

The Morris Leatherman Company

Report of Findings 2022 City of Columbia Heights

City Demographics:

Columbia Heights is a demographically balanced first-ring suburban community, with a significantly high in-migration rate. The median longevity of adult residents is 9.4 years. Twenty-eight percent of the sample report moving to the city during the past five years, while 31% were there for over two decades. Thirteen percent report they will move in the next five years; in contrast, 74% have no plans to leave during the next ten years, with 46% sure to spend the “rest of their lives” in the city.

Twenty-seven percent of Columbia Heights households report seniors in residence. Twenty-six percent of the households contain school-aged children or preschoolers, while 74% contain no children. Sixty-eight percent own their current residences, while 32% rent. The median adult age in the community is 47.7 years old. Twenty-seven percent are under 35 years old, while 40% are 55 years old or older. Sixteen percent report their household includes at least one member whose physical limitations make it difficult to access city services.

Using standard U.S. Census categories, 60% self-report they are White, 19% are African American, two percent are African, 10% are Hispanic-Latino, four percent are Asian-American, one percent is Asian, and two percent are Mixed or Biracial. One percent each labeled themselves as American Indian or Pacific Islander. English is the primary language spoken in 88% of Columbia Heights homes, seven percent speak Spanish, and two percent each report their primary home language is either Somali or Hmong.

Thirty-eight percent report they are fiscally stressed – either their monthly expenses exceed current income or monthly expenses are met but little or no savings are put aside. Sixty-two percent report no fiscal stress – either managing comfortably and putting some money aside or managing very well.

Fifty percent classify their gender identity as female, 49% report male, and one percent is non-binary. The precinct of residence of each respondent was noted and catalogued in one of four regions: The Northeast, precincts four and six, contains 24% of the sample; the Northwest, precincts seven and eight, has 23% ; the Southeast, precincts three and five, contain 24% of the sample; and, the Southwest, precincts one and two, contains 30%.

Quality of Life Issues:

Ninety percent rate their quality of life as either “excellent” or “good.” In fact, 24% deem it “excellent.” Eleven percent rate the quality of life lower. While the overall positive rating is in the top quartile of suburban communities, the “excellent” rating is just below the suburban norm.

Interviewees were asked what they like most about living in Columbia Heights. The table below shows their open-ended responses in rank-order. If a number in parentheses is shown, it indicates the change since the previous study in 2014.

	Percentage
Closeness to family	16%
Small town ambience	15%
Closeness to job	15%
Neighborhood/Housing	14%
Convenient location	11%
Safe	10%
Parks and trails	6%
Closeness to shopping	4%
Schools	3%
Quiet and peaceful	2%
Scattered	3%
Nothing	0%
Unsure	1%

The shaded blue boxes form the statistically significant cluster of highly valued attributes of Columbia Heights. They cover proximity to key places, safety, small town feel, and neighborhood and housing.

Next, Columbia Heights respondents were asked what they thought is the most serious issue facing Columbia Heights today. Again, the table below shows their open-ended responses in rank-order.

	Percentage
Rising crime rate	22%
Street maintenance	13%
High taxes	12%
Aging infrastructure	9%
Property maintenance	6%
Aging park system	6%
Homeless	2%
Lack of businesses	2%
Lack of affordable housing	2%

	Percentage
Scattered	7%
Unsure	7%
Nothing	11%

The shaded orange boxes form the statistically significant issues residents consider to be serious; they range across rising crime, high taxes, streets and property maintenance, to aging infrastructure and park system. The “booster group” – those who believe the City faces no serious issues – is at 11%, below the median in Metropolitan Area suburbs. Interviewees were queried about items missing from Columbia Heights which, if present, could greatly improve the quality of life for residents. The table below shows their open-ended responses in rank-order.

	Percentage
Jobs	15%
Restaurants	12%
Retail/Shops	12%
Community Center	11%
More parks and trails	6%
Updated parks and trails	6%
Sidewalks	2%
Scattered	8%
Nothing	15%
Unsure	13%

The shaded green boxes form the statistically significant cluster of desired facilities: more jobs, restaurants and more retail and commercial businesses, Community Center, and more or updated parks and trails.

An exceptional 92% would recommend living in the City of Columbia Heights to others; only five percent would not do so, and four percent are unsure.

Economic Development and Redevelopment:

Respondents were asked about the current quantity of seven types of development or services. They could answer “too much or many,” “about the right amount or number,” or “too few or little. The table below first lists the type of development or service, then the percent rating it as “about right” follows. The final column, labeled “Difference” shows the difference between the percent it is “too much or many” and the percent feeling it is “too few or little.” If the “Difference” is positive more residents see it as “too many or much,” while if it is negative, more see it as “too few or little.” The table is rank ordered by the percent who view enforcement as “about right.”

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	About Right	Difference
Library programs and services	81%	-4%
Parks and open spaces	75%	-17%
Playgrounds	75%	-13%
Recreation programs	73%	-10%
Sidewalks	65%	-32%
Sports athletic fields, courts, and ice rinks	62%	-23%
Trails and bikeways	52%	-47%

In each case, most respondents deem the level as “about right.” Three types of development are rated by a least 23% more as “too few or little” than “too much or many:” trails and bikeways, sidewalks, and sports athletic fields, courts, and ice rinks. A park and recreation bond referendum proposal should include at least one of these three components.

Interviewees were queried if there were any types of businesses they would like to see in the City of Columbia Heights. The table below rank orders these suggestions.

	Percentage
Restaurants	18%
Grocery store	14%
Boutique retail	9%
Job opportunities	4%
Bars/Nightlife	2%
Coffee shops	2%
Fitness center	2%
Scattered	7%
Unsure	2%
None	38%

“Restaurants,” “grocery store,” and “boutique retail” are posted by statistically significant percentages. A moderately large 40% say there are “none” they would like to see or are “unsure.”

The use of financial incentives to attract specific types of development was the next topic. Support or opposition to this practice was garnered.

	Percentage
Strongly support	17%
Support	65%
Oppose	11%
Strongly oppose	2%
Don't know/Refused	6%

By an 82%-13% super-majority, residents support the use of financial incentives. Opponents were asked if they still oppose providing financial incentives if they could bring in desired businesses and increase the city’s tax base. Forty-one percent would shift positions, while 45% would stand pat, and 14% are unsure. The shifts would add another five percent to the majority in favor, bringing the total to 87%.

Seventy-six percent rate the general appearance of homes in the city of their neighborhood as either “excellent” or “good;” twenty-three percent are more critical in their evaluations. Only fifty-eight percent favorably rate the appearance of multi-family rental properties in the city; a large 45% see them as “only fair” or “poor.” Seventy-five percent rate the general appearance of business, industrial, and commercial areas in the city as either “excellent” or “good;” but 23% rate their general appearance lower.

Interviewees were queried about the number of rental properties in Columbia Heights. The table below lists their responses.

	Percentage
Too many	16%
About right amount	64%
Too Few	13%
Don’t know/Refused	6%

Almost two-thirds of the sample view the number of rental properties as “about right.”

Respondents answering “too many,” were asked what type of rental properties they were most concerned with. Four types account for 81% of the responses: “low-income,” “apartments,” “large multi-family homes,” and “rundown properties.”

Interviewees were asked to rate the City’s enforcement efforts on ten codes in their neighborhood. They could rate the efforts as “too tough,” “about right,” or “not tough enough.” The table below first lists the type of code violation, then the percent rating enforcement as “about right” follows. The final column, labeled “Difference” shows the difference between the percent feeling enforcement is “too tough” and the percent feeling it is “not tough enough.” If the “Difference” is positive more residents see it as “too tough,” while if it is negative, more see it as “not tough enough.” The table is rank ordered by the percent who view enforcement as “about right.”

	About Right	Difference
Storage of lawn mowers and tools outside	91%	-7%
Storage of garbage and recycling cans	90%	-9%
Vehicles parked in yards	79%	-15%
Storage of boats, trailers, and non-motorized campers outside	74%	-11%

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	About Right	Difference
Long grass and weeds	72%	-17%
Loud noise after 9:00 PM	71%	-15%
Junk vehicles	70%	-21%
Deteriorating siding, foundation, doors, windows, roofing, painting, gutters, and downspouts	62%	-30%
Winter parking restrictions and parking rules	59%	-6%
Junk and debris in yards	56%	-32%

In each code violation a majority rates code enforcement as “about right;” Large groups of residents are most concerned about lax enforcement of “junk and debris in yards,” “deteriorating siding, foundation, doors, windows, gutters, roofing, painting and downspouts,” “and “junk vehicles.”

Next, respondents were asked to prioritize the ten code violations. The table below shows the violation, followed by the percent who gave it a top priority for remedy:

	Top Priority
Storage of lawn mowers and tools outside	0%
Storage of garbage and recycling cans	1%
Vehicles parked in yards	6%
Storage of boats, trailers, and non-motorized campers outside	6%
Long grass and weeds	7%
Loud noise after 9:00 PM	13%
Junk vehicles	9%
Deteriorating siding, foundation, doors, windows, roofing, painting, gutters, and downspouts	21%
Winter parking restrictions and parking rules	16%
Junk and debris in yards	15%

The stronger enforcement of four code violations is prioritized by at least 13% of the sample: “deteriorating siding, foundation, doors, windows, gutters, roofing, painting, and downspouts,” “winter parking restrictions and other parking rules,” “junk and debris in yards,” and “loud noise after 9:00 PM.”

City Services:

In evaluating specific city services, the mean quality rating among those holding opinions is 88.0%, within the top decile of summary ratings in Metropolitan Area suburbs. The table below lists each city service, followed by its positive rating – “excellent” or “good” – and its negative rating – “only fair” or “poor.” The table is rank ordered by the positive rating of each service:

	Positive	Negative
Fire services	96%	1%
Police services	94%	5%
Garbage, recycling, composting and yard waste collection	91%	9%
Utility billing	89%	9%
Park maintenance	84%	15%
Library services and programs	83%	6%
Top Valu Liquor stores	78%	11%
City recreation programs	77%	11%
Snow plowing of city streets	76%	25%
Building inspections and permits	68%	12%
City street and alley maintenance	68%	31%
Code enforcement	67%	25%

The three cells shaded in blue are city services positively rated by at least 90% of the sample: “fire services,” “police services,” and “garbage, recycling, composting and yard waste collection.” The three cells shaded in green are city services whose positive ratings are at least 80%: “utility billing,” “park maintenance,” and “library services and programs.” The two cells shaded orange are services whose positive rating is below 70% and whose negative rating is at least 25%: “city street and alley maintenance” and “code enforcement.”

Prior to this survey, 79% of the sample was aware the Top Valu liquor stores were owned and operated by the City of Columbia Heights; in fact, 74% visited the Top Valu stores in the community. Knowing the City owns and operates the liquor stores makes only two percent more likely to begin to visit them.

Eighty percent rate Waste Management’s collection service as either “excellent” or “good;” eighteen percent see it as “only fair” or “poor.” The residents not rating Waste Management as “excellent” gave four primary reasons for their lower ratings: “missed pick-ups,” “messy pick-ups,” “limit accepted items,” and “poor customer service.”

Sixty-five percent of community households visited or participated in the library’s on-line or in-person programs. Eighty-one percent of library patrons primarily use in-person services, while 37% primarily use on-line services. The 35% non-library users cite “no need,” “lack of interest,” or “no time” as their major reasons.

Next, interviewees were asked if they were aware of three additional city services. Sixty-six percent are aware of recycling facilities to dispose of items such as batteries and tires.” Forty-six percent report awareness of the Home Energy Assessment service. Forty-three percent are aware of the City’s Home Improvement Loans.

Next, interviewees were read a list of seven potential priorities for the City of Columbia Heights. They were asked to choose the one that should be the highest priority for the City to focus on. The table below rank-orders the selections made by respondents:

	<i>Highest Priority</i>
Maintaining and improving infrastructure, such as roads, water and sewer	32%
Economic development	19%
Improving public safety	15%
Parks, playgrounds, trails, and recreation	12%
Creating and improving community connections, such as neighborhood associations, community events and activities, and education and athletic programs	10%
Equity, equality, and accessibility	6%
Neighborhood centers, libraries, and other public facilities	5%
Something else (volunteered)	1%
Don't Know/Refused	1%

Over three-quarters of the sample choose one of four as top priorities for action: “maintaining and improving infrastructure,” “economic development,” “improving public safety,” and “parks, playgrounds, trails, and recreation.” In any bond referendum proposal, a judicious blending of these four priorities would resonate with most residents.

Property Taxes:

Columbia Heights residents can be classified as fiscal moderates. Thirty percent think their property taxes are “high” in comparison with neighboring suburban communities, while 58% see them as “about average. Seventy-seven percent of the residents view city services as either an “excellent” or a “good” value for the property taxes paid; this endorsement level places Columbia Heights within the top quartile of Metropolitan Area suburbs. The general property tax climate in Columbia Heights can be best described as “fiscally benign.”

By an 80%-12% margin, residents support an increase in city property taxes increase if it were needed to maintain city services at their current level. Most opponents, when asked about services they would cut, think cuts are not needed, but reductions can be achieved by eliminating waste. By a split 47%-40% margin, residents would OPPOSE an increase in city property taxes if it were used to improve and enhance city services. Supporters suggest improving or expanding street repair, snow plowing, and recreation programs.

Public Safety:

A high 93% feel safe in the City of Columbia Heights. Seven percent do not feel safe in the community, particularly along Central Avenue, and urge more police patrols and lower speed limits to improve their feelings of safety. A moderate 80% feel safe walking alone at night in their immediate neighborhood; eighteen percent disagree and about two-thirds of this group

would suggest additional police patrols or more street lighting. Ninety-four percent feel safe using city parks and city trails; Four percent disagree, and they report they do not feel safe in a city park or trail, and primarily suggest the need for more police patrols. Ninety-six percent feel safe using the City’s Library, Murzyn Hall, and other City buildings; only two percent do not.

Seventy-seven percent rate the amount of police patrolling as “about the right amount,” while 21% think it is “not enough.” Seventy percent also feel the same way about the amount of traffic enforcement by the police, with 29% rating it “not enough.” These results are consistent with other first- and second-ring suburban communities.

Twenty-eight percent report household members had contact with the Police Department during the past year. An impressive 96% rated their contact as either “excellent” or “good.” A very small five percent rated their contact lower.

Parks and Recreation:

Eighty-four percent rate the park and recreation facilities and amenities in Columbia Heights as either “excellent” or “good.” Twelve percent are more critical.” Similarly, 79% rate the maintenance and upkeep of park and recreation facilities in Columbia Heights as “excellent” or “good;” eighteen percent feel it is “only fair” or “poor.”

The most popular park and recreational opportunities are “neighborhood and community parks,” used by 94% of city’s households, “trails,” used by 84% of the city’s households, and “green spaces and natural areas” enjoyed by 82%.

	Usage	User Evaluations	
		Positive	Negative
Neighborhood and community parks	94%	91%	9%
Trails	84%	86%	14%
Green spaces and natural areas	82%	88%	12%
Picnic shelters	72%	83%	17%
Playgrounds	63%	82%	18%
Murzyn Hall	57%	73%	27%
Courts for basketball and tennis	50%	69%	31%
Ballfields for softball and baseball	48%	89%	11%
Athletic fields used for soccer and football	47%	84%	16%
Outdoor ice skating rinks	44%	77%	23%

Among users of each city park and recreation offering, five are rated positive – either “excellent” or “good” – by at least 80% of the sample: “neighborhood and community parks,” “trails,” “green spaces and natural areas,” “picnic shelters,” and “playgrounds.” Three opportunities score negative ratings of at least 20% by their users: “outdoor ice skating rinks,” “Murzyn Hall,”

and “courts for basketball and tennis.” A solid 89% feel existing recreational facilities and amenities offered by the City of Columbia Heights meet the needs of their households; only seven percent disagree.

Eighty-nine percent report, in general, they feel existing recreational facilities and amenities offered by the City meet the needs of their household; only seven percent disagree.

A large 35% of Columbia Heights households participated in City park and recreation programs. Among participants, “soccer,” “basketball,” “baseball/softball,” and “fitness classes” are the most popular. Ninety-three percent rate their experience favorably, while six percent are more critical. Lack of participation in these programs are attributable to three factors: “no interest,” “no time,” and “age or health.”

Residents were asked if they would support a property tax increase for each of four purposes. The table below shows each purpose followed by its support of a tax increase and its opposition to a tax increase. The purposes are listed from highest to lowest levels of support:

	Support	Oppose
Renovation of city parks	84%	14%
Funding for public art and beautification projects	81%	16%
Construction of a new Recreation Center	77%	21%
Renovation of Murzyn Hall recreation building	73%	20%

The four proposals are supported by at least 73% and support to opposition is at least 3-to-1 – these purposes have strong drawing power in a referendum election. The strategy will be to include the most highly supported purposes and then prudently add the less attractive ones, bearing in mind that most of the latter will provide volunteers for any grassroots campaign effort.

Only 16% report they would oppose **any** tax increase to fund a park and recreational facilities bond. The typical resident would support a park bond referendum which increased property taxes by \$4.56 per month or \$54.72 per year on the median-valued home in the community.

City Events:

Respondents were told the City currently funds many community events, such as Music in the Park, Movies in the Park, Truck or Treat, the Community Art and Info Fair, the Fire Department Open House, and Snowblast. During the last three years, members of 63% of Columbia Heights households participated in at least one these community events. Among participating households, 97% favorably rated the events; in fact, 71% rated them as “excellent.” Only three percent were critical in their judgments. Participant-respondents not rating the events as “excellent” suggested three improvements: “more cultural events,” “more restrooms,” and “more vendors.” Non-participating households cited four reasons for not attending: “no interest,” “age/health,” “unaware of events,” and “lack of time.”

City Government and Staff:

Fifty-one percent think they know “a great deal” or “a fair amount” about the work of the Mayor and City Council. Respondents give the Mayor and Council a job approval rating of 83% and a disapproval rating of six percent. The nearly 14-to-1 approval-to-disapproval rating of the Mayor and City Council is among the top ratings in the Metropolitan Area suburbs.

Interviewees were told the City of Columbia Heights has a Library Board and six commissions, including the Charter, Planning, Traffic, Youth, and Park and Recreation, composed of residential volunteers. Thirty percent report they would consider volunteering to be on one of these Boards or Commissions. Resident who would not consider volunteering cite “no interest,” “no time,” and “age/health.”

Forty percent had either “quite a lot” or “some” first-hand contact with Columbia Heights City Staff during the past year. This level of interaction is among the highest in the Metropolitan Area. From their experience, 82% rate the job performance of the City Staff as either “excellent” or “good;” only eight percent are rated it lower.

Transportation Issues and Preferences:

By an 85%-15% margin, interviewees rate the ease of getting from place to place in the community as “excellent” or “good;” an impressive 47% rate the ease as “excellent.” Suggestions for making things easier among respondents not rating it as “excellent” include: “better street maintenance,” “more public transportation,” and “better-timed stoplights.”

Excluding gasoline, almost three-quarters of the sample consider one of five places to be their principal retail shopping area: “Fridley Target Store,” at 25%; “Columbia Heights Central Avenue,” at 18%; “Columbia Heights Aldi Grocery Store,” at 14%; “Fridley Walmart Store,” at eight percent; and “Fridley Cub Grocery Store,” also at eight percent.

Thirty-seven percent of the sample does not leave the city for dining and entertainment options elsewhere. Twenty-seven percent go to “Minneapolis” and five percent journey to “Saint Paul.” Thirteen percent head to “Fridley,” while five percent go to “Roseville,” and five percent, to “Brooklyn Center.”

Communications Issues:

The “City Newsletter” is the most often indicated principal source of information about city government and its activities, at 37%. The “City website” ranks second, at 26%. The “local newspaper” is pointed to by 13%, followed by “social media” and “word-of-mouth,” each at eight percent.

The “City Newsletter” is also the most preferred communications channel to receive information about city government and its activities, at 40%. The “City website” ranks second, at 21%. The “local newspapers” is preferred by 11%, followed by “mailings,” at eight percent, and “social media,” at seven percent.

Eighty-nine percent received the City’s quarterly newsletter and recreation brochure, while 85% of receivers regularly read it. The newsletter’s effectiveness as an information channel is highly regarded: ninety-one percent rate the newsletter and brochure favorably.

Ninety-three percent have access to the internet; ninety-two percent at home and 57% at work. The right percent reporting no access are “not interested,” “think it is too high cost,” or cite “age/health.” Among internet users, 68% accessed the City’s website during the past six months; thirty-five percent did so on a computer, 18% on a mobile device, and 15%, on both. Among website viewers, 88% favorably rate the ease of navigation, while 12% are more critical.

Seventy percent used the City’s on-line payment system to pay their utility bills; the remaining 30% generally “prefer other payment methods.”

Thirty-two percent of sampled households used the City’s social media. A hearty 91% of users rate it as “excellent” or “good;” only nine percent rate it as “only fair.”

Overall, a solid 83% rate the job the City does communicating with residents as “excellent” or “good.” Sixteen percent see it as “only fair” or “poor.”

Conclusions:

Columbia Heights residents are very comfortable with their community, and reasonably high ratings on many aspects of city operations are profuse. The key issues facing decision-makers in the future are addressing perceptions about “rising crime,” “property and street maintenance,” “aging infrastructure,” and “enhancement of park and recreation amenities.” To improve the quality of life in the short-run, additional enforcement of city codes will be necessary particularly with respect to deteriorating housing and junk and debris in yards.

The proposal of a park bond referendum will require careful planning. The typical resident would support a property tax increase of \$55.00 per year to fund improvements; that level could be somewhat increased if tie-ins are made to other city priorities. Voters will support a park bond referendum, if it includes not only maintenance and updating projects, but also provides a “value-added” array of new additions to the system, such as additional trails, Community and neighborhood park renovations, construction of a new Recreation Center, and funding for public art and beautification projects. In the end, the proposal will need to balance widely popular projects with enhancements aimed at more limited, although critical, constituencies, such as leagues and clubs.

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In comparison with neighboring communities, Columbia Heights Public Safety services and personnel score high positive ratings. Trustworthiness and community connection are not problems in the city. To enhance these ratings further, police services will need to offer more police patrols in neighborhoods and city parks and trails, as well as concentrate more activity on traffic issues, particularly along Central Avenue.

Information levels about City Government activities are solid. Positive ratings of both the Mayor and City Council and City Staff are among the top of Metropolitan Area communities. The City's quarterly newsletter and recreation brochure is exceptionally well regarded: its readerships and effectiveness ratings are within the top decile of Metropolitan Area suburbs.

The "City Booster" core is 11%, about four percent higher than the median of Metropolitan Area suburbs. It represents a moderate reservoir of goodwill. This core dampens the trust issues found in many communities, and it will serve decision-makers very well as new issues are encountered and relatively tough decisions must be made.

Methodology:

This study contains the results of a telephone survey of 400 randomly selected residents of the City of Columbia Heights. Survey responses were gathered by professional interviewers across the community between February 1st and 22nd, 2022. The average interview took 24 minutes. The non-response rate was 5.0%. All respondents interviewed in this study were part of a randomly generated sample of adult residents of the City of Columbia Heights. In general, random samples such as this yield results projectable to their respective universe within ± 5.0 percent in 95 out of 100 cases.