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Social Capital and Community Retention: The Influence of Social Capital on the Residency Decisions of Rural Community Members

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Abstract

In order to effectively retain rural residents, we must understand why, despite known social and economic challenges, people choose to live and invest in their home communities. The community capitals framework can be used as a tool for categorizing community assets. By partnering with youth, teachers, and extension faculty located in rural communities, researchers sought to reach non-traditional survey respondents and engage them in the identification of community assets that influence their decision to live in their home community. The results of this survey, which reached over 700 rural residents, provide insight into the connection between social capital and recruitment and retention of residents in rural areas experiencing significant out-migration. Individuals who lived in a community for more than 20 years and/or engaged in volunteerism were more likely to identify community assets and cited social capital as the motivating factor for choosing a residence. Conversely,

those under the age of 35 and/or newer to a community were less likely to identify social capital as a motivating factor, and less likely to identify community assets. Results of this research have implications for the development of youth and adult-focused initiatives aimed at building small rural communities through the recruitment and retention of residents to mitigate the effects of population decline.

Keywords: Community, retention, social capital, extension

Capital social et maintien dans la communauté : l'influence du capital social sur le choix de résidence des membres des communautés rurales

Résumé

Pour retenir efficacement les résidents ruraux, il est essentiel de comprendre pourquoi, malgré les défis socio-économiques connues, les gens choisissent de vivre et d'investir dans leur communauté. Le cadre des capitaux communautaires peut servir à catégoriser les atouts de la communauté. En collaborant avec des jeunes, des enseignants et des professeurs d'universités situés dans des communautés rurales, les chercheurs ont cherché à atteindre des répondants atypiques et à les impliquer dans l'identification des atouts communautaires qui influencent leur décision de rester dans leur communauté. Les résultats de cette enquête, menée auprès de plus de 700 résidents ruraux, fournissent des informations sur le lien entre le capital social et le recrutement et le maintien des résidents dans les zones rurales connaissant un exode rural important. Les personnes vivant dans une communauté depuis plus de 20 ans et/ou s'engageant dans le bénévolat étaient plus susceptibles d'identifier les atouts communautaires et ont cité le capital social comme facteur déterminant dans leur choix de résidence. À l'inverse, les personnes de moins de 35 ans et/ou nouvellement arrivées dans une communauté étaient moins susceptibles de considérer le capital social comme un facteur de motivation et d'identifier les atouts de la communauté. Les résultats de cette recherche ont des implications pour le développement d'initiatives destinées aux jeunes et aux adultes, visant à renforcer les petites communautés rurales par le recrutement et le maintien des résidents afin d'atténuer les effets du déclin démographique.

Mots-clés : communauté, maintien, capital social, extension

1.0 Introduction

Effectively retaining rural residents requires understanding the factors that motivate them to live and invest in their home communities, even in the face of known social and economic challenges. The community capitals framework (CCF) (Flora et al., 2016; Stout, 2025) can be used as a tool for categorizing community assets, including financial, built, political, organizational, social, human, cultural, and natural capitals. By partnering with youth, teachers, and extension faculty located in rural communities, researchers sought to reach non-traditional survey respondents and engage them in the identification of community assets. The results of this survey provide insight into the connection between social capital and retention of residents in rural areas experiencing population decline.

Population loss has a significant impact on the wellbeing of rural communities across the United States. With a population of almost 1.77 million people (United States Census Bureau, 2024), West Virginia suffered the largest population decline in the country between 2010 and 2020, losing over 60,000 residents (Shribman, 2021). The 2020 census data resulted in the loss of a national congressional representative due to the sharp decline in population (United States Census Bureau, 2021). This issue is not new to the state, which has remained on a slow decline since 1950 (with a population of about 2 million at that time) (United States Census Bureau, 1950). Population decline is exacerbated by the significant out-migration of those born in the state. This drop started with an out-migration of almost 800,000 residents during the last half of the 20th century (West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources [DHHR], 2000). Many known factors may contribute to out-migration including persistent poverty, high rates of substance use disorder, and significant economic impacts resulting from declines in the coal industry.

Despite these challenges, West Virginia has begun to make strides towards growth in recent years. The state has leaned into its unique assets, which include significant natural capital (with over 40 state parks and a booming outdoor recreation economy), low cost of living, and affordable and quality opportunities for higher education. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the availability of remote work has shifted the landscape of workforce development efforts in West Virginia. Many initiatives focus on increasing investments from companies that will bring not just jobs, but also workers from other states. Additionally, the state has developed and expanded successful programs aimed at incentivizing remote workers to settle in target communities through programs like Ascend West Virginia (Ascend West Virginia, 2024). The increased focus on attracting new residents to the state compounds the need for those working in community and economic development to understand the connection between social capital and the choice of home community in a rural setting. Harnessing the power of social capital in small rural communities has the potential to impact the population growth and/or decline of rural states like West Virginia.

2.0 Background

The CCF was developed as a framework for understanding how communities work and grow through the interaction of local assets, or “community capitals.” Community capitals frameworks are particularly useful for demonstrating sustainable community change as they embrace a systems perspective (Emery et al., 2016). Since its inception, the CCF has been widely used as a tool for understanding communities, evaluating the impact of community development efforts (Emery & Flora, 2020; Mattos, 2015; Adhikari et al., 2018; Borron et al., 2019; Garner, 2024), and informing strategic planning. The CCF also offers a useful structure for capturing rural residents’ assessments of community resources and how those resources influence their decision to remain in or return to their hometown.

For the purposes of this study, and in alignment with the approach used by Stout (2025) and Roseland et al. (2024) we consolidate the eight capitals of the CCF into three broader domains: **economic** (organizational, political, financial), **environmental** (natural and built), and **social** (social, human, cultural). This simplification retains the CCF's core systems perspective while providing an accessible structure for examining resident perceptions and priorities. The literature review that follows draws upon this tripartite structure.

Many factors may contribute to a person's decision to live in a certain community. In rural states, economic drivers, including pursuit of gainful employment, are often a leading cause for out-migration (McGranahan et al., 2011; Cromartie et al., 2015). This issue is particularly relevant in West Virginia, which has experienced significant economic decline resulting from decreases in coal mining employment and other natural resource extraction activities that previously sustained thriving rural communities. In fact, many individuals who would otherwise choose to remain in a rural community are not able to do so due to a lack of career opportunities (Cromartie et al., 2015). These constraints are especially pronounced among lower-income residents, who often lack the resources necessary to act on decisions to relocate (Nelson, 2019; Sowl et al., 2022). Educational attainment also shapes migration decisions in complex ways. While higher education is often framed as a pathway out of rural areas, evidence suggests that strong community attachment can outweigh mobility incentives: among college graduates, attachment to place has been shown to be a stronger predictor of staying than among those with less education (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Erickson et al., 2018). Importantly, life-stage factors interact with these dynamics, as having children or other dependents often strengthens ties to place even when economic prospects are limited (Erickson et al., 2018). Research has also examined how community characteristics beyond employment opportunities influence migration and retention. For example, multiple studies suggest that access to natural amenities, attractive landscapes, and quality-built infrastructure can enhance quality of life and serve as important motivators for in-migration and return migration (Gosnell & Abrams, 2011; Heinemann & Hadler, 2015). These amenities can be particularly influential in rural areas where economic opportunities may be limited but environmental quality remains high.

Social capital, including social networks, cultural familiarity, and emotional ties, are essential drivers of both migration and long-term community integration, particularly in rural communities (Sharp, 2011). A consistent theme throughout the literature is the strong pull of family and personal ties. For example, return migrants frequently cite the desire to be near family and friends as their primary motivation (Low et al., 2022; Cromartie et al., 2015). National survey data reinforce this pattern: among adults who have always lived near their hometowns, more than one-third identify proximity to family as their main reason for staying (Parker et al., 2018). These ties strengthen over the life course, with older adults reporting higher levels of community attachment than their younger counterparts—a trend that persists even after controlling for length of residence (Parker et al., 2018). In some cases, attachment to family and community persists even in areas facing population decline and limited job prospects, suggesting that relational bonds can outweigh economic factors (Harrison, 2017; von Reichert et al., 2011; Parker et al., 2018; Cromartie et al., 2015; Heinemann & Hadler, 2015). For example, a study of nearly 2,000 participants in northwestern Missouri found that nearly 30% of newcomers relocated primarily to be closer to family or friends—more than double the proportion who cited employment—and over 40% moved in support of a spouse (Low et al., 2022).

Beyond family, residents are often drawn to the familiarity of rural life, including the opportunity to raise children as they were raised, engage in civic life, and take on leadership roles. The role of social connection and sense of community has been studied as a significant motivating factor and as a predictor of community investment, evidenced through increased volunteerism (Okun & Michel, 2006). Qualitative findings further indicate that practices that promote inclusion, such as

offering meaningful responsibilities and direct invitations to participate in civic life, strengthen emotional connections and a sense of belonging (Wolfe et al., 2020). These findings align with civic community perspectives, that emphasize the role of community institutions, such as churches, long-standing local businesses, and civic organizations. Communities with stronger civic infrastructures have been shown to exhibit higher proportions of non-migrants, suggesting that community structural supports for social cohesion reduce mobility even when economic incentives to move are strong (Irwin et al., 2004). Similarly, supportive institutional environments such as schools and workplaces function as mechanisms for building social capital, mentorship, and interpersonal networks, all of which contribute to educational attainment, workforce engagement, and long-term attachment to place (Demir, 2021; Boat et al., 2021; Daly et al., 2021). In sum, social capital not only explains why residents leave or stay in a community but also how they experience and contribute to community life.

3.0 Methods

Researchers from West Virginia University (WVU) partnered with the West Virginia Health Science Technology Academy (HSTA) and rural high school students to conduct a survey aimed at assessing rural resident's perception of their community's assets. HSTA works to increase the number of African American and underrepresented students in [state] who pursue degrees in Health Sciences and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) majors. Students who successfully complete the program receive a college tuition waiver. During the 2020-2021 school year, all students participating in the HSTA program completed WVU Extension's "My Hometown is Cool" lesson series in the fall as part of the larger program model. Each year, HSTA students are also required to complete a research project that directly addresses local issues in their communities. In 2021, students chose from a menu of statewide research projects, including the "My Hometown is Cool" community asset mapping research project. Thirty students selected this project and engaged in this research with support from their teacher, program staff, and extension faculty. Research received approval from the WVU Institutional Review Board as Non-Human Subjects Research (Exempt).

Faculty developed the community-asset survey tool by utilizing the CCF (Flora et al., 2016; Stout, 2025). The survey instrument included questions related to demographics (age, time in community, stakeholder role), open-ended questions asking participants to describe capital assets in their community, and a Likert-type rating of the assets within the respective capitals. For each capital, participants were provided a definition describing the community capital and examples of assets that could be considered (i.e., social capital refers to the connection that makes things happen. Examples include groups, community networks, bonds between people, relationships, and other social connections or resources). After describing how the assets present themselves in their community, respondents were asked to rate the capital assets on a five-point scale from Excellent to Terrible.

HSTA students participated in a short orientation session prior to participation. Then, the anonymous survey link and flyer were shared with students, who further distributed them to friends and family members over the age of 18. No identifying data was collected, and no responses were collected from individuals under the age of 18. To increase participation at the state level, the survey was further distributed by faculty at WVU Extension to areas not covered by HSTA.

When the survey closed, the WVU research team compiled community-specific data and shared it back with participating students / student teams. Students worked to analyze data with support from HSTA staff, using multiple approaches as part of their education in research methods. Students then developed community summaries of responses to present at their end-of-year- statewide summits, and with community stakeholders.

Researchers analyzed open-ended responses to the question, “What are the reasons you choose to live in your community?” using the CCF categories: financial, built, political, organizational, social, human, cultural, or natural capital. Responses were coded as “1” if a reference to the type of capital was present, and “0” if it was not. Respondents often identified multiple capitals, while some identified only one or none. To ensure reliability, two researchers independently reviewed and coded each response; in the rare event of disagreement, a third researcher reviewed the response, and the majority classification was used for analysis.

The following examples illustrate the process. A response such as, “Had a job opportunity here,” was coded as financial capital, reflecting an economic reason for community choice. In contrast, a response like, “My family lives close, and the rural area, yet it is not too far from stores/restaurants,” demonstrated multiple capitals: social (family ties), natural (rural environment), and organizational (proximity to basic goods and services).

For analysis, responses were consolidated into three broader domains: **economic** (financial, political, organizational capital), **environmental** (natural and built capitals), and **social** (social, human, cultural, capitals) based on the work of Roseland et al. (2024) and Stout (2025). This paper focuses on the **social domain**, which comprises cultural, social/relational, and human capitals. Cultural capital includes heritage, organizations, facilities, sites, and measures of race, ethnicity, and diversity. Social/relational capital captures organizational activity, civic engagement, volunteerism, neighborhood stability, and safety. Human capital encompasses residents’ health, skills, knowledge, abilities, and outlook; relevant secondary data include indicators such as health status, educational attainment, and age distribution.

4.0 Results and Findings

The survey received a total of 907 responses from 35 of the state’s 55 counties. Researchers removed blank and unusable responses, resulting in 784 usable responses for analysis.

Due to the location of HSTA youth partnering to distribute the survey, responses were heavily focused on areas where students were located. As a result, a total of 62% of overall responses came from four counties: Raleigh County (252), Marshall County (122), Greenbrier County (67), and McDowell County (50). The remaining 31 counties had responses from between 1 and 40 survey participants. Additionally, 84 respondents failed to identify the county in West Virginia where they live. This prevented a meaningful analysis based upon location of the respondents.

This research focused on responses to the open-ended question, “What are the reasons you choose to live in your community?” Responses were considered in light of demographic questions, including respondents’ age, stakeholder category, volunteerism, number of years they have lived in their community, and number of other places they have lived. There was great variation in responses among these indicators, which were used as the independent variables in this research.

More than two-thirds of respondents (536 or 68.4%) responded to the open-ended question. This included almost one-sixth of all respondents (121 or 15.4%) who listed multiple rationales that cut across different categories. Analysis of variance was used to determine if characteristics of the respondents, based on the indicators outlined above, demonstrated meaningful differences in the rationale they reported for living in their respective communities. Bi-modal indicators used for the analysis were constructed for the ANOVA.

Volunteer experience indicated whether the respondent reported that they volunteered for a community organization. There were 778 usable responses for this indicator. Other stakeholder indicators examined whether the respondent was a “parent” or whether they played a role in “schools.” There were 774 usable responses for each indicator. These variables were considered by researchers as potential indicators of community connection that may influence perspective (see Table 1).

Three related variables that were examined included the number of years a person lived in their community and the number of places a person lived in their lifetime. For years in the community, the four categories were examined to capture all stages of residence in the community from relative newcomers to long-time residents. “0-to-5 years,” “5-to-10 years,” “10-to-20 years” and “20-or-more years.” For number of other places lived, both “None” was used to measure the exposure respondents had to other places. It had 782 usable responses. Combined, these variables were viewed by researchers as potential indicators of level of community attachment (see Table 1).

Finally, the age of respondents was examined. The indicators used for age included “under 35” and “55-and-over.” These indicators captured individuals who had limited time in their community (under 35) and those who might be entrenched in their current location (over 55) to determine if these groups held different views than others in the adult population. There were 777 usable responses for the age indicators (see Table 1).

Several statistically significant differences were found with respect to the category of community capitals related to social factors. Responses that fit this category were the most common. More than half of all respondents (433, or 55.2%) listed social factors as the reason for living in their home community. This was also almost twice the total of responses for the other two categories combined—economic factors (157) and environmental factors (67). In short, our survey reinforced findings from previous literature that point to the critical importance of social capital in rural community attachment (Cromartie et al., 2015; Low et al., 2022; Parker et al., 2018). Thus, it is the focus of this analysis. Overall, five variables showed statistically significant differences at the 0.05 level. Two of these statistical relationships were positive, while the other three were negative.

Table 1: Socio-Economic and Education Characteristics for Counties with Ten or More Responses

	Responses	Percent (for those providing county of residence)	Population	County population change 2010-2020	County median HHI	County population % with bachelors	2 or 4 year institution present
Raleigh	252	32%	73,666	-3%	\$52,055	22%	2 & 4 years
Marshall	122	16%	30,129	-5%	\$60,329	19%	4 years
Greenbrier	67	9%	32,688	-8%	\$48,662	22%	4 years
McDowell	50	6%	18,413	-4%	\$29,980	6%	--
Calhoun	36	5%	6,158	-17%	\$41,421	10%	--
Wyoming	31	4%	20,948	-4%	\$48,038	12%	--
Summers	29	4%	11,833	-9%	\$42,544	16%	--
Cabell	25	3%	93,300	-2%	\$52,828	32%	2 & 4 year
Morgan	14	2%	17,327	-2%	\$63,805	18%	--
Mercer	10	1%	59,062	-2%	\$47,799	21%	2 & 4 year
All other reported counties	64	8%	--	--	--	--	--
No county identified	84	11%	--	--	--	--	--
West Virginia	--	--	1,784,462	-2%	\$57,917	23%	--
U.S.	--	--	332,387,540	3%	\$78,538	35%	--

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, 2019-2023, 2014-2018, and West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission.

Table 2. *Expanded Demographics of Survey Respondents*

	Total	Percent	Responses
Stakeholder place/role			
Parent	393	50.8%	774
Schools	148	19.1%	774
Healthcare	85	11.0%	774
Business owner	52	6.7%	774
Faith-based organization	33	4.3%	774
Non-profit organization	33	4.3%	774
Government	26	3.4%	774
Civic/volunteer organization	25	3.2%	774
Law enforcement	11	1.4%	774
Media	2	0.3%	774
Other	61	7.9%	774
Volunteer	297	38.2%	778
Time in community			
0-5 years	82	10.5%	782
5-10 years	86	11.0%	782
10-20 years	158	20.2%	782
20+ years	456	58.3%	782
Places lived			
No other place	149	19.1%	782
Age			
Under 35	186	23.9%	777
35 to 54	381	49.0%	777
55 and over	210	27.0%	777

Source: Community Asset Survey.

Note: Some responses were grouped into larger categories, while those not relevant to the analysis were omitted.

Information about serving in a volunteer category was collected separately. It is included with stakeholders because it is a common role played by individuals in many stakeholder groups.

The strongest positive relationship was that those who said they had lived in the community for 20 or more years ($p=0.001$) were more likely to list social capital as a reason for their residence. Respondents also discussed the length of time in the community and/or being born and raised there as a reason for choosing to stay. For example, responses included, “For one, I am a native, and my family has lived here for centuries. It’s a feeling of grounding being where you were born and grew up, especially when it provides such a great community and a great quality of life.”

This finding aligns with previous research (Parker et al., 2018), which found that attachment tends to increase with age and length of residence. This may indicate that interpersonal relationships, which serve as the basis for cultural capital, human capital, and “relational” capital, tend to strengthen over time. It also aligns with national findings showing that proximity to family and strong relational ties are often the dominant reasons rural residents return or stay (Cromartie et al., 2015; Low et al., 2022; Parker et al., 2018). Many respondents share proximity to family as their reason for choosing their community. For example, one respondent stated, “Same area I grew up in, and I wanted to remain close to family.” Likewise, those who reported they volunteered ($p=0.012$) were more likely to list social capital as a reason for their residence. Some respondents cited motivation to support others as their reason for choosing their community. For example, “To teach and give back to the community that raised me.” This may indicate that those more actively engaged in a community, place an increased value on social capital. This evidence complements the civic community perspective (Irwin et al., 2004), which emphasizes the anchoring effect of long-term participation in schools, churches, and local organizations.

Conversely, those who lived in the community for a shorter time were less likely than expected to cite matters that related to the social category of capitals as their reason for being in the community. In other words, those who were not settled in a place—either relative newcomers or those who still might be considering relocation—are less likely to identify social capital as the reason for living in their home community and therefore may be more likely to be there for other reasons. This inverse relationship was found with both those who had been in the community for 0-to-5 years and 10-to-20 years. It should be noted for the shortest-term residents that very few respondents fit in this category ($n=31$), which may overstate the strength of this relationship. That does not mean the relationship is not meaningful, however, as it serves to confirm that those who have not been in a place as long report less motivation to remain due to factors related to the social category of capitals in their home community.

Additionally, respondents who were under age 35 ($p=0.026$) listed social factors less frequently than would be expected. The cause of this is unknown, but it suggests that the bonds described in the literature take time to form and could be weaker in early adulthood. This could be due to a variety of factors, including less significant interpersonal relationships, factors beyond their control, or factors unknown to respondents as they enter early adulthood.

Table 3. *Correlation of Respondent Demographics with Identification of Social Capital as Motivating Factor for Choice of Residency*

Question 13 social factors	Positive responses	Pct. of all responses	Pct. of category	Pct. of positives	P-value
Stakeholder					
Parent	226	29.2%	57.5%	52.4%	0.301
Schools	84	10.9%	56.8%	19.5%	0.771
Healthcare	47	6.1%	55.3%	10.9%	0.939
Volunteer⁺⁺	181	23.3%	61.0%	42.1%	0.012

Table 3 continued

Time in community					
0-5 years ⁻⁻⁻	31	4.0%	37.8%	7.2%	0.001
5-10 years	52	6.7%	60.5%	12.0%	0.314
10-20 years ⁻	75	9.6%	47.5%	17.3%	0.025
20+ years ⁺⁺⁺	275	35.2%	60.3%	63.5%	0.001
Places lived					
No other place	88	11.3%	59.1%	20.3%	0.315
Age					
Under 35 ⁻	90	11.6%	48.4%	20.9%	0.026
35 to 54	220	28.3%	57.7%	51.0%	0.212
55-and-over	121	15.6%	57.6%	28.1%	0.464
Total	433	55.4%			

Source: Community Asset Survey.

Notes: Percentages were calculated using the items for each category or response.

As a result, the base varies and not all groups have the same number of total responses or positive responses.

Information on serving in a volunteer category was collected separately. It is included with Stakeholders because it is a common role played by persons in many stakeholder groups.

+++ (0.01)/++ (0.05)/+ (0.10) Indicate statistically significant positive relationship.

--- (0.01)/- (0.05)/- (0.10) Indicate statistically significant negative relationship.

In other words, respondents who had become established in the community through their actions or through their long-term presence—either by having served as volunteers or having lived there for 20 or more years were more likely to have identified social community capitals as a primary driver for choosing to live in their home community. Conversely, those who had lived in the community for less time and those who were age 35 or younger were less likely to identify social capital as a motivational factor and more likely to have failed to identify any asset that influenced their decision to reside in their community, at a statistically significant level.

Finally, there were two results that at first appeared confounding. The first was that the indicator measuring whether the respondent had lived elsewhere (No other place lived) failed to show any statistically significant difference on this question. One explanation may be that those who have never lived elsewhere lack a frame of reference for determining the impact of social factors as a distinct reason for remaining in the community. This interpretation aligns with Harrison’s (2017) work on young return migrants to legacy cities such as Youngstown, OH, which found that opportunities and relationships were often taken for granted until young people experienced life elsewhere.

A second surprising finding was that age (for older residents 55+) did not show a statistically significant relationship with mentions of communities’ social assets, even though length of residency did. At first this seemed counterintuitive, as older

residents might be expected to demonstrate stronger connections to community institutions. This is despite the fact that the older generation was more likely to have lived in their home community by a statistically significant margin (57.0 percent for ages 35-54 compared to 82.4 percent for ages 55+ ($p=0.000$)). However, since approximately the same proportion of respondents from the 35–54 (57.7%) and the 55+ age group (57.6%) reported that social factors influenced their reason for living in the community, it appears residency history—which includes length of time in the community, rather than chronological age—matters most for shaping perceptions of social capital. Both results highlight the importance of experience and perspective over demographic characteristics alone and suggest that social capital is best understood not as a product of age or mobility in isolation, but as the outcome of lived engagement in community life.

5.0 Implications for Rural Development

Results of this research reinforce the importance of social, political, human, and cultural capital in the residency decisions among individuals in rural communities of West Virginia. It is clear from the literature that economic capital, including employment opportunities, continues to have a significant influence on where a person lives. Social capital, although not primary, also plays a role in residency decisions. The shift in workforce opportunities toward more hybrid and remote options may provide greater opportunities for those who value social capital to freely consider residency in small rural communities with sacrificing economic wellbeing.

The CCF considers the complex flow and interaction of capitals in community growth with social capital as an entry point to capitalizing on all capitals (Emery & Flora, 2020). The connection between capitals in the social arena (including social, human, and cultural capital) and key demographics has implications for rural community development work, including youth and workforce development, and economic development initiatives aimed at increasing the in-migration of residents. Building a sense of connection to place seems to be important to those who choose to live in small rural communities. Additionally, there seems to be a connection between volunteerism and prioritization of capitals in the social arena. Community development professionals working in rural communities can apply these lessons to the design of programs that are intended to recruit and retain residents in struggling rural communities.

This research found that individuals under the age of 35 were significantly less likely to identify social capital as the reason for choosing their home community. Moreover, those under 35 were less likely to identify any community asset as a motivational factor for their residency. The reasons for this are uncertain and may include the perception among younger residents that they did not actively “choose” their community but rather ended up there. This finding is notable given that West Virginia out-migration trends are strongly shaped by the movement of young adults.

For extension community development professionals, these results highlight the importance of youth and young adult engagement. Prior research shows that satisfaction with one’s community and social relationships influences young people’s intention to stay or leave (McLaughlin et al., 2014). Extension already plays a significant role in youth development, workforce development, and community and economic development through initiatives such as entrepreneurship training, business retention and expansion, and occupational safety and health programs. Strengthening connections between these initiatives

and incorporating intentional community engagement strategies may facilitate economic opportunities for young people while also increasing social capital and the retention of young residents. Findings also suggest that the length of residency and volunteer activity are linked to higher recognition of social capitals as motivators for staying in a community. Extension has well-established programs that engage community members across the lifespan, from youth to seniors. Our findings point to the potential value of cross-generational programming that connects long-term, civically engaged residents with younger or newer community members who may feel less connected. Such efforts could deepen social ties and foster a stronger sense of belonging among younger populations.

Finally, initiatives aimed at recruiting residents from other areas may benefit from an intentional focus on the development of social capital. By pairing new residents and/or forming cohorts that include established residents, newer community members may be more likely to learn about community assets and/or be incorporated into formal and informal social networks that increase attachment. Engaging young and new residents in community volunteerism may be key to increasing social capital and, therefore, community retention.

6.0 Conclusion

Overall, the results of this research provide insight into the motivations of rural adults in West Virginia in choosing their place of residency. There are key differences in the perception of the value of social capital among individuals who have lived in a community for an extended time and/or engage in volunteerism. These results, combined with existing research/literature, have the potential to influence the development of community retention efforts in rural communities, including those focused on youth development, workforce development, and the recruitment and retention of residents. There are differences in the values and perceptions of rural residents that motivate them to stay in communities with significant and persistent challenges to doing so. As community development professionals, understanding these differences is key to successful community building.

Results also demonstrate areas for further exploration through additional research. Among respondents, young people, newer residents, and those who do not volunteer are less likely to prioritize social capital. However, the reasons for this are unknown and could vary broadly. Increasing the reach of this survey to a broader audience of young and/or newer residents may provide additional insights. Additionally, asking for information on intentions to stay/leave the community may have provided additional information to help researchers understand the motivations of these groups.

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