

MARCH 11, 2021

SURVEY OF MASSACHUSETTS MUNICIPALITIES

IMPACTS OF COVID-19 AND RECOVERY STRATEGIES

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Massachusetts
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Association

Report prepared by a team of researchers at the **University of Massachusetts Amherst** with the support of the *Massachusetts Municipal Association (MMA)*.

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March 11, 2021

Executive Summary

SURVEY RESULTS

IMPACTS OF COVID-19 AND RECOVERY STRATEGIES

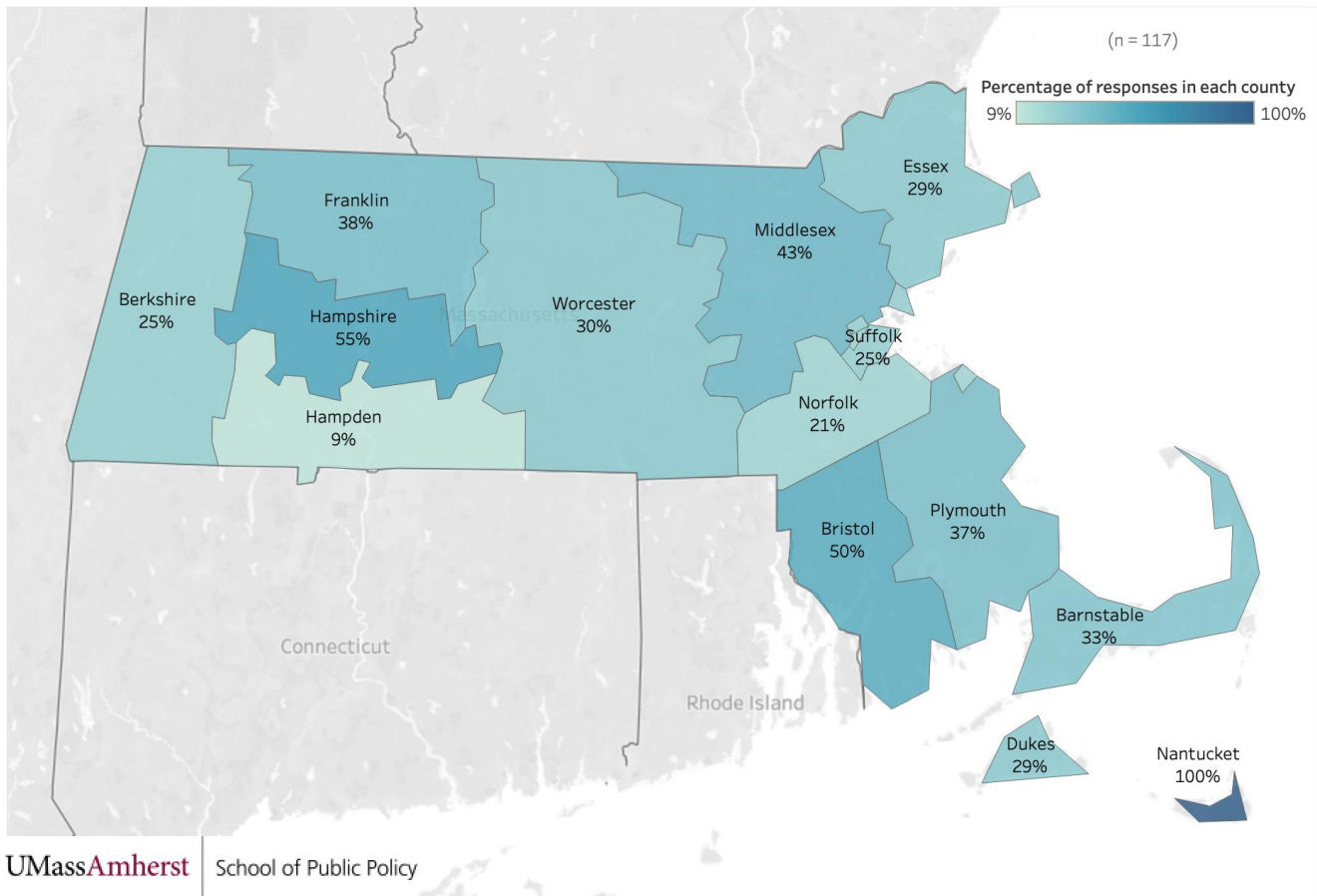
The UMass Amherst School of Public Policy's Socioeconomic Policy Lab conducted an online survey from February 22, 2021 to March 2, 2021 with support from the Massachusetts Municipal Association (MMA). The purpose of this survey is to gather information about the challenges municipalities are facing because of the COVID-19 public health crisis and its socio-economic fallout, the strategies adopted to address these challenges, and issues currently prioritized by municipal leaders. The survey includes questions on eight areas:

1. Impacts on municipal operations
2. Strategies adopted by municipalities in their emergency response and current priorities
3. Funding and financial impacts on municipal budgets
4. Vaccine preparedness, planning, and best practices
5. Equity indicators used in monitoring the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis
6. Impacts on vulnerable populations, particularly regarding food and housing security
7. Impacts on local businesses
8. Possible strategies for an inclusive and sustainable post-COVID socio-economic recovery

The survey was distributed online by the MMA to the municipal leaders of each of Massachusetts' 351 municipalities, of which 117 answered the survey (Fig 1). The percentage of cities (as opposed to towns) among the municipalities which answered the survey is slightly higher compared to Massachusetts as a whole. However, the characteristics of municipalities in the sample are comparable to municipalities in the

entire Massachusetts in terms of percentage of communities defined as “rural level 1” and “rural level 2”¹, average municipal per capita income, and population size (Table 1).

Figure 1. Massachusetts map showing the percentage of municipalities that responded to the survey by county (117 municipalities responded)



¹ Massachusetts State Office of Rural Health, List of Rural Towns: <https://www.mass.gov/doc/massachusetts-rural-towns-list/download>

Table 1. Characteristics of municipalities

| | Massachusetts | | Sample in this study | |
|--|----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|
| | 351 municipalities | | 117 municipalities | |
| | Count | Percent of Total | Count | Percent of Total |
| Number of cities | 39 | 11% | 24 | 21% |
| Number of towns | 312 | 89% | 93 | 79% |
| Not rural | 191 | 54% | 68 | 58% |
| Rural level 1 | 104 | 30% | 32 | 27% |
| Rural level 2 | 56 | 16% | 17 | 15% |
| Average municipal per capita income | \$42,194 | | \$43,592 | |
| Average municipal population size | 19,664 | | 17,742 | |

KEY FINDINGS

1. IMPACTS ON CITY/TOWN OPERATIONS

- The majority of Massachusetts municipalities reported significant to extreme impacts of COVID-19 on municipal operations (78%) and local economies since March 2020 (65%). (Tables 2 and 3)
- More than 90% of municipalities reported moderate to severe impacts associated with COVID-19 in terms of restrictions of in-person access or complete closure of the town/city hall. (Fig. 2)
- More than 90% of municipalities reported moderate to severe impacts associated with COVID-19 in terms of transition to school remote or hybrid learning. (Fig. 2)
- Between 70-85% of municipalities reported moderate to severe impacts in the following areas: increase in overall daily operations, delays in decision-making, and municipal budget/finance challenges. (Fig. 2)
- More than 75% of municipalities reported moderate to severe impacts on municipal employees' physical and mental health. (Fig. 2)

2. STRATEGIES AND PRIORITIES

- In response to the challenges of COVID-19, the most frequently adopted organizational strategies include: transitioning to electronic public meetings (97%), enhancing public health and safety protocols to facilitate access to municipal buildings (91%), and adopting or expanding remote working for municipal employees (86%). (Fig. 3²)
- 40% of municipalities introduced programs to enhance employees' mental health and wellness. (Fig. 3)
- The top three priority areas of municipalities in relation to COVID-19 are: (1) preparing for vaccine distribution, (2) enhancing public health and safety protocols to facilitate continuity of in-person learning, and (3) addressing municipal budget/finance challenges. (Fig. 4)

² Some of the questions in our survey (Figure 3, and Tables 4, 5, 7) are drawn from an online survey on COVID-19 conducted by the *International City/County Management Association* (ICMA) in July 2020. Our goal by including these questions was to compare the results obtained by ICMA in July 2020 with the current situation in Massachusetts. <https://icma.org/documents/icma-survey-research-covid-19-impacts-local-governments>

- More than 80% of municipalities ranked as moderate to high priority the following: enhancing remote learning capabilities of hybrid models for schools, and addressing food and housing insecurity. (Fig. 4)
- A large majority of municipalities stated that, over the next year, they will adopt a hybrid format between pre-/post-pandemic practices in relation to electronic public meetings, virtual community engagement, remote working for municipal employees, and remote permitting processes. (Fig. 5)

3. FUNDING AND FINANCIAL IMPACTS

- 88% of municipalities have received funding under the CARES Act, with 74% of these municipalities using the funding for Public Health expenses (e.g., PPE supplies, disinfection of facilities, technical assistance or consulting); and 60% using the funding for compliance with COVID-19 measures (e.g., telework support for employees, paid sick/family medical leave for public employees, distance learning technologies for schools). (Table 4)
- A vast array of personnel actions has been taken to mitigate budgeting challenges, including: hiring freezes (37% of municipalities), consolidation of personnel responsibilities and functions (36%), and elimination of unfilled positions (16%). (Table 5)

4. VACCINE PREPAREDNESS

- 60% of municipalities reported that they definitely have the capacity to administer vaccines. (Fig. 6)
- 73% have developed local or regional partnerships with other institutions to support vaccination (e.g., hospitals, higher education institutions, EMS, Councils on Aging). 62% have developed local partnerships with neighboring municipalities. (Table 6)
- 81% have a page on the municipal website providing regular, updated information on vaccinations, 61% have volunteers to assist with vaccination registration and scheduling by phone, and 59% have developed outreach and education programs about COVID-19 and vaccination. (Fig. 7)
- More than 40% of municipalities have developed services to support vaccinations for elderly and vulnerable populations, including: transportation to/from vaccination sites and the ability to provide vaccinations at home. (Fig. 7)
- 75% of municipalities reported having enough financial resources to start vaccine clinics, however 72% indicated that they do not have access to sufficient vaccine supply. (Fig. 9)

- In response to an open-ended survey question asking what the most helpful resource would be to support municipal vaccine distribution efforts, 63% of respondents identified a larger and more continuous vaccine supply as the most important resource.
- In response to another open-ended question inviting respondents to share additional thoughts or feedback about vaccination planning and implementation in their municipalities, 20% of respondents identified the redirection of vaccines to mass statewide sites (from local/municipal vaccination clinics) as the main impediment to municipal vaccination planning and implementation process. Several respondents reported concerns about equitable access to vaccines in rural vs urban areas of Massachusetts. Some municipalities indicated that they may close their vaccination clinics because of lack of vaccine supply.

5. EQUITY MEASURES

- 74% of municipalities reported using local health statistics to monitor the impacts of COVID-19, 33% are currently monitoring food security metrics, and under 25% are monitoring employment statistics and homeless population indicators. (Fig. 10)
- The data municipalities are using are generally not disaggregated by race and ethnicity. Only 7% of respondents indicated that the data on health statistics they use offer details by race and ethnicity. Less than 3% of respondents have access to data disaggregated by race and ethnicity on employment, food security and homelessness. (Fig. 10)
- 7% of municipalities stated they have racial equity tools or impact assessments to aid in decisions of resource allocation, and 31% are interested in acquiring these tools. (Table 7)

6. FOOD AND HOUSING SECURITY

- 30% of municipalities reported significant to severe impacts of COVID-19 on food insecurity. 74% have invested resources in programs to support food security since March 2020. (Tables 8 and 9)
- 14% of municipalities reported significant to severe impacts of COVID-19 on housing insecurity. 38% have invested resources in programs to support housing security since March 2020. (Tables 8 and 9)
- 40% of municipalities reported that, in the next 6 to 12 months, they would have enough resources to start or continue investing in programs to support food security, while 22% said they could continue or

start investing in programs supporting housing security. (Table 10)

7. BUSINESSES

- About 60% of Massachusetts municipalities reported significant to severe impacts to local businesses associated with the COVID-19 crisis. (Table 11)
- Over 70% of municipalities reported that at least half of hospitality businesses and small businesses had to limit operations (Fig. 11). Over 35% of municipalities reported that at least 10% of these business categories had to permanently close. (Fig. 12)
- Over 55% of municipalities reported that at least half of retail businesses and service businesses had to limit operations (Fig. 11). Over 25% of municipalities reported that at least 10% of these business categories had to permanently close. (Fig. 12)
- Between 30 to 40% of respondents expect that, in their municipality, more small businesses, hospitality businesses, service businesses, and retail businesses will close permanently because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

8. GREEN RECOVERY

States and municipalities around the US have started exploring possible COVID-19 economic recovery pathways. The expression “green recovery” has emerged to describe policies that push for low-carbon economic growth, prioritizing renewable energy, energy efficiency, green transport, and other environmentally beneficial projects. One of the priorities of green recovery is to generate new, long-lasting jobs quickly to compensate for the job losses resulting from the pandemic and lockdowns.

- 32% of municipalities reported having discussed internally about green recovery strategies.
- Among green recovery strategies, municipalities are most interested in incentives to support energy efficiency (67%), and incentives to invest in climate-resilient infrastructure of transport, communications, water, and energy networks (e.g., enhancing flood protection schemes) (60%). (Fig. 13)
- More than 90% of respondents indicated moderate to strong interest in investments in three additional areas: installing more renewable energy capacity; investing in electric vehicle charging infrastructure; and Nature-based Solutions (NBS). NBS are green infrastructure strategies that rely on natural or modified ecosystems to enhance water security, climate resilience, climate adaptation, and disaster risk-reduction. (Fig. 13)

FIGURES AND TABLES

1. IMPACTS ON CITY/TOWN OPERATIONS

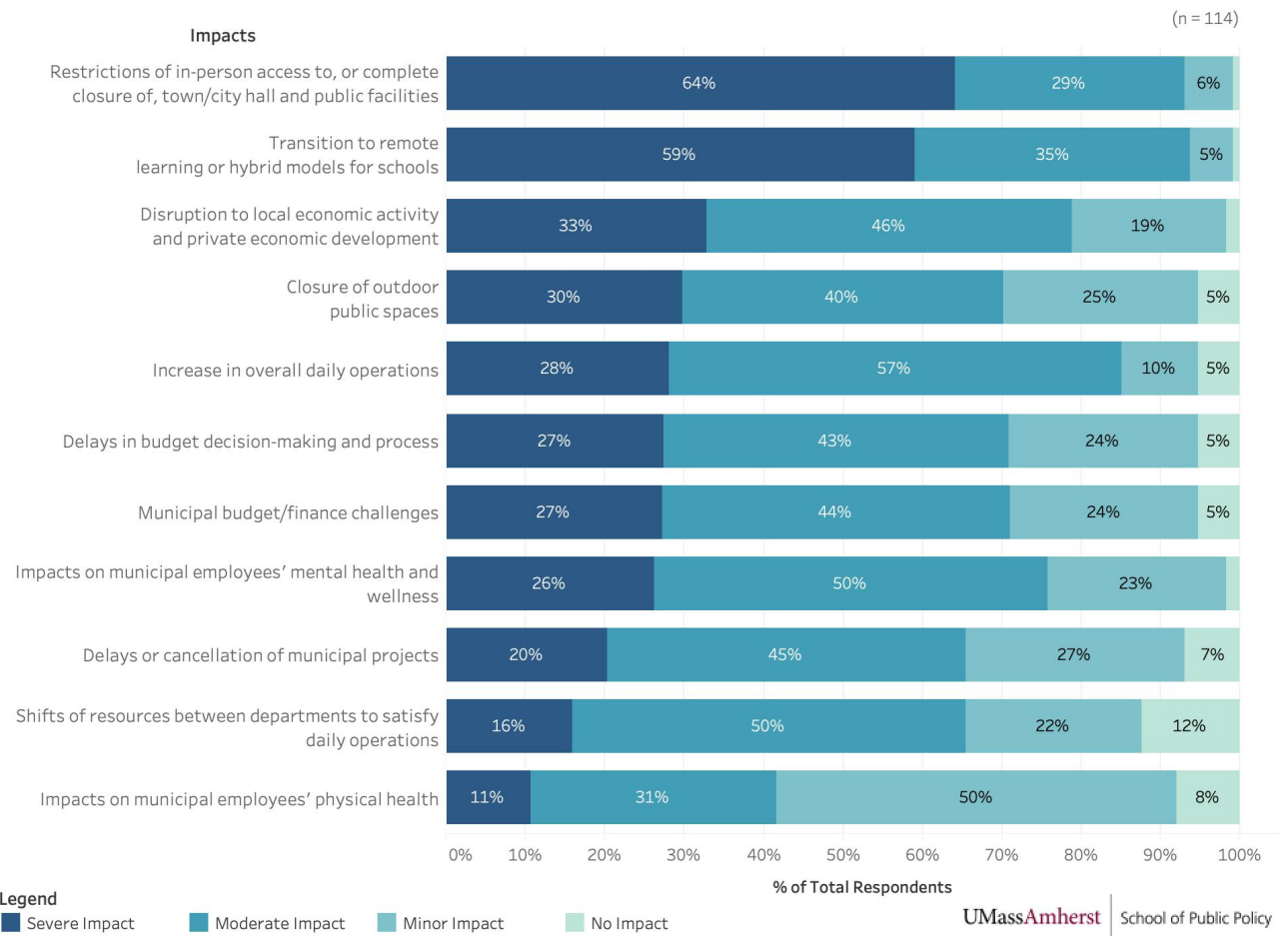
Table 2: How would you describe the impacts of COVID-19 on municipal operations since March 2020? (n=117)

| Description | Count of Responses | Percent of Total |
|-------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Extreme | 27 | 23% |
| Significant | 64 | 55% |
| Moderate | 22 | 19% |
| Minor | 4 | 3% |
| None | 0 | 0% |

Table 3: How would you describe the impacts of COVID-19 on the local economy within your municipality since March 2020? (n=116)

| Description | Count of Responses | Percent of Total |
|-------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Extreme | 21 | 18% |
| Significant | 54 | 47% |
| Moderate | 30 | 26% |
| Minor | 11 | 9% |
| None | 0 | 0% |

Figure 2. Impacts associated with COVID-19 experienced by municipalities



2. STRATEGIES AND PRIORITIES

Figure 3. Strategies municipalities adopted in response to the COVID-19 crisis

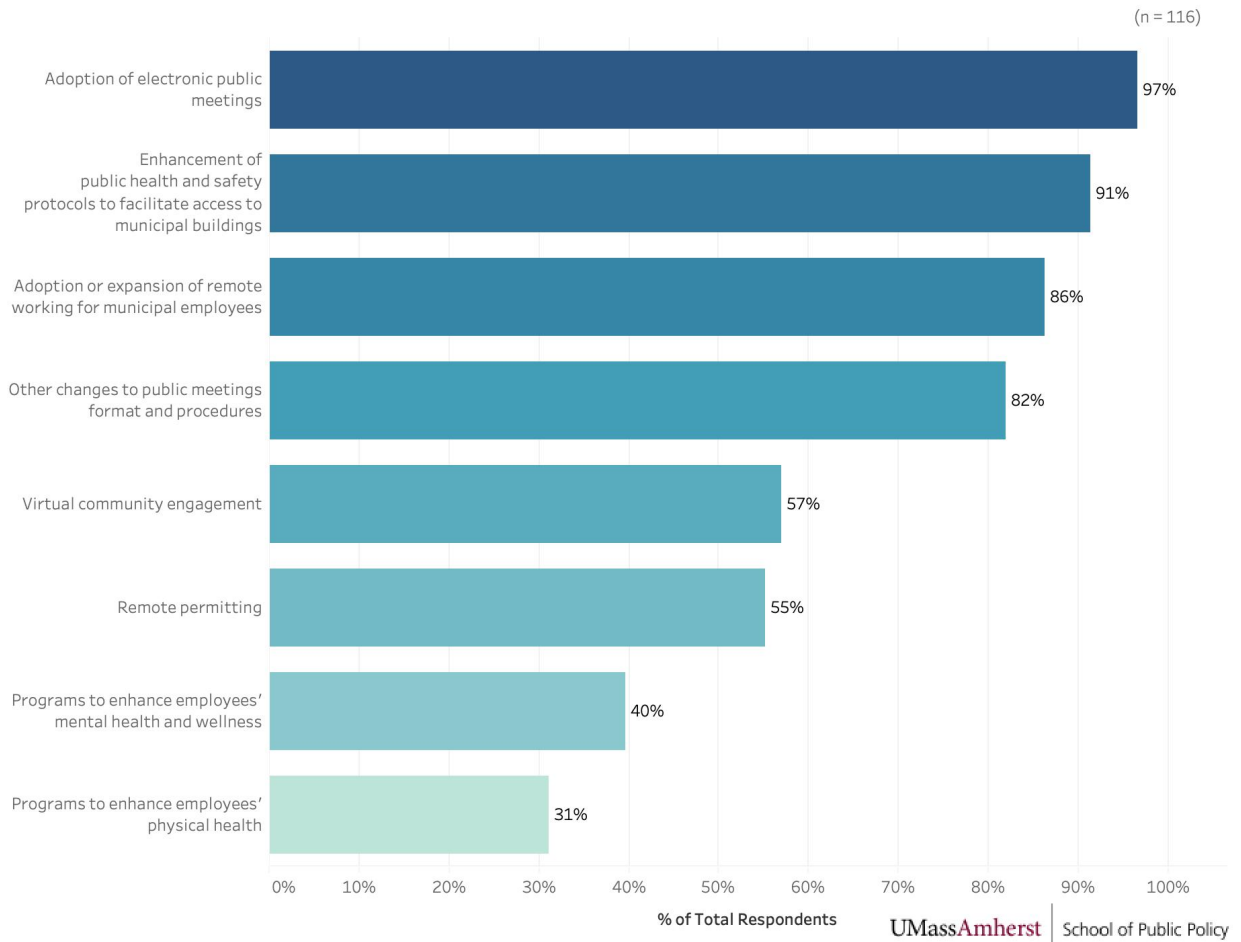


Figure 4. Priority areas for municipalities in relation to the COVID-19 crisis

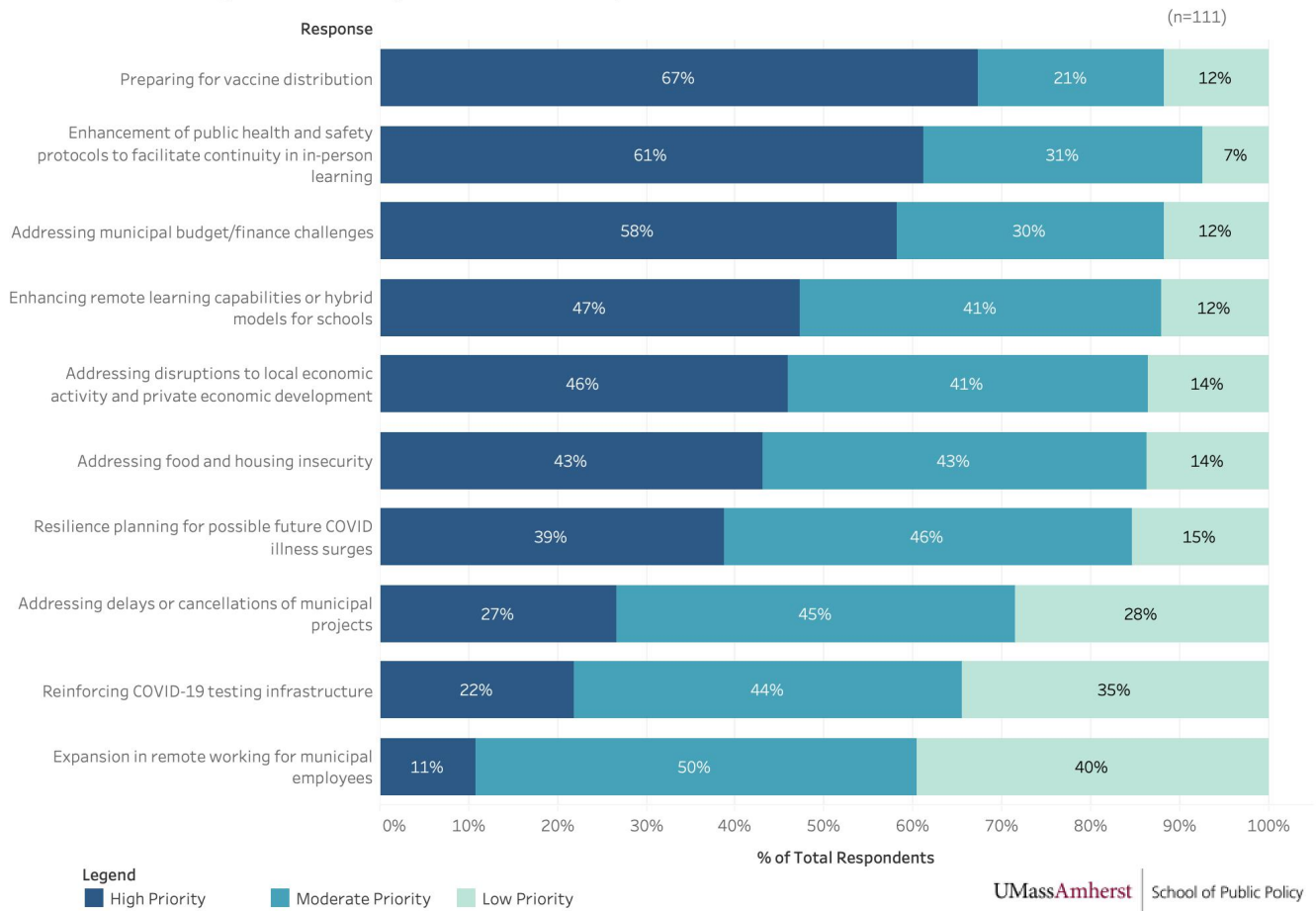
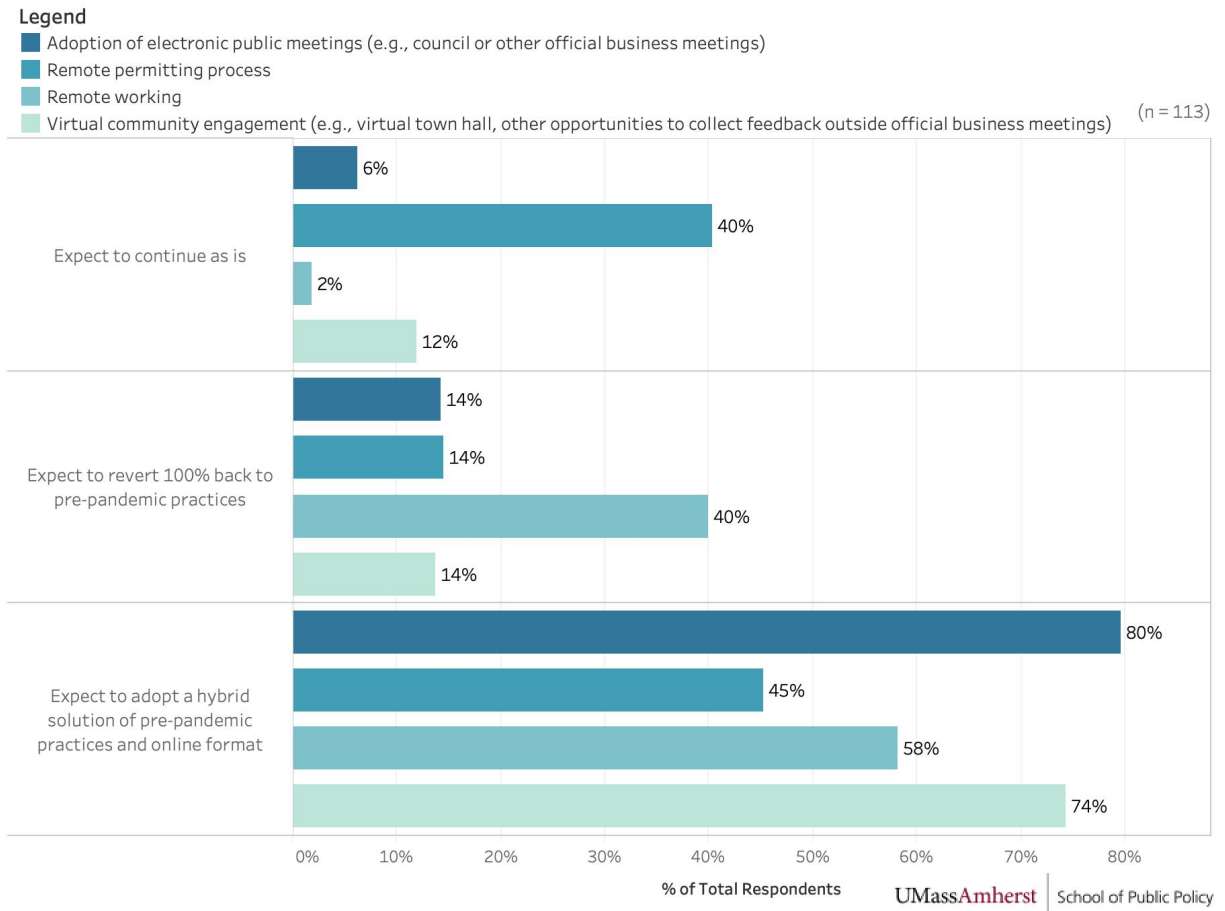


Figure 5. For any of the following strategies adopted by your municipality in response to the COVID-19 crisis, how do you foresee its use changing over the next year?



3. FUNDING AND FINANCIAL IMPACTS

Table 4: If you have received CARES Act funding, how have these resources been primarily used in your municipality? (n=106)

| Description | Count of Responses | Percent of Total Respondents |
|--|--------------------|------------------------------|
| Public health expenses (e.g. PPE and supplies, disinfection of facilities, technical assistance or consulting) | 78 | 74% |
| Compliance with COVID-19 public health measures (e.g. telework support for employees, paid sick/family medical leave for public employees, distance learning technologies or process improvements) | 64 | 60% |
| Payroll expenses for key public personnel (e.g. public works, public health, public safety) | 48 | 45% |
| Support to vulnerable populations (e.g. food delivery, care of homeless populations, sanitation/safety measures for incarceration facilities, other social and community measures) | 30 | 28% |
| Medical expenses (e.g. testing, vaccination clinic, existing or temporary facilities) | 32 | 30% |

Table 5: Since March 2020, which of the following personnel actions have you taken to mitigate budgeting challenges that have occurred as a result of COVID-19 impacts? (n=92)

| Description | Count of Responses | Percent of Total Respondents |
|---|--------------------|------------------------------|
| Hiring freeze | 34 | 37% |
| Consolidation of responsibilities/functions | 33 | 36% |
| Elimination of unfilled positions | 15 | 16% |
| Salary freezes | 9 | 10% |
| Furloughs | 11 | 12% |
| Layoffs | 10 | 11% |
| Early retirement incentives/packages | 2 | 2% |
| Temporary pay cuts | 3 | 3% |
| Reductions of Benefit Contributions | 1 | 1% |

4. VACCINE PREPAREDNESS

Figure 6. Does your municipality have the ability to administer vaccines?

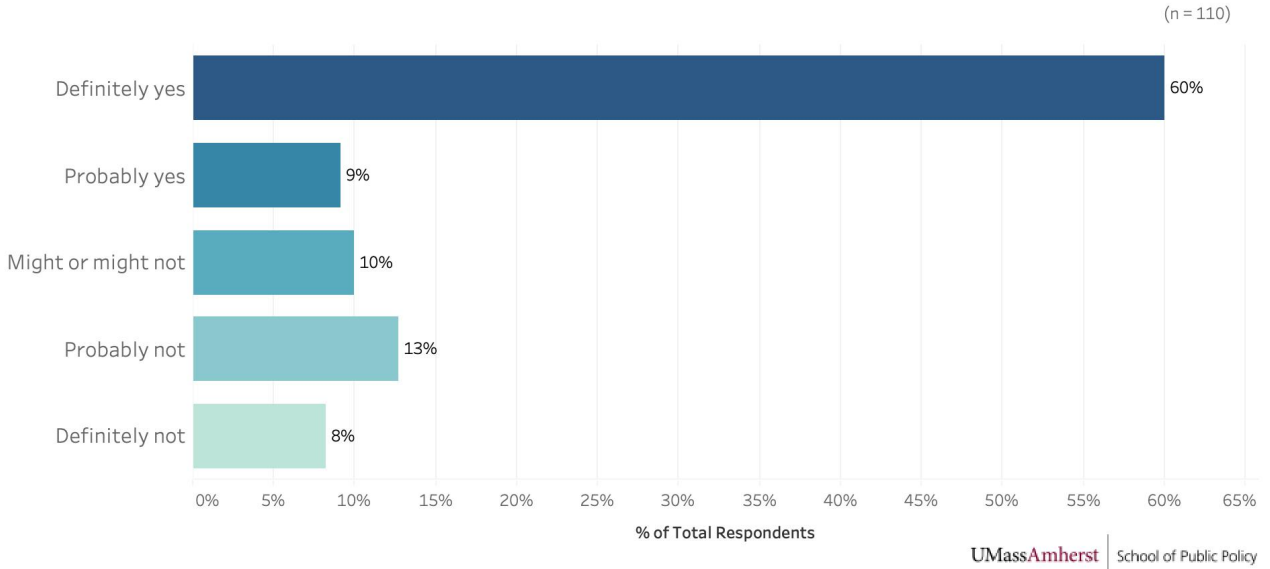


Table 6: Does your municipality have any of the following? (n = 117)

| | Responses | Percent of Total Responses |
|---|-----------|----------------------------|
| Local or regional partnerships with other institutions to support vaccination (e.g., hospitals, higher education institutions, EMS, Council on Aging) | 85 | 73% |
| Volunteer public health board/committee | 84 | 72% |
| The physical space to establish a vaccination clinic | 78 | 67% |
| Local partnerships with neighboring municipalities | 72 | 62% |
| Municipal health department/office operating full-time | 68 | 58% |
| Dedicated paid public health worker(s) (nurses and inspectors) | 66 | 56% |
| Volunteer public health worker(s) | 61 | 52% |
| Funding to hire temporary public health workers | 60 | 51% |
| A COVID-19 task-force/committee | 58 | 50% |
| Municipal health department/office operating only part-time | 26 | 22% |

Figure 7. What resources for vaccine distribution are available in your municipality?

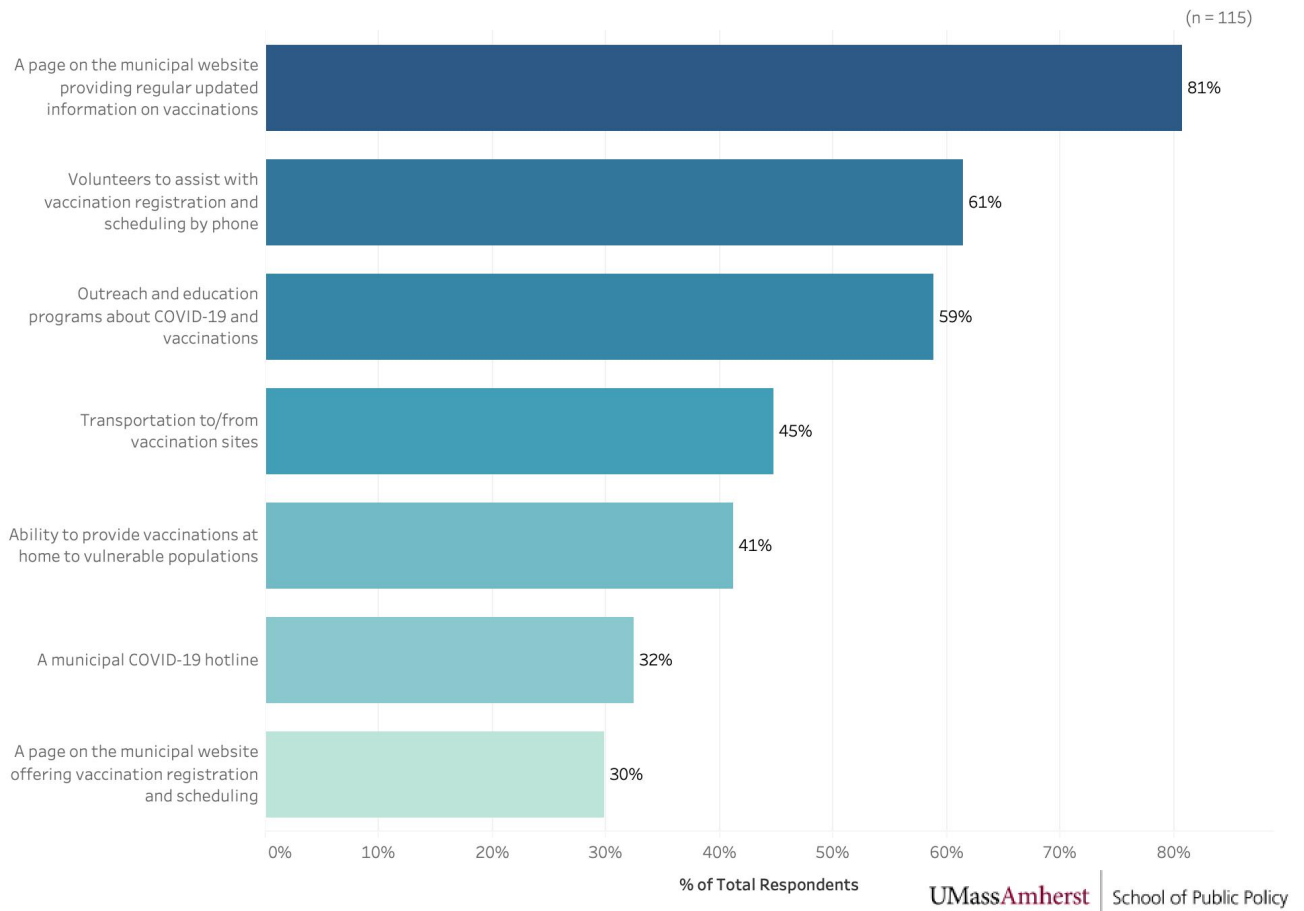
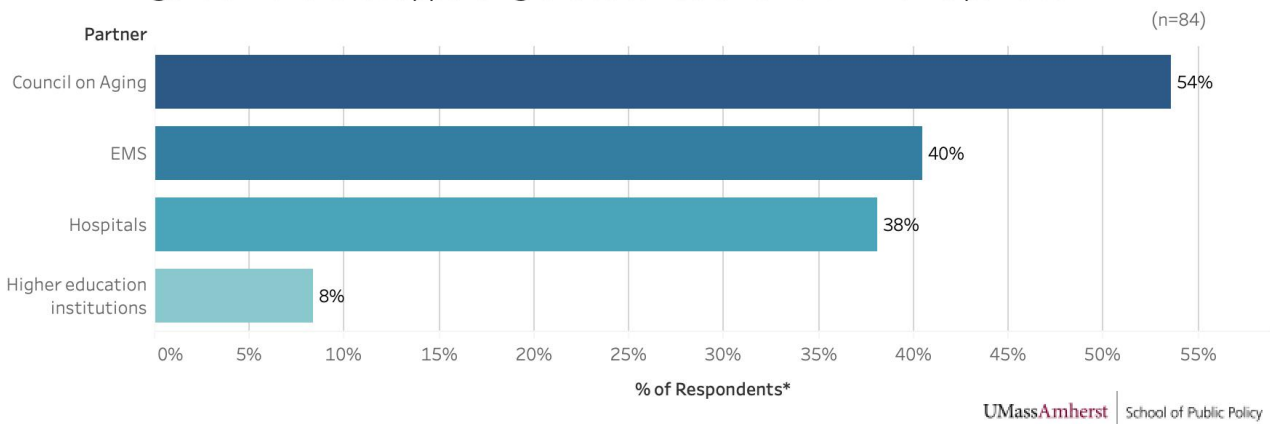


Figure 8. Partners supporting the vaccination effort in municipalities

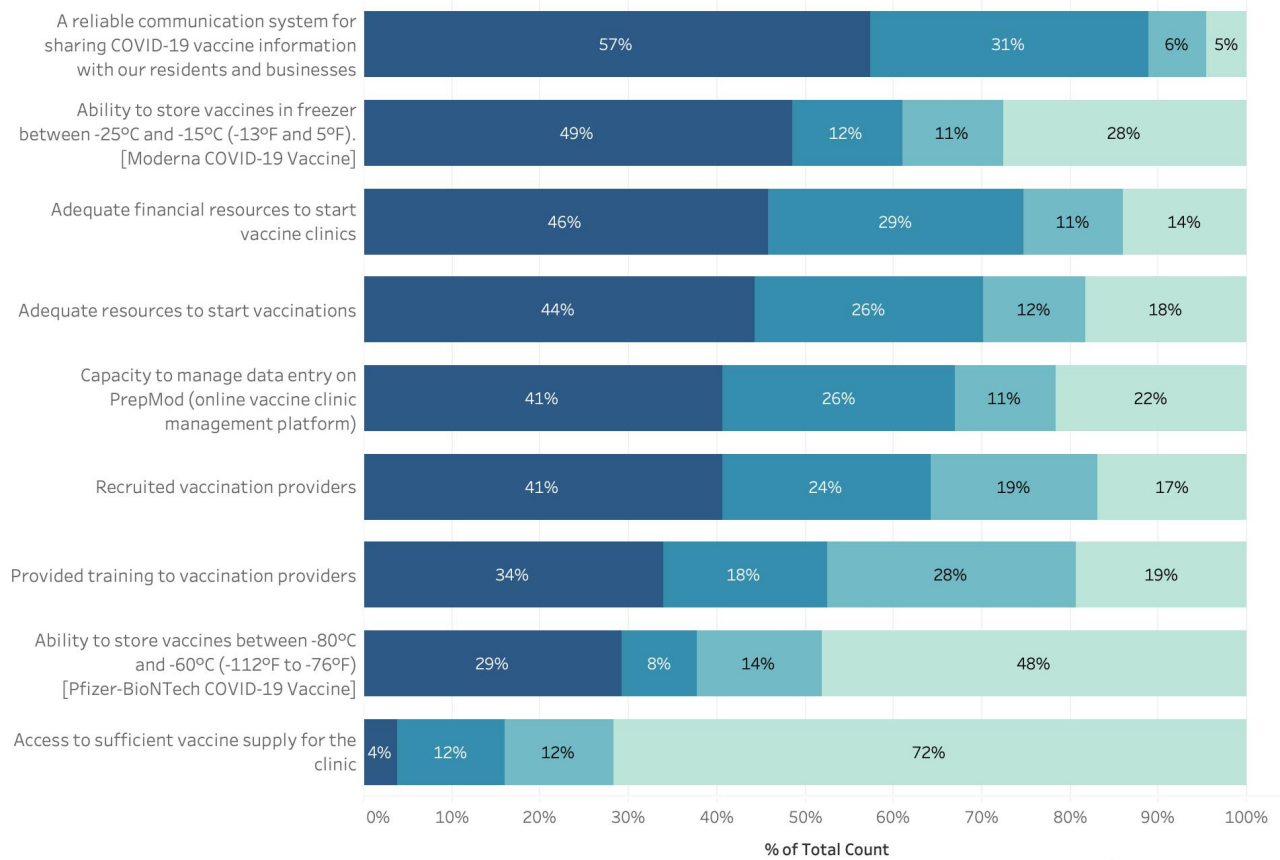


* Among those who indicated local or regional partnerships in Table 5.

Figure 9. How strongly do you agree with the following statements?

My municipality has...

(n = 108)



Legend

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Strongly disagree

5. EQUITY MEASURES AND INDICATORS

Figure 10. Is your municipality using any of the following types of local data in monitoring impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic?

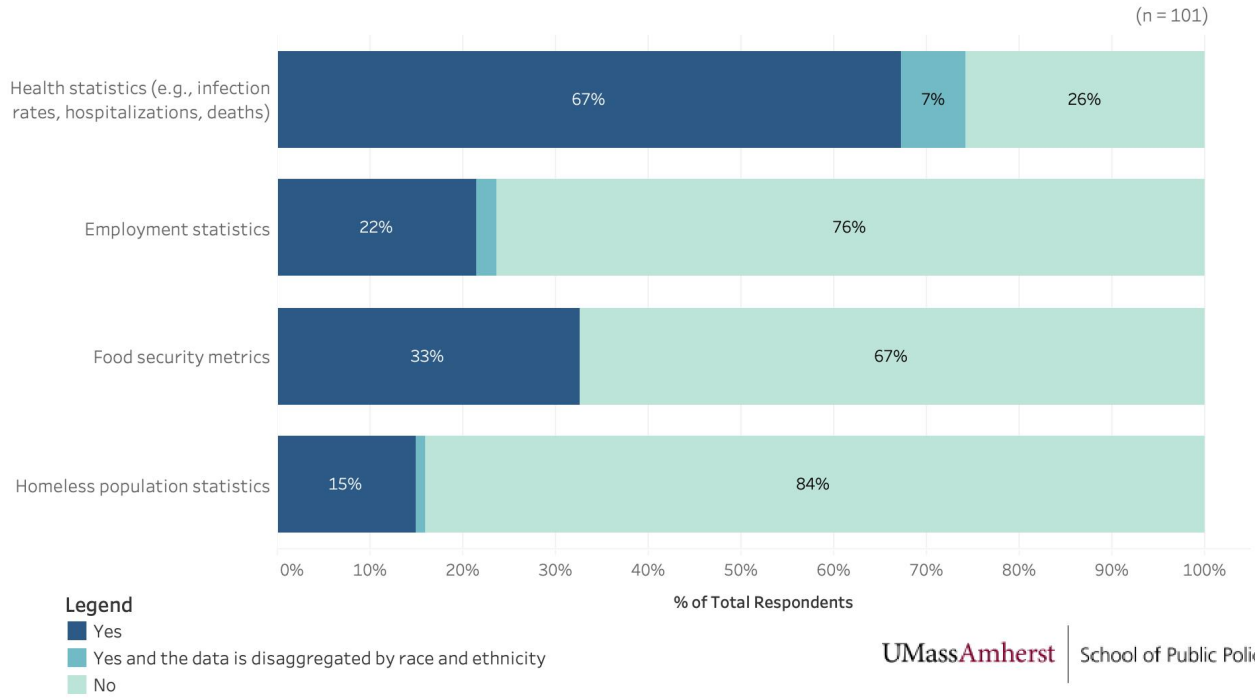


Table 7: Does your local government currently use any racial equity tools or impact assessments in making decisions about allocation of resources? (n = 102)

| Answer | Count of Responses | Percent of Total |
|---|--------------------|------------------|
| Yes | 7 | 7% |
| No, but our municipality is interested in acquiring these tools | 32 | 31% |
| No | 49 | 48% |
| Unsure | 14 | 14% |

6. FOOD AND HOUSING SECURITY

Table 8: How severely have residents in your municipality been affected by food insecurity, homelessness and housing issues in relation to the COVID-19 crisis? (n = 102)

| Answer | Food Insecurity | Homelessness and Housing Issues |
|--------------------|------------------------|--|
| Severe Impact | 6% | 3% |
| Significant Impact | 24% | 11% |
| Moderate Impact | 38% | 11% |
| Minor Impact | 27% | 52% |
| No Impact | 5% | 23% |

Table 9: Has your municipality invested resources in programs to support housing and food security in relation to the COVID-19 crisis? (n=106)

| Answer | Food security | Housing Security |
|---------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Yes | 74% | 38% |
| No | 26% | 62% |

Table 10: In the next 6 to 12 months, will your municipality have enough resources to start (or continue) investing in programs that support housing and food security? (n=104)

| Answer | Food security | Housing Security |
|---------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Yes | 40% | 22% |
| No | 18% | 34% |
| Not sure | 42% | 44% |

7. BUSINESSES

Table 11: How severely have businesses in your municipality been affected by the COVID-19 crisis? (n=107)

| Description | Count of Responses | Percent of Total |
|--------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Severe impact | 17 | 16% |
| Significant impact | 46 | 43% |
| Moderate impact | 33 | 31% |
| Minor impact | 9 | 8% |
| No impact | 2 | 2% |

Figure 11. Percentage of businesses that had to limit operations, as reported by municipalities

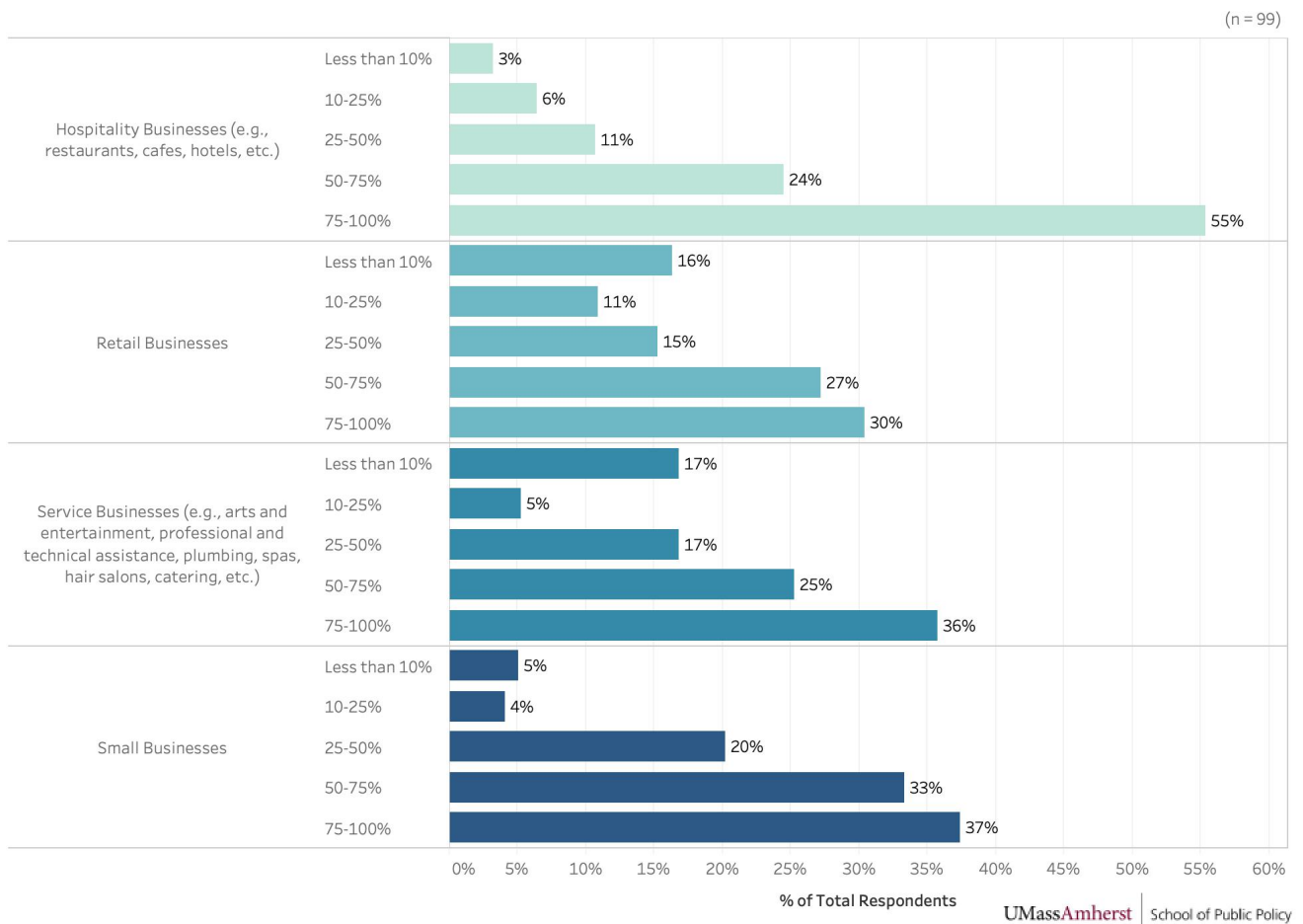
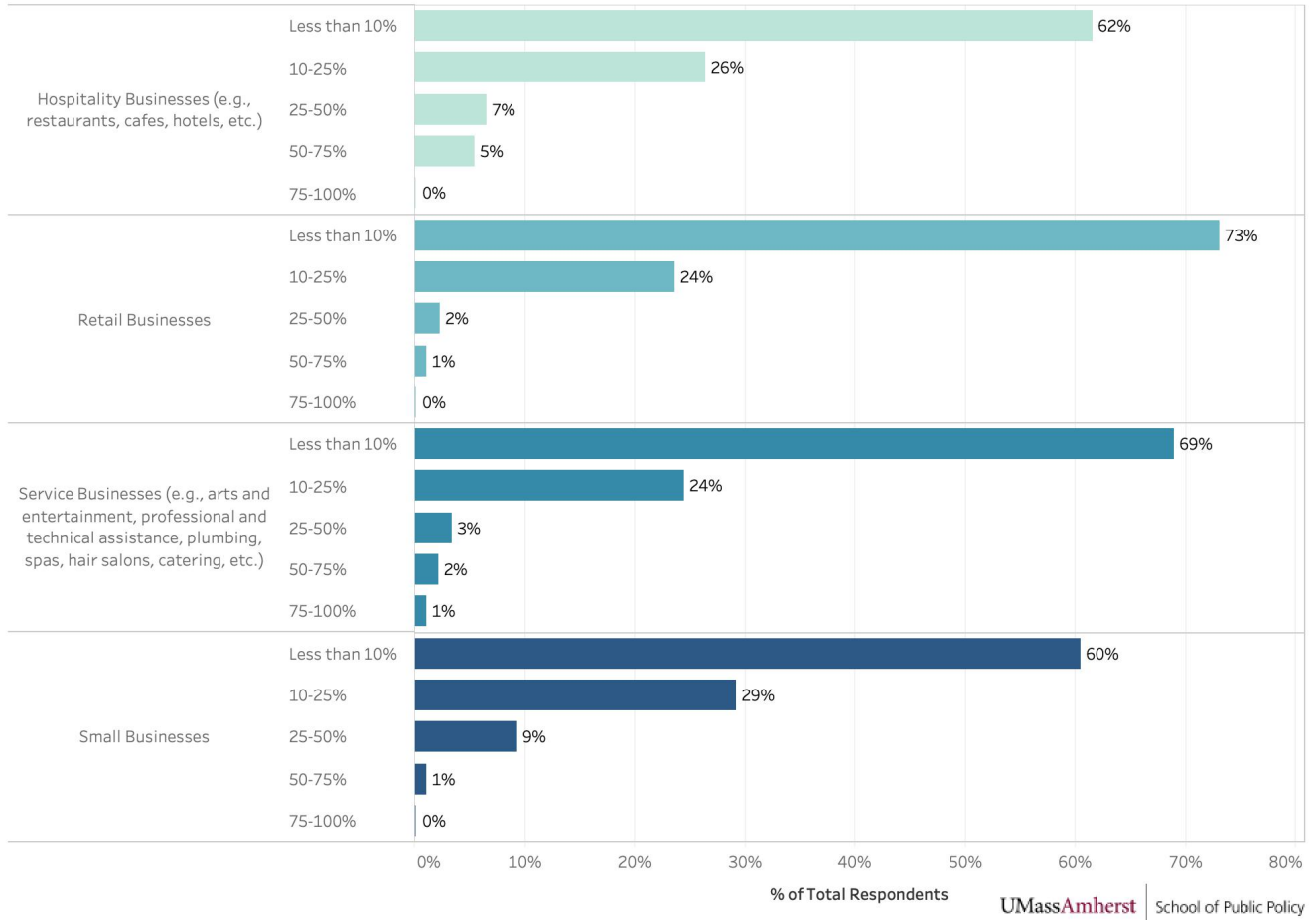


Figure 12. Percentage of businesses that had to stop operations, as reported by municipalities

(n = 99)



8. GREEN RECOVERY

Figure 13. Green recovery strategies of interest to municipalities. Incentives to...

