

**The Welcoming Project:
Exploration, Engagement, and Education
about Vanderhoof's Welcoming-ness**



Ministry of
Tourism, Arts
and Culture

Project purpose:

The mission of the Good Neighbours Committee is to support a diverse, welcoming, inclusive, vibrant, progressive community for all. Each year, the Committee applies for project funding from the Province to support work to forward our mission. Since 2016, reports of Hate Crimes in Canada have risen by 47%. This is a staggering increase, which means we have to continually be vigilant to increase awareness about what hate talk/literature/behaviour is in order to support safe communities to live in. This year, the Good Neighbours Committee procured funding from the Organizing Against Racism and Hate (OARH) Program, which is housed under Multi-cultural programs within the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture in the Province of BC, in order to deliver an exploration and engagement initiative that would educate and raise consciousness within the Nechako region on issues of welcoming-ness, inclusion, and privilege. Knowledge is power and our goal is to empower people to notice hate and exclusionary attitudes and behaviour in order to address and prevent it.

Starting in December 2018, we contracted local writer, Sasha Striegler Iannone, to write a series of articles on this topic, and to organize a culminating face-to-face public engagement dinner and event on March 22, 2019. This booklet contains the 7 articles from the project.

These articles are also available online on our Facebook page @GoodNeighboursCommittee. Questions or comments are always welcome.



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BY SASHA STRIEGLER IANNONE

Author's Biography: Sasha Striegler Iannone was born in Burnaby, BC, but moved back to the family hometown of Vanderhoof when she was six years old. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing from Vancouver Island University in 2014 and returned to Vanderhoof once again in 2016. While she is saddened by her lack of opportunity to sing in Mexican gay bars and the cheap, high-speed internet of the city, she is nevertheless grateful to be back home among family.

Sasha lives with her two cats, Ragamuffin Tigg and Oliver Friday, in addition to her several plants, all of which are, of course, named.

The Welcoming Project: Exploration, Engagement, and Education about Vanderhoof's Welcoming-ness.

Is Vanderhoof A Welcoming Community?

Part I



You may have seen me around town recently, stopping passersby to interview and chat with them. It's all part of my quest to answer two (not so) simple questions: **is Vanderhoof a welcoming community** and **what can we do to be (even) better?**

I'd like to start us off with an anecdote from my own experience. My family has been in Vanderhoof since the early 1900s. Although I don't share the same "prestige" as my siblings of having been born here like my predecessors, my parents and I moved back when I was five years old. Vanderhoof, to me, is home. I'm lucky in that I feel a part of this community and have enjoyed its

support on many occasions. However, when I meet someone who has newly moved (or is thinking of moving) to Vanderhoof, I invariably give them my “here’s how to live in a small town” speech. It goes along the lines of this:

‘Vanderhoof can be an amazing community. The great thing about a small town is how we all know each other and come together to support and celebrate each other. But I’m lucky. I’m *from* here. You’re not. And, unfortunately, that means you’re going to have to prove yourself first before you’re fully welcomed into the community. Go to the events, even if you’re not interested. Take local classes. Connect with people. Show that you are dedicated to the community. The town can be a little cautious, so you need to reach out and make yourself available. Once you do that, that’s when you’ll start seeing all the benefits of living in a small place.’



The Good Neighbours Committee logo by Saik'uz artist Michael Antoine.

It's not a speech I *like* giving. It's one I feel I *have* to give to ensure newcomers are prepared for the difficulties they might face integrating into this town I care about so much. I recognize it might be a speech that scares people off or makes them feel like they have to conform to a nebulous idea of what a “Vanderhoofian” is, and that makes me uncomfortable. I have met several newcomers throughout my residence here who have spoken about feeling lonely, isolated, or having no idea what kind of events and resources are available. (Take a moment to consider. How do you know about local events and resources? If you're like me, it's either because someone you know told you or because it is an event that reoccurs every year. If you don't have the network or knowledge, how would you find out?) I want everyone who lives and comes to Vanderhoof to fall in love with it as I have, so I give the speech.

But it's not all about newcomers, either. I've known individuals, born and raised here, who have felt stigmatized, ignored, isolated, and unwelcome. It could be because of their skin colour. It could be because of their interests and hobbies. It could be because of who they may or may not love. It could be because of their accent or because of their faith or simply because they're otherwise struggling and don't know how to connect. Regardless of the reason, it hurts me to think of some people in our community having less support than others—when Vanderhoof isn't there for its citizens, that is when I feel it is at its lowest. That's not who we are. However, maybe that's just me. Maybe my experience is far from the normal of our town. And that is where you come in.

Throughout the next several weeks, I encourage all of you reading this to come with me on a journey of exploration of our community. Ponder the questions. Send me your thoughts. The more voices we have, the more complete a picture we have of who we, as a collective, are. Consider whether it is fair to ask newcomers to assimilate into our local culture. What even is our local culture? Do we have one? Are we a town that welcomes all who come to our door—whether new or old—or do we only let in those who meet certain criteria? Do we want it that way? What even is a Vanderhoofian?



While I may have raised a slew of questions, there is one thing I do know: Vanderhoof is a town with immense potential. Whether that potential is realized or not, I look forward to discovering it with you.

“T” is for “Trans”, Not “Tragedy”

Several weeks ago, the announcement of government-funded, gender-affirming surgeries becoming available in Northern BC prompted a reaction from the people of Vanderhoof both on- and offline. After observing some of the comments made in regards to that announcement, and in keeping with the theme of these articles on whether or not Vanderhoof is a welcoming place, I decided the topic of gender identity was an important one to address. This article isn't meant to be a debate on the announcement itself. I'm writing simply to share knowledge.



For those of you who are hoping to reaffirm your beliefs that Vanderhoof is a welcoming community, I'm sorry—for individuals who are transgender or non-binary, it's very much not. And if those words sound overwhelming or foreign, don't worry. I've got you.

The first thing to remember is that sex—your biological parts—and gender—how you present yourself—are two different things. Most people have their sex and their gender line up. This is called “cisgender”. For example, a man who is born with male genitalia and who feels like this is a good or comfortable thing is cisgender.

However, this isn't the case for all individuals. Some people feel that their biological parts don't match what they know about themselves. For example, a woman who is born with male genitalia and who feels this is a bad or uncomfortable thing is transgender.

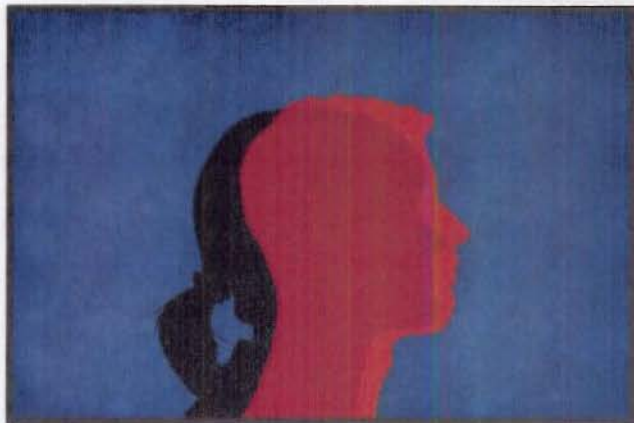
Now, I get that the previous sentence might be a little confusing. Some of you might be thinking, “but how can a woman have male genitalia?”. The

answer goes back to what we discussed before: sex and gender are two different things. When you refer to someone as a woman, you're commenting on their gender, not their sex. Therefore, what bits belong to a person has nothing to do with whether they are a man or a woman.

Think of it kind of like adoption. A child adopted into a new family often has their surname changed. In that case, it would be rude and potentially hurtful to keep calling that child by their old name, wouldn't it? It's the same with a transgender individual. A person is *transitioning* their gender—being adopted—so whatever came before is irrelevant. A cisgender woman and a transgender woman are both women (just like a biological sibling and an adopted sibling are both children of a set of parents); the only difference is one started with slightly different parts than the other. So, to sum it up, cisgender woman = woman who was born a woman. Transgender woman = woman who became a woman.

Hoo! I hope you're still with me. We got a little more to go.

Now that "cisgender" and "transgender" are a little clearer, let's move on to "non-binary". Non-binary is a catch-all name for a transgender person who doesn't identify as part of the "gender binary"—masculine and feminine. This might be a person



who feels they are both genders, in-between genders, or has no gender at all. To continue our adoption metaphor, think of it like a child who has one biological parent and one adopted parent—someone might ask the child, "do you live with biological or adopted parents?" and the child could reply "yes" or "both". That wouldn't make the family any less legitimate or real. The same goes for individuals who are non-binary.

So. You've come with me this far. Now, maybe, you're wondering what you can do to help make the town that we all care about more welcoming for transgender and non-binary residents (and visitors!). Firstly, use the names that

you are asked to use. If you can remember someone's new name when they get married, you can remember a transgender person's new name, too. Secondly, use the pronouns (him, her, they, etc.) that they ask you to use. No one expects you to be perfect, but making a good effort goes a long way. If you're not sure what pronouns or name to use, ask! Thirdly, even if you don't agree with what has been said in this article, open up a piece of your heart to show kindness. The Bible asks us to "do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12). The Torah claims the "world is built with *chesed*"—acts of kindness and compassion (Psalms 89:3). The Qur'an tells us to "keep to forgiveness, and enjoin kindness, and turn away from the ignorant" (7:199). And if you are of a different religion or no religion at all, then there are similar words of wisdom and compassion upon which to call.

We, as the town of Vanderhoof, have failed transgender and non-binary residents before. Some among us might claim that "we don't have them here", but it only seems that way because of the cold welcome transgender and non-binary individuals receive when they come out, transition, or simply live as they are. We can do better. We can make our town a place for transgender and non-binary individuals to live without fear. I hope, with this little article, you have been inspired to do this with me.

A Legacy for Inspiration

When the Good Neighbours Committee in Vanderhoof first asked me to write the series of articles which you are currently reading, it was easy for me to come up with areas in which I felt Vanderhoof could use some development. Some research suggests that the human brain remembers negative experiences more clearly than positive and confirmation bias—the phenomenon where one is more likely to search for, interpret, favour, and recall information in a way that confirms one's pre-existing beliefs or ideas—is well documented. I wanted to use this article to remind myself, and, by extension, all of you, that Vanderhoof is more than a series shortcomings. It was built at the expense of the Indigenous community, like most settlements in Canada, but Vanderhoof was originally settled to be a place of creativity, originality, refuge, and, in some ways, equality. That may be a beautiful and worthy heritage to embrace.



The crest of Saik'uz First Nation.

I would like to take this moment, however, to acknowledge that Vanderhoof *does* exist on the unceded and occupied territory (meaning non-treatied land) of the Saik'uz First Nation, and that the settlement of Vanderhoof and the ensuing actions of the settlers and the people who came here resulted in grave and lasting harm to the Saik'uz community. This article is not an attempt to hide or minimize that (and will be addressed in a later article).

When Herbert Vanderhoof—the man to whom the community owes its name—first arrived in the Nechako Valley, he was so taken aback and awed by the beauty of it that he vowed to return and build a retreat for writers. Vanderhoof himself was an American newspaper writer and editor of national acclaim, who additionally pioneered some of western Canada's most successful advertising magazines (one of which you can see in the Vanderhoof museum. Support local history, folks!). And, while many of the

immigrants who followed Vanderhoof to the area were less interested in poetry and more in ensuring they didn't freeze to death or starve during the winter, the original spark of the town was born of the desire for artistry and inspiration.

Those settlers who came, however, even if they weren't the artists for whom Herbert Vanderhoof hoped, sought opportunities that they felt were no longer available to them in their homelands. Land in Europe, from where many of Vanderhoof's settlers came, was not something that the common person could have. It was reserved for the wealthy and the titled. In Canada, a person, not of nobility, not of wealth, could own land. It's difficult to express how much that must have meant to those coming here. It was something for which they were willing to risk death—not only of themselves, but of their families,



Herbert Vanderhoof, the town's namesake.

too. In this way, Vanderhoof represented a more equal society, a place where one's status as a commoner didn't matter. (That is not to say that Vanderhoof was egalitarian by any definition. The Saik'uz people faced regular and severe discrimination—even in the face of their initial friendliness to the settlers—women's rights were a fraction of what they are today, and a child's right to education didn't exist.) But it was, in this small way, a change in opportunity from what many of those settlers experienced in their homelands.

Additionally, Vanderhoof, like many other places in Canada, was a religious refuge. For example, early Mennonites were drawn to Vanderhoof, not only by the advertisement of land, but by the guarantee that they would

not be pressed into military service by the Canadian government. This promise was crucial to them, as one of the core beliefs of the early Mennonites (and many Mennonites today) was the concept of pacifism, which did not allow them to engage in violence. This guarantee became even more important after the outbreak of World War I: several Mennonite families, with descendants still here today, fled to Vanderhoof after experiencing persecution, sometimes nearly resulting in death, due to their beliefs.

This heritage does not end in the annals of history, either. It is one that continues to this day. The mural by the Nechako Avenue bus stop combines art and reconciliation with the Indigenous community. Tens of thousands of dollars raised in the last year alone have been donated to families with sick members and for the BC Children's Hospital. Social programs like the Best Moms and Dads program offer support for residents who might otherwise be underserved. The Circle of Hearts Society for Women and the Men's Shed provide spaces for individuals to develop support networks and skills. And let



The Good Neighbours Committee and Saik'uz Elders mural, "ilhoh uztoodelh Walking Together". Written in Dakelh, the traditional language of the Saik'uz people, and English.

us not forget the weekly Wednesday Neighbourlink lunch, hosted by rotating denominations of some of the local Christian churches, which serves to provide a free meal and a place in which to socialize with others in and outside one's usual peer group. This is only a part of what we, as a community, have built.

This legacy of inspiration, opportunity, and refuge is one that I feel is so very worth upholding. Our history is not perfect, and we cannot forget that, but there are inspirational moments within it to which we can aspire while learning from our mistakes. This may sometimes mean being uncomfortable. This may sometimes mean welcoming someone you don't understand, or even like, because, from dress-wearing Mennonite to rainbow-speckled activist, and from Indigenous business owner to newly-arrived citizen, we all belong to this town, its heritage, and the potential it encompasses. Vanderhoof is, in its best moments, a testament to the opportunity to be one's self.

Walking Together



STOP
RACISM

Anti-Indigenous racism.

Some of you just rolled your eyes. Some of you perked up. And some of you frowned at your screen and thought, “what does that even really mean?”.

Anti-Indigenous racism is racism (the belief that all members of a race share characteristics or abilities specific to that race, particularly so as to offer grounds for persecution or discrimination) that is specifically targeted toward Indigenous peoples (in this case, the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples of Canada). Why is it important to single out anti-Indigenous racism? Because, for one, minority groups, of any kind, experience discrimination differently, and, for two, racism directed at Indigenous peoples often includes struggles regarding land rights—a particularly heated topic, currently, considering the ongoing difficulties with pipelines and Indigenous lands.

Before we get into the meat of this article, however, I’d like to make a few things clear: I’m not of Indigenous ancestry. What I know about the struggles of Indigenous peoples has come from observation and from discussion *with* Indigenous people. I’m still learning and unpacking my own learned, racist behaviours. So, to all Indigenous readers, if I trip up, I apologize and I will make an effort to learn and improve. I highly recommend that, if this article fosters a desire in anyone reading it to learn more about these issues, seek out information from Indigenous writers and speakers, as they are the authority on this topic.

Let's take a step back into what I just said in the above paragraph. "I'm still learning and unpacking my own learned, racist behaviours." The reality of the situation in Canada, and in Vanderhoof, is that many of us still carry or are complicit with racist beliefs or behaviours with no intention of doing so. We want to be good people. We bring good things to our communities, to our families, and to society as a whole. But. That doesn't mean we

**"PRIVILEGE IS WHEN
YOU THINK SOMETHING
IS NOT A PROBLEM
BECAUSE IT'S NOT A
PROBLEM TO YOU
PERSONALLY."**

Peggy McIntosh on white privilege.

aren't also unconsciously contributing to or benefiting from racist establishments or lines of thought. How is this possible? Well... several ways. Let's start with one. Let's look at the benefits of being white in Vanderhoof. As a white person in Vanderhoof, I:

1. can go to any restaurant or business in Vanderhoof without being disturbed by the fact that my ethnic group was once barred from entering (certain Vanderhoof businesses once had "No Indians Allowed" signs).
2. am confident my ethnic group's history will be represented in the education of the community's children and that it will be an accurate representation. (I'm of European descent. You can't *avoid* learning about the history of Europeans in Canada.)
3. do not worry that I will be perceived as an inauthentic member of my ethnic group due to my behaviour or due to a lack of ownership of a government-issued document. (No one's going to say I'm not *really* Irish because I don't have an accent, don't have red hair, and don't drink—or even because I'm not an Irish citizen—when I claim that as my heritage.)
4. am unconcerned my skin colour or ethnicity will affect my service if I visit a restaurant. (I usually only worry because it's busy or I'm on a time limit.)

5. do not worry that my failing to receive a job or rental opportunity is because of my ethnicity. (Because of other things, maybe, but not due to my ethnicity.)
6. never hear the status of my ethnic group referred to as a "plight". (You don't really hear "the plight of the white peoples of Canada".)
7. can see myself and my ethnic group represented in a wide variety of media and popular culture that aren't predominantly stereotypes. (I have to actively search for media that features non-white artists, although this is improving.)
8. can see myself and my ethnic group represented in a wide variety of occupations and positions of leadership within Vanderhoof. (The town council, the school board, every committee that I've been on or observed, most businesses... it's not difficult for me to find white role models, whatever I want to do.)



Now, of course, being white doesn't make you a bad person. Skin of any colour or ethnicity of any kind doesn't make *anyone* good or bad. But I still *benefit* from being white, and that points to a society in which not all are equal. So, in honesty, if you're not aware of the fact that you're benefiting, or don't move to take action against that, then... that's unfortunately being complicit in the racism

that allows for the erasure of and discrimination toward Indigenous peoples. Again, that doesn't necessarily make someone a *bad person*. It just means that person has to do some learning, like many of us.

So how do we fix this? How do we remove the quiet (and sometimes not-so-quiet) racism that lingers in our community? Well, for one, speak out when you see it. If a co-worker offers Indigenous customers less patience or good faith than others, call it out. If you hear your friend say to an Indigenous person, "but you're not *really* Native", point out how it's a double-standard,

rude, or just plain wrong. Remember the injustices that attempted to relegate the Indigenous peoples of Canada, and not just Vanderhoof, to second-class citizens, and acknowledge that echoes of that thinking still affect both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples today.

Saik'uz is our neighbour. Vanderhoof was once known as Khelhkoochek—the river mouth. It was the place where Stoney Creek—Khelhkoh—met the Nechako River—Netja koh—a place where two bodies of water came together. And, as we all know, when two bodies of water come together, they flow onward with greater strength and beauty. Whatever came before, we are in this together now. And, while we shouldn't forget or ignore how the history has shaped us, we have the choice to make the future better. Let's make our community welcoming to all citizens, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, and wear away the sharp rocks at the bottom of our riverbeds into something that cuts no-one's feet.

Nanahoost'en si. See you again.

Im-MY-gration: A Moving Story

Have you ever moved?

It's a sensation with which many of us are familiar. We have, at the very least, moved from elementary school to high school. Most of us have moved from one house to another. Some of us have moved jobs, moved communities or provinces, and some of us have even moved countries. We know what it's like to feel the trepidation and excitement of an upcoming, new experience, the hopefulness for something better than what was, and the fear that what was left behind is irretrievably better. Sometimes the decision to move is easy. Sometimes it's difficult. And sometimes we have no choice in the matter.

Recently, the question of moving has been on my mind. Refugees from Syria, individuals and families seeking asylum from potential deportation in the United States under Donald Trump's administration, the anti-immigration currents in the growing Yellow Vest movement in Canada... It seems that the debate only becomes more and more pertinent to my life as time goes on. I wonder on the nature of what it means to be Canadian, what I want it to mean, and how my beliefs on the matter tie in to how other Canadians feel. And while I don't truly have answers on that scale, I do have a few answers on another: what it means to be Vanderhoofian.

At the start of this series of articles, I released a survey in which one of the questions asked participants to define what they felt a Vanderhoofian to be. Of the 110 responses given to the question (as of the time of writing for this article), 14% of participants indicated that they felt a Vanderhoofian was a



Protestors attending a "Yellow Vest" rally.

person who had been born or was raised in Vanderhoof. 11% indicated it was someone who had been living in Vanderhoof for a minimum of 5-10 years. 27% indicated that a Vanderhoofian was someone dedicated to the community, and 45% suggested that a Vanderhoofian was someone who lived in the community. The remaining 6% defined it otherwise. So, at the end of the day, the data has spoken: the large majority of participants believe that a Vanderhoofian is someone who lives in Vanderhoof. That is all.

Think about that. Someone who lives here. It's not a person who has a specific ethnicity, creed, or politics. It's not someone who has a particular religion or ancestry. It's not a person with a certain job. It's someone who lives here.

To me, this is profound. To me, it demonstrates that it is the nature of one's relationship with the town that defines their belonging to it, rather than an accident of birth or circumstance. It is important to me because it means that Vanderhoof is a town that can be the home of any person who, like me, cares for it, too.



Welcome
HOME

I know not everyone agrees with me. I know, to some people, the idea of a Vanderhoofian is not as the majority of the survey participants suggested, or that their ideas of who are Canadians are not the same, either. To some, those who do not fit their definitions of these ideas do not belong. To this end, I'd like to share a story.

We all have somewhere we want to belong.

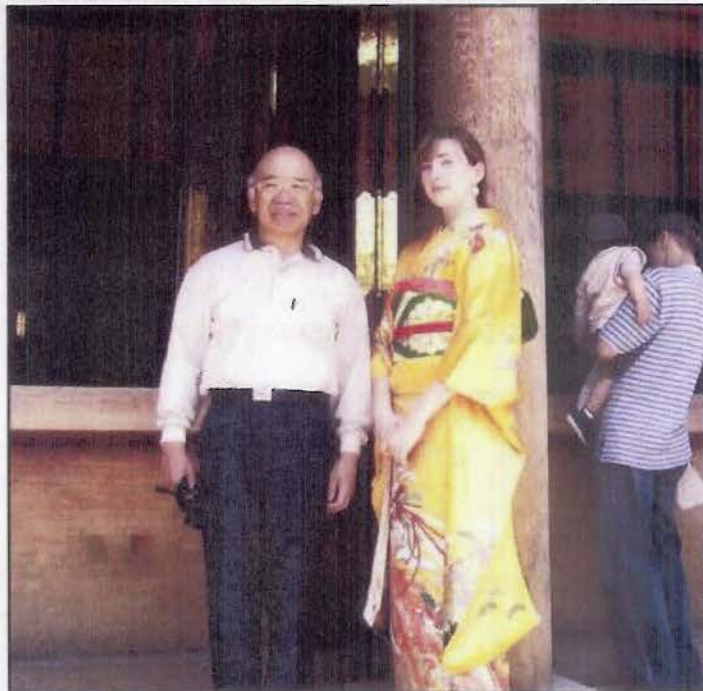
When I was seventeen, I went to live in Japan for a month. While I was there, I experienced homesickness and culture shock so severe that, for the first week and a half of my being there, I near-constantly felt like I was about to be violently sick. It got to the point where my host father (a lovely Japanese man) would seek out English speakers

he overheard so that I would have someone to talk to in my native language—and someone who, more often than not, looked like me.

I became paranoid during my stay. I couldn't understand most of what was being said around me, so I would wonder, sometimes angrily, if I was the subject of the discussion or laughter around me. I defied Japanese standards of what someone my age should look like: I was white, blue-eyed, with brown, blond-streaked hair that fell to my elbows. The students at the school I attended weren't *allowed* to wear their hair longer than their shoulders and they certainly weren't allowed to dye it. There was nothing about me that was the same as them at a casual glance. The feeling of isolation was sometimes suffocating.

When I see new families or individuals in Vanderhoof, I sometimes wonder if they feel the same as I did in Japan. Is this a strange, foreign place with cultural rules that they have no guidebook for? Do they long for their family? For

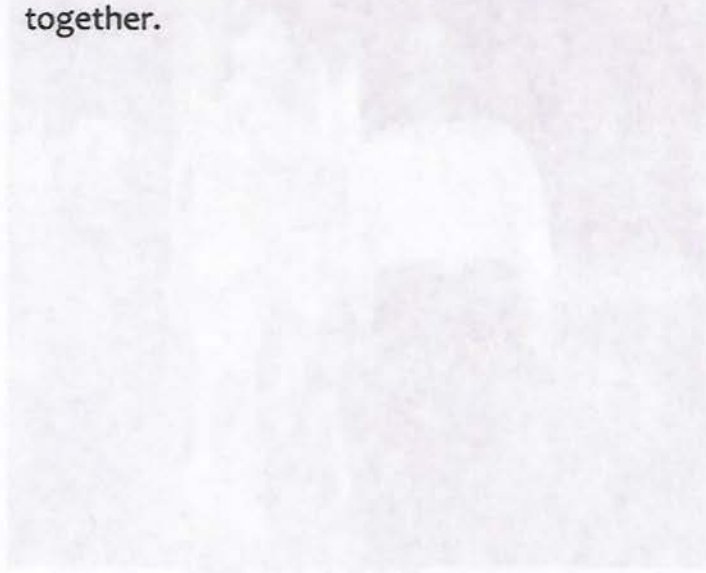
someone to speak to who is like them (whatever that might mean)? When I was in Japan, I had the comfort of knowing that I would return home. For some, returning home is not an option, be that because there is no work available there, they are a refugee, or have a family that is abusive. Despite my struggles, I never felt unwelcome in Japan. My host family, the students I interacted with, and the people who met with me all did their best to make me feel wanted and appreciated—despite the fact that I committed social faux pas, sometimes acted far too exuberant and enthusiastic in comparison to my Japanese peers, and received special treatment. It made the difficulties I did



My host father, Kazuhiro Matsui, and I at a temple in Hammamatsu.

experience tolerable, and ultimately left me with fond memories of what would become one of the formative experiences of my adolescence.

That is how I want moving to Vanderhoof to be. That whatever difficulties might exist, whatever struggles or joys that might have brought someone here, being here, ultimately, allows for an experience that is positive. My host father said it was important for us to travel and meet people around the world, because, if we knew someone there, it was harder to hate them. I think it's also true that, if we welcome and meet those travellers who come to us, whether they be transient or permanent, our world—our town—will be better for it, too. After all, we all live in Vanderhoof. We are all Vanderhoofians together.



Well, Mentally

There's a wonderful article by Christine Miserandino in which she describes "Spoon Theory", an analogy she created to describe what it was like living with a chronic illness (in her case, lupus). In Spoon Theory, Christine uses spoons to represent energy. Those who are not chronically ill have unlimited spoons to spend throughout the day for things like getting out of bed in the morning, brushing their teeth, cooking meals, taking a shower, etc. However, the chronically ill have a limited number of spoons and must carefully choose how to spend them. On a good day, a person might have twenty spoons, but, on a poor day, they may have only five.¹ (I strongly suggest you read her article,

crayonster:

reversingyourpolarity:

Anxiety is like perpetually hearing the boss/enemy music but never seeing the threat.

This is the best description I've ever heard.

A quote by Tumblr user reversingyourpolarity on anxiety.

as it goes into more depth and explains it better than I have here.)

When I first heard of Spoon Theory, it was revolutionary. "Finally," I thought. "I have the language to explain what it's like living with anxiety". Because lupus and anxiety have one

thing in common: they're both invisible illnesses.

Invisible illnesses are particularly difficult to manage because of the disbelief that accompanies them. You don't *look* ill to most people, so they

1 [Miserandino 2003]

don't believe it when you explain you're struggling. And mental illnesses get the doublewhammy of some individuals not believing in their legitimacy to begin with—it's all just in our heads, right? Cheer up!

But have you ever lost a loved one?

There's a quote I appreciate from Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*: "If you have ever lost someone very important to you, then you already know how it feels; and if you haven't, you cannot possibly imagine it."² When you are grieving, there's nothing "wrong" with you. Your bones aren't broken. You aren't bleeding. Nothing is bent or twisted or out of place. But, even so, how many of us would deny that heartbreak, grief, or loss are real things? How many would claim that the pain isn't real? It's the same for mental illness. Even though nothing may be "wrong", the suffering that the illness sometimes exacts is as real as any fracture, laceration, or tumour. (There's also the fact that, for some people, mental illness is a result of their brain's chemistry being different than the average person's, just like some people have different biochemistry when it comes to the production of insulin in Type 1 diabetics.)

So how does this fit into Vanderhoof's inclusivity? Although it's improving, Vanderhoof still has some way to go in recognizing the legitimacy of mental wellness issues. The World Health Organization³ and Mental Health Commission of Canada⁴ both stress the importance of providing a healthy workspace for employees, but, if you are anything like me, asking for a "mental

2 [Snicket 1999]

3 [Mental Health 2019]

4 [Mental Health Commission of Canada 2019]

health day” is a daunting task. This is not an issue exclusive to Vanderhoof, but I bring it up because of some interesting survey results. In the survey released last October, one of the questions asked is, “regarding physical wellness, mental wellness, and social services, how does Vanderhoof perform in providing for its community?” Of the 48 responses that directly addressed the issue of mental wellness, 71% indicated that they believed the mental health services in Vanderhoof to be lacking in some capacity. 17% of responders indicated that they felt Vanderhoof’s mental health services were good, while the remaining 12% indicated they were unsure of the status of mental health services in the community. Of the 71% that concluded Vanderhoof’s services were lacking, 26% suggested it was because of outside factors like the size of the town (e.g. unable to hire more professionals due to the allocation of

strife-senpai:

57circlesofhell:

I once tried to explain depression to someone as like if one day you gradually started to lose both your sense of taste and your ability to feel full. And you don't know why, but now everything you eat tastes like mashed potatoes and nothing you eat is satisfying. You keep eating because you must eat to live, but the effort that it takes to prepare food is taxing and there is no pay off. You just know it will taste like mashed potatoes. You just know you will still be hungry. So you stop bothering with seasonings. Then you stop bothering to use ingredients you used to like. Then you start to wonder what the point of eating is because there is no payoff. You still feel hungry and you're sick of the taste and you don't know if you will ever enjoy food again and you don't know why this is happening.

If someone comes up to you in this scenario and says, "Well have you tried spicing your food? Using different ingredients? Eating foods you used to love?" It isn't necessarily helpful because the reason you stopped doing all that in the first place is that everything...tasted...like mashed...potatoes.

This. Completely this.

funding by provincial and federal governments, inability to retain professionals in the field, etc.) rather than because of a deficit in the services provided.

However, this raised a question for me: if the majority of respondents agree that mental wellness services in our community are lacking, what can we do on our own to meet the needs of our fellow citizens? I know, for me, addressing the stigmas surrounding people who have mental illnesses would go a long way to making me feel more comfortable and certain that others like me will be welcomed into the community. And seeing as 50% of Canadians⁵ will have or have had a mental illness by the time they're forty, I feel it's an important stigma to address. This can look a few ways:

1. Public conversations about mental wellness
2. Continued education for our youth and other community members on what mental wellness is and where to go in Vanderhoof, specifically, to receive help
3. The acknowledgement of mental health as a legitimate reason for requesting sick leave by businesses, employers, and educators
4. Recognizing that those with mental illnesses are as deserving of support and encouragement as those with physical illnesses or injuries
5. Asking those with mental illnesses about their needs and how best to facilitate their place in the workforce and education sectors

5 [Canadian Mental Health Association 2013]

Vanderhoof's ability to offer services for its citizens may or may not be limited by its size, but size has never limited our heart. And heart—compassion, kindness, and empathy—is a key element in any recovery.

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'ilhoh uztoodelh
walking together

Is Vanderhoof a Welcoming Community? Part II

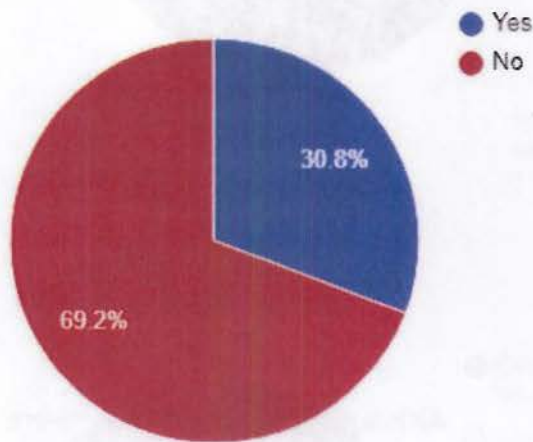
Is Vanderhoof a welcoming community?

This has been the subject of my five months-long investigations, and today I reveal to you some of what I have learned. Now, bear with me, we're going to be exploring stats (and hopefully most of you enjoy statistics as much as I do), as well as some of the implications of those stats. We will break these stats down into different categories: Demographics; the intersection of welcoming-ness by **Age, Ethnicity, Gender Identity, Sexual Orientation, Religion, Occupation, Birth and Family in Vanderhoof; Would you Stay; What Would You Change;** and, finally, the topic of the title, **Is Vanderhoof A Welcoming Community.**

Demographics:

The survey, *Is Vanderhoof a Welcoming Community*, went live in December of 2018. Since then, it has garnered 159 responses (roughly 3.5% of Vanderhoof's population as of the 2016 census). Time for some fancy pie charts!

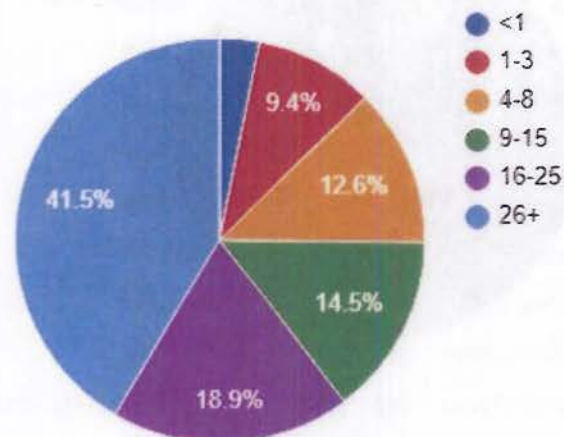
Were you born in Vanderhoof?



As you can see here, the majority of respondents are those born outside of Vanderhoof, although there is a decent percentage of those who were born in the town represented as well.

A majority of respondents have lived in Vanderhoof for 26 or more years. This could represent individuals who have spent their lives here, but whether that means 26-year-olds or 76-year-olds is difficult to tell from this data. Respondents who have lived in Vanderhoof for 4-25 years are moderately well represented.

How many years have you lived in Vanderhoof?

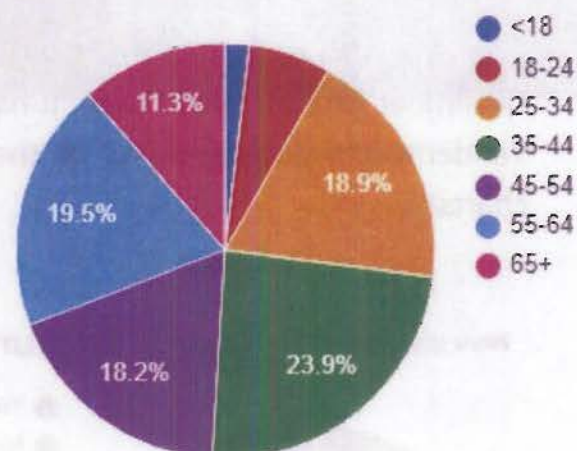


Those who have lived in Vanderhoof for less than 1 year comprised 3.1% of survey respondents.

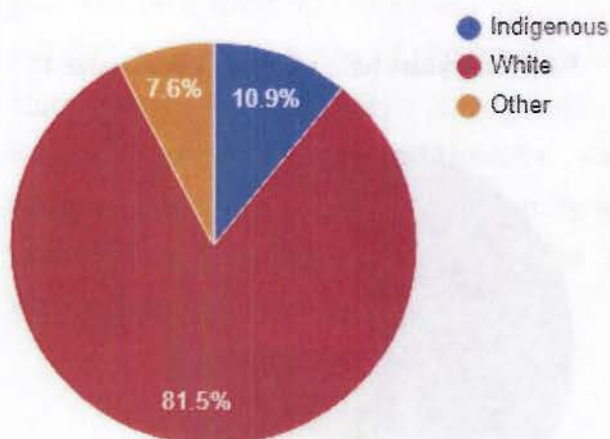
Except those under twenty-five and those over sixty-five, all ages are represented with general equality.

Those under 18 represent 1.9% of respondents. 18-24-year-olds represent 6.3% of respondents

What is your age?



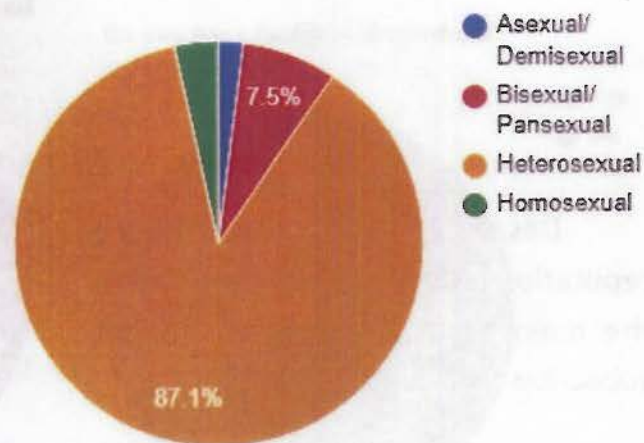
Ethnicity



Although there were ethnicities listed other than "Indigenous" and "white", for ease of reading I decided to include them as one statistic. These additional ethnicities included South Asian, Hispanic, and multi-ethnic individuals.

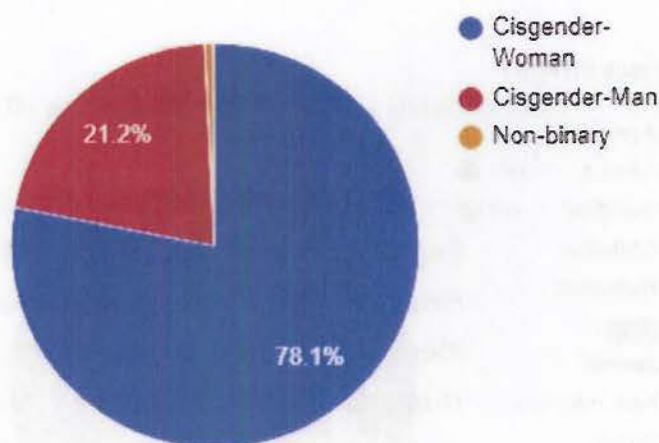
Members of the rainbow community (also known as the LGBTQ+ community) made up roughly 13% of respondents.

Sexual Orientation



Those who identify as asexual or demisexual comprise 2% of respondents, while those who identify as homosexual comprise 3.4% of respondents.

What is your gender identity?



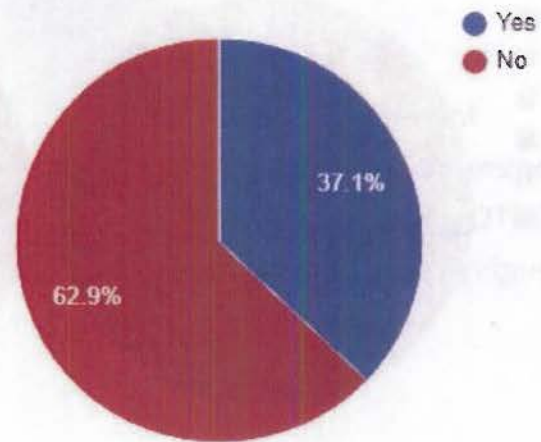
Non-binary respondents made up roughly 7% of participants.

The overwhelming majority of respondents identified themselves as cisgender women (women who were assigned female at birth). There were no respondents who identified themselves as transgender—either male or female. As transgender individuals are known in the community, and as Vanderhoof is not 78%

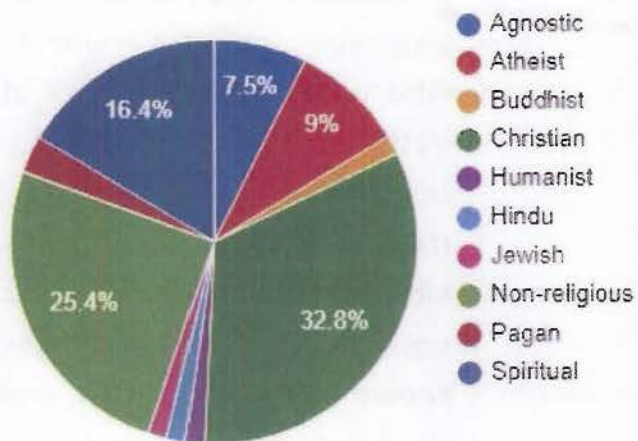
female, this statistic, unfortunately, is likely to be less accurately representative of the community.

Despite Vanderhoof's reputation as a religious community, the majority of respondents do not subscribe to a religion or faith.

Do you subscribe to a religion or faith?



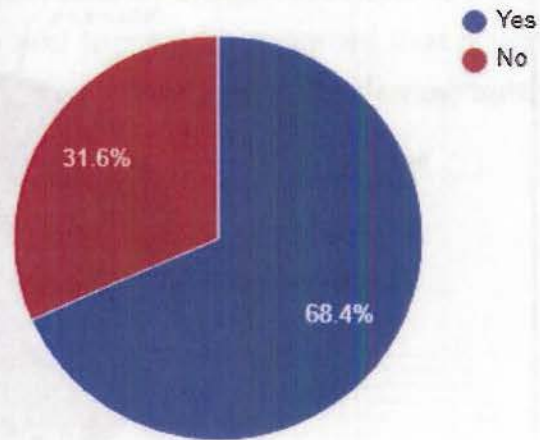
How do you identify your religion, faith, or lack thereof?



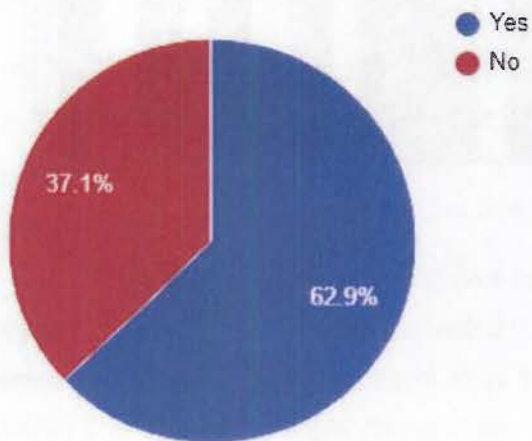
Those who identified as Pagan comprised 2% of respondents, while those who identified as Buddhist, Humanist, Hindu, or Jewish each represented 1.5% of respondents.

Interestingly, despite the majority of respondents indicating they were born outside Vanderhoof, the majority of respondents also indicated that they had family in the community.

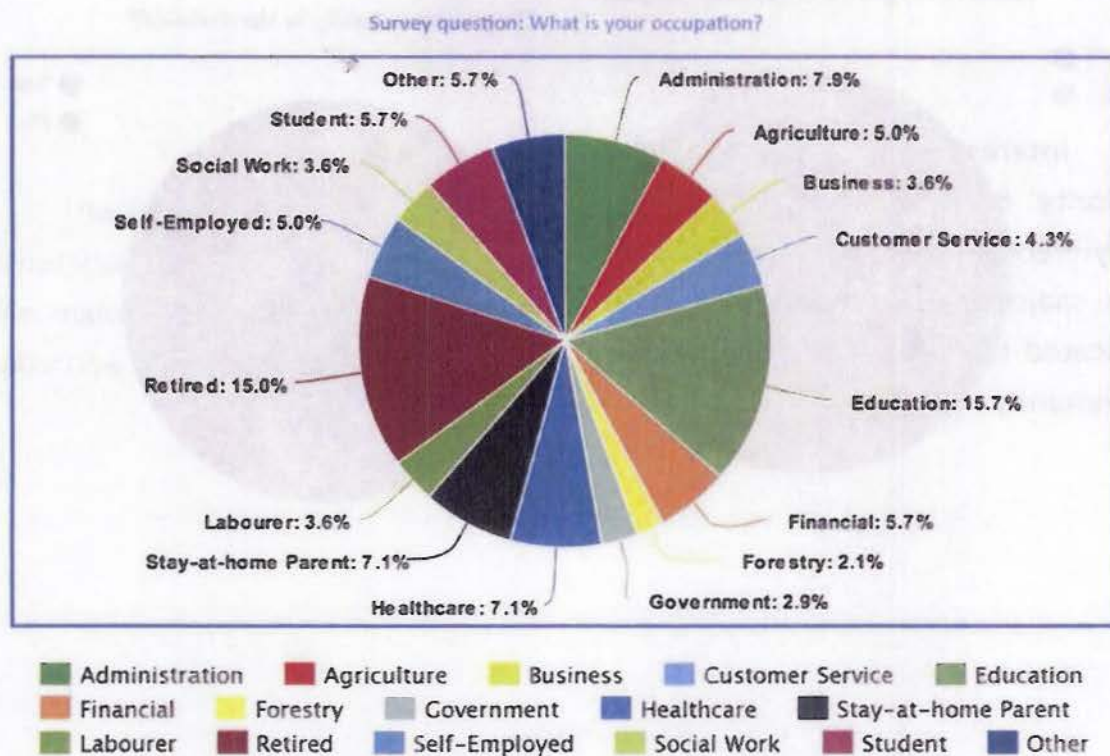
Do you have family in Vanderhoof?



Do you consider yourself to be a Vanderhoofian?



The prevailing definition of a Vanderhoofian is "someone who lives in Vanderhoof".

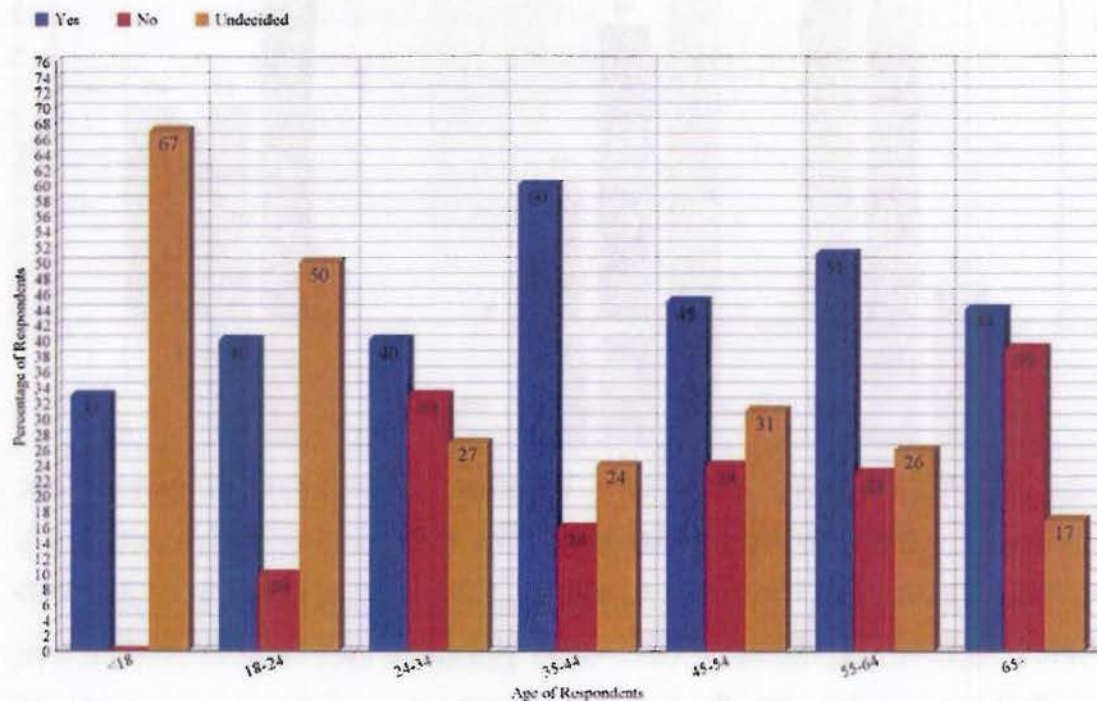


Identifying one's occupation was one of the questions not requiring an answer on the survey; however, we received 127 responses out of the total 159 respondents (roughly 80% of participants).

Welcoming-ness:

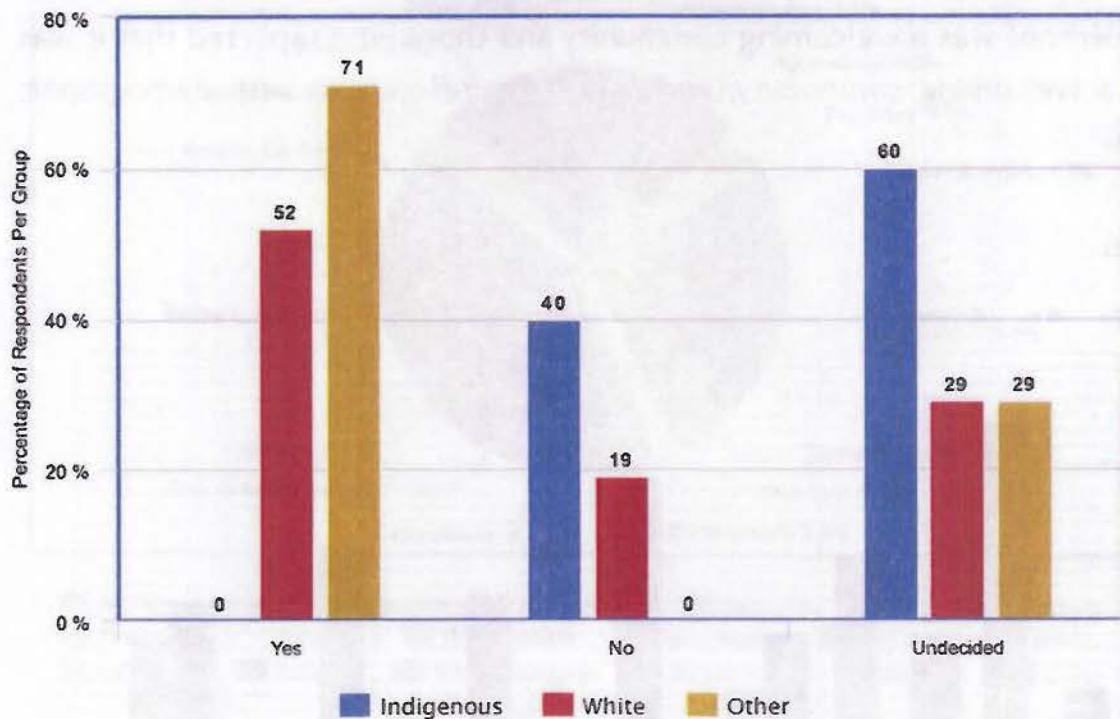
For this section, responses were separated by those who reported that Vanderhoof was a welcoming community and those who reported that it was not a welcoming community, and then cross-referenced with demographic data.

Age:



Of all the respondents, those who are 35-44 years old were most likely to report that Vanderhoof is a welcoming community. Those age 65 and older were the most likely to report that Vanderhoof is not welcoming, while those under the age of 25 were most likely to be undecided. This may point to an area of needed improvement in Vanderhoof—whether or not this means our seniors require additional services to help them feel welcome, simply require greater kindness from the community, or something else entirely is difficult to say.

Ethnicity:



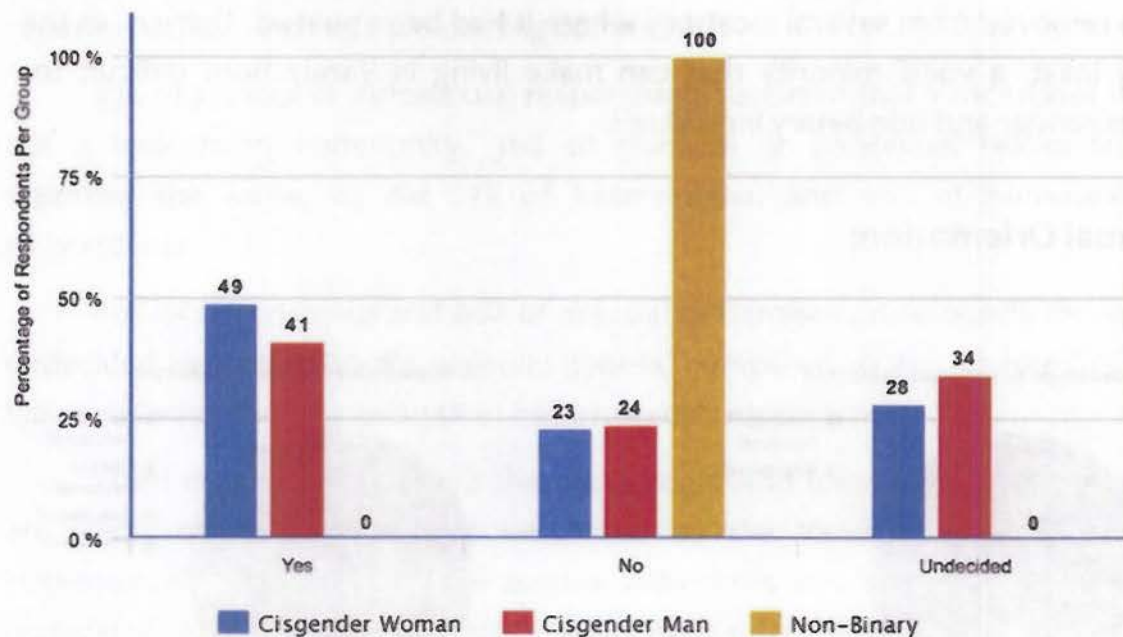
Of the respondents, those who identified as neither Indigenous nor white were most likely to report Vanderhoof as a welcoming community (71%), followed by those who identified as white (52%). There were no Indigenous respondents who reported that Vanderhoof was a welcoming community.

In fact, those who identified as Indigenous were 21% more likely to report Vanderhoof as a not welcoming community (40%) than their closest contenders, those who identified as white (19%). Those who identified as Indigenous were also the most likely to report that they were undecided as to whether or not Vanderhoof is a welcoming community (60%). Respondents who identified as white or neither Indigenous nor white both followed with 29% undecided.

From this, it seems that there's a marked difference in how people who identify as Indigenous feel about the welcoming-ness of Vanderhoof. In my

personal opinion, this says that we have quite a bit of work to do to ensure that our Indigenous residents, neighbours, and visitors feel as welcome as those who are not, as, at best, the Indigenous members of our community feel undecided about its welcoming-ness.

Gender Identity:



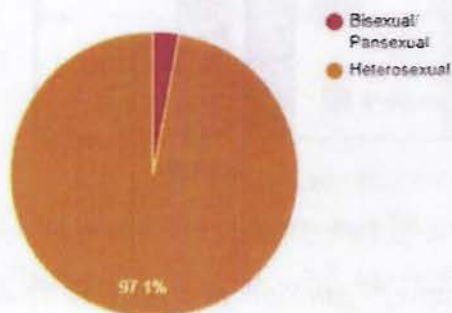
Cisgender individuals (those whose assigned gender at birth is the gender with which they identify) have only a small percentage difference between those who feel Vanderhoof is welcoming, not welcoming, or are undecided. It suggests that one's gender, as long as it is cisgender, does not greatly affect one's experience.

However, the only respondent to identify as non-cisgender reported Vanderhoof as not welcoming. It is difficult to surmise if this is agreed upon by the majority of non-cisgender (e.g. transgender or non-binary) individuals in Vanderhoof or not. Additionally, it is difficult to know whether non-cisgender individuals did not take the survey or, if they did, they chose not to identify themselves as non-cisgender respondents.

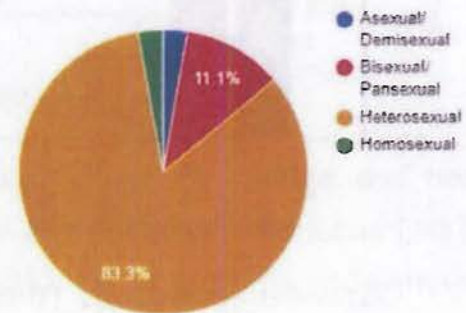
Regardless, to me this paints a bit of a picture, as I know there is more than one non-cisgendered individual living in Vanderhoof, and, anecdotally, understand that several transgender or non-binary individuals have either left the community because of feeling unwelcome or live with that feeling of unwelcome-ness. This is corroborated by the fact that, upon the release of article #2, "'T' is for 'Trans', Not 'Tragedy'", which focused on transgender and non-binary individuals, the negative response was so vehement that the article was removed from several locations where it had been posted. There is, at the very least, a vocal minority that can make living in Vanderhoof difficult for transgender and non-binary individuals.

Sexual Orientation:

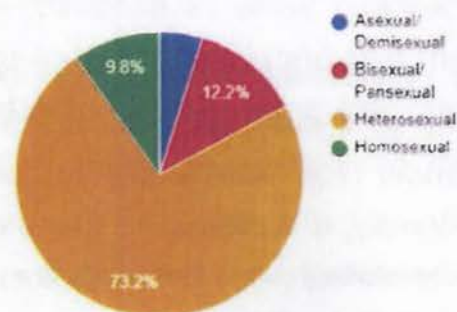
Welcomingness by Sexual Orientation (Yes)



Welcomingness by Sexual Orientation (No)



Welcomingness by Sexual Orientation (Undecided)



LGBTQ+ members made up roughly 13% of survey respondents.

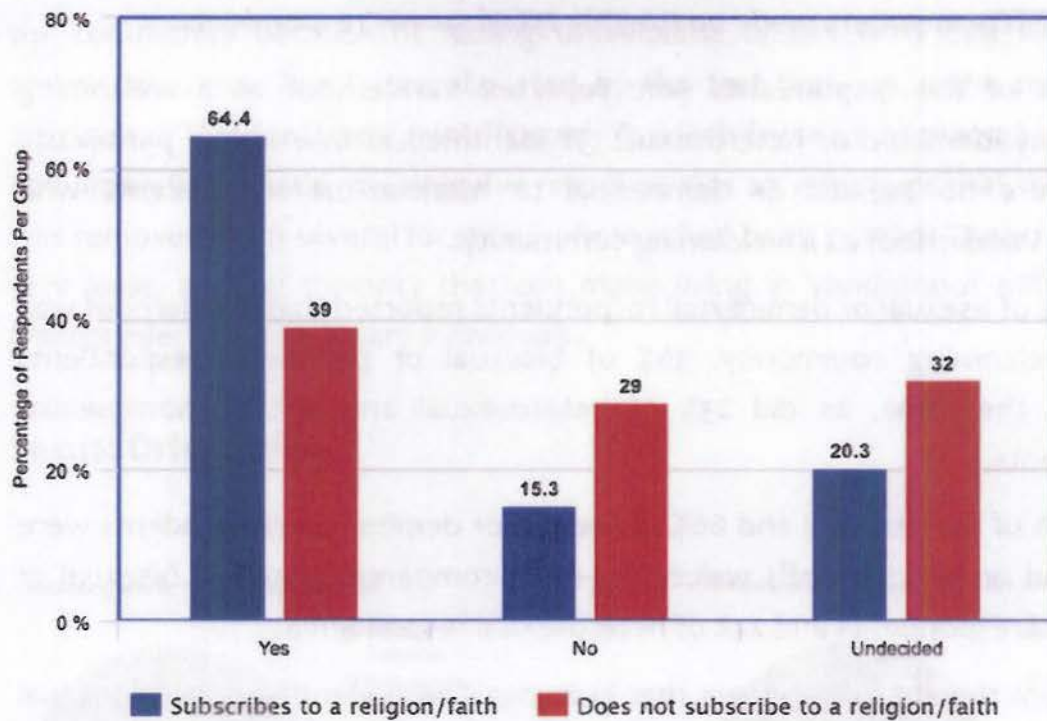
97% of the respondents who reported Vanderhoof as a welcoming community identified as heterosexual. 3% identified as bisexual or pansexual. There were no asexual or demisexual or homosexual respondents who reported Vanderhoof as a welcoming community.

33% of asexual or demisexual respondents reported that Vanderhoof was not a welcoming community. 36% of bisexual or pansexual respondents reported the same, as did 23% of heterosexual and 20% of homosexual respondents.

80% of homosexual and 66% of asexual or demisexual respondents were undecided on Vanderhoof's welcoming-ness, compared to 46% of bisexual or pansexual respondents and 24% of heterosexual respondents.

From this data, it appears that individuals who identify as heterosexual are vastly more likely to feel welcomed by the Vanderhoof community. Homosexual and asexual or demisexual individuals are, at best, likely to be undecided about the community's welcoming-ness. Bisexual or pansexual individuals are more likely to feel welcome than their LGBTQ+ brethren, but, even then, bisexual or pansexual individuals are 18% more likely to report feeling the community is not welcoming rather than welcoming (although the majority of bisexual or pansexual respondents sit in the 'undecided' category at 46%). It is interesting to note that the only LGBTQ+ members who reported Vanderhoof as a welcoming community are members who can "pass" as heterosexual.

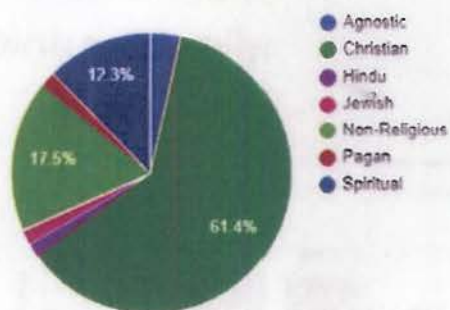
Religion:



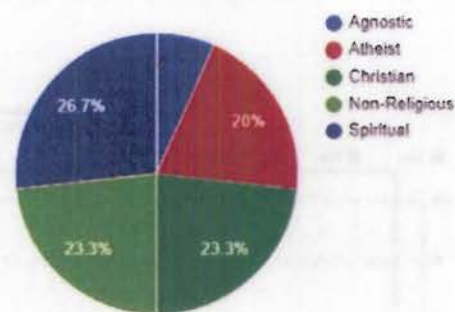
Although more responders found Vanderhoof to be welcoming than not welcoming or being undecided, those who subscribed to a religion or faith were more likely to report Vanderhoof as welcoming (64.4%) than those who do not subscribe to a religion or faith (39%).

Subscribing to a faith or religion increased respondents' likelihood of reporting Vanderhoof as welcoming by roughly 25%.

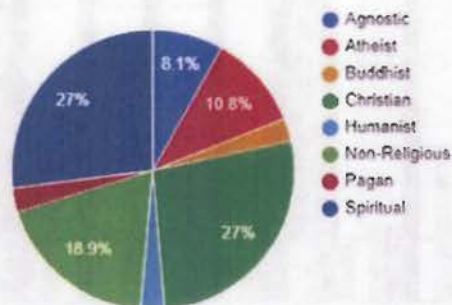
Welcomingness by Faith (Yes)



Welcomingness by Faith (No)



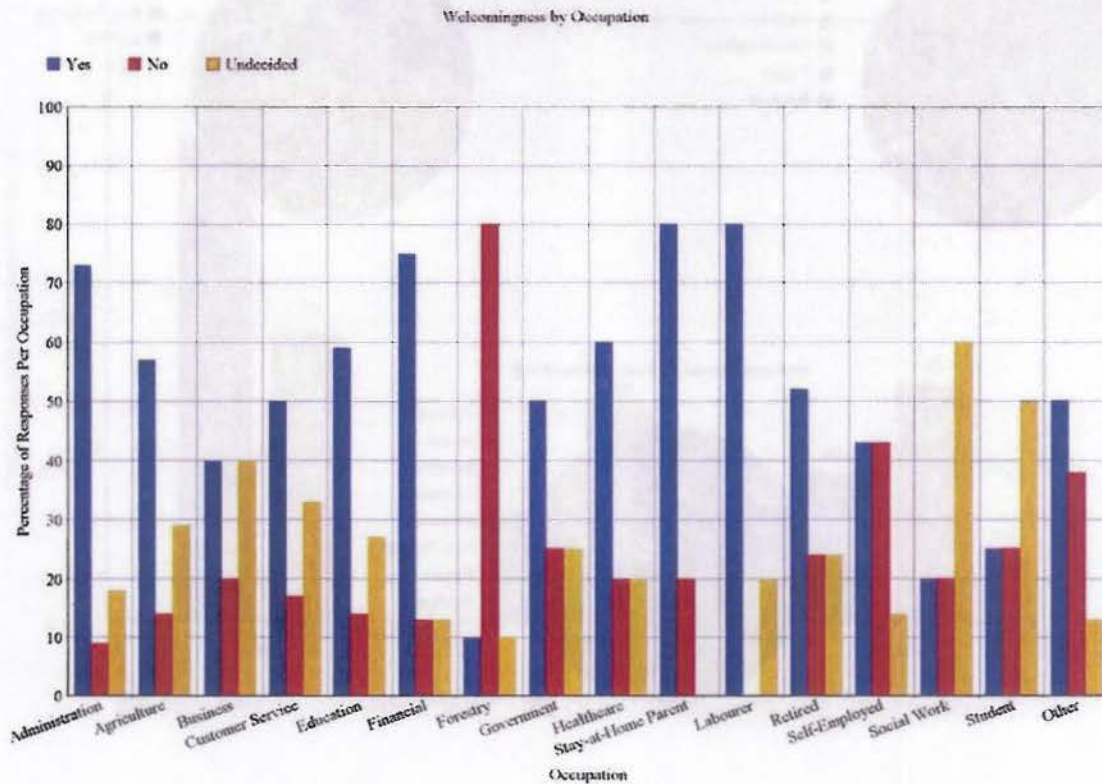
Welcomingness by Faith (Undecided)



Of those who identified their religion, faith, or lack thereof, Christians were most likely to report that they felt Vanderhoof is a welcoming community (67.3% of Christians). Atheists were most likely to report Vanderhoof a not welcoming community (60% of atheists), as were agnostics (50% of agnostics). Those most likely to report being undecided about Vanderhoof's welcomingness were those who identified as non-religious (41.7%) or spiritual (40%).

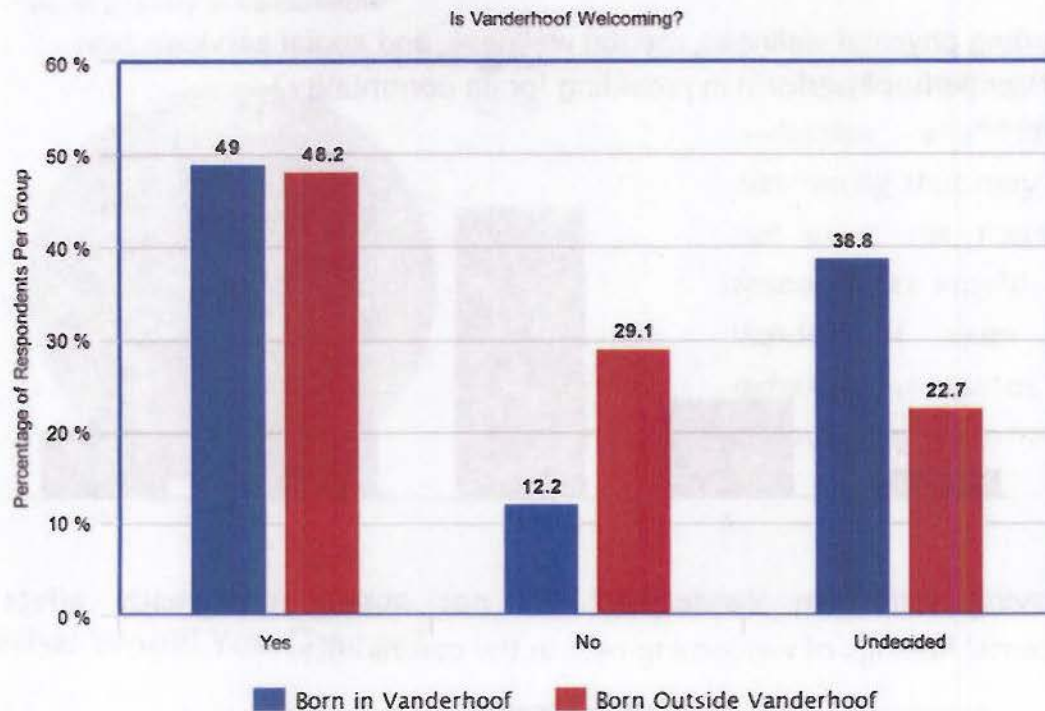
While I included those who identified as Buddhist, Hindu, Humanist, Jewish, and Pagan on the charts above, I did not feel that there was enough data to come to an accurate conclusion about the consensus of individuals identifying as members of one of those (non-)religions.

Occupation:



While it generally appears that occupation does not have a significant impact on how welcoming one feels the community to be, there are a few notable exceptions. Those in the forestry sector were significantly more likely to report Vanderhoof as not welcoming than any other occupation (80% of forestry respondents versus the nearest contender, those self-employed, at 43%). Additionally, students and those in the field of social work were much more likely to be undecided about Vanderhoof's welcoming-ness (50% and 60% of respondents in their respective groups).

Birth and Family:



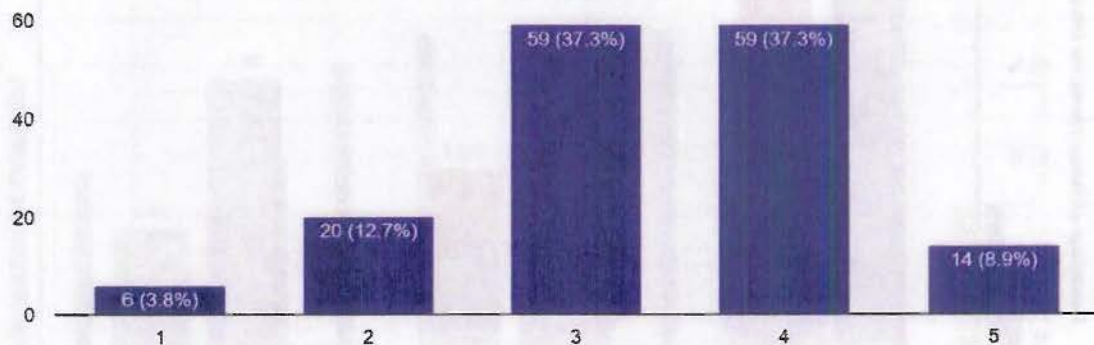
Being born in Vanderhoof did not have a significant impact on whether a respondent reported Vanderhoof to be welcoming. However, for those not reporting the community as welcoming, those born outside of Vanderhoof were more likely to report it as not welcoming, while those born in Vanderhoof were more likely to report it as undecided.

Additionally, those born in Vanderhoof were much more likely to report themselves as Vanderhoofians, with 82% of those born in Vanderhoof identifying as such. Those born outside Vanderhoof were much more split in their opinion of their Vanderhoofian-ness, with only 54.5% identifying as such. Even so, the majority of respondents *did* identify themselves as Vanderhoofians.

When it came to rating the services of Vanderhoof, those born in Vanderhoof were roughly 7% more likely to have a favourable opinion than those born outside of Vanderhoof.

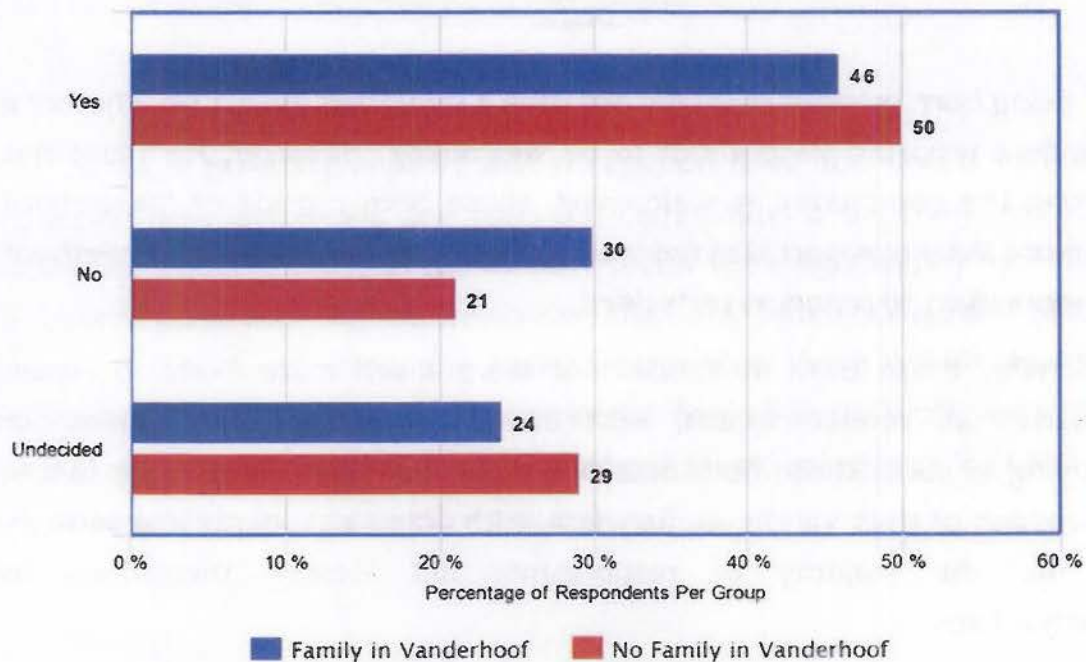
Regarding physical wellness, mental wellness, and social services, how does Vanderhoof perform in providing for its community?

158 responses



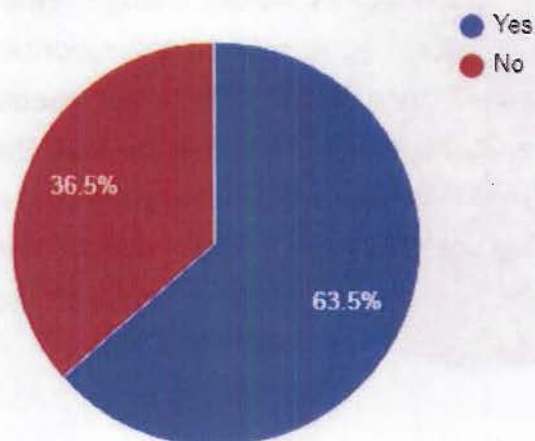
Having family in Vanderhoof did not appear to greatly affect respondents' feelings of welcoming-ness in the community.

Is Vanderhoof Welcoming?



Would You Stay?

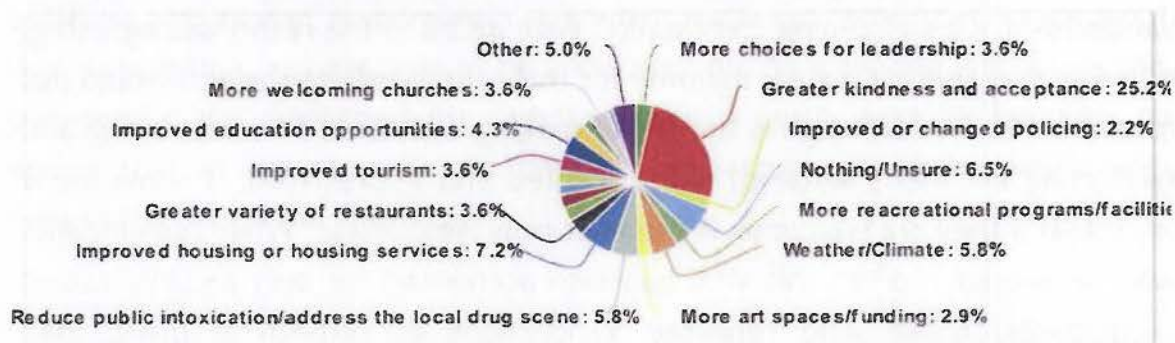
If money, opportunity, or social pressure wasn't an issue, would you stay in Vanderhoof?



An encouraging statistic—despite any lack of welcoming that may or may not exist, the majority of respondents would stay in Vanderhoof even if no external pressures were encouraging them to do so.

What Would You Change?

WHAT IS ONE THING YOU WOULD CHANGE ABOUT VANDERHOOF?



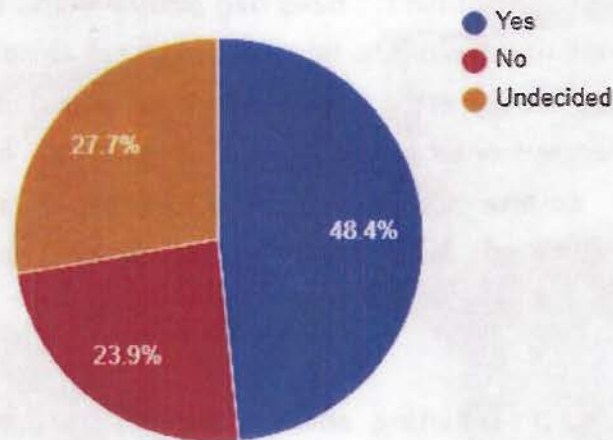
The "what would you change" question was deliberately left open so that respondents could fill in their suggestions and ideas. These responses are compiled from the most reoccurring answers.

The overwhelming response of what participants would change about Vanderhoof is to make it a kinder and more accepting community. Responses within this vein ranged from requests for more peaceable social media interactions to reduced racism to greater acceptance of those outside the considered "norm". Additionally, this response came from respondents across all age, ethnicity, religion, and occupational categories. It seems clear to me, from this data, that there is a call to action for all residents of the community to ensure we make our home as kind as possible.

Is Vanderhoof a Welcoming Community?

From the 159 respondents to the survey, the result is that, yes, Vanderhoof is a welcoming community. With 48.4% of the responses agreeing, it seems that there is a clear majority for this sentiment. However, I would put forward this: "welcoming" is the act of making welcome, of encouraging and facilitating another's sense of being wanted and appreciated. If someone is uncertain if they are welcome, is the host truly welcoming? While respondents who answered "no" to this vital question accounted for only roughly 24% of participants, those who reported Vanderhoof as something other than welcoming—undecided or no—account for 51.6% of those who participated. To me, this is the more important statistic—that roughly half of those who answered couldn't say that yes, they felt welcome.

Is Vanderhoof a Welcoming Community?



Additionally, my research into these statistics, my interviews, and my street conversations all point me to the conclusion that, yes, Vanderhoof is welcoming... but primarily to those in certain demographics. Indigenous, LGBTQ+, and atheist respondents overwhelmingly indicated that Vanderhoof was a place that, at best, was to be undecided on. As someone who loves this community, this saddened me greatly. There is much work to be done to ensure that all our community's minorities experience the same welcomingness as the rest of our residents.

But I have faith.

Despite what seems to be a dour conclusion, I have also been uplifted by what I have learned. I have spoken to individuals who, when presented with the evidence, consider and reflect. I have had people come to me and say that, yes, while there is still much work to be done, we have already come so far as a community and that life is better than when they were younger, first moved here, and so on. Vanderhoof *has* improved, *is* improving, and can continue to improve as our community grows and learns. I believe that we, Vanderhoofians, the people who live here, can achieve anything we set our minds to.

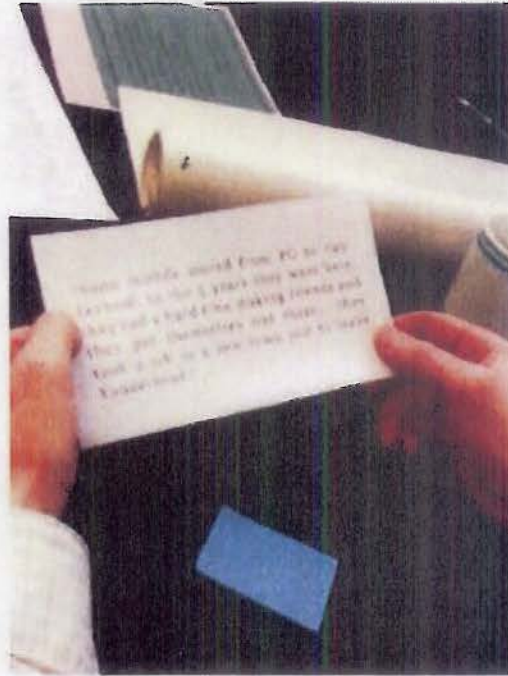
"No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."

—Nelson Mandela

Thank you to everyone who has participated in the survey, shared their thoughts, or supported me on this journey of revelation and learning. It has been a momentous period of my life, and I'm grateful to all those who provided me with the opportunity to do this work. And while this project may be concluded, I hope that we will continue to grow, share, and learn together.

Sincerely,

Sasha Striegler Iannone
via the Good Neighbours Committee



*The Good Neighbours Committee wishes to thank the following
for their support of this project:*

**Nechako Health Community Alliance, College of New Caledonia,
Wallace Studios, St. Joseph's Parish,
Carrier Sekani Family Services, The Gander,
Vanderhoof Online, Sarah John,
Province of British Columbia,
Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture.**



Ministry of
Tourism, Arts
and Culture

