



# HOUSING ATTAINABILITY IN THE BEAR RIVER AREA

Assessing the Public's Attitudes, Beliefs, and Preferences  
on Housing Attainability, Growth, and Development

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## BACKGROUND & METHODS

As the rental market has tightened, housing prices have soared, interest rates have spiked, and supply chain problems have increased, Utahns are experiencing numerous challenges related to affording, securing, and maintaining housing. In a recent Kem C. Gardner report\*, authors report that 40% of all Utahns are housing cost-burdened (spending more than 30% of total monthly income on housing) and 18% are severely cost-burdened (spending more than 50% of total monthly income on housing). For low and extremely low-income households, these figures are even more troubling. Challenges in affording, securing, and maintaining housing impact Utahns in a variety of ways, and this same report shows that housing quality, affordability, and neighborhood conditions all meaningfully contribute to residents' health. Furthermore, housing affordability challenges are impacting counties' ability to attract and retain a workforce. While there are a variety of government and community efforts underway to tackle the housing affordability crisis in Utah, progress is slow and meanwhile, Utah residents are struggling.

Cache County recently led a Housing Crisis Taskforce effort where potential solutions were examined and recommended to municipal governments and other community stakeholders. However, municipal governments often report experiencing challenges related to public sentiment and NIMBYism as they work to tackle the problem.

Gaining a baseline understanding of the public's perceptions will be crucial for informing interventions and policy solutions. To this end, a public perception survey was conducted by Transforming Communities Institute (TCI) faculty and students. Survey findings can be used to inform key stakeholders about public sentiment, differentiating itself from public clamor which may not always reflect the sentiment of the whole community.

Using community-engaged strategies, TCI researchers partnered with BRAG to co-develop the survey in this QUAN+qual, descriptive research design. Researchers obtained Institutional Review Board approval (#14603) from Utah State University. They employed public-intercept and online survey recruitment strategies to collect 316 survey responses from residents in the Bear River area. The majority of responses came from Cache County (74%) with 17% responding from Box Elder County and 9% responding from Rich County.

While public intercept methods allow for a sampling procedure that approaches randomness, there is still room for selection bias. As can be seen in the table on the next page, there are a number of demographic differences between American Community Survey (Census) data for the Bear River area and the study sample - most notably the higher proportion of women in the study sample.

# SAMPLE

## Study Sample Demographics (N=316) vs. Bear River American Community Survey (ACS) Demographics (2022)\*

Demographic Variable	2018-2022 ACS Data (Census)	Study Sample
<b>Gender</b>		
Men	50.6%	25.3%
Women	49.4%	70.3%
Non-Binary	Not Reported	2.3%
Prefer not to say/Other	Not Reported	2.0%
<b>Age</b>		
Under 18	30.1%	N/A
18-24	16.1%	8.9%
25-34	13.4%	22.4%
35-44	12.3%	27.3%
45-54	9.1%	21.4%
55-64	8.4%	11.8%
65 and older	10.7%	7.9%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
Black or African American	0.6%	1.6%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.3%	1.0%
White	83.8%	77.0%
Asian	1.6%	0.7%
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0.3%	0.7%
Hispanic	10.6%	9.9%
Two or more races	2.6%	3.3%
Prefer not to say	Not Reported	5.9%
<b>Housing Tenure</b>		
Own	79.1%	60.9%
Rent	20.9%	30.8%
Other	Not Reported	5.7%
Prefer not to say	N/A	2.7%
<b>Education</b>		
Less than High School	6.1%	1.7%
High School Diploma	58.9%	31.3%
Associates or Technical Degree	Not Reported	15.6%
Bachelor's Degree or Higher	35.1%	51.5%
<b>Annual Household Income<sup>a</sup></b>		
< \$34,999 ( <b>&lt; \$35,999</b> )	20.4%	20.9%
\$35,000 - \$49,999 ( <b>\$36,000 - \$53,999</b> )	11.7%	20.9%
\$50,000 - \$74,999 ( <b>\$54,000 - \$71,999</b> )	19.6%	12.6%
\$75,000 - \$99,999 ( <b>\$72,000 - \$89,999</b> )	14.9%	10.0%
- ( <b>\$90,000 - \$107,999</b> )	N/A	7.0%
\$100,000 - \$124,999 ( <b>\$108,000 - \$125,999</b> )	12.4%	6.3%
>\$125,000 ( <b>&gt;\$126,000</b> )	21.1%	13.0%
Prefer not to say	N/A	9.3%
<b>Children at Home</b>		
Children 18 years or younger living at home	40.3%	46.0%
<b>Political Views</b>		
Strongly Liberal	Not Reported	9.4%
Somewhat Liberal	Not Reported	17.5%
Independent	Not Reported	21.9%
Somewhat Conservative	Not Reported	26.3%
Strongly Conservative	Not Reported	15.8%
Prefer not to say	Not Reported	9.1%

Notes: <sup>a</sup>Income ranges in parentheses apply to the study sample, which do not align precisely with ACS income ranges but still allow a general comparison.

# WHAT HOUSING CHALLENGES ARE BEAR RIVER AREA RESIDENTS MOST CONCERNED WITH?

- #1** Housing Affordability
- #2** Infrastructure capacity (roads, water, electricity)
- #3** Overcrowding
- #4** Limited variety in housing types (e.g., apartments, townhouses)
- #5** Other

It is important to note that the rank order of concerns was remarkably consistent between counties. In other words, from rural parts of Box Elder and Rich to more populated parts in Cache, residents placed similar priorities on concerns. However, there were numerous nuances that emerged in the 'other' category, explained in greater detail on page 6.



# UNPACKING 'OTHER' HOUSING CHALLENGES

Although 'Other' was ranked last among housing challenge concerns, there were more than 70 Bear River Area residents who shared their concerns in detailed qualitative responses. These responses are summarized by themes below.

## Affordability and Housing Quality

**Affordable Housing:** Many respondents emphasized the need for affordable housing, citing issues like high rents, low wages, and a lack of housing options suitable for families. Specific concerns were raised about housing being overpriced for the quality, with some noting that rents are unaffordable for large families, and the cost of living is rising faster than wages. Additionally, high lot fees for their trailers was mentioned

**Housing Quality:** There were concerns about low-quality housing being built, especially by mass builders compared to custom homes. This includes issues like overcrowding, poor materials, and bad management practices that affect the living conditions for tenants.

## Community and Social Issues

**Loss of Small-Town Character:** Some respondents were concerned about the loss of their small-town feel due to overcrowding, density, and development. This was also tied to concerns about losing the "Cache Valley" identity, with some saying the growing population may lead them to leave.

**Social Problems:** Several people mentioned concerns about the rising cost of living leading to poverty, drug issues, and crime, which they felt was being exacerbated by rapid population growth.

## Zoning and Land Use Issues

**Zoning Restrictions:** Many respondents expressed frustration with zoning ordinances that make it difficult to add more housing supply. There's a particular concern about the lack of mixed-use zoning and overly restrictive land use policies that limit housing options.

**Sprawl and Loss of Farmland:** Some highlighted the negative impact of urban sprawl and the development of agricultural land into housing, fearing that it changes the character of their community. There's a desire to preserve farmland and prevent excessive development.

## Short-Term Rentals

**Impact of Short-Term Rentals:** A significant number of responses indicated concerns about the growth of short-term rentals (STRs), which they believe crowd out long-term rental housing and contribute to higher prices. Some respondents noted that STRs are dominating the housing market, leaving fewer affordable options for permanent residents.

## Impact on Schools and Community Services

**School Overcrowding:** There were numerous responses highlighting concerns about local schools being unable to handle population growth, leading to overcrowding and strained resources. This includes concerns about a lack of school opportunities and the impact of growth on the education system.

**Lack of Services:** Some respondents noted that overpopulation is straining local services, including housing services (e.g., BRAG) and general community support. There's frustration with service providers not meeting the needs of current residents, especially those facing housing challenges.

## Government and Policy Concerns

**Government Overreach:** Some respondents were concerned about local government overreach, particularly regarding regulations, taxes, and development controls. There were calls for less government interference in the housing market.

**Taxation and Subsidies:** A few individuals expressed frustration with taxes rising to unsustainable levels, which they believe are funding "pet projects" rather than addressing the real housing needs of the community. Some also expressed a need for more government-subsidized housing options.

## Housing for Vulnerable Populations

**Senior Housing:** The lack of affordable senior housing options was noted as a concern, especially for aging residents who may need more suitable housing.

**Homelessness and Shelters:** There were calls for better housing options for the homeless and unsheltered populations, with some respondents pointing out that the current system does not adequately address their needs.

## Miscellaneous Issues

**Parking:** There were multiple mentions of parking issues, especially in areas with dense housing.

**Crime:** Some respondents felt that crime is rising as a result of the increasing population, with some specifically mentioning concerns about the impact of housing developments on crime rates.

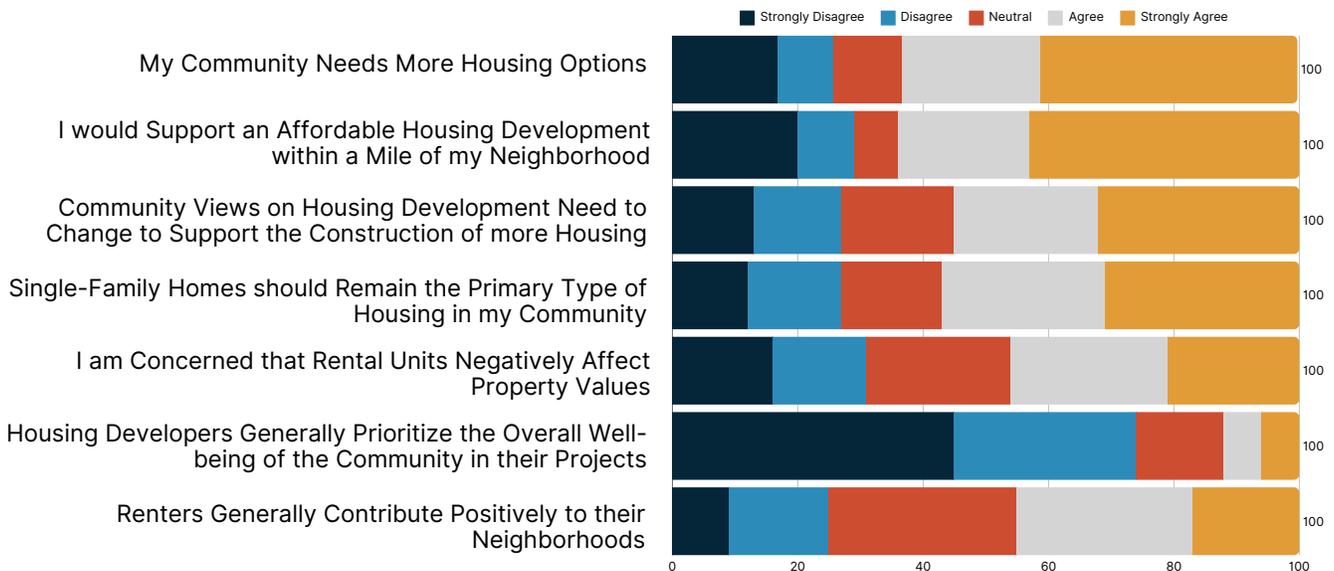
**Pet-Friendly Housing:** A few respondents noted the lack of pet-friendly housing options in the community.

## Other Concerns

**Environmental Impact:** Concerns about the environmental sustainability of new housing developments, including the loss of green spaces and the environmental impact of increased sprawl, were mentioned.

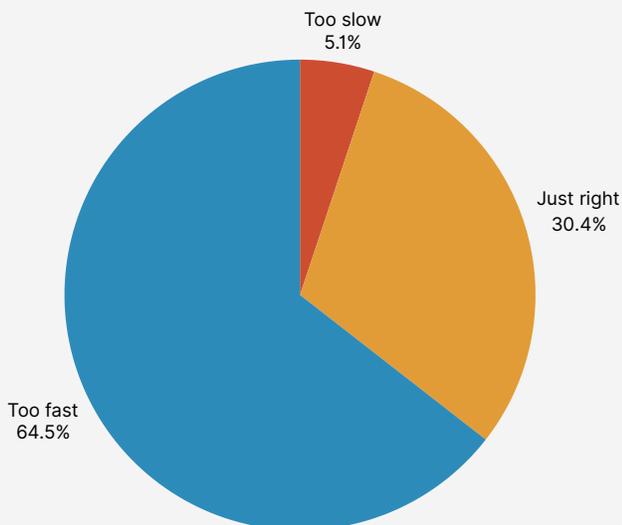
**Eligibility Requirements:** Some expressed frustration with eligibility requirements for housing programs, such as credit scores, past evictions, or felony charges, making it difficult for certain populations to access housing.

# COMMUNITY ATTITUDES & BELIEFS

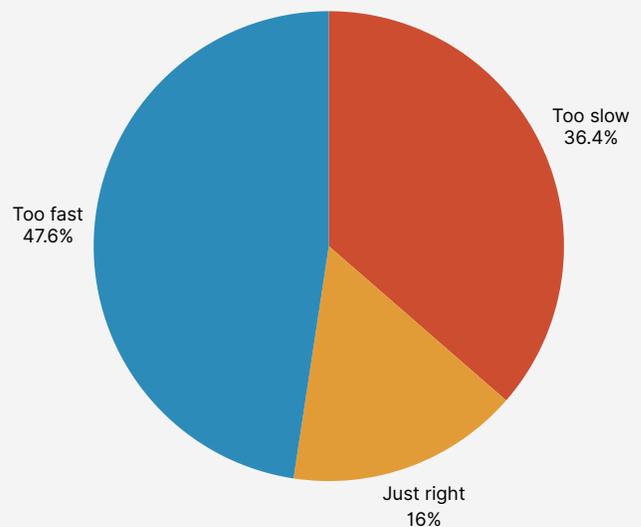


Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement on each statement. The chart above reflects the percentage of respondents for each level of agreement.

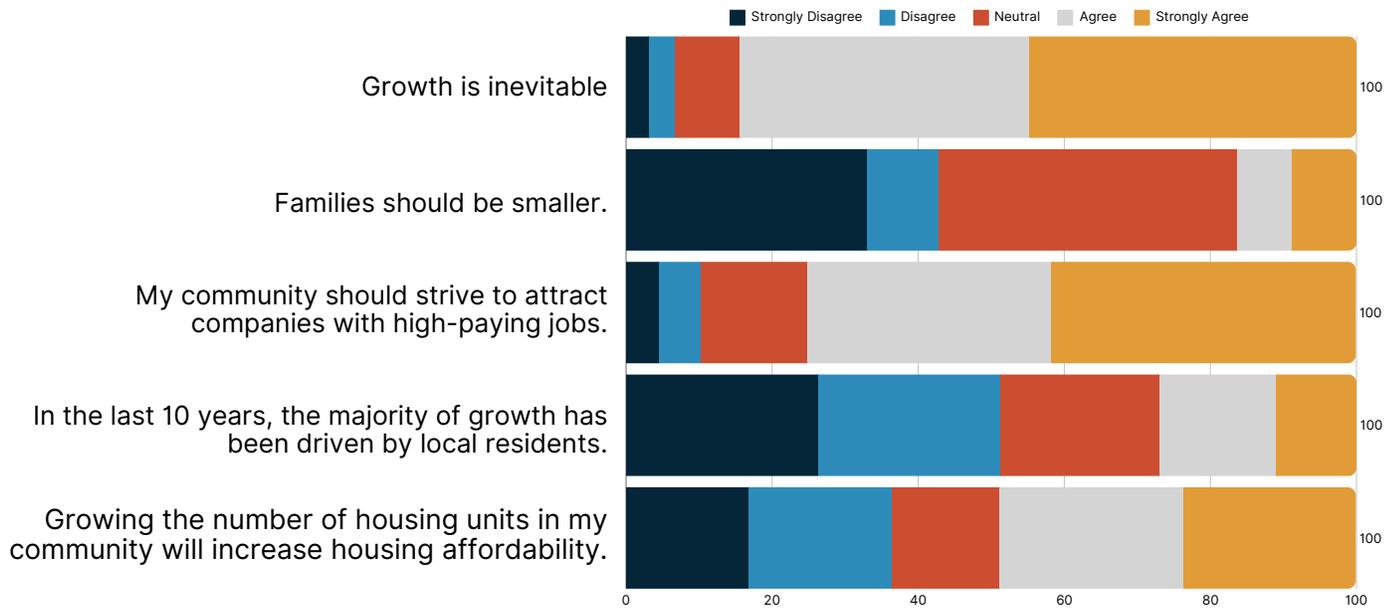
In the last 5 years, **my community's population** has grown...



In the last 5 years, **housing in my community** has grown...



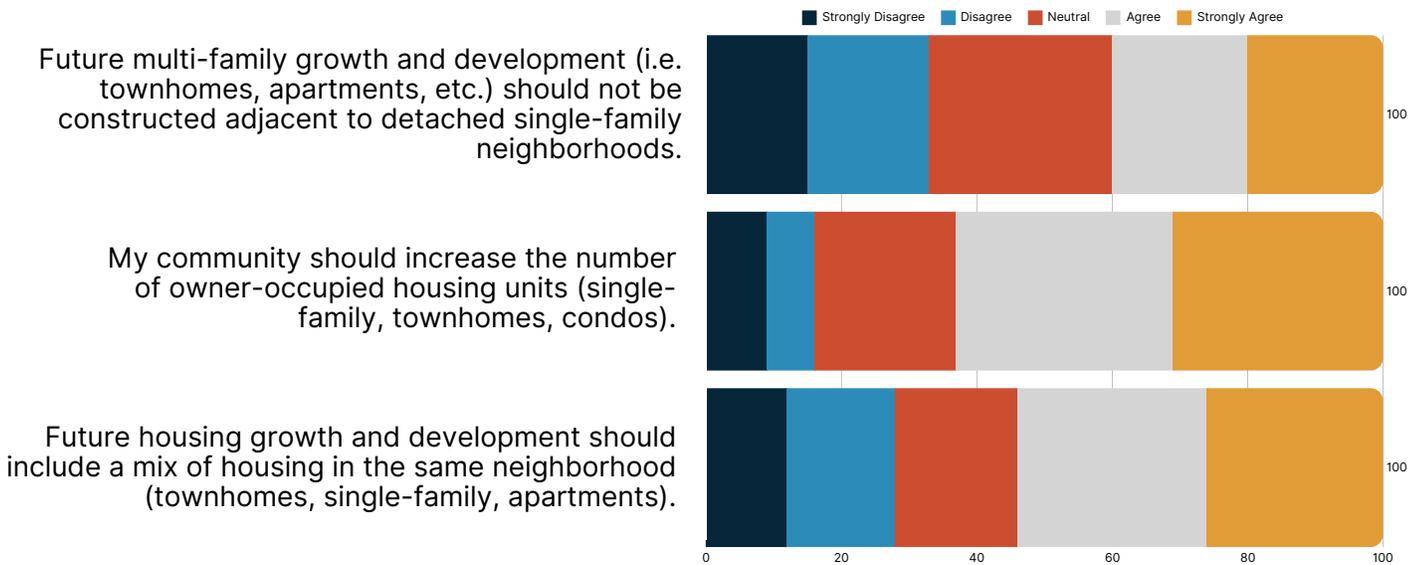
# COMMUNITY ATTITUDES & BELIEFS



Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement on each statement. The chart above reflects the percentage of respondents for each level of agreement.



# HOUSING DEVELOPMENT PREFERENCES + CIVIC ENGAGEMENT



Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement on each statement. The chart above reflects the percentage of respondents for each level of agreement.



## In the last 5 years...

**27%**

I spoke with an elected official about housing development in my city.

**13%**

I gave public comment at a city council meeting.

**14%**

I submitted written public comment on housing development in my city.

**28%**

I attended a planning and zoning meeting in my city.

**35%**

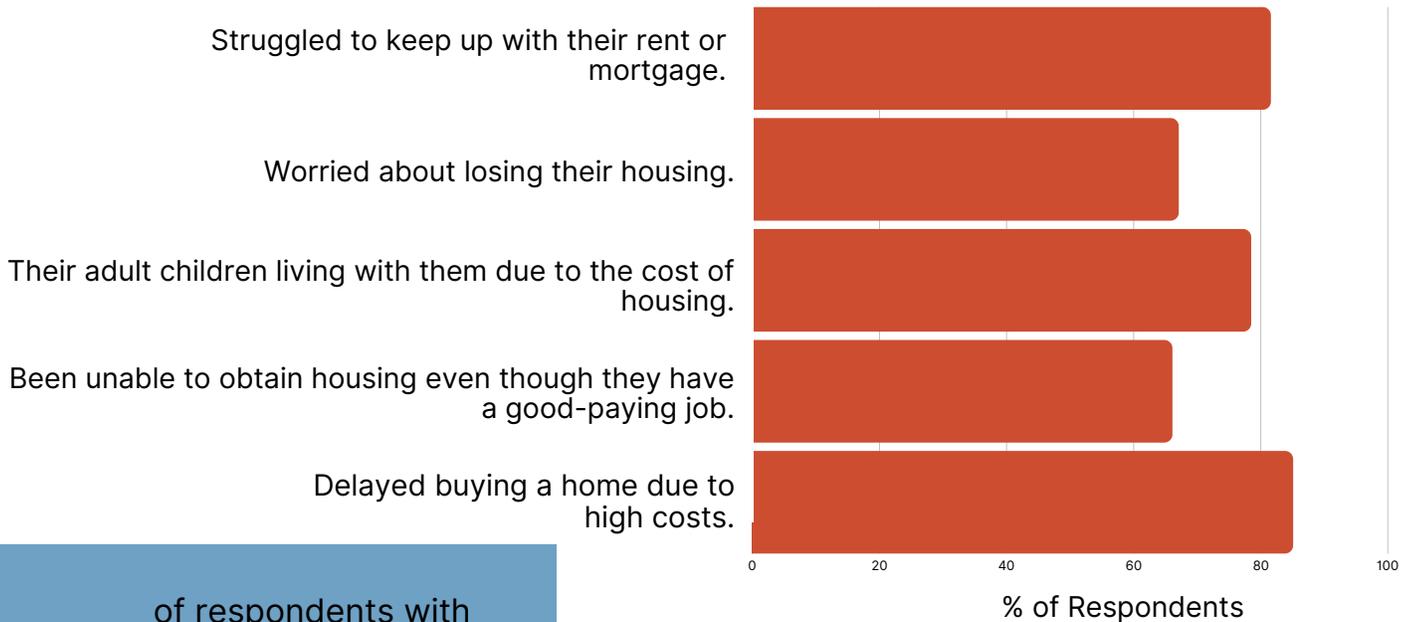
I attended a city council meeting.

**15%**

I gave public comment at a planning and zoning meeting in my city.

# PERSONAL CONNECTION & EXPERIENCES

In the last 5 years, I personally know someone who has...



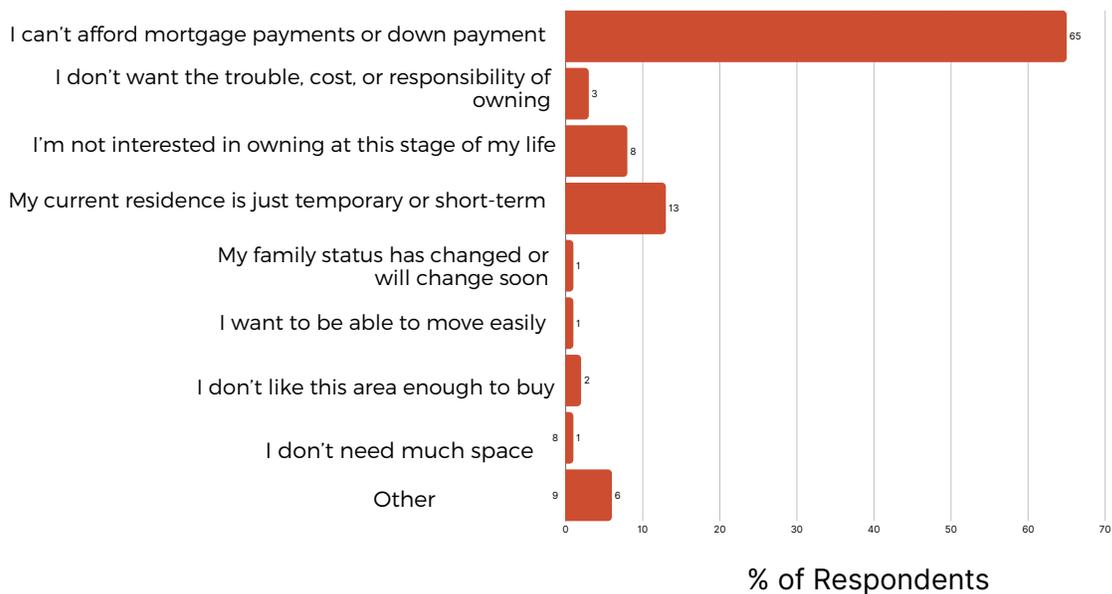
**68%**

of respondents with adult children living at home say they are at home because they cannot afford housing.

**31%**

of respondents are renters

When asked why they are currently renting, respondents indicated...



# ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS FROM BEAR RIVER AREA RESIDENTS

PARTICIPANTS WERE ASKED IF THEY HAD ANY ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS THEY WOULD LIKE TO SHARE. THEIR RESPONSES REFLECTED A GENERAL SENSE OF URGENCY AND FRUSTRATION ABOUT THE CURRENT HOUSING CRISIS, WITH MANY SEEING THE SITUATION WORSENING AS THE POPULATION GROWS.

**Housing Affordability Issues:** Many respondents emphasized the high cost of housing, particularly in areas like Bear Lake and Garden City, which are affected by seasonal tourism and second-home ownership. Respondents noted that local wages are insufficient to cover housing costs, making it difficult for year-round residents to find affordable homes.

**Impact of Tourism and Second-Home Ownership:** The influx of second-home owners, particularly in vacation destinations, is driving up housing prices, making it harder for full-time residents to afford homes. This is especially a concern for teachers, emergency responders, and other essential workers.

**Challenges for Students and Families:** Students, particularly married students, face housing shortages, with limited availability of affordable options close to campus. Some respondents also noted the need for more family-friendly housing options, such as single-family homes or townhomes, instead of apartments.

**Concerns About School District and Community Needs:** Respondents raised concerns about local school districts not having enough space or resources to properly serve the growing population. There is also a desire for more schools and better management of local funds.

**Government and Policy Concerns:** Some respondents believe that government intervention in housing, particularly through taxes, is problematic. They advocate for less government involvement in housing and suggest reevaluating property values relative to local incomes.

**Quality of Housing:** There is frustration with the quality of housing in some areas, with concerns about poorly maintained homes and the lack of ADA-compliant apartments. There is also a preference for more owner-occupied homes rather than investor-owned rental properties.

**Suggestions for Solutions:** Some respondents suggested several ways to improve the housing situation, including a moratorium on short-term rentals, better regulation of housing developments, raising the minimum wage, and allowing more developers to build affordable housing.

# CONCLUSIONS

The Bear River Area faces a critical housing attainability challenge marked by soaring costs, limited affordable options, and public resistance to new development. Survey findings highlight significant personal connections to these challenges, as many residents report knowing individuals who have struggled to keep up with rent or mortgage payments, delayed homeownership due to high costs, or been unable to secure housing despite stable employment. Additionally, the prevalence of adult children living at home due to unaffordable housing reflects the widespread impact of the crisis on families.

Residents identified key concerns such as zoning restrictions, the rise of short-term rentals, and the loss of small-town character due to rapid growth. Frustrations with strained community resources, such as

overcrowded schools and insufficient local services, further underscore the need for comprehensive solutions. Despite these challenges, there is a strong community desire for diverse, affordable housing options and thoughtful development that balances growth with preserving community identity.

These findings emphasize the importance of collaborative, community-driven efforts to address housing attainability. By engaging residents, addressing public sentiment, and prioritizing equitable policy solutions, stakeholders can work together to mitigate the impacts of the housing crisis and foster a sustainable and inclusive future for the Bear River Area.





## Questions? Contact us.

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<https://chass.usu.edu/social-work/transforming-communities-institute/>

