



# Community Foundation of Wabash County

2019 On the Table Report

March 10, 2020

Turn the  
page to  
find out!

What was the  
#1 Word Mentioned  
in Conversations?



Community  
Foundation of  
Wabash County

*We're here for giving. We're here for good.*



**GROW**  
**WABASH**  
*County*



*Imagine*  
**One85**



**Manchester**  
**University**

## What is On the Table?

**On the Table is a community engagement model that brings people together in conversation to consider community challenges.** On the Table was developed by the Chicago Community Trust to reach community members whose voices weren't being heard. The model is used many other community organizations across the country.

## Why Did the Community Foundation Administer On the Table Conversations?

**We wanted to hear from YOU about life in Wabash County!** *Listening to you* is an important part of the Community Foundation's work. Being informed about what you think is critical to our grant making. Furthermore, *On the Table* conversations help build unity and a shared understanding of the challenges our community faces and possible solutions to grow the County.

## How will Comments from On the Table conversations be used?

**Information from On The Table conversations will be combined with other research and qualitative data about life in Wabash County to inform initiatives related to population growth.** The Community Foundation, in a partnership with Grow Wabash County and in response to a leadership challenge from Lilly Endowment elected to prioritize population growth as the County's number one challenge. Population growth is vital to school enrollment and funding, and it sustains retail, professional, financial, and personal services. Growing our population will result in more amenities like restaurants and other resources for residents to enjoy. A growing talent pool supports economic growth, innovation, and business expansion for increasing household incomes. Population growth translates too as deep and diverse civic leadership. Hearing from you, helps us understand and consider what we could do to help grow the County's population.

*On the Table* comments will also be shared in the development of our County's comprehensive plan in which the City of Wabash, Wabash County, North Manchester, and the towns of LaFontaine, Lagro, and Roann have united to produce. The countywide comprehensive plan will be the first of its kind and will gather more public feedback. More information regarding the plan called Imagine One85 will be released in the coming months.

## How was On the Table conducted?

**With dedicated and caring citizens!** We express our profound thanks to more than 40 community members who hosted 17 public and 48 private conversations. Equal thanks and recognition goes to the more than 400 citizens who participated. This feedback is vital to our progress. Without you, there would be no *On The Table*.

**What was the Process?** The Community Foundation created *On The Table* discussion guides, and with Grow Wabash County solicited volunteers from our boards and the community at large. We trained volunteer table guides and provided them a packet of information including question prompts. Table guides were instructed to simply ask questions and let the group talk.

A note-taker was designated to record comments and recommendations heard throughout the conversation. Table-guides and note-takers were advised to not associate names with comments. An optional survey was also supplied. Table guides chose to lead a private or public conversation. For private conversations, the participants, location, and time were at the discretion of the guide. Conversely, public conversations were held in public locations including North Manchester's Aquatic Center, Wabash County's YMCA, the offices of the Foundation and Grow Wabash County, Roann's Town Hall, and McDonald's. Public conversations were advertised in the newspaper, on the radio, and in social media, and everyone in the community was encouraged to attend. Completed surveys and notes from the conversations were collected and delivered to the Manchester University psychology senior research students, under the direction of psychology department chair, Dr. Marcie Coulter-Kern, to be analyzed.

## How are *On the Table* Comments Analyzed?

In order to analyze the participants' comments from *On the Table* conversations, notes from the table guides were provided to Manchester University's psychology senior research students. Under the direction of Dr. Marcie Coulter-Kern, the notes were transcribed and uploaded into NVivo, the university's qualitative data analysis software.

The research team began their analysis by generating a list of reoccurring themes, called nodes, that emerged from the data. The nodes provided a framework for comments to be coded in order to produce results. The nodes that emerged were similar to Becker Consulting's recommendations in the Community Foundation's 2019 population study report, which can be found at [www.cfwabash.org](http://www.cfwabash.org).

Likewise, nodes from the data aligned with three talent categories developed by Governor Holcomb's Next Level Indiana Agenda, 21st Century Talent Region initiative, including talent attraction, talent development, and talent connection (see page 05 for more information).

In addition to categorizing comments, researchers ran a word query, a feature on NVivo, to uncover the top 25 words captured by note-takers during *On the Table* discussions. Results of the word query were not impacted by the number of times a comment was assigned to a node.

After running the query, the top ten words resulted in the following order: schools, jobs, housing, town, work, family, businesses, educational, kids, and attract. The word "school" was referenced 110 times in two-thirds of the conversations, while the word "jobs" was mentioned 103 times, and "housing" 76 times. Following is discussion around *On the Table*'s most prevalent themes including education, economic development, and housing, in addition to discussion related to talent attraction, talent development, and talent connection.



\*Words in the query appear in different sizes relative to the number of times the word was mentioned in conversations. Filler words, including "that," "thing," etc. were removed from analysis.

## Who Else Have We Talked To?

Since the announcement of GIFT VII in October 2018, the Community Foundation and Grow Wabash County have deployed multiple methods to listen and learn about life in Wabash County. With Lilly funding, we commissioned a study of population loss by the Community Research Institute, Purdue Fort Wayne and Mark Becker, Becker Consulting. We engaged Transform Consulting Group to gather qualitative data about life in Wabash County by conducting online surveys, private interviews and focus groups with commuters, transplants and life-long residents. Their studies produced 21 recommendations for growth. In Fall 2019, over 400 citizens heard the population study presentation through open gatherings and meetings of

service clubs and government organizations. More than 1300 citizens viewed the population study on our website. In addition, Ball State University, Indiana Communities Institute delivered a 3-day community development course to 30 Wabash County citizens in June 2019. And in October 2019, the Community Foundation organized an inter-city visit to Findlay, Ohio, with 30 community members to learn about collaborative initiatives that are growing Findlay. In January, the Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership helped county representatives build our 21st Century talent dashboard and stakeholder map, which will be released this summer.

# What are On the Table's most Prevalent Themes?

## Education

Education proved to be one of the most popular themes of the *On the Table* conversations, regardless of whether or not participants still had children enrolled in school. Comments regarding our K-12 school systems, early childcare, adult education, Manchester University, and Heartland and Ivy Tech were referenced in two-thirds of the conversations that took place.

In discussing our K-12 schools, nine participants commended Wabash City School's dual immersion program and hoped this program would continue to grow and be replicated in other Wabash County school districts. A few individuals also spoke positively about the leadership in our school districts. However, out of concern for Wabash County's students, the majority of participants called for more rigorous programming to maintain a competitive and high quality K-12 school system, while one-third of the K-12 related comments called for greater cooperation and collaboration between the county's schools. One individual commented, "We are a stellar community. It's time to develop one stellar school system."

Related to increasing the opportunities Wabash County schools can provide its students, two *On the Table* participants mentioned they have friends, family, and coworkers who live outside of Wabash County, so that their children can attend school elsewhere.

Likewise, nine participants mentioned finding affordable and quality childcare is a challenge for young families. While there are current efforts by community leadership to address quality childcare in Wabash County, nine participants noted the need for more quality childcare options, reduced waiting lists, and reduced childcare costs.

Fourteen comments involving Manchester University related to increasing the University's connections to the community. These participants noted the strengths of the University and wished the University could be better leveraged by increased communication and partnerships with Wabash County organizations and businesses. Participants said, "Manchester University must be more incorporated throughout the whole county," and "MU is a great resource – how can we use them more?"

The majority of *On the Table* comments regarding Heartland Career Center and Ivy Tech Community College applauded their work and the programs they offer their students. Seven individuals hope that both Heartland and Ivy Tech will expand their physical space and add more courses for certifications. One participant referenced the shortage of workers with trade skills and said, "Heartland Career Center is a significant asset to the community. We should leverage its potential to address our [Wabash County's] needs."

## Economic Development

Economic Development and the need for jobs were also key themes in discussions. Twenty-five participants wished there were more types of jobs in Wabash County and noted the effect a greater variety of employment offerings can have on attracting newcomers and college graduates to the community. One recent college graduate had commented that she was happy to have found a job within her career path, but most of her friends did not and located elsewhere. A few participants also felt the jobs available in Wabash County are not attracting or retaining talent due to the lack of awareness among high school students and young professionals of the job opportunities here in Wabash County.

The loss of manufacturing jobs, consolidation of many small farms, and the need for more individuals with

certifications to perform skilled trades were also discussed in conversations. Additionally, twelve participants noted the lack of high-speed Internet in Wabash County, which is critical for people who need to work from home. Comments included, "We need better internet and updated systems in the county" and "Better internet is needed for those working from home. This is a common complaint from many living in the County."

Despite what is missing in Wabash County, a few participants hoped that Wabash County could improve upon and leverage its existing assets including U.S. 24 and the senior living communities. As well, numerous comments praised the renovations in downtown Wabash and North Manchester, and they hope to see the revitalization continue in each of the Wabash County communities.

# On the Table Themes Continued

## Housing

Housing, or the lack thereof, emerged as a priority in discussions regarding why population growth has been difficult for Wabash County. The majority of *On the Table* participants mentioned the need for all types of housing for all income levels. Regarding newcomers and young individuals, nine participants said finding housing can present a challenge for them, because they typically prefer to live in rental units before purchasing a home. Unfortunately, many of the existing homes and rental apartments in Wabash County are in need of refurbishing and are not in turnkey condition. Four participants also commented it is difficult to find high income-level homes or empty lots for construction of new homes. Overall, *On the Table* participants felt that housing issues currently hinder individuals wishing to upgrade, downsize, rent, or move to Wabash County, and that they present a challenge for Wabash County employers seeking to recruit talent.

Nine comments related to housing included the need for tighter ordinances and enforceable zoning to promote the values of home ownership. One participant lamented, “Too many residents do not keep up their yards and have junk and trash scattered in their yards. This makes it difficult to attract future development.” These participants wish the ordinances were enforced in order to highlight the beauty of our community, historic buildings, and neighborhoods, in addition to increasing the pride in one’s own home.



## Governor Holcomb's - Next Level Agenda

Gov. Eric Holcomb calls his strategy for growing Indiana the “Next Level Agenda.” It focuses on improving the lives of Hoosiers by way of better health, improved career opportunities, and quality of place initiatives. To drive the agenda forward, Governor Holcomb has charged areas of the state to become what are called 21st Century Talent Regions, places that commit to using a systems approach to attract talent, develop talent, and connect talent. **Wabash County is in the Northeast Indiana Region, which has been designated the very first 21st Century Talent Region in Indiana.**

The eleven counties of northeast Indiana are working to build and implement plans to increase the quality of

place (to attract talent), raise educational attainment (to develop talent), and raise household income (by connecting talent to jobs).

Each focus—placemaking, education, jobs—is related to the other two. Success in all areas is the engine that drives population growth. A group of 30 Wabash County leaders recently created its own dashboard to visualize progress and set benchmarks for the county in talent attraction, development, and connection. Seeing the extensive lists of local resources in each category demonstrates that the county is well positioned to marshal resources to grow the county.

Wabash County needs more population to sustain our schools, grow our economy, improve our quality of life, and meet the needs of our workforce. What will draw the people and talent we need to live and work in Wabash County? **Talent Attraction** leverages the power of place, such as amenities and services, to grow population and increase desirability to live in a community.

*On the Table* talent attraction comments included the need to revitalize the county's downtowns, increase county branding efforts, develop the Wabash and Eel rivers with more trails and restaurants, expand the medical and orthopedic industry in Wabash County, and build more rigorous and high-quality schools.

To attract talent, one participant suggested providing incentives for people to return to Wabash, such as the repayment of student loans. Likewise, twelve participants suggested increased access to high speed internet to provide more remote work opportunities. A few comments also suggested increasing the number of Spanish-speaking services and classes to grow diversity in Wabash County.

A few participants commented that talent attraction is difficult. Some felt that the best solution was to create jobs in order to attract the workforce and grow the population. The population study researchers note, however, that in general, jobs follow people. People do not necessarily follow the jobs.

How will we prepare talent to fill our jobs and lead our community? First-rate schools and training programs will both attract people and employers to Wabash County and develop the talent we need for the 21st Century workforce. **Talent Development** is the effort to build a homegrown learning system to cultivate talent and increase educational attainment in the community. A few *On the Table* respondents underscored this need for increasing the skills and certifications of our current workforce, establishing a greater career focus in our K-12 schools, and increasing excitement and rewards for students who choose the career and technical education path.

By developing the skills of our K-12 students and our workforce, Wabash County will be in a better position to connect our workforce to current and new businesses seeking to fill high-demand jobs that require great expertise and reward high wages. Strong collaboration between education and business sectors will help the community more clearly define how students affect the workforce and the workforce affects education.

How will Wabash County connect excellent education with career opportunities to raise the earning power of families in our community? **Talent Connection** efforts seek to coordinate the learning system from birth to adulthood with economic opportunity that will increase household income for Wabash County residents. It brings industry into the classroom, providing internship and apprenticeships, and it brings education into the workplace, by driving up the educational attainment level to meet the demands of well-paying middle skills jobs.

Strong early childhood education programs, K-12 schools, and two post-secondary education institutions in the county, each with strong connections to the business community, have the potential to increase the chances for success in adulthood and reduce the risk of brain drain in

Wabash County.

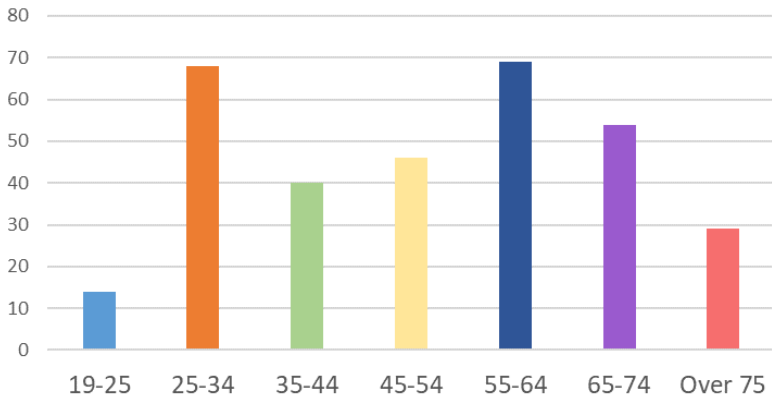
In *On the Table* conversations, a few participants recommended increasing the effort among K-12 schools and post-secondary education to raise the awareness of jobs and businesses that exist in Wabash County and how students might find careers in local companies. One individual suggested, "Start introducing students to the businesses and factories in our county at an earlier age. Likewise, businesses need to be more involved in making students aware of what opportunities are available in Wabash County." Some participants recommended the creation of more partnerships between schools, students, and the business community by increasing the number of internships and apprenticeships.

# SURVEY RESULTS

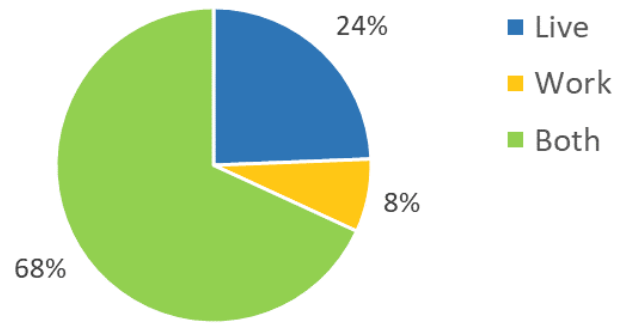
At the conclusion of *On the Table* conversations, participants had the opportunity to complete a follow-up survey regarding their feelings of living and/or working in Wabash County. Below are the results.

## Participant Demographics

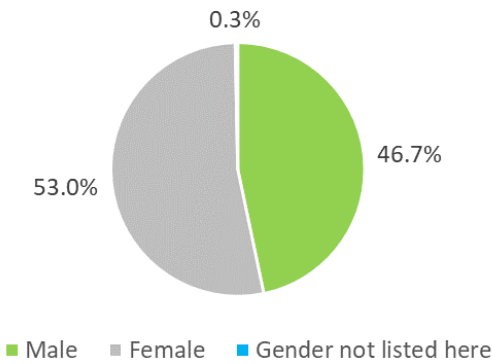
### Age of Survey Participants



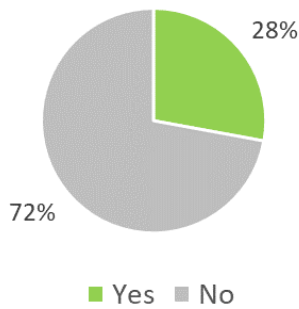
### Survey Participants who live or work in Wabash County



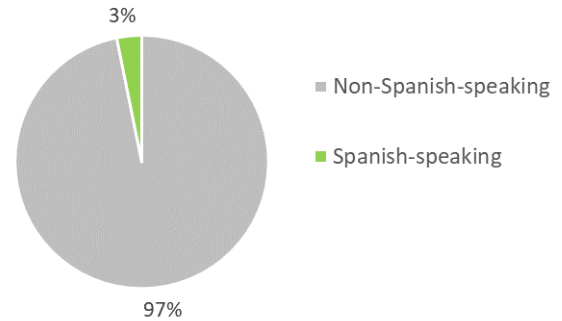
### Gender of Survey Participants



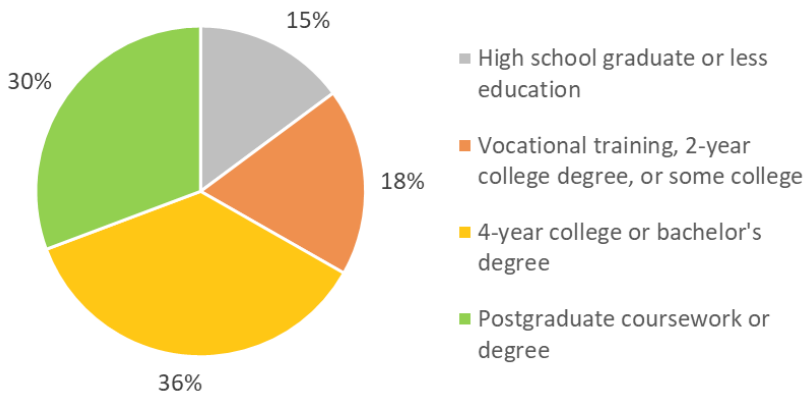
### Are you the parent or guardian of children under 18?



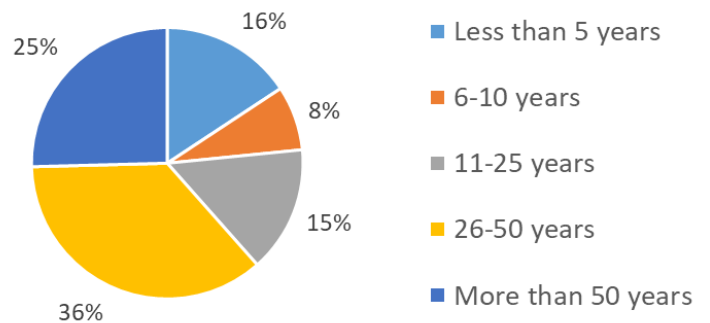
### Participants from Spanish-speaking backgrounds



### Education of Survey Participants

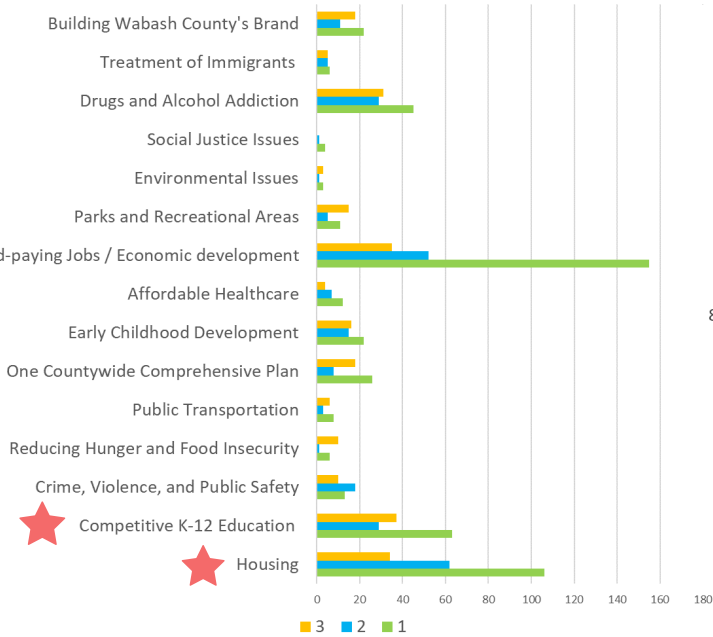


### How long survey participants have lived in Wabash County

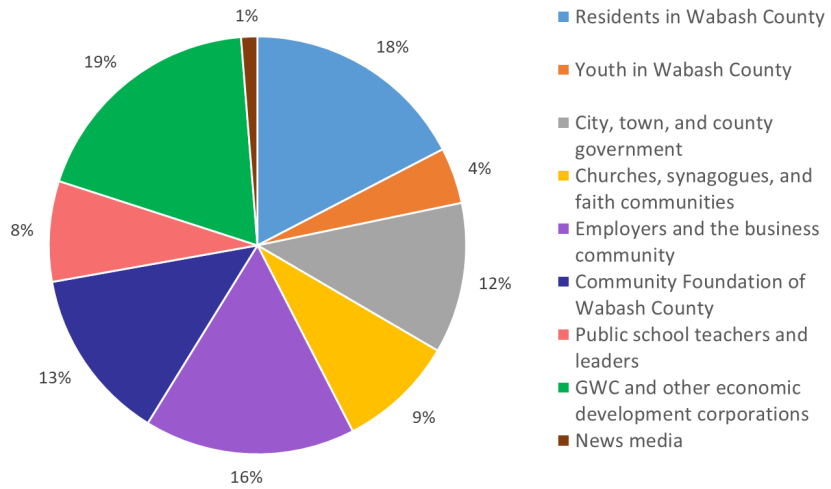


# SURVEY RESULTS CONTINUED

Which three issues are the most important for the community to address?

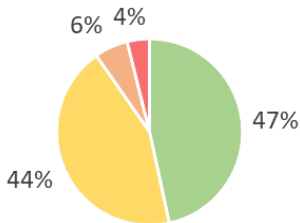


Which two or three groups are having the greatest impact in making Wabash County a better place to live?

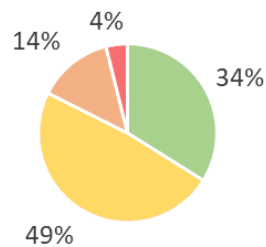


Strongly Agree      Somewhat Agree      Somewhat Disagree      Strongly Disagree

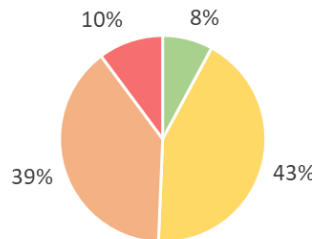
The area in which I live has a strong sense of community.



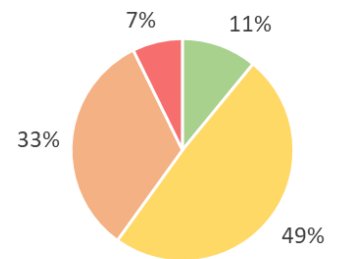
My community is changing for the better.



My community provides opportunities for everyone.



Residents have shared goals and priorities for our community.



## Wabash County is Our Home

All in all, 96% of the *On the Table* participants had a positive conversation experience and appreciated the opportunity to voice their thoughts and ideas. From survey results, 73% of respondents are more hopeful for the future of Wabash County. Even though discussion often related to what is needed in our community, many participants commented they enjoy living in the county and noted its wonderful assets and amenities. Speaking highly of Wabash County, participants said, **“In comparison to other rural communities, Wabash is a special place. You can feel it,”** **“I’ve stayed here because I love it,”** and **“I feel like I belong here.”**

Many participants realize that change needs to happen in order to grow Wabash County’s population and continue enjoying the amenities and services currently available in this small community. One individual said, “There is no magic bullet for growth,” and that change will “require more courage and responsibility to challenge



mindsets.” However, despite the challenges that lie before our community, there are opportunities ready to be leveraged if we, the community, can join together, be intentional, and remember why we love and are proud of our county, our *home*.