



**Nantucket Data Platform**  
BIG DATA FOR A SMALL ISLAND

# **Island Life Survey: Executive Summary**

October 2, 2019

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# Introduction

The Nantucket Data Platform (NDP) created the Island Life Survey (ILS) to generate valuable and compelling insights into Nantucket's community and values.

NDP's team of survey experts followed industry best practices and evidence from social science research at every step of the way.<sup>1</sup>

## The Process:

1. Interview local citizens to inform NDP's thinking and generate broad research questions.
2. Design a robust and comprehensive survey with questions that are thoughtfully crafted to create the necessary data.
3. Program the survey in a user-friendly online platform.
4. Conduct multiple rounds of quality assurance and pretesting to catch any issues.
5. Conduct outreach to maximize community participation.
6. Answer the research questions with a holistic analysis of the quantitative (multiple choice) and qualitative (open-ended) survey questions
7. Conduct a separate mini-study of commuters that includes a shorter survey and semi-structured interviews to learn more about this previously unknown and important subgroup of the island population.

The survey ran from April 27th to July 31st. After reviewing and cleaning the data, and discarding ineligible responses, NDP analyzed a total of 394 responses.

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<sup>1</sup> For full explanation of Methods and Results, please refer to the Island Life Survey Full Report.

# Terminology

During the qualitative interviews, it became evident that commonly used terms often have different meanings.

**NDP uses the following definitions for the purposes of this report:**

<b>Year-round Resident or Year-rounder:</b>	Someone who currently lives on Nantucket at least six months per year.
<b>Seasonal Resident:</b>	Someone who spends at least six weeks but not more than six months per year on Nantucket. <sup>2</sup>
<b>Vacationer:</b>	Someone who spends, in total, less than six weeks per year on Nantucket.
<b>Washashore<sup>3</sup>:</b>	A year-rounder who was not born on Nantucket.
<b>Nantucketer:</b>	Anyone who is a seasonal resident or year-rounder.

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<sup>2</sup> Seasonal residents include anyone who lives on the island between six weeks and six months per year, including the seven seasonal workers who participated in the survey. The sample of seasonal residents tended to be older and earn higher incomes, leading us to believe that the data is skewed towards certain groups (e.g., second-home owners) and away from younger seasonal workers although we are unable to say to what extent because no benchmark data exists to make a reliable comparison.

<sup>3</sup> Several people who participated in NDP's qualitative interviews used the term "washashore" to refer to someone who lives on Nantucket full-time but was not born there. NDP adopted this definition for the purposes of this report.

# Research Questions

The goal of the research questions is to lend structure to the survey design and inform the survey questions themselves.

## **NDP developed the following set of research questions for the ILS:**

1. What are the factors that draw people to Nantucket?
2. What are the factors that motivate people to transition from vacationer to part-time resident or part-time resident to full-time resident?
3. What are the “sticking factors” that make people want to stay on the island?
4. What are the attributes or characteristics of the island that people would like to see stay the same (PROS), and conversely, that people do not like or would like to see change (CONS)?
5. What are the factors that cause people to move off-island?

Within this structure, the survey addressed important Nantucket issues, including the community, diversity, jobs and work, shopping and commerce, transportation and other infrastructure, citizen engagement and local government, and community challenges.

## Key Takeaways

NDP then conducted a rigorous analysis of the responses, including a comparison of the responses across population subgroups for year-rounders. These responses were weighted to the broader Nantucket population, which provided an understanding of not only the survey respondents but also the island’s year-round population as a whole.

## **Having completed these investigations, NDP presents five main findings:**

1. The importance of community
2. The importance of natural beauty
3. The reasons Nantucketers consider moving off-island
4. The existence of gender disparities in community participation
5. The importance of striking a balance for commuters

## The Importance of Community

The importance of community on the island cannot be overstated. The vast majority of Nantucketers, both year-round and seasonal, think both that Nantucket has a strong sense of community and state that they like that. Most say Nantucket is a good place to live, work,

raise a family, vacation, and retire (although the degree to which they say so differs for year-round and seasonal residents).

Nantucketers are also very engaged in their community. In fact, most year-rounders and seasonal residents say they feel passionately about local issues, and majorities of both also note that their fellow islanders are engaged with the local government. When given the opportunity to leave comments, survey respondents wrote about community more frequently than any other topic.

One of the reasons Nantucketers feel so strongly about community may be that the island's small size, combined with the geographical isolation, encourages a greater sense of interdependence. One interviewee, for example, said that being 30 miles out to sea forces people to come together, providing evidence for such a connection.

Another thing that makes Nantucket unique (and complicates naming conventions) is the composition of the population—a mix of vacationers, part-time residents, and full-time residents. Even among the part- and full-time residents a variety of situations exists. For example, some may spend two months out of the year on Nantucket but consider themselves vacationers, while others would consider themselves part-timers. Similarly, some might live on Nantucket six months of the year and consider themselves part-timers, while others would consider themselves full-time or year-round residents.

To avoid confusion in the analysis, NDP asked about residency status in two ways, one allowing respondents to self-identify and the other using NDP's standard definition. Using the latter, NDP found that majorities of year-round and seasonal residents spent time on Nantucket prior to their current residency, pointing to an ebb and flow of people changing their relationship with the island. These long-term ties likely contribute to the deep sense of community and connection to the people and the place.

There are many things about island life that Nantucketers like, which may contribute to the sense of community residents find so appealing. For example, despite the fact that many people say they have trouble finding things they need in local shops and that they wish there were more options for grocery shopping, they overwhelmingly want to keep shopping local and reject the notion of chain stores coming to the island. Continuing to keep local stores as the main source of commerce appears to be an important element of what Nantucketers consider "community."

Nantucketers offer a more mixed view on community topics like diversity, opportunities for career progression, and local government. The majority of Nantucketers say the island is a "global community" and racially/ethnically diverse, but a sizeable proportion say that Nantucket does not celebrate all forms of diversity nor do they feel a sense of equality. When it comes to career progression, Nantucketers are more negative—more people think there are not good opportunities for career progression than think that there are.

## The Importance of Natural Beauty

The importance of natural beauty was highlighted over and over again. Natural beauty is a key factor in people's decisions to move to the island in the first place, as well as stick around once settling here. It is the #1 reason seasonal residents both move to the island and continue to stay. And while it isn't the #1 reason year-rounders move here (work/business takes that title), it *is* the #1 reason they stay.

It is one of the things people most appreciate most about the island. Nearly all residents (year-round and seasonal) say the island's natural beauty is the best thing about Nantucket. Given its widespread importance, it seems imperative for stakeholders to protect Nantucket's natural beauty. The challenge will be balancing that need with other competing concerns.

## The Reasons Nantucketers Consider Moving Off-island

Despite being very positive about their community, about half of Nantucketers say they have seriously considered moving off-island.

### **The primary drivers of these considerations are:**

- The cost of housing,
- The cost of living (other than housing), and
- Traffic and overdevelopment (perceived or real).

People also frequently shared concerns in their comments about how the island is changing. They largely attribute these changes to overdevelopment and are concerned with the resulting strain on local infrastructure. In fact, a majority of people agree that traffic makes daily life in the summers difficult and that they avoid going downtown because of traffic and a lack of adequate parking.

These challenges could be all the more daunting due to the fact that Nantucketers have mixed views on how local government performs. About half of Nantucketers disagree that local government officials do a good job and do enough to communicate.

## The Existence of Gender Disparities in Community Participation

Among year-rounders, NDP found the existence of gender disparities in community participation. Women are more likely to report discomfort speaking their minds in public forums and have difficulty voting. In addition, they are less likely to feel a sense of equality. Women are also more likely to disagree that the public transportation coverage is sufficient on the island. Difficulty accessing public transportation could possibly be a barrier to participating in community life.

## The Importance of Striking a Balance for Commuters

Commuters make important contributions to the island workforce and economy. NDP conducted a supplementary study to understand who commutes, how they commute, and why they commute.

Most of Nantucket's commuter workforce have relatively long commutes (3+ hours per day, 5 days a week). This is unsurprising given the ferry trip alone is one hour each way. But contrary to what one might expect, they seem to prefer this arrangement rather than wishing they lived on the island. Qualitative interviews suggest this may be because they enjoy the positives (e.g., good salary) of working on Nantucket, and moving to the island might negate them (e.g., housing costs and being farther away from family and friends).

In addition, while several expressed loving the island and being happy to travel to Nantucket for work, they also noted that the commute can be costly, making it difficult to take care of daily chores/tasks and get home quickly if needed (e.g., in an emergency). It can also place a strain on family life. It will be key to strike the right balance for commuters, i.e., ensuring the pros outweigh the cons.

## Areas of Future Research

As with any study, this project answered many questions and raised new ones as well. NDP has identified five areas of potential additional studies to help the community:

- Nantucketers deeply value the island's natural beauty. Yet, they are also concerned with the lack of affordable housing and perceived overdevelopment and traffic. How can these concepts be addressed in a balanced way when they are seemingly at odds?
- Why do female year-rounders appear to be less involved in community government than their male counterparts?
- How can Nantucket balance economic growth with maintaining the island's unique character?
- What can be done to mitigate the drawbacks of commuting to Nantucket for work?
- Nantucketers have mixed opinions on the performance of local government. What can be done to strengthen democratic processes, improve communication, and grow the public's confidence?

## Conclusion

Findings from the Island Life Survey and Supplemental Commuter Study suggest there are many positive aspects about the island, making it a good place to live, work, vacation, retire, and raise a family. What makes it particularly special are the natural beauty and sense of community.

And, just as Nantucketers are passionate about the things they love, they are also passionate about identifying and addressing the less positive aspects of the community such as overdevelopment (real or perceived), traffic, and the challenges that come with growth.

NDP's survey experts are hopeful that these findings will lead to better-informed decisions, balancing what makes and keeps the community special with the need to create positive change.