

SUMMER  
2025



# FINAL REPORT

LISTENING SESSIONS & STATEWIDE SURVEY

***"We've gotta fight from within. Together."***

***"We're missing a sense of community and the sense that we all have to take care of each other."***

***"We are struggling so much because we don't have anyone fighting for us"***

***"We need to invest in our folks."***

Ada • Ardmore • Tahlequah  
Altus • OKC • Tulsa • Lawton

[www.togetherOK.org](http://www.togetherOK.org)

## Executive summary

This report shares what Oklahomans told us about their communities, their challenges, and their hopes for the future. Through a series of listening sessions held across the state and a statewide survey, we gathered both stories and data that highlight where people feel the greatest strain and what changes they most want to see from policymakers. The goal is to ensure that the voices of residents — especially those most impacted by economic insecurity, health gaps, and justice system involvement — help shape the policy priorities for the upcoming legislative session.

## Data & methodology

During the summer of 2025, OK Policy and Together Oklahoma hosted listening sessions in **Lawton, Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Ardmore, Ada, Tahlequah, and Altus**. Participants shared firsthand experiences around housing, health, education, justice, and other community concerns. Notes from the listening sessions were compiled and analyzed, leading to the identification of eight broad categories. Key takeaways from each category were then examined both statewide and at the city level.

Alongside these sessions, a **statewide survey of 416 respondents** provided quantitative insights into who is most affected and which issues rise to the top across Oklahoma.

These two data sources — the survey and the listening sessions — are presented together here to provide a fuller picture of community priorities.

## Top themes identified

- **Housing & cost of living** — affordability, stability, and access to safe housing
- **Economic security & jobs** — wages, employment opportunities, and financial stability
- **Justice system & reentry** — incarceration, diversion, and support for returning citizens
- **Immigration** — community integration, services, and policy barriers
- **Health care** — access, affordability, and quality of services
- **Youth well-being** — education, safety, and opportunities for young people
- **Tribal-State relationship** — sovereignty, collaboration, and resource sharing
- **Democracy & voting access** — civic engagement, representation, and barriers to voting

## Survey demographics

Nearly one-third of respondents were 65 or above and another fifth between 55–64, with few under 25. **Education levels were high** — two-thirds held a bachelor’s degree or higher, and one-third had graduate or professional degrees. **Women made up 71% of respondents**, men 25%, and non-binary or other identities about 4%.

The sample was **predominantly white** (70%), with multiracial (12%), AI/AN (7%), Black or African American (6%), Hispanic or Latino (3%), and Asian (0.5%) respondents also represented (1% identified as “other”). Compared to [Oklahoma’s 2020 Census demographics](#), the sample notably overrepresents white (+8.4%) and American Indian/Alaska Native (+6%) respondents, while underrepresenting Hispanic or Latino (-15%), Black (-6%), and Asian (-5.5%) populations.

**Most respondents were homeowners** (74%) and **urban residents** (72%). **Family income leaned higher**, with one-third earning \$100,000 or more, though 12% earned less than \$30,000.

## Regional differences

- **Central region:** Similar to the overall profile, with somewhat younger adults and higher educational attainment. About one-third earned \$100,000 or more.
- **Northeast:** The oldest group, with nearly 40% age 65+. More racially diverse.
- **Southeast:** Skewed middle-aged and entirely rural, with strong homeownership.
- **Southwest:** Younger overall, more racially diverse, and majority rural. Income was polarized, with many high earners alongside many with low incomes.

## Housing & cost of living

Across Oklahoma, residents emphasized that **rising housing costs** and **limited assistance** are pushing more families into instability. Participants described homelessness increasing as affordable housing shrinks, while high living costs make it harder to cover food and health care. They pointed to **rigid eligibility rules for assistance, discrimination against voucher holders and low-income tenants**, and **medical bills** that often tip families into crisis.

About **1% of survey respondents had been evicted** and **3% had experienced homelessness**. Nearly three-quarters reported owning their home, while just over a quarter rented. **Rent burdens varied widely**: about 22% paid between \$501–\$1,000 a month, a third between \$1,001–\$2,000, and small shares reported paying less than \$500 or more than \$5,000. These figures show that while most survey respondents are stably housed, **many remain just one unexpected bill or disruption away from crisis**.

## Economic security & jobs

Economic security was a dominant theme across communities. Residents described how **limited job opportunities** — especially in rural areas — combine with a **minimum wage that cannot cover basic needs** to leave families constantly on edge. **Older adults and low-income workers** were identified as especially vulnerable, while **gaps in education and training** restrict upward mobility. Many also emphasized the **rising costs of food, housing, and other necessities**, noting that people are often just one paycheck away from losing everything.

Survey data reflects these struggles: **42% of respondents reported difficulty paying bills and 55% struggled with food access**. Regional variation sharpened the picture — the Southeast reported higher food insecurity (59%), while the Southwest stood out with 52% struggling to pay bills and 81% struggling with food. When asked to rank economic security priorities, respondents placed **paid sick leave first**, followed by economic support for low-wage workers.

## Justice system & reentry

Criminal justice was described as a **system built more on punishment than rehabilitation**. Residents pointed to broken promises and weak follow-through, emphasizing the need for **restorative justice alternatives**. Many described the **ongoing penalties people face** even after completing a sentence — fines and fees, barriers to housing and work, and the revolving door of re-incarceration. They argued that a fair system would focus on **rehabilitation and opportunity** rather than deepening cycles of harm.

A **small share of survey respondents reported being incarcerated as children** — about 1% of urban and rural residents, though men were more affected (3%) than women. **Adult incarceration was more common**: 6% of rural and 3% of urban residents reported it, with men (8%) and non-binary respondents (8%) showing the highest rates compared with under 3% of women. The Central region reported the largest share of men with incarceration histories, with additional cases in the Northeast and Southeast. When asked to rank issues within criminal justice, respondents prioritized **improving job access for people with records, consistent sentencing, and adequate legal representation**.

## Immigration

Immigration was described as **essential to Oklahoma's identity and strength**. Residents emphasized that immigrants contribute **not only to the economy but also to the vitality of local communities and culture**. At the same time, they noted that many non-immigrants misunderstand immigrant experiences, which fuels stigma and exclusion. Participants stressed that challenges are felt by **both undocumented and legal residents**, and that **policy uncertainty disrupts stability** for families who want to put down roots.

## Health care

Health care emerged as both a **deeply personal and systemic concern**. Residents described the **high cost of private insurance, limited coverage, and frequent denials of medication or treatment** by insurers. Many noted that hospitals profit from Medicaid and Medicare patients while still leaving gaps in access. While Medicaid expansion improved coverage for some, **barriers remain**, especially for those who lack the knowledge or resources to navigate the system. Participants emphasized that **health care should be treated as a right**, not a privilege, and expressed frustration that people are left to struggle in a country with vast wealth.

When asked to rank priorities, respondents placed **disability care at the top**, with equitable access and adequate funding for SoonerCare and Medicare also receiving high importance.

## Youth well-being

Youth well-being was described as a **shared responsibility** that requires investment and long-term commitment. Residents emphasized that young people need **stability, mentorship, and guidance** to thrive, and that Oklahoma has not done enough to take preventative steps or invest in supports that would benefit future generations. **Education** was identified as the foundation for opportunity, while vocational training was highlighted as a pathway to success.

Participants also noted the importance of **expanded therapy and interventions** to address challenges early, before they escalate into larger problems. While programs to support youth do exist, they are often **limited in reach and resources**, leaving many without the consistent care and opportunities they need. The discussions highlighted a **strong desire for policies and investments that treat youth as a priority** rather than an afterthought.

## Tribal-State relationship

Tribal-state relationships were described as **marked by both strength and strain**. Residents highlighted the sovereignty and leadership of Tribal Nations, noting that **Tribes continue to invest in health, education, and economic development** that benefit all Oklahomans. Participants emphasized that Tribes often “do the most with the least,” setting an example of community care and responsible governance. At the same time, **state leaders were frequently seen as resistant to recognizing Tribal authority**, which creates ongoing disputes and uncertainty. Key issues included state reluctance to engage in good-faith partnerships, inconsistent recognition of Tribal sovereignty, and the expansion of Tribal courts’ jurisdiction.

In the statewide survey, **about 10% of respondents identified with a Tribal Nation**, with the Cherokee Nation the most represented among Tribal affiliations.

## Democracy & voting access

Democracy and voting access were described as areas where Oklahomans feel **increasingly shut out of decision-making**. Participants spoke of an **erosion of citizen power**, noting how few meaningful ways there are to engage with government. Many described legislators as **disconnected from the people they represent**, while the **voting process itself was often seen as inaccessible or ineffective**. Local elections, in particular, were frequently overlooked, even though they carry significant impact on daily life.

Within this context, residents expressed **strong support for structural reforms** aimed at opening up opportunities for broader civic participation. **Same-day registration and expanded early voting emerged as top priorities**.

## Cross-sector policy needs

While each issue — from health care to housing to democracy — was discussed separately, participants painted a **clear picture of how these systems overlap in daily life**. The same barriers surfaced again and again: confusing or inaccessible services, limited early support, and policies that punish rather than help. What people called for most was not a single fix, but a **connected, responsive system** that treats people as whole rather than as isolated problems.



### Shared needs across all themes included:

- **Adequate wages and economic stability** to ensure families can meet basic needs.
- Health care that is **affordable, easy to access, and equitable for everyone**
- **Stronger, more supportive communities** built through investment in youth, families, and local leadership.
- **Policies and systems that reduce barriers** rather than create them, including fairer eligibility rules for assistance and less punitive approaches to criminal justice.
- **Meaningful opportunities for voice and participation**, from local decision-making to statewide democracy reforms.

## Opportunities

The listening sessions and survey findings reveal not only the barriers Oklahomans face but also the **opportunities to build stronger, fairer systems**. Across communities, people called for **policies that respond to everyday struggles**. They also made clear that democracy and governance matter: without accountability, transparency, and community participation, even the best-designed policies will fall short of their promise.

These insights will guide our advocacy in the months ahead. From what we heard, **three broad areas of priority** stand out:

- **Economic security for families and children** — Raising wages, expanding access to child care, strengthening tax credits, improving health coverage, and investing in schools and child well-being.
- **Strong communities** — Ensuring affordable housing and renter protections, data-driven criminal justice reform, and reducing incarceration.
- **Accountable, responsive governance** — Protecting state revenue for programs and services, ensuring fair taxes, respecting Tribal sovereignty, and advancing accountability and transparency in state leadership.

While outreach efforts successfully captured a wide range of voices and experiences, there remains an opportunity to **expand representation** among participants from **racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds, non-homeowners**, and **men** or **gender-diverse individuals**. Future engagement could prioritize intentional strategies to reach these communities to ensure their perspectives are more fully reflected in the findings.

It's also important to note that this report provides an **overview of the most common and consistent themes identified across sessions**, rather than a complete record of every viewpoint shared. Some feedback — particularly individual or less frequent comments — may not be represented here but still holds value for continued discussion and follow-up.

Additionally, several conversations revealed **gaps in public understanding around key issues** such as homelessness, criminal justice, and tribal relations. These moments highlight an opportunity for ongoing education and outreach to strengthen community knowledge, challenge misconceptions, and build a more informed dialogue moving forward.

Overall, these opportunities point toward a more **connected, people-centered policy agenda**. They suggest that the solutions Oklahomans want are not siloed fixes, but **integrated approaches** that recognize how economic stability, strong communities, and good governance all reinforce one another.

## Take Action

Building this foundation will require commitment from state leaders — but it also depends on **everyday Oklahomans**. You can:

- Join a **Together Oklahoma action group** organized around core issue areas and work alongside others who share your priorities. Sign up for Together Oklahoma action groups, updates, and newsletters at [TogetherOK.org/join-us](https://TogetherOK.org/join-us).
- Stay engaged with Oklahoma Policy Institute, from our yearly **Day of Action at the Capitol** to our **listening sessions across the state**, where we bring community voices directly into the policy conversation. Learn about upcoming events and ways to get involved at [TogetherOK.org/events](https://TogetherOK.org/events).
- **Follow our updates** to stay informed and take action when key decisions are being made at the Legislature. Subscribe to newsletters or general updates at [OKPolicy.org/subscribe](https://OKPolicy.org/subscribe).

Together, **we can turn these opportunities into real progress** for Oklahoma families and communities.