NATIONAL 4-H COUNCIL

The Bridgespan Group

A Field Report by National 4-H Council and The Bridgespan Group



Social Mobility in Rural America

Insights from Communities Whose Young People Are Climbing the Income Ladder

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Collaborating to accelerate social impact

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Table of Contents

Letter from the President and CEO, National 4-H Council 3

Foreword 5

Executive Summary 7

Social Mobility in Rural America 10

Getting a Ground-Level View 13

Communities Whose Youth Are Advancing Economically 16

Six Factors That Might Support Upward Mobility 18

- Factor #1: A high expectation that youth will "opt in" and work hard to acquire the skills to build a better future; a low tolerance for opting out 19
- Factor #2: Strong, informal support systems, with neighbors helping neighbors 20
- Factor #3: An early focus on career pathways 23
- Factor #4: A wealth of opportunities for youth to build life skills, regardless of the community's size 24
- Factor #5: Many potential challenges to accessing opportunities, but creative solutions for overcoming them 25
- Factor#6: A sense of shared fate and a deep commitment to sustaining the community 28

Building Inclusive Communities 32

Beginning to Test Our Findings in Rural Counties With Average Social Mobility 33

Six Questions for Moving Forward 38

Looking Ahead 40

Acknowledgments 41

Appendix: The Geography of Rural, Upwardly Mobile Youth 42



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Letter from the President and CEO, National 4-H Council

Building pathways to economic opportunity for America's youth has always been 4-H's focus—and that includes those young people growing up in rural communities. This has been the subject of our research over the past year: to understand the local factors that help young people in rural communities grow up to achieve a higher standard of living—factors that other rural communities might build on.

4-H is America's largest youth development organization, with roots that have grown deep and wide across rural communities in the last 100 years. 4-H was founded on the belief that when kids are empowered to pursue their passions and chart their own course, their skills grow and take shape, helping them to become true leaders in their lives, careers, and communities. With programs delivered by the Cooperative Extension System of our nation's land-grant universities, 4-H cultivates youth voice and nurtures youth leadership.

Because of our scale, our history, and our deep connection to rural communities, 4-H is uniquely positioned to examine rural social mobility and the critical role of youth in driving change. While there has, of late, been renewed interest in the health of rural communities, we do not consistently see the voices of young people themselves included as a critical part of these conversations. Through 4-H's experience, we have learned that each community's most powerful asset for growth and development is its young people. This important work with The Bridgespan Group starts from this premise, exploring social mobility from the perspectives of youth themselves, and the adults who support them.

Many of this report's findings echo Cooperative Extension's experience. A hundred years ago, the technologies that now drive our $1 trillion agriculture industry (USDA estimate) were new—and farmers resisted them. But 4-H educators believed in the power of our nation's youth just as much as they believed in those new methods. They armed youth with the skills and knowledge to educate their parents, build their communities, and drive upward economic mobility.

We are gratified to see this philosophy reflected in the most successful communities of today's rural America. Cooperative Extension's approach to community and youth development has never been top-down—we know that all communities have strengths and assets to help their young people climb the income ladder. However, many communities have a longer, harder pathway due to deep-seated historical and environmental barriers.

Today's 4-H is more diverse than ever, reaching young people in every county, parish, and borough across America's urban, suburban, and rural communities. And when it comes to lifting youth voice and building upward economic mobility, rural and urban areas are more alike than they are different. By offering the highest quality programming and supportive environments, 4-H helps to ensure that ALL youth—regardless of race, gender, or residence—have the potential to become leaders.

We do this work not only on behalf of young people—but also to raise their voices through it.



President and CEO
National 4-H Council

Foreword

By Karen Pittman, Co-Founder, President, and CEO, The Forum for Youth Investment

Work hard, get ahead. That is the "American Dream." However, according to economist Raj Chetty, this dream has not been a reality for almost 50 years, when getting ahead is defined as being better off than your parents were at your age. In 1970, when I was entering college to prepare for my career as a sociologist focused on bridging youth development research into policy and practice, 30-year-olds had a 90 percent chance of achieving this milestone. Today, it's a coin toss.

As a Black woman who grew up in Washington, DC, I know that urban young people of color have always struggled with upward mobility. But, as this report makes clear, the path upward is also a challenge for young people in rural America, where economic opportunity varies greatly, even within the same state or region. The barriers to upward mobility are similar to those in urban areas: poverty, racial barriers, underinvestments in education, limited job options. But what about the solutions?

This is the question that National 4-H Council and The Bridgespan Group set out to answer. Their findings are relevant not only for rural America, but for all of us. Believing that the answers to the question could only be fully revealed through discussions with youth and adults in rural America, the research team made a bold decision. They dug in deep to look for common success factors in rural counties whose youth are upwardly mobile. This decision had one obvious drawback that the team recognized: none of the approximately 200 rural counties in which at least a quarter of the population is Black ranked in the top quartile for upward mobility, and only two ranked in the top half. This fact is not surprising. But it does raise the question of whether the findings from this study are relevant for more racially and ethnically diverse communities. I believe that they are.

The study, which is richly filled with quotes and examples from the extensive listening tour, identified six common factors that seem to help rural young people advance, all of which reflect social capital rather than economic capital. These are communities in which adults—teachers, parents, business owners, neighbors, and health and social service professionals—worked together to ensure that all young people were known and supported. The Bridgespan team interviewed approximately 100 young people. Many said they were provided with early and ample opportunities to build life skills, have jobs, explore careers, and take leadership roles.

There are plenty of large cities and metropolitan areas—from San Francisco and King County (Seattle) in the Northwest, to Nashville and Palm Beach County in the Southeast—in which mayors, school superintendents, youth and social service organizations, and business and civic leaders have come together to make youth master plans that call for these factors to be put in place, and to secure the resources needed to do so. But the devil is in the detail. Two questions—by whom and for whom—surface quickly, and the fragmentation begins, with resources flowing to some and bypassing others.

When there is a cohesive sense of community, the answers to these questions are easy: by everyone, for every young person. Every young person is known. Every young person is needed. Every adult can play a role. Every opportunity matters. No offer of support is too small. In rural communities where all means all—and where differences in opportunity, effort, and expectation are not linked to race and class—small populations (about 20,000 people) require people to make connections, which seem to activate caring, compassion, commitment, and creativity among the community members as a whole. In rural communities that lack this cohesiveness, some of the six factors may be more difficult to activate or even extend to all youth. This may be one of the reasons that rural communities with larger Black populations fall into the bottom quartile of the upward mobility scale.

The rural communities studied clearly had a cohesive sense of community that made them willing to create and direct significant social capital towards all of their youth. As I read the examples, however, I was reminded of the Washington, DC, community that I grew up in.

The kids on my block, in my school, and in my church were known by name. We were expected to behave. If you did something wrong on the way home from school, word traveled fast. We were expected to work hard in the community: alley clean-ups, sick and shut-in meal preparation, errands for elderly neighbors. We were expected not only to work hard in school but also to be engaged after school in clubs, part-time jobs, or church-run volunteer programs. We also were supported by an overlapping community of adults, which included neighbors, teachers, business owners, and parishioners who, when needed, pitched in to provide care packages and hold fundraisers to send kids to camp or pay for uniforms, books, or college applications.

The life experiences of teens living in a predominantly white rural county of 10,000 people and those living in a dense, predominantly Black urban neighborhood are different in many important ways. However, both types of communities can suffer from more limited economic diversity, albeit for different reasons. And this constraint can make adults acutely aware that their future depends on their ability to take full advantage of their greatest asset: their young people.

There is no doubt in my mind that the six social factors identified in this study are making a difference in the lives of rural youth across the country. They made a difference in my life. This leaves me wondering: What will it take to activate these factors in rural communities with class and racial divides or pressing external constraints? Might the social cohesion seemingly activated by the social proximity found in small rural communities also be activated by cultural bonds? The sixth factor, a sense of shared fate and community ownership, can be found in communities that share a common culture, especially when they also are in geographic proximity. If so, is it possible that rural young people, especially those involved in programs like those sponsored by 4-H, who are living in racially or economically divided communities, could use the findings from this study to challenge adults to do better by all youth? This report has certainly inspired me to think differently about the factors behind the numbers.

Executive Summary

Much of the research on the fading "American Dream"—the expectation that children will grow up to earn more than their parents—has focused on the country's urban areas. However, as the nation's cultural, economic, and political divides have deepened, there has been accelerating interest in understanding how the 60 million people who live in rural America are confronting the challenges that come with climbing the income ladder.

Eye-opening data have allowed researchers led by the economist Raj Chetty to map out the geography of economic opportunity in rural America, revealing large swathes of the country where children—often those of color—have been left behind. Researchers have identified characteristics that correlate with social mobility—that is, the extent to which people ascend or descend the income ladder—including income inequality, residential segregation, and quality of education.

However, a close-up view of what is happening on the ground—the dynamics, mindsets, and activities within individual communities that support upward mobility—is harder to find. What does social mobility look like in those rural communities where many young people grow up to achieve a higher standard of living? And what are the local factors that support upward mobility in those communities—factors that other rural communities might build on?

Researchers and journalists have documented the challenges confronting the nation's rural communities—dwindling populations, few employment opportunities, the opioid crisis, and a lack of public investment. However, we also know there are many rural communities that are surmounting these obstacles and helping their young people build a brighter future. National 4-H Council collaborated with The Bridgespan Group to more deeply understand the places in rural America where upward mobility is thriving. We set out to learn from the young people as well as the adults in those communities, in hopes that their insights and experiences might prove useful for other rural communities, as they figure their own way forward.

Working from the Chetty group's data, we identified 133 rural counties that rank in the top 10 percent of all rural counties for youth economic advancement. To get a ground-level view, we homed in on a subset of counties within the top 10 percent, using characteristics that correlate with upward mobility—such as teen birth rates and high school graduation rates—to guide us. We also used demographic data to seek out counties with some diversity in terms of population size, adjacency to metropolitan areas, racial makeup, and predominant industries.

We followed all of these data, which took us to 19 communities in four regions—the Texas Panhandle (where there are substantial Hispanic populations), as well as Minnesota, North

Dakota, and Nebraska (all of which have American Indian populations). Supported by the Cooperative Extension System of our nation's land-grant universities, we conducted over 200 in-person interviews with public, private, and nonprofit community leaders, including approximately 100 interviews with focus groups comprised of middle and high school students. To discern how these communities increase the odds that their young people will climb the income ladder, we surfaced insights from youth voices. The young people we met with stand at the cusp of their career journeys and are about to confront social mobility's challenges. Their personal experiences and critical perspectives inform much of what we learned.

This field report details what we found. It offers a firsthand account of economic mobility in rural America, reflecting what we saw as well as what we heard from community leaders and young people themselves.

Rural America is not a monolith. Each community we visited had its own unique story. Still, we observed six common factors that appear to be pervasive and to support young people as they advance. In many ways, each factor is a facet of social capital—the connections and shared values that help groups of people build trust and work toward a common goal. The six factors:

- **A high expectation that youth will "opt in" and work hard to acquire the skills to build a better future; a low tolerance for opting out.** Many of the communities we visited infuse their young people with a sense of possibility—that if they set high goals, they can build a good life. As a result, there are both the expectation and the pathways for young people to "opt in" and participate in skill-building activities that might help them advance. Opting out is far less of an acceptable alternative.
- **Strong, informal support systems, with neighbors helping neighbors.** Aside from churches, these communities have few formal supports, such as direct service nonprofits and institutional funders. However, for young people who choose to opt in, there is often a strong social fabric to help them. These communities' high expectations are grounded in durable, informal support systems and celebrations of youth achievement.
- **An early focus on career pathways.** When considering their future careers, young people exuded a strong sense of direction. Education is not an abstraction, but a foundation for building careers. In some communities, efforts to help children build in-demand skills begin in grammar school.
- **A wealth of opportunities for youth to build life skills, regardless of the community's size.** All of the towns we visited, which range from populations of 600 to 20,000 people, are small enough to ensure that every young person has an array of options to build skills. Although they are often remote, these communities provide enough access points for kids to engage.
- **Many potential challenges to accessing opportunities, but creative solutions for overcoming them.** These communities do not just generate youth development opportunities. Residents collaborate so that as many young people as possible can seize on those opportunities, despite multiple potential barriers—financial, cultural, logistical, or simply a lack of awareness.

- **A sense of shared fate and a deep commitment to sustaining the community.** People in these small communities still recall existential threats from the past, such as the 1980s farm crisis and the oil industry's busts, whose aftershocks remain. Against that backdrop, residents spoke of how their individual well-being is deeply entwined with their neighbors' well-being—that their future depends on taking responsibility for sustaining their communities. In some cases, young people themselves are leading efforts to weather challenges through peer-to-peer and family-to-family support.

These six factors were culled from a small set of communities. To begin to gain a broader perspective, we field tested our insights with a handful of community leaders in six additional counties. They are located outside the country's mid-section, have household incomes lower than the rural median, and in some cases, have substantial Black American populations. Each of those counties has its own assets as well as challenges, including histories of racial oppression and financial struggles that span generations. Nevertheless, as we show in the report, many of the six factors that support upward mobility still resonated. Each of the counties with more modest outcomes have geographic or cultural pockets where all six factors exist, to varying degrees.

While these factors may offer helpful guidance to other communities, no single approach can put young people on an upwardly mobile trajectory. However, based on the common elements we observed, there are six questions that rural communities and national stakeholders might ask, to inform future action at the local level:

1. Does our community expect all our young people to participate and stay engaged?
2. What support systems are we providing to our youth, and which are most needed?
3. Are we imbuing our young people with a sense of possibility and helping them plan accordingly toward a better life?
4. Are we providing a wide array of opportunities for youth to build life skills?
5. What actions are we taking to extend access to resources and opportunities to all our people, regardless of their income, race, religion, or location?
6. What steps are we taking to build the "demand side" of the economic opportunity equation—are we making our community a place where young people want to remain or return to if they leave?

In answering these questions, other communities can take stock of their assets and deficits. Armed with a clearer line of sight, they can map out ways to improve economic opportunities for their young people and target resources—both homegrown and external—to support them.

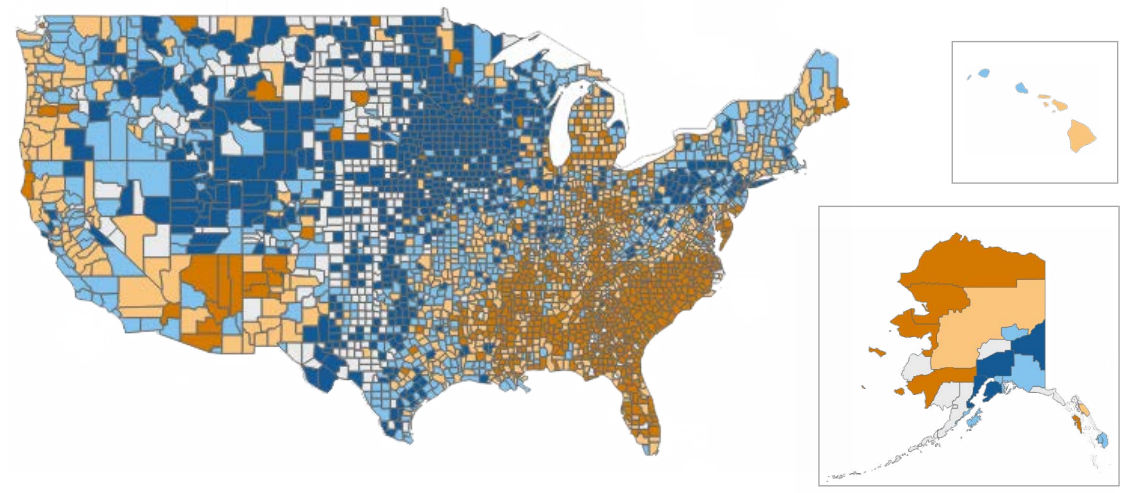
Our site visits, while meaningful and informative, touched less than 1 percent of the country's rural counties. However, we were struck by the common themes that surfaced across all of them. Our hope is that the research, stories, and insights that we detail in this report will help enable the adult and youth leaders of rural communities, as the experts in their own places, to work towards a future where every young person has an equal opportunity to build a better economic life.

Social Mobility in Rural America

An essential, animating feature of America's identity is the notion that if you work hard, a better economic future awaits. While often an aspiration rather than a reality for recent generations—especially for people of color—that widely held expectation is increasingly evading the nation's young people.[1]

According to researchers led by the economist Raj Chetty, upward economic mobility—the possibility that children will grow up to earn more than their parents—has been declining for nearly half a century. In 1970, 30-year-olds had more than a 90 percent chance—almost a certainty—of earning more than their parents did at the same age, adjusted for inflation. By 2014, those odds had dropped to around 50 percent.

Economic mobility in US counties



Source: Equality of Opportunity Project (http://equality-of-opportunity.org/data/)[2]; data available in 2,769 counties and unavailable in 372.

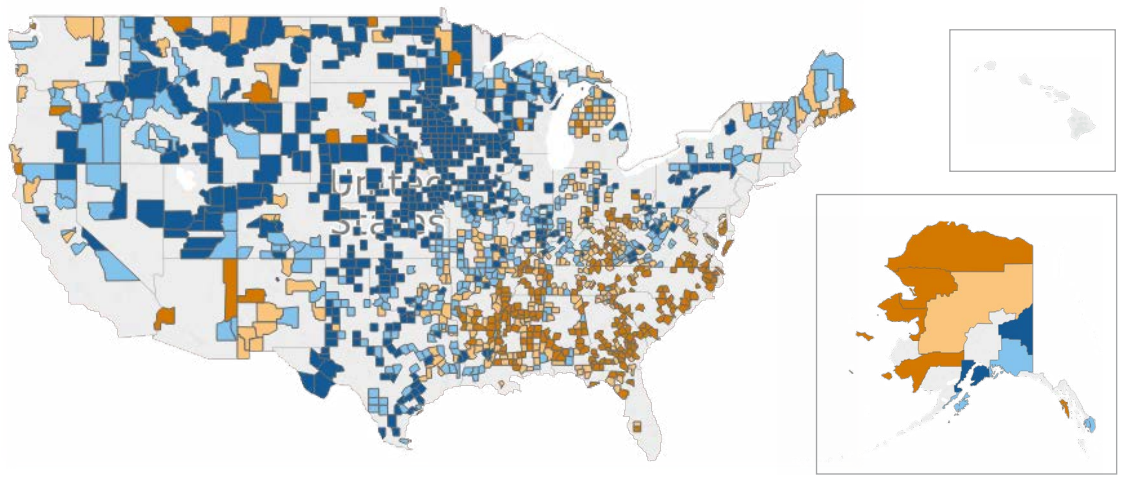
1 Raj Chetty, David Grusky, Maximilian Hell, Nathaniel Hendren, Robert Manduca, and Jimmy Narang, "The Fading American Dream: Trends in Absolute Income Mobility since 1940." *Science* 356, no. 6336 (April 2017), http://science.sciencemag.org/content/early/2017/04/21/science.aal4617.full.

2 Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline, and Emmanuel Saez, "Where Is the Land of Opportunity? The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129, no. 4 (2014).

Much of the research on the fading "American Dream" has concentrated on the country's urban areas. However, as the nation's cultural, economic, and political divides have deepened, there has been accelerating interest in understanding how the 60 million people who live in rural America are confronting the challenges that come with climbing the income ladder.[3]

Geographically, some of the greatest variation in economic opportunity occurs in rural parts of the country, even in areas that are not so far from each other. For example, parts of rural Texas have high rates of upward mobility, unlike large swathes of the rural Southeast next door. The most upwardly mobile region in the United States is in the Great Plains and the Upper Midwest, which includes many rural counties. And yet, in far too many rural areas, residents struggle to overcome significant impediments to upward mobility: poverty, racial barriers that deny opportunity for all, limited (or no) access to diversified economies, low levels of investment in health and education, and the spiraling opioid epidemic, among other dispiriting factors.

Economic mobility in US rural counties



Most upwardly mobile — Least upwardly mobile

Source: Equality of Opportunity Project (http://equality-of-opportunity.org/data/)[4]; data available in 1,325 counties and unavailable in 340. Rural counties defined as those with fewer than 20,000 residents in their urban centers.

3 According to the US Census Bureau (https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2017/08/rural-america.html), the population of rural America is 60 million. In this report, we take a narrower definition (counties with urban populations less than 20,000) encompassing 27 million people.

4 Chetty et al., "Where Is the Land of Opportunity?"

To try to explain why economic advancement is abundant in some rural areas but not in others, recent work by The Brookings Institution has built off of data from Chetty et al.'s Equality of Opportunity Project (now called Opportunity Insights) to identify a number of factors that correlate with higher upward mobility.[5] For example, rural counties where youth are advancing economically tend to have more people migrating away (especially 15- to 24-year-olds), a lower fraction of children with single mothers, lower teen birth rates, and stronger local economies. Based on Chetty et al.'s data, there are 133 rural counties that rank in the top 10 percent of all rural counties for upward mobility. Importantly, data are linked to where young people were raised, *not necessarily where they work or live as adults*. These counties are concentrated in just 16 states that span the nation's midsection, revealing that larger regional factors correlate with economic mobility.

Given that researchers can now pinpoint those rural areas where young people are more likely to experience higher rates of upward economic mobility—as well as identify some of those communities' common characteristics—what can we begin to learn about what is actually happening on the ground? What are the circumstances in these high opportunity rural communities that help young people advance economically? And how do they inform a deeper understanding of local factors that may support upward mobility—factors that other communities might build on? In pursuing these basic questions, we did not set out to conduct a comprehensive, definitive study—that would require a different kind of research. Our aim was to get a ground-level view of upward mobility and surface insights that rural communities themselves might test and extend.

Economic Opportunity and Racial Equity

Upward mobility in the United States is distributed unevenly. Nearly seven out of 10 Black Americans (versus a third of white Americans) who are born into the middle-income quintile end up in the bottom two quintiles as adults, a testament to the deep-seated barriers and structural racism they face.[6] Research has detailed some of the main factors that impede people of color as they try to climb the income ladder, including racial bias.[7] These factors often have roots in historic and long-lasting inequities, such as redlining—the formerly legal, discriminatory lending practice that prevented Black Americans from integrating white neighborhoods—and over-criminalization, which still disproportionately affects Black Americans.[8]

5 Eleanor Krause and Richard V. Reeves, "Rural Dreams: Upward mobility in America's Countryside," The Brookings Institution, 2017, http://www.brookings.edu/research/rural-dreams-upward-mobility-in-americas-countryside/.

6 Edward Rodrigue and Richard V. Reeves, "Five Bleak Facts on Black Opportunity," The Brookings Institution, January 2015, http://brookings.edu/blog/social-mobility-memos/2015/01/15/five-bleak-facts-on-black-opportunity/.

7 Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Maggie Jones, and Sonya R. Porter, "Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States: An Intergenerational Perspective," Economic Opportunity Project, 2018, http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/assets/documents/race_summary.pdf.

8 According to the Sentencing Project, "African-American adults are 5.9 times as likely to be incarcerated than whites": "Report to the United Nations on Racial Disparities in the U.S. Criminal Justice System," The Sentencing Project, April 19, 2018, https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/un-report-on-racial-disparities/.

Getting a Ground-Level View

To test these questions, National 4-H Council worked with The Bridgespan Group, a global nonprofit that collaborates with mission-driven leaders.[9] Building upon existing research in the field, and Bridgespan's previous work on economic opportunity (which did not have an explicit rural focus), we sought to identify and further characterize areas in rural America where upward mobility is thriving.[10] We aimed to get a close-up view of the dynamics and activities, attitudes, and mindsets in a handful of rural communities whose young people continue to make their way up the income ladder. If we could begin to understand how these communities help young people prepare for adulthood and the labor market, perhaps we could identify some of the factors that might help bolster economic opportunity in other parts of rural America.

Our research draws on four main inputs:



EXPERT INTERVIEWS

Conversations with **over 25 experts from the public, private, and social sectors** to source perspectives on economic advancement from across rural America



DATA ANALYSIS

County-level analysis of **demographic, economic, and outcomes data** from disparate sources, to generate hypotheses about upward mobility trends in different rural communities



SITE VISITS

Listening tour across **19 towns in 10 counties**, including **focus groups with 100+ youth** and visits with **120+ nonprofit, business, and civic leaders**



FIELD TESTING

Discussions and **focus groups with more than 20 local leaders** in six rural counties in four additional states to begin testing and refining learnings

Even as we pushed into this work, we were mindful of two important assumptions. First, that while larger forces such as regional economies and state policies can drive as well as constrain economic mobility, individual communities play an integral role in supporting positive change. Second, even though every area has its own unique history and circumstance, there are strengths inherent in rural communities that span disparate places. That is, a higher opportunity, higher income community in the Midwest might still reveal underlying factors that are helpful even for a lower opportunity, lower income community

9 National 4-H Council is the nonprofit partner of USDA and the Cooperative Extension System of our nation's land-grant universities that delivers 4-H programming.

10 Debby Bielak, Devin Murphy, and Jim Shelton, "'Billion Dollar Bets' to Increase Early Childhood Development: Creating Economic Opportunity for every American," The Bridgespan Group, 2016, https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/big-bets/billion-dollar-bets-to-create-economic-opportuni.

in the South or some other region. By investigating what might work in the highest opportunity communities, we sought to provide a framework for other rural communities to take stock of their own unique assets and possibilities, and begin to build pathways that might help their young people climb the income ladder. The journey is longer and steeper for many areas, but the direction remains the same.

Site visits comprised the backbone of our effort. Although several landmark studies have delivered big-picture views of economic mobility in rural America, especially from the aforementioned Equality of Opportunity Project and The Brookings Institution, we sought to get a ground-level view in a few places with particularly strong outcomes.[11] We analyzed data from The Equality of Opportunity Project—supplemented with analyses of more recent datasets—to identify places that have seen positive outcomes for their youth. (For more on the methodology we used, see "The Geography of Rural, Upwardly Mobile Youth" in the Appendix, p. 42.) Recognizing the limitations of visiting towns in just 10 of the highest opportunity counties, we then began testing themes and insights amongst an additional set of six counties with differing characteristics and more typical economic outcomes for their youth. (See field-testing section, p. 33.)

11 Work by scholars such as Robert Putnam (*Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*) has also described upward mobility from the viewpoint of young people and families who are experiencing it themselves.

Going Where the Data Took Us

We can examine economic mobility through several different lenses, including race, policy, and geography. For example, although Hispanic Americans[12] have slightly lower levels of upward mobility than whites, American Indians and Black Americans have substantially lower rates.[13] Public policy can also affect economic mobility. For example, Chetty and his co-authors have shown how investments in public education and tax credits for low-income families correlate with upward mobility.[14] And in their recent comprehensive report, "Restoring the American Dream," the US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty concluded, "Success will likely require tapping into local leadership while tackling city, county, and regional disparities through policy changes and increased public and private investment."[15]

Even as we acknowledged how race and government policies can profoundly affect a young person's ability to climb the income ladder, we began this work by using geography as our primary lens, to ascertain what we could learn from rural areas where youth have tended to experience high rates of upward economic mobility. Having established that our primary parameter would be rural counties that rank among the nation's top 10 percent for upward mobility, we followed where the data took us. We did not factor demographics into our initial screen for high opportunity counties, although they are an important lens through which to study our findings.

Nevertheless, in one profound sense, the demographics are disheartening, as the nation's most upwardly mobile rural counties all have small or even non-existent Black American populations. To be sure, there are big stretches of rural America, including parts of northern New England, Central Appalachia, and the Pacific Northwest's northern coast, with predominantly white populations that are among the nation's least upwardly mobile. But none of the approximately 200 rural counties with populations that are more than 25 percent Black American rank in even the top quartile for upward mobility and just two of those counties rank in the top half.[16] Such data underscore the bleak reality that the promise of "equal economic opportunity for all" remains out of reach for too many Black Americans.[17]

While our overriding aim was to surface insights that might prove useful to those areas with the greatest need, our initial focus was on learning from those areas with the best outcomes. Even though the areas we identified have low-to-no Black populations, they otherwise mirror the demographics of rural America writ large and therefore should be broadly relevant to other rural areas (See "Racial Composition" table, p. 17). We also sought to explore how racial dynamics affect economic mobility in the communities we visited, some of which have substantial American Indian and Hispanic populations. It is important to note that while economic opportunity is unevenly distributed (including in some high opportunity counties), economic data could not be disaggregated by race within each county. In follow-up field-testing research, we scrutinized our initial learnings in counties with more substantial Black populations. (See "Beginning to Test Our Findings in Rural Counties With Average Social Mobility," p. 33.)

12 We use the terms Hispanic American and Hispanic in this paper, to reflect how people of Latin American heritage in the specific communities we visited most commonly self-identified.

13 Chetty et al., "Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States."

14 Chetty et al., "Where Is the Land of Opportunity?"

15 David T. Ellwood and Nisha G. Patel, "Restoring the American Dream," US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty, January 2018, https://www.mobilitypartnership.org/restoring-american-dream.

16 These are Evangeline and Catahoula Parishes in Louisiana, which were included in our field-testing interviews.

17 It is important to note that the data we analyzed are anchored in the last two decades and that some communities with substantial Black populations may have made progress in recent years that has not yet been recorded.

Communities Whose Youth Are Advancing Economically

To get a closer view of the elements that might support upward mobility in rural communities with the highest economic outcomes for their youth, we visited four areas that exhibit demographic diversity along four dimensions: population and adjacency to metropolitan areas (according to the Rural-Urban Community Codes (RUCC) designation), racial makeup, region, and predominant industries. These four sites, comprised of 10 counties, are located in the Texas Panhandle, southwest Minnesota, northeastern Nebraska, and western North Dakota. (For more on how we identified the communities in this paper, see "The Geography of Rural, Upwardly Mobile Youth" in the Appendix, p. 42.)

In total, we visited 19 towns in these 10 counties, ranging from 600 to about 20,000 people. Most of the 10 counties' economies are rooted in agriculture, energy, and some light manufacturing, which might help spur upward mobility. Although the counties have certainly endured challenges in the past, such as the 1980s farm crisis and boom/bust oil cycles, there are few abandoned storefronts in their modest business centers, and they seemingly have avoided the worst of the opioid scourge.

Sites visited across four states



TEXAS
Counties: Hansford, Ochiltree
Towns: Perryton, Gruver, Spearman, Morse



NORTH DAKOTA
Counties: Stark, Mercer, McLean
Towns: Hazen, Beulah, Dickinson, Washburn



MINNESOTA
Counties: Redwood, Brown, Cottonwood
Towns: Redwood Falls, Wabasso, New Ulm, Sleepy Eye, Windom



NEBRASKA
Counties: Knox, Cedar
Towns: Laurel, Hartington, Verdigre, Randolph, Crofton, Wausa

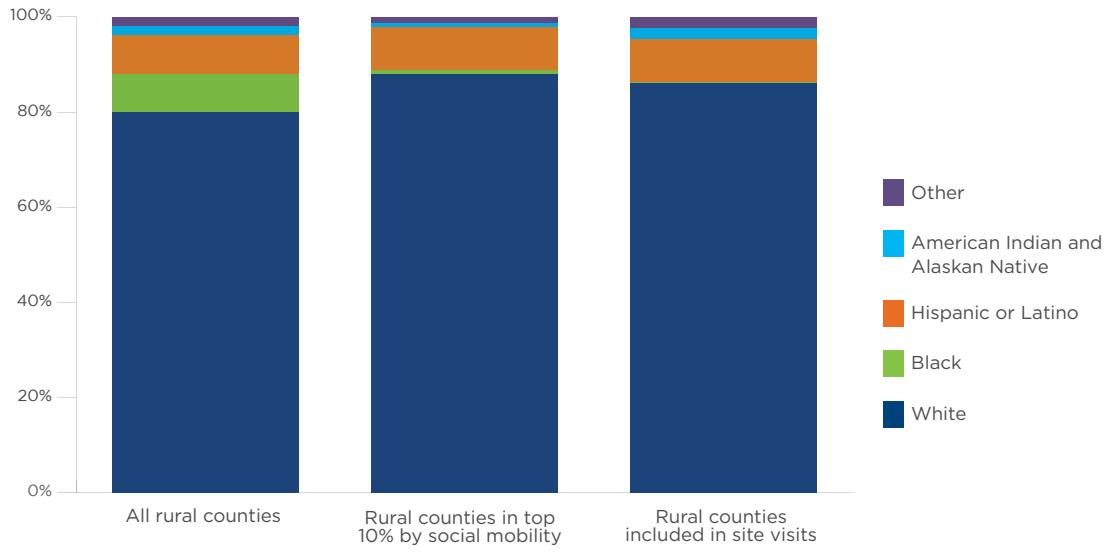
Leveraging 4-H's deep local knowledge, we spent two to three days in two to three counties within each of these sites. We spoke with more than 220 people, interviewing leaders of youth development organizations, social service providers, community/regional foundations, religious leaders, elected officials, and local businesspeople. Importantly, we met with focus groups of teenagers who are preparing to enter post-secondary education or the labor market within a few years. These groups typically represented the racial and socioeconomic demographics of the host communities.[18] Our conversations took us from

18 While site visits were coordinated through local 4-H leaders, many, if not most, students in the focus groups were not affiliated with 4-H.

high school classrooms and libraries to local diners, grocery stores, and courthouses and from pig farms and grain elevators to American Indian reservations. We spoke with people who had been living in these communities for generations, as well as newcomers.

Of course, spending a few days in a community is not sufficient to understand a place's full context. However, local Extension and 4-H agents were instrumental in organizing conversations with community and business leaders and most especially, focus groups with middle and high school students. They also helped us surface insights. Given the small sample and the fact that we did not visit places with low levels of upward mobility, our learnings take the form of hypotheses rather than firm conclusions.

Racial composition: US rural counties, high economic mobility rural counties, and rural counties included in site visits



Source: US Census Bureau, Population Division, 2016 Estimate of the Resident Population, and 2012-2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

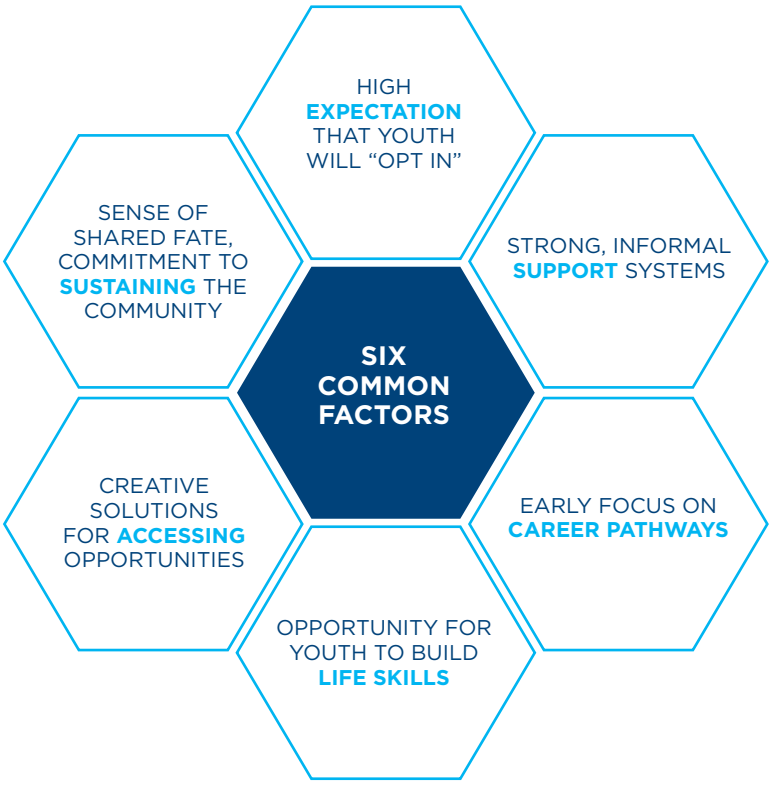
While the counties we visited in Texas have large Hispanic populations, many of the communities in Nebraska, Minnesota, and North Dakota are largely white, in line with the demographics of rural counties overall. However, several counties had above median proportions of American Indians and/or Asian Americans. As previously noted, none of the counties have a significant proportion of Black Americans. In fact, for rural communities across the country where over a quarter of the population is Black, upward economic mobility is far lower than average. This sobering statistic reflects a systemic disinvestment in majority Black communities, and highlights the critical need to address the deep, historical challenges that many of those communities still struggle to surmount. To fully support young people of all races and backgrounds, much more work needs to be done.

Six Factors That Might Support Upward Mobility

The individuals we spoke with in high opportunity areas tended to think of the towns in which they lived—as opposed to the counties—as their "community," although state and county pride was also abundant. These communities shared common aims for their children—ambitions that likely reside in many communities across the country: graduate from high school and pursue some form of post-secondary education, find a job with a future, and lead happy and fulfilling lives. With a few exceptions, young people rarely mentioned that "climbing the income ladder" or "earning more than my parents" were explicit goals. Rather, upward mobility appeared to be a long-term, multigenerational benefit enabled by many intentional, day-to-day activities.

Still, our conversations with members of these communities surfaced six common, local factors that seem to support young people's economic advancement. Each of these factors might be present, to differing degrees, in areas with lower levels of upward mobility. However, their pervasiveness in all of the rural areas we visited—often with differences in the details—was striking. It suggests that having all of these factors broadly in place and integrated is potentially important, if young people are to have a real opportunity to build better economic lives.

Six factors that seem to support young people's economic advancement



In many ways, these six factors are affiliated with social capital, which the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development defines as "the links, shared values and understandings…that enable individuals and groups to trust each other and so work together."[19] In fact, economic mobility correlates strongly with social capital.[20] Almost all of the communities we visited have above-median levels of it, as reflected in the Social Capital Index, a composite of such elements as the density of religious institutions in a community and voter turnout.[21]

Perhaps it should not be a surprise that these communities have a surplus of social capital, which is very nearly a synonym for "civil society." According to the authors of a recent *Stanford Social Innovation Review* article, rural America is both an "incubator and innovator" for creating and maintaining civil society, which arises when people who live near each other "work cooperatively—even when they strongly disagree with or dislike one another—to sustain mutually beneficial conditions."[22] While we observed abundant social capital and a highly functioning civil society in these communities, residents never mentioned these terms. They seemed too busy building social capital to worry about what to call it.

Factor #1: A high expectation that youth will "opt in" and work hard to acquire the skills to build a better future; a low tolerance for opting out

Many of the communities we visited infuse their young people with a sense of possibility—that if they set high goals and stay engaged with the community, they can build a good life. As a result, there are both the expectation and the pathways for youth to "opt in" and participate in skill-building activities that might help them advance. Opting out is far less of an acceptable alternative.

Participation required. Even in the largest town we visited—Dickinson, North Dakota (population, approximately 20,000)—young people often spoke of how many in the community knew them, and of how peers and adults (not just their parents) expect them to participate in school and community life. In Sleepy Eye, Minnesota, teachers expressed the school system's overriding goal: "to have every kid involved in something outside of school—it makes them more invested." Every young person's participation is especially crucial in smaller towns, as a team or club can't function without enough members. Of course, there are challenges: A school administrator in Beulah, North Dakota, described one remotely located family whose children no longer participated in summer activities, because it required "just too many trips into town." That said, participation is the norm.

> *"You just get used to being busy and having a full schedule. I don't like not being busy anymore!"*
>
> YOUTH VOICE

19 Brian Keeley, "Human Capital: How what you know shapes your life," *OECD Insights*, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007, https://www.oecd.org/insights/37966934.pdf.

20 Chetty et al., "Where Is the Land of Opportunity?"

21 Anil Rupasingha, Stephen J. Goetz, and David Freshwater, "The production of social capital in US counties," *Journal of Socio-Economics* 35, no. 1 (February 2006) 83-101, https://aese.psu.edu/nercrd/community/social-capital-resources/social-capital-variables-for-2014.

22 Allen J. Smart & Betsey Russell, "What Rural America Can Teach Us About Civil Society," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, August 21, 2018, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/what_rural_america_can_teach_us_about_civil_society.

The "stay busy" mindset. For young people, opting in often means working from early morning to late at night. They fill their days with diverse activities: jobs, sports, arts, and volunteering, in addition to school. In Texas, one resident summed up the opt-in ethos: "We expect our kids to get involved. We don't allow kids to sit around." At the Spearman, Texas, high school, 260 students out of 266 were involved in at least one after-school activity. Empowering youth was a common theme. The logic: Young people are generally more enthusiastic about things they choose to do, rather than things they are assigned to do. A number of students volunteered that they want to fully participate in school and community life. Opting in gives them a chance to follow their curiosity, take on different roles and experiences, and see what sticks.

Many of these communities have deep agricultural roots, and there are abundant opportunities for youth to build reservoirs of discipline and accountability, by tending land and livestock. Explained one resident of Verdigre, Nebraska: "When you're on a farm there is no other choice, animals need to be fed. You need to go out there and do it." Researchers are increasingly focusing on how psychological resources like grit and perseverance can play a prominent role in determining a young person's economic future.[23] Even for young people who do not live on farms, there is an expectation that they will find summer and after-school jobs.

Committing to kids is the norm. Opting in applies to adults as well, stretching beyond parents and family. On the eve of a school play in Spearman, Texas, a teacher spoke of getting text messages from three different student actors, asking if she was going to attend. "They expect me to show up," she said, "and I will." Other community members, aside from teachers, are also expected to give more of themselves to students. In Wabasso, Minnesota, a student who was at risk of dropping out of high school expressed interest in joining a construction crew. A local contractor offered to hire the young man (whom he had never met), but not until he finished high school. To motivate the student to stay in school, the contractor offered to take him on part time and pay him for the time he spent doing homework. That kind of commitment just might contribute to a young person's sense of volition.

Factor #2: Strong, informal support systems, with neighbors helping neighbors

For young people who choose to opt in, there is often a strong social fabric to help them. Indeed, these communities' high expectations are grounded in durable, informal support systems, deep investments in communal spaces, and celebrations of youth achievement. Aside from churches, there are few formal supports, such as direct service nonprofits and institutional funders. Instead, there are informal, virtuous networks of neighbors helping neighbors.

> *"Everyone is so supportive. Everyone is behind you."*
>
> YOUTH VOICE

To start, extended families and schools provide a solid foundation of support, especially when young people face adversity. Said one school administrator in Crofton, Nebraska, "If

23 Nicole Shechtman, Angela H. DeBarger, Carolyn Dornsife, Soren Rosier, and Louise Yarnall, "Promoting Grit, Tenacity, and Perseverance: Critical Factors for Success in the 21st Century," US Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology, 2013, http://pgbovine.net/OET-Draft-Grit-Report-2-17-13.pdf.

there is a trauma, there's always family members that are nearby...We have a lot of interventions in this school to help those kids who struggle." However, school and family are just one part of a much more extensive web of support.

The social sector's core pillar. Religious institutions—of all creeds, but typically churches of different denominations in these predominantly Christian towns—play an important role in community life, organizing service days, running food banks, and encouraging young people, as one pastor put it, "to get involved in something that's bigger than themselves." Nearly every young person that we spoke with said they participate in church activities. One church in Perryton, Texas, annually sends a youth group to do service work at a sister church in Nicaragua. In Redwood Falls, Minnesota, the local church donates food backpacks to needy students.

"A lot of what we think of as the social sector in small towns happens through churches," said one philanthropic leader. That includes providing the ties that bind community members. (This attribute can bring the community together, but it can also run the risk of reinforcing racial or ethnic divisions.)[24] In Spearman, Texas, a town official said, "I didn't go to church in Houston but I do here. My church is my community. I know everyone, and they would notice if I wasn't there."

Aside from 4-H and Future Farmers of America (FFA), direct service nonprofits are relatively rare—although every community has some. (Examples include EPIC Youth Ministry in Laurel, Nebraska; the United Way and Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts in numerous communities, including southwest Minnesota; and Big Brothers Big

Citizen Philanthropy

Often, groups of residents perform outsized acts that inspire others in the community. In Hartington, Nebraska, citizens decided that a motel was essential to the town's economic vitality. A motel, they reasoned, would provide entry-level jobs, drive ancillary spending from guests, and be a source of civic pride. So they banded together and funded the construction of the Cobblestone Inn and Suites, with no expectation that they would recoup their investment. A similar story played out in Gruver, Texas. The town's sole grocery store closed down, which threatened to drain Main Street of much of its lifeblood. Realizing this, the community kick-started a campaign to fund and build a replacement, the aptly named Neighbors Grocery.



Community members in Gruver, Texas, raised funds to build the Neigbhors Grocery, after the town's only grocery closed.

At first glance, "fund a grocery store" would not be top-of-mind for a philanthropist seeking to deliver a social good. And yet, in Gruver, such a store was seen as vital to the town's economic survival. Instead of looking for an outside benefactor, the community looked within to fund and literally build the solution. At the same time, just because a philanthropic investment was atypical, that did not mean it was amateurish. The developers behind the Hartington motel project were adept enough to leverage their personal investments in order to tap into other funding streams, including bonds and public grants.

24 In some areas, such as Perryton, Texas, churches highlighted real separations in the community (for example, through a Spanish-speaking and English-speaking Catholic church). In other areas, such as Randolph, Nebraska, the Catholic and Protestant churches worked together closely and exhibited strong bonds.

Sisters in the Texas Panhandle). Except for a few small community foundations, funders were also sparse.[25]

In lieu of formal services, there were volunteers and a shared sense of mutuality and interdependence. Inspiration and support often came from temporary peer networks, where neighbors banded together to solve a common challenge. Solutions came from the bottom up, not from the top down: local people who were closest to the problem knew best how to solve it, and they took it upon themselves to do so. Mauricio Lim Miller, who won a MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship for his unconventional approach to generating economic mobility among low-income families, summarized this ethos in his book, *The Alternative*: "When friends work together to improve their lives, their example becomes contagious and leads to faster and more effective social change than starting more programs or passing policies and legislation."[26]

Networks of neighbors. Residents also described virtuous networks of community members, who support each other and help keep the vulnerable from succumbing to life's challenges. In Cottonwood County, Minnesota, a network of neighbors will informally "adopt" a child facing financial and transportation barriers, so she can participate in after-school activities. Others in town will donate money to help pay for a low-income student's lunch at the end of a semester, or offer anonymous donations for "whoever needs a winter coat."

We also saw substantial investments in communal spaces such as libraries, parks, schools, and recreation centers. Redwood Falls, Minnesota, boasts an impressive community library. One resident described his Boston-based brother's surprise at the town's resources for youth: "I can't believe a town of 5,000 has a library that looks like the one we have here."

Using media to build kids' self-esteem. Sometimes, the most basic forms of support, such as prominently featuring young people in local media, seemed among the most resonant. Said one official in Ochiltree County, Texas, "You can hardly do anything as a young person in this community without gaining recognition." On the day we visited Perryton, *The Perryton Herald's* lead articles spotlighted the high school choir and the school's male and female power-



KDIX radio station in Dickinson, North Dakota, helps build students' esteem through an essay writing competition and an invitation to share the winning essay on air.

25 A Bridgespan report on rural nonprofits noted that they receive only eight percent of spending in the nonprofit sector, yet serve areas covering 18 percent of the total US population. Alex Neuhoff and Andrew Dunckelman, "Small but Tough: Nonprofits in Rural America," September 2011, https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/funding-strategy/small-but-tough-nonprofits-in-rural-america.

26 Mauricio L. Miller, *The Alternative: Most of What You Believe about Poverty is Wrong*, (Lulu Publishing Services, 2017).

lifting teams. The paper also included a regular column ("Where are they now?"), which highlighted young people who had left town and built lives in other parts of the country. The two radio stations in Perryton regularly feature local 4-H competitions and other youth-centric events. In Dickinson, North Dakota, radio station KDIX hosts a competition where students read their winning essays on air. The implicit message: "These kids are our future."

In many communities, the desire to encourage young people runs deep. When the Randolph, Nebraska, boys' basketball team bused to nearby Battle Creek to compete in the district finals, nearly the entire town evacuated to travel with them and scream their support. (The town emptied for non-athletic events as well.) And in Perryton, the Lions Club hosts an annual banquet that honors students for their academic achievements. Although it is impossible to gauge their impact, the communities' investment in building young people's sense of confidence and self-esteem are palpable.

Factor #3: An early focus on career pathways

When considering their future careers, young people in these communities express a strong sense of direction. Education is not an abstraction but a tool for career development. Parents and teachers expect high school graduates to pursue some form of post-secondary education and there is little stigma about attending two-year community or vocational colleges. Many of the community members we spoke with described with pride how their children and other family members pursued vocational training pathways, a relatively recent trend.

Targeted efforts to build career pathways. As young people opt in to improve their skillsets, the community often takes a pragmatic approach toward helping them build career pathways, such as starting career education in elementary school and creating abundant job shadowing opportunities in high school. (Beulah, North Dakota, whimsically arranges its job shadowing on Groundhog Day.) Remarkably, in one Minnesota middle school, every sixth and seventh grader has two job shadowing placements a year.

> *"I look at which jobs are growing and shrinking to think about my future."*
> YOUTH VOICE

Career pathways are grounded in economic realities. Some communities in Minnesota host "What to expect when expecting a senior" programs, which bring in economists to forecast the near-term future of local job markets. Regional groups often support local efforts to build career pathways. For example, Minnesota's South Central Perkins Consortium produces a Course-to-Career resource guide for schools that's emblazoned with the slogan, "Make the connection from learning to earning." However, local business leaders are often the real difference-makers. In Redwood Falls, Minnesota, the head of the Chamber of Commerce is so invested in young people's success, she teaches a high school career class that helps students explore the opportunities that surround them.

The communities we visited in Nebraska exhibit a similar pragmatic approach. On the walls of one student center are posters describing career pathways in different fields, the number of projected positions in the state over the next decade, average salaries, and more—literally a step-by-step guide up the income ladder. Educators didn't just tell students about the arc of various career pathways. They vividly brought those pathways

to life.

Career-oriented curriculums. This pragmatic spirit seems to influence the schools' course offerings. "The pendulum was swinging towards the four-year [college], and now it's moving back towards the technical side because that's where a lot of the jobs are in Minnesota," stated one Minnesota administrator, who is responsible for a school of 350 students. "We're trying to expose our kids to as much as we possibly can. We offered 49 different electives this year." Students seem to internalize this career-oriented approach. "Careers class helped me write my resume, learn how to interview, and it connected me to businesses in the community so that I had references," said one student.

Outside the classroom, administrators gear many activities toward career development. The library in Redwood County, Minnesota, hosts "Story Hours," which include a STEM component, for kindergarten through fourth-grade students. Also featured are engineering and robotics classes, organized by 4-H for older students. In Hazen, North Dakota, eighth graders can take part in a "Scrubs Camp" that features health-care professionals. Said a local hospital administrator: "[Camp participants] get some exposure to what health care is all about, and which career paths might be available to them."

Sometimes, however, young people have limited opportunities to even gain exposure to certain career paths, particularly those that branch away from the area's dominant industries. One youth from a Minnesota focus group reflected, "I want to do computer engineering, but I haven't met anyone with that type of job."

The potency of a summer job. Summer job opportunities often arise through a community's rich social networks, and young people frequently credit those work experiences with helping them prepare for careers. One young person in Nebraska described a job servicing computers—it wasn't what she wanted to do long-term, but the job taught her valuable skills. In places where jobs may not have been readily available or enriching, communities take it upon themselves to create more rewarding opportunities. For example, according to its website, the Lower Sioux Indian Community of Minnesota's summer employment program gives young people the opportunity to "learn the Dakota language, culture, [and] core values, while engaged in diverse work skills, including cooking, gardening, construction, cleaning, and the arts."[27]

Based on our observations, these practical approaches to education, such as job shadowing and skill building, may help make school more relevant in the eyes of young people, even as the national debate over learning for the sake of knowing versus learning to prepare for careers continues.[28]

Factor #4: A wealth of opportunities for youth to build life skills, regardless of the community's size

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27 Minnesota Youth Program SFY 2017 Annual Report, MN Employment and Economic Opportunity, https://www.workforcedevelopmentinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/MYP-Annual-Report_2017.pdf.

28 Of course, an early focus on careers is not without serious risks, as some youth may train for jobs that will become obsolete over the coming decades. In addition, we heard examples of youth who were dissuaded from pursuing careers with less promising employment prospects, which could narrow their horizons.

Each of the towns we visited—which range from 600 to approximately 20,000 people—are small enough (or have schools that are small enough) to ensure that *all* young people have a dizzying array of options to build skills, apart from working on a farm or in an after-school job. Every young person can take on a leadership role, often in multiple activities (sports, 4-H, church, and more). As one Nebraskan memorably commented, "Here, everyone is someone."

At the same time, communities commit themselves to providing enough access points for young people to try on different experiences. For example, if a student dislikes athletics, she can participate in drama, dance, or any number of other activities, in addition to an after-school job or church volunteer work. Commented one nonprofit leader in Redwood County, Minnesota: "We're trying to flood our kids with as much programing as we possibly can, just to keep them from falling off the path."

> *"I'm a waitress at a cafe and I also do postsecondary enrollment option classes, and then I also like to volunteer at the nursing home...So I'm learning a lot of time management."*
>
> YOUTH VOICE

Building life skills. We heard young people describe some of the benefits of these skill-building opportunities: greater confidence, enhanced communication skills, stronger resumes, time-management skills, and clarity around planning. Communities take some creative approaches in bringing these skill-building activities to life. For example, the high school in Randolph, Nebraska, has a four-day week, a cost-saving initiative that also frees up time for outside learning: acquiring money management skills through a seminar, taking an online Spanish course (remote learning is popular), or attending Northeast Community College's Extended Campus, for "Fridays at Northeast."

Tech-based and real-world learning. Despite limited resources, many of these communities use tech-enabled remote learning to increase skill-building opportunities. Every student in Beulah, North Dakota, gets their own tablet in fifth grade. There are also opportunities for real-world learning: the "University on the Prairie" in Minnesota provides hands-on exposure to science, through a three-day summer camp. In other cases, temporary resources, like a traveling drama troupe called Prairie Fire Children's Theatre, provides learning opportunities from outside the community.

Many opportunities are student-driven. To build public speaking and leadership skills, *students* lead parent-teacher conferences in the Minnesota schools we visited. Teachers serve as facilitators, as young people report on their progress and plans for the future.

The dynamic at play in these rural communities raises a question worth testing: Are there benefits for youth engagement when towns and schools are small enough to ensure that every young person can take on a leadership role (in sports, 4-H, church, etc.), while still providing enough access points for kids to engage? In that sense, smaller rural communities might have an advantage over their urban counterparts, where the anonymity that can be found in larger school and community populations can give youth a chance to withdraw.

Factor #5: Many potential challenges to accessing opportunities, but creative solutions for overcoming them

> *"If you want to do something, you can...If you want to get involved, you can."*
>
> YOUTH VOICE

These communities do not just generate youth development opportunities. Residents collaborate to ensure that as many young people as possible have access to them, despite multiple potential barriers: financial, cultural, psychological, logistical, or simply a lack of awareness.

Overcoming financial barriers. Community members try to surmount financial barriers in a number of ways. In Nebraska's Cedar and Knox counties, most after-school activities are low- or no-cost, ensuring that youth from low-income families have a chance to participate. In situations where a student could not afford a $25 activity fee, community members spoke of discretely providing financial support. In Minnesota, the United Way provides funds to help children participate in after-school activities. In Spearman, Texas, the high school principal builds substantial activity fees directly into the school's planned expenditures, making activities a top priority.

As it does throughout the country, college debt looms large in these communities. A number of programs help lower the financial barriers to college, including dual credit classes to help students shorten the number of semesters they would have to pay for. In addition, scholarships are abundant and well-publicized. In Perryton, Texas, businesspeople in the oil and gas industry raised $1 million to start a scholarship program called Pathways. Beginning in

From Corn to Scholarships for All

While the communities we visited often offered traditional scholarships from local foundations, philanthropists, corporations, and nonprofits, they could also come from unlikely places—even a great swath of corn—as demonstrated by the Gruver, Texas, farm scholarship program.

As recounted through our interviews and in the *Amarillo Globe-News*,[29] in the 1980s, the Gruver Independent School District was gifted with 640 acres of prime farmland. Several years ago, school and community leaders helped create the Gruver Farm Scholarship Foundation. Residents banded together to donate time, sweat equity, equipment, seed, and fertilizer to plant 440 acres of the school's farmland with corn. Money from the harvest—estimated to be around $500,000—was then invested through the foundation and used to potentially provide every Gruver graduate with a four-year scholarship to pay for college tuition and fees. Students earn the scholarship through a system that awards points for academic grades, extra-curricular work, athletic achievement and participation, and other measures. Students who earn the highest number of points can get the full cost amount of eight college semesters.

School leaders designed the point system to spur greater student participation in school life, even as the big prize is major tuition help at a time when college costs are spiraling. Perhaps most importantly, the scholarship program is another example of building demand, as it is now a magnet for the community. "It's a big draw for young families," the Gruver school superintendent told us. "It just makes your whole community better."

the eighth grade, students who maintain good grades and their residency through high school can win a Pathways scholarship, which covers two years of tuition, fees, and books at the local community college—a vital step toward attending a four-year university. Of the 22 current Pathways scholars, many were the first in their families to attend college.

Overcoming other barriers. Hand in hand with financial barriers were transportation challenges, often cited as a critical obstacle to access. In response, Redwood Falls, Minnesota, is experimenting with a "Green Route" bus that shuttles between many of the key community hubs: the library, community center, hospital, and government center. In other instances, communities directly address the barriers to upward mobility, such as risk behaviors in adolescence. Perryton, Texas, features an alternative high school, The Accelerated Education Center, which offers a streamlined curriculum for at-risk youth, such as teen mothers, or those young people who want to graduate early. The center provides young people with an opportunity to opt-in to a different set of supports to build their future.

Often, increased access grows out of increased collaboration. In more than one community we visited, school systems work together to share resources. In Minnesota, the Lutheran school has a mutually beneficial relationship with the public school, collaborating on their special education programs. Said one administrator, "They want our kids to be successful and we want their kids to be successful...We build on each other. Let's make the best school system that we can, instead of building our own separate entities."



Health-care centers, like the Coal Country Community Health Center in Beulah, North Dakota, offer important access to medical services in rural areas.

Health-care access. In many cases, access to health care is a precondition to accessing other important opportunities. Healthy birthweight and pregnancy-free teenage years are two of the critical, health-related milestones linked to upward mobility.[30] There are numerous challenges to accessing health care in rural communities, and these bear out in the sobering statistics on rural/urban health disparities.[31] However, in our research and site visits, we heard a

29 Jon Mark Beilue, "Harvest to Aid Gruver Students," *Amarillo Globe-News*, October 29, 2013.

30 Isabel V. Sawhill, Scott Winship, and Kerry Searle Grannis, "Pathways to the Middle Class: Balancing Personal and Public Responsibilities," The Social Genome Project at Brookings, September 20, 2012, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/pathways_middle_class_executive_summary.pdf.

31 "Rural Americans at Higher Risk of Death from Five Leading Causes," CDC, 2017, https://cdc.gov/media/releases/2017/p0112-rural-death-risk.html.

number of encouraging approaches to extending access. For example, in Hazen, North Dakota, behavioral health care—a concern in many communities we visited—is integrated directly into schools, making it easier to connect services to youth who need them.

Throughout the country, the opioid crisis looms large in rural communities. Although residents we spoke with generally felt less affected than those in other areas, they did highlight the growing problem. Said one high school principal in Stark County, "There's a drug problem in every place in North Dakota right now." And while we did not focus our research on this timely topic, important questions remain about how addiction could impact these or similar communities—despite their high rates of upward mobility—and how it might affect youth outcomes in the future. Given the crisis' potential toll on vulnerable children, there might soon be a critical need to build treatment and recovery resources even in rural areas where upward economic mobility remains high.

Factor #6: A sense of shared fate and a deep commitment to sustaining the community

Top-of-mind for many residents is a commitment to helping youth advance economically in a way that also helps sustain the community, whether by fostering entrepreneurship, attracting and keeping businesses, or retaining the town's young people. People frequently recalled existential economic threats from the past, whose aftershocks remain. Residents of Cedar County, Nebraska, spoke of the farm crisis of the 1980s, which left thousands of Midwestern farm families in ruin and washed away local banks and agribusinesses in a surge of bankruptcies. Across rural America's farm belt, communities that once bustled with activity soon looked like ghost towns.

The de-population threat. Similarly, people in Stark County, North Dakota, and Ochiltree County, Texas, live with the oil industry's boom/bust cycles, which for them extend at least as far back as the oil price collapse of the mid-1980s. That crash, which sidelined more than half of the nation's oil rigs, echoes through the industry's more recent struggles.[32] A Perryton, Texas, oil executive, pointing to a nearby RV trailer park that is principally used by oil workers, observed: "You can tell the price of oil by how full that lot is. And right now, it's pretty empty."

> *"If we don't come back, we could lose our school. And if you lose your school, you lose your community."*
>
> YOUTH VOICE

According to USDA's 2017 report "Rural America at a Glance," for the first time on record, the country's overall rural population is shrinking.[33] Students and parents in smaller towns in Nebraska and Texas spoke of cautionary tales from neighboring districts, where declining enrollments forced towns to shutter local schools and consolidate. (Residents of larger towns, such as Dickinson, North Dakota, and Perryton, Texas, believe the community's size and more diversified economy should shield them from an economic downturn's worst effects.) Against this backdrop, residents articulated a sense of shared fate: the notion that their individual well-being is entwined deeply with their neighbors' well-being; that their future

32 Collin Eaton, "1980s oil bust left a lasting mark," *Houston Chronicle*, August 31, 2016, https://www.chron.com/local/history/economy-business/article/The-1980s-oil-bust-left-lasting-mark-on-Houston-9195222.php.

33 "Rural America at a Glance 2017 Edition," Economic Information Bulletin 182, November 2017, USDA Economic Research Service, https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/85740/eib-182.pdf.

depends on pulling together and taking responsibility for sustaining their communities.

Building the "demand side" of the economic opportunity equation. Pulling together often means working to promote the town's economic viability, whether by fostering entrepreneurship, attracting new businesses, sustaining existing ones, or by retaining and sometimes returning the town's most valuable resources: its young people.

While helping young people build skills is critical "supply side" work, the economic opportunity equation also has an all-important "demand side": creating career pathways that young people can come back to. In Washburn, North Dakota, career-counseling materials contain the message, "Go learn and then return." However, civic leaders don't just deliver this message and hope that young people will come back. They take concrete steps to make the town attractive enough to exert a pull, by adding amenities such as a community swimming pool, especially appealing to families with small children. So too did the residents of Spearman, Texas, who collectively raised $1.2 million to build a community center.

One commonsense approach is to ask people in the community, including young people, what matters most. In Brown County, Minnesota, local leaders, in partnership with the Search Institute, surveyed area schools to identify the county's needs and assets. In Mercer County, North Dakota, the Sakakawea Medical Center coordinated a Health Needs Assessment for Hazen, Beulah, and some surrounding towns. They identified one of the greatest threats to the towns' sustainability—insufficient resources for childcare—a theme that emerged in nearly every community we visited. In response, local businesses, inspired by another community's example, formed Energy Capital Cooperative Child Care to pool resources and provide daycare.

Despite these efforts, most of the counties have high rates of youth out-migration. Against that backdrop, local leaders widely recognize that communities must have enough options to at least give young people the opportunity to stay, even as they equip them with the tools to succeed elsewhere. One USDA official summed up this aspiration: "It's a both/and option. Both strengthen the local communities and give people the springboard to leave. It's about having the option to do either."



Citizens in Hartington, Nebraska, raised $5 million to bring broadband internet access to their town.

Lowering barriers, raising broadband. Another way to make towns more attractive is to lower financial barriers for young professionals, such as through tuition reimbursements and loan forgiveness programs. In Perryton, Texas, the community is supporting two local students while they attend medical school—both

financially and by renovating their potential future clinic—in return for commitments that after completing their residencies, the newly minted doctors will return to their hometown to practice medicine.

Hazen, North Dakota, took a different approach. At the local Sakakawea Medical Center, students can enroll in the Dakota Nursing Program, a collaboration between local colleges, to take virtual classes that are supplemented with hands-on clinical training from an on-site instructor. The expectation is that by using digital tools to bring nursing education opportunities to young people, some might find it easier to remain in Hazen.

And yet, when a young person wants to return to a smaller community, too often there are fewer pathways to do so. As one public official from Crofton, Nebraska, put it, "There may be opportunity for everybody, but that opportunity doesn't necessarily come on demand." (For example, in a town of 700, it might be decades before a position for an aspiring chiropractor becomes available.)

Strategies that aim to entice young people to return to their hometowns often require significant financial resources—resources that may not be available in many rural areas. However, communities are often adept at finding funding, from federal or state grants, to help make their towns fit for the future. In the case of Hartington, Nebraska, the community secured a $5 million loan to extend broadband internet locally. Broadband in particular could make all the difference in whether rural communities thrived or stagnated. One Minnesota resident described broadband's absence in many rural areas as "the inequity of our generation."

Even within the communities we visited, there is inconsistent access to broadband. Some areas are equipped with high-speed Internet, allowing residents to work remotely. Other areas lack even basic cell phone reception. The disparities affect communities in a number of ways, from hampering efforts to coordinate youth activities and outreach to reducing business competitiveness.

Growing and replenishing local businesses. Instead of focusing solely on attracting new businesses, many communities also try to grow their own. The town of Dickinson, North Dakota, has a long history of fostering entrepreneurship, most recently by launching initiatives like the 3 Day Startup, a learning-by-doing workshop to help educate and connect local entrepreneurs. Indeed, several successful businesses, such as Steffes, an equipment manufacturer, originated as local start-ups.

Sometimes, communities focus on keeping the businesses they already have. In Laurel and Hartington, Nebraska, older business owners, on the verge of retirement, recently helped entrepreneurial couples return and take over their businesses. And in nearby Wausa, one community member worked to connect businesses to young entrepreneurs who might take them over, lest the sole HVAC company, for example, die off without a replacement. This approach often means favoring Main Street over larger retailers. One resident of Cedar County, Nebraska, exhorted, "Don't go to the big box store just because you can. If you've got somebody here, let's stay here and support them. Let's keep them going."

Across a number of the counties we visited, there is an abiding expectation that youth and adults alike will commit to sustaining their communities and building pathways to a better

economic life—and that they will hold themselves accountable for the results. This multi-generational engagement does not happen by accident. It is the product of deliberate initiatives. When civic leaders in Dickinson faced the challenge of reinvigorating the downtown square, they enlisted young adults, to ensure that the next generation's voices contribute to the town's planning. Said one civic leader, "It gets the kids excited about the future of Dickinson…about coming back or staying here."

Many towns—even smaller ones—have invested in a local economic development officer to help seed and coordinate new projects. Development staffers who are trying to bring economic opportunities to their remote locales face significant challenges, but they are not flying solo. "The likelihood [that counties] will turn around their economies alone is slim to none," said one leader of a regional economic development organization. "We are seeing success when these entities come together collectively as regions and say, 'How can we build on our economic advantages and work together?'"

Individualism and collectivism. This sense of shared fate might seem to contradict the tendency towards self-reliance, which is prevalent across many of these communities. Nevertheless, individual and collective action coexist in a healthy balance. People put a premium on entrepreneurialism and bootstrapping their way through challenges. At the same time, this individualistic spirit does not seem to lead to isolation. Rather, people seem bound by a common purpose and cause, which is captured in a quote that graces the Hartington, Nebraska, Community Foundation's home page: "This is my community, and it's my responsibility to make it better."

Building Inclusive Communities

Even as these communities work to build access to resources and opportunities for economic advancement, like many places in America they often struggle to overcome racial barriers. As a county commissioner in northeastern Nebraska put it, "These are insular, isolated towns" whose efforts to engage fully with their American Indian and Hispanic populations are often mixed. Even as some residents described broadly inclusive youth programs, others had a bleaker view, even characterizing relations between whites and American Indians living on the Santee Sioux Reservation as "separate but equal in the most stereotypical way you can…think of it."

On the other hand, there are efforts to build connections across racial and ethnic cleavages that typically divide different groups within a community—what researchers call "bridging social capital." In the Spearman, Texas, high school, which is 50 percent Hispanic, teachers promote inclusion by creating a "newcomer guidebook," in Spanish, to help newly arrived immigrants orient themselves to the school and community. The school leaders in Spearman and Gruver, as well as the leaders of other community institutions, said they sought to hold all students to the same standards—a claim that Hispanic and white students in two focus groups agreed with.

Another approach to promoting inclusion: increasing racial diversity among adults serving youth. Said one leader of a nonprofit: "We can't provide quality services if everyone on our staff looks the same." In Minnesota public schools, the Office of Indian Education provides a support system for Indian American students. For example, in Redwood Falls, a member of the Indian Education program works with an attendance advocate and a social worker to regularly review the attendance roster, to tamp down absenteeism and its deleterious effects. If a student's attendance lapses, someone will call the family, or even go to the home and drive the student to school. One educator described the mix of empathy and problem solving directed at students: "Tell me what your struggles are. Tell me what your barriers are. Then we're going to try to help you get through them."

Building inclusive communities is a long-term endeavor. Yet local citizens could cite individual events that pulled their community together and fostered meaningful connections. Case in point: a superintendent in Minnesota looked for opportunities outside his schools by setting aside a day to bus every single school-district employee onto a nearby American Indian reservation. One attendee later recalled, "Custodians, secretaries, teaching staff, paraprofessionals, admins, bus drivers. Just as a way to really engage and learn a little bit more about the history of the community and why it's important to recognize that this is a Dakota place…it was a very impactful day." A youth leader on the reservation agreed: "Most of the things you see about Indian people in the media are bad. So highlighting some of the positive stuff that is going on here and letting the people know about the good things that are available for our kids and the community [is important]."

Beginning to Test Our Findings in Rural Counties With Average Social Mobility

Our framework of six common factors is based on a relatively small number of communities with the greatest upward economic mobility for their youth, an inherently narrow representation of rural America. After conducting our initial site visits, we therefore sought to expand on what we learned, by connecting with a set of counties where the level of economic mobility is closer to the nation's rural median.

To begin to gain a broader perspective, we spoke with community leaders in six additional counties that are located in regions outside the center of the United States, have household incomes lower than the rural median, and in some cases, have substantial Black American populations. Each county has its own assets—a strong core of teachers, natural resources, a community college—as well as challenges, including histories of racial oppression and financial struggles that span generations. We selected these counties for their relatively average levels of economic mobility, and connected with a handful of leaders from the religious, business, education, public, and social sectors. Through their eyes—and with our own research and site visits as context—we got a line of sight into the economic opportunities for youth in their areas.

Characteristics of six counties with relatively average levels of social mobility

Geography			Economic indicators		Population
Region	State	County/ Parish	Social mobility percentile	Median household income percentile	Percent people of color
South	LA	Evangeline	59th	6th	33%
South	LA	Catahoula	67th	22nd	34%
South	MS	Amite	31st	8th	43%
South	MS	Wayne	36th	14th	42%
Appalachia	WV	Mingo	56th	17th	4%
West	CA	Siskiyou	53rd	33rd	22%

Source: Social mobility data from the Equality of Opportunity Project (http://equality-of-opportunity.org/data/); median household income (in 2015 inflation-adjusted Dollars) and demographic data from the US Census Bureau 5-year American Community Survey (2011-2015 for income, 2012-2016 for demographics).

Social mobility and median household income percentiles based on the 1,325 rural counties with social mobility data available.

Although these six counties differ from the counties we visited in the Midwest and Texas, many of the six factors we identified as potentially supporting upward mobility still resonate as important—in fact, we tested this explicitly through simple surveys of our interviewees where they identified their community's assets. Even if the factors are not as pervasive as in the high opportunity counties, each of the counties with more modest outcomes have geographic or cultural pockets where all six factors exist to varying degrees.

However, there are also pockets where the factors are almost nonexistent. Racial and socioeconomic realities play a large role in determining who has a promising opportunity to climb the income ladder and who does not. Nevertheless, interviewees generally agreed that the six factors provide a framework to help community members take stock of local assets, with an eye toward creating a brighter future for their youth.

A high expectation that youth will "opt in" and work hard to acquire the skills to build a better future; a low tolerance for opting out

In settings where there are fewer organized activities for young people, staying busy and engaged is often a challenge. In Amite County, Mississippi, one teacher noted that after school, "[kids] just put their books down and they will hang out on the street, because there's really nothing constructive for them to be engaged in." Across the state in Wayne County, one local leader summarized, "There's just not a push for the kids to get involved in something." Yet she also highlighted individual efforts to pull youth in: "I see kids here that just aren't getting the push at home…It has to come from outside sources, teachers, those of us who are mentors."

A precondition to high expectations is high aspirations, and building hope is a chronic challenge in many communities. A leader from Siskiyou County, California, described the outlook of those young people who are especially pessimistic. "They say, 'Why should I try? Why should I go to school? There's nothing here. There aren't any jobs. I can't afford to move anywhere.' There's kind of this fatalistic attitude." However, there are also persistent efforts to discourage defeatism. She described how educators in the community, in partnership with businesses and local industry, try to "get these youth to start opening up, dreaming again, looking at possibilities."

Strong, informal support systems, with neighbors helping neighbors

Although many communities called out attempts to support young people, a dearth of financial and community resources, combined with areas of poverty, sometimes stymie their efforts. Said one former teacher in Amite County, Mississippi, "It's kind of hard to focus on what's going on in class when you're…hungry, there's domestic violence [in your home]."

While there is abundant good will, community leaders described a diminished sense of social cohesion and shared responsibility for building opportunity for young people. "You won't have a neighbor coming down and saying, 'Hey you need to finish school,'" said another leader from Amite County. Families and parents have an overwhelming share of influence on their children's development, so much so that when a child struggles, others in the community may be reluctant to step in.

All of the people we spoke with, however, said their communities have small groups that come together to support young people. In Catahoula Parish, Louisiana, "You have the same people who are there volunteering, and it doesn't matter if you're talking church or different community functions," said one leader of an economic development organization. In Williamson, West Virginia, 10 families came together to erect an obstacle course, "just something for the kids to do to keep them active." The project is a modest but essential step toward building a sense of momentum in the community. Said another community member in Mingo County, West Virginia, "It starts with individuals, because we've got some community volunteers that really aren't affiliated with the civic organization or a nonprofit or anything. In southern West Virginia, our teacher population is so incredibly passionate. They are kind of like their own nonprofit."

An early focus on career pathways

In local economies where just one industry has dominated, there is an inherent danger of narrowly focusing on training for careers that might vanish in the coming decades, a top-of-mind risk for many counties. Said one leader in Catahoula Parish, Louisiana, concerned about the dwindling opportunities available to local youth: "Employment in the oil industry has decreased. However, I don't think parents really understand that."

Summer and part-time employment appears limited in many places, often because of a lack of suitable employers or transportation options. Explained one high school principal in Catahoula Parish, Louisiana, "Financially, the kids can't hardly afford to drive [long distances] to work because the minimum wage they can get won't pay enough to be worth it." Similarly, job-shadowing opportunities appear rare. "A lot of students don't really know what's out there…a lot of them might not know some of the things that might interest them, things that exist locally," conjectured one educator from Amite County, Mississippi.

Yet in all the communities we spoke with, there are experimental efforts to develop new career pathways. In Siskiyou County, California, a Prop 39 Clean Energy Jobs grant is enabling a community college program described as "a really cool series of basic construction, green building, plumbing, electrical, and solar classes." The program aims not only to help develop job opportunities in an emerging field, but to rally the community around its young people: "I have found so many wonderful people and contractors who are like, 'I'll come teach the classes. I'll volunteer,'" said the program's designer.

A wealth of opportunities for youth to build life skills, regardless of the community's size

In many communities, building life skills remains a fundamental need. A high school principal in Catahoula Parish, Louisiana, summarized: "We did some surveys and studies and determined goal setting and personal responsibility to be weaknesses of our students." Building life skills is not geared solely toward career preparation; it also helps heal the scars of adverse childhood experiences. One leader in Siskiyou County, California, described the importance to youth of "slowly skill-building their confidence…because a lot of them, they feel pretty helpless. They're struggling with homelessness, trauma, abuse, lack of support."

Practically speaking, parents often lack the supports that can more easily be found in more affluent areas, making it harder for them to engage on the challenge of building life

skills for their children. Said one teacher in Catahoula Parish, Louisiana, "In our area, there is no daycare within 30 miles." In Wayne County, Mississippi, although there are efforts to enhance life skills through music and dance, the opportunity to cultivate responsibility through farming is often lacking: "That rural, agrarian…mindset is dead and buried," observed one local economic development leader.

However, there are other activities—including those that take advantage of natural spaces—even if they seem hidden to some. In Evangeline Parish, one leader said, referring to local sites like an arboretum, "People are surprised when they visit our website or visit our Facebook page to recognize all the things and activities that we constantly have going on here."

Many potential challenges to accessing opportunities, but creative solutions to overcoming them

For each of the opportunities potentially available to youth in these counties, there were also barriers to accessing them. To begin, there was a pervasive sense that many young people were unaware of the options and opportunities that were available to them. Said a youth program coordinator from Catahoula Parish, who described her meetings with high school students in November of their senior year: "I'd asked them if they've done their FAFSA application, and they wouldn't have any idea what I was talking about."[34]

Even when young people were aware of potential supports, it was difficult to capitalize on them. A member of the Evangeline Parish Chamber of Commerce described this frustrating reality: "Participation over the years is so low because when those programs are happening, parents are at work. They don't have a means of necessarily being able to get to their kids, bring them to this program, bring them home, and then get back to work."

Even within a single community, these barriers loomed larger in underserved areas than in others. In some places, government policies may have addressed the inequities that hold people back; however, in other places the reverse could be true. "Every time the county goes through a budget cut, they cut the services from the neediest communities," said one school superintendent, discussing the supports available for youth. "Some of our communities don't get the resources they need, and that's too bad, because those are the ones that struggle."

Despite the numerous barriers, there were creative solutions to overcoming some of them. For instance, in Mingo County, West Virginia, the Harless Community Center hosts a number of summer after-school programs to feed children and provide programming in arts and crafts, reading, and sports. By bundling a number of services together—including nutrition, physical activity, and education—the community can increase access to those who might benefit.

A sense of shared fate and a deep commitment to sustaining the community

In many of these places, the consequences of struggling regional economies and eroding populations loom large. "The population is declining," said one high school principal in

34 FAFSA is the Free Application for Federal Student Aid.

Louisiana. “There’s no jobs really, no good jobs around.” One educator in Siskiyou County, California, speculated: “It’s not necessarily the kids that are balking about going on to college, but it’s the parents that are holding their kids back, because they know if they leave, the possibility of them coming back is pretty slim, just because there isn’t anything here for them to come back to.”

As the engines that drove their economies for generations grind down, some communities struggle over how to escape the gravitational pull of the past and redefine themselves economically. In Wayne County, Mississippi, one community member lamented, “[There is] always the mindset that oil is going to come back.” While in Mingo County, West Virginia, local leaders are trying to build a future that does not depend on the declining coal industry: “We are developing these sustainable economies that do not leave us in this crisis mode, the way that we’ve been left with the collapse of the mining industry,” said one local leader.

In areas with larger Black populations, racial differences can dampen hope that communities might pull together and work collectively to create economic opportunity for all young people. Said one community member, “In this place, each race goes to its own church.” There are, however, ongoing efforts to foster community spirit and thereby connect youth to a common purpose, regardless of race. In Wayne County, Mississippi, Rock Solid Youth Education, a group of mostly Black young men, organizes projects for young people to develop life skills and assist the elderly and the needy. Through volunteering, it’s helping to build a sense of community among young Black Americans.

Six Questions for Moving Forward

Given that the six common factors proved relevant across all the rural communities we visited and spoke with, what are the takeaways that might help young people climb the income ladder in other rural areas? Exciting experiments are already underway, which are truly testing whether elements of programs that have succeeded elsewhere—even in urban settings—are transferrable.

For example, a rural community might not find much that's relevant in the Harlem Children's Zone's model of "cradle-to-career" support for young people. However, Promise Neighborhood, a federally funded program, is for the first time testing this very premise, in collaboration with Kentucky's Berea College. The Berea College Promise Neighborhood, which covers several rural counties in eastern Kentucky, is working to instill a continuum of solutions that spans the lives of the area's young people and ultimately gives them an equal opportunity to become economically mobile. According to the program's leader, "With each community, we work to figure out what are the programs that will actually help. Promise Neighborhoods are *locally driven* solutions measured against results data."

With this experimental approach in mind—and based on the common elements we observed—there are six questions that rural communities and national stakeholders might ask, so as to potentially inform future action at the local level. In a sense, each of these questions frames an approach to increasing social capital, strengthening civil society, and expanding opportunity to places and people that have been historically marginalized. Of course, there is no silver bullet to building upward economic mobility—especially when many underlying factors reflect structural inequities—but taking stock and drawing lines of connection across communities may be a helpful step. As one nonprofit leader put it, "Every community has a bright spot, a place to start."

1. Does our community expect all our young people to participate and stay engaged? Are these expectations the same for all youth? When young people are disengaged, who takes ownership of reaching out to them? More broadly, when has our community come together, and are there lessons from that experience we can build on?
2. What support systems are we providing to our youth, and which are most needed? Are supports distributed equitably? Where are the gaps and are there areas where philanthropists and nonprofits can do more to help? Are we celebrating local efforts and people in visible ways?
3. Are we imbuing our young people with a sense of possibility and helping them plan accordingly toward a better life? How hopeful are our young people about their futures? Can they vividly imagine themselves in a career? How are we making the future more tangible for all our young people?
4. Are we providing a wide array of opportunities for youth to build life skills? What programs are available to our young people, inside and outside of school, and where are we lacking?
5. What actions are we taking to extend access to resources and opportunities to all our people, regardless of their income, race, religion, or location? How do barriers to economic opportunity vary by race and socioeconomic background

in our community? Do our young people have access to essential resources and opportunities, and if not, why not? How early in a child's life are we addressing race- and socioeconomic-based barriers?

6. What steps are we taking to build the "demand side" of the economic opportunity equation—are we making our community a place where young people want to remain or return to if they leave? What assets can we build on? What opportunities have we seen for targeted infrastructure investments (for example, in broadband) that might shape our community's future? Have we asked our young people, parents, businesses, and teachers what they would want?

The answers to these questions may be a starting point or a next step for communities as they map out ways to improve the economic opportunities for their young people. We believe these questions will be helpful regardless of race, income level, or geography. By taking stock in this coordinated way, communities can not only inform their own strategies, they can also identify how the targeted deployment of resources—both homegrown and external—just might transform the lives of young people.

Looking Ahead

We have sought to create a snapshot—by no means a full portrait—of economic mobility in rural America. Our conversations, though meaningful and informative, have touched less than 1 percent of the country's rural counties. In future research, it will be important to pressure test these initial findings through additional qualitative and quantitative research, incorporating diverse voices to address some of the unique needs of specific communities.

We have seen firsthand the factors that seem to support upward mobility in counties where youth are more likely to advance: the opt-in ethos, neighbors helping neighbors, a big focus on career pathways, opportunities to build skills, creative solutions to overcoming barriers, and a sense of shared fate. Communities innately know these things, but don't often recognize them until they surface.

Having named and described these factors as they play out in rural America, our hope is that this framework will help enable community leaders, as experts of their own places, to think about their assets in a coordinated way. All the communities we connected with—including those that are struggling to overcome racial barriers, resource constraints, a dearth of social capital, and more—have the capacity to work toward ensuring that every young person has an equal opportunity to build a better economic life. Said one school administrator from Siskiyou County, California: "Sometimes I only focus on the negative, and I forget about all the positive things…It makes you think about the good things that our communities are doing."

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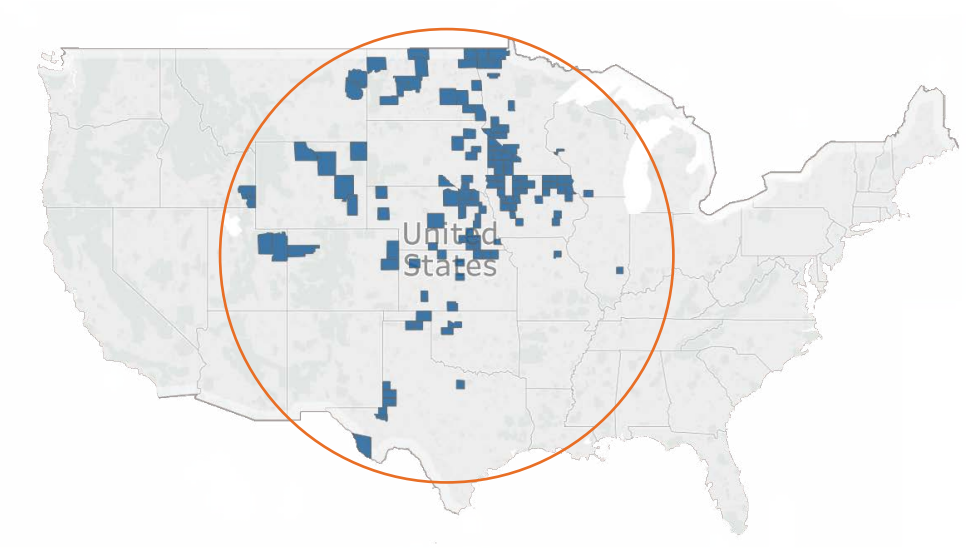
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Appendix: The Geography of Rural, Upwardly Mobile Youth

Before we could research rural communities where youth are upwardly mobile, we first had to identify them. To begin, we broadly defined "rural America" as the 1,655 counties with urban populations of less than 20,000 people, in accordance with the USDA RUCC definitions.[35] Leveraging The Equality of Opportunity Project data, available for 1,325 of these counties, we then identified the 133 rural counties that ranked in the top 10 percent for upward mobility. These data from the Equality of Opportunity Project are based on anonymized tax figures comparing parents' income to their children's income a generation later. Importantly, data are linked to where young people were raised, not necessarily where they work or live as adults. For example, if a young woman grew up in Cedar County, Nebraska, left to attend the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and now works and lives in Omaha, her income is still tied to Cedar County.

Strikingly, these 133 counties in the top 10 percent for youth economic advancement are located in just 16 states, spanning roughly the upper Midwest south through Texas. These upwardly mobile communities tend to cluster into groups of three or more adjacent counties, with just eleven clusters comprising 99 counties.

Top 10 percent (top 133) of US rural counties by economic mobility



Source: Equality of Opportunity Project (http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/data/).

35 Rural-Urban Continuum Code: Each county in the United States is assigned to one of nine codes based on population distribution and adjacency to metropolitan areas; we defined rural as counties in the 6-9 RUCC range (urban populations less than 20,000).

The top 10 percent consist of largely (but not exclusively) higher-than-average income counties, whose economies mostly depend on agriculture, with pockets of manufacturing- and energy-based businesses. Some have persisted with comparatively unchanging economies for generations, while others have seen substantial shifts due to new resource discovery or technological innovations. Not all of these counties are wealthy: even in some counties with high rates of upward mobility, large portions of their residents receive free and reduced-price lunches for their children.

Although most of the 133 counties are predominantly white, 46 counties have populations of people of color greater than or equal to 10 percent and some are substantially more diverse. For example, six have majority Hispanic populations (including Ochiltree and Hansford Counties in Texas). Given that it was not possible to disaggregate economic data by race, those counties with majority Hispanic populations provided a unique view of how communities of color can help drive upward economic mobility across an entire region. If economic advancement were solely concentrated in the white population in these counties, they would not rank among the top 10 percent of rural counties.

These data end in 2012 and start decades earlier. To build a more up-to-date view, we incorporated county-level analyses of recent data points and milestones linked to upward mobility. These milestones emerged from work done by the Social Genome Project, which identified a number of make-or-break factors that lead to a middle class standard of living by age 40. Our analysis surfaced a number of indicators, of which we selected five: the percentage of low birth-weight babies, the percentage of teen parents, the high school graduation rate, the employment rate, and the jail incarceration rate.[36] These metrics provided a view of how young people are faring in these counties more recently.

Of the 133 counties, 74 are above the rural median on all five indicators for economic advancement.[37] These 74 counties are concentrated entirely in eight central states, which reinforces the idea that important regional factors or state policies may help drive upward economic mobility. Although these counties tend to have smaller populations than the typical rural county, they still vary widely in size and demographic patterns. Some counties have towns with populations of 500, others have towns with populations in the tens of thousands. Some counties are hours away from metropolitan areas, while others are adjacent to at least one. Such diversity suggests that rural counties of differing sizes and demographic patterns can still achieve excellent outcomes.[38]

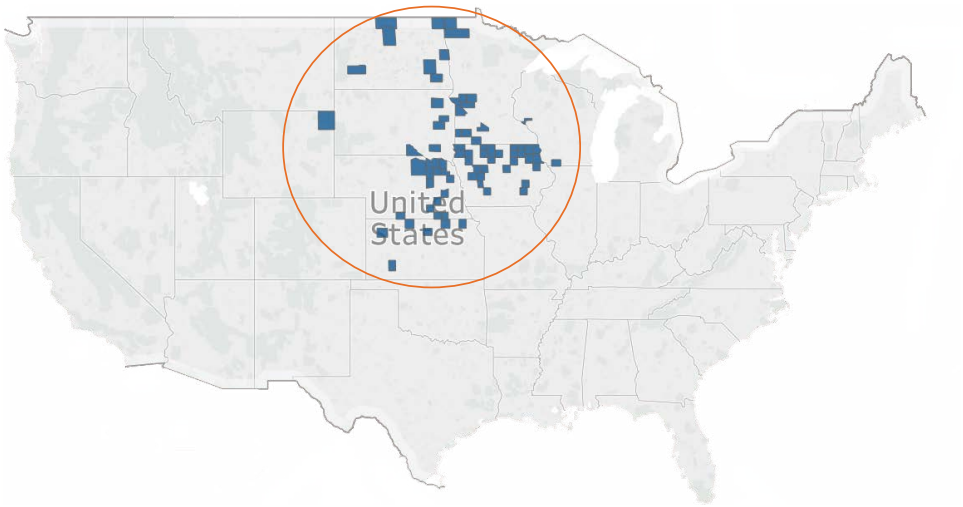
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36 These milestones are built from analyzing what factors are most important in achieving a middle-class standard of living by age 40, as described previously ("'Billion Dollar Bets'"). We selected five indicators where data were generally accessible at a county level and which spanned multiple domains of a youth's life: low birth weight rate (2008-2014); teen birth rate (2008-2014); employment rate (2012-2016); jail incarceration rate (2015); and high school graduation rate (2011-2017), where data were available.

37 The rural median was calculated from the 1,325 rural counties with economic mobility data, where data were available. All rural counties had data for low birth weight rate and teen birth rate. Employment data were unavailable for one rural county. Where possible, county-level graduation rates were used; graduation rates from the largest town within a county were used for 24 counties (2013-2017). Incarceration rates were divided into national terciles, with the top two terciles replacing "above median" for this indicator.

38 Smaller counties were overrepresented among the top 10 percent for youth economic advancement, indicating a possible link between smaller county size and upward mobility.

US rural counties in the top 10 percent of upwardly mobile counties that meet key advancement milestones



Source: Social mobility data from the Equality of Opportunity Project (http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/data/); Milestone data from the RWJF County Health Rankings (2017), US Census Bureau 5-year American Community Survey (2011-2016), and Vera Institute of Justice: Incarceration Trends (2015).

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