

TransitCenter Focus Group Report

YouGov Blue

September 15, 2020

Introduction

On behalf of TransitCenter, YouGov hosted a series of four focus groups of eight to twelve attendees each. These focus groups occurred from August 29 through September 1, 2020. Each focus group took place for between 100 and 130 minutes. The focus groups focused on the subjects of attendees' experiences using public transit in the era of COVID-19, and in their cities' and transit networks' overall responses to COVID-19. This memorandum presents an analysis of the results.

While the moderator guide used for these focus groups laid out a set of questions, follow-up probes, and challenge statements meant to facilitate the discussion, the conversation attendees had with each other naturally did not perfectly follow an established script. That said, each focus group was generally guided so that the conversation touched on a few key sections or "modules" as laid out in the moderator guide, which is included in Appendix C. These modules included:

1. A **preamble module**, in which the moderator outlined the privacy statement, and each respondent tested their audio and visual systems to ensure they could fully participate in the focus group. The moderator began this module by asking each attendee to report the area from where they were attending, and to discuss their occupation or prior career. The moderator allowed free discussion to occur throughout this module to ensure attendees could converse with each other in a frank and cordial fashion.
2. A **background module**, in which the moderator probed attendees on some details of their work. All attendees who were either working or in school (i.e., those who were not retirees) were asked to provide some information on how they got to and from work or school. Each attendee was probed on how their work situation had changed in the past few months, even if they reported they were retired.
3. A **COVID-19 module**, in which the moderator focused the discussion on how life had changed under COVID-19. Attendees were guided to discuss how their own personal habits had changed, as well as their perceptions of how the personal habits of those in their communities had changed. Attendees were probed on how helpful, effective, annoying, and necessary they felt these habit changes were, and were then asked how long they thought these changes would persist. Attendees were asked to discuss their communities' economic

situations. Attendees were asked about the transition to work-from-home, including how their commutes had changed recently.

4. A **trust in transit networks module**, in which the moderator focused the discussion on the past and present of attendees' experiences with public transit. Attendees were asked to expand on their experience using public transit, including means of transit, the length of their commute, the frequency of public transit use, and their community's current state of transit openness (i.e., whether their transit network was operating at full capacity, hygiene/distancing rules, etc.). Attendees were asked what changes their transit networks had made recently versus what changes they would prefer to see, whether they believed their transit use would ever return to normal, and if so, when. Attendees were asked to contextualize those feelings with how they perceived fellow members of their communities felt.
5. A **concluding module**, in which the moderator circled back on any questions or threads about attendees' situations that had gone unaddressed or not satisfactorily addressed. These typically included further details on the economic situation of attendees' communities, and acquiring more details on the day to day of attendees' experiences with public transit. Finally, all attendees were asked to talk about one aspect of their situation in the era of COVID-19 that they wished they saw more discussion of around them. The focus group then concluded.

While each module governed a discrete topic in the moderator guide, the conversation with and amongst focus group attendees naturally flowed of its own accord. As such, here, the content arising from the **COVID-19** module and the **trust in transit networks module** are analyzed together. The **preamble** and **background** modules, by far the shortest two components of the focus groups, are also analyzed together. As is clear from what focus group attendees had to say, these topics are inseparable.

Summary of results

There were a few areas of strong agreement among respondents.

1. **Everyone, no matter their family or employment situation, experienced at least one major life change due to COVID-19.** Even attendees whose situations seemed about as immune to a pandemic as possible – those who worked from home, or only took classes online from home, or had no children – had major changes at work, or in caring for a family member, being called back to work from retirement, or being forced into retirement early. No sector of the population has been fully unaffected.
2. **Inconsistent and unenforced rules about public transit operation and use led many to switch from public transit to ride-sharing.** In many cities, reduced availability of public transit, as well as inconsistent rules and sanitary standards,

led many attendees to report switching to cabs and ride-sharing services they believed were cleaner and safer.

3. **Masks and social distancing on public transit and in daily life are necessary, and those refusing to abide by health recommendations are regarded negatively.** Almost all attendees agreed COVID-19 remained a persistent and present danger, and even those who disagreed said they were continuing to abide by mask-wearing and social distancing guidelines. Attendees generally reported they did not find masks to be annoying or restricting, and those who did still said that masks were worth wearing.
4. **Public transit is not viewed as particularly unsafe - people are equally unready to be indoors at private businesses or events.** Though many focus group questions centered around the use of public transit, stories from focus group attendees made it clear that mask enforcement was as lax or worse in private businesses. The vast majority of focus group attendees viewed public transit as equally safe or unsafe as any other enclosed space.
5. **The government is not giving consistent or reliable advice.** Attendees toward their mayor and transit agencies, but felt that rules concerning the operation of public transit systems were changing too frequently and too capriciously.
6. **No source of communication could outweigh misinformation from the President.** Attendees, from liberal Democrats to conservative Republicans to the vigorously apolitical, believed that the state of confusion was largely attributable to the President. Even if governors, mayors, and public transit authorities were regularly putting out consistent and reliable information, attendees believed it was being drowned out by the President.
7. **Nothing will return to normal until there is a vaccine.** No matter how attendees felt about their cities and the steps their public transit networks had taken to make things cleaner and safer, the vast majority of attendees felt that their use of any form of transit, for any reason, would remain diminished until there was widespread vaccine availability.
8. **The flu season is viewed as likely to set back any progress achieved on containment of COVID-19.** Even in focus group sessions without healthcare professionals to provide an elevated level of insight, attendees expressed concern that the impending flu season would lead to a new wave of COVID-19 cases as hospital visits would increase across the board.

In other areas where one might expect more consensus, there was disagreement.

1. **Some modes of public transit were systematically viewed as more reliable than others.** In several focus groups, respondents in different cities agreed that their city's bus system was unreliable and had become less so over the course of the COVID-19 era. On the other hand, attendees were mostly of the opinion that train and subway systems were reliable and more or less fully functional.
2. **Younger attendees and those in technical fields had adapted to isolation better than older attendees.** Older attendees and those who reported they did not live near family reported particular difficulty with the isolation caused by

COVID-19. Others reported that their job had already been remote or that they had enough access to social interaction via the Internet that they were not feeling similarly isolated. Several student attendees reported they were already accustomed to a large online component to their learning.

The following section begins with an analysis of the focus group attendees' present circumstances and some of their demographic information, and then begins analyzing the interviews from the first two modules, the "preamble" and "background" modules described in Appendix C. In this report, the names of the focus group attendees have been anonymized, and some elements of focus group attendees' stories have been changed or removed to protect their anonymity. Additionally, some focus group attendees' quotes included in this report have been lightly edited where indicated for ease of comprehension by the reader.

Background and preamble: The focus group attendees

In the era of COVID-19, YouGov performed each focus group session online, rather than in person. These focus groups were held over the communication application Zoom. At the outset of each focus group, after being given consent language concerning the purpose of the focus group, the moderator elicited some background information about each focus group attendee to facilitate conversation. Each participant was invited to tell the group where they were calling into the focus group from, and their general area of employment.

The following tables briefly summarize some these details, and provide the city each attendee said they lived in (or lived near, for those who lived in suburban areas).¹ In this report, the names of focus group attendees have been anonymized. The first names reported here are not the first names provided to the moderator in each focus group session. Other efforts to protect the anonymity of attendees were taken and noted in the report where necessary.

The first session took place on August 27, 2020, from approximately 12pm through 2pm Eastern time. Attendees were distributed from across the country, and included a mixture of full-time, part-time, temporarily furloughed, and retired attendees. Focus group one was the only focus group which included no students. One attendee, "Brian," was excused roughly 90 minutes into the focus group as his lunch break had ended.

Name	Age	Occupation	City
Cheryl	55-64	Retired	Chicago

¹ Each of these statements was verified against focus group attendees' ZIP codes, recorded in the focus group invitation pre-survey. See Appendix B for more information on the focus group recruitment strategy.

Name	Age	Occupation	City
Dale	18-29	Mechanic	Phoenix
Daren	55-64	Mechanic	Duluth
Don	18-29	Technology (furloughed)	Columbus
Kathryn	55-64	Retired	Cleveland
Kyle	18-29	Customer service	Baltimore
Linda	45-54	Homemaker	Seattle
Reginald	45-54	Mechanic	Jamestown
Tammy	45-54	Teacher	Cleveland
Thomas	65+	Retired	Long Beach
Session 1			(Attendee names changed)

The second focus group session took place on August 29, from 12pm-2pm Eastern time. Focus group two included a student whose laboratory work focused on measuring the spread of COVID-19. Naturally, in the flow of the conversation, respondents were interested to hear “Matthew’s” views on the state of things and on what was to come.

Focus group two also included the most rural public transit user in the project, “Wanda” from Juneau, Alaska, who reported relying on a series of city-owned vans and a state-subsidized airline to travel to Seattle, Washington for medical care. She reported having used this transit network for several years, and commented favorably on how it had persisted in the area of COVID-19.

Name	Age	Occupation	City
Aaron	30-44	Graphic designer	Grand Rapids
Beverly	65+	Retired	Manchester
Chastity	30-44	Homemaker	Orlando
Katherine	65+	Retired	Juneau
Manjodh	18-29	Student	Newhaven
Michelle	45-54	Homemaker	Pensacola
Wendy	55-64	Tehnology (government)	Washington, DC
Session 2			(Attendee names changed)

Focus group three occurred on August 29 from 4pm through 6pm Eastern time. Focus group three included two students who reported they had returned to their campuses within the past week, which naturally was a source of curiosity for other focus group attendees. Focus group three also included several attendees whose careers and personal situations had been dramatically upended by COVID-19 – several professional healthcare workers, a delivery driver, and an immune-compromised retiree whose treatment could not be administered at home.

Name	Age	Occupation	City
Alex	30-44	Parish organizer	Los Angeles
Angela	30-44	Teacher (furloughed)	Evansville
Bobbie	55-64	Nurse	New York City
Cindy	65+	Retired	Hartford
Debra	65+	Homemaker (on disability)	Lancaster
Drew	65+	Healthcare administrator	New York City
Emily	18-29	Insurance	Boston
Erika	18-29	Student	New York City
Grace	18-29	Student	Fort Wayne
Jesse	30-44	Technology (on disability)	San Antonio
Kin	30-44	Technology	Seattle
Rodney	45-54	Nurse	Buffalo
Tammie	55-64	Transit	Asheville
Session 3			(Attendee names changed)

Focus group four took place on Tuesday, September 1, from about 12pm-2pm Eastern time. Focus group four included several attendees who lived in different neighborhoods of the same city (namely, the New York City neighborhoods of Brooklyn, Queens, and Long Island), leading to an extensive discussion on the subject. Focus group four also included an attendee with a family member who had recently been diagnosed with COVID-19. Focus group four also included the only attendee who verbalized a belief that COVID-19, while previously a major threat, had now more or less gone away and that people were generally being overcautious at the expense of their wellbeing.

Name	Age	Occupation	City
Alexander	45-54	Accountant	Chicago
Arnold	30-44	Finance	Orange County
Debra	65+	Healthcare administrator	Saint Louis
Devi	55-64	Nurse	Durham
Donald	65+	Retired	Tucson
Florence	65+	Retired	New York City
Julie	45-54	Retired	San Antonio
Lonnie	18-29	Student	New York City
Mashari	18-29	Student	Chicago
Pat	45-54	Teacher	New York City
Shaun	30-44	Entertainment/television	New York City
Session 4			(Attendee names changed)

In Appendix A, we provide demographic breakdowns for our focus group attendees. There, we show that by measures such as age, race/ethnicity, sex, income, education, and geography, our focus group attendees were generally well-representative of Americans who make frequent use of some form of public transit network. This means that the sample is slightly younger, more urban-area dwelling, and more educated than the general population, and are generally more demographically similar to residents of urban counties than of the US overall. In Appendix B, we include more information on how respondents were recruited and screened to ensure a sample representative of US public transit users.

At the outset of each focus group, many attendees reported they had been furloughed or had their working hours curtailed. Patricia, a teacher from Cleveland who had been furloughed, reported that her position had been exacerbated by the fact that she specialized in teaching international students. "There's not a lot of jobs in teaching English as a second language," she says, adding,

"... to switch [careers] feels a little sad but it's going to be hard to stay in the educational field so... I'm feeling out the field and trying to network... I mean there's lots of jobs in other fields, like maybe more manual labor jobs, but not in the educational area I'm looking for."²

Another furloughed teacher in another focus group, Helen, reported that COVID-19 had effectively ended her career as a teacher. "I used to substitute teach for my county but I have since quit – I basically retired to be a stay-at-home mom again,"³ she explains. Later, she elaborated on how COVID-19 had motivated her to leave teaching:

"as a substitute teacher, I dealt with young children... our schools here in my area shut down back in March, yeah, that ended substitute teaching right there for me. ...They started back in my neck of the woods, but I don't want to go back. I personally don't think it'll work."⁴

Even though she had originally been furloughed by the schools closing, she came to feel that returning to work would be unsafe because it was not yet safe to go back. She said that going back to school was unsafe,

"especially when you've got young children. They love to socialize, they love to touch each other. That's just the way they are... I think the cases are going to skyrocket, bad. It is especially difficult to have a kid."⁵

² Focus group one, approximate time code 00:27:10.

³ Focus group session two, approximate time code 00:04:50.

⁴ Focus group two, approximate time code 00:25:30.

⁵ Focus group two, approximate time code 00:25:45.

Similarly, in focus group one, Johnny, who owned a catering company, suggested that he had been put on the edge of retirement (or "semi-retirement" as he put it) as a result of the pandemic.⁶

Even a self-employed tech worker, graphic designer "Aaron," whose work situation is often viewed as the epitome of independence, explained that contributing to his child's education had drastically changed his workflow. "Trying to do a full-time job at home, plus all the stuff you got to do around the house, house work... I will say I am no good at teaching, and that's the hardest," he says, adding that the pandemic gave him "a lot of respect for the teachers, because I couldn't handle it. I think that's one of the positive things about the pandemic, if you can say that, is people have a lot more respect for teachers."⁷ Several of the parents in his focus group agreed at this point.

While some attendees felt they had been forced into retirement by COVID-19, others felt pulled out of it. "I retired before this started and then [a hospital she had previously worked for] called me back to work," reported formerly retired healthcare worker Marie, in focus group one. "They had a woman out on maternity leave and they were very shorthanded, so they called me and said, would you work part-time? And I said yeah."⁸ For obvious reasons, expecting parents were not expected to return to work. Several of the attendees who had worked in the healthcare field reported a similar set of circumstances. Those who were retired or part-time became full-time employees, and those who were full-time worked around the clock, particularly in the field of healthcare.

Ultimately, while several of the retirement-age attendees and parents who weren't working did not report their work situation had changed as much, nearly every working parent reported that their work situation had changed. All but one of the student attendees agreed their situation had changed drastically. One focus group attendee who believed his work situation hadn't changed at all, Gerald from Los Angeles, was aware that his situation was anomalous due to particular features of his job. He explained,

*Fortunately, I'm in a very different position, it seems ... our business is functioning just as it was before. We do a little bit more work at home, but we still go into the office as need be, and we still conduct one-on-one and small-group meetings, so all is well.*⁹

⁶ Focus group one, approximate time code 00:11:00.

⁷ Focus group two, approximate time code 01:00:00.

⁸ Focus group one, approximate time code 00:10:55.

⁹ Focus group four, approximate time code 00:25:35.

"What business are you in?" asked another attendee, to which Gerald simply replied, "finance." He went on to explain that he managed an investment firm.

Another attendee who felt his own work situation hadn't changed as much as others said he worked in an industry that had actually improved slightly since COVID-19: Auto repair. "I'm in a pretty good place... [with] the business that we do, due to the fact that people may have more time on their hands, they want to get their cars looked at should they have to go into work. They better get their car fixed!" Explained Jerry, from a small town near Bismarck, North Dakota, in focus group one.¹⁰ But even then, he acknowledged that "we used to have multiple people working on one car... now it's kind of like separate jobs [for each worker], because we practice social distancing." He later expressed his workload had increased at least partially because social distancing meant there were now fewer workers per car.

At the same time, those who had lost work or had trouble finding new work reported that their states' unemployment systems were overwhelmed. Emily, from Cleveland, expanded on her experience searching for a job during the pandemic.

*Part of our unemployment system is called ohiomeansjobs.com and ... I was told you'd be able to work with somebody to help you find work, but I never got called. Every time I try and call them it just says we can't even leave a message, so...*¹¹

Later, she reiterates, "the original assistance I was looking for was through this state system and they don't even have a way for us to leave a message."¹²

Attendees with extensive experience dealing with the government response to COVID-19 frequently reported feeling that the government was overwhelmed with respect to the employment situation. Indeed, frustration with "the bureaucracy" – as separate from governors and mayors, of whom attendees overwhelmingly approved, as the next section demonstrates – was a common thread throughout each focus group's first module, which was focused on the employment situation. While several attendees had stories about drags and delays in the government employment system, none had successfully reported that such an experience had matriculated into a new job.

In focus group two, "Anna," a Washington, DC-area federal contractor, encapsulated these feelings on the government's response to the changing work situation in a way that had other attendees nodding their heads.¹³

¹⁰ Focus group one, approximate time code 00:14:40.

¹¹ Focus group two, approximate time code 00:26:00.

¹² Focus group one, approximate time code 00:38:25.

¹³ Some details of "Anna's" anecdote have been changed or anonymized so that her exact department of employ can not be discerned.

"Very abruptly, I remember, ... that Friday, I was just checking in to see what's going on and an email came out at four in the afternoon saying, starting Monday, we're all working from home. So after my team was already gone for the day... I had to scramble. It's all of a sudden, 'don't come into the office on Monday.' ... So it was very abrupt. It was very odd. People didn't have things they needed to do their job. A lot of the stuff was still at the office."¹⁴

Anna explained this occurred at an agency where it was the norm for people to leave their computers at the office, and to use secure file-sharing systems that would prevent them from accessing many of their resources at home. That following Monday, employees were not permitted to re-enter the building to retrieve their laptops but, as Anna reports, were allowed to stand outside the building while a designated employee retrieved laptops on their behalf. She added, "I had to do a lot of recreating of documents and recreating of procedures and pulling stuff out of places that [previously] we could get [on the secure system] or, sometimes, I had to basically recreate work that I'd already done." To fellow focus group attendees, Anna's story seemed emblematic of how the federal government had responded to the coronavirus.

Three of the four focus groups included at least one student. Of the six total students, five had begun classes already, all five of whom reported their university had either instituted fully online classes or a system in which instructors who preferred to teach online could do so, and those who preferred to teach in person could do so. None of the students in the focus groups reported fully understanding their university's current system of rules, but all six reported there was at least some level of restriction on social interaction, and five of the six reported an explicit ban on parties and other large gatherings, the sixth student attending a university that had already mostly been online.

Jennifer, a recent college graduate living in Boston, reported that her alma mater had begun walking back on-campus instruction just before it began. "It really varies but some schools, like [the University of Massachusetts system] was going to go back and then they announce, like, three weeks before people were supposed to go back, we're not actually having anybody on campus," she explained, with another student in her focus group session agreeing. The inconsistency and last-minute changes schools had made had caused her family considerable financial strain. She explained,

"It's just generally a hot mess everywhere. My brother's girlfriend goes to a college in [Massachusetts] in the city and they're not even having any students on campus. She's from Texas, which is having a really bad time with COVID and they

¹⁴ Focus group two, approximate time code 00:52:50.

have her stuck, it's not like she can just go back. The state hasn't explained what she has to do – there's no guidance around it.”¹⁵

Another undergraduate student in her session, Rebecca, agreed that the rules were unclear and inconsistent. She added that in her experience, the rules were simply being ignored. Not only did her university's administration change the rules too much, in her view, they did not enforce existing rules. Rebecca explained that her college had instituted what she called the “no-party statute” but that it was not being followed. She said,

“The president of the university sent out an email yesterday – very tone-deaf, the email was totally blind to the facts. He was like, ‘none of you are taking this seriously,’ but they aren't doing any enforcing. If they catch a party, it's not so much the alcohol that's the issue anymore, now it's, there's too many people together. Like, we don't care about the alcohol, but you're going to get in big trouble for having a party.”¹⁶

She expressed that enforcement of any of the rules had been too lax to expect undergraduates to be complying with them, and that this lax enforcement had made things worse on the campus. She anticipated her campus closing, as many others across the country already had by that point.

Eight of the focus group attendees were retired or semi-retired, six were students, three were homemakers, and the remainder were in the workforce, either employed, furloughed, or looking for work. COVID-19 has upended the work situation of all of these different groups. The small number of attendees who felt more or less unaffected already had stable careers taking place at home or worked in a field that saw an uncommon uptick in demand during COVID-19.

Even those whose work had not been affected had seen major changes in their day to day lives. Parents of young children, even if they did not identify as stay-at-home parents, had become such, and each had to learn to handle work and childcare simultaneously. A parent of a child with special needs was acutely affected in this regard, and even though he was adamant that his work was generally unchanged, he frequently commented on the challenges of taking care of his son under these circumstances. An auto mechanic who reported his business had improved also reported that the structure of his job had changed to accommodate social distancing obligations. In other words, even those who were not forthcoming about major life changes initially were quick to point them out when probed on another element of life or work. Everyone has been affected by COVID-19.

Those looking for work reported that the state and federal government had been of little help. Teachers - typically employees of their county - who had been

¹⁵ Focus group three, approximate time code 00:25:30.

¹⁶ Focus group three, approximate time code 00:27:15.

furloughed were either not called back to work or were called back to work under unsafe circumstances. A federal employee reported a similarly unreliable situation. Students almost unanimously reported high levels of day to day uncertainty, with the only exception being a student already accustomed to online learning from home. Several focus group attendees were the parents or grandparents of students starting or returning to college, and they expressed similar concerns on those students' behalves. Most were pessimistic that colleges would be open long, even as most had made living (and spending) arrangements under the belief that they would be attending classes on campus.

The following section analyzes the moderator guide modules focused on live in the COVID-19 era and on the use of public transit networks. Respondents were asked to discuss their community's and transit systems' compliance with new health regulations, how they felt about those regulations, and to talk about how they thought life was proceeding in the era of COVID-19.

Public transit use in the era of COVID-19

An attendee of the fourth focus group, Lisa from Pennsylvania, painted a particularly vivid portrait of the COVID-19 outbreak in the city of Lancaster. She said that the outbreak in her area was at its worst in March, and that she returned to work in April.

"I retired but ... they were calling retired healthcare workers back to work. I went back to work and I was totally shocked at what I saw in the hospital. Services were discontinued except to people on ventilators and on the verge of death ... even my co-workers. Some of them got sick, and some of them died. It was really upsetting and, luckily, they didn't need me that long."¹⁷

She went on, explaining that her city and her hospital both lacked the infrastructure to ensure that people could safely receive any sort of treatment.

"This was already when [the caseload] came down and yet still more died because there wasn't enough personal protective equipment – that was the whole situation. They didn't have enough masks, they didn't have enough [ventilating equipment] and people just got sick and died."¹⁸

When pressed on the day to day of her experience, including with the city's public transit system, Lisa gave the impression that her city's public bus system initially curtailed service, and that ridership had gone down even more when the initial caseload was so high. She said that though she had taken the bus to work before, when called out of retirement, she only drove. In the same focus group, Ryan from the city of Duluth, Minnesota had a similar sentiment. "Our suburban bus system, I

¹⁷ Focus group four, approximate time code 00:31:00.

¹⁸ Focus group four, approximate time code 00:32:00.

think it's changed quite a bit because of people no longer getting on." Referring to friends of his who continued to use their city's light rail system to get to work, he added, "they said it's really very different now – different in that it is less available available. The same number of people use the train, just not for going out to have fun so much."¹⁹

In his city of Phoenix, Arizona, focus group attendee "Chris" gave the impression that there was widespread curtailing of routes. He also said the city had been unclear about which routes would be curtailed versus those that would be eliminated or changed slightly, nor had they given much information about for how long those changes would be in place. He explained,

*"The schedules have changed a lot recently. Particularly, with the public transit systems, they closed down what were probably the less common routes, but I don't know how they chose the routes. The [overall] schedule has been decreased as well"*²⁰

Focus group attendees who commuted to work by any means of transit, from car to subway, expressed agreement with this view in Chris's focus group. This early mistrust of many elements of public transit was ubiquitous across focus groups. "Laura," a resident of the city of Durham, North Carolina, put it succinctly: "I don't take [the bus] anymore." She added, however, that public transit use had visibly fallen in other ways. She explained,

*"These days... they may have three buses at the same time instead of just having one so they can space out [riders]. They have sanitizer and things ... but drivers are spraying and wiping down seats for the people that are still going to work. Over by where I live, in a little parking lot there used to be maybe fifty cars for the Park-'n-Ride. There are maybe ten now. So I think a lot of people have switched to working from home which gives them the option of not going out much and then, they use Lyft and Uber [because] the people driving have seemed to be pretty good with keeping things clean. I have a driver [in my family] and she says every time somebody gets out, she sprays down her seats and stuff. I don't know if that's mandatory but she does it for herself."*²¹

In her area, as with Lisa's, people initially moved away from using public transit at all. Instead, they transitioned to either staying home or using single-rider alternatives where they felt the sanitary conditions were better. Anna from the DC area concurred, saying, "safety, that's often an issue for us... I have my own car now that

¹⁹ Focus group four, approximate time code 01:02:15

²⁰ Focus group one, approximate time code 01:20:00.

²¹ Focus group four, approximate time code 01:16:10

I've got that fixed, I just use my car and I try to stay away from the bus line and stuff like that at least for now when I have to [go out]."²²

In another focus group session, Nicholas from Queens commented that bus riders were not compliant with the city's mask orders. He related an anecdote from earlier in the COVID-19 outbreak, saying,

*"I was on a Long Island bus – not only was the bus driver not wearing a mask, [another rider] came on with a mask on, but she didn't leave it on once she sat down on the bus. Fifteen minutes later, she pulled it up when she got up to leave the bus."*²³

Nicholas reported that he worked for the city as a healthcare administrator, and that those in his office had been compliant both with the requirement to wear masks and to socially distance. But he also said that he, his manager, and several coworkers were each still expected to commute to work, and that he had decided to carpool with his manager instead of taking the bus when he could. In an area like Queens, New York City, it struck him as significant to note that he had opted for carpooling instead of city transit. To him, this was a sign that things really had changed in New York City.

One consequence of adapting public buses to the COVID-19 era was that they became less reliable. Several focus group attendees were explicit that they felt buses ran less frequently, which they often viewed as acceptable, but also that they were less aligned with their printed schedules, which they did not. In focus group one, Chris from Phoenix, said,

*"I think for me, at first, back in March and April, the service was diminished because there were so few riders. But the time schedules, they're usually reliable, but lately buses are off with more frequency. It's hard because you don't know when the bus is going to be there and and now it's like, as they change things around, the communication isn't there, it's harder to always anticipate what the schedule is going to be here. If I miss this train, when is the next one? and the schedule they said, they don't match up with reality, so hopefully that will get ironed out."*²⁴

While many riders reported negative experiences with regard to the public transit system, another focus group attendee, "Ruth," a student in New York City, said that the city had come up with a new public transit program to ensure she had a free and reliable way to get to and from the hospital. Ruth reported that she would be classified as "immune compromised" because she had a prior illness that not only

²² Focus group two, approximate time code 01:47:05

²³ Focus group three, approximate time code 01:30:00

²⁴ Focus group one, approximate time code 00:50:45

made her susceptible to other diseases, but that could not be treated at home and obligated her to make regular (and frequent) visits to the hospital.

But while others were concerned about using city transit systems to do so, Ruth reported that the van service the city and her hospital coordinated on was a success. She described it as,

"My hospital provides a ride for patients. [At first] I was actually really nervous to get in the ride, because the seats are pretty close in the back, and most times there are two to three other people in the car, and so I was not sure if I was the only one there... But the first time I got in the car the driver actually had on gloves, he had sanitized the car door, and opened the door for me, and once I got inside he actually buckled the seatbelt for me, also. Like, they didn't want patients touching anything, which I thought was actually good. That has persisted pretty well, it feels like they're holding it together and keeping it clean clean when – I hope they keep running that system."²⁵

Ruth had experienced an innovative transit method that improved upon her existing ability to get to her hospital when she needed to, while in other parts of the city, the bus system had been scaled back or was not reliably enforcing health measures. Not surprisingly, Ruth felt more optimistic in the early months of COVID-19 than others did.

In another focus group, "Emily" from North Carolina worked for the city of Asheville's transit authority. She worked as a bus driver, and over the years had also served as a workers' representative to her city's transit authority. She said that the public transit drivers in her network had followed the rules, but were not able to combat the perception that, along with the economic collapse in the area, people were too afraid that those without homes were using the transit service as a place to stay during the pandemic. This in turn reduced usage of the public transit system, and allowed the city to continue reducing work hours and reducing the number of buses on the road.

Her city's transit network spanned four counties, but she described her city's buses as smaller than what would be typical in a larger city. "They started a protocol where you have to clean the vehicle every morning, early, and at the end of the day. They shortened the hours that people could ride, [because at] the beginning, people quit riding. And then, in the city, like six passengers at a time [could be onboard] and they started wearing masks, and the city required we gave them masks [if they didn't have one] or ask them to put on a mask," she explained. But she had no way of actually enforcing these rules.

But, to make them? Where I'm at, we weren't legally able to make them [wear masks] and I didn't care to push people ... so then, when that started to happen...

²⁵ Focus group four, approximate time code 01:06:00

people got wind of it and [some] would still ride, retired people who couldn't drive anymore would still ride. But then the homeless people, you couldn't do anything, because they are a little bit more belligerent about wearing a mask ... It's a challenge."²⁶

Emily reported that she had no authority to enforce mask wearing, and that those on the bus who refused to do so would in turn make others less likely to use the bus. Over the course of spring and summer, when Asheville's case load was high, it took only a few such situations to drastically reduce usage of the public transit system, she said. By the end of August, she had felt that she was once again semi-retired or retired, pending any changes to "the situation" in her city's transit authority.

From Michigan, Steven expressed a similar set of concerns. While his family did not really view public transit as an inherently risky place compared to any other, in terms of infection risk, it only took a few "non-compliers" to make him feel unsafe bringing his son with him onto a bus. "When my son's with me you know, he definitely doesn't need to be around all," he says, in reference to the bus system. That system's new rules included an obligation to board from the back, which he said was a bit of a climb for his young son. It also included reduced hours of operation, which required them to be out and about for longer. He elaborated,

"Boarding the bus, they say expressly to load in the back, don't load in the front, you never go by the driver. They have sanitizer and masks if someone forgot their [own], and they only allow one person per [every few] seats. And once the buses are full they won't stop at the next stop, but they'll say another, 'another bus will be here in another 5 and 10 minutes!' [with sarcasm] They say 'definitely!' With what is allowed right now, it's scary to go out. It's just... I don't go out."²⁷

Ultimately, Steven had skepticism toward the safety of the public transit system, similar to that of others. While he repeatedly expressed that he himself was not immune-compromised and that he did not have many concerns of his own, his son's health situation was always at the front of his mind. He explained that, given "the bus situation," his family had quickly moved toward adopting more ride sharing:

"When my wife was at work, I have no vehicle. It's ride sharing, all that, even now my wife's working from home too, so, we have the vehicle now too when we need. But yeah, there was a lot of public transportation for me and the little guy, when the wife was working, prior to this. Now [in comparison] the bus is scary looking! ... They said they were going to cut down on the amount of people per bus, but they cut down on the buses too so I just think that, number one, they're not going to be able to sanitize every seat every time someone gets up. They just can't. There's no time to do that schedule, and the amount of people... For me and my son? Say someone

²⁶ Focus group three, approximate time code 00:55:45.

²⁷ Focus group two, approximate time code 01:39:45.

*else is sitting two seats ahead if they happen to turn around or whatever that's still not far enough for me to feel safe."*²⁸

Anna from Washington, DC had a similar view. For her, the comparison between buses and cars was a no-brainer. "Before [the pandemic], every day, I took a bus from my house and I transferred to another one that will bring you right to the front door of the office," she says, "so I used to do that. But since we've been working from home since March really the only time I leave is to go to a doctor's appointment." Under those circumstances – particularly, only going out when her health was already on her mind, "we just call our local taxi cab company."

Having recently made the switch from public transit to taking a taxi service, Anna was impressed with the level of safety precautions her local taxis had taken. She explained:

*"[Taxi cabs] are disinfected after each person uses them. The cabs have plexiglass now, like the ones I used to see in New York... I just have to be kind of uber careful at this point so, you know, stay off public transportation. ... I've been starting to think, okay, you know what, I'm going to get around the only way I feel safe.... The morning bus that goes into town, I wouldn't feel safe on that right now. There is no way to clean it. If we're back to regular, the buses [would] run out of here every two minutes and you have to stop you know a million times on the way. I wouldn't feel safe doing that."*²⁹

The experience was not ubiquitous across focus groups. But those who had been used to taking the bus, but had since switched to using their own car or ride-sharing service, generally felt favorably that cars were easier to clean and that those who did not comply with mask-wearing rules could be more easily kept out of cars than out of buses. As cabs and ride-sharing services could simply refuse to open the door for anyone not wearing a mask, some felt this was either impractical or simply not enforced on public transit. Emily's experience made her feel that it was not safe to confront someone not wearing a mask. Several attendees felt this risk could be ameliorated by simply using ride sharing services instead.

Additionally, many commuters were aware that even if they were not at risk, they could accidentally put others at risk by taking public transit. Steven's concerns were particularly acute in any situation where he knew his son might be exposed. In Cleveland, Patricia reported a similar concern when it came to keeping her mother safe. That concern had led her to invest in a car even as she searched for employment:

"Because I was overseas, it wasn't me just coming back and, you know, finding a job. I had to find somewhere to stay, like a family member took me in and so, I also

²⁸ Focus group two, approximate time code 01:43:20

²⁹ Focus group two, approximate time code 01:49:35

*had to buy a car because of my mother. I didn't want to put her at risk by me being affected if I were to get COVID but I was finally able to just go get a car instead [of take the bus]."*³⁰

Marilyn, a straight-talking New Yorker, spoke up in her focus group on behalf of what she saw as the most effective mechanism to get people to wear masks: Shame. Other attendees in her focus group seemed to be in agreement as she explained the power of the dirty look or a direct comment to accomplish what unenforced rules could not.

*"If you don't have [a mask] on they can't force you to do it. The bus drivers are not going to kick you off. But there's a little bit of public shaming, you know, if someone [without a mask] tried to get on the bus, and then you give them the typical dirty looks from people. And you tell them, 'put your mask on!' So there is that. Like, this is serious! You know, I don't care what you think, you know this is what needs to be done. Wearing a mask is effective and at least brings the spread down, you know. One of the things that needs to be done more is that people have to hold people accountable for this. You can't just say, 'I don't want to wear a mask.'"*³¹

There was strong agreement with this point of view in Marilyn's focus group. While it was uncommon to report ever actually having confronted someone about failing to wear a mask – only one or two attendees per focus group made such a claim at any point – attendees seemed to strongly agree that a little social pressure was a necessary and effective deterrent against noncompliance.

At the same time, the focus group attendees themselves without exception reported they wore masks whenever they went out. Even an attendee in the fourth focus group, who strongly believed that most people were too worried about COVID-19 and that all the restrictions had taken a negative toll on the economy, reported wearing a mask whenever he was outside. Every attendee who was immune-compromised, even if they felt that wearing a mask made breathing more difficult, reported wearing a mask. Even when the moderator attempted to overcome some possible social stigma associated with noncompliance with some anecdotes about common circumstances under which one might forget or neglect to wear a mask, attendees were adamant. While several had stories about seeing people who did not wear masks, attendees themselves stuck to the mask-wearing rules.

While attendees old and young, immune-compromised and in good health, regarded mask-wearing as important, a few were willing to admit they still found wearing masks to be annoying. Attendees from hotter climates, such as Elizabeth

³⁰ Focus group one, approximate time code 00:40:20.

³¹ Focus group three, approximate time code 01:42:50

from Kentucky and George from Texas, expressed this view in their respective focus groups. George noted,

"Here in Texas, it's so hot. The little surgical masks would be all sweaty all day... The N-95 [type of mask] works and then I, like [fellow focus group attendee "Martin"] said, those other ones with the breathing apparatus on the side work good, but it's still very annoying. What I hate about them is mainly since I have to wear glasses, I just cannot see. My glasses fog up from just breathing. That's my only grievance with masks right now. I don't mind wearing it, but I would really like it if medical technology progressed to the point where maybe my glasses don't fog up just trying to breathe, you know?"³²

Happily, fellow focus group attendee Rebecca quickly chimed in to suggest to George that he could wash his glasses lenses with soap to prevent fogging up. In another focus group, "Helen" from Pensacola, Florida expressed a similar sentiment.

"I hate to admit it, but I still I still find it a little bit annoying. I can't tell you how many times I leave my house like, 'oh shoot, I forgot mine.' And in the summertime it's really annoying to walk around, sweat dripping down your mask... I have asthma, so that's a problem for me. Wearing a mask, its even harder to breathe than normal"³³

However, Helen also clarified that she believed wearing masks was overall the right thing to do. Even though it constricted her breathing, she clearly believed that abiding by health regulations was important. Overall, complaints about wearing masks centered around the heat. Across all focus groups, none of our attendees expressed displeasure about masks based on political principles or alternative health beliefs.

Indeed, though many attendees viewed public transit as unsafe at the outset of COVID-19, their concerns were by no means limited to that domain. Across focus groups, people felt that entering any large private business was at least as risky. Even though most businesses had stated rules requiring masks, the rules were often not enforced inside those businesses. Many focus group attendees felt that private businesses were at least as lax as public transit services in terms of letting people get away with skirting health regulations.

Overall, attendees abided by public health recommendations in their own daily lives, and with some vivid exceptions also generally felt that those in their community were doing the same. But several attendees also had stories about others failing to abide by the recommendations. Several people in each focus group observed situations in which health recommendations were not followed inside of

³² Focus group three, approximate time code 00:54:00.

³³ Focus group session two, approximate time code 00:40:35.

businesses, without any effort by employees of those businesses to enforce compliance. Steven from Michigan offered a typical example, saying,

"I've gone to a store employee to tell them if socially distancing isn't happening in the store, but then I see someone else come in, standing right next to the sign that says 'wear a mask,' but don't! No one seems to enforce these policies, I think, as much as they should. It's one thing to have these policies in place and it's one thing to have the sign out there and look like you're doing everything, but it's another to follow through. At Walmart, they're pretty lax on what they say. If someone comes up to a store manager and says they can't [wear a mask] for a 'medical reason,' and by law we can't ask him to prove it, and I just say, well why can't you tell him well then I'm sorry you can't come in?"³⁴

Aaron said he was at least as frustrated in situations like that as he was anywhere else. "We need a federal law and common sense would dictate that we can work together," agreed Nicholas from Queens.³⁵ On this, there was clear agreement from those in Nicholas's focus group. In the moments that followed about half his focus group verbalized agreement, and others nodded.

Expanding on his situation, Nicholas explained that he saw mask non-compliance as a potential problem all around him, not just on the bus or subway. Mirroring the details of many others' stories, he expanded on his working situation. Throughout the pandemic he'd been required to work in the office, but as a healthcare professional, he felt that he and his team had successfully played it safe so far. He could not say the same of a few of his fellow New Yorkers.

"A large majority of people are working from home now, [but] I'm required to be in the office one day per week and my boss was driving me to the office because it's out in [another New York neighborhood] and I live in the city. So otherwise I'd have to take public transportation and, well, the problem is people aren't wearing masks. Whether it's in the street, or the smaller stores, or the buses and subways... living in the city, it's hard to enforce. Even though signs on the door say 'no entry without a mask,' those smaller stores – you know they're struggling to survive, and then being expected to kick customers out..."³⁶

In other words, though attendees were probed on the subject of their public transportation systems, people generally did not view any one set of institutions – government, private sector, etc. – as places where breaking the rules happened more frequently than anywhere else.

³⁴ Focus group two, approximate time code 01:10:30

³⁵ Focus group three, approximate time code 01:31:00

³⁶ Focus group three, approximate time code 44:30.

Instead, in conversation, focus group attendees generally traced their anxiety and confusion to two sources. The first was inconsistent information from different levels of government. George, from San Antonio, Texas, and Martin, a delivery driver from Buffalo, New York, expressed their group's sentiments clearly:

[George:] "There has been so much misinformation, and there was so much conflicting information. It seemed like the government officials are changing the rules every single day. I just got used to one way, then they all had to change it."

[Martin:] "Like I said, you know, at [the delivery company], they just to take a spray bottle and spray [the workplace] down and wash it down. Then it's, whenever somebody gets off [their shift], they had to spray then... Now we would just disinfect throughout the day..."

[George:] "At this point people still find it annoying. I do, in my personal experience."³⁷

In the same conversation, "Lisa" from Lancaster and "Joshua" from Seattle, Washington expressed that they would occasionally forget to go to the end of the entry line when going into a store, because they did not have to do so at every store, or even at the same store on different occasions. Whether their place of work or their local government was attempted to provide order, focus group attendees found inconsistent information and changing rules to be disruptive to their lives. In the second focus group session, Wanda, from Juneau, pointed to New York governor Andrew Cuomo as a model of consistent messaging. Others in her focus group were quick to agree. As she put it,

"When I go out for medical [procedures], I have to go to Seattle. And I've had to cancel four surgeries so far, and it'll probably stay that way – I hope other states follow in Andrew Cuomo's footsteps. Requirements, active enforcement of those policies, keep putting out the most recent news [on television] always, that has been quite nice."³⁸

Although she was literally on the other side of the country, Wanda found Governor Cuomo's updates helpful as a source of information. The problem, many agreed, was that they lacked a central source of information, which they could often find in the governor who went on CNN every day to provide updates. Although his updates were specific to the state of New York and to New York City, many felt that his CNN appearances provided enough of a general overview of how things were going that they felt more informed about their own situations as a result.

³⁷ Focus group three, approximate time code 00:43:30

³⁸ Focus group two, approximate time code 01:09:15

John and Angela from Connecticut³⁹ expressed a similar sentiment. Absent another source of reliable information, Andrew Cuomo was a welcome source of updates. In conversation with another focus group attendee, Heather, a student from Brooklyn, they expressed their gratitude for the clarity Cuomo had provided:

*John: "Like seatbelts. ... It's pretty simple actually when you get down to it but you have to do it – I wish our governor did, like the Governor of New York and [other] states around here. Some other places, for whatever reason, they haven't. They don't want to take that step and I think that that's a big mistake."*⁴⁰

As focus group attendees were strongly in favor of wearing masks, even if they found doing so to be annoying, it is not surprising that they in turn showed great respect for politicians who had made mask wearing mandatory where possible. Similarly, Wanda from Juneau reiterated,

*"Without technology, this would have been a really awful thing to go through. But the technology, to keep the news on, to keep abreast of all this, that's the thing that's giving me a lot of comfort here, being so far away from the lower forty-eight states. In New York, Andrew Cuomo, he has a talk show every day. It brought you up to date even though also, every other state was working on it. What we're talking about is life-or-death but there is just so much misinformation out there, it's really frustrating, without it [the Cuomo news updates]."*⁴¹

Similarly, "Jennifer" from Somerville, Massachusetts said that her state's governor had provided helpful information. Echoing Heather's sentiments, she said that her governor's willingness to put the safety of Massachusetts above partisanship was encouraging. She explained,

*"It's been really great in Massachusetts with the mask mandate. It set a tone for everybody that wearing a mask was really important, and we keep people safe. ... And I talk to people from other states, and not having Governors signal that to them, makes them especially dispirited. We're like other parts of the country, we're being hit as hard ... I like his messaging. He's saying this is really serious, I think unfortunately not everybody is saying that... Massachusetts's Governors is Republican and the legislature is Democratic, so it hasn't seemed like a partisan issue. And I think some people like to know that if you wear a mask, it isn't a political ideology."*⁴²

³⁹ John attended the focus group with Angela as the sampled and screened adult in the household who qualified for the focus group study. He attended because Angela had recently had a surgery that made it difficult for her to speak loudly. The moderator permitted this arrangement in advance of the focus group.

⁴⁰ Focus group three, approximate time code 01:27:50

⁴¹ Focus group two, approximate time code 00:35:05.

⁴² Focus group three, approximate time code 01:32:30

Bipartisanship struck several focus group attendees as important. “Brian,” a user of the DC metro system as well as the light rail system for frequent work trips between Washington, DC and Baltimore, Maryland, was happy with the approach that Maryland governor Larry Hogan had taken. In a leadership vacuum, Brian was glad that Hogan had instituted travel restrictions and mask requirements. He said,

“[On the DC transit system], they actually added this plastic guard between the drivers and the rest of the bus ... and buses are currently mandated to have a specific number of people on them. So you can be standing at a bus stop and watch a bus whisk past you because they’re ‘full.’ An awful lot of my life I’ve spent standing up, scrunched in on a bus or a train, so the idea that a bus that holds forty to forty-five people, to only have twenty people on it now is like this the whole new world... I believe [Maryland Governor Larry] Hogan instituted these things, and they’re doing really well. The system is doing really well.”⁴³

Brian, a young person who said he did not identify as politically conservative, was clear that he knew his governor was a Republican, and had made helpful decisions that made him feel safer about using DC’s transit system, which extends through northern Virginia and the two southernmost counties of Maryland.

In Los Angeles, small business owner “Johnny” had a similar, upbeat outlook on how Governor Gavin Newsom, who hosted a daily televised update on the state’s most frequently viewed local news networks, had updated the state. He said,

“I just feel really good about what he has done for California as a whole. In Long Beach, our mayor has been in communication on a daily basis but also there’s an article every day in the paper from him... But yes, the governor has helped raised awareness. I’m not sure we’ve all appreciated that. I can’t think of anything I would want to be different right now, except I think our local leaders could do a better job of communicating.”⁴⁴

Absent any leadership from a more local source of information, attendees made it clear that their states’ governor was a vital source of direction. Elsewhere, in Chicago, focus group attendees were dissatisfied with mayor Lori Lightfoot for reasons unrelated to COVID-19 (specifically, her response to recent protests), but held her in esteem for providing daily updates on the COVID-19 situation. Although our Chicago attendees each were not necessarily always fans of the mayor, they acknowledged she had provided valuable information. For example, “Kathleen,” a lifelong Chicago resident, said,

“I’m very pleased with my mayor. I’m very pleased with our governor. They’ve made mistakes, they said this one day, and then turned around and said we have new information and therefore... we need to have fewer people on the bus, or we

⁴³ Focus group one, approximate time 00:55:45.

⁴⁴ Focus group one, approximate time code 1:07:05.

*have new information to allow more people in this area as long as everybody follows these rules... there's no instruction manual, and we're all in this together."*⁴⁵

While there had been confusion and inconsistency in the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak, Kathleen viewed this as understandable. Cities did not have experience dealing with pandemics, so why should she expect her mayor to have all the answers on day one?

Despite this, focus group attendees agreed that the patchwork of different rules and regulations was dispiriting. In focus group three, "Rebecca" summed up these feelings, saying,

*"I definitely agree that allowing fifty different states to create their own rules over things was not the best, because we have seen good things in states where everyone takes it seriously, but in states that don't have as strict demands as others, they never flatten the curve. And so to say, at a national level, this is what we're doing, whether it's more strict than what's going on right now or less strict than what's going on right now, I think that would have been a lot more beneficial. Shut everything down to begin with, and really shut it down... We could have paid it all down at the beginning, if everybody could have just suffered for two or three weeks."*⁴⁶

In each focus group, this subject turned inevitably toward the second source of misinformation attendees were concerned about: The President. In each group, attendees were clearly reticent to bring up the President, who is a contentious subject in any circumstance. But once he was mentioned, in each focus group, the overall feeling was clear: Trump was not helping things.

Notably, respondents in several focus groups didn't like that the President made a political issue out of wearing masks. In focus group three, "Angela" explained,

*"The President constantly talks about how wearing masks is not manly. Its so different [from governors like Cuomo], that sends a really bad message to people about [masks]. Or that he doesn't do it himself, so I also think that hurts enforcement."*⁴⁷

In a different focus group, "Maud" explained that Trump's attempts to talk over the governors of states that were successfully combating COVID-19 only made things worse. As she put it,

⁴⁵ Focus group one, approximate time code 01:41:10

⁴⁶ Focus group three, approximate time code 01:21:25

⁴⁷ Focus group three, approximate time code 01:15:00

"We're a mess across the country, and the President isn't, you know, holding the full deck. ... I don't need the inconsistency, this lack of unification, across all these different boards, and Trump is just playing to remove any liability for his B. S." ⁴⁸

Observing the situation across the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia (the "DMV" as the metro area is known, roughly spanning from Alexandria, Virginia up through Prince George's County, Maryland, and including Washington, DC), Anna explicitly contrasted local governors with the President. Though Anna lived in Alexandria her word choices clearly indicated she was in touch with Washington, DC's political situation, and felt that in both cases the President was making things worse. As she explained,

"As far as compliance concern goes, the governor of Virginia and the governor of Maryland are still pretty much on the TV every day talking about COVID-19, to keep it in front of everybody's mind, and maybe that's making people more compliant. It seems like every day our news is telling us the updates and we're seeing the governors and mayors on TV, like [Michigan] governor Whitmer, she's doing everything she can you know. ... But the people who refused to wear masks... we all know where it's coming from. And it goes right back to what [another focus group attendee] said earlier: all the states need to unify. This is what you need to do. This needs to be a policy of the United States."⁴⁹

Similarly, "Rebecca," in a different focus group, said that the governor of her state (Indiana) had done too much to put partisanship over the health of the state. To her, listening to Trump meant doing the wrong thing for the people of the state. She speculated as to whether pressure from Trump had made things less safe in Indiana, saying,

"Our Governor got some heat because he's a Republican and, not to say, again, by one party or the other .. but our Governor came out [initially] and said you should be criminally charged [for violating a mask order] and then later on that day, after getting news from his 'colleagues' [this word emphasized, sarcastically], and opinions from his people, he said, actually we're just not going to make you wear masks. ... It just sucks that at the end of the day, it is a partisan issue and it is a political game, and at the end of it all, peoples' health and safety are at risk" ⁵⁰

Rebecca, along with many across focus groups who made politically charged comments, was quick to suggest that she did not view herself as a very political person. In each focus group, attendees were willing to speak well of leaders they thought were doing a good job, even if they were of different political parties. It was

⁴⁸ Focus group two, approximate time code 01:15:30

⁴⁹ Focus group two, approximate time code 01:07:45

⁵⁰ Focus group three, approximate time code 01:38:50

also clear that attendees did not relish the idea of bringing up specific political figures, particularly Trump.

In each focus group, the tone of the conversation changed noticeably when it was clear that Trump was going to be a subject of conversation. Both his perceived mismanagement of COVID-19 and his divisiveness as a figure made him a seemingly unwelcome subject even in situations where his role was relevant and germane to the topic at hand. Even among the attendees who reported they identified as more politically conservative, or who disagreed with the same health measures that the President had disagreed with, did not come to his defense, and in some cases, were critical of him as well.

As a consequence of these divisive statements, unfortunately, focus group attendees were not optimistic that things would return to normal. In each focus group, the moderator paused to see, by show of hands, how many people thought things would “go back to normal.” This question typically prompted attendees to assert that a “new normal” had arrived (indeed, the phrase “new normal” was spoken explicitly in three of the four focus groups). While a smaller number of attendees believed that things would approach normal once again as the COVID-19 case load began to drop, many believed that masks and social distancing would remain a permanent fixture of daily life for the foreseeable future. In each case, the political situation – particularly from the President – quickly entered the conversation as a relevant subject. From Cleveland, Emily expressed a certain fatalism with which many attendees agreed, saying,

“Everything's political if you're on one side ... It's like there's no happy medium, there's no communication, and one side doesn't want to listen to the facts. I'm back in the States [from traveling abroad] and there's so much gridlock – politicians people are yelling, no one's listening. I worry now they're sending the kids back to school in so many states but I don't think anything will change their minds. I mean, I hate to bring it up, but when the Sandy Hook shooting happened, at that time, that was a massive shock and then it seems about a week after – everything just sort of return to a place of normalcy.”⁵¹

In the same focus group, on the subject of COVID-19, Matthew from Connecticut made a similar point before the discussion had turned more heavily to politics. Even independent of politics, there was a general consensus that COVID-19 would be much harder to isolate than many thought. In his view,

“I think there's also a common misconception that once a vaccine comes out and everyone gets vaccinated that this will slowly be eradicated, or that it will be very quickly effective against it... If this develops into another strain, like, originally, it came from Wuhan and then it went to Russia and then it'll leap. and then the United States, and that's now mutated in Malaysia... I mean God, forbid this happens, but I

⁵¹ Focus group two, approximate time code 01:49:45

*could see this becoming like the flu in the sense that it becomes seasonal. And [as] big [as the flu]. A disease that's always in need of a new vaccine of its own."*⁵²

The concern about the impending flu season was ubiquitous across focus groups. From Southern California, Johnny shared the pessimism of others that things were only going to get worse. To him,

*"I just don't think we're going to be back to normal before next summer, to to be honest. I think that we need to be prepared for the flu season. We need to be prepared for another rise. I mean, just take a look at the back-to-school things, to the universities. They were being smart and, all of a sudden, they have cases, and I just think there are too many people who are taking risks unnecessarily and it's put the rest of us in jeopardy."*⁵³

In a separate focus group, Maud from New Hampshire expressed a very similar sentiment. To her, even the health recommendations already in place were

*"too little, too late. ... I could definitely see that what happens is we have a vaccine, but anti-vaxxers are going to come out of the woodwork, and it's going to be a big deal. We're going to need hundreds of millions of doses to get everybody the vaccine to begin with, which is going to be hard now, just to get it produced and distributed, and make it available to everybody. ...[to other focus group attendees] You know, you guys are right when you talked about the flu, the way it is even though we have a flu vaccine. People still get the flu every single year. So you know, even if we get a vaccine for COVID-19... if someone gets on a plane with a mask, but gets off the plane without it..."*⁵⁴

Returning to the subject later, Matthew, who reported he had experience working in a biology lab, added,

*"I know everybody thinks different about it but I think almost this flu season could be the most unique one we've ever had. I really think that this is the time to lock it down again, to say, look for this flu season, stay at home unless you really, really, really can't, because maybe if we do, if more people stay at home, I think we'll have a much smaller flu season"*⁵⁵

But as a college student who had already witnessed some violations of his campus' rules against social interactions, he was not optimistic. While speaking, his tone alternated between hopeful and sarcastic.

⁵² Focus group two, approximate time code 00:34:20

⁵³ Focus group one, approximate time code 01:06:20

⁵⁴ Focus group two, approximate time code 00:40:35

⁵⁵ Focus group two, approximate time code 01:37:40

But at the same time, many others were ready to get back onto their city's public transit networks. Indeed, after wrestling with the subjects of COVID-19 and their governments' responses to the pandemic, some were quick to reiterate that they did not view their public transit situation as particularly bad – at least, as no better or worse than any other institution had fared in the era of COVID-19. Expanding on what might happen during flu season, even as some cities attempt to reopen, Anna said,

"I think it's going to be interesting to see this winter what's going to happen, because people that live in big cities like we do, a lot of them don't have cars. Like [another attendee] was saying, everybody here, whether by the bus or the train, we're going to use it if we have good public transportation. Like I said earlier in the focus group, there's a bus outside my door every two minutes or so. Some of the Metro stations have just reopened. Some of the subway stations reopen today... I'll be back to taking the buses, for sure."⁵⁶

Earlier in the focus group, Anna had worked out the costs to her of using the taxi cab service she'd discussed. Although she preferred using single-rider vehicles when she could, she also expressed clear awareness that taxis were prohibitively expensive compared to her normal means of commute.

Indeed, to many focus group attendees, their own city's public transit system had never really become unacceptable, and they simply weren't using it because they had transitioned to working from home or were furloughed. "I still use the subway to get taround. I know the T [Boston's metro system] is pretty is as pretty good in my opinion,"⁵⁷ said Jennifer of Somerville. In New York, Marilyn, a healthcare worker who continued to ride the subway every day, said that she felt perfectly safe doing so every day.

"In the subway in New York City they all wear masks... People just have to get to work. MNt everyone is going to get a Lyft or Uber or drive or take a bike. I give props to the New York City Transit [employees] working overtime at night to clean them, and if you have to work in Manhattan, you can still get to work. ... Also, get on a bus [in New York City] and the driver will refuse to let people on that don't have a mask... I once left [work] at five in the morning and, I ran out of my job, and I forgot my mask. I didn't have one in my bag, so I take my t-shirt or whatever, trying to cover my face. I go downstairs on the subway and a guard came out and they had bags [of masks]. That's what they do to help me get to work."⁵⁸

"I'm doing the most I can to keep myself safe and keep seeing my co-workers safe," she concluded. "I'm doing my part and I don't have any issues taking public

⁵⁶ Focus group two, approximate time code 01:48:00

⁵⁷ Focus group three, approximate time code 01:38:30

⁵⁸ Focus group three, approximate time code 01:41:15

transportation in New York City. I get to work. That's just my mother's mantra."⁵⁹
Marilyn

In each focus group, the moderator pressed on the subject of feeling safe on public transit at two points, one in each of the "COVID-19" and "Public transit" modules of the moderator guide (see Appendix C). In each case, attendees did not fixate on particular aspects of the public transit system. Any problems they saw in that system were simply manifestations of the same problems they saw elsewhere. The vast majority of attendees, who simply did not have a reason to go out or were working at home, did not have a reason to use public transit, but that did not mean they were especially *deterred* from using public transit.

Conclusion

At the end of each focus group, the moderator asked all respondents,

And finally, if there was one thing you wish others understood about your situation that you feel like no one is talking about, what would it be?

Perhaps not surprisingly, a common theme ran through each focus group's responses: Loneliness. In focus group one, Johnny reported that having to stay home, instead of volunteer with his church group, was a particular source of feeling isolated. Some combination of "alone," "isolated," or "lonely" was used in three of the four focus groups. From Juneau, Alaska, Wanda was particularly clear on this point. She said,

"What affects me to tears is, I can't safely travel to go see my grandkids. It's a thousand miles, and you can't stop anywhere on your travel, but I would feel so bad if I would bring something. I could fly to Anchorage and then drive down, but my daughter, she's a full-time worker. But not to see my three grandkids... I can't wait until I can go see my grandbabies."⁶⁰

In the fourth focus group, another topic was particularly important for some: Those who were stuck at home were eating less healthily and were doing more self-medicating. Two attendees of the fourth focus group expressed particular concern about those stuck at home with abusive family members. To some, the isolation itself was their biggest concern, and to many others, it was the thought of with whom people were isolating.

Throughout each focus group, it was difficult to keep attendees strictly on the subject of public transit. As long as people had to get around in cities, they needed to use the public transportation system. Attendees, while not optimistic, tended not

⁵⁹ Focus group three, approximate time code 01:44:00

⁶⁰ Focus group two, approximate time code 00:46:10.

to view their public transit situation as particularly bad. It was simply an instrument to get to work that may no longer exist or had changed drastically, to take care of chores they now feared they could not take care of safely, or to visit family who they could no longer visit due to concerns of contagion. While America's public transit systems themselves are facing financial strain, their users report that this is not because the systems themselves are bad or dangerous. They are simply overwhelmed by other events.

No focus group had many attendees who thought they would resume regular and frequent transit use until there was a vaccine. Every focus group at some point or another directly assigned blame to the President for his failure of leadership and his general mismanagement. Because of the President's prominent role in public affairs, focus group attendees said that his irresponsible rhetoric was making things worse and would continue to do so into the fall, when flu season begins to pick up.

Going forward, transit activists should encourage transit authorities to be as clear and direct about the rules and regulations as they can, but must also understand that Americans take a measure of civic pride in their transit systems. People generally do not fault transit systems for presenting confusing or rapidly-changing information because our general situation at the moment is indeed confusing and rapidly-changing. If anything, local and statewide leaders have earned appreciation as leaders simply for ensuring that their constituents are on the same page with the present state of affairs, even if the future remains unclear.

All of these efforts are subsumed by the efforts of the President. The media attention and subsequent controversy inevitably directed toward the President's actions apparently overwhelm the efforts of other communicators. Focus group attendees, however, almost without exception understood that the President was an unreliable source of information. Across focus groups, representing urban areas around the country, even with considerable probing and challenging of opinions that had been raised, a defense of the President's communication style was not forthcoming. The President's actions are contributing negatively to the information environment.

This also suggests there is limited room for civic activism on behalf of public transit systems while this is the case. While many focus group attendees paid attention to the words of governors and mayors, few could hold straight the varying recommendations made by their local transit authorities. Transit activists should understand that the information environment is currently dominated by a President who is generally viewed unfavorably, and to a secondary degree, by local leaders who are received happily by those in search of leadership.

Appendix A: Demographics of focus group attendees

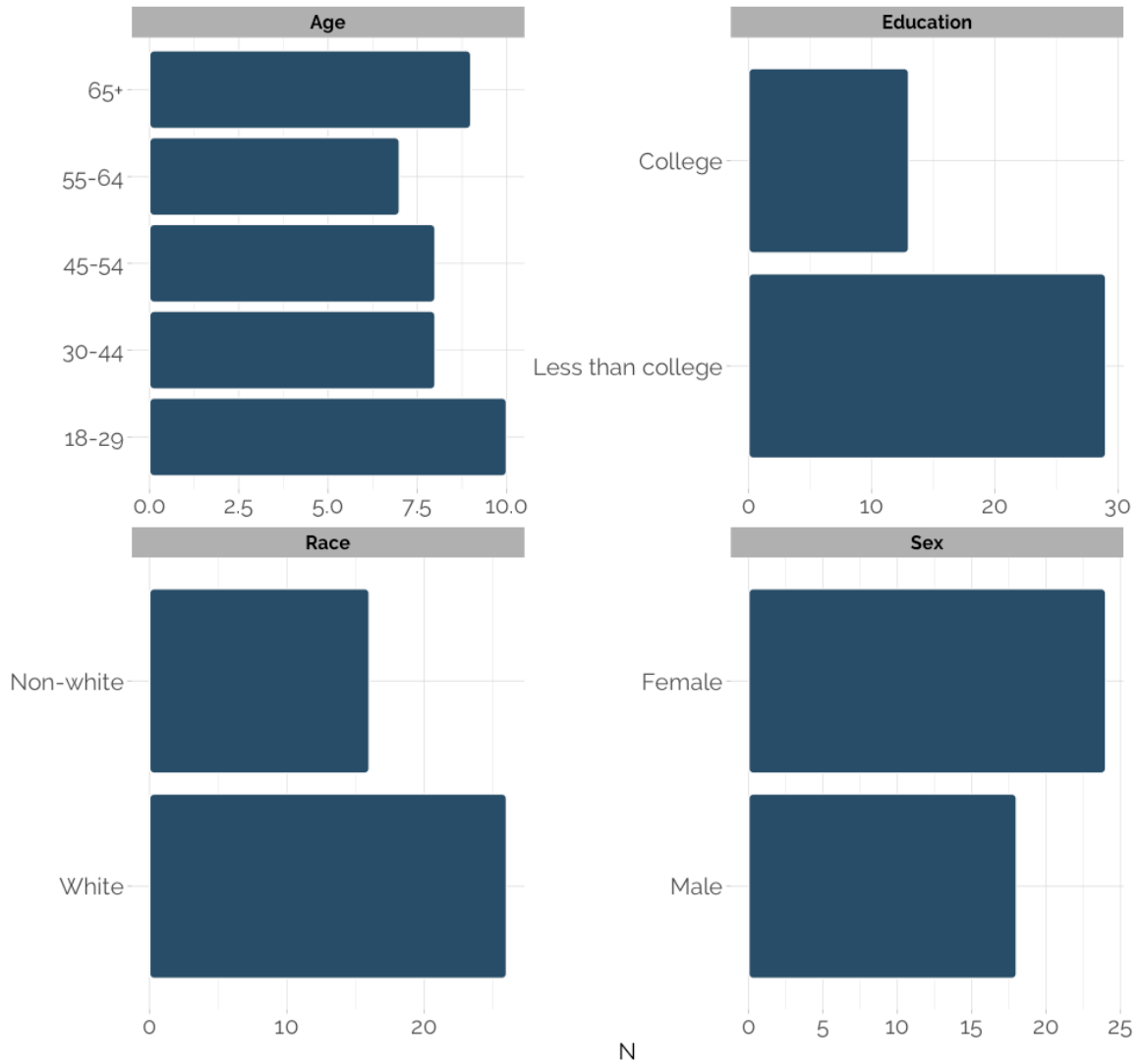
The following chart breaks down the demographics of the focus group attendees. The first pane shows that 10 attendees were between the ages of 18-29, 8 were between the ages of 30-44, 8 were between the ages of 45-54, 7 were between the ages of 55-64, and 9 were over the age of sixty-five. The slightly higher share of 18-29 year old respondents is not surprising, as urban areas are generally younger than other kinds of areas,⁶¹ and as this project focused on public transit networks our sample was naturally more representative of urban-area respondents.

Additionally, about 31 percent of respondents reported having a college degree or above, which is slightly higher than the national average of about 26 percent but consistent with the urban/rural divide.⁶²

⁶¹ See, for example, [A Glance at the Age Structure and Labor Force Participation of Rural America](#).

⁶² See, for example, [Rural Education: Employment and Education Overview](#). The average share of Americans aged 25 years and over is about 20 percent in rural areas, and about 35 percent in urban areas.

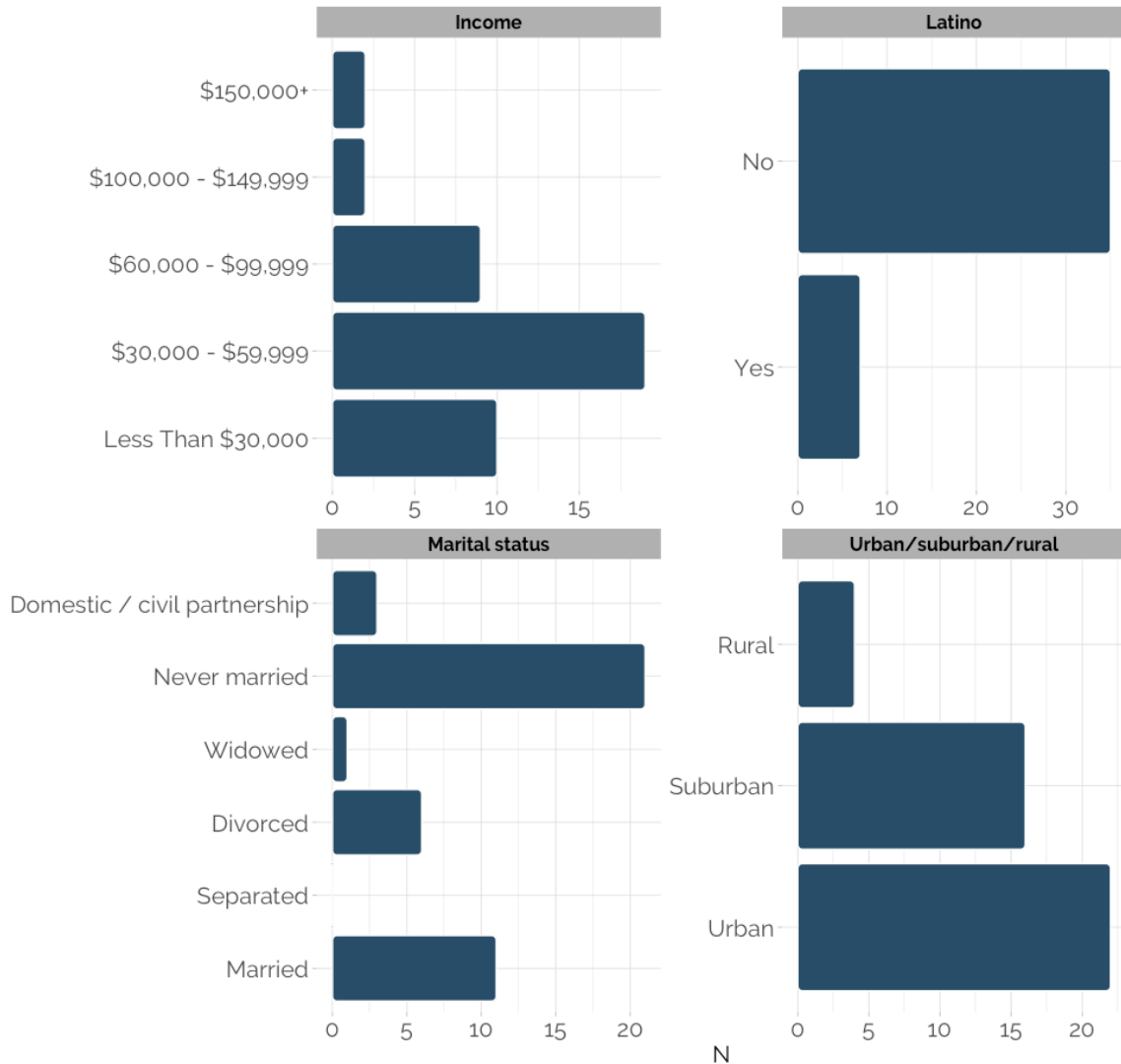
Focus group attendee demographics



Our sample was about 40 percent non-white, including about 12 percent of respondents being Black and a further 17 percent identifying as Latino-ethnicity even if they identified with another race. This breakdown is in line with the estimated racial and ethnic diversity of urban counties.⁶³

⁶³ See, for example, the recent Pew Research report [Demographic and economic trends in urban, suburban and rural communities](#).

Focus group attendee demographics, continued



Attendees were representative of the overall US income distribution, with the modal respondent earning between \$30,000 and \$60,000 per year, roughly equal shares earning one income bracket above or one income bracket below that, and a thin tail of respondents being wealthier. About half of respondents reported they were never married, with the other half distributed amongst married or in a civil partnership, divorced, or widowed. Finally, and not suprisingly, the vast majority reported living in an urban area or a suburban area, with just under 10 percent of the sample reporting that they lived in a rural area (while also being regular public transit users).

While estimating the demographic characteristics of the “true population” of US public transit users is difficult, our focus group resopndents are broadly

representative of working-age US adults residing mostly in urban and suburban areas. The majority of our respondents reported living in an urban area, with another large share reporting living in the suburbs, which typically feed into an “urban core.” All respondents reported using at least some public transit recently, and identified at least one of a few forms of public transit that they took.

Appendix B: Focus group recruitment strategy

Focus group attendees were recruited from YouGov's panel. In order to attend the focus groups, respondents were required to report they regularly used at least one form of public transit, and also that they used public transit for at least “a few trips” recently. Specifically, our initial screening questions read,

Thinking back before the coronavirus outbreak, which modes of travel did you use at least once per week to get around for at least part of a trip? Please select all that apply.

- <1> Walk
- <2> Drive alone
- <3> Drive or ride with others in a private vehicle
- <4> Ride a bicycle or scooter
- <5> Public transit train
- <6> Public transit rail (i.e., subway, light rail, trolley)
- <7> Public transit bus
- <8> Public transit ferry
- <9> Van pool or shuttle
- <10> Take a taxi, Uber, Lyft, or other for-hire car service

and

Currently, how often are you using public transportation (e.g., public buses, subways, trains, paratransit, or ferries)?

- <1> All of my trips
- <2> Most of my trips
- <3> Some of my trips
- <4> Just a few trips
- <5> None of my trips
- <6> Not sure

If a respondent selected any of responses **5, 6, 7, and/or 8** in the first item *and* any of responses **1, 2, 3, or 4** in the second question, they were permitted to continue the survey.

Attendees were then required to report that they owned at least one device capable of connecting to the online communication application Zoom, and that they would be willing to use that application for the purpose of attending a focus group. Then, they were asked if they would be able to attend a 90-120 minute focus group, and offered a list of time slots. While YouGov offered several time slots, the focus groups were ultimately held **Thursday, August 27, from 12pm-2pm Eastern time, Saturday, August 29, from 12pm-2pm Eastern time, Saturday, August 29, from 12pm-2pm Eastern time, and Tuesday, September 1, from 12pm-2pm Eastern time.**

Attendees were then given two follow-up questions both to ensure their availability at their selected time slots, and to provide a consent statement regarding how their participation in the focus group would be used. We next asked,

You've said you can attend a 90-120 minute focus group on Are you sure you can attend at this time and participate, including listening and contributing to a conversation on Zoom? A successful focus group requires a satisfactory group size to facilitate the conversation, and we will not be able to proceed with the focus group if too few people attend.

Followed by,

Do you agree to participate in this study, affirm that you are able to do so via the application Zoom, to participate in the focus group to which you are assigned for its full duration, and to YouGov sharing anonymized data with our client for the purposes described above?

Only respondents who agreed to both were eligible for an invitation to their Zoom focus group.

This relatively stringent set of screening criteria was necessary considering the high incentive for participation compared to typical YouGov surveys. Ultimately, among those who successfully completed these criteria, compliance with focus group attendance was high. The average focus group had about 16 or 17 invitees, of whom 10 or 11 ultimately attended and completed to the satisfaction of the moderator – a roughly 63 percent completion rate. This includes a small number who were screened at the outset of the focus group for having intractable technical issues. However, the vast majority of those invited to take the survey screened out well before this point. Roughly 97 percent of those who started the survey were screened out at some point.

Appendix C: The moderator guide

[Permit up to five minutes of allowing respondents to join and figure out their microphones. Permit up to five minutes of small talk. Clarify when you begin taping]

Preamble

Good afternoon everyone, my name is John Ray and I am the moderator who will be hosting this afternoon's focus group. This focus group session is hosted by YouGov but I know it's a little different from your typical survey experience. Here, we will be having a frank and amicable discussion about some topics I hope you will find interesting.

To facilitate conversation, I have asked attendees to provide their first names on their Zoom accounts so that we know how to refer to each other. But let me take this time to reiterate the privacy agreement from our survey. I'm interested in your opinions and will not be using any private information whatsoever. While I may refer to you by your first name, and presume that we will all so do, or call on you by name from time to time, this is to help facilitate our conversation.

We are all meeting each other for the first time and I invite everyone to approach this conversation in the spirit of how we speak to our friends and neighbors. As the moderator I will have some questions designed to guide, probe, and develop our conversation, but that's what we are here to have: a conversation.

Does anyone have any questions before we hop in?

Module 0: Introductions

- How is everyone doing today? I know this is not like a usual focus group experience where we all get to shake hands and have snacks together.
- Does anyone want to share a bit about what line of work they're in?

Module 1: Background

- Would anyone like to talk about how their work situation has changed in the past few months? **[call on one person if necessary]**

-Who in your community would you say is being hardest hit? Why do you think that is?

-Does anyone disagree with that or want to share their own view?

-Would anyone say things around them haven't changed much in the past few months?

-What else has changed about your routine lately?

-Does anyone want to share their own story?

[pause five seconds]

-Has anyone had a very different experience or a different perspective from that they want to share?

[pause five seconds]

-Overall, who would say their job situation has changed a lot, for better or worse, over the past few months?

-[to anyone who raised their hand but hasn't spoken, or has spoken little] And **[name]**, would you like to say more about how things have been going for you the past few months?

Module 2: COVID-19

-[To attendee who has said things have changed a lot for them] And would you say it's a lot to handle, or have you started getting used to things?

-And let's talk about some of the biggest changes. **[If masks, or working from home, or unemployment, or worries about people getting sick have predominated conversation, pivot to that]**

On masks:

-How long have folks been wearing masks?

-Do you tend to wear masks around a lot, most of the time?

-Has anyone been treating things much differently from that?

-Who wants to talk about their mask wearing habits, how often they wear masks?
[goal is to get them to why they were a mask]

-And who wants to agree or disagree with that? **[call on or wait for several people]**

-Have folks found it annoying to wear masks?

-Does anyone disagree/[find they've gotten used to things]?

-How much longer do folks think they will be wearing masks?

-Are **[you/folks/guide from flow of conversation]** anticipating wearing masks **[until there's a vaccine/until its safe/until things are back to normal]**, until you feel ready to go back to normal, or what?

-When/**[if]** things go back to normal, would you prefer if others continued wearing masks, or would it be fine if others stopped wearing masks?

On working from home:

-Who has transitioned to working from home in the past few months?

-Does anyone/**[call on someone]** want to talk about the transition to working from home they've experienced?

-Who is enjoying working from home more now than they used to?

-Who is struggling with such a transition?

-And who would say they commuted, whether to work or just doing a fair amount of travel for chores or leisure, before COVID-19?

-Tell me about what that commute was like before COVID-19. **(call on several people. Use silence to permit them to explain fully)**

-(draw this out with how folks got around, how long the commute was, who they commuted with, how often they commuted, how much they think it cost, etc.)

-Must include how people got around, whether it involved public transportation or not, and if so, what kind

-Must include "and what did you like about your commute back before COVID-19?" (read the room – this will be a dumb question to many people. Just be tactful about asking)

-Must include "and what did you dislike about your commute back before COVID-19?"

-And would anyone say they commuted to a very different kind of place from where they live, like from a suburb into a city, or vice versa?

-And what was that commute like?

Module 3: Trust in transit networks

-What do you think it will be like going back to work?

-Who disagrees with that? **[things being very different or not very different]**

-Now let's say, imagine your town or city's local government said they were going to try to reopen things, including public transit, **[shortly – days or a few days from now – read the room, this may require clarifying it's a hypothetical exercise]**. Who here would feel ready to start using public transit again?

-[gently probe or call on one or two people who did not raise their hand, or disagreed] And why do you feel that way?

-And what changes would you like to see to public transit to encourage you to get back into using it?

-Who are you looking to for information about when it will be safe to go back to using public transportation?

-And who are you looking to for information on how to keep safe once cities start to reopen?

-Now let's step back just a bit. Do you think people in your city or town generally feel like you do? Or do you think people around you feel differently?

-Do you view yourself as more cautious than others around you, or do you think you're a bit more ready to get things up and running again?

-And who feels the opposite of that?

Module 4: The economic situation

-**for anyone who reported their situation has changed a lot** And who would say they think the economy is going to recover pretty soon, with maybe more jobs becoming available?

-And who disagrees with that?

-And who just isn't sure – just feeling a lot of uncertainty? **attempt to invite conversation/ideas from other participants**

-What kind of information do you wish you had going forward? If you had a magic wand and could use it to learn anything you wanted, what would it be?

-How much do you think things are going to go back to normal, if at all?

-And who disagrees with that?

-**[Must include]** And finally, if there was one thing you wish others understood about your situation that you feel like no one is talking about, what would it be?