

# GREATER NEBRASKA YOUTH SURVEY

*Understanding the perceptions and perspectives of Nebraska's next generation*



**AUGUST 2023 REPORT**



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## BACKGROUND

In January 2020, Nebraska Community Foundation began working 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 Greater Nebraska hometowns. Now, after four years, more than 3,700 students have participated in our youth surveys. Over the last year, 980 students responded to the online survey which was administered in rural communities of varying sizes and geography between December 2022 and May 2023.

The results of the 2023 Greater Nebraska 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.



The Center for Public Affairs Research collaboratively produces and disseminates high-quality public scholarship about topics that impact the lives of Nebraskans. Ongoing projects from CPAR include policy analyses for the Planning Committee of the Nebraska State Legislature, the Nebraska Rural Transit Project, governing.unomaha.edu, and designation by the U.S. Census Bureau as a statewide liaison for disseminating a range of data products. To learn more about CPAR and access many of our data resources go to [cpar.unomaha.edu](https://cpar.unomaha.edu).



Nebraska Community Foundation unleashes abundant local assets, inspires charitable giving, and connects ambitious people to build stronger communities and a Greater Nebraska.

Headquartered in Lincoln, the Foundation serves communities, donors, and organizations by providing financial management, strategic development, education, and training to a statewide network of 1,500 volunteers serving more than 270 communities. In the last five years, donors have made 46,653 contributions to Nebraska Community Foundation and its affiliated funds. Since 1994, Nebraska Community Foundation has reinvested \$463 million in Nebraska's people and places. For information, visit [NebraskaHometown.org](https://NebraskaHometown.org).

## METHODS

In December of 2022, Nebraska Community Foundation (NCF) continued work with the Center for Public Affairs Research at the University of Nebraska at Omaha to conduct a survey of middle and high school students in communities across Greater Nebraska.

The survey development team consisted of Kara Asmus, Affiliated Fund Development Coordinator at Nebraska Community Foundation; K.C. Belitz, former Chief Operating Officer at Nebraska Community Foundation; and Josie Gatti Schafer, Ph.D., Center for Public Affairs Research.

Questions were kept consistent from the previous year's survey, as well as expanded upon to learn more about Nebraska youth's perspectives about their hometowns.

After the survey instrument was created in Qualtrics software, Asmus worked with school administrators and local fund leaders to distribute each school's private link to their online survey. These private links assigned to each individual school allowed the research team to assess results based on school, NCF affiliated fund region, and community. Survey data were collected between December of 2022 and May of 2023. The results from each school were pooled in the provided reports.

Once all schools that participated had responded, the online survey was closed. A total of 980 students responded. Not all students completed all questions. Analysis was conducted in Microsoft Excel and Stata v.15. The research team did not analyze representation or selection bias because only select schools in Nebraska participated.

This report represents the views of 980 Nebraska middle and high school students that responded to the survey. The report summarizes the perceptions of these students at a point in time. Several questions asked students to make predictions about their future choices. It is expected that students' views and behaviors will change over time. Nonetheless, this is one of the only surveys in Nebraska that provides insights into the future growth and evolution of Nebraska's rural communities.

# SURVEY RESPONDENTS



980

Total responses



11

Communities

Arcadia, Chase County, Crofton, David City, Diller-Odell, Ogallala, Ord, Paxton, Pender, Shickley, and Stuart



11

Schools

7<sup>th</sup> GRADE

2%

8<sup>th</sup> GRADE

8%

9<sup>th</sup> GRADE

23%

10<sup>th</sup> GRADE

25%

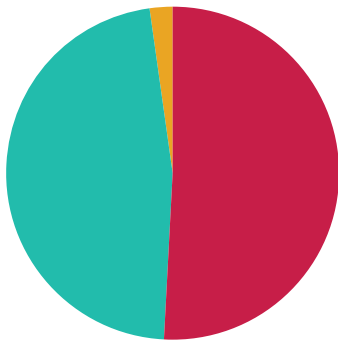
11<sup>th</sup> GRADE

19%

12<sup>th</sup> GRADE

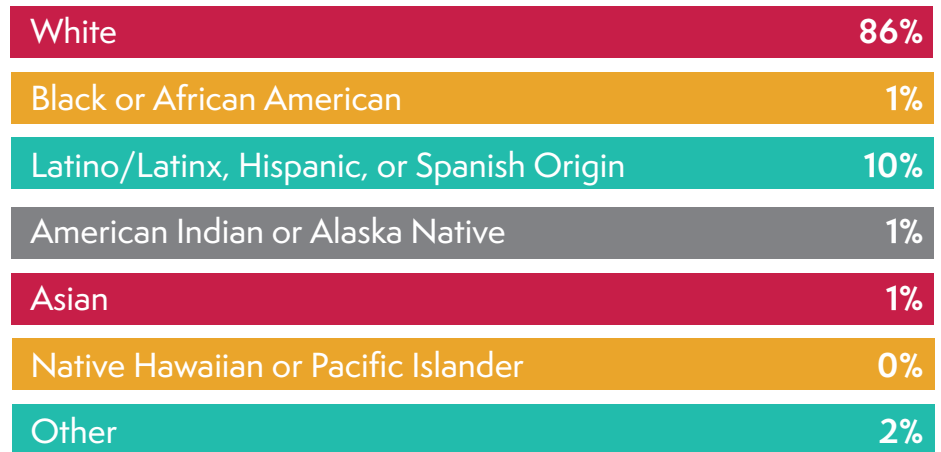
22%

Participants by gender



Female = 51%  
Male = 47%  
Prefer not to say = 2%

Participants by race and/or ethnicity



Besides the people in your household, do you have other family that live in your community?



71%



29%

Do you have a job, including summer jobs, babysitting, mowing lawns, owning your own business, etc.?



86%

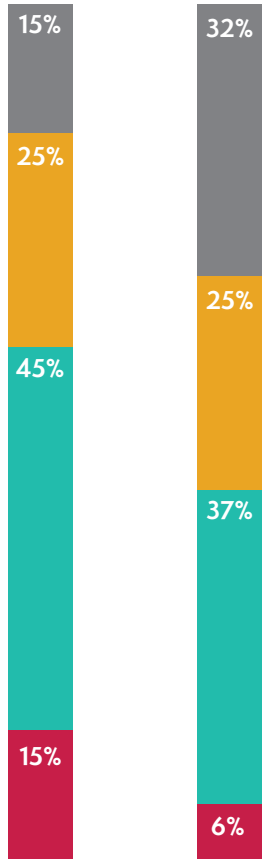


14%

# PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

When you are an adult, how likely are you to live in the area you live in now?

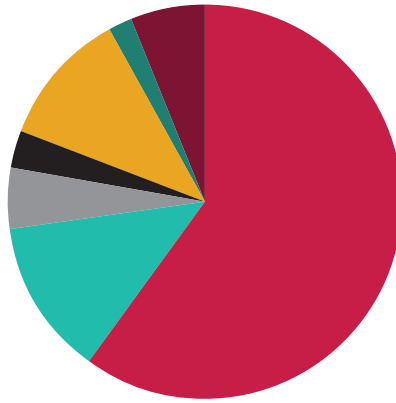
- Extremely unlikely
- Somewhat unlikely
- Somewhat likely
- Extremely likely



White Students

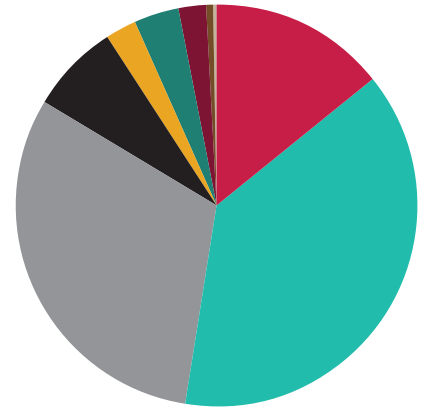
Students of Color

What are your plans after high school?



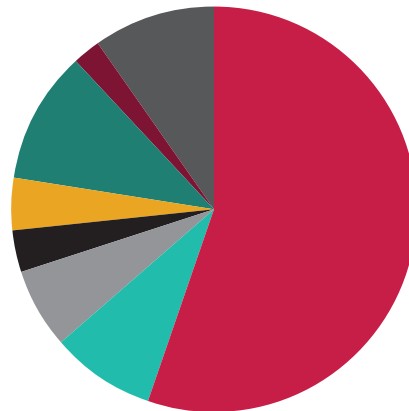
- 4-year college = 60%
- Community college = 13%
- Technology school = 5%
- Military = 3%
- Work = 11%
- Self-employment = 2%
- Other = 6%

If you were to live in this area as an adult, what do you think the main reason would be?



- Job or business opportunity = 12%
- Good place to raise a family = 32%
- Family ties = 26%
- Low cost of living = 6%
- Quality schools = 2%
- Safety = 3%
- Other = 2%
- Recreation opportunities = 0.4%
- Diverse cultural or community experiences = 0.1%

If you were not to live in this area as an adult, what is the main reason you would not live in this area?



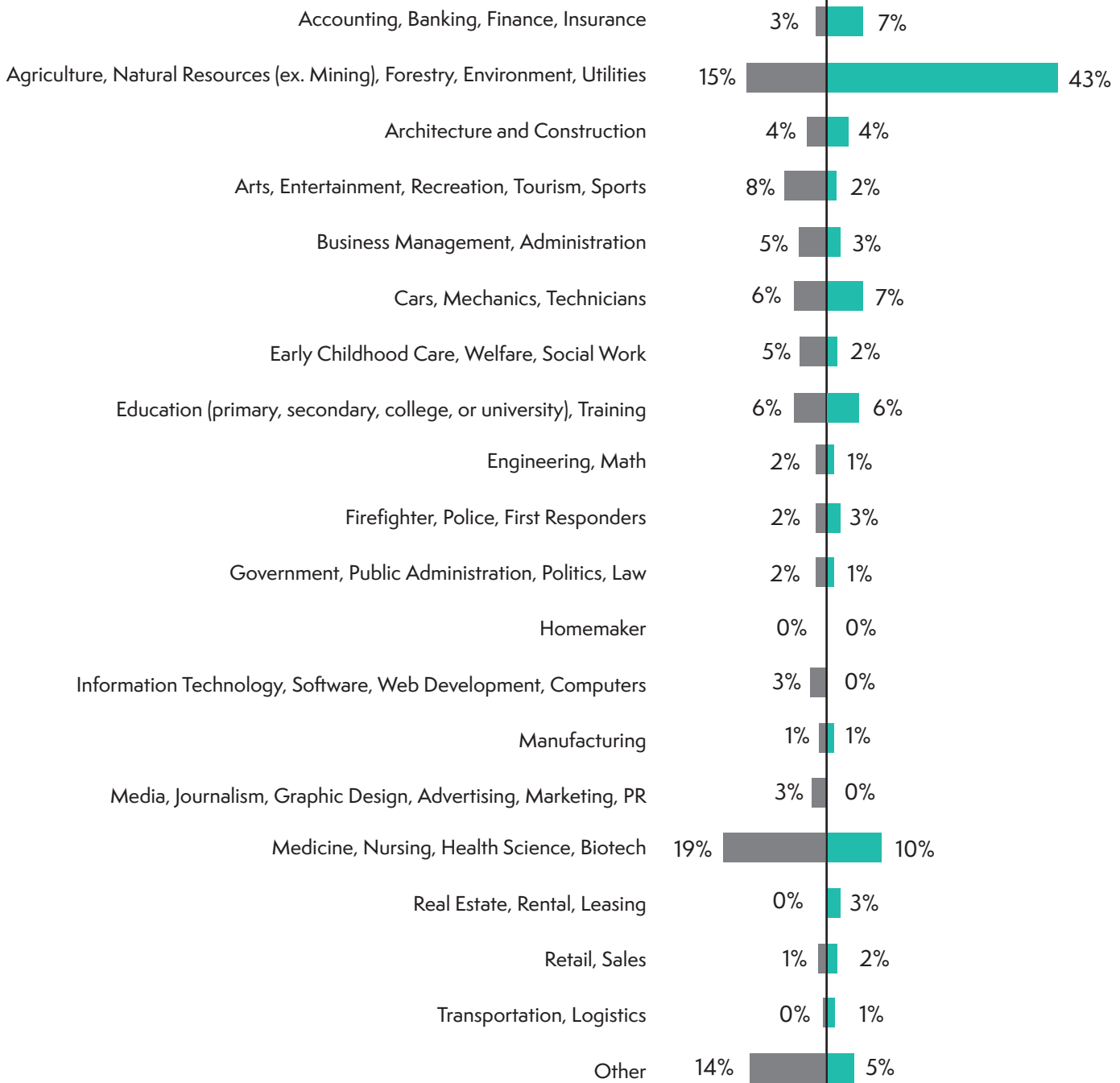
- Job or business opportunity elsewhere = 52%
- Better places to raise a family elsewhere = 8%
- Family ties elsewhere = 6%
- Lower cost of living elsewhere = 3%
- Quality schools elsewhere = 4%
- More recreation opportunities elsewhere = 10%
- Safer elsewhere = 2%
- Other = 9%



# PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

*In the future,  
what industry would you  
like to work in?*

*What do you think are the best  
employment opportunities in  
your area?*



# MY IDEAL COMMUNITY

What is the ideal size of a community to live in?



**SMALL,**  
like my hometown  
**64%**



**MEDIUM,**  
like Grand Island  
**25%**



**LARGE,**  
like Omaha  
**8%**



**VERY LARGE,**  
like Chicago  
**4%**

Rank the following from most important (1) to least important (7) when you think of your ideal community.

- |                                       |                 |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Safety from violence and theft     | Most Important  |
| 2. Good schools                       |                 |
| 3. Proximity to family                |                 |
| 4. Diverse cultural experiences       |                 |
| 5. Entertainment and shopping options |                 |
| 6. Feeling included                   |                 |
| 7. Parks and outdoor recreation       | Least Important |

Do you think there is a negative stigma with returning/staying in the place you live now?

**YES**  
28%

**NO**  
72%

◀ Question responses by gender

|                   | YES | NO  |
|-------------------|-----|-----|
| Female            | 32% | 68% |
| Male              | 23% | 77% |
| Prefer not to say | 44% | 56% |



## SAFETY & WELCOMING

*Do you feel safe from violence or theft in your community?*

**YES**  
90%

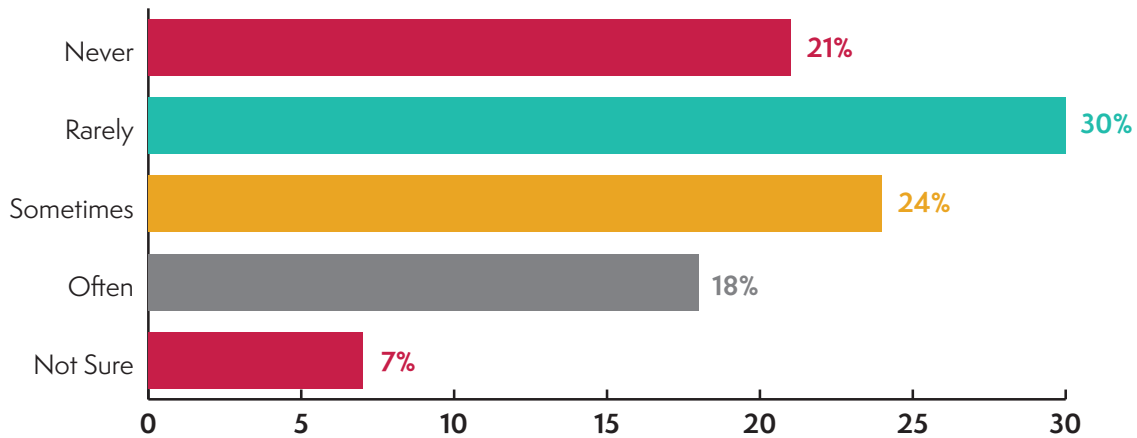
**NO**  
10%

*Have you ever been bullied (in-person or electronically) in your community?*

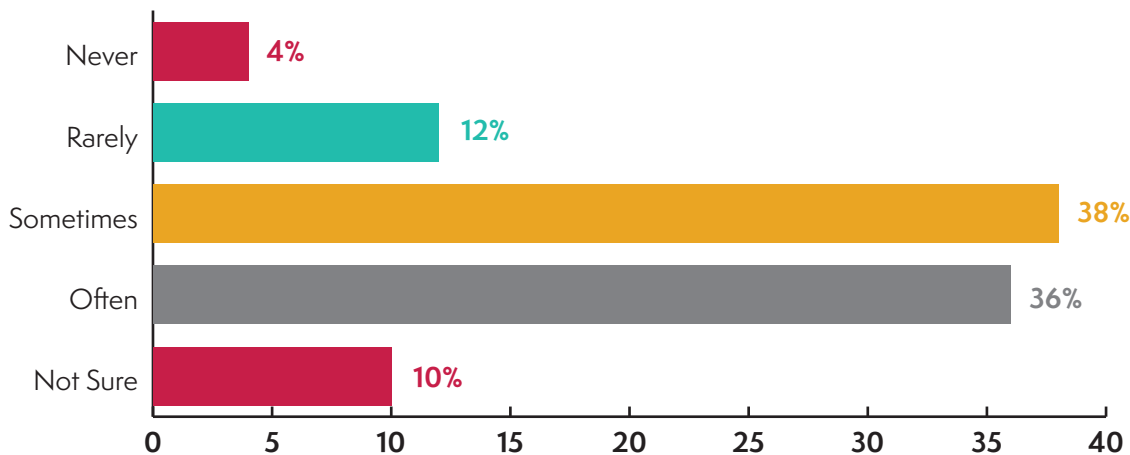
**YES**  
41%

**NO**  
59%

*How often have you seen someone in your community treated unfairly because of their age, race, gender, sexual orientation, physical illness, or mental health?*

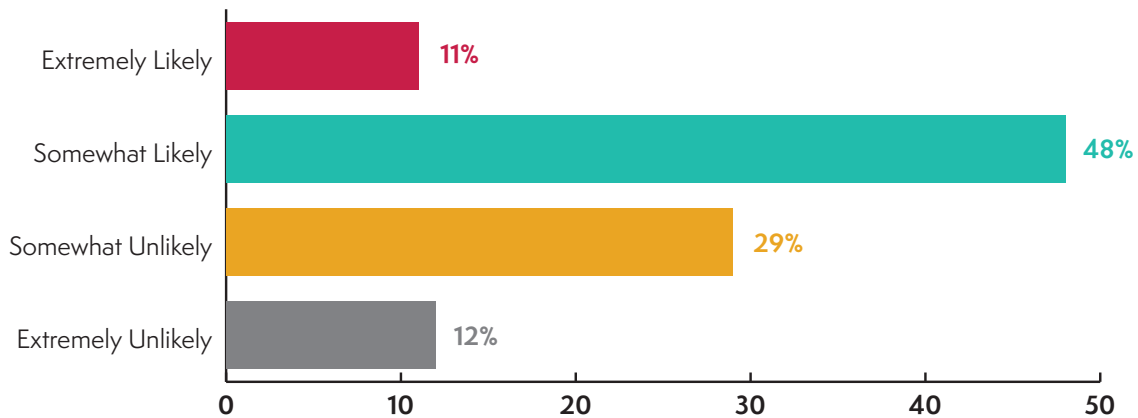


*How likely are you to act to stop unfair treatment when you see it?*



## SAFETY & WELCOMING

*How likely are you to be an advocate for diversity and inclusion in your community? (Some examples of advocating for diversity include sharing information about diversity and inclusion and volunteering with organizations working on diversity and inclusion topics in the community.)*



“

Activities and events tuned towards oneness, unity, and respect.

”

“

Provide safety for everyone no matter race, sexuality, or opinions.

”

“

The ability to handle differences better.

”



# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & VOLUNTEERISM

*My peers and I are invited to share our opinions or get involved in town projects or happenings.*

TRUE **65%**  
 FALSE **35%**

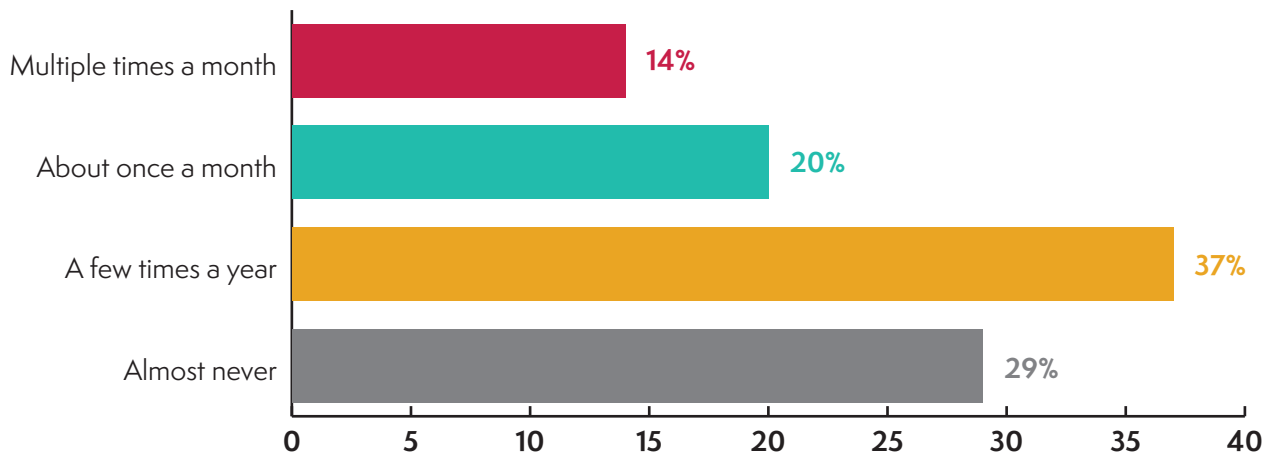
*I feel connected to the place I live now.*

TRUE **76%**  
 FALSE **24%**

*I play a role in this community (ex. you are involved in decision making about the community like events, programs, law making, or projects).*

TRUE **24%**  
 FALSE **76%**

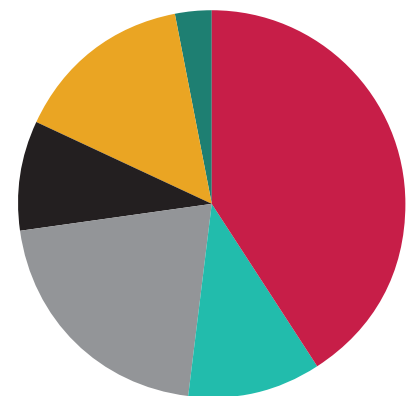
*How often do you get together with other people from your town to do something positive for your community (ex. volunteering, donating, or activism)?*



“ More opportunities—jobs, internships, service projects. ”

“ Provide more opportunities in our community to acquire skills that are not taught in school. ”

*Do you participate in any of the following activities?*

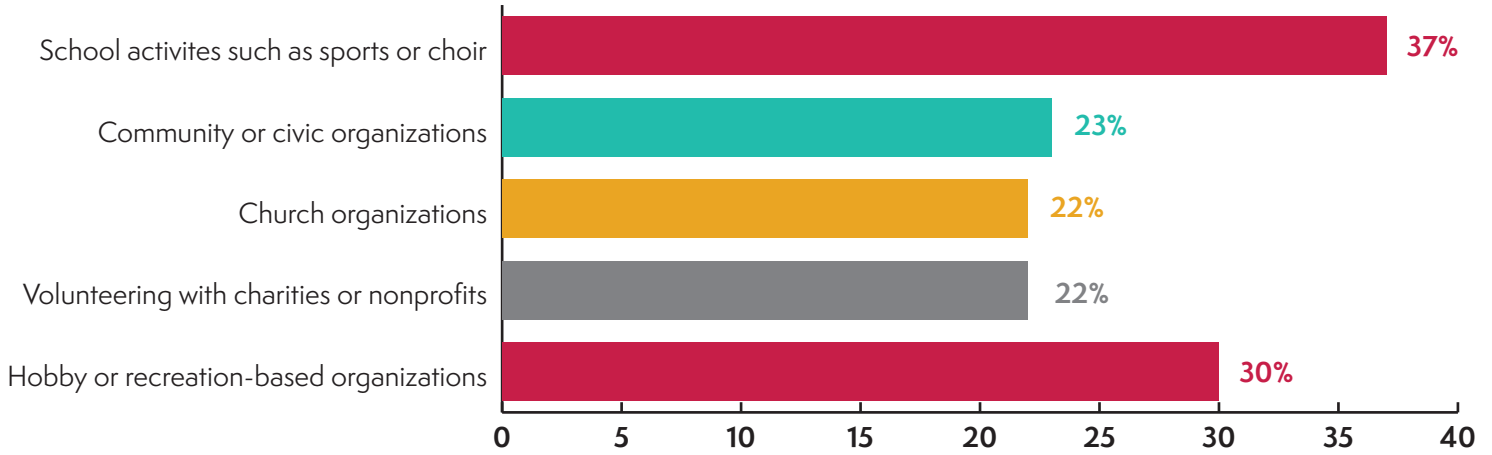


- School activities such as sports or choir = 41%
- Community or civic organizations = 11%
- Church organizations = 21%
- Volunteering with charities or nonprofits = 9%
- Hobby or recreation-based organizations = 15%
- Other = 3%

# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & VOLUNTEERISM

*For each of the following activities are there any barriers for you to participate?  
(Barriers might include financial resources, transportation, time, or other similar things.)*

Percentages represent the number of students who agree with the above statement.



*Do you wish there were more organizations or groups for you to engage with in your community?*

**YES**  
31%

**NO**  
69%

White Students

**YES**  
36%

**NO**  
64%

Students of Color



*Have you ever had an internship?*

**YES**  
11%

**NO**  
89%

## FINDINGS

The 2023 Greater Nebraska Youth Survey represents the views of 980 Nebraska middle and high school students. Their survey responses indicate that our Nebraska hometowns are uniquely positioned to offer precisely the things local youth say they want in the places they choose to live. Below are key findings of this research.

**1. Students still prefer small towns.** Year after year, students have expressed a preference for small communities with 64% of our Greater Nebraska respondents saying their ideal community size is “small, like my hometown.” Only 4% say their ideal community is larger than those that exist in Nebraska. Importantly, the vast majority (72%) say there is no stigma attached to living in a rural community.

**2. They want to remain in Nebraska.** The majority (58%) report that they are extremely or somewhat likely to live in the area they live now. A job or business opportunity is the topmost reason to live elsewhere.

**3. They desire safety.** Safety, good schools, and proximity to family continue to be the top three most important factors in their ideal community—qualities that are abundant across Greater Nebraska. However, 42% report that they have been bullied and qualitative data demonstrates students’ wishes for more welcoming, inclusive communities.

**Dr. Josie Gatti Schafer, Ph.D., Center for Public Affairs Research at the University of Nebraska at Omaha**

Participants in the 2023 Greater Nebraska Youth Survey continue to demonstrate enthusiasm for their hometowns.

- Over 60% say their ideal community size is small, like their hometown.
- Close to 60% of students are extremely or somewhat likely to live in the same area they live in now as an adult.
- Over 70% say there is no stigma in living in their hometowns long term.
- Since 2020 a majority of students report feeling positive about their communities.

Students were asked to think about their ideal community and the characteristics it would have. They ranked in the following order (with 1 being the most important and 7 being the least important):

1. Safety from violence and theft
2. Good schools
3. Proximate to family
4. Has diverse cultural experiences
5. Has entertainment and shopping options
6. Makes them feel included
7. Has parks and outdoor recreation options

Responses to the ranking question along with the reasons why students are most likely to live in the area as an adult (good place to raise a family (32%) and family ties (26%)) shows that students value quality of life in their communities. However, as in years past, the most common reasons students think they would not live here as adults is for job or business opportunities elsewhere (52%).

In 2023, Nebraska youth again showed themselves to be hardworking and engaged, for example:

- Employment: 86% of rural youth report having a job, indicating that a significant portion of young people in rural areas are actively participating in the workforce.
- School Activities: 37% of rural youth are involved in school activities.
- Community or Civic Engagement: 23% of rural youth are involved in community or civic organizations. Additionally, 71% report they get together with other people from their community to do something positive at least a few times a year.

In the future, respondents are interested in careers in industries including health and medicine (19%), agriculture (13%), and arts, entertainment, recreation, and tourism (8%).

Students recognized the availability of agriculture and health and medicine jobs in their communities, but few felt other occupations of interest like the arts, entertainment, recreation and tourism, business management, information technology, and media and journalism were available in their communities.

In summary, the data portray rural youth as hardworking and engaged in their communities. The active participation of young people in rural Nebraska bodes well for the future of rural communities as it indicates that many of them are likely to stay or return to their hometowns later in life. Despite their engagement today, more needs to be done to retain and attract youth to rural communities. The survey does reveal some opportunities to help rural youth set strong networks in their hometowns. For example, while many students report having a job, only 11% report ever having an internship. Research suggests that engaging students early and often in internships is critical to building and sustaining their economic networks in their hometowns. Moreover, 76% of students reported not feeling like they play a role in their community. Thus, additional engagement of youth in local decision-making and planning can further connect students to their communities, setting social networks for the future.

Forty-one percent of student respondents in the 2023 survey reported having been bullied, online or in-person, which is particularly concerning as students report wanting to live in safe communities at high rates. When students were asked what two things could improve their communities, several responded about the need for more kindness and less bullying. One student called to “. . . teach people empathy and respect.”

While students were overall positive about living in their hometowns in the future, some differences in response, by gender identity, race, and ethnicity were evident. These differences in perceptions and experiences could have negative implications for the future of rural communities.

**Differences by Gender:** Female students and students that chose not to identify their gender (2%) report being less likely to live in their current community as adults. Students that chose not to identify gender were much more likely to report feeling unsafe.

**Differences for Students of Color:** Students of color reported feeling less connected to the place they live now compared to students that identify as white. Additionally, students of color were more likely to report having been bullied and to have seen someone treated unfairly in their community.

The negative experiences reported by some students, including bullying, discrimination, and feeling unwelcome, particularly among those of diverse backgrounds, can have far-reaching implications for their well-being and sense of belonging. It can also deter students from choosing to live in their hometowns as adults.

The negative impacts can extend beyond the individuals directly affected to other students in the community who value safety and diversity. Rural Nebraska youth surveyed valued safety above all other elements of community life. Additionally, rural youth explicitly stated they valued diversity with 74% reporting they would act to stop unfair treatment and close to 60% reporting they are likely to be an advocate for diversity and inclusion in their community. Witnessing negative treatment of their peers can create a negative spillover effect, eroding the sense of positivity and attachment to the community for these students as well.

To address these issues, rural communities must foster an inclusive and supportive environment for everyone. Emphasizing safety, diversity, and inclusion aligns with the values expressed by the rural youth in the survey and as result should have a positive impact on population retention and people attraction.

## CALL TO ACTION

### ***Jeff Yost, President & CEO, Nebraska Community Foundation***

The 2023 Greater Nebraska Youth Survey makes me incredibly hopeful for the future of our state. Along with our partners at the Center for Public Affairs Research at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, we have surveyed over 3,700 middle and high school students in the past four years to better understand their priorities, values, desires, and how they truly feel about the places they call home.

Year after year students tell us about their preference for small communities. They point to safety, good schools, and proximity to family as the most important characteristics of the places they choose to live. In the future they say they are likely to live in the area they live now, and they do not recognize a negative stigma with remaining in or returning to your hometown—something that has undoubtedly shifted in the past decade.

We believe these young people are on to something very important. Today, given information technology, we can live and work wherever we choose to live and work. As awful as the pandemic was, it proved that remote work is a reality, and it is here to stay. So, with the ability to work remotely, the most important community economic development question we have today is: Why do I want to live, work, and raise my family in this community? Today, helping Nebraska hometowns become “communities of choice” is our highest order priority.

In Nebraska, we have what we need to create an even brighter future. We have incredible abundance, including the massive intergenerational transfer of wealth. We have amazing people who are innovative, hardworking, and generous with their time, talent, and treasure to build and sustain wonderful homeplaces. We have incredible systems and institutions that are efficient and effective. And, most importantly, we have young people, as illustrated by this survey, who want to be in community with us.

Human migration is one of the most complex puzzles we can try to solve. There are so many variables that go into the choice of where you want to live and make your life. Let’s work on the pieces of this puzzle we have some influence over, such as:

- Being welcoming and creating a sense of genuine belonging for everyone
- Supporting great K–12 schools and educational resources, including world class early childhood development
- Investing in and building partnerships to provide more affordable housing
- Asking friends, neighbors, and newcomers to co-create community with us
- Making introductions and serving as a connector to business and employment opportunities
- Sharing good news about our homeplaces and having a positive narrative about our collective future

I frequently say I’m a Nebraskan “by birth and by choice.” I’m proud to be a Nebraskan. We need these words to be spoken frequently and with real conviction by thousands of Nebraskans. Based on these survey results, most of our young people want to say the same thing. Ask them. Tell them. Show them. Connect them. Invite them. As Nebraskans, let’s all model what we believe and invite these young Nebraskans to be in community with us.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are several community and partner organizations Nebraska Community Foundation would like to thank for being a part of this project and for their efforts to build stronger communities and a Greater Nebraska.

*We would like to thank the communities that participated in the 2023 Greater Nebraska Youth Survey. Their willingness to learn more about their youth and find ways to better engage them continues to make the NCF network stronger and more diverse.*

*We would like to thank the following affiliated funds, as well as the communities and school districts they serve, for their participation: Valley County Community Foundation Fund; Butler County Area Foundation Fund; Crofton Community Foundation Fund; Diller Community Foundation Fund; Imperial Community Foundation Fund; Keith County Foundation Fund; Pender-Thurston Education & Community Foundation Fund; Shickley Community Foundation Fund; and Stuart Community Foundation Fund.*

*We would also like to give a special thank you to the Center for Public Affairs Research at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and CPAR Director, Dr. Josie Gatti Schafer, who thoughtfully guided us through the entire project. Their expertise and experience allowed us to share meaningful data with the communities that participated, as well as in this final statewide report.*