

YOUTH RETENTION

KNOWLEDGE BRIEF

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The outmigration of rural youth is a longstanding issue across Canada¹. For regions like the Columbia Basin Boundary where there are aging demographics youth retention is increasingly important². Outmigration in general acts as a destabilizing factor that can result in the loss of services and a shrinking local economy³. Specific to youth, the so called rural 'brain drain' sees those with greater academic abilities as more apt to leave, something highlighted as a key issue with talented youth labelled as a rural export⁴⁻⁹. While rural youth retention is a recognized need, it is rarely clearly defined. For the purposes of this brief youth retention is defined as any initiative resulting in a stable youth population within the region. In this way youth retention is not limited to keeping existing youth, but includes repatriation and attraction.

There has been a large amount of research on what causes and influences rural youth to stay, go, and return. Decisions related to education, work, marriage, parenting, mobility, and so on

are not made in isolation from each other¹⁰. This highlights the importance of identifying what youth value in communities and working to translate these values into a where place youth wish to be¹¹. Relevant factors include:

- Lack of opportunities related to employment and education^{4,12-19}

Quality of life factors such as:

- Limits to or lack of amenities and services^{3,4,6,7,9,12,19,20}
- Community acceptance, attitudes toward youth, and youth engagement^{3,4,6,9,13,14,19}
- Personal and socio-cultural factors like: relationships (e.g., friends, family), parental role models, financial ability, and gender^{3,4,6,7,9,15,16,21-23}
- Perception of available opportunities^{8,9,16}, of the choice to stay in rural areas^{6,8,15,22,24,25}, and of the opportunities available elsewhere^{7,20}



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The literature reviewed suggest a variety of approaches to youth retention. Overall, youth retention strategies often focus on education, training, career opportunities, as well as youth engagement demonstrating that retention is a combination of efforts²⁶. In order to successfully retain youth you have to identify and pay attention to the influencing factors noted above. It is important to know your youth, to understand the relationships that youth have with their region and to educate decision makers about youth needs⁴. Education is a critical element of youth retention as rural school success is tied to economic viability and the sustainability of economic development⁹.

A strong, integrated education network, from daycare to post-secondary, is important⁴. There also needs to be a focus on enhancing youth employment opportunities through entry level or temporary positions, funding for training and networking, and other supports^{27,28}. Active engagement with youth also increases likelihood of them staying, including involving youth in strategy and decision making^{4,28}. Changing perceptions is also a key factor, including working to promote strengths, raising awareness of opportunities, and eliminating negative perceptions⁴.

Youth retention is broad, relating to workforce development, community engagement, assets and amenities, social programming, and so on. In light of the discussion above two messages are important to highlight.

First, it is important to go beyond jobs. While jobs and education are critical, youth will only remain or return if a rural area is attractive²⁷. Creating not only job opportunities, but an engaged community – a community that has engaged youth before they leave – is crucial. Areas with strong civic engagement, civic welfare, and social capital are shown to retain

higher proportions of their populations²⁹.

Second, leaving can be a good thing. Within the youth retention conversation it is important to consider that leaving can be good – so long as there is thought given to ensuring youth return³⁰. Youth retention strategies should be approached with the mindset that retention is not keeping youth locked in place. There are employment opportunities in rural areas that require skills and experience that youth may not be able to get at home, forcing them to leave. Examples from the literature note the importance of encouraging youth to explore, while inviting them to return and, more importantly, creating the conditions that allow them to do so^{3,21}.

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