

# Factors that Influence Youth Retention in Northwest Ohio

**Greg Homan<sup>1</sup>**

**Wright State University Lake Campus  
Celina, OH 45822**



**Jason Hedric<sup>2</sup>**

**Ohio State University Extension, Putnam County  
Ottawa, OH 45875**

**Jeff Dick<sup>3</sup>**

**Ohio State University Extension, Williams County  
Bryan, OH 43506**

## Abstract

This study analyzes the trends and issues related to youth retention in Northwest Ohio. Researchers sampled over 875 graduating seniors from 16 high schools within six counties throughout Northwestern Ohio. Results highlight future career and educational goals of these young people, their impressions of their home communities as a place to live and work, and the impacts on their post-high school choices. Youth whose parents are originally from Northwest Ohio and those young people who earn higher wages in part-time employment are more likely to believe that they will return to Northwest Ohio to live and work. Results suggest that the area is not seen as a viable option for the highest achieving high school students. Students with GPA of 3.75 or higher report an overall lower rating of Northwest Ohio as an employment location for them.

## Theoretical Base

Career development and occupational choice are important decisions for older youth. Not only do occupations provide a means to support individuals and families, but they also provide meaning and purpose in life for many. The context of the school and community culture has a significant impact on youth occupational choice (Ferry, 2003a). A study of Pennsylvania graduating high school youth found that parents and family members had the biggest influence on youth occupation choice. Closely following parents in terms of influence was the young person's evaluation of their own personal skills, aptitudes, and academic efficacy. Other influences included part-time or volunteer work experience, teachers and school projects (Ferry, 2003b). It is also suggested by Ferry (2003b) that the key to changing youth perceptions about potential careers will be to provide parents, schools, and communities the tools to communicate positive opportunities about local employment.

A study of Rural West Virginia High School Students (Chenowith and Galliher, 2004) found that family and peer influence are significantly strong predictors of college aspirations for male youth, while individual academic preparation and external barriers (such as economic issues) having stronger influence on female decisions to seek post-secondary education. This same study found that youth whose parents either had a college education themselves or whose parents worked in professional fields were more likely to plan to attend college and see it as an available opportunity for them. Providing youth to a variety of careers in a realistic manner will be essential to broadening options and opportunities for youth. Adolescents commonly select career options from those they readily understand and can see. The diversity of career options presented to rural youth can be particularly limited in some areas.

Students in a Pennsylvania study of high school graduates reported "money" or financial means to attend school or training" as the number one barrier to achieving their occupational goal (Ferry, 2003b). Rural youth tended to have lower educational and career aspirations than their urban counterparts. Major contributors include lower socio-economic status of rural families and the limited scope of available opportunities presented to rural youth (Haller and Virkler, 1993).

The out-migration of youth from rural areas is an issue predominantly driven by economic factors. Rural adolescents, more frequently than their urban or suburban counterparts, are more likely to experience the conflict of choice between the desire to live close to family and the necessity of moving away to achieve success. Youth who choose to place a predominant weight on the desire to remain close to home in their future career choice are more likely to feel limited and are more likely to have lower career aspirations (Hektner, 1995). A study of Pennsylvania youth found that youth who planned to stay were

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor; 7600 Lake Campus Drive; Email: greg.homan@wright.edu

<sup>2</sup>Extension Educator; 219 S Oak Street, PO Box 189; Email: hedrick.10@osu.edu

<sup>3</sup>Extension Educator; 1122 West High Street; Email: dick.7@osu.edu

**Table 1. Population Change 1990-2030 (Projected) of 20-39 year old subset**

County	Population 1990 (20-39)	Population 2030 (20-39)	% Change
Mercer	11,460	12,430	+8.5%
Putnam	10,140	8,760	-13.6%
Henry	8,510	7,070	-16.9%
Williams	11,140	8,330	-25.2%
Van Wert	8,900	6,510	-26.9%
Paulding	6,070	3,980	-34.4%
State-Wide	3,443,800	3,173,580	-7.8%

Source: Ohio Department of Development

motivated to do so because of family and the culture in the rural area, the connection to family being very strong in these young people. Those planning to leave their home-based rural setting were deciding to leave based on better employment opportunities (Ferry, 2003a).

The objectives of this research study were to analyze the current trends related to career, education, and future residency choice of high school graduates in Northwest Ohio. Specific components included:

What are the current trends of youth interest in career and educational objectives, particularly in rural Northwest Ohio?

How do young people feel about their home community as it relates to their future intent of either remaining or returning to live and work?

How do parents, peers, economic factors, and distance from post-high school educational institutions impact educational decisions after high school graduation?

What factors influence the intention of youth to either remain or return to the Northwestern Ohio area upon graduation?

## Methods

This descriptive and correlation study was conducted in spring of 2008 to assess workforce competencies, career and educational aspirations, and overall retention of graduating high school youth in Northwest Ohio. Sixteen high schools were identified in six study counties (Mercer, Van Wert, Williams, Henry, Putnam, and Paulding). After receiving approval from Wright State University Human Subjects Review and Ohio State University Human Subjects Review, a written survey instrument was administered in 16 cooperating Northwestern Ohio High Schools with 875 high school seniors providing usable instruments for this research project. Anonymity and confidentiality of participants and their individual responses were maintained throughout the project.

Data analysis using SPSS was utilized to evaluate multiple components of the research. Descriptive statistics analyzed overall youth ratings of community perception. Pearson correlations were used to determine interrelation between various components of the research. Cronbach's alpha of .90 indicates a high level of confidence in instrument validity.

## Results

### Demographic Data

This sample of students from 16 cooperating school districts in six Northwestern Ohio Counties (Williams, Henry, Paulding, Putnam, Van Wert, and Mercer) is comprised of 875 high school seniors (as of May 2008). Approximately 52% of the sample was female. A large number of their parents were employed in the management/professional, manufacturing, and skilled trades as professions. A relatively low percentage of the parents of these high school seniors had completed Bachelors or Graduate Degrees (approximately 22% of mothers and 17.5% of fathers).

The majority of respondents indicated that their parents were originally from Northwest Ohio with over 80% of both parents being from the area. The vast majority of these Northwest Ohio high school seniors were employed at-least part-time. Over 59% of these seniors indicated that they were working 11 hours or more per week. At the end of their high school programs, most reported that they were not allocating a large amount of time studying per week. Over 84% of high school seniors indicated that they were allocating two or less hours per week studying. More than half of the respondents indicated that they were actively engaged in volunteer work on a weekly basis. A sizable number (9.4%) were volunteering more than five hours per week. High school seniors reported relative success in their academic work (when analyzing high school grade point average). Over 61% of seniors reported grade point averages of 3.0 or higher.

### Post-High School Plans of Northwest Ohio Graduating Seniors

The researchers explored the intended high school plans of this sample of high school seniors. The vast majority (80.0%) reported an intention of attending college. In addition, 8.1% indicated that they were entering the workforce directly, 6.0% had chosen a trade school option, 3.1% selected a military plan, and 2.9% were unsure of their post high school plans (Table 2). Of those seeking a trade school education, the most popular program areas included Auto/Mechanical (32.7%), Skilled Trades (21.2%), and Health Care (13.5%) (Table 3). The top three programs of study for those planning to attend college include Medical (29.7%), Business (17.1%), and Education (13.0%) (Table 4).

Moving outside of the home to attend college or trade school is the plan reported by 69.2% of high school seniors. Those that are moving, tend to report an overall close locale for their college/trade school of choice. More than 50% of those that have selected to commute to a college or trade school will commute to seek their training (Table 5). In reporting the distance of their move to seek an advanced education, 63.2% reported a location less than two hours away (Table 6).

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**Table 2. Post High School Plans of HS Graduating Seniors**

Category	Number	Percent
College	695	80.0%
Workforce Directly	70	8.1%
Trade School	52	6.0%
Military	27	3.1%
Don't Know	25	2.9%
Total	869	

**Table 3. Program of Study – Trade School**

Program Area	Number	Percent
Auto/Mechanical	17	32.7%
Skilled Trades	11	21.2%
Health Care	7	13.5%
Driving/Trucking	4	7.7%
Business	2	3.8%
Education	1	1.9%
Other	7	13.5%
Total	52	

**Table 4. Program of Study – College**

Program Area	Number	Percent
Medical	205	29.7%
Business	118	17.1%
Education	90	13.0%
Engineering	50	7.2%
Liberal Arts	34	4.9%
Social Sciences	30	4.3%
Agriculture	23	3.3%
Physical Science	23	3.3%
Computer Science	21	3.0%
Other	59	8.5%
Total	691	

Respondents were asked what type of job category they would seek upon graduation, if entering the workforce directly. Manufacturing, Construction/Skilled Trades, and Agriculture were the most common areas of intent for direct from high school employment (Table 7). Of those working directly, 78.9% indicated that they believed they would stay in the Northwest Ohio Area for employment, while 21.1% revealed that they would be leaving the area.

The Army was the branch of military service most likely indicated by those choosing the military as their post-high school plan, reported by 41.4% of service-bound youth. Other branches of service included the Marines, Navy, Air Force, and the National Guard.

**Table 5. Commute Distance (Those Commuting to College or Trade School)**

Distance	Number	Percent
Less than 15 minutes	32	13.6%
15-30 minutes	89	37.7%
30-45 minutes	68	28.8%
45-60 minutes	36	15.3%
More than 60 minutes	11	4.7%

**Table 6. Move Distance (Those Moving to College or Trade School)**

Distance	Number	Percent
Less than 2 hours	318	63.2%
2-3 hours	113	22.5%
3-4 hours	34	6.8%
4-5 hours	15	3.0%
5-6 hours	5	1.0%
More than 6 hours	18	3.6%
Total	503	

## Youth Perceptions of their Home Communities

The high school seniors in this sample reported overall positive ratings of their community on a series of twelve perception indicators. Highest overall mean ratings on these questions were reported on the following two areas: “Northwest Ohio is a Safe Place to Live” and “Northwest Ohio is a Good Area to Raise a Family.” Youth tend to have an overall lower rating of Northwest Ohio when evaluating the cultural, entertainment, and overall employment opportunities of the area (Table 8).

## Impacts on Youth Retention

The researchers analyzed if there was an impact on youth retention and if their respective parents were originally from Northwest Ohio themselves. Youth whose parents were born and raised in Northwest Ohio reported a significantly higher rating on the “Desire to Live in Northwest Ohio.” “Northwest Ohio will Provide a Good Job,” and “My Mother Influences me to Remain in Northwest Ohio” ( $p < .05$ ) (Table 9). As reported in Table 10, youth whose parents were from Northwest Ohio were significantly more likely to reveal a greater employment opportunity in Northwest Ohio and that their fathers encouraged them to remain in Northwest Ohio (as compared to their peers whose parents were not originally from Northwest Ohio) ( $p < .05$ ).

Not only do young people whose parents originate from Northwest Ohio tend to perceive their future employment success in Northwest Ohio more optimistically, but they also tend to have an overall more positive view of their respective community (when compared to their peers whose parents were not originally from NW Ohio).

According to findings reported in Table 11, the highest achieving high school students reveal a lower perception of employment viability for them-

**Table 7. Job Classification of those Entering Workforce Directly**

Category	Number	Percent
Manufacturing	13	18.3%
Construction/Skilled Trades	13	18.3%
Agriculture	12	16.9%
Food Service	8	11.3%
Business	6	8.5%
Retail	4	5.6%
Secretarial	3	4.2%
Health Care	2	2.8%
Other	10	14.1%
Total	72	

**Table 8. Youth Perceptions of their Community (Likert Scale 1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree)**

Question	Mean Rating
Safe place to live	4.39
Good area to raise a family	4.07
Schools are of high quality	3.64
Area share my beliefs	3.62
I can get a good education in this area	3.49
My parents want me to stay in the area	3.38
There is positive growth in the area	3.37
Area is interesting and fun	2.81
Enough cultural activities	2.72
There are enough employment opportunities in the area	2.60
There are enough shopping/restaurants in the area	2.20
Other people know too much about me	4.24

**Table 9. Youth Perceptions of their Community Differences Based on Maternal Alumni Status (Likert Scale 1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree)**

Question	Mean Rating Mother from NW Ohio (n=702)	Mean Rating Mother not from NW Ohio (n=153)	Levene's Test Significant Difference
Safe place to live	4.45	4.20	p<.05
Good area to raise a family	4.14	3.82	p<.05
Schools are of high quality	3.68	3.47	p<.05
Area share my beliefs	3.73	3.16	p<.05
I can get a good education in this area	3.56	3.16	p<.05
My parents want me to stay in the area	3.50	2.82	p<.05
There is positive growth in the area	3.43	3.14	p<.05
Area is interesting and fun	2.89	2.45	p<.05
Desire to live in Northwest Ohio	3.08	2.42	p<.05
My mother strongly influences me to remain in NW Ohio	3.02	2.40	p<.05
Northwest Ohio will provide a good job	2.92	2.54	p<.05
Enough cultural activities	2.80	2.35	p<.05
There are enough employment opportunities in the area	2.69	2.15	p<.05
There are enough shopping/restaurants in the area	2.24	1.95	p<.05
Other people know too much about me	4.27	4.16	NS

**Table 10. Youth Perceptions of their Community Differences Based on Paternal Alumni Status (Likert Scale 1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree)**

Question	Mean Rating Father from NW Ohio (n=711)	Mean Rating Father not from NW Ohio (n=134)	Levene's Test Significant Difference
Safe place to live	4.45	4.20	p<.05
Good area to raise a family	4.16	3.63	p<.05
Schools are of high quality	3.72	3.26	p<.05
Area share my beliefs	3.75	3.01	p<.05
I can get a good education in this area	3.56	3.12	p<.05
My parents want me to stay in the area	3.47	2.86	p<.05
There is positive growth in the area	3.47	2.89	p<.05
Desire to live in Northwest Ohio	3.09	2.29	p<.05
My father strongly influences me to remain in NW Ohio	2.93	2.22	p<.05
Northwest Ohio will provide a good job	2.93	2.36	p<.05
Area is interesting and fun	2.88	2.47	p<.05
Enough cultural activities	2.77	2.39	p<.05
There are enough employment opportunities in the area	2.67	2.22	p<.05
There are enough shopping/restaurants in the area	2.20	2.10	p<.05
Other people know too much about me	4.25	4.23	NS

selves in Northwest Ohio (p<.05). When analyzing GPA and responses on “Desire to Live in NW Ohio” and “NW Ohio will Provide a Good Job,” results indicate a significantly lower rating from youth with high school grade point averages of 3.75 and higher.

An additional variable analyzed in terms of its possible relationship to youth perception of future employment viability in Northwest Ohio was their high school employment. Youth earning higher overall pay per hour reported higher ratings on their “Desire to Live in NW Ohio” and “NW Ohio will Provide a Good Job for Me” (p<.05) (Table 12).

The researchers found considerable variance in the youth perceptions of the employment viability of their community and the parental support to remain in Northwest Ohio. Graduating seniors from Mercer and Putnam County reported higher overall employment perceptions of the area and indicated stronger encouragement from their parents to remain in Northwest Ohio (as compared to their peers in Van Wert, Paulding, Henry and Williams Counties) (Table 13.)

## Conclusions

Ohio as a state continues to deal with youth retention. Not only is the state losing population, but a disproportionate share of this loss on the state-level is those highly educated and skilled young people. The impact of loss of youth is compounded in rural areas as they deal with the trend of population loss to metropolitan areas of the state and outside the state. Data from the Ohio Department of Development reveals a

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continual trend not only in overall population loss in most areas of Rural Northwest Ohio, but a disproportionate loss of the 20 to 39 year old cohort group. This study, focused on rural Northwest Ohio, found a strong desire of young people to advance their education and skills beyond high school. Over 80% of high school seniors in this study were planning to advance their education in either a college or trade school setting. When looking at retention issues, we

Those students whose parents were originally from Northwest Ohio reported a higher level of interest in living in the area and indicated more positive evaluations of their home community. The families that are located here in Northwest Ohio tend to be deeply rooted with a strong desire reported by these young people to want to stay here if the employment opportunities are available for them.

Another interesting finding that influenced the retention likelihood of these youth was their employment during high school. Over 82% of high school seniors report that they are employed in a paid position. Youth earning higher overall pay per hour reported higher ratings on their “desire to live in Northwest Ohio” and also are more likely to agree that “Northwest Ohio will provide a good job for them.”

Northwest Ohio has a strong foundation of stable families, strong communities, quality schools, and a history as a great place to live and raise a family. However, population trends reveal some challenges regarding the inability of the area to retain youth. A number of recommendations should be considered to further position Northwest Ohio to retain the next generation of working young people. Central to the issue of retaining youth in Northwest Ohio is employment opportunity for the next generation and the preparation for this group

**Table 11. Impact of High School GPA on Youth Perception of Northwest Ohio (Likert-Based Questions 1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree)**

HS GPA	N	Desire to Live in NW Ohio	NW Ohio Will Provide Good Job
Under 2.0	14	2.93	2.69
2.0-2.49	77	2.81	2.74
2.50-2.99	223	2.96	2.82
3.0-3.49	252	3.02	2.95
3.50-3.74	122	3.04	3.16
Higher than 3.75	139	2.83	2.52

**Table 12. Impact of High School Employment and Pay Rate on Youth Retention Rankings Likert-Based (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree)**

Employment	N	Desire to Live in NW Ohio	NW Ohio will Provide a Good Job For Me
Not Employed	163	2.72	2.66
Under \$5.00 per hour	34	2.85	2.35
\$5.00 - \$6.50 per hour	77	2.86	2.70
\$6.51-\$8.00 per hour	418	3.04	2.93
Over \$8.01 per hour	141	3.07	3.04

**Table 13. Impact of Community on Youth Retention Rankings Likert-Based (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree)**

County	Projected youth population loss/gain 1990-2030	N	Desire Live NW Ohio	NW Ohio Good Job	Mother Influence to Stay	Father Influence to Stay
Mercer	+8.5%	224	3.70	3.32	3.04	3.05
Putnam	-13.6%	171	3.09	3.09	3.11	2.87
Henry	-16.9%	53	2.45	2.64	2.79	2.76
Williams	-25.2%	154	2.55	2.57	2.89	2.84
Van Wert	-26.9%	113	2.41	2.44	2.45	2.40
Paulding	-34.4%	127	2.62	2.50	2.87	2.78

are not typically losing these students from the area upon starting their college or trade school program as 63% are seeking this education within a two hour radius of our region. The area has a strong education infrastructure in the region that students plan to utilize to seek advanced training.

When analyzing the impressions that high school seniors have regarding Northwest Ohio, the results indicate an overall positive evaluation. High school seniors report Northwest Ohio as a “safe place to live,” “a good place to raise a family,” and that the “quality of the schools are very high.” Most young people tended to report a desire to either remain or to return to the area to live and work. However, students did reveal that there were challenges in living in rural Northwest Ohio. Among the greatest challenges were the perceptions of limited professional jobs in their community, limited cultural activities, and less recreation and shopping options.

Generally, students indicate encouragement from their parents to remain in Northwest Ohio.

to match the future job needs of the area. The researchers suggest an analysis of the advising and preparation of high school students as they make choices in their future educational and career goals. These youth need to be aware of what future employment opportunities might look like. Career exploration, mentoring, young professional speakers, etc. can strengthen the link between community employers and their potential workforce. Internships, job shadowing, tours, and other methods of showcasing a realistic view of local employment opportunities will enable youth to make an educated knowledgeable decision on career goals. To encourage talented youth to remain in Northwest Ohio, they have to be able to see viable professional career options from a realistic perspective.

The linkage with future working professionals should continue beyond the high school setting as youth pursue college training. Some organizations and communities have been successful building

linkages with students in the form of internships, coops, and work study arrangements. As organizations consider their financial support of students traditionally given in the form of scholarship grants, they may want to consider formalizing the relationship in terms of a paid part-time or summer position, or asking for a return of investment with a certain amount of community service hours in the home community. A number of medical organizations in the Northwest Ohio area have been proactive in this arena providing paid internship experiences to talented college students to build a relationship and encourage their eventual employment in the area.

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