

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS: 2-1-1 STUDY OF AT-RISK OF HOMELESSNESS CALLS

BACKGROUND

On May 1, 2020, Mecklenburg County Community Support Services launched a Continuum of Care (CoC) planning grant project – “Evaluate Upstream: Optimizing the Homelessness Prevention Assistance System In Charlotte-Mecklenburg.” One goal of the project is to understand the experience of households in Charlotte-Mecklenburg who report experiencing housing instability, and whether and how they are able to resolve their housing needs.

In order to meet this goal, a retrospective study was conducted of households who called NC 2-1-1 between Jan. 2, 2020, and July 10, 2020, seeking housing assistance, and were believed to have resolved their housing needs based on the absence of subsequent calls from them. Researchers contacted households who had called previously and who were determined by NC 2-1-1 operators to be “at risk of homelessness” but were not referred for a Coordinated Entry housing needs assessment. Instead, these households were provided a list of community resources based upon their reported circumstances and needs. The purpose of this report is to summarize the findings from that retrospective study.

METHODOLOGY

During the first three weeks of August 2020, 131 prospective study participants were randomly selected from among 695 households who previously called NC 2-1-1 between Jan. 1, 2020, and July 10, 2020, and who were categorized by NC 2-1-1 operators as being “at risk of becoming homeless.” Study participants were contacted by phone and asked to complete a survey consisting of 12 questions. The interview questions explored whether their housing needs were resolved subsequent to the NC 2-1-1 call; the method of resolution, if any; their current housing status; and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their ability to find and maintain permanent housing (for households who called NC 2-1-1 between March and July 2020). The study questions are included as Appendix A.

RESULTS

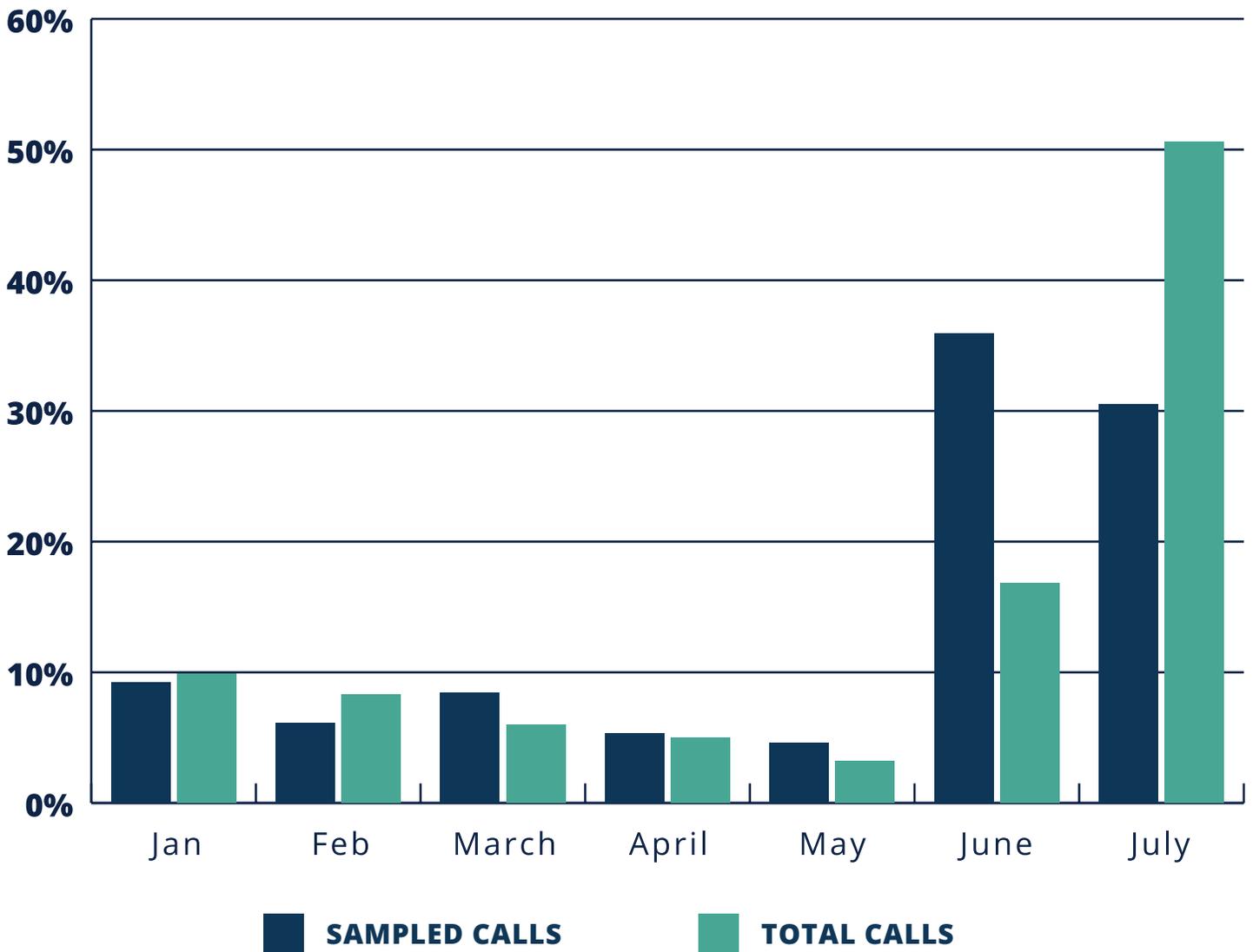
DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

The following tables provide a demographic profile of the 131 study participants as compared to all 695 callers categorized as “at risk of homelessness” by NC 2-1-1 operators between Jan. 1, 2020, and July 10, 2020.

Table 1 indicates that the percentage of callers sampled for each month is proportional to the total number of “at-risk” calls received during each month, with the exception of the months of June and July. Researchers ended the survey period during the second week in July. This was to allow all study participants to have a minimum of three weeks to resolve their housing crisis.

TABLE 01

AT-RISK 2-1-1 CALLERS: STUDY SAMPLE VS. TOTAL CALLS, JAN-JULY 2020



As summarized in Table 2, the gender representation among participants in the study was 72.5% female and 27.5% male. This is similar to the gender breakdown for all callers identified as “at risk of homelessness” during the study period (69.5% female and 30% male).

TABLE 02

GENDER COMPARISONS OF SAMPLED VS. TOTAL CALLS

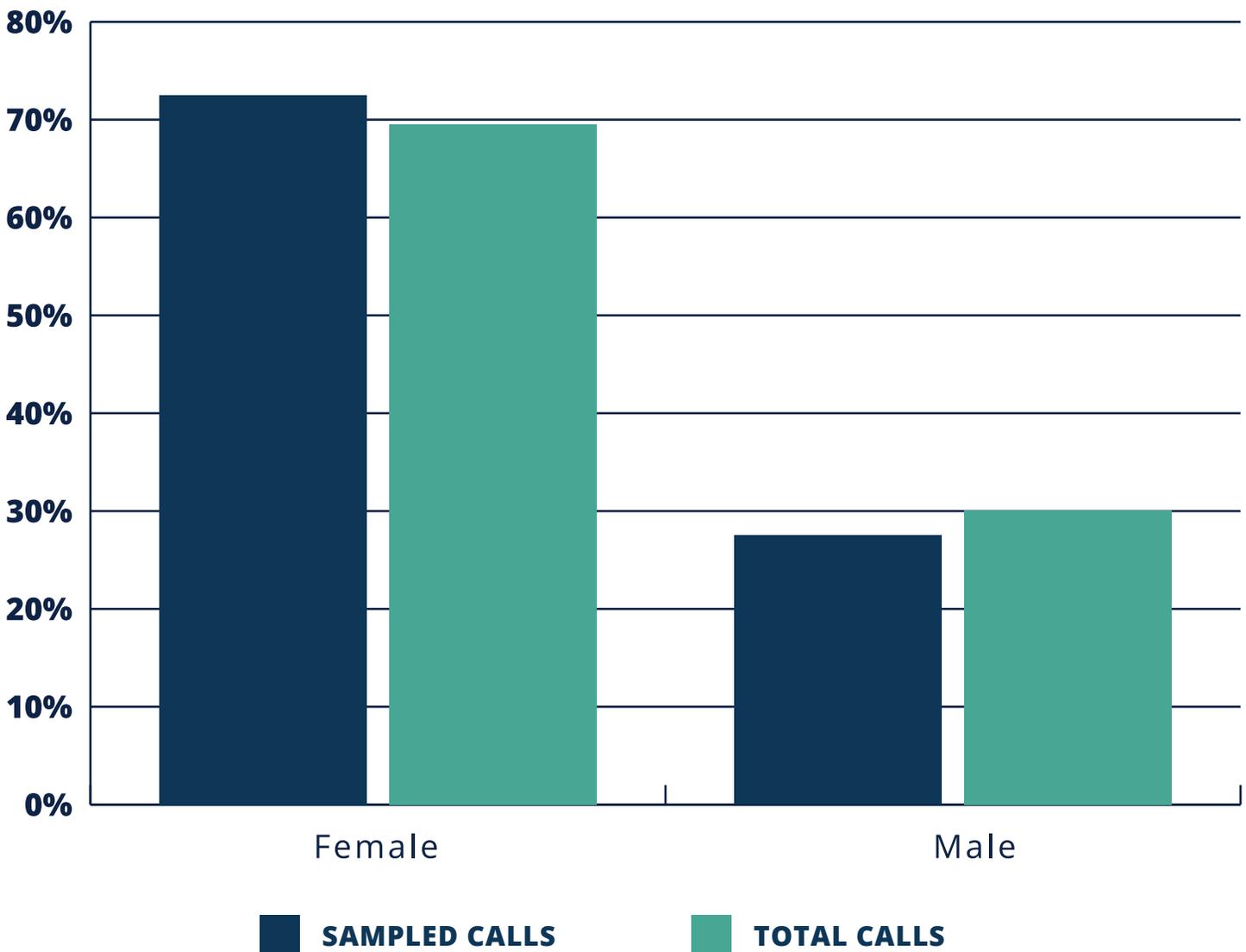
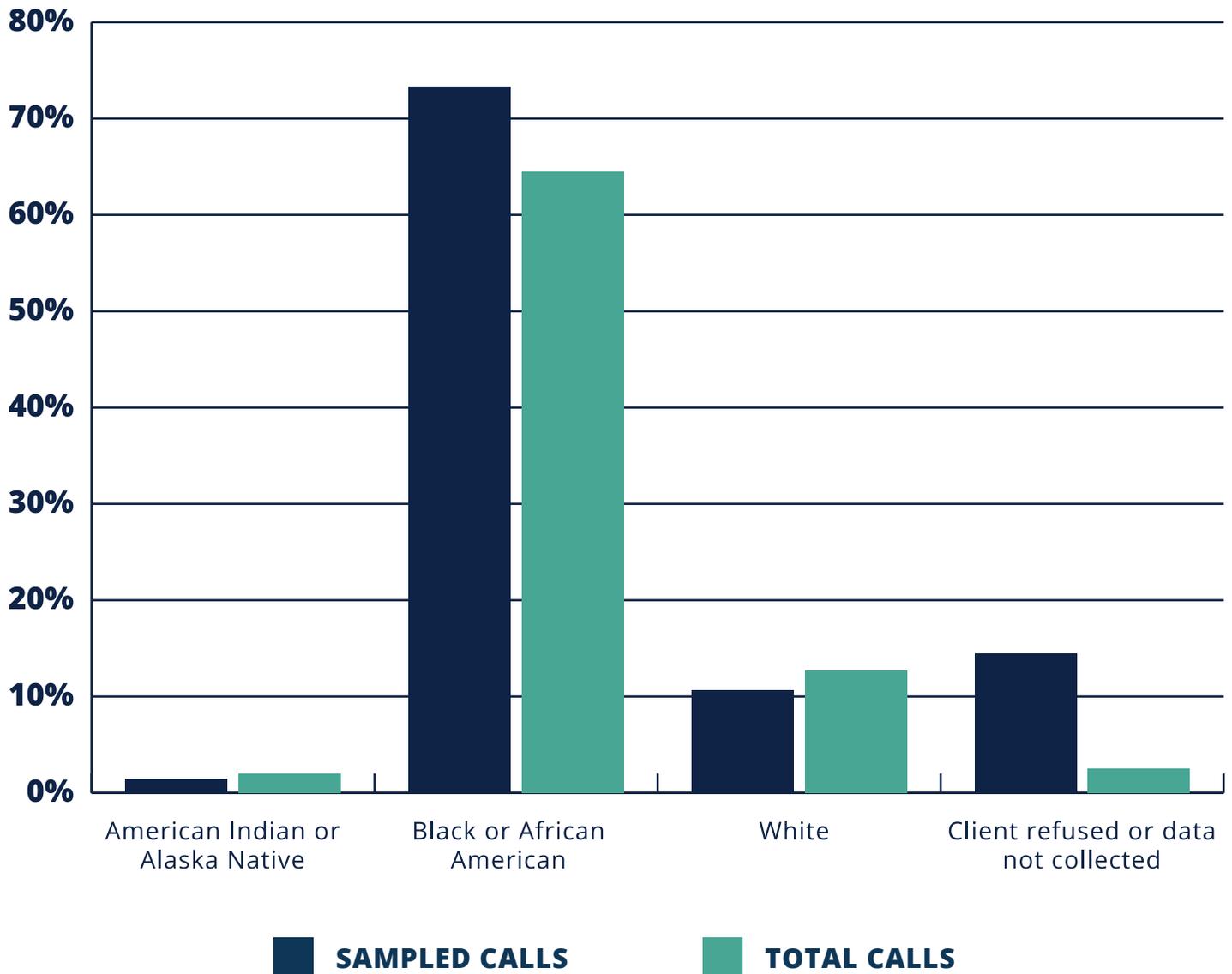


Table 3 summarizes the racial composition of the study group, which had slightly higher representation of African Americans than among all callers (73% versus 65.5%) and slightly lower representation among White callers (10.7% versus 12.7%). During the study period in question, there were no callers to NC 2-1-1 who were categorized as “at risk” for homelessness and who self-identified as Hispanic/Latinx. Native Americans or Alaska Natives represented 1.5% of the study group and 2% of the general population of at-risk callers.

TABLE 03

RACIAL IDENTITY COMPARISON OF SAMPLED VS. TOTAL 2-1-1 CALLS

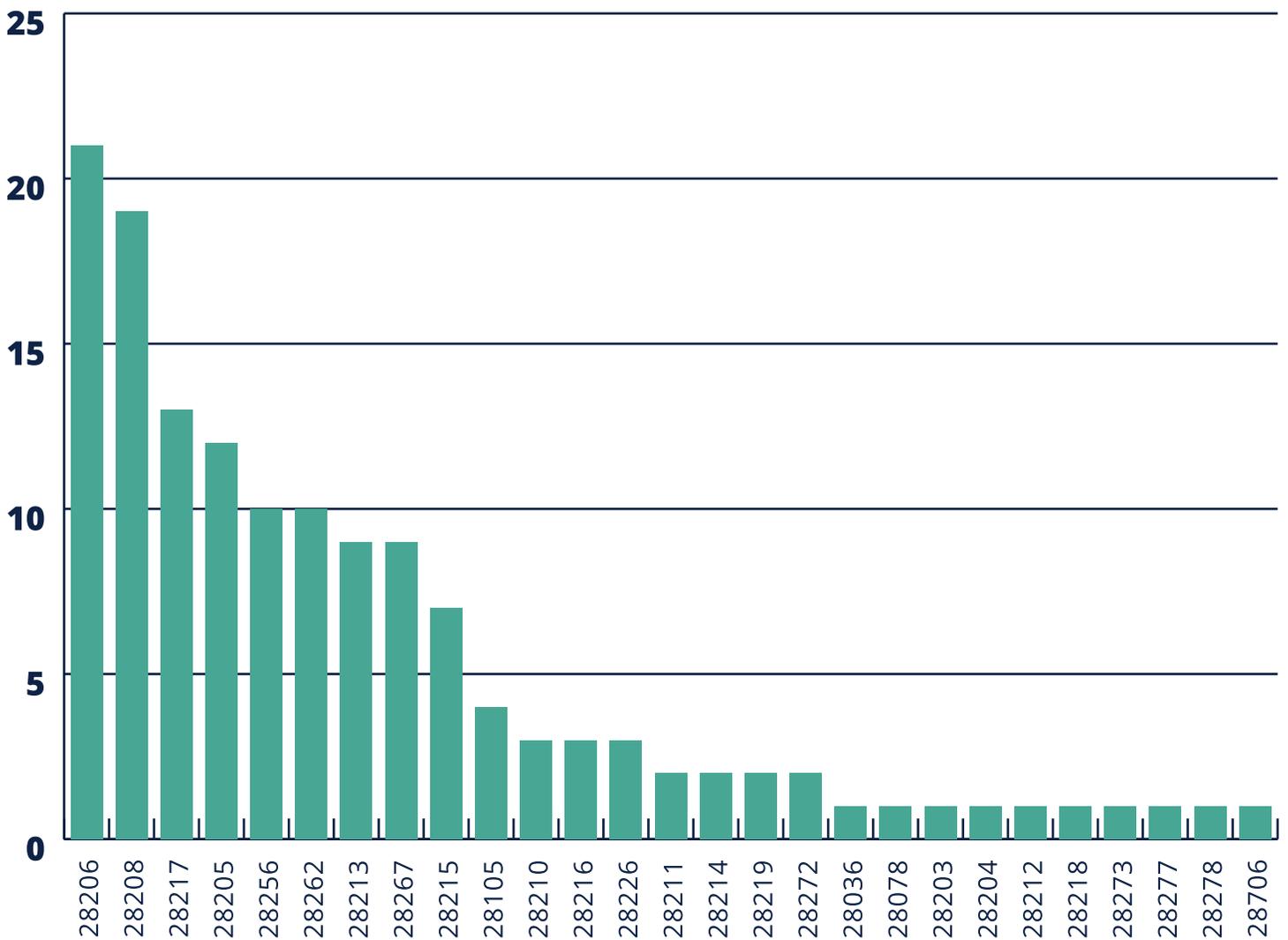


Among study participants, 21 were identified by 2-1-1 as having a disabling condition, three self-identified as being affected by a disability and 88 responded that they did not have a disability.

Finally, an analysis of study participants' ZIP codes of residence, summarized in Table 4, revealed that most calls came from ZIP codes 28206, 28208, 28217, 28205, 28256 and 28262.

TABLE 04

NUMBER OF CALLS, BY ZIP CODE OF RESIDENCE



FINDINGS

CAUSES OF HOUSING INSTABILITY

Study participants were asked to identify the primary cause of their housing instability and up to two additional contributing causes. The reported causes of housing instability reported by study participants are summarized in Table 5.

The most frequently cited primary, secondary and tertiary cause was that available housing is unaffordable for the study participants' level of income (total of 62). This was followed by job loss (37 mentions), medical/health issues (14 mentions), current living situation with friends and/or family not working out (11 mentions) and insufficient income (11 mentions). Eviction risk was only mentioned five times as a primary cause of being at risk of homelessness, which was less frequently than "other causes" (16 mentions) and domestic violence (six mentions). Among explanations offered for "other causes" were conflicts with landlords and motel management over maintenance and repairs, prior convictions that made finding housing more difficult and financial victimization in a housing purchase scam.

TABLE 05

PRIMARY CAUSES		SECONDARY CAUSES		TERTIARY CAUSES	
FREQUENCY OF MENTION		FREQUENCY OF MENTION		FREQUENCY OF MENTION	
40	Housing unaffordable for level of income	19	Housing unaffordable for level of income	3	Housing unaffordable for level of income
36	Lost Job	7	Medical/health issues	1	Eviction history
14	Other	6	Lost job	1	Food insecurity issues
11	Living situation with friends/family not working out	3	Can't afford child care	1	Lost job
10	Working but insufficient income	1	Eviction history	1	Medical/health issues
6	Domestic violence	1	Food insecurity issues	1	Uninhabitable quality of housing
6	Medical/health issues	1	Working but insufficient income	1	Other
5	At risk of being evicted	1	Other		
1	Eviction history				
1	Poor credit				
1	Uninhabitable quality of housing				

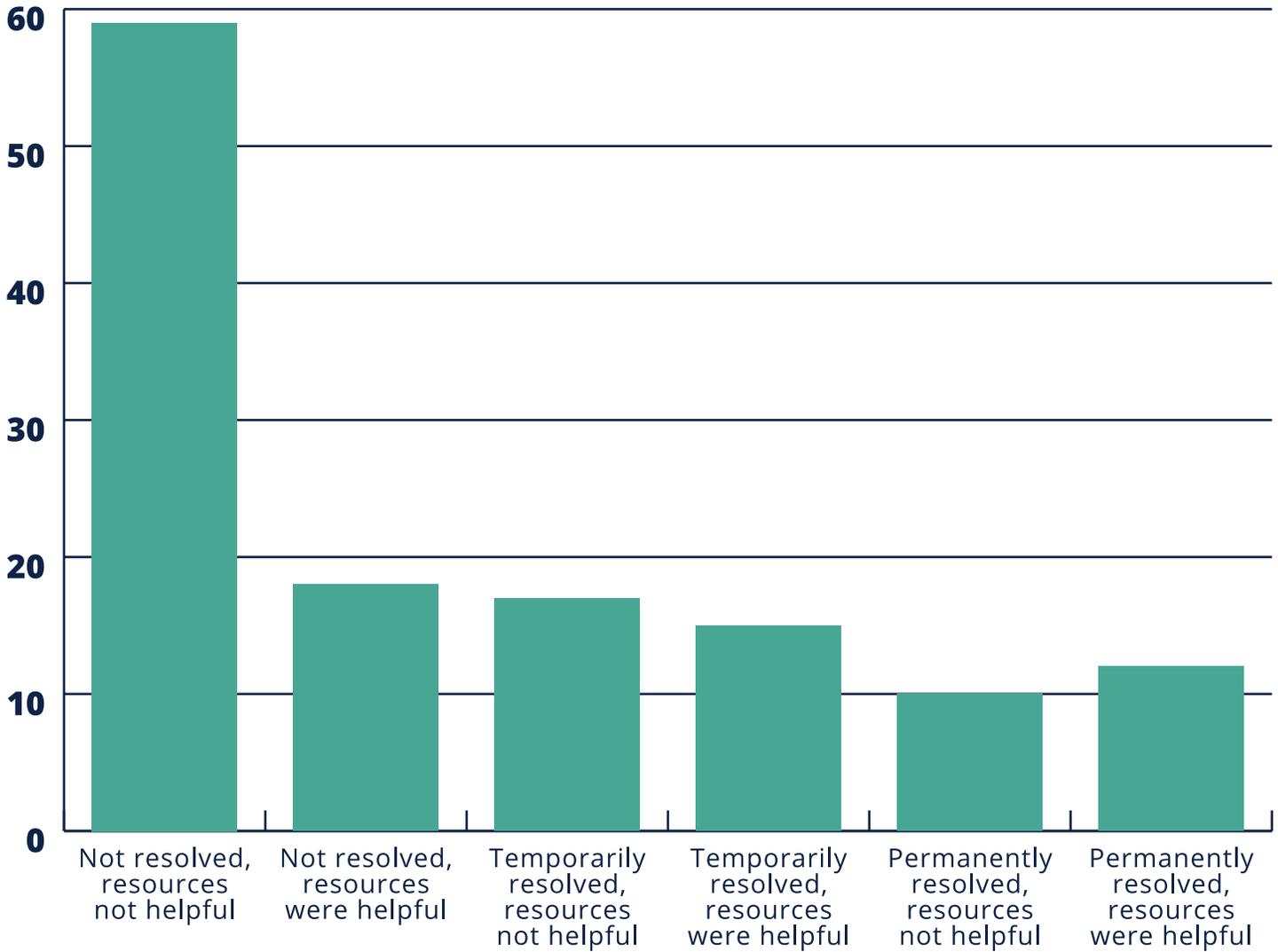
STATUS OF RESOLUTION OF HOUSING INSTABILITY & HELPFULNESS OF RESOURCES

Callers to NC 2-1-1 who are determined by operators to be “at risk of homelessness” are provided a list of resources to contact, based upon their needs, and the assistance for which they might qualify. In querying the study participants about their current housing status, researchers asked whether their current housing status was a temporary resolution, a permanent resolution or unresolved. They were also asked whether the resources to which they were referred were helpful in addressing their housing needs.

To enable a more nuanced understanding of the impact of resource referrals on housing stabilization, responses about the resolution of their housing issues were cross-tabulated with responses on perceptions about the helpfulness of resources. This resulted in six possible response categories. The results are summarized in Table 6.

TABLE 06

STATUS OF HOUSING ISSUES AND HELPFULNESS OF RESOURCE REFERRALS

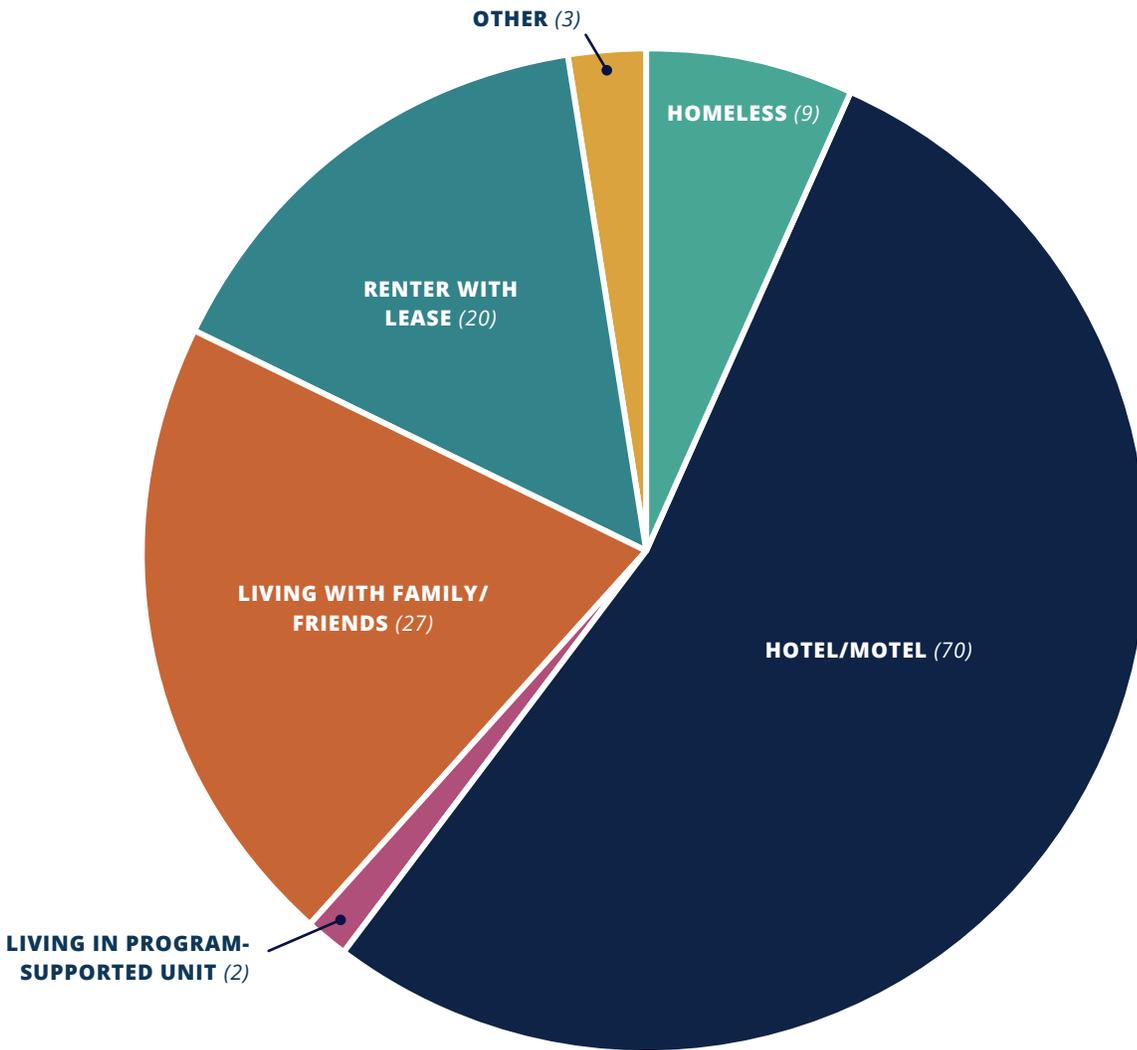


Almost half (45%) of all study participants who stated that their housing issues were not resolved did not find the referral resources helpful. At the other end of the spectrum, 9% of study participants who stated that their housing issues were permanently resolved did find the referral resources helpful.

Study participants were asked about their current living situation. Their responses are summarized in Table 7. Over half (53.4% or 70) were living in hotels/motels, 21% (27) were living with friends or family and 15% (20) were renters with leases in their own name.

TABLE 06

CURRENT HOUSING SITUATION



- RENTER WITH LEASE (20)**
- LIVING WITH FAMILY/FRIENDS (27)**
- HOTEL/MOTEL (70)**
- HOMELESS (9)**
- SHELTER (0)**
- OTHER (3)**
- LIVING IN PROGRAM-SUPPORTED UNIT (2)**

Tables 8, 9 and 10 summarize the current living situation of survey participants based on whether their housing needs were reported to be unresolved, temporarily resolved or permanently resolved.

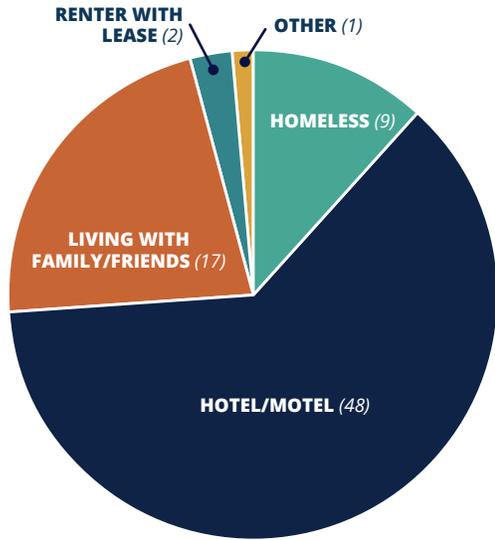


TABLE 08

CURRENT HOUSING SITUATION AMONG THOSE RESPONDING “HOUSING WAS NOT RESOLVED”

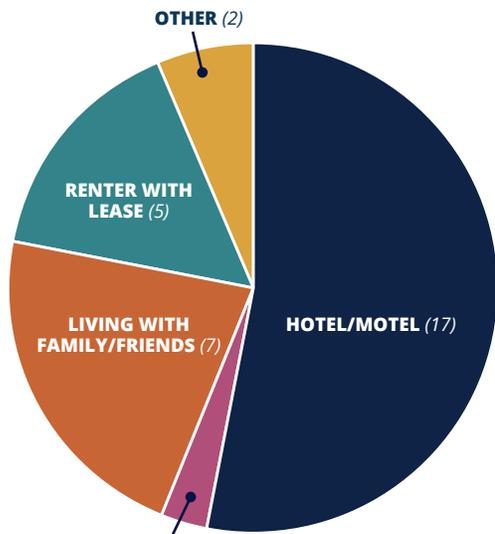
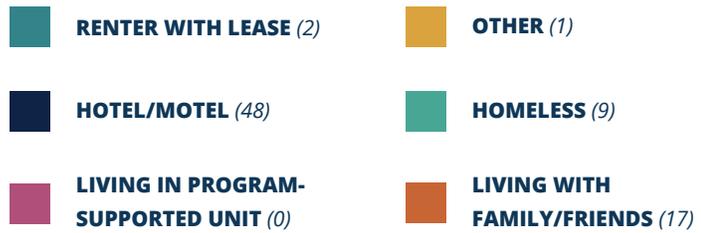
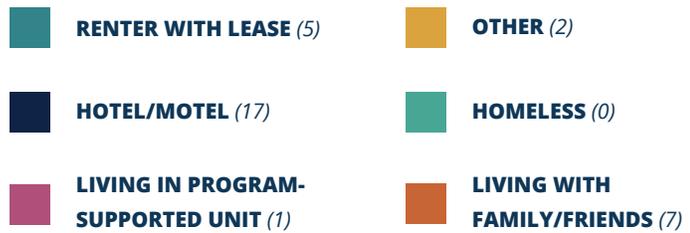


TABLE 09

CURRENT HOUSING SITUATION AMONG THOSE RESPONDING “HOUSING TEMPORARILY RESOLVED”



LIVING IN PROGRAM-SUPPORTED UNIT (1)

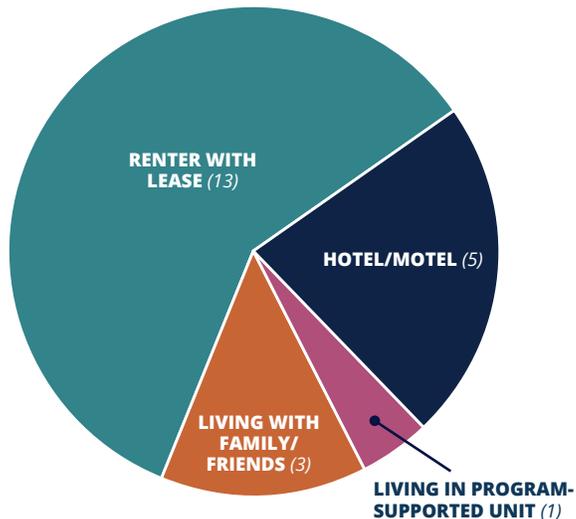
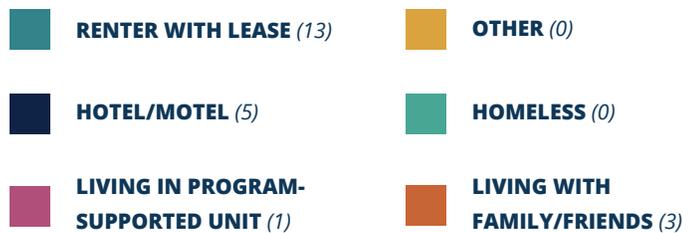


TABLE 10

CURRENT HOUSING SITUATION AMONG THOSE RESPONDING “HOUSING PERMANENTLY RESOLVED”



An analysis of the study participants’ current housing situation, cross-tabulated by reported resolution of housing needs and perceived helpfulness of resources, is summarized in Table 11 below.

TABLE 11

CURRENT HOUSING SITUATION

STATUS OF RESOLUTION OF HOUSING NEEDS AND HELPFULNESS OF RESOURCES	HOMELESS	HOTEL/ MOTEL	PROGRAM-SUPPORTED UNIT	FAMILY/ FRIENDS	RENTER WITH LEASE	SHELTER	OTHER
Housing not resolved; resources not helpful	7	34		15	2		1
Housing not resolved; resources were helpful	2	14		2			
Housing temporarily resolved; resources not helpful		5		7	3		2
Housing temporarily resolved; resources were helpful		12	1		2		
Housing permanently resolved; resources not helpful		1		2	7		
Housing permanently resolved; resources were helpful		4	1	1	6		
TOTAL	9	70	2	27	20	0	3

The majority (60%) of the 109 study participants whose housing issues were unresolved or temporarily resolved are currently living in hotels or motels. Twenty-four (22%) percent are living with friends or family and seven (6%) are renters with a lease.

When asked how many families were sharing living quarters, 108 reported one family and 15 reported two families sharing living quarters. The average number of family members that were reported living together was 2.36.

Of the 22 participants who consider their housing issues to be permanently resolved, 13 identify as renters with leases, three are living with family or friends, five are living in hotels or motels and one is in permanent supportive housing.

The data would suggest that, whether housing needs were temporarily addressed by the callers themselves or by resources to which they were referred, hotel/motel stays were the most common resolutions except among callers whose needs were permanently resolved. This points to the ongoing challenges of stabilizing housing through placement in permanent, affordable housing; only 20 (15%) of all at-risk callers became renters with leases in their names.

Researchers compared the number of study participants for whom the resolution of housing needs resulted in housing in a hotel or motel before and after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. From January through March 2020, a total of eight of the 131 study participants ended up living in hotels or motels. Between April 1, 2020, and July 10, 2020, 62 “at-risk” callers to NC 2-1-1 ended up living in hotels or motels; this represents an almost seven-fold increase in the number of at-risk callers whose housing needs resulted in hotel or motel stays. The mean, median and mode lengths of stay for the 31 study participants who were asked how long they had been living in a hotel or motel are as follows.

REPORTED LENGTH OF HOTEL/MOTEL STAY¹ (N=31)

MEAN	9 MONTHS
MEDIAN	7 MONTHS
MODE	6 MONTHS

¹In calculating the mean, we eliminated the outliers of 4.5 years and 2 months.

HELPFUL RESOURCES – REFERRALS AND SELF-RESOLVED

All study participants were asked how, or through what resources, their housing needs were addressed. The responses were tallied and analyzed consistent with the previous six combinations of status of resolution of housing needs and perceived helpfulness of resources. Table 12 summarizes how survey participants who did find the resources helpful reported their housing needs were resolved.

TABLE 12

RESOURCES WERE HELPFUL - HOW HOUSING NEEDS WERE RESOLVED

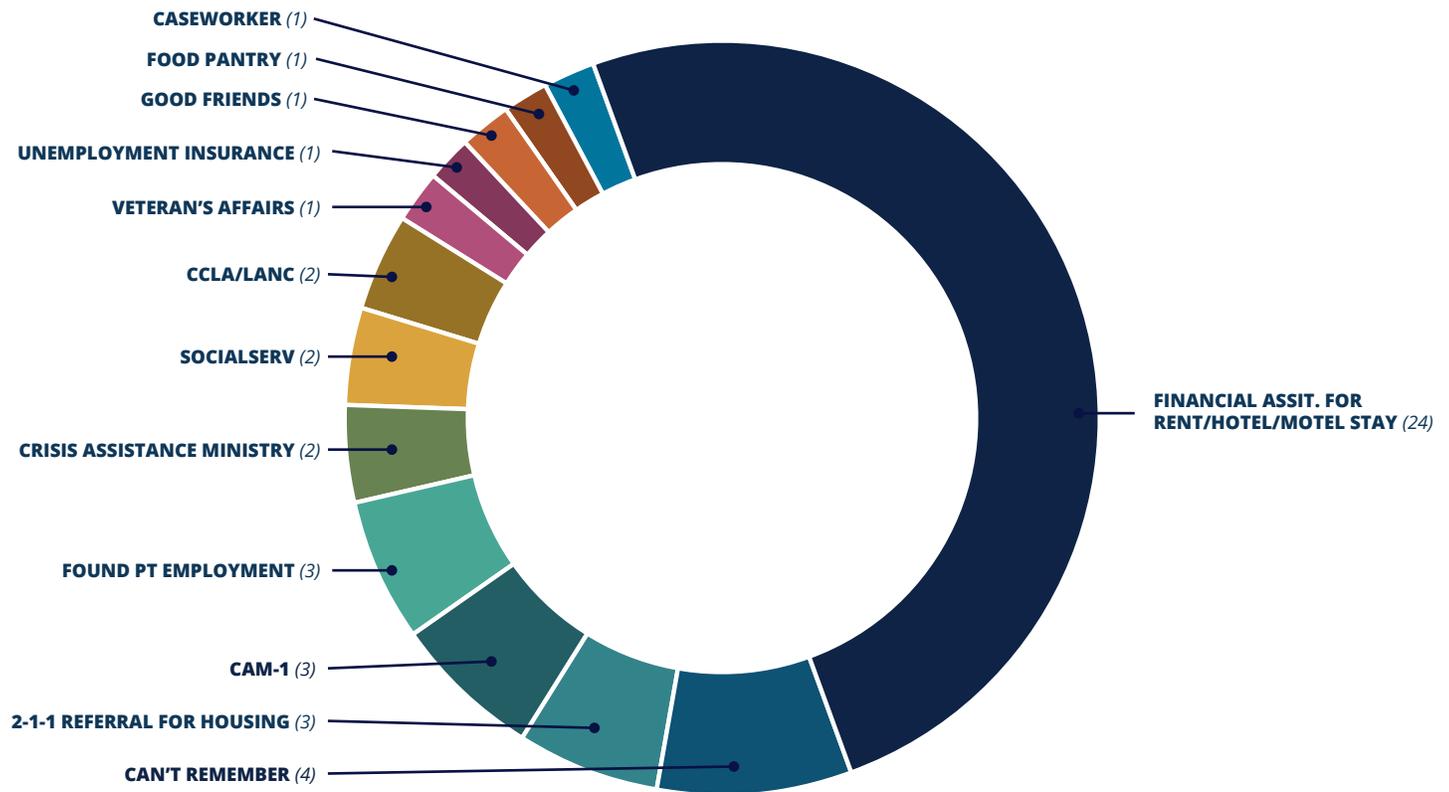
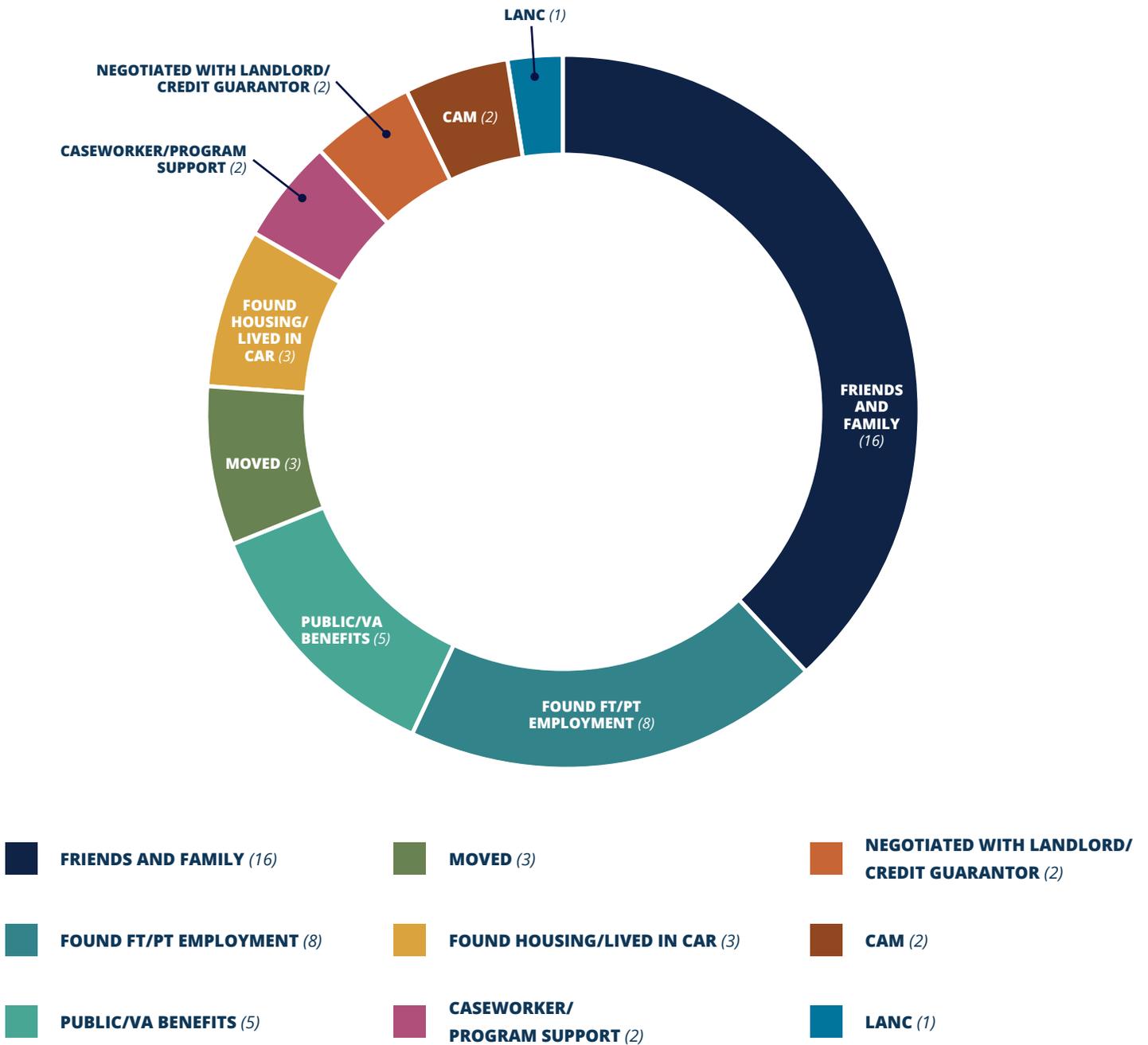


Table 13 summarizes housing needs resolution for those who did not find the resources helpful.

TABLE 13

**RESOURCES NOT HELPFUL -
HOW HOUSING NEEDS WERE RESOLVED**



A more detailed summary in Table 14 provides this same information based on whether the housing resolution was reported to be temporary or permanent. Financial assistance with rent or hotel/motel stays was cited most often as having helped, followed by assistance by family and friends.

TABLE 14

MOST HELPFUL RESOURCES IN ADDRESSING HOUSING NEEDS

Housing not resolved; resources not helpful	Housing not resolved; resources were helpful	Housing temporarily resolved; resources not helpful	Housing temporarily resolved; resources were helpful	Housing permanently resolved; resources not helpful	Housing permanently resolved; resources were helpful
Friends and family - 8	Financial help for hotel/motel stays - 7	Family/friends - 6	COVID relief funds for hotel/motel - 11	Friends/family - 2	Can't remember - 3
Public benefits - 4	One-time help with rent payment - 3	Moved - 3	Found PT employment - 3	Found job on own - 2	Mecklenburg County assistance - 2
Found limited employment - 3	2-1-1 referral for housing - 2	FT/PT employment - 2	Unemployment insurance - 2	CAM - 1	SocialServ - 1
	Crisis Assistance Ministry - 2	Performs odd jobs at motel to retain room - 1	SocialServ - 1	Negotiated with landlord - 1	Veteran's Affairs - 1
		CAM - 1	CAM - 1	Found credit guarantor - 1	CCLA/LANC - 1
		LANC - 1	Can't remember - 1	Caseworker - 1	Rent assistance - 1
		VA/disability benefits - 1	Caseworker - 1	Found apartment on own - 1	Good Friends - 1
		Found housing on own - 1		Lived in car until saved rent deposit - 1	2-1-1 referral to Hall House - 1
		Referred from recovery program - 1			Food pantry - 1

IMPACT OF PANDEMIC ON MAINTAINING HOUSING

Finally, when participants were asked whether finding housing has become more difficult since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, 116 responded affirmatively and 16 responded “no.” When asked in what way finding housing was becoming more difficult, 75 study participants cited job loss, job unavailability and reduced employment; 13 individuals mentioned rental office closures making it difficult to find apartments; 10 individuals mentioned fear of contracting COVID-19 among friends and family members as limiting their housing options; and seven study participants cited the scarcity of affordable housing. Other study participants mentioned the increased demand and/or competition for assistance, the lack of availability of child care so that they can work and health issues as contributing to pandemic-related housing challenges.

OBSERVATIONS

The findings from this study raise four significant issues about the current state of Charlotte-Mecklenburg's homelessness prevention network. First, with the exception of programs that provide direct financial assistance, it appears that prevention-facing services are not a major factor in actually keeping "at-risk" populations from becoming homeless. More often, people struggling with housing instability turn to friends, family and informal social networks to navigate the arduous process of finding and keeping permanent affordable housing.

Secondly, long-term residents of hotels and motels constitute the "hidden" subset of the homeless population and are largely underestimated, both in sheer numbers and for length of stay. One family of three reported having lived in a motel for seven years; another has lived in a motel for four-and-a-half years.

Third, the current intake, screening and Coordinated Entry pipeline operates more like a sieve that permits leakage of populations who are in dire need. There is no current mechanism for consistent identification, tracking and follow up with individuals and families who have received referral information; there are insufficient "warm handoffs" of households to homelessness prevention programs and services; and there is no methodology for assessing the effectiveness and impact of those resources to which at-risk callers are referred by NC 2-1-1 operators.

Finally, the absence of representation of the Latinx population in this survey raises concerns about whether they are being missed in the count of unstably housed households and questions about how they are coping with access to affordable housing. The fact that no callers to 2-1-1 between January and July 2020 identified "Hispanic/Latino" as their primary or secondary racial identity may suggest that they are among the "hidden" homeless as well.

APPENDIX A

DRAFT TELEPHONE INTERVIEW SCRIPT FOR HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION RETROSPECTIVE STUDY

Hello. I'm (name) and I am a researcher partnering with Mecklenburg County and 2-1-1 to understand how helpful their referrals for housing services are. A few (months/weeks) ago, you called 2-1-1 for assistance with housing. I'm calling you today to check back to see if your need for assistance was resolved. Would you mind answering a few questions?

1. What was the main cause of your housing challenge when you originally called 2-1-1?
2. Has your housing issue been resolved? If so, how did you resolve your it? (If no, skip to question 4)
3. Were you able to get assistance from any of the resources that were recommended to you by 2-1-1?
 - a. If yes, which ones?
 - b. If not, did you receive assistance from some other source?
4. What is your current living situation (renting as leaseholder, homeowner, hotel/motel, living with family members, program-supported unit, etc.)?
5. How many immediate and/or extended family members are currently living with you? How many separate families are living together?
6. Have you had a harder time maintaining housing since the pandemic than you did before? If so, in what way?

Thank you for helping us to understand what resources were available and helpful to you in addressing your housing needs.

POST-INTERVIEW APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY REFERRAL PROSPECTS:

If the interviewee was able to **self-resolve his/her housing challenges and currently considers himself/herself to be stably housed**, please read the following question.

We will be conducting additional in-depth interviews, called Appreciative Interviews, with a few participants in this study. The purpose of Appreciative Interviews is to capture the positive stories of strength and success among people who were able to resolve their housing issues.

Would you be willing to participate in a more in-depth conversation about how you successfully resolved your housing needs with another volunteer?