

Rural Youth Wellbeing

Physical Health

- Safe from harm
- Access to information
- Habits and behaviors
- Access to care

Emotional Wellbeing

- Life satisfaction
- Pos/Neg emotions
- Hopefulness
- Stress

Community & Civic Life

- Participation
- Welcome and belong
- Civil conversation
- Community vitality
- Voice

Identity & Culture

- Authentic self
- Tradition & celebration
- Acceptance
- Role models

Financial & Economic

- Basic Needs
- Stability
- Resources
- Opportunities

Belonging & Connections

- Acceptance
- Relationships
- Safety
- Support

Nature & Environment

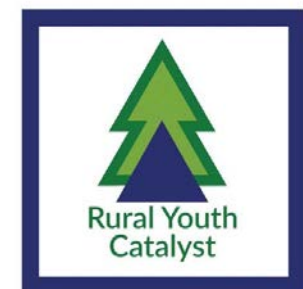
- Access and opportunities
- Sense of Stewardship
- Capacity to take action

Time Use

- Work and school
- Family
- Relaxation
- Sleep

Learning & Education

- Love of learning
- support to succeed
- New experiences
- Curiosity
- Literacy





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GROWING VOTERS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Supporting Youth,
Creating Opportunity, and
Strengthening Democracy

JANUARY 2024

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About CIRCLE

The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) is a non-partisan, independent research organization focused on youth civic engagement in the United States. We conduct extensive research on youth participation, and we leverage that research to improve opportunities for all young people to acquire and use the skills and knowledge they need to meaningfully participate in civic life. In all of our work, we are especially concerned with understanding, addressing, and ultimately eliminating the systemic barriers that keep some young people marginalized from and underrepresented in civic life.

CIRCLE is part of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University.

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Contributors

Alongside the authors listed above, CIRCLE staff members Peter de Guzman and Alberto Medina made valuable contributions to this brief, and insights from all Learning Community participants were essential to its development.

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Introduction to the Brief and the Learning Community

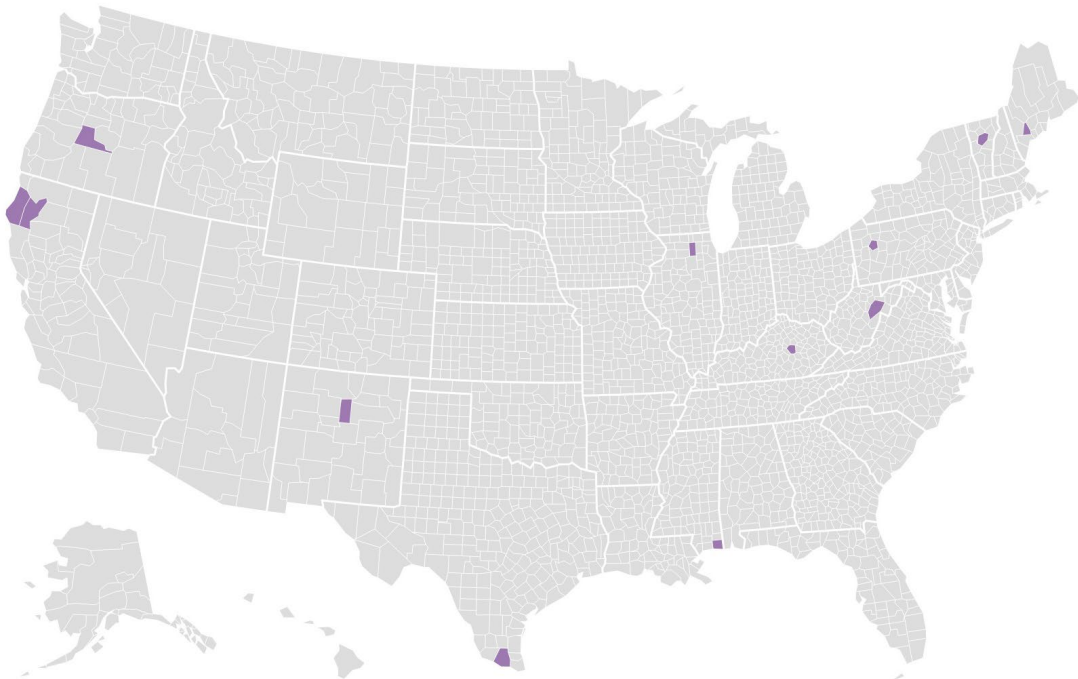
Starting in the spring of 2023, CIRCLE and Rural Youth Catalyst kicked off a nonpartisan learning community with anchor organizations from a diversity of rural places that provide support to young people. The goals of the learning community were to learn from one another about experiences working with youth in rural communities, wrestle with the systemic challenges in rural communities and elections, and to co-create a vision for efforts to increase civic participation, including voting, across diverse rural communities in the United States.

This brief is informed largely by the Learning Community's insights and reflections. It outlines our collective findings and offers ideas for rural organizations to begin to center youth civic engagement as an integral part of their work.

The following organizations and individuals participated in the Learning Community:

Heart of Oregon Corps; In Our Backyards Initiative - Vera Institute; California Heritage YouthBuild Academy; Partners for Rural Impact; LUPE (La Unión del Pueblo Entero); Keystone Smiles Community Learning Center; YouthBuild North Central West Virginia; APRIL (Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living); 100 Days in Appalachia/Rural Digital Resiliency Project; Children's Defense Fund Southern Regional Office - Southern Rural Black Women's Initiative; ReSource YouthBuild - Barre, VT; Serve Learn Earn; Arcata Playhouse; Santa Fe YouthWorks; Angie Koontz - School Counselor, Somonauk Middle School; Mara Casey Tieken, Ed.D. - Associate Professor of Education, Bates College

Organizations and individuals are headquartered in the range of communities and counties highlighted below, though many work across multiple counties, regionally, or nationally.



Youth Engagement Strengthens Communities

When young people have nonpartisan opportunities to contribute to and lead in their communities, not only do they learn critical skills, but communities are better for it. There are extraordinary examples of young people's community leadership [across the country](#). In rural northern California, youth are [building transitional housing](#) for people who are unhoused; in Oregon they are [limiting the spread of wildfires](#); and in the Rio Grande Valley they are [advocating for their entire community](#) to get more attention from public officials. [In the South](#), young Black women from rural communities are opting into intergenerational conversations about the future, and [in Georgia](#), young people are working to get their rural communities registered to vote and informed about voting and elections.

Through these and other efforts, young people across rural communities are also helping to build a robust and inclusive democracy. However, there are rarely comprehensive and systemic support systems for youth to learn how to participate in their communities—including in elections. Often, the ways voting is promoted in these communities do not include educational opportunities or support youth navigating information and being able to ask questions.

These important forms of support are frequently less available to young people in rural areas. By bringing together insights and experiences from longtime rural leaders, youth workers, and researchers, this is what we seek to change.

See the following page to learn more about the [CIRCLE Growing Voters framework](#) that details how different community stakeholders can provide young people diverse and supportive pathways to civic participation.

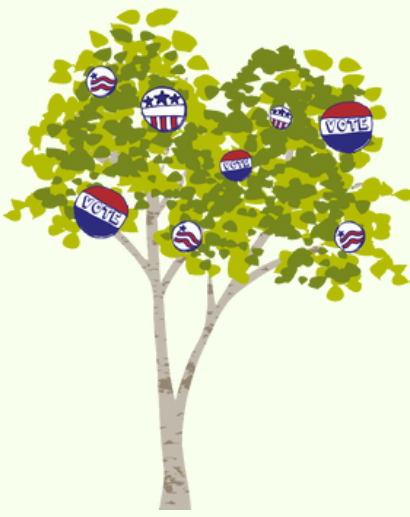
Defining "Youth":

When we generally mention "youth" or "young people," we are referring to the varied age groups that members of our learning community collectively work with, ranging from teens to young adults up to the age of 34. When referencing data, we will reference the specific age range used.

Defining "Rural":

There are many ways to define rural communities, and multiple definitions are used throughout this brief when referencing different data.

- For youth voter turnout data, rurality is defined based on the U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service's 2013 Rural-Urban Continuum Codes codes, including 5, 7, 8, and 9.
- In our Fall 2023/Pre-2024 Youth Election Survey, young people provided their ZIP code, which was sorted into rural / non-rural based on the Census Bureau's 2020 urban-rural classification.
- In our 2020 teen poll, participants self-identified as living in a rural, suburban, or urban area.



CIRCLE GROWING VOTERS

CIRCLE Growing Voters invites stakeholders, beyond political parties and organizations, to take on and support formal and informal roles in youth electoral engagement. The framework is informed by data on the civic access and experiences of teens; by what we have learned in 20 years of research and findings of fellow scholars; and by what we hear from educators, practitioners, organizers, and others who work directly with youth.

THE PROBLEMS



There are profound inequities in access to civic learning and engagement opportunities for young people. These inequities lead to differences in voting rates and other types of participation by race/ethnicity, education, and other factors that prevent us from building a fully representative multiracial democracy.



The current model of bringing young people into the electorate, which relies on short-term mobilization tied to election cycles and overly focuses on “likely voters,” is grossly insufficient and further reifies existing inequities.

BASIC PRINCIPLES



ACCESS AND EXPOSURE
to diverse civic engagement opportunities, including and beyond voting, that meet young people where they are



SUPPORT in the form of pathways, systems, and structures that enable all youth to take advantage of the opportunities they may have access to



CULTURE that promotes and values voting and youth participation, and that helps make elections relevant to young people's lives

HOW TO GROW VOTERS



Create multiple entry points that welcome young people coming from a range of different experiences and backgrounds.



Target a wide range and diversity of youth —not just those who are already likely to be leading and actively participating in civic life



Use developmental, rather than transactional, programming focused on building knowledge and efficacy, not merely mobilizing youth.



Learn from and work alongside young people who're already engaged in expanding access and opportunities for themselves and their peers.

CIRCLE Research: Civic Deserts, Rural Areas, Youth Voting

Many rural youth believe in the power of their generation and many are using that power to create change in their communities. However, when we look broadly at the landscape of support for youth civic engagement in rural communities, a pattern of inequity emerges that has troubling implications for our democracy.

In 2020, [youth voter turnout](#) (ages 18-29) among eligible citizens was 50% nationally. However, among the states for which we have data, turnout in rural counties was 44%, compared to 52% in non-rural counties—a 15% (not percentage-point) difference. In the 2022 midterms, the difference was smaller in absolute terms: 20% in rural areas and 23% in non-rural areas. However, the difference remained similar: 13% lower. Looking at the percent difference allows us to compare the relative differences in turnout, even though the midterms had a lower turnout (and thus, a seemingly smaller gap).

This difference in turnout isn't generally a result of greater apathy or disinterest among rural youth. Rather, it likely stems from the lower levels of access that rural youth have to opportunities to learn about and engage in elections and voting. Rural youth are:

- **More likely to live in civic deserts:** According to [2016 CIRCLE research](#), 60% of rural youth live in a Civic Desert—compared to about 30 percent of their suburban and urban peers. In 2023, we found that only 27% of 18- to 34-year-olds living in rural areas said that there were people, organizations, or resources in their community that can help them make sense of and act on social and political information, compared to 36% of urban youth.

A Note on the Data:

Looking at % changes in turnout (as opposed to percentage-point differences) allows us to compare the relative differences in turnout in a presidential and midterm cycles, which have very different turnout rates.

What Is a Civic Desert?

In [our initial study on civic deserts](#) and throughout this brief, CIRCLE uses a working definition of “civic desert”: a place with access to one or no institutions, aside from schools, that provide opportunities for civic learning and engagement. The prevalence of civic deserts in rural areas illuminates how the lack of access to community institutions where people gather, connect, and solve problems together can negatively affect young people's sense of agency and civic engagement.

- **Less likely to have access to civic education opportunities in school:** Nonpartisan curricular civic learning that addresses both knowledge and practice is an important part of building young people's identities as voters and civic actors. According to 2020 CIRCLE research, while nearly three-quarters of teens (ages 14-17) in urban areas had taken a civics or government course, far fewer in suburban (55%) and rural (50%) places had taken such a course.
- **Less likely to be exposed to high-quality civic education practices:** The CIRCLE teen survey also revealed that rural teens were 12 percentage points less likely to learn about different political attitudes and beliefs in their civics course than urban youth (73% vs 85%) and 34 points less likely than youth in urban areas to have an opportunity to think about where their own beliefs may fit on the political spectrum (30% vs. 64%).

- **Confident in the power of young people:** Despite the lower access and support for civic engagement in their communities, 61% of youth (18-34) in rural areas believe that as a group, young people have the power to change things in this country.

Expanding rural civic engagement opportunities requires an [ecosystem of stakeholders](#) to create varied, interconnected pathways to engagement. These opportunities must be accessible and relevant to rural youth of diverse identities, backgrounds, and experiences. By addressing existing barriers to civic engagement—including access to quality civic education—and making intentional investment in public infrastructure, we can ensure that all rural young people have the knowledge and ability to participate in everyday civic life and in the upcoming 2024 elections.

Barriers to Promoting Rural Youth Voting

Through our rural learning community conversations and activities, we unpacked the underlying patterns, structures, and beliefs that can act as both barriers and levers of opportunity in growing young rural voters. These insights have informed our understanding that engaging rural youth requires far more than a transactional, mobilization-focused approach to youth voting that would solely prioritize increasing opportunities to learn about voting and civic participation. While access to such opportunities in rural communities is also a problem that must be addressed, many challenges for rural youth permeate far deeper, making it hard for them to take advantage of opportunities even when and where they do exist.

We identified eight barriers that uniquely shape the experiences of rural youth:

1. Young people believe their voice doesn't matter

Almost every member of our learning community identified young people not believing their voice matters as one of the core mental models hindering civic participation in their rural community. This feeling shows up in different ways: distrust or feeling of powerlessness in the electoral system, low self-confidence, discomfort expressing different beliefs than the rest of their community, and internalized narratives related to identity. This underscores the importance of creating a community culture that emphasizes young people's power and highlights the benefits—but also acknowledges the challenges—of the electoral system.

2. Older adults think young people are apathetic

Young people's beliefs about their own power, or lack thereof, may be influenced by other community members' views. These self-perceptions are shaped by the narratives that rural youth see and hear about young people in their community, in the media, and in their social networks. For example, the fact that young people vote at lower rates than older generations and rural youth vote at lower rates than their non-rural peers can be interpreted as evidence of apathy toward elections and politics—if it is not properly contextualized given the structural barriers that young people face to learning about and engaging with elections.

3. A vicious cycle: Lack of support in rural communities results in youth disinterest

When young people don't feel like valued members of their communities, they may not be inclined to participate in ways that could make their voice heard, such as voting. One reason youth may feel

disengaged is because they intend to move away, so they question the purpose of investing their time and energy into a place they don't plan to call home for long. While our Fall 2023 poll found that 59% of rural youth felt that the future success of their community was important to them; 11% did not—and more than a quarter (28%) expressed that, given the opportunity, they would move out of their community.

Our survey also found that, while almost half of rural youth as a whole (48%) and rural youth of color (50%) reported feeling like they belong to their community, nearly 1 in every 5 youth (19% of all rural youth, 22% of rural youth of color) disagreed with this statement. Our learning community participants particularly cited these feelings of lack of belonging, and discussed how they can be intensified when young people lack a voice in their community and don't feel like rural culture understands or cares about the issues youth face. Moreover, the number of [disconnected youth](#) who aren't in school and do not have a job has been growing in the last decade in rural communities, a population that may face additional challenges in feeling a sense of belonging.

If young people get the message that voting or other forms of civic participation isn't for them, that is a fundamental failure within our communities that is preventing young people from reaching their civic and electoral potential.

4. External belief that rural communities are not worth investing in

Rural communities are often misrepresented as a [“drain on resources and national priorities,”](#) and the people who live there are assigned negative tropes discounting them as the [“source of their own problems.”](#) These misconceptions affect funding: while rural communities make up 20% of the U.S. population, [only 7% of funding](#) from private philanthropists ends up in rural communities. This pattern of marginalization and underinvestment overlooks the resilience and complexity of rural communities, and can influence how rural communities see themselves, eventually leading to disengagement from civic life.

Rural practitioners report that community members, including youth, often believe that decision makers do not care about them or their opinions. They also feel that the system is ineffective and designed to disempower rural communities. These perceptions may affect rural young people's willingness and ability to engage in their communities, and prevent those communities from contributing unique solutions to address challenges caused by decades of private and public divestment.

5. Mental health is a barrier

Deteriorating mental health among all youth has been named as an [urgent public health issue](#), and rural youth have been identified as being at [higher risk](#) of facing some mental health challenges. Factors that contribute to declining mental health in rural communities, like [social isolation](#) and [inadequate access to mental health support](#), are also further compounded at the intersections of identities such as gender, race, sexuality, and ability. Our learning community described the ways that

mental health issues manifest in the youth they work with and in the adult practitioners that provide critical support to youth.

For example, young people often find themselves part of a vicious cycle: they feel inadequate because they lack knowledge of social or political issues, but learning about or engaging with these topics can cause or worsen anxiety, depression, or helplessness. [Research by the American Psychological Association](#) shows that young people can find elections to be a significant source of stress, with [some studies](#) finding higher levels of election related “sociopolitical stress” among groups that experience marginalization. For youth who are already engaged in their local communities, these mental health challenges often result in burnout, potentially causing them to step away from work they’re participating in.

6. Increased partisanship, polarization, and extremism

[Empirical evidence](#) shows that the United States is becoming more politically polarized and Americans are isolated from opposing viewpoints. As the current political climate further isolates individuals and divides rural communities, there is ongoing depletion of rural community assets that were once used to bolster community connections for young people. For example, due to national hyperpartisanship that plays out locally, local organizations are less likely to engage in nonpartisan dialogue with community members, educators are afraid to teach about certain topics and issues as part of civic education, and there is trauma from intra-community violence and interactions with the criminal legal system.

7. Limited and under-resourced rural infrastructure

While not necessarily obviously connected to voting and civic participation, limited or under-resourced public utilities in some rural settings—such as [public transit](#), [broadband internet](#), [public schools](#), and libraries—can have detrimental effects on the ability for young people to participate in their communities. With many rural youth already living in civic deserts, lacking this sort of infrastructure can worsen access to civic participation. As the internet has become an increasingly integral part of civic life, [broadband has emerged as an essential civic resource](#), and public transit can be critical in helping young people access opportunities for community involvement.

Additionally, inadequate school funding and limited support for many rural educators can have a negative impact on the quality and quantity of civic education that rural youth experience. Looking back on their school years, 41% of rural 18- to 34-year-olds in CIRCLE’s Fall 2023 survey felt like their classroom experiences in high school impacted their understanding of the democratic process and its importance—7 points fewer than their non-rural peers. When rural communities lack access to key public infrastructure, it can make it more difficult for people to equitably participate in the democratic process.

8. Voter suppression in rural communities

These under-resourced public utilities can also directly impact individuals’ ability to vote. For example, given the prevalence of mail-in voting, transportation and access to post offices can affect the accessibility of voting in rural communities. These unique challenges can mean that electoral policies can have all the more impact in [facilitating or restricting](#) voting access. Research indicates that rural

populations have to travel farther to vote in person, with half of polling places in rural communities serving an area of 62 square miles, compared to less than 2 square miles in urban areas.

Many states with large rural populations also have restrictions in place making it harder to vote by mail, such as Montana, which does not provide voters with secure drop boxes and has stricter deadlines for mail-in ballots. And limited access to broadband can impact rural voters' ability to utilize online voter registration and find information about elections, candidates, and how to vote. Many of these restrictive policies, like [those put in place in Arizona in 2021](#), have a greater impact on Black, Latino, and Indigenous communities in rural areas.

Why is Youth Civic Engagement Vital for Rural Communities?

If these barriers were addressed, more young people in rural communities would have access to opportunities for civic learning and engagement and feel empowered to take them. Civic engagement has been shown to have a powerful impact on young people themselves. But higher rural youth participation would also benefit communities in other ways: increasing their inclusivity, social connectedness, and economic vitality. Members of our learning community highlighted the positive feedback loop that would arise from greater youth civic engagement, which is summarized in the infographic on the following page.



INCREASED CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG YOUTH IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Community engagement builds skills that transfer to employment and creates networks that young people can use to build opportunities and bring resources to their community. Additionally, consistent opportunities for engagement and contribution provide alternatives to less productive behaviors

ECONOMIC VITALITY

INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

More rural youth involved locally can counter detrimental perspectives held by adults and young people alike about other generations. Additionally, more youth perspectives can update and reimagine existing beliefs in the community, while youth can also learn from the valuable knowledge and experience of older generations. Connecting with older generations can also help young people learn the history of their local community, which may increase local pride.

SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

DIVERSE VOICES

If young people's voices were welcomed in community decision-making, it would mean such processes and people in positions of power would become more reflective of the community. That would help to make more people, including youth, feel heard, supported, and represented. This can happen if young people assume positions of power themselves, but it may also result from young people voting or otherwise supporting older adults that represent their values and the issues that matter to them.

INCLUSIVITY

DECREASED OUTMIGRATION

Strengthening young people's relationship to rural communities may reshape trends of outmigration by shifting the incentives for individuals charting their futures. [Read more about this dynamic here.](#)

DECREASED ISOLATION

Bolstering community connections and creating an inclusive environment can be one way to combat the increasing isolation felt in rural communities, which has been connected to deteriorating mental health and more extreme partisanship.

Strategies and Opportunities

The barriers to youth participation in rural communities highlight the need to think beyond just providing access and exposure to opportunities for civic learning and engagement. Building systems of support for engagement, and nurturing a culture that values it, requires that communities reimagine the efforts, activities, structures, and factors that they consider related to civic engagement. In this section, we outline six different levers for change in rural communities that may not immediately seem directly connected to youth civic participation. However, they each offer opportunities to expand on existing work being done in rural communities in ways that can support young people.

As you read through these strategies, consider what you might be doing well already and how you can expand on these strengths to specifically target and bolster youth civic engagement and belonging.

Equipping Adult Allies with the Tools They Need

Resources and information about how to better engage young people in civic action are often written with a youth audience in mind and focused on their experiences with youth programming. But it's the adults working with young people in rural areas who often need greater support in creating transformative, safe, and developmentally appropriate spaces for young people. That includes the need for better mental health care to prevent burnout, more resources to help navigate sticky situations that can arise during civic programming, and increased funding to reduce strain on overburdened staff.

- Resources—like our [Teaching for Democracy Alliance resources for community organizations](#)— can provide organizations with nonpartisan lesson plans and activities to educate about elections, voting, and media literacy, as well as tools to facilitate challenging conversations. Supporting adult allies with these tools can help them feel better equipped to engage with civic information and dialogue in existing programming.
- Lean on your community ecosystem to build community around supporting young people in your area. The CIRCLE Growing Voters report emphasizes the need to do this work in tandem with other community institutions, which can help to diminish the burden on individual adult allies or organizations. Check out CIRCLE's [community ecosystem mapping tool](#) to brainstorm possible connections.

Supporting Youth Leadership

Involving youth in community planning and decision-making will make rural communities better at addressing the social and economic needs of rural youth, and layering youth leadership into existing

programs can teach civic skills and dispositions even when programs aren't focused on civic content. Many settings can create or strengthen structures for youth to have a voice: schools, government offices, organizations, and other spaces. When done effectively, this can help youth to feel empowered and allow them to practice important skills.

- For ideas, resources, and best practices in incorporating youth voice into your organization or community, consult [CIRCLE's Youth-Adult Partnerships Guide](#).
- Look beyond the usual suspects to find young people who break the mold of typical young leaders in your community. Too often, the same high-achieving youth are selected for any leadership opportunity in a community, preventing other young people—especially those who represent identities, experiences, and perspectives that haven't historically been a priority—from building their leadership skills and having a say.

Rural Youth Want Leadership Opportunities—But Often Lack Them

Rural youth are interested in being leaders in their communities. We found that, if provided the opportunities, 56% of rural 18- to 34-year-olds would attend a meeting where residents engaged in discussion about local issues, 51% might volunteer at a community event or with a community organization, and 44% would consider serving in a leadership role at a local organization. But far fewer are engaging in these civic actions now, often because they don't see opportunities or hear from their community that their voice matters and is wanted in these spaces.

Telling Different Stories about Youth and Rural Communities

Many of the barriers identified in our rural learning community are centered around some prevailing narratives about youth and rural communities that can misrepresent these people and places—or not tell their full story. Some of these narratives deeply permeate our culture, but we can change them. Intentional communication about young people and their rural communities can both rewrite these stories and change how young people see themselves and their communities.

- National organizations can use their capacity and platforms to highlight stories about youth civic engagement in rural communities to showcase innovation and participation. However, it is imperative that national organizations give credit where it is due and not harvest ideas or exploit work that is being done for their own recognition and fundraising.
- Local organizations must talk to young people—especially those who aren't heard from as often in the community. That can happen either formally through a focus group or survey, or informally through personal networks and conversations. This will help organizations better understand what young people in their community are experiencing, and data like survey results or other insights can be shared through various community outlets. Use this information to shape organizational messaging and programming based on what youth actually want and need.
- Funders often approach rural investment with a desire for scalability and efforts that reach as many young people as possible. They often do so by insisting on replicating models that were crafted for urban populations but are not conceived with the needs of rural young people and

communities in mind. Rural organizations, on the other hand, often think of every community as unique, and can be resistant to the applicability of programs expanded to their community. Both sides could shift their approach to and expectations of rural funding and programming, focusing on adaptability rather than scalability and uniformity.

Employment and Career Exploration

Rural youth's perception of their local communities can be connected to job prospects and how they see their future. By giving young people opportunities to learn about local employment opportunities, organizations can help young people to envision a future for themselves in their rural community, which can give them reason to be more engaged. Additionally, civic engagement can often provide valuable skill-building experiences and introduce young people to different types of work and careers, highlighting additional opportunities for pairing workforce development work with civic life.

- Connect youth to employers early so they have a sense of opportunities that exist after high school, or so they see employers to come back to after or during college. Local career awareness and exploration programs can take place in elementary, middle, and high school.
- Skill-building opportunities, even casual or one-off events, can help young people see what kinds of opportunities exist in the workforce that may match their skills and interests. They can also help young people understand how certain skills fit into non-career related activities, including civic engagement.
- Supporting youth entrepreneurship and innovation can give young people a greater sense of ownership in their community, and can introduce community leaders to new ideas and perspectives driven by young people's experiences.
- Embedding civic and community themes into GED, career education, and local leadership programs can integrate civic learning into other development opportunities. For example, a conservation corps career development program can include opportunities to learn about environmental policy and local history in a way that builds civic knowledge and community connections.
- Partner with a range of businesses and organizations through civic efforts (like conferences, civic fairs, and community events) to expose youth to a wider range of possible careers.
- Name and discuss the skills youth are using in their community, and help youth articulate the skills they have used while being civically engaged on their resume.

Community Building as Civic Engagement Work

Community-building activities within youth-focused programs can help young people feel more connected to their local community and feel like their voice is more powerful, even if the program is unrelated to civic participation. CIRCLE has found that [community connections](#) can help young people in taking civic action without worsening their mental health, which allows for more sustainable youth engagement. Whether a program is already engaged in civic work or not, community building is important for developing civic dispositions and belonging. These activities can be entirely separate from civic and political engagement, but may help lay the groundwork for future civic participation and long term community power-building efforts.

- Community events like craft nights, community meals, trivia nights, and workshops can serve as a low-commitment way for youth to learn about an organization without feeling intimidated, especially for individuals who may feel excluded from electoral politics or their communities. First building relationships and trust outside of directly working on civic and political issues can help facilitate future involvement with an organization. [Read about how one organization does this here.](#)
- Mentorship programs, whether formal or informal, can support youth in seeing civic and community participation modeled, especially by near-peers or adults who have a similar background. It can also be used to connect young adults with younger teens, helping them to feel more invested in the community's future.
- Restorative circles — a conversation model centered around navigating conflict and fostering self-expression — can create a space for young people to talk about the issues that matter to them and their experiences in a comfortable, safe setting, allowing them to practice civic skills while developing trust and relationship with their peers.
- Affinity groups, like a young alumni of color association, can help young people feel like they have a home within their community—especially if their identity puts them in the minority in their community.

Half of all rural youth say that the friendships and associations they have with other people in their rural community mean a lot to them. But 55% of rural youth of color report feeling alone or lonely several days in the last two weeks, and 37% of rural youth of color feel unsupported by others around them, such as their friends or family. This data highlights the importance of spaces and opportunities that are relevant and welcoming for young people of color in rural communities.

Recognize and Work to Heal Trauma

Rural youth experience a [disproportionate amount of trauma](#) and adverse childhood experiences, which can have long term impacts on their health, education, and well-being. Recognizing and seeking to heal individual and collective trauma through [trauma-informed practice](#) is critical for ensuring long term, sustainable youth development and community resilience.

- Build organizational resilience and capacity to anticipate, plan for, and respond to rural youth in times of collective trauma. [The CARE \(Cope, Acknowledge, Remember, Emerge\) organizational model](#), originally developed for trauma in health care settings, is broadly applicable in other settings like nonprofit organizations. This model provides a non-linear healing pathway that organizations can adopt to support at various stages of crises.

- Address trauma through healing justice practices. [The Kindred Collective](#), led by a collaboration of healers and organizers in the South, uplifts [healing justice traditions](#) and practices rooted in Southern communities and movements, particularly Black and Indigenous southern ancestral traditions. Kindred engages practitioners to understand the legacy of trauma and create integrative healing models.
- Create [trauma-informed](#) spaces to build community connectedness with [LGBTQ youth](#), [justice-involved youth](#), [rural youth in schools](#), and other impacted communities that often experience isolation after trauma.

Where to Start

Now that we've unpacked some of the unique barriers and levers of opportunity in growing young rural voters, use the following guiding questions to help you think about how to take action and expand civic engagement opportunities in your rural community:

- In what ways does your organization's existing work support youth civic engagement? If it doesn't, what are some ways that you can layer civic engagement opportunities onto existing programs or activities? Refer to the Strategies and Opportunities section for examples of ways to expand existing work to become more civically focused. Or consider some of these activities:
 - Gather community members, including young people, to talk about how to engage young people better.
 - Work with young people to develop community service projects that address issues they are concerned about in their community.
 - Compile information about how and where to vote in your community and make it available to young people you work with.
 - Invite young people to a community meeting to give their input, keeping in mind strategies for building effective [Youth Adult Partnerships](#).
- Who are the organizations or institutions that either do work with young people or are connected to civic participation in your local community? How can you partner with them? Use CIRCLE's [community ecosystem mapping tool](#) to brainstorm stakeholders in your rural community.
- What are some capacity needs (staffing, funding, community support, etc) that need to be addressed in order for you to be able to do this work?

Methodology

The turnout of young people ages 18-29 in rural and non-rural counties was calculated using voter file data from Catalist as well as data on the citizen voting age population from the American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Voter file data was not available for the following states, which we excluded from our analysis: AK, DC, HI, IL, MD, MS, NH, ND, TX, UT, WI, WY. To classify counties as rural or non-rural, the 2013 Rural-Urban Continuum Codes produced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service were used. For our analysis, the 2013 RUCC codes 5, 7, 8 and 9 were classified as rural.

Rural respondents were identified in the CIRCLE Fall 2023/Pre-2024 Election Youth Survey as residing in a rural area as defined by the Census Bureau's 2020 urban-rural classification. More information on the Census Bureau's methodology can be found [here](#).

The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) is a non-partisan, independent research organization focused on youth civic engagement in the United States. We conduct extensive research on youth participation, and we leverage that research to improve opportunities for all young people to acquire and use the skills and knowledge they need to meaningfully participate in civic life. CIRCLE is part of the Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University.

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