Summary of 2017 Marathon County LIFE Survey

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**Background**

During March and early April, the Survey Research Center collected data on behalf of United Way of Marathon County for the 2017 LIFE Survey. The 2017 mirrored similar surveys done by the United Way of Marathon County in previous years.

Data were gathered in three ways:

- A six-page survey was sent to 2,100 households in Marathon County. Because we wanted to try and ensure representation in the sample from three populations that are sometimes challenging to reach with surveys (those under age 35, households with incomes under $25,000, and people of color), we specifically requested 200 addresses for each of these subpopulations. The remaining 1,500 addresses were randomly selected from throughout Marathon County.
- 100 surveys were distributed to selected Marathon County non-profit partners by United Way of Marathon County.
- Respondents could also go on-line and complete the survey electronically.

The SRC used the Dillman Method for the 2,100 households in the mail survey. Each person in the sample was sent a survey initially. Those who had not returned their survey within two weeks were sent a postcard reminding them to complete the survey. Two weeks after the postcard, those who had still not responded received a second postcard.

The SRC received the following number of responses from these three sources:

- 443 paper surveys from the mailout
- 33 paper surveys from non-profit partners
- 21 on-line surveys

Given an adult population of 103,194 in Marathon County, these data should provide estimates accurate to within plus or minus about 4.5%.
Quality of Life

Residents were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the aspects of life in Marathon County shown in Figure 1. Answer options included very satisfied, satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, dissatisfied, very dissatisfied and don’t know/not applicable. Figure 1 excludes the don’t know/not applicable responses and combined the satisfaction and dissatisfaction options into single categories for ease of exposition. In all figures, green generally signifies good, yellow signifies neutral, and red indicates concerns.

Figure 1: Satisfaction with Availability of Services and Amenities, Marathon County, 2017

- Marathon County residents seem relatively satisfied with the availability of health care, parks, recreational and natural areas, and dental care.
- More than 20% expressed dissatisfaction with Marathon County’s schools in terms of preparing students for a career, how tolerant people are for those who are different, alcohol and drug treatment services, mental health care, public transportation and maintenance of streets, roads and highways.
- One-quarter (25%) or more of the 2017 had no opinion about how well the schools prepared students for college, how well they prepared them for a career, public transportation availability, mental health services, elder care services, services for victims of abuse, or child care availability.
**Marathon County Resident Concerns**

Residents were asked how concerned they were with the items shown in Figure 2 with answer options of very concerned, concerned, somewhat concerned, not concerned and don’t know. They are ranked in descending magnitude based on the proportion saying they are very concerned about the issue.

![Figure 2: Marathon County Resident Concerns, 2017](image)

- Approximately three-quarters or more of Marathon County residents are concerned or very concerned about texting and driving, drug use, drinking and driving, prescription drug use, and the affordability of health care.
- Approximately three-quarters or more of Marathon County residents are not concerned or only somewhat concerned about the cost of arts and entertainment, the safety of their neighborhood during the day or night, or their personal safety in their homes.
Issues of Greatest Concern

From the concerns included in Figure 2, Marathon County residents were asked to identify the issue that was their biggest concern, their second biggest concern and their third biggest concern. The SRC gave a weight of three to the top concern, a weight of two to the second biggest concern and a weight of one to the third. The total weighted votes for each issue is shown in Figure 3.

- By a substantial margin, the biggest concerns among Marathon County residents are drug use and the affordability of health care
- Texting and driving, the availability of jobs that pay enough to meet basic household expenses, and drinking and driving are also fairly wide-spread concerns
- An aging population in the County is also generating some concerns (dealing with an aging population and the affordability of elder care)
Marathon is a Good Place to Live

Respondents were asked the extent to which they agree or disagree that Marathon County is a good place to live for a various types of people. Answer options were strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree. In Figure 4, for ease of exposition, the SRC grouped strongly agree and agree into agreement and strongly disagree and disagree into disagreement. The groups have been sorted in descending order of the percent of respondents in disagreement.

- Few disagreed that Marathon is a good place to live for families, children and adults
- About 10% disagreed that Marathon County is a good place to live for young adults and those with disabilities
- Only about half agreed that Marathon County is a good place to live for people from diverse ethnic or racial backgrounds and 17% were in disagreement
Most Important Reasons for Living in Marathon County

LIFE survey participants identified “the three most important reasons” for choosing to live in Marathon County, and their responses are summarized in Figure 5. The data in Figure 5 show the percentage of all the people who answered this question and chose a particular reason and excludes those who skipped the question. In a few instances, the SRC re-coded “Other” responses into an existing category. For instance, in two cases a person selecting “Other” said they chose to live in Marathon County because of their job, and two others said they live there because of friends or family. In the first set, the SRC re-coded them to “Job Opportunities” and in the second pair to “Near Family and Friends”.

- Being near their community of family and/or friends was more than twice as important as any other reason identified for living in Marathon County
- Between about one-quarter and one-third of respondents said a key reason they live in Marathon County is the size of the community, the rural lifestyle it offers, because it’s a good place to raise children, the job opportunities open to them, the cost of living is affordable, and/or the schools are of high quality
- Very few said they live in the County because it is a welcoming community or for the entertainment opportunities
- 14 of the 20 who selected “Other” said some variant of “I was born here” or “This is my hometown”
Most Important Connections to Community in Marathon County

Respondents were given the list of factors in Figure 6 and asked which three most connected them to their community in Marathon County. Again, data in Figure 6 excludes those who skipped over this question. The SRC did not re-code any of the “Other” answers to this question.

- By far the most important factor connecting Marathon County residents to their community is their family and/or friends; 88% of those responding to this question selected this option
- The organizations to which they belong, clubs, churches and such, were important to about half the respondents and access to needed services to a bit more than one-third
- In the “Other” category, 12 of the 34 responses identified their job as a key factor connecting them to their community
**Experiences with Discrimination in Marathon County**

The survey defined discrimination as, “when a person is treated unfairly based upon personal characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, income, religion, disability or handicap, etc.” Respondents were then asked how many times they or a member of their household had experienced discrimination in Marathon County during the previous year. Answer options were as shown in Figure 7.

- Approximately three-quarters of 2017 respondents said they had not experienced any instances of discrimination in the previous year.
- Three percent experienced discrimination about once a month or more frequently in the previous year.
- Since 93% of the respondents to the 2017 survey listed their race/ethnicity as “white,” for some portion of the 23% who reported experiencing discrimination in Figure 7, the bias is likely based on something other than this factor. Based on cross tabulations, bias based on gender and socio-economic status appear to be somewhat common sources of bias. For example, 77% of men but only 66% of women reported no instances of discrimination; 72% of those reporting household incomes greater than $25,000 reported no discrimination compared to 66% of those from households earning less than that.

![Figure 7: Number of Times Experienced Discrimination, Marathon County, 2017](image)
Work Life in Marathon County

Respondents were asked two questions about their work life:

- Do the people with whom you currently work or with whom you used to work have a strong work ethic
- Do you get satisfaction from your current job or the job you most recently had

Answer options are as shown in Figures 8 and 9

- Cumulatively, only 1% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that their co-workers have/had a strong work ethic. More than 90% agree or strongly agree their colleagues have a strong work ethic
- Cumulatively, 6% of the respondents disagree or strongly disagree that their job gives them satisfaction. Still, 80% agreed or strongly agreed that they get satisfaction from their work
Reasons for Job Dissatisfaction in Marathon County

If the respondent did not get job satisfaction from their current job or the one they had most recently, they were invited to indicate why. The data in Figure 10 exclude those who skipped this question and those who selected “not applicable” (since the question focused on reasons for job dissatisfaction); 53% or 182 respondents selected not applicable. The data are reported as the number of respondents selecting a given reason. Respondents could select multiple factors.

- Low wages cause more job dissatisfaction than any of the other factors included in Figure 10
- A poor work environment, a lack of benefits and a lack of potential for advancement are roughly equal in terms of sources of discontent with jobs in Marathon County
- Poor management was cited eight times and “retired” by nine in the “Other” category
Reasons for Lack of Health Insurance in Marathon County

If the respondent had not had health insurance, including Medicare, Medicaid, BadgerCare, or private insurance, during the previous year, they were asked why. Answer options are as shown in Figure 11. The percentages represent only those who answered the question.

- Most respondents (86%) indicated that they did have health insurance coverage over all 12 months of the previous year
- 34 (9%) of the 324 who responded to this question said health insurance was too expensive for them to buy; recall that “health care affordability” was the second most common concern among Marathon County residents (Figure 3)
Reasons for Missing Doctor, Dentist or Mental Health Appointment in Marathon County

If a respondent or a member of their family should have seen a doctor, dentist, or mental health specialist during the previous 12 months but didn’t, they were asked to indicate why. Answer options were not applicable (excluded from Figure 12), didn’t know how to find a provider, no insurance, couldn’t afford, distance/no transportation, no appointments available, chose not to, and other. In Figure 12 the top (purple bar) refers to skipping an appointment with a mental health provider, the middle (orange) bar a dental appointment, and the bottom (blue) bar a doctor’s appointment. A respondent could select multiple reasons.

- Large majorities of Marathon County residents chose “not applicable” for all three types of medical services – meaning either that they didn’t need that service or they didn’t fail to see the relevant medical service provided when they needed to.
- The inability to afford the service was the most commonly selected reason for failing to see a health care provider when needed for all three types of medical services.
- Choosing not to go to the provider was the second most commonly selected option for mental health services and doctors appointments; lack of insurance was the second most important reason for not seeing a dentist when needed.
- Not knowing how to find a provider, lack of transportation to the appointment, and lack of appointment availability were minor impediments for Marathon County residents for all three types of medical services.
Current Household Medical Debt in Marathon County

Participants in the LIFE survey were asked to indicate how much medical debt their household/family currently has. Answer options were: $0, $1 - $999, $1,000 - $4,999, $5,000 - $10,000, and more than $10,000.

- Slightly less than half the respondents said they currently have no medical debts
- About one-in-five respondents said their household currently owed under $1,000 in medical debt
- One-third of the respondents currently owed more than $1,000 to medical service providers

Concerns About Family Member Abusing Drugs in Marathon County

- A substantial minority of Marathon County respondents are either concerned (6%) or uncertain (2%) about someone in their family abusing prescription or illegal drugs
Household Financial Stress Indicators in Marathon County

Respondents were asked how many months, during the past year, have they/someone in their family struggled to cover food expenses, missed/was late with rent/mortgage payments, missed/was late with monthly bills (utilities, phone, etc.), and missed work, a medical appointment or some other important event because they had no transportation. Answer options included: don't know, zero months, one to two months, three to six months, and seven or more months. In the following charts, the don't know responses were excluded.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1 - 2</th>
<th>3 - 6</th>
<th>7+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lacked Transportation</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missed/Late Rent/Mortgage</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggled with Food Expense</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missed/Late Monthly Bills</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 15 suggests a relatively high level of financial stress in Marathon County households despite the economic expansion the nation has been experiencing for nearly six years.

- Only 6% of respondents missed work, medical appointments or other important events because they lacked transportation, and most of these only experienced this in one or two months.
- Nearly 10% missed or were late with rent or mortgage payments putting them at some risk of eviction or foreclosure.
- 15% struggled to cover food expenses during at least one month in the previous year and many households experienced this quite regularly; 4% faced this issue in three to six of the previous twelve months and another 4% faced it in seven or more of those months.
- Nearly one-in-five households missed or were late with monthly bills at least once in the prior year; 5% missed or were late between three and six months out of the previous twelve and another 2% experienced this in seven or more months.
Causes of Transportation Problems in Marathon County

If a household had, during the past year, missed work, a medical appointment, or other important event because they had no transportation, they were asked to indicate the cause(s). Answer options included: not applicable (excluded from Figure 16), no car, unreliable car, couldn’t afford gas or cab fare, unable to drive, no one available to drive me, no public transport, or other. Given the relatively small number of households affected, Figure 16 shows actual numbers rather than percentages.

- There is no single dominant transportation impediment facing Marathon County households who have had difficulty getting to work or to important appointments/events.
Housing Cost Burdened in Marathon County

The federal government defines a household as “cost burdened” if they spend more than 30% of their household income on housing (including rent/mortgage, utilities, home/rental insurance, and property taxes). Marathon residents were asked if they were spending 30% or more of their household income on housing defined in this way and they had answer options of yes, no, and don’t know. Figure 17 excludes don’t know responses (12% of the respondents).

- More than half of all respondents to the 2017 survey said they are “cost-burdened” as defined by the federal government.
**Household Savings in Marathon County**

Respondents were asked if they have enough savings to cover their expenses for a three-month period in case of sickness, job loss, or other emergency. Answer options included yes, no, and don’t know. Don’t know responses (7%) were excluded from Figure 18.

![Figure 18: Percent Marathon County Households Who Report Having Savings to Cover Three Months of Expenses, 2017](image)

- Despite having a large proportion of its households who would be considered “cost burdened” in terms of the proportion of household income spent on housing (Figure 17), a surprisingly large proportion of Marathon County households say they have savings that could cover 3-months of expenses.
Charitable Activities in Marathon County

The LIFE survey asked respondents if they had donated items or made a financial contribution to a charity and if they had helped individuals outside their household and/or volunteered in the community in the past year. Answer options were yes, no and don’t know. Don’t know responses were excluded in Figure 19.

- Nearly nine out of ten households in Marathon County reported donating items or money to a charity in the past year
- About three quarters of Marathon County households have, in the past year, helped a non-family member and/or volunteered in their community

![Figure 19: Participation in Charitable Activities, Marathon County Households, 2017](image-url)
**Well Testing Impediments in Marathon County**

Respondents were asked to identify up to three reasons they had not tested their well water in the past year. Response options were: not applicable, don’t know how to have my well water tested, testing costs too much, dealing with a problem with my well water quality would be too expensive, I have been drinking my well water for years without any problems, I didn’t know I should test the water, and other. In Figure 20, we’ve excluded those for whom well testing is not applicable (58% of the respondents chose this answer). Data are reported in number of respondents rather than percentages.

- By far the most common reason Marathon County residents give for not testing their well water annually is that they’ve not experienced problems in the past and, presumably, see no need to test their water.
- In the other category nine of the 36 responses said they do/have tested their water but are on a less than annual testing cycle and five said they filter or treat their water.
- A substantial number of respondents were not aware they should test their well water regularly.

![Figure 20: Why Marathon County Residents Don't Test Well Water Annually, 2017](chart)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drinking for Years, No Problems</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t Know I Should</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too Expensive to Test</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know How</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too Expensive to Correct Any Problem</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Disposal Practices in Marathon County

In addition to disposing of items in their trash, LIFE participants were asked if, during the past year, they have disposed of items by composting, donating them, recycling, re-using, using a medication drop box, participation in a Clean Sweep or other program for hazardous wastes, purposely purchased products with less packaging, or other. Respondents could select as many as applicable so the totals in Figure 21 don’t add to 100%. Those who skipped the question were excluded from Figure 21.

![Figure 21: Disposal Practices of Marathon County Households, 2017](image)

- More than nine out of ten Marathon County households said they recycled items in the previous 12 months, and three-quarters donated items rather than putting them in the trash.
- Between one-third and a half of the respondents said they compost materials or re-use them.
- About one-quarter used a medication drop box in the previous year.
- About one-in-five purposely buy products with less packaging or participated in a hazardous waste disposal opportunity such as Clean Sweep.
Environmental Concerns in Marathon County

Respondents were asked to indicate how concerned they were about the following environmental issues: drinking water quality, cleanliness of local lakes and rivers, availability of drinking water, air quality, climate change, energy conservation, soil erosion, protection of open/natural areas, failing septic systems. Answer options were: very concerned, concerned, neither concerned nor unconcerned, unconcerned, very unconcerned. For ease of exposition, the SRC combined very concerned and concerned into a single category and unconcerned and very unconcerned into another single category.

- The biggest environmental concern of Marathon County households is about the cleanliness of local lakes and rivers
- About half or more of Marathon County Households are concerned about energy conservation, protecting open and natural areas, drinking water quality, air quality and climate change
- 15% or fewer households are unconcerned about soil erosion, protecting open/natural areas, energy conservation or the cleanliness of local lakes and rivers
- Between about one-quarter and one-third are unconcerned about drinking water quality, air quality, climate change, drinking water availability or failing septic systems

![Figure 22: Level of Concern about Environmental Issues, Marathon County, 2017](image)
**Body Mass Index Data for Marathon County Households**

The body mass index (BMI) is a widely used and quoted indicator of obesity. According to the Center for Disease Control’s (CDC) website, “BMI does not measure body fat directly, but research has shown that BMI is moderately correlated with more direct measures of body fat . . .” ([https://www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/assessing/bmi/adult_bmi/index.html](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/assessing/bmi/adult_bmi/index.html)). The CDC associates BMI values under 18.5 with being underweight, values between 18.5 and 24.9 are considered normal or healthy weight, values between 25 and 20.9 indicate being overweight and values above 30 indicate obesity. The formula used to calculate the BMI is the person’s weight in pounds divided by their height in inches squared and multiplied by 703 (see the above CDC site). The SRC used the height and weight reported by respondents to calculate a BMI for the 380 people who completed these questions. The accuracy of the reported values cannot be verified.

- Marathon County BMIs ranged from 13.9 to 64.9
- Only about one-quarter of Marathon County respondents fell into the “normal” BMI category
- 32% of Marathon County LIFE survey respondents fell into the obesity category; as of 2015 36.5% of adults in the U.S. and 31% of Wisconsin adults were classified as obese. So, Marathon’s LIFE data appear to align with the state
- 39% of LIFE participants fell into the overweight category compared to 36% in the U.S. and 35% in Wisconsin, so Marathon County has slightly higher proportions in this category

![Figure 23: Distribution of BMI Scores for Marathon County, 2017](image)
Exercise Habits for Marathon County Households

Participants in the LIFE survey were asked how many times in a typical week they engage in 30 minutes or more of physical activities like walking, running, swimming, etc. Answer options were: no days, 1–2 days, 3–4 days, or 5–7 days.

- Only one-in-five Marathon County adults, based on this survey, engage in five or more 30-minute exercise sessions in a typical week
- About half the respondents do 30 minutes of exercise two or fewer days per week, typically
Relational Dining Habits of Marathon County Households

Respondents were asked how many times per week they eat a meal at a table with family and/or friends. Answer options were: no days, 1 – 2 days, 3 – 4 days, or 5 – 7 days.

- Nearly half the Marathon County LIFE respondents sit down at a table with friends and/or family at least five days in a typical week
- However, one-third of the respondents have dinner with friends and family two or fewer times per week, suggesting either a significant degree of social isolation or very packed schedules

Social Isolation in Marathon County

Respondents were asked if they had at least one person with whom they can talk if they have a personal problem. Answer options were yes or no.

- Only 6% of the respondents had no one with whom they could talk about personal problems
Alcohol Consumption Habits of Marathon County Households

Respondents were asked to indicate the number of times over the prior 30 days that they had consumed five or more drinks on one occasion and how often they had operated a motor vehicle after consuming two or more drinks in an hour. Answer options for both questions included: none, 1-2 times, 3-5 times, 6-9 times and 10 or more times. Consuming five or more drinks on one occasion is a common definition of binge drinking. Consuming two or more drinks in an hour would likely put a driver over the legal limit for operating a motor vehicle.

- Nine of ten respondents said that over the last month they had not driven after consuming two or more drinks in an hour and seven in ten said they had not consumed five or more alcoholic beverages on one occasion.
- The fact that 30% had engaged in “binge” drinking at least once in the prior month suggests a fairly wide-spread problem with excessive alcohol consumption.
- While better than the binge drinking result, 10% of Marathon County adults saying they had driven a motor vehicle after consuming two alcoholic beverages in an hour is still troubling.
Demographic Profile of Marathon County LIFE Survey Households

Gender

- Slightly more than half (52%) of the LIFE Survey participants were female
- As of 2015, 49.9% of the adult population in Marathon County were male and 50.1% were female, so the gender distribution in the survey sample is similar to the underlying population

Age

- Despite the fact that the SRC “oversampled” residents 25 and younger, the LIFE Survey sample is very heavily tilted toward those 65 and older.
- For Marathon County as a whole, 13% of the adult residents are 18-24, 16% are 25-34, 16% are 35-44, 20% are 45-54, 18% are 55-64, and 20% are over 65; the LIFE sample is likely to have bias at both ends of this age spectrum with young residents under-represented and older ones over-represented
**Race and Ethnicity**

- Clearly, the Marathon LIFE participants were mainly white residents of the County.
- The racial/ethnic distribution of the sample reflects the underlying population of Marathon fairly well; according to the U.S. Census, 90% of the population of Marathon County is white, Hispanics 2.5%, blacks 0.7%, American Indians 0.3%, Asians 5.4%, 2+ races 1.5%

**Years Living in Marathon County**

- Nearly half the 2017 LIFE Survey respondents have lived in Marathon County their entire lives.
- Relatively few (5%) are new to the County.
- No comparable data exist from the US Census to which this distribution can be compared.
**Education Level**

- A majority of the 2017 Marathon County LIFE survey participants do not have a post-secondary degree
- According to the U.S. Census, 9% of the Marathon County population 25 years old or more do not have a High School diploma or GED, 37% have a High School diploma, 18.5% have some tech/college, 12% have a 2-year degree, 16% have a 4-year degree, and 7% a graduate or professional degree
- The LIFE Survey sample has somewhat more formal education than the overall adult population in Marathon County

**Marital Status**

- Slightly less than two thirds of the respondents reported being married with roughly equal proportions saying they are separated or divorced (10%), a widow or widower (13%), and single (14%)
- According to the U.S. Census, married couple families made up 54% of the households in Marathon County in 2015, 13% were single-parent households, 6% were widowed and 27% have never married; the under-representation of single households is expected given age distribution of the sample (Fig 29)
• Participants who selected the “prefer not to say” option for this question were excluded from Figure 34.
• Slightly less than half the sample are from households earning between $25,000 and $75,000 per year.
• The U.S. Census reports that in 2015, 9% of Marathon households had incomes under $15,000, 11% had incomes between $15,000 and $24,999, 25% had incomes between $25,000 and $49,999, 20.5% had incomes between $50,000 and $74,999, 15% had incomes between $75,000 and $99,999, and 19% had incomes of $100,000 or more.
• The LIFE sample matches the underlying income distribution quite well.