

## ***Study of Rural Communities Whose Youth are Thriving Reveals Six Common Factors that May Drive Upward Mobility***

*National 4-H Council and Bridgespan's Report on Social Mobility Surfaces Promising Pattern of Supports for Young People*

BOSTON, November 14, 2018 — A study published today illuminates factors that may support upward social mobility in rural America—the possibility that children will grow up to earn more than their parents. The “Social Mobility in Rural America: Insights from Communities Whose Young People Are Climbing the Income Ladder,” a field report from National 4-H Council and The Bridgespan Group, with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, provides ideas and guiding questions that other communities might build upon, as they work to expand economic opportunity for their young people.

“There has been a lot of talk about how the “American Dream” is playing out in rural communities,” says Mark McKeag, a Bridgespan partner and co-author of the report. “While much of that research has focused on analyzing social mobility in rural contexts, we took a different tack. We went into rural communities where upward mobility is thriving, to get a ground-level view of what that looks like.”

Informed by data analysis of high-opportunity counties, and building upon existing studies in the field, including Bridgespan’s previous [work](#) on social mobility, Bridgespan and 4-H sought to discern how high-opportunity rural communities are helping their young people build a brighter future. With the help of National 4-H Council and the Cooperative Extension System of our nation’s land-grant universities, Bridgespan’s research team visited 19 communities across three Midwestern states and Texas, interviewing more than 200 public, private, and nonprofit community leaders, including over 100 middle and high school students.

“While there has been renewed interest in social mobility in rural communities, we do not consistently see investment in young people or their voices represented as a critical part of these conversations,” says Jennifer Sirangelo, president and CEO, National 4-H Council. “In 4-H, we know that each community’s most powerful asset for growth and development is its young people. We sought to lift up this vital asset through this work with The Bridgespan Group.”

With young people’s critical perspectives at the center, the field report surfaces six common factors that seem to support upward mobility in these 19 rural communities:

- 1. A high expectation that youth will “opt in” and work hard to acquire the skills to build their future.** Many of the communities infuse their young people with a sense of possibility—that if they set high goals and stay engaged, they can build a good life. As a result, there are both the expectation, and the pathways, for youth to “opt in” and participate in skill-building activities that might help them advance. “Opting out” is far less of an acceptable alternative.
- 2. Strong, informal support systems, with neighbors helping neighbors.** For young people who choose to opt in, there is often a tight social fabric to support them. Indeed, these communities’

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high expectations are grounded in durable, informal support systems, deep investments in communal spaces, and celebrations of youth achievement.

3. **An early focus on career pathways.** When considering their future careers, young people exuded a strong sense of direction. Education is not an abstraction, but a foundation for career development. In some communities, efforts to help children build in-demand skills begin in grammar school.
4. **A wealth of opportunities for youth to build life skills, regardless of the community's size.** All of the towns Bridgespan and 4-H studied—which range from populations of 600 to approximately 20,000 people—are small enough to ensure that all young people have an array of options to build skills, apart from working on a farm or in an after-school job. Although they are small and often remote, these communities provide enough access points for kids to engage.
5. **Many potential challenges to access opportunities, but creative solutions to overcome them.** These communities do not just generate youth development opportunities. Residents work to ensure that as many young people as possible can seize on those opportunities, despite multiple potential barriers: financial, cultural, psychological, logistical, or simply a lack of awareness.
6. **A sense of shared fate and a deep commitment to sustaining the community.** People in these small communities still recall existential threats from the past, such as the 1980s farm crisis and the oil industry's busts. Against this backdrop, residents spoke of how their individual well-being is tied to their neighbor's well-being—that their future depends on taking responsibility for sustaining their communities.

Across the United States, none of the approximately 200 rural counties in which at least a quarter of the population is Black American rank in the top quartile for upward mobility. That dispiriting statistic—as well as the fact that all site visits focused on the center of the country—pushed the research team to test the six factors by interviewing leaders in more diverse rural communities. Those additional field-testing counties in Mississippi, West Virginia, California, and Louisiana have more typical levels of social mobility, household incomes lower than the rural median, and in some cases, a more substantial Black American population. While each of those communities has its own assets as well as challenges, including histories of racial oppression and financial struggles that span generations, the report shows that many of the six factors supporting upward mobility still resonate.

“As places across rural America work to create the conditions for young people to thrive, it is important to consider what it will take to activate these factors in more diverse rural communities,” says Monica Hobbs Vinluan, senior program officer, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. “We want to ensure that in places where a history of discriminatory policies and practices led to chronic disinvestment, opportunity can be expanded for all young people.”

While the site visits and interviews, though meaningful and informative, touched just one percent of the country's rural counties, common themes emerged across all of them. Concludes Bridgespan manager and co-author Mike Soskis: “We hope this report will enable leaders of rural communities, as the experts in their own places, to work towards a future where every young person has an opportunity to build a better economic life.”

To learn more and read the full report, “Social Mobility in Rural America: Insights from Communities Whose Young People Are Climbing the Income Ladder,” visit [Bridgespan.org](http://bridgespan.org).

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### **About The Bridgespan Group**

The Bridgespan Group ([www.bridgespan.org](http://www.bridgespan.org)) is a global nonprofit organization that collaborates with mission-driven organizations, philanthropists and investors to break cycles of poverty and

dramatically improve the quality of life for those in need. With offices in Boston, Mumbai, New York, and San Francisco, Bridgespan's services include strategy consulting, leadership development, philanthropy and nonprofit advising, and developing and sharing practical insights.

#### **About 4-H**

4-H, the nation's largest youth development organization, grows confident young people who are empowered for life today and prepared for career tomorrow. 4-H programs empower nearly six million young people across the U.S. through experiences that develop critical life skills. 4-H is the youth development program of our nation's Cooperative Extension System and USDA, and serves every county and parish in the U.S. through a network of 110 public universities and more than 3000 local Extension offices. Globally, 4-H collaborates with independent programs to empower one million youth in 50 countries. The research-backed 4-H experience grows young people who are four times more likely to contribute to their communities; two times more likely to make healthier choices; two times more likely to be civically active; and two times more likely to participate in STEM programs.

Learn more about 4-H at [www.4-H.org](http://www.4-H.org), find us on Facebook at [WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/4-H](https://www.facebook.com/4-H) and on Twitter at [HTTPS://TWITTER.COM/4H](https://twitter.com/4H).