Ionia – Rising Tide
Gen Z Survey Results

July 2019

As younger generations approach young adulthood and are soon to be entering the workforce and housing market, understanding their preferences is essential to plan successfully for the future. "Gen Z," defined as the generation born between 1995 and 2015, is the first group to be native technology-users en masse. Never before has anyone grown up in an age of instant and international connectivity with such ease. As such, many of their emerging opinions have been formed in ways that are different than older generations. It is beneficial for cities to include this unique and important cohort and incorporate their values into the planning process if they have any hopes of retaining them or enticing them to return.

As of 2015, Michigan still had the sixth highest population loss for Millennials,[1] and without a swift change to address youth outmigration, there's no reason to believe that Generation Z at large won't do the same, taking with them their valuable education, training, and investment dollars that could be used to build up Michigan. As Generation Z's values map largely onto Millennials, local and state government need to rethink their efforts to keep youth here. Michigan Millennials follow slightly different patterns when compared to the nation in that they are not as concentrated in larger cities. This is good news for smaller cities that can position themselves as desirable alternatives places to be young and single or to start a family. Again, without this type of data yet on Generation Z as they come of age, it is presumed that their habits will follow suit.

Who Took the Survey?

The 108 students who participated in the survey were distributed among all four high school class years: 38 students were in 12th grade, 17 students in 11th, 19 students in 10th, and 31 students in 9th grade. Close to 60% of the respondents identified as female (59%) with the remaining students identifying as male (38%) or transgender (2.8%).

---

[1] Institute for Public Policy and Social Research. The Michigan Millennial: Urban Legends. June 2017. https://ippsr.msu.edu/public-policy/michigan-wonk-blog/michigan-millennial-urban-legends

Grade

Gender
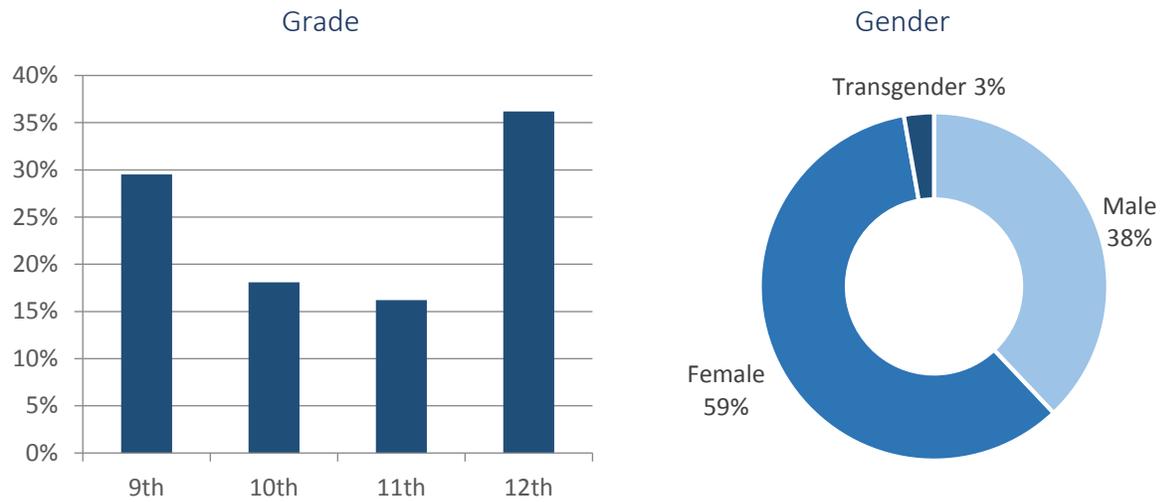
General Attitudes

To determine where Ionia's Gen Z population stands on national issues, students were given several statements referring to current national debates and asked to indicate to what extent they agreed. The top two issues with overwhelming support among the students were "the federal and state government needs to protect our natural environment" (91%), and "gun owners should be required to register their guns" (81%). About 70% believe that "climate change is due to human activity" which corresponds with their desire to have higher levels of government protect natural features and that "the federal government should do more to solve national problems" (68%). Over 60% of students also agreed that "increasing racial/ethnic diversity is good for society" (68%) and that "college/university tuition should be provided to all eligible students" (60%).The most divided response was "teachers should have guns in the classroom" where the most common answer was "strongly disagree" (29%) followed by "undecided" (27%).

These responses indicate that the students in Ionia feel that both higher levels of government should be more involved in protecting the environment, making education more financially accessible, and promoting gun safety. As a generation growing up confronting the realities of climate change, gun violence at school, a rapidly deteriorating natural environment, and worried about significant student loan debt, it is unsurprising that the students support a wider range government intervention on these issues. According to Pew Research Center, Generation Z tracks Millennials' views on some key issues such as climate change and the value of ethnic diversity.[2] Until there is more substantial data on Generation Z, it is unknown precisely how their habits will affect small cities. It is safe to assume that they are likely to respond to their environment similarly to Millennials.

---

[2] Pew Research Center. "Generation Z Looks a Lot Like Millennials on Key Social and Political Issues." January 2019. https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/01/17/generation-z-looks-a-lot-like-millennials-on-key-social-and-political-issues/

While some of these questions feel out of reach for local government to tackle, some of them are directly tied to local land use policy and others can be incorporated into broader community development efforts. While higher levels of government can make more encompassing sweeping legislation, local planning commissioners and city councilpersons are responsible for how land – the natural environment- is used and when 90% of students agree that the natural environment should be protected, that change can start at home.

For instance, Generation Z believes that climate change is due to human activity. Does the City know what its carbon footprint is? Does it know what steps to take to reduce emissions? Is there any way to have the youth involved in this process? How are economic development decisions balanced against costs to the environment? Taking the steps to see to what extent the City is contributing to the problem and modifying local policy to address that would show the youth that decision-makers have listened and taken their input seriously. There are several ways for a community to become more eco-friendly through resolutions and zoning ordinance updates that promote nonmotorized modes of travel, stronger protection of natural resources, incentives for development with lower emissions, stormwater retention, and other low-impact design features. Making climate change a mainstream issue could be a part of a cultural shift in educating households how to lower their carbon footprint and be rewarded for their contribution.
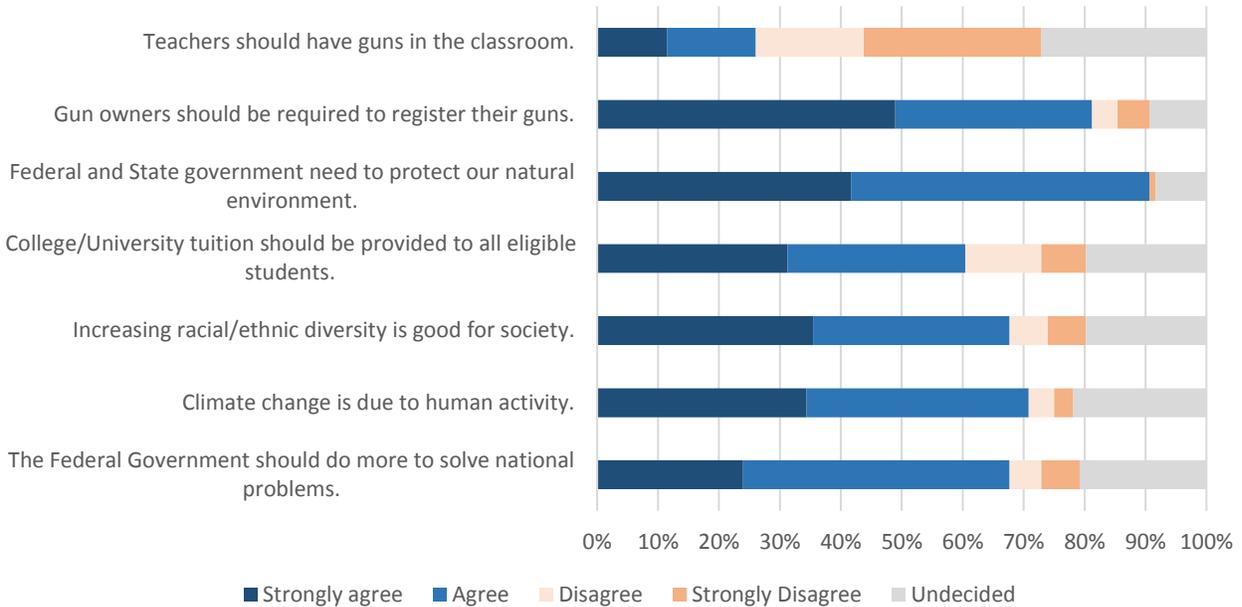
Increasing racial and ethnic diversity was also seen as a positive contribution to society by students. Generation Z is the most diverse generation to date; although that is not always reflected in small Michigan cities, it may influence the types of places they want to live. Immigration, as one way the state can build racial and ethnic diversity, has had positive economic effects in Michigan; foreign-born residents are almost twice as likely to start new businesses than native-born residents, according to a Kauffman Foundation study from 2015 (and also rely less on safety-net programs).[3]

Moreover, local governments can take this information and advocate to higher governments on the students' behalf. At conferences and meetings with state representatives, this data can be used to promote change at larger scale, to take collective action to keep Michigan's youth here and thriving.
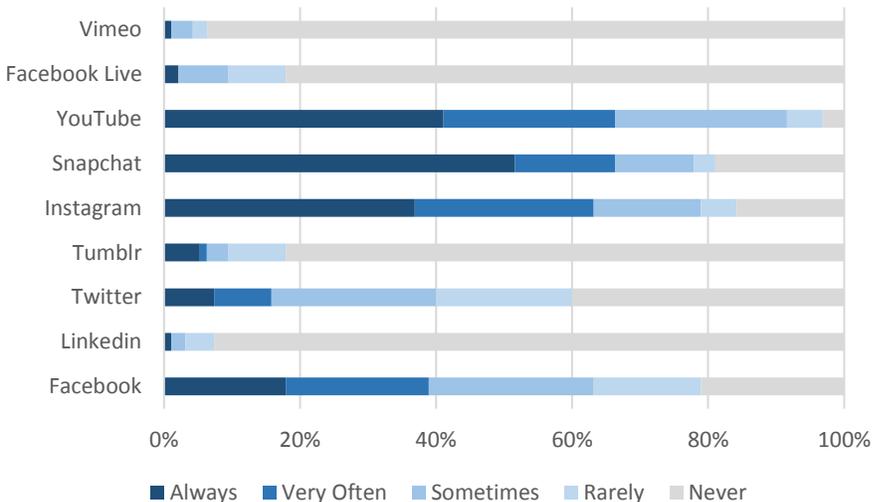
---

[3] Mack, Julie. "Economic Impact of Immigration in Michigan by the Numbers." Mlive. https://www.mlive.com/news/2017/03/economic_impact_of_immigration.html

General Attitudes on National Issues

Teachers should have guns in the classroom.
Gun owners should be required to register their guns.
Federal and State government need to protect our natural environment.
College/University tuition should be provided to all eligible students.
Increasing racial/ethnic diversity is good for society.
Climate change is due to human activity.
The Federal Government should do more to solve national problems.

0%   10%   20%   30%   40%   50%   60%   70%   80%   90%   100%

■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly Disagree ■ Undecided

Social Media

Social Media Preferences

Vimeo
Facebook Live
YouTube
Snapchat
Instagram
Tumblr
Twitter
Linkedin
Facebook

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

■ Always ■ Very Often ■ Sometimes ■ Rarely ■ Never

With the widespread prevalence of social media use, especially with Generation Z, municipal communication should adapt to fit the digital landscape. In order to reach residents, communities must also use a variety of platforms to broadcast their message. The top social media platforms that survey respondents use most frequently are Snapchat, YouTube, and Instagram; two-thirds of students recorded using them "always" or "very often," demonstrating a preference for quick, highly-visual forms of communication that they can access on a mobile device or computer. While many cities have caught on to hosting a Facebook page, only a little over one-third (39%) use that platform as frequently, which is substantially less than their top three preferences.
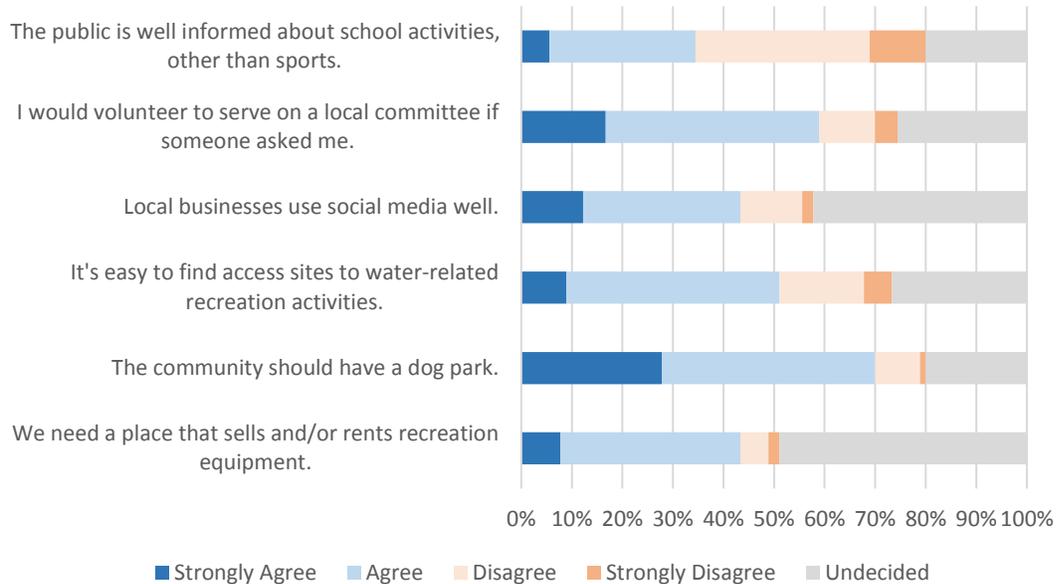
Do you like living here?
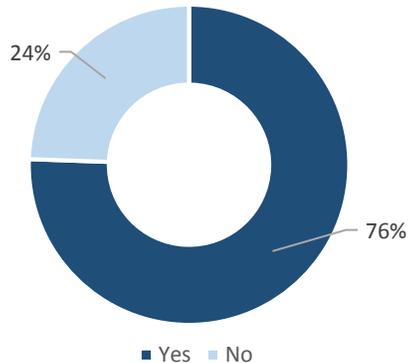
The good news is that a large percentage (76%) of students enjoy living in Ionia. To determine their stance on possible local improvements, students were asked to respond to a series of statements with their level of agreement. More strongly than any other statement, a majority of students (70%) agree that "the community should have a dog park." Other local issues that had above 50% support were "I would volunteer to serve on a local committee if someone asked me" and "it's easy to find access sites to water-related recreation activities." These findings express the importance of no-to-low cost activities for teenagers – either through recreation or volunteering. If a municipality is serious about retaining youth, it is a worthwhile first step to personally invite them to join a decision-making body to represent their interests.

The respondents also agreed that the public is not informed about school activities (outside of sports) and that local businesses do not use social media well—another indication of mismatched communication style potentially causing a disconnect between the youth and the rest of the community.

It is notable that 36% of students reported that getting to and from destinations is a problem for them. This may be because the family shares one car and members have conflicting schedules, and few alternatives exist outside of a personal vehicle—an obstacle to getting involved in local issues or finding and keeping a job.
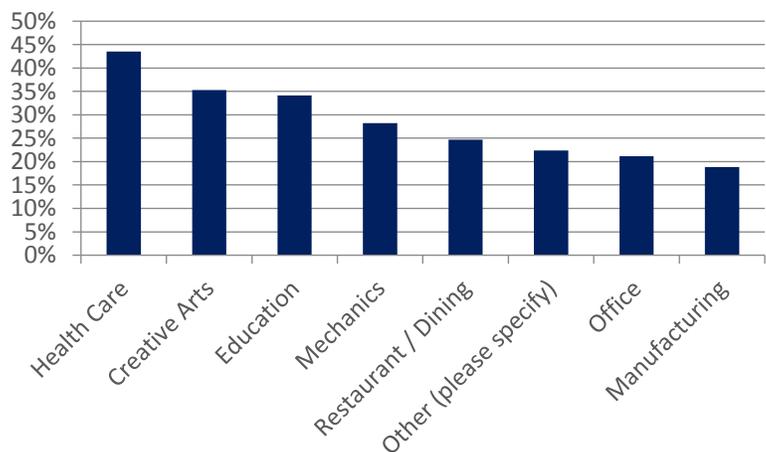
General Attitudes on Local Issues

Survey responses (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, Undecided):

- The public is well informed about school activities, other than sports.
- I would volunteer to serve on a local committee if someone asked me.
- Local businesses use social media well.
- It's easy to find access sites to water-related recreation activities.
- The community should have a dog park.
- We need a place that sells and/or rents recreation equipment.

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

■ Strongly Agree ■ Agree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly Disagree ■ Undecided

Local Career Experiences

During high school, there are opportunities for students to visit local employers to see their daily operations and learn about the industry. However, about 86% and 80% of the students had not heard about this opportunity for both non-manufacturing and or manufacturing businesses, respectively. Of the remaining respondents who went on the tour, they left with a favorable or neutral impression of that business. These findings expose a missed opportunity in proactively promoting this experience to high school students and to track how effectively it helps retain youth. Alternatively, there is a cooperative education experience that gives academic credit for structured job experience in different fields. The students' selection indicates what fields they are interested in. Health care (44%) came in first, followed by creative arts (35%), and education in a close third (34%). Manufacturing was the least selected option at 19%, but this percentage mirrors closely to the currently level of employment in this sector according to the American Community Survey 2017 estimates that 22% of Ionia residents work in manufacturing. The "other" category featured many professional, "new economy" service jobs in science or technology.

### Opportunities for Co-op Education Experiences

Categories (left to right): Health Care, Creative Arts, Education, Mechanics, Restaurant / Dining, Other (please specify), Office, Manufacturing

Post-Graduation Career

Students were asked what field they were considering after high school or college. Healthcare was the most popular (25%), then "other" (15%) and then after quite a drop off, law enforcement was selected (9.4%). The other top selections were professional services and technology fields, and again manufacturing was towards the bottom (1.2%) of the list. Only four students selected the military as a career option.
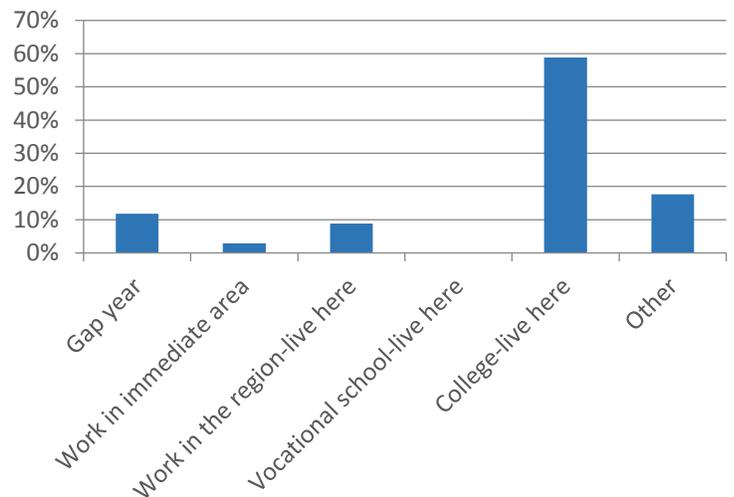
A majority of students plan to move away after high school graduation (60%). Of the 40% that plan to stay in the community or close by, over half of them still plan to attend college (59%). The students that have decided to leave Ionia are mostly going to a college or university in Michigan (65%), a small number are leaving the state for additional schooling, or plan to find work in the state but outside of the City. Their top school choices are University of Michigan and Michigan State University, but only about one-third of students stated where they would attend.
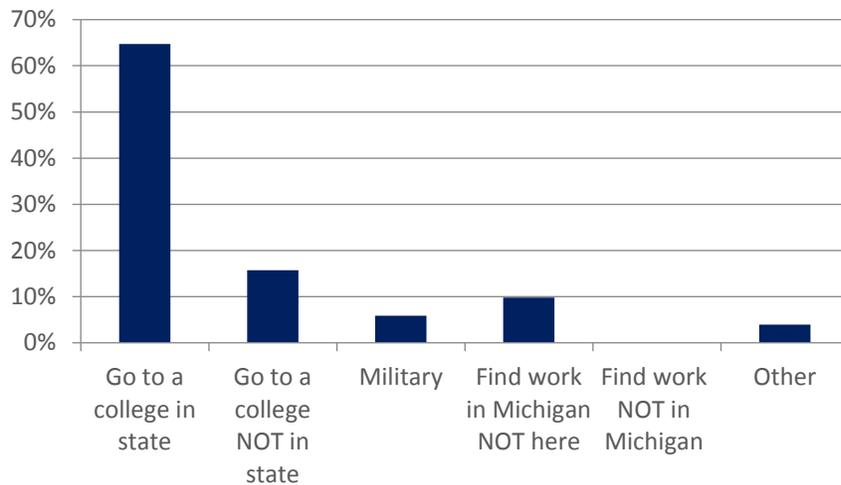
After High School Plans

40%
60%
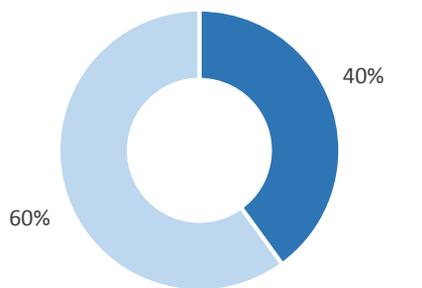
- I plan to stay in the community or close by.
- I plan to leave to move away.

Plan to Stay in the Community

Gap year | Work in immediate area | Work in the region-live here | Vocational school-live here | College-live here | Other
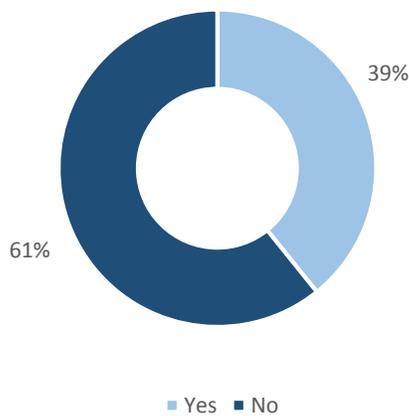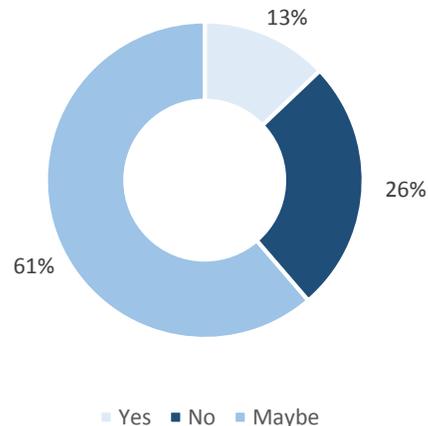
Plan to Leave the Community

Returning

When students were asked if they plan to return to the area after college, 61% said "no." The main reason for not wanting to return is simply a desire "to live elsewhere" (47%) but there is also the perception that there are no jobs within their field and that their career goals cannot be realized in Ionia (38%). For those that said they will return, they cited "family" most commonly as the reason (75%). When asked if they would come back later in life, as opposed to directly after college, the results were more favorable. A smaller percentage said "no" (26%), and a greater percentage selected "maybe" (61%). Similarly, those who expressed a desire to return later in life would do so to be near friends and family (86%) rather than reasons that are related to planning, such as recreation, quality of life, or affordable housing.
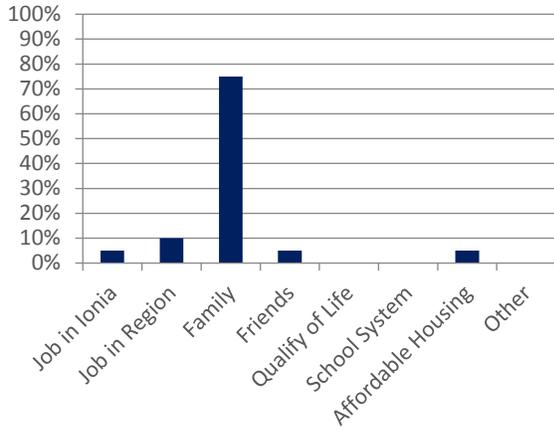
Return After College

Return Later in Life

Reasons for Returning After College

Bar chart showing percentages for: Job in Ionia (~5%), Job in Region (~9%), Family (~75%), Friends (~5%), Qualify of Life (0%), School System (0%), Affordable Housing (~5%), Other (0%).

Reasons for Returning Later in Life

Bar chart showing percentages for: To retire (~5%), Family and Friends (~86%), Recreational Opportunities (0%), Quality of Life (0%), Affordable Housing (~9%), Other (0%).