

A black and white photograph of a man wearing a cap and a t-shirt, sitting on a tractor in a grassy field. The tractor is facing left. In the background, there is a line of trees under a cloudy sky.

# Quality of Place

“Quality of Place,” “Quality of Life,” and “Sustainability” are concepts used in planning, community and economic development, and public policy. Quality of Life tends to reflect physical, mental, and social well-being. Quality of Place studies often focus on factors in the external environment that contribute to quality of life.<sup>48</sup> Sustainability is a term used by developers to refer to the health of environmental, economic, and social systems. The factors used to measure these concepts exist in the interlocking systems described throughout this report. Historically, researchers observed that communities struggling economically focused first on quality of life—meeting basic needs for food, shelter, health, and education. When communities started to thrive, then they turned their attention to recreational, physical, and social amenities associated with quality of place. Today, researchers and community development experts recognize how intertwined all of these factors are and increasingly embrace the notion that investments in quality of place can and do improve and enhance quality of life. A local example for Scott County might be the recent addition of paved trails to promote physical recreation, health, and well-being.

The Forward Together Survey is all about the interconnected elements of sustainability, quality of life and place. A systems approach recognizes the relationships between amenities, health, social capital, and safety and how all of these relate

directly to each of the topics covered in the survey. Still, a series of questions on quality of life and place, and sections on public services and infrastructure, arts and creative expression, and community building provide a useful way to assess quality of life and place.

Among the overall quality of life and place items, 50% or more of respondents expressed positive sentiments in seven of the 14 areas (Figure 54). Responses confirm that elements of community and natural beauty are strong and a majority of people feel good about the schools, and think it is a good place to raise children. Consensus shifts to disagreement around issues of civic engagement, satisfaction with local government, economic opportunity, and satisfaction with healthcare. The greatest dissatisfaction is with available recreational opportunities. Respondents see too few options for recreation.



Figure 54: Quality of Life and Place in Scott County

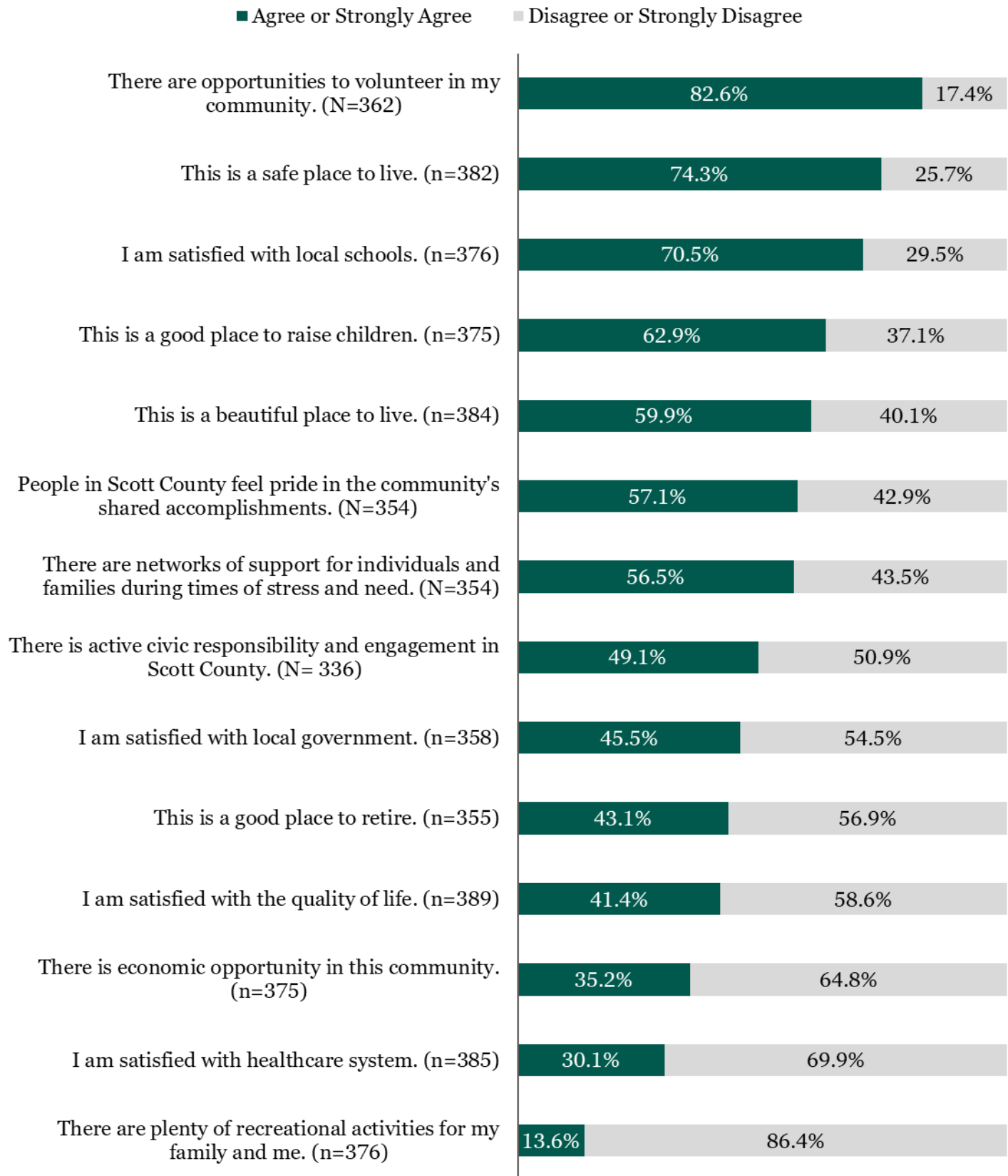
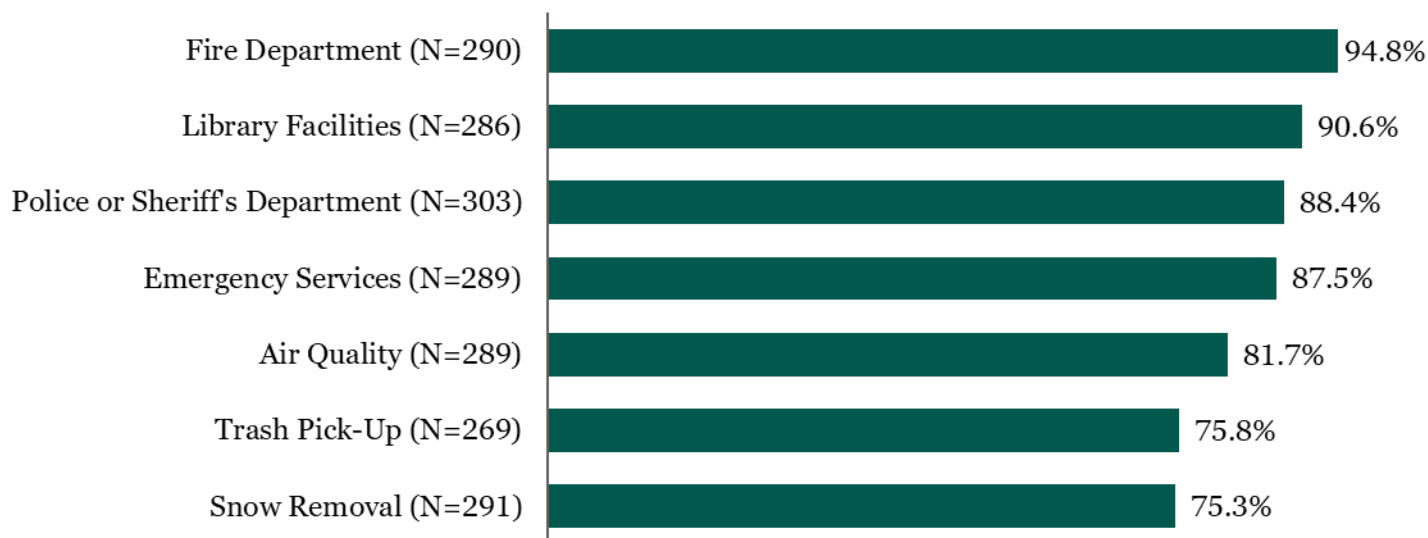


Figure 55: Percent of respondents who rate each public service as "good" or "excellent"



## Public Service And Infrastructure

Scott County residents rate a wide range of public services as “good” or “excellent” (Figure 55). Strong social ties between community members and those who work in public service engender positive feelings. This small rural community is home to three public libraries! This is an enormous asset to the community, providing free access to information and public spaces for meetings and activities (including showcasing art and hosting cultural activities). The community also shares consensus on where they need to do better in the area of public service.

More than 50% of survey respondents rate the following public services as “poor” or “very poor”: code enforcement for private properties (70.7%), internet access (59.5%), road maintenance (59.0%), and crime prevention activities (58.9%).

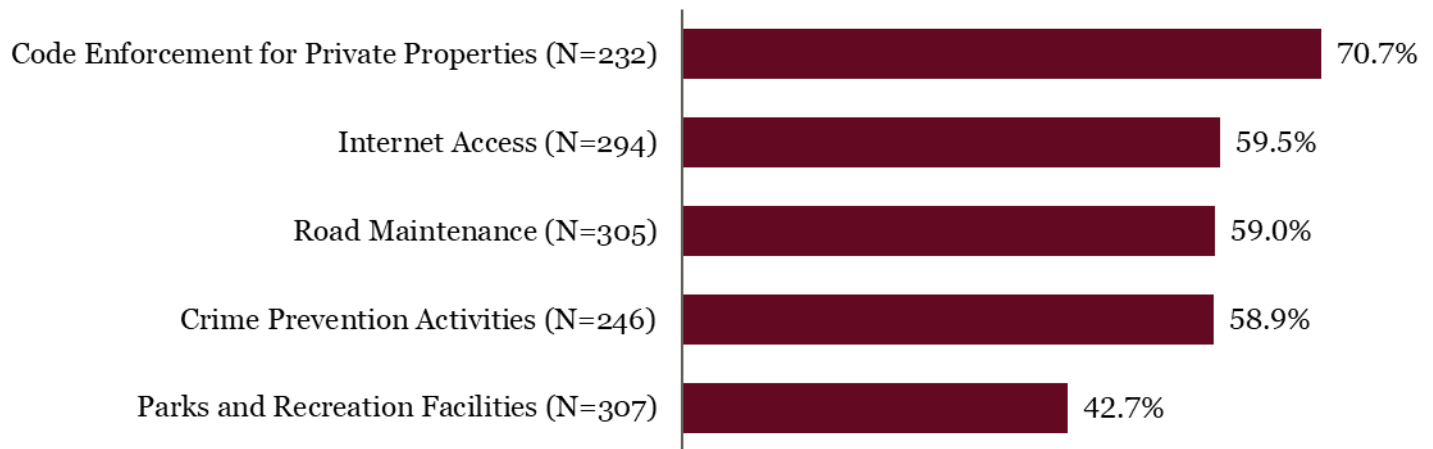
### Code Enforcement for Private Properties

The highest level of disagreement was with “code enforcement for private properties.” As noted in the section on “Housing,” this is a place where the economic challenges of the community create an issue that needs attention. In interviews, we heard about two aspects to the code enforcement issue: 1) code enforcement for poorly kept rental properties and 2) code enforcement for poorly maintained owner occupied properties.

One interview respondent said, “I can’t believe what they charge in rent for places that I’m not sure people should even be living in. Too much of the housing is unsafe and that doesn’t help our residents stay healthy or be productive.” In other conversations, residents expressed frustration with the number of run down properties and wanted to see major neighborhood revitalization efforts. Community groups work to improve a handful of properties each year, but they also recognize their efforts are insufficient to solve the problem.

Lower income respondents indicate the need for assistance with home repair and maintenance. These responses suggest that community members across income levels recognize the same problem, but may see different paths to solving the problem. Code enforcement in the case of owners who rent their properties is likely an important step to improving the quality of housing. On the other hand, enforcing codes for home and property maintenance may place burdensome fines on families who would like to maintain their property better, but do not have the resources to do so. Addressing this issue will require bringing together public officials, property owners, and residents in struggling neighborhoods to develop strategies.

Figure 56: Percent that rate the public service "poor" or "very poor"



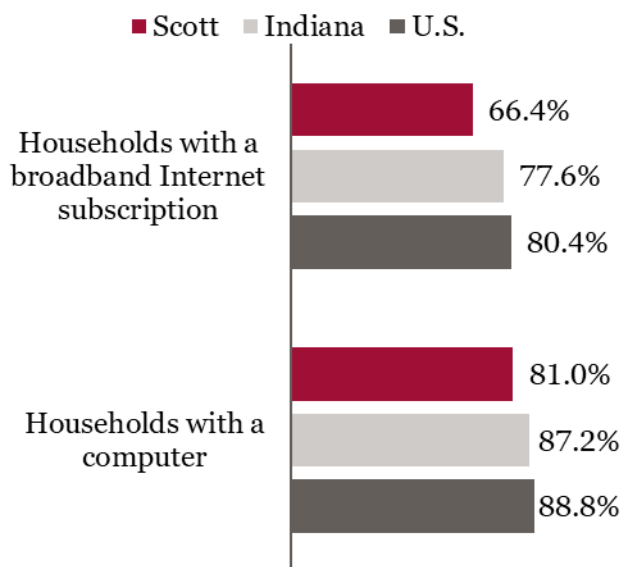
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### Internet

Interviews confirm the need to continue expanding broadband high-speed internet and finding ways to ensure that all residents can access it. The COVID-19 pandemic has made this need even more urgent. According to American Community Survey data, in the years from 2014 to

2018, an estimated 81.0% of residents had a computer in their household and a significantly lower 66.4% had a broadband internet subscription. Local leaders have worked to expand infrastructure to provide broadband, but the economic challenges in the community continue to hamper access. Internet and cell phone companies have expanded free access to some (students, for example) during the pandemic. Scott County, like communities all across the country, needs to find ways to continue free or very low cost access to internet.

Figure 57: Computer and internet access in Scott County, Indiana, and the U.S., 2014-2018



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U.S. Census Bureau. 2020. "Quickfacts." American Community Survey 5-Year Data 2014-2018. Retrieved 08/13/2020  
<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/IN.scottcountyindiana.US/PST045219>.

### Roads

In interviews, several local leaders expressed the importance of road maintenance to attracting and building successful businesses, improving safety, and limiting damage to residents' vehicles. Respondents support these efforts and interviewees suggest this as an area where state and federal resources can play a significant role. Local roads present a greater struggle, but there are opportunities for rural communities to get needed support for these efforts.

### Crime Prevention

A majority of respondents rated crime prevention activities as poor or very poor. In conversations, this issue became more complicated. The community is somewhat divided. Some believe the police need to do more to prevent the crime of drug use. Some suggested that recent



efforts of the sheriff's department have made an important difference. Others believe law enforcement has a role to play in the community's response to drug use, but they question the impacts of a punitive approach. In one interview, a respondent suggested that jailing locals for drug use and sales is not a deterrent. For some, "when they go to jail, they meet up with family and friends." If those engaged in these activities already feel socially isolated from the community and have normalized movement in and out of the jail, this response may not produce any change in the pattern of behavior and does nothing to address the root of the behavior.



The challenge of addressing this reinforcing cycle of economic struggle, drug use, incarceration, difficulty gaining employment, and continued economic struggle is enormous. Law enforcement has a role to play and they must protect the community from violent offenders. But if the data from the health and wellness section of this study point to childhood trauma as a driver of community-wide challenges, then a different approach to nonviolent offenders struggling with substance use disorder may be essential to disrupting the feedback loop that is hindering education, employment, health, and wellness in Scott County.

### *Parks and Recreation Facilities*

Residents of Scott County have mixed responses to questions about parks and recreation. People agree that the community needs more opportunities for recreation. Some point to the fact that the community has some very nice parks that sit largely unused. When parks host too little activity, they can become sites for problem activities.<sup>49</sup> This happened several years ago with a local park in Austin. The community cleaned up and refurbished parts of the park, but generating consistent use still poses challenges.

In a similar way, new trails provide opportunities for outdoor recreation. In many communities, simply building trails generates widespread use (they exemplify the "if you build it

they will come" philosophy). However, in a community that struggles with mental and physical health issues and where many families are just struggling to make ends meet, taking the step of getting out and using this resource is less likely. Physical activity has the capacity to improve mental and physical health, but problems in those same areas keep people from engaging such activities. Existing parks, trails, Hardy Lake, and local forests are strong assets that, when more fully activated, may be essential to promoting, achieving, and maintaining physical and mental health and wellness and meeting recreational and entertainment needs.

### *Transportation*

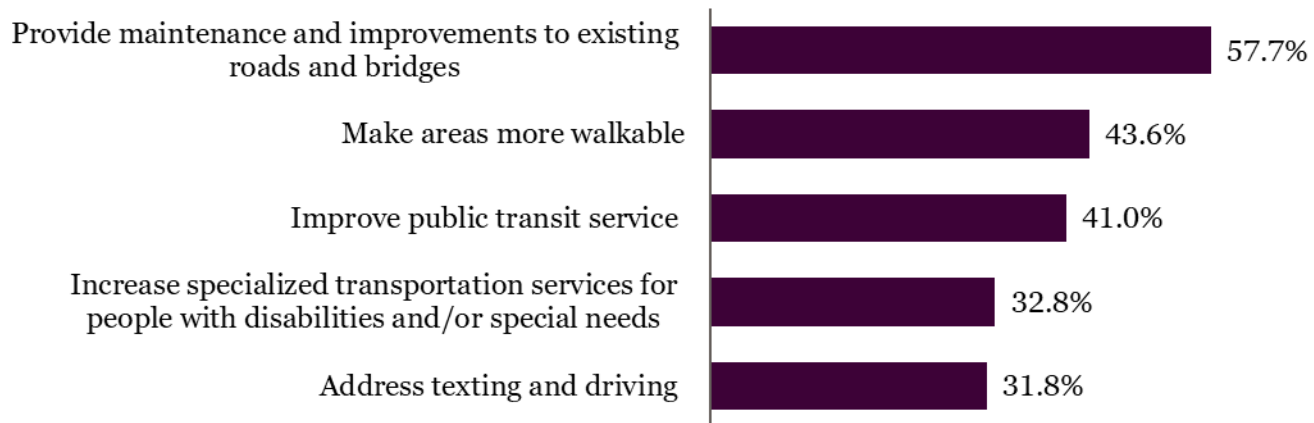
Transportation is a common challenge for rural communities. Asked to prioritize issues related to transportation, a majority of survey respondents placed road maintenance and improvements among their top priorities. The consensus dropped off after that. Transportation came up in comments across multiple topics (e.g. health, community building, employment) and was a topic of discussion in interviews.

*I believe transportation is often a barrier for youth and adults to participate in our existing community building activities.*

*Need for more public transportation for the elderly that is widely available.*

*I had a family member that lived with us. We*

Figure 58: Priorities for transportation (N=305)



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*had great difficulty getting transportation to Dialysis that was 6 miles away.*

*Transportation is a major problem.*

*[T]ransportation to health appointments do[es] not help if there is no transportation for employment, groceries, and education [sic].*

*Needs to be professional vision/planning for transportation and growth in every way.*

One person wrote in “Transportation” as a top five economic/personal finance priority. Conversations and comments suggest the community needs public transportation to support youth and adult engagement in community

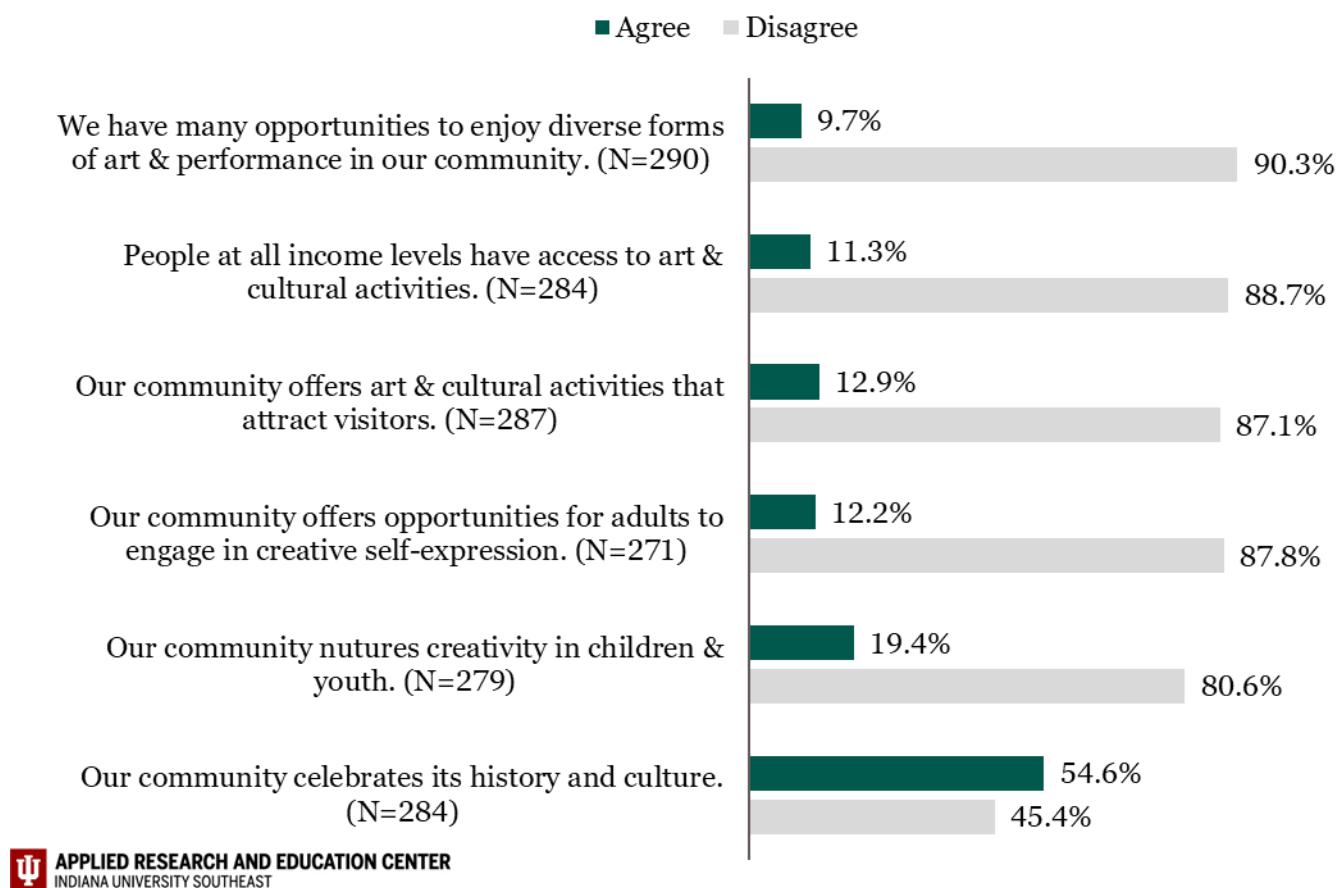
activities, employment, educational activities, recreation, and to support access to physical and mental health care. Local providers shared comments about the extent to which providing transportation has been essential to keeping people in treatment for substance use disorder and getting them to physical health appointments. Yet only 41.0% of respondents selected “improve public transit service” as a priority. People may not associate public transportation with rural communities or some may feel like they cannot improve what they do not have.

Public transportation is a challenge throughout the southern Indiana region and across the U.S. We have a few notable exceptions in major cities, but most of our communities are underserved. Public transportation will not pay for itself in fares.

Public subsidies to transportation, however, can produce savings in health, mental health, and unemployment, and can generate tax revenue as the result of higher and more stable employment. To the extent that public transportation can increase engagement in employment, educational activities, recreation, extracurricular activities and can support access to physical and mental health, it may be a significant leverage point for community and economic development in Scott County. In order for public transportation to achieve these goals, however, it has to be frequent and reliable, and it has to offer good coverage of the community. Achieving a system that meets these criteria requires significant funding and effective planning.



Figure 59: Agreement with statements about art and creative expression opportunities in the community



## Art and Creative Self-Expression

Art and creative self-expression can provide entertainment, but the benefits of thriving support for arts and creativity go far beyond entertainment. Nurturing creativity in children is essential to developing strong critical thinking and problem solving skills.<sup>50</sup> The arts are essential to nurturing entrepreneurship and innovation.<sup>51</sup> Attending theater events helps open the eyes of youth to creative industry and career paths, but is also essential to teaching tolerance and perspective taking.<sup>52</sup> Theater and fiction reading help people develop habits of thinking that allow them to better understand the experiences of others and to see issues and experiences through the eyes of people different from themselves. In addition to these vital functions for learning and building strong and welcoming communities, the arts enrich peoples' lives and bring pleasure to those who view, listen, or otherwise experience the arts.

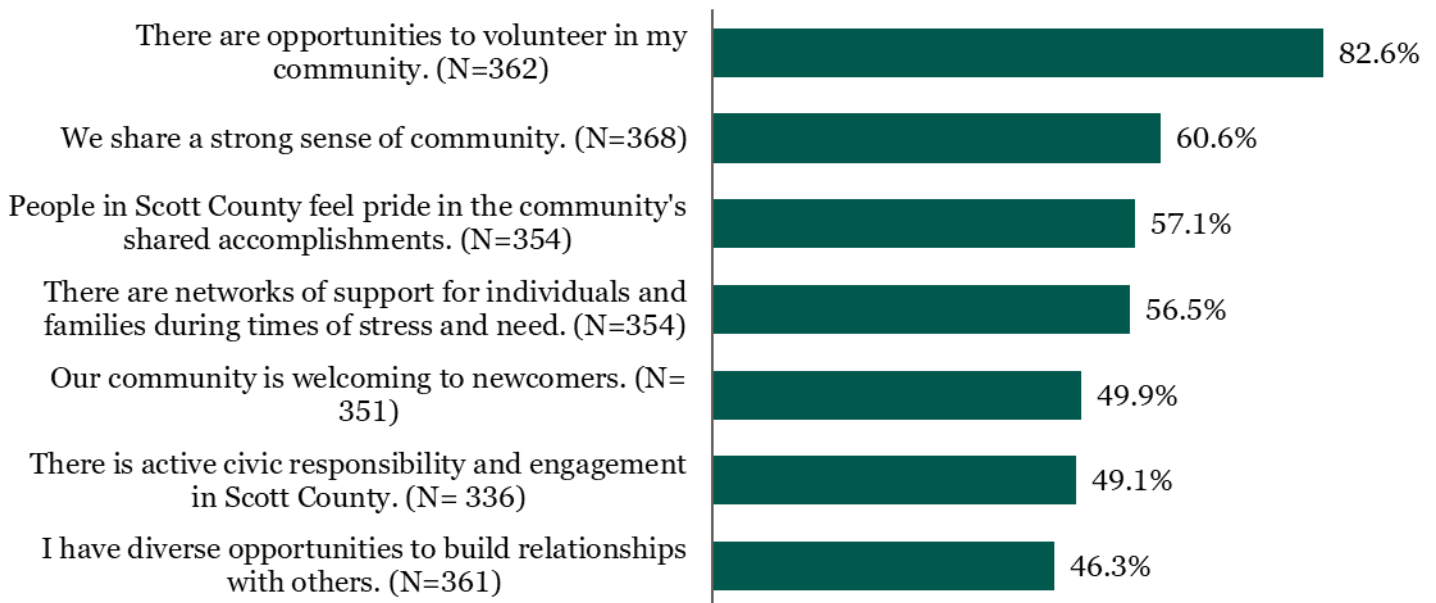
Adults we spoke with mentioned that their only arts opportunities are through the schools—they

enjoy them, and recognize room for growth. Survey respondents shared overwhelming consensus that Scott County is lacking in the arts. Youth value the art and music programs in their schools and see the opportunity to build on what they have. They would like to see a more public venue for youth music and theater, as well as community productions. Youth envision opportunities for a multi-use space to house an e-sports arena that could provide entertainment for all ages. They also mentioned the need for Scott County to think more strategically about their ability to be a hub of entertainment for surrounding rural communities.

Lower income respondents are significantly more likely to perceive opportunities for arts, creative expression, and cultural activities. These findings likely reflect varied expectations. Higher income residents may be more likely to pursue arts entertainment and enjoyment in nearby Louisville, Columbus, or Indianapolis, giving them a different frame of reference than residents who do not travel to access art and cultural activities.



Figure 60: Social capital aspects of quality of place: percent who "agree" or "strongly agree"



Even with these significant differences, however, very few respondents see significant opportunities. The exception is in response to the item, "Our community celebrates its history and culture." Among lower income respondents, 64.9% agree or strongly agree and 48.6% of higher income respondents agree. Celebration of local history and culture is not simply a cultural asset, but also builds a strong sense of community, which is Scott County's greatest asset. These activities may be assets to build on in expanding arts and cultural opportunities.

## Community Building and Social Capital

Scott County appears moderately strong in social capital, a key component of quality of place. A central theme running through this study, and embedded in perceptions of quality of life and place, is *community*. Community includes the extent to which people identify as part of an in-group as the result of living together in Scott County and the extent to which they draw strength and positive energy and association from their social interactions and relationships in this location. Healthy community and strong social capital provide this kind of belonging. *Social capital* refers to people's relationships and personal networks, which, like financial capital,

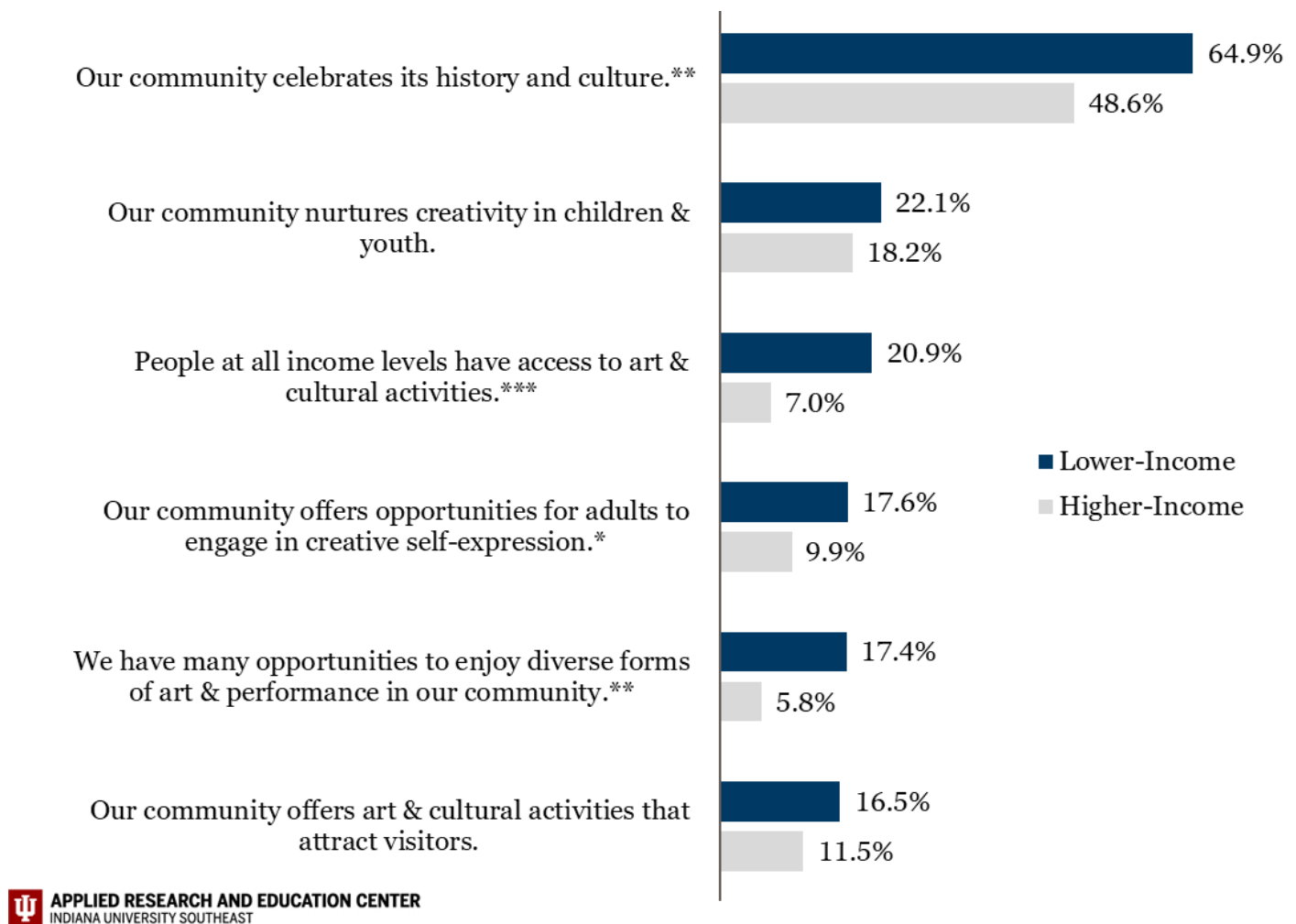
function as an important resource for achieving certain ends.<sup>53</sup>

The Forward Together community assessment found *social capital* and a strong sense of community to be Scott County's greatest asset (Figure 60). The strength of a population's social ties and their identification with their local community are important to quality of life and engender feelings associated with quality of place. These ties have the capacity to support children and youth in ways that nurture developmental assets that build resilience—a set of coping skills, outlooks, and attitudes that help people succeed in life and manage its challenges in healthy and constructive ways.

Social capital items on the survey had a strong consensus, but the findings reflect differences between lower and higher income respondents (Figure 61). A majority of higher income respondents "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that "People in Scott County feel pride in the community's shared accomplishments," but a marginally significant larger share of lower income respondents agreed. For the item "our community is welcoming to newcomers," lower income respondents were significantly more likely to "agree" or "strongly agree" (66.7% compared to 55.6% for higher income respondents). In response to the statement, "There are networks of



Figure 61: Perceptions of social capital by income, percent that "agree" or "strongly agree"



support for individuals and families during times of stress and need,” there was a marginally significant difference between the groups, with lower income respondents less likely to agree. For many of these items, just over 50% agree. These are not overwhelming figures, but they reflect stronger consensus than many other items and they do so consistently across items measuring social capital.

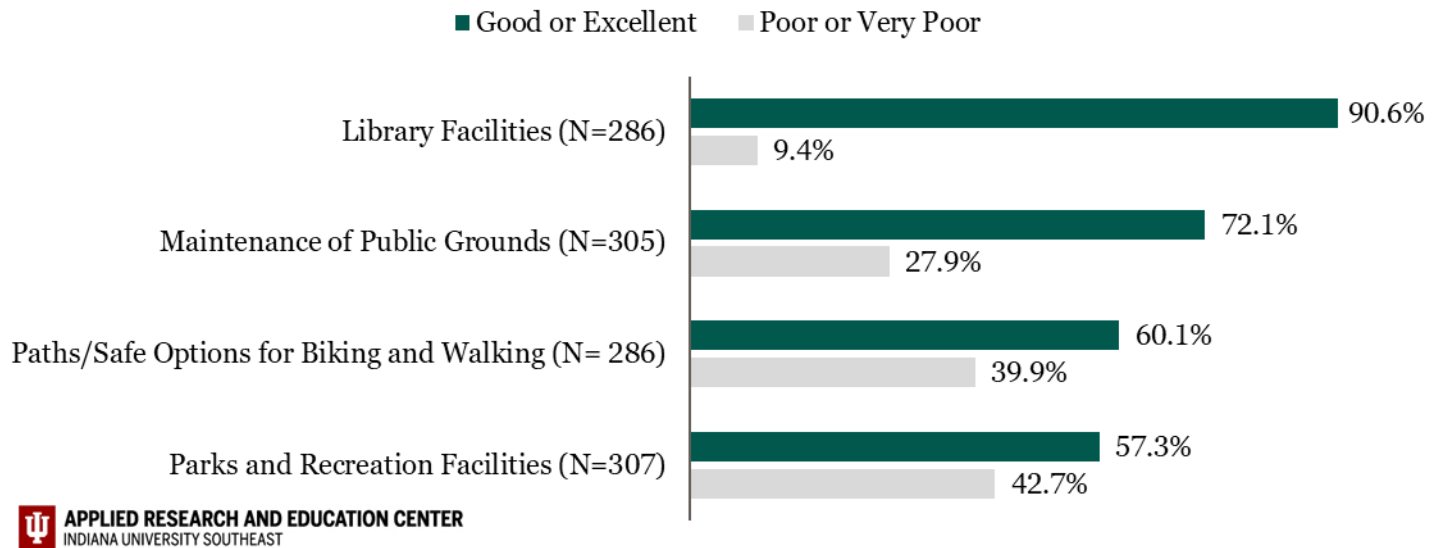
Close-knit communities with strong in-group identification can also engender challenging social dynamics for those who do not quite fit in or those the in-group chooses to exclude.<sup>54</sup> One group of young people at a survey event mentioned that it is difficult for teens who do not fit in or who do not feel like they fit in. When a community is tight knit with strong social capital, if one does something to place themselves outside of the in-group, feelings of isolation or rejection may be even more intense than in a community with weaker social ties.<sup>55</sup> Finding ways to decrease social isolation among those who may not always fit in is an important

step in building resilience and expanding community.

Efforts to build a strong recovery community are an example of residents using their social capital assets to engage people to address local challenges



Figure 62: Ratings of the quality of social infrastructure



and reintegrate people who may be experiencing isolation. The next step is to reduce stigma to reintegrate people in recovery into the larger community, not just the recovery community. These efforts are well underway in Scott County, and will need to continue.

In general, high levels of civic engagement engender higher levels of tolerance. The few exceptions tend to be in cases of more exclusionary voluntary associations and fundamentalist religious organizations. Like communities all across the United States, Scott County saw voluntary associations and social institutions decline along with strong manufacturing jobs and family wages.<sup>56</sup> Respondents diverge, however, on perceptions of current civic engagement in Scott County. Our conversations suggest that while churches in the area remain active, attendance at other voluntary association meetings has declined.

Survey respondents split on the item, “There is active civic responsibility and engagement in Scott County.” As some pointed out in their comments, strengthening the community will require greater engagement. Community development efforts will need to create spaces for traditional and new forms of voluntary activity to flourish.

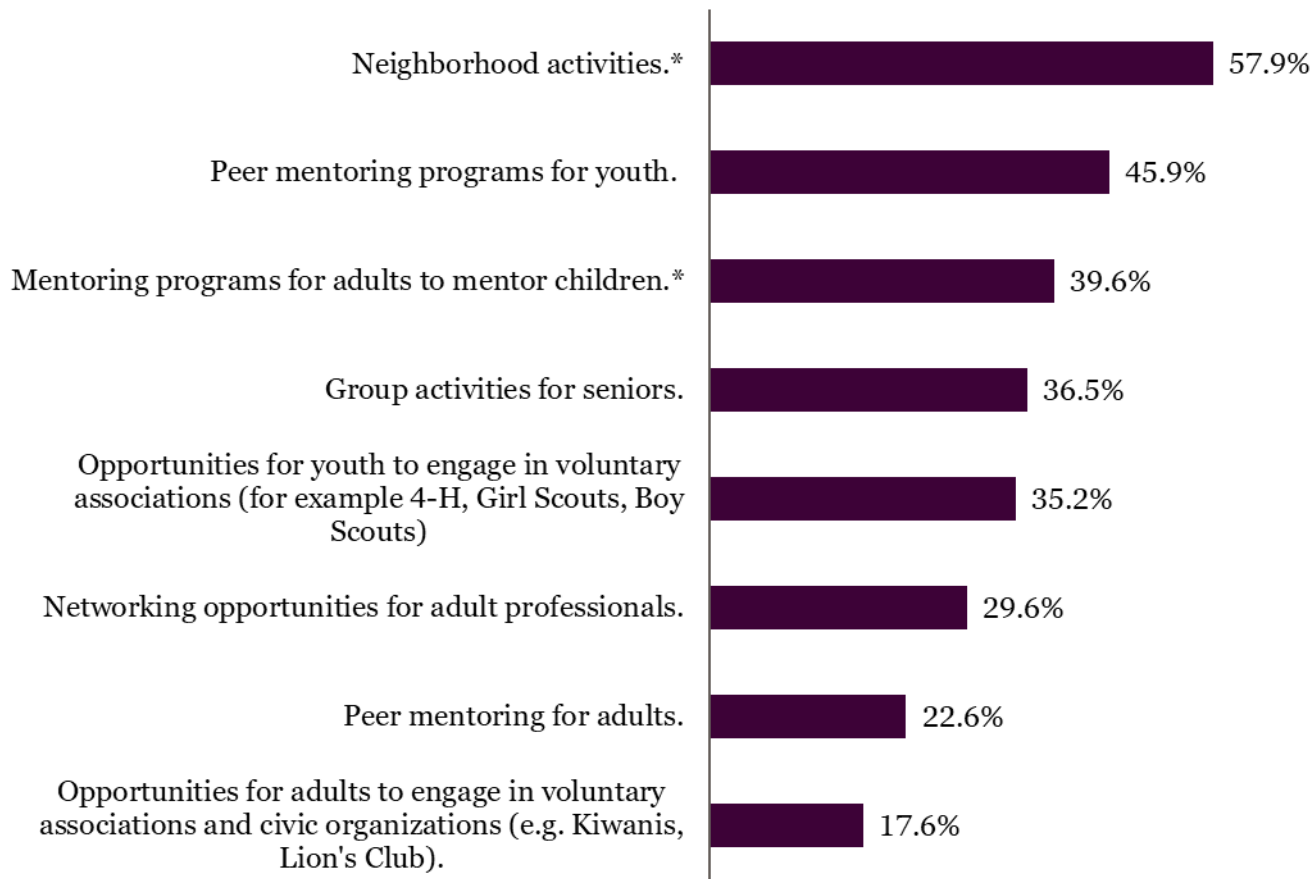
Social infrastructure refers to spaces and structures that facilitate social engagement.<sup>57</sup> A majority of respondents rated library facilities, public grounds maintenance, paths for biking and walking, and parks and recreation facilities “good”

or “excellent” (Figure 62). In addition, the Finley Firehouse hosts a weekly Euchre night that the research team hears is a strong draw for a portion of the community. On the other end of the county, karaoke at Leroy’s is the Saturday night happening. Scott County has some strong social infrastructure, but many remain concerned about insufficient recreational opportunities and facilities. Survey and interview comments suggest that the area needs more of these spaces for varied activities and the transportation that would facilitate widespread use.

In a community where lower income residents may be juggling multiple part-time jobs whose schedules change weekly, and teens may be working to help pay the family’s bills, providing spaces for social activity and civic engagement will not necessarily generate widespread engagement. Movement on education, health, housing, and employment, will be important to also creating the time, mental space, and discretionary income for stronger engagement, which will then feed back into progress in education, health, employment, and housing stability. The key is to try to determine what leverage points could build on existing strengths to shift areas of need in a positive direction.

The survey asked respondents to select three top priorities for community building (Figure 63). The majority agree that neighborhood activities should be a priority. About one-third of respondents included opportunities for youth to engage in voluntary associations and group activities for

Figure 63: Community building, percent that selected item as top three priority (N=159)



seniors among their priorities.

Mentoring programs and, in some cases neighborhood activities, can use the existing social infrastructure for events and engagement opportunities. Activation of these spaces, while building social connections at the individual and neighborhood level, can help spur participation in other activities. Scott County has a number of hardworking and effective youth and adult voluntary organizations. The primary task is to expand participation, to reach those not currently participating. This is a challenge. Those who participate maintain social ties to one another and those who do not may feel and be isolated, or may have other personal barriers—anything from transportation to mental health challenges—that deplete motivation to engage.

Social capital and some aspects of community are among Scott County's greatest strengths, but concerns about health and mental health and relatively low employment ratios suggest that for

those who are not feeling that strong sense of connection, there is room for growth. Stable health and housing are basic needs that can allow people to devote time and mental energy to social engagement. The schools present a hub from which activity spokes may emerge—youth we spoke with see real potential to build in the area of the arts and gaming. Among adults not connected to the schools, activating other public social spaces will be important to building community.

While community engagement and strong social ties do not eliminate all problems, they protect the community from far more significant damage when crises occur.<sup>58</sup> In 2015, Scott County was home to a substantial HIV outbreak. Strong social networks generated a quick and effective community response that included changes in health department policy, establishment of a one-stop treatment and needle exchange facility, and growth in support for and attention to the recovery community and all it could do to help heal and provide safe harbor to those struggling with



substance use disorder. Strong social ties and positive regard for the community made this response possible.

The outbreak spurred action on economic and health concerns in other parts of the community as well. Re-energized support for the farmer's market and intentional efforts to engage long-term community and economic development planning reflect a strong commitment to generating positive cycles of health and development. When we asked interview respondents to map local assets, they had no trouble identifying community leaders they see as movers and shakers who can help lead this community into a strong future.

## Forward Together

Quality of Place is about the community's shared resources and amenities, and about the social relationships they foster. Scott County's greatest strength is its people and their sense of connection to one another. Challenging times, however, create hardship and social isolation for many. Much of the community feels very close knit, but leaders recognize the need to engage community members in healthy activities,

educational opportunities, and creative pursuits that build happier, healthier lives and a stronger community. Scott County can use its assets to address gaps and areas of need.

- Identify short and long-term strategies for preventing and responding to substance abuse and the crime engendered by use and an active drug trade.
- Use local libraries and public parks, in collaboration with schools and nonprofit organizations, to support increased access to arts and cultural, physical, and civic activities.
- Work with state representatives, schools, healthcare providers, and local employers to develop a long-term strategy to develop public transportation that can effectively serve diverse needs in the community and can promote full use of the community's existing assets.
- Harness the energy of youth, and the adults who work with them in the schools, to nurture the arts in younger children through summer, school break, and after school programs, and draw in collaboration with area adults with interest and talent.<sup>59</sup>
- Build on strong celebration of local history and culture, using local festivals to showcase new programs and recruit participation.
- Support & organize neighborhood activities that offer opportunities for fellowship, physical activity, and mentoring: tutoring, block parties, walking groups, sports and games.

All citation and figure numbers consistent with full report and available at [www.scottcountyfoundation.org](http://www.scottcountyfoundation.org)



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