



THE VETERANS AND
CITIZENS INITIATIVE

Moving Forward Together

After Kabul:

Veterans, America, and the
End of the War in Afghanistan

November 2021

INTRODUCTION

On August 30, 2021, the last American Soldier left Afghanistan. Over the preceding month, Americans had watched the military and front-line civilians evacuate tens of thousands of personnel, American and Afghan, as the Taliban took control of Afghanistan. Public attention was fixated on Afghanistan in a way it had not been since the 2010 surge, and before that, the initial invasion in 2001–2002. Although the last flight out of Kabul marked the formal end of America’s longest war, there is a broader story that is far from over.

In an effort to capture key elements of this story, More in Common collaborated with a range of veteran and military family partners to design a national survey to gauge emotional reactions to the end of the war in Afghanistan. We fielded the survey in October with an emphasis on understanding the emotions and views of veterans following the end of the war, how such emotions and views differ from Americans in general, and how businesses and civil society can engage with veterans and military families to process the end of the war in a healthy way.

After Kabul: Veterans, America, and the End of the War in Afghanistan lays out the findings from this large-scale national survey. It shows a wide gulf between veterans and the broader society, with veterans — especially those who served in Afghanistan — processing a range of intense emotions while also feeling a sense of alienation from their fellow Americans. At the same time, the data shows clear opportunities to help bridge this gulf, with an emphasis on working together to resettle Afghan allies and on creating opportunities for veterans and non-veterans to get to know each other and share stories.

THE VETERANS AND CITIZENS INITIATIVE

The Veterans and Citizens Initiative (VCI) launched in 2020 to serve as a connective tissue that elevates civic work being done by veterans and military family organizations and builds connections between such organizations and the broader field of nonpartisan civic renewal efforts. Anchored in More in Common, a nonpartisan research and civic nonprofit, the VCI leads national research and engages with partners to elevate ways for veteran and military family organizations, and civil society groups, to come together around nonpartisan work that strengthens our democracy and builds a stronger shared sense of belonging.

VCI Partners



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

General Population Survey

Results are shown as “U.S. Average”.

More in Common partnered with international polling company YouGov to conduct online survey interviews with n=2,000 Americans from September 29 – October 13, 2021. The data was weighted to be representative of American citizens to a sampling frame built from the 2019 American Community Survey (ACS). The data was weighted using propensity scores, with score functions including gender, age, race, education, and region. The weights were then post-stratified on 2020 Presidential vote choice, and a four-way stratification of gender, age (6-category), race (5-category), and education (4-category). The margin of error (adjusted for weighting) is +/- 2.6.

American Military Veteran Survey

Results are shown as “Veterans”.

More in Common also partnered with YouGov to conduct online survey interviews with n=537 American veterans from September 30 – October 13, 2021. The data was weighted to be representative of American veterans between the ages of 18 and 55, using the sample of veterans aged 18-55 from the 2019 American Community Survey as the sampling frame. The data was weighted using propensity scores, with score functions including gender, age, race, and education. The weights were then post-stratified on census region, and a four-way stratification of gender, age (4-category), race (4-category), and education (4-category). The margin of error for this sample (adjusted for weighting) is +/- 7.2. Within this sample, n=103 veterans identified as having served in Afghanistan.¹ The margin of error for this sub-sample (adjusted for weighting) is +/- 14.2. Results from this subgroup are shown as “Afghanistan Veterans”.

Endnotes

Additional information on instances of statistical significance and other minor research notes are denoted by endnotes and are available at the end of this presentation on slide 35.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Processing the End of the War

Veterans feel disconnected from broader American society, and they are processing a range of intense emotions in response to the end of the war.

Veterans are significantly more likely than the average American to identify with a sense of disconnection from broader society. Veterans also report much higher levels of feeling emotions such as betrayal and humiliation with respect to the end of the war in Afghanistan. This is particularly true for veterans who served in Afghanistan.

2. Resettling Afghan Allies

Veterans — and Americans in general — feel America has an obligation to help resettle our Afghan allies in this country.

Close to two-thirds of veterans and over half of Americans in general say that America has an obligation to allow Afghan allies to resettle in the United States. This sentiment holds across ideological lines.

3. Coming Together With Veterans

Veterans and non-veterans alike say it is important to create more opportunities to come together to build stronger ties, share stories, and work on community projects.

Most non-veterans do not have strong social linkages with veteran communities. Yet both veterans and Americans in general feel more should be done to foster connections. Many veterans and Americans in general agree on specific actions businesses and civil society can take to create a more robust relationship between veterans and non-veterans.

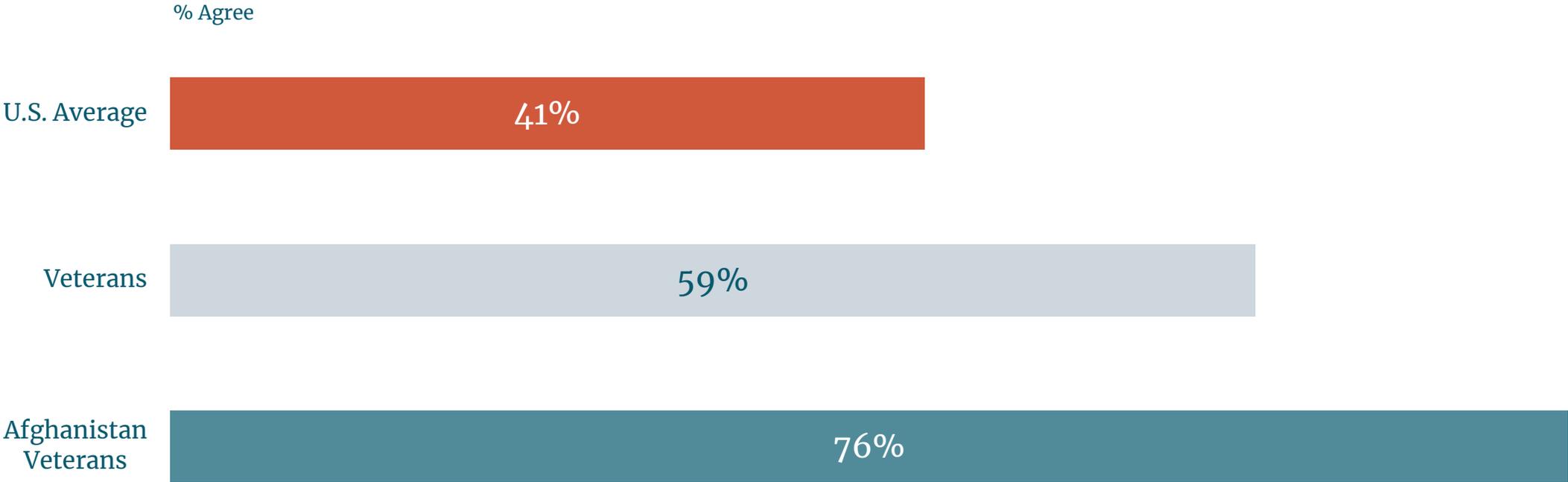
Processing the End of the War

Section 1

3 in 5

Veterans sometimes feel like a stranger in their own country, whereas less than half of Americans in general sometimes feel like a stranger in their own country (41%).

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:
“Sometimes I feel like a stranger in my own country.”^{2 3}

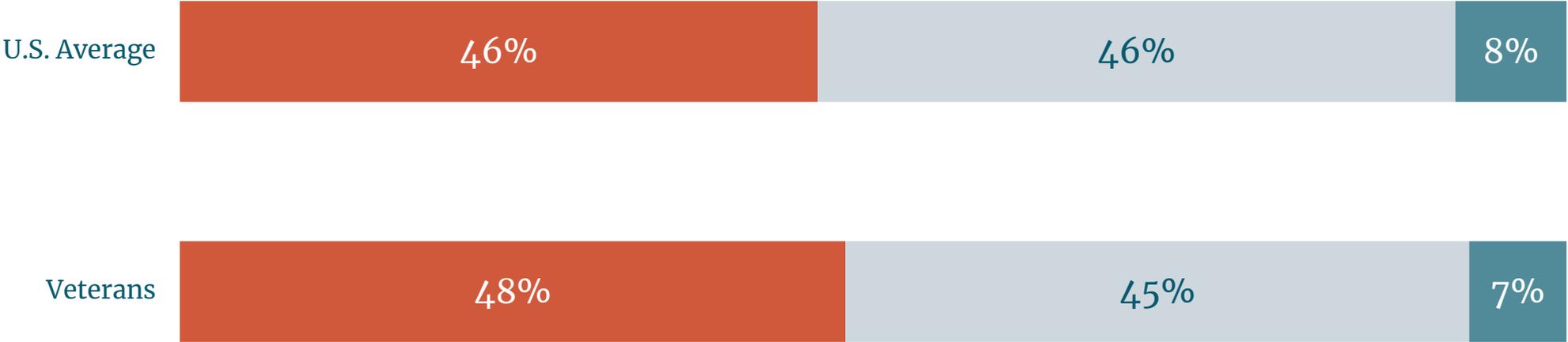


Both Americans in general and veterans are split between thinking the Afghanistan war was a *failure* and that it had a *mixed bag of successes and failures*.

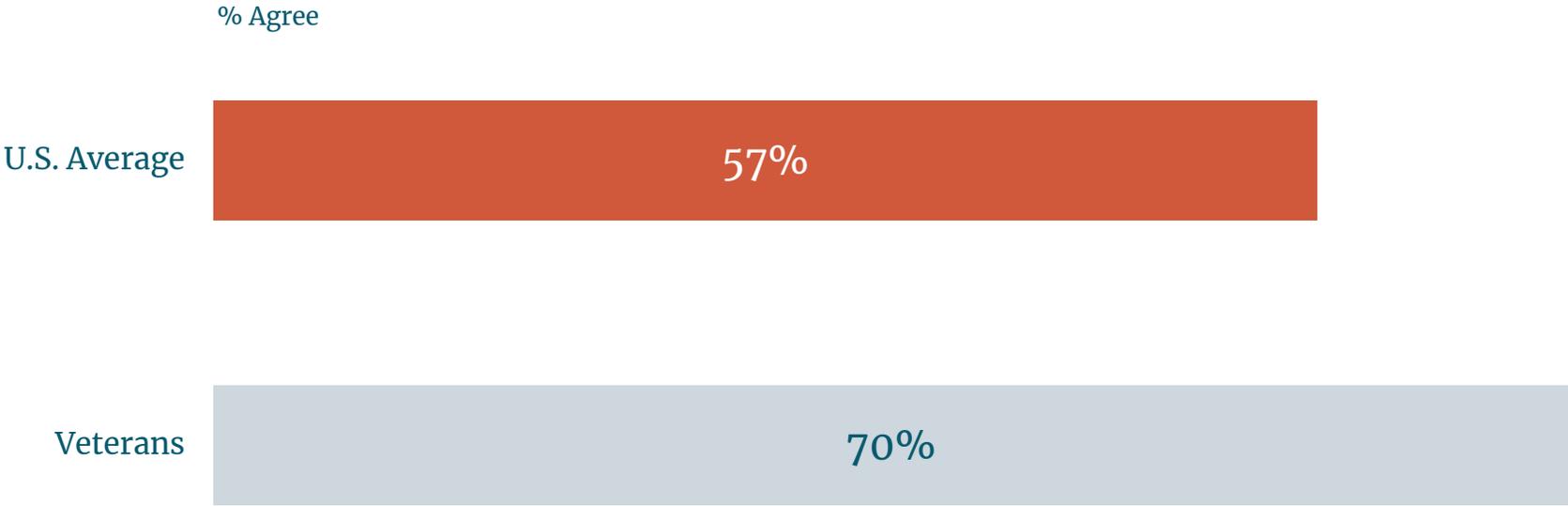
Americans in general and veterans also agree that America did not leave Afghanistan with honor, although the sentiment is held by a higher proportion of veterans.

Which of the following statements best reflects your assessment of America’s success or failure with the war in Afghanistan? *“The war was a complete failure.”* *“The war had both successes and failures.”* *“The war was a complete success.”*

■ The war was a complete failure ■ The war had both successes and failures ■ The war was a complete success

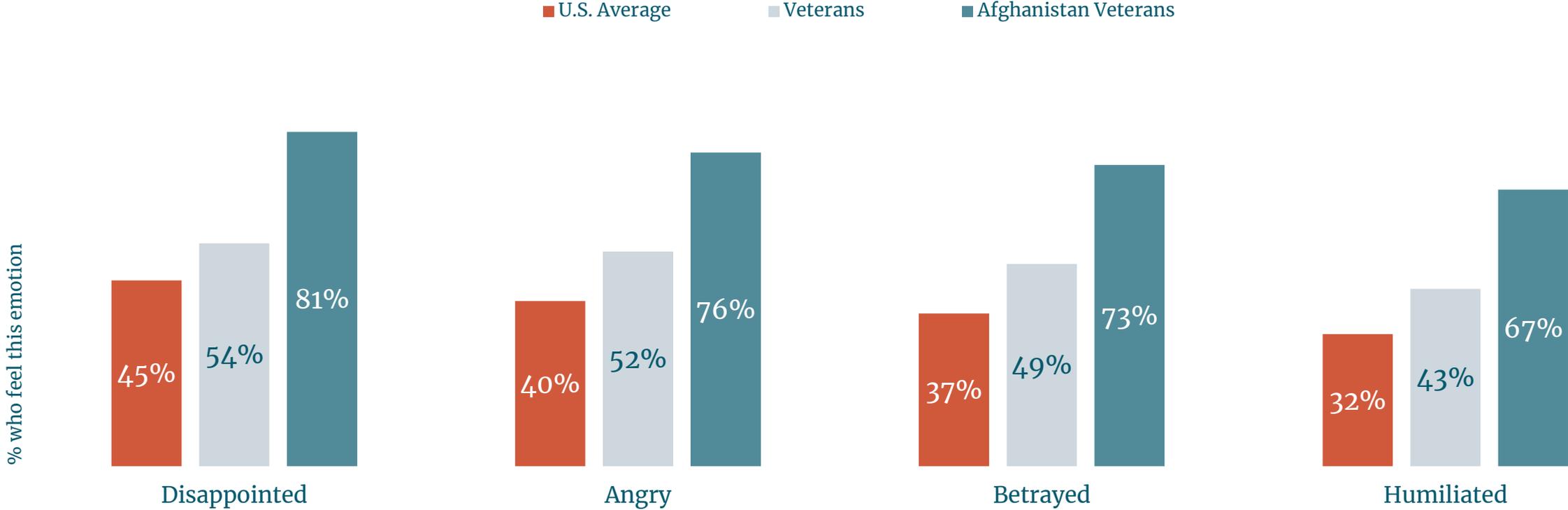


To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:
“America did not leave Afghanistan with honor.”



Veterans are feeling an intense array of emotions regarding the end of the war, including disappointment, anger, betrayal, and humiliation.

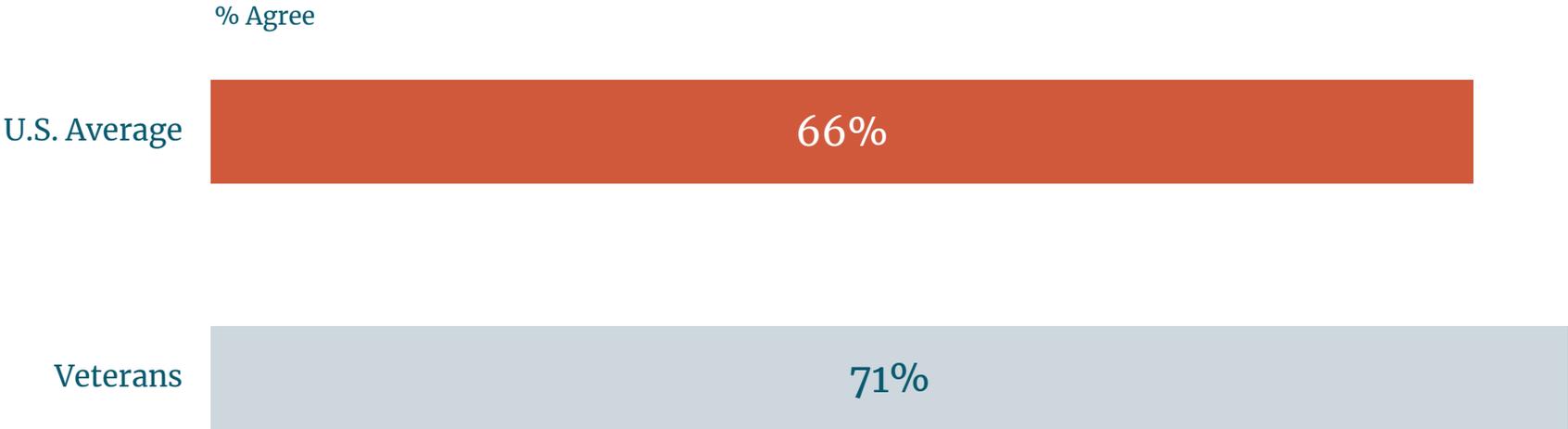
On a scale of 1-5 (“Not feeling at all” to “Feeling very much”), to what extent are you currently feeling the following emotions about the withdrawal of the American military from Afghanistan? (*Disappointed, Angry, Betrayed, Humiliated*)^{4 5}



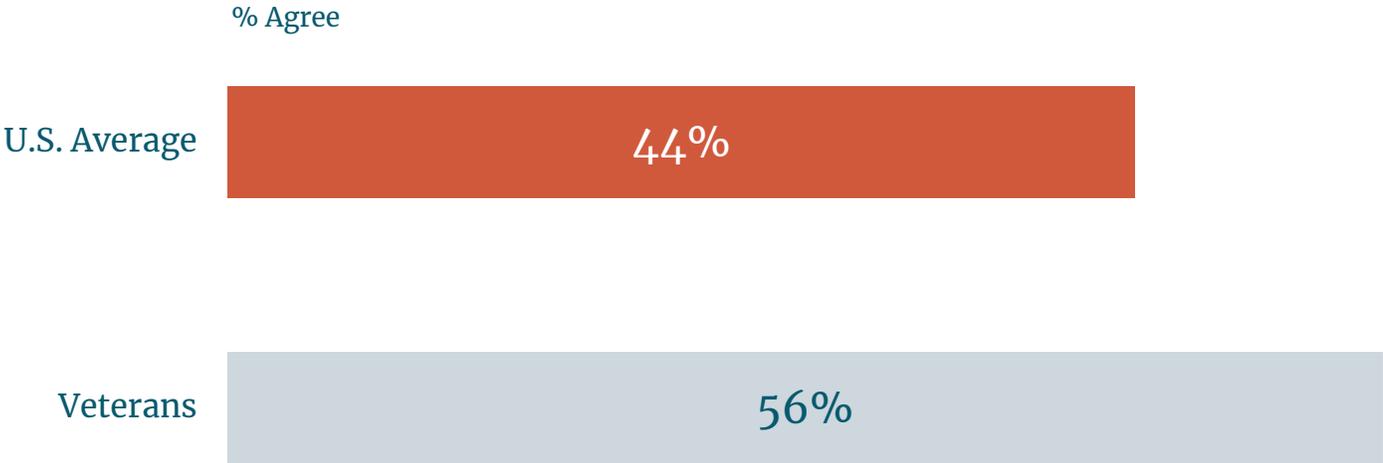
Both veterans and Americans in general feel that veterans of the war in Afghanistan are going to have a hard time processing the end of the war.

A majority of veterans feel that American society will move on quickly from the war.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:
“Veterans of the war in Afghanistan are going to have a hard time processing the end of the war.”



To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:
“American society will move on quickly from the end of the war.”

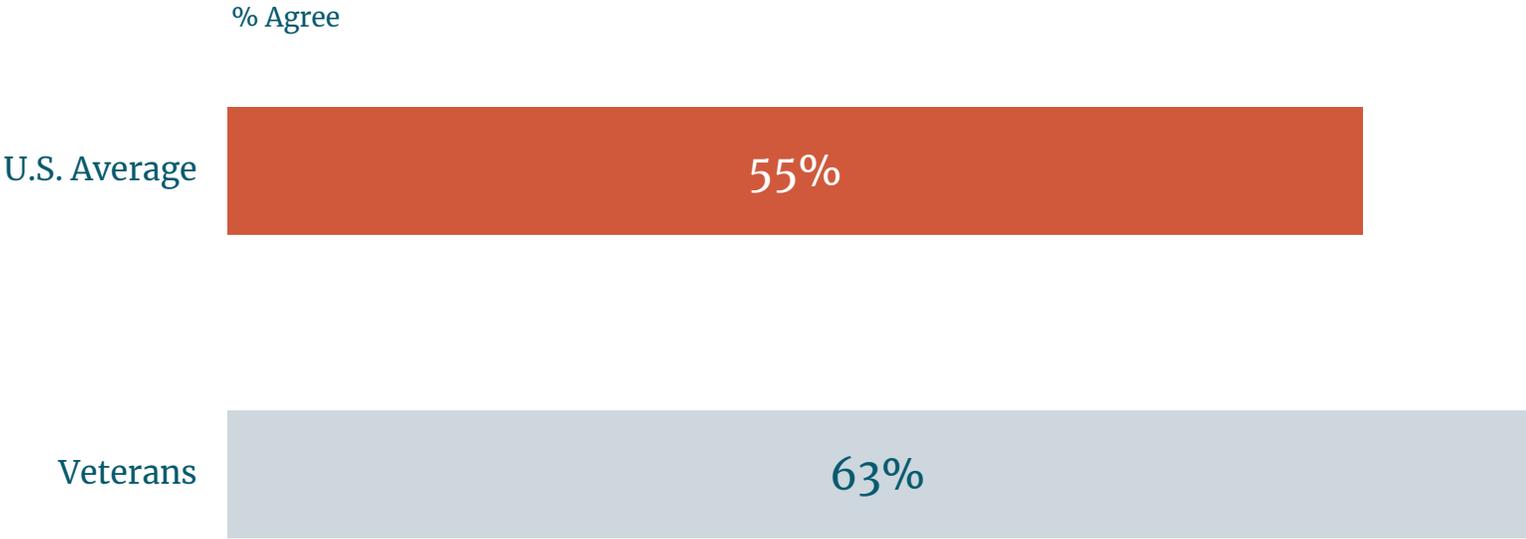


Resettling Afghan Allies

Section 2

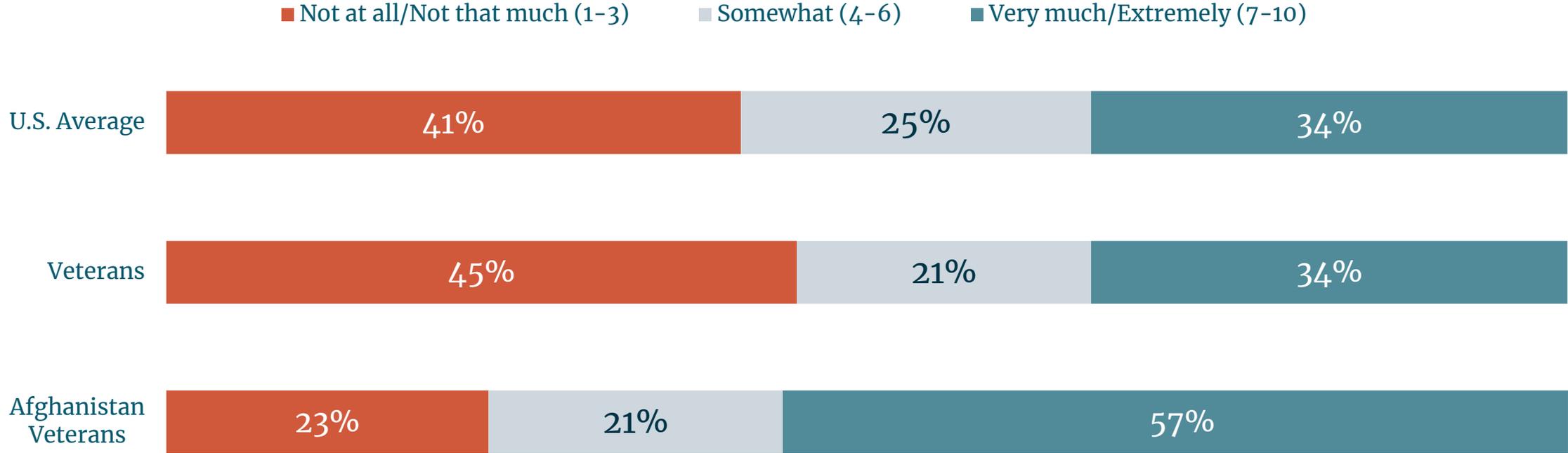
Over half of Americans in general and close to two-thirds of veterans believe that we have an obligation to resettle our Afghan allies in the United States.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:
“The U.S. has an obligation to allow Afghan allies to resettle in the United States.”



A majority of veterans, and most Afghanistan veterans, say that opportunities to help resettle Afghan allies would improve their mental health or wellbeing.

To what degree would an opportunity to help resettle Afghan allies improve your wellbeing or mental health? Note: Afghan allies refers to Afghan citizens who have supported the American/NATO efforts in Afghanistan, such as guides or interpreters.⁶

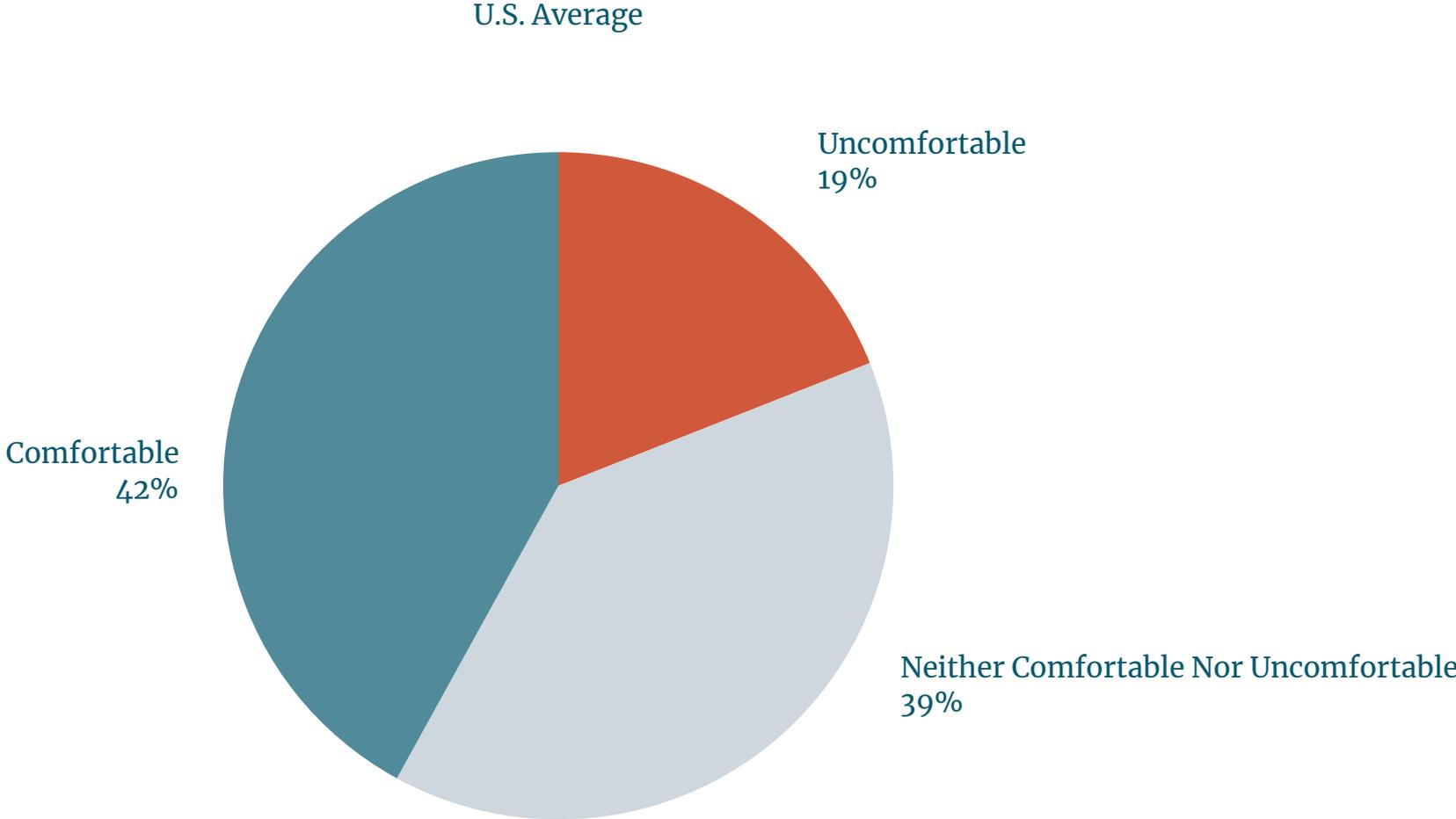


Coming Together With Veterans

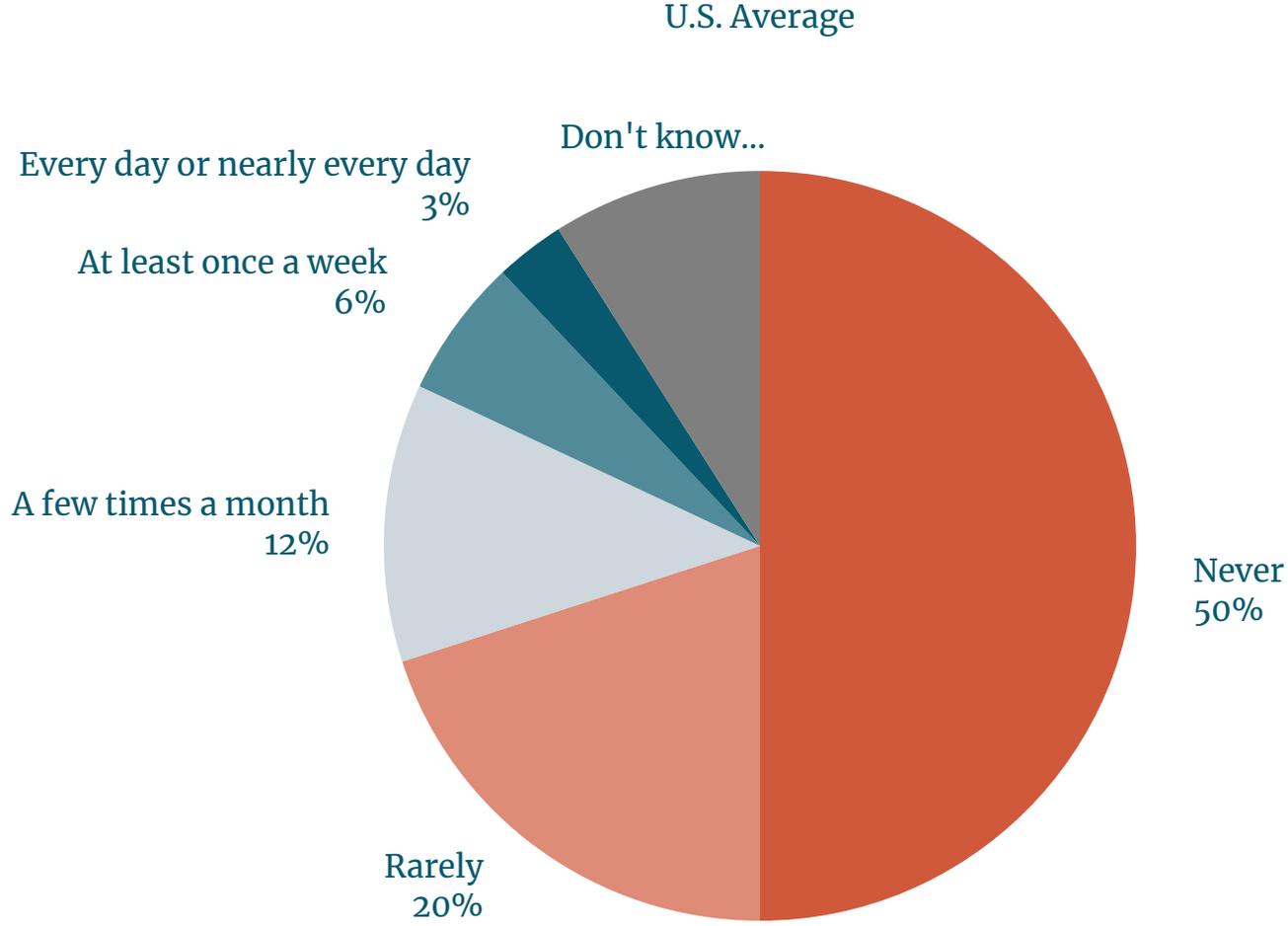
Section 3

A plurality of Americans say they feel comfortable talking about the Afghanistan war with a veteran. However, most Americans (70%) rarely or never talk to veterans about the war.

On a scale of 1-5, how comfortable or uncomfortable would you feel talking about the war in Afghanistan with an American who fought in Afghanistan?

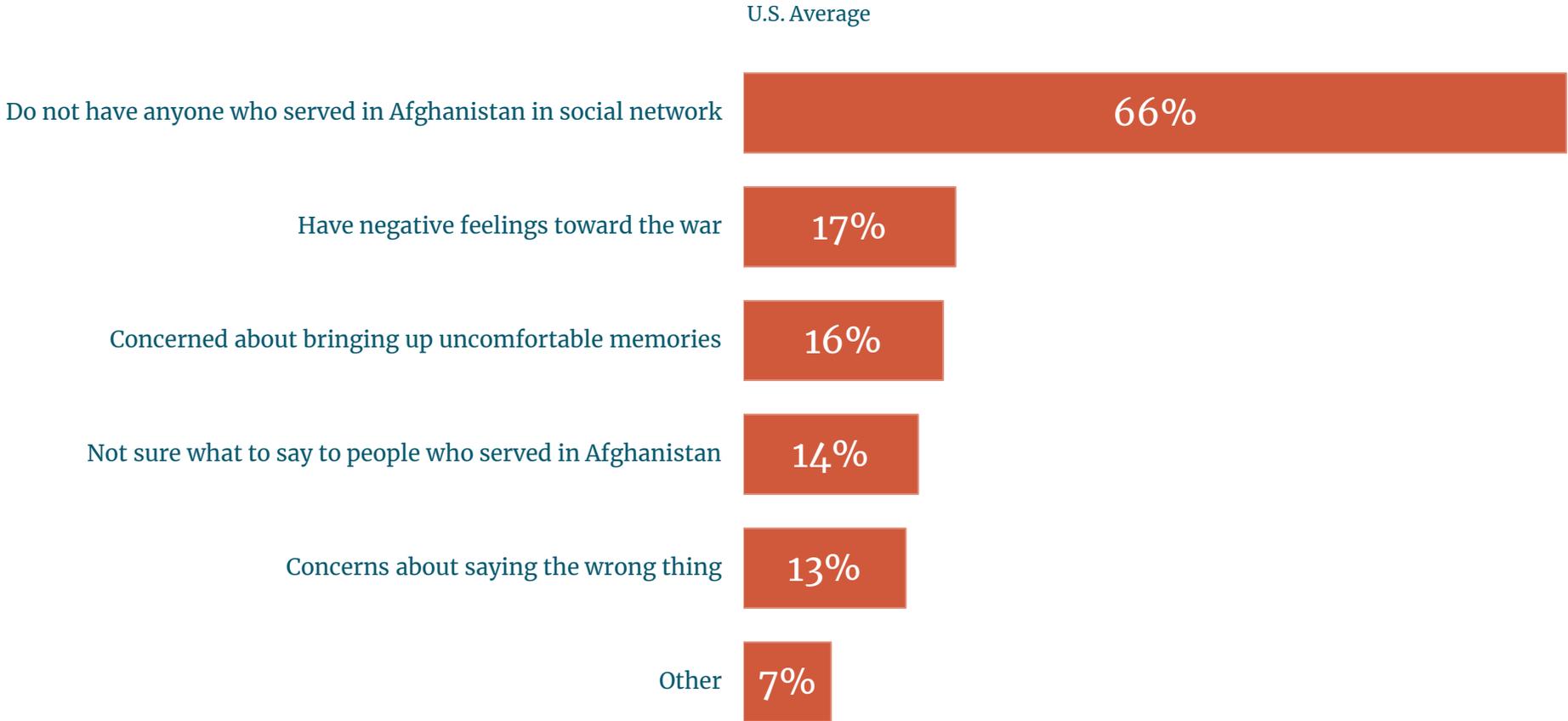


In the past two months, how often have you communicated about the war in Afghanistan in person, on the phone, or online, with American(s) who served in Afghanistan?



Most Americans cite *lack of contact with veterans* in their social networks as the top reason for not communicating with a veteran about the war.

Which of the following are reasons for why you rarely or never communicated with an American who served in Afghanistan about the war? Select all that apply.⁷

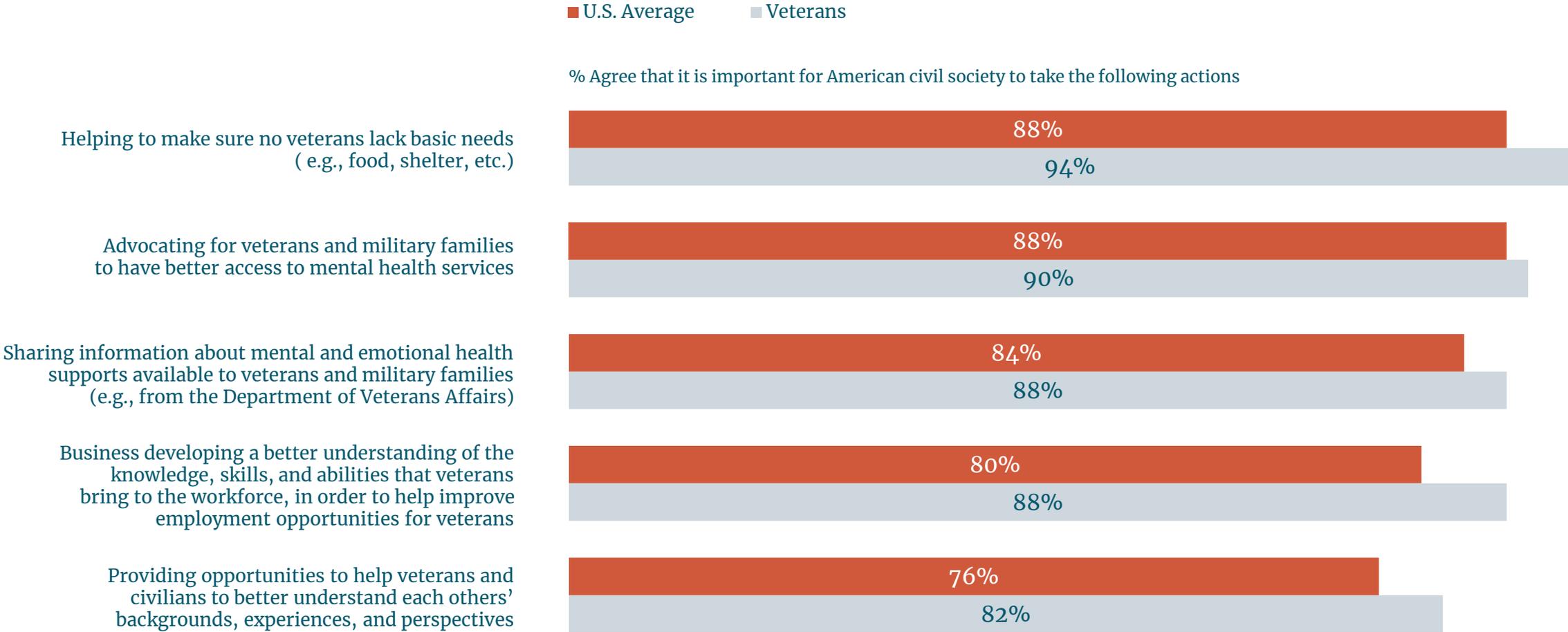


73%

of Americans say it is important for Americans to help veterans and military families process the end of the war in Afghanistan in a healthy way.

In addition to ensuring basic needs and mental health support, both veterans and Americans in general say it is more important to create community engagement opportunities than it is to hold events such as parades to commemorate veterans.

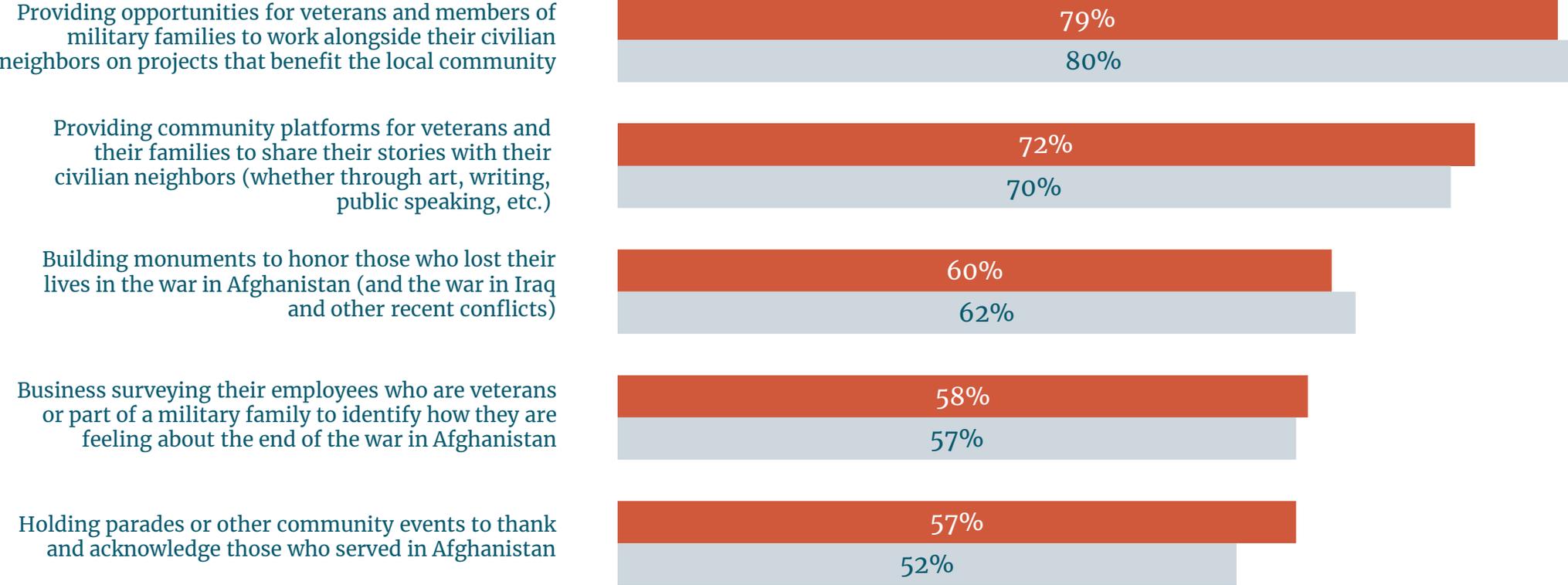
On a scale of 1-4, how important do you feel it is for American civil society (businesses, universities and colleges, faith institutions, and local communities) to take the following actions to support veterans and military families?



On a scale of 1-4, how important do you feel it is for American civil society (businesses, universities and colleges, faith institutions, and local communities) to take the following actions to support veterans and military families?

■ U.S. Average ■ Veterans

% Agree that it is important for American civil society to take the following actions



CONCLUSION

This report aims to support efforts to bring Americans together to help process the end of the war in Afghanistan. The data shows the intense emotional impacts of the end of the war, especially on veterans, and reveals a troubling lack of connection between veterans and American society more generally. This social and civic distance between veterans and non-veterans, while not universal, has significant implications for the veteran and military family community and for American civil society more generally.

Fortunately, there are immediate opportunities to make inroads on building bridges and connections. The data shows clear support for collective action to resettle and welcome our Afghan allies. This work can bring together veterans, non-veterans, and Afghan allies to help build a stronger shared sense of belonging in communities across the country. Similarly, the report shows the strong desire among both veterans and non-veterans for efforts that bring them together to share stories, work on community projects, and otherwise connect on a common civic or community identity.

The departure of the final C-17 cargo plane from Hamid Karzai International Airport on August 30th has been called the end of America's 20-year war, and that is true in a formal sense. Taking a broader view, however, the story remains ongoing. The ultimate conclusion to the war in Afghanistan will depend on the actions Americans - veterans and non-veterans alike - take in the coming years to process the end of the war. This report underscores the importance of taking up such work in earnest at all levels of society.

CREDITS

For their assistance with many elements of this work, we would like to thank the *More in Common* team and all of the veteran and military family partners who provided input to this process.

For their efforts across our polling projects, we thank the following members of the *YouGov* research team in particular: Samantha Luks, Rebecca Phillips, Caitlin Collins, and Marissa Shih.

The report, data visualizations, and other aesthetic considerations were designed and created by Alane Marco and Michelle Ng.

Thank You

For additional information, email:

dan@moreincommon.com

ENDNOTES

- 1 Statistically significant differences describe differences between samples with non-overlapping margins of error. Note that we only show data for Afghanistan Veterans when the response is statistically significant relative to either the response of the broader veteran sample or the general population sample.
- 2 Throughout the survey, certain categories are combined, such as “Slightly agree” and “Strongly agree,” and categories 4 and 5 on a 5-point “emotions felt” scale.
- 3 A statistically significant difference exists between the percentage of veterans (e.g., both veterans and Afghanistan veterans) and the percentage of Americans who agree with the statement, “Sometimes I feel like a stranger in my own country.” However, a statistically significant difference does not exist between the percentage of Afghanistan veterans and the percentage of veterans who agree with the above statement.
- 4 A statistically significant difference exists among the percentage of general population and both veteran groups who feel “Angry,” “Betrayed,” and “Humiliated.”
- 5 A statistically significant difference exists between the percentage of Afghanistan veterans and the percentage of Americans who feel “Disappointed” following the withdrawal from Afghanistan.
- 6 A statistically significant difference exists between the percentage of Afghanistan veterans and the percentage of both veterans and Americans who think that “an opportunity to help resettle Afghan allies would improve your wellbeing or mental health.”
- 7 This survey question was only fielded to respondents who responded that they “rarely” or “never” “Communicated with an American who served in Afghanistan about the war” in the past two months.