

NEBRASKA YOUTH SURVEY

Understanding the perceptions and perspectives of Nebraska's next generation



AUGUST 2022 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



BACKGROUND

In January 2020, Nebraska Community Foundation began work 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 of their Nebraska hometowns. Now, after three years, more than 3,200 students have participated in our youth surveys. In 2022, over 700 students responded to the online survey which was administered in rural communities of varying sizes and geography between January and May 2022.

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.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The 2022 Nebraska Youth Survey represents the views of 715 middle and high school students. The emerging patterns indicate that our hometowns are uniquely positioned to offer precisely the things Nebraska youth 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 love small communities. Once again, our student respondents expressed a strong preference for small communities. Only 4% say they would like to live in a community larger than those that exist in Nebraska. Safety, good schools, and proximity to family continue to be the top characteristics of their ideal community and the vast majority (71%) say there is no stigma associated with returning to your hometown as an adult.

***Dr. Schafer:** Greater Nebraska's youth continue to show great passion for their small communities. For the three years that we have conducted the survey, a majority of students have expressed that their community is an "ideal size," that they feel connected to the places they live (75% in 2022), and they are somewhat or extremely likely to live in the areas they live in now as adults (61% in 2022). Students say their communities are engaging places where they have strong family ties. The results of this survey, similar to prior years, present a hopeful future for Greater Nebraska with many students planning to be part of their communities for a long time.*

Greater Nebraska offers the jobs they want in abundance. Healthcare (22%), agriculture (14%), and education (8%) represented the top three industries our student respondents would like to work in in the future, but there seems to be a disconnect between what they want to do and what they perceive to be available where they live.

***Dr. Schafer:** UNO CPAR regularly provides analysis on the workforce of Nebraska. We have two consistent findings from these analyses: 1. Nebraskans are hardworking with a high labor force participation rate across all demographics; and 2. Filling the workforce of today and preparing for the workforce of the future are challenges statewide. We can see further evidence of these findings in the Greater Nebraska Youth Survey. Most Greater Nebraska youth, 87%, have a current job including summer jobs, babysitting or mowing lawns, demonstrating that archetypical strong Nebraska work ethic.*

Greater Nebraska youth are also on the right path to become the workforce of Nebraska's future. Student respondents largely plan to attend four-year colleges (60%) or community colleges (35%) after high school graduation. This is great news, as estimates suggest that today about 65% of all jobs require at least some postsecondary education including trade school, associate degree, or bachelor's degree. Moreover, a majority of individuals that work in high wage jobs in Nebraska have at least a bachelor's degree, including those industries Greater Nebraska youth want to work in such as healthcare and education. Our Greater Nebraska youth are preparing today to fill the high wage, high demand, high skill jobs of the future.

Unfortunately, some Greater Nebraska youth share a common misperception about career opportunities available in their hometowns. Of our student respondents, 48% said a job or business opportunity elsewhere would be their top reason

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

for leaving their community. However, many of the industries students are pursuing have job openings in their current communities. According to data from the Nebraska Department of Labor there are over 21,000 open jobs in Greater Nebraska right now. Importantly, industries that are hiring the most are industries Greater Nebraska youth have showed interest in, including healthcare, education, and recreation. Opportunities, like internships or job shadows are a great way to help students on their career path and ensure they understand the potential that exists in their own communities. Notably, only 14% of our respondents said they have had an internship experience to date.

There is work to be done. Students of all ethnic and racial backgrounds said they value “diverse cultural experiences” and were likely to take a stand against “unfair treatment;” however, there were notable differences among the experiences of students of color in our sample of respondents. They reported feeling less connected to the places they live and are less likely to live there in the future.

Dr. Schafer: *Diversity among young people is increasing especially in areas of Greater Nebraska. Our sample this year included 149 students of color, or 24% of the sample. Of those 149, 107 students identified as Latinx. The variation in race and ethnicity in the sample allowed us to examine how students of color compared to white students in answering a range of questions on the survey—we found statistically significant different responses across several questions. For instance, students of color were more likely to plan to go directly to work after high school, they wanted more organizations to engage with in their community, and they were less likely to want to live in the area they live now as an adult. In addition, they reported seeing unfair treatment at slightly higher rates than their white peers. With diversity increasing, outreach and inclusion is critical to population sustainability and growth in Greater Nebraska. The variation in response across demographic groups suggests some work needs to be done to ensure inclusion of all young Nebraskans.*