
THE FILMMAKER- PARTICIPANT RELATIONSHIP UNPACKED:

Ethical Responsibility and
Impact in Documentary
Filmmaking

Findings from a large-scale study
exploring the relationship between
documentary filmmakers and
participants

iTVS

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Key Findings

As documentary films grow in popularity, ethical concerns about their production have also increased. Questions arise about how to balance the potential benefits of telling powerful human stories—such as fostering empathy and driving social change—against the risks individuals who participate in documentaries face when sharing personal experiences or perspectives. In light of these challenges, ITVS conducted a large-scale study that included the voices of 678 U.S.-based documentary filmmakers and 195 participants to better understand how to improve participant experiences while still producing impactful films.

Participants' Overall Experience With Documentaries

Most have a positive experience and would participate again if given the chance.

89%

of film participants responded **YES**, they would be part of their documentary again if given the chance.

"I would participate again in order to educate, inspire, and motivate others to take action. The film was a chance to dispel negative stigmas."

– FILM PARTICIPANT

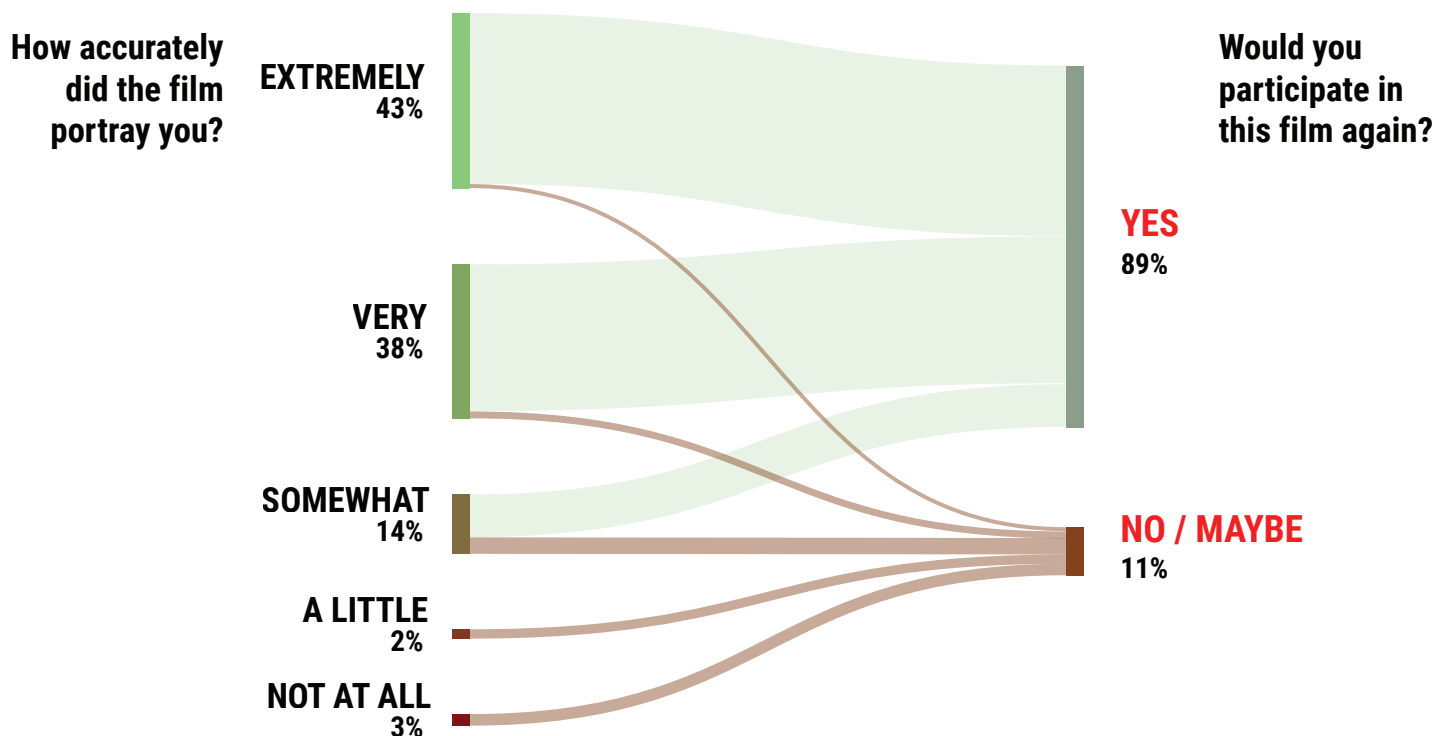
"I feel like the story has been distorted and some of my words taken out of context.... The story was distorted just to sell more tickets. It made me angry because it was such a sensitive and traumatic episode of my life."

– FILM PARTICIPANT

11%

of film participants responded **NO** or **MAYBE** to the same question.

Those who would participate again generally felt the film **accurately portrayed their story** and indicated it had a **positive impact on them and their community**. Conversely, those who expressed hesitation or unwillingness to participate again often felt the portrayal was inaccurate and the film had a negative impact.



Participant Insights

Most participants would do it again.

89% of participants said they would take part in the documentary again if they could go back in time, with many finding the experience overall rewarding. They highlighted how their films shaped public opinion, alleviated feelings of isolation, and inspired viewers facing similar circumstances.

But, significant harm and risks persist.

Misdirection and distorted stories. Around 1 in 10 participants regretted their involvement, often citing concerns that filmmakers had misled them about the direction of the film or grossly misrepresented their stories. In some cases, films took unexpected turns, leaving participants to feel as if the final product breached the terms of their initial consent. Many felt they should have had the right to control any footage featuring them if they chose to withdraw from the project because of these concerns. Some even faced either professional or personal consequences, or both, as a result of inaccurate narratives, prompting calls for legal protections when filmmakers fail to uphold their promises or act unethically during production.

Unanticipated negative impacts. A fifth of participants reported that they did not fully grasp the risks to themselves or their communities, with 1 in 12 stating that their involvement had negatively impacted their personal or professional lives. Those involved in films covering sensitive topics, such as trauma or mental health, often faced significant unexpected attention, including requests to provide emotional support. “Strangers continually email me.... It’s a lot of emotional labor,” one participant shared. Some received hate mail or even feared for their safety due to their exposure in the film. In response, participants advocated for more upfront discussions about risks, as well as for more support after the film’s release.

Calls for clear communication and ongoing support were common, even among participants with an overall positive experience.

Release forms were often unclear. Many participants did not understand the business implications of their participation, including whether they would have access to the film for their own use, if their stories could be licensed or sold, or if they would be compensated.

Being filmed is taxing. Challenges during filming were common, with most participants reporting mixed to negative experiences. Many found the process emotionally draining, particularly when revisiting traumatic or difficult events from their pasts. Among those featured in films about their own lives, 40% wanted more upfront information about what to expect and a greater degree of involvement in the decision-making process. About 30% expressed a need for better communication channels to voice concerns, noted the absence of mental health support, legal support, or both. Some participants felt pressured to perform on camera, with one recalling, “I felt like the director wanted to film me crying...but I’ve gone through intense therapy to help me process those feelings better.”

Communication breakdown after filming. Once filming was complete, participants often felt disconnected from the filmmakers. Many expressed frustration, noting that they did not understand the distribution process and were not informed about important decisions. 41% did not see the finished film before its public release, and several reported dissatisfaction that they did not have ongoing access to the film. “How could you give years of your life to the film, and you can’t even get the finished product without trying to bootleg it off the internet?” one participant asked.

Filmmaker Insights

Current practices vary.

How filmmakers work with participants varies widely, shaped by factors such as budget constraints, production timelines, the nature of the story, and their prior relationship with participants. Findings reflect ongoing industry debates about what constitutes ethical filmmaking. 20% of filmmakers offered direct payment or profit-sharing to compensate participants for their time on their most recently completed project, and just over a third pursued editorial feedback. Other filmmakers opposed participant compensation and feedback, observing the strictest interpretation of journalistic ethics and standards.

Calls for change.

Filmmakers who are early-career or mid-career, particularly those who identify as Asian, Black, Latino/a/x, Middle Eastern or North

African, Native American, and/or Pacific Islander, are pushing established boundaries through their actions and their advocacy. These filmmakers are more inclined to involve participants in decision-making, offer compensation, and provide nonfinancial support such as counseling. They are also more vocal about the need for systemic changes within the field, with 74% of early-career filmmakers calling for a reassessment of how filmmakers engage with participants, compared to 58% of later-career filmmakers.

Challenges exist.

46% of filmmakers reported that limited resources made it challenging to deepen their work with participants. This constraint was more prevalent in films with public funding and distribution than in ones with commercial investment and distribution. In contrast, filmmakers working in public media were less likely to cite production teams as a challenge. Around 15% of filmmakers across both commercial and public media distribution reported difficulties stemming from funder requirements or distributor standards and practices, further complicating their work with participants.

Introduction

The documentary field has long grappled with ethical challenges, with many recent conversations centering on how filmmakers interact with individuals who participate in their films and minimize potential harm.^{1, 2, 3} A comprehensive understanding of the filmmaker-participant relationship has been absent, complicating efforts to focus and prioritize resources to improve the experience for people in front of and behind the camera. This extensive study offers a timely and critical opportunity to enhance ethical practices in the industry. ITVS surveyed 678 U.S.-based documentary directors and producers, alongside 195 participants across a range of categories such as investigative journalism, biopics, community portraits, and true crime. Focus group discussions with filmmakers and participants surfaced deeper insights. The research was conducted in partnership with academic researchers, other filmmaker organizations, and participant advisors.

The relevance of this study is underscored by the growing audience demand for unscripted content, including documentaries.^{4,5} Unlike actors in scripted films or series, documentary participants—often labeled as “subjects” or “characters”—share their real-life stories, experiences, and perspectives with viewers. This authenticity not only captivates audiences but also has transformative potential. Documentaries can alleviate feelings of isolation, foster empathy, and even drive social change.⁶

This powerful genre also comes with significant risks. Participants have reported negative professional and mental health outcomes, and at times serious privacy and security concerns.^{1,2} As commercial production and distribution of documentaries surged over the past decade, so too has attention to its risks.⁷ For instance, Miranda Derrick reported fearing for her safety after appearing in *Dancing for the Devil: The 7M TikTok Cult*, in 2024, while the acclaimed 2022 film *Retrograde* was linked to a Taliban reprisal that resulted in the death of a participant.^{8,9} Failing to address these risks can have far-reaching consequences.

Documentary filmmakers, like journalists, must navigate a delicate balance between the benefits and potential harms of bringing important stories to light. Unlike journalism, the documentary field lacks a unifying set of ethics. Many documentarians fully adopt the code of ethical journalism, while others follow more flexible guidelines or rely on their own ethical instincts, depending largely on the category and style of their films.²

Industry-wide discussions about what constitutes ethical documentary filmmaking have intensified over recent years.^{3,10,11} Focusing on issues such as fair compensation, mental health support, and editorial independence, these conversations mirror broader debates about ethics in media and entertainment. Impacts range from unionization efforts in reality television to the increase in intimacy coordinators, production personnel who focus on setting clear boundaries and establishing informed consent in film and television production.

New financial pressures for documentary filmmakers have arrived as the major streamers and networks have recently cut back on

documentaries to invest in more profitable programming.^{7,12} This trend may slow the response to ethical concerns and yet the demand for change persists.

A systematic understanding of how filmmakers engage with participants can help drive that change. What are common practices? What factors shape filmmakers' decisions? How do they envision the evolution of ethical standards? And the collective voice of documentary participants themselves – the individuals whose stories form the core of these films – can also drive change. Why do participants choose to share their lives in such a public way? Was it worth the risks? What would they change, and what support do they need?

This study, which includes the first large-scale survey of documentary film participants, offers crucial evidence to address these questions. It provides valuable insights into the ethical dynamics of documentary filmmaking and highlights areas for improvement, relevant not only to the filmmakers and participants who took part in the study but also to the broader industry, including funders, distributors, and educators.

Who took part in the study?

Filmmakers. A total of 678 producers and directors, all based in or working within the United States, participated in the survey, with 35 also taking part in focus groups. Our sample reflects a diverse group of filmmakers in terms of gender, age, and race. Approximately half of the filmmakers self-identified as mid-career professionals, while the remaining respondents were almost evenly divided between those who identified as early in their career and filmmakers who had significant experience in the industry (“veteran filmmakers”).

Filmmakers were asked to focus on a recently completed film for the survey. Over two-thirds of respondents reflected on a film completed in the past five years, representing a wide variety of projects in terms of length, funding sources, and distribution platforms.

Filmmaker data collection took place from September through November 2023.

Participants. A total of 195 participants responded to the survey, with 31 engaging in focus groups. Their voices capture a rich array of perspectives across a range of documentary categories, including investigative journalism, biopics, community portraits, and true crime. Participants ranged from individuals who shared their personal life experiences on screen to professionals offering expert analysis of cultural or historical events. Their involvement in the filmmaking process varied significantly, from brief interactions to multiyear commitments. As with the filmmakers, the participant sample was diverse in gender, age, and race.

Participant data collection occurred from January through April 2024.

Detailed Methodology and In-Depth Survey Findings: The Filmmaker-Participant Relationship Unpacked

AVAILABLE ON THE ITVS WEBSITE, THIS RESOURCE DETAILS THE:

- Study methodology and survey questions.
- Characteristics of the filmmakers and participants who took the surveys (including gender, age, and race) and the films that they discussed (including length, topic, release dates, and where it was seen).
- Responses to each survey question overall for all filmmakers and participants who took the survey and by key subgroups, such as filmmaker or participant gender or race, filmmaker career stage, and where the film was seen.

The Overall Experience

“The impact that the film has had was well worth the time, energy and challenges that came with participating with the film. Lives have been saved, systems and mind-sets have been transformed and new approaches to the work have been created as a result of the film.”

– FILM PARTICIPANT

“How participants are treated in documentaries is absolutely essential to reform so that less harm is done to their lives. With that being said I am against blanket prescriptive best practices, as each participant and relationship is different and complex.”

– FILMMAKER

“The people I spoke with about the documentary claimed they wanted to represent facts and clear up misconceptions. Instead the series created a firestorm of controversy due to its lack of historical accuracy.... It hurt my professional reputation. It felt like a friend stabbing me in the back.”

– FILM PARTICIPANT

Participants: Feel the Impact, and the Risks

The impact.

Documentary participants overwhelmingly believe in the medium's potential for positive change. Nearly 90% reported that their motivation for participating stemmed from the desire to highlight important work, help others with similar experiences, or drive social or political change.

Remarkably, 89% of participants indicated they would participate again if they could go back in time, suggesting that, despite challenges, the films largely lived up to their expectations.

- **Social Impact.** For many, the social impact of the documentary was a key reason they would participate again. Participants provided examples of how their films reshaped perspectives, alleviated feelings of isolation, and inspired those facing similar issues. During focus groups, several participants shared that they viewed contributing to a cause greater than themselves as a form of compensation.
- **Personal Impact.** In addition, 86% of participants felt the film had a positive effect on their personal or professional life. Focus group discussions revealed that many participants saw their involvement as leading to new job opportunities or strengthening connections within their community. For others, the experience of filming was emotionally healing.

"Fantastic experience working with this team on an important and often disregarded or poorly reported on topic. I appreciated their diligence in fact-checking and accuracy of reporting, as well as their professionalism and talent in the filming of the documentary. The result was deservedly Emmy-nominated."

– FILM PARTICIPANT

"Doing the film was part of my healing journey. It opened doors and exposed me/us to people, places and things that I would not have had access to if I had not done the film."

– FILM PARTICIPANT

The risks.

For a significant minority – about 1 in 12 participants – the film had an overall negative impact on their personal or professional life, with many of them ultimately regretting their involvement. These participants often felt the final film misrepresented their stories or communities, in some cases perpetuating negative stereotypes or spurring professional repercussions. Many of those who felt misrepresented described feeling “misled” or “lied to” by filmmakers about the direction of the film. Others indicated the filmmakers had manipulated situations in a way that made them uncomfortable, such as asking them to repeat what they said multiple times or to emote on camera.

Moreover, most participants who indicated the positive societal impact of the film made their participation worthwhile also felt the experience was uncomfortable and stressful at times. Common problems included a lack of clarity about the process – especially during the distribution phase – overall miscommunications, and the emotionally taxing nature of filming.

Weighing the impact and risks.

During focus groups, participants called for greater transparency from filmmakers and more upfront discussions about potential risks, allowing them to make informed decisions about participation. Several also advocated for legal protections in cases where a final film diverges significantly from initial expectations or the filmmaker behaves unethically.

“I feel like the story has been distorted and some of my words taken out of context to make it look like I said something I didn’t say. The story was not completely accurate, and distorted just to sell more tickets. It made me angry because it was such a sensitive and traumatic episode of my life. I felt used and cheated.”

– FILM PARTICIPANT

“I was totally lied to about the purpose of the film with no recourse.”

– FILM PARTICIPANT

What influenced their experience?

Pre-existing personal relationships with the filmmaker – whether as family, friends, or colleagues – played a key role in shaping participants' experiences. Those with personal connections reported fewer misunderstandings and a clearer grasp of potential risks, legal terms, and expectations. These participants were also more involved in decisions regarding distribution and impact campaigns, areas where others often expressed frustration.

The documentary's subject also heavily influenced participants' experiences. Those featured in films about their own lives felt personal and professional impacts more intensely than others. They were also significantly more engaged, often contributing to the film's direction and remaining involved for months or even years. Participants in such films were over three times as likely to express that additional information about the filming process, along with more resources during production and after the film's release, would have been beneficial compared to others.

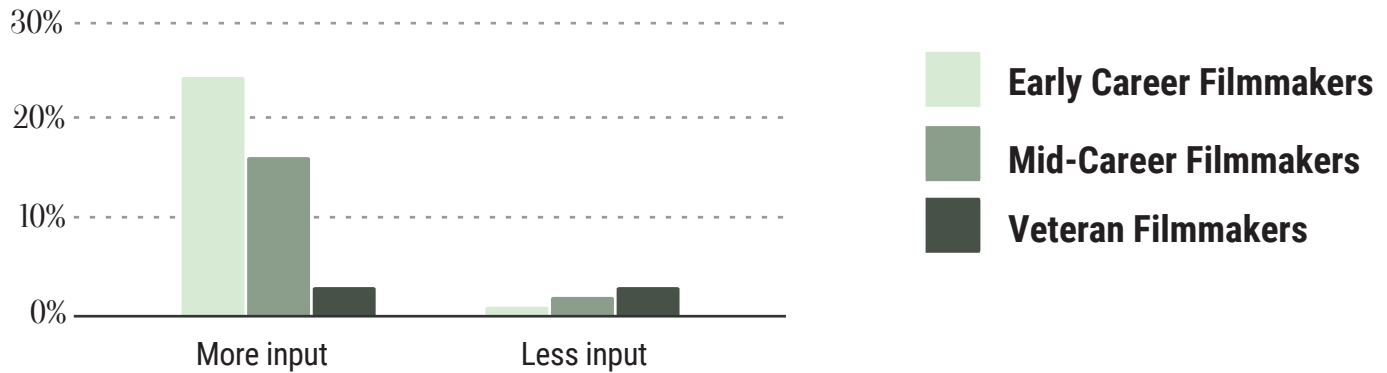
Interestingly, these factors outweighed demographic differences. Participants who identified as Asian, Black, Latino/a/x, Middle Eastern or North African, Native American, and/or Pacific Islander were more likely to be in films about their own lives (55%) compared to white participants (29%), driving most of the observed differences in experiences. No significant differences were found based on gender or age.

How Filmmakers Would Have Changed Their Approach to Working with Participants on a Recently Completed Project

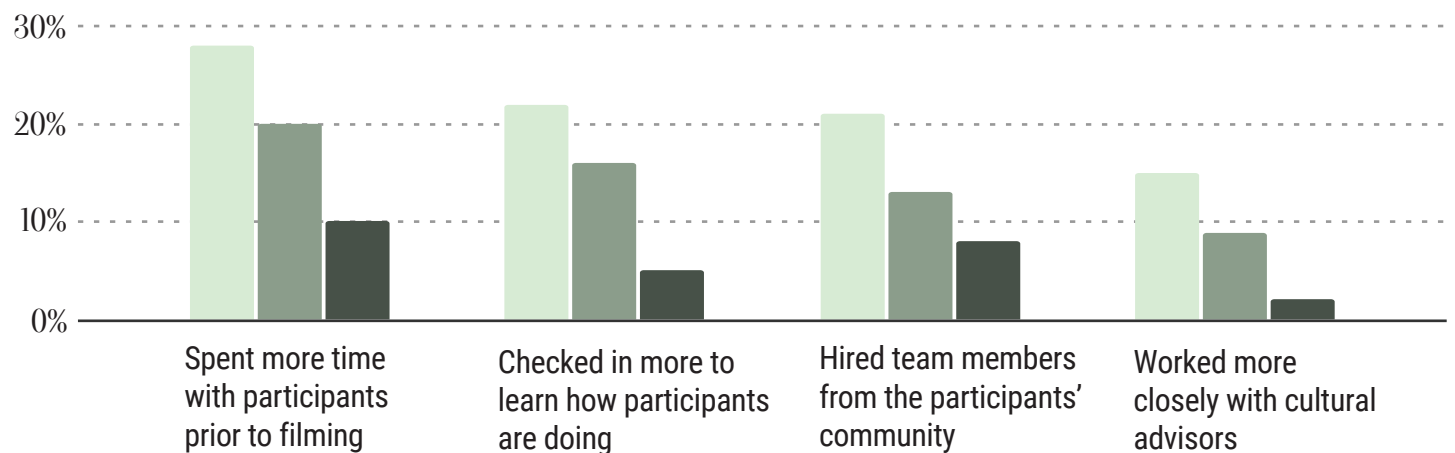
Overall, half of filmmakers would have worked differently with participants in some way. Filmmakers were most likely to indicate that they would have changed their approach to participant compensation (20%), increased time spent with participants before filming (19%), and increased input on decisions (14%).

Across the board, filmmakers earlier in their career are more likely to indicate they would have ideally worked differently with participants.

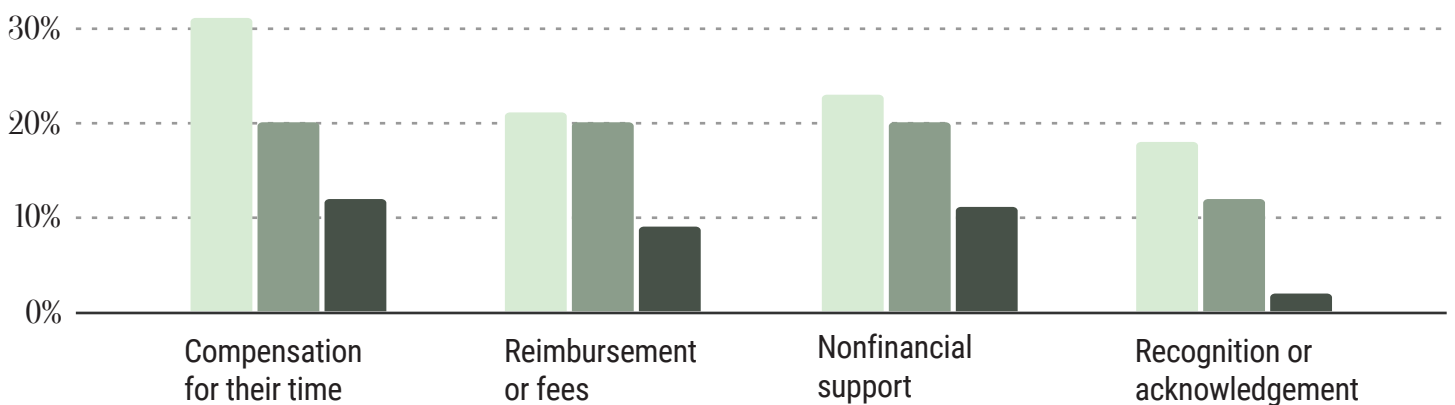
Asked for More or Less Input



Adjusted Approach to Trust Building



Offered Different Supports, Services, or Recognition



678 filmmakers responded to the survey. The number of respondents per question and subgroup are available in the report appendix on the ITVS website.

Filmmakers: Many Call for Change, But Challenges & Disagreements Persist

Calls for change.

Reflecting ongoing industry conversations, 69% of filmmakers surveyed believe that the documentary filmmaking community should address how filmmakers work with participants. Early- and mid-career filmmakers were more likely to call for change compared to filmmakers with the most experience.

When reflecting on their most recent projects, half of the filmmakers indicated that they would have preferred to engage differently with participants. Common themes included a desire to spend more time with participants before filming (19%) and offer different compensation (20%). Filmmakers earlier in their careers, or those who identified as Asian, Black, Latino/a/x, Middle Eastern or North African, Native American, and/or Pacific Islander, were more likely to express a wish for these changes, particularly when their films focused on communities facing systemic inequities.

“If this study into the relationship between documentary filmmakers and participants is to matter, then it would lead to tangible means of making change—not another glossy PDF that impresses a board of funders while failing to get its hands dirty in the filmmaking practice. Self-satisfied email blasts from deep-pocketed foundations are ubiquitous: practical tools from such entities that help the day-to-day work of filmmakers are rare, and should be developed.”

– FILMMAKER

“The field is changing quickly and, while filmmakers are taking on more and more responsibility for creating ethical work and working with participants, the funding community is not moving as fast.”

– FILMMAKER

Common challenges.

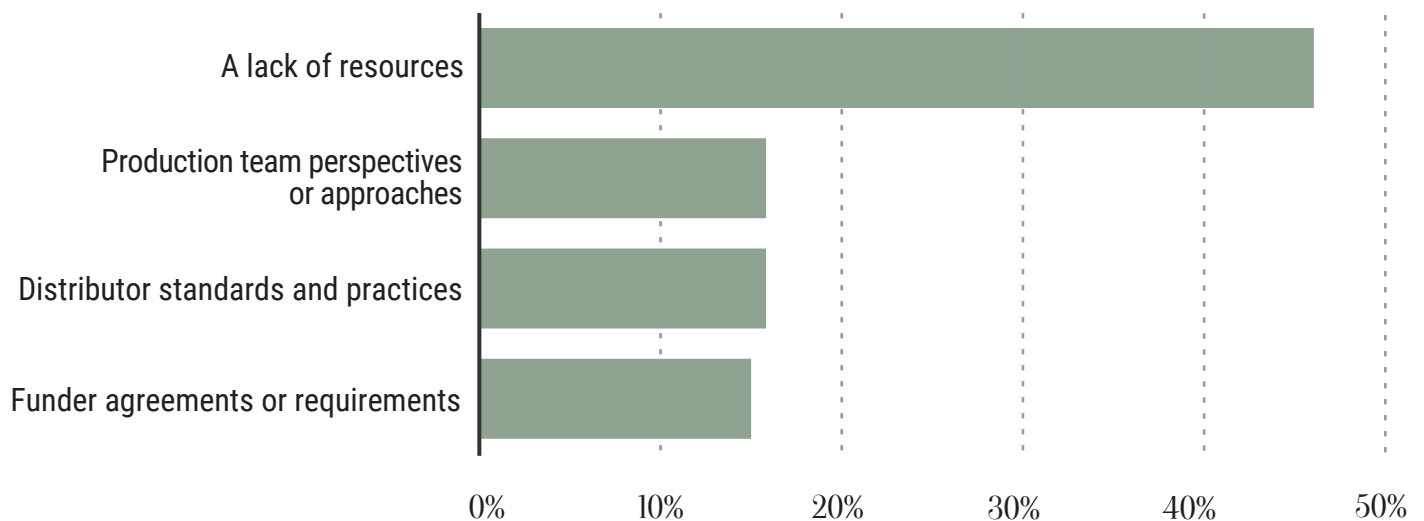
57% of filmmakers said they would benefit from additional training or resources on working with participants.

Financial pressures also loom large. Nearly half of filmmakers cited lack of financial resources as a key challenge to working with participants. During focus groups, many expressed concern that it would be difficult to implement new ethical practices without additional support from funders and distributors. Calls for increased funding, particularly during the development phase, and more generous production schedules were common, as money and time would allow filmmakers to build equitable and trusting relationships with participants.

About 15% of filmmakers also cited restrictive funder or distributor requirements, or conflicting views within their production teams, as obstacles to working more effectively with participants. During focus groups, several filmmakers emphasized that they are often primarily accountable to these stakeholders, not just to their participants.

Filmmakers with commercial media distribution were less likely to report financial constraints but more likely to face challenges with their production teams, compared to those working with public media. Most obstacles were more commonly reported by filmmakers who identified as Asian, Black, Latino/a/x, Middle Eastern or North African, Native American, and/or Pacific Islander.

What Made It Challenging to Work with Participants?



678 filmmakers responded to the survey. The number of respondents per question and subgroup are available in the report appendix on the ITVS website.

Dissenting voices.

20% of filmmakers indicated they needed more information to decide if or how the filmmaking community should address how it works with participants, and 7% felt such action was unnecessary.

In response to open-ended survey questions and during focus groups, many filmmakers voiced concerns about moving away from established journalistic standards or adopting one-size-fits-all ethical rules. They emphasized the importance of preserving journalistic integrity, warning against practices like paying participants or involving them in editorial decisions. Filmmakers also argued for tailoring ethical practices to the specific documentaries – highlighting the differences in investigative journalism, biopics, or long-term personal stories. Several filmmakers pointed out that production teams are best positioned to determine the appropriate ethical practices for a particular situation.

Although less common, a number of filmmakers viewed these ethical challenges as nearly insurmountable. Some questioned the intense focus on ethical debates given the shrinking funding opportunities and tightening budgets in the industry. A few filmmakers even doubted whether they could raise adequate resources to create films in a way they considered ethically sound.

“[Documentary filmmakers] are the ones already doing all the work and often we are underpaid or not paid for our work. The responsibility needs to be with the [major distributors]. Those people get paid vacations and 401ks and they are often very demanding and maybe even unethical about getting the “OMFG” stories. As filmmakers, we are left in the field picking up the pieces and trying to navigate crazy situations while we both capture stories and work hard to take care of our participants.”

– FILMMAKER

“Sometimes, when I hear certain talks about ethical filmmaking, it seems like I could never make an ethical film. It’s overwhelming! It makes me afraid to put years of unpaid effort behind projects that might not be ‘ok’ years later when it’s time for release.”

– FILMMAKER

Breaking Down the Relationship

Film production timelines can unfold over the course of months and years. The experience for filmmakers and participants shifts with the challenges of getting the film made and distributed. The business of securing funding, sticking to deadlines, and delivering cuts may take priority over uplifting, supporting, and minimizing harm to participants at times. And for documentary participants, navigating the uncertainties and emotional demands of the documentary filmmaking process and release may inflict a personal or professional toll.

“My feelings about the documentary experience definitely evolved throughout the journey. Before filming and while we were making the film, I was excited and kind of nervous about it, but also very hopeful. There was a lot of excitement over it. ... But, I left the experience feeling very disappointed in how it was handled. We didn’t really get any participation in the post-production process.”

– FILM PARTICIPANT

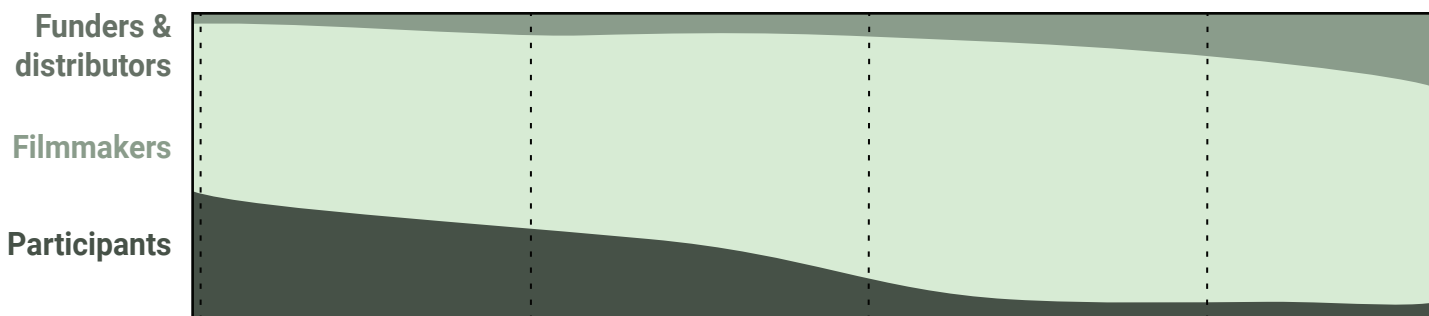
“I’ve been thinking a lot about the length of time it takes to make a feature film, and how participants, when they begin in a project, can’t fully know how they’re going to feel about the film by the time it is completed. So much may have changed in their lives...that affects their relationship to the filmmakers and being a public facing individual. How do we as filmmakers navigate this with them throughout the journey?”

– FILMMAKER

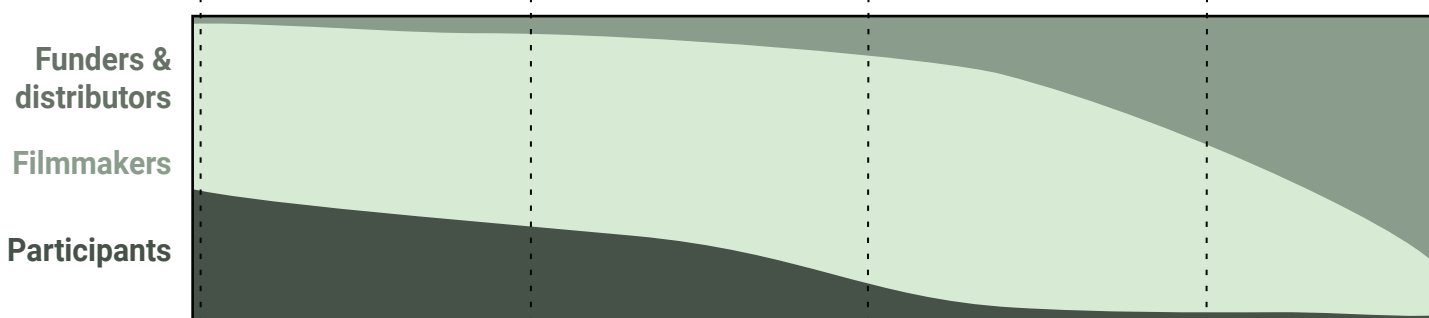
Whose input is most influential at each stage?

These archetypes are based on findings from this study.

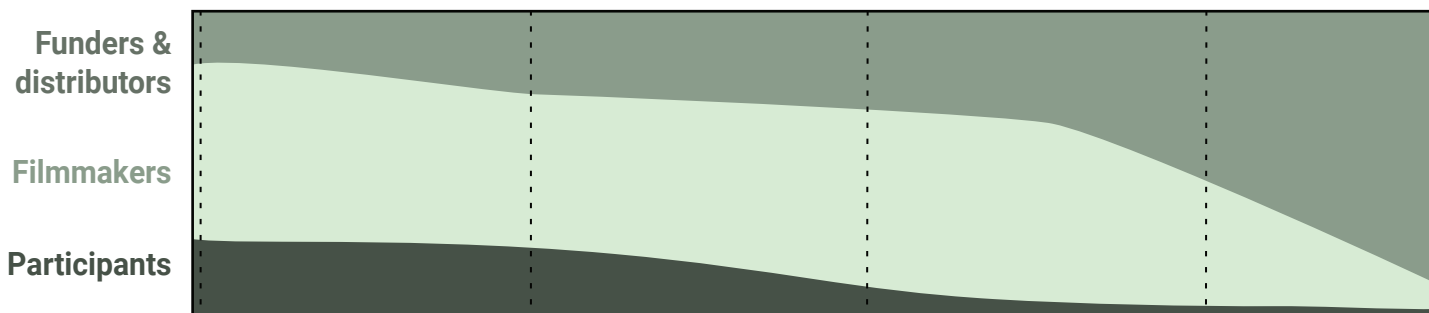
Independently Produced and Self-distributed



Independently Produced and Acquired for Distribution



Commercially/Publicly Produced and Distributed



Before Filming

Filmmakers have insight into the production process, the demands of participation, the potential risks involved, and their creative vision, while participants are often far less informed. Despite this imbalance, participants hold considerable power given that their decision to participate can determine the project's viability. When involved, production companies often hold considerable influence over how filmmakers build trust with participants at this early stage.

During Production

During production, the balance of power starts to shift away from participants. While participants often have some say in what is filmed and what is off-limits—and may feel free to withdraw from the project at any time—they may not fully grasp the nuances of the filming process and their rights as it unfolds. Filmmakers and production companies, when relevant, face a simultaneous challenge: crafting compelling narratives in a competitive market while minimizing harm for participants.

Editing

After filming concludes, filmmakers generally hold significantly more power than participants. During editing, filmmakers shape the story, selecting what footage is included or left out. For films with formal distribution, distributors may also influence how the narrative is crafted. Yet, a growing number of filmmakers are incorporating participants' viewpoints during the editing phase, asserting that participants' perspectives can result in a more accurate and nuanced portrayal.

Distribution

As the film is released, filmmakers with formal distribution commonly face new obstacles, with authority shifting from them to distributors that often dictate how the film will be marketed and where it will be made available. Participants similarly experience a loss of control, frequently finding themselves without adequate information, influence, or support during the release phase.

Before Filming

Before filming, filmmakers introduce the project to participants who decide whether to get involved. The knowledge gap at this point is significant: Filmmakers are well-versed in the production process, the demands of participation, the potential risks involved, and their creative vision, while participants are often far less informed. Despite this imbalance, participants hold considerable power given that their decision to participate can determine the project's viability. This dynamic may incentivize filmmakers to disclose only minimal information to secure participation, raising ethical concerns about their responsibility to fully share risks and details upfront.

“I feel like one of the most contested areas is around consent because, traditionally, the producers and filmmakers are like, ‘Oh, you just signed this form, and it gives us a blanket consent to do all of these things. Basically, now we own your story. You’re not getting paid for it. You agreed to it so we can do whatever we want.’ It’s been kind of an all-inclusive thing.”

– FILM PARTICIPANT

“Maybe there could be a workshop or education for filmmakers that helps us to better understand what consent means—even its legal basis. Consent has a legal foundation that is different from a signed release.”

– FILMMAKER

Filmmaker Approach

How much time filmmakers typically took to introduce their projects, the detail that they shared, and the time they spent getting to know participants varied widely from project to project. Generally speaking, filmmakers who took part in focus groups fell roughly into two even camps.

Lengthy and deliberate. About half of the filmmakers described lengthy and deliberate trust-building processes. Many of them were working on long-term projects, particularly vérité-style films, and emphasized the importance of taking time to explain their vision and build relationships with participants before formalizing agreements.

Quick and focused. Other filmmakers emphasized that they quickly explained the project and secured agreements in writing via release forms to lower financial risk and move forward swiftly with production. These filmmakers often stressed that tight production timelines imposed by funders or distributors did not allow for extended pre-filming discussions. Several described working on projects with street interviews or short scenes that eliminated the need for deep trust-building with participants.

“They always reassured me. When it’s like a White vs [minority ethnicity in US] type of thing, and the director, and everybody who’s working on the film is White, I’m kinda questioning, ‘Are you gonna tell my story in a beautiful way, or do you just want me to be vulnerable and tell my story?’ But they just always reassured me and let me know that they were always on my side.”

– FILM PARTICIPANT

“The filmmakers were serious and concerned with telling [this story about a vulnerable population]. I felt they were going in a good direction, even if I didn’t know what the final film was going to be like. I respected them professionally and they respected me and my work. I wanted to get the story of what I do out there and I knew they would do a good job. Trust was a key issue.”

– FILM PARTICIPANT

“I just let them sign [the release form] and continue shooting because who knows if you will ever get that chance again.... You’ve got a lot riding on [the film].... We’re probably all investing our personal money into these projects.”

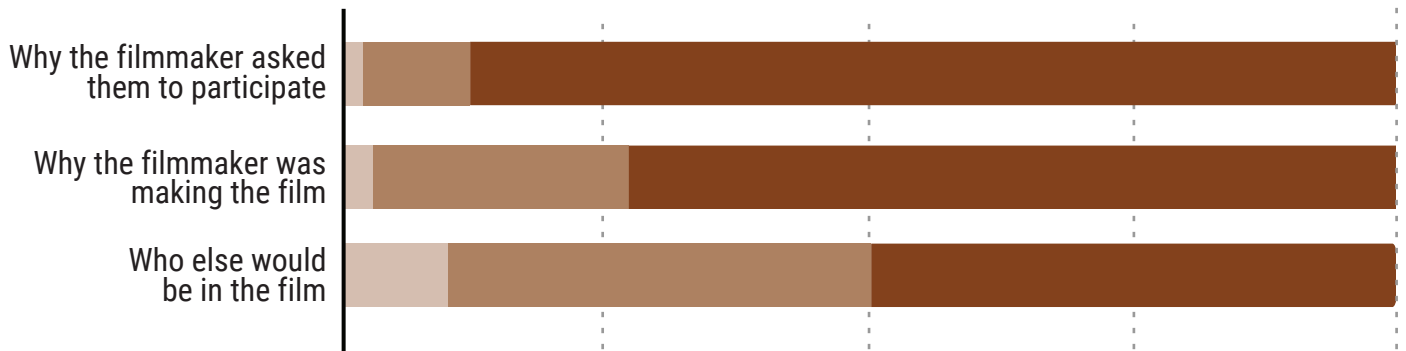
– FILMMAKER

How Well Participants Understood the Project, Their Rights, and the Impact of Participating *Before* Filming Started

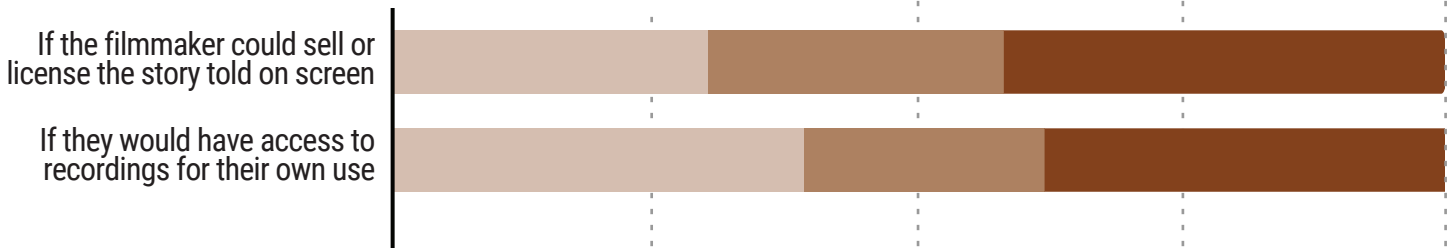
Most participants understood the film’s subject and their role, but many were unclear about key aspects of their involvement before filming started. Most commonly, they did not understand if they would have access to footage (39%), if the filmmaker could license or sell their story (30%), whether they would receive compensation (23%) or other support (39%), or the potential risks of participation (22%).

Understanding the Project

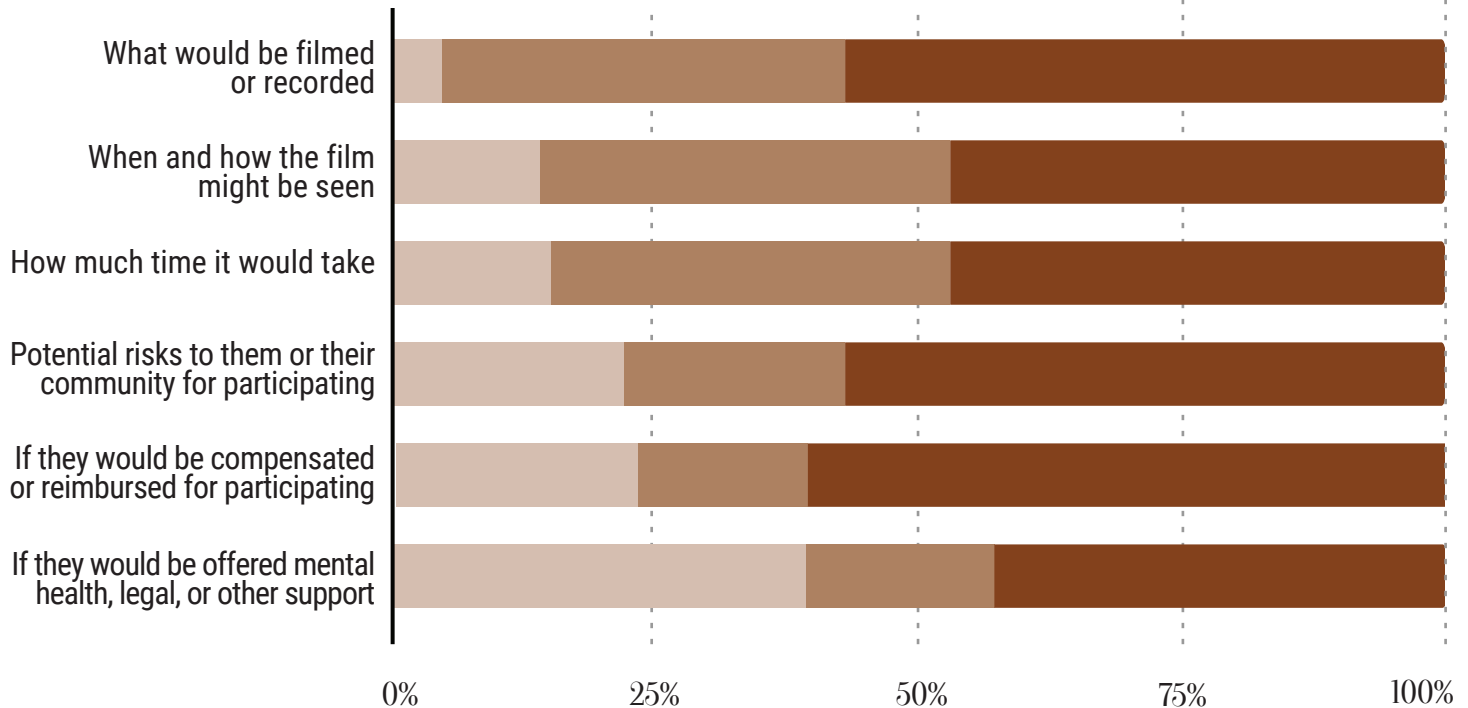
Not at all Somewhat Very well



Understanding Their Rights as Participants



Understanding What Was Expected and the Impact of Participating



195 film participants responded to the survey. The number of respondents per question and subgroup are available in the report appendix on the ITVS website.

Participant Perspectives

What did participants understand?

Almost all participants had a clear understanding of the film's subject matter and the reasons for their involvement before filming began. During focus groups, several participants who were initially hesitant – due to factors such as the filmmaker coming from a different community or the film addressing a sensitive topic – ultimately felt reassured. This shift occurred as filmmakers demonstrated their genuine commitment to the issues, a deep understanding of the topic, and an openness to learning more.

Less clear were the specifics of participation. Many participants expressed that their lack of familiarity with the documentary filmmaking process left them uncertain about the terms of their involvement, their rights, and the potential impacts of joining the project.

Legal and business details. A significant number of participants did not understand or internalize core parts of the release forms, which are often long, dense, and complex. Despite the complexity, only 22% of participants whose films focused on their lives, and just 7% involved in films on other topics, consulted an attorney before signing.

Participants were sometimes distressed when they later realized what they had signed away. Before filming started, 39% did not understand if they would have access to the footage or the film for personal use, and 30% did not understand if the filmmaker could license or sell their story. Nearly a quarter were unclear on whether they would be compensated.

"The risk that I could have been taking, I realize in retrospect, was enormous. I had no way to understand the gravity of it at the time. I don't participate in these [documentary] projects anymore because we now realize that you are never actually in control. Your capacity to consent to participate is never truly what it should be."

– FILM PARTICIPANT

"I'm sure I did [sign a release] and I'm sure I didn't even look at it because I trusted the filmmaker so much... She didn't need to walk through it with me but she could have explained it to me. The only thing I can think of that came up for me [after filming started] is that, when you're being interviewed later on and you wish you hadn't said something, it would have been nice to know if I had a right to say, 'Don't use this, please don't use this.'"

– FILM PARTICIPANT

Risks. 22% of participants did not understand the potential risks of participation for themselves, their families, or their communities before they signed on. This gap in understanding raises significant concerns in light of participants' experiences. They commonly described personal or professional stress resulting from filming and some felt unprepared to handle the unexpected privacy and security risks they faced after the film's release.

What influenced their understanding?

Participants who had pre-existing personal relationships with the filmmaker – whether as family, friends, or colleagues – reported fewer misunderstandings and a clearer grasp of potential risks, legal terms, and expectations.

Interestingly, participants with past experience on another documentary project had similar gaps in understanding to first-time participants, pointing to the complexities of the process and how projects differ from each other.

Recommendations from Filmmakers and Participants

During focus groups, filmmakers often conflated the processes of obtaining a signed release form with gaining informed consent. Participants tended to emphasize the quality of communication with filmmakers before filming rather than the legal documents themselves. These findings highlight a critical issue: The release form primarily protects the distributors, filmmakers, and their insurance companies, while the informed consent process aims to ensure participants fully understand the project, their role, and any potential risks.

“Maybe there is a workshop or education for filmmakers that better helps us to understand what consent means—even its legal basis. Consent has a legal foundation that is different from a signed release.”

– FILMMAKER

“Honestly dumb it down—like it just looks like this huge legal form that I had to fill out. And I'm like, I don't know what this says.”

– FILM PARTICIPANT

“It would be helpful to just have an advocate there. [Someone] just to check in with that is outside of the film crew. Like a trusted messenger to walk you through [what to expect], 'hey, how you feeling? Do you feel good about this? Do you understand?'”

– FILM PARTICIPANT

Filmmakers and participants attuned to this distinction agreed that clearer, more accessible release forms and a separate, robust informed consent process are necessary. One filmmaker summed it up: “We have to be super careful...making it easier to get participants to sign something that doesn’t actually protect them. That poses an ethical problem as well.”

Easier to understand release forms.

Nearly three-quarters of filmmakers supported the idea of simplifying release forms, with newer filmmakers expressing particular enthusiasm. Many participants shared this sentiment, suggesting that release forms should be shorter, written in plain language, or at least annotated to clarify technical terms.

During focus groups, some filmmakers called for standardized release forms, as endorsed by major industry players like the Documentary Producers Alliance, that could be tailored to specific projects. Others questioned whether a one-size-fits-all approach could accommodate the wide variety of films and participant needs.

Transparent and comprehensive informed consent.

One-fifth of participants expressed a desire for more time with the filmmakers on their projects before filming began, and 23% wanted more detailed information about what to expect during production. This sentiment was particularly strong among those whose lives were the focus of the films.

Notably, nearly all focus group participants who had negative expe-

“The filmmakers engaged in a bait-and-switch confidence scheme to gain our trust, claiming that the film would be about one thing, then making it about another. When confronted, he showed no remorse, but replied simply, ‘We changed our minds.’”

– FILM PARTICIPANT

“I didn’t have the opportunity to consent, so I couldn’t decline participation, because I didn’t know I was participating in a documentary about me. I thought it was a documentary about [broader topic]. I would have chosen to not participate had I known the terms of participation.”

– FILM PARTICIPANT

periences during filming or after the film's release emphasized the need for a more comprehensive informed consent process. Many of these participants indicated that the filmmakers, in an effort to sell the project and secure their involvement, were less than transparent about the risks of participation and the level of input in the final product. These experiences prompted calls for clearer standards on what information should be disclosed upfront.

Participants advocated for better guidelines to ensure they not only received necessary information but also fully understood it.

Key points they emphasized included:

- The right to request that filming stop, and the process for doing so.
- If and how they would be involved in the editing process.
- Whether they would have access to unused footage or the final film.
- The potential risks to themselves and their communities.
- Their role, if any, after the film's release.

In addition to clearer expectations, participants called for standards around the timing of consent requests. Some expressed concern that filmmakers approached them for consent immediately after a traumatic experience without factoring in the question of whether they were in the right state of mind to make a significant decision. Others felt that, given the project changed significantly during production, they should have been offered the chance to re-evaluate their participation.

Several filmmakers proposed educational resources to help participants better understand the documentary filmmaking process. Suggested assets include print or video guides and participant statements detailing what to expect and empowering informed choices.

During Production

During production, the balance of power starts to shift to the filmmakers. While participants often have some say in what is filmed and what is off-limits—and may feel free to withdraw from the project at any time—they may not fully grasp the nuances of the filming process and their rights as it unfolds. Filmmakers and production companies, when relevant, face a simultaneous challenge: crafting compelling narratives while minimizing harm for participants.

This balancing act lies at the center of ongoing debates about the ethical treatment of documentary participants, with particular focus on the risks of re-traumatization and the question of whether participants should be compensated.

“I found the experience pretty draining and noticed just a lot more anxiety and fatigue around the time of filming.”

– **FILM PARTICIPANT**

“I think we need to create more understanding with funders around the need for mental health line items in the budget for both the film participants and the creative team.”

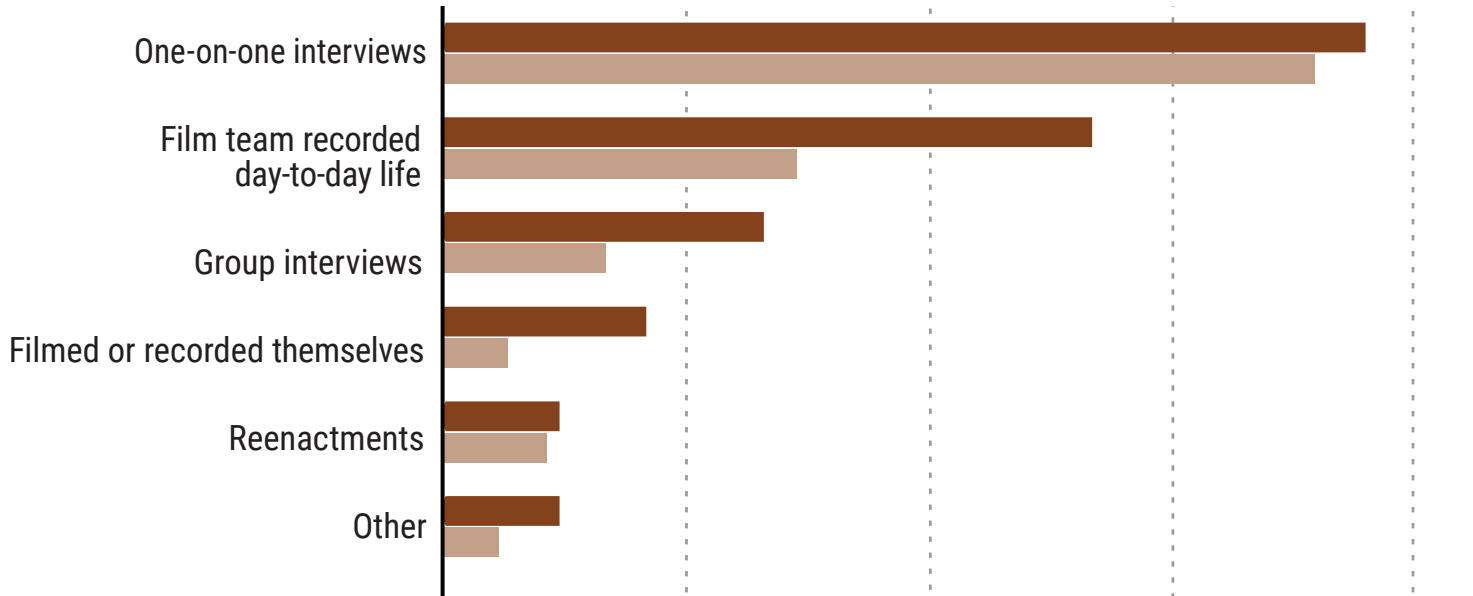
– **FILMMAKER**

How Participants Contributed to Documentaries

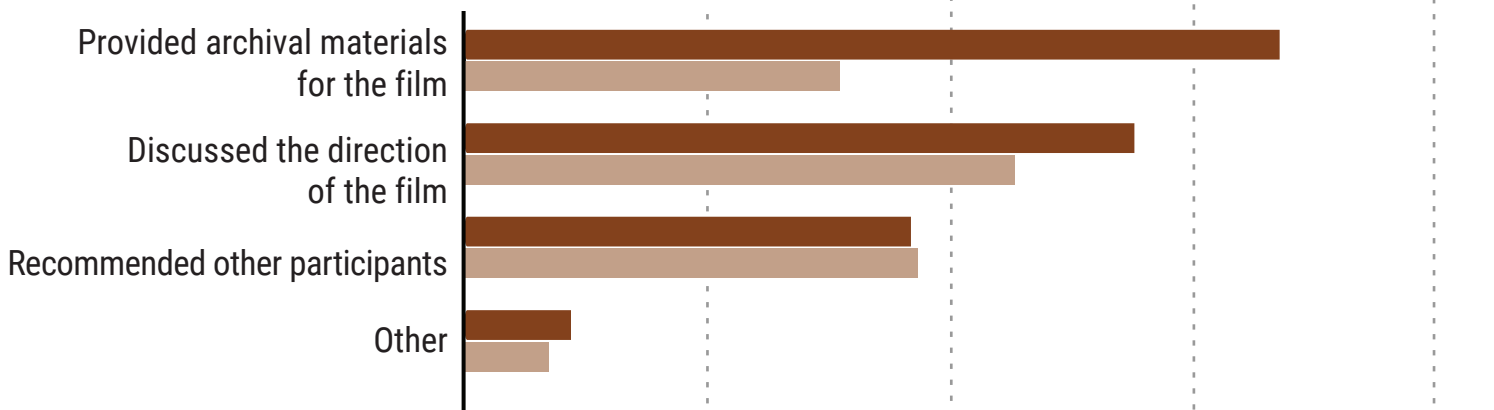
Participants contribute substantially to films in many ways that go beyond being filmed or recorded. In particular, participants who are in a film about their own life contribute to the film and decision-making in other important ways.

How Participants Were Filmed or Recorded

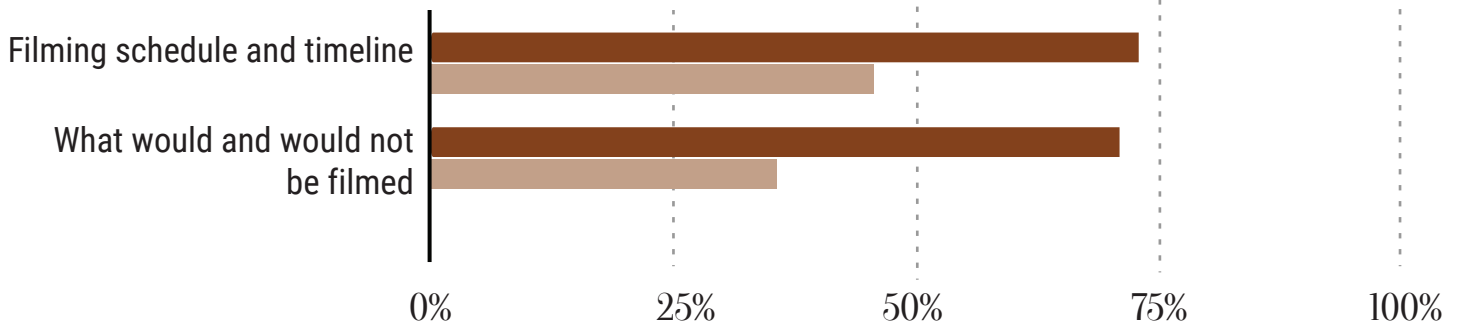
Film was about the participant's life
 Not about the participant's life



How Participants Contribute in Other Ways

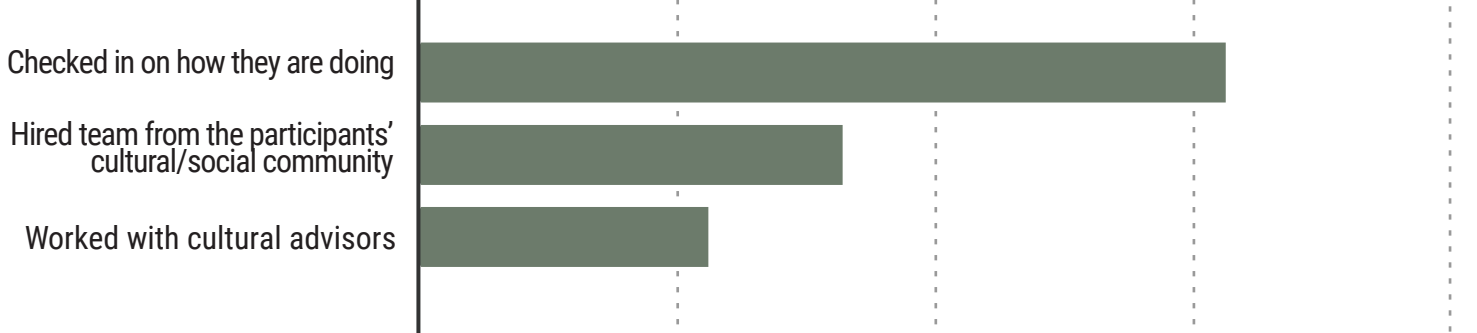


How Participants Were Involved in Decisions Regarding...

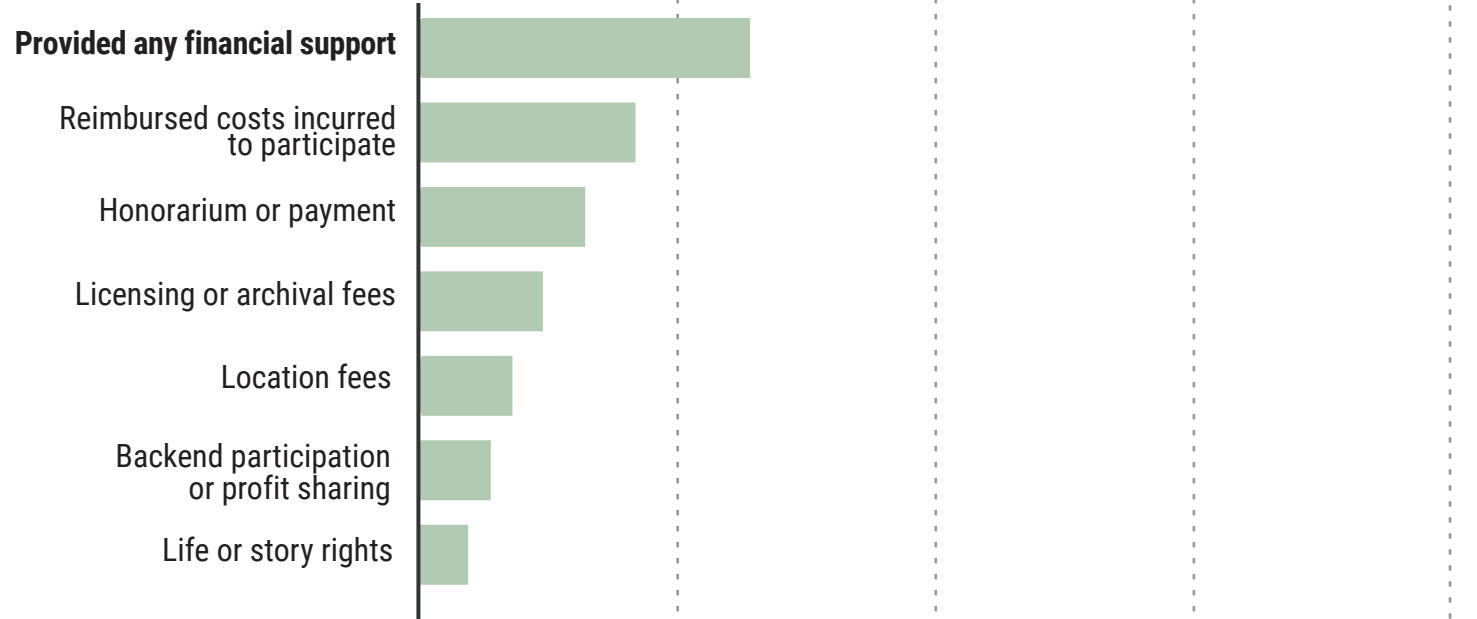


Strategies Filmmakers Used to Support Participants

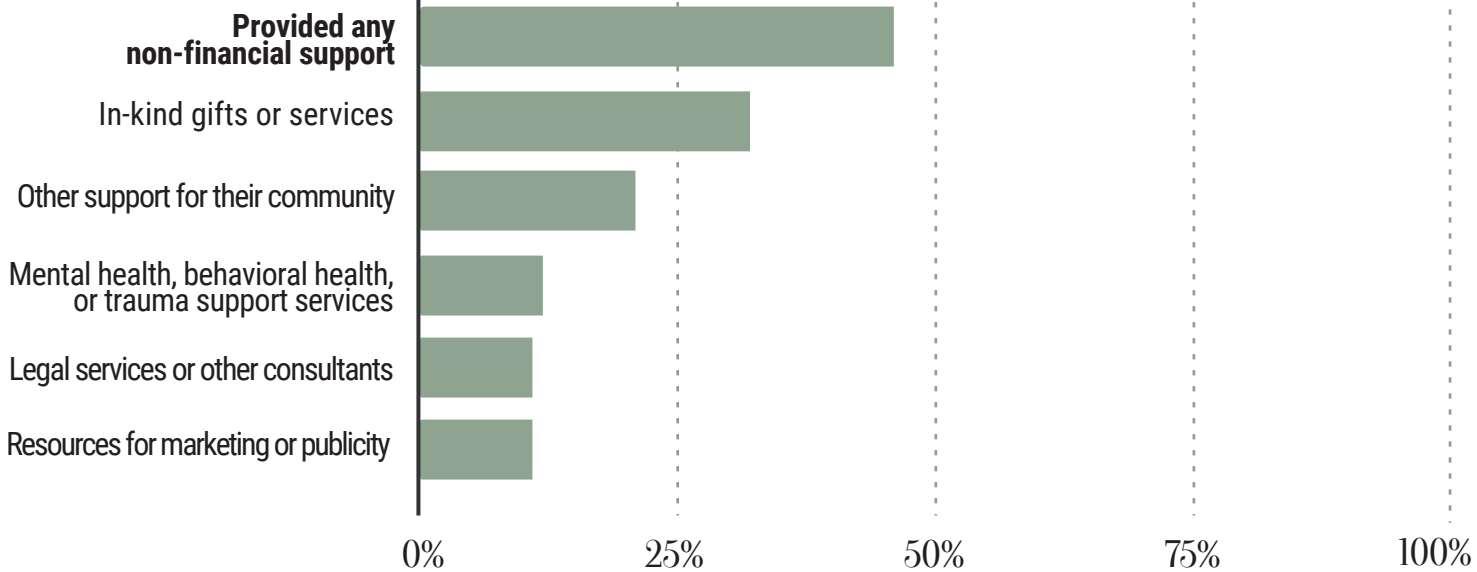
Trust-Building Strategies



Financial Support



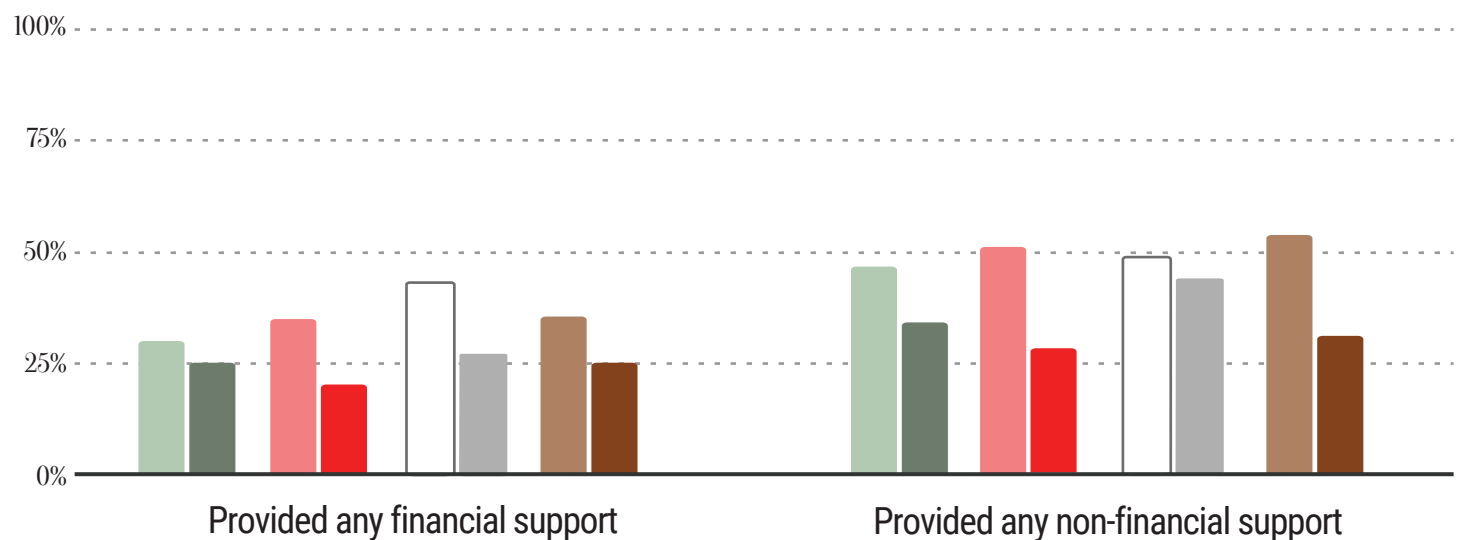
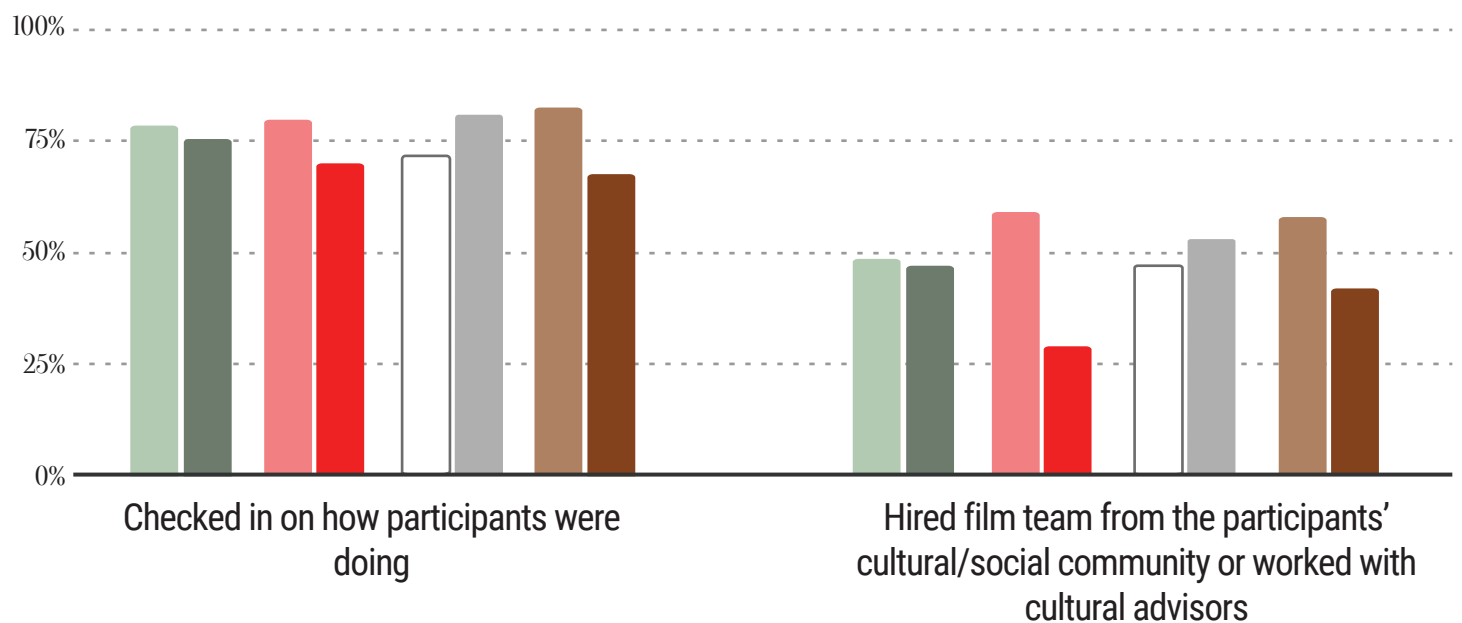
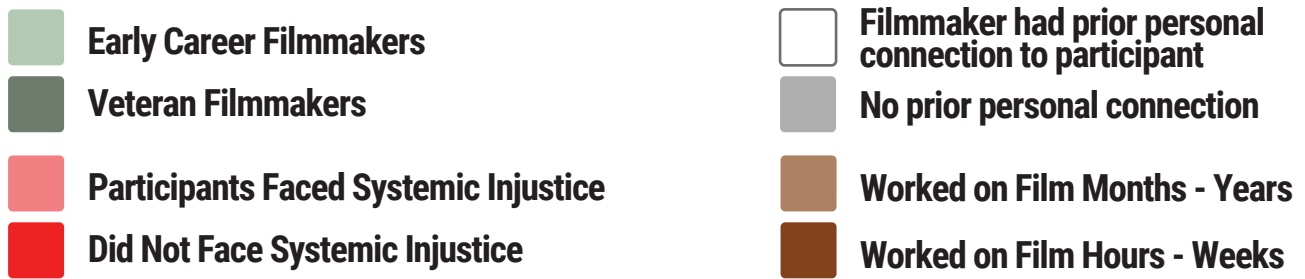
Non-Financial Support



678 filmmakers responded to the survey. The number of respondents per question and subgroup are available in the report appendix on the ITVS website.

Filmmakers' Strategies to Support Participants Varied

Filmmakers are more likely to provide support if they are earlier in their career. Participants are more likely to be offered support if they are from a community that has faced systemic oppression, had a personal connection to the filmmaker, or were involved in the project for a long time.



Filmmaker Approach

How did filmmakers work with participants?

Participants contribute to documentaries in significant ways in addition to interviews. About two-thirds talked with filmmakers off-camera about the film's direction. Those who were experts on the film's topic often indicated the film drew heavily on their professional work or research. Over half of participants shared personal photos, home videos, or other materials for the film, and nearly half recommended other participants. 22% received a production credit for this work.

Participants who shared personal stories, especially those involving difficult situations, were more involved in decisions about what was filmed and when. These participants were also more likely to provide personal materials for the film, with 84% saying they did so.

“We checked in and paused interviews when sensitive topics arose to give them a chance to establish or reiterate boundaries around sharing potentially confidential details.”

– FILMMAKER

“Several of my characters would sometimes ask that I not include certain aspects of their lives in the film and my answer was always ‘of course.’”

– FILMMAKER

“We partnered with legal organizations...to provide a legal framework and safety assessment for our protagonist. [They helped] to determine what actions and behavior on camera would not put our protagonist at legal (or criminal) risk.”

– FILMMAKER

How did filmmakers support them?

Ongoing communication. 78% of filmmakers said they checked in with participants throughout filming to see how they were doing. Filmmakers indicated that participants' most common concerns were about their portrayal (50%), privacy or confidentiality (42%), or scheduling conflicts (41%). Filmmakers stressed that maintaining open communication, built on the foundation of trust established early in the project, was key to addressing concerns. They often had lengthy and sometimes difficult discussions with participants.

Addressing concerns. When participants raised concerns about their portrayal, privacy, or confidentiality, most filmmakers indicated, in response to an open-ended survey question, that they reassured participants they would have the chance to review and comment on edits before the film was finalized. About half guaranteed they would remove any personal details that made participants uncomfortable. Others were open to discussing changes but emphasized that the filmmaker would make the final editorial decisions.

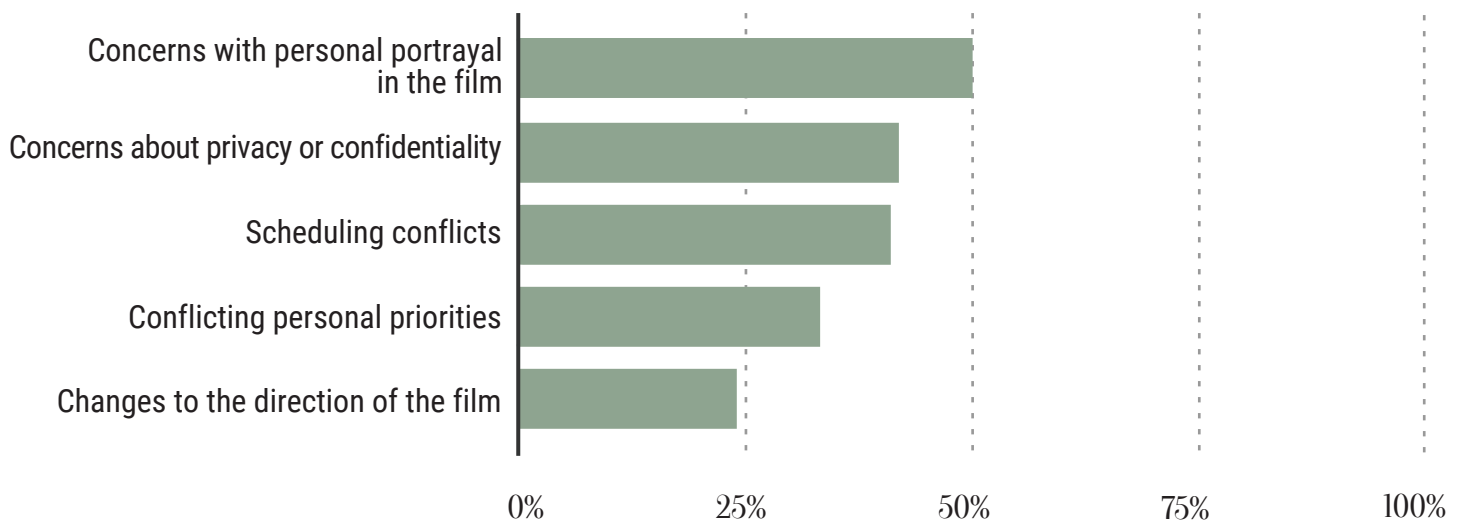
Filmmakers commonly used other strategies to address participants' concerns, such as:

- Convincing participants that the personal risk was worth it due to the film's potential positive impact.
- Reiterating the film's goals and the filmmakers' experience in telling the story.
- Filming participants out of focus, in shadow, or obscured to protect their identity.
- Avoiding filming personal topics or locations participants felt uncomfortable with.
- Discussing cultural accuracy in detail with participants or bringing on cultural advisors to review the film.
- Reassuring participants that they could withdraw from the project at any time.

“This film was an investigative documentary on a very powerful U.S. based corporation known for acting punitively against its perceived critics, including employees. In the case of an inside whistleblower appearing in the film, we interviewed them in shadow, and replaced their voice with a producer’s. We explained to this person that we could not guarantee that his employer would not find out their identity or take punitive actions against them. We explained that we would not provide legal representation in the case that the employer discovered our source and took punitive actions.”

- FILMMAKER

Concerns the Filmmakers and Participants Discussed During Production



678 filmmakers respondent to the survey. The number of respondents per question and subgroup are available in the report appendix on the ITVS website.

Why do some participants decide to withdraw from a documentary?

Filmmakers were unable to address all participant concerns, with 9% reporting that at least one central participant withdrew from their latest film. Filmmakers were asked to elaborate on those experiences. Half indicated that the participants withdrew for personal reasons such as health, family issues, or strained relationships with others in the film. According to filmmakers, the remaining participants left due to concerns with the film. Most often these concerns were related to privacy, safety, or potential legal and financial risks. Several filmmakers indicated that participants, especially in long-term projects, withdrew due to the stress of continuous filming, while a few indicated participants did so because they disagreed with the direction of the film.

Filmmakers responded to these withdrawals by participants in various ways: some continued with fewer participants or replaced them with backup participants, while others used existing footage. In some cases, filmmakers indicated that participants gave them permission to use their footage despite withdrawing. A few filmmakers, relying on signed release forms, used the footage even after participants asked to be excluded.

“While we had several conversations prior to the start of filming, three participants withdrew during filming. Two seemed not to understand that we wanted to film over the course of a year, coming back many times to film them. I feel we could have communicated that better, but at the outset.”

– FILMMAKER

“The mother of one of the participants...decided that it was best that her 19-year-old son not appear in the film because it revealed a crime he had committed.”

– FILMMAKER

“I have never paid a participant for the fact of being in a film. I have paid location fees for having me film in their homes as it uses electricity and lots of other resources. And, I have paid materials fees for using family photos and home movies. But, philosophically, it is important for me that they understand any money exchanged isn't for being in the film.”

– FILMMAKER

“They spent a substantial amount of time and energy participating in the film and helping to coordinate many logistics and I feel that it would be fair to compensate them for their time.”

– FILMMAKER

“They deserve to be compensated for their time regardless of news and public media regulations. I believe that conventional non-fiction platforms have rules that end up exploiting and taking advantage of victims and individuals facing economic hardships.”

– FILMMAKER

Providing financial and nonfinancial resources.

In addition to checking in with participants and discussing their concerns, many filmmakers proactively provided participants resources or services to support their participation.

Reimbursement. During focus groups, filmmakers emphasized that participating in a film should not be a financial burden. 21% of filmmakers who took the survey reimbursed participants for expenses incurred as a result of the film, such as transportation expenses, electric bills, or lost wages.

Direct compensation. 20% of filmmakers offered direct payment or profit-sharing to compensate participants for their time. During focus groups, some filmmakers acknowledged that participants contributed real work to their films, including emotional labor, research, or recruiting others, and should be compensated for it. An additional 10% of filmmakers provided participants location, licensing, or archival fees as compensation for other contributions to the film—such as allowing the film to be shot in their house or providing home videos or personal photographs.

Nonfinancial support.

Fewer filmmakers offered participants nonfinancial support: 12% offered mental health support and 11% offered legal support. Most participants who were offered these services accepted them, and those who did generally found them helpful.

In-kind or community support.

Filmmakers were more likely to offer informal support, like providing rides, groceries, or meals, with 32% doing so. A fifth of filmmakers supported participants' communities, for instance, by helping a featured nonprofit create a promotional video or volunteering for related causes. During focus groups, several filmmakers described these efforts as part of building rapport with participants. Others indicated that, while they did not agree with financially compensating participants, in situations where they were more materially privileged than participants, they wanted to give something back.

Early- or mid-career filmmakers were more likely than their more experienced counterparts to compensate participants for their time or provide mental health, legal, or in-kind support. Filmmakers were more likely to offer support to participants from communities that faced systemic inequity, those sharing stressful or traumatic stories, or with whom they had longer standing or closer personal relationships.

“I feel we unearthed experiences that may have re-traumatized [the participants] by asking them to talk about them again. If we are benefiting from these stories in some way, they should also be able to benefit. It’s causing an impact to their mental health, which might impact their financial health.”

– FILMMAKER

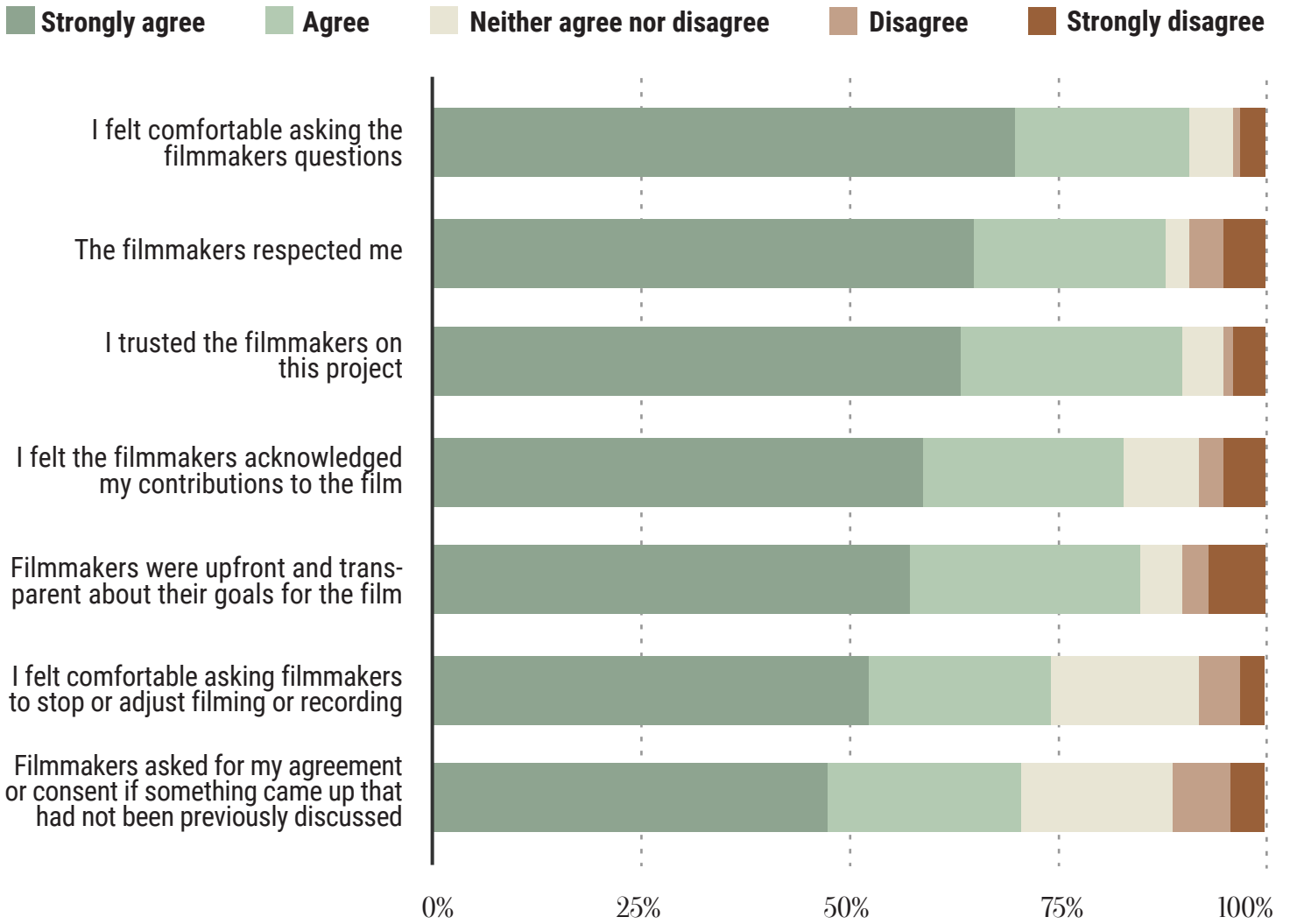
Participants and filmmakers had different perspectives on direct compensation and in-kind support.

Although the filmmaker and participant surveys reflect different samples, the findings on how often filmmakers provided support to and sought editorial feedback from participants were fairly consistent. However, there was a stark contrast in the results regarding direct compensation and in-kind support.

Participants were significantly more likely to report receiving honorariums or payments for their time than filmmakers were to acknowledge offering such compensation. Focus groups revealed that participants often considered honorariums or speaking fees for post-release engagements as compensation for their involvement in the film, whereas filmmakers tended to view these payments as separate from project participation. This difference may reflect the filmmakers’ allegiance to journalistic standards that prohibit compensating participants during production but allow later benefits such as speaker fees during the distribution phase.

In contrast, participants were considerably less likely to report receiving in-kind gifts, services, or other forms of support for their community than filmmakers were to report providing them. This discrepancy may be due to participants being unaware of community-focused efforts, less likely to recall these contributions, or that they perceived in-kind support as less transactional than filmmakers did.

Participants' Views on the Filmmaker and Process



195 film participants responded to the survey. The number of respondents per question and subgroup are available in the report appendix on the ITVS website.

Participant Perspectives

Filmmaker-participant relationship. Around 90% of participants reported feeling comfortable asking questions, trusted the filmmakers, and believed they were treated with respect. Trust was highest among participants who worked on the film for months or years. During focus groups, participants shared that filmmakers maintained strong relationships by sticking to their project goals.

Experience with filming.

Positive experiences. About a quarter of focus group participants reported positive filming experiences. These participants said filmmakers clearly explained what was expected of them and respected their boundaries. Filmmakers also worked to create a supportive filming environment by shooting at convenient locations, ensuring flattering lighting, or hiring crew members committed to the project's goals. Those sharing challenging stories appreciated that filmmakers checked in on their well-being and paused filming when needed. Some even described the experience as healing.

Mixed experiences. More commonly, half of the participants that took part in focus groups had mixed experiences. While they trusted and respected the filmmakers, many found the process more demanding than expected, especially when a camera crew followed them at home or work. Filming often took longer or was more intense than anticipated, leaving some participants feeling anxious or fatigued. Several participants discussing stressful or traumatic events said the filmmakers or crew did not fully grasp the “mental gymnastics” required. These participants called for more trauma-informed training for filmmakers and their teams.

Several focus group participants shared that the high degree of trust and respect that they had for the filmmakers made it harder to establish boundaries during filming. While 70% felt very comfortable asking questions, only 53% felt as comfortable asking filmmakers to stop or adjust filming. Fewer than half felt strongly that they they were asked for consent if the filmmakers decided to film something not previously discussed.

Negative experiences. The remaining focus group participants indicated that filmmakers had pushed their boundaries to the point that trust significantly eroded. They often felt the goals of the film kept changing, with filmmakers asking for more even after participants expressed discomfort. Several focus group participants felt

"I felt that it was a very cathartic experience.... I appreciated [the filmmaking team's] craft and their skill. They got a lot of footage, asked really good questions. The film crew exercised great care with every aspect of it. They took the time because they cared about the story. The end result was really great."

– FILM PARTICIPANT

"I was treated kindly & thoughtfully during the process & the film had a positive outcome."

– FILM PARTICIPANT

"I was lucky that I had like a friendship and a close relationship with the director. I think in some ways, because you're close with people, you kinda let them push the boundaries more and then maybe get out of your comfort zone. This can be good sometimes for the viewer but then sometimes it's a bit uncomfortable for you."

– FILM PARTICIPANT

"I did not feel there was an understanding of the need to limit the time of filming on a particular day due to the stress of discussing sensitive material."

– FILM PARTICIPANT

"The process of being interviewed and feeling very vulnerable about the film's release and the exposure that it brought was very challenging."

– FILM PARTICIPANT

"What I didn't expect was to be grilled for so long on camera and for the last part of the interview to be almost hostile in repetition of the variations of the same questions. The director hoped to make me say something on camera that suggested that I had huge remorse for what was effectively run of the mill operations in that time period."

– FILM PARTICIPANT

"A lot of what you see in the documentary is honestly just staging and kind of like, well, 'We wanna do this. Let's do a shot of this. And, can you say something about this?' So, it's kind of just following instructions. I think that the priority was definitely on sound bites."

– FILM PARTICIPANT

"I was working on the documentary before I had therapy...and it was a shit show to be completely honest with you. The relationship definitely declined over time because they were not trauma-informed, and I was a very damaged person going into that."

– FILM PARTICIPANT

"I felt like the director wanted to film me crying. She had it in her mind that I should be this broken down mess.... But, I've gone through intense therapy to help me process those feelings better."

– FILM PARTICIPANT

they should have been given the chance to re-consent when the film's direction changed or raised significant concerns about filmmakers who tried to manipulate situations. Participants described being asked to repeat difficult parts of their story multiple times or that filmmakers pressured them to heighten their emotional responses, read scripted material, or participate in reenactments. These participants were not expecting to participate in this manner and described the resulting process or film as "inauthentic" or "disingenuous."

Recommendations from Filmmakers and Participants

More participant input on key decisions, especially if the film is about their life.

Participants whose stories were the subject of the film were more likely to ask for a larger role in decision-making (40%) compared to those in films about other topics (26%). They were also more likely to call for easier ways to discuss concerns about filming with filmmakers (28% versus 6%). Though less common, participants also called for greater community involvement in the filmmaking process, with 20% of those in films about their life expressing that having more film team members from their cultural or social community would have been beneficial.

The loudest calls for more involvement came from participants who felt misled about the direction of the film. They suggested industry standards requiring filmmakers to keep participants informed and reseek consent if the film's story direction significantly changes.

Additional resources for participants, in particular those sharing challenging stories.

Nonfinancial resources. Both filmmakers and participants called for more support, particularly for those sharing sensitive stories. 63% of filmmakers called for resources to help connect participants to counseling, legal, or other support. Nearly a third of participants sharing personal stories indicated this type of support would have been helpful.

During focus groups, filmmakers indicated that additional funding is needed to provide these supports, with several calling for mental health support to become a standard budget line. Several filmmakers

"There should be training and resources available to make sure protections are in place for participants, whether it be financial, mental health support, or other supports."

– FILMMAKER

and participants also called for more training for filmmakers on how to actually approach trauma-informed filmmaking, noting that while filmmakers often discuss trauma-informed practices they are not always prepared to deliver. Sometimes filmmakers indicated that they played the role of a therapist with participants, and did not feel equipped for it.

Compensation. During focus groups, filmmakers extensively debated the issue of compensation for participants. Opinions were divided: Some filmmakers strongly believed participants should be compensated, others felt compensation was inappropriate, and a third group was conflicted. Many grappled with what they perceived as a blurred line between maintaining journalistic objectivity and potentially exploiting participants. Often, the debate was overshadowed by practical constraints, with many filmmakers commenting along the lines of, “We didn’t have the money, so we couldn’t do it anyway.” In the survey, 20% of filmmakers expressed a desire to compensate participants more for their time, while 17% wished they could have provided more reimbursement or fees.

Participants were generally less focused on compensation. Most shared during focus groups that they did not expect payment and indicated that financial compensation was not their primary concern or motivation for participating. Instead, they valued non-monetary forms of compensation, such as the social impact of the film, or access to the film and unused footage for personal use.

Participants who called strongest for compensation had negative experiences on the film, such as feeling mistreated or misled about the project. In the rare cases that films were commercially successful, most participants felt they should have received a share of the profits.

“There’s a huge piece of the film that was very meaningful to me that I really was excited about. It all got cut out of the [final] film, so I asked her if I could have that part of the footage for myself and she gave it to me. I felt like that was compensation.”

– FILM PARTICIPANT

“I mean, money is great, and you need it to pay the rent. But, I don’t think that’s part of the documentary process.”

– FILM PARTICIPANT

“I feel like we’re kind of like college athletes at this point. You’re going into it and it is this one thing and then, all of a sudden, it turns into this big business. You’re like, ‘Wait, all these people are making money off of it.’ I think the dynamics need to change.”

– FILM PARTICIPANT

Legal recourse for mistreatment. Several participants and filmmakers advocated for legal protections for participants, especially those sharing vulnerable stories. They pointed out during focus groups that participants take on significant risks, often without adequate safeguards in place. A few focus group members voiced frustration over the lack of recourse after signing release forms or nondisclosure agreements, especially when filmmakers failed to honor promises made to ostensibly secure their consent. Several filmmakers echoed these concerns and called for formal channels for participants to report unethical behavior and a process for them to disentangle themselves from a project if they experience harm.

“I like the idea of having something with the consent form that will hold the filmmaker responsible.”

– FILM PARTICIPANT

“You know, [the release] is only about giving our permission to be filmed, to have the camera on us. It does nothing to protect us.”

– FILM PARTICIPANT

“I worked on a film where the director ended up actually losing their funding because they behaved so unethically....If they find funding from somewhere else, he can still [make the film]—use their footage. There should be some kind of protection for participants.”

– FILMMAKER

“The only way to protect participants is if participants have recourse. Release forms deny them recourse. That has to fundamentally change before we’re ever gonna get anywhere towards an ethical place in this industry when it comes to participants.”

– FILMMAKER

Editing

After filming concludes, filmmakers hold significantly more power than participants. During editing, filmmakers frame the narrative and decide what makes it into the film, and what does not. They have traditionally maintained full authority over this crucial phase to preserve journalistic and artistic integrity. For films with formal distribution, distributors may also influence how the narrative is crafted. Yet a growing movement of filmmakers are inviting participants into the process, asserting that participant's perspectives can result in a more accurate and nuanced portrayal.

“What really determines how the story is told is the editing. Things can be totally taken out of context, or highlighted in a weird way... If it's about our lives, we should have the opportunity to review that material and say... 'I'm okay with it.' or 'Please don't use that scene as it makes me really uncomfortable.’”

– FILM PARTICIPANT

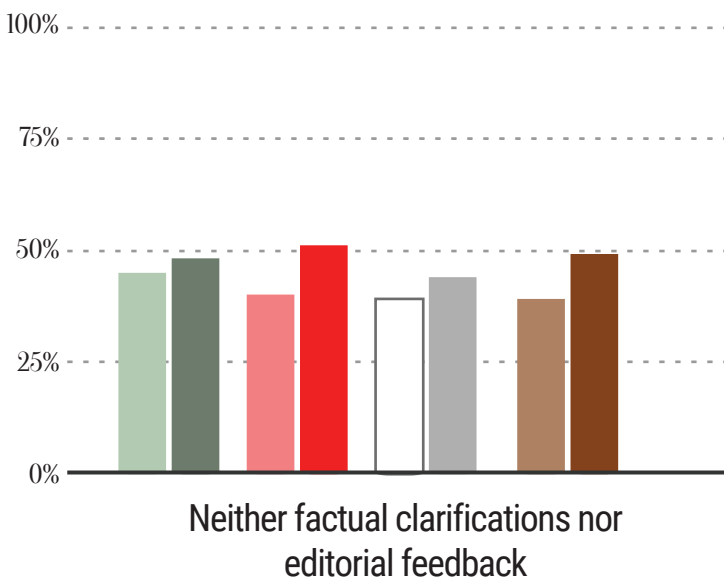
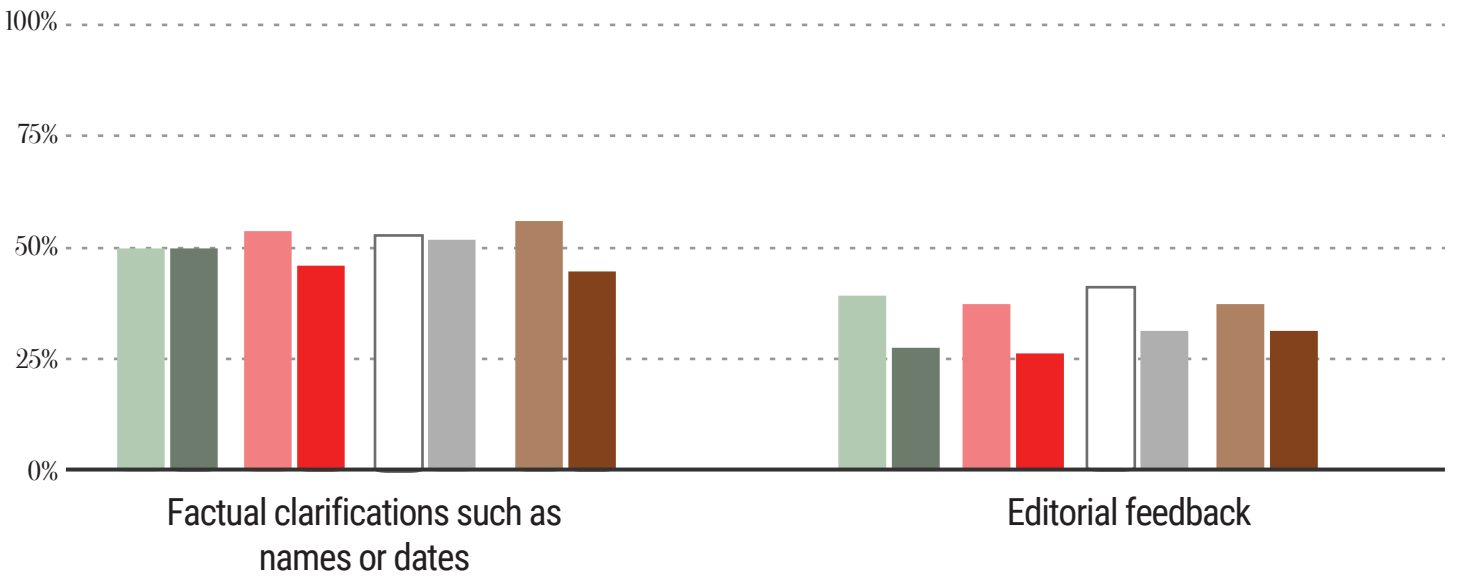
“We followed the standards of journalism. We could not offer them the right to review a cut but we shared what pieces made the Final Cut with them to make sure they accurately represented their story. We also agreed to not make certain information public that would have endangered them.”

– FILMMAKER

Type of Feedback Filmmakers Sought from Participants

Filmmakers are more likely to seek editorial feedback if they are earlier in their career. Participants are more likely to be asked for editorial feedback if they are from a community that has faced systemic oppression, had a personal connection to the filmmaker, or were involved in the project for a long time. **52% of filmmakers shared cuts of their film with participants to get factual clarifications, such as names and dates. 36% sought editorial feedback.**

- Early Career Filmmakers**
- Veteran Filmmakers**
- Filmmaker had prior personal connection to participant**
- No prior personal connection**
- Participants Faced Systemic Injustice**
- Worked on Film Months - Years**
- Did Not Face Systemic Injustice**
- Worked on Film Hours - Weeks**



“I removed some scenes that might be problematic for the subject as well as their cause. In truth, I’m not sure if it was the right or wrong thing to do.”
 - **FILMMAKER**

Filmmaker Approach

Just over half of filmmakers shared cuts of their recently completed film with participants to get factual clarifications such as names or dates. 36% sought editorial feedback, with early and mid-career filmmakers more likely to do so. Filmmakers were also likely to seek editorial feedback if they had a prior relationship with the participants or if the film explored stressful or traumatic events in the participant's life.

In response to open-ended survey questions, most filmmakers who pursued feedback from participants indicated that they maintained editorial control and ultimately made final decisions about the film. Several explained that the input allowed them to check their own biases and their films' accuracy, noting that they felt this level of review adhered to journalistic standards.

Most commonly, filmmakers wanted participant feedback on:

- **Security or legal concerns.** Several filmmakers indicated that they reviewed cuts with participants and their legal representatives. When concerns were raised, filmmakers either removed concerning details, such as the location of the participant, or applied effects, such as blurring faces or changing voice pitch.
- **Personal privacy.** Several filmmakers indicated that they were happy to remove personal details that the participant would prefer not share and that were not directly pertinent or imperative to the central story line.
- **Accuracy.** Other edits included changes to correct facts, such as removing incorrect gender references, or to more accurately relay how a person was feeling in a moment, or the portrayal of a cultural event or ceremony.

“A major concern [for the participant] early on was not having editorial control over the content. We talked extensively about why it is important not to give that up. I assured her that she would see the film first and that if there were things she felt were taken out of context or not factually correct, it would be changed.”

– FILMMAKER

“I respected their autonomy and right to privacy. While something may be good for a film, when it wasn't for the participant, I was hands off.”

– FILMMAKER

“At one participant's editorial suggestion, we added some content to make the film feel more true to the reality of what he was feeling at the time.”

– FILMMAKER

Though less common, some filmmakers and participants described a more collaborative editorial process. Most of these filmmakers felt strongly that participants should maintain control over their story, and focus group participants who actively participated in editing reported high levels of satisfaction with the process. In a few cases, filmmakers expressed regret about the level of editorial control they had ceded to participants.

Participant Perspectives

During focus groups, most participants supported a dynamic in which they could provide input on the film and the filmmaker makes the final call. Participants stressed the importance of checking the facts, especially if they were a subject matter expert or the film was about their life.

A handful of focus group participants expressed frustration that they did not get the opportunity to provide input on the film. In a few cases, participants indicated that the filmmakers had reneged on an initial commitment to gather feedback. These participants felt that the films misrepresented their stories or contained factual errors, leading to regret about their involvement.

"I was told initially that I would be able to review aspects of the footage...as an expert. But, we didn't get to view the film until after it was already made.... It was very important to get scientific details right. It's very important to make sure that you're relaying things in a sensitive way on-screen. A lot of things were not done well."

– FILM PARTICIPANT

"They would allow me to say, 'I cry too much in this clip, can you cut the crying out a little bit? You know, it looks like trauma porn and it hurts me.' They allowed me to be in an editing room, and were sensitive about that."

– FILM PARTICIPANT

"I feel like the story has been distorted and some of my words taken out of context to make it look like I said something I didn't say. The story was not completely accurate, and distorted just to sell more tickets. It made me angry because it was such a sensitive and traumatic episode of my life. I felt used and cheated."

– FILM PARTICIPANT

Recommendations from Filmmakers and Participants

Upfront clarity.

While most focus group participants were ultimately comfortable with the level of feedback that they had on the film, many called for more upfront clarity about the editorial process. Participants indicated that filmmakers should clearly outline if participants will be able to provide feedback on the film, the type of feedback they can offer, and who will ultimately make decisions about the film before asking participants to sign on to the project. Several indicated that they were surprised to learn that they had no control over the final product.

“It can be delicate but I think that showing the film to participants with enough time to reflect upon and act upon their feedback is important whenever possible. The feedback we have gotten has helped with fact checking, and with adjusting the tone of the film, or the way it touches certain ideas or certain parts of the story. Despite a filmmaker’s best intentions, it is easy to miss the mark without trusting the participants to view the film and provide input.”

– FILMMAKER

“They asked us our opinions a lot.... But, the reality is, it was their film. We generally love the film, but there were certainly some things we would have done differently if we had had control over the film. But, I really felt like we were heard when they asked our opinion.”

– FILM PARTICIPANT

Distribution

The distribution and release phase is a pivotal one for both filmmakers and participants because it determines the film's visibility and potential impact. This stage also introduces significant risks and challenges, creating a delicate balance between maximizing impact and managing potential downsides.

As the film transitions to distribution, filmmakers commonly face new obstacles, with authority shifting from them to distributors that often dictate how the film will be marketed and where it will be shown. Participants similarly experience a considerable loss of control, frequently finding themselves without adequate information, authority, or support during the release phase.

“Strangers continually email me....I’ve had good and bad experiences.... A lot of people who reach out to me are in a bad place. It’s a lot of emotional labor. I don’t regret doing it, but I definitely wasn’t necessarily fully prepared for... how I would lack some privacy.”

– **FILM PARTICIPANT**

“I would have pushed harder against our distributor for certain marketing decisions that were not true to the film that we made and capitalized on cliches and tropes about the community that was depicted in the film. This was hurtful to our participants and, unfortunately, our filmmaking team did not anticipate this. We could not stop it or mitigate it.”

– **FILMMAKER**

Filmmaker Approach

Filmmakers were significantly less likely to involve participants in decisions regarding the film's distribution (33%) than in discussions about the filming schedule (75%) and what could be filmed (78%). This dropoff in participant involvement and collaboration reflects in part the low number of distribution opportunities and broader uncertainties of the documentary landscape.

During focus groups and in response to open-ended survey questions, many filmmakers reported that they find distribution challenging and enter this phase often lacking details about the potential distributors of their film, the timing, or the logistics. Several indicated that this information gap made it particularly hard to navigate conversations with participants who were either eager for wide exposure or, conversely, concerned about the implications of a broad release. A few filmmakers expressed frustration about their limited input into their distributor's marketing and publicity efforts, describing campaigns that prioritized clicks and views over the nuanced needs of participants. These campaigns either emotionally taxed participants or perpetuated negative stereotypes about communities.

"I would have had the participants do less press around the project. It was not my decision, but, unfortunately, the film was in a position in which the participants had to fiercely stand up against detractors.... A lot of the confirming of the film's importance and legitimacy was on their shoulders in a way I learned was difficult for some of them..."

- FILMMAKER

"The streamer would not let us share the film in advance with participants. They got access when the world did via the streamer's platform. I didn't think this was fair to the filmmakers who have the primary relationship with the participants. As filmmakers, we spend a lot of time managing the worries and anxieties of participants and advocating for their needs. The streamers basically aren't prepared to help us with the financial, emotional, safety and logistical problems of the participants, even as they constantly push us for drama and conflict in the films."

- FILMMAKER

"In my experience, the primary issue has been the distributor and their disconnect from the relationship between filmmaker and participant and their lack of interest in understanding it... the distributor seeks to dictate mandates superseding both the filmmaker and the participants' perspectives, with no interest in our perspectives."

- FILMMAKER

Participant Perspectives

Distribution decisions.

Approximately half of focus group participants reported negative experiences with their film's distribution. Negative experiences were reported by a diverse group, including those who had both positive and negative filming experiences and those who were ultimately pleased with the film's reach and impact.

Participants who had negative experiences often cited inadequate communication from filmmakers about the next steps after filming concluded. Many felt "shut off" or "left high and dry," compelling them to actively seek updates or information online. This lack of communication was particularly challenging for participants unfamiliar with the distribution landscape or film festival processes, underscoring the need for greater transparency.

Release.

41% of participants had not seen the final film before its release to the public. Even among participants in films about their own lives, 31% had not seen the final film before it was screened for an audience. A few focus group participants who saw the film for the first time alongside the public were unhappy with the content of the final film or identified inaccuracies.

About two-thirds of participants engaged in screenings, press interviews, or provided feedback on marketing campaigns. Participants were more actively involved in distribution when the film focused on their own lives. Only 11% of filmmakers reported that participants received marketing or publicity training to prepare them for these activities.

During focus groups, several participants indicated that they were surprised by the level of their involvement after the film and expressed that filmmakers should have more clearly outlined at the outset the possibilities following release, even if the details remained unknown. A few participants raised serious concerns with their film's marketing, reporting they were put in uncomfortable positions to promote the film or were dissatisfied with marketing decisions.

"We rarely hear of anything from the distributors. If we want an update, we will Google the name of the documentary, and it'll pop up with something new. I'm like, 'Oh, that would have been nice to know.' There wouldn't be a film without me and my family participating in it so I didn't understand why we weren't being communicated with more."

– FILM PARTICIPANT

"The distributor did not take into account the needs of my family once the marketing and promotion of the film got under way. The filmmakers were great but they did not have much control over how the distributor conducted business. There were things that could have been covered such as childcare, wardrobe and other expenses when we went on the road."

– FILM PARTICIPANT

"When we were at [film festival], that's when the negotiations started. I met people negotiating on the film, and I didn't even know they were negotiating anything. We thought we were just going [to the festival]. Everyone else knew...and we were like, 'oh, what happened now? It sold to [distributor]?'"

– FILM PARTICIPANT

"[The film] has helped me get so many jobs from people all across the United States and helped me make connections I never would've thought possible."

- FILM PARTICIPANT

"I did get hate mail like, 'How dare you say that? And, we're gonna get you.'...I was a little bit worried for my wife because she lives with me. If I was alone, there would be less worry. You know, it does create tension."

- FILM PARTICIPANT

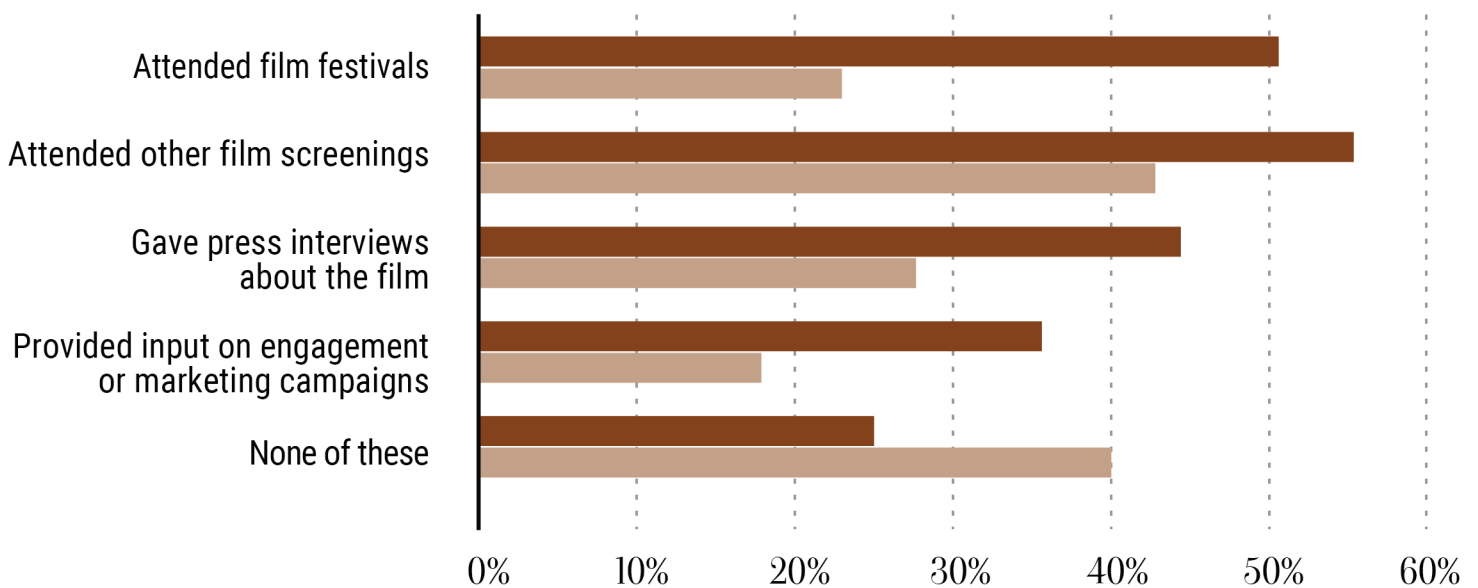
Impact.

Nearly all participants reported that the film impacted their personal or professional lives, and 34% felt unprepared for this impact. Participants in films exploring traumatic experiences or mental health issues were particularly surprised by the volume of media exposure and ensuing requests from strangers to provide emotional support on issues related to the story or subject matter. Many focus group participants felt ill-equipped to handle these requests and lacked support from filmmakers or distributors for managing the situation.

Several participants also voiced concerns about safety and privacy post-release. Issues included receiving hateful comments online and fearing for their or their families' safety.

How Participants Were Involved After Release

Film was about the participant's life **Film was not about the participant's life**



195 film participants responded to the survey. The number of respondents per question and subgroup are available in the report appendix on the ITVS website.

Recommendations from Filmmakers and Participants

Improved communication.

During focus groups, most participants called for increased communication leading up to and during the distribution process. Several filmmakers went one step further, indicating that better communication and coordination regarding distribution is needed not only with participants but also with filmmakers. They called for closer, three-way collaboration on distribution, marketing and publicity, and impact campaigns. A few indicated that this communication should start early in the process and should include an explicit discussion of potential negative ramifications from distribution, especially in the current digital age.

Support after release.

21% of participants felt they needed more support after the film's release, with those featured in films about their own lives more likely to express this need (37%). During focus groups, participants suggested creating funds or resources to support those facing significant privacy or safety concerns. While less common, a few filmmakers also highlighted the need for resources to better prepare participants for the release, including legal or financial support and standardized speaker fees for festivals or conferences.

Several participants tied discussions of the impact of the film back to earlier conversations about consent, stressing the importance of making sure participants understand the potential benefits and risks to participating before folks sign on.

"The hardest issue was addressing [participants'] concerns about how the film would be seen. Since this was a film commissioned by the network we had no say in how they distributed it."

– FILMMAKER

"I was unprepared for the amount of emails I would receive from viewers of the film and think it would have been helpful to have more conversations with the filmmakers or streaming service about how to interact with the public around the film."

– FILM PARTICIPANT

"I can't get a personal copy of the movie. Once it's sold, that's it. And I was totally unaware of that. It's like, how could you give years of your life to the film, and you can't even get the finished product without trying to bootleg it off the Internet yourself?"

– FILM PARTICIPANT

What's Next

This study, the largest exploration of the relationship between documentary filmmakers and participants to date, identifies actionable steps that can improve the participant experience. The findings signal change is underway and underscore the need for further industry-wide discussions and action. Meaningful change will require substantial support, resources, and collaboration across the industry—involving funders, distributors, educators, and filmmakers themselves. The work may benefit from drawing on lessons and tools from fields like journalism and academic research that have also grappled with balancing ethics and impact. Additionally, exploring how this work might influence audiences and shape their perceptions and relationships with documentaries is crucial.

The experiences and perspectives documentary participants shared for this study offer invaluable insights that can help prioritize future efforts. Potential avenues for change include:

Reflection and Action from Filmmakers. Filmmakers can use this report as a guide to reflect on if and how they may want to evolve their practices. While changes in funding, tools, and policies are needed to drive broader reforms, many filmmakers are already adopting strategies to reduce harm and support participants. Key areas for reflection identified in the study include considering and communicating long-term risks to participants before taking on a project, ensuring participants fully understand release forms, improving communication throughout the process, and intentionally preparing participants for the film's release.

Ongoing and Expanded Dialogue. Industry-wide discussions on what defines ethical documentary filmmaking have intensified in recent years. This study underscores the importance of centering the voices of film participants in these conversations and brings new insights to some established contentious issues, such as compensation and editorial control. In forums where ITVS shares the study findings, we will aim to facilitate discussions focusing on solutions.

Training and Tools for Filmmakers. Over half of filmmakers expressed a desire for additional training and resources related to working with participants. Film schools, journalism programs, and professional associations and networks all have essential roles in supporting filmmakers as they evolve and enhance their practices. This study specifically highlights the need for more training and resources on informed consent, as many filmmakers were uncertain about the process and many participants were not fully aware of what they were agreeing to from the outset.

Filmmakers also emphasized the importance of moving beyond theoretical discussions to actionable solutions that they can implement in their practices today. Findings from participants and filmmakers point to the need for tools such as simple consent forms and directories of professionals who can provide mental health or legal support for participants. Creating a centralized resource library for these tools could assist filmmakers in identifying and utilizing them effectively.

Resources for Film Participants. Almost all discussions, training, and resources on documentary ethics have centered on filmmakers. Establishing dedicated resources and support systems for participants will help bridge a significant gap and tackle the key challenges identified in this study. The newly formed Documentary Participants Empowerment Alliance, for example, launched in July 2024 to provide resources to participants.

Enhanced Funding for Documentary Films. Numerous documentary filmmakers face challenges establishing sustainable careers while working with limited budgets. These financial constraints hinder their ability to evolve their practices, particularly when it comes to time or resource intensive changes such as spending more time with participants before filming or providing mental health or legal support during filming or after release. Enhanced funding could foster change.

Reform from Funders and Distributors. Depending on the project, funders and distributors may dictate budgets and timelines, establish standards or requirements for filmmakers' approaches, exert considerable influence over editing, and control the film's release and marketing. Each of these interactions with the filmmaking process can profoundly affect how filmmakers engage with participants and the impact of that experience. Given their substantial power, funders and distributors have a responsibility to evaluate how their practices and policies affect participants. As a co-producer and distributor, ITVS is actively reflecting on the implications of these study findings for our work.

Additional Research. Although this snapshot study offers valuable insights, many questions remain. As new training, resources, and tools are developed, further research can help identify what is most useful and effective, as well as any additional support that may be necessary. Furthermore, it remains unclear how participants' experiences and perspectives evolve over time after their involvement in a project. Moreover, our sample underrepresents participants in films without formal distribution due to difficulties identifying these individuals. Those who had particularly negative experiences might also be under-represented, as they may be less likely to respond to a survey closely associated with the documentary industry. Further research could explore their experiences in depth.

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Independent Television Service (ITVS)

Research Organizations

American University
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NORC at the University of Chicago

Design Partners

Brown Girls Doc Mafia
Documentary Accountability Working Group
Documentary Participants' Empowerment Alliance
Documentary Producers Alliance
FWD-Doc
Muslim Wellness Foundation
4th World Media Lab
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Filmmaker Survey Fielding Organizations

Academy of Television Arts & Sciences
Arab Film and Media Institute
Asian American Documentary Network (A-Doc)
Austin Film Society
BAVC Media
Big Sky Film Institute
Black Public Media
Brown Girls Doc Mafia
Center for Asian American Media
Documentary Producers Alliance

Film Fatales
FilmNorth
Frameline
FREE THE WORK
FWD-Doc
Global Impact Producers Alliance
Hawai'i International Film Festival
Independent Television Service (ITVS)
Indie Media Arts South
International Documentary Association
Jewish Film Institute
Kartemquin Films
4th World Media Lab
Latino Public Broadcasting
Mezcla Media Collective
New Orleans Film Society
Northwest Film Forum
Pacific Islanders in Communications
Points North Institute / CIFF
Producers Guild of America
ReelAbilities
Seattle International Film Festival
Sundance Institute
The Flaherty
The Gotham Film & Media Institute
The Redford Center
Video Consortium
Vision Maker Media
Visual Communications
Women in Film & Video
Youth FX

Film Participant Survey Fielding Organizations and Individuals

Caldera Productions
Color Farm Media
Independent Television Service (ITVS)
Indie Media Arts South
Margie Ratliff
New Orleans Film Festival
Rahi Hasan
Rajal Pitroda
Represent Justice
The Gotham Film & Media Institute
Vitamin Sea Productions
Working Films

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