

THE STATE OF

WHAT DO WE BELIEVE

# What Do We Believe? How Hampton Roads Residents View Their World

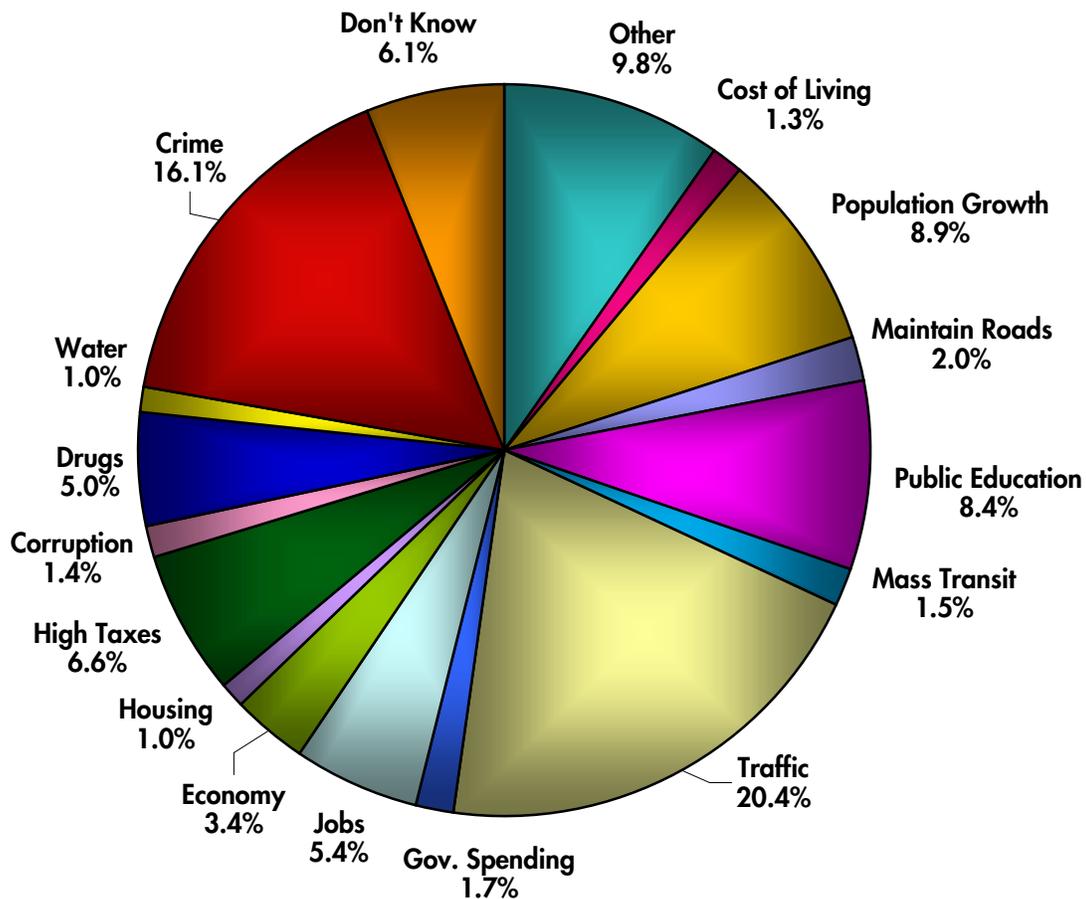
*I can't get no satisfaction. — Mick Jagger*

In May and June 2004, the Social Science Research Institute at Old Dominion University polled a stratified random sample of 1,189 residents who live throughout Hampton Roads and asked them to express their views on a wide range of issues. Political scientist Joshua Behr directed this effort, which was designed to elicit residents' feelings about many of the hot-button issues within the region. For the first time, a Quality of Life Index (QLI) was developed on the basis of residents' responses in order to measure their overall satisfaction with their situation. Not surprisingly, the QLI reveals that we're not all equally satisfied with our lot in life and that the level of satisfaction varies substantially from city to city and from one ethnic group to another. We report all of these results in this chapter.

# What's The Biggest Problem Facing Your City Today?

Traffic (20.4 percent) and crime (16.1 percent) are the two problems citizens seem most concerned about in Hampton Roads. Further, when road maintenance and mass transit are factored in, it is apparent that general traffic-related problems loom largest in the public perception. Graph 1 presents these data. Note that economic issues (jobs, taxes, cost of living) do not burden area residents as much as one might have expected. The region's relatively low rate of unemployment, its less-than-national-average cost of living, and Virginia's position as a low-tax state probably have something to do with this.

**GRAPH 1**  
**WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE BIGGEST PROBLEM FACING YOUR CITY TODAY?**

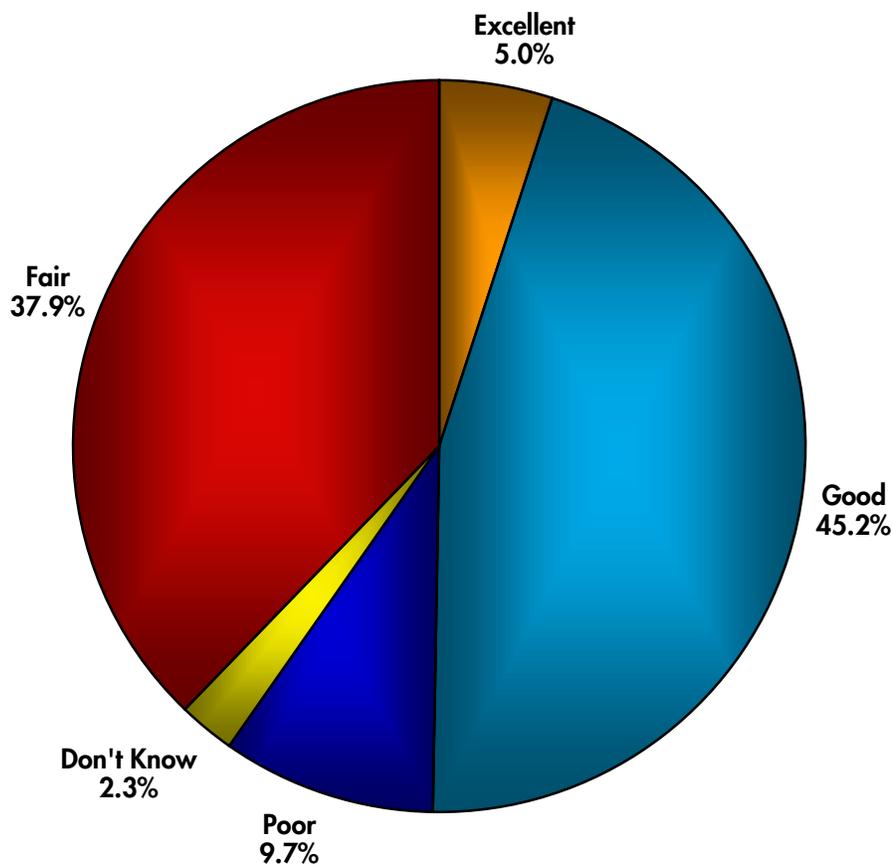


# How Do You Rate Local Government Services?

Slightly more than 50 percent of survey respondents rate the provision of their local government services as excellent or good, with 38 percent rating those services only as fair, and 10 percent as poor. Graph 2 reports these results, which subjectively one might classify as “not really good, yet not so bad.” Previous experience, however, suggests that most citizens are rigorous graders where their public services are concerned. Among the larger cities, the residents of Virginia Beach assign the highest grades to their local government services (almost 58 percent regard them as excellent or good), while Portsmouth occupies the other end of the distribution with only 34 percent of its residents ranking their local government services as excellent or good.

Approximately 58 percent of Whites/Caucasians and Asians/Asian Americans regard their local government services as either excellent or good, while only 33 percent of Black/African Americans and Hispanics/Latinos hold the same view. Also, 54 percent of men see their government services as excellent or good, while only 48 percent of women hold the same view.

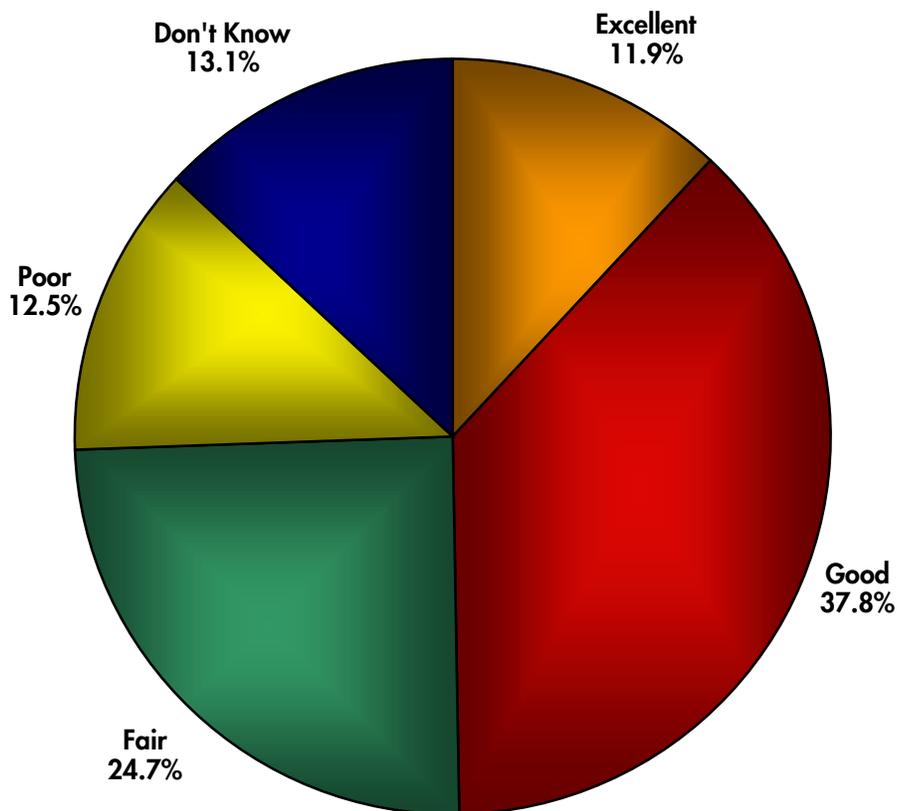
**GRAPH 2**  
**OVERALL, HOW WOULD YOU RATE LOCAL GOVERNMENT SERVICES?**



# How Do You Rate K-12 Education In Your Public Schools?

Hampton Roads' K-12 public schools occupy a generally favorable position in the eyes of regional citizens. Approximately 50 percent of respondents rate their K-12 public schools as excellent or good, with 25 percent viewing them as only fair, and a bit more than 12 percent as poor. James City and York County residents are particularly pleased with their schools, while Portsmouth and Suffolk citizens generally are displeased. Graph 3 illustrates these data.

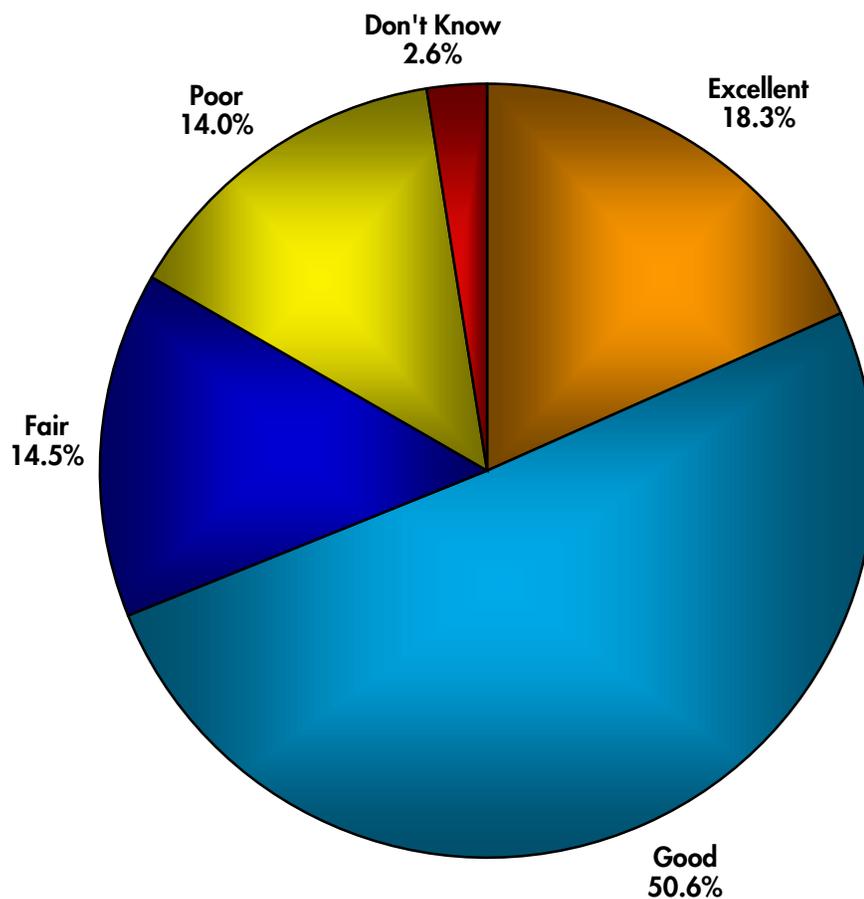
**GRAPH 3**  
**OVERALL, HOW WOULD YOU RATE EDUCATION IN YOUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS, KINDERGARTEN THROUGH 12TH GRADE?**



# How Do You Rate Education In Our Colleges And Universities?

Almost 69 percent of Hampton Roads citizens grade their higher education opportunities as excellent or good, with only 2.6 percent rating them as poor. Indeed, the lowest satisfaction score among any of the cities and counties is the 58.6 percent from Gloucester. Higher education received high scores in nearly every community.

**GRAPH 4**  
**OVERALL, HOW WOULD YOU RATE EDUCATION IN OUR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES?**



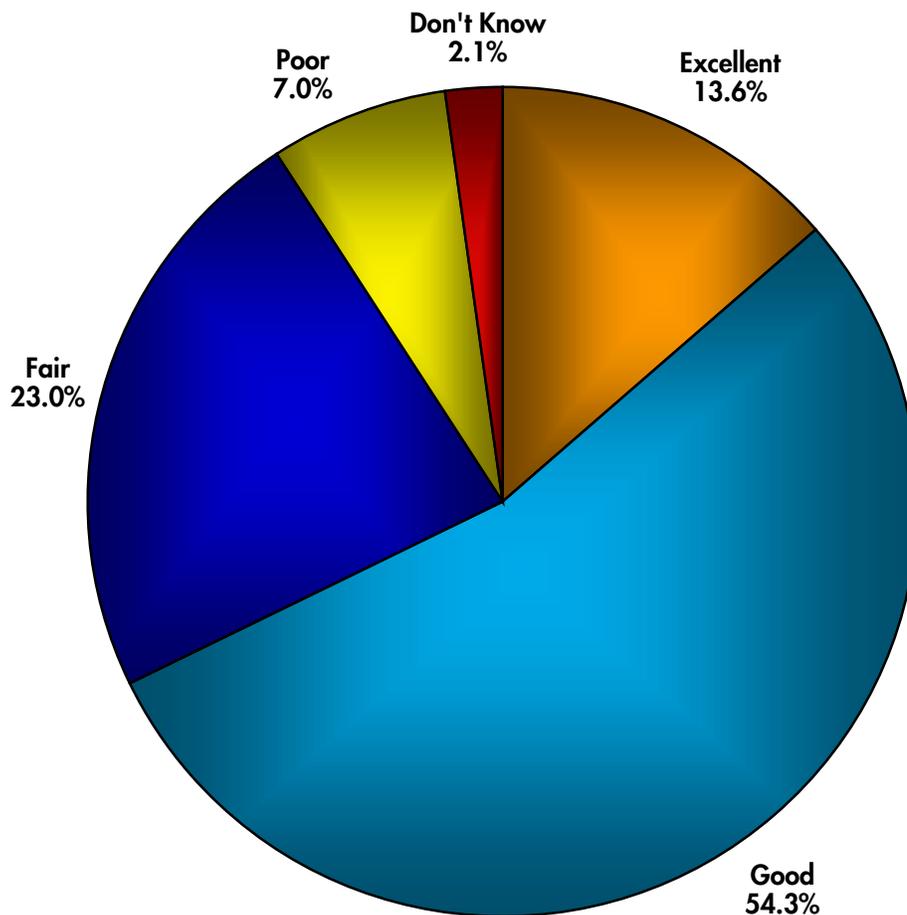
# How Do You Rate Law Enforcement And Home Safety?

Law enforcement also receives generally favorable ratings from the region's residents. Almost 68 percent of respondents perceive their local law enforcement to be excellent or good and only 7 percent rate it as poor. The citizens of the region's central cities typically assign somewhat lower scores to their law enforcement services.

There are no significant differences in the perceptions of men and women with respect to law enforcement. Nonetheless, noticeable differences between ethnic groups exist in terms of their evaluations of local law enforcement. More than three-quarters (77 percent) of Whites/Caucasians believe their law enforcement is either excellent or good, while only 58 percent of Asians/Asian Americans, 52 percent of Hispanics/Latinos and 47 percent of Blacks/African Americans do. These differences actually are smaller than those observed in the largest urban areas of the country. The 2001 State of the Region report documented similar disparities in the perceptions of the region's citizens concerning law enforcement. Thus, things have not changed even though several cities now have minority police chiefs.

Whatever residents think about their law enforcement, an overwhelming majority report that they feel safe at home. More than 94 percent report a feeling of safety, while only 4.9 percent perceive that they are unsafe.

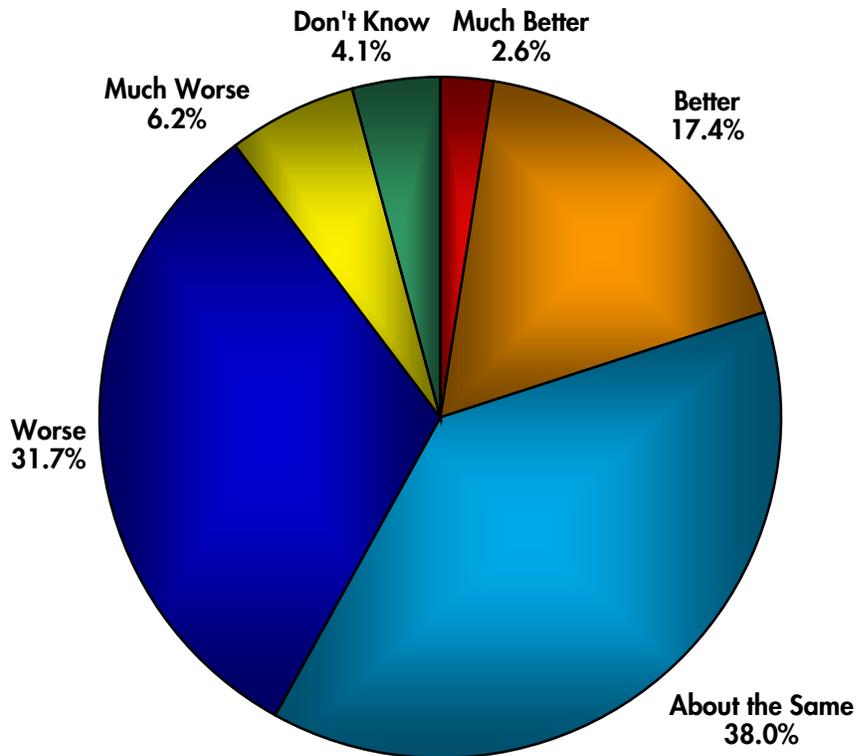
**GRAPH 5**  
**OVERALL, HOW WOULD RATE LAW ENFORCEMENT?**



# How Do You Rate The Change In Crime Over The Past Five Years?

Has crime increased or decreased over the past five years? About 20 percent of citizens believe the rate of crime has declined, while 38 percent report it is about the same. However, Graph 6 reveals that a significant 38 percent of citizens believe crime has become worse in recent years. There is some dissonance between this perception and the generally positive reviews that local law enforcement receives.

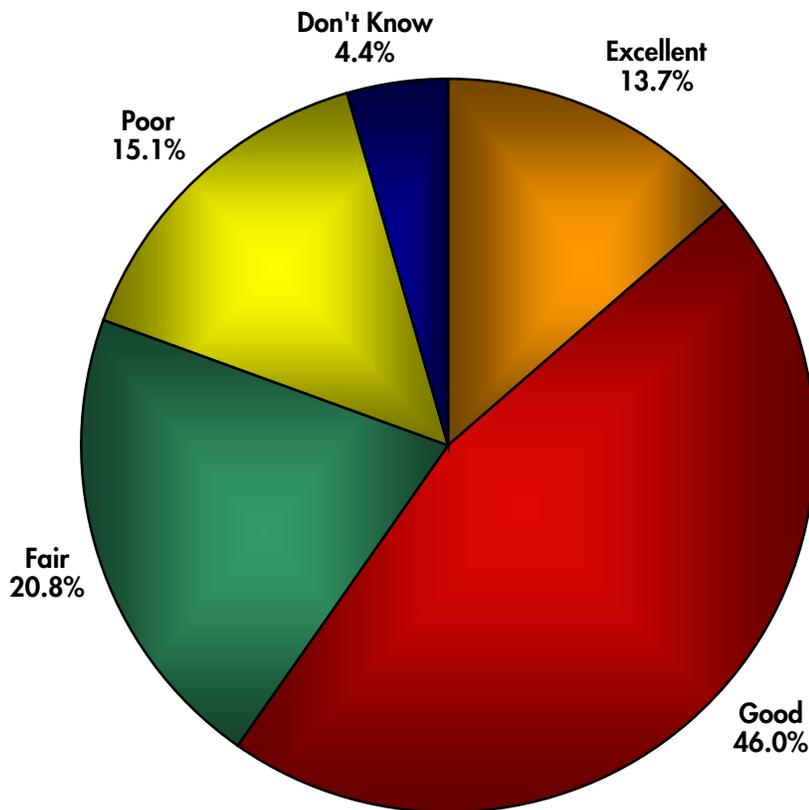
**GRAPH 6**  
**OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS, OVERALL HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE CHANGE IN CRIME?**



# How Do You Rate Your Medical And Health Care?

Almost 60 percent of Hampton Roads residents rate their medical and health care as excellent or good, though 15 percent regard it as poor. In general, the more remote and rural a city or county is, the lower the ratings medical and health care receive in that jurisdiction.

**GRAPH 7**  
**OVERALL, HOW WOULD YOU RATE MEDICAL AND HEALTH CARE?**

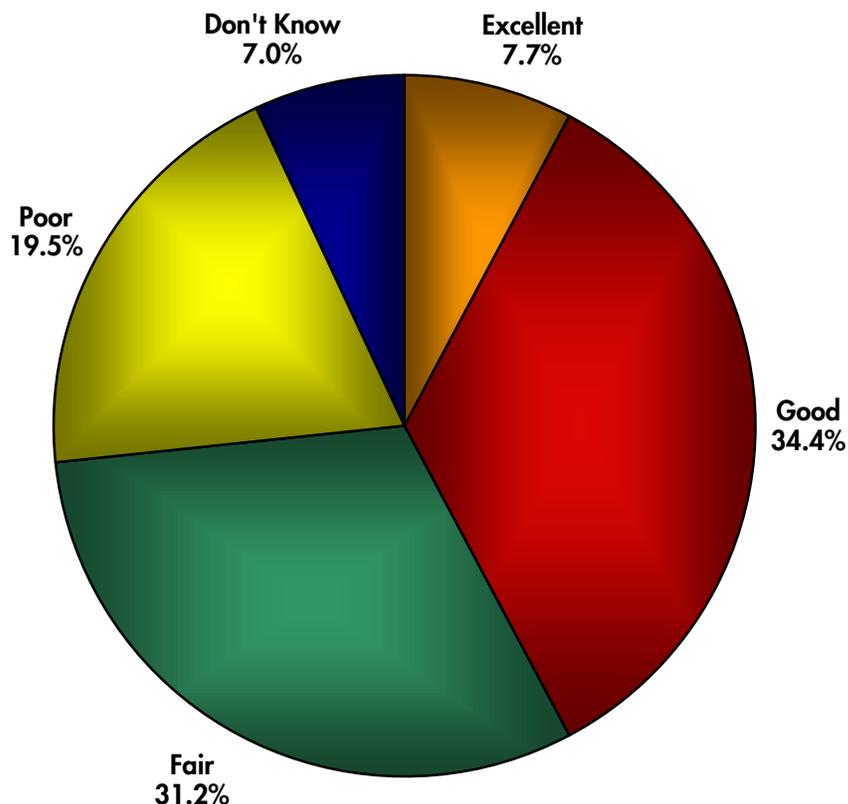


# How Do You Rate Opportunities For Employment?

Despite the fact that the region's rate of unemployment has been below the national average for many years, citizen perceptions of employment opportunities are surprisingly lukewarm. As Graph 8 records, slightly more than 42 percent of respondents believe that employment opportunities are excellent or good, but 31.2 percent assign only a fair rating and 19.5 percent assign a poor rating. This may reflect the view that while unemployment has been relatively low within our region, opportunities for high-paying jobs have not grown at a rapid rate, or that employment security is low. These latter perceptions are only partially supported by actual evidence.

The various ethnic groups in the region respond in very different ways to the employment opportunity question. Fifty-one percent of Whites/Caucasians believe their employment opportunities are excellent or good, while only 41 percent of Hispanics/Latinos hold the same view. For Asians/Asian Americans, this response declines to 32 percent and it is only 21 percent for Blacks/African Americans.

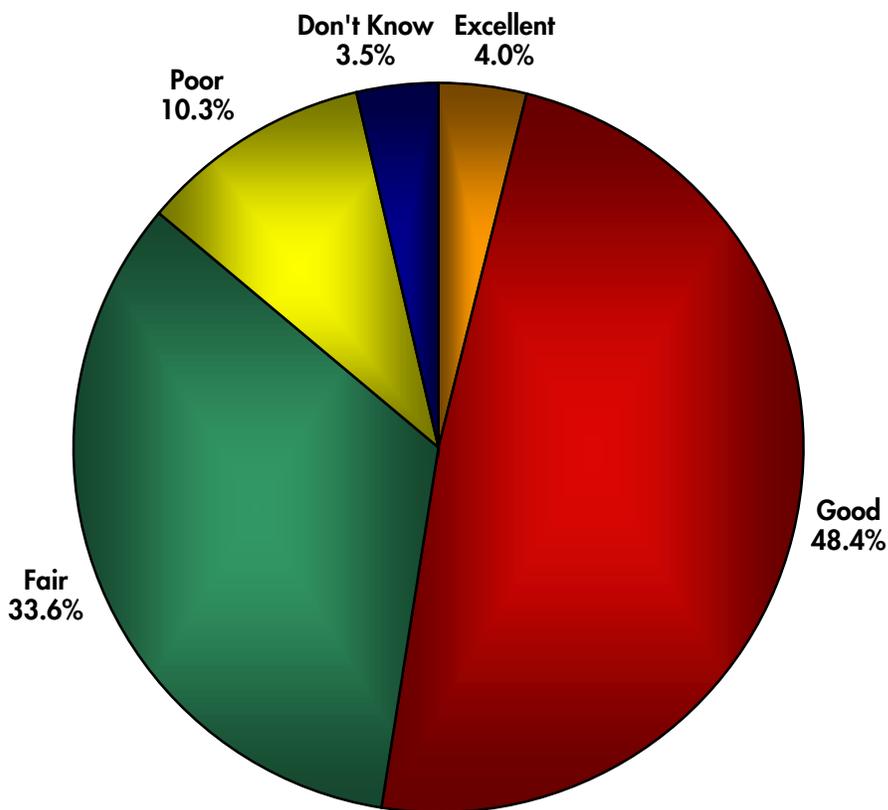
**GRAPH 8  
OVERALL, HOW WOULD YOU RATE  
OPPORTUNITIES FOR EMPLOYMENT?**



# How Do You Rate Race Relations?

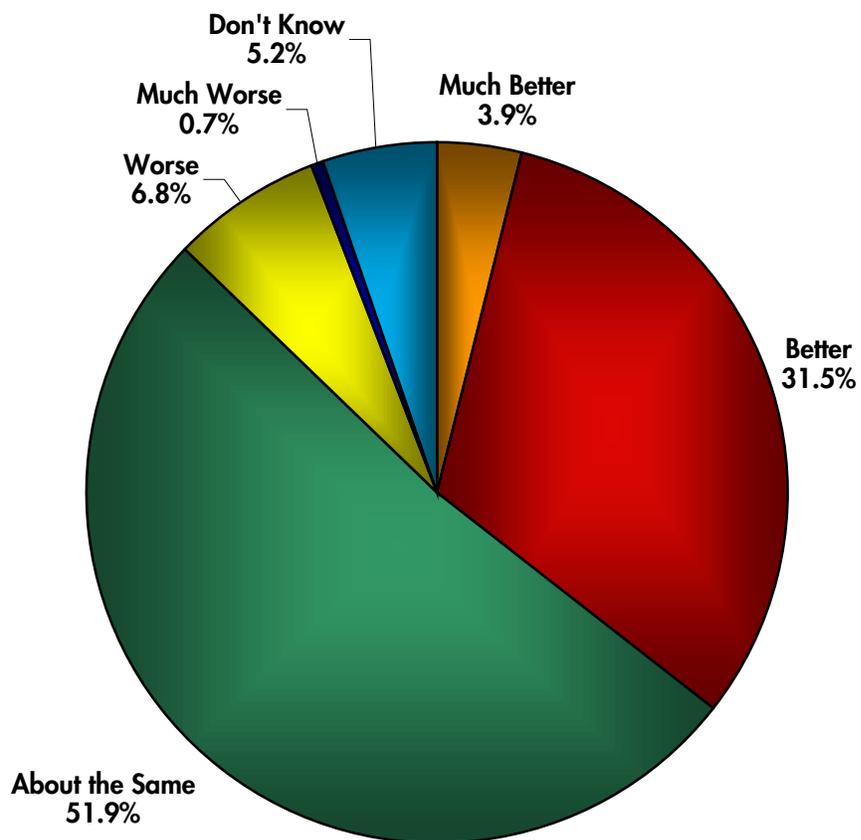
More than 52 percent of respondents rate race relations in Hampton Roads as excellent or good, with 33.6 assigning only a fair rating and 10.3 percent a poor rating. Graph 9 reports these data. No difference exists in the responses of men and women to this question. However, the citizens of cities with the largest minority populations typically do not assign ratings as favorable as do residents where there is less ethnic diversity. Twice as many Whites/Caucasians (62 percent) believe race relations are excellent or good, as do Blacks/African Americans (30 percent). Hispanics/Latinos (41 percent) and Asians/Asian Americans (53 percent) fall in between the polarized White/Black responses.

**GRAPH 9**  
**OVERALL, HOW WOULD YOU RATE RACE RELATIONS?**



How have things changed in this arena over the past five years? Graph 10 discloses that a gratifying 35.4 percent of citizens believe race relations have improved, while only 6.8 percent believe race relations have deteriorated. Suffolk stands out as the city where the largest proportion of respondents perceives that race relations are improving.

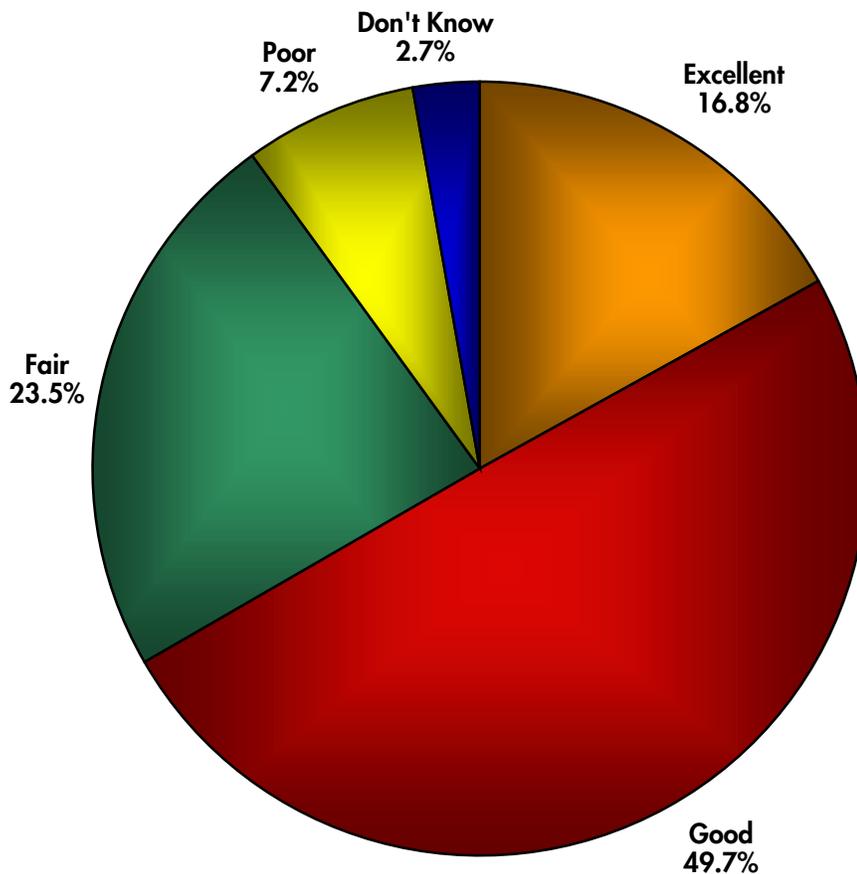
**GRAPH 10**  
**OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS, OVERALL HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE CHANGE IN RACE RELATIONS?**



# How Do You Rate Parks And Recreation?

Approximately two-thirds of the residents of the region rate their parks and recreational opportunities as excellent or good, and only 7.2 percent consider them to be poor. These results are summarized in Graph 11. Among the larger cities, the residents of Portsmouth assign the lowest ratings, while Virginia Beach citizens assign the highest ratings.

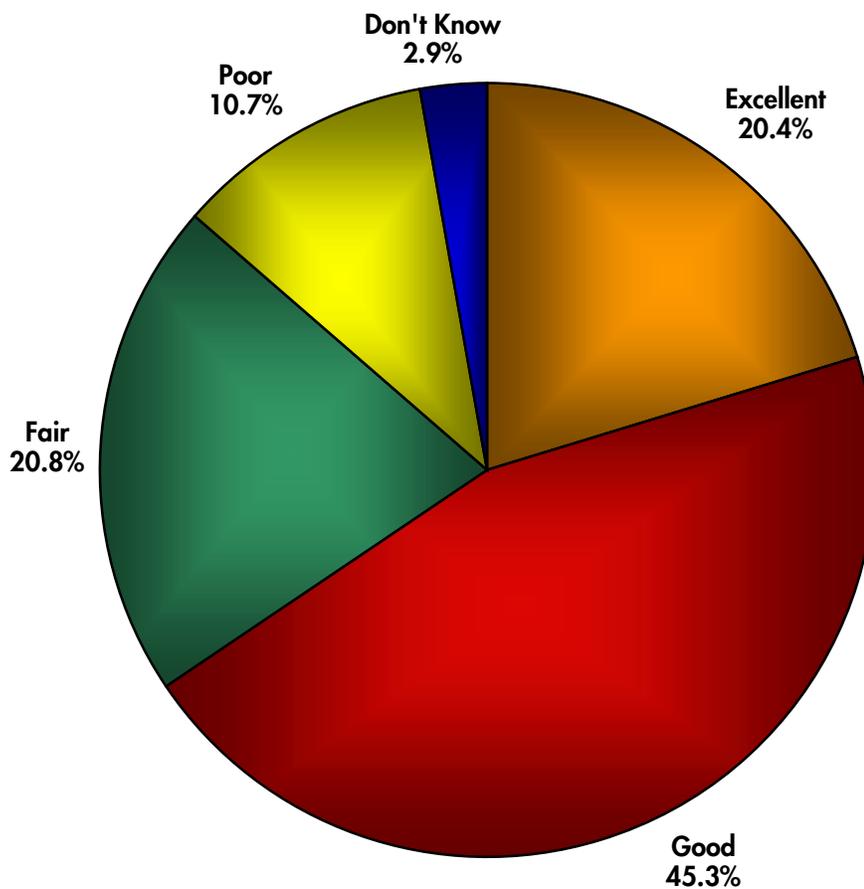
**GRAPH 11**  
**OVERALL, HOW WOULD YOU RATE PARKS AND RECREATION?**



## How Do You Rate The Arts And Cultural Activities?

Fully 65.7 percent of the region's residents perceive the availability of arts and cultural activities to be excellent or good, though 10.7 percent believe such to be poor. Graph 12 depicts these ratings. The residents of Hampton Roads' largest cities generally believe their arts and cultural opportunities are strong, while more rural residents often say the opposite. Among the largest cities, Suffolk's residents are most critical of the arts and cultural opportunities available to them. It's interesting that "Cities Ranked and Rated" (Sperling and Sanders, 2004) assigns much higher ratings to our cultural and arts amenities than do Hampton Roads residents. (These rankings were reported in the preceding chapter.) Cultural and arts leaders believe that many citizens simply are unaware of the richness of opportunities available in the region.

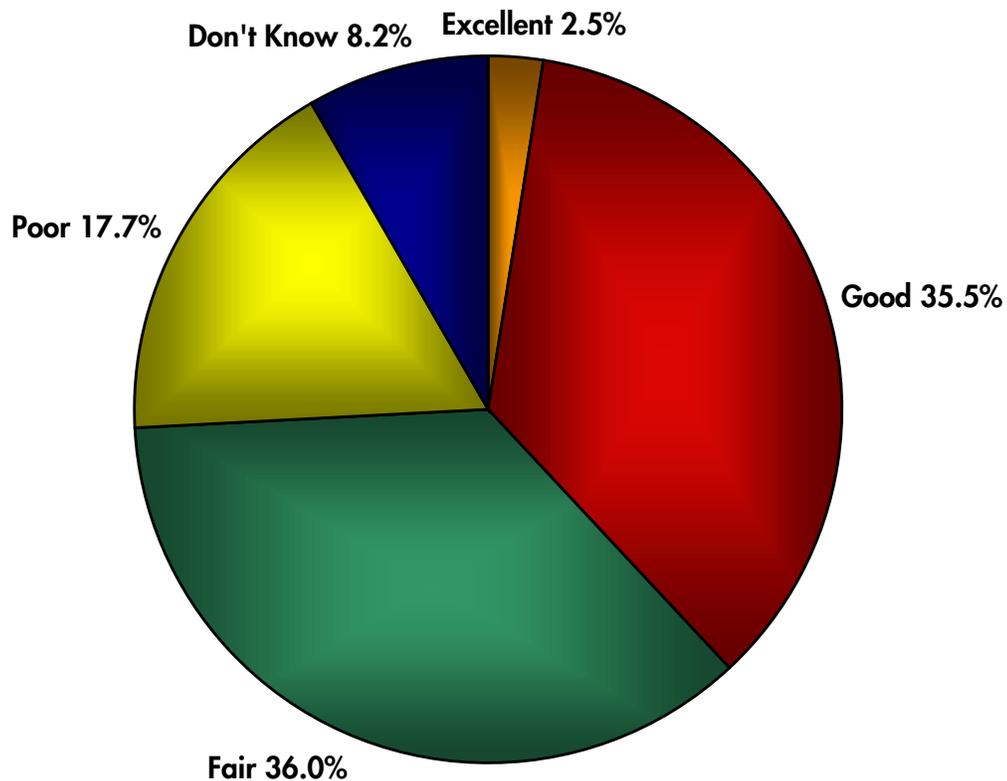
**GRAPH 12**  
**OVERALL, HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE VARIETY OF**  
**ARTS AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES?**



# How Do You Rate Cooperation Among Local Governments?

Do local government units cooperate with each other? The region's citizens assign mixed grades here. Graph 13 reveals that a majority of residents believe that such cooperation is only fair or poor. Portsmouth, Norfolk and Hampton citizens are particularly critical in this regard. In general, citizens are inclined to the view that their elected officials do not work hard enough to cooperate with other jurisdictions.

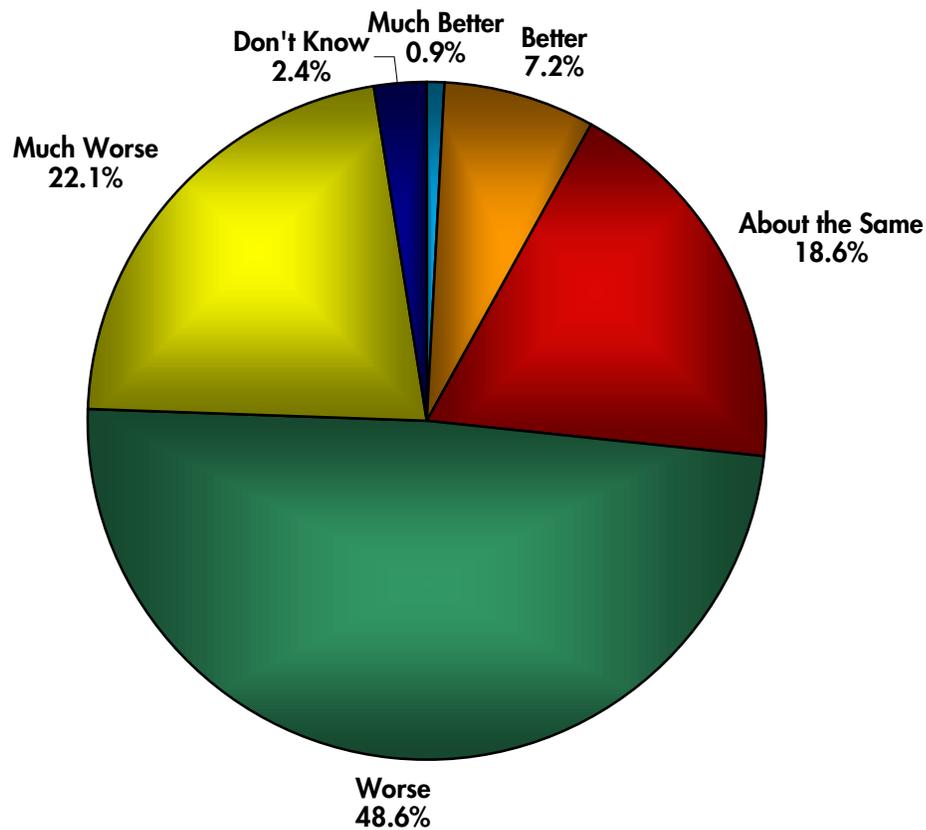
**GRAPH 13  
OVERALL, HOW WOULD YOU RATE  
COOPERATION BETWEEN GOVERNMENTS?**



# How Do You Rate The Change In The Flow Of Traffic Over The Past Five Years?

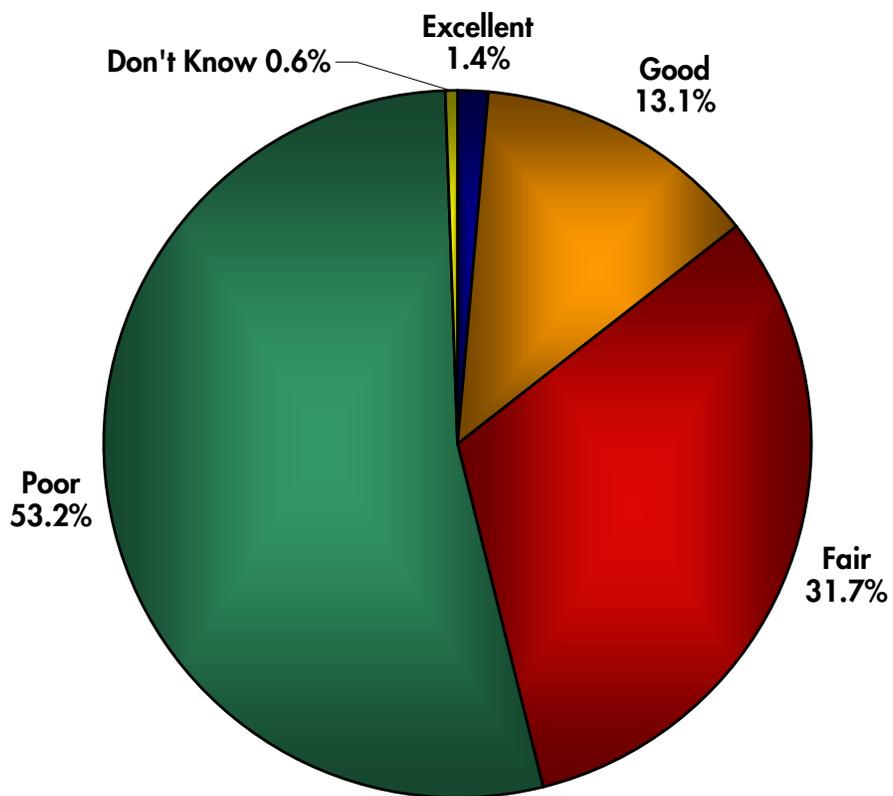
The citizens of the region perceive (accurately) that traffic congestion has increased over the past five years. Only 8.1 percent rate the change in the flow of traffic during this period as improved, while 70.7 percent believe traffic has become more congested. Graph 14 summarizes these responses. Among the larger cities, Norfolk and Virginia Beach residents are especially critical of the changes in their traffic flow, followed by the citizens of Suffolk, Hampton and Chesapeake.

**GRAPH 14**  
**OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS, HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE CHANGE IN FLOW OF TRAFFIC ON THE REGION'S ROADS?**



While most of the region's residents believe traffic is getting worse, 46.2 percent believe it still is excellent, good or fair. Nevertheless, the data presented in Graph 15 portray deterioration in traffic congestion, at least compared to the polling data we published in the 2000 State of the Region report.

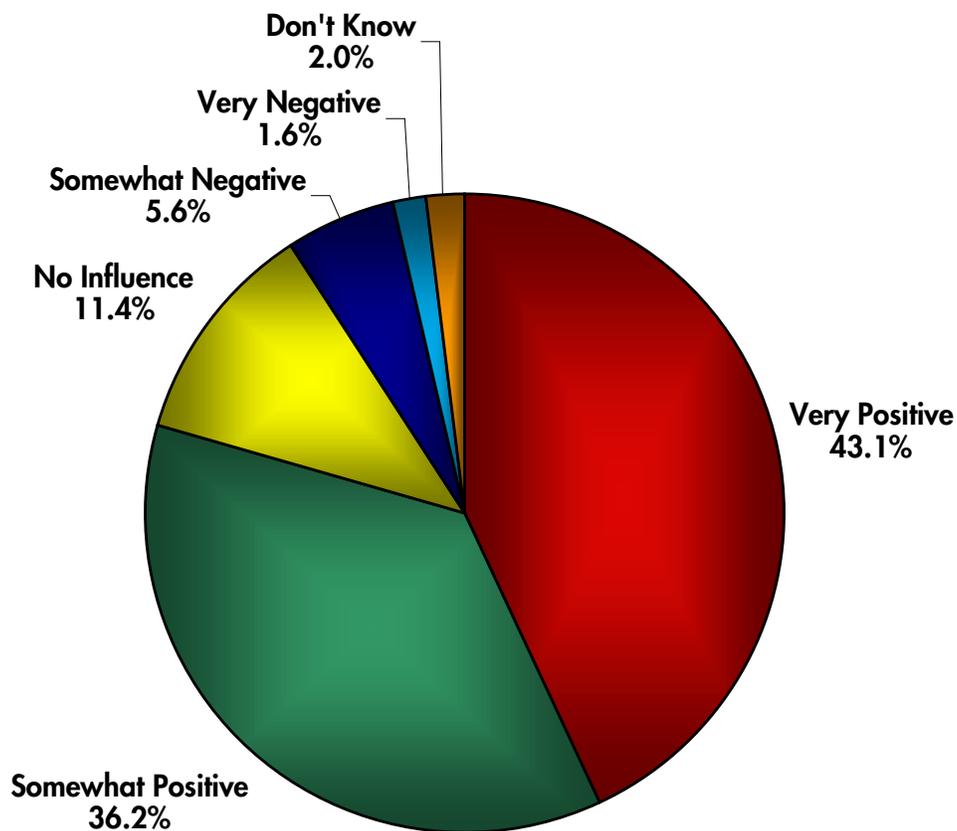
**GRAPH 15**  
**OVERALL, HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE**  
**FLOW OF TRAFFIC ON THE REGION'S ROADS?**



# What Type Of Influence Does The Military Have On Your City?

In 2003, more than 104,000 active-duty military personnel were stationed in Hampton Roads and another 30,000 civilian personnel who work for the military also lived in the region. As we already have seen, about one-third of our region's income is directly attributable to the Department of Defense. Therefore, the influence of the military looms large in Hampton Roads. What is the attitude of residents toward the military? Almost 80 percent see the influence of the military as somewhat positive or very positive. As Graph 16 reveals, only 7.2 percent of citizens rate the influence of the military as somewhat negative or very negative. Given the pervasive presence of the Department of Defense in Hampton Roads, this must be regarded as a salutary result for all concerned.

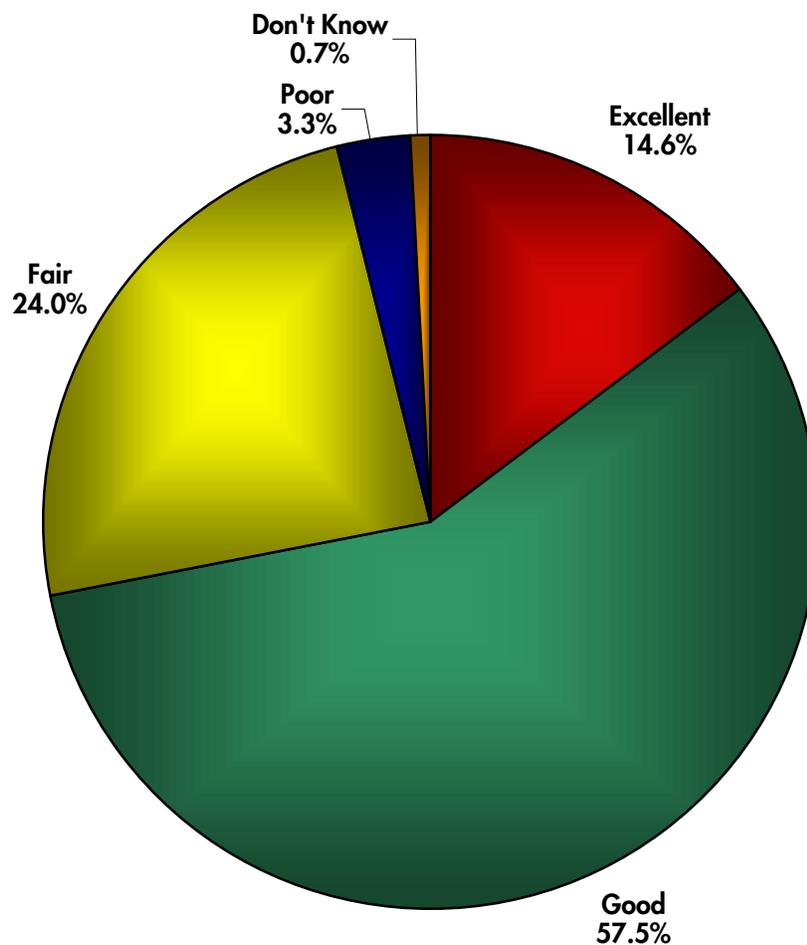
**GRAPH 16**  
**WHAT TYPE OF INFLUENCE WOULD YOU SAY THE PRESENCE OF THE MILITARY HAS ON YOUR CITY?**



# How Do You Rate The Quality Of Life In Your City?

Slightly more than 72 percent of those surveyed believe that the overall quality of their lives is either excellent (14.6 percent) or good (57.5 percent). Only 3.3 percent of respondents believe the quality of their lives is poor. Graph 17 provides a visual representation of these data. While our region's residents see many problems in their environment, nonetheless a healthy majority of survey respondents believe that their quality of life is at least good. As we shall see below, however, a significant segment of the region's citizens would move away from Hampton Roads if an opportunity arose.

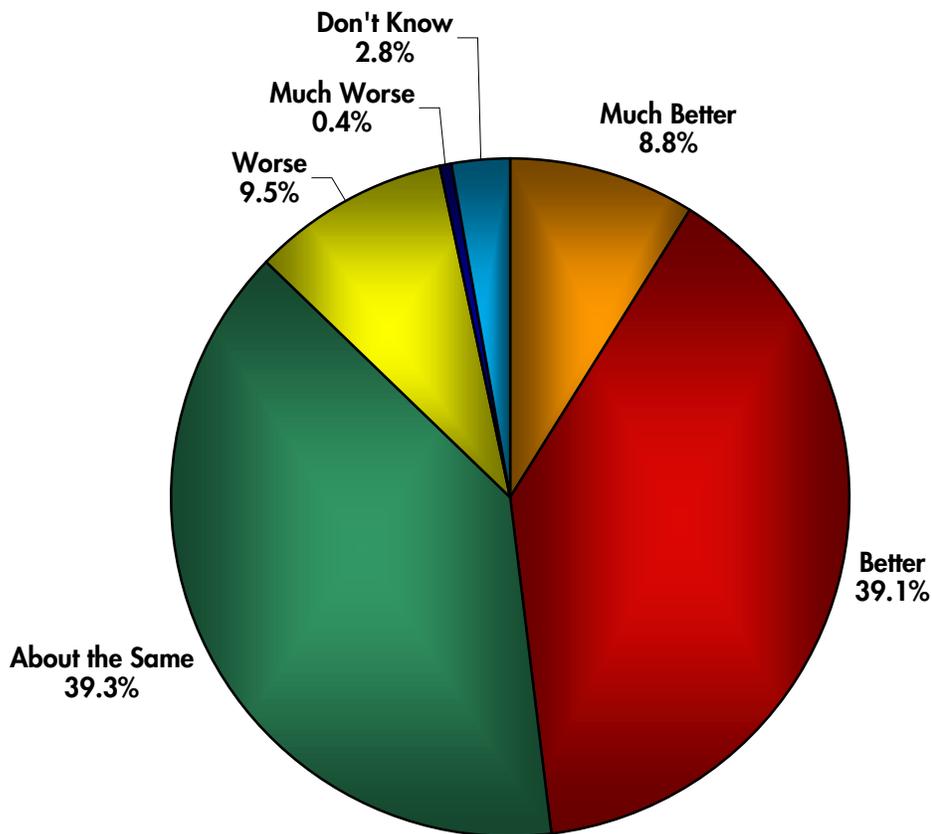
**GRAPH 17**  
**HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE OVERALL QUALITY OF LIFE IN YOUR CITY OR COUNTY?**



# Has Hampton Roads Become A Better Place To Live In The Past Five Years?

If we consider all of these issues together, has Hampton Roads become a better place to live over the past five years? Graph 18 reports that 47.9 percent of survey participants saw improvement, while only 9.9 percent perceived deterioration. The pattern of responses among the cities represents a patchwork. More than 60 percent of the residents of suburban cities such as Gloucester believe improvements have occurred, but so also do 52 percent of the citizens of a core city such as Norfolk. Among the larger cities, the residents of Hampton are least likely to perceive improvement.

**GRAPH 18**  
**OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS, OVERALL HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE CHANGE IN YOUR REGION AS A PLACE TO LIVE?**



# A Quality Of Life Index (QLI) For Hampton Roads

Measuring the quality of life of an area is a difficult, subjective task. We have developed a Quality of Life Index (QLI) based upon 12 factors:

## TIER ONE<sup>1</sup>

- Cost of living
- Safety around one's home
- Opportunities for employment
- Traffic flow

## TIER TWO

- Local government services
- Medical and health care
- Race relations
- K-12 public schools

## TIER THREE

- Parks and recreation
- Arts and cultural activities
- Neighborhood appearance
- Political responsiveness

The QLI varies between 1 and 100 and is a weighted average of the responses from the 1,189 people who were polled concerning the 12 factors noted above.<sup>2</sup>

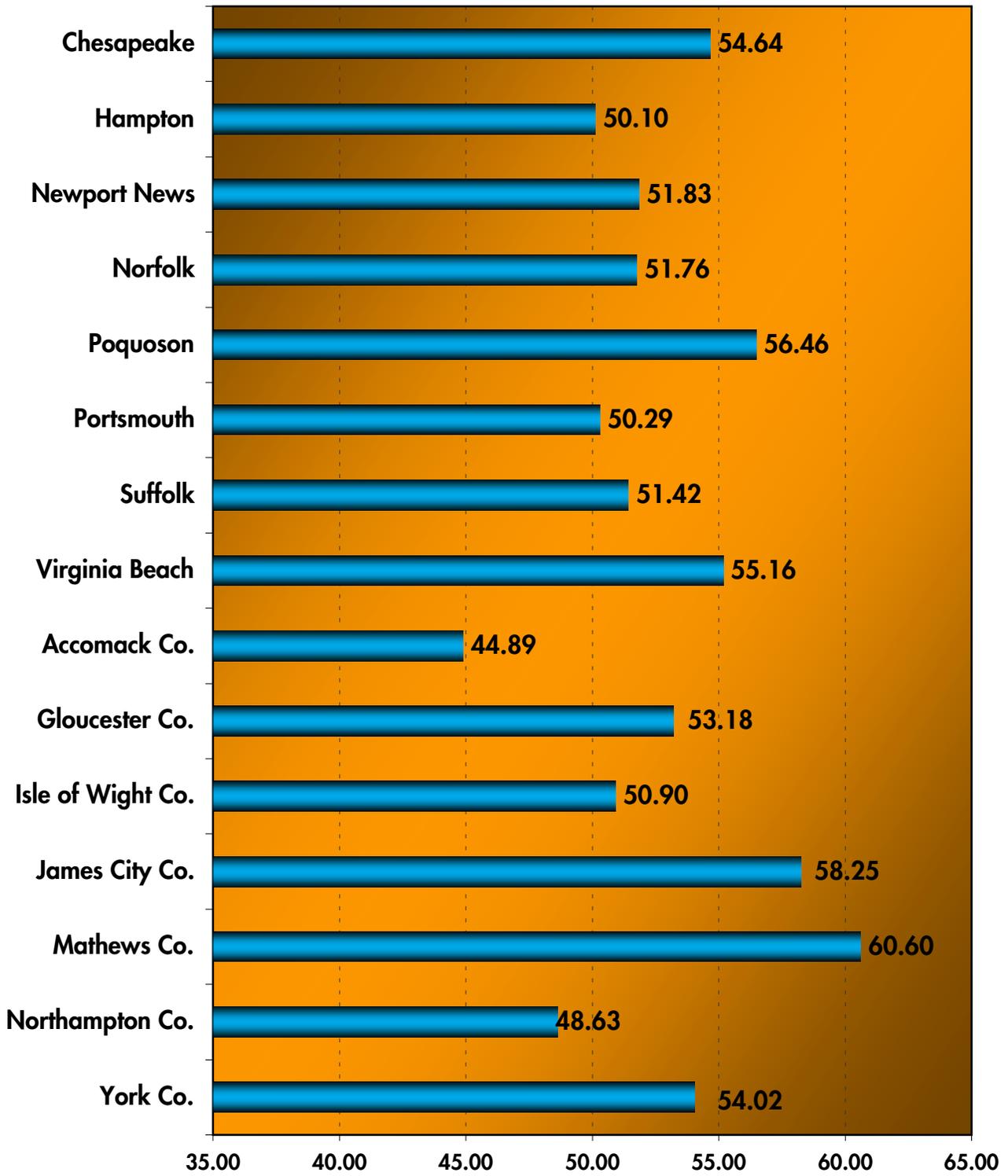
Graph 19 depicts the QLI values for each city or county within the region. The highest QLI (60.60) belongs to the residents of Mathews County, while the lowest is Accomack County (44.89). The average QLI for Hampton Roads is 47.96. In general, cities and counties with the highest average incomes tend to have the highest QLIs, though income is not the only determinant. Plausibly, however, residents of James City County, Poquoson, Virginia Beach, Chesapeake and York County typically are able to purchase or command more of the things individuals usually prefer – better schools, more smoothly flowing traffic, arts and cultural offerings, job opportunities and the like.

Since this is the first year that a QLI has been computed, it provides only a snapshot of the quality of life in the various cities, and in the case of the smallest cities and counties, it is based upon sample sizes as small as 22. Hence, one should not make too much of these data immediately, intriguing as they are. As time passes, however, the QLI data will provide us with increasingly useful information. A change in the QLI over time, in particular, will carry with it the intimation of visible improvement or deterioration in a city's or county's circumstance. Decision makers could choose to ignore such changes, but only at considerable peril. Further, cities whose QLIs consistently are higher (or lower) than those of other cities plausibly should pay attention and reflect on the reasons for this. Upon request, we will supply city-specific data so that municipal leaders can see precisely how their citizens responded to the 12 factors listed above.

<sup>1</sup> The three tiers reflect the relative importance of these factors expressed by the 1,189 poll respondents.

<sup>2</sup> The QLI was constructed by assigning a number, 1 through 4, to each citizen's response to any question on the survey. In each case, the number 4 represents a best-of-all-worlds response ("excellent" or "very satisfied") while a 1 records precisely the opposite ("poor," "very dissatisfied"). Let's consider an example: "How would you rate the overall quality of life in your city or county?" The 114 people polled in the city of Hampton responded with an average 2.63 score – closer to "good" than to "fair" in the middle of the scale. Since this factor is in Tier One (one of the items that residents told us they believed is most important to their lives), it was assigned a weight of six. Tier Two factors were assigned a weight of four and Tier Three factors were assigned a weight of three. Weighted scores for Hampton were aggregated for the 12 questions and then converted to a scale of 100 to make the QLI easier to interpret. Hampton's QLI is 50.10, which is higher than the regional average of 47.96.

**GRAPH 19  
HAMPTON ROADS QUALITY OF LIFE INDEX**

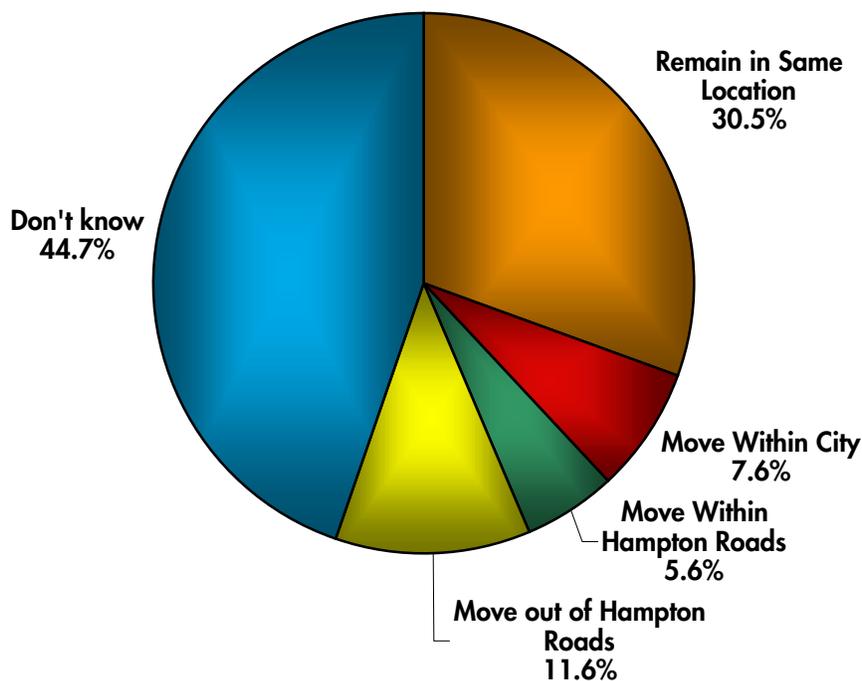


# If You Had The Opportunity, Would You Move?

Ultimately, citizens can vote with their feet – they can move. Fully 44.5 percent of respondents report they would move if the opportunity arose, though about a third of those who say they would move indicated they would stay within the same city. More than one-fifth of the “movers” say they would move to another city within Hampton Roads. The remainder (about 47 percent of those who say they would move and about 21 percent of all those polled) would depart from the region.

**Minority residents are much more likely to say they would move away from Hampton Roads. Thirty-seven percent of Asians/Asian Americans, 30 percent of Hispanics/Latinos and 26 percent of Blacks/African Americans say they would move away from the region if the opportunity arose. Only 18 percent of Whites/Caucasians offer this view.** Once again, it is apparent that the White/Caucasian majority in Hampton Roads tends to see most issues more favorably than our minority citizens and this affects the latter group’s willingness to consider a move to another region.

**GRAPH 20  
IF YOU HAD THE OPPORTUNITY, WOULD YOU...**



These are interesting data in that large majorities of the survey respondents also rate the quality of their lives as excellent or good, and significant proportions of citizens believe their lives have improved over the past five years. Nonetheless, one in five citizens within the region would leave Hampton Roads if the appropriate opportunity presented itself, even though only 3.3 percent of all citizens believe the quality of their lives is poor.

Perhaps we should not be surprised with this result, given the size of our international, port and military communities (whose members tend to exhibit higher mobility) and the flexible nature of the American economy. It is, however, an outcome that should be monitored closely, especially as it relates to the region's minority citizens. In a variety of ways, minority citizens are much more likely to perceive their Hampton Roads environment less favorably than majority Whites/Caucasians and ultimately are more likely to believe that the grass is greener elsewhere. To some extent, this "grass is greener on the other side of the fence" perception is based upon reality, as we demonstrated in the 2003 State of the Region report. There, we found that African Americans in Hampton Roads often do not fare as well economically as African Americans nationally, or African Americans in comparable Atlantic Coast metropolitan areas.

**If the perceptions of Hampton Roads minority residents reflect an actual absence of opportunity, pernicious discrimination or unequal provision of public services, then they clearly indicate a set of problems of major magnitude. On the other hand, these perceptions may represent primarily a lack of knowledge and/or an absence of communication. If that is the case, this is still problematic, but a situation more easily addressed by our citizenry.**

## More Detailed Data And The Future

This State of the Region report would approximate the size of an encyclopedia if we were to publish all the data collected in our survey of the region's citizens. If you are interested in receiving more detailed data classified by city, race, gender and other variables, contact Joshua Behr at [jbehr@odu.edu](mailto:jbehr@odu.edu) or James Koch at [jkoch@odu.edu](mailto:jkoch@odu.edu). Please specify precisely what data you wish to have.

It is our intention to poll the citizenry of Hampton Roads again in 2005 and ultimately to assemble a time series of responses, especially dealing with the QLI, so that we can measure the region's progress over time.

