

NEBRASKA YOUTH SURVEY

Understanding the perceptions and perspectives of Nebraska's next generation



AUGUST 2021 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



BACKGROUND

In January 2020, Nebraska Community Foundation began work with Center for Public Affairs Research at the University of Nebraska at Omaha to co-create a survey designed to explore young people's perceptions of their Nebraska hometowns. Now, after two years, more than 2,500 students have participated in our youth surveys. In 2021, over 1,000 students responded to the online survey which was administered in rural communities of varying sizes and geography between January and May 2021.

The results of the Youth Survey begin to reveal the priorities, values, and desires of these individuals as well as factors that may influence their decision to return to or remain in Greater Nebraska in the future. The hope is that these data may serve as a resource for Nebraska Community Foundation's network of 1,500 community volunteers as well as other organizations and entities that share an interest in people attraction.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The 2021 Nebraska Youth Survey represents the views of 1,047 high and middle school students. The emerging patterns indicate that our hometowns are uniquely positioned to offer precisely the things Nebraska youth say they want in the places they choose to live. Below are key findings with further analysis provided by Josie Gatti Schafer, Ph.D., Center for Public Affairs Research.

They prefer small, safe communities. Students resoundingly said their ideal communities are small like their hometowns. The traits they seek in their ideal community—safety, good schools, and proximity to family—are already abundant in Greater Nebraska.

***Dr. Schafer:** A series of questions on the survey attempt to uncover what students like about their communities and how that may shape their image of their ideal community. For example, 91% feel safe from violence or theft in their community, and safety is something over 37% of students identified as the top priority for their ideal future community. We also saw an increase, 47% to 64%, from the 2020-to-2021 surveys in the percentage of students that said in the future they want to live somewhere "small, like my hometown." This is a boon for the future of Greater Nebraska. The work communities put in now to be safe spaces may pay off in attracting these students for years to come.*

They embrace their roots. A persistent myth of stigma hangs over returning to or staying in our Greater Nebraska hometowns; however, youth today are dismantling that notion with the vast majority surveyed saying no such stigma exists.

***Dr. Schafer:** When we began this survey, one of the central interests was uncovering the extent to which there was a stigma associated with living in small towns in Nebraska and why. After two years of conducting the survey, the results are clear—most student respondents do not feel a stigma exists about living in the place they live now. Moreover, the trend is positive with more students saying there is no stigma in the 2021 survey (76%) compared to the 2020 survey (70%). However, we found male respondents were more likely to say there was no stigma compared to females, and the difference was significant. While overall the lack of stigma is great news for the future, there is still work to do to understand why perceptions vary.*

They are engaged, active, and welcoming. Greater Nebraska youth are community-oriented—and busy. They balance sports, jobs, volunteering, and club activities all while attending school. They are involved and want to play a part in shaping their community—adults and community leaders must continue inviting them to share their voice.

***Dr. Schafer:** The results from the survey show Nebraska's small-town youth are hardworking, engaged, and welcoming. Eighty-seven percent of the youth surveyed have a job, 84% participate in school activities such as sports or choir, and 41% join others in doing something positive for their community a few times a year. Almost 80% are likely to act to stop unfair treatment of others. However, when asked if they are involved in community decision-making around events and projects, 75% said no. Furthermore, 35% said they wish their community had more organizations or groups with which to engage. Opportunities exist to deepen engagement, particularly in civic life. As a result, investments made now to deepen the connections between students and their hometowns may impact future likelihood to embrace their hometowns.*