

# MIDWEST NETWORK

**Landscape Scan of Grassroots Environmental Justice  
Organizations in the Midwest**

**2022**



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# OVERVIEW

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**Analysis of Grassroots Environmental Justice Groups and Indigenous Organizations Applying for Midwest Environmental Justice Network Funding in 2021**



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# Our mission

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- The mission of the Midwest Environmental Justice Network (MWEJN) is to connect and strengthen frontline and grassroots organizations to achieve environmental justice (EJ) in the Midwest.
- MWEJN seeks to ensure that grassroots EJ organizations have the resources to effectively organize their communities to address environmental issues and to participate in local, state, regional, and federal policy development.





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# Our approach

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- Environmental Justice (EJ) is based on the belief that every community has a right to a healthy environment in which all residents can live, learn, work, pray, and play.
- To reverse the long history of government and industry decision-making that has led to environmental racism and inequality, EJ communities must be placed at the center of environmental efforts.


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## Our approach: Indigenous communities

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- This analysis includes twelve 501c3 or fiscally-sponsored non-profit EJ groups that primarily serve Native and Indigenous communities.
- These groups were analyzed on their own as opposed to being compiled with each state analysis.





## **MWEJN is made up of, and seeks to support, grassroots EJ groups who are:**

- Rooted in, made up of, and accountable to communities of color, low-income communities, tribes, and Indigenous communities who are most directly impacted by environmental and public health issues;
- Committed to building grassroots power and leadership to influence the decisions that affect their communities; and,
- Working to uphold EJ on Midwestern Indigenous/Native lands or in at least one of the 12 Midwestern states: IL, IN, IA, KS, MI, MN, MO, NE, ND, OH, SD, WI.

# Purpose



Grassroots EJ organizations are doing urgent and important work in the Midwest, yet they are often operating invisibly – without recognition or funding.



MWEJN analyzed our 2021 grant applications to understand the geographic distribution, size, and priorities of grassroots EJ groups working in the Midwest.



Our goal is to lift overall trends, opportunities, and challenges facing grassroots EJ groups in the region.





# Regional data

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Data: Request for information submissions to MWEJN in 2021

# REGIONAL ANALYSIS | 501c3 status (n=72)



75% (n = 54) of the 72 grassroots respondents are 501c3 organizations

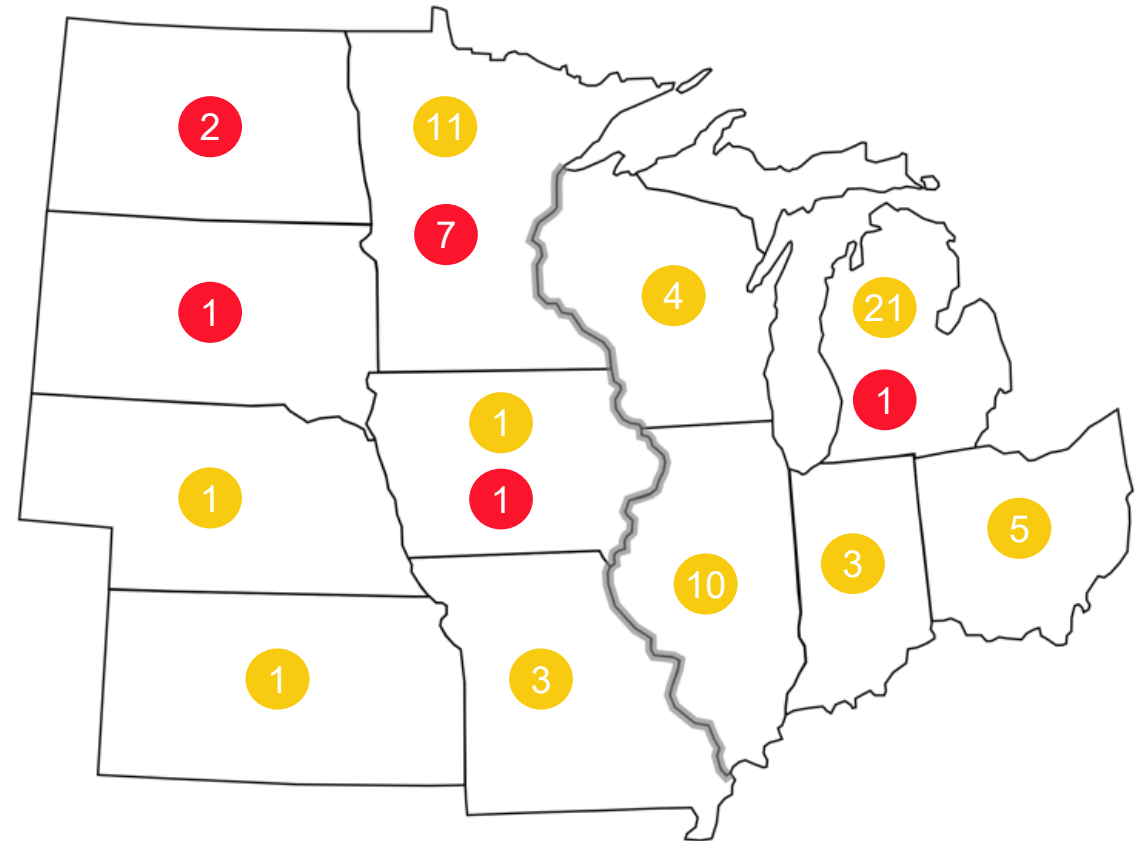


The remaining 25% (n=18) are in the process of obtaining 501c3 status, have a fiscal sponsor, or are open to working with a fiscal sponsor.

# REGIONAL ANALYSIS | geographic distribution (n=72)

Total EJ applicants = 72

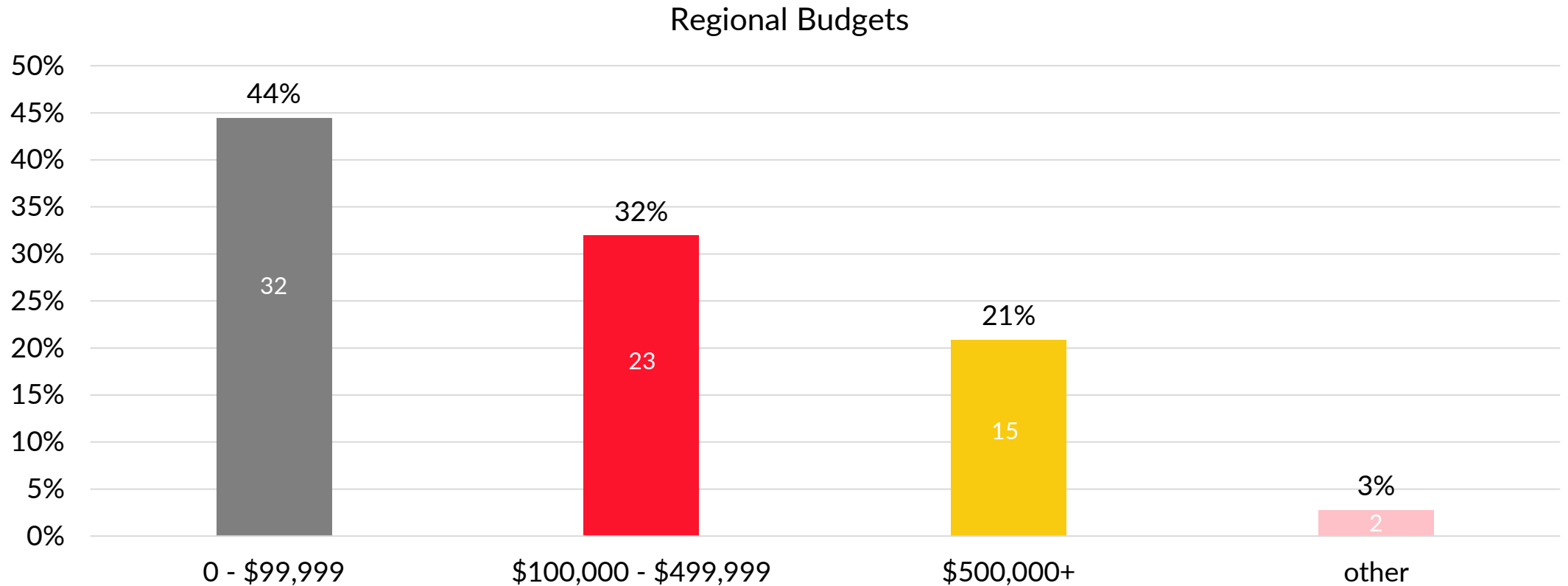
- # Grassroots groups (Total = 60)
- # Indigenous groups\* (Total = 12)



\*no applications received from Tribal governments

# REGIONAL ANALYSIS | budgets (n=72)

This analysis includes groups that have 501c3 status or have a fiscal sponsor.





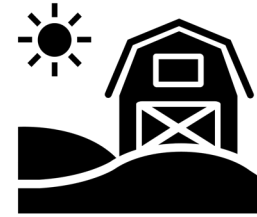
# REGIONAL ANALYSIS | 501c3 status (n=72)



Applicants are mostly focused in urban areas



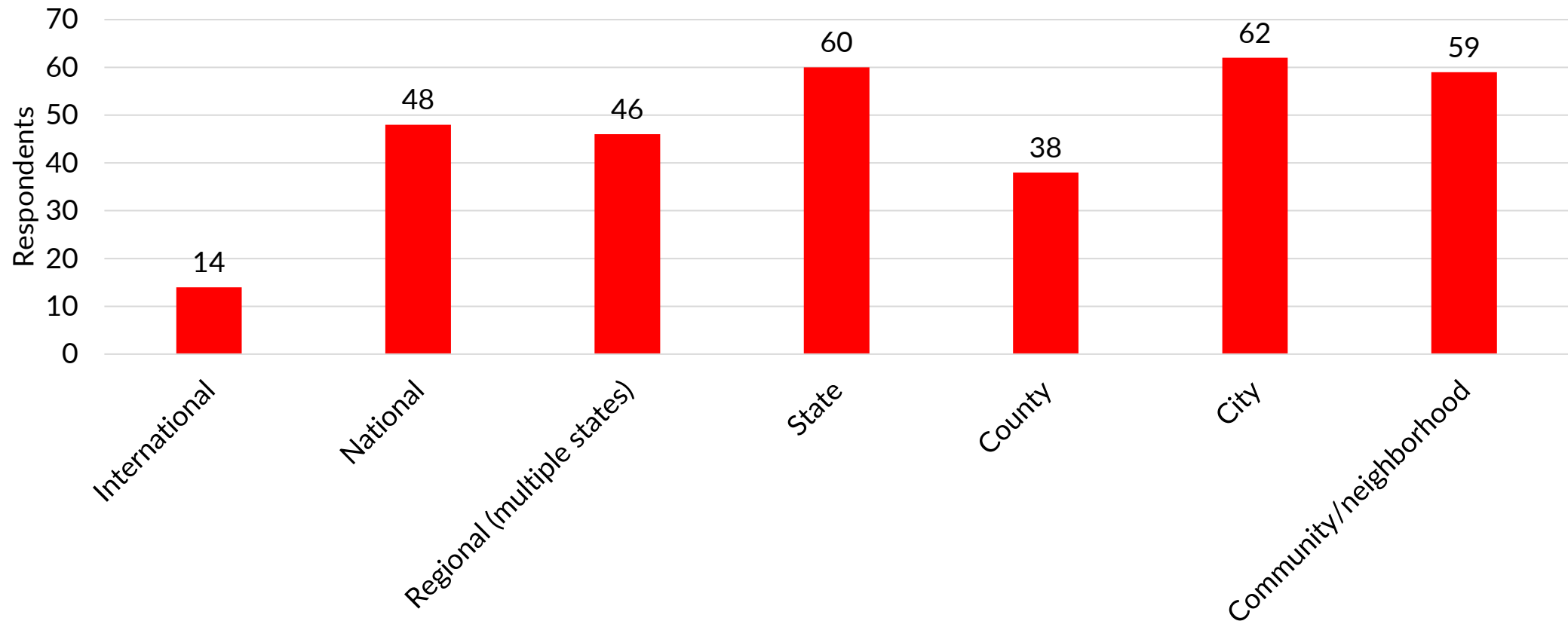
74% (n = 39) of all applicants report that they mostly focus on urban areas



Only 6% (n = 4) of all applicants report that they mostly focus on rural areas

# REGIONAL ANALYSIS | work (n=72)

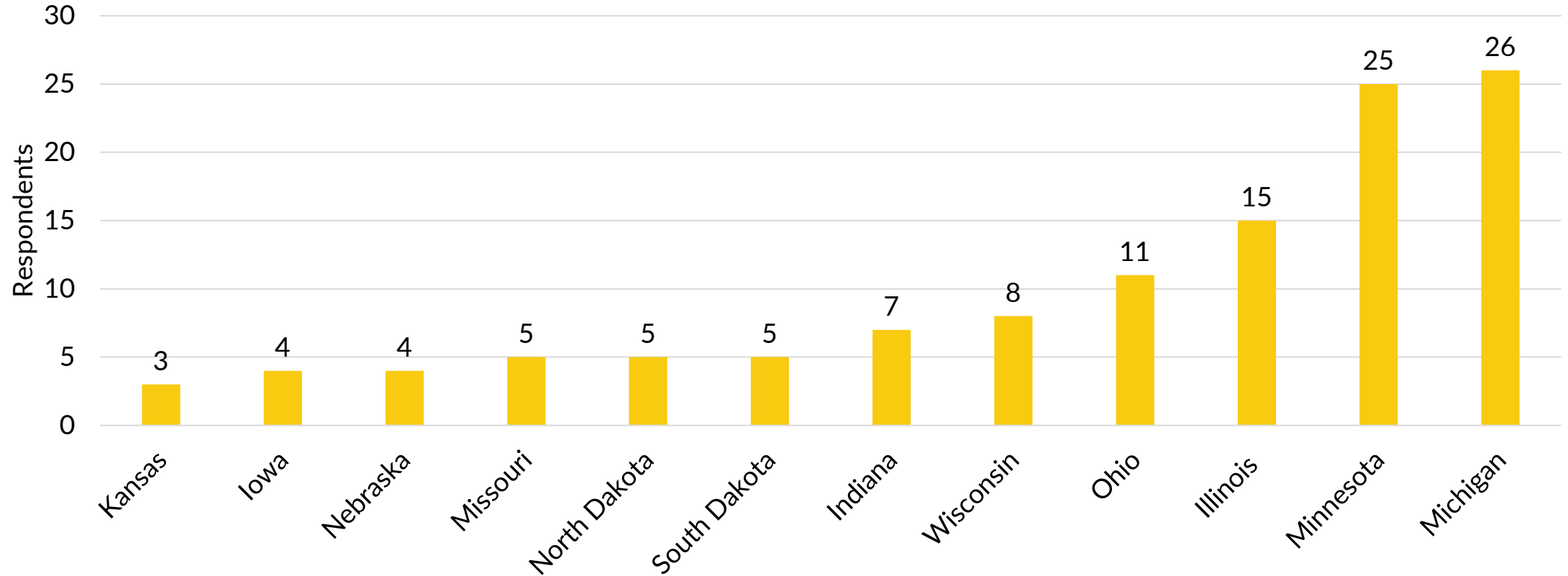
Types of networks and coalitions respondents participate in



# REGIONAL ANALYSIS | regional distribution of EJ efforts (n=72)

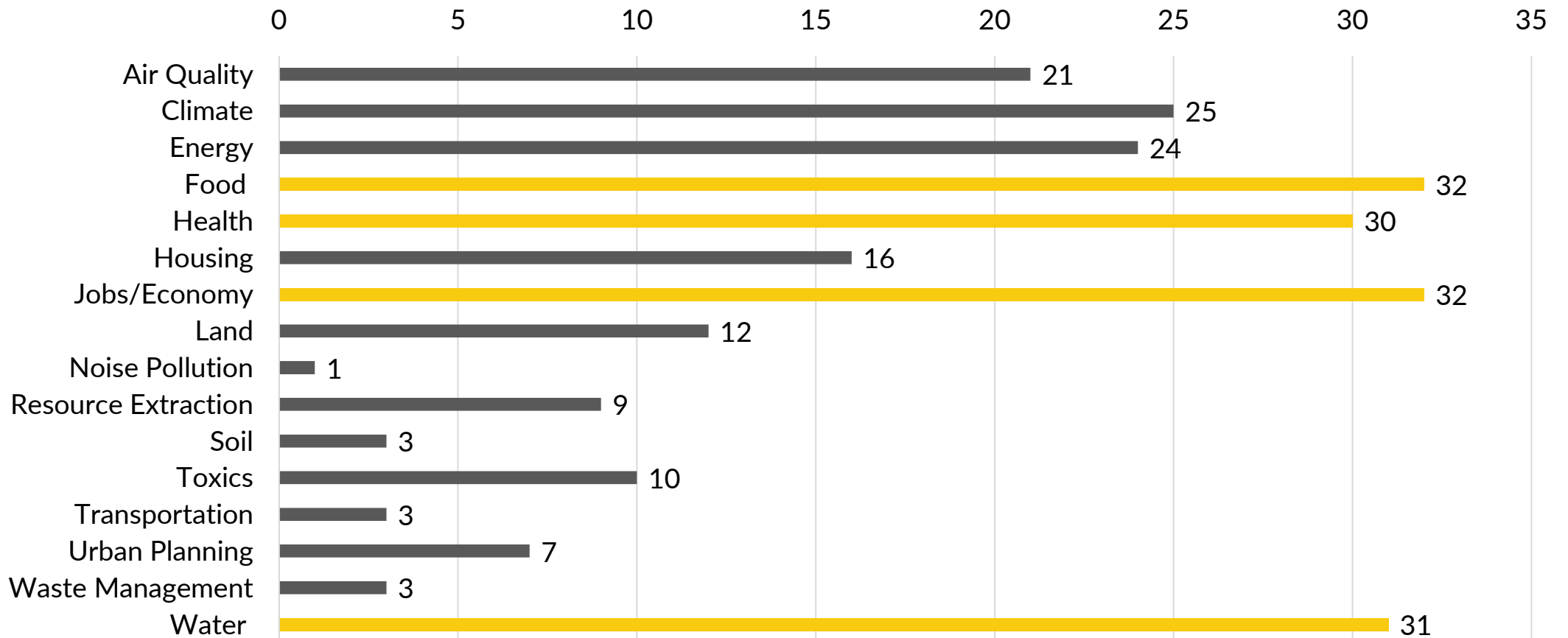
Many organizations work in more than one state.

Midwestern states in which respondents work



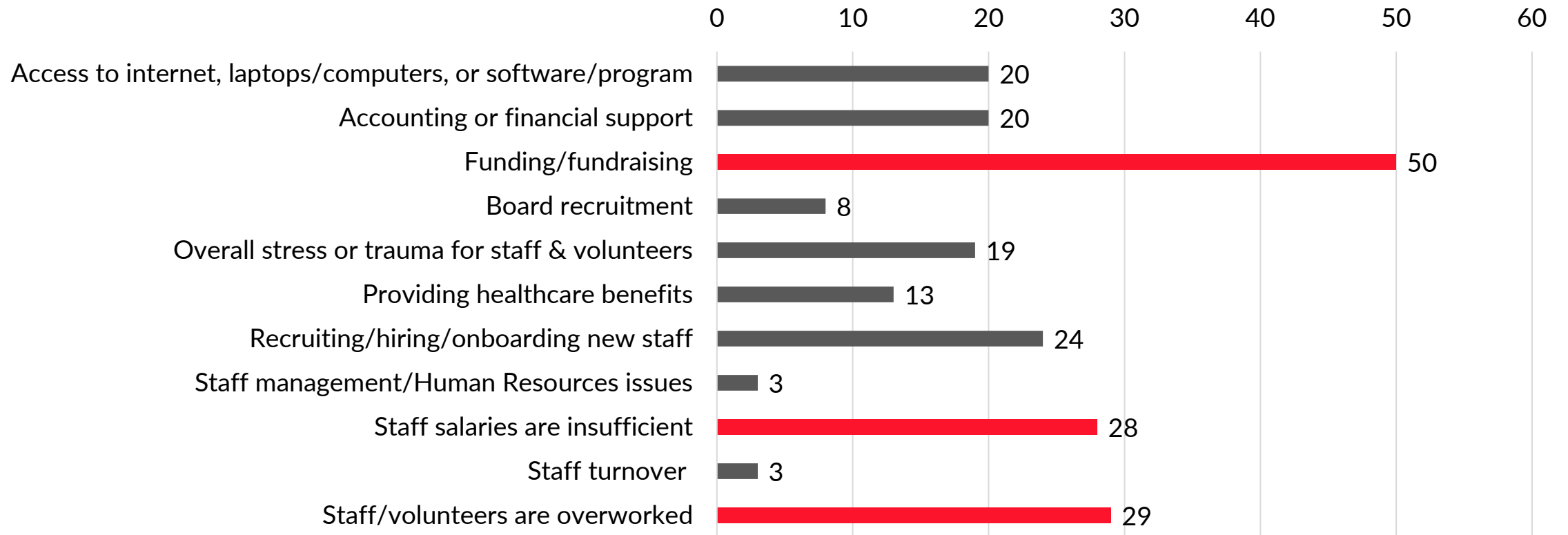
# REGIONAL ANALYSIS | primary issue areas (n=72)

Applicants were asked to check the three priority EJ issues for their communities. The four most frequently-named community priorities are highlighted in gold: Food, Health, Jobs/Economy, and Water.



# REGIONAL ANALYSIS | organizational concerns (n=72)

Applicants were asked to check the top three pressing concerns for their internal operations. The three most frequently-named concerns for internal operations are highlighted in red: Funding/fundraising, Staff/volunteers are overworked, and Staff salaries are insufficient.





# Applicant insights

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# Applicant insights: internal operations

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“Our bandwidth has stretched and will not be sustained without additional compensation for staff. Salaries do not match the breadth of our vision and on-the-ground work to elevate intersectional visibility of injustice and the denigration of African American women and girl’s lives....”



# Applicant insights: internal operations

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“We need financial resources and people power to help build a multiracial environmental community. Both board recruitment and recruiting new staff will be furthered by our initiatives which are creating new relationships and collaborations.”





# Applicant insights: internal operations

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“We are actively seeking resources to attract and keep quality staff. Having the ability to offer good salaries and benefits are essential. It is easier to leverage resources for programming than it is for general operations.”

“We have also had no formal training in how to even write for a grant, as I'm sure the person reading this has deduced.”



## Using the grant

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GRANTS

ING PRO

## Responses | How would you use MWEJN funds if a grant was awarded?

- 38 groups (53%) would allocate funds to support salaries, staff support, communications, and overhead costs (including IT needs).
- 19 groups (26%) would allocate funds to support community organizing programs related to community EJ needs, including programs to mobilize and connect Black women, BIPOC students, Hmong Americans, and specific EJ neighborhoods and communities.

## Responses | How would you use MWEJN funds if a grant was awarded?

- 16 groups (22%) would allocate funds to protect waterways and water quality and/or to advocate for safe, affordable drinking water.
  - Some proposed projects seek to protect local waterways from coal ash, stormwater runoff, and other contaminants.
  - Many groups, especially in Michigan, seek funding to continue addressing lead exposure in drinking water and water shutoffs. These groups distribute potable water and water filters and assist with testing of drinking water.

# Responses | How would you use MWEJN funds if a grant was awarded?

- 13 groups (18%) would allocate funds to support youth education, development, or training programs.
  - Proposed projects included supporting and training youth for green professions and green jobs, engaging youth in soil testing and community research projects, hiring youth as interns, and training youth to become advocates and organizers.
  - Some groups seek to engage BIPOC youth in outdoor activities to bolster knowledge of, and appreciation for, their natural environment.

# Responses | How would you use MWEJN funds if a grant was awarded?

- 11 groups (15%) would allocate funds to support access to culturally relevant, healthy foods. Proposed projects include:
  - Supporting BIPOC farmers, community gardening projects, and food processing plant workers.
  - Strengthening community-focused distribution systems (through buses, markets, pantries, and home deliveries).
  - Promoting traditional practices such as Native food preparation and preservation methods to reduce food waste.

# Responses | How would you use MWEJN funds if a grant was awarded?

- 11 groups (15%) would allocate funds to advance public health efforts. Many groups seek to improve the quality of air, water, soil, and food to improve the health of their community residents.
  - Proposed projects aim to increase access for healthy food in culturally appropriate ways.
  - Groups also seek funds to collect air quality data, address toxic contamination, and increase community access to information and healthcare services.

## Responses | How would you use MWEJN funds if a grant was awarded?

- 10 groups (14%) would allocate funds to address climate change. Many proposed projects are focused on educating communities and elected officials.
  - Groups also seek resources to support their communities in the face of climate disaster (such as flooding and heat island effects) and community-led resiliency efforts such as increasing tree canopies and green infrastructure.
- 6 groups (8%) would allocate funds to support renewable energy projects and education, with 4 groups working specifically on solar projects.



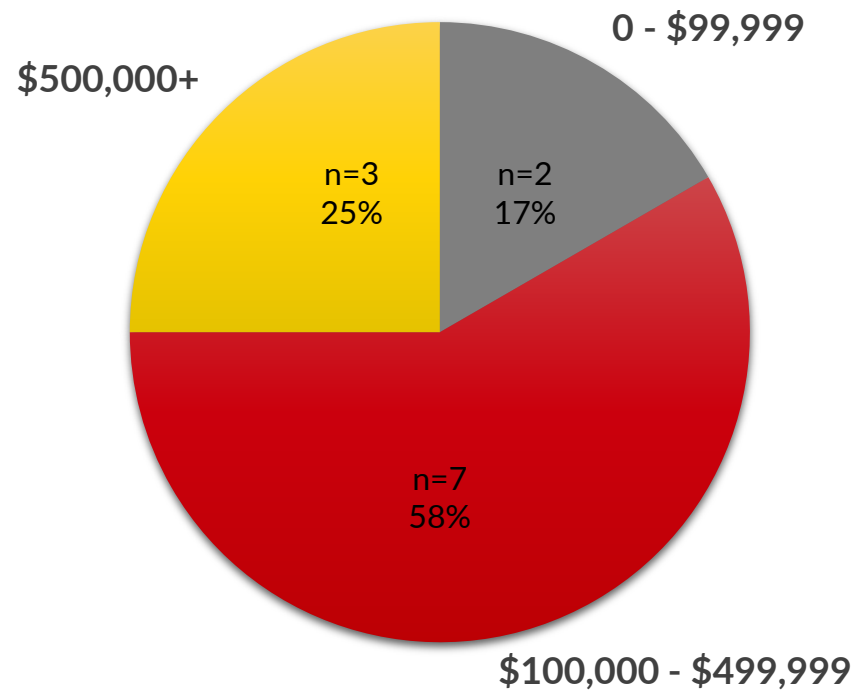


# Indigenous applicant data

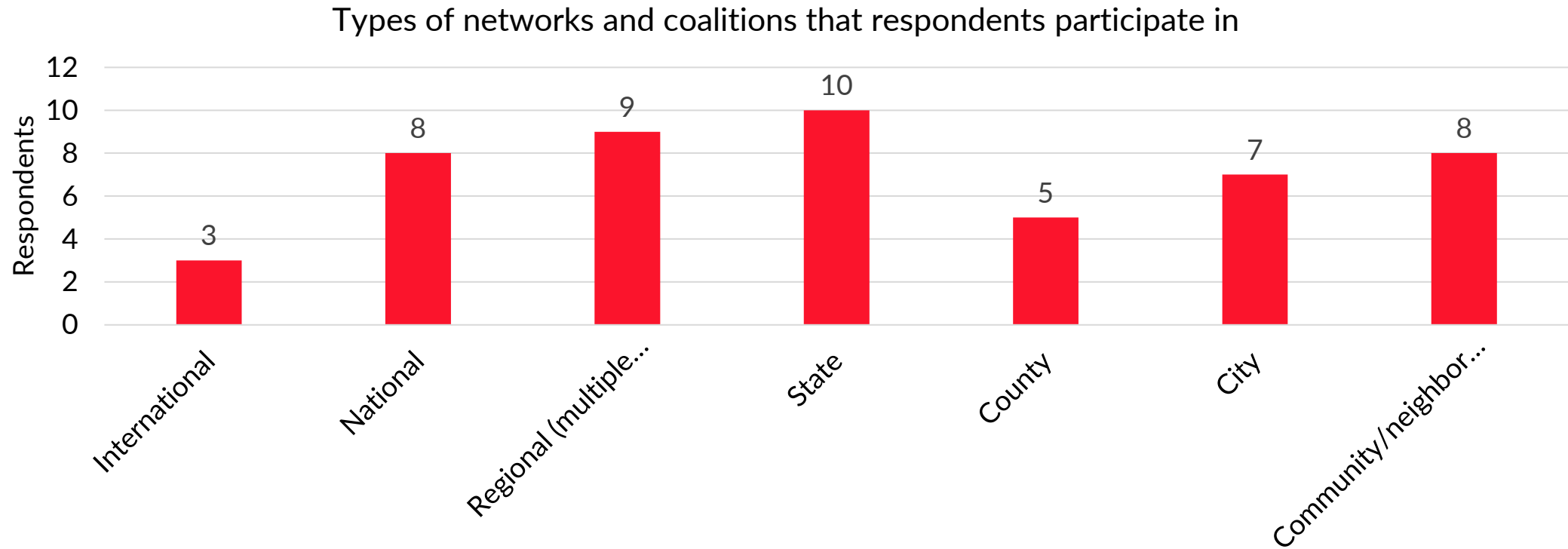
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# INDIGENOUS | organizational budgets (n=12)

This analysis includes groups that have 501c3 status or have a fiscal sponsor.

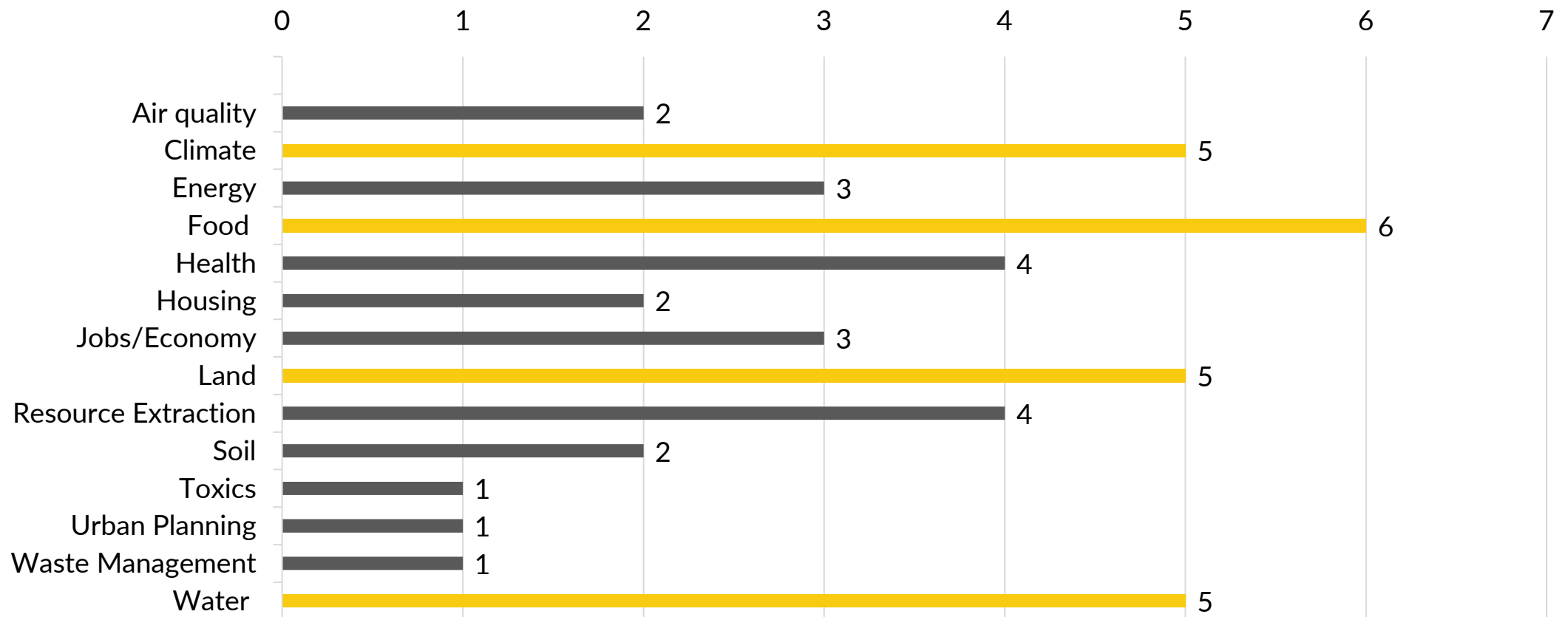


# INDIGENOUS | work (n=12)



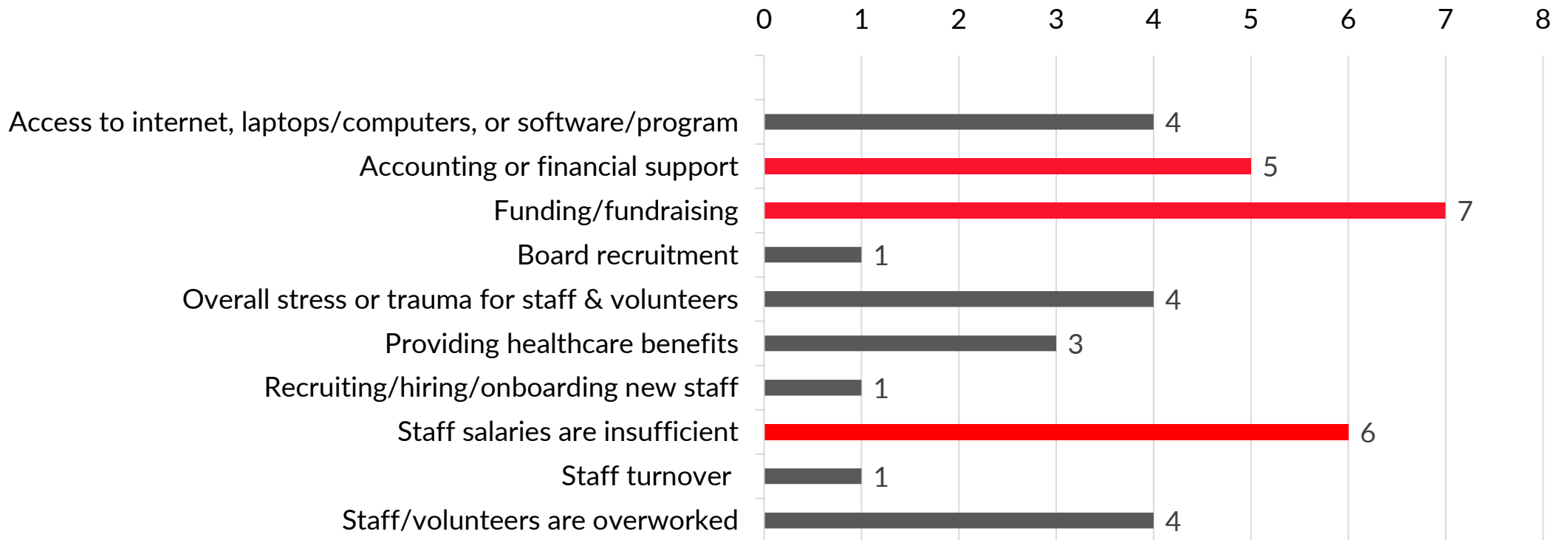
# INDIGENOUS | primary issue areas (n=12)

Applicants were asked to check the three priority EJ issues for their communities. The four most frequently-named community concerns are highlighted in gold: Food, Climate, Land, and Water. Some applicants chose more than three priorities.



# INDIGENOUS | organizational concerns (n=12)

Applicants were asked to check the top three pressing concerns for their internal operations. The three most frequently-named concerns are highlighted in red: Funding/fundraising, Staff salaries are insufficient, and Accounting or financial support. Some applicants chose more than three priorities.







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# Indigenous applicant insights

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“It would be great to connect with national and International Indigenous-led organizations that are doing similar work. Also, it would be good to connect with funders that MWEJN may be linked to who are looking to grow critical environmental, social, and racial justice work.”



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# Indigenous applicant insights

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“We have been given our original instructions to protect the earth and life. Our cultures teach us to look ahead seven generations when making impacts to the land, air, or water so that we may have a viable future for our children's children. We believe that renewable energy is a major piece of that picture.”



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# Indigenous applicant insights

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“[Our organization] like many small and Native-led nonprofits, has a dedicated but overworked and under-resourced staff. It would be incredibly meaningful and beneficial to the organization's operations and programming to be able to provide healthcare benefits and competitive salaries.”





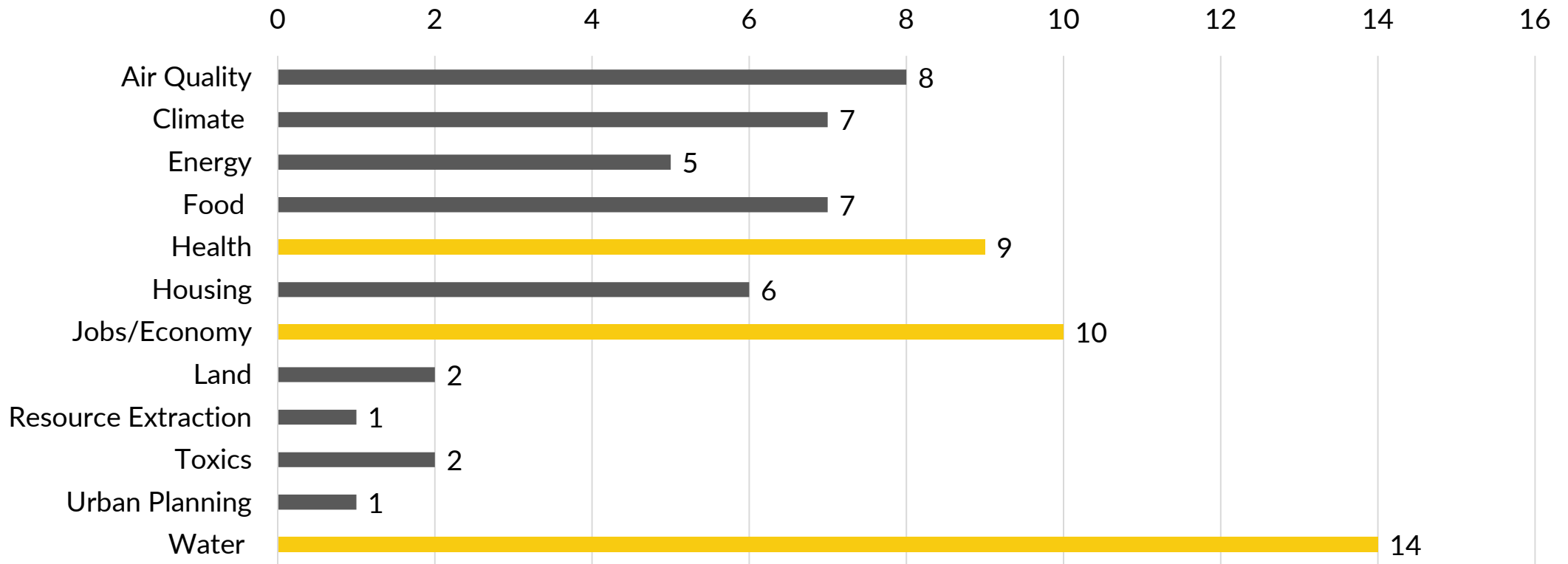
# State data: community priorities

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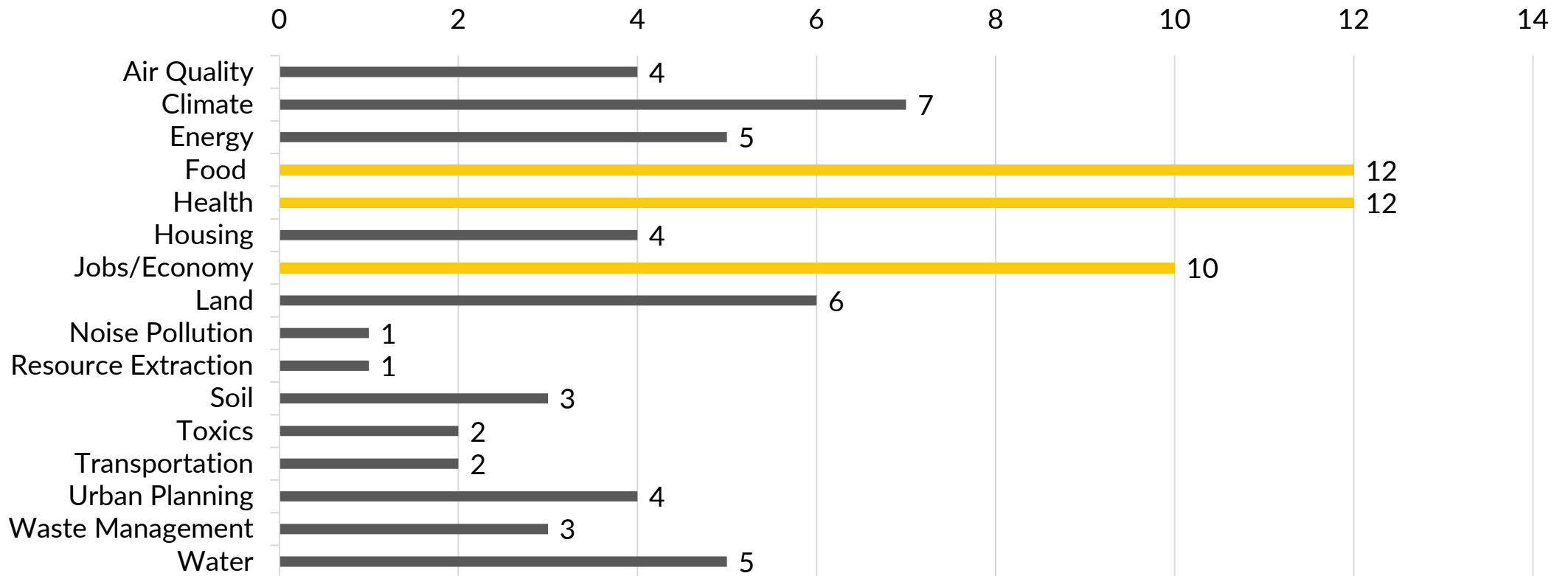
# MICHIGAN | primary issue areas (n=22)

Applicants were asked to check the three priority EJ issues for their communities. The three most frequently-named community concerns are highlighted in gold: Water, Jobs/Economy, and Health. Some applicants chose more than three priorities.



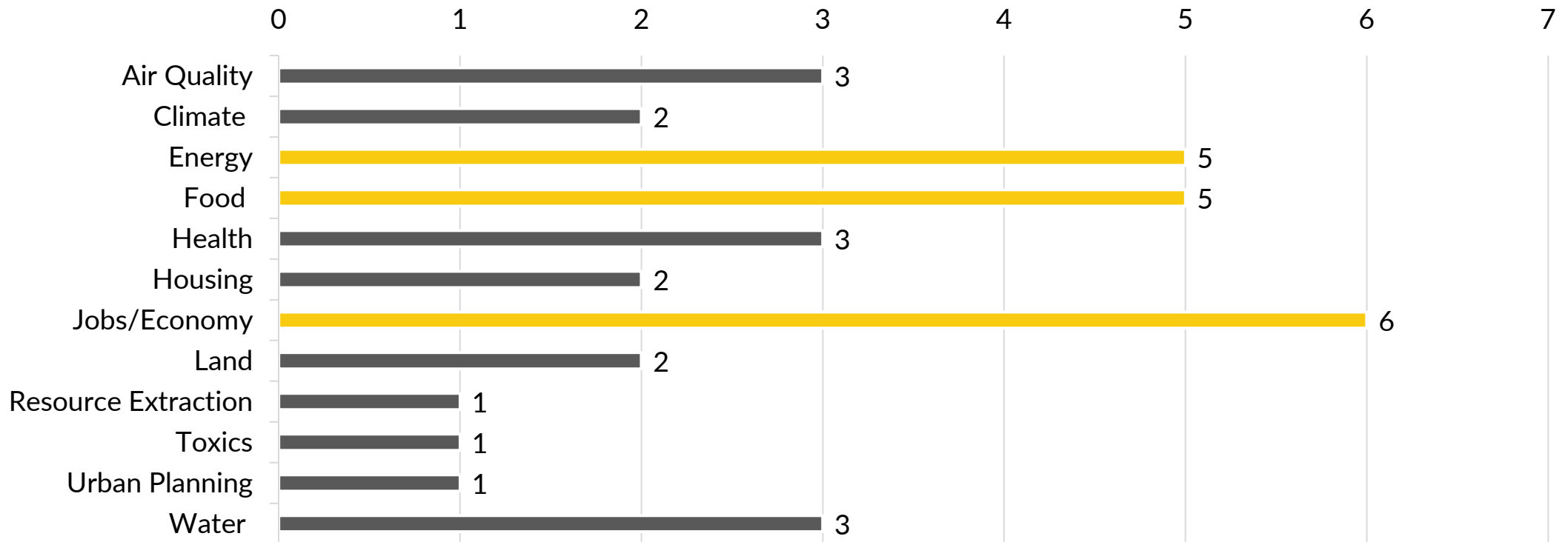
# MINNESOTA | primary issue areas (n=18)

Applicants were asked to check the three priority EJ issues for their communities. The three most frequently-named community priorities are highlighted in gold: Food, Health, and Jobs/Economy. Some applicants chose more than three priorities.



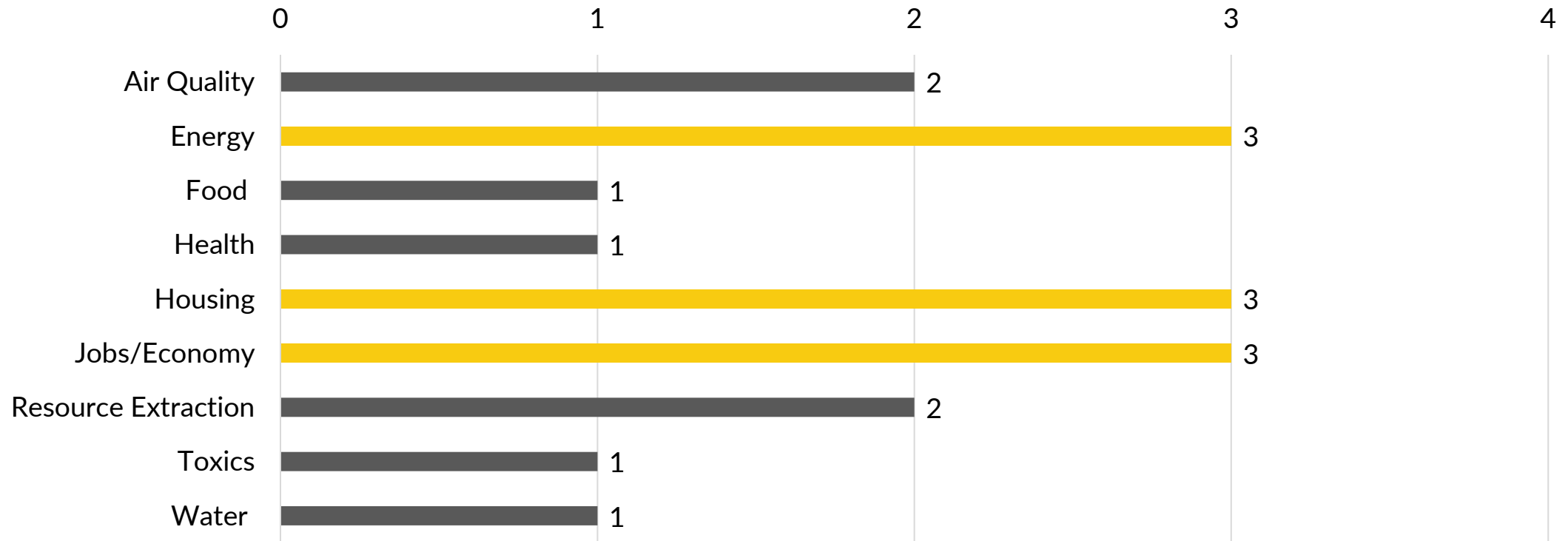
# ILLINOIS | primary issue areas (n=10)

Applicants were asked to check the three priority EJ issues for their communities. The three most frequently-named community priorities are highlighted in gold: Jobs/Economy, Energy, and Food. Some applicants chose more than three priorities.



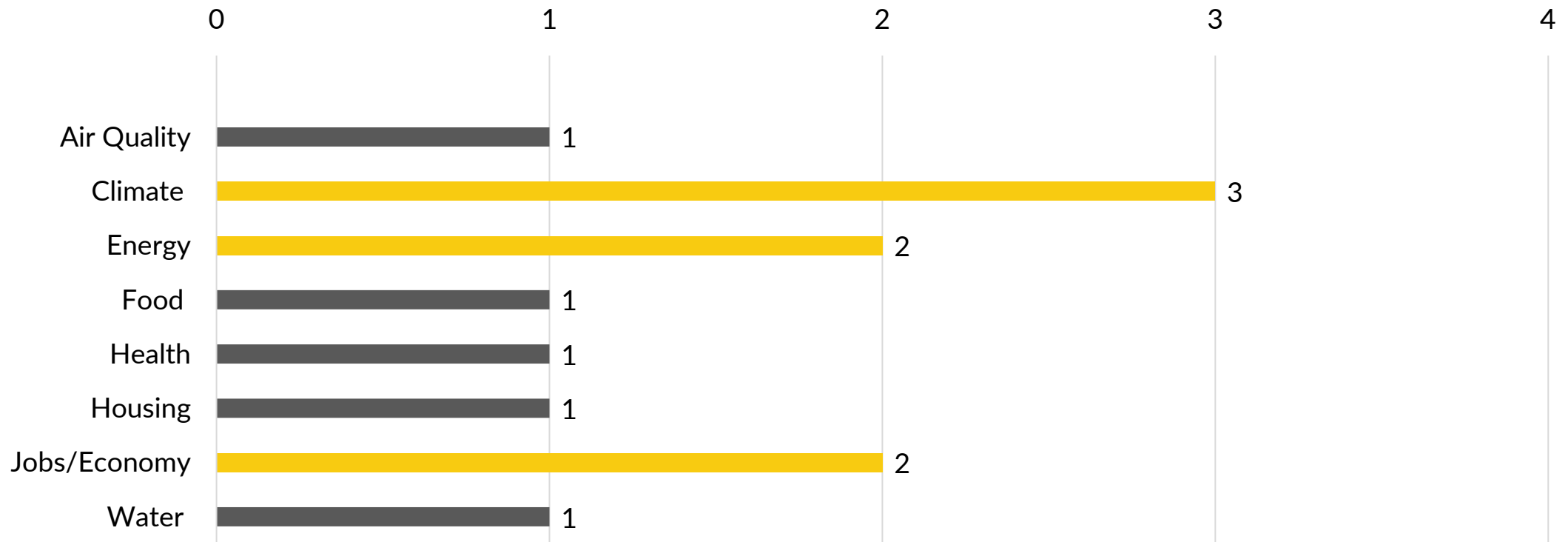
# OHIO | primary issue areas (n=5)

Applicants were asked to check the three priority EJ issues for their communities. The three most frequently-named community priorities are highlighted in gold: Energy, Housing, and Jobs/Economy. Some applicants chose more than three priorities.



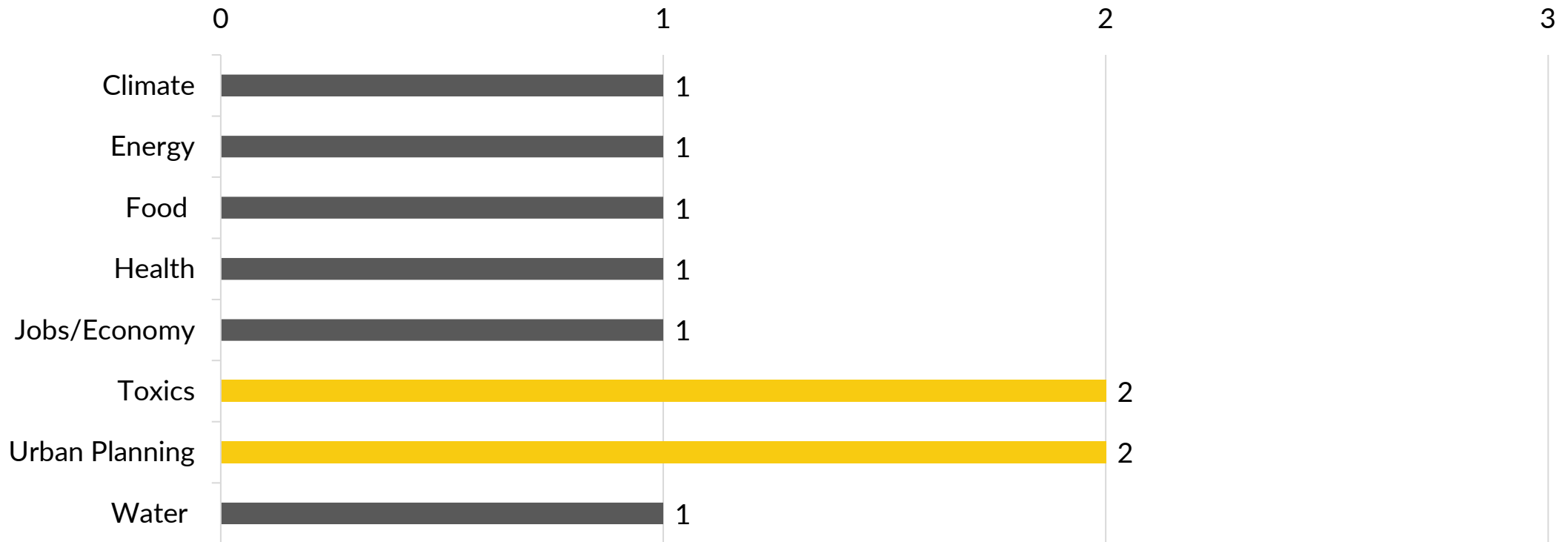
# WISCONSIN | primary issue areas (n=4)

Applicants were asked to check the three priority EJ issues for their communities. The three most frequently-named community priorities are highlighted in gold: Climate, Energy, and Jobs/Economy.



# INDIANA | primary issue areas (n=3)

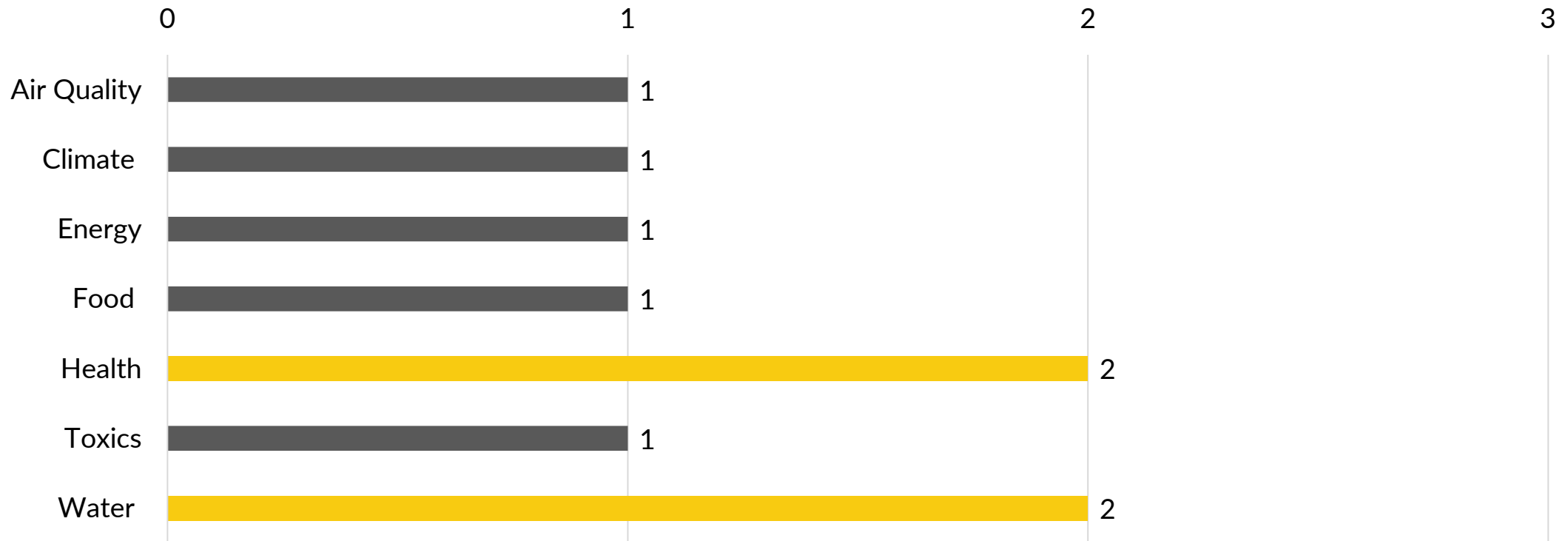
Applicants were asked to check the three priority EJ issues for their communities. The two most frequently-named community priorities are highlighted in gold: Toxics, and Urban Planning.





# MISSOURI | primary issue areas (n=3)

Applicants were asked to check the three priority EJ issues for their communities. The two most frequently-named community priorities are highlighted in gold: Health and Water.





# Longitudinal data, findings, & next steps

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# Change over time | all applicants

## 2017/2018

- 9 applications from Indigenous-led groups and 3 tribes
- 55 applicants were 501c3 organizations

## 2021

- 12 applications from Indigenous-led groups (no tribes applied)
- 54 applicants were 501c3 organizations

# Change over time | all applicants

## 2017/2018

- Less than \$100,000 = 41%
- \$100,000 - \$499,999 = 38%
- Over \$500,000 = 21%

## 2021

- Less than \$100,000 = 44%
- \$100,000 - \$499,999 = 32%
- Over \$500,000 = 21%



# Findings

## *Applicants*

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, grassroots EJ organizations across the Midwest developed new mutual aid and community in response to meeting basic needs and disaster recovery. This was accomplished with budget sizes like those from previous years.

# Findings

## *Applicants*

There was a shift was in how organizations identified community priorities.

- In 2017/2018, for all applicants, the top two priorities were Water (first place) and Food (second place), with Health and Air Quality tying for third place. In 2021, more applicants identified Food as a top priority, with Jobs/Economy second, Water falling into third place, and Health in fourth place.
- For Indigenous applicants, Water and Food were named as top two community priorities both times.

# Findings

## *Applicants*

Grassroots EJ groups are not spread evenly across the Midwest, with some states having more grassroots EJ leadership and capacity than others. Applicants were distributed as follows:

- MI: 22 applicants, including 1 Indigenous-led group
- MN: 18 applicants, including 7 Indigenous-led groups
- IL: 10 applicants
- OH: 5 applicants
- WI: 4 applicants
- IN & MO: 3 applicants each
- IA: 2 applicants, including 1 Indigenous-led group
- ND: 2 applicants, both Indigenous-led groups
- SD: 1 Indigenous-led group
- NE & KS: 1 applicant each





# Findings

## *Applicants*

EJ and Indigenous groups continue to work in holistic, interdisciplinary ways. Traditional funding silos (water, energy, food, etc.) do not align with the cross-sectional approach and people-centered values of our partners.

Indigenous organizations are unique in their practices and approach. Their inter-generational work is deeply rooted in culture and traditions.

# Findings

*Community, Programs & Policy*

More groups are being called to inform policy – including federal policy – and EJ groups struggle with capacity and knowing how to effectively engage.

Emerging threats: carbon capture, pipelines, and PFAS.

Regional challenge: when one community successfully opposes a polluting facility, the problem can be pushed to another area or state.

Many organizations are interested in community solar programs.

# Findings

## *Organizational Position & Challenges*



Fundraising and organizational capacity continue to be key challenges for grassroots EJ organizations.



Applicants' greatest concerns for internal operations were funding/fundraising, staff/volunteers are overworked, and staff salaries are insufficient.



Applicants also expressed the need for addressing staff trauma and building staff capacity so the organization could do more work on EJ priorities.



Applicants noted that it is difficult to hire and retain people and their existing staff is overworked.



# MWEJN next steps

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- Provide ongoing multi-year funding for general operations.
- Establish an emergency fund to address new opportunities and threats, which could help organizations with organizing for mutual aid or fighting new projects such as pipelines.
- Continue to bolster communications efforts to lift Midwestern EJ voices.
- Explore regional energy and climate issues with partners .



# Thank you!

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Midwest EJ Network Leadership  
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