

**THE NCS**<sup>TM</sup>  
The National Community Survey<sup>TM</sup>

# River Falls, WI

Community Livability Report

2019



2955 Valmont Road Suite 300  
Boulder, Colorado 80301  
n-r-c.com • 303-444-7863



777 North Capitol Street NE Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20002  
icma.org • 800-745-8780

# Contents

About..... 1

Quality of Life in River Falls ..... 2

Community Characteristics ..... 3

Governance ..... 5

Participation ..... 7

Special Topics..... 9

Conclusions ..... 13



The National Community Survey™  
© 2001-2019 National Research Center, Inc.

The NCS™ is presented by NRC in collaboration with ICMA.

NRC is a charter member of the AAPOR Transparency Initiative, providing clear disclosure of our sound and ethical survey research practices.

# About

The National Community Survey™ (The NCS™) report is about the “livability” of River Falls. The phrase “livable community” is used here to evoke a place that is not simply habitable, but that is desirable. It is not only where people do live, but where they want to live.

Great communities are partnerships of the government, private sector, community-based organizations and residents, all geographically connected. The NCS captures residents’ opinions within the three pillars of a community (Community Characteristics, Governance and Participation) across eight central facets of community (Safety, Mobility, Natural Environment, Built Environment, Economy, Recreation and Wellness, Education and Enrichment and Community Engagement).

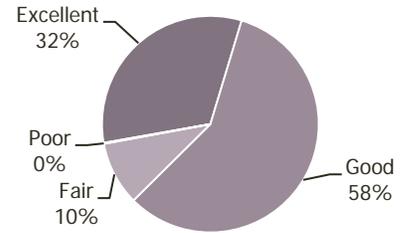
The Community Livability Report provides the opinions of a representative sample of 477 residents of the City of River Falls. The margin of error around any reported percentage is 4% for all respondents. The full description of methods used to garner these opinions can be found in the *Technical Appendices* provided under separate cover.



# Quality of Life in River Falls

Nine in ten residents rated the quality of life in River Falls as excellent or good. This rating was similar to ratings given in comparison communities (see Appendix B of the *Technical Appendices* provided under separate cover).

Overall Quality of Life



Shown below are the eight facets of community. The color of each community facet summarizes how residents rated it across the three sections of the survey that represent the pillars of a community – Community Characteristics, Governance and Participation. When most ratings across the three pillars were higher than the benchmark, the color for that facet is the darkest shade; when most ratings were lower than the benchmark, the color is the lightest shade. A mix of ratings (higher and lower than the benchmark) results in a color between the extremes.

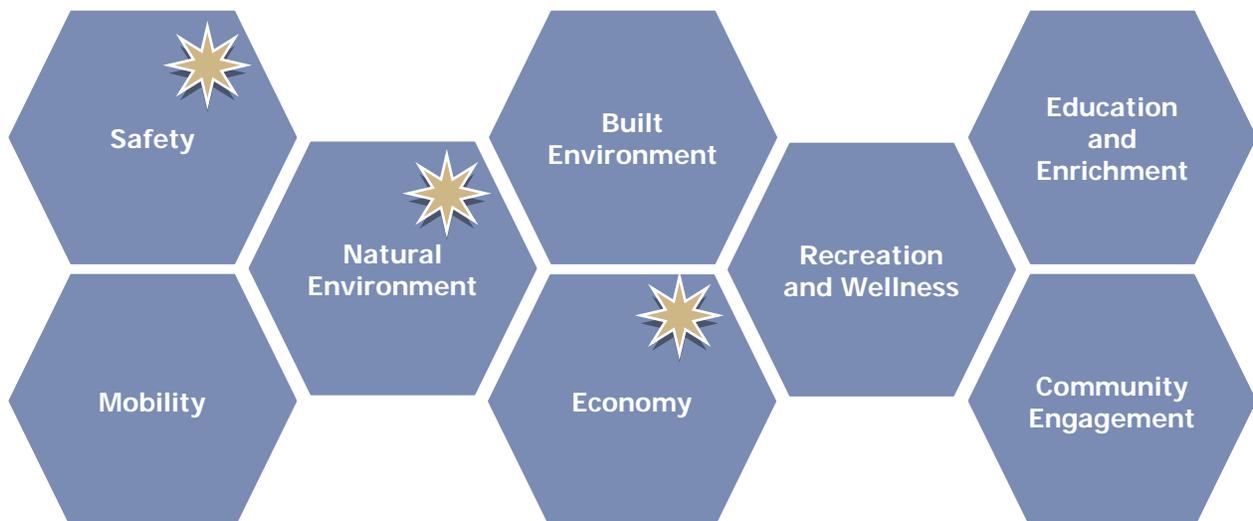
In addition to a summary of ratings, the image below includes one or more stars to indicate which community facets were the most important focus areas for the community. Residents identified Safety, Economy and Natural Environment as priorities for the River Falls community in the coming two years. This overview of the key aspects of community quality provides a quick summary of where residents see exceptionally strong performance and where performance offers the greatest opportunity for improvement. Linking quality to importance offers community members and leaders a view into the characteristics of the community that matter most and that seem to be working best.

Details that support these findings are contained in the remainder of this Livability Report, starting with the ratings for Community Characteristics, Governance and Participation and ending with results for River Falls' unique questions.

## Legend

- Higher than national benchmark
- Similar to national benchmark
- Lower than national benchmark

★ Most important



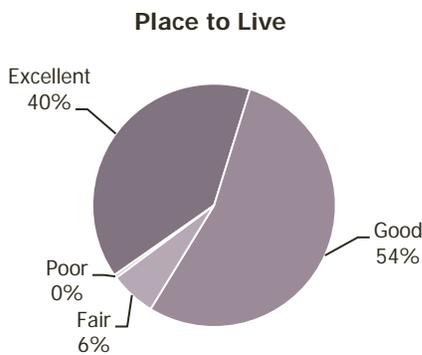
# Community Characteristics

*What makes a community livable, attractive and a place where people want to be?*

Overall quality of community life represents the natural ambience, services and amenities that make for an attractive community. How residents rate their overall quality of life is an indicator of the overall health of a community. In the case of River Falls, about 9 in 10 residents rated the city as an excellent or good place to live. Respondents' ratings of River Falls as a place to live were similar to ratings in other communities across the nation.

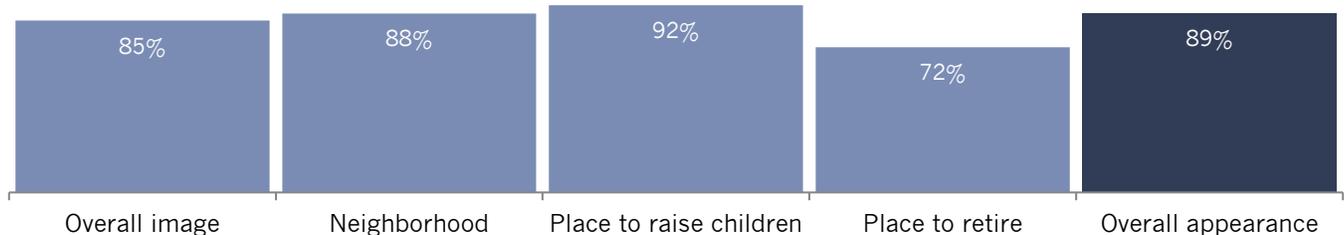
In addition to rating the city as a place to live, respondents rated several aspects of community quality including River Falls as a place to raise children and to retire, their neighborhood as a place to live, the overall image or reputation of River Falls and its overall appearance. At least 8 in 10 respondents gave excellent or good ratings to the overall image and overall appearance of the city, their neighborhood as a place to live and River Falls as a place to raise children, while 7 in 10 were pleased with the city as a place to retire. These ratings were similar to those given in other communities across the nation except for overall appearance, which was above average.

Delving deeper into Community Characteristics, survey respondents rated over 40 features of the community within the eight facets of Community Livability. Broadly, most aspects of community livability tended to be similar to the national benchmarks. However, multiple aspects of Mobility, Natural Environment, and Education and Enrichment were rated positively by at least 7 in 10 respondents and stood out as higher than the benchmark comparisons, including the overall ease of travel, the overall natural environment in River Falls and overall opportunities for education and enrichment, among others. Only two items, shopping opportunities and ease of travel by public transportation, received below-average ratings.



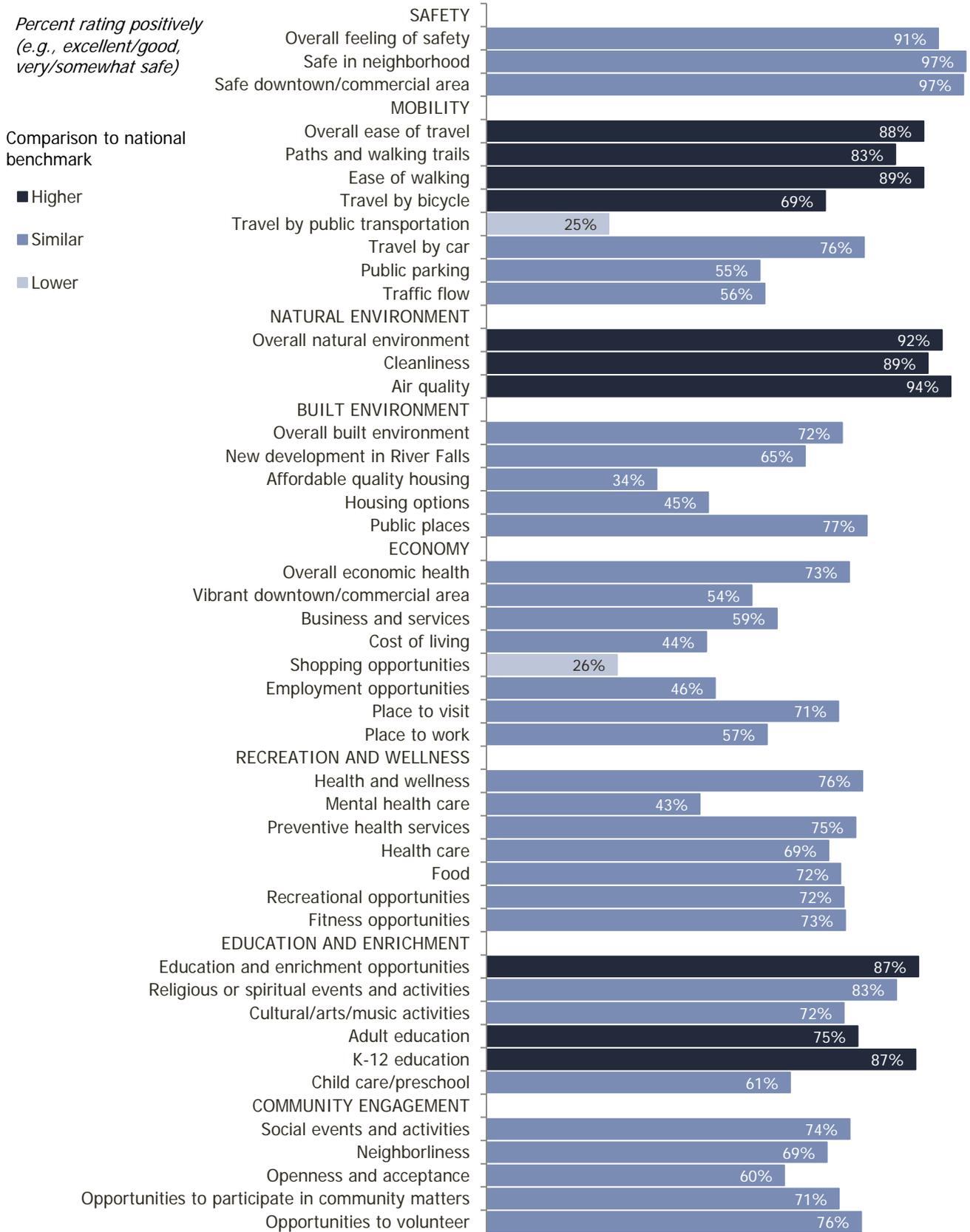
Compared to 2017, most ratings for Community Characteristics tended to remain stable. Ratings in 2019 improved for new development, employment opportunities and preventive health services, but declined for availability of affordable quality housing, variety of housing options, shopping opportunities, cost of living and opportunities to volunteer (for more information see the *Trends Over Time* report under separate cover).

Percent rating positively (e.g., excellent/good)



# The National Community Survey™

Figure 1: Aspects of Community Characteristics



# Governance

*How well does the government of River Falls meet the needs and expectations of its residents?*

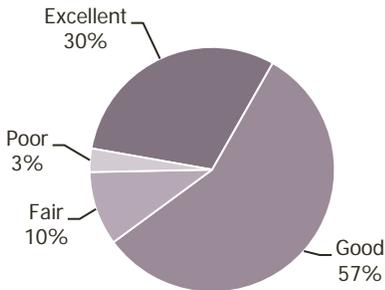
The overall quality of the services provided by River Falls as well as the manner in which these services are provided is a key component of how residents rate their quality of life. About 9 in 10 residents gave excellent or good reviews to the overall quality of City services while one-third were pleased with the services provided by the Federal Government; both of these ratings were on par with national averages.

Survey respondents also rated various aspects of River Falls' leadership and governance. More than 8 in 10 residents gave positive marks to the overall customer service provided by City employees, while roughly 6 in 10 favorably rated the remaining aspects of government performance. While all of these ratings were similar to the national benchmarks, several declined from 2017 to 2019.

Respondents evaluated over 30 individual services and amenities available in River Falls. Almost all City services were evaluated positively by at least two-thirds of residents and were similar to the national benchmarks. Residents gave above-average ratings to street lighting; traffic signal timing; utility billing; land use, planning and zoning and City parks, but below-average marks to bus or transit services.

Compared to 2017, ratings declined for several services related to Natural Environment (including garbage collection, recycling, open space and natural areas preservation) as well as for storm drainage and economic development.

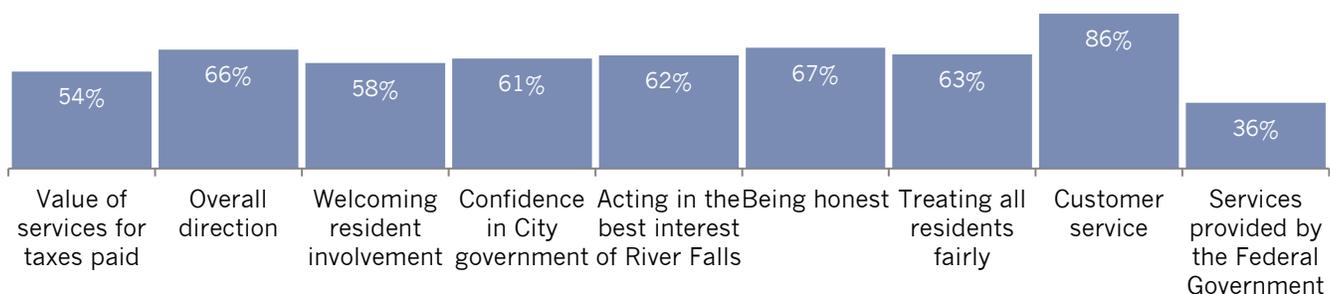
**Overall Quality of City Services**



*Percent rating positively (e.g., excellent/good)*

Comparison to national benchmark

■ Higher ■ Similar ■ Lower



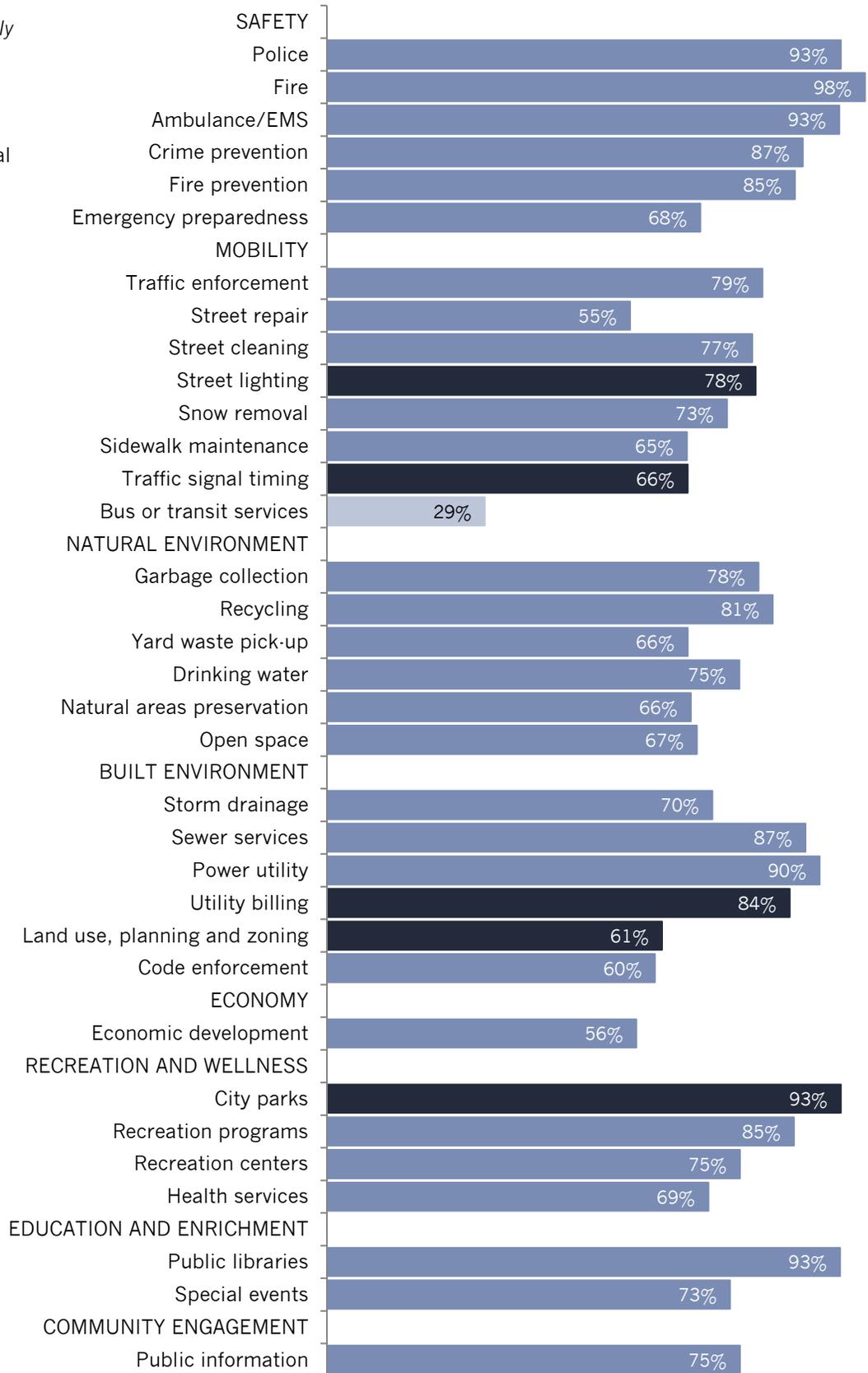
# The National Community Survey™

Figure 2: Aspects of Governance

Percent rating positively  
(e.g., excellent/good)

Comparison to national  
benchmark

- Higher
- Similar
- Lower



# Participation

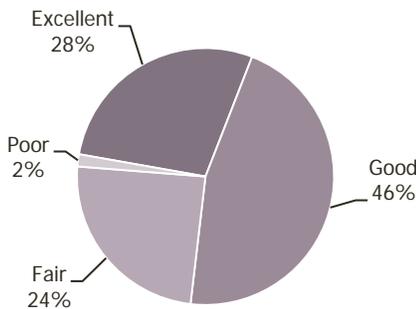
*Are the residents of River Falls connected to the community and each other?*

An engaged community harnesses its most valuable resource, its residents. The connections and trust among residents, government, businesses and other organizations help to create a sense of community, a shared sense of membership, belonging and history. About three-quarters of residents gave positive ratings to the sense of community in River Falls, which was higher than the benchmark comparison. About 9 in 10 residents would recommend living in the city to someone who asked and 8 in 10 planned to remain in River Falls for the next five years.

The survey included over 30 activities and behaviors for which respondents indicated how often they participated in or performed each, if at all. Generally, levels of participation tended to vary widely across the different facets, making the comparisons to the benchmarks, as well as to River Falls over time, useful for interpreting the results. Most participation rates tended to be similar to the national averages. River Falls residents were more likely than those who lived elsewhere to have walked or biked instead of driving, recycled at home, visited a City park or attended a City-sponsored event and were less likely to have observed a code violation. However, they reported lower levels of stocking supplies for an emergency.

In comparison to 2017, residents in 2019 were more likely to have made their homes more energy-efficient, but less likely to have used public libraries, participated in religious or spiritual activities, volunteered or contacted River Falls employees.

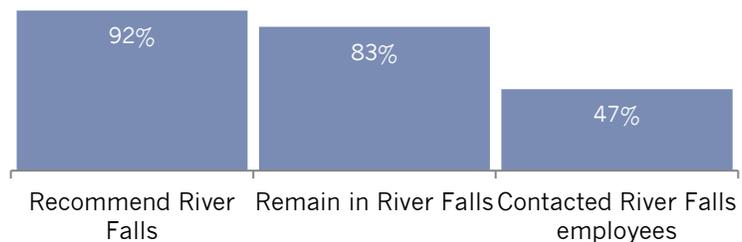
**Sense of Community**



Percent rating positively  
(e.g., very/somewhat likely,  
yes)

Comparison to national  
benchmark

■ Higher ■ Similar ■ Lower



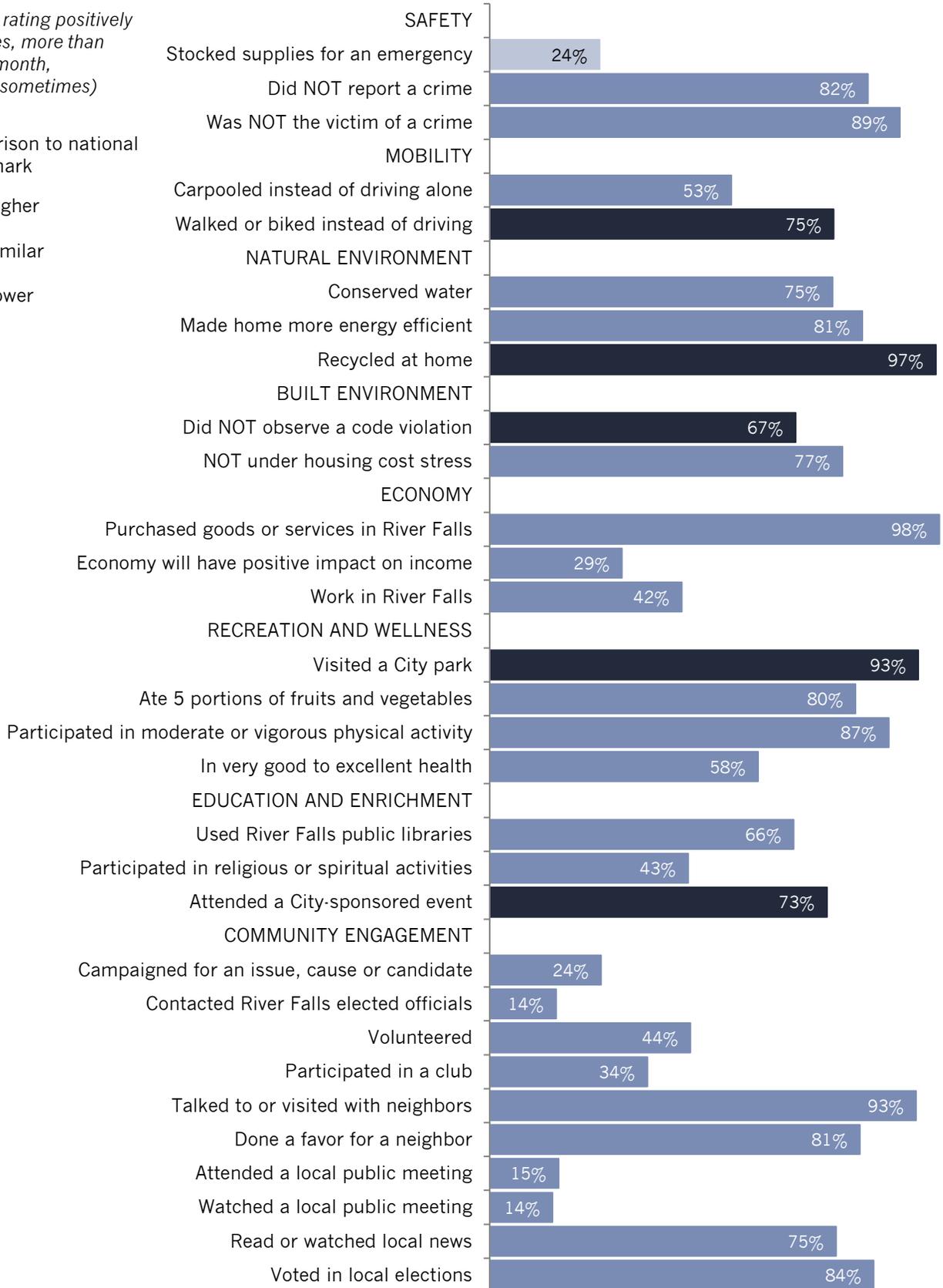
# The National Community Survey™

Figure 3: Aspects of Participation

Percent rating positively  
(e.g., yes, more than  
once a month,  
always/sometimes)

Comparison to national  
benchmark

- Higher
- Similar
- Lower



# Special Topics

The City of River Falls included seven questions of special interest on The NCS. Topic areas included contact with City employees, relocation of the City compost site, parks and recreation amenities and the downtown area, among others.

When asked whether they'd had contact with a City employee in the past 12 months, about 6 in 10 residents indicated that they had, while 4 in 10 had not. Survey respondents also rated the knowledge, responsiveness, courtesy and their overall impression of the employee with whom they had last had contact. About 9 in 10 residents gave positive ratings to each of these measures.

Figure 4: Contact with City Employee(s)

*Have you had any in-person, phone, or email contact with an employee of the City of River Falls within the last 12 months (including police, utility, receptionists, or any others)?*

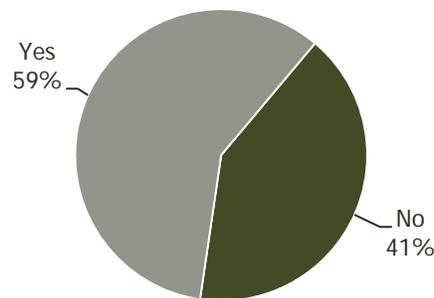
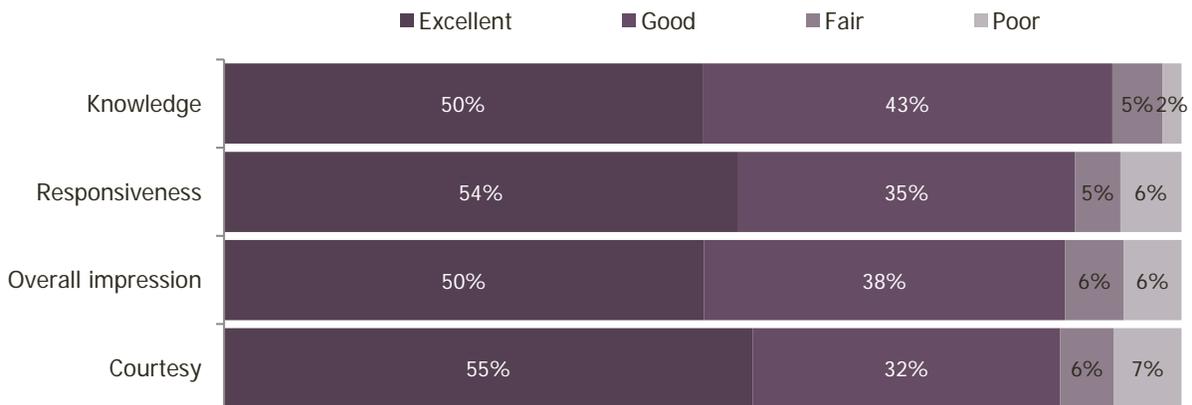


Figure 5: Impressions of Employee Contact

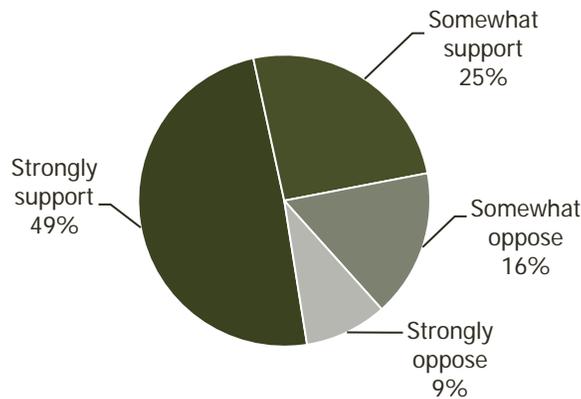
*What was your impression of the employee(s) of the City of River Falls in your most recent contact?*



Residents were asked to gauge their level of support for relocating the City compost site. About three-quarters of residents supported keeping the compost site at its existing location, while one-quarter opposed it; only 1 in 10 residents strongly opposed moving the site.

Figure 6: Location of City Compost Site

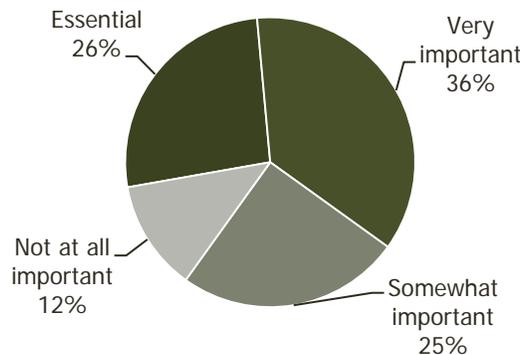
*The City of River Falls is considering moving the City compost site, currently located at 901 West Locust Street, to a new location (yet to be determined). To what extent do you support or oppose the City keeping the compost site at its existing location?*



Thinking about the importance of the City making efforts to increase housing density and/or provide different housing options to try to keep housing costs low, about 6 in 10 residents thought this was essential or very important, one-quarter thought it was somewhat important and 1 in 10 thought it was not at all important.

Figure 7: Importance of Efforts to Keep Housing Costs Low

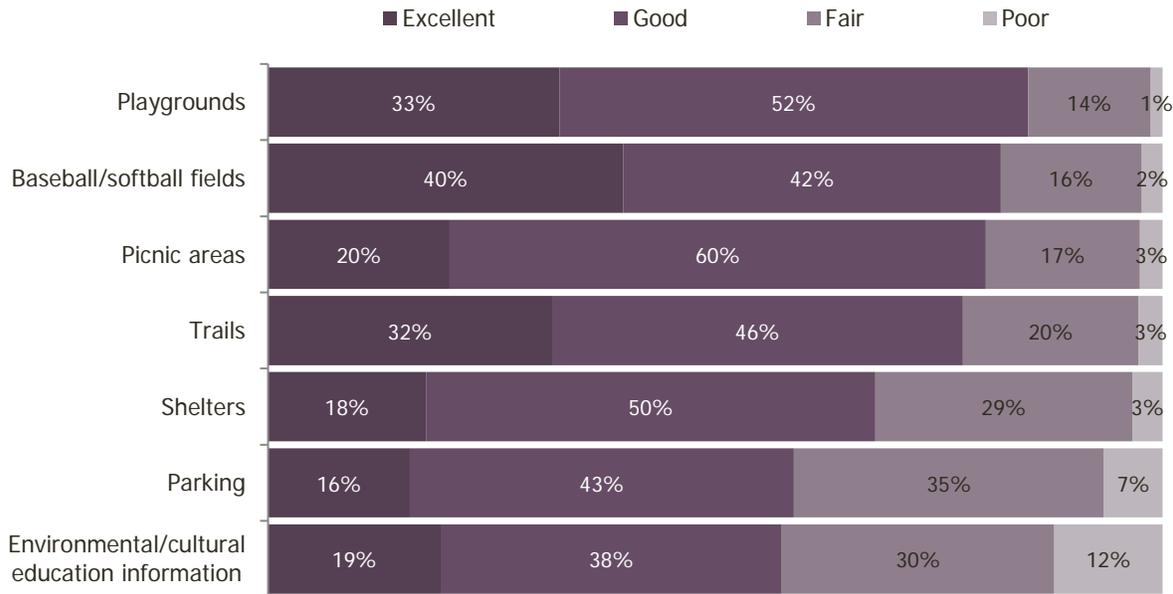
*How important, if at all, do you think it is for the City to increase housing density and/or provide different housing options in order to try to keep housing costs low?*



The National Community Survey™

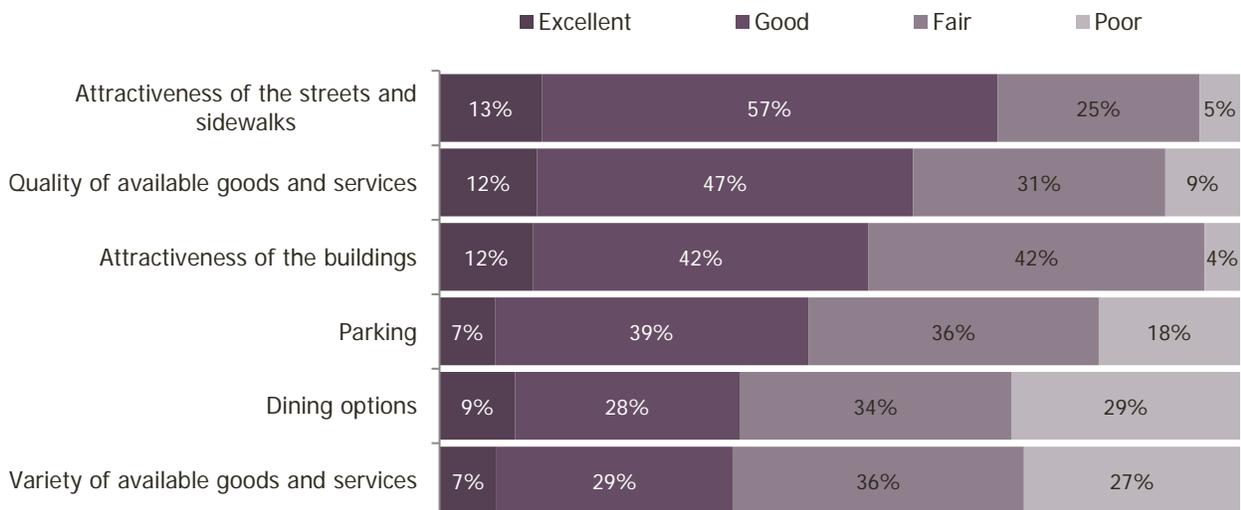
Residents rated the quality of various existing parks and recreation amenities in River Falls. Roughly 8 in 10 residents gave positive reviews to the City’s playgrounds, baseball/softball fields, and picnic areas and trails, while 7 in 10 were pleased with shelters. About 6 in 10 residents gave favorable evaluations to the City’s parking and environmental/cultural education information.

Figure 8: Quality of Parks and Recreation Amenities  
*The City will be reviewing its outdoor recreation plan in the near future. Please rate the quality of each of the following existing parks and recreation amenities in River Falls:*



Residents also evaluated aspects of River Falls’ downtown. About 7 in 10 residents gave positive ratings to the attractiveness of the streets and sidewalks, while roughly 6 in 10 awarded favorable marks to the quality of available goods and services and to the attractiveness of the buildings. About half of residents or less gave positive reviews to parking, dining options and the variety of available goods and services.

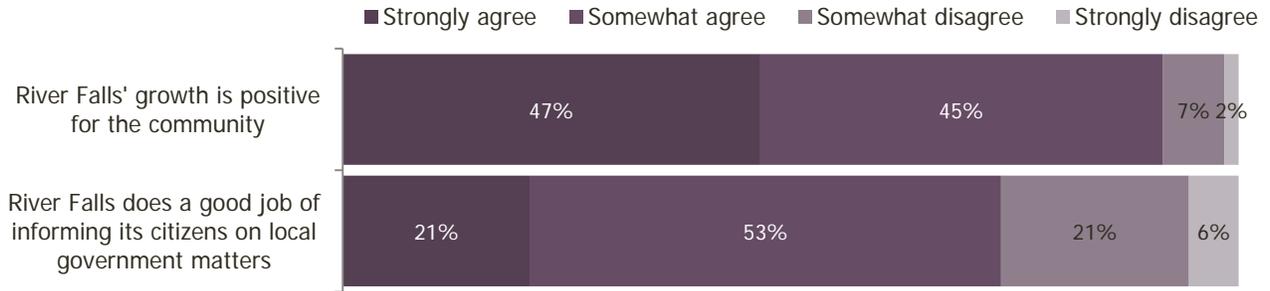
Figure 9: Quality of Aspects of Downtown River Falls  
*The City will also be reviewing its downtown plan. Please rate the quality of each of the following aspects of River Falls’ downtown:*



The National Community Survey™

About 9 in 10 residents strongly or somewhat agreed that River Falls' growth is positive for the community, while about three-quarters agreed that the City does a good job of informing its citizens on local government matters.

Figure 10: Growth and City Communication Efforts  
*To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?*



# Conclusions

## River Falls residents continue to enjoy a high quality of life.

Nine in ten residents gave positive ratings to the overall quality of life in River Falls and to the city as a place to live. At least 8 in 10 respondents gave excellent or good ratings to the overall image and overall appearance of the city, their neighborhood as a place to live and River Falls as a place to raise children, while 7 in 10 were pleased with the city as a place to retire. These ratings were similar to those given in other communities across the nation except for overall appearance, which was above average. About three-quarters of residents gave positive ratings to the sense of community in River Falls, which was higher than the benchmark comparison. About 9 in 10 residents would recommend living in the city to someone who asked and 8 in 10 planned to remain in River Falls for the next five years. Quality of life ratings in 2019 were on par with those observed in 2017.

## Residents value the Natural Environment and rate it positively, though some scores have decreased over time.

Survey respondents identified Natural Environment as an important focus area for the City in the next two years and ratings within this facet tended to be strong. About 9 in 10 residents awarded high scores to the overall natural environment in River Falls, cleanliness, and air quality and these ratings were all higher than the national averages. River Falls residents were also more likely than those who lived elsewhere to have recycled at home compared to their counterparts, and reported a higher level of effort to making their homes more energy efficient in 2019 than in 2017. Further, when rating the quality of various existing parks and recreation amenities in River Falls, roughly 8 in 10 residents gave positive reviews to the City's playgrounds, baseball/softball fields, picnic areas and trails. At least two-thirds of residents gave favorable ratings to Natural Environment-related services such as garbage collection, recycling and yard waste pick-up and all of these service ratings were similar to the benchmark comparisons. However, it is noteworthy that ratings for garbage collection, recycling, open space and natural areas preservation declined from 2017 to 2019.

## Ratings for some measures of government performance have also declined.

About 9 in 10 residents gave excellent or good reviews to the overall quality of City services. More than 8 in 10 residents gave positive marks to the overall customer service by City employees, while roughly 6 in 10 favorably rated the value of services for taxes paid, the overall direction, the job City government does at welcoming resident involvement, overall confidence in City government, government acting in the best interest of River Falls, being honest and treating all residents fairly. While all of these ratings were on par with those observed in other communities nationwide, scores for several measures of government performance decreased from 2017 to 2019.

## Residents are pleased with Mobility, but public transportation remains an area of opportunity.

Respondents tended to be pleased with most Mobility-related aspects of the community: at least 8 in 10 gave favorable marks to the overall ease of travel in the city, paths and walking trails and the ease of walking in River Falls, while 7 in 10 were pleased with the ease of travel by bicycle. These ratings were higher than the national averages. Further, when evaluating Mobility-related services, at least two-thirds of residents gave high scores to traffic enforcement, street lighting, street cleaning, snow removal, sidewalk maintenance and traffic signal timing; further, ratings for street lighting and traffic signal timing were higher than benchmark comparisons. However, only one-quarter of residents gave positive ratings to the ease of travel by public transportation or bus and transit services; thus, this could be an area of focus for the City in the future.