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The Benefits and Barriers to Living in Coös County, New Hampshire

Perceptions of the Region From Emerging Adults

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Introduction

As recently graduated teens move away to pursue academic or professional opportunities beyond their hometowns, rural communities across the United States face a loss of “emerging adults,” defined as people age 18–25.¹ This outmigration has lasting effects on communities, as it leads to a disproportionately older population and fewer people entering the workforce or starting families.

Coös County, a rural county situated in northern New Hampshire, is encountering this migration trend. This report aims to identify the benefits and barriers emerging adults perceive as they make the decision to stay in Coös, leave, or return.

Benefits to Living in Coös County

The benefits emerging adults identify from living in Coös County tend to fall into three categories: community benefits, economic benefits, and natural amenity benefits. Some appreciate living in a small, tight-knit community, some like the economic profile, and some enjoy the region’s remote, scenic location. One respondent sums up how a series of these factors influenced her decision to live in the area:

I love where I live. [Coös] is where I was born and raised and it’s a beautiful place to live. I feel safe and everything I possibly need I have at my [fingertips]. I’ve found amazing jobs, friends, and events here. It’s a beautiful and safe place to live with a family, and I would never want to live anywhere else.²

For this person and many others, Coös is rich in benefits that make the region an ideal place for emerging adults to live.

Community Benefits: Extensive Support and Networks

Several of the benefits to living in Coös revolve around emerging adults’ connections to their local community. By far, the greatest benefit is support systems. In particular, respondents say that proximity to their families is a key reason to live in the region. They mentioned parents, spouses, boyfriends, girlfriends, partners’ children, their children, and extended family, suggesting that emerging adults think beyond their immediate

Key Findings

- For adults age 18–25, the main draws to living in Coös County are its family and community support systems. Those with local professional and educational plans, or who have purchased a home locally, experience additional benefits.
- Some young adults say they would live in Coös if it provided the employment opportunities, diverse communities, and amenities they seek.

nuclear family when prioritizing the family connectedness that anchors them to the area. Moreover, many people consider Coös County to be the ideal place to raise children. They recall their own family experiences from growing up in the area and want their children to have the same advantages.

Young adults also cite the support of neighbors and local communities as an attractive feature. One woman describes her community as having an “inherent closeness here, because there’s not a lot of people.” Another person reflected back on his own childhood, explaining that the community

...is supportive in a way...If there’s a Friday night basketball game, there’s a lot of people in the community that go to that, that care about the kids, that care about what’s happening to the kids, and everything like that. So, I think that’s probably one of the most positive things.

In general, many people feel supported by their community due to the close social ties. Thus, even for people without strong family ties, living in the rural communities of Coös County may provide a support system attractive to emerging adults.

People living in Coös County also consider the small-town community atmosphere to be a benefit. To many, the community is close-knit in a way that seems impossible outside of Coös County. One respondent captures this atmosphere in a description of her town:

I like just the small town closeness. You can go down the street and wave to almost every car you pass because chances are you know them. You can walk into a restaurant and sit down and the waitress just brings your drink over because they know what you’re going to have.

A woman who left the area to attend college contrasts her experiences in Coös County with her new residence, explaining that she felt safer in her rural hometown than she does in her current city: “I just felt safe and now that I’ve actually been able to drive in the city and do all that cool stuff, I don’t like it. I don’t feel safe.” The rural nature of Coös can produce both a sense of belonging and safety, which emerging adults perceive as a benefit to living in the area.

Economic Benefits: Affordable Living

Along with community benefits, many respondents discussed the economic incentives to living in Coös County, including access to affordable housing, secure employment, and educational opportunities. As one respondent explains, “I have a good job and family in the area. Cheap housing and the simple life!” People are drawn to the reasonable rent and the possibility of buying a home. One woman says she is “buying a house [because it is a] quiet place for my daughter to grow up,” while another woman “bought a house and both myself and fiancé have very good jobs here.” These residents, all fewer than seven years post-high school, have access to homeownership that might not be available in urban areas. Buying a home in the region is a way for these emerging adults to officially claim Coös County as their home, not just because they were raised in the area, but also because they are choosing to put down their own roots in the region as adults. However, access to affordable housing varies within the county, and most respondents who mentioned purchasing a home also referred to having a good job or a significant other, implying dual income. Consequently, the housing market might be a benefit only for a select group of residents.

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While access to housing is an economic benefit for some emerging adults living in Coös County, respondents acknowledge that they could not remain in the area without educational or professional opportunities. For some, White Mountains Community College provides the education and professional development they need to launch their careers, while others see

the college as a stepping stone to further educational attainment. For example, one woman plans to go to the local nursing program before transferring to a bachelor’s program in nursing elsewhere. People who have secured jobs in Coös County see their employment as a reason to remain in the area. Respondents said things like, “I’m established with my job.” One man explains, “I have a job and I think it would be hard to find work [anywhere] else.” Findings suggest that if emerging adults are actively pursuing education or already have employment in the area, then the county is an ideal place to live.

Having a secure job in the region greatly depends on the industry in which people are seeking work, and some industries have arisen to provide new employment opportunities. For instance, a few people surveyed referenced either working at or applying to work at the federal prison. One woman describes how the prison provided her husband an employment opportunity that enabled the couple to return to Coös:

My husband is employed at the state prison in Berlin and things are going well for him there. We moved out-of-state last year for a period of roughly 18 months and missed home, so we are determined to stay in the area and take what work we can get, with hopes of our job prospects improving with time and experience.

Her statement reflects how emerging adults must weigh the benefits and barriers to living in the region. Therefore, accessing employment and educational opportunities is an important draw for people who want to live in Coös County.

Natural Amenity Benefits: Recreation Access

One of Coös County’s greatest benefits is its natural beauty and related recreational activities. Home to Mt. Washington, the northern portion of the White Mountain National Forest, and wildlife refuges, the region has numerous forests, lakes, and mountains. While the county’s remote location creates some barriers, it also affords residents a high level of natural beauty unmatched in other areas. One respondent who travels for work has “seen all the surrounding northern states,” but chooses Coös because “it’s a beautiful place to live.” Many respondents reference the natural beauty, the seasons, and the mountains as positive reasons to live in the region. Respondents enjoyed a variety of activities,

including hiking, fishing, hunting, skiing, snowboarding, snowmobiling, and four-wheeling. As one person surveyed notes, the region provides “outdoor activities that you can’t get anywhere else quite like here.” These activities are an important benefit because they provide entertainment and social activities that might otherwise be lacking in remote areas. By leveraging the natural environment into recreational activities, Coös provides emerging adults with attractive local amenities.

Barriers to Living in Coös County

While many emerging adults have made Coös their home, others cannot picture themselves living there as adults. As one respondent explains, the region has “not enough jobs and night life. Good place to raise a family, just not for finding a life partner or going out for city life experiences.” Hence, emerging adults who were raised in Coös County perceive multiple deterrents to living there now.

Employment Barriers: Unemployment and Underemployment

Many people who were raised in the county but later moved away cite lack of job security as their reason for not returning, and the difficulty in finding employment is perhaps the greatest barrier to living in Coös County. In February 2020, the county’s unemployment rate was 4.2 percent, compared to the statewide average of 3.1 percent.³ One woman explains that “career opportunities, as well as career advancement opportunities, are far greater in southern New Hampshire than in Coös County. As a result, starting salaries are greater in southern New Hampshire.” Table 1 confirms this perception: annual per capita income in Coös County is more than \$12,000 lower than in New Hampshire as a whole.

TABLE 1. POPULATION DEMOGRAPHICS OF COÖS COUNTY AND NEW HAMPSHIRE

	Coös County	New Hampshire
Per Capita Annual Income	\$26,535	\$38,548
Median Age of Resident	48.1	42.7
Percent Non-Hispanic White Only	92.1%	90.4%

Note: County and state differences are statistically significant for all three variables ($p < 0.01$)

Source: American Community Survey 2018 5-year Estimates

As one person notes, Coös is a “great place to raise kids and be old, but not a good place for steady good paying work for young adults.”

Respondents who left the region to attend college are now faced with paying for their education, which can be difficult with low starting salaries. Not only are there few jobs, but the jobs are mostly in specific fields—namely, education, health care, and social assistance. The sentiments that “the job market is extremely limited” and “working [in my field] would not be feasible” are common among people who moved away from Coös and did not intend to return. The lack of available jobs also leads to the barrier of longer commutes. As one person notes, Coös is a “great place to raise kids and be old, but not a good place for steady good paying work for young adults.” In sum, with few job opportunities, many emerging adults seeking employment in the region are faced with being underemployed, working outside their fields, or driving long distances to jobs.

Population Barriers: Too Old and Too White

Emerging adults who were raised in Coös describe being deterred by the region’s demographic homogeneity: they consider the county too old and too white. Indeed, compared to New Hampshire as a whole, Coös County has an older and more white population (Table 1). Many of those interviewed felt that “this place is for old people,” noting that the aging population hinders potential community change, such as investments in schools and the needs of young families. One woman “feel[s] that like the older generations...don’t want a huge change. They just want it to stay little ol’ [Coös] and they don’t want to change anything that would help them....They’re stunting their own growth.” Another person surveyed describes this older population as “kind of stubborn. They want what they want, and...they’re not looking to help the kids.” This man explains that the people who make decisions in his hometown either do not have children or have grown children who have moved away, and therefore they are not investing in supporting the next generation. As shown in Figure 1, over 30 percent of the county’s population is 60 years

FIGURE 1. AGE DISTRIBUTION IN COÖS COUNTY AND NEW HAMPSHIRE

Source: American Community Survey 2018 5-year Estimates

old or older, and the county has a lower proportion of children, adolescents, and emerging adults than the state as a whole. Respondents perceive this aging population as affecting the prioritization of children and families in their communities.⁴

In addition, respondents consider Coös to be lacking cultural and ethnic diversity. Coös County has a racially homogenous population, with approximately 92 percent identifying themselves as white (Table 1).⁵ One person who moved away believes that “there is little to no culture. Diversity is greatly lacking.” Another person also explains that “a lot of people don’t accept people [who] aren’t exactly what they’ve seen throughout the years,” which makes it difficult for people to move to the area who do not “fit within a mold.” As these responses portray, some of the emerging adults who have moved away from the region consider the homogenous population of the region to be a barrier to returning, as they value living in places with racial, cultural, and age diversity.

Lifestyle Barriers: Limited Amenities and Activities

Because Coös County is rural, emerging adults lack access to local amenities and activities that are common in more urban areas. The people surveyed explained that the region would need to have better access to shopping and entertainment options in order to be an attractive place to live in their current stage in life. From few choices for fast food to long distances to drive for shopping, respondents consider Coös to be lacking the abundance of consumer options and social events prevalent in less-remote areas. One woman who left the area says that Coös County “is a beautiful place

to visit, however it cannot fulfill the same quality of life that I have become accustomed to regarding salary and entertainment.” Similarly, another respondent explains that in Coös County, “There are also not enough shopping locations to give me a good variety in the things I require.” These explanations emphasize how emerging adults, many of whom have yet to get married and have children, are an age group that values easy access to a wide variety of amenities and entertainment. Many respondents consider a rural area “not the lifestyle” that they enjoy.

Although Coös County has extensive outdoor activities, people feel that the region lacks other choices. An emerging adult notes that “there’s not a lot to do. If you’re not outdoorsy and adventurous, [Coös] offers so little because you have to travel so far to do anything else.” This feeling is corroborated by a man who states that the region “offers nothing but the forest.” His statement illustrates that for emerging adults who want more than outdoor activities, there are few other options in Coös County.

Community Barriers: Stifling Social Interactions

While some people see social aspects of the local community, such as the close-knit structure, as a benefit, others find them stifling. A few respondents complained about local gossip, with one person explaining that “people are super judgmental.” Some emerging adults value their anonymity and autonomy, which is difficult to maintain when everyone in the community knows and interacts with each other.

Safety Barriers: Increase in Crime

Many respondents see their communities as deteriorating due to an increase in crime, particularly drug use. Previous research from the Coös Youth Study found that local youth are more likely to have substance problems than rural youth nationwide.⁶ Substance misuse impacts some respondents’ views of the area, as remarks by one woman illustrate: “The drug rate has gone up and it is a black hole that sucks you in and I have seen a lot of people not be able to escape it.” The recent increase in drug use has dampened people’s memories of the idyllic, safe communities of their childhood.

Weighing Barriers and Benefits

The emerging adults in this study present a complicated picture of why people in their age range might be either drawn to or constrained from living in the region. Many of the people who remained in Coös County or intend to return cite the relationships among people—from family to friends to the community at large—as an advantage. However, some who have left or intend to leave describe these close bonds as an undesirable side effect of living in a small, remote area. One interviewee sums up the opposing views on tight-knit communities, stating: “It can be a bad thing when people are gossipy... when you know when anything bad happens, but when somebody’s house burns down, there’s instantly someone helping, somebody doing a fund raiser. There’s a lot of support here if you need help.”

While some people have found their niche in the limited job market in the region, others cannot picture themselves thriving in a professional capacity in Coös. The remote location affords natural beauty and recreational activities, but also isolates people from shopping, entertainment, and other amenities available in more urban areas.

People who grew up in Coös are aware of the economic changes occurring in their county, and they are trying to picture how the changes in their own lives as they enter adulthood can align with the opportunities in the region. One young man describes the dichotomy in Coös between economic decline and revitalization, explaining that he can walk down the street and see

...these vibrant little park areas that [have] a little water fountain...which is just colorful and a whole bunch of seats there. But then you just walk a little farther down the road and it’s just all sorts of closed, abandoned buildings. It’s kind of interesting that you can just walk down one road and get a full spectrum.

He says that he hopes to contribute to his community because he sees that a dedicated group is “trying to help the community, while other people have just given up, [saying] ‘Oh, there’s no mill here. Nothing’s happening.’” His response captures the contradicting views of Coös from people who emphasize the benefits and those who focus on the barriers. Overall, emerging adults are weighing multiple priorities—including their professional field, lifestyle values, and support system needs—when deciding whether to live in Coös County at this stage of their lives.

Conclusion

When interpreting the benefits and barriers described in this report, it is important to emphasize that Coös County is not a homogenous region. The experiences of emerging adults in a remote unincorporated township will differ from the experiences of those living in the city of Berlin or closer to amenities in Vermont and downstate New Hampshire. Thus, addressing the barriers and emphasizing the benefits requires an understanding of how a benefit in one region might be a barrier in another.

It is also important to understand that the barriers Coös County faces in retaining its younger adults are not unique to the area. A national study of people raised in rural areas found that employment is the highest barrier to returning to rural hometowns.⁷ The few who returned to a region were able to do so because of the educational and economic resources they developed after leaving. This aligns with the finding that emerging adults in Coös who have economic or educational prospects experience added benefits to living in the region.

Though the challenge is a national one, policy and program decisions made at the state, county, and municipal levels should consider how to address the barriers and amplify the benefits to retain and attract emerging adults in New Hampshire’s rural areas. Issues of employment, commuting, and housing may be best managed through policy initiatives. For example, given that multiple people mentioned the benefit of affordable housing and rentals, municipalities in Coös County should consider how their land use and planning regulations might work for or against the development of housing options that would attract young people. A study of rural New England residents underscores how zoning in rural towns can prevent access to affordable housing.⁸ Allowing for smaller lot sizes, mixed-use developments, and greater density in some places could coalesce to encourage development of affordable housing options that could be attractive to emerging adults. Encouraging local rental-property owners to accept housing vouchers can also provide specific support to lower-income renters who want to establish or retain residency in the region.

In addition to policies, local programs could provide a platform to celebrate community and cultivate racial and generational inclusion. One method for overcoming the tension between generations is to encourage

emerging adults' participation in local politics and decision making. Previous research has found that local Coös youth are actively involved in civic-related activities.⁹ Building upon this, Coös County could develop programs that nurture the development of emerging adults as civic leaders through mentorship with older residents, thus bridging a generational divide. Leveraging the factors that attract emerging adults and managing the characteristics that deter them is a crucial step in making Coös County a region where people in their twenties want to live.

Data

Data presented here are from the Coös Youth Study, a ten-year longitudinal panel study that gathered data from two age cohorts of youth who attended public school in the region.¹⁰ This analysis includes interviews conducted in 2014 with thirteen emerging adults who were one year post-high school. Interviewees were selected from a larger sample of Coös Youth Study participants based on town of residence and available contact information. In-person, recorded interviews were conducted by Coös Youth Study researchers. The interviews were semi-structured, and interviewees were asked about what they liked best and least about their community.

In addition, written responses were analyzed from the 2015–2016 Coös Youth Study survey of 129 respondents who were two years post-high school and 168 respondents who were six years post-high school. These surveys were administered via mail and email, as respondents were living in various locations post-high school. People surveyed were asked why they intended to stay in, leave, return to, or remain away from Coös County in the upcoming year. To determine what draws these respondents to Coös County or deters them from living there, this paper presents a secondary data analysis of the themes evident in the open-ended survey responses and in-depth interviews using a qualitative, inductive coding method.¹¹

Endnotes

1. The term “emerging adults” was created by psychologist Jeffrey Arnett to describe people 18–25, the age when they are no longer adolescents and are beginning their exploration into adulthood (Jeffrey J. Arnett, “Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development From the Late Teens Through the Twenties,” *American Psychologist*, vol. 55, no. 5 (2000): 469–80).
2. Due to the Coös Youth Study’s original cooperation agreement with stakeholders in the region, data cannot be disaggregated by town. Thus, quotes referring to particular locations within Coös County are changed to “[Coös]” throughout the paper.
3. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Unemployment Rate of Coos County, NH, Feb 2020,” BLS Data Viewer.
4. This finding aligns with prior research on aging populations’ impact on rural community priorities. For more details on this issue within New Hampshire, see Peter Francese and Lorraine Stuart Merrill, *Communities & Consequences: The Unbalancing of New Hampshire’s Human Ecology, and What We Can Do About It* (Portsmouth, NH: Randall, 2008).
5. This statistic represents people who identify their race as only white, and do not identify as Hispanic or Latino.
6. Karen T. Van Gundy, “Mental Health Among Northern New Hampshire Young Adults: Depression and Substance Problems Higher Than Nationwide,” Regional Issue Brief No. 35 (Durham, NH: Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire, 2013).
7. Christiane von Reichert, John B. Cromartie, and Ryan O. Arthun, “Impacts of Return Migration on Rural U.S. Communities,” *Rural Sociology*, vol. 79, no. 2 (2014): 200–26.
8. Jessica Carson and Marybeth Mattingly, “Not Very Many Options for the People Who Are Working Here,” National Issue Brief No. 128 (Durham, NH: Carsey School of Public Policy, 2017).
9. Justin R. Young, “It Takes a Community: Civic Life and Community Involvement Among Coös County Youth,” New England Issue Brief No. 32 (Durham, NH: Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire, 2012).
10. For more details on the Coös Youth Study, see the study’s website (<https://carsey.unh.edu/policy/coos-youth-study>).
11. I defined codes from emergent themes and subthemes based on the content of the interview and survey data. An independent researcher coded a subset of the data, with an inter-rater reliability of 97 percent.

About the Author

Kristine Bundschuh is a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at the University of New Hampshire. She conducted this research as the 2018 Peter C. and Kristin Van Curan Nordblom Summer Fellow. Questions and comments can be addressed to kab1098@wildcats.unh.edu.

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