

Community-University Research for Recovery Alliance RESEARCH REPORT

Rural Youth and Quality of Work

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This report is adapted from the following presentations:

T. Norman, N. Power, K. Dupré and A. Day. “Playing Where You Work: Rural Newfoundland Youth and Intersections of Work, Play and Health.” Presented at CARWH Conference, May 28-29, 2010, Toronto, Ontario.

N. Power, T. Norman, K. Dupré and A. Day. “This Town is Really Old Fashioned: An Examination of the Connections Between Youth, Gender and Work in Rural Newfoundland. Presented at Gender, Rurality, Transformation: A conference on gender relations and the changing dynamics of Canadian rural life, May 13-14, 2010, University of Guelph, Ontario.

Introduction

The problem of youth outmigration has been identified as a central crisis impacting the health and vitality of coastal Newfoundland communities. Over the past three years, the Community-University Research for Recovery Alliance (CURRA) has been studying this problem by talking to young people (between the ages of 12-24) on the west coast of Newfoundland about their connection to their communities. We focused on the work and recreation experiences of these youth because quality of work and recreation have been identified as two of the most important factors that shape youth experiences in their home communities. Our ultimate objective is to aid in the production of evidence-based youth retention policies and strategies.

Methods

Our research employed a mixed methods approach, including surveys, interviews, focus groups (small group discussions) and a visual methodology known as *photovoice*. The data included in this report emerge from the *photovoice* study, the interviews and the focus group discussions. The research was conducted in rural communities on the west coast of Newfoundland, including Port aux Basques, Isle aux Morts, Burnt Islands, Codroy Valley, Burgeo, Stephenville and the Port aux Port Peninsula, Rocky Harbour, Trout River and Woody Point. Fourteen youth were interviewed, eleven youth participated in the *photovoice* project and 91 youth participated in the focus groups. For the focus groups and *photovoice* project, youth were divided into categories based on their age (i.e.

12-15 year olds; 16-18 year olds; 19-24 year olds).

Themes

Connection to Community

Youth in rural Newfoundland described a love-hate relationship with their communities. On the positive side, youth stated that their communities were safe, clean, beautiful and free. They stated that it was “a good place to raise a family” and said that the place is comforting and safe because “everyone knows everyone.” Many had a strong connection with their community due to family ties. The range of outdoor recreational activities that rural communities offered was also described as a positive aspect of rural living.

Youth also described the negative aspects of rural life. Some stated that it was a place that they could not wait to get away from. It was often described as “old-fashioned,” “too small,” with “nothing to do” and “nowhere to go.” The negative side of “everybody knowing everybody” was also described. Rural communities are often riddled with “gossip,” “rumors,” and “verbal bullying.” In addition to this, some youth talked about the lack of work and how the communities catered more to young children and adults with no place for youth. Almost all of the youth suggested that “your family name takes you really far in this town.” Others, however, described being discriminated against because of their family name; something, they suggested, would be less likely to occur in bigger cities where it was less likely that their family name would be known to members of the community.

Despite these negative comments, with few exceptions, almost all of the participants expressed deep-seated connections to their communities. Although critical of their rural homes, most of the youth remained intensely proud of Newfoundland and were quick to defend their rural communities and their way of life from the judgments of “outsiders” and “mainlanders.” In this way, most youth simultaneously held positive and negative views of their communities, with those that were either solely critical or entirely celebratory being the minority.

Rural Youth and Work Experience

Youth described their communities as having “few jobs” with those available often going to “mature” and older youth. Participants also stated that the labour market is deeply gender divided. To get a good job, youth stated that it was necessary to either re-locate or commute back and forth from their communities to the work location. Some of the youth compared the relatively bleak job market of contemporary times with what they characterized as the prosperity of the fisheries from years ago. Indeed, for many youth living in more rural communities such as Burgeo, Isle aux Morts and Burnt Islands, fishing and fish related industries represented the only hope for improved job markets in the future.

Youth described an employer’s market where employers had the option of choosing from a large pool of labour. Youth stated that you need to be 17 or 18 years of age to compete for the few jobs offered and, even then, competition remains high. Some youth described a bias in hiring resulting in jobs being

given based on “family name” or “who you know.”

The gendered structure of work was also elaborated on as seen below.

Female, 23 years old

A lot of cashiers—women, women, women. Um, but then you look at the flip side of it. If say I went to a grocery store and applied for stocking shelves because I didn't like customer service, didn't want to be at the cash, I probably wouldn't get it. Even if I was Miss USA bodybuilder. They want guys to bag the groceries....[and] guys stockin' shelves.

Youth labeled their communities as “old-fashioned” and “narrow-minded” compared to urban areas.

Securing better work, which entails security, benefits and decent wages, often means leaving the community. It was pointed out that this can cause socially fractured communities and disjointed families as seen below.

Female, 19 years old

It's like Christmas you walk around town at Christmas, it's crazy, you sees everybody, right? And then after like New Year's you would walk in Burgeo and probably not see a person.

Another youth was disapproving when asked was working away appealing.

Male, 18 years old

No, 'cause my father used to work on the lakes and he used to be gone a month, back a month, or gone two months and back two months. He never got to see like important things in our family, like graduation and stuff like that.

The few jobs that remain in rural communities were labeled as “bad jobs,” These were mainly in the service industry and were marred with sexism and discrimination.

Rural Youth Experiences of Leisure and Recreation

Youth also expressed mixed feelings about their experiences of leisure and recreation. Participants often described their communities as “boring” or “too small” with “nothing to do” and “nowhere to go.” These types of responses were consistent across research locations. On the other hand, youth also described many positive aspects of their communities. They noted the wide open spaces and the great deal of “freedom” they have in contrast to urban settings that entail the surveilling gaze of adults and authority figures.



Photovoice image: “We spend all our time in the pit. Goin' in there and havin' fires and stuff”

Responses also varied according to recreational interests and age. Youth that enjoyed outdoor activities such as snowmobiling, dirt biking, fishing and hunting portrayed rural communities more positively. The role of school was also important. School was a central venue where rural youth recreated, formed friendship networks and made

connections to the community. For youth that were no longer in school, many of these positive aspects were disrupted as the school was no longer available as a source of recreation and friendship. Groups were fractured once youth graduated from school because youth often moved away for post secondary education or work and to start families elsewhere. For those youth who remained in their communities, they often commented that none of their friends were left; a reality which rendered their communities boring. The boredom of older youth was compounded by the lack of work opportunities.

In summary, the participants both celebrated and bemoaned rural Newfoundland, suggesting that it offered “freedom,” “independence,” many outdoor activities and, for the younger youth, a space to call their “own.” At the same time, they characterized their rural communities as “too small” and “boring” places with “nothing to do” and “nowhere to go”. Although these themes were consistent across the groups, they did seem to vary somewhat with age and recreational preferences. Older youth tended to be more critical of the recreational opportunities available within their communities as did those youth who were not interested in the activities associated with Newfoundland’s natural environment.

Rural Youth and the Fisheries

Fishing and fish-related industries were central to how the youth understood and talked about their communities. One participant explained that fishing “symbolises everyday life in Port aux Basques.”



Photovoice image: fishing “symbolises everyday life in Port aux Basques”

Despite the importance fishing represented to the identity of their communities, many youth nevertheless talked about people working in the fishing industry as “struggling” to make a living and thus suggested that there was little future in the fisheries. Rather, the fishery seemed to be something from their parents’ and grandparents’ generations.

Female, 23 years:

Well, it seems like it’s been so long “well we can’t fish” for so long that it’s something that I personally don’t think about.

Male, 19 years:

I would do it.

Female, 22 years:

It’s not something I think about at all because it’s been gone since ’92. I was five years old.

Female, 23 years:

Yeah, it’s not in our generation. That’s how I feel. Fishin’, that was my pop’s time, that’s my dad’s time.

Though the fishing sector did not represent a career option for many of the young women, not even in the fish plant, several of the young men suggested that they would work in fishing and fishing related industries if they could.

Moreover, youth living in more rural locations, such as Burgeo and Isle aux Morts, seemed more likely to point to the fishing industry as a possible source of employment.

While youth in more rural locations were more likely to see fishing as a potential employer in the future, all youth talked nostalgically about how their communities were vibrant and thriving prior to the moratorium. This is an interesting memory given that many of the youth commented that they did not consider fishing as a potential employer. Clearly the rich legacy of Newfoundland fisheries is an important part of their historical recollection of their communities.

Although there appeared to be disparities in how young men and women related to the fishing sector as a potential form of employment, and in how youth from more rural locations talked about the fishing industry, many youth saw fishing as a time of unequalled prosperity and community success. Furthermore, youth living in more rural locations saw fishing as one of the only industries that could possibly bring jobs to their communities. Fishing was talked about as something that was from a generation gone by. Nonetheless, the participants shared many stories of how it used to be when fishing was still part of their community

fabric, thus leaving the impression that fishing narratives were still very much a part of the everyday language of youth living in rural communities.

Conclusion

Youth outmigration has been identified as a problem that puts the health and vitality of coastal Newfoundland communities in jeopardy. Quality work and recreation are central components to young people's connection to rural Newfoundland and their continued residence in these communities. As such, this research has set out to examine the work and recreational experiences of youth living in rural communities on the west coast of Newfoundland.

In summary, this research has shown that young people have complex connections to their rural communities. Connections that can perhaps best be described as a "love-hate" relationship. While some youth were uncritically positive about their rural communities and others entirely negative, most youth were somewhere between these extremes, expressing both affection and contempt. This report has outlined some preliminary findings from that research with the ultimate objective of aiding in the production of evidence-based youth retention policies and strategies that could help revitalize struggling rural communities in Newfoundland.

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