

Rural Renewal – As Near as Your Own Young People Executive Summary

Community leaders and developers have recognized for some time that the key to the renewal of rural communities and towns lies in people attraction. How to stem the outflow of young adults from America's countryside and attract new residents have been topics of concern for decades. Now, research conducted in the Midwest suggests a tangible answer – provided by the young people themselves.

Greatest Asset – Youth. For the past five years, detailed surveys completed by high school and middle school youth in 39 rural communities in Nebraska, Missouri, and Kansas have yielded startling results that serve to highlight how broadly communities are missing out on their very best asset: youth. Rural communities have persistently, if unintentionally, overlooked involving youth in the shaping of their own futures. Through the absence of definitive strategies that focus and engage the young, rural communities have continuously failed to create constructs that offer young residents quality employment after high school or college, and substantive involvement in community improvement efforts.

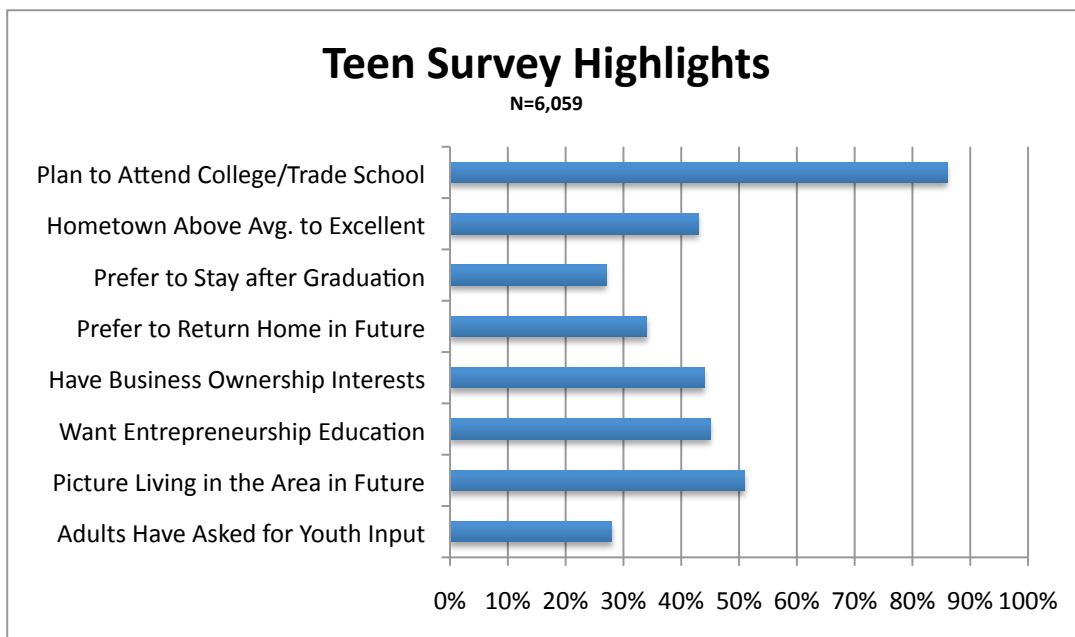
Survey Results. Seventy-two percent (72%) of survey respondents indicated that no adult had ever asked their views on how to make their community a more attractive place for young people. And yet, the 6,059 Midwestern youth that responded to the survey had some important things to share. There is good news.

First of all, 43% of the young people rated their communities as an above average to excellent place to live. Many (27%) said that they would like to stay in their communities after high school, and another 34% indicated that they would return upon the right conditions. The big "if" for youth in both these categories is whether or not quality career opportunities will be available to them in their hometown communities. The current perception shared by 43% of the students is that greater chances for economic and professional success exist beyond the bounds of the rural regions they call home.

Why would they like to stay? Family ties and a good place to raise a family were two important motivators for 45% of the survey participants to remain in or return to their communities. These reasons signify potent emotional ties to the places where the youth grew up, and rural community leaders should recognize this strong social capital for its true value.

Secondly, too often, rural communities tend to encourage youth to seek their futures elsewhere instead of providing the basis for them at home. This holds true for higher education as well as job searches. An unusually high number of the survey's Midwestern students (86%) plan to go on to college. It need not be automatic for them to leave the area if good community colleges and branch campuses of major universities can offer educational opportunities. Rural communities can match their educational assets with these youngsters' aspirations to keep them closer to home.

Third, young people may well represent a rural region's economic ability to grow. A series of responses regarding entrepreneurship show a significant amount of interest in small business ownership. Forty-four percent (44%) of those surveyed stated an interest in business ownership, and in fact, 14% of the population answering the survey already owned businesses. Added to this, 45% of all respondents said that they would like to take an entrepreneurship class linked with hands-on learning experiences.



The Value-Added of Youth. In business terms, how to add value to a natural resource or product is often discussed. The findings of these surveys seem to beg communities to build upon the raw potential and energy of young people. Their willingness to remain in or return to their communities, their dedication to acquiring higher education and higher quality jobs, and their notable interest in entrepreneurship should add up to a formula for success with the right value-added activities. It is up to communities to design and enact plans that hone that social and intellectual capital into a more promising future.

A Call to Action. Rural communities can take steps immediately to begin to cultivate the full potential of their youthful population. Some recommended action steps given the results of these surveys are:

- Combine vision with action. Invest time and resources into (1) youth priorities, and (2) making communities more attractive options for young people to live in, contribute and work.
- Create a community plan for improvement that actively engages youth as integral, vital partners in planning efforts.
- Encourage the development of small and medium-sized businesses that can offer small business ownership or quality level jobs to young people. Create and ensure access to technical assistance and business coaching in the development of businesses owned by young people.
- Introduce entrepreneurship education within the school system or as an extra-curricular opportunity. Create a mentorship program where students can shadow community entrepreneurs and gain hands-on knowledge.
- Map the community's assets, especially with an eye to matching educational and training assets with young persons' educational and career plans.
- Above all, consult and involve local youth and young adults in every phase of community economic development activities.

Partnering for Future Research. The completion of this first round of surveys was a collaborative effort of the RUPRI Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, Hometown Competiveness (HTC), Kansas Hometown Prosperity, and the Connie Fund in partnership with the Nebraska Community Foundation. Special thanks go to the W. K. Kellogg Foundation for its underwriting support of these efforts.

Tapping the potential of rural youth and what they can contribute is far from complete. The original research group recognizes that a broader study must be mounted. Since the current research only includes students at Midwestern schools, it is proposed that samples be drawn from diverse rural settings around the nation to achieve a more balanced representation of how rural youth might feel or behave toward their hometown communities. The collaboration will be seeking partners to further this work, and to promote a greater understanding about the potential that youth represent for rural America and its renewal.

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