

Community-University Research for Recovery Alliance RESEARCH REPORT

Rural Youth and Recovery Project: Survey Analysis of Work and Community Issues

Kathryne Dupré
Faculty of Business
Administration
Memorial University
kdupre@mun.ca

Arla Day
Department of
Psychology
Saint Mary's University
Arla.Day@smu.ca

Nicole Power
Department of
Sociology
Memorial University
npower@mun.ca

Moss Norman
Faculty of Kinesiology and
Recreation Management
University of Manitoba
Moss.Norman@ad.umanitoba.ca

Summary

Based on existing research, including our own findings from interviews and focus groups with rural youth as part of the 'Rural Youth and Recovery project' subcomponent of the Community-University Research for Recovery Alliance (CURRA) initiative, we developed an on-line survey for youth either currently living in Newfoundland and Labrador, or from the province but living away. In this survey we examine and evaluate youths' perceptions of local employment and community options and experiences. Included in this analysis, is examination of the range and quality of employment opportunities, views and experiences with fisheries, and issues related to migration and sense of place. In an attempt to improve our understanding of some of the unique issues associated with rural youth, we also explore differences and similarities between rural and urban youth in these areas.

Study Background

The experiences of young people play an important role in shaping their long-term (i.e., adult) attitudes, perceptions and beliefs (e.g., Lorence & Mortimer, 1985). Because people are shaped in part through their experiences, and because research indicates that part-time employment is essentially now the norm for young people while in school (e.g., Loughlin, Barling, & Kelloway, 1999), in this study we focus on the community and employment experiences of young people. Compared to their adult counterparts, youth tend to be employed in various forms of lower quality work characterized by poor pay, job insecurity and high levels of health risks (Loughlin et al., 1999). Moreover, young people in rural environments face distinctive issues as compared to youth in general (e.g., associated with industry type and structure, access to training and expertise; e.g., Lee, Westaby, and Berg, 2004), and thus not only is it important to better understand youth as a whole, but it is essential to understand the distinctive opportunities and challenges faced by rural as compared to urban youth. In 2001, approximately 61% of employed youth in Newfoundland and Labrador were reporting as coming from rural areas (Community Accounts, 2006). We argue that an improved understanding of the work and community experiences of young people is an essential component in developing effective recovery strategies for rural communities.

Study Design

To recruit youth to take part in the on-line survey, we: (1) sent an e-mail request to participate in the study to youth who are part of youth databases developed by CURRA community partners (e.g., the Community Youth Network, FINALLY!), (2) posted a link to the on-line survey on the Government of NL's Youth Retention and Attraction Strategy website, and (3) posted advertisements at approved locations across Memorial University's campus, and sent emails through university list-serves, asking students to take part in the research study. In all three instances, potential participants were given some information about the nature and purpose of the study, and told that they must be between the ages of 16 and 29 to participate.

Each respondent had the chance to win 1 of 5 VISA \$100 gift cards in exchange for his/her participation. At the end of the on-line survey, if a participant wanted to be entered into the

draw, he or she could enter his/her name and contact information. This personal identifying information was immediately (and electronically) separated from an individual's responses to the survey so that there was no way to link an individual to responses on the survey.

Youth Survey Participants and Findings

There were 152 young people who took part in the survey, comprised of 117 women and 35 men (average age 22; range of age from 16 to 29 years). Among participants, 147 (98%) were currently living in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, and 48% described their current town or community as rural, while 52% described it as urban. The respondents indicated that 41.1% were single, 31.8% were in a serious relationship, 26.2% were married or common-law, and most (88%) had no children; 89.4% identified as heterosexual, 1% as gay, 3.8% as lesbian, 1% as queer and 4.8% as other; 51% had graduated from college or university (16.7% had less than grade 12 education, 9.3% were high school graduates' and 19.4% had some university/college experience) and 43% were currently in school.

In terms of employment, 57% reported that they had a paid job, 16% reported that they did not have a job, and 5% reported casual or informal jobs (e.g., babysitting). Participants reported being in their jobs for an average of 2 years (range of 0-9 years), working an average of 30 hours each week (range of 0-45 hours), being paid an average of \$16.75/hour (range of \$0-\$45 per hour). Among the participants, 35.5% reported currently working as a volunteer; volunteers worked an average of 12.5 hours per week, with a range of 0-80 hours per week. Most participants (93%) reported that they have never worked in a fishing industry.

Survey findings indicated that 53% have moved away from the community where they grew up, while 18% have never moved away from the community where they grew up. Among those who moved away, for 8.6% it was for a job opportunity, for 26.3% it was for school, for 11.8% it was for family obligations, and for 6.6% it was due to other reasons (e.g., marriage, family problems). For those living away from the community they grew up in, 10.5% say they want to return to live there, while 24% say they do not want to return to live there. Forty-seven percent describe the city/town they grew up in as rural, while 25% describe it as urban.

Given previous findings, and focus group results, we asked youth about various relevant community issues (where there are differences between urban and rural, the distinction is noted). We found that within participants' communities overall: (1) 60% agreed or strongly agreed that there are job opportunities for them (more urban youth agreed with this than did rural youth); (2) 46% agreed or strongly agreed that there are opportunities for self-employment (more urban youth agreed with this); (3) 18% agreed or strongly agreed that there are job opportunities in the fishing industry (more rural youth agreed with this statement); (4) 68% agreed or strongly agreed that a lack of jobs is an obstacle to employment for many people (more rural youth agreed with this); (5) 80% agreed or strongly agreed that a lack of experience is an obstacle to employment for many people; (6) 72% agreed or strongly agreed that they had access to a variety of recreation activities (more urban youth agreed with this); (7) 86% agreed or strongly agreed that where they were currently living was a good place to raise a family (more urban youth agreed with this); (8) 54% agreed or strongly agreed that things are not as progressive as they should be (more rural youth agreed with this); (9) 50% agreed or strongly agreed that the Newfoundland

'way of life' is deteriorating; (10) 75% agreed or strongly agreed that they have a close knit family; (11) 34% agreed or strongly agreed that family values have deteriorated; (12) 60% agreed or strongly agreed that many of their friends had left (more rural agreed with this); (13) 61% agreed or strongly agreed that they felt like a member of the community (more rural youth agreed with this). These perceptions of community provide some information about the views of youth in the province, and more specifically, indicate where there are differences between rural and urban youth.

We asked young people about their use of alcohol, cigarettes, drugs and caffeine. Previous research shows that there are differences across rural and urban youth when it comes to their use of alcohol and drugs (e.g., rural youth are more likely to smoke than urban youth; Duke et al., 2009; differences are also associated with degree of attachment to community; van Gundy, Stracuzzi, Rebellon, Jenkins Tucker, & Cohn, 2011). Although there has been a decline in certain types of substances, there have been increases in others, and youth usage of alcohol and drugs in general continues to be an issue of societal concern given that it is associated with both short-term and longer term detrimental consequences (e.g., personal, employment-related) for young people (e.g., DeSimone, 2002). In this study, we found that alcohol usage per week was marginally higher for rural youth, while cigarettes smoked each week was significantly higher for rural youth; caffeine usage was higher for urban youth. We asked young people about their stress at work, home and in general. Some research suggests that there are differences across rural and urban youth when it comes to the experience of stress, and that – in general - there both short- and longer-term implications of stress at work among youth (e.g., Winefield, Tiggemann, & Winefield, 1992). We found that approximately 35% of all youth feel stressed at home, stressed at work, and stressed in general. Urban youth report marginally higher levels of stress across the three categories. These findings are important, in that they suggest that there are differences when it comes to health indicators among urban and rural youth.

We asked young people about the social support available to them from their partner, family and friends, co-workers and community - in terms of how much they can count and rely on these people. We found that on average youth feel primarily supported by partners and families. They feel less support from coworkers, and the least support from communities (across urban and rural youth). Further, findings indicate that when support from families/friends, coworkers and community is higher, stress tends to be lower. Greater support from friends and family is related to fewer injuries and incivility at work, while greater community support is related to better health and life satisfaction, and less client and coworker incivility. Urban and rural youth were also similar on measures of overall life satisfaction, and similar on levels on work recovery (e.g., relaxing after work). Urban youth reported more access to recreation and jobs; however, they also reported less perceived support from the community and higher levels of stress. Both urban and rural youth reported being equally engaged in their work, in the sense that they reported being enthusiastic about it, and proud of it. Among rural youth, 80% reported experiencing injuries never or rarely at work, while among urban youth 74% reported experiencing injuries never or rarely at work. These findings suggest that there are both similar and unique factors when it comes to exacerbating and mitigating negative outcomes among urban and rural youth. In terms of future research and policy related to young people, an improved understanding of these findings is important.

Among all participants, 45% saw the Newfoundland and Labrador fishery as relevant to their lives, while 55% did not see it as relevant to their lives (46% of rural youth saw it as relevant, while 54% did not; 44% of urban youth saw it as relevant, while 56% did not); 44% report that they have lived in a city/town with a fishing industry, while 28% report that they have not; 5% report that they have worked in the fishing industry, while 66% have not. Additionally, the more important youth see fishing, the less life satisfaction they have; and for those who think fishing is a tough way to earn a living, they are less likely to see job opportunities as available, more likely to see the NL way of life and family values as deteriorating, and less likely to feel like a member of the community. We asked participants about the extent to which they agree with particular statements about the fishing industry and found the following: (1) 3% agreed that they have had bad experiences in the fishing industry (urban youth tended to agree more); (2) 33% agreed or strongly agreed that working in the fishing industry is a tough way to earn a living (rural youth tended to agree more strongly); (3) 15% agreed or strongly agreed that fishing is important to their lives (rural youth were more likely to agree to this); (4) 22% agreed or strongly agreed that fishing is important to their families (urban youth were more likely to agree with this); (5) 33% agreed or strongly agreed that fishing is important to their communities (urban and rural youth tended to similarly agree with this statement). These findings highlight views of urban and rural youth when it comes to fisheries, and suggests that particular perceptions related to fisheries may have implications more broadly for perceptions of place, self and community.

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Community-University Research for Recovery Alliance (CURRA), Memorial University
St. John's, NL A1C 5S7 Telephone 709-864-7551 www.curra.ca