordination** of community organizations serving POCs.

   > *"What has been done so far is good but we can do much more."*
   > -Community Leader

   - Community leaders shared concerns that the **disparate impacts of COVID-19 on POCs, in addition to inaccessible COVID-19 testing** in the early weeks of the pandemic, increased mistrust in the government among POCs.
   - Community leaders highlighted the **need for information to be transmitted via multiple diverse channels** and with consultation from diverse representatives to broaden reach and accessibility of the information.

2. There were several key findings based on the community survey results:
   - Many respondents believe it is important for the City of Albany to prioritize **community safety, COVID-19 testing, childcare/education, and housing** in the coming months. However, while white respondents prioritized childcare and testing, POCs were more likely to prioritize housing and less likely to prioritize testing. Black or African American respondents were also more likely to prioritize employment and food/household goods. *Note: Social services and testing are coordinated by Albany County. It is not clear whether respondents were aware of the City's role in the implementation and coordination of these services or were aware but felt the City should play a more prominent role.*
   - **Only about 50-60% of respondents are satisfied with the accuracy, timeliness, and ease of access of City communications** about COVID-19 and services. Some respondents and community leaders noted that they were not aware of City communications related to COVID-19 and relied instead on the County and State for information. There was some confusion around whether the City should play a more prominent role. *Note: The City's Administration recognized that the City's role during this pandemic was to amplify the State and County's messages.*
   - **Sources of information that community members rely on for COVID-19 updates may vary by race/ethnicity.** For instance, Black or African American respondents are more likely to get updates from television and less likely to get them from social media.
   - POCs are **more likely to be dissatisfied with their ability to get personal protective equipment (PPE) and to get tested for COVID-19** in their communities compared to white respondents. More data is needed to understand the rate of testing at community testing sites among people of color and potential barriers to testing.
   - Most community members **use their smartphones to connect to the Internet**.
   - POCs reported being at **greater risk of losing access to the Internet**, threatening their ability to receive web-based critical communications related to COVID-19 and to connect to the Internet for distance learning.
   - Community members with children in their households are most concerned with helping with **online schooling, healthy social development, and childcare.** However, POCs are more concerned about **affording extra expenses for basic needs, youth employment, and youth violence** as compared to white respondents.

Policy Opportunities for the City of Albany

Based on the key findings, there are several short- and long-term policy opportunities the City could consider in its ongoing COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery efforts to address the needs of POCs. The full report includes examples of how the City responded to each challenge. The policy opportunities may be additions or enhancements to the City's existing initiatives.

Overview of Short-Term Policy Opportunities

Challenge	Short-Term Policy Opportunity
1. Early COVID-19 response efforts across the U.S. were often fragmented and	1. Create a centralized, multi-sector COVID-19 pandemic response committee with diverse community leadership.

reactive due to the unique challenges of this public health emergency.	
2. Communications about COVID-19 may not be reaching all residents.	2. Implement a coordinated, multi-channel, and inclusive communications strategy.
3. Gathering information from people of color on their needs during the COVID-19 pandemic is important, but challenges with inclusive community engagement are exacerbated by the nature of the pandemic.	3. Implement a more inclusive community survey to understand the needs of people of color during the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. People of color face barriers to accessing COVID-19 testing.	4. Initiate a social media campaign to educate residents on the importance of COVID-19 testing and vaccination. 5. Coordinate with Albany County to address barriers to COVID-19 testing and vaccination and enhance outreach and education on the importance of these preventive measures through coordination with Albany County.
5. Children of color may be at higher risk of falling behind their peers during the COVID-19 pandemic.	6. Assess gaps that Albany School District cannot address and work with the District and other partners to support schooling and social development of high-need youth.
6. Without a systematic approach or framework to assess impacts of decisions on equity, rapid decision-making can run the risk of leaving out marginalized groups.	7. Implement COVID-19 Rapid Response Tool for Equity Impact Analysis.

Overview of Long-Term Policy Opportunities
1. Invest in more full-time staff to support equity work in the City of Albany.
2. Implement equity toolkit in all City departmental planning and decision-making processes.
3. Develop a more robust, inclusive emergency management plan for the City of Albany.
4. Continue investing in the built environment of historically underinvested communities and evaluating progress.
5. Continue to expand Internet access, particularly for historically underinvested communities.
6. Provide funding for neighborhood associations.

Conclusion

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to take a disproportionate toll on POCs nationwide, it is critical that the City of Albany actively invests in efforts to identify and address the needs of POCs in Albany. These efforts should be informed by the community and involve diverse stakeholders working in partnership with the City to enhance and build on COVID-19 response efforts to lessen the racial/ethnic disparities. In addition, the City has the opportunity to

implement a more resilient COVID-19 response that seeks to lessen the racial/ethnic disparities that are at risk of being exacerbated during the pandemic and in the years following.

Background

COVID-19 and the economic fallout have disproportionately affected People of Color (POCs) across the United States, as well as in the City of Albany. In Albany County, 52.7% of COVID-19 cases were among white residents as of December 7, 2020, even though 72% of the county's population is white. Black or African American residents also experienced higher rates of hospitalizations and intensive care unit (ICU) admissions, as well as deaths until recently.[1]

Currently, data on COVID-19 cases and deaths are not being publicly reported at the city-level, but COVID-19 cases in Albany County were concentrated in the City of Albany.[2] The City of Albany has a higher percentage of residents identifying as nonwhite compared to Albany County (49% vs. 28%).[3] This suggests that COVID-19 has disproportionately affected racial/ethnic minorities in the City.

From July to September 2020, the City of Albany Office of Audit & Control (OAC) was awarded a Bloomberg Harvard COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fellow. Christina Wu, a recent graduate of the Master of Public Health program at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, was competitively selected to work with the OAC on a COVID-19-related project. The goals of the project were twofold:
- To assess community perceptions of the City of Albany's COVID-19 response among POCs; and
- To identify short- and long-term policy opportunities for the City to address the disparate health and economic impacts of COVID-19 among POCs.

Methods

The project consisted of three phases:

1. Landscape Scan	2. Key Informant Interviews	3. Community Survey
Strategies to Address Needs	5 City of Albany Representatives	City of Albany COVID-19 Community Survey
Strategies to Evaluate Efforts	15 Community Leaders	
Equity Agenda	7 Representatives from Other Cities	

First, a landscape scan was performed to summarize the strategies other city, county, or state

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[1] Albany County Department of Health COVID-19 Dashboard. Retrieved October 28, 2020, from https://www.albanycounty.com/departments/health/coronavirus-covid-19/covid-19-dashboard
[2] Ibid.
[3] U.S. Census Bureau 2018 American Community Survey 1-year estimates.

governments in the U.S. are taking to address the needs of people of color in their COVID-19 response (see **Appendix A** for high-level overview) and to evaluate the effectiveness of their efforts. Given that the OAC is interested in how the City's COVID-19 response fits into the broader context of the City's equity initiatives, including implementation of the Equity Agenda, the landscape scan also explored how other governments have implemented equity-focused legislation or dedicated equity offices to address broader issues of equity in their jurisdictions. Next, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 27 key informants in total (see **Appendix B** for interviewee affiliations). Interviewees included representatives from the City of Albany government and community organizations, as well as representatives from other cities identified as having promising practices. The interview guide is included in **Appendix C**.

Findings from the first two phases informed the design of the final phase, the implementation and analysis of the City of Albany COVID-19 Community Survey. The goals of the community survey were to gain a better understanding of how community members are experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic, especially POCs, as well as to inform policy opportunities for the City of Albany in future response efforts. The community survey was administered online using the Qualtrics survey platform, and was made available in English, Spanish, and Chinese. The survey was open to the public for one week from August 26th to September 1st, 2020. The survey was promoted through the OAC and Mayor's Office social media accounts, public radio, and partnerships with neighborhood associations, community and faith-based organizations, and other local community leaders. The survey and promotional materials can be found in **Appendices D and E**. The analysis included 445 responses in total.[4]

Key Findings from Interviews

Interviews were conducted with community leaders (i.e., leaders of community-based organizations serving POCs) focusing on their perceptions of their community members' needs during the pandemic, their awareness of the City's efforts to address those needs, and potential opportunities for the City to continue to support their organizations and their members.

In general, community leaders noted that the City of Albany has put in a lot of effort to address the needs of POCs given the resources and authorities that were available. Some had suggestions to strengthen the City's response even further:

"What has been done so far is good but we can do much more."
-Community Leader

- Community leaders stated that their organizations and community members would benefit from the City providing **more proactive communication and strategic coordination** of community organizations serving POCs across many sectors.
- Community leaders shared concerns that the **disparate impacts of COVID-19 on POCs, in addition to inaccessible COVID-19 testing** in the early weeks of the pandemic, increased mistrust in government among POCs.

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[4] Note: Some respondents did not complete the full survey. All responses that were more than 50% complete were included in the analysis. For questions for which less than 445 responses were received, the "n" reported in the chart title shows a number that is less than 445. For charts displaying only select racial/ethnic categories, the sum of the selected groups does not sum to the total n in the chart title.

- Community leaders highlighted the **need for information to be transmitted via multiple diverse channels** and with consultation from diverse representatives to broaden reach and accessibility of the information.
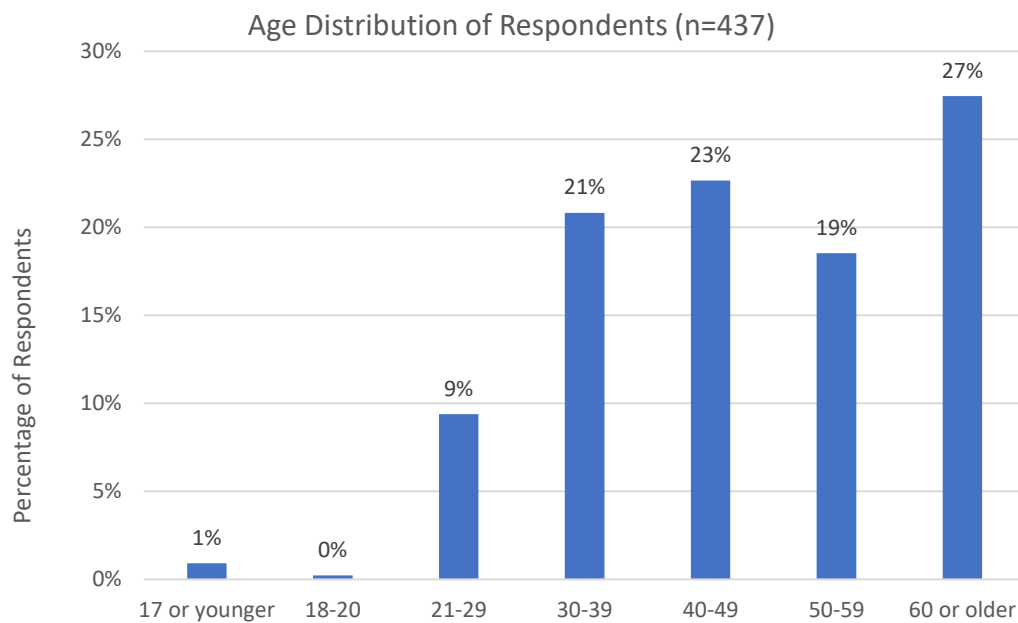
Key Findings from the Community Survey

The community survey focused on specific areas of need among POCs that were raised by City and community leaders during the interviews. These areas of focus were also identified as areas the City could feasibly tackle, on its own or in partnership with other entities (e.g., Albany County). The survey was primarily designed to gather actionable information to inform the City's response moving forward rather than to evaluate the City's current response efforts.

Demographics of Survey Respondents

The map below shows the distribution of survey respondents by zip code. The table below lists the top six zip codes with the highest number of respondents.

Zip Codes of Respondents (n=445)

Top Six Zip Codes with Highest Number of Survey Respondents

Zip Code	Neighborhood/ Geographic Area	Number of Respondents
12208	Pine Hills, New Scotland, Buckingham Lake	132
12203	Pine Hills, Melrose, Westmere	70
12202	South End	69
12209	West of South End	52
12210	Arbor Hill	47
12206	West Hill	29

Respondents were more likely to be older in age, 31% identified as nonwhite, and 71% identified as female.

Age Distribution of Respondents (n=437)

Age Group	Percentage
17 or younger	1%
18-20	0%
21-29	9%
30-39	21%
40-49	23%
50-59	19%
60 or older	27%

Percentage of Respondents

Gender Identity of Respondents (n=437)

- Female 71%
- Male 26%
- Prefer not to say 2%
- Other (Transgender, additional gender…
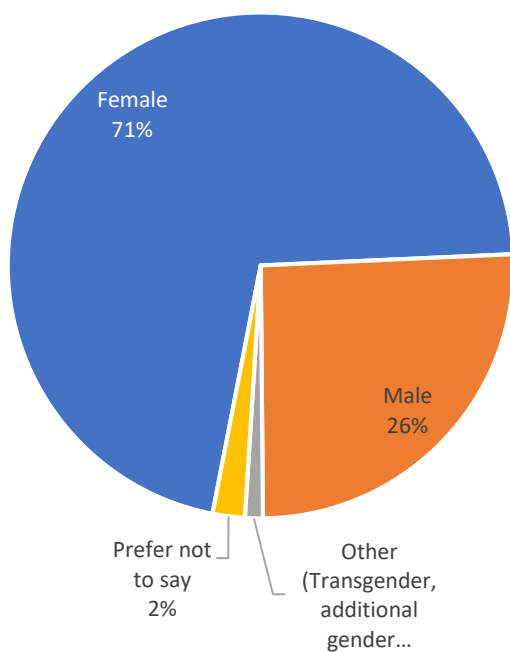
Respondents by Race/Ethnicity (n=445)

- Asian or Pacific Islander 2%
- Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish 6%
- Black or African American 17%
- Middle Eastern or North African 1%
- Mixed Race 5%
- Native American or American Indian 0%
- White 65%
- Prefer not to say 4%
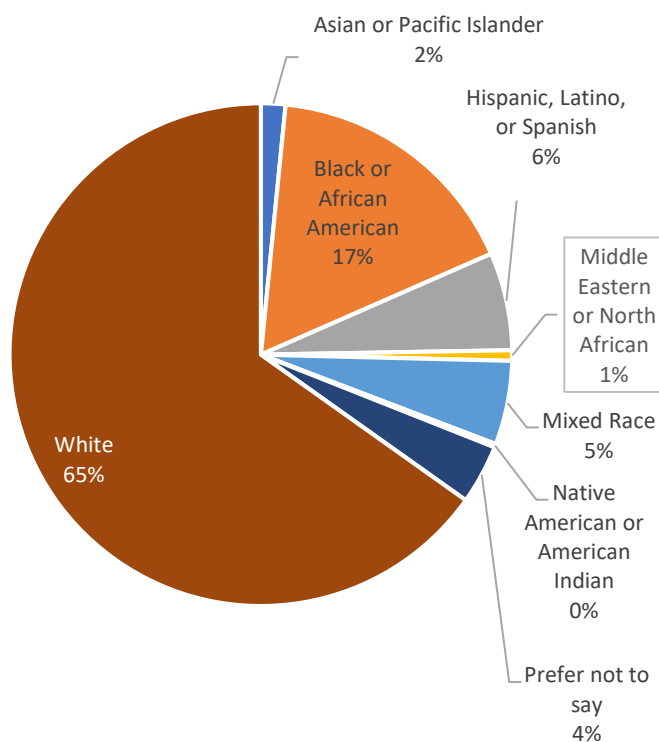
Respondents tended to be higher educated—77% have earned a college or graduate degree. They also tended to be higher income, with over 50% with household incomes of more than $75,000. Please see **Appendix F** for additional demographic details on the survey respondents.

Highest Level of Education Completed (n=437)

1%	
3%	

Total: 11% | 9% | 31% | 46%

Percentage of Respondents

- Less than high school degree
- High school degree or equivalent (e.g., GED)
- Associate degree
- Some college but no degree or in progress
- Bachelor degree
- Graduate degree

Total Household Income in 2019 (n=437)

200% Federal Poverty Level (FPL) for a family of 4 is $52,400 in 2020

Total: 5% | 6% | 10% | 22% | 16% | 29% | 13%

Percentage of Respondents

- Less than $20,000
- $20,000 to $34,999
- $35,000 to $49,999
- $50,000 to $74,999
- $75,000 to $99,999
- $100,000 and above
- Prefer not to say

Priorities for the City's Response

Respondents were asked to reflect on what the City should prioritize in the coming months. They were asked to rate different areas from 1 to 5, with 1 being not a priority to 5 being essential. The chart below shows the number of respondents selecting each rating per policy area. Based on the results, community safety, COVID-19 testing, and childcare/education were deemed essential by the highest number of respondents.

What should the City prioritize in the coming months? (n=445)
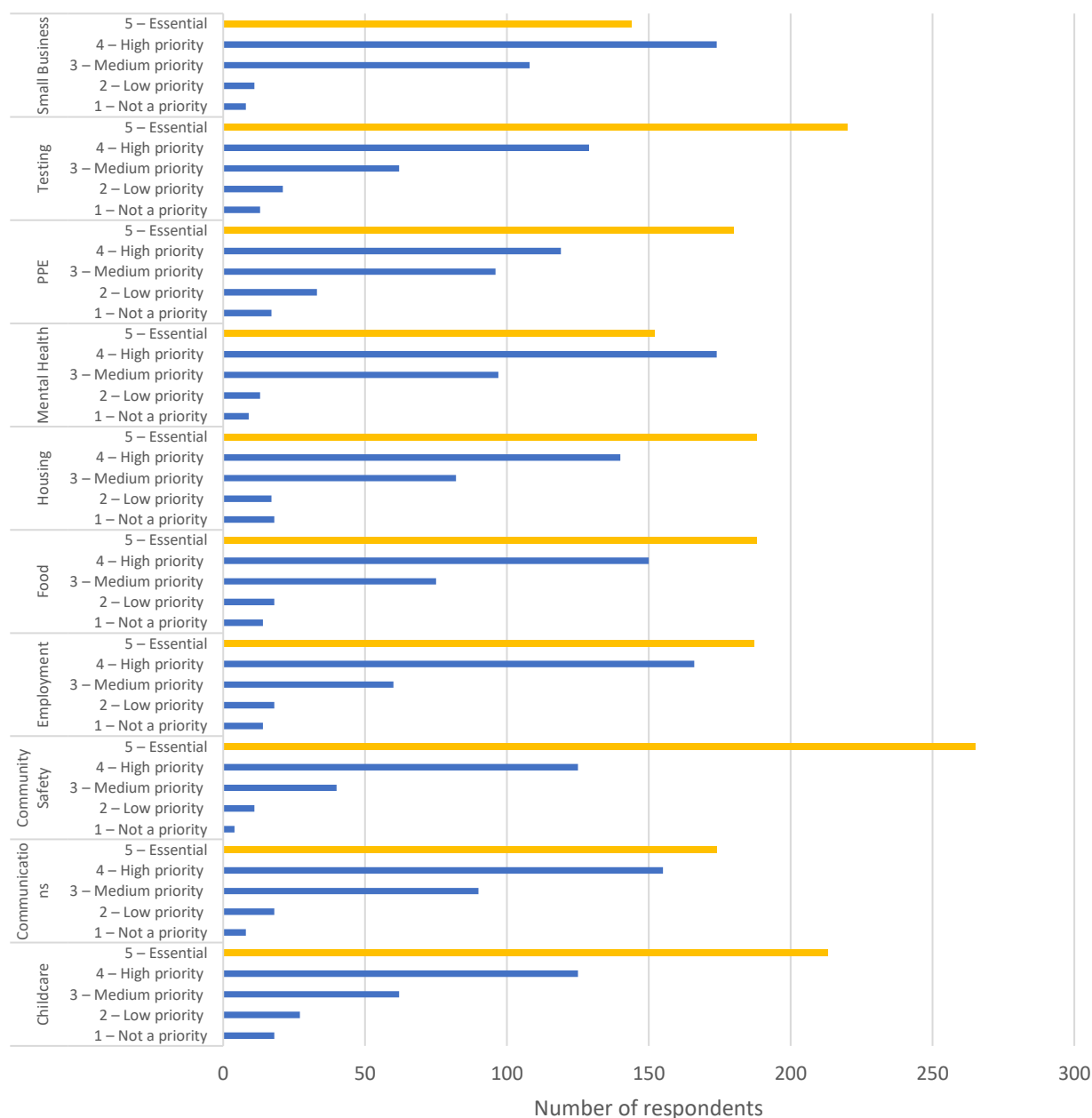
When respondents were asked to select the most and second most important areas, housing and utilities were among the top selections, in addition to the previously identified priorities.

Top Two Most Important Areas (n=445)
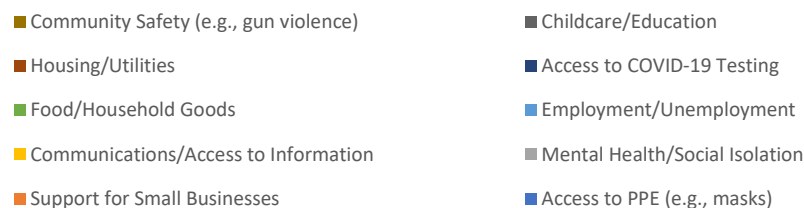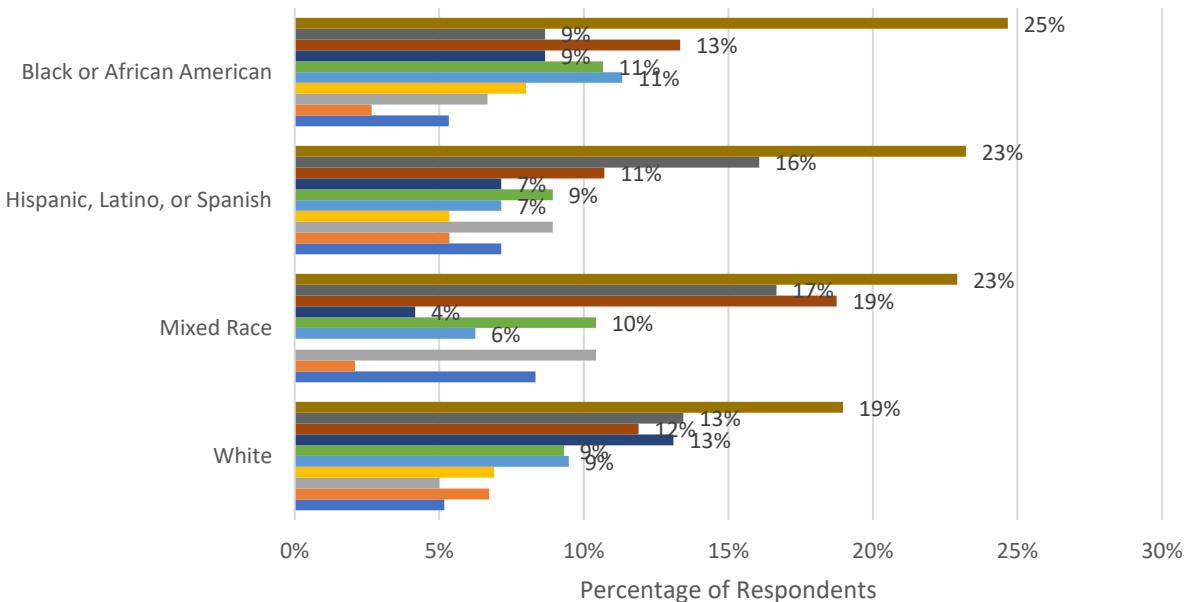
Area	Percentage
Community Safety (e.g., gun violence)	21%
Childcare/Education	13%
Housing/Utilities	12%
Access to COVID-19 Testing	11%
Employment/Unemployment	9%
Food/Household Goods	9%
Support for Small Businesses	6%
Communications/Access to Information	6%
Mental Health/Social Isolation	6%
Access to PPE (e.g., masks)	6%

Percentage of Respondents
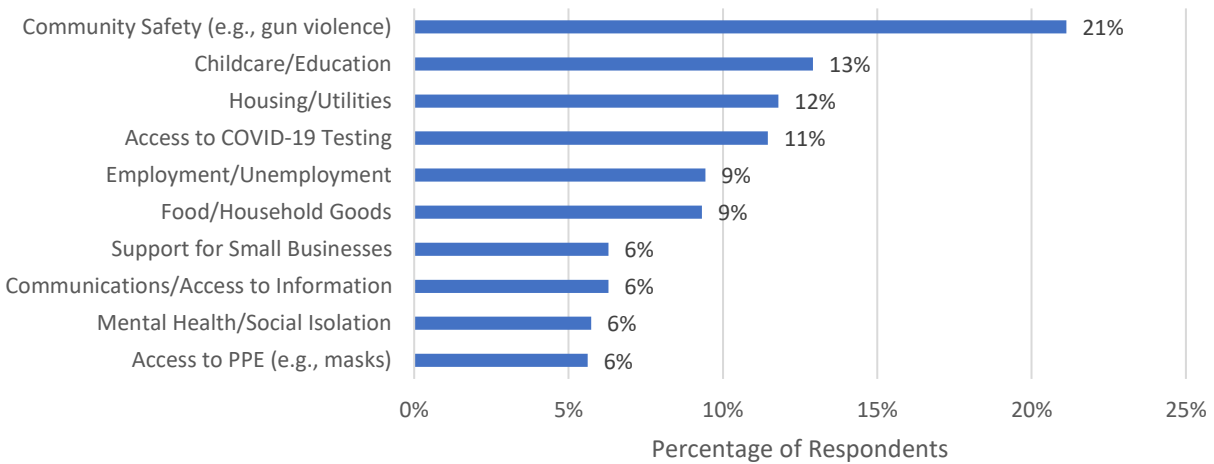
Community safety was overwhelmingly cited across all racial/ethnic groups, but the next highest ranked areas differed between POCs as compared to white respondents. White respondents were more likely to prioritize childcare and testing, while POCs were more likely to prioritize housing and less likely to prioritize testing. Notably, Black or African American respondents were more likely to prioritize employment and food/household goods.

Top Two Most Important Areas, by Race/Ethnicity (n=417)

Percentage of Respondents

Legend:
- Community Safety (e.g., gun violence)
- Childcare/Education
- Housing/Utilities
- Access to COVID-19 Testing
- Food/Household Goods
- Employment/Unemployment
- Communications/Access to Information
- Mental Health/Social Isolation
- Support for Small Businesses
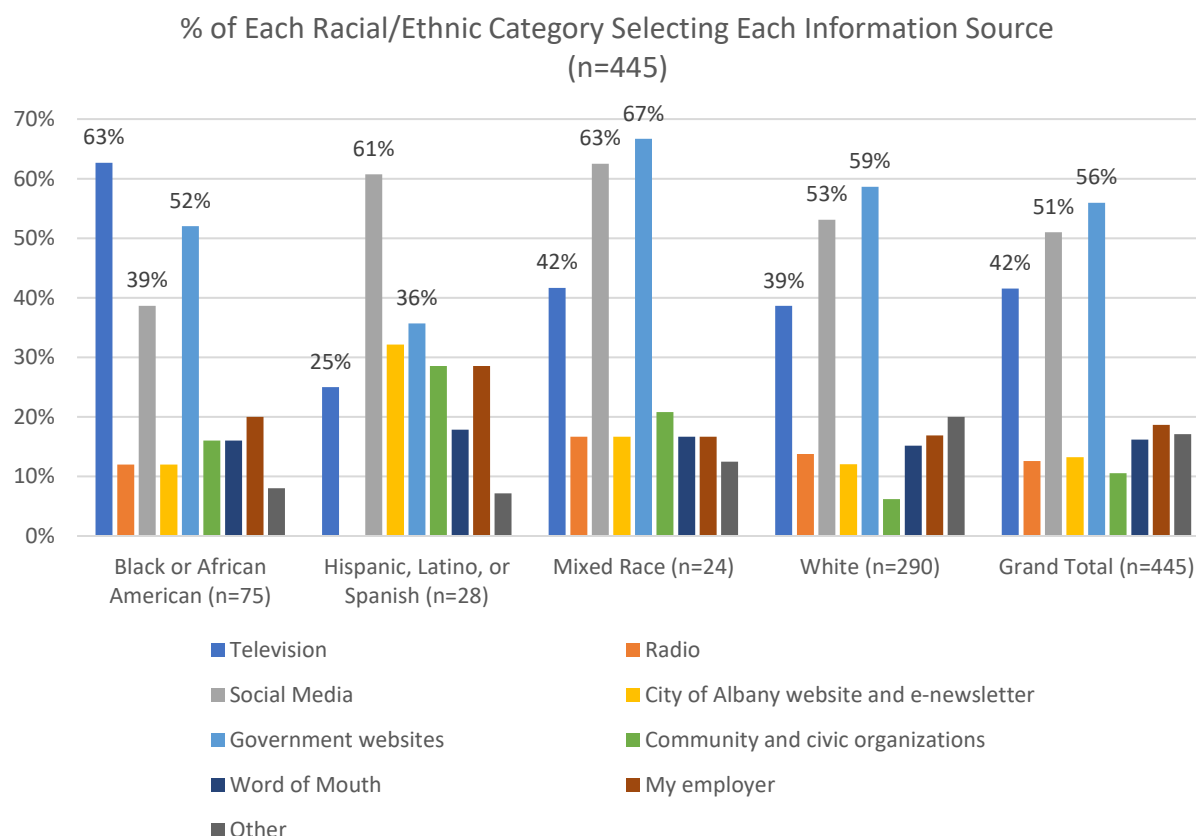- Access to PPE (e.g., masks)
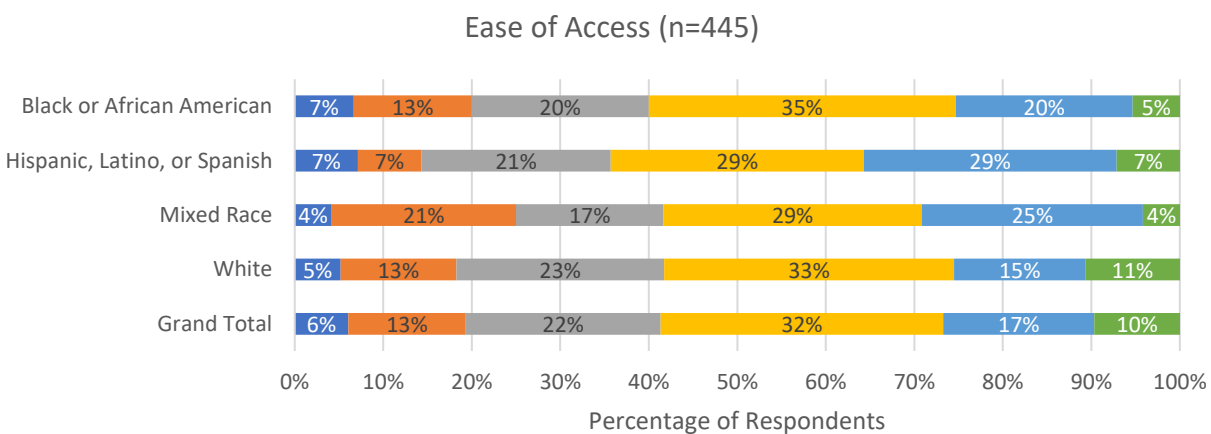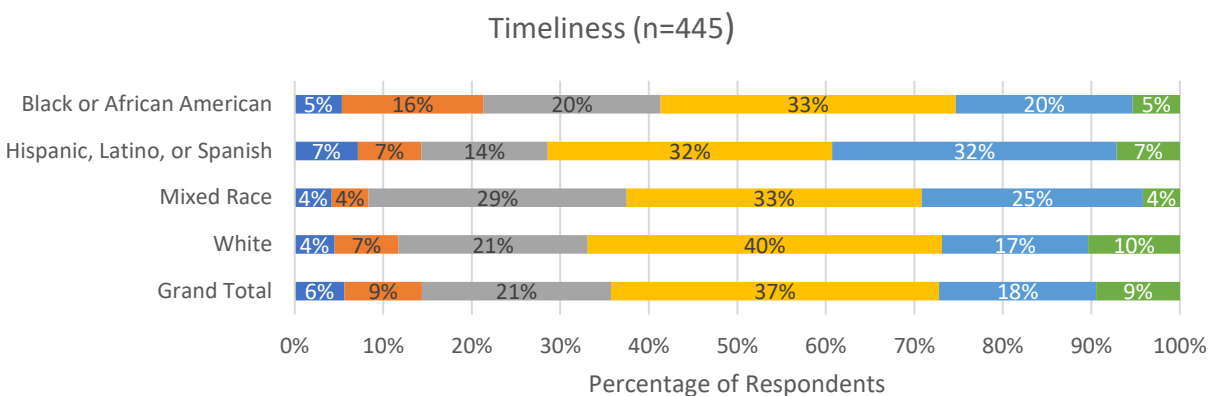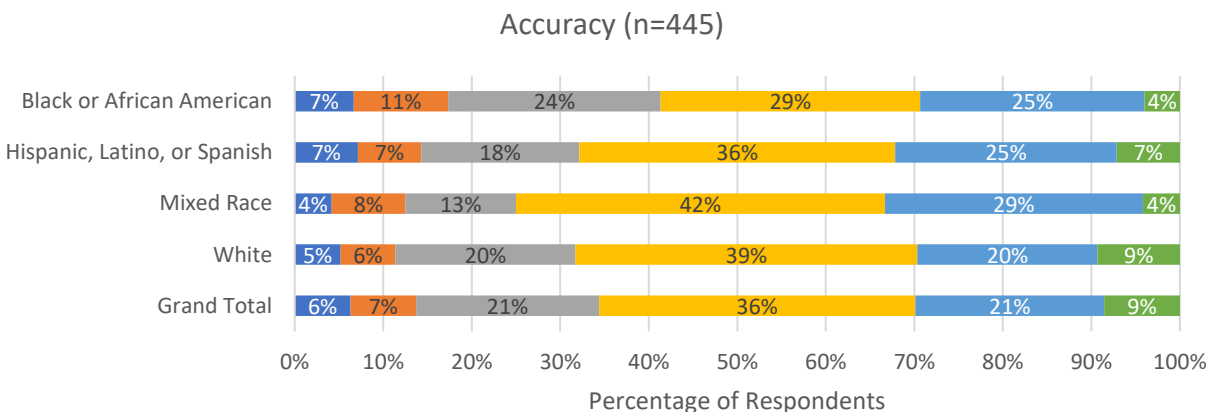
Communications/Access to Information

Respondents were asked to select all the sources of information they go to for updates on COVID-19 and the community. The top source that was selected overall was "county, state, and federal government websites." The second and third most selected sources were social media and television, respectively.

Notably, Black or African American respondents are more likely to receive COVID-19 updates from television and less likely to get them from social media. Given that the survey sample is skewed towards individuals with higher income levels and higher levels of education, it is possible that the rate of Black or African American individuals that relies on television may be even higher in the general population in the City of Albany.

Some survey respondents and community leaders expressed concerns about what they perceived to be a strong emphasis on social media for City communications—many Albany residents cannot or do not access the Internet regularly, and those that are on social media may use it purely for entertainment and may not use it to follow government organizations. Several respondents also noted they rely on newspapers and news websites like the Times Union.

% of Each Racial/Ethnic Category Selecting Each Information Source (n=445)

Legend:
- Television
- Radio
- Social Media
- City of Albany website and e-newsletter
- Government websites
- Community and civic organizations
- Word of Mouth
- My employer
- Other

Selected data labels:
- Black or African American (n=75): Television 63%, Social Media 39%, Government websites 52%
- Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish (n=28): Television 25%, Social Media 61%, City of Albany website 36%
- Mixed Race (n=24): Television 42%, Social Media 63%, Government websites 67%
- White (n=290): Television 39%, Social Media 53%, Government websites 59%
- Grand Total (n=445): Television 42%, Social Media 51%, Government websites 56%

Next, survey respondents were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with communications from the City related to COVID-19 across three dimensions—accuracy, timeliness, and ease of access (i.e., easy to find, easy to understand). Approximately 49%, 57%, and 55% of respondents were satisfied with each of these dimensions, respectively.

Accuracy (n=445)

Race	1	2	3	4	5	I don't know
Black or African American	7%	11%	24%	29%	25%	4%
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish	7%	7%	18%	36%	25%	7%
Mixed Race	4%	8%	13%	42%	29%	4%
White	5%	6%	20%	39%	20%	9%
Grand Total	6%	7%	21%	36%	21%	9%

Percentage of Respondents

Timeliness (n=445)

Race	1	2	3	4	5	I don't know
Black or African American	5%	16%	20%	33%	20%	5%
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish	7%	7%	14%	32%	32%	7%
Mixed Race	4%	4%	29%	33%	25%	4%
White	4%	7%	21%	40%	17%	10%
Grand Total	6%	9%	21%	37%	18%	9%

Percentage of Respondents

Ease of Access (n=445)

Race	1	2	3	4	5	I don't know
Black or African American	7%	13%	20%	35%	20%	5%
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish	7%	7%	21%	29%	29%	7%
Mixed Race	4%	21%	17%	29%	25%	4%
White	5%	13%	23%	33%	15%	11%
Grand Total	6%	13%	22%	32%	17%	10%

Percentage of Respondents

- ■ 1 – Extremely dissatisfied
- ■ 2 – Somewhat dissatisfied
- ■ 3 – Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- ■ 4 – Somewhat satisfied
- ■ 5 – Extremely satisfied
- ■ I don't know / I don't use information from the City

There were no significant differences between respondents from different racial/ethnic categories. The most significant difference was seen in dissatisfaction with timeliness—21% of Black of African American respondents were dissatisfied with the timeliness of City communications compared to 11% of white respondents.

Some respondents and community leaders also noted that they were not aware of City communications related to COVID-19; many relied on the Albany County and New York State governments for information. There was some confusion around whether the City should play a more prominent role.

When asked whether they would like alternative forms of communication, respondents noted interest in an opt-in text message service (i.e., emergency alerts) or email listserv/newsletter, indicating they may not know about these existing channels from the City.

% of Each Racial/Ethnic Category Selecting Each Trusted Source of Information (n=445)
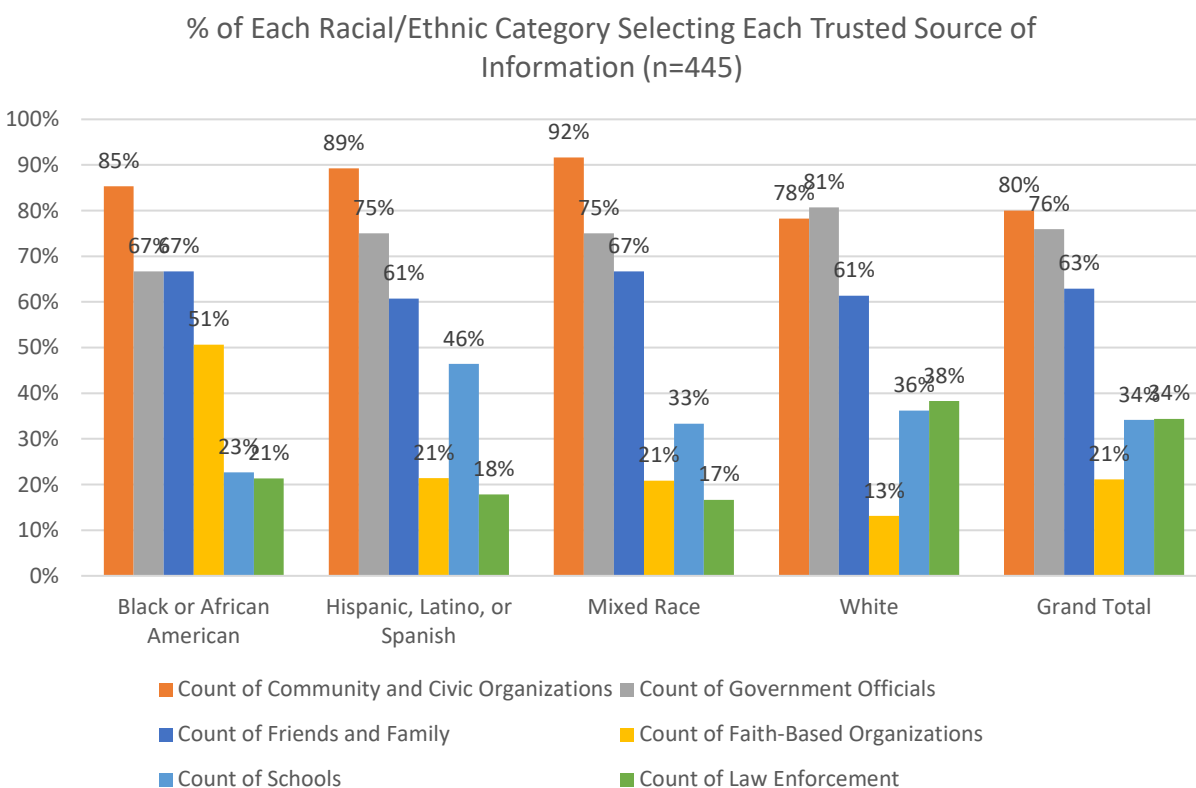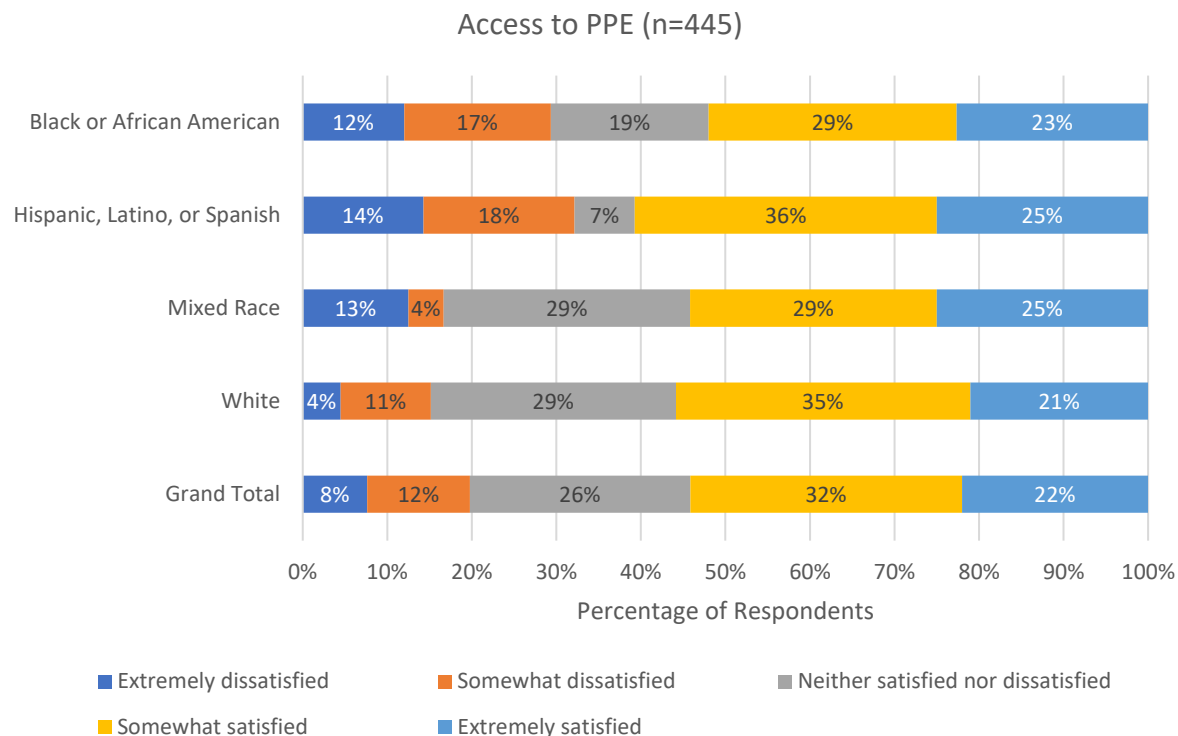

Respondents were asked who they trust for information in general. Overall, the top selected choice was community and civic organizations, followed by government officials and family and friends. In general, Black or African American respondents trust government officials and family and friends equally. They are also more likely to trust faith-based organizations for information.

Note: Several respondents commented that they would have only chosen one or two but were forced to select three choices by the design of this question.
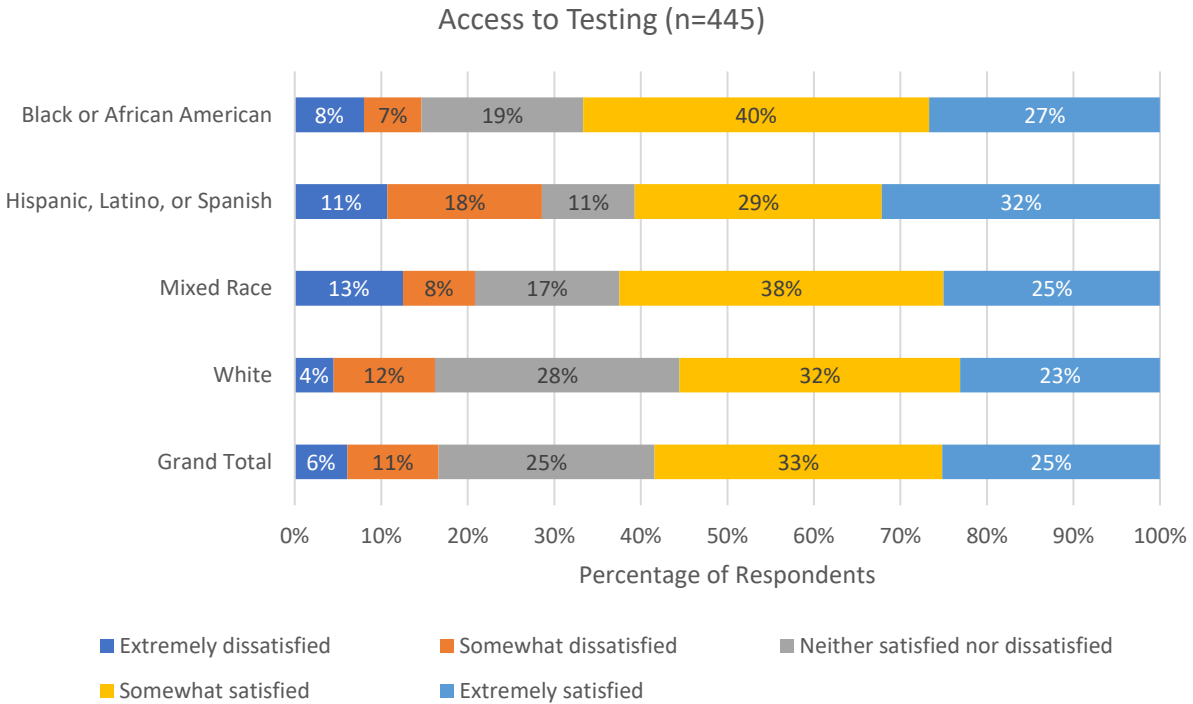
Testing & Prevention

Respondents were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with their ability to obtain personal protective equipment (PPE) in their community. Approximately 54% of respondents are satisfied with their ability to obtain PPE. POCs are twice as likely to be dissatisfied with their ability to obtain PPE as compared to white respondents.

Given that the survey sample is skewed towards individuals who have higher income and education levels, this may not accurately capture the dynamics in the community, particularly among POCs. Community leaders have emphasized the need for mass distribution of masks and supplies, and more outreach needed to promote behavior change.

Access to PPE (n=445)

Race	Extremely dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Extremely satisfied
Black or African American	12%	17%	19%	29%	23%
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish	14%	18%	7%	36%	25%
Mixed Race	13%	4%	29%	29%	25%
White	4%	11%	29%	35%	21%
Grand Total	8%	12%	26%	32%	22%

Percentage of Respondents

■ Extremely dissatisfied ■ Somewhat dissatisfied ■ Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
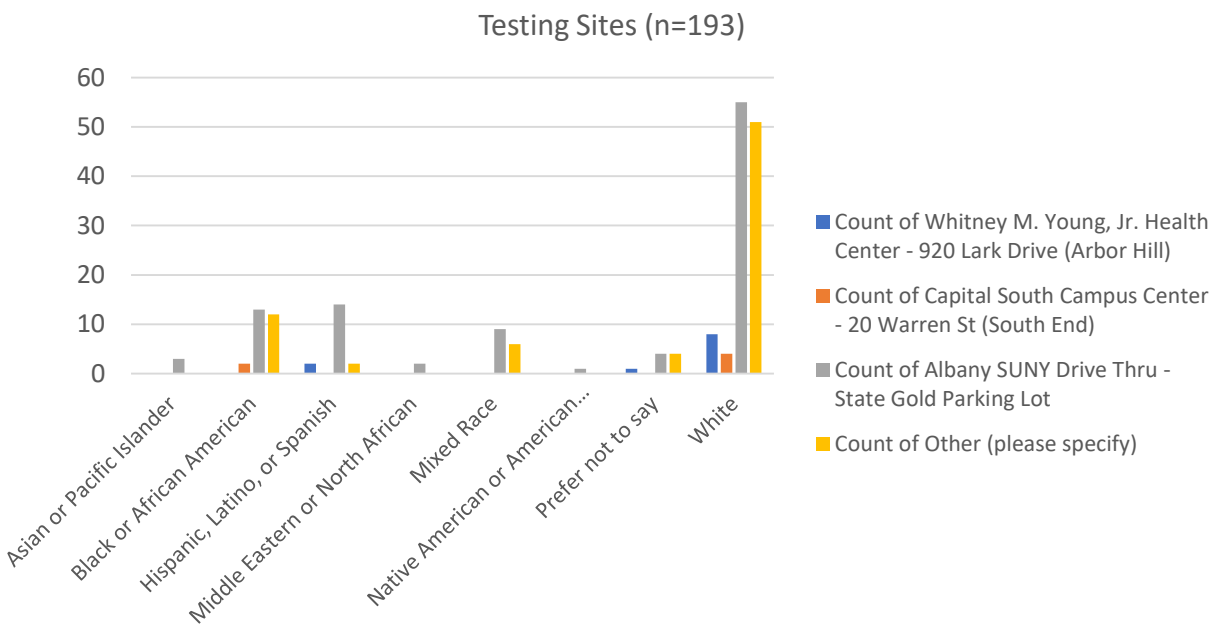■ Somewhat satisfied ■ Extremely satisfied

Respondents were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with their ability to get tested for COVID-19 in their community. Approximately 58% of respondents are satisfied with their ability to get tested. Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish respondents are twice as likely to be dissatisfied with their ability to get tested for COVID-19 as compared to white respondents.

There was also a high reported rate of testing among this sample (approximately 47%), but this may be an overestimate since the question asking respondents whether they had gotten tested was optional.

Access to Testing (n=445)

	Extremely dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Extremely satisfied
Black or African American	8%	7%	19%	40%	27%
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish	11%	18%	11%	29%	32%
Mixed Race	13%	8%	17%	38%	25%
White	4%	12%	28%	32%	23%
Grand Total	6%	11%	25%	33%	25%

Most respondents who responded to an optional question about where they had gotten tested selected "SUNY Drive Thru" and "Other," identifying locations such as CVS and Urgent Care. Only 5 POCs reported getting tested at Arbor Hill and South End testing sites. This may indicate that our sample population has access to resources such as a car or health insurance. These results also may reflect a general lack of understanding of who is getting tested at the community sites. Community leaders have noted that the community sites have been underutilized but the underlying reasons for this have not been clearly identified.

Testing Sites (n=193)

- Count of Whitney M. Young, Jr. Health Center - 920 Lark Drive (Arbor Hill)
- Count of Capital South Campus Center - 20 Warren St (South End)
- Count of Albany SUNY Drive Thru - State Gold Parking Lot
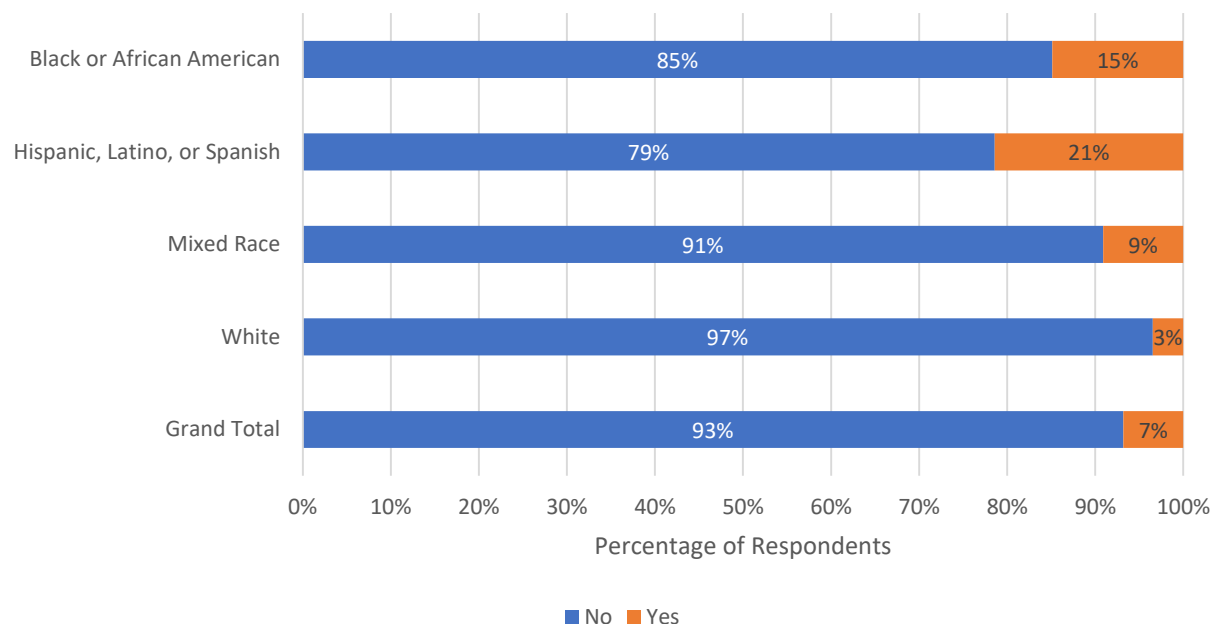- Count of Other (please specify)

Access to Technology/Internet

When respondents were asked which technological device they use most often to connect to the Internet, 58% of respondents selected smartphone. This was the top response for all income levels. This finding highlights the importance of making information related to COVID-19 easily accessible and readable on smartphones.

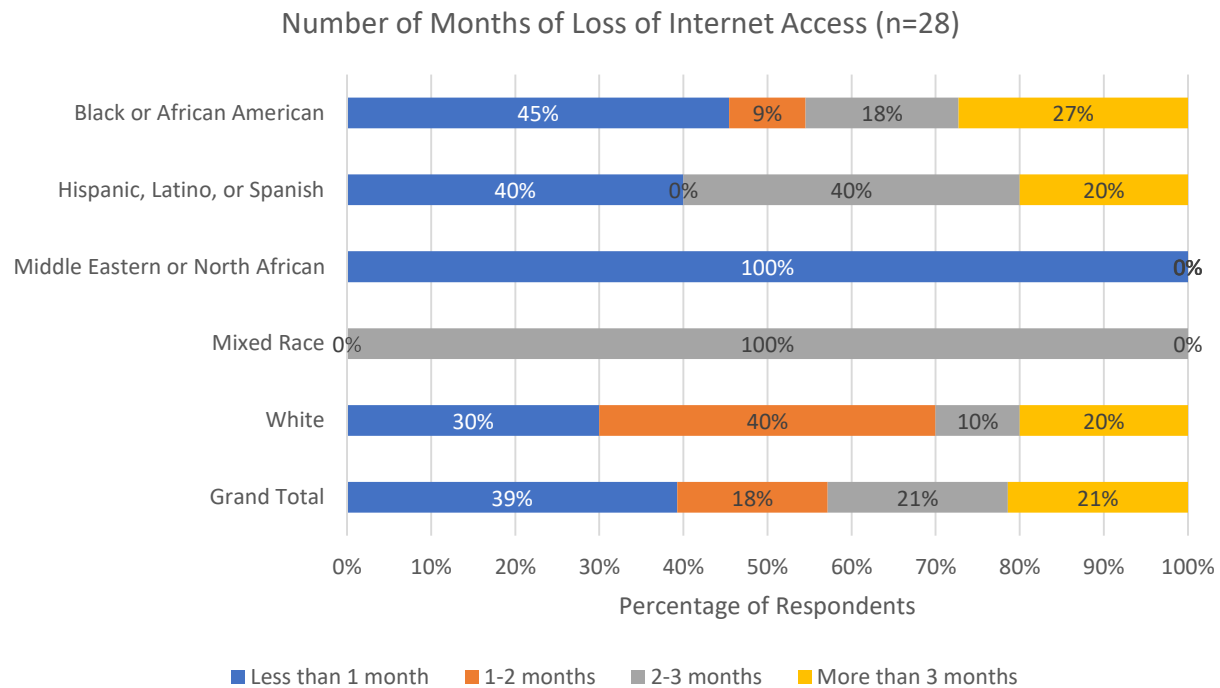**Device Used MOST OFTEN to Connect to the Internet (n=441)**

- Tablet, 6%
- Desktop computer, 12%
- Laptop, 23%
- Other (please specify), 0.2%
- Smartphone, 58%
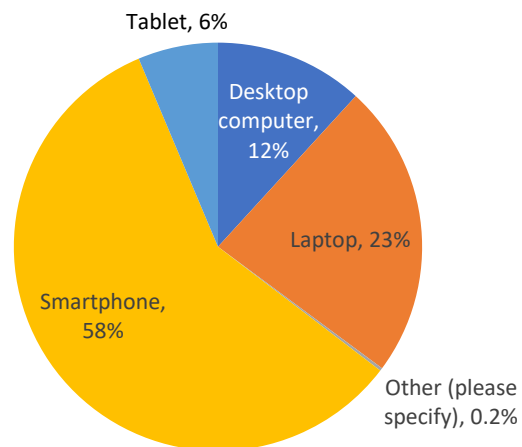
In response to a survey question about Internet reliability, approximately 7% of respondents reported they had lost Internet access in the past year, with higher rates among POCs.

% Respondents Who Lost Internet Access During Past Year (n=441)

Race	No	Yes
Black or African American	85%	15%
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish	79%	21%
Mixed Race	91%	9%
White	97%	3%
Grand Total	93%	7%

Percentage of Respondents

■ No   ■ Yes

POCs were more likely to lose Internet access for more than two months in the past year.

Number of Months of Loss of Internet Access (n=28)

Race/Ethnicity	Less than 1 month	1-2 months	2-3 months	More than 3 months
Black or African American	45%	9%	18%	27%
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish	40%	0%	40%	20%
Middle Eastern or North African	100%			0%
Mixed Race	0%		100%	0%
White	30%	40%	10%	20%
Grand Total	39%	18%	21%	21%

Percentage of Respondents

Legend: ■ Less than 1 month ■ 1-2 months ■ 2-3 months ■ More than 3 months

POCs were also nearly twice as likely to be concerned about losing Internet access in the next six months.

% Concerned about Losing Access to Internet in Next 6 Months (n=441)

Race/Ethnicity	Extremely concerned	Moderately concerned	Somewhat concerned	Slightly concerned	Not at all concerned
Black or African American	14%	5%	24%	15%	42%
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish	11%	4%	18%	14%	54%
Mixed Race	9%	0%	18%	27%	45%
White	4%	4%	8%	16%	67%
Grand Total	6%	5%	12%	15%	62%

Percentage of Respondents

Legend: ■ Extremely concerned ■ Moderately concerned ■ Somewhat concerned ■ Slightly concerned ■ Not at all concerned

Families with Children

32% of respondents reported having children in their households. This was consistent across racial/ethnic categories.

Percentage of Respondents with Children in the Household (n=439)

Yes 32%
No 68%
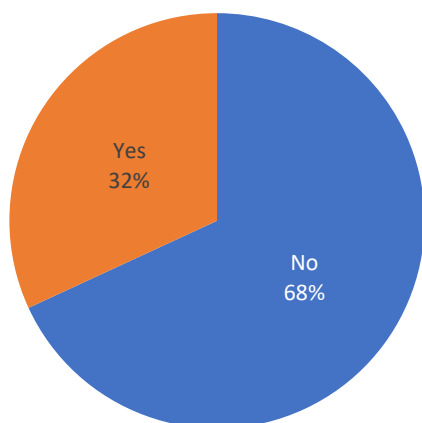
Respondents were asked to select areas of concern facing their households in relation to their children. The top areas of concern that were selected were helping with online schooling, healthy social development, and childcare.

Number of Respondents Selecting Each Area of Concern Facing their Families/Children (n=140)

90 — Count of Helping my children with online schooling
89 — Count of Healthy social development (i.e., ability to play with other children)
58 — Count of Childcare
36 — Count of Affording extra expenses for food and other basic needs
33 — Count of Accessing Internet and technology for schooling
31 — Count of Youth violence
29 — Count of Youth employment (e.g., loss of income, job readiness skills)
15 — Count of Other (please specify)
9 — Count of None at this time
1

Total

Respondents of color were more concerned about affording extra expenses for basic needs, youth employment, and youth violence as compared to white respondents.

Percentage of Respondents in Each Racial/Ethnic Category Selecting Each Area of Concern in Relation to Children in their Household (n=140)

Black or African American (n=28)
- 61%
- 43%
- 36%
- 32%
- 32%
- 29%
- 29%
- 4%
- 4%
- 0%

Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish (n=11)
- 73%
- 36%
- 82%
- 18%
- 36%
- 36%
- 36%
- 9%
- 18%
- 0%

White (n=86)
- 66%
- 20%
- 71%
- 20%
- 44%
- 15%
- 21%
- 6%
- 10%
- 1%

Legend:
- Helping my children with online schooling
- Affording extra expenses for food and other basic needs
- Healthy social development (i.e., ability to play with other children)
- Youth violence
- Childcare
- Youth employment (e.g., loss of income, job readiness skills)
- Accessing Internet and technology for schooling
- None at this time
- Other (please specify)
- Domestic violence

Limitations of Study

In interpreting the generalizability of the results from the community survey, there are several important limitations to consider.

1. **Survey respondents are not representative of the full target demographic.**
   As noted in the demographics section of the key findings, the survey respondents tended to have higher levels of education and household income. There was a smaller percentage of nonwhite respondents compared to nonwhite residents in the City of Albany. Given the survey was administered online, it was also more likely to be completed by individuals with reliable access to and comfort with technology. These characteristics suggest that the survey respondents are not fully representative of the City's population. Some of the racial/ethnic differences observed in the survey results may in fact be even more marked in the general population. It is important to note that POCs in the City of Albany vary on the income spectrum. That being said, health disparities persist among POCs even when controlling for socioeconomic status. This implies that POCs with higher incomes are still at increased risk of experiencing disproportionate poor health outcomes due to other social determinants of health.

2. **The design of the survey tool may have introduced bias into the survey results.**
   The full survey tool was somewhat long and included multiple sections with the goal of capturing more comprehensive, actionable information. To accommodate differences in willingness to complete a lengthy survey, many questions were marked as optional to facilitate quicker completion for those who chose to skip those questions. However, the length and complexity of the survey may still have deterred some individuals who may have been more likely to respond to a shorter survey. In addition, there are some limitations in the questions that were asked. For example, the survey did not include a question about whether or not the respondent owned a car, which could have shed more light on barriers to accessing the drive-thru testing site.

3. **The survey rollout and promotion process may have affected the survey results.**
   The survey was available for only one week, which could have limited the survey's reach. The makeup of the survey respondents could have resulted from potential differences in the internal capacity and level of promotion by community organizations. For instance, much of the outreach to promote the survey was conducted through neighborhood associations, which are generally more highly attended by white homeowners.

While the individuals who participated in the interviews and survey comprise only a segment of the full population, inferences can be drawn from the data that suggest how the broader population (and sub-populations of interest) may be experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic. Inferences drawn from the interviews and survey, combined with research on promising practices from other city, county, and state governments, were used to identify potential policy opportunities for the City of Albany in the next section.

Policy Opportunities for the City of Albany

Based on the key findings from this study on community perceptions, there are several policy opportunities the City of Albany can consider in its ongoing COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery efforts to address the needs of POCs. These strategies are divided into more immediate opportunities and longer-term opportunities. In the short-term policy opportunities section, we have included examples of how the City responded to each policy challenge. The policy opportunities may be additions or enhancements to the City's existing initiatives.

Overview of Policy Opportunities

The short- and long-term policy opportunities are listed below. More specific details on each policy opportunity can be found in the next subsection.

List of Short-Term Policy Opportunities

Challenge	Short-Term Policy Opportunity
1. Early COVID-19 response efforts across the U.S. were often fragmented and reactive due to the unique challenges of this public health emergency.	1. Create a centralized, multi-sector COVID-19 pandemic response committee with diverse community leadership.
2. Communications about COVID-19 may not be reaching all residents.	2. Implement a coordinated, multi-channel, and inclusive communications strategy.
3. Gathering information from people of color on their needs during the COVID-19 pandemic is important, but challenges with inclusive community engagement are exacerbated by the nature of the pandemic.	3. Implement multiple strategies to assess the needs of people of color during the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. People of color face barriers to accessing COVID-19 testing.	4. Initiate a social media campaign to educate residents on the importance of COVID-19 testing and vaccination. 5. Coordinate with Albany County to address barriers to COVID-19 testing and vaccination and enhance culturally relevant outreach and education on the importance of these preventive measures.
5. Children of color may be at higher risk of falling behind their peers during the COVID-19 pandemic.	6. Assess gaps that Albany School District cannot address and work with the District and other partners to support schooling and social development of high-need youth.
6. Without a systematic approach or framework to assess impacts of decisions on equity, rapid decision-making can run the risk of leaving out marginalized groups.	7. Implement COVID-19 Rapid Response Tool for Equity Impact Analysis.

List of Long-Term Policy Opportunities

1. Invest in more full-time staff to support equity work in the City of Albany.
2. Implement equity toolkit in all City departmental planning and decision-making processes.
3. Develop a more robust, inclusive emergency management plan for the City of Albany.
4. Continue investing in the built environment of historically underinvested communities and evaluate progress.
5. Continue to expand Internet access, particularly for historically underinvested communities.
6. Provide funding for neighborhood associations.

Short-Term Policy Opportunities

The policy opportunities outlined in this section have been identified as more actionable in the immediate future. Each short-term opportunity is prefaced by a description of the *policy challenge* that the opportunity seeks to address. The policy challenges are challenges that are generally faced by governments during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each opportunity is also preceded by a formal response provided by the administration that describes some of the *actions the City has already undertaken* to address this challenge.

Challenge #1: Early COVID-19 response efforts across the U.S. were often fragmented and reactive due to the unique challenges of this public health emergency.

- Strong coordination and partnerships with community organizations on the ground are critical to understanding and responding to the needs of POCs in a more timely and thorough manner. However, the unique challenges presented by COVID-19 (e.g., social distancing, evolving information about virus transmission) made it difficult for governments to respond proactively in the early weeks and months.
- The public health response in Albany is driven by multiple levels of government. Each of these entities have authority over different parts of the overall public COVID-19 response; for instance, public health functions (e.g., testing, contact tracing) are held at the County level since the City does not have a public health department itself. While it would likely require partnering with these other entities, there is an opportunity for the City to play a larger role in coordinating response efforts at the local level.
- Many interviewees felt their organizations were operating in siloes and were unaware of what other organizations were doing and how they fit into the bigger picture of the City's COVID-19 response. Some reported that communication with City officials has been discontinuous.

The City's COVID-19 Response to Challenge #1
The City convened three COVID-19 pandemic response committees:

- *The **Emergency management-focused Senior Staff committee** was comprised of the Mayor, Police Chief, Fire Chief, Corporation Counsel, Commissioner of Administrative Services, Chief of Operations, and Chief of Staff. This committee was tasked with ensuring the safety of City employees and the continuity of emergency services for Albany's residents and visitors.*
- *The **COVID-19 Vulnerable Communities committee** was comprised of the Chief City Auditor, Chief Diversity Officer, Director of the Albany Community Development Agency, Chair of the Equity Agenda Committee, and the City's Constituent Services Assistant. This committee was tasked with ensuring that Albany's most vulnerable communities – including its Communities of Color – were not left behind during the COVID-19 crisis by sharing information, insights, and recommendations (recommendations included translating important documents in commonly spoken languages), and identifying any information gaps that needed to be filled (e.g., PPE distribution, advocating for expanded COVID-19 testing locations, etc.).*
- *The **Committee supporting the Business Community** was focused on small, minority, and women-owned businesses. It was led by the head of the City's economic development partner with participation from the directors of the City's three business improvement districts.*

The City convened a variety of summits to identify the needs of our communities and to direct resources to those communities. These summits focused on PPE distribution, childcare, summer recreation programming, and small business resiliency, and brought together community organizations who serve Albany's most vulnerable residents, including communities of color, to ensure that resources were made available to them.

Short-Term Policy Opportunity #1: Create a centralized, multi-sector COVID-19 pandemic response committee with diverse community leadership.

The City has an opportunity to convene diverse community stakeholders in an ongoing coordinated effort to address the needs of POCs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Convening stakeholders is a low-cost and high-impact action that falls within the role of city government.[5] In implementing a committee, the City can consider the following dimensions:

- **Autonomy: The committee operates independently or fairly independently**.
  The City should consider the level of autonomy the committee is given. For example, the committee could report back to the Mayor's Office on a regular basis but not need to seek official permission to take most actions to allow for speed when necessary. In general, the more independent the committee, the more effective it is likely to be.
- **Leadership: The committee is co-led by the government and the community.**
  The selected leaders should have, or be able to establish, credibility with different communities of color and other marginalized communities (e.g., an outsider, a neutral party with no connection to any specific group, or someone who is well-liked and/or respected throughout the community for fairness and integrity). Importantly, some interviewees commented that the leader should have the bandwidth to dedicate to this work and not be stretched too thin.
- **Membership: The committee includes representatives from both governmental and non-governmental organizations.**
  This includes healthcare organizations, social service organizations, religious organizations, minority business community, minority-focused organizations, and any other key organizations providing resources and support to POCs. A key element in selecting members of a committee is their ability to participate on a regular basis (i.e., weekly or biweekly meetings).
- **Purpose: The purpose of the committee is to craft and implement a strategic direction for the City's COVID-19 response.**
  A centralized committee can facilitate scaling resources across partner organizations and identifying opportunities for partnership between organizations and needed supports from the City.
- **Activities: Meetings can include updates from the City government as well as from non-governmental organizations to report on community needs and to share best practices.**
  Ideally, meetings would provide a platform for organizations to collaborate to address needs across sectors. One such example that has formed during the COVID-19 pandemic so far is a partnership focused on food distribution in the South End between the Food Bank, Catholic Charities, Centro Civico, the Albany Housing Authority, and the Albany Police Department. A committee can offer opportunities to facilitate the formation of similar partnerships.

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[5] Porterfield, M. (2020, September 1). Personal interview [Personal interview].

- **Areas of Focus: The committee can focus on areas such as Outreach & Education, Access to Basic Necessities, Data, and Testing and Vaccination.**
Some models from other cities, such as Chicago, Houston, and Worcester, include subcommittees assigned to working on each of these areas.[6,7,8] The committee could also be leveraged to develop a more inclusive emergency management plan for the remainder of the COVID-19 pandemic in the City of Albany.

A less resource-intensive version of this policy opportunity would be to convene a regular forum for community organizations that involves updates from the City, best practices from highlighted community organizations, and facilitated conversations around challenges and potential opportunities for partnership.

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[6] Bloomberg Cities. (2020, May 27). *Lessons from Chicago's COVID-19 Racial Equity Rapid Response Team.* Medium. https://medium.com/@BloombergCities/lessons-from-chicagos-covid-19-racial-equity-rapid-response-team-6d47414567bd
[7] *Health Equity Response (H.E.R.) Task Force.* (n.d.) City of Houston COVID-19 Recovery Initiative. Retrieved October 28, 2020, from https://houstoncovid19recovery.org/health-equity-response-task-force/
[8] COVID-19 Health Equity Task Force. (n.d.) City of Worcester. Retrieved October 28, 2020, from http://www.worcesterma.gov/hhs/health-equity-task-force

Challenge #2: Communications about COVID-19 may not be reaching all residents.

- During a time of crisis, it is critical to convey important information in a timely manner to all citizens. This has been challenging due to the unique constraints on in-person communications posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The City of Albany has effectively leveraged electronic communications during this period; however, these communications may not be reaching residents without regular access to or comfort with technology and the Internet. POCs are disproportionately impacted by lack of access to technology and the Internet.
- Community leaders commented that some communications have not been translated into other languages and are not written in an easily digestible way.

The City's COVID-19 Response to Challenge #2
The City of Albany utilized a variety of communication mediums to provide real-time updates as quickly as possible given the circumstances and without the ability to provide in-person communication due to the ongoing pandemic.

- *Mayor Sheehan published **12 weekly video updates** and more than **14 other COVID-19 and Public Safety-related video updates**.*
    - *Videos released to more than 100 members of the media.*
    - *Videos published between March 15-August 15 reached a combined 225,000 individuals on Facebook.*
- *The City's **Public Access Channel production** was coordinated through the Office of Cultural Affairs and included the update videos.*
- *The City's COVID-19 updates were included in dozens of news outlet publications, including in the Albany Times Union and local network television stations.*
- *The Mayor's office **fielded hundreds of inquiries via mail, email, and phone** regarding a variety of COVID-19-related matters, including testing sites, PPE distribution, food acquisition, rental and income assistance, and other urgent public health and safety matters.*
- *The City **utilized Nixle**, a text alert notification system to communicate updates about COVID-19.*
- *The City created a **COVID-19 Resource Guide** – a one-stop shop for a variety of COVID-related resources that provided information for topics including testing, food, day care, education, recreational opportunities, public transportation, rent assistance, small business grants, and other important updates. The guide can be accessed here.*
    - *The Resource Guide and fact sheets were translated into Spanish, Pashto, Traditional Chinese, Simplified Chinese, French, Burmese, and Karen.*
    - *The City of Albany updated the resource guide at least two times a week and published updates via an online newsletter at least twice a week for several months.*
    - *The City of Albany also engaged with Common Councilmembers and Neighborhood Associations to gauge the interest of residents who sought the COVID-19 resource guide in print, however there was a very minimal response to that inquiry.*

Short-Term Policy Opportunity #2: Implement a coordinated, multi-channel, and inclusive communications strategy.

Ensuring all residents are represented in City engagement efforts related to COVID-19 is important. The City should continue to use nondigital methods to target communities without reliable access to the Internet, since these tend to overlap with the communities at higher risk of contracting COVID-19. The City of Albany can consider the following:

- **Use diverse channels for COVID-19 outreach and education efforts to try to engage marginalized communities** – Based on the community survey results, local television can be an important medium for relaying important COVID-19-related information to POCs. Other nondigital methods to consider include local radio, paper-based materials distributed to households and posted in stores and public places, door-to-door outreach, newspapers, advertisements on buses and bus shelters, etc. The City could also consider broadening the reach of its opt-in text message service to deliver critical information and updates related to COVID-19.
    - *Real World Application:* The City of Boston recruited volunteers to distribute door-to-door informational materials related to COVID-19 and city resources translated into seven languages. Boston also created a text alert service that relays urgent information related to COVID-19 to residents and is available in 11 languages to best serve the diverse community within the City.[9]

- **Engage local partners to design messaging that is accessible to diverse audiences** – In addition to expanding the modalities of communication, the City could design communications to reach residents with different primary languages, cultural values, lived experiences, literacy levels, disability status, etc. This can be achieved by engaging local partners that can speak to the different segments of the City's population in the process of designing public communications. The local partners can also convey to the City in a timely manner any misinformation being spread within the community that the City should address.
    - *Real World Application:* After conducting focus groups with representatives from different cultural groups across the state, the Oregon Health Authority found that its initial COVID-19 campaign slogan "Stay Home" did not resonate with many of their residents who were essential workers and could not stay home. Based on the focus groups, they also discovered the need for more guidance around how to protect one's family when living in a multi-generational home. The slogan and communications were adjusted based on this feedback.[10]

- **Expand South End Block Ambassador Program to other neighborhoods** – The City might consider establishing or expanding an existing model that leverages trusted

[9] City of Boston Mayor's Office. (2020, April 20.) *City of Boston Expands Covid-19 Text Service to Include 11 Languages.* Retrieved October 28, 2020, from https://www.boston.gov/news/city-boston-expands-covid-19-text-service-include-11-languages
[10] Kruzel, A. and Jones, M. (2020, June 23). *Addressing Equity through COVID-19 Response: Communications Approaches in States.* State Health & Value Strategies. https://www.shvs.org/addressing-equity-through-covid-19-response-communications-approaches-in-states/

messengers to provide information and to promote two-way dialogue with marginalized communities.

- o ***Real World Application:*** The City of Boulder has created a team of Emergency Response Connectors (i.e., individuals from marginalized communities in Boulder) to share COVID-19 information, educate about community resources, and document concerns and issues raised by community members – while practicing social distancing.[11]

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[11] City of Boulder Mayor's Office. (2020, April 10). *City of Boulder Launches Emergency Response Connectors Program.* Retrieved October 28, 2020, from https://bouldercolorado.gov/newsroom/city-of-boulder-launches-emergency-response-connectors-program

Challenge #3: Gathering information from people of color on their needs during the COVID-19 pandemic is important, but challenges with inclusive community engagement are exacerbated by the nature of this pandemic.

- POCs should be engaged in dialogue regarding how they are experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic. However, typical methods for community engagement are less effective during social distancing.
- The Albany Community Development Agency (ACDA) survey may have encountered similar limitations to OAC's community survey since it was administered online and was not initially translated into other languages.
- Community leaders noted the importance of door-to-door or phone outreach to increase survey engagement, but felt their organizations were limited in their capacity to promote the ACDA survey and their own surveys through nondigital methods.

The City's COVID-19 Response to Challenge #3

ACDA distributed a survey to dozens of agencies that serve POCs, including:

Feed Albany	*St. Vincent's Food Pantry*	*The Food Pantries*
Senior Services of Albany	*Albany Housing Authority*	*Black Nurses Coalition*
CARES	*Albany Housing Partnership*	*Albany PAL*
In Our Own Voices	*Tru Heart*	*AVillage*
Christ Church	*518 SNUG*	*Mission Accomplished*
Homeless Action Committee	*Arbor Hill Development Corporation*	*Catholic Charities*
Boys and Girls Club	*Art Partners*	*Equinox*
HATAS	*South End Improvement Corporation*	*Center for Law and Justice*
Center for Employment Opportunities		

This survey was responded to 371 times and helped craft decisions on how to distribute millions of CDBG and CARES Act dollars. As result of this survey, ACDA has distributed $2,830,000 to local organizations for COVID-19 response/recovery.

- *$219,000 was allocated for summer programming/day care*
- *$250,000 was allocated for eviction prevention/rent assistance*
- *$230,000 was allocated for PPE, Health Education, Food, and other public services*
- *$1,000,000 for small business loans.*

A complete listing of funded organizations, the amount of money they received, and the programming they were funded to provide to the City's most vulnerable communities, including Communities of Color, is provided in **Appendix G***.*

As per the second CARES Act funding round and Year 47 CDBG funding period, the Albany Community Development Agency will conduct a second survey to evaluate impacts of funding that was awarded and help determine the funding priorities for future grants. This survey will be translated into the five critical languages spoken within the City of Albany, and the City will ensure a print version of the survey is available.

Short-Term Policy Opportunity #3: Implement multiple strategies to understand the needs of POCs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on survey responses and feedback during our community presentations, residents emphasized the need for the City to dedicate more resources to surveying the community to try to reach the most vulnerable community members. The City can consider additional ways to increase response rate among POCs in efforts to better understand their needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Potential strategies to enhance participation include:

- **Conduct a community survey through multiple channels to reach as many POCs as possible** – The survey could be administered in-person (i.e., door-to-door), by telephone, or through a paper-based survey that the respondent can easily mail back.
- **Continue to partner with and provide supplies to community organizations to assist with community survey distribution** – The City should continue their efforts to partner with community organizations to distribute and collect a paper-based survey in targeted neighborhoods at community sites such as food banks, congregations, and housing developments. Community members also suggested distributing the survey through the school system. The City should provide printed copies of the survey to community partners and engage them in the process of designing, promoting, and conducting the survey. It would be most beneficial to share with community partners promotional language and materials that have already been translated into different languages.
- **Consider collecting demographic data in ACDA's second survey** – Inclusion of questions on demographic information (with the opportunity to opt out) in ACDA's second survey can help the City to understand who responded to the survey and to identify specific trends among POCs based on survey results.

Challenge #4: People of color face barriers to accessing COVID-19 testing.

- COVID-19 testing is critical for controlling the spread of the virus. While testing is run by the Albany County government, the City should continue to play a role in amplifying the message and spreading the word. Additionally, the City should play a role in ensuring important messages related to testing and COVID-19 prevention are reaching POCs in a culturally competent manner.
- POCs in Albany faced many barriers to accessing the original drive-thru testing site at the University of Albany. The community testing sites that have been since set up in Arbor Hill and the South End have been underutilized (the South End testing site has since been closed), but the underlying reasons have not been clearly identified.
- Community leaders have indicated potential reasons including language barriers, financial barriers, fear of stigma, fear of exposure at the testing sites, and historical mistrust of the government and healthcare as well as mistrust resulting from early operational challenges of the testing sites (e.g., incorrect phone number publicized).

Short-Term Policy Opportunities #4 and #5:

- **Initiate a social media campaign to educate residents on the importance of COVID-19 testing and vaccination.**
- **Coordinate with Albany County to address barriers to COVID-19 testing and vaccination and enhance culturally relevant outreach and education on the importance of these preventive measures through coordination with Albany County.**

Since the majority of positive COVID-19 cases are in Albany City, the City and its partner organizations can assist the County with doing outreach and education and designing the testing and vaccination sites to be more accessible to POCs. Some opportunities for the City of Albany to address barriers to testing and vaccination include the following:

- **Initiate a social media campaign to promote COVID-19 testing and vaccination that is designed in collaboration and message tested with diverse community members** – In addition to Short-Term Policy Opportunity #2, the City can engage local partners to design and message test a social media campaign on the importance of testing and vaccination that is accessible to diverse audiences. It is critical for any social media campaign to involve the perspectives of the community to help ensure it is effective and addresses common concerns or misunderstanding about testing and vaccination.

- **Work with the County to address barriers to accessing community testing and vaccination sites, including inconvenience, fear of stigma, language barriers, and financial barriers.**
    - **Partner with faith-based institutions and food banks as testing and vaccination sites** – The City could advocate for placing testing and vaccination sites at easily accessible community hubs, such as faith-based institutions, food banks, and public parks. This would not only make the sites more geographically convenient as some POCs may already be going to these places, but also may address concerns around stigma that residents might face with being seen going to the health center locations for testing or vaccination. This may also help to normalize the act of getting tested if POCs see others in the community getting tested and vaccinated, including community leaders.

- - **Real Life Application**: The Schenectady County COVID-19 Disparities Committee created mobile COVID-19 testing sites at churches, mosques, and food banks. Materials promoting the testing sites have been translated into Spanish and Arabic and distributed throughout predominantly minority neighborhoods, including to local institutions to post in their buildings, posted on sandwich boards, etc.[12]
  - **Increase language access of mobile testing sites** –Advocating for forms at testing sites to be made available in Spanish and other major languages spoken in Albany and for interpreters to be made available would improve language access of testing sites. Non-English speakers would also benefit from increased availability of materials promoting the testing sites in Spanish and other major languages. The City can look for philanthropic funding to support these efforts as well. It is important to note that some testing sites do use technology in place of hired in-person interpreters. Community members who are technologically challenged may find this option as a barrier to seeking testing.

- **Combine efforts with flu vaccine drives and outreach** – During flu season, the City can promote both getting the flu vaccine and getting tested for COVID-19, delivering the important message that getting a flu shot is more important this year than ever before.[13] There is a major opportunity to encourage more people to get flu shots this year since some may be more willing to get a flu shot this year than in prior years. The City should also consider advocating for making both flu vaccines and COVID-19 testing available at community hubs; for instance, Macedonia Baptist Church has previously offered flu vaccines on site and could be a promising site for COVID-19 testing as well.

[12]Porterfield, M. (2020, September 1). Personal interview [Personal interview].

[13] Bloomberg Cities. (2020, August 11). *Dose of reality: Flu season is right around the corner.* Medium.
https://medium.com/@BloombergCities/dose-of-reality-flu-season-is-right-around-the-corner-ed0466387ea1

Challenge #5: Children of color may be at higher risk of falling behind their peers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Children without reliable access to the Internet and to technological devices are at risk of falling behind their peers during online schooling.
- Based on the community survey results, parents are most concerned about helping their children with online schooling.
- POCs are concerned about impacts on youth employment, possibly because of the cuts to the summer youth employment program this past summer.
- High-need youth are also at risk of engaging in violence given limited programming during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The City's COVID-19 Response to Challenge #5

- *The City funded $400,000 for grants for broadband, WiFi, and/or electronic devices for low-income youth/families so that distance learning can continue while access to school buildings, libraries, and other facilities remains restricted.*

- *WiFi at all Albany Public Library branches and two city parks (near Lincoln Park pool and Washington Park playhouse and skate park) remain turned on and accessible to community members near these locations.*

- *Charter Communications continues to offer free Spectrum broadband and Wi-Fi access for 60 days to households with K-12 and/or college students who do not already have a Spectrum broadband subscription and at any service level up to 100 Mbps. Installation fees will be waived for new student households.*

- *As mentioned above, ACDA also distributed large amounts of funding to organizations serving high-need youth. $219,000 was allocated for summer programming/day care.*

Short-Term Policy Opportunity #6: Assess gaps that Albany School District cannot address and work with the District and other partners to support schooling and social development of high-need youth.

The City can consider creative ways to support high-need youth and keep them from falling behind academically and professionally during a socially distanced environment. Some promising practices include:

- **Continue to increase Internet access for distance learning through creating public WiFi hotspots and distributing mobile hotspot devices in underserved communities** – It is important to ensure that all children have reliable access to the Internet and to the technological devices they need for online schooling. One possible option is to work with community centers, libraries, and schools to create public WiFi hotspots that can be accessed outside (which may quickly become less feasible during the colder months), or to open their doors to a limited number of students to access the Internet. However, some community leaders noted community members would be more interested in accessing Internet from their homes, which would support an approach of ensuring

mobile hotspot devices have been distributed to all children in need of Internet access.

- **Set up "learning hubs" for high-need youth with supervision by staff from nonprofits** – The City could consider partnering with community organizations to set up "learning hubs," or small, socially-distanced groups that meet to take their virtual classes together in recreation centers, branch libraries, and other sites in the community. While some parents are forming "pandemic pods" with other families to split the cost of hiring a tutor to keep their children up to speed on schoolwork, several cities are setting up similar programs for families who can't afford such an arrangement. The City of Albany could consider working with local churches and the YMCA—key partners in the learning hub model in the City of Memphis. The City could also partner with mentoring programs for mentors to assist with online schooling and homework.
    - *Real Life Application:* The City of San Francisco is rolling out one of the largest learning hub programs, which is targeted at students living in public housing, homeless youth, those in foster care, English-language learners, and low-income families of color. The program is meant to give students structure while taking care of several pandemic needs at once, including tutoring and support with classwork, full-day childcare, Internet access, meals, and opportunities for children to play and socialize safely.[14]

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[14] Bloomberg Cities. (2020, August 25). *Cities try 'learning hubs' to keep kids on track with online school.* Medium. https://medium.com/@BloombergCities/cities-try-learning-hubs-to-keep-kids-on-track-with-online-school-9c9f419a5e26

Challenge #6: Without a systematic approach or framework to assess impacts of decisions on equity, rapid decision-making can run the risk of leaving out marginalized groups.

While the decisions around the initial drive-thru testing site were made by the County and State governments, it serves as an example of how decisions can be made without consideration of how they affect marginalized communities. This is challenging for any government and may require the adoption of new tools and processes to address.

Short-Term Policy Opportunity #7: Implement COVID-19 Rapid Response Tool for Equity Impact Analysis.

The City of Albany could implement a tool to help operationalize equity considerations in its COVID-19 response. In general, many city governments have adopted an Equity Toolkit, which is a tool that outlines a series of questions that must be considered when making decisions to assess the impact of the decision on equity and help to mitigate unintended negative consequences. Some cities, such as the City of San Antonio, have adapted their tools into a "rapid response tool" for their COVID-19 response.[15] The tool includes the following questions:

1. What are the racial and economic equity impacts of this decision?
2. Who will benefit from and/or be burdened by this decision? Is this support or relief prioritized for the people and communities who need it the most and are already marginalized (lower income, disabled, communities of color)?
3. Is this accessible regardless of ability or status?
4. Will this effort help rebuild toward a just, equitable, and sustainable future?
5. Are there strategies to mitigate any unintended negative consequences of this decision?

The City of Albany can consider adopting this tool and making it available during any meeting where decisions are being made related to the City's COVID-19 response. As part of this process, the City should encourage department heads to include staff with a variety of experiences, backgrounds, and skills (including staff that can speak to the groups most likely to be impacted) at the decision-making table and include them in the decision-making process.

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[15] City of San Antonio Office of Equity. (n.d.) *COVID-19 Equity Framework and Rapid Response Tool.*
https://www.sanantonio.gov/Portals/0/Files/Equity/COSACOVIDEquityRapidResponseToolandFramework.pdf?ver=2020-06-22-165856-570

Long-Term Policy Opportunities

The City of Albany can consider several policy opportunities to mitigate the disparate impacts of future emergencies on POCs and to work towards greater equity overall.

1. **Invest in more full-time staff to support equity work in the City of Albany.**
   The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed and worsened longstanding inequities in the City of Albany. Given the City's commitment to advancing equity, the City could expand the team dedicated to equity work and clearly identify the team's mission and measures of success.

   For instance, other cities have established an equity office. According to a survey of equity offices in 33 cities, most perform both internal and external activities, with a few offices focused solely on one or the other.[16,17] Most also report to the City Manager or the Mayor of their city, indicating that these offices are given a certain level of prominence and visibility and held accountable to high-level officials. The City can look to the different models that other cities have employed to determine which is best for the City of Albany. The City could also consider becoming a member of the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE), a national organization which can provide support and technical assistance to the City as it works to improve equity in its services and business processes.[18]

2. **Implement an equity toolkit in all City departmental planning and decision-making processes.**
   As mentioned in Short-Term Policy Opportunity #6, the City can consider implementing an equity toolkit in all governmental planning and decision-making. An equity toolkit is a set of questions to guide City departments as they assess how their policies, projects, initiatives and budget decisions benefit and burden communities. Equity toolkits have been adopted by many city and county governments seeking to advance equity in their communities.[19] Adopting an equity toolkit can help the City of Albany change the policies, programs, and practices that may be perpetuating inequities revealed and exacerbated by COVID-19.

3. **Develop a more robust, inclusive emergency management plan for the City of Albany.**
   The COVID-19 pandemic is unlike any other emergency for which the City has set protocols due to the nature of the virus requiring social distancing, the uncertain timeframe, etc. However, the City of Albany may face similar challenges in future pandemics. The City of Albany has the opportunity to learn from the COVID-19 pandemic and to develop an emergency management plan that ensures all residents are included in the City's communications and overall response. For instance, the City of Houston updated its

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[16] City and County of San Francisco Budget and Legislative Analyst's Office. (2019, May 1). *Survey of Other Local Offices of Equity and Current Efforts by the City and County of San Francisco to Address Racial and Other Inequities.* https://sfbos.org/sites/default/files/BLA.OfficeofEquity.050119_0.pdf
[17] Internal-facing activities include addressing equity issues within the municipal organization such as hiring and contracting processes, while external-facing activities include addressing equity issues in terms of the delivery of the municipality's services.
[18] The Local & Regional Government Alliance on Race and Equity. https://www.racialequityalliance.org/
[19] The Local & Regional Government Alliance on Race and Equity. (2015, September). *Racial Equity Toolkit: An Opportunity to Operationalize Equity.* https://www.racialequityalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/GARE-Racial_Equity_Toolkit.pdf

emergency management plan with lessons from COVID-19 and is in the process of getting feedback on the plan from the community, with a focus on marginalized communities.[20]

4. **Continue investing in the built environment of historically underinvested communities and evaluating progress.**

   This summer, the COVID-19 pandemic and its disproportionate effects on POCs coincided with a national reckoning on racism in police brutality. During our interviews with community leaders, they emphasized low morale and mistrust in government among POCs. One potential strategy that was raised by community leaders was for the City to continue to invest in the built environment (i.e., homes, buildings, streets, open spaces, and infrastructure) in historically underinvested communities, with more transparency around how these investments are being tracking with metrics of success. This is aligned with the City's existing Equity Agenda, which includes investments in the built environment. It is recommended that the City continue investing in the built environment of these communities and widely publicize these investments to ensure community members and leaders are aware.

5. **Continue to expand Internet access, particularly for historically underinvested communities.**

   COVID-19 has shone a light on the digital divide – the economic, educational, and social inequalities between those who have computers and Internet access and those who do not. The digital divide will continue to drive racial and ethnic inequities, given our society's increased reliance on the Internet and the educational and economic harms experienced by those without Internet access at home. To help address these inequities in the long run, the City should continue to invest in infrastructure to provide Internet access to historically underinvested communities.

6. **Provide funding for neighborhood associations.**

   Neighborhood associations have played a major role in providing information to and helping to address the needs of community members during COVID-19. Since these neighborhood associations are entirely volunteer-run, they face challenges with sustainability and are limited in their capacity. Furthermore, some community leaders noted that the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding can only go to non-profit organizations; some suggested requiring grantees to engage more or formally partner with a neighborhood association to ensure the funds are going where community members feel they are needed. The City can consider providing funding for neighborhood associations in order to empower the community and to invest in community-driven projects.

Conclusion

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to take a disproportionate toll on POCs nationwide, it is critical that the City of Albany actively continues investing in efforts to identify and address the

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[20] City of Houston Mayor's Office. (2020, May 18). *Houston Integrates COVID-19 Response and Recovery into Resilient Houston Framework.* https://www.houstontx.gov/mayor/press/2020/resilient-houston-covid-response.html

needs of POCs in Albany. These efforts should be informed by the community and involve diverse stakeholders working in partnership with the City. The City has the opportunity to enhance its investments based on lessons learned from the first wave of the pandemic and to take every opportunity to promote these investments to ensure residents are informed.

Any questions regarding this report should be directed to
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Appendices

Please see accompanying document for detailed appendices:

Appendix A. High-Level Overview of Landscape Scan
Appendix B. List of Key Informants' Departmental/Organizational Affiliations
Appendix C. Interview Guides
Appendix D. City of Albany COVID-19 Community Survey
Appendix E. Survey Promotional Materials
Appendix F. Additional Detailed Analysis of Demographic Data
Appendix G. Distribution of Albany Community Development Agency
Funds in Response to COVID-19