

## Youth Opinions Matter: Retaining Human Capital in Coos County

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### Background

Coos County, located in New Hampshire's northernmost region, has been experiencing economic difficulties that predate recent problems nationwide. The closing of numerous pulp and paper mills over the past two decades has resulted in the loss of many good manufacturing jobs that previously sustained the region.<sup>1</sup> As the county attempts to revitalize its local economy, some are concerned that too many young people are leaving the area permanently once they graduate from high school. In this study, we report findings from a survey of Coos County youth concerning two related issues: First, we examine whether high school youth, compared to their younger middle school counterparts, are less attached to their communities and more likely to report plans for permanently leaving Coos County. Second, we examine whether differences between high school and middle school youth can be attributed, in part, to high school youths' perceptions that

their views do not matter to adults in Coos County.

The study is based on an ongoing research program at the Carsey Institute. Responses reflect the experiences and views of 78 percent of all seventh and eleventh graders attending public schools in Coos County during the spring of 2008. Researchers asked 316 seventh and 340 eleventh graders about their family, education, and occupational experiences and aspirations, as well as their demographic characteristics, general well-being, friendships, and views about their North Country communities. Data were deliberately collected from seventh graders, who are in the initial stages of exploring their identities and formulating future plans, and from eleventh graders, who are likely to be more certain of their short-term educational and occupational plans.

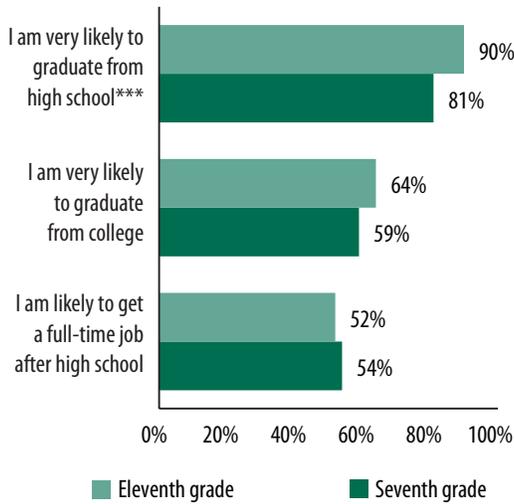
### Youth Have High Educational Expectations but Uncertain Employment Prospects

Because future plans often depend on educational and employment expectations, we begin by comparing seventh and eleventh graders' views about how likely they believe it to be that they will graduate from high school, graduate from college,<sup>2</sup> and find a full-time job after high school.<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 reveals a measure of good news about educational expectations. In particular, a majority of both seventh and eleventh graders believe they will graduate from both high school and college. The older group is significantly more optimistic about their prospects of graduating from high school, perhaps because many at-risk youth of this age have already dropped out of school between seventh and eleventh grade. More important, however, the high educational expectations among both groups suggest a strong pool of human capital from which Coos County could potentially draw in the future, assuming it is able to keep educated youth from migrating permanently away from the area.

### Key Findings

- Coos County youth have high educational ambitions and most believe they will graduate from both high school and college.
- The majority of youth appear to be positively attached to their Coos County communities, but as they get older, their attachment may deteriorate and their intentions to leave the county on a permanent basis following high school graduation may be increasing.
- Efforts aimed at preventing permanent youth migration from Coos County may benefit from interventions aimed at persuading older youth that their opinions and views still matter to the adults in the their communities.

**FIGURE 1. EDUCATIONAL AND EMPLOYMENT EXPECTATIONS BY GRADE<sup>4</sup>**



*Note: Job expectations only reported for those students who believe they will not graduate from college.*

Of potential concern, however, expectations for future employment are limited among those youth who do not believe they will graduate from college. Specifically, among the 36 percent of seventh graders who say they will *not* likely graduate from college, only 52 percent believe it to be “likely” they will get a full-time job after high school. Similarly, among the 41 percent of eleventh graders who say they will not likely graduate from college, only 54 percent believe it to be “likely” that they will get a full-time job after high school. This suggests a lack of perceived opportunity, which may in turn encourage youth to consider moving away following high school.

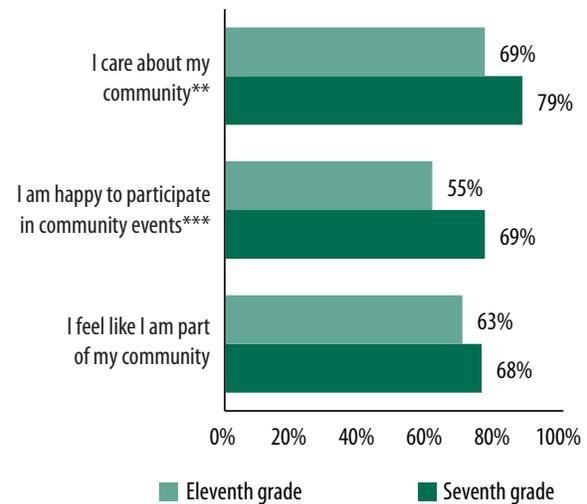
### Community Attachment May Be Fading as Youth Get Older

While economic concerns may motivate youth to leave Coos County in the future, strong attachment to community could conceivably encourage them to stay.<sup>5</sup> In Figure 2, therefore, we depict the strength of both groups’ attachment to community. We assessed attachment by the extent to which youth agreed that they are happy to participate in community events; that they feel themselves to be part of their community; and that they care about their community.<sup>6</sup>

The majority of Coos County youth from both groups ap-

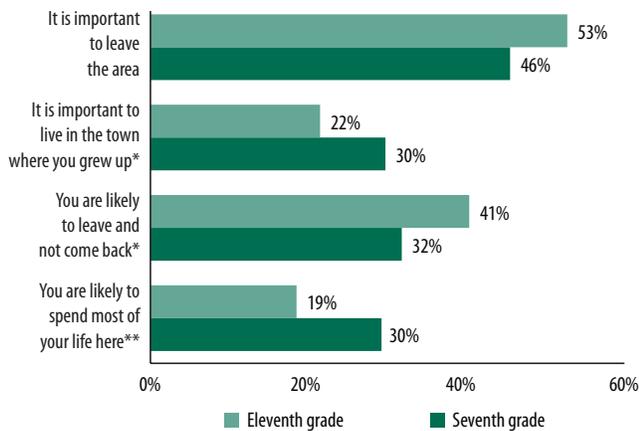
pear attached to their communities. At the same time, two results from Figure 2 provide reason to suspect that attachment to community may deteriorate as youth move from middle school to high school. First, eleventh graders are significantly less likely (69 percent) than seventh graders (79 percent) to report caring about their community. Second, eleventh graders are significantly less likely (55 percent) than seventh graders (69 percent) to report being happy to participate in community events. Thus, it would appear that older youth have less positive attitudes toward their communities.

**FIGURE 2. ATTACHMENT TO COMMUNITY BY GRADE<sup>4</sup>**



### Intentions to Leave Coos Permanently May Increase as Youth Get Older

In light of the above results, it would appear that youth have reasons to consider a future both within and beyond Coos County. In Figure 3, we therefore present data from two questions addressing the importance that youth attach to leaving Coos County and from two questions addressing their intentions to leave Coos County permanently. In particular, we asked youth to indicate how important it is to remain in the town where they grew up and also about how important it is to them to leave the area in the future.<sup>7</sup> Further, we asked youth how likely it is that they will leave and not come back and how likely it is that they will spend most of their life in their current community.<sup>8</sup>

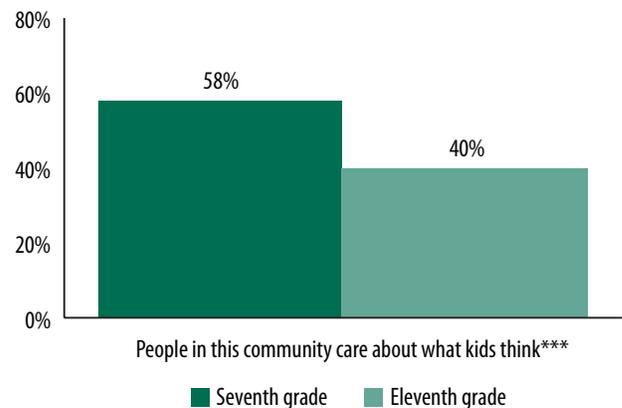
FIGURE 3. MIGRATION PLANS BY GRADE<sup>4</sup>

Considering some students' plans to attend college and others' apparent concerns about finding employment after high school, it is not surprising that a majority of eleventh graders and nearly half of seventh graders feel it is important to leave the area or that a minority of both groups believe it is important to live in the town where they grew up. Of particular concern, just as eleventh graders reported less attachment to their community than did seventh graders, eleventh graders also report a greater belief that it is important to leave and a weaker belief that it is important to live in their hometowns. Similar differences emerge between seventh and eleventh graders in their intentions to leave Coos County permanently. Less than one-third of seventh graders but 41 percent of eleventh graders believe they are likely to leave and never return to Coos County. Likewise, only 19 percent of eleventh graders versus almost one-third of seventh graders believe themselves likely to spend most of their lives in Coos County.

## Group Differences May Reflect a Decline in Youths' Beliefs that Their Views Matter

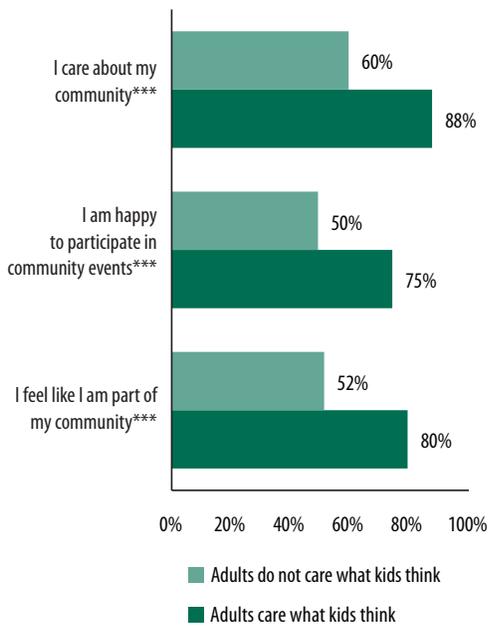
Research has found that “empowering” environments characterized by such qualities as “genuine concern for youth . . . as well as [concern for] their ideas and opinions” may help to foster “positive youth development and citi-

zenship.”<sup>9</sup> We therefore turn next to whether youth believe adults in their communities care about their views. Data presented in Figure 4 demonstrate that eleventh graders are significantly less likely than seventh graders to believe that “people in this community care about what kids think.” Thus, despite the likely reality that older youth have greater objective ability to contribute to their communities, it may be the case that feelings of empowerment actually deteriorate over time as youth leave middle school and approach high school graduation.

FIGURE 4. YOUTH EMPOWERMENT BY GRADE<sup>4</sup>

Given the large difference between eleventh and seventh graders depicted in Figure 4, we next explore whether empowerment may be related to community attachment and to permanent migration plans. Indeed, data depicted in Figure 5 demonstrate that youth who believe their views matter are 47 percent more likely to report they care about their community, 50 percent more likely to report they are happy to participate in community events, and 54 percent more likely to feel that they are part of their community. Figure 6, in turn, suggests that this greater attachment may result in a stronger intention to build a life in Coos County. Specifically, youth who believe their views matter are 65 percent more likely to believe that it is important to live in the town where they grew up, 39 percent less likely to report that they will leave their community of origin permanently, and 50 percent more likely to report that they may spend most of their life in Coos County.

FIGURE 5. COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT BY EMPOWERMENT<sup>4</sup>

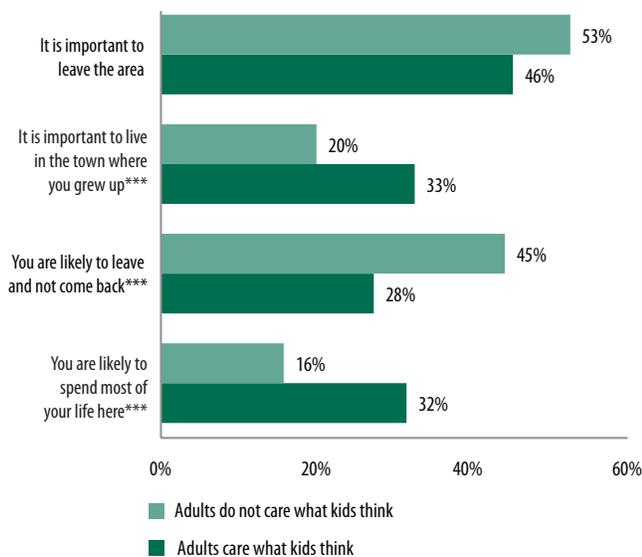


Although Figures 5 and 6 reveal that empowerment is associated with attachment to community and with migration plans, they leave open the question of whether initial attachment and migration differences between seventh and eleventh graders can be attributed to differences in their subjective feelings of empowerment. We consequently explore this issue in Figures 7 and 8 by isolating only those youth who report feeling that adults do care about what they think and, within this sub-group, examining whether differences in community attachment and migration plans persist by grade.

Figure 7 demonstrates that, among youth who feel their views matter, eleventh graders and seventh graders both have high levels of community attachment. Whereas Figure 2 reveals that only 69 percent of *all* eleventh graders care about their communities, Figure 7 reveals that 87 percent of empowered eleventh graders care about their communities. Similarly, whereas only 55 percent of all eleventh graders report being happy to participate in community events, 75 percent of empowered eleventh graders are happy to participate. Finally, whereas only 63 percent of all eleventh graders feel they are part of their community, 80 percent of empowered eleventh graders feel themselves to be a part of their community.

Of greater importance, upon isolating only those who feel empowered in their community, the decline in community attachment suggested by Figure 2 is no longer evident in Figure 7. Instead, among eleventh graders who remain confident that their views are taken seriously, community attachment remains as strong as that of seventh graders. Taken together, these results suggest that community attachment may deteriorate between seventh and eleventh grade, but only among youth who do not believe their opinions matter in the community at large. Thus, one way to retain youths' sense of attachment to their communities may be to prevent

FIGURE 6. MIGRATIONS PLANS BY EMPOWERMENT<sup>4</sup>

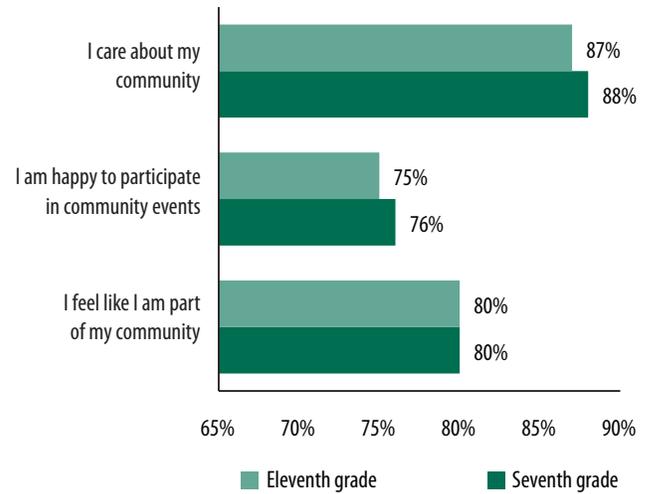


them from feeling that adults do not care about their views.

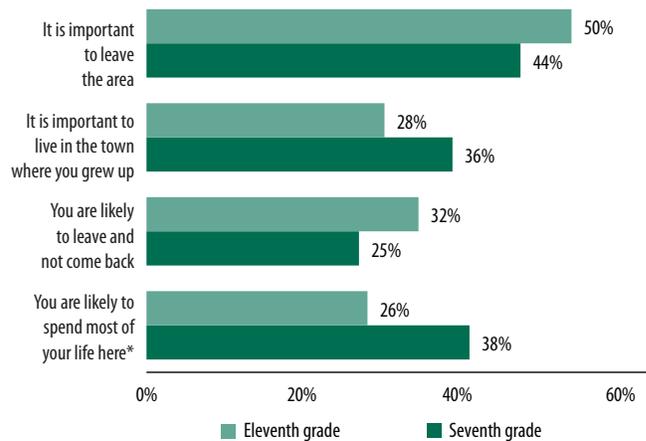
Figure 8 addresses whether differences in seventh versus eleventh grade empowerment may also explain eleventh graders' higher overall probability of migrating permanently. Whereas Figure 3 demonstrates that only 22 percent of *all* eleventh graders feel it is important to live in their community of origin, 28 percent of empowered eleventh graders feel this way. Likewise, whereas 41 percent of all eleventh graders report it to be likely that they will leave and not come back to Coos County, only 32 percent of empowered eleventh graders feel the same way. Finally, whereas only 19 percent of all eleventh graders report they are likely to spend most of their life in Coos County, 26 percent of empowered eleventh graders report it likely that they will do so.

Of more importance, Figure 8 reveals that the substantial differences between seventh and eleventh graders depicted in Figure 3 are largely reduced upon comparing only those seventh and eleventh graders who believe that their views matter. On one hand, one statistically significant difference remains between seventh and eleventh graders in Figure 8. Namely, eleventh graders remain significantly less likely to report that they will spend most of their life in Coos County. Further, small (though statistically non-significant) differences remain between seventh and eleventh graders for each of the other questions examined in Figure 8. On the other hand, however, group differences in Figure 8 are statistically smaller than are those depicted in Figure 3. Results therefore suggest not only that youth may remain attached to their community when they believe their views matter but also that they may be less likely to leave their communities permanently on the basis of this belief.

**FIGURE 7. COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT BY GRADE AMONG EMPOWERED YOUTH<sup>4</sup>**



**FIGURE 8. MIGRATION PLANS BY GRADE AMONG EMPOWERED YOUTH<sup>4</sup>**



## Conclusion

Overall, our results suggest that good educational expectations among Coos County youth provide a strong store of potential human capital with which Coos County can potentially reinvigorate its economy. At the same time, our results suggest that youths' community attachment may be deteriorating over time and that this may be due in part to adolescents' increasing doubts about whether their opinions matter within their communities. Preventing "brain drain" in Coos County may therefore depend in part on adults' ability and willingness to demonstrate to older youth that their views still matter to the larger community.<sup>10</sup>

## THE CARSEY INSTITUTE COOS YOUTH STUDY

*The Carsey Institute is conducting a panel study of Coos County youth that will provide data about the attitudes and experiences of the county's youth as they approach young adulthood and face the decision to remain in their community, seek opportunities elsewhere, or leave for an education and then return. By following the entire populations of two age groups over a ten-year period, we will help North Country leaders gain a better understanding of young people's decision making.*

## RESEARCH TEAM

CESAR J. REBELLON is a faculty fellow at the Carsey Institute and an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of New Hampshire. His primary research interests focus on family and peer correlates of juvenile crime and delinquency, with a particular emphasis on the manner in which delinquency may yield reinforcing social rewards among adolescents.

ERIN HILEY SHARP is a Carsey Institute faculty fellow and assistant professor in the Department of Family Studies at the University of New Hampshire. Her research interests include activity involvement as a context for adolescent development; parental, family, and broader contextual influences on adolescent development; and prevention research and theory from a positive youth development perspective.

NENA STRACUZZI is an assistant research professor at the Carsey Institute. Her research focuses on vulnerable youth and families.

CORINNA JENKINS TUCKER is a faculty fellow at the Carsey Institute and an associate professor in the Department of Family Studies at the University of New Hampshire. Her primary research interests focus on adolescents' family relationships.

HEATHER TURNER is a senior fellow at the Carsey Institute and a professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of New Hampshire. Her research concentrates on social stress processes and mental health.

KAREN VAN GUNDY is a faculty fellow at the Carsey Institute and an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of New Hampshire. Her work investigates the mechanisms by which life circumstances and social statuses influence variations in health, emotional, and behavioral outcomes.

## ENDNOTES

1. Chris R. Colocousis, "The State of Coos County: Local Perspectives on Community and Change," Issue Brief No. 7 (Durham, NH: Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire, 2008).
2. Responses ranged from 0 (very unlikely) to 6 (very likely). Answers to each item were recoded to compare those who responded "very likely" with those who did not respond "very likely."
3. Responses ranged from 0 (very unlikely) to 6 (very likely). Responses 0–3 were recoded as "unlikely," and responses 4–6 were recoded as "likely."
4. Differences between groups significant at \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$
5. Glenn H. Elder Jr., Valarie King, and Rand D. Conger, "Attachment to Place and Migration Prospects: A Developmental Perspective," *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 6 (1996), 397–425.
6. Answers to each item were recoded as agreeing (strongly agreed or agreed) or disagreeing (disagreed or strongly disagreed) with each item.
7. Responses ranged from 0 (not important at all) to 6 (very important). Responses of 0–3 were recoded as "not important" and responses 4–6 were recoded as "important."
8. Responses ranged from 0 (very unlikely) to 6 (very likely). Responses 0–3 were recoded as "unlikely," and responses 4–6 were recoded as "likely."
9. Margo Cargo et al., "Empowerment as Fostering Positive Youth Development and Citizenship," *American Journal of Health Behavior*, 27 (Supplement 1) (2003), S66–79, quotes on S66 and S71.
10. We plan to continue this study with future waves of data collection from the same two groups of Coos County youth as they approach adulthood. We will explore in more detail the degree to which empowered youth remain attached to their community and will also examine other family, school, peer, and community factors that may be associated with youth decisions to leave their community.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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The Carsey Institute conducts policy research on vulnerable children, youth, and families and on sustainable community development. We give policy makers and practitioners timely, independent resources to effect change in their communities.

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