FINAL REPORT

Assessment of Residential Satisfaction & Future Housing Interests

Town of Newington, CT

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I. OVERVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

In an effort to come to a greater understanding of the housing needs and satisfaction levels among its citizens, the Town of Newington's Housing Needs Study Committee (HNSC) partnered with the Department of Sociology at Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) in Fall of 2014. The purpose of this collaborative effort was to assist the Town of Newington in assessing the housing needs and satisfaction levels among its current residents while providing CCSU students the opportunity to experience and conduct important community-based research. After several preliminary meetings between Dr. John R. Mitrano (Professor of Sociology at Central Connecticut State University) and members of the town's Housing Needs Study Committee, a detailed work plan and accompanying timeline was established. (Please see **Appendix I: "Letter of Understanding"** for more details).

In September of 2014, Dr. Mitrano and his students conducted two focus groups of Newington residents to begin to identify residents' thoughts on current and future housing needs and desires. The town's HNSC members were responsible for recruiting prospective participants. The focus groups were held at the town hall and moderated by members of the CCSU Community Research Methods Team. In the interests of impartiality, no town officials or HNSC members were present during the focus groups. The complete findings from these focus groups are presented in the section of this final report entitled, **"Executive Summary: Focus Group Results".**

Based on themes generated in these focus groups, the CCSU research team then created a preliminary survey for review by HNSC members. The survey was designed to further explore some of ideas generated in the focus groups, as well as measure residents' opinions on a variety of other housing-related matters. After a series of reviews and revisions, a final survey instrument was agreed upon and approved for distribution by the Housing Needs Study Committee.

The original intent was to have the survey distributed to a small sample of Newington residents from which to generalize. However, the study was undertaken at a time in which two major events-- with the potential to greatly affect future land use in the town-- were occurring. These two events were: 1) The demolition of the former National Welding Manufacturing Facility; and 2) The impending completion of the CTfastrak Busway, scheduled to run through a significant portion of the town beginning in March of 2015. As such, the HNSC believed it prudent to survey all of the town's residences to gauge citizens' thoughts on the matter of housing development.

Data-Mail, Inc. of Newington was contracted to print and mail a cover letter, survey, and return envelope to all "residential units" (i.e., non-commercial units) in the town. As such, 13,150 surveys were mailed on October 24, 2014. Residents were instructed to complete and return the surveys by the November 7, 2014 deadline. All surveys post-marked by the deadline were included in the final results. [i] The total number of surveys returned was 3,228 of the 13,150 mailed out, for a response rate of approximately 24.5%. Such a rate is consistent with the rates obtained in other community-wide mail surveys. The complete findings from the survey are presented in the section of this final report entitled, **"Executive Summary: Survey Results".**

The decision of the Housing Needs Study Committee to utilize both qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches in this study was rather prudent. Doing so allowed for a much more comprehensive expression of citizens' needs, desires, opinions, attitudes, concerns, and level of satisfaction than could have occurred through the use of any single method. As a result, the HNSC and town officials now possess a wealth of information to assist in future decisions regarding housing development within the town.

What follows in the remainder of this report are more specific findings emanating from both the focus groups and the town-wide survey. The authors of this report have selected to highlight data that suggested significant themes, desires, and/or differences among groups of residents. However, it must be noted at the outset that this report is intended to merely summarize and present data to town officials. It is beyond the purview of the Community Research Methods Team and the Department of Sociology at CCSU to proscribe any specific policies or actions to be taken based on the data presented. Any formal recommendations or policy decisions that emanate from the data will be solely determined and enacted by Town of Newington officials who have been elected and entrusted to do so in the public's best interests.

II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: FOCUS GROUP RESPONSES

In an effort to come to a greater understanding of perceived future housing needs among Newington residents, a series of three (3) focus groups were scheduled to take place on the evenings of September 9, 10, and 11, 2014 from 7:00-8:00 p.m. at the Newington Town Hall. The town's Housing Needs Study Committee was responsible for recruiting focus group participants, and Dr. John R. Mitrano and the Community Research Methods Team were to serve as moderators of these focus groups.

One focus group was to consist of young residents of Newington, aged 18-29 years old. A second was to be comprised of residents between the ages of 30-54, and a third focus group was intended to solicit opinions and ideas from Newington residents aged 55 and older. Despite active efforts to recruit (and verbal commitments secured from) citizens in the middle-aged group, unfortunately none showed up on the evening their focus group was scheduled to convene. Thus, the results outlined in this "Executive Summary of Findings" stem from opinions and ideas expressed by younger and older citizens of Newington.

Focus group participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and nature of the questions, and were assured that their responses would be anonymous in any subsequent report or publication. Two members of the CCSU Community Research Methods team-- trained in research methodology-- were responsible for summarizing general themes while participants spoke, but they were also tape recorded to ensure the accuracy of responses in this subsequent report.

Based on the candid discussions, several themes emerged that provide insight into town residents': 1) perception of the town's housing stock; 2) views on future housing needs; and 3) the overall assessment of Newington as a place to reside. We turn now to the findings, categorized by age cohorts.

A. YOUNG ADULTS (AGES 18-29 YEARS OLD)

An analysis of the responses from members of the "YOUNG" focus group revealed their general perception of the town overall. They believed that living in Newington offered residents the opportunity to provide their children with a quality public educational experience; the ability to maintain close relationships with family, friends, and other community members; a safe, clean, and quiet living environment; and a rather unique town layout in which there was a relative segregation between commercial entities and residential communities. They particularly liked that they had easy access to a large variety of businesses and restaurants along the Berlin Turnpike (and to a lesser extent, within the town center) and yet the vast majority of the town maintained a residential character segregated away from the traffic and noise of the Berlin Turnpike.

While they perceived and described Newington in an overwhelmingly positive light, the young respondents did, however, view Newington as having very little open space remaining, high property taxes, and not a lot of rental units that they believed were affordable for people their age.

PERCEPTION OF COMMUNITY

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES	MISC.
Quality of public schools	Lack of open space	Perceived as a middle to lower-upper class segment of society
Close relationship to family, friends, and community (familiarity)	High property taxes	
Safety, quietness, and cleanliness of town	Expensive rental units	
Segregation of commercial and residential communities		

DESIRE IN FUTURE HOUSING

In terms of their articulated desire for future housing, the members in this 18-29 year old focus group expressed a strong desire for single-family homes in which to raise families that were close in proximity to their work and to other immediate and/or extended family members. And as much as they expressed a desire to remain in Newington in the future, they cautioned that doing so was dependent upon receiving "value" for the size of the homes they intended to purchase and the amount of taxes they would have to pay in relation to comparable homes and tax situations in several neighboring towns.

Finally, the young focus group participants identified a need for Newington to develop "affordable" apartments that would allow for Newington's current "younger generation" to remain in town, and they wanted to convey to the town's HNSC that the town strive to maintain as much open space as possible when exploring future housing projects

B. MATURE/SENIOR ADULTS (AGES 55 YEARS OR OLDER)

An analysis of the responses from members of the "SENIOR" focus group revealed their general perception of the town overall as well. They believed that living in Newington offered residents a quiet and safe living environment; the opportunity to live in proximity to their family members; a chance to be involved with a senior center that was right in town; and a heightened sense of community. Many of them were life-long residents who valued their roots and strong ties in the town—though they did suggest that they would be willing to move from Newington should better housing options be available in nearby towns. Several seemed to be a bit concerned that there were many single houses for sale in town at the time of the focus group, and wondered what this may be signaling about the town they so cherished and respected.

One town that was mentioned as a municipality that was "doing things right" when it came to housing issues was Berlin—with its availability, range of housing options, and affordability. They felt that Newington had a serious shortage of senior housing, citing waiting lists with a long duration until units become available, a lack of preference/priority given to residents of the Town of Newington on those waiting lists, and dissatisfaction that once a unit finally became available for new tenants, the person next on the list must take whatever unit is available—or lose their spot and return to the bottom of the list. They believed that many of the senior housing units were too small

and that larger condominiums were not a viable option for many seniors due to their often-prohibitive costs—especially for seniors from fixed incomes and more modest financial means.

PERCEPTION OF COMMUNITY

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES	MISC.
Sense of community (town center, community center)	Lack of senior housing	Lifelong residents
Quiet and safe	Waiting lists (duration, lack of preference, take what you get)	Many single family houses for sale
Proximity to family Senior center in town	Size of housing Condominiums are costly	Berlin is "doing it right" Want to stay in town but would leave for better options

DESIRE IN FUTURE HOUSING

When the discussion turned to seniors' preferences for future housing, one word in particular stood out: "More." They expressed a strong desire for "more senior housing" (in general), with more variety" of sizes/styles/layouts, "more affordable" prices, and "more amenities" included that are convenient for seniors—most notably washers and dryers that are included in the unit itself for the convenience and safety of seniors. In terms of types of units, they preferred those that fostered "more community" among residents (perhaps with a communal complex of some kind for shared activities among residents), as well as housing that was low maintenance. Housing that contained all of these characteristics, however, should be "more affordable" and geared toward middle class seniors.

C. SUMMARY and CONCLUSIONS

The responses and opinions expressed by the focus groups of younger residents and senior residents reveal a great deal of satisfaction with the experiences of both growing up in and raising a family within Newington. However, it appears that Newington may not necessarily be an optimal town for young, childless people just starting to live independently post-high school/college, as well as not particularly hospitable for seniors on modest incomes and "empty nesters" looking to downsize

their housing situation. Additionally, a large segment of the current Newington housing population (i.e., middle-aged residents) was not heard from for this segment of the housing study. Thus, these conclusions are tentative at best.

Results from the town-wide survey (which incorporate middle-aged residents' opinions not reflected in the focus group findings) provide even more representative and generalizable data. We now turn to an examination of the survey data.

III. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: SURVEY RESPONSES

As previously mentioned, a town-wide survey was distributed to all residences in the Town of Newington. A total of 13,150 surveys were mailed, with 3,228 returned by the deadline requested for a response rate of approximately 25%. Members of the CCSU Community Research Methods Team entered the survey data into an SPSS database for subsequent analysis. Data provided by respondents were not edited or altered. If a respondent chose not to answer a question, no response was entered and the data was classified as "missing" for the purpose of analysis. Thus, when observing totals throughout the tables provided, there will be great variability. Only valid percentages are included in the tables (i.e., percentages computed based on the number

of people who chose to answer the question— and not the percentage based on the 3,228 total of surveys received).

Any qualitative comments provided on the surveys by respondents were compiled by the team of students for further review and are included in the Appendix.

In the following executive summary, we provide an overview of the population's demographic profile, as well information that assists in illustrating: 1) the current housing situation and level of satisfaction among town residents; 2) their future housing plans and interests; 3) the reasons why apartment renters choose to rent; and 4) differences of note in responses among people in several key independent variables, including gender, age, and household income. Finally, at the request of the NHSC, the responses from one group in particular (i.e., Town of Newington employees) were also examined.

A. RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

An examination of the demographic characteristics of the 3,228 residents who returned a survey reveals the following:

Variable	Attributes	Percentage
Gender:	Women	52%
	Men	48%
Age:	Under 40	13%
	40-59	34%
	60 or older	53%
Income:	Under $50,000	32%
	$50,000-$99,999	38%
	$100,000 or more	31%

Variable	Attributes	Percentage
Years Living In Newington:	10 years or fewer	24%
	11-30 years	33%
	More than 30 years	43%

Work in Newington (Self)	Yes	12%
Work in Newington (Others in Household)	Yes	9%
Employed by Newington (Self)	Yes	3%
Employed by Newington (Others in Household)	Yes	2%

B. CURRENT HOUSING AND LEVEL OF SATISFACTION: ALL RESPONDENTS

In regards to their current housing situation, approximately 71% of the respondents lived in a single-family house, with an additional 20% living in a condominium and 5% residing in an apartment. Nearly 40% owned their residence "free and clear", with an additional 50% owning their residence but still paying a mortgage. Nearly half (49.6%) of the respondents were paying less than $1,000 a month for their residence, with an additional 40% paying between $1,000 and $2,000 monthly.

In terms of the make-up of the households, slightly over two-thirds (69%) are comprised of 2 or fewer people. Another quarter of households (26%) consisted of 3 or 4 people. Only 5% of respondents indicated there were 5 or more people in residence. Approximately half (48%) of the respondents indicated they lived in a residence with 3 bedrooms, with an additional 29% stating that their residence had 2 bedrooms. Thus, 77% of residents lived in a 2-3 bedroom household.

Respondents were then asked to subjectively assess their current housing situation. Fully two-thirds (66%) considered the size of their residence to be "just right" for them, with only 2% each believing their residence to be "significantly too small "or "significantly too large. " Similarly, when asked how satisfied they were with their current housing situation, 84% said they were either "somewhat" or "very" satisfied, and over three-quarters (79%) indicated that their current housing situation met most, all, or exceeded their needs.

In sum, the respondents' answers suggest a great deal of satisfaction with their current housing situation in relation to the size and costs of their domiciles.

C. FUTURE PLANS AND HOUSING INTERESTS: ALL RESPONDENTS

Given this rather high degree of satisfaction, it is a bit surprising that only 55% of residents stated that they planned to remain in their current house in the next 5-10 years. Approximately 38% believed they "definitely" or "probably" would be moving in the next 5-10 years, with roughly the same percentage of respondents planning to buy larger (11%) or smaller (10%) houses. Of those planning to move, 40% indicated they "definitely" or "probably" would move within Newington, with 30% stating they would "definitely" or "probably" move out of Newington. Of those planning on moving, over three-quarters (78%) said they intend to pay less than $1,500 a month for housing.

As satisfied as they are, a significant portion of the population is nonetheless considering moving in the future. An examination of the many unsolicited qualitative comments submitted by respondents on the returned surveys may shed some insight as to why some citizens want to move—despite being satisfied with their housing. Two of the most common comments mentioned "high taxes" and the "desire to move to warmer climates." (See Appendix "Qualitative Comments" for the entire list of comments submitted).

When asked about their degree of interest in a variety of housing types Newington was considering developing in the future, it was clear that many of the options held little to no interest among the vast majority of respondents. Only one of the options—senior housing—garnered more than a third of the respondents indicating "moderate" to "high" interest in possibly moving to such housing sometime in the future.

Type of Housing	Percent Indicating Moderate/ High Interest
Senior Housing	36%
Single Family Home 150-250K	31%
Single Family Home <150K	24%
Single Family Home 250K+	21%
Apartment (2-3 BR)	17%
Government subsidized housing	14%
Housing for Disabled	11%
Apartment (Studio/1 BR)	10%
Single Room Occupancy (SRO)	4%

D. REASONS FOR CHOOSING TO RENT

Respondents who are currently renting were asked to identify some of the factors in their decision to rent instead of buying/owning. Overwhelmingly, respondents "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that a reason they rented was because it required little or no upkeep on their part. Approximately 84% of them noted this as a strong appeal of renting. Listed below are some additional possible motivations and reasons for renting and the percentage of respondents "strongly agreeing" or "agreeing" with each.

Reason to Rent	Percent Indicating Strongly Agree/ Agree
Requires Little/No Upkeep	84%
Newington Has No Houses I Can Afford	48%
Saving to Buy House	33%
Plan to Stay Short Time	28%
Bigger/Better Than House I Can Afford	22%
Newington Has No Houses Meeting Needs	21%

When asked about the importance of ownership, 68% of respondents indicated that it was "somewhat" or "very important" to own their residence. Thus, ownership still is alluring to a large segment of this population. However, nearly half of the renting population believes that the Newington housing stock is largely unaffordable to them, with a third of respondents actively saving in order to eventually buy a house. So while there are a fair percentage of renters who do so because they are transitory or prefer not to shoulder the responsibility of residential upkeep, it appears that many others would prefer ownership to renting.

E. SPECIFIC RESPONDENTS: GENDER

When examining the possibility of gender differences in the housing situation and interests among men and women, preliminary analysis reveals that there are very few differences. (Please see the Appendix). The most notable is the percentage of women living in residences with 1-2 bedrooms (40%) in comparison to the percentage of men living in such residences (30%).

F. SPECIFIC RESPONDENTS: AGE COHORTS

When examining differences in age cohorts, there were several areas and topics in which the differences among the age groups were noteworthy. They include:

• Only 38% of those under the age of 40 intended to stay in their current residence, compared to 58% of those aged 40-59 and 58% of those 60 or older.

• Approximately 56% of those under the age of 40 indicated that they will "definitely" or "probably" be moving in the next 5-10 years, compared to 39% of those aged 40-59 and 32% of those 60 or older.

• Of those probably moving, 41% of those between the ages of 40-59 indicated they "definitely" or "probably" will not be staying in Newington, whereas only 24% of those under 40 and 24% of those 60 or older indicated as such.

• Fully 80% of those 60 or older intended to pay less than $1,250 a month for housing in the future, compared to 62% of those aged 40-59 and 26% of those under the age of 40.

• In terms of interest in senior housing, 65% of those 60 years or older expressed an interest (with 26% expressing a "high" degree of interest), while only 41% of those 40-59 and 7% of those under age 40 indicating any interest.

• Regarding interest in housing for the disabled, 28% of those 60 years or older expressed any interest, while only 18% of those 40-59 and 8% of those under age 40 indicating any interest.

• In terms of interest in government subsidized housing, 31% of those 60 years or older expressed any interest, while only 17% of those 40-59 and 8% of those under age 40 indicating any interest.

• While there was not much difference among age groups in expressed interest for houses costing less than $150,000, there appear to be significant differences in interest for houses in the middle and upper-range of costs. Approximately 58% of those under 40 stated any interest in houses costing $150,000-$250,000, compared to 47% of those aged 40-59 and 34% of those over age 60. Similarly, 60% of those under 40 expressed any interest in houses costing over $250,000, compared to 36% of those aged 40-59 and 22% of those over age 60.

• In terms of interest in various types of apartments, there were also differences among the age groups. Approximately 27% of those 60 years or older expressed any interest in a studio or one bedroom apartment, while only 16% of those 40-59 and 13% of those under age 40 expressing any interest. Similarly, 35% of those 60 years or older expressed any interest in a two or three bedroom apartment, while only 23% of those 40-59 and 17% of those under age 40 expressing any interest.

• Of those residents living in an apartment, 69% of those under 40 "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that they were renting because they were saving to buy a house, compared to only 33% of those 40-59 and 6% of those 60 or older. Related to this, 89% of those under 40 believed it was "very" or "somewhat" important to own a house, compared to 81% of those 40-59 but only 52% of those 60 or older.

Taken as a whole, it appear older residents are more likely to remain in the town and in the houses they currently occupy, though they express far more interest in smaller, more convenient/accessible, less expensive residential options than their younger and middle-aged counterparts. Younger cohorts, on the other hand, are more likely to consider moving, with middle-aged respondents much more willing to move out of Newington than their older and younger neighbors. Younger cohorts seek larger homes and expect/are willing to pay more for that additional space.

G. SPECIFIC RESPONDENTS: INCOME COHORTS

When examining the influence of income, there were a few areas and topics in which the differences among the age groups were noteworthy. They include:

• Nearly 45% of respondents from higher-income households were "probably" or "definitely" moving out of Newington in the next 5-10 years, compared to 32% of moderate-income and 16% of lower-income household respondents.

• Approximately 65% of lower-income households expressed an interest in senior housing, compared to 47% of moderate-income households and 36% of higher-income households. Fully 30% of lower-income household respondents in particular expressed a "high degree" of interest in such housing, compared to only 13% of moderate-income and just 8% of higher-income respondents.

• Perhaps rather unsurprisingly, 45% of lower-income households expressed interest in government-subsidized housing, whereas only 18% and 11% of moderate and higher-income residents expressed such interest. Conversely, only 20% of lower-income

households displayed any interest in houses costing more than $250,000, whereas 29% of moderate-income and 47% of higher-income residents stated such interest.

• In regards to interest in various types of apartments, there are also notable differences. Over a third (34%) of lower-income households expressed any interest in renting a studio or one bedroom apartment, whereas only 20% of moderate and 13% of higher-income residents did. As for interest in larger apartments, there were similar differences. Thirty-six percent of lower income residents stated an interest in these apartments, whereas 29% of moderate and 20% of higher-income residents did.

In sum, lower-income household residents were interested in a wider variety of housing options—except for higher-priced houses—than moderate and higher-income residents. Higher-income residents also appear to be those most likely to move out of Newington in 5-10 years.

H. SPECIFIC RESPONDENTS: TOWN OF NEWINGTON EMPLOYEES

One segment of the population that was of particular interest to the Town of Newington Housing Committee was the town's employees and their current situation and future needs. Of those who live in and work for the town, 90% were living in a house with the additional 10% living in a condo. Fully 95% owned their residence.

Employees indicated a fairly high degree of satisfaction with their current housing situation. Approximately 62% stated that they intend to remain in their house or condo when thinking of their plans 5-10 year from now. Additionally, 68% said that the size of their housing was "just right", 76% said they were "very" or "somewhat" satisfied with their current housing situation, and 82% stated that their current housing "exceeds", "meets all" or "meets most" of their needs. All of these percentages are comparable to the percentages expressed by the overall population of respondents.

It is not surprising, then, that only 37% indicated that they would "definitely" or "probably" move in the next 5-10 years, with 43% contending they would "definitely" or "probably" move within Newington.

In terms of their interest in different types of housing:

• 32% expressed at least some interest in houses costing less than $150,000
• 38% expressed at least some interest in houses costing between $150-$250,000
• 30% expressed at least some interest in houses costing more than $250,000

In sum, employees of the Town of Newington appear to be quite satisfied with their current housing situation.

I. SPECIFIC RESPONDENTS: THOSE MOST LIKELY TO MOVE

Finally, when examining the segment of the population that indicated they were "definitely" or "probably" moving in the next 5-10 years, it is interesting to note their characteristics and expressed desires for future housing:

• Approximately 36% of those most likely to move in the near future have lived in Newington from 11-30 years. Another 36% lived in Newington more than 30 years.

• Nearly 40% of those likely to move have moderate household incomes between $50,000-$99,999.

• 54% of those likely to move in the near future are women. Approximately 45% are 60 years old or older.

• 68% of those likely to move in the near future reside in a house, with an additional 24% living in a condo. Over 87% of those likely to move in the near future own their residence.

• About 27% of those likely to move in the near future consider the size of their current residence to be too small, while 21% consider it to be too large. Perhaps a bit surprisingly, only 14% of those who "definitely" or "probably" will be moving are "somewhat" or "very" dissatisfied with their current housing situation, with 58% of them saying that their current housing meets most, all, or exceeds their housing needs. Taken as a whole, it appears that the likelihood of moving has not as much to do with the satisfaction of the current housing situation as it does with other factors.

• Only a little over a third (34%) of those likely to move said they would "definitely" or "probably" move within Newington.

• Approximately 61% of those likely to move plan on spending less that $1,250 a month for housing.

• Of those likely to move in the near future:

*48% expressed interest in houses costing $150,000-$250,000

*46% expressed interest in senior housing
*41% expressed interest in houses costing less than $150,000
*39% expressed interest in houses costing more than $250,000
*31% expressed interest in a two or three bedroom apartment
*23% expressed interest in a studio or one bedroom apartment
*23% expressed interest in government-subsidized housing
*18% expressed interest in disabled housing
*10% expressed interest in SRO housing

IV. FINAL COMMENTS

Taking into account the responses from the focus groups as well as the survey data, it appears that the vast majority of Newington residents are satisfied with their current housing situations, yet a significant percentage of the population are considering moving—despite their satisfaction with their *housing*. This seeming anomaly perhaps is better understood in light of many of the qualitative comments indicating a degree of dissatisfaction not with housing *per se,* but with other factors such as the level of taxation in town, as well as a desire to move to warmer climates. Such findings may reflect the fact that 53% of the 3,228 respondents were over the age of 60 and perhaps considering retiring soon to warmer, lower-taxed regions of the country, especially the south.

As for interests in future housing within the town, senior housing and single-family homes priced between $150-$250,000 were the two most desired options. Qualitative comments indicated a great degree of opposition to low-income housing developments and options.

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[i] Note: Seven surveys were returned with comments written on them but no survey responses filled in. Additionally, sixteen surveys were "Returned to Sender" by the U.S. Postal Service, four were returned indicating the person to whom it was addressed was deceased, no longer lives at the address, or is too infirmed to answer. Six returned the copy letter indicating that they had accidentally received two copies of the cover letter but no survey. Several others called the town hall to indicate the same had happened to them. They were then mailed a copy of the survey.