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Is There Too Much Pressure to Attend University in the United States? A Case Study in Western Ohio

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Abstract

Rural population loss is a major problem in the United States and abroad. Rural location typically lose populations as young people move towards urban and suburban centers for education and job opportunities available there. This region continues to face a problem with shrinking population. The researchers in this study surveyed high school graduating seniors (typically ages 18 and 19 years of age) to evaluate the issue of rural population loss by assessing youth impressions of their home communities. The sample revealed strong positive impressions of their home communities when evaluating their schools, safety, and how affordable the community was to live. The young people reported lower evaluation of the job opportunities and the availability of entertainment, cultural, and job options. Youth from families deeply rooted in the rural community for generations and those youth working in high school jobs with higher rates of pay were more optimistic about their rural community. Youth report a strong influence of parents on their future choices about remaining or returning to their rural community.

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Introduction

Population loss in rural communities is an important issue when considering sustainability of small towns in the United States. Many rural communities struggle retaining young people, as they make choices to immigrate to urban and suburban locations for educational and employment opportunities. Recent data from the U.S 2020 Census reveals that the rural population declined between 2010 and 2020. Between 2010 and 2020 population loss was widespread across rural America, with more than two-thirds of all nonmetropolitan counties losing population (Johnson, 2022). Since the 19th century, various forces — declining employment in agricultural and extractive industries, the globalization of manufacturing, and economic growth in urban areas — have led many people to leave rural communities for cities and suburbs (Marre, 2022). The exodus of young people from small communities leads to a decreased local workforce and lower tax base, while services and infrastructure costs of small towns and villages stay the same. Rural counties experiencing population loss did not see costs drop proportionally and some costs, such as those for roads, increased per capita (Wallheimer, 2020). The ability to attract people to rural communities becomes much more of a challenge as this happens. As a result, policy makers and community stakeholders are forced to explore what incentives can be created and highlighted to retain and attract young people to small town communities. Being proactive (as opposed to reactive) can be measured by a small town's willingness and ability to act on a particular challenge before it becomes a problem (Lambe, 2008). Small towns with the most dramatic outcomes tend to be proactive and future-oriented; they embrace change and assume risk (Lambe, 2008).

The authors analyzed the trends and issues related to the retention of young adults in Northwest Ohio to evaluate the perceptions of rural youth at the conclusion of their high school education regarding their community and life goals. Researchers also analyzed the support from parents for their children to remain in their communities to better understand sustainability of communities in rural Ohio. Historically, the population trends in rural areas within northwest Ohio have been in decline. When analyzing the US Census Bureau reports, rural counties and rural town outside of metropolitan areas continue to see population losses. Meanwhile, urban and suburban locations have grown.

Methods

An online survey was administered to high school graduating seniors in Northwestern Ohio. 236 respondents completed surveys from four rural community school districts. A web link was sent to all graduating high school seniors ages 18-19 between the last day of classwork and graduating in the spring of 2019. As outlined in Table 1, there was an average response rate of 25% (N=236). Descriptive statistics analyzed overall student ratings of their awareness of employment opportunities in their respective rural areas, the impressions of their community, how they see their future in the region, the parental influence in staying/leaving their rural areas and parental influence on career pathing after high school.

Table 1

School District	Number of Respondents	Percent of Sample
St. Henry	64	27.0%
Coldwater	67	28.7%
Marion Local	33	13.9%
Celina	72	30.4%
Total	236	

Findings

Are students aware of the opportunities available to them in their rural communities? Young people often indicate they leave their communities based on the perception there are better opportunities in larger urban areas. Is this perception based on understanding the local job market and opportunities or based on small town stigmas? When asked if students were aware of the companies and careers located in their region, the data indicated only 4.8% felt they did not have a good understanding of the opportunities. 62.3% of students noted they agreed or strongly agreed

with the statement 'I am aware of the companies and careers located in this region' indicating most feel they have a good grasp of what work opportunities are available to them.

Table 2: I am aware of the companies and careers located in this region

Response	Percent
Strongly Disagree	1.3%
Disagree	3.5%
Neutral	32.9%
Agree	54.4%
Strongly Agree	7.9%

What are the impressions of living in rural communities? The students living in the rural communities in which the research was conducted have an overwhelming positive perception of living in their hometowns. As outlined in Table 3, nearly 90% of those surveyed indicated they either somewhat agreed or strongly agreed that their rural communities were safe places to live. Students also indicated a high degree of confidence that their rural communities were good places to raise families. This aligns with past findings that indicates the presence of parents and the desire to raise their children back home were the most frequently cited reasons for returning to live in relatively remote rural communities (Cromartie, 2015). Only 5% surveyed indicated they strongly disagreed or somewhat disagreed their communities did not provide a good place to raise families. The two elements that emerged from the survey that are challenges for small communities in this region are in the areas of cultural experiences and interesting/fun activities. Providing things to do and offering a rich cultural scene is difficult. Nearly 30% of respondents indicated there was not enough cultural activities in their communities and not enough interesting / fun things to do.

Table 3: Impressions of living in their rural communities

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Some-what Agree	Strongly Agree
This is a safe place to live	1.68%	1.68%	8.40%	31.93%	56.30%
This area is a good place to raise a family	1.68%	3.36%	13.87%	28.15%	52.94%
I can stay in this area and get a good education	3.38%	8.44%	14.77%	35.02%	38.40%
The people here share my values and beliefs	5.04%	4.62%	36.97%	26.89%	26.47%
This area offers enough cultural activities	11.02%	17.37%	26.69%	23.31%	21.61%
This area provides interesting and fun activities	10.50%	17.23%	21.43%	37.82%	13.03%

Respondents in the survey feel as if the educational systems are strong within their communities (Table 4). Despite data indicating population decline in the area, students feel as if their communities are generally in an era of growth and providing enough employment opportunities. When asked if the likelihood this region will have a good paying job for students later in life, 48.26% of students indicated they somewhat agreed or strongly agreed with the statement (Table 5). Not surprising, local shopping opportunities and restaurant options are considered limited. Also not surprising, nearly 65% of students feel their small town environments create places where people know too much about each other's business.

Table 4: Education, Community Growth and Opportunities

	Strongly Disagree	**Some-what Disagree**	**Neither Agree or Disagree**	**Some-what Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
The schools/teachers here are high quality	2.52%	7.56%	18.07%	42.44%	29.41%
There is positive growth in this area	1.68%	6.72%	22.69%	35.71%	33.19%
There are enough employment opportunities	1.27%	3.80%	25.32%	36.29%	33.33%
There is enough shopping and restaurants in area	8.82%	24.37%	27.73%	25.21%	13.87%
My family can buy the things others can	1.26%	3.78%	25.21%	31.51%	38.24%
People in this area know too much about others	2.10%	8.40%	25.21%	33.61%	30.67%

Students indicated an apparent desire to live and work in the rural areas in which they were raised. Nearly 75% of those surveyed said they had at least a moderate desire to live and work in the region in the future and of those, 44% indicated they had a strong or very strong desire to stay. When asked who has had the most influence on the desire to stay, respondents indicated mothers (74.66%), compared to fathers (71%) tended to have slightly more influence over the choice to stay and or return to area.

Table 5: Future in the Region and Parental Influence

	Very Weak	**Weak**	**Moderate**	**Strong**	**Very Strong**
My desire to live and work in the region in the future	16.09%	9.13%	30.43%	22.17%	22.17%

My mother's influence on my intention to stay or return to the region	9.95%	15.38%	45.25%	15.84%	13.57%
My father's influence on my intention to stay or return to the region	12.15%	16.36%	39.72%	18.69%	13.08%
Likelihood this region will have a good paying job for me later in life	15.22%	7.39%	29.13%	26.09%	22.17%

As reported by graduating high school students, mothers tend to have a higher level of involvement in their child's formal education than do fathers. 83.1% of respondents indicated their mothers had at least a moderate level of involvement in their formal education and 48.76% of those were involved in a high to very high degree. Mothers tended to be more involved with their communities as volunteers as well.

Table 6: Parental Involvement with Youth Education and Community

	Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very High
Mother's involvement in my formal education	2.89%	12.81%	38.54%	26.45%	22.31%
Mother's involvement in community/volunteerism	9.40%	16.67%	42.74%	20.51%	10.68%
Father's involvement in my formal education	7.56%	17.78%	32.89%	24.89%	16.89%
Father's involvement in community/volunteerism	9.59%	21.92%	33.79%	21.00%	13.70%

Results, Conclusion, and Recommendations

Northwest Ohio, like other rural areas in the United States, continues to struggle with retaining youth in their communities. Northwest Ohio Counties, as a region, are not competing as favorably as other more metropolitan areas of the state. When analyzing the impressions that young adults

(age 18-19) have regarding Northwest Ohio, the results indicate an overall positive evaluation. Young adults report Northwest Ohio as a "safe place to live", "a good place to raise a family", that there is an "affordable cost of living" and that there are "quality schools." The impressions of our communities are generally positive. As community stakeholders explore strategies to retain and recruit young adults within their communities, it would be suggested to focus on the aspects of what makes these communities a safe place to raise families. This may be of appeal to the millennial generation as they are in the stages of raising families, finding good schools, and settling into safe neighborhoods.

As we move beyond the pandemic, there is an opportunity to reframe work opportunities within small towns as more jobs emerge in the remote work environment. Remote work probably will have significant economic impacts on urban, suburban and rural communities long after the pandemic eases (Milder, 2020). While businesses and workers have been gradually shifting to remote work over time, the sudden shock of COVID-19 represents an unexpected and massive trial run for many workers and companies (Ozimek, 2020). The constraints of location for work are changing. Small town success, traditionally reserved for towns that were within the commuter belt of larger metropolitan areas, is broadening.

Those that have opportunities to work remotely can choose to live in small towns that offer affordability and safer living, while earning larger paychecks from bigger companies located elsewhere. These remote jobs filter incomes back into small town economies. Small communities should focus on broadband infrastructure, to prevent making remote work difficult. This will become critical in rural areas if they want to compete for the remote work demographic.

As found in the survey results, it appears students feel their communities, schools and employers are doing a good job educating young people on what jobs are available to them in rural areas. However, it seems this is not the catalyst for keeping younger generations planted in their hometowns. Young adults did reveal that there were challenges in living in rural Northwest Ohio. Among the greatest challenges were the perceived lack of "entertainment and cultural activities." Researchers suggest the next step in attracting young adults and retaining youth in communities is to promote the best of small-town life. There has been some movement in local communities to tackle the perceptions of "there is little to do" and "there are low cultural experiences." In some cases, community leaders have established committees that lead efforts to build downtown open

stages, green spaces for events, and focused revitalizing of main streets. The goal of these improvement committees are to promote their small towns through a variety of cultural events and experiences. These committees should work with individuals, businesses, and community service organizations to encourage and support cultural events that develop and grow the vitality of the area. They also should foster a culture of community through events that highlight local and regional music and arts, history, and natural surroundings. Small communities should be deliberate about creating intentional marking campaigns targeting young people through social media and web-based outlets.

Historically, rural America has been increasingly hollowed out in recent decades as young people migrate to urban areas. Today, small towns may be finding themselves on the verge of opportunity if they can capitalize on the changing landscape of remote work and highlighting what makes them unique in terms of affordability, safe places to live / raise families and having access to quality educational opportunities for children. The limited shopping opportunities, that in the past plagued small towns, may not be a mitigating factor as our consumer culture shifts to online purchasing as a means of getting products and goods. Amidst the changes in the way we work, shop and live can be an advantage to small town growth and retention. The quality-of-life factors that our upcoming generations are looking for can be found in small towns.

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