



FINAL REPORT

LET'S TALK, MARATHON COUNTY

Overview and Lessons Learned from Conducting Deliberative Dialogues

October 8, 2025

Prepared by

Sharon Belton, Ph.D.
April Bleske-Rechek, Ph.D.
Noah Colletti, M.P.P.
Eric Giordano, Ph.D.

And the Let's Talk, Marathon County Team

| | |
|--------------------------|----------------------|
| Julie Bunczak | Corrie Norrbom, M.D. |
| Norma Castro | Gustavo Perna |
| Melissa Coates | Amy Prunuski |
| Nicholas Giordano | Luke Rudolph |
| John Greenwood | Mariana Savelachimal |
| Francisco Guerrero | Rubens Silva |
| Maddie Hahn | Lisa Stein |
| Jami Kaiser | Gwen Taylor |
| Sheng Khang | Jeff Todd |
| Jennifer Leber | Joan Theurer |
| Maysee Lao | Isis Vidal |
| Diana Lozano Sanguinetti | Nate Zurawski |

WIPPS RESEARCH
PARTNERS

WISCONSIN INSTITUTE *for* PUBLIC POLICY *and* SERVICE

Let's Talk Marathon County



Absolutely a great experience. I appreciate moderation of tough discussions around the complex issues...

The conversation was especially spirited and there were many positives that yielded "common ground."

Even though some of the viewpoints were extreme, I at least feel more aware of those differing positions.

It's always good to see things from a different perspective. It can open new opportunities and thoughts you hadn't considered before.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Table of Contents | 2 |
| Overview and Key Findings | 3 |
| Future Opportunities for Let’s Talk | 7 |
| The Let’s Talk, Marathon County Panel | 8 |
| The Let’s Talk, Marathon County Deliberative Dialogue Process and Logistics | 11 |
| Appendix A – Summary of Participant Survey Responses across Topics | 15 |
| Appendix B – Sample Issue Guide – How Do We Manage Immigration? | 20 |

For more information about how to support Let’s Talk or to discuss conducting Let’s Talk dialogues in your community or organization, or for inquiries about moderator training in deliberative dialogue techniques, please contact:
Eric Giordano, Executive Director of WIPPS at eric.giordano@wisconsin.edu.

OVERVIEW AND KEY FINDINGS

WHAT IS LET'S TALK, MARATHON COUNTY?

Let's Talk, Marathon County (Let's Talk) was launched in 2023 by the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) to foster constructive conversations among community members on a variety of highly-charged and complex public issues by using deliberative dialogues.¹ Through this initiative, a panel of nearly 100 politically and demographically diverse residents from across urban and rural areas of Marathon County, Wisconsin has met regularly in small groups to weigh approaches to topics such as:²

- *How Do We Support Youth Mental Health in Our Communities?*
- *How Do We Address Homelessness in Our Communities?*
- *How Do We Manage Immigration in Our Country?*
- *Voting and the U.S. Presidential Election System*
- *How Do We Ensure Access to Safe, Quality, and Affordable Child Care?*
- *How Should We Prevent Gun Deaths in Our Communities?*

To date, 53 deliberative dialogues have been conducted across these topics.³ This report provides an overview of lessons learned from the Let's Talk project, including key findings about the community's ability to engage in civil discourse.⁴

Let's Talk was selected by New Pluralists as one of 32 grantees for the Healing Starts Here initiative, a nationwide effort to address and understand divisive forces in communities and promote healing.⁵ WIPPS was chosen from a pool of almost 800 applicants, and no taxpayer dollars were used for this project.

Let's Talk demonstrates that civic engagement can be promoted by having community members talk with one another through moderated, deliberative dialogues. The results of the Let's Talk project have shown that large majorities of participants who engaged in the Let's Talk deliberative dialogues reported greater confidence in their community's ability to engage in civil conversations about complex topics, as well as considerable common ground, despite the participants' political differences. The Let's Talk dialogues were characterized by high levels of respect for those with differing views; increased understanding of the topics and potential solutions; and increased interest in community engagement. Let's Talk provides a promising approach to fostering civic engagement in highly polarized times.

¹ Founded in 2007, the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) is a unit of the Universities of Wisconsin. Our mission is to address local, state, and national issues by linking public scholarship, civic outreach, and student service to enhance community life throughout Wisconsin. For more information about WIPPS, see <https://wipps.org/>.

² The total number of individuals in the Let's Talk panel at any given time varied slightly, as several individuals withdrew due to factors like moving out of the community. Others were added to account for attrition. The initial panel created in 2023 consisted of 94 individuals; the number of panelists for subsequent topics ranged from 92 to 94. Over the course of the entire project, a total of 97 separate community members were included in the main Let's Talk panel. In 2024, a separate "mini-panel" of 22 Hispanic and Latino community members was formed in order to ensure that the voices of non-English speaking residents were included. In addition, thirty-nine (39) high school students participated in dialogues on the topic of youth mental health as part of the Central Wisconsin Leadership Program. Thus, in total, 158 different community members participated in at least one Let's Talk dialogue across a range of topics. Throughout this report we will focus primarily on the findings from the main Let's Talk panel.

³ The total of 53 dialogues includes 42 dialogues conducted across the six topics with the members of the main Let's Talk panel; eight additional dialogues were conducted in Spanish on the topics of immigration, child care, preventing gun deaths, and creating healthy communities; and three dialogues were conducted with high school students participating in the Central Wisconsin Leadership Program on the topic of youth mental health.

⁴ Detailed summary reports on all of the Let's Talk, Marathon County topics, including Issue Guides, can be found at <https://wipps.org/lets-talk/>.

⁵ New Pluralists is an organization committed to helping Americans recognize our shared humanity, embrace our differences, and solve challenges together. For more information see <https://newpluralists.org/>.

WHAT ARE DELIBERATIVE DIALOGUES?

Let's Talk uses a deliberative dialogue process to facilitate conversations among community members. Deliberation—sometimes called “choice work”—is a way for the public to weigh together various approaches to solving problems and find courses of action consistent with what communities and individuals hold valuable. Deliberation is more than simply raising and discussing important issues in a public setting. Genuine public deliberation is a thoughtful public process by which communities and stakeholders learn from one another and strive to come to judgment together about real policy matters.⁶

- **Deliberation means actively listening when you may not agree and seeking to understand why others feel the way they do.**
- **Deliberation weighs the costs and consequences of potential actions.**
- **Deliberation involves uncovering common ground and negotiating potential solutions.**
- **Deliberation is a kind of talk that encourages responsible decision-making.**

This form of public dialogue is not far removed from what citizens, including elected officials, routinely do every day. However, constructive dialogue is frequently drowned out by incivility and hyper-politicization of issues in public spaces. Advocates of deliberation seek to grow the practice so that public deliberation becomes a healthy and realistic way to create spaces for individuals and communities to work through complex issues and come to common ground on difficult policy choices. Deliberation is, therefore, public work—that is, work by the public, for public purposes. While public deliberation will not address or solve all community problems (nor erase fundamental conflicts in values), it remains an important component of healthy democratic practice and an avenue for residents to become involved in public policy. It also offers a vehicle for individuals to learn more about complex issues and the real tradeoffs that different approaches to community problems entail.

WHAT ARE THE GOALS OF LET'S TALK, MARATHON COUNTY?

Let's Talk uses deliberative dialogues as a way for members of the public to come together to weigh various approaches to solving problems and to find courses of action consistent with their community values. Like much of America, Central Wisconsin is beset by political division, magnified by digital media, which often portrays citizens in a constant state of disagreement around public issues with a shrinking middle ground. Social and popular media offer podiums to the loudest, most persistent voices, which typically represent the opposite poles of the political spectrum. However, research shows that most Americans do not fall neatly into one political party or ideology.⁷

Let's Talk, Marathon County is aimed at fostering constructive conversations among residents on a variety of public issues. It aims to give a voice to those whose thoughts and ideas have been overshadowed by dominant and polarizing narratives. By bringing together individuals from different backgrounds and viewpoints, this program seeks to create an inclusive space where all voices are heard, valued, and respected. The broader goals of Let's Talk, Marathon County are to:

- **Create spaces for residents of central Wisconsin to address issues that matter in a civil and constructive manner.**
- **Build and sustain a community culture of civil dialogue around important issues.**
- **Improve feelings of trust among fellow residents despite differences in viewpoints.**
- **Train local facilitators with capacity to moderate future deliberative dialogues.**

⁶ See, for example, Yankelovich, Daniel, and Will Friedman, eds. *Toward Wiser Public Judgment*. Vanderbilt University Press, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv17vf70s>.

⁷ <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/11/09/beyond-red-vs-blue-the-political-typology-2/>

IS LET’S TALK, MARATHON COUNTY MEETING ITS INTENDED GOALS?

In order to evaluate whether the dialogues are helping to create spaces for residents of central Wisconsin to address issues in a civil and constructive manner and to increase trust among community members despite different viewpoints, the Let’s Talk team created a brief, 20-question survey that was administered after each dialogue. The questions gathered information about whether the dialogues expanded participants’ views on the issue they discussed; helped them consider tradeoffs and solutions; increased appreciation for diverse viewpoints; and increased interest in engaging more in their community about the specific topic. A QR code was available at the dialogue to allow participants to scan and complete the survey on their devices, and paper copies were also available. Participants in virtual dialogues were provided with a survey link. Tables 7 through 12 in Appendix A summarize the survey responses for each of the six dialogue topics.⁸ Looking at the patterns across all of the topics, we find that Let’s Talk dialogue participants report:

- **Greater confidence in their community’s ability to have civil discussions.** Across all of the Let’s Talk, Marathon County topics, large majorities (more than 80%) reported that the dialogue made them “somewhat more” or “much more” confident that their community can engage in civil conversations about complex topics.
- **Considerable common ground, despite political differences.** Each dialogue included participants with a range of political affiliations. Even with these differences, at least 7 out of 10 dialogue participants reported “quite a bit” or “a great deal” of common ground surrounding the topics and solutions they discussed.
- **High levels of respect within the dialogues for those with differing views.** Across the topics, 3 out of 4 participants reported that those with differing views acted “very respectfully” toward one another.
- **Increased understanding of community issues and the pros and cons of potential solutions.** More than half reported that participating in a dialogue helped them better understand the issue they discussed and helped them evaluate the pros and cons of solutions “quite a bit” or a “great deal.”
- **Expanded perspectives and viewpoints.** Many participants (at least half in most dialogues) reported that the dialogue helped them “quite a bit” or “a great deal” to consider perspectives or viewpoints they had not considered before.
- **Input was highly-valued.** Nearly 9 out of 10 dialogue participants responded that they valued “quite a bit” or “a great deal” the input provided by the other participants.
- **Increased appreciation for differing viewpoints.** At least two-thirds reported that participating in a dialogue made them value viewpoints that differed from theirs “somewhat more” or “much more” than before the dialogue. Similar percentages reported being “somewhat more” or “much more” comfortable interacting with members of their community who hold different viewpoints from theirs.
- **Increased interest in community engagement.** Generally, at least two-thirds of dialogue participants reported that participating in the dialogue made them want to be “quite a bit” or “a great deal” more involved with community decision-making about the topics they discussed and made them want to learn “quite a bit” or “a great deal” more about the topics

⁸ Although the data in the tables in Appendix A can be used to observe the general patterns of responses, given the relatively small sample sizes, we often combined response categories when discussing results. Also, the tables can be used to get a general sense of participants’ positivity in response to the survey question being displayed. While survey response rates were very high, (ranging from 98 to 100%, depending on the topic), readers are cautioned to not draw inferences about one topic versus another based on the percentages shown. That is because each percentage is an error-bound estimate based on a relatively small sample size.

The survey provided participants with the opportunity to share open open-ended comments about their experience. To illustrate the impact of the dialogues from the participants' perspective, we have shared a sampling of comment below.

We tend to converse with people who hold very similar opinions as the ones we hold. This allowed me to speak with people who have different opinions in an organized way with defined rules of engagement.

While there was a significant amount of agreement around certain topics, there was a healthy amount of discourse as well. Hearing from people in my community that I normally wouldn't speak to because of age/race/gender was enlightening.

There is no progress unless people can discuss the topic and try to find common ground. We need more of these with a larger portion of the community.

I definitely think it is valuable because it pushes people to get out of their bubble of confirmation bias that comes from curated algorithms on social media as well as reinforcing ideas amongst family & friends. I also like the way the different stances were illustrated and there were talking points in each one. That made it easy to follow along.

Even with differing opinions, we were all able to put in some input and it was well received by other members.

The more we talk about an issue the better we can do to work toward a viable solution. We need to engage a larger number of people to talk and develop an action plan.

I find the opportunity to engage in a safe and controlled setting to be invaluable. My political leanings are more to the left rather than the right and residing in a deeply conservative area can make sharing an alternative perspective somewhat intimidating. The WIPPS activities helps build my confidence in sharing a different and regionally minority perspective with others as I have learned that through dialogue, we may find common ground.

The biggest take away for me was hearing from other community members and how this issue affects them

It was absolutely valuable to engage in this dialogue. I appreciated having different voices. It was great to hear from different genders, different age, groups, and people with different life experiences. When you sit down and actually talk with someone, it's much easier to find common ground.

It is very interesting to see others perspectives and see the reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with others.

I feel often disconnected from my community and these discussions have been one of the only ways I've been able to communicate with others in the area in a comfortable and safe way.

Even though some of the viewpoints were extreme, I at least feel more aware of those differing positions.

It's always good to see things from a different perspective. It can open new opportunities and thoughts you hadn't considered before.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES FOR LET'S TALK

Sustaining a community culture of civil dialogue around important issues is the next step for the evolution of Let's Talk. While the concept has been proven to work, as demonstrated by results to date, future dialogues will depend on additional financial resources. There are numerous opportunities for the future of Let's Talk, such as:

- **Continue to expand the capacity of moderators by offering trainings.** To date, 25 individuals have been trained as moderators and observers and additional trainings are planned in the coming months. Having this existing capacity within the community serves as a valuable resource going forward. Individuals trained in deliberative dialogue facilitation techniques will have a unique skill that can be applied in many settings beyond the scope of this project, including work, social, and personal settings.
- **Communicate and use areas of common ground to create action.** Incorporating the dialogue findings into policy development or local initiatives to influence community-level change is another logical next step for the Let's Talk project. Each round of dialogues conducted on a given topic produces a valuable set of qualitative information about the kinds of actions that may be generally supported by the public and why, as well as identify actions that the public may oppose, or hold mixed views. While deliberative dialogues may not yield consensus about one action item vs. another, the insights from a dialogue process can be useful for creating action plans around solving community problems. Proactively communicating the findings from the Let's Talk project with members of the general public, community leaders, elected officials, and others can help move from talk to action. The original intention of Let's Talk was to evaluate whether civil dialogue in a community setting like Marathon County was possible. Now that the "proof of concept" has been successful, creating opportunities for impact is needed.
- **Link the Let's Talk model to community decisionmakers and elected officials.** Consistent with the point above, one of the key ways in which Let's Talk can continue to evolve is by looking for ways to use the model to help policymakers make more informed decisions or to provide ways in which citizens can have input in the policymaking process. Piloting the Let's Talk panel and deliberative dialogue process within a local government entity would be an intriguing possibility. This could be focused on a specific local issue or help inform issues on an "on call" basis.
- **Extend the model of Let's Talk beyond the borders of Marathon County.** If there are adequate resources, the Let's Talk model could be replicated in other communities or within public and private organizations and nonprofits looking to navigate discussions around complex or polarizing topics. For example, in 2024, UW Extension collaborated with WIPPS, UW Population Health Institute, and Wisconsin Public Health Forward/Wisconsin Association of Local Health Departments and Boards to pilot deliberative dialogue conversations in Adams, Jackson, and Marinette Counties. These dialogues were focused on the topic of *How Do We Achieve a Healthy Community for All?* The purpose was to identify if the deliberative dialogue method could help build trust among residents and local public health leaders and to work toward a shared understanding of the importance of health equity.⁹ This effort is an example of how Let's Talk can be applied in other settings.
- **Develop Issue Guides on other topics of key interest to communities.** For example, topics such as creating welcoming communities; reproductive rights; creating healthy economies; reducing substance use; and reducing crime are examples of other policy areas where deliberative dialogues could be beneficial.
- **Expand youth involvement in deliberative dialogues.** Building off the success of the youth mental health dialogues, establishing a foundation of civil dialogue practices among our next generation of community members and leaders will be essential.

⁹ The findings from these dialogues can be found at <https://wipps.org/research/community-health-deliberative-dialogues/>.

THE LET’S TALK, MARATHON COUNTY PANEL

HOW WAS THE LET’S TALK, MARATHON COUNTY PANEL CREATED?

In 2023, the Let’s Talk team assembled a participant panel of nearly 100 community members from across Marathon County to meet in small groups of approximately 10 people per group in order to engage in conversations about public issues. To date, members of the Let’s Talk panel have engaged in conversations on a range of topics, including youth mental health, homelessness, immigration, voting and the U.S. presidential elections, child care, and preventing gun deaths.¹⁰ The goal was to select a panel of community members who reflected a range of political affiliations and ensured geographic representation of residents from rural and urban areas, as well as a cross-section of demographics. The following process was used to populate the Let’s Talk panel:

- A community-wide public marketing campaign using a combination of media and social media resources, as well as informal networking and outreach to individuals and organizations across the county, was launched in the spring of 2023. Interested individuals were asked to sign up via an online Qualtrics application. In addition to collecting the individual’s name, the application also asked standard demographic questions, including the individual’s political leaning (see Table 1). Following this initial campaign, we received 259 unique applications.¹¹
- Following the initial recruitment, a random selection process (weighted by political leaning to ensure balance) was used to whittle down the pool to 127 applicants. A follow-up survey was sent via email to those 127 applicants to verify that they were residents of Marathon County. We received valid and affirmative responses from 91 of the 127. Additional recruitment helped increase the political, geographic, and demographic diversity of the initial panel which consisted of a total of 94 individuals.
- The exact number of individuals in the Let’s Talk panel at any given time can fluctuate due to occasional attrition, as well as from new panelists being added. For example, over time, a few panelists dropped out for personal reasons such as moving out of the area. When a panel member leaves, project staff attempt to add a new panel member with a similar political affiliation and geographic representation (urban or rural). The initial panel consisted of 94 individuals; the number of panelists for subsequent topics ranged from 92 to 94. As August 2025 there were 92 Let’s Talk panelists. In total, 97 people served on the panel at one point or another.

Table 1. Let’s Talk, Marathon County Panel Political Affiliation Categories

| Aggregation of Self-Reported Leaning | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Liberal | | Moderate | | | | Conservative | |
| Very liberal | Moderately liberal | Slightly liberal | Middle of the road | Neither liberal nor conservative | Slightly conservative | Moderately conservative | Very conservative |

Table 2 on the next page shows the characteristics of the Let’s Talk panel. The self-reported political affiliation reflected the intended distribution of approximately 30% liberal, 40% moderate, and 30% conservative. In creating these categories, we aggregated responses as shown in Table 1. The panel reflected a geographic distribution of approximately 73% urban and 27% rural.¹² About 53% selected “woman” as their gender; 42% selected “man,” with 4% selecting “other” or “prefer not to respond.” About one-third (35%) were aged 60+ (20% of the county population is age 65+). The vast majority were white (86%), which is similar to the county (86%).¹³ Four percent (4%) were Asian and 10% reported Hispanic or Latino ethnicity. The panelists reflected higher educational attainment compared to the county, with about 22% having a master’s degree or professional degree compared to about 9% in the county’s population.

¹⁰ As a shorthand, we sometimes refer to the “preventing gun deaths dialogues” as the “firearms dialogues.”

¹¹ This number reflects the total individuals after the registration data were cleaned to remove possible spam registrations.

¹² This distribution reflects an approximate population density in Marathon County by Census Tract. In Marathon County, 43% of the population lives in a low population density area based on County Health Rankings. <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/health-data/wisconsin/marathon?year=2024>

¹³ <https://www.marathoncountypulse.org/index.php?module=DemographicData&controller=index&action=index>

Table 2. Let's Talk, Marathon County Panel Characteristics

| | N | % |
|--|----|----|
| Political Affiliation | | |
| Liberal | 26 | 28 |
| Moderate | 40 | 44 |
| Conservative | 26 | 28 |
| Geography | | |
| Urban | 67 | 73 |
| Rural | 25 | 27 |
| Age | | |
| 16-20 | 1 | 1 |
| 21-29 | 8 | 9 |
| 30-39 | 20 | 22 |
| 40-49 | 15 | 16 |
| 50-59 | 14 | 15 |
| 60-69 | 17 | 18 |
| 70+ | 16 | 17 |
| Prefer not to answer/no response | 1 | 1 |
| Gender | | |
| Woman | 49 | 53 |
| Man | 39 | 42 |
| Other | 2 | 2 |
| Prefer not to answer/no response | 2 | 2 |
| Race (Select all that apply) | | |
| Alaskan, American Indian, Indigenous, or Native American | 4 | 4 |
| Asian | 4 | 4 |
| Black or African American | 3 | 3 |
| Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander | 0 | 0 |
| White | 79 | 86 |
| One or more not listed | 1 | 1 |
| Prefer not to answer/no response | 5 | 5 |
| Ethnicity | | |
| Hispanic/Latino | 9 | 10 |
| Not Hispanic/Latino | 83 | 90 |
| Highest Level of Education | | |
| Some high school | 1 | 1 |
| High school graduate/GED | 8 | 9 |
| Trade school | 1 | 1 |
| Some college, no degree | 15 | 16 |
| Associate degree | 15 | 16 |
| Bachelor's degree | 28 | 30 |
| Master's degree | 16 | 17 |
| Professional degree | 4 | 4 |
| Prefer not to answer/no response | 4 | 4 |

Of the 97 community members who were ever in the Let’s Talk panel, 71% (69 individuals) participated in at least one dialogue. This means that 28 people who initially committed to serving on the panel opted not to participate. In each of the dialogue reports we compare the political, geographic, and demographic characteristics of the participants with those characteristics of the panel. In each case, we determined that the participants’ characteristics were generally similar to the characteristics of the full panel. Readers interested in these details can refer to the full reports.

Table 3 shows the percentage distribution of the frequency of dialogue participation among the 69 individuals who participated in a dialogue. In other words, the table shows how many individuals participated in 1, 2, 3, etc. dialogues. It is noteworthy that 41% (28 individuals) attended all six of the dialogues.

Table 3. Distribution of Let’s Talk Participants Based on the Number of Dialogues Attended (Main Panel)

| Number of Dialogues Attended | Number of Panelists Participating in Given Number of Dialogues | Percentage (%) |
|------------------------------|--|----------------|
| 1 | 7 | 10% |
| 2 | 8 | 12% |
| 3 | 5 | 7% |
| 4 | 8 | 12% |
| 5 | 13 | 19% |
| 6 | 28 | 41% |
| Total | 69 | 100% |

DELIBERATIVE DIALOGUES WITH SPANISH LANGUAGE PARTICIPANTS

In an effort to be inclusive of a broad range of community members’ perspectives, beginning with the immigration dialogues, the Let’s Talk team assembled a new mini-panel consisting of 22 Hispanic/Latino community members. All of these individuals had limited English language proficiency and therefore the dialogues were conducted in Spanish. Two (2) in-person Spanish language dialogues were on the topics of immigration, child care, and preventing gun deaths. Comparable methods were used for conducting these dialogues, including translating the issue guide and post-dialogue survey tool into Spanish. We had limited information on the political leaning of these individuals and the vast majority were rural community members and male (67%). About one-third (36%) of the Spanish-language panelists reported “some high school” as their level of education. An additional 36% reported obtaining their “GED.” Half (50%) of the Spanish-language panelists were between the ages of 20 and 29; 36% were between the ages of 30 and 39. Because the Let’s Talk panel is intended to be reasonably representative of the county, we did not want to skew the main panel characteristics by merging the mini-panelists’ demographic data or the post-dialogue survey responses with the main Let’s Talk panel.

THE LET’S TALK DELIBERATIVE DIALOGUE PROCESS

WHAT ISSUES WERE DISCUSSED DURING THE LET’S TALK DIALOGUES?

To date, the Let’s Talk dialogues have focused on the topics of youth mental health, immigration, homelessness, voting and elections, child care, and preventing gun deaths. These topics were selected based on input from Marathon County community leaders and residents about issues of greatest concern. In order to structure the dialogues, the project partners created a detailed Issue Guide that “named and framed” each topic. Appendix B includes an example of an Issue Guide.¹⁴ Each Issue Guide outlines three potential approaches to the topic and within each approach, three to five potential action items.¹⁵ In addition, the Issue Guide includes background information and relevant statistics. A glossary of terms and a list of resources is also shared with participants. The Issue Guide is provided to the participants prior to each dialogue.

HOW MANY DIALOGUES WERE CONDUCTED?

As shown in Table 4, 53 dialogues have been conducted to date. This includes 42 dialogues with members of the main Let’s Talk panel; eight dialogues in Spanish on the topics of immigration, child care, preventing gun deaths, and creating healthy communities; and three dialogues with high school students on the topic of youth mental health.

Table 4. Number of Dialogues Per Topic

| Topic | Dates | Number of Dialogues | Number of Panelists | Number of Dialogue Participants |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| Let’s Talk Dialogues | | | | |
| Youth Mental Health | November 2023 | 6 | 94 | 61 |
| Homelessness | March 2024 | 7 | 94 | 53 |
| Immigration | July-September 2024 | 8 | 92 | 53 |
| Voting and Elections | October-November 2024 | 7 | 93 | 48 |
| Child Care | March 2025 | 7 | 92 | 47 |
| Firearms and Safety | July 2025 | 7 | 92 | 48 |
| Spanish Language Dialogues | | | | |
| Immigration | September 2024 | 2 | 22 | 17 |
| Healthy Communities | December 2024 | 2 | 22 | 15 |
| Child Care | March 2025 | 2 | 22 | 22 |
| Firearms and Safety | July 2025 | 2 | 22 | 22 |
| Youth Dialogues | | | | |
| Youth Mental Health | November 2023 | 3 | N/A | 39 |

N/A: The high school students were part of the Central Wisconsin Leadership Forum as part of a one-time event.

HOW DID THE LET’S TALK TEAM ENSURE POLITICAL DIVERSITY IN EACH DIALOGUE?

Each individual dialogue was structured to reflect a distribution of approximately 30% liberal, 40% moderate, and 30% conservative participants. With approximately 10 participants for each dialogue, therefore, the goal was to include 3 liberal, 4 moderate, and 3 conservative-leaning individuals. To accomplish this, Let’s Talk panelists were divided into three groups according to the panelists’ self-reported political affiliation. Each of the three groups was sent a unique dialogue sign-up link with the dates of the various sessions. This allowed participants to choose a date and location convenient to them while allowing the project team to manage political affiliation representation within each dialogue. With 10 as the goal, group sizes varied from 3 to 12 participants; the vast majority reflected the intended political mix of participants.

¹⁴ The Issue Guides are included in the appendix of each final report as well as on the project site: <https://wipps.org/lets-talk/>. The time needed to “name and frame” the issues and to development the Issue Guide should not be understated.

¹⁵ Feedback from Let’s Talk moderators suggests that four action items per approach is “just right.”

WHAT ARE KEY LOGISTICAL FACTORS TO CONSIDER?

Table 5 outlines some of the main logistical factors that are taken into consideration when conducting the Let’s Talk dialogues. The dialogues were conducted largely in person at various locations throughout Marathon County, including in Marathon, Mosinee, and Wausau. Host sites were generally public libraries and other neutral spaces. Several Zoom dialogues were offered during each round for those who preferred a virtual format. Each dialogue was scheduled for approximately 120 minutes. As a recruitment incentive and as a token of appreciation for their time, each participant received a \$100 gift card.¹⁶ A technical staff person was also present at each dialogue to troubleshoot any issues in sessions where live polling was used. In most sessions, two trained moderators facilitated each dialogue by carefully examining each approach, including weighing trade-offs among the proposals and identifying areas of tension as well as common ground.¹⁷ An observer served as a public notetaker in order to capture key themes and takeaways. A total of 25 individuals were trained as deliberative dialogue moderators and observers through this project.

Table 5. Logistical Considerations

| Logistics | Description |
|--|---|
| Number of Dialogues per Topic | 6 to 8 |
| Format | In-Person and Zoom sessions offered |
| Geographic Locations | Mosinee, Marathon City, Wausau (include a mix of urban and rural sites) |
| Host Sites | Marathon County Public Library (Mosinee and Wausau) Marathon City Village Hall UW Center for Civic Engagement (City of Wausau) Willow Springs Garden (Town of Maine) |
| Scheduling Considerations | Mix of daytime, evening, and Saturday morning sessions |
| Duration of Dialogue | 120 minutes |
| Group Size | 10 (range was 3 to 12) |
| Participation Incentives | \$100 gift card (see footnote 16 below for more discussion of incentives) |
| Background Materials (prepare in advance) | Issue Guide Glossary of terms and List of resources Mentimeter poll to obtain real-time participant feedback on action items Qualtrics form for participant registration Qualtrics post-dialogue survey with link and QR code |
| On-Site Materials | Large sticky easel pad and markers Extra printed copies of the Issue Guide Extra printed copies of the post-dialogue survey QR code for participants to scan to access the post-dialogue survey Laptop and projector for live Mentimeter poll Extra iPad for participants to use for polling if they do not have a phone |
| Staffing Needs | Moderator (frequently two people served as co-moderators) Observer (served as notetaker responsible for compiling detailed notes) Technical staff (to assist with any issues with live polling) Research staff (synthesize notes, analyze surveys, and prepare reports) |

¹⁶ It is unclear the extent to which financial incentives are important for recruitment and whether offering a lower amount or no gift card would generate the same level of interest and participation. Participant feedback suggested that the experience itself was positive enough for them that compensation might not be necessary. We would need to test whether participants would be engaged on an ongoing basis without the gift card. On site child care was offered during the Spanish language dialogues.

¹⁷ Key considerations for training moderators include: how to navigate aspects of group dynamics when there are participants who may be quieter and/or reluctant to participate; clarify the desired level of tension in the group and what role the moderator should play in terms of looking for opportunities to elicit alternative viewpoints or direct the discussion more proactively; and how to navigate situations where there is a high level of tension or disagreement.

HOW ARE THE DIALOGUES STRUCTURED?

Beginning with the voting and elections dialogues, the Let’s Talk team started to explore alternative dialogue formats. The motivations for trying the alternative formats were rooted in an interest in innovating. Table 6 outlines the key differences in the formats. The main features of Alternative Format 2 used for the child care and firearms dialogues in comparison to the more traditional format used during the youth mental health, homelessness, and immigration dialogues were: (1) fewer action items per approach in order to allow time for a deeper discussion of each; (2) the use of live polling using Mentimeter to gauge participants’ views of various action items in real time; and (3) a polling format that gauged participants’ views of the action items before and after discussing them within each approach, enabling the moderators to observe subtle changes in views subsequent to the discussions.

Table 6. Characteristics of the Traditional Dialogue vs. Alternative Dialogue Formats

| | Traditional Format | Alternative Format 1 | Alternative Format 2 |
|------------------------------------|--|---|-------------------------------------|
| Issues | Youth Mental Health Homelessness Immigration | Voting and U.S. Presidential Elections | Child Care Preventing Gun Deaths |
| Format | In-Person and Zoom | In-Person and Zoom | In-Person and Zoom |
| Issue Guide | Yes | No (used Power Point) | Yes |
| Definitions and Glossary | Yes | No | Yes |
| # Approaches per Topic | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| # Action Items per Approach | 5 | 3 | 4 |
| Use of Live Polling | No | Yes | Yes |

USING SNAP POLLING AS A DIALOGUE FACILITATION TOOL

The moderators of the dialogues used "snap polling" to gather real-time feedback from the participants about their views on the action items during the dialogues. The purpose of the polling was to enhance the moderators’ understanding of the participants’ broader views and as a vehicle for navigating the discussion of the action items. At the start of the discussion of each of the three approaches, participants scanned a QR code to access a Mentimeter poll that asked them their level of agreement with each action item within that approach. The poll used a 5-point scale (1 = “strongly disagree” and 5 = “strongly agree”). The results of the poll were immediately displayed so that the moderator(s) and the participants could see the average score for each action item going into the discussion of each approach. The poll was intended to serve as a useful way for participants to anonymously and privately share their views without fear of reprisal, but also function as a tool for the moderator to get a general sense of the extent to which the group members, on average, agreed with (supported) specific action items or disagreed with (opposed) specific action items.

The same poll was readministered at the conclusion of the discussion of the action items within a given approach, thus giving the participants an opportunity to anonymously reassess their level of agreement with each of the action items after having had the benefit of the discussion. Since the polls were anonymous, participants could provide input privately and independently of the group dynamics. The post-discussion polling data was useful for the moderator to identify remaining areas of tension or to prompt further discussion of any large shifts in views. In each dialogue where polling was used, the participants took six snap polls; these polls were primarily implemented to help the moderator(s) navigate the discussion and gauge general views rather than for a systematic analysis comparing pre and post poll values.

Due to the relatively small number of participants in each group and for the potential of a single extreme data point (an outlier) to disproportionately affect the average, we do not use the pre and post polling data to draw conclusions about changes in dialogue participants’ views within or across dialogues; but they can be useful to observe the general patterns.

WHAT WERE THE GROUND RULES FOR DISCUSSION?

At the start of each deliberative dialogue, moderators reviewed the ground rules for discussion. Informal participant feedback suggests that establishing these ground rules up front is critical to setting the stage for a respectful discussion.

- Focus on the options and actions we can take nationally and in our communities.
- Consider all options fairly.
- Listening is just as important as speaking.
- Let others finish their thoughts before sharing yours.
- No one or two individuals should dominate.
- Maintain an open and respectful atmosphere.
- Everyone is encouraged to participate.

HOW WERE THE DIALOGUES EVALUATED?

There were four components to the evaluation of each round of dialogues: (1) a post-dialogue survey was administered to all of the participants at the conclusion of each dialogue in order to get feedback on the dialogue process from the participants' perspective; (2) a review of the detailed notes taken by the observers and notetakers for each dialogue in order to identify and summarize the overall level of support for various actions items within each dialogue; and (3) for the three topics where live polling was used, a compilation of results of the polling conducted in each dialogue in order to see patterns in responses and to evaluate the extent to which areas of common ground subjectively identified by the moderators and observer were supported by the participants' polling data; and (4) regular focus group discussions and process improvement discussions with project staff to get feedback on areas to improve. Each individual dialogue report contains the evaluation results of the first three components. A summary of lessons learned from the processing of conducting the early dialogues is also available.

APPENDIX A: POST-DIALOGUE SURVEY RESULTS BY TOPIC

These tables can be used to get a general sense of the patterns of participants' responses. While survey response rates were very high, (ranging from 98 to 100%), readers should not draw inferences about one topic versus another based on the percentages shown. Each percentage is an error-bound estimate based on a relatively small sample size.

CONSIDER TRADEOFFS AND SOLUTIONS

Table 7. Understanding Issues and Considering Tradeoffs

| How much did today's dialogue... | Not at all | A little | Some | Quite a bit | A great deal |
|---|------------|----------|------|-------------|--------------|
| | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ |
| ...help you better understand the issue that you discussed? (%) | | | | | |
| Youth Mental Health | 0 | 17 | 26 | 34 | 23 |
| Homelessness | 0 | 4 | 25 | 48 | 23 |
| Immigration | 0 | 8 | 29 | 46 | 17 |
| Elections and Voting | 4 | 17 | 23 | 31 | 25 |
| Child Care | 0 | 9 | 27 | 38 | 27 |
| Preventing Gun Deaths | 4 | 11 | 32 | 32 | 21 |
| ...help you evaluate the pros and cons of various potential solutions to the issue that you discussed? (%) | | | | | |
| Youth Mental Health | 2 | 11 | 21 | 42 | 24 |
| Homelessness | 2 | 8 | 23 | 42 | 26 |
| Immigration | 0 | 10 | 27 | 40 | 23 |
| Elections and Voting | 4 | 10 | 29 | 35 | 21 |
| Child Care | 0 | 2 | 24 | 53 | 20 |
| Preventing Gun Deaths | 2 | 13 | 21 | 40 | 23 |

Table 8. Levels of Disagreement and Common Ground

| Thinking overall about today's dialogue... | None | A little | Some | Quite a bit | A great deal |
|--|------|----------|------|-------------|--------------|
| | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ |
| ...how much disagreement was there among the participants? (%) | | | | | |
| Youth Mental Health | 13 | 49 | 32 | 6 | 0 |
| Homelessness | 8 | 65 | 27 | 0 | 0 |
| Immigration | 10 | 36 | 38 | 14 | 2 |
| Elections and Voting | 12 | 46 | 29 | 10 | 2 |
| Child Care | 14 | 50 | 34 | 2 | 0 |
| Preventing Gun Deaths | 13 | 42 | 27 | 16 | 2 |
| ...how much common ground was there among the participants? (%) | | | | | |
| Youth Mental Health | 0 | 0 | 8 | 72 | 21 |
| Homelessness | 0 | 0 | 6 | 60 | 34 |
| Immigration | 0 | 6 | 24 | 47 | 23 |
| Elections and Voting | 0 | 4 | 19 | 58 | 19 |
| Child Care | 0 | 0 | 7 | 64 | 30 |
| Preventing Gun Deaths | 0 | 2 | 13 | 57 | 28 |

EXPAND VIEWS ON AN ISSUE

Table 9. Considering New Perspectives

| Thinking overall about today's dialogue... | Not at all ↓ | A little ↓ | Some ↓ | Quite a bit ↓ | A great deal ↓ |
|--|-----------------|---------------|-----------|------------------|-------------------|
| ...how much did you personally consider perspectives or viewpoints that you hadn't considered before? (%) | | | | | |
| Youth Mental Health | 2 | 9 | 47 | 32 | 9 |
| Homelessness | 2 | 9 | 32 | 43 | 13 |
| Immigration | 6 | 11 | 32 | 40 | 11 |
| Elections and Voting | 4 | 12 | 35 | 38 | 10 |
| Child Care | 0 | 7 | 22 | 56 | 16 |
| Preventing Gun Deaths | 2 | 8 | 33 | 40 | 17 |
| ...how much do you think the other participants considered perspectives or viewpoints that they hadn't considered before? (%) | | | | | |
| Youth Mental Health | 0 | 15 | 42 | 37 | 6 |
| Homelessness | 0 | 8 | 43 | 40 | 9 |
| Immigration | 2 | 10 | 48 | 36 | 4 |
| Elections and Voting | 2 | 12 | 29 | 46 | 10 |
| Child Care | 2 | 0 | 29 | 60 | 9 |
| Preventing Gun Deaths | 0 | 4 | 48 | 33 | 15 |
| ...how much did you value the input provided by the other participants? (%) | | | | | |
| Youth Mental Health | 0 | 2 | 11 | 43 | 43 |
| Homelessness | 0 | 0 | 9 | 55 | 36 |
| Immigration | 0 | 2 | 11 | 57 | 30 |
| Elections and Voting | 2 | 4 | 10 | 52 | 31 |
| Child Care | 0 | 0 | 9 | 58 | 33 |
| Preventing Gun Deaths | 0 | 2 | 4 | 46 | 48 |
| ...how much do you think the other participants valued the input you provided? (%) | | | | | |
| Youth Mental Health | 0 | 8 | 42 | 36 | 15 |
| Homelessness | 0 | 13 | 40 | 32 | 15 |
| Immigration | 0 | 11 | 40 | 42 | 8 |
| Elections and Voting | 6 | 6 | 48 | 29 | 10 |
| Child Care | 0 | 7 | 38 | 47 | 9 |
| Preventing Gun Deaths | 0 | 10 | 40 | 27 | 23 |

Table 10. Interactions and Respect

| During today's dialogue... | Very disrespectfully ↓ | Somewhat disrespectfully ↓ | Neutral ↓ | Somewhat respectfully ↓ | Very respectfully ↓ |
|---|---------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------|----------------------------|------------------------|
| ...how did participants with differing views act toward one another? (%) | | | | | |
| Youth Mental Health | 2 | 0 | 9 | 11 | 77 |
| Homelessness | 2 | 0 | 4 | 12 | 82 |
| Immigration | 0 | 8 | 17 | 11 | 64 |
| Elections and Voting | 0 | 2 | 17 | 6 | 75 |
| Child Care | 0 | 0 | 7 | 4 | 89 |
| Preventing Gun Deaths | 2 | 2 | 10 | 4 | 81 |
| ...how did participants with similar views act toward one another? (%) | | | | | |
| Youth Mental Health | 0 | 0 | 6 | 4 | 91 |
| Homelessness | 0 | 0 | 4 | 13 | 83 |
| Immigration | 0 | 0 | 10 | 14 | 77 |
| Elections and Voting | 0 | 0 | 10 | 6 | 83 |
| Child Care | 0 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 93 |
| Preventing Gun Deaths | 2 | 0 | 6 | 8 | 83 |

APPRECIATE DIVERSE VIEWPOINTS AND DECREASE “DEMONIZATION” OF DIFFERING VIEWS

Table 11. Trust, Comfort, and Connectivity as a Result of Participation

| Coming out of today’s dialogue... | Much less than before ↓ | Somewhat less than before ↓ | No change ↓ | Somewhat more than before ↓ | Much more than before ↓ |
|---|----------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| ...how much do you value viewpoints on the issue that differ from yours? (%) | | | | | |
| Youth Mental Health | 0 | 0 | 33 | 38 | 39 |
| Homelessness | 0 | 0 | 27 | 46 | 27 |
| Immigration | 0 | 6 | 28 | 49 | 17 |
| Elections and Voting | 2 | 0 | 31 | 44 | 23 |
| Child Care | 0 | 0 | 18 | 60 | 22 |
| Preventing Gun Deaths | 0 | 0 | 29 | 50 | 21 |
| ...how comfortable do you feel interacting with members of your community who hold viewpoints on the issue that differ from yours? (%) | | | | | |
| Youth Mental Health | 0 | 0 | 23 | 53 | 24 |
| Homelessness | 0 | 0 | 23 | 44 | 33 |
| Immigration | 0 | 0 | 26 | 51 | 23 |
| Elections and Voting | 2 | 2 | 27 | 35 | 33 |
| Child Care | 0 | 0 | 27 | 48 | 25 |
| Preventing Gun Deaths | 0 | 0 | 29 | 35 | 35 |
| ...how trusting do you feel toward members of your community who hold viewpoints on the issue that differ from yours? (%) | | | | | |
| Youth Mental Health | 0 | 6 | 26 | 47 | 21 |
| Homelessness | 0 | 2 | 33 | 48 | 17 |
| Immigration | 0 | 4 | 40 | 49 | 8 |
| Elections and Voting | 2 | 0 | 34 | 47 | 17 |
| Child Care | 0 | 0 | 42 | 38 | 20 |
| Preventing Gun Deaths | 0 | 0 | 45 | 36 | 19 |
| ...how connected do you feel to members of your community who hold viewpoints on the issue that differ from yours? (%) | | | | | |
| Youth Mental Health | 0 | 4 | 30 | 47 | 19 |
| Homelessness | 0 | 0 | 31 | 50 | 19 |
| Immigration | 0 | 2 | 34 | 55 | 9 |
| Elections and Voting | 2 | 0 | 42 | 42 | 15 |
| Child Care | 0 | 0 | 31 | 49 | 20 |
| Preventing Gun Deaths | 0 | 0 | 34 | 47 | 19 |
| ...how confident are you that your community can engage in civil conversations about the issue you discussed? (%) | | | | | |
| Youth Mental Health | 2 | 4 | 9 | 49 | 36 |
| Homelessness | 2 | 2 | 14 | 59 | 24 |
| Immigration | 0 | 4 | 8 | 58 | 30 |
| Elections and Voting | 2 | 0 | 15 | 52 | 31 |
| Child Care | 0 | 0 | 16 | 62 | 22 |
| Preventing Gun Deaths | 0 | 4 | 6 | 54 | 35 |

INCREASE ENGAGEMENT IN COMMUNITY ISSUES AND INTEREST IN MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Table 12. Interest and Engagement in Community Issues

| Did participating in today’s dialogue make you want to... | Not at all | A little | Some | Quite a bit | A great deal |
|--|------------|----------|------|-------------|--------------|
| | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ | ↓ |
| ...learn more about the issue you discussed? (%) | | | | | |
| Youth Mental Health | 2 | 2 | 26 | 36 | 34 |
| Homelessness | 0 | 10 | 10 | 50 | 31 |
| Immigration | 2 | 0 | 30 | 42 | 26 |
| Elections and Voting | 4 | 11 | 22 | 47 | 16 |
| Child Care | 0 | 9 | 22 | 47 | 22 |
| Preventing Gun Deaths | 6 | 6 | 27 | 44 | 17 |
| ...talk more with your fellow community members about the issue you discussed? (%) | | | | | |
| Youth Mental Health | 2 | 6 | 17 | 42 | 34 |
| Homelessness | 2 | 4 | 19 | 46 | 29 |
| Immigration | 0 | 6 | 36 | 36 | 21 |
| Elections and Voting | 9 | 11 | 33 | 29 | 18 |
| Child Care | 2 | 4 | 30 | 41 | 23 |
| Preventing Gun Deaths | 2 | 6 | 42 | 31 | 19 |
| ...collaborate with your fellow community members to address the issue you discussed? (%) | | | | | |
| Youth Mental Health | 0 | 6 | 19 | 45 | 30 |
| Homelessness | 2 | 2 | 17 | 45 | 34 |
| Immigration | 0 | 9 | 32 | 38 | 21 |
| Elections and Voting | 6 | 11 | 41 | 28 | 13 |
| Child Care | 0 | 2 | 31 | 42 | 24 |
| Preventing Gun Deaths | 2 | 10 | 31 | 38 | 19 |
| ...be more involved with decision-making in your community about the issue you discussed? (%) | | | | | |
| Youth Mental Health | 0 | 2 | 24 | 36 | 38 |
| Homelessness | 0 | 6 | 23 | 42 | 29 |
| Immigration | 0 | 2 | 31 | 48 | 19 |
| Elections and Voting | 4 | 9 | 18 | 53 | 16 |
| Child Care | 0 | 4 | 32 | 34 | 30 |
| Firearms and Gun Safety | 4 | 4 | 31 | 38 | 23 |

In each of the individual topical reports, participants’ responses to each of the post-dialogue survey questions were further separated into rural versus urban respondents. Tests of the statistical significance of the differences between groups were not conducted. Therefore, we do not make direct comparisons of the differences between the urban versus rural respondents. It is unlikely that the results in any one cell are significantly different from the results for that same cell for another group. As such, the data should not be used to draw conclusions about the magnitude of differences between urban versus rural respondents. Responses to two open-ended survey questions are also included in each of the individual topical reports.

APPENDIX B: SAMPLE ISSUE GUIDE – IMMIGRATION

ISSUE GUIDE

How should we manage immigration in our country?



Let's Talk, Marathon County

Throughout its history, the United States has been shaped by waves of immigrants who have brought their diverse backgrounds and traditions, contributing to the country's rich cultural heritage and economic growth.

In Marathon county, the recent arrival of refugees from countries such as Afghanistan, Syria and Congo, as well as unauthorized arrivals from the southern border, provide a local perspective on the national discussion over U.S. immigration policy.

This issue guide provides a framework for considering the kind of immigration policies we ought to have as a nation, how these policies affect our communities, and the values and goals we want to guide our decisions about immigration. Different groups of people may be affected by the changes in our approach to immigration. including:

- U.S. citizens, including people born in the United States and those who have become citizens through naturalization;
- Newcomers who came to the country legally through our current system;
- Refugees escaping war or oppression;
- People now living in the United States who entered the country without documentation, including many who arrived decades ago;
- People who arrived here with valid visas but have overstayed; and
- People brought here as infants or children by parents who came into the country without permission.

In 2023, the U. S. reached a seven-year high in number of refugee arrivals, at just over 60,000, driven by global conflicts and humanitarian crises. More than 969,000 immigrants became U.S. citizens in 2022, the largest naturalization total since 2008. 140,000 immigrant visas are available each year for those seeking to immigrate based on job skills. In addition, 10.4 million students, business travelers, and tourists were granted visas for temporary visits in 2023.

But these numbers don't tell the whole story. Some immigrants cross the border undetected or choose to stay on expired temporary visas. An estimated 11 million unauthorized immigrants are now living in the United States. The current situation on our southern border began with the arrival of unprecedented numbers of families and children from Central and South America, many of them asking for asylum and overwhelming border facilities. Compounding the issue, border officials have separated thousands of children from their families.

Most Americans agree that the nation's immigration policy needs an overhaul, but perceptions differ about what kind of solution the country needs.

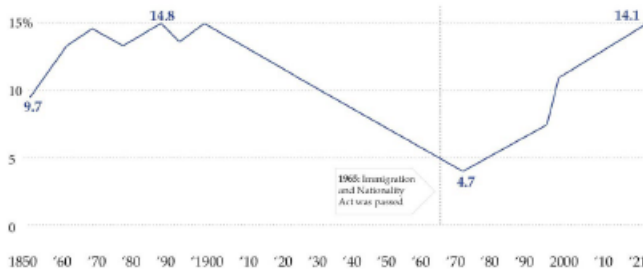
How should the United States approach the issue of immigration?

This issue advisory presents three approaches to addressing immigration, each coming from a different perspective and each reflecting a different set of ideas about what should be done. Most people will find something to agree with in all three approaches, but each also has trade-offs, risks, or drawbacks to be taken into account and worked through. The options presented here are not ready-made solutions, but rather a starting point for weighing alternatives and reaching a sound judgment.

ISSUE GUIDE

Immigrant share of U.S. population nears historic high in 2021

Percentage of U.S. population that is foreign born



Note: All numbers are rounded independently and are not adjusted to sum to US total or other totals.

Source: PUS Census Bureau, "Historic Census Statistics on Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850-20221" and Pew Research Center tabulations of 2010-2021 American Community Survey (IPUMS).

2023 ended with more migrant encounters at U.S.-Mexico border than any previous month on record

Monthly migrant encounters by U.S. Border Patrol at U.S.-Mexico border

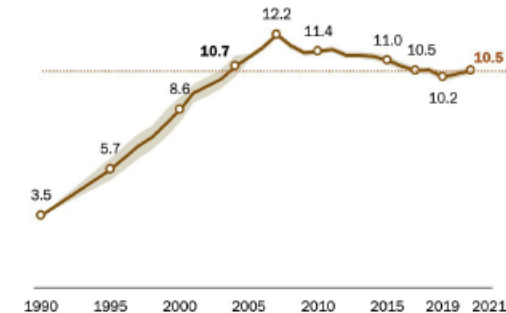


Note: Beginning in March 2020, monthly totals combine apprehensions and expulsions into a new category known as encounters. Monthly totals before March 2020 include all apprehensions only. Some migrants are encountered more than once.

Source: US Customs and Border Protection. Pew Research Center.

Unauthorized immigration remained mostly stable from 2017-2021

Unauthorized immigrant population, in millions

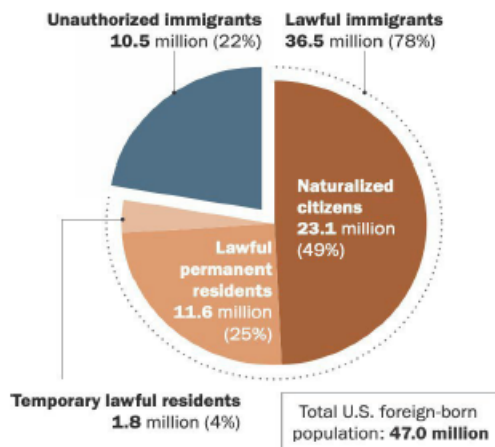


Note: Shading shows range of estimated 90% confidence interval.

Source: Pew Research Center estimates based on augmented US Census Bureau data

Status of immigrants in the U.S.

Foreign-born population estimates, 2021



Note: All numbers are rounded independently and are not adjusted to sum to US total or other totals.

Source: Pew Research Center estimates for 2021 based on augmented US Census Bureau data (IPUMS).

Option One: Welcome Immigrants; Be a Beacon of Freedom

This option says that immigration has helped make the US what it is today—a dynamic and diverse culture, an engine of the global economy, and a beacon of freedom around the world. We should develop an immigration policy that builds on that tradition, one that welcomes newcomers, helps immigrant families stay together, and protects those fleeing from war and oppression. Welcoming immigrants is not only the right thing to do; it benefits our economy and counters falling US birth rates. To remain competitive in a fast-changing global marketplace, the United States needs newcomers who are willing to contribute their skills to strengthening our culture of ingenuity and entrepreneurship.

A Primary Drawback

This option would add even more burden to systems already overwhelmed by historically high levels of immigration.

| Actions | Drawbacks |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Give those who entered the US without permission years ago a path to legal status. It's time to forgive and welcome these people who have become part of our communities. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This allows immigrants who violated our laws to cut in front of the line of the thousands of people who are seeking to enter the United States legally. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Welcome immigrants who are willing to work, whether in low-skilled jobs many Americans do not want or in high-skilled jobs where there are shortages. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This would detract from the focus on helping our own citizens get jobs. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accept more refugees fleeing violence and deprivation in countries such as Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, El Salvador, and Guatemala. We have a moral obligation to help. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are US citizens in need, too, and it is difficult to vet people coming from such areas of upheaval. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide legal residency and the ability to apply for citizenship to DREAMers, the term commonly used for undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as young children. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It's not fair to allow this group to benefit from the illegal actions of their families. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow all residents to get driver's licenses, regardless of their immigration status and as long as they meet all licensing requirements, to make roads safer for all. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This could make it easier for criminals and terrorists to get fake documents. |

- Other options to consider....

As of 2021, 3.9% of Marathon County residents (5.32k people) were born outside of the U.S., which is lower than the national average of 13.6%.

U.S. Census Bureau

Option Two: Enforce the Law; Be Fair to Those Who Follow the Rules

This option says we need a fair system, in which the rules are clear and, above all, enforced. Ever since the nation’s first immigration policies were put into place, the premise has been that welcoming newcomers should be done in an orderly way. But with an estimated 11 million people living in the country illegally, our current system is unjust and uncontrolled. In fairness to the many people who are waiting to come to the US and stay here legally, we have an obligation to enforce our borders and deport people who enter the country without our permission. That is why we must strengthen our commitment to border security, crack down on those who overstay their visas, and introduce more stringent measures to deal with immigrants living outside the law.

A Primary Drawback

This will harm millions of people now living in our communities and contributing to our society. It will spread fear in cities and towns nationwide.

| Actions | Drawbacks |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify people who entered the country illegally and deport them. Require that they reapply for entry. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This will tear up families—many of which include one or more US-born children. The punishment is not only impractical but far outweighs the crime. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cut off federal funding to “sanctuary cities” that refuse to cooperate with federal immigration agents. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This punishes entire communities over disputes that should be settled legislatively. It could mean underfunded police departments and schools in some places and deny aid at a time of dire need. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prosecute employers if they hire workers without legal papers. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This will create chaos in industries such as construction and agriculture, including dairy farming, and lead to higher prices for basic goods such as food and housing when times are already tough. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build a secure southern border wall. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This will cost billions of tax dollars. Plus, migrants already go around, climb over or cut through the existing walls. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Detain all adults who enter the country illegally, even if this means separating families | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Such a “zero tolerance” policy traumatizes children who had no say in their parents’ decisions and invites international condemnation. |

- Other options to consider...

In 2022, some 708,000 foreign visitors to the United States, whose visas required them to depart by the end of the year, did not leave.

—US Department of Homeland Security

Option Three: Slow Down Immigration and Focus on Common Bonds

This option recognizes that newcomers have strengthened our culture in the past. But the number of foreign-born residents has reached 48.2 million, or 14.1 percent of the population. Fifty years ago, the foreign-born share of our population was 4.7 percent. We need to moderate the flow of immigrants and focus more on helping newcomers integrate into US society. We should have a measured immigration policy—one that reduces the rate of immigration and ensures that immigrants become part of the US community. We need to find ways to accommodate newcomers without compromising our sense of national unity.

A Primary Drawback

This option would rob us of much of the energy and hard work people from around the world bring to the United States. The coronavirus pandemic only underscored how many of our “essential workers”—serving in hospitals, staffing grocery stores, and producing food—are immigrants.

| Actions | Drawbacks |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce the number of authorized immigrants admitted to the United States each year. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This deprives us of the workers needed in key industries such as agriculture and construction and could threaten the economy by lowering birthrates. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Give preference to immigrants who already speak English. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This would place an undue burden on some immigrants—especially those who are willing to take on some of the back-breaking jobs most US citizens do not want. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restrict family reunification to spouses and young children, and concentrate on admitting immigrants who will work in areas where we need them. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This would split immigrant families apart, forcing people who come here to leave loved ones behind, sometimes in danger or poverty. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools should require English immersion programs so newcomers learn the language as quickly as possible and absorb US culture and democratic values. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Special language programs take needed time and funds away from other important subjects. Besides, teaching classes in both languages would better prepare students to participate in today's global economy. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reform the country's immigration policy so that the path to citizenship is clear, affordable and more concise than the current policy. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This would require a significant and expensive investment in personnel - judges, lawyers, and other officials - to expedite the process. |

- Other actions to consider...

Together, immigrants and their US-born children make up about 28 percent of US inhabitants.

—Pew Research Center

About This Issue Guide

THE IMMIGRATION ISSUE AFFECTS VIRTUALLY EVERY AMERICAN, directly or indirectly, often in deeply personal ways. This guide is designed to help people deliberate together about how we should approach the issue. The three options presented here reflect different ways of understanding what is at stake and shed light on the critical tensions in what we hold most valuable.

The issue forces us to consider a number of difficult questions, and there are no easy answers. Should we strictly enforce the law and deport people who are here without permission, or would deporting millions of people outweigh their crime? Should we welcome more newcomers to build a more vibrant and diverse society, or does this pose too great a threat to national unity? Should we accept more of the growing numbers of refugees from war-torn regions, or should we avoid the risk of allowing in people whose backgrounds may not have been fully checked? Should our priority be to help immigrants assimilate into our distinctive way of life—by insisting they learn English, for example—or should we instead celebrate a growing mosaic of different peoples?

Ground Rules

- Focus on the options and actions we can take nationally and in our communities.
- Consider all options fairly.
- Listening is just as important as speaking.
- Let others finish their thoughts before sharing yours.
- No one or two individuals should dominate.
- Maintain an open and respectful atmosphere.
- Everyone is encouraged to participate.

Holding a Deliberative Forum

1. Introduction

Review the ground rules.
Introduce the issue.

2. Connect to Issue

What concerns you about the issue or how does it affect you or people you know?

3. Consider Each Option

What concerns Consider each option one at a time. Allow equal time for each.

- What is attractive?
- What about the potential drawbacks?

4. Review and Reflect

Review the conversation as a group.

- What areas of common ground were apparent?
- What tensions and trade-offs were most difficult?
- Who else do we need to hear from?

This issue guide was originally created by the National Issues Forums (NIF) in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation (ISBN: 978-1-946206-54-1). National Issues Forums issue guides are used by civic and educational organizations interested in addressing public issues. The original issue guide on immigration has been modified by the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS). It is common for local communities and organizations to adapt NIF issue guides to local conditions. If you desire to access the original NIF issue guide on immigration, please visit www.nifi.org.

