

Stay or Leave Coos County? Parents' Messages Matter

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Background

Similar to the trend in rural America as a whole, significant numbers of youth are leaving Coos County, the northernmost and most sparsely populated county in New Hampshire. Coos County has been transformed by the loss of manufacturing jobs in the pulp and paper industry, leading to increased poverty and unemployment (Colocousis 2008), and its youth are leaving to seek educational and employment opportunities elsewhere. These economic and social changes have created unique challenges for successful youth development, and confront youth with the decision of whether to stay or leave Coos County. Young people's decisions to migrate from Coos may be partly shaped by parents' encouragement of a belief that greater possibilities for stability and achievement lie outside the county. Similarly, youth who decide to stay in Coos County, despite the likelihood of limited future opportunities, may be encouraged by parents who believe their children's future aspirations can be achieved in Coos; these parents may also be concerned about how current out-migration trends will affect their family and their community in the future. The primacy of parents in shaping adolescents' educational and occupational aspirations is documented in several studies. Little is known, however, about rural youths' perceptions of their parents' messages to stay or leave their home communities and how these messages are connected to youths' future residential plans. The current study offers an unprecedented opportunity to examine rural youths' future residential plans and the links between youths' perceptions of their future residential plans and their parents' messages to stay or leave Coos County.

Panel Study of Coos County Youth

We collected survey data from 78 percent of all seventh and eleventh graders in public school in Coos County, New Hampshire. During a designated time during school hours, seventh ($n = 316$) and eleventh ($n = 340$) graders filled out a thirty-five page questionnaire designed to learn about youths' family, educational, and occupational experiences and aspirations, as well as demographic characteristics, well-being, friendships, and these youths' views of their community. Most students completed the survey within 45 to 60 minutes. Data was deliberately collected from seventh graders, who are in the initial stages of exploring their identities and formulating future plans, and eleventh graders, who are likely to be more certain of their short-term educational, family, and occupational plans. Students were approximately evenly divided by sex and, reflecting the demographic characteristics of the region in which they live, the majority of students in the sample were European-American (more than 90 percent). About half of the students' parents were married, and about a third of the parents were either divorced or separated. On average, mothers completed some college and fathers graduated from high school (educational attainment ranged from less than high school to graduate or professional degree).

The data were collected as part of a research program at the Carsey Institute's Center for Rural Youth, whose interest lies in establishing data benchmarks that can be used to track rural youth employment and residential trends over time. Cohort differences in youths' experiences will be examined by comparing the data of the current seventh graders to that of the current eleventh graders once the seventh graders reach eleventh grade. Our exclusive focus on the rural youth of Coos County is unique and moves beyond the common rural-urban comparisons to explore diversity within a rural community (see Crockett, Shanahan, and Jackson-Newsom 2000).

Coos County Youths' Future Residential Plans

Youths' responses to questions about the importance of staying or leaving and the likelihood of staying or leaving Coos County in the future did not vary by sex or mother's education level. To further describe the nature of Coos youths' future plans, we employed a strategy that used the midpoint of a seven-point scale to create two groups: one group above the midpoint, indicating more important or high likelihood, and one group below the midpoint, indicating less important or low likelihood. On the importance of leaving the area, approximately one-third of youth in the seventh grade and 25 percent of eleventh graders indicated it was not important to them to leave the area in the future, but about one-half indicated it was; the latter number reflects out-migration trends (Colocousis 2008; see Figure 1). Thirty percent of seventh and 22 percent of eleventh graders reported it was important to them to live in the town in which they grew up, and about half of the students in each grade indicated that this was not important (see Figure 2).

We expected that eleventh graders, who are more likely to be focused on future academic and occupational opportunities in the community than seventh graders, to indicate that it was more important to leave Coos County than seventh graders, but grade differences in the levels of importance of staying or leaving the area were not evident.

Students' reports of their likelihood of staying or leaving Coos County also were reflective of out-migration trends (Colocousis 2008). Although the number of youth who reported that they would likely spend most of their life in the area was low (see Figure 3), a large portion of youth in both grades also indicated that it was unlikely for them to leave the area and not move back (46 percent and 32 percent for seventh and eleventh graders, respectively; see Figure 4). Comparison of the two grade levels revealed that more eleventh graders than seventh graders reported they were likely to leave the area and not move back and were unlikely to stay in the area in the future. This finding may reflect the fact that eleventh graders are more likely than seventh graders to be considering their futures and cognizant of the limited opportunities that were currently available in Coos.

FIGURE 1: IMPORTANCE OF LEAVING THE AREA BY GRADE

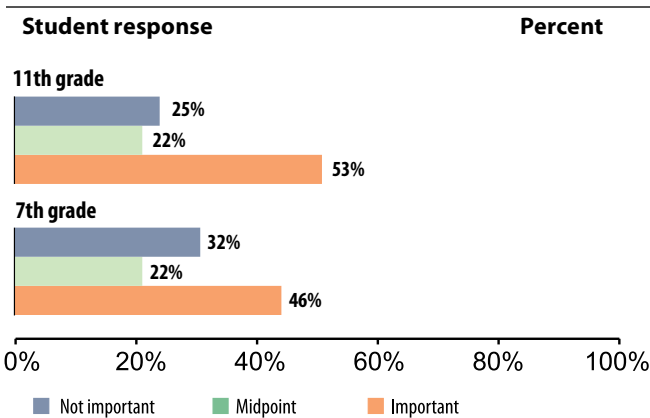


FIGURE 3: LIKELIHOOD OF SPENDING MOST OF LIFE IN AREA BY GRADE

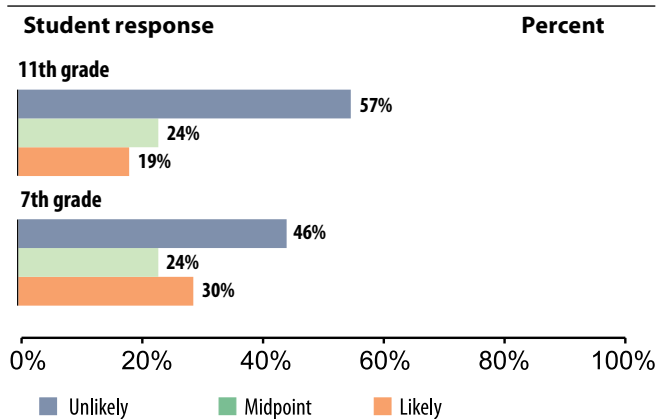


FIGURE 2: IMPORTANCE OF LIVING IN TOWN GREW UP IN BY GRADE

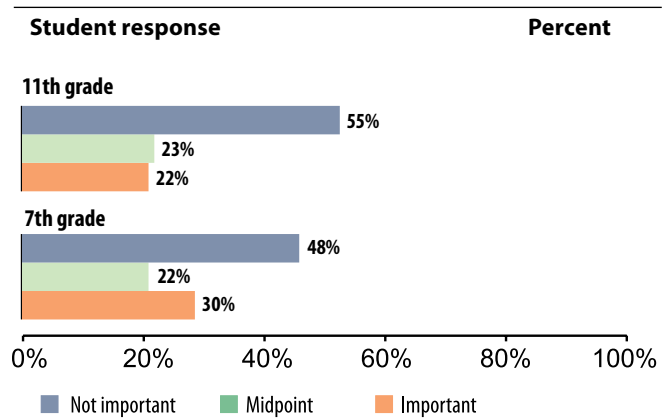
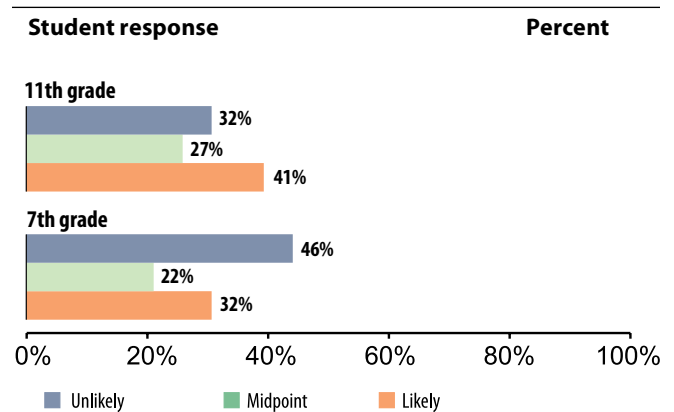


FIGURE 4: LIKELIHOOD OF LEAVING AND NOT MOVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY BY GRADE



Parents' Messages

What are the messages Coos County youth perceived they heard from their parents regarding future residential plans? We asked youth to report on their perceptions of whether their parents encouraged them and their sibling closest in age to stay or to leave the area. Youths were given the option of responding “yes, equally;” “no, neither of us;” “no, me more;” or “no, my brother/sister more.” These response options enabled us to capture a sense of parents’ messages given in different families and also within the same family. Thirty-nine percent of eleventh graders and 33 percent of seventh graders were from two-child families, the most common family size in each grade (family size ranged from one to twelve). Across both grades, there were no differences in parents’ messages by sex or mothers’ education level. Approximately 50 percent of eleventh graders and 45 percent of seventh graders reported that neither they nor their closest sibling were encouraged to think about staying (see Figure 5). Youth may have perceived that their parents never gave this message or discouraged them and their sibling from thinking about staying in the community. Comparison of youths’ reports in the two grades revealed that more eleventh than seventh graders reported that neither they nor their closest sibling were encouraged to think about staying in the area. However, about one-quarter of eleventh and one-third of seventh graders reported that they and their closest-age sibling were equally encouraged to think about staying in the community. Turning to whether youths believed that their parents encouraged them and their sibling to think about leaving the community, about 35 percent of seventh and 40 percent of eleventh graders reported that they and their

sibling were equally encouraged to leave, but there were no grade differences in youths’ reports of parents’ messages. Forty-one percent of youth at each grade level said that their parents did not encourage them or their closest sibling to leave the community (see Figure 6).

FIGURE 6: YOUTH AND CLOSEST SIBLING ENCOURAGED BY PARENTS TO THINK ABOUT LEAVING THE AREA BY GRADE

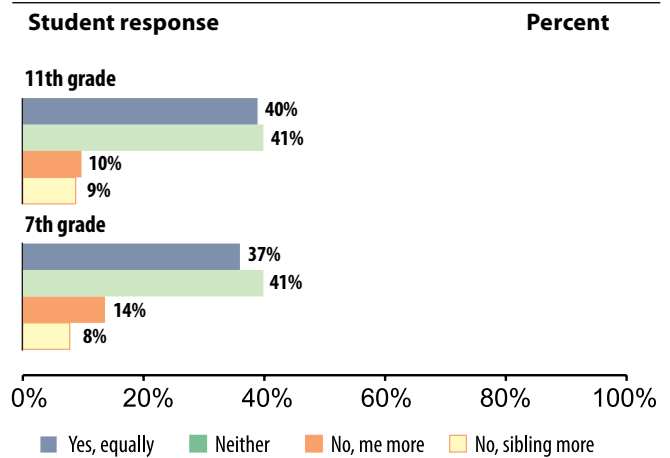
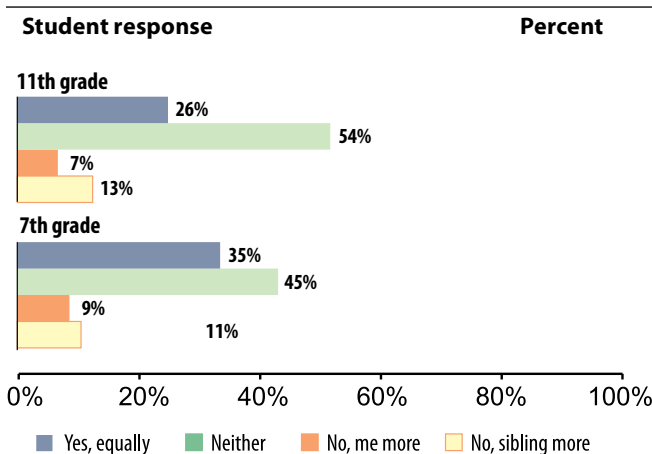


FIGURE 5: YOUTH AND CLOSEST SIBLING ENCOURAGED BY PARENTS TO THINK ABOUT STAYING IN THE AREA BY GRADE



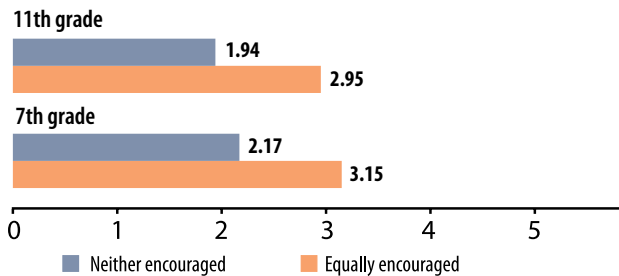
Parents' Messages Matter

We observed a positive relationship between youths' perceptions of their parents' messages to them and their siblings as to whether they should stay or leave Coos County and youths' future residential plans. Comparison of Coos siblings who were equally encouraged to stay or leave with those who were neither encouraged to stay or leave revealed that those seventh and eleventh graders who reported that they and their closest sibling were equally encouraged to stay in the area were: (1) more likely to say

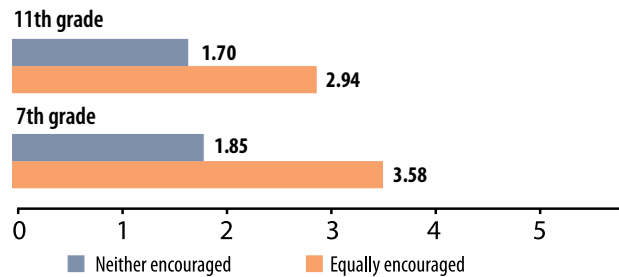
it is important to live in the town where they grew up and to spend their life in the town in which they grew up and (2) were less likely to want to leave the area and never come back (see Figure 7a–c). Youth in both grades who reported that they and their closest sibling were equally encouraged to leave the area by their parents thought it was important to leave the area in the future (see Figure 8). Finally, seventh graders who perceived that their parents encouraged them and their closest sibling to leave the area were more likely to report that it was less important to live in the town where they grew up, that it was likely that they would not spend most of their life in the area, and that it was likely they would leave and not come back (see Figure 9a–c). The greater number of connections between parents' messages and future residential plans among seventh graders may reflect typical developmental patterns in which seventh graders are likely to be more dependent on parents and have less autonomous decision-making skills than are eleventh graders.

FIGURE 7: LINKS BETWEEN PARENTS' MESSAGE TO YOUTH AND CLOSEST SIBLING TO STAY IN THE AREA AND

a) Importance to youth of living in the town grew up in by grade



b) Likelihood of youth spending most of life in the area by grade



c) Likelihood of youth leaving and not moving back to the community by grade

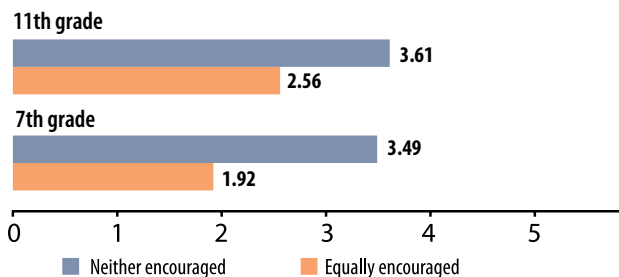


FIGURE 8: LINK BETWEEN PARENTS' MESSAGE TO YOUTH AND CLOSEST SIBLING TO LEAVE THE AREA AND THE IMPORTANCE TO YOUTH OF LEAVING THE AREA IN THE FUTURE BY GRADE

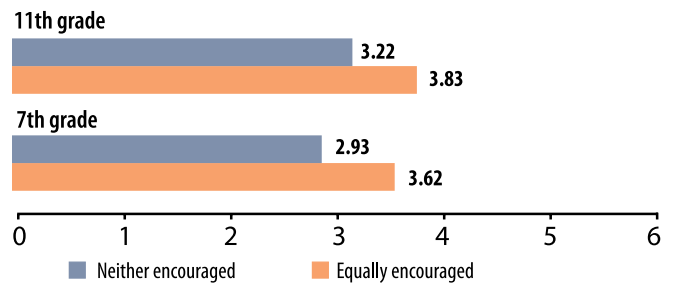
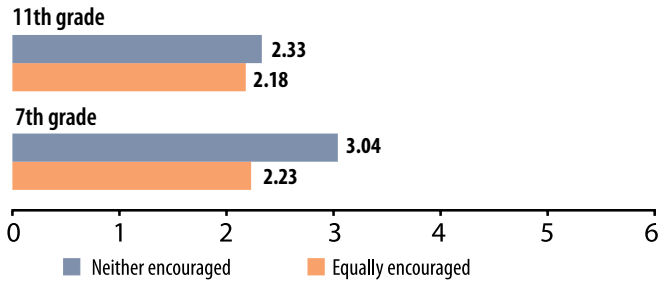
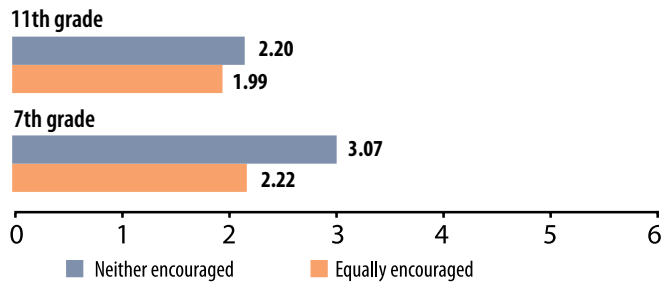


FIGURE 9: LINKS BETWEEN PARENTS’ MESSAGE TO YOUTH AND CLOSEST SIBLING TO LEAVE THE AREA GIVEN AND

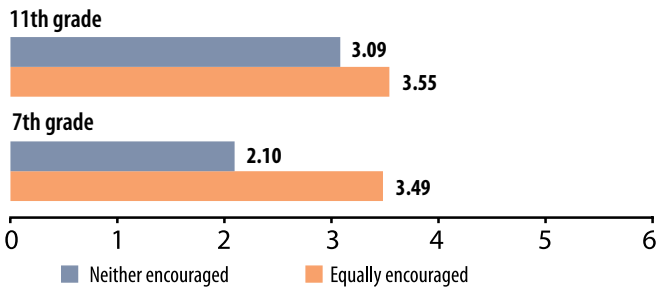
a) Importance to youth of living in the town grew up in by grade



b) Likelihood of youth spending most of life in the area by grade



c) Likelihood of youth leaving and not moving back to the community by grade



Reaching Parents and Youth

Across both grade levels, approximately half of youths indicated that their future plans did not include living in Coos County. In addition, youths' perceptions of their parents' encouragement of them and their closest sibling to stay or leave the area suggested that the messages were approximately evenly split about whether to remain or not in Coos County. The exception to this pattern was that less than half of seventh and eleventh graders reported that it was likely that they would leave and not move back. Although this finding was more common for seventh than eleventh graders, the idea of not living in the area in the future may reflect the struggle Coos County youth have between their attachment to the region and the economic desire or need to live somewhere else. Our work has shown that Coos youths' future residential plans are influenced by their perceptions of their parents' messages to stay or leave. Some parents, perhaps due to the economic woes and restructuring that Coos County has suffered, want their children to leave for better opportunities, and out-migration is often seen as an advantageous choice that can have long-term effects for youth. However, other parents, enticed by some of the advantages of living in a small rural community surrounded by an abundance of natural amenities, may encourage their children to stay in the area. While these data suggest some similarities among seventh and eleventh graders' future residential plans and the nature of parents' messages regarding these plans, greater links between parents' messages and future residential plans were more evident for seventh than eleventh graders. This was an expected finding, because, developmentally, seventh graders are more likely to be embedded within the family context and more likely to be influenced by parents' messages than are eleventh graders. Part of the challenge of keeping youth in Coos County is helping them and their parents see the value of living in the region. Taken together, our findings suggest that community programs aimed at encouraging youth to stay in Coos County should target both young adolescents and their parents. Instilling positive perceptions of the area in conjunction with the creation of economic and educational opportunities in the local community are key factors to reversing youths' and parents' current perceptions and out-migration trends. With future data, we will be able to explore how youths' plans and parents' messages evolve over time and how parents' messages are linked to youths' actual choices.

References

- Colocousis, C.R. 2008. "The State of Coos County: Local Perspectives on Community and Change." Issue Brief No. 7 (spring). Durham, NH: Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire.
- Crockett, L. J., M.J. Shanahan, and J. Jackson-Newsom. 2000. "Rural Youth: Ecological and Life Course Perspectives." In R. Montemayor, G.R. Adams, and T.P. Gullotta (eds.), *Adolescent Diversity in Ethnic, Economic, and Cultural Contexts*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Notes

Reported differences between subgroups are statistically significant at the .10 level.

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 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.

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