

DEDICATED TO DANCE:
The New Jersey Dance Needs Assessment Project
By Joan Jeffri

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New Jersey Dance Needs Assessment Project

Dancing is everywhere. We ought to celebrate and find ways to knit it all together. ...Mindy Levine, Developing the Whole Dancer

It is well known that dance is one of the most poorly paid professions in the arts in the United States. Although people may be somewhat familiar with the salaries of dancers, few realize the deep and profound system that supports the world of dance. This network is comprised of dancers, arts managers, instructors, costumers, designers, advocates, and technical staff, among others. Both dancers and dance workers, often working at several jobs, sometimes working without pay, have long supported a vibrant and diverse dance scene in the United States. Yet, there is little formal research on this subject and little primary data that illuminate the needs of these workers. *The New Jersey Dance Needs Assessment Project* is the first state-wide exploration into these needs in the state of New Jersey where, for many years, dance has had a vibrant – though largely under-recognized presence.

Project Brief

In 2004, Dance New Jersey contacted the Research Center for Arts and Culture (RCAC) at Teachers College, Columbia University to design and administer a needs assessment study of dance workers in New Jersey. As the premier dance service organization in the state, Dance New Jersey, a charitable non-profit organization located in Morristown, and founded in 1998, is a statewide service organization dedicated to “reaching new audiences and promoting the energy, excitement and excellence of dance and dance education in New Jersey”¹. Dance New Jersey collaborates with state and national partners to advocate for and represent the interests of New Jersey dance and dance education through its membership in ArtPRIDE/NJ and Dance/USA, and as the statewide affiliate for the National Dance Education Organization. The organization also aims to foster the artistic, administrative and educational growth of its members through resource sharing, dialogue and collaboration. Dance New Jersey advocates for high quality performance and works to strengthen the funding base for dance within the state.

With these organizational goals in mind, Dance New Jersey initiated *The New Jersey Dance Needs Assessment Project*, designed to “identify the population of individual choreographers, performers, folk and traditional artists and educators throughout the state”. Dance New Jersey’s stated purpose in undertaking such a study was to “develop a comprehensive profile of New Jersey’s dance workforce and to better understand the most critical needs

¹ <http://www.dancenj.org>

confronting this essential community". This project marks the first time in the state's history that a comprehensive mapping project of this type has been conducted. By establishing baseline data, Dance New Jersey, the funding community (public and private) and dance supporters may use this information to begin to accurately address the most salient needs and issues of dance artists in New Jersey.

A random sample of 992 New Jersey dancers and dance workers was created from lists representing individual choreographers, performers, folk and traditional artists as well as administrators and educators (public and private schools, colleges/universities and private studios), managers, dancers, costumers, and designers. The paper questionnaire was sent out with a response of 17% (170).

Definitions

Dance New Jersey has found it essential to define clearly what it means by "dance community". For the purposes of this study, "dance community" involves not only institutionalized groups that produce and/or promote dance, but also grass roots level performing groups, teachers and creators. In order to adhere to this definition of the dance community, Dance New Jersey made a concerted effort to probe into the local ethnic dance communities as much as possible within the confines of the project's timetable. It is important to note that Dance New Jersey, in embarking upon this project, stressed the importance of reaching as many dancers and dance workers as possible, regardless of whether or not these people were organized as a professionally recognized group.

When Dance New Jersey approached the RCAC about conducting the *Needs Assessment Project*, it was presented as a needs assessment study of dancers and "dance workers" within the state of New Jersey. The term "dancer" did not present much of a problem in terms of clarifying the sample population and/or communicating its meaning. The term "dance worker", on the other hand, presented challenges at different points during the study both within Dance New Jersey itself and within the New Jersey dance community at large.

Dance New Jersey chose the term "dance worker" to denote any person actively working in the field of dance in a professional capacity. This category was meant to include non-dancers who were actively involved in making dance happen within the state. The catchall term includes costume, makeup and set designers that design for dance, administrators, teachers, choreographers, managers, technical and production workers and any other individuals who work within the framework of dance.

While both Dance New Jersey and the RCAC intended for this term to be all-inclusive and potentially self-explanatory to the sample population, some

practitioners saw the term in a negative light. The questionnaire was designed to capture both dancers of all kinds and a wide variety of those who work in dance. The lack of consensus in the field regarding these categories made it difficult to accurately denote the study population.

Like many other dancers—and I'm sure artists of other mediums—I consider myself a dancer, first and foremost, by vocation, though not by 'profession' because when people ask you if you are a 'professional dancer' what they're driving at is whether or not you are paid to perform as a dancer. For those of us who have received 'professional' training, but find ourselves without current employment actually dancing, this is an insulting, often embarrassing question. For the many dancers who take work in small companies, frequently on a short-term basis, there are often spells of time when you aren't dancing for anyone. How disheartening it is to be sorted out by this often misleading title of 'professional', which implies that your alternative status is 'amateur' or 'recreational dancer.'

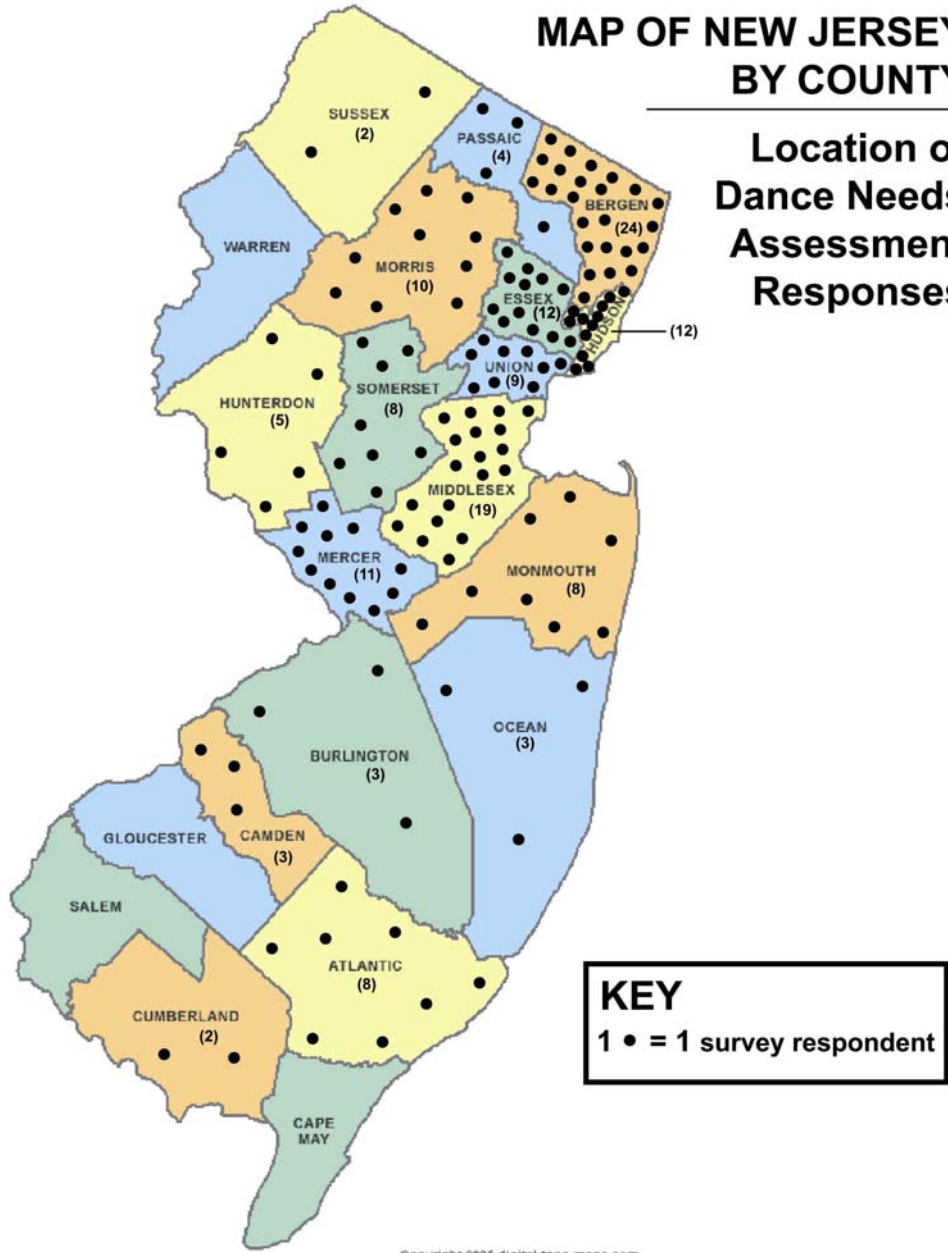
Where Respondents Live

While much of the dance activity in New Jersey takes place in the Northern part of the state - possibly due to its proximity to New York City, the list compiled for this study has a good mix of north and central New Jersey. Only three groups represent what is considered the South - but this is an accurate representation of the distribution of dance activity across the state of New Jersey. Twenty-three percent of our respondents were from south Jersey. The New Jersey State Arts Council has given substantial financial assistance to South Jersey cultural groups to stimulate activity in those regions. Respondents replied from Sussex in the north to Cumberland in the south. Thus, we believe the list is a fair representation of New Jersey dance workers' realities.

The following map shows locations (and density) of residences of 143 survey respondents. This map does not include the 27 survey respondents who live outside the state of New Jersey.

MAP OF NEW JERSEY BY COUNTY

Location of Dance Needs Assessment Responses



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SURVEY ANALYSIS

Earnings and Hours

Over half the New Jersey dance workers (58%) earned below \$20,000 from their dance work in 2004. The mean for total income as a dance worker is \$24,000; the median \$16,000.

This compares to our dancers from four cities (New York, Los Angeles, Minneapolis and San Francisco) in 1997 in our *Information on Artists II* study as follows: 80% of *IOA II* dancers earned under \$20,000 from their dance work in 1996. The mean for total income as a dance worker was \$12,757; the median \$5,000. For 23% this amount was 10% or less of their total individual income and for 36% it was 10% or less of their household income. Family support (37%) and money “off the books” (23%) supplemented this income; for 88% of those making money off the books, it was less than \$6,000. The mean for money earned off the books is \$5,600; the median \$2,500.

Exactly half earned \$30,000 or less from their total **individual income** in 2004. In 1996 three-quarters (75%) earned \$30,000 or less from their total **individual income**. In 2004, almost half (49%) earned over \$60,000 in **gross household income**. The mean for total individual income is \$36,000; the median, \$25,000. In 1996, the mean total individual income was \$24,572; the median, \$25,000.

Household Income

The 2004 estimated median household income in New Jersey was \$61,359; the mean \$80,350.² The median family income was \$73,973.³ The mean for gross household income in this study is \$79,000; the median, \$55,000. This would indicate that dance workers are being subsidized by others in their households. Indeed, they may actually be subsidizing the field itself. In the San Francisco Bay Area Needs Assessment 66% of respondents said they paid some of their companies’ bills out of their own pockets.⁴

Dancer/Dance Worker Total Individual Income

Year	Population Surveyed	Mean	Median
1996	Dancers from four U.S. cities	\$12,757	\$5,000
2004	Dance workers from New Jersey	\$36,000	\$25,000

Ten respondents (2%) reported incomes of over \$150,000.

² http://factfinder.census.gov/serlet/ADPTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=04...

³ http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ACSSAFFacts?_event=Search...

⁴ Ibid., 32.

The New Jersey dance worker is likely to be a white, 40-year-old married female with a college degree who received her dance-related training in New Jersey and has lived in the county of her current residence for more than 10 years. She earns her main income as a dance instructor or outside the dance field, spends over 30 hours a week at that occupation, and works at more than one job. Her workspace is adequate for dance-related work in New Jersey and she does have health insurance. She is likely to earn some money through dance-related work but is not likely to be a member of a union. She has voted in federal, state and local elections in the last two years and is a registered Democrat who performs community service and volunteers. She feels valued as a dance worker but her biggest constraints are not enough money or time and the need to strengthen the community of New Jersey dance workers.

Education and Dance Training

As with all studies of artists, the respondents to this survey are highly educated. 2004 education statistics for New Jersey residents show that 86.21% have graduated high school and 33.3 have a Bachelor's degree or higher⁵. In this study, 9% have graduated high school, 51% have college degrees and another 24% have graduate degrees. In the *aDvANCE Project*, 24.5% of US **current** dancers had a Bachelor's degree, and 8.2 a graduate degree; 32.3% of US **former** dancers had Bachelor's degrees and 7.6% graduate degrees. In *Information on Artists II* in 1997, 8.9% graduated high school, 45.5% had college degrees and another 26.7 had graduate degrees. In the 1993 National Endowment for the Arts study *Dancemakers*, 77% of the choreographers were college graduates or had advanced professional degrees.⁶ It seems New Jersey dance workers have a very high educational level by comparison.

Some explanations for the high incidence of advanced degrees in New Jersey dancers and dance workers may be 1) the educational opportunities in the state (44% claim they earned their primary income last year as dance instructors); 2) the requirements to obtain such educational opportunities and 3) the high incidence of modern and indigenous dance companies, many of which run on a less rigorous schedule than major ballet companies.

Over half (54%) of the respondents received dance-related training in New Jersey, a statistic that is somewhat less than other studies the RCAC has conducted on a variety of kinds of artists. Figures from four cities of dance workers in *Information on Artists II* in 1997 indicate that 82% of dancer workers received dance or art-related training in the city or region. While 58% of New Jersey respondents received a formal degree in the arts and 36% were trained at

⁵ http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ACSSAFACTs?_events=Search/...CSS

⁶ Netzer and Parker, 15.

conservatories or professional schools, experience as a mentor, apprentice and in the community.

Experience as a mentor or Master Artist	40%
Experience as an apprentice	47%
Community-based arts experience	44%

It is common knowledge that formal education impacts negatively on income for artists. While, in many other professions—medicine and law, for example—there is a positive correlation between years of education/advanced degrees and income, in arts the rule is the reverse. In this study, this trend is borne out: 62% of those with graduate degrees earned under \$40,000 total income for work as a dance worker in 2004; 48% of those with graduate degrees earned under \$40,000 total individual income in 2004. Only 11% of those with graduate degrees earned under \$40,000 in gross household income in 2004, suggesting that other members of the household or other assets provided a higher total income. Further investigation might show that those dance workers who are educators with advanced degrees do better economically than the above respondents.

Seventy-nine percent of NJ dance workers have lived in the county of their current residence over 5 years; 66% have worked in the same county for the same period. Over half (54%) have received dance-related training in the region.

A Stable Population

Dance workers in New Jersey seem to be a stable population, 60% having lived in the county of their current residence for more than 10 years, with another 19% having done so for 5-10 years. This stability may be true for New Jersey residents in general: the 2000 census reports 59.8% of New Jersey residents and 54.1% of US residents living in the same house in 1995 and 2000.⁷ The most important reasons NJ dance workers have for staying are affordable living space (23%), personal ties (22%) followed by cultural activity (14%). In the write-in comments, close proximity to New York City was mentioned as well. A substantial number have also remained in the county of their current workspace, 43% for more than 10 years and another 23% for 5-10 years and 67% say their workspace is adequate.

⁷ <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/34000.html>

Health and Welfare

Completely consistent with all other RCAC studies over the last 20 years is the figure of 89% of respondents with health or medical coverage. Thirty-seven percent have HMOs or PPOs; 33% have Horizon Blue Cross/Blue Shield of New Jersey; 22% have a group insurance policy and 10% have a personal policy through a private insurance company (some respondents may have more than 1 of these).

It should be noted that many of these dance workers may not have obtained health insurance through their dance work, unless they were affiliated with educational institutions or unions. In the NEA's *Dancemakers* study in 1993, 64% of the choreographers did not have the ability to obtain health coverage through their work in dance.⁸ According to Dance New Jersey, due to the structure of New Jersey laws, health insurance, while accessible for individuals to purchase who are not employed full time by an organization, remains unaffordable for most dance workers. Many are either hired as "independent contractors," enabling them to perform with one group, or on a part-time basis with a company, but without access to such coverage. Individual coverage that is available to the single dance worker, not otherwise covered is not comparable to the kinds of plans one can obtain through group affiliation.⁹ Over 20% indicated health care/disability/insurance and benefits should be provided by service organizations used by dance workers. And one 25-year-old, male dancer commented, "Virtually NONE of the dancers I know have health insurance. That is unacceptable!"

Other basic needs were expressed by one 34-year-old, male respondent who works professionally as an accompanist:

"I don't have a pension. I cannot afford to get married. I can't afford a car."

Value

Eighty-one percent of New Jersey dance workers feel valued in their dance work, as evidenced by employment as dance workers (65%), attendance at dance performances (63%) and, for half, being regarded as a contributing member of the community. Seventy-one percent believe they have contributed most to the New Jersey dance community as dance instructors; 44% as choreographers; 42% as dancers.

Nevertheless, one female dancer-teacher expressed quite eloquently what she sees as the dilemma:

⁸ Ibid. 53.

⁹ Interview with Marete Wester, Executive Director, Dance NJ, March 3, 2006.

“The main problem with dance in New Jersey is the same for the nation, with few exceptions. Lack of respect by the public, the government and the arts community for dance as an art. Culturally, dance is viewed as mere entertainment. This attitude permeates the dance community, with dancers accepting their lot and settling for meager pay, inadequate working conditions, and often downright scorn, even from other performing artists. We are the ‘unskilled physical laborers’ of the artistic community. For me, the problem of being female, a teacher, and a dancer has been financially lethal. I have often been asked why I haven’t applied my abilities in a field that was ‘useful’ so that I can ‘have more respect’. The day that dancers as a group literally ‘put their feet down’ and demand equal working conditions, pay, etc. is the day that we will begin to receive recognition from the community.”

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

New Jersey dance workers seem to be a stable population who often hold multiple jobs, one of which is in dance. They are close to the median age of New Jersey residents but are more highly educated, a fact consistent with other artist studies. They earn under \$20,000 from their dance work, are politically involved, and have health insurance. Although the respondents in this study have a higher percentage of white respondents than are represented in the state, they seem to represent the different geographic sections of New Jersey.

- **Identifying Dancers and Dance Workers:** A statewide effort to systematize this information, which normally must be gathered for tax and other kinds of reporting, and a central protected databank would help service and other organizations to reach out directly to workers in the field.
- **Empowerment of Audiences:** One recurring theme in the dance literature is the “image problem” of dance, especially for audiences and audience outreach. The combination of insular audiences and an uninformed or uncomfortable general public needs to be addressed.
- **Empowerment of Dancers:** The areas of coalition building, empowerment and a collective voice could be addressed by a strong service organization, but would require significant outreach to individuals across the community and from a variety of kinds of dance.
- **Dancers, Dance Workers and Teaching:** Given the high percentage of dance teachers in this study (44%), the relationship between teaching and creating should be examined further.
- **Compromises:** What is not evident in the data from this survey is what kinds of compromises dance workers are making in their dance work, due

to fiscal and other constraints. These kinds of issues should be explored with the myriad of dance workers in New Jersey—dance managers and administrators, dance costumers, technical and production people, makeup and set designers, and dancers and choreographers.

- **Hidden Subsidies:** It is common knowledge in the performing arts, and particularly in dance, that the unemployment insurance system is a subsidy. It is unknown whether this kind of subsidy is being used by New Jersey dance workers, but worth further investigation to better understand exactly how dance workers are supporting themselves.
- **Company Survival:** The difficulty in surviving, particularly for small and medium-sized dance companies, is serious as the number of companies going under is increasing.
- **Workspace:** Although a majority of the respondents to this survey seemed to obtain their workspace at educational institutions, this bears further investigation.
- **Isolation:** A problem for a state like New Jersey where many regions house a vibrant variety of dance activities, genres, and companies, is the isolation of these groups and activities from each other. This isolation also makes identifying constituents difficult for an organization that wants to tackle this challenge.
- **Services for Dancers and Dance Workers:** New Jersey dance workers voiced a need for a centralized service provider and additional desired services including assistance with health care/disability/insurance/benefits, performance and rehearsal space and resources such as discounted rates for space, and advertising and marketing. Some respondents to an Arts Plan New Jersey online survey went further, suggesting a system of county arts councils, a free database of artists and the creation of a “State Chair for the Arts, with each of New Jersey’s 21 counties to coordinate events and promote the arts at all government levels.”¹⁰

Further Areas of Investigation

The above discussion identifies a number of areas for further investigation and development, some of which have made progress for artists (although not necessarily dance workers) a priority and others that have not yet been pursued. The arts have been found to be an integral part of the development and progress of many New Jersey cities. These include non-arts efforts like local revitalization, gentrification, tax incentives and exemptions for artists living in

¹⁰ Ibid.

specific districts, which serve as models in other cities from Chicago to Providence, Rhode Island. In many cities the arts are an integral part of entrepreneurial efforts, small business development, start-up companies, creative thinking and urban regeneration. And finally, the arts can serve a role in economic initiatives that act as magnets for progress.

Unique from workers in many other fields, those dedicated to dance in New Jersey, as evidenced by our research, offer communities a stable population, who train in the region and choose to stay there to live and work and who are actively engaged professionally and personally. For cities, states and regions looking to create places that are attractive, thriving and looking to the future, New Jersey's dance workers are a population that should be integral to the process.

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Appendix A

Research Center for Arts and Culture

The Research Center for Arts and Culture at Columbia University's Teachers College (RCAC) has spent the last twenty years gathering information and data on living artists. Its *INFORMATION ON ARTISTS* series, conducted in ten and then four cities in 1988 and 1997, and in a single city in 2003, includes data on dancers, as does its 2004 study of the career transition of dancers in eleven countries.

Other studies include *Making Changes: Facilitating the Transition of Dancers to Post-Performance Careers*, a study of career transition of dancers in eleven countries; the NEA-commissioned Research Report #34, *Changing the Beat: A Study of the Worklife of Jazz Musicians*; *The Artists Training and Career Project*—a series of oral history interviews published by Greenwood Press as *The Actor Speaks*, *The Painter Speaks* and *The Craftsperson Speaks*, as well as a survey of 12,000 artists nationwide in these 3 categories and other one-off studies including *The Playwright's the Thing*, a study of New York playwrights for the Theatre Development Fund and *Commuters on Broadway* for Exploring the Metropolis. Its work has also been a prototype for an international study of artists in Portugal, and cross-cultural comparisons with artists' studies in Australia.

RCAC data are made available through the Center for Policy and the Arts National Data Archive at Princeton University. (Please see our website at www.tc.columbia.edu/centers/rcac)

Appendix B

Survey Method

Dance New Jersey initiated its own outreach procedures to the communities all over New Jersey so that the names and contact information of dancers and dance workers who are unaffiliated could be gathered alongside information obtained from state and county arts councils, schools and colleges, companies and organizations.

The RCAC obtained additional lists from as many of the institutionalized dance organizations in the state as possible. These included 80 organizations in the Dance New Jersey database as well as additional resources from board members, educators and practitioners. Lists of dancers and dance workers were gathered from institutions that serve and/or represent them including arts and artists' service organizations, artists' unions, membership organizations, art schools and academies, funding agencies, industry bodies, government cultural agencies and artists' collectives.

The usable lists of individuals that were collected for the purposes of the mail questionnaire came from 23 New Jersey dance organizations. Dance New Jersey provided its own database of individuals plus five other lists obtained through grassroots research efforts. The following groups donated lists for this project: Dance New Jersey, Alborada Spanish Dance Theatre, American Repertory Ballet, Argen-Tango Dancers, Art of Motion, Dancing Lotus, Carolyn Dorfman Dance Company, Center for Modern Dance Education, Dance Arts League of Atlantic City, Encore Performing Arts Center, Freespace Dance, Julia Ritter Performance Group, Kennedy Dancers, LKB Dance, Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company, New Jersey Ballet, New Jersey Tap Ensemble, NJAHPERD, Princeton Dance and Theatre Studio, Randy James Dance Works, Raritan Valley Community College, Rutgers University, and Vineland Regional Dance Theatre.

After the lists were merged and purged, a total of 992 dance individuals remained, broken down into the following categories: dance workers (363), dancers (126) and unknown (503). The unknown category represents those people who could not or did not identify as strictly dancer or dance worker as defined in this study. In most circumstances, this ambiguity is due to the fact that one individual plays multiple roles within the dance community at large, alternating between dancing, teaching, managing and producing dance, and therefore had difficulty classifying him/herself.

The response rate was 17% (170 responses), comparable to DANCE USA's San Francisco Bay Area Needs Assessment (18%) and the aDvANCE project's US survey (17%).