



Key Findings and Recommendations from the Coös Youth Study

Research from the First Half of the Study

Michael S. Staunton and Eleanor M. Jaffee



The Coös Youth Study is a ten-year research project exploring young people's decisions about their educational and job opportunities in rural northern New Hampshire and their plans to stay in their home region or move away. The study began in 2008 and is planned to continue through 2018, surveying the same participants a minimum of once every two years as well as following up with a smaller group of participants for more in-depth interviews. As the study progresses, we are beginning to see trends in the decisions young people are making related to their lives and goals.

The results of the study are shared with local decision makers, community leaders, and organizations serving youth in Coös County so that they may better understand the strengths and needs of Coös youth and better respond to their concerns. They are also published in Carsey research briefs and fact sheets, such as those referenced in this publication.

The topics discussed in this brief include:

- Youth Aspirations and Perceptions of Regional Opportunities
- Substance Use and Mental Health
- Participation in Extracurricular and Out-of-School Activities
- Youth Retention and Out-migration
- Community Attachment and School Connectedness

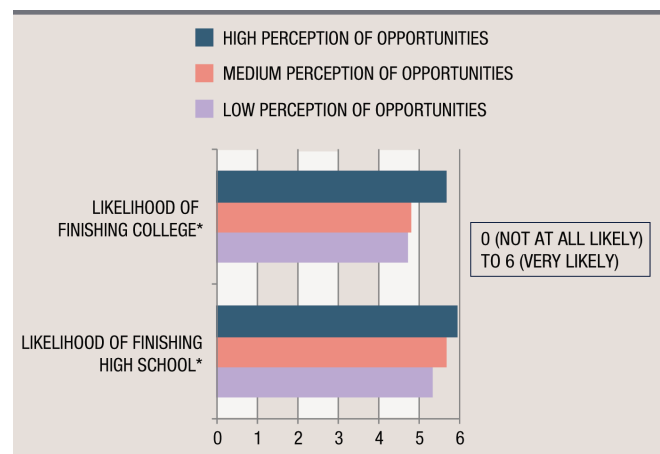
If you have questions or comments about the Coös Youth Study, please contact our project manager, Eleanor Jaffee, at coos.youth.study@unh.edu or (603) 862-1012. If you are a participant in the Coös Youth Study, please let us know if you change your email address, postal address, or phone number by contacting us at coos.youth.study@unh.edu, or by calling us at (603) 862-5062.

Youth Aspirations and Perceptions of Regional Opportunities

Key Findings

- Coös County youth have high aspirations for future success. Most believe they will graduate from both high school and college.¹ Aspirations align with what young people believe their parents think is important.^{1,2}
- Youth from areas that have experienced significant job losses (for example, Berlin/Gorham) report less positive beliefs about their ability to get ahead with hard work if they stay in the area compared with those from Colebrook/North and Lancaster/South.³
- Coös County youth who perceive fewer educational and occupational opportunities in their home communities report less confidence that they will graduate from high school and college.³
- The percentage of Coös Class of 2009 participants reporting that it is easy for people their age to find a job in Coös County has declined significantly from 67 percent in 2008, to 39 percent in 2009, and down to 19 percent in 2011.⁴
- One-third of adolescents in Coös County reported perceiving that their family is experiencing significant economic pressure. These adolescents were more likely to report negative parent-child and sibling relationships one year later.⁵
- Coös County seventh and eleventh graders reporting a mentor relationship with an adult were more likely to agree that they can do anything that they set their mind to, and were more likely to believe that they are going to graduate from college.⁶ Sixty-eight percent reported that their mentors are extended family members.⁷

FUTURE EXPECTATIONS BY PERCEPTION OF OPPORTUNITIES³



Note: Asterisks denote statistically significant differences.

Recommendations

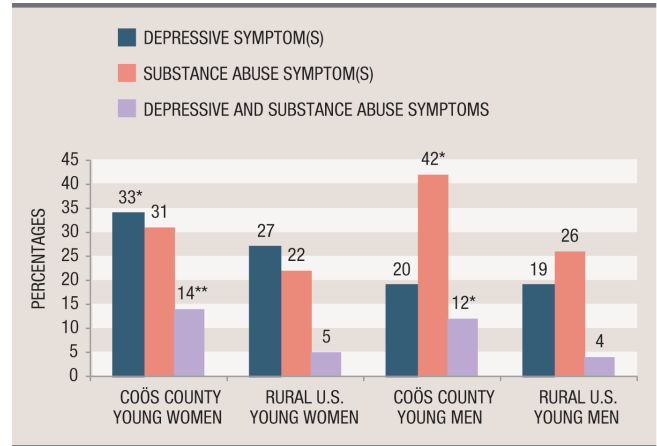
1. Expand educational opportunities and connect youth with existing educational and occupational opportunities in efforts to reduce obstacles to goal attainment and positively influence future perceptions.
2. Bolster job training initiatives and teach youth money management skills to help alleviate the stress of financial instability for individuals and families.
3. Promote programs that support economically challenged families with problem-solving skills, communication skills, and conflict resolution skills to enhance family functioning and reduce the family costs of financial strain.
4. Strengthen efforts to promote and increase the longevity of mentor relationships either informally or through established mentoring programs like Big Brother/Big Sister.

Substance Use and Mental Health

Key Findings

- Coös County young adults report more symptoms of depression, substance abuse, and co-occurring depression and substance abuse than young adults from rural areas nationwide.⁸ In addition, Coös teens are more likely than the national rural sample to report problems with family members or friends due to their substance use.⁹
- Compared to same-aged rural teens nationwide, Coös County teens are less likely to report the use of tobacco.⁹
- Alcohol is the substance most likely to be used by all Coös teens surveyed, yet among substance users, marijuana is used most frequently. Compared to other rural teens, Coös boys are twice as likely to have used marijuana three times weekly or more.⁹
- Exposure to social stress (for example, death of a loved one, being victimized/bullied, or exposure to family substance use problems) elevates the risk for alcohol and/or drug use problems.¹⁰
- Among “stressed out” girls and boys, community attachment reduces risk for problem substance use.¹⁰
- Coös teens feel close to their parents and siblings but also argue with them. A small group of Coös teens (11 percent) reported that they had seriously hit a family member in the past year.¹¹

CO-OCCURRING DEPRESSIVE AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE SYMPTOMS AMONG COÖS COUNTY YOUNG ADULTS AND RURAL YOUNG ADULTS NATIONWIDE⁸



Note: Asterisks denote statistically significant differences between Coös young adults and rural young adults nationwide: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Recommendations

1. Mental health and substance use interventions should focus on both prevention and treatment.
2. Target primary prevention strategies on “upstream” interventions that focus on (a) helping Coös teens manage the stressful realities of their lives and (b) engaging Coös teens in their broader communities in order to reduce problem substance use and promote mental health in young adulthood.
3. Encourage parents, teachers, school administrators, and community members to recognize the link between stress exposure and substance use among youth and employ measures that increase community attachment to reduce the risk of problem substance use.
4. Consider input from treatment service providers in the North Country who have called for (a) increases in the number of available mental health professionals, (b) more variety in the types of services offered, and (c) a more conscious effort to include the community’s youth members in leadership roles.

Participation in Extracurricular and Out-of-School Activities

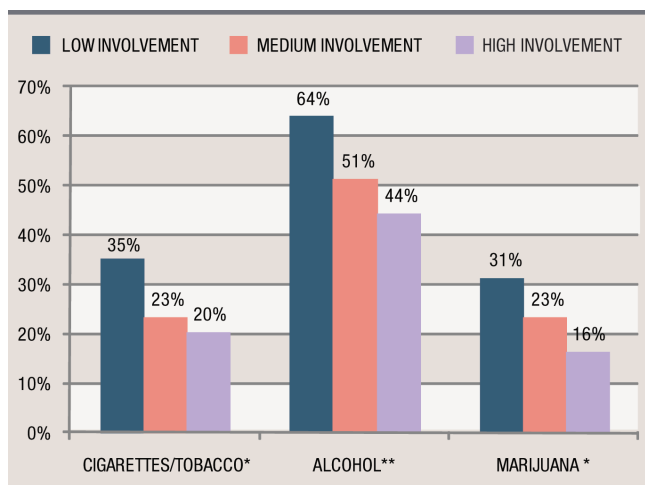
Key Findings

- Coös County youth who are the most involved in positive activities report higher grades, a more positive attitude toward school, a stronger sense of belonging at school, and more positive expectations for the future.¹² Coös youth who are the most involved in positive activities also report the least amount of substance abuse.¹³
- Participation in unstructured outdoor activities remained fairly constant between eighth grade and twelfth grade, while participation in structured outdoor activities declined by 50 percent.¹⁴
- Perceived barriers to involvement in structured out-of-school activities include lack of time and transportation. Male students are also more likely to report their grades as barriers, and that nothing interested them.¹⁵
- As of 2009, approximately 75 percent of Coös County youth were engaged in civic-related activities. Forty percent volunteered in the prior year and a third were part of a community service club.¹⁶

Recommendations

1. Target program interventions at adolescents' out-of-school time to reduce substance abuse and improve youths' academic performance, commitment to education, and future expectations.
2. Develop policies and programs that (a) increase the number of constructive activities available to youth in Coös County, (b) reduce potential barriers to participation like transportation, grades, and cost, (c) communicate the value of out-of-school activity participation to community officials, parents, and youth, and (d) help youth structure their free time in healthier ways.
3. Foster communication and coordination among state and private agencies, youth-serving organizations such as 4H and the Appalachian Mountain Club, and educational institutions in order to leverage the links between youth development and community development. Support the expansion of outdoor sectors that provide viable career futures for adolescents who acquire important skills and interests through their involvement in outdoor activities during their school years.

SUBSTANCE USE IN PAST SIX MONTHS BY LEVEL OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL ACTIVITY INVOLVEMENT¹³



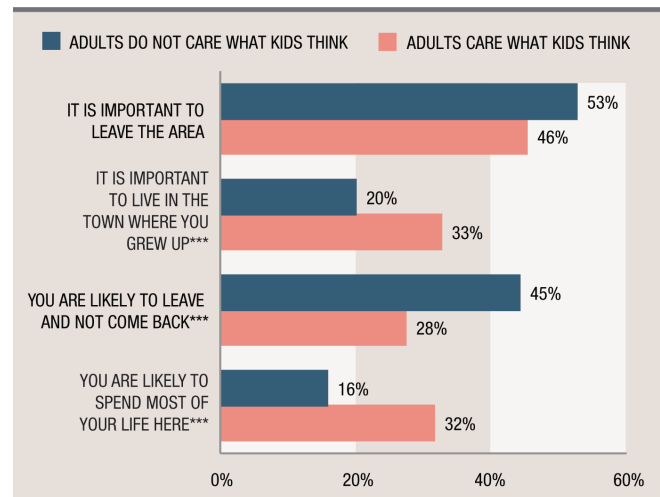
Note: Differences significant at * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. sample is of eleventh graders in Coös County.

Youth Retention and Outmigration

Key Findings

- As of 2011, approximately half of the Coös County Class of 2009's follow-up survey participants were living in Coös County the majority of the time. Of those participants living outside Coös County, 81 percent reported attending school full time.⁴
- Seventy-six percent of the class of 2009 follow-up participants rate leaving Coös County as highly or moderately important; however, 93 percent also report living close to family as highly or moderately important, suggesting conflicted priorities.⁴
- While the majority feel it is important to live near their families as adults, more than half of Coös youth report they are unlikely to remain in their communities most of their lives and more than one-third say they are likely to leave and never return.¹⁷
- Parents' messages to stay or leave Coös County are linked to youths' future residential plans. Youth who report being encouraged to stay in Coös County are more likely to say it is important to live in the town where they grew up and are less likely to want to leave the area and never come back.²
- Coös youth who believe their views matter to their community are more likely to believe that it is important to live in the town where they grew up.¹

MIGRATIONS PLANS BY EMPOWERMENT¹



Note: Differences between groups significant at * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Recommendations

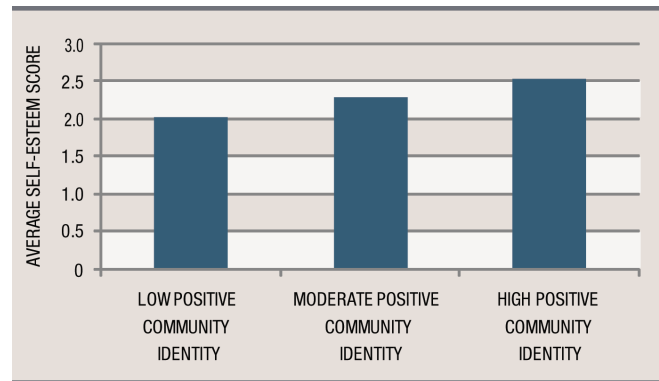
1. Community programs aimed at encouraging youth to stay in Coös County should target both young adolescents and their parents.
2. Reverse youths' and parents' current perceptions and out-migration trends by increasing opportunities in the local community and conveying positive messages about the area.
3. Continue longitudinal data analysis to help determine why some young adults are more likely to stay in Coös County and why some are more likely to leave.
4. Communicate to young people that their opinions and views still matter to the adults in their communities.

Community Attachment and School Connectedness

Key Findings

- Coös County Youth who positively identify with their communities are less likely to believe that it is important to leave the area and more likely to believe that it is important to finish college.¹⁸ In addition, a strong sense of community attachment appears to protect some highly stressed Coös youth, especially boys, from problem substance use.¹⁰
- Coös County youth who are not involved in either structured or unstructured outdoor activities show significant declines in community connection between eighth grade and twelfth grade. Uninvolved youth also report less community connection in both eighth grade and twelfth grade compared to their more involved peers.¹⁴
- Despite economic hardships, most Coös County youth are happy to participate in community events and are proud of where they live. They also feel that their communities are safe. However, many youth also report feeling bored, that there is not enough variety in shops or stores, that people like to gossip, and that community members do not seem to care what youth think.¹⁷
- The majority of Coös County youth report feeling connected to their schools. Students who feel more connected to their schools are more likely to do well in school; report higher self-esteem, fewer depressive feelings, and fewer aggressive behaviors; and are less likely to use substances.¹⁹
- Among twelfth graders, self-esteem is higher among those students who positively identify with their community.¹⁸

SELF-ESTEEM AND POSITIVE COMMUNITY IDENTITY¹⁸



Recommendations

1. Create and expand community programs or activities for youth that foster social ties and help Coös youth form a positive identification with their communities in order to improve their self-esteem and increase the likelihood that they will stay or return to their communities in later adulthood.
2. Help youth stay connected to their communities in order to increase their resilience to stress and reduce problem substance use.
3. Increase school connectedness for disconnected students by (a) encouraging open communication with teachers, parents, and students, (b) giving students an opportunity to express their own educational preferences, and (c) encouraging students to work one-on-one with adults outside of the classroom through mentoring, service learning projects, or other extra-curricular activities.

Endnotes

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