



Young and Rural

A Snapshot of Rural
North Carolina's
New Generation



“ I live here because I want to
give back to the community
that gave me so much. ”



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Introduction

We know that successful rural communities of the future must have a population of young people engaged in decision-making and actively working to grow their local economies. Young people

- > who bring fresh perspectives and new energy,
- > who have insight into social change,
- > who understand the dynamics of the global marketplace,
- > who grasp the full potential of emerging technologies,
- > who are raising families and participating in community life,
- > and who think and act entrepreneurially whether on the farm, in business, in local institutions or in public service.

Yet each year, hundreds of young people move away to attend college, join the military or take a job – and never return to become part of the economic and social fabric of their hometowns. Many who stay feel disconnected from the mainstream of decision-making and activity.

During the fall and winter of 2010-11, the Rural Center took a first step toward understanding the aspirations of rural youth and their perspectives on their communities through a survey conducted in 16 county public school systems. More than 15,000 middle and high school students responded, sharing their concerns, their hopes and their ideas.

The center followed the survey in the summer of 2011 with focus groups that involved 40 young adults, mostly in their 20s, in seven rural locations. They, too, shared their ideas and experiences through both discussions and written survey responses.

And, throughout the last year, the Rural Center has been examining statistical data regarding the well-being of children, youth and young adults in rural North Carolina, including new releases of the 2010 U.S. Census and the American Community Survey.

Highlights of the findings are included in the following pages. We present these to you with the firm belief that young people are our greatest asset in rural North Carolina. Working across generations, we must give them a reason to stay or return by creating welcoming, economically vibrant communities – and ensure they are full participants in shaping this positive future.

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6 key messages about rural youth

Highlights of the Rural Center’s youth research are featured on the following pages. The take-home messages are straightforward.

The loss of young people from rural counties is widespread and accelerating

A few fast suburbanizing rural counties have recorded a healthy increase in the young adult population, but in many more, the dwindling number of young people has reached crisis proportions. In 16 rural counties, the young adult population has declined by more than 20 percent since 1990.

Amenities mean quality of life

In surveys and focus groups, rural young people cited a shortage of amenities as serious deficits in their communities. These amenities are not frills but the factors that lead to a high quality of life: places where they can connect with each other, a safe and welcoming environment, opportunities for recreation and places close to home where they can purchase goods and services.

Continued educational improvements are critical

High school graduation rates are up, and encouraging numbers of young people plan to pursue education beyond high school. Many counties, however, struggle to fund an adequate public school system. Parents may lack the skills and the commitment to education to help keep their children on the right track. And for students pursuing post-secondary education, limited finances can make it difficult to remain in school long enough to obtain a degree. Continuing improvements in educational attainment will be critical at both the personal and community level.

Jobs: the driving force of change

The geographies of population loss and job loss largely mirror each other. As young people talk about their futures, they clearly recognize they need to earn a decent living if they choose to remain in, or return to, their home communities.

Many want to stay

Many young people value their ties to home. They like living near family and longtime friends. They appreciate small towns and the availability of outdoor recreation. With adequate economic opportunity and improved amenities, we have the potential to keep a vibrant, youthful face in rural North Carolina.

Change begins with engagement

An encouraging message from this research is that young people care about and want to help improve their communities. But they don’t feel their voices are being heard or their potential contributions valued. If communities are to be welcoming places for young people, we can start by engaging them, making them part of the process and grooming them to take their place as leaders.

The loss of young people from rural counties is widespread and accelerating

With the release of the 2010 Census, we see clearly some disturbing trends for rural counties. Over the last two decades, rural North Carolina’s youngest population (under age 18) has grown at only half the state rate and the number of young adults (ages 24 to 30) has actually declined. The real story, however, emerges at the county level.

Consider that in each of these decades, the statewide under-18 population grew by 22 percent and the young adult population increased 5 percent.

Yet from 1990 to 2000:

- > 11 rural counties lost population younger than 18, three of them by more than 10 percent
- > 41 rural counties lost young adult population, 23 of them by more than 10 percent

From 2000 to 2010:

- > 30 rural counties lost population under 18, four by more than 15 percent
- > 47 rural counties lost young adult population, 20 by more than 15 percent

Altogether, over the two decades:

- > 22 rural counties lost population younger than 18
- > 54 rural counties lost young adult population
- > 16 rural counties lost more than 20 percent of their young adult population

The trend is accelerating, and what demographers tell us is that losses in the young adult population will likely accelerate the declines even further because it means we’re losing young families and young families-to-be.

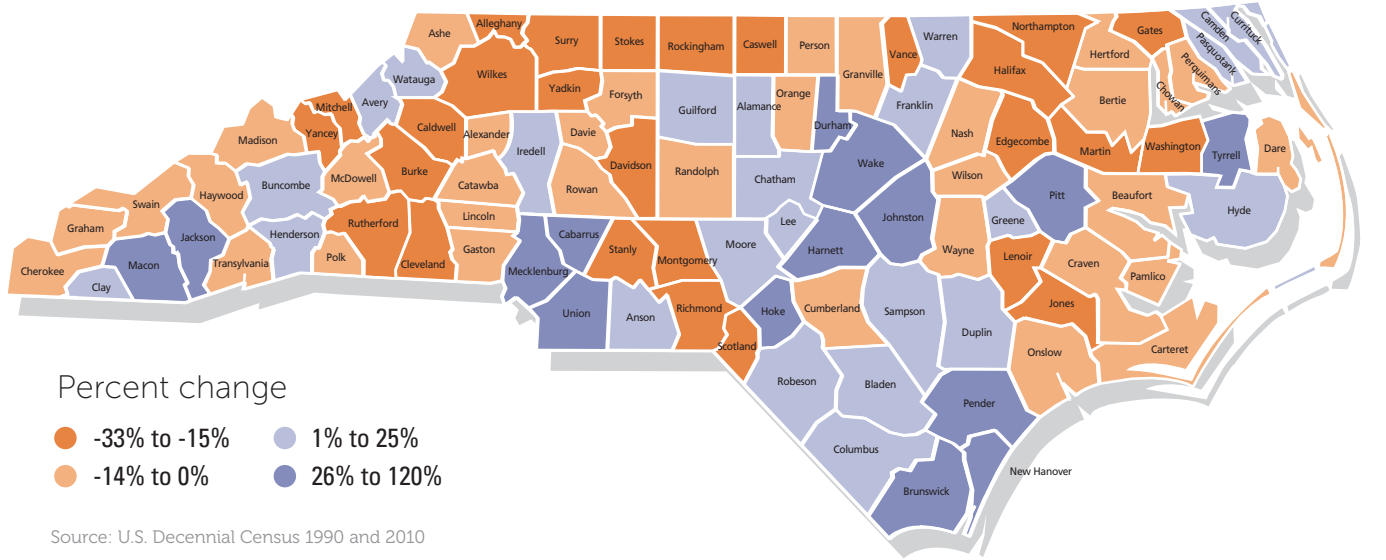
N.C. population change, 1990-2010

	Urban	Rural
Total population	+54%	+35%
Under 18 population	+59%	+28%
Young adults (ages 24-30)	+20%	-0.3%

But there are bright spots. Even in the midst of these declining numbers, some rural counties report a dramatically different story. Ten saw their young adult population grow by 1,000 or more individuals, and nine recorded a proportional growth among young adults of 30 percent or more. Hoke County is the stellar example. Fueled by the expansion of Fort Bragg in neighboring Cumberland County, Hoke added nearly 3,000 young adults for an increase of 120 percent. Union, Johnston and Harnett counties, all adjacent to urban areas, also saw significant increases, as did Pitt.

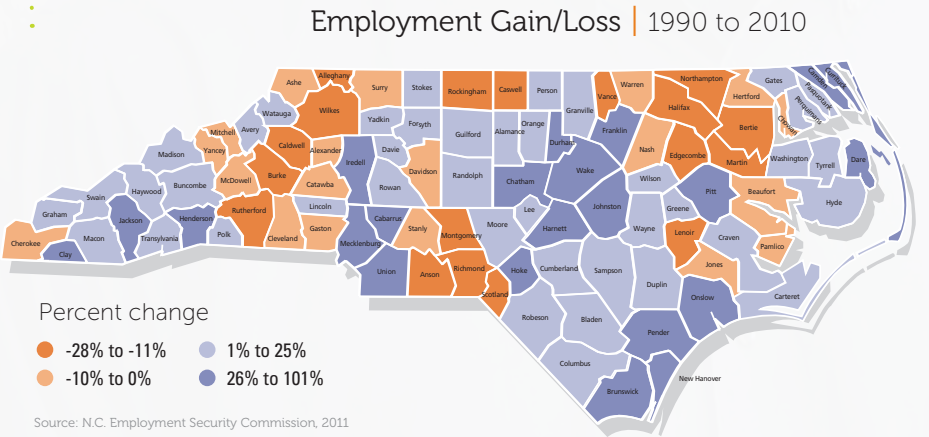
Another noteworthy trend is the increase in Hispanic youths. Hispanics now make up 9.8 percent of all rural young people, ages 15 to 29, up from 7.8 percent a decade earlier. Here, too, wide differences can be noted among counties. Two dozen counties exceed the rural average, and in Duplin, Lee, Chatham and Sampson, more than 20 percent of 15- to 29-year-olds are Hispanic.

Change in population of 24- to 30-year-olds 1990 to 2010



“ We need more jobs. A lot of people have to drive a long way to get to their job because there aren't any around here. ”

Teen, Alleghany County



Unemployment Ages 22 to 34 (Rural and Urban)



Source: American Community Survey, 2005-09

“ My family lives here and I don't want to move away from them. Plus I like this small town I call my home. ”

Young adult, Rutherford County

Jobs: the driving force of change

The North Carolina economy changed dramatically in the past 20 years, with varying effects on different parts of the state. Job growth in the 85 rural counties over the 20-year period was only 11.8 percent, less than half the urban rate.

The job picture differed dramatically within rural areas as well. Just 10 rural counties accounted for 65 percent of the rural job growth, and 34 rural counties had fewer employed people in 2010 than they did 20 years earlier.

For young people, a decline in the number of available jobs hits especially hard, for they typically have the most difficulty obtaining employment. With joblessness generally higher in rural counties, rural young adults are 25 percent more likely to be unemployed than are their urban counterparts. The problem is compounded by race, with unemployment among blacks roughly double that of whites.

When a local economy creates jobs, young people tend to stay in place and others move in. When jobs are lost, young people will move elsewhere in search of opportunity. Less burdened by families or homeownership, they are more mobile when economic conditions deteriorate.

These realities are not lost on the young people themselves. Counties posting job losses or meager growth correspond closely with those that lost young adult population during the same period. Among young adults participating in Rural Center focus groups, nearly 9 in 10 named jobs and career opportunities as the No. 1 challenge their communities face.

Many want to stay

Certainly, many young people, no matter where they grow up, want to spread their wings and try something new. But many of those taking part in the Rural Center's research appreciate all that home has to offer.

About half who participated in the youth survey rated their home communities as above average to excellent places to grow up – a higher proportion than their rural counterparts nationally. Nearly that many said they would prefer to stay in or return to their home communities in adulthood *if quality career or business ownership opportunities were available*. Of those who thought it likely they'd stay or return, the leading reasons related to close personal ties: either they want to be near friends and family or they see the community as a good place to raise a family.

Young adults also expressed appreciation for small town life and for family and community connections. They recognized that in a modern, mobile society, being able to remain near family and longtime friends is a rare gift. Many of these same small-town qualities can also attract others seeking to start careers and families.

But there is that all-important qualifier. They must be able to earn a living and support their families.

Amenities mean quality of life

Young people, like their elders, seek quality of life in their home communities. For the young especially, this means places where they can connect with each other, a safe and welcoming environment, opportunities for recreation and places close to home where they can purchase goods and services.

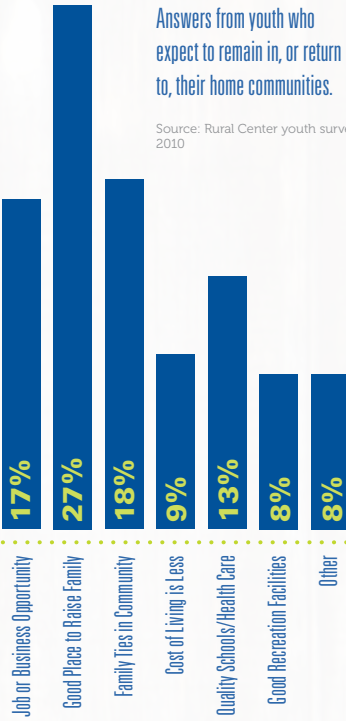
Both rural North Carolina students and young adults see their communities as coming up short on many of these quality-of-life measures.

About 30 percent of school-age youth considered more entertainment, recreation and shopping the most important improvement needed in their communities. Among young adults, 45 percent called the lack of entertainment, night life and social life a major challenge. Only jobs and careers garnered a higher level of concern. Community events were appreciated, but seen as catering to an older audience.

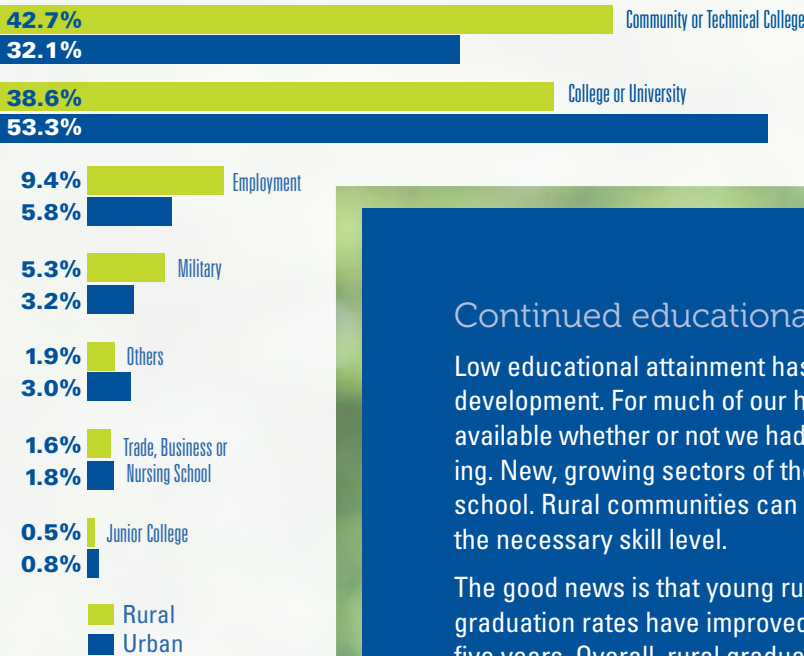
Proximity to urban areas eases the problem for some. “Be prepared to drive,” was the advice one had for any other young person moving in. Elsewhere, distance can be too great a barrier.

Although evidence is mixed on how important amenities are to new business locations, they clearly do influence decisions about where individuals and families choose to live. They are considered especially important in attracting and retaining the young and the “creative class,” including entrepreneurs who can help build the economy and create jobs.

Why Youth See Living in Hometown in Future



High School Seniors' Plans for after Graduation



84 percent of rural high school seniors plan some type of formal education beyond high school.

Another 5 percent plan to enter the military.

Since 2006, graduation rates in rural areas have increased from 65.5 to 77.9%.

Continued educational improvements are critical

Low educational attainment has been one of the great challenges of rural economic development. For much of our history, good jobs that could support a family were available whether or not we had completed high school. Those jobs are fast disappearing. New, growing sectors of the economy increasingly require education beyond high school. Rural communities can build these economic sectors only if the workforce has the necessary skill level.

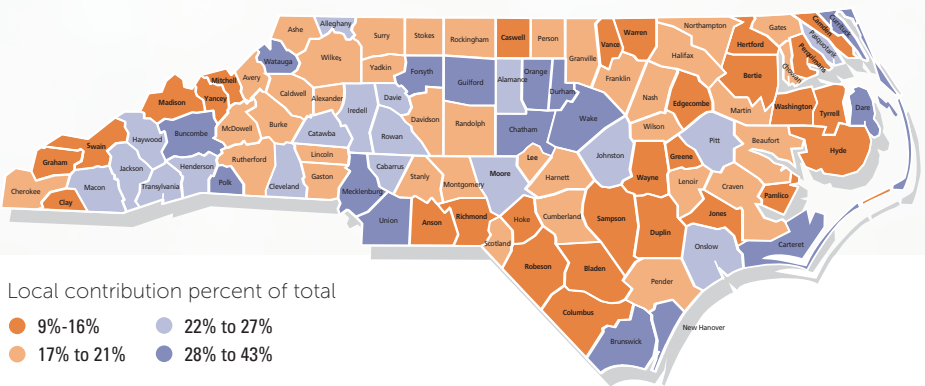
The good news is that young rural North Carolinians are doing better. High school graduation rates have improved considerably throughout North Carolina over the last five years. Overall, rural graduation rates are nearly on a par with urban, and some fast-suburbanizing rural counties exceed the urban rate.

Rural communities also can be pleased that today's students appear to recognize the importance of continuing their schooling. According to the N.C. Department of Public Instruction, 84 percent of rural high school seniors plan some type of formal education beyond high school. Another 5 percent plan to enter the military, which affords opportunities for training that can be transferred to civilian life.

But it is too soon to celebrate. The failure of two students in 10 to graduate from high school is troubling. Economic downturns and budget cuts challenge the ability of communities to sustain the improvements they have realized thus far. In economically distressed counties in particular, a low tax base limits local contributions to school spending. Furthermore, as young adult focus groups reminded us, parents with limited education may be unable to help their children excel and or to inspire the perseverance necessary to complete schooling.

We also know that many college students must work to cover some or all of their expenses. This is especially true of those from families with modest incomes and those attending community colleges – in other words, for a large proportion of rural students. Today, with a stagnant economy and high unemployment, many find it more difficult than ever to keep pace with expenses and remain enrolled.

Local Contribution to Public School Expenditures | 2008



Teens willing to volunteer

80%

Source: Rural Center youth survey, 2010

Change begins with engagement

Across rural North Carolina are tens of thousands of youth and young adults eager to invigorate the economic, civic and social lives of their communities. They want their voices heard, and they want to be involved in the work to make change happen. The challenge lies in closing the gap between their desire for involvement and actual engagement in community.

Among school-age youth, for example, only 38 percent said adults had asked their views on community and school issues. Although teens understand they can't make final decisions on big issues, they feel they have ideas worth sharing. They also know the exchange goes both ways. They are interested in the history and heritage of their communities and welcome exchanges across generations.

These young people are a huge, untapped resource. Fully 80 percent said they'd be willing to volunteer on community projects if only someone asked. This means right now, in 16 rural counties, at least 12,000 energetic teens are ready to be engaged. Furthermore, 28 percent said opportunities to take part in events and projects wouldn't just help the community, but would make it a better place for young people to live.

In theory, engaging young adults should be easier. They at least can vote. Yet – like their counterparts across the nation – rural young people are less likely to vote than are other age groups.

In Rural Center focus groups, young adults expressed frustration with their place in the community. They are adults, yet many feel older generations still view them as kids. Established leaders may care about younger folks, some said, "but they aren't ready for our input." Said another: "I wanted to come back and make a change, but you don't have a voice in this town unless you're certain people." Several worried about the lack of a pipeline bringing their generation into leadership roles in the community.

Rural communities must draw on the productive capacity and civic engagement of every individual if they are to compete in the 21st century. Perhaps nowhere is the need to broaden the base more important than with the young. Otherwise, as one focus group participant asked, "What happens when all those old, powerful people are gone?"

“Everybody is nice and cordial, but if you want to get something done, it's going to be a challenge.”

Young adult, Surry County



“ The good would far outweigh the bad if young people were invested in the community. ”

Young adult, Robeson County

The research behind the findings

Data collection and analysis

To compile a statistical picture of youth and young adults in rural North Carolina, the center selected indicators that best expressed the economic, demographic, educational, civic and cultural components of young peoples’ lives.

Selection began with identifying publicly available data sets that related to one of these components. Sources included the Decennial Census and American Community Survey of the U.S. Census, Employment Security Commission of North Carolina, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, N.C. Department of Public Instruction and others. Consideration was given to how well an indicator could adequately represent the pre-college, college and post-college age groups. Each of these groups faces different issues and has widely varying degrees of mobility. With some data sets, it was necessary to capture a close approximation (such as 18 to 23), or a broader age group that included one or more of them (25 to 34, for example). In these instances, other factors (accuracy, reliability, timeliness and availability) influenced the decision to include or exclude an indicator.

For indicators available at the county level, data were aggregated by the 85 rural counties and 15 urban counties. Variations among rural counties also were examined. Analysis consisted of examining trends, for data available in time series; variation across geography; and correlation between trends. Spatial analysis of the distribution of indicators was made using ESRI ArcMap software.

Youth survey and focus groups

In 2010, the Rural Center engaged the Rural Policy Research Institute’s Center for Rural Entrepreneurship to conduct a survey of middle, junior high and high school students in selected North Carolina communities. The goal was to provide insight into the attitudes of youth toward their communities.

The 20-question survey was conducted in the fall through the cooperation of school systems in 16 rural counties: Alleghany, Chatham, Columbus, Duplin, Graham, Greene, Hyde, Jones, Mitchell, Montgomery, Pamlico, Pasquotank, Rutherford, Warren, Washington and Yadkin. More than 15,000 students took part.

To supplement the survey data, nine focus groups were conducted with 154 junior high and high school students in Alleghany, Chatham and Washington counties. In the focus groups, the students elaborated on views about their communities, how the communities might be improved and ways to engage youth in the community.

Young adult focus groups

From June through July of 2011, Rural Center staff conducted seven focus groups with young adults in rural North Carolina. The focus groups were a follow-up to the youth survey of middle and high school students conducted in the fall 2010.

The 40 focus group participants were between 18 and 30 years of age and represented some of the economic and demographic diversity of the state.

The focus groups were guided by use of a survey similar to the one completed by school students but tailored specifically to this project. Each session consisted of participants completing the survey privately, then discussing the questions as a group.

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“ They care about what we want and think and they want us here but don’t know how to include us. ”

Young adult, Rockingham County

The **N.C. Rural Economic Development Center** is a private, nonprofit organization whose mission is to develop sound economic strategies that improve the quality of life in rural North Carolina, with a special focus on individuals with low to moderate incomes and communities with limited resources. The center operates a multifaceted program that includes conducting research into rural issues; testing promising rural development strategies; advocating for policy and program innovations; and building the productive capacity of rural leaders, entrepreneurs and community organizations.



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