

Takoma Park Focus Groups

Study Findings

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Study Background

The City of Takoma Park, Maryland conducts a periodic resident survey. As part of the 2018 survey process, the City wanted to hear from residents who have historically been less likely to respond to a traditional survey. The City of Takoma Park contracted National Research Center, Inc. to conduct two focus groups: one with African immigrants and a second with Spanish-speaking residents.

Script Design

In conjunction with Takoma Park staff, NRC developed a focus group script with questions that were asked in both discussions. The commonality in the script among the two groups enabled a deeper understanding of residents' opinions. The script focused on participants' current perspectives of community strengths and challenges, government service provision, sources of information, and diversity and inclusion. The script can be found in *Appendix A*.

Recruitment and Participation

The focus groups were held at the Takoma Park Community Center. Childcare and refreshments were provided, and those participating in the discussion were given a \$50 cash thank you gift. The discussions were guided by a professional facilitator and were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis purposes. The Spanish-speaking focus group transcription was translated into English for analysis. The discussions were held for approximately 60-90 minutes.

Participants for the African immigrant group were recruited by staff and volunteers of CHEER (Community Health and Empowerment through Education and Research). As some of the participants were not fluent in English, a facilitator from CHEER who spoke Amharic also participated and provided assistance to ensure that focus group members understood the questions. Nine African immigrant residents participated in the group, which was held on September 5, 2018.

The focus group with Spanish-speaking residents was recruited by staff of Dragonbridge, a multicultural communications company in Maryland. They worked with community organizations serving Spanish-speaking residents of Takoma Park to recruit participants. Eight residents participated in discussion, which was held on October 15, 2018.

Data Analysis

Comments from the focus groups participants were analyzed qualitatively. The NRC analyst first listened to and read through all responses to identify key statements and general themes and organized excerpts of each discussion so that recurrent themes could be coded and further analyzed.

Study Limitations

As with all focus groups, the small number of participants and purposeful selection of participants limit the generalization of these results. They do, however, suggest what other residents might say, despite not being intended to be broadly representative. These focus groups lend insight into the opinions of the residents with whom we spoke about Takoma Park, and helped inform the content of the survey instrument.

Using the Report of Study Findings

Themes from the focus groups are summarized in the following pages. Similarities as well as any differences in responses between the groups are indicated throughout the report. Direct quotes from focus group participants are included to highlight perspectives. These quotes are indented and italicized. Words added to enhance reader understanding appear in square brackets. Each quote under a given topic is from a specific individual, unless otherwise specified.

Study Findings

Community Strengths and Challenges

Focus group participants were first asked to write down three words (positive or negative) that described what they thought about Takoma Park. Residents were overwhelmingly positive about their hometown. A variety of words were used to describe perspectives of the community. The most common words chosen were security, diversity and peaceful.

What three words best describe Takoma Park?



Participants were then asked to talk about what they liked best about living in Takoma Park. Many residents cited the sense of community and small town feel.

- *There is also solidarity here at Takoma.*
- *I think of a small town and the same time homelike, because we feel welcome, like family.*
- *Solidarity, but it's not just like people take care of each other, but how we take care of nature, how we take care of the animals, the kids...*
- *There's this neighborhood where we have all known each other for some time now, so you can hear things like: "oh, please take care of your girls," or we go out on the street and we're like: "hey cousin!" We yell because we know each other, we're not really cousins but we know each other.*

- *When I think about Takoma Park, I think it's like a family, I think also about the community.*
- *Takoma is a small town in the middle of a big city. In my country we call "guajiros" people that come from farms, so I consider myself a "guajiro" and that's what I like about Takoma, you live like in a small town but in the middle of a big city.*
- *For me, community. Very nice people, safe and free of crimes mostly. I appreciate my community.*

Related, a number of participants hailed the diversity and inclusion of their city.

- *[D]iversity is really nice here in Takoma Park, [it has a] really open mind too. Takoma Park is really open.*
- *I have neighbors from different origins[...]. [W]e all speak English very bad, but we can understand each other. People come from different cultures and we help each other.*
- *[I]t's really diversity, it's a lot of people that live everywhere, different cultures. When they do the farmer's market, you can see a lot of people everywhere, Latinos, no Latinos.*
- *People are very open, liberal, friendly.*

In addition, Takoma Park was considered a secure, peaceful place. Residents particularly contrasted the safe atmosphere of the city in comparison to other areas nearby.

- *When someone talks about Takoma, security comes to mind. I think I'm safe living in Takoma.*
- *It's very safe. I've been here for a long time, and I have not had any accident or incidents.*
- *The first thing I value about a place it's that I can feel secure and peaceful. I think it's a very peaceful area.*
- *I observe that it is very peaceful area. The communities are so quiet.*
- *You can take your kids around here and find a safe place to walk.*

Other positive descriptors of the city, chosen by one or two participants, related to the quality of the schools, the transportation system, the city's natural environment and its geographic location.

Improvements Residents Would Like to See in Takoma Park

Participants were asked to think about Takoma Park and, if given a magic wand, what one thing they would change. The most common changes desired by residents focused on increased housing, security, childcare and new community activities.

Housing issues were a common complaint of focus group participants. The quality and affordability of multifamily housing, as well as the relationships between landlords and tenants were frequently mentioned. A number of participants reported that their apartments or complex facilities were poorly maintained. They also reported a lack of response and concern from the landlords.

- *The apartments in Takoma, most of them I would say, about 90% are in really bad condition. Some people complain, but if you complain, then you have to go.*
- *Many times the owners are like, "well you're rent is really cheap", but you have to say, "yes I need this cheap, but we need to fix things also." I call and I say, "my bathroom is full of mold, it's looks really bad," and the answer is, "you have to leave the window open so it doesn't get that way." If a light is not working I have to go and buy it and change it. So, even though I complain, I feel like they don't do anything.*
- *In the apartment where I live, there are too many cats around, so that should be managed.*
- *The pool is not clean or sanitary. So, needs improvement.*
- *They shut down the pool, but somehow, they managed to get the maximum rate increase this year.*
- *The grass is not even managed--they stopped cutting the grass. The grass is as tall as my waist, and the guy was telling me there was a snake going through the grass. He saw a snake.*
- *The wall is cracked, my cabinet doesn't work, and the houses are sticky from all the old paint.*
- *The company, they just lie to me, lie after lie.*

Focus group participants also noted that purchasing a home was costly in Takoma Park, forcing many to rent. The increasing cost of rent also concerned residents. Some felt new townhomes or other smaller, affordable owner-occupied units would be a good addition to the city.

- *Rent is increasing a lot over the past 2-3 years. It is getting really bad.*
- *My rent increased close to 2.2%.*
- *Prices are rising but I am unable to move. I am stuck.*
- *Rent is very expensive. If I pay like \$1,000, \$600 for a bedroom, why don't I just pay that for a mortgage, a townhouse, yes?*

Although security was felt to be a positive asset of Takoma Park, there still were a number of safety concerns in the community. Many of the concerns related to areas of public use of alcohol and the smoking of marijuana near parks and playgrounds.

- *You can see them with their little black bags and they cross the street, sometimes they fall, sometimes they don't.*
- *There are a lot of drunk people, asking for money in the street.*
- *You have to be careful because you don't know how they are going to react, they are not very conscious of what they are doing.*
- *[Y]ou can also see people selling drugs, and they are all under the influence. We have kids, we walk by their side. We are not scared and neither are they. You don't see them with the intention to hurt you, but still we don't like that the kids have to look at those things.*
- *I'm always in this area, mainly by Flower, you can see alcoholics in there all the time. They give a bad appearance and might be a little dangerous, because there are kids and young people in there. They are always upsetting them.*
- *There are a lot of young people that gather in there [parks] when they should be at school, they are in there during school hours.*
- *The kids see people smoking marijuana [in parks] so I took my kids away. I have seen teenagers, and there are one or two groups that are bad examples. The other ones here, I welcome them, but they are bad models.*

- *Whenever I go to the playground, especially during the school year, there are groups at the school that hide in the bushes or even in front of the children. They are just smoking. It is a high smoking area.*
- *At the top of the basketball field, you see big kids and they hide inside and take some bad actions with this marijuana. It is the environment of protection. When the park police come around, they hide and just throw the cigarettes or the thing.*
- *There is a walking in the bushes, but you can't walk safely, so that's a concern. They are mostly youngsters.*
- *For me all people that smoke should be out of here!*

There also were concerns about general safety in the area of town bordering with neighboring communities.

- *I cannot say there isn't any danger, that I don't feel any danger. I live near Langley Park, and where I live there's a lot of addicts, people on the streets, shouting, or whatever.*
- *It would be good to have a borderline between Langley Park and Takoma Park.*
- *So when you are in Takoma Park but near Langley Park you have to be more cautious.*

A number of community services also were felt to be lacking by focus group participants. A number of focus group participants suggested the idea of a community clinic. Healthcare was believed to be expensive in Takoma Park. Although participants acknowledged that there were already quality programs dedicated to childcare, recreation and education in Takoma Park, residents wanted more to see more programs in the community.

- *I would like to have an after-school daycare [near my home]. I would want five days. [For] my work, I need to have a daycare after school.*
- *It would help to have after care for the kids.*
- *Residents are not getting childcare in the summer. They need the service to be expanded.*

- *[needed service] Kids' program for after-school/weekends. (Kindergarten-4th grade)*
- *Childcare and first aid classes (currently only offered to teens) but should have it for mothers, parents, etc.*

Additional recreation opportunities suggested by the participants included increases in the number or variety of: indoor activities during the cold season. (e.g. Chuck-E-Cheese, or play stations), playground facilities, soccer fields, gymnasium time, and community party rooms. Some suggested a community garden as a great way to engage residents of all ages.

- *People here like to work in their gardens. It's an activity that people like. The purpose is to produce food so you [the City] should get them organized so they can produce more. I see people in their gardens with tomatoes, vegetables, chilies, and we need to take advantage of that enthusiasm.*

Other offerings suggested for the City, chosen by one or two participants, related to the senior job skills programs, adult reading programs and access to a legal advisor.

A final area where focus group participants felt Takoma Park could improve related to economic development. A couple of residents reported an interest in new restaurants, new shopping opportunities and more local jobs.

Government Service Provision

After discussing current perceptions of the community, participants were asked a number of questions to uncover their views about local governance in Takoma Park. Most of the conversation around government opportunities tied back to the community strengths and weaknesses discussed earlier in the sessions.

Residents were asked which services the City provided best. Although most expressed positive opinions toward the City of Takoma Park in general, police, transportation, cleanliness and various recreation/cultural attractions were those highlighted in the discussions. It is noteworthy that while at least some focus group participants were concerned about drug use in parks or other visible locations, some participants lauded the public buses as free of drugs.

- *The Police department does a great job. Keep it up!*
- *The police do good job. Our community is safe.*

- *Transportation is good.*
- *I use the bus for transportation to the city, and I see the society that is here is drug free. There is no violence in contrast to other areas, so I do appreciate the safety of transportation. It [the bus] is a drug free zone.*
- *Cleaning of the city is very great, and that is appreciated.*
- *I like Takoma Park because they collect the garbage every day where I live.*
- *The library and the playgrounds are fantastic.*
- *The mini-libraries they did all over Flower Street-- I love it. I can go with the kids, and I would leave some books and pick up new ones. It's like little pretty houses, and when I saw them the first time I was very proud to live in Takoma.*
- *The rent in Takoma Park does not go up more than usual.*

When asked what services the City could improve, participants circled back to their complaints about landlord-tenant issues and apartment maintenance. Participants felt the government could do a better job of inspecting and enforcing code violations, although the complaints were more largely made against the County rather than the City.

- *They could do a better supervision of the complaints. We need a really fast solution, but often times it can be like a month. With a water problem, a person could have contracted a disease, pneumonia, bronchopneumonia, something like that, tuberculosis, you never know. You may think I'm exaggerating, but no. Humidity creates all that, fungus, mold.*
- *The County doesn't do anything and it takes them too long.*
- *[Related to a specific incident] The City of Takoma called the County and they said, "everything is fixed." So the lady from City of Takoma called me and asked, "is it true that everything is fixed? And I said, "No, it's not". The City of Takoma was involved - that's why they solved it, otherwise the County wouldn't have done anything. If the City of Takoma wouldn't have intervened, I would have never gotten a solution.*
- *There are good news and bad news, the inspectors.*

There also was discussion about increased policing in some areas of the city. Some felt that more patrols were needed (near Langley Park and in parks) and also that the police could be more effective in some situations.

- *When my girls walk to school (13 and 6 years old), the police often arrive at the park because young people sometimes fight in there (at the spot where there's a little bridge to the street, Barron street). They see all that and they are scared.*
- *In the area where we live, there are a lot of drunk people standing at the bus stop, sometimes yelling at each other, women vs. men, fighting. Where's the police? And if they come, everybody runs. However, the police don't do anything, and I'm trying to understand, why would they take them? It's just a burden, they're all bums and don't have any money to pay a fine; so, it's hard to see the situation, because you see them every day.*
- *[pot smokers] Yeah, when the park police are coming around, they hide, they just throw the cigarettes or the thing, I've seen that also.*

Streetlights not working (for not only days but sometimes years) and the customer service at the Passport office also were noted as areas for improvement. (The services provided the Passport office overall were felt to be good, it was more that a specific staff member could be more gentle, nice and friendly.)

Information Sources Used in Takoma Park

Focus group participants were asked about the sources of information they used to learn about the City and community events. Most reported knowing of/or using some source of information outlet, but also felt they could benefit from more and different sources.

Although some of the African focus group participants reported using the website, most reported getting most of their information through the City newsletter, apartment or public building message boards and chatting with police and other local government staff. When asked which method of information they preferred, most felt flyers distributed or posted at apartment buildings would work best. Newsletters or flyers in the mail also were considered a good option.

- *In my case, it is very excellent, the website [of the City of Takoma Park]. All the information, the events, the lettering, where is closed, where is open, is fantastic.*
- *It's best if it is just posted, on each building in the lobby. Whenever we get our mail, we can see the notice board in each building.*

- *There is a website of course, and the library also just put some notice on the board, but the most important thing is when there is the poster on the street. When I pass, I just notice that-- that's the easiest way. Because I don't have any time at home to see the website, or to walk down to the library. The whole day I am busy. So, whatever I pass on the street, that's how I get the notice*
- *As with many immigrants when we come, we find a place or we fit the place. If we don't get a detailed website address or mail, it's not easy for us. It would be better they had a new kind of communication center, when you arrive. It's very difficult to fit in, and at some point, it's a breakdown to some of my friends. So, I would advise this information is written.*

For the Spanish-speaking participants, the discussion centered more around whether the information sources were translated into Spanish. Although many of the Hispanic residents could read in English, these translations were felt to be important as it would make the activities feel more inclusive or welcoming.

- *[Spanish translation] That would be good because many people come that don't speak English. Maybe they throw it into the garbage, never read it, so they don't know of the activities.*
- *And the simple fact that the information in Spanish can encourage the interest on it. Because you think: "these are activities for our community". I get the newspaper too, I look at it and I think: "there's only going to be Americans in here," so I don't go.*
- *When I hear about Takoma, the American community comes to my mind. There are many Americans living in here, that's why we feel good in here. It's peaceful. There are many Americans, but we don't feel there're many activities for us. Maybe they want us to get involved, but we don't feel involved.*
- *If part of the newspaper is in Spanish it makes you feel included, like they want to share the information with you.*

Diversity and Inclusion in Takoma Park

The final questions asked of focus group participants related to how the Takoma Park community is for people from diverse backgrounds. Participants from both focus groups were very positive.

- *It is considered a sanctuary city. We won't be persecuted in here, that it doesn't matter our creed or religion, orientation.*
- *I like that -- we all do. I feel people here give all humans equality.*
- *Diversity is good here too, and everybody has fun. We have a good community over here. Even the people of Takoma, they are welcoming, they are very special people too.*
- *Always in Takoma, pretty much whoever, they have international nights. At that time we dress up in cultural dress, and we bring our traditional dish and everything, and we eat together and we see our culture. They show us, and we show them, and the diversity is really nice.*

When asked which, if any, groups of people would not feel welcome in Takoma Park, the only groups identified were marijuana smokers, extremists and racists. Both focus groups discussions revolved around the marijuana smokers.

- *[anyone not welcome?] No, we are family*
- *People smoking marijuana in playgrounds*
- *Maybe the ones that smoke drugs -- because they pollute the environment*
- *I think Takoma's philosophy -- people that are for example, warmongering, that support war or sympathize with extremists in politics -- I don't think they are welcome in this community.*
- *Like people that are really racists -- they will not be welcome*

While discussing the equality of service provision, some participants in the Hispanic group felt there could be greater inclusivity in service provision through more translation, tutorials for new immigrants and more City-sponsored “culture” days. When commenting about equity of services, one participant said, “the Mayor is perfect though. She listens and cares about the community.” (The African focus group did not make it to this final question about equity of services but was very positive about community and diversity overall.)

Appendix A: Focus Group Script

Moderator Discussion Guide

Welcome and Ground Rules (5 minutes)

Hello. Thank you all for coming and participating in this focus group discussion. My name is _____, and I work for an independent research group called National Research Center.

You were invited to join this discussion because you live in Takoma Park and the City is interested in your perspectives on the quality of life in Takoma Park and opinions about your vision for the City's future. The City is going to conduct a resident survey this fall and as part of that process, City staff and council asked us to hold a series of focus groups to assure that the perspectives of all residents are heard.

How many of you have participated in a focus group before? In case you have not been in a focus group before, a focus group is a structured discussion where we'll ask you a series of questions to encourage sharing of ideas and opinions. We really want you to express yourself openly and honestly. There are no right or wrong answers. We just want to know what you think.

We are going to audio record this session to ensure our report accurately reflects your comments. However, your responses will not be linked with your name in any way. Everything you say will be kept strictly confidential. Because we are recording, I may need to remind you occasionally to speak up or talk one at a time so that we can hear you clearly when we review the session audio tapes.

I am your guide, but I want the conversation to be among all of you. Each time I ask a question, we don't need to go around the table to let everyone respond in turn. But every so often I may check in and make sure that we get a chance to hear from different people because it is important that we understand different perspectives. There are only _____ of you, so each one of your perspectives is important to hear. If you would like to add to an idea, or if you have an idea that is different from other people's ideas, that's the time to jump into the conversation. Bear in mind, we're not looking for consensus here; we're looking to hear a variety of opinions and experiences.

[Mention food protocol, money at end of group, no bathroom break].

Ice Breaker (10 minutes)

Let's begin by pronouncing your name for the group and tell us how long you've lived in Takoma Park and why you moved here.

Community Strengths and Challenges (30 minutes)

We're going to spend some time talking about the quality of life in Takoma Park.

1. Take the note card in front of you and write down 3 words that describe Takoma Park. Any three words at all that tell in a nutshell what you think about this city. They can be positive or negative.

[PROBE: Discuss the adjectives. What makes you think of that description?]

2. What do you like most about Takoma Park? Tell me more about that quality or aspect of Takoma Park that you like the most

[PROBE: What is unique to Takoma Park that makes it stand out as better than other places in the U.S.?)

3. If you could wave a magic wand and change one thing in Takoma Park right now, what would it be?

Government Service Provision (20 minutes)

4. Now I want you to think specifically of the City of Takoma Park, the local government here.

5. What services do you think the City does best?

6. What services do you think the City could improve?

[PROBE: In what ways could the service improve?]

7. How well do you think the Takoma Park City government does as listening to its residents?

[PROBE: What are some examples of how they do it well? What are examples of when they have not done it well?]

Information Sources about City of Takoma Park and Community Events (10 minutes)

8. I'd also like to ask you about how you learn about the City of Takoma Park programs, and other community events and activities.

9. How do you get information about city programs and things going on in Takoma Park?

10. How would you like to get that kind of information?

Diversity and Inclusion (20 minutes)

11. Now I want to talk about Takoma Park as a place for people from diverse backgrounds and cultures.

12. *How welcoming do you think the Takoma Park community is for people from diverse backgrounds?*

[PROBE: For People of Color, For Non-US Citizens, For people who speak a primary language other than English, other?]

13. *Are there any groups of people who you think would not feel welcome here?*

[PROBE: Who? Why?]

14. *What about the City of Takoma Park, do you feel like the City provides services equally to all residents?*

[PROBE: IF NOT, which services? Which residents?]

Closing (5 minutes)

Thank you so much for spending time with me today to talk about these important issues. Is there anything else you would like to me tell the City of Takoma Park about the community or governance here?