

Journal of Rural and Community Development

Qualitative Community Needs Assessment for a Rural Town in Montana, USA: Documenting an Emerging Identity of a Community Undergoing Unprecedented Growth

Authors: Ania Bartkowiak, Heidi Baumgartner, Lindsay DeGroot,
Olympia Gioulekas, & Jessica Gerthe

Citation:

Bartkowiak, A., Baumgartner, H., DeGroot, L., Gioulekas, O., & Gerthe, J. (2025). Qualitative community needs assessment for a rural town in Montana, USA: Documenting an emerging identity of a community undergoing unprecedented growth. *The Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 20(4), 215–258.



Publisher:

Rural Development Institute, Brandon University.

Editor:

Dr. Doug Ramsey

Open Access Policy:

This journal provides open access to all of its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge. Such access is associated with increased readership and increased citation of an author's work.



Qualitative Community Needs Assessment for A Rural Town in Montana, USA: Documenting an Emerging Identity of a Community Undergoing Unprecedented Growth

Ania Bartkowiak

Montana State University
Bozeman, MT, United States
anna.bartkowiak@montana.edu

Heidi Baumgartner

Fireweed Counseling LLC
Studied town, MT, United States
fireweedcounseling.heidi@gmail.com

Lindsay DeGroot

LD Counseling Services, PLLC
Studied town, MT, United States
ldegrootcounseling@gmail.com

Olympia Gioulekas

Montana State University
Bozeman, MT, United States
Oegioul1@gmail.com

Jessica Gerthe

Montana State University
Bozeman, MT, United States
jessica.gethe@montana.edu

Abstract

This study conducts a qualitative community needs assessment in a small, rapidly growing rural town in Montana, aiming to engage local residents in discussions about their cultural identity, priorities, and social service gaps. Over the past 15 years, previous initiatives for community development have struggled to achieve lasting change. Utilizing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, the research involved 36 participants from a population of 972, gathered through surveys and focus groups. The findings highlight specific needs for improved services and infrastructure while uncovering deeper community dynamics, such as isolation, a longing for belonging, and reactions to growth. Organized into four primary themes, the results reveal that the studied town's community faces challenges related to limited access to services, workforce retention, aging population, and cultural shifts. Participants expressed concerns about the impact of these transitions and a desire for solutions that enhance recreational and social opportunities. This research emphasizes the ongoing challenges faced by rural areas in adapting to evolving needs, reflecting broader issues experienced across similar Montana communities.

Keywords: Community needs assessment, rural population, population growth, Montana, focus groups, qualitative method, interpretive phenomenological analysis

Évaluation qualitative des besoins d'une communauté rurale du Montana (États-Unis) : Documenter l'émergence d'une identité au sein d'une communauté en pleine croissance

Résumé

Cette étude présente une évaluation qualitative des besoins d'une petite ville rurale du Montana, en forte expansion. Elle vise à impliquer les résidents locaux dans des discussions sur leur identité culturelle, leurs priorités et les lacunes des services sociaux. Au cours des 15 dernières années, les initiatives de développement communautaire ont peiné à induire des changements durables. S'appuyant sur l'analyse phénoménologique interprétative, la recherche a impliqué 36 participants sur une population de 972, recueillis par le biais d'enquêtes et de groupes de discussion. Les résultats mettent en lumière des besoins spécifiques d'amélioration des services et des infrastructures, tout en révélant des dynamiques communautaires plus profondes, telles que l'isolement, un désir d'appartenance et les réactions à la croissance. Organisés en quatre thèmes principaux, les résultats montrent que la communauté de la ville étudiée est confrontée à des défis liés à l'accès limité aux services, à la fidélisation de la main-d'œuvre, au vieillissement de la population et aux mutations culturelles. Les participants ont exprimé leurs inquiétudes quant à l'impact de ces transitions et leur souhait de trouver des solutions pour améliorer les possibilités récréatives et sociales. Cette recherche met en lumière les défis persistants auxquels sont confrontées les zones rurales pour s'adapter à l'évolution des besoins, reflétant des problématiques plus générales rencontrées par des communautés similaires du Montana.

Mots-clés : évaluation des besoins communautaires, population rurale, croissance démographique, Montana, groupes de discussion, méthode qualitative, analyse phénoménologique interprétative

1.0 Introduction

Needs assessments serve as a crucial tool for understanding the intricate dynamics within communities, highlighting their unique strengths, challenges, and aspirations (Billings & Cowley, 1995; Reeves et al., 2008). As communities evolve, existing resources may become strained, and new needs emerge. By identifying gaps in resources and services, these assessments guide the development of intentional and targeted programs. Involving community members fosters a deeper comprehension of local relationships while encouraging greater engagement and investment from stakeholders in project initiation and execution.

The community assessed in this study is a small town in a large county in Montana. This town has experienced exponential growth over the past decade compared to other United States cities of similar size (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). The population has increased by about 8.5%, from 838 residents in 2010 to 917 residents currently. The town's growth is largely attributed to its geographical location, abundant natural resources, and recreational opportunities. The region's rich history includes early inhabitants from several Native American tribes, who

valued the valley for its abundant wildlife. The town was then established by pioneers during Montana's gold rush. While the area retains its ranching and farming roots, recent years have seen its transformation into a residential hub for commuters from nearby growing cities, spurred by rising housing costs in those areas. However, like many similar rural towns across Montana, this town's geographical seclusion, severe winters, and constrained infrastructure create challenges in meeting the community's evolving needs.

Over the past decade, various organizations have conducted community needs assessments in the area (Allhands et al., 2022; Kishbaugh et al., 2016; Stack, 2011). These primarily survey-based quantitative studies effectively identified resource gaps, such as the need for expanded mental and behavioral health services, local educational programming, and infrastructure improvements. However, they often overlooked the nuanced experiences that shaped these perceived needs.

In response to this limitation, a QCNA was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the safety and social services needs in the town and the county. Using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), the study explored the individual and collective experiences of community members, capturing the depth, breadth, and texture of their perspectives. Beyond its research aims, conducting this QCNA proved to be a meaningful intervention in itself. Participants and later consumers of the study's findings expressed the importance of the process, particularly the value of the community forum, and demonstrated a willingness to engage in defining leadership needs.

This study also highlights the value of conducting a QCNA as an educational opportunity for graduate counseling students. The process underscores the vital role counselors can play in community leadership and advocacy, equipping students with practical experience in addressing systemic issues while promoting their professional growth (Burkhalter et al., 2012; Skehan et al., 2024). Ultimately, the purpose of this study was to inform the design of effective programs and services that can better address the diverse and growing needs of the town's community during a time of significant transition.

2.0 Methods

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a qualitative research approach (Smith et al., 2009) that aims to explore how individuals make sense of their personal and social experiences. This methodology is built on the principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography, and seeks to provide a detailed examination of personal lived experiences. According to Smith et al. (2009), IPA involves a dual process of interpretation where the researchers attempt to make sense of the participants' experiences while the participants themselves are trying to make sense of their own experiences. This approach emphasizes the importance of maintaining an in-depth, idiographic focus, typically achieved through thorough and flexible semi-structured interviews with a relatively small sample size. IPA is particularly suited for our study since our objective is to understand how the town's residents perceive and articulate their experiences within the context of their community.

2.1 Study Design

The town under study is located in a large but sparsely populated county in Montana, with a projected population of under ten thousand in 2025. The town has been experiencing significant growth, with an annual increase of nearly 4% and a 22% rise since the 2020 census, which recorded a population of under 1,000. The demographic profile of the town reveals a predominantly white population (99%), with a median age of 52-53 years for males and 55 years for females. The average household income is \$70,084, accompanied by a poverty rate of 12%. The limited ethnic diversity of the community is indicative of broader trends in rural Montana, where recent growth has been driven largely by an influx of affluent, mostly white newcomers.

To explore the community's perspectives, we utilized convenient sampling and a referral method, leveraging personal networks to recruit participants. We conducted six focus groups at the public library, inviting all interested adults to participate without discrimination or vetting. This approach yielded 36 participants—predominantly white females—reflecting a range of ages and accounting for approximately 3.5% of the general population, including those who completed surveys.

While our sample's limited diversity mirrors the demographic realities of Studied town, our recruitment strategy was essential in navigating social dynamics that may have discouraged broader participation. The qualitative method employed emphasizes the value of capturing the nuanced voices of community members, providing insight into their struggles and aspirations. This community-based research approach was intentionally chosen to enrich our understanding of the dynamics within Studied town, highlighting the experiences of those willing to share their perspectives.

Convenient sampling, utilizing the personal network and referral method (Smith et al., 2009) was employed to ensure as diverse a range of participants as possible. Project consultants leveraged their personal and professional networks, along with dissemination efforts including local newspaper advertisements, flyers, Facebook posts, and email invitations, to recruit 18 diverse community members for the study. This approach ensured the inclusion of varied perspectives and enhanced the richness of the data collected.

Participants were requested to allocate at least 1 hour for face-to-face meetings with the research team during the primary interview phase. They were given six chances to participate in an in-person focus group over a 4-day period. The focus groups convened in a conference room at the town's local public library. If participants could not attend the face-to-face meetings, they were encouraged to complete the online survey.

To address potential concerns regarding power dynamics within the focus groups, we focused solely on recruiting adults for this study. While we initially considered dividing participants based on their self-identified occupational categories—such as helping professionals, tourism workers, and agricultural workers—this approach was adjusted due to low response rates.

To mitigate power differentials, we employed qualitative interviewing techniques that emphasized collaborative discussion and individual narratives. Facilitators encouraged participants to share their experiences by using paraphrasing and reflective questioning, which fostered an open environment for dialogue. It is

noteworthy that male representatives from positions of power in the community predominantly attended only the final presentation of results, where they engaged in discussions addressing the concerns of the participants, most of whom were female and had actively contributed to the focus groups. This strategy aimed to create a supportive atmosphere that empowered participants to speak freely.

Regarding the focus group structure, we did not divide participants by gender. Instead, we aimed to gather insights into the needs of male, female, and non-binary community members through the perspectives of all participants, regardless of their own gender identities. This approach allowed us to capture a broader understanding of community needs and facilitated discussions about gender-specific issues.

During the discussions, two male participants shared their perceptions of the needs of women, particularly acknowledging the presence of domestic violence within the community. Female participants highlighted how the prevailing culture of self-reliance affects not only women but also men, as they observed the impact on their partners, family, and friends.

We recognize that discussing gender identity in a small-town focus group can be sensitive. Participants were not required to disclose their gender identity to contribute; rather, we encouraged an environment where individuals could share their perspectives freely. We also conducted an online survey to complement the focus group findings. This dual approach allowed us to capture a wider range of experiences, particularly from individuals who might feel more comfortable expressing their identities in an anonymous online setting. The differences between online and in-person responses are significant; online surveys can provide more anonymity and may lead to more honest disclosures about sensitive topics, while focus groups can foster deeper discussions but may constrain openness due to social dynamics. By integrating both methods, we aimed to create a comprehensive understanding of the needs of all community members, including those who identify as non-binary.

The research question guiding this study was: How do residents of this small rural town in Montana perceive and interpret the community's needs? To facilitate semi-structured discussions within each focus group, we developed a set of interview questions that were also utilized in an online survey conducted using Microsoft Forms. The questions aimed to elicit rich, qualitative insights into participants' experiences and perspectives. They included:

- In your experience, what are the needs for social services and safety in this county?
- What is your experience of living in/around this town in rural Montana?
- If you could have a dream county community center, what would it offer? What facilities would it have? How would it address the most pressing needs in this community?
- What do women need? What could you use?
- What do men need? What could you use?
- What do the non-binary folks in your community need? What could you use?

The research team, composed of members who were not residents of the town, conducted the interviews, ensuring an objective perspective in the discussions. Each focus group was audio-recorded, with no personal identifiers linked to the recordings or transcripts, to protect the anonymity of participants and encourage open dialogue.

2.2 Participants

Eighteen people participated in the in-person focus group interviews, while another 18 completed the online survey, with no known overlap between the two groups. All participants were at least 18 years old and residents of this rural Montana town. In compliance with ethical standards, all participants provided written informed consent.

Table 1 presents the demographics of the study participants. Notably, a significant majority of respondents were women, which reflects the community's social dynamics and may indicate an inherent gender imbalance in our sample. While we did not specifically inquire about the duration of residence for each participant, it is essential to acknowledge that this convenience sampling approach was influenced by the practical constraints of engaging with available community members. This sampling method, although resulting in limited gender diversity, allowed us to gather valuable insights from a group deeply embedded in the community's social fabric.

2.3 Researchers

In interpretive phenomenological analysis, the researcher serves as the primary lens through which data is interpreted. The research team comprised both residents and non-residents of the town. All team members share the common identity of being white women with a professional interest in counseling, including licensed clinical professional counselors and those in the final stages of their graduate training at Montana State University. The team also represented a range of age identities, with members identifying as either middle-aged or young adults.

The researchers' perceptions of community needs in the town were shaped by their interactions with residents both before and during the study. They recognized two key assumptions they held: (a) small communities tend to be resilient and cohesive, and (b) addressing identified needs in communities can drive cultural change.

Table 1. *Demographics of Study Participants*

Gender (n)	Age (n)	Racial affinity (n)	Income level (n)
FOCUS GROUPS PARTICIPANTS			
Women (16)	18-24 (0)	White (17)	≤ \$10k (0)
Men (2)	25-34 (4)	RND (1)	\$10-20k (0)
Non-binary (0)	35-44 (4)		\$21-40k (3)
Rather-Not-Disclose – RND (0)	45-54 (3)		\$41-65k (4)
	55-64 (0)		\$66-80k (4)
	≥ 65 (7)		\$81-100k (5)
	RND (0)		\$101-125k (0)
			\$126-150k (0)
		>\$150k (0)	
		RND (2)	

Table 1 continued

SURVEYS PARTICIPANTS			
Women (17)	18-24 (1)	White (18)	≤ \$10k (0)
Men (1)	25-34 (2)	RND (0)	\$10-20k (0)
Non-binary (0)	35-44 (7)		\$21-40k (4)
Rather-Not-Disclose – RND (0)	45-54 (4)		\$41-65k (1)
	55-64 (1)		\$66-80k (3)
	≥ 65 (3)		\$81-100k (1)
	RND (0)		\$101-125k (3)
			\$126-150k (1)
			>\$150k (0)
		RND (5)	

Note: Gender, age, racial affinity, and income level of focus group and survey participants are displayed. n = number, RND = rather not disclose.

3.0 Data Analysis

The audio recordings of the five face-to-face focus groups were transcribed verbatim using a transcription service that complies with privacy regulations. Each researcher conducted a line-by-line analysis to code the transcripts and create matrices of personal experiential themes, according to the principles of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). Themes were identified based on the repetition of an idea or statement at least threetimes by more than two participants in each focus group transcript. The research team worked together to recognize and discuss common emerging themes and subthemes for each focus group, as well as to establish connections across themes and groups in order to develop a final meta-matrix of group experiential themes. The written feedback from the online surveys was analyzed by a single researcher using the same coding process to identify and incorporate themes into the meta-matrix group experiential themes.

3.1 Trustworthiness

In our study, we utilized various methods, including "generating a rich, thick description" (Cresswell & Poth, 2017, p. 263), to ensure the trustworthiness of our research. The detailed descriptions and direct quotes from the transcripts reflect our dedication to transparency. We also conducted peer debriefing on the data and the inquiry process (Cresswell & Poth, 2017) to consistently validate our team's approach to data analysis. Additionally, we carried out an independent audit, which involved organizing the data in a way that allows an external reviewer or a research recipient to access the raw data and trace the process (Smith et al., 2009). This demonstrated our commitment to scientific rigor and enhanced the credibility of our study.

3.2 Ethics Approval

This study was reviewed and approved by the Montana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), protocol number IRB-2023-780. All procedures followed ethical guidelines to ensure the protection and confidentiality of participants.

4.0 Results

The analysis of focus group transcripts and online survey responses using interpretive phenomenological methods revealed four main themes that captured the shared experiences of the study participants. We decided to present those themes with a brief narrative and then strengthen the story by choosing and adding direct quotes from study participants. We organized the quotes in categories (subthemes) under the umbrella of each main theme in a way that offers our interpretation and a story about this community. We selected quotes and presented themes and subthemes in order of priority based on the frequency and emphasis placed on the issues and experiences discussed by the participants in the study.

4.1 Identified Themes

4.1.1 The community experiences tensions during its growth, as it seeks to define its collective identity. This theme explores the main issue arising from both in-person and online feedback from community members. Every focus group underscored the noticeable evolution and transformation within the community. Participants pointed out changes in the community's demographics, infrastructure, and needs. They also conveyed concerns about the observed changes and growth in their community. The researchers observed a diversity of community opinions regarding new developments and proposed changes within the community.

Within this theme, the following subthemes were isolated:

- *There is opposition to change and attachment to how things are:*
I want a small town. That's why I moved here" (TE 16, 17). "There are people who've lived here a long, long time and like the way it is" (TA 1, 3). "I see in communities like ours kind of a denialism going on 'cause everything's changing, but nobody wants it to change. So, the infrastructure to support the change never happens (TD 14, 14).
- *There is tension between untamed growth and desire for sameness:*
I would say I'd like to see some of the dirt roads fixed, but as soon as we fix the dirt roads, there'll be too many people here" (TA 5, 1). "Well, I moved here 17 years ago, and I'm not a real outgoing person by nature, but I found people to be pretty welcoming. With the caveat that if you are new, you better not try to change anything (TD 5, 7).
- *A polarization of viewpoints is present in the community:*
There's like a bitterness, like a frustration of there's not enough to do or there's not enough for our kids to do. And so, I think with that shift, there's come some like, momentum to create more things, you know, and I felt the pushback from some people where they're like, don't mess with our community. We love it the

way it is. But we also have this momentum from these young families who just want they want more, more opportunity, more things (TB 11, 11).

- *Participants describe paradoxes within individualism and community-mindedness, describing the current state of the community:*

I think part of the issue when somebody moves into town, nobody trusts them because they don't know them. Stranger danger. Yeah. I mean, it's just a fact. It's but once they warm up to the person, then it's fantastic. So, it's finding that balance (...) (TC 9, 10).

I love the community here, everybody. I won't say everybody, but we have, you know, everybody when you know they need to, everybody gets together. You know, like I said, when your neighbors get snowed in, those that have the equipment to plow people's driveways and things like that, they do. They go out and help and they make sure that everybody's, you know, taken care of. (TB 8, 14).

I would say that's a good description of this community: disjointed (TA 21, 10).

4.1.2 Gaps in social safety and community services drive the identification of community needs—community services, facilities, centralized information system. Participants highlighted community needs by discussing the current shortcomings in services and the constraints they face. They emphasized the necessity for a bigger and more adaptable space to accommodate recreational activities, education, events, and to act as a central gathering point for community engagement and the sharing of information about other available services and resources. There were concerns about the community's ability to consistently provide staff, upkeep, and funding for such a space. Within this theme, the following subthemes were isolated:

- *A need for a facility large and versatile enough for connection and community events—parent education, event space, centralized dissemination of information—was identified:*

And the school has, you know, a big gym and a big cafeteria, but they're busy all the time. They can't do community events. They can't. They're just busy. And so, where else do you go? To the basement of the [local church] that might hold 100? The [local church of a different denomination] probably holds 70 round tables. The [local church of a third different denomination] out there on the highway probably holds 50, but there's no place that would hold, say, 200 people. And this is a population of I'm guessing we're up to 2500 now [in fact the town's population hovers around 1,000 residents]. So if somebody has a big funeral or a big wedding or something, there's no place" (TA 7, 13).

- *Space for a healthy outlet—pool, pickle ball court, fitness classes, indoor skate park—to meet social needs was identified:*

The state does a prevention needs assessment. And this touched my heart since the first time I read it six years ago. But one of the largest risk factors for youth and substance abuse, violence, suicide, depression and overall poor mental health is low neighborhood attachment or low community attachment TC (23, 17).

- *A position is needed for a resource manager or coordinator to serve as a connection to resources:*

I would agree that the advocacy of having someone to disseminate that knowledge of how to get what you need would be amazing” (TC 8, 22). “It's like we have these little pockets of interesting programs, but you really got to know somebody to figure it out” (TC 32, 27).

- *A need for expansion of services for the community (domestic violence support, childcare, LGBTQ+ support, housing, hospice, crisis support, disability) was identified:*

There's not after-school options” (TB 25, 13). “There is a great need for domestic violence services, sexual assault services, education in those areas as well” (TC 3, 8).

- *There is concern about the ability to staff new facilities:*

It was once just brain drain, but now it's like able-bodied drain [away from] rural communities, become just increasingly elderly. And there's... There's no one to provide these resources. Or provide the labor for them, I should say” (TC 29, 16).

4.1.3 Community members expressed a need for leadership to support connection and want to see the impact of their contributions as a way of experiencing leadership. Researchers have noted a strong desire for unity among various segments of the community. Participants have expressed the need for effective leadership that can drive residential town development, expand park systems, and establish a cohesive community identity for people to rally around. Within this theme, the following subthemes were identified:

- *A need for connection between individuals, between facilities and parks, and between individuals and facilities/parks was identified. A sense of community ownership through contribution was identified as a driver of buy-in:*

And just for example, the library is hoping to get new doors that have the push button for handicapped folks, and I'm like, ‘Oh, these doors aren't that bad.’ And then I open them with that in mind. And it's like, ‘yeah, they are’, it's hard to get in the library, even though it's on the same level. And if you try to get someone in a wheelchair to the churches, for example, it's like, yeah, they've got a ramp, but there's gravel at the bottom or whatever, and it's just, it's difficult (TD 13, 2).

- *The participants expressed valuing being together and having meaningful in-person interactions:*

So, she does. The kids do fiddle camp and all that. She works at the co-op down here. She put the Boy Scouts back together. Wow. Yeah, she's a force. She does it all. She really does. And. And she. And she loves it. She loves to be in the community. She loves to get out and do all that stuff. Which is really good. And like I said, she probably she probably knows three times the people I do, and I get to interact with them every day (TB 10, 10).

4.1.4 A sense of isolation and need for belonging weaves through the participants' stories. The prevailing theme highlights feelings of solitude, seclusion, and pressure expressed by respondents in various research settings, including focus groups and online surveys. Participants pointed out the town's remote location, emphasizing its geographical isolation with hills on either side of the county serving as natural barriers to neighboring communities. Moreover, they discussed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it has influenced the dynamics of relationships within the community. Through these conversations, it became clear that the town is perceived as an outdoor-oriented community that treasures its identity and is committed to preserving its intimate, small-town character and unique outdoor opportunities. Within this theme, the following subthemes were noted:

- *The COVID-19 pandemic impacted community ties and strained relationships:*

And we haven't really recovered from it. Just as humans like people have not let go of that frustration and anger and resentment like it is. It has created. That's been a huge part of this divide because now it's like now we were it's you or me on everything, whether I want to be on your side or not. If I didn't, if you weren't on my side two years ago, then, yeah, I'm not coming to you now (TB 14, 14).

We had people that wouldn't come in the library because they didn't want to wear a mask and they haven't been back (TB 14, 19).

We watched when Covid happened. We watched the school shut down. We watched the shut down and then we watched it when it reopened. There was so much, you know, like everywhere else. There was just so much concern about how they were going to open and how that it was really, really slow to welcome the community back in. I mean, it's 2023 now and parents still can't go in and visit their kids' classrooms like it is. There's been a big like closed off fitness, I think, of the school. In terms of us feeling welcome. There aren't very many. I mean, they just got prom back a year ago. You know, it took them a while to let those things happen and to feel safe about doing it again, I guess (TB 13, 12).

- *The geographical and environmental location of [the town] contributes to and mirrors social isolation, leading to a sense of hopelessness and exhaustion—“winter is hard”, “valley living”, “disconnected trail and sidewalk system:”*

And you know the hill between [this county] and [the next county]? ...It makes a huge barrier psychologically. People are like, ‘Oh, I don't want to go to the [the next county].’ It's like there's a barbed wire fence up there” (TD 4, 23).

I think we're geographically isolated. You can't get to this town without going over a mountain pass (TD 5, 9).

And I just think everyone's so tired, and I think that's like, that's why I was so excited to hear about this and the potential for there to be this momentum to actually do something to help because the school needs help. Parents need help, like our community needs help and we need something else. We need something to grow. Everyone is tired, and everyone is burnt out. And so our apathy right now is strong and the empathy is real low. And so I just I think people could get behind something like this if they knew that we're it's going to help and it's going to take some of that burden off. I just think that that's going to take a lot of buy-in from the people who are willing to. Stick it out. And I think it exists (TB 33, 8).

- *The perpetuation of invisibility and stigma is a barrier to receiving help:*

And I hope that we can find a way to reduce the stigma. And be able to be proud of who we are, no matter who we are” (TC 25, 19).

It's very isolating. I moved here 18 months ago, and I will tell you, people would physically leave a room when I would walk in at my job when I started. So, I've managed because I can. But I think it would be one of the things that I think is frustrating and even a challenge is just even connecting community (TC 13, 5).

- *The need to hold on to the vision of a small outdoor Montana community where one belongs, socializes, and has a good time was identified:*

But anyway, I just think that a sense of value, a sense of worth is part of what contributes to healthy outlook and less loneliness and less paranoia and all those things” (TG 2, 33).

Main theme	Subtheme	Quotes	Notes
<p>1. The community experiences tensions during its growth, while searching for a needed collective identity.</p>	<p><i>a. There is opposition to change and attachment to how things are.</i></p> <p><i>b. There is tension between untamed growth and desire for sameness.</i></p> <p><i>c. A polarization of viewpoints is present in the community.</i></p> <p><i>d. Participants describe paradoxes within individualism and community-mindedness, describing the current state of the community.</i></p>	<p>“I want a small town. That’s why I moved here” (TE 16, 17).</p> <p>“There are people who’ve lived here a long, long time and like the way it is” (TA 1, 3).</p> <p>“I see in communities like ours kind of a denialism going on 'cause everything's changing, but nobody wants it to change. So the infrastructure to support the change never happens” (TD 14, 14).</p> <p>“I would say I'd like to see some of the dirt roads fixed, but as soon as we fix the dirt roads, there'll be too many people here” (TA 5, 1).</p> <p>“Well, I moved here 17 years ago, and I'm not a real outgoing person by nature, but I found people to be pretty welcoming. With the caveat that if you are new, you better not try to change anything” (TD 5, 7).</p> <p>“There's like a bitterness, like a frustration of there's not enough to do or there's not enough for our kids to do. And so I think with that shift, there's come some like, momentum to create more things, you know, and I felt the pushback from some people where they're like, don't mess with our community. We love it the way it is. But we also have this momentum from these young families who just want they want more, more opportunity, more things” (TB 11, 11).</p> <p>“I think part of the issue when somebody moves into town, nobody trusts them because they don't know them. Stranger danger. Yeah. I mean, it's just a fact. It's but once they warm up to the person, then it's fantastic. So it's finding that balance of the right individual, like you said, whether they already live here and they become educated on all the resources or they're from here, they leave, they come back” (TC 9, 10).</p> <p>“I love the community here, everybody. I won't say everybody, but we have, you know, everybody when you know they need to everybody gets together. You know, like I said, when your neighbors get snowed in, those that have the equipment to plow people 's driveways and things like that, they do. They go out and help and they make sure that everybody's, you know, taken care of.” (TB 8, 14).</p> <p>“I would say that's a good description of this community. Disjointed” (TA 21, 10).</p>	<p>1. Fear of change and attachment to how things are.</p> <p>Tension between untamed growth and desire for sameness. Polarization through this attitude</p> <p>2. Community growth means the change in culture</p> <p>3. Social mirroring of geographical isolation → in Theme D</p> <p>4. Mixed feelings</p> <p>5. Individualism vs community-mindedness</p> <p>6. Pros and cons of living in a rural area</p> <p>Missing: polarization (7)</p>

Main theme	Subtheme	Quotes	Notes
<p>2. Gaps in social safety and community services drive the identification of community needs (community services, facilities, centralized information system).</p>	<p><i>a. A need for a facility large and versatile enough for connection and community events (parent education, event space, centralized dissemination of information) was identified.</i></p> <p><i>b. Space for a healthy outlet (pool, pickle ball court, fitness classes, indoor skate park) to meet social needs was identified.</i></p> <p><i>c. A position is needed for a resource manager or coordinator to serve as a connection to resources.</i></p> <p><i>d. A need for expansion of services for the community (domestic violence support, childcare, LGBTQ+ support, housing, hospice, crisis support, disability) was identified.</i></p> <p>e. There is concern about the ability to staff new facilities.</p>	<p>“And the school has, you know, a big gym and a big cafeteria, but they're busy all the time. They can't do community events. They can't. They're just busy. And so where else do you go? To the basement of the Catholic Church that might hold 100? The Assembly of God Church probably holds 70 round tables. The Baptist church out there on the highway probably holds 50, but there's no place that would hold, say, 200 people. And this is a population of I'm guessing we're up to 2500 now. So if somebody has a big funeral or a big wedding or something, there's no place” (TA 7, 13).</p> <p>“The state does a prevention needs assessment. And this is touched my heart since the first time I read it six years ago. But one of the largest risk factors for youth and substance abuse, violence, suicide, depression and overall poor mental health is low neighborhood attachment or low community attachment” TC (23, 17).</p> <p>“I would agree that the advocacy having someone to disseminate that knowledge of how to get what you need would be amazing” (TC 8, 22).</p> <p>“It's like we have these little pockets of interesting programs, but you really got to know somebody to figure it out” (TC 32, 27).</p> <p>“There's not after-school options” (TB 25, 13).</p> <p>“There is a great need for domestic violence services, sexual assault services, education in those areas as well” (TC 3, 8).</p> <p>“It was once just brain drain, but now it's like able-bodied drain [away from] rural communities, become just increasingly elderly. And there's. There's no one to provide these resources. Or provide the labor for them, I should say” (TC 29, 16).</p>	<p>1. Facility large enough for connection and community events that would be versatile (parent education, event space, centralized dissemination of information)</p> <p>2. Space for healthy social outlet (pool, pickle ball court, fitness classes, indoor skate park) that would be an alternative to bars to meet social needs.</p> <p>3. A position of a resource manager and coordinator (a “new Sue”) to serve as a connection hub for outside resources to meet community’s needs.</p> <p>4. Needed expansion of services for the community: DV, Childcare, LGBTQI+, housing, hospice, crisis support, disability.</p>

Main theme	Subtheme	Quotes	Notes
<p>3. Community members expressed a need for leadership to support connection and want to see the impact of their contributions.</p>	<p><i>a. A need for connection between individuals, between facilities and parks, and between individuals and facilities/parks was identified. A sense of community ownership through contribution was identified as a driver of buy-in.</i></p>	<p>“And just for example, the library is hoping to get new doors that have the push button for handicapped folks, and I'm like, "Oh, these doors aren't that bad." And then I open them with that in mind. And it's like, "yeah, they are," it's hard to get in the library, even though it's on the same level. And if you try to get someone in a wheelchair to the churches, for example, it's like, yeah, they've got a ramp, but there's gravel at the bottom or whatever, and it's just, it's difficult” (TD 13, 2).</p>	<p>1. Accessibility to resources/connection 2. Human lending library 3. Parks, social public spaces 4. Healing happens in present process 5. Leadership in community as hope for unification 6. Impact of environment on community cohesion</p>
	<p><i>b. The experience of strong community leadership in the past fuels the yearning and need for the next generation of leaders.</i></p>	<p>“It feels like we're bumping onto this like engagement piece. It seems like there's like an initiative, something happens, volunteers kind of get engaged, and then either the lack of structure or lack of organization or some kind of leadership that makes that effort fizzle out over time, in short time, and then it just disappears” (TD 8, 18).</p>	
	<p><i>c. The participants expressed valuing being together and having meaningful in-person interactions.</i></p>	<p>“So she does. The kids do fiddle camp and all that. She works at the co-op down here. She put the Boy Scouts back together. Wow. Yeah, she's a force. She does it all. She really does. And. And she. And she loves it. She loves to be in the community. She loves to get out and do all that stuff. Which is really good. And like I said, she probably she probably knows three times the people I do, and I get to interact with them every day” (TB 10, 10).</p>	
<p>4. A sense of isolation and need for belonging weaves through the participants’ stories.</p>	<p><i>a. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted community ties and strained relationships.</i></p>	<p>“And we haven't really recovered from it. Just as humans like people have not let go of that frustration and anger and resentment like it is. It has created. That's been a huge part of this divide because now it's like now we were it's you or me on everything, whether I want to be on your side or not. If I didn't, if you weren't on my side two years ago, then, yeah, I'm not coming to you now” (TB 14, 14).</p> <p>“We had people that wouldn't come in the library because they didn't want to wear a mask and they haven't been back” (TB 14, 19).</p> <p>“We watched when Covid happened. We watched the school shut down. We watched the shut down and then we watched it when it reopened. There was so much, you know, like everywhere else. There was just so much concern about how</p>	<p>1. Covid wounds 2. Resistance to change and a growing town (Already under theme A.) 3. “My bootstraps are broken” 4. Impact of environment on community cohesion (*winter is hard)</p>

Main theme	Subtheme	Quotes	Notes
		<p>they were going to open and how that it was really, really slow to welcome the community back in. I mean, it's 2023 now and parents still can't go in and visit their kids' classrooms like it is. There's been a big like closed off fitness, I think, of the school. In terms of us feeling welcome. There aren't very many. I mean, they just got prom back a year ago. You know, it took them a while to let those things happen and to feel safe about doing it again, I guess" (TB 13, 12).</p>	<p>5. Sportsman Sign 6. Barriers/stigma around seeking help 7. Perpetuation of invisibility and stigma 8. Facebook</p>
	<p>b. The geographical and environmental location of Studied town contributes to and mirrors social isolation, leading to a sense of hopelessness and exhaustion. ("Winter is hard," "valley living," "disconnected trail and sidewalk system")</p>	<p>"And you know the hill between [redacted] A Valley and [redacted] B Valley? ...It makes a huge barrier psychologically. People are like, 'Oh, I don't want to go to the B Valley.' It's like there's a barbed wire fence up there" (TD 4, 23).</p> <p>"I think we're geographically isolated. You can't get to Studied town without going over a mountain pass" (TD 5, 9). "And I just think everyone's so tired, and I think that's like, that's why I was so excited to hear about this and the potential for there to be this momentum to actually do something to help because the school needs help. Parents need help, like our community needs help and we need something else. We need something to grow. Everyone is tired, and everyone is burnt out. And so our apathy right now is strong and the empathy is real low. And so I just I think people could get behind something like this if they knew that we're it's going to help and it's going to take some of that burden off. I just think that that's going to take a lot of buy-in from the people who are willing to. Stick it out. And I think it exists" (TB 33, 8).</p>	
	<p>c. The perpetuation of invisibility and stigma is a barrier to receiving help.</p>	<p>"And I hope that we can find a way to reduce the stigma. And be able to be proud of who we are, no matter who we are" (TC 25, 19).</p> <p>"It's very isolating. I moved here 18 months ago and I will tell you, people would physically leave a room when I would walk in at my job when I started. So I've managed because I can. But I think it would be one of the things that I think is frustrating and even a challenge is just even connecting community" (TC 13, 5).</p>	
	<p>d. The need to hold on to the vision of a small outdoor Montana community where one belongs, socializes, and has a good time was identified.</p>	<p>"But anyway, I just think that a sense of value, a sense of worth is part of what contributes to healthy outlook and less loneliness and less paranoia and all those things" (TG 2, 33).</p>	

5.0 Discussion

Denzin et al. (2008) have discussed how qualitative research has historically been intertwined with colonial knowledge, power, and truth. Researchers often positioned themselves as outsiders and asserted their superiority over the studied population. They tended to impose their interpretations of findings without much regard for the best interests of the study's subjects. In this study, the research team adopted a constructivist approach (Morrow, 2005) and focused on reshaping the power dynamic between researchers and the community under study. To break away from colonial traditions, they (a) involved community representatives as consultants and team members; (b) empowered the community by allowing them to share their experiences, and formulated findings based on their voices; and (c) prioritized the best interests of the town residents throughout the study.

The town's remarkable expansion evoked strong emotions among community residents. In interviews, they expressed the belief that this growth necessitated a cultural shift beyond the community's control, or—in different words—having its own momentum within the community. A notable theme that emerged from the participants' narratives was the contradiction between acknowledging unmet needs within the community and resisting change. Participants indirectly addressed the conflict between their desire for independence and self-sufficiency and their need for social interaction. The need for connection extended beyond interpersonal relationships to include the desire for physical connections through sidewalks and trails and access to services and resources through centralized advocates. Participants expressed feelings of hopelessness and fatigue stemming from the tensions within the community, revealing a sense of being unable to surmount their challenges. One participant encapsulated this sentiment by stating:

And I just think everyone's so tired, and I think that's like, that's why I was so excited to hear about this and the potential for there to be this momentum to actually do something to help because the school needs help. Parents need help, like our community needs help and we need something else. We need something to grow. Everyone is tired and everyone is burnt out. And so, our apathy right now is strong, and the empathy is real low. And so I just I think people could get behind something like this if they knew that we're... it's going to help and it's going to take some of that burden off. I just think that that's going to take a lot of buy-in from the people who are willing to stick it out. And I think it exists. (TB 34, 4).

The results of the previous quantitative needs assessments correspond with the identified needs of our study participants. They underscore the importance of enhancing services in multiple areas, including (a) mental health, (b) domestic violence support, (c) childcare, (d) parental assistance, (e) LGBTQ+ education and support, (f) event facilities, (g) centralized resource information dissemination, and (h) indoor recreational amenities.

Utilizing a qualitative approach, we gained valuable insights into past experiences addressing these needs, current barriers, and the requirements for meaningful

community engagement. Researchers have used such methods with success (Bennett-Levy et al., 2021; De Weger et al., 2020). Members of the focus groups expressed a shared and ongoing desire to actively engage with the town's community. However, they also identified areas within the community that might hinder connection and cohesion, reflecting a perceived barrier to progress. One participant aptly articulated this challenge.

...then people started disagreeing about how it could be done. It is kind of like what [another participant's name] talked about with the pool. You know, it was a board that started out—and it started out small—but then people kept bringing these... 'big ideas.' And then it got bigger and then it got bigger and then it got bigger and then it...disbanded. Let's do something! Start, and then we'll see what happens from there (TC 32, 5).

The anecdotes shared by participants highlighted two potential strategies for managing the town's rapid growth and changing community needs. A crucial recommendation was the necessity for strong, proactive leadership to address internal disconnection within the community. Residents expressed a desire for leaders who would uphold the community's values and identity while fostering connections among members and facilitating access to resources, facilities, and parks. It was repeatedly emphasized that effective leadership would provide structure and organization to keep community members engaged. Additionally, participants stressed the importance of instilling a sense of individual ownership of the community to overcome barriers to change. They emphasized the significance of community members' contributions in fostering a sense of ownership and active engagement. The town's residents are eager to actively participate in shaping the community's future and witnessing the impact of those changes.

The participants expressed their frustrations, differences, and letdowns, but they did so together as a community. The residents came together to share their rural life experiences and to envision a positive future. They dedicated time from their schedules to gather at the community library, bravely opening up to outsiders in order to support their community. The participants found that being in the group, sharing their knowledge and resources, was rejuvenating and in line with the community's requirements.

5.1 Limitations

In line with the qualitative nature of this research, it is important to recognize the limitations associated with subjectively interpreting the stories of participants. The researchers have made a transparent effort to present their experiences and biases that could influence the study results. To ensure a balanced perspective, the research team comprised both non-residents and residents of this town. It is acknowledged that the focus groups and survey participants may not have fully represented the community, as those who participated may have been especially interested and engaged in seeking change within the community to meet evolving needs. The demographic analysis revealed that there were no disclosed non-binary individuals who participated in the study. Additionally, there was a lack of representation from individuals aged 18–24 and 55–64, suggesting that the needs of these populations may not have been fully captured. Furthermore, there was a clear overrepresentation of female respondents, prompting consideration about the perspectives that could have been provided by more male participants.

6.0 Conclusions

Our research team presented the study results at the county's Mental Health Advisory Council, followed by a public evening meeting at the county's public library on March 4, 2024. The themes of tension and transition in the town's identity deeply resonated with participants at both meetings. Throughout our study, we observed the community's pride, investment, hope, and struggle to reach a consensus on its priorities. Themes of change and tension accompanied the town's growth, alongside geographical, physical, and emotional isolation, and the need for more resources, particularly a community gathering space.

We also observed a paradox: The immobilization alongside a sense of momentum in a new effort, underpinned by unwavering hope in the success of the current attempt to build a community center. The emergence of rapid leadership in the community, addressing the diverse needs of the town's demographics, signifies another crucial need for the town. The new energy and financial means invested in this community imply that the establishment of a community center is a tangible possibility.

Conducting this QCNA has proved to be a community intervention in and of itself (Bennett-Levy et al., 2021; De Weger et al., 2020; Denzin et al., 2008), and this was no exception. Study participants expressed a strong appreciation for the community forum created by the research process and demonstrated a willingness to engage in defining leadership needs for this town. Similarly, stakeholders who consumed the results of this study acknowledged the value of the findings in shaping actionable goals and fostering collaboration. The process of engaging with participants and stakeholders highlights how qualitative methodologies can serve not only as tools for understanding but also as catalysts for community engagement and development.

This project also underscored the importance of QCNA as an educational opportunity for graduate counseling students (Burkhalter et al., 2012; Skehan et al., 2024). Involving students in this study emphasized their potential roles as leaders and advocates within the communities they serve. By participating in this QCNA, students experienced firsthand the intersection of research, leadership, and community advocacy, reinforcing their professional development as counselors equipped to facilitate change.

Our primary recommendation is for the town to invest in creating a master plan in partnership with all community representatives. This would provide a roadmap for addressing the town's evolving needs while fostering a sense of shared purpose. Our secondary recommendation is for the county's leadership to invest in effective communication strategies that empower the resilient and independent community to achieve common goals. Given the unique rural and remote character of the county, it is essential to address the communication challenges specific to rural areas and ensure that information reaches all residents while respecting the community's collective culture and diverse viewpoints.

Lastly, we recommend conducting a longitudinal design study to track the transformation and growth of this rural community. Long-term engagement through listening sessions could provide valuable insights, with results shared with the community as they were in this study. Additionally, further research is needed to better understand the needs of rapidly growing rural communities. Similar studies replicated in other rural communities in the mountain West would enhance our understanding of the challenges and opportunities these communities face.

Funding Statement

This study was funded by Montana State University's College of Education, Health, and Human Development as an investment in adding to the body of knowledge about Montana's rural communities and supporting the small rural communities.

References

- Bennett-Levy, J., Singer, J., Rotumah, D., Bernays, S., & Edwards, D. (2021). From digital mental health to digital social and emotional wellbeing: How indigenous community-based participatory research influenced the Australian government's digital mental health agenda. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(18), Article 9757. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18189757>
- Billings, J. R., & Cowley, S. (1995). Approaches to community needs assessment: A literature review. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 22(4), 721–730. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.1995.22040721.x>
- Burkhalter J. E., Cahill S., Shuk E., Guidry, J., Corner, G., Berk, A., Candelario, N., Kornegay, M., & Lubetkin, E. I. (2012). At the intersection of HIV/AIDS and cancer: A qualitative needs assessment of community-based HIV/AIDS service organizations. *Health Education & Behavior*. 40(4), 493–503. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198112459049>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2017). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- De Weger, E., Van Vooren, N. J. E., Drewes, H. W., Luijkx, K. G., & Baan, C. A. (2020). Searching for new community engagement approaches in the Netherlands: A realist qualitative study. *BMC Public Health*, 20, Article 508. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-08616-6>
- Denzin, N. K., Lincoln, Y. S., & Smith, L. T. (Eds.). (2008). *Handbook of critical and indigenous methodologies*. SAGE.
- Morrow, S. L. (2005). Quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research in counseling psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52(2), 250–260. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.250>
- Reeves, S., Kuper, A., & Hodges, B. D. (2008). Qualitative research methodologies: Ethnography. *BMJ*, 337, Article 1020. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.a1020>
- Skehan, J., Thornton, L., Tynan, R., & Fitzpatrick, S. (2024). A qualitative assessment of community needs and views about discussing suicide. *Advances in Mental Health*, 23(2), 143–157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/18387357.2024.2369133>
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis*, Sage.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). *Research data centers*. Retrieved April 2023, from <https://www.census.gov/content/census/en/about/adrm/fsrdc/locations.html>