



Differences and Common Ground: Minnesota's Rural Regions

Findings from the MPR News | APM Research Lab
2017 Ground Level Survey of Minnesotans

APM Research Lab, February 2018

Introduction

Rural residents of Minnesota have experiences, habits, and outlooks that are shared, as well as unique challenges and opportunities. The statewide 2017 Ground Level Survey of Minnesotans provides an opportunity to assess where perspectives align and where they diverge *within* rural Minnesota and with the state as a whole. This brief summarizes the Ground Level findings—revealing common ground and existing fault lines.

For purposes of **this brief, “rural” residents are those who live in Northern, Central, and Southern Minnesota, excluding the Duluth, St. Cloud, and Rochester Areas and the 7-county Twin Cities region. We will be analyzing each of these rural regions separately.**¹ This brief complements our other reports on Ground Level Survey findings, including briefs that summarize findings for Minnesota’s urban and rural areas broadly, and another on state’s three largest regional centers.

For purposes of this project we have divided rural Minnesota into three large rural regions:

- **Northern Minnesota** includes 19 counties, excluding Duluth and the zip codes immediately surrounding the city. There are approximately 379,200 Minnesotans residing in this region (or 7% of the state population).

- **Central Minnesota**, home to 834,800 Minnesotans (15% of the state population) consists of 23 counties, excluding St. Cloud and its surrounding zip codes.
- **Southern Minnesota**, with an estimated population of 887,400 (16% of the state population), comprises 38 counties, excluding Rochester and its surrounding zip codes.

Demographic, Economic, and Social Overview of Minnesota’s Rural Regions

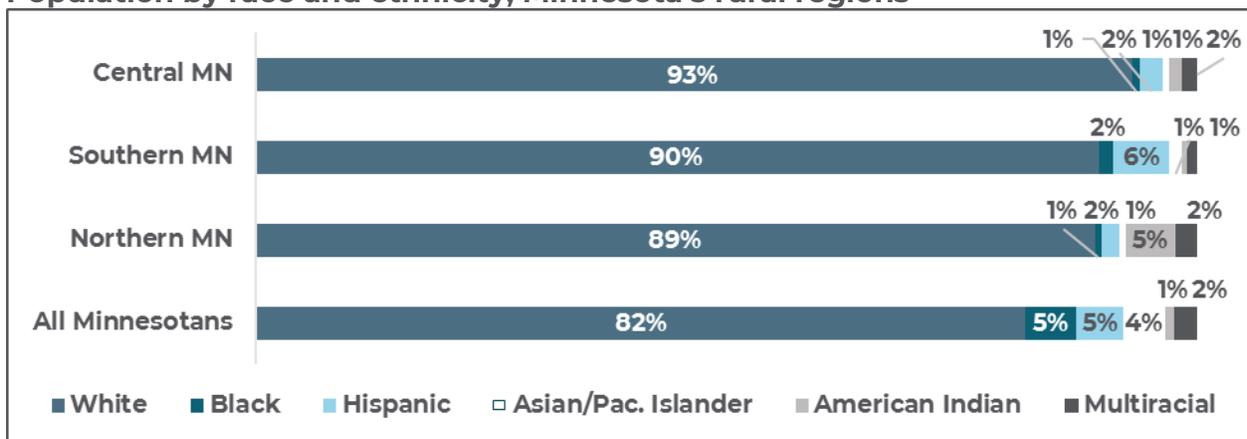
Understanding differences and similarities by age distribution, race and ethnicity, birthplace of residents, levels of formal education, and household incomes in the rural regions and statewide provides additional context to the survey findings.

The proportion of children under the age of 18 in Northern, Central, and Southern does not vary greatly, at 22 percent, 25 percent, and 23 percent, respectively. The share of young adults age 18-24 is equal in Northern and Central Minnesota (8%), and slightly higher in Southern Minnesota (10%). **Notably, a higher proportion of Minnesotans age 65 and older reside in Northern Minnesota (19%) than in Central and Southern Minnesota (15% and 17%, respectively).**

The vast majority of residents in Northern, Southern, and Central Minnesota self-identify as non-Hispanic White (89%, 90%, and 93%, respectively). All three regions exceed the statewide share of 82 percent non-Hispanic White. With regards to populations of Color,² the Hispanic population is more prominent in Southern Minnesota (accounting for 6% of all residents) than in Northern and Central Minnesota (at 2% each). The American Indian population comprises one percent or less of Central and Southern Minnesota, but this number increases five-fold in Northern Minnesota, which includes the Bois Forte, Fond du Lac, Grand Portage, Red Lake, and parts of the White Earth and Leech Lake reservations.

The Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Multiracial populations each makes up only two percent or less of each region. Notably, the Black population accounts for five percent of Minnesotans statewide (five times that of rural Minnesota), while the Asian or Pacific Islander population is four percent of the statewide population, compared to roughly one percent of rural Minnesota.

Population by race and ethnicity, Minnesota’s rural regions

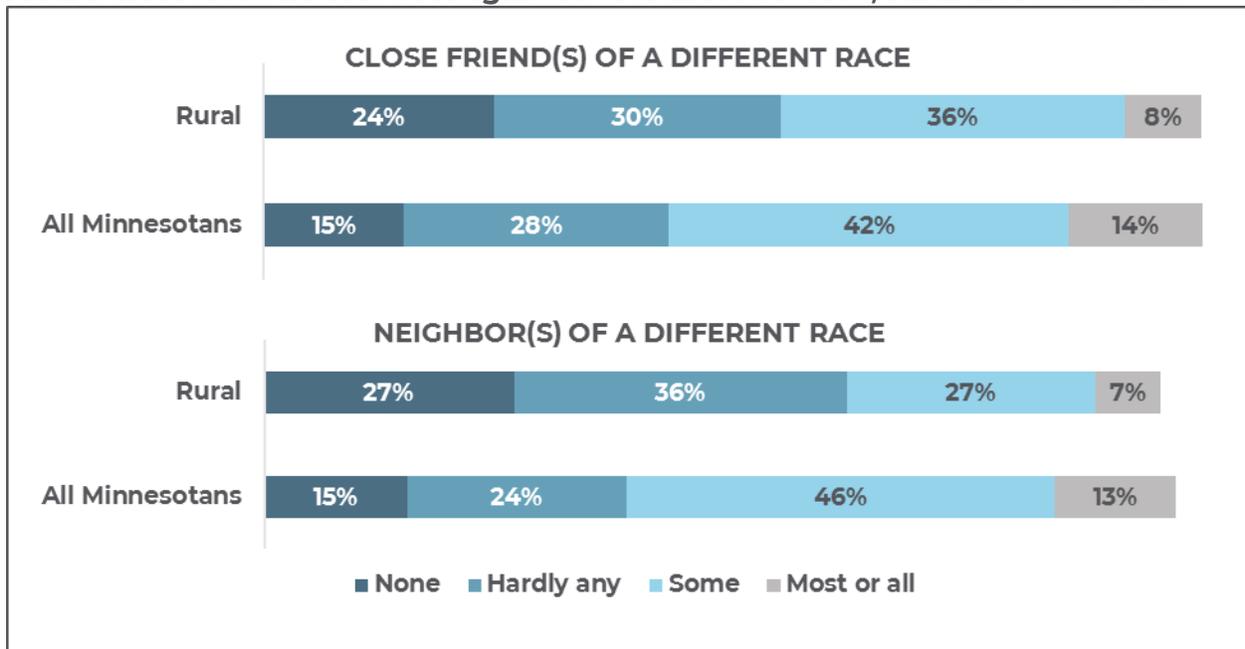


Source: APM Research Lab analysis of U.S. Census Bureau 2011-2015 American Community Survey data.

The racial demographics of rural Minnesota are reflected in some Ground Level Survey findings. **When asked how many of their neighbors are of a different race, roughly 6 in 10 rural residents say *hardly any or none***, compared to roughly 4 in 10 statewide. Similar portions of each of the three rural regions reported having (or lacking) racially diverse neighbors, although a somewhat higher proportion of those in Northern than Southern Minnesota report that *none* of their neighbors are of a difference race (32% compared to 22%, respectively).

Friendships appear somewhat more integrated than neighborhoods, but the patterns of the two types of relationships are similar. Fifty-six percent of Minnesotans statewide identify *some or most or all* their friends are of a difference race than themselves, compared to only 44 percent of rural Minnesotans. Residents of the three rural regions responded to this question in similar patterns, but those in Central Minnesota are more likely than those in Southern Minnesota to report having no friends of a different race (29% versus 20%, respectively).

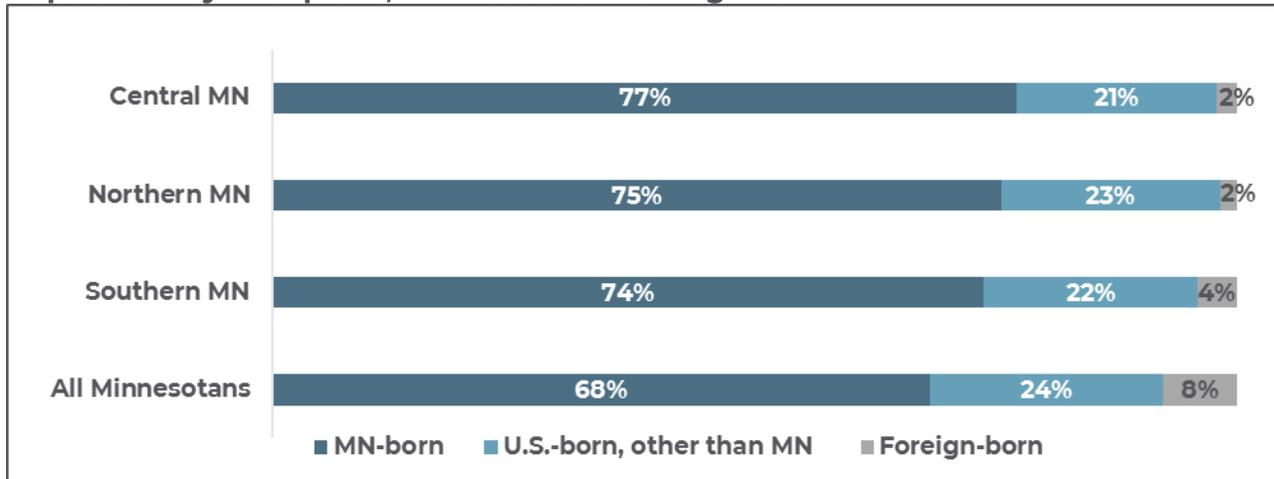
Adults with close friends or neighbors of a different race, rural and statewide



Source: MPR News | APM Research Lab 2017 Ground Level Survey of Minnesotans.

Racial diversity across the state is driven in large part by the presence of immigrants in urban regions. Birthplace does not vary much across Minnesota’s rural regions. **Fewer than 5 percent of the population in all three regions was born outside of the United States.** Statewide the foreign-born percentage is more than double than that of rural Minnesota (8% compared to 3%, respectively). When it comes to Minnesota-born residents, two-thirds of the state’s population belong to this group; this proportion increases to about three-fourths in each of the rural regions.

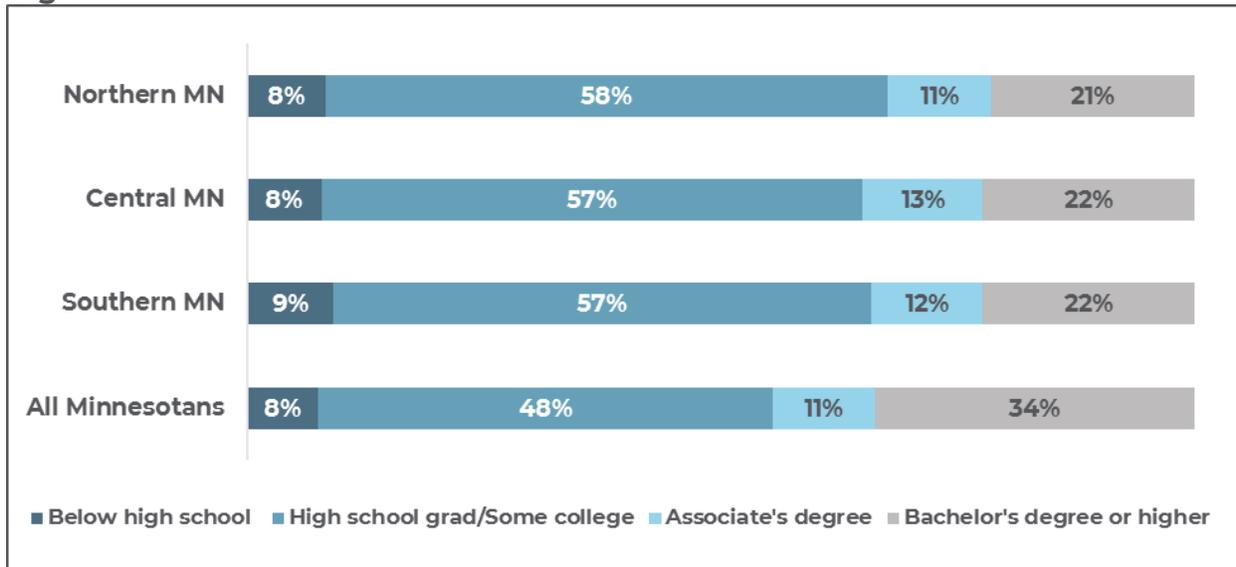
Population by birthplace, Minnesota's rural regions



Source: APM Research Lab analysis of U.S. Census Bureau 2011-2015 American Community Survey data.

Disaggregating regions by educational attainment reveals similar levels of education across Northern, Central, and Southern Minnesota. For all three regions, the majority (57-58%) of residents have a high school diploma or some college, followed by a just over a fifth with at least a bachelor's degree. Statewide, just under half of Minnesotans are high school graduates or have some college education, and roughly a third have at least a bachelor's degree. **Overall, residents of rural Minnesota are less likely than the statewide population to have a college degree.**

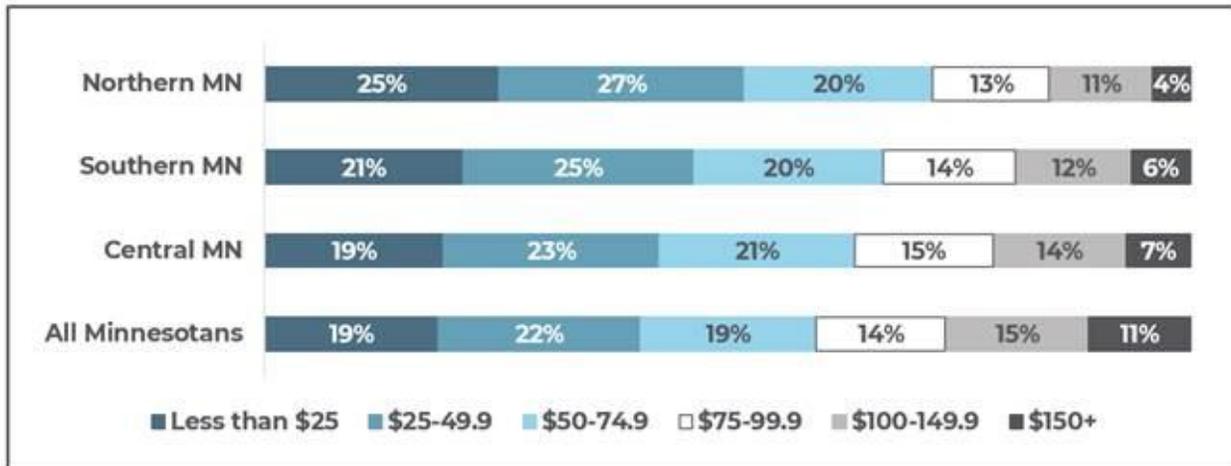
Population (age 25 and older) by highest level of education, Minnesota's rural regions



Source: APM Research Lab analysis of U.S. Census Bureau 2011-2015 American Community Survey data.

Education levels are highly correlated with household income. As previously noted, Minnesota’s overall population has higher levels of educational attainment, which is also reflected in its higher proportion of high-income households, when compared with its rural regions. For example, 11 percent of Minnesota adults have incomes of at least \$150,000 annually, compared to 4-7% for the rural regions. More than half of Northern Minnesota’s households have incomes under \$50,000 (52%), whereas a minority of households have this same level of income in the Southern and Central regions (46% and 42%, respectively).

Households by annual income (shown in thousands), Minnesota’s rural regions



Source: APM Research Lab analysis of U.S. Census Bureau 2011-2015 American Community Survey data.

The Ground Level survey also illustrates two lifestyle similarities between rural Minnesota and the state as a whole. **Rural residents and those statewide are equally like to:**

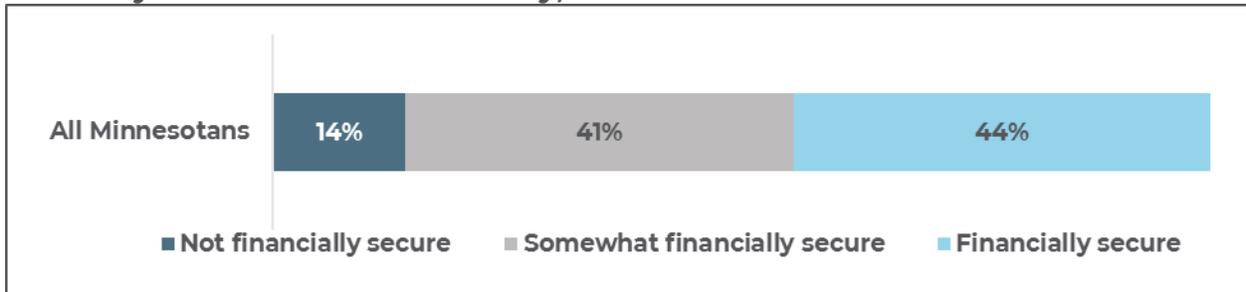
- possess a permit to carry a concealed weapon (11-17%), and
- attend religious services at least monthly (46-48%).

There is no measurable difference between the three regions on either of these questions.

Personal Financial Security and Sense of Economic Improvement

The Ground Level Survey included questions designed to measure Minnesotans’ assessment of their current economic situation and whether it had improved or deteriorated since 2007, just preceding the financial crisis and subsequent recession. Regarding present circumstances, the survey asked, “Do you feel you are financially secure, somewhat financially secure, or not financially secure?” About 4 in 10 Minnesotans indicate they feel *financially secure* today. A similar share (41%) feel *somewhat financially secure*, while the remaining 14 percent report they are *not financially secure*.

Adults by sense of financial security, all Minnesotans



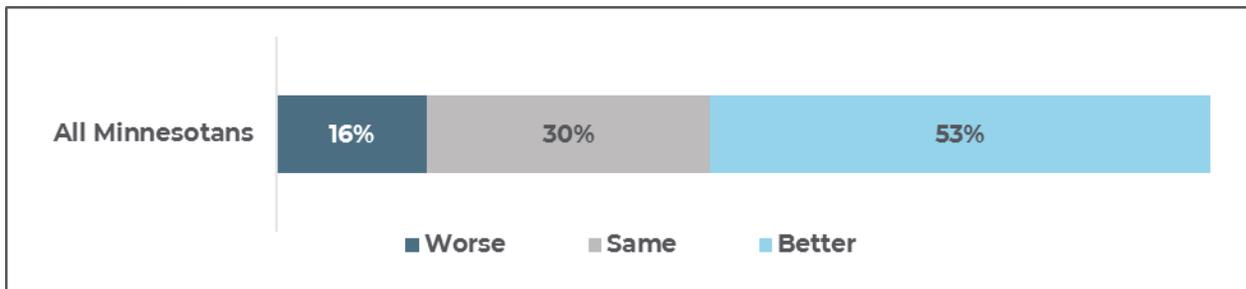
Source: MPR News | APM Research Lab 2017 Ground Level Survey of Minnesotans.

When we examined responses by rural region, the percentages did not meaningfully diverge for any of the three response categories. In other words, **by their own assessment, residents throughout rural Minnesota are equally likely to be feeling financially secure.**

The Ground Level Survey also asked respondents, “Thinking about where your personal financial situation is today, compared to ten years ago - that is since 2007 - is your personal financial situation today better, worse, or the same?” Responses statewide were statistically tied with those of all three regions of rural Minnesota, with about half reporting they are faring better.

When it comes to their sense of economic improvement, rural Minnesotans are tied with the statewide population across the board. Sixteen percent of residents feel “worse off” than a decade prior, while just over half experienced what they perceive as economic progress. Three in 10 feel economically unchanged, not better nor worse. In other words, **Ground Level survey results suggest Minnesotans throughout the state weathered the recession in similar fashion.**

Adults by sense of economic improvement compared to 10 years ago, all Minnesotans



Source: MPR News | APM Research Lab 2017 Ground Level Survey of Minnesotans.

Levels of Trust in Minnesota Institutions

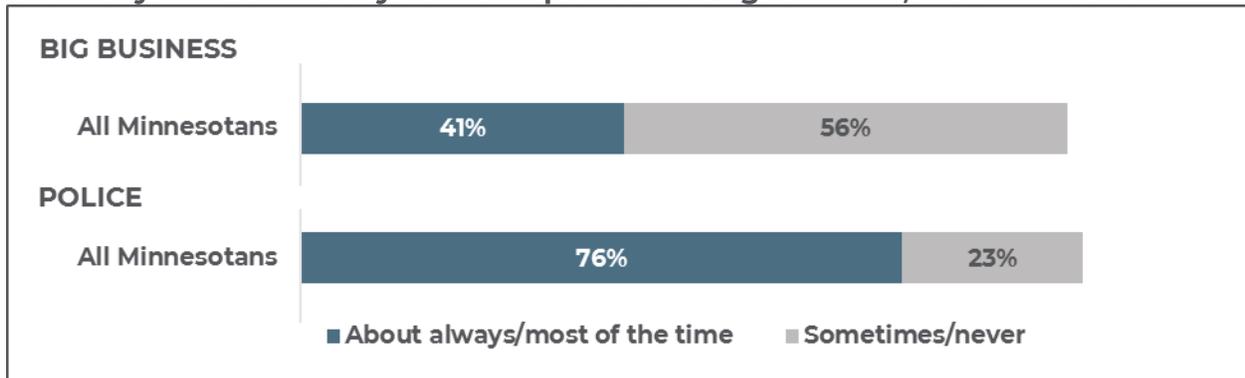
The Ground Level Survey asked respondents a series of questions that began: “Generally speaking, how much of the time do you think you can trust _____ to do what is right? Would you say, just about always, most of the time, only some of the time, or never?” The survey explored residents’ levels of trust in seven Minnesota institutions, including:

1. The police in Minnesota
2. The church or organized religion in Minnesota
3. The medical system in Minnesota
4. The public schools in Minnesota
5. News media, including TV, newspapers, and radio in Minnesota
6. Big business in Minnesota
7. The state government in St. Paul

Responses were collapsed into two groups: those who trust the institution to do what is right more often than not (*always + most of the time* responses), and those who generally distrust the institution (*only some of the time + never* responses).

Responses to two of the seven institutions yield very similar results between Minnesota’s three rural regions and the state as a whole. When it comes to big business in the state, opinion is very low in rural Minnesota and across the state: the majority of Minnesotans feel they can trust the actions of big business *only some of the time or never* (56%). Responses for the police do not show any notable differences between the rural regions or statewide, with an overall high level of trust (76%) across the board. There is more variation by region in levels of trust for the remaining institutions.

Adults by how often they trust the police and big business, all Minnesotans



Source: MPR News | APM Research Lab 2017 Ground Level Survey of Minnesotans.

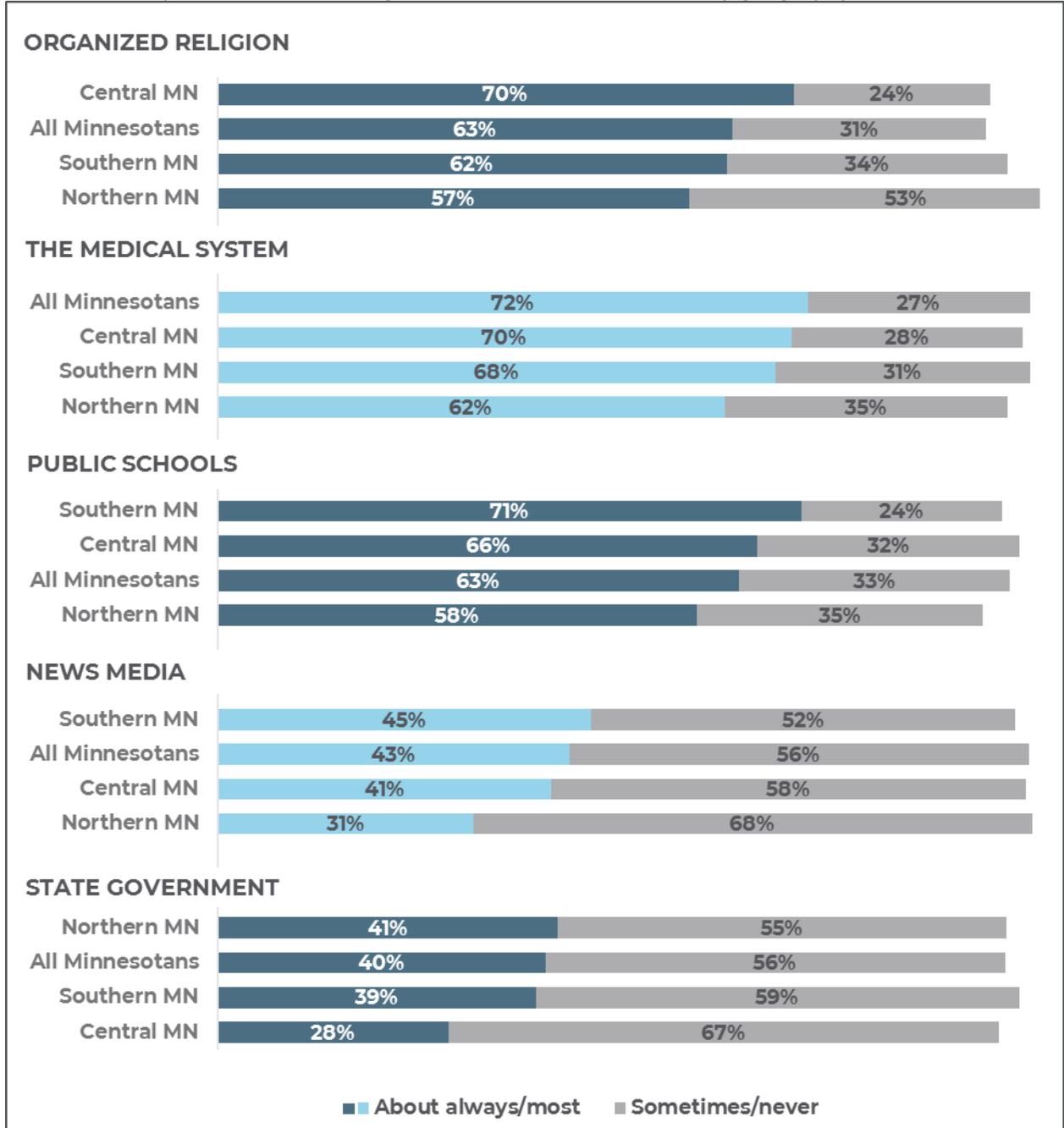
While 7 in 10 Minnesotans from Central Minnesota trust organized religion to do what is right *just about always or most of the time*, this share drops to about 6 in 10 residents in Northern Minnesota and the state as a whole. The proportion of the Southern Minnesotans who say this is statistically tied with both rural regions and the state overall.

Across the three rural Minnesota regions, residents are equally likely to say they trust the medical system to do what is right *just about always or most of the time* (62-70%, statistically tied). However,

the proportion of Minnesotans residing in the Northern region reporting this level of trust (62%) is lower than that of all Minnesotans (72%).

Adults by how often they trust select institutions, Minnesota's rural regions

Institutions are presented in order of greatest to smallest differences by geography



Source: MPR News | APM Research Lab 2017 Ground Level Survey of Minnesotans.

News media suffers from lower levels of trust in rural Minnesota and across the entire state; less than half of residents saying they trust the media to do what is right *just about always* or *most of the time*. **Residents of Northern Minnesota express the lowest opinion of news media, with more than two-thirds trusting it to do what is right *only some of the time* or *never*.** This proportion is significantly higher than the share of residents who express skepticism in Southern and Central Minnesota as well as the state as a whole, which are all statistically tied (52-58%).

A large proportion of Minnesotans throughout the state are distrustful when it comes to the state government. Central Minnesota residents are the most skeptical, with only 28 percent of residents saying they trust the state government to do what is right *just about always* or *most of the time* compared to roughly 40 percent of Minnesotans statewide and in the two remaining rural regions.

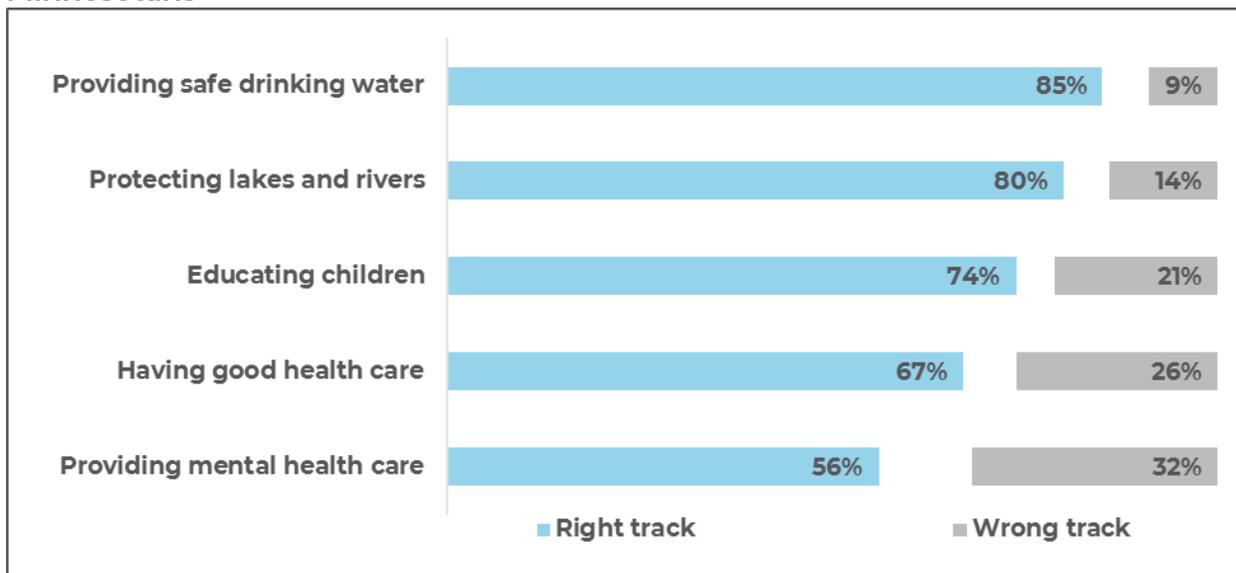
Right Track / Wrong Track on Key Public Issues

The Ground Level Survey asked respondents a series of questions that began: “Do you think Minnesota is generally on the right track or the wrong track when it comes to _____?” The survey probed respondents’ feelings across nine issue areas that touch on Minnesotans’ shared public life, including:

1. Educating children
2. Having good health care
3. Providing care for those facing mental health issues
4. Providing safe drinking water
5. Protecting lakes and rivers for things like swimming, boating, and fishing
6. Welcoming immigrants and refugees
7. Strengthening the economy
8. Caring for older adults
9. Providing opportunities for everyone to get ahead, regardless of their background

Across five of the nine issue areas, the percentage of residents indicating Minnesota is on the right track is statistically tied between rural regions and with the statewide results: **Minnesotans feel the state is on the “right track” for *providing safe drinking water* (85%), *protecting lakes and rivers* (80%), *educating children* (74%), *having good health care* (67%), and *providing mental health care* (56%).** Responses to four of the nine issue areas showed variation by region, as noted in the following graph.

Adults who feel Minnesota is on the right or wrong track by issue area, all Minnesotans



Source: MPR News | APM Research Lab 2017 Ground Level Survey of Minnesotans.

The following issue areas elicit significant differences of opinion between Minnesotans residing in rural regions or between at least one of the regions and the statewide population.

In terms of welcoming immigrants and refugees, a minority of rural residents (42%) believe Minnesota is on the right track, compared to majority of Minnesotans statewide (57%). Survey findings consistently reveal immigration as among the most contentious issues in the survey; thus, the steep divide between the state as a whole and rural Minnesota is one of many surfacing on this issue. Responses from the three rural regions are statistically tied.

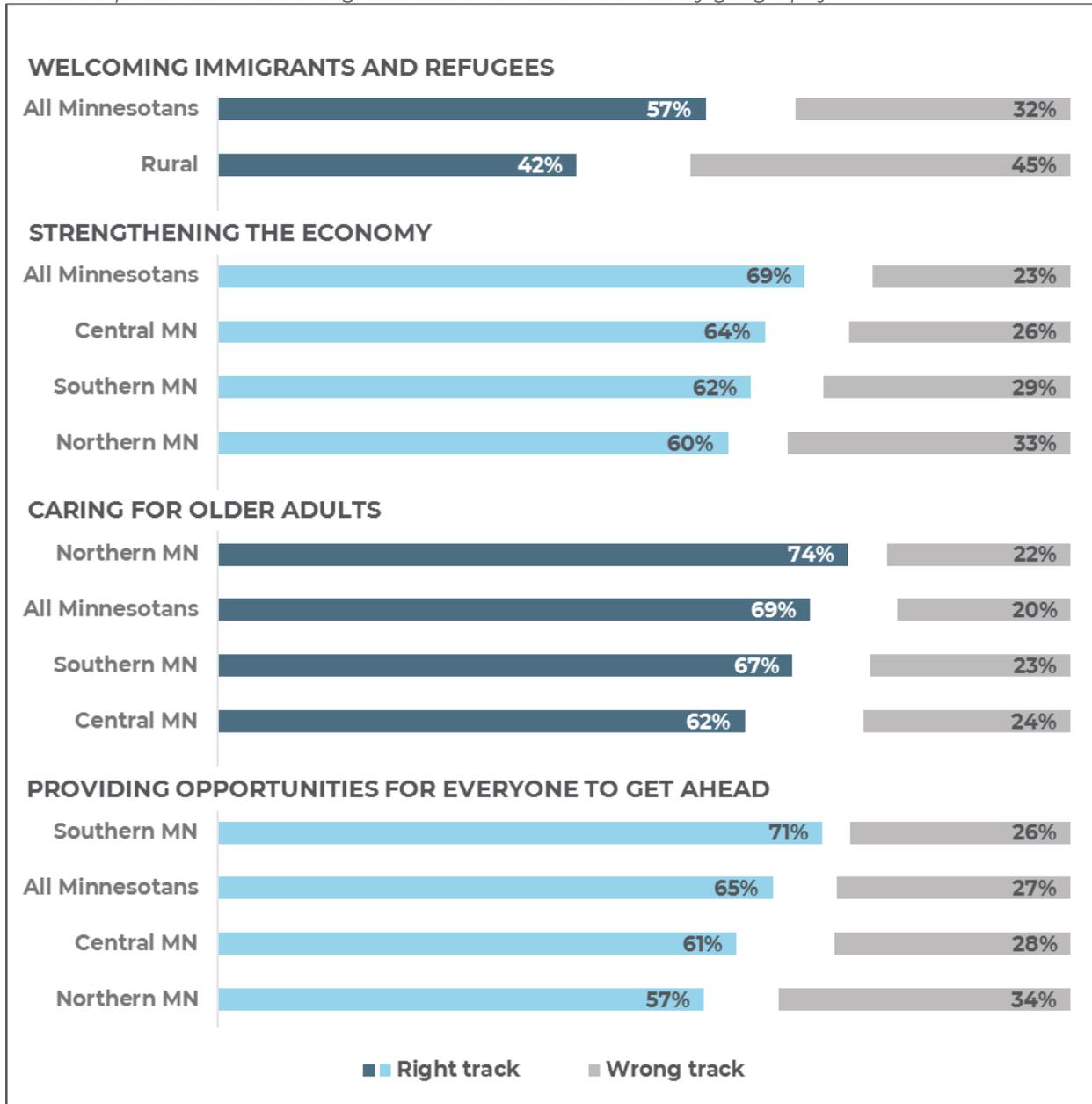
Residents throughout rural Minnesota are equally likely to say they feel the state is on the right track for strengthening the economy, with roughly 6 in 10 feeling this way. However, the share of Minnesotans from the Northern region (60%) who feel the state is on the right path for this issue area is significantly lower than the share of Minnesotans statewide (69%) who feel the same way. Central and Southern Minnesota are statistically tied with the statewide percentage.

Although there are no differences between rural Minnesota as a whole and the state population with regards to *caring for older adults* and *providing opportunities for everyone to get ahead*, there are differences between the rural regions of the state. **When it comes to taking care of older adults, about three-quarters of Northern residents agree with the direction of the state compared to just 62 percent of Minnesotans in Central Minnesota.**

Northerners are less optimistic about the path the state is on when it comes to providing opportunities for everyone to get ahead, regardless of their background, specifically when compared to their Southern counterparts. Just under 6 in 10 Northern residents feel the state is on the right track compared to just over 7 in 10 Southern residents. Central Minnesota is statistically tied to both the Northern and Southern regions.

Adults who feel Minnesota is on the right or wrong track by issue area, Minnesota's rural regions

Issues are presented in order of greatest to smallest differences by geography



Source: MPR News | APM Research Lab 2017 Ground Level Survey of Minnesotans.

About the Survey

The MPR News | APM Research Lab 2017 Ground Level Survey of Minnesotans was a representative sample of 1,654 Minnesotans age 18 and older. The survey has an overall margin of error of +/-3.5 percentage points at the 90 percent confidence level. Data collection was conducted via telephone (42% landline, 58% cell phone) August 22 – September 14, 2017, by SSRS of Glenn Mills, Penn. For more details and analysis see: bit.ly/GroundLevel

Acknowledgments

Funding for this project was generously provided by the Blandin Foundation, the Bush Foundation, the McKnight Foundation, and the Knight Foundation Donor Advised Fund at The Miami Foundation, as well as donors and members of Minnesota Public Radio. The survey was designed with input from several members of the Minnesota Public Radio Newsroom, including Nancy Cassutt, Mike Edgerly, Mike Mulcahy, and Bill Wareham. We would like to thank all the Minnesotans who took part in the survey.

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End Notes

¹ **Northern Minnesota** consists of 19 counties in the northern region of the state, excluding the embedded geography represented by the Duluth Area region. These counties are: Aitkin, Beltrami, Carlton, Clearwater, Cook, Hubbard, Itasca, Kittson, Koochiching, Lake, Lake of the Woods, Mahnomen, Marshall, Normal, Pennington, Polk, Red Lake, Roseau, and St. Louis.

Central Minnesota consists of 23 counties in the central region of the state, excluding the embedded geography represented by the St. Cloud Area region. These counties are: Becker, Benton, Cass, Chisago, Clay, Crow Wing, Douglas, Grant, Isanti, Kanabec, Mille Lacs, Morrison, Otter Tail, Pine, Pope, Sherburne, Stearns, Stevens, Todd, Traverse, Wadena, Wilkin, and Wright.

Southern Minnesota consists of 38 counties located in the southern region of the state, excluding the embedded geography of the Rochester Area region. These counties are Big Stone, Blue Earth, Brown, Chippewa, Cottonwood, Dodge, Faribault, Fillmore, Freeborn, Goodhue, Houston, Jackson, Kandiyohi, Lac Qui Parle, La Sueur, Lincoln, Lyon, McLeod, Martin, Meeker, Mower, Murray, Nicollet, Nobles, Olmsted, Pipestone, Redwood, Renville, Rice, Rock, Sibley, Steele, Swift, Wabasha, Waseca, Watonwan, Winona, and Yellow Medicine.

² Race groups are presented as non-Hispanic, excepting the Hispanic group, and single race alone. Note: Responses for “don’t know” or refusals are not graphed in this brief and appear as gaps in bar graphs.

