

St. John's Perceptions of Change Survey



How residents of Atlantic Canada perceive change, and whether or not they are open to it, is a question of pressing social and policy importance. The region has been experiencing some of the most profound economic, social, cultural, physical, and environmental changes in recent Canadian history. However, a lack of data on the region has hampered the ability to systematically examine those changes and public perceptions toward them.

For this reason, the Perceptions of Change project was launched at Dalhousie University, with funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. In consultation with colleagues at Memorial University, University of New Brunswick, McMaster University, University of British Columbia, University of Toronto, and Western University, a team of researchers at Dalhousie conducted a telephone survey of St. John's residents in the spring of 2017. The purpose of this survey was to assess what changes residents have observed over the last five to 10 years, both in their own neighbourhoods and the city as a whole, and to better understand how they feel about those changes.

Overall, survey results show that residents of St. John's were quick to note changes in the state of the economy, as well as growth in housing, population growth, social problems like increased drug use and crime, and changes to infrastructure. St. John's residents were divided on whether, overall, the economy had changed for the better or for the worse over the last five to 10 years. Perceptions of change in the built and natural environment were also mixed, but there was a broad consensus among participants that ethnocultural diversity in the city had increased.

Executive summary:

- St. John's residents noted significant change in the economy, as well as growth in population and housing. Alongside these changes, an increase in drug use and crime and the deterioration of infrastructure were also top changes observed.
- Opinions on the economy were mixed. While most reported increased income and employment, participants were divided in their perceptions of change in the city's economy overall.
- Participants overwhelmingly reported increased ethnocultural diversity and more senior citizens in the city. The majority felt neighbourhood social and cultural changes were for the better.
- On average, residents believed that 61% of their neighbours shared similar values and beliefs, and, in general, they reported high levels of "fitting in" to their neighbourhoods.
- Ninety-eight percent of participants noted the construction of new buildings and homes in their city, and 67% within their neighbourhoods.
- The majority of participants believed that their neighbourhood facilities and amenities were sufficient, but were less likely to believe that public transit was accessible or had improved.
- The majority reported no change in the condition of buildings and houses or change in rental housing in their neighbourhood.
- Most participants observed no changes in the water and air quality in the city, but opinions were divided on changes in the number of green spaces and in overall environmental quality.
- Perceptions of the ethnocultural make-up and unemployment rate of St. John's neighbourhoods were similar to the figures reported in 2016 Census data for the city overall. Participants estimated higher numbers of seniors, residents with university degrees, with low incomes, and unemployed residents in their neighbourhoods than census data reports for the city as a whole.

MOST NOTICEABLE CHANGES

When St. John’s residents were asked to identify the biggest changes in the city over the last five to 10 years, the top five areas of change mentioned were economy/business, housing, population and growth, drugs/crime, and infrastructure.

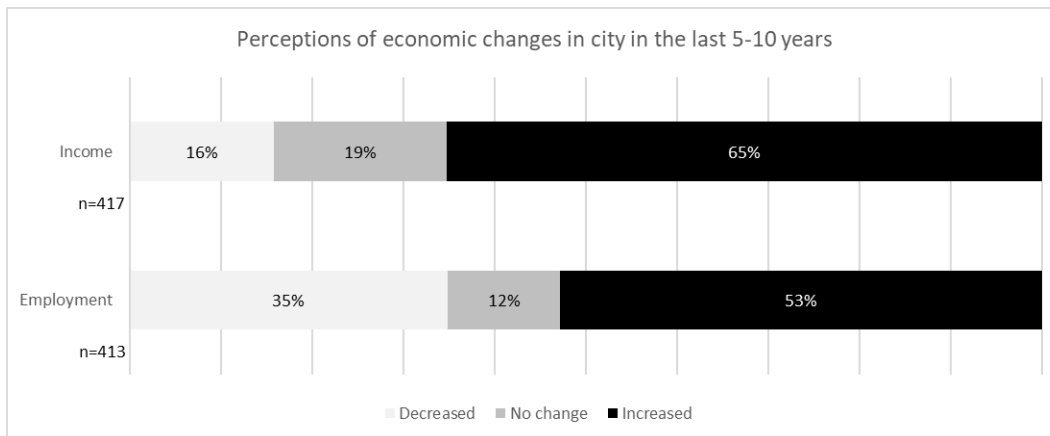
Top Five Most Noticeable Changes in St. John's		
1	Economy/Business	184 39%
2	Housing	145 31%
3	Population and Growth	109 23%
4	Drugs/Crime	80 17%
5	Infrastructure	72 15%
n=473		

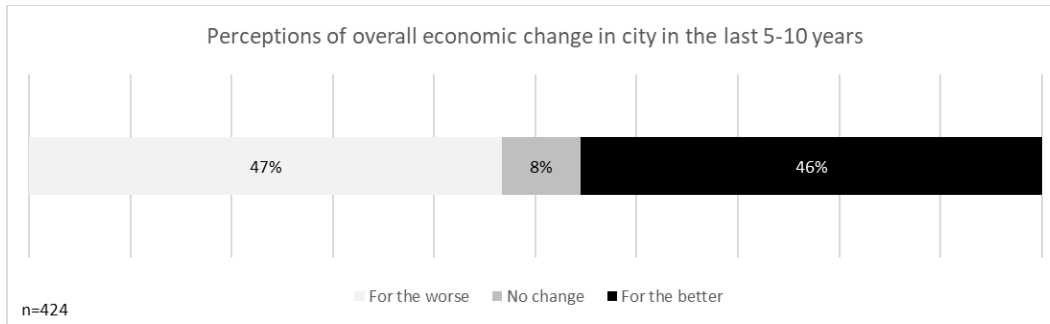
Thirty-nine percent of participants in St. John’s mentioned changes to **business and the economy**, including many who noted fluctuations in the oil industry and its effects on the city. Many observed increased economic prosperity in the last five to 10 years; others noted a decline in the last couple of years.

Thirty-one percent of participants discussed changes to **housing**, with many specifically mentioning new residential development, larger houses, and increased housing prices. Nearly one-quarter, 23%, referred to **growth and population** increases. Seventeen percent expressed concerns over the increased visibility of **drugs and crime** in St. John’s. Finally, 15% noted changes to **infrastructure**, notably the deterioration of road conditions.

ECONOMIC CHANGES

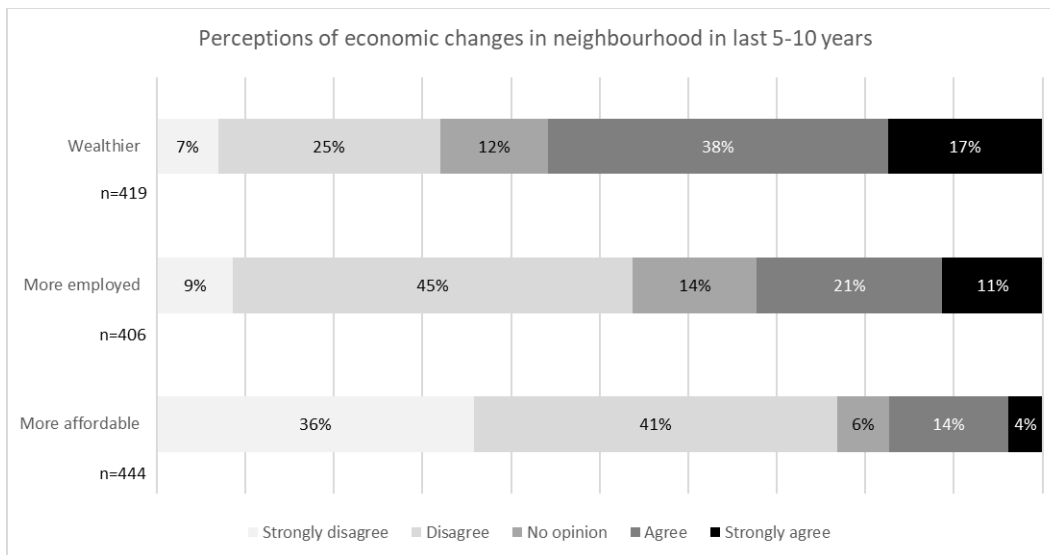
When participants were asked about economic changes in the city, 65% had observed an increase in average income and 53% noted higher rates of employment. When asked for their overall perception of economic changes in the city, participants were divided: 46% reported seeing change for the better, and 47% noted change for the worse.



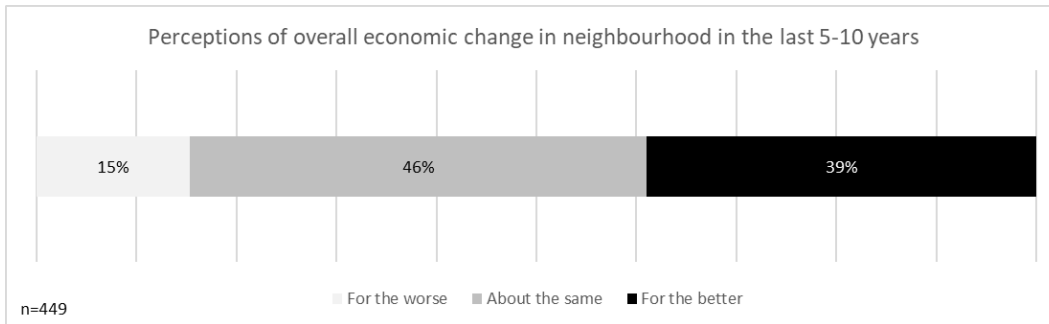


Survey participants were also asked about economic factors within their neighbourhoods. On average, they estimated neighbourhood unemployment rates at 11%, and they estimated that 19% of their neighbourhood’s residents had low incomes. These estimates are higher than the 9% unemployment rate and the 7% low-income rate estimates for St. John’s provided by Statistics Canada based on the 2016 Census.

Participants were asked their level of agreement to questions about economic changes in their neighbourhoods. Fifty-five percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that people in their neighbourhood were wealthier compared to five to 10 years earlier. When asked if more people were employed compared to five to 10 years before, 32% agreed or strongly agreed. Just 18% agreed or strongly agreed that their neighbourhood had become more affordable over the same period, while 77% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

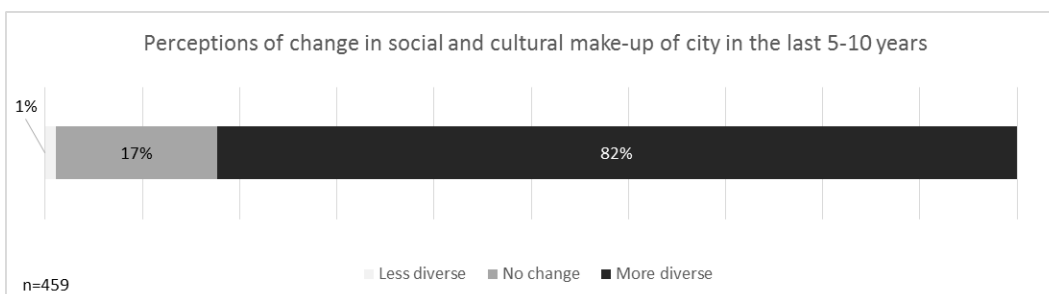
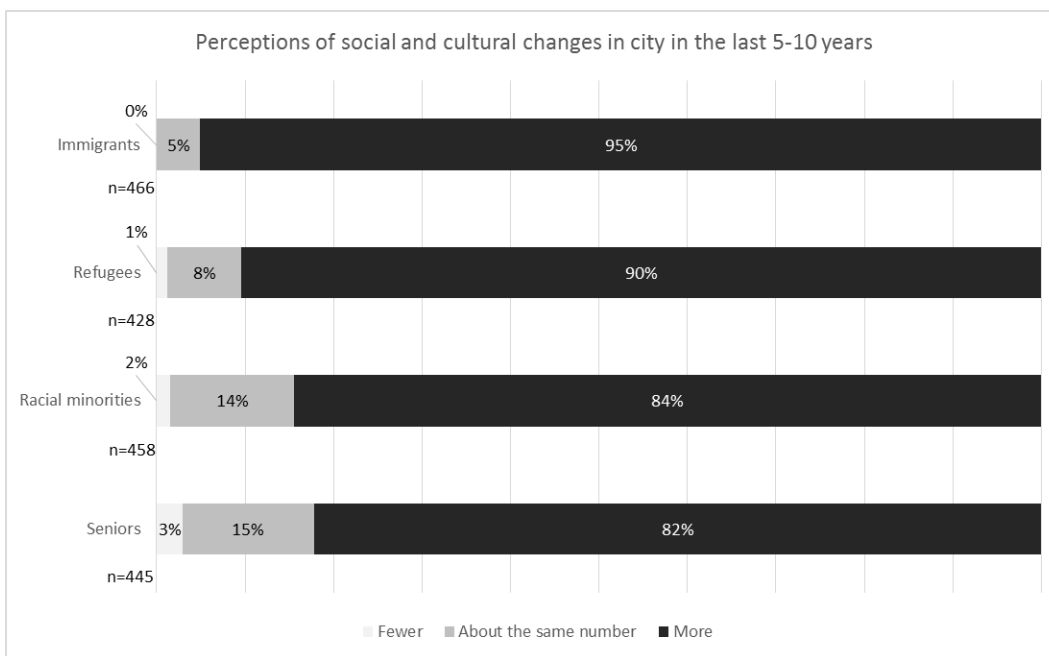


When participants were asked about their overall perceptions of economic change in their neighbourhoods, 46%, felt things were about the same, while 39% noted that it had changed for the better.

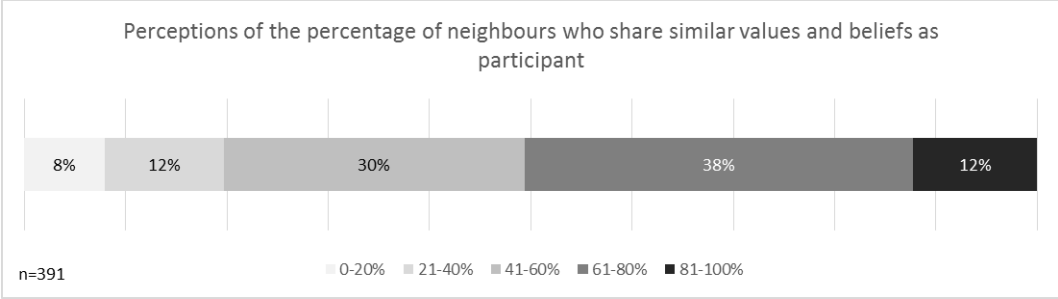


SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CHANGES

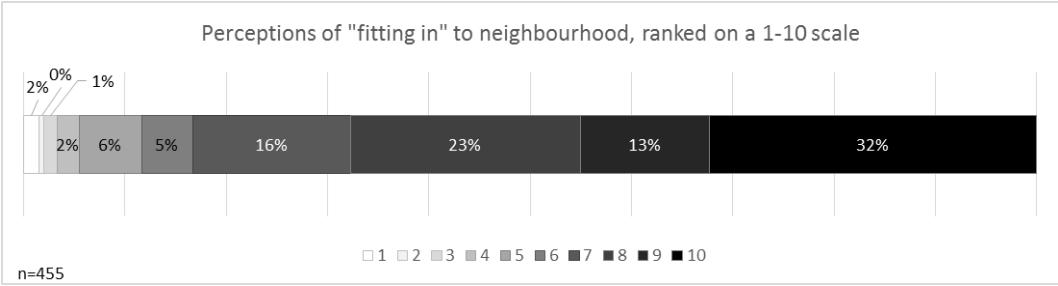
When participants were asked about social and cultural changes in St. John's over the last five to 10 years, 95% noted an increase in the number of immigrants; 90%, an increase in the number of refugees; 84%, an increase in the number of racial minority residents; and 82%, an increase in the number of senior citizens. When asked whether the cultural make-up of the city had changed compared to five to 10 years ago, 82% of participants reported that, overall, the city had become more socially and culturally diverse.



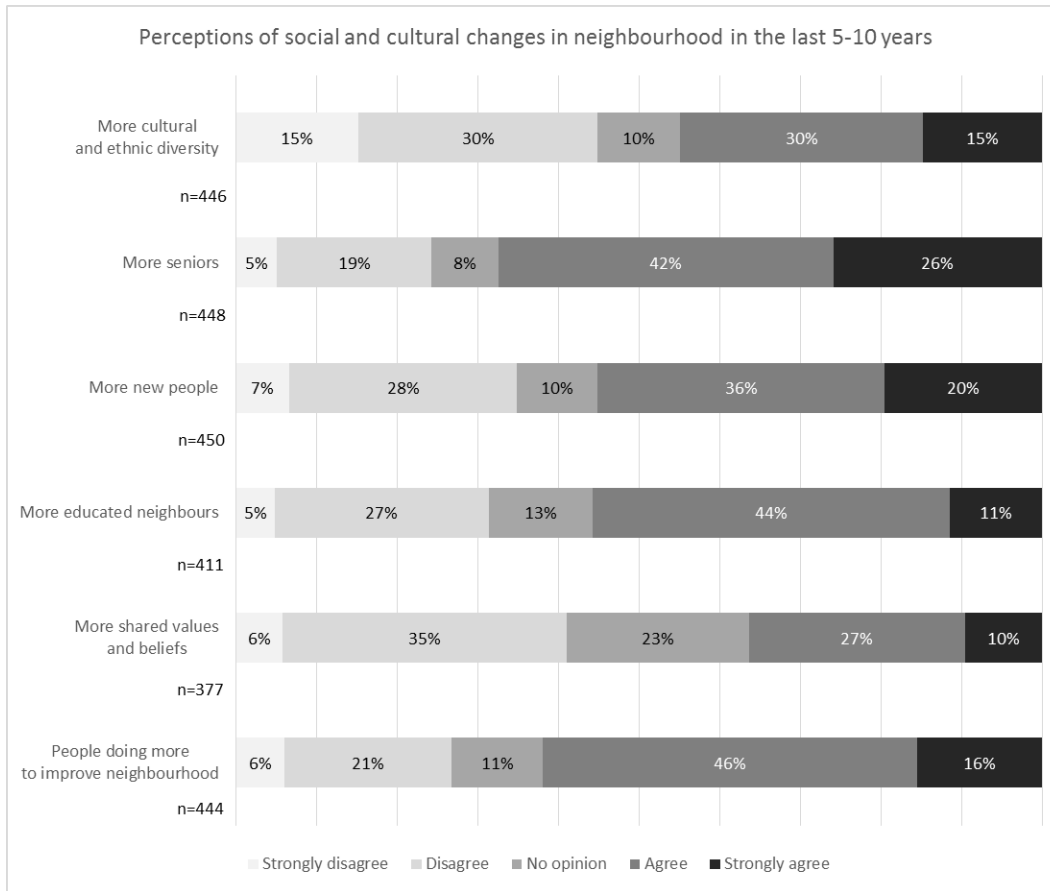
Participants were also asked about social and cultural diversity within their neighbourhoods. On average, St. John’s residents who participated in the survey estimated that 8% of their neighbours were racial minorities, 6% were immigrants, 2% were refugees, 44% had university degrees, and 33% were senior citizens. These values are higher than the estimates of 4% racial minorities, 4% immigrants, 1% refugees, 24% with university degrees, and 15% senior citizens based on the 2016 Census.



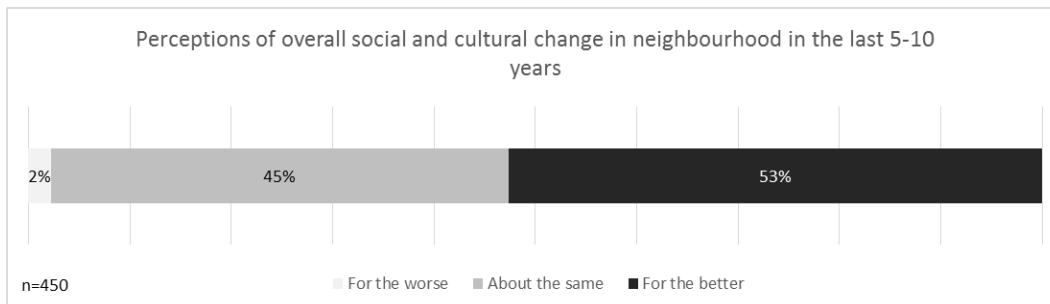
When asked what percentage of people in their neighbourhood shared similar values and beliefs, participants estimated, on average, that 61% of people did. The most common estimate was 50%, but a wide range of estimates were offered, with the majority of participants estimating between 40% and 80%. When asked how well they believed they “fit in” to their neighbourhood on a scale from one to 10, St. John’s participants, on average, reported “8,” largely expressing a strong sense of fitting in and belonging.



Participants also rated their level of agreement with statements on social and cultural changes in their neighbourhood. When asked if their neighbourhood had become more culturally or ethnically diverse compared to five to 10 years ago, 45% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that it had; 68% agreed or strongly agreed that the number of senior citizens had increased in the same period; 56% agreed or strongly agreed that there were more new people in their neighbourhood; 55% agreed or strongly agreed that their neighbours had become more highly educated; 37% agreed or strongly agreed that more people shared the same values and beliefs as them; and 62% agreed or strongly agreed that people were doing more to improve their neighbourhood compared to five to 10 years ago.

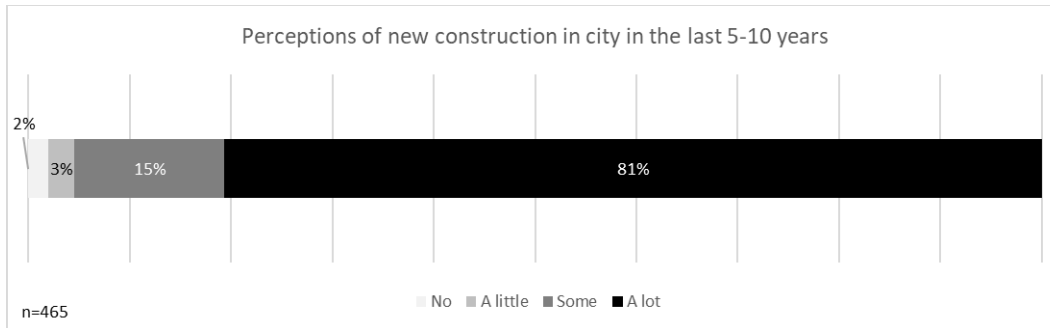


Overall, when participants were asked to assess the social and cultural changes in their neighbourhood, the majority, 53%, observed changes for the better, while 45% felt that things had remained about the same.



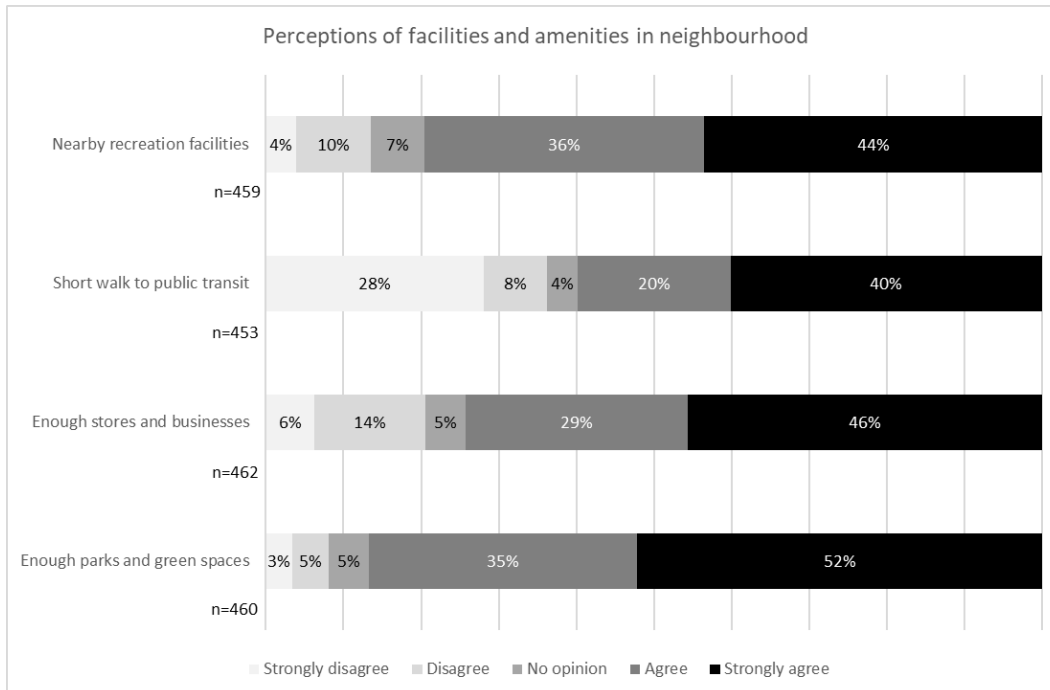
CHANGES TO THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Survey participants were asked questions about their perceptions of the built environment and their access to amenities and services. When St. John’s residents taking part in the survey were asked whether they observed new construction in the city, 81% reported noticing “a lot” of new construction compared to five to 10 years ago. Overall, 98% of participants noted some amount of new construction in the city.



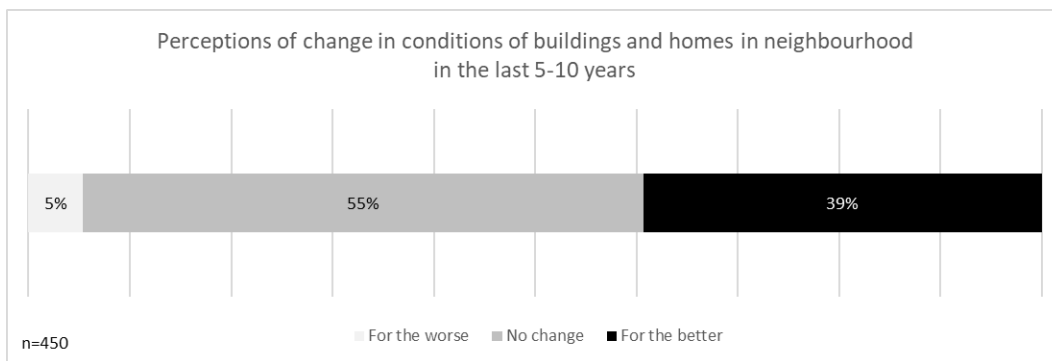
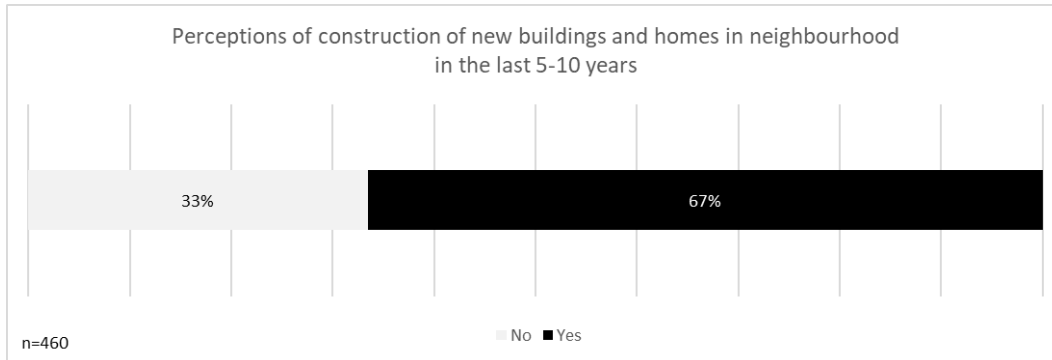
Regarding the condition of buildings, participants estimated on average that 10% of buildings and houses in their neighbourhood were in need of repair. They were also asked to estimate the percentage of rental housing in their neighbourhood; on average, participants put this figure at 19%. Participants’ average estimate of houses and buildings in need of repair is higher than the 4% estimate for St. John’s reported in the 2016 Census. Their estimate of the prevalence of rental housing is lower than Statistics Canada’s estimate of 30%.

When asked about facilities and amenities in their neighbourhoods, 80% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that there were nearby recreational facilities; 60% agreed or strongly agreed that public transit was available within a short walk of their home; 75% agreed or strongly agreed that there were enough shops, stores, markets or other places in their neighbourhood to buy what they need; and 87% agreed or strongly agreed that there were enough parks and green spaces in their neighbourhood.

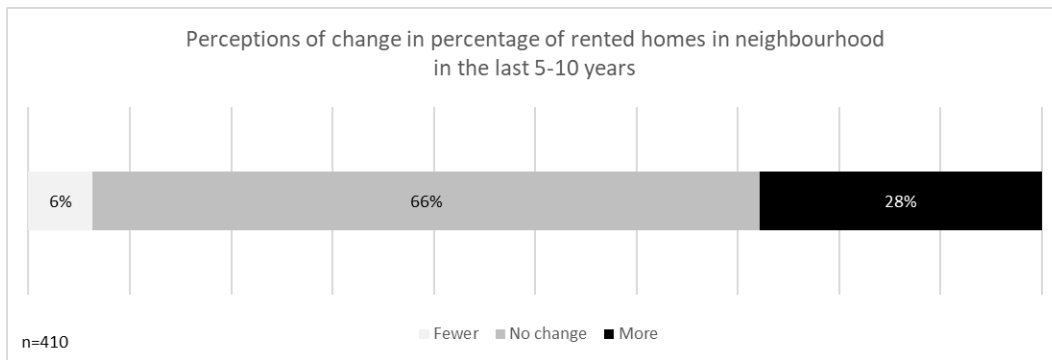


When participants were asked about changes to the built environment in their neighbourhood, 66% reported that new buildings and homes had been constructed and 39% observed improvements in the

conditions of buildings and homes in the last five to 10 years. The majority, 55%, had observed no change in conditions.

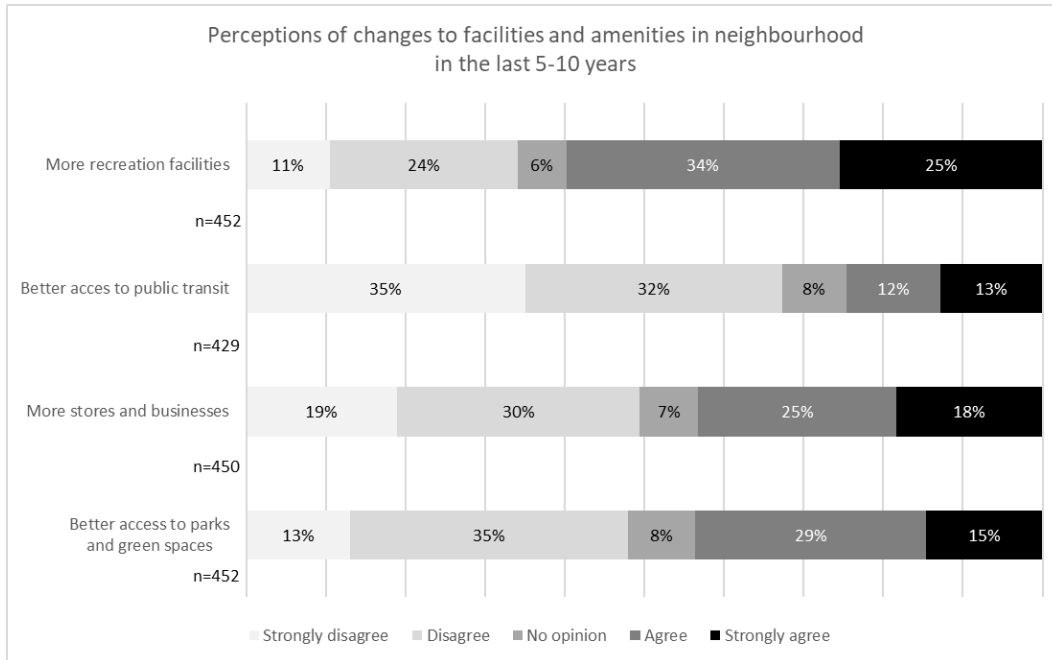


Participants were also asked about housing tenure: 28% of those surveyed noted more rental housing in their neighbourhood compared to five to 10 years earlier. However, the majority, 66%, did not perceive any change.

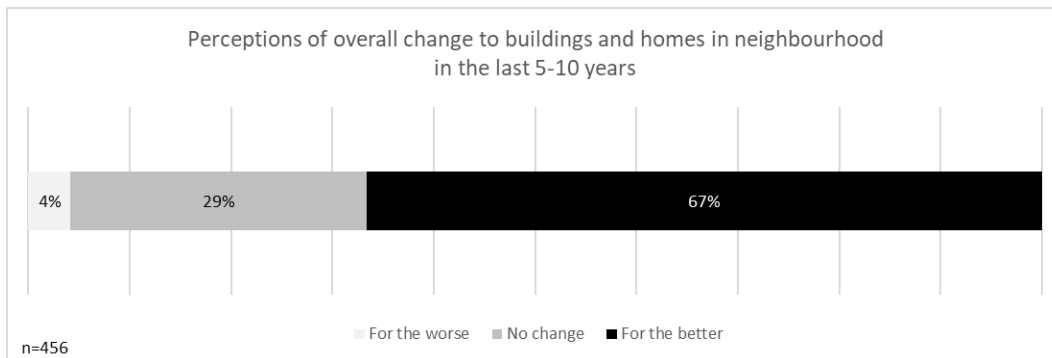


Participants were also asked for their level of agreement with several statements on changes to the amenities and services available in their neighbourhood: 59% agreed or strongly agreed that there was better access to recreational facilities in the neighbourhood at the time of the survey compared to five to 10 years before; 25% agreed or strongly agreed that there was better access to public transit; 43% agreed or strongly agreed that the number of stores and businesses in their neighbourhood had

increased; and 44% agreed or strongly agreed that there was better access to parks or green spaces compared to five to 10 years earlier.

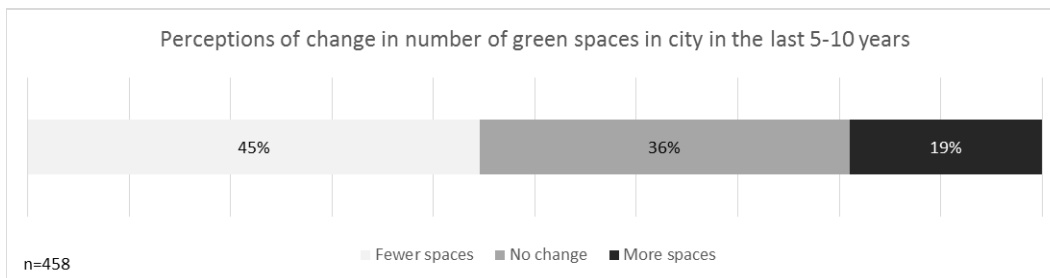
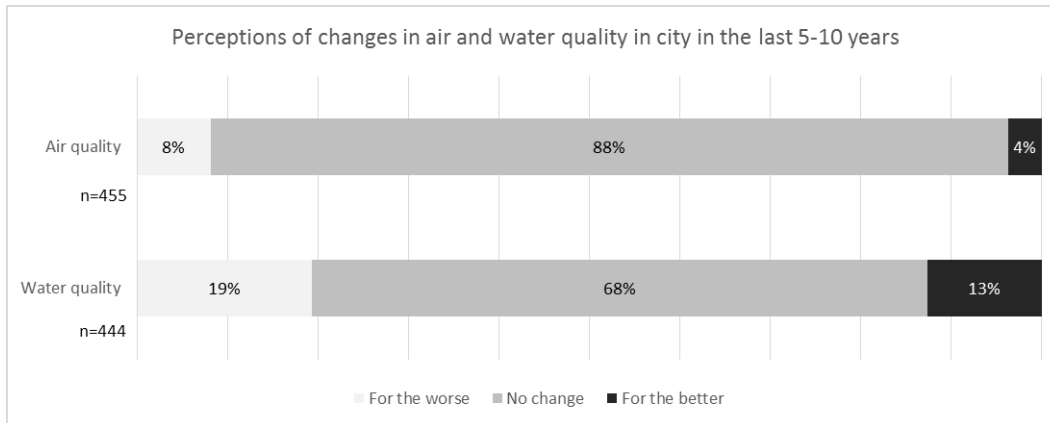


In St. John's, 67% of participants felt that changes in their neighbourhood's built environment were for the better, and 29% felt that buildings and homes had generally stayed about the same in the last five to 10 years.

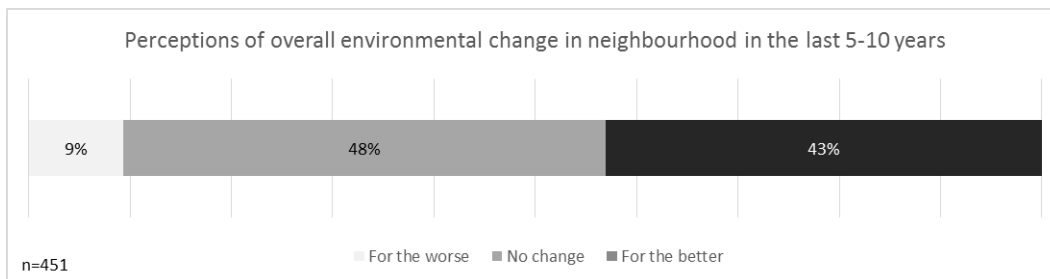


CHANGES TO THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Participants were asked about their perceptions of change in the natural environment. The majority of participants in the survey, 88%, reported no change in the city's air quality over the last five to 10 years. A majority, 68%, also noted no change in the city's natural bodies of water, and 19% observed change for the worse. Participants were divided on changes in the number of green spaces in the city: 45% observed fewer green spaces, 36% believed the number had stayed the same, and 19% noticed more spaces.



Forty-eight percent of St. John’s residents participating in the survey reported no overall change to the natural environment in their neighbourhood in the last five to 10 years, 43% reported change for the better, and 9% noted that change had been for the worse.



WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE SURVEY

More women than men participated in the survey: 59% women compared to 41% men. The majority of participants, 81%, owned their homes; 81% lived in detached houses. Almost all of the participants, 96%, spoke English as their first language. The average age of participants was 54. Four percent identified as racial minorities, 6% as immigrants or refugees, 7% identified as Indigenous (Indian, Métis, or Inuit), and 63% were legally married.

The majority of participants, 81%, had some post-secondary education; 29% named a Bachelor’s degree as their highest level of education obtained. Just over one-third of participants, 34%, reported having earned no employment income in the last year. The median individual employment income reported

was \$40,000 to \$60,000, and 10% reported spending more than a third of their incomes on housing and related expenses.

METHODOLOGY

To understand St. John's residents' perceptions of neighbourhood change, we conducted a telephone survey of 473 residents between June 22, 2017 and August 8, 2017. The survey had a 95 percent confidence level and a standard error of 0.025. We recruited participants through a random selection of telephone numbers assigned to the St. John's Census Metropolitan Area, from a list that included landline and mobile telephone numbers. Twenty-eight percent of participants were recruited through mobile numbers. Only participants over the age of 18 and who reside in St. John's were invited to participate. To ensure confidentiality, the names and telephone numbers of the participants were not linked to their responses.

The survey was supervised by Professor Howard Ramos, Sociology and Social Anthropology, Dalhousie University. For additional information, he can be reached at: howard.ramos@dal.ca

Research assistants who worked on the survey in St. John's were: Emma Cruddas, Shekara Grant, Emma Kay, Kathleen MacNabb, Rachel McLay, Jordan Minx, and Kirstie Smith.