

Key Findings from Focus Groups Among Pennsylvanians

*January 2022, Prepared for the **Pennsylvania State Innovation Exchange** by TargetSmart*



Methodology



- TargetSmart administered four online focus groups in Pennsylvania.
 - Allegheny County middle income Black women, Jan. 10, 2022
 - Allegheny County affluent white women, Jan. 12, 2022
 - Delaware County low to middle income white men & women, Jan. 12, 2022
 - Lehigh Valley Hispanic or Latino men & women, Jan. 13, 2022
 - Chester low income Black men & women, Jan. 17, 2022
- Participants were recruited from the voter file from targeted segments of the population, but registration to vote was not a requirement of this study.
- As a caution, findings from qualitative research are not necessarily representative of the opinion of the population being studied. Though strategic conclusions can and should be drawn from this research, it should not be thought of as a projection of all targeted voters, but rather instructive examples of how some targeted voters are thinking about and talking about important issues of the day.



Key Takeaways

- The ongoing pandemic, rising crime, and growing cost of living lead to anxiety for participants.
 - Delaware County and Lehigh residents in particular raise concerns about rising crime.
 - Several women mention mental health effects of the pandemic.
 - In addition to the other sources of worry, racism is a prevalent concern for Black women in Pittsburgh.
 - Across the state, participants say wages are too low and prices are too high.
- Participants provide a divided report on the economy and opportunity: some say businesses are faring well and jobs are available, others say it's hard to find work and businesses closed during the pandemic.
 - There's discomfort and mistrust towards both taxes, which are viewed as unfair, and the state budget, which seems opaque. Most have not heard of the budget surplus.
 - Many participants see current needs as too pressing to justify saving part of the surplus, but some, fearing things might get worse, see value in saving part of it.
- Voting in the 2020 election went smoothly for most participants, but some experienced long lines and tense interactions at polling places.
- Participants divided along racial lines on confidence that their votes count.
 - White participants generally trust that their vote is counted.
 - Black and Hispanic voters expressed skepticism that officials are elected by voters.
- A general lack of trust in the government underlies concerns about state budget and voting.
 - Voters across groups want to see more transparency and accountability.

Funding priorities



Education

Participants express frustration and concern about education funding:

- Childcare costs are high
- K through 12 schools need funds
- Schools' pandemic response also concerns participants.



Housing

High costs, house flipping, gentrification, and new housing developments all worry participants.

Groups are divided on housing assistance.



Health care

While some praise the state's healthcare system, especially in Pittsburgh, participants also point to areas that need improvement: the cost and availability of care and medications.



Allegheny County middle income Black women



Isabel

28-39

Moderate

Non-profit director



Jasimine

28-39

Liberal

Workforce development



Racheal

28-39

Moderate

Mental health counselor at a crisis center



Selena

28-39

Moderate

Social worker



Sophia

28-39

Moderate

Customer services



Yvonne

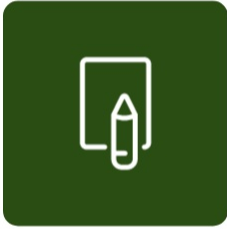
28-39

Moderate

Education liaison



Allegheny County affluent white women



Melinda

50-59

Moderate

Freelance writer



Miranda

28-39

Conservative

Homemaker



Sheila

50-59

Liberal

School secretary



Stefanie

40-49

Moderate

Elementary school lunch monitor



Delaware County low to middle income white men and women



Bill

60-69

Conservative

Pharmacy



Kelly

50-59

Moderate

Hospital secretary



Kevin

50-59

Moderate

Retired auto mechanic



Walt

50-59

Liberal

Unemployed painter



Lehigh Valley Latinos and Latinas



Alicia

40-49

Moderate/Liberal
Self-employed



Carlos

40-49

Liberal
New York Police Department



Marilyn

60-69

Moderate
Cook



Angelo

40-49

Moderate
Insurance



Manny

28-39

Conservative
Nassau County Officer



Sandy

28-39

Conservative
Transportation



Anita

40-49

Liberal
Receptionist



Chester low income Black men and women



Mylisa

28-39

Moderate

Stay at home mom



Albert

50-59

Moderate

Disabled



Kayla

40-49

Liberal

Student/Target employee



General Environment

Pittsburgh participants praise the city's health care, opportunities, and friendliness

They keep saying Pittsburgh is an up and coming city and everybody wants to move here.

Stefanie

It's a healthcare city... I am a respiratory therapist. I thrived in my job... Even talking to some of my classmates who live in different areas in the world, salary wise, pay wise, I was in the top tier as far as healthcare wise because this city is known for their different healthcare stuff, for their advancement in technology and stuff with cancer. It's a very, very big healthcare city.

Racheal

We're known for our hospitals and our healthcare system. I think that's good... South Fayette is booming.

Sheila

There are opportunities for success in Pittsburgh, and you get a family feel.

Jasmine

Pittsburgh in general is a very friendly, respectful town where people can live how they want to. ... Pittsburgh, in comparison to other cities, it's always been a safe place... I don't have any reservation going downtown eating and walking around, or... parking 10 blocks away and having to walk to my car by myself.

Melinda

It's beautiful. Just absolutely gorgeous. It has views, man. Seriously. The way they're able to combine modern and classical texture throughout the skyline, dope. I really like it.

Yvonne



But some Black respondents plan to leave Pittsburgh due to racism

Racism is very huge here. I felt like as Black women on this call, we have seen it, experienced it, felt it, deal with it, either on a daily, weekly, monthly, whatever basis... **I'm on a six month timeline and I'm out.**

Racheal

Life in Pittsburgh or, and Allegheny County, it's hard, and I think it's hard everywhere you go, honestly. But it's hard to be a Black female... The glass ceiling is real. I find it hard to advance in my career. I find racism still very prevalent. I moved out of one specific part of Pittsburgh just because my neighbor...called me a n***** with the E-R. And so, I moved immediately right before I caught a case and went to jail for life. I think that that type of thing chases me down and it's very real... I don't like Pittsburgh... **I pray that God aligns my life so that I don't have to raise my children here because it's not progressive enough for Black people at all.**

Jasmine

I just became a dual citizen in 2020. What I've experienced, I've seen racism happen. It's happened around me and it will happen to me in the sense of, until I start talking, I get the dirty looks. ... I get the dirty looks but as soon as I start talking... As soon as I start talking, it's, "Oh, you're not from around here, blah, blah, blah." In that aspect, I've seen what racism is in the workplace for Black women. ... When I say the racism happens around me, I can see it. I get the passive racism, but Pittsburgh, **I'm so over it. I'm so ready to move out of Pittsburgh** because... it's stifling.

Isabel



Chester respondents generally negative towards their city

There's people who have went to Chester High who have definitely advanced themselves and moved on to careers and did other things. They have not moved back, a lot of them, but some have. So when you look at Chester to move, no, it probably wouldn't be the ideal place to move.

Kayla

It's bad and good. You've got good spots you can be at Chester, but then you have your bad spots and it seems like the bad spots are just, it's like they're just taking over and you just see a little good but more bad... [Chester] has a positive point as far as helping people, that and the low income. ... Like food, clothing, shelter, stuff like that. Counseling.

Albert

I've been away from Chester for a weekend and I feel awesome. As soon as I get off the highway and see that exit, I'm like, ugh, I just be so depressed. I'm just discouraged... It's no place to call home. It's no place to call home. ... I don't have hope in there. I really don't. I'm actually looking to buy a house at the end of this year. It's just not a place to call home. I mean, I don't knock anybody for living here. Some people only can afford to live here. You know what I mean? Some people been, raised here all their life. This is all they know. So they think this is what it is. Some people was raised here. They're going to die here. This is just what it is. But for me and my children, I just, Chester is just not in my future at all.

Mylisa



Delaware County white respondents want a stronger community feel

20 years ago, if you went out and didn't lock your door, your neighbors would call you if somebody came into your house. Now neighbors don't care about neighbors. People don't care about what's going on down the street, other than video it, I mean, there's just a lack of respect all the way around I think.

Kevin

We need something that brings people together more, I don't know if it's more parks or whatever, but it seems like everyone's scared of everybody these days. Maybe we should all come out of our shells... We need some more parks and stuff. It seems like we're building everywhere and chasing the animals away, so I would say reserve more ground to stop building on everything.

Walt

I was in New Orleans, and my neighbor called me. He didn't know I was away, but he hadn't seen the dogs out as much... He just thought something happened to us because he hadn't seen the dogs out, hadn't seen the cars move... And so I brought him home, obviously, a gift. And he's just so good. He shoveled our sidewalk for us because it was during the little snowstorm. And, at least for me, around our house, and with being newcomers to Delaware County, I've met at least four or five of the neighbors in the two years, being that we moved in during the pandemic, we moved in in March, with everything going on. And they've been great. I don't know if I just moved in on a good block or what, but they've been really, really good.

Kelly



Hispanic participants say Lehigh Valley is quiet; one reports his children experience racism at school

A little boring. I'm kind of used to the noise from the city and stuff since I grew up in Brooklyn, New York, so you know it's like I need that noise back again.

Sandy

I'm 100% you know Puerto Rican, but I look white... but my kids don't. So when they go to schools... sometimes you know it's tough... The way they get treated, ...you get the certain racism that does occur, and you'd be surprised, you wouldn't think that it would be you know that mean. And it's not just specific to those people of color like Black... So we decided to cyber school them and also, at the same time, keep them away from all the negativity.

Angelo

It's expensive... I'm just dying to move out again... [I want] a little bit more noise, I want to hear the fire trucks, I want to hear the police alarm... Some noise or least somebody even somebody fighting outside.

Marilyn

I'm originally from Philly so I mean it's more quiet... It's just daily living... I do like the peace and tranquility. I don't need any more... stress in my life. I'm content with where I am... I think you live a decent life here.

Alicia



Ongoing pandemic creates frustration and confusion

I'm truly hopeful that when my boys are older, school is normal for them and they can experience normal things and they don't have to constantly wear a mask and take it off to eat their lunch and put it right back on. It's so silly. And I want to travel with my family and I don't want it to be, show me your papers.

Miranda

I am for wearing masks right now. So I like that it seems that our schools have their own individual, they can mask mandate or not. I like walking around our city, I feel like the people were taking the virus seriously... So I'm happy where we are, especially compared to other areas.

Stefanie

It's been really overwhelming because you can't make the type of money that you normally could, especially if you're in customer service... or if you got to deal with people up close.

Angelo

COVID of course has everything for everyone in an uproar.

Yvonne

Just like... everywhere else, everybody's making their own individual choices [in Chester].

Kayla

Right now I'm working, but I'm not vaccinated yet. I'm not against it, but I feel like I need to find out more, and it needs to develop more. And it's like right now, in my job it's going to come to a point where they're going to mandate me to get vaccinated.

Sandy

I'm hopeful that some more things are opening up a little bit now... I work with the doctors who take care of the COVID patients... I've heard a lot of skepticism about people, saying numbers are being made up. But I read the reports because I have to send out death notices to their primary care physicians when patients are dying, with COVID pneumonia or a variety of other things caused by COVID.

Kelly



Many participants, especially women, raise mental health concerns related to pandemic and work

That's affecting the morale of people that are working because they're so overworked, they're doing multiple jobs and they're not happy. They're not happy at the workplace because they are being pulled in so many different directions, because they are so short staffed.

Sheila

I lost my father and my grandmother a month apart. It was devastating. I shut down. And so, that brings me to this year where I took three months, I had a mental sabbatical from work. I just couldn't do it. But in that three months even, it's just continued. I don't know.

Yvonne

I am feeling stretched. I feel like because of COVID every little bit... if I'm an able body, I'm asked to give more in terms of volunteering for school and even working extra hours at the school at my job basically. But my kids' events too, because I have my clearances to be able to do things in elementary school. You know, there's slim pickings with staff, and I feel like I'm always being asked to give more.

Stefanie

I don't know if that's a state thing but I definitely think as the frontline workers, we as the workers who are the hands and feet, we need to be compensated a lot better so that we can produce better outcomes. We're reaching burnout because we're working overtime and not seeing the money for it.

Sophia

It's probably one of the one of the most stressful times [from a] mental health standpoint... About 99% of the psychologists and psychiatrists are backed up. They're not seeing any new clients.

Angelo

Mental health is very important on a statewide level.

Kayla

I know hospitals are trying to get more nurses to work and doing some kinds of bonus type situations. Our hospital's a non-for-profit, it's a community hospital, and it's just getting people to work. They're overworked, they're exhausted.

Kelly



Participants in Delaware County and Lehigh Valley very concerned about crime

There's no rules,
it's chaos.
Kevin

Your kids can't even go outside and be kids. It's like, if you live in Chester, your children are being robbed from their childhood. It's terrible. It's terrible. It's terrible... Once I put them in the car, I shoot straight to the highway. You can't even drive down the street. Your car gets shot up... Bullets that's not even meant for you go through your car, it's killing kids. It's killing people they're not even meant for. It's a tragedy... In order to keep your son safe, it's like you've got to hold him hostage in the house. This is not an area where you can send your boys outside to be boys. It's like, a month after they're outside, they'll be drug dealers. They'll be having guns in their book bags. It's just nowhere motivational at all.

Mylisa

If anyone owns a Honda over here...be careful because they're going to steal your catalytic converter.

Manny

Somebody got stabbed down here the other week. Wawa got robbed... with an ax. I mean, it's crazy. It's all this stuff that the government is not helping with. And this people being homeless is creating a lot of desperation and people are just doing outlandish things. I mean, when it's not a surprise to hear that your son or daughter got murdered...cause they wouldn't give up their car or something... My wife's... arming herself. She got a carry permit now.

Walt

[We should] properly fund the police to reduce crime.

Carlos

The crime makes [businesses] leave.

Kayla

My car has been broken into a couple of times... It's just out of control.

Alicia

Last week in Montgomery County at the Target in King of Prussia, there was an armed carjacking and there was a child near the car or in the car... You just have to be wary of people.

Kelly



Most participants want to see greater investment in infrastructure

We are constantly putting that black stuff on to fill the holes which just goes away the next year. Why can't we just really repair our road systems? I feel like we're throwing money away just putting band-aids on that... We don't have the roadways for, not even talking about the holes, just the whole getting downtown coming in and out. We're really going to need that money soon. I'm sure somebody's working on it, but they need to do it faster because the way they're advertising this city as growing, it should not take an hour to get downtown midday.

Stefanie

They need to get more fire hydrants.

Albert

There's three roads up here that are literally falling apart. They are sinking because of all of the homes that are being built and they're not supporting these roads and all the flooding and the roads that are sinking. You can't have all this growth without fixing the roads and everything else that build up that.

Sheila

I feel like this city says they're so broke, but everywhere you go, there is construction. We don't have no money to do nothing else, but to build more stuff that either keep certain people out that people can't afford or something else.

Racheal

Pittsburgh is aiming to be progressive, and we see that unfolding right in front of our eyes. We're building new structures. We're making it more of a attractive city. Developers are working hard to make Pittsburgh one of the more comfortable and one of the ideal places to live.

Jasimine

Money should go to...cleaning up the streets, making sure the streets are paved correctly and upkept and things of that nature.

Kayla

During the Obama years, that a lot of money was distributed to the states for road repair and other infrastructure. And all it seems we got in Delaware County were little bumps on the double yellow lines with reflectors.

Bill



Transportation receives mixed reviews; some want more transit options

People here are expected to drive. And I think throughout the state of Pennsylvania, you're expected to have a car and you're expected to have to drive. There should be better ways of us getting across the United States in general, but even getting across the state or to different places.

Melinda

I don't use it regularly, but when I've used it to go to the city for an event or something that I know there's not going to be good parking ... SEPTA overall, I feel like it's pretty good.

Kelly

If you don't have a vehicle...it's overwhelming, especially...for those who are from New York City and used to the buses and trains and the convenience.

Angelo

[Public transit is] fair to better. About middle to good, yes. I don't use it a lot, but I use it.

Kevin

My husband and I, we can't stand traveling out of Pittsburgh because there's no direct flights.

Stefanie

Everything you need is close by here in this area. That's why I moved here at first, because I wasn't driving when I first moved here. And it's close to everything. I [can take the] train down here, I can shoot to Philly, and I have the neurologist up there. You can shoot up to Walmart, Acme. They're all right up the street. So that's why I moved here, strategically, for those things because I was in a lower poverty.

Walt

Luckily I have a car, I think you need a car now in town. I'm from Philly -- I mean every corner was a bus stop. We have the subway... It's convenient

Anita

Some parents can't afford to hop on a highway and go to Jersey or go to Delaware. Especially at a time where like right now, a lot of families are struggling financially. They can't even afford to take these kids nowhere... You're really stuck where you are.

Mylisa



Economy & Budget

Mixed opinion on current condition of businesses

I've seen several small businesses that just had to close, because they just didn't make it through the pandemic... which is really sad. It's so sad that Amazon and Walmart are thriving, but little mom and pop shops can't make it, and that's so sad because that's someone's livelihood. That's how they probably put their kids through college, and that's sad to me.

Miranda

Not too many businesses didn't make it. The only one I see around here that didn't make it was The Mad Greek. ... That's the only business I seen fail. Everything else seems to be the same.

Walt

I was really glad to see some businesses pitch in when the pandemic came in, they tried their best others didn't. They did a little bit of what they could without hurting their bottom line, basically, helping the community. I think that we get a lot more help from the outside than we do the inside businesses for helping the community.

Kayla

We had, I want to say a Checkers for about a year and some change and it's going already. So it's just like businesses come through here and they leave as quick as they come. So it's just like homeowners, renters, business nobody really just like stay long. They come, they get a hang of it and they go back on out. So it's kind of hard... Nobody wants to die over a dollar.

Mylisa

It seems like [businesses are] doing pretty good... I know there's one restaurant I've tried to go to and if you don't make a reservation like a week in advance, you can't get in there. I feel like maybe it's because for a year, people couldn't really do anything, nine months to a year because you know, we were, things were shut down.

Kelly



Some division on job availability; affluent white women blame worker shortage on laziness

Right now the job market is so much better for people who are willing to work.

Sheila

There's no jobs here.

Mylisa

There are opportunities. It might not look like the opportunities that I want, but there are opportunities. I didn't lose a job during COVID. I didn't struggle. Many people did and I do not want to negate that.

Jasimine

My husband and I went to go to Buffalo Wild Wings and it was during a game too, so you would think it would be packed. There was a 30 minute wait, but where you eat, there were all these empty tables. And so I asked like, "What is the wait for, are you keeping people distanced?" And he said, "They don't have enough workers." So I think, yeah, and that just bothers me that there's not enough workers.

Stefanie

People are not hiring. Some jobs are closing.

Carlos

We have a lack of people, there are far more jobs available in our area than there are people who are willing to go out and work.

Melinda

Having more decent jobs [is an issue]. Like I was saying about the CVS, they can't get nobody to work because they don't want to pay anybody. Corporations... just worry about a bottom line. Nobody's trying to help anybody get ahead, I guess. And that's just not in Pennsylvania, but that's just the way the world's been going for years.

Kevin



General agreement that wages are too low

In Pennsylvania, our minimum wage has not been [raised] in well over 10 years, why hasn't minimum wage gone up in all that time?

Sheila

I'm busting my ass, sorry if I'm not allowed to cuss, but I'm not getting compensated. And I'm... no disrespect in my job, I love my job, I'm fine. But I think that the state needs to start funneling money into these [nonprofit] organizations to give us more money.

Sophia

Even if they raised the minimum wage to \$15 an hour, how would somebody live on that?

Melinda

I'm a director and I'm one of the lowest paid directors that I know.

Jasimine

It's been 30 years since I've done minimum wage, but...it's pathetic to think... I mean, it's okay for a high school kid, but for adults, with family and all that, you can't live off of that.

Kevin

There has to be fair pay. For me, fair pay when it comes to like homemaking programs, homemaking services, home attendant programs, those are programs that are also paid at a minimal, at the minimum. So those sort of salaries are not high enough for a living... I always hear from my aides, they are always trying to fight [for] fair payment.

Alicia

I think \$15 an hour is [a livable wage]. That's \$96 a day. If you can't live on \$500 a week, at least an apartment. But at least perhaps a roof.

Walt



Participant in the field of workforce development calls for legislation to help train workers

I'm in this field, but workforce development is something that is very big. It's not something that is a huge area of focus in Pittsburgh. Because we do have a population of people, I won't say African Americans, but just a population of people who are re-entrants, and people who have socioeconomic barriers to employment and background barriers, I think that workforce development is something that's so forward-thinking because it trains people up and puts them in positions where they can flourish. But I don't think that there's a lot of law backing behind that and we definitely need it, especially here in Pennsylvania.

Jasimine

As the city of Pittsburgh is growing more and we're getting more people coming in, we have a whole community that is for immigrants... And that's great. That's amazing. But what are we doing to support them, to help them get jobs? Don't just use Pittsburgh as a dumping ground. If we're going to dump people in Pittsburgh, let's be able to provide opportunities to employment and opportunities to success for them. And I just don't think that that's present.

Jasimine

The state [should address workforce development.]
Come on, Tom, let's get it together.

Isabel



Prices of groceries and other items are worrying

I grocery shop all the time and just every week, I'm astounded by, it's gone up again, oh my goodness. And it's five cents here, five cents there, but it all adds up, and it's quickly increasing too.

Stefanie

Cost of living is kind of going insane right now... Mortgages are tough, interest rates are tough.

Miranda

It's hard, just hard to even buy used cars right now, apparently... My daughter's been looking for a car, and to get a decent car, they're just going really fast.

Kelly

We're in a pandemic, so things should be easier, but it's starting to go up: gas, food.

Manny

I try to... squeeze my penny to buy food, to pay rent.

Marilyn

Now I'm more like trying to be a more savvy consumer and you know compare prices, because every day is expensive. [It's] ridiculous, really expensive.

Alicia

Food prices [are] starting to climb.

Selena

Supermarkets don't have food in it anymore. That's just recent, but it's hard to get stuff... The price of everything's going up except for the price of your paycheck. It's not going up. It's not keeping up with inflation, that's for sure.

Kevin

We're holding up okay, because we're not driving as much, being retired. And the biggest hit is on gasoline. We're in the winter heating season, but the bills are just starting to roll in. So, concerned, but not panicking yet.

Bill

In Pennsylvania right now, there was a 7% inflation in 2021 because the economy is trying to recoup from COVID, right? So you put a 7% inflation on everything. So things are now more expensive. Restaurant that was \$20 is now \$65, and the food is piss poor. So you put this inflation on things and you're trying to raise the economy however, we're still getting paid [the same]. ... I have a whole degree and a whole full time career, and I think I got like three eggs and a can of beer in my fridge.

Jasimine



Many participants see unfairness in the tax code

Schools get their money based on their taxes. So, of course if you're in a district where the taxes are higher, you're getting more money. And that's really not fair.

Sheila

[We need] stricter regulations on home buyers who do not live in this state and have no investment, they're not vested in the state of Pennsylvania, other than just to make money. I think it should be taxed more or regulated harder.

Selena

You have a value because of the school district means a lot to the area that you live in. And so that's why we built the house here knowing that, I mean, I'm not complaining. We knew exactly what we were doing, but the taxes across the county line are far less than half of what I'm paying.

Melinda

Cutting taxes sounds good, but what are we doing with the rest? So education, education is important, so you cut that, I think things will fall apart.

Manny

All these big corporations [are] not giving taxes or if they are, very little, very little, so they need to give up more. Hit them up for more taxes.

Albert

Large corporations have so many ways to cut down in their taxes.

Alicia

When you want to increase taxes on the corporations and the rich, you better be careful how far you go, because you could scare them away, and if you scare them away, you lose it all.

Bill

We give [businesses] a lot of tax break breaks, which we shouldn't.

Kayla

For my school district, my taxes are ridiculous... The people that are making most of the money off of Pennsylvanians should have to pay most of the money in taxes, I think. They should have to pay the same amount that I should have to pay. I don't see why, because somebody has a better lawyer than me, that I have to pay... He's making 25 times the amount of money I'm making, and I'm paying three times the amount of taxes he is. I have never understood how that works, but that's how it works.

Kevin



Mistrust, lack of knowledge about state budget

I was on welfare and I know that welfare is a part of the Pennsylvania state budget, but it really don't affect me... I don't dig deep into that type of stuff, honestly, when I probably really should. But it's really hard. It's a lot going on in the world right now, so you're not really going to worry about Pennsylvania state budget unless it's being broadcasted, and it's never being broadcasted because what they do in these offices, if they wanted us to know it'll be on TV. Things they want us to know is on TV, it's on social media, it's on the billboards on the highway. It's being hidden for a reason. They don't want us to know.

Myliisa

Where's the budget going now? I don't really have any insight.

Bill

I have no idea who controls it. I think it's just a figure of the imagination, I don't even think there is a budget or anything. They could fund the police, they could help these kids, they could fix these abandoned buildings.

Anita

I don't know exactly the amounts of where they're splitting the pie, but I do believe more of it's going towards reinvesting in companies that already have the money... We pay our taxes for our representatives and congressmen and all so that we get something out of it. And the only one that seemed to ever be getting out of it is them, or people in the upper class. The middle class has not been getting their slice of the pie, in my opinion, for a long time.

Kevin

When I was working as a Head Start teacher, they were constantly talking about the state budget and if we're going to get funded again... Or when I worked as an after school coordinator for a nonprofit for girls at risk, it was always, are we going to get funding? ... And the funding always gets cut in education.

Isabel

The budget needs to be more fairly distributed, so that it stays within the communities... There's no clarity into how that money is being spent.

Alicia

State officials need to definitely listen to the city officials, but they also need to get out, expand their horizon, get more in touch with the people of the community... I think that they really need to have a look into where the finances are being allotted, and allot more when they can, where they can... State officials need to prioritize the whole area of Pennsylvania that they're over.

Kayla

The state in these past few years, had a hard time like regenerating money. And that's why one of the things on the dockets is the legalization of marijuana, because they need the revenue.

Selena



Moderator prompt:

Surplus explanation

As you may know, Pennsylvania currently has a budget surplus of roughly one point five billion dollars, meaning tax receipts in the last year were one point five billion dollars higher than what state government spent. Additionally, the state has yet to allocate roughly six billion dollars that it received in federal funding from the pandemic-related American Rescue Plan. So that means in total, the state has about seven-point-five-billion-dollars in available funding right now. So, here's the question -- if I were your state representative, where would you tell me you would like to see that money go?



Education, health care, and housing are top surplus priorities

If there's such a surplus of money, why aren't they putting it towards maybe increasing the rate of pay?

Sheila

Schools for people with autism...to help them get a job after they are adults, because I'm having the same problem with my son...like they're forgotten already.

Marilyn

Updating technology in **public schools**, I think that's very important. Expanding after school programs... Funding the police and and creating more jobs at the local level.

Alicia

Make sure all programs are... fully funded and more **education** for the kids... Make it a better state. Make sure everybody gets treated equal.

Albert

Maybe jobs, maybe create opportunities [to] increase the economy.

Carlos

It should go...to the **schools** and stuff like that, for the kids and stuff like that. But I feel like Chester needs some free things. Therapy, help, love, comfort, support, motivation, things like that. I just don't think money could fix this where

we live.

Myliisa

Housing, education.

Isabel

Education, roads.

Racheal

I'd also like to see to it that the inmates at the jail are in livable conditions. You know, I have family members that work there and they are literally scooping food around rats, dead rats in the food. It's not okay. This past summer, what, they lost their air?

Yvonne

Pennsylvania should invest its money back into the state, its people, better schools. Should give the money back to the people by cutting taxes and it should afford a better quality of health care, better roads, and more affordable housing.

Kevin

If they're putting it back into more affordable health care and more affordable housing, then in the end, we all should be saving something off of that. If I don't have to pay as much for my health care, monthly health care, healthcare premium through my job, and then for the housing. If there's some kind of break somewhere with that, if I could save a \$100 or \$150 a month on those things, that'd be great.

Kelly



Many participants say current need is too great to save surplus for a “rainy day”

We need things done now.

Sheila

Rainy day is every week or every other week because they're living paycheck to paycheck.

Racheal

There's always a rainy day. Every day is a rainy day. Why you saving it for a rainy day? ... I would like to know what is a rainy day for the state.

Sophia

The storm is upon us, and... It's time. I can't believe we have that much of a surplus. We need to do stuff with it.

Stefanie

It's pouring.

Marilyn

I'd like to know what that amount of money would be that we'd each get back. It would be probably so insignificant that it wouldn't make a difference to us individually.

Melinda

Because of the need, [the part saved] shouldn't be a very big part of the money right now.

Kayla

Why wait for a rainy day, when I feel like rainy days is right now.

Sandy

We can't afford for them to cut no funding and no education and no health care and housing, because that's a part of what we struggling to get more of.

Mylisa

I mean they, the pandemic money, there's still municipalities that haven't spent it, that they got a year ago... What did they do with it? You know, if nothing else, they kept it and made interest on it. And what did they do with the interest? ... I don't get a break off of my taxes because they got money, you know?

Kevin



But some in Delaware County groups want part of surplus to be saved

Pennsylvania should hold on to [the surplus] for a rainy day... I like the idea of restraint. Be careful what you do.

Bill

[Saving for a rainy day] sounds fine too, because this pandemic situation isn't over yet. Who knows what's going to happen if another variant's going to come out? Or whatever they're going to call it, I don't know. We're going to see how things play out.

Kelly

We should save some of it... When you think about saving something for rainy day, I start to think of different things that my children may need that they just won't have available that that money can contribute to. When I say that they may need, I don't mean need on a day-to-day right now. I mean broad scale like recycling, things that may contribute to some of those type of things, the environment as a whole, worldwide. I'm not just thinking local when I say that.

Kayla

I wouldn't be opposed to holding on that either, I think that the interest will come in handy, and we still the other money to play with, which we don't [know] what to do with yet. We got to see what's going to happen basically with this Omicron variant thing. Is this thing going to get worse? That's going to be the deciding factor on where some of the money goes, because we don't know about two weeks from now yet... I don't mind saving the \$1.5 [billion budget surplus], that's fine. That's absolutely smart. Can't leave yourself short later.

Walt



Some participants with experience with public assistance say it's difficult to get aid

The stipulations that they put around the funding, they make it unrealistic. For example, when it comes to rapid rehousing, you've got to be housed within 9 months. Mind you, these are homeless people who have been on the street for how long, and now you want to throw them into a house and then tell them, you need to find a job. You need to get a regular income going, and you need to do this all in 9 months. You can only stay in rapid rehousing for 2 years maximum if we see that there's a specific need. So all these stipulations, all these great theories that they have when they're putting these budgets together, they need to be realistic. If you don't know, if you're not tied to someone, if you don't have the experience, talk to people or do focus groups or whatever you need to do to get realistic stipulations to spend this money. Don't make it harder.

Isabel

Living in...Chester, [it seems] like you [have] to be a little known to get help. You have to be a little popular. You have to stand out to get help when help should be free. It should just be that people should just be putting flyers in your door like, "We got this program available, we got this, we got that." It's just not treated as a community to me.

Mylisa

Just like anywhere else you have to fight for what you want. So nobody's going to give you anything. Even the programs and the different things, that's out there, no matter where you are, you have to seek it out, get that information, get your documents. You have to do what you have to do in order to get it.

Kayla

The mental health end of things is really not addressed properly. There are a lot of people that unfortunately should not be on the streets right now that are allowed to be on the streets.

Angelo



But other participants see need for more vetting in welfare

So this stimulus packages that they keep handing out money, there should be some way of vetting. And I think even at the state level, it shouldn't be blanket, every household gets this or like the childcare stuff. It's like, okay, if you're getting childcare stuff, are there ways of kind of checks and balances? Like, does every person actually need that? Or if they do need it, how are they using it? ... Why do we have a shortage of people willing to go out and work? Because they can sit home and work. I had somebody who was working with me and she literally said she doesn't want to work anymore because she could get unemployment and make more money on unemployment than she could working, because of all that money that was out there.

Melinda

[There are] people that are going to work the system.

Sheila

People who are unemployed are getting more money than me.

Manny

The Pennsylvania state budget, when it comes to mind, I feel like there needs to be more investigation on who's on welfare and why you are on welfare, and should you be working or should you be on welfare? I feel like there needs to be more investigation on that. I don't know if that's harsh, but that's how I feel.

Sophia



Education, Housing, & Health Care

Across markets, schools generally seen as underfunded

Our schools probably could use more money. But... there are those school districts [that] have a lot of money, that as a taxpayer, I'd like to see my taxes cut so I didn't have to pay that. Because having the amazing stadium that they have for sporting events and things like that, that's not my priority. But I'm not on the school board. I pay the taxes.

Melinda

So many more cuts into our public schools, the arts, and other sectors in our community.

Alicia

If you're looking outside to live in Chester, you're not going to pick Chester... Our school district ratings, if you have little ones, you're absolutely not even going to look at it, when you look at the other surrounding areas.

Kayla

College is so expensive. If a kid wants to go to college, and the parents can't afford it, they're in debt for 10 years. Last I checked, the buildings were still there. They're using less paper and less ink, and everything. How does it keep going up by thousands of dollars? It's just ridiculous.

Kevin

My daughter just got a job about 3 weeks ago working for Walmart. She started at \$18 an hour, okay. I had just for the sake of curiosity, I figured...I love working with youth... Let me try to see if I can get a job working for the Allentown school district. I actually applied and was hired. And you know what they offered me an hour? \$15 an hour. I actually am taking the job, and on my first day I'm reaching out to 69 News. I'm reaching out to the news stations and letting people know.

Angelo

Something's got to be done about education. Something's got to be done to reach the smarter kids, to really bring themselves up, and get themselves to college. But the kids that are okay or not doing so well, get them into vocational training. Get them into the trades. Because they can make just as much money as a college kid if they're in a trade.

Bill

[We need] more books in school, computers, pencils, erasers, maybe give the teachers a raise or something like that. If the schools need to be fixed up, fix them up, make sure they have heat, air during the summer, a food program, lunch program for the kids, transportation for the kids, back and forth.

Albert



Schools receive low marks for pandemic response

When the schools went virtual I mean, some of these kids didn't even have Chromebooks and the schools weren't even providing them... How were these kids even going to learn?

Sheila

Everybody's in shambles [due to COVID]. I have family employed by the District of McKeesport and literally, they get emails for COVID and everything like that. They get emails 7 to 10 buses at a time not running, boom. They're not even going to excuse absence and make it work, congratulations, and then, the next day it'll be like, "We're remote. Please do remote teaching." And they're teachers, they're like, "We'll teach what?" The state of education right now, I'd say, is a crisis.

Yvonne

I see everyday when you drive the kids and it's like a checkup...a lot of stuff. Closing the schools can be stressful too... we have to work.

Carlos

My son will never attend, if I was to stay here, will never attend Pittsburgh public, anything. It's not ran how it used to be. The leadership is not who it used to be. It is showing in our scores, it is showing in the lack of leadership, even dealing with COVID. I get it. COVID is new. I understand that, and I know that that's a hard position to be in as far as a superintendent and things and saying, "Oh, we're going virtual." But some of this stuff that they're doing, I feel like they're doing it for the money and the numbers more than what the kids and the safety. I just think the state of, especially public schools here, has gone down.

Racheal



Childcare costs big concern for some participants

Before I became a stay home mom, I was working... in the orthodontic industry...making \$15 an hour. And that's when my husband and I had that conversation. When our baby is born, am I going to go back? ... There was no way, my entire paycheck would have had to go to that. And that is **incredibly depressing**.

Miranda

We need some clubs, like social clubs, Boys & Girls clubs, stuff like that for the kids.

Mylisa

In America, you don't get time off to stay at home with your child... Other countries, they get a year off to spend with their child and they still get paid for that. That would really help a lot of people to be able to do that and not have to pay for child care that whole year. It's **ridiculous**.

Melinda

My son has 4 kids, and for his wife to work, she would have to make \$23-24 an hour to justify getting a job to pay for the child care for the 4 kids. She works now, she works 2 nights a week, or whatever, but she can't work a full-time job with 4 kids, because you can't afford the daycare, you can't afford the babysitting, you can't afford the tutor, or whoever. It's **outrageous**.

Kevin

There's so many safety issues to guarantee a child's life for that amount of time during the day. **You're going to pay out the ying-yang for that**, but I've seen a lot of these closed, kinder cares, and stuff like that. They're all closed. The babysitters, everyone's afraid to have somebody in their house that's a stranger. That kind of fell off the map decades ago, the single babysitter idea.

Walt



Rent, housing costs are generally seen as rising

Rent is cheap. [There are] a couple public houses that accept anybody.

Mylisha

The price of houses have gone up tremendously. If you were thinking about selling your house, now's the time to sell it. Because I've been thinking about it. My wife's got about 2 more years of work. She says 5, but I say 2. I say let's sell the house, get an RV and go drive around the country.

Kevin

Homes are still affordable here.

Alicia

Housing in general, has just gone up.

Melinda

The housing market...is crazy right now. So expensive.

Carlos

Rent and the price of homes are out of control.

Sheila

Real estate, yeah it's actually cheaper than it is in New York City, but things are still going up. I mean it's still cheaper.

Manny

I just recently left the rental, and you know my lease was up. And he jacked it up about \$650... So it went from you know say \$1,500 a month for 3 bedroom something so now he's he's asking for like \$2,200. And he got it.

Angelo

I still live in an apartment right now, but it goes up \$20 every year. I started at about, what is it, \$720, and I'm all the way up to \$800 now. For the last 4 years he's just started raising it every year. And I swear, as soon as you get 2 months late, he hauls you into court, and doesn't even tell. He'll tell you one thing on the phone, and then you'll end up in court with him.

Walt



House flipping and development raise concerns

The [low] cost of the homes would definitely attract people to be able to do real estate... A lot of people will probably come buy a home and try to flip it, honestly, once they get here.

Kayla

Low-income housing is a good idea, if it's tempered, if it's not totally crazy. You don't want to put 500 units in a 2 block neighborhood that only has 300 units, for example. 300 single family homes.

Bill

Build them up and stop letting white people move in... You know what I'm saying? Build them up, house the homeless.

Racheal

Pennsylvania has a regulatory issue of just housing. If you have people buying up houses in low-income or moderate-income communities and they don't even live in the state and they're just buying up the property because it's super cheap and flipping it and making it harder for people to even purchase homes, I think that that's a major regulatory issue that should be addressed.

Selena

A developer can get a tax credit or HUD credit if they say, you knock down like maybe 500 apartments, and then you build only 300, and you say, well, we'll bring back 20% into these new development. But what happens to the rest of those people? And I think that they need to have stricter guidance, and that tax credit needs to be amended to really include something where those people can come back, a good portion of those people can come back into their community and stay in their community, and not be pushed further and further away.

Selena



One appreciates rental assistance; affluent white participant indecisive on housing assistance

[Landlords] were definitely hit hard during the pandemic, but rental assistance is bailing a lot of people out. I got rental assistance to help out. Luckily I did that, and there was some aid there. And when the benefits ended on 9/4 last year, they actually told me to go to rental assistance now. And they actually paid our utility bill 3 months forward, as well as the rent, so I don't have to pay rent now till March. So I'm sitting pretty right now, actually, so that's pretty a hopeful thing, actually.

Walt

If you're working, you should be able to afford a home. If you're not working, then you can't afford anything. And that's maybe why you should get a job.

Stefanie

There's a lot of abuse going on, especially with with low-income people that have even Section 8... these landlords are getting away with jacking up the price, because you know they're getting whatever they can get out of it.

Alicia

1

People deserve to be able to live in a safe neighborhood. But you have to work hard to be able to do that. I think you make the sacrifices.

Melinda

2

Isn't it the American dream to be able to afford a home and maybe to afford a home in an area that maybe you want your child to go to a school? ... It's America, there should be something that you should be able to afford to get a house in an area that you might not normally be able to.

Melinda

3

[There] are also people who for their livelihood, or maybe they own apartment buildings, or even just have places that they own and rent... We've had some people we know that that did that just as investments and they had people that were not paying the rent for 2 years. And they lost a ton of money because they had to still pay the mortgage on those places. They still had to pay the water bills that were unpaid... People who own property have to defend themselves.

Melinda



Participants view homelessness as a growing issue

My daughter who is... always... in downtown Pittsburgh, she said, it's really scary when she goes there. And nothing against homeless people or anything like that, but she said, it's a lot of homeless people just on the streets, where it used to be a lot of business people would be walking around and you felt somewhat safer just because there were a lot more people there than they are now. And I do you hear on the news a lot of violence in the actual city of Pittsburgh lately, it seems like a lot of people getting shot.

Sheila

You can't fix a homeless population for people...who are working, but they're just one paycheck away. And that's an issue. That's a state issue. It's not just a county thing.

Selena

I'm working with people who are experiencing homelessness, who are facing homelessness, but they aren't jobless. They aren't someone who was just sleeping under the bridge. No. They had an unfortunate incident happen due to domestic violence, and now they're coming to me for me to help them find housing... Our homeless shelters are becoming more and more full. It's harder to get people in the homeless shelters.

Racheal

There's a lot of homeless people out there.

Manny

Let's try to clean these homeless people up, because it's really getting ridiculous. You got 80,000 homeless people running around Philadelphia and the cops are driving right by when they're shooting needles in their arms and legs. I've seen the videos on YouTube, it's disgusting.

Walt

You see it in King of Prussia, and you see it down here, people on the corners... Some of it could just be a little bit of laziness. I mean, there's so many jobs available that you could go get a job at McDonald's or at Wawa. I'm not saying every single person that's homeless is in that same situation because they may have extenuating circumstances such as like dependence on drugs or alcohol or whatever. And it's hard to get off that to then get yourself into a job. But I think some of the population that's homeless could help themselves a little more.

Kelly



Participants see room for improvement in access to health care and prescription drugs

We do offer the best Medicare and Medicaid programs for people who are low-income and elderly, to be able to get the healthcare coverage that they deserve... People don't have to be uninsured in Pennsylvania, they really don't... There are affordable health plans.

Melinda

It seems like there's a lot of things going on with hospitals, and they also need help.

Carlos

The 1 local hospital around here is going to... the emergency department's closing, which means other hospitals in the area are going to have an influx of sick people.

Kelly

When we went through the COVID situation, I had to go to several different counties to get the different things that I needed. I couldn't find that in where I am now. It wasn't even in the next surrounding.

Kayla

If you have any prescriptions to get refilled or whatever, the CVS that I've dealt with for 30 years are now like horrible. Takes 4 days to get a prescription filled that I could usually, less than 2 years ago, I could sit and wait for 20 minutes.

They can't get staff, they can't get people.

Kevin

I have a(n) eye disease called keratoconus. Basically, it closes my cornea in my eyes, so basically, light blinds me. I have Keystone First and they approve my procedure, but they didn't approve the medication for the procedure. The medication for the procedure is \$4,000, and I feel like with a condition that's really serious like this, it should have automatically been approved... In the times we living in, medical should just be free, honestly... It should be no cost to being healthy. As humans, we already endure a lot of pain, a lot of hurt, a lot of transitioning throughout our lives and going through our own problems. I feel like medical should at least be free.

Myliisa



Democracy & Voting

Some report long lines, tense interactions at polls in 2020, but most voted without issue

I was intimidated and nervous to go to the polling places. People at that time were just so aggressive and angry. And so... I mailed mine in, and then I just kept checking to make sure it was received.

Stefanie

To be honest, I was very unmotivated to vote. I registered to vote, I was unmotivated to vote, and only because my girlfriend called me and insisted, and showed me that she had a badge here that she voted, it motivated me to get dressed and go out.

Alicia

I had to register in May for my ballot and then I got it and sent it in. I didn't have an issue. So it was pretty easy.

Selena

I don't think I had any issues like actually voting, getting there, I don't think I had, I didn't have any issues actually voting.

Racheal

I voted at the polls. I felt kind of bombarded. It was one of the first elections I can remember a lot of people standing outside and really trying to pressure you to vote like their side... I know it was a pretty intense election. But I mean, I cannot remember a previous election where that many people... They were a little bit in your face and it was a little bit too much.

Miranda

[It was] crazy...
Everyone was out there.

Marilyn

You can't vote in my town if you don't have an ID and nobody should vote if they don't have an ID. And nobody should vote if they're not a citizen.

Bill

My husband, he can't get out the house right now. So knowing the deadlines to get his vote in on time and things of that nature and staying on top of that, it was a lot more anxious. I had a whole lot more anxiety about it. However, when the nail hit the road and I was going to mail in his ballot and go to vote and get my children where they need to go, it was a pleasant experience. It was in this local area, it was not bad at all.

Kayla

[The wait] I'm going to say probably close to 40 minutes. In my little town that's a long wait... Normally I'm in and out in 8 minutes.

Kevin



White voters generally have confidence their votes will be counted; some raise technological concerns

Nowadays more than any, it will be counted. Maybe 10 years ago, eh, you know. But I think now, for sure... They're more aware of the cyber part of it. And I just think that because you're aware of something, you're looking for it more. Plus there's more checks and balances.

Sheila

I had gotten an email saying that my vote was received the last time. So I wasn't not confident the first time when other people were claiming that there was voter fraud and everything.

Kelly

There's people that they take an oath. They're reflective of all parties.

Melinda

I lost a little bit of trust in, we got rid of the lever pullers and we went to paper ballots. So I already lost a little bit of trust in the old system, but that just might be me being uncomfortable with change. As far as mailing goes, I'd be a little more uncomfortable. Fearing that maybe it might get lost, it might get not counted.

Bill



Black and Latino respondents are more likely to respond with cynicism and distrust about the voting process

They going to put in office who they want in office, point blank, period. They got to cheat the system, whatever they got to do, they going to put in there who they want in there, so I don't get into it... I don't think votes count at all. I just don't.

Mylisa

I'm not really confident, but...I don't care... I'm just giving you my blunt honesty. I don't care because... I'm not doing it to let doubt sink in. I'm doing it for the fact that this is what my, those before me fought to get done. I'm doing it because I'm a Black female face that people don't think should vote.

Jasimine

The whole mail-in votes and ballots...It could've took nothing for you to see Trump and just toss the ballot or get rid of it somehow... I don't know how they kept track of it.

Anita

I don't know that I trust the voting. I don't know that I've ever trusted voting. I know I do it because I feel it gives me my right to complain... I mean, honestly speaking, I personally feel officials are chosen. I personally, on a bigger scale, I feel like they get their homeboys in there. Now, I'm going to vote because I mean, all right, okay. They say this is something I should do, it's not a problem. I'll do it. It's not a problem. It may get counted, it may not. I know I'm going to, if on the off chance that it does get counted, my vote will be there. That's how I feel.

Yvonne

[There are] 7 white men that orchestrate what goes on in the world.

Sophia

The mail ballots were lost... I feel that the electoral college is the one that decides... I feel like it's a farce, it's a farce. I feel like our votes don't count anyway.

Alicia

I know if I put it in the ballot then it's going somewhere. This time, I wasn't all that sure with my children, but with me, I was. So those voting changes, the different mandates that they had really did cause more anxiety, but in my local area and the place where I voted, those people were knowledgeable. They did help with that anxiety, so it was a pleasant experience, but as a whole, I was anxious about it.

Kayla

I do it because I know that somewhere in my lineage, somebody probably died for us to be able to have the right to vote as a Black person, as a Black woman. But I... Do I really sit there and focus on if it's going to get counted or not? No.

Rachel



Across groups, participants lack trust in government

We need better roads. We need better health care. We need more affordable housing. Can we trust the government to do it?

Melinda

How do you get people to actually do what they said? Once again, it's just holding people accountable. Like here, you came out with this report. Well, let's go, you got the money. Sometimes there is the money behind a report, but... Nobody moves on it. They move on to a new idea or they go somewhere else or they spend the money elsewhere.

Selena

It's all about politics and what's better for them. They say they're going to do something for the communities, but they're really not... It's what's going to please them, what's going to get them into power, what's going to get them on next. [They do] not worry about the...minority community.

Manny

We trusted you, and you're not doing [a] good job to protect us and help us.

Marilyn

The state officials are only going to do what they have to do in order to stay in office.

Kayla

They put a front and they're going to do this and promise this, and then they do absolutely nothing.

Anita



Several participants, especially in Delaware County, say politicians are corrupt and mishandle funds

They line their pockets.

Anita

If none of that money going where it's supposed to now, where do you think \$750 billion going to go to?

Myliisa

More money needs to be allocated to making sure that funds are being used properly.

Kayla

How [does the state budget] impact my life? To me, I'm going to be straight up with you, I don't worry about it. It is what it is. They don't want us to know. They don't want us to know.

Albert

Our government really doesn't like us as much as we think. When it comes down to it, everybody wants to steal everything when they get money for whatever we're getting aid for... Everybody seems to be out for themselves... We're supposed to be so rich. Why is everybody homeless? Like how can somebody make a billion dollars in the government? ... People are skimming and stealing and even their outright salaries. How can you trust anyone that they, what do they do, they pass the laws to give themselves raises and they're voting on their own raises. Like they don't have a boss. These people are all just out there doing whatever they want.

Walt

"Well you voted for me, you got your school to vote for me, here let me pay for your football field." There's way too much political favoritism and money spending that goes on behind closed doors... It's outstanding that nobody's uprising about it at this point in life. If you do the maths what they say and what paper says, don't add up. So the money's going somewhere.

Kevin



Questions?



Ben Lazarus

Director of Research Solutions

TargetSmart

ben.lazarus@targetsmart.com

m: (734) 649-3438