

NEBRASKA YOUTH SURVEY

Understanding the perceptions and perspectives of Nebraska's next generation



AUGUST 2020 FULL REPORT



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BACKGROUND

In January 2020, Nebraska Community Foundation began working with Center for Public Affairs Research at the University of Nebraska at Omaha to co-create a survey designed to explore young people's perceptions and perspectives of their Nebraska hometowns. Over 1,000 high school students responded to the online survey which was administered in rural communities of varying sizes and geography between January and May 2020.

The results of the Youth Survey begin to reveal the priorities, values, and desires of these individuals as well as factors that may influence their decision to return to or remain in Greater Nebraska in the future. The hope is that these data may serve as a resource for Nebraska Community Foundation's network of 1,500 community volunteers, as well as other organizations and entities that share an interest in people attraction.



The Center for Public Affairs Research is a research and community outreach unit in the College of Public Affairs and Community Service at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, since 1963. CPAR's current focus is the collection and wide dissemination of public affairs data to facilitate an evidence based approach to governance in Nebraska. Some ongoing projects include, governing.unomaha.edu, policy analyses for the Planning Committee of the Nebraska State Legislature, designation as the lead agency of the Nebraska State Data Network by the United States Census Bureau, and the Nebraska Rural Transit Project with the Nebraska Department of Transportation.



Nebraska Community Foundation unleashes abundant assets, inspires charitable giving and connects ambitious people to build stronger communities and a Greater Nebraska.

Headquartered in Lincoln, the Foundation serves communities, donors and organizations by providing financial management, strategic development, education and training to a statewide network of 1,500 volunteers serving 260 communities.

In the last five years, 44,476 contributions have been made to Nebraska Community Foundation and its affiliated funds. Since 1994, Nebraska Community Foundation has reinvested \$355 million in Nebraska's people and places. For information, visit NebraskaHometown.org.

METHODS

In January of 2020, Nebraska Community Foundation (NCF) began working with Center for Public Affairs Research at the University of Nebraska at Omaha to conduct a survey of high school students in communities across Greater Nebraska.

The survey development team consisted of Kristen Ohnoutka, Youth Survey Coordinator at Nebraska Community Foundation; K.C. Belitz, Chief Operating Officer at Nebraska Community Foundation; and Josie Gatti Schafer, Ph.D., Center for Public Affairs Research. Questions came from previous surveys conducted by NCF and research on topics of interest for the survey.

After the survey instrument was created in Qualtrics, the survey was published on a hidden webpage. Ohnoutka worked with school administrators to provide the web link to the survey and ensure students were able to access and complete the survey. Schools responded at different times using an abbreviation for their school. This allowed the research team to group responses by school. Survey data was collected between January and May of 2020.

Once all schools that participated had responded, the online survey was closed. A total of 1,302 students responded. Not all students completed all questions. As a result, throughout the report we provide the number of students that responded and the percentage for that question. Analysis was conducted in Microsoft Excel and Stata v.15. The research team did not analyze representation or selection bias since only select schools in Nebraska participated.

This report represents the views of over 1,000 Nebraska high school students that responded to the survey. The report summarizes the perceptions of high school students at a point in time. Several questions asked students to make predictions about their future choices. It is expected that students' views and behaviors will change over time. Nonetheless, this is one of the only surveys in Nebraska that provide insights into the future growth and evolution of Nebraska's rural communities.

SURVEY RESPONDENTS



1,302

Total responses



8 Communities

Axtell, McCook, Columbus, Diller, Shickley, Ainsworth, Stuart, and Norfolk



10 Schools

9th GRADE

356

10th GRADE

422

11th GRADE

249

12th GRADE

245

Besides the people in your household, do you have other family that live in your community?



940



347

Do you have a job, including, summer jobs, babysitting, mowing lawns, owning your own business etc.?



978



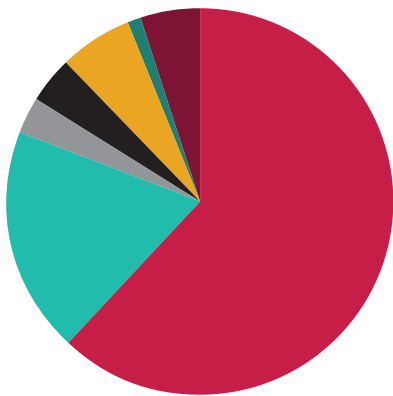
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PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

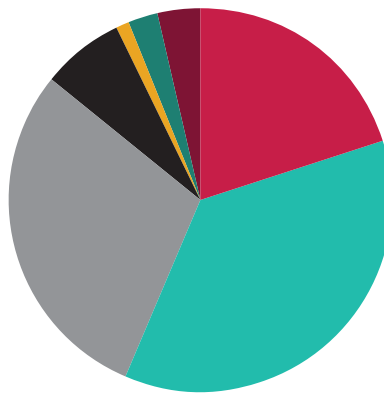


What are your plans after high school?



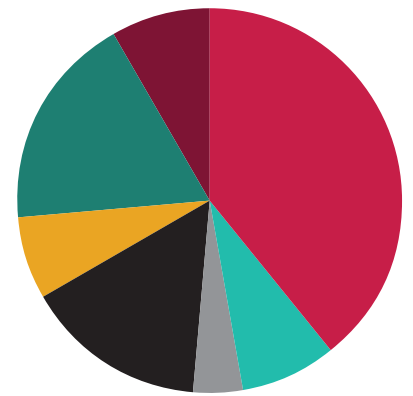
- 4-year college = **797**
- Community College = **239**
- Technology School = **38**
- Military = **49**
- Work = **79**
- Self-employment = **12**
- Other = **65**

If you were to live in this area as an adult, what do you think the main reason would be?



- Job or business opportunity = **167**
- Good place to raise a family = **308**
- Family ties = **249**
- Cost of living = **57**
- Good recreation facilities = **7**
- Quality schools/health care = **23**
- Other = **29**

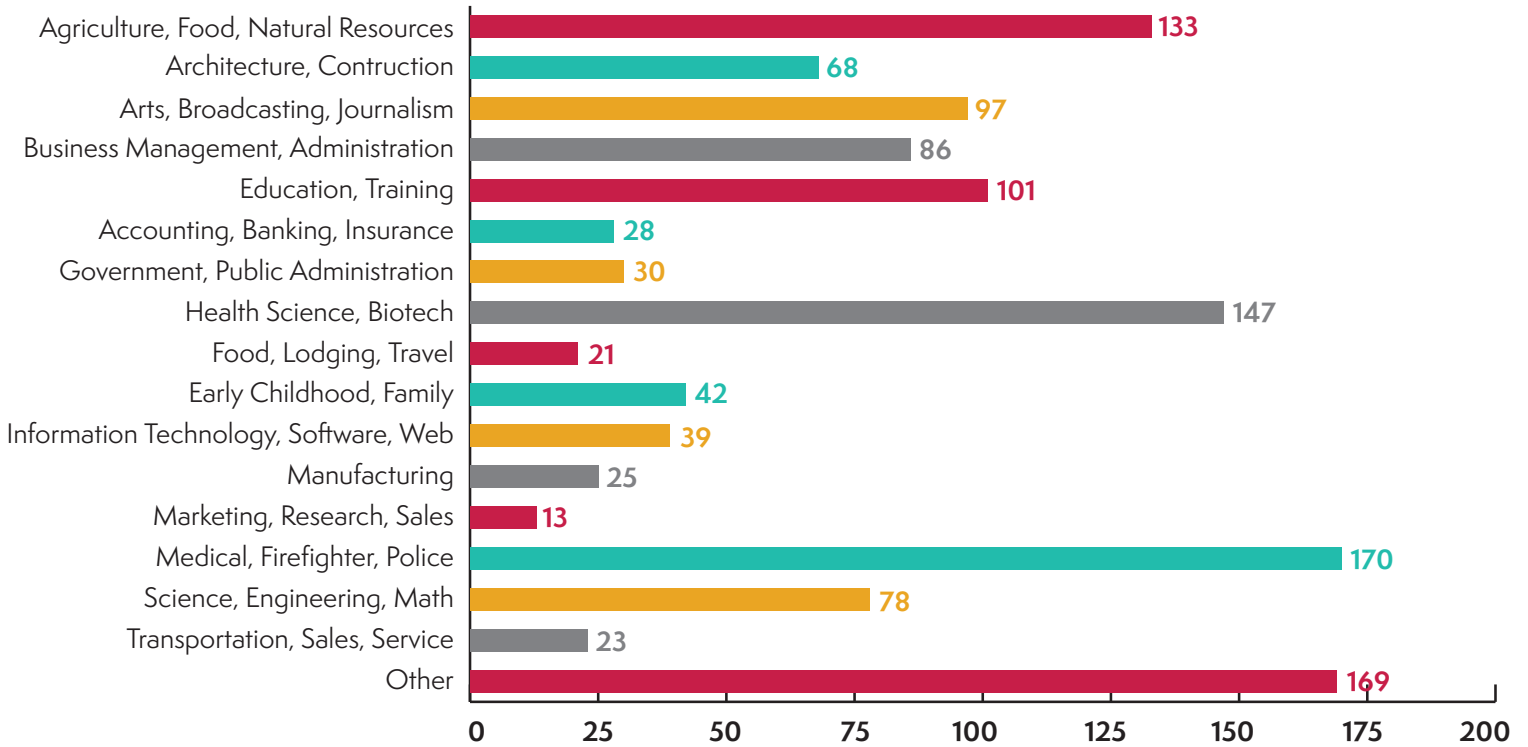
If you do not plan to live here as an adult, what is the main reason you would not live in this area?



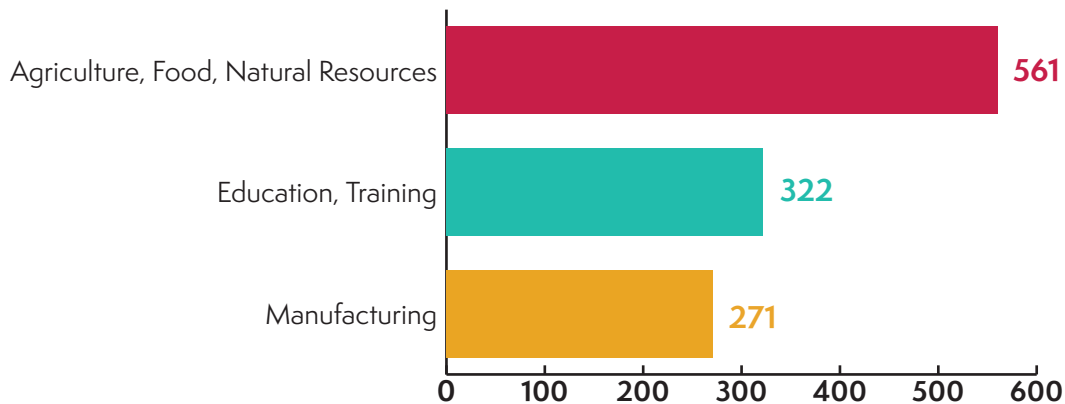
- Career opportunity elsewhere = **522**
- Community too small = **89**
- Encouraged to leave = **43**
- Make more money elsewhere = **176**
- Too few shopping options = **58**
- Lack of entertainment = **209**
- Other = **84**

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

In the future, which industry would you like to work in?



What do you think are the best employment opportunities in your area?



“

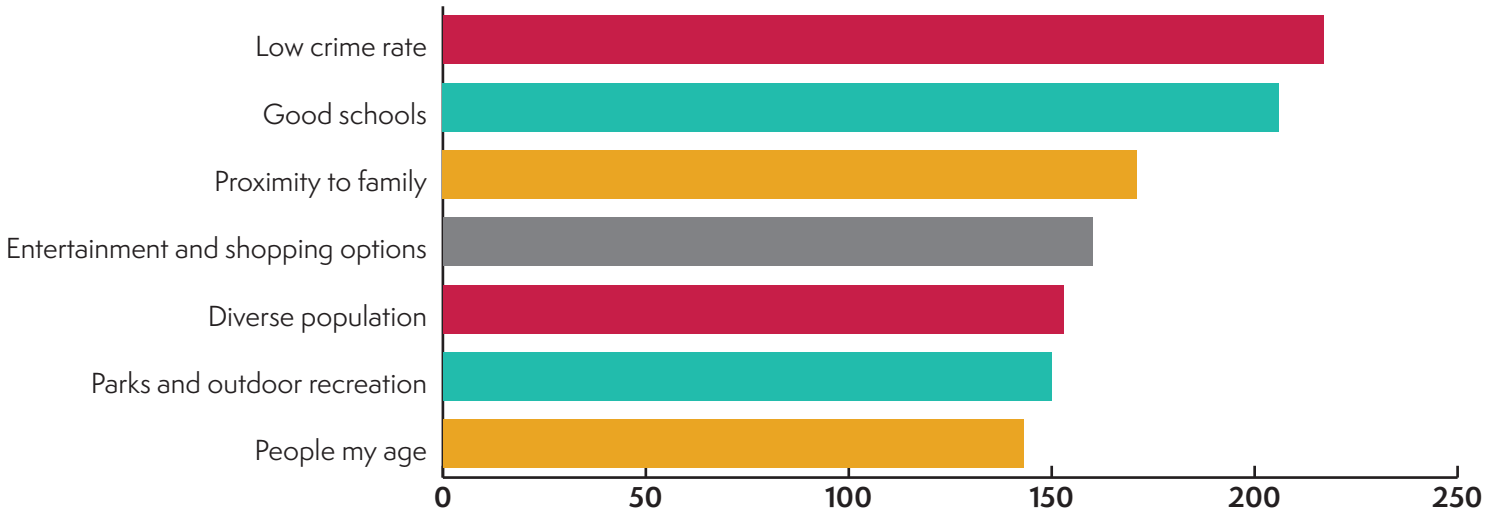
Our community does not allow us to advance in our careers without creating a business.

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

”

MY IDEAL COMMUNITY

What is the most important/least important when you think of your ideal community?



What size community is your ideal to live in?



SMALL,
like my hometown
579



MEDIUM,
like Grand Island
408



LARGE,
like Omaha
183



VERY LARGE,
like Chicago, IL
62

IN THEIR OWN WORDS ...

“

Make a more welcoming and inviting community.

”

“

I think having more things to do for younger kids, because you cannot really do anything until you can drive.

”

“

Leaders willing to embrace change.

”

MY IDEAL COMMUNITY



“

Having healthier restaurants would make my community a better place to live.

”

“

Our community could definitely use some more entertainment.

”

When you are an adult, how likely are you to live in the area you live in now?



- Extremely likely = 163
- Somewhat likely = 407
- Neither likely nor unlikely = 298
- Somewhat unlikely = 202
- Extremely unlikely = 167

Do you think there is a negative stigma with returning/staying in the place you live now?

YES

332

NO

855

Not sure = 36

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & VOLUNTEERISM

My peers and I are invited to share our opinion or get involved in town projects or happenings.

TRUE **659**
 FALSE **509**
 ? UNSURE **42**

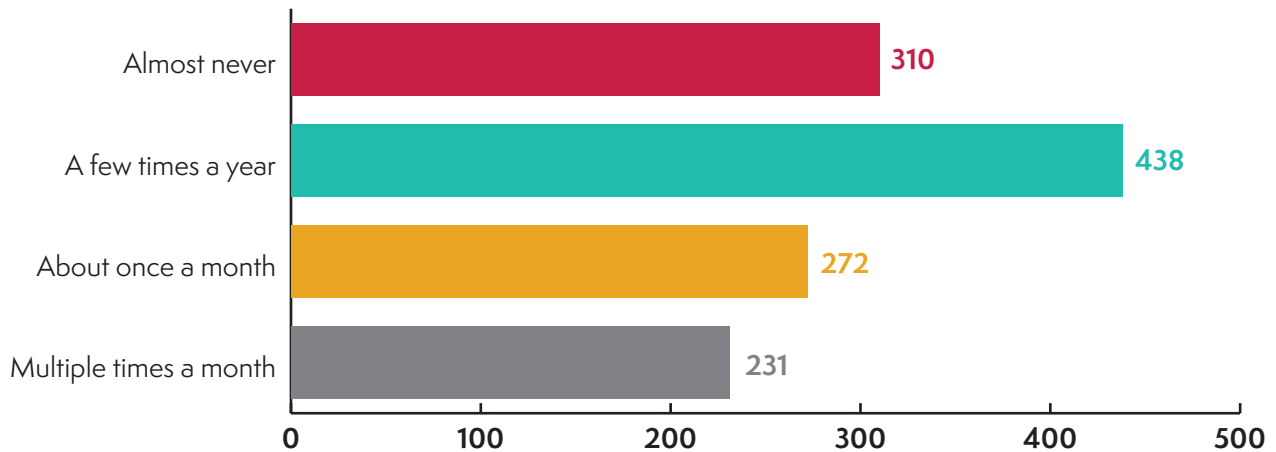
I feel connected to the place I live now.

TRUE **822**
 FALSE **315**
 ? UNSURE **80**

I play a role in this community.
 (Ex. You are involved in community events, programs, or projects and play a role in their success.)

TRUE **591**
 FALSE **528**
 ? UNSURE **98**

How often do you get together with other people from your town to do something positive for your community (ex. volunteering, donating, activism etc.)?



“ I believe more community groups and more youth leadership would improve my town. ”

“ We need to make the youth feel more involved. So far everything seems to be run by adults and adults only. ”

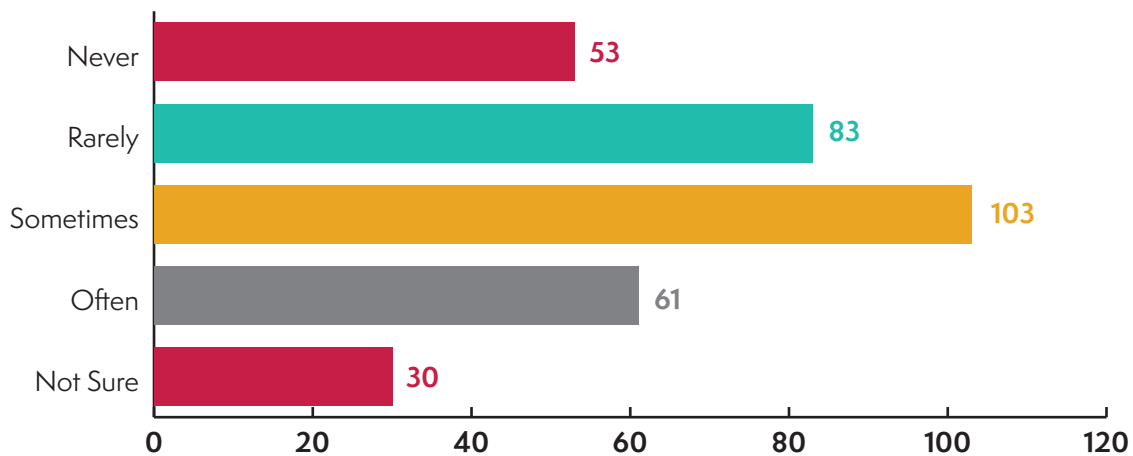
Do you participate in any of the following activities?



- School activities/sports = 1,000
- Community/Civic organizations = 330
- Church organizations = 604
- Charities/Non-profits = 100
- Hobby/Recreation-based organizations = 473
- Other = 64

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & VOLUNTEERISM

How often have you seen someone in your community treated unfairly because of their age, race, gender, sexual orientation, physical illness, or mental health (some examples of unfair treatment are someone not included in a group, denied participation in an event, or called an unkind name based on their demographic characteristics)?



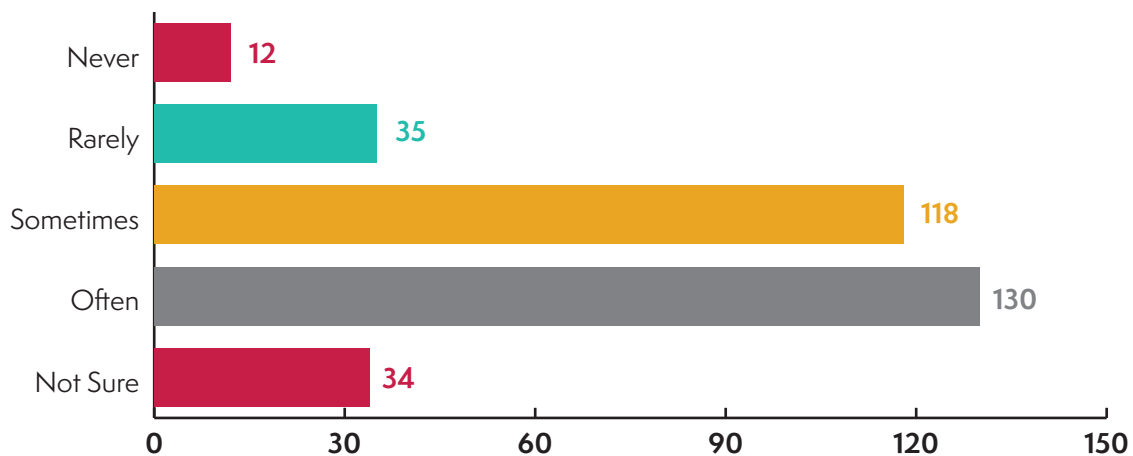
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I think our community should have more diversity and create more attractions to bring people into the community.

”

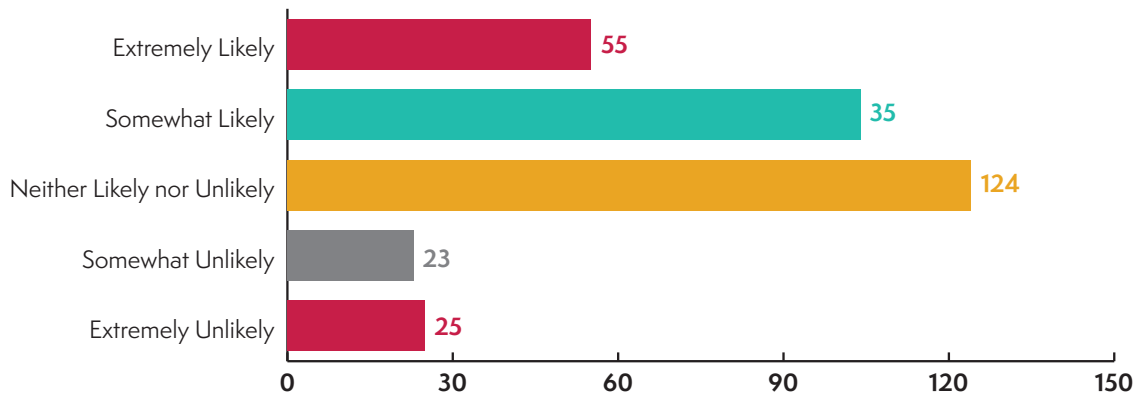


How likely are you to act to stop unfair treatment when you see it (some examples of unfair treatment are someone not included in a group, denied participation in an event, or called an unkind name based on their demographic characteristics)?



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & VOLUNTEERISM

How likely are you to be an advocate for embracing diversity and inclusion in your community?



“

Make sure **EVERYONE** in the community has all their basic needs and necessities taken care of, and creating a safe and helpful environment for the next generation.

”



FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

While this survey only represents the views of 1,302 Nebraska high school students, the emerging patterns indicate that our hometowns are uniquely positioned to offer precisely the things that Nebraska high schoolers say they want in the places they choose to live. Below are key findings with further analysis provided by Josie Gatti Schafer, Ph.D., Center for Public Affairs Research.

They value safety. Students expressed an affinity for safe, low-crime, family-oriented places. Contrary to popular perceptions of youth, the students indicated a preference for safety and security over entertainment. This new discovery reveals a piece of this generation's identity that must be considered when planning for the future of our hometowns. The national and global events that have occurred in their lifetime cannot be overlooked as a potential explanation for this phenomenon.

***Dr. Schafer:** When imagining their ideal community, student respondents sought places with good schools, low-crime rates, and a connection to family. While entertainment and recreational amenities also factored into a student's image of their ideal community, the safety and security that small Nebraska communities offer were the primary factors. A series of questions on the survey provide greater insight into student respondents' perceptions of safety, which includes, low crime rate, good place to raise a family, engagement with the community, and fair treatment and inclusion of others.*

They are community-oriented. Many students boast a resume filled with school sports, extracurricular activities, community volunteerism, and part-time jobs. Nebraska youth are not only highly involved, they also have a desire to be a part of their community. However, only a little more than half of the responding students say they have been invited to share their opinion and get involved, and only half agree with the statement "I play a role in this community."

***Dr. Schafer:** Participation in school sports, extracurricular activities, community volunteerism, and part-time jobs is one vital aspect of community connection and engagement. In addition, students that were connected to their community (68% of student respondents report feeling connected to their communities) were also more likely to feel that unfair treatment of others was rare in their community and that they would be advocates for diversity and inclusion in their community. However, only a little more than half of the responding students say they have been invited to share their opinion and get involved in their community and only half agree with the statement "I play a role in this community." The findings here suggest that communities can foster a sense of connectedness by respecting and embracing natural differences of individuals as well as by taking steps to actively engage and learn from their younger residents.*

They favor small communities. Nearly half of responding students shared that their community is the perfect size. This result bolsters the previous two statements that Nebraska's hometowns are uniquely positioned to offer young people the safe, secure, family-oriented communities they desire.

***Dr. Schafer:** Student respondents embraced many aspects of their small hometowns across Nebraska. However, when asked why students would not live in their community in the future, they expressed concern over job opportunities. Notably, the most often chosen future profession of students was the category medical, police or fire services. However, students felt that the best opportunities in their community were in the agriculture industry. These findings suggest a need to better connect students and schools to the variety of job opportunities that exist in small towns across Nebraska as well as continue to grow and diversify Nebraska's economy.*

Jeff Yost, President & CEO, Nebraska Community Foundation

Over the past decade, the way we talk about rural places has dramatically shifted in Nebraska. Pick up a newspaper or turn on the news today, and you're likely to see stories of young entrepreneurs returning to their hometowns to fulfill a dream and young couples deciding to leave the hustle and bustle of the big city because in the 21st century economy, you can live and work wherever you want. "Brain drain" is being replaced with "brain gain." A reverse talent migration is bringing young people back to smaller communities where the cost of living is low and the quality of life is high. In 53 of Nebraska's most rural counties, the population of 30- and 40-year-olds is on the rise.

The dialogue in Greater Nebraska is changing because communities recognized that they could no longer give their high school graduates luggage and expect their places to continue to thrive. Communities all across the state are getting intentional about the way they talk to young people about blooming where you're planted . . . and it's paying off.

Nebraska Community Foundation is a grassroots, volunteer-led network of 1,500 people who believe in the future of our hometowns. Of the 250 Greater Nebraska communities NCF works with across the state, a great majority are highly focused on people attraction—giving young people and families compelling reasons to return to, remain in, or choose to live in Greater Nebraska.

In 2020, many of us can take our jobs just about anywhere, provided there's a steady internet connection. So today, the community economic development question is not one of jobs. The better question is: Why here? Why do I want to live, work, and raise my family in this community? People attraction has become a top priority in Nebraska and it is central to the work of Nebraska Community Foundation.

Hometowns all across the state are discovering that philanthropy can be a powerful people attraction tool. Charitable dollars are being used to fund projects and programs that directly benefit young people and families—like early childhood development, access to arts and culture, recreation and other amenities, support to small businesses and entrepreneurs, high quality education, and opportunities for young and emerging community leaders.

This survey and report have helped us identify the qualities and amenities that are important to the next generation of Nebraskans—a critical step in our quest to create more attractive communities.

It has also revealed that young Nebraskans are already envisioning themselves in their hometowns in the future. Nearly half of the high school students surveyed said their ideal community is "small, like my hometown" while only 5% percent saw themselves in a large city like Chicago. The qualities they most value in a community—low crime rate, good schools, proximity to family—are characteristics Nebraska is already offering in spades.

Our hope is that this survey might serve as a tool for Nebraska Community Foundation affiliated funds; statewide organizations; governmental agencies; Greater Nebraska community leaders, businesses and employers; and others who share our interest in people attraction.

Within the NCF network, these results will directly inform the work we do. At Nebraska Community Foundation, we're already talking with communities that participated in the survey about the next steps in this process—like hosting conversations with young people that will allow us to go deeper and better understand their motivations in choosing the places they decide to call home.

The time is now—to get serious about engaging young people, show them the abundance of opportunities that exist for them in Nebraska, and tell them that making your future in a small town is an honorable and ambitious path.

It's time to stop giving our young people luggage and invite them home instead.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are several community and partner organizations Nebraska Community Foundation would like to thank for being a part of this project and for their efforts to build stronger communities and a Greater Nebraska.

We would like to thank the communities who chose to be a part of this novel project. Their willingness to learn more about their youth and find ways to better engage them continues to make the NCF network stronger and more diverse.

We would like to thank the following communities, schools, and affiliated funds: Ainsworth High School and the Brown County Community Foundation Fund; Axtell High School and the Axtell Community Fund; Columbus Lakeview High School, Columbus Public High School, Columbus Scotus Central Catholic High School and the Columbus Area Future Fund; Diller-Odell High School and the Diller Community Foundation Fund; McCook High School and the McCook Community Foundation Fund; Norfolk Public High School and the Norfolk Area Community Foundation Fund; Shickley High School and the Shickley Community Foundation Fund; and Stuart High School and the Stuart Community Foundation Fund.

We would also like to give a special thank you to the University of Nebraska–Omaha’s Center for Public Affairs Research and CPAR Director, Dr. Josie Gatti-Schafer, who thoughtfully guided us through the entire project. Their expertise and experience allowed us to share considerate and meaningful data to the communities that participated, as well as in this final state aggregate report.

Nebraska Community Foundation's presence at the 2019 Latino Youth Summit (Columbus) and START Youth Summit (Norfolk) served as yet another opportunity to collect data from high school students living in Greater Nebraska. Though this data was not included in the preceding report, it is still a valuable tool in further understanding the perspectives and perceptions of Nebraska's next generation.

2019 LATINO YOUTH SUMMIT

Held in Columbus

Respondents: 263

9th grade	41
10th grade	41
11th grade	73
12th grade	108

Schools represented: 39

Communities represented: 47

Rank the following from Most Important (1) to Least Important (6) in deciding where you will live.

Live close to family

Job opportunities in my field

Safety/low crime rate

Good schools

Entertainment, nightlife, shopping, etc.

Diversity

Top Three Most Important

- Job opportunities in my field (30.1%)
- Live close to family (26.5%)
- Good schools (19.0%)

Top Three Least Important

- Entertainment, nightlife, shopping, etc. (38.9%)
- Diversity (27.3%)
- Safety/low crime rate (10.9%)

When deciding where to live, how likely are you to choose your current hometown?

Options: Very likely (1), Somewhat likely (2), Not sure (3), Not very likely (4), Not likely at all (5)

Average: 2.75 (2 = Somewhat likely, 3 = Not sure)

Do you feel welcome in your hometown?

Yes: 239

No: 13

Did not answer: 10

Circle the top two reasons that would encourage you to live in your hometown. *(Ranked from most selected to least selected)*

1. To live close to family
 2. Job opportunity/financial reasons
 3. Safety/low crime
 4. Schools
 5. Things to do (entertainment, shopping, etc.)
 6. Diversity
-

2019 START Youth Leadership Summit

Held in Norfolk

Respondents: 28

9th grade	8
10th grade	6
11th grade	13
12th grade	1

Schools represented: 4

Communities represented: 5

Rank the following from Most Important (1) to Least Important (6) in deciding where you will live. *(Listed in order with corresponding average ranking)*

- Job opportunities in my field: 2.5
- Live close to family: 2.6
- Safety/low crime rate: 3.2
- Entertainment, nightlife, shopping, etc.: 4.7
- Good schools: 4.7
- Diversity: 5.1

When deciding where to live, how likely are you to choose your current hometown?

Options: Very likely (1), Somewhat likely (2), Not sure (3), Not very likely (4), Not likely at all (5)

Average: 2.85 (2 = Somewhat likely, 3 = Not sure)

Do you feel welcome in your hometown?

Yes: 24

No: 0

Did not answer: 4