



Lexey Swall for The Pew Charitable Trusts

# How Black Philadelphians View Their City

Key findings from a decade of polling results

## Overview

The Pew Charitable Trusts has conducted public opinion polls in Philadelphia since 2009, asking residents about their experiences and their views of life in the city. In the wake of the events of 2020, including the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing demands for racial justice, Pew decided to re-examine its citywide polling results with an emphasis on documenting and analyzing the attitudes of Black Philadelphians, who make up 40% of the city's population.

Over the years, Black Philadelphians have been generally but not overwhelmingly positive in their assessments of the city. Two-thirds have said they expect to still be living in Philadelphia five to 10 years from now, but in the most recent Pew Philadelphia Poll, taken in summer 2020, only 40% said they thought the city was headed in the right direction.

In last year's survey, Black Philadelphians' opinions on city issues varied substantially based on demographics such as age, income, and educational attainment. And Black Philadelphians' views differed from those of the city's White residents on some questions more than others. But race serves as a defining variable in a few poll areas—most notably, public safety. (Survey limitations precluded researchers from including results on Hispanics and Asian Americans. See "Survey Limitations" section on Page 5.)

Black Philadelphians have consistently rated public safety as their top concern about life in the city, saying it affects many of them directly. In 2020, the percentage who said they felt unsafe outside in their neighborhoods at night—59%—was the highest in the poll's 12-year history.

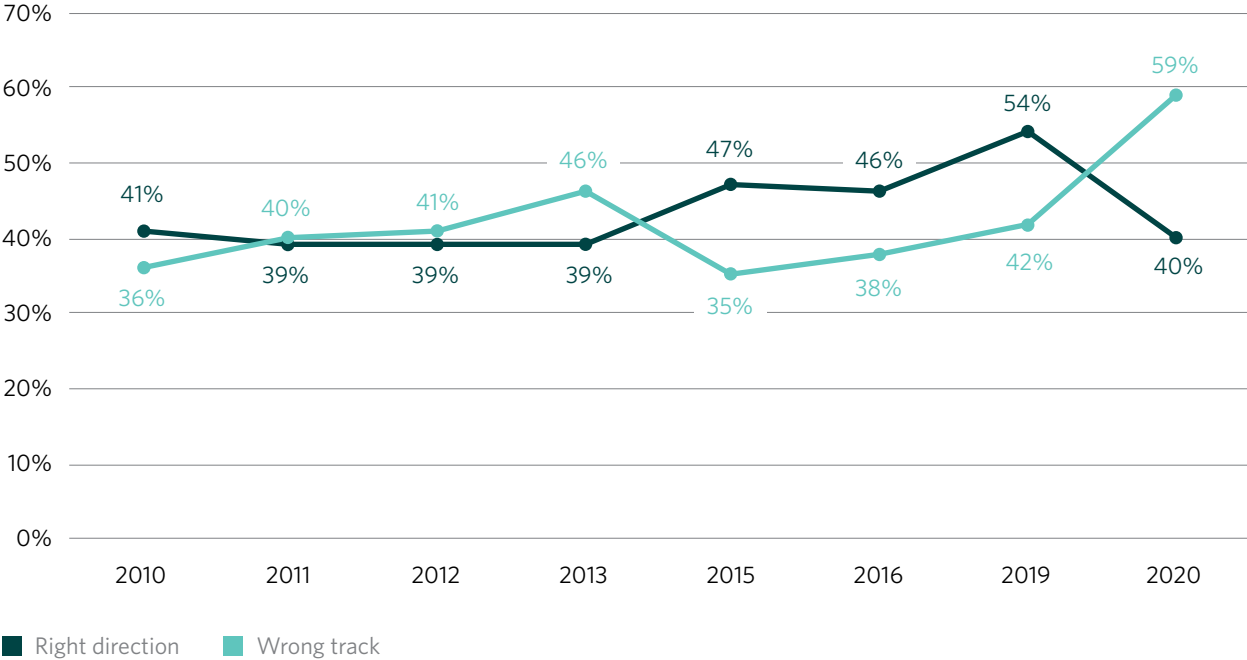
And increasingly, Black residents see race playing a major role in the city government's decisions; in the summer 2020 survey, 70% said that it does, up from 53% in 2015. In addition, only 40% said they trust police officers to treat Black people and White people equally, down from 47% in 2015.

# Black Philadelphians' views of life in the city in general

Pew has consistently asked Philadelphians over the years whether the city is headed in the right direction or on the wrong track.

As seen in Figure 1, Black residents were fairly evenly divided on the subject for much of the past decade, with the percentage choosing "right direction" rising through 2019. That changed dramatically in the survey conducted in July and August of 2020, with only 40% selecting the more positive option and 59% choosing the more negative response. This was a year in which Black Philadelphians were hit particularly hard by both COVID-19 and job losses sparked by the economic shutdown. And it was a year that brought widespread demonstrations, both nationally and locally, against police violence and for racial justice.

Figure 1  
**Share of Black Philadelphians Who Think the City Is Headed in the Right Direction or on the Wrong Track**  
2010-20



Note: Polls were not conducted in 2014, 2017, and 2018; therefore, data is not available for those years. Through 2016, polls were conducted by telephone. Starting in 2019, respondents answered questions online or filled out paper forms. The change resulted in more participants selecting either right direction or wrong track and fewer saying they did not know or had a mixed view. This explains why the combined 2020 results add up to 99% while the 2012 results, for instance, add up to just 80%.

Sources: The Pew Philadelphia Polls, 2010-2013, 2015, 2016, 2019, and 2020

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Among Black Philadelphians, those with incomes under \$30,000 (58%) were among the groups most likely to say in 2020 that the city was on the wrong track. Middle-income Black Philadelphians were more evenly split on the question.

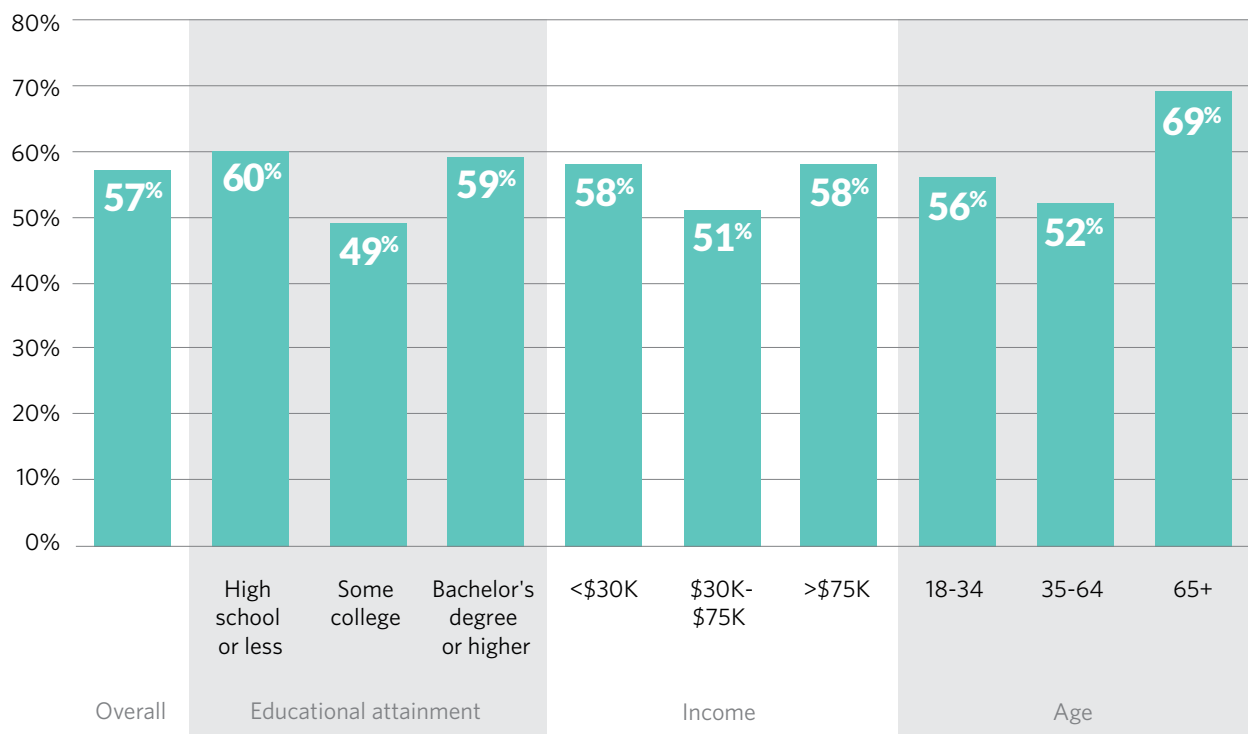
In the same survey, 56% of White Philadelphians said the city was headed in the right direction, creating a 16-point gap in the views between Black residents and White residents—the survey’s largest-ever difference on this question.

On rating Philadelphia as a place to live, a modest but consistent majority of Black residents gives the city good or excellent ratings: The figure was 59% in 2010 and 57% in 2020. Figure 2 shows the variations by demographic characteristics to be distinct but relatively slight. For instance, by age, the percentage rating the city good or excellent ranged from 52% among those ages 35-64 to 69% among those ages 65 and older.

Figure 2

## Share of Black Philadelphians Who Rate Philadelphia as a Good or Excellent Place to Live

By educational attainment, income, and age



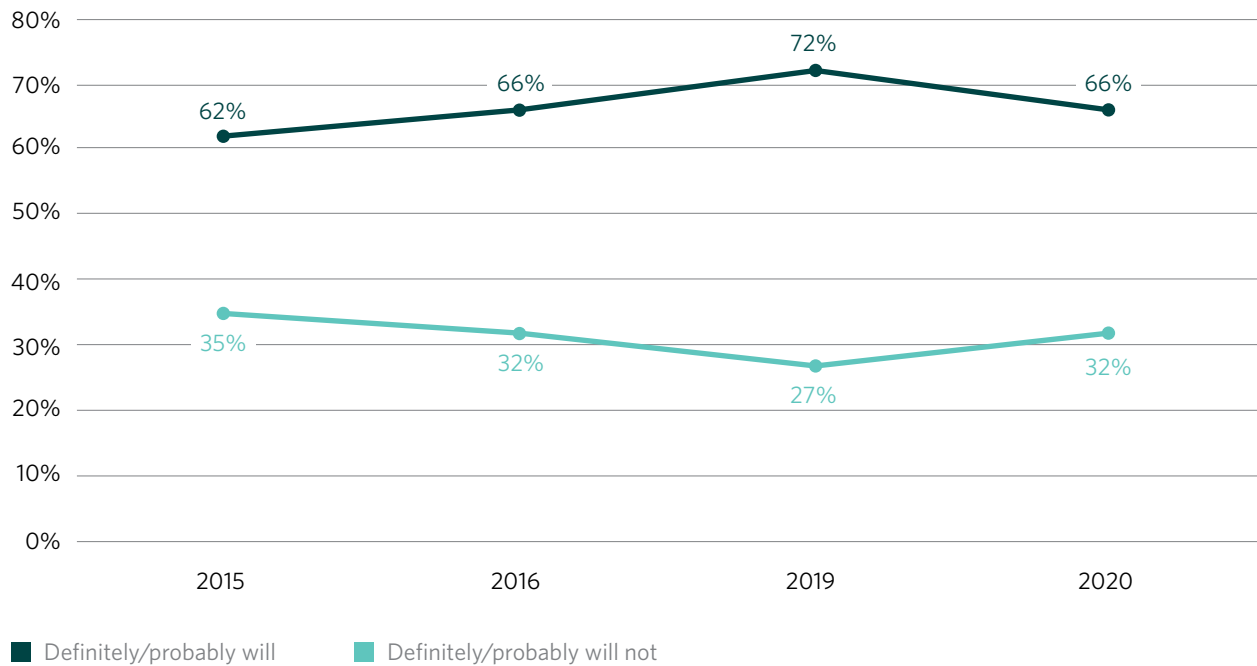
Source: The Pew Philadelphia Poll, 2020

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The Pew survey has also asked whether Philadelphians expected to still be living in the city over the next five to 10 years. Although there has been some fluctuation over the years, roughly two-thirds of Black Philadelphians have said they see themselves staying in the city. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3

### Share of Black Philadelphians Who Are Likely (or Unlikely) to Be Living in Philadelphia in the Next 5 to 10 Years 2015-20



Note: Polls were not conducted in 2017 or 2018; therefore, data is not available for those years.

Sources: The Pew Philadelphia Polls, 2015, 2016, 2019, and 2020

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The share of Black residents saying they expected to stay in the city varied widely based on several demographics, with higher percentages among those who are older, have less education, and have lower incomes. In the 2020 survey, 78% of those with a high school diploma or less schooling said they expected to remain in Philadelphia—but only 46% of those with at least a bachelor’s degree said so. Black residents with college degrees seemed less attached to the city than White Philadelphians with the same level of education: Sixty percent of White residents with college degrees said they expected to stay.

### Survey Limitations

Pew's surveys have some limitations, mostly regarding sample size. Within a survey, when a small number of people from a particular group are polled, the margins of error for those results can become very large, making the numbers unusable. Issues concerning sample size—particularly in the 2020 poll, which had 1,025 respondents overall—prevented the researchers from being able to report separate results for Hispanics or Asian Americans and from breaking down the numbers among Black residents by metrics such as neighborhood. Additionally, lack of data prevented the researchers from providing demographic breakdowns of Black Philadelphians for years prior to 2020.

## The role of race in city government

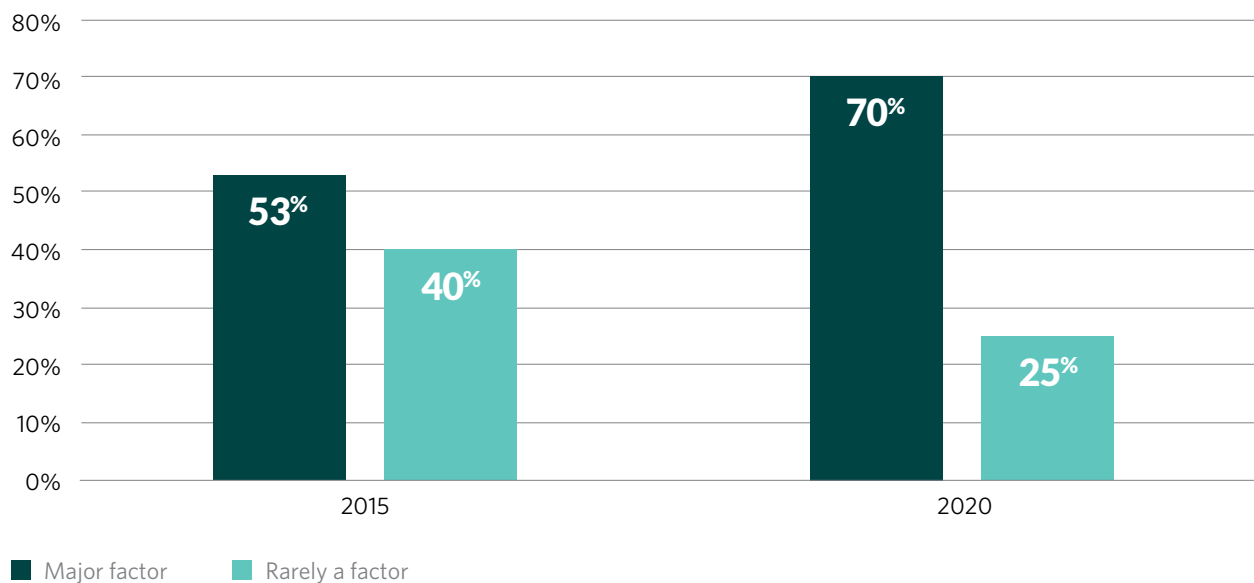
On two occasions, five years apart, the survey asked respondents whether they agreed with the statement that race is often a major factor in city government decisions.

In 2015, 53% of Black residents agreed with that assessment and 40% disagreed. Five years later, during a summer of demonstrations calling for racial and social justice, 70% agreed and 25% disagreed. (See Figure 4.) The percentage of White Philadelphians agreeing that race is often a major factor in city government decisions was slightly higher in both years, 62% in 2015 and 73% in 2020. (The poll results do not shed light on why Black and White residents came to these conclusions.)

Figure 4

### Black Philadelphians' Views on Whether Race Is Often a Major Factor in the City Government's Decisions and Policies

2015 and 2020



Sources: The Pew Philadelphia Polls, 2015 and 2020

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On this question, there was little variation in 2020 among Black respondents based on educational attainment, income, or age.

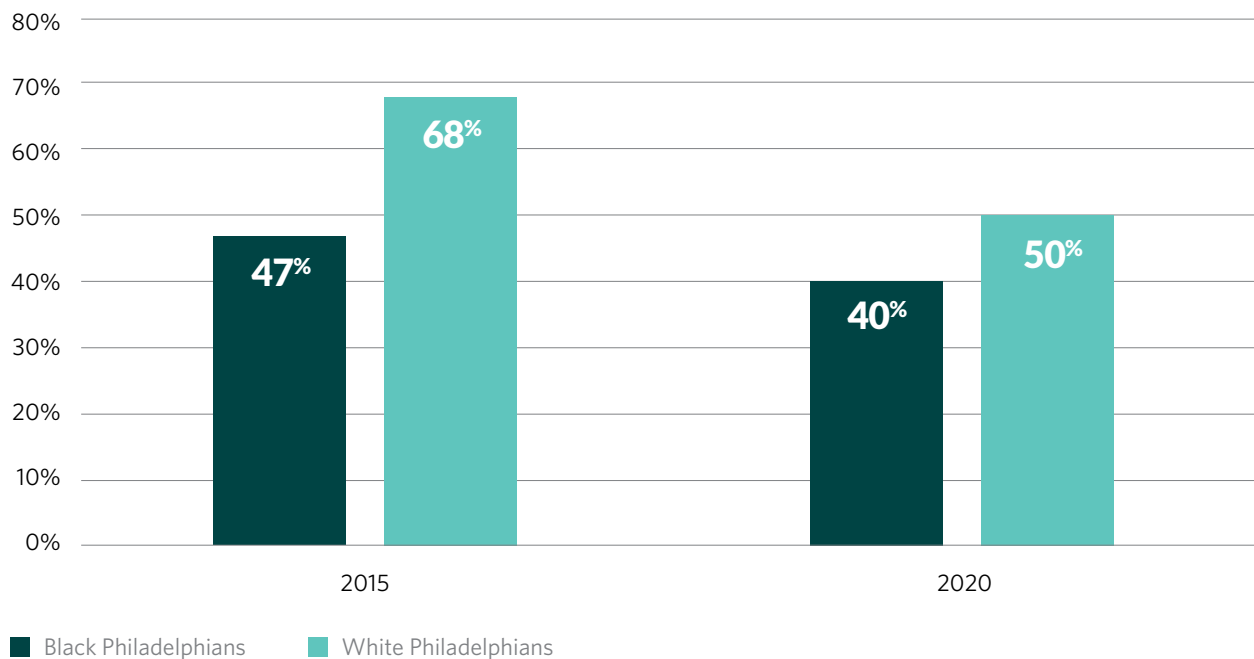
A second question related to race has been part of the Pew Philadelphia Poll since 2015, the first survey after a police officer shot and killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri: Do city residents feel confident that police officers treat Black people and White people equally?

In the 2015 poll, 47% of Black Philadelphians expressed such confidence; five years later, in a survey taken after George Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer, the share dropped to 40%. The gap on this question between Black Philadelphians and White Philadelphians fell from 21 percentage points in 2015, when 68% of White residents said they had confidence in the police to treat Black people and White people equally, to 10 points in 2020—a decrease largely due to a change in White people’s attitudes. (See Figure 5.)

Figure 5

## Percentage of Philadelphians Who Feel Confident That Police Officers in Their Community Treat Black People and White People Equally, 2015 and 2020

By race



Sources: The Pew Philadelphia Polls, 2015 and 2020

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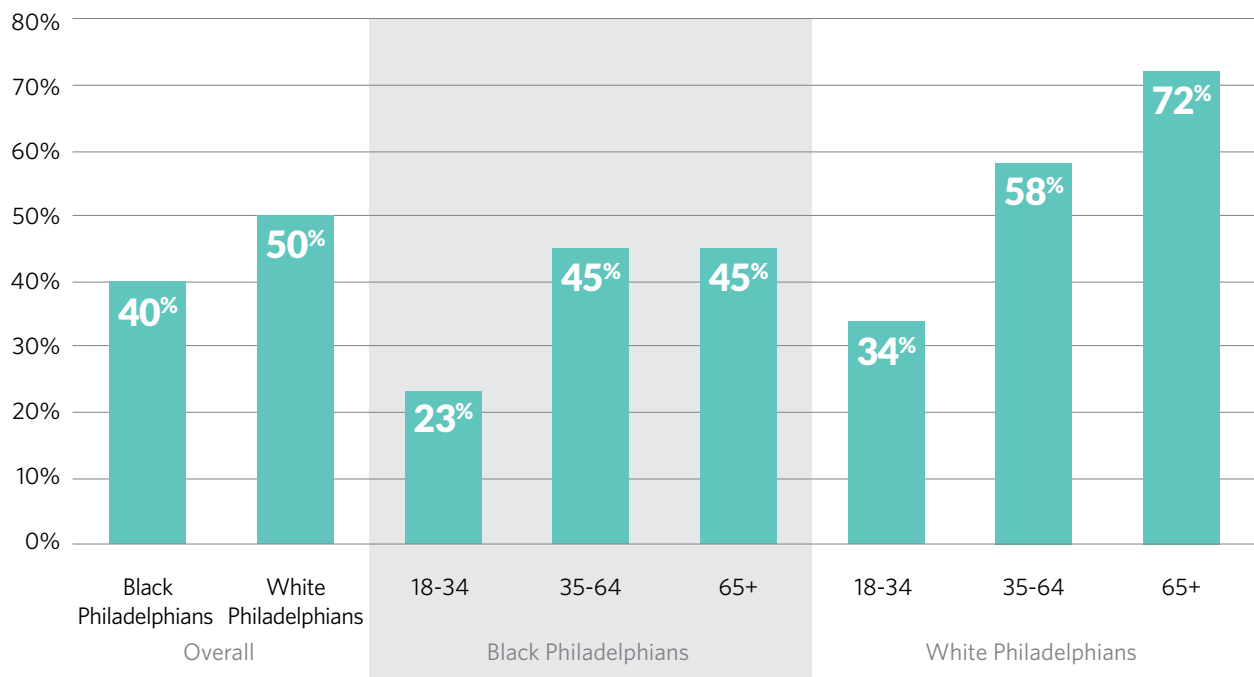
In the answers to some polling questions, the demographic-based variation among Black Philadelphians' responses turns out to be greater than the difference between Black residents as a group and White residents. Sometimes, though, as on this question of whether police officers would treat Black people and White people equally, that is not the case.

To be sure, there were significant differences in 2020 among Black Philadelphians (and White Philadelphians as well) based on age, with younger people less likely to express confidence in the police than older people. (See Figure 6.) But among respondents 65 and older, race made a huge difference, with a 27-point gap between Black and White residents.

Figure 6

## Percentage of Philadelphians Who Feel Confident That Police Officers in Their Community Treat Black People and White People Equally

By race and age



Source: The Pew Philadelphia Poll, 2020

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### Data From the U.S. Census Bureau

Although the share of Philadelphians who identify as Black or African American has held steady at roughly 40% in recent years, there have been notable changes in the demographic characteristics of the city's Black community. For instance, the share of Black adults with a bachelor's degree or higher rose from 11.5% in 2010 to 17.6% in 2019. Over the same period, the poverty rate among Black residents fell from 31.2% to 26.7%, and Black Philadelphians' median household income rose from \$27,216 to \$36,601. These trends likely influence the pool of survey respondents.

## Attitudes about public safety

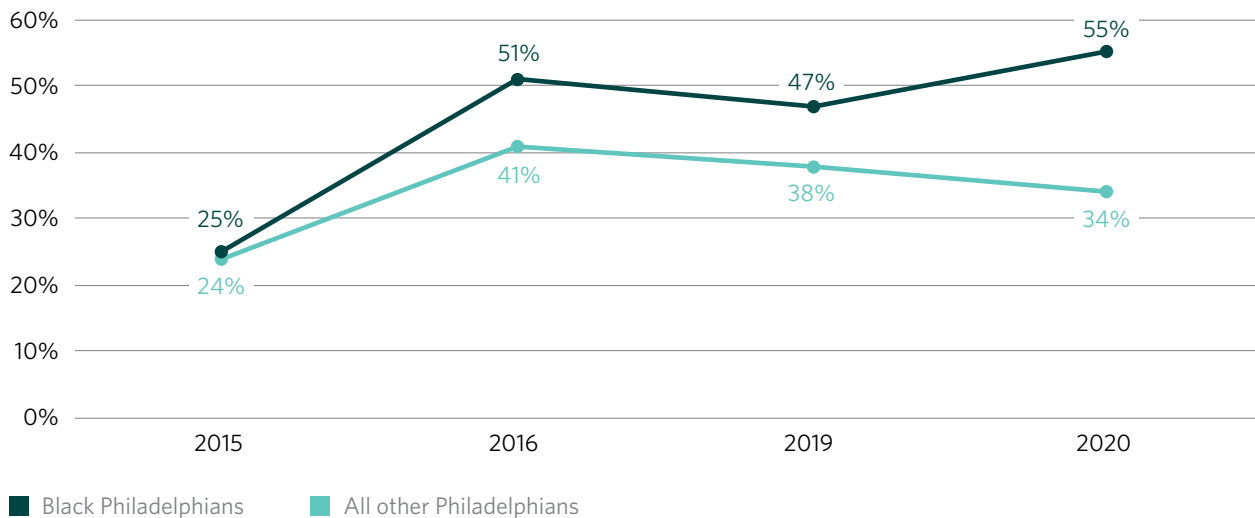
Since 2015, the Pew survey has asked Philadelphians in the form of an open-ended question—meaning that residents could give any answer they chose—to name the biggest issue facing their city. And each of the four times the question has been asked, Black residents have cited public safety as the top issue—sometimes by a narrow margin over other issues, more recently by a large margin. In the past three surveys, roughly half of Black respondents have named public safety as the top issue.

Figure 7 shows that the gap between Black residents and all other Philadelphia residents citing public safety as the city's top issue grew from 9 percentage points in 2019 to 21 points in 2020, suggesting that Black Philadelphians may feel the impact of the rise in violent crime more than some other Philadelphians do.

Figure 7

### Percentage of Philadelphians Mentioning Crime/Drugs/Public Safety as the City's Most Important Issue

2015-20



Note: Polls were not conducted in 2017 or 2018; therefore, data is not available for those years. Because this was an open-ended question, respondents could—and often did—name more than one issue in each of the polls.

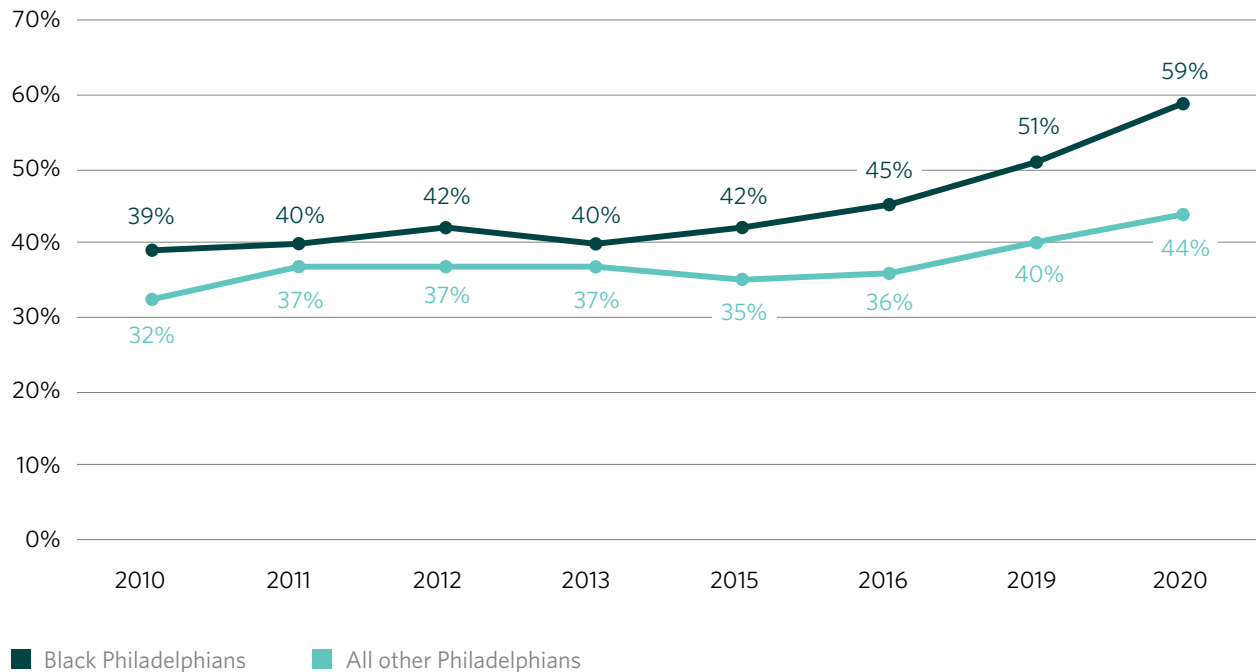
Sources: The Pew Philadelphia Polls, 2015, 2016, 2019, and 2020

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And as the percentage of Black residents expressing concern about public safety has grown, so has the percentage saying they feel unsafe outside in their neighborhoods at night. In 2020, 59% of Black residents said they felt unsafe—by far the largest percentage recorded in the survey’s history. (See Figure 8.)

Figure 8  
**Share of Philadelphians Who Feel Unsafe in Their Neighborhoods at Night**  
2010-20



Note: Polls were not conducted in 2014, 2017, and 2018; therefore, data is not available for those years. Results shown are the combined percentages of residents who said they felt “a little unsafe” or “not safe at all.”

Sources: The Pew Philadelphia Polls, 2010-2013, 2015, 2016, 2019, and 2020

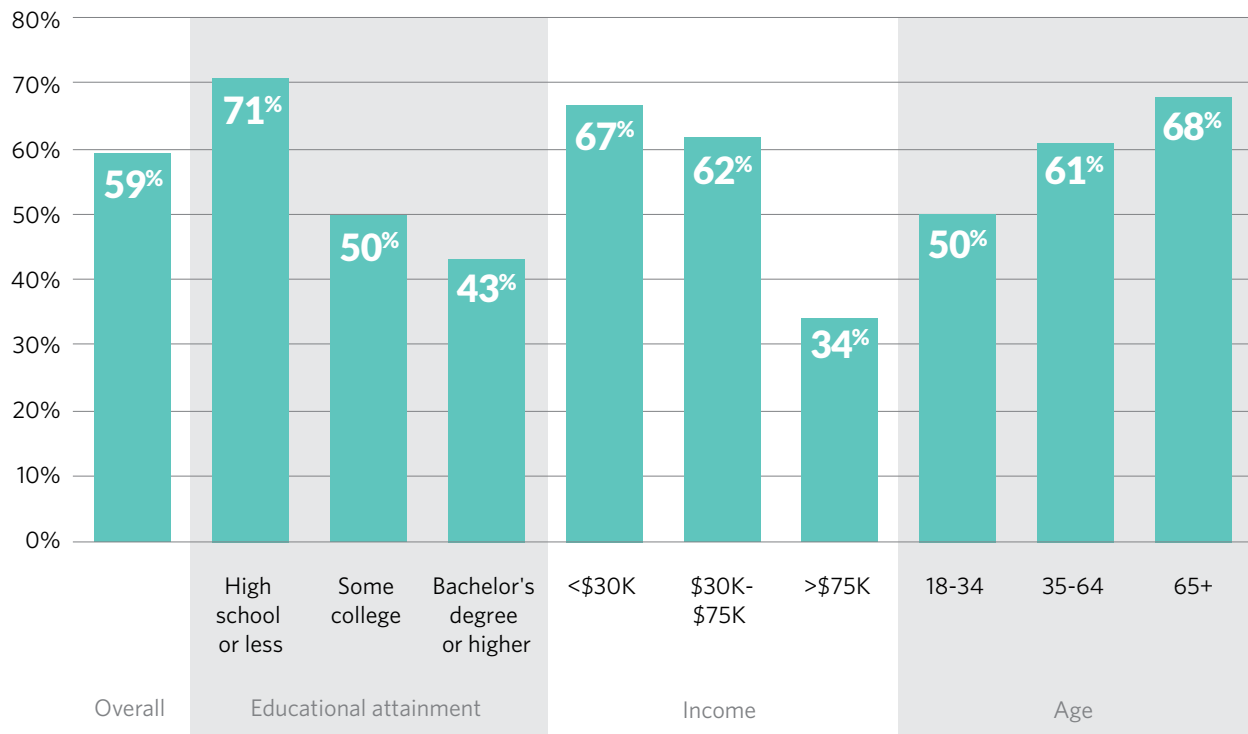
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Here, too, there were wide gaps among Black residents based on educational attainment and income; between Black residents with an income of less than \$30,000 and those with an income of more than \$75,000, the gap was 33 percentage points, perhaps a reflection that neighborhoods with lower median incomes generally tend to have more crime than higher-income neighborhoods. (See Figure 9.)

Figure 9

## Share of Black Philadelphians Who Feel Unsafe in Their Neighborhoods at Night, 2020

By educational attainment, income, and age



Source: The Pew Philadelphia Poll, 2020

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## About this brief

This brief was written and prepared by Jason Hachadorian, LaDeshia Maxwell, and Katie Martin from Pew's Philadelphia research and policy initiative. Larry Eichel, senior adviser to the initiative, edited the brief, along with Erika Compart. Sarah Spell, an officer with Pew's research review and support team; Octavia Howell, a manager with the Philadelphia research and policy initiative; and Sara Strickland, a senior officer working on Pew's biomedical programs, also contributed to the research.

To learn more about each year's individual survey findings and methodology, visit the following links: [2009](#), [2010](#), [2011](#), [2012](#), [2013](#), [2015](#), [2016](#), [2019](#), and [2020](#).

## Acknowledgments

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