

I Don't See Race; I Don't See Racism: Colorblindness in Melrose

SUMMARY

A substantial proportion of people who responded to the 2022 Melrose DEI Survey chose not to report their race or ethnicity (14%).

Among people who did not report their race or ethnicity:

- 80% do *not* think racism is a concern in Melrose.
- 78% do *not* want the city to do more to address concerns related to DEI.

People who did not report their race or ethnicity:

- have among the strongest feelings of any group about racism, belonging, and DEI.
- appear to be engaged in “colorblindness,” or denial of race and racism.

Introduction

"I don't see race."

"I don't care if he's Black, white or purple."

"I didn't even notice she is Black."

These are the kinds of statements we hear when someone is engaged in colorblindness, a form of racial denial.¹ People who espouse colorblindness may do so from a place of good intent, seeking to assure others that they are not influenced by racism. However, this perspective suggests a limited conception of racism as interpersonal, rather than structural and systemic. People may also engage in colorblindness to avoid racial discomfort, or distance themselves from the benefits of whiteness in a racist society. Whatever the intent or reason, pretending race isn't important makes racism worse; it eliminates structural explanations for racial inequities such as the wealth gap, and reinforces harmful ideas like the myth of meritocracy.²

In her book *The New Jim Crow, Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, scholar Michele Alexander invites us instead to commit to “color consciousness.” She says that an emphasis on color consciousness “places faith in our capacity as humans to show care and concern for others, even as we are fully cognizant of race and possible racial differences.”³ Moreover, we all want to be seen and embraced for who we are, which is why this study measures whether respondents feel they can be their “full, authentic self” in Melrose. As the character Carter in Angie Thomas’ novel *The Hate U Give* puts it, “If you don't see my blackness, you don't see me.”⁴

The purpose of this report, which is based on publicly available data from the 2022 Melrose DEI survey, is to take a closer look at the beliefs of respondents who declined to provide their race or ethnicity in the context of the survey. Findings highlight the problem of colorblindness in Melrose, and underscore how colorblindness may prevent us from addressing systemic racism.

Methods

These data are from a 2022 survey conducted by the City of Melrose as part of a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) assessment process “designed to collect information about the racial climate in Melrose.” The DEI assessment consisted of 33 focus groups and a survey. The assessment included people who live in Melrose, people who work in Melrose, people who attend school in Melrose, and parents of young people who attend school in Melrose. The assessment was conducted by the City in collaboration with VISIONS Inc. Results of the survey and focus groups were shared with the public in an online community forum held on June 22, 2022.⁵

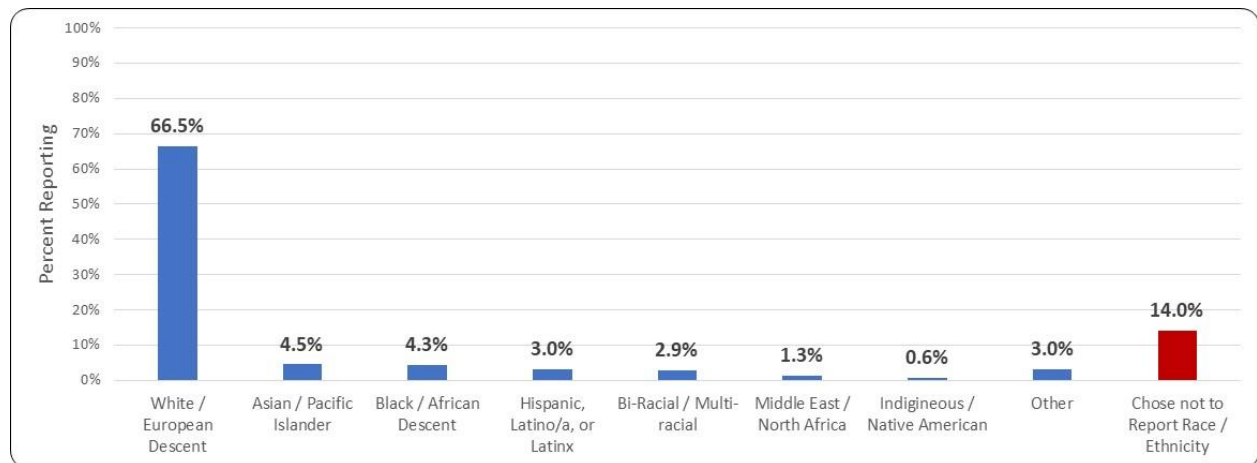
Data collection took place from August 4 through October 4, 2021. Survey recruitment took place via email and through the Mayor’s Blog. Melrose residents received an invitation to participate in the survey on August 4, 2021. Families of Melrose Public School students received an invitation on August 5, 2021. The survey was also promoted by the Melrose Energy Commission and other community groups. The survey was available in English, Chinese, Portuguese, and Spanish. SurveyMonkey was used for data collection. A link to the survey is available at the end of this report.⁶

The survey question used to measure race and ethnicity is “What is your racial/ethnic identity?” Response options are shown in Figure 1, below.

Characteristics of Survey Respondents

In total, 1,363 people took the DEI Survey. Most survey respondents identified as white (66.5%). The second most common response to the race/ethnicity question was “I prefer not to respond” shown here as “Chose not to report Race/Ethnicity” (14.0%). The other 19.5% of respondents identified as Asian Pacific Islander; Black or of African descent; Hispanic, Latino/a, or Latinx; Middle Eastern or North African; Indigenous or Native American; Bi-racial or multi-racial; or another race not listed in the survey. The majority of respondents were female residents of Melrose, age 31-60 (shown in Figures 10-12, which appear at the end of this report).

Figure 1. What is your racial/ethnic identity?



Findings

Concern about racism is lowest among people who did not report their race or ethnicity.

Among people who chose not to report their race or ethnicity in the DEI survey, only 20% believe racism is a concern in Melrose (Figure 2). Likewise, only 9% of people who chose not to report their race or ethnicity believe that racism is more of a concern in Melrose than in surrounding communities (Figure 3). Agreement with both statements was greater among people in *every racial or ethnic group* compared to those who chose not to report their race or ethnicity.

Figure 2. I believe that racism is a concern in Melrose

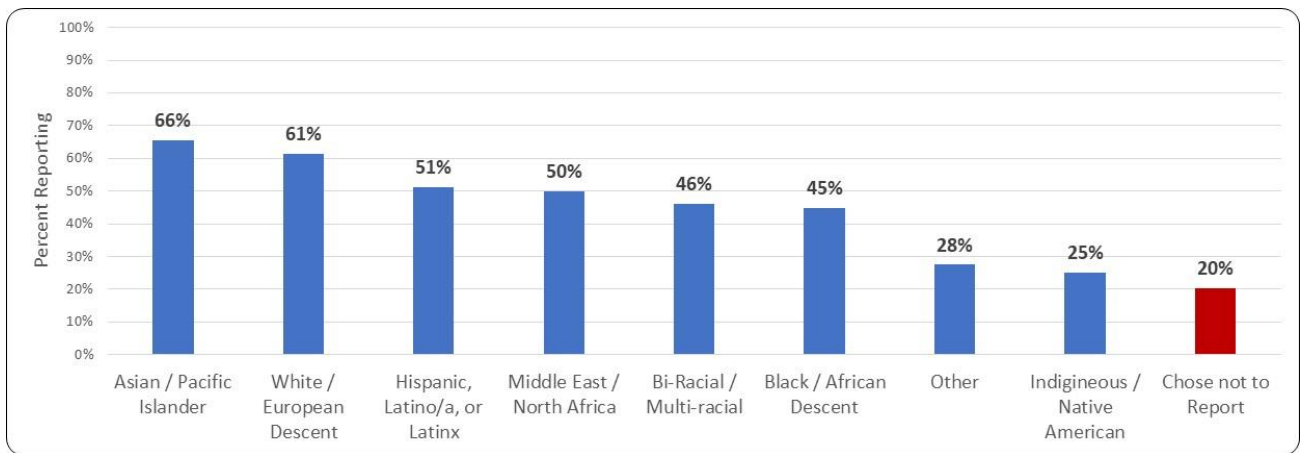
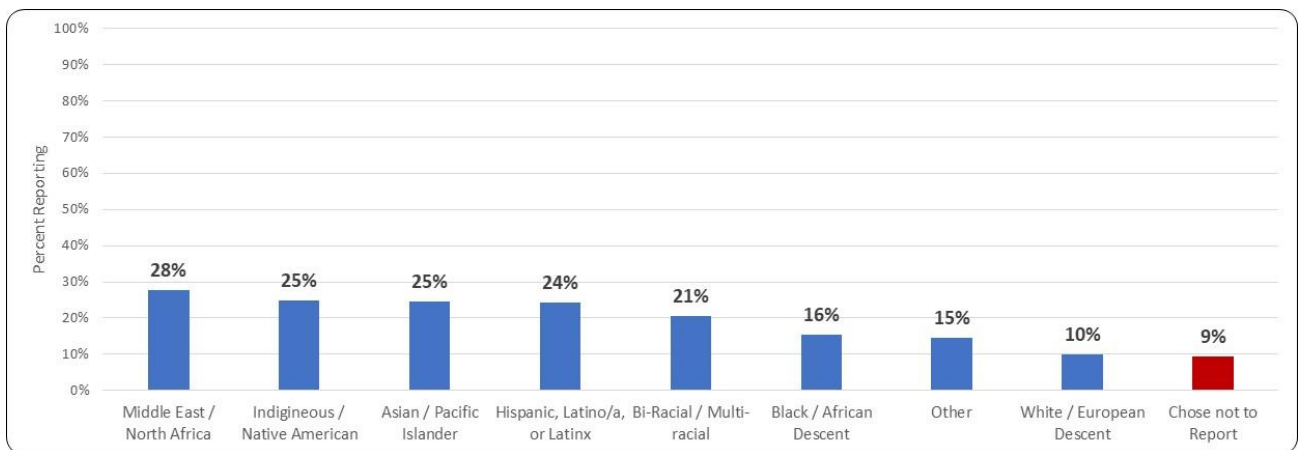


Figure 3. I believe that racism in Melrose is more of a concern than in the surrounding communities.



The perception that Melrose is inclusive and committed to DEI is greatest (or nearly so) among people who did not report their race or ethnicity.

People who did not report their race or ethnicity in the survey had greater agreement than people in nearly every racial or ethnic group that Melrose is inclusive of all (Figure 4) and that the city demonstrates a commitment to DEI (Figure 5).

Figure 4. I believe Melrose is inclusive of all, regardless of race, religion, gender, class, sexual orientation, ability, etc.

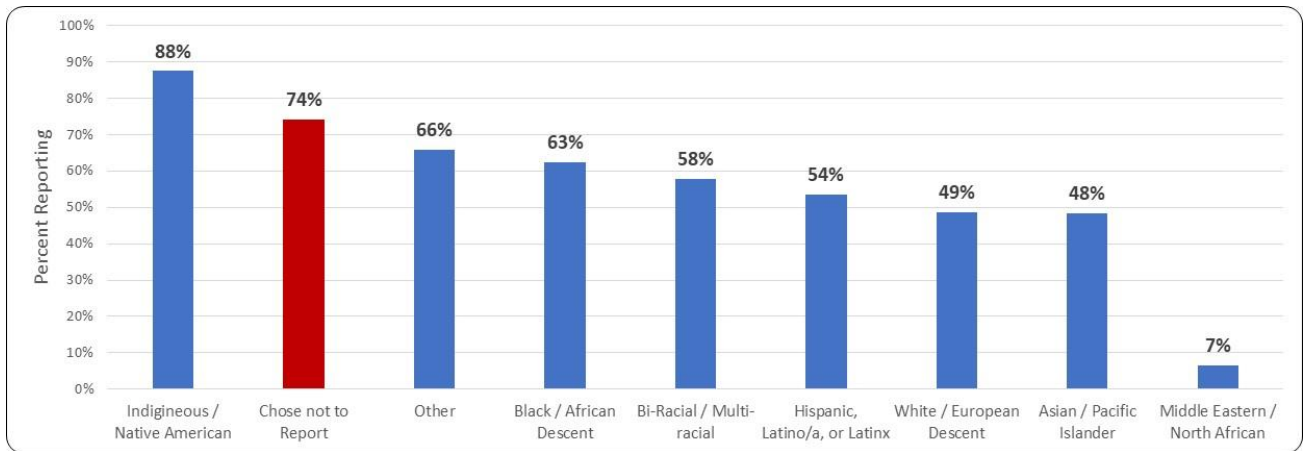
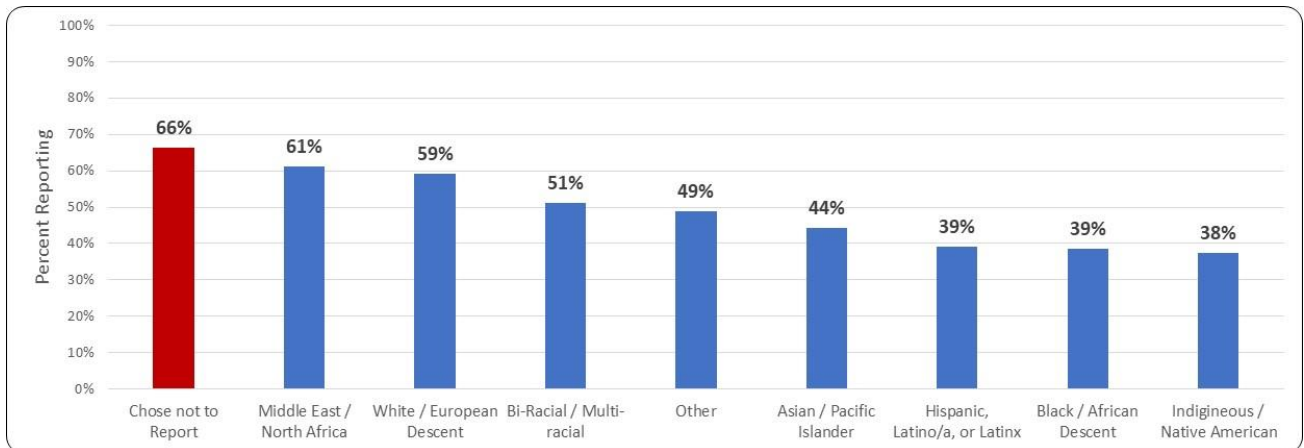


Figure 5. The city of Melrose demonstrates a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in/for the community.



People who did not report their race or ethnicity are satisfied with how Melrose addresses DEI, and do not think Melrose should do more.

People who did not report their race or ethnicity in the survey had greater agreement than people in every racial or ethnic group that Melrose addresses concerns related to DEI (Figure 6). Only about one in five agreed that Melrose needs to do *more* to address DEI (Figure 7).

Figure 6. The City of Melrose addresses concerns related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

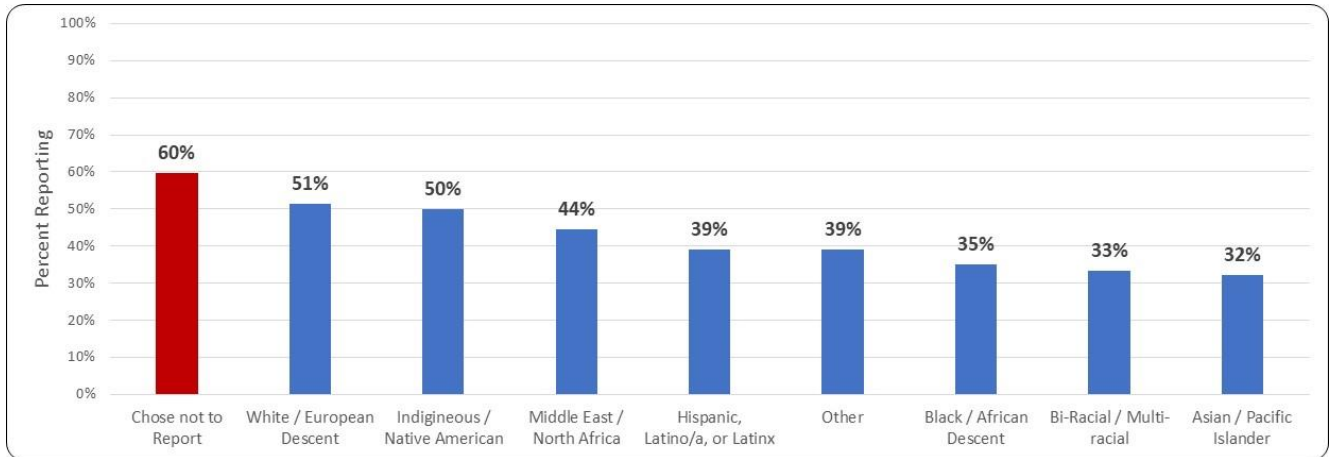
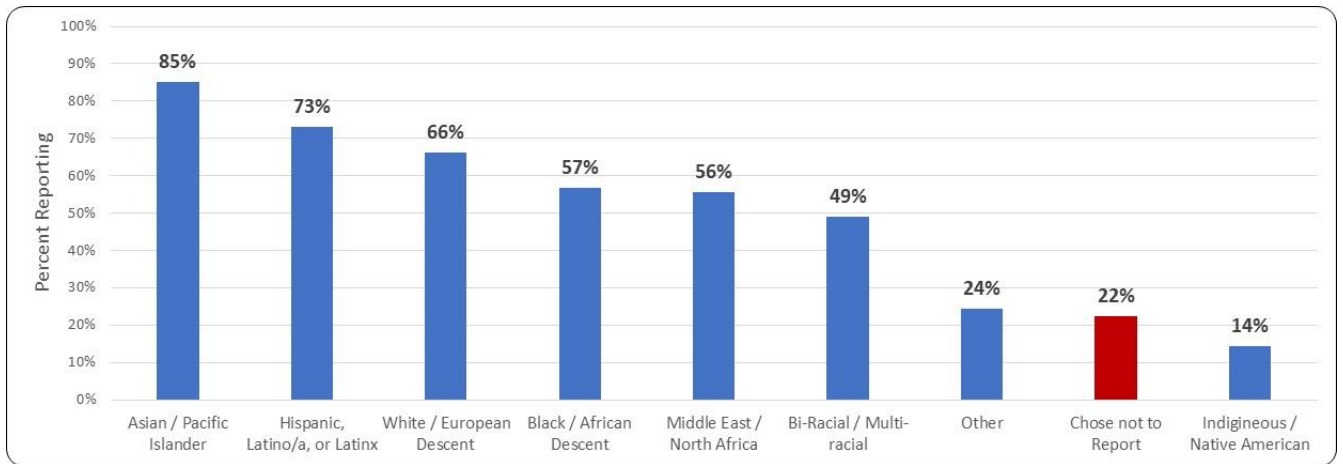


Figure 7. The City of Melrose should do more to address diversity, equity, and inclusion.



People who did not report their race or ethnicity have a greater sense of belonging in Melrose than people in most racial and ethnic groups.

Most people who did not report their race or ethnicity in the survey reported feeling a sense of belonging in Melrose (Figure 8), and felt they could be their full, authentic self in Melrose (Figure 9). Only people who identified as white had greater agreement with these statements.

Figure 8. I feel a sense of belonging in Melrose.

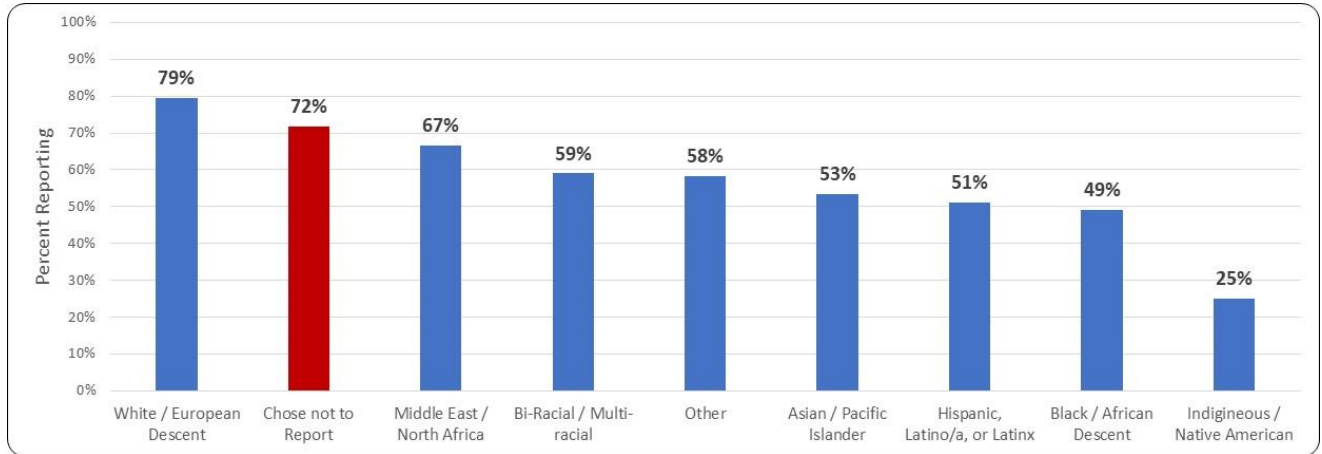
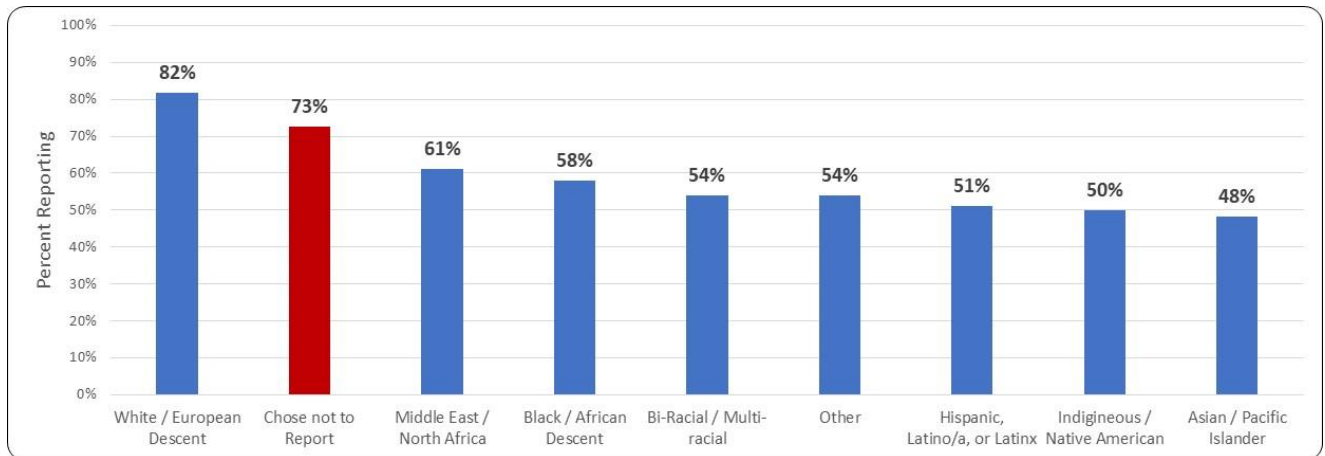


Figure 9. I can be my full, authentic self in Melrose



Conclusions

These data suggest that individuals who did not report their race or ethnicity in the DEI survey are engaging in colorblindness.

- They did not acknowledge their own race in the context of the survey.
- Most of them do *not* think racism is a concern.
- Most do *not* want the city to do more to address concerns related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

These findings are notable not only for what they say about people who did not report their race or ethnicity in the survey, but what they say about this group *relative to other groups surveyed*. On each of the eight questions presented in this report, people who did not report their race or ethnicity had among the *greatest* or *least* endorsement of the items. This shows that individuals who did not report their race or ethnicity have among the strongest feelings of any group about racism, belonging, and DEI.

For example, people who chose not to report their race or ethnicity had the least agreement of any group that racism is a concern in Melrose, and that it is more of a concern than in other communities. They had the least agreement of any group with the statement, “the city should do more to address concerns related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.” Conversely, they had the among the greatest agreement that Melrose is inclusive of all, demonstrates a commitment to DEI, and addresses concerns related to DEI. Only people who identified as white reported a greater sense of belonging in Melrose, and a greater sense that they could be their full, authentic self in the city.

This underscores that people who did not report their race or ethnicity in the survey likely did not omit it because they didn’t consider it to be important, but the opposite; they have strong feelings of denial when confronted with the concepts of race and racism. This mindset is problematic, because racism *is* a concern in Melrose, as it is in every city in the United States. We cannot begin to address racism in Melrose if we cannot acknowledge race.

Other Demographics

Figure 10. What is your gender identity?

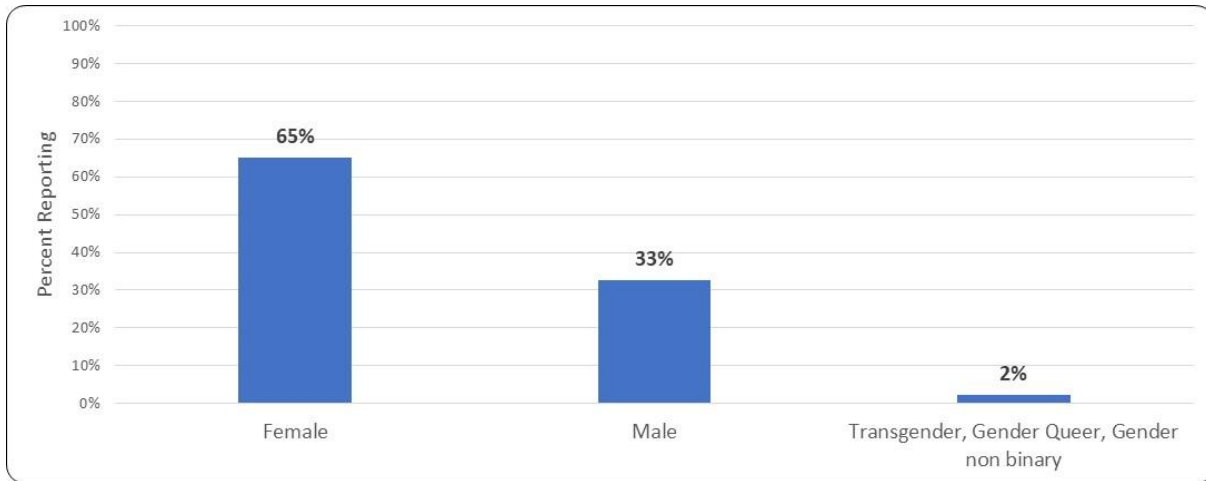


Figure 11. What is your community role? (check all that apply)

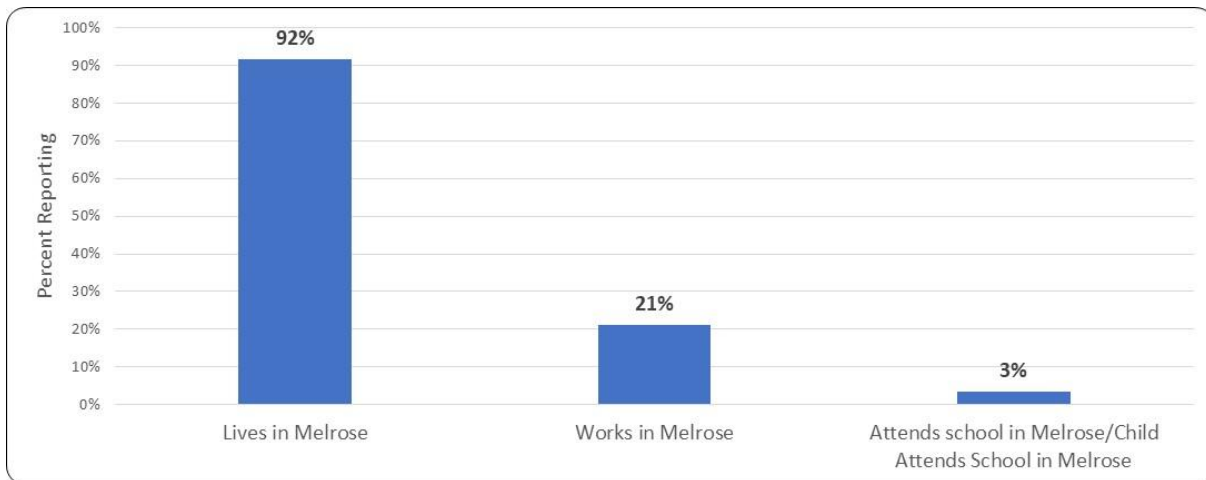
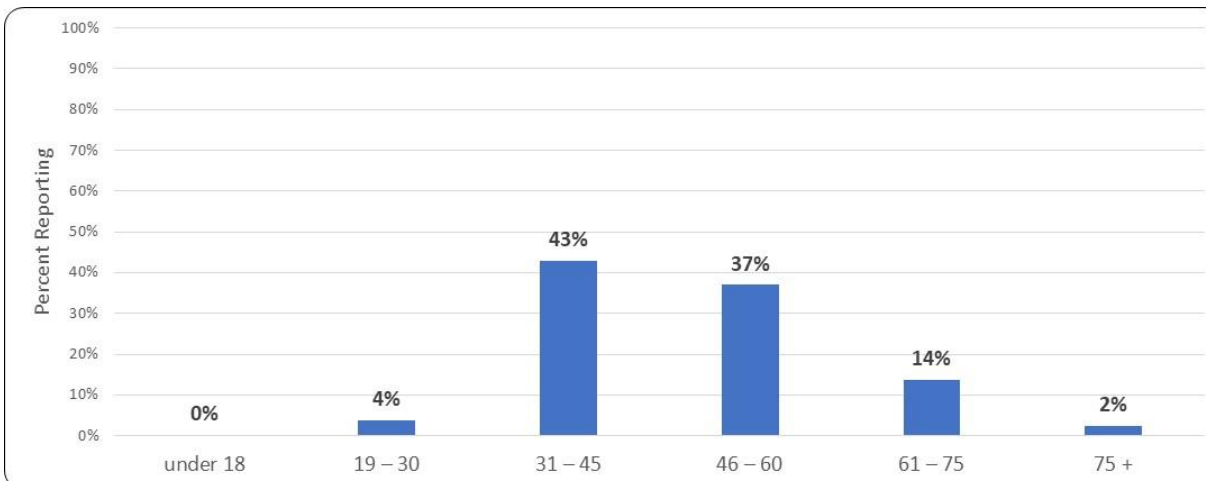


Figure 12. What is your age?



Acknowledgements

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Sources

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5. Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Community Forum June 22nd 2022. <https://vimeo.com/724592993>
6. Link to the online Survey: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/QH5NDPG>