



THIRD ANNUAL

The Medill survey 2026: How the Chicago area gets its news

While overall consumption of news holds steady, broadcast TV and radio face shrinking audiences for local news.

As the industry grapples with how to adapt artificial intelligence, the public is skeptical of its role in local news.

Authors

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and Tim Franklin

SEPTEMBER 2026

Northwestern
MEDILL
Local News Initiative

Witness to historic changes in news consumption

It only took three years. In less time than you need to replace your laptop or earn a college degree, news consumption has been transformed. Our third annual news consumer survey shows the arc of these profound trends happening in real time.

The Medill Local News Initiative at Northwestern University is commissioning these comprehensive surveys of Chicago-area residents to provide greater understanding of rapidly shifting news diets that are forever reshaping the media industry and flow of information in our communities.

What we found this year was striking. Local broadcast TV and radio audiences are shrinking at a worrisome pace, especially with young people. Printed newspapers are now a specialty product. Smartphones are still growing as the device of choice for local news consumers, and social media is the destination. Use of search engines for local news dropped sharply in just one year. A chunk of those folks are turning to AI chatbots. But people are highly skeptical about using AI in the practice of journalism.

In all three of our surveys, one thing hasn't changed. There's still high demand for local news.

This year's survey was led again by Stephanie Edgerly, Medill's associate dean of research and a top national expert on news audiences. All our surveys have been conducted with our partners at NORC, the highly regarded polling organization based at the University of Chicago. This year's survey included 1,223 people in the 14-county Chicago metropolitan area. It spanned the city, suburbs, exurbs and rural regions that make up the market, making this sample a bellwether for the nation.

Medill is deeply appreciative of the Robert R. McCormick Foundation's support of this and other local news projects. We thank our partners at M. Harris & Kern, a Chicago-based marketing and communications agency, for their expert contributions to the execution, writing and design of this report.

With the benefit of three years of data, we hope these surveys will serve as a guidepost for news leaders, editors, producers, creators and others who are attempting to navigate this shifting terrain and inform the residents of this region.

Tim Franklin

Professor and John M. Mutz Chair in Local News
Founding Director, Medill Local News Initiative

THE MEDILL SURVEY 2026:
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GETS ITS NEWS
SEPTEMBER 2026



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**THE MEDILL SURVEY 2026:
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GETS ITS NEWS
SEPTEMBER 2026**



Executive summary



Three years of data capture sharp decline in local broadcast audiences

Respondents distrust AI news, but maintain strong overall interest in local news

In 2024, the Medill Local News Initiative at Northwestern University conducted its first in-depth survey of Chicago-area news consumers to understand how smartphones and social media were remaking the relationship between audiences and local news. Medill did a second survey in 2025. It now has completed a third annual study to capture not just a 2026 snapshot but a three-year timeline of the digital revolution's impact on local news.

The survey results lay bare the severe pressure faced by legacy media to retain and grow audiences. Print has become a niche product, while linear broadcast TV and radio are losing their audiences at an alarming rate. One encouraging sign is that survey respondents say they maintain a strong interest in consuming local news. However, if news organizations believe that incorporating artificial intelligence is an easy fix for streamlining news-gathering at lower cost, they will need to think hard about their approaches. This year's study looked closely at the relationship between consumers and AI. It found respondents are deeply skeptical of AI in news for anything more than helping to check spelling or grammar.

With three years of survey data, it's clear news consumers have established new habits and tastes in the way they access information. Their device of

choice is the smartphone, and they are much more likely to search for news or turn to social media than pay for subscriptions. Young people in particular are reliant on content creators for local news, one of many major changes underway in the way people search out and absorb news and information.

Three years isn't a lifetime, or even the lifespan of a smartphone. But in terms of how technological and social change are buffeting the news industry, the speed of transformation is forever remaking how people get news and the providers that supply it.

2026 survey opinions about AI and news

The 2026 survey asked many of the same questions and explored many of the same issues as the previous reports. But this year's Medill study focused

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A few highlights:



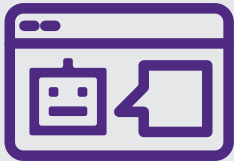
Areas where respondents are skeptical of AI

- **52%** said they were uncomfortable with the use of artificial intelligence to write a full news story generated from a reporter's notes.
- **46%** said they were uncomfortable with using AI to personalize an article.
- **50%** said they were uncomfortable with using AI to create images or videos to accompany the text of an article.



Areas where people are comfortable with AI

50% approved of using AI to edit the spelling and grammar of an article and **39%** said they were comfortable with using AI to translate news.



Consumers aren't using chatbots for local news

Only **11%** say they asked an AI chatbot a question about local news in the past week instead of searching for it on Google or another search engine.

Search engine use down

The survey captured the potential leading edge of a shift in local news consumption, with the percentage of respondents using a search engine daily for local news declining sharply to **34%** this year from **41%** in 2024.



Daily local news consumption holds steady at **54%** this year



Smartphone usage (all the time/often) jumps to **67%** this year from **62%** in 2024



Television usage (all the time/often) declines to **47%** from **52%**



Radio usage (all the time/often) is down to **25%** from **34%**



Fewer respondents pay for local news, dropping to **14%** from **19%**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Continued from page 5

more attention on one of the latest, most controversial innovations in the news field – the use of artificial intelligence in the news-gathering process.

AI, which offers news organizations the potential to save time and money in news production, is already in use in some newsrooms, though it is still largely at the experimental stage. The Medill survey provides a warning to news leaders. Respondents showed clear distrust of AI in the news-gathering process. Discomfort with AI was widespread. It applied to many facets of newsroom activities, including the use of AI to write stories or create images, deciding which stories to prioritize, personalizing coverage and even summarizing the news.

Chicago-area as a microcosm for the country

The Medill Local News Initiative at Northwestern University produces groundbreaking research about the digital revolution's impact on local journalism, with the goal of supporting industry professionals as they reshape news organizations into sustainable, vigorous enterprises. For the third year in a row, the Local News Initiative commissioned a comprehensive, scientific survey of news consumer habits and opinions in the Chicago metropolitan area. This survey of 1,223 adults examined news consumer behavior in Chicagoland, but it can be taken as a microcosm for what is happening locally across the country. The survey included the city, suburbs, exurbs and rural areas on the outskirts of the metro area.

News events drive engagement

The Medill survey over its three-year existence confirms a positive starting point for assessing the popularity of local news: There is strong interest among Chicago-area residents in local news as well as national news. The majority of Chicago-area adults (54%) follow local news daily, while 85% engage with local news providers at least once a week. Those figures have held steady since 2024. Overall, just 4% of respondents said they never engage with local news.

For comparison's sake, the survey also asked respondents about their engagement with national news. Chicago-area consumers follow national

About this survey

The survey was undertaken by Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications, with funding by the McCormick Foundation. The authors are Medill Professor Stephanie Edgerly, Associate Dean of Research; and Tim Franklin, Medill's John M. Mutz Chair in Local News and founding director of Medill's Local News Initiative. NORC at the University of Chicago, on Medill's behalf, surveyed adults throughout the 14-county Chicago metro area, including counties in Indiana and Wisconsin. The margin of error was +/- 4.21%. (See our detailed explanation of the methodology.)

news even more closely than local news, with 62% consuming national news daily, and 90% consuming national news weekly.

News events undoubtedly drive consumer engagement. Over the past two years, President Donald Trump's busy second term has generated intense daily interest in national news. There are indications in the 2026 survey that a major national news story with an important local angle created greater interest in local news. Beginning last September, the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) conducted significant operations in and around Chicago. The activity, known as Operation Midway Blitz, focused heavily on the region's Hispanic population. Local news organizations covered events closely. The Medill 2026 survey did not specifically ask about Operation Midway Blitz, but it likely tracked heightened interest in this story at the level of demographic differences, with 53% of Hispanic respondents consuming local news daily, compared to 45% in 2025.

Broadcast news loses traction

The 2024 Medill survey showed how small print newspaper audiences have become: Just 13% of respondents said they read a print newspaper or magazine often or all the time. That compared to 52% for local television news. In the 2026 survey, the print audience has held steady at 12%, but it's now broadcast news that is sliding precipitously. According to the survey, the daily audience for television dropped from 52% in 2024 to 47%. The loss of radio audience is even steeper: From 34% to 25%.

These results are not necessarily a surprise. While print news has been in steep decline for two de-

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ades, TV news audiences slipped at a slower pace. But it seemed inevitable that the forces of the digital revolution would catch up with television – and now it's happening. The disruption of broadcast news is upon us. The trend is particularly strong among younger audiences. While 67% of survey takers in 2026 ages 60+ said they use the television to get local news often or all the time, the number drops to 29% among 18-29 year olds.

The question then becomes where are these audiences going? They have migrated to digital sources. Among the 2026 survey's results, 67% of respondents rely on their smart phones to consume local news often or all the time (an increase from 62% in 2024). Desktop and laptop usage also increased to 37% from 30% in 2024.

Here is where newspapers have done a better job than television of reaching audiences where they want to be. The survey asked respondents not just about the devices they use to get news but how often they consume local news from a specific source across any medium. This was done to track, for example, whether a consumer read a newspaper's website or watched TV news segments on social media.

The result indicates that newspapers are far ahead in the critical task of going where the audiences are. For example, of people who reported getting local news at least once a month from a newspaper, 47% said they consumed news from the newspaper's website, app or email. By contrast, people who reported getting local news at least once a month from TV mainly watched their television sets (62%). Just 15% went to the local television station's website, app or email. This shows that local TV news still has a long way to go to fix its audience problem.

The search for good news

The fact that newspaper owners have moved on from print and now reach their audiences on the web is one important starting point for change. There are, in fact, local newspapers around the country that have shifted their focus to digital operations and are financially stable. In every era of journalism, technology has forced change on newsrooms. In that way, this era is no different.

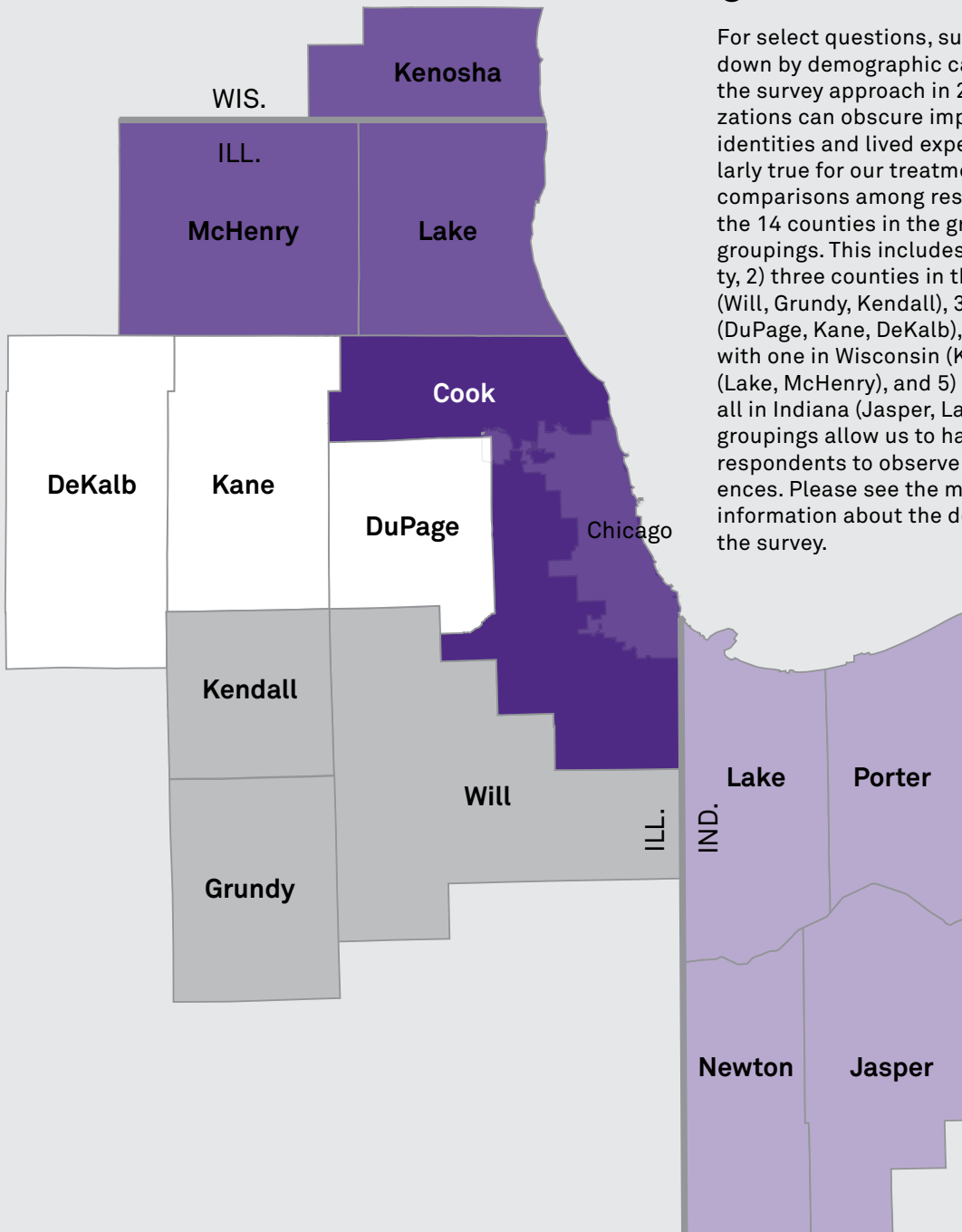
The pressure points are intense, however. The Medill survey looked at the relationship between audiences and their willingness to pay for news and identified a troubling trend. News consumers don't want to pay for news, and many believe that no one should pay. According to the survey, the number of people who have given money to a local news organization by subscribing, donating or becoming a member has dropped from 19% in 2024 to 14% in 2026.

Perhaps the most hopeful signs in the survey are that audiences retain a strong positive relationship with local news. Taken together, the results of the 2026 Medill Survey of Chicago-area news consumers show that audiences are out there, especially on their smart phones. And there are ways to reach even young audiences. For example, 44% of respondents ages 18-29 report consuming local news daily from content creators. In addition, news consumption by this young cohort increased to 43% in 2026 from 32% in 2025.

The news landscape is shifting rapidly in the digital era, but some things don't change. The challenge facing news organizations for generations has been to deliver timely, useful news and information to audiences when they want it and where they want it. Now news providers must quickly find new ways to do that in a time of profound change.

Breaking down the greater Chicago area

For select questions, survey findings are broken down by demographic categories consistent with the survey approach in 2024. Demographic categorizations can obscure important nuances in people's identities and lived experiences, and this is particularly true for our treatment of geography. To facilitate comparisons among respondents, we transformed the 14 counties in the greater Chicago MSA into five groupings. This includes groupings for: 1) Cook County, 2) three counties in the southwest Chicago area (Will, Grundy, Kendall), 3) three counties to the west (DuPage, Kane, DeKalb), 4) three northern counties, with one in Wisconsin (Kenosha) and two in Illinois (Lake, McHenry), and 5) four southern counties, all in Indiana (Jasper, Lake, Newton, Porter). These groupings allow us to have a sufficient number of respondents to observe some county-level differences. Please see the methodology section for more information about the demographic composition of the survey.



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Local news consumption

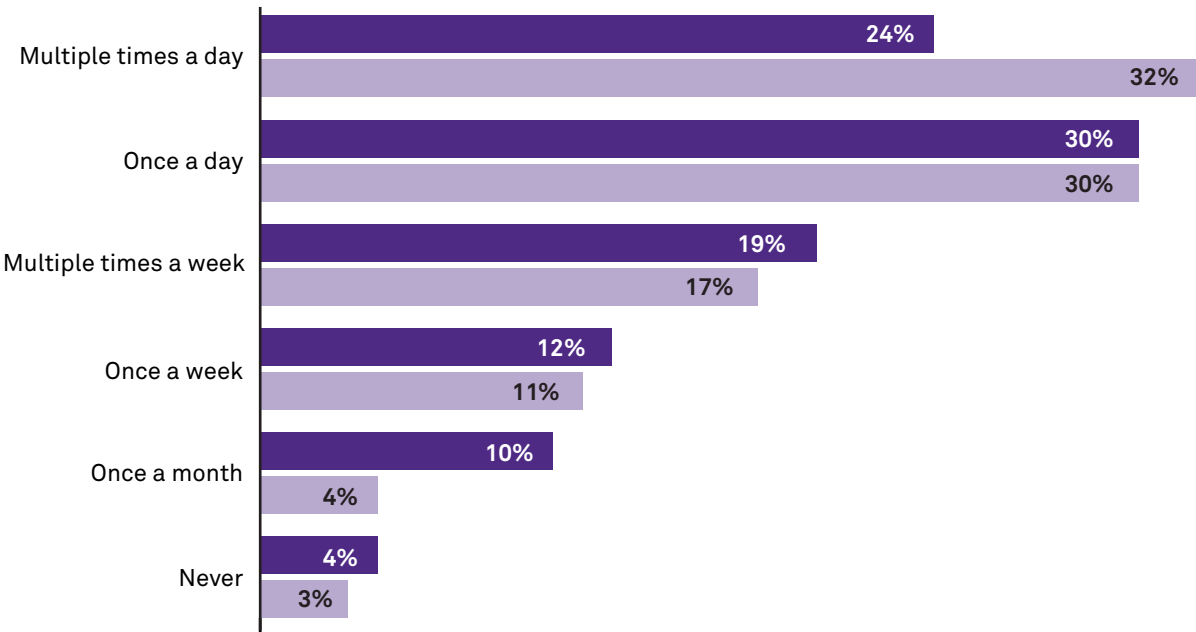
What we found:

- Local news is a habit for many
- Smartphones solidify hold as the device of choice
- TV and radio news consumption has declined sharply
- Daily use of search engines is falling
- Almost half of younger audiences get local news daily from content creators

In a changing world, consumers still turn to local news

HOW OFTEN RESPONDENTS CONSUME LOCAL VS. NATIONAL NEWS

Local news about your local community National news



NOTE: Because of rounding and the omission of missing responses, totals may not add to 100 percent.

The 2026 Medill Local News Survey captures the digital revolution’s fast-evolving impact on journalism by examining the news consumption habits of Chicago-area residents.

The full report details the many ways that the smartphone, social media and other innovations are breaking down and reinventing relationships between audiences and information. These changes, especially visible over three years of Medill Survey results, are putting significant pressure on the news industry to adapt.

The starting point for this study is measuring consumer demand for local news, and here the outlook is positive. Chicago-area residents indicated they have a strong connection to the news. More than half of all adults in the Chicago metropolitan area (54%) said they consume local news every day, whether once or multiple times, according to the survey from Northwestern University’s Medill Local News Initiative. This is an important finding,

though it measures general interest rather than any specific news habit, such as watching local TV news or making search engine queries. Subsequent questions in this section of the report asked about the devices used and news content sources consumers preferred.

According to the 2026 survey, about one-quarter (24%) of adults consume local news multiple times a day, while a larger percentage (30%) consume local news once a day (54% combined). Another 30% of people consume local news at least once a week or multiple times a week, which means 85% of consumers in the Chicago area maintain a weekly relationship with a provider of local news and information. Just 4% of respon-

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LOCAL NEWS CONSUMPTION

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dents said they never consume local news.

For comparison's sake the survey asked respondents about their interest in national news and found an even higher engagement rate. The survey showed that 32% of adults consume national news multiple times a day, while 30% consume national news once a day, for a total of 62%. Another 28% consume national news at least once a week. In all, 90% of survey takers maintain a weekly relationship with national news. Just 3% said they never consume national news. Though the Medill Local News Survey of 1,223 adults examined news consumer behavior in Chicagoland, it can be taken as a microcosm for what is happening locally across the country. The survey included the city, suburbs, exurbs and rural areas on the outskirts of the metro area.

The Medill Local News Initiative conducted its first in-depth survey of Chicago-area news consumers in 2024 and conducted a second survey in 2025. With the results of this third survey, Medill now has not just a 2026 snapshot but a three-year timeline of the digital revolution's impact on local news. This timeline shows remarkably consistent demand for news, with just over half of respondents each year consuming local news once or multiple times a day. About six in 10 people each year said they consume national news once or multiple times a day. For local news, there was a slight drop in weekly engagement over the three-year period: 35% of respondents in 2024 consumed local news once or multiple times a week, a figure that slid to 31% in 2026. Throughout this report, survey results include the three-year timeline to track news consumption trends over time.

The durability of local news

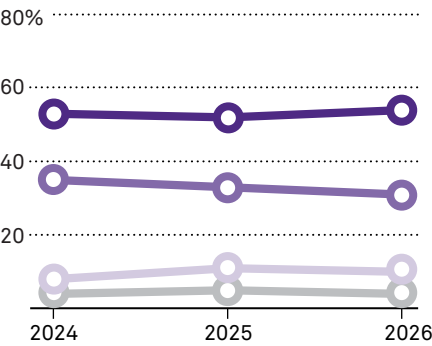
Survey respondents continue to value local news, a number that has remained high since the survey began, observed Tim Franklin, Medill Senior Associate Dean, Professor and John M. Mutz Chair in Local News:

“There’s high demand for local news, and we’ve seen it consistently across the three years of this survey. How consumers access local news, though, has changed markedly.”

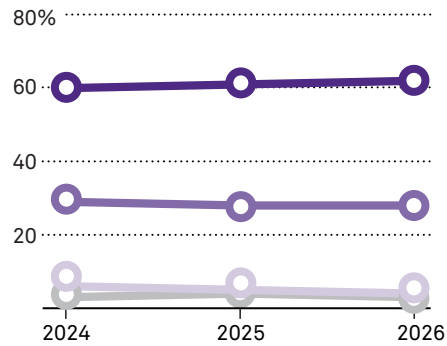
NEWS CONSUMPTION: CHANGE OVER TIME

■ Daily ■ Weekly ■ Monthly ■ Never

Local news about your local community



National news



NOTE: Daily = once + multiple, weekly = once + multiple. Because of rounding and the omission of missing responses, totals may not add to 100 percent.

How a major news event increased Hispanic engagement

The survey examined consumer news habits at both the macro level and within demographic groups to gain a deeper understanding of trends. Looking within the demographic results, the 2026 survey identified a significant increase in Hispanic engagement with local news compared to 2025. A likely explanation is that a major national news story with an important local angle in the Chicago region generated strong interest in local news among Hispanic audiences.

Beginning in September 2025, the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) conducted significant operations in and around Chicago. The activity, known as Operation Midway Blitz, focused heavily on the region’s Hispanic population. Local news organizations covered events closely. The Medill 2026 survey did not specifically ask about Operation Midway Blitz. However, the survey revealed that 53% of Hispanic respondents in the 2026 survey said they consumed local news daily, compared to 45% in 2025.

The survey also identified an increase in news engagement by respondents ages 18-29. In that cohort, 43% said they consumed local news daily in 2026, versus just 32% in 2025. The bounce back in news interest could be due to interest in the Operation Midway Blitz news, which dominated the news cycle for weeks.

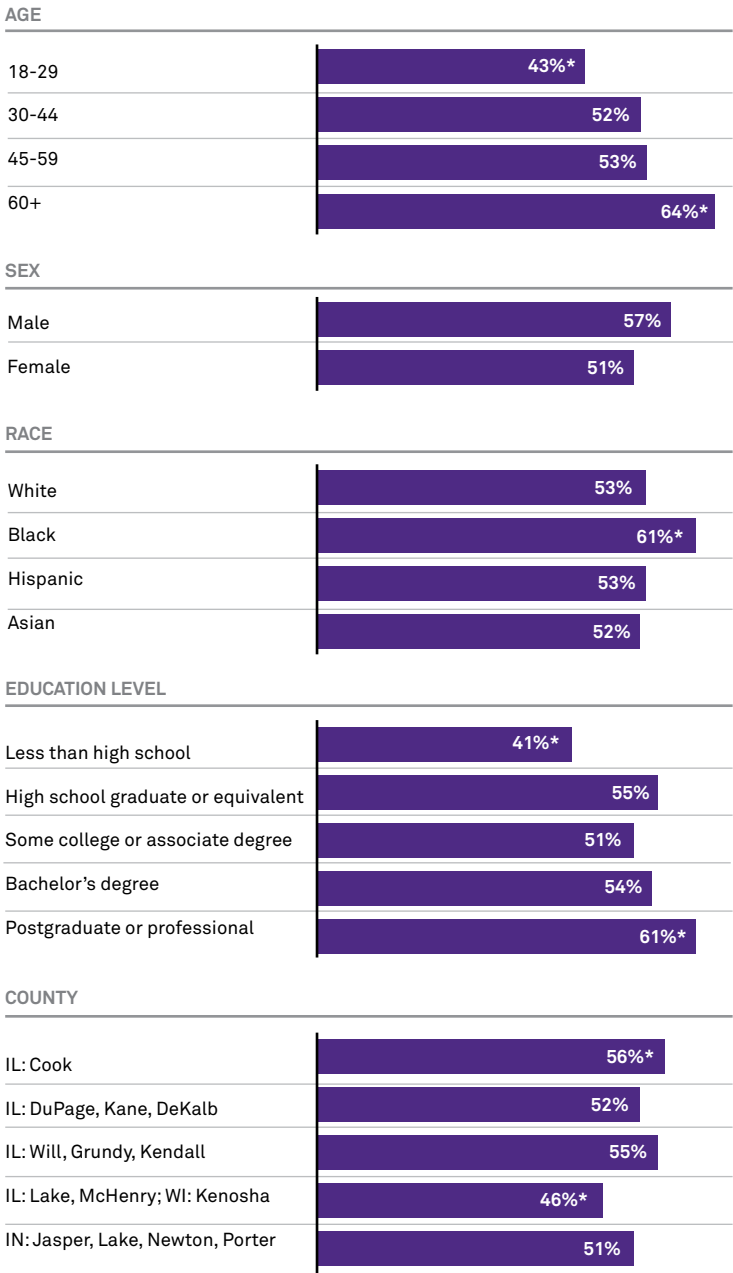
A huge local story, and a shift in survey results

A significant jump in the share of Hispanics consuming local news from 2024 to 2025 could be attributed to one of the largest stories in Chicago area last year, observed Tim Franklin, Medill Senior Associate Dean, Professor and John M. Mutz Chair in Local News:

“Operation Midway Blitz was a seismic story affecting the Hispanic community, especially. These findings illustrate that credible local news coverage was an essential daily lifeline for many.”

CONSUMPTION OF LOCAL NEWS ONCE OR MULTIPLE TIMES A DAY

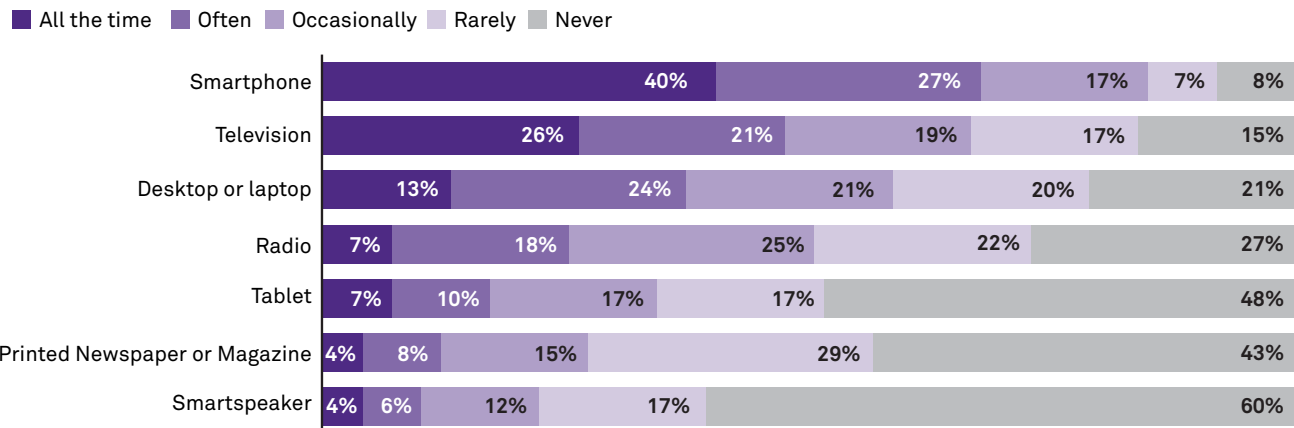
% of respondents in each demographic group



Note: * = Denotes a statistically significant difference between respondents who belong to the given group and those who do not, at least at the 0.05 level.

The devices and sources people use

HOW OFTEN RESPONDENTS USE EACH DEVICE TO CONSUME LOCAL NEWS



NOTE: Because of rounding and the omission of missing responses, totals may not add to 100 percent.

Smartphones dominate, TV and radio in steep decline

When asked how often they used different devices to access local news, consumers in the 2026 survey identified the smartphone as their device of choice. More than two-thirds of people (67%) said they used their phones to get local news all the time or often, well ahead of the number who watch television news all of the time or often (47%).

For generations, television was the device of choice for local news consumers. The shift to the smartphone is more than a matter of a technology upgrade. It represents a fundamental change in consumer preference and behavior. Smartphones underpin the digital revolution, giving consumers mobile computing

power that allows them to access near limitless news and information programming anywhere anytime. Legacy news media now must compete with content creator videos, social media posts, search engines and even chatbot queries.

That competition is now hurting television and radio the way the Internet siphoned away print newspaper audiences starting in the late 20th Century. The Medill survey shows not just heavy reliance on smartphones as a device, but also a steep drop in television and radio as devices. This is evident by looking over the three years of the survey. In 2024, more people (62%) said they used

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A historic turn downward for TV and radio?

Declines in local news consumption on television and radio could point to a key transition point, observed Tim Franklin, Medill Senior Associate Dean, Professor and John M. Mutz Chair in Local News:

“Taken together, linear broadcasting – TV and radio – have taken significant hits in consumption in the last year. It tracks other polling about how people get news. When the history of this era is written, I believe we’ll see that we’re hitting an inflection point when it comes to declines in the use of television and radio. The industry as we’ve known it appears in decline.”

LOCAL NEWS CONSUMPTION

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their phones to get local news all the time or often, while 52% watched television all the time or often. The gap widened in 2025: 67% of people said they used their phones to get local news all the time or often, compared to 53% for television. In the 2026 survey, smartphone usage held at 67% as television as a device dropped precipitously to 47%.

Three years of survey results show the toll on other legacy media. Radio as a device took a big hit from 34% in 2024 to 25% in 2025 and then held steady in 2026 at a diminished 25%. The survey confirmed that newspapers, which long ago dominated the journalism industry, are now a niche product, with just over 1 in 10 consumers saying they read a print newspaper or magazine often or all the time. That number was steady through the three years of the survey.

As consumers have begun to let go of the habits of using TV and radio as devices, the survey showed they may be substituting desktop or laptop computers for local news as well as smartphones. The survey showed that frequent use of desktop or laptop computers increased from 30% in 2024 to 37% in 2026.

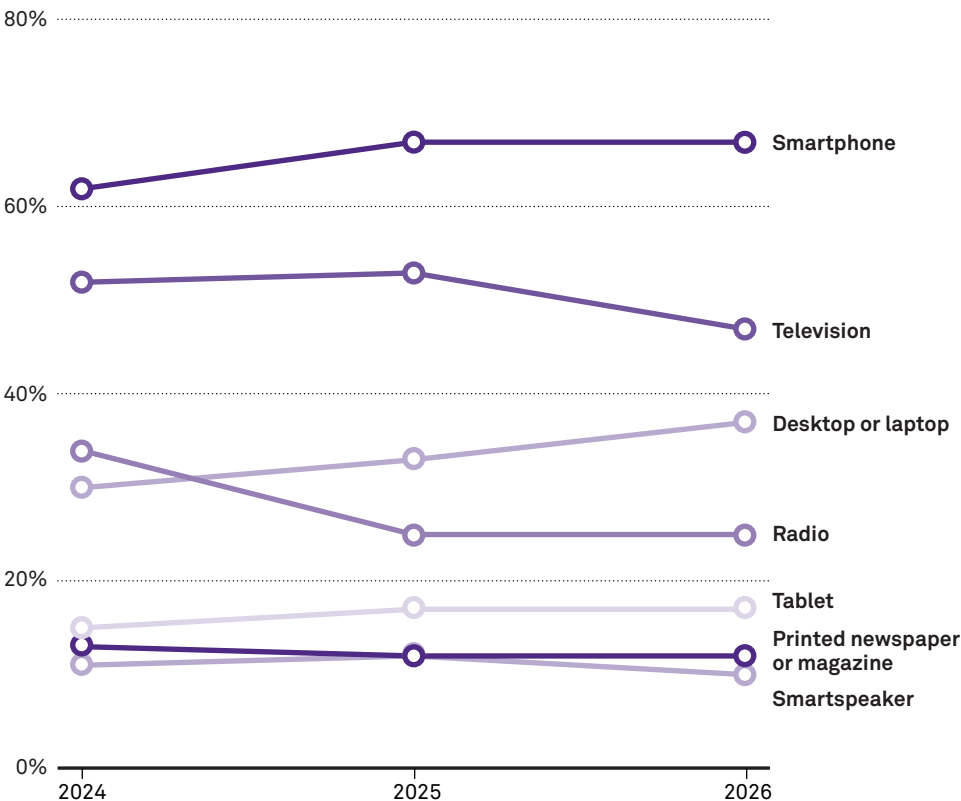
Watching videos, not news broadcasts

Changes in the devices people use to consume local news doesn't mean they aren't watching, said Medill Professor Stephanie Edgerly, Associate Dean of Research:

“The decline in TV and radio news audiences isn’t about people tuning out. It’s about where they’re tuning in. Increasingly it involves a phone or computer, not a television set.”

DEVICE USE OVER TIME

% of respondents answering often or all of the time

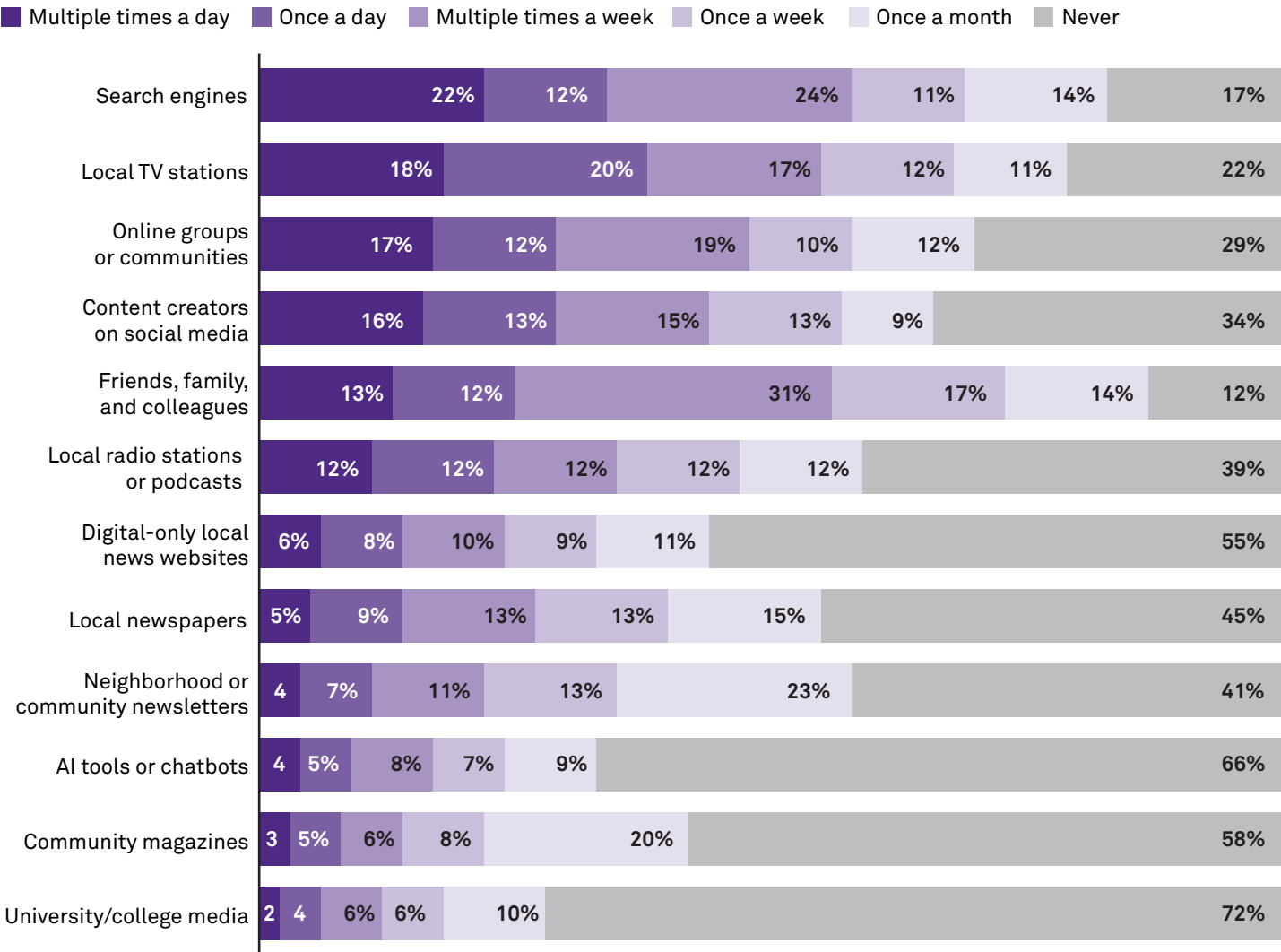


A closer look at how audiences seek out news

The devices people use for local news represent one layer of consumer decision-making. Then there is the important question of which specific content sources of local news across any medium audiences seek out and rely upon. In other words, how often do respondents consume newspaper content, whether in print or online, or TV content whether a television set or online? This question gets more directly at consumer relationships to newsroom organizations.

About four in 10 respondents in the 2026 survey (38%) said they get local news at least once a day from local television stations. This result was followed by search engines (34%), online groups or communities (29%) and content creators on social media (29%). Radio and podcasts as a source came in at 24%. Local newspapers trailed other legacy sources with 14% of respondents saying they relied daily on local newspapers across different media.

HOW OFTEN RESPONDENTS CONSUME LOCAL NEWS FROM DIFFERENT SOURCES



Newspapers far outperform TV in the shift to digital

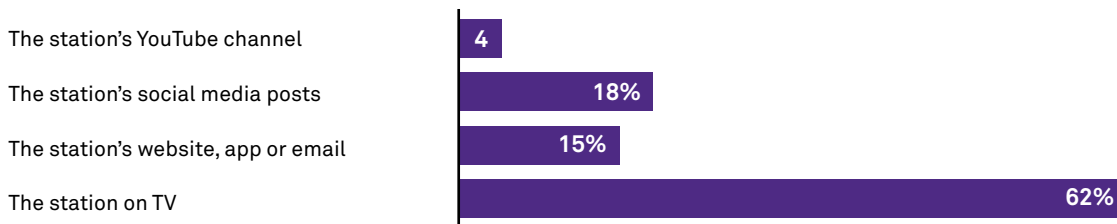
In the digital age, it's important to recognize how barriers have broken down between competitors. Newspapers are not confined to distributing their content by print; they have moved aggressively into digital channels, and in many cases have abandoned or curtailed print production. Television stations have been slower to make the shift, as the Medill survey shows. When the survey asked newspaper readers how they primarily get news from that source, 23% said they read the print newspaper, while an impressive 47% said they get news from the newspaper's website, app or email. One-quarter (25%) said they get news from the newspaper's social media posts.

By contrast, those survey takers who reported consuming news from a local TV station said they relied primarily on watching the station on TV (62%). The number of people who consumed TV news programming via the station's website, app or email was low (15%), showing that television has not yet figured out how to reach a significant audience beyond the TV set. With TV declining in popularity as a device, television news executives have their work cut out for them to transition audiences to other platforms. The same is true for linear radio as it declines in popularity.

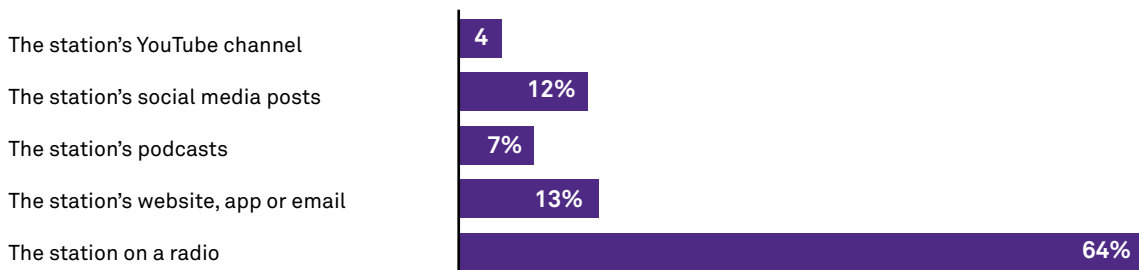
HOW PEOPLE PRIMARILY GET LOCAL NEWS FROM DIFFERENT SOURCES

Among respondents who said they consume news from that source at least once a month.

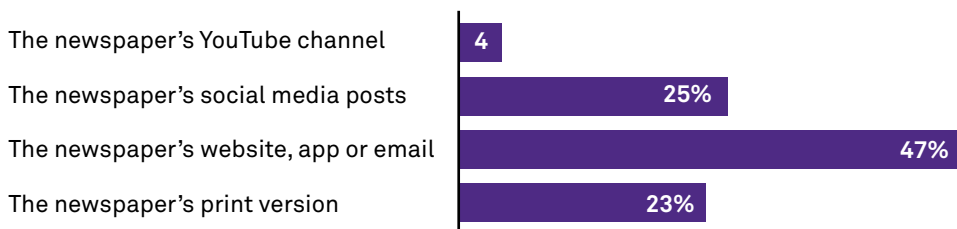
Local TV stations



Local radio stations or podcasts



Local newspapers



NOTE: Because of rounding and the omission of missing responses, totals may not add to 100 percent.

Search engine use declines, but where are the bots?

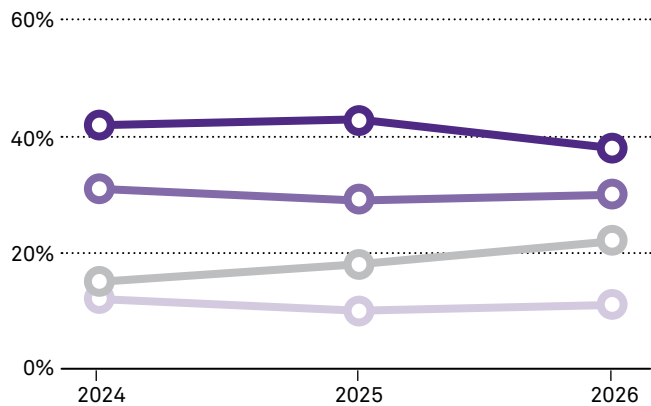
Consumers using smartphones, laptop computers and other digital devices often turn to search engines to look up news and information. That habit has weakened over time, the survey showed. In 2024, 41% of respondents said they consumed local news daily via a search engine. That figure dropped to 34% in 2025 and held steady at 34% in this year's survey. To explore the trend in online search, this year's survey asked how often people consumed

local news by using artificial intelligence tools or chatbots. The number of people who shifted their online search habits from search engines to chatbots appeared low, with 9% saying they used AI or chatbots daily and 15% once or multiple times per week. The decline of search by consumers is potentially perilous for news organizations' ad revenue because many rely on search to direct traffic to their websites.

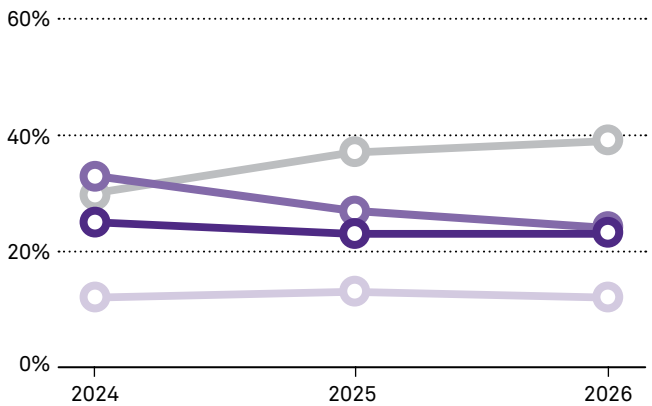
USE OF SOURCES: CHANGE OVER TIME

■ Daily ■ Weekly ■ Monthly ■ Never

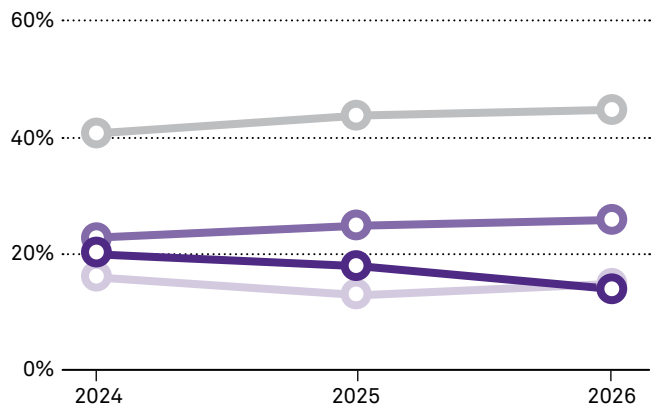
Local TV stations



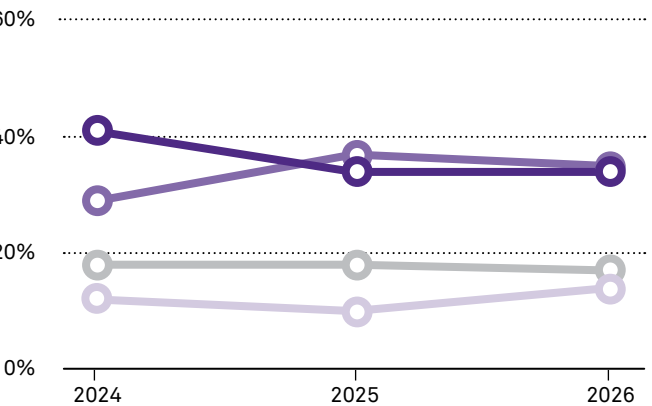
Local radio stations or podcasts



Local newspapers



Search engines



NOTE: Daily = once + multiple, weekly = once + multiple. Because of rounding and the omission of missing responses, totals may not add to 100 percent.

Young news consumers gravitate to content creators

Content creators now play an active role as providers of local news and content, especially among younger consumers. About one in three respondents overall (29%) said they consume local news daily from content creators on social media, whether once or multiple times. That number is a slight decline from previous Medill surveys (the question was asked differently in 2024). Another 28% of survey takers said they consume news from social media weekly, meaning overall about six in 10 people get news or information from content creators weekly. There were some differences in habit among demographic groups. People ages 18-29 were most likely to consume news from content creators, with about 44% doing so once or multiple times a day. Black respondents were more likely than white respondents to rely on content creators.

Consumers value the transparency and tone of content creators, as well as original reporting

Distinct from the traditional practice of journalism, content creators on social media seek to build and hold audiences both by providing information and highlighting their personal brands or personalities. Consumers may have different reasons for turning to content creators for local news. To explore these relationships and understand what audiences value, the survey asked the 66% of respondents who reported getting local news from content creators on social media to rank the importance of various attributes of creators.

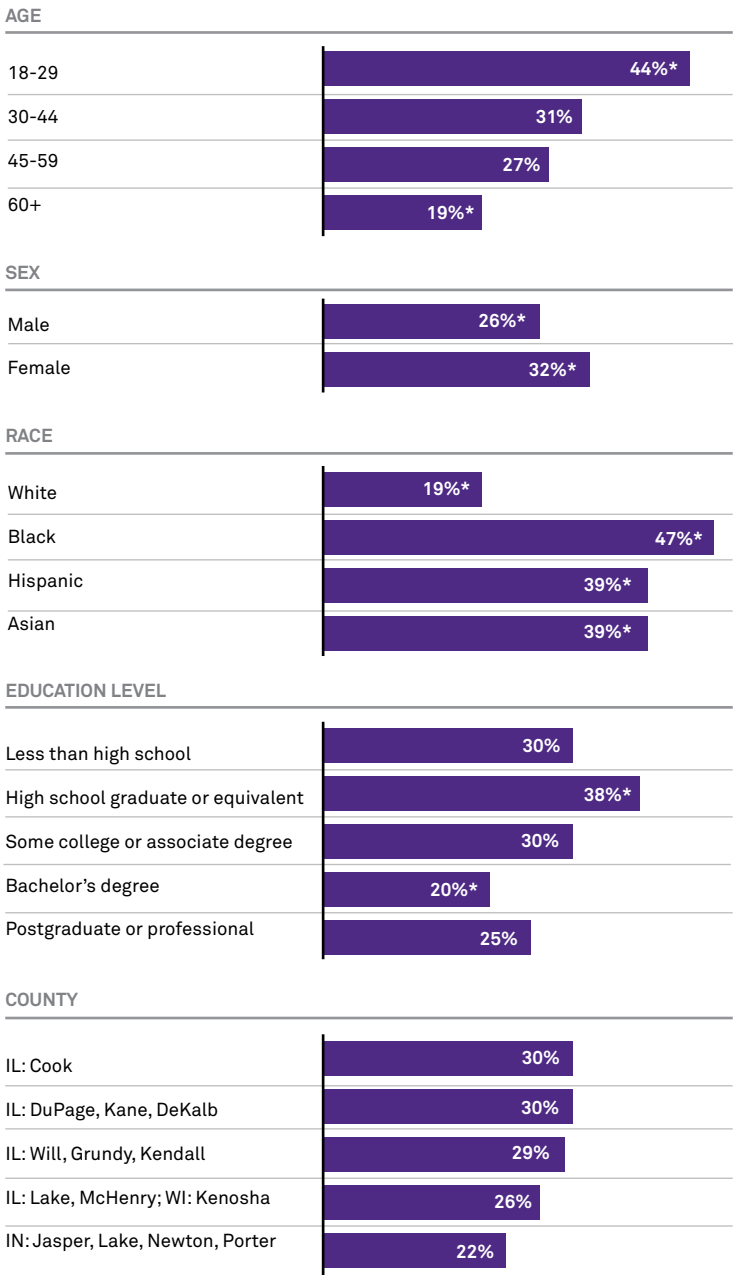
Of the attributes listed, respondents gave the highest ranking (62%) to transparency in sponsored content or advertising. Social media users in general want content creators to be upfront about

Continued on next page

The draw of content creators

CONSUMPTION OF LOCAL NEWS VIA CONTENT CREATORS OR SOCIAL MEDIA ONCE OR MULTIPLE TIMES A DAY

% of respondents in each demographic group



Note: * = Denotes a statistically significant difference between respondents who belong to the given group and those who do not, at least at the 0.05 level.

LOCAL NEWS CONSUMPTION

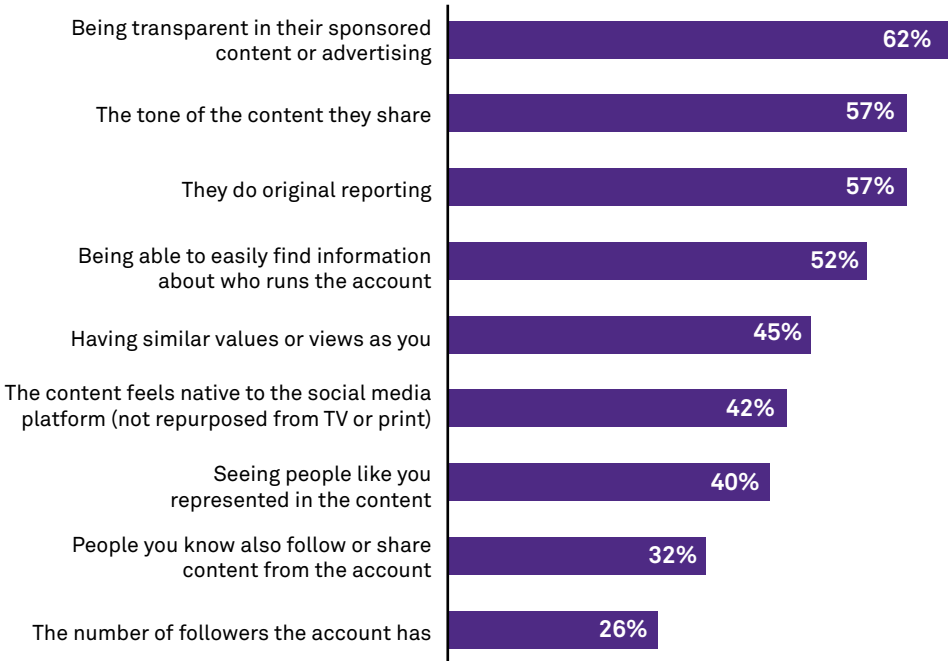
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financial relationships that may influence posts, and this carried over to local news posts. Ranked second among the reasons for turning to content creators for local news was a tie at 57% between the tone of the posts and doing original reporting. Another quality related to transparency also ranked highly: Being able to easily find information about who runs the account was chosen by 52% of respondents.

Overall, it appeared that consumers turning to social media for local news want original reporting from content creators, and they want those creators to abide by a recognized standard of practice or ethics. In other words, audiences going to content creators on social media are being discerning about quality, which is good news for this important, growing medium.

IMPORTANCE OF REASONS FOR GETTING LOCAL NEWS FROM CONTENT CREATORS OR SOCIAL MEDIA

Among the 66% of people who reported getting local news from creators at least once a month, the percentage who answered important or extremely important



NOTE: Values for “not at all important,” “not too important,” and “somewhat important” are not shown.

Expectations for local news content creators

The audience for local news content creators has expectations for those who are creating content, Medill Professor Stephanie Edgerly, Associate Dean of Research, observed:

“For a lot of young people and Black Chicagoans, content creators are their way into local news. We find that they’re holding these creators to a real standard, not just tuning in for personality.”

**THE MEDILL SURVEY 2026:
HOW THE CHICAGO AREA
GETS ITS NEWS
SEPTEMBER 2026**



Funding local news

What we found

- Few people pay for local news
- A majority say no one should pay
- More respondents understand the news industry is struggling

The unwillingness to pay for news

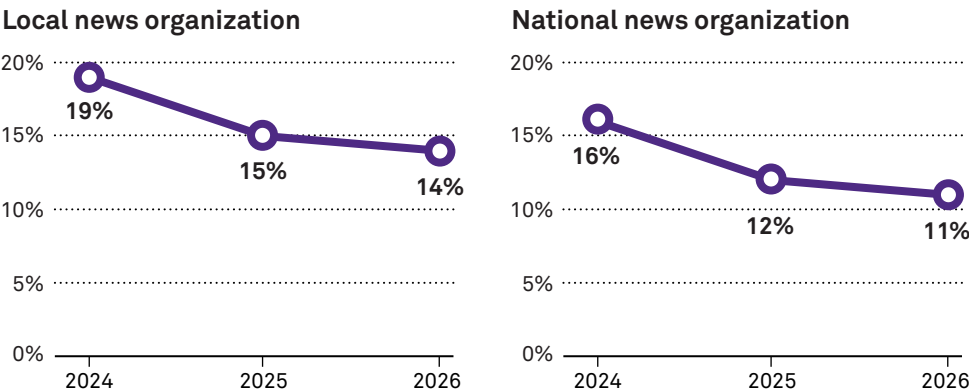
Consumers value local news but the great majority of people do not pay for it. This is the tension at the heart of journalism’s financial crisis. Without strong, reliable revenue streams, news organizations will struggle. In the early years of the digital age, the news industry disseminated much of its content free of charge, anticipating that ad revenue would fund operations.

When that model collapsed as advertisers shifted to newer digital platforms, many local newspapers and other news organizations introduced pay walls, but it is a challenge to convince consumers to pay for something they previously got for free.

This section of the report explores the public’s willingness to pay for news, as well as its understanding of the tenuous economics of news organizations. Just 14% of respondents said in the past year they paid for local news, more than the share who paid for national news (11%). These dire figures held generally steady from the 2025 Medill survey, but they represented a decline from the 2024 survey, when 19% of respondents said they paid for local news and 16% paid for national news.

The question about paying was asked in broad terms, encompassing both paying for local news and giving money to a local news organization by subscribing, donating or becoming a member. Public broadcasting, which relies on the membership and donation model for revenues, became even more dependent on this model in 2025 when the Trump Administration and Congress defunded public broadcasting. Even so, this year’s survey results didn’t identify increased willingness by consumers to contribute funding. It did find one small positive shift in attitude: Among the 14% of respondents who said they paid for local news in 2026, the number who said they gave money because of a donation drive rose to 20% from 14% in 2025.

LOCAL OR NATIONAL NEWS: RESPONDENTS WHO SUBSCRIBE, DONATE, OR JOIN MEMBERSHIP



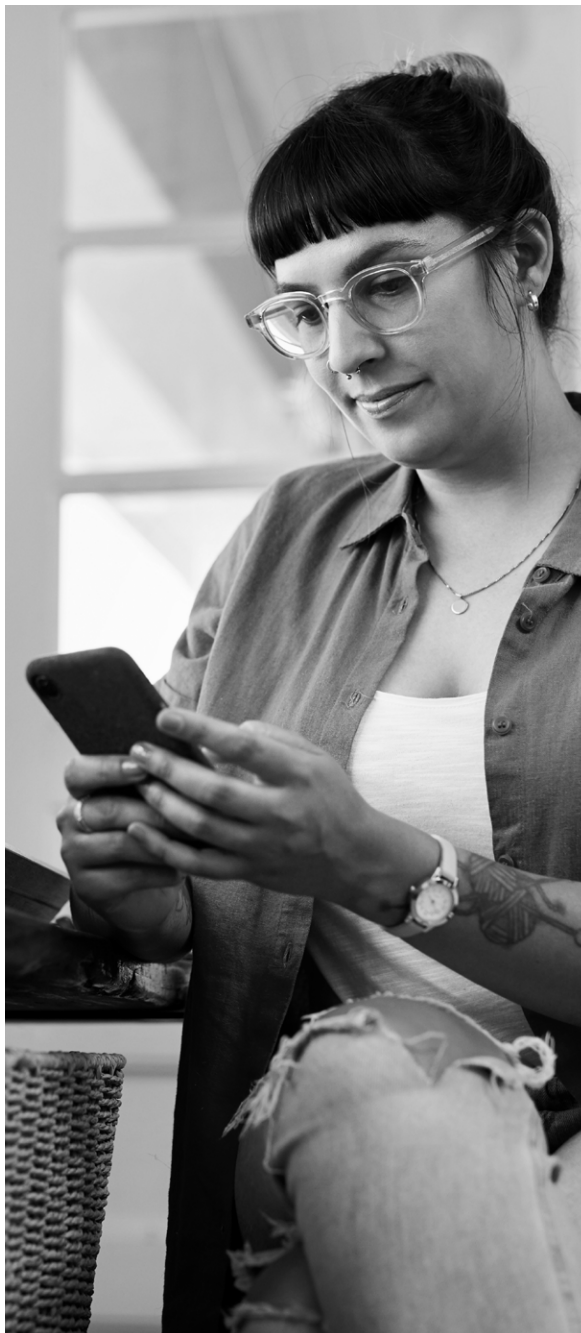
NOTE: The wording for this question changed slightly between 2024 (Do you currently subscribe or donate to a local (national) news publication?) and 2025 and 2026 (In the past year, have you directly paid or given money to a local (national) news organization by subscribing, donating or becoming a member?)

A challenge to win consumer support

Can local newsrooms convince more consumers to pay for news through subscriptions, donations or memberships? Results of the survey indicate it won't be easy. Among the 86% of respondents who said they did not pay for local news in 2026, the survey asked them to consider potential inducements to change their minds. Among the various benefits listed, 27% said discounts or perks to local businesses would make them more likely to subscribe or donate to a local donation. Fewer than two in 10 (17%) said that a bundled plan, such as family plans or a joint museum membership, would make them more likely to pay for local news. However, the number one answer to this question amounted to a rejection of paying for local news. Nearly half of respondents (46%) said none of the inducements or benefits would make them more likely to subscribe or donate.

Many who pay for local news support journalism's mission

To explore motivations to pay, the survey asked the 14% of respondents who paid for local news what reasons triggered their decisions to subscribe or donate to a local news publication. More than half (58%) said they paid or donated in the past year to support local journalism. This result was an increase from 2025 (47%) when the same question was asked. Nearly a third (28%) said they subscribe or donate because it's a longtime habit. Third on the list of motivations at 26% was the desire for coverage of a specific neighborhood or area.

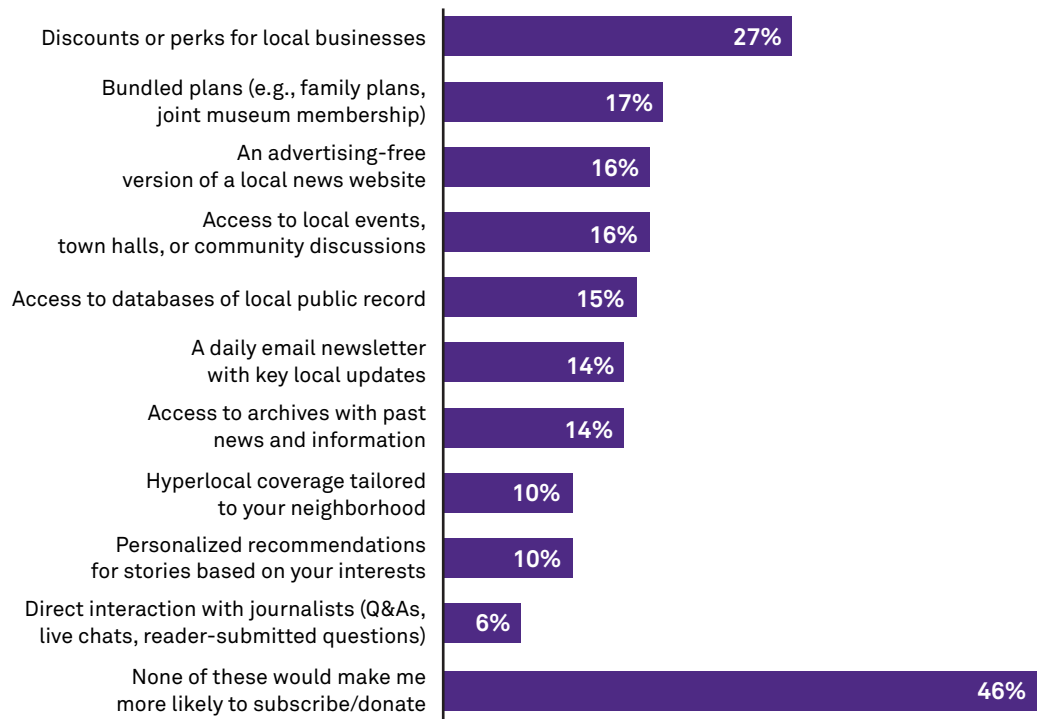


FUNDING LOCAL NEWS

REASONS RESPONDENTS WOULD CONSIDER PAYING FOR LOCAL NEWS

Among people who said they have not paid for local news in the past year

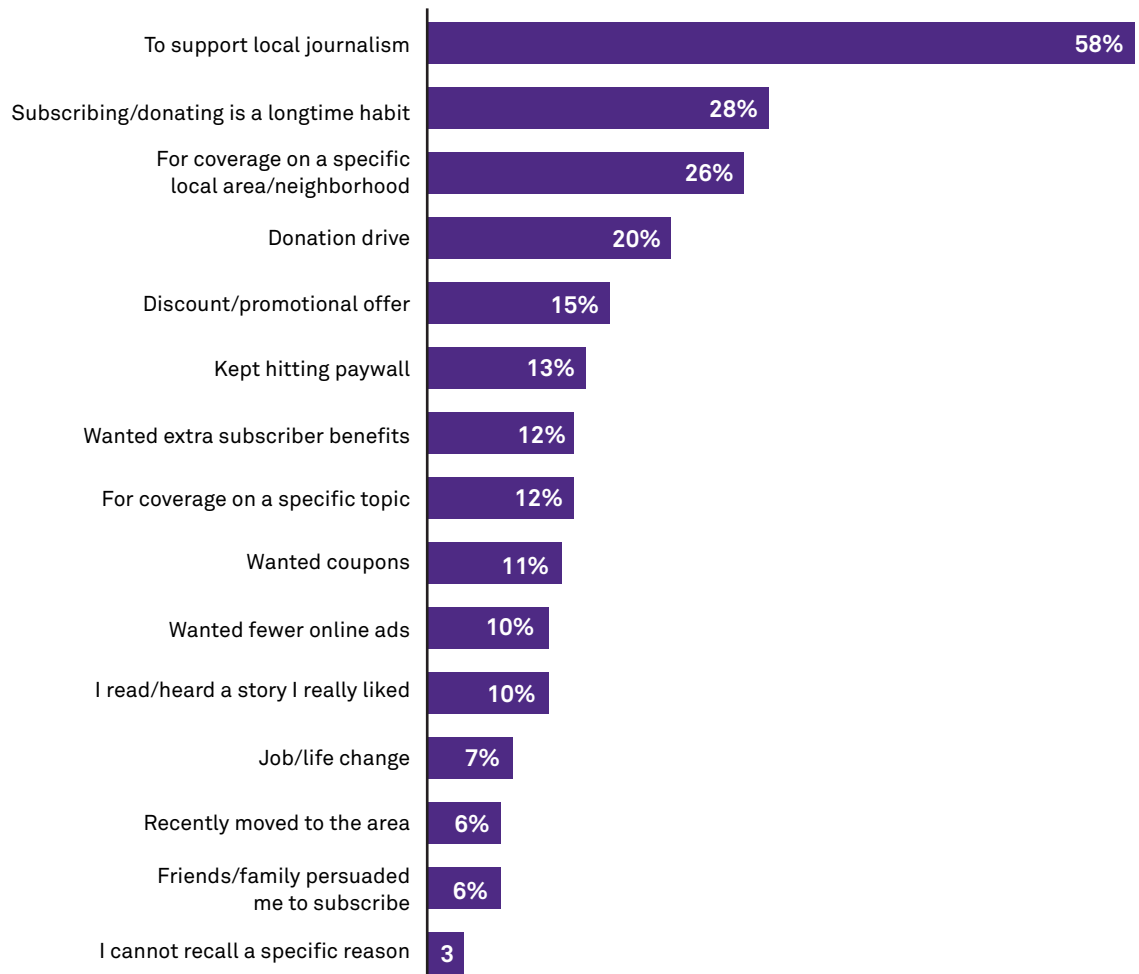
NOTE: Percentages indicate a "yes" response; multiple responses permitted.



REASONS RESPONDENTS PAID FOR LOCAL NEWS IN THE PAST YEAR

Among people who said they have paid for local news in the past year

NOTE: Percentages indicate a "yes" response; multiple responses permitted.

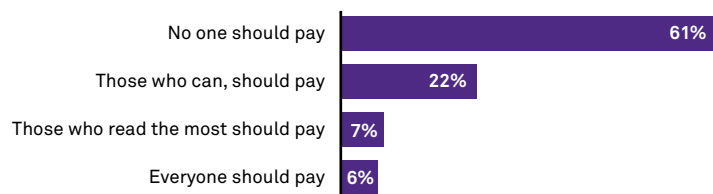




The problem of ‘No one should pay’

If people are reluctant to subscribe or donate money to get local news, is there any other consumer revenue approach they might support? Each year the survey asked respondents a specific question about who should pay for local news. Their answers posed another dilemma. The majority of respondents in 2026 (61%) said no one should pay for news. This number has climbed since 2024 (51%). The second most-popular answer was those who can pay, should pay (22%). Few people said those who read the most should pay (7%) or everyone should pay (6%). The fact that six in 10 consumers believe no one should pay for news shows the lasting impact of news organizations’ decision in the early digital era to disseminate news on the internet for free. Consumers are used to finding the information they want for free.

HOW PEOPLE FEEL ABOUT PAYING FOR LOCAL NEWS



NOTE: “Other” response not being show

How to fund local news

A shift in thinking is needed, Medill Professor Stephanie Edgerly, Associate Dean of Research, observed:

“More people than ever believe no one should pay for news, and that belief isn’t going away. The path forward isn’t fighting it. It’s rethinking how local news gets funded in the first place.”

Organizations need to try different approaches, Tim Franklin, Medill Senior Associate Dean, Professor and John M. Mutz Chair in Local News, said:

“If there are a limited number of households that will pay for local news, it means the industry will need to raise more money from its most loyal, existing audience base, and it will need to turn to other revenue sources like marketing services, events and sponsored content.”

Addressing the economics

An increased understanding of industry hardships

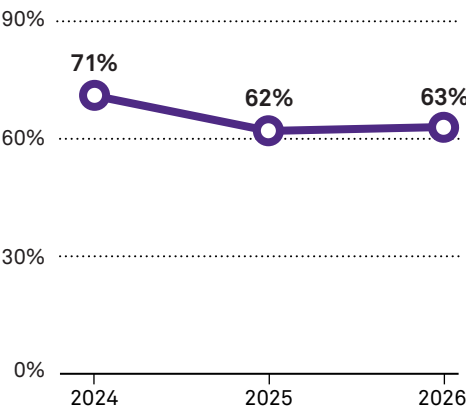
If news organizations hope to see increased subscription revenues, they need to persuade the public that credible, original local reporting is worth paying for. Direct support by consumers is required. When asked about the financial state of local news, the public has begun, albeit slowly, to show more awareness of local news’ struggles. In 2026, 63% said local news outlets are doing somewhat or very well, down from 71% in 2024. Meanwhile, about one-third (35%) said in 2026 that local news is doing not at all or not too well financially, an uptick from 2024 (28%). While the majority of respondents still believe local news organizations are in good financial shape, greater awareness of the reality is good news.

As the news industry searches for new revenue models, governments including in Illinois have become involved. To judge support, the survey asked consumers if they approve of the government providing tax credits and other financial assistance to help local news. About half of consumers (49%) said they supported the idea, a noticeable increase from the 2024 survey (38%). The number of those who oppose government participation declined to 20% from 25% in 2024. The Medill Local News Initiative recently reported that 55 news entities operating 130 outlets in Illinois received \$4.3 million in state tax credits through the Illinois law, which was enacted in 2024.

AWARENESS OF STATE OF NEWS INDUSTRY AND OPENNESS TO GOVERNMENT HELP

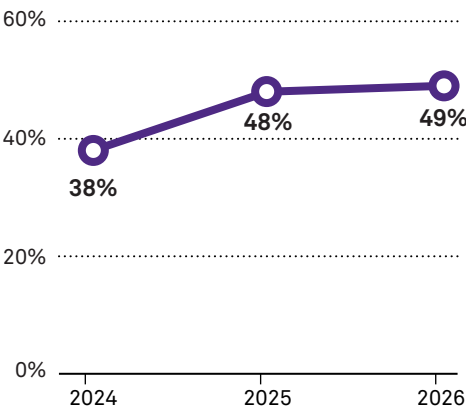
Thinking about the financial state of local news in your local community, how well do you think your local news outlets are doing financially?

Percentage answering somewhat or very well



Several states have passed legislation to help strengthen local news. Should the government provide tax credits and other financial assistance to help local news?

Percentage answering yes



NOTE: The wording for this question changed between 2024 (“Should the government provide tax credits to help local news outlets?”) and 2025 and 2026 (Several states have passed legislation to help strengthen local news. Should the government provide tax credits and other financial assistance to help local news?)

Respondents are open to tax credits

Survey respondents showed an increased awareness of the financial state of local news and openness to public funding, Tim Franklin, Medill Senior Associate Dean, Professor and John M. Mutz Chair in Local News, observed:

“These findings clearly show that as awareness of the financial crisis in local news is rising, so, too, is the number of people supporting public policy to address the problem. These results bolster the view that local news is a public good worthy of public support.”

THE MEDILL SURVEY 2026:
HOW THE CHICAGO AREA
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SEPTEMBER 2026



Local news attitudes and engagement

What we found

- Chicago-area consumers trust local news organizations
- Respondents say they have access to relevant local news
- They feel more stressed by national news than local news

Chicago-area consumers trust local news media

The news media’s relationship with the public is based on trust that journalists will report the news fairly and accurately. While nationally the news media’s reputation has come under fierce political attacks, the relationship is stronger at the local level.

The Medill Survey found that about half (51%) of people surveyed agree, or strongly agree, that local news media can be trusted to get things right. That figure was about the same as in Medill’s two previous surveys.

Medill asked several other questions to explore the public’s views about journalism and engagement level with local news. The results were positive.

Journalists are in touch with local needs

Many respondents (44%) agreed or strongly agreed that local journalists are “in touch with the needs of my community.” This was an increase over last year (42%) and 2024 (38%), offering encouragement that journalism organizations are on the right track in their efforts to build and maintain relationships with audiences.

Local reporters deliver relevant news

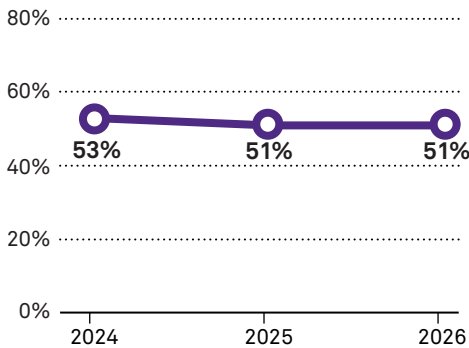
The survey asked consumers if they have access to local news that is relevant to their lives. The answer suggests that Chicago-area news media in general are successful in this fundamental goal. Two-thirds (66%) agree or strongly agree that local news is relevant. That figure was up slightly from 2025 (63%) though down from 2024 (75%).



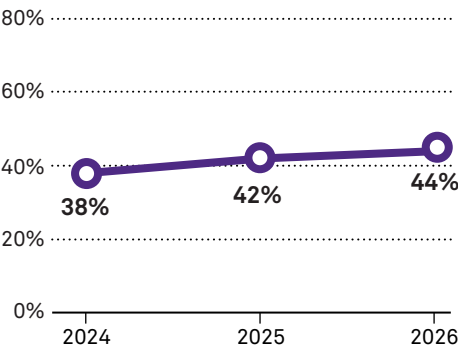
ATTITUDES ABOUT LOCAL NEWS

Percentage answering agree or strongly agree

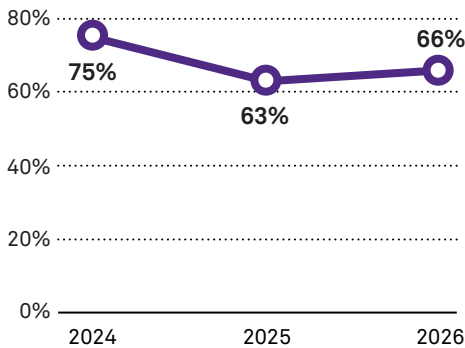
I trust my local news media to get things right



Local journalists are in touch with the needs of my community



I have access to local news that is relevant to my life



NOTE: The categories “Disagree/strongly disagree,” and “neither agree nor disagree” are not shown

News stress and avoidance

Consumers are more likely to avoid national news than local news

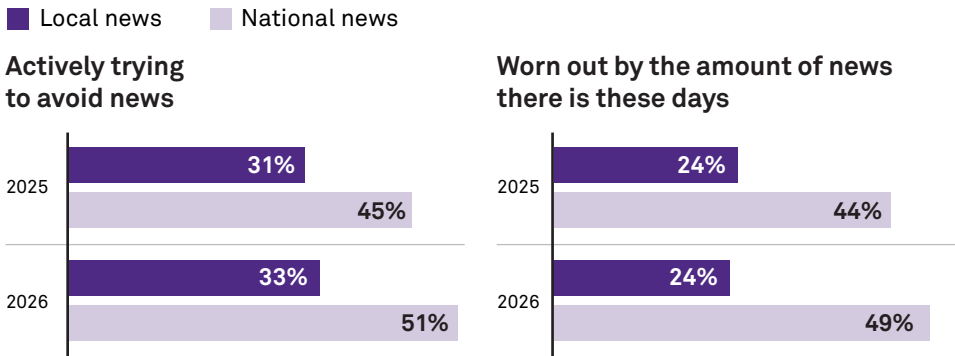
The national news scene has been punctuated by partisan attacks, reflecting the country’s intensifying political divide. When the news is stressful, audiences face the decision of whether to keep engaged or tune out. Medill Survey results show that the public is fatigued by the state of national news, but feels differently and more positive about local news and is more likely to keep reading, watching and absorbing events about their community.

Respondents said they were much more likely to avoid national news than local news. Half of adults (51%) said they sometimes or often actively avoid national news, while 33% said they sometimes or

often try to avoid local news. The gap widened from last year, suggesting audiences seem even more fatigued by national news headlines and political conflict.

Focusing on the emotional toll of negative news, the survey asked respondents whether they feel worn out by the amount of local and national news these days. Half of survey takers (49%) agreed or strongly agreed that they are worn out by the amount of national news, but just 24% said they were worn out by the amount of local news again. Again, the gap between national and local widened, showing that adults this year feel even more worn out than last year by the state of national news.

WHETHER PEOPLE FIND THEMSELVES ACTIVELY AVOIDING OR FEELING WORN OUT BY NEWS



NOTE: Percentages equal those answering sometimes and often. The categories never and occasionally are not shown.

One way local and national news differs

The survey found differences in how people react to local and national news, Medill Professor Stephanie Edgerly, Associate Dean of Research, observed:

“People aren’t abandoning national news completely, but they do get fatigued by it and need to pull back. Local news doesn’t trigger that same reaction. That makes local news a steadier, more welcome presence in people’s lives compared to national news.”

**THE MEDILL SURVEY 2026:
HOW THE CHICAGO AREA
GETS ITS NEWS
SEPTEMBER 2026**



AI and local news

What we found

- Consumers do not trust AI to write or produce local news
- They don't want AI creating video or images
- They believe AI will accelerate the spread of misinformation
- Respondents are more accepting of AI's use for specific tasks such as spellchecking
- Just a small percentage of people use chatbots to engage with local news

Consumers distrust AI to produce local news

Artificial intelligence is transforming society and having a major impact on the way people communicate. The news industry recognizes that AI’s ability to synthesize information and create text and video images can become tools for supporting or even producing journalism. Some news organizations are experimenting with AI, though its use as a replacement for human journalists is controversial.

The 2026 Medill Survey asked a series of questions to assess the public’s views of artificial intelligence and chatbots as they relate to the production and consumption of local news. The results overall showed palpable distrust of AI in the newsgathering, reporting and writing process. This discomfort transcended many facets. Survey takers were not comfortable with journalists using AI to write stories, decide which stories to prioritize, create images, personalize coverage or even summarize the news.

While most respondents haven’t used AI as a tool to consume local news, they held negative views about its impact, including its potential to accelerate the spread of misinformation, cause more errors in local news reporting and take jobs away from local human journalists. These opinions were most strongly held by consumers who were among the 14% of survey takers who pay for local news. This is a clear warning sign that local journalism’s most valuable customers – those who pay – will not be happy if AI begins to take a significant role producing local news.

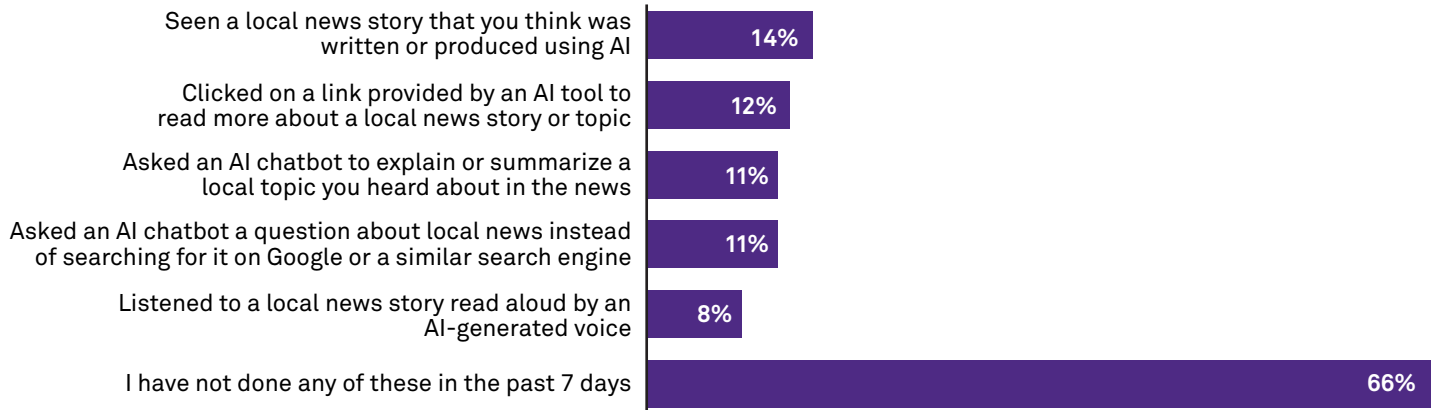
Two-thirds of people haven’t engaged with AI to consume local news

To assess the public’s familiarity with artificial intelligence and usage of chatbots, the survey

asked adults whether they had engaged with AI in the past seven days in various scenarios related to the consumption of local news. The results showed that chatbots are not yet mainstream products in this area. Two-thirds of respondents (66%) said they had not engaged with AI in any way connected to the consumption of local news. The top response related to general awareness, with 14% of adults saying they had seen a local news story they think was written or produced using AI. About one in 10 (12%) said they clicked on a link provided by an AI tool to read more about a local news story or topic.

Just a small number said they had used a chatbot to read local news: 11% said they had asked a chatbot a question about local news instead of searching for it on Google or another search engine, and 11% also said they had asked a chatbot to explain or summarize a local topic heard about it in the news. It remains early days in the rollout of AI, with many questions about its potential usage. So it isn’t yet clear whether low engagement with AI for local news reflects distrust versus the newness of the technology. What is more certain, based on responses to other requisitions, is that local news audiences are very cautious about having AI brought into the newsgathering process.

HOW RESPONDENTS USED AI FOR LOCAL NEWS



Consumers do not want AI to create local news stories, but they recognize it can be a useful tool

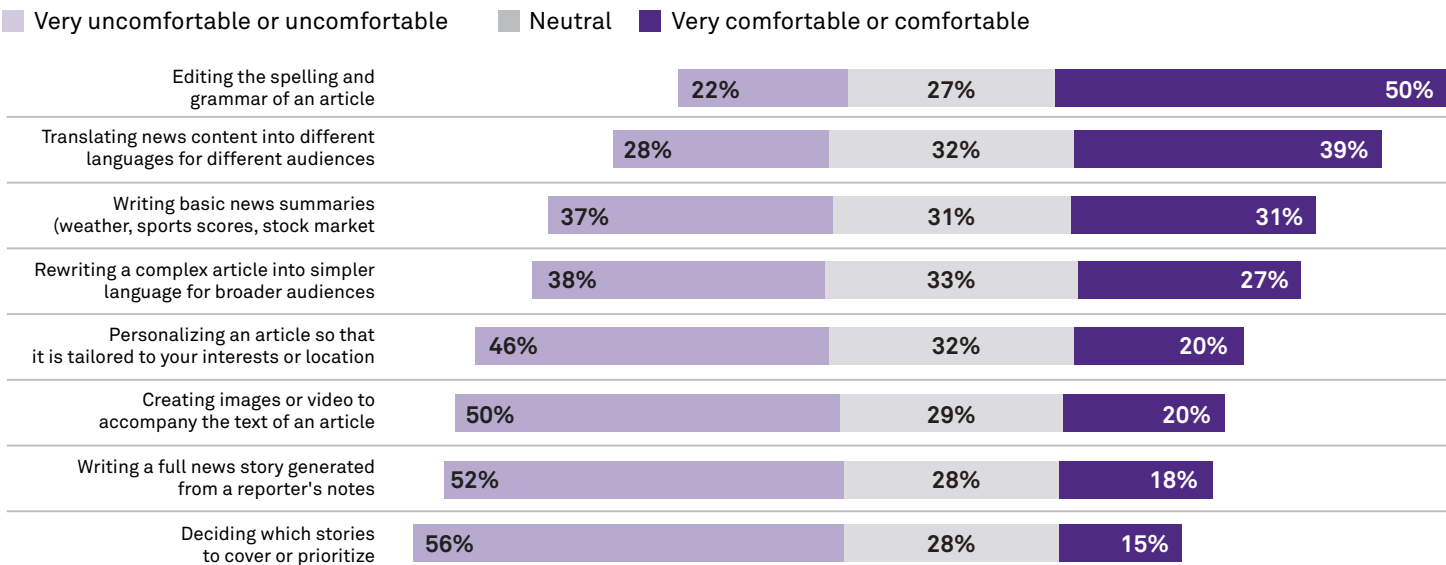
Local news organizations are under financial pressure, and artificial intelligence technology is potentially a money-saving innovation to support news gathering and production. Large language model chatbots are capable of writing and producing images that can pass as created by humans, so outsourcing local news to AI is tempting though controversial. Organizations have been experimenting with AI-created news for some time. But should they? Results of this survey suggest that news executives need to be extremely cautious because they risk alienating the public. Respondents, especially those who pay for local news, are distrustful.

To assess the public's comfort level, the survey asked a detailed question describing various ways AI can be used to produce or support the production of local news. These scenarios ranged from using AI to write basic news summaries or write full news stories to deciding which stories to cover to editing the spelling and grammar of an article.

Respondents rejected the use of AI to write full news stories, with more than half (52%) saying they were uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with news organizations using AI to generate a complete news stories from a reporter's notes. They felt the same about using AI to create images or video to accompany text, with 50% saying they were uncomfortable or very uncomfortable. Adults were even more negative about newsrooms using AI to decide which stories to cover or prioritize (56% were uncomfortable or very uncomfortable).

Sentiment shifted over using AI to write basic news summaries, with just over one-third (37%) saying they were uncomfortable or very uncomfortable and about one-third (31%) saying they were very comfortable or comfortable with the idea. Consumers were more accepting about using AI as a passive writing aid: 50% said they were comfortable with AI for spelling and grammar, and 39% were comfortable or very comfortable with using AI to translate news content into different languages.

LEVEL OF COMFORT WITH USE OF AI IN LOCAL NEWS



NOTE: Because of rounding and the omission of missing responses, totals may not add to 100 percent.

AI as a tool for news — not so fast

The survey asked people to pick the best tool for a variety of tasks related to news — whether AI, content creators, local news outlets or national news outlets would be better. Respondents picked AI last in all categories — none over 6% of respondents — telegraphing the steep task providers have in adapting these new tools. AI scored no better in

straightforward categories like “provide background context” than more nuanced options like “treat all sides fairly.” Respondents selected local news outlets as the top option when it came to treating all sides fairly, giving relevant or new information and providing background context.

PREFERENCES: BEST TOOLS FOR VARIOUS DIGITAL ACTIVITIES

● Highest

	AI chatbots like ChatGPT, Claude, Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot	Independent creators or influencers either in print, digital, TV, radio, or through social media	Local news outlets either in print, digital, TV, radio, or through social media	National news outlets either in print, digital, TV, radio, or through social media
Help people understand the world around them	● 4%	● 19%	● 23%	● 32%
Verify and get the facts right	● 6%	● 16%	● 25%	● 30%
Treat all sides fairly	● 4%	● 17%	● 24%	● 22%
Give people relevant information	● 4%	● 18%	● 34%	● 24%
Uncover new information	● 4%	● 24%	● 25%	● 25%
Provide background context	● 5%	● 19%	● 28%	● 24%
Offer commentary or interpretation	● 5%	● 26%	● 24%	● 23%

NOTE: Don't know responses are not shown. Respondents were answering the question “If you had to choose one news source that does each of the following best, which one would you choose?”

People are skeptical of AI as a tool for news

The survey showed AI behind all other options in a range of news-related tasks, Medill Professor Stephanie Edgerly, Associate Dean of Research, observed:

“When we asked people to pick the best source for things like fair reporting or background context, AI finished last, behind local outlets, national outlets and even content creators.”

Consumers who pay for news are more negative about AI than those who don't pay

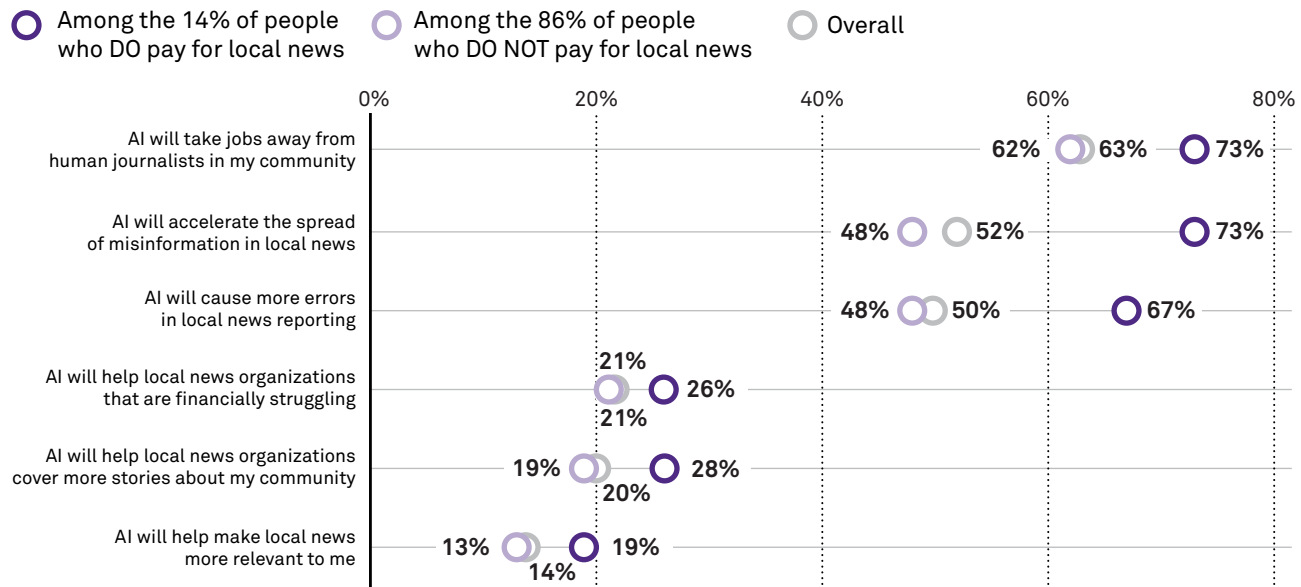
The survey took a deeper look at opinions on AI's impact and found some differences in views among consumers who pay for news versus those who don't. Consumers who pay for news were more negative than those who don't, showing people with a tighter relationship to the news media are especially concerned about AI's influence. Among the 14% of respondents who pay for local news, 73% said they believe AI will accelerate the spread of misinformation in local news and 73% will take jobs away from human journalists. Among the 86% of consumers who don't pay for news, about

half (48%) said AI will spread misinformation and nearly two-thirds (62%) said it would destroy journalism jobs.

If AI's purpose in local news is to free up resources for financially struggling organizations, respondents indicated they have a small amount of sympathy for that argument. Only about one-quarter of consumers (26%) who pay for news and 21% of those who don't pay agreed that AI will help local news organizations that are financially struggling.

HOW RESPONDENTS SEE THE IMPACT OF AI ON LOCAL NEWS

Percentage answering strongly agree or agree



Local news and AI: Next steps

Survey results about how people view AI and local news indicate organizations should move forward with care, Tim Franklin, Medill Senior Associate Dean, Professor and John M. Mutz Chair in Local News, observed:

“As with many new technologies, AI consumer adoption is still ramping up and many are skeptical. News outlets should view these findings as another reason to proceed thoughtfully and transparently.”

**THE MEDILL SURVEY 2026:
HOW THE CHICAGO AREA
GETS ITS NEWS
SEPTEMBER 2026**



Methodology

How the survey was conducted

This study was designed by researchers at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications to understand how local news is being consumed in the greater Chicago area. The project was supported by a grant from the Robert R. McCormick Foundation and conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago, an independent social research organization.

For this study, the greater Chicago area was defined by the 14 counties comprising the Chicago Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). This includes nine counties in the state of Illinois, four counties in northwest Indiana, and one county in southeast Wisconsin. The outlying areas are within about 70 miles from the Chicago city border.

The survey of 1,223 Chicagoland residents took place from May 15 to June 12, 2026. The sample of adults age 18+ who live in the Chicago MSA was selected from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak and ChicagoSpeaks panels (n = 755) and from Dynata's non-probability panel (n = 468). Respondents who confirmed that they reside in the Chicago MSA and met the screening criteria were allowed to participate. The questionnaire was self-administered online and available in English and Spanish, depending on respondent preference. The median time to complete was 15 minutes.

The probability sample was selected from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak and ChicagoSpeaks Panels. During the initial recruitment phase of the AmeriSpeak panel, randomly selected U.S. households were sampled with a known, nonzero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame and then contacted by U.S. mail, email, telephone, and field interviewers (face-to-face). The AmeriSpeak panel provides sample coverage of approximately 97 percent of the U.S. household population. Those excluded from the sample include people with P.O. box-only addresses, some addresses not listed in the USPS Delivery Sequence File, and some newly constructed dwellings. ChicagoSpeaks is a probability panel designed to be representative of the city of Chicago household population. In 2024, NORC completed a survey named the Chicago PD Consent Decree Survey for the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), which utilized an address-based sample of Chicago residents. At the end of this survey, respondents were asked if they would like to participate in more surveys related to Chicago. Those that consented to joining and continue to report living in Chicago comprise the ChicagoSpeaks panel.



For the probability sample, all AmeriSpeak panelists who reside in the Chicago MSA were invited to take the survey. A random selection of ChicagoSpeaks panelists was used to supplement the Chicago specific collection. If a panel household had more than one active adult panel member, only one adult panel member was selected at random. NORC panelists who previously participated in either the 2024 or 2025 local news study were invited to again provide their responses for the 2026 study. In total, 561 of the 755 NORC panelists who participated in this report, also participated in a prior wave (either 2025 or 2024); 393 NORC panelists participated across all three waves. For these people, we have matched panel data across multiple years.

For the non-probability sample, NORC defined nested quota buckets for demographic strata to reflect known population distributions for age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, and regions of Chicago MSA. NORC worked with Dynata to slowly release sample over the field period to adequately fill each quota.

The final sample of 1,223 Chicagoland residents does not include cases that were removed due to quality-control checks. NORC removed 47 cases from the final sample for either speeding (i.e., those that completed the survey in less than one-third of the median duration) or high refusal rates (i.e., those that skipped or refused more than 50% of the eligible questions). Additional data quality steps were taken for the non-probability sample. This includes using the reCAPTCHA and Research Defender tools to flag

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SURVEY SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS

Demographics	Chicago MSA sample (%)
Age	
18-29	20.3
30-44	26.8
45-59	23.4
60+	29.9
Gender	
Male	48.6
Female	51.4
Race / Ethnicity²	
White	51.4
Black	14.8
Hispanic	22.7
Asian-Pacific Islander	7.5
Other	3.7
Education	
Less than high school	7.5
High school graduate or equivalent	25.6
Some college or associate degree	26
Bachelor's degree	21.4
Postgraduate or professional	19.4
Income	
Less than \$30,000	16.2
\$30,000 to under \$60,000	21
\$60,000 to under \$100,000	24.8
\$100,000 or more	38.1
County groups	
Cook	54.8
Will, Grundy, Kendall	10
DuPage, Kane, DeKalb	17.7
IL: Lake, McHenry; WI: Kenosha	10.7
IN: Jasper, Lake, Newton, Porter	6.7

Notes: Values are weighted percentages. Categories may not total to 100% due to rounding and respondents who indicated they did not know the answer or refused to answer the question.

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and block bots and other suspicious activity (e.g., duplicate IP addresses, hyperactivity, historic fraud lists). Two attention check questions were asked of Dynata respondents in their battery of demographic questions. Any Dynata respondents who failed either attention check were removed.

The final sample is weighted to the Chicagoland population using NORC's TrueNorth[®] Calibration.¹ In simple terms, this process adjusts the raw survey responses so the final results accurately reflect the full population of the Chicago area. The weights were developed in three steps. First, NORC fit a weighted tree model to the combined probability and nonprobability sample. Second, based on the fitted tree model, NORC estimated the probabilities of inclusion in the combined probability and nonprobability sample and computed the initial weights as the inverse of the estimated probabilities. Third, poststratification adjustments, including calibration to benchmarks and weight trimming, were made to the initial weights to create the final weights. Population benchmarks were obtained from the 2024 American Community Survey (ACS). NORC provided additional weights to balance demographic distributions within the Chicago MSA by the following county groupings:

1. Cook, IL
2. DuPage, IL, Grundy, IL, McHenry, IL, Will, IL
3. DeKalb, IL, Lake, IL, Kane, IL, Kendall, IL, Jasper, IN, Lake, IN, Newton, IN, Porter, IN, Kenosha, WI.

While these three groups were used for weighting purposes, this report presents descriptive results using a more granular five-group county breakdown to better illustrate geographic differences across the Chicago MSA. All analyses in the report were performed using the overall Chicago MSA weighting.

The overall margin of error for the combined weighted sample is +/- 4.21 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect (1.95). Estimates based on subgroups have larger values. It is important to note that sampling error is only one of many potential sources of error in a survey. Other sources, such as question wording and reporting inaccuracy, may contribute additional error.

- 1 More on TrueNorth Calibration can also be found here: <https://amerispeak.norc.org/us/en/amerispeak/our-capabilities/truenorth.html>
- 2 White, Black and Asian adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic; Hispanic adults are of any race; Other includes those who selected "other" for race/ethnicity and those that selected multiple races, non-Hispanic.



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