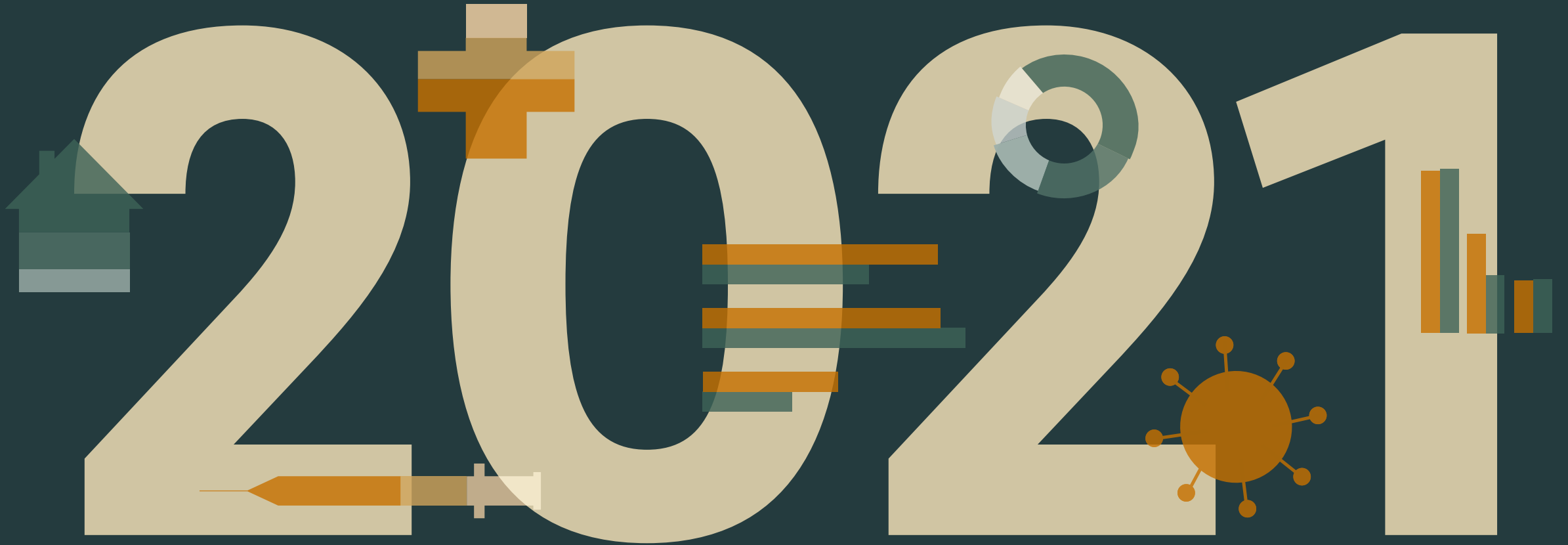


GULF SOUTH INDEX





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



AS SOCIETY MOVES toward conquering the worst pandemic in more than 100 years, the behaviors of Americans and changes in their attitudes are coming into focus. What has begun to emerge is a faint sense that a resurgence is in the offing, and that the road ahead is smoother than the one we've been on for the past year.

This 2021 Gulf South Index report is a high-tech measuring stick, delving into the minds of Gulf South residents and those around the country, offering insights on lifestyle trends, trust issues and general views on the pandemic a year after the notorious COVID-19 virus reared its ugly head. The index is the product of a cooperative research project between The Ehrhardt Group and Causeway Solutions. The U.S. Gulf South is defined as Louisiana, Mississippi, Coastal Alabama and the Florida Panhandle.



LIFESTYLE

"The pent-up demand seems very clear. People aren't necessarily ready to get on an airplane, but they're ready for a road trip."

THE OPTIMISM BAROMETER is pointing upward, both nationally and in the Gulf South. When respondents were asked if 2021 would be a better year for them personally than 2020, 69% of those polled nationwide said "yes." For the Gulf South, 60% answered yes. Only 8% nationwide and 10% in the Gulf South answered "no." The rest answered "about the same."

In July of 2020, the audience was asked if the second half of 2020 would be better than the first. Only 40% of the U.S. audience and 44% of the Gulf South audience said "yes."

Although the most recent results reflect a significant increase in optimism for all, respondents nationwide were more optimistic than those in the Gulf South, which is a change from last year when southerners exhibited a brighter outlook.

"The rest of the country is more optimistic than we are now," said Marc Ehrhardt, president and partner of The Ehrhardt Group. "That being said, 60% of the people in the Gulf South are optimistic. I think that says something after the year we've had."

Income levels impact the optimism scale. For both nationwide and Gulf South audiences, there is a large gap of optimism between those who earn \$25,000 a year or less and higher earners who rake in over \$150,000. Only 57% of the lower waged workers were optimistic, compared to 80% of those with higher wages.

The overall improving outlook is impacting the travel and food service industries. A growing number of people are eating out and socializing with friends and family.

Many are making travel plans for the summer, mostly driving trips.

More than 50% of respondents both nationwide and in the Gulf South say they are planning a road trip within the next three months. This compares to about 40% last year.

"The pent-up demand seems very clear," Ehrhardt said. "People aren't necessarily ready to get on an airplane, but they're ready for a road trip."

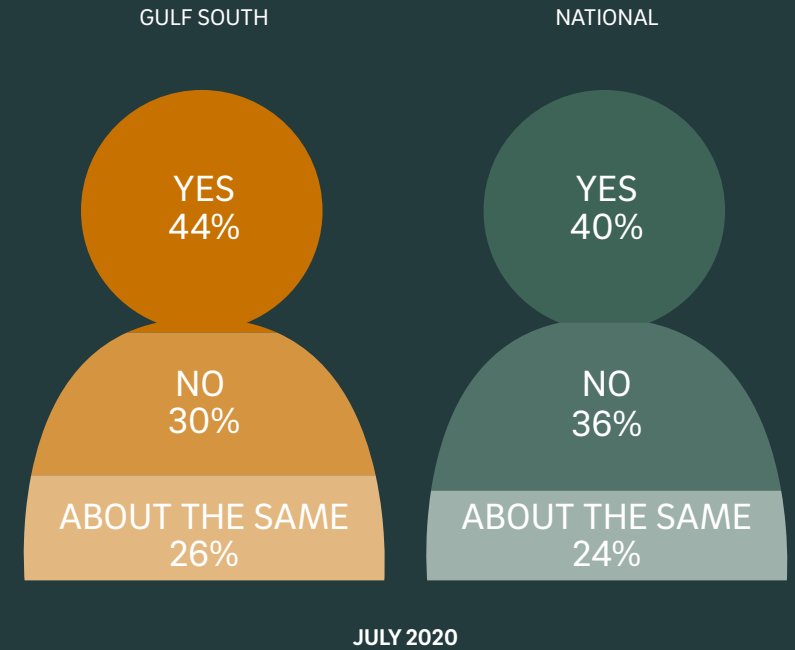
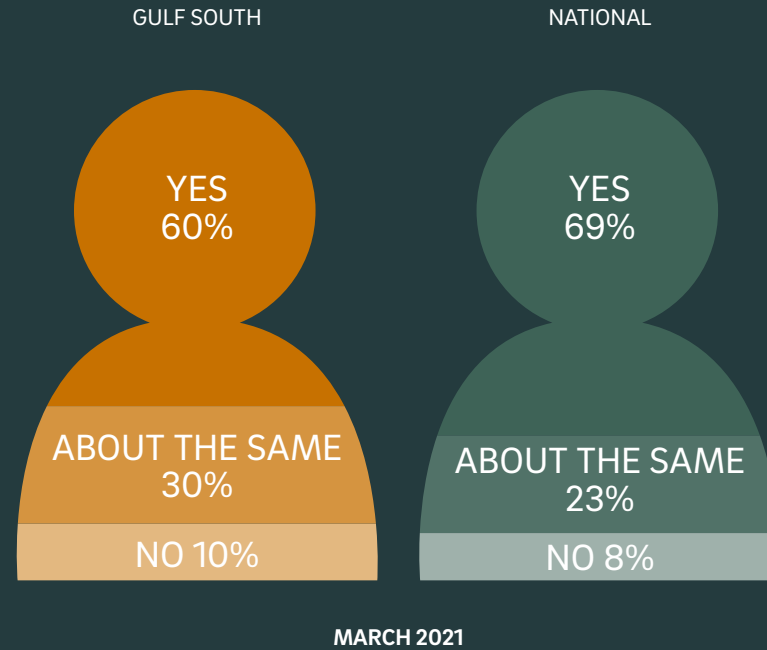
When it comes to socializing, 31% of the people in the Gulf South said they are already doing so, versus about 20% in the U.S. When asked about dining indoors at restaurants, 31% of those in the Gulf South said they were doing so, compared to 24% nationwide.

In the Gulf South, people are more concerned about losing personal freedoms – 39% fear that – than contracting the virus, which comes in at 26%. Nationwide, a much higher number – 37% - feared getting COVID-19 and 36% saying they feared loss of freedom.

On personal finance, Gulf South residents are experiencing more difficulty making ends meet than the country as a whole. When asked to describe their financial situation, 42% in the Gulf South said times are tough and they're having trouble paying bills. The nationwide number is 29%.

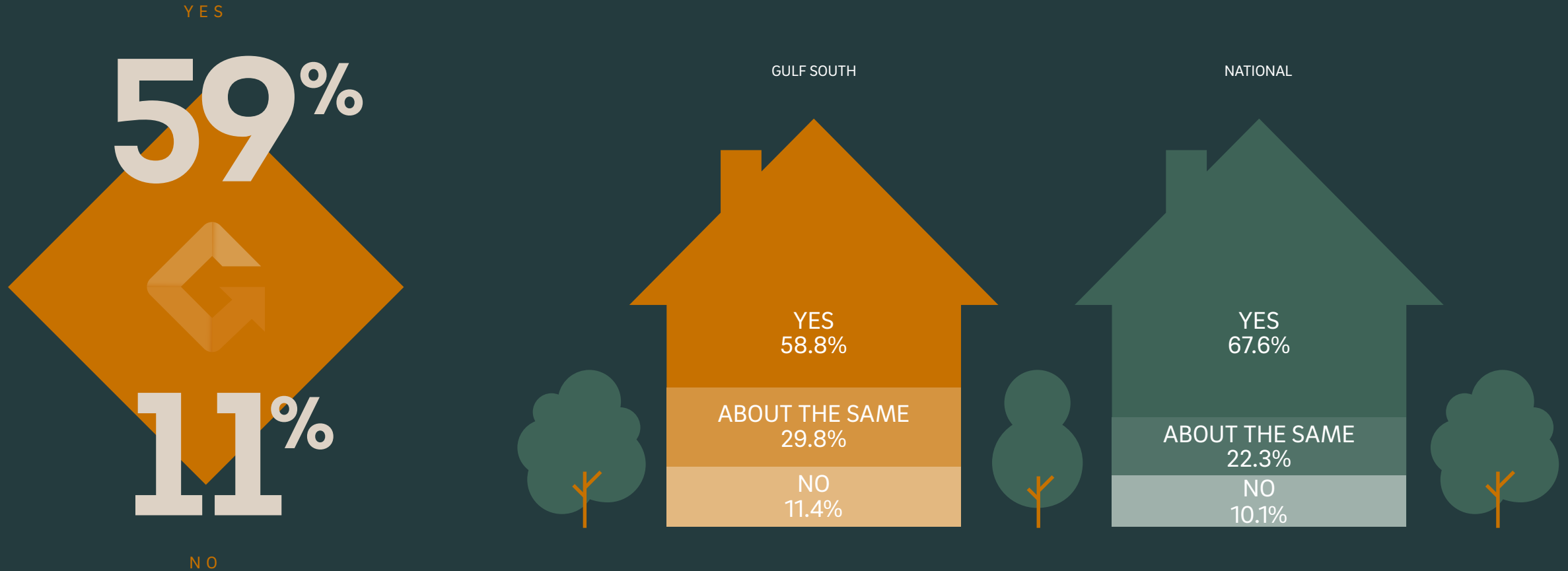
Only 17% of Gulf South residents said they were doing ok financially and had money in the bank, compared to 24% for the U.S. as a whole.

DO YOU BELIEVE THAT 2021 WILL BE A BETTER YEAR FOR YOU PERSONALLY THAN 2020?



Both audiences saw a precipitous drop in optimism between March and July of 2020, but both audiences are rebounding now. National optimism has increased and surpassed the Gulf South optimism.

DO YOU BELIEVE THAT 2021 WILL BE A BETTER YEAR FOR YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITY THAN 2020?

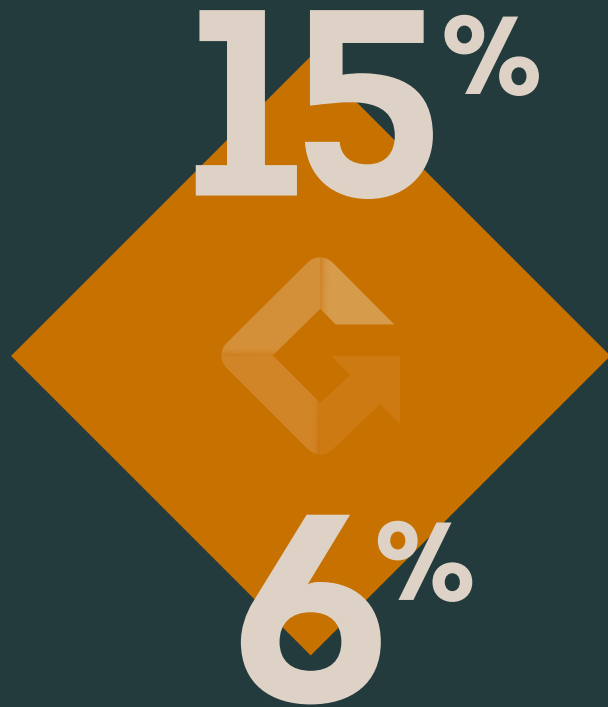


Both audiences saw a precipitous drop in optimism between March and July of 2020, but both audiences are rebounding now. National optimism has increased and surpassed the Gulf South optimism.

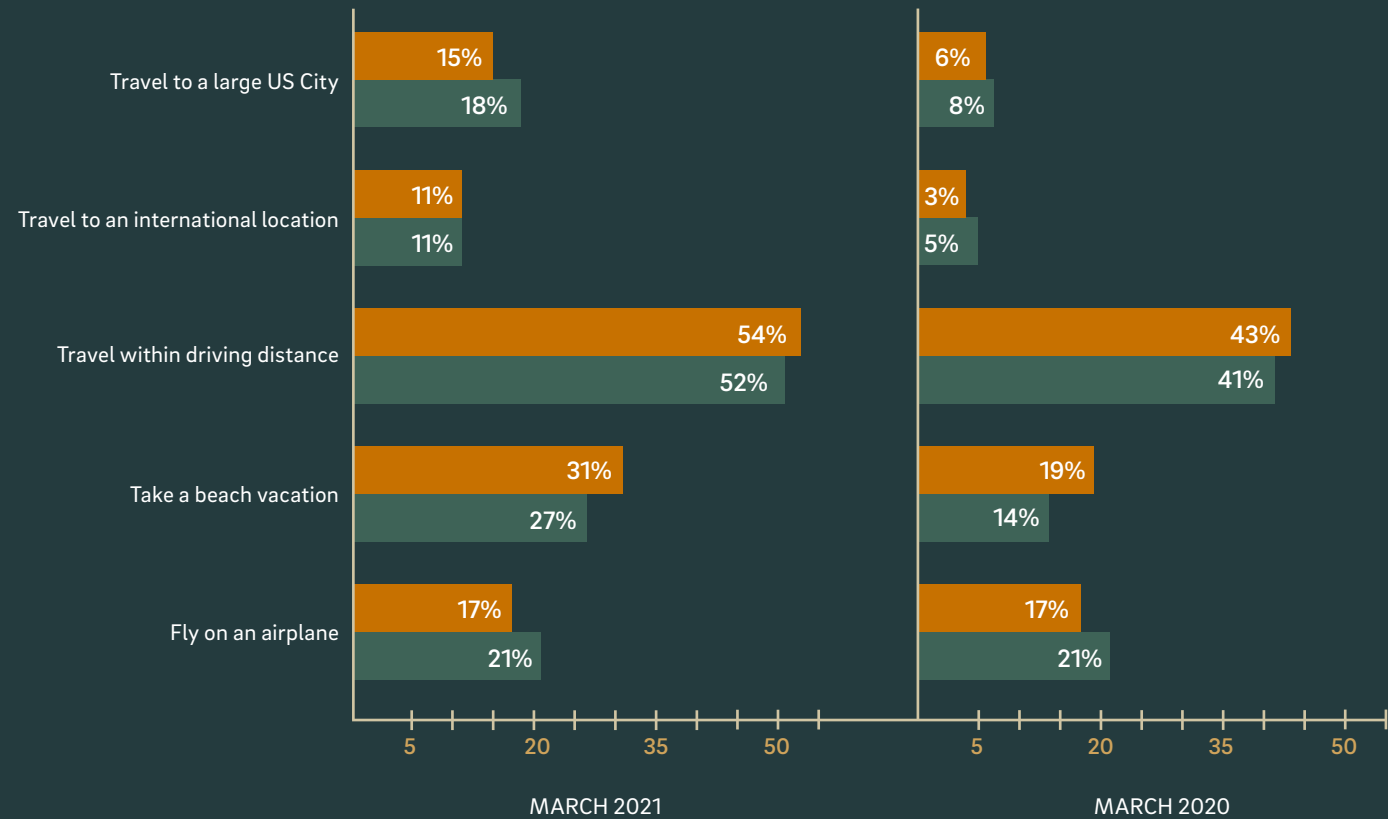
THINKING AHEAD FOR THE NEXT THREE MONTHS, HOW LIKELY ARE YOU TO DO EACH OF THE FOLLOWING ACTIVITIES?



TRAVEL TO A LARGE US CITY - 2021



TRAVEL TO A LARGE US CITY - 2020

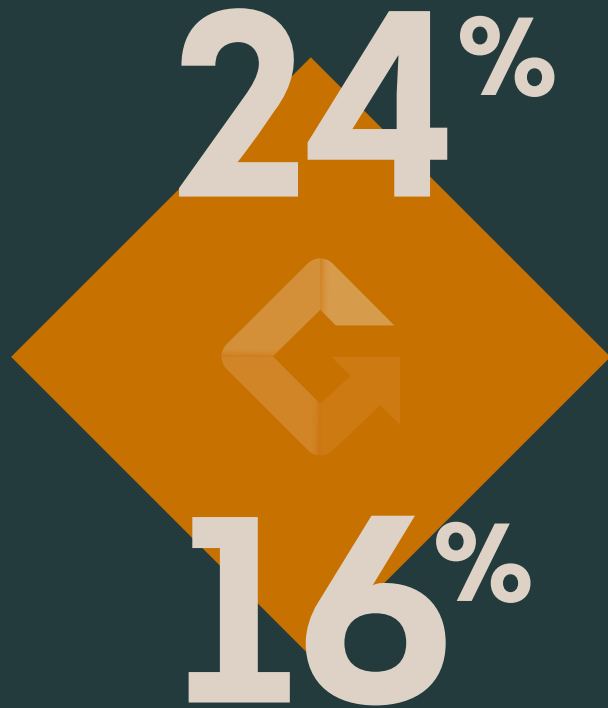


"Pent-up demand seems very clear. People aren't necessarily ready to get on an airplane, but they're ready for a road trip."

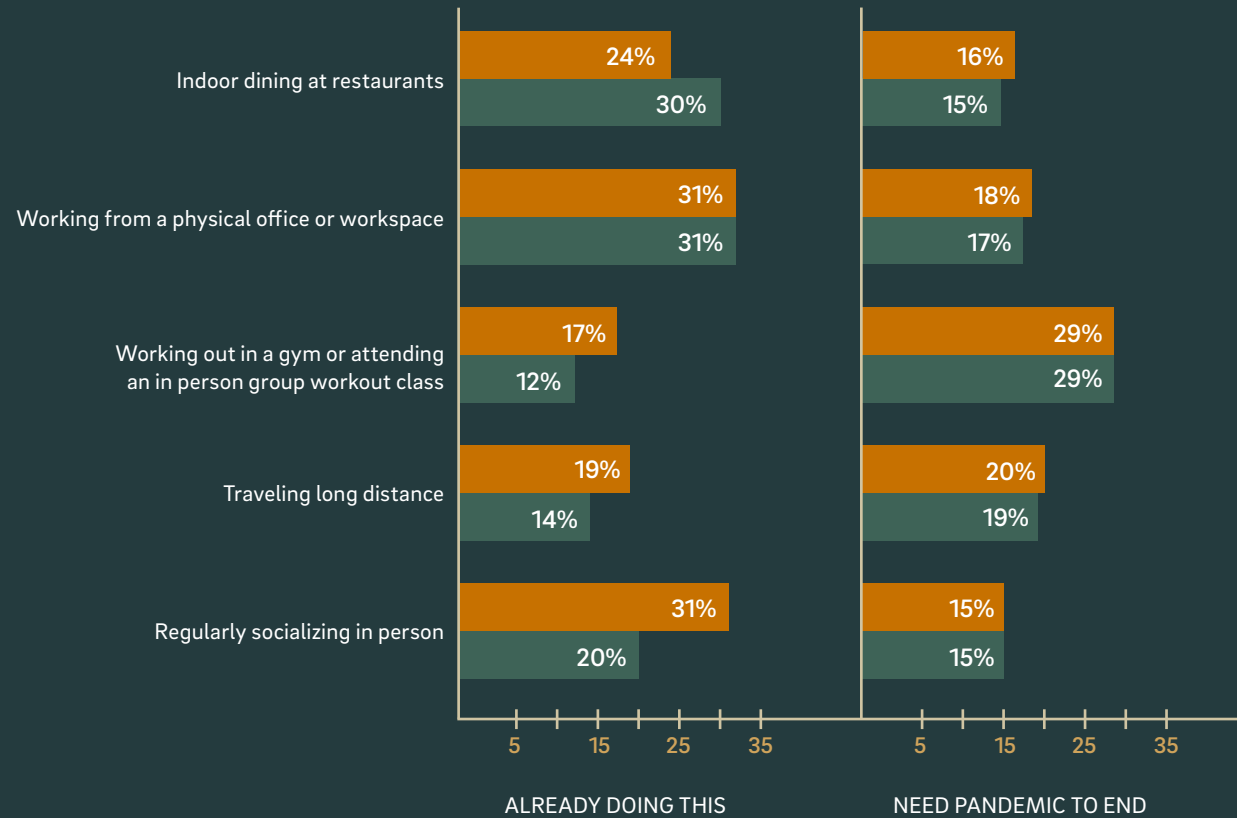
IF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC WERE TO CONTINUE TO EXIST IN ITS CURRENT FORM, AT WHAT POINT WOULD YOU CONSIDER RETURNING TO THE FOLLOWING ACTIVITIES?



RESTAURANTS - ALREADY DOING THIS



RESTAURANTS - NEED PANDEMIC TO END



People are eating out, going back to the office and socializing with family and friends. Indoor dining and socializing is happening markedly higher now in the Gulf South than nationally.

OF THE FOLLOWING SERVICES AND BEHAVIORS YOU MAY HAVE ADOPTED DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, WHICH DO YOU INTEND TO MAINTAIN WHEN THE PANDEMIC ENDS?

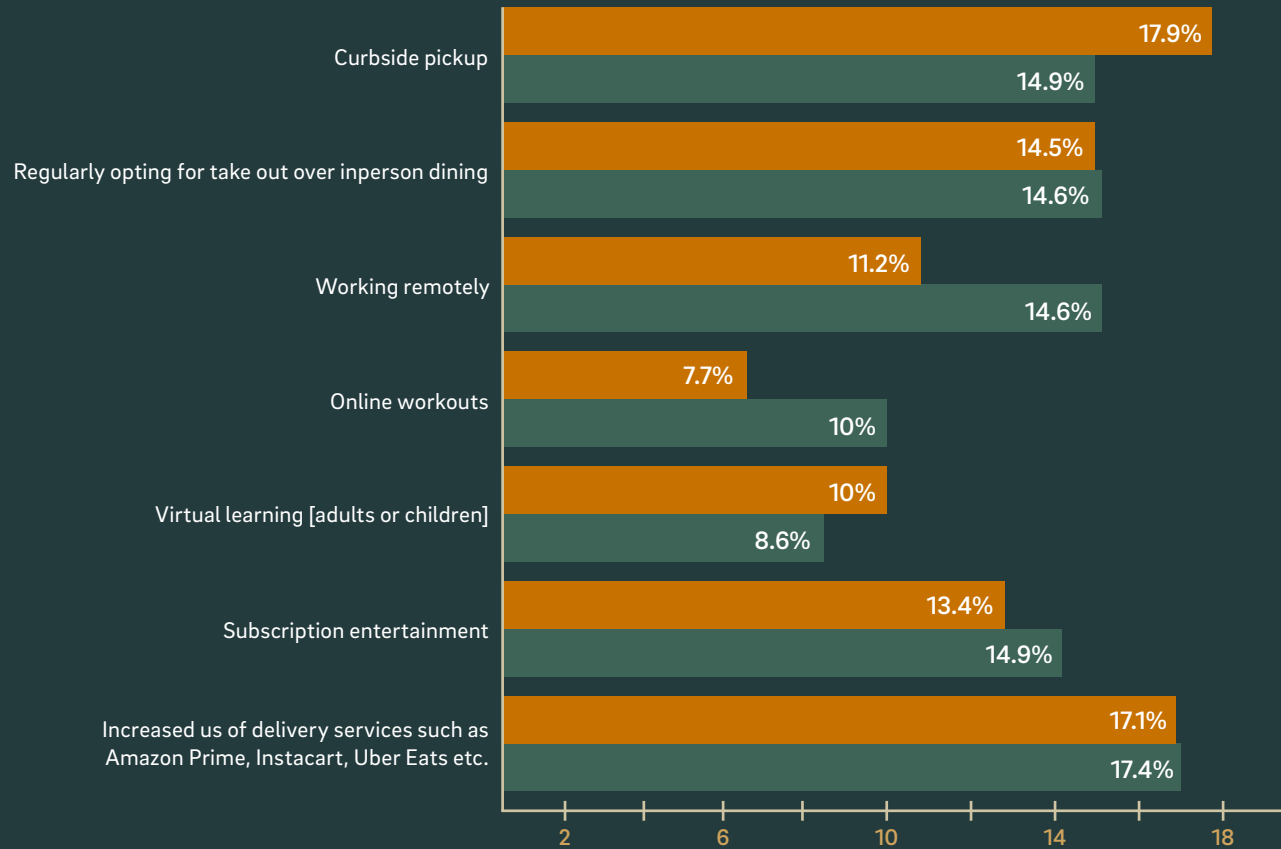
GULF COAST
NATIONAL

CURBSIDE PICKUP - GULF SOUTH

18%

16%

CURBSIDE PICKUP - NATIONAL

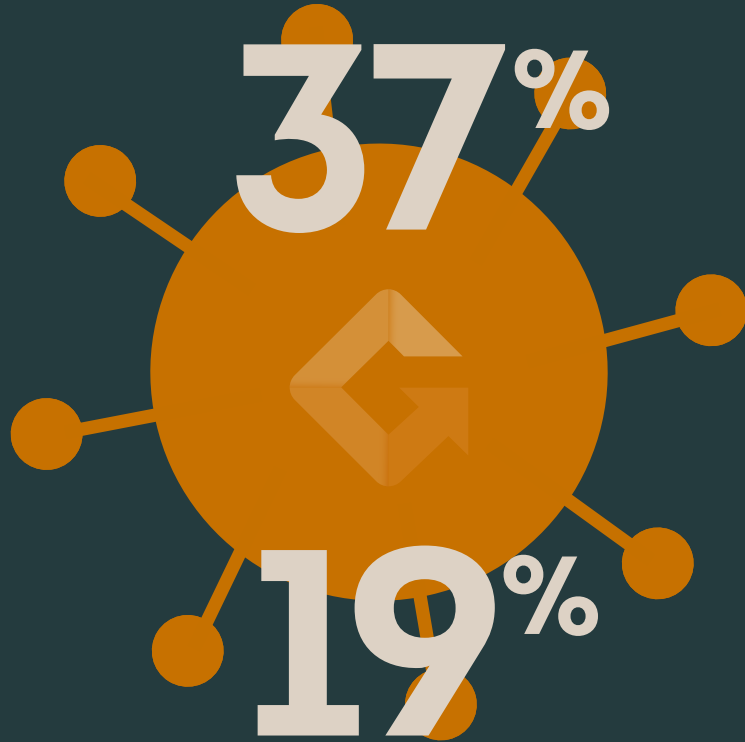


Both audiences saw a precipitous drop in optimism between March and July of 2020, but both audiences are rebounding now. National optimism has increased and surpassed the Gulf South optimism.

HOW MUCH DO YOU WORRY ABOUT THE FOLLOWING:

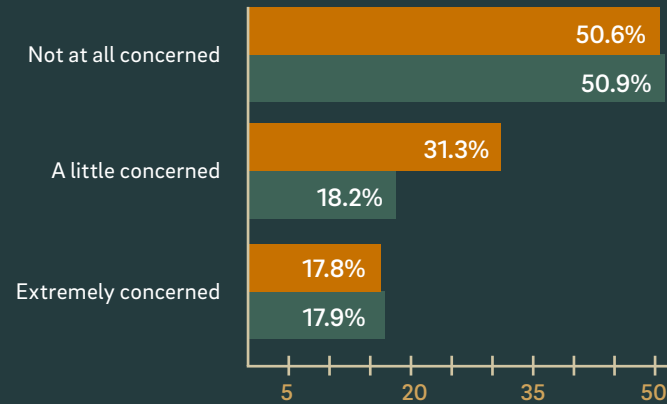
GULF COAST
NATIONAL

GETTING COVID - EXTREMELY CONCERNED

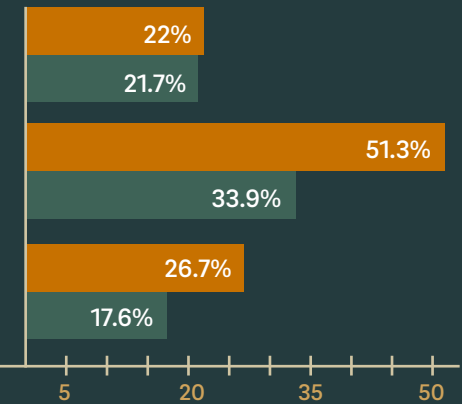


GETTING COVID - NOT AT ALL CONCERNED

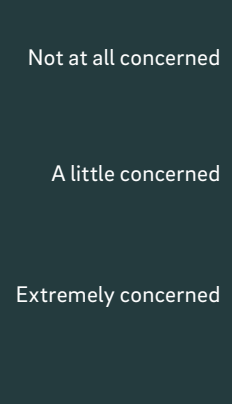
LOSING YOUR JOB



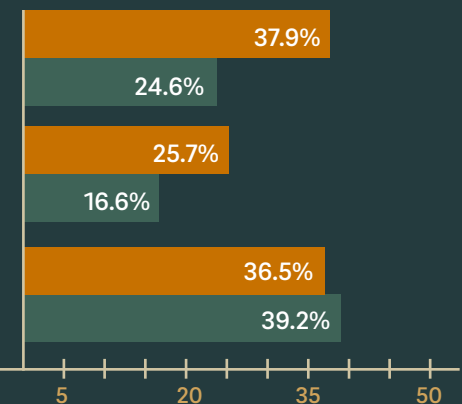
CYBER-ATTACKS



GETTING COVID



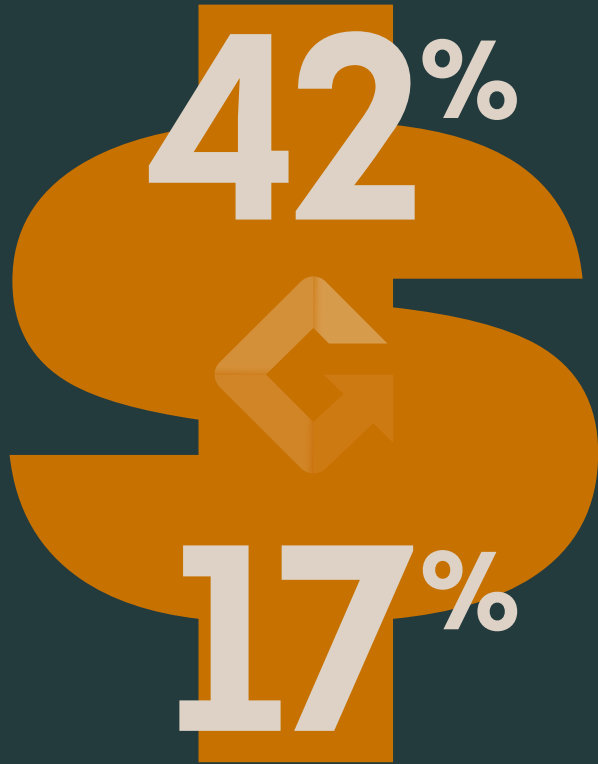
LOSING YOUR FREEDOMS AS A CITIZEN



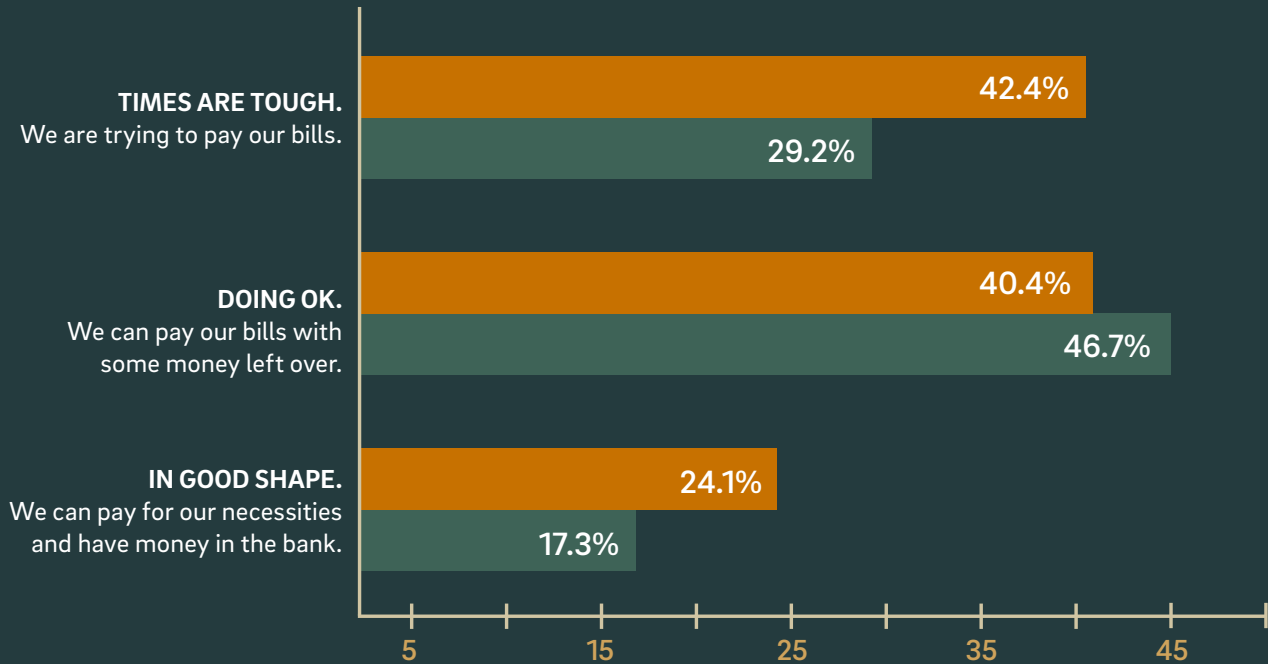
WHICH STATEMENT BEST DESCRIBES YOUR CURRENT PERSONAL FINANCIAL SITUATION?

GULF COAST
NATIONAL

TIMES ARE TOUGH



IN GOOD SHAPE



Nationally, people are making ends meet much more so than in the Gulf South. In the south, 42% of people said times are tough and they're having trouble paying bills. The nationwide number is 29%.

HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION IN YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITY?

VERY GOOD

38%

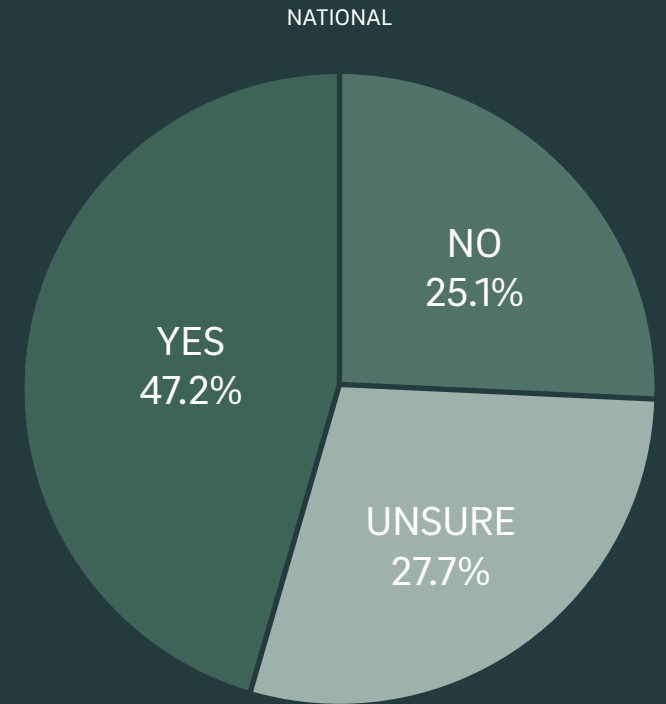
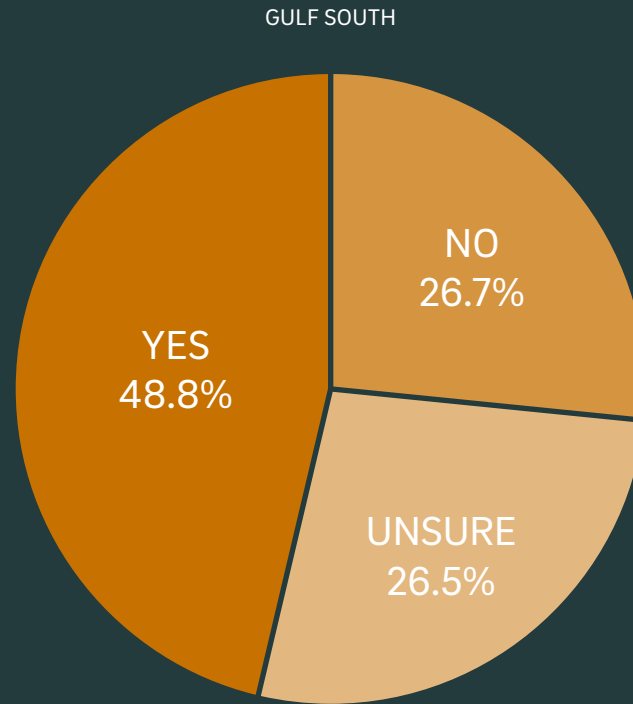
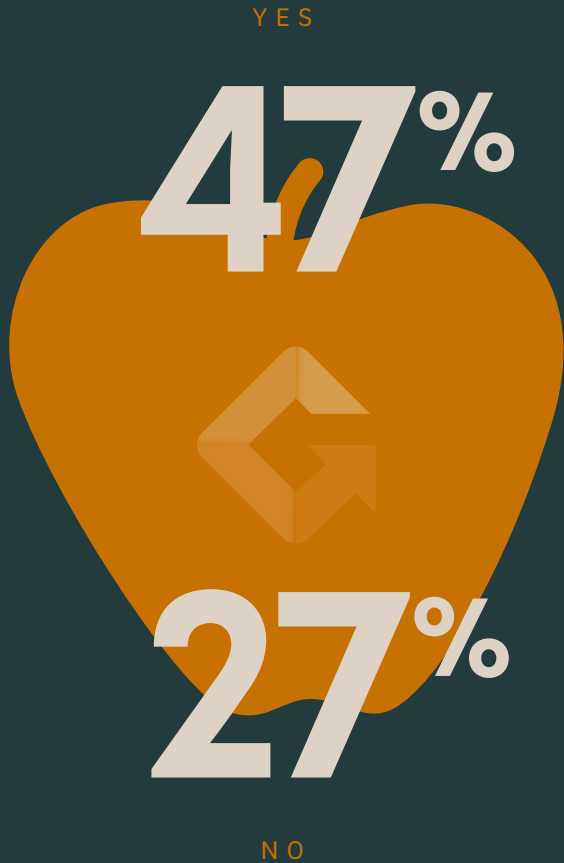



11%



VERY BAD

DO YOU BELIEVE THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN YOUR COMMUNITY ARE SUCCESSFULLY NAVIGATING THE CHALLENGES PRESENTED BY THE CORONAVIRUS SITUATION?





TRUST

"Businesses have taken steps to garner trust. You have to go out and earn someone's trust. Businesses more than anyone else have gone out and done that during the pandemic."

FAIR AND ACCURATE dissemination of information is a hot button issue. The index reveals a higher level of trust in local news sources and businesses than in national news outlets and governments.

More than two-thirds in the Gulf South trust local news to present information accurately, while less than half have trust in social media. Nationally, trust in social media is six points less than in the Gulf South.

"The headline here is 'being local and knowing local is more important than ever,'" Ehrhardt said. "What we see is that people are looking in larger numbers toward local sources for information."

Elected officials are not highly trusted throughout the country. Only 49% of people in the U.S. and 46% in the Gulf South have trust in information from government. Citizens have more confidence in information they receive from businesses and from their employers – around 60% for those in both the Gulf South and nationally – compared to social media and elected officials, which measured about 50%.

"That's a shift that's been happening for a while. It's very different from 20 or 30 years ago where people would look to their leadership for information. People would take what their elected officials were telling them more or less at face value and assume it was accurate. Those days are long, long gone," Ehrhardt said.

In the Gulf South, 62% said they trust the business community's information, with the number rising to 67% nationwide.

"We've seen businesses take a proactive approach to help people preserve their jobs, work at home and remain on salary," Causeway Solutions CEO Bill Skelly said, explaining the high level of trust in the business community.

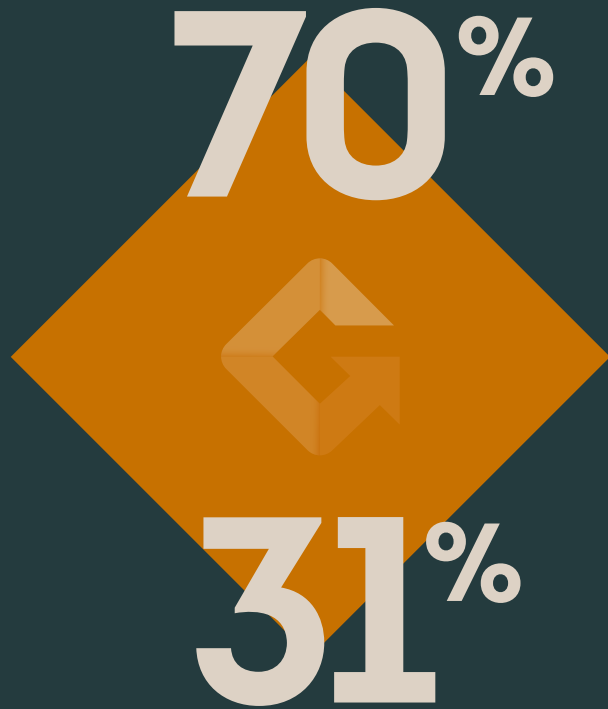
"Businesses have taken steps to garner trust. You have to go out and earn someone's trust. Businesses, more than anyone else, have gone out and done that during the pandemic."

The trust issue is significant as efforts intensify to prompt those not planning to receive the COVID-19 vaccine that doing so is the way to beat the pandemic. Employers and local businesses, both of whom are viewed as more trustworthy than elected officials, are more likely to have success in convincing skeptics to get vaccinated.

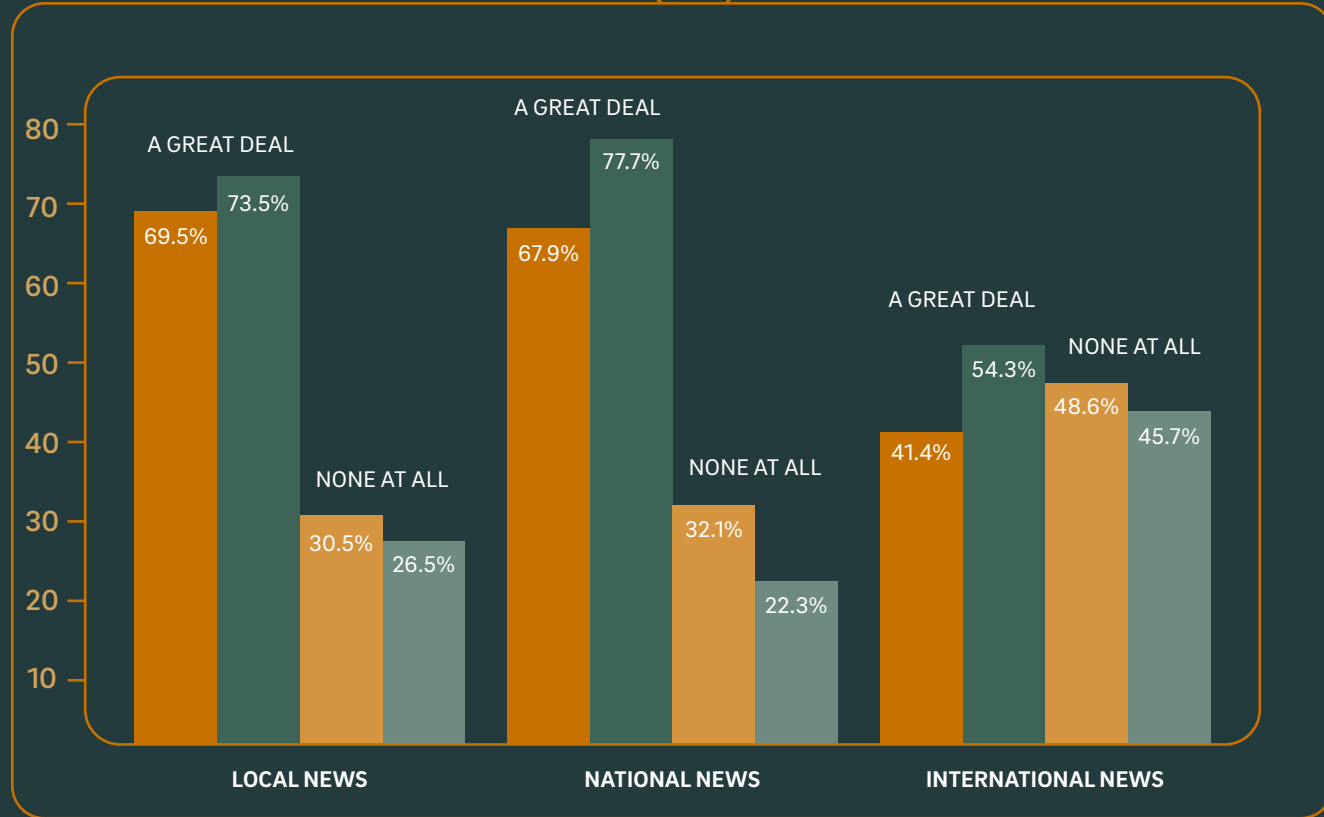
HOW MUCH ATTENTION ARE YOU CURRENTLY PAYING TO EACH OF THE FOLLOWING?

GULF COAST
NATIONAL

LOCAL NEWS - A GREAT DEAL



LOCAL NEWS - NONE AT ALL



National audiences pay a lot of attention to national news, 20 percentage points more than those in the Gulf South. The Gulf South shows a high level of mistrust in the national news.

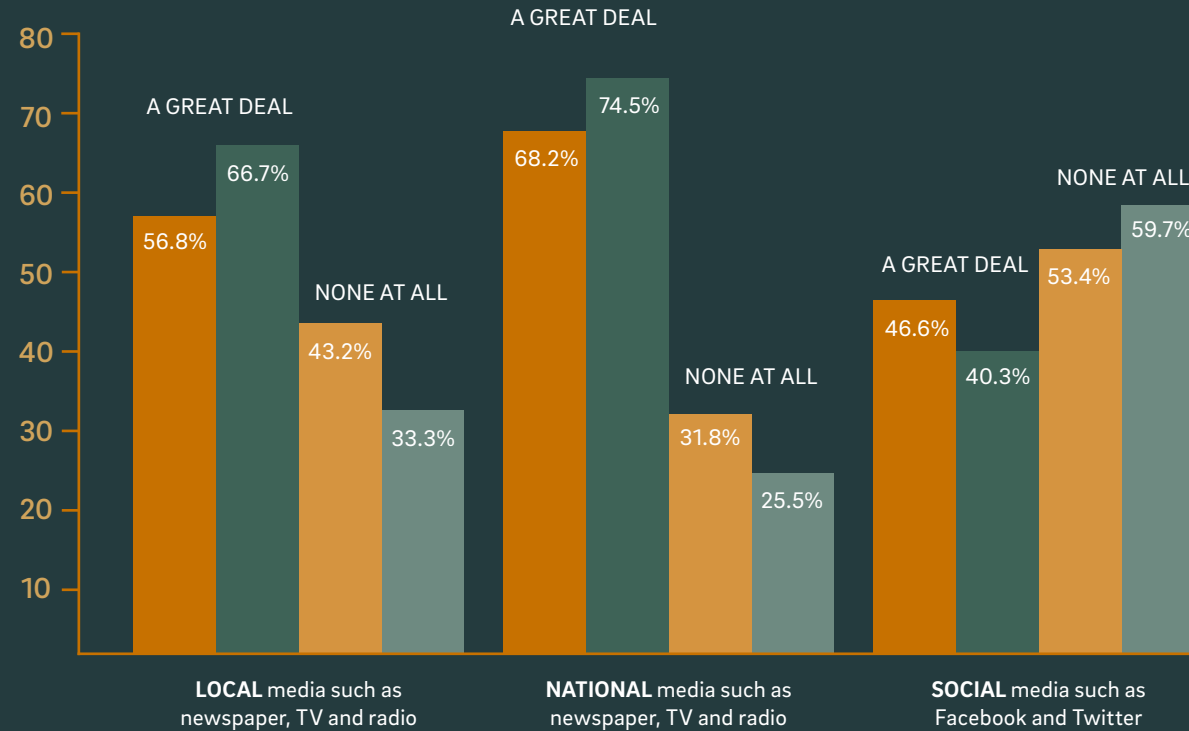
IN GENERAL HOW MUCH TRUST AND CONFIDENCE DO YOU HAVE IN THE FOLLOWING WHEN IT COMES TO REPORTING THE NEWS FULLY, ACCURATELY AND FAIRLY?

GULF COAST
NATIONAL

LOCAL - A GREAT DEAL



LOCAL - NONE AT ALL

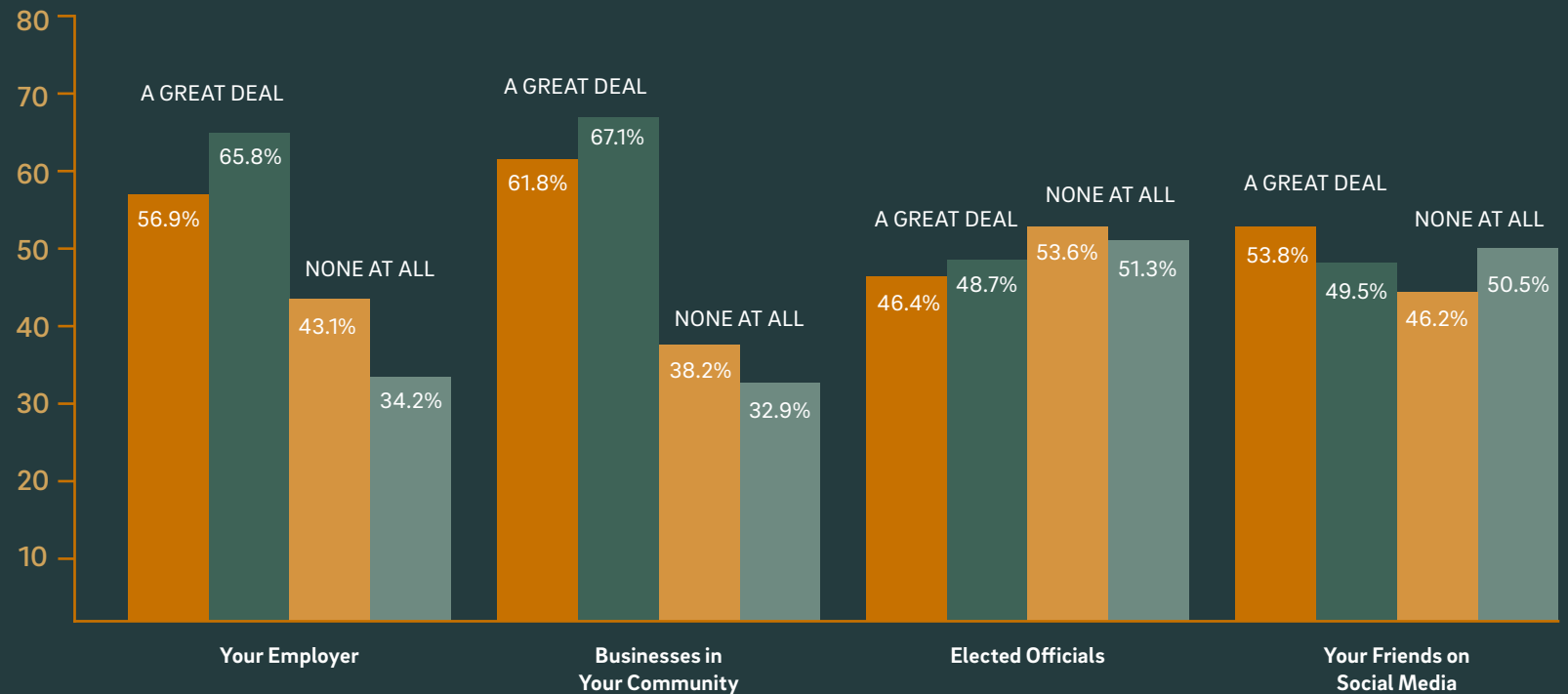
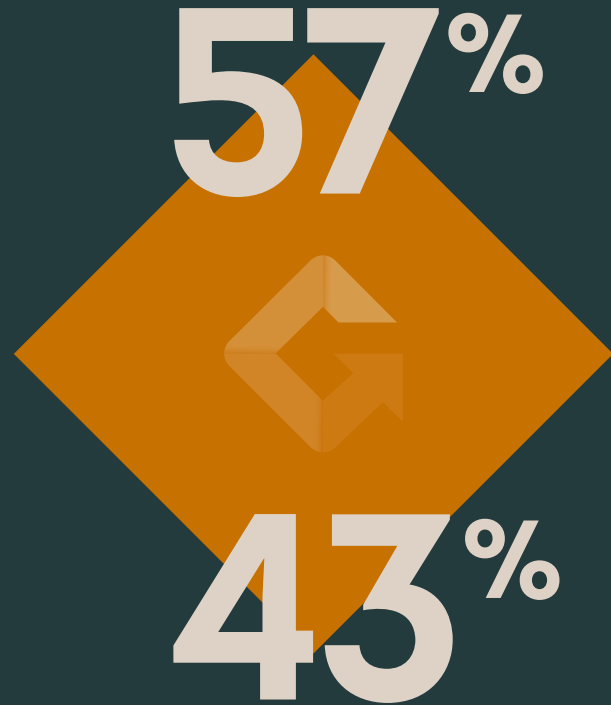


National audiences have higher levels of trust in local and national media and less trust in social media when compared to the Gulf South. In both audiences, social media has the highest levels of mistrust in accuracy and fairness.

IN GENERAL, HOW MUCH CONFIDENCE DO YOU HAVE IN THE INFORMATION ABOUT NEWS AND CURRENT EVENTS THAT YOU RECEIVE FROM THE FOLLOWING SOURCES?

GULF COAST
NATIONAL

YOUR EMPLOYER - A GREAT DEAL



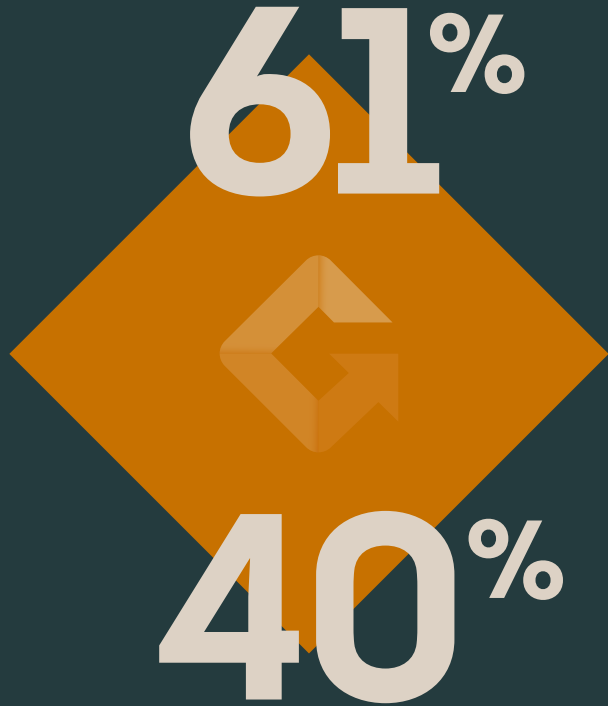
YOUR EMPLOYER - NONE AT ALL

Gulf South audiences trust their friends on social media four percentage points more than national audiences and at the same level they trust organizations and groups they follow. This means the content created by businesses and organizations has a higher level of trust and visibility with audiences in the Gulf South.

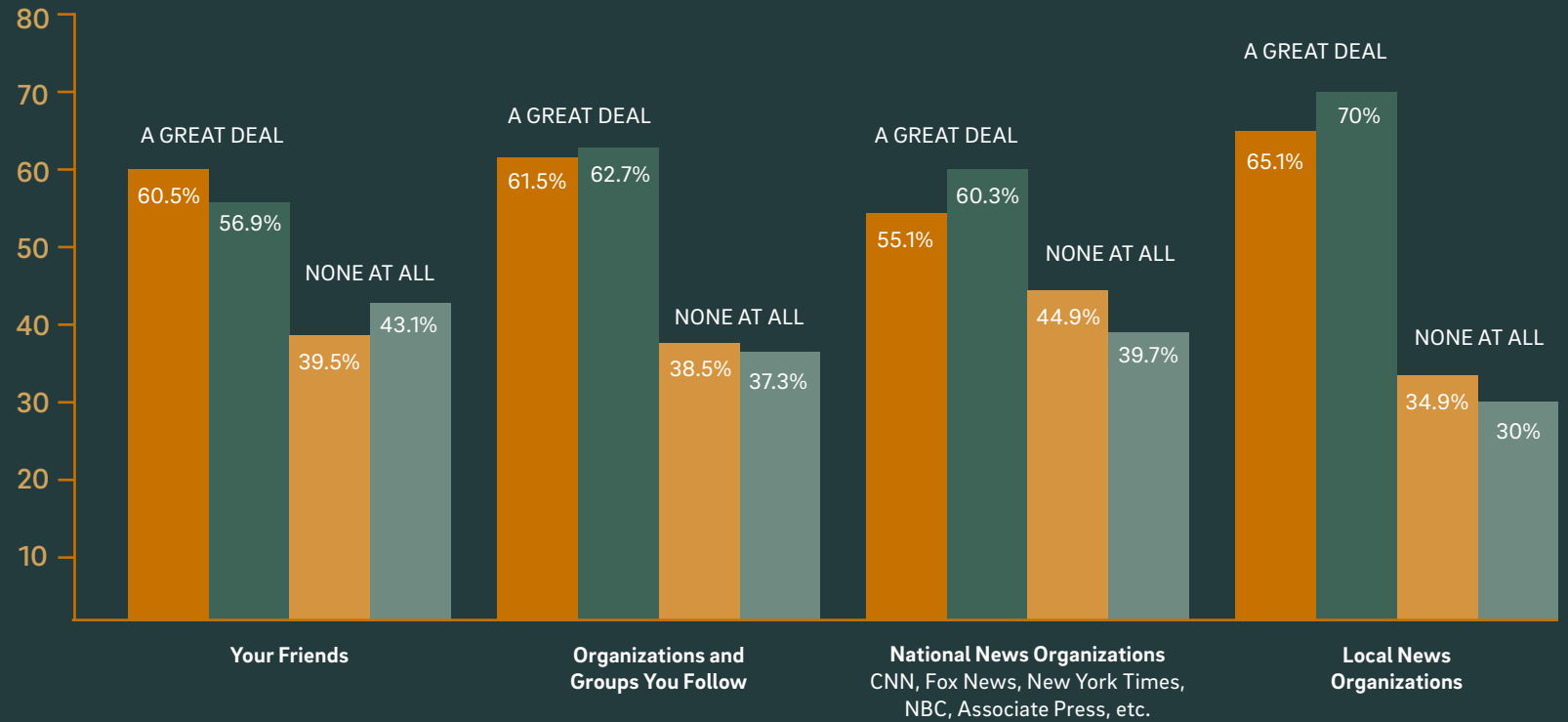
IN GENERAL, HOW MUCH CONFIDENCE DO YOU HAVE IN THE INFORMATION ABOUT NEWS AND CURRENT EVENTS THAT YOU RECEIVE FROM THE FOLLOWING SOURCES ON SOCIAL MEDIA?

GULF COAST
NATIONAL

YOUR FRIENDS - A GREAT DEAL



YOUR FRIENDS - NONE AT ALL



Elected officials are not highly trusted, falling below 50% confidence with Gulf South and national audiences.



"I just think the Gulf South is in a way much more resilient and more likely to roll with the punches to get through tougher times. On the flip side of that, this nonchalant nature during a crisis leads to a lower willingness or a lower desire to take the vaccine."

BOTH REGIONALLY AND NATIONALLY, people were far less concerned about the pandemic getting worse in March of 2021 than in July of 2020. In July, around 79% said they feared the situation was getting worse. The March numbers show 20% nationally and 26% in the Gulf South think the crisis is worsening.

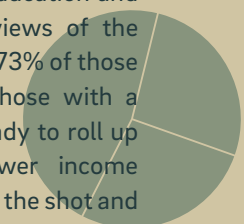
The reason the Gulf South trails the rest of the nation in optimism may be because southerners did not share the same level of concern about the virus from the get-go.

"The fact that since the outset of this, we (in the Gulf South) have always remained less concerned than the rest of the country when it comes to the pandemic reflects the kind of attitude that exists here compared to the rest of the country," Skelly said.

"I just think the Gulf South is in a way much more resilient and more likely to roll with the punches to get through tougher times. On the flip side of that, this nonchalant nature during a crisis leads to a lower willingness or a lower desire to get the vaccine."

The Gulf South lags behind the rest of the nation in vaccine willingness, although steadily changing attitudes make this a moving target. Nationally, 68% of respondents said they want the vaccine, compared to 51% in the Gulf South. A significant number remain undecided.

Demographics such as gender, race, age, education and income have a bearing on the public's views of the COVID-19 vaccine. Our research found that 73% of those who are college educated and 68% of those with a household income over \$100,000 were ready to roll up their sleeves for the shot. Among lower income households, 31% were more likely to decline the shot and 29% were uncertain.



Black women, specifically, are the least likely to say they will get the vaccine with only 38% in the Gulf South and 51% nationwide saying yes.

HOW CONCERNED ARE YOU ABOUT THE CORONAVIRUS SITUATION TODAY IN THE UNITED STATES?

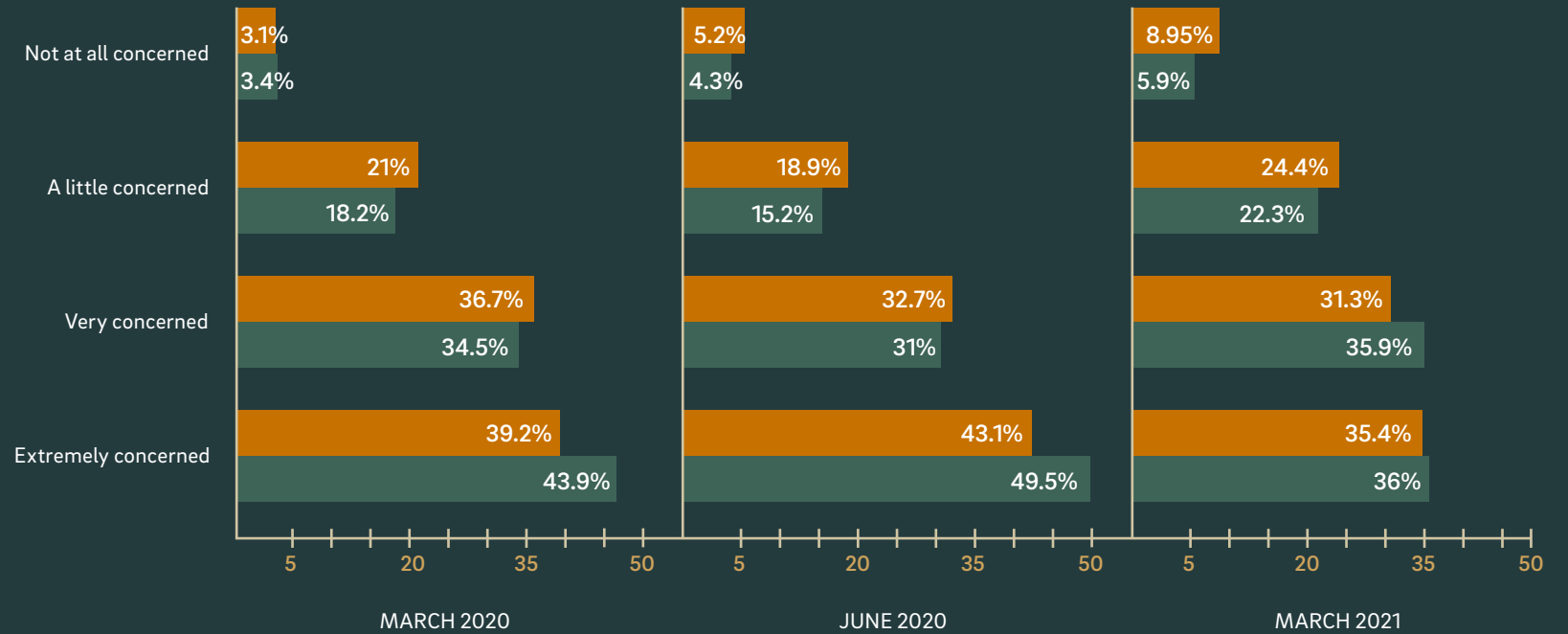
GULF COAST
NATIONAL

EXTREMELY CONCERNED

35%

9%

NOT CONCERNED

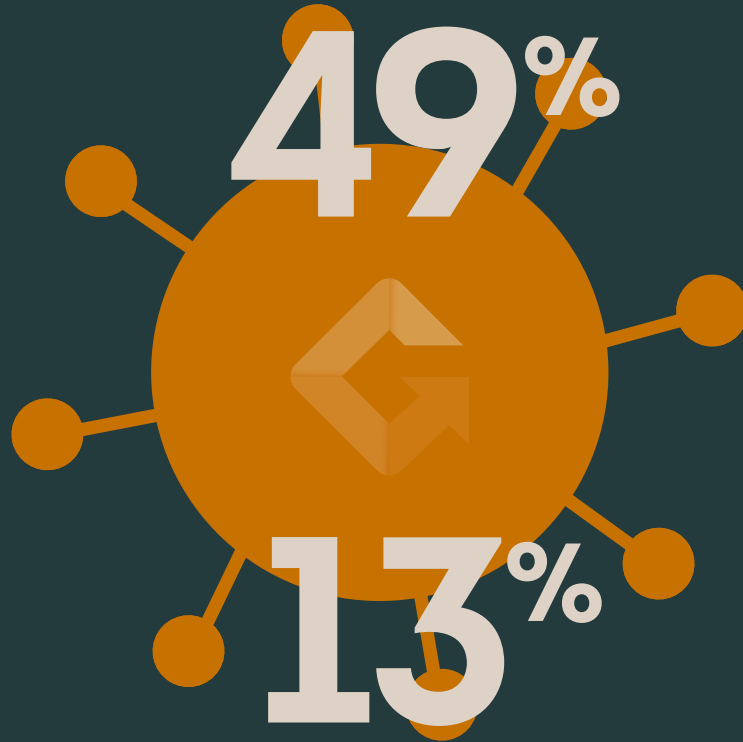


The Gulf South is less concerned today about COVID than the national audience and has been so since the pandemic began in March of 2020.

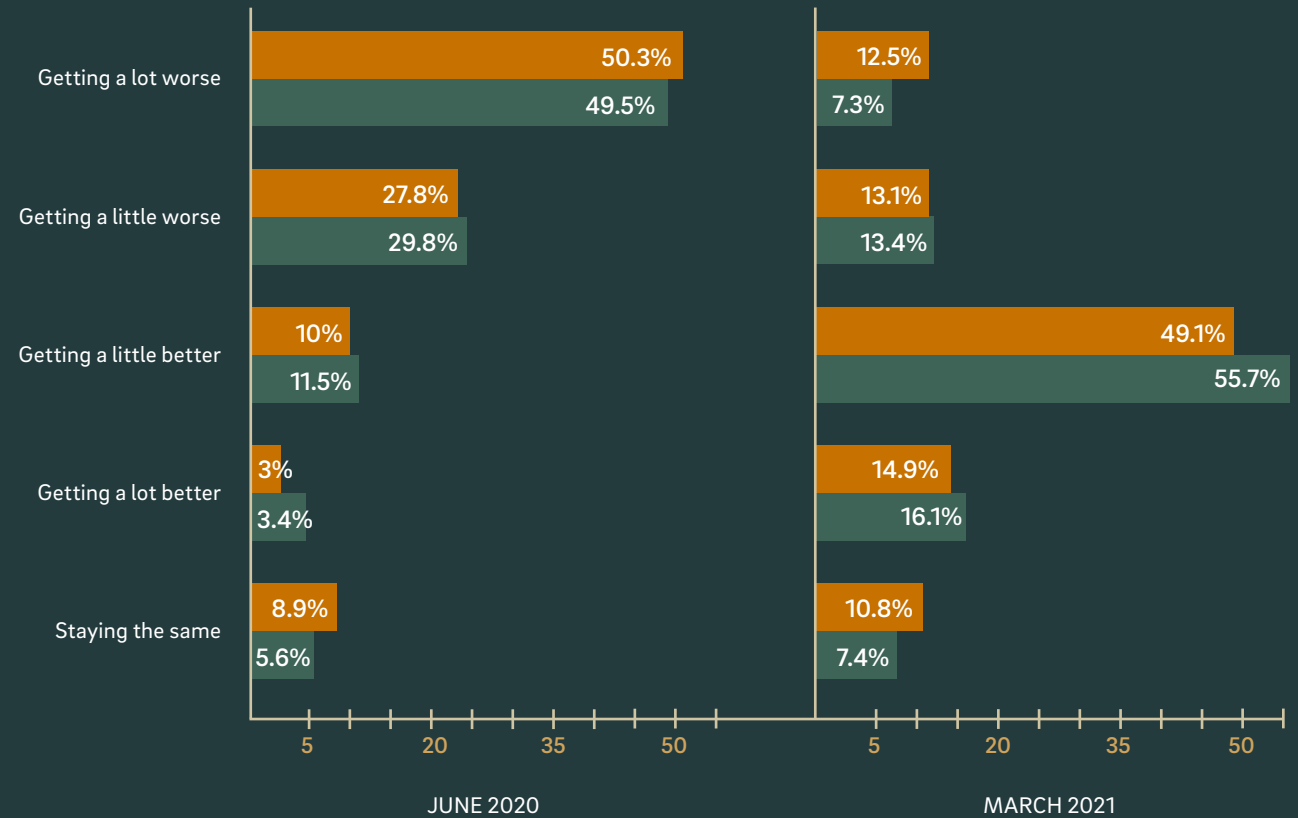
WHAT IS YOUR IMPRESSION OF THE CORONAVIRUS SITUATION TODAY IN THE UNITED STATES? IS IT...

GULF COAST
NATIONAL

GETTING A LITTLE BETTER

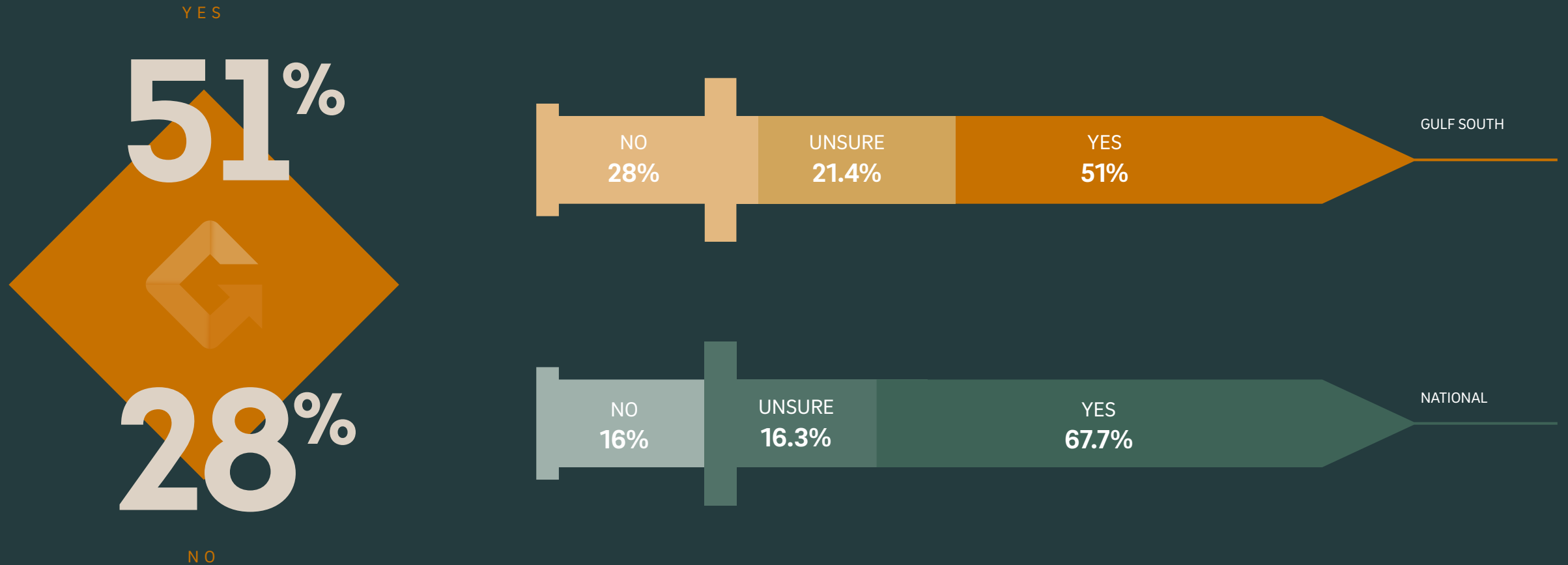


GETTING A LITTLE WORSE



Both regionally and nationally, there is a significant drop in concern about COVID-19 getting worse.

IF AN FDA-APPROVED VACCINE TO PREVENT YOU FROM CONTRACTING COVID-19 WERE AVAILABLE TODAY AT NO COST TO YOU, WOULD YOU AGREE TO BE VACCINATED?



In the Gulf South, nearly 30% of people say they will not get the vaccine. Employers and local businesses, both of whom are viewed as more trustworthy than elected officials, are more likely to have success in convincing skeptics to get vaccinated.



CONCLUSIONS

"I think the Gulf South was able to navigate this pandemic well. I think we're positioned to come out of this really strong. I think the Gulf South is poised for a great decade ahead."

FROM THE FINDINGS in this report, we are able to begin sketching a roadmap to what our post pandemic existence will be, both as a nation and as a very distinct Gulf South region of a country that shouldered a heavy burden during the worldwide health crisis.

We're beginning to see more people emerging from their pandemic cocoons, heading out to restaurants and partaking in social activities. This behavior is fueling a sense of optimism and a belief that normalcy is just around the corner.

For a myriad of reasons, the Gulf South is emerging from the pandemic in better shape than some other areas of the country. Many students have been back in the classroom for quite a while, people are out and about, and the overall economic picture is getting brighter, although some in the region remain concerned about making ends meet. Because of our climate, Gulf South residents have spent more time outdoors. Thus, we've been able to better avoid the invisible virus droplets that circulate around us and the soul-crushing repercussions of feeling locked in.

Pent-up demand for many of the things the Gulf South has to offer – tourism, entertainment and outdoor activities – is palpable. People are heading back to bars and restaurants and planning road trips to the beach. Service industries are emerging from their dormancy.

In many ways, this survey reflects how the Gulf South differs from the rest of the country in its attitudes and behaviors. Within those differences lie great opportunities.

This research shows that people both nationwide and in the Gulf South are exhibiting a great deal of trust in the information they receive from local sources, in particular the local business community and individual employers. This mindset offers a great chance for businesses to build better bonds with the communities they serve.

These businesses can shape content and target it to well defined audiences, building better relationships within communities in the process. They can create clear, trusted messaging not only about products and services, but about what they believe and why they open their doors every day.



CONCLUSIONS



Because of the uniqueness of the Gulf South – think Mardi Gras in New Orleans or the Mullet Toss in Orange Beach, Florida – messaging can be tailored so that it clearly connects to what makes us tick as a region. This trust that Gulf South residents have in their own businesses and local news outlets for information is worthy of a bold headline.

All of this speaks to the need for businesses and news organizations to have a better understanding of the local audience. And, it points to the need for these information sources to be accountable for the information they push out. When a company or business puts out an agenda for change, it creates a high expectation, making it important for the goal to be reached. In essence, accountability is a big deal.

Just how much our daily lives will be changed when COVID-19 is completely in the rear-view mirror remains a bit fuzzy. It appears more people will be working from home than before and other habits may be tweaked. Maybe we'll visit our elderly relatives more often. But earlier notions that the pandemic would leave life in the Gulf South unrecognizable have given way to a different, perhaps more upbeat outlook.

"I think the Gulf South was able to navigate this pandemic well," Skelly said. "I think we're positioned to come out of this really strong. I think the Gulf South is poised for a great decade ahead."



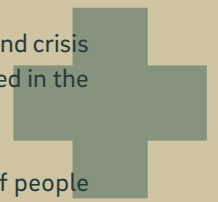
HOW DO WE KNOW ALL OF THIS?



CAUSEWAY SOLUTIONS AND THE EHRHARDT GROUP conducted a series of online surveys, each of 1,443-1,500 adults with a margin of error of 2.5%. Surveys were conducted on February 25, 2021 and March 16, 2021.

The Gulf South Index is a cooperative project between The Ehrhardt Group, a public relations, content, issues and crisis firm, and Causeway Solutions, a nationally recognized research and data analysis company, that are both based in the Gulf South.

The Index delves into hundreds of thousands of data points to create a sharper image of how the millions of people living in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and the Florida Panhandle are going about their lives. We want to find out more about how we make decisions, from what we are buying and how we are getting our news to where we plan to travel.



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