

Creating Demand for a Downtown Lifestyle in Saskatoon

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Executive Summary

Canadian civic officials are reconsidering the function of downtowns by emphasizing their liveability and promoting them as neighbourhoods that offer diverse housing, entertainment, employment, and lifestyle options. Branding, public realm and built form improvements, economic, social and cultural strategies, and property development are used to enhance the perception and experience of living downtown. Liveable downtowns need a large residential population to thrive. Saskatoon's downtown population is small. Cultivating demand for downtown living in the city has been a challenge for the public- and private-sectors. Identifying interest and residential market demand for the downtown is necessary to uncover approaches to promote downtown living and help achieve the City of Saskatoon's strategic goal of *Sustainable Growth*.

Methodology

The *Creating Demand for a Downtown Lifestyle in Saskatoon* survey was used to understand the positive and negative attributes of Downtown Saskatoon according to respondents. The survey also examined a variety of aspirational features for downtown living generally, and characteristics specific to Saskatoon's downtown. It was administered in July 2020 to residents of Downtown and 10 other neighbourhoods. The City of Saskatoon's 2019 Neighbourhood Profiles publication was used to select the 10 other neighbourhoods with demographic characteristics best matching those of households that are likely in mid-sized cities to consider living downtown, from three different development periods: *Pre-War* – Buena Vista, Caswell Hill, City Park, Nutana; *Post-WWII* – Forest Grove, North Park, Queen Elizabeth; and, *Post-2000* – Evergreen, Hampton Village, Stonebridge. Survey invitation letters were mailed out containing a web address for the online survey administered by the University of Saskatchewan's Canadian Hub for Applied and Social Research. The survey was completed by 470 respondents.

Five focus groups were held to examine ways in which neighbourhood and lifestyle amenities are prioritized and perceived, along with conditions that would increase the desirability of a downtown lifestyle in Saskatoon. Discussion topics emphasized community, housing, amenities, public realm, and transportation. Each focus group discussion was 60-90 minutes in duration, held on *Zoom Pro*, a video teleconferencing platform, in November 2020. Participants were recruited by email from a list of survey respondents that identified themselves as willing to participate in a focus group. A total of 30 people (14 male and 16 female) were selected to participate based on their neighbourhood and availability. Focus groups had four to seven participants each. The composition of each focus group was purposeful to reflect gender and age diversity, taking cues from literature indicating who, in Canadian mid-sized cities, comprise the demographic groups most likely to choose a downtown residential urban lifestyle.

Key Findings

- 21st Street East is generally considered the heart of Downtown Saskatoon, especially where it intersects with 2nd Avenue South. Saskatoon residents appreciate the restaurants and bars, retail, landmarks, and design features on the street and its central location.
- The South Saskatchewan River and Meewasin Valley are considered Downtown Saskatoon's biggest assets. The natural areas, space for activities, and special events that occur there are valued by Saskatoon residents and should be further enhanced and programmed for use throughout the year.

- The convenient lifestyle of being close to work, school, retail, businesses, services and the action are top reasons people choose to live in Downtown Saskatoon. Diverse activities and amenities are expected to be within walking distance to residences.
- If given the choice, most people interested in living downtown want to live near the river and Meewasin Valley corridor for the views and recreation options.
- There is demand for diversified housing development Downtown in terms of price point, architectural style, and on-site amenities.
- Residents and visitors would like more well-placed outdoor public spaces with greenery and urban furniture suitable for socializing and gathering with friends and family in different parts of Downtown throughout the entire year.
- There was a desire among focus group participants for Downtown Saskatoon to be more pet friendly. Residential choices that allow pets and charge reasonable pet fees; on-leash access to downtown parks; an off-leash dog park(s); and other spaces that allow pets would meet the aspirations of residents and would-be residents for households that so often include pets.
- In Downtown, community is experienced in residential buildings, local businesses, neighbourhood organizations, and the public realm. Community building should be prioritized to enhance relationships among those who live and work in Downtown Saskatoon.
- The art gallery, theatre, and public library facilities downtown are considered good quality amenities and important public/private investments for a downtown urban lifestyle. But ensuring qualities of coziness, locality, and accessibility will ensure these facilities (existing or new) are a popular part of a regular Downtown lifestyle for residents living there, instead of just occasional places to pop into for visitors to downtown.
- Downtown employment and entertainment options are highly regarded among Saskatoon residents, especially when it comes to restaurants and nightlife.
- Saskatoon residents would like vacant and underutilized property and buildings in the Downtown to be developed or repurposed to meet the needs of the community. People are tired of the unsightly barren lots punching holes throughout the fabric of downtown.
- Downtown built form is average at best, and more deliberate attention needs to be paid to developing high quality building frontages that add value to the streetscape and human-scale and protecting/adapting built heritage and history to build a distinctive sense of place.
- The most prominent concerns with Downtown Saskatoon are the lack of food stores and the feelings of being unsafe.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Downtown Saskatoon has tremendous potential to build its place-product and promote its brand as a highly desirable residential environment offering active, culturally enriching, dynamic, civically engaged lifestyles close to work, services, recreation, education, entertainment, well programmed green and natural spaces, in a diverse community setting with a rich history. The results of this study add an important public

perspective piece to the existing planning directions for Downtown Saskatoon, articulated, for example, in the *City Centre Plan* (City of Saskatoon, 2013) and *Inquiry Toward a Downtown Stimulus Strategy for Saskatoon* (Beasley & Associates, Planning Inc., 2019). The following recommendations are expanded upon in the last section of the report.

- Develop and Repurpose Vacant Property and Buildings
- Diversify Housing Options, in Good Locations, to Respond to Market Demand
- Implement Cohesive and Distinctive Land Use and Design
- Implement Consistent Streetscaping and Placemaking Efforts
- Enhance the Number, Types, and Qualities of Parks and Green Space
- Create a Pedestrian Street or Pedestrian-Priority Street
- Make Downtown More Pet-Friendly
- Build a Downtown Place Brand that Emphasizes Community and Cohesion
- Improve Food Security
- Address Social and Safety Concerns
- Improve the Pedestrian Experience
- Provide Consistent Cyclist Infrastructure
- Improve Public Transit
- Apply Reconciliation with Purpose and Intent
- Keep Developing and Promoting 'Urban With a Prairie Heart'
- Consider these findings and recommendations in City Centre Plan update and related downtown initiatives (e.g., Entertainment District planning)

1. Introduction

Canadian civic officials are reconsidering the function of downtowns by emphasizing their liveability and promoting them as neighbourhoods that offer diverse housing, entertainment, employment, and lifestyle options. Branding, public realm and built form improvements, economic, social and cultural strategies, and property development are used to enhance the perception and experience of living downtown. Liveable downtowns need a large residential population to thrive. Saskatoon’s downtown population is small. Cultivating demand for downtown living in the city has been a challenge for the public- and private-sectors. Identifying interest and residential market demand for the downtown is necessary to uncover approaches to promote downtown living and help achieve the City of Saskatoon’s strategic goal of *Sustainable Growth*.

The project team is led by Ryan Walker (Principal Investigator, University of Saskatchewan) and Brent McAdam (Lead Collaborator, City of Saskatoon), and driven by Zoe Hagen (USask), Ellen Wardell (CoS), Loleen Berdahl (USask), Janel Fergusson (USask), Ana Maria Bogdan (USask), Jessica McCutcheon (USask), Haven Rees (CoS), and Brent Penner (Downtown Saskatoon Business Improvement District). The research is made possible through the support provided by Research Junction, funded by the City of Saskatoon and University of Saskatchewan.

This report provides insight into local experiences and perceptions of Downtown Saskatoon, and recommendations to improve the neighbourhood for present and prospective residents and visitors (Figure 1). The purpose of the study is to learn how to make Downtown a desirable place to live by identifying local interest in and perspectives on Downtown living in Saskatoon. Results come from the Creating Demand for a Downtown Lifestyle in Saskatoon survey that provided insight into local opinion of Downtown Saskatoon, and five focus groups where participants shared perspectives on valuable neighbourhood attributes and how to make improvements in order to make Downtown living more desirable.

Figure 1. Downtown Saskatoon.



2. Literature Review

Downtown Revitalization

Urban planning is influenced by national, provincial, and local housing, infrastructure, and economic policies and demographic trends. Many planning and development decisions prioritized suburban development patterns and separated land uses, while downtowns have not been maintained to meet consumer preferences (Filion et al., 2016). As mid-sized cities (i.e., cities with a population of 50,000 to 500,000 residents) face an array of environmental, social, and economic constraints, downtown neighbourhoods become an increasingly important place. These constraints have motivated urban planners to reconsider their function to make better use of existing urban infrastructure and cultivate a viable downtown neighbourhood (Ehlerz et al., 2019).

Filion et al. (2004) describe three types of downtown revitalization that have occurred in mid-sized cities: (1) adapting downtown to be automobile-friendly by improving road networks to and within downtown and providing parking options, which failed to make downtown an appealing neighbourhood; (2) replicating suburban commercial trends in order to compete with new development, which was also not successful in bolstering downtown; and, (3) creating a distinct downtown identity by preserving and enhancing unique downtown attributes to distinguish it from the suburbs, which has been the more effective approach.

Cultivating a complete and cohesive downtown neighbourhood involves public, private, and community actors. Numerous cities have adopted revitalization strategies that aim to enhance downtown liveability and desirability. This process involves improving physical and functional neighbourhood attributes so the downtown meets the lifestyle needs and preferences of consumers (Balsas, 2004). As such, it is essential that revitalization strategies have long term commitment and reflect local capacity, interests, and market demand in order to produce a desirable place. Lively downtowns of mid-sized cities feature diverse residential, entertainment, and employment options in a socially and financially inclusive, safe, and attractive built environment (Filion et al., 2004; Balsas, 2004; Burayidi, 2018). However, downtowns in many mid-sized cities currently do not provide an inviting urban lifestyle.

Lifestyle preferences are influenced by cultural values and social norms, making it important for urban planners and developers to be aware of market trends. Karyy (2015) maintains that involving citizens in the planning stages leads to better implementation of downtown change, and satisfaction with the result. This highlights the benefit of understanding local consumer behaviour. Fostering a strong downtown community creates an urban commodity that consumers demand, which helps promote a downtown lifestyle. Filion et al. (2000) suggest that enhancing existing advantages, alleviating problems, marketing, and improving conditions for developers enhances the community and stimulates residential demand. Many downtown revitalization efforts aim to do so by addressing downtown branding, public realm, economic development, and property development. This results in a downtown that offers a high quality of life for citizens, which attracts residents, businesses, and investment.

Consumer Behaviour

Consumer behaviour is a process that involves the selection, purchase, and use of products and ideas (Solomon et al., 2016). This is impacted by demographics (observable aspects of a population) and psychographics (attitudes, values, and traits of a population) (Solomon et al., 2016). Downtown must be thought of in this context, as a *place*-product to be planned, developed, marketed and sold to consumers. A strong marketing strategy for a place-product concept that does not live up to expectations on the ground

will yield disappointing results, and attention must be focused on product development. A well-developed place-product that has no conceptual currency among would-be consumers should place greater attention on a marketing strategy. Ideally, planning, development, and marketing will occur in coordination with one another and iteratively. Planning and development have a direct impact on how consumers access, use, and value urban commodities, such as parks, malls, and neighbourhoods. Uncoordinated planning efforts, entrenched transportation and land use systems, and privileging a suburban lifestyle produce significant barriers to positioning downtown as the most desirable place in the city to live for many (Filion et al., 2016). To address these barriers, it is important for downtown development to be prioritized and for it to respond to, and cultivate, market demand (Lewis and Donald, 2009; Burayidi, 2018).

Consumer demand reveals preferences and expectations because behaviours (i.e., residential decisions) are oriented toward a goal state (Filion et al., 2016, Solomon et al., 2016). This implies that inducing demand for downtown living begins with identifying the neighbourhood and lifestyle preferences and expectations of potential downtown residents (Ehlenz et al., 2019). Marketing segmentation is used to identify consumers with similarities in order to understand and influence their behaviour (Solomon et al., 2016). Determining population segments that are likely to live downtown and conditions that would help achieve their lifestyle goals turns them into partial producers of the urban space they consume (Karry, 2015).

Downtown Residents

A sizeable residential base is required to support a vibrant downtown and sustain a variety of amenities and services (Bauer and Fosmoe, 2018). Pfeiffer et al. (2019) note that residential choices are primarily impacted by lifecycle stage because needs vary depending on life circumstances and responsibilities. Recent Canadian Census data indicate that people aged 25-34 and over 65 are more likely than other age cohorts to reside downtown (City of Calgary, 2019; City of Edmonton, 2019; City of London, 2016; City of Regina, 2017; City of Saskatoon, 2019; City of Winnipeg, n.d.; Downtown/Harris Green, n.d., Gregory, 2016). Reasons for living downtown are generation-specific, making it vital to use consumer behaviour to rationalize planning, development, and investment decisions (Williams, 2010). The younger segment (especially those with a suburban upbringing) often seek opportunity and excitement in downtown neighbourhoods (Williams, 2010; Sotheby's International Realty Canada, 2015). They are also known for their acceptance of diversity and desire for authenticity and experience (Solomon et al., 2016). On the other hand, senior citizens pursue accessibility and lifestyle simplification as they age (Williams, 2010; Sotheby's International Realty Canada, 2015). They also tend to be more traditional, have fewer obligations, and seek pre-conditions for social interaction due to 'empty nesting' and retirement (Solomon, et al., 2016). Despite differences in lifestyle and life stages, these two consumer segments are well-suited to downtown living because it offers convenient mixed-use living environments that are an extension of residents' living spaces (Sotheby's International Realty Canada, 2015).

While knowing the demographic characteristics of potential downtown residents is useful, more meaningful decisions can be made by identifying psychographic characteristics (i.e., activities, interests, and values) of these segments. This mixed approach to interpreting consumer behaviour to learn their preferences and expectations is a lifestyle marketing perspective, recognizing that since consumers vastly differ in terms of how they spend disposable time and income, it is important to appeal to the common values of the target market segments (Solomon et al., 2016). When combined, the demographic and psychographic characteristics of potential downtown residents reveal how downtown branding, public

realm improvements, economic development, and property development should transpire to make downtown a desirable place to live.

Liveability

Liveability is measured by qualitative and quantitative indicators and helps to attract and retain investment in a community (Balsas, 2004). Downtowns are characterized by their diversity of uses including retail, entertainment, government functions, and professional services (Balsas, 2004). While these uses are necessary, they alone are not adequate to ensure downtown is a liveable neighbourhood. Several factors contribute to liveability, such as neighbourhood cooperation and interaction; sustainable and convenient amenities and resources; functional infrastructure; safety; affordability; and ease of mobility (Burayidi, 2018; Balsas, 2004). Although they are difficult to articulate and measure, these attributes and indicators align with consumer values and impact lifestyle. Lifestyle refers to a social identity that is achieved by consuming and participating in certain goods, services, and activities based on interests and goals. These interests and goals, including those related to neighbourhoods and dwellings, are largely determined by social position, life stage, and culture.

Residential choices reflect lifestyle and consumption practices, and shape ways of being (Benson, 2014). This is significant because the community has a direct impact on the quality-of-life residents experience. Since they have not traditionally been conceptualized as residential neighbourhood(s) in mid-sized Canadian cities, downtowns need to offer a variety of opportunities for users to meet their personal and collective needs and preferences to be a viable residential option. These opportunities are implemented over time through large- and small-scale projects driven by the public sector, private sector, and community organizations. Downtown performance criteria include *vitality*, or the strength of the downtown community; *sense*, which refers to sense of place and time; *fit*, or the extent to which the built environment meets the expectations of users; *equity*; and *control*, which signifies safety and advocacy downtown (Balsas, 2004). While approaches to improve downtown liveability differ across mid-sized cities because they depend on local context, these criteria may be used to measure downtown liveability and guide revitalization efforts.

Branding

Brand image is based on place-related meanings (Lindstedt, 2011). Branding is a component of downtown revitalization that helps articulate the downtown vision to industry and the public. Marketers often promote a sense of community among product users, making it essential that the downtown brand reflects the values of the community (Solomon et al., 2016). Branding is used to distinguish downtown as a unique place with competitive advantages over other neighbourhoods to attract residents (Runyan and Huddleston, 2006). Management, organization, and knowledge of consumer behaviour are foundations of establishing a competitive advantage (Runyan and Huddleston, 2006). The branding process involves creating a desired image through market research, designing the brand aesthetic, educating the public about the brand, and maintaining a positive reputation (Erlandson, 2009). Determining and implementing a desired image are both crucial in revitalizing downtown because a strong brand identity “establishes an expectation that is either met or exceeded by the reality” (Erlandson, 2009, pg. 1). Essential parts of articulating the downtown image for mid-sized cities include clear objectives, with policies and initiatives to achieve them; openness to innovation; and, engagement with target consumer segments (Randall, 2015). The downtown brand concept and reality must resonate with consumers in order to make downtown living desirable.

Downtown branding is a collective effort involving local government, organizations, developers, and community members who determine and operationalize the long-term vision for downtown (Runyan and Huddleston, 2006; Erlandson, 2009). Since brand is established through intentional and unintentional means, conveying a consistent downtown brand to consumers is often challenging in midsized cities. This is largely due to negative perceptions of downtown that are formed both individually and collectively based on noteworthy events, personal experiences, and media coverage. These negative perceptions must be identified and addressed in coordination with city administration, the private sector, and other organizations to improve or change them (Erlandson, 2009). Strengthening positive features is important, but negative features must also be addressed to change consumer perception and behaviour. Rupp et al. (2019) emphasize that engaging citizens in downtown branding can facilitate community empowerment, behavioural action, and in so doing cultivate demand for a downtown urban lifestyle.

Public Realm

A significant part of the downtown brand is positioned in the public realm, which includes sidewalks, streets, parks, and other areas freely accessible to the public. Placemaking is the practice of making users feel a sense of connection and attachment to these areas through design and programming, and is an essential element of downtown revitalization. Creating place is a complex and ongoing process. Downtowns in midsized cities often have room for improvement in terms of human scale and sense of place. To create a meaningful place, the physical location and material setting for social relations must evoke a relationship between the users and place itself (Cresswell, 2004). The physical form of a place impacts the perception and experience people have within it (Burayidi, 2018). Furthermore, the way people behave in a space and the amount of time they spend there provides insight into how the space is perceived. Planners may strategize improvements to public spaces by facilitating walking, sitting, gathering, leisure, and exercise (Gehl, 2010). Downtowns are social spaces produced by the users and their relationships (Cresswell, 2004). Since downtown residents rely on the public realm for transportation and recreation, upholding its high quality is essential to promote downtown living.

As a tangible and visible undertaking, placemaking and public realm improvements communicate that city administration values a place and those who occupy it (Burayidi, 2018). Common placemaking policies include provision of green and open space, attractive building facades, mixed materials, textures, and colours, lighting, heritage, culture, and public art. The downtown public realm is essential to liveability because it impacts both functionality and aesthetics. While it is crucial for downtowns to evolve to meet the contemporary needs and preferences of citizens, they must also maintain character and identity over time to exhibit a consistent sense of place (Randall, 2015). Quality places often feature a unique built environment, access to nature, artistic and cultural presence, and active streetscapes with landmarks (Lewis and Donald, 2009). It is useful to think of at least four approaches to enhancing the public realm: (1) standard placemaking aims to improve public spaces through design and programming changes; (2) strategic placemaking is used to achieve a specific goal, such as providing an opportunity for people to congregate; (3) creative placemaking is achieved through focusing on arts and culture; and (4) tactical placemaking projects are temporary and experimental measures that change how a place is used and perceived, such as transforming a parking lot into a pocket park (Burayidi, 2018; Kahn, 2007). When implemented, these strategies contribute to downtown revitalization by building attachment between users and their surroundings, fostering a sense of community empowerment, and capitalizing on downtown advantages (Kahn, 2007; Lewis and Donald, 2009). Public realm improvements should be executed to align with downtown branding strategies.

The urban environment is where people socialize, express themselves, and engage in community initiatives. As such, it must offer opportunities for market, meeting, and movement, and downtown public spaces should include places to sit, stand, walk, cycle, play, and use transit safely (Gehl, 2010). Investing in downtown design and programming have been proven to attract consumers, producing desired behavioural results such as attracting and retaining downtown residents (Solomon et al., 2016; Kelly et al., 2016). Since the target downtown residential consumer segments value dynamic streetscapes, providing more amenities in public spaces downtown is necessary to induce residential demand (Bagilvo, 2016).

Economic Development

Since the primary function of downtowns in mid-sized cities has been commercial activity, economic development has been a consistent priority for downtown planning and revitalization. As a result, the success of downtowns has been measured by economic indicators such as productivity and consumptive behaviours (Kelly et al., 2016). With a large presence of services and offices downtown, factors of economic success include retail activity, employment opportunities, and vacancy rates (Charney, 2015; Filion et al., 2004). These indicators do not consider social, environmental, or community-oriented aspects of downtown, and have instilled a strong business place brand that does not necessarily drive momentum for downtown community/neighbourhood revitalization. Morisson and Bevilacqua (2018) note that neighbourhoods are dynamic entities that adapt and change as society progresses. Changing consumer preferences and increasing commercial activity in suburban areas have transformed the downtown commercial experience. This presents a need to make downtown a preferred destination for living, in addition to work, shopping, and entertainment.

While economic development strategies often emphasize arenas, fine arts, and cultural amenities that serve broader city residents and tourists, increasing attention must be paid to other economic development strategies involving around-the-clock businesses, outdoor recreation, and specialized goods and services that serve downtown residents (Kelly et al., 2016). This aligns with Burayidi's (2018) recommendation that downtown economic development should include residential development and cultural and heritage amenities. The emerging sharing economy and collaborative consumption patterns suggest a decline in ownership of tangible goods and an increase in temporary or shared ownership of a product, service, or experience (Solomon et al., 2016). This makes it necessary for downtowns to offer both traditional and modern commercial uses and experiences that the downtown resident market segments seek. Diverse food and drink places, concerts and special events, speciality clothing and personal services, and health and fitness resources are popular downtown (Solomon et al., 2016). Underutilized commercial spaces may be transformed into permanent or temporary features to keep consumers engaged. Target consumer segments may be enticed to live downtown by providing their favoured activities (including work) and interests in proximity to residential real estate.

Property Development

Place image is based on visible features in the infrastructure and landscape, as well as nonvisible social and economic conditions. Property development is a key component of downtown revitalization because it signifies interest, investment, and improvement in the neighbourhood. The property market is shaped by economic conditions, generational values, and demographics, which implies that the use and appearance of downtown property must change over time (Charney, 2015; Sotheby's International Realty Canada, 2015). The character of downtown property is created by a variety of actors, including planners and developers who transform the urban landscape through policies that direct new construction and infill

development, and community members who find purpose and enjoyment in these places (Ehlenz et al., 2019). Even though cooperation is required for downtown revitalization strategies to be successfully executed, tension often occurs between the public sector, private sector, and community due to limiting regulations, unclear expectations, and opposing agendas (Charney, 2015). This may be improved if downtown strategies recognize how the stakeholders' objectives contribute to enhancing downtown liveability, and prioritize those objectives based on local consumer behaviour and demand (Baarveld et al., 2015).

Downtown strategies in many mid-sized cities support incentives for mixed-use developments with active frontages, adaptive reuse, repurposing surface parking lots, and human scale design. Identifying consumer behaviour and demand for urban space is especially important to property developers who choose sites and buildings based on their perceived knowledge of what consumers desire (Pfeiffer et al., 2019; Ehlenz et al., 2019). Studies indicate that downtown residents value short commutes, multi-modal transportation, and socially diverse areas with access to arts and culture (Pfeiffer et al., 2019; Ehlenz et al., 2019). Furthermore, these consumer segments appreciate the convenience and variety of choice afforded by smaller dwellings, rental and ownership options, and an assortment of land uses in proximity to one another. Downtown revitalization must incorporate and incentivize the implementation of these preferences and expectations to ensure new and infill property developments appeal to these consumer segments. For instance, residential developments in thriving downtowns have unique character and identity, provide common outdoor space, support flexible lifestyles, provide technology-enabled amenities and features, integrate environmental and social consciousness, and are in proximity to employment and entertainment options (Pfeiffer et al., 2019). In order to make downtown living enticing, the property attributes that potential downtown residents value must exist in the neighbourhood.

3. Methodology

A survey and five focus groups were used to gather data to help learn how to make Downtown Saskatoon a more desirable place to live. The quantitative survey data provided important local perspective about the characteristics of Downtown Saskatoon and the qualitative focus group data went deeper into the perception and experience of Downtown living in Saskatoon, how to improve it, and providing important context and depth of understanding to some of the survey results. Together, the data from each method yielded complementary results that identify the tangible and intangible neighbourhood attributes that would make Downtown Saskatoon a desirable residential location.

Survey

The *Creating Demand for a Downtown Lifestyle in Saskatoon* survey was used to understand the positive and negative attributes of Downtown Saskatoon according to respondents. The survey also examined a variety of aspirational features for downtown living generally, and characteristics specific to Saskatoon's downtown. It was administered in July 2020 to residents of Downtown and 10 other neighbourhoods. The City of Saskatoon's 2019 Neighbourhood Profiles publication was used to select the 10 other neighbourhoods with demographic characteristics best matching those of households that are likely in midsized cities to consider living downtown, from three different development periods: *Pre-War* – Buena Vista, Caswell Hill, City Park, Nutana; *Post-WWII* – Forest Grove, North Park, Queen Elizabeth; and, *Post-2000* – Evergreen, Hampton Village, Stonebridge.

Using anonymous mailing addresses provided for the Downtown and 10 other neighbourhoods by the City of Saskatoon, survey invitation letters were sent by regular mail to all Downtown households and a random sample of households in the 10 other neighbourhoods. The random sample in neighbourhoods outside of Downtown was stratified and administered in equal numbers to 1) detached (including semi-detached), and 2) multi-unit dwellings. The invitation letters, mailed out July 7-9, contained a web address for the online survey administered by the University of Saskatchewan's Canadian Hub for Applied and Social Research. The survey was completed by 470 respondents before closing at 9:00 AM on July 31 (see Appendix A at the end of this report for respondent location and demographic characteristics).

The results were analyzed using *SPSS v.26* and are presented as descriptive statistics. Nonresponse bias is likely present in the survey results – i.e., those who chose to respond will more often have some interest in downtown residential conditions; those without much interest in the topic would be more likely to discard the invitation to participate. This is not overly concerning, however, given that our goal is to understand how to make Downtown Saskatoon a more desirable place to live for those who might consider moving there if improvements were made, and what would prompt current residents to choose to stay.

Focus Groups

Focus group discussions were directed at ways in which neighbourhood and lifestyle amenities are prioritized and perceived, along with conditions that would increase the desirability of a downtown lifestyle in Saskatoon. Discussion topics emphasized community, housing, amenities, public realm, and transportation. Each focus group discussion was 60-90 minutes in duration, held on *Zoom Pro*, a video teleconferencing platform, in November 2020. Participants were recruited by email from a list of survey respondents that identified themselves as willing to participate in a focus group. A total of 30 people (14 male and 16 female) were selected to participate based on their neighbourhood and availability. Each participant was paid a \$75 honorarium. The participants were divided into five groups of four to seven

people each. The composition of each focus group was purposeful to reflect gender and age diversity, taking cues from literature indicating who, in Canadian mid-sized cities, comprise the demographic groups most likely to choose a downtown residential urban lifestyle. Table 1 describes how the focus group participants were organized.

TABLE 1. FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Session	Participants	Gender	Age Range	Neighbourhood	Status
1	6	3 male; 3 female	25 – 43	Downtown	Continue living Downtown
2	7	2 male; 5 female	58 – 72	Downtown	Continue living Downtown
3	6	3 male; 3 female	25-46	Downtown	Moving out of Downtown
4	4	1 male; 3 female	27 – 57	Pre-War, Post- War	Consider living Downtown
5	7	5 male; 2 female	34 – 63	Pre-War, Post- War, Post-2000	Consider living Downtown

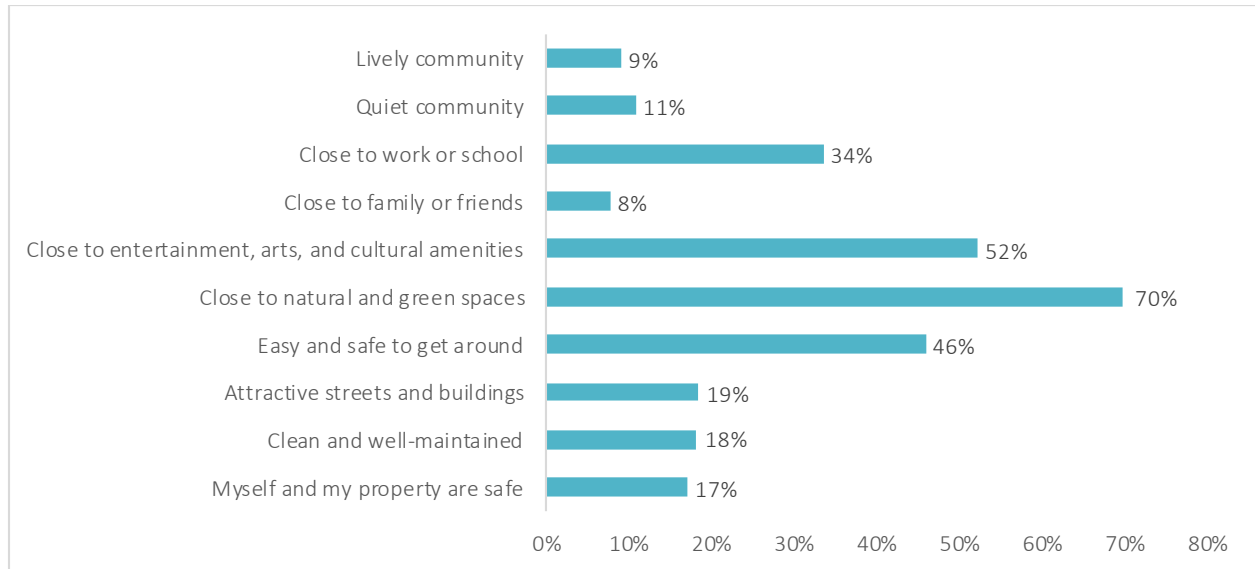
Each focus group discussion was recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were coded and analyzed using *NVivo v.12* qualitative data management software. Predetermined codes were established based on known downtown revitalization concepts and the survey results, while spontaneous codes were created as key words or ideas emerged (Bergin, 2018). Structural coding was used to categorize the data into tangible and intangible attributes of the urban environment, and values coding occurred to contextualize and prioritize the structural codes (Saldana, 2016). Overall, the analysis highlights key concepts that relate to downtown living, and what participants value in a downtown neighbourhood.

4. Survey Results

Neighbourhood Green Space, Amenities and Easy Mobility Highly Valued

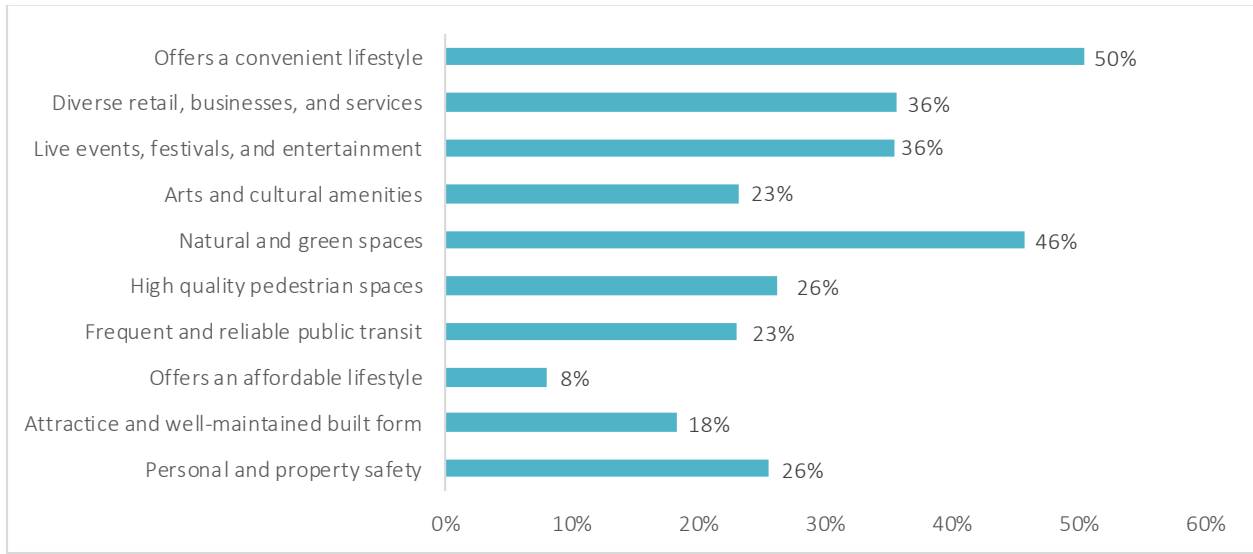
First, respondents were asked to identify up to three qualities they enjoy most about the neighbourhood where they currently live (Figure 2). Seven in ten respondents chose the nearby natural and green spaces. Over half enjoy being close to entertainment, arts, and cultural amenities. That it is easy and safe to get around by walking, biking, public transit and/or driving is a top quality for nearly half of respondents.

Figure 2. Which three qualities do you enjoy most about your current neighbourhood?



Next, respondents were asked to choose up to three qualities that make downtowns a good place to live in general, without focusing specifically on Downtown Saskatoon (Figure 3). Half indicated that a convenient lifestyle with lots of things close by would be one of the best things about downtown living. Almost half of respondents feel that natural and green spaces (e.g., parks, trails, trees, water features) make downtowns a good place to live. Other qualities that make downtown living desirable to many respondents are the diverse retail, businesses, and services available and the live events, festivals, and entertainment on offer.

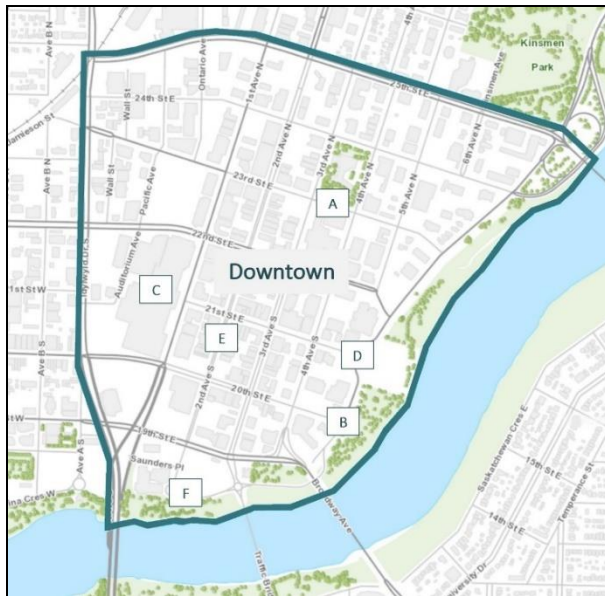
Figure 3. Which three qualities make downtowns a good place to live generally (not specifically Downtown Saskatoon)?



Heart of Downtown

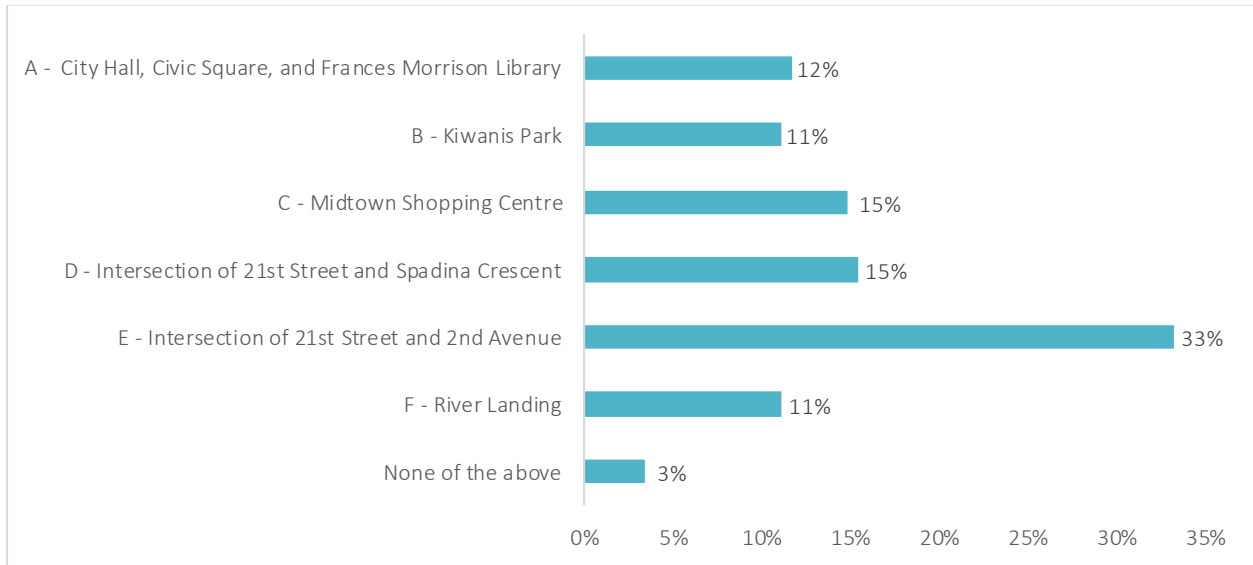
Respondents were asked to select the place that represents the heart of Downtown Saskatoon (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Heart of Downtown Saskatoon options.



The intersection of 21st Street East and 2nd Avenue South was the most common response, more than twice as popular as the next two places that were the intersection of 21st Street East and Spadina Crescent, and Midtown Shopping Centre (Figure 5). These results imply that, in general, 21st Street East is the heart of Downtown Saskatoon according to respondents, especially around the intersection with 2nd Avenue South.

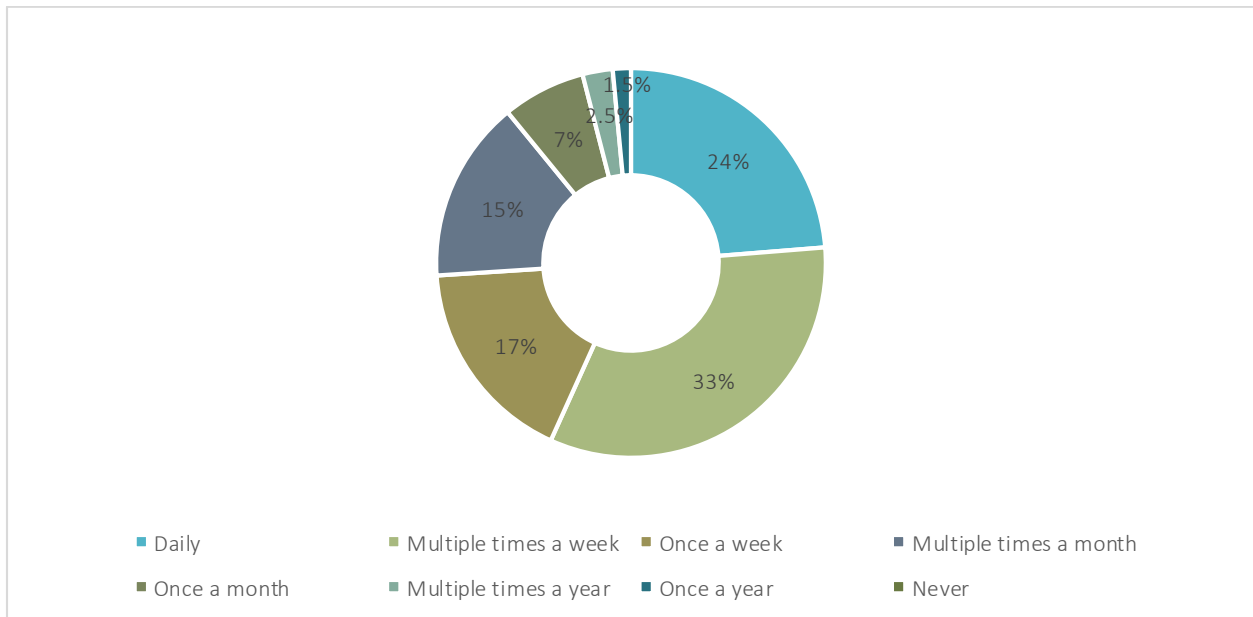
Figure 5. Which of the following locations is the heart of Downtown Saskatoon?



Downtown Saskatoon Visited Often to Drink, Eat, Shop and Work

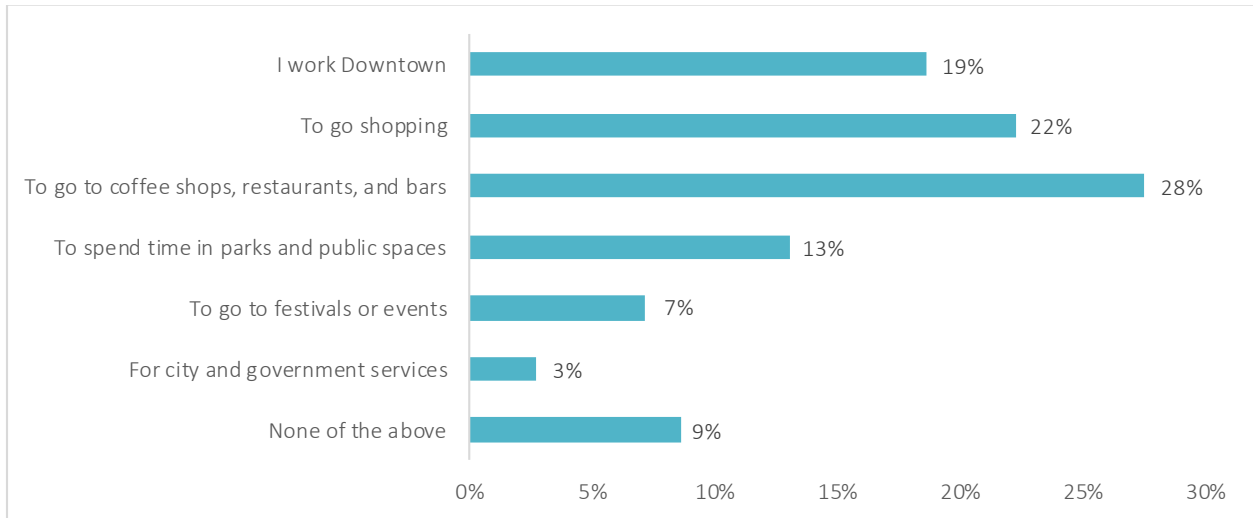
Respondents who do not live in Downtown were asked how often they visit it, and what they typically do when they are there. Most respondents who do not live in Downtown go there often, with one-third visiting multiple times a week and about a quarter visiting daily (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately how often did you visit Downtown?



For over a quarter of respondents who do not live in Downtown Saskatoon, the main reason to spend time there is to go to coffee shops, restaurants, and bars (Figure 7). The next most frequent reason for coming downtown is to go shopping. Nearly one in five respondents most frequently go downtown because they work there.

Figure 7. For what reason do you most frequently come Downtown?



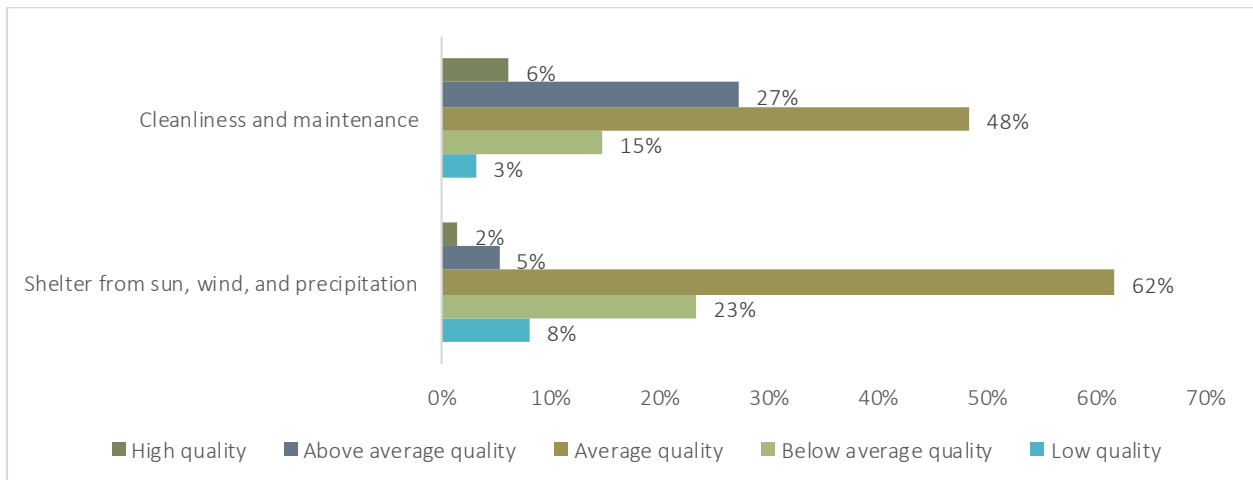
Rating Downtown Saskatoon

Respondents were asked to rate the quality and their level of satisfaction with a whole host of items in Downtown Saskatoon including comfort features, public spaces, activities, built form, public facilities, residential options, businesses, and transportation. In doing so, they considered the availability, variety, condition, adequacy, and upkeep of the items.

General Comfort in the Downtown

Most respondents feel that Downtown Saskatoon is generally pleasant (Figure 8). The majority feel that it is clean and well-maintained. Most feel that shelter from the sun, wind and precipitation is fine, though nearly one-third consider it inadequate.

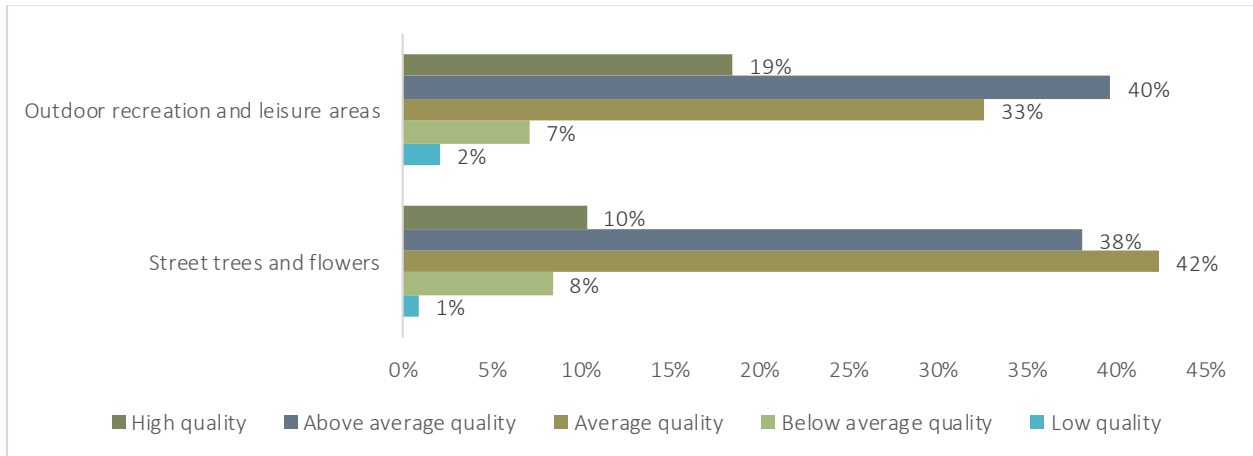
Figure 8. Rate the following comfort features in Downtown Saskatoon.



Great Downtown Green Space

Respondents rated Downtown Saskatoon's outdoor recreation and leisure areas highly and were similarly impressed with the quality of street trees and flowers (Figure 9). These two items were the most highly rated public space features by respondents.

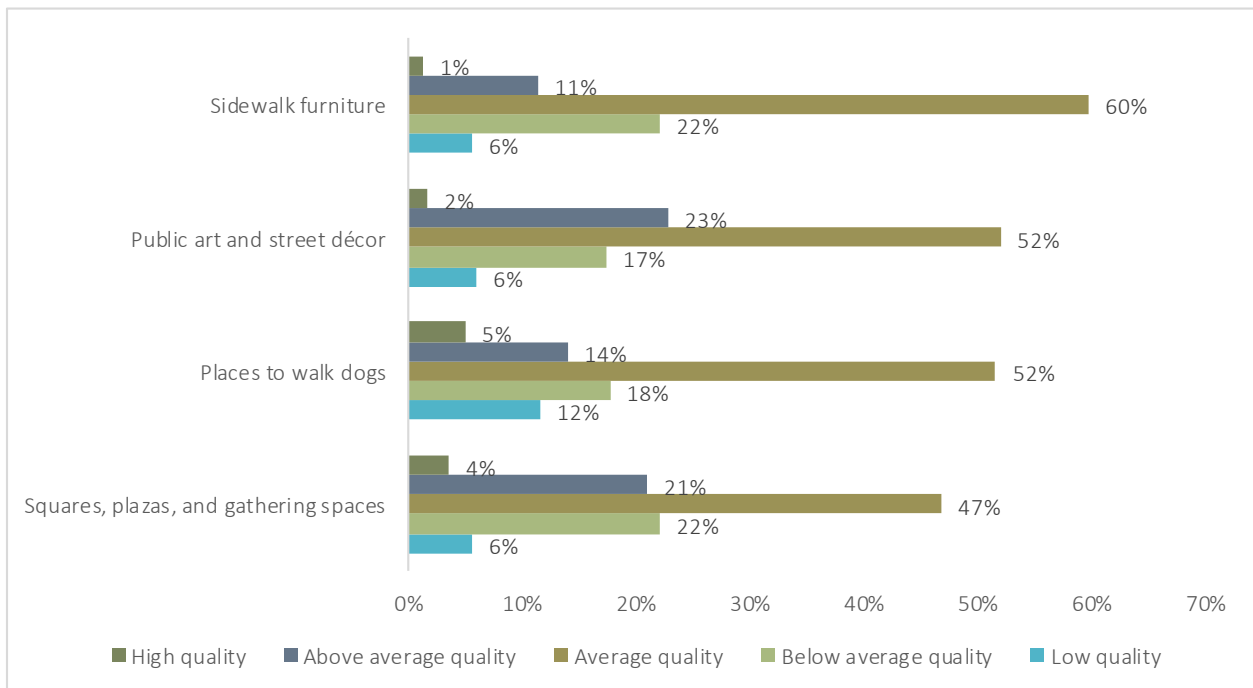
Figure 9. Rate the quality of the following public space features in Downtown Saskatoon.



Room for Improvement in Downtown Public Spaces

Other public space features in Downtown Saskatoon tended to elicit more average quality ratings from respondents (Figure 10). This includes sidewalk furniture, places to walk dogs, public art and street décor, and squares, plazas, and gathering spaces. Public art and street décor, and squares, plazas and gathering spaces stand out from the pack for having a sizeable above average rating as well, though not approaching the high praise attached to green space (Figure 9).

Figure 10. Rate the quality of the following public space features in Downtown Saskatoon.

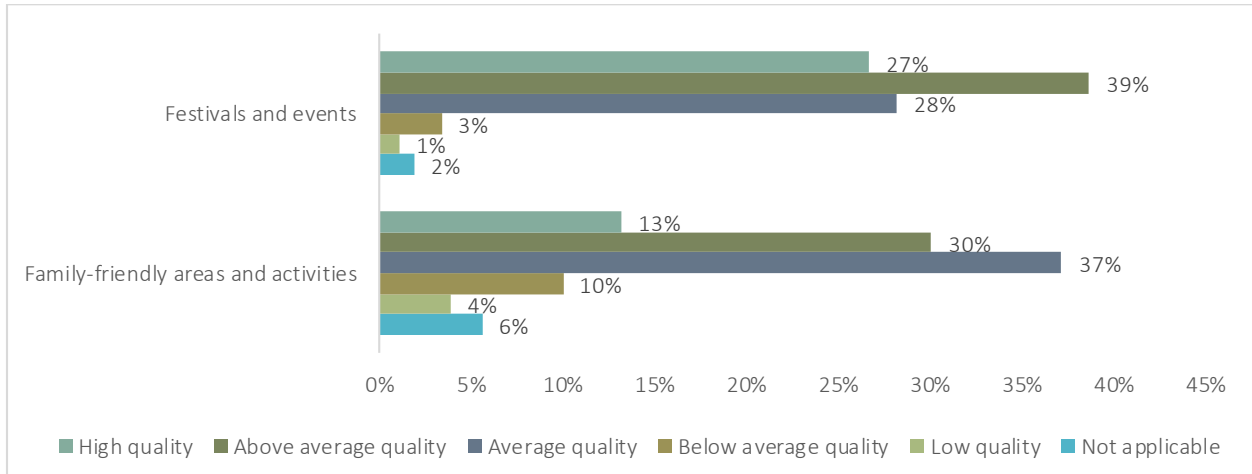


Things to Do for Everyone Downtown

Downtown is often a destination for special events. Respondents were asked what they think of events and activities in Downtown Saskatoon (Figure 11). Two-thirds of respondents think that the festivals and events

that occur Downtown are high quality or at least above average. Respondents also rated Downtown well on the quality of its family-friendly areas and activities.

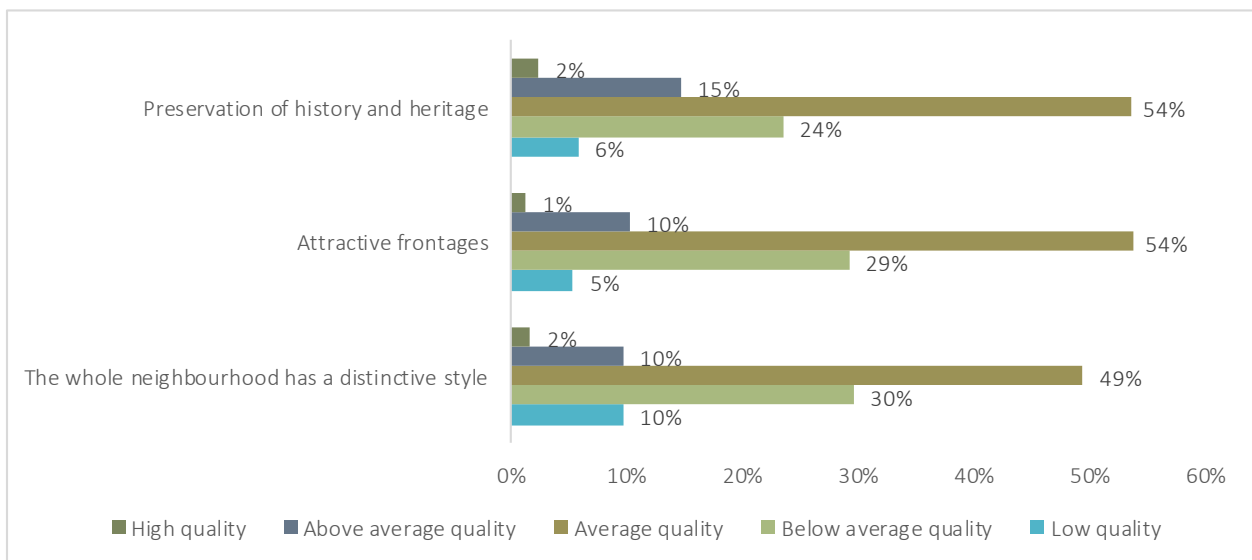
Figure 11. Rate the quality of events and activities offered in Downtown Saskatoon.



Downtown Built Form is Average at Best

Buildings frame the public realm of our streets, public spaces, our views and the skyline. The quality of real estate development is critical to the vitality of any downtown. When asked about Downtown Saskatoon’s building and architectural characteristics, most respondents indicated that the Downtown built form in Saskatoon is average at best, overall, with a sizeable group finding it below average or low quality (Figure 12). When asked about the quality of building and architectural features, close to one-third or more of respondents said that the preservation of history and heritage, attractiveness of building frontages, and the neighbourhood style as a whole are below average or low quality.

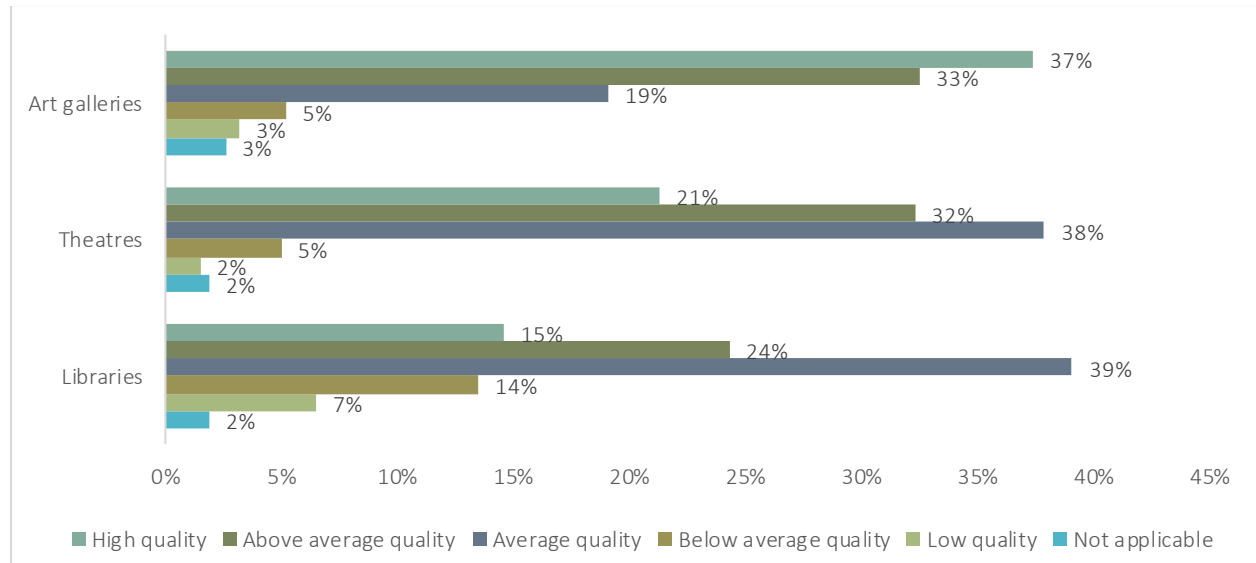
Figure 12. Rate the quality of the following building and architectural features in Downtown Saskatoon.



Good Quality Downtown Public Facilities

Public facilities provide important amenities for Downtown residents and visitors to enjoy. Respondents were asked what they think of several public facilities in Downtown Saskatoon (Figure 13). Art galleries were ranked highest: Nearly four in ten respondents giving this a high quality rating, joined by one-third rating it above average. Most people rated the Downtown theatres and library as average to high quality.

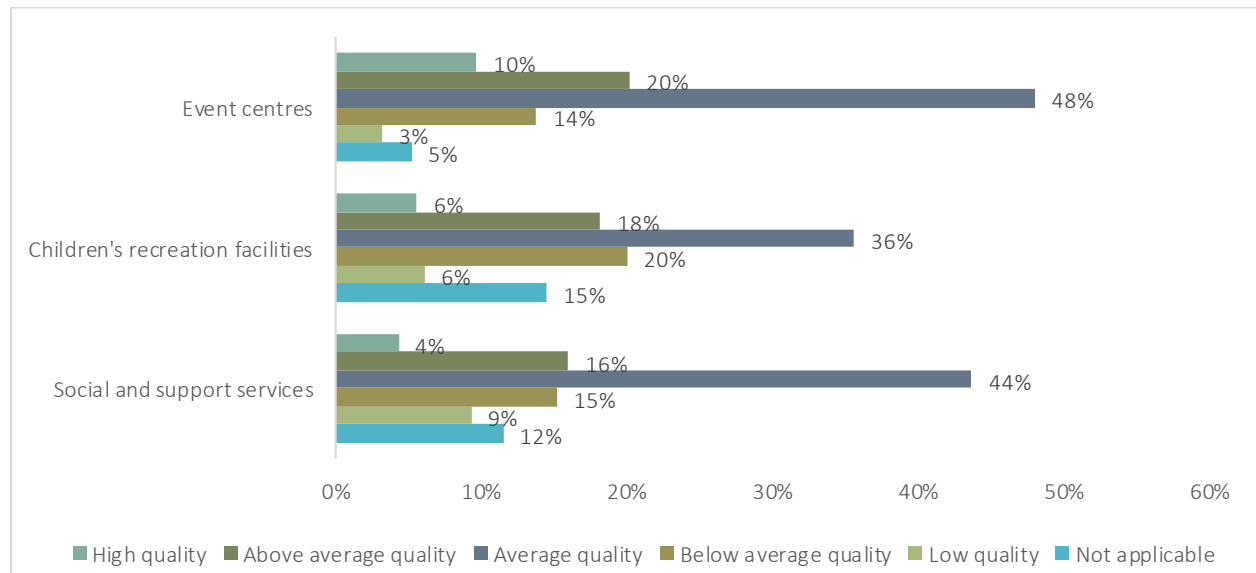
Figure 13. Rate the quality of the following public amenities in Downtown Saskatoon.



Mostly Average Quality Downtown Public Facilities

Respondents gave a mostly average rating to other facilities in Downtown (Figure 14). Generally pleased with event centres, nearly half rated them as average and almost one-third as above average or high quality. Children’s recreation facilities rated a little bit lower, and most respondents consider the social and support services offered Downtown to be average.

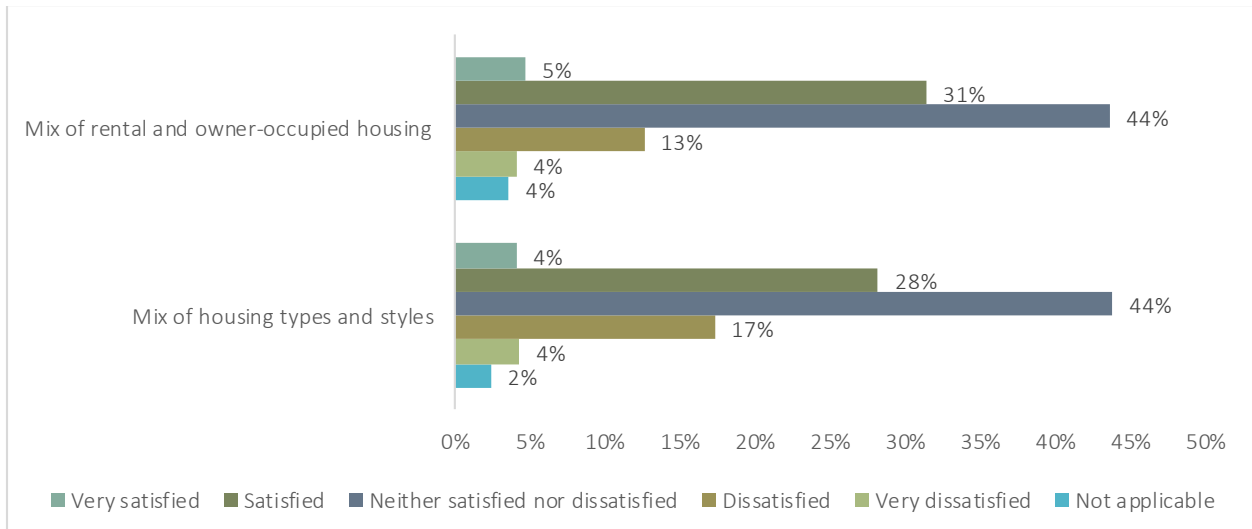
Figure 14. Rate the quality of the following facilities in Downtown Saskatoon.



Downtown Residential Options OK

Figure 15 shows what people think about the existing residential options in Downtown Saskatoon. About one-third of respondents are satisfied with the mix of owner-occupied and rental housing and the mix of housing types and styles. Many respondents, however, did not have an opinion one way or the other on these items.

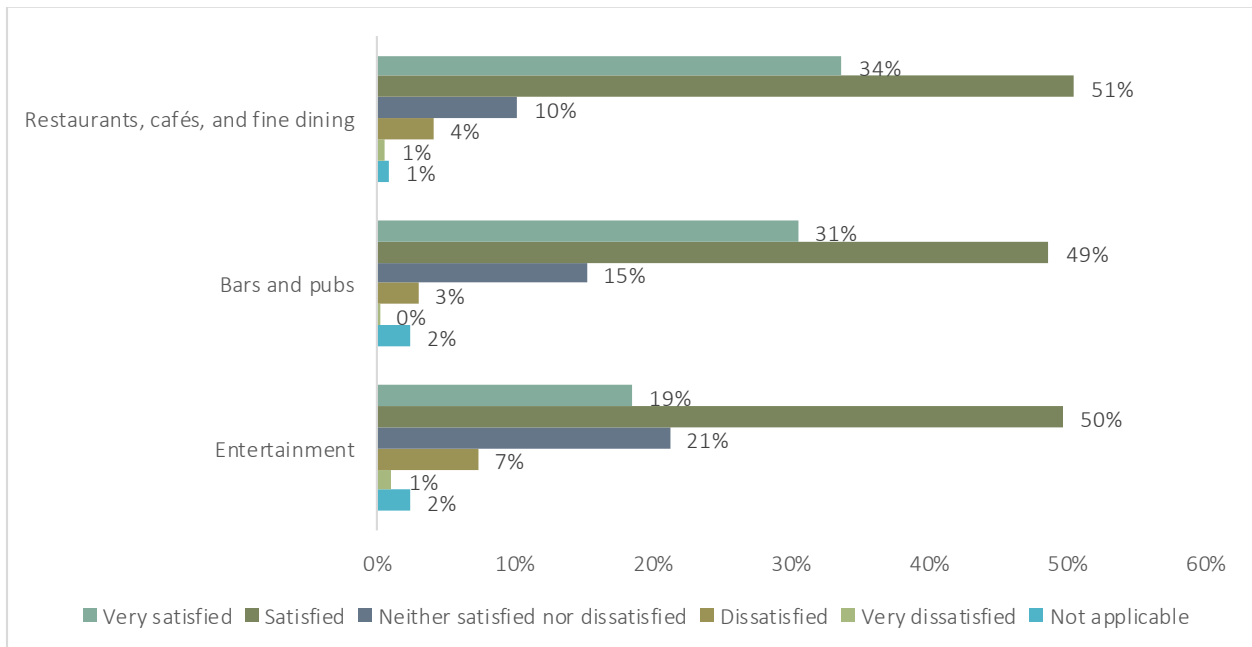
Figure 15. Rate how satisfied you are with the following residential features in Downtown Saskatoon.



Happy Downtown Customers, if They Don't Need Groceries

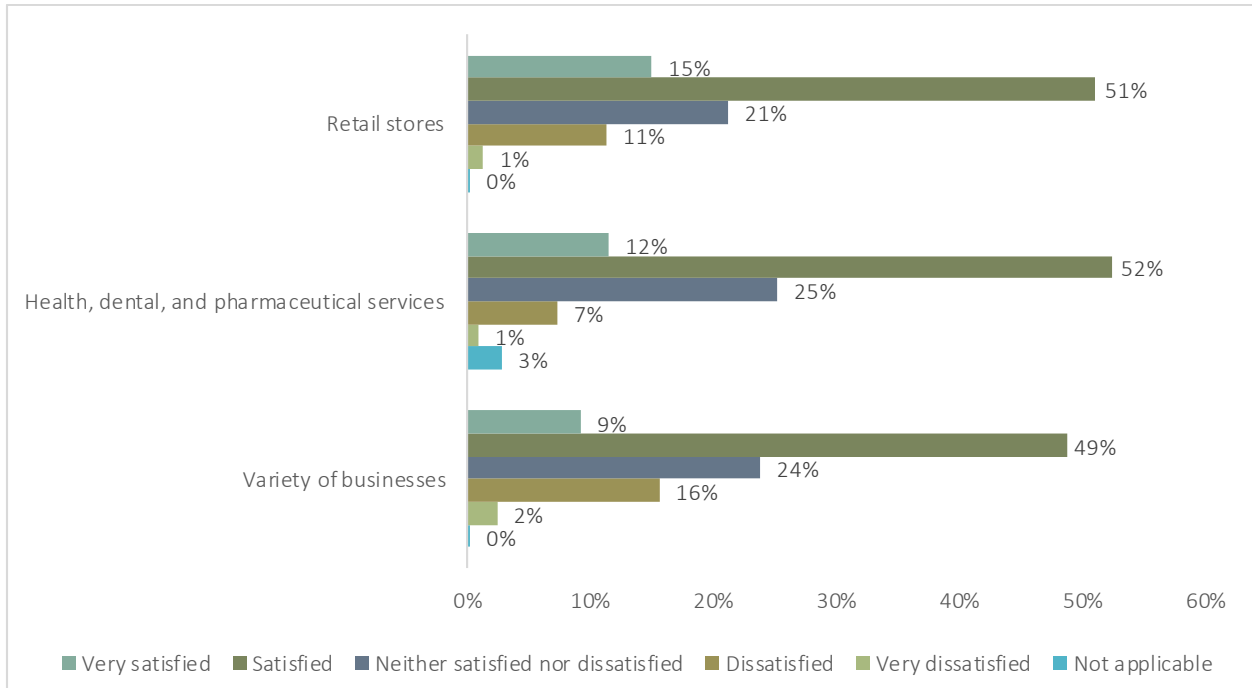
Figures 16 to 18 indicate what respondents think of the businesses on offer in Downtown Saskatoon. Restaurants, cafés, fine dining, bars, pubs, and entertainment all received large satisfaction ratings (Figure 16). Restaurants, cafés, fine dining, bars and pubs stand out as also having a lot of very satisfied ratings.

Figure 16. Rate how satisfied you are with the following businesses in Downtown Saskatoon.



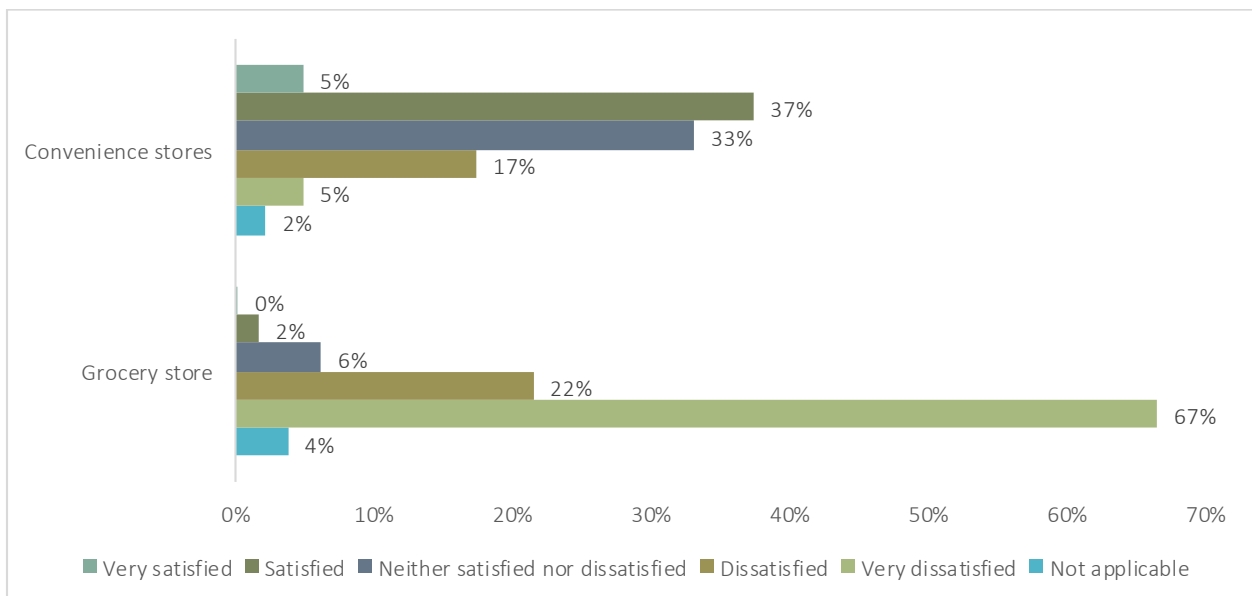
Half of respondents are satisfied with business features including retail stores, health, dental, and pharmaceutical services, and the general variety of businesses Downtown (Figure 17). A quarter to a fifth of respondents also appear to be indifferent to these features.

Figure 17. Rate how satisfied you are with the following business features in Downtown Saskatoon.



Downtown food stores received mixed reviews (Figure 18). Most respondents are satisfied with Downtown convenience stores. It will come as no surprise that most respondents are very dissatisfied with the conspicuous absence of a Downtown grocery store, largely a result of Downtown’s low residential population (i.e., customer base).

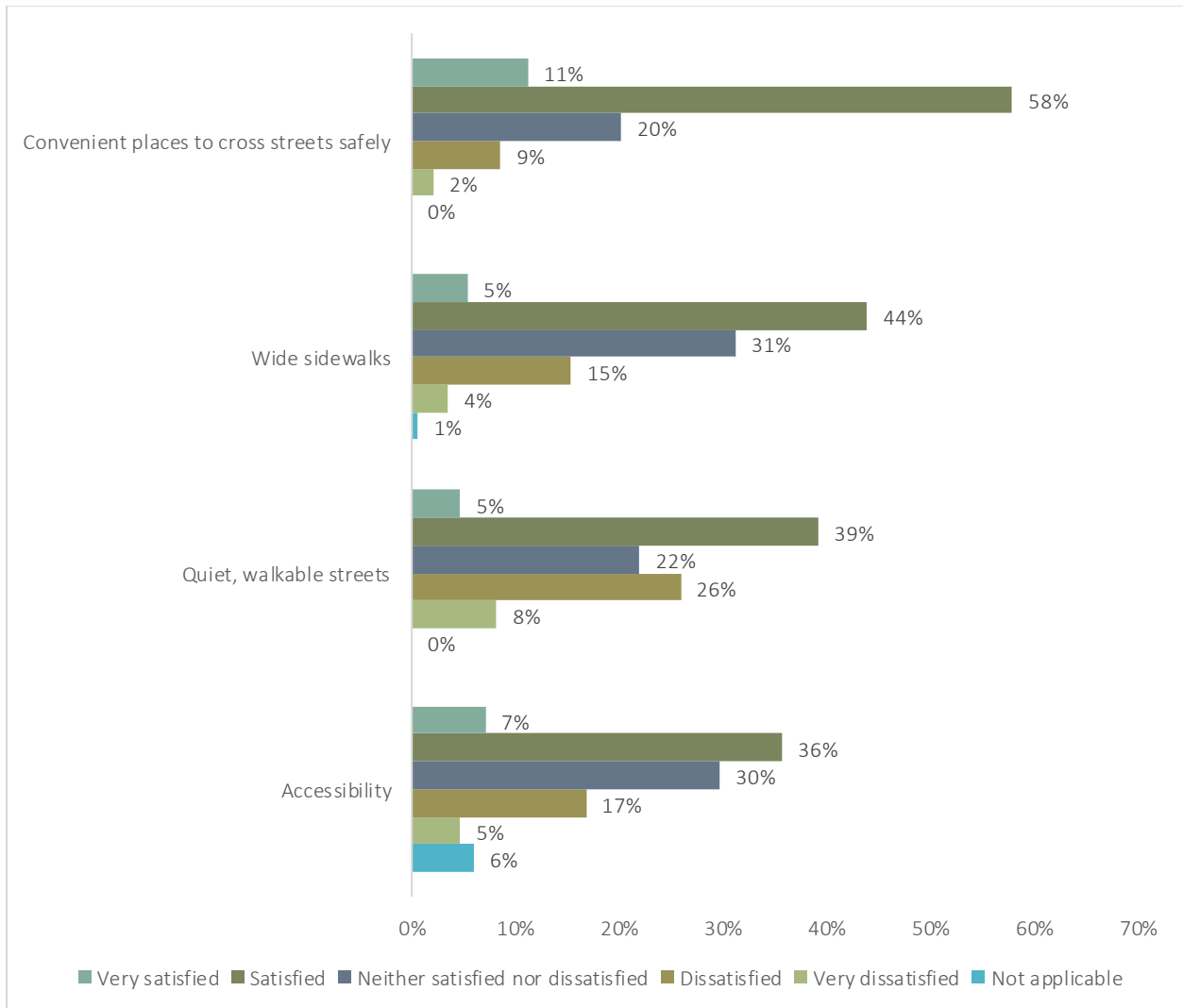
Figure 18. Rate how satisfied you are with food stores in Downtown Saskatoon.



Downtown is Fine for Walking

Whether one lives downtown or visits frequently, and no matter how one arrives downtown, we experience the downtown environment mostly as a pedestrian. It is therefore important that people are comfortable and enjoy walking in Downtown Saskatoon. Respondents are mostly content with the pedestrian infrastructure, though when it comes to quiet and walkable streets, a sizeable portion of responses indicated dissatisfaction (Figure 19).

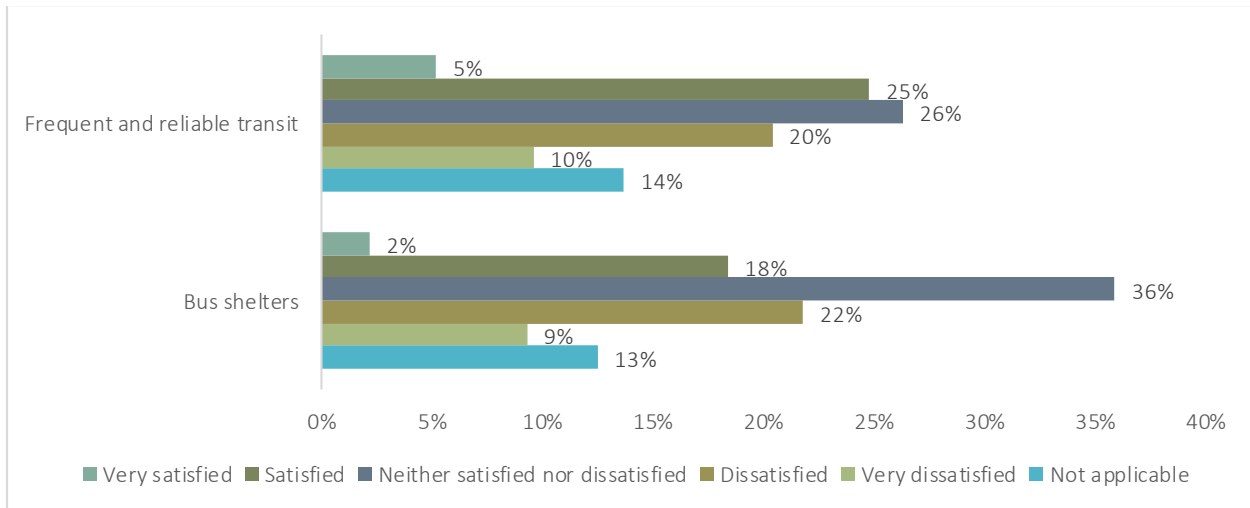
Figure 19. Rate how satisfied you are with the pedestrian infrastructure in Downtown Saskatoon.



Mixed Reviews on Public Transit

Public transit is an important element of downtown living, and respondents have mixed opinions about the current transit system in Downtown Saskatoon (Figure 20). An equal number of respondents are either satisfied or dissatisfied with the frequency and reliability of transit. Bus shelters received a slightly lower rating, with 20% of respondents indicating satisfaction over 30% expressing their dissatisfaction.

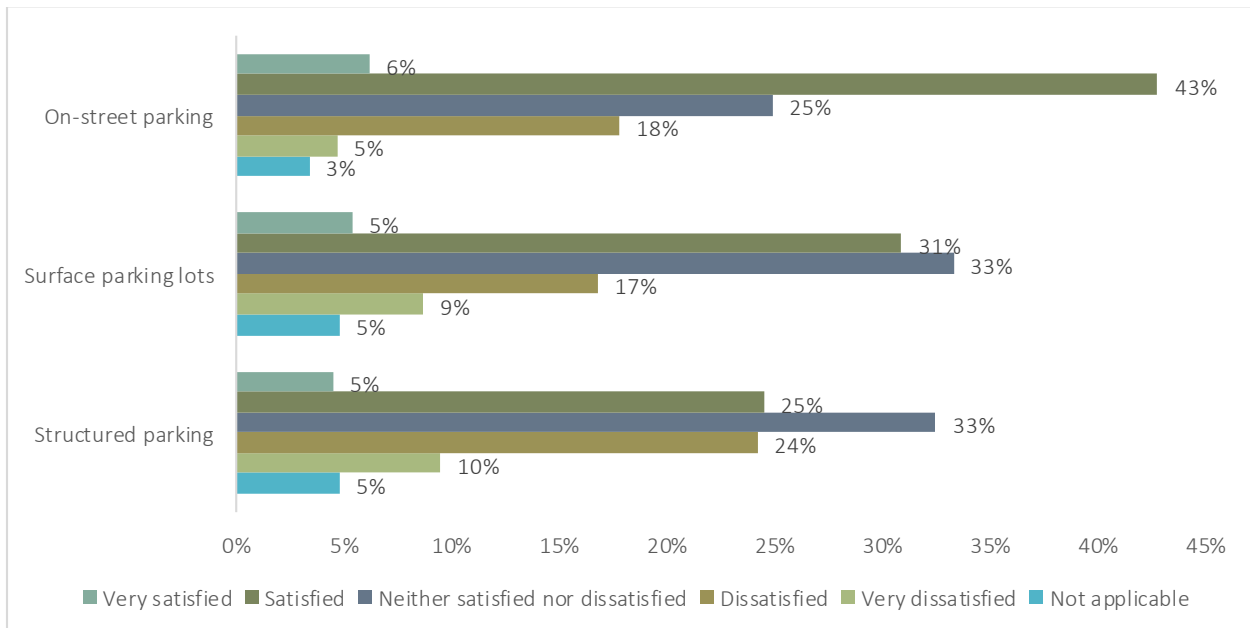
Figure 20. Rate how satisfied you are with public transit in Downtown Saskatoon.



Places to Park

Parking options are important for people who live in and visit Downtown. In general, respondents are satisfied with places to park their vehicles on the street or in surface parking lots (Figure 21). The availability, choices and adequacy of structured parking (i.e., above/below ground parkades) received mixed reviews: Over one-third expressing dissatisfaction, less than one-third satisfaction, and one-third ambivalent.

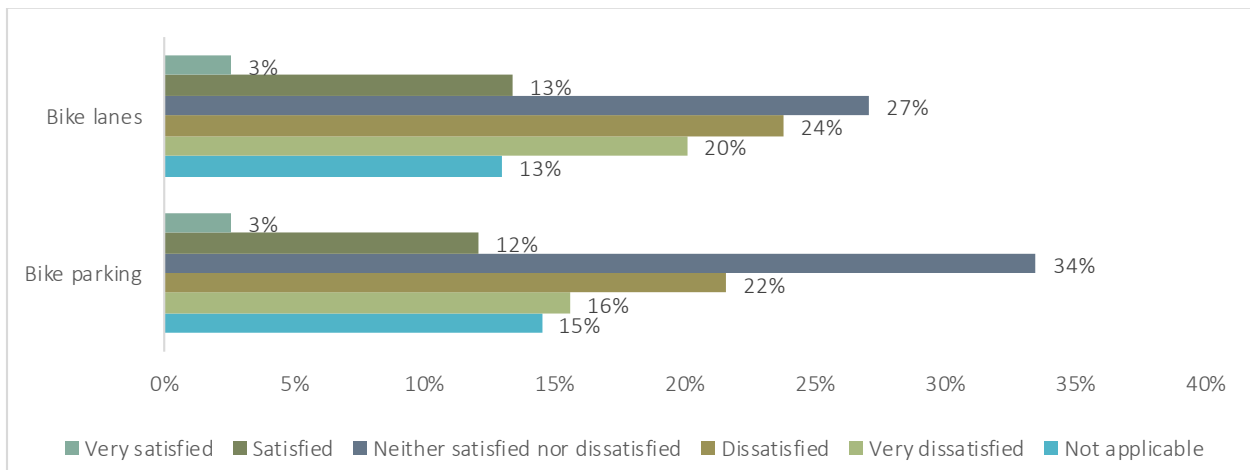
Figure 21. Rate how satisfied you are with the following parking options in Downtown Saskatoon.



Cycling is a Complex Issue

Cycling infrastructure has been a controversial issue in Downtown Saskatoon. Respondents gave it a mostly negative rating, when they ventured an opinion on it at all (Figure 22). Presumably some respondents are dissatisfied with Downtown’s cycling infrastructure because they think there should be more of it, and others are dissatisfied because they think there should be less. Some of the high number of ambivalent responses may also be attributable to the complexity of giving this mobility feature an overall rating.

Figure 22. Rate how satisfied you are with cycling infrastructure in Downtown Saskatoon.

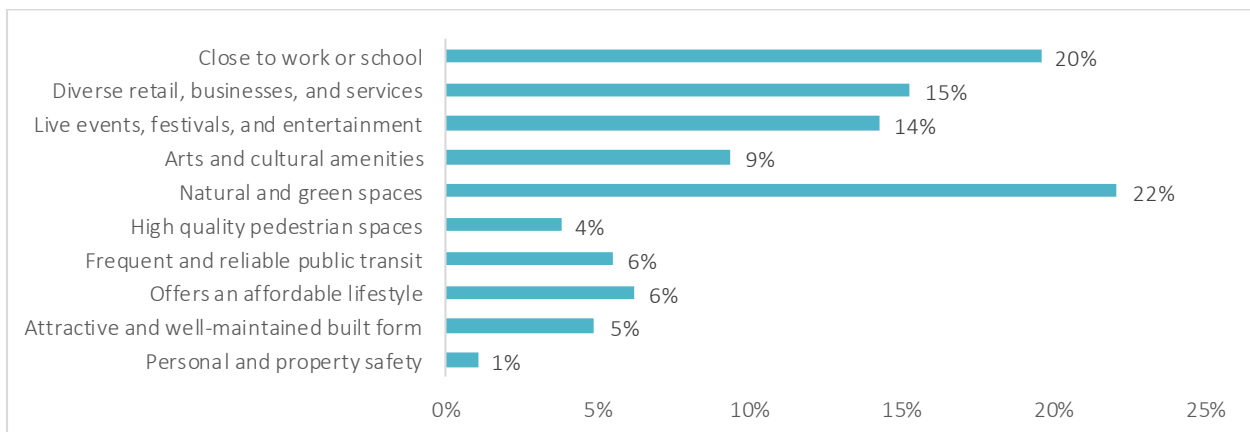


Interest in Downtown Living

Reasons to Live Downtown

It was important to learn what makes living in Downtown Saskatoon appealing, so Downtown residents were asked to choose up to three factors that most influenced their decision to live there. Consistent with the top choices given by all respondents for what makes downtowns good places to live in general (not specific to Saskatoon) noted earlier in Figure 3, responses from only those currently living in Downtown indicated that natural and green spaces, proximity to work or school, and being near diverse retail, businesses, services, live events, festivals, and entertainment are all top influences on the decision to live in Downtown Saskatoon (Figure 23).

Figure 23. What influenced your decision to live Downtown? (Respondents who currently live downtown)



General Interest in Downtown Living

Respondents who live outside of Downtown Saskatoon were asked if they would consider living there in the future (Figure 24), and those who live in Downtown were asked if they plan to continue living there (Figure 25). The results show that there is general interest among respondents in downtown living, though the reader must keep in mind the nonresponse bias likely present in these results discussed earlier (i.e., respondents are more likely to have some interest in the topic of downtown living, while those with no interest in the topic of downtown living who were mailed a survey would be more likely to discard it). Of the respondents who currently live in other neighbourhoods, 64% said that they would consider living in Downtown Saskatoon in the future. Of respondents who currently live in Downtown, 81.5% plan to stay.

Figure 24. Would you consider living in Downtown Saskatoon in the future? (Respondents who currently live outside of the downtown)

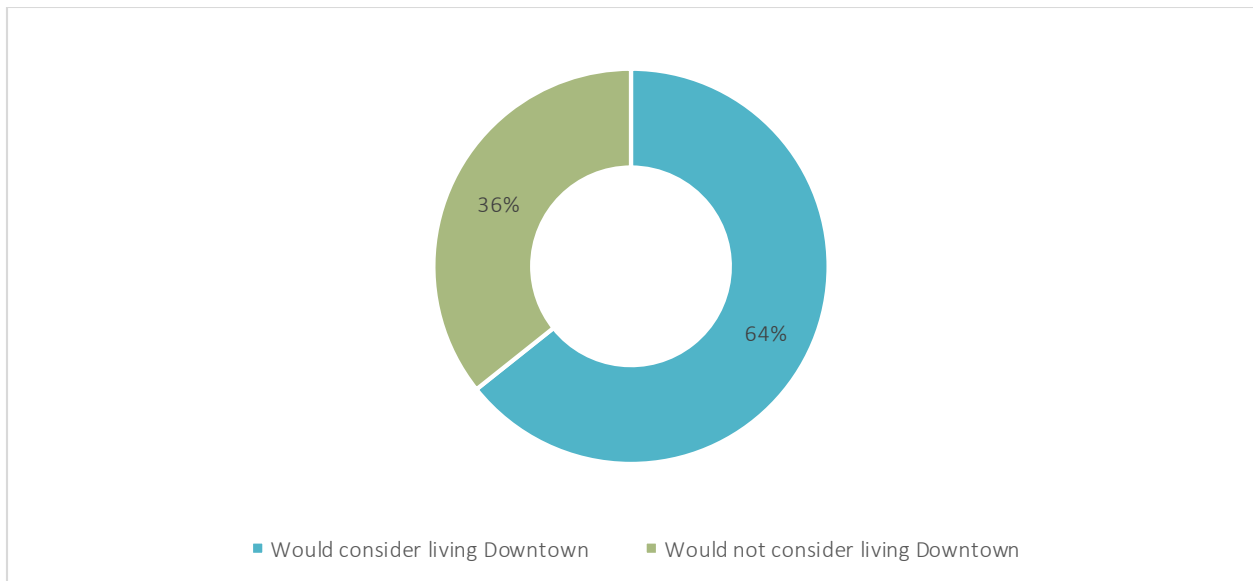
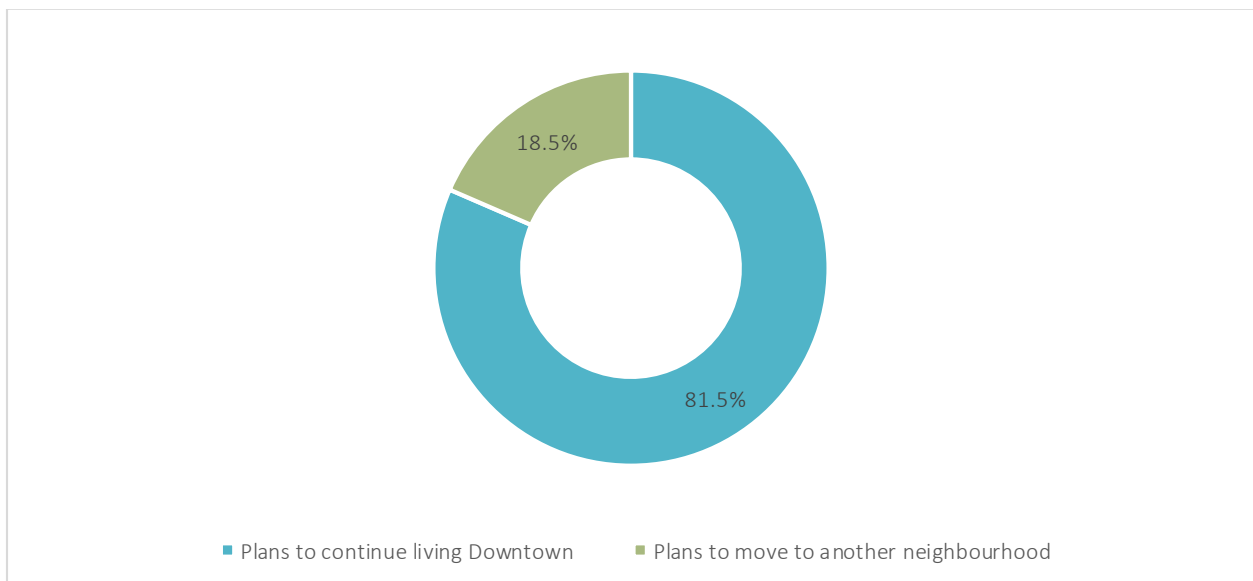


Figure 25. Do you plan to continue living in Downtown Saskatoon? (Respondents who currently live downtown)



People Want to Live by the River and Green Corridor

It was important to understand where in the Downtown people would like to live. Respondents who said they would consider living Downtown or that they plan to continue living Downtown were asked to indicate and rank their preferred residential areas, which are shown in Figure 26.

Figure 26. Downtown residential location options.

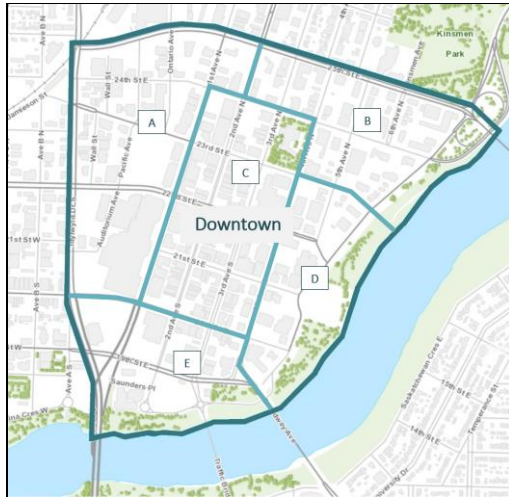
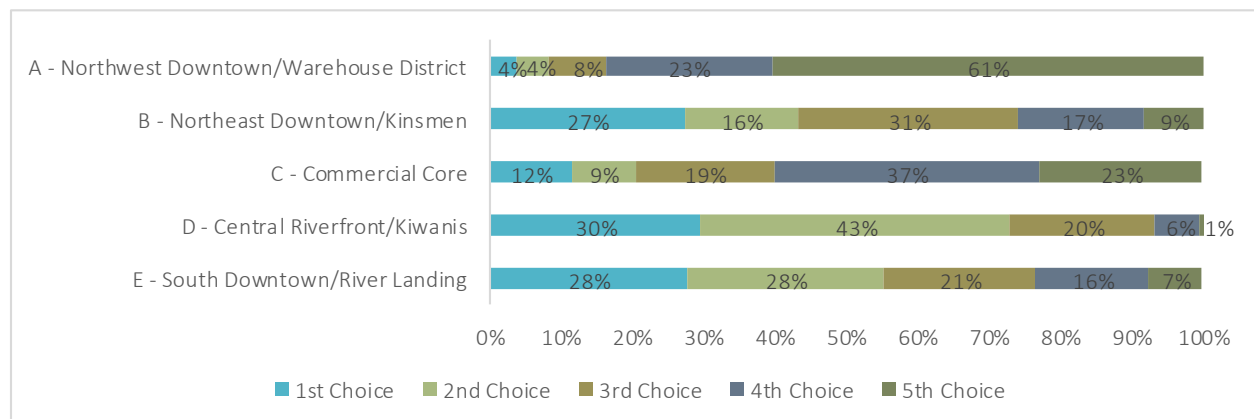


Figure 27 shows the overwhelming popularity of living within immediate proximity to the South Saskatchewan River and the green corridor along it, when given the choice. Area D (Central Riverfront/Kiwanis) was chosen by 73% as their first or second choice. The corresponding figure for Area E (South Downtown/River Landing) is 56%, and for Area B (Northeast Downtown/Kinsmen) it is 43%. Combined, 85% of respondents selected one of these three areas along the river and green corridor as their first choice. Areas A (Northwest Downtown/Warehouse District) and C (Commercial Core) did not rank highly as places where people would like to live in Downtown Saskatoon, when presented with this list of options. Area A was the 5th/last choice for 61% of respondents, and Area C was the 4th or 5th choice for 60% of respondents. Given what respondents have indicated that they value most highly in downtown living generally (Figure 3) and Downtown Saskatoon specifically (Figure 23), it is not surprising to see them drawn to living along the river and green corridor, while still within easy access to the mix of downtown restaurants, shops, workplaces, services and events that make a downtown urban lifestyle distinctive and attractive.

Figure 27. Rank the following residential location options from most preferred to least preferred.



Important Downtown Features for Respondents Interested in Living There

The majority of respondents who said they would consider living Downtown or that they plan to continue living Downtown currently reside in multi-unit dwellings (70%; N=181).

The one principal thing that stands out for making Downtown Saskatoon a great place to live, according to these respondents, is that it offers a convenient lifestyle with lots of things close by (53% N=139).

The overwhelming majority of respondents interested in living downtown identified feeling safe from crime (90%) and keeping it clean and well-maintained (92%) as two of the most important comfort features for creating a vibrant Downtown neighborhood.

When asked what amenities would help to create a vibrant downtown, the majority of respondents identified festivals and events as being important features (68%).

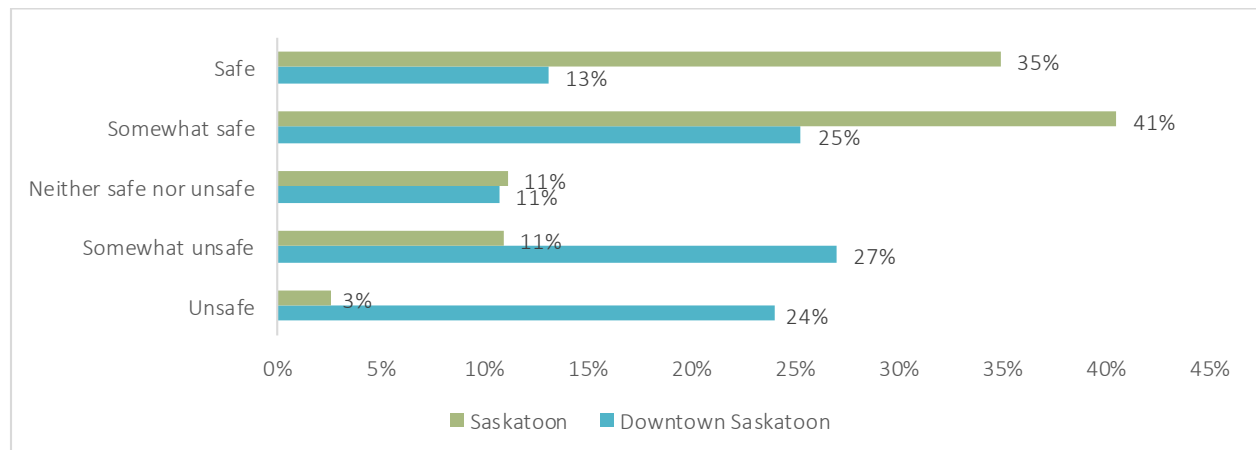
Public space features viewed as important or very important in the opinions of people interested in living downtown are well-lit public spaces (91%), outdoor recreation and leisure areas (85%), street trees and flowers (83%), and squares, plazas and gathering spaces (72%).

Building and architectural features seen as important for creating a vibrant Downtown by respondents interested in living there were preservation of history and heritage (75%), attractive building frontages (63%), and constructing buildings on vacant land like surface parking lots (62%).

Feeling Unsafe Downtown

Respondents were asked to rate how safe they feel in Saskatoon generally, and in Downtown Saskatoon specifically (Figure 28). By asking about safety overall in Saskatoon, a benchmark against which to interpret feelings of safety in Downtown specifically was established. Results show that Downtown safety is a concern for many respondents. Just over three-quarters of respondents believe that the city is safe or somewhat safe. Just over half of respondents feel unsafe or somewhat unsafe in Downtown Saskatoon.

Figure 28. How safe do you consider the following areas?

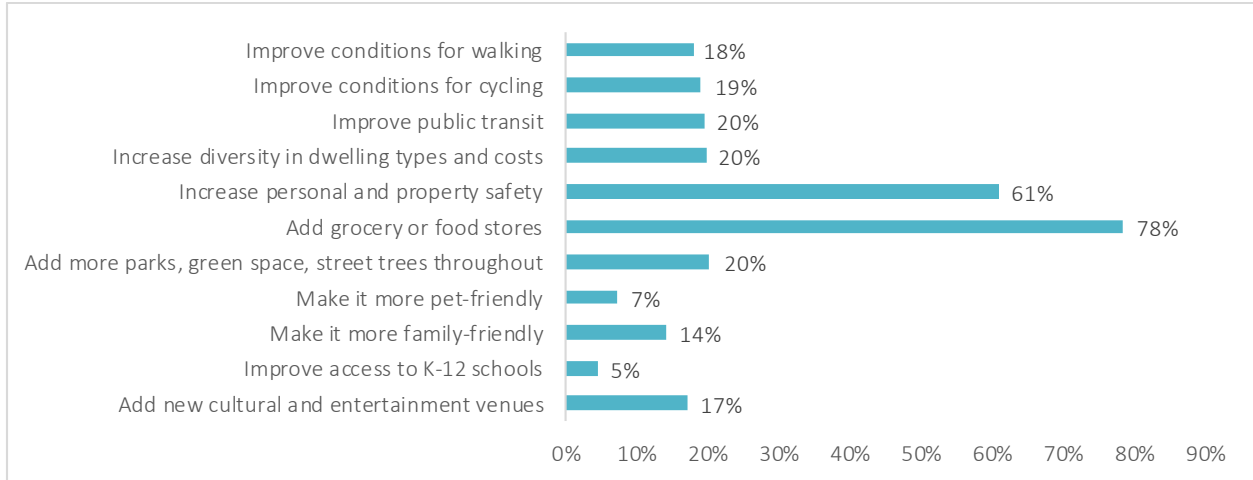


Things to Improve

Respondents were asked to choose up to three things to improve to make Downtown Saskatoon a more desirable place to live (Figure 29). First, adding grocery/food stores was chosen by 78% of respondents. Second, and consistent with the low perception of Downtown safety, 61% of respondents identified a need

to increase personal and property safety. Virtually tied for a distant third was adding more parks, green space, and street trees throughout the Downtown, increasing diversity in housing types and costs, and improving active transportation infrastructure (i.e., transit, cycling, walking).

Figure 29. What are the most important things to improve to make Downtown Saskatoon a more desirable place to live?



5. Focus Group Results

Downtown revitalization often focuses on improving liveability, which is measured by tangible and intangible attributes comprising the public realm, built form, transportation network, community, and sense of wellbeing (Balsas, 2004). Together, these urban attributes create a desirable lifestyle and drive consumer demand for downtown living. The focus group discussions revealed that regardless of demographic characteristics, participants have remarkably similar opinions and expectations regarding downtown liveability in Saskatoon. Psychographic characteristics, which include attitudes, interests, and priorities of the participants, pointed to a few key findings.

It was evident that the desirability of a downtown neighbourhood is linked to consumers' real and perceived ability to meet quality of life and lifestyle expectations within the neighbourhood. Liveability is influenced by physical and social development, and preferred residential location is influenced by social position, like most consumer decisions. This is because social position impacts consumers' lifestyle and behaviour expectations, as well as their understanding of what is good or right. Residential decisions are also affected by place branding, whether the brand is established through formal marketing efforts, the media, or personal experience. Neighbourhoods are packed with meaning that is understood and upheld by the public (Cresswell, 2004). Notwithstanding a general interest among focus group participants (and many survey respondents) from a variety of neighbourhoods to live downtown and enjoy a downtown lifestyle, Downtown Saskatoon is not hitting the mark as a residential neighbourhood. Neighbourhood features and lifestyle amenities that would enhance the desirability of downtown living are discussed below. *Downtown liveability* findings touch on land use and design in the built form and public realm, residential options, and businesses. *Downtown community* findings break down into belonging and diversity, and safety, stigma, and reputation. The section ends with some reflections on moving *from interest to achievement* of a place where downtown urban lifestyles thrive.

Downtown Liveability

Liveable neighbourhoods enhance quality of life by offering residents safe, attractive, affordable, and interesting places to live, work, and spend their leisure time. As consumer needs and expectations change over time, neighbourhoods must adapt to remain liveable. This is an expectation of downtowns that compete with new suburban development that is built according to market demand. Consumer demand for a neighbourhood largely depends on the lifestyle and quality of life it offers. In this context, quality of life means ability to meet basic and advanced needs, according to preferences. Focus group participants believe that a downtown lifestyle is desirable and discussed ways it could be improved in Saskatoon. There was general agreement among the participants because consumers generally have similar needs and expectations for downtown living.

Downtown Land Use and Design

Land use and urban design shape and communicate the downtown brand. Downtowns are typically known for their dense and diverse development patterns and interesting public spaces. From a consumer behaviour standpoint, development plays an important role in revitalization because it communicates who and what the area is for. During the discussions, participants implied that the expectations and opportunities associated with downtown living are different from other residential neighbourhoods.

Downtown in particular here offers the closest thing to a true metropolitan lifestyle in Saskatchewan. I think that's a unique attraction. It offers good nightlife, decent working opportunities.
- Participant 20, Male, 27, Pre-War neighbourhood resident

This presents an opportunity to cultivate a distinctive neighbourhood that appeals to those interested in an urban lifestyle (in mid-sized Canadian cities, 25–34-year-olds and senior citizens). The impact that development, which includes everything from infrastructure to street furniture, has on place brand and lifestyle is highlighted in the following narrative.

I love the stretch of 21st Street between Midtown [Shopping Centre] and the Bes[borough]. I think it's so scenic. I see photos on Instagram all the time of shots down the length of the street, whether they're facing Midtown or the Bes. And I think the street there is fantastic, not only to walk, but it's beautiful. Speaking to [participant 2's] point about the white lights, Taverna has a string of white lights that they string outside between the trees on 21st Street and I just think that looks so beautiful. I think the trees look great. I think the street is aesthetically pleasing that I'm happy to walk down it. I think the shops are all cute. There's a bustling energy about that street, which makes me very attracted to want to walk down it. Likewise for 2nd Avenue, too. It feels very walkable, there's always a tonne of people out, which I really like about living downtown – the feeling of being amongst a lot of people, but also having the anonymity at the same time.

– Participant 5, Female, 26, Downtown resident

Participants agreed that interesting views, active streetscapes, and diversity make downtown appealing. Human scale design makes an urban area appropriate, inviting, and comfortable for people to experience, and is a key component of downtown liveability (Gehl, 2010). It applies to building proportions, design elements, transportation options, and other parts of the urban fabric. For example, one participant suggested that the presence of more five-to-seven storey mid-rise residential buildings and public gathering places would enhance the human scale of downtown.

It is important for Downtown Saskatoon to develop and market a set of lifestyle advantages over other neighbourhoods. Focus group participants agreed that regardless of life stage, being close to the action and within walking distance to a variety of amenities are important elements of a downtown lifestyle, as exemplified by the statement below.

I walk everywhere, so not only are things convenient, but just about everything I need in my life is available within walking distance.

– Participant 13, Female, 63, Downtown resident

Proximity within the downtown and ease of access to other parts of Saskatoon were noted as positive features by participants. However, different areas within downtown, such as the riverbank, commercial core, residential towers, and warehouse district that are functionally disconnected, cause some to perceive Downtown Saskatoon as an incoherent community. Participants noted that adding green spaces, active transportation routes, and programmed activity spaces to connect the different parts of downtown would improve this. When asked what type of development participants would like to see in Downtown Saskatoon, there was strong support for residential mixed-use buildings that improve convenience and connectivity in Downtown Saskatoon.

I like the idea of a mixed-use building because if you have a commercial space or a restaurant or a coffee shop on the lower floor and then you might have a couple of office levels, I think this makes it easier to meet people and bring people over. More convenient. More safe because there's more foot traffic.

– Participant 17, Female, 37, Post-War neighbourhood resident

In general, participants felt that while Downtown Saskatoon is an attractive place to walk or bike, there is room for improvement to pedestrian and cyclist infrastructure. Participants of varied ages and abilities expressed concern over the accessibility of the downtown, especially for seniors or those with disabilities. Poor sidewalk conditions, lack of prompt snow removal, inconsistent bike lanes, and short time periods to cross the street were noted as items that need improvement because they reduce accessibility and signal that people, especially those who live or wish to live there, and active transportation are not prioritized.

Participants indicated that the amount of surface parking downtown caters to the business crowd but reduces attractiveness, comfort, and walkability for residents. They implied that significant amounts of vacant land are not typical in downtowns in other cities and are not desirable residential features. A 29-year-old male who lives Downtown stated that “we have too many surface parking lots that are completely underutilized,” and a 57-year-old female who lives in a Pre-War neighbourhood asserted that “it feels like there's nothing but parking lots downtown.”

There were a few key topics that participants emphasized regarding meeting quality of life expectations and lifestyle preferences. Being part of a vibrant community where work, living, and leisure are conveniently interlocked is an expectation of downtown living and, when it exists, should be communicated to consumers through branding. In the case of Downtown Saskatoon, place-product development and marketing is needed to enhance and promote that urban lifestyle. Focus group participants suggested that development patterns in the downtown are not residential-oriented and lack human scale, pointing to their incoherence or disjointedness. It was noted that vacant and undeveloped property in Downtown Saskatoon detract from the neighbourhood, and the small population and low activity levels exacerbate the problem. While discussing circumstances under which participants would move downtown, participants offered perspectives like the following:

Getting rid of the spaces that are not being used, whether that's turning them into more green spaces or using that space to make affordable housing, things like that. I want to see more use of downtown and I think that's going to involve some changes to the physical space. I'd like to see those spaces more cohesive with each other. Again, I love the idea of having a little place to sit and chat and whatever, but it's going to need to be somewhere that's more accessible. Stop making pockets of things. Let's bring it all together so that it's not so spread out or street specific.

– Participant 22, Female, 47, Pre-War neighbourhood resident

While downtowns are typically dense and diverse neighbourhoods, Downtown Saskatoon is currently underdeveloped. Participants suggested that land use and design impact place satisfaction and neighbourhood pride. This presents an opportunity to create a unique downtown lifestyle through property development. Overall, participants agreed that function, comfort, and practicality are important aspects of a residential neighbourhood but are not enough to make it satisfying or desirable. Participants implied that Downtown Saskatoon lacks vibrancy as a neighborhood, but has potential to become a complete community and a highly sought after place to live.

Downtown Public Realm

Since downtown is largely experienced in public areas, the public realm is essential to downtown liveability. Consistent with the survey findings, focus group participants indicated that outdoor space and activities are key components of a desirable downtown lifestyle. Participants agreed that urban lifestyle amenities (green space throughout the downtown, places to gather, sit, and eat, and distinctive urban design) make downtown liveable and attractive.

I think COVID has really helped push for more of those beautifications. You've seen quite a few restaurants open up cool patios in the parking and everything, which means we've had less parking downtown and it still hasn't been an issue. In general, it's been enhancing the level of attractiveness of our downtown.

- Participant 3, Male, 29, Downtown resident

According to focus group participants, the existing green network is one of Downtown Saskatoon's biggest strengths. The following statements captures this sentiment.

One of the things I love about downtown is the amount of trees and green space compared to most neighborhoods in Saskatoon that are less than 15 years old. There's just no comparing the Stonebridge-type of areas to downtown as far as the amount of trees and the age of the trees. That's part of why we love being close to the river, too. You don't think of downtown usually as being about trees compared to other areas, but in this city it certainly is.

- Participant 15, Male, 44, Downtown resident

I think the riverbank is used very, very well. We have a lot of our events there. Obviously in the summer and the fall it's very beautiful. And then they put all the lights up in the winter and that's very nice too, with the ice rink and stuff like that.

- Participant 19, Female, 26, Post-War neighbourhood resident

Participants appreciate downtown's proximity to the South Saskatchewan River and Meewasin Valley trail and public space network. Public access to these spaces was noted as an important feature of the downtown in the survey and focus group discussions. Many agreed that its natural beauty and ease of use and access for people of all ages and abilities is a neighbourhood asset. River Landing was specifically noted as a high-quality area that is family-friendly and conducive to a variety of activities.

It was generally agreed that the riverbank should be preserved. But importantly, focus group participants felt that more of the river valley should be enhanced with programming and design, and utilized year-round. It was explained that the abundance of green space did not translate into an abundance of things to do in that area. For example, it was noted that allowing pets and adding opportunities to get coffee or food would enhance the area.

The existing green network bordering a large portion of downtown represents a competitive advantage over many Saskatoon neighbourhoods. To further strengthen this advantage, participants agreed that there is opportunity to build upon the existing network and add and diversify public space design and programming within the downtown.

Different kinds of parks – especially ones that have artists involved that make them look interesting and attractive and desirable to spend a lot of time in – would be great. Having them kind of spread throughout downtown would be a lot nicer than just having them on the outskirts. We already have the attraction of walking by the river, it's already beautiful there. So, kind of [extending] that into the centre would be great.

– Participant 21, Female, 30, Pre-War neighbourhood resident

Practical public space is highly valued by consumers, and several participants stated that additional green space near residential buildings, such as on 2nd Avenue and in the warehouse district, would improve the public realm and make those areas more appealing for residents.

Centralized places designed for public gathering were also suggested to strengthen the downtown community. A recurrent example was making an area like 21st Street a place to gather, closed to vehicle traffic.

That's where people would meet, congregate. It could be surrounded by different things. You can't just build something like that, but you could close traffic to a street like 21st Street or something. That could kind of be a focal point where people could meet and they'd be surrounded by things to do.

– Participant 27, Male, 37, Pre-War neighbourhood resident

A significant number of participants requested a pedestrian street that could be used as a safe and common place for people to spend time as well as a market area for vendors facilitating necessary, optional, and social activities in the public realm, creating an example of what is special about a downtown urban lifestyle (Gehl, 2010). Twenty-first Street provides access to retail stores, restaurants, services, and Midtown Shopping Centre, and is considered the heart of downtown (according to survey respondents; Figure 5), making this a viable opportunity to enhance the public realm.

Cities where the downtown is actually closed to traffic and it's mostly just pedestrians, bicycles – I love that idea. It's safer. It's more environmentally friendly. Things are accessible. It's interesting. You have that sense of community. There's a lot going on, so you feel safer around the clock.

– Participant 21, Female, 30, Pre-War neighbourhood resident

Furthermore, participants noted that places to sit and experience the urban environment make spending time downtown interesting. Adding common areas with tables, seating, and other engaging features throughout the downtown would activate these public spaces, creating places for residents and visitors to spend time.

While participants conveyed the importance of placemaking and human scale improvements throughout the downtown, they went further than that, recommending that the areas in which these improvements are implemented be carefully considered. The following anecdote illustrates what was expressed by participants.

I was sitting at the lights and I suddenly saw what the City's done on that one corner and I was shocked. I was like, what's the purpose of those tables and chairs? I don't understand, there's nothing around here. And then I realized they've literally just put it there for people who want to stop on that lovely corner and sit and eat or talk or do whatever. I thought that's fantastic. And then I realized no one's going to do that. You've done it on the corner of 25th [Street] and 1st [Avenue]. Nice idea, but you've

got empty building, empty building, optometrist, a denture place, and a computer place. And the police – the new police headquarters a block away. So again, nice idea, but why did you put it there? That's not where people are. It would be great if they had done that on 2nd [Avenue] or closer to the library.
– Participant 22, Female, 47, Pre-War neighbourhood resident

According to participants, outdoor urban spaces are important, and improving the public realm would provide residents and visitors opportunities to connect and build community. It would also strengthen the relationship between a network of green space and the built form. For example, the skating rink was noted as a positive feature, and there is desire for more winter-friendly spaces throughout the downtown. Lighting, leisure opportunities, street furniture, naturalized spaces, developing vacant properties, and an outdoor community anchor like a pedestrianized 21st Street would make participants feel more of a sense of place in the downtown. Implementing a consistent theme through aesthetically pleasing design and installments was suggested. These placemaking improvements would help build neighbourhood pride and place satisfaction, though figuring out where to make these improvements so that they enhance liveability for residents is important.

Downtown Residential Options

Many factors influence residential location and dwelling decisions. Survey respondents and focus group participants agreed that green space makes a downtown more liveable. The survey results showed that if given the choice, respondents would prefer to live in parts of downtown that have direct access to parks and the river. Residential location was discussed at length during the focus groups, and this preference was upheld. This suggests that residential development should be prioritized in these areas. Again, accessibility and walkability were important topics, as they are crucial to a desirable downtown lifestyle.

For me, it's the walkability and the green space. There's a large amount of green space here being on the riverfront that is very attractive to living downtown... I chose [this building] because of the view and the location and the easy accessibility.

- Participant 10, Female, 58, Downtown resident

Participants also discussed architecture and building features. Room for improvement in terms of building design and character, quality, and amenity space was noted. Among participants, there were mixed preferences for different housing types and styles. Some people prefer high-rises while others prefer warehouse lofts; some people favour new builds while others appreciate heritage properties; and, some people need balconies or outdoor space while others accept large windows and lots of natural light. Diverse architectural styles should be encouraged in Downtown Saskatoon to accommodate these preferences. Common requests included sound proofing, secure buildings and parking structures, and dwellings that are suitable for diverse household structures. Some participants believe that more families would live downtown if there were more housing options.

Participants also had mixed preferences for building amenities, including outdoor space, fitness facilities, and more. Many participants consider indoor and outdoor recreation features valuable. Overall, though, ability to easily access amenities within the downtown was more important to participants than amenities within their own residential buildings. For example, a few participants stated that a commercial or community recreation centre is often preferred to a fitness facility or pool in a residential building, so having those larger scale amenities within walking distance would be ideal. Some participants did, however, state that on-site outdoor space (e.g., rooftop patio) would be a nice feature, provided it was functional and

secure. Some participants believe that ground-level green space enhances the downtown. Regardless of housing type and building amenities, participants stressed that their quality and maintenance are what is fundamentally important.

According to Kelly et al. (2016) the presence of amenities can influence residential location decisions even if the individual does not personally use the amenity. There was consistent support for mixed-use housing development (e.g., retail, services on lower floor(s)) and increased density because it adds to the interest and convenience of downtown living and helps build relationships within the community. For example, a 78-year-old female participant who lives Downtown explained that knowing people at the pharmacy, local businesses, and in nearby buildings helps build a downtown social network.

While on the topic of building amenities, there was a lot of discussion about pets. Notably, many young people have pets instead of children, and people in all life stages consider pets part of their family and a driver of their interaction with others in the public realm. Participants in multiple sessions commented on how many residences and public spaces in the downtown do not accommodate pets. Having more pet-friendly buildings, reducing pet fees, and adding an off-leash dog park(s) and allowing dogs, on-leash, in the existing parks would facilitate the lifestyle needs of many consumers.

A few participants noted that downtown housing is more attainable in Saskatoon than larger cities, establishing a local advantage, though others raised concerns about the housing available in Downtown Saskatoon. Many feel that new housing developments in the downtown are unattainable for the average consumer and are too expensive for what you get. The importance of maintaining and upgrading older and more affordable housing was emphasized. In general, the cost-of-living is considered high among several participants. This was compounded for some by their view that property taxes downtown are similar to those in other neighbourhoods when less land, infrastructure (e.g., linear assets like sewer, water, roadway), and resources are used by downtown property owners. These concerns prevent some participants from envisioning themselves living downtown in the future.

Affordability is an issue. And of course, everybody would like to live in a place that has a pool and a gym and everything. But you know, I think for the most part a lot of people that are living downtown are either younger or older, and maybe they can't afford all that. I don't know. And that's the good thing about downtown – these things should be reasonably close, like the Y[W/MCA] or whatever. You can just pick the ones you want to go to and then pay, as opposed to paying the high fees at your condo.
– Participant 28, Male, 55, Pre-War neighbourhood resident

Residential development, whether proposed or underway, gave participants confidence in the future of Downtown Saskatoon. For example, when asked what would make Downtown Saskatoon a more desirable place to live, a participant offered the following:

I would've said additional downtown residential, because for the longest time there hadn't had a new build. Now it seems like we're getting many new builds in downtown, which is nice. I mean, it's more options, so more people can live there. I think that with more people will come more community.
- Participant 20, Male, 27, Pre-War neighbourhood resident

Many participants noted that increased residential density will attract businesses and make the neighbourhood safer and livelier. Density and activity are expected in a downtown. Some participants

hoped that new residential developments would also attract more families and professionals to grow and diversify the downtown population.

Downtown Business

Downtowns are known for their economic function, and businesses are essential to residents and downtown liveability. Consistent with the survey results, participants value the diversity of retail stores, food and drink places, nightlife and entertainment options, services, and employment opportunities available in Downtown Saskatoon. It was noted that they are not only convenient, but a fundamental part of the community. Farmers' markets, local businesses, and people-oriented places like the public library, for example, were recognized as community builders and were advocated for by participants. The role of downtown businesses was important to participants when discussing how to make Downtown Saskatoon a more desirable neighbourhood.

Small local businesses – I think that's where you get community. And you get a reason to visit a specific place: for niche little places to go... Having worked in lots of coffee shops in the city, I can see that that's where community grows, where it exists. So having those places downtown, smaller little niche places I think would definitely draw me down there. Grocery stores as well. Arts and culture are huge. I think that's the biggest thing that we're missing in our city and in society as a whole, is just having more things to go out and engage with.

- Participant 21, Female, 30, Pre-War neighbourhood resident

The lack of food stores was the top business-related issue for almost all participants, regardless of where they live, once again reinforcing the survey results. Even though residents of Pre-War, Post-War, and Post-2000 neighbourhoods admitted to driving to grocery stores in the areas they currently live in, having one within the downtown is a requirement for almost all participants because convenience and walkability are expected, specifically, for a downtown urban lifestyle. Once the dust settled in discussions of food stores, it was clear that focus group participants do value the proximity to other businesses as a positive feature of living in Downtown Saskatoon.

It was, however, evident that solely prioritizing business is insufficient for developing a desirable residential place (Burayidi, 2018). Downtown is currently recognized as a destination for work, shopping, and entertainment, as opposed to a residential neighbourhood that offers these wonderful features to people living there. It was interesting to learn that participants felt downtown businesses do not factor downtown residents into their customer base, as neighbours. Work can be done to establish Downtown Saskatoon as a residential neighbourhood that facilitates an active relationship with local businesses.

People tend to define downtown as the core business district and sometimes City Hall thinks that way as well. And so, the focus is on the business. It's a perception shift that I think can be worked on, regardless of what amenities are included in the downtown area. Just to get the businesses that are our neighbours to think and understand that they have hundreds and hundreds of neighbours living around them.

– Participant 10, Female, 58, Downtown resident

The Downtown Saskatoon place-product and its brand need to develop in ways that bolster other aspects of liveability, in addition to business, to be a desirable residential location. Many participants stated that they would like to experience a downtown lifestyle and that Downtown Saskatoon has potential to offer

that. This highlights an opportunity for the public and private sectors to develop Downtown Saskatoon as a complete community to meet, and honour, the demand.

Downtown Community

The urban environment provides a setting for movement, market, and engagement, which are all important aspects of a liveable downtown. Neighbourhood of residence is a significant aspect of identity because it is both personal and collective. Rupp et al. (2019) maintains that revitalizing neighbourhoods empowers community residents and organizations and promotes safe and cohesive neighbourhoods. Fostering a sense of community is important in a downtown neighbourhood because it makes it more liveable, comfortable, and vibrant. Building community is a dynamic process that influences consumer behaviour. Participants shared their perspectives about community in Downtown Saskatoon and suggested that strengthening it would make it a more desirable neighbourhood.

Belonging and Diversity

Benson (2014) claims that residential choices are based on personal characteristics (lifestyle, taste, values) and practical needs (suitable dwelling, financial constraints). Participants tended to agree that Downtown Saskatoon should accommodate residents of diverse household structures and backgrounds. While most felt that diversity in housing types, prices, and family structures was lacking in Downtown Saskatoon, some felt otherwise and emphasized the availability of mixed housing prices, diverse employment opportunities, and access to amenities and services that make the Downtown appealing for people in various life stages.

Downtown is for anyone who wants to live there... In the block in which I live there are more and more children. The school bus comes in the morning and picks them up and takes them to school. The green space is there. The resources are there. I think we've got this concept that downtown is for people on their way starting their career or those retiring. And that it's sort of a – I heard the word transient – kind of a thing. I've lived in the same building for 20 years and I intend to keep living downtown until I am no longer able.

- Participant 13, Female, 63, Downtown resident

Participants agreed that downtown living can be suitable for a variety of consumers and enhancing the diversity of people and families living there is key to cultivating a diverse and cohesive community.

In order to develop and densify the downtown more effectively, there has to be a better mix of ownership and rental buildings so that you can have a diverse group of residents – economically, socially. Families, singles, students...

– Participant 17, Female, 37, Post-War neighbourhood resident

Social interactions and relationships are a key to a vital and viable downtown neighbourhood. It was noted that in a downtown, community is comprised of residents, businesses, and visitors, and is experienced in different settings, such as multi-unit dwellings and public spaces.

Outside of those community meeting places, the apartment building itself becomes its own kind of neighborhood, its own little suburb... I've been living downtown about 14 years now and just on my floor of my building probably two-thirds of the occupants have lived there for 20 years plus and have become true neighbours. We take each other's packages, stop and chat in the hallways; we connect in

the same way people would think that individuals connect typically in the suburban areas.
- Participant 10, Female, 58, Downtown resident

Some participants explained that shared on-site amenity space encourages residents to socialize, and special events that occur downtown enhance the community. One significant gap in community infrastructure identified was the absence of a Downtown neighbourhood community association. Some participants from Pre-War neighbourhoods noted that community associations are important and effective in connecting residents and facilitating activities.

While community cohesion is important, many participants expressed frustration with certain members of the downtown community, contradicting statements that were also made in each focus group session about how downtowns should accommodate and welcome anyone who wants to live there. Some participants would find it desirable if more property owners, long-term tenants, families, and professionals lived downtown. It was implied that these residents make better neighbours. The passage below demonstrates the social conflict within Downtown Saskatoon that many participants alluded to.

But there also is the mixture of those who are very, very troubled in all ways: mental health, physical health. And those who are very wealthy, cause there's some very wealthy people who live downtown as well. They're both expected to be cohesive and live side-by-side and be accepting of one another, and that's very difficult.

– Participant 23, Female, 57, Post-War neighbourhood resident

Based on the discussions, it is evident that more work needs to be done to make people feel comfortable and safe in the downtown. As Middleton et al. (2005) maintains, neighbourhood residents must respect and connect with one another in order to form a cohesive community. Diversity and balance in the community identity of Downtown Saskatoon will activate the neighbourhood, bridge the gaps that exist between the existing inhabitants, and make it more desirable to a variety of new would-be-residents.

Safety, Stigma, and Reputation

Focus group findings were consistent with survey results on the point that Downtown Saskatoon has a negative reputation among local consumers. There was discussion around neighbourhood stigma in Saskatoon, and particularly how Downtown and other areas west of the South Saskatchewan River have a reputation of being dangerous. Without being prompted, participants in each session agreed that sense of safety has been getting worse in Downtown Saskatoon over the last two to five years.

Concern about social conditions, violence, and property crime in Downtown Saskatoon was discussed in all five focus groups. Participants attributed these safety concerns to matters such as homelessness, mental health and addictions challenges, theft, vandalism, and assault. The discussions revealed that some people and activities are favoured in Downtown Saskatoon while others are not. For example, panhandling and drug use make some participants feel uncomfortable downtown. Several participants shared stories of security issues in their building or parkade, or finding used needles on the property of their apartments or condominiums. A 26-year-old female participant from a Post-War neighbourhood explained that “you may not be threatened, but it makes you feel unsafe.” Participants stated they avoid certain parts of the downtown, particularly at night or when alone because they feel out of place or unsafe. The Lighthouse vicinity and inactive areas were highlighted as potentially unsafe places. Additionally, many participants shared experiences when their safety was threatened, their belongings were vandalized or stolen, and

incidents involving gun shots, stabbings, and gang activity. To address these concerns, some participants requested improved social support, while others requested heightened security or policing.

While the degree to which participants are disturbed by these matters differed, there were few participants who did not comment on their presence or scale. People feel committed to environments that facilitate their personal needs and values (Lindstedt, 2011). The real and perceived threats to personal safety diminish the benefits and desirability of living or spending time downtown for many participants, and some have moved to other neighbourhoods because of it. This was true for participants of varied life stages, genders, and family structures. Moving away on account of this negative attribute of the Downtown place brand, and the commonality of the concern suggests that it will be important to replace negative personal and public memories related to Downtown Saskatoon with a compelling and uplifting new narrative(s).

Changing Downtown Saskatoon's brand identity is essential for it to be considered a desirable place to live. The focus groups revealed that Downtown Saskatoon lacks a strong neighbourhood place identity in part because of its reputation. According to participants, emphasizing business and employment characteristics, almost in isolation from residential promise, results in a weak sense of community compounded by a drastic fluctuation in the number of people downtown after working hours. This contributes to reduced ownership and advocacy over the area, safety concerns, and low neighbourhood desirability. Many participants noted that Downtown Saskatoon would be more desirable if it were a vibrant, active, and trendy place to *be* and a coveted place to *live*. Sneed et al. (2011) say that a place's brand can be enhanced through marketing and by improving sense of place and distinguishing the neighbourhood. These findings suggest that residents need to feel valued, supported, and energized in a downtown in order to consider it a liveable neighbourhood.

From Interest to Achievement

The focus group discussions revealed that while there is high interest in a downtown urban lifestyle among Saskatoon residents, improvements are necessary to convert Downtown Saskatoon into a sought-after residential neighbourhood(s). A defining feature of downtown living is the diverse lifestyle opportunities that typically come with density and mixed land uses. In addition to the expected convenience and proximity to goods and services, the focus group results pointed out that liveliness is essential to a viable Downtown neighbourhood.

When I think of a downtown in any city, I think of a little bit of a busy space with some energy and just kind of feels alive, right? But like was brought up at the beginning, there is some empty space, and it does kind of die off on a Sunday and after 5:00 pm and things like that. It doesn't totally have that full energy that you might expect out of a modern city downtown. That's what I would move downtown for – that community and energy and the feeling of being around people.

– Participant 20, Male, 27, Pre-War neighbourhood resident

This perspective, upheld by most focus group participants, suggests that consumers have different expectations for downtown than other residential neighbourhoods, highlighting its potential competitive advantage.

During the discussions, Downtown Saskatoon was often compared to other cities that have vibrant and liveable downtowns. Participants referenced pedestrian-oriented environments, activity levels and safety, residential developments, and community in other mid-sized Canadian cities with positivity. They also

expressed that built form and public realm improvements in Downtown Saskatoon must reflect local culture, market, and climate. This will both attract and retain residents in Downtown Saskatoon.

Mihinjac and Saville (2019) remind us that liveability is impacted by physical and social experiences with a place, which is consistent with the wisdom shared by focus group participants. The importance of purposeful investment and development in the downtown built form and public realm, oriented toward the needs and wants of the residential market, was acknowledged. Further, participants emphasized that a diminishing sense of belonging and safety detract from downtown desirability. These experiences affect both real and perceived quality of life.

Improving quality of life for current downtown residents will attract new residents (Lewis and Donald, 2009). Participants offered several ways to do this, including: developing property and buildings in a purposive and attractive manner; enhancing the human scale with design, programming, and green space; addressing food insecurity; improving the pedestrian and cyclist experience; incentivizing downtown living by reducing the cost of living and diversifying the housing stock; and improving the sense of safety and community. These suggestions are feasible, practical, relevant, and would enhance the downtown experience and perception, making them objective methods to improve liveability (Balsas, 2004). It was evident that local consumers will consider the downtown neighbourhood highly desirable if it offers a unique urban lifestyle.

6. Conclusion & Recommendations

Local experiences and perspectives on Downtown Saskatoon are shared in this report, based on results from the *Creating Demand for a Downtown Lifestyle in Saskatoon* survey (470 respondents, July 2020) and five focus groups (30 participants, November 2020). The purpose in conducting the study was to understand how to make Downtown Saskatoon a more desirable place to live for households who would be interested in a downtown urban lifestyle. Downtown Saskatoon has tremendous potential to build its place-product and promote its brand as a highly desirable residential environment offering active, culturally enriching, dynamic, civically engaged lifestyles close to work, services, recreation, education, entertainment, well programmed green and natural spaces, in a diverse community setting with a rich history. The results of this study add an important public perspective piece to the existing planning directions for Downtown Saskatoon, articulated, for example, in the *City Centre Plan* (City of Saskatoon, 2013) and *Inquiry Toward a Downtown Stimulus Strategy for Saskatoon* (Beasley & Associates, Planning Inc., 2019). Below are some of the key findings of the research, followed by recommendations.

Key Findings

- 21st Street East is generally considered the heart of Downtown Saskatoon, especially where it intersects with 2nd Avenue South. Saskatoon residents appreciate the restaurants and bars, retail, landmarks, and design features on the street and its central location.
- The South Saskatchewan River and Meewasin Valley are considered Downtown Saskatoon's biggest assets. The natural areas, space for activities, and special events that occur there are valued by Saskatoon residents and should be further enhanced and programmed for use throughout the year.
- The convenient lifestyle of being close to work, school, retail, businesses, services and the action are top reasons people choose to live in Downtown Saskatoon. Diverse activities and amenities are expected to be within walking distance to residences.
- If given the choice, most people interested in living downtown want to live near the river and Meewasin Valley corridor for the views and recreation options.
- There is demand for diversified housing development Downtown in terms of price point, architectural style, and on-site amenities.
- Residents and visitors would like more well-placed outdoor public spaces with greenery and urban furniture suitable for socializing and gathering with friends and family in different parts of Downtown throughout the entire year.
- There was a desire among focus group participants for Downtown Saskatoon to be more pet friendly. Residential choices that allow pets and charge reasonable pet fees; on-leash access to downtown parks; an off-leash dog park(s); and other spaces that allow pets would meet the aspirations of residents and would-be residents for households that so often include pets.
- In Downtown, community is experienced in residential buildings, local businesses, neighbourhood organizations, and the public realm. Community building should be prioritized to enhance relationships among those who live and work in Downtown Saskatoon.

- The art gallery, theatre, and public library facilities downtown are considered good quality amenities and important public/private investments for a downtown urban lifestyle. But ensuring qualities of coziness, locality, and accessibility will ensure these facilities (existing or new) are a popular part of a regular Downtown lifestyle for residents living there, instead of just occasional places to pop into for visitors to downtown.
- Downtown employment and entertainment options are highly regarded among Saskatoon residents, especially when it comes to restaurants and nightlife.
- Saskatoon residents would like vacant and underutilized property and buildings in the Downtown to be developed or repurposed to meet the needs of the community. People are tired of the unsightly barren lots punching holes throughout the fabric of downtown.
- Downtown built form is average at best, and more deliberate attention needs to be paid to developing high quality building frontages that add value to the streetscape and human-scale and protecting/adapting built heritage and history to build a distinctive sense of place.
- The most prominent concerns with Downtown Saskatoon are the lack of food stores and the feelings of being unsafe.

Recommendations

A. Built Form

The recommendations below apply to physical development in Downtown Saskatoon.

Develop and Repurpose Vacant Property and Buildings

Downtowns are known for dense and diverse land uses that serve the needs and preferences of consumers, and there is an opportunity to densify and diversify Downtown Saskatoon so it becomes a popular residential neighbourhood(s), advancing infill efforts and sustainable growth by cultivating a unique community. Streetscaping and placemaking efforts should occur on vacant sites to enhance the human scale and walkability for residents. Pocket parks, interactive activities, public art installments, pop-up uses, and functional furniture may be added in these areas to create inviting urban rooms. Mixed-use buildings with active frontages (i.e., retail and restaurants at ground level with services and offices on mid-level floors and residences on the upper floors) should also be encouraged given their desirability to downtown and would-be downtown residents. Converting underperforming buildings to different uses that could better serve the neighbourhood.

Some projects will be temporary and experimental, while others will be permanent. Regardless of the type of development that occurs, it is crucial that it helps foster a sense of place and belonging for all members of the community, both those present now and those that could be attracted to downtown living. With an enormous quantity of downtown developable land sitting undercapitalized, mostly as surface parking lots, policy, bylaw, and other statutory tools would be helpful. The property tax assessment structure does not include a premium on the inherent value of zoned developable land, and there is an absence of regulations against using building land as surface parking. Demolition and holding as income-generating gravel parking lots may make some sense to a single landowner but it can work against creating vibrant and viable streetscapes where people enjoy spending time, feel safe walking, and businesses along the block-face have the highest potential to thrive (Walker and Blakley, 2020).

Diversify Housing Options, in Good Locations, to Respond to Market Demand

While Downtown Saskatoon offers a variety of employment and entertainment options, there is a need for more housing options in the neighbourhood. Demographic trends confirm that diverse age, income, and ethnic groups live downtown, suggesting that diversity is a positive feature of urban living. More housing options at mid-range price points should be offered to appeal to consumers who tend to live downtown in midsized cities. Dwellings that are suitable for singles, couples, pets, and families are all needed. Incentives for developers to provide larger units at affordable prices may be required. On-site amenities, such as gyms, pools, and rooftop patios, are generally considered assets by renters and purchasers, but mixed-use buildings with retail, restaurants, and services are preferred. Many people are happy to trade off a small gym or pool in their building, for example, if there are good high quality public gyms and pools within walking distance.

Developers want to ensure there is market demand and lower their risk when deciding whether to develop new residential real estate in Downtown Saskatoon. The City of Saskatoon wants to see more residential development downtown. Findings in this study point out that people who would consider living downtown or who would like to keep living downtown want to live near the river and Meewasin Valley corridor (Figure 26). The area identified by survey respondents as the ‘heart of Downtown Saskatoon’ (Figure 4) is within a 5-10 minute walking distance of the downtown areas where most want to live, and within that walkable radius are the majority of the diverse businesses, services, and activities that embody the convenient and dynamic downtown urban lifestyle people are attracted to.

Implement Cohesive and Distinctive Land Use and Design

Downtown Saskatoon has different areas (i.e., River Landing, warehouse district, riverbank, and commercial core) that are neither functionally nor aesthetically connected. Working both on accentuating distinction between areas – each with its own qualities – and functional wayfinding through high-quality public realm connections between them is important. Architectural control overlay zoning districts may be valuable in some key areas of downtown, with a high priority on publicly accessible urban design guidelines, and opportunities for early formative discussions between development proponents and design advisory/review panels committed to the public interest. This can help create an urban environment that feels connected and deliberate, combining heritage or modernity in good proportion and in the most impactful ways, depending on the streetscape and precinct of downtown.

Major projects for downtown such as the new public library, entertainment district, outdoor festival site, streetscape and public space design projects, bus rapid transit and active transportation infrastructure should be coordinated in relation to residential priority areas, so that the exciting next phase of Downtown Saskatoon’s urban evolution is curated in a way that creates positive feedback loops between these major components. The design, location, and functional programming of each of these pieces should be planned, as much as possible, for synergistic (not basic additive) impact, building excitement and demand for a downtown urban lifestyle.

B. Public Realm

The following recommendations relate to the design and use of public spaces in Downtown Saskatoon.

Implement Consistent Streetscaping and Placemaking Efforts

Downtown is primarily experienced in the public realm, making urban design an essential component of a liveable downtown neighbourhood. The harsh winter climate presents challenges for creating and

maintaining usable public spaces and often prevents citizens from enjoying these spaces year-round. For these reasons, public spaces within Downtown Saskatoon should be prioritized and improved. Public art, urban furniture and programming, lighting, nature, and other design elements should be added throughout the downtown to foster a sense of place. Involving local artists, leaders, and Indigenous groups will be essential to ensure that the public realm is inclusive and reflects local culture and values. These improvements should also be appropriate for Saskatoon's winters and provide relief from snow and wind where possible. They should first be implemented in dense and high activity areas, such as residential nodes, riverbank, 21st Street, and 2nd Avenue, before extending into other parts of the downtown where people spend less time in the public realm. It is important that residential streets (e.g., 5th Avenue) and corridors that lack human scale (e.g., sections of 1st Avenue and 24th Street) be included to bolster connectivity and comfort for residents and visitors.

Enhance the Number, Types, and Qualities of Parks and Green Space

Extending the already popular natural areas and green spaces from the riverbank up into a green network throughout Downtown Saskatoon would be valuable to residents and visitors, perhaps extending the attractiveness of land for residential development further into the commercial core. Pocket parks and extended connections to the riverbank should be added in high activity areas and near residences, offering opportunities for people to sit, gather, get food or beverages, and participate in activities to promote prolonged use. The range of special events that occur in Downtown Saskatoon make it essential for parks and public spaces to be versatile and flexible.

Vegetation should be suitable for Saskatoon's climate. Native plant species that thrive in hot, dry summers should be added throughout downtown to provide low-maintenance greenery and texture in public spaces. Bioswales provide natural drainage while enhancing the appearance of urban spaces, and could replace underperforming pavement or grass. Fruit trees, berry bushes, and other edible plants may also be considered to integrate decorative and practical vegetation in the landscape. Community gardens, whether established in existing parks or vacant land parcels, would provide downtown residents an opportunity to grow their own food and build relationships. The new public library, Civic Square, and some of Downtown's vacant lots, for example, would be prime sites for green outdoor space that accommodates and appeals to users of all ages and abilities, throughout the year. Recall too that while existing green space was popular in the survey and focus groups, it is also considered under-programmed. In other words, it is really nice but also kind of dull. Programming in public space is what gives it most of its life and quality, not its design. Art, activity, places to sit and talk with things to eat, drink, things to ride and play on, places for dogs to run and people to watch, places rich in birdsong, squares for soccer, skating, films and markets, spaces created to foster tranquility, invite ceremony – to name a few programming types.

Create a Pedestrian Street or Pedestrian-Priority Street

It was a popular and recurring concept in this study, with 21st Street mentioned most often. The City Centre Plan (City of Saskatoon, 2013) contains good examples and specific considerations for transforming 21st Street East, or some blocks of it, into a pedestrian priority street. This is a natural existing strength to build upon in Downtown Saskatoon. It is already a highly used, interesting, historic, vibrant, and positively defined urban room where pedestrians congregate. Phase One of the City Centre Plan (City of Saskatoon, 2011) noted that more pedestrians than cars travel along 21st Street. It also showed that the block of 21st Street between 1st and 2nd Avenues, and the block of 2nd Avenue between 21st and 22nd Streets have the first and second highest pedestrian volumes in both summer and winter of the whole city centre, by a

longshot. They also have the most attractive and engaging ground floor frontages downtown (City of Saskatoon, 2011). Why not read the signals people have already provided through their actions and make pedestrian oriented-street blocks, whether intersecting blocks of 21st Street and 2nd Avenue or just parts of 21st Street, and create the preconditions for bringing even more people, and importantly Downtown residents and would-be residents, to this area to shop, eat, drink, visit, participate in programming and enhance the sense of downtown community. Further placemaking, streetscaping, and community building efforts would make the pedestrian street a distinct destination in Downtown Saskatoon.

Make Downtown More Pet-Friendly

Liveable downtowns welcome diverse residents and visitors and meet their lifestyle needs and preferences. While Downtown Saskatoon accommodates some diversity in household structures, many residential developments do not allow pets, charge additional pet fees, and the Downtown lacks outdoor spaces for pets to play and exercise freely. Developers and building management may consider evaluating the demand and feasibility for pet-friendly residential developments. Regulations prohibiting on- and off-leash dogs in downtown parks have for years limited the use and enjoyment of these public spaces and exacerbated challenges for downtown residents with pets. As such, allowing dogs in existing public spaces and creating an off-leash dog park in Downtown Saskatoon are recommended to meet the needs of many consumers. The recent decision by City of Saskatoon to allow pets on leashes in Kiwanis Memorial Park is an important move in the right direction.

C. Community Development

These recommendations aim to enhance the wellbeing of Downtown Saskatoon residents.

Build a Downtown Place Brand that Emphasizes Community and Cohesion

Intentional branding and community building efforts are required to improve the reputation and liveability of Downtown Saskatoon. As an ongoing endeavour, prioritizing residents will help shape downtown as a complete neighbourhood(s). Placemaking and maintenance should occur in a manner that is considerate of residents wishing to build a sense of cohesive and functional community. For example, more pet- and family-friendly spaces for residents to meet and gather could be added to densely populated areas to facilitate social activity. Downtown streets, especially those with residential buildings, should be Priority 1 for snow clearing (most are currently Priority 2 or 3) to signal that the downtown neighbourhood(s) and its residents are cared for. In addition to physically improving the community, there is opportunity to reinforce relationships and sense of belonging among residents. A Downtown Saskatoon Community Association should be established to advocate for and give voice to residents as well as facilitate social and cultural events that bring people together. The new public library is a significant project that will serve as a community anchor that sets a positive tone for Downtown Saskatoon, offering resources and opportunities for people to connect. The *Inquiry toward a Downtown Stimulus Strategy for Saskatoon* (Beasley & Associates, Planning Inc., 2019) also provides recommendations for branding and place management.

Improve Food Security

Food security is an important part of creating liveable neighbourhoods. In downtown neighbourhoods, being able to walk to food stores is an expected convenience and dimension of an urban lifestyle. Downtown Saskatoon needs a food store(s) that serves not only residents, but workers and visitors as well. The *Saskatoon Downtown Grocery Store Market Sounding* (Saskatoon Regional Economic Development Authority, 2017) analyzes the feasibility of a Downtown grocery store.

Address Social and Safety Concerns

The perception of safety is a significant and ongoing issue in Downtown Saskatoon. It should be addressed to improve the sense of security and wellbeing among residents and visitors. This could help reduce risk for developers that hesitate to invest in the downtown residential market. The *Inquiry toward a Downtown Stimulus Strategy for Saskatoon* (Beasley & Associates, Planning Inc., 2019) provides recommendations on how to address concerns related to social matters in the Downtown in order to make the neighbourhood more liveable for all members of the community. Importantly, Phase One of the City Centre Plan (2011) found that the perception of safety was highest in downtown when walking in the high residential density northeast precinct of Downtown where there are people day and night and eyes on the street. Perceived safety is lowest in large inactive areas. The low perception of safety is a barrier to attracting people downtown, while increasing the downtown residential population is the most potent solution to safety challenges. Persistence will pay off in time.

D. Transportation

The following recommendations apply to the transportation network in Downtown Saskatoon.

Improve the Pedestrian Experience

Since downtown neighbourhoods are largely experienced through active transportation, pedestrian infrastructure and walkability are crucial for residents and visitors. The riverbank is an attractive destination for walking, and there is opportunity to add pedestrian linkages from the riverbank and the residential nodes to the rest of Downtown in a cohesive and intentional manner. This would enhance the human scale and could initiate further streetscaping or programming efforts. Sidewalk conditions, wheelchair accessibility, time to cross the street, greenery, lighting, and protection from the elements (sun, snow, rain, and wind) should be improved throughout downtown. High quality and well-maintained pedestrian infrastructure is especially important given Saskatoon's winter climate and the number of senior citizens who live downtown. The *Complete Streets Design and Policy Guide* (City of Saskatoon, 2017) provides recommendations for sidewalk design, surface treatment, among other elements.

Provide Consistent Cyclist Infrastructure

While cycling is a complex issue in Saskatoon, it should be an easy priority downtown, where active transportation is a non-negotiable part of the downtown urban lifestyle package. Safe and practical cycling infrastructure is almost absent Downtown, but will need to improve considerably as part of a downtown residential strategy. Cycling is twice as common a mode of travel for downtown residents as it is for the city as a whole (City of Saskatoon, 2011). A permanent cycling network with consistent routes that improve connectivity to the riverbank, residences, employment areas, and other popular destinations should be implemented. In addition to being functional, design features, lighting, and natural elements should be applied to enhance the streetscape. Further, secure places for residents, workers, and visitors to store their bikes must be available throughout the Downtown. The *Complete Streets Design and Policy Guide* (City of Saskatoon, 2017) also provides suggestions for bicycle facilities.

Improve Public Transit

Downtown residents often offset the need to own or use a vehicle by using active and public transportation. Through the bus rapid transit system, there is an opportunity to improve the frequency and reliability of public transit within the Downtown and to other areas of Saskatoon to ensure the needs of residents are met. Improved public transit may reduce demand for private vehicle use and parking Downtown regardless of where citizens live, making it an important matter to address.

E. Apply Reconciliation with Purpose and Intent

If we think of ‘urbanism’ as referring to how cities are designed and built to accommodate inhabitants in the pursuit of a good quality of life, we also have to acknowledge that most of Saskatoon’s built environment, public space design, civic institutions, bylaws, formal consultation mechanisms, and so on come from having privileged Western, European-derived worldviews and approaches since the city’s founding, and actively displacing or erasing Indigenous presence in the city (Fawcett and Walker, 2020). ‘Indigenous urbanism’ can be thought of as a concept to challenge and adjust our approaches to designing, building, and programming Downtown Saskatoon in order to ensure that we build our city, civic institutions, and its quality of life in the full spirit and practice of reconciliation, partnership and shared sovereignty. First Nations and Métis peoples are large, strong, and engaged communities in the Saskatoon region and represent powerful and creative partners in Downtown planning, design, building and programming. There are good examples of Indigenous urbanism in Saskatoon already that can be built on. Examples from cities around Canada and internationally exist that can be valuable here. There are also many persistent examples of Indigenous exclusion from Downtown Saskatoon. Building and reinforcing Downtown Saskatoon as an Indigenous place will be one of the great advantages for Saskatoon’s urban future, increasing the depth of our shared civic identity and sense of commitment to one another as peoples.

F. Keep Developing and Promoting ‘Urban With a Prairie Heart’

Urban With a Prairie Heart is a conceptual place brand for downtown Saskatoon that was created as a result of leadership from City of Saskatoon, Tourism Saskatoon, Saskatoon Regional Economic Development Authority, and Downtown Saskatoon business improvement district over the past few years (City of Saskatoon et al., 2020). It creatively casts Downtown Saskatoon in ways that our research findings align with, and as such we recommend that the City and partners continue to develop into this place identity and market it as a meaningful and attractive concept to downtown and would-be downtown residents.

G. Consider these findings and recommendations in City Centre Plan update and related downtown initiatives (e.g., Entertainment District planning)

Saskatoon’s City Centre Plan is closing in on a decade since its endorsement by City Council. When it is updated, and during other important planning initiatives such as around the future Entertainment District, it is important to factor in what we know about creating demand for a downtown urban lifestyle in Saskatoon. It is our hope that some of the findings and recommendations in this report can fold constructively into some of these fundamental future downtown planning projects.

7. References

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Appendix A: Survey Respondents

Characteristics of the survey respondents are shown in Figures 30-40.

Figure 30. Neighbourhood respondents currently live in.

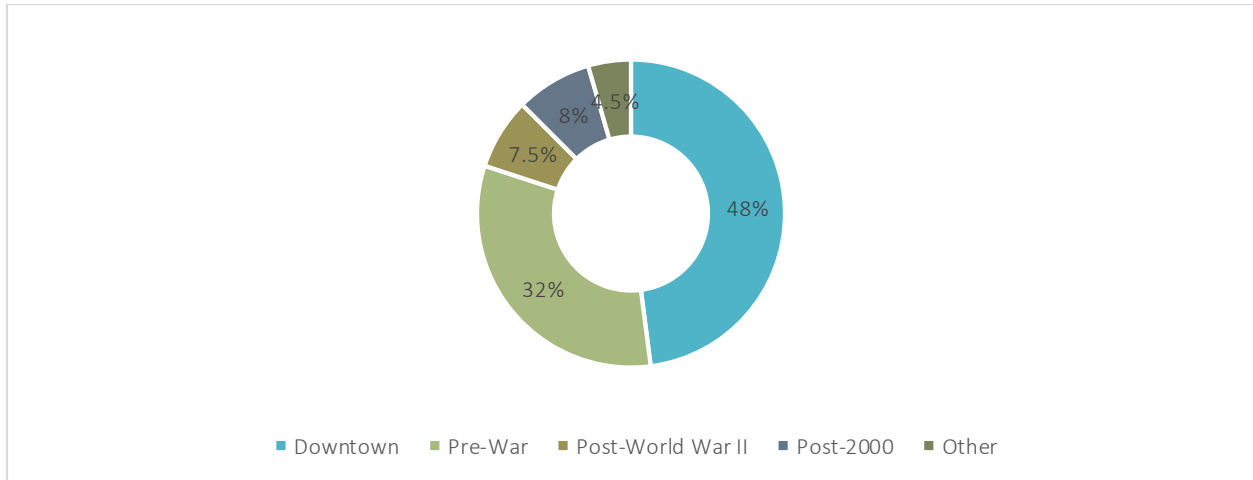


Figure 31. Type of dwelling respondents currently live in.

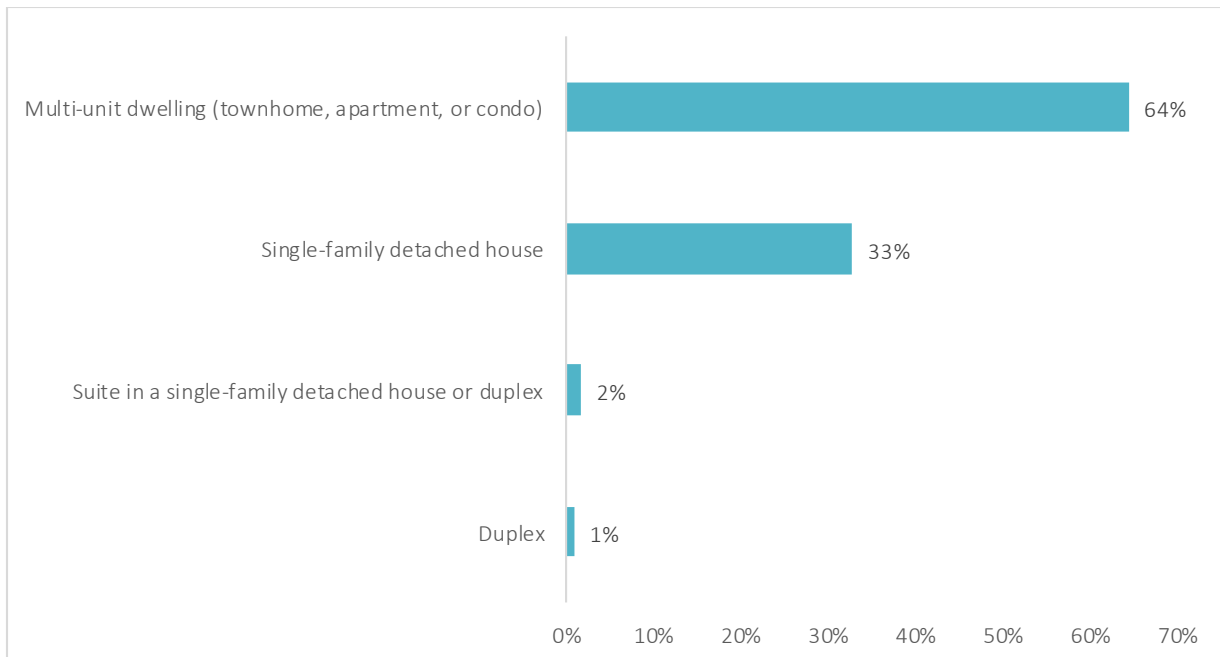


Figure 32. Age (years).

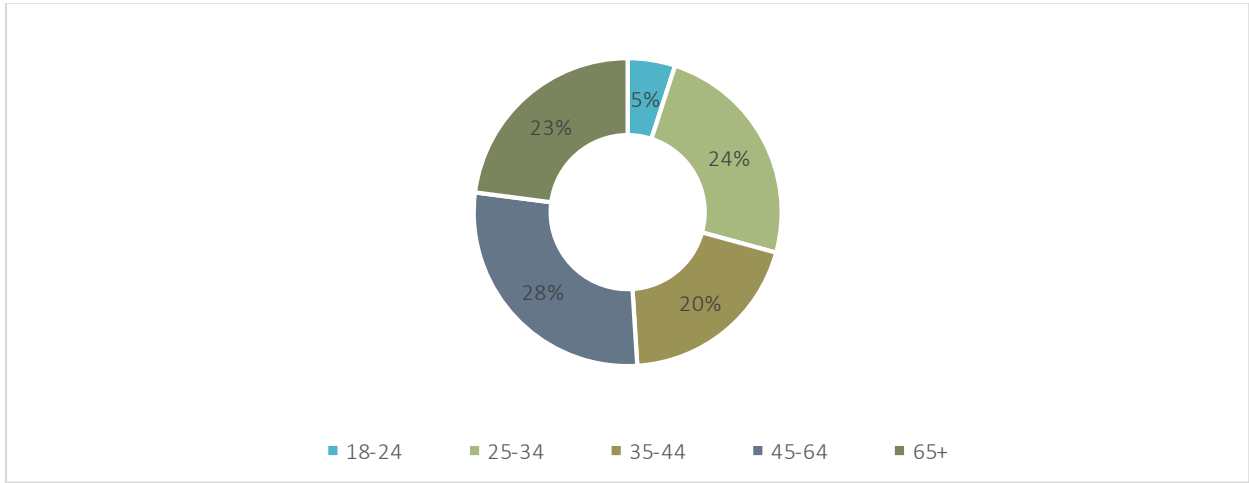


Figure 33. Gender.

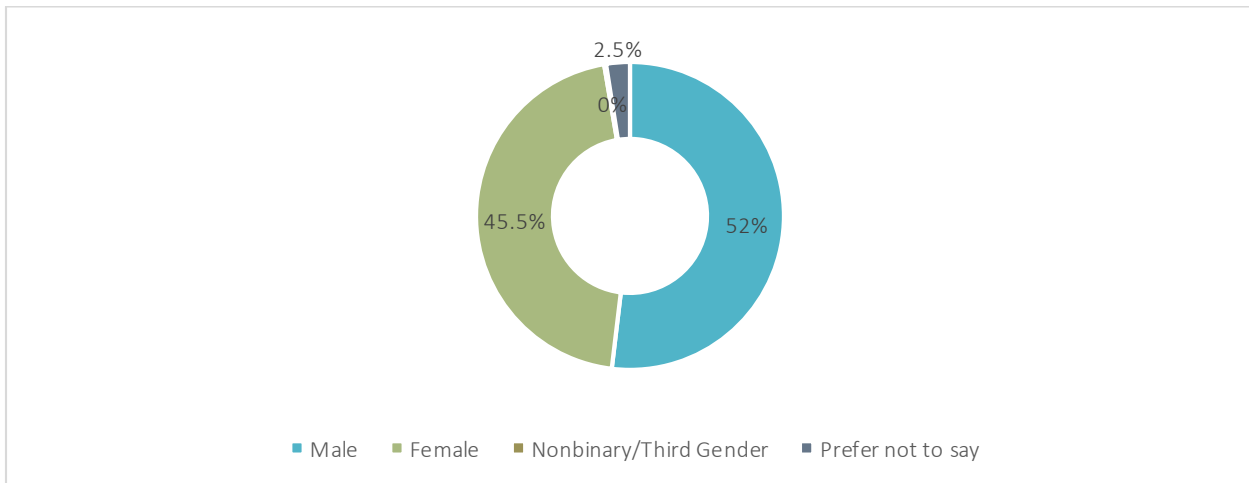


Figure 34. Highest level of education completed.

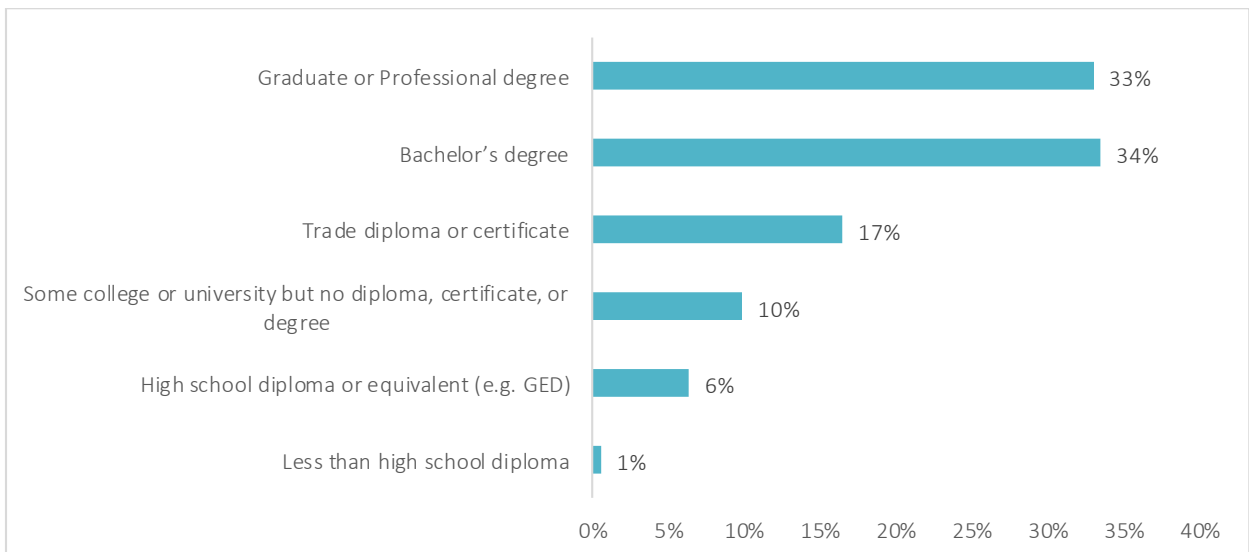


Figure 35. Employment status (in 2019).

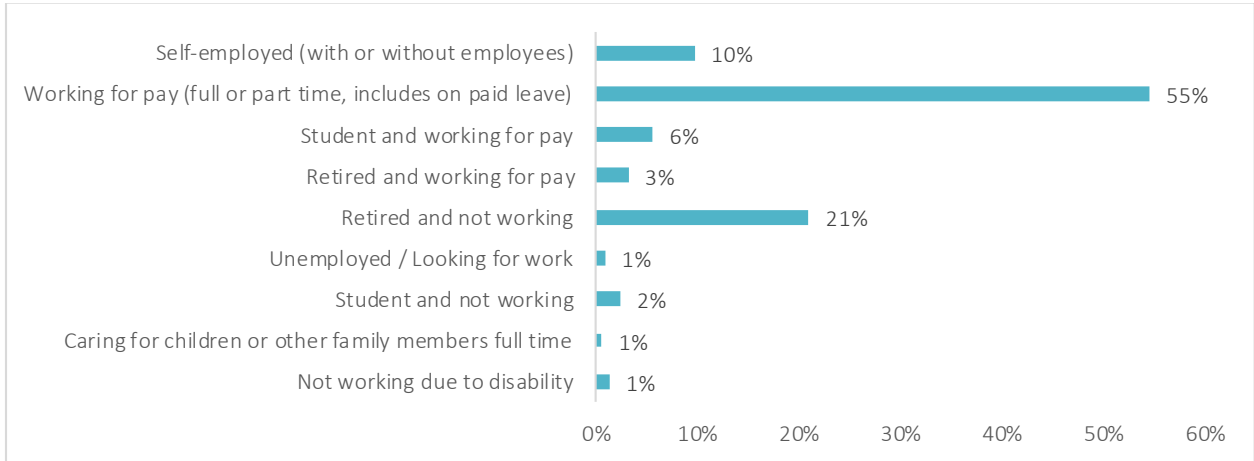


Figure 36. Annual household income before taxes (in 2019).

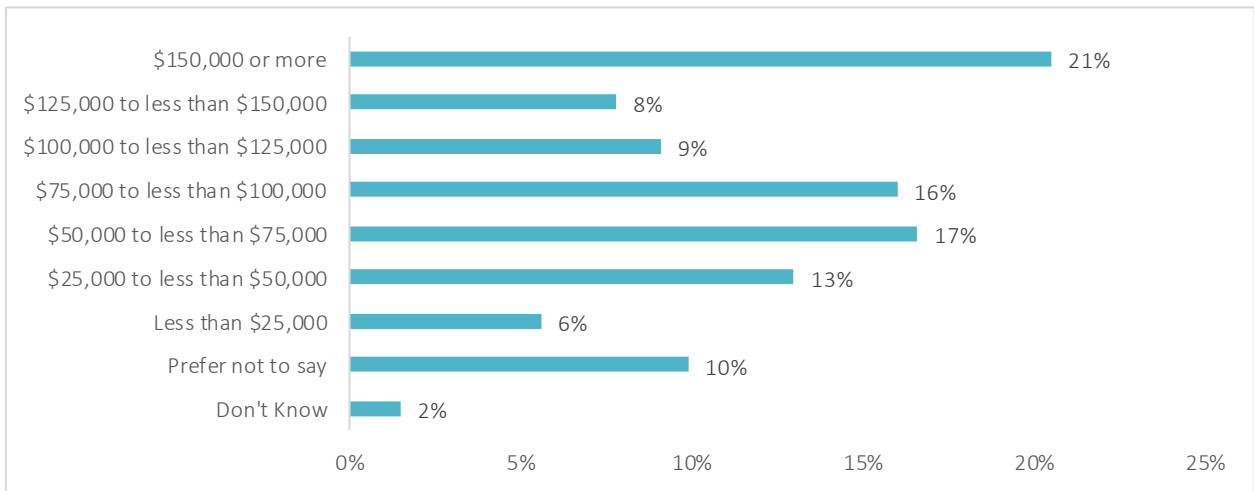


Figure 37. Number of people in household.

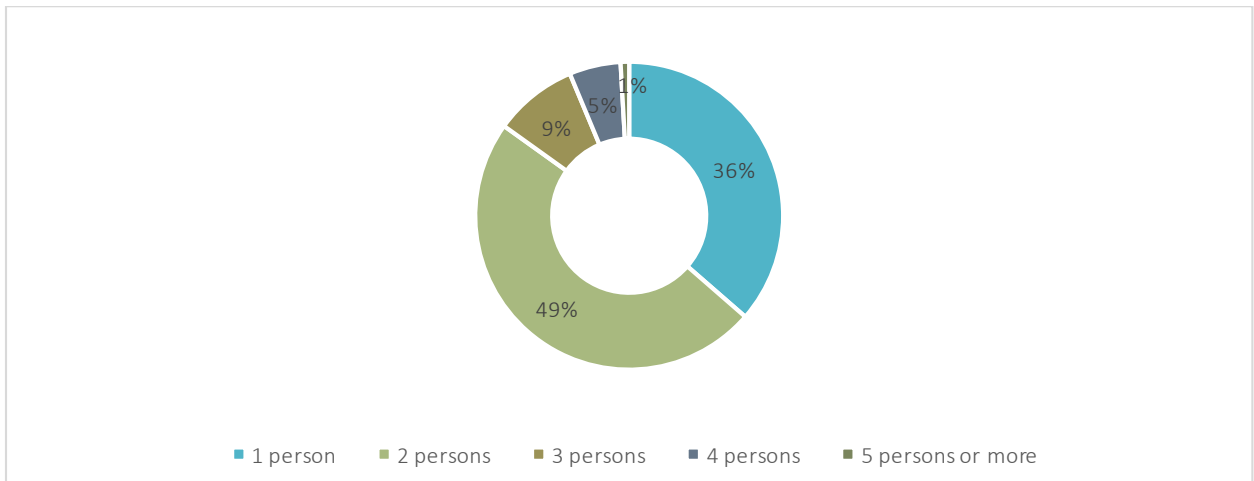


Figure 38. Number of youth under 18 years of age in household.

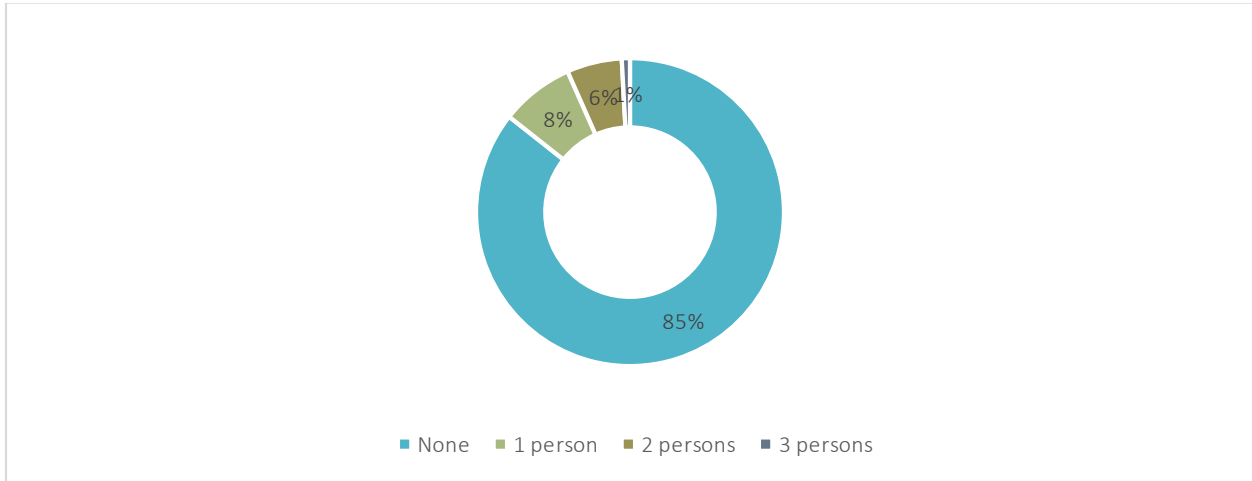


Figure 39. Racial or ethnic heritage of respondents.

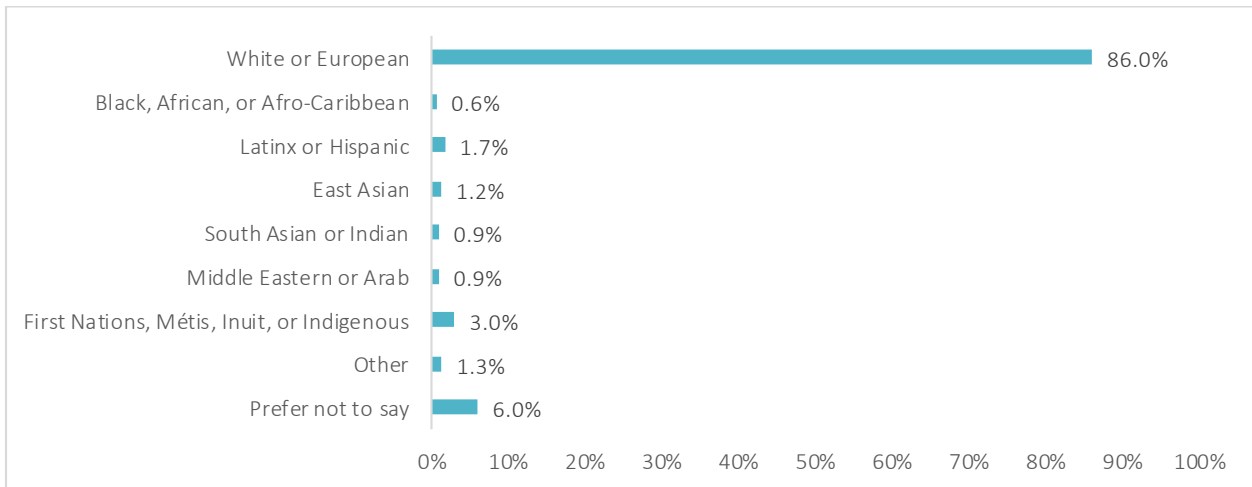


Figure 40. Birthplace of respondents.

