Age & Dementia Friendly Boston Needs Assessment 2025

AGE+

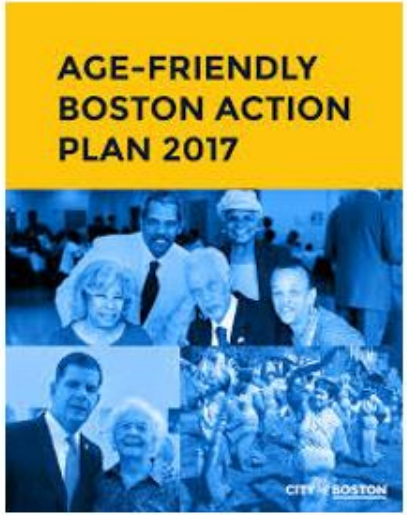
Age Strong Commission

UMass Boston

AGE FRIENDLY INITIATIVE TIMELINE

2016-2017

FIRST AGE FRIENDLY ASSESSMENT CONDUCTED & ACTION PLAN PUBLISHED



2018-2024

ACTION AND IMPLEMENTATION

2024-2025

NEEDS ASSESSMENT & ACTION PLAN UPDATED

Methods

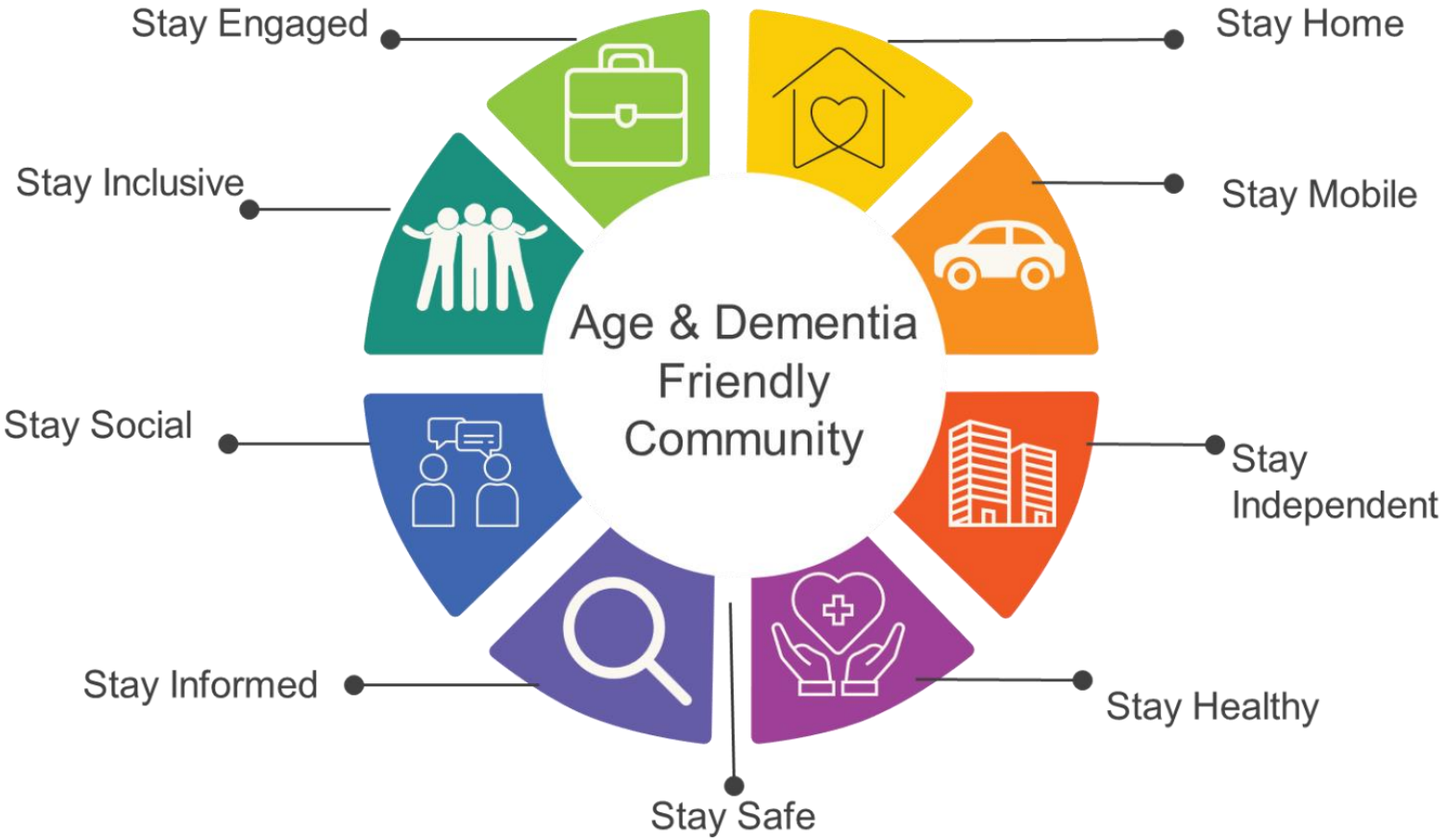
- ❑ 37 community forums
  - 12 accommodate non-English speakers
  - 650 participants
- ❑ 2,520 survey respondents age 50+
  - Translated into 8 languages

Where community forums were held:

Neighborhood	Name/Description of Group
Back Bay	Central Boston Public Library (BPL)
	South Cove Plaza West*
Brighton	Veronica B. Smith
	Greater Boston Chinese Golden Age*
	Brighton BPL
	DEAF Inc.*
Charlestown	Charlestown BPL*
Chinatown	Quincy Towers*
Dorchester	CVAB- Cape Verdean Creole*
	Lower Mills Apartments*
	Peabody-Englewood Apartments
	Codman Square BPL
Downtown	Advisory Council In-person
	Advisory Council Zoom
East Boston	East Boston Senior Center (1 English, 1 Spanish)*
Fenway	Kenmore Abbey
Hyde Park	Hyde Park BPL
	The Pryde
Jamaica Plain	Julia Martin House: Grandparents raising grandchildren
	Jamaica Plain BPL
Mattapan	The Foley
	Saint Belvi- Haitian Creole*
	Mattapan BPL *
Mission Hill	Mission Hill BPL*
North End	North End BPL
Roslindale	Roslindale BPL
Roxbury	Whittier Street Club 1290
	PACE*
	La Alianza*
South Boston	South Boston Neighborhood House
	South Boston BPL
South End	Union Church
West End	West End BPL
West Roxbury	West Roxbury BPL
Virtual	Outstanding Life-LGBTQ+
	Caregivers of PLWD
	MA Association for the Blind & Visually Impaired (MABVI)- (Dorchester, Roxbury, Mattapan residents)

***Non-English-speaking participants**

Guiding Framework



AREAS OF LIVABILITY:

Transportation & Walkability- Creating reliable, accessible, and safe transportation and pedestrian options so older adults can stay mobile and connected.

Financial Security & Economic Opportunity- Ensuring resources, protections, and opportunities to remain financially stable, employed if they choose, and fully engaged in community life.

Places & Spaces- Designing accessible, inclusive, and welcoming environments that enable older adults of all abilities to participate fully and comfortably in their communities.

People & Neighborhoods- Building connected, supportive communities that promote belonging and engagement across generations.

Access to Health & Wellness- Programs and partnerships that foster physical, mental, and social wellbeing for older adults.

Homes for All Ages- Expanding safe, affordable, and accessible housing options and supports so older adults can live independently and with dignity.

How we adapted the Framework:

1 Alignment with the State

Economic Opportunity & Security

People & Communities

Places & Spaces

Health & Wellness

Aging in All Policies

Information, Communication & Framing

2 Elevation of cross-cutting themes (financial security)

-Financial security & economic opportunity (coded 105 times

-31% financially insecure

3 Responding to interconnectedness of the domains

-bringing experts together through working groups ex. Transportation & walkability

ReiMAgine Aging 2030: The Massachusetts Plan. MA Executive Office of Aging & Independence

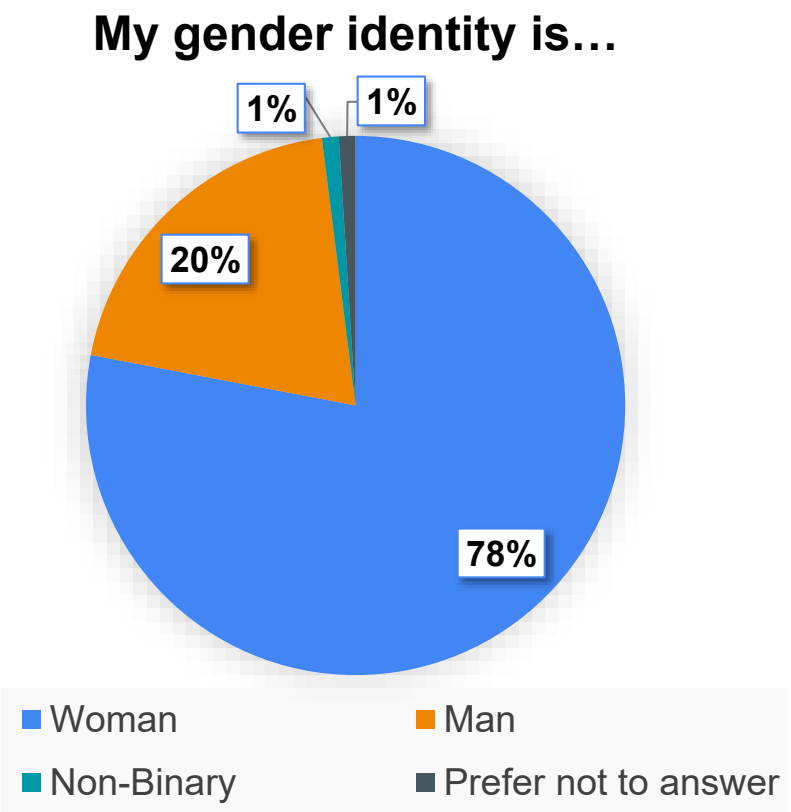
DEMOGRAPHICS OF OLDER BOSTONIANS:

Who we heard from…

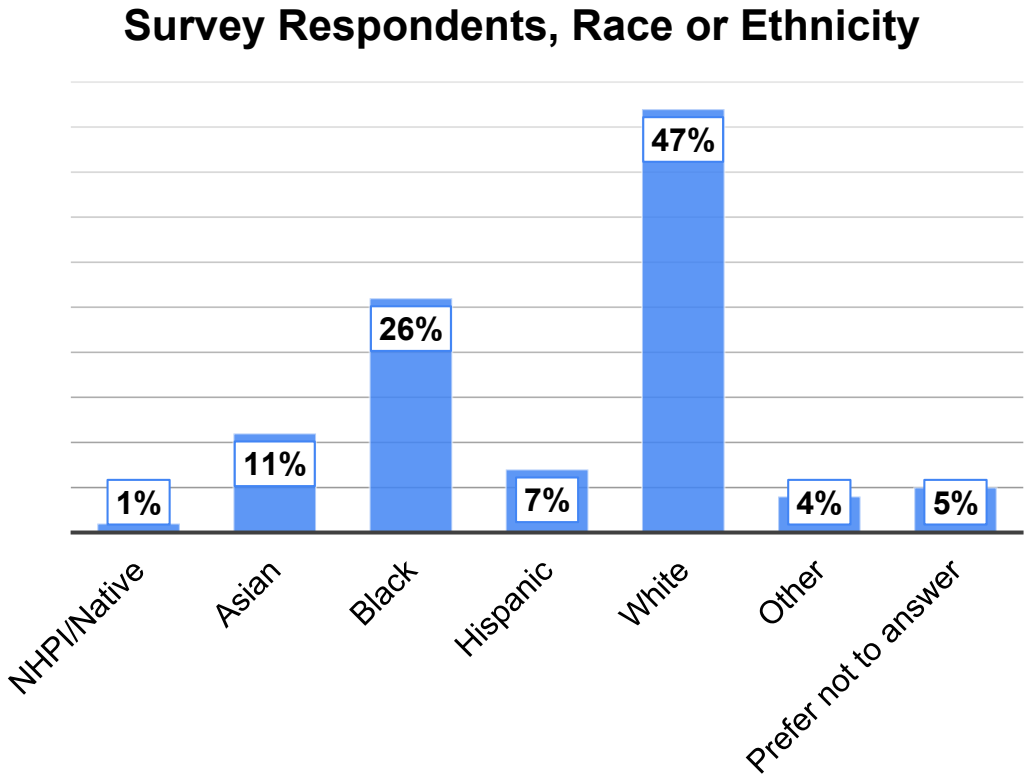
Overrepresentation of 70-79 years of age:

Age	Number	Percentage
<60	145	8%
60-69	464	26%
70-79	800	45%
80+	380	21%

…mostly women:



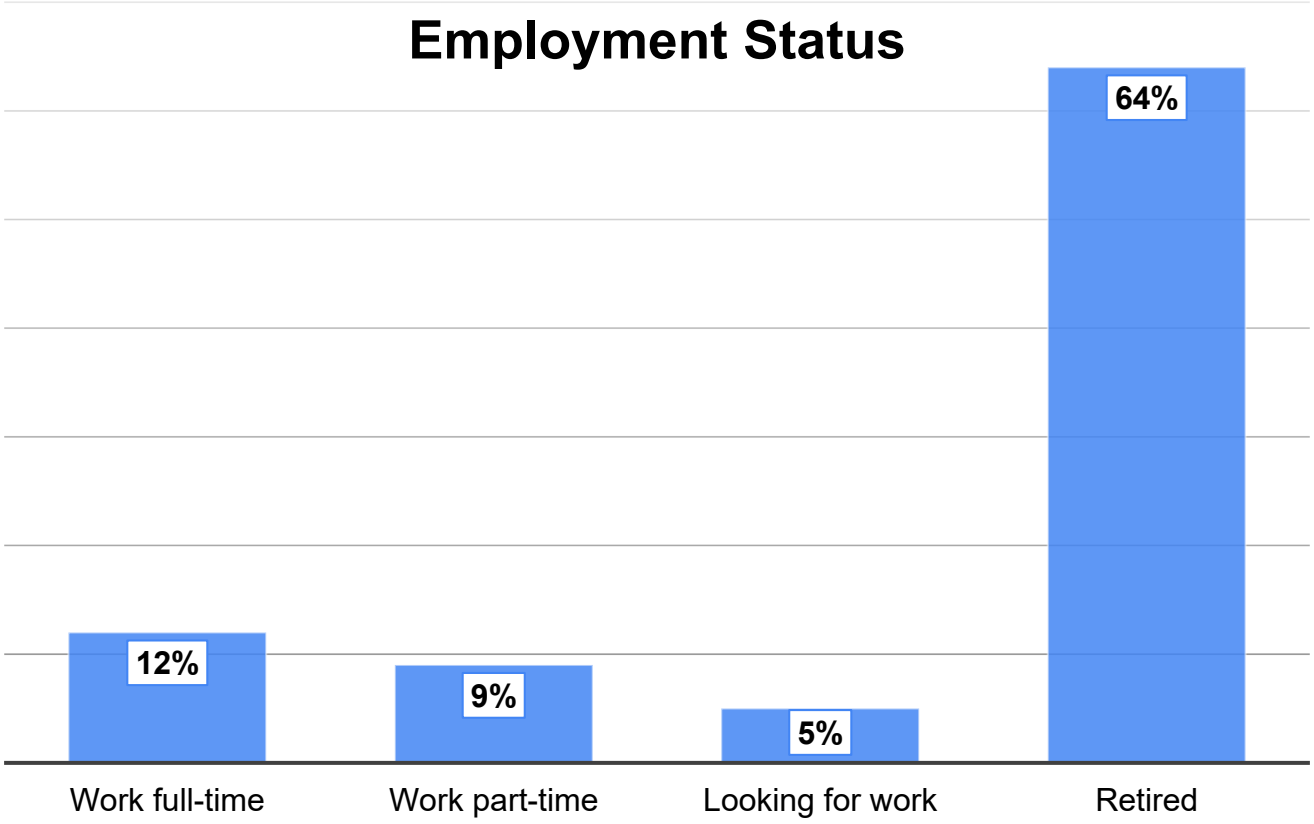
Variation by race/ethnicity:



...and length of residency:

How long have you lived in Boston?	Percentage
Fewer than 5 years	5%
5-14 years	10%
15-24 years	9%
25-34 years	11%
35-44 years	12%
45-54 years	14%
55+ years	39%

Most are retired:



NEEDS ASSESSMENT RESULTS:

In community forums across Boston, older adults shared what makes growing older here meaningful. **The three strengths mentioned most often were:**

Getting Around & Staying Mobile
Safe streets, walkable neighborhoods, & access to transportation

Strong Neighborhood Connections
Friendly neighbors, community ties, and things to do

"Third Spaces" to Gather & Belong
Libraries, community centers, parks, and faith spaces

In community forums across Boston, residents also shared the biggest challenges faced by older adults. **The three concerns raised most often were:**

Feeling Isolated or Left Out
Limited opportunities for social connection and participation

Knowing What's Available & How to Access It
Difficulty finding or understanding important information and services

Safety & Peace of Mind
Concerns about crime, scams, traffic safety, & personal security

TRANSPORTATION & WALKABILITY

We Envision... seamless, safe, and reliable transportation options for everyone, ensuring older adults can walk, drive, ride transit, or use paratransit with confidence and ease, supported by clear information and connected routes.

In community forums, these were the most frequently mentioned needs related to Transportation & Walkability:

Traffic safety for pedestrians, bikers, and drivers

Barriers to accessing the MBTA limit some older adults' use of public transit

The condition of streets and sidewalks can make walking challenging and limit mobility

Older Bostonians value the public transit and walkability in the city...

"There's great walkability- one of the best places in the country for that. I live car-free. I can get places on the train. It's good that way... Compared to most American cities, we're really well set up."

-Back Bay listening session

"I'm close to transportation and stores. I live right by Ashmont Station- I go right outside and around the corner and catch the bus. I can catch the bus to almost any kind of place from that station."

-MABVI listening session*

*This listening session was co-hosted by the Massachusetts Association for the Blind & Visually Impaired and included residents from Dorchester, Mattapan, and Roxbury.

Structural barriers in the built environment like the condition of streets and sidewalks can limit walkability.

"[It's a] safety issue to me. Compared to 10 years ago, it feels like the wild west with the bikes- bikes on sidewalks, zooming through red lights- it's challenging to walk with bikers, and it's also challenging to walk because corners flood..."

-Back Bay listening session

"Trees... the roots upset the sidewalk or the sewer pipes and the bricks. You can't walk down the street or ride a bicycle. Walking is really important in Charlestown and if I can't walk down the sidewalk, I can't get anywhere."

-Charlestown listening session

Affordability of transportation can be a barrier to access...

9% of respondents report not having enough money to pay for transportation

"My friends in Philadelphia have free transportation for older adults- would Boston ever do that? "

-Roslindale listening session

Accessibility of public transit is crucial...

“I live in Mattapan and I don’t see any services at all. If my daughter isn’t around to take me, I’m out. I live in my own home. I’m totally blind, I’m 82 years old, I’m not going to stand on the corner and wait for a bus. "
- MABVI listening session*

"MBTA is hard to travel on alone. People with disabilities might need more help."
- Roxbury listening session

*This listening session was co-hosted by the Massachusetts Association for the Blind & Visually Impaired and included residents from Dorchester, Mattapan, and Roxbury.

Safety of the streets and sidewalks is one of the most highly cited challenges reported by older Bostonians.

“The bikes and the motorbikes… you’re trying to cross the street and they won’t stop for you… Bikers don’t look at the lights, they pay no attention to the traffic signals, or if people are crossing the street. It’s scary.”

- South End listening session

"[One challenge is] crossing the street. In our neighborhood, the cars don’t stop. The light tells you to walk, but you can’t"

-Mattapan listening session

Transportation gaps and parking challenges can lead to isolation and limit access to community life.

"Children of older adults are not able to stay with parents due to lack of parking. This leads to increased isolation."
- South Boston listening session

"One thing that could be helpful is to provide transportation from people's homes to the things to do. Sometimes public transportation is too much with walkability and accessibility"
-Charlestown listening session

FINANCIAL SECURITY & ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

We Envision... that all older Bostonians are empowered to achieve economic stability and opportunity through affordable housing, fair policies, employment options, financial supports, and protection from scams, while promoting age-friendly businesses and accessible resources.

In community forums, these were the most frequently mentioned needs related to Financial Security & Economic Opportunity:

The rising costs of food and utilities are making them harder to afford

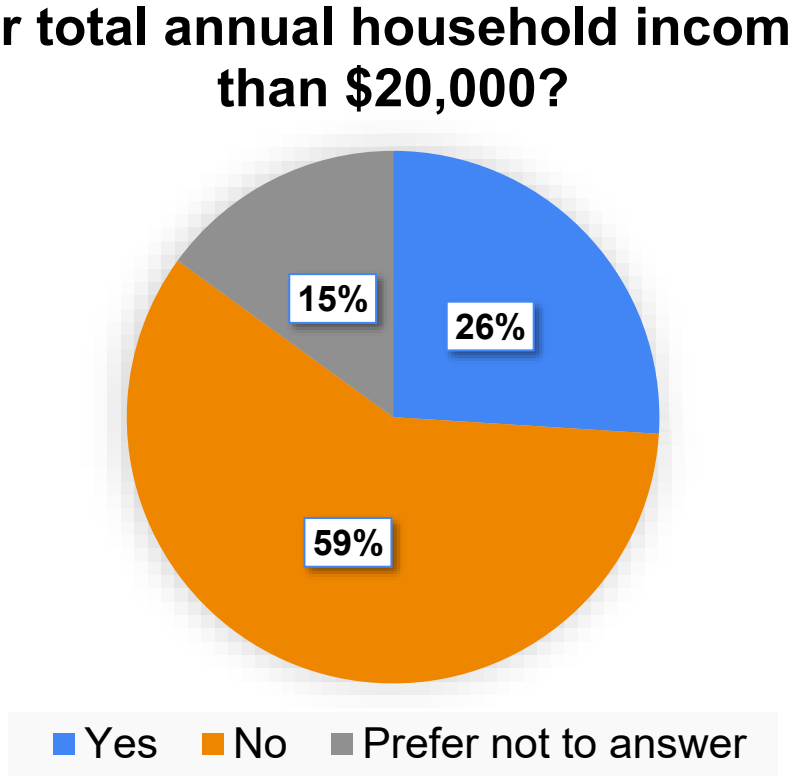
Lack of supports for middle income older adults; not eligible for assistance, but still struggling

Rising property taxes are putting pressure on homeowners

Rising costs while living on a fixed income leave people feeling stuck

Many older Bostonians are living on limited incomes.

1 in 4 have less than $20,000 annual income.



Older adults are stretching their budgets against rising prices.

"Everything is expensive, social security doesn't help enough to cover costs, we have to really stretch to cover a lot."
-Back Bay listening session

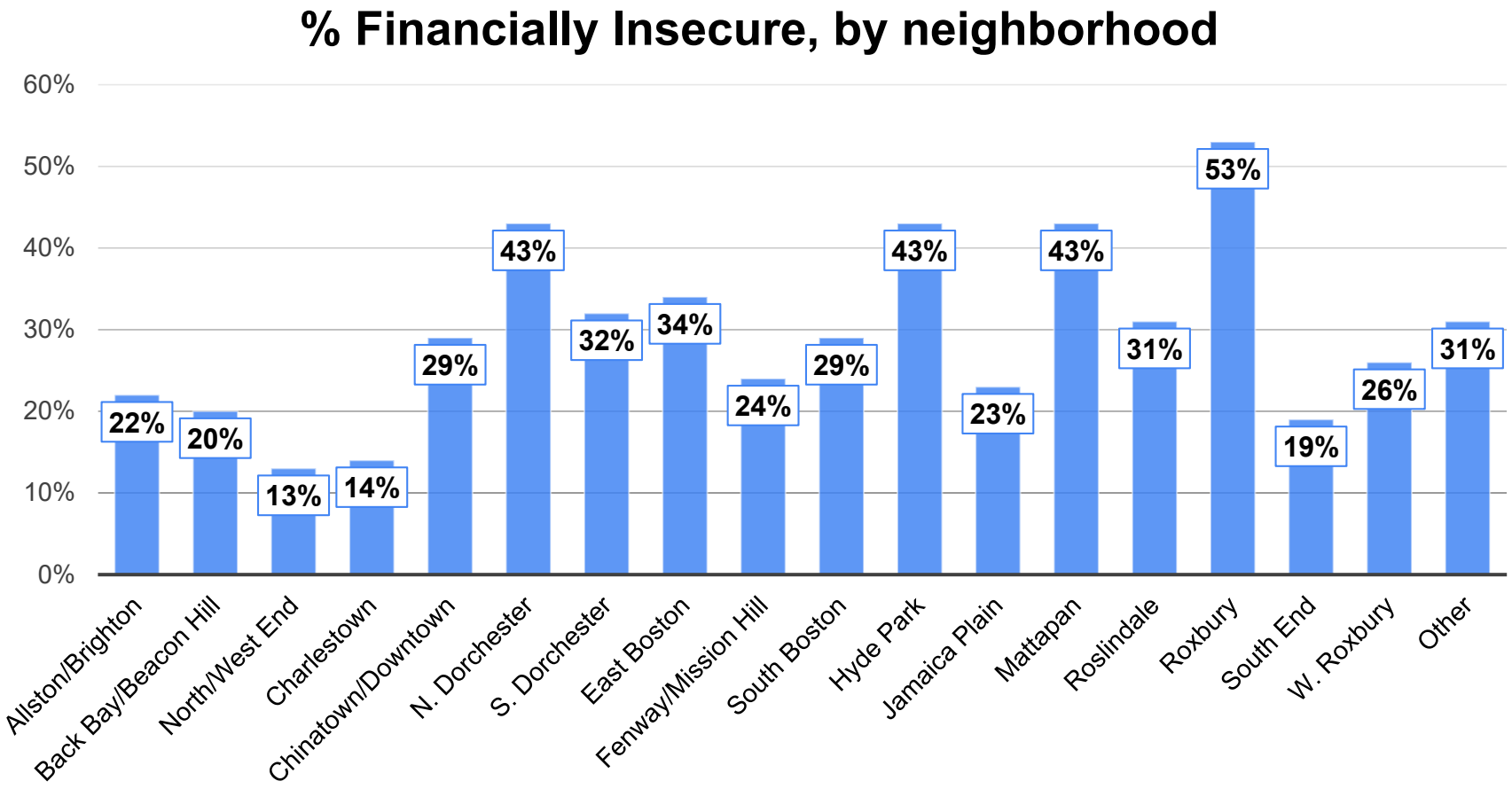
"I stay home because I can't afford [to go out]...I don't go out for coffee, let alone go out for a meal."
-LGBTQIA+ listening session

Many fall into the “forgotten middle;” they make too much to be eligible for assistance, but not enough to feel secure.

“How can I get services when I make a little too much money for public assistance programs?”
-Mattapan listening session

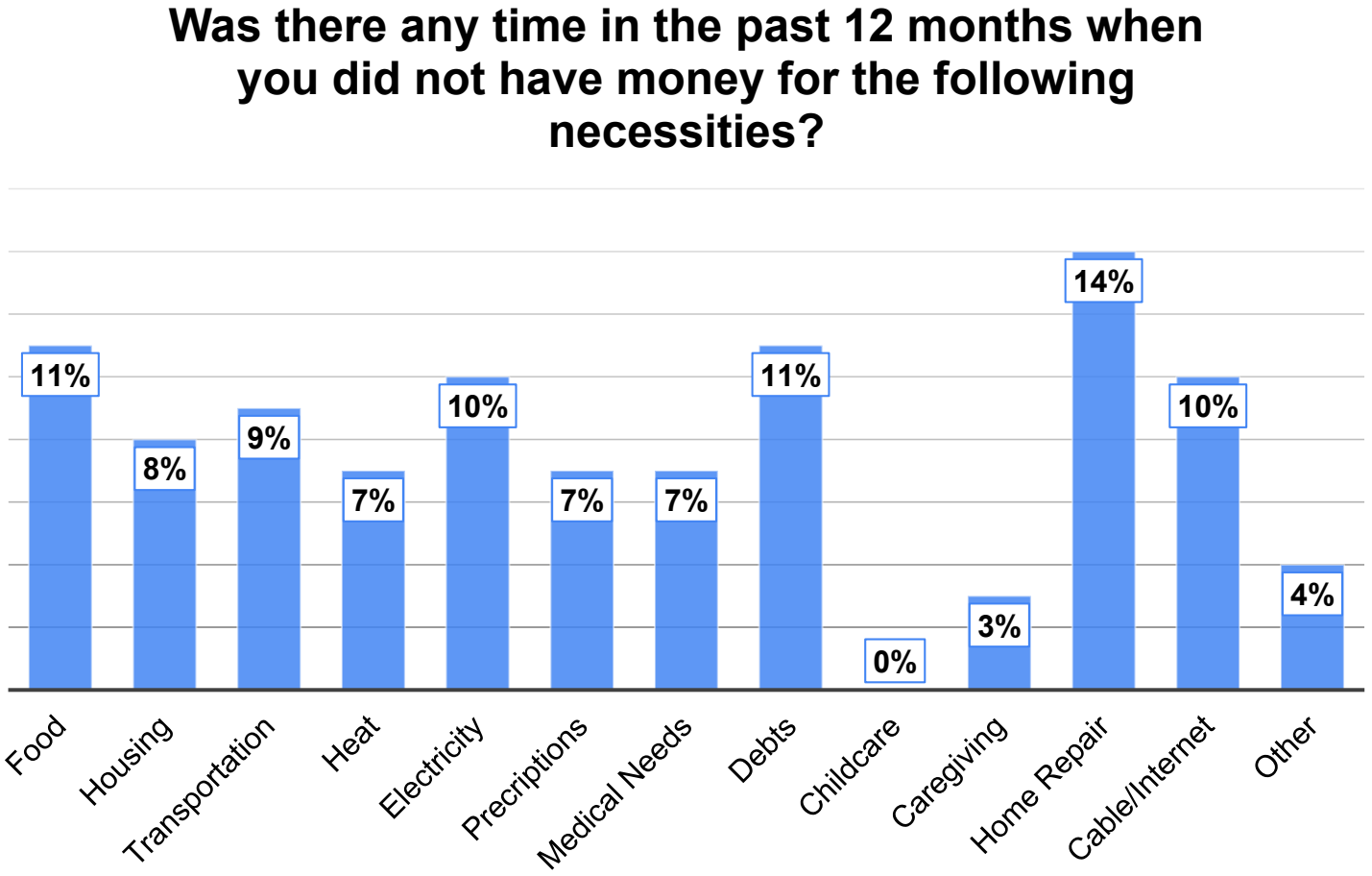
“We’re living longer. We work, we save; we’re getting penalized for saving. We are restricted from services. I don’t know if they want us to be out there begging"
-Roxbury listening session

31% reported not believing they have enough resources to meet their basic needs.



by need...

The highest reported needs were (1) home repair, (2) food, (3) debts, and (4) utilities like electricity and cable/internet.



PLACES & SPACES

We Envision... Boston as a city where all residents can move freely and feel connected—enjoying safe, accessible parks, community spaces, and familiar neighborhoods that foster social cohesion and provide proximity to essential amenities.

In community forums, older Bostonians shared that they want to see more of the following in their neighborhoods:

Safety and peace of mind in public spaces

Streets, sidewalks, and buildings that are accessible for everyone

The desire for more “third spaces” beyond home & work

Accessibility of buildings, green spaces, and sidewalks is critical.

8% reported living with vision loss

14% reported living with hearing loss

22% reported living with physical disabilities

"There's a group of seniors that call themselves "the street walkers," they have to walk in the street because the sidewalks are so screwed up. It's a hugely treacherous thing. It's a fall risk."

-South End listening session

Public safety was one of the highest cited concerns among older adults...

"[The] streets are too dark in Back Bay. There's no one nearby or call boxes. Police officers zoom by in cars, but they aren't walking around. What are you supposed to do if something happens?"
-Back Bay listening session

"[It's] Dangerous for seniors walking on the streets. By La Alianza and BMC, you can tell there are drug users on the streets. The gate to the center is open and sometimes people will enter and start using drugs."
-La Alianza listening session

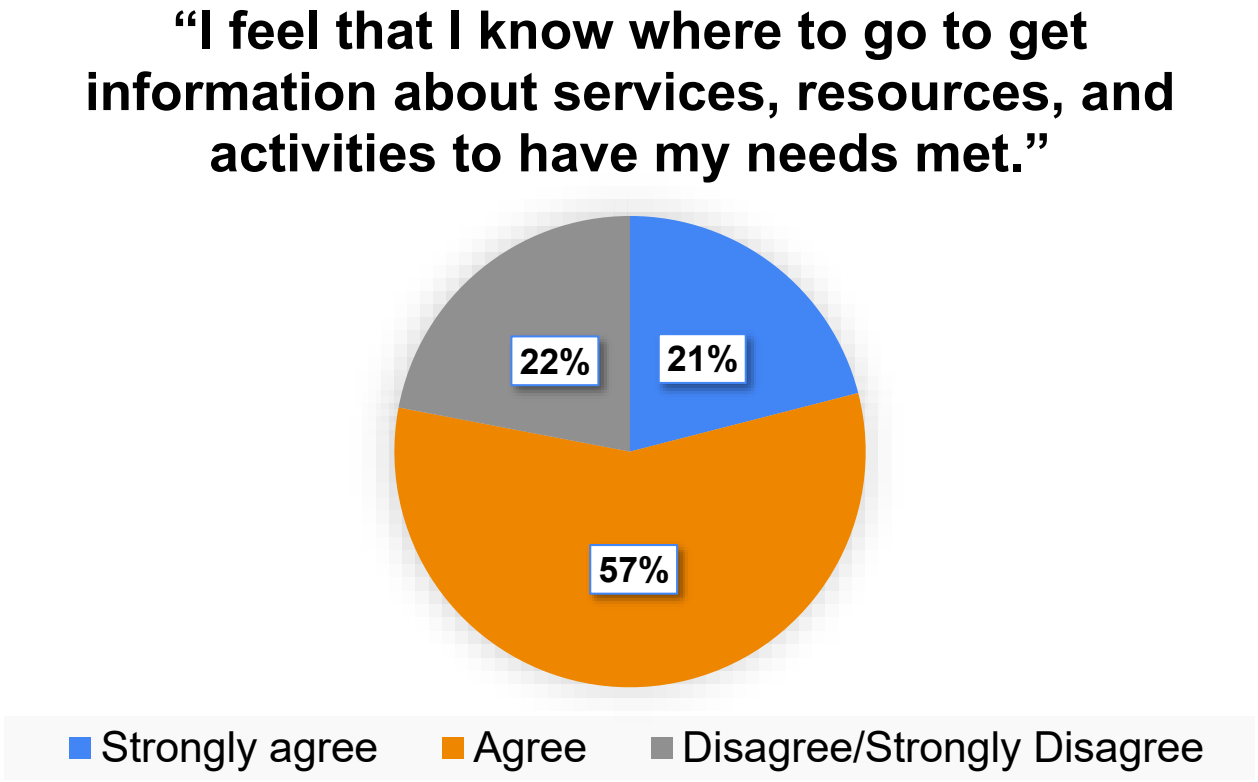
For older Bostonians, neighborhood "third spaces" and small businesses foster connection and belonging.

"[I want] more accessible third places that don't cost money. Things that are well-cared for... like libraries, parks, and faith communities."
-West Roxbury listening session

"[..."...small businesses are really important. Walking to them is really important. It's valuable to have small businesses in your neighborhood because they also go out of their way to be helpful... I feel like I have a relationship with the businesses, and they recognize my humanness. I go to the fish market and you don't need to have all the money- they trust you to come back."
- Roslindale listening session

The loss of places like Harriet Tubman and the library are a killer...there's no replacement for that... The loss is big. We lost a place to gather."
-South End listening session

Communication and information are important for access... 22% do not know where to get information.



Older Bostonians get their information from different sources, and this varies by age.

Top three sources of information, by age:

Younger than 60	60-69 years	70-79 years	80 and older
1. Internet/ social media	1. Internet/ social media	1. Neighbors	1. Friends & family
2. Friends & family	2. Neighbors	2. Television	2. Neighbors
3. Neighbors	3. Community organizations	3. Community organizations	3. Community organizations

Survey results show that people also get information from newspapers, churches/faith institutions, signs/flyers, and the radio.

PEOPLE & NEIGHBORHOODS

We Envision…a City of neighborhoods that fosters a culture of respect, inclusion, and social connection, where older adults are engaged, valued, and supported—through family ties, community programs, volunteering, and meaningful civic participation

In community forums, these were the most frequently mentioned needs related to People & Neighborhoods:

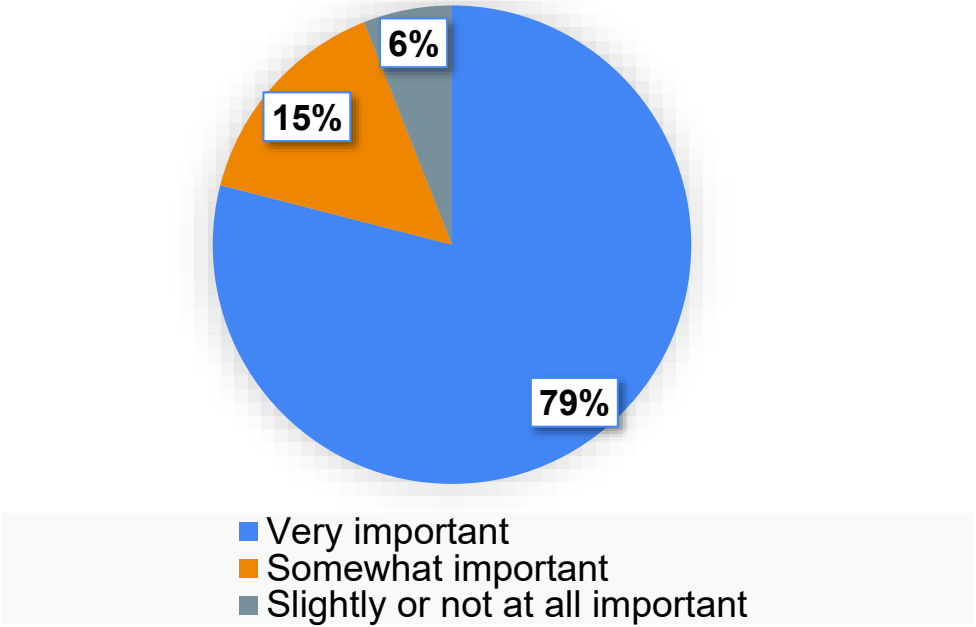
Social programs are uneven and not always nearby

Interest in programs that connect older adults, youth, and families

The need for multilingual outreach & culturally responsive services

Older adults want to stay in their neighborhoods.

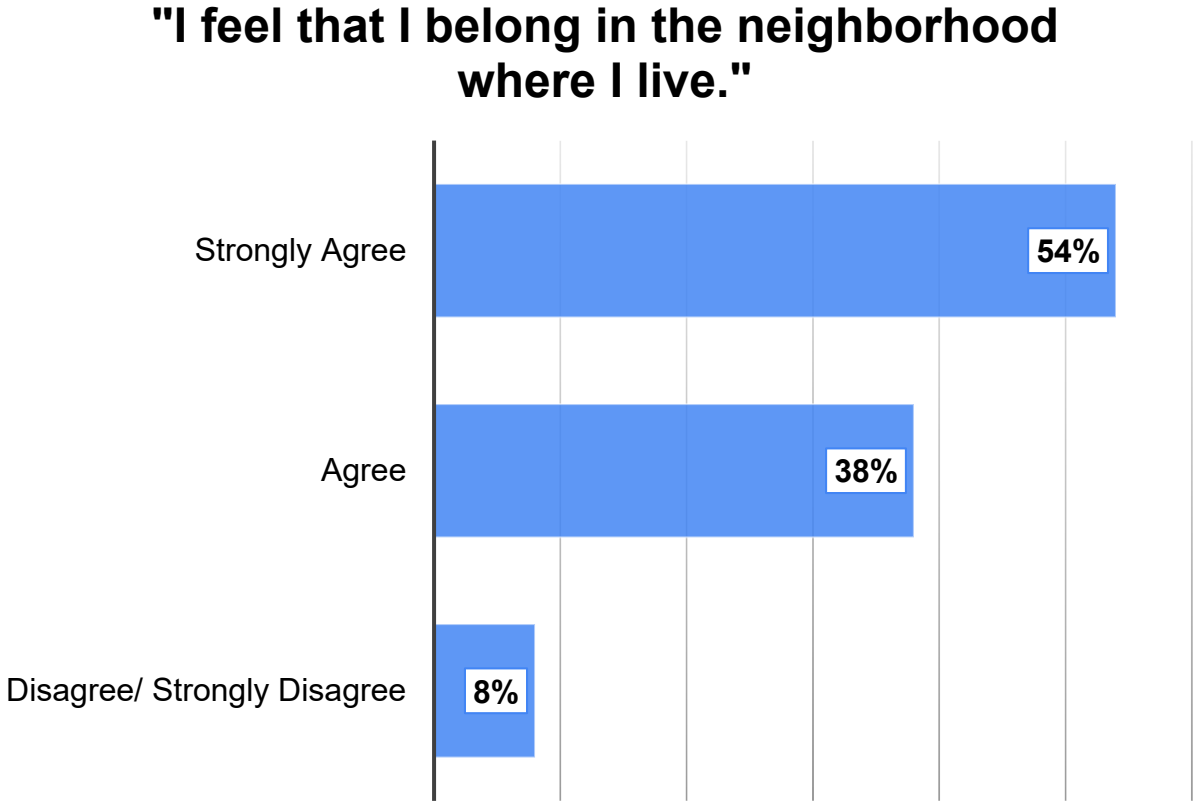
How important is it for you to remain living in the neighborhood where you currently live as you age?



"I live in a community where a lot of my neighbors have lived there for a long time- you know your neighbors and they would notice if they haven't seen you in awhile"

-Roxbury listening session

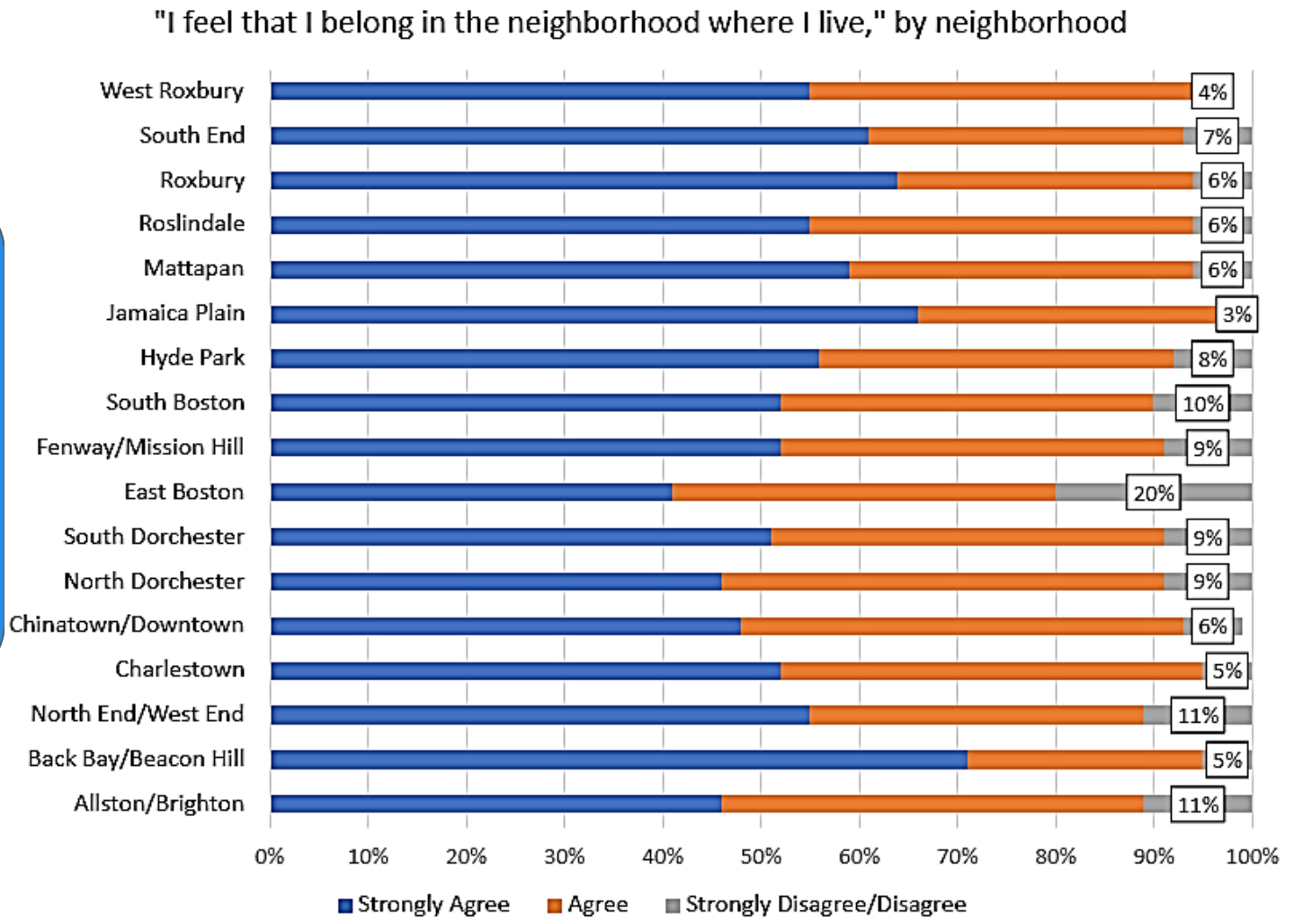
Most feel they belong.



"Familiarity of the community...your neighbors, your merchants... your neighborhood can be reassuring. Seeing familiar faces...there's a welcoming feeling about the places where people go."

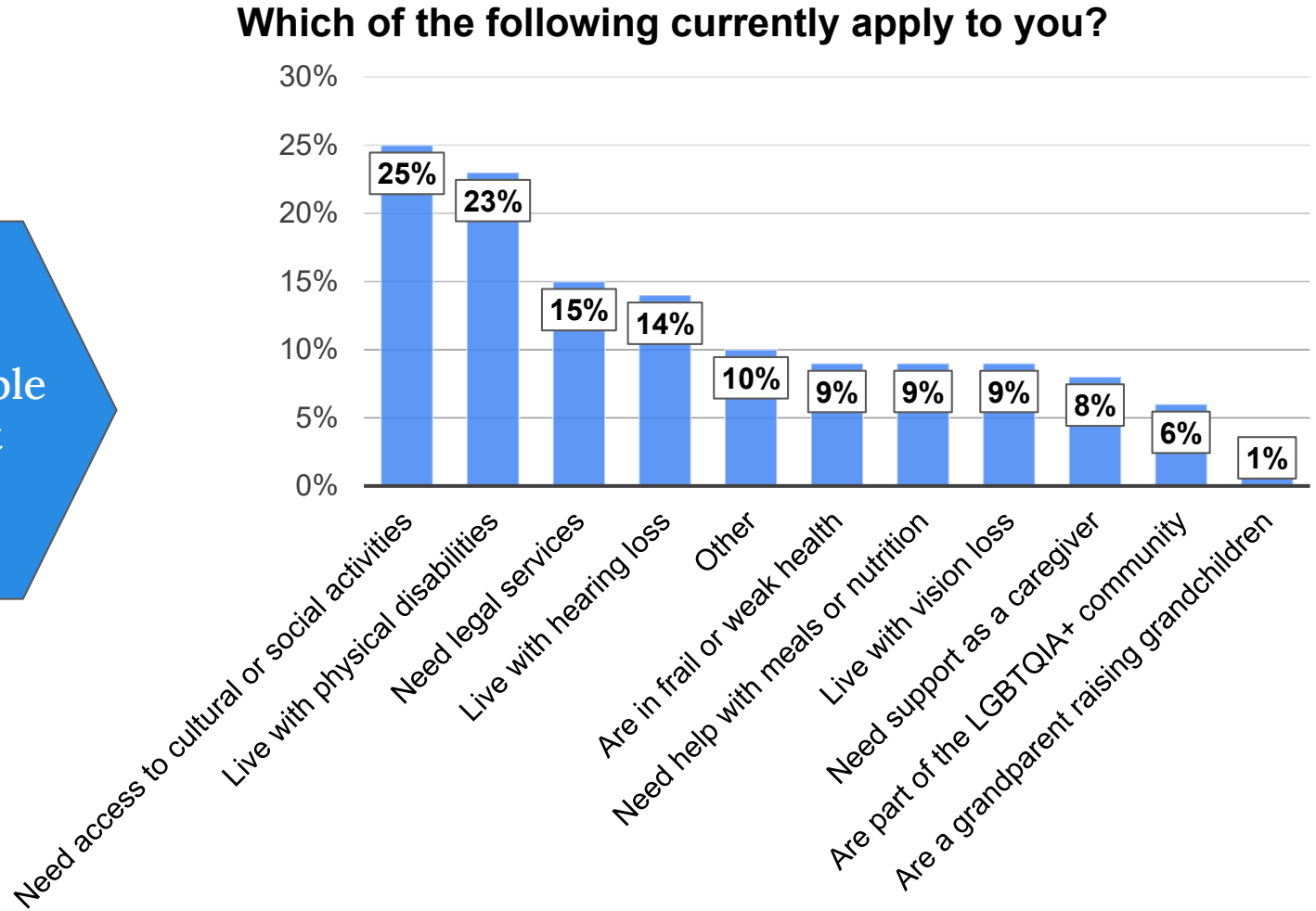
-Charlestown listening session

East Boston, North/West End and Allston/Brighton have the highest rates of respondents not feeling like they belong.



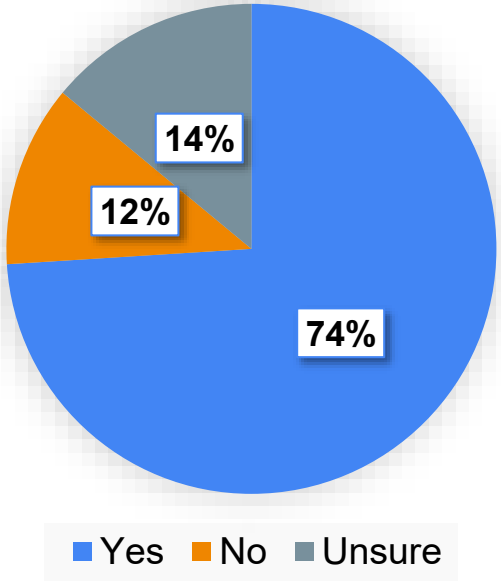
The types of activities and services desired varies...

Cultural or social activities & physically accessible activities are most relevant for respondents.



26% don't know who they would contact in the case of an emergency.

If there were an emergency today, do you know someone who would check on you and your household?



"We have a crime watch in our community and I'm on the street watch. My neighbors watch my home when I'm not present. [They're] gonna watch out for me."

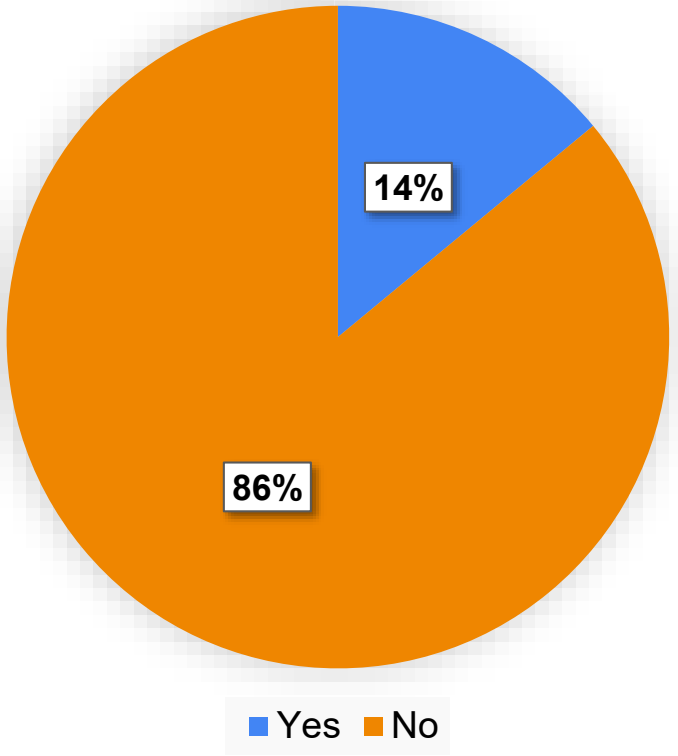
-Roxbury listening session

Language barriers persist for many Boston residents.

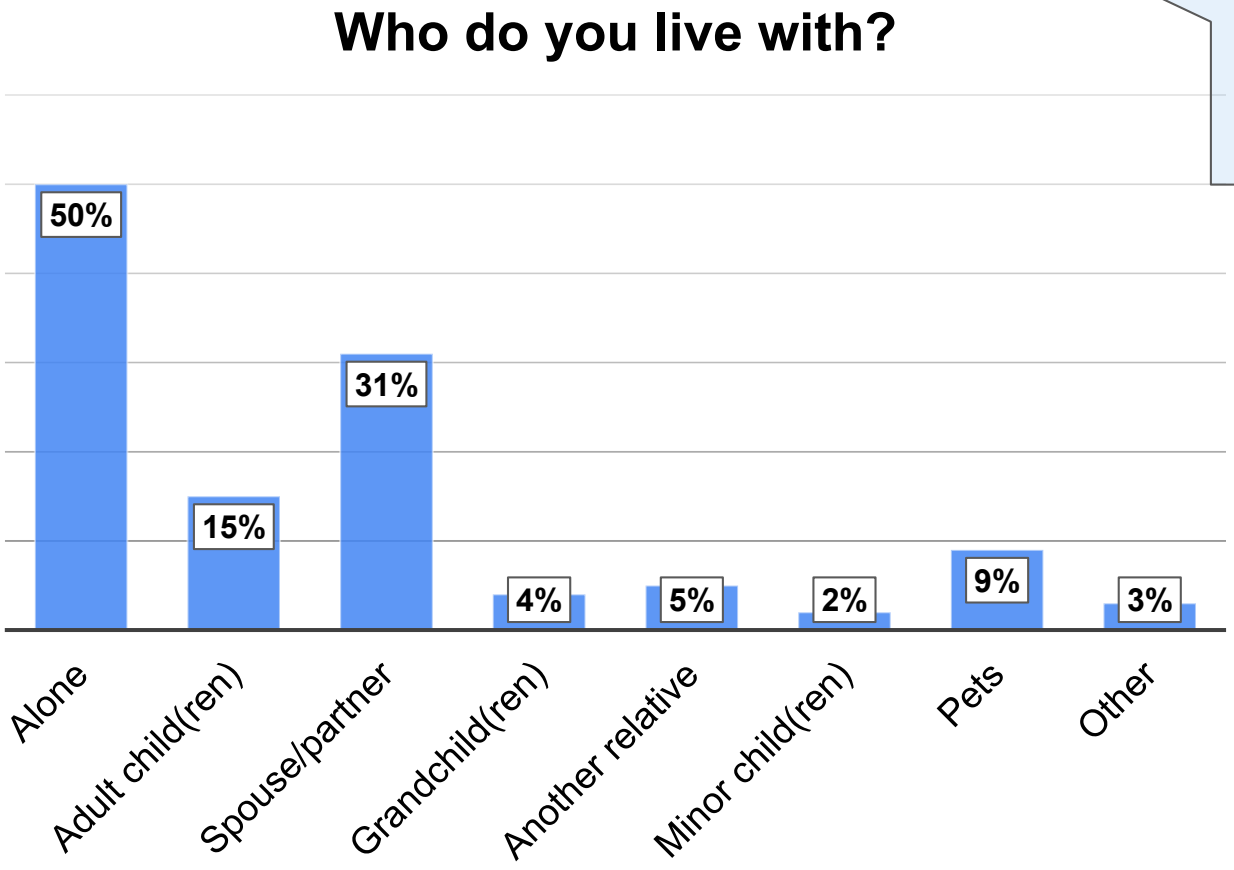
"Outside of Chinatown, there are no Chinese speaking activities...I live in Roxbury, and even though I want to participate in activities, I don't know English, so I'm not able to participate. I need to take a bus to Chinatown for activities. Sometimes I need my daughter to translate to participate in activities."
-Chinatown listening session

"[We need] more language support in BHA buildings. People who don't speak English well should have the opportunity to voice their concerns."
-Dorchester listening session

Has language been a barrier to accessing services in Boston?



50% live alone.



"Some people do not leave their homes; we need to work on addressing social isolation."
-Advisory Council listening session

6% of respondents identify as LGBTQIA+

"LGBT seniors often don't have that family support."
-LGBTQIA+ listening session

ACCESS TO HEALTH & WELLNESS

We Envision…a City that ensures equitable access to comprehensive health and wellness services—including physical, mental, and cognitive care, caregiving support, and nutritious food—so all residents can thrive with dignity and informed choice.

In community forums, these were the most frequently mentioned needs related to Access to Health & Wellness:

Knowing where to turn for help: difficulty accessing support services

Access to providers, specialists, and insurance coverage that meets needs

Challenges living with sensory impairments

The challenges of caregiving

Boston's robust healthcare network is a valuable resource for many older adults...

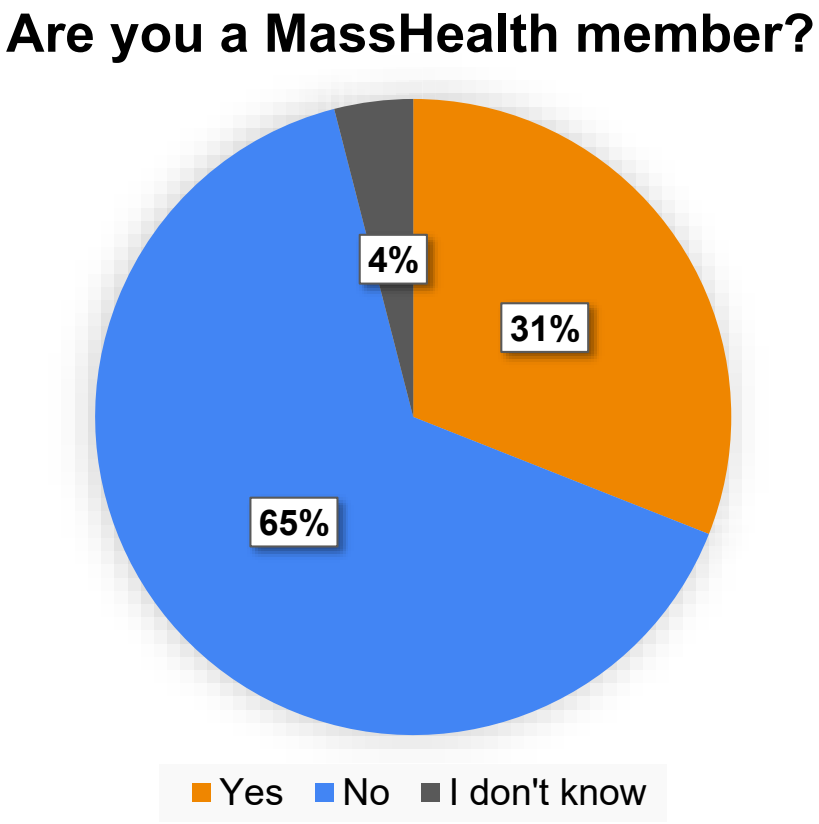
"Medical facilities in the area are top-notch, and we are fortunate to have them."
-Advisory Council listening session

"We have healthcare that is accessible. When you look at the radius of where we live and the accessibility of all the hospitals, that's really good.."
-South End listening session

Many older adults face challenges affording health care.

31% are MassHealth members

14% reported not being able to afford prescriptions/ medical needs



Navigating complex health care and insurance systems can be challenging.

"Navigating health care process…everything [we have] to fight for… MassHealth application shouldn't be a full-time job."

-Caregiver Support listening session

"[We need] in-person vs. online assistance. Seniors want to see the same people in the community to whom they can turn for help. It would give us a sense of continuity of care."

-Hyde Park listening session

...and coverage can be lacking.

"One of my husband's medications is more than his Social Security check. Insurance covers a lot but there is still a lot to pay. He needs a medical advocate to help understand if he needs to be on that many medications.
-Mattapan listening session

"[For people] aging into deafness...there's a lot of changes, and it can be very challenging and isolating. A lot of times it starts with how do I get a hearing aid? But insurance doesn't cover hearing aids until you're deaf..."
-DEAF Inc. listening session*

*This listening session was co-hosted DEAF Inc., a multi-service nonprofit run by and for Deaf (Deaf, DeafBlind, Hard of Hearing, and Late-Deafened) adults.

15% of respondents reported living with mental or emotional health issues.

"A lot of people in our age range are dealing with losses of family members. Having access to things like grief support groups would be great."
-North End listening session

"Mental health care services- there's not enough access to it."
-East Boston listening session

Integration of supports and services for people with sensory impairments is a concern.

"There's an interpreter shortage...a lot of interpreters are moving out of Boston- that could be a problem for longevity."
-DEAF, Inc. listening session*

"It would be good to have some classes or information about how to keep up with daily tasks and ADLs especially as your vision is changing- how to cook and clean and get out of bed."
-MABVI listening session**

*This listening session was co-hosted DEAF Inc., a multi-service nonprofit run by and for Deaf (Deaf, DeafBlind, Hard of Hearing, and Late-Deafened) adults.

**This listening session was co-hosted by the Massachusetts Association for the Blind & Visually Impaired and included residents from Dorchester, Mattapan, and Roxbury.

11% of respondents need support as caregivers.

"I have a lot of grandchildren and stepchildren. They expect childcare help. I'm also a caregiver of someone who is really frail. Resources for younger people are important for older adults too like good childcare, etc. People are embedded in social networks and helping everyone will help everyone"

-Roslindale listening session

"I am a full-time caregiver, and would desperately like assistance and/or respite!"

-Open-ended survey response

"[There is] a lack of support for folks living with dementia in my neighborhood"

-Mission Hill listening session

HOMES FOR ALL AGES

We Envision...sufficient housing that adapts to residents' needs across the lifespan, providing options for stable, safe, and accessible living—whether aging in place, downsizing, or exploring alternative housing—backed by supports for independence, home care, and personal safety

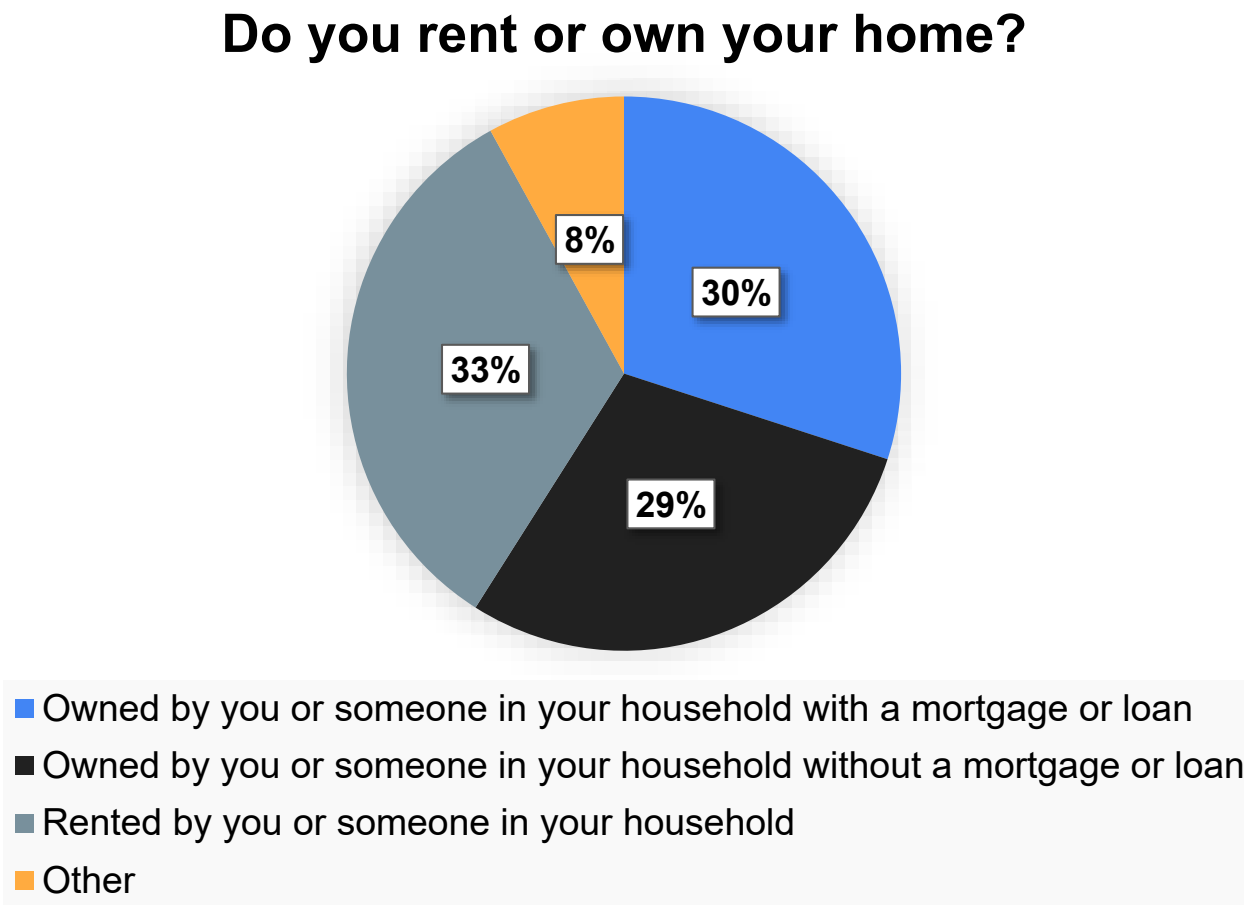
In community forums, these were the most frequently mentioned needs related to Homes for All Ages:

The need for more affordable and accessible housing for older adults

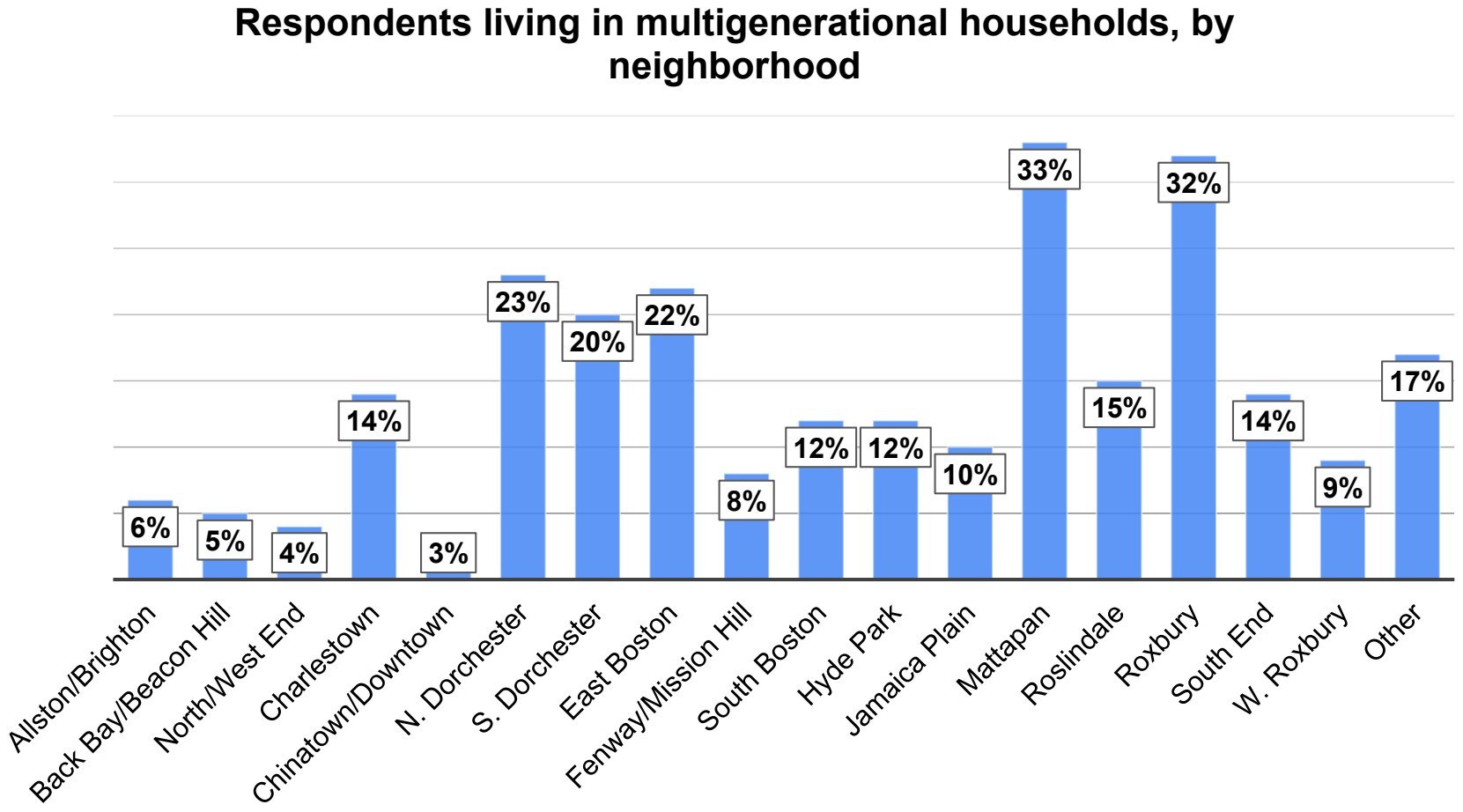
Rising costs of rent, maintenance, and repairs

Poor conditions in senior public housing

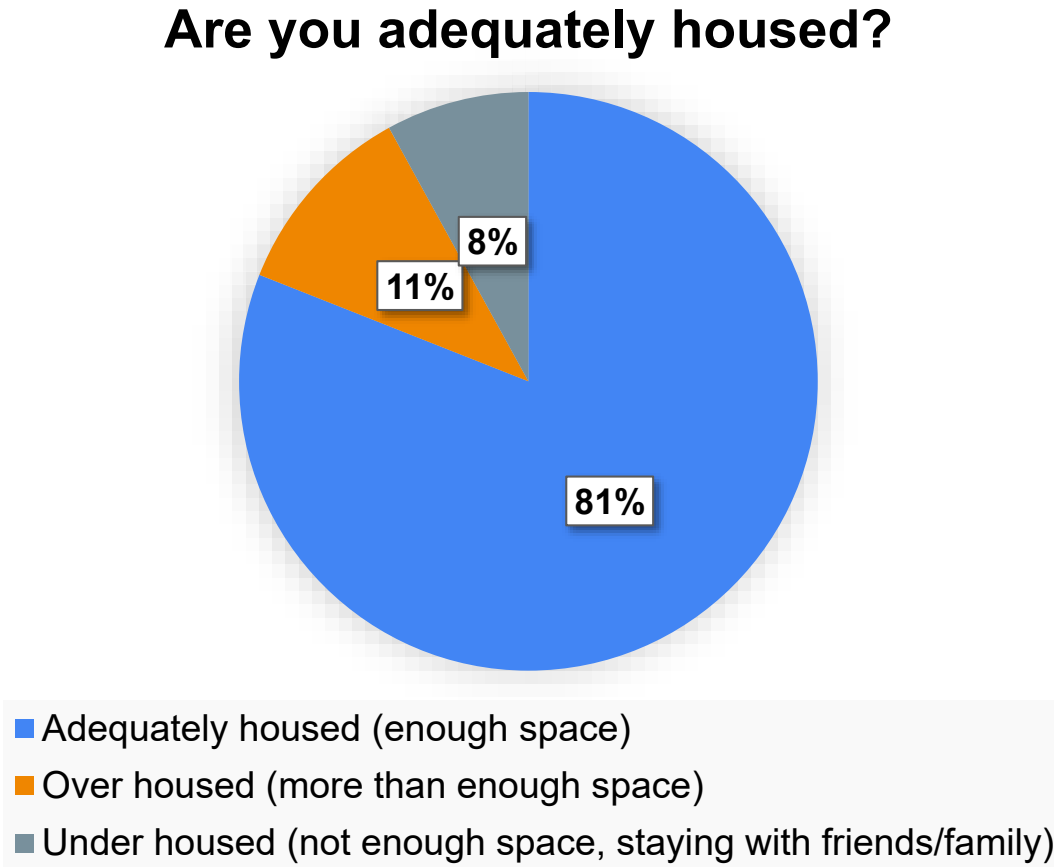
30% of respondents own a home with a mortgage.



15% of respondents live in multigenerational homes.



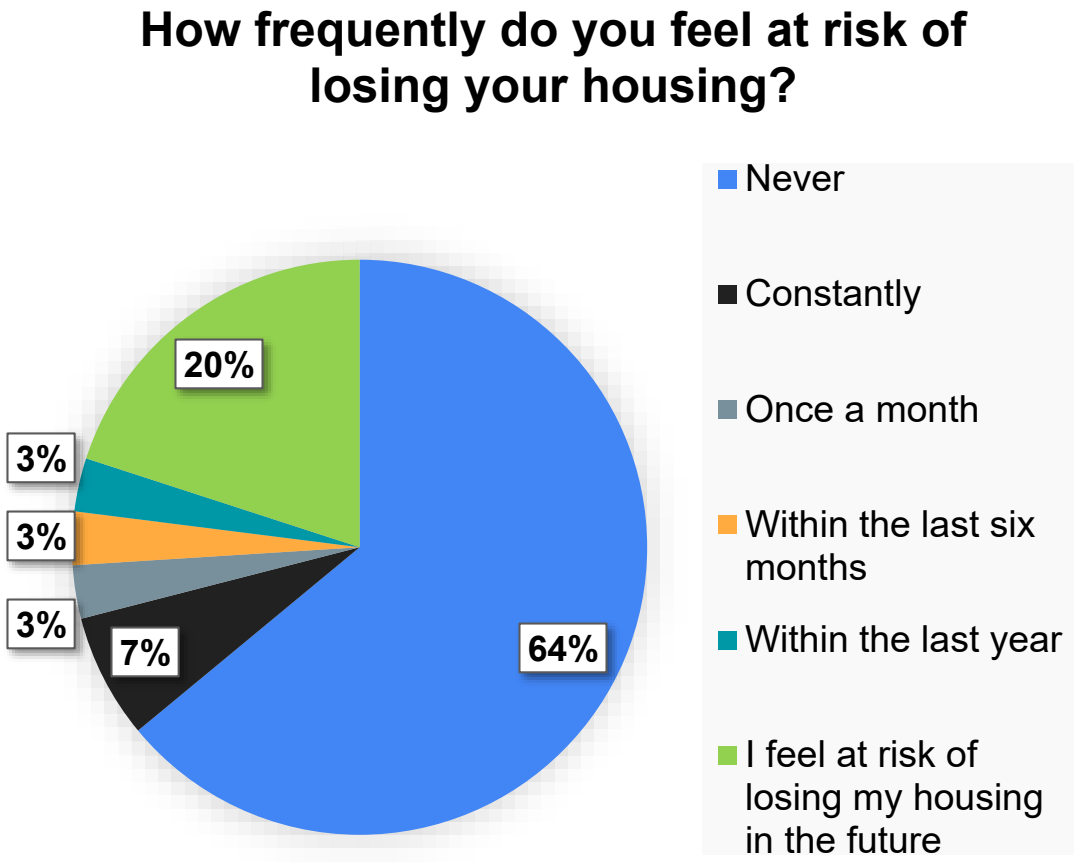
19% of respondents are inadequately housed.



Housing security...

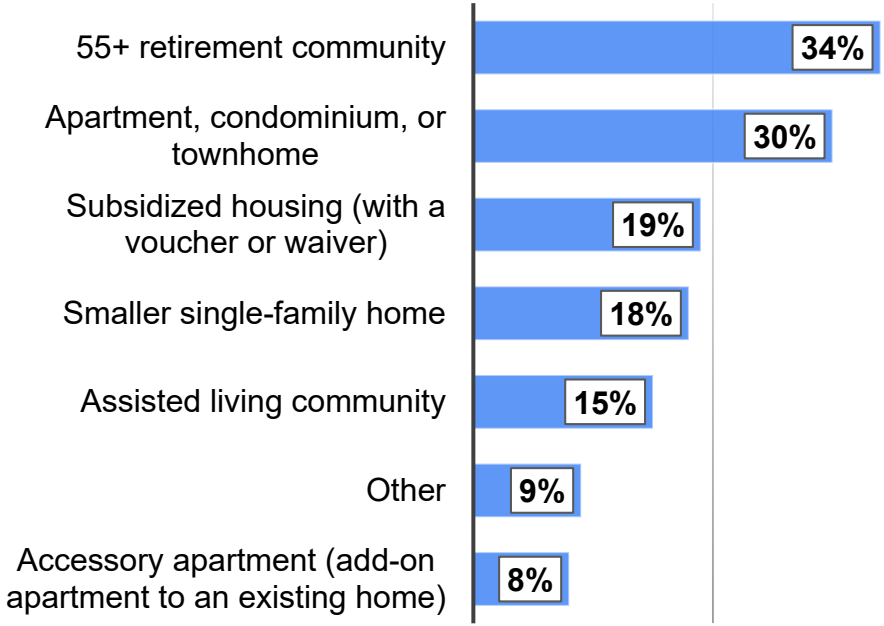
1 in 5 respondents feel at risk of losing their housing in the future.

16% have worried about losing their housing within the past year.

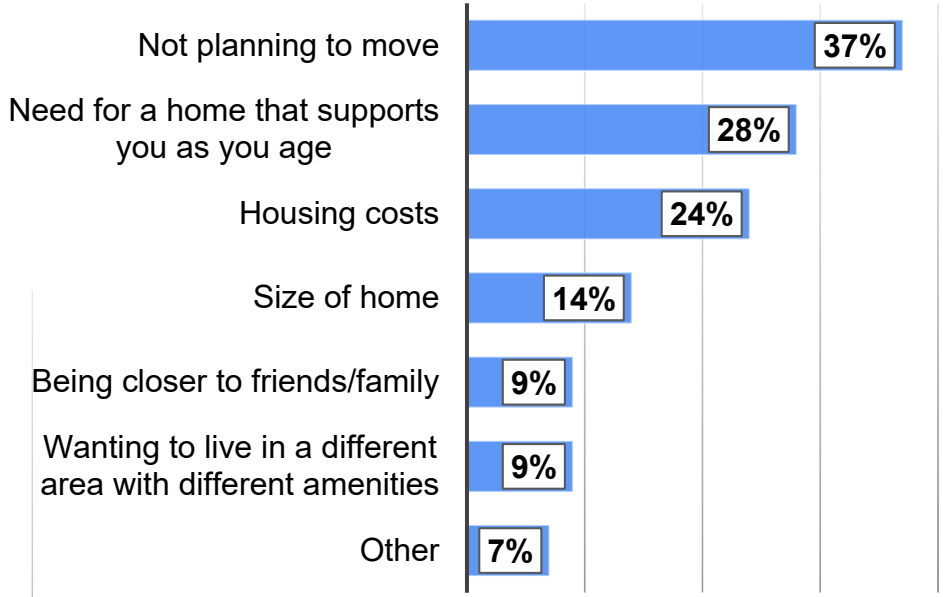


Looking into the future, supportive housing is desired in Boston.

In the next 5 years, if you needed to move from your current home, what kind of housing would you prefer in Boston?



If you were to move out of your current residence, what would be the reason why?



"They're gonna gentrify me right out. People need affordable housing- don't penalize if we're a dollar over"
-Roxbury listening session

This presentation was prepared by researchers from the Center for Social and Demographic Research on Aging at the Gerontology Institute through UMass Boston in collaboration with Age Strong.

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