

Renters' Commission Outreach Report

Findings from Survey & Focus Groups

Neighborhood & Housing Services Department
CITY OF SAN ANTONIO | NOVEMBER 2020

NEIGHBORHOOD & HOUSING SERVICES DEPARTMENT

Renters' Commission Findings from Outreach



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Executive Summary

The Neighborhood & Housing Services Department conducted a survey and two focus groups in September and October 2020 to gauge perceptions of the proposal to establish a renters' commission. Through the survey and focus groups, staff sought to gain insight from the community about the perceived scope of work, preferred composition, and desire for a renters' commission.

The survey netted over 3,600 responses from nearly 1,700 current renters, over 350 property owners and operators, and many other community members including homeowners and people experiencing homelessness. Five renters and seven property owners/managers participated in focus groups. This report summarizes the findings of this work.

Key Takeaways

- Most respondents preferred a commission comprised of both renters and property owners/managers. Diverse backgrounds, socio-economic statuses, and rental housing types are strongly preferred.
- Renters felt that the Commission could be a space for education for both renters and landlords, and it could be a forum for mediating issues in the community, especially regarding rising rents.
- Property owners and managers felt that a renters' commission could be redundant given that the City already has a Housing Commission. However, they did agree that the Commission could be a space for education for both parties.
- Property owners and managers who responded to the survey were more than twice as likely than renters to say that they engage with the City frequently.
- Renters who responded to the survey were very likely to report feeling underrepresented and that their issues were unheard at the City. Renters who participated in the focus groups were less likely to report their issues were unheard.
- Renters were more evenly distributed across all income categories than property owners/managers. However, renters were also more likely than property owners/managers to report annual incomes below \$ 60% AMI for a family of 3. 17% of reported annual income of less than 30% AMI for a family of 3.

Staff looks forward to sharing this report with the Culture & Neighborhood Services Committee along with options for implementation at the December 2020 meeting.

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Background

In June 2019, Councilmember Treviño, District 1, issued a Council Consideration Request (CCR) for the creation of a Renters' Commission. The goals of the proposed renters' commission are to elevate renters' issues in citywide discussions and increase renter representation on boards and commissions. Neighborhood & Housing Services Department (NHSD) staff has since briefed the Housing Commission, Governance Committee, and Culture & Neighborhood Services Committee on existing related initiatives and examples from within and outside of San Antonio.

Outreach on this initiative was delayed from March 2020 to September 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. NHSD staff worked with Councilmembers and Government & Public Affairs (GPA) to launch a survey through SA Speak Up. The department also hosted two focus groups in October 2020. The findings from that survey and focus group are detailed in this report.

Survey Findings

Staff created a survey to hear from the public on the proposed commission and renters' issues. Prior to launch, Councilmembers were given the opportunity to review the questions and provide edits. The survey was launched through SA Speak Up and was live for six weeks from September 14th through October 29th. A total of 3,660 responses were received. 45% came from renters, 10% came from property owners & managers, and 45% came identified as something else, usually a homeowner. Other responses were people who are both property managers & renters or experiencing homelessness.

Outreach

NHSD partnered with GPA to send text messages to their COSAGov text message program, distributed via email to EHAP program participants, Council Offices, the Right to Counsel stakeholders' group, Housing Commission, and NHSD communication channels. Staff also distributed flyers in both English and Spanish during a San Antonio Food Bank distribution event in collaboration with District Three. In addition, the District One Council office appeared on local news stations to promote the survey.

Content

People who identified as renters or property managers/owners received different sets of questions specific to their situation. Many respondents identified as neither current renters nor property managers. Within this group included homeowners and people experiencing homelessness. These respondents were given the option to answer the renters' survey questions. Some respondents identified as both property owners/managers and renters and received both question sets. Not all questions have the same response rate.

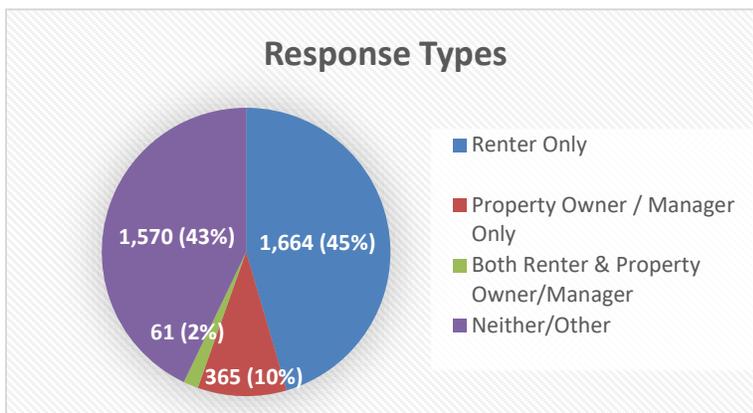


Table A:

Survey respondents by response type



Renter Survey Responses

2,875 respondents took the renters' survey, of which 1,664 are renters themselves. About half of renters who responded had rented for 5 years or longer (Table B). More than half of respondents lived in apartment complexes with greater than 10 units and more than a quarter rented a single-family home (Table C.)

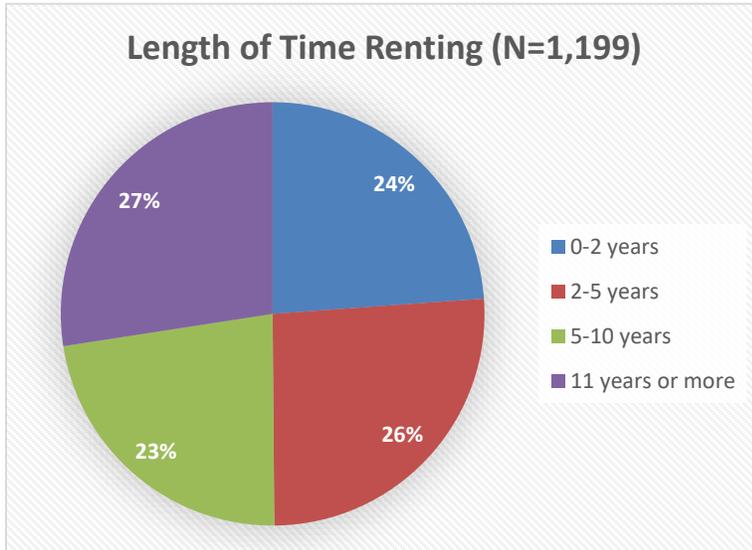


Table B: Renter respondents by length of time renting

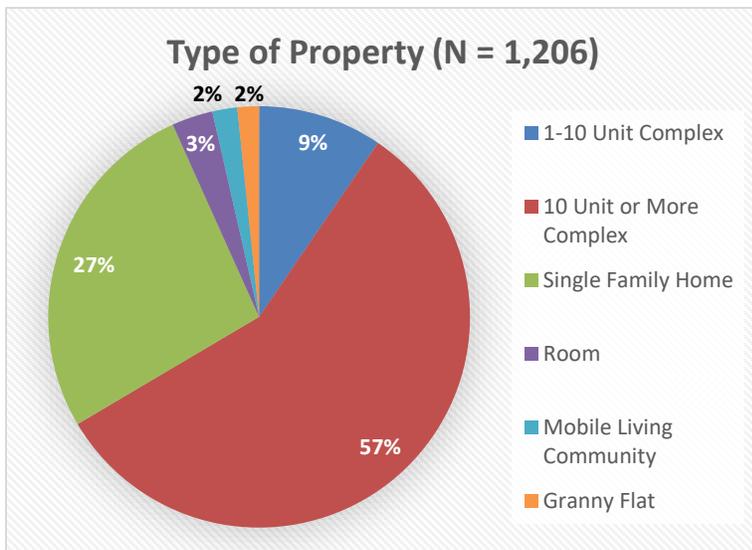


Table C: Renter respondents by the type of property they rent

Housing Assistance

107 respondents (6% of renters) said they live in a property managed by a housing authority. 68 respondents (4% of renters) stated they used a housing voucher to pay their rent. Because many housing authority residents also use vouchers, there is likely overlap between these two groups.



Eviction & Housing Discrimination

14% of respondents stated they have or currently are experiencing eviction and 12% reported receiving a notice to vacate (Table D). Nearly a third reported having experienced housing discrimination.

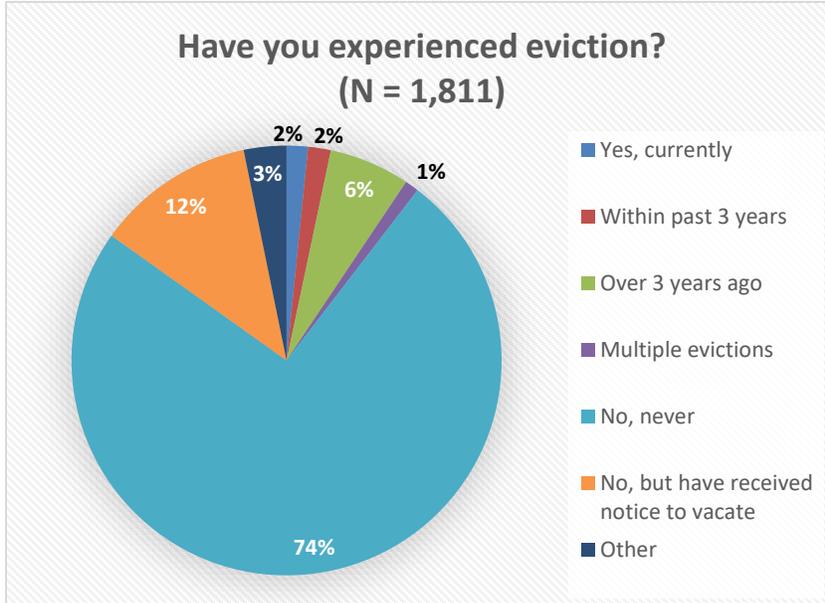


Table D: Experience with eviction

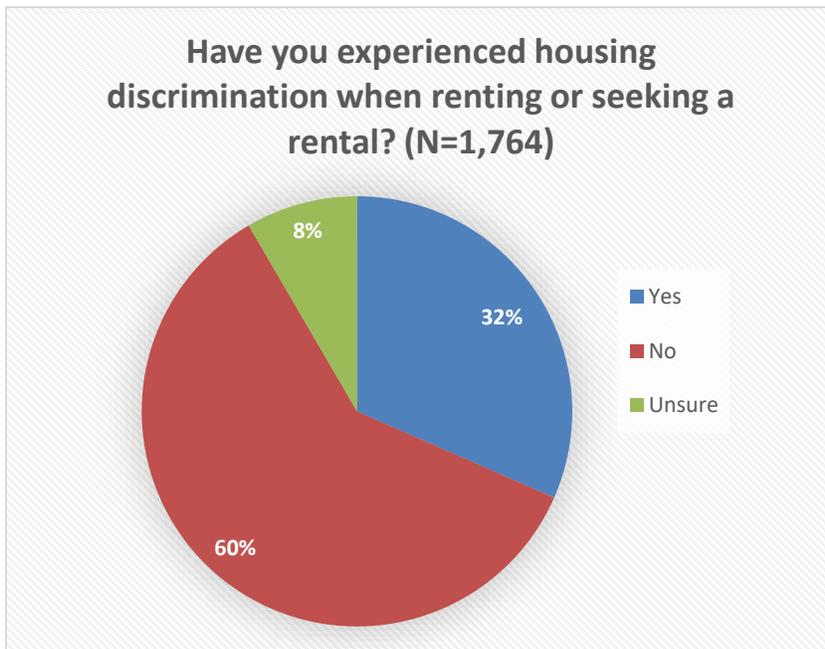


Table E: Experience with housing discrimination



Property Owner & Manager Responses

10% of respondents identified as property owners or managers. More than half of respondents had owned or managed property for more than 11 years. 49% own or manage single-family properties, and almost a third manage multi-family properties with more than 10 units (Table F.)

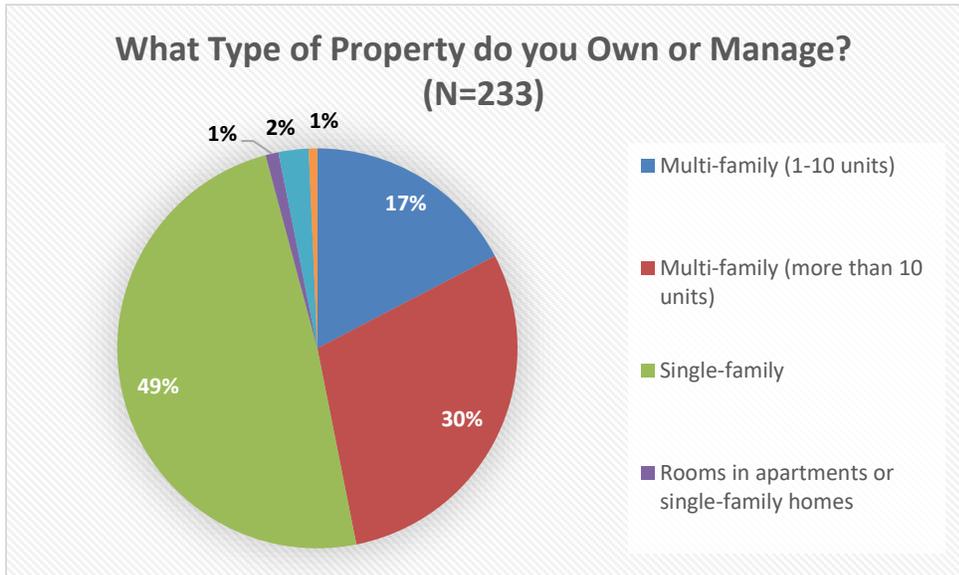


Table F: Property owner/manager respondents by property type they own or operate

Responses on Engaging with City & Impact of City Policies

All respondents were asked to rate their knowledge of City policies and to describe the frequency and ease with which they engage with the City. Renters were more likely to say they are not familiar with City policies on renters or renter housing (Table G).

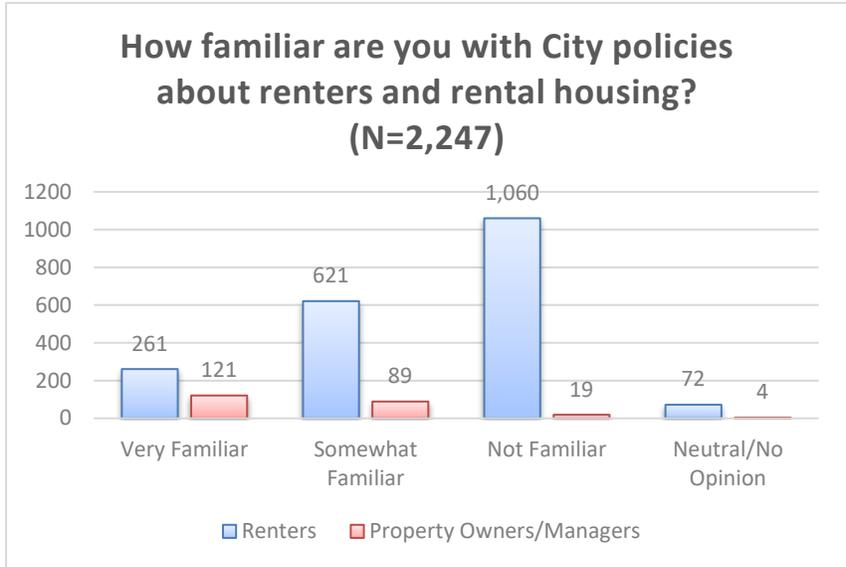


Table G: Familiarity with City policies about renters and rental housing.

Property Owner/managers were slightly more likely to have strong feelings about the ease of interaction with the City, approximately 33% said the City was very or somewhat easy to interact with and 37% said

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it was very hard or somewhat hard (Table H). However, property managers and owners were twice as likely as renters to engage with the city “very or somewhat frequently” (Table I).

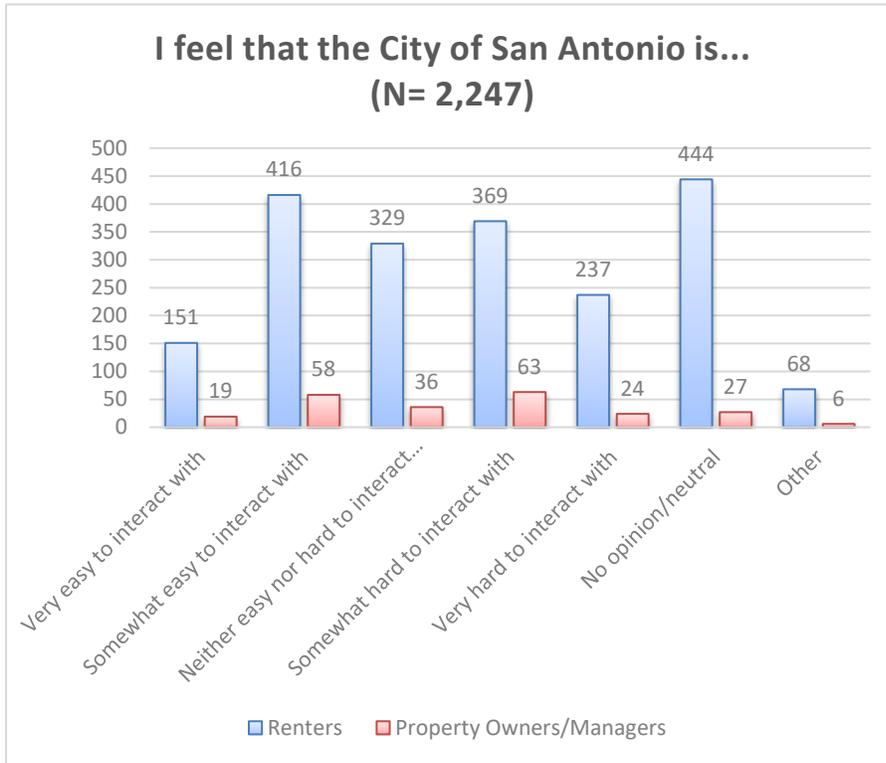


Table H: Ease of interaction with the City

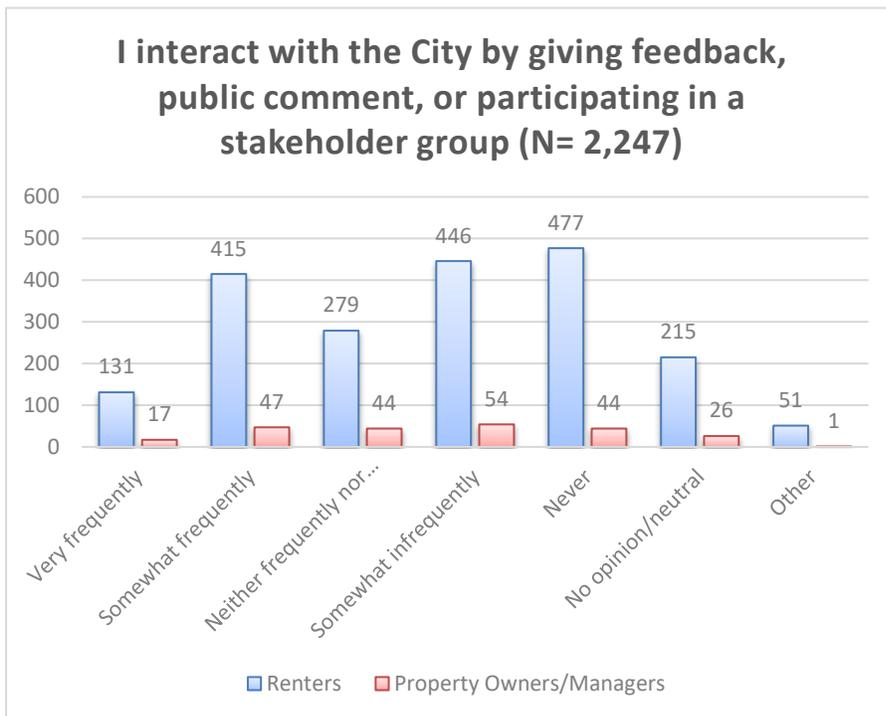


Table I: Degree of interaction with the City



Responses on Renter Representation & Issue Discussion

The goals of the proposed renters' commission are to elevate renters' issues in citywide discussions and increase renter representation on boards and commissions. Respondents to the renter survey were asked explicitly if renters are sufficiently represented on boards and commissions and if renters' issues were given enough consideration by boards and commissions. For both questions, respondents were more than twice as likely to answer "no" than "yes" (Tables J and K). A plurality of respondents said they were unsure about their perceptions for both questions as well.

Respondents who provided comment frequently called for diversity and public awareness of renters' issues. Respondents also stated there should be more advocacy and education regarding renters' issues and policies that would be able to inform the community.

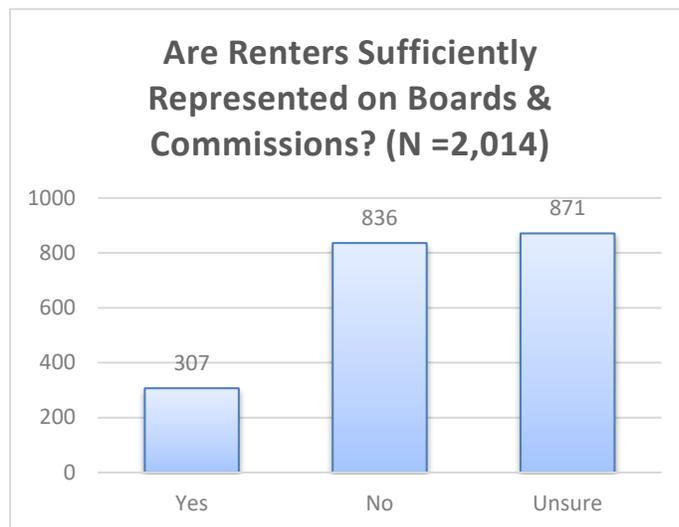


Table J: Familiarity with City policies about renters and rental housing¹

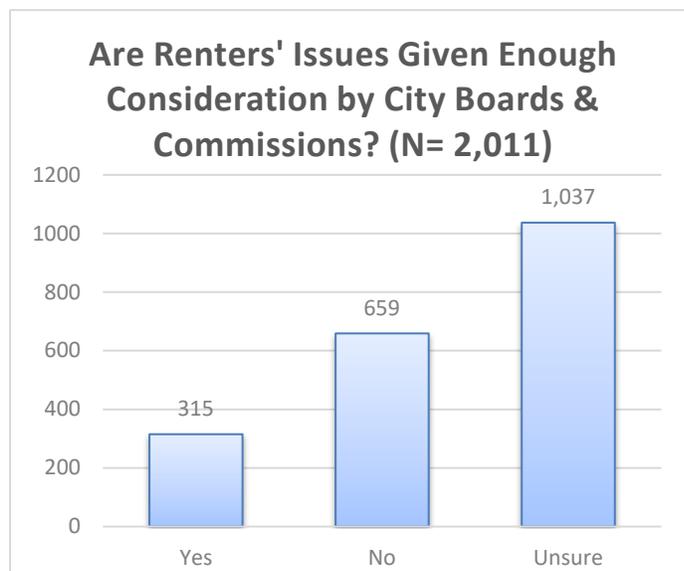


Table K: Perceived consideration of renters' issues by City boards and Commissions[†]

¹ Only respondents to the renters' survey were asked this question.

[†] Only respondents to the renters' survey were asked this question.



Responses on Commission Composition

Over 60% of respondents preferred a commission that included a mix of renters and property owners or managers (Table L). A mixed composition was favored by 62% of renter respondents and 68% of property owners & managers. 37% of renters and 9% of property owners and managers favored a renters-only commission. 1.5% of renters and 66% of property owners & managers favored a commission comprised solely of property owners and managers.

Survey respondents indicated that the prospective Commission include representatives from a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, race/ethnicity and gender identity. Respondents also felt it was important that the representatives come from a variety of rental settings such as single-family homes, small and large rental properties, housing authority properties, senior housing, student housing, and mobile living communities. Other representatives could include staff such as on-site service providers and non-profit housing providers.

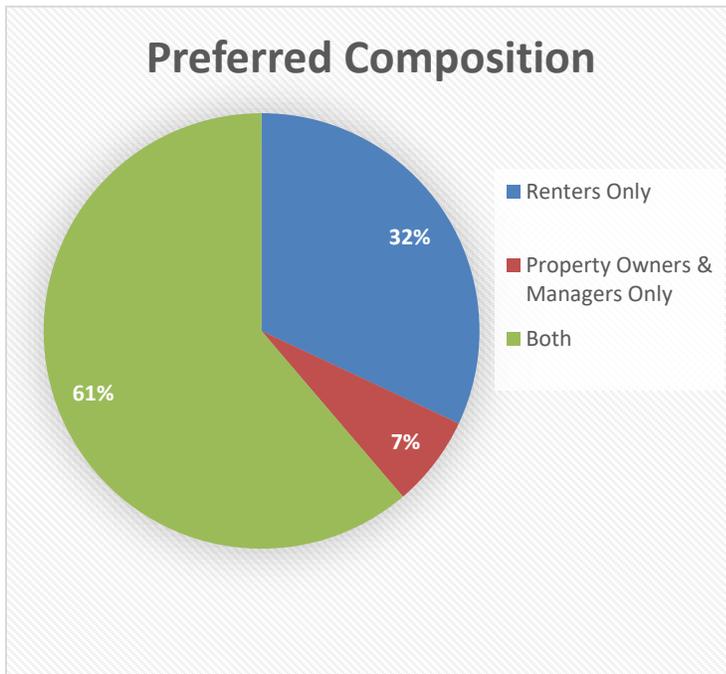


Table L: Preferred composition by industry/resident

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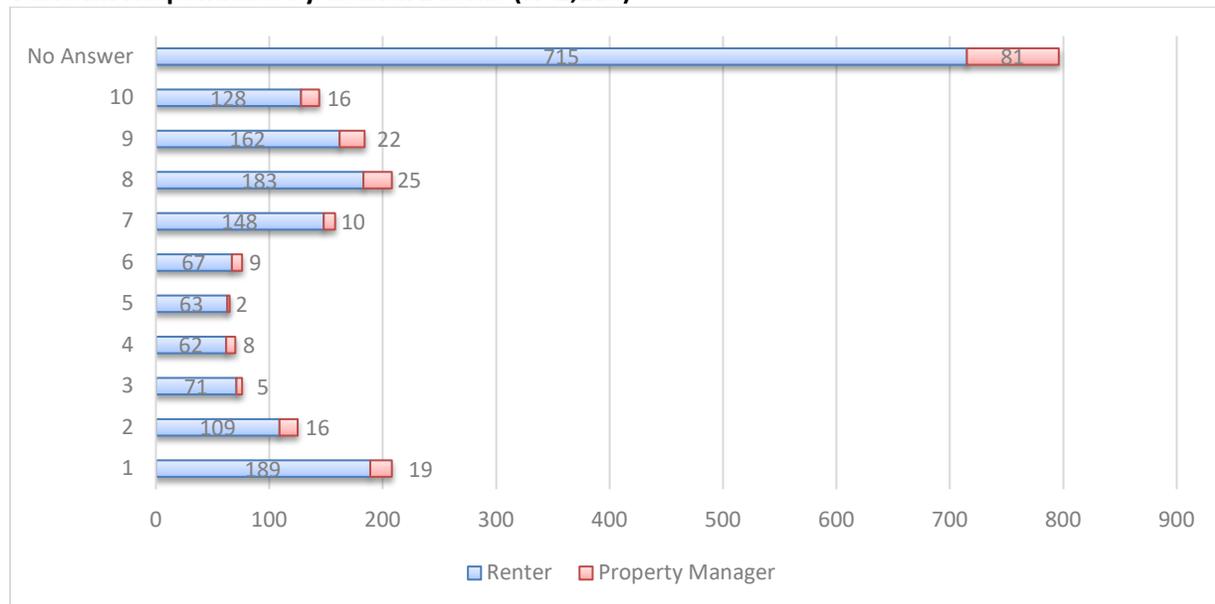
Survey Respondent Demographics

All SA Speak Up surveys include an optional set of demographic questions at the end of each survey. The responses to those questions are detailed below. All respondents were given these questions.

Council District

District 8 received the highest level of engagement overall and the highest level of engagement from property owners & managers. District 1 had the highest engagement from renters (Table M). Staff notes that SA Speak Up surveys do include a link for respondents to look up their council district, however most respondents skipped this question.

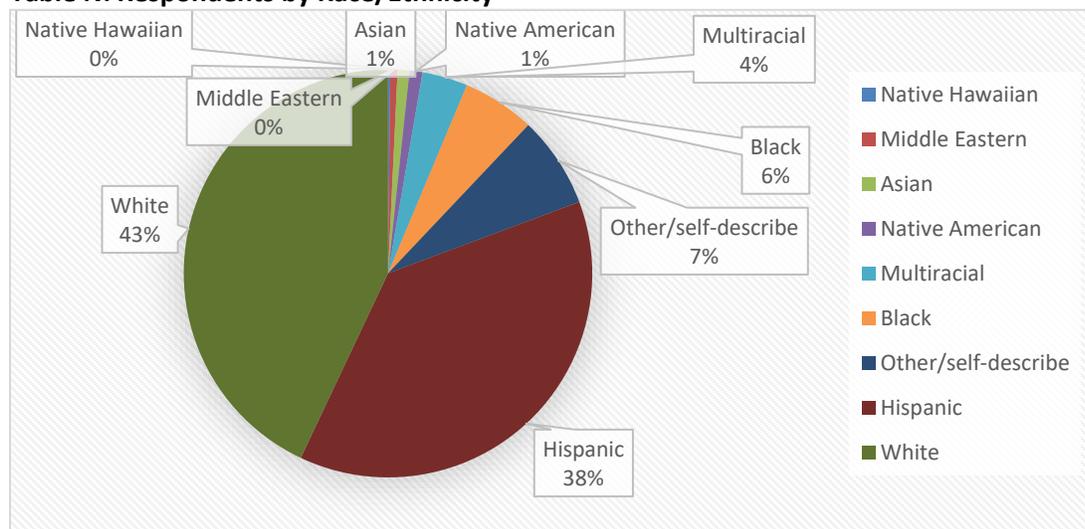
Table M: Respondents by Council District (N=1,210)



Race/Ethnicity

Responses did not vary significantly by respondent type and align closely with Census data (Table N).

Table N: Respondents by Race/Ethnicity



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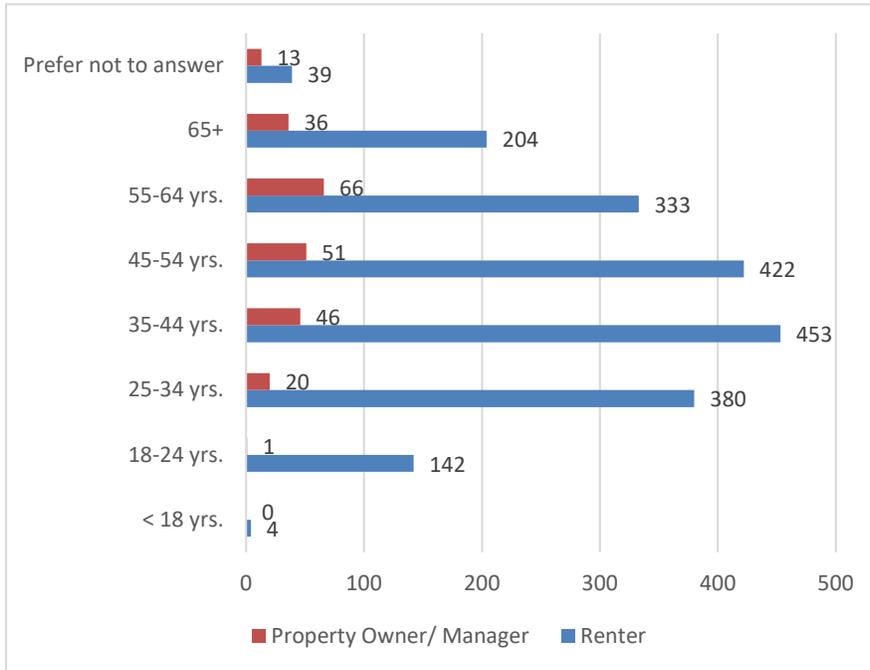


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Responses by Age

Notably, most property owners/managers were over age 45 while a slight majority of renters were below age 45 (Table O).

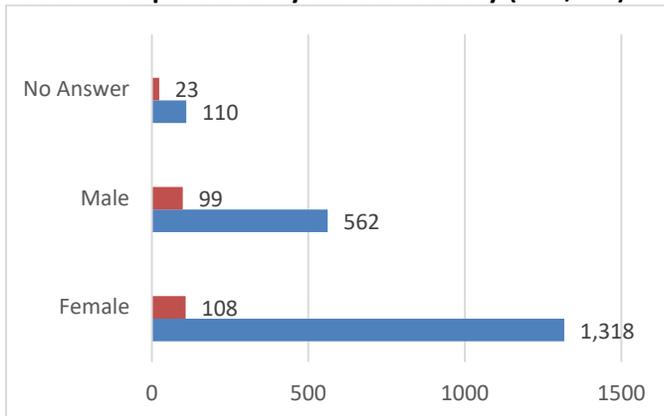
Table O: Respondents by Age (N=2,210)



Responses by Gender Identity

Renters were more likely to identify as female, though most survey respondents in both groups identified as female (Table P).

Table P: Respondents by Gender Identity (N=2,220)



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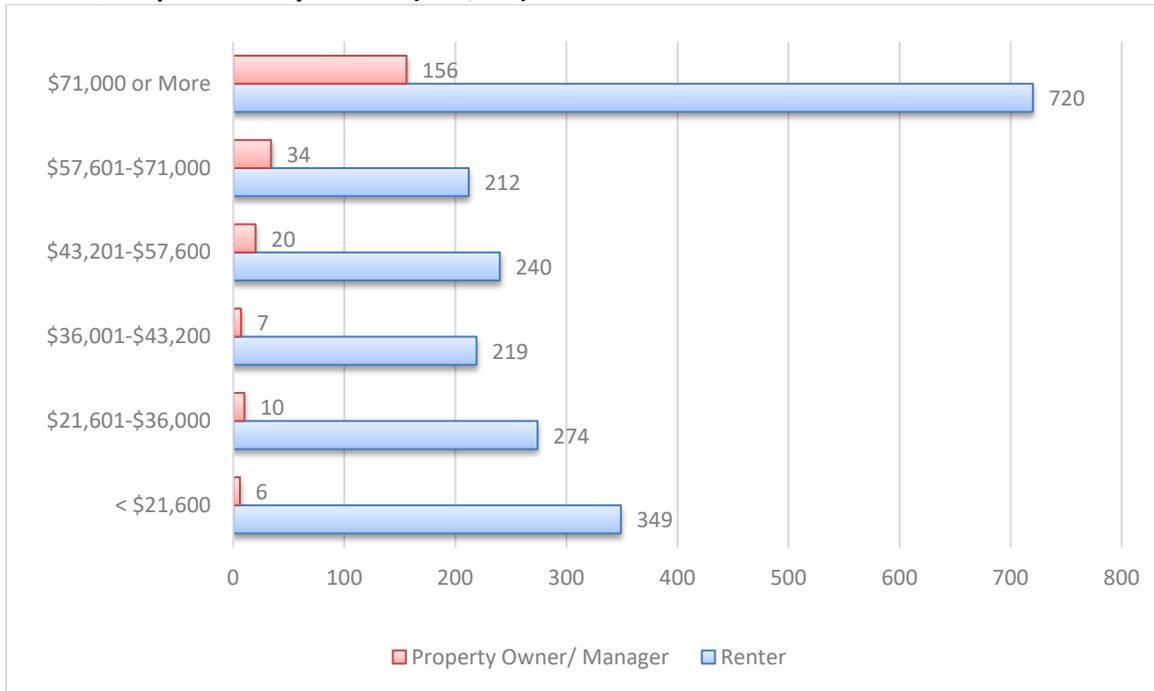


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Responses by Income

Renters were more evenly distributed across all income categories than property owners/managers. However, renters were also more likely than property owners/managers to report annual incomes below \$43,200, which is 60% AMI for a family of 3. 17% of reported annual income of less than \$21,600, or 30% AMI for a family of 3 (Table Q). For reference, the Census reports the average household income in San Antonio was \$72,587 in 2019.

Table Q: Respondents by Income (N=2,247)





Focus Group Findings

Both renters and landlords were invited to participate in virtual focus groups. The goal of the focus groups was to receive qualitative feedback from stakeholders in a group setting with their peers about the renters' commission proposal and what issues a commission could address. The questions asked both groups to identify renters' issues, have them provide priorities and suggestions for solving resident issues. The stakeholders were selected based on their willingness to participate in a focus group (indicated on a survey question or as a recommendation from council staff). Staff sent invitations to people with varying renter and landlord backgrounds, and people who were frequent or infrequently participants in other City-convened spaces.

Renters' Focus Group

This focus group was held on Wednesday, October 14th. Five participants attended including:

- A person who is both a renter and property manager
- A senior renter
- A market-rate renter
- A SAHA renter
- A Community Organizer renter

Additional invitations were sent to mobile home park residents, people who lived in student housing, and a veteran. Staff did not receive a response to a request to participate in either a focus group or 1:1.

The participants agreed that more education for first time renters to better understand their rights and education for first time landlords to understand their responsibilities. A commission, regardless of structure, should provide outreach regarding education and training. Participants felt that rising rents would be a key focus for the renters' commission and favored a renters-only commission so that renters could use the forum as a safe space to discuss their concerns.

Property Owner & Manager Focus Group

This focus group was held on Thursday, October 15th. Seven participants attended including:

- A realtor
- An independent landlord
- An affordable housing developer
- A market-rate housing developer
- A representative from SAHA
- A representative from SABOR
- A representative from SAAA

Participants expressed a lack of clarity as to the need for a new commission but felt if there was one that it should include both renters and property owners & managers. They agreed that more education for renters and landlords on their rights and responsibilities is needed and a Commission could be a way.

Focus Group Summary

Table K on the following page highlights points of difference (red) and points of agreement (green) between both focus groups. It came up in both discussions that issues between property owners/managers and renters often stem from miscommunication of roles that sometimes leads to a chain of negative impacts.

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Table K: Points of Difference (red) and Agreement (green) between both Focus Groups

Renters	Property Owners
All Renter Commission*	Half Renters and Landlords
Renter's Rights Education	Renters' Rights Education
First Time Property Manager Training	First Time Property Manager Training
First Time Renter Training	First Time Renter Training
Workgroups to address issues	Unclear as to reason for creation
Safe space for renter resolution	Perceived redundancy of Renters' Commission

* Staff notes that some renters are also property managers/owners.



Appendix

A. Responses to Council Questions

The following section contains responses to questions asked by City Councilmembers during the Culture & Neighborhood Services Committee meeting on November 2, 2020.

Outreach for non-digitally connected people

Though the surveys were only available online, various methods were used to direct people to the SA Speak up Survey in both English and Spanish. Flyers were created and distributed at a Food Bank event with support from District 3. District 1 staff held a media event to generate responses as well.

The links were shared with Council staff, Housing Commission, and a wide array of organizations that receive regular emails from the Department Director; almost 300 contacts were asked to share the survey. The list has an array of developers, city employees, and non-profits. In addition to being posted in the SA Speak Up Survey, GPA released a text message to their opt-in texts. This resulted in the largest jump with over 800 responses in one day.

What percentage of renters are from Districts 1-6?

57.2% of renters in San Antonio live in Districts 1-6 according to an analysis completed by Texas Housers in 2020. The distribution of renters in all 10 Council districts is in the table below.

District	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	All SA
# of Renters	61,500	66,800	53,500	49,100	50,900	59,800	62,100	82,700	53,700	53,700	597,100
% of all renters in SA	10.3%	11.2%	9%	8.2%	8.5%	10%	10.4%	13.8%	9%	9%	100%

How much rent did respondents pay?

This survey did not ask about monthly rent payments, except a yes/no question about whether the respondent used a voucher. However, a survey conducted over the summer through the ForEveryoneHome initiative did collect data from a subset of respondents on their monthly rent and mortgage costs. This survey found an average of \$914.

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Who participated in the focus groups?

Below are the names of people who attended the focus groups. Others were invited but did not join.

Renters		Property Owners & Managers	
1	Jeanie Murphy	1	Brett Finley
2	Louis Taplin	2	Hector Morales
3	Kayla Miranda	3	Richard Milk
4	Aaron Arguello	4	David Asher
5	Stacy Ybarra	5	Jean Latscha
		6	Tim Sousa
		7	Ruben Medrano

What were some of qualitative responses from the survey? Especially to the questions about the City being difficult to interact with and policies not working. Were there suggestions for improvement?

A common theme among open-ended responses was that respondents felt unheard. Some respondents felt the City was more responsive to the needs of developers, others stated that the City is only responsive to the needs of the people with the lowest incomes. While some stated they appreciated the survey and other spaces to provide feedback, they did not feel that their contributions were consistently reflected in the City's adopted policies. Many respondents simply stated they were unaware of any policies that impacted them. Examples are below:

- *"A seat at the table sounds like a step in the right direction. The space should be separate from landlords and developers. They are over-represented and considerable (sic) more power than tenants."*
- *"The city should not be involve (sic) in this at all. This is handled now by current law. Keep politics out of this."*
- *"City need to see both side to this issue"*
- *"Y'all aren't difficult to interact w but difficult to get thru to. we talk but y'all don't listen."*
- *"Not given enough info on how to interact or given enough information to attend meetings pertaining to our community."*
- *"I think it's easy for me because I'm educated and somewhat familiar with city functions and structure. It might be very difficult for some residents who lack that background and resources."*
- *"I feel like the city has an agenda and is not listening. The system is not broken and does not need fixing. Leave it alone. If a renter does not pay they should not stay. Just like the homeowner with a mortgage. They do not get special representation if they go into foreclosure."*
- *"Biased toward low income issues. Taxes homeowners excessively because they perceive homeowners as a bottomless cash cow they can exploit with little negative consequences."*
- *"This kind is survey is an improvement."*
- *"Public meetings are used to promote already determined policy."*
- *"Trying to help but may be catering too much to those that hold influence and power."*

Suggestions for improvement included general requests for more representation for renters and landlords and suggestions that the City allow these issues to be governed by State law and development

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code. Many responses focused on engagement as it relates to public meetings such as that they be held virtually, or if they are in person that they be held in diverse neighborhoods around the City. Examples are below:

- *“Online surveys and questionnaires offered ahead of meeting to be discussed at the meeting and responses for all questions/comments posted on a City of San Antonio public meetings website.”*
- *“Organized from the bottom up, i.e., in which the city heard the decisions of the citizens rather than the citizens the decision of the city.”*
- *“Many of us don't have computers or smart phones. And many of us have children. We need childcare and access to internet if we are to participate nowadays. But even before, the City never tried reaching out to us. Nobody thinks about us.”*
- *“Multiple meetings during the day and evening and on both weekends or weekdays.”*

Are a majority of apartments/rentals in Districts 7-10?

44% of rental units in San Antonio are located in Districts 7-10 according to an analysis completed by Texas Housers in 2020. District 8 has both the highest number of rentals units and the highest proportion of rental to ownership housing at 58% of housing units. Information for all districts is below.

District	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	All SA
# of rental housing units	27,904	27,570	22,123	16,285	20,863	24,282	29,347	36,427	25,114	21,523	255,528
% of housing units that are rentals	53%	49%	40%	38%	42%	41%	46%	58%	42%	39%	45%

What are all the organizations included in outreach?

Staff—including Council and Executive—shared the survey along with Commissioners. Though the exact organizations are unknown, the Director shared the survey with her 300 contacts. These contacts list Community Housing Development Organizations, developers, the Apartment Association, SABOR, other city departments and groups such as COPSMetro and Texas Organizing Project. The Housing Commission was asked to share with their organizations.

How many units were represented by the owners who responded to the survey?

Staff does not have a reliable estimate of how many units the respondents own or operate. 30% of respondents indicated they operate more than 10 units, and 49% indicated they operate single family homes. Two hundred and thirty-three landlords responded to the question of what kind of property they managed. They would account for an estimate of at least 900 units and 141 single-family homes.

How many boards and commission slots are vacant?

The City has 88 Boards and Commissions that hold 878 seats. As of July, there were 106 vacancies, 32 of which were for a new Climate Action Committee that was recently created. The Clerks Office does not have an up-to-date count as of November 17th.