The economic condition of youths’ home communities may impact youth development, well-being, and expectations about the future. Many rural communities in the United States face economic vulnerabilities due to declines in traditional manufacturing, agriculture, and natural-resource extraction. The communities in Coös County, New Hampshire, in the northernmost region of New Hampshire have been hit hard with the closing of several mills and other industries followed by the economic recession, leaving the county with the highest unemployment rate in the state. This fact sheet examines Coös County youths’ beliefs about their access to educational and occupational opportunities in their home communities and whether these beliefs relate to their expectations for the future. To do so, we draw on the Coös Youth Study data collected in 2011 from 318 eleventh graders in the public schools. Although there is limited research to date, it can be argued that when adolescents perceive limited opportunities in their community, they may lower their own expectations for what is possible in the future.

Perception of Opportunity

We asked Coös youths to report their opinions about available educational and occupational opportunities in their communities. The answers on the Perception of Opportunity measure ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). We explored the data separately for three regions of the county (see Figures 1 and 2). Overall, youths in Coös reported feeling more positive than negative about the opportunities available to them, but they do seem to acknowledge some concerns. For example, youths living in Region 3 (Berlin/Gorham), where some of the most significant job losses have occurred, reported less positive beliefs about their ability to work hard to get ahead and feel more strongly that they won’t get ahead unless their family moves.

Key Findings

- Overall, Coös County youths’ opinions about the educational and occupational opportunities available in their home communities are somewhat positive, but youths do perceive areas of concern.
- Youths’ perceptions of opportunities are fairly similar across the three regions of Coös County; however, those youths living in communities that have experienced the most significant job losses (Berlin and Gorham) seem to be aware of decreased opportunities.
- Youths’ perceptions of available opportunities matter for their future expectations. Coös County youths who perceive less educational and occupational opportunities in their home communities also report less confidence that they will graduate from high school and college.

Links Between Perception of Opportunity and Expectations for the Future

To explore whether there was a link between youths’ opinions about the availability of opportunities in their home communities and their expectations for the future, we looked at the links between overall perceptions of opportunities and youths’ reports about the likelihood of finishing high school and college (see Figure 3). To do this, perceptions of opportunities were broken down into three levels: low perceptions of opportunities (105 youths), medium perceptions of...
opportunities (99 youths), and high perceptions of opportunities (114 youths), and the differences between opportunity groupings and youths’ reported likelihood of finishing high school and college were tested. The answers on the likelihood of finishing high school and college items ranged from 0 (not at all likely) to 6 (very likely). Overall, the majority of Coos youths expect to finish both high school and college. However, youths’ perceptions of opportunities in their home communities matter. Coos County youths who perceive less educational and occupational opportunities in their home communities also report less confidence that they will finish high school and college. These findings suggest that communities can have a positive impact on youths’ futures if they can improve educational and job opportunities available to teens and help teens connect to existing opportunities. It will be important to continue to examine youths’ beliefs about opportunities and expectations for the future as economic changes continue to take place in Coos County.

Figure 1: Perception of opportunity (positive items)

Overall, I feel pretty good about my future.
If kids like me work hard they can get ahead.
Most kids in our area will graduate from high school.
The world is usually good to kids like me.
I am as well off as most people.
Someone like me has a pretty good chance of going to college or university.

Region 1: Lancaster and South
Region 2: Colebrook and North
Region 3: Berlin/Gorham

1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

Figure 2: Perception of opportunity (negative items)

There is not much chance that a kid from my area will ever get ahead.
I’ll never have enough money to go to college or university.
In this area, it’s hard to make much money without doing something illegal.
My family can’t give me the opportunities that most kids have.
I probably won’t go to college or university because my family will want me to get a job.
Around here you have to have connections to get a decent job.
Unless my family moves, I won’t get ahead.
I’ll never have as much opportunity to succeed as kids from other areas.
Most people are better off than I am.
I probably won’t be able to do the work I want to do because I won’t have enough education.

Region 1: Lancaster and South
Region 2: Colebrook and North
Region 3: Berlin/Gorham

1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

Figure 3: Future expectations by perception of opportunities

Likelihood of finishing high school

Region 1: Lancaster and South
Region 2: Colebrook and North
Region 3: Berlin/Gorham

Likelihood of finishing college

Region 1: Lancaster and South
Region 2: Colebrook and North
Region 3: Berlin/Gorham

1 (not at all likely) to 6 (very likely)

ENDNOTES


2. Route 2 serves as a geographical marker. Region 1: “Lancaster and South” includes students attending schools in the towns of Lancaster and Whitefield. Region 2: “Colebrook and North” includes schools in Colebrook, Pittsburg, Stewartstown, Stratford, and Groveton. Region 3: includes students attending schools in Berlin and Gorham.

3. In figures 1, 2, and 3, if an item is followed by an asterisk, this indicates that differences are statistically significant.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erin Hiley Sharp, PhD, is a Carsey Institute faculty fellow and an assistant professor in family studies at the University of New Hampshire (erin.sharp@unh.edu).