

Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois



Prepared For:



January 2024 Analysis Provided By:



College of Agricultural,
Consumer &
Environmental Sciences
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

**Illinois
Extension**

Executive summary

Rural communities in northern and central Illinois face many challenges—out-migration, an aging population, over-reliance on large employers—but just because these rural communities are changing, does not mean that they are withering. While the pandemic created hardships, it also created opportunities for rural communities. For instance, a surge in new business applications indicates a growing interest in entrepreneurship, and the ongoing expansion of the nation’s broadband infrastructure has created remote work opportunities and made rural living a more realistic option for many people.

To help our rural communities thrive, rather than just survive, we must better understand their needs and priorities. This project—sponsored by Compeer Financial—used a survey, focus groups, and individual interviews to gather input from rural leaders throughout northern and central Illinois (defined here as the 33 counties within Compeer Financial’s Illinois service area that are not in the Chicago Metropolitan Statistical Area). *This resulting white paper highlights what those community leaders think about the issues that most affect their community’s overall vitality.* Throughout, regional leaders shared their insights about the factors that drive their local economy, shape their physical infrastructure, and encourage active and wide-ranging civic engagement.

Entrepreneurship and workforce development drive local economic growth

Entrepreneurs create local opportunities for themselves and other area workers. The pandemic generated a new entrepreneurial energy within many communities. Capturing and sustaining that energy, however, requires better connecting entrepreneurs to the resources and support they need to grow their business. Stakeholders also believed that the region lacked the spaces (e.g., business incubators, commercial kitchens) necessary to support entrepreneurial businesses. Agriculture remains vital to the region and many of its challenges—diversification, barriers to entry for new farmers, succession planning—are similar to those facing many entrepreneurs and business owners.

The region’s demographic changes also present workforce challenges. Given the region’s shrinking and aging population, prime age (25 to 54) workers now represent a declining share of its labor force. Local jobs are available, but area leaders expressed concern that young people cannot find rewarding careers locally. If effectively supported and promoted, Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs can help students prepare for careers in locally important industries such as manufacturing, construction, healthcare, and agriculture. Area stakeholders also believed that youth groups such as 4-H, FFA, and Boys & Girls Clubs can help young people explore potential career options.

Vibrant communities are based on a strong physical infrastructure and attractive public places

Broadband has become critical infrastructure for rural communities because, among other things, it makes distance learning, remote work, telehealth, and self-employment possible. While challenges remain, federal and state funding has allowed the broadband infrastructure in northern and central

Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois

Illinois to expand. Over 60% of survey respondents felt that their internet access met their personal and business needs. Other physical infrastructure challenges persist, however, as many communities expressed concerns about the costs necessary to maintain or replace key infrastructure such as municipal water and sewer systems.

Housing remains a pressing regional challenge, as many residents cannot find housing that meets their budget, needs, or standards. Almost two-thirds of respondents believed that finding an affordable home was difficult because of limited supply, minimal turnover, no land or labor for new home construction, and a lack of multi-family or rental units. These housing challenges make it difficult for new residents to move into the region and existing residents to find homes that meet their needs.

The attractiveness of public places, such as downtowns and parks, can affect how residents and visitors perceive the community. A majority of survey respondents agreed that their downtowns were attractive, well-maintained, and a location for community activity, but over 90% also thought that their downtown had potential for greater development. Regional stakeholders noted that community centers, parks and other recreational assets played an important role in community building and the overall quality of life.

A strong social infrastructure allows area residents to fully participate in their community

Much of northern and central Illinois is rural, but there are several major population centers (e.g., Peoria, Bloomington, Rockford, etc.) throughout the region. More than 80% of survey respondents agreed that they had access to specialized treatment, emergency services, and local primary care physicians, in part because of their relative proximity to those population centers. This coverage is not universal. Healthcare gaps—especially for mental health and substance abuse treatment—remain. An aging population has increased demand for healthcare, but also the need for more eldercare and assisted living services. Survey respondents believe that their communities face challenges in making eldercare services available, and, especially, affordable. The lack of eldercare services and assisted living options further impacts the regional housing market, since many seniors stay in their homes longer when they don't have good options for senior living.

Regional stakeholders viewed the availability and affordability of childcare services as an even more pressing challenge. Much like eldercare services, childcare facilities rely on many, relatively low-wage workers. The pandemic further weakened the region's childcare infrastructure as numerous smaller in-home childcare centers closed permanently, and many communities do not have enough larger centers to meet local demand. The challenges associated with childcare prevent many people, especially women, from joining the workforce.

Active and inclusive civic engagement can facilitate greater community vitality

Most survey respondents believed that their community encouraged young people to join civic organizations. They also thought that their local government listened to the concerns of its residents, although respondents younger than 45 years of age were less likely to agree with that sentiment than those older than 45. Throughout the regional meetings, local leaders expressed their belief that active civic engagement was critical for community vitality.

Despite the many challenges described above, survey respondents were generally optimistic about their community's future. Stakeholders agreed that their community had made progress since the pandemic, and they expected that progress to continue. Across the region, stakeholders offered suggestions for how—through local action—their community could continue to become more prosperous. These suggestions focused on several types of activities, including:

- Promoting entrepreneurship,
- Investing in public places,
- Expanding efforts to grow the workforce, and
- Encouraging greater housing development.

Turning these activities into concrete outcomes will require different resources, champions, and stakeholder coalitions. For rural communities to make any progress, they must support the people actively doing the work. This means supporting the volunteer groups, civic organizations, non-profits, and local government staff that organize, staff, and lead these efforts. Moreover, a broad array of community actors—volunteers, funders, local government, and non-profits, etc.—must collaborate to pool their resources and coordinate their efforts to move their community forward.

Contents

Executive summary	i
Introduction	1
Economic factors drive opportunity	3
The pandemic sparked a new interest in entrepreneurship	3
Agriculture remains vital, but presents both challenges and opportunities	6
Demographic shifts create workforce challenges, but work opportunities are available	8
Strengthening local career pathway opportunities can help retain area youth	9
A strong physical infrastructure provides the foundation for rural vitality	11
Broadband creates opportunities for rural communities	11
Housing availability and affordability affects the ability for rural communities to grow	12
Vibrant downtowns and public spaces contribute to community placemaking efforts	13
An effective ‘social infrastructure’ can greatly enhance rural vitality	16
Access to healthcare and wellness services varies across the region	16
An aging population needs more eldercare options	17
Insufficient childcare options can limit labor force participation	18
Greater civic engagement requires broad participation and responsive local leadership	19
Many tangible and intangible factors influence rural vitality	21
More often than not, area stakeholders remain optimistic about the future	24
Moving forward	26
Appendix	28

Introduction

Rural communities face many challenges—out-migration, an aging population, or over-reliance on large employers—but just because rural communities are changing, or even shrinking, does not mean that they are withering. Communities can take steps to ensure that they continue moving toward greater prosperity. For instance, Iowa State University examined small towns that were shrinking smartly.¹ Among other things, Shrink-Smart towns are:

- Closely tied to agriculture, but are also working to grow their industrial base;
- Characterized by diverse social linkages, more participation in local projects, and residents belonging to more organizations; and
- Are better kept, open to new ideas, more trusting and viewed as safer places.

The pandemic created many hardships, and out-migration continues throughout the Midwest, albeit at a slower pace.² However, it has also created new opportunities for rural communities. For instance, a surge in new business applications demonstrates a growing interest in entrepreneurship, and the ongoing expansion of the nation's broadband infrastructure has created remote work opportunities and made rural living a more realistic option for many people.

Despite these changes, agriculture remains a central pillar of the regional economy. Declining agricultural employment and the ongoing consolidation within production agriculture, however, affects rural Illinois communities both economically and culturally. In 2021, almost 55% of Illinois farm household income came from off-farm sources; agriculture, therefore, needs vibrant rural local economies for additional employment opportunities and amenities that keep people in the community.³

This white paper highlights how community leaders— throughout northern and central Illinois—think about the issues affecting their community's overall vitality. By better understanding these rural communities' needs and priorities, we can develop more effective strategies to address their most pressing challenges. Sponsored by Compeer Financial, this project used a survey, focus groups, and individual interviews to gather input from rural leaders throughout rural northern and central Illinois.⁴ This project focuses primarily on Compeer Financial's Illinois service area, largely excluding the counties within the Chicago Metropolitan Statistical Area (See Figure 1).⁵

¹ Peters, D. "[Shrink-Smart Small Towns: Communities Can Still Thrive as They Lose Population.](#)" Iowa State Extension, SOC 3083, November 2017.

² White, M. "[Post-Pandemic Population Trends in the North Central United States.](#)" farmdoc daily (13):84, Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, May 9, 2023.

³ This figure is drawn from the USDA Economic Research Service (ERS) and National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) Agricultural Resource Management Survey (ARMS). Nationwide, 77% of farm household income came from off-farm sources.

⁴ With few exceptions, our focus groups and interviews were with community leaders outside the Chicago Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). In addition, we did not actively promote the survey to economic and community development organizations within the Chicago MSA.

⁵ When referring to the "Region" or "Northern and Central Illinois" we specifically mean the 33 counties within Compeer Financial's service area that are outside the Chicago MSA (Cook, DeKalb, DuPage, Grundy, Kane, Kendall, Lake, McHenry, and Will). The metro counties within this region are part of the Bloomington, Kankakee, Peoria, Quad Cities and Rockford MSAs. The nonmetro or rural counties within the region do not belong to any MSA. We recognize that there are many rural communities within those broader MSAs, but the commuting patterns of those communities indicate greater connectivity to more urban areas than the communities found in nonmetro counties.

Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois

We distributed the stakeholder survey in Fall 2023 and received roughly 200 responses.⁶ We also engaged with over 145 area residents through a series of individual conversations, focus groups, and several community meetings. Throughout, we asked community leaders to consider the issues that spurred new opportunities and sparked greater vitality (e.g., increased entrepreneurship, remote work, volunteerism), as well as those that prevented communities and residents from truly thriving (e.g., lack of appropriate housing, limited childcare options). The appendix contains a more detailed description of our approach.

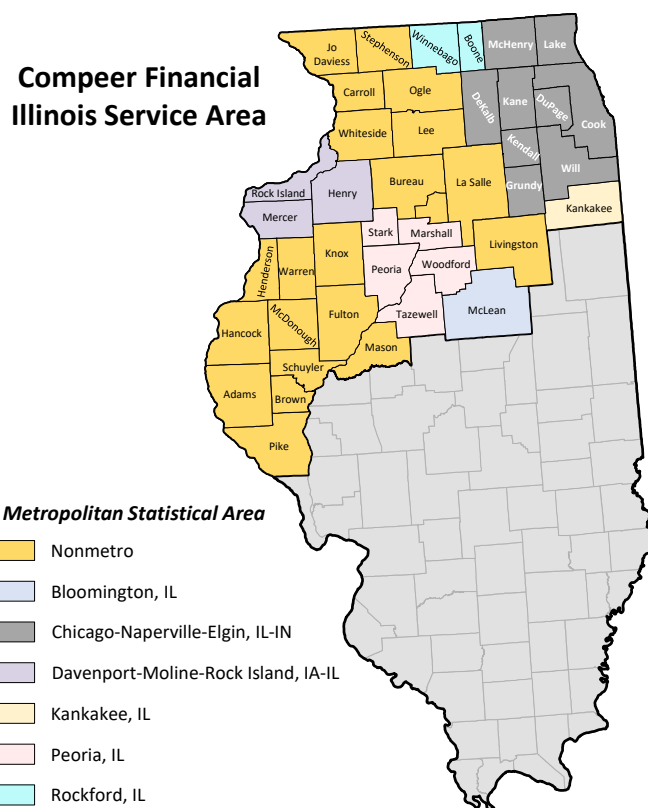
Below, we review these findings in three broad sections, including:

- **Economic factors**, such as entrepreneurship, agriculture, workforce, and opportunities for youth;
- **Physical assets**, such as infrastructure, housing, downtowns, and recreational amenities; and
- **Social infrastructure**, such as access to healthcare, eldercare, and childcare, as well as civic engagement and local government.

We conclude by highlighting how stakeholders prioritized these issues, as well as the types of actions necessary to better position rural communities for future success.

The findings synthesize the stakeholder feedback (from the survey and meetings) throughout the region, but the extent to which these issues affect individual communities varies from place to place. Moreover, it is also important to contextualize these communities. Many communities in northern and central Illinois are rural, but not remote. As a result, their access issues may not be as challenging as those experienced by rural communities in the Great Plains or elsewhere in the Midwest. Regardless, this white paper highlights the most pressing issues and challenges facing rural communities in northern and central Illinois. Creating more opportunities for regional and/or collaborative solutions requires greater understanding of these issues.

Figure 1: Study Region



⁶ Not all survey respondents offered demographic information about themselves. Among those that did, 55% were women, 45% were men; 94% were white; 79% has at least a 4-year degree, 84% of respondents were directly involved in economic and community development professionally or as a volunteer; 22% were under the age of 45, 57% were aged 45 to 64, and 21% were aged 65+; and 71% lived within an hour of where they or their spouse went to high school.

Economic factors drive opportunity

Economic factors can dictate the opportunities and resources available to area residents, but they are not always within the control of local communities. Corporate decisions to close or relocate large facilities can occur independently of local input. However, local communities can influence their economic future by supporting local entrepreneurs or expanding education and training opportunities for area residents and workers. This section reviews how survey respondents and local stakeholders think about their community's efforts to support local entrepreneurs and businesses, sustain agricultural activities, and prepare the future workforce.

The pandemic sparked a new interest in entrepreneurship

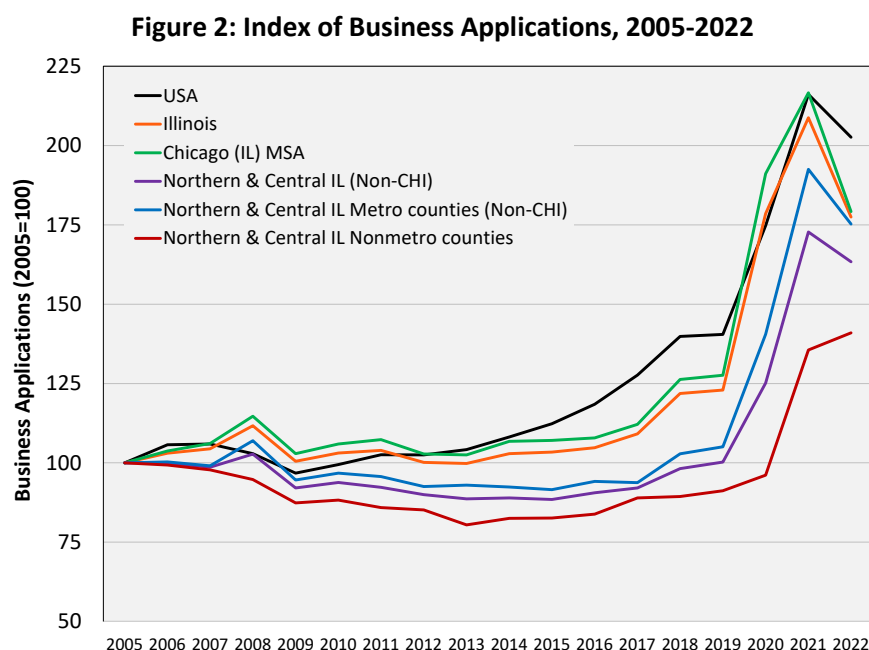
Entrepreneurship is foundational to rural vitality because it allows residents to create economic opportunities for themselves. If successful, these ventures can also create employment for other area residents. Based on the

number of new business applications, there was a surge of interest—both nationwide and in the region—in entrepreneurship resulting from pandemic's impact on the economy (Figure 2). The pandemic cost many people their jobs, so in response they created their own. They did so either to make a living or generate supplemental income.

The spike in business applications subsided

with the recovering economy, but the number of new business applications remains higher than what occurred pre-pandemic.⁷

This recent entrepreneurial energy presents economic opportunities, but aspiring entrepreneurs face challenges along the way. Only 20% of the survey respondents said that starting or growing a business in their community was very easy (1.5%) or easy (19.0%). Access to financial resources remains a



⁷ Business applications data are available through the U.S. Census Bureau's [Business Formation Statistics](#). County-level business application data are available annually through 2022. At the state level, these data are available weekly. Most business applications do not result in the creation of an actual business, but these data do reflect the interest that people have in starting a business

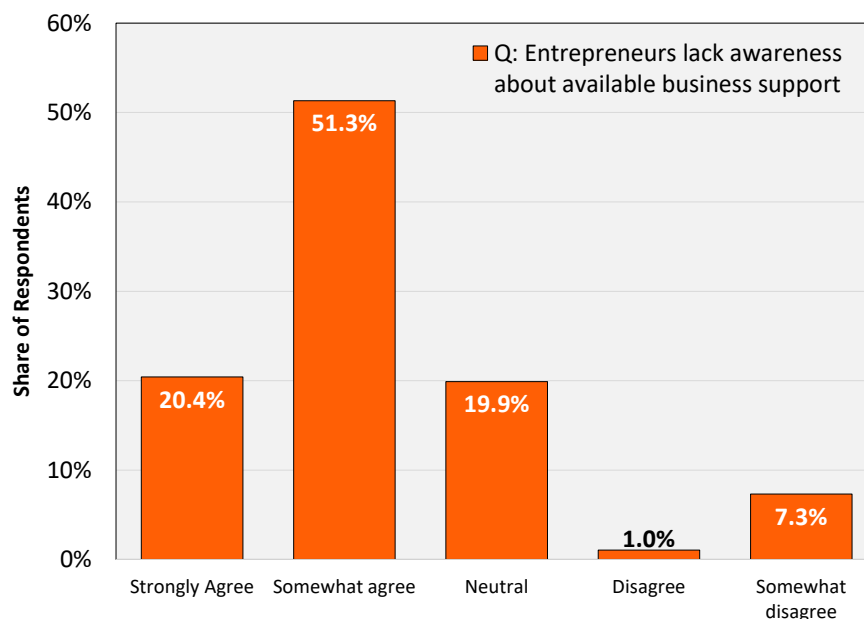
challenge, but the survey respondents identified two more pressing regional issues—limited awareness and use of available (non-financial) business support services, and the need for physical space for entrepreneurs and new businesses.

Entrepreneurs lack awareness of business support programs

There are many services available to guide entrepreneurs, but Figure 3 shows that 71% of survey respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that their community's entrepreneurs lacked awareness about available business support services. Organizations such as the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) and the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE) offer counseling and mentoring services that help entrepreneurs develop business plans, complete grant applications, and identify potential financing options. Our conversations with regional stakeholders confirmed the ongoing need to raise awareness and increase the use of these existing services. Stakeholders further indicated that entrepreneurs also need help with local permitting and better connections to legal, accounting or financing services.

Rural entrepreneurs can also have trouble getting the attention of service providers. Many service providers are based in urban areas and those urban areas generate enough activity to keep them busy. Greater use of virtual meetings—particularly during the pandemic—improved rural access to these support services.

Figure 3: Regional impressions about local awareness of entrepreneurial support services



Source: 2023 UIUC Rural Vitality Survey

Throughout the region, there are some ongoing efforts to promote and expand use of the entrepreneurial support programs. For instance, the Greater Freeport Partnership's [Freeport Community Business Academy](#) provides area entrepreneurs with the foundational knowledge required to successfully start a business. The Gale Business Suite at the Freeport Public Library, for instance, helps people build business plans and provides templates for legal documents, and are also increasing efforts to better serve the community's Hispanic population. Other communities have taken steps to better serve the region's entrepreneurial Hispanic population. For instance, Northwest Illinois Economic Development (which serves Jo Daviess, Carroll, and Whiteside counties) has organized workshops for Hispanic entrepreneurs at some area Catholic churches. In addition, the Sauk Valley Chamber of

Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois

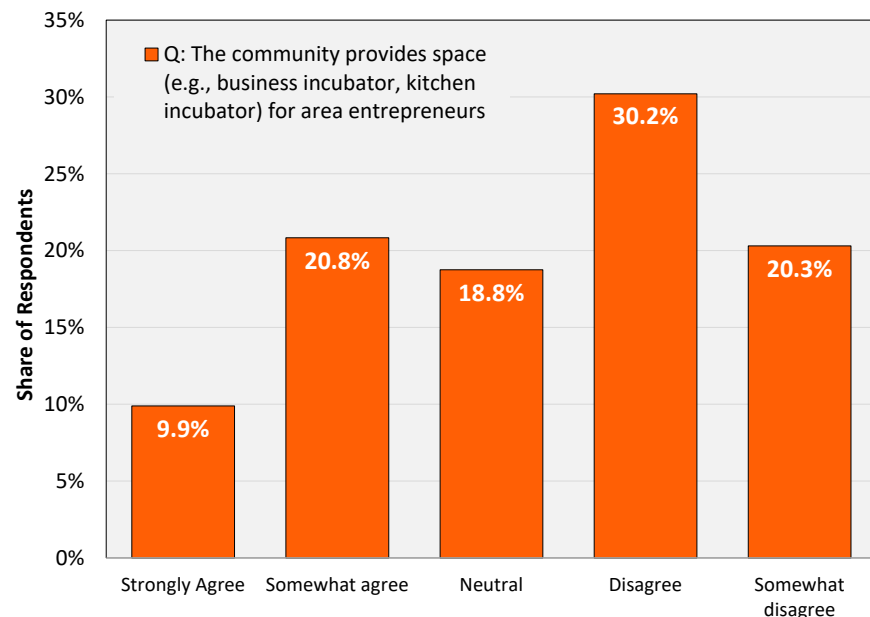
Commerce's Hispanic Business Leaders Committee provides leadership, networking, and education for the region's Hispanic business owners. Statewide business service providers such as Illinois SBDC (Small Business Development Centers) and Illinois Manufacturing Excellence Center (IMEC) also provide access to Spanish speaking counselors to support businesses and workers.

Physical space enables entrepreneurs to grow their businesses responsibly

Survey respondents also identified the need for physical space. Figure 4 shows that less than a third of the survey respondents agreed that their community provided space (e.g., business incubators, commercial kitchens) for area entrepreneurs. For many entrepreneurial ventures, moving out of the home and into physical

space is a milestone. However, this step can also create risk because some entrepreneurs may overextend their resources and find themselves in a precarious financial position. Shared workspaces or commercial kitchens can allow them to manage their risk by providing affordable spaces so they can grow their business at a more sustainable pace.

Figure 4: Regional impressions about the availability of entrepreneurial facilities



Source: 2023 UIUC Rural Vitality Survey

Expanding the entrepreneurial support infrastructure would enable more entrepreneurs to take the next step in growing their businesses. Nevertheless, the availability and demand for these spaces and facilities varies by locality. Not all communities have shared office space facilities that can serve both local entrepreneurs and remote workers. The local demand for commercial kitchens also varies by community; the Galena area expressed need due to its strong tourism industry, but this demand was not universal. Rural entrepreneurs may benefit by establishing greater connections to some of the entrepreneurial resources in the region's more urban areas—such as Peoria's Distillery Labs—that can provide a venue where entrepreneurs can grow their businesses and access services to help grow their businesses.

Agriculture remains vital, but presents both challenges and opportunities

The agricultural sector accounts for more than 40% of county GDP in some of the region's more rural counties (e.g., Henderson, Hancock, and Mercer counties).⁸ Over half of the survey respondents believed that agriculture was extremely important to their community's vitality, and another 33% found it very important. Agriculture not only dominates the landscape, but it also creates jobs on the farm and beyond in activities such as agricultural services and food manufacturing. Over three-quarters of survey respondents indicated that their community had a farmers' market providing residents with another opportunity to engage with agricultural producers.

Nevertheless, agriculture remains in a continuous process of transformation as agricultural producers adopt new technologies and products. Figure 5 shows that over 60% of survey respondents believed that agriculture continues to offer entrepreneurial opportunities.

Agricultural producers with the equipment and time, for example, can provide contract services (e.g., harvesting, spraying) for other producers. Regional stakeholders noted that with greater regional processing capacity, local livestock

producers could expand their operations. Currently, small processing facilities are booked and have little flexibility. Beyond beef and pork producers, several stakeholders also mentioned that mobile processing units would benefit producers of smaller animals (e.g., poultry, rabbit). Farmers can grow their business through supplementary activities (e.g., honey, goats, horticulture) or by leveraging agritourism opportunities.

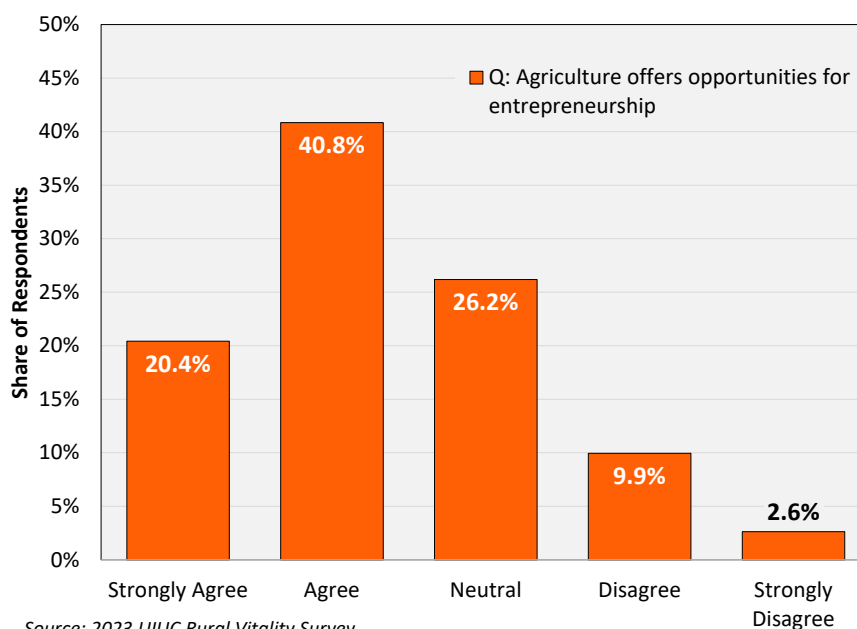
producers could expand their operations. Currently, small processing facilities are booked and have little flexibility. Beyond beef and pork producers, several stakeholders also mentioned that mobile processing units would benefit producers of smaller animals (e.g., poultry, rabbit). Farmers can grow their business through supplementary activities (e.g., honey, goats, horticulture) or by leveraging agritourism opportunities.

producers could expand their operations. Currently, small processing facilities are booked and have little flexibility. Beyond beef and pork producers, several stakeholders also mentioned that mobile processing units would benefit producers of smaller animals (e.g., poultry, rabbit). Farmers can grow their business through supplementary activities (e.g., honey, goats, horticulture) or by leveraging agritourism opportunities.

Barriers persist for new farmers

It's difficult for people to start farming. Land and equipment are prohibitively expensive, especially during a period of high interest rates. Younger, aspiring farmers also differ from more traditional farmers or farmers that inherit a farm operation. Their interests often focus less on traditional production agriculture and more around opportunities involving greenhouses (e.g., horticulture,

Figure 5: Regional impressions of entrepreneurial opportunities in agriculture



⁸ U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, [2022 Gross Domestic Product by County](#).

Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois

cannabis) that do not require significant amounts of land. Almost half of the survey respondents (47.1%) strongly agreed or agreed that local youth want to pursue careers in agriculture. However, if they are new to agriculture, they face challenges common to many entrepreneurs, such as finding mentors or connecting to customers (e.g., urban restaurants).

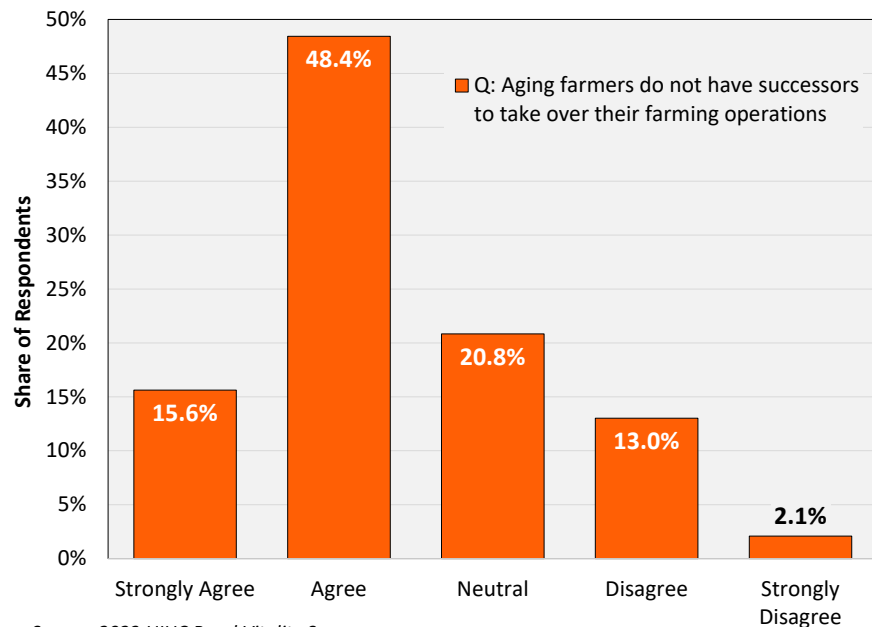
Beyond operating farms, agriculture presents other opportunities for young people. Through agricultural or Career and Technical Education (CTE), young people can find careers such as agricultural equipment operators or technicians. High school agricultural education and CTE programs provide the foundational knowledge and skills that can lead young people to post-secondary agriculture programs or straight into the workforce. Despite these opportunities, not all students are naturally drawn to these fields. Many students in agriculture come from farm families, but with fewer farm families, these post-secondary agricultural programs must work harder to recruit students who don't have an agricultural background.

Succession planning requires greater attention given the state's aging farmers

Mirroring national trends, the region's farm operators are aging. According to USDA's Census of Agriculture, the average age of Illinois' principal producers was 59.5 in 2017; up from 57.8 in 2012.⁹ Given the aging of Illinois' rural population generally, that number will likely rise when USDA releases the 2022 Census of Agriculture. Figure 6 shows that almost two-thirds of survey respondents strongly agreed (15.6%) or agreed (48.4%) that aging farmers do not have successors to take over their farming operations. In the

coming years, farm operators and farm families must develop plans to continue farm operations or discontinue the farm business. For many farm operators, the latter will require selling their land to larger operations. For communities, however, more consolidation can lead to fewer local purchases and less support for local businesses.

Figure 6: Regional impressions of agricultural succession planning



Source: 2023 UIUC Rural Vitality Survey

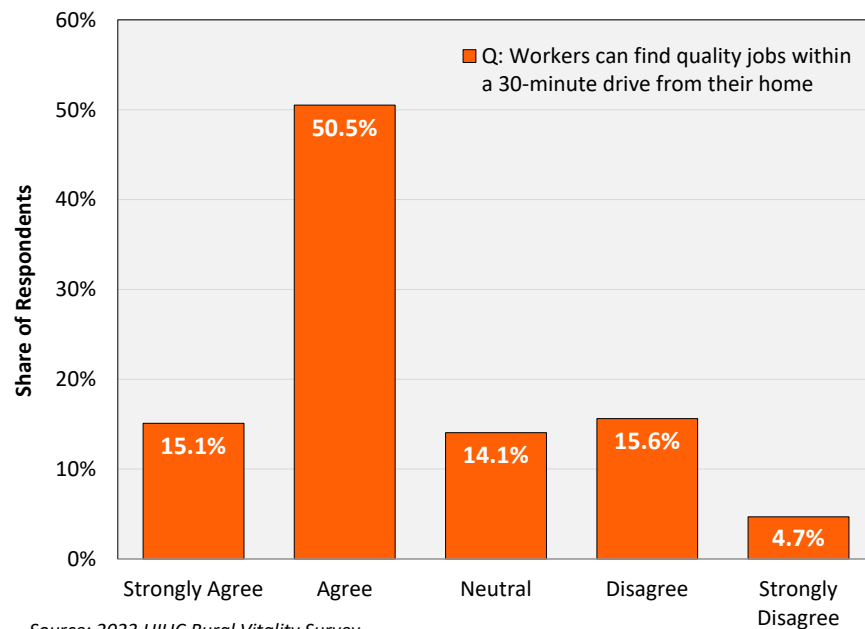
⁹ These data are available in the [Illinois state report](#) for the 2017 Census of Agriculture. USDA is scheduled to release the 2022 Census of Agriculture in February 2024.

Demographic shifts create workforce challenges, but work opportunities are available

As with many places, finding enough workers remains a pervasive regional challenge. In northern and central Illinois (excluding the Chicago MSA), the labor force is about 10% smaller than it was in 2000; in the region's nonmetro counties it is 16% smaller. Demographic factors—primarily net-out-migration and retiring baby boomers—have reduced the number of available workers. Simply put, it is harder to find workers when there are fewer workers to find. This is a challenge for all employers, but especially larger employers with many different positions to fill. For instance, one regional health system noted that they faced challenges hiring workers at all levels, be it physicians, nurses, allied health professionals, housekeeping, or food service staff.

These employer challenges create opportunities for local workers. Figure 7 shows that almost two-thirds of survey respondents either strongly agreed (15.1%) or agreed (50.5%) that workers could find quality jobs within a 30-minute drive from their home. Differences emerged, however, depending on where residents lived. Relative to those living in denser communities (e.g., towns), rural survey respondents

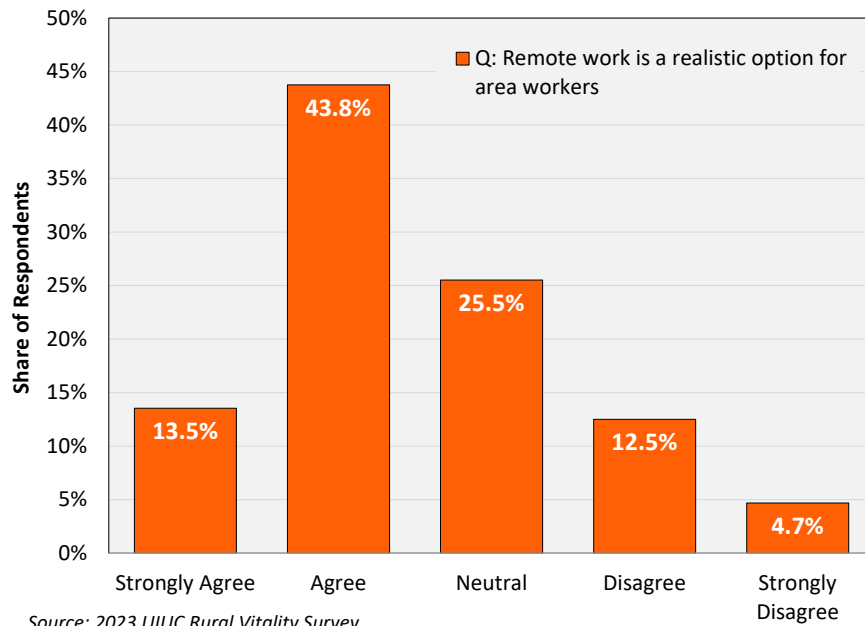
Figure 7: Regional impressions about the local availability of quality jobs



were less likely to believe that quality jobs were within 30 minutes. That said, rural residents may be more accustomed to longer commutes than other residents, but also more sensitive to gas prices.

Training opportunities can help workers prepare for area jobs or enable them to grow within those jobs. By an almost 2 to 1 margin (51.8% strongly agree/agree v. 27.7% disagree/strongly disagree), survey respondents agreed that local training opportunities were available for area workers. Since the pandemic there has also been more opportunities for remote work. Figure 8 shows that most survey respondents believed that remote work offered realistic opportunities for area workers. Strengthening and expanding the region's broadband networks will further improve access to both remote work and distance learning opportunities.

Figure 8: Regional impressions about the local potential for remote work

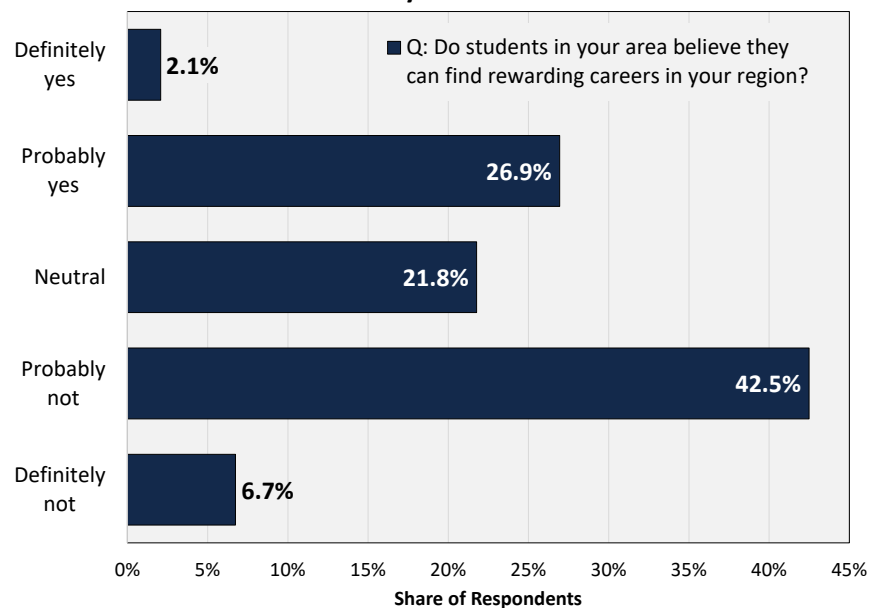


Strengthening local career pathway opportunities can help retain area youth

Young people often leave their hometowns for college, and a lack of quality career opportunities may discourage them from returning. Survey respondents expressed concerns about the region's ability to retain its youth. When asked if they can find rewarding careers in the region (Figure 9), almost half of the survey respondents answered probably not (42.5%) or definitely not (6.7%). Quality career opportunities, particularly for non-college bound students, can keep young people in the region.

Figure 10 shows that almost half of the survey respondents believed that area high schools offer programs that prepare students to directly enter the workforce. Regional stakeholders specifically

Figure 9: Regional impressions about career opportunities for local youth

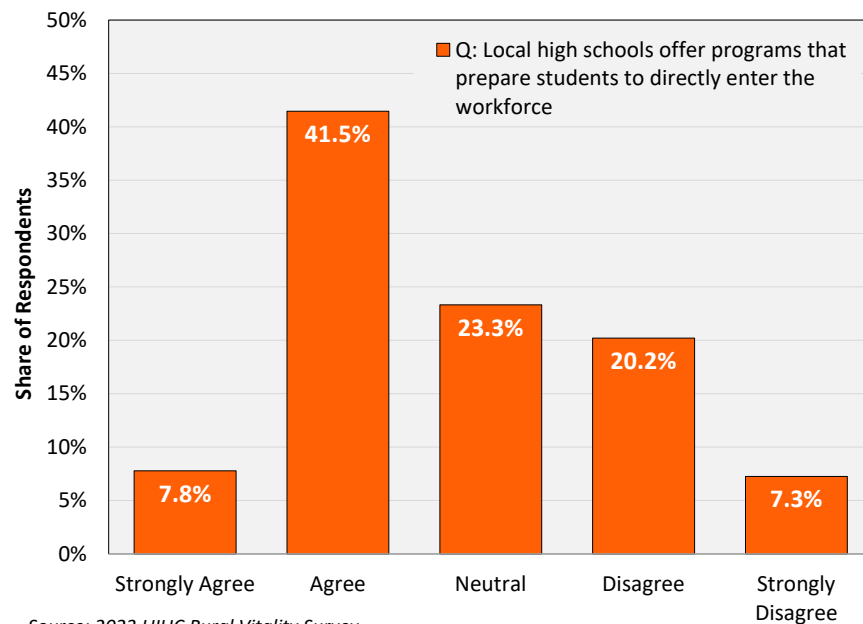


mentioned that greater use of career academies—that blend school with work opportunities—and career and technical education (CTE) programs can prepare students for local jobs in fields such as manufacturing, construction, or healthcare. Responding to these needs, for instance, Elmwood High School recently opened a new Industrial Arts Building to better serve its CTE students. The

more educational opportunities that are available to both college-bound students (e.g., AP or dual enrollment programs) and students looking to enter the workforce more directly (e.g., CTE programs), the better the community will feel about local school quality.

Regional collaboration can create stronger pathways into the workforce. More than three-quarters of survey respondents agreed (59.4%) or strongly agreed (17.2%) that youth groups (e.g., 4-H, FFA) actively promote career exploration for young people. Industry partners are critical to success for many secondary and post-secondary technical programs (e.g., CTE, Agriculture) because they can provide expertise, donate equipment, and offer internship or employment opportunities. Moreover, stronger partnerships between high schools and community colleges further strengthen career-oriented programs that lead young people into the workforce.

Figure 10: Regional impressions of youth workforce preparedness



A strong physical infrastructure provides the foundation for rural vitality

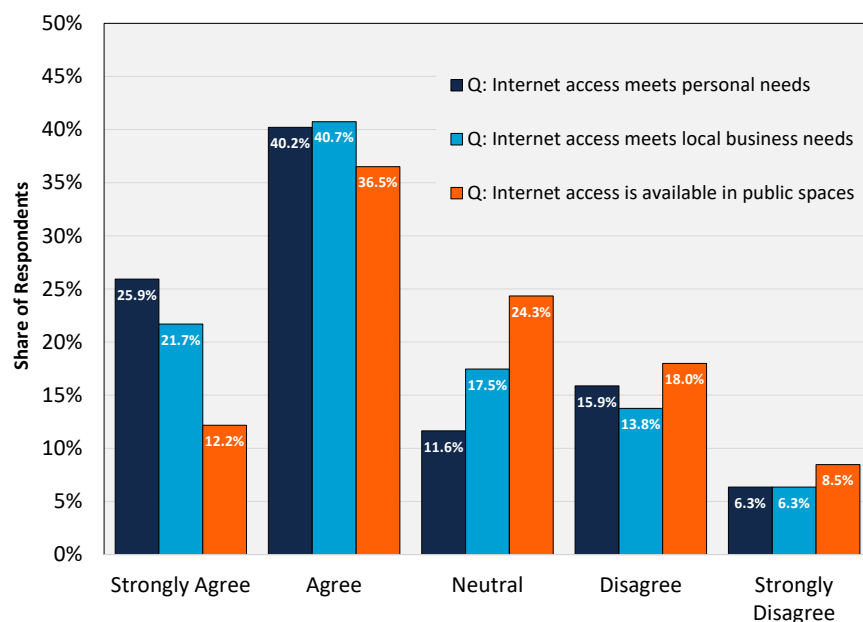
The physical infrastructure (e.g., roads, water, sewer) are critically important for rural communities, but they can also prove very expensive to maintain or expand. In some instances, communities rely on federal and/or state resources to fund their maintenance; in others, the local municipality must generate the necessary resources from local tax revenues. This can pose challenges for smaller communities, particularly those with a declining tax base. Beyond this traditional infrastructure, broadband has also become critical infrastructure. The availability and affordability of appropriate housing also influences regional growth. The quality and availability of public spaces such as downtowns, community centers, and outdoor recreational facilities factor into the region's overall quality of life. Combined, these factors can determine a community's ability to thrive.

Broadband creates opportunities for rural communities

Broadband access makes distance learning, remote work, telehealth, and self-employment possible. It also contributes to the overall quality of life. Supported by substantial federal and state funding, significant progress has been made toward expanding and strengthening northern and central Illinois' broadband infrastructure. Figure 11 shows that over 60% of survey respondents found that their internet access met their personal and business needs. There were some statistically significant differences about how internet access met personal needs between respondents indicating that they lived in rural communities and those that lived in towns or cities—an indication that many last-mile challenges remain, particularly for residents who live outside town boundaries.

There was somewhat less agreement about public internet access, as just less than half of the survey respondents agreed that it was available in public spaces. Free public Wi-Fi enables local residents to spend more time in their downtowns (e.g., remotely working in coffee shops). Some cities, such as Normal already provide downtown Wi-Fi.

Figure 11: Regional impressions of broadband access



Other infrastructure issues raise concern across the region

Broadband access has improved significantly over the past decade, but regional stakeholders were more mixed about the condition of roads, bridges and especially the water and sewer infrastructure. For instance, only 55% of survey respondents agreed the local roads are well maintained. Some of these issues result from the region's shrinking population. In many communities, the water and sewer infrastructure are nearly 100 years old and need to be replaced. However, the shrinking population has diminished the tax base and these communities lack the resources to adequately maintain or replace waterlines. Even if resources are available through the federal or state government, some rural communities may lack the local matching funds necessary or local government capacity to access those resources. Similar challenges arise for the commercial infrastructure, as many communities cannot afford to establish or renovate industrial sites.

Housing availability and affordability affects the ability for rural communities to grow

Housing is less expensive in rural northern and central Illinois than in more urban areas, but housing availability remains one of the region's most pressing issues. Many residents cannot find housing that meets their budget, needs, or standards. A lack of new home construction—driven in part by Illinois' demographic challenges and relatively slow economic growth—exacerbates these challenges. The U.S. Census Bureau collects annual and monthly data on residential building permits.¹⁰ In northern and central Illinois (outside the Chicago MSA), permits were issued for 982 new residential buildings containing 1,108 units for 2023 (through the month of October). This means that for every 10,000 residents, there were building permits issued for six new housing units. By comparison, there were permits issued for 11.2 housing units per 10,000 residents in the State of Illinois and 37.7 housing units per 10,000 residents nationwide.¹¹

Figure 12 shows how survey respondents view the regional housing market. Almost two-thirds of respondents believed that it was not easy to find an affordable home within the region. Several factors contribute to these challenges. For instance, labor shortages in the building trades and the unpredictable cost of building materials have limited new home construction and home renovations. As a result, builders focus more on developing larger, more expensive homes which deliver better returns on their investment. In other communities, there is no land available for residential construction because land is more valuable for agriculture.

Figure 12 shows that almost 60% of survey respondents did not believe that different types of houses (e.g., single-family, multi-family) were available in their community. This has led to fewer homes for first home buyers or people with more modest incomes, who might first buy a duplex or townhouse as an initial step toward building equity. Stakeholders also noted the lack of turnover within their existing housing stock and that many homes are sold before making it to the market. The lack of assisted living

¹⁰ These data are available from the U.S. Census Bureau's [Building Permits Survey](#).

¹¹ The population data are drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau Population Estimates Programs v2022 Estimates. It should also be noted that relative to other Midwest states, Illinois has a relatively low level of new home construction. By comparison, neighboring Midwest states have had issued relatively more building permits. At 11.2 housing units per 10,000 residents, Illinois trailed states like Indiana (33.9), Iowa (28.9), Michigan (16.9), Missouri (23.5), Ohio (19.7), Minnesota (36.9), and Wisconsin (29.5).

facilities exacerbates the lack of turnover as many older residents end up staying in their homes longer than they would prefer. When these homes do make it to market, many need extensive maintenance and rehabilitation.

Renters are particularly affected by these rural housing challenges. In northern and central Illinois (outside of the Chicago MSA), 45% of renting households are housing cost-burdened

(more than 30% of total household income goes toward housing expenses)—a figure consistent with the state. Figure 12 shows that just over 15% of survey respondents agreed that rental units were readily available in the region. Some regional stakeholders noted that local opposition to rental property development had the potential to further limit the supply of adequate rental properties.

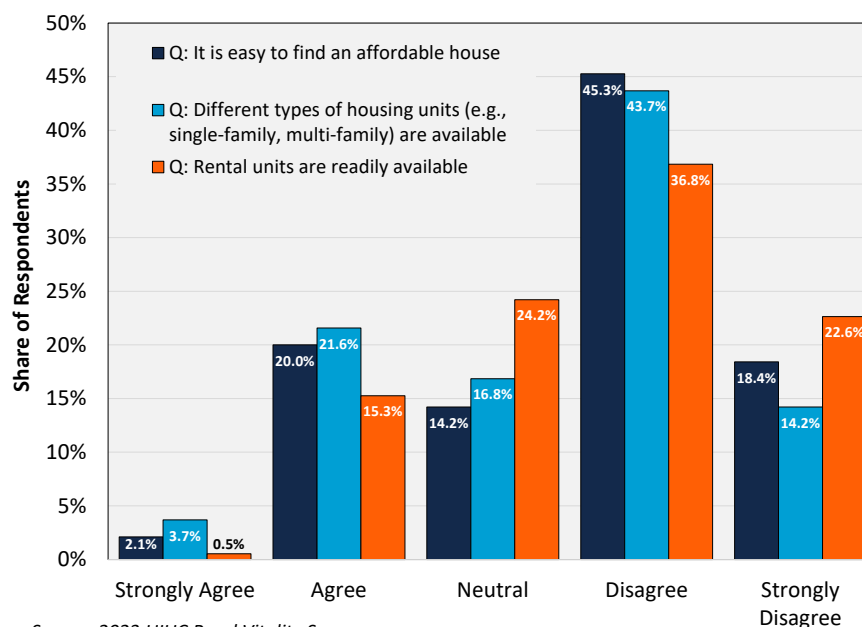
As with many issues, the nature and severity of these housing challenges vary throughout the region. A few places (e.g., Washington, IL) are growing and adding new housing units. Several communities noted that the lack of quality housing and housing options (own/rent) created additional workforce challenges. For instance, the Illinois River Biological Station (Havana, IL) brings educated and relatively well paid workers to the community, but these workers often cannot find adequate housing. As a result, workers pursue longer-term rentals or stay in Airbnbs, both options that are inconsistently available. These housing challenges are not unique to the region, but rural communities will not be able to attract and retain residents if they do address these issues.

Vibrant downtowns and public spaces contribute to community placemaking efforts

A community's vitality is often reflected in the vibrancy of its downtowns and public spaces. Attractive downtown areas draw residents to local bars, restaurants, and community events and make important first impressions on both tourists and potential new residents. Moreover, vibrant downtowns make citizens feel good about, and take pride in, their community. Public spaces and facilities, such as parks and community centers, further contribute to this community spirit and improve the community's overall quality of life.

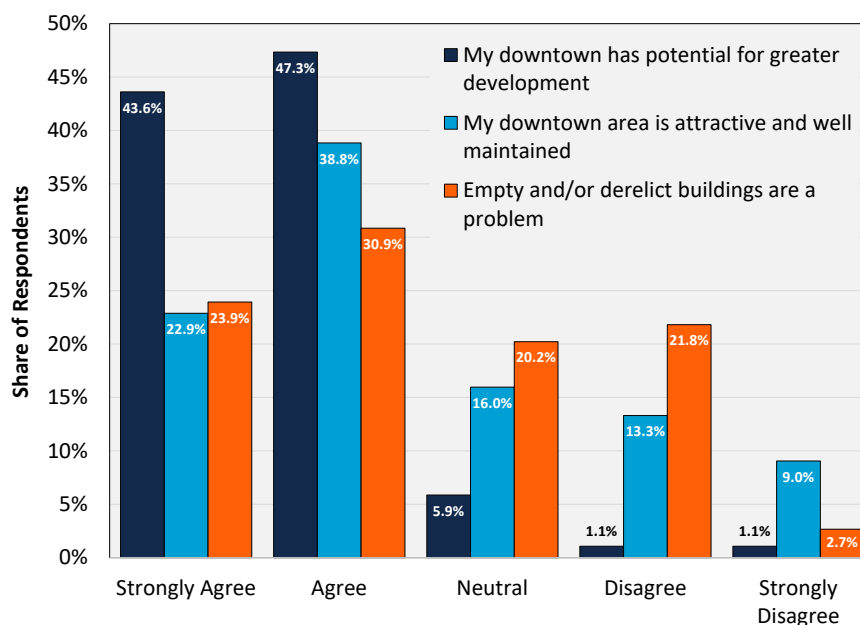
Figure 13 shows how the survey respondents felt about the condition of their local downtown. Survey respondents overall had positive impressions of their downtowns (again, variations exist between

Figure 12: Regional impressions of the regional housing market



communities). Over 60% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that their downtown area was attractive and well maintained. Just over half of the survey respondents recognized the challenges arising from empty or derelict buildings. Among other things, derelict buildings can limit the extent to which residents use their downtown and can hurt the property values of neighboring properties. By contrast, restoring or maintaining historic buildings can be critical for making places unique.

Figure 13: Regional impressions of downtown conditions



Source: 2023 UIUC Rural Vitality Survey

Although generally satisfied with their downtowns, over 90% of survey respondents felt that their downtown areas had potential for greater development. Many communities use [Tax Increment Financing \(TIF\) districts](#) to encourage the new development or redevelopment of downtown properties to fill in gaps, redevelop derelict properties, or make façade improvements. For instance, the City of Chillicothe used TIF to redevelop several downtown buildings that are now used for retail, restaurants, and a new boutique hotel. Some communities have also invested in public art (e.g., murals) to make their downtowns more attractive. In Havana, local property owners redeveloped downtown buildings for Airbnb units which has helped to bolster the region's tourism industry.

Downtown areas and other recreational assets support community interaction

Downtowns conditions affect how much residents and visitors use them. Figure 14 shows that roughly 60% of respondents agreed that their downtown attracted people during the day and the availability of bars, restaurants and theaters brought people downtown at night. Special events (e.g., festivals, fairs, outdoor concerts) also brought people downtown, according to more than three-quarters of survey respondents. In addition to local schools, these downtown areas remain a center for the community's social activities.

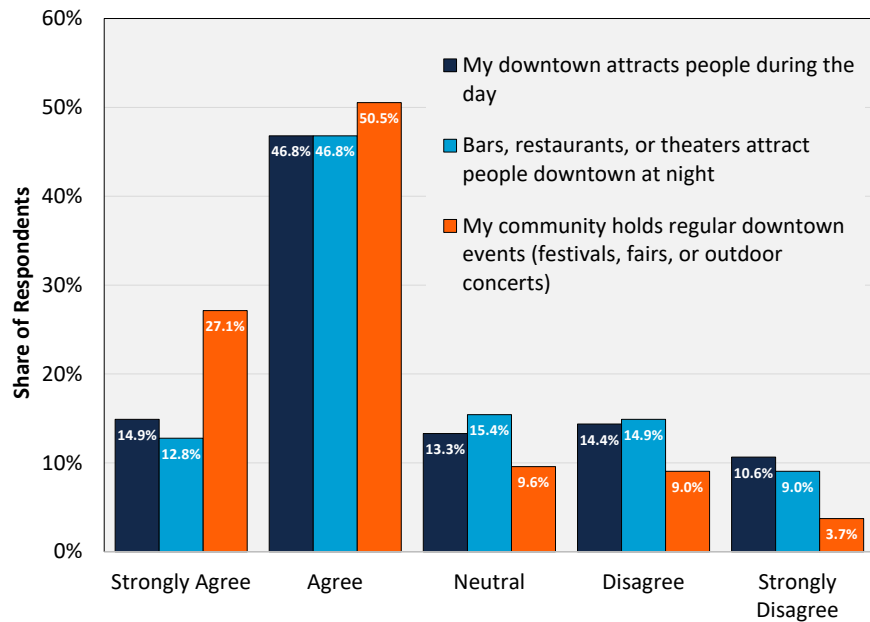
Beyond downtown and main street development, regional stakeholders also highlighted the contributions that other public spaces make to their local quality of life. Numerous stakeholders noted that community centers provide venues for events that bring the community together. In Wyoming, IL the community redeveloped a downtown theater, but in the process opted for more flexible seating to accommodate a wider array of uses. In Elmwood, IL efforts are currently underway to raise funding for a

new community center. In partnership with the area YMCA, this center will serve both the community's seniors and provide afterschool programs and summer childcare options.

Well maintained parks, trails, and other recreational amenities can further enhance a community's overall attractiveness and quality of life. These recreational amenities can also influence where people decide to live,

along with factors such as employment opportunities, family proximity, and school quality. Efforts to connect trails between communities can also create more tourism opportunities. Our conversations with regional leaders, however, made clear that creating attractive downtowns and other public spaces require significant collaboration between municipal government, local businesses, business organizations (e.g., chambers of commerce, local economic development corporations, convention and visitor bureaus), educational institutions (e.g., K-12 Education, Colleges, and Universities), and, importantly, volunteer groups.

Figure 14: Regional impressions of downtown activity



Source: 2023 UIUC Rural Vitality Survey

An effective ‘social infrastructure’ can greatly enhance rural vitality

Key support services such as healthcare, eldercare, and childcare allow area residents to live healthier lives and more fully participate in the workforce and their community. These services, therefore, represent an essential ‘social infrastructure.’ Some rural communities lack sufficient access to these services due to their relatively small size and lack of density. Expanding access to these services will enable many rural communities to thrive.

Access to healthcare and wellness services varies across the region

Much of northern and central Illinois is rural, but there are several major population centers (e.g., Peoria, Bloomington, Rockford, etc.) throughout the region. Proximity to these more populous urban areas means that the region has greater access to key services such as healthcare, relative to other more remote regions. Figure 15 shows that more than 80% of survey respondents agreed that they had access to specialized treatment, emergency services, and locally based primary care physicians. Survey

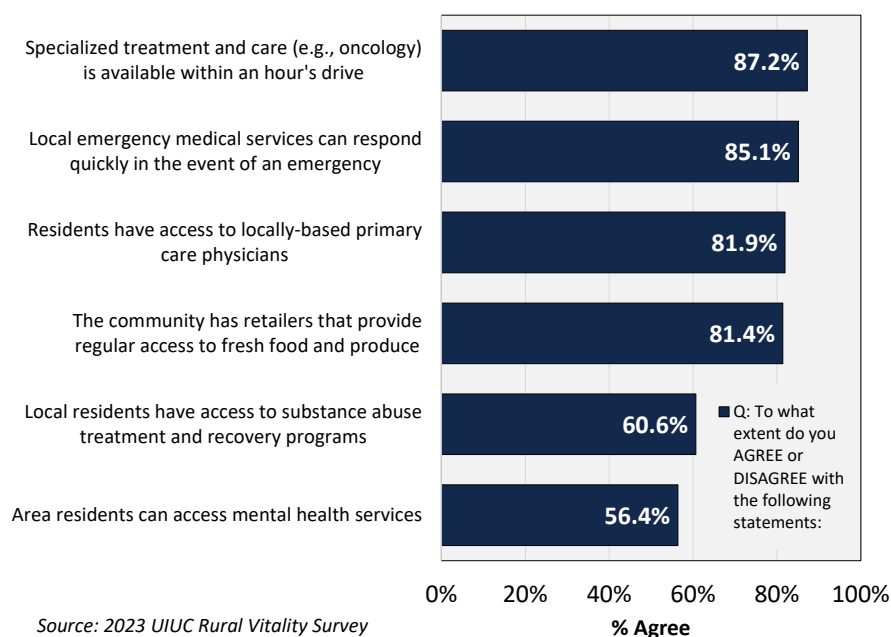
respondents indicated that access to mental health and substance abuse treatment services was more limited, despite the growing need for these services that arose during the pandemic.

The survey also highlighted other healthcare-related challenges that are a byproduct of rural living.

For instance, respondents who lived in rural locations were less likely to have timely access to emergency

services relative to those living in towns or cities. The lack of grocery stores, particularly in more rural areas, can pose additional challenges for the health and wellness of area residents because of their limited access to healthy food. Over 80% of survey respondents, however, indicated that their community had retailers that provide fresh food and produce.¹² Respondents who identified as living in

Figure 15: Regional impressions of healthcare availability



¹² Not all communities have access to grocery stores that provide fresh food and produce. Sheffield, IL was at risk of losing their community grocery store. The original owners sold the store to a non-profit, which with the assistance of over \$500,000 of grants and donations (individual and corporate) to overhaul the store which served as the focal point of the community's downtown. These efforts were reported in *The Washington Post*: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2023/08/31/royal-super-mart-sheffield-illinois/>

Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois

rural locations were somewhat less likely to have access to fresh food and produce than those living in towns or small cities.

Access to healthcare and wellness services, nevertheless, varies from community to community. For instance, the LaSalle-Peru region lost its local healthcare system, leaving the region dramatically underserved, despite its population base. Besides the consequences for people's health, the relative lack of healthcare services makes it more difficult to attract and retain people and businesses.

An aging population needs more eldercare options

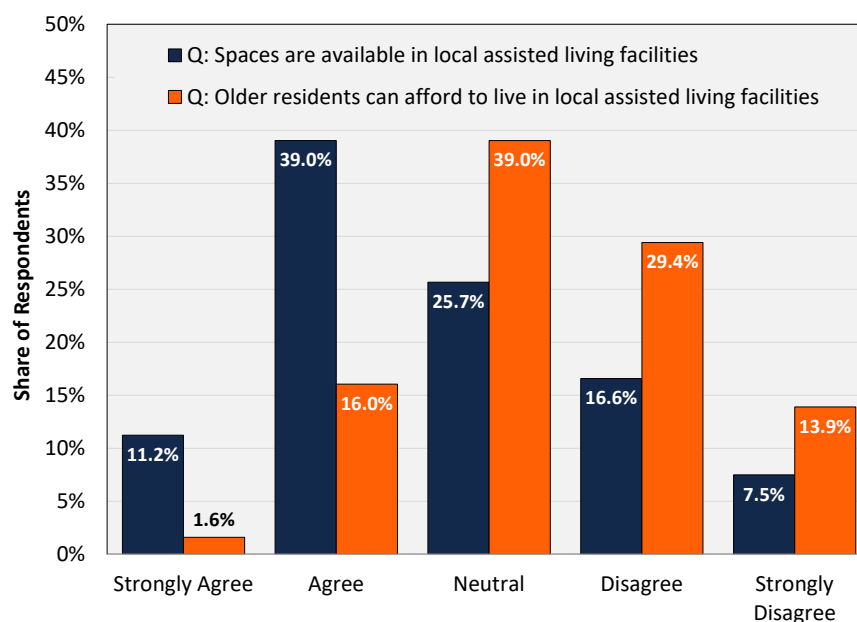
Along with many other parts of the Midwest, the region has an aging population. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2022 population estimates, 19.8% of northern and central Illinois (not including the Chicago MSA) was aged 65 and older—a share 2.5% higher than the state and nation. In some counties, that share is even greater; in Jo Daviess, Henderson, Putnam, Carroll, and Hancock counties, almost a quarter or more of the population is aged 65 or older.¹³ The aging population, therefore, increases the need for more eldercare options. These services can affect both the self-sufficiency of seniors and the financial and emotional well-being of families. Greater access to assisted living facilities can allow seniors to move out of their homes, thereby making more homes available for prospective home buyers.

Expanding eldercare options and opportunities has become increasingly difficult. Nationwide, many assisted living facilities face intense staffing challenges—particularly in more rural places. Many facilities lost workers during the pandemic and never recovered. The pandemic accelerated these trends, but within the region, these employment losses are a

longer-term trend. In northern and central Illinois, metro counties (excluding the Chicago MSA), employment in nursing care and eldercare facilities is down almost 8% since 2012; in the nonmetro counties employment is down over 20%.¹⁴

As with other issues, the severity of these challenges varies throughout the region. Survey respondents

Figure 16: Regional impressions of eldercare availability and affordability



Source: 2023 UIUC Rural Vitality Survey

¹³ Again, we define the region as the northern and central Illinois that are included within Compeer Financial's Illinois service area, excluding the nine counties of the Chicago MSA. Figure 1 also highlights the nonmetro and metro portions of the region.

¹⁴ These figures are based on employment estimates provided by Chmura Economics JobsEQ.

believed that these challenges were more often a challenge of affordability, than availability. Figure 16 shows that half the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that there were spaces available in their community's assisted living facilities, but only 18% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that older residents can afford to live in local assisted living facilities. However, the level of care required affects the affordability. In the state of Illinois, the annual costs of a private room in a nursing home are almost \$86,000, a home health aide \$64,000, assisted living \$54,000, and adult day care \$23,000.¹⁵ Rural areas are not necessarily less expensive, because fewer providers mean less competition and potentially higher costs.

More eldercare facilities and options would lead to greater competition, but creating facilities and spaces at prices seniors can afford is not easy. Establishing new senior centers involves significant upfront costs, the ability to navigate a highly regulated industry, and finding workers to fill what are often difficult, low wage jobs. For instance, home health and personal care aides—one of the most common occupations within the industry—earn median wages of \$14.21 per hour, or 72% of the regional median wage of \$19.82 per hour.¹⁶ Moreover, the level of care required by seniors can vary widely—some seniors are largely independent but need occasional in-home services (e.g., Meals on Wheels), while others need 24 hour care. Therefore, the challenge is not just one of creating more spots, but rather creating eldercare opportunities that fit local community needs.

Insufficient childcare options can limit labor force participation

The availability and affordability of childcare services remains another significant regional challenge. Similar to eldercare services, childcare facilities face difficulty filling many, relatively low-wage jobs. Childcare employment in the northern and central Illinois' nonmetropolitan counties is now 70% of what it was in 2000.¹⁷ Demographic factors stemming from depopulation and smaller families contribute to this decline. The pandemic further weakened the region's childcare infrastructure, as many small in-home childcare centers closed permanently and there are not enough larger centers to meet local demand. These challenges are most pressing for families with infants who require a greater level of care.

Figure 17 shows that just over 30% of survey respondents believed that childcare was available to area families that needed it, but only 15% felt that childcare was affordable.¹⁸ The [Illinois Department of Human Services' Child Care Assistance Program](#) does provide some financial assistance for eligible families. As with many programs, however, families do not always know about these programs or know how to access them. Even if they are eligible, not all daycare facilities accept those benefits. The relative lack of childcare has many regional consequences, especially for labor force participation. Many

¹⁵ These 2021 data are available through the insurance company Genworth's Cost of Care Survey tool: <https://www.genworth.com/aging-and-you/finances/cost-of-care.html/>

¹⁶ Wage data are drawn from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics for the Northwest Illinois nonmetro area. The wage estimates in other neighboring rural areas (e.g., West Central Illinois nonmetro area) are very similar.

¹⁷ Again, based on employment estimates provided by Chmura Economics JobsEQ.

¹⁸ There were some differences between younger respondents (less than 45) and older respondents (45 and older), as well as men and women about the availability and affordability of childcare. Younger respondents and women were more likely to disagree with the statements that childcare was available and affordable for families that need it. That said, the sample size was not large enough for these findings to be statistically significant.

people—often women—must choose between work or staying at home to care for their children. In a region relatively short on people of prime working age, losing workers from lack of childcare only exacerbates the labor shortage. These issues are particularly consequential for female-dominated occupations, including teachers and nurses. Beyond its impact on the labor force, daycare availability can also

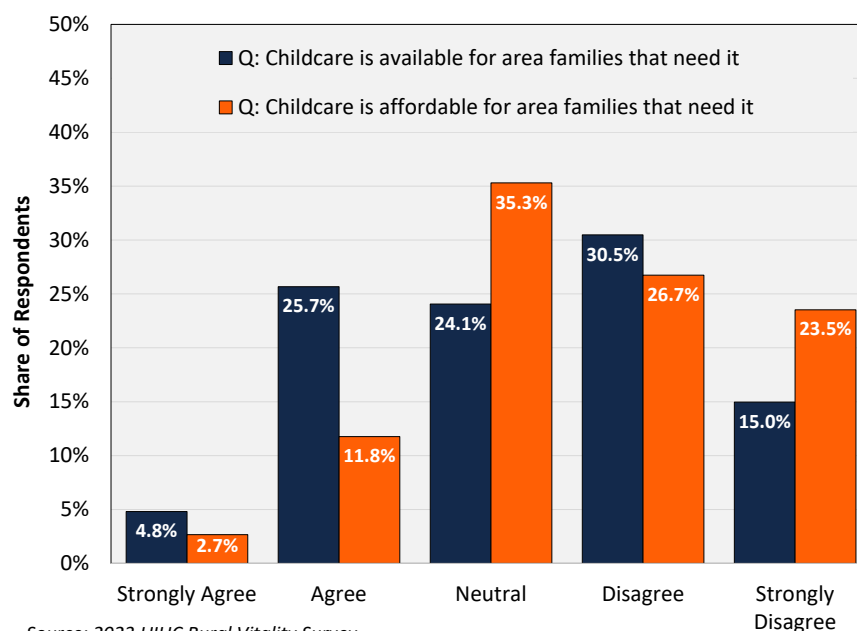
affect how communities attract and retain businesses. For instance, Elizabeth, IL in Jo Daviess County is a daycare desert and at least one company elected to locate elsewhere due to the community's lack of childcare services.

Rebuilding the region's childcare infrastructure will require addressing several entrepreneurial challenges that prospective childcare providers face, such as finding resources for facilities and equipment, or effectively navigating the regulations that govern childcare. Staffing, however, remains the most persistent challenge because affordable rates often mean paying relatively lower wages, and lower wages lead to staffing challenges and high turnover.¹⁹

Greater civic engagement requires broad participation and responsive local leadership

Local government represents another crucial part of the social infrastructure. Some rural communities, particularly very small communities, are unable to access federal, state, or non-profit grant opportunities because they lack the capacity and resources to pursue this extra funding or even administer the grants if they did receive them. Moreover, many smaller communities cannot raise the matching funds required for many grants. These issues arose during our conversations with community leaders and stakeholders. Nevertheless, over 70% of survey respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that their local government had the capability to pursue federal and state grants. In some cases,

Figure 17: Regional impressions of childcare availability and affordability



¹⁹ The Commonwealth of Virginia's Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) recently released a comprehensive examination of the availability and affordability of childcare in Virginia (<https://jlarc.virginia.gov/pdfs/reports/Rpt579.pdf>). It found that significant shortages remain in spite of the Commonwealth's efforts to implement the common approaches used by other states (e.g., incentivizing staff and providers, training and professional development, tax incentives, etc.). It also noted that the Commonwealth should consider seed funding for new childcare programs and a pool of substitute workers. However, since the childcare industry largely operates in the private sector the state's ability to expand childcare was relatively limited.

Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois

stakeholders noted the importance of regional organizations such as the Greater Peoria Economic Development Council (GPEDC) sharing information about potential funding opportunities and providing technical assistance, especially as part of the pandemic recovery.

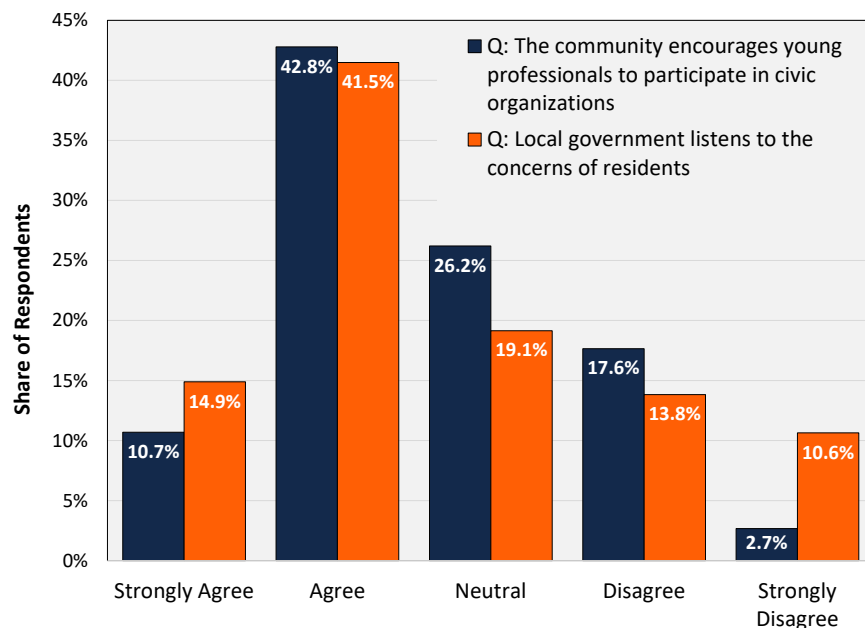
Public resources are not the only potential funding sources. Active philanthropic organizations (e.g., community foundations) support and contribute to community efforts. Depending on their organizational mission, philanthropic organizations often support efforts to address key challenges related to youth, education, substance abuse, or other locally relevant issues. Within the region, 72% of survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that their community had active philanthropic organizations.

Civic organizations and local governments must continually engage new people

Vibrant communities also welcome new residents and new ideas. Almost 80% of survey respondents perceived their community as definitely (24.5%) or probably (55.3%) welcoming to new residents. We recognize that these perceptions may vary between residents of different racial and ethnic groups and across generations.²⁰ For instance, younger residents do not always participate in local civic organizations. Not only are there fewer younger residents due to out-migration and the region's relatively older population, but the time commitments required of raising younger children can also preclude these activities.

Figure 18 shows that over half of the survey respondents either strongly agreed (10.7%) or agreed (42.8%) that the community encourages young people to participate in civic organizations. Over 56% also believed that their local government listened to the concerns of its residents. There were, however, statistically significant differences between older and younger respondents. Older respondents (age 45+)

Figure 18: Regional impressions of civic openness



Source: 2023 UIUC Rural Vitality Survey

²⁰ 94% of the survey respondents that shared information about their racial and ethnic background were white. According to the U.S. Census Bureau 2022 Population Estimates, 86.4% of the population in the Compeer Financial service area (outside the Chicago MSA) is white.

were more likely to strongly agree or agree (60.9%) that local government listened to their concerns, than respondents who were younger than 45 years old (36.8%).

Successful community initiatives require an active and engaged group of volunteers

The importance of civic engagement arose many times throughout the stakeholder conversations. As will be shown later, this issue was one of the most cited factors contributing to overall community vitality. Effective and forward-thinking local elected officials and the professional staff of local government are necessary, but not sufficient for, thriving communities. Success often relies on an active and inclusive set of volunteers, as these residents often assume primary responsibility for moving any community initiative forward.

Durand, IL (Winnebago County) offers a good example of a community that revitalized its downtown through stronger volunteer efforts. In 2012, Durand participated in [Western Illinois University Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs' MAPPING program](#). Through this program, the community reached a consensus that it needed a facelift. This program allowed them to identify resources and partners, and better understand how they could more effectively use their existing resources. Over the past decade, the community worked with local government, entrepreneurs, and investors to renovate many of its downtown buildings, making them more attractive for businesses and residents. Local volunteers organize events and fundraisers that encourage people to spend time in the downtown and become more invested in their community. For instance, an 'adopt-a-pot' program involves selling plants as a fundraiser, and then the potted plants are also placed outside downtown businesses as part of the downtown beautification efforts.

To facilitate these efforts, the community formed [Durand Charm](#)—"a community -wide, volunteer-driven, non-profit organization that strives to restore beauty, economic prosperity, teamwork and pride to the Village of Durand and the surrounding areas" in 2014. Although it recently hired a full-time executive director, Durand Charm relies heavily on the efforts of a very engaged local citizenry. Led by a core group of highly invested volunteers, this community group works to recruit partners, follow through with opportunities, and broaden their network of volunteers. They have also engaged school and youth groups (e.g., FFA, 4-H) to support seasonal events and fundraisers.

Community leaders raised the importance of volunteerism and civic engagement throughout the region. These activities need not be formal, but stakeholders noted how important regular communication and interaction were to effective community action. Moreover, broader regional communication was also viewed as critical because it allowed stakeholders to ask questions of peers in neighboring communities that face similar challenges and may be open to collaborative solutions.

Many tangible and intangible factors influence rural vitality

As demonstrated above, many factors influence the vitality of rural communities. Where someone sits often dictates what issues they find most pressing—local mayors may prioritize downtown developments and community infrastructure, working families may prioritize access to daycare or quality jobs, and school administrators may focus on big picture issues such as the local tax base and demographic trends, or more specific issues such as hiring teachers.

Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois

This section will first highlight the factors—both positively and negatively—that the survey respondents believed most influenced their community’s overall vitality. It then shows how survey respondents and stakeholders assess their community’s recent progress and prospects for the immediate future. The survey respondents have a unique perspective because many are actively involved in their community’s economic and community development activities.²¹

To better understand how regional leaders prioritize different factors, we asked survey respondents to identify the two factors that most contributed to their community’s overall vitality and the two factors that most threatened its vitality.²² Figure 19 shows the factors that survey respondents identified as most contributing to the community’s overall vitality. Many of these responses spoke to the importance of the volunteers and other groups like economic and community development, philanthropic, and non-profit organizations that create a sense of community.

Figure 19: Factors that most contribute to overall community vitality



Source: 2023 UIUC Rural Vitality Survey

Respondents also noted that local schools played a big role, not only in dictating where people choose to live or not live, but also how they view their community. Schools play a central role in the community’s social life, and this can dictate how much people engage with—and invest in—their community. Economic factors such as small businesses, downtowns, and agriculture were also common responses about what contributes to community vitality.

Conversely, Figure 20 shows that the symptoms of decline—housing, depopulation, and challenging social conditions (e.g., poverty, substance abuse, crime)—were common responses about what most threatens community vitality. Respondents expressed concerns about downtowns (e.g., derelict

²¹ 85% of survey respondents indicated that they are actively involved in their community’s economic and community development activities.

²² The two open-ended questions were: “What two (2) factors contribute the most to your community’s overall vitality?” and “What two (2) factors most threaten your community’s overall vitality?”. We subsequently coded these answers to create the word clouds in figures 19 and 20.

Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois

buildings), infrastructure (e.g., roads, water, and sewer lines), and taxes, regulation, and other non-local economic factors. Just as survey respondents spoke about the importance of civic engagement (e.g., volunteers), they also noted that factors such as stagnant thinking, complacency, a lack of vision, disengaged or uninformed leaders, or the failure to welcome new or diverse residents all posed significant challenges to future progress.

Figure 20: Factors that most contribute to threaten community vitality



Source: 2023 UIUC Rural Vitality Survey

More often than not, area stakeholders remain optimistic about the future

In spite of many of the challenges described above, survey respondents were cautiously optimistic about their community's future. Specifically, we asked survey respondents about their overall impressions about their community's economic, social and cultural, and environmental vibrancy over the past few years and how they expected that to change over the next two years.

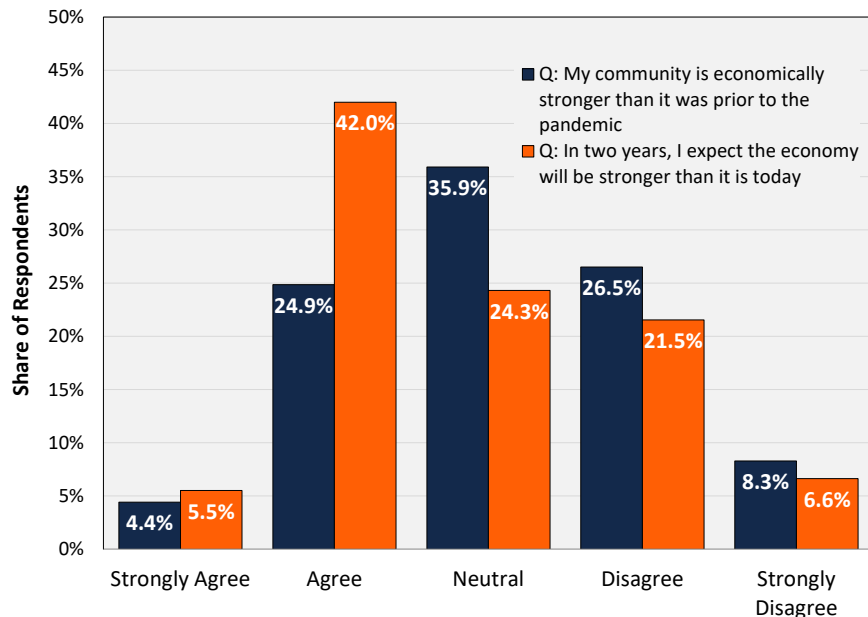
Figure 21 shows respondent impressions of their local economy.

Almost 30% of survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that their community's economy was stronger than it was pre-pandemic. Even though the pandemic led to the loss of many small businesses, almost half of the survey respondents remained economically optimistic about the future. Over 47% of respondents

either strongly agreed or agreed that their local economy would be stronger in two years than it is today. Among individual responses, 37% of survey respondents gave a more optimistic response to the question about the future than they did to the question about the recent past; 15% gave less optimistic responses for the future-oriented question, and about half gave the same response.

Survey respondents expressed similar optimism when asked about the social and cultural vibrancy of their community. Figure 22 shows that just over 27% of survey respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that their community was more socially and culturally vibrant that it was prior to the pandemic. By contrast, 42% expected their community to be more vibrant in the future, and roughly 23% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed when asked if the community would become more vibrant. Moreover, respondents who went to high school more than an hour away from their current residence were more likely to be optimistic about their community's future social and cultural vibrancy. The share of survey respondents that changed their answers between the question referring to the recent past

Figure 21: Regional impressions of the local economy



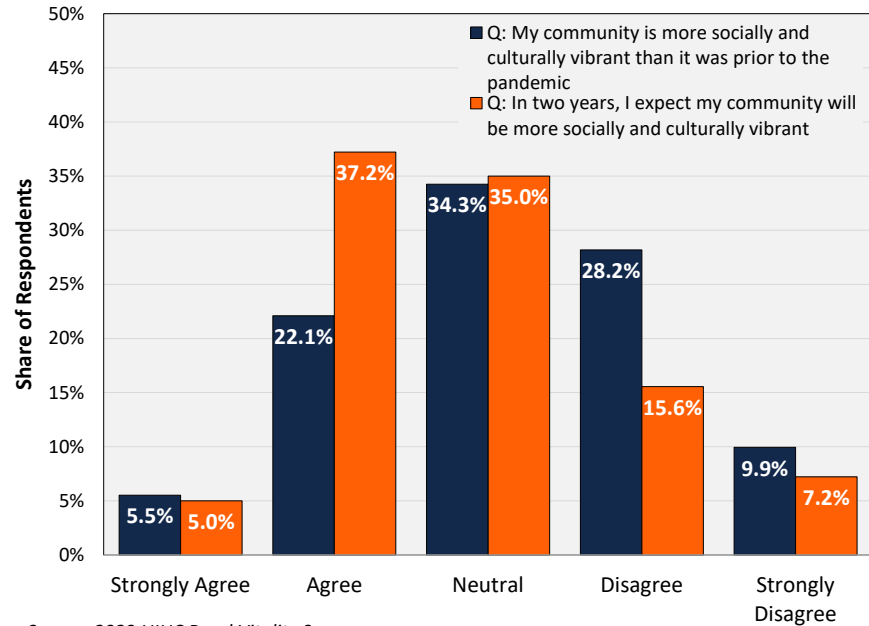
Source: 2023 UIUC Rural Vitality Survey

Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois

and the questions about near future was similar to the question about the local economy (37% more optimistic, 15% less optimistic, 48% neutral).

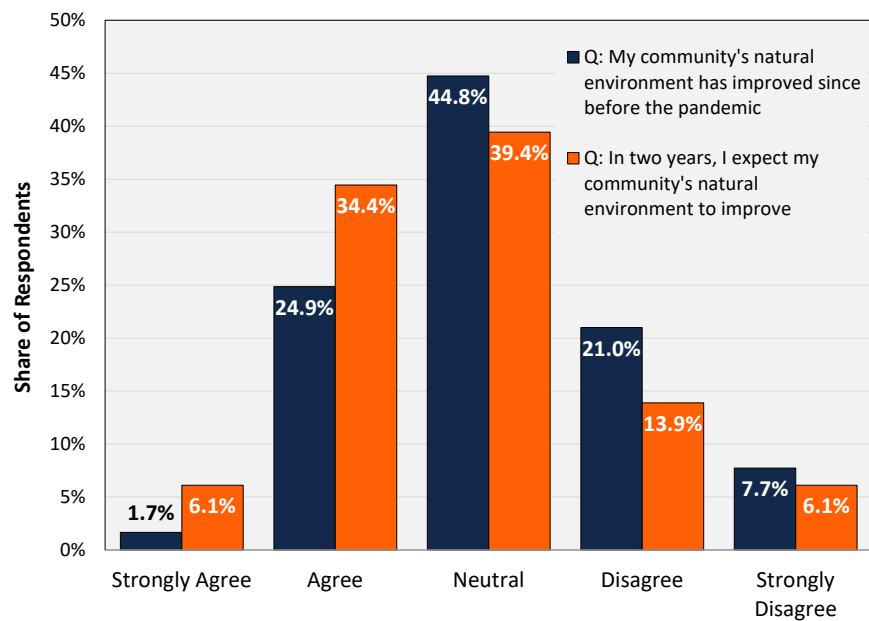
Survey respondents provided somewhat different impressions of their community's natural environment. Figure 23 shows that just over a quarter of survey respondents thought the natural environment had improved since the pandemic, whereas 40% expected it to improve over the next two years. More than the other questions, survey respondents were more neutral in their impressions about the ability for the natural environment to improve.

Figure 22: Regional impressions of social and cultural vibrancy



Source: 2023 UIUC Rural Vitality Survey

Figure 23: Regional impressions of the natural environment



Source: 2023 UIUC Rural Vitality Survey

Moving forward

More often than not, regional stakeholders believe that their communities are moving in a positive direction. However, to create more vibrant rural communities they must continue addressing a myriad of community, workforce, and economic development challenges. Some of these challenges are—to a great degree—beyond their influence, but small victories can lead to bigger victories by generating enthusiasm and building stronger relationships within the community.

The feedback received throughout this project showed that rural communities in northern and central Illinois can thrive, but to do will require local action to actively address several basic issues. These actions include:

- **Promoting entrepreneurship:** Entrepreneurship can drive rural vitality by creating locally based opportunities for individual entrepreneurs and other area workers. Starting a new business is never easy, but communities can support entrepreneurs by making a collective effort to connect them to resources and support services (e.g., SBDC, SCORE). Where viable, communities might also establish facilities (e.g., shared office and meeting space, commercial kitchens) that allow entrepreneurs to grow their business without overextending their nascent business financially. Entrepreneurs are involved in a wide array of activities, but the region's agricultural strengths and heritage create unique opportunities in agricultural and food-based based industries.
- **Investing in public places:** The attractiveness of public places like downtowns, community centers, and parks can affect how both residents and visitors feel about the community. Investing in these places and facilities encourages more people to use them. This may require beautifying downtowns, façade improvements for main street buildings, or installing better street lighting so that people feel safer at night. Community centers represent important meeting places, but can be even more valuable if those centers provide flexible space so that they can be used for multiple purposes. Successful places also find ways to connect natural and recreational amenities within and between communities, so that the whole of these assets becomes greater than the sum of its parts. Maintaining attractive and useful public places and facilities can lead to more intangible benefits such as greater community engagement and pride.
- **Expanding efforts to grow the workforce:** The region's demographic challenges have led to workforce challenges. School quality plays an important role in dictating residential decisions. Rural communities need to support and invest in their local schools. The region must pay particular attention to programs (e.g., CTE) that often support non-college bound students and prepare them to work in locally important industries such as manufacturing, construction, healthcare, and agriculture. Partnering with organizations such as 4-H, FFA, and Boys & Girls Clubs provide another avenue for promoting careers available in the region. The lack of available and affordable childcare can prevent people, especially women, from joining the workforce. Communities must take steps to expand childcare availability by, for instance, helping local families find and use childcare support programs or providing resources for entrepreneurs looking to start new childcare businesses.

- **Encouraging greater housing development:** The availability of affordable and appropriate housing limits the region's growth potential. Housing issues are not unique to northern and central Illinois, but housing remains one of its greater regional challenges. Local communities might explore programs to address derelict or distressed properties. Such investments can limit additional decay, and stabilizing property values also helps stabilize the local tax base. They might consider efforts to promote more diverse types of residential housing (e.g., multi-family, rental) that sometimes face opposition from existing residents and homeowners.

Addressing these issues, as well as others, will require champions, stakeholder coalitions, and resources. For rural communities to make progress on any of these issues, they must support the people actively doing the work. This means providing financial and public support for the volunteer groups and civic organizations that organize, staff, and lead these efforts. In many instances, these financial needs will be necessary, but not exorbitant. Other efforts will require greater financial resources and multiple partners and funders. As a result, community leaders must regularly collaborate to leverage the combined resources available through local government, philanthropic organizations, financial institutions, and the private sector.

The more community stakeholders—volunteers, funders, local government, and non-profits, etc.—work together and achieve success, the better positioned they will be to address increasingly ambitious projects. Creating this virtuous cycle can boost community spirit, and lead to a more invested and engaged citizenry, and ultimately a more vibrant, thriving community.

Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois

Author

Dr. Mark C. White, Clinical Associate Professor, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

This analysis was supported by Compeer Financial—a member-owned, Farm Credit cooperative that serves and supports agriculture and rural communities. Compeer Financial provides loans, leases, risk management and other financial services throughout 144 counties in Illinois, Minnesota and Wisconsin.

December 2023

Appendix

Stakeholder focus groups and interviews

To better understand the issues and concerns facing rural communities in northern and central Illinois, we engaged area residents through a series of individual conversations, focus groups, and several community meetings. These conversations covered several topics, including:

- The most pressing economic, social, and/or environmental challenges facing their communities,
- Emerging opportunities for area residents and the community,
- The impact of specific issues related to entrepreneurship, education, infrastructure, healthcare and social services, civic engagement, etc.,
- Current efforts to address these issues and which efforts have been most successful, and
- The types of actions stakeholders believed their community could take to better thrive in the future.

This engagement occurred throughout the Fall of 2023. We reached area stakeholders in several ways. For example, the organizers of the Great Peoria EDC's Technical Working Group, the Havana Chamber of Commerce's 3rd Tuesday meeting, and the Sauk Valley Chamber of Commerce's Hispanic Business Leaders Committee afforded us time on the agenda of their previously scheduled meetings. In Northwest Illinois, area extension leaders organized focus groups and meetings with local stakeholders. Some of these engagements led to other opportunities, such as presenting preliminary findings and a discussion of key issues with the local Rotary Club in Princeton, IL or an informal group of local leaders in Elmwood, IL. We also organized numerous one-on-one phone calls and in-person meetings with stakeholders throughout the region.

In total, we engaged with over 145 stakeholders throughout the region. These meetings allowed us to explore issues more fully than what can be derived from the survey or secondary data. Moreover, this information helped validate and interpret the survey findings. Also, by putting a face on the data we are better able to articulate how these issues affect the vitality of the region's rural communities.

Rural Vitality survey

The research team also surveyed regional stakeholders throughout Compeer Financial's Illinois service area. Given the priority placed on rural perspectives, we focused primarily on the areas outside of the Chicago Metropolitan Statistical Area. Since many different factors contribute to rural vitality, the survey sought to elicit stakeholder feedback on a wide range of topics, including:

- Opportunities for entrepreneurs, businesses, and workers,
- Community infrastructure,
- Healthcare, childcare, and eldercare access and affordability,
- Civic engagement and local leadership,
- Downtown use and condition, and
- The current and future outlook for the community's overall vitality.

We sought respondents that, at a minimum, had a vested interest in these issues. As a result, the research team drew contact information from two primary sources. First, we used email addresses drawn from recent registrants for University of Illinois Extension’s Local Government Education webinar series. This list allowed us to identify participants—from the targeted counties—who through their participation in these webinars demonstrated an interest in local issues. Moreover, since they had registered for a webinar in the past year the email addresses were current. The project team supplemented this list with email addresses drawn from the Illinois Economic Development Association member database. There was overlap between these two sources of contact information. The final contact list included 559 unique email addresses.

The survey opened on September 12, 2023 and closed on October 27, 2023. During this period, we emailed the survey to the contact list three times. We promoted the survey in several other related email newsletters (e.g., Rural Partners Newsletter). We encouraged the regional stakeholders who attended the meetings and focus groups to complete the survey. In total, 216 respondents answered at least one question on the survey. 188 respondents completed most of the survey; another 5 completed at least half. To provide the option of anonymity, respondents were not required to identify themselves.

Below is a summary of the responses to each survey question.

2023 UIUC Rural Vitality Survey

Final Results 10/27/23

Section 1: Survey Respondents

Q-Are you in any way involved in local community and/or economic development (professionally or as a volunteer)?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes	84.09%	185
2	No	15.91%	35
	Total	100%	220

Q-Do you live within an hour of close family?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes	79.09%	174
2	No	20.91%	46
	Total	100%	220

Q- Which one of the following best describes where you live?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Rural area	35.00%	77
2	Small city or town	55.91%	123
3	Suburb near a large city	5.00%	11
4	Large city (Pop. greater than 50,000)	4.09%	9
	Total	100%	220

Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois

Q- Do you live within an hour of where you and/or your spouse went to high school?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes	71.36%	157
2	No	28.64%	63
	Total	100%	220

Q-Where do you live?

County	Count	Percent
Adams Co.	1	0.5%
Boone Co.	1	0.5%
Bureau Co.	14	6.6%
Carroll Co.	5	2.3%
Champaign Co.	1	0.5%
Cook Co.	1	0.5%
DeKalb Co.	1	0.5%
DuPage Co.	3	1.4%
Fulton Co.	8	3.8%
Grundy Co.	2	0.9%
Hancock Co.	3	1.4%
Henry Co.	4	1.9%
Jo Daviess Co.	8	3.8%
Kane Co.	2	0.9%
Kankakee Co.	1	0.5%
Kendall Co.	1	0.5%
Knox Co.	6	2.8%
La Salle Co.	17	8.0%
Lee Co.	3	1.4%
Livingston Co.	3	1.4%
Mason Co.	5	2.3%
McDonough Co.	7	3.3%
McHenry Co.	1	0.5%
McLean Co.	6	2.8%
Mercer Co.	4	1.9%
Ogle Co.	11	5.2%
Peoria Co.	14	6.6%
Pike Co.	3	1.4%

Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois

County	Count	Percent
Rock Island Co.	4	1.9%
Sangamon Co.	1	0.5%
Stark Co.	1	0.5%
Stephenson Co.	28	13.1%
Tazewell Co.	3	1.4%
Whiteside Co.	10	4.7%
Will Co.	1	0.5%
Williamson Co.	1	0.5%
Winnebago Co.	8	3.8%
Woodford Co.	4	1.9%
N/A	14	6.6%
Scott Co. (IA)	1	0.5%
Dane Co. (WI)	1	0.5%

This question received 213 total responses. 197 respondents from Illinois counties answered the question. 14 responses elected not to answer the question. Two respondents were from outside the state. One respondent was in Iowa but worked for an organization that served the Quad Cities region, so their responses were include in the survey. Another respondent was from outside the state, so we elected to not use their responses at this time for this Illinois-focused summary.

Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois

Section 2: Community opportunities for entrepreneurs, businesses, and workers

Q- How strong is your community's entrepreneurial culture?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Far above average	2.59%	5
2	Somewhat above average	30.57%	59
3	Average	41.45%	80
4	Somewhat below average	17.10%	33
5	Far below average	8.29%	16
	Total	100%	193

Q-How easy or difficult is it to start and/or grow a business in your community?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Very easy	1.54%	3
2	Easy	18.97%	37
3	Neutral	42.05%	82
4	Difficult	27.18%	53
5	Very difficult	10.26%	20
	Total	100%	195

Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois

Q-An entrepreneurial ecosystem consists of entrepreneurs and support organizations, processes, and policies who interact with them as they operate their business. To what extent do you AGREE or DISAGREE with the following statements about your community's entrepreneurial ecosystem:

#	Question	Strongly Agree		Somewhat agree		Neutral		Somewhat disagree		Disagree		Total
1	Entrepreneurs and/or expanding businesses have access to financing	11.86%	23	44.85%	87	21.13%	41	14.95%	29	7.22%	14	194
2	Non-financial support for entrepreneurs is abundant	10.36%	20	37.31%	72	24.87%	48	19.17%	37	8.29%	16	193
3	The community provides space for area entrepreneurs	9.84%	19	20.73%	40	18.65%	36	20.21%	39	30.57%	59	193
4	Entrepreneurs lack awareness about available business support	20.31%	39	51.56%	99	19.79%	38	7.29%	14	1.04%	2	192

Q- How important is agriculture to your community's economic vitality?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Extremely important	51.03%	99
2	Very important	33.51%	65
3	Moderately important	11.34%	22
4	Slightly important	3.61%	7
5	Not at all important	0.52%	1
	Total	100%	194

Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois

Q-To what extent do you AGREE or DISAGREE with the following statements about your community's agricultural sector:

#	Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Total
1	Local youth want to pursue careers in agriculture	8.76%	17	38.14%	74	26.29%	51	23.20%	45	3.61%	7	194
2	Aging farmers do not have successors to take over their farming operations	15.54%	30	48.19%	93	20.73%	40	12.95%	25	2.59%	5	193
3	Your community has a farmers' market	44.56%	86	33.68%	65	7.77%	15	8.81%	17	5.18%	10	193
4	Agriculture offers opportunities for entrepreneurship	20.83%	40	40.63%	78	26.04%	50	9.90%	19	2.60%	5	192

Q-To what extent do you AGREE or DISAGREE with the following statements about workers in your area:

#	Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Total
1	Area workers can find jobs that pay family-sustaining wages	6.19%	12	31.44%	61	21.13%	41	29.38%	57	11.86%	23	194
2	Training opportunities are available locally for area workers	7.81%	15	44.27%	85	20.31%	39	22.92%	44	4.69%	9	192
3	Workers can find quality jobs within a 30-minute drive from their home	15.54%	30	50.26%	97	13.99%	27	15.54%	30	4.66%	9	193
4	Remote work is a realistic option for area workers	13.99%	27	43.52%	84	25.39%	49	12.44%	24	4.66%	9	193

Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois

Q- Do students in your area believe they can find rewarding careers in your region?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Definitely yes	2.58%	5
2	Probably yes	26.80%	52
3	Neutral	21.65%	42
4	Probably not	42.27%	82
5	Definitely not	6.70%	13
	Total	100%	194

Q- To what extent do you AGREE or DISAGREE with the following statements about opportunities for the area's youth:

#	Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Total
1	Local high schools offer programs that prepare students to directly enter the workforce	8.25%	16	41.24%	80	23.20%	45	20.10%	39	7.22%	14	194
2	Area youth groups (e.g., 4-H, FFA) actively promote career exploration	17.62%	34	59.07%	114	19.17%	37	2.07%	4	2.07%	4	193
3	Area residents encourage students to pursue post-secondary education	14.51%	28	56.99%	110	19.17%	37	7.25%	14	2.07%	4	193

Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois

Section 3: Community infrastructure

Q- To what extent do you AGREE or DISAGREE with the following statements about your local broadband infrastructure:

#	Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
1	Internet access meets personal needs	26.32% 50	40.00% 76	11.58% 22	15.79% 30	6.32% 12	190
2	Internet access meets local business needs	22.11% 42	40.53% 77	17.37% 33	13.68% 26	6.32% 12	190
3	Internet access is available in public spaces	12.17% 23	36.51% 69	24.87% 47	17.99% 34	8.47% 16	189

Q- To what extent do you AGREE or DISAGREE with the following statements about the community's housing market:

#	Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
1	It is easy to find an affordable house	2.09% 4	19.90% 38	14.14% 27	45.03% 86	18.85% 36	191
2	Different types of housing units (e.g., single-family, multi-family) are available	3.66% 7	21.99% 42	16.75% 32	43.46% 83	14.14% 27	191
3	Available homes are move-in ready	0.00% 0	26.70% 51	24.08% 46	31.41% 60	17.80% 34	191
4	Rental units are readily available	0.53% 1	15.79% 30	24.21% 46	36.84% 70	22.63% 43	190

Q- To what extent do you AGREE or DISAGREE with the following statements about your local transportation infrastructure:

#	Question	Yes	No	Total
1	Local roads are well maintained	55.50% 106	44.50% 85	191
2	Local roads adequately support commercial transportation needs	69.84% 132	30.16% 57	189
3	Shared transportation services such as Uber or Lyft are available in my area	18.95% 36	81.05% 154	190
4	I can meet some of my transportation needs without an automobile (e.g., cycling, walking, bus)	41.88% 80	58.12% 111	191

Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois

Section 4: Community healthcare, childcare, and eldercare services

Q- Please consider the issues related to healthcare and wellness in your community. To what extent do you AGREE or DISAGREE with the following statements:

#	Question	Agree	Disagree	Total
1	Residents have access to locally-based primary care physicians	82.01% 155	17.99% 34	189
2	Local emergency medical services can respond quickly in the event of an emergency	85.19% 161	14.81% 28	189
3	Specialized treatment and care (e.g., oncology) is available within an hour's drive	87.30% 165	12.70% 24	189
4	Area residents can access mental health services	56.91% 107	43.09% 81	188
5	Local residents have access to substance abuse treatment and recovery programs	62.16% 115	37.84% 70	185
6	The community has retailers that provide regular access to fresh food and produce	81.48% 154	18.52% 35	189

Q- To what extent do you AGREE or DISAGREE with the following statements related to childcare in your community:

#	Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
1	Childcare is available for area families that need it	4.79% 9	26.06% 49	23.94% 45	30.32% 57	14.89% 28	188
2	Childcare is affordable for area families that need it	2.66% 5	11.70% 22	35.11% 66	26.60% 50	23.94% 45	188

Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois

Q- To what extent do you AGREE or DISAGREE with the following statements related to eldercare in your community:

#	Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Total
1	Spaces are available in local assisted living facilities	11.17%	21	39.36%	74	25.53%	48	16.49%	31	7.45%	14	188
2	Older residents can afford to live in local assisted living facilities	1.60%	3	15.96%	30	38.83%	73	29.79%	56	13.83%	26	188
3	The community provides senior services (e.g., transportation, food services) to residents that need them	11.70%	22	51.60%	97	17.55%	33	14.36%	27	4.79%	9	188

Section 5: Civic engagement and local leadership

Q- Do you perceive the community as welcoming to new residents?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Definitely yes	24.34%	46
2	Probably yes	55.56%	105
3	Probably not	15.87%	30
4	Definitely not	4.23%	8
	Total	100%	189

Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois

Q- Please consider the level of civic engagement in your community:

#	Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Total
1	The community encourages young professionals to participate in civic organizations	10.64%	20	43.09%	81	26.06%	49	17.55%	33	2.66%	5	188
2	Local government has the capability to pursue state and federal grants	23.94%	45	47.87%	90	13.30%	25	11.70%	22	3.19%	6	188
3	The community has active philanthropic organizations (e.g., community foundations)	23.53%	44	48.66%	91	14.44%	27	8.56%	16	4.81%	9	187
4	Local government listens to the concerns of residents	15.34%	29	41.27%	78	19.05%	36	13.76%	26	10.58%	20	189

Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois

Section 6: Downtowns

Q- To what extent do you AGREE or DISAGREE with the following statements about your local downtown:

#	Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Total
1	My downtown area is attractive and well maintained	23.28%	44	38.62%	73	15.87%	30	13.23%	25	8.99%	17	189
2	My downtown attracts people during the day	15.34%	29	46.56%	88	13.23%	25	14.29%	27	10.58%	20	189
3	Bars, restaurants, or theaters attract people downtown at night	13.37%	25	47.06%	88	15.51%	29	14.97%	28	9.09%	17	187
4	Empty and/or derelict buildings are a problem	23.94%	45	30.85%	58	20.21%	38	22.34%	42	2.66%	5	188
5	My community holds regular downtown events (festivals, fairs, or outdoor concerts)	27.51%	52	50.26%	95	9.52%	18	8.99%	17	3.70%	7	189
6	My downtown has potential for greater development	44.39%	83	47.59%	89	5.88%	11	1.07%	2	1.07%	2	187

Rural Vitality in Northern and Central Illinois

Section 7: Current and future outlook

Q- How would you describe your community now?

#	Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Total
1	My community is economically stronger than it was prior to the pandemic	4.95%	9	24.73%	45	35.71%	65	26.37%	48	8.24%	15	182
2	My community is more socially and culturally vibrant than it was prior to the pandemic	6.04%	11	21.98%	40	34.07%	62	28.02%	51	9.89%	18	182
3	My community's natural environment has improved since before the pandemic	1.65%	3	24.73%	45	45.05%	82	20.88%	38	7.69%	14	182

Q-How would you describe your community in the future?

#	Question	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Total
1	In two years, I expect the economy will be stronger than it is today	6.04%	11	41.76%	76	24.18%	44	21.43%	39	6.59%	12	182
2	In two years, I expect my community will be more socially and culturally vibrant	5.52%	10	37.02%	67	34.81%	63	15.47%	28	7.18%	13	181
3	In two years, I expect my community's natural environment to improve	6.08%	11	34.81%	63	39.23%	71	13.81%	25	6.08%	11	181