

MN StoryCollective: Citizen Storytelling

Humphrey School Capstone Report

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MN StoryCollective



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Abstract:

The Minnesota Story Collective (MNSC), an initiative of the State of Minnesota, was established to collect and analyze qualitative narratives from diverse community members. This effort aims to provide state agencies with a flexible and ongoing source of qualitative data to ensure that programs, policies, and practices better meet the needs of all families. In Fall 2023, MNSC collected a substantial dataset through community events and an online portal, creating an opportunity to more deeply understand key communities or subgroups in Minnesota, including: youth, single parents, and parents of children with identified special health needs.

This project was undertaken to analyze the collected narratives and identify recurring patterns and themes within the data of these three subgroups. The analysis focused on three key research questions: (1) What are the frequently recurring ideas shared by participants? (2) What do these stories reveal about the lived experiences of Minnesotans? (3) How can the MNSC initiative be effectively communicated to potential users to enhance policy-making processes?

Through thematic analysis, the study identified seven primary themes across the narratives: Home, Region/Place, Events, Community, Institutions, and Needs (with subcategories of Barriers to Needs and Needs Met). These themes were further explored within the context of the three target populations, providing insights into the unique challenges and experiences faced by each group.

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Executive Summary

The Minnesota Story Collective (MNSC), an initiative of the State of Minnesota, was established to collect and analyze qualitative narratives from diverse community members. This effort aims to provide state agencies with a flexible and ongoing source of qualitative data to ensure that programs, policies, and practices better meet the needs of all families. In Fall 2023, MNSC collected a substantial dataset through community events and an online portal, creating an opportunity to more deeply understand key communities or subgroups in Minnesota, including: youth, single parents, and parents of children with identified special health needs.

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Through thematic analysis, the study identified seven primary themes across the narratives: Home, Region/Place, Events, Community, Institutions, Needs (with subcategories of Barriers to Needs and Needs Met). These themes were further explored within the context of the three target populations, providing insights into the unique challenges and experiences faced by each group.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. **Increase Staffing Capacity:** Expand the MNSC team to include dedicated staff for narrative analysis and marketing to improve the efficiency and reach of the initiative.
2. **Establish Clear Goals:** Develop a comprehensive document outlining the goals of MNSC to ensure clarity and alignment among stakeholders.
3. **Further Research/Expand Research Scope:** Continue exploring the remaining subgroups and consider mixed-methods research and in-depth interviews to complement the qualitative data.
4. **Employ Analytical Frameworks:** Incorporate analytical frameworks to provide deeper insights and ensure that the data is effectively utilized in policy-making.

These recommendations aim to enhance the MNSC initiative's impact, ensuring that qualitative data is effectively leveraged to inform state policies and improve the well-being of Minnesota's diverse communities.

Background

General Background

MN StoryCollective(MNSC) is a new, cross-agency initiative of the State of Minnesota. Its goal is to provide a regular, flexible source of qualitative data on diverse community stories to ensure state programs, policies, and practices better meet the needs of all families. Housed within the Results Management group of Minnesota Management and Budget, MNSC collaborates with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders.

Purpose

The primary purpose of this project is to create a series of data insight documents that capture patterns and themes from the data collected in Fall 2023 through an online portal hosted by the MNSC website, focusing specifically on three target populations: youth, single parents, and parents of children with identified special health needs. This will extend the analysis beyond individual sensemaking sessions led by the MNSC team, providing an interpretive layer to the larger data set. Additionally, the project aims to document the MN StoryCollective Process to help policymakers and community groups understand its methodology and effectively utilize the insights generated.

Research Questions

1. What are frequently recurring ideas shared by participants in the rich, deep data collected through MNSC in Autumn 2023 specifically for those individuals who supplied stories and indicated demographic/identity identifiers in the three distinct categories of 1) youth; 2) Single Parents; and 3) Parents of children with identified special health needs?
2. What are the stories in the data set telling us about how people are experiencing life in Minnesota?
3. How can the MNSC initiative be explained or described to potential users so that the data it generates is utilized in policymaking throughout the state?

Literature Review

Current and Historical Context of Public Administration

Scholars of public administration have sought to describe and theorize the nature of interaction between governments and constituents, often through denoting the evolution of public services and how agencies are organized and managed. Central to this work is a question of how, and

even if, the democratic nature of public administration necessitates different approaches to management from techniques and practices in the private sector, including the question of how institutional goals and objectives are to be set and realized (Ferlie and Ongaro, 2022).

Traditional forms of government bureaucracy as described by Max Weber stressed stable, administrative jurisdictions, hierarchically organized, and focused on the documentation of a static body of knowledge that sought to record what is to be done in all possible scenarios (Meier and Hill, 2005). Weberian-style bureaucracies proliferated globally, particularly in the expansion of government programs, as well as their scope, starting in the 1930s and continuing through the 1980s. This growth was associated with programs such as FDR's New Deal and LBJ's Great Society in the US, the nationalization of strategic industries in the UK, and Nordic country social welfare programmes (Ferlie and Ongaro, 2022). The expansion of the public sector, largely managed by technocratic civil servants, along with the political and economic upheavals of the late 1960s and 1970s, attracted the attention and critique of the New Right. Writers and scholars such as Bill Kristol and William Niskanen questioned the value for money (efficiency), responsiveness, and whether or not such large administrative apparatuses were capable of being governed or held accountable (Ferlie and Ongaro, 2022).

Mirroring the political ascent of right-wing governments in the US and UK in the late 1970s and 1980s that promised to scale back "big government," the New Public Management (NPM) emerged as a set of ideas and practice in public administration (Klijn, 2012). While debate among scholars exists regarding the exact definition of NPM (Pollitt et al., 2007), one key element of NPM is its emphasis on central steering and political control, especially when understood in contrast to the sprawling, technocratically controlled welfare state (Klijn, 2012). This was often accomplished by transforming government into "leaner" steering organizations, responsible for setting goals and providing oversight, rather than actually doing the service provision itself (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). Thus, granting/contracting and auditing emerge as key activities of public administrators (Power, 1997).

One early theorized benefit of utilizing outside organizations to carry out the work of government is that the complexity of government responsibilities generated under the welfare state could be relocated to the private sector and controlled through macro-economic incentives (Klijn, 2012), thus simplifying and clarifying the role of government. However, instead of removing the complexity of the welfare state, the use of markets, quasi-markets, and networks in place of Weberian hierarchical bureaucracies simply transferred the complexity toward having to navigate a fragmented but interconnected web of institutions, organizations, and communities (Rhodes, 1997). Coinciding with attempts to bridge management practices and frameworks from the private sector, scholars began referring to the work of creating or enhancing an institution's ability to steer and coordinate across organizational boundaries and within networks as

governance (Levi-Faur, 2012), including a view of government activities within such networks as governance-in-action (Barkay, 2009).

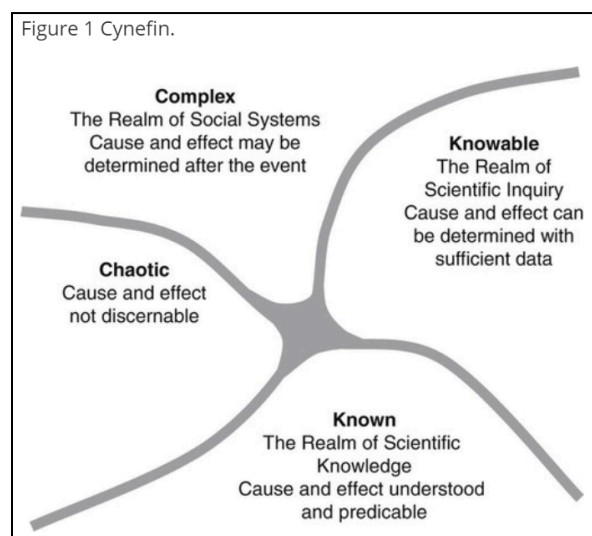
While there is no consensus among public administration scholars concerning whether governance represents an evolution of NPM, a parallel development, a wholesale replacement heralding a post-NPM landscape, or all of the above (Klijn, 2012), some commonalities regarding the importance of governance have emerged. Among them is a recognition that macro explanations regarding institutions as autonomous principal actors are insufficient and that governance-in-action involves new institutional arrangements that facilitate coordination, cooperation, and integration of and among different social orders (Schneider, 2012). Related scholarly efforts in public administration similarly reflect the growing awareness of the need to navigate increasingly complex social contexts and realities, including descriptions of leadership as existing within shared-power contexts (Crosby & Bryson, 2005), the need to incorporate (with adaptations) forms of strategic thinking and strategic planning (Bryson, 2018; Ferlie & Ongaro, 2022; Mintzberg et al., 2005), and even techniques and practices to bridge decision making and conflict resolution across organizational boundaries (Bryson, 2004; Bryson et al., 2016; Höglund et al., 2018; Quick & Feldman, 2014).

Complexity and Narrative in Public Administration

This brings us to the elements of complexity theory and narrative forms of information gathering, dissemination, and use in the literature and discourse within the confines of the public administration space. The attention to networks and interrelated components within and across organizational boundaries that the governance perspective provided highlighted the need to understand the ways public policy is formed and realized as complex, emergent, and within adaptive systems (Eppel & Rhodes, 2018). The implications of this view—heavily influenced by complexity theory—highlight the need to understand what happens at the micro level where many governing agents, including individuals and communities, interact with diverse incentives, motives, and histories (Pierre & Peters, 2005; Nachbagauer, 2021). Complexity theory is a nascent series of ideological principles that undergirds a core idea that the organizational fields of human organization and knowledge operate within a complicated and often nonlinear web of interactions (Teisman & Klijn, 2008). Complexity theory also holds that the wholesale understanding of said structures cannot always be ascertained by only looking at one or a few of the parts that make it up is in itself a relatively new feature of public policy discourse as noted in a seminal review of the theory in public policy contexts by Teisman and Klijn (Teisman & Klijn, 2008). As such, the specific aspects of constituent narrative collection and instrumentalization in governance is even more novel and narrow. However, the academic literature available is apparent and seemingly burgeoning. Collecting and understanding stories or narratives at the micro level helps form a more complete picture at the macro level in understanding how to most effectively navigate networks and determine appropriate interventions (Klijn, 2008). Further,

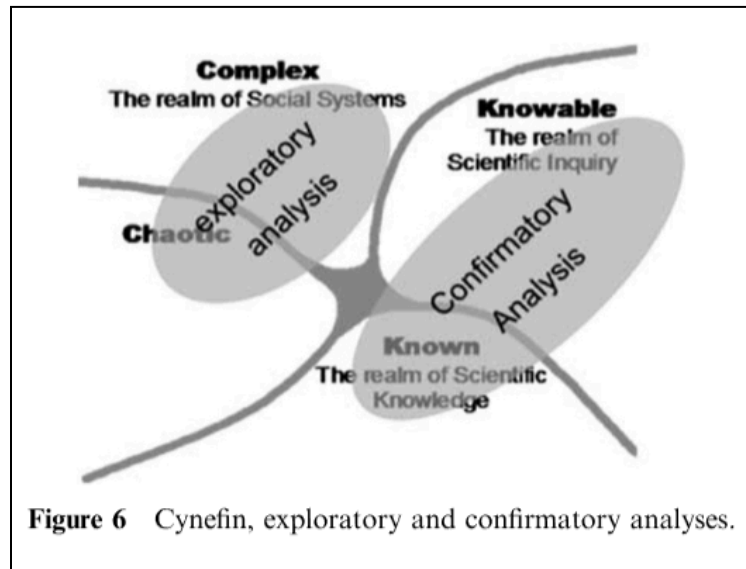
scholars drawing on humanistic theories have noted that narratives function as sensemaking devices that reveal linkages between and across systems (Boswell, 2013).

Situated betwixt and between complexity theory and sensemaking is an examination of the Cynefin model. ‘Cynefin’ has many layers of meaning – it’s a Welsh noun with no direct equivalent in English and conjures a very personal ‘sense of place’, belonging, familiarity, and relationship to the place of your birth or upbringing (French, 2013; John, Ahuja, Johns & Jewell, 2023). The Cynefin approach has origins in a new way of attempting to ensure that the most pressing issues for Welsh youth were directly conveyed to policymakers and to collaborate on potential solutions with key members of parliament (John, Ahuja, Johns & Jewell, 2023). This was navigated “Through a series of design workshops and evaluation, a diverse programme of public education was created by the Royal College of Psychiatrists Wales, Technology Enabled Care (TEC) Cymru, and co-produced with young people” (John, Ahuja, Johns & Jewell, 2023). As French describes, the Cynefin model roughly divides decision con-texts into four spaces (see figure 1) (French, 2013).



Governments and governance projects are seeking to channel the voices of constituencies into tailored actions to resolve specific public policy problems and in doing so, tend to err on the side of standardization and qualitative abstractions to craft a meaningful picture within which governance actors can operate; or the “known” portion in figure 1 (French, 2013; Haynes, 2008). However, this will almost always fall short and therefore sensemaking that is predicated on the Cynefin model invites and centers flexibility, and emergence as part and parcel to both human needs/experiences and the ways in which we collectively seek to meet those needs (Nachbagauer, 2021; Holly, Bartels, Lewis, Howard & Ramaswamy, 2022; Ramaswamy, Reed, Livesley, Boguslavsky, Garcia-Elorrio, Sax, Houleymata, Kimble & Parry, 2018). In looking at narrative qualitative data, there is an inherent difficulty in knowing how to synthesize and chart actionable steps for governance actors. The Cynefin model attempts to provide a discernable framework for

those steps, or what otherwise might be understood as experimental design in the qualitative narrative data landscape (French, 2013). In relation to the operation of sensemaking in the context of the ‘*Our Tomorrows*’ project and subsequently in the MN Story Collective, Complexity theory, and Cynefin frameworks are indispensable in upholding exploratory analysis and resisting the tendency for governmental actors to return to confirmatory approaches to knowledge creation, policy solutions, and state action (see figure 6) (French, 2013).



Story, Sensemaking, and Policy

Finally, there are again, limited but sufficiently rich examples strewn across the literature denoting the meaning, dynamics, challenges, and future application of specific synthesis of information within complexity theory and Cynefin frameworks for public policy issues (i.e. sensemaking in action). In an examination of the existing information written about applications of public policy sensemaking and qualitative narrative data, there are multiple notations of the importance of reflexivity. That is to say that power not only shapes the sensemaking process but also makes it; dividing that power or recognizing how it can alter the perceptions of the researchers is a key part of reliable sensemaking and improving the process (Schildt, Mantere & Cornelissen, 2020; Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2015). This emphasis on reflexivity is echoed again in Introna’s work on Sensemaking when stating “Sense is always given and made simultaneously, as it flows” (Introna, 2019).

In analyzing the literature on sensemaking specifically as it relates to the MN StoryCollective initiative at the Minnesota Office of Management and Budget, documentation of the ‘*Our Tomorrows*’ project in Kansas by Elford and Eggers was immensely salient. The ‘*Our Tomorrows*’ project combines narrative qualitative data and other statistical demographic data situated within sensemaking sessions wherein citizens engaged in the collective and collaborative interpretation of their own stories (a process dubbed naturalistic sensemaking)

(Elford & Eggers, 2021). This process, which includes concepts of framing problems for governmental actors, is covered directly by Van Hulst and Yanow in research about how sensemaking plays out in political endeavors (Van Hulst & Yanow, 2016). That same work goes on to highlight aspects covered in the wider discourse related to tracking feedback at the micro, meso, and macro levels of systematic and multidimensional governance work (Elford & Egger, 2021; Rice & Mündel, 2018; Seidl & Werle, 2018). As articulated in the literature, sensemaking in practice is difficult because it presents a paradigmatic challenge to the institutions and communities within which it is deployed. Sensemaking that is not grounded in an adaptive paradigm that seeks to embrace complexity and recognizes the inherent shortcomings of traditional structures of decision-making will always be myopic and inaccurate (Angeli & Montefusco, 2020; Schildt, Mantere & Cornelissen, 2020; Bauer, Hammond, Travers, Kaay, Hohenadel & Boyce, 2009). Instead, sensemaking should look to incorporate tenets of transparent data sharing, solutions that are adaptable to varying localities, and a dedication to cooperation and flexibility within and without a particular organization or social system/context (Angeli & Montefusco, 2020). This also strikes directly at the role of narrative in policymaking and utilizing data that is embedded in storytelling (Lejano, Ingram & Ingram, 2018).

Methodology

The primary purpose of this project was to create a series of documents that identify and illustrate patterns and themes from the data MNSC collected in Fall 2023 as well as help general readers understand the broader MNSC process. While narratives had previously been utilized as part of story packs (documents that captured specific illustrative examples of topics or issues) or in collaborative sensemaking sessions, an exploration of the broader data set had not been undertaken to this point. This meant that there was a lack of insight into what patterns and themes might be present when the collected narratives were taken as a whole. In other words, the goal was to extend the analysis beyond individual sensemaking sessions, thus providing an interpretive layer to the larger data set. Additionally, potential use of the dataset was restricted by a lack of information that policymakers and community members could refer to in order to better understand what the dataset is, how it is produced, and consequently how the dataset might be useful to their activities. The capstone team collaborated with MNSC staff to identify research questions that could guide the analytical work. Three research questions were identified:

1. What are frequently recurring ideas shared by participants in the rich, deep data collected through MNSC in Autumn 2023?
2. What are the stories in the data set telling us about how people are experiencing life in Minnesota?
3. How can the MNSC initiative be explained or described to potential users so that the data it generates is utilized in policymaking throughout the state?

Questions 1 and 2 most directly related to the narrative data collected as part of the MNSC project, while the third question related to how the data came to be. This served as the foundation for determining the two types of deliverables for the client. The first would be “data insights” documents that shared the findings from questions 1 and 2. A second, “methodological explainer” would share the findings from the third research question. Further, as part of the refinement of the project scope, the teams collaboratively decided to focus on 3 of the total 11 identified communities or subgroups for the first two research questions. These communities or subgroups were:

- Youth
- Single Parents
- Parents of Children with Identified Special Health Needs

To address the research questions pertaining to the narratives (1 & 2), we determined a qualitative analysis approach to the data was most appropriate. Understanding that the qualitative research process is largely emergent and subject to evolve as our team worked deeper into the data (Creswell et al., 2018), our plan was to begin with a basic thematic analysis of the supplied data and utilize additional methods if needed or as possible.

To accomplish this, we focused only on the subgroups pre-selected by the client. Because the data has already been generated in an earlier part of this initiative, and because this initiative is modeled on initiatives in other states, our initial plan was to deploy both deductive and inductive approaches to coding the data (Hennink et al, 2020). For example, the MNSC initiative is modeled after the *‘Our Tomorrows’* initiative in Kansas, which has identified patterns such as “Bright Spots” and “Unmet Needs” in their data set. Our hope was that those patterns would effectively serve as deductive codes to help efficiently organize our initial attempts at identifying additional (inductive) themes from within the data—an important consideration given the size of the dataset and our limited capacity. Our ultimate goal was to build patterns, themes, and categories from the narratives in the dataset, organizing the data upward from concrete instances from the narratives into increasingly abstract and theoretical units of information that would provide basic insights into meaning within the data that addressed the research questions and the client’s needs.

Data Collection

Because this project encompasses two complementary but distinct deliverables, data collection occurred in two separate areas:

Deliverable 1, Data Insights: The data utilized for this component consists of the raw data collected through the SenseMaker platform—a digital tool for collecting narratives from

individuals along with demographic information and responses to numerous additional questions regarding respondents' perspectives and views on life in Minnesota.

Deliverable 2, Methodological Explainer: The data utilized for this component consists primarily of documents and artifacts collected by the capstone team, including existing descriptions of the endeavor, participant guidebooks, legislative mandates, and scholarly literature related to underlying theories and similar initiatives.

The client supplied the raw data from the SenseMaker platform that was collected through Autumn 2023. This data contained both narratives as well as extensive demographic information that respondents were invited to share as part of the data collection process. Narratives for the Minnesota StoryCollective (MNSC) are collected using a multi-faceted approach that emphasizes community involvement and participant agency. The primary method involves collaboration with culturally relevant community partners who engage participants through various means, including independent online submissions, facilitated interviews, and participation in larger community gatherings, all of which are eventually imported into the SenseMaker platform. Further, the online story collection tool allows individuals to share their experiences directly into the SenseMaker platform using open-ended prompts and self-coding options to categorize their narratives, ensuring that the storytellers' perspectives are central to the data.

Data from the SenseMaker platform was exported into an Excel spreadsheet by the client, and filtered to only include responses from the three identified subgroups for analysis. It was further organized into separate sheets (tabs) by the client before being transmitted to the capstone team. This dataset included narratives supplied by respondents as well as answers to 31 survey type questions, ranging from demographic questions to questions regarding perspectives and outlooks on everyday living. There were 450 responses for the parents of children with identified special health needs subgroup, 249 responses for single parents, and 154 responses for youth, equaling a total n of 853.

Analysis

Since the Capstone team was working across three different communities or subgroups within the larger data set and an understanding that eventually 8 other subgroups would be analyzed, our plan for conducting the thematic analysis rested on creating a prototype process and codebook that we could then replicate for the other subgroups, fine-tuning and refining as necessary. To accomplish this, we selected the Youth subgroup as our prototyping subset of the data since it was the first subset of the data available to us. The process of coding the data began with each member of the capstone team spending time familiarizing themselves with the data. Our initial orientation to the data was simply to observe and document/record any things of note

in the narratives as we read through all of them, including our observations, thoughts, or insights. These were recorded into an electronically shared document, where we could also review and reflect on what other team members were seeing. This initial familiarization activity helped confirm that some themes/codes utilized in the *'Our Tomorrows'* project were present in the narratives as well as identified other themes that emerged from our initial readings of the narratives.

Once we had familiarized ourselves with all of the narratives in the Youth dataset, we began the process of developing a codebook of the primary themes within the narratives. Remembering that part of our objective was to create and prototype a process and an analytical method that could be replicated for other subgroups, there were two primary considerations that guided the development of the process. First, that thematic elements were, by definition, recurring or patterns of repetition across narratives. This meant that themes that are descriptive of the entire dataset could be identified even if not all narratives were individually coded. Second, that any successful process that could be replicated would have to take into consideration that staff or researcher capacity is not unlimited, especially given that the number of narratives collected in the initiative is not limited by the number of staff who are available to analyze collected narratives.

Accordingly, we decided on the following process to create a codebook of themes in the dataset. We first sorted and arranged the data by the character length of the narratives from shortest to longest. Doing so allowed us to observe two important elements of the dataset. First, narratives shorter than 100 characters were often (although not always) unremarkable in terms of thematic content. For example, some narratives consisted of words or phrases such as “Nothin,” “Happy,” or “I don’t want to share.” The second thing we noticed is that there were some duplicate entries in the dataset that, when sorted by character length of the narrative, would place the duplicate entries next to each other since they were of identical lengths. Based on these observations, we made two decisions on the next steps of the process. One, that we would filter out any narratives that had fewer than 100 characters, and two, that we would only hand-code every other narrative once they were arranged in order of number of characters from smallest to largest, thus halving the number of narratives to hand-code as well as avoiding hand-coding duplicate entries.

In the Youth subgroup, this allowed us to take the original dataset of 154 entries and bring it down to 114 entries once filtered for length. We then hid every other entry, which halved the remaining entries, leaving us with 57 narratives to hand-code. From there, we divided the narratives up among the 4 capstone team members, leaving us with either 14 or 15 narratives each to work from as we developed our codebook.

Building on some initial observations we recorded during our familiarization phase as well as using some predetermined codes from the *'Our Tomorrows'* project, we created a codebook of

the data by reading and re-reading the narratives, recording and documenting recurring phrases, content, or ideas in the narratives themselves. Initially, we started with working only from the 14 or 15 narratives that had been assigned to each capstone team member. One benefit of having only 14 or 15 narratives to work from, as opposed to 154, was that it allowed us to more efficiently and effectively identify thematic elements within the dataset while still allowing us to be able to read and re-read the narratives several times, considering each individual narrative in context and relation with other narratives. As we were engaged in this reading, we met as a team to share our thinking and observations, allowing us to begin to refine our recorded thoughts into broader codes or themes that provided a deeper understanding of the underlying patterns and meanings within the data, often through sharing illustrative or representative examples of emerging themes so that we could align around a common understanding and increase our interrater reliability of coding.

Through this process, we arrived at a draft codebook of 7 themes. We then reviewed narratives that were initially filtered out, either because they were shorter than 100 characters or were the other half that we did not hand-code. We determined through this review that even though the remainder of narratives yielded additional illustrative examples of the codes we had developed, it did not reveal any additional codes that we had not previously identified, thus indicating that our process had successfully reached the point of saturation with the Youth subgroup whereby no new information or themes were being discovered from the data analysis process.

We then replicated this process for the other two subgroups (Single Parents and Parents of Children with Identified Special Health Needs), with the only change being that we started with the codebook developed from the Youth dataset and remaining open to discovering additional themes or categories in the narratives. After concluding the hand-coding component of the remaining two subgroups, we determined that no additional themes or categories emerged and that the codebook developed through this process was exhaustive and reflective of the dataset we worked with.

Findings

Utilizing the thematic analysis process described above, and aligning with the client's need to have a descriptive account of the recurring ideas shared by respondents, our team identified 7 primary themes that encapsulate the types of content or information contained within the narratives across all three subgroups. These are:

- Home: descriptions of a dwelling or location that is identified as “home”
- Region/Place/Rural/Urban/Suburban: descriptions of a physical location/place other than home
- Events: descriptions of something happening
- Community: descriptions of interactions with other people

- Institutions: descriptions of interactions with organizations
- Needs (Descriptions of things needed for life, either day-to-day needs or larger quality of life needs)
 - Barriers to Needs: descriptions of being denied needs
 - Needs Met: descriptions of having needs met

Note that the last category of “Needs” was broken into two related but distinct categories due to the frequency of descriptions of both within the dataset. Illustrative examples for each theme are presented below and organized by the three subgroups. Additional illustrative examples were utilized in the “data insight” documents prepared for the client and included in the appendix of this report.

Youth

Illustrative examples from each of the 7 themes identified within the Youth subgroup are provided below, **with the words or phrases specific to them emphasized with boldface type**. Additional commentary on the interactions and relationships of different themes within each narrative, as well as across the three subgroups, is provided in the discussion section.

Home: descriptions of a dwelling or location that is identified as “home.”

- **“We live in north [Minneapolis] and bought our house last year.** We are experiencing feelings of anxiety over the gun violence, drugs, and crime and shady shit seen in broad daylight. I love my neighbors and they are kind, but to be honest, we don't do the parks here, run to the stores here, or go on walks around the neighborhood. **We live two blocks from Folwell park,** and shootings have happened there. **We live a block or so from a corner store** where a 17 year old was shot last summer. It saddens me to think we can't be a true part of this community just in case something happens. I work late and my biggest fear is I will be t boned by a driver flying down the road and ignoring stop signs and traffic signals. **We never planned for our house to be our forever home,** but we will be selling when we are able to avoid paying the capitol gains taxes. I don't see it as fleeing, but it doesn't suit the way I want our child to be raised if I can't provide him with what **I believe is a safe, clean space to live.** My post partum anxiety just kind of never went away, so it doesn't help my mental health either to be worried about our car being stolen, **or stray bullets hitting our house.”**
- **“Living in this community has given me the resources to raise my kids up to success,** it has helped us to grow stronger in our faith and has given us hope for a bright future, growing up I never had a community, we never stayed at a place for longer then a year, we moved maybe twice a year because my mom struggled with poverty and couldn't live on her own. Now that I'm a single mother of three kids, I wanted my kids to have what I didn't, which was of course, safety, stability and community. My kids have been so

blessed to have such a strong village surrounding them and it's all I could ever want for my family and for our community. The foundation here is so welcoming and so loving, this is definitely a community that's for people! I'm a single mother of three kids and I am a full time college student and I work, **I have built a life here for 5 years now and I plan to stay, we are home!**”

Region/Place/Rural/Urban/Suburban: descriptions of a physical location/place other than home

- **“It has been great to live in our city.** We have made efforts to connect with our mayor, city council, and police department in order to build trust with them, especially as people of color. I appreciate that diversity and racial justice is a priority to the city. I also appreciate the investment in local parks, libraries, native plantings, removal of invasive species, promotion of pollinator plantings, and watershed protection efforts. I like the annual community art fair. I also love how compost/yard waste is part of our weekly waste collection.”

Events: descriptions of something happening

- **“I want to share an unpleasant thing that happened in the community recently. The reason is that my girlfriend and I went shopping in a supermarket in the community, and when we left the underground garage of the supermarket after buying things, the rolling gate of the garage did not recognize our car, and then fell heavily on the rear glass of our car, and the glass was broken in an instant.** It was frustrating because it delayed my travel plans later on. What is even more disappointing is that **the supermarket blames the apartment next door because they rented the parking lot of the apartment, and the apartment blames the responsibility on the property management company. The property company claims no responsibility.** It really makes me feel that after a dispute arises in the United States, it is very inefficient and expensive to fight a lawsuit. And then I let it go. **Our car is still not fully repaired, and I cut my hand on the glass.** I hope the community government can attach importance to the management of civil facilities and strictly supervise these irresponsible property companies and community organizations. What if the next roll doesn't recognize someone else's front window?”

Community: descriptions of interactions with other people

- **“I remember when we found out that there was mold in the house that we recently bought. We had to cut corners by doing a lot of the home repairs ourselves so that we could afford the mold remediation itself (which we really couldn't afford either). Our friends let us live with them for 3 months while our house was being worked on and various people from our community helped step in with various parts of the home**

repairs. So many people helped chip in money, time, or resources to make it so we could finish the repairs and move in.”

Institutions: descriptions of interactions with organizations

- “me and my fiance just had a baby, we were homeless and struggling to stay sober and had no financial means. **We decided to go onto treatment where we both got the help we needed to stay sober** and I got to bring my daughter with but the housing situation and the financial means were a challenge. **We tried to go through the county, where we basically got the runaround. We signed up for section 8, housing grants & everything else that they told us to sign up for. It didn't go nowhere we ended up having my fiance leave treatment early,** so he could get a job and save money so we can get our own house. **The county kept bleeding us on thinking that they were going to help us get into a place** but we end up having to put our feet on the ground and look for ourselves. **The county in the state are so backwards. It's like the people that really do need the help don't get it.** So long story short, we ended up saving enough money. **We found our own private landlord thank God she was willing to rent to us.”**
- “It has been great to live in our city. **We have made efforts to connect with our mayor, city council, and police department in order to build trust with them, especially as people of color. I appreciate that diversity and racial justice is a priority to the city. I also appreciate the investment in local parks, libraries, native plantings, removal of invasive species, promotion of pollinator plantings, and watershed protection efforts. I like the annual community art fair. I also love how compost/yard waste is part of our weekly waste collection.”**

Barriers to Needs: descriptions of being denied needs

- “In my family, I have two younger sisters and there's my mom, with a small dog here name is mijha. **A challenge we have faced recently is the negligence of my mom's landlord and his slow to respond or not respond at all to request that needs to be done around the house. This has been a challenging time because it can make life hard to live when your fridge is not working or windows are being broken and nothing is being done to fix it. That's what's been going on and we've had to make our own way, but it's hard when you have someone who's supposed to care not care.”**
- “**My husband and I re-signed our lease and they raised our rent without telling us when we signed the lease or even after when rent was due so we couldn't pay all of our rent and now we can't afford it even though we are on section 8 and they also lowered our snap so we are struggling with buying food. We have trouble affording anything in general”**

- “We recently lost our car and haven't been able to access taking my daughter to her appointments and it's been hard because we don't have money either to access a new car”

Needs Met: descriptions of having needs met

- “A community resident loses his job and his home due to a family accident. **Other residents of the community organized to provide assistance, providing temporary shelter, food and work opportunities to help him get back on his feet.**”
- “I remember when we found out that there was mold in the house that we recently bought. We had to cut corners by doing a lot of the home repairs ourselves so that we could afford the mold remediation itself (which we really couldn't afford either). **Our friends let us live with them for 3 months while our house was being worked on and various people from our community helped step in with various parts of the home repairs. So many people helped chip in money, time, or resources to make it so we could finish the repairs and move in. Without the generosity of our community, we would not have been able to move into a mold-free home. I look back on what could have been a devastating situation with hope and gratefulness for our friends and family members who supported us when we needed them.**”
- “When you have a premature baby there's a lot of guessing involved. You don't know how their development will be effected. Our child came 7 weeks early due to severe preeclampsia. They are now 16 months old and thriving. Her specialists have stopped using her adjusted age. **The Help Me Grow program has been an amazing support. Our child has some sensory issues, most likely caused by NICU trauma. They have been nothing but supportive. They want to see her thrive. They truly enjoy watching her grow and prove the tests wrong. We wouldn't know where to start without the Help Me Grow program. We are beyond grateful to them for their support and care.**”

Single Parents

Illustrative examples from each of the 7 themes identified within the Single Parents subgroup are provided below, **with the words or phrases specific to them emphasized with boldface type.** Additional commentary on the interactions and relationships of different themes within each narrative, as well as across the three subgroups, is provided in the discussion section.

Home: descriptions of a dwelling or location that is identified as “home.”

- **It feels great to live in the community I share with my family and relatives.** Our community is always so willing to lend out a helping hand to anyone in need. Relatives have been so willing to help our family with child care and other assistance when we

were struggling financially. **It is always great to have someone to lean on and within the community I live in, I know that I will always have that.**

- I like how the churches and other programs try to spread Love and Knowledge and resources to the community. **I live over North Minneapolis I came from St. Paul 3 years ago and I wish they had these resources over there!**
- **Growing up in the Leech Lake Reservation for us was tough.** Coming from low class addicted parents and a broken home was a struggle. I didn't start today level out in my journey till 2020. My sister moved to the Bagley area with her family just after 2010. Started their home here in the small town of Bagley, MN. **They helped me and my father move from leech lake Reservation to the town of Bagley and helped me move into my own apartment and employment also at my current Employer Team Industries.** I've struggled with addiction From a very young age with drugs and alcohol. I've overdosed once. Been around the gang and drug life of the streets and currently on probation till 2035 for felon in possession of ammunition. All my life I've known the life of drugs and violence and fast money was easy the get. I'm a father to 1 son. His mother passed away from suicide 2019 she struggled with addiction also. My life didn't start to turn till I found Recovery from drugs and alcohol in 2020. It's been a long hard path but it's worth it at the end of the day. I've made new friends in recovery who I lean on today and I owe all my progress to my family, friends in recovery, my Employer Team Industries. And my choice to make the right steps each day for that better future cause at the end of the day I don't see myself ever throwing away where I'm at today cause I have a life today. And I wanna help others along their path and show them that you can make it out the streets and you can become the man and warrior your supposed to Be”

Region/Place/Rural/Urban/Suburban: descriptions of a physical location/place other than home

- After experiencing a difficult family situation. It's been hard to find resources and agencies in our community to feel supported. This has been the first time I have felt very much so excluded, unsupported or alone while living in the county we reside in. **Other counties seemed much more welcoming, and helpful. Unfortunately, I would like to share a better experience. Especially given I am a Social Worker with a background in Policy. I have my own experience providing resources to my past clients (in a different county).** This is incredibly disheartening & frustrating to actually live in a community where I am seeing so many people unsupported & unable to get access to resources. I hope to educate MN on how poorly it has become.

Events: descriptions of something happening

- **“Getting a new job at place that helped me get sober. Finding family support and building a community and friendships.”**

- **"Last month, my daughter Sophie started kindergarten at our local elementary school. I was so proud to see her go off on the first day in her new backpack, eager to make friends and start learning. However, after just a few weeks, Sophie said she didn't want to go to school anymore. She told me that some of the other kids made fun of her for not having the trendy sneakers or not bringing special snacks for lunch.** As a single mom, I've had to carefully budget just to cover our basic needs. It hurt to hear Sophie was being left out for things I couldn't provide. **I met with her teacher who was understanding and said she would address the issue with the students. She also suggested ways I could talk to Sophie about valuing herself for who she is rather than what she has.** While this experience was discouraging at first, I'm hopeful that with the teacher's help and continued conversations at home, Sophie will gain confidence and not let material things define her friendships. I'm grateful this challenge surfaced early in the school year before it could seriously impact her learning and wellbeing. Our community is stronger when we embrace each child's unique situation with empathy and support.

Community: descriptions of interactions with other people

- We had to deal with the trauma of a house fire. It was a very difficult time for me and my family. **With help from my family, friends, coworkers, and even some community members who I didn't know, we got through it.** We had to start over almost from scratch, but with hard work and **some help that I mentioned** it happened somewhat quickly and let me know who would be there for me in the hardest times.
- I think one of my hardest challenges I had to face was living on the reservation in high poverty areas. It is actually sad to think we were placed in these areas to isolate and keep us all together with little to no resources. I feel strong everyday I wake up because we are able to still strive off of the little resources we were given. **I think that it is amazing to see all these tribes governing themselves and investing in our future generations. I am very thankful for my community and the people that are surrounded by us because without them we would not be able to be a successful tribe.**
- **One neighbor, in particular, went above and beyond to assist us. They used their professional network to connect my spouse with a potential job opportunity that had recently arisen. They arranged an introduction and helped my spouse prepare for the interview, offering valuable insights and advice.**

Institutions: descriptions of interactions with organizations

- "I was so stressed and depressed and I had a friend that introduced me to **an non-profit organization called Promise Neighborhood and they were giving out school supplies and free meals to the community, i was taken back, so ended up joining that team to learn to help kids and families so i worked there and met a lot of community**

organizations, got a job in the school district because i seen the need especially for people who look like me so i stay involved with my community, now I'm working with united way a 1 year project as a literacy leader building Black positive identity in the community and looking for more opportunity to support my community.”

- **“My dad had COVID pneumonia so he had to get disabled because his lungs shrunk and needs oxygen now, so he applied for MA but got denied because my mom apparently makes too much and he also applied for snap but also got denied so it's been hard for them to keep up with some bills and they feel like they are not important here like other races that get all the help while the husbands make over 100k a year and still get free help”**

Barriers to Needs: descriptions of being denied needs

- **My son has a few medical issues and sometimes it's hard to get to all his appointments in the cities.** I am thankful he has blue plus insurance. I am fortunate enough to have a car **but with having a higher property tax on my house it's getting harder to pay the bills each month and having gas money. Groceries are still getting more expensive and yet I don't get paid anymore than I was.** I'm glad school lunches are free this year it really helps out.
- **We were homeless for awhile, took a lot for me to make sure the two kids I have will have a home for them selfs.** I never gave up. **We do struggle with getting anywhere appointments etc school games to work. Due to not being able to afford a car. Just not making enough an don't have a babysitter as well.** But I won't give up I'll keep pushing to find a way for us do better and live better.
- Well the looks and feels may vary depending on who you ask. My community is quiet for the most part but there also is a lot of havoc. **The challenges we have in my community is the ability to let my children be children without worrying about the Gun violence or the wreckless driving that my neighborhood experiences on a daily basis. I am a voucher participant and it's hard to find housing in the better areas so in a sense families are almost forced to reside in the highly violent populated areas or give up their voucher to move into areas where the crime rate is very low.**

Needs Met: descriptions of having needs met

- **i have been looking for a job actively, and when i had a job interview i hat to reach out to someone to take car of the kids, my neighbors agreed to watch out for the kids, because they know how important it is for me having a job and securing it.**
- **"It all started with sudden decision of one of my family leaving our community to live far away, her place is where families gathered for various activities and events. The house was not only a place for recreation but also a symbol of unity in our neighborhood. being sold out left a void that we, as a community and friends, struggled to fill. One sunny**

afternoon, a group of concerned neighbors, including myself, decided to come together to address the issue of the meeting point. We formed a committee with the goal of finding a solution to find a new place. Meetings were held in living rooms, ideas were shared, and a sense of determination fueled our efforts. As the weeks passed, we encountered numerous challenges. Fundraising proved to be a daunting task."

Parents of Children with Identified Special Health Needs

Illustrative examples from each of the 7 themes identified within the Parents of Children with Identified Special Health Needs subgroup are provided below, **with the words or phrases specific to them emphasized with boldface type**. Additional commentary on the interactions and relationships of different themes within each narrative, as well as across the three subgroups, is provided in the discussion section.

Home: descriptions of a dwelling or location that is identified as "home."

- Transportation and getting pulled over multiple times **living here and living in greater east side and not having that issue**
- **I like living in a small town where people come together to help each other**, but sometimes the resources aren't available for organizations to help people in need.

Region/Place/Rural/Urban/Suburban: descriptions of a physical location/place other than home

- **"We were living in rural MN, and our school district was served by a special education cooperative.** Our children have needs and qualify for early intervention. However, the cooperative was not serving them. I called the state to inquire, and the response was horrifying. My child at this time was about 9 months old, and their specialist only came if I called. So I stopped calling her and she stopped coming. This is when I called the state to ask about formal complaints. The answer - **THE COOP HAD TO BE OUT OF COMPLIANCE FOR AN ENTIRE YEAR BEFORE THE STATE CARED ENOUGH TO FOLLOW-UP! Seriously?!!!!** My child would have been without services for the first 2 years of life before the state would **BEGIN** a process to do **ANYTHING!** **I am not happy about living in MN, because it is ABSOLUTELY NOT the best state to raise children if the children are not normally developing, ESPECIALLY if you live in RURAL MN. Our family moved to an urban setting (brings us back to housing insecurity), where our children are enrolled in programs that they receive early intervention.** The growth is fantastic, and I'm proud of them for the work they are doing. One child talks about having friends, which is so heartwarming. Something they did not have before. Solution option: Let's re-visit early intervention throughout the state, and make a plan for improvement, keeping rural Minnesotan's with

delays and disabilities in mind...the rules that pertain to an 11th grader for compliance, should not be the same as for a 9 month old."

Events: descriptions of something happening

- **“My family, along with other residents, participated in the cleanup of the community park. Together, they trimmed flowers, cleaned up pests and diseases, and added rides to make the park more beautiful and livable.”**
- **“Headstart daycare got vetoed by the school board. Now I can't get back to my regular hours, and am having trouble paying for my vehicle.”**

Community: descriptions of interactions with other people

- **“One challenge that impacted our community was the closure of a local small business that had been a cornerstone of our neighborhood for years. Its closure left a void in our community and affected the livelihoods of many families. To address this, we organized a "Shop Local" campaign, encouraging residents to support other local businesses. We collaborated with the affected business owners to explore alternative solutions, such as online platforms or shared spaces. The resilience and adaptability displayed by the community during this challenging time were truly inspiring.”**
- **“My family and I are often stereotyped when we go to the store. We notice when we are followed by employees thinking we are going to steal. When in reality we are not but we are stereotyped because we are family of color.”**

Institutions: descriptions of interactions with organizations

- **“Signing up for sports for the kids. It was kind of a new and scary experience for the kids. We went to the community center, and the receptionist went above and beyond answering my questions and helped with signing up. My kids are the first in the family to participate in local sports. If it wasn't for the grant provided to the local tribe for Native American children, we wouldn't have been able to afford my children's interest in sports and activities.”**
- **“An elementary school principal who did not understand childhood trauma and the multiple diagnosis that were unfolding. My children were denied access to the resources needed to be successful in early elementary school because of one individual blocking access. Additionally, not understanding that the medical system has such incredibly long delays for those needing proper mental and behavioral health diagnosis. We were on wait lists (some over 9 months long) or simply denied all because we had medical assistance (and that was a secondary insurer). So, we had a school system requiring a diagnosis before allowing help for children's needs would be considered and a medical system where you have to hunt down a provider who will accept your insurance all to be put on a wait list for 6-12 months. It felt like**

no one wanted to help. And certainly had no understanding how challenging it is to work through failing systems.“

Barriers to Needs: descriptions of being denied needs

- **“My family lives in a rural area, where it can be hard to access the services we need. For example, we have found it is nearly impossible to get my two toddlers into the dentist since there is such limited choices within a 40 mile radius. No one seems to be taking new patients, especially with our insurance. It can be stressful when it seems so far out of my control and there are no alternative options. So far, we have not found a solution, other than brushing their teeth twice a day. We have been calling area Dentists for about a year now.”**
- **“One of the biggest things that my family struggles with is Accessibility. I am a single parent and have a child with a physical disability. My child is a power chair user. I found it very challenging to find accessible housing, and even more difficult to find accessible child care. I do not feel I have much support in this and end up doing a lot of it on my own”**

Needs Met: descriptions of having needs met

- **“I was in need of daycare due to work. Through the program that my child was in I was able to get resources of a head start program my child could attend all day while I go to work. This was great because it allowed my family to continue to be successful by working and providing a safe place for my child.”**
- **“After my daughter was born, I was crippled with post-partum depression. I don't have a lot of friends near by, and felt so alone. I didn't know how to cope. However, there were some classes at the local hospital for moms to connect, music classes, library programs, breastfeeding support groups. These programs (along with medication and therapy) helped me out of that darkness.”**

Discussion

Youth

In analyzing the narratives shared by young people in the MN Story Collective, it became evident that many youth are grappling with challenges typically associated with adulthood. These "adult" problems—ranging from financial instability and housing insecurity to concerns about safety and mental health—are a significant part of their lived experiences. Despite their young age, these individuals are navigating complex and often overwhelming issues, revealing a maturity and resilience that is both impressive and concerning. It underscores the importance of

creating supportive environments that acknowledge and address the burdens these young people carry.

Amidst these challenges, the narratives also highlight the profound sense of joy and connection that many young people find within their communities. For many, community is not just a backdrop to their lives but a source of strength and happiness, providing them with opportunities to build relationships, receive support, and engage in meaningful activities. This sense of community serves as a crucial counterbalance to the difficulties they face, offering a space where they can experience positivity and belonging.

An important aspect of the narratives is the diversity of experiences and perspectives they represent. No two stories are identical, even when they come from individuals facing similar circumstances. This diversity reflects the unique contexts, identities, and backgrounds of the young people who contributed their stories, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of their experiences. It also highlights the critical role of the storyteller—their identity, perspective, and voice significantly shape the way their story is told—both in style and in content—and understood.

Finally, the narratives reveal that people care, notice, and show up for one another. Whether it is friends stepping in to support each other, community members offering help, or young people themselves taking action to address issues in their lives, these stories illustrate a deep sense of empathy and responsibility. This collective caring is a powerful force within communities, and it plays a vital role in helping young people navigate the complexities of their lives. The act of storytelling itself becomes a form of connection and empowerment, as those who share their stories contribute to a broader understanding and potentially to the shaping of future policies and programs.

Single Parents

The narratives shared by single parents in the MN StoryCollective illustrate the compounded challenges they face in their daily lives. For many single parents, the demands of balancing work, childcare, and household responsibilities are immense, and even small setbacks can quickly escalate into significant crises. These challenges often intersect, creating a web of difficulties that can be overwhelming to navigate alone. The stories reveal how the lack of support, whether in the form of affordable childcare, accessible healthcare, transportation, or financial stability, can make it extraordinarily difficult for single parents to provide for their families and maintain their well-being.

One of the most powerful aspects of the MN StoryCollective is its ability to offer single parents a direct line of communication to State leadership through anonymous storytelling, something that many respondents took advantage of. This platform allows them to share their experiences and challenges candidly, without fear of judgment or repercussions. Many narratives concluded with

suggestions or even pleas to policymakers to improve situations and needed services. True to its intention, by providing a space for these voices to be heard, the initiative can help ensure that the realities of single parents' lives are brought to the attention of policymakers, who may otherwise be disconnected from the day-to-day struggles faced by this group. This direct communication has the potential to inform and shape policies that are more responsive to the needs of single parents.

The stories from single parents also convey a profound sense of shared humanity. Despite the anonymity of the platform, the narratives are deeply personal, candid, and resonate with universal themes of love, resilience, and the desire to provide a better life for one's children. These stories remind us that, at their core, the struggles of single parents are not just individual issues but reflections of broader societal challenges. They highlight the common human experience of striving for stability and security in the face of adversity, fostering empathy and understanding among readers, and potentially inspiring collective action to support these families.

Parents of Children with Identified Special Health Needs

The narratives shared by parents of children with identified special health needs in the MN StoryCollective reveal the multifaceted nature of health challenges and the numerous external factors that influence them. These health needs are not monolithic; they vary widely in scope and severity, encompassing physical, emotional, developmental, and psychological aspects. The stories illustrate how these needs are deeply affected by external factors such as geographic location, socioeconomic status, and the availability of specialized care. For many families, navigating the complexities of healthcare systems and accessing the necessary resources requires considerable effort and resilience, often leaving them feeling overwhelmed and uncertain.

When multiple challenges arise simultaneously, the strain on these families intensifies, making it even more difficult to find adequate resources and support. The narratives frequently depict situations where parents are juggling not only their child's health needs but also additional stressors such as financial instability, housing insecurity, or personal health issues. In these moments, the scarcity of comprehensive support becomes painfully evident. The stories highlight the critical gaps in services and the need for more robust, accessible resources that can adapt to the complex realities these families face.

Institutions play a pivotal role in either addressing or exacerbating the needs of caregivers. The narratives underscore how interactions with healthcare providers, schools, and government agencies can significantly impact the well-being of both the children and their parents. Positive experiences with institutions—such as receiving timely, compassionate care or effective support from educators—can make a world of difference. Conversely, bureaucratic hurdles, inadequate services, or dismissive attitudes can deepen the challenges these families face, contributing to feelings of frustration, helplessness, and neglect. These stories highlight the importance of

responsive, empathetic institutional support in improving outcomes for children with special health needs and their families.

A recurring theme in the narratives is the profound sense of isolation experienced by many parents. Descriptions of feeling alone in their struggles are common, with many parents expressing that their unique challenges are not fully understood or acknowledged by those around them. This isolation is often compounded by the demanding nature of caregiving, which can limit parents' ability to connect with others who share similar experiences or to participate in broader community life. The stories call attention to the need for more community-based support networks that can provide these parents with the understanding, companionship, and assistance they need to feel less isolated and more supported in their caregiving journey.

Limitations

While the datasets provided many insights into the thoughts and feelings of the people of Minnesota, they also presented a variety of limitations that are imposed on what we have gathered from it. The first is due to the method of collection, the insights from the data cannot be generalized as the sample is not representative of all the people of Minnesota but also because the sample wasn't randomly obtained. In some instances, specific populations were targeted to better gather their feedback, again meaning the insights cannot be generalized to the larger population.

The method of collection also presents another limitation of the data. That being the content shared in the stories and the inability to ask follow-up questions. Some stories are well over a thousand characters long while others are only two. This means that there isn't an ability to dig deeper into the content of them. In a similar vein, given that this was an anonymous survey, people self-identified their characteristics in the demographics section. This might mean people were placed in the wrong group or should've been with a different group, meaning there is some room for error in that sphere. The methodology employed focuses on descriptive readings of the stories and not recommendations or solutions from the stories. Looking instead at what people are saying and how that could be used to better inform policy, rather than make policy. Additionally, using a qualitative methodology leads to a potential for researcher bias and thus adds a limitation on the data in regards to how we might have interpreted the data.

For the specific datasets, there is an additional limitation on the 'Parents of Children with Identified Special Needs' category. Unlike the other categories this one wasn't created from a specific demographic question, instead, it was a facsimile using multiple questions at once. What this means is that the category, while intended to represent the group, may have members that shouldn't be there, with the opposite also being true.

Recommendations

In working alongside the MN StoryCollective staff, the Capstone team from the Humphrey School gleaned several recommendations which are outlined below.

1. Increase staffing capacity
 - a. When looking at the Kansas University *'Our Tomorrows'* project one of the struggles they identified was the labor of going through the stories, and how time-consuming that could be. During our analysis process, we believe we found a method to somewhat circumvent this, however, there are still a lot of stories that need to be read and analyzed. As it stands the MN StoryCollective doesn't have enough people to be even skimming the stories. So we recommend finding someone or a small group of people dedicated to reading through the stories and analyzing them using the methodology we have set down.
 - b. Additionally in the area of staffing something that came up often was that there wasn't anyone on the team dedicated to producing marketing materials. With the thought in mind that the research is to be presented to individuals and a part of that is that it needs to look nice we recommend looking into having someone directly working on the marketing and design for the MN StoryCollective.
2. Establish clear goals
 - a. The MN StoryCollective initiative is unique insofar as it has an explicit purpose of remaining exploratory rather than interpretive. That is to say, the initiative seeks to bolster the accessibility and usability of qualitative narrative data from Minnesotans as stakeholders and decision-makers navigate the shifting environment of priorities in state government. However, this exploratory process can lead to the goals of the program feeling muddled. We recommend having a document that clearly explains and lists the goals of the MN StoryCollective, that could be used to present it to another body.
3. Further research/Expanding research scope
 - a. During the analysis process, only 3 of the 11 total sub-groups were looked at by this team. Evidently this leaves 8 groups currently unexplored. Additionally, our research focused on the qualitative aspects of the MN StoryCollective, and there is a potential for all 11 sub-groups to have a mixed methods study performed on them. All this is to say that there is plenty more to explore within the data, and so we recommend that the data continues to be explored.
 - b. Amidst our reading of the stories, one thing that kept coming up was that we wanted to hear more from individuals contributing. This was to not only draw more interpretive conclusions from the data but also to give us a clearer picture of

what was going on. To solve this conundrum we recommend conducting a series of in-depth interviews to complement the anonymous story collection

- c. To finalize the research process as a whole, we believe it to be important to get more information about the data collection methodology out into the broader academic space. One of the struggles encountered during this process was the lack of literature surrounding the data collection process as it is still relatively new. To further the process for academia as a whole, we recommend getting information about the process out there so it can have a larger impact than what it is now.
4. Employ analytical frameworks
 - a. We were asked to solely focus on descriptive analysis—sharing what the data shows without any interpretation. However, the goal is that these data insights could inform the budgets and actions of policymakers. If this is the case, a certain degree of analysis might be necessary to make the best use of the staff time and ensure the insights are substantive.

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Appendix A: Youth Data Insights

BACKGROUND

MN StoryCollective (MNSC) is a cross-agency initiative of the State of Minnesota. MNSC's goal is to provide a regular, flexible source of qualitative data from diverse community stories to ensure State programs, policies, and practices better meet the needs of all families. Housed within the Results Management team of Minnesota Management and Budget (MMB), MNSC collaborates with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders. For example, The University of Kansas Center for Public Partnerships and Research (CPPR) provides MNSC with technical assistance. In 2019, CPPR developed an initiative named "Our Tomorrows," collecting stories from across Kansas to inform work in their early childhood system, providing MNSC with a framework on which to build its own story collecting and sensemaking program.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Many young people experience “adult” problems.** Just like their older peers, young people face issues accessing quality housing, transportation, healthcare and childcare.
- **Community is a source of joy.** Many of the youngest respondents shared positive experiences at community events and expressed gratitude for their communities.
- **No two stories are identical.** Each person has a unique lived experience and perspective to offer.
- **People care. People notice. People show up.** Time and time again these stories show how communities came together to help individuals in need.
- **Needs are complex.** They are sought and met through numerous disparate channels. Organizations and other people play a critical role in facilitating access to needs. This can result in fragmented assistance.
- **People are complex.** Their lives are rich and layered. Their identities are multifaceted, and their lived experiences are full of both joys and sorrows.
- **Who tells the story matters.** Trust and power dynamics play a large role in how (and if) stories are told and understood. Researchers and practitioners should be mindful of this nuance as they leverage narrative to better understand the experience of youth living in Minnesota.

DATA COLLECTION

Much of MNSC's story collection centers around targeted community engagement. During fall of 2023, MNSC partnered with community-based partners to support story collection through in-person workshops. Sensemaking sessions were also facilitated by MNSC staff in cooperation with community partners. There was no expectation that sensemaking participants would share their own stories. Instead, these community conversations were sparked by prompts and anonymous stories. Sensemaking sessions delve deep into shared experiences and goals and cultivate a greater shared understanding of the lived experiences of community members.

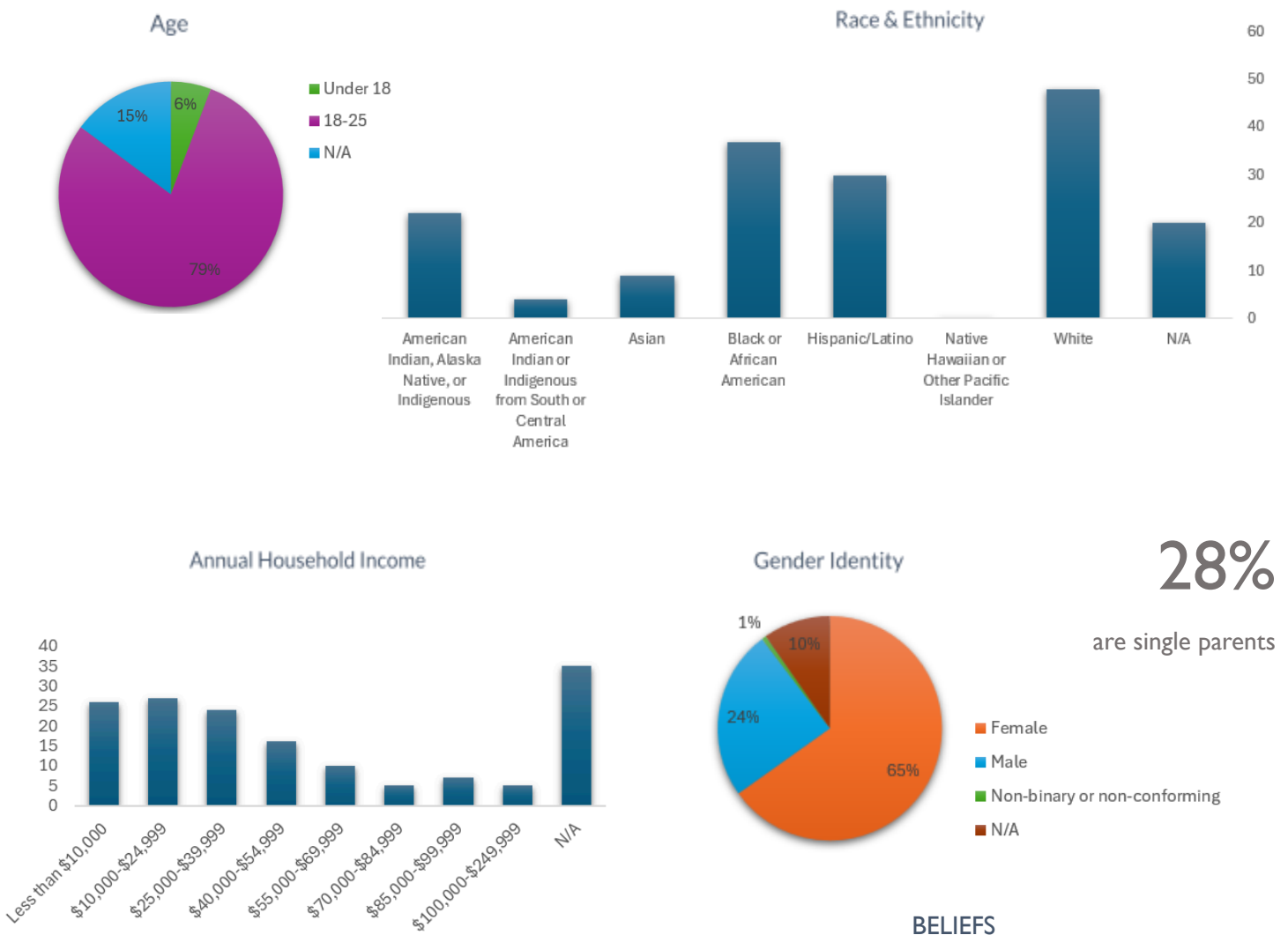
Simultaneously, MNSC launched an online platform for story collection. Anyone is eligible to share a story. Submissions can be about anything the storyteller likes, and all stories are submitted anonymously with no personally identifiable information (PII) included. Thousands of people have shared responses and experiences with MN StoryCollective. These experiences can be used to better understand and support the state’s many communities.

These data insights were developed in collaboration with graduate students of the Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs as part of their capstone project. This was an exploratory—not confirmatory—process. Rather than seeking to confirm any specific hypothesis going into the analysis, the students simply sought to explore the data and note patterns that arise amongst stories from people that share common self-identities. This data insight centers on stories of youth living in Minnesota.

COMMUNITY PROFILE

A total of 155 stories were submitted to MNSC by individuals self-identifying as age 25 years or younger.

DEMOGRAPHICS



Some of the questions in the MNSC story collecting tool were triad questions. These questions largely centered on beliefs and identity formation. Respondents were asked to answer the triad questions by moving a dot from the center of a triangle to a location of their choice. Proximity to a corner indicates greater influence of the corresponding source. Each dot on the triangles below represents an individual's response. Dots in the center represent individuals that see all sources as more or less equally influential.



The majority of youth respondents primarily trust information that comes from their own experiences and instincts (41%), closely followed by information from friends or family (38%). Majority of youth respondents say that their idea of community is formed by people close to them (36%), closely followed by their culture, history, and traditions (34%).

THEMES

The following key themes emerged from our analysis of the data, each providing insights into how residents experience life in Minnesota:

Home. Narratives regarding “home,” be it dwelling or place.

Place. Narratives referencing a physical location other than home, such as region, rural, urban, suburban space.

Events. Narratives about something that happened.

Community. Descriptions of interactions with other people.

Institutions. Descriptions of interactions with organizations and systems.

Needs. Things needed for daily living, such as jobs, medical care, and transportation.

STORIES

“I remember when we found out that there was mold in the house that we recently bought. We had to cut corners by doing a lot of the home repairs ourselves so that we could afford the mold remediation itself (which we really couldn't

afford either). Our friends let us live with them for 3 months while our house was being worked on and various people from our community helped step in with various parts of the home repairs. So many people helped chip in money, time, or resources to make it so we could finish the repairs and move in. Without the generosity of our community, we would not have been able to move into a mold-free home. I look back on what could have been a devastating situation with hope and gratefulness for our friends and family members who supported us when we needed them.” –Age 18-25

“Being young and in the foster care system I've experienced many types of community and many different versions of what community is supposed to look like . When I first started doing youth based community work I was 15 turning 16 and I got introduced to things and people in the community that really helped me work on myself and learning new things so I could be successful. I think having safe and healthy relationships in communities is very important and I love the work I do and being able to have relationships in the community.” –Under 18

“Whenever I suffer from hard times I reach out to the community and the people I know, in most cases they do give me support. it is good to find people to reach out to especially in the hard times.” –Age 18-25

“[When I was] new to the community I didn't know where to find resources. Working with a teacher was great because my child was able to learn but also have access to necessary resources that were able to meet my family's immediate needs. The teacher not only told me where my family could get food at no cost but also went with me to support me with questions. I am very appreciative of these programs.” –Age 18-25

“My parents came to Minnesota in the 1990s they have lived here since ever since they worked a lot of jobs my parents would usually be working all of my childhood working 2 jobs every day and any side jobs they could find when they had the chance but that also taught me to work a lot I would chose to work then to do drugs or go party or hang out with friends. To this day they still work a lot and I just hope that one day I can help them if I ever get a good career and job one thing that is pretty good is that I speak Spanish and I can always translate when people need help I am very grateful of my parents teaching me to speak Spanish first as my first language it feel good to be able to help people that just came from another country and don't know English it reminds me of my parents and i just think if these where my parents I'd hope someone would help them also.” –Under 18

“I want to share an unpleasant thing that happened in the community recently. The reason is that my girlfriend and I went shopping in a supermarket in the community, and when we left the underground garage of the supermarket after buying things, the rolling gate of the garage did not recognize our car, and then fell heavily on the rear glass of our car, and the glass was broken in an instant. It was frustrating because it delayed my travel plans later on. What is even more disappointing is that the supermarket blames the apartment next door because they rented the parking lot of the apartment, and the apartment blames the responsibility on the property management company. The property company claims no responsibility. It really makes me feel that after a dispute arises in the United States, it is very inefficient and expensive to fight a lawsuit. And then I let it go. Our car is still not fully repaired, and I cut my hand on the glass. I hope the community government can attach importance to the management of civil facilities and strictly supervise these irresponsible property companies and community organizations. What if the next roll doesn't recognize someone else's front window?” –Age 18-25

“My family and I recently had a fun day exploring a local nature park. We hiked through the beautiful trails, had a picnic by the lake, and spotted some adorable wildlife. It made us feel so connected to nature and truly thriving.” –Under 18

“The main thing I have experience with is the housing issue, I'm not on any assistants for housing but on a waiting list, i had to give 3 months of rent to move my family in so we won't be homeless. My job pays 12 dollars an hour, so I had to work extra hours away from my kids to get the money. I also had to borrow money from family and also ask for help from the county and was denied. The stress was so bad but I was able to come up with the money so my kids could have a place to sleep.” –Age 18-25

“Me siento invisible dentro de mi comunidad. Muchos no contamos con los acceso a programas educacionales para niños pequeños, necesitamos más opciones para niños menores de cinco años. [I feel invisible within my community. Many of us do not have access to educational programs for small children, we need more options for kids under 5 years old.]” –Age N/A

Appendix B: Caregivers of Family Members with Special Health Needs Data Insights

BACKGROUND

MN StoryCollective (MNSC) is a cross-agency initiative of the State of Minnesota. MNSC's goal is to provide a regular, flexible source of qualitative data from diverse community stories to ensure State programs, policies, and practices better meet the needs of all families. Housed within the Results Management team of Minnesota Management and Budget (MMB), MNSC collaborates with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders. For example, The University of Kansas Center for Public Partnerships and Research (CPPR) provides MNSC with technical assistance. In 2019, CPPR developed an initiative named "Our Tomorrows," collecting stories from across Kansas to inform work in their early childhood system, providing MNSC with a framework for its own story collecting and sensemaking program.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **When given the opportunity, people will share their stories.** With thousands of stories already shared, people are eager to make their stories known.
- **Health needs take many forms and are impacted by several external factors.** Primary language, immigration status, ability, mental health, injury, and substance use all impact an individual's experience with health maintenance and care.
- **When multiple challenges arise at once, adequate resources and support can be harder to find.** When Minnesotans and their families are reckoning with several obstacles at once, finding tailored supports becomes more challenging.
- **Self determination is key.** By fostering trust and cultivating comfort in the sensemaking environment and offering an 'opt-in' informed consent approach, MNSC's story collection approach offers storytellers physical and psychological safety as well as a sense of autonomy and ownership over the entire storytelling process.
- **Institutions play a critical role in addressing or exacerbating caregivers' needs.** Organizations and other people play a critical role in facilitating access to needs. This can result in fragmented assistance.
- **Descriptions of isolation are common.** While many respondents described the critical nature of community in addressing needs, many others described feeling isolated or excluded from communities.
- **People are complex.** Their lives are rich and layered. Their identities are multifaceted, and their lived experiences are full of both joys and sorrows.

DATA COLLECTION

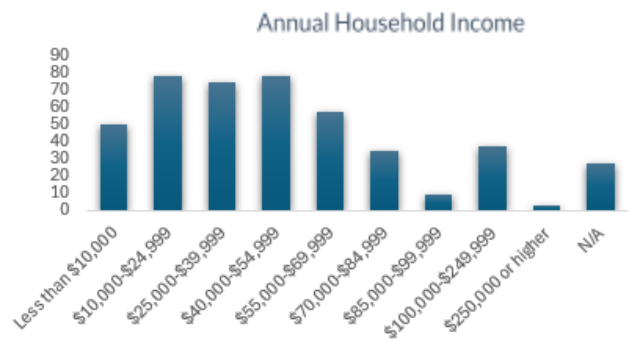
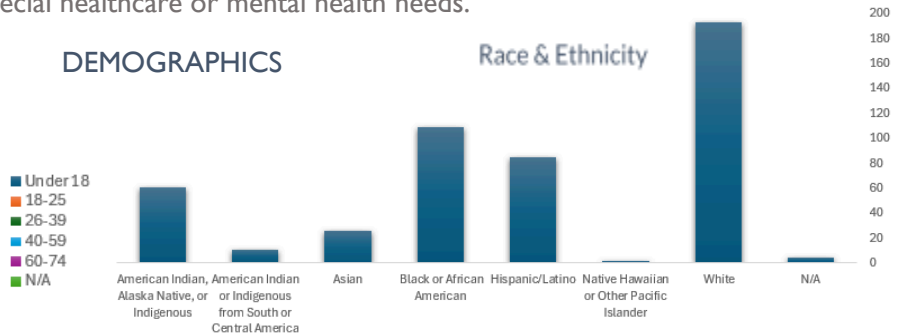
Much of MNSC's story collection centers around targeted community engagement. During fall of 2023, MNSC partnered with community-based partners to support story collection through in-person workshops. Sensemaking sessions were also facilitated by MNSC staff in cooperation with community partners. There was no expectation that sensemaking participants would share their own stories. Instead, these community conversations were sparked by prompts and anonymous stories. Sensemaking sessions delve deep into shared experiences and goals and cultivate a greater shared understanding of the lived experiences of community members.

These data insights were developed in collaboration with graduate students of the Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs as part of their capstone project. This was an exploratory—not confirmatory—process. Rather than seeking to confirm any specific hypothesis going into the analysis, the students simply sought to explore the data and note patterns that arise amongst stories from people that share common self-identities. This data insight centers on stories of parents of children with identified special health needs.

COMMUNITY PROFILE

A total of 449 stories were submitted to MNCS by individuals self-identifying as caregivers and as being an individual or having family with disability/varying abilities, special healthcare or mental health needs.

37%
are single parents



BELIEFS

Some of the questions in the MNSC story collecting tool were triad questions. These questions are largely centered on beliefs and identity formation. Respondents were asked to answer the triad questions by moving a dot from the center of a triangle to a location of their choice. Proximity to a corner indicates greater influence of the corresponding source.

Each dot on the triangles below represents an individual's response. Dots in the center represent individuals that see all sources as more or less equally influential. Dots closer to a corner represent individuals that trust information from that source more.

I usually trust information that comes from...

What shapes your idea of community?

The majority of respondents primarily trust information that comes from their own experiences and instincts (44%), followed by information from friends or family (31%). Majority of respondents say that their idea of community is formed by their culture, history, and traditions (36%), closely followed by people close to them (34%).



THEMES

The following key themes emerged from our analysis of the data, each providing insights into how residents experience life in Minnesota:

Home. Narratives regarding “home,” be it dwelling or place.

Place. Narratives referencing a physical location other than home, such as region, rural, urban, suburban space.

Events. Narratives about something that happened.

Community. Descriptions of interactions with other people.

Institutions. Descriptions of interactions with organizations and systems.

Needs. Things needed for daily living, such as jobs, medical care, and transportation.

STORIES

“My family, along with other residents, participated in the cleanup of the community park. Together, they trimmed flowers, cleaned up pests and diseases, and added rides to make the park more beautiful and livable.”

“Signing up for sports for the kids. It was kind of a new and scary experience for the kids. We went to the community center, and the receptionist went above and beyond answering my questions and helped with signing up. My kids are the first in the family to participate in local sports. If it wasn't for the grant provided to the local tribe for Native American children, we wouldn't have been able to afford my children's interest in sports and activities.”

“One of the biggest things that my family struggles with is Accessibility. I am a single parent and have a child with a physical disability. My child is a power chair user. I found it very challenging to find accessible housing, and even more difficult to find accessible child care. I do not feel I have much support in this and end up doing a lot of it on my own?”

“My child's father and I are not married, yet live together, this means for county programs we are required to report both of our incomes yet for insurance purposes we cannot benefit from one another's employer benefits. Due to inflation these days we are just barely getting by with a newborn and have been selling things, asking family for help, giving up extra curricular activities just to get by, a clear indication we could use some help but in order to receive WIC, Public Health, SNAP or even PSOP we would need to live separately, something we also cannot afford to do. Our system is FLAWED and discriminates against who it will help”

“It can feel difficult to feel that my autistic family and small children are safe and included in their community. In elementary school, I want and request for my son to be included in general ed, but they keep him segregated every day and have never allowed him to participate in the general ed class that he was supposed to be a part of since last year. In community settings, it's hard to enroll my children in activities such as music, gymnastics, swimming, etc. due to the lack of adaptive programs for children with special needs. Safe and inclusive childcare for POC and special needs does not exist. My child was recently approved for a fence around my home from a Dakota county waiver and that's a huge win. Now I know my kids will be safe in the back yard and won't run into the street or elope [slip away].”

“My son loves to play hockey but it is expensive, I am a single Mom & it's hard to swing the cost of registration, gear, etc. I was able to get a scholarship through our local Community Action Center & was very grateful!”

“Improving the community A series of burglaries and neighborhood crimes have occurred, making residents feel unsafe. The community organized a community Policing committee and worked with local police to increase patrols, improve lighting and strengthen community surveillance, which successfully increased the level of safety in the community.”

“My family lives in a rural area, where it can be hard to access the services we need. For example, we have found it is nearly impossible to get my two toddlers into the dentist since there are such limited choices within a 40 mile radius. No one seems to be taking new [patients], especially with our insurance. It can be stressful when it seems so far out of my control and there are no alternative options. So far, we have not found a solution, other than brushing their teeth twice a day. We have been calling area Dentists for about a year now.”

“I dealt with Child Protection for the past two and a half years, all these struggles of being a single, black woman keep catching up to me. I always get people that are supposed to be helping my family and I jump to conclusions that I am hurting my kiddos when they are autistic and I literally witness one of them self harming themselves by making themselves bleed when he doesn't get his way. I do not trust services due to the fact that I'm asking for help for my children to get the help and services that they need. But instead of helping, people put their bias and feelings into situations they know nothing about because they don't witness my kid's behaviors like I do at home. They're not with them 24/7 so how can they know what I do at home with my children? It's basically okay for my children to get hurt at school or therapy services but it's not okay for them to get hurt with me. Every situation turns to CPS and that's wrong. Minnesota needs to do better in helping families who are low income and need to help those who have children with disabilities. Just because a child gets hurt, doesn't mean it's automatically abuse. I'm sick of the bias.”

“After a bad car accident I realized how alone I truly am in this community. There aren't any uber or lyft services available in our rural community. There is a bus service but it has limited hours and it takes a very long time to get out and do what you need to do i.e. shopping, paying bills, things of that nature. There is also only one taxi service available and it is very expensive which is not good for my budget.”

Appendix C: Single Parents Data Insights

BACKGROUND

MN StoryCollective (MNSC) is a cross-agency initiative of the State of Minnesota. MNSC's goal is to provide a regular, flexible source of qualitative data from diverse community stories to ensure State programs, policies, and practices better meet the needs of all families. Housed within the Results Management team of Minnesota Management and Budget (MMB), MNSC collaborates with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders. For example, The University of Kansas Center for Public Partnerships and Research (CPPR) provides MNSC with technical assistance. In 2019, CPPR developed an initiative named "Our Tomorrows," collecting stories from across Kansas to inform work in their early childhood system, providing MNSC with a framework on which to build its own story collecting and sensemaking program.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Challenges compound quickly for single parents.** Economic and logistical pressures compound when there are more minors living in a household. When resources are already stretched from parenting, small crises can have big implications.
- **Anonymous storytelling provides a direct line of communication to State leadership.** MNSC provides a unique conduit for individuals to directly communicate with State leadership. Story tellers are able to anonymously share their unfiltered personal thoughts and experiences to leaders of State agencies and programs, unhindered by time constraints and the power dynamics at play at in-person public forums.
- **Stories convey shared humanity.** Although each story is singular, these stories are united by common challenges, needs, goals, and experiences. This recognition fosters empathy and shared connection.
- **Needs are complex.** They are sought and met through numerous disparate channels. Organizations and other people play a critical role in facilitating access to needs. This can result in fragmented assistance.
- **People are complex.** Their lives are rich and layered. Their identities are multifaceted, and their lived experiences are full of both joys and sorrows.

DATA COLLECTION

Much of MNSC's story collection centers around targeted community engagement. During fall of 2023, MNSC partnered with community-based partners to support story collection through in-person workshops. Sensemaking sessions were also facilitated by MNSC staff in cooperation with community partners. There was no expectation that sensemaking participants would share their own stories. Instead, these community conversations were sparked by prompts and anonymous stories. Sensemaking sessions delve deep into shared experiences and goals and cultivate a greater shared understanding of the lived experiences of community members.

Simultaneously, MNSC launched an online platform for story collection. Anyone is eligible to share a story. Submissions can be about anything the storyteller likes, and all stories are submitted anonymously with no personally identifiable

information (PII) included. Thousands of people have shared responses and experiences with MN StoryCollective. These experiences can be used to better understand and support the state’s many communities.

These data insights were developed in collaboration with graduate students of the Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs as part of their capstone project. This was an exploratory—not confirmatory—process. Rather than seeking to confirm any specific hypothesis going into the analysis, the students simply sought to explore the data and note patterns that arise amongst stories from people that share common self-identities. This data insight centers on stories of single parents.

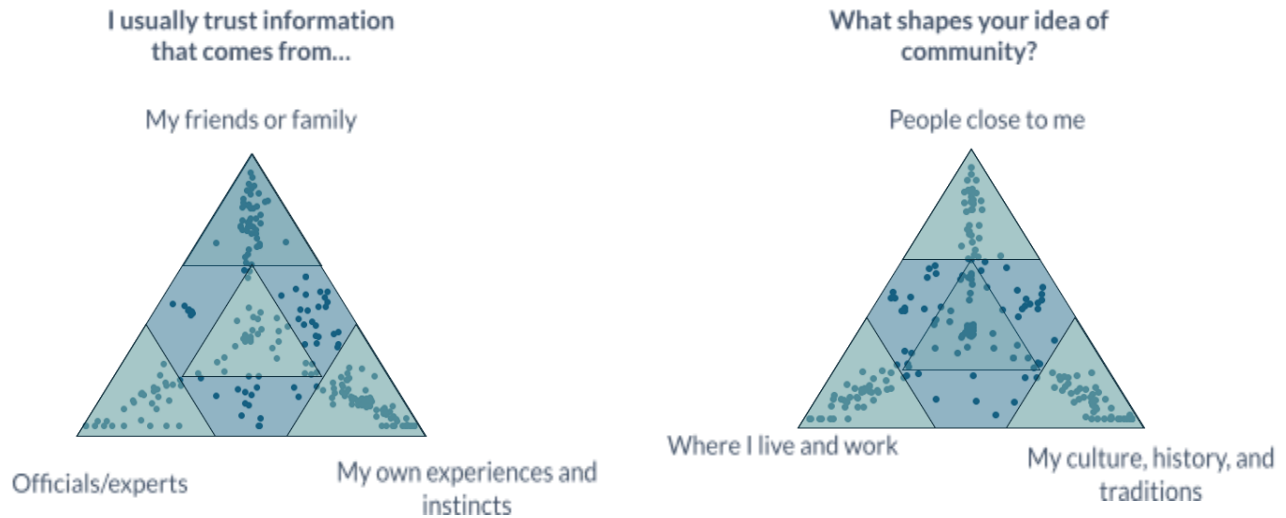
COMMUNITY PROFILE

A total of 248 stories submitted to MNSC by individuals self-identifying as single parents.



BELIEFS

Some of the questions in the MNSC story collecting tool were triad questions. These questions largely centered on beliefs and identity formation. Respondents were asked to answer the triad questions by moving a dot from the center of a triangle to a location of their choice. Proximity to a corner indicates greater influence of the corresponding source. Each dot on the triangles below represents an individual's response. Dots in the center represent individuals that see all sources as more or less equally influential.



The majority of single parent respondents primarily trust information that comes from their own experiences and instincts (43%), closely followed by information from friends or family (32%). Majority of single parents respondents say that their idea of community is formed by their culture, history, and traditions (36%), closely followed by people close to them (32%).

THEMES

The following key themes emerged from our analysis of the data, each providing insights into how residents experience life in Minnesota:

Home. Narratives regarding “home,” be it dwelling or place.

Place. Narratives referencing a physical location other than home, such as region, rural, urban, suburban space.

Events. Narratives about something that happened.

Community. Descriptions of interactions with other people.

Institutions. Descriptions of interactions with organizations and systems.

Needs. Things needed for daily living, such as jobs, medical care, and transportation.

STORIES

“Day to day life can be difficult and stressful as a single mother of 5. I did not intend to be a single mother of so many however due to circumstances that is where I am at. We rely on government assistance to feed us. Supporting the family on one income is really difficult. Rent is high and finding housing for a large family is hard to do. Taking the kids to the doctor and the dentist is a real chore. I have very little PTO once that little bit is gone if I take a day off for a sick kid or appointments I go without pay. Our bills are only slightly less than I can make in a month. So taking a day off without pay means one bill is not going to get paid on time. I try to get all of the kids into the dentist or doctor all on the same day. It is a hassle however we can't afford [for] me to miss multiple days of work. Many places close before I am done with work so I have to take time off. Continuing education to secure a better paying job is currently not an option as all of my time not spent at work is spent taking care of the children and the house work helping the kids with homework and so on. I don't have a solution to this other than just get through it because it will not be like this forever. Other than the government healthcare and the food support we don't have any other supports, unless you are part of a church (which we are not). The biggest struggle is paying the bills, and scheduling and making it to appointments for the kids.”

–Individual living with 5 kids under age 18

“I am a foster parent and a way that my family has felt strong and thriving is through the help of the school system in our community along with our united community action and greaterMN workers. They have all helped my family learn how to grow and adapt to our different level of needs.” –Individual living with more than 5 kids under age 18

“I recently went through a divorce. It was a high conflict situation and the safety of myself and my children were threatened by my former spouse. It was difficult to get an order of protection and even crazier that the judge did not seem to care one bit about any of it. She required us to spend a bunch of money on a custody evaluator and then did not even take the recommendations into consideration. The system is broken and it is the children who are suffering. My children are forced to go to see this man who regularly mistreats them and no one cares. I have all three children in therapy because this situation is so bad!” –Individual living with 4 kids under age 18

“Lately I've been spending more time paying attention to our community, what's available, what I believe we need, what's thriving and how we're all adjusting to the changes. As of now I'm having a real bittersweet feeling about my community and I want to feel like the help that is being placed for help in our communities are actually accessible. For example I have families that are still struggling with being able to pay for childcare and the programs that are being provided are very hard for families in that median area of income. Most of the families that I meet with will either lack basic needs to be able to afford childcare and me as a provider cannot afford to lower rates for the care that I provide, which leaves families to have to sacrifice even more to have quality care for their children.” –Individual living with 2 kids under age 18

“A challenge my community recently is facing right now is a drug epidemic. It's been really difficult, kids can barely play without being in a hazardous area. There is always drug paraphernalia laying around alot of ppl have passed away due to this epidemic we have been trying to get through this so other community members or family members don't fall into this epidemic” –Individual living with 3 kids under age 18

“Transportation is an issue where I live. There was a route down the street but they no longer run. The metro bus for maple Grove is 3\$ a adult and you have to call ahead. I've had a few issues with public transit. Asking if my transfer was

real and then writing the ticket as being expired. I have lived here and have been pulled over 12 times in 2.5 yrs that I have lived in maple Grove and lived in Greater E side for three and never an issue ” –Individual living with more than 5 kids under age 18

“Recently a family member needed help getting a child registered for school. Due to the language barrier it was difficult to navigate the process. With help from a bilingual teacher for their younger child they were able to get assistance for the older school child. They were very appreciative that the teacher went above and beyond their role to help this family with the other children.” –Individual living with 2 kids under age 18

“Recently my cat got picked up by the community service the people that ride around town or whatever and brought to his Humane Society well my cats are inside / outside cat and when I found out my cat was there they wanted to charge me over a hundred some dollars to get my cat back People Like Us don't have that kind of money around here but that cat was dear to my heart and my children's heart and now he is gone forever we're very sad about that” –Individual living with 3 kids under age 18

“Well I'm originally from St. Paul and our food shelves out there are really over picked and closed on the weekends. I've been over North Minneapolis for 3 years and had seen a difference in food support. The community I live in has multiple resources and places open on the weekends! I hope St. Paul picks up more of these types of programs!” –Individual living with 0 kids under age 18

Appendix D: Methodology Explainer

ABOUT MN STORYCOLLECTIVE

MN StoryCollective (MNSC) is a way to share experiences, generate ideas for change, and help support the state's many communities. MNSC does this by connecting the voices of people in Minnesota with those making decisions in State Government. This connection can be made by responding to MNSC's story collection tool (independently or with the support of a community partner), or by attending public engagement sessions to make sense of the stories and other information that has been shared with MNSC.

The goal of MN StoryCollective is to provide a regular, flexible source of qualitative data of diverse community stories so that State programs, policies, and practices better meet the needs of all families. The tool and process brings together individuals' stories along with opportunities to interpret the data collected and identify opportunities for change within state systems.

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PHILOSOPHY OF MNSC

The MNSC addresses the need for bringing community-driven insights into the state's programs and services. Traditional data collection methods often overlook the everyday experiences that can reveal the nuances and complexity of community needs and aspirations. By prioritizing personal narratives and stories, MNSC seeks to fill this gap, providing decision-makers with rich, contextually grounded information that reflects the lived realities of Minnesotans.

At its core, the MNSC is guided by the belief that everyone has a voice and a story worth sharing. The initiative recognizes the complexity of individual experiences and the importance of integrating diverse perspectives into the decision-making processes. By fostering a collaborative environment where communities feel empowered to share pieces of their daily life, MNSC aims to co-create solutions that lead to equitable outcomes for all residents.

DATA COLLECTION AND USE

The MNSC story collection tool is a key component of the initiative, designed to capture the diverse experiences of Minnesota residents in a user-friendly and accessible format. Participants, known as "storytellers," are invited to respond to an open-ended prompt, sharing narrative experiences that highlight moments of strength, resilience, or challenges faced in their lives. The tool also includes follow-up questions that allow storytellers to categorize or "self-code" their stories, providing additional context and depth to the collected data.

This open-ended approach ensures that the narratives reflect what matters most to the storytellers, rather than imposing predefined categories or constraints. This allows for a more authentic and nuanced understanding of community experiences and enables state staff and decision-makers to view issues from the storytellers' perspectives.

Community partners play a crucial role in promoting and facilitating story collection, employing various methods such as interviews, group sessions, and independent submissions to engage participants. This collaborative effort is instrumental in ensuring that the collected stories are representative of Minnesota's diverse communities.

A key element of the MNSC initiative is its ability to "loop back" with community groups, ensuring that engagement is truly interactive rather than one-way. This differs from traditional approaches to community engagement, which often involve only the collection of information from community members without providing feedback or updates. MNSC closes this gap by actively involving community groups in the entire process, from story collection to implementation and reflection. This continuous feedback loop helps to build trust, fosters collaboration, and ensures that the insights derived from narratives are not only actionable but also aligned with the evolving needs and priorities of Minnesota's communities.

DATA COLLECTION METHODOLOGY

MNSC's methodology is informed by complexity theory and the Cynefin framework, which emphasize understanding the dynamic and interconnected nature of social systems. Complexity theory acknowledges that community issues are rarely linear and often involve multiple interacting factors that make up any one person or group's experience and reality. The Cynefin framework helps MNSC navigate this complexity by categorizing problems into domains and guiding appropriate responses based on the nature of the issue and the various ways in which it is experienced by different Minnesotans.

At MNSC, this approach informs the story collection and sensemaking processes. By viewing narratives as complex, interconnected data points, MNSC facilitates collaborative sensemaking sessions where community members, partners, and state staff explore patterns and themes. These sessions are crucial for identifying actionable insights and developing a portfolio of small-scale actions that contribute to systemic change.

This initiative is modeled after the successful *'Our Tomorrows'* project in Kansas, which demonstrated the power of narrative-based data collection in driving policy innovation. *'Our Tomorrows,'* developed by the University of Kansas Center for Public Partnerships and Research, has provided valuable technical assistance as the MNSC continues to grow and adapt. Like MNSC, *'Our Tomorrows'* uses the SenseMaker tool to gather narratives, making them accessible to decision-makers and fostering a participatory approach to policy development. The lessons learned from *'Our Tomorrows'* continue to inspire and guide MNSC as it strives to make Minnesota a better place for all its residents.

IMPACT SUMMARY

The MNSC initiative represents a new approach to community engagement and data analysis. By centering the voices of residents, MNSC creates opportunities for meaningful dialogue and collaboration, ultimately leading to more informed and equitable state policies. By embedding this work into standard state processes and expanding outreach efforts, MNSC aims to create lasting impacts that resonate across communities and state agencies alike.