CITY OF WEST DES MOINES
CITY COUNCIL MEETING COMMUNICATION

ITEM: Motion- Approval of the Inclusive Index Report for the City of West Des Moines - Human Services & Inclusion

DATE: November 18, 2024

FINANCIAL IMPACT: No impact to the City's General Operating Fund.

BACKGROUND:

The Human Services & Inclusion Director contracted students from the Masters of Community and Regional Planning studio course at Iowa State University. They were tasked with developing an Inclusivity Index for the City of West Des Moines. This 15-week project was divided into three phases: (1) initial data gathering and framework development, (2) community surveying and outreach with target groups, and (3) data analysis and development of inclusivity indicators.

The resulting Inclusivity Index Report was a comprehensive framework designed to assess and monitor the city's progress towards becoming a more inclusive community across five key pillars: social inclusion, economic inclusion, political inclusion, inclusive built environment, and inclusive natural environment.

OUTSTANDING ISSUES (if any): None

RECOMMENDATION: The City Council approve the Inclusive Index Report as a guiding document for our inclusion strategy.

Lead Staff Member: Audrey Kennis, Director of Human Services & Inclusion

STAFF REVIEWS

Department Director	Audrey Kennis, Director of Human Services & Inclusion
Appropriations/Finance	
Legal	
Agenda Acceptance	AP

PUBLICATION(S) (if applicable)

Published In	
Dates(s) Published	

SUBCOMMITTEE REVIEW (if applicable)

Committee			
Date Reviewed			
Recommendation	Yes	No	Split

INCLUSIVITY INDEX: BASELINE REPORT

INCLUSIVE WEST DES MOINES
October 2024

[This page is intentionally left blank]

The Inclusivity Index for the city of West Des Moines was created through the combined efforts of the students in the Spring 2024 Community Planning Studio, an applied research and professional practice class for students completing their Masters in Community and Regional Planning Degree at Iowa State University. Their efforts contributed in multiple ways to the final document presented here, including the development of the conceptual framework, community outreach and engagement, content development, writing, and layout of earlier drafts.

Spring 2024 Community Planning Studio students

Morenike Atejioye
Ayodele Fadoju
Jenna Gilliam
Brandin Johnson
Latifa Moro
Marci Snow-Perry
Hyunsik Son
Addison Williamson

Faculty Supervisor, Iowa State University

Jane Rongerude, PhD
Associate Professor of Community & Regional Planning

City Partners, City of West Des Moines

Tom Hadden
City Manager

Audrey Kennis
Director of Human Services & Inclusion
ADA & Title VI Coordinator

The West Des Moines Inclusivity Index Team

Back row *(from left to right): Tom Hadden, Addison Williamson, Brandin Johnson, Ayodele Fadoju, Audrey Kennis, Morenike Atejioye.* ***Front row*** *(from left to right): Jane Rongerude, Jenna Gilliam, Hyunsik Son, Latifa Moro, Marcy Snow-Perry*

This report was finalized by Jane Rongerude and Latifa Moro and submitted to the City of West Des Moines October 2024.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We sincerely thank those who live, work, and play in the City of West Des Moines for their active participation in the West Des Moines Inclusion Index planning process and invaluable contributions to shaping the West Des Moines Inclusion Index. Additionally, we would like to acknowledge the groups named below for availing themselves either by responding to our emails or having virtual meetings to provide feedback inputs and contribute significantly to the success of this project.

Participating Organizations:

AARP, AlRazi Academy, Amani Community Services, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Iowa, Business Development Coordinator for City of WDM, Can Play, Culture All, DMACC, Eddie Davis Community Center, Hip Hope, Hola Iowa/America, Iowa LGBTQ Chamber of Commerce, Iowa Safe Schools, Sacred Bridges, Iowa Small Business Development Center, Kiwanis Miracle League, Knock and Drop, Krause Group, Language Translation Services, Latinx Immigrants of Iowa, LUNA, Monsoon, Nisaa African Family Services, One Iowa, Polk County, Refugee Alliance of Central Iowa, Refugee & Immigrant Voices in Action (RIVA), Taste of the Junction, The Arc of Iowa Chapters; I Am Able Radio Show, Southwood Freshman High School, Valley Station, West Des Moines Community Schools, Youth Justice Initiative (YJI).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document serves as a baseline report for the West Des Moines Inclusivity Index. Inclusive cities are prosperous cities, and the Inclusivity Index is a comprehensive framework designed to assess and monitor the city's progress toward becoming a more inclusive place. The Index provides a data-based methodology for measuring inclusivity based on West Des Moines, enabling the city to develop targeted strategies and initiatives that address the city's unique needs and challenges.

This report defines an inclusive city in this way: **An inclusive city ensures all residents have *full access* to the city and its services and the opportunity to *authentically participate* in its social, political, and economic life. The Inclusive City cultivates a *shared sense of stewardship and connection*. Neighborhoods and residents know that their *contributions are recognized and valued.* In an inclusive City, everyone *belongs.***

The Index includes 37 different indicators organized according to 5 pillars: social inclusion (12), economic inclusion (7), political inclusion (6), inclusive built environment (7), and inclusive natural environment (5). The indicators are listed below:

Pilar 1: Social Inclusion

1. School bullying
2. High school graduation rates
3. Conditions for learning
4. Free to be me
5. A sense of belonging
6. Number of cultural events
7. Diversity of city-sponsored events
8. Free or sliding-scale recreational programs
9. Family-supportive neighborhoods
10. Welcoming communities
11. Neighbors helping neighbors
12. Health insurance coverage

Pillar 2: Economic Inclusion

1. Heterogeneity of local business owners
2. Employment for individuals with disabilities
3. Housing stability
4. Down payment assistance utilization
5. Economic agency
6. Economic opportunities for families
7. Access to systems of support

Pillar 3: Political Inclusion Indicators

1. Perceived heterogeneity within city government
2. Outreach events hosted by the city
3. Community-police engagement
4. Youth inclusion in city planning and decision-making
5. Sense of efficacy
6. Open access to city data

Pillar 4: Inclusive Built Environment

1. Housing cost burden
2. Rental housing vacancy rates
3. Subsidized housing for seniors
4. Inclusive facilities in public spaces
5. Shaded playgrounds and bus stops
6. Heating and cooling centers
7. Public WiFi availability

Pillar 5: Inclusive Natural Environment

1. Acres of tree cover
2. Community garden accessibility
3. Perceptions of inclusion in parks and other public spaces
4. Acres of public green space
5. Access to parks

The Index captures a moment in time. Updating the data periodically will ensure that the Index remains responsive to the needs of West Des Moines into the future.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ..... **II**

Participating Organizations: II

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ..... **III**

TABLE OF CONTENTS ..... **IIIv**

INTRODUCTION **1**

WEST DES MOINES INCLUSIVITY FRAMEWORK **2**

Why Inclusivity Matters 2
Defining an Inclusive City 2
Dimensions of Inclusivity 2
Pillars of Inclusivity 3

PILLAR 1: SOCIAL INCLUSION **5**

Social Inclusion Indicator 1: Reported School Bullying Incidents 6
Social Inclusion Indicator 2: High School Graduation Rates 6
Social Inclusion Indicator 3: Conditions for Learning 7
Social Inclusion Indicator 4: Free to Be Me 10
Social Inclusion Indicator 5: A Sense of Belonging 10
Social Inclusion Indicator 6: Number of Cultural Events 11
Social Inclusion Indicator 7: Diversity of City-Sponsored Events 12
Social Inclusion Indicator 8: The Number of Free or Sliding Scale Recreational Programs 12
Social Inclusion Indicator 9: Family-Supportive Neighborhoods 13
Social Inclusion Indicator 10: Welcoming Neighborhoods 14
Social Inclusion Indicator 11: Neighbors Helping Neighbors 15
Social Inclusion Indicator 12: Health Insurance Coverage 16

PILLAR 2: ECONOMIC INCLUSION **17**

Economic Inclusion Indicator 1: Heterogeneity of Local Business Owners 18
Economic Inclusion Indicator 2: Employment of Individuals with Disabilities 18
Economic Inclusion Indicator 3: Housing Stability 19
Economic Inclusion Indicator 4: City Down Payment Assistance Programs 20
Economic Inclusion Indicator 5: Individual Economic Agency 21
Economic Inclusion Indicator 6: Opportunities for Families 22
Economic Inclusion Indicator 7: Access to Systems of Support 23

PILLAR 3: POLITICAL INCLUSION **24**

Political Inclusion Indicator 1: Perceived Heterogeneity within City Government 25
Political Inclusion Indicator 2: Outreach Events Hosted by the City 26
Political Inclusion Indicator 3: Community-Police Engagement 27
Political Inclusion Indicator 4: Youth Inclusion in City Planning and Decision-Making 28
Political Inclusion Indicator 5: Sense of Significance 29
Political Inclusion Indicator 6: Open Access to City Data 30

PILLAR 4: INCLUSIVE BUILT ENVIRONMENT **31**

Inclusive Built Environment Indicator 1: Housing Cost Burden 32
Inclusive Built Environment Indicator 2: Rental Vacancy Rates 32
Inclusive Built Environment Indicator 3: Subsidized Housing for Seniors 33
Inclusive Built Environment Indicator 4: Inclusive Facilities in Public Spaces 33

Inclusive Built Environment Indicator 5: Shaded Playgrounds and Bus Stops 34
Inclusive Built Environment Indicator 6: Public Heating and Cooling Centers 34
Inclusive Built Environment Indicator 7: Public WiFi Availability 35

PILLAR 5: INCLUSIVE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT 36

Inclusive Natural Environment Indicator 1: Acres of Tree Cover 37
Inclusive Natural Environment Indicator 2: Community Garden Accessibility 37
Inclusive Natural Environment Indicator 3: Perceptions of Inclusion in Parks and Other Public Spaces 38
Inclusive Natural Environment Indicator 4: Acres of Green Space 39
Inclusive Natural Environment Indicator 5: Access to Parks 39

NEXT STEPS: A CALL TO ACTION FOR ALL STAKEHOLDERS 40

APPENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE 41

TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1. West Des Moines Inclusivity Dimensions 3
Figure 2. West Des Moines Inclusivity Framework 4
Figure 3. Social Inclusion Challenges (outreach quotes) 5
Figure 4: Conditions for Learning Index by Race/Ethnicity: West Des Moines School District 7
Figure 5: Conditions for Learning Index by Race: Waukee School Disctrict 8
Figure 6: Conditions for Learning Index by Race: Van Meter School Disctrict 9
Figure 7: I feel safe being my authentic self in West Des Moines 10
Figure 8: I feel like I belong in West Des Moines 11
Figure 9: City-sponsored events in West Des Moines recognize and celebrate the City's Diversity 12
Figure 10: My neighborhood is a good place to raise a family 13
Figure 11: My neighborhood is welcoming to newcomers 14
Figure 12: The people in my neighborhood help each other 15
Figure 13: I have at least one neighbor I can rely on if I need assistance 16
Figure 14. Economic Inclusion Challenges (outreach quotes) 17
Figure 15: West Des Moines is a stronger city when everyone has stable housing 19
Figure 16: My family can comfortably afford our current home 20
Figure 17: I contribute to the economic well-being of West Des Moines 21
Figure 18: My family has opportunities to succeed in West Des Moines 22
Figure 19. A picture of "Inclusionville" created by children from AlRazi Academy 22
Figure 20: There are sufficient resources and support systems in West Des Moines 23
Figure 21. Political Inclusion Challenges (outreach quotes) 24
Figure 22: City government in West Des Moines reflects the city's diversity 25
Figure 23. A member of the project team setting up a box to collect survey responses 26
Figure 24. Two members of the project team attended an AARP Coffee Connections 27
Figure 25. Youths in West Des Moines participated in an outreach event to provide feedback for this report. ..28
Figure 26: My opinion matters to the city decision-makers in West Des Moines 29
Figure 27. Inclusive Built Environment Challenges (outreach quotes) 31
Figure 28. Inclusive Natural Environment Challenges (outreach quotes) 36
Figure 29: I feel welcome in parks and other public spaces in West Des Moines 38

INTRODUCTION

West Des Moines is a rapidly evolving community, dedicated to nurturing a vibrant economy, ensuring the well-being of its residents, and fostering an inclusive environment. As one of the fastest-growing cities in Iowa, West Des Moines is home to over 72,000 residents, each contributing to the rich tapestry that defines our urban landscape. Our commitment to fostering an inclusive and accessible city is at the heart of everything we do from public services and educational programs to cultural and recreational opportunities. This document outlines our ongoing initiatives and strategies to ensure that every resident, regardless of their background, can enjoy a high quality of life and participate fully in all aspects of city life. By continuously evolving and adapting our approaches, West Des Moines remains a vibrant, welcoming, and resilient community, ready to meet the future with confidence and optimism.

The Inclusivity Index for the City of West Des Moines is a comprehensive framework designed to assess and monitor the city's progress toward becoming a more inclusive community. This Index will serve as a critical tool for policymakers, community leaders, and residents to understand the current state of inclusivity within the city and identify areas for improvement. By providing a data-driven approach to measuring inclusivity, the Index enables the city to develop targeted strategies and initiatives that address the unique needs and challenges diverse population segments face.

The indicators included in the Inclusivity Index were developed through a rigorous process that involved extensive data gathering, community engagement, and stakeholder consultation. The Index incorporates both quantitative and qualitative data, ensuring that it captures the diverse landscape of West Des Moines residents. By providing a comprehensive and nuanced assessment of inclusivity, the Index enables the city to identify strengths, challenges, and opportunities for growth, informing the development of evidence-based policies and programs.

The City of West Des Moines has embarked on an ambitious journey toward inclusion. It has achieved significant process, as evidenced by an exemplary score in the most recent Municipal Equity Index (MEI) conducted by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC 2023). However, as with other cities that excel on indicator-driven indices of inclusion, there is a risk of complacency on behalf of the cities after achieving their goal of becoming a fully inclusive city. Further, while such indicators establish a baseline for assessment, the city should perceive them not as a goal but as a starting point for continuing improvement. Thus, West Des Moines is now pursuing a proactive strategy to embed inclusivity across all facets of the city.

WEST DES MOINES INCLUSIVITY FRAMEWORK

Why Inclusivity Matters

Cities bring together people from many different backgrounds. Although cities serve as hubs for growth and innovation, they can also inadvertently deepen social and economic disparities. This juxtaposition underscores the importance of deliberate and inclusive urban planning to mitigate exclusionary effects and ensure that cities remain beacons of opportunity for all. Inclusive cities are prosperous cities.

Defining an Inclusive City

This report defines an inclusive city in this way:

An inclusive city ensures all residents have *full access* to the city and its services and the opportunity to *authentically participate* in its social, political, and economic life. The Inclusive City cultivates a *shared sense of stewardship and connection*. Neighborhoods and residents know that their *contributions are recognized and valued.* In an inclusive City, everyone *belongs.*

Dimensions of Inclusivity

The framework operationalizes four cross-cutting and interconnected themes of inclusion: access, belonging, equity, and participation (See Figure 1).

- *Access:* Ensuring all community members can access the necessary services and opportunities.
- *Equity:* Promoting fair treatment, opportunity, and advancement for all while striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of some groups.
- *Belonging:* Creating environments where all individuals are welcome and valued for their intrinsic worth.
- *Participation:* Encouraging and facilitating the involvement of all community members in the civic, cultural, and economic life of the city.

These themes recognize the varied dimensions through which people experience a sense of belonging and well-being within a place and the extent to which a place extends opportunity and makes itself available to its inhabitants.

Figure 1. West Des Moines Inclusivity Dimensions

Pillars of Inclusivity

The Inclusivity Index is organized according to five key pillars of civic life: social inclusion, economic inclusion, political inclusion, inclusive built environment, and inclusive natural environment. These pillars represent the essential domains where inclusivity must be fostered to create a genuinely welcoming and equitable community. Within each pillar, carefully selected indicators measure the city's performance and progress over time.

- *Social Inclusion:* Focuses on reducing barriers to social interaction and promoting a sense of belonging and cohesion among all demographic groups.
- *Economic Inclusion:* Aims to address economic disparities and promote equality of opportunity.
- *Political Inclusion:* Ensures all community members can influence local government and participate in decision-making.
- *Inclusive Built Environment:* Concentrates on urban and infrastructural development that supports inclusivity.
- *Inclusive Natural Environment:* Aims to promote environmental justice and access to green amenities.

By integrating the four cross-cutting themes across the five pillars, the West Des Moines Inclusivity Index aims to build a city where everyone has the opportunity to thrive and where everyone feels at home. This approach ensures that the city's development reflects its residents' diverse needs and potentials, making West Des Moines a model for inclusive urban development.

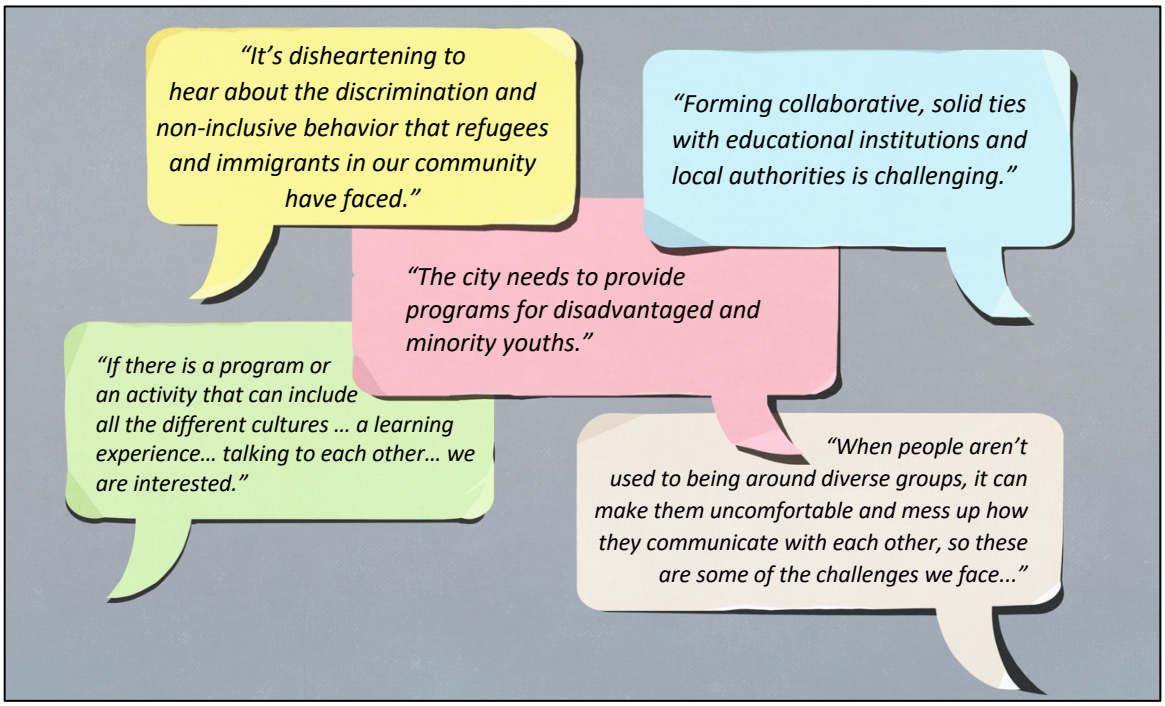
Figure 2. West Des Moines Inclusivity Framework

PILLAR 1: SOCIAL INCLUSION

Social inclusion focuses on reducing barriers to social interaction and promoting a sense of belonging and cohesion among all demographic groups. By prioritizing social inclusion, cities lay the groundwork for thriving communities where people want to stay over time. Places with high degrees of social inclusion are places where every resident feels safe, welcome, and at home.

This component of the inclusion index resonated deeply with residents, evoking personal narratives and experiences of both belonging and exclusion. For example, many people reported feeling their neighborhood is an excellent place to raise a family and expressed a willingness to help their neighbors, strong indicators of social cohesion. However, others shared concerns about inclusivity outside their neighborhood or within the city as a whole. As Figure 3 demonstrates, not everyone reported feeling welcome.

Figure 3. Social Inclusion Challenges (outreach quotes)



The social inclusion landscape in West Des Moines is multifaceted, with indicators revealing both strengths and areas for improvement. Community feedback also revealed mixed sentiments, and the social inclusion indicators were selected in part through the explicit concerns raised through outreach and community engagement events. The City of West Des Moines's commitment to fostering inclusivity is evident; however, challenges persist, demonstrating the importance of targeted interventions to ensure equitable access to opportunities and services for all residents. As one resident of West Des Moines explained, "An inclusive city is a place that makes a point to make everyone feel welcome." The following indicators serve as measures of the city's progress in this pillar.

Social Inclusion Indicator 1: Reported School Bullying Incidents

This indicator addresses the issue of school safety and justice by tracking the number of bullying incidents reported in the West Des Moines Community School district annually. Tracking bullying incidents is a critical step in understanding our progress toward creating a safe and supportive learning environment in our schools. Monitoring these figures helps to assess the effectiveness of anti-bullying policies and intervention programs.

During the 2020-2021 academic year, there were 16 reported bullying incidents in the West es Moines Community School District. This number increased significantly to 58 incidents in the 2021-2022 school year.

Over the past two years, we have seen notable changes in the number of reported bullying incidents within the West Des Moines school district. This trend underscores the need for ongoing scrutiny and possibly enhanced measures to ensure a safe and supportive educational environment for all students. The significant rise reported here may reflect not only an actual increase in incidents but an improved reporting system and greater awareness among students and staff about the importance of reporting bullying.

Social Inclusion Indicator 2: High School Graduation Rates

This indicator addresses educational attainment by measuring the graduation rate and dropout rate within the high schools serving the residents of West Des Moines. This data is essential for understanding the effectiveness of the district's educational strategies and its support systems for students. For the 2022-2023 school year, the graduation rate through grades 7th-12th was reported at West Des Moines, Waukee, and Van Meter school district was 98.12%, 99.45%, and 99.78% respectively. Despite the high graduation rate, there were 114 students who dropped out of school before graduation, constituting a dropout rate of 1.10%. Table 1 breaks down those numbers by school district and race.

Table 1. Highschool Dropout Rates in West Des Moines for the 2022/2023 School Year[1]

School	Racial/ethnic group	Total enrollment	# of students that dropped out	Drop-out rate
West Des Moines Community Schools	White	2,565	35	1.36%
	Non-White students	1,782	47	2.64%
Waukee Community Schools	White	4,029	17	0.42%
	Non-White students	1,571	14	0.89%

** No data was available for the Van Meter school district*

[1] Iowa Department of Education, Dropout Rates by District, Grades 7-12, 2022-2023
https://educate.iowa.gov/pk-12/data/education-statistics/graduation-dropout-rates

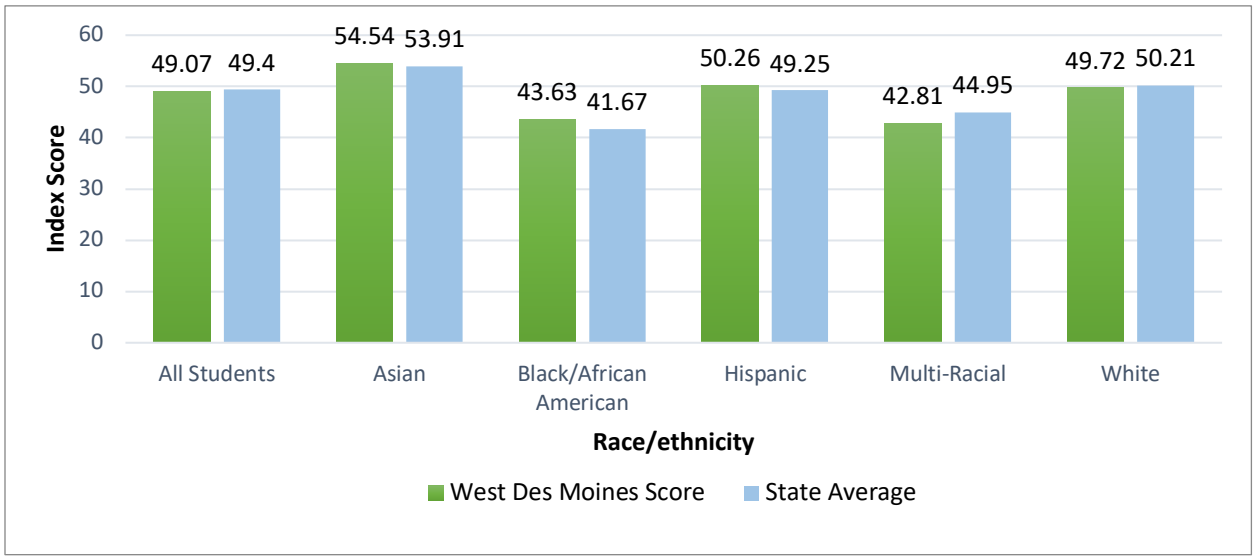
Although both school districts have strong graduation rates, there is a disparity between the graduation rates of white students and those of students of color. Looking at the 2022-2023 schoolyear in the West Des Moines School District, 35 of the 2565 enrolled white students dropped out, while 47 of the 1,782 nonwhite students dropped out. These two dropout rates are 1.36% for white students and 2.64% for nonwhite students. The same trend can be seen in the Waukee Community school district where 17 of the 4,029 enrolled white students dropped out, while 14 of the 1,782 enrolled non-white students dropped out. These number reflect a 0.42% dropout rate for white students and a 0.89% for nonwhite students.

Graduation rates are a fundamental measure of educational success and are indicative of a school district's ability to prepare its students for post-secondary opportunities and career readiness. High graduation rates are often correlated with higher lifetime earnings for students and lower rates of unemployment. Conversely, students who drop out face significant economic and social challenges. Monitoring both graduation and dropout rates helps identify areas where interventions may be necessary to support all students, especially those at risk of dropping out.

Social Inclusion Indicator 3: Conditions for Learning

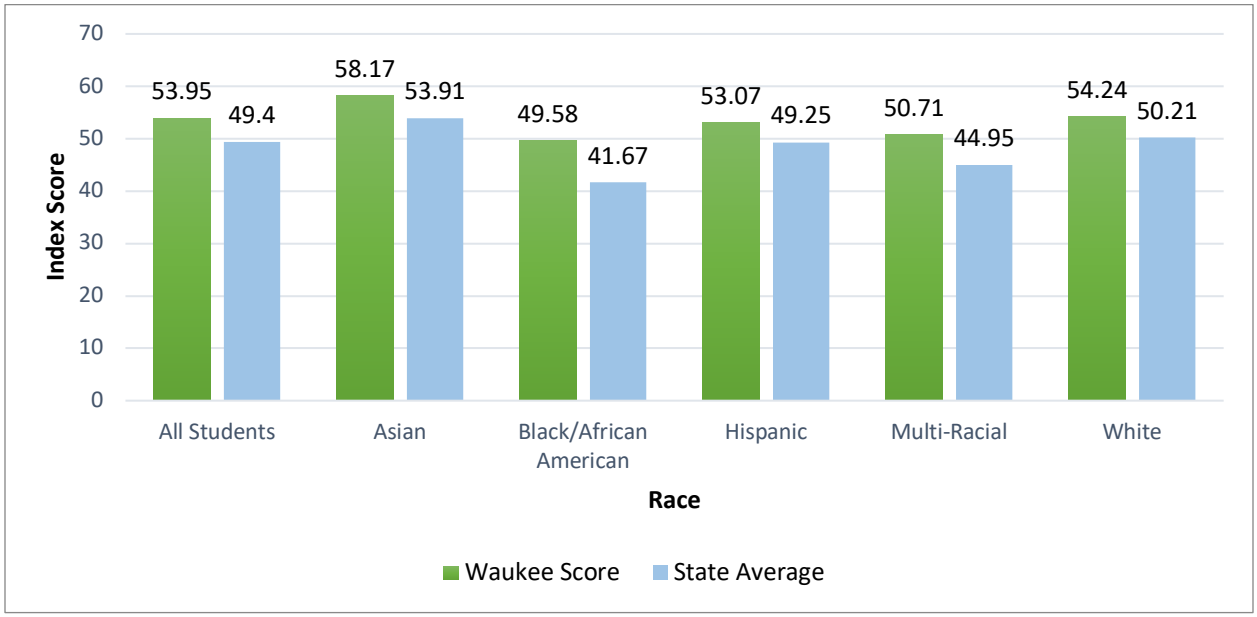
This indicator monitors the sense of youth belonging in West Des Moines by tracking the responses to the state's Annual *Conditions for Learning* survey. The *Conditions for Learning* survey is administered annually in public schools across Iowa to measure three key domains: Safety, Engagement, and Environment. This survey provides crucial insights into the sense of belonging and inclusivity among youth in public schools serving West Des Moines.

Figure 4: Conditions for Learning Index by Race/Ethnicity: West Des Moines School District vs. State Average



In the West Des Moines Community School District, conditions for learning closely mirror the state average, across all races. In Figure 4, the largest disparity in the conditions for learning between the West Des Moines School District and state averages is in the multi-racial category, as the state average is 2.14 points higher than the score in West Des Moines. Another notable disparity between the state averages and the West Des Moines school district are in the Black/African American group, as the conditions for learning index in West Des Moines is 1.96 higher for this group than the number for the state.

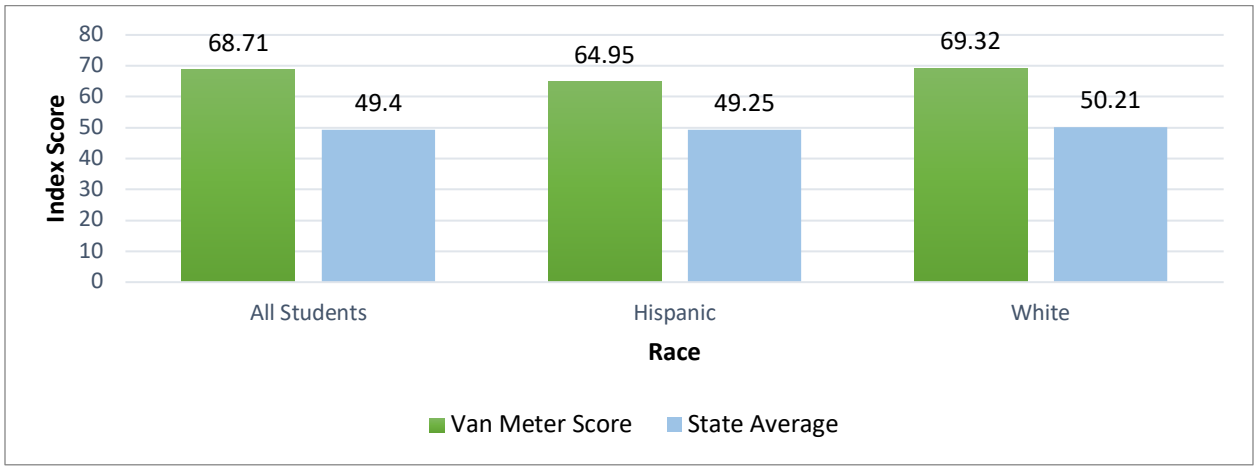
Figure 5: Conditions for Learning Index by Race: Waukee School District vs. State Average



Looking at the Waukee Community School District in Figure 5, the scores for conditions for learning index are higher for all groups. The largest gap between Waukee Schools and the state average is in the Black/African American category, as Waukee scores 7.91 points higher than that of the state average for this group. Similar trends are shown for all races included in the report. Across all students, the Waukee Conditions for Learning Index score is 4.55 points higher than the state average.

The Van Meter Community School District shows even larger differences from the state average (see Figure 6). For the total student population, the conditions for learning index scores are 19.31 points higher than the state average. This trend continues in the groups of Hispanic and white students; however, data for other races was not available for the Van Meter School District.

Figure 6: Conditions for Learning Index by Race: Van Meter School District vs. State Average



In schools, a feeling of belonging is crucial. On outreach events with young people in West Des Moines, participants reported instances of discrimination, anxiety, and alienation. When students experience bullying or feel alienated, it can lead to decreased attendance and poorer academic outcomes, as disengaged students are less likely to participate fully in educational opportunities. Positive feelings of belonging can enhance academic performance, reduce social isolation, and contribute to better mental health outcomes. By monitoring this indicator, the city can take proactive steps to address any disparities and support initiatives that strengthen the sense of belonging among all youth in West Des Moines. Monitoring these metrics helps identify areas needing intervention to ensure all students feel safe, supported, and valued, which is essential for maintaining a conducive learning environment.

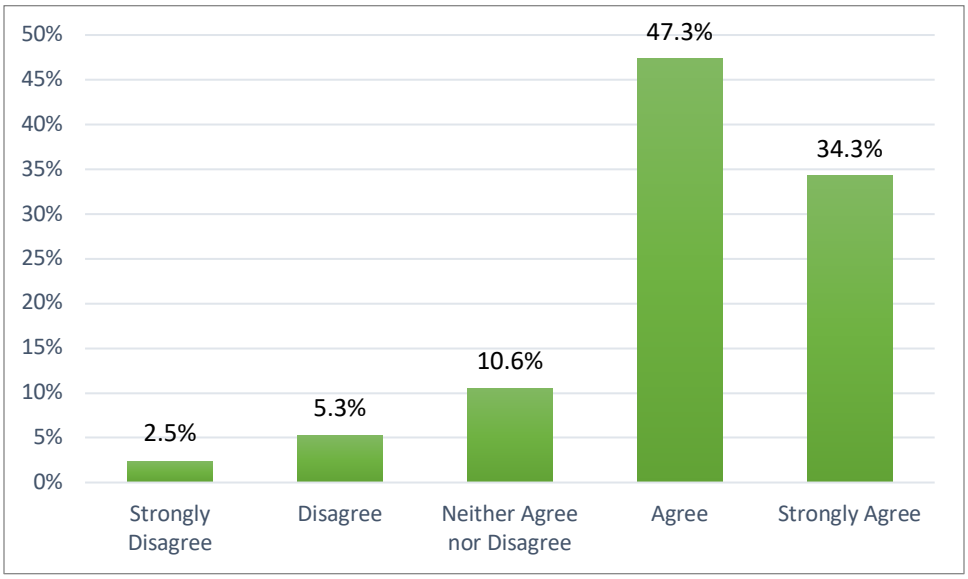
"[An inclusive city is] a place that is understanding but still shows kids everything they would need to know. A place that doesn't hold kids back on learning, but still shows them how things in this world work."

-Youth participant

Social Inclusion Indicator 4: Free to Be Me

In West Des Moines, a majority of residents report feeling safe to express their true selves, a cornerstone of an inclusive and supportive community. When survey participants were asked to respond to the statement, "I feel safe being my authentic self in West Des Moines" using a 5-point Likert scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree, 81.6% expressed feeling safe being their authentic selves in West Des Moines, with 34.3% strongly agreeing with this sentiment (Figure 7). The high level of positive responses suggests a community atmosphere that not only tolerates but encourages individual expression and diversity.

Figure 7: I feel safe being my authentic self in West Des Moines

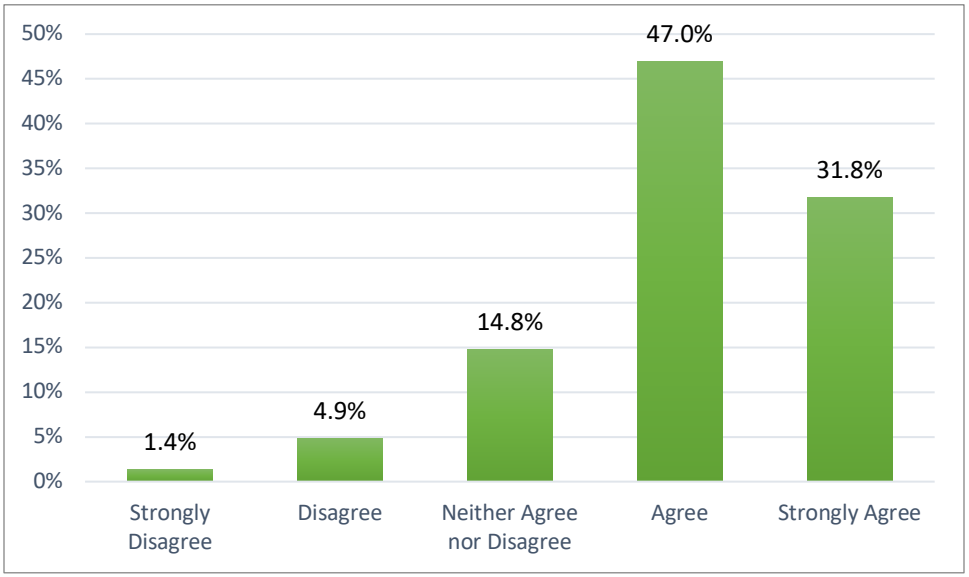


This sense of personal authenticity and safety is vital for fostering an environment where all residents can thrive without fear of discrimination or reprisal. It reflects a community commitment to inclusivity that supports various identities and backgrounds. While these figures are promising, continuous efforts are required to nurture this culture of acceptance and to address the concerns of 19.5% who feel less secure. By maintaining a focus on the value of being a diverse community of creativity and innovation, West Des Moines can further solidify its reputation as a community that values and protects the uniqueness of each of its residents.

Social Inclusion Indicator 5: A Sense of Belonging

West Des Moines is a community where most people feel like they belong. When survey participants were asked to respond to the survey question, "I feel like I belong is West Des Moines" using a 5-point Likert scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree, only 6.3% stated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed (Figure 8). Approximately 78.8% of respondents affirmed that they felt sense of belonging in the city with 31.8% strongly agreeing. This strong sense of belonging is a positive indicator of community cohesion, at the same time these numbers show room for growth to ensure that ALL residents have an emotional investment in their city.

Figure 8: I feel like I belong in West Des Moines



While these results indicate a generally positive perception of belonging among residents, there is still room for improvement. Ensuring that all residents, regardless of background, feel included and valued is essential for maintaining and enhancing community stability and satisfaction. Monitoring this indicator over time will be crucial to assess whether efforts to increase inclusivity are effective and to identify any emerging challenges that may need to be addressed. By continuously working towards improving these perceptions, West Des Moines can further strengthen its community bonds and ensure a welcoming environment for all.

Social Inclusion Indicator 6: Number of Cultural Events

This indicator counts the number of cultural events annually supported by West Des Moines. These events are pillars of the community's cultural agenda, drawing participants and audiences from across the region. These events highlight the rich tapestry of local and international cultures, traditions, and arts in West Des Moines.

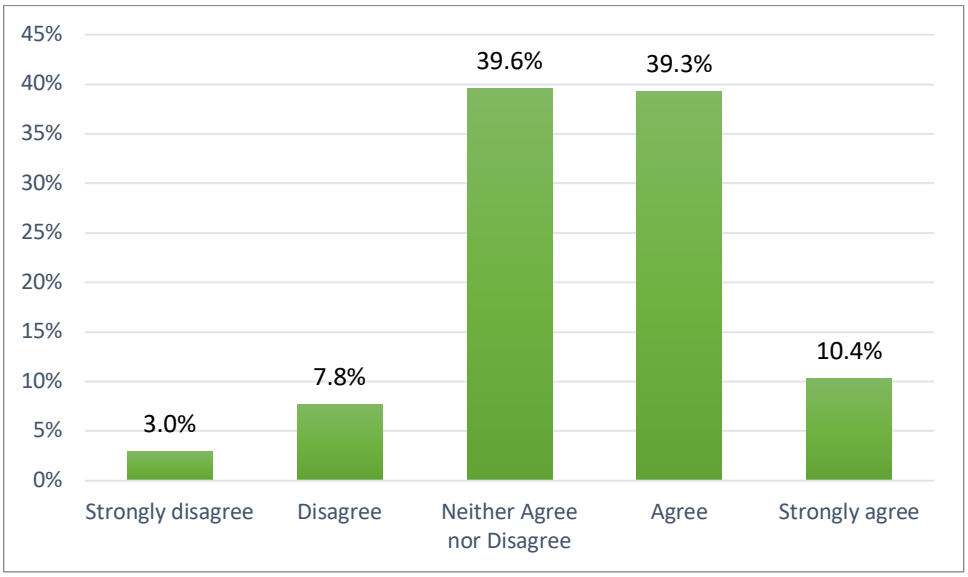
The City of West Des Moines currently sponsors **seven** annual cultural events: Illumifest, RevAMPed, Raccoon River Palooza, West Des Moines Community Band, Public Art Program, Athene Black and Brown Business Summit, Earth Day Family Fun.

The city's steadfast support of these six annual events signals a strong ongoing commitment to cultural vibrancy and community engagement. The variability in the number of additional events each year is influenced by factors such as community initiatives, changes in funding streams, and evolving partnerships with local organizations, showcasing the city's dynamic approach to cultural programming. The adaptability in adding or modifying events based on the community's evolving needs indicates a responsive governance model that values cultural growth and public input, ensuring the cultural calendar remains fresh and relevant.

Social Inclusion Indicator 7: Diversity of City-Sponsored Events

Cultural events are vital for enhancing community vitality and resident's quality of life. They serve as key platforms for artistic expression, celebration of diversity, and community bonding. Such events support local economies by attracting visitors who spend on accommodations, food, and shopping, thus benefiting local businesses. When survey participants were asked to respond to the statement, "City-sponsored events in West Des Moines recognize and celebrate the city's diversity" using a 5-point Likert scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree, almost half of the respondents (49.7%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement (Figure 9). However, approximately 80% of the remaining participants responded that they neither agreed nor disagreed (39.6%) suggesting that there is work to be done in this area.

Figure 9: City-sponsored events in West Des Moines recognize and celebrate the city's diversity



The city's support for civic and celebratory events is essential, as it not only provides the necessary resources like funding and logistical aid but also helps in marketing these events to a broader audience. This strategic support ensures the sustainability and growth of cultural initiatives, making them accessible to a wider population and encouraging ongoing community engagement.

Social Inclusion Indicator 8: The Number of Free or Sliding Scale Recreational Programs

This indicator tracks the availability of free or sliding scale recreational programs in West Des Moines. It monitors the number and variety of programs offered, such as adult sports programs, youth introductory sports, training sessions and workshops for coaches and staff working with children with disabilities, nature programs, and senior programs. This indicator helps assess the city's commitment to providing accessible recreational opportunities for all residents.

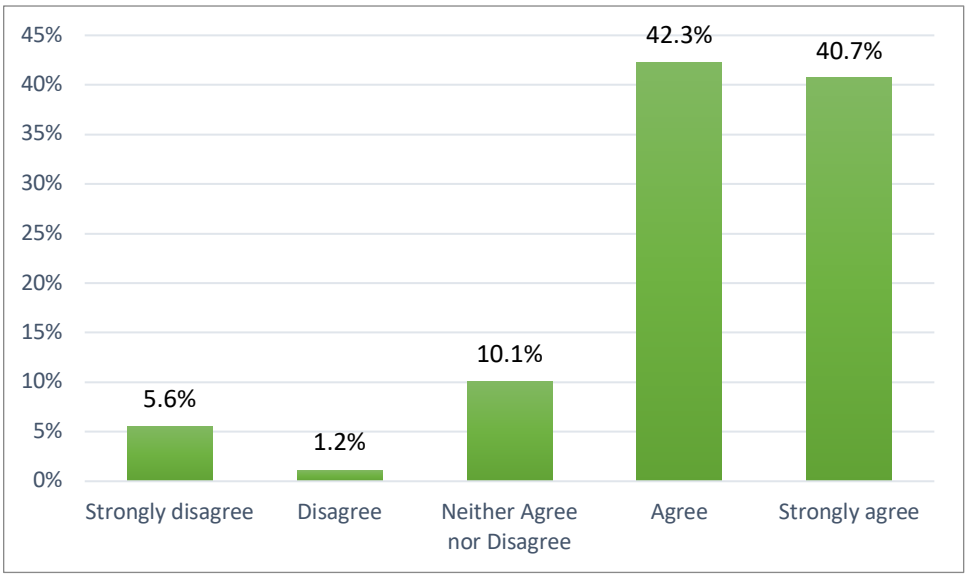
In 2023, West Des Moines offered 19 free or sliding scale recreating programs including: 11 adult sports programs, 6 different types of youth programs across categories such as sports, technology, and arts, and 2 senior programs focused on sports and travel.

The number of free or sliding scale recreational programs offered in West Des Moines is a critical measure of the city's commitment to accessibility, community engagement, and overall well-being. These programs provide essential opportunities for residents of all ages and abilities to participate in physical, social, and educational activities without the barrier of cost.

Social Inclusion Indicator 9: Family-Supportive Neighborhoods

West Des Moines exemplifies a strong family-oriented community, as evidenced by the overwhelmingly positive response from residents regarding the suitability of their neighborhoods for family life. When survey participants were asked to respond to the statement, "My neighborhood is a good place to raise a family" using a 5-point Likert scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree, an impressive 83% affirmed that their neighborhood is an excellent place to raise a family with 40.7% expressing strong agreement (Figure 10). This high level of endorsement suggests a widespread sense of security, contentment, and community belonging.

Figure 10: My neighborhood is a good place to raise a family

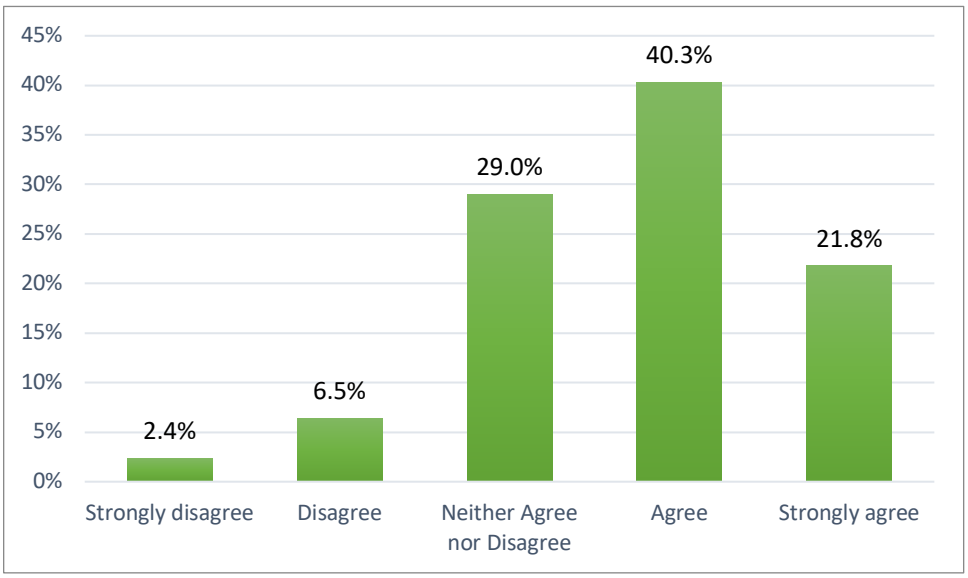


In further analysis of survey results, residents who reported knowing most or all of their neighbors consistently reported the strongest agreement that their surroundings are conducive to family life. This suggests that fostering strong neighborly bonds can significantly enhance the family-friendliness of a community. By continuing to nurture these community relationships and ensuring that all neighborhoods within West Des Moines are seen as welcoming and safe for families, the city can strengthen its social fabric and further enhance its appeal as a top choice for residents looking for a supportive environment to raise their families. Ongoing efforts to boost social capital and inclusivity will be vital for maintaining and improving these perceptions.

Social Inclusion Indicator 10: Welcoming Neighborhoods

West Des Moines places a high value on creating a welcoming environment for new residents, reflecting its commitment to social inclusivity and community integration. When survey participants were asked to respond to the statement, "My neighborhood is welcoming to newcomers" using a 5-point Likert scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree, 62.1% reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that their neighborhood is welcoming to newcomers (Figure 11). Fewer than 10% of the participants (8.9%) responded that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement. These results show high levels of openness and receptivity among existing community members, but they also show room for improvement. It is worth noting that 29% neither agreed nor disagreed about their neighborhood being welcoming. Improvement in this indicator will most likely come from movement within this group.

Figure 11: My neighborhood is welcoming to newcomers



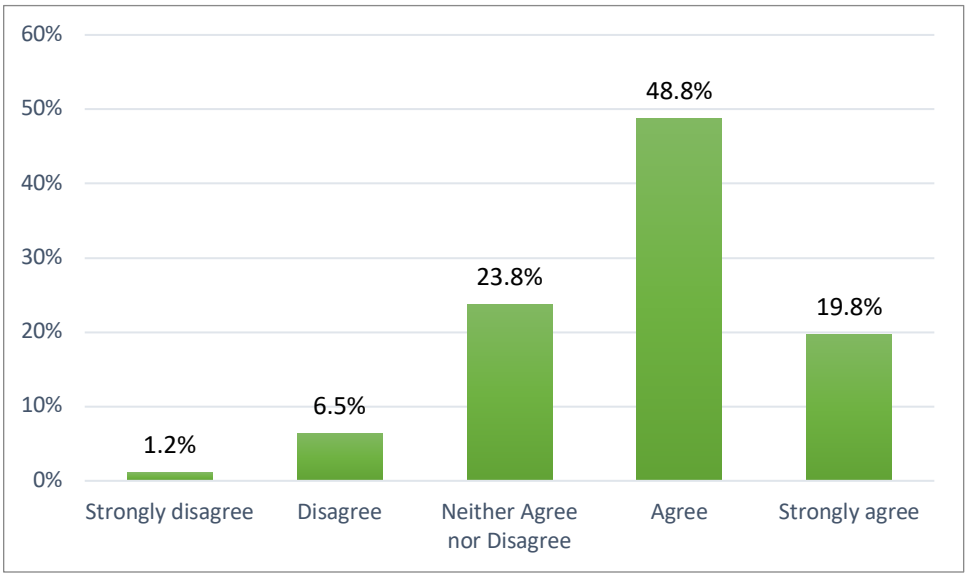
A deeper analysis of the survey results revealed that the sense of welcomeness is notably enhanced among residents who are well-acquainted with their neighbors. Specifically, those who know 'a few' neighbors express the highest levels of agreement (20.2%) and strong agreement (5.2%) about their neighborhood's openness. This correlation underscores the importance of social networks and personal interactions in cultivating an environment that is not only accepting but actively welcoming to new members. This welcoming nature is crucial for fostering a sense of belonging among newcomers and integrating them into the social fabric of the community. It also contributes to the overall stability and growth of the neighborhood, as new residents bring fresh perspectives and new opportunities to a community.

Social Inclusion Indicator 11: Neighbors Helping Neighbors

This indicator has two parts. The first measures the extent to which residents perceive their neighborhoods as places of mutual support. The second addresses a more concrete measurement of how many people have at least one neighbor they feel they can rely on in a time of need. A strong cohesive and resilient social network requires both components.

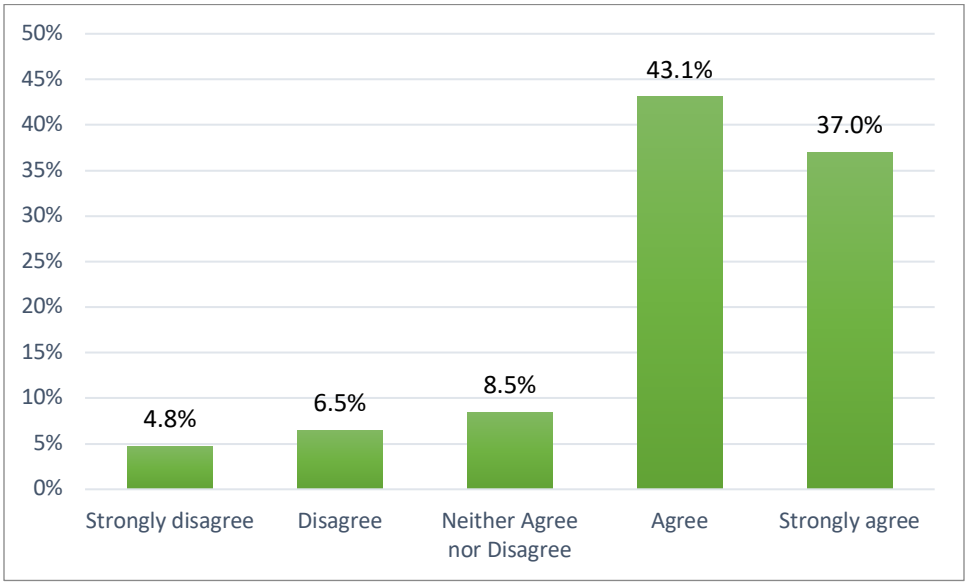
In West Des Moines, a strong sense of community support and cohesion is evident among residents. When survey participants were asked to respond to the statement, "The people in my neighborhood help each other" using a 5-point Likert scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree, 68.6% affirmed that their neighbors are willing to offer help to each other and only 7.7% disagreed or strongly disagreed indicating a robust support system within the community (Figure 12). This likelihood of mutual assistance increases with the familiarity residents have with their neighbors, reflecting the reciprocal nature of support in closely knit communities.

Figure 12: The people in my neighborhood help each other



Building and maintaining neighborly relations helps to enhance community cohesion and support, particularly when it comes to providing assistance in times of need. When survey participants were asked to respond to the statement, "I have at least one neighbor I can rely on if I need assistance" using a 5-point Likert scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree, 80.2% responded that they have at least one neighbor they can rely on for help, showcasing a robust community safety net (Figure 13). However, 11.3% responded that they disagree or strongly disagree to the statement, indicating that there is more community building work to be done in the neighborhoods of West Des Moines.

Figure 13: I have at least one neighbor I can rely on if I need assistance



By continuing to encourage interactions among neighbors and fostering a culture of mutual aid, West Des Moines can further strengthen its community safety net. This not only benefits individuals in times of need but also enhances the overall sense of security and belonging among all residents, making it a more resilient and supportive community.

Social Inclusion Indicator 12: Health Insurance Coverage

This indicator measures the percentage of residents in West Des Moines who have health insurance coverage. Health insurance coverage is crucial for ensuring that residents can obtain necessary medical care without prohibitive costs. High coverage rates are indicative of a community's overall health and economic stability as they reduce the financial burden of healthcare expenses on families and the local government. Moreover, widespread insurance coverage supports preventive care, which can decrease the prevalence of serious health issues and reduce long-term healthcare costs. A high percentage of insured residents contributes to better public health outcomes and a stronger workforce.

As of 2022, 95.0% of the population in West Des Moines under 65 years of age has health insurance (US Census Bureau).

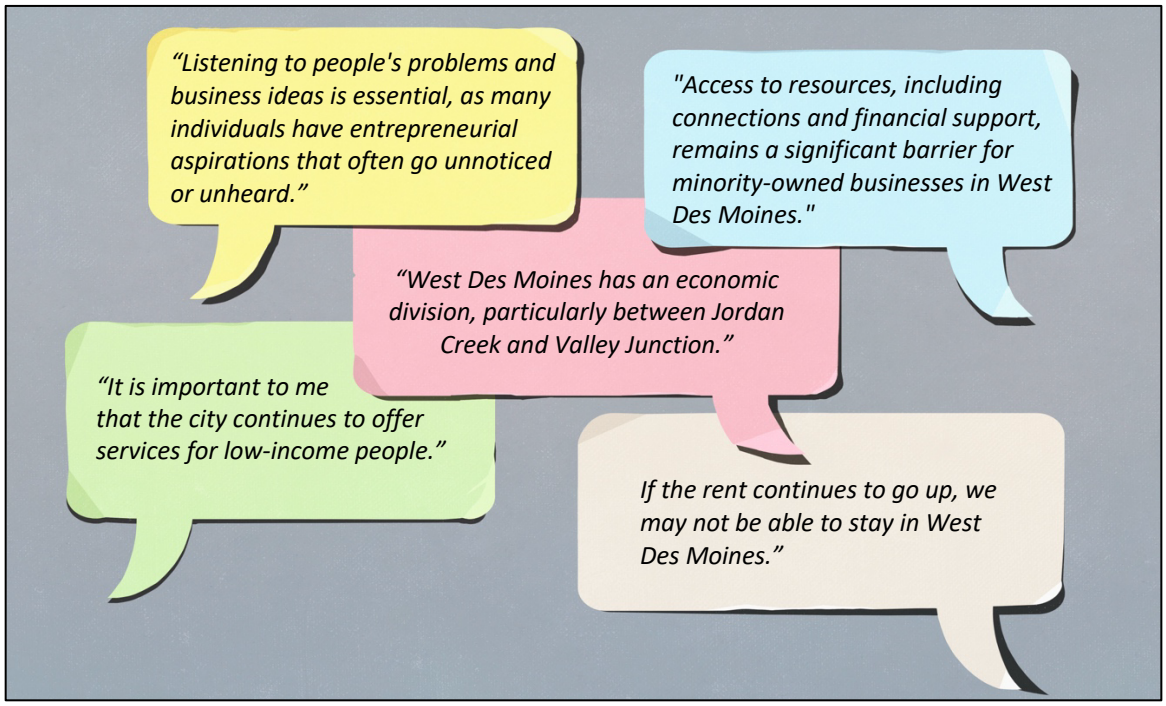
This indicator showcases the success of community health initiatives and the accessibility of low cost insurance programs. There is strong access to health insurance options in West Des Moines and the community remains committed to ensuring that residents can access necessary medical services affordably. However, while West Des Moines boasts a high health insurance coverage rate, the aim remains to achieve universal coverage.

PILLAR 2: ECONOMIC INCLUSION

Economic inclusion aims to address economic disparities and promote equality of opportunity. It also speaks to the city's overall fiscal well-being and competitiveness. Inclusive cities are prosperous cities. In West Des Moines, embracing economic inclusion means fostering an environment where all residents can access opportunities for economic growth and prosperity.

West Des Moines boasts a thriving and diverse economic landscape, offering numerous economic opportunities, and many residents believe the city provides their families with opportunities to succeed. However, outreach with residents and local business owners also revealed disparities in small business opportunities, economic mobility, housing cost burden, educational attainment, and support for families in need, with communities of color faring less well than their white counterparts (see Figure 14). Despite the overall prosperity in West Des Moines, some people are facing barriers in accessing opportunity.

Figure 14. Economic Inclusion Challenges (outreach quotes)



Prioritizing economic inclusion is essential for West Des Moines to build a sustainable, equitable, resilient community that fosters shared prosperity and well-being. Addressing disparities in the quantity and quality of opportunities for small businesses, providing public services to fight rising poverty rates, and supporting homeowners and renters in need are all part of a broader toolkit that can help to make West Des Moines more economically inclusive. The following indicators will serve as measures of the city's progress in this pillar.

Economic Inclusion Indicator 1: Heterogeneity of Local Business Owners

A heterogeneous small business community reflects a diverse and vibrant local economy, one that supports innovation, job creation, and community resilience. This indicator examines the number of local businesses in West Des Moines categorized by the identity of the business owner(s) including minority-owned, women-owned, and veteran-owned businesses. Tracking these figures is essential for understanding the diversity of the local business community and assessing the effectiveness of programs aimed at supporting underrepresented business owners.

Out of the 2,036 employer firms in West Des Moines in 2017, 86 were minority-owned (4.2%), 341 were women-owned, (16.7%), and 69 were veteran-owned (3.4%).[2] The census does not collect data on businesses owned by people who identify as LGBTQIA.

Understanding the heterogeneity among small business owners in West Des Moines is crucial for promoting economic diversity and equity within the local business community, and positive trends reflect a city's commitment to creating an inclusive and supportive environment for all business owners. Minority-owned, women-owned, veteran-owned, and LGBTQIA+-owned businesses often face unique challenges, including limited access to capital, resources, and networks. Tracking this indicator over time will enable the city to evaluate the impact of initiatives designed to support these businesses and identify areas where additional resources or policy adjustments may be needed.

Economic Inclusion Indicator 2: Employment of Individuals with Disabilities

This indicator measures the number of employed individuals with disabilities per thousand in the labor force within the West Des Moines area. Employment is a key factor in ensuring economic stability and quality of life, and this indicator helps highlight potential barriers that might prevent individuals with disabilities from obtaining and maintaining employment. Understanding the employment rates of individuals with disabilities in West Des Moines is crucial for gauging the inclusivity and accessibility of the local job market.

Of the 44,957 individuals in the West Des Moines workforce, 2,328 are people with disabilities.[3]

Tracking this metric helps in assessing the employment equity and inclusivity of workplaces for people with disabilities. It reflects the effectiveness of policies and programs aimed at integrating individuals with disabilities into the workforce. This indicator can signal the need for better training programs, recruitment practices, and workplace adaptations that facilitate full and equal participation in the workforce for people with disabilities. Ongoing tracking and analysis over time will enable the city to measure progress and identify trends over time.

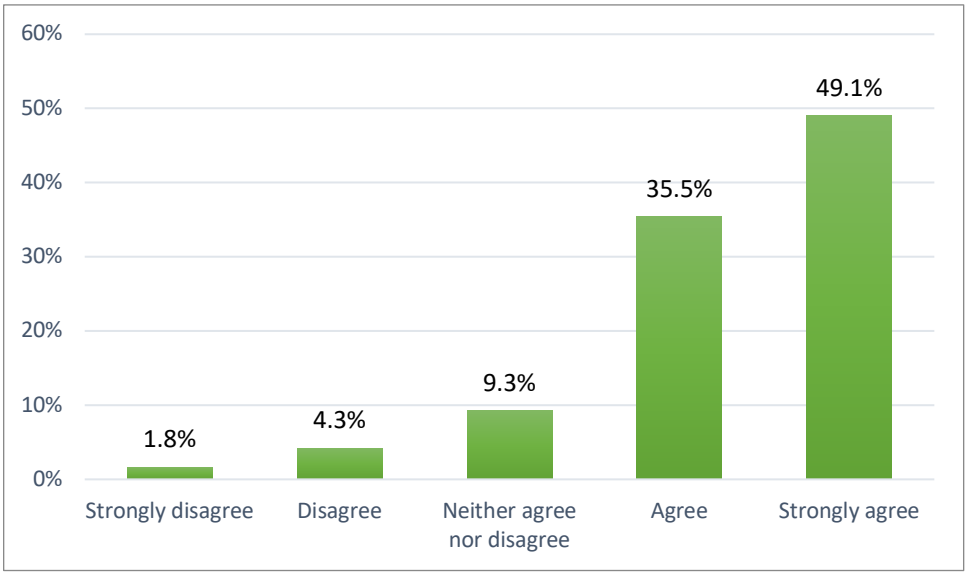
[2] At the time of this report, the US Census was using 2017 as the reference year for business ownership data.
[3] American Community Survey, 2023 1-year Estimate, Table B18120

Economic Inclusion Indicator 3: Housing Stability

Like social inclusion indicator 11, this indicator has two parts. The first measures the extent to which residents agree that stable, affordable housing benefits the entire city. The second provides a more concrete measurement of housing stability by asking residents the extent to which they can comfortably afford their current home. Housing stability includes both components.

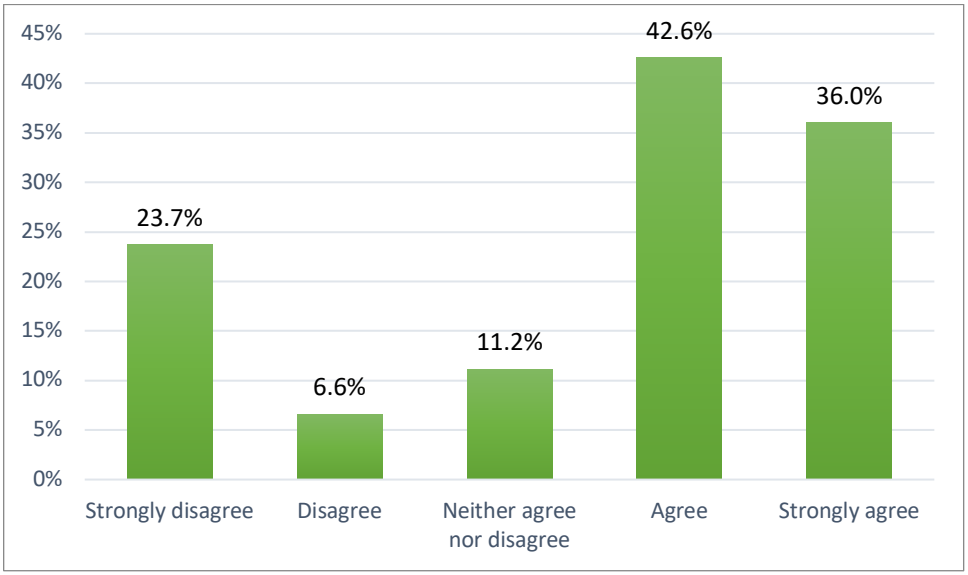
This indicator measures the degree to which residents agree that housing stability contributes to the well-being of the city as a whole. When survey participants were asked to respond to the survey question, "West Des Moines is a stronger city when everyone has stable housing they can afford" using a 5-point Likert scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree, 84.58% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed and only 6.09% disagreed or strongly disagreed (Figure 15). Residents clearly support housing stability across all income levels.

Figure 15: West Des Moines is a stronger city when everyone has stable housing they can afford



This second component of the indicator measures residents' perceptions of their own housing stability. When survey participants were asked to respond to the statement, "My family can comfortably afford our current home" using a 5-point Likert scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree, most residents expressed that they could comfortably afford their current home (Figure ***16***). Approximately 78.6% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their family can comfortably afford their current home in West Des Moines.

Figure 16: My family can comfortably afford our current home



Housing stability refers to the ability of individuals or families to consistently maintain safe, affordable, and adequate housing over time. It involves having reliable housing that is not at immediate risk of being lost due to factors like eviction, unaffordability, or unsafe conditions. Housing stability is essential for a family or individual's overall well-being as well as the well-being of a city. It provides the foundation for employment, education, health, and community engagement.

Economic Inclusion Indicator 4: City Down Payment Assistance Programs

This indicator measures the number of city programs that offer down payment assistance to home buyers. By assisting residents in purchasing homes, these programs not only help individual families, they promote economic diversity and build community stability. This indicator reflects the extent to which the city proactively supports and expands access to homeownership.

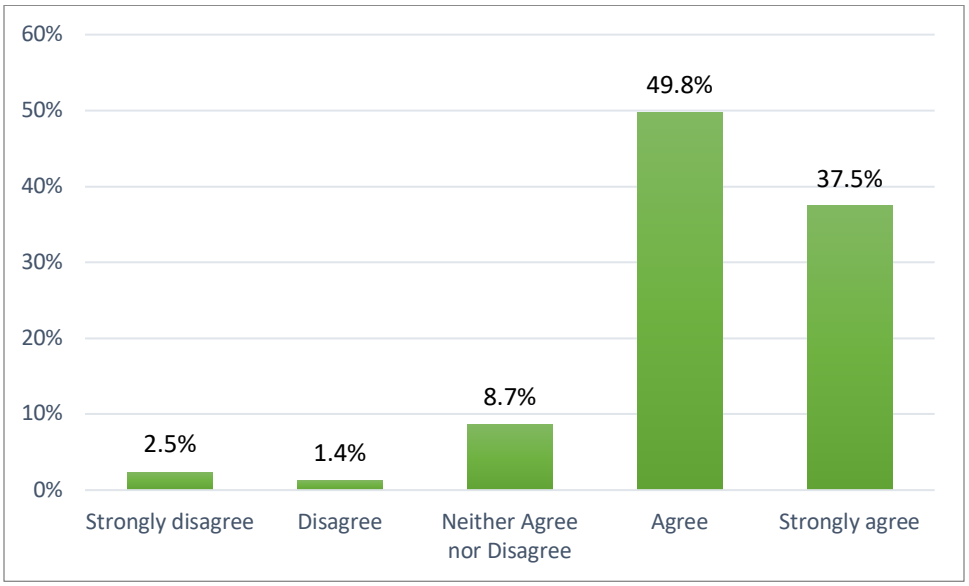
Currently the city has one downpayment assistance program. This program offers grants and deferred loans, ranging from $2,500 to $10,000, aimed at helping qualified buyers purchase a home within Historic West Des Moines.

Access to down payment assistance can greatly expand the number of households that are able to buy homes, particularly first-time buyers and those from low to moderate-income brackets. For future indicator reports, the city may want to build partnerships with other organizations within the metro area that offer downpayment assistance. Gathering data on the households that make use of these programs and their the long-term outcomes, such as continued homeownership and financial stability, also would be valuable for a comprehensive evaluation of these efforts.

Economic Inclusion Indicator 5: Individual Economic Agency

This indicator measures the degree to which residents feel they and their families have opportunities to succeed economically in West Des Moines. When it comes to opportunities to succeed in West Des Moines, there is a prevailing positivity. When survey participants were asked to respond to the statement, "I contribute to the economic well-being of West Des Moines" using a 5-point Likert scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree, 78.7% of respondents feel that they contribute to the economic well-being of West Des Moines, either agreeing (49.8%) or strongly agreeing (37.5%) (Figure 17). This is a positive indicator of residents' perception of their role in the city's economy, suggesting active participation and a shared responsibility for the community's prosperity.

Figure 17: I contribute to the economic well-being of West Des Moines



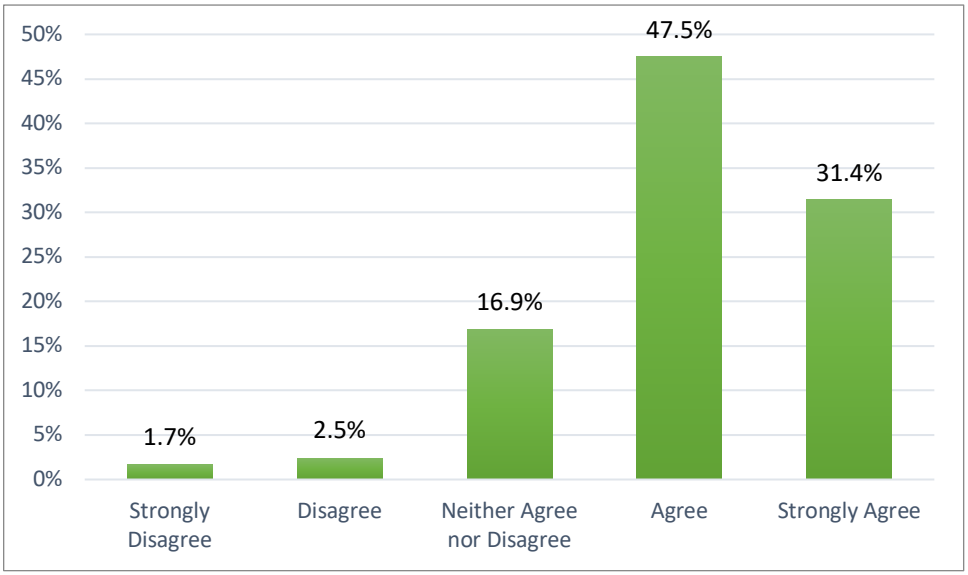
"Promoting active participation is crucial; we encourage engagement in civic duties and local politics, as it's essential for our community members to feel their voices are heard and valued."

-Outreach participant
Community-based organization

Economic Inclusion Indicator 6: Opportunities for Families

This indicator measures the degree to which residents feel that their families have opportunities to succeed economically in West Des Moines. When survey participants were asked to respond to the statement, "My family has opportunities to succeed in West Des Moines" using a 5-point Likert scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree, 78.9 % of residents agreed or strongly agreed and only 4.2% disagreed or strongly disagreed (Figure 18).

Figure 18: My family has opportunities to succeed in West Des Moines



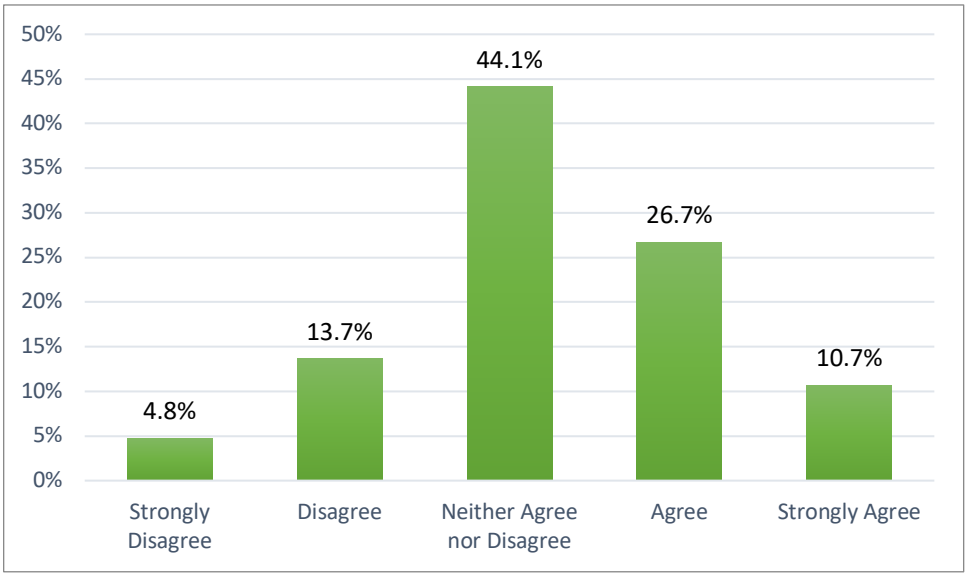
This indicator demonstrates that residents share a strong belief that West Des Moines is a place where their families can succeed. West Des Moines is more than a place to live, work, and play. The residents of West Des Moines see the city as a place where it is possible to build a strong future.

Figure 19. A picture of "Inclusionville" created by children from AlRazi Academy

Economic Inclusion Indicator 7: Access to Systems of Support

This indicator measures the degree to which residents feel that their families have opportunities to succeed economically in West Des Moines. When survey participants were asked to respond to the statement, "There are sufficient resources and support systems in West Des Moines for the diverse groups of people who live and work here" using a 5-point Likert scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree, only 37.4% of residents agreed or strongly agreed while only 18.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed (Figure 20). The highest number of responses was in the neither agree nor disagree category suggesting that most residents are unfamiliar with the range of resources and support systems available to people living in West Des Moines.

Figure 20: There are sufficient resources and support systems in West Des Moines for the diverse groups of people who live and work here



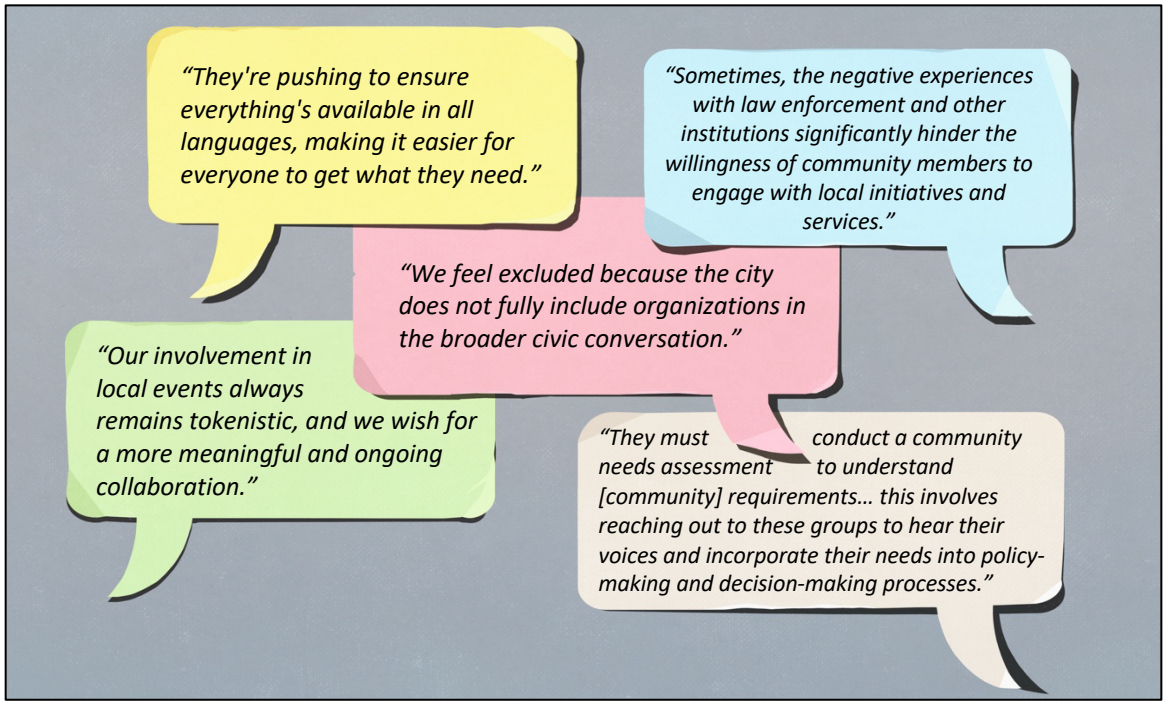
Like every other indicator in this report, this measurement serves as a baseline. What is especially important to notice with this measurement is that while the percentages of residents who responded "strongly disagree" or "disagree" are under 20%, the percentage who responded "agree" or "strongly disagree" are also low – approximately 37%. It is especially interesting to consider this indicator in light of the previous question. Although respondents revealed a strong sentiment that West Des Moines is a place that provides their families with opportunities, this indicator suggests that there is still work to do in West Des Moines to match resources and support systems to the diverse needs of the city's population and workers.

PILLAR 3: POLITICAL INCLUSION

Political inclusion requires a deep commitment to social engagement that crosses all arenas of civic life. It encourages local leadership from all the varied communities that make up a city. Political inclusion requires a resilient and equitable democracy where all citizens have equal access to political institutions and processes and where they are provided with opportunities to contribute in a meaningful way to those institutions and processes. It also requires a broad agenda of civic engagement programs, policies, and practices that facilitates community voice and supports community attachment and a sense of efficacy among residents. A city is stronger, more vibrant, and more successful when civic engagement is part of the fabric of a city.

West Des Moines takes pride in its civic culture. Programs such as the Community Engagement Institute Provide opportunities for residents to learn about city processes and to develop social networks and leadership skills, strengthening the connections between city officials and city residents. The city's recent efforts to offer materials in multiple languages is also an important step in expanding political inclusion. However, as Figure 21 demonstrates, there is still room for improvement. Some communities in West Des Moines do not feel seen.

Figure 21. Political Inclusion Challenges (outreach quotes)

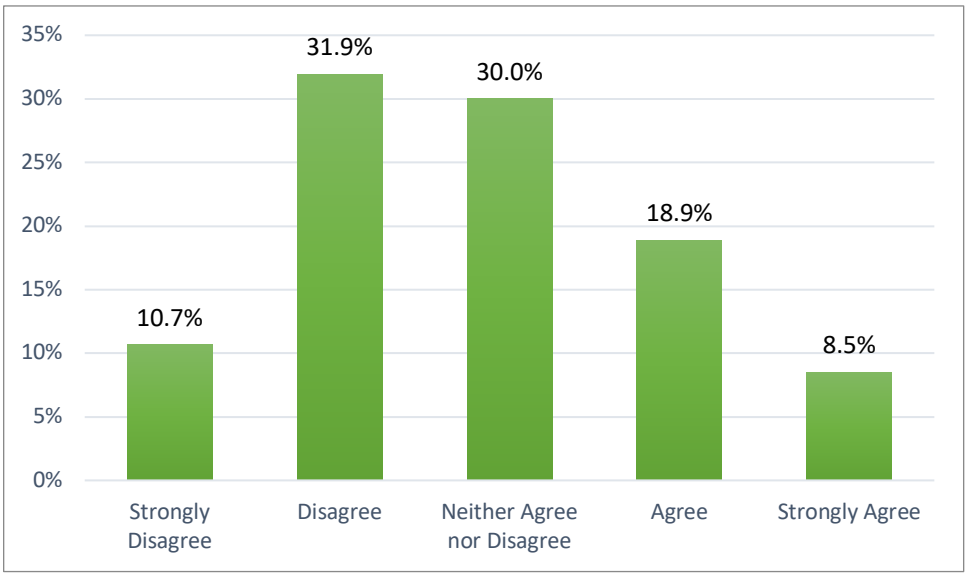


The political inclusion pillar acknowledges that economic success and civic engagement go hand-in-hand. But this requires local government to think beyond meetings and creating opportunities for neighbors to collaborate with local government and each other proactively, building shared visions for a common future. The following indicators serve as measures of the city's progress in this pillar.

Political Inclusion Indicator 1: Perceived Heterogeneity within City Government

This indicator measures the degree to which residents feel that the elected officials, staff, and administration of the City of West Des Moines represents the diversity of the city. When survey participants were asked to respond to the statement, "City government in West Des Moines reflects the city's diversity" using a 5-point Likert scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree, only a minority of residents (28.4%) agreed or strongly agreed (Figure 22).

Figure 22: City government in West Des Moines reflects the city's diversity



Understanding the existing diversity within city government is crucial for gauging how reflective the workforce is of the community it serves. Heterogeneity within local government can enhance the delivery of public services by bringing a wide range of perspectives and experiences to the table. This can lead to more effective, equitable, and culturally sensitive service delivery. It can also build civic engagement and trust. When diverse communities see themselves reflected in their leadership, it can reduce tensions and build a stronger sense of shared purpose.

As of 2022, the data shows that 65.7% of city employees are women. In terms of racial and ethnic diversity, 70.4% of employees identify as non-Hispanic White, while 29.6% belong to other racial groups. The city does not collect data about the number of LGBT employees. These statistics reveal that the City of Des Moines has a diverse and vibrant workforce. The key to harnessing the benefits of this heterogeneity lies in fostering collaboration and ensuring that different voices contribute constructively to the decision-making process. However, residents also need to know that this representation exists.

Political Inclusion Indicator 2: Outreach Events Hosted by the City

This indicator measures the number of outreach events hosted by the city government over the course of a given year. These initiatives go beyond formal public hearings. They may be targeted on engaging with people from specific identity or interest groups and are held at non-traditional locations with varied timing and translation services to ensure accessibility and inclusivity. Regular, open outreach events – whether they are listening sessions, roundtable discussions, or engagement academies for community leaders – are crucial for engaging diverse community groups in local governance and decision-making. These events facilitate direct communication between city officials and residents, helping to address specific community needs and concerns. Such outreach is essential for building trust between the government and the community, particularly among underrepresented or marginalized groups. It ensures that policies are not only informed by a broad spectrum of perspectives but are also more equitable and effective. People support what they help create.

Currently, the city has one established and resourced program for outreach and engagement that has the objective of more generally increasing communication between residents and city staff and elected officials. This is the Community Engagement Institute. This free program connects residents with City leaders so that they can learn about programs and services, tour facilities, and provide officials with feedback on how to improve service delivery.

It is likely that more events have taken place in the last year; however, the city does not currently have a system for collecting data about those events. While the city government's commitment to engaging in community outreach is evident, the absence of precise data on the number of events poses significant limitations. Without detailed records, it is challenging to track progress over time or compare the city's efforts with those of similar municipalities. Improvement on this indicator is likely to result in improvement on the first political inclusion indicator.

Figure 23. A member of the project team setting up a box to collect survey responses

Political Inclusion Indicator 3: Community-Police Engagement

This indicator measures the number of community-police engagement programs and the number of officers dedicated to community engagement and outreach within the local police department. The number of community-police engagement programs and dedicated officers is crucial for fostering trust and cooperation between law enforcement and the community. These programs are designed to enhance understanding, reduce conflicts, and build a safer environment by promoting dialogue and cooperation. Dedicated officers play a pivotal role in these initiatives, serving as liaisons and building relationships within the community.

Currently, there are three community-police engagement programs in place, with six officers specifically dedicated to these outreach efforts.

This number provides a baseline from which to assess the adequacy of resources allocated to these efforts and their potential expansion to meet growing community needs. It also shows that West Des Moines has already initiated a structured approach to enhancing police-community relations. Effective community engagement by police not only helps in addressing immediate safety concerns but also contributes to long-term community well-being. It allows for more nuanced responses to community issues, tailored crime prevention strategies, and greater public confidence in law enforcement.

Figure 24. Two members of the project team attended an AARP Coffee Connections event to collect feedback from participants

Political Inclusion Indicator 4: Youth Inclusion in City Planning and Decision-Making

This indicator measures the number of youths formally involved in city advisory boards, committees, and formal decision-making processes in West Des Moines. Monitoring these figures helps to assess the extent that youths are engaged in local governance. Involving youth in decision-making processes is crucial for fostering civic engagement and leadership among younger residents. It also ensures that their perspectives and needs are considered in city planning and policy-making, which can lead to more balanced and effective governance. Youth inclusion fosters lifelong participation in local affairs, strengthening democratic processes and community ties. This metric underscores the importance of providing young residents with opportunities to contribute to community decisions that may affect their lives and future.

Currently, the number is zero.

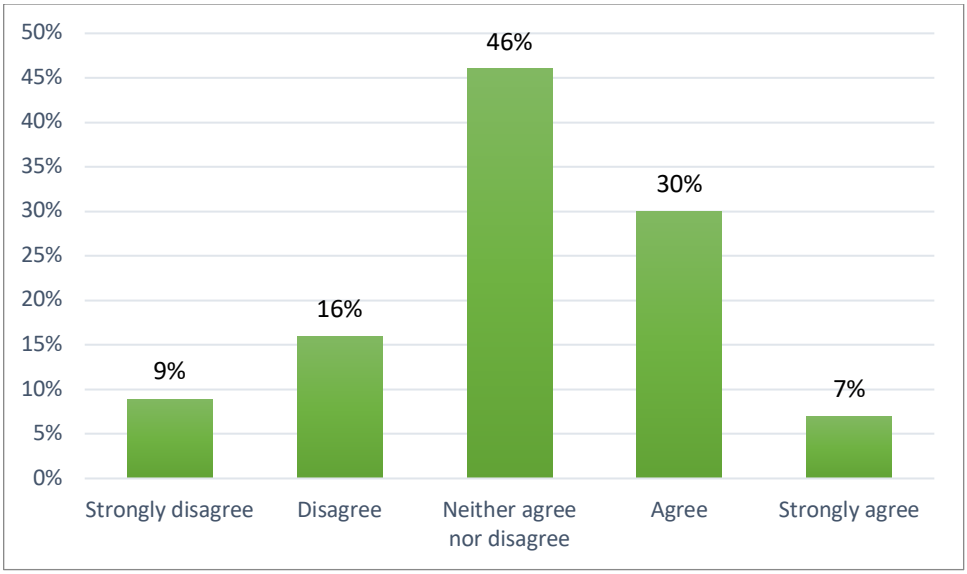
Although the city does not yet have formal systems in place for engaging young people in local decision-making, the existence of this indicator reflects the city's commitment to empowering its younger population by actively integrating them into governance structures.

Figure 25. Youths in West Des Moines participated in an outreach event to provide feedback for this report.

Political Inclusion Indicator 5: Sense of Significance

This indicator measures the degree to which residents feel that their voice makes a difference in West Des Moines. When survey participants were asked to respond to the statement, "My opinion matters to the city decision-makers in West Des Moines" using a 5-point Likert scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree, almost half (46%) replied that they neither agreed nor disagreed and only 37% replied that they agreed or strongly agreed (Figure 26). These number reveal that residents do not have a strong sense of connection to the decisions being made on their behalf by local government officials.

Figure 26: My opinion matters to the city decision-makers in West Des Moines



When people feel that their opinions matter to local government, it fosters greater civic engagement, trust, and participation, leading to more informed decision-making and policies that better reflect the needs of the community. It also contributes to the long-term success of local governance, promotes well-being, and builds a more resilient and cohesive society. This indicator suggests that there is work to do in West Des Moines to build trust between residents and decision-makers and a sense of efficacy among residents that their voice and perspectives matter.

"I will recommend that the city host programs or events like music programs, financial literacy classes, and gender-specific empowerment conferences at the city level. It would be very beneficial as it significantly aids individuals dealing with challenges."

-Outreach participant

Political Inclusion Indicator 6: Open Access to City Data

This indicator measures the number of open, downloadable, up-to-date datasets available in the City of West Des Moines's data portal. The availability of open and accessible datasets is crucial for transparency, civic engagement, and data-driven decision-making within a community. By providing up-to-date datasets, the portal enables researchers, policymakers, developers, and the general public to analyze and utilize data effectively, fostering innovation and informed community planning. This accessibility not only enhances public trust but also encourages community participation in governance and policy development.

Currently, the City of West Des Moines only offers access to Geographic Information System (GIS) data and maps of the community. The downloadable data for GIS include city parks data, street data, and trail data. In addition to this, there are maps hosted in the web browser for utilities, zoning, comprehensive land use, flood hazards, and more pertaining to infrastructure/ development. In terms of downloadable datasets, the City of West Des Moines does not have an open-source portal where the public can access current city data.

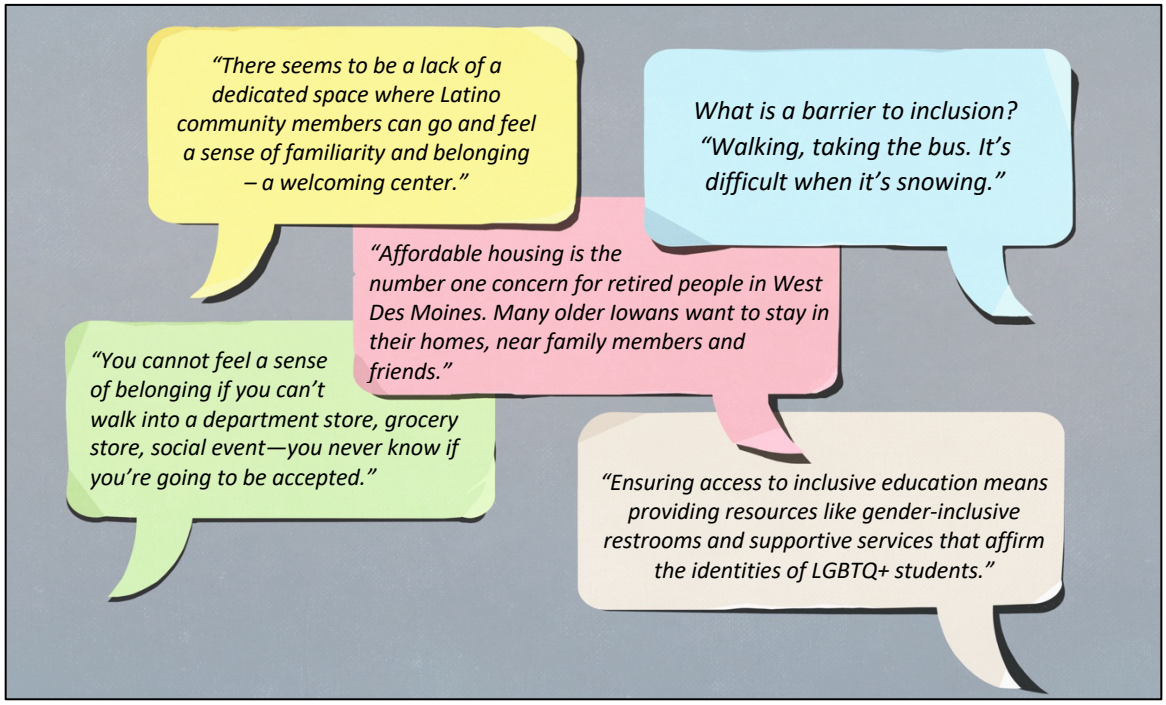
Open data serve as a foundational tool for developing public awareness, analyses, and interventions that can address local issues, improve services, and promote a more connected and informed society. The number of datasets currently available and their usage metrics indicate there is potential to expand and further engage the community. Increasing the variety and depth of datasets could address more specific needs and interests, enhancing the portal's relevance and impact.

PILLAR 4: INCLUSIVE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

The built environment includes the form, physical features, and infrastructure of a city. An inclusive built environment is accessible by people with a range of abilities, affordable, safe, and culturally inclusive. Such environments consider the varied needs of community members, and do not overlook underserved groups, small sub-communities, newcomers, or people with unique needs or fewer resources. As cities grow and diversify, an inclusive built environment plays an increasingly vital role in promoting equitable urban development and a shared sense of belonging.

West Des Moines takes its built environment seriously, and many of the city's roads, neighborhoods, and public spaces benefit from that attention. However, as Figure 27 demonstrates, there is more work to be done. Residents expressed concerns about affordable housing, inclusive public facilities, access to public transportation, a lack of cultural spaces, and the need for a welcoming environment within the built environment of the city. By tracking these key aspects of urban life, policymakers and planners can make data-driven decisions and build communities that work for everyone.

Figure 27. Inclusive Built Environment Challenges (outreach quotes)



Demographic changes as well as climate changes require flexible strategies to keep the city's built environment inclusive and resilient. This means considering inclusion when planning and maintaining the physical components of the city: housing, roads, public transportation, pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, public facilities, zoning and land use, utilities, and WiFi. Continuous monitoring facilitates adaptation in the face of emerging needs or unanticipated outcomes. The following indicators serve as measures of the city's progress in this pillar.

Inclusive Built Environment Indicator 1: Housing Cost Burden

This indicator tracks the percentage of renters and homeowners in West Des Moines who spend more than 30% of their household income on rent and mortgages, respectively. This 30% measurement is defined by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development as the threshold for housing cost burden. When a household spends more than 30% of their income on housing costs, they are referred to as housing cost burdened. When that number increases to 50%, they are referred to as severely cost burdened. This measurement is crucial for assessing housing affordability and housing stability within the community. It reflects the economic pressures on both renters and homeowners to maintain housing.

Within West Des Moines, 16.47% of homeowners and 42.16% of renters spend 30% or more of their income on housing costs.[4]

The data indicates a significant difference in housing cost burdens between renters and homeowners in West Des Moines. Renters face greater challenges in affordability, which suggests a need for increases in the supply of multifamily rental options. Spending a high percentage of income on housing can limit the ability of families to afford other essentials, such as food, healthcare, and transportation, and contributes to financial stress and family instability. High rates of housing cost burden can signal potential issues in the local housing market, such as a lack of affordable housing options or rising housing costs that outpace income growth. Understanding the proportion of income that residents spend on housing is vital for assessing the financial health and stability of households in West Des Moines.

Inclusive Built Environment Indicator 2: Rental Vacancy Rates

This indicator tracks the vacancy rate of rental housing. The City of West Des Moines recognizes that rental housing is an important part of the city's residential mix and rental housing options range from single family homes to townhomes to duplexes, triplexes or fourplexes to larger multifamily developments. Vacancy rates are a way for tracking the health of the city's rental housing market.

The rental vacancy rate for West Des Moines in 2023 was 1.1%.[5]

This number indicates a troubling lack of rental housing in the city. When the vacancy rate is too low, rents become too high for many households, contributing to housing instability and homelessness. A vacancy rate below 4% is considered tight and below 3% is considered unhealthy. A balanced vacancy rate for rental housing is 5-8%. When vacancy rates are too high, the rental property owners may struggle to maintain their properties and remain stable in their business. High vacancy rates can also signal larger economic and social concerns within a community.

[4] 2023 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, Table B25106

[5] 2023 American Community Survey 1-year estimate Table CP04

Inclusive Built Environment Indicator 3: Subsidized Housing for Seniors

This indicator examines the number of subsidized housing units that are available per thousand older adults. People who are over 65 years of age often live on fixed incomes, and access to subsidized housing is vital for their financial security and quality of life.

The city of West Des Moines currently has 2 subsidized units per thousand seniors.

West Des Moines has a significant gap in targeted support for the older adult population, suggesting a need for enhanced measures to ensure sufficient affordable housing options for seniors. Given the growing population of older adults as well as the time it takes to build new housing developments, this number is a call to action. Increasing the supply of affordable housing for seniors will help to ensure that older adults in West Des Moines can age safely and affordably in their community.

Inclusive Built Environment Indicator 4: Inclusive Facilities in Public Spaces

This indicator examines the accessibility and inclusiveness of public facilities in West Des Moines, specifically focusing on the availability of all-gender/family restrooms and feeding rooms in schools and other public facilities. The availability of all-gender/family restrooms and dedicated feeding rooms is crucial for creating inclusive, welcoming, and supportive public environments. These facilities ensure that all individuals, regardless of gender or family needs, can access safe and private spaces in public settings. This inclusivity is particularly important in promoting equity and dignity for all community members, including those with young children, reinforcing the community's commitment to accessibility and support.

Currently, there are 20 restrooms in city facilities and public spaces that are either new or have been upgraded or to accommodate all genders and families, enhancing accessibility in community spaces such as parks, libraries, and government buildings. Additionally, dedicated feeding rooms have been established in key public areas to support parents needing to care for their infants privately and comfortably or others who need a private, sanitary space for assisted feedings.[6]

West Des Moines has made significant strides in enhancing the accessibility of its public facilities. These upgrades are part of a broader effort to maintain and improve the city's infrastructure to make public spaces more welcoming and inclusive. The introduction of dedicated feeding rooms reflects the city's proactive approach to meeting modern urban needs and supporting families in public settings.

[6] A count of the publicly available feeding rooms was not available for this report, but having this number would enhance future reports.

Inclusive Built Environment Indicator 5: Shaded Playgrounds and Bus Stops

Shaded areas in playgrounds and bus stops are essential for enhancing user comfort and safety, especially during warmer months. Shade not only protects against harmful UV rays but also improves the overall usability of these spaces by reducing heat exposure. This is particularly important in playgrounds where children spend significant time outdoors and at bus stops where commuters may wait for public transport. By measuring the availability of shaded areas, West Des Moines can gauge how well it is meeting the needs for safe and comfortable public spaces.

This indicator measures the provision of shaded areas in playgrounds and bus stops in West Des Moines, specifically quantifying that there are 0.5 playgrounds per thousand residents equipped with shaded areas. This metric helps assess the city's commitment to providing comfortable and usable public spaces for residents of all ages.

West Des Moines has started to address the need for sun protection in recreational and transit areas. However, this relatively low number suggests that there is substantial room for improvement to ensure that more residents can benefit from shaded facilities in public spaces, potentially enhancing the overall community experience and safety.

Inclusive Built Environment Indicator 6: Public Heating and Cooling Centers

This indicator counts the number of public heating and cooling centers that are free and available to residents of West Des Moines during extreme weather events as well as the accessibility of those centers throughout the 24 hours in a day. Access to heating and cooling centers is crucial for ensuring the safety and comfort of residents during extreme weather conditions.

As of August 2024, four city facilities have been designated as heating and cooling centers that are free and accessible to the public. None of those facilities are open for 24 hours a day.

With an estimated four public facilities providing heating and cooling, West Des Moines has taken steps to ensure that residents have access to safe environments during extreme temperatures. However, the impact and sufficiency of these facilities depend on their capacity, distribution across the city, the specific needs of different populations within the community, and their availability during all hours of a day.

Inclusive Built Environment Indicator 7: Public WiFi Availability

This indicator examines the availability of free WiFi in public facilities within West Des Moines, focusing on enhancing accessibility and connectivity for residents and visitors. Providing free WiFi in public spaces is crucial for ensuring that all community members have access to the internet, which is increasingly necessary for education, communication, employment, and access to essential services. This availability can significantly enhance the usability of public spaces, making them more attractive for residents and boosting local businesses by encouraging more extended stays in these areas.

Known locations with public WiFi access provided by the city are the West Des Moines Public Library, City Hall, and the Valley Junction Neighborhood. In addition to these locations, the West Des Moines Public Library has rentable Wi-Fi hotspots available to residents for up to 14 days. This is free for West Des Moines library residents/cardholders as the cell service that hosts them is paid for by the library.

Digital inclusion means ensuring that all individuals have access to the digital tools and skills they need to participate fully in society. Offering free Wi-Fi is one step toward fostering an inclusive digital ecosystem, which is vital for residents to stay connected in an increasingly digital world. The city has started to address the need for public internet access: schools, the West Des Moines Public Library, and the Valley Junction neighborhood are a great start. However, the geographic range of these programs is limited. A more expansive public WiFi system will enable the City of West Des Moines to facilitate innovation and connection among residents and be better prepared for the future.

"…stereotypes are created by storytelling. And so is West Des Moines telling the right stories? Are they all the stories? How can they incorporate the image of who they want to be into stories that resonate with a broad spectrum of people?"

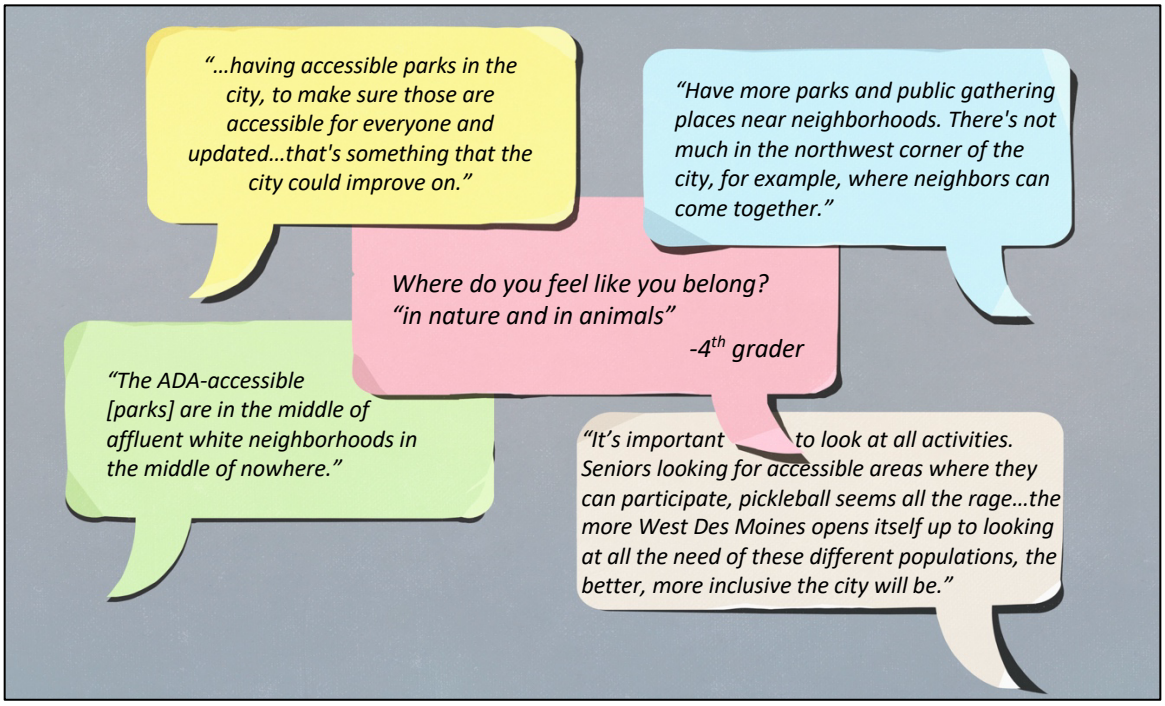
-Outreach participant

PILLAR 5: INCLUSIVE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

An inclusive natural environment integrates nature into the urban fabric while also ensuring that green spaces and natural landscapes are abundant and designed to be accessible by all. Planning and maintenance of inclusive green spaces demands diverse stakeholder involvement at all stages – from planning and design through stewardship and renovation. An inclusive natural environment also necessitates freedom from cost barriers and equitable distribution that prevents a concentration of quality green spaces in affluent neighborhoods or that are accessible only by car. In an inclusive natural environment, everyone feels safe and welcome.

Cultivating an inclusive natural environment in West Des Moines entails fostering urban ecosystems that are accessible, welcoming, and beneficial to all community members regardless of their identities, abilities, or socioeconomic status. The survey revealed that 88% of respondents feel welcome in parks and other public spaces within the city. This is a strong foundation to build from, but residents are asking for more (Figure 28) An inclusive natural environment extends beyond green spaces and addresses concerns such as air quality, climate change and governance, water and sanitation, urban ecology, sustainable transportation, and environmental justice.

Figure 28. Inclusive Natural Environment Challenges (outreach quotes)



An inclusive natural environment fosters better health and social cohesion within the community and provides safe spaces for leisure, social interaction, and recreational activities. Initiatives may include community gardens, shaded bus stops and playgrounds, and public heating and cooling centers, all aimed at mitigating the impacts of extreme weather conditions, particularly for vulnerable populations. The following indicators serve as measures of the city's progress in this pillar.

Inclusive Natural Environment Indicator 1: Acres of Tree Cover

Tree cover is crucial for assessing the environmental quality and sustainability of urban areas. Trees play a significant role in improving air quality, reducing urban heat islands, enhancing aesthetic and recreational value, and supporting biodiversity. By measuring tree cover per capita, West Des Moines can gauge how well it is doing in providing sufficient green spaces for its residents, which is essential for physical and mental well-being, as well as ecological health.

As of 2021, there were 6,899 acres within the city of West Des Moines that had 50% or greater tree canopy coverage. This is the equivalent of 95.82 acres per thousand residents.[7] This means that between 20 and 25% of the city's land area has a canopy cover. For contrast, the country's leafiest cities have tree canopy coverage greater than 75%.

High levels of tree cover demonstrate a proactive approach to urban planning and environmental stewardship, and a commitment to creating a city that is livable and sustainable. This indicator evaluates the adequacy of green spaces and urban forestry initiatives relative to the population, highlighting the city's commitment to maintaining and enhancing its environmental assets. Protecting current trees as well as continuing to plant new trees will be important strategies for continuing to improve this measurement.

Inclusive Natural Environment Indicator 2: Community Garden Accessibility

This indicator measures the availability of community garden plots in West Des Moines. Community gardens are vital for urban areas as they provide numerous benefits, including promoting local food production, enhancing biodiversity, and fostering community engagement. They offer a space for residents to grow their own food, which can improve access to fresh produce and reduce food insecurity. Moreover, community gardens can serve as educational platforms for sustainable practices and help strengthen community bonds by bringing together diverse groups of people. This metric helps assess the city's commitment to promoting sustainable living and providing residents with opportunities to engage in gardening, which can enhance community well-being and environmental awareness.

As of May 2024, West Des Moines has 1.14 community garden plots per thousand residents.

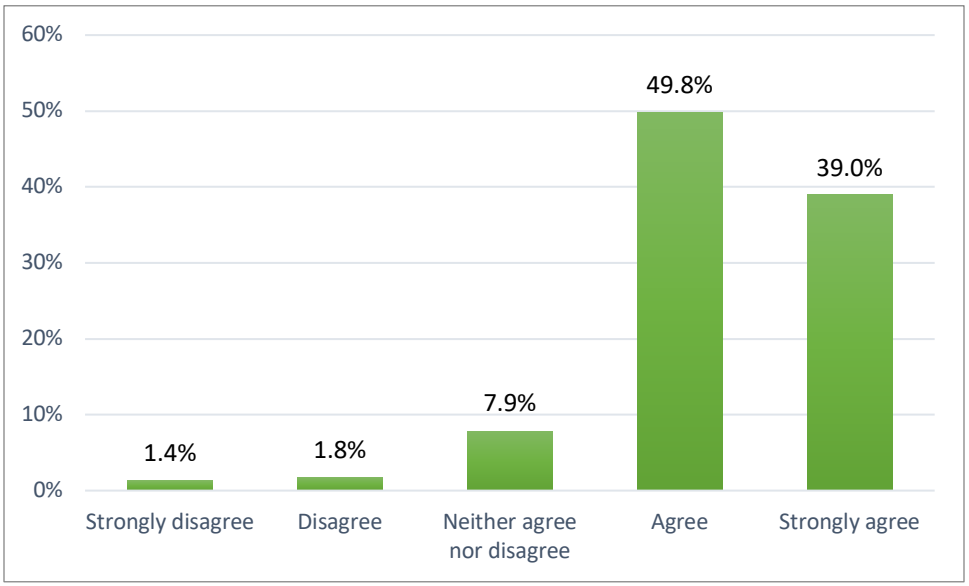
West Des Moines has made strides in creating green spaces that facilitate community gardening. This indicates a foundational level of support for urban agriculture, but there may be room to expand these initiatives to meet increasing interest and demand within the community. In particular, as West Des Moines continues to grow, it will be important to add new community garden plots in different parts of the city.

[7] The USA National Land Cover Database is a dataset with detailed information concerning land use and environment change. This database houses tree canopy cover data derived from satellite imagery and other available ground and ancillary information. The most recent update is from 2021.

Inclusive Natural Environment Indicator 3: Perceptions of Inclusion in Parks and Other Public Spaces

This indicator measures the extent to which residents of West Des Moines feel comfortable and included in the city's public spaces. When survey participants were asked to respond to the statement, "I feel welcome in parks and other public spaces in West Des Moines" using a 5-point Likert scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree, 80.8% of the respondents reported feeling welcome in parks and other public spaces (Figure 29), highlighting the city's well-regarded and inclusive public amenities.

Figure 29: I feel welcome in parks and other public spaces in West Des Moines



This high level of satisfaction with public spaces speaks to the quality and accessibility of these spaces. The city has successfully created public spaces that promote community interaction and a sense of belonging.

"What I heard from people was that our diversity has strengthened the community. Others reported that '*I came back to this community*' or '*I moved to this community because I loved the diversity.*'"

-Outreach participant

Inclusive Natural Environment Indicator 4: Acres of Green Space

This indicator measures the area of public green space per thousand residents in West Des Moines. This metric is utilized to assess the city's effectiveness in providing adequate natural environments for recreation, relaxation, community cohesion and essential environmental benefits including improving air quality, managing storm water, supporting biodiversity, and reducing urban heat effects. Fields in Trust sets a minimum recommendation that for every 1,000 people there should be approximately 5.9 acres of accessible green space.

Currently, West Des Moines has 16.62 acres of green space per thousand residents.

West Des Moines demonstrates a commitment to maintaining and expanding its green infrastructure. This level of green space provision suggests that the city values the role of natural environments in enhancing residents' lifestyle and is actively working towards integrating these areas within the urban fabric.

Inclusive Natural Environment Indicator 5: Access to Parks

This indicator measures the number of residents in West Des Moines who live within a quarter mile of a park. Accessibility to parks is crucial for promoting public health, environmental education, and community well-being. Parks provide essential spaces for recreation, relaxation, and social interactions, which are vital for mental and physical health. Proximity is beneficial for encouraging frequent park usage and fostering a closer connection between the community and the natural environment. Well used parks serve as important communal hubs that foster social interactions and build community cohesion. According to standards established by the World Health Organization, cities should have at least 1.23 acres of greens space at a linear distance of no more than 0.2 miles from every home.

As of May 2024, 13.85 residents per thousand live within a quarter mile of a public park in West Des Moines.

By evaluating how many residents live close to parks, West Des Moines can gauge the effectiveness of its urban planning and ensure equitable access to these valuable community resources. Taking into account the city’s very strong results regarding the amount of public green space within West Des Moines, this indicator speaks to an inequality in the distribution of those spaces. Future parks would have the most benefit in this area if they were located in areas with higher numbers of multifamily developments, which would also ensure greater usage and public stewardship of those spaces.

NEXT STEPS: A CALL TO ACTION FOR ALL STAKEHOLDERS

> *"Seventeen years ago, as I first started my job… here in West Des Moines, one of the key things I heard from people in our community is, 'Wow, our community is really changing.' We're becoming a lot more diverse, and I don't think we're ready for it. I don't think we're prepared for it."*
>
> – Outreach participant

The work of building a more inclusive city requires that all stakeholders – city officials, community leaders, business owners, and residents – actively engage in this ongoing pursuit. The Inclusivity Index offers a valuable, data-driven framework to enhance inclusivity across the city and to help monitor progress over time. However, its success hinges on a collective will to implement policies, initiatives, and programs that move these indicators in the right direction. It is important that the city periodically engages with stakeholders to review the indicators, track progress, and identify concrete steps toward fostering a more equitable, accessible, and inclusive environment. West Des Moines is poised to become a model of inclusivity, where every resident feels valued, heard, and empowered to contribute to the city's growth and success; however, the city will not reach these goals without attention and effort.

This report confirms that West Des Moines has a strong dedication to creating a welcoming city that provides access to opportunity for all its residents, but the journey toward inclusivity is ongoing. While the foundation is strong, there are still those who report feeling left out and overlooked. As the city grows and evolves, consistently addressing disparities identified through the Inclusivity Index and applying an equity lens to those results are crucial for maintaining community well-being, stability, and prosperity, now and in the future. Keeping inclusivity at the forefront of the city's objectives will ensure that West Des Moines continues to grow in its efforts to be a welcoming and supportive environment for all.

The Index captures a moment in time, and the Index should be updated regularly, and adapted and changed as conditions change. Future iterations could incorporate new data, engage with community members in new ways, seek out new interest groups, or seek out more nuanced measurements in order to capture changing community needs. Additionally, periodic revisions should align the Index with the latest urban planning and inclusivity research best practices. Regular updates to the data presented here and ongoing community engagement related to the outcomes will help ensure that the Index remains responsive to the needs of West Des Moines' diverse population. Through this iterative process, the Inclusivity Index will continue to guide the city's efforts to build an inclusive and equitable community.

APPENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Screening questions

1. Are you at least 18 years of age?
   Yes No [If no, end survey]

Questions about residency

2. Do you live in the City of West Des Moines?
   Yes No [If no, go to question 15]
3. Approximately how many years have you lived in West Des Moines?
4. Approximately how many years have you lived in your current residence?
5. Thinking about where you live right now, how many of your neighbors do you know?
   None A few Half Most All

*Please answer how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement as it relates to your **neighborhood**.*

6. My neighborhood is a good place to raise a family.
   Strongly disagree Disagree Neither Disagree nor Agree Agree Strongly agree
7. My neighborhood is welcoming to newcomers.
   Strongly disagree Disagree Neither Disagree nor Agree Agree Strongly agree
8. The people in my neighborhood help each other.
   Strongly disagree Disagree Neither Disagree nor Agree Agree Strongly agree
9. The people in my neighborhood come together to address common issues or goals.
   Strongly disagree Disagree Neither Disagree nor Agree Agree Strongly agree
10. People of diverse races and ethnicities live in my neighborhood.
    Strongly disagree Disagree Neither Disagree nor Agree Agree Strongly agree
11. I have at least one neighbor I can rely on if I need assistance.
    Strongly disagree Disagree Neither Disagree nor Agree Agree Strongly agree

*Please answer how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement as it relates to your experiences living in **the City of West Des Moines**.*

12. My family can comfortably afford our current home.
    Strongly disagree Disagree Neither Disagree nor Agree Agree Strongly agree
13. My family has opportunities to succeed in West Des Moines.
    Strongly disagree Disagree Neither Disagree nor Agree Agree Strongly agree
14. I plan to remain in West Des Moines for at least the next 5 years.
    Strongly disagree Disagree Neither Disagree nor Agree Agree Strongly agree
15. Do you work or go to school in the City of West Des Moines?
    Yes No *[If only both questions 2 AND 15 are answered NO, end survey.]*

CITY OF WEST DES MOINES INCLUSIVITY SURVEY

*Please answer how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement as it relates to your experiences in **the City of West Des Moines as a whole**.*

16. I feel like I belong in West Des Moines.
    Strongly disagree Disagree Neither Disagree nor Agree Agree Strongly agree

17. I contribute to the economic well-being of West Des Moines.
    Strongly disagree Disagree Neither Disagree nor Agree Agree Strongly agree
18. I feel safe being my authentic self in West Des Moines.
    Strongly disagree Disagree Neither Disagree nor Agree Agree Strongly agree
19. I feel welcome in parks and other public spaces in West Des Moines.
    Strongly disagree Disagree Neither Disagree nor Agree Agree Strongly agree
20. On a scale of 1 – 5 where 1 is very little diversity and 5 is the highest possible level of diversity, how diverse is West Des Moines? (You can use decimals if necessary):

Please answer how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement as it relates to ***city government and public resources in West Des Moines****.*

21. My opinion matters to city decision-makers in West Des Moines.
    Strongly disagree Disagree Neither Disagree nor Agree Agree Strongly agree
22. City government in West Des Moines reflects the city's diversity.
    Strongly disagree Disagree Neither Disagree nor Agree Agree Strongly agree
23. City-sponsored events in West Des Moines recognize and celebrate the city's diversity.
    Strongly disagree Disagree Neither Disagree nor Agree Agree Strongly agree
24. There are sufficient resources and support systems in West Des Moines for the diverse groups of people who live and work here.
    Strongly disagree Disagree Neither Disagree nor Agree Agree Strongly agree
25. It is important to me that the City continues to offer services for low income people in need.
    Strongly disagree Disagree Neither Disagree nor Agree Agree Strongly agree
26. West Des Moines is a stronger city when everyone has stable housing they can afford.
    Strongly disagree Disagree Neither Disagree nor Agree Agree Strongly agree

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability.

27. Aside from your home or workplace, what is a place in West Des Moines where you feel like you belong?

28. What are your recommendations for making West Des Moines a city where everyone feels included, valued, and empowered?

Your answers to the following questions will be used for statistical purposes only.

29. What zip code do you live in?
30. How many people are living or staying in your household right now, including yourself?
31. How many people 65 years of age or older live in your household, including yourself?
32. How many people under 18 years of age live in your household?
33. What is your age?
    Under 18 18-34 35-44 45-64 65 and over
34. Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin? Yes No Prefer not to answer
35. What is your race? (select all that apply)
    White Black or African American American Indian and Alaska Native
    Asian Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander Other race
36. What is your country of origin?

37. What is your gender?
    Male Female Non-Binary/Transgender/Third Gender
    Prefer to self-describe:
    Prefer not to answer
38. What is your sexual orientation?
    Straight, that is not LGBTQ Gay or lesbian Bisexual
    Something else Prefer not to answer
39. Do you identify as a person with a disability or other chronic condition?
    Yes No Prefer not to answer
40. Do you own or rent your current residence?
    Own*[Go to question 42]*
    Rent *[Go to question 41]*
    I live at home *[Go to question 41]*
    Other *[Go to question 41]*
41. Is homeownership something you aspire to?
    Yes No Prefer not to answer
42. Approximately what percentage of your total household monthly income do you spend on your rent or mortgage payment?
    20% or less *[Go to question 44]*
    21 – 30% *[Go to question 44]*
    31 – 40% *[Go to question 44]*
    40 – 50% *[Go to question 44]*
    More than 50% *[Go to question 44]*
    Not sure *[Go to question 43]*
43. Do you think you spend more than 30% of your total household monthly income or less than 30% of your total household monthly income on your rent or mortgage?
    More than 30% Less than 30% Not sure
44. What is your household income?
    Under $25,000 Between $25,000 and $34,999 Between $35,000 and $49,999
    Between $50,000 and $74,999 Between $75,000 and $99,999
    Between $100,000 and $149,999 Between $150,000 and $199,999
    $200,000 or more
45. What is the highest level of school you completed?
    Less than high school diploma High school diploma (includes equivalency)
    Associate's degree Bachelor's degree
    Graduate or professional degree
46. Thank you for your time! Would you like to know about the results of this survey?

Yes No *[If no, end survey]*

47. What is your name?
48. What is your email address?