



# **FINDING A PLACE IN THE WORLD**

*Understanding Youth Outmigration  
from Shrinking Rural Communities*

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# KEY MESSAGES

**FINDING 1 Rural youth outmigration is driven by much more than purely economic factors. Young people from rural areas, like their urban and adult counterparts, move for a complex mix of subjective, personal reasons and objective, structural, economic reasons.** Scholars tend to agree that migration is a relational, biographical and emotional process that is driven by routines, cultures, values, identities, sense of place, sense of “home” and belonging, attachment to community and landscape, significant others, family contexts, school experiences, position and inclusion in their peer groups and communities, academic achievement and aspirations and additional ostensibly “non-economic” aspects of peoples’ lives. These factors intersect and partially determine a young person’s *predilection* for staying in, leaving and/or returning to their rural community, while “economic reasons”—primarily the pursuit of education and/or job opportunities—come to the deal, one way or the other.

**POLICY IMPLICATION |** There is no panacea when it comes to youth outmigration and rural population decline—no one overarching rural strategy will work in all places at all times, and thus context-specific policies based on context-specific knowledge are the best path toward sustainable rural futures and improved well-being for people of all ages, no matter what kind of community they live in. Improving the well-being of rural young people is a first step toward making communities attractive to them, and it has to start early in life. It also has to start from the ground up, by seeking at all levels of policy development to protect what makes rural life attractive already—particularly those aspects that seem unique to rural communities and attract people to live in them: for example, nature, recreation, pace of life, and social capital.

**FINDING 2** A significant proportion of the scholars whose work appears in this report explicitly warn that youth outmigration emerges as a policy problem primarily because it threatens the future of rural communities—not because it negatively impacts young rural outmigrants. **What is good for the community might not be good for the individual.** It follows that “youth retention” is a problematic idea in a society premised on freedom of choice, and not the ultimate goal for policy.

**POLICY IMPLICATION** | Policymakers should develop equally ‘supports to leave’ *and* ‘supports to stay,’ and make a concerted effort to avoid automatically conflating rural development goals with young people’s best interests. In line with these insights, it is recommended that policymakers and rural youth practitioners focus their population retention efforts on return migrants, shift their energies toward involving young people in community planning and decision-making, and recognize the heterogeneity of needs, abilities, desires and resources that underlie migration decisions.

**FINDING 3** **Dominant cultural narratives tend to frame rural places as “failed” and “failing” elements of a world that is moving toward urban lifestyles and standards; rural young people who stay in their home communities are characterized as failures too**—people who are stuck in place in a world on the move. These discourses are powerful motivators to young rural people considering where to live and what to do for a living, and they close off viable employment and educational paths, limit the range of options available to individual young people from urban and rural communities alike, and work to undermine rural sustainability. Importantly, these ideas are supported and perpetuated by parents, teachers and other authority figures in young rural lives.

**POLICY IMPLICATION** Rural policy should work *with*, not *against*, traditional rural industries, occupations, knowledge and skills, at the same time as it works *with*, not *against*, mobility and migration. In line with the development of ‘supports to leave’ alongside ‘supports to stay,’ rural education should include attention to viable occupations and requisite skills in rural areas, by including traditional rural and ecological knowledge in the classroom, inviting guest speakers in rural occupations, and resisting the temptation to groom the ‘best and brightest’ for urban life before they have had a chance to consider rural alternatives.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Wherever rural communities are ageing, losing young people, and shedding employment opportunities and amenities of all kinds, youth outmigration appears as a key policy issue. Communities, their governments, and subject experts believe that it demands some kind of directed policy action, but there is, as yet, no coordinated response or even a consensus about what, if anything, should be done.

This Knowledge Synthesis (KS) project examines Canadian and prominent international research on youth outmigration, drawing from literature in a number of fields within the social sciences: economics, geography, history, sociology, and youth studies. It systematically assesses the overall state of knowledge, foregrounding Canadian and especially Atlantic Canadian research, and referencing the Canadian context.

This exercise identified considerable agreement in the academic literature around particular policies and decision-making frameworks that are useful in addressing youth outmigration. Scholars and policymakers alike continue to see a need, and value, in ascertaining what factors keep young people in rural communities, what factors encourage them to stay or return, and conversely, what motivates them to leave and stay away. At the same time, however, this research also prompts us to ask some critical questions: whether youth outmigration is, in itself, a problem; and whether it is (also) a symptom or a cause of rural population decline. The answers to these questions are very important for guiding policy development.

Fortunately, the literature is rather conclusive on these two points. Many scholars forcefully argue, and others tend to implicitly support, that youth outmigration is not necessarily a bad thing. There is considerable consensus that youth *retention* should not be an immediate goal for public policy or for rural youth practitioners. Instead, the focus should be on developing equally ‘supports to leave’ and ‘supports to stay’, so that young people in rural places can make real choices about where to live and what to do with their lives. Youth outmigration is widely understood in these studies as

a response to, or a symptom of, deeper social and economic phenomena—and as a phenomenon that is itself better explained by subjective, biographical factors than by putatively objective economic push-pull factors.

Beyond these general agreements, the research synthesized here tells us that young people are and always have been highly mobile. The reasons and experiences, as well as the timing vis-à-vis major life course events, do change over time and place, but the enduring fact is that young people who are leaving their families of origin but not yet establishing families and careers of their own tend to move a lot, period. Furthermore, in contemporary Canada and comparable countries, they move for a complex mix of subjective, personal reasons and objective, structural, economic reasons. Scholars have found that migration is a relational, biographical and emotional process that is driven by routines, cultures, values, identities, sense of place, sense of “home” and belonging, attachment to community and landscape, significant others, family contexts, school experiences, position and inclusion in their peer groups and communities, academic achievement and aspirations and additional ostensibly “non-economic” aspects of peoples’ lives. These factors intersect and partially determine a young person’s *predilection* for staying in, leaving and/or returning to their rural community, while “economic reasons”—primarily the pursuit of education and/or job opportunities—come to the deal, one way or the other.

This framing of the issue should not, however, lead to the conclusion that young people are in control of their migration trajectories or that migration is a private, personal or individual issue. It is a social, structural issue, insofar as young lives are indelibly shaped by local and global power relations and inequalities. Class and gender, and the particularities of individual communities, have a demonstrable impact on who stays, who leaves, why, and with what consequences. Further complicating the issue, research findings in this area depict youth outmigration as an ongoing process, not a single, linear, one-time event; attitudes toward home, motivations, aspirations, relationships, needs, economic circumstances, values—all of these factors shift as peoples’ biographies unfold, which makes youth outmigration a tricky policy issue, but also introduces the hope that nothing is final. Communities that watch young people move away can stay connected, attract them back, and invite newcomers.

Attraction to rural communities, according to this literature, entails a host of personal, biographical, and practical/economic considerations. One of the primary factors inducing young people to stay in or move to a rural community is ‘attachment to place’ and social ties—feeling a

strong affinity to a locale, its landscape, its culture, history, people, and community. This usually applies to young people who stay in or return to a rural community, but people who opt to migrate in from an urban area are drawn by a search for the same kinds of things, bundled together in the form of a rural ‘lifestyle’, characterized by proximity to nature, recreation and leisure opportunities, beautiful scenery, a close-knit community, and a slower pace of life.

These perceived elements of rural life are particularly attractive to young families, who see rural places as safe and wholesome locations in which to raise children; they and other young adults are further enticed by lower costs of living, especially house prices.

But while return migrants, in-migrants and rural youth who ‘stay rural’ appreciate the isolation and distinction of rural places, many are also especially attracted to rural communities that are reasonably close to an urban centre, where they might commute for employment, entertainment, socialization and amenities.

Employment *within* rural communities is important too; rural students are highly motivated to stay or leave based on perceived employment opportunities (which are not, it should be noted, always reflective of *actual* employment opportunities), and return migrants and in-migrants usually need some employment prospects, for at least one household member. Interestingly, income does not show up as a strong inducement for migration—that is, people do not appear to move primarily for a raise—but people do put a lot of emphasis on job quality, and meaningful work. People who stay in or move to rural communities desire more than jobs; they want the meaning, security and sense of purpose that is commonly associated with *careers*.

Finally, among all the intangibles identified as motivations for migration, hope for the future might be the most perplexing. It is evident, across many of the studies synthesized here, that young peoples’ attitudes and beliefs about the future of their communities and their own prospects therein play a significant role in their migration decisions. This works in seemingly contradictory directions: young people who feel optimistic about the future of their rural communities are more likely to say they want to stay, those who feel pessimistic try to leave, but those who hold ‘fatalistic’ attitudes—



that a person cannot change his or her lot in life—tend to stick around. While hope may not be the kind of thing public policy can manipulate, its importance tells us that youth outmigration starts early—long before a person really has to begin thinking about what to do and where to go after high school.

Relatedly, it must be acknowledged that not all young people who stay in rural communities have truly chosen to do so. Although we might believe we live in a world where mobility is the norm, not everyone experiences this to the same degree. Some young people, owing to family and socioeconomic circumstances, relationships, disabilities and illnesses, school experiences, and social exclusion, do not confront migration as a choice at all (but cf. Foulkes & Newbould, 2008, on the mobility patterns of the poor).

This is especially problematic given that, according to many of the researchers referenced here, strong cultural discourses and narratives characterize rural places as “failed” and “failing,” and the young people who stay in them as “failures”—people who could not ‘make it’ in today’s highly mobile, urbanizing, globally-interconnected world. There is a persistent connection drawn, on the part of ordinary young people, their parents and teachers, media, art and literature, between urban life and conventional success—between ‘moving on’ from rural upbringings and ‘moving up’ in the world. Rural youth—and all of us—have few role models to point to as ‘successful stayers.’ While these might seem like ‘mere’ ideas, like all ideas, they have the power to change peoples’ behaviours and shape their entire lives.

Thus, it may come as no surprise that rural young people who aspire to higher education or to careers that are hard to come by in rural communities tend to migrate away, as do those who are overeducated for their first rural jobs. If a young person’s career and education aspirations cannot be supported by their home communities, they will leave. Young people whose parents are in-migrants, especially if they are also highly educated, tend to move away from rural communities too, because this has been the expectation since they were young and because they likely possess the social, cultural and economic capital to facilitate a move. At a more general level, youth outmigration is ‘normalized’ in many rural communities, such that even if people do not like it, they accept it as an inevitable part of rural life. Migration in such family and community contexts is thus partly about going with the flow.

Similarly, relationships with others can pull people away from rural communities just as much as they can draw people in: if a spouse moves away, or is met at university or while temporarily in an urban locale, rural youth are likely to leave their home communities to preserve the relationship. Conversely, negative relationships with family and friends can motivate young people to move away in search of new networks and freedom from those relationships.

At a more structural level, rural young people can feel like they do not ‘fit’ in their communities, are not valued, and are always being scrutinized. The feeling that ‘everybody knows everybody’, combined with a perceived lack of social spaces to be around other young people without adults watching, can lead young people to pursue urban life when they begin to establish themselves as adults.

Based on these findings, youth outmigration researchers in Canada and comparable settings tend to agree that while there is a role for public policy in addressing youth outmigration, youth *retention* is not the right target. One of the most compelling arguments in this vein is that what is best for individual young people is not always what is best for communities; there are, in other words, ‘conflicts of interest’ between rural economic development and young people’s well-being. Thus, there have to be ‘supports to leave’ *and* ‘supports to stay,’ and a concerted effort to avoid automatically conflating rural development goals with young people’s best interests. The following more specific policies and policy guidelines reflect these insights.

- ❶ Focus on return migrants—develop community assets and connections that are proven to attract people back.
- ❷ Involve young people in community planning and decision-making—for example, through the creation of a youth community council.
- ❸ Work *with*, not *against*, traditional rural industries, occupations, knowledge and skills—make room for rural skills and knowledges in school curricula, and help young people see opportunities for success in traditional rural occupations.
- ❹ Work *with*, not *against*, mobility and migration—support young people who want to leave, develop supports for households that commute short or long distances for employment, and support and encourage telework.

- 5 Recognize a heterogeneity of needs, abilities, desires and resources—understand, for example, that mobility itself is a resource that is unevenly distributed along class and gender lines.
- 6 Start with schools, and start early—recognize schools as more than educational institutions; they serve as community hubs, signals of vitality and hope for the future, and assets.
- 7 Protect what makes rural life attractive already—consider the impacts of policy decisions in all areas on quality of life, particularly those aspects that seem unique to rural communities and attract people to live in them: for example, nature, recreation, pace of life, and social capital.

## STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

The social scientific knowledge about youth outmigration, including its history, causes, consequences, and what is to be done to address it, is remarkably consistent compared to some other fields of inquiry. Yet scholars in this area are able to point out some avenues for future research, problems afflicting current research efforts, and questions that remain unresolved. These include more research on: the impact of school closures and other service loss on rural communities and potential in-migrants; the long-term outcomes and experiences of rural stayers, leavers and return migrants; case studies of successful rural stayers; the impacts of youth outmigration on home communities; and the ways in which different levels of motivators—individual/biographical and structural—interact.

## CONCLUSION

Researchers interested in young people's migration have mostly arrived at the conclusion that youth outmigration is not the problem for policy intervention. Young people leave rural communities for a plethora of subjective, biographical, interrelated and relational reasons, only some of which relate to the availability of jobs locally, and most of the evidence suggests they tend to benefit from leaving, at least in terms of income, education and life experiences. While researchers are also careful to emphasize that it is possible to earn a livable income, gain valid knowledge and experience a rich life within rural communities—and careful to challenge dominant narratives that depict rural people and places as backward, failed and failing—they also tell us that policy should not directly intervene

to discourage outmigration or ‘retain’ young people in their home communities. Instead, the objective has to be creating and sustaining communities with the characteristics that make distinctly rural life attractive to return migrants and new in-migrants, and inclusive and respectful of the young people who already call a rural place ‘home.’ Thankfully, there is no shortage of specific policies that meet these goals.

# KEY FINDINGS

## CONTEXT

When policy makers, politicians, researchers and the general public look at struggling rural communities in Canada, one of the first problems they notice is youth outmigration (OneNS Coalition, 2014). Discussions about the future of rural Canada, much of which appears to be in economic crisis, often gravitate toward the question of how rural places could retain or attract more young people to live, work, start families, build social cohesion, and eventually revitalize and sustain their communities. This is especially the case in Atlantic Canada, where the rural share of the population is larger than in the rest of the country, but is also shrinking.

The channeling of anxiety about rural populations toward youth outmigration in particular stems from several interrelated assumptions, only some of which are grounded in empirical evidence. The first assumption is that rural populations are shrinking, dramatically, to the point that they are on the verge of disappearing. In reality, there has been slow and steady rural depopulation in Canada and US for a century or more (Bryant & Joseph, 2001), with a short “turnaround” in the 1970s, followed by a “reversal” and another smaller “rebound” in the 1990s (Johnson & Fuguitt, 2000:27-28). To explain these population changes, researchers have mostly pointed to changes in the jobs available locally: namely, a decline of traditional employers in agriculture, manufacturing and resource extraction (Delisle & Shearmur, 2010; Jones, 1999) and the rise of the service and knowledge economy outside major cities. However, they have also cited an increase in the influence of non-economic factors in people’s migration decisions (i.e., the “normalization” of highly mobile lifestyles), and the contraction of space and time thanks to globalization and information communication technology (Johnson & Fuguitt, 2000:28; Halfacree, 2004).

While the diagnosis and explanation of population decline are true for many places, they do not apply to all; nor do they accurately reflect the situation in the Atlantic Provinces. Between 41 and 53% of each province’s population lives in rural parts of Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island—figures much higher than the Canadian average of 19%. Moreover, the rural proportion of each Atlantic province’s population only declined by

2-3% between 1996 and 2011. Compared to other historical periods, this represents a much slower rate of decline over the last twenty years (Statistics Canada, 2011). Granted, this relatively slow change at the aggregate level “mask[s] far-sweeping changes to the demographic, economic, social, and political organization within [the rural] population,” such as “the growth of new regional cities, the desertification of vast expanses of Canada’s countryside, the restructuring of services, and the re-evaluation of [rural] assets” (Reimer and Bollman, 2005:np). Nevertheless, rural population decline is not necessarily a new, worsening or uniform problem (but cf. Polese & Shearmur, 2006).

A second assumption, which *is* generally confirmed by statistical research, is that rural communities are ageing faster than urban populations (Dandy & Bollman, 2009; Reimer & Bollman, 2005). Although the outmigration of young people is nothing new for rural communities (Burrill, 1992; Kealey, 2014; Johnson & Fuguitt, 2000) and is thus not entirely to blame for population ageing, it has combined in recent decades with lower fertility rates and longer life spans, making more of an impact on the “age structure” of the communities of origin (Johnson & Fuguitt, 2000). A third and related assumption is that ageing populations inevitably put more pressure on publicly-funded services—most notably health care—while contributing less through income tax, because they tend to be retired from paid employment. The evidence to support this assumption is actually mixed, and suggests that policy decisions about how, where and what to spend actually dictate costs more than an ageing population’s inherent needs and capacity to contribute to GDP (Hauner, 2007; Reimer & Bollman, 2005).

A fourth assumption, grounded in empirical evidence, is that youth outmigration has negative implications for the people and communities they leave behind (Harling-Stalker & Phyne, 2014; Phyne & Harling-Stalker, 2011; Stockdale, 2004), but the research detailed below highlights why this does not necessarily mean communities should seek to “retain” young people, nor should it lead us to characterize all rural communities as dying or “failed” places (Looker & Naylor, 2009). A fifth assumption follows: that a place needs to have decent-paying, stable jobs, an attractive “lifestyle”, and amenities like schools, grocery stores, pharmacies, banks, and recreation facilities, to entice young people and families to live there (Kennedy, 2012; Gabriel, 2006).

## IMPLICATIONS

All of the assumptions above come together wherever rural communities appear to be ageing, losing young people, and shedding employment opportunities and amenities of all kinds, and they turn youth outmigration into a policy issue. Communities, their governments, and subject experts believe that youth outmigration demands some kind of directed policy action, but there is, as yet, no coordinated response or even a consensus about what, if anything, should be done. A selection of targeted policies have shown some anecdotal promise—tax incentives for new graduates, start-up funding and other resources for new entrepreneurs, child care funding for young families—but the extant research synthesized here suggests that the mechanisms behind young people’s work and family trajectories are not greatly or easily influenced by targeted policy changes (Delisle & Shearmur, 2010; Jentsch, 2006:237-8; Polese & Shearmur, 2006).

Nevertheless, there is some agreement in the academic literature around particular policies and decision-making frameworks; there are stories of success, of local revitalization, of communities that begin to grow again against the odds. Scholars and policymakers alike continue to see a need, and value, in ascertaining what factors keep young people in rural communities, what factors encourage them to stay or return, and conversely, what motivates them to leave and stay away. At the same time, however, this research also prompts us to ask whether *stemming youth outmigration* is really the best way to address rural population decline.

## APPROACH

This Knowledge Synthesis (KS) project examines Canadian and prominent international research on youth outmigration, systematically assessing the overall state of knowledge and identifying any gaps that could be addressed by Canadian researchers. It began with a systematic search for research on youth outmigration from rural and declining communities, using Google Scholar and the online journal holdings of Dalhousie University, identifying the most influential (i.e., widely cited) sources. A list of search terms is included as an appendix. This search yielded a list of 175 articles and books. Once we had an initial grasp on the scope of the field, we read and summarize the most prominent studies, the sources they cite the most, and the subsequent works that reference them, whether

by way of critique or agreement. We focus on Canadian research, and highlight Atlantic Canadian research, but the goal is to situate Canadian and Atlantic knowledge in a global research context.

We draw from literature in a number of fields within the social sciences: economics, geography, history, sociology, and youth studies. These studies looked at youth outmigration from many different perspectives and methodologies. They include, for example, historical case studies of outmigration from communities in the Atlantic Provinces, qualitative interviews with individual young people, and quantitative analyses of predictors of migration and patterns after settlement. We mainly draw on literature from the past 20 years, reaching further in the case of extremely influential and tone-setting pieces that continue to have relevance today.

## RESULTS

### *Young people are highly mobile, and this is not a new phenomenon*

Among studies reviewed for this report, two common findings stand out as being as close to laws of human behaviour as the social sciences ever get. The first finding is that, from the dawn of the last century to today, **young adults have tended to move a lot, period** (Kealey, 2014). Geographic mobility has historically been, and still is, most intense in young adulthood, particularly in the years after formal schooling but before most young people begin to settle into careers and form families in households of their own (Johansson, 2016; Johnson & Fuguitt, 2000). Among young people, those born in rural areas are even “more likely to leave home [and] more likely to leave at an early age” (Looker & Naylor, 2009: 40; Molgat, 2002). These patterns shape expectations and understandings of normal, acceptable life paths. Accordingly, in Atlantic Canada, rural communities have seen youth outmigration as a normal (even if negative) part of life for well over a century (Beattie, 1992; Brookes, 1976; Brookes, 1981; Kealey, 2014; Thornton, 1985). However, the “normal” patterns of outmigration have shifted over time, alerting us to the contingency of what is acceptable to communities and our definitions of youth: in Lewis’s (2001) historical analysis of migration patterns in rural New Brunswick from 1851-1901, it was the 10-25 age group that moved most often (45).



*Young people move for a complex mix of subjective, personal reasons and objective, structural, economic reasons*

The second common finding is that young people leave rural communities for a complexity of reasons that originate or reside at multiple scales. Like everyone else, **young people are** not simply “pushed” or “pulled” from place to place by jobs and income, but are rather **actively engaged in migration as a relational, biographical and emotional process that is driven by routines, cultures, values, identities, sense of place, sense of “home” and belonging, attachment to community and landscape, significant others, family contexts, school experiences, position and inclusion in their peer groups and communities, academic achievement and aspirations and additional ostensibly “non-economic” aspects of peoples’ lives** (Cairns, 2014b; Corbett, 2007b, 2009, 2010; Elder, King & Conger, 1996; Gabriel, 2002; Jones, 1999, 2004; Halfacree, 2004; Hanson, 2013; Howley et. al, 1997; Janning & Volk, 2017; Liebert, 2016:277; Marshall & Foster, 2002:68-69; McMillan & Lequieu, 2017; Ní Laoire, 2000; Niedomysl and Amcoff, 2011; Pretty *et al.*, 2006; Rérat, 2014; San Antonio, 2016; Stockdale, 2004; Thissen *et al.*, 2010; von Reichert, Cromartie & Arthun, 2011; but cf. Millward, 2005).

This is not to say that jobs and income do not matter at all. Rather, across most times and places covered in this Knowledge Synthesis review, scholars have found that the factors listed above intersect and partially determine a young person’s *predilection* for staying in, leaving and/or returning to their rural community (Cairns, 2014b; Kloep *et al.*, 2003; Looker & Naylor, 2009), while “economic reasons”—primarily the pursuit of education and/or job opportunities—come to seal the deal, one way or the other (MacMichael *et al.*, 2015:37; Bruce, Lister, & Ellis, 2005:27; Jones, 1999; Ní Laoire, 2000:237; Norman & Power, 2015; Rérat, 2014:73-75; Ulrich-Schad, Henly, & Safford, 2013; von Reichert, Cromartie & Arthun, 2011:44; Wiest, 2016:286). As Cairns (2017) theorizes, mobility should be regarded as a “reflexive” undertaking, in which people move “not so much [because of a] desire to make an immediate change in one’s economic fortunes,” but rather in search of “enhancement of one’s life situation in terms of the acquisition of new skills, inter-cultural competences and possibilities in life” (415).

It is important to note that some international research, particularly in places that tend to serve global economic development rather than grow rich from it—for example from rural parts of Asia and Latin America (e.g. Azaola, 2012; Barney, 2012; Bhandari & Ghimire,

2016; Brown, Scrase & Granguly-Scrase, 2017)—foregrounds economic motivators and constraints, examining young people who are propelled away from their rural communities in search of jobs and remittance income as the economies of their home communities restructure and globalize.

Nevertheless, in other contexts, this research emphasizes that **rural places are not entirely devoid of jobs**; instead, it is the *perceived job opportunities that seem to matter most to young people* (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006; McLaughlin, Shoff & Demi, 2014:470; Norman & Power, 2015), **and the perceived quality of the available jobs**. Rural work is not uniformly worse than urban work, but it tends to differ across rural/urban boundaries and across different rural communities in terms of security, hours, permanence, pay, skill requirements and opportunities for advancement, and there is some evidence to suggest that local networks and personal connections in the labour market tend to be more important for job searches in rural communities (Cartmel and Furlong 2000; Jentsch, 2006:230; Looker & Naylor, 2009:52). Moreover, employment challenges in rural communities are compounded by “inadequate infrastructure,” such that “a lack of public and private transport could be a serious problem in finding work” (Jentsch, 2006:231).

Thus, when rural youth say there are “no jobs,” what they really mean is that they do not have *access* to “good’ jobs”—or perhaps more to the point, they cannot access anything that could be spun into a *career* (Norman & Power, 2015:54; cf. Peou, 2016). This last point is important because it signals that rural young people are looking for some stability—in terms of their finances and their identities—and they see the establishment of a career as a step toward full adulthood and citizenship (Norman & Power, 2015:54; Peou, 2016).

Bearing in mind the persistence of employment and income as motivating factors, attention to the “non-economic” motivations has crystallized around several theories and concepts. The first is the importance of “identity” and “subjectivity”—phenomena we might commonly lump together and call a person’s “sense of self”. That this emphasis is found in studies of young people is not surprising, given that it is widely assumed among academics and laypeople alike that “identity [...] plays a crucial role in the process of becoming an adult” (Leyshon, 2008:4). The relevance of identity and subjectivity to studies of migration is also not surprising, given the common sense that where a person comes from is a critical part of who they are (Leyshon, 2008:3; Marshall & Foster, 2002; Norman &

Power, 2015) As Wilborg writes, in an examination of rural students “attachments” to their home communities, “the meaning people ascribe to their home places, and how they describe their relationship to their home place, can [...] be considered as a part of their formation and management of identity” (2004:417; cf. Leyshon, 2008:3).

But the focus on identity and subjectivity in youth outmigration research is further bolstered by the emergence of an influential paradigm in social scientific thought that characterizes our present era as a “late modern” or “liquid modern” moment (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994:39, 100) in which *identities—and the personal project of “constructing” an identity and a life story—are more important than ever before* (Leyshon, 2008; Looker & Naylor, 2009; Molgat, 2000; Molgat, Leblanc & Simard, 2008; Rérat, 2004:72). According to late modern theorists, before the development of the highly interconnected and “globalized” world we inhabit today, peoples’ identities and life stories were guided to a much greater extent by local and familial traditions and customs. People ostensibly had fewer choices about what to do with their lives: what to study (if they went to school at all), what to do for a living, who to associate with, and what sorts of experiences and commodities (foods, media, travel, etc.) to consume. Lives were shaped more by, and understood in terms of, “traditional notions of fate and chance, often defined locally” (Looker & Naylor, 2009:41; cf. Nugin, 2014:61).

Late modern societies, in contrast, are marked by increased “individualization” (Rérat, 2014:72), such that people must individually confront and answer, on a daily basis, the question “how shall I live?” (Giddens, 1991:14). This requirement ostensibly means that people’s lives and biographies are increasingly “disembedded” from geographic place (Rérat, 2014:72), driven by choices, “calculations” (Looker & Naylor, 2009:41), contingency and risk, and every person is understood to be responsible for him or herself alone. Such increased self-responsibility arguably presses people to be more *reflexive* (i.e., self-conscious and deliberate) about their choices and their identities (Giddens, 1991; Looker & Naylor, 2009). Accordingly, identities in late modern society are envisaged as fluid, negotiated things; at the same time, it is also recognized that people want to, try to, and do, *experience* a “stable self” (Leyshon, 2008:5) despite their shifting circumstances. Identities in late modern societies are understood as “projects” that people actively and deliberately work on (Giddens, 1991).

These tenets of late modern theory have particular consequences for rural young people. Like all young people, those who live in

rural places are confronted by the grand questions of “who am I?” and “what should I do with my life” by virtue of being on the cusp of adulthood *and* by virtue of living in the late modern world (San Antonio, 2016:254-5). But rural young people are doing this in the context of declining traditional industries and, relatedly, the decline of straightforward occupational succession within families—making a living the same way one’s parents and grandparents did (Jones, 1999).

Moreover, for rural young people, part of the answer to the “who am I?” question involves counterposing the identities and subjectivities of *urban* young people—such that rural young people understand themselves as *not-urban* (Venderbeck, Morse & Dunkley, 2003; Leyshon, 2008:15). But at the same time, through their interpersonal relationships, education experiences, and exposure to wider cultures and media of all kinds, young people are presumed to absorb the late modern premise that attachments to place constitute a “horror,” and to feel pressured to distance or “disembed” their possible futures and fates from those of their rural community (Jeffrey, 2010:499). This pressure creates fertile ground for the acceptance of a late modern life goal: the “*avoidance* of being fixed—to an identity, to a relationship, or to a place” (Jones, 1999: 2; Jones, 2004:211). Staying “at home in a world on the move,” in the late modern cultural repertoire, becomes as much of an achievement (ideologically and practically) as moving somewhere else (McMillan & Lequieu, 2017:203; Rye, 2011:172).

These connections between place, context and identity are encapsulated in the sociological concept of “**habitus**” [See Glossary], which many of the studies synthesized here use to examine and explain how young people experience, *as matters of identity*, the shifts in customs and cultures that accompany a move from one community to another (Marshall & Foster, 2002). This holistic, yet analytically precise concept is helpful for making sense of the unquantifiable, interrelated mix of anthropological, psychological and sociological factors influencing young people’s trajectories and shaping their experiences both of migration *and* of staying in place.

It also expresses the assumption that while certain factors may be, for all practical intents and purposes, beyond an individual young person’s control, **young people exercise a great deal of agency** [see Glossary] **in the migration process**; whether they leave or stay, they *actively* “weigh multiple influences” (McLaughlin, Shoff & Demi, 2014:467) in their lives and “can cope with and even overcome certain obstacles” (Leyshon 2008 22) as they move toward leaving or staying in their home communities after secondary school or

returning to them after post-secondary (Rérat, 2014). Moreover, mobility and migration become channels through which young people attempt to *find* or *display* their agency—their power to make choices (Azaola, 2012).

Accepting or seeking to test theories of late modernity, identity, and habitus, scholars who study rural youth outmigration have focused intently on how young people make decisions about where to live and ultimately who to *be*, and how such decisions might be interrelated (e.g. Cairns, 2017; Karabanow *et al.*, 2014; Jones, 2004; Leyshon, 2008). Key questions for scholars interested in rural youth outmigration include whether young people who stay in rural communities have different senses of self and make different choices than those who leave, and whether staying or leaving have any effects on individuals' identities (Molgat, Leblanc & Simard, 2008).

According to Looker & Naylor (2009), both in late modern theory and in the society it aims to describe, the “rural has become framed as a potential *deficit*, both subjective and structural, within the current political and policy climate that governs our understandings of smooth transitions” (44). This point underscores the influential channels between academic theories, public policies and peoples' self-understandings, in that the assumption of urbanity in academic working definitions of success exists in conversation with everyday discourses that make the same assumptions, creating a discursive environment where rural young people feel they must choose *between* success, however risky it may be, and rural life (Antonelli, 2016; Cairns, 2014a; Corbett, 2007b, 2009; Evans, 2016; Haartsen & Thissen, 2014; Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Norman & Power, 2015; San Antonio, 2016). As Vanderbeck, Morse & Dunkley (2003) contend, “place-based narratives continue to be imbued with social power, and have implications for, among other things, young people's senses of self, their thoughts about the future, and the constitution of youth cultures” (256).

But the study of youth in rural communities has shone light on the blind spots in late modern theory—specifically, the fact that the late modern individual is a decidedly urban person, and “participation” in the late modern “risk society” appears to demand a move to the city (Looker & Naylor, 2009:42; Farrugia, 2014). There is not much room in late modern theoretical propositions for the possibility of a *successful and rural life* (Looker & Naylor, 2009), or for a nuanced understanding of the risks *in* rural communities; there is little attention to the ways in which outmigrants maintain attachments to place, obligations to people (e.g., through remittances to

rural family; see Punch, 2007), and other instead, living in a rural community is characterized as one monolithic risk in and of itself (Looker & Naylor, 2009:44). Only the decision to migrate away from a rural community is framed, in much research, as an expression of late modern subjectivity. People who stay where they are—rural or urban—come to be framed as traditional, less modern subjects (Molgat, Leblanc & Simard, 2008:18). The problem is that careful investigations into the complex relationships people have with geographic places tend to challenge simple dichotomies of “rural crisis” versus “urban progress” (Norman & Power, 2015:51).

### *Young lives are shaped by local and global power relations and inequalities*

The foregoing set of assumptions about the primacy of biography, young people’s agency and their putatively “non-economic” motivations poses a risk in studies of youth outmigration: namely, the risk of framing migration as a rather individualistic phenomenon, diminishing the influence of the real and persistent inequalities among people and communities, and the persistence of social ties for many people and places—the fact, in other words, that “economic development” across the world, and the transition to “late modern” life, has happened *unevenly*. Rural communities and rural-dominated regions are disproportionately disadvantaged, marginalized, made dependent, and playing catch-up with the mostly urban places that benefit more from global economic growth and development (Punch *et al.*, 2007:209; Jeffrey, 2010:500; Jones, 2004:211). As such, rural places are made “peripheral to the cultural ideal of a globalised metropolitan youth culture”, and this placement affects how young people grow up (Farrugia *et al.*, 2014:1048).

Even among rural communities, there are additional differences that put some areas at further disadvantage relative to urban areas. There is rural, and there is *isolated*; the two are not the same. There are rural places on the periphery of major urban centres, and they can offer more work and social opportunities than places that are located far away from the closest urban centre. There are rural centres—small towns with clusters of amenities and a discernible ‘heart.’ And then there are remote areas comprised mainly of residences that are physically very far from each other, where people “get by” on multiple income streams through “occupational pluralism” or a “pluriactivity of income-generating activities (Kuhmonen *et al.*, 2016:98).

This variation in what “rural” actually means has been found to matter in studies of rural young people’s expectations about whether or not they will stay in their communities after school (Kloep et al., 2003), because it impacts employment opportunities, social life and leisure possibilities. However, it is not a singular relationship where increasing isolation means increasing outmigration; while some “previous research has shown that growing up in remote regions is connected to higher aspirations for mobility (Skrbis et al., 2014; cited in Leibert, 2016:269), there is some scattered evidence that young people in *more* remote places tend to feel more connection to place and a greater desire to stay—to enjoy specific leisure and lifestyle benefits, including the freedom to have a “self-made life” (Kuhmonen *et al.*, 2016:98); whether or not they are able to stay, when it is time to establish an independent household, is another matter (Kuhmonen *et al.*, 2016:98).

Descriptions of late modern life tend to presume an urban context, and they also imply a Western locale—reflecting life in countries in the Northern hemisphere that experienced modern transitions such as urbanization, globalization and deindustrialization in roughly the same ways at roughly the same times. While there is evidence that similar processes of the “disembedding” of rural life, the decline of traditional livelihoods, and increased mobility are leading to late modern lifestyles in Eastern societies as well (e.g. Peou, 2016, on the Cambodian experience), these processes are not playing out in the same ways across (or even within!) geographic boundaries.

As Ní Laoire (2000) argues, this means that even if researchers find value in the late modern theoretical concepts of “individualization” and “disembedding,” **youth migration “must be placed in the context of [...] uneven development and marginalisation”** (231). Such contextualization means shifting away from a focus on individual lives, chances, opportunities and disadvantages, and thinking “sociologically” about structures and relations that exist far above the level of the individual. Considering rural youth outmigration, this entails recognizing that “young people have been found to be, in some senses, disadvantaged as an age group, being unable to access many of the facilities and structures open to adults. But young people are also a heterogeneous group: some are privileged and others further disadvantaged by gender, by ethnicity, by social class, or by disability. Young people in rural areas may be additionally disadvantaged and excluded, and for them in particular access to transport and leisure, issues of identity and the visibility of living in small communities might be added to the list” (Shucksmith, 2004:45).

Furthermore, as Jentsch (2006) writes:

The barriers [rural] young people may experience are likely to be of an indirect nature. It is not prejudice which will prevent them from gaining access to education, training and employment, but it may well be issues such as a lack of mobility and financial burdens” (Jentsch, 2006:234).

**Young peoples’ movements and underlying motivations are thus intertwined with global, “structural” forces**—from the rapid advancements in internet communications (and their increasing necessity in nearly every realm of life), to the casualization of many once-stable jobs, the boom and bust of oil-based economies, and the polarization of wealth and income (Norman & Power, 2015; Walsh, 2013).

*Within* rural communities and among rural people, there are further structuring patterns of inequality—advantage and disadvantage, inclusion and exclusion, dominance and marginalization—that may well “determine youth’s experiences [more] than their geographical location” (Jentsch, 2006:235). Two such dimensions of social inequality are explored here: class and gender.

### *Class and youth outmigration*

It is evident from the research synthesized here that the propensity to migrate is classed. What this means, from a sociological point of view, is that migration is shaped by a person’s socioeconomic status, which includes their own individual income, education, and occupational prestige, as well as the various forms of economic capital, **social capital, and cultural capital** [see Glossary] transmitted to them by their parents and significant others.

For starters, there is already a significant overlap between low income and rurality (Karabanow *et al.*, 2014:116). But even within rural communities, young people with educated parents are more likely to leave when they finish compulsory education (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006; McLaughlin, Shoff and Demi, 2014:470; Stockdale, 2004:177). Indeed, rural youth from the “upper” classes—those whose parents have more social and economic capital—are not only more likely to migrate away from their communities, they also experience greater returns as a result of doing so (Rye, 2011:175). As Shucksmith explains, “young people from rural areas become integrated into one of two quite separate labour markets—the national (distant, well-paid, with career opportunities) and the local (poorly paid, insecure, unrewarding and with fewer prospects)” (2004:46).



In part, the relationship between parental background and young peoples' trajectories is about the transmission not just of money but of a set of values and expectations, as is evidenced by the fact that people whose parents migrated *in* to a rural community are far more likely to migrate *out* when they come of age. Referencing her data on this topic, Jones (1999) explained that immigrant parents were more likely to be middle class, thus children of in-migrants may have access to migration opportunities (e.g., kin in other places; personal knowledge of other places) and a habitus that supports and encourages mobility and cosmopolitanism (Jones, 1999).

These findings serve as important correctives to late modern theory, because they show that mobility *itself*, "as a strategy of self-realisation," is "not available to all rural youth" (Nugin, 2014:62). In practical terms, this is evidenced by finding that access to a vehicle is often the gatekeeper in when and whether young people get to more lucrative work opportunities (Shucksmith, 2004:46), and in whether or not people leave rural communities to move to urban ones (Stockdale & Catney, 2014:90).

At the same time, there are also correlations between extreme low income and outmigration. Research on the Bolivian experience suggests that rural youth with limited financial means who migrate may face "increased pressure to obtain cash" and will opt for employment instead of further education, possibly limiting their earnings, career prospects, and fulfillment in the long run (Punch, 2007). Karabanow *et al.*'s (2014) research in the Canadian context highlights the invisible phenomenon of rural youth homelessness, and the even wider issue of housing precariousness in rural communities. Both of these problems can push already marginalized young people out of their home communities for urban areas in search of more robust supports. Indeed, previous studies found that "a substantial number of urban homeless youth migrated to cities from rural contexts" (Karabanow *et al.*, 2014:114; cf. Stockdale, 2004:171).

Even the "late modern" *subjectivities* thought to guide and structure young peoples' migration decisions are classed. While theories of late modernity tend to be "applied to everywhere and to everyone," Shucksmith (2004) warns that "individualisation amongst young people is highly uneven"; some people are actively involved in these life projects and others are not; some are more bound by "social commitments and assurances" and others are more free-floating (Shucksmith, 2004:48), for reasons that have to do with class in all its aforementioned dimensions.

Nevertheless, the relationship between class and migration is not unidimensional or completely deterministic. For example, among Norwegian youth, Rye (2006) found that those “on the top and the bottom of the social ladder” tend to view rural life more positively than those in the middle (Rye, 2006:409). The author concludes that “rural youths’ habitus sets its imprint on their future actions, which is not the same as claiming that the class habitus represents an obligatory and narrowly predefined trodden path, with no escape opportunities” (Rye, 2011:179).

### *Gender and youth outmigration*

Young rural women are more mobile than their male counterparts. Young women tend to leave home earlier than young men, in rural and urban places alike (Jones, 2004:210), and they are more likely to migrate away from rural communities for education (McLaughlin, Shoff & Demi, 2014:459) and “more female-friendly labour markets” (Johansson, 2016; Kloep et al, 2003; Leibert, 2016:268; Measham & Fleming, 2014:377; Rauhut & Littke, 2016; but cf. Looker & Naylor, 2009:49; Wiest, 2016:280). At the same time, young women’s explanations of their migration decisions are more likely to focus on relationships (Looker & Naylor, 2009:57; Walsh, 2013). But there is evidence that young women and men do not differ this much in terms of their “dreams” or aspirations, suggesting that external factors and necessity play more of a role than desire in creating the demonstrable gender differences in migration patterns (Kuhmonen *et al.*, 2016:98; Wiest, 2016).

However, there is little evidence of a clear-cut case of declining rural employment opportunities for women. Young men in rural areas also face a decline of traditionally masculine jobs (Brandth & Haugen, 2005; Jeffrey, 2010:501; Norman & Power, 2015:52), and young rural men are more likely to be unemployed than young rural women (Johansson, 2016). However, some studies have found that young rural women are more likely than young rural men to be involuntarily part-time or underemployed (Johansson, 2016), and others have found that young women perceive fewer paid job opportunities in their rural communities (Timar & Velkey, 2016). There is persistent “occupational segregation” in rural communities, where young men tend to work in volatile but full-time, traditional industries, while young rural women work in service and retail, which tends to be less volatile but is rarely full-time. This kind of occupational segregation may lead to women feeling “a greater ‘push’ (or ‘pull’) to the city than young rural men,” because the sectors where

women tend to work often “[require] a higher standard of education,” and post-secondary programs tend to be found outside rural communities (Jones, 2004:212). Given the rise of rural development strategies to attract large manufacturers to rural areas, it may be that the decline of certain “traditional” rural jobs, which have historically been coded as masculine jobs, have merely given way to another set of similarly “gendered” employment options (Reimer & Bollman, 2005) and rural men and women alike are now adjusting to this new reality.

Nevertheless, despite worsening economic prospects in rural communities for both young men and women, “remote and economically weak regions are affected by selective out-migration and a shortage of young women” in particular (Johansson, 2016). In Sweden, for example, women are more likely to out-migrate *and* in-migrate than men (Johansson, 2016:294). However, they also tend to return or move to rural areas when they start their own families (Johansson, 2016; Wiest, 2016).

The gender imbalances in some rural populations (specifically, more men than women) that result from selective outmigration are worrying for several reasons. First, they exacerbate population loss because they lower the possible fertility rate (Leibert, 2016:267). Second, there is evidence to suggest that a concentration of men—particularly if they are underemployed, unemployed and/or experiencing poverty—creates the conditions for a plethora of social problems from alcohol abuse to political extremism and hate groups (Leibert, 2016:267). Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that youth outmigration, including the higher outmigration of young women from many rural communities, might be a symptom rather than a problem in itself—thus the intervention point for policymakers is not at the selective outmigration of women, but rather at the social and economic conditions that seem to drive the process and underlie its negative consequences.

Importantly, the “gendering” of rural work and youth outmigration is not purely about employment and income; it is also about a “macho” culture (Rauhut & Littke, 2016) that arguably characterizes many rural communities. The **rural idyll** [see Glossary] itself arguably positions women as wives and mothers, tending homes, rather than individuals with careers and leisure pursuits; even leisure is constructed as something men do in rural places (Wiborg, 2004:428-9). Accordingly, Liebert (2016:268) writes that “young women perceive rural communities as more intrusive, constraining

and controlling and are subject to stricter social control than young men” (citing Haugen and Villa, 2006).

However, other findings challenge this rendering of the gendered rural community. Looker & Naylor (2009) reported that their findings, echoing those of some previous studies, suggest that rural places, including those with resource-based economies, are not necessarily or simplistically “male” spaces, dominated by “male” interests. Rye (2006) similarly found “no sound foundation in the data for the claim that rural youth view the countryside primarily as a masculine arena” (415; cf. Wiest, 2016). Moreover, notions of masculinity in rural communities, just like everywhere else, change over time and adapt to fit new circumstances (Brandth & Haugen, 2005).

In fact, while “boomtowns” have a reputation for being male-dominated and fairly hostile to women and families, many researchers have troubled this characterization (Dorow & O’Shaughnessy, 2013). Measham and Fleming (2014) show, for example, that extractive industries that are geographically dispersed and more technological—such as “coal seam gas”, commonly known in Canada as “fracking”—actually appear to increase the population share of young, educated people, including more women, who come to work in construction, retail, food and accommodation, and other industries supported by the increases in gas-related jobs.

Scholars have also shed light on the gendered *outcomes* of rural youth outmigration. For one, women who migrate from one province to another see less of an income boost than men; in fact, they are more likely to *lose* income as a result of the move (Khan, 2015). This may partially explain why women have also been found to be more likely to return (Stockdale & Catney, 2014). Meanwhile, women who stay, if they have children, are disadvantaged by a lack of daycare and meaningful, well-paying employment opportunities—for many, it is not that they conceive a child and decide to “stay rural” and exit the paid labour force; it is that they conceive and, in a rural community, this becomes a major barrier to labour market success because there are not enough child care options and jobs do not pay enough to warrant spending money on care (Looker & Naylor, 2009:58; Ryser et al, 2013).

All of these findings about the heterogeneity of young lives underscores Jones’s (1999) point that “the relative emphasis of social structure and self-agency in defining identity and determining behaviour will continue to vary amongst young people and over time” (Kloep *et al.*, 2003:107; cf. Shucksmith, 2004).



Beyond these first three major, overarching empirical findings—that young people are highly mobile, that they move for myriad economic *and* non-economic reasons, and that their movements are shaped by structural inequalities—there are several recurring ideas. These are theories and related assumptions that tend to frame research on youth outmigration, and they are worth understanding because they offer some important foundational knowledge and insights to policymakers, media, communities and researchers interested in making sense of and addressing youth outmigration from shrinking rural communities.

*“Youth” and “rural” are social constructions that change over time and place*

Many of the studies examined here begin from the premise that **“youth,” like “adulthood,” is a social construction.** When social scientists refer to something as a “social construction,” they mean that its meaning is not natural, inherent, or fixed, but that it is actively worked out through social interactions, shared understandings and values. If youth is a social construction, this means that expectations and understandings of youth and the transition to adulthood—and even the very existence of a “transition” itself—vary over time and across cultures, responding to structural, local and global political, economic and demographic contexts (Jeffrey, 2010:497).

Importantly, this does not mean that researchers do away with the concept of youth. **Youth is obviously an “identity category” (Jentsch, 2006) and a social status;** people understand themselves and others through it, without having to think much about it. Treating “youth” as a social construction means that researchers question the base assumptions about what “youth” should look like, and they are careful about implying or imposing a singular ideal version of youth, the transition to adulthood, or patterns of youth migration. Even if a society seems to have a sense of “normal” childhoods, youths, adulthoods, and the transitions between them (Looker & Naylor, 2009:49), researchers remind their audiences that *ideal* versions and “normal” versions of youth, adulthood, transitions from school to work, and the related phenomenon of youth outmigration, depend on what we want and value as a society.

In Canada, like other Western countries, it is widely accepted that **part of “becoming an adult” is a matter of negotiating an adult**

identity apart from one's identity as a young person (San Antonio, 2016), and this process often entails moving out of the parental home and out of the home community (Jones, 1999:2; Stockdale, 2002:42) to gain wider experiences and “see something” (Nugin, 2014:61; Wiest, 2016:287). Culturally, Canadians tend to endorse this understanding of adulthood, where “moving out” is part-and-parcel with “moving up” and “growing up”—evidenced recently in the public concern over Statistics Canada's finding that the *majority* of Canadians in their twenties still live with their parents (Statistics Canada, 2017b). In other words, it appears that a “normal” Canadian life course involves, at some point, dislocating from one's parental home.

Some scholars also contend that rural is a social construction too—“rural” is what we collectively say it is, and thus its definition is context-dependent and not fixed (Rye, 2006:410). This may seem slippery but it does help account for the diversity of rural experiences (Rye, 2011), the unevenness of rural decline, and the wide discrepancies in how scholarly and state-led studies conceptualize rural. Moreover, “defining rurality as a subjective and socially constructed phenomenon, located in people's minds, rather than as a material and objective reality, does not preclude taking structural phenomena into account in order to explain what social constructions people hold” (Rye, 2006:413).

***Youth outmigration is an ongoing process, not a single, linear, one-time event***

Despite the tendency to think of “normal” life transitions in linear terms, the research shows that young people *rarely* make a simple, one-time, linear transition from the dependence of youth to the independence of adulthood; parents support their children long into adulthood, financially and emotionally (Jeffrey, 2010:501; Sage, Evandrou & Falkingham, 2013). Scholars studying young lives have found compelling evidence that “adulthood” is not something that is achieved, once and for all (Irwin, 1998). Instead, their findings lend support for the theory that there are “critical moments” in young lives, where relationships to institutions, communities, and other people can be transformed to “shape action in particular spans of time” and to bring “new visions of the future [...] into play” (Jeffrey, 2010:498).

Importantly, what the notion of “critical moments” tells us is that “processes of belonging and leaving [are] ongoing”; there are always

“migrants who [want] to return” and “stayers who [want] to leave” (Jones, 1999:6). There are also always young people who leave home early, young people who “boomerang” back to the parental home and childhood community after setting out on their own, and young people who “fail to launch” at all (Jones, 2004:209-10; Molgat, 2002). There are many critical moments and transitions *during* what we call adulthood that could cause a person to leave, move to, or come back to a rural community too (Stockdale & Catney, 2014:92-95).

These are the moments that arguably matter most in any policy intervention designed to influence rural young people’s decisions about whether to stay in or leave their communities, and to attract young people and young families who are not completely settled in place to shrinking rural communities. If policies ignore the nuance and treat youth homeleaving as something that has a “correct” age (Jones, 2004:211), they will not reflect peoples’ lived experiences, and they may miss the mark.

### *Youth outmigration is not, in itself, a bad thing*

A scan of the literature confirms Jentsch’s (2006) simple but provocative claim that the plight of rural young people comes into focus not because we are particularly concerned about their unique disadvantages and poor individual outcomes, but because their outmigration depopulates communities. Most studies draw direct connections between the “loss” of young people, which is their focus, and extraneous outcomes that are not *often* empirically measured: social instability (but cf. Lewis, 2001), increased fiscal pressure on local governments, an erosion in the “basis for commercial and public services” (Johansson, 2016:294; Elshof & Bailey, 2015; Stockdale, 2004), “reduced consumer spending, reduced supply of entry-level workers, [a] lack of entrepreneurial opportunity” (Looker & Naylor, 2009:44), and the decline of agricultural economies and other traditional rural industries (Punch, 2007).

At the same time, most scholars who reflect explicitly on the problem recognize that “meeting the needs of the community [may not be] identical with meeting the needs of young people”, and “there may sometimes be conflicts of interests” (Jentsch, 2006:235-6; cf. Pretty et. al, 2006; Shucksmith, 2004:54; Walsh, 2012). This is especially clear when one considers the proven correlation between increased education and outmigration; if a community wanted to retain its youth, it could discourage formal secondary and post-sec-

ondary education since these are tightly linked to the decision to move away. That no community in its right mind would do this alerts us to the “conflict” between what is best for a community and what is best for the individual young person (Kloep *et al.*, 2003:106). As Jentsch (2006) puts it, because “the experience of life outside one’s home community tends to be enriching for the individual,” economically and otherwise, policies that interfere with such enrichment should strike us as misguided (237-8).

There is even some evidence that the impacts of youth outmigration on the home communities might be overblown. For example, Lewis (2001) found that outmigration did not create social instability among the community’s remaining inhabitants; the fact that there is discrepancy between individual migration patterns and those of the whole household—i.e., the fact that young people may leave but their parents stay—means that their outmigration does not throw the whole community into disarray.

This is not to say that youth outmigration’s impact on rural communities should be ignored. For example, Punch & Sugden (2013) found that youth outmigration from rural communities in upland Asia reduced their contributions to farm labour and threatened the viability of their families’ farms. Migrating away may have had many positive consequences for the individual young people, but the communities they left behind suffered, both in terms of lost agricultural output and in terms of a loss of “ecological knowledge” (2013:255). As the authors put it, “global economic restructuring led to deskilling and community destabilisation which resulted in the displacement of young people from their local environment” (267).

However, other studies have found that outmigrants who return to their agricultural communities of origin may bring back the skills and technologies to modernize agricultural operations. This may still represent a loss of ecological knowledge, and may not actually contribute to the long-term sustainability of the agricultural sectors, but it challenges the notion that outmigration automatically causes agriculture to wither and die (Qian, Wang & Zheng, 2016; Qin & Liao, 2016). Whatever the case, because research finds that young in-migrants, including return migrants, bring valuable “new viewpoints, experiences, and knowledge” to rural communities (MacMichael, 2015:38), policies that try to stem migration in any direction may work to stifle social change and diversity.

This appears to put policymakers in a conundrum: to do something about youth outmigration or let it happen? But this is a mischar-



acterization of the problem. Instead, if policymakers and communities see youth outmigration as a *symptom* of larger social issues (MacMichael *et al.*, 2015:38) rather than a problem in itself, they can **focus efforts on making *communities* more “attractive” (Jentsch, 2006:237-8) instead of making young people more immobile.**

An embrace of this philosophy leads many scholars in this field to endorse the provision of “both ‘support to leave’ alongside ‘support to stay’ (Burnett *et al.*, 2001, p. xvi; in Kloep *et al.*, 2003:106).



The foregoing leads to more practical, empirical questions: namely, what attracts or retains young people in rural communities, and conversely, what leads them away? We begin with the positive question, and move on to consider its opposite.

## WHAT ATTRACTS YOUNG PEOPLE TO RURAL COMMUNITIES?

*“Some question why, despite having been liberated from place, we as a nation still search for some idealized place to live equivalent to an agrarian community, where one is known, attached, nurtured, or can sustain a coherent identity” (Salamon, 2003:19)*

Before we study the problem of why young people leave rural communities, we must understand why people stay in rural communities. In the literature, such “attraction” factors appear as a mix of the qualities young people appreciate while growing up in rural communities, qualities return migrants say brought them back to rural communities, and those that new in-migrants report as having attracted them to their new rural homes. Across the studies synthesized here, one main reason for coming, returning and staying comes to the surface immediately: strong attachments to place and to family and a sense of “belonging” (Kloep *et al.*, 2003:102; Pretty *et al.*, 2006).

### *Attachments to place and people*

The literature unequivocally shows that people who have higher levels of “attachment” and strong social ties in a place are less likely to leave, and more likely to return after pursuing higher educa-

tion elsewhere. Importantly, attachment to place is usually *more* than attachment to a physical locale (but cf. Cassidy & McGrath, 2015; Morse & Mudgett, 2017; von Reichert, Cromartie & Arthun, 2011 and Wiborg, 2004 on the significance of *land* among return migrants who grew up in farming families). Rather, young people are attached to the symbolism around a place (Wiborg, 2004, p. 428), and to a number of cultural or social values that are distinct in that location. Attachment to place is connected, in the literature, to a sense of home (Janning & Volk, 2017)—with home defined as a “bundle of material resources, social construction, and embodied experiences” (McMillan & Lequieu, 2017:209; San Antonio, 2016:256)—and an identity, formed in childhood and youth and forged against an “imagined” urban “other” (Leyshon 2008 12; Vanderbeck, Morse & Dunkley, 2003).

Place attachment is also attachment to the people in it (Elder, King & Conger, 1996), which includes a generalized “community sentiment” (Pretty et al., 2006), as well as diffuse “social networks” (Rauhut & Littke, 2016:306) and particular relationships with particular people (Flint, 2007). This association between people and place attachment is, according to researchers, especially true for women (Looker & Naylor, 2009:57; MacMichael *et al.*, 2015:42; Rauhut & Littke, 2016; Rérat, 2014). Relationships with parents (i.e., do they want to live near them) also strongly determine young people’s aspirations to stay in or leave rural communities (McLaughlin, Shoff & Demi, 2014:270; Stockdale, 2002:50). Relatedly, young people have been found to stay for social support (Jones, 2004:218) that they do not find in the city; connection to family and friends, and desires to raise their own children in the same environment (Kloep *et al.*, 2003:101; Looker & Naylor, 2009:60; Pretty *et al.*, 2006; Rauhut & Littke, 2016:306, 309). There is an interesting consequence of this attraction factor, namely that it may entail significant pressures on rural parents of young adults who increasingly bounce between “independent” living in cities and the rural parental home (Sage, Evandrou & Falkingham, 2013).

Importantly, place attachment is a two-way street. In order to feel attached, many young people need to feel included in local decision-making and respected in the local community. “Youth who feel respected, feel connected to adults, and perceive that their contributions are valued may be more likely to build strong attachments to their families and communities” (Cargo et al. 2003; Larson, Walker, and Pearce 2005; Nicholson, Collins, and Holmer 2004; cited in McLaughlin, Shoff & Demi, 2014:456).

### *Lifestyle*

Although Johansson (2016) found that recreation, scenery and leisure attracted older adults rather than young people in their twenties to rural areas, more studies find that young people appreciate the beauty and simplicity of rural landscapes and “nature” (Bijker, Haartsen & Strijker, 2012; Flint, 2007; Wiborg, 2004) and interpret living in them as a “privilege” (Leyshon, 2008; McLaughlin, Shoff & Demi, 2014). Young adults in MacMichael *et al.*’s case studies of in-migrants said they moved to rural communities in search of “simpler”, “slower” and “more balanced” lives, in beautiful, scenic communities (2015:42, 45). Young in-migrants in Bijker, Haartsen & Strijker’s research prioritized the “quietness” and “physical qualities of the environment” in rural areas (2012:495). While growing up, young people have been found to value the “purposeful leisure” (Kloep *et al.*, 2003:101) characteristic of rural places, and the opportunity to “make one’s own fun” (Leyshon, 2008:14-15). Without diminishing the many studies that challenge this version of the “rural idyll” as a “myth”, noting the negative experiences of rural life (Matthews *et al.*, 2000; Punch *et al.*, 2007; Timar & Velkey, 2016), the self-reported motivations of rural young in-migrants and return migrants suggest that for many people there is something inherently attractive about rural living (Bijker, Haartsen & Strijker, 2012).

### *Family formation and child-rearing*

Family formation can keep young parents in their home communities *and* attract young parents and couples to rural places. For example, actually having a child—especially for women—is correlated with *staying* rural (Looker & Naylor, 2009:56-7). Rural youth also tend to have children earlier (Molgat, Leblanc & Simard, 2008:14), but not because rural youth inherently do things early; rather, it is partly that “migration has a delaying effect on transitions to adulthood,” so *not* moving away allows family formation to happen earlier (ibid.:17).

In terms of attracting new or return migrants, Johansson (2016) found that “out-migration of young women creates in-migration some years later and then often as return-migrants” (299). In general, in-migrants tend to see rural communities as good places “to raise a family” (Bijker, Haartsen & Strijker, 2012; Johnson & Fuguitt, 2000:34; MacMichael, 2015:42; Rérat, 2014), and people of all ages perceive rural communities as “safe” (Andresen, 2012; Reimer and Bollman, 2005:np).

### *Proximity to an urban centre*

Young “commuter” families (Johansson, 2016; Kloep *et al.*, 2003; Rérat, 2014:79-80) have been found to prefer rural communities within driving distance of urban centres (cf. Flint, 2007). They also believe this would attract other families at their stage of life (MacMichael, 2015:43). Millward’s (2005) finding that isolation—measured in terms of the distance from a major urban centre—was an “independent cause” of outmigration also supports this view. At the same time, there are some households that engage in “long-distance labour mobility,” where one or more members migrates temporarily for work in order to maintain income and geographic stability of the household (Walsh, 2012).

### *Lower cost of living*

While there are conflicting findings around this point, many studies point to lower house prices as a motivator for young adults contemplating a move or return to a rural community. Young adults cited lower housing costs as an attractive feature of rural communities and said it made up for any sacrifices in earnings relative to comparable urban jobs (MacMichael, 2015:43). Return migrants count lower housing costs among the “pros” when considering a move (von Reichert, Cromartie & Arthun, 2011:43). This may not hold true in some international markets where housing is out of reach even in rural areas (Stockdale, 2002), but in the Canadian context houses in rural communities tend to cost a fraction of the cost of comparable houses in more populated areas. This may be why Statistics Canada’s recent analysis of young adults’ living arrangements shows that “among rural areas (regions located outside CMAs and census agglomerations), the share of young adults living with their parents was lower [than the Canadian average], at 32.2%.” But even here, the picture is mixed: “the Atlantic provinces and the territories stood out as the only regions in the country where the share of young adults living with their parents was higher in rural areas than in urban areas” (Statistics Canada, 2017b).

Lower cost of living may also play a role in encouraging some rural youth to stay put in their communities. As Looker & Naylor (2009) explain, “while rural families may not be able to help fund further education or expose their children to what Bourdieu calls cultural capital, such as museums, they are often able to provide access to housing for young adults” (58).

### *Quality, meaningful jobs*

While the studies examined here foreground “non-economic” motivations, they acknowledge that jobs and income do attract young people to rural places (Antonelli, 2016; Beattie, 1992; Culliney, 2017; Finnie, 2004; White, 2012). However, they tend to emphasize that income is not as important as meaningful, stable work. As Norman & Power (2015) contend, stated desires for jobs reflect deeper desires for “a community space where ‘everybody ... [has] something to do’, a desire that bespeaks an affective connectivity, a healing of sorts of the collective community skin” (61).

Moreover, it appears that “perceived” job opportunities (McLaughlin, Shoff & Demi, 2014:470; Norman & Power, 2015) are more strongly correlated with peoples’ migration decisions than *actual* economic circumstances. Indeed, Stockdale’s (2002) study showed that increased aggregate rural youth outmigration was sometimes tied to downturns in local economies—major employers leaving, industries dying—but other times it was tied to workers’ anticipations of future unemployment (49).

Among rural leavers who manage to return, common jobs include those in the public sector (which are reliable and well-paid); entrepreneurship (out of necessity—one way to make a go of it in a rural place); and large service firms (e.g. banks) (von Reichert, Cromartie & Arthun, 2011).

### *Hope*

Among the intangibles cited as reasons that young people stay in or move to rural communities, hope for the future (Norman & Power, 2015; Rauhut & Littke, 2016:307) may be the most elusive, but it may also be the most compelling. Conversely, Looker and Naylor found that “fatalistic attitudes” were correlated with staying rural (Looker & Naylor, 2009:55). Policymakers thus face the choice of whether to stoke hope in young people to *attract* them to rural communities or reinforce fatalistic attitudes to keep them moored in place. The recommendations section below urges toward the former.

### *Not having a choice*

The literature consulted here, while focused on migration decisions, agency, and choice, also draws our attention to youth for whom the

migration decision is not a decision at all, but a foregone conclusion. In fact, as Corbett (2010) shows, some young people are not afforded the luxury of leaving their community. For these young people, the rational economic choice is to forgo higher education and an uncertain future elsewhere in favour of a known future in their community. These young people are from families who cannot afford for youth to make mistakes during their emerging adulthood. The idea driving high mobility of life—mobile modernity and the ‘project of the self’ (Giddens, 1991)—is a luxury that lower class rural youth cannot afford. In a modernity where youth are encouraged to forge their own identities, this is simply not available to some youth. They stay in their rural home community, and ostensibly out of choice. However, the choice is restricted (cf. Du, 2017; Rye, 2011).

Policymakers tend to spend a lot of time thinking about a certain set of rural young people. Gabriel (2002), in her review of press coverage of youth outmigration in Tasmania, concludes “much of the debate has centred on lamenting the loss of young achievers, rather than addressing the social and economic needs of those left behind.” (p. 212). Likewise, Corbett’s influential studies of Digby Neck, Nova Scotia, highlight the fact that “options are a luxury, unequally available possibilities liberal educators wrongly imagine anyone can access” (2007b:189). In fact, Corbett argues that rural education trains students for a future outside of their rural community, and that for some, disengaging from this formal school system and remaining in the community is a form of resistance against this modern ideal.



In addition to the discrete factors that seem to attract young people to rural places, researchers tend to agree that migration decisions emerge from a mix of considerations that are not mutually exclusive. To cite just one example, in a survey of return migrants, Rérat (2014) found the following reasons, in order of importance: “proximity of friends and family (34.7% important and 40.7% very important), followed by job opportunities (34.8% and 39.4%), the rural setting (36.7% and 36.7%), the suitability of the living environment for starting a family (29.4% and 37.6%), and attachment to the region (33.7% and 36.7%)” (75). Rérat and others contend that these reasons intermingle, such that “the choice of place is a family-lifestyle-jobs bundle that people consider simultaneously” (von Reichert, Cromartie & Arthun, 2011:42), looking for the right “match or fit between personal preferences and opportunities of the region” (Kuhmonen *et al.*, 2016:98). Teasing out the single biggest factor and tugging it with policy is unlikely to untangle the whole knot, but as

the Recommendations section will show, there are ways to “nudge” and support those who wish to stay or return, and to lay the groundwork for more people to want to do so in future. First, we turn to the factors that evidently lead young people to move away from rural communities, and discourage in- and return migration.

## WHAT MOTIVATES YOUNG PEOPLE TO LEAVE OR AVOID RURAL COMMUNITIES?

While the research synthesized here does not reject the primacy of economic reasons—i.e., jobs and further education—behind youth outmigration from rural areas, it troubles the simplicity of that explanation. One of the most prominent and compelling findings is that young people’s career and educational aspirations begin to form very early, and are shaped by public *narratives* and *discourses* that equate urban locations and mobility with success, and rural attachments with failure (Looker & Naylor, 2009; Karabanow *et al.*, 2014:118; cf. Nugin, 2014). Importantly, there is a strong, albeit imperfect, correlation between young peoples’ intentions and their eventual migration pathways (Bjarnason, 2014).

### *Discourses of success and failure*

Parents and other adult significant others often support the view that to “stay rural” is to fail (Abbott-Chapman, Johnston & Jetson, 2014; Howley *et al.*, 1996; Leibert, 2016:268; Marshall & Foster, 2002:69; Nugin, 2014; Punch & Sugden, 2013:266; Wiest, 2016:285; cf. Looker & Naylor, 2009; Sherman & Sage, 2011:3). Community members have been found to see the “brain drain” as a “necessary evil” (Sherman & Sage, 2011:7; Abbott-Chapman, Johnston & Jetson, 2014). Sherman and Sage, in an ethnographic study that involved close contact with high school teachers and other adult community members, documented the sentiment that “the ones you didn’t want”—the poor young people from families deemed “morally degenerate”—were often the ones who stayed in the community (2011:12). The idea was that if you were a good family, you pushed your children away to higher education and better jobs.

Norman & Power (2015) note that some scholars have argued that these discourses of success and failure also attach themselves to places and not just people, creating a “moral geography” of successful, opportunity-rich and dead or dying places. Even return migra-

tion to rural communities has, in some studies, been classified as a “failure” to make it in the other community (Niedomysl & Amcoff, 2011:658; Stockdale, 2006).

Moreover, Wiest (2016) has argued that these representations of success and failure are gendered and have gendered implications, whereby “masculinities are apparently constructed as disadvantaged and problematic in contrast to outclassed femininities,” pointing to “photographs [of] shrinking landscapes represented by the remains of the industrialisation period like a forsaken open-cast mine or run-down buildings inhabited by lonely men with nothing to do” (Wiest, 2016:288). These powerful images and discourses have been shown, across time and place, to impact how young people think about their future possibilities, and ultimately to encourage them to leave rural communities behind. As Rauhut & Littke (2016) found, young people leave because they feel, having absorbed these dominant ideas about success and failure, like there is no legitimate future in rural places (307). Of course, leaving is not without a cost for these young people, and they find themselves experiencing inner tension: “Rural youth can choose to stay, but they are likely to believe-with most of the world-that the choice is a mark of their failure. They can choose to move, but long-with most of their mobile rural friends-for home. Like all humans, rural youth try to be savvy about choosing between two evils. For only a few is it likely to be a very happy choice.” (Howley et al., 1996:159)

### *Going with the flow*

The pervasive discourses of rural failure and urban success are attached to the “normalization” of migration, especially for work, in rural communities (Abbott-Chapman, Johnston & Jetson, 2014; Azaola, 2012; Easthope & Gabriel, 2008; Marshall & Foster, 2002:69; Peou, 2016; Stockdale, 2002:50). Indeed, in today’s world, “being on the move represents the rule rather than the exception” (Rye, 2011:172). This matters because young people tend to follow “established pathways” based on gender and cultural norms (Shucksmith, 2004:49) in the surrounding communities, and in the wider world. Thus, contemporary young people in rural Canada likely confront mobility as an “imperative” rather than one option among many, in that they “*must* often be mobile in order to access the resources they need to navigate biographies and construct identities” (Farrugia, 2016:837).



Propensity to migrate is thus culturally embedded, but it also has familial roots and it can start early, in the seeds sown by previous generations. Jones (1999) found that young rural people whose parents were “locals” were less likely to outmigrate than young rural people whose parents had been in-migrants themselves (5). Likewise, Rye (2006) found that young people whose parents were not born in the rural community were more likely to hold negative views of rural life (416). On a broader level, a recurring assumption in migration research is that outmigration and population decline beget more outmigration and population decline, not only because outmigrants follow the paths set by others, but also because population decline can whittle away community assets and make communities less attractive places to stay. However, the evidence to support this assumption is mixed (Elshof et al, 2014; Polese & Shearmur, 2006).

### *Isolation and social exclusion*

As noted above, in some senses to be “rural” is always already to be excluded—from many of the benefits of globalization, from the coverage of urban amenities, from “late modern” lifestyles, and from conventional notions of success. But additionally, researchers find that young people face social exclusion *within* rural communities. Many scholars have drawn on young peoples’ firsthand accounts of isolation, exclusion and marginalization in their rural homes to show that the “rural idyll”—the notion of rural life as “problem-free, open, inclusive, orderly, organic, secure and traditional” (Leyshon, 2008:14)—is a “myth.” In reality, they argue, while “the countryside is, on one hand, enabling and nurturing (inclusive),” it is simultaneously “restrictive and prohibitive”; as a result, young people experience “conflicting and sometimes contradictory feelings of inclusion and exclusion” (Leyshon, 2008:1).

At one level, young people are excluded *as a group*, on the basis of age, from certain spaces and practices within rural communities. One of the foremost ways in which they *experience* exclusion is by not having a voice in decision-making (Alston & Kent, 2009; Matthews *et al.*, 2000; McLaughlin, Shoff & Demi, 2014:456), but they also report feeling shut out of adult pastimes and spaces (pubs, for example) (Giddings & Yarwood, 2005; Leyshon, 2008). To combat such exclusion and resultant feelings of isolation, studies find that “rural youth identify *with each other* through their collective rejection of an imagined other (Cloke 2003)” (Leyshon, 2008:12; emphasis added). In Leyshon’s (2008) study of young people in the

UK countryside, his research informants “all identified with the countryside regardless of social background, class, gender, age and time lived in the countryside and they made it explicit that ‘to be country’ was not about simply being in place or imagining an idyll but rather through the adoption of a moral code of behaviour” (12). Being “country,” to these young people, meant to be “‘inclusive’, ‘decent’, ‘honest’, ‘independent’, ‘respectful’ and ‘healthy’” (13), and all of these qualities were posed in contrast to an “abject” urban identity. However, such collective identities are evidently not enough to keep rural youth attached to their communities.

Moreover, it is not enough to erase differences *among* young people in rural communities. To some degree, processes of social exclusion in rural communities are set in motion by the same factors that exclude people in metropolitan places, but with different, likely magnified consequences. Being LGBTQ or otherwise different can be very hard in small rural places (Leyshon, 2008; Annes & Redlin, 2012); being a woman is especially isolating in rural places where “macho” pursuits may dominate the leisure landscape (Rauhut & Littke, 2016:308) and where a woman’s role, according to the rural idyll, is to raise children and keep house. Marshall & Foster (2002) found evidence that local children excluded the children of migrant workers from Newfoundland on Grand Manan in school, and that their children’s social difficulties were a major factor convincing migrant families to move back to Newfoundland seasonally or forever. Likewise, poor families who did not contribute to the local school were viewed as inferior and morally corrupt in Sherman & Sage’s (2011) ethnographic study, and young people “who stayed behind” when their peers moved on “were further marginalized, both in the community and in the labor market” (Sherman & Sage, 2011:10).

### *Boredom and scrutiny*

Many of the young research participants across the studies featured here claimed that there was “nothing to do” in their home communities (Kloep et al., 2003:102; Leyshon 2008 13). But Norman and Power (2015) argue that “nothing to do” among their young women participants really meant a lack of access to particular consumer goods and experiences that counted as globally relevant (2015:56; cf. Peou, 2016; Punch, 2007). They felt they lived in a place “emptied of choice”, which is the opposite of what we expect of global societies (57). Accordingly, young people who left or planned to leave rural communities cited their “curiosity” (Punch, 2007:101) about

other places, and their desire for wider experiences (Peou, 2016), diversity (San Antonio, 2016:256), and “something different” (Wiest, 2016:287), as motivating factors.

Leyshon (2008, 2011), like others (Karabanow *et al.*, 2014), found that rural youth were particularly affected and in some cases motivated to leave by a perceived lack of a safe public space away from “adult scrutiny” (Leyshon, 2011:311), where they can gather together and talk” (Leyshon, 2011:309). Rural youth often feel excluded from adult spaces and judged by adults (Matthews *et al.*, 2000), and in this they are not so different from urban young people (Leyshon, 2011:313). However, “what particularly distinguishes a rural upbringing [...] is the sharp disjunction between the symbolism and expectation of the Good Life (the emblematic) and the realities and experiences of growing-up in small, remote, poorly serviced and fractured communities (the corporeal)” (Matthews *et al.*, 2000:156). Granted, the lack of public space to congregate is also a problem for older young adults, including young parents, who bemoan having no coffee shops, libraries, community centres or similar spaces to socialize and be around others (MacMichael, 2015:44-45; Elshof & Bailey, 2015).

Leyshon found that young people would push back against their marginalization--finding spaces to claim as their own, including the open countryside (Leyshon, 2011; Matthews *et al.*, 2000; Punch *et al.*, 2007)—but they nevertheless perceived a lack of freedom (Kloep *et al.*, 2003:102) and intense pressure to conform. ‘Everybody knows everybody’ was a common refrain, and while it signaled a sense of a tight-knit community, it also reflected a desire to escape the “adult gaze” (Punch *et al.*, 2007:214) and for the freedom to be oneself (Stockdale, 2004:185; Azaola, 2012). On the other hand, other studies have found that there is “freedom” of a different sort in rural communities—freedom to escape intense social experiences by retreating to “nature”, in contrast with urban contexts where being truly alone seems impossible (Wiborg, 2004:429).

### *Education and Career Aspirations*

Young people coming of age in rural communities will move if their educational aspirations cannot be satisfied in the local area (McLaughlin, Shoff & Demi, 2014; Molgat, Leblanc & Simard, 2008; Petrin, Schafft & Meece, 2014). Indeed, as Corbett (2006, 2007b) argues, primary and secondary education in rural areas actually prepares students for an education and career outside of their home

community, creating a situation where “Atlantic Canadian coastal communities are places that people learned to leave” (2007b:11). Because of the cosmopolitan, placeless nature of the modern education system, the students who are successful in secondary education tend to look outside of the rural area for their future. This perpetuates patterns of low education levels in rural communities (Gibbs, 1995). On the other hand, American high-achieving rural high school students surveyed by Byun et al. (2012) were not more likely than others to intend to migrate away, and some who did planned to return after postsecondary education. This suggests that young people’s decisions are not set in stone early, and may stem from a mix of socialization in schools and practical considerations after graduation.

In fact, most studies show that once they acquire their credentials, rural youth are more likely to move in search of employment that requires them. Empirical evidence from the Maritime Provinces (Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, 2011) shows that, at least at the level of the region, between 18 and 22 percent of postsecondary graduates from the Maritimes leave their home province *after* receiving their education.

Kahn (2015) found that people who were overeducated for their jobs were much more likely to migrate away from their home province than people whose job requirements matched their education credentials (cf. Punch & Sugden, 2013:264; Stockdale, 2002:46; Whisler et al. 2008). However, some migrants in Rérat’s (2014) study said they applied for jobs for which they were overqualified in order to try to stay rural (81), and thus, again, extant research suggests that economic opportunities matter, but they are not always enough to motivate migration (Punch, 2007). Relatedly, while migration out of a rural community is, at the aggregate level, associated with income gains (Kennedy, 2012; Kao-Lee & Qi, 2004), better pay is rarely a stated motivation found in research.

### *Lack of services and amenities*

The research gathered here is clear that the *experience* of rural decline is tied most to the loss of services and amenities; that is, people feel rural decline by seeing and dealing with the slow disappearance of schools, grocery stores, banks, community centres, hospitals, and privately-owned businesses (Elshof & Bailey, 2015). The loss of such services is less important to young people still living with their parents, and more important to young families with children of their own.

However, the limited research that focuses explicitly on the impacts of service loss on youth outmigration finds that young families already in rural areas tend to endure the erosion of services and instead prioritize their social networks, jobs and health (Elshof & Bailey, 2015), perhaps because rural families have low “expectations” about service delivery in the first place (*ibid.*, 78); relatedly, the availability—and even less so, the *quality*—of local services is rarely a stated motivation for leaving or migrating to a rural community. Nevertheless, families in MacMichael *et al.*’s study said the loss of an elementary school in particular would push them to leave (MacMichael *et al.*, 2015:44), and Elshof & Bailey emphasize the importance of schools, not only as educational institutions but also as community hubs, to parents of primary children (Elshof & Bailey, 2015:76). The analysis of Elshof and Bailey (2015) may be instructive for making sense of the relative *unimportance* of services to young people and families, at least in terms of stated motivations for migration. The authors argue that the presence or absence of services is felt less in terms of the actual service and more in terms of its impact, positive or negative, on social capital. When services act as meeting places, monuments to collective effort, and distributors of collective benefits, they tie communities together. Their loss is felt, then, as a tear in the social fabric, leaving people to build and maintain social capital in voluntaristic, individualistic ways.

### *Relationships*

Just as strong social ties can encourage young rural people to stay in their home communities, negative relationships with significant others can lead them to move away (Elder, King & Conger, 1996; Punch, 2007:102; Karabanow *et al.*, 2014; Stockdale, 2002:50). Conversely, social ties to people in other communities, or people who are moving to other communities—e.g., meeting a romantic partner in university, following a friend to a new city—are oft-stated and theorized reasons for outmigration (Bednaříková, Bavorová, & Ponkina, 2016; Rérat 2014; Walsh 2013).

### *The importance of ambivalence and time*

It is very possible for young people to want to stay in and leave rural communities at the same time, and for feelings about rural communities to change with the passage of time and shifting life circumstances. Rural youth have been found to hold ambivalent feelings

about the “privilege” of growing up rural (Leyshon, 2008:8; Wiborg, 2004) and “contradictory” or “conflicting” feelings about staying (Looker & Naylor, 2009; McLaughlin, Shoff & Demi, 2014:458). They experience and buy into the “rural idyll,” but they also perceive it as a “myth”, because they know “a ‘darker’ rural, where not all children are growing-up in innocence within carefree, supportive communities” (Matthews *et al.*, 2000:145); indeed, Rye (2006) argues that the “rural idyll” and the “rural dull” coexist and do not contradict one another (409; cf. Wiborg, 2004; Wiest, 2016).

Young people can “hate” a rural place and still miss it if or when they leave (Norman & Power, 2015:57), and many outmigrants report feeling caught “between” two places, and two identities (San Antonio, 2016:262-3)—and wondering if they have to choose one or if it’s possible to have both (263). As Wiborg argues, “people do not have to be living in a place to ascribe meaning, or construct bonds of attachment, to it” (Wiborg, 2004:417); it is still part of their identities. Some outmigrants continue to understand their migration as a form of “exile” (Ní Laoire, 2000)—they feel forced. Whatever the case, as MacMichael *et al.* put it, “what happens in the destination community is still part of the migration process. The general experiences of migrants and the challenges they face, combined with their personal values and goals, influence their vision for themselves and the community long term” (MacMichael *et al.*, 2015:49).

In other words, as already discussed, migration is rarely a one-time, discrete, linear event. Motivations form and re-form throughout childhood and young adulthood, and throughout the rest of the life course, and actual trajectories are “complex and precarious” and even “cyclical” (Sage, Evandrou & Falkingham, 2013:738; cf. Annes & Redlin, 2012; Bijker, Haartsen & Strijker, 2015; Cairns, 2017; San Antonio, 2016:257; Walsh, 2012). Outmigrants’ first destination is often a temporary “stepping stone” to somewhere else (Stockdale, 2002:57; Stockdale, 2004:179), whether they return or move onto a third community, and mobility becomes valued as an ongoing process, and a part of life, rather than a path to one specific destination (Cairns, 2017; Devadason, 2007).

One consequence of late modernity—and intense digital communications in particular—is that attachments to place can survive even long-distance moves, through strong and regular communications with home communities. Granted, visits home tend to decline over time, and social connections to the home community tend to diminish (Stockdale, 2002:62). Moreover, “the connections that allow people to stay current with happenings in [their home communi-

ties] may also carry news that dissuades them from moving back. Unlike their nineteenth-century predecessors, today's out-migrants can enjoy nearly immediate 'fixes' of home, and maintain a [rural] identity, while making the most of favorable conditions elsewhere" (Morse & Mudgett, 2017:101).

On the other hand, those who stay rural may not experience it as an easy decision or an easy life, but persist anyway. There is much evidence that people who want to stay rural struggle to make it work, through odd and seasonal jobs or working in another province (MacMichael *et al.*, 2015; Walsh, 2012), and by "adjusting" their education, career and service delivery expectations, as well as their identities, to fit their surroundings (Elshof & Bailey, 2015; Gabriel, 2006; Rérat, 2014).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The rich research conversation presented above, while heterogeneous, points in some common policy directions. In addition to the empirically-grounded policy suggestions detailed below, it also suggests several more general ‘guiding assumptions’ that policy-makers, practitioners and other researchers should carry with them into their work.

The first guiding assumption is that *policy does matter* (but cf. Polese & Shearmur). Leaving youth outmigration, its causes and consequences to be solved by “the market alone” (Kao-Lee & Qi, 2004:188) will never deal with the problem of youth outmigration, as currently framed. Yet there is no panacea when it comes to youth outmigration and rural population decline—no one overarching rural strategy will work in all places at all times (Stockdale & Catney, 2014; Thissen *et al.*, 2010). Context-specific policies based on context-specific knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006) are the best way forward if the goals are sustainable rural futures and improved well-being for people of all ages, no matter what kind of community they live in.

Fortunately, many of the policies and initiatives that have been argued to attract or retain young people in rural communities are, not coincidentally, the same “bottom-up” or “endogenous development” policies and initiatives that work to “develop” a community, economically and socially (Stockdale, 2004). Thus, *it may be helpful to view youth outmigration as a consideration in economic and social development policy rather than an independent policy target.*

Indeed, and rather ironically, a significant proportion of the scholars whose work appears in this report explicitly warn that “*youth retention*” is a *problematic idea in a society premised on freedom of choice* (Jentsch, 2006; Shucksmith, 2004). As discussed earlier, rural youth outmigration is not necessarily a problem in itself. It emerges as a policy problem primarily because it threatens the future of rural communities—not because it negatively impacts young rural outmigrants. While the scholarship generally cautions policy-makers and academics to *question or reject the assumption that to stay rural is to fail* (Looker & Naylor, 2009), it also acknowledges that migrants do generally see benefits in terms of education, skills and income (Thissen *et al.*, 2010). The strong emphasis in these studies on “non-economic” motivations and biographical factors highlight some inconvenient truths for policy development: that “life plans can have other objectives than those related to the labour market, and can also change over time as personal circumstances



change” (Shucksmith, 2004:52; cf. Jentsch, 2006:237-8), and that what is “good” for the community might not be good for the individual (Punch & Sugden, 2013; Walsh, 2012:124; Shucksmith et al. 1996, cited in Shucksmith, 2004:52).

But recognition of this potential “conflict of interests” between youth and their communities (Jentsch, 2006:235-6; cf. Pretty et. al, 2006; Shucksmith, 2004:54; Walsh, 2012) need not lead to a policy stalemate. Instead, policymakers are urged to “replace the principle of retaining youth” with principles that increase the range of “viable alternatives” for young people by *focusing equally on the development of “supports to leave” and “supports to stay”* (Shucksmith, 2004:55; cf. Jones, 1999; Jones, 2004; Kloep *et al.*, 2003; Nugin, 2014:62; Theodori & Theodori, 2015). In practice, this means improving young peoples’ social and economic integration and civic involvement within rural communities from very early on, and focusing retention and attraction efforts more closely on those people who already want to stay in, come, or return to rural areas (Jentsch, 2006:236). It may also be helpful to view youth outmigration as a “symptom” (MacMichael et al., 2015:37) of community deficits rather than an isolated target for direct policy intervention. The following policies fit with this orientation, satisfying the critique of youth retention by making room for community goals and needs, and young peoples’ goals and needs.

### ① Focus on return migrants

Across the world, a substantial proportion of migrants to rural communities are actually *return* migrants. In Canada, return migration accounts for 31% of the immigration to rural communities (Niedomysl & Amcoff, 2011:656). Moreover, return migrants have been characterized as the “best and brightest”, bringing higher qualifications and higher incomes (Pettrin, Schafft & Meece, 2014:298; Stockdale, 2004:178), as well as myriad other benefits to the destination community: children and spouses, energy for civic engagement, entrepreneurial skills, an expanded labour supply, job creation, and “the desire to play a role and make a difference in their community” (Von Reichert, Cromartie and Arthun, 2014: 221; but cf. Delisle & Shearmur, 2010, for a critique of the assumed importance of in-migrants).

For these reasons, Canadian researchers Reimer and Bollman (2005) note, many rural communities “**encourage their youth to move away for employment and education objectives**, but maintain close contact with them in anticipation of their return once

they establish families of their own. They use **regular newsletters, Internet sites, invitations to local events, and family connections** to keep their youth informed about local events and opportunities, and they **plan their local services strategically to ensure that the services remain for young families during the interim.** [...] Even **school reunions and regular festivals** can serve as a basis for re-connecting with the region's diaspora to explore new opportunities that may emerge with age" (Reimer & Bollman, 2005:np).

However, return migrants still need support to flourish and maximize their local contributions. Stockdale's survey of rural households in Ireland showed that in-migrants, while they might have "the necessary human capital to bring about an economic regeneration", tend to establish themselves in self-employment in "traditional enterprises" (Stockdale, 2006:354), if not retirement (Stockdale, 2004:172). Thus they do not necessarily create jobs or engage in business "innovation" (von Reichert, Cromartie & Arthun, 2011; Stockdale, 2004) and need policy assistance to "use their knowledge and skills for the benefit of host communities" (Stockdale, 2006:364). Specific policies could include "**'hard' (financial assistance)**" (Stockdale, 2006:364) in the form of "**small venture capital funds [...] for returning youth**" (Reimer & Bollman, 2005:np), and "**'soft' (training) initiatives**" (Stockdale, 2006:364), such as "**mentorship programs established to facilitate the process of starting and building businesses in the region**" (Reimer & Bollman, 2005:np). Furthermore, communities are encouraged to fill the "information gap between job openings and business opportunities on the one hand, and people looking for ways of moving back on the other" (von Reichert, Cromartie & Arthun, 2011:50). This could be achieved through the development of a **local online database of job openings and business opportunities** (e.g., firms for sale, partnerships, investment opportunities, and even opportunities for 'import replacement'—cf. Foster, 2018), as well as "**programs to attract and retain return migrants by assisting with job searches, facilitating business transitions, and offering support for business start-ups**" (von Reichert, Cromartie & Arthun, 2011:50; cf. Kennedy, 2012 on entrepreneurship). In order to make sure community efforts fit with the local context, the approach used by Andresen (2012) to enlist recent return migrants in an "**asset-mapping**" exercise could help a community identify its attractive features and work to boost them among potential return and in-migrants.

## ② **Involve young people in community planning and decision-making.**

One compelling suggestion from several studies is to “**mainstream**” youth issues so that “**they are integrated in all sectors and programmes, [including] community and rural development**” and so that “youth perspectives [are] reflected at all stages of the development and implementation of policies and programmes” (Jentsch, 2006:236; cf. Alston & Kent, 2009; Pretty *et al.*, 2006:237-8). Scholars have pointed to the dramatic, transformative potential in such a policy approach (Ryser *et al.*, 2013), suggesting that young people’s place attachments and “hope” for the future in rural places can be channelled into efforts at local community and economic development and ultimately challenge the “dominant and largely constraining story of rural crisis” (Norman & Power, 2015:53).

Actually achieving this requires a difficult “shift in power relations” to **make adults and youth work together as “allies” in sustainable rural development** (Jentsch, 2006:237). Even the logistics of gathering community members of all ages may take extreme efforts, given declining participation “in local forums”, such as churches and clubs (Stockdale, 2004:178). And it means thinking *generationally* about policy decisions too. A first step for policymakers might be to **take stock of existing policies and arrangements and ask who they work for**. While this exercise may bring troublesome conflicts of interest to the surface, it is fundamental to the goal of mainstreaming young peoples’ perspectives. As White (2012) argues, “there is something fundamentally worrying about policy contexts which allow older men, in communities, local or national governments” to make decisions that “permanently” close off some opportunities to “the next generation of young men and women [...] without giving those to be affected any say-so in this process” (White, 2012:16).

Mainstreaming youth perspectives is thus not only valuable for the discrete policy problems it solves directly. It also addresses issues of intergenerational equity (Krawchenko & Foster, 2016) and could mitigate the “resentment” rural young people have been found to feel “about their lack of involvement in local affairs” (Matthews *et al.*, 2000:150). One practical initiative, recommended by Theodori & Theodori (2015), is the “**creation of a community-level youth council.**” The authors argue that this

“could provide valuable insights and information to organizations such as the city council, the city economic development

corporation, and civic organizations. Recommendations for youth to serve on the council should be solicited from schools, churches, and other neighborhood associations, and every effort should be made for the council to include youth from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds” (2015:388).

### **③ Work with, not against, traditional rural industries, occupations, knowledge and skills**

One of the key findings across studies in this report is that formal education, from elementary through to post-secondary, tends to privilege urban definitions of success and prepare young people for urban careers (Corbett, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2009, 2010; Harmon & Schafft, 2009; Looker & Naylor, 2009; White, 2012; Punch & Sugden, 2013). These biases are replicated in economic development discourse, where new industries, global connections, corporate structures and “placeless” goals are prioritized over “place-based”, traditional, locally relevant and embedded, small and community-controlled economic endeavours (Bristow, 2005; 2010). The result is that many young people in rural communities grow up in a milieu that discourages them from pursuing the kinds of livelihoods that shaped the landscapes and cultures around them (Pretty et, al., 2006; von Reichert, Cromartie & Arthun, 2011:45; Wiborg, 2004) and possibly their own family trees.

Even if the value of traditional rural occupations—such as farming, fishing, forestry, skilled crafts and trades—is not diminished or “downgraded” by education systems and cultural discourses (White, 2012:11), such occupations may be rendered off-limits by the extinction of the necessary skills, and the gradual elimination of traditional means of transmitting them across generations (Punch & Sugden, 2013:256; White, 2012:11 calls this process “deskilling”). This would not be as important if the industries themselves were dying natural deaths, but they are not: workers and proprietors across rural occupations and industries are raising concerns that their *viable* businesses and enterprises will not get handed on to the “next generation,” not because they are failing, but because there is not enough interest or policy support (Beaulieu, 2014; Bruce & Wong, 2012; Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, 2016; Machum, 2005; Statistics Canada, 2017a; Williams, forthcoming 2018).

It follows that policies should:

- **Try to preserve intergenerational opportunities for learning outside schools** (Punch and Sugden, 2013).
- **Tailor rural education to rural occupations, or at least make sure they do not devalue relative to other kinds of work.** In other words, “policy-makers and political actors need to reconsider the education curriculum in rural areas to ensure that it is relevant to rural livelihoods and can foster social change” (Punch & Sugden, 2013:267-8).
- **Focus on “school-community development”**—in other words, find ways to integrate the development and improvement of schools with the development and improvement of communities, rather than prioritizing “global competitiveness” (Harmon & Schafft, 2009:8).
- **Support small-scale farmers,** which means pushing back against discourses of failure, viewing “large-scale land deals” as a “last resort” (White 2012:13), investing in skills development, helping young people raise the capital to get started, and improving necessary infrastructure (White, 2012). This is an example of how general endogenous, bottom-up development policies can simultaneously support young people who want to stay in or move to rural communities.

Importantly, these recommendations do not preclude participation in the so-called “knowledge economy” or other new, growing, technology-intensive industries. For example, given the demonstrable uptake of new mobile and digital technologies among young people across geographic divisions, Reimer & Bollman recommend that rural communities **“identify current knowledge workers and those that are potentially able to work in knowledge-based occupations”** as “key community assets” who might help communities **seize “opportunities for knowledge-related economic developments** at a regional, national, and international level” (Reimer & Bollman, 2005:np). There is great potential in “telework” and “telecommuting” options for people who want to live in rural communities but stay attached to urban workplaces. Finally, jobs in “unconventional gas” (Measham & Fleming, 2014) have been shown to attract young, educated workers to rural areas (but see Recommendation #6 for further reflection).

#### ④ **Work with, not against, mobility and migration**

In keeping with the recognition that preventing or discouraging youth outmigration is a problematic objective, the research synthesized here offers numerous recommendations that can help rural communities and rural young people *adapt* to long-term moves and ongoing short-term mobility.

Importantly, addressing outmigration and supporting young people who want to stay must be balanced by efforts to **increase urban social supports for rural leavers** (Jones, 2004:218; Karabanow *et al.*, 2014). San Antonio’s interviews with rural leavers from the Northeastern US revealed that they often felt very alone and lost in their new homes (258), not just because of the “culture shock” of urban life but also because it happened during a key life transition from living with parents to living independently. Punch (2007) and Stockdale (2002) found that migrants sought communities of other migrants, and benefitted from these connections. This could be a space for policymakers and community actors to develop networking programs to connect migrants in their new urban homes, with the added benefit that staying “in touch” with rural home communities has been shown to encourage successful return migration (Reimer & Bollman, 2005).

At the same time, rural communities and policymakers should find ways to accommodate and support short- and long-term “labour migration”—that is, there should be supports for people who relocate temporarily or take long commutes to for employment. In fact, there is strong research evidence to back up the prioritization of “functional regions” comprised of multiple “nonmetropolitan” communities of various sizes and at least one “urban place of at least 10,000 persons.” These kinds of regions “have traditionally been among the most successful at retaining and attracting migrants” (Johnson & Fuguitt, 2000:35), and are likely to become more common as “the rural segments within a local labour market [become] more dependent on and interconnected with the development and transformation in the urban areas” (Johansson, 2016:292). While such developments are not inevitable, they are likely; thus, as Walsh writes, “rural communities must be increasingly prepared for mobile populations; and policies should be put in place to support mobile workers, their families, and the communities in which they live” (Walsh, 2012:125). Such supports could take a range of forms, such as **focused investments in the most “viable” towns and communities** so that people in more isolated surrounding areas can commute in for jobs and amenities (Millward, 2005), or

**investments in child care** so that parents who stay rural, including those left behind by short-term migrant partners, can themselves attach to the labour market (Looker & Naylor, 2009:57-58; Ryser et al, 2013).

### **5 Recognize a heterogeneity of needs, abilities, desires and resources**

All of the recommendations in this report must be evaluated with reference to the local context and tailored to different communities and individual situations. Policymakers should also take seriously the point that rural places and the people who live in them are heterogeneous (Drozdeweski, 2008; Rye, 2011, Stockdale & Catney, 2014; Thissen *et al.*, 2010), and consider the impacts of gender and class on the experiences, needs, abilities, desires and resources of the young rural people they aim to support.

There are also more specific, targeted policies recommended in the literature synthesized here for very specific rural problems and challenges that not all communities will face. For homeless young people in rural areas, for example, instead of “better local (structural) supports” to keep them from leaving, Karabanow *et al.* suggest “that what rural homeless youth require, more immediately, are solutions which can be tailored to the unique needs of this increasingly visible homeless population in urban centres” (Karabanow, 2014:126). Looking at “young rural women,” on the other hand, researchers have found that they move more often “between housing situations,” and argue for “a variety of different and flexible housing options, both within rural and urban areas, from which young rural women can choose” (218).

Overall, policymakers must be careful that their actions do not “assume that all rural youth are able to be geographically mobile to access increased opportunities offered in regional and urban centres” (Jones, 2004:219), while at the same time resisting the temptation to see “moving out” as the only way to “move up.”

### **6 Start with schools, and start early.**

**Given the widespread research finding that students begin forming attitudes about rural life and aspirations to leave when they are in elementary school,** it is crucial that students are informed about local employment opportunities and lifestyle benefits from the moment they begin formal education. Teachers need to have examples of local jobs that are attractive and viable. **People with**

**good local jobs could visit schools, and rural schools could help educate kids for rural jobs (White, 2012).**

At a higher level, schools are incredibly important community hubs and institutions (Sherman & Sage, 2011), and should be regarded as civic spaces that could even facilitate the development of youth community councils and serve as physical homes for the entrepreneurship programs and local networking events. However, it must also be acknowledged that schools can function to exclude some people in the community, and as a result, people feel ambivalently about them (Sherman & Sage, 2011:8-9). Even their physical location is an important policy issue when it comes to young lives. As Shucksmith (2004) argues, if smaller rural schools are consolidated and students forced to commute long distances to enrol, “the families of some pupils will not be able to meet the costs involved in commuting, or will regard this as a poor investment. [Thus] even secondary education can become a privilege, rather than a right, and social inequalities will become perpetuated” (Shucksmith, 2004:53).

**7 Protect what makes rural life attractive already**

The literature synthesized here makes a clear case for investments in rural communities that strengthen what they already have going for them (Andresen, 2012). For example, if people love a place for its natural beauty and recreation, investments ought to target the improvement and/or preservation of natural spaces. If strong social capital is important for community resilience, and if it ties together the myriad factors that seem to attract young people to rural areas, investments in elements of social capital make sense. However, policymakers cannot simply dump money into a fund called “social capital,” and it is difficult to build social capital from the top down. Reimer & Bollman (2005) found “only a low correlation” between the existence of social capital—conceptualized as “the social networks that people can call upon for the resources and information to get things done”—and “the use of these networks” (np). Thus, like many of the policy foci in this report, building strong social capital is probably a matter of investing in the smaller factors that make it up—public spaces to congregate and socialize, councils and other forums for civic participation, community hubs that deliver collective benefits, and good quality jobs that leave people with time and energy to devote to civic life.



In terms of specific investments, this research lends credence to:

- **the preservation of small schools**, as they contribute to making communities safe, good places to raise children and serve as community meeting spaces and targets for civic participation and energy (Elshof & Bailey, 2015; Andresen, 2012).
- **Beautification efforts**—for example, community funds to help people maintain private and public properties (Elshof & Bailey, 2015:83; Andresen, 2012).
- **The protection of natural areas and infrastructure to help people enjoy nature**, such as walking trails, boardwalks, cycling infrastructure, small parks and scenic lookoffs (Andresen, 2012).

There was disagreement in the literature about the importance of the arts and nightlife—things one might commonly associate with city life. While Norman & Power (2015:61) assert that “community vitality lies in the arts”, Andresen (2012) found, in a study of young in-migrants’ perceptions of “community assets,” that art and music were neither important to young peoples’ migration decisions nor perceived as a community asset.

Many policy decisions around population retention are not so simple, and present themselves to communities and governments in the form of a dilemma—a fork in the road. Decisions made in one area of policy can benefit some people, and, immediately and through their impacts in other areas, disadvantage other people. Oftentimes, communities must decide on the basis of subjective, ideally collectively-defined goals and values, between two seemingly equal policy choices. The academic literature on rural youth outmigration suggests that policymakers should consider what any given decision might do to the factors that make rural life and rural communities *attractive*, both to young people growing up in them and to others contemplating a move *to* them (Jentsch, 2006:237-8), and should seek to protect and preserve these factors as much as possible.

One practical way in which a dilemma might present itself is in decisions that could negatively affect the nature, beauty and recreation in rural areas. The draw of natural, clean rural landscapes “poses an opportunity for some rural areas to attract or keep youth (or adults) who value a lifestyle that encompasses access to natural resources and outdoor activities”, but this opportunity is threatened by eco-

conomic developments and policies that put the preservation and protection of clean natural landscapes behind the extraction of resources or the efficient flow of goods and services (McLaughlin, 2014:472). If communities wish to explore new industries, such as “unconventional gas” or fracking (Measham & Fleming, 2014), or open-pen aquaculture facilities (currently highly controversial in Atlantic Canada), in the hope of bringing new jobs and in-migrants, they must test these hopes empirically and take into account the ecological dangers such industries pose. Policymakers need to ask, do such industries actually deliver the jobs, spinoff industries, and tax income they promise? Where is the evidence? And in cases where the evidence backs up claims of job creation (Measham & Fleming, 2014), they must further question the impacts on all of the “non-economic” factors identified in this report that are proven to stem outmigration and increase in-migration.

## STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

The social scientific knowledge about youth outmigration, including its history, causes, consequences, and what is to be done to address it, is remarkably consistent compared to some other fields of inquiry. The most important points of consensus seem to be that (a) young peoples' migration decisions are influenced by a host of economic and non-economic factors that are not easily changed with targeted policies, (b) there is a danger in assuming what is purportedly good for rural communities (i.e., youth retention) is also good for young people, and (c) supporting young people who want to stay actually entails broader, holistic policies that aim to improve rural well-being across the life course. Yet scholars in this area are able to point out some avenues for future research, problems afflicting current research efforts, and questions that remain unresolved. These are listed here, for ease of reference.

- “More research needs to be done” on the impact of **rural school closure and consolidation** on rural youth outmigration and population ageing (Shucksmith, 2004:53).
- “More attention to the **longterm aspects of migration**” would help ground policy recommendations (Kao-Lee & Qi, 2004: 189). There are not many **longitudinal studies** of youth outmigration (Sage, Evandrou & Falkingham, 2013), and Canada’s national statistical agency, with its track record of longitudinal surveys of young people (NLSCY, NGS) should give the country a “leg up” on such endeavours. There is also less research focusing on the **experiences of migrants after they leave**, and thus room for more qualitative studies of the emotional and relational consequences of leaving (Punch, 2007:102; but cf. Marshall & Foster, 2002). Relatedly, migration behaviour around “other life-course transitions”—for example, retirement, family formation, empty nests—is relatively understudied (Rérat, 2014:83; but cf. Johannson, 2016:299; Johnson & Fuguitt, 2000:34; Stockdale & Catney, 2014).
- There is dearth of research on **successful “stayers”**, and thus “there is a need to more fully consider what active transition behaviours would look like for rural youth who wish to remain in their home communities, since all of the pathways to success that are understood to be strategic and/or successful are premised on pathways that lead youth out of their rural homes and communities” (Looker & Naylor, 2009:54). Like-

wise, “considerably fewer studies have directly asked return migrants about their reasons for return migration” (Niedomyśl & Amcoff, 2011:657; cf. Rérat, 2014). Expanding such inquiries could help direct the development of “supports to leave” and “supports to stay” (Shucksmith, 2004:55) as well as supports to return.

- There is comparatively less research done on the **impact of youth outmigration on their home communities** in terms of social and economic development, social cohesion, and political life (but cf. Stockdale, 2004; Harling-Stalker & Phyne, 2014).
- As mentioned, it is more often presumed than proven that a lack of services and amenities drives people away from, or dissuades them from moving to, rural communities. There is a need, then, for more research on the precise connection between **service and amenity availability and quality**, including public and private services and amenities, and youth outmigration and attraction.
- Much of the extant research can be characterized as a conversation between studies that examine the **structural determinants of migration** and those that examine the **individual-level determinants**. Ní Laoire urges for more research that does the difficult work of **knitting these two levels of analysis together**; her preference is a “biographical approach” (2000; cf. Stockdale, 2004).

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### *Glossary of Terms*

**Agency** | a person’s capacity to act. In sociology, agency is often understood in relation to **structural** forces, which work to both constrain and enable peoples’ agency. A key sociological problem is deciphering how structure and agency work together in any given situation.

**Cultural capital** | a term coined by the late sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to describe the skills, tastes, interests, habits, educational credentials and other ‘markers’ of status that people accumulate as the result of belonging to (including being born into) a particular socioeconomic class.

**Habitus** | another of Bourdieu’s terms; used to describe a person’s “sense of place”, way of “being-in-the-world” (Marshall & Foster, 2002:66), and engrained and embodied habits, tastes, preferences and behaviours, all of which reflect that person’s upbringing—it is the physical embodiment of their cultural capital, in other words, derived from their exposure to different experiences in different contexts.

**Rural idyll** | A romantic conceptualization of the countryside as innocent, natural, peaceful, and as Short (1991:34) puts it “a refuge from modernity.”

**Social capital** | “The concept of social capital can be understood from an individual and a communal perspective. The individual perspective on social capital, which originates in work by Coleman (1988), regards social capital as the collection of a person’s social contacts that affect their economic, physical, and emotional well-being. A person may thus receive practical or emotional help from people within their social network[...]. The communal perspective,[...] perceives social capital as a collective effort to produce benefits that exceed the capabilities of an individual” (Elshof & Bailey, 2015:75).

## KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION

A polished PDF of this report will be shared directly with any individual, government apparatus or service organization concerned with rural sustainability and youth outmigration. The authors are also available to give a presentation of the results to any interested group. We are reaching out specifically to the Regional Enterprise Networks in Nova Scotia, Regional Development Corporations across Atlantic Canada, the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA), and rural civic organizations whose work touches on population ageing and/or youth outmigration.

The results will be shared in presentations at several conferences, including a November 2017 workshop on the impact of demographic shifts on the future of work and housing in Atlantic Canada, hosted at the Sobey School of Business by the Atlantic Research Group on the Economics of Ageing, Immigration and Diversity. Results will also be presented at the next *Local Prosperity* conference, organized by the Centre for Local Prosperity in Annapolis Royal, NS. This means sharing the synthesized knowledge with a room of upwards of 100 rural municipal officials, farmers, fishermen, entrepreneurs, and federal and provincial government representatives from all four Atlantic Provinces. Likewise, we will seek to share the results in a presentation at the next *Georgetown* conference on Prince Edward Island, which has an overlapping but different audience of the same types of people and a slightly different agenda.

To reach other researchers, we will present the results at the Canadian Sociology Association's (CSA) annual meetings (in the Rural Cluster, of which I am a member), and share the report in hard copy at the International Rural Sociology Association meetings in 2018, where Dr. Foster has co-organized a panel on rural revitalization. The results have also provided the basis for two academic review papers, one for the journal *Rural Sociology*, and a more critical, environment-focused piece for the *Journal of Political Ecology*.

This report is also serving as the impetus for a one-day workshop on youth outmigration at Dalhousie, to be held in Spring 2018. It will invite up to 35 representatives from government (including elected officials, civil servants and policy makers/researchers from ACOA, RDC and the RENs), rural communities and organizations (including, for example, the *Centre for Local Prosperity* and its conference participants, and the *Community Foundation of Nova Scotia*), and academia (through the Dalhousie Agricultural Campus and relevant departments at all Atlantic universities, as well as the CSA's Rural

Cluster). Part of the day will be devoted to a presentation and discussion of the synthesis results, and part will be devoted to a check-in with participants to report on the major research, policy and community activities currently focused on youth outmigration. The objective of this workshop, and indeed the whole Knowledge Mobilization plan, is to forge new collaborative research relationships between government, community and academia and encourage the sharing of knowledge between us.

## CONCLUSION

This knowledge synthesis project has described and assessed an international body of research on young people's migration, with an eye to assessing the state of knowledge about youth outmigration from rural communities. But what it found was that researchers have mostly arrived at the conclusion that youth outmigration is not *the* problem for policy intervention. Young people leave rural communities for a plethora of subjective, biographical, interrelated and relational reasons, only some of which relate to the availability of jobs locally, and most of the evidence suggests they tend to benefit from leaving, at least in terms of income, education and life experiences. While researchers are also careful to emphasize that it is possible to earn a livable income, gain valid knowledge and experience a rich life *within* rural communities—and careful to challenge dominant narratives that depict rural people and places as backward, failed and failing—they also tell us that policy should not directly intervene to discourage outmigration or 'retain' young people in their home communities. Instead, the objective has to be creating and sustaining communities with the characteristics that make distinctly rural life attractive to return migrants and new in-migrants, and inclusive and respectful of the young people who already call a rural place 'home.'

Thankfully, there is no shortage of specific policies that meet these goals—from the protection of public assets such as community centres and schools and the preservation of natural landscapes, to the development of networking programs to connect local business opportunities and job openings with aspirant rural in-migrants and the creation of community youth councils. There are also compelling avenues for future research, including more longitudinal studies of long-term aspects of migration among people of all ages, the precise relationship between service and amenity loss and population change, and in-depth research highlighting what rural success looks like.



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# APPENDICES

## *List of Search Terms*

Four main ways of searching.

### ❶ Wide search on search engines

- Google search: “youth outmigration” + Nova Scotia publications; Atlantic Metropolis Centre, Canadian Centre For Policy Alternatives
- Google scholar search: Nova Scotia rural youth; youth migration Atlantic Canada;

### ❷ Search on Google scholar for papers citing other influential papers:

- Ivany et al (2014); Corbett (2007); Jones (1999); Easthope and Gabriel (2008); Petrin, Shafft & Meech (2014); Rye (2011); Leyshon (2011); Hafacree (2004); Stockdale (2006)

### ❸ Mining references from influential papers:

- Corbett (2007, 2009, 2010); Farrugia (2016); Harling-Stalker & Phyne (2014); Norman and Power (2015); Rérat (2014); Rye (2011)

### ❹ Searches within specific journals

- Journal of Rural and Community Development—browsed all
- Journal of Rural Studies—searched “migration OR mobility OR youth”
- Rural Sociology—searched “migration OR mobility OR youth” since 1997
- Canadian Geographer—searched “rural OR youth” since 1997
- Community Development—searched “rural OR youth” since 1997
- Acadiensis—searched “youth OR rural”
- Children’s Geographies—searched “rural”
- Sociologia Ruralis—searched “youth”