



CAVE CITY THRIVING PROJECT CAVE CITY, ARKANSAS

THRIVING CITIES LAB
INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES IN CULTURE



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UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

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Front Cover: Watermelon field by Julie Graves

Inside Covers: Fieldstone in Cave City, Arkansas by Brandi Schulz

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1 • CAVE CITY THRIVING PROJECT PHASE ONE

1.1: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Cave City Thriving Project (CCTP) is an initiative of the Thriving Cities Lab at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia. The Thriving Cities Lab works from the Civic Endowment Framework and its six classical and contemporary civic “endowments,” an interpretive and analytical approach to well-being and community life developed through fifteen years of research and study in partnership with pilot cities and research sites across the country.

In a report entitled, “America: A Nation of Small Towns,” the U. S. Census Bureau notes that in the most recent national census, 76% of the approximately 19,500 incorporated places in the United States had fewer than 5,000 people, and almost 42% had fewer than 500 people. So, as the Thriving Cities Lab looked for a national pilot city early in 2024, we set out to find a small town.

How fortunate we were to be introduced to Cave City, Arkansas, population 1,994.

With engaged city leadership and committed community members eager to make Cave City into a place that their children and grandchildren would be proud to call home, we came to appreciate that this small town embodied many of the hopes and challenges of thousands of similar communities.

With the help of a core leadership team in Cave City, we introduced the Civic Endowment Framework and asked stakeholders to evaluate their city and their role in helping it thrive during our initial meetings in May, 2024. A Civic Capacity Survey and a Cave City Thriving Survey followed. Through the summer of 2024, the project team conducted remote interviews with stakeholders in Cave City and Sharp County and the data team reviewed and compiled publicly accessible data and reports comparing Cave City to small towns in Arkansas and across the U.S. In October, 2024 we presented and discussed our preliminary findings at a second convening with stakeholders in Cave City. The Phase One report that follows summarizes all the qualitative and quantitative data gathered in the project to date.

The purpose of Phase One is to introduce the leaders of a community to the endowment framework and to establish a baseline for its thriving, to capture a sense of how the community sees and values its own categories of The True, The Good, The Beautiful, The Just & Well-Ordered, The Prosperous, and The Sustainable. Because the framework provides new language and new ways of bringing together the city’s institutions and leaders, it enables unlikely connections and new opportunities for collaboration and the identification of overlapping interests.

Themes that emerged from our research include:

Leadership (The Just & Well-Ordered): Cave City is fortunate to have an excellent cohort of community leaders, both in city government and across a number of key institutions and groups. While good leadership is largely an intangible asset, no city can take steps to increase its flourishing without it. To ensure that this asset is available in the future, the city needs to strategically support current leaders and to recruit and develop new ones.

Social Institutions (The True, The Good, and The Sustainable): The city's esteemed school district, outstanding network of health care providers, and vibrant churches provide a solid foundation for the community's social needs and well-being. Nevertheless, the community is marked by high rates of poverty, with accompanying social challenges that seem to fall disproportionately on grandparental caregivers and young families.

Cultural Assets (The Beautiful and The Good): The famed Cave City Watermelon Festival has an overwhelmingly positive and outsized impact on the cultural life of this region; however, this event takes place once a year, and there seems to be a desire in the community for more cultural offerings and for an aesthetic upgrade to the city's built environment. The community also encompasses several historic sites and natural features which, if preserved, would significantly enhance its cultural life and cement its identity.

Local Economy (The Prosperous): Cave City has a number of successful small businesses. The recent re-boot of the city's Chamber of Commerce will likely lead to more coordination and planning in the realm of economic development. Residents are grateful for the businesses that exist but also want access to more well-paying jobs.

1.2: Overview of Project and Conceptual Framework

The Thriving Cities Lab is an extension of the thought and work of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia, founded by cultural sociologist James Davison Hunter. The Cave City Thriving Project builds upon the ambitious, interdisciplinary, multi-million-dollar research infrastructure of the Thriving Cities Lab, and benefits from its deep bank of research assets.

The basis of the Thriving Cities approach is a broadly humanistic and dynamic approach to civic life. We start from the premise that each city can be described in terms of an array of different but fundamental endowments—in this case, they are moral, intellectual, aesthetic, economic, political, and natural. These endowments include the three classical ideals—The Good, The True, and The Beautiful—to which we join three additional categories—The Prosperous, The Just & Well-Ordered, and The Sustainable. We call these six the “endowments” because, like financial endowments, they can grow over long periods of time and may be depleted by mismanagement or neglect.

To effect movement toward cultural change requires a small group of leaders from each of these endowments, working with a common vocabulary and shared goals. The groups most successful in effecting such changes are characterized by deep, cross-endowment collaboration, frequent discussion, and early-stage agreement on benchmarks and long-term goals. Leaders engaged in such collaborative initiatives reinforce complementary missions and benefit from overlapping concerns, solving mutually agreed upon civic problems together.

The Thriving Cities Lab brings together external data and historical sources and draws upon the wisdom of community stakeholders, and then advises lead partners to evaluate the strengths and challenges, consider how the endowments interact, identify new solutions to commonly understood problems, and build new coalitions for human flourishing in the community.

Using this conceptual framework, this study engaged community leaders from all spheres of civic life to reflect on Cave City's progress in each of these endowments and to contribute to a collective and holistic definition of community success. In so doing, these leaders could see their work and their city through a new lens, the first step in moving beyond the limitations of the status quo and creating together the conditions for their city to thrive in the future.

1.3: Cave City Thriving Project Team

Dr. Scott Roulier (project lead) is Co-Director of the Thriving Cities Lab and a Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia. He is John D. Trimble, Sr., Professor of Political Theory and Social Sciences Chair, Lyon College, Arkansas, and author of *Shaping American Democracy: Landscapes and Urban Design* and *Kantian Virtue at the Intersection of Politics and Nature: The Vale of Soul-Making*. Roulier received his PhD in Politics from the University of Virginia.

Dr. Ty Buckman (project organizer) serves as Director and Senior Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture and the President of the Advanced Studies in Culture Foundation. A former provost and professor of English, Buckman has served as a strategic planning consultant and accreditation peer reviewer at more than thirty colleges and universities across the U.S. He holds a PhD in English Renaissance Literature from the University of Virginia.

Dr. Brendan Connell (survey design) is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Lyon College. He is an expert on comparative political economy, and his research on migration and public opinion has appeared in multiple academic journals. He holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Colorado at Boulder and an MA from American University in Washington, D.C.

Caroline Daniel (project manager) has had leadership roles in several social service agencies and non-profits in greater Atlanta, where she is also active on the boards of school, community, and church groups. She received her BA in Social Rehabilitation Services and Psychology from Assumption University.

Kristen Evangelista (project researcher) is a freelance writer and researcher based in New Jersey. She has a background in curation, arts administration, and grant writing, and received an MA in Curatorial Studies from Bard College.

Oluwatominsin Falegan (project editor) is a Dallas-based program coordinator and caseworker who holds a Master of Public Health degree from Georgia State University.

Dr. Ed Hasecke (data team lead) is a political scientist in Washington, D.C. and the Dean and Executive Director of the Lutheran College Washington Consortium. He previously served as Professor of Political Science and Director of the Hagen Center for Civic and Urban Engagement at Wittenberg University in Springfield, Ohio, where he led the development of a community data repository and dashboard as a campus-city joint venture. He holds a PhD in Political Science from Ohio State University.

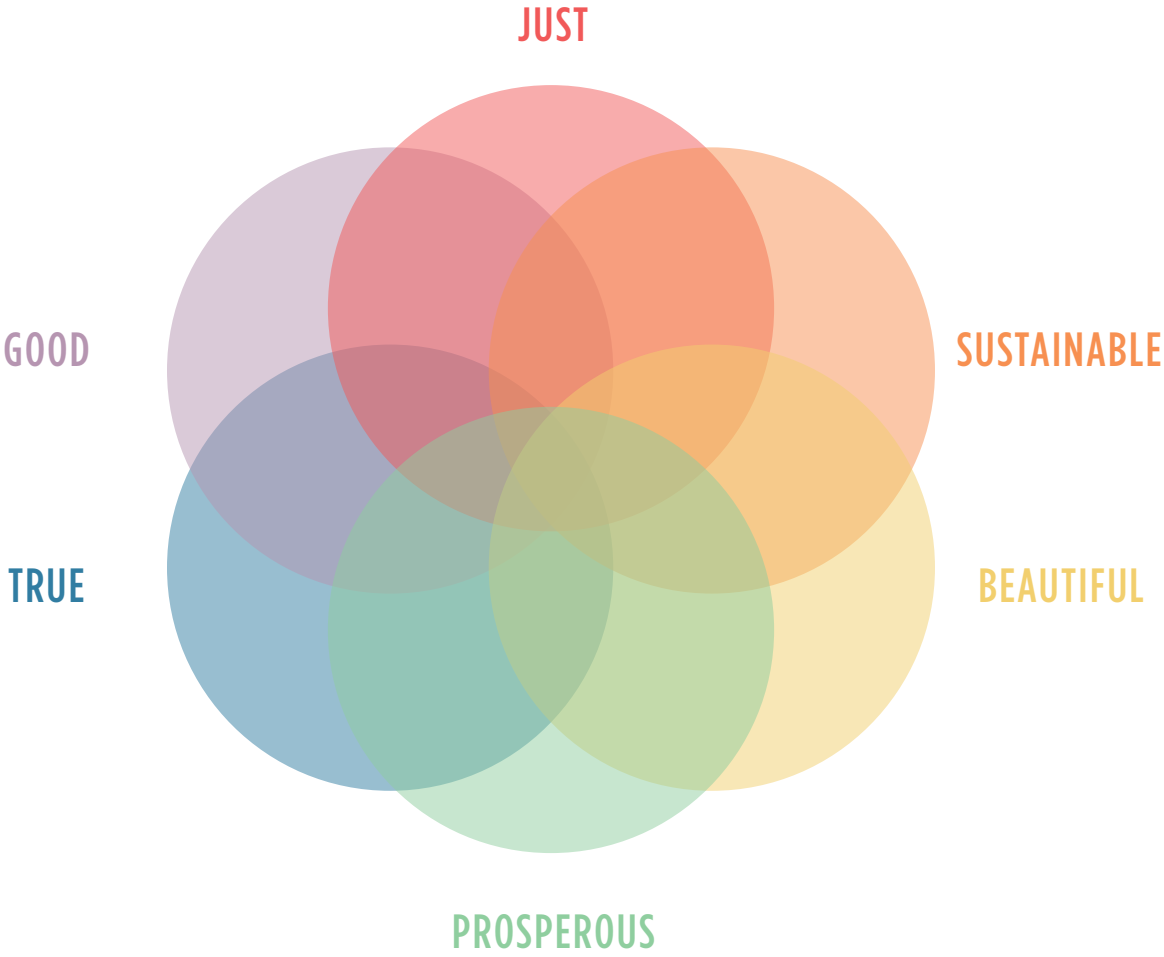
Harley O'Neill (endowment lead) is an entrepreneur and leader in the arts community in Gainesville, Florida and a core member of the Gainesville Thriving Project team. With a background and practice in dance, choreography, and arts education, O'Neill and her non-profit, Spatially Fed, advocate for the essential place of the arts in a healthy and thriving community. She received her BA from the University of Florida and has also completed graduate work in the Shands Arts in Medicine program.

Student Research Interns: The Thriving Cities Lab is grateful for contributions to this project from the following undergraduate student researchers: **Lizzie Grafton**, Lyon College (Political Science Major); **Sophia Hanway**, University of Virginia (Environmental Studies Major); **Alexis Marley**, Lyon College (Political Science Major); **Zoe Papazoglou**, Lyon College (Political Science Major).

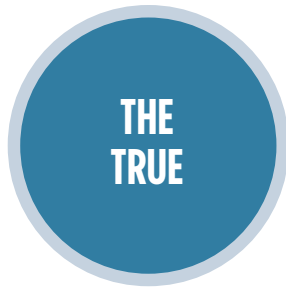
1.4: Acknowledgments

The Thriving Cities Lab would like to thank the Bank of Cave City and President John Beller and Mayor Jonas Anderson for making this project possible, and the many Cave City community members who took part in individual interviews, completed surveys, and joined endowment group discussions.

We also would like to thank the dozens of partners who worked closely with us in Gainesville, Florida on the Gainesville Thriving Project that preceded the Cave City pilot. Of special note, Phoebe and Richard Miles of the Cade Museum for Creativity and Invention and Barzella Papa, President of the Community Foundation of North Central Florida, helped re-launch the Thriving Cities work in 2021. The research that led to the founding of the Thriving Cities Lab was conducted by sociologists James Davison Hunter and Joshua J. Yates at the University of Virginia. (See their co-edited volume, *Thrift and Thriving in America: Capitalism and Moral Order from the Puritans to the Present* (Oxford UP, 2011). Finally, we are grateful to the major funders of this project across its first decade, the Kern Family Foundation, and more recently, the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation for visionary and sustaining support of this work.



1.5: Thriving Cities Civic Endowment Framework



Human Knowledge & Learning

schools and other educational institutions, newspapers/media, libraries



Social Mores & Ethics

religious, community, service, organizations



Political & Civic Life

government, law and legal organizations, policy and political groups



Natural & Physical Health

health and wellness organizations, parks and the natural environment



Creativity, Aesthetics, & Design

public parks and museums, neighborhoods and vernacular architecture, arts and culture vibrancy



Economic Life

business and real estate, employment, affordability



1.6: Cave City Thriving Survey Word Cloud

Cave City survey respondents' ranking of characteristics that define a thriving community.

2 • FINDINGS BY ENDOWMENT



2.1: The True—The realm of human knowledge and learning (e.g., schools, media, libraries)

“Our school has been recognized as being in the top 40 in the state.”

•

“There is a significant need for [more] tutoring when it comes to help for students with math and reading deficiencies, particularly with those in our community [who] are most vulnerable and lack parental interest.”

•

“The public library is an incredible asset to our community as a place and reason to gather and as a resource.”

•

“We need more active participation from the community. It seems that people want to tear down the schools and employees instead of working with us to help our kids.”

•

“We have a great school district, but we need to continue focusing more on education and skills opportunities rather than just sports...”

•

“The school is a vital institution in the community. Investing in the school, students, and employees is very important for Cave City’s future.”

•

“There is no [truly] local media anymore in the Cave City/Batesville area because of lack of patronage.”

THE TRUE IN CAVE CITY: HIGHLIGHTS AND ANALYSIS

The category of The True in Cave City includes the public library and the Cave City School District.

COMMUNITY SURVEY RESULTS

Thinking only about the endowment of *The True*, how would you evaluate Cave City's level of thriving? (22 out of 39 responded; 0 = not thriving and 10 = fully thriving)

7.0 on a ten-point scale

How would you describe the effectiveness of the local schools? (21 out of 39 responded)

7.0 on a ten-point scale

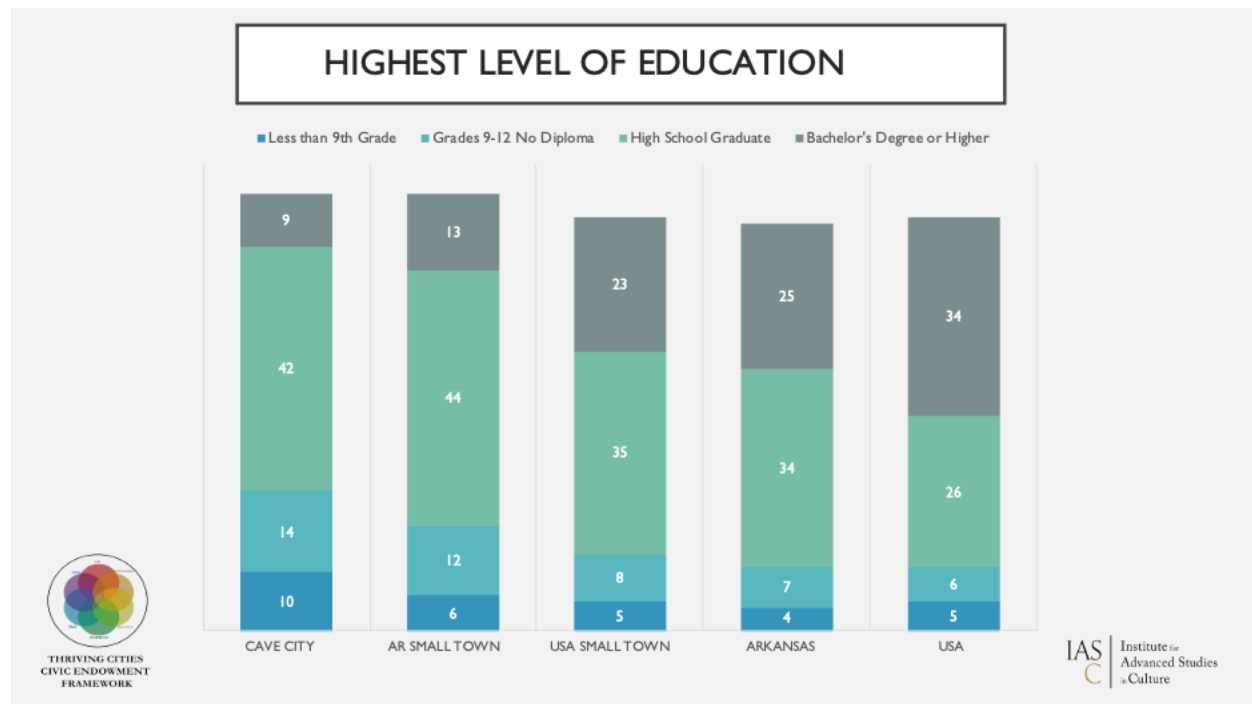
Arkansas Department of Education Report Card (2023)

Cave City High School	B
Cave City Middle School	B
Cave City Elementary	B

<https://myschoolinfo.arkansas.gov/SRC/33/6802000>

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

The percentage of Cave City residents who completed high school (42 percent) compares favorably to other Arkansas small towns, and significantly exceeds the state-wide average, as well as the U.S. (overall) and U.S. small towns categories. However, the percentage of people in Cave City who possess a bachelors degree or higher (9 percent) is lower than other Arkansas small towns and the state-wide average and is significantly lower than other U.S. small towns and the U.S. in the aggregate.



SUCCESS DESPITE CHALLENGES

The Cave City school district, with particular reference to the grades assigned to the district by the Arkansas Department of Education cited on the previous page, is doing an admirable job of educating its students. The success of the district is even more impressive when one considers that 77 percent of its students receive free and reduced school lunches. Families that are experiencing financial stress may find it more difficult to support students in their school work, placing even more responsibility for student learning on the shoulders of teachers. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that drug use is prevalent in a significant number of households of students enrolled in the district. Moreover, similar to schools across the country, the district has witnessed, post-Covid, an uptick in mental health issues. Resources—staff and programming—to address these challenges do exist, but the high volume of need often outstrips the resources available.

THE TRUE IN CAVE CITY IN SUMMARY

Overall, the community sees the public school system as a valuable asset. In small towns, schools are anchoring institutions that not only educate children but function as “first responders” to a host of social struggles faced by youth and their families; this is certainly the case in Cave City. Ensuring a quality education for its residents is indispensable for the city’s well-being. As the city grows and/or as residents in key professions (e.g., health care and teaching) retire, others must have the know-how to take advantage of new opportunities and to fill future vacancies. Beyond the professions, education is crucial for all sectors of the Cave City economy—business, agriculture, and manufacturing—all of which are becoming increasingly technical, requiring strong basic skills and the ability to tackle advanced training.



2.2: The Good—The realm of social mores and ethics (e.g., service and religious organizations)

“The Caveman Closet is a program that provides some clothing and food to students, and the First Assembly of God Food Pantry serves a large number of families regularly...”

•

“Individually, we have some great churches that do a lot of good. More cooperation among them would be great.”

•

“More folks involved in a neutral civic organization would be great, too.”

•

“I know there are many various and right ways to raise children and organize and manage a family. However, there are certainly some hurtful ways. I would love to see some type of family life skills training to break cycles of poverty, poor parenting etc.”

•

“I believe transportation may be an area that could be addressed. By transportation, I mean those who need to be taken to appointments and/or run errands.”

THE GOOD IN CAVE CITY: HIGHLIGHTS AND ANALYSIS

The Good in Cave City includes churches, the Caveman Closet, and civic organizations.

COMMUNITY SURVEY RESULTS

Thinking only about the endowment of *The Good*, how would you evaluate Cave City’s level of thriving? (28 out of 39 responded; 0 = not thriving and 10 = fully thriving)

7.2 on a ten-point scale

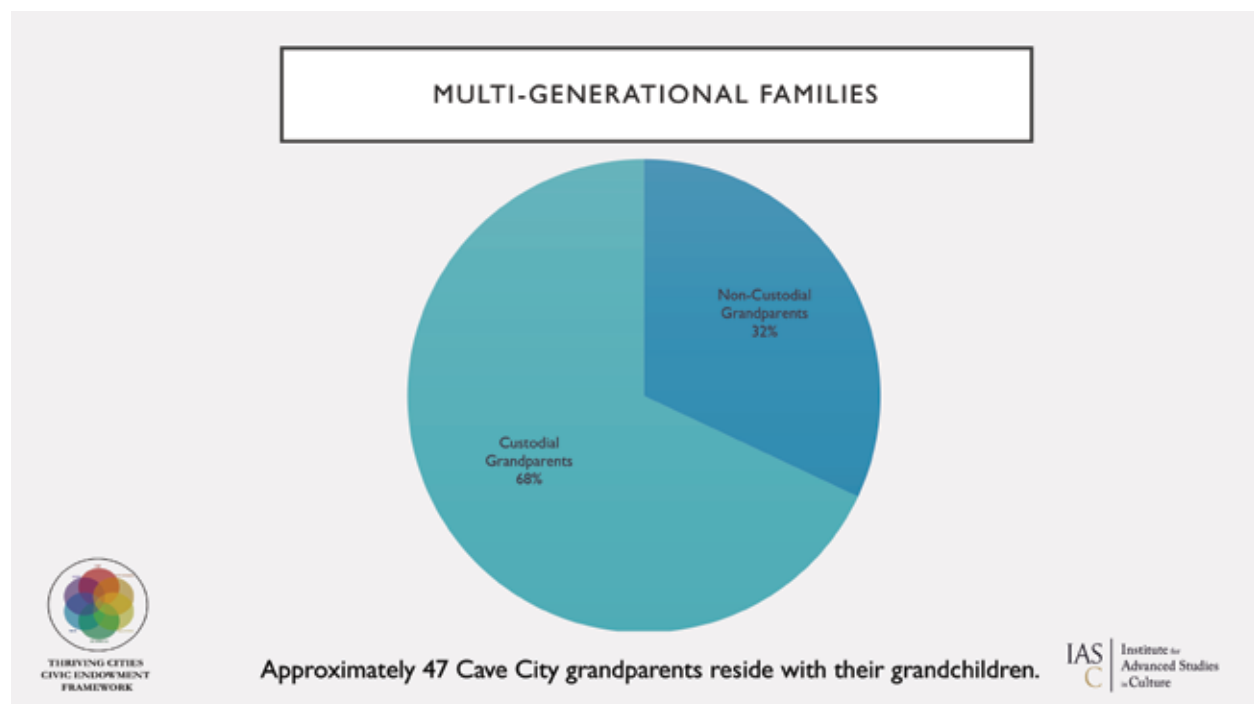
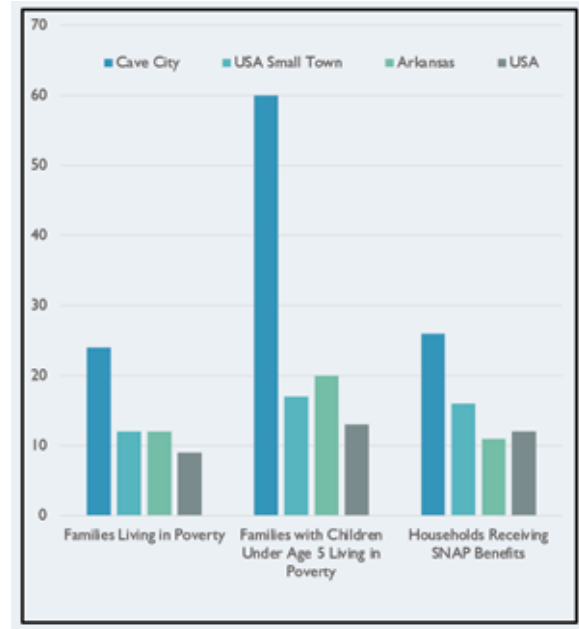
POVERTY

The data show that 24 percent of all families in Cave City earn incomes that place them below the federally defined threshold for poverty. Unsurprisingly, then, 26 percent of Cave City households receive SNAP benefits. If we zoom in on families with related children under the age of five, we discover that 60 percent live in poverty. Further insight is provided when we separate married couples from female head of households: married couples who have related children under the age

of five have a poverty rate of 27 percent, whereas female headed households (no spouse present) with related children under five have a poverty rate of 69 percent. As the figure to the right demonstrates, Cave City's poverty rate is significantly higher than the Arkansas state average, as well as the U.S. average and U.S. small town average.

GRANDPARENTS

During our community convenings, several people mentioned the burden placed on grandparents in the community. No doubt grandparent caregivers do their utmost to step in for absent parents, but some interviewees attributed the decrease in income that normally accompanies retirement (not all grandparents are retired but some are), coupled with the difficulty grandparents may have monitoring (if mobility is an issue) and establishing their authority with juveniles to explain some of the behavioral problems observed by school personnel and church leaders. As the chart below indicates, of the approximately 47 grandparents who live with their grandchildren, a surprising 68 percent are “custodial” grandparents.



THE GOOD IN CAVE CITY IN SUMMARY

There is no sugarcoating the high level of poverty in the city. Economic distress has spillover effects that impact a number of dimensions of community life, and nearly every civic endowment will, in some manner, attempt to ameliorate it. That said, beyond programs and services provided by the state and federal governments, in the city it is the civic endowment of The Good and its constellation of organizations—religious and civic—that are on the frontlines of addressing poverty. From our focused interviews, convenings, surveys, and informal conversations with community members, what emerges is a picture of a city blessed with a large number of compassionate people who are dedicated to caring for their neighbors. In spite of these heroic efforts, however, the high volume of need in Cave City often exceeds the available resources. Poverty, as most communities would attest, is a stubborn condition that is not easily improved, but that does not mean that progress is impossible. Most poverty reduction strategies are multifaceted. To the degree, then, that the people and institutions of The Good are seeking to help, it seems prudent, as many are already doing, to pursue holistic strategies, ones that combine economic, social, and spiritual components—from job training to housing assistance, from addiction counseling to programs for spiritual growth. One common suggestion from community members was that churches, especially, attempt wherever possible to enhance their impact through increased coordination and collaboration.



2.3: The Beautiful—The realm of creativity, aesthetics, and design (e.g., art, architecture and urban design)

“As always mentioned, the cave area being preserved and enhanced would be nice, but it is private property.”

•

“I would love to see our Main Street and pocket park remodeling completed. The pocket park could offer a great opportunity for local artists to express themselves. I think we could also start doing a lot more events in the park. Movies in the park, music in the park, food trucks, etc., throughout the year. A lot of our time and effort goes into the watermelon festival which isn’t a bad thing but we could be doing so much more for community involvement.”

•

“There is also a lack of art and creativity, learning, and socializing opportunities. Theater, painting, drawing, photography, pottery, baking, metal art classes, quilting, knitting, a rotating art gallery, a community choir or band....ANYTHING. We have some incredibly talented people here, but we aren’t showcasing any of their work.”

•

“Aside from the mural on the library, there is little to no art to create a vibrancy as you drive through town.”

•

“We have many artists in our community, but I believe we have failed to prioritize arts.”

•

“The revitalization of downtown is creating a great momentum for the aesthetics of the buildings.”

THE BEAUTIFUL IN CAVE CITY: HIGHLIGHTS AND ANALYSIS

The category of The Beautiful in Cave City includes public murals, new and renovated city buildings, independent artists, and historic sites.

COMMUNITY SURVEY RESULTS

Thinking only about the endowment of *The Beautiful*, how would you evaluate Cave City's level of thriving? (21 out of 39 responded; 0 = not thriving and 10 = fully thriving)

5.1 on a ten-point scale**THE BEAUTIFUL IN CAVE CITY IN SUMMARY**

Of all the civic endowments, The Beautiful received the lowest score. That does not mean that efforts are not being made to improve the city's aesthetic. A newly renovated municipal building and new police headquarters have significantly upgraded the city's suite of government buildings. Many of the comments from the survey, community convenings, and focused interviews stressed that there is no dearth of artistic ability in Cave City; rather, the problem seems to be that there are too few platforms, events, and opportunities to highlight area talent. There are also some historic treasures—e.g., the Pinkston House and the motor lodge, the latter the first of its kind in Arkansas—that seem to local citizens ripe for preservation.



2.4: The Just & Well-Ordered—The realm of political and civic life (e.g., city planning, local government, law enforcement)

“We have the most engagement and excitement at city hall that we have had in many years, and it is making a difference. The police department is well respected, and the majority [of residents] are very excited about current leadership and the direction our town is going.”

•

“Enforcement of moderate property upkeep codes would help, [with a clear] timeline for rectifying dilapidated or abandon properties.”

•

“Nondescript metal buildings hold many of our businesses. Since the vast majority of the homes in town are rentals, many of the neighborhoods are sad...with unmaintained homes and yards.”

•

“Sidewalks need to connect to park...”

•

“Nobody seems to stop at school crosswalks. Maybe need activated lights during crossing times?”

•

“[Need] better, affordable housing.”

•

“There are certainly opportunities to increase the housing supply, and I think we should be organizing around engaging the Arkansas Department of Transportation on a potential bypass and planning for its impact.”

•

“Our sewer cannot sustain more residential or industry growth.”

•

“We have to clean-up the rougher parts of town.”

•

“We need more social services that are local. It is very hard for poverty folks to get the help they need without leaving town. Local churches are [pretty much] the only organizations offering help.”

•

“Cave City has great leadership and community support.”

THE JUST IN CAVE CITY: HIGHLIGHTS AND ANALYSIS

The category of The Just & Well-Ordered in Cave City includes the volunteer fire department, police department, and the Mayor's Office and city government.

COMMUNITY SURVEY RESULTS

Thinking only about the endowment of *The Just & Well-Ordered*, how would you evaluate Cave City's level of thriving? (19 out of 39 responded; 0 = not thriving and 10 = fully thriving)

7.0 on a ten-point scale



HOUSING

As the graphic above indicates, nearly half of Cave City's homes (46 percent) were built over two decades, from 1960–1979. Not only is Cave City's housing stock relatively old—presenting maintenance challenges—but a very high percentage of residences (48 percent) are renter-occupied; renters and landlords, generally speaking, are less inclined to invest in property upkeep. Furthermore, while an average of 30 percent of homes in other Arkansas towns are valued between \$50,000 to \$99,000, 45 percent of Cave City homes fall into this category—another indication that the city struggles to provide the same quality housing as other small cities.

CRIME

The crime statistics we could access were only available at the county level. A rather remarkable statistic was the juvenile arrest rate of 71 cases per 1,000 juveniles. This is inordinately high compared to the juvenile delinquency rate of Arkansas's other, predominantly rural counties (22 arrests per 1,000 juveniles). Obviously, Cave City is only one of the small cities in Sharp County;

nonetheless, this statistic would seem consistent with concerns expressed in our community convenings, in the community survey, and in focused interviews about the need for more positive outlets for youth.

THE JUST IN CAVE CITY IN SUMMARY

In the community survey, the civic endowment of The Just & Well-Ordered received one of the highest ratings. The city has witnessed significant improvement to its government buildings (City Hall and the Cave City Police Department). The Thriving Cities team was impressed with the optimism and excitement expressed by residents about Cave City's future. Indeed, the leaders of any city in the U.S. would be jubilant if 79 percent of their residents strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement that "this community displays a hopeful attitude about the future" (Civic Capacity Survey). Cave City is extremely fortunate to have leadership in the mayor's office and on the city council that have earned broad community support. Law enforcement officers, too, have strong backing from the citizens they serve.

Nonetheless, every community has problems to solve, and Cave City is no exception. One of the biggest challenges is providing quality housing for its residents. Obviously, it is not the responsibility of the city to actually supply housing; rather, the private sector is the primary supplier of housing and, like other commodities, housing is subject to market forces. That said, cities play a key role in facilitating the development of new housing and ensuring the preservation and upkeep of existing housing stock; planning documents and zoning codes are the regulatory tools deployed to achieve these goals. It seems clear that there is community support for (and a need for) a basic zoning code. Once in place, this should incentivize more development by establishing clear guidelines about what is expected/allowed in each sector of the city. Related to city planning, nearly a quarter of those surveyed (23.5 percent) said roads and sidewalks were below average. Finally, 50 percent of respondents said the local social service agencies were inadequate. It should be noted that much of the governmental responsibility for caring for those who have fallen on hard times (besides non-profits and churches, discussed in the endowment of The Good), rests with the state of Arkansas's Department of Human Services and its Local Community Action Agencies. For Cave City/Sharp County, the relevant agency is Northcentral Arkansas Development Council, Inc. (NADC), not the city. Still, many Cave City residents think that more services are needed, warranting further action on the part of the city to ensure that its residents are receiving all the benefits and services to which they are entitled.



2.5: The Prosperous: The realm of economic life (e.g., business development and meaningful work)

“We have been blessed with many new small businesses, which is encouraging.
It would be great to have some larger employers though.”

•

“We need a functioning chamber of commerce.”

•

“We need to keep folks at home working, instead of leaving the city to go to other towns to work.
Retail and the hospitality industries will only be sustainable when the community has
more people during the day to support them.”

•

“We are experiencing a lot of good growth and development in terms of local small businesses.
We just need to do what we can to maintain and encourage more of it.”

•

“I think we leave a lot of opportunities unexplored by not having an active
Chamber of Commerce or similar organization.”

•

“Watermelons has been a strong seasonal contributor to the economy but more industry and
job opportunities would increase growth exponentially.”

•

“I would like to see us promote our town to companies/industries because I feel we have a workforce
that is not being utilized. We are not a community of professionals. We are a community of
hardworking people who can greatly benefit companies.”

THE PROSPEROUS IN CAVE CITY: HIGHLIGHTS AND ANALYSIS

The Prosperous in Cave City includes industry, small businesses, banking, and real estate.

COMMUNITY SURVEY RESULTS

Thinking only about the endowment of *The Prosperous*, how would you evaluate Cave City’s level of thriving? (18 out of 39 responded; 0 = not thriving and 10 = fully thriving)

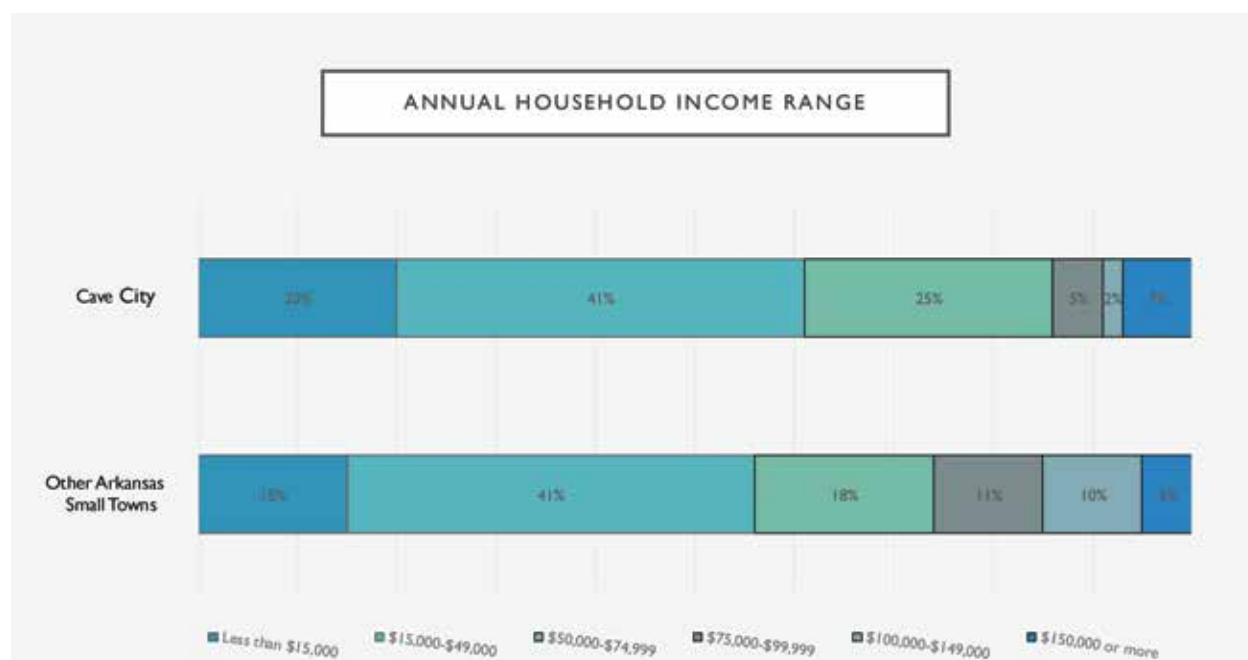
5.2 percent on a ten-point scale

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

As we did with the civic endowment of The Just & Well-Ordered, we asked respondents in The Prosperous section of the survey to rate various dimensions of the community's economy. One statistic that stood out measured the community's perception of the availability of "well-paying" jobs, with 72 percent of respondents stating the community was below average in this regard. In terms of overall economic opportunity, 82 percent of those who filled out The Prosperous section of the survey said the community's offerings were average (42 percent) or below average (42 percent). In addition, 44 percent of respondents said support for innovation and entrepreneurship was average, whereas 33 percent said such support was lacking. Finally, when queried about the business community's collaborative efforts to improve the business environment, just under half (47 percent) characterized the efforts as average, while 35 percent said they were inadequate.

HOUSEHOLD INCOME AND BENEFITS

Our analysis compared Cave City household incomes and benefits to household incomes and benefits in other Arkansas small towns—the best comparison, given that incomes tend to vary significantly by region. The percentage of Cave City households earning \$50,000 to \$74,999, a solidly middle income for the state, is 25 percent; that is 7 percentage points higher than what one finds in the same income range in other Arkansas small towns. This is a positive economic indicator for the city. However, if we move up the income scale, to the \$75,000 to \$99,999 range (still considered to be middle income in Arkansas), the comparison is less favorable: the percentage of Cave City households earning this amount of money is only 5 percent compared to 11 percent in other small Arkansas towns. In the \$100,000 to \$149,999 range, the disparity is most pronounced. Only 1.5 percent of Cave City households earn that amount, whereas 10 percent of households in



other Arkansas small towns fall in that range. Finally, in a head-to-head comparison of households that earn less than \$15,000, Cave City has five percent more households in this category than other Arkansas small towns (20 percent versus 15 percent).

THE PROSPEROUS IN CAVE CITY IN SUMMARY

Two economic data points highlight some of the city's challenges: the relatively high percentage of households earning less than \$15,000 per year and the community's perception that well-paying jobs are in short supply. Of course, a community's desire for more well-paying jobs and the ability of a city to quickly provide them are two different things. During the Thriving Cities Lab first community convening, in May of 2024, a talented person volunteered to help resurrect the city's Chamber of Commerce. This is a crucial first step. Presumably, the new Chamber will begin formulating an economic development plan, including strategies for recruiting new businesses to the city—with an emphasis on businesses that would provide good compensation for their workers. Similarly, the Chamber re-boot holds the promise of helping support local individuals who want to start businesses while increasing collaboration and engagement among existing businesses.



2.6: The Sustainable—The realm of natural and physical health (e.g. health and wellness organizations, parks and the environment)

“We have great clinics and other medical services for such a small town. A lot of work is being done to improve our park and add other spaces like that. We are on a good track.”

•

“Having a community center that includes a workout gym, pool, basketball courts, etc. would provide a place for the community to meet together and be physically active. Team games could promote healthy competition as well as working together further strengthening relationships among residents. The community center itself would provide employment.”

•

“We need better grocery options for fresh fruit, vegetables, and overall competition to provide better quality goods to improve our health.”

•

“The park property has great potential but essentially is designed just for a Festival that is held one time a year. While having a great Watermelon Festival is good for our city, our park should not be designed for a once-a-year festival. To have a thriving city, I imagine a park for every one of every age to enjoy. More walking paths throughout the park, not just a big circle around the playground.

Renovate the sports courts. The city also owns two lakes to the northwest of town that are overgrown.... Those lakes have great potential to have walking/hiking trails. Benches to bird watch and fish from. A bike lane through and around town would be great.”

•

“We are lucky to have three family care practices, two pharmacies, PT/OT and a dentist. For a town our size that is unheard of.”

•

“Want bike trails; only so many miles in town; not many side streets to run and bike on; play equipment for kids in park but not much for adults.”

THE SUSTAINABLE IN CAVE CITY: HIGHLIGHTS AND ANALYSIS

The category of The Sustainable in Cave City includes parks, healthcare providers, a nursing home, local grocery stores, local agriculture, a city pool, and other recreational facilities.

COMMUNITY SURVEY RESULTS

Thinking only about the endowment of *The Sustainable*, how would you evaluate Cave City's level of thriving? (25 out of 39 responded; 0 = not thriving and 10 = fully thriving)

6.1 on a ten point scale

HEALTH BEHAVIORS: TOBACCO USE, DIET AND EXERCISE, ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD, RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES, AND ALCOHOL AND DRUG USE

According to data we gathered, several key behaviors of Cave City residents that have a significant impact on population health outcomes—some positively, such as regular exercise, and some negatively, such as smoking—occur at rates similar to other small towns and cities within the region. One notable difference is that excessive alcohol use is lower in Cave City relative to comparable small towns and cities within the region, as well as to the U.S. at large. However, two measures, access to healthy food and the affordability of healthy food, indicate that Cave City faces higher rates of food insecurity.

CLINICAL CARE: ACCESS TO CARE AND QUALITY OF CARE

Although Cave City does not have its own hospital, it does have one close by, and residents do have access to many primary care providers in town. Cave City boasts favorable primary care physician and dentist to patient ratios—and has a lower rate of preventable hospital stays compared to other small cities and towns in the region.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT: AIR, SOIL AND WATER QUALITY

Cave City has well maintained parks and access to agriculture-ready soil and land. Compared to other small towns in the region, Cave City enjoys clean water and air (i.e., lower than average daily density of pollution particles in the air).

THE SUSTAINABLE IN CAVE CITY IN SUMMARY

While residents have access to many quality providers, they would like to see more specialist options (like optometry or podiatry) to serve their aging population. A very positive sign is that the age-adjusted death rate in Cave City is lower than that found in other small towns in the region, and the life expectancy is higher.

Many respondents expressed a strong desire for a community center that would expand recreational options and increase community health. Residents say that the parks in Cave City are well maintained, but they would like to see improvements made to the city-owned lakes and the development of walking/biking paths. Another common concern expressed in our surveys and interviews, backed by USDA data, focused on the lack of healthy food options. In terms of the local sourcing of food, respondents mentioned that some growers had diversified production, providing vegetables in addition to watermelons in the summer, but said there is a need for more year round, locally grown produce. Incentives to increase the supply of local vegetables, some suggested, might be provided by the creation of a farmers market. Significant pain points captured in our surveys revolved around perceptions that many residents struggled with deteriorating mental health and increased drug use and addiction.

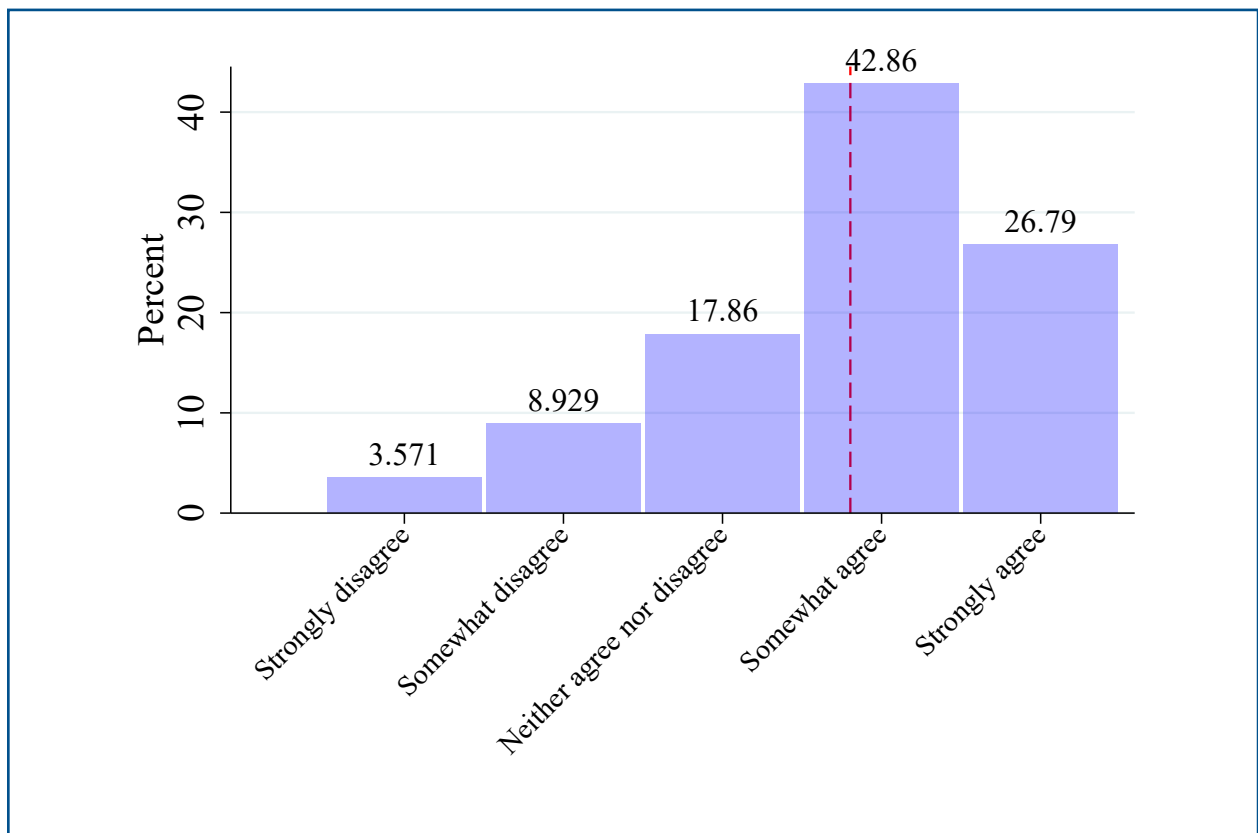
3 • APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Civic Capacity

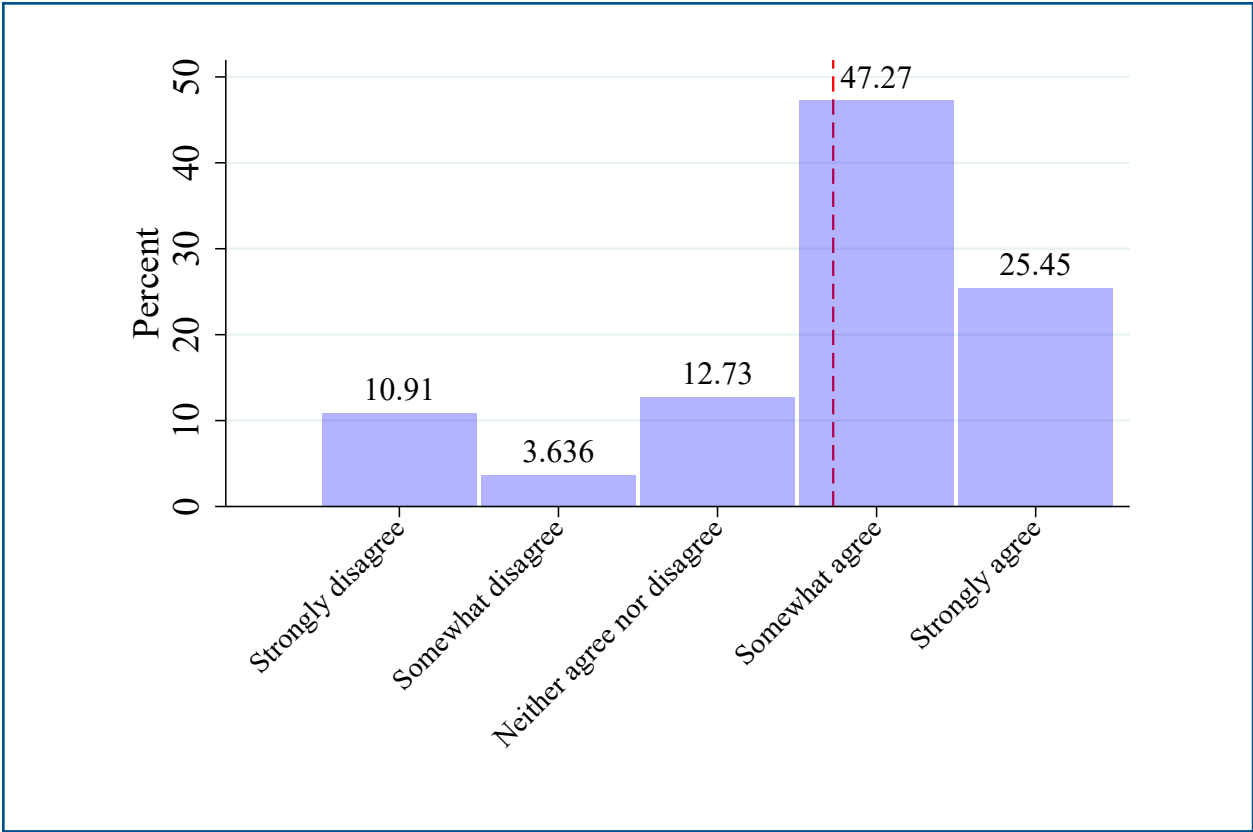
According to the results of our Thriving Cities Lab Civic Capacity Survey, Cave City receives high marks for a number of civic attitudes and behaviors that undergird community members' dedication to and ability to solve community-wide problems and to ensure that all residents thrive.

In Cave City...

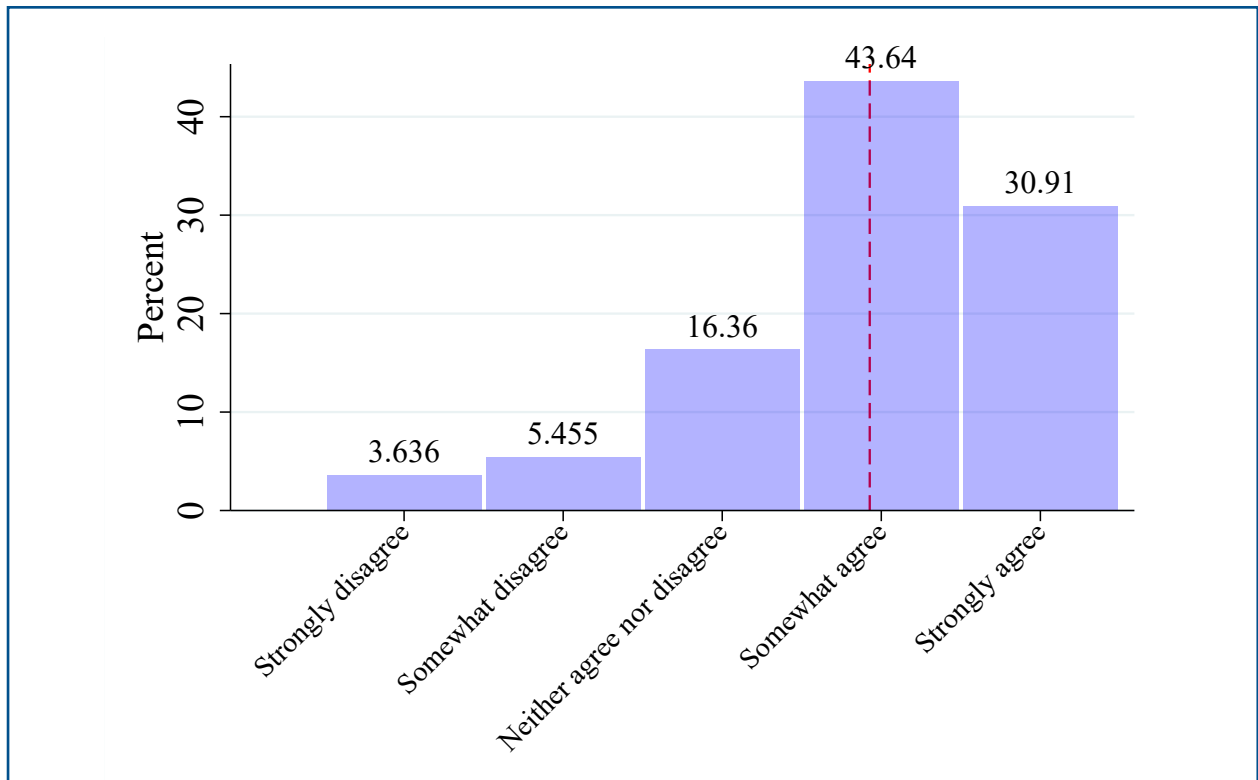
INTERPERSONAL INTERACTIONS REFLECT TRUSTING ATTITUDES.



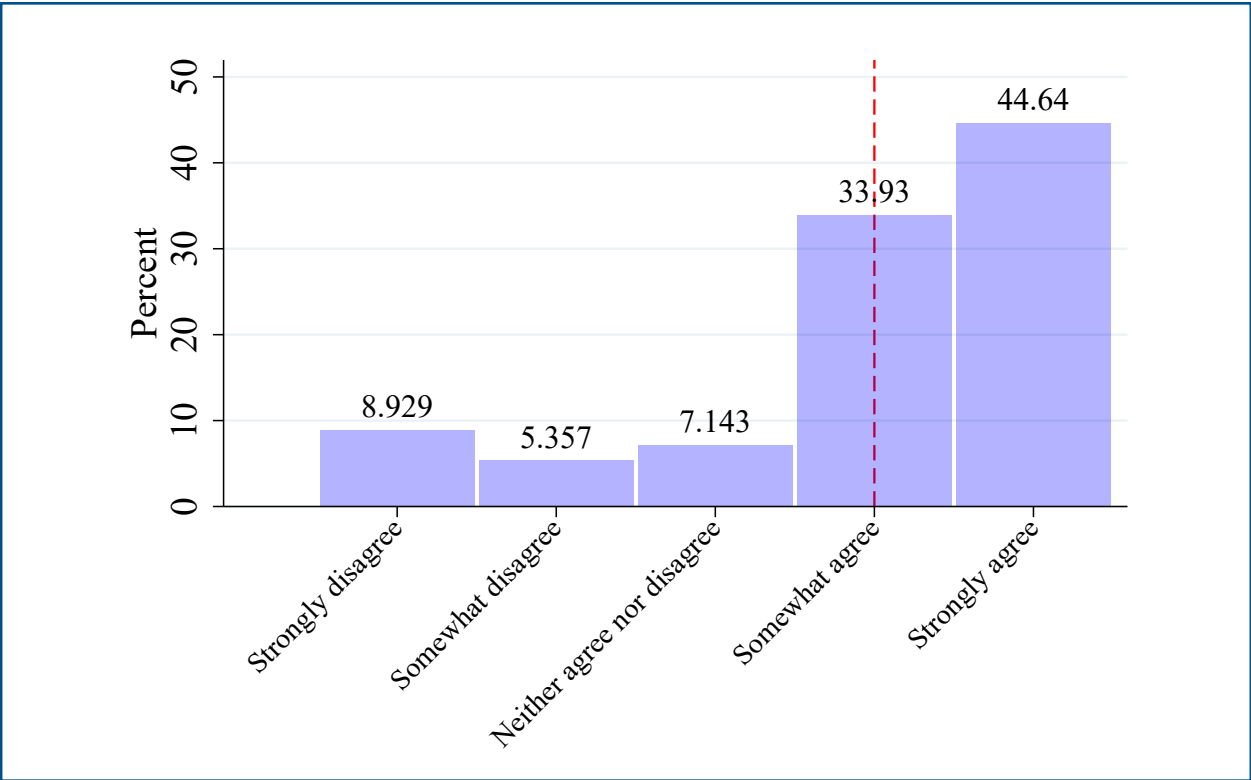
LEADERS ARE WILLING TO TACKLE DIFFICULT PROBLEMS.



COMMUNICATION AMONG CITIZENS IS RESPECTFUL.



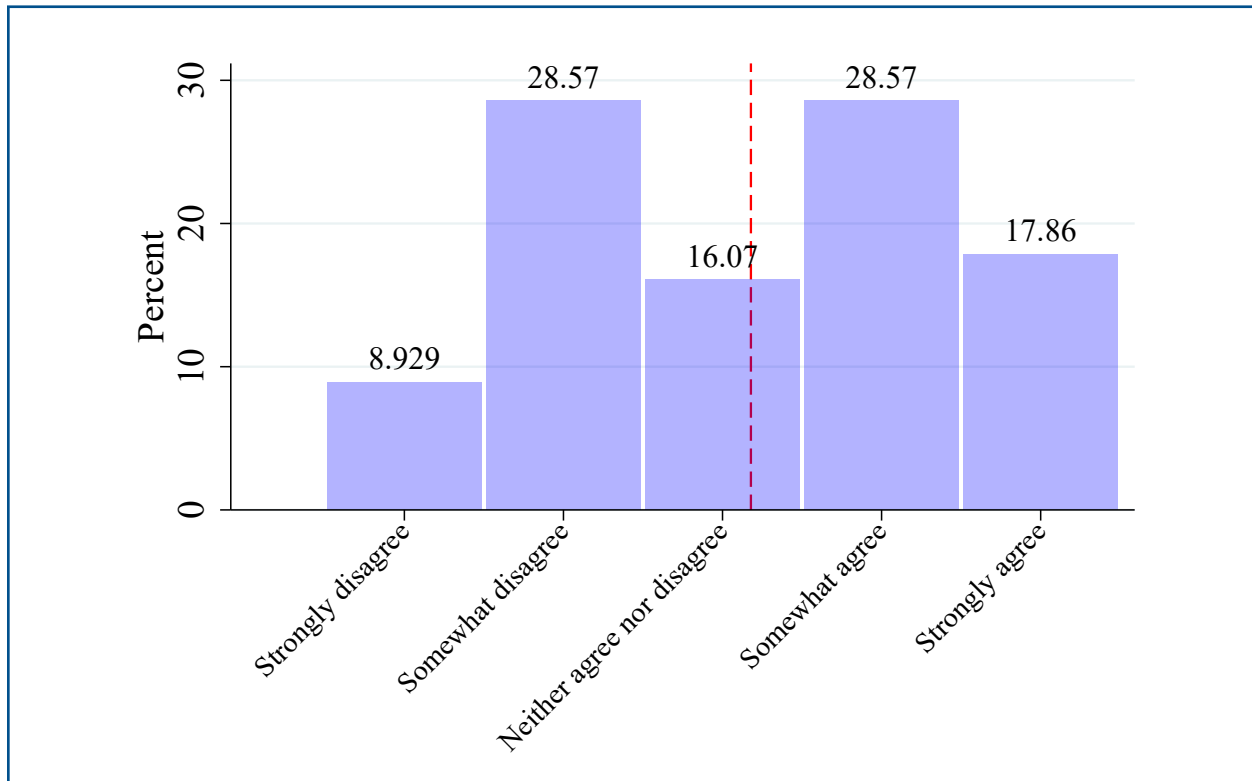
CITIZENS ARE HOPEFUL ABOUT THE FUTURE.



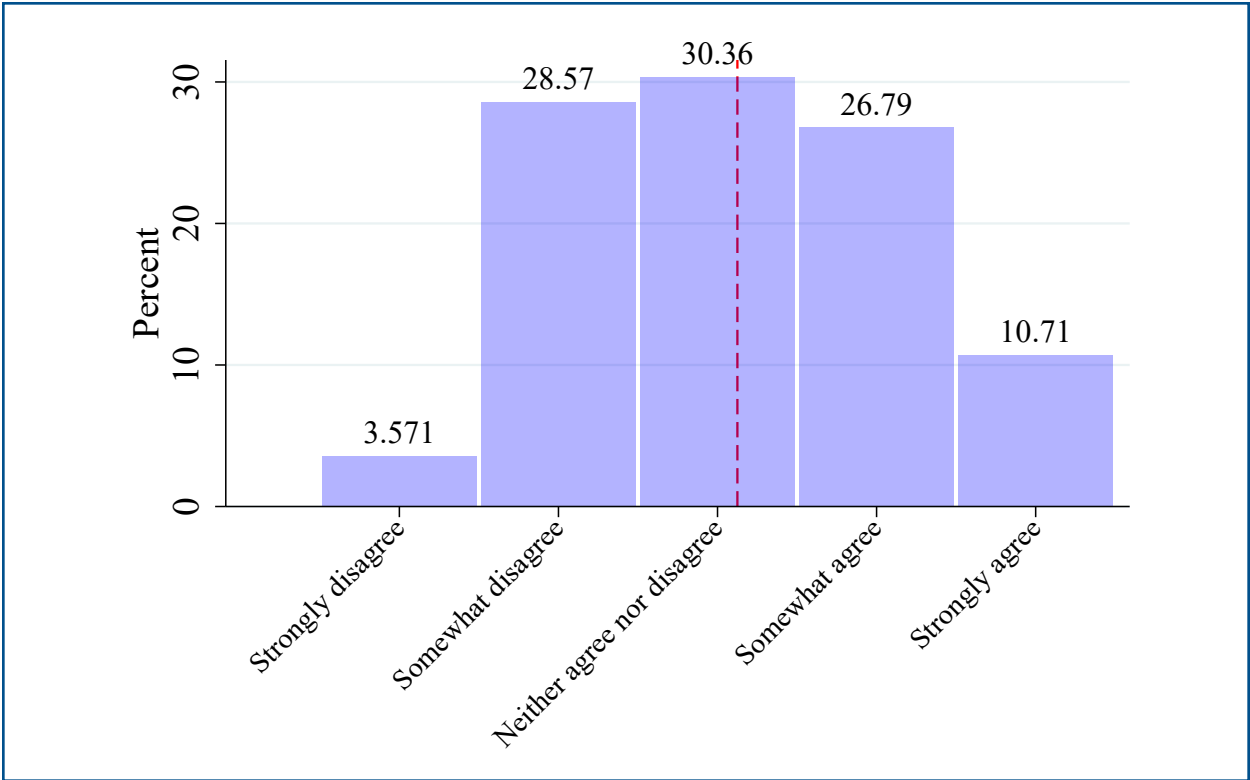
Nevertheless, the community appears to be uncertain or divided on the issues below, indicating that more attention should be paid to shoring-up these critical components of civic capacity:

In Cave City...

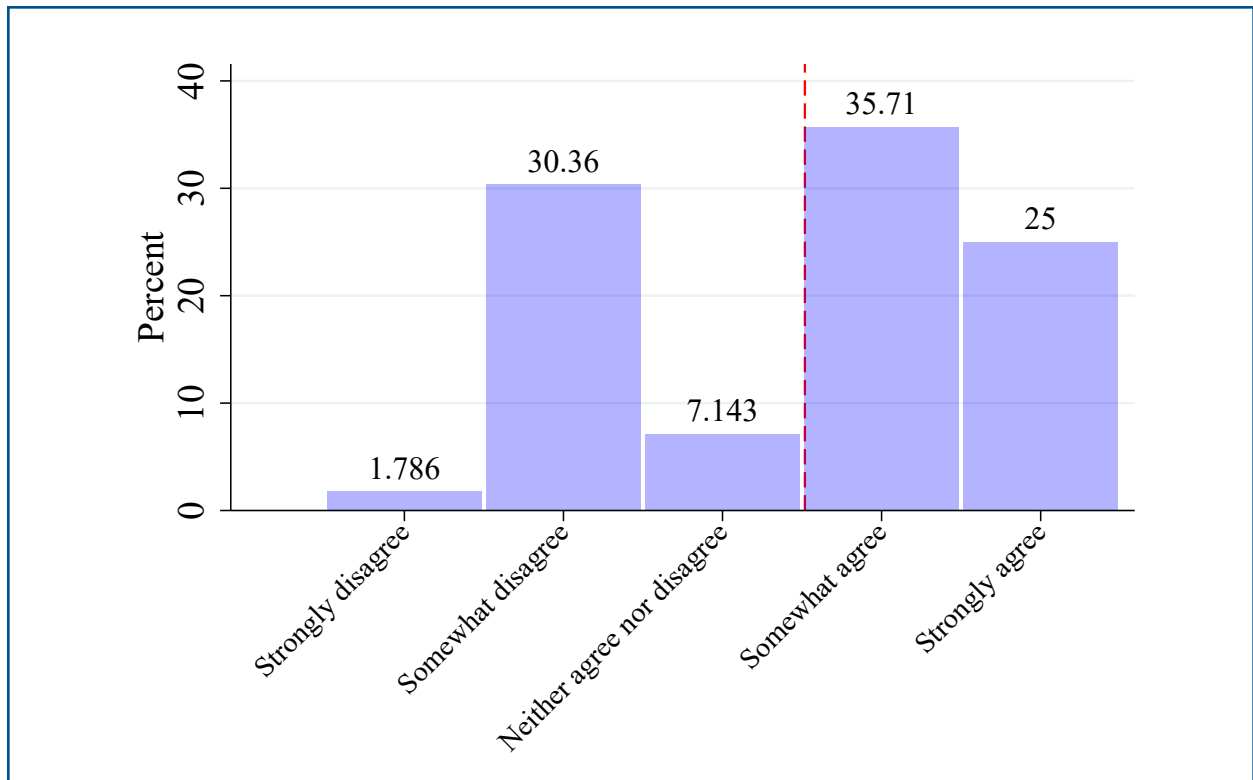
LEADERSHIP IS BROADLY DISTRIBUTED.



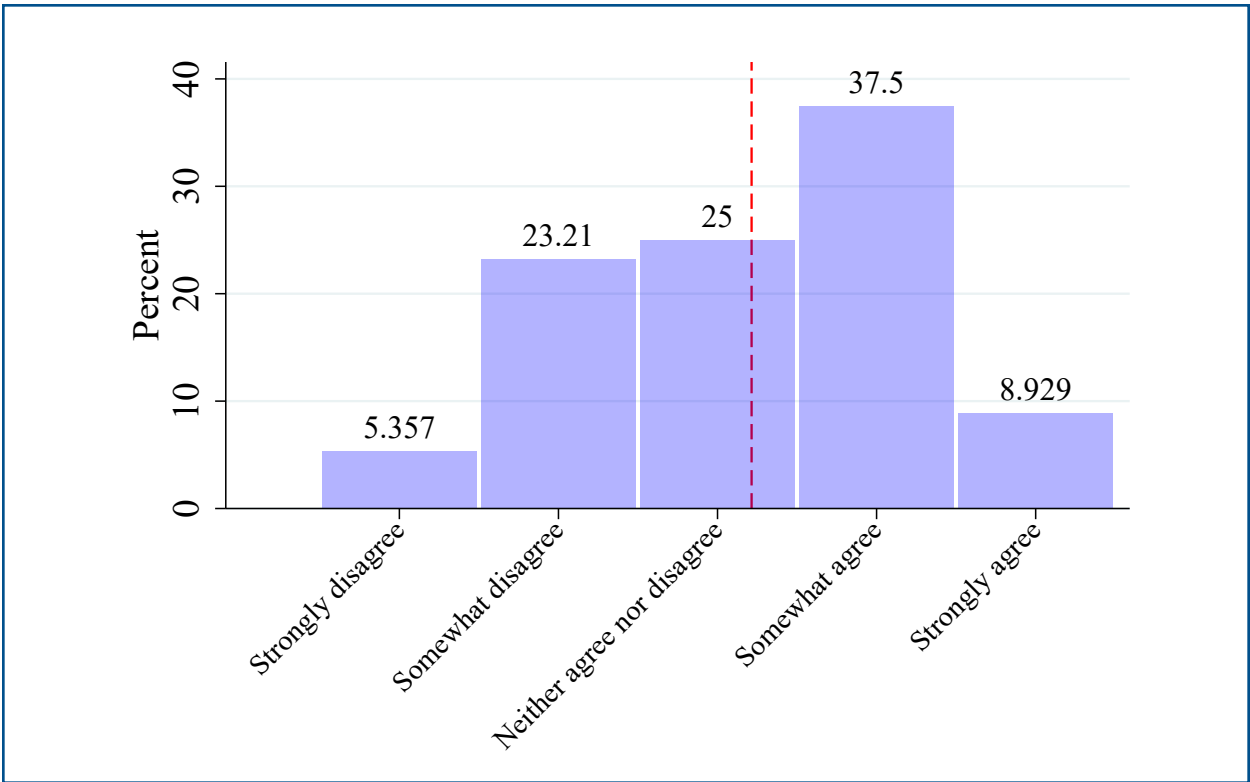
THERE IS A SOLID RECRUITMENT AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PLAN IN PLACE.



THERE IS SIGNIFICANT CROSS SECTOR COLLABORATION (BUSINESS, GOVERNMENT, NON-PROFITS).



CITIZENS COMPROMISE FOR THE SAKE OF THE COMMON GOOD.



Appendix 2: Key Sources for this Report

- American Community Survey
- Area Health Resource File/American Medical Association
- Arkansas State Government Free/Reduced/Paid Lunch Counts by District
- Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System
- Colorado State University Civic Capacity Index
- Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy (CHAS) data
- Easy Access to State and County Juvenile Court Case Counts
- Mapping Medicare Disparities Tool
- National Center for Health Statistics—Nativity and Mortality Files
- National Civic League Civic Index
- USDA Food Environment Atlas; Map the Meal Gap from Feeding America
- U.S. Census Data

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