

## Sheltering in Place: COVID-19 and Vermont's Future

### Live in Vermont Survey & Live Where You Love Stories

September 28, 2020



Eliza Fitzhugh and Andrés Gutierrez took shelter in Vermont to give birth to their first home. The couple recently purchased a home in South Burlington. *Read more of their story [here](#). Photo by Anna Watts.*

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Photography and Stories by [Anna Watts](#)

## BACKGROUND

Stories of people moving to Vermont to “shelter in place” during the early months of the pandemic inspired this research. Motivated in part by COVID-19, they are a disparate group, twenty-something children moving back in with the parents, second-home owners, some already thinking about re-locating to Vermont and others with family, or strong connections to the state.

Around the country, employers have told employees to work from home for the foreseeable future- and maybe forever. Tech leaders like Facebook, Google, and Amazon have presented telework as a viable permanent option for employees, and other industries are following suit. Non-profits, small businesses, writers, artists, researchers, and more are finding that they can be just as effective working from “home.” Some of those jobs could be done from anywhere, so why not Vermont?

But are these people here for the long-term? What could the State of Vermont do to make them relocate permanently? Is there something in this moment that has more people considering moving here, and bringing their jobs with them?

The states’ demographic challenges are well-documented. Vermont is the second oldest state, on average, in the nation. The state lacks replacement workers for those who are retiring. People move away; that has always been a part of the Vermont story. But there are not enough people moving back. In-migration barely matches out-migration. Because of the state’s low birth rates- the lowest in the U.S. -- population growth in the state is non-existent. In the last five-year census count, the state added 378 people, and 11 of Vermont’s 14 counties saw population decline (2019 Population Brief, Vermont Data Center).



Justin Will and Elise Willer were international nomads when the pandemic hit. They made the decision to move full-time to Vermont to work remote and welcomed their first child in August. *Read more of their story [here](#). Photo by Anna Watts.*

Vermont governor Phil Scott has often reiterated the danger of this demographic challenge, noting that in 2019 there were 55,000 fewer people in Vermont under the age of 45 and 44,000 more people over the age of 65 than there were in 2000.

Yet the state is clearly an attractive location, particularly in light of the present global pandemic. Vermont's suppression of COVID-19 ranked first in the country during the last few weeks of August, with testing indicating under a quarter of a percent of COVID-19 prevalence in the population. State leaders have received high marks for their science-based approach to managing the outbreak (VT Digger August 9, 2020; Vermont Bucks Rural COVID trend).

The combination of Vermont's successful COVID-19 management strategy and mounting demographic challenges raises the question: does the COVID-19 pandemic present an opportunity to add a new wave of in-migrants to the state? This is the question at the center of this exploratory research.

### **ABOUT THE SURVEY**

The 25-question survey asked people sheltering in place during the pandemic in Vermont a series of demographic questions and the Vermont county they were currently residing in, and the status of the community they lived in (rural, suburban, urban). They were asked how long they have been in Vermont, the quality of their internet connection, and their reason for coming to Vermont. Respondents were also asked to note the aspects of Vermont that were most attractive to them as a place to live, barriers to them making their move permanent, factors that would compel them to stay in Vermont, and their connection to Vermont. The full survey is provided in Appendix A.



Kiera Lewis and Corey Bratton grew up in Brattleboro. With Kiera's grad school program in LA now remote, the two are reconsidering their commitment to Vermont and interest in a future in their hometown. *Read more of their story [here](#). Photo by Anna Watts.*

This survey was administered over the summer of 2020 via a google forms document. Respondents were recruited through the Center for Research on Vermont and Vermont Futures Project mailing lists, realtors, regional development councils, chambers of commerce, Vermont Business Magazine, Vermont Department of Tourism, LinkedIn and other social media, and word of mouth. The survey yielded 232 responses, with 226 usable responses following the elimination of duplicates.

The responses from this survey indicate a non-probability purposeful sample of individuals who self-identified as a temporary resident of Vermont due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the data gleaned from this survey is informative, but not generalizable to the entirety of those sheltering in place in Vermont, since that number is unknown.

Results were analyzed for their descriptive statistics, and through a series of cross-tabulations that yielded insight into correlations between different variables. These results were analyzed using the program SPSS Statistics v24. Additionally, qualitative questions were analyzed through key word searches in Microsoft Excel.

In a companion effort coordinated by the Vermont Futures Project, five respondents were further interviewed to get a greater picture of their experience, and the reasons they chose Vermont. Those stories and photos can be found [here](#).



Jonathan Brathwaite and Becky Alford moved to Vermont intending to move Becky's mother, Christa (background), in with them before an emergency struck. They finished Christa's companion home on their property weeks before the pandemic hit. *Read more of their story [here](#). Photo by Anna Watts.*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The survey signals an opportunity for the state, particularly in its effort to attract new residents to the region who can contribute to the social and economic vibrancy of Vermont. Of the 226 individuals surveyed, over a third of respondents (35%) indicated that they were “likely” or “very likely” to stay in Vermont following a return to normalcy.

Because of the ability to telework, many of the respondents said they could conduct their work -- often based in urban hubs like Boston and New York City -- in Vermont. Additionally, nearly half of the respondents (44%) said that their employers would allow them to telework from the state in the future.

As for respondents’ motivations for choosing Vermont as their work-from-home locale, many had strong connections to Vermont through family and friends, or through a love for the natural beauty and outdoor access the state provides.

Many of those considering Vermont in the survey were under 35 (40%), with another 24% in the 36-50 age range. Respondents represented a highly educated group, with 92% indicating having completed a college education. Of the 226 respondents, 70% noted they were in rural locations, and there was a diverse range of internet capabilities amongst those respondents.

Additionally, specified responses from respondents provide insight into the individual experiences of those sheltering in place in Vermont, and some of the opportunities and obstacles they see at the individual level in re-locating to the state. The report concludes with a series of recommendations for next steps for Vermont to attract and retain this new wave of potential, motivated, at least in part, by the pandemic and it’s aftershocks.



Jack and Jean own a second home in Warren, Vermont. They arrived in March when the pandemic hit and haven’t left. They now intend to spend more of their year in Vermont. *Read more of their story [here](#).*  
*Photo by Anna Watts.*

## RESULTS

The descriptive statistics from this survey indicated a diverse array of respondents. 51.5% of respondents identified as female, and 39.6% of respondents were under the age of 35. The respondents were highly educated, with 94.3% reporting that they had completed college and/or graduate school. Roughly 60% of respondents noted that they worked in business, and approximately 10% reported that they worked in non-profit and education. About 5% of respondents noted they worked in government.

When asked whether respondents were in Vermont because of the COVID-19 pandemic, 156 respondents indicated “yes.” Of those respondents, 60 cited the ability to work or learn remotely as their reason for coming to Vermont. 50 respondents indicated that they were staying with family or friends, 26 were escaping a hotspot, and 10 were settling permanently in Vermont.

Of the 226 respondents, there was representation from all fourteen counties in Vermont. The highest concentrations of respondents were found in Chittenden County (24.2%) and Washington County (21.6%). A breakdown of respondents by county is provided below:

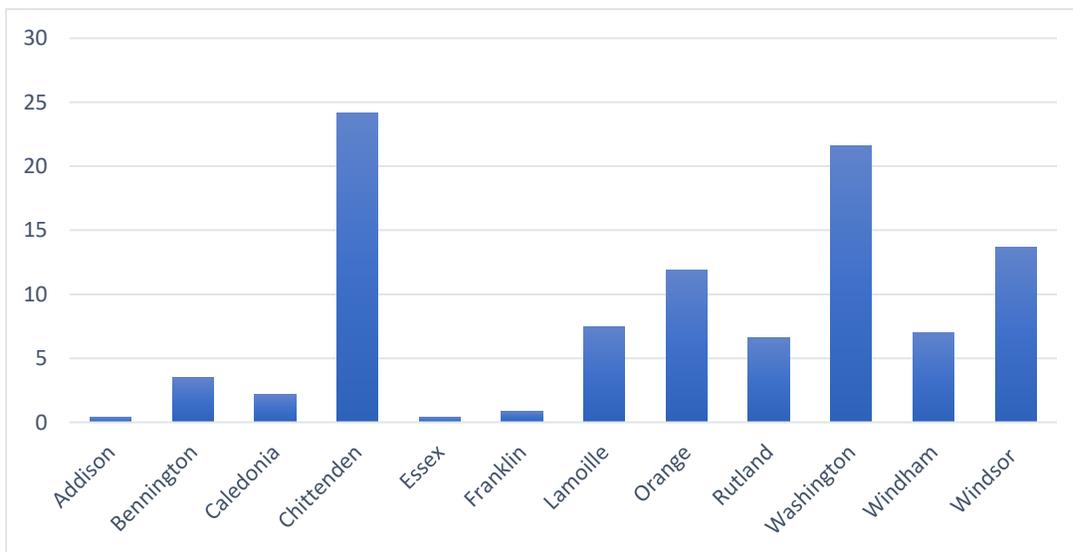


Figure 1. Percentage breakdown of respondents by Vermont counties. N=226.

Respondents were asked to classify the communities they were living in as rural, suburban, or urban. The majority of respondents indicated that they were in a rural community (62.5%), while 12.3% of respondents noted they were in a suburban community, and 22.0% indicated they were in a village or city center. Additionally, respondents were asked to rate the quality of their internet (figure X), and the amount of time they had spent in Vermont (figure X). A full breakdown of the descriptive statistics of this report is provided in Appendix B.

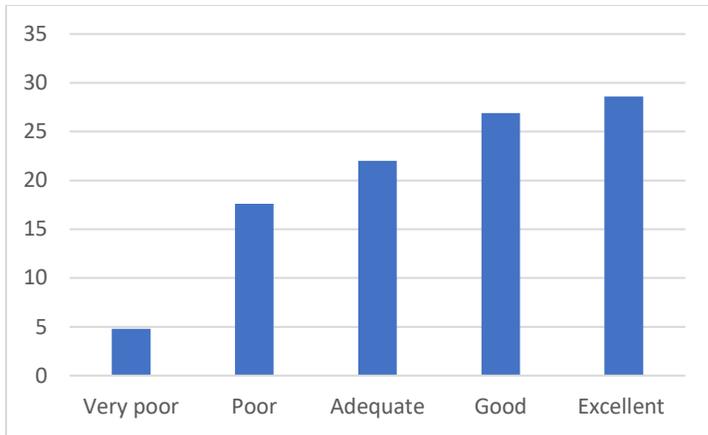


Figure 2. Percentage breakdown of internet quality. N=226.

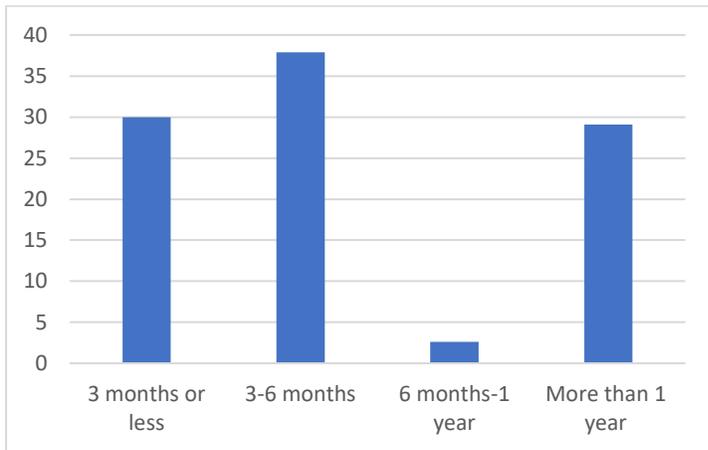


Figure 3. Percentage breakdown of time spent in Vermont. N=226.

*“We have had a second home in Vermont for 15 years. We are now selling our primary residence in Massachusetts and moving to Vermont. COVID put us over the edge in the decision-making process. Our long-term plan has been to retire to Vermont; we are now instituting our long-term plan sooner than later!”*

**Senior Manager, Health Insurance Company, Boston, MA**

Following an initial assessment of the descriptive statistics of respondents, a closer look was taken at what determinants impacted a respondent’s likelihood of remaining in Vermont permanently. Initial responses to the question, “once life returns to normal, how likely is it that you will remain living in Vermont” were as follows:

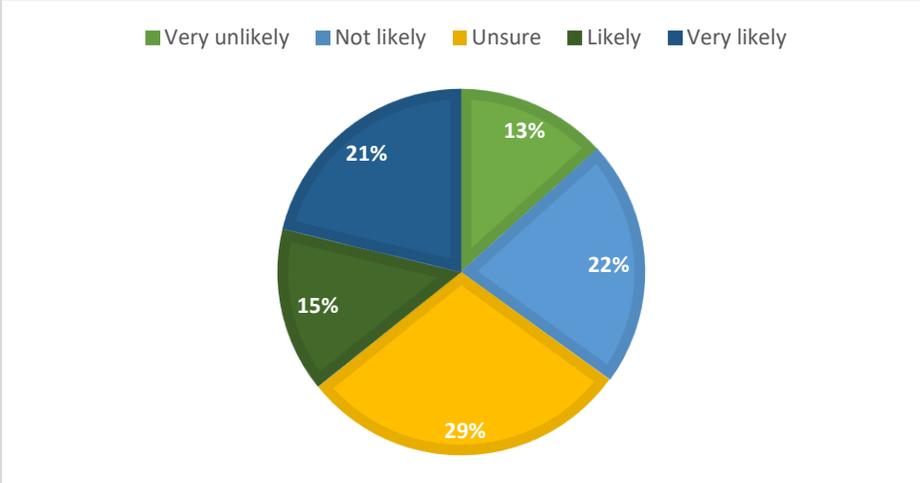


Figure 4. Percent breakdown of likelihood of respondents remaining in Vermont post-COVID-19. N=226.

Respondents who indicated that they were “likely” or “very likely” to remain in Vermont after life returns to normal were generally here for a longer period of time. 66.7% of respondents who have already been in Vermont for 6-12 months, and 62.1% of respondents who had been in Vermont for longer than 1 year noted they were “likely” or “very likely” to stay. This indicates that many of the respondents noting they planned to remain in Vermont had arrived prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the respondents who had been in Vermont for less than three months, only 14.7% indicated they would be “likely” or “very likely” to stay. Respondents who had been in Vermont for 3-6 months responded with a 30.3% likelihood of remaining in Vermont.

*“We want to live here. We want nature. We want community. We want neighborhoods and biking. We want to be around family. We want to prioritize other parts of life other than work and financial gain. In Brooklyn, we worked long hours, and barely had time to make dinner. We love our work, and continue to be ambitious, but we needed to find a better balance to our lives”*

**Creative Director, NYC**

Additional determinants that impacted respondent likelihood of staying in Vermont included the quality of their internet, location, and age. A breakdown of those factors with respect to those who responded that they were “likely” or “very likely” to remain in Vermont is provided below.

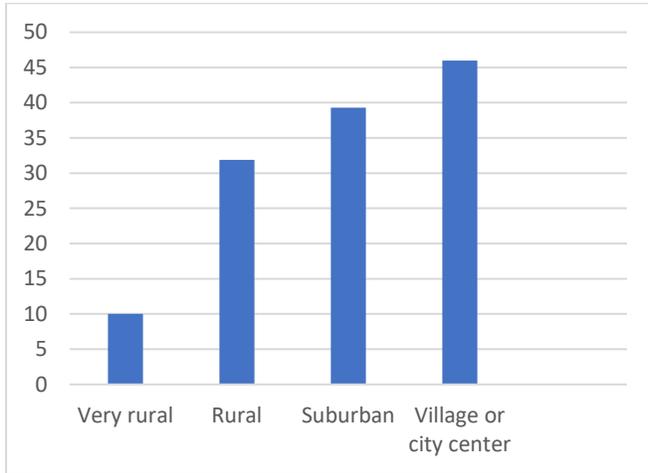


Figure 5. Percentage breakdown of locations of “likely” and “very likely respondents”. N=226.

*“If we are required to resume work at our office it will not be feasible [to permanently relocate to Vermont]. However, if working remotely becomes the new norm, then it’s not only possible, but likely that we would move to Vermont”*

**Investment Product Manager, NYC**

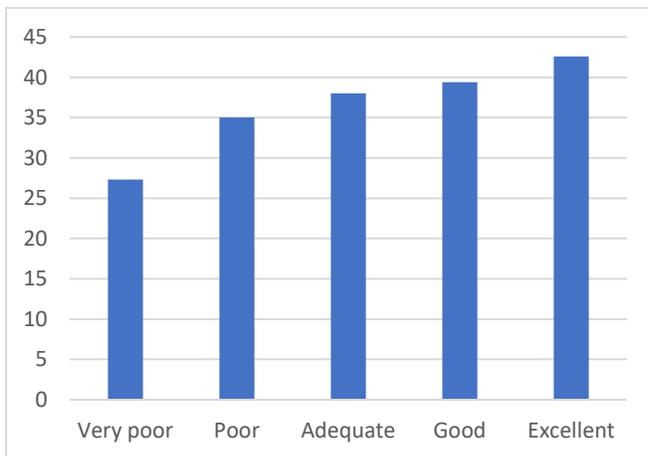


Figure 6. Percentage breakdown of internet quality of “likely” and “very likely respondents”. N=226.

*“I recently was connected with high speed fiber internet (EC Fiber), so now I am able to effectively work remotely. Our employer is currently encouraging everyone to work from home. Vermont’s highly responsible approach to COVID-19 is very important”*

**CEO, Private Internet Company**

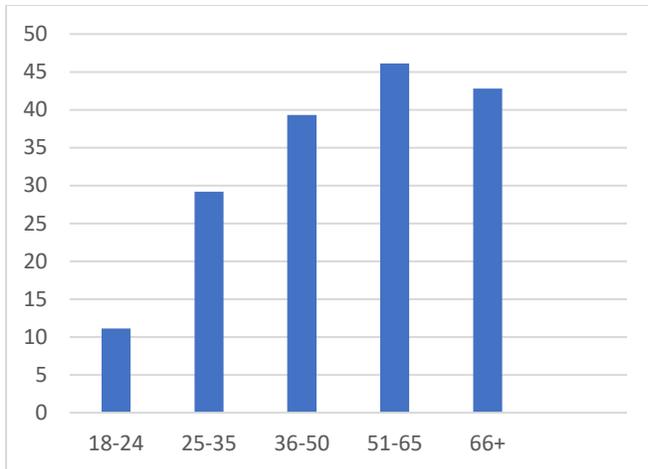


Figure 7. Percentage breakdown of age of “likely” and “very likely respondents”. N=226.

Of these factors, it appears that those who are not in very rural communities are more likely to remain in Vermont. Additionally, for the respondents of this survey, the quality of internet was not a key factor in determining whether or not to remain in Vermont. Age was a key factor, though. Only 11.1% of 18 to 24-year old’s indicated that they were likely to remain in Vermont, while 46.1% of 51 to 65-year old’s and 42.8% of 66+ year old’s noted they were likely to stay.

Those who noted they were “likely” or “very likely” to remain in Vermont also provided insight into the reasons they had for remaining in Vermont, the barriers and challenges that would inhibit them from permanently relocating. Respondents noted that nature and the outdoors, the quality of life, an ongoing ability to work remotely, COVID-19 safety, and proximity to family were all reasons to remain in Vermont. Barriers included winter weather, lack of affordable housing, a lack of economic opportunity, high taxes and cost of living, lack of diversity, poor internet quality, and the need to return to their established life as barriers to remaining in Vermont.

Amongst the younger demographic of 18 to 35-year old’s, an expanded job market, a higher quality rental inventory, and lower taxes were all factors Vermont could take on to make them more likely to relocate permanently.

*“We are growing a business here and are surrounded by friends and family. We’re natives. As an employer, we are being clear that where you work does not matter as long as you continue to operate at a high level. We are also arming our remote workers with the materials and equipment they need to do so”*

***Vice President, Massachusetts***

A more generalized examination of the qualitative questions provided some additional findings. When asked to describe the connections that they had to Vermont, many noted that family (112), friends (73), and being from Vermont (45) were their primary connections. 44 respondents indicated that they had second homes in Vermont, and 32 respondents said that access to nature and the outdoors were their primary connection. When asked what most attracted them to living in Vermont, 184 respondents indicated that nature and the outdoors were the most compelling factor for relocating. Additionally, 76 respondents noted that the community in Vermont were attractive to them. 30 respondents noted that the political climate was attractive, and 28 respondents noted that their family being nearby was a factor.

There was a range of responses to the question: what are the main reasons that you see yourself leaving Vermont once things return to normal? 76 respondents indicated that having to return to work or school in-person would require them to return home. A lack of economic opportunity (36), high cost of living and high taxes (27), and winter weather (17) were popular reasons for folks leaving Vermont post-pandemic, as were the fact that Vermont lacks the features of urban life (14).

## **DISCUSSION**

The results of this survey offered a series of high-level findings which provide critical insight into the perspectives and needs of telecommuters who have relocated to Vermont, either temporarily or permanently, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these findings include the fact that more than 1/3 of respondents to this survey indicated that they were “likely” or “very likely” to stay in Vermont after the COVID-19 pandemic. Many respondents have jobs that are not based in Vermont, but which have offered the opportunity to work remotely. Additionally, many of those respondents who were working remotely in Vermont either already owned a second home in Vermont, grew up in Vermont, or had friends and family in Vermont. Young people were far less likely to relocate permanently to Vermont than older demographics, while factors such as location within Vermont and internet quality were not substantial factors in whether or not respondents indicated that they were likely to remain in Vermont.

When considering the factors that attracted telecommuters to Vermont, respondents noted that the natural landscape, community, safety with respect to COVID-19, and the political climate were all positive attributes that compelled them to come to Vermont, and potentially attributes that would keep them here following the pandemic. Alternately, barriers to respondents relocating to Vermont included a need to return to in-person work and school, a lack of economic opportunity, high cost of living, and poor internet quality.

Moving forward, there are steps that can be taken to hone in on the individuals and communities that are likely to relocate to Vermont, and consider their needs as components of community development geared towards building Vermont’s tax base and solving its demographic crisis.

For multiple reasons, this exploratory survey suggests more people are considering re-locating to Vermont. The pandemic has opened up more telework possibilities and raised the profile of the state for people thinking about leaving urban centers.

## **SOME RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Develop a branding campaign around Vermont as the “work-from-home” capital of the United States.
- Conduct a needs assessment of this population of new Vermonters to determine what will keep them here.
- Conduct a phase 2 survey focused on 2<sup>nd</sup> Home Owners, to understand in more detail who is moving to Vermont.

- Create a weekly seminar series around Vermont – on-line – for people to learn about and engage with their new state.
- Consider how to recruit and organize this new potential wave of in-migrants to meet Vermont’s goals of downtown renewal.

## **ABOUT THIS REPORT**

This report is a collaboration between the Center for Research on Vermont, Vermont Futures Project, and the University of Vermont’s Office of Engagement.

### **About the Vermont Futures Project**

The Vermont Futures Project promotes the long-term economic health of Vermont through leadership, research, and education. The Vermont Futures Project seeks to inform the conversation about Vermont’s economic future and demonstrate how a healthy economy contributes to Vermont’s vibrant communities and unique quality of life.

### **About the Center for Research on Vermont**

Founded in 1974, the Center for Research on Vermont supports research in the Vermont “laboratory” -- research that provides original knowledge to the world -- through examining the state's social, economic, cultural and physical environment. The Center does this work by supporting scholars, engaging students and storytelling.

### **About the Office of Engagement at UVM**

The Office of Engagement at the University of Vermont enhances partnerships and support efforts throughout the state to build upon the University’s land-grant mission, acting as a “front door” to the University for private, public and non-profit entities and communities looking to access UVM’s many strengths and capabilities.

## APPENDIX A

### Survey Instrument

#### Telework from Vermont Survey:

1. Timestamp
2. Name (optional)
3. Email (optional)
4. Check the box that best describes the type of organization you work for; non-profit, business, education, government, other
5. How long have you been living in Vermont? 0-3 months, 3-6 months, 6 months- 1 year, more than 1 year
6. Are you here now in Vermont because of the COVID-19 pandemic in some way? Please explain.
7. Once life returns to something like more normal, how likely is it that you will remain living in Vermont?
8. Please briefly describe why or why not?
9. What are some of the aspects of Vermont that most attract you to continue living here?
10. What are the main reasons that you see yourself leaving Vermont once things return to more normal?
11. What are some things Vermont could do to make you more likely to stay?
12. What are some of the connections you have to Vermont?
13. Would your current employer allow you to continue teleworking from Vermont?
14. If you are interested in remaining in Vermont, what steps could your current employer take that would enable you to continue working from Vermont?
15. How is the internet where you are living?
16. Who is your current employer?
17. What is your current position?
18. My present living situation in Vermont is in a....Very rural, rural, suburban, city/village
19. Can we contact you?
20. Pronouns
21. Age
22. Email Address
23. Highest level of education completed
24. Please select the county where you are currently located in Vermont.
25. Is there anything else you would like to add?

## Appendix B

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

| Variable                |                                      | Percent |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------|
| Pronouns                | Female (she/her)                     | 51.5    |
|                         | Male (he/him)                        | 47.6    |
|                         | Non-binary (they/them, sie/zie, etc) | 0.9     |
| Age                     | 18-24                                | 7.9     |
|                         | 25-35                                | 31.7    |
|                         | 36-50                                | 24.7    |
|                         | 51-65                                | 22.9    |
|                         | 66+                                  | 12.3    |
|                         | Did not disclose                     | 0.4     |
| Education level         | High school or equivalent            | 5.3     |
|                         | College                              | 48.0    |
|                         | Graduate school and beyond           | 46.3    |
| Time spent living in VT | 3 months or less                     | 30.0    |
|                         | 3-6 months                           | 37.9    |
|                         | 6 months-1 year                      | 2.6     |
|                         | More than 1 year                     | 29.1    |
| Living location         | Very rural                           | 4.4     |
|                         | Rural                                | 58.1    |
|                         | Suburban                             | 12.3    |
|                         | Village or city center               | 22.0    |
| County                  | Addison                              | 0.4     |
|                         | Bennington                           | 3.5     |
|                         | Caledonia                            | 2.2     |
|                         | Chittenden                           | 24.2    |
|                         | Essex                                | 0.4     |
|                         | Franklin                             | 0.9     |
|                         | Lamoille                             | 7.5     |
|                         | Orange                               | 11.9    |
|                         | Rutland                              | 6.6     |
|                         | Washington                           | 21.6    |
|                         | Windham                              | 7.0     |
|                         | Windsor                              | 13.7    |
| Employment organization | Business                             | 56.4    |
|                         | Business, education                  | 0.4     |
|                         | Business, government                 | 0.4     |
|                         | Business, other                      | 0.9     |
|                         | Education                            | 11.5    |
|                         | Education & Training                 | 0.4     |
|                         | Government                           | 5.7     |
|                         | Non-profit                           | 10.1    |
|                         | Non-profit, government               | 0.4     |
|                         | Non-profit, other                    | 0.4     |
|                         | Other                                | 13.2    |
| Internet quality        | Very poor                            | 4.8     |

|  |           |      |
|--|-----------|------|
|  | Poor      | 17.6 |
|  | Adequate  | 22.0 |
|  | Good      | 26.9 |
|  | Excellent | 28.6 |

*Note.* N=226.