

COVID-19 Survey of Rural Leaders and Residents

October 2020

Introduction

Idaho Rural Partnership and several partner organizations and agencies conducted a survey of rural Idaho leaders and residents from July 22 to August 7, 2020 to capture their thoughts and concerns about the impact of and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic in their communities. The participating agencies and organizations, many of whom helped distribute the survey to their contacts lists, are listed in Appendix A. Special thanks go to the Idaho Department of Commerce for supporting survey administration and report production. Conducted on-line, the survey generated 333 responses. The survey questions are found in Appendix B.



“Thank you for providing this survey! Your questions were very well presented and unique.”

— Survey respondent

Summary of Survey Respondents

- While responses came from all over the state, just over one-half of survey respondents (57%) live in the following six counties: Valley, Idaho, Teton, Benewah, Lewis, and Nez Perce.
- Most respondents (69%) identified themselves as either a local elected official, city or county employee, a leader of a community organization, or a resident. Respondents were limited to a single choice from among nine pre-defined categories. It is likely that many survey respondents fall into more than one category.

Key Findings

Priority funding areas. Survey respondents feel the need for funding and other assistance is greatest around the following concerns in their community: (1) help impacted businesses survive and thrive, (2) help residents whose incomes have been reduced by job loss or reduced hours meet basic expenses like housing, utilities, and food, and, (3) education and other youth services.

“I would like to see the money used to help provide food and necessities of life to those who have lost their incomes as a direct result of the pandemic.”

— Survey respondent

Most significant pandemic-related challenges. Responses to a question about the most significant anticipated challenges largely mirror the question about funding priorities. The most significant challenges identified by respondents include: (1) business survival, (2) people being able to meet basic expenses, (3) education and youth (including school, childcare, recreation, library programming), and (4) community cohesion. Community cohesion includes a concern that an influx of visitors and new residents from urban areas could adversely impact the community and socio-political divisions heightened by differing opinions about the validity of the pandemic and appropriate government responses.

“Less income for locals which means less spending, especially locally, in the small shops. This means that more local small shops will close their doors.”

— Survey respondent

Successful community efforts. Respondents expressed pride in their community responses to the coronavirus pandemic in the following areas: (1) putting COVID-19 protective measures in place (e.g., testing, personal protective equipment, social distancing), (2) volunteerism, (3) charity response (e.g. faith organizations and nonprofit organizations helping struggling residents), and (4) businesses adapting to minimize the exposure of employees and customers. A list of example COVID-19 response efforts is found in Appendix D.

“We formed a group of caring individuals representing local government, hospitals, chambers, public schools, local businesses, food, parks, etc. that have one goal: to protect the people and the community and those that are visiting. The group is caring, creative, and driven. They take ideas and put them to action. I’ve never worked with a team that truly has the best interest of the people in mind. No egos involved.”

— Survey respondent

“If anything, COVID-19 has made us stronger and tighter. To see the way our businesses have taken it upon themselves – even before our government agencies did – to protect our community should be heavily celebrated and recognized. We are people who truly value one another over the dollar and I am immensely proud to be a citizen and be in my leadership role.”

—Survey respondent

Need for training and other assistance. Survey respondents believe training and other assistance in the following priority areas would support their community's recovery from the pandemic (in order of priority):

- Broadband
- Housing
- Education
- Strategic planning (includes emergency response, resiliency, disaster planning, etc.)
- Youth and family services
- Small business development/entrepreneurship
- Downtown revitalization
- Local food access

Need for trust and understanding among individuals and organizations. 43% of survey respondents strongly agreed that increasing trust and understanding would help the community make better decisions and complete community projects; 34% agreed with this statement. Just 5% either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

Anything else? The last survey question gave respondents an open-ended opportunity to express anything else they would like to share about the impacts of or recovery from COVID-19 in their community. 78% of survey respondents offered a response to this question. Most responses under the 'Anything else?' question fell under one of the following categories.

- Building bridges across increasingly visible political divides
- Differing views about the seriousness or legitimacy of COVID-19
- Jobs and the economy
- Impact of visitors on community services, facilities, and residents' exposure to COVID-19
- Measures to reduce and prevent health impacts
- Communication and leadership

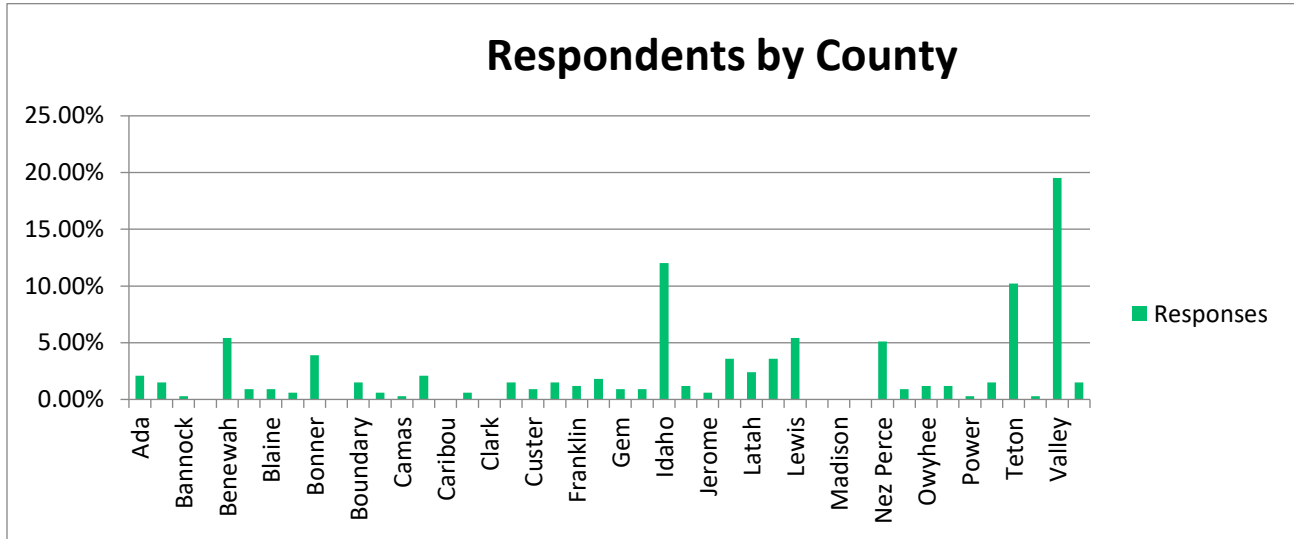
About the Idaho Rural Partnership

The Idaho Rural Partnership IRP was created by the State of Idaho over 25 years ago to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of efforts to support rural community and economic development by improving coordination, collaboration, and information sharing among government agencies, private sector interests, and other stakeholders who share an interest in rural community stability and prosperity. IRP is designated as Idaho's State Rural Development Council. IRP is guided by a 35-member board of directors co-chaired by Tom Kealey, Director of the Idaho Department of Commerce, and Art Beal representing the Idaho Resource Conservation and Development Association. Go to www.irp.idaho.gov for more information.

Contact

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Q1: In what county do you live?

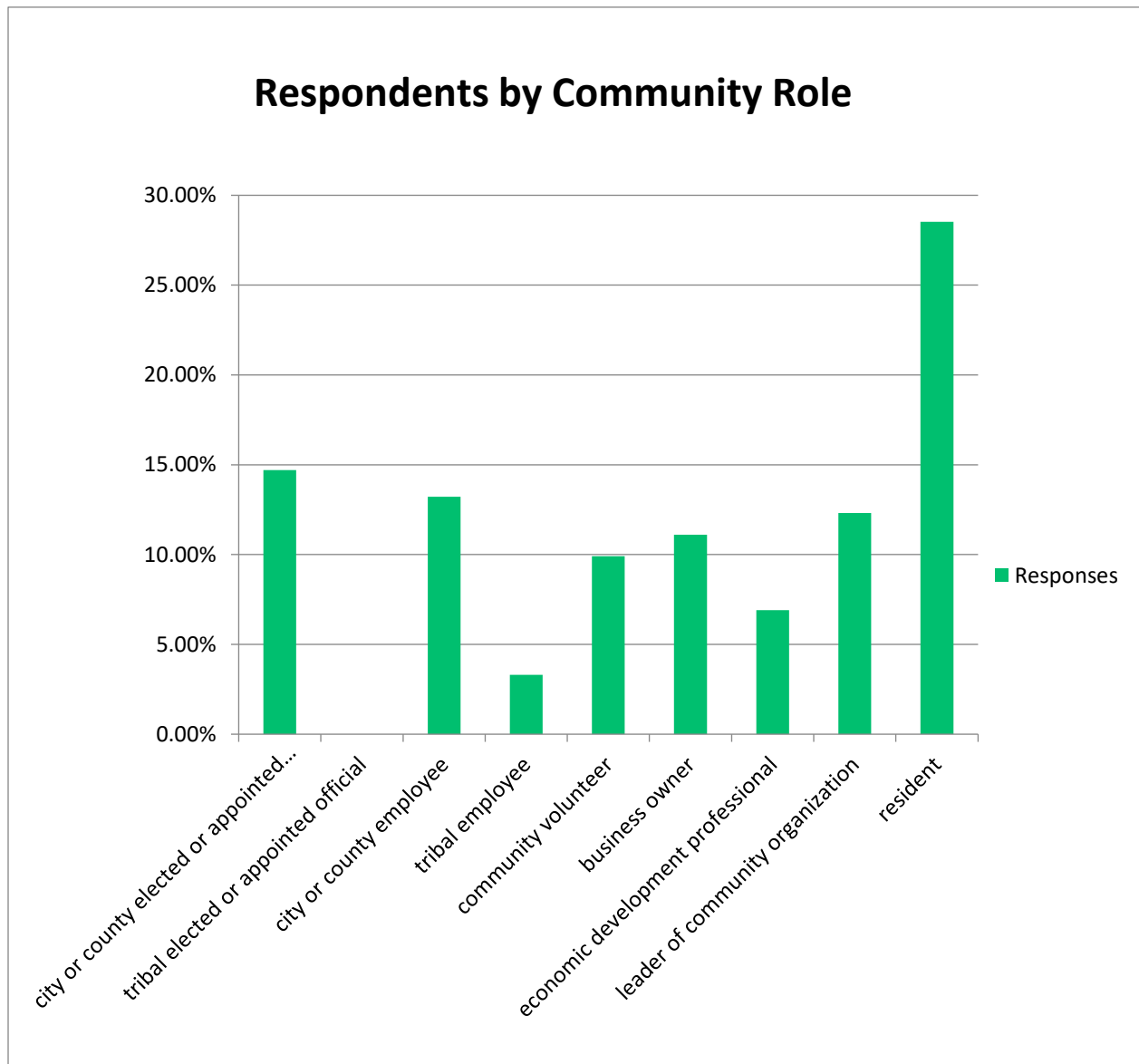


Survey Respondents by Region

Asking survey respondents to identify their county of residents allowed us to compare responses across the state's six regions. A map identifying the six regions is found in Appendix C.

Region	Respondents	Percentage
I	53	16%
II	88	26%
III	107	32%
IV	12	4%
V	12	4%
VI	61	18%
Totals	333	100%

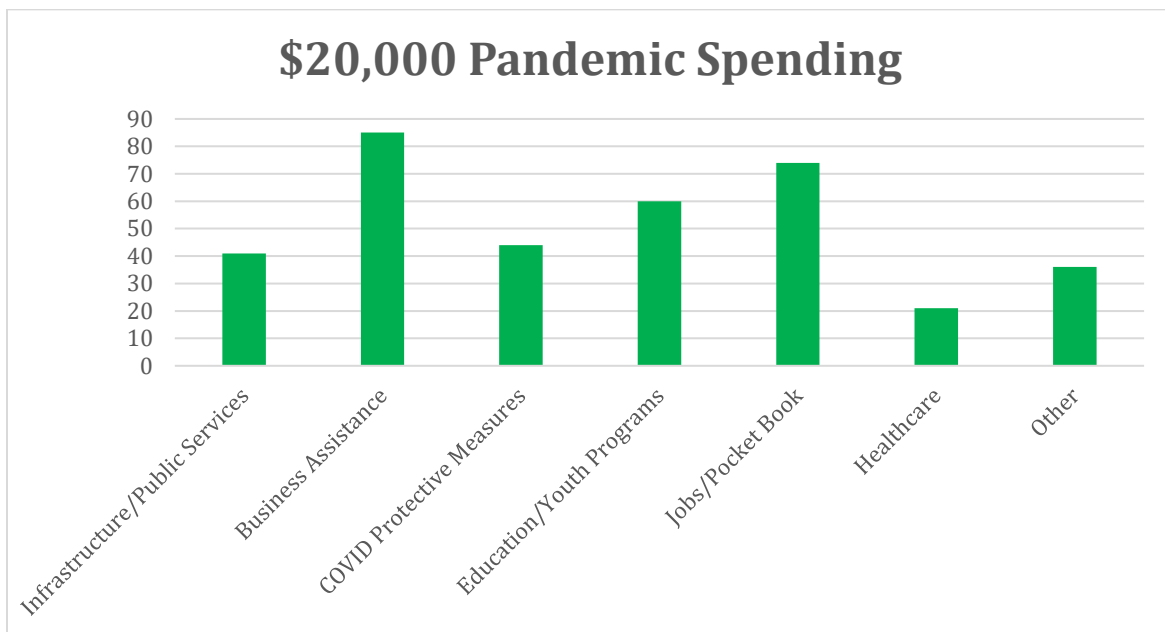
Q2: What best describes your role in the community?



Community Role, by Region

Role	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	Total
Elected Official	5	9	18	3	3	11	49
Tribal Official	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Local Gov. Employee	7	7	18	2	2	8	44
Tribal Employee	0	10	1	0	0	0	11
Community Volunteer	4	8	16	0	1	4	33
Business Owner	7	9	10	0	1	9	37
Economic Development Professional	7	5	5	2	1	3	23
Community Leader Other	6	7	16	2	2	8	41
Resident	16	33	23	3	2	18	95
Totals	53	88	107	12	12	61	333

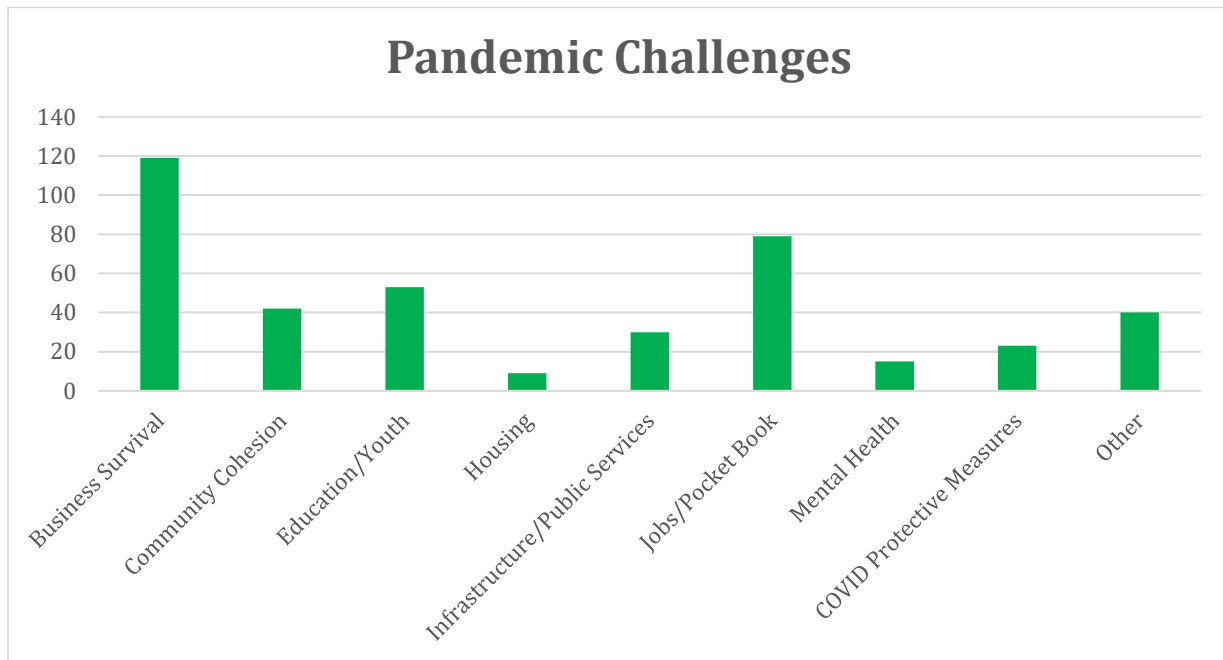
Q 3: If your community won \$20,000 in the lottery next week, how would you like to see that money used to help it recover from the pandemic?



Funding Needs, by Region

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	Totals
Infrastructure/Public Services	6	6	17	3	2	7	41
Business Assistance	20	13	35	1	1	15	85
COVID Protective Measures	6	15	14	1	0	8	44
Education/Youth Programs	6	20	15	0	4	15	60
Jobs/Pocket Book	10	21	21	3	2	17	74
Healthcare	4	7	8	0	1	1	21
Other	8	11	6	2	2	7	36

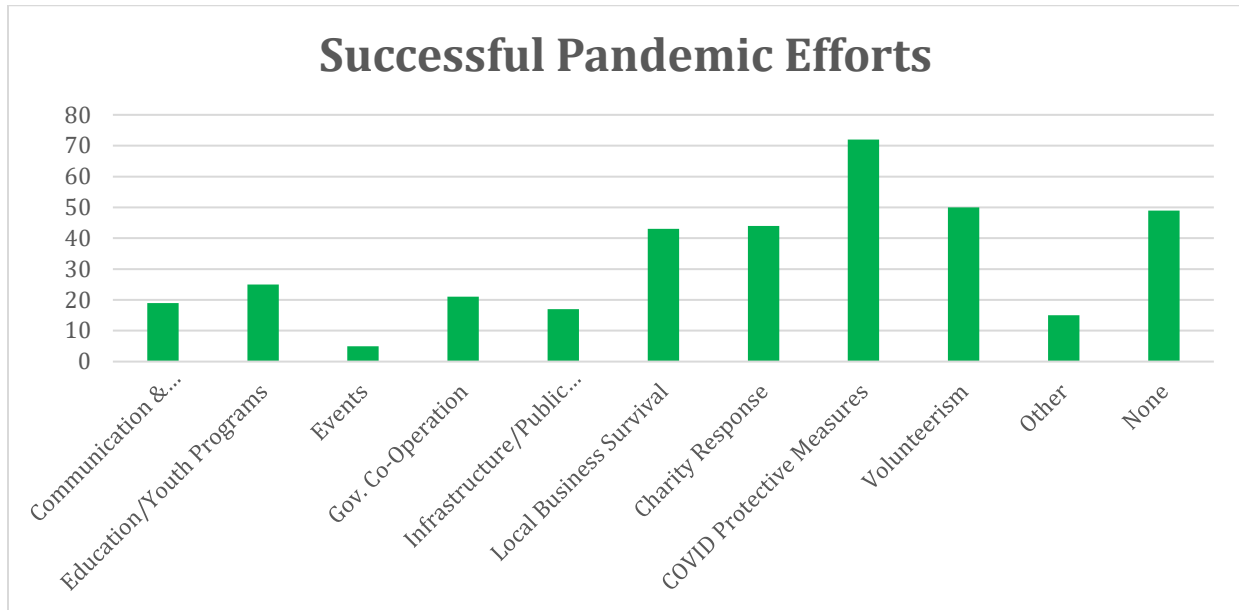
Q 4: What are challenges you anticipate as your community recovers from the economic and other impacts of the pandemic?



Anticipated Challenges, by Region

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	Totals
Business Survival	28	29	36	2	4	20	119
Community Cohesion	10	7	16	0	0	9	42
Education/Youth	7	15	12	3	2	14	53
Housing	1	0	6	0	0	2	9
Infrastructure/Public Services	6	6	8	2	4	4	30
Jobs/Pocket Book	8	29	23	5	3	11	79
Mental Health	1	5	6	0	2	1	15
COVID Protective Measures	6	7	4	0	0	6	23
Other	4	15	15	0	0	6	40

Q 5: Please describe a successful effort or response in your community you are particularly proud of that might inspire other communities?



Successful Efforts or Responses, by Region

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	Totals
Communication & Leadership	1	2	9	0	0	7	19
Education/Youth Programs	1	10	6	2	2	4	25
Events	1	1	1	0	1	1	5
Gov. Co-Operation	2	3	10	0	1	5	21
Infrastructure/Public Services	6	2	5	2	2	0	17
Local Business Survival	13	12	11	0	1	6	43
Charity Response	4	10	17	3	0	10	44
COVID Protective Measures	10	18	28	1	0	15	72
Volunteerism	5	8	15	1	2	9	50
Other	1	7	2	0	0	5	15
None	14	15	10	3	3	4	49

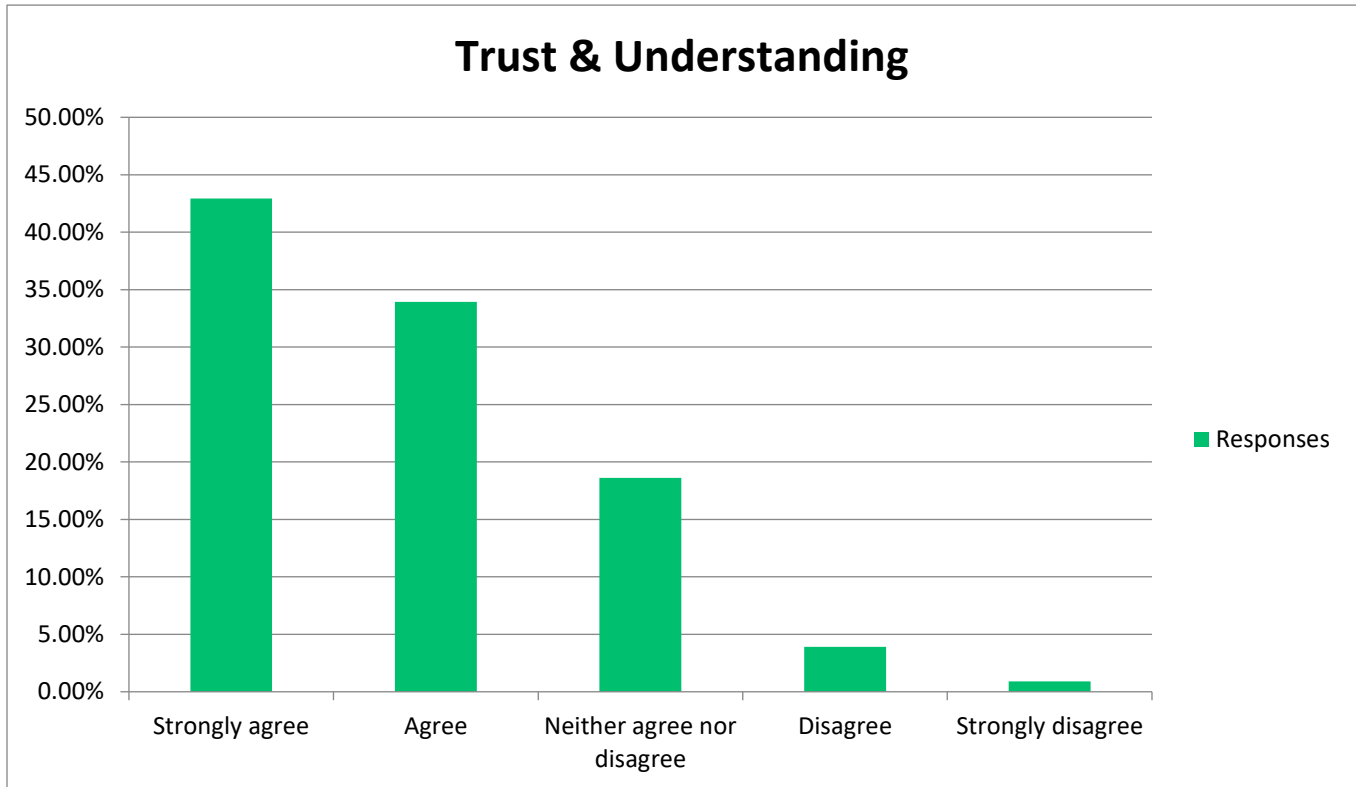
Q6: Would training or coaching on specific topics help your community recover from the pandemic? If yes, please identify up to five topics in the list below.



Training or Coaching Needs, by Region

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	Totals
Small Business Training	16	24	26	4	3	14	87
Downtown Revitalization	13	20	26	3	4	12	78
Community marketing	15	17	17	4	5	8	66
Education	18	37	26	2	2	23	108
Broadband	20	22	43	8	1	22	116
Sewer and water systems	7	8	11	1	2	3	32
Transportation	3	5	9	2	1	4	24
Health care	13	27	17	1	1	13	72
Housing	16	15	46	4	3	26	110
Arts & Culture	3	9	10	0	2	1	25
Recreation Opportunities	4	15	10	1	3	7	40
Senior Services & Facilities	9	14	26	2	2	10	63
Youth & Family Services	15	32	23	4	0	20	94
Volunteerism	10	13	14	2	4	9	52
Communication	8	18	23	4	2	12	67
Leadership	13	25	14	3	1	11	67
Local Food Access	8	24	25	2	1	17	77
Intergovernmental Coordination	7	16	14	1	0	7	45
Strategic Planning	18	28	27	2	3	19	97

**Q7: Please indicate your level of agreement with this statement:
There is a need to increase trust and understanding among organizations and
individuals in my community to help us make better decisions and complete
community projects.**



Need to Increase Trust and Understanding, by Region

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	Total
Strongly Agree	25	44	41	6	2	25	143
Agree	16	32	34	2	9	20	113
Neutral	10	11	25	3	0	13	62
Disagree	2	0	7	0	1	3	13
Strongly Disagree	0	1	1	1	0	0	3

Q8: Is there anything else you would like us to know about the impacts of COVID-19 in your community?

The last survey question gave respondents an open-ended opportunity to express anything else they would like to share about their observations and concerns about COVID-19 in their community. 78% of survey respondents offered a response to this question. Responses under the “Anything else?” question fell under the following categories.

Building bridges across political divides. A few respondents noted how the pandemic has brought their community together. A larger number of respondents expressed concern about how the pandemic is exacerbating political divides and/or expressed a mixture of hope and doubt that such divides can be bridged.

“Division between parties made it volatile and political, which isn’t community-oriented.”

—Survey respondent

“Just when everyone is getting lax and tired of being careful, it is hitting our sleepy little town. Many disregard masks due to it becoming a political issue rather than health.”

—Survey respondent

Differing views about the seriousness or legitimacy of COVID-19. This subject is related to the political divide topic described above. A number of survey respondents wrote about the lack of consensus about the seriousness of the pandemic – especially in rural areas. There is a belief among some that – at the national level – the seriousness is being exaggerated for political reasons. People who hold this view are less likely to trust pandemic-related information coming from government and more likely to feel the economic impacts of the pandemic are of far greater concern than the health impacts.

“Little to no actual impact from the virus.

Major impacts from irrational fear and overcautiousness.”

—Survey respondent

Jobs and the economy. Comments under this subject express concern for the economic impact of the pandemic on businesses and individuals. If the pandemic continues for an indefinite period, how are businesses going to survive? How are people of modest means (i.e. a relatively large % of rural residents) going to pay their bills?

“Our small communities are held together by small mom and pop businesses that are still operating due to local loyalty. The decrease in visitors, elderly customers, and other COVID situations are causing these stores to think twice about reopening or selling off their business. The younger generations are apprehensive about opening a business at this uncertain time, so all of this combined leads to a negative outlook for many communities.”

—Survey respondent

Visitors. Many survey respondents talked about how it seems like people from more populated areas are descending on their rural community, straining or likely to strain public services and facilities and increasing COVID-19 exposure among residents. Also falling under this subject are concerns that a large number people from larger cities (from within and outside of Idaho) will want to relocate to rural communities in response to the pandemic.

“We are feeling like we are risking everything – the stability of our health care system, the potential re-opening of our schools, the safety of our essential workers – only so that visitors can have their summer vacations. We are staying put and I wish that others from out-of-town would have been strongly encouraged to do the same. They will go home to where the curve is flattening and leave us with a situation where we need to lock down again. Very unfair to people in rural parts of the country.”

—Survey respondent

Measures to reduce or prevent health impacts. A significant number of survey respondents express genuine concern and uncertainty about how COVID-19 will ultimately impact the health of residents. Concern about the limited capacity of health care facilities and services also fall under this heading. Questions and concerns about access to testing and the tracking and communication of COVID-related data are also in this category.

“We are seeing a rapid increase, so the impacts aren’t completely clear yet.”

—Survey respondent

“I believe the isolation of individuals will have a long-lasting effect on our mental health. I believe we need some safe ways to experience our sense of community.”

—Survey respondent

Communication & leadership. Survey respondents expressed the importance of clear, non-sensationalized, and trustworthy information from elected leaders and government agencies. Some respondents expressed appreciation for communication and leadership to date; others want to see it improved significantly.

‘We need sound information, not sensationalized reporting that ALL media outlets seem to be providing.’

—Survey respondent

“My biggest hope is that we can find a way to use this disruption as impetus to do more community-wide strategic planning that REALLY emphasizes measurable goals our community can rally around, AND come up with the action plans and steps needed to reach those goals.”

—Survey respondent

Appendix A: Partner agencies and organizations

The following agencies and organizations participated in this survey by helping develop survey questions and circulating the survey invitation among their contacts in rural communities around the state.

Idaho Department of Commerce

Idaho Commission for Libraries

Idaho Housing and Finance Association

University of Idaho Extension

Idaho Commission on the Arts

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

U.S. Small Business Administration

Clearwater Economic Development Association

Rocky Mountain Power

Appendix B: Survey Questions

Greetings!

We hope you and the people in your life are staying healthy during this time.

The Idaho Rural Partnership is coordinating with a several f agencies and organizations to conduct a survey of rural community leaders and residents. The survey results will inform our efforts to support Idaho's rural communities going forward.

If you live and/or work in a rural community, will you please take 5-7 minutes to complete the survey by clicking on this link?: <https://www.research.net/r/C6YHS5B>.

Completing the survey will ensure you will receive information about funding and other resources available to rural communities, businesses, and residents to help them recover from the pandemic. You will also be provided an opportunity to receive a copy of the survey results. Your contact information will not be sold or rented to any other organization.

Please respond to the survey **by August 7, 2020** so that your answers are included in the results. Your responses to the survey questions will remain anonymous.

Thank you in advance,

Jon Barrett

Executive Director

1. In what county do you live?

2. What best describes your role in the community?
☐ city or county elected or appointed official
☐ city or county employee
☐ community volunteer
☐ business owner
☐ economic development professional
☐ leader of community organization
☐ resident

3. If your community won \$20,000 in the lottery next week, how would you like to see that money used to help it recover from the pandemic?
4. What are challenges you anticipate as your community recovers from the economic and other impacts of the pandemic?
5. Please describe a successful effort or response in your community you are particularly proud of that might inspire other communities?
6. Would training or coaching on specific topics help your community recover from the pandemic? If yes, please identify up to five topics in the list below.

- | | | |
|--|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Small business training | <input type="checkbox"/> Health care | <input type="checkbox"/> Communication |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Downtown Revitalization | <input type="checkbox"/> Housing | <input type="checkbox"/> Leadership |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Community marketing | <input type="checkbox"/> Arts and cultural opportunities | <input type="checkbox"/> Local food access |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Education | <input type="checkbox"/> Recreation opportunities | <input type="checkbox"/> Intergovernmental coordination |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Broadband | <input type="checkbox"/> Senior services and facilities | <input type="checkbox"/> Strategic planning (e.g. emergency or resiliency planning and preparedness) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sewer and water systems | <input type="checkbox"/> Youth and family services (e.g. childcare) | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Transportation | <input type="checkbox"/> How to increase volunteerism | |

7. Please indicate your level of agreement with this statement: *There is a need to increase trust and understanding among organizations and individuals in my community to help us make better decisions and complete community projects.*

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Disagree

☐ Agree

☐ Strongly disagree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

8. Is there anything else you would like us to know about the impacts of COVID-19 in your community?

9. Would you like to receive a copy of the survey results?

10. If you answered YES to question 9, please provide your contact information.

11. Would you like to be added to Idaho Rural Partnership's email list to stay informed about our work with rural communities? You can unsubscribe at any time.

Appendix C: Six Regions of Idaho Map



Appendix D: Representative answers to survey question 5:
*Please describe a successful effort or response in
your community you are particularly proud of that
might inspire other communities.*

- Businesses offering purchase of gift cards to bridge the time when in-person dining was not available.
- Small rural hospital partnering with other community entities (e.g. churches) to plan for worst case scenarios situations, coordinate with other regional hospitals, and be prepared as possible for a potential surge.
- ABC (Above and Beyond the Classroom) program providing after-school tutoring, snacks, STEM activities, and more.
- Creation of small business recovery team.
- Annual and new fundraising efforts conducted on-line.
- An existing nonprofit group serving senior citizens and people with disabilities launched a new program to provide free grocery shopping service and delivery and provide face masks to homebound seniors.
- After School Promise provided four nights of free dinner for kids all summer.
- Neighborhood COVID response teams to help connect the community members and bridge the gap in services and to drop off information about available resources at residences.
- “Mask Force” group formed to sew masks.
- Developed creative ways to keep employees working.
- City writing off utility bills of those businesses that were not able to stay open due to COVID.
- A group of families called the restaurants to see which workers were having financial issues, then pooled their funds to buy grocery store gift cards for those employees.
- Food pantries transitioning from open distribution to pre-boxed, drive-thru food pick up.
- Development of mobile food pantry.
- Expanded recreational day camp programs for kids (4H).
- Formation or expansion of farmer’s markets.
- School district and internet service provider working together to deploy free, secure, and reliable outdoor community wi-fi in public locations.
- Initiatives and incentives to encourage buying from local businesses.
- Provide take home STEM education kits to kids.
- Local restaurant “quarantine cuisine” punch card. When punch card is full, card holder is eligible to win raffle prizes or receive gift certificate that can be used at local businesses.
- Libraries offering curbside service.
- Creation of message boards people can use to ask for help.

- Residents checking in on each other.
- Grocery stores setting up handwashing/sanitizing stations at entrances.
- Creation of neighborhood watch program.
- Creation of teen center for recreation, life skills education, tutoring, etc.
- Community mentors helping entrepreneurs.
- Information campaign so residents know which businesses are open, open by appointment only, and closed.
- Not shutting off utilities or charging late fees for late payment.
- “Round up” program that allows people to round up their utility bill payment to help others in need make their payment.
- Efforts to increase awareness of locally grown and/or processed food.
- One family offering community BBQ potlucks in their front yard. Hot dogs and hamburgers for all.
- Teacher appreciation parade.
- Restaurants shifting to curbside pickup.
- Expansion of services and programs available at libraries.
- Free medication to those with COVID who cannot afford it.
- Youth leadership council spending time with and supporting younger kids.
- New or expanded community clean-up projects.
- Awards program or other types of recognition that puts a spotlight on local businesses.
- Grass roots efforts to continue community events by instituting COVID adaptations.