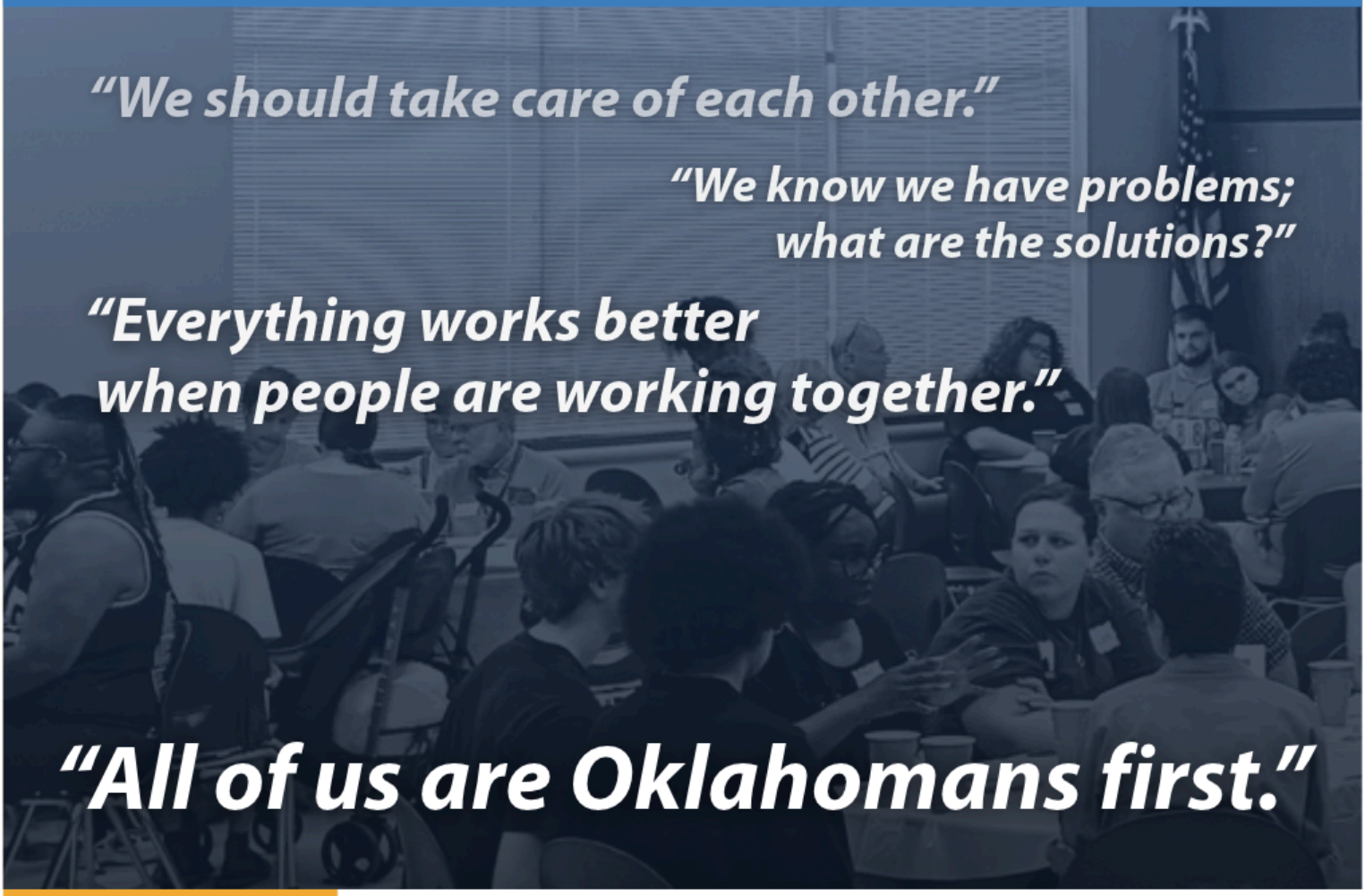
SUMMER 2026

FINAL REPORT

OKPOLICY Oklahoma Policy Institute

together OK

LISTENING SESSIONS & STATEWIDE SURVEY



Ada • Ardmore • Chickasha • Lawton
McAlester • OKC • Tahlequah • Tulsa

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 summer 2026, OK Policy and Together Oklahoma hosted listening sessions in **Lawton**, **Ardmore**, **Tulsa**, **McAlester**, **Tahlequah**, **Ada**, **Chickasha**, and **Oklahoma City**. 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 498 respondents** provided quantitative insights into who is most affected and which issues rise to the top across Oklahoma. Because not all respondents answered every question, percentages were calculated based on the total number of respondents who answered each individual item.

Top themes identified

- **Housing** — housing costs and quality, renter protections, and access to assistance
- **Economic security & jobs** — wages, cost of living, employment, and food access
- **Health care —** affordability, insurance barriers, provider shortages, and coverage
- **Justice system & public safety** — fines and fees, diversion, reentry, and policing
- **Youth & education** — safe places and programs, youth mental health, public schools, and family stability
- **Immigration** — community contributions, fear, and racial profiling
- **Tribal–State relationships** — Tribal investment, sovereignty, and state-Tribal partnership
- **Taxes, government spending, & democracy** — fairness, transparency, and voting access and reform

Survey demographics

Survey respondents skewed **older and highly educated**. More than one-third (37%) were age 65 or older, **roughly twice the statewide share** of 18%, while just 3% were under age 25. More than 8 in 10 respondents (83%) held a bachelor's degree or higher, nearly three times the statewide rate of 28%, and nearly two in five (39%) held a master's degree. **Women made up 73% of respondents**; men accounted for 24%, and non-binary or other identities for 3%.

The sample was **predominantly white** (80%), substantially higher than the 59% statewide share of non-Hispanic white Oklahomans, followed by respondents who identified as multiracial (8%), American Indian or Alaska Native (5%), Black (3%), and Hispanic or Latine (3%). Hispanic (14% statewide), Black (8%), American Indian or Alaska Native (9%), and Asian (3%) Oklahomans were underrepresented. About **1 in 10 respondents identified with a Tribal Nation**, most commonly the Cherokee Nation.

Respondents also tended to be **homeowners**, **urban residents**, and **higher-income**. Among those who reported owning or renting their home, 79% were homeowners, compared with a statewide rate of 66%. Three-quarters (75%) lived in urban areas. Two in five respondents (41%) reported household incomes of $100,000 or more, compared with a statewide median household income of about $65,000, while 6% reported incomes below $30,000.

Regional differences

Most responses came from the **Central** (245 respondents) and **Northeast** (171) regions. The Southeast and Southwest each had fewer than 30 respondents.

- **Central**: Closely mirrors the statewide profile. It had the most urban respondents (85%) and the largest share of high earners (45% at $100,000 or more).
- **Northeast**: This region had the highest number of oldest respondents, with 40% of respondents age 65 or older. About three-quarters of its Tribally affiliated respondents were Cherokee Nation citizens.
- **Southeast**: All respondents were rural, and this region had the most racially diverse response (64% white, with 16% American Indian or Alaska Native and 16% multiracial). When compared to other regions, it had more men (36%), fewer high earners (28%), and the highest share of people reporting difficulty paying bills (48%).
- **Southwest**: Majority rural (65%) and nearly all white (95%). This region reported the highest rates of trouble accessing food (71%), barriers to employment (90%), and voting challenges (33%).

***Footnote**: State benchmarks: **U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts, Oklahoma** (2025 population estimates; 2020–2024 American Community Survey for education, income, and homeownership).*

Housing

Across every community, residents raised **housing costs as a significant concern**. Participants described a **shortage of homes that are both affordable and livable**, with rents rising faster than wages, new construction priced beyond many families' reach, and older homes and rental units falling into disrepair. In several communities, residents said families increasingly need roommates to afford rent, young adults struggle to buy their first home, and some people are leaving their hometowns in search of more affordable housing.

Renters described **poor housing conditions and limited protections**. Some reported landlords delaying or refusing needed repairs, while tenants may hesitate to raise concerns because they fear eviction or other consequences. Participants frequently pointed to landlord-tenant laws they viewed as favoring property owners over renters. Homeowners, particularly seniors living on fixed incomes, described a different kind of financial pressure: **rising property insurance**, **property taxes**, **utility bills**, and **maintenance costs** are making it increasingly difficult for some residents to remain in homes they already own.

For residents who need **housing assistance, options can be limited and difficult to access**. Participants described long waiting lists for public housing and rental assistance, strict eligibility requirements, and programs that can be difficult to find or navigate. Many connected these barriers — along with the broader shortage of affordable housing — to increasing homelessness in their communities.

Survey responses reflected many of the same concerns. **Housing was the most commonly reported source of budget strain**, selected by 28% of respondents. Among respondents who reported housing-related difficulties, finding affordable housing was the most common challenge, accounting for nearly two-thirds of selections.

Economic security & jobs

Across the state, residents said **wages have not kept pace with the cost of living**. Participants described working multiple jobs, living paycheck to paycheck, and choosing between necessities like housing, food, gas, and medicine. For some families, one illness, job loss, or unexpected expense could put their housing at risk.

Participants also pointed to **low-wage jobs that leave workers dependent on public benefits** and a "benefits cliff," where earning slightly more can mean losing assistance before a family can afford to go without it. **Child care costs** were another common barrier to work. In rural

communities, limited job opportunities and transportation made employment harder to access, while people with criminal records described being screened out of jobs.

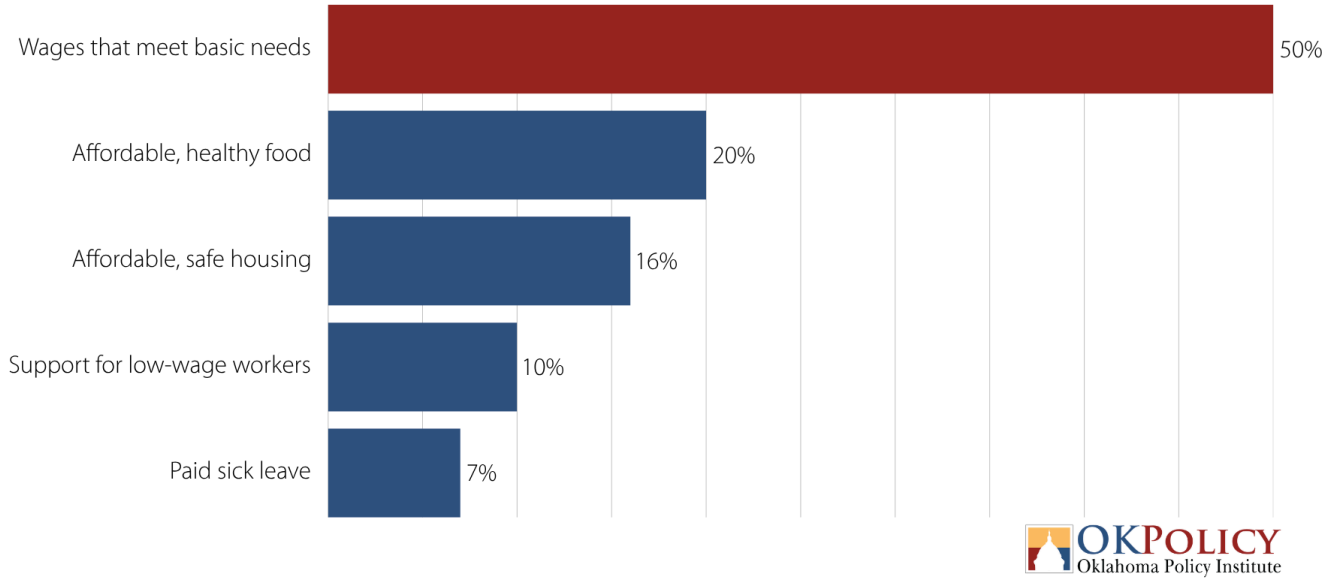
Food insecurity emerged across several communities, including concerns about food deserts and children losing access to regular meals during the summer.

Survey responses reflected these pressures. **More than half of respondents (57%) reported difficulty accessing food**, while 38% struggled to pay bills, particularly medical and utility expenses. Nearly two-thirds (64%) reported **barriers to employment**, most commonly low wages or inadequate benefits. Food access challenges were highest in the Southwest (71%), while difficulty paying bills was highest in the Southeast (48%).

Wages that meet basic needs stood out as the clear top priority, ranked first by half of respondents (50%), well ahead of affordable food (20%) and housing (16%). Sufficient wages ranked first in every region.

Half ranked wages that meet basic needs as their top economic priority

Share of respondents ranking issue as most important



Health care

Across the state, residents described a health care system that is **expensive even for people with insurance and difficult to access, particularly outside metro areas**. Participants reported delaying medical and dental care, skipping medications, or waiting until health problems became emergencies because they could not afford treatment. Many also described **struggling with insurers** over denied claims, prior authorizations, referrals, and prescriptions.

Provider shortages were a major concern in rural and small-town communities. Many rural residents said they must **travel to Oklahoma City, Tulsa, or even out of state** for specialty care, while others worried about the future of rural hospitals as Medicaid funding tightens.

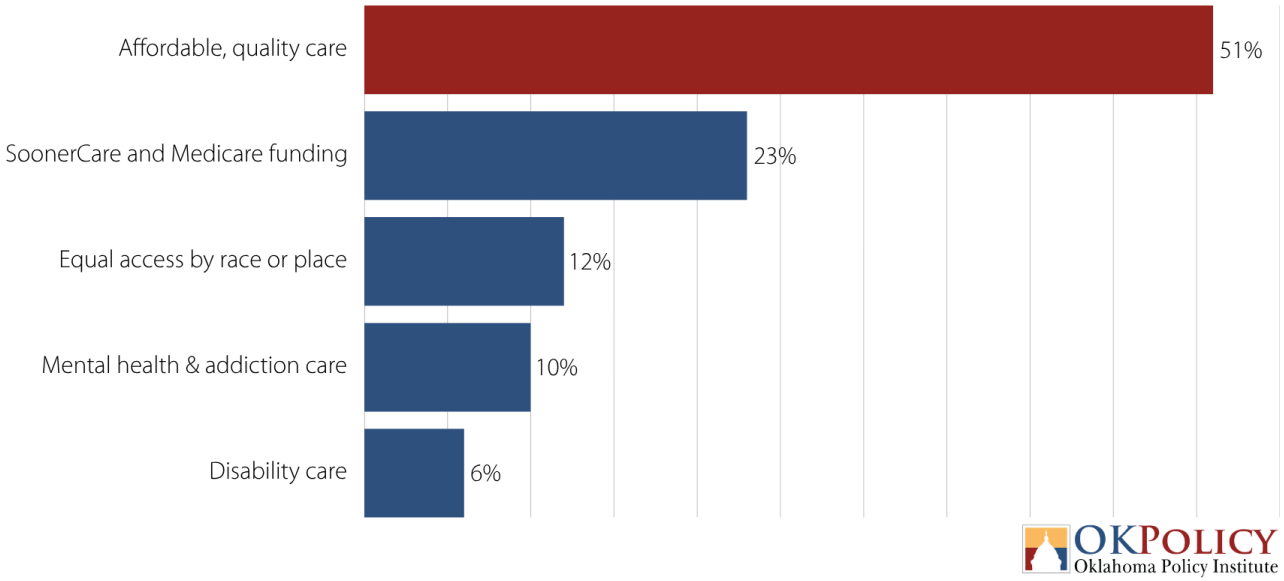
Experiences with **SoonerCare were mixed**. Some participants credited Medicaid expansion with improving access to coverage, while others described coverage losses, frustration with managed care, and difficulty finding providers who accept Medicaid. Residents also pointed to gaps for people who earn too much to qualify for SoonerCare but still cannot afford private coverage, as well as a system complicated enough to discourage people from seeking help.

Mental health services were frequently described as scarce and underfunded. Tulsa participants raised concerns about distrust of the health care system among Black residents.

Survey findings reflected these financial pressures. Among respondents who reported difficulty paying their bills, **medical bills were the most commonly reported challenge.** However, when all respondents were asked to identify their greatest source of overall budget strain, **medical expenses ranked third (14%)** behind housing and groceries. **Affordable, high-quality health care, including dental care**, was the survey's clear top priority, ranked first by 51% of respondents and identified as the top priority in every region of the state. Sustainable funding for Medicaid (SoonerCare) and Medicare followed, receiving the most first-place rankings from 23% of respondents.

Half ranked affordable, high-quality care as their top health priority

Share of respondents ranking issue as most important



Justice system & public safety

Participants statewide described a **two-tiered justice system in which money, race, and connections can shape outcomes**. Many felt wealthy or well-connected people receive more lenient treatment, while people without those resources or connections face harsh consequences for minor offenses. Participants also raised concerns about **racial profiling and heavier policing in some communities**.

Fines and fees for criminal offenses were among the most consistent concerns. Residents described a cycle in which unpaid fines or court costs can lead to warrants and arrests, which can then cost people their jobs and make it even harder to pay what they owe. Participants also described **significant barriers after incarceration**, particularly to employment and housing. Many called for **reentry support beginning before release**, **greater access to rehabilitation in prisons**, and **mental health and substance use treatment as alternatives to incarceration** when appropriate.

On policing, participants called for **more interaction with officers outside of emergencies** and stronger training in de-escalation and trauma-informed practices.

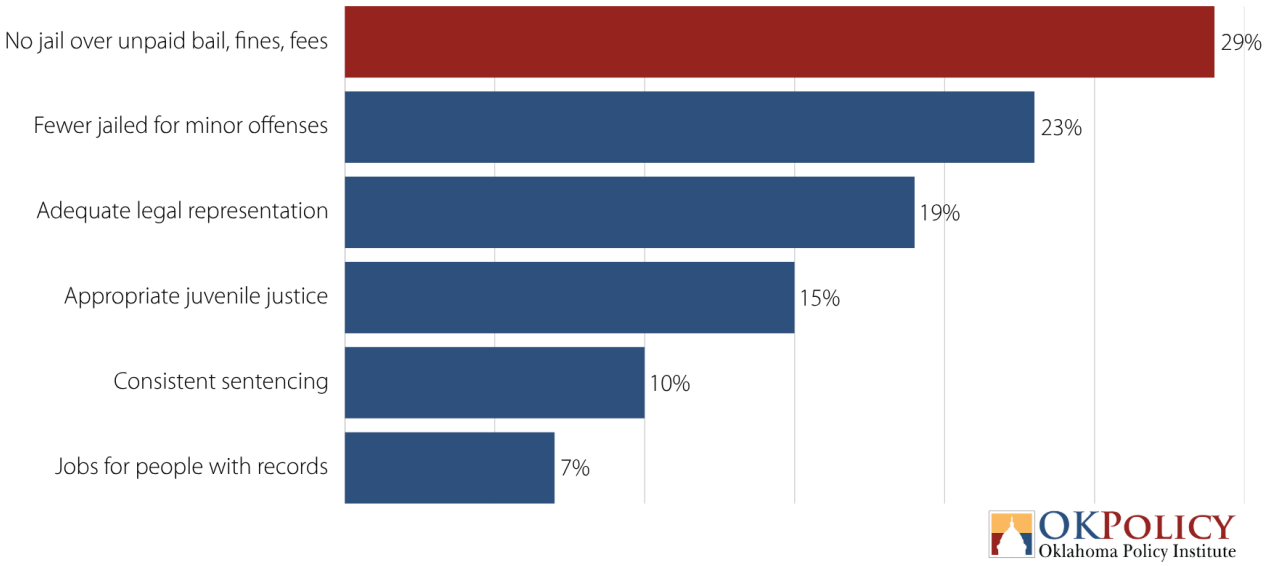
Most survey respondents (82%) reported **no direct involvement with the justice system**. However, 7% had a family member currently in jail or prison or on probation or parole; 4% had a

child or family member involved in the juvenile justice system; 4% reported having been arrested themselves; and 2% declined to answer.

Making sure no one is jailed only because they cannot afford bail, a fine, or a fee was the top priority (29%), followed by reducing incarceration for nonviolent and minor offenses (23%).

Ending jail time over unpaid bail and fines was the top justice priority

Share of respondents ranking issue as most important



Youth & education

Across the state, residents said young people need **stability, trusted adults, and safe places to go**, but many communities lack enough of all three. In nearly every city, participants described **few free, safe, and accessible activities for children and teens outside of school**.

Youth mental health was another recurring concern. Participants described young people struggling with anxiety and discouragement alongside shortages of school counselors, therapists, and crisis beds. They also pointed to limited support for **LGBTQ youth and young people aging out of foster care**, while highlighting school-based mental health providers as a promising approach. **School safety**, including bullying and school shootings, was also commonly mentioned.

Participants closely connected youth well-being with **family economic stability**. Parents working multiple jobs have less time with their children, and many families struggle to afford school supplies, clothing, meals, and child care. Residents credited **school meal programs,**

Summer EBT, and Tribal Nations with helping fill these gaps. Many expressed strong support for public schools and concerns about funding being diverted elsewhere.

One in four survey respondents (25%) were parents. Among the challenges parents reported, **paying for children's education expenses** and **finding affordable child care** were among the most common.

Immigration

Most participants described immigrants as **hardworking neighbors who contribute to their communities and local economies**. Many felt negative attitudes toward immigrants were driven more by political rhetoric than personal experience. Although these views were not widely shared, a small number of participants called for stricter immigration enforcement, often citing concerns about competition for job opportunities and immigrants' potential access to public benefits.

Another dominant theme was **fear surrounding immigration enforcement**. Participants said immigrant families, including long-time residents pursuing legal status, avoid going out, skip community events, or keep children home from school because they fear encounters with authorities. Some described people being detained during routine immigration appointments and families struggling with the effects of a parent's deportation. Participants were also concerned about **local law enforcement cooperating with federal immigration authorities**.

Participants also described **racial profiling and broader effects on U.S. citizens and Tribal communities**. Some Latino citizens reportedly worry about having to prove their legal status, while participants said Native families and Tribal communities have faced similar concerns. Many also described the legal immigration and citizenship process as **slow, costly, and difficult to navigate**, and called for a system they viewed as more humane and workable.

Tribal-State relationships

Across the state, participants expressed **strong appreciation for Tribal Nations' contributions to Oklahoma**, alongside frustration with state-Tribal relations. Residents described Tribes investing in health care, education, housing, infrastructure, clean water, and jobs, often benefiting Tribal and non-Tribal residents alike.

By contrast, participants frequently described **state-Tribal relations as strained**. Many felt state leaders fail to treat Tribes as sovereign nations, neglect treaty obligations, and overall seek greater control over Tribal resources. Participants contrasted these tensions with

successful partnerships at the local level, including cooperation among law enforcement agencies in Ardmore, school partnerships in McAlester, and housing efforts involving Tulsa and Tribal leaders. Residents called for **stronger government-to-government partnerships**, including honoring treaties and expanding Tribal representation in state decision-making.

About **1 in 10 survey respondents (10%) identified with a Tribal Nation**. Most identified as citizens of the Cherokee Nation, followed by the Choctaw Nation and Chickasaw Nation.

Taxes, government spending, & democracy

Most participants generally **opposed replacing property taxes with higher sales taxes**, describing sales taxes as placing a greater burden on lower-income families. Participants emphasized that property taxes **support schools, libraries, roads, and emergency services**, and many felt eliminating or reducing them would disproportionately benefit wealthier property owners. Others called for fewer tax breaks for large corporations and raised concerns about local governments increasingly relying on fees as state support declines.

Nonetheless, views were not uniform. **Seniors and homeowners on fixed incomes** described property taxes rising while their incomes remained largely unchanged, and some supported efforts to reduce those costs. Across perspectives, participants called for **greater transparency about where tax dollars go**, with many saying residents do not have a clear understanding of which taxes fund which public services.

In the survey, 8% of respondents identified taxes as their largest source of budget strain. **Nearly 60% of respondents (59.7%) reported no noticeable change in their grocery bills since the state grocery tax cut took effect**, while another 12.5% were unaware the tax cut had occurred.

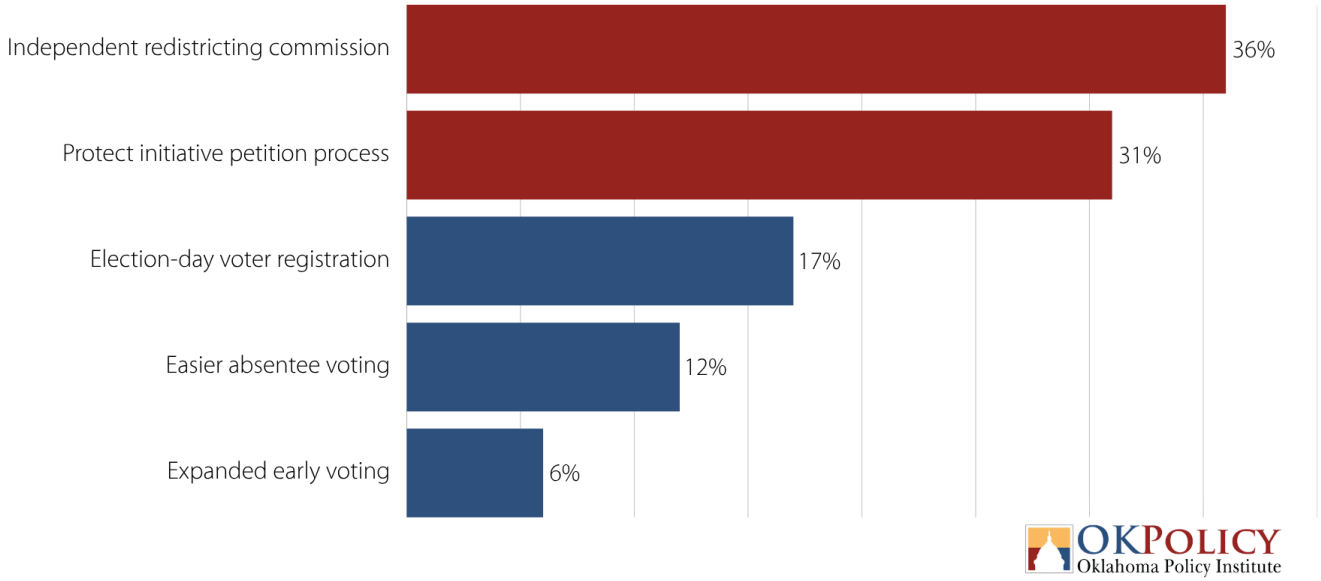
When participants discussed taxes and government, they consistently returned to **fairness and accountability**: who pays, what communities receive in return, and whether residents have a meaningful voice in decisions. Many participants felt that **state leaders are not listening to residents**, and called for greater accountability and representation.

Survey respondents reported high levels of electoral participation, with **two-thirds (66%) saying they vote in every election**. Even so, one in five (21%) reported experiencing barriers to voting, most commonly insufficient information about candidates or issues, work schedules, or not knowing an election was taking place.

When asked to rank their democracy priorities, respondents placed the greatest emphasis on **structural reforms intended to strengthen voters' voice**. An **independent redistricting commission** received the most first-place rankings (36%), followed by **protecting the initiative petition process** (31%).

Redistricting reform and protecting initiative petitions led democracy priorities

Share of respondents ranking issue as most important



Cross-sector policy needs

Although each policy area was discussed separately, **the same underlying barriers surfaced across nearly every conversation**. Residents described costs rising faster than wages, assistance programs that are difficult to navigate, gaps that leave people earning too much for help but too little to get by, and rural communities where distance makes services even harder to reach. Across issues, participants also described policies that deepen financial hardship and a disconnect between residents and state leaders.

Shared needs across policy areas included:

- **Greater economic stability**, with wages that keep pace with the cost of basic needs.
- **Affordable, accessible housing and health care**, regardless of income or geography.
- **Programs that are easier to access and navigate**, without gaps that leave people without needed support.
- **Policies that reduce financial hardship**, rather than placing greater burdens on people with fewer resources.
- **Stronger communities and opportunities for young people**, supported by investment in families and local resources.

- **Greater transparency, accountability, and public voice** in decisions that affect communities.

Overall, the listening sessions highlighted how closely connected residents' concerns about economic security, health care, housing, justice, and community well-being are, and **the importance of considering these issues together** when developing policies that affect Oklahomans.

Opportunities

The listening sessions and survey point not only to the barriers Oklahomans face but to **clear opportunities to build fairer, more responsive systems**. Residents called for policies that address everyday costs, remove barriers rather than add them, and give communities a real voice in decisions that affect them.

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

- **Economic security for Oklahoma families & children**: Economic opportunity and work supports, health coverage, public education, youth justice, and reducing financial barriers from justice involvement
- **Safe and stable neighborhoods**: Affordable housing, renter protections, criminal justice reform, private prison oversight, and protections from harmful immigration enforcement
- **Transparent, accountable, & responsive governance**: Fair taxes, protected state revenue, Tribal sovereignty and cooperation, and government transparency

While these surveys and community events captured a wide range of experiences, future engagement could prioritize reaching **Hispanic, Black, and American Indian residents, renters, younger Oklahomans, men and gender-diverse residents, and lower-income households**, as well as more respondents from the Southeast and Southwest regions.

This report summarizes the most common and consistent themes across sessions rather than every viewpoint shared. Individual or less frequent comments still hold value for continued discussion and follow-up.

Take Action

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

- Connect with your **regional Together OK organizer**. As the grassroots organizing arm of OK Policy, Together OK has organizers serving **four regions across the state**:
    - **Central Regional Organizer**: Joshua Higginbotham, jhigginbotham@okpolicy.org
    - **Northeast Regional Organizer**: Mollie Tindle, mtindle@okpolicy.org
    - **Southeast Regional Organizer**: Maison Rosales, mrosales@togetherok.org
    - **Southwest Regional Organizer**: Alex Good, agood@togetherok.org

  You can also reach out to Together OK's **Outreach Director**, Austin Webb, at awebb@togetherok.org.
- 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. Through our **advocacy trainings**, you can also learn how to turn the issues that matter most to you into meaningful action and make your voice heard in the decisions that affect your community. Learn about upcoming events and ways to get involved at **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**.

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