

**PULSE OF
VERMONT**

Quality of Life Study

2000

VERMONT BUSINESS ROUNDTABLE

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2000

Prepared by the Center for Social Science
Research at Saint Michael's College in cooperation with
the Vermont Business Roundtable

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Acknowledgements

A number of people at Saint Michael's College and the Vermont Business Roundtable have been involved in the design, execution, and analysis of this survey. Meetings with the President of the Roundtable, Maxine Brandenburg, along with the *Quality of Life Task Force* helped shape and sharpen our survey instrument. As always, Beth Volker provided invaluable help coordinating the work of the researchers from Saint Michael's with the members of the *Quality of Life Task Force*. Our understanding of the results were informed by the extensive discussions that occurred during the Vermont Business Roundtable's annual 2000 meeting.

The work of collecting data fell to a large number of student interviewers from Saint Michael's College. They include Christy Bolduc, Jen Kelly, Mary Epright, Melissa Guerrette, Emilee Hoover, Laurabeth Wallace, Tony Kimble-Ruggero, Jessica Scott, Ryan Eldred, John Triller, Andrea Henchey, Sarah Coombs, Megan Morrisey, Vered Kleinberger, Nick Miller, and Cheryl Messier. B.J. Shoja should be singled out for the exceptionally fine work he did in helping to supervise the student interviewers. Kevin Anderson helped maintain the study's database and worked throughout the project analyzing the results from the study. Finally, we would like to recognize the much-appreciated organizational, editing, and formatting assistance of Carol Martin, Leslie Turner, and Cathy Yandow.

The Vermont Business Roundtable is a non-profit, non-partisan organization of 115 chief executive officers representing geographic diversity and all other major sectors of the Vermont economy. The Roundtable is committed to sustaining a sound economy and preserving Vermont's unique quality of life by studying and making recommendations on statewide public policy issues.

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Executive Summary

This report summarizes the results from a statewide *Quality of Life* survey, completed during the summer of 2000. This is the third such survey conducted by the Center for Social Science Research (CSSR) at Saint Michael's College under the sponsorship of the Vermont Business Roundtable (VBR). Prior surveys were completed in 1990 and 1995. These three points of time provide an overview into how various institutional changes and external events over time influence Vermonters' sense of well-being and their public and private priorities.

Methodology

This survey employed the conventional techniques of scientific survey research to randomly select and interview just over 400 adults in Vermont. The 20- to 30-minute telephone interviews were conducted in the summer of 2000 and the results are likely accurate within +/- 5%. Disproportionate refusals to participate from persons with lower levels of education dictated a corrective weighting of the responses to achieve a proportionate balance of major demographic groups. The response rate among Vermonters contacted was 60%.

First Impressions of Quality of Life in Vermont

When Vermonters in the year 2000 think about the term "quality of life," we learned that the qualities of a reasonable "standard of living," a relaxed "pace of life," and a clean and attractive "physical environment" first come to mind. A decade ago the standard of living was less frequently mentioned but the physical environment was a more common theme. More Vermonters than in the past are concerned that there are aspects of our quality of life under attack. These included concerns about family values, community, and government interference. Vermonters are evenly divided, as they have been in our earlier surveys, about whether "life in Vermont" is getting "better" or "worse," but a strong majority believes that their standard of living is improving.

State Priorities

Some respondents in our survey felt that issues such as "preserving scenic views" and "maintaining family farms" should be important priorities for the State, but most saved their highest priority rankings for "improving educational opportunities," "preserving clean air and water," and "limiting government involvement in [their] lives." The first two categories have received high rankings in the past, but the ranking of the third priority has increased substantially since 1990.

Life in Local Communities

Vermonters still feel their communities are notably free from crime. They are also more willing than previously to support increased taxes to preserve open land. While local schools seem to be improving, satisfaction with schools is not as high as it was in 1990. Frustrations with Act 60 are conspicuous, with only 11% feeling that this legislation has improved their schools, and only 10% saying that Act 60 reduced their taxes. More than half of our respondents had volunteered in the past year, a figure consistent with prior surveys as well as national trends. Almost two thirds of our sample have computers in their homes, and about three-quarters of those are also connected to the Internet. Among those with higher incomes and education, most felt that computers and the Internet add to the quality of their lives, while those without computers were less likely to take this position.

Economic Growth

The 2000 survey finds that Vermonters have positive perceptions about the value of economic growth, reflecting their experience with growth and expansion over the past decade. People rank “more jobs” in their local communities as the single most important outcome they favor from economic growth. They also rate “more single family housing,” “more recreational facilities,” and “more industries” as important priorities. On the other hand, Vermonters grade “more shopping malls” and more “multi-family housing” as lower priorities.

Population Changes

Vermont’s population has increased by about 8% over the decade, a rate just under the national average, but higher than the rate for most of New England. This increase stems largely from an increase of births over deaths rather than in-migration. Most respondents are content with this population growth rate, but in selected counties such as Chittenden County, residents believe that Vermont’s increase is too rapid. As we found in the past, about three quarters of those born in another state told us that they would have moved to Vermont even if they had to take a cut in pay. By and large, residents who told us that they would move out of the state if given the opportunity tend to be the youngest and the best educated. Since this pattern is repeated in all states, Vermont benefits from an influx of young well-educated persons.

Private Priorities and Satisfaction

When asked to rate the importance of 10 different aspects of their private lives in areas as diverse as the family, job, religion, and even “living in Vermont,” most Vermonters rate the areas of life dominated by our primary social and emotional ties as being the most important. Most of the rankings (and satisfaction levels with each domain of life) have remained surprisingly stable over the decade. “Family

life” and “good friends” once again rated highest, with “helping others in difficulty” ranking third on the list. “Having a good job,” “a residence,” and “having enough money” came next on their lists. The importance of religion, recreation, and volunteering received lower rankings.

As the economy has improved over the decade, so has satisfaction with “life as a whole.” As one might expect, those with greater financial resources are more satisfied with many aspects of their lives, including their lives “as a whole.” Since the early *Quality of Life* studies, satisfaction with health has increased, while satisfaction with the amount of spare time has decreased, especially for those at the higher ends of the income and education distribution. Answers to several questions about job satisfaction parallel those found in national surveys. Just over one-half of the respondents feel that they are now better off financially than they were 5 years ago. Only 17% felt that they were “worse off,” down from the 28% in 1995 who said that they were worse off than they were in 1990.

A State Divided

The survey results indicate that Vermont is increasingly being confronted with a number of unwelcome divisions. Part of this is due to the controversies triggered by Act 60, the Civil Unions bill, and the recent hotly contested election. Demographically, the state is almost evenly divided between those born in state and those born out of state, but the two groups differ significantly in their social composition. Persons born out of state, on average, have significantly higher levels of income and education than the native born, and these differences, in turn, are associated with secondary differences (from political orientation to computer ownership) that widen the gap beyond mere demographics. Likewise, sharp disparities in the population composition and the economic prospects of selected counties exacerbate divisions and stereotypes and make efforts at achieving broad-based consensus more challenging.

Introduction

In 1989, the Vermont Business Roundtable (VBR) first contracted with the Center for Social Science Research (CSSR) at Saint Michael's College to study a broad array of social and economic issues which affect the quality of life of Vermonters. Since finishing that 1990 benchmark study, two additional and parallel studies have been completed, one in 1995 and another during the summer of 2000. Outwardly, much has changed in Vermont during the decade of the 90s. Jobs have been lost, then regained; politically charged issues about dislocated workers, welfare reform, and ski industry expansion have been replaced with new concerns about school funding, civil unions, and suburban sprawl. The information super-highway, a small "back road" in 1990, is now a reality transforming many aspects of life in Vermont. This report is about the impact that this decade of change has had on the lives of average Vermonters.

Vermonters — whether new arrivals or long-time residents — do not disguise their enthusiasm for the quality of life afforded by our living in this unique corner of the United States. We are proud of our clean air and water, open countryside, town meetings, low crime rates, and warm, friendly communities. This quality of life is rarely studied in the same systematic fashion as are other more objective measures of the state's well-being. We have multiple measures of our economic health which are routinely reported in the business pages. Likewise, the state has commonly known statistics on divorces, mortality, breast cancer, auto accidents, snowfall, milk production, homicides, and other measures which affect our collective lives. But we have no well-established and clear measures of Vermont's quality of life.

The VBR has completed Quality of Life studies in 1990, 1995, and 2000.

Some believe that quality of life is too subjective to measure directly, so indirect proxies are substituted. Yet, important dimensions of life are missed when proxies are used. If the unemployment rate falls, do we know whether people are finding rewarding work which offers a "livable wage?" If gross state product rises, can we assume that people are necessarily better off? We must remember that this measure would also rise if we spent more money to fight crime or cope with the aftermath of divorces or natural disasters. Each of these raise state output in the same way as other goods that are created to feed, house, and clothe our population. Furthermore, rising material abundance does not mean that all segments of the population necessarily share in society's prosperity. Robert Kennedy's observation that "GNP ... measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile" sums up the problem we face when we rely on surrogate measures to assess quality of life. If we want to understand how Vermonters are "doing" at the beginning of the new millennium, we must go beyond our traditional or "objective" standards of measurement and assess how people *think* and *feel* about themselves and various aspects of life.

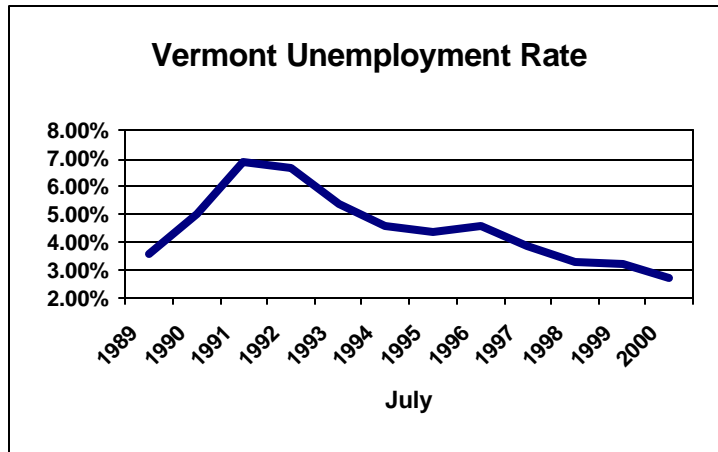
People's perceptions of quality of life also help us better understand the meaning of the more objective and widely published measures of well-being. For example, while educational attainment in Vermont has been rising, if people feel they have the wrong skills or lack jobs that take advantage of their talents, satisfaction with this domain of life may not be particularly high. The objective indicators of quality of life may not correspond with what Vermonters are actually experiencing.

We must admit from the outset that quality of life is not easily measured. Relying on people's perceptions can be problematic. Impressions and self-reflections conceal sociological and psychological influences which neither we, nor the respondent, may be entirely aware of. At times, perceptions may be in conflict with the objective conditions of life. Yet measures of how people feel about their lives are important — certainly no less important — than many of the official and seemingly more objective statistics that fill

our newspapers on a daily basis. People's perceptions of life create a "reality" that to them is no less authentic than ones defined by social scientists.

Background

The Vermont Business Roundtable's first *Quality of Life* survey was conducted in the summer of 1989, a period not unlike the conditions in the summer of the year 2000, the time of our most recent study.



Exceptionally tight labor markets and rising economic prosperity were the rule. In 1989, Vermont was entering its sixth consecutive year of economic expansion. Today, our record economic expansion has passed the eight-year mark. In January of 1989, Vermont's unemployment rate stood at 3.2%, slightly above today's rate of 2.8%. Like the late 1980s, workers and government budgets have profited from the growth in jobs and incomes while the business community has had to cope with the challenges of severe labor shortages.

One of the few constants in economics is that change occurs in ways that are only fully understood after the fact. In 1989, very few people recognized how rapidly and fundamentally the economy would change. Economic restructuring, largely in response to the globalization and domestic deregulation, along with the impact of the prolonged 1990-92 recession, quickly turned labor shortages into surpluses. By 1992, statewide unemployment rates exceeded 7%, more than double the rate recorded just a few years earlier. Between 1989 and 1994, 5,600 manufacturing jobs and 6,450 construction jobs were lost in Vermont. People from all walks of life worried about falling incomes and downward economic mobility. Communities throughout Vermont were affected by plant closings, downsizing, and the sense of uneasiness that comes with economic restructuring and dislocation. This was the environment that set the stage for VBR's second *Quality of Life* study in 1995.

Our third and the current *Quality of Life* study was completed in the year 2000, a time of economic prosperity and significant social conflict. The recent past has seen soaring stock market valuations and record low unemployment rates. But in the social and political realms, Vermonters struggled bitterly and publicly with the impact of a dramatically different education financing law (Act 60) and civil unions. Both of these came on the heels of controversial Supreme Court decisions.

Methodology

The same approach to survey research was followed in all three studies. Survey participants were selected randomly from

The results from the study are based upon telephone interviews conducted over the past 10 years with over 1,200 Vermonters.

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS Adjusted Samples			
	1990 (n=436)	1995 (n=412)	2000 (n=407)
Education			
Under 12 yrs	16%	15%	13%
12 yrs or GED	42	44	34
13-15 yrs	18	18	26
16 yrs or more	24	23	27
Age			
Under 25 yrs	8	4	3
25-39 yrs	32	29	23
40-64 yrs	42	48	54
65+ yrs	18	19	20
Gender			
Male	42	46	50
Female	58	54	50
Nativity			
Born in Vermont	51	59	52
Working (ex. students)	70	74	65
Chittenden County	22	24	21
Home Business-Main Job	15	16	16
Religious Affiliated	59	60	62
Marital Status			
Married	60	66	64
Widowed	11	9	7
Divorced/Separated	14	13	12

a list of all Vermont households with listed telephone numbers. Telephone interviews were conducted in each case with just over 400 Vermont adults. Prior to each call, respondents received two letters of introduction. The first was sent by the project directors at Saint Michael's College and explained the purpose of the survey and requesting cooperation. A letter from the Vermont Business Roundtable followed with a similar explanation and request for participation. With some modifications, the most recent survey instrument closely resembles the one used in the original 1990 study.

Each of the surveys was completed largely over a three-week period at the beginning of the summers of 1989, 1995, and 2000. In the most recent survey, 407 interviews were successfully completed from the 684 persons contacted. This represents a response rate of 60%, which is consistent with rates achieved in the earlier studies.

The results from surveys based upon population samples are always subject to sampling error. Sampling error, in our case approximately 5%, arises from the random variation that is associated with a specific sample. This means that all statistics discussed in this report are accurate within +/- 5% points.

Beyond the normal sampling error, two forms of bias challenge survey researchers. The first is that not all households have telephones or listed numbers. (According to the 1990 Census, 4.5% of Vermont households lack phones). These Vermonters were not part of the study's sampling frame. The second source of bias, (i.e., non-response

bias), comes from the nature of those Vermonters who chose not to participate in the survey.

The bias presented by non-respondents can often be identified by comparing the characteristics of the sample to what independent sources — such as the Census — tell us about the general population. When we did this, we found many reassuring parallels between our sample and the known state population. Substantial differences were found however, in the area of educational attainment. Our sample had a low

proportion of respondents with less than 12 years of education (4% compared to 13% in the state as a whole for those over 18 years of age) and a correspondingly high percent of well-educated Vermonters (46% with at least an undergraduate degree in comparison to 27% in the state as a whole for those over 18 years of age). National studies and our own experience reveal that those who refuse to participate in surveys most often have lower levels of education.

To compensate for this pattern of non-response bias, all data was adjusted, often referred to as “weighting,” to reflect Vermont’s educational distribution in 1998. Similar modifications were made in the earlier studies. In effect, people with less than 12 years of education were given more “votes” in the survey, while those with higher education levels received fewer “votes,” although no less than would be the case if we had been able to interview all members of the Vermont population over 18 years of age. The weighting procedures, while providing better representation, do not alter the findings from the report.

Throughout this report, we compare results from the most recent year 2000 study with those from 1990 and 1995. We know that much has changed during the years between these studies. For purposes of comparison, it’s important that the characteristics of those who comprise the samples are alike. If this were not the case, we would be left wondering whether changes identified reflect nothing more than the opinions rendered by samples composed of very different people rather than the changing social and economic conditions in the state. As should be expected with studies sharing common random sampling designs and similar adjustment procedures, the characteristics of the three samples are quite similar.

Before turning to the study’s findings, it’s important to note that no policy recommendations appear in this report, although many could be drawn from our findings. Instead, an analytical framework is provided to help the reader interpret the data and highlight the study’s major themes.

Major Findings

Quality of Life as Understood by Vermonters

We began the interviews by asking respondents what first came to mind when they heard the expression “quality of life.” Subsequent questions would probe specific areas that are conventionally treated when researchers study quality of life, but starting with a question that elicited spontaneous responses helped us judge whether or not our questions reflect what “the public” thinks of when they speak about this concept. Indeed, there was a close correspondence between the dimensions of quality of life that were raised by the respondents and the ones explored later on in the interviews.

More Vermonters are now feeling that some aspect of quality of life is under attack today than previously.

The frequency of items mentioned in the summer of 2000 were similar to those produced in prior years, but with some notable shifts in emphasis. The number of references to the quality of the physical environment (27%) (e.g., clean air, water, views, open land) slipped from first place in 1990 to third place in 2000, with just 17% of the respondents mentioning this item. Perhaps the relative absence of prolonged statewide acrimonious public conflicts over environmental issues during the recent decade kept this dimension out of the public’s mind.

QUALITY OF LIFE “What First Comes to Mind”			
	1990	1995	2000
Physical Environment (clean air, water, views, open land, landscapes)	27%	25%	17%
Pace of Life (serenity, aesthetic/spiritual dimension, well-being, rural lifestyle)	26	26	24
Standard of Living (jobs, incomes, material comforts/goods, housing)	20	20	25
Freedom and Independence	7	3	5
Family, Friends, Community	5	5	8
Safety, Crime-free	4	6	3
Recreational, Cultural, or Educational Opportunities	4	3	4
Good Health	3	4	7
Other	4	9	8

ASPECTS OF QUALITY OF LIFE UNDER ATTACK TODAY IN VERMONT				
	Total		Native-born Vermonters	
	1995	2000	Yes	No
Financial Situation/ Jobs/Incomes/Taxes	16%	9%	9%	9%
Freedom/Privacy/Government Restrictions	11	11	15	7
Family Life/Values, Community, Marriage	11	20	17	22
Environmental Issues	3	7	7	8
Health and Health Care Issues	7	10	13	7
Safety, Criminal Justice Issues	8	8	11	5
Educational Opportunity/Quality	5	4	3	5
Vermont Way of Life	5	5	3	8
Government Services	3	2	3	2
Other	2	5	5	5
Nothing	31	18	15	22

Conversely, improvements in the economy and the rising standard of living will surely stand out as one of the hallmarks of the decade, and so the increased importance of this aspect of quality of life, moving from third place in 1990 into first place in 2000, may reflect that reality. The proportion of respondents mentioning the “pace of life,” “serenity,” and “rural lifestyle” remained in second place, with 24% of those interviewed mentioning this aspect. While many respondents associate this dimension with quality of life, later on it will be shown that Vermonters increasingly are concerned by a lack of spare time.

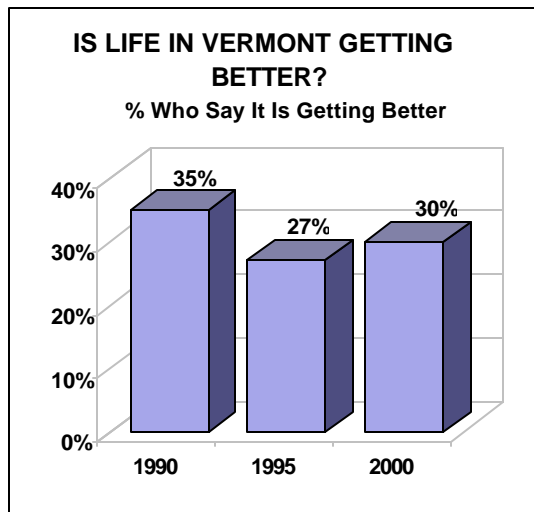
By the end of the survey, after we had explored some 11 distinct areas of quality of life, respondents were given the opportunity to tell us in their own words if there was “one thing in particular” that they felt was “most threatened or under attack” regarding quality of life in Vermont. Not surprisingly, financial issues such as jobs, incomes, and taxes were greatly diminished from their 1995 levels, but the “hot button” issues of the election year were cited frequently. These included fallout from the debates over civil unions, including family values and the erosion of “community,” and the perception that the State was playing a more overreaching role in the life of average Vermonters by supporting legislation like Act 60. Health care was also a problem cited by 10% of the respondents. This is not surprising in light of rapidly rising health care costs and the departure of some prominent health insurance companies from the state. It is notable that fewer respondents had nothing to suggest in 2000 — only 18%, down from 31% in 1995.

Evidently, more people are now feeling that some aspect of quality of life is under threat than previously.

Throughout this study, we found many differences between the way that those born within the state and those born elsewhere responded to a variety of questions. In comparison to natives, those born outside of Vermont come to the state with considerably higher education levels, earn significantly more when they arrive, and are more likely to reside in Chittenden County. While the limited sample size makes it difficult to distinguish the impact of nativity from effects that can be traced to education, income, or geography, those who were born in Vermont were particularly concerned about what they perceive as an erosion in their sense of freedom and the intrusion of government in their way of life. While some of those born outside of Vermont were also troubled by what they perceive as attacks on traditional family structures and an activist government, they were generally less likely to feel that their quality of life was “threatened” by the changing environment in Vermont.

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Vermonters Weigh Change



Respondents continue to be divided about whether life in Vermont, as a whole, is “getting better, worse, or staying the same.” The largest proportion, 39%, felt that the quality of life in Vermont was not changing dramatically while other respondents split their votes between life becoming either “worse” (31%) or “better” (30%). Democrats and Progressives were the most positive about life in Vermont “getting better,” as were those who identified themselves as “liberals.” Other categories of respondents who were most likely to say “better” included college graduates, those born outside of Vermont, and those who are single.

When respondents told us they felt that life in Vermont was getting “better” or “worse” we asked, in an open-ended format, why they felt this way. Of the 118 persons who said “better,” 39% volunteered some aspect of the

economy as the major reason, although 14% just felt there was a broad-based improvement that was difficult to specify. Of the 127 respondents who told us that life in Vermont was getting “worse,” only 14% identified economic issues as the source of the problem, while 24% expressed frustration with some aspect of government policy or the current administration. The 19% of responses that dealt specifically with the civil union legislation could be added to this total. Finally, an additional 22% felt that population issues such as growth, suburban sprawl, and traffic congestion were major sources of declining quality of life.

Democrats and Progressives were the most positive about life in Vermont “getting better.”

We probed further to identify ways in which Vermonters felt their state was “improving” or “worsening.” After a transition that told them that “Vermont is a dynamic state that has changed over the last five years,” we read five specific aspects of life in

While a sizable number of Vermonters are worried about the direction the state is heading, most people (81%) are still satisfied with life in Vermont.

Vermont and asked them if each of these areas had “improved,” “worsened” or “stayed the same.” Almost three out of four persons (73%) told us that “the Vermont economy” had improved over the past five years, and 7% felt that it had worsened. A majority of the respondents, 64%, also felt that “opportunities for cultural activities” had improved. But the remaining three items displayed less consensus: 40% said that the quality of Vermont’s lakes, rivers, and streams had improved (26% said it had worsened); 38% said the “sense of community” had improved (13% said it had worsened); and 32% said the “ease of travel” in their region had improved (17% said it had worsened).

WHY IS VERMONT GETTING BETTER OR WORSE? (Number of Responses)		
	Better (n=118)	Worse (n=127)
General Quality of Life	13%	2%
The Economy	39	14
Civil Unions	5	19
Government Policy/ Administration	5	24
Pace of Life/Cultural Change	4	7
Education	5	2
Environment	4	2
Sense of Community	4	2
Population/Sprawl/Traffic	-	22
Crime	-	7
Technology	8	-
Other	14	-

The wording of a question, as most realize, can change how people respond to issues. For example, when respondents were questioned about “how satisfied are you with life in Vermont today?” the answers did not display the sharp divide that we saw when we asked people whether Vermont was getting better or worse. Eighty-one percent told us they were either “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with “life in Vermont today.” Only 5% were dissatisfied. These results are nearly identical to those recorded in the two earlier studies. While there is little doubt that people felt strongly about how Vermont was changing, they may compartmentalize some of these concerns, especially those that remain in the public arena. In general, respondents seem quite satisfied with life in Vermont, by which they may mean how their personal lives are proceeding. While people may get upset with the direction of public policy, they are often able to insulate their personal lives from events they find disturbing.

How Vermonters Feel About Their State

What aspect of life in our state do Vermonters think is the most important? To answer this question, each respondent was asked to assess a list of 12 aspects of

life in Vermont as being either “very important,” “somewhat important,” or “not at all important.” Respondents tended to see many of the items as being “very important.” To identify priorities more precisely, respondents were then asked to select the most important item among all those they had rated as being “very important.” The rankings or the relative importance of the various dimensions of Vermont life shift from one form of the question to the other.

The most important public priorities in this year’s survey, as they have been in the past, were those related to the most basic needs; without them, life would be difficult. Heading the list were “maintaining a low crime rate” and “preserving clean air and water.” Well over 90% of the respondents felt that these areas were “very important.” Interestingly, the ranking of the former dimension falls sharply when respondents are asked to single out only their top priority. People understand the important role that public safety plays in quality of life, but apparently do not feel threatened in this area. Otherwise its ranking would be higher. Indeed, while crime rates have been falling nationally for several years, Vermont still remains one of the safest states.

We suspect that the list of items that people chose for their “single most important priority” are the hot button items of the day, areas that respondents feel are under

The ranking of the priority “limiting government involvement in my life” has steadily increased with each survey over the past decade.

threat. If this is true, it is not surprising that the current controversy over civil unions and the Act 60 education financing law have triggered the movement of “limiting government involvement in my life” from near the bottom of the list of important priorities in 1990 to near the top in 2000. These two issues were also frequently mentioned when respondents were given the opportunity to explain ways in which Vermont was getting “worse” (as opposed to “better”) and also identified as “aspects of the quality of life” that are “under attack.” The importance of “limiting government involvement in my life” has steadily increased with each survey over the past decade.

RANKING OF PUBLIC PRIORITIES						
	“Very Important”			“The Top Priority” from list of 12 Public Goals		
	1990	1995	2000	1990	1995	2000
Access to Recreational Land	67%	62%	68%	7%	10%	8%
Family Farms	73	70	79	4	8	8
Scenic Views	73	70	74	2	1	2
Educational Opportunities	74	72	81	15	21	22
Cultural Activities	44	40	53	2	1	1
Clean Air and Water	97	87	92	34	15	21
Low Crime Rate	89	93	94	9	12	9
Good Jobs	68	84	79	7	14	6
Small Towns and Villages	70	72	74	7	4	6
Limiting Government	47	52	54	7	11	15
Limiting Economic Growth	38	-	-	6	-	-
Limiting Population Growth	-	28	29	-	2	2
Limiting Business Growth	-	16	18	-	1	1

The high ranking of “improving educational opportunities” continues to be selected as the single most important priority for Vermonters. The reason for this likely reflects the union of several factors including media attention, public criticism about local school performance, and the public’s recognition of the importance of properly preparing young Vermonters for the high tech demands of the workforce. On a related matter, “supporting cultural activities” has increased markedly as a priority since the first year we did this survey — from just over 40% in 1990 to 53% in 2000. This parallels other state surveys that show

that Vermont’s growing population has been a stimulus to increased cultural opportunities. While maintaining a clean and healthy environment is still strongly supported by Vermonters, its place among the

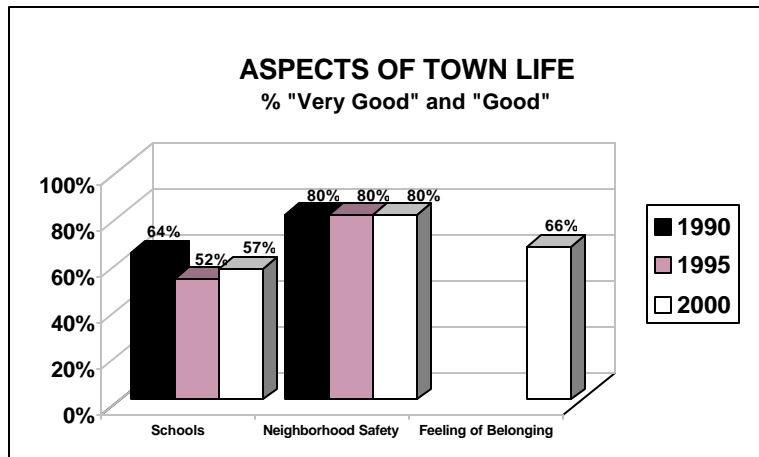
While maintaining a clean and healthy environment is still strongly supported by Vermonters, its place among the state’s “top priorities” has lost some ground during the decade. Unlike 1990, “Improving educational opportunities” is now the top priority for Vermonters.

state’s “top priorities” has lost some ground in comparison to its leading position in the 1990 *Quality of Life* survey. These results are not easy to interpret. It may be that Vermonters feel comfortable with the current environmental progress or the environmental planning infrastructure and do not see the need for change as they do in other areas such as education or government reform. It is also possible that Vermont’s strong environmental ethic has begun to lose its comparative distinctiveness as other states begin to market their own environmental efforts.

Life in Local Communities

Year after year, Vermont’s rate of violent crime is among the lowest in the nation. There are so few homicides that many police officials can name each of the state’s victims from memory (there were 11

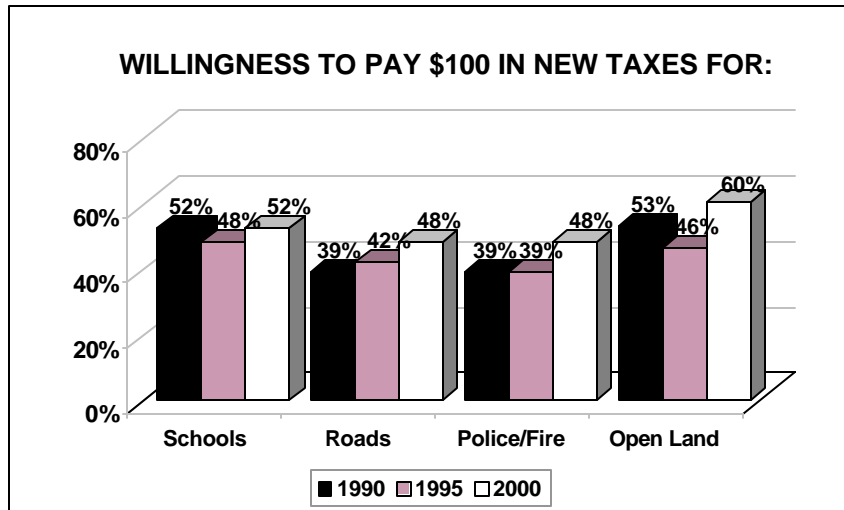
homicides in Vermont in the year 2000) and even our rate of juvenile offenses is near or at the bottom of the nation’s crime index. It is not surprising that Vermonters continue to feel that their towns and neighborhoods are safe places to live. Eighty percent of our respondents told us that they feel safe in their neighborhoods when they go out for a walk at night, a figure that would be the envy of many Americans. Safety and security are among our most basic needs and most Vermonters feel well served in this area.



Our schools, however, are not in such an enviable position. When asked “how would you rate the quality of the public schools in your town?” just over half (57%) rated them as “good” or “very good.” There seems to be a sense that schools have improved over the past five years, but satisfaction levels have not risen back to the level we first recorded in 1990.

Vermonters feel that schools have improved over the past five years, but satisfaction levels have not risen to levels recorded back in 1990.

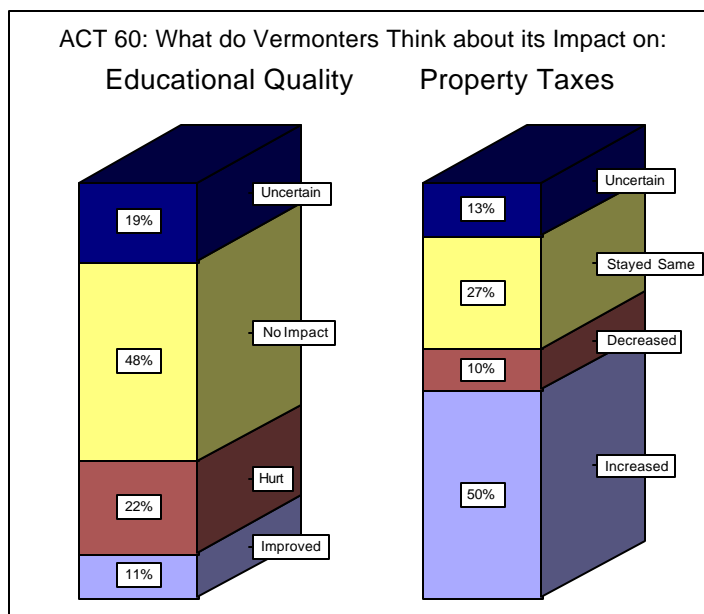
Vermonters were also asked about their “feeling of belonging to the community in [their] local town” and 66% of respondents rated it as either “good” or “very good.” This is the first time we asked this question, but it was interesting to note that sense of belonging was highest among respondents who were either married or widowed and those who considered themselves conservatives. It was weakest among those with the lowest income as well as those with the highest levels of education; the latter group includes a high percentage of people who were not born in Vermont.



One way to determine people’s commitment to improvements in government services is to ask them whether they are willing to pay more taxes to support such services (obviously, income considerations enter into people’s minds). In spite of the evident frustrations over increased property taxes in towns throughout the state, many Vermonters are nonetheless willing to pay “an extra \$100 in local taxes” to improve various forms of public services. In fact, Vermonters

willingness to pay an “extra \$100” to improve services like police, fire, and roads or maintain open land has increased since 1990. Yet, the value of \$100 also has diminished during this period and the sum might now seem like a minor increase in taxes.

Just over one-half of Vermonters were again willing to pay additional taxes for “better roads” with similar proportions for “better police and fire protection” and “better schools.” Sixty-three percent of women were willing to have their taxes increased to support the schools compared to only 42% of men, and support increased directly with both age and education. Republicans and conservatives were less willing to support increased taxes for local schools. Perhaps they question whether increased school funding will lead to better performance. The greatest change was the increase in commitment to the “preservation of open land in town,” up by 14% since 1995, a sentiment felt most strongly by liberals, Democrats and those born outside of Vermont.



When respondents were unwilling to spend the extra \$100 for any item, we probed for their rationale. In the case of police and fire protection, 84% said that they simply were satisfied with the service in its present form. In the case of roads, 80% were satisfied with the *status quo*, and 59% were satisfied with the current level of funding for preservation of open land. On the topic of “better schools,” only 33% were unwilling to pay more because they were satisfied with their local schools. An additional 34% told us that they did not believe that more money would help, while 26% believed that \$100 was too much to pay. Another 8% responded that the

extra \$100 would be sent to the State and, therefore, would not help improve their own schools.

The passage of Act 60 in 1997, Vermont's controversial education financing law, focused the public's attention on school quality, property taxes, and financial equity across town lines. This subject stirred strong reactions from many in the sample. Before asking questions about the perceived impact of Act 60, a "filter question" was asked to make sure that people could answer the subsequent questions with some level of understanding: "are you familiar with Act 60, Vermont's education financing law?" Seventy-eight percent answered in the affirmative, with the lowest level of familiarity among women, the young, those politically independent, and those in the lowest income category. The 22% "not familiar" with Act 60 were not asked subsequent questions.

The largest category of respondents (48%) felt that Act 60 had "no impact on the quality of [their] public schools," but more respondents (22%) felt that it "hurt" public school quality than "improved" it (11%).

Very few Vermonters (11%) felt that Act 60 has improved the quality of their local schools while an equally small percent, 10%, thought that their property taxes have declined as a result of Act 60.

Republicans were the most likely to say that it "hurt" school quality, while Democrats were the most likely to say that it had "improved" public school quality, but the largest proportion in both parties said that it had no impact. Sharp regional differences were recorded as well. Residents from Orange and Washington Counties were the

most likely to say that Act 60 has "improved" their schools (27%) while residents from Chittenden County were the most likely to say that it "hurt" their schools (37%). Respondents from the Northeast Kingdom, an area that should benefit from financial transfers from wealthier communities, were by far the most likely (73%) to say that the Act had "no impact" on the educational quality of their local schools.

The third and final question about Act 60 asked whether respondents felt that their property taxes changed as a result of the new law. Exactly one-half felt as though their taxes had "increased;" 10% told us their taxes had decreased; and 27% said their taxes had stayed the same. The percent saying, "increased" was lowest (about 33%) among residents of Orange and Washington Counties and the Northeast Kingdom. Persons most likely to say that Act 60 had increased their property taxes were persons born outside of Vermont, the elderly, the married, and the widowed. In spite of the income sensitivity of the prebates, there was no statistically significant difference by income. For example, 49% of those with incomes under \$40,000 said that their taxes have increased, while nearly the same percentage, 50%, of those with household earnings over \$40,000 said the same thing.

Computers and Quality of Life

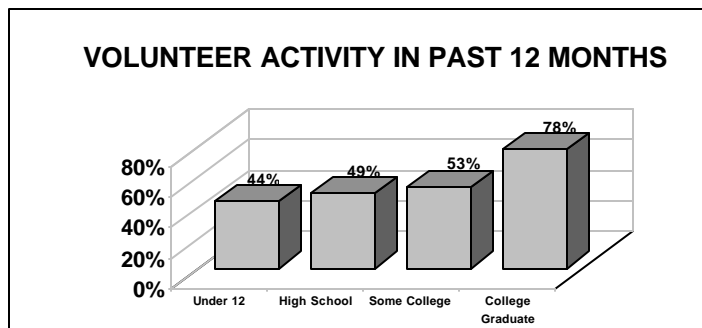
Computers and the Internet did not play a key role in the lives of the most Vermonters when we first started taking the *Pulse of Vermont*. This is no longer the case, and the year 2000 survey instrument reflected the changing role that new communication technologies are having on Vermonters. While the Internet has the power to connect all Vermonters together, many have also worried about an emerging digital divide that will further separate the social classes and ultimately reduce the quality of life for all. Sixty-four percent of our sample told us that they had a computer in their homes, a proportion almost identical to a recently published national figure of 60% recently reported in *The Burlington Free Press*. The characteristics of respondents who were most likely to have home computers were predictable — those in the highest income categories, those with the most education, married persons, and persons

between 25 and 64 years of age. Only 58% of the native-born Vermonters had computers in their homes compared to 71% of those born out of state.

Of those with home computers, 76% use the Internet. Other than e-mail, respondents were asked to identify the main activity the Internet was used for in their homes. The results were as follows: chat rooms, 41%; research-related, 24%; shopping, 10%; reading journals, papers, 9%; work, 8%; formal education, 5%; and finance and stock market activities, 3%. Internet use increased with family income, education, and age, with men and those born outside of Vermont being the most common users. There was an inexplicable gap in Internet use between self-described “liberals” and “conservatives,” with 90% use for liberals and 71% for conservatives.

Whether a respondent had a home computer or not, they were asked whether they thought that “computers and the Internet brought people closer together ... or made people more isolated and distant from one another.” Forty-one percent felt that computers brought people closer together compared to 31% who thought the technology was isolating. The remainder were uncertain. The best educated and the young were the most likely to have positive views, as were people who owned a home computer. A more general question on whether “the Internet has improved, reduced, or made no difference on quality of life” yielded slightly more positive results. Fifty-eight percent chose “improve,” while only 8% chose “reduce.” Consistently, the most positive were younger persons and the better educated. Persons from the Northeast Kingdom were the least likely to say that computers improved their quality of life.

Civic Life



When we examine the importance of various domains of life in a future section, we will see that Vermonters rate “helping others who are having difficulty” as a very high priority, and one that has increased in importance since 1995. It is comforting to note that most Vermonters follow through by their actions on this priority. Overall, 57% of respondents reported that they had volunteered for civic or community

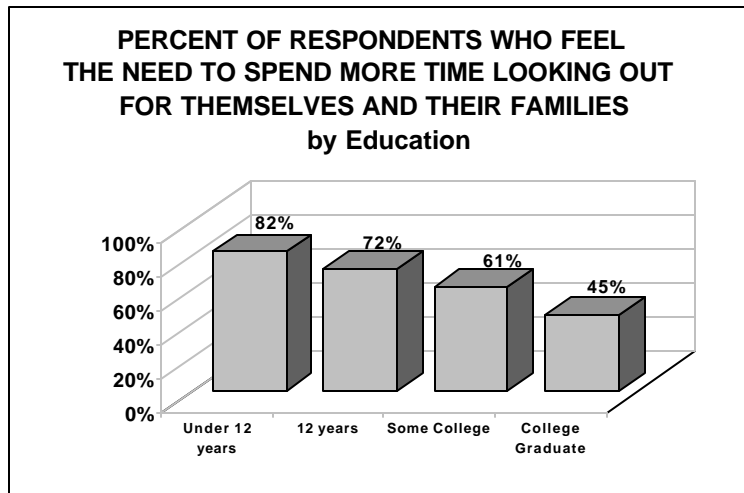
activities in the past twelve months, a proportion slightly higher than the 49% national average. As with other areas of life, levels of volunteerism are dependent on education. For example, 78% of those with a college degree indicate they had volunteered in the past year, compared to only 44% of citizens with less than twelve years of education. Persons who are actively involved in a religious tradition and those with higher income are also more likely to have recently volunteered.

Since a rich civic life is vital to quality of life in the state as a whole, we asked our respondents the following question: “Some people feel that civic life, that is the way that we help each other on our own or through voluntary organizations, has weakened in recent years while others feel as though it remains strong. In your area of Vermont, would you say it has weakened or remains strong?” Six out of every ten Vermonters believe that civic life in Vermont remains

In comparison to their counterparts in other states, Vermonters were more likely to be involved in a volunteer activity (57%) during the year. An equally high percentage felt that civic life remains strong in Vermont.

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strong, while nearly three out of ten told us that civic life had weakened in recent years. The remaining proportion were uncertain. Those in the highest income categories and those born outside Vermont were the most skeptical that civic life remains strong. No longitudinal comparisons are available as this question was a new addition to the third *Pulse of Vermont* study.



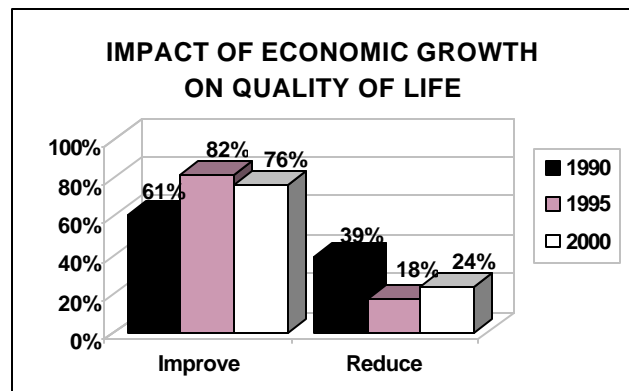
As a final measure of commitment to civic life, we asked a question that survey researchers have asked for more than 60 years to measure social alienation and distance from the prevailing social standards. Respondents were asked to “agree” or “disagree” with the following statement: “*With all the troubles we are facing today, I need to spend more time looking out for myself and my family.*” It is usually thought that persons who agree with this statement tend to have a diminished sense of belonging to the community and are feeling the need to focus on self and family at the expense of the common

good. While not all persons who reject that statement are selfless altruists, persons who agree with the statement may be more likely to have life views characterized by stronger individualism.

The results from this question were consistent with the prior years — 63% agreed, a high percent that causes us to question its reliability as a measure of the lack of civic involvement. After all, this high percent inevitably includes many volunteers committed to a vibrant civic life. In spite of this, only 49% of persons who agreed with this statement volunteered last year compared to 70% who disagreed. Other patterns are clear. The highest levels of agreement are among those with the lowest levels of education and income. There was a parallel decline as levels of income increased: from 78% for the lowest income category to 49% for the highest. Those born in Vermont were also the most likely to feel the need to focus on self and family, as were respondents living in the Northeast Kingdom, and those who have been divorced or separated.

Economic Growth

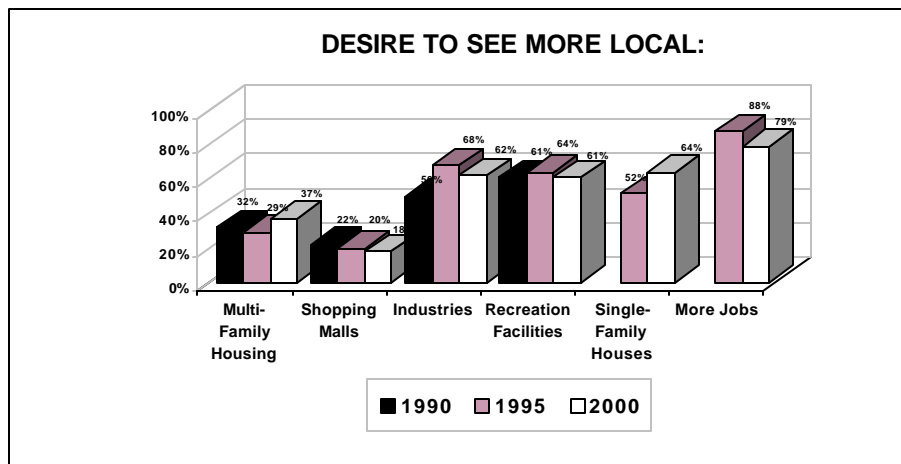
Few issues divided Vermonters more in 1990, the time of the first *Pulse of Vermont* study, than the perceived value of economic growth. Nearly four out of ten respondents felt that economic growth would reduce their quality of life. Anti-growth sentiments were woven broadly into the fabric of Vermont society as some, especially native Vermonters, worried that economic growth would turn the state into a vacation land for “flatlanders” who were driving housing prices and taxes to unaffordable levels. Others, many born outside of the state, equated growth with the type of pollution and congestion they had moved away from.



Since 1990, Vermonters' perceptions about the value of economic growth have become considerably more positive. The widespread loss of jobs and the resulting economic upheaval of the early 1990s undoubtedly changed people's way of thinking about the importance of a growing economy. By the year 2000, Vermonters were most likely to see economic growth in a positive light. No statistically meaningful

differences were found in the way that people from different parts of the state or different group affiliations (e.g., political affiliation, ideology, educational backgrounds) responded to this question. A broad cross-section of Vermonters felt that economic growth would improve their quality of life.

Although Vermonters are now more favorably attuned to the benefits of economic growth than they were in 1990, they are still as divided about whether they favor "less" or "similar control" of economic growth. Only 14% of the sample preferred "more control" (down from 21% in 1990). A sizable and growing minority, (from 39% in 1990 to 44% in 2000), would like to see "less control" of economic growth. A nearly identical percentage, 42%, would like to maintain our current economic controls.



When we see that three out of four Vermonters believe that economic growth will improve the quality of life in Vermont, we are still left wondering whether there are specific aspects of change that are perceived as either more or less desirable. While economic growth clearly provides important advantages to Vermonters, change rarely comes without some cost, whether it be in the public

or private sectors. We now turn to see whether respondents would support specific types of growth *in their own towns* — not just in the abstract.

As a way of reminding respondents of the potential duality of growth, each person was asked to consider the question: "Economic growth provides more jobs and new tax revenues. Yet some people worry about the possible effects of economic growth such as overcrowding and pollution. In your town, would you like to see... (more multi-family housing, more shopping malls, more industries, more recreational facilities, more single family housing, more jobs)." It is not surprising that the most sought after benefit of economic growth is "more jobs," selected by 79% of respondents, but this percentage is down almost ten points from five years ago. Three other categories of growth were considered desirable for almost two-thirds of respondents — more single family houses (64%, up 12% from 1995), more industries (62%), and more recreational facilities (61%). Much further down the

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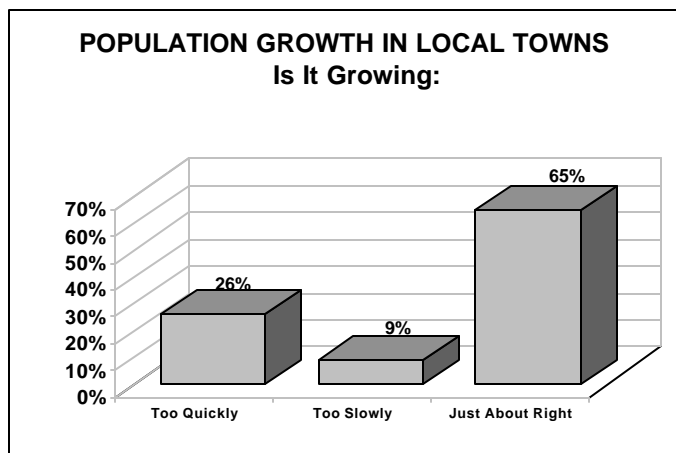
list of desirable items were multi-family housing (37%) and more shopping malls (18%). In comparison to earlier years, the need for more housing, at least single-family homes, now seems better understood by the public.

There were some notable differences in the responses of various sub-groups. Residents from the Northeast Kingdom were the most interested in more industry, while residents of Chittenden County were the least interested. Republicans were more likely than Democrats to favor more single-family housing, but when it comes to multi-family housing, it was those who consider themselves “liberal” who were the most supportive. Republicans and Democrats were equally interested in more jobs, but it was the young who had the greatest interest in jobs. Residents of Chittenden County were the most supportive of multi-family housing, and respondents from the Northeast Kingdom and Orange and Washington Counties were the least interested in that form of housing.

Vermont Population Changes

Population size and density can have an important impact on the quality of life that citizens enjoy and Vermont’s small population is one of the state’s most distinctive characteristics. There are only a handful of states with populations of less than one million, and Vermont’s population of just 608,827 in the year 2000 gives us the distinction of being the second least populous state in the nation. Vermont is also one of the most ethnically homogeneous areas in the United States.

Rising incomes and job opportunities that are the byproducts of a growing economy also promote



population growth. Workers are recruited or attracted from other parts of the country to fill job opportunities or to take advantage of the general rise in prosperity. Native-born Vermonters also are less inclined to leave the state. Yet Vermont’s small population, in turn, has shaped the types and quality of relationships that characterize the state. Town meetings, a part-time non-professional legislature, and a shared sense of community are all vestiges of the state’s agrarian and rural heritage that still continue today. People who move to Vermont are often surprised by how quickly they come to know others in their social or professional circles. If a citizen

wishes to participate in civic life — either in a leadership role, or merely in feeling that their voice “matters” — it is easier in Vermont than elsewhere.

In the year of our first *Pulse of Vermont* survey, the population of the state was 562,758, compared to the year 2000 Census figure of 608,827. This represents an increase of 46,069 or a growth rate of 8.2%. This rate of growth was under the national average of 13.2% for the decade, but higher than the 5.7% average for the other New England states. Some counties in Vermont have experienced higher rates of population growth (Grande Isle, Lamoille, Franklin, and Chittenden), while others (such as Bennington and Essex) have lost population.

Most Vermonters are satisfied with the rate of population growth in their towns. When asked if they felt that their town’s population was growing “too quickly,” “too slowly,” or “just about right,” 65% told us “just about right.” Of those who were troubled by the increase, 26% felt the rate was too rapid, while only

9% felt it was too slow. These proportions vary considerably by location within the state. Forty percent of the residents of Chittenden County selected the “too quickly” option, compared to only 12% of the residents of the Northeast Kingdom.

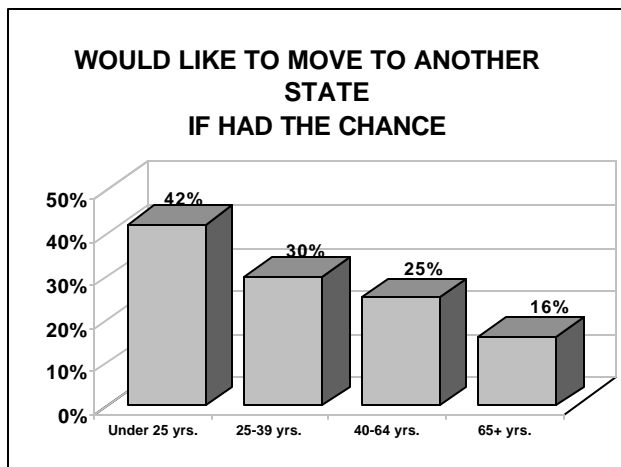
These figures are parallel to an identical question asked in another 1999 statewide survey conducted by the CSSR for the Vermont Population Alliance. This study also found that concern with population growth increased gradually by geographic distance. Twenty-three percent of Vermonters felt that population was “growing too quickly” in their towns; 29% felt that way about Vermont; 71% felt that way about the United States; and 88% for the world.

For the period between 1990-1998, only 27% of the state’s population growth came from in-migration, the remainder being from the natural growth of more births than deaths.

RESPONDENTS WHO HAVE MOVED TO VERMONT			
	1990	1995	2000
Moved for Definite Job	33%	30%	27%
After Moving, Family was Financially:			
Better Off	27	30	27
Less Well Off	29	35	31
About the Same	44	36	42
Respondent Would Have Moved to Vermont Even if Had to Take Cut in Pay	82	74	77

It is a common misconception that most of Vermont’s increase in population is from the migration of people from other states. In fact, according to Department of Health, estimates for 1990-1998, only 27% of the state’s growth comes from in-migration, the remainder being from the natural growth of more births than deaths. The Vermont Population Alliance survey of 1999 found that most Vermonters incorrectly believed that the ratios are virtually reversed.

New migrants to the state are generally attracted by what they perceive as a high quality of life. Among the 54% of our respondents who had lived as adults in other states for a significant amount of time, only 27% told us that they moved here because of a definite job offer. In fact, it appears that the lure of being financially “better off” as a result of their move to Vermont was not the most powerful allure. Only 39% of the migrants who came because of a definite job said they were financially “better off” after their move



to Vermont. Those who moved here for other reasons were even less likely to be financially better off after the move (23%). Over three-quarters of new migrants would still have moved here even if they had to take a cut in their total family income.

We also asked all respondents if they would like to move out of Vermont “if they had the chance to do so,” and found that only 26% said that they would (perhaps those who would like to depart have already moved!). Sixty-one percent would not move even if they had the chance to do so. Younger persons were the most likely to be willing to move out of state, but this sentiment is

in keeping with well-established national trends. Young people are more mobile and move more frequently than older segments of the population. Many of the state's younger residents depart to other areas attracted by a broader array of job and educational opportunities and the allure of something different from what they've known. In the process, Vermont ends up losing some of its brightest homegrown talent who are replaced by very well-educated people from elsewhere (a number of whom are products of the state's public and private institutions of higher education). The long-term impact of this selective circulation process is to create significant gaps in the income and educational status between those born in and outside of the state.

Over three-quarters of people born outside of the state told us that they would still have moved here even if they had to take a cut in their total family income.

The Domains of Life: Private Priorities

No matter how important various aspects of the economy are to the quality of our collective and individual lives, for most people, triumphs and failures in the economic realm are ultimately less important than whatever successes people achieve in their private lives. Many people consider work and the income earned to be only a means to more important ends, such as supporting a family, contributing to society, being able to retire with dignity, social approval, or self-actualization. Indeed, the "Protestant work ethic" taught that we should work hard and be economically productive as a way of fulfilling a higher religious obligation. It is some of these non-material aspects of quality of life that seem most important to our respondents.

PRIVATE PRIORITIES OF LIFE "Very Important"			
	1990	1995	2000
Respondent's Town	66%	76%	71%
Residence	69	78	77
Living in Vermont	73	76	73
A Good Job	76	82	78
Religious Faith	41	51	47
Enough Money	65	75	75
Recreation and Volunteering	39	38	48
Good Friends	84	84	88
Family Life	96	96	95
Helping Others	-	67	84

Since we had already asked respondents several questions about each of the "domains of life," we read them a list of the 10 areas and asked them to rate the importance of each to their own lives. The areas of life defined by our primary social ties are the ones that people considered to be most important. Few will be surprised to learn that "having a good family life" led the list as the most important domain of life, just as it has since 1990. "Having good friends" and "helping others who are having difficulty" came in second and third on our list. The movement of "helping others" to near the top of the list suggested a dramatic shift in its importance, from having had only 67% rating as "very important" in 1995 to its present rating of 84% in 2000. This priority was not offered as an alternative in 1990. In a parallel shift,

The areas of life defined by our primary social ties are the ones that people consider to be most important.

the odd combination of "recreation and volunteering" enjoyed a significant increase in importance, but it remained near the bottom of the list along with "having a strong religious faith."

Satisfaction with Domains of Life

As noted above, the survey instrument was constructed around various domains of life. Each section asked respondents a set of questions which explored these domains in some detail. At the end of each section, respondents were asked to summarize how satisfied they were with each of these areas of their lives. In every one of the 12 domains, more than 60% of the respondents said that they were “satisfied.” People were most satisfied with the

As the Vermont economy has improved, so has satisfaction with “life as a whole.”

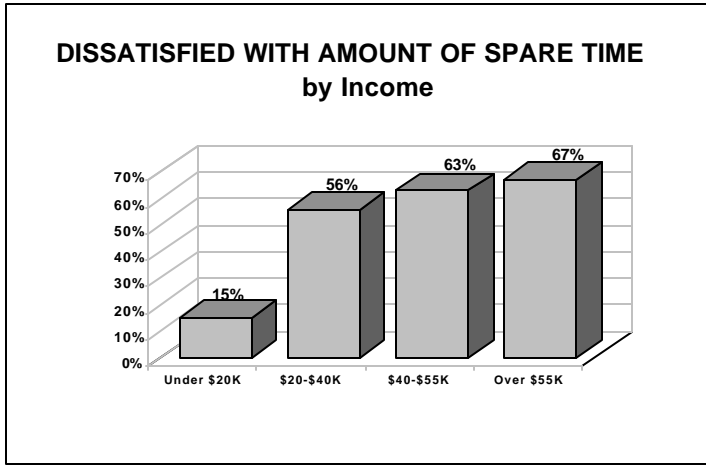
SATISFACTION WITH PRIVATE DOMAINS OF LIFE			
With:	1990	1995	2000
Town	82%	80%	79%
Residence	80	80	81
Life in Vermont	85	81	81
Education	57	54	64
Job	77	73	75
Religious/Spiritual Aspect of Life	66	66	74
Standard of Living	69	63	71
Health	66	66	75
Spare Time	66	66	63
Friends	80	81	84
Family	80	87	84
Life in General	77	75	82

same areas that they considered to be most important, namely “family” and “friends.” Eighty-four percent were “satisfied” with these domains of life, a rate that has changed little since the time of the first *Pulse of Vermont* study in 1990. A summary question about “how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days” indicated that 82% of Vermonters said they were “satisfied,” followed by three items which place us in our physical environment — our residence, our town, and “life in Vermont.” The lowest levels of satisfaction were applied to the respondent’s education and the amount of spare time they had available. As the Vermont economy has improved, so has satisfaction with “life as a whole” (from 75% in 1995 to 82% in 2000). Among the domains tracked, satisfaction with “standard of living” has increased the most from 63% in 1995 to 71% in the year 2000. A Harris Poll conducted in May of 2000, which asked a national sample of over 1,000 Americans about what they felt “good about” yielded results that were quite similar to the ones reported here. When it comes to satisfaction with the private domains of life, the views of Vermonters correspond closely to those in other states.

There were few major changes over the decade except for a small overall increase in satisfaction on most items. The only area that showed significant increases since 1995 were in the areas of education and standard of living. There are a number of interesting differences in which sub-groups are most satisfied with the various domains. Some are quite predictable.

For example, persons with higher incomes are more satisfied with their jobs, their standard of living, the towns they live in, and even their health. They are least satisfied with the amount of spare time they have. The elderly, in contrast, are most satisfied with their spare time, the residence in which they live, their levels of education, their standard of living, and “life in Vermont” as a whole.

Persons with higher incomes are more satisfied with their jobs, their standard of living, the towns they live in, and even their health. They are least satisfied with the amount of spare time they have.



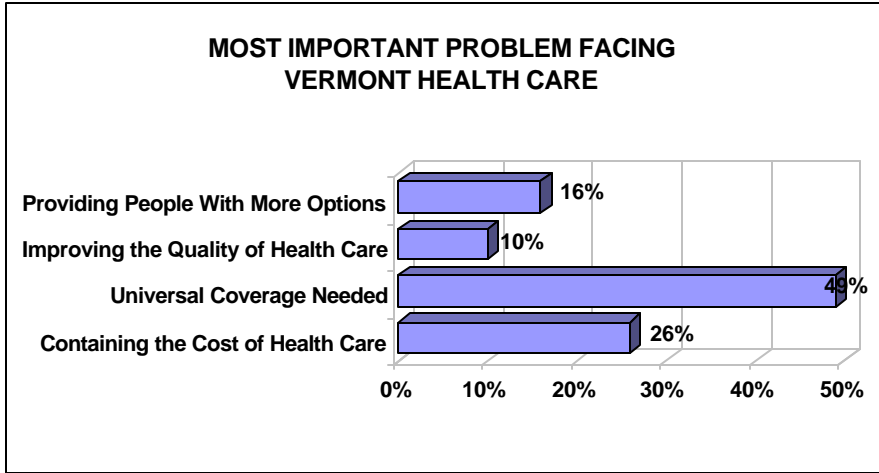
There are many reasons why people decide to remain in or move to Vermont. A specific job offer, as shown above, is not always the reason. People are attracted to Vermont’s quiet pace of life, its rural traditions, its physical beauty, and the healthy environment. Perhaps one surprise faced by many newcomers is that this postcard image of the state may be far removed from the realities of everyday life. The pace of life might not be as leisurely as expected. Out of all the domains of life examined, respondents were least satisfied with the amount of “spare time.” While over one-third were not satisfied with this

aspect of their lives, this was an even greater concern among Vermonters with higher income and educational levels. As one might expect, those who worked the most hours per week were significantly more likely to feel that they did not have adequate spare time. Are Vermonters losing some control over their lives or has the “cost” of spare time simply become too expensive, especially for those in higher wage jobs? Robert Reich, the former Secretary of Labor, in his new book *The Future of Success* argues that the competitive pressures of the New Economy are inducing us to work more hours and to work harder, leading to a frenzied existence and a loss of time for family, friends, community, and leisure. These dimensions, of course, play an essential role in determining our quality of life.

There has been almost a 10% increase in the satisfaction of Vermonters with their health over the decade. In a related question, 90% of respondents told us that they “currently have health insurance,” a proportion almost identical to recent statewide published figures. Only 78% of respondents from the Northeast Kingdom told us they had insurance, but the proportions throughout the state increased with income and education.

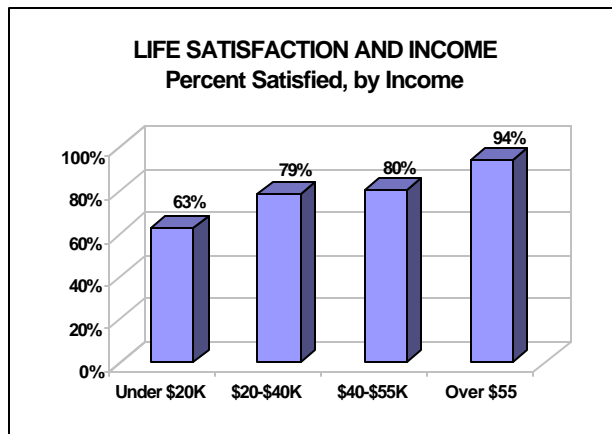
Providing universal health coverage for all Vermonters was selected as the most important health care problem the state faces.

What do Vermonters think is the “most important” health care problem we face today? The most common



choice was “providing health care coverage for all Vermonters,” drawing 49% of all respondents. The second most common choice was “containing health care costs” selected by 26%, and the last two were “giving people more options in the care they receive” and “improving the quality of care,” options selected by 16% and 10% respectively. Democrats, Progressives, and self-

identified “liberals” were the most likely to identify universal coverage as the most important issue.



Since 1995, the proportion of Vermonters who told us that they were either “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with “life as a whole” has risen from 75% to 82%. While there are many factors associated with higher levels of life satisfaction, out of all the domains examined, satisfaction with standard of living correlates most highly ($r=.406$). In light of this relationship, it is not surprising to find that those with higher incomes also report higher levels of satisfaction with “life as a whole.” This relationship is a common finding found in national studies of well-being and income at different points of time and places. Robert Frank, in *Luxury Fever*, has argued that the relationship is more complex than

what at first might seem to be the case. He concludes that it is relative income, a person’s place in the distribution of income, that is the key determinant of perceived well-being. Over a period of time, people adapt, some more quickly than others, to changing life circumstances. We see this in long-term studies which show, on average, a remarkable degree of stability in reported levels of well-being even as a

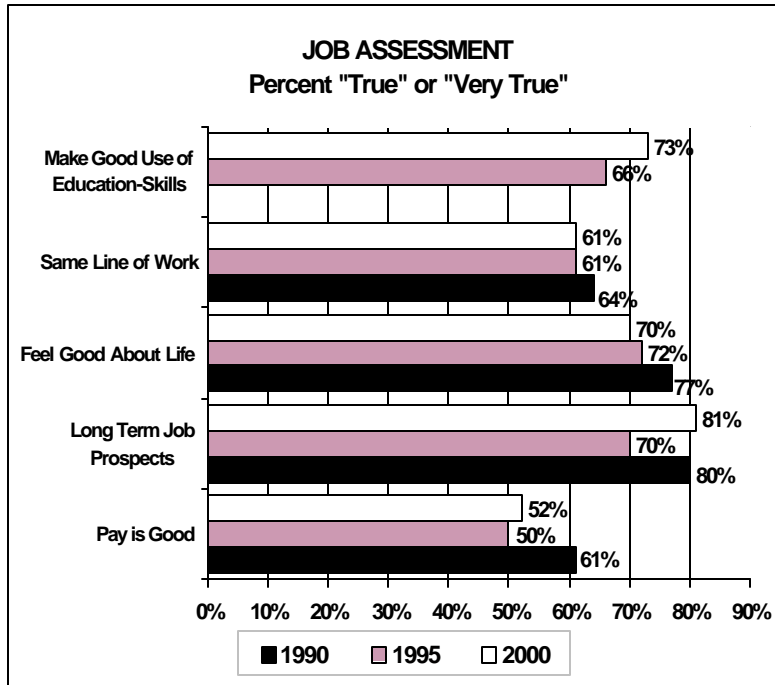
country’s GDP grows significantly. Yet, as John Kenneth Galbraith has pointed out, “Wealth is not without its advantages and the case to the contrary, although it has often been made, has never proved widely persuasive.” While the numbers in our study are small, those who were unemployed and those with reported health problems were much less likely to be satisfied with their “life as a whole.” Age, geographical area, education, belonging to a religious group, gender, and nativity were not significantly associated with this broad measure of quality of life.

While there are many factors associated with higher levels of life satisfaction, out of all the domains examined, satisfaction with standard of living correlates most highly.

Job Satisfaction

At the time of our last *Quality of Life* study in 1995, one would have had to search far and wide in Vermont to find a community that was not experiencing some lingering affects of worker dislocation, corporate downsizing, and the rise of the contingent labor force. While the economy had recovered by 1995 from the prior recession, its impacts — both psychological and real — were still being felt by many respondents in our second *Quality of Life* study. In 1995, 63 out of the 412 respondents had recently “lost a long-term job, one in which they had worked for at least two years.” Unlike early economic downturns, the recession of the early 1990s was a democratic one as workers with diverse backgrounds and throughout the state found themselves out of work.

There was good reason for Vermonters to be more sanguine about their job prospects in the year 2000. Since 1995, 21,400 new jobs have been created, mostly in retail trade (5,350) and business (3,600) and health (2,200) services. Statewide unemployment remains under 3%. In the summer of 2000, “help wanted” signs were as prevalent as the ubiquitous political signs that dotted the Vermont landscape. It was not surprising in this environment to find that 81% of respondents feel that their current jobs offer a good chance for long-term employment, which represents an increase from 70% in 1995. Moreover, a



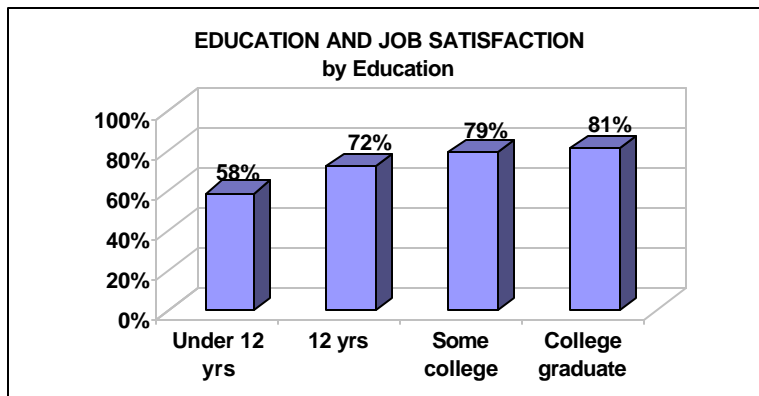
similarly high percentage of respondents, 77%, are either “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their current jobs (up from 73% in 1995, but virtually indistinguishable from the figure recorded in 1990). Respondents from the Northeast Kingdom, which traditionally lags behind the state in job growth, and those with lower levels of education were considerably less likely to be satisfied with their jobs.

Vermont job satisfaction statistics reflect national norms. In a 1999 Gallup Poll, 39% of a national sample said that they were “completely satisfied” with their jobs, nearly identical to the 38% of the *Pulse of Vermont* who said that they were “very satisfied” with their

jobs. The percentage of those in both samples who said that they were either “completely dissatisfied (Gallup Poll)” or “very dissatisfied (Pulse Survey)” was 2%. In another survey conducted by Rasmussen Research in September 1999, 75% of the respondents in a national study of job satisfaction indicated that they were “happy with their current job,” a rate comparable to the 77% who told our interviewers that they were either “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their jobs.

Vermont job satisfaction statistics reflect national norms.

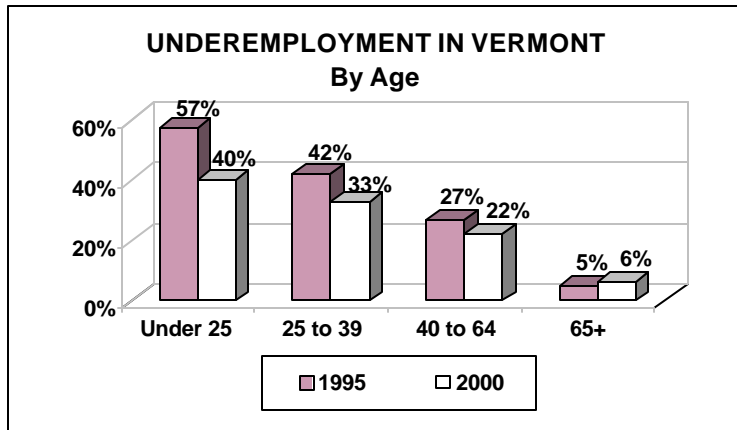
While job satisfaction remains high, respondents were less enthusiastic about pay levels. Only 51% of the respondents felt that their “pay was good,” a rate which has changed little since 1995, and which has declined since 1990 (satisfaction with pay levels was also lower in the previously mentioned Gallup Poll). People may be responding to an expansion that has had only a modest impact on the inflation adjusted earnings of the average worker. Both in Vermont and nationally, median hourly earnings have only recently begun to recover in real terms after falling from a high of \$11.09 in 1990 to \$10.43 in 1998.



Those with the highest household incomes were the most satisfied with their pay. Current Population Survey data shows that workers with college degrees or higher experienced real increases in inflation adjusted hourly wages between 1989 and 1997, while the wages of those with lower levels of education failed to keep pace with inflation. Declines were especially pronounced for those with educational levels below high school.

Whether or not respondents would enter the same line of work if they could “do it all over again” is another measure of job satisfaction. The

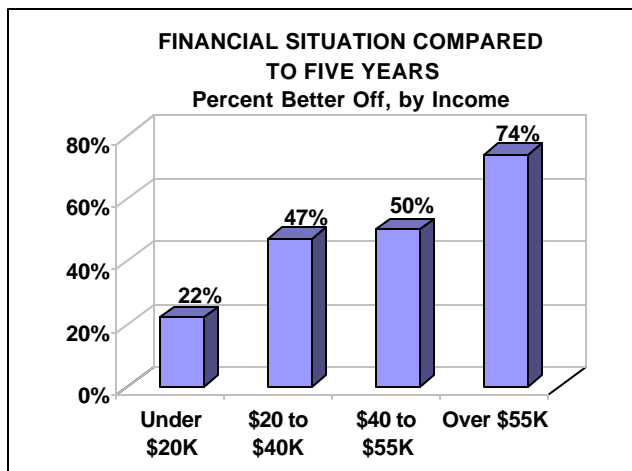
answer to this question has remained virtually unchanged since 1990. Just over 60% of the respondents “would still go into the same line of work” again. These findings do not vary across the different groups within the sample.



The Vermont economy has generated a number of new jobs since the time of the first study in 1990. With the exception of New Hampshire, the annual rate of employment growth in Vermont between 1989 and 1997, at .8%, was higher than other New England states. Yet some have argued that Vermont still faces an employment problem that reflects job quality, not job growth. The image of college graduates helping people onto ski lifts or waiting tables is a common one in the state. How

accurate is this picture? We asked respondents, both in 1995 and 2000, whether their jobs allowed them to “make good use of their education and skills.” In the year 2000 survey, nearly three-quarters felt that their jobs did utilize their skills and education, an increase from 66% recorded in 1995. Both of these figures mask an important age dimension. Younger workers often find themselves in jobs in which they feel underemployed. Eventually, however, most people do seem to find what they consider appropriate employment levels. By the time workers have reached their 40s, nearly 80% feel that their jobs utilize their skills and education.

In 1990, we found a high proportion of workers whose main jobs were based in their homes. The fact that the percentage of home workers, (15% in 1990, 16% in 1995, and 16% in 2000), has not changed over the 10-year period of these *Quality Of Life* surveys gives us greater confidence in these results (it is also possible that these “high” percentages might be impacted by the survey methodology; people who work out of their homes are more easily reached; they answer their phones). Unlike the findings from the earlier surveys, in the most recent study, home workers were indistinguishable in terms of job satisfaction from those that work outside the home. In the past, home workers were more likely to say (1) that their jobs made them feel good about life, (2) would go into the same line of work if they could do it all over again, and (3) that their jobs made good use of their education and skills. People who work out of their homes tend to be somewhat older than other workers. Higher proportions of home workers were found in the Northeast Kingdom (23%) and Orange and Washington Counties (25%) than in other parts of the state.

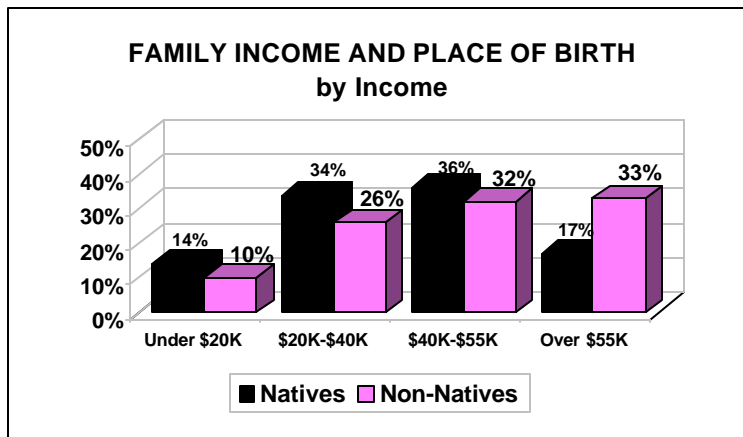


The unemployment level in Vermont has declined since 1995, falling from almost 4.5% to under 3% in 2000, while household income in constant dollars (1998) has increased from \$38,783 in 1990 to \$39,372, a gain of just under \$600. Averages, of course, can be misleading. Do Vermonters feel that they are better off? Overall, just over 50% of the respondents felt that they were better off financially than they were five years ago. Only 17% felt that they were “worse off,” down from the 28% in 1995 who said that they were worse off than they were in 1990. While respondents’ financial status has improved, consistent with national trends, the biggest gains

were recorded for those in the higher income brackets and those who were younger. Nearly one-third of those from the Northeast Kingdom felt they were “worse off” than five years ago. This was the highest rate recorded for any area in Vermont. Even though most Vermonters are either better off or no worse off than they were five years ago, a large minority, 44%, told our interviewers that they still “frequently worry about paying family bills.”

A State Divided

In this past election season, newspaper editorials frequently commented upon the strong undercurrent of a Vermont divided by geography, socio-economic status, religious affiliation, and nativity. The press has been quick to characterize this division in simplistic terms, with political forces repeatedly clashing over



controversial issues, such as civil unions, Act 60, and environmental regulations. The data from the *Pulse of Vermont* study suggests that these forces are hardly one-dimensional and cannot be captured by any single label — not political party affiliation, not region, not education, and not native born versus new migrants. Consider the characteristics of the 60 respondents who had selected “limiting government” as their single most important Vermont priority from among a list of 13 alternative areas. As expected, this group had a large

proportion of persons who were also opposed to civil unions, but the group’s composition was not as homogeneous as some might expect. Among these 60 respondents, 28% were not native-born Vermonters; 20% were college graduates; 18% were Democrats; and 8% resided in Chittenden County. Thus, while subgroups share many traits and beliefs in common, the stereotypical descriptions are limited by a measure of diversity.

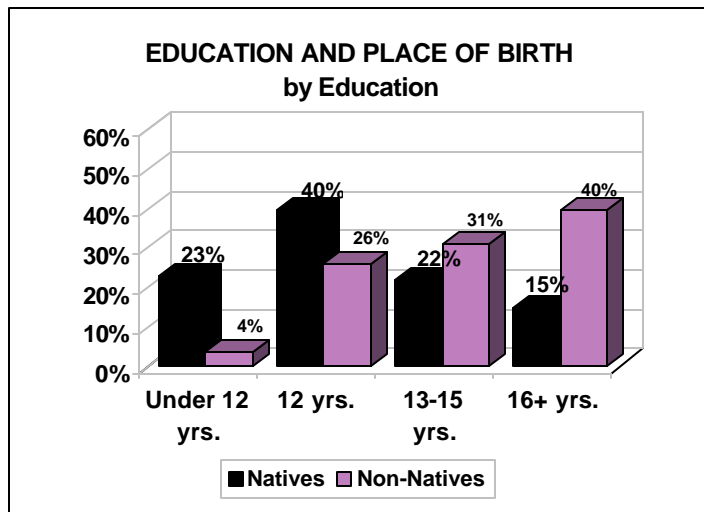
These complexities also remind us that divisions and conflicts over controversial issues should not obscure the high degree of commonality that Vermonters share in a whole host of areas. Vermonters, as was shown earlier, speak with one voice when it comes to identifying the relative importance of the various domains of life (e.g., having good friends, having a good family life, helping others who are having difficulties). Nevertheless, there are divisions within the state that sometimes coalesce around common themes that are sources of acrimony and tension. Group differences that manifest themselves in times of controversy are often important and divide us more often than many would wish. But the differences are also multi-dimensional. Factors such as geography, education, and income are commingled; it is difficult to single out any one factor as the primary cause for group differences.

We can better understand this complexity by examining group responses by geography and nativity, both of which show sharp differences. Demographically, Vermonters are divided almost evenly between those who were born in and outside of the state. According to our survey, 52% of our population was born within the state, a figure that is lower

When income and educational differences combine with nativity, the likelihood of political divisions is accentuated.

than the 58% reported in the 1990 Census. We will need to wait until the full 2000 Census is published before we know the actual rate at the time of our survey. The average for the 50 states is 67%, and the average for New England is 68%. States with substantial in-migration, such as Vermont and New Hampshire, have the lowest proportions of native born. Even within Vermont, natives and non-natives are not evenly distributed throughout the state. Within Chittenden County, for example, only 37% of our sample was born within the state, compared to 70% of those in the Northeast Kingdom.

We found that there are a number of differences between those who were born in Vermont and those who live in Vermont but who were born elsewhere. Two of the most striking differences are that non-natives are more likely to have higher levels of education and income. About 25% of our respondents were making over \$55,000 in household income annually, but the figure is only 17% of those born in Vermont, and 33% for those born elsewhere.



The trend is more pronounced when we examine educational levels. While many people are surprised that only 27% of adults in Vermont are college graduates (slightly higher than the U.S. average), the proportion is only 15% among our native born, but 40% for those born out of state. Even if we calculate these figures to a different base, the differences remain strong and clear: 87% of respondents with less than 12 years of education were born in Vermont, while among those with a degree from a four-year college, 71% were born in other states.

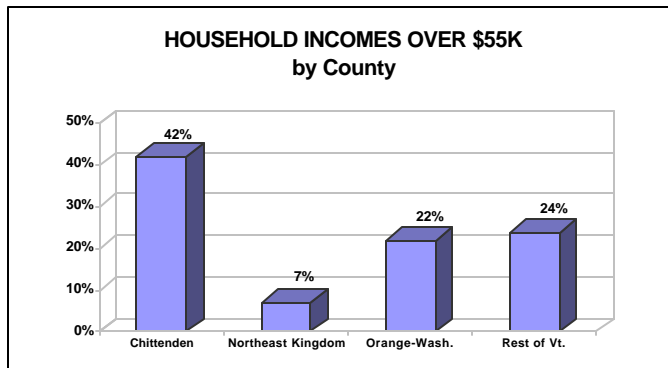
Largely *because* of these educational and income differences between the natives and non-natives, we found many attitudinal and quality of life differences as well. Yet, when we compare “natives” and “non-natives” with equal educational or income levels, the differences between the two groups diminish. This is not to dismiss the social significance of the fact that the three characteristics are strongly co-related, and to some extent, causally linked.

When income and educational differences combine with nativity, the likelihood of political divisions is accentuated. We see this in the well-established geographic concentrations of native-born Vermonters (or concentrations of non-natives) in our various counties with their accompanying political orientations. Some of the more prominent differences by nativity are as follows:

- 13% of respondents who were born in Vermont describe themselves as politically “liberal” compared to 31% of those born outside of Vermont.
- 35% of those born outside of Vermont think that life in Vermont as a whole is “getting better” compared to 26% of those born in Vermont.
- 71% of those born outside of Vermont have computers in their homes compared to 58% of the native born.
- 59% of those born outside of Vermont agree that “with all the troubles we are facing today, I need to spend more time looking out for myself and my family” compared to 67% of the native born.
- 56% of those born outside of Vermont told us that their financial situation is “better off” than five years ago compared to 46% of the native born.

- 7% of those born outside of Vermont felt that issues of freedom, privacy, and government restriction are “under attack today” compared with 15% of the native born. Vermont-born respondents were similarly more troubled by issues of adequacy of health care, as well as safety and criminal justice. Those born outside of Vermont were more likely to feel that issues of “family life, values and community” were under attack.

Chittenden County is unlike any other area in Vermont in terms of population growth, density and diversity. It is home to about one in every four Vermonters and shares in common some of the problems



that are unique to many urban and suburban areas such as sprawl and traffic congestion. For some time, Chittenden County has been the prime engine responsible for much of Vermont’s economic growth. Between 1990 and 1999, an additional 36,544 jobs in areas covered by the unemployment insurance system were added to state totals. Among these jobs, 16,408 or 45% were located in the Burlington labor market area. Annual wage rates are also much higher in the Burlington labor market. For example, average annual wages in the Burlington area in 1999 were

\$32,102 in comparison to \$27,589 for the state as a whole. In Chittenden County 42% of our respondents had household incomes of over \$55,000 in comparison to just 7% in the Northeast Kingdom, 22% in Washington and Orange Counties, and 24% for the rest of the state. Some other prominent differences by region include:

- 40% of respondents in Chittenden County felt population in their town was growing “too quickly” versus 12% in the Northeast Kingdom, 29% in Orange and Washington Counties, and 24% in the rest of the state.
- 49% of respondents from Chittenden County want to see more multi-family houses in comparison to approximately 35% for the rest of the state. Respondents from the Northeast Kingdom were the most likely to prefer more industries and jobs and more recreational facilities than other Vermonters.
- While few Vermonters felt that Act 60 had helped their schools (11%), respondents from Chittenden County were much more likely (36%) to feel that their schools have been hurt than others in the state (17%). Only 4% of Vermonters from Chittenden County felt that Act 60 reduced their property taxes in comparison to 11% for respondents living in other counties.
- 69% of respondents from Chittenden County have computers in their homes in comparison to 54% for those from the Northeast Kingdom.
- 96% of respondents from Chittenden County have health insurance versus 78% from the Northeast Kingdom.
- 25% of respondents from Chittenden County prefer more government control of economic growth versus 7% in the Northeast Kingdom, and 11% for respondents living elsewhere.
- 4% of respondents from Chittenden County felt that the economy had worsened over the last 5 years in comparison to 15% for those from the Northeast Kingdom. 70% of those from Chittenden County felt that opportunities for cultural activities had improved over the last 5 years in comparison to 43% in the Northeast Kingdom. Ease of travel had worsened for 25% of respondents from Chittenden County versus 14% for those living elsewhere.

- One-third of respondents from the Northeast Kingdom selected “limiting government” as their top public priority versus 6% for those from Chittenden County.
- 40% of respondents from the Northeast Kingdom felt that their attachment to their local communities was “very good” compared to 20% in Chittenden County, and 33% for the rest of the state.
- 80% of respondents from Chittenden County were satisfied with their jobs versus 66% for those from the Northeast Kingdom. Nearly one-third of respondents from the Northeast Kingdom frequently worry about paying their bills versus 20% in Chittenden County and 15% elsewhere.
- Respondents from the Northeast Kingdom were the most likely to be a member of a religious group (75%), the most likely to feel that they needed to “look out for themselves and their families (74%), and the least likely to have volunteered in the last 12 months (44%). Respondents from Washington and Orange Counties were the least likely to be a member of a religious group (49%) and the least likely to feel the need to “look out for themselves and their families” (46%). Respondents from Chittenden County were the most likely to have volunteered during the last 12 months (66%).

Regional differences and resulting conflicts in Vermont are likely to become more pronounced if economic growth continues to be centered in selected areas of the state. When unbalanced growth is combined with differences in education, income, and nativity, the state faces a future of more strident conflicts like those seen in the recent election. Ultimately, this may impact the quality of life that Vermonters have come to appreciate and expect.

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Conclusion

In 1989, the Vermont Business Roundtable contracted with the Center for Social Science Research at Saint Michael’s College to study a broad array of factors which contribute to or undermine the vitality of Vermont’s quality of life. Over the next decade, two more samples of Vermonters were called upon, once in 1995 and again in the year 2000, to help us redefine and measure Vermont’s quality of life. During this ten-year period, we have seen the rise and fall of public officials, the introduction of important new legislation, old industries being replaced by companies from the “New Economy,” the expansion of new technologies into households, and, of course, new problems. While Vermont’s institutional landscape has changed and, with it, the political concerns of its people, the basic values and priorities that define the private lives of citizens have remained remarkably steady.

Vermonters once again told us that their relationships with their families and friends, were the most important factors defining their own quality of life. Our residences, our towns, our jobs, and even our income levels all fade into the background when we compare them in importance to having close-knit and rewarding relationships with families and friends. These are not ordinarily subjects of public discussion,

targets of legislation, or social movements for reform. Typically considered “private,” we hold these relationships close to “home” and value them for their stability. As long as the changing institutional landscape and public policy do not interfere in this domain, then Vermont’s quality of life will remain strong and largely insulated from the day-to-day travails of life.

When we examine how Vermonters appraise their lives, we are struck by the similarities to norms recorded by other survey researchers in national studies on perceived well-being or quality of life. On average, Vermonters seem to be doing as well as most people in America. This seems paradoxical in light of some of the more objective state rankings related to quality of life. Vermont crime rates, for example, are almost the lowest in the nation (forty-ninth in violent crimes), we have fewer bankruptcies (forty-ninth lowest in 1999), a smaller percent of children in poverty (sixth lowest in 1999), many physicians per capita (sixth highest in 1997), smaller male-female wage differentials (second best in 1995), and fewer families headed by a single parent (fortieth in 1998). Other summary indexes also make us the envy of most states. The Children’s Rights Council rated Vermont the second best state for children while Vermont was rated number one in overall “Quality of Life” by the Thomas Index and eighth “Most Livable” on the Morgan scale. These external indicators can be more readily influenced by public policy than the quality of people’s family relationships and friendships. There would be no reason to expect that this private aspect of life in Vermont, an essential ingredient of well-being, would be substantially different here than elsewhere.

The decade of the 1990s brought economic growth and various forms of welcome improvements to the material side of Vermonters’ lives. Thousands of new jobs were created; household incomes rose for many Vermonters; unemployment remained at historically low levels; and many other indicators of social change and civic health showed notable improvements. Such material progress was reflected in many of the quality of life issues raised by our respondents. Satisfaction with “life in general” and the standard of living were the highest they had been since our first survey. The memories of the recession of the early 1990s, and the subsequent concerns that surfaced clearly in our second *Quality of Life* study in 1995 have not completely disappeared. People realize that times have improved and this is reflected in their assessments of how well their lives are going. More people were willing now to invest in many public amenities such as roads, city services, and the preservation of open land than in earlier years.

As if we needed reminding, the results from our surveys indicate that the material aspects of our lives are important. As the economy improved, so too did the assessments of respondent’s quality of life. This was manifest clearly among respondents with higher incomes who were satisfied with a range of quality of life issues, including their jobs, their town, and even their health. However, on the “down side,” rising affluence comes with a price. People with higher incomes expressed much more concern about the lack of spare time in their lives. They also may ratchet up their spending plans. Nearly one-half of the respondents worried about being able to pay their monthly bills.

Education is one area where there is a persistent dissatisfaction. It was the top priority of Vermonters among 13 competing choices, but even though there is some sense that the schools have improved over the past five years, satisfaction is still lower than in most other areas of life in Vermont. Among those unwilling to provide further financial support to the schools, one-third felt that more money would not help improve educational quality. Vermonters saw little reason to hope that the enactment of Act 60 would be helpful. Indeed, 70% of our respondents felt that it was either “hurting” or had “no impact” on their local schools, and a mere 10% felt that it decreased their taxes.

As is the case in any decade, public issues and controversies have a way of quickly surfacing and then disappearing from public view. However, some public issues seem to have greater resilience. While respondents assign a high priority to “preserving clean air and water,” our results suggest that various environmental concerns have nevertheless moderated somewhat in the public’s consciousness. While the environment may not have been topmost on people’s minds, many more respondents than in either of the

two previous surveys cited some aspect of our quality of life that was under attack. In the summer of the year 2000, civil unions and Act 60 easily upstaged all other statewide issues, creating significant public discord. For a significant minority of the sample, dissatisfaction was galvanized around powerful concerns about what they saw as unwelcome intrusions by the government into their private lives. While strong feelings were expressed by respondents during the course of the interviews about recent legislative actions, it was surprising that these concerns did not impact their assessment of their own well-being or quality of life. People seem to have a way of insulating their own perceptions about quality of life from these volatile issues.

In spite of the public discord that filled the front pages of our newspapers in the summer of 2000, about the same proportion of Vermonters felt that life was getting “better” (30%) as did those who felt that life in Vermont was getting “worse” (31%). Those who felt life was getting “better” were those who considered themselves on the “liberal” side of the political spectrum and they were joined by those who most benefited from the improvements in the economy.

The ideas of continuity and change are clearly reflected in the data findings. Equally apparent and perhaps even more compelling were the complex set of social, economic, and regional divisions that permeate the data. The fracture lines are fairly consistent, yet defy easy generalizations. While significant commonality can be seen in the way that people from all walks of life and backgrounds answered a number of questions, sharp divisions still emerge when analyzed by education, income, county, political ideology, and nativity. Indeed, the stereotypes that depict Chittenden County and the Northeast Kingdom as being “worlds apart” contain a disquieting degree of truth. Likewise, the stereotypes that depict native-born Vermonters and new migrants as personifying different sets of expectations and priorities is not without a basis in reality. When the various divisions overlap, they can coalesce into social conflicts and balkanization that become acrimonious and divisive. The year 2000 elections manifested some of these tensions.

It should not be surprising to find divisions within populations. By their very nature, market economies generate differences based upon an array of social, personal, and human capital factors. If we look at the differences between those born in Vermont and those born in other states, we learn that the majority of the college educated and, therefore, more wealthy were born out of state, while a majority of those of the lowest educational levels and with the lowest incomes were born and raised in Vermont. Younger and well-educated native Vermonters, a group which could be counted upon to reduce these disparities, often seek their fortunes outside the state when they begin their careers. The differences between native and non-native-born Vermonters become more significant when we combine these overlapping traits and observe the many issues in which “quality of life,” and “satisfaction” are positively related to either higher education, higher income, or both. If we look at another basis for social division — that of county differences — we again see the overlap with educational and income differences. Unbalanced economic growth, with Chittenden County’s strong gravitational forces commandeering many of the state’s resources, has led to sizable differences in socio-economic status and expectations. Other authors and social commentators who have used the term the “Two Vermonts,” correctly underscore the depth of these divisions. Yet, unlike some of the private factors underlying quality of life, the nature of these divisions is subject to public policy. Public policy that recognizes and attempts to respond to these divisions will help ensure that future generations will share in the distinctive quality of life that Vermonters now expect and appreciate.

This report reminds us of the complex balance in our lives and in our society. Many of our satisfactions are tied to the material basis of our lives, but we have also learned that quality of life is not limited to the tangible. Our society should continue to work towards that elusive and delicate balance between supporting the private spaces that we inhabit as citizens, providing an efficient and responsive government, and nurturing the productive work of private enterprise as we pursue the common goal of sustaining Vermont’s quality of life.

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