

Brookline from the Perspective of Its Older Residents:
An Age Comparison of Responses to the National Citizen Survey

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Background. In 2018, Brookline subscribed to the National Citizen Survey, a service offered by the National Research Center (NRC), an organization that specializes in offering information to local governments. NRC has developed a survey designed to be administered to the adult population of municipalities to measure public perception of the community and the performance of municipal government. The National Citizen Survey is very broad in its scope. The 2018 questionnaire included 175 items. NRC seeks to reach a representative sample of adults in each participating municipality with sample sizes that are large enough to produce stable estimates of perceptions for the municipality as whole. Most respondents completed a self-administered paper questionnaire that was mailed to them. Respondents also have the option of completing an internet version of the questionnaire.

Participating municipalities can compare how respondents in their community compare with respondents in other communities throughout the country. NRC provided Brookline with a report on the findings of the survey. The report is available on the web:

<https://www.brooklinema.gov/DocumentCenter/View/17920/The-NCS-Community-Livability-Report-Brookline-2018>

The NRC report compared responses of Brookline residents with aggregate national responses. The NRC report did not include any analysis of variation in perceptions among various groups in Brookline.

This report is a secondary analysis of the 2018 Brookline data. This report compares responses of those 65 and over with responses of those under 65. An age comparison is readily performed because older residents were over-represented among the respondents; 36% of respondents were 65 and over. (In 2010, 16% of Brookline adults were over 65.) In fact, the survey is largely a comparison of perceptions of middle aged and older adults since 88% of respondents were age 35 and older. This report was made possible by the fact that NRC provided Brookline with a copy of the raw data set in an electronic format and a data dictionary.

This report is largely a series of charts that provide an item by item comparison of older and younger respondents. The charts follow the sequence of questions in the questionnaire. In large part, the first portion of the questionnaire is concerned with perceptions of the Town as a whole. Another section is concerned with public perceptions of the performance of Town government. Many of the final questions are concerned with behavior and personal characteristics of respondents.

Shown here is a simple comparison of those over 65 with those under 65. The comparison is of unweighted data.

The charts are organized so that readers can readily determine whether older respondents differ from younger respondents. In every case, a criterion is shown for a comparison. Then percentages of younger and older responses are shown for that criterion.

Finally, the text that accompanies the charts reports on whether the differences are statistically significant according to a chi-squared test. The chi-squared test is a widely used statistic for analyzing non-parametric bivariate relationships. The test simply determines whether a relationship between two variables is likely; it does not provide information on the direction of a relationship. The test criterion used was 5 percent; in other words, we concluded that there was a relationship when the probability of a false positive was less than 5 percent.

For the analysis presented here, no summary measures were created. Further, no multivariate analysis is reported.

The report includes summary statements highlighting the findings in each chart.

Overall, the report shows that older respondents are very similar to younger respondents in their overall perceptions about Brookline. In their assessments of services of Town government, more differences emerge. In describing themselves and their own behavior, younger and older respondents are frequently different.

Caution in generalizing the findings of the survey is advisable. As indicated above, most respondents were age 35 and over. Brookline has a large population of adults in their 20s and early 30s that was under-represented in the survey. An appendix provides additional information about potential bias in the survey results. In the case of some variables, it is possible to compare respondent characteristics to U.S. Census data. Whites, homeowners, and those living in single family homes were more likely than non-whites, renters, and residents of multi-family buildings to participate in the survey. Participation in the survey was voluntary; a relatively high level of motivation was necessary for respondents to be willing to complete a survey with 175 items. Residents who are above average in their engagement in the Town are likely to be over-represented in the survey. It is possible that the survey does a good job of capturing an assessment of the views of the more engaged portion of the middle aged and older population.

Findings

Respondent Characteristics.

Younger and older respondents differed substantially on many basic characteristics. Most respondents were women. Of the younger respondents, slightly over half were women. Among the older respondents, more than two-thirds were women. More than 90 percent of respondents were white. Among those over 65, 99 percent were white. Less than ten percent of respondents identified themselves as Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino. Among those over 65, only 2 percent classified themselves as Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino. Nearly half of the household of younger respondents include one or more children 17 or under. Only 14 percent of older households include a child. Older respondents were much more likely than younger respondents to have lived in Brookline for more than 20 years. Seventy percent of older respondents had lived in Brookline for more than 20 years. Less than a quarter of younger respondents had lived in Brookline that long.

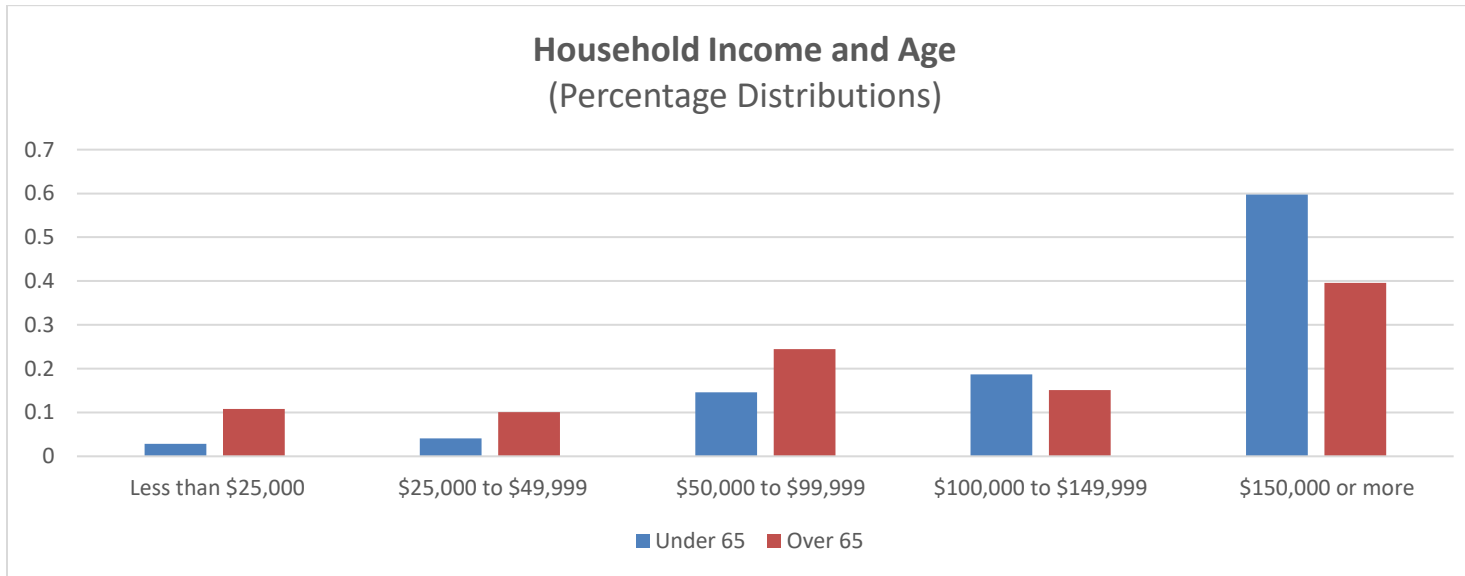
Younger respondents were much more likely to be working full time. Among younger respondents, three-quarters were working full time. In contrast, less than 20 percent of older respondents were working full time. Incomes of younger respondents were higher than those of older respondents. Among younger respondents, 60 percent live in households with incomes over \$150,000 per year. Among older respondents, only 40 percent live in households with an income above \$150,000. More information about the income distributions of younger and older respondents is shown in chart 1 below. Incomes below \$50,000 were much more common among older than younger respondents. Older respondents also were less likely than younger respondents to have high housing expenses. More than half of younger respondents had housing costs above \$2,500 per year. In contrast, a third of older respondents had housing costs above \$2,500 per month.

Younger respondents were more likely to report that they were in excellent or good health. Older respondents more often reported that someone in their household has a disability. Age was not associated with living in a single-family home. However, older respondents were more likely than younger respondents to be homeowners.

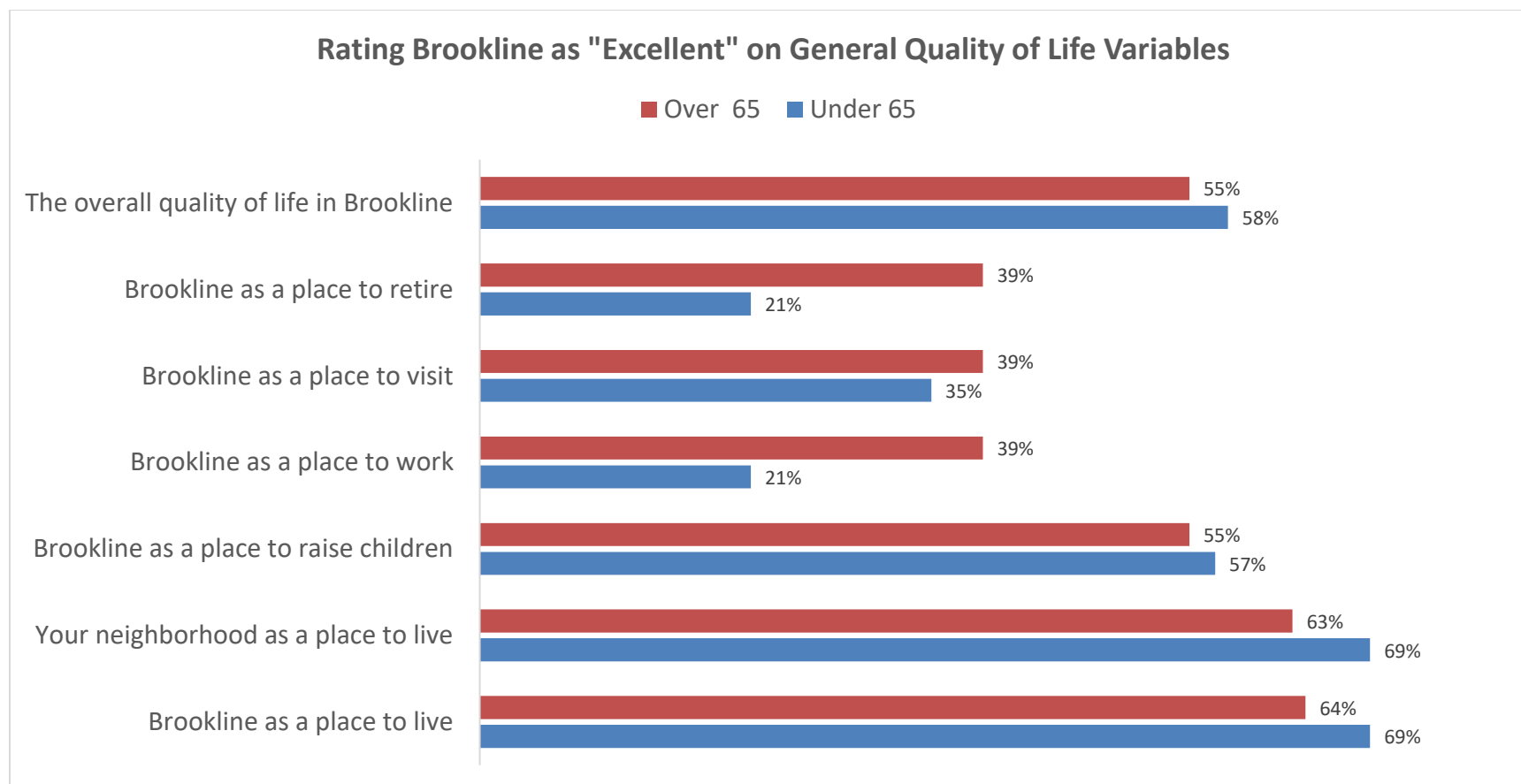
Younger respondents are also different in their use of telephones. More than three of four younger respondents **were** using a cell phone as a primary telephone. Among older respondents, less than 40 percent were using a cell phone as a primary telephone.

Respondent Characteristics

	Under 65	Over 65	Statistically Significant
Female	55%	69%	yes
White	94%	99%	yes
Spanish, Hispanic or Latino	6%	2%	no
Children 17 or under live in household	46%	14%	yes
Lived in Brookline for more than 20 years	24%	70%	yes
Working full time	75%	19%	yes
Annual household income above \$150,000	60%	40%	yes
Monthly housing cost above \$2,500	56%	32%	yes
Excellent or good health	83%	65%	yes
Lives in single-family home	31%	29%	no
Homeowner	63%	81%	yes
Cell phone is primary telephone	77%	38%	yes

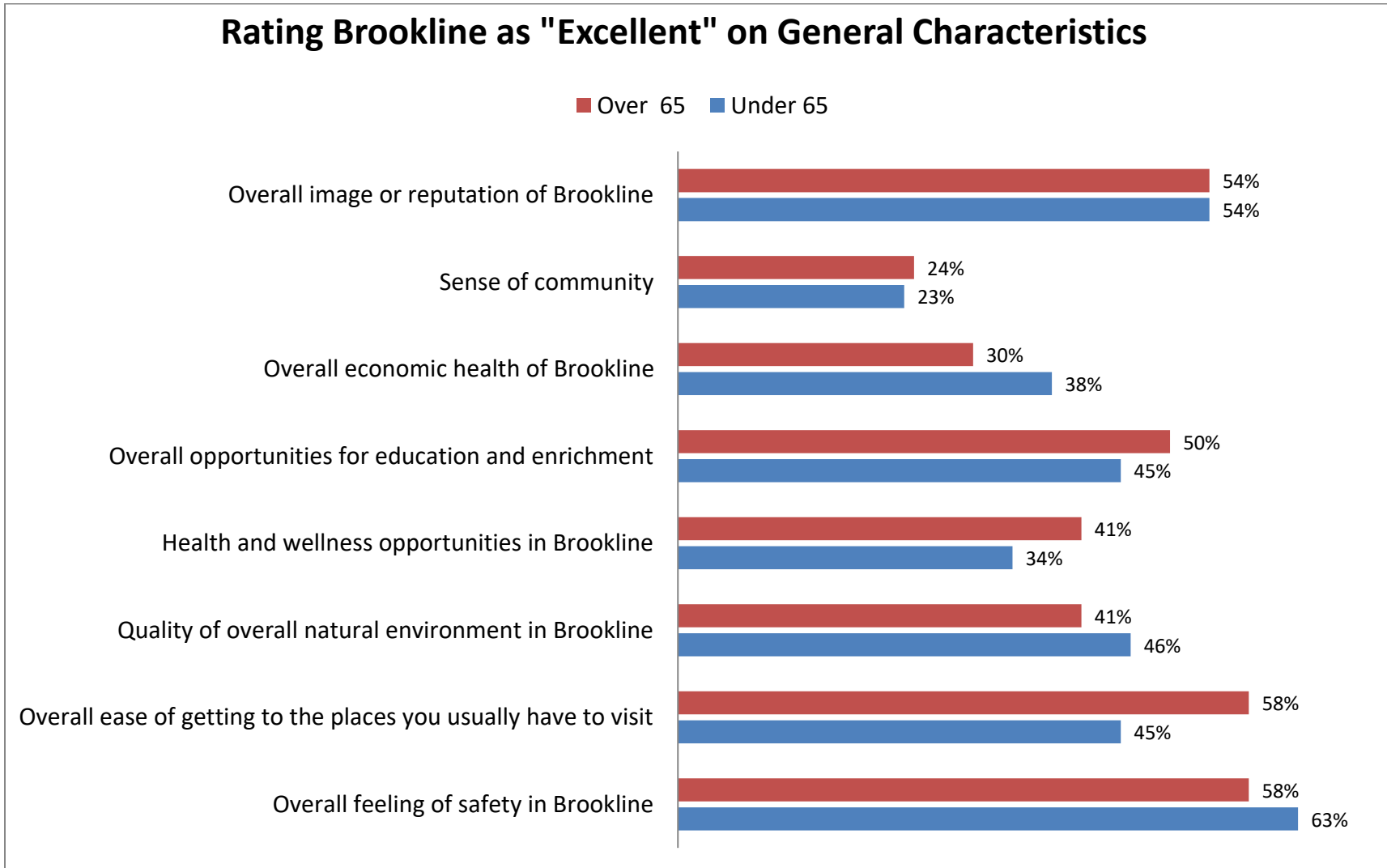


General Quality of Life in Brookline

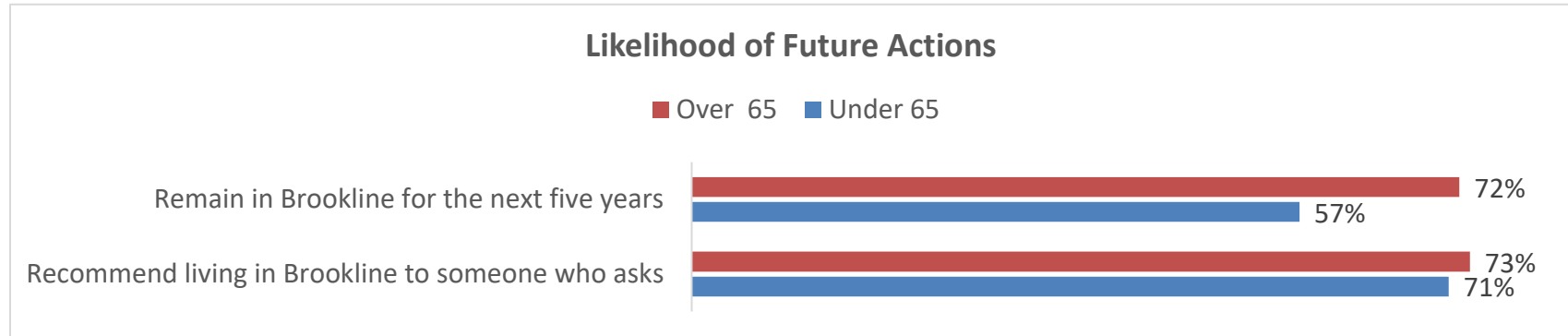


Most respondents of all ages rated Brookline as “excellent” on four quality of life variables shown in the chart below. On those variables age was not associated with ratings. Of interest from an age-comparison perspective, older respondents were more likely than younger respondents to rate Brookline as an “excellent” place to retire. A more refined analysis revealed that the tendency to report Brookline as a good place to retire is particularly strong among those over age 75 and among those who were fully retired. Of those who were fully retired, over 70% rated Brookline as an excellent or good place to live. More than a third of those who are fully

employed responded that they do not know whether Brookline is a good place to retire. Older respondents are also more enthusiastic than younger respondents out Brookline as a good place to work.

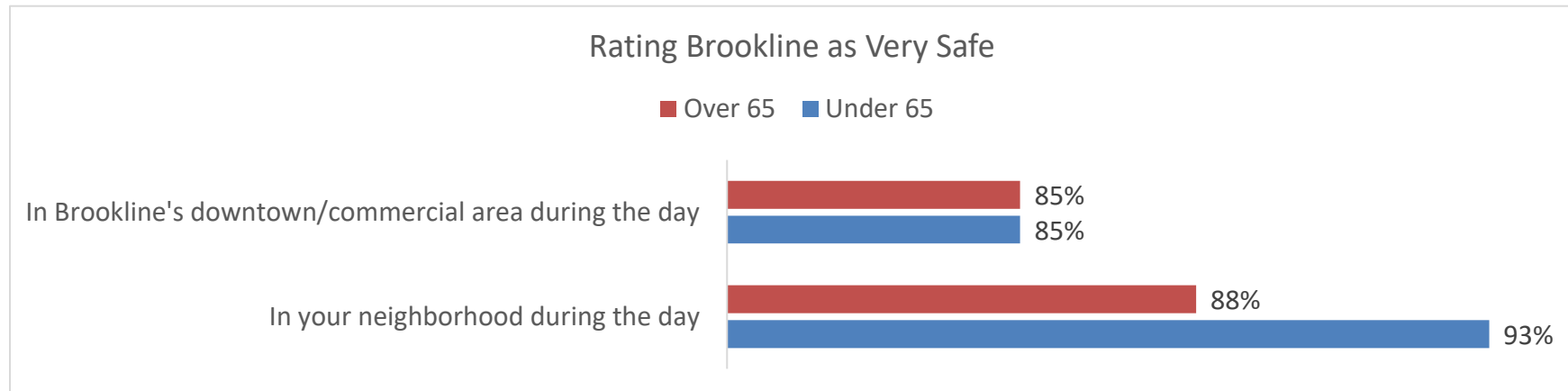


In this series of general questions about perceptions of Brookline, ratings were generally highly positive. For the most part, ratings of older and younger respondents were similar. However, older respondents were more likely than younger respondents to rate Brookline as “excellent” for its health and wellness opportunities.



Older respondents are more likely to predict that they will remain in Brookline for the next five years. The difference is statistically significant. Both older and younger respondents are very likely to recommend Brookline to others as a place to live.

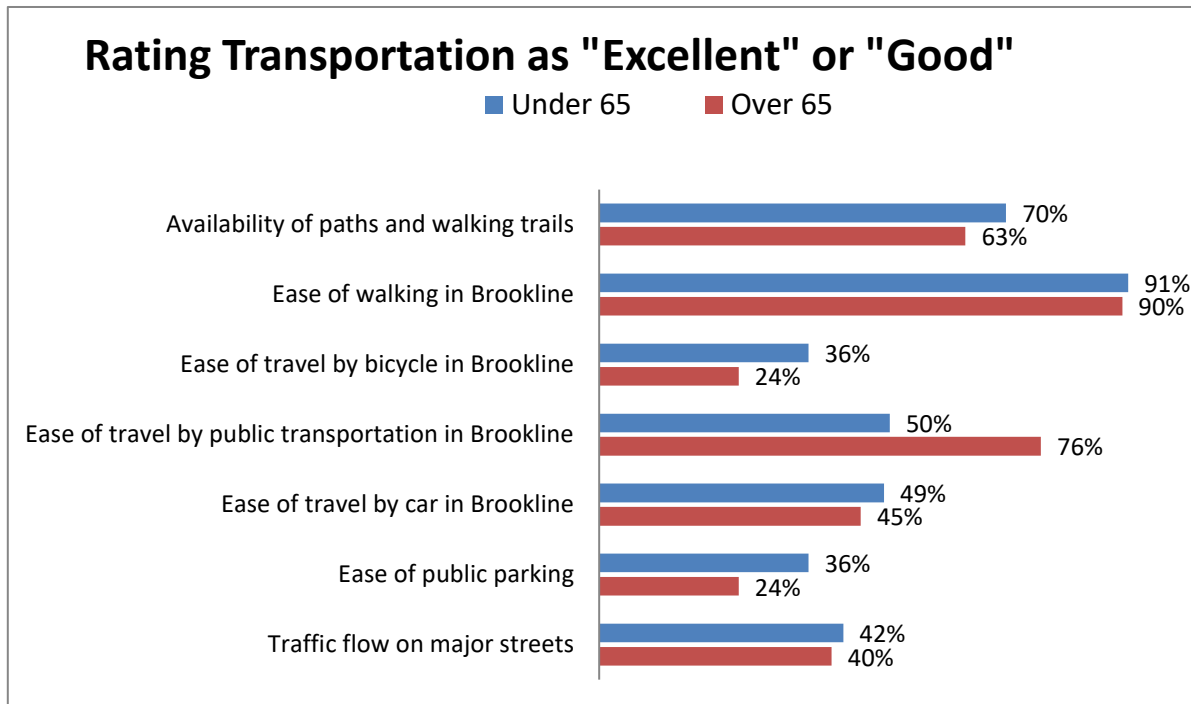
Safety ratings



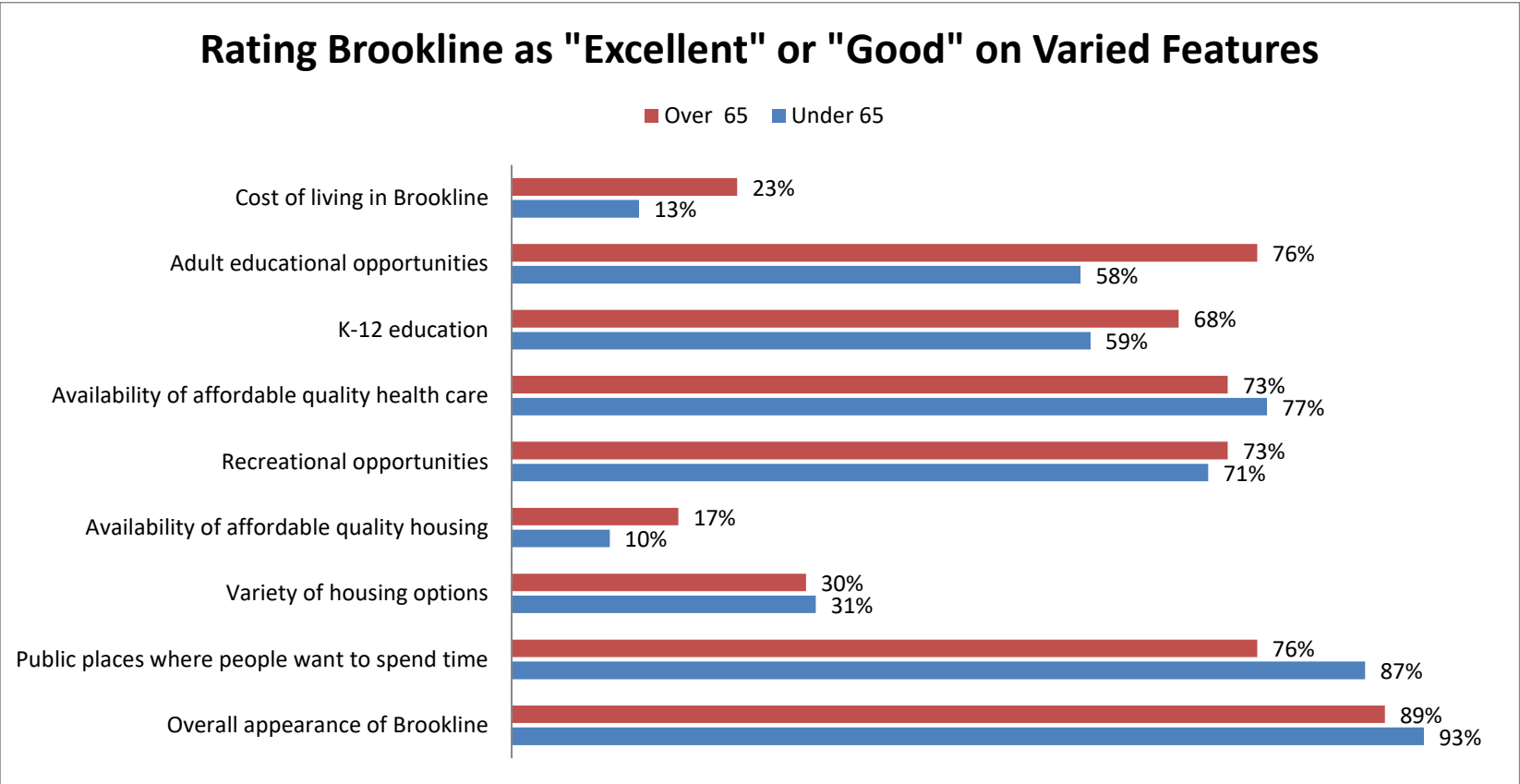
Respondents of all ages rate Brookline as “very safe” during the day both in their neighborhoods and in commercial areas. (No questions were asked about perceived safety at night.)

Transportation

Respondents rated Brookline highly for its walkability. Over 90% respondents of all ages rate “ease of walking” as excellent or good. Respondents were also enthusiastic about Brookline’s “paths and walking trails.” Older respondents differed from younger respondents on three transportation variables. Older respondents give more favorable ratings to ease of travel by public transportation. A separate analysis revealed that those who were employed full time were more likely than retirees to rate public transportation as “fair” or “poor.” Younger respondents rated ease of public parking and ease of travel by bicycle more favorably than did older respondents.

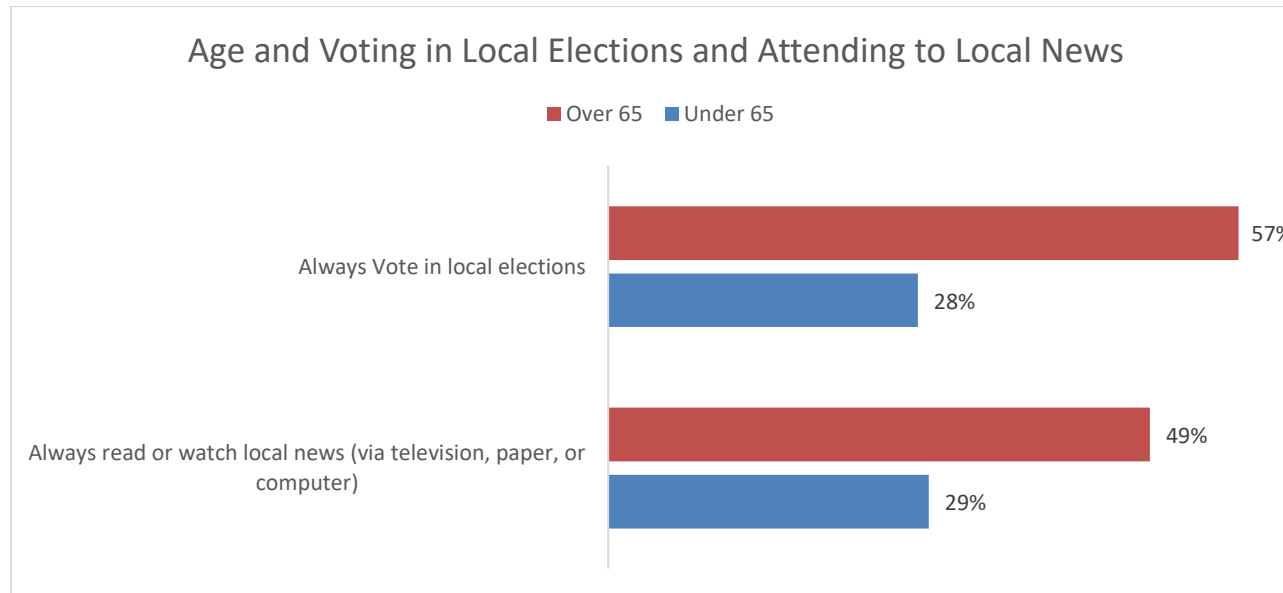


Most respondents of all ages gave Brookline “excellent” or “good” ratings on overall appearance of the Town, public spaces where people want to spend time, affordable quality health care, and recreational opportunities. However, both older and younger respondents were sensitive to the high cost of living in Brookline, the limited availability of affordable housing, and the limited variety of housing options. Older respondents more often rated adult education opportunities as “excellent” or “good.”



Civic Engagement

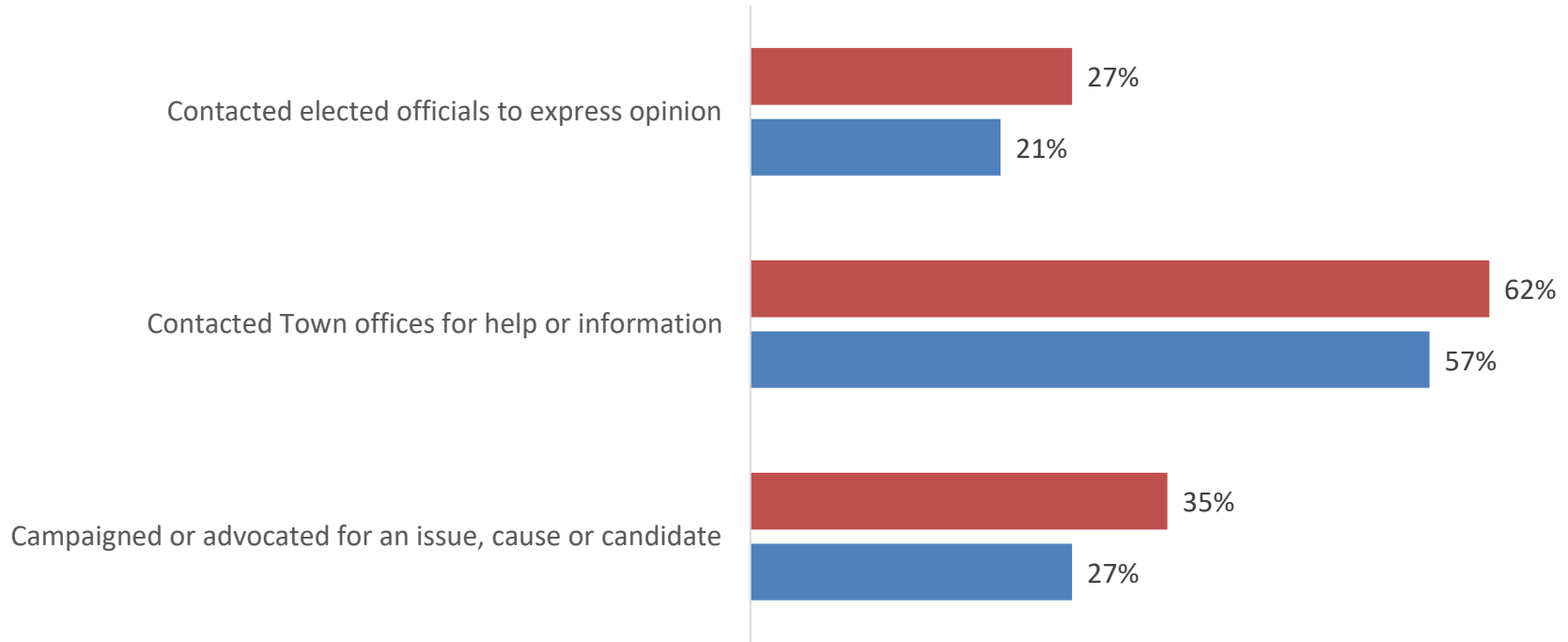
Scattered through the survey were questions reflective of civic engagement. Among the most important of these is voting in local elections. Older respondents were much more likely than younger respondents to report that they “always” vote in local elections. Older respondents were also much more likely to attend to local news whether by television, a newspaper, or on a computer.



Respondents were asked to report on three other activities in the past year that are reflective of civic engagement. This set of activities consists of contacting an elected official to express an opinion, contacting town offices to get help or information, and campaigning for an issue, cause, or candidate. There were no significant differences with respect to age. Older respondents, however, tended to show greater civic engagement on all three variables.

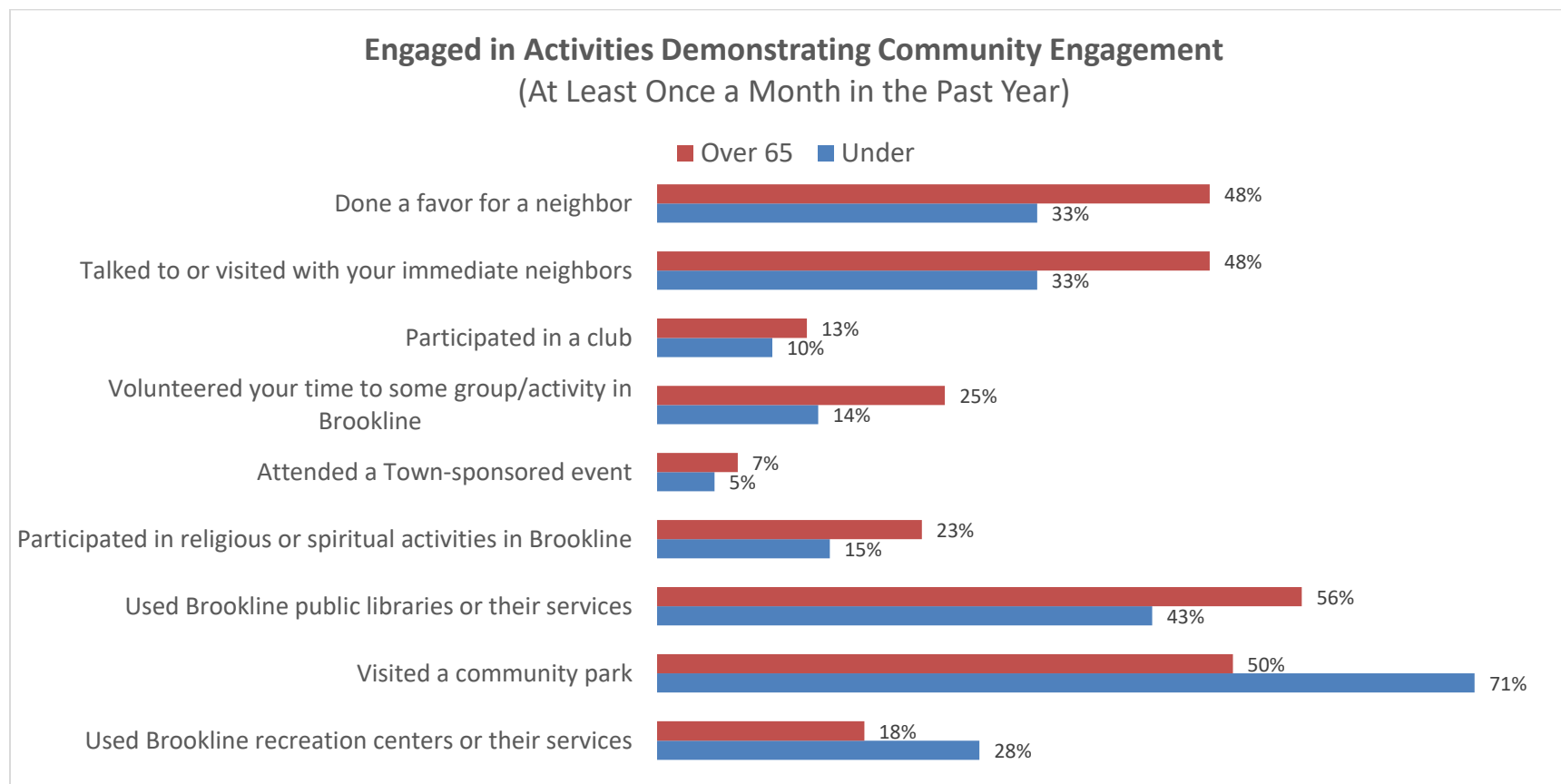
Activities in Past 12 Months Indicating Civic Engagement

■ Over 65 ■ Under 65

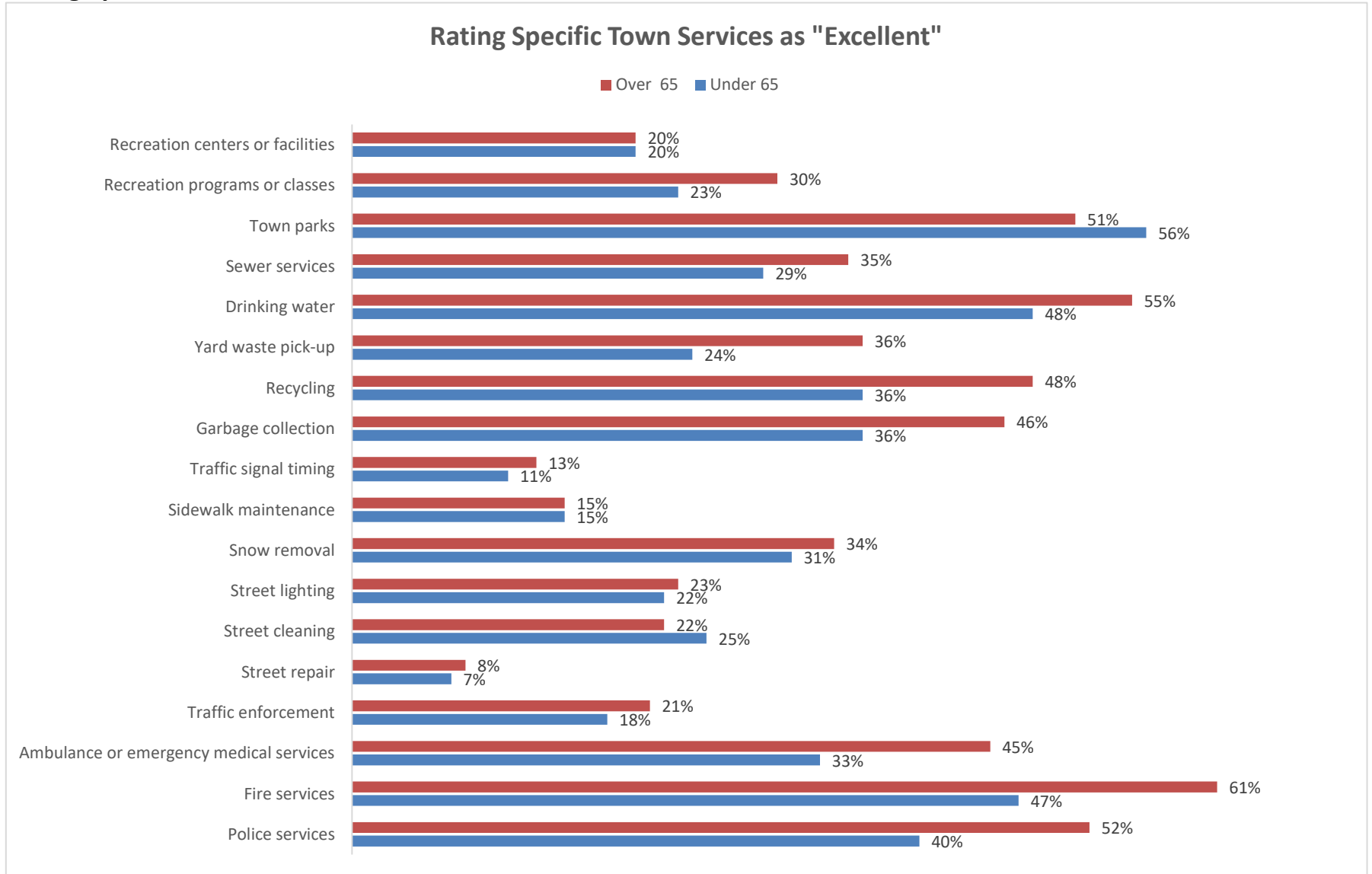


Other Activities Demonstrating Community Engagement

Respondents were also asked whether they used Brookline public libraries, visited community parks, and used recreation centers or services. In each case there were statistically significant age differences in use at least once a month. Older people were more likely to use public libraries. Younger people, however, were more likely to visit community parks and use Town recreation centers.



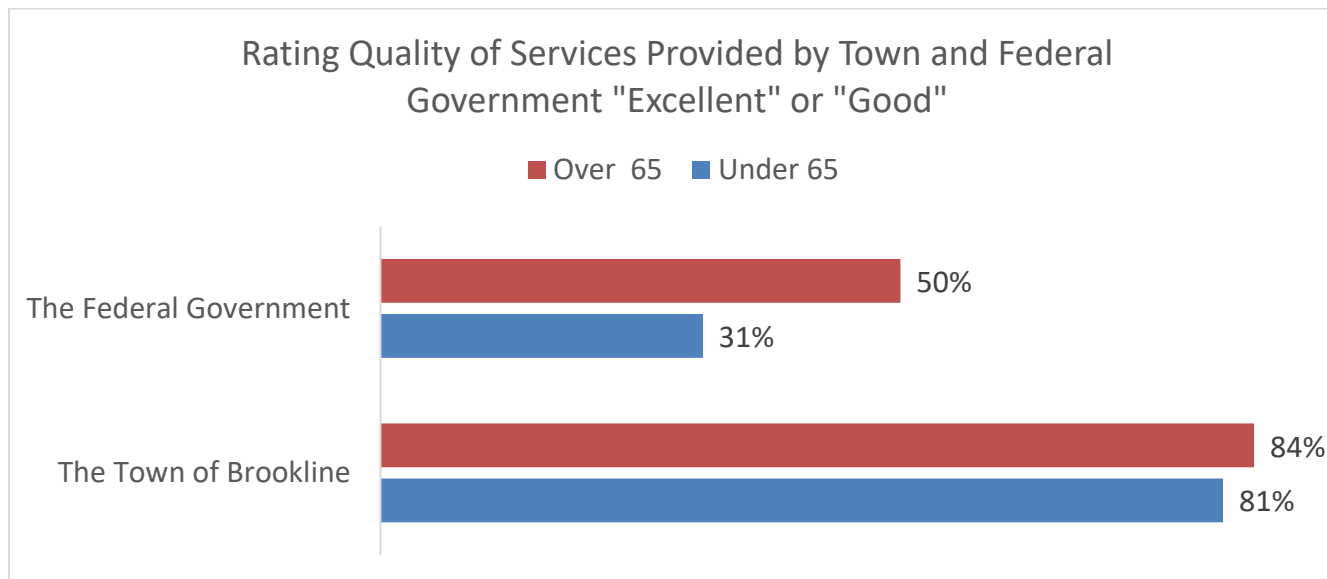
Rating Specific Town Services



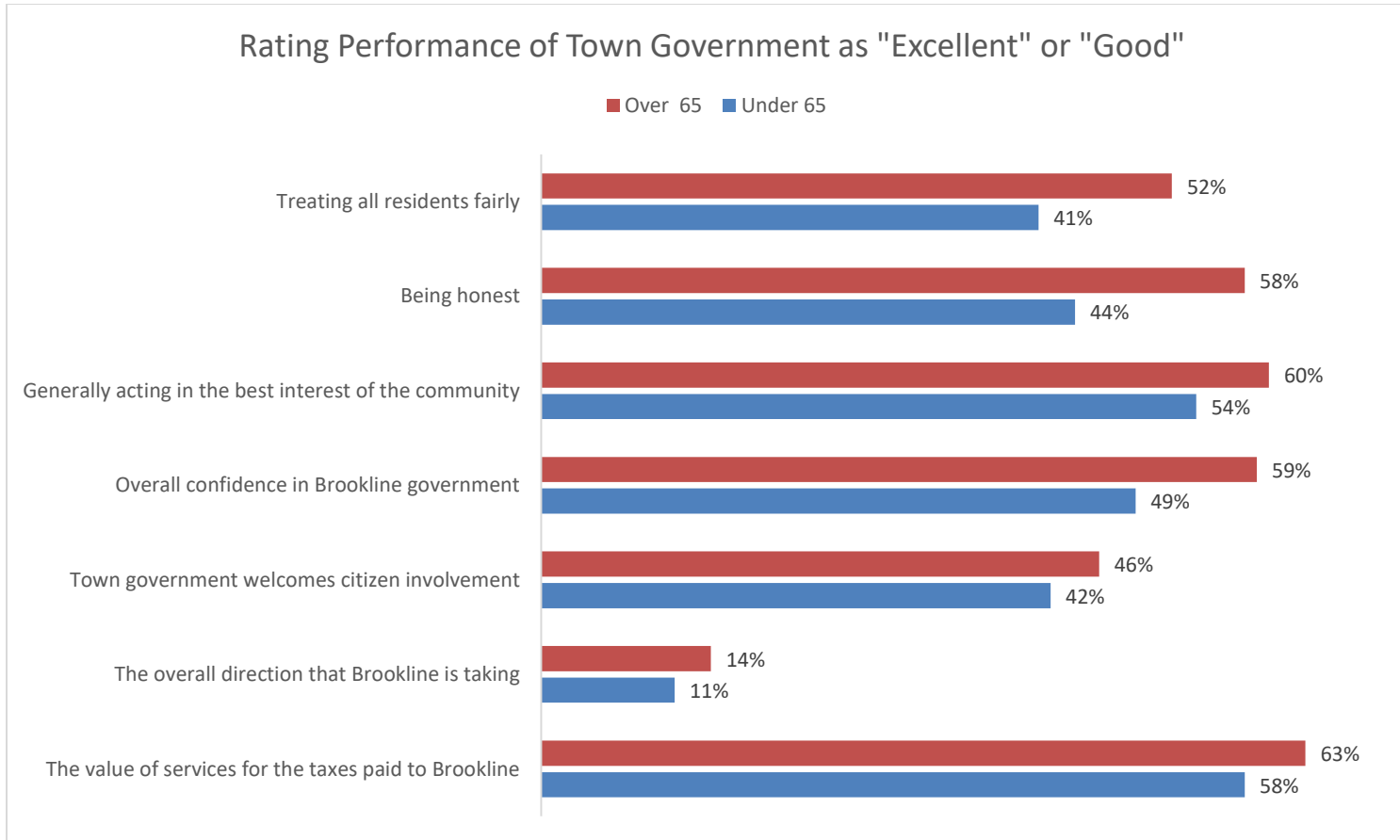
Older respondents were more likely to provide “excellent” ratings of several Town services. For the following five services, the age differences in rating were statistically significant: fire, ambulance, garbage collection, recycling, and yard waste pickup. Younger respondents were more likely to rate the parks as excellent, but the difference was not statistically significant.

Comparison of Town services with federal government

Respondents of all ages rate Town services much more highly than they do services of the federal government. Older and younger respondents were similar in their ratings of Town services. However, older respondents were more likely than younger respondents to rate services of the Federal government as either “excellent” or “good.”

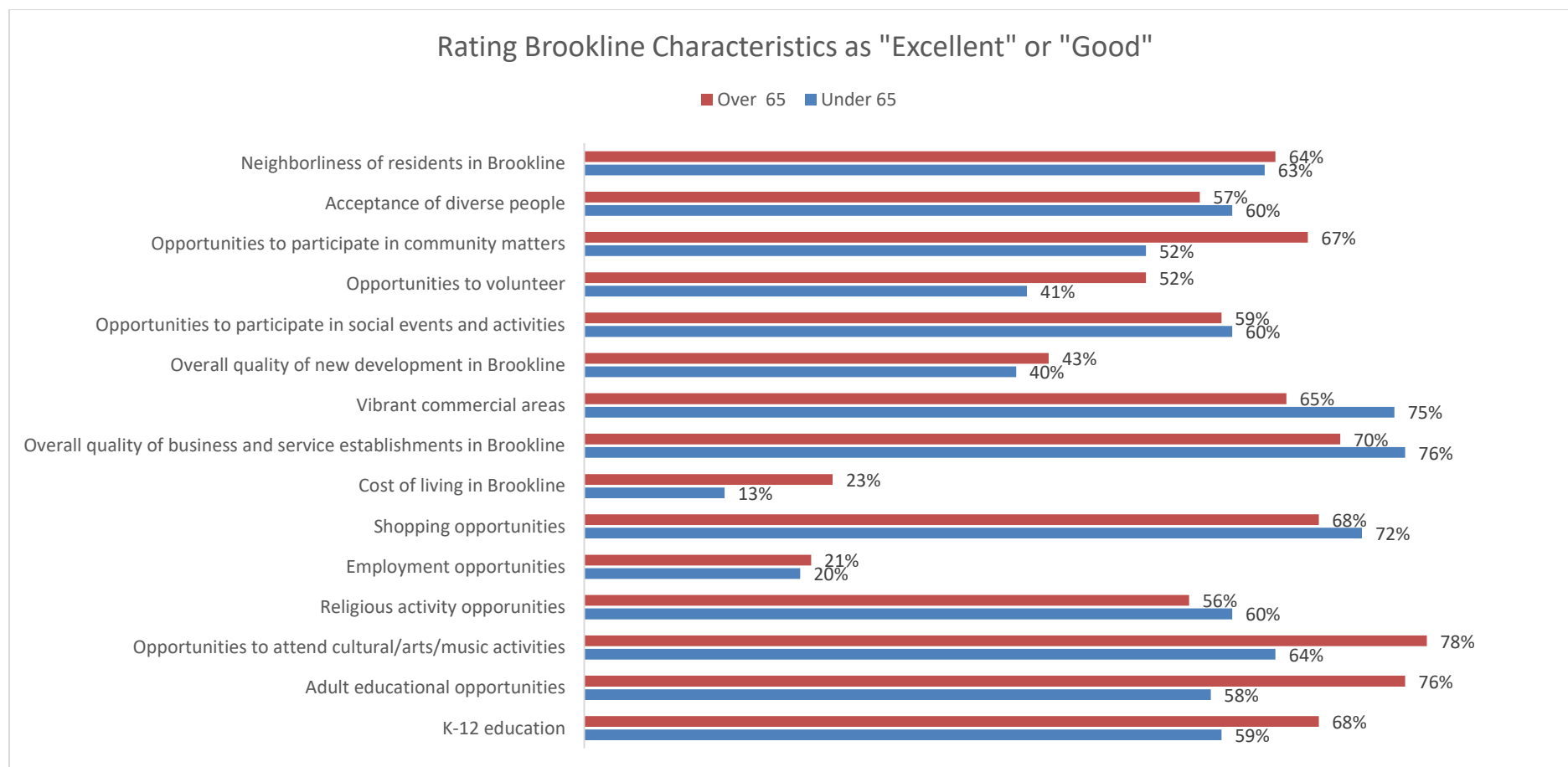


Ratings of Town Government



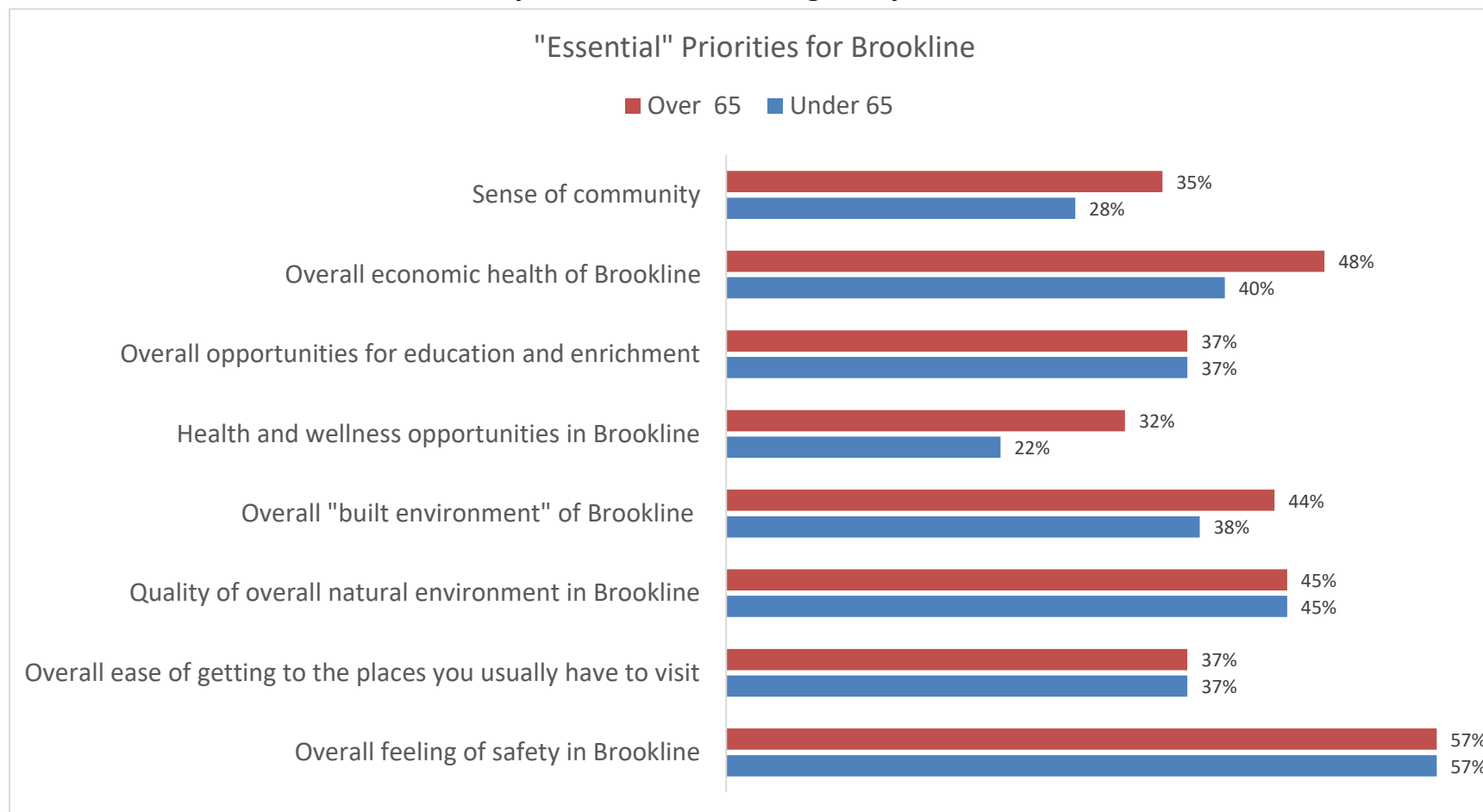
Older respondents tended to rate the performance of Town government more highly than younger respondents. However, in only one case (being honest) was the difference statistically significant. On one dimension, older respondents were less likely to give the Town government an “excellent” or “good” rating. That dimension is “The overall direction that Brookline is taking.” In this case, the difference was not statistically significant.

Economic conditions, participation, and inclusiveness ratings



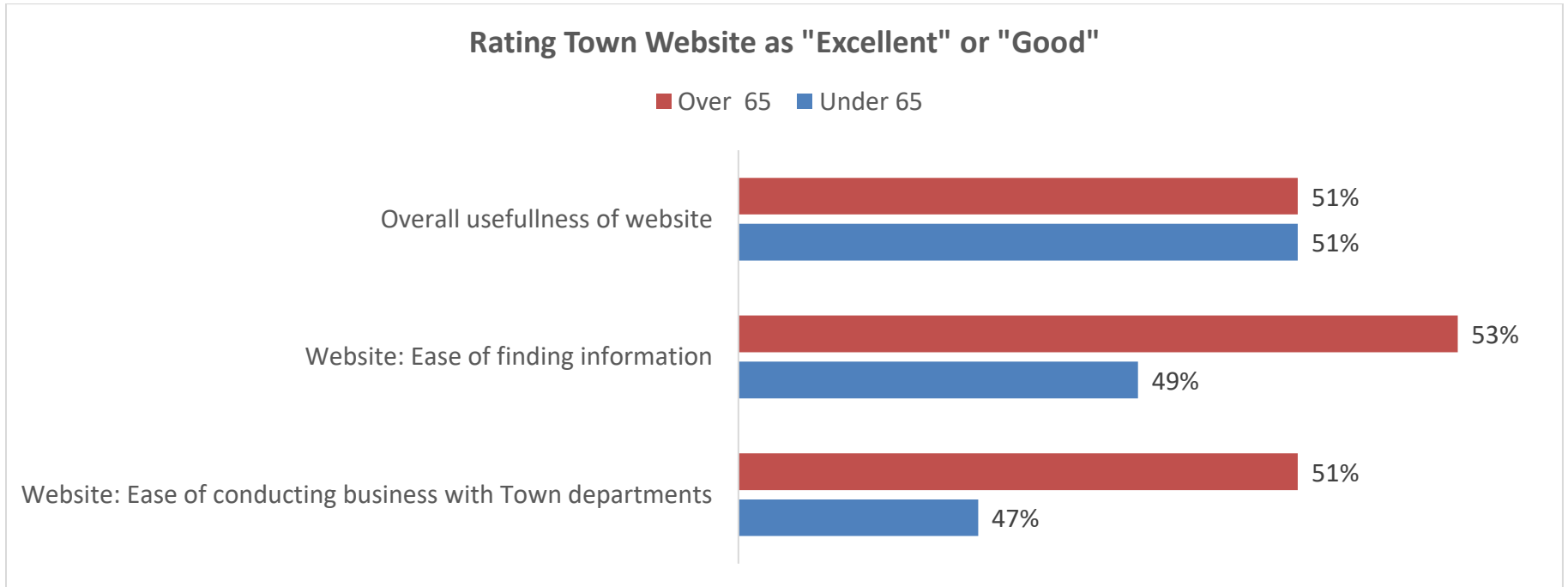
Older respondents were like younger respondents in their ratings of economic conditions, participation, and inclusivity. Respondents of all ages are sensitive to the high cost of living in Brookline and give low ratings to employment opportunities in Brookline. However, older respondents tend to be less sensitive than younger respondents to the high cost of living in Brookline. In three cases, the differences were statistically different: sensitivity to high cost of living, opportunities for cultural activities and adult education.

Priorities for the Brookline Community in each of the coming two years



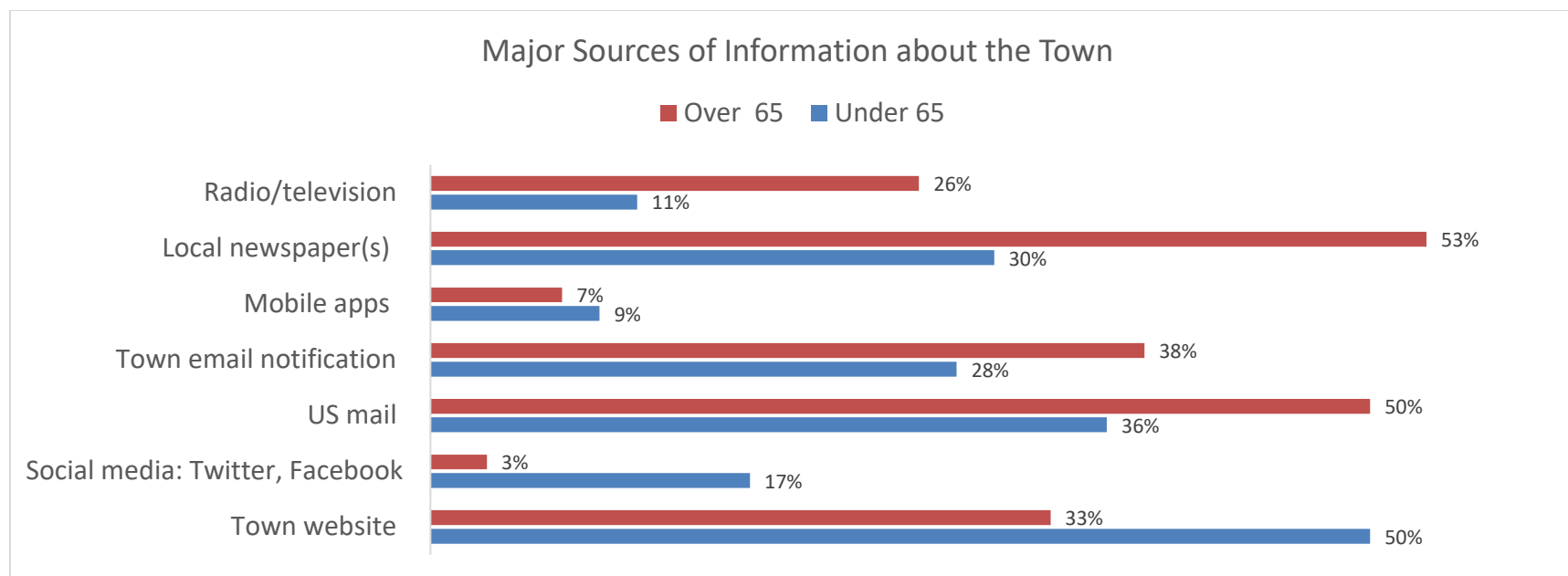
Respondents of all ages most often judged “overall feeling of safety” to be an essential priority for the Town. For the most part, older and younger respondents were similar in their priorities for the Town in the next two years. Older respondents differed from younger respondents, however, in giving a higher priority to “Health and wellness” opportunities. The difference was statistically significant. Health and wellness opportunities were least likely to be rated as “essential” priorities among respondents of all ages.

Quality of the Town website



Respondents of all ages were similar in their rating of the Town website. If anything, older respondents were more likely to rate characteristics of the website as “excellent” or “good.” More than 20% of respondents of all ages responded “Don’t know” to each of the questions about the website.

Importance of sources for obtaining information about Town events, projects or issues



Older respondents differ from younger respondents in the sources on which they rely for information about Town affairs. For older respondents, U.S. mail, local newspapers, and radio/television are more often rated as “major” sources of information. Among younger respondents, the Town website and social media were more likely to be rated as major sources of information.

Summary and discussion.

The study provides insights about the ways in which a large group of middle aged and older residents of Brookline are involved with community life. The survey covers a wide range of characteristics of respondents, their activities, and their opinions about the Town. Those who responded to the survey were residents sufficiently motivated to complete a very long questionnaire without any incentives for doing so. Most respondents are women. Reflecting the generally greater longevity of women, women are particularly strongly represented among the older respondents. Older people are included in the sample to a greater extent than would have

been expected based on the overall age distribution within the population. The sample reflects the disparities in income within Brookline. Most younger respondents reported annual household incomes above \$150,000. A substantial minority of older respondents also had household incomes above \$150,000. At the same time, a substantial proportion of older respondents had household incomes either under \$25,000 or between \$25,000 and \$50,000. Reflecting the high cost of housing in the Boston area, a substantial proportion of both older and younger respondents reported high housing costs. Older respondents were more likely to be homeowners. Younger respondents were more likely than older respondents to report high housing costs. Older respondents were more likely to have lived in Brookline for a long time and were more likely to report that they expected to continue living in Brookline. The respondents were also overwhelming white, particularly within the older group.

Respondents are extensively engaged in Town affairs, and older respondents tended to be more engaged than younger respondents. Older respondents were more likely to interact with neighbors and to assist neighbors. The older respondents were also more likely to volunteer for local causes. Reports of voting in Town elections is particularly interesting. Annual Town elections often attract about 15% of registered voters. Much higher rates of voting in Town elections was reported by survey participants with more than half of older respondents reporting that they always vote in Town elections. Older respondents also reported that they pay regular attention to local news. Older respondents were particularly likely to contact local officials and attend meetings on local issues. Older respondents tend to take advantage of adult education and cultural activities available in the Town to a greater extent than younger people. In contrast, younger respondents were more likely to make use of parks and recreation programs.

Age makes a difference in communication patterns. Younger respondents were much more likely than older respondents to report that a cell phone was their main telephone. Older respondents were more likely to rely on newspapers, U.S. mail, e-mail messages, and radio/television for information. In contrast, younger respondents were more likely to get their information from the Town website or social media.

Both older and younger respondents have high regard for the Town. Respondents of all ages tend to be similar in their opinions about the Town. Among the serious reservations that respondents have about the Town are the high cost of living in the Town with an emphasis on the high cost of housing. Overall, respondents of all ages have high regard for Town government. However, respondents vary in their regard for Town services. The Fire Department, Library, and Parks are particularly held in high regard. Road repair, traffic signal timing, sidewalk maintenance, and traffic enforcement receive much lower ratings.

BrooklineCAN emphasized Brookline as a good place for older people to live in retirement. Older respondents were more likely than younger respondents to rate Brookline as a good place to retire. Retired respondents were particularly likely to rate Brookline as a good place to retire. The Town has reason to promote itself as a good residential choice for those who are retired since most older residents make only modest demands for Town services.

The finding that older respondents were less frequent users of parks and less frequent participants in recreation programs invites questions since older respondents were much more likely than younger respondents to be retired. Those who are retired might be expected to have more time available than those who are employed full time to visit parks and participate in educational programs. Because Brookline has many neighborhood parks, most residents live close to a park of some kind. Perhaps both parks and Town recreation programs might do more to make themselves attractive to older residents.

Altogether, the findings provide insights about the Town from the perspective of engaged middle aged and older residents. Older people are strongly represented among these engaged citizens. The study shows how older people participate in distinctive ways and have some distinctive opinions on Town issues.

Appendix

Representativeness of the Brookline National Citizen Survey

Comparison of Adult Age Distribution in 2010 American Community Survey and Brookline National Citizen Survey, 2018

Age categories	Percent distribution 2010 Census	Percent distribution NCS sample
20-24	14%	2%
25-34	26%	10%
35-44	16%	16%
45-54	14%	17%
55-64	14%	19%
65-74	8%	21%
75+	8%	15%
Total	100%	100%

The Brookline National Citizen Survey under-represents adults under 35 years of age; the survey over-represents those ages 55 and older. Women are slightly overrepresented in the Brookline National Citizen Survey sample. In 2010, 55% of residents were women. In the NCS sample, 60% of respondents were women.

The NCS sample is less diverse than the population. In 2010, 77% of residents were white. In the NCS sample, 96% were white. However, Hispanics were proportionately represented in the sample. In 2010, 5% of residents were Hispanic; in the NCS sample, 5% were Hispanic.

In Brookline, half of housing units are rental. In the NCS sample, 69% of the respondents live in owner-occupied housing units.

In Brookline, 23% of housing units are single family. In the NCS sample, 30% of respondents live in single-family homes.