Gift VII Qualitative Research Report

Community Foundation of Wabash County
Grow Wabash County

May 24, 2019

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1. Introduction

The Community Foundation of Wabash County (CFWC) and Grow Wabash County engaged Transform Consulting Group (TCG) to assist with the Lilly Endowment GIFT VII Community Leadership grant. Part of the scope of services provided by TCG is to conduct qualitative research related to population decline, specifically collecting data through focus groups, interviews, and surveys from residents, former residents, and workers employed in Wabash County. This report will be delivered to the Community Research Institute, CFWC, and Grow Wabash County to inform the population loss study and recommendations for Wabash County.

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2. Data Collection Methodology

To investigate population decline in Wabash County, multiple perspectives were sought with a particular emphasis on millennials (born between 1980-2000) and "transplants" (individuals who did not grow up in Wabash County). TCG solicited feedback from these groups through an online survey, phone interviews, and in-person focus group meetings. Each research instrument asked similar questions around affinity to Wabash County and how Wabash County could become a more attractive place to live.

An **online survey** was created for previous residents of Wabash County who were millennials and had graduated from a Wabash County high school but have since moved away. The online survey was sent to a contact list provided by CFWC by TCG. The online survey link was also shared on social media and sent to personal contacts. Nearly 50 people began the survey, and 31 people completed the survey between April 29th and May 8th. The other respondents were disqualified from taking the survey because they still lived in Wabash County, didn't graduate from a high school in Wabash County, or did not fall in the millennial age group.

TCG held four **focus group meetings** between May 6th and May 9th in Wabash and North Manchester. Each location held a focus group for millennials and a focus group for transplants (not necessarily millennials). Participants were current residents of Wabash County. In total, 16 people participated in the transplant focus groups, and 18 people participated in the millennial focus groups. If a person was invited to participate but could not attend a focus group meeting, they were provided a link to an online survey that mirrored the questions posed to the focus groups. Two people completed the online survey for transplants, and 26 people completed the online survey for millennials.

TCG contacted individuals who work in Wabash County but live outside of the county for phone **interviews**. Seventeen phone interviews were conducted, and one person submitted written answers to the interview questions.

The CFWC, Grow Wabash County, and TCG cultivated a list of potential research participants and sent personal invitations asking for their participation in one of the above options. Additional methods were used to recruit participants including sharing the survey link on the social media pages of TCG, CFWC and Grow Wabash County as well as an invitation to participate in CFWC's newsletter.

3. Findings

Previous Residents – Millennials that graduated from a Wabash County high school but have since moved away.

The beginning of the survey asked questions to determine if the respondent qualified to take the survey. Thirty-six people qualified to take the survey, and 31 finished the survey. All respondents were millennials and generally from the younger part of the generation with 32% between ages 18-24 and 52% between 25-30. Two thirds of respondents (68%) were female, just over half (52%) of respondents are single, and 84% have a bachelor's degree or higher degree.

High School Experience

Survey respondents were first asked a few questions about their high school experience. The majority of respondents (53%) found it to be only somewhat rigorous or challenging. The other half were split between finding it challenging and not finding it challenging. Respondents generally believed they were able to at least somewhat pursue all the course work they desired in their areas of interest with 42% selecting yes and 42% selecting somewhat.

What was missing in their high school experience was the schools informing them of career opportunities in Wabash County with 61% saying they were not informed and the remaining 39% split between being informed and unsure.
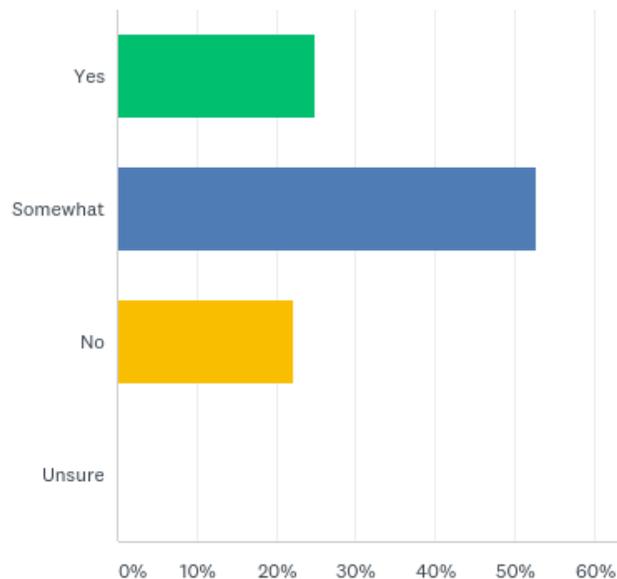

Figure 1: Previous residents on whether they felt their public school experience was rigorous or challenging
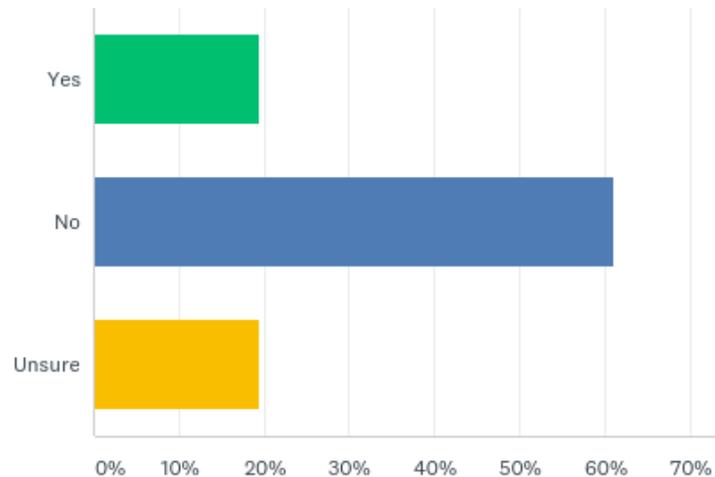
Figure 2: Previous residents on whether their school informed them about career opportunities in Wabash County

Workforce and Higher Education Experience

All but one of our survey respondents pursued higher education after graduating high school. The survey incorporated skip logic at this point to ask the two groups different sets of questions. For the one person who did not continue to higher education, they were asked if high school prepared them for their first job. The respondent's comment was that "I don't feel like it's the schools [sic] responsibility to prepare me for work. That's my own personal responsibility." This individual joined the military after high school and was provided additional training there.

Of the 35 respondents who went to college, all 35 were admitted to their college of choice. They generally felt that they were well prepared for college work related to writing and a little less so for college work related to mathematics/analytical skills. However, the majority still selected "yes".
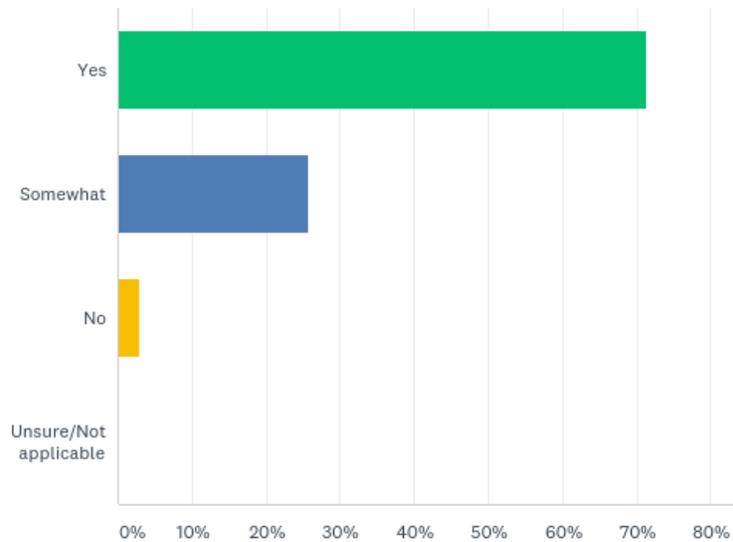
Figure 3: Previous residents on if they were well prepared for the academic work in college related to writing
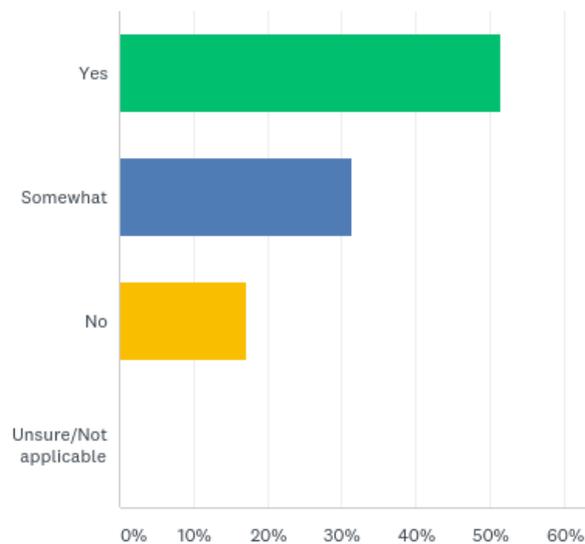
Figure 4: Previous residents on whether they were well prepared for academic work in college related to mathematics/analytical skills

Respondents were then asked the open-ended question of whether they were well prepared for college overall. Generally, the respondents felt well prepared or mostly prepared. About a third of respondents elaborated further that AP courses made them feel prepared, and others mentioned they would have taken more AP courses if they had been offered. One particular area that was mentioned by multiple people was a lack of foundational knowledge in the sciences particularly chemistry and physics.

> "I felt prepared for most subjects, including reading, writing, critical thinking, biology. However, I definitely lacked the foundation in math, chemistry, and physics that I saw in my fellow college students."

"I felt prepared in the courses I did take. I was behind because we did not offer many courses that my college expected you to have already taken."

"Mostly. I was prepared above average in reading/writing. I felt below average prepared for chemistry/physics."

Why They Left Wabash County
The top reason for leaving Wabash County was to take a job outside of the area. A close second was the millennial leaving to attend college. For millennials, only 18% had left because their significant other lived elsewhere. The one "other" response referenced leaving for the variety of things to do in a bigger city.

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Culture (I wanted to live in a different community that more closely aligned to my lifestyle and values)	5.88%	2
Family/Friends (A family member or close friend lived elsewhere)	0.00%	0
Military (I left to serve in the military)	0.00%	0
Primary relationship (My significant other lived elsewhere)	17.65%	6
School (I left to attend college/university)	35.29%	12
Work (I was offered a job)	38.24%	13
Other (please specify)	2.94%	1
TOTAL		34

Figure 5: Previous residents on why they moved away from Wabash County

Respondents were also asked if there were any resources or attributes that Wabash County is lacking that contributed to their decision to move away and not return. Similar to the above question, the most selected resource that they said was lacking is employment opportunities selected by 88%. Social offerings was selected by 71%. After that, the next highest item selected was retail attraction at 35%.

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Arts and cultural opportunities	26.47%	9
Education system	14.71%	5
Employment opportunities	88.24%	30
Family-friendliness	2.94%	1
Health services	8.82%	3
Opportunities for people under the age of 21	14.71%	5
Public safety	0.00%	0
Public transportation	8.82%	3
Recreation/wellness opportunities	20.59%	7
Retail attraction	35.29%	12
Social offerings (e.g., vibrant nightlife, good spaces and places to meet and spend time with people)	70.59%	24
Volunteer opportunities	2.94%	1
Workforce training/professional development opportunities for adults	20.59%	7
Your neighborhood/personal network	11.76%	4
No, there are no attributes that Wabash County is lacking.	2.94%	1
Other (please specify)	8.82%	3
Total Respondents: 34		

Figure 6: Previous residents on resources or attributes that Wabash County is lacking

When survey respondents were asked why they think the primary reason most Wabash County residents live there, nearly everyone selected one of two answers: current residents grew up there (68%) or they have family/friends there (29%).

How to Attract and Retain Residents
The top two resources and attributes respondents said contributed to them leaving are the top two responses selected when asked where Wabash County should allocate resources to attract new residents. From there, respondents selected more items than before, but the top two answers are still the only two to be selected by more than 50% of respondents.

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Arts and cultural opportunities	30.30%	10
Education system	36.36%	12
Employment opportunities	90.91%	30
Family-friendliness	9.09%	3
Health services	6.06%	2
Opportunities for people under the age of 21	12.12%	4
Public safety	6.06%	2
Public transportation	9.09%	3
Recreation/wellness opportunities	48.48%	16
Retail attraction	45.45%	15
Social offerings (e.g., vibrant nightlife, good spaces and places to meet and spend time with people)	81.82%	27
Volunteer opportunities	3.03%	1
Workforce training/professional development opportunities for adults	33.33%	11
Your neighborhood/personal network	6.06%	2
Total Respondents: 33		

Figure 7: Previous residents on where Wabash County needs to allocate its resources to attract new residents (limited to 5 answers)

A similar question asking about retaining current residents elicited much the same answers.

Respondents were then posed with the question in an open-ended format specifically asking what needs to be down to attract younger people ages 20-30. The top response was that Wabash County needs more job opportunities and quality jobs for people with college degrees. Beyond that, respondents think that Wabash County needs more things to do for both single people and those with families.

> "Have more activities to do in the city. For most things, you have to travel a fair distance to reach any attractions that young adults or families with children would want."

> "I think many individuals go on to pursue degrees where there are not opportunities for a career in Wabash."

> "It all comes down to job opportunities for decent/high paying jobs. Any other shortcomings are "forgivable" if you have high paying jobs and affordable housing."

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To attract younger people to stay in Wabash County the answers are much the same and often mention job opportunities. Beyond that, some mentioned improving the schools (K-12) and having appealing public spaces.

Do you think you will ever move back to Wabash County?
The answers for this question are mixed. About a fifth expect they will move back while nearly 40% do not think they will move back and nearly a third are unsure. Respondents who selected "other" are generally unsure as well and provided more specifics:

"Hard saying because now my parents moved from Wabash to Fort Wayne."

"Only if I believe my future children could have a better education than where I live currently."

"My partner, a non-native of Indiana, and I often fantasize about moving back to my hometown. I'm not certain how realistic this is, considering the rumors I hear about the Manchester Community School, as well as Manchester University these days. Both institutions would be our primary source of employers should we return."
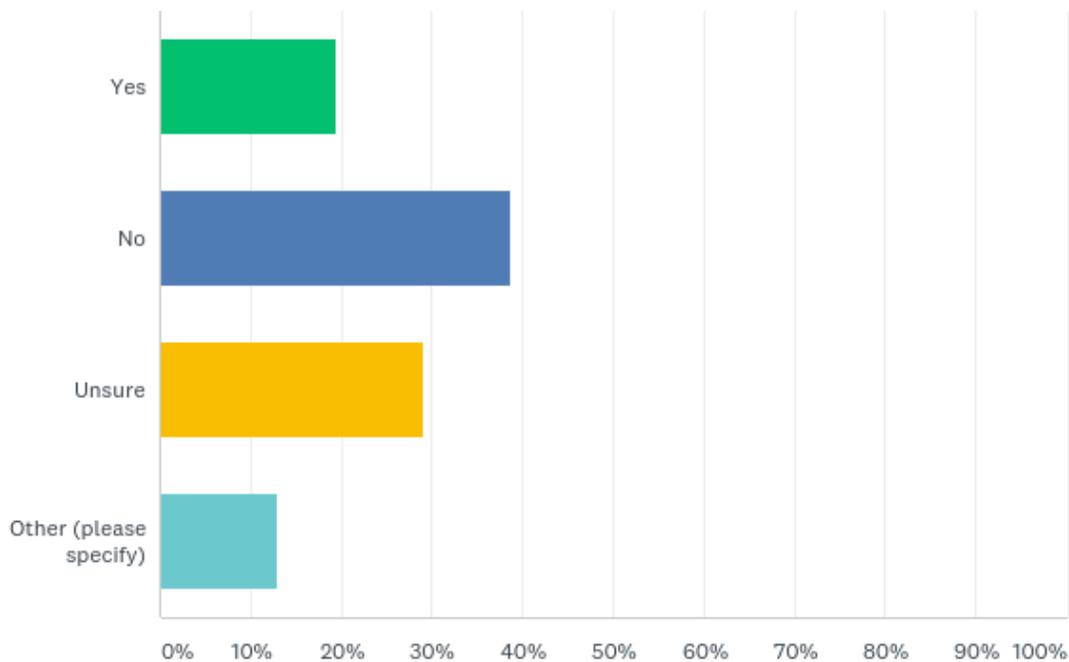

Figure 8: previous residents on whether they will ever move back to Wabash County

The $5 Million Question
There were 21 responses provided to this question and their answers generally centered around the following themes:
- Improving education
- Attract jobs that require highly educated people
- Invest in business development

- Increase the availability of cultural opportunities, retail, and recreational opportunities

Millennial Survey – Those who stayed or have since returned to Wabash County

For those who could not attend an in-person focus group, they were encouraged to provide their opinions in an online survey. Twenty-six people took the online survey. With such a large number of responses, the online survey responses will be compared to those of the previous resident survey instead of being combined with the answers provided in the in-person focus group meetings.

Workforce and Higher Education
Not only do the millennials who took this survey reside in Wabash County, but the demographics of the respondents are different from those in the previous resident survey. This group is older with the greatest percentage (42%) in the age group 31-39. Females only outnumber males by 8% in this sample, and more than half (58%) are married. Also, a third of the sample has less than a bachelor's degree.

Three survey respondents went straight into the workforce after high school. Two of three felt that their high school experience did not prepare them for their first job, and the third respondent felt that vocational school helped. All three respondents received additional training from their employer.

The majority of those who went to college felt like they were well prepared as did the younger millennials from the previous resident survey, but they mentioned more frequently that while they were prepared academically, they didn't have many real-life skills needed for college.

> "Intellectually, but there were no real-life skills like money management."

> "They didn't prepare me for the real world unfortunately."

How to Attract and Retain Residents
The older millennials who currently live in Wabash County had slightly different ideas for where Wabash County most needs to allocate its resources to attract new resources. Employment opportunities were still the top area to invest in and social offerings was second but only 50% selected it. The education system was selected third with more votes than in the previous resident survey at 46%.

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Arts and cultural opportunities	19.23%	5
Education system	46.15%	12
Employment opportunities	80.77%	21
Family-friendliness	11.54%	3
Health services	19.23%	5
Opportunities for people under the age of 21	7.69%	2
Public safety	11.54%	3
Public transportation	15.38%	4
Recreation/wellness opportunities	26.92%	7
Retail attraction	30.77%	8
Social offerings (e.g., vibrant nightlife, good spaces and places to meet and spend time with people)	50.00%	13
Volunteer opportunities	0.00%	0
Workforce training/professional development opportunities for adults	34.62%	9
Your neighborhood/personal network	23.08%	6
Other (please specify)	15.38%	4
Total Respondents: 26		

Figure 9: Millennial residents on where Wabash County needs to allocate its resources to attract new residents (limited to 5 answers)

Respondents were then posed with the question in an open-ended format specifically asking what needs to be down to attract younger people ages 20-30. The top response was the same as the previous residents, that Wabash County needs more job opportunities and quality jobs for people with college degrees. Beyond that, this group is more likely to recommend additional social offerings, retail, and a better nightlife.

> "Attract newer more popular business. i.e. (Starbucks, brand name retail, nonsmoking sports bars like Wings Etc.) Also attract higher paying careers. For my certain career I would make $3-4 less an hour than other counties and markets."

> "Jobs. Things to do on a social level such as restaurants (craft brewery), arts and entertainment, and retail. "

> "This has to be job opportunities and social life. Our community has really changed for the better in the past 10 years, but we must continue to provide young people with job opportunities and social opportunities."

Do you think you will still be living in Wabash County in 5 years?
The millennials who currently live in Wabash County are more likely to say they expect to be here in 5 years however a third are unsure.
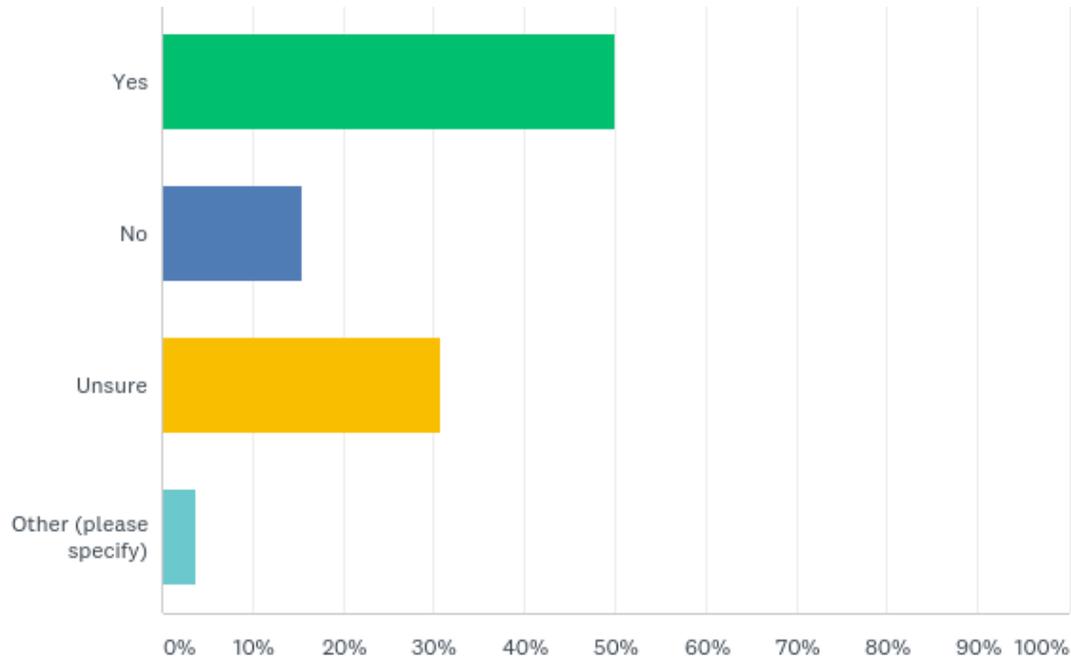

Figure 10: Millennial residents on whether they think they will still be living in Wabash County in 5 years

The $5 Million Question
There were 19 responses provided to this question and their answers generally centered around the following themes:
- Improving education
- Attracting jobs that require highly educated people
- Investing in business development
- Attracting more retail business
- Increasing activities and things to do for families
- Cleaning up blighted city areas and improve the town facades

Millennials Focus Groups – Who have stayed or have since returned to Wabash County

Two focus group meetings were held with millennials living in Wabash County. The focus group meeting held in Wabash had 11 participants, and the one held in North Manchester had 7 participants. While millennial has been defined as those born between 1980-2000, there were a few attendees that were just a few years older, but still fit the audience we were seeking to attract. The majority of our participants had returned to Wabash County whether leaving for college or for a job after college, many had returned to Wabash County in the last 5-6 years.

High School Experience
The first few questions to the focus groups centered on their high school experience. The majority said they did not find their education rigorous. They felt there were not as many AP courses or advanced courses offered. Some felt the rigor was extremely dependent on the teacher and thus felt prepared for some college classes but not others.

While in high school, many of the participants felt they were not informed about the career opportunities in Wabash County. Some mentioned being aware of opportunities, especially in agriculture, but were unaware of opportunities outside of that industry, and there were no job fairs to learn about those other opportunities. One of our youngest participants however (graduated in 2016), mentioned that his school had hosted two job fairs, and these provided good networking opportunities.

Workforce and Higher Education Experience
Only one person out of either focus groups went directly into to the workforce after high school. He felt that high school work wasn't correlated to his job and didn't help him to be prepared when entering the workforce. For those who went to college, they generally felt that high school had prepared them well as long as they had been told that college would be different. Many said they had to learn how to study and develop time management skills. AP classes were also good at preparing some for college.

Why They Chose to Remain or Return to Wabash County
Most of the focus group participants said they chose to stay or return to Wabash County because their family is here. Beyond that, about half said they stayed or returned because of a job opportunity. Participants also enjoy the small-town feel and are excited about the progress the county has made.

Satisfaction with Wabash County
To determine how satisfied focus group participants were with various resources and attributes of Wabash County, they were asked to fill out a Likert scale question with the various attributes and rating them from very dissatisfied to very satisfied. The areas in which they were most dissatisfied were employment opportunities, public transportation, and workforce training/professional development opportunities. The areas in which they were most satisfied were family-friendliness, and their neighborhood/personal networks.

When asked why people they knew growing up have left Wabash County, participants mentioned the lack of diversity in employment opportunities, a lack of social offerings, poor housing market, and that those people are not ready to settle down. One participant feels that once people are ready to settle down, they're more likely to move home. The struggle to buy a home is a reason people feel others aren't moving to Wabash County. There isn't a large price range of houses already built; they're either too expensive or cheap but require too much work to rehab.
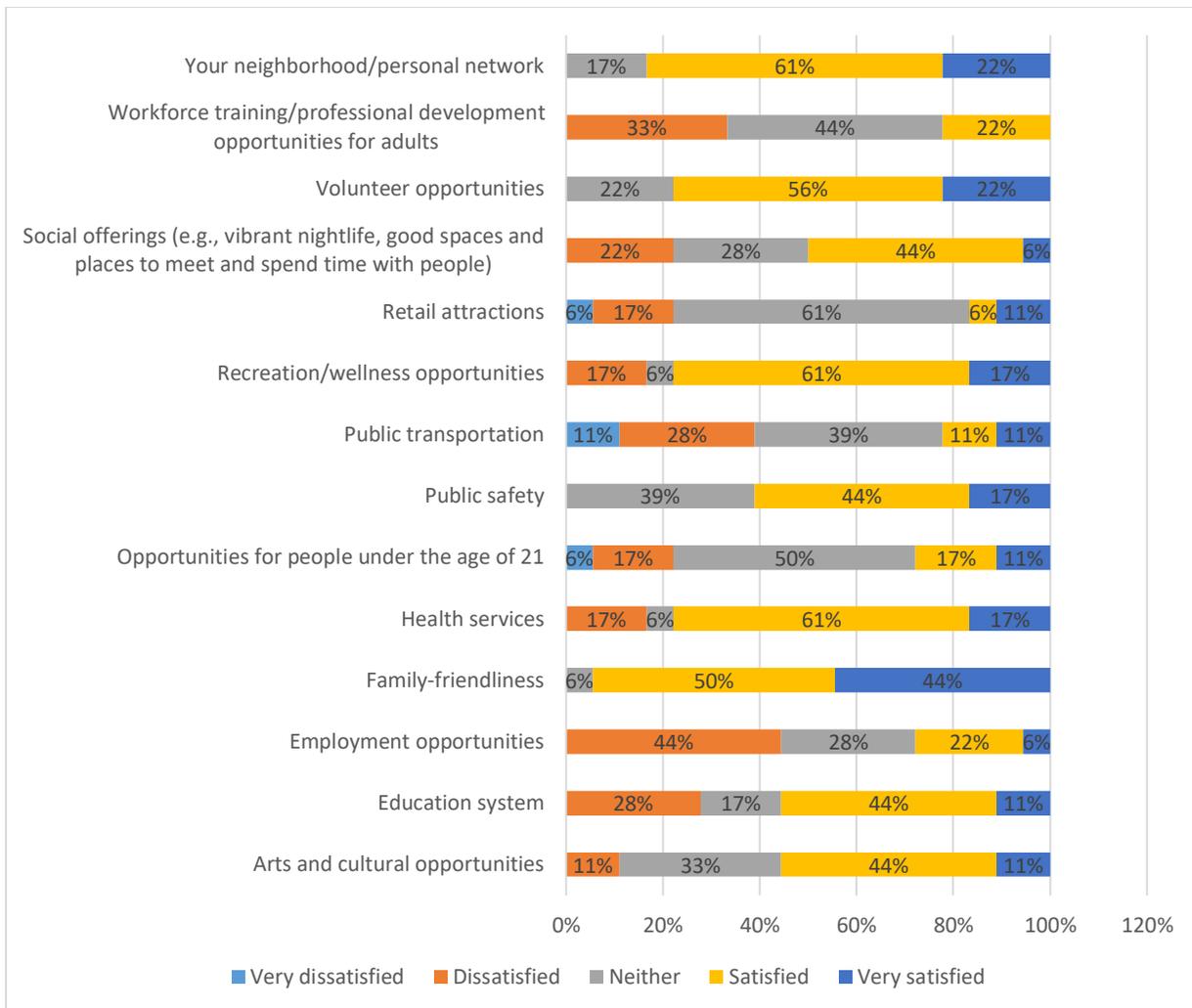
Figure 11: Millennial residents' satisfaction with Wabash County

How to Attract and Retain Residents

The two focus groups came up with three main areas where Wabash County needs to allocate its resources to attract new residents. Those areas include housing as mentioned above, and besides issues with available housing stock, people aren't sure what neighborhoods to recommend to someone moving into the area. The quality of homes and neighborhoods varies from street to street. Employment opportunities in diverse industries with better salaries was discussed as another area of need. And finally, if employment opportunities bring more families to Wabash County, the participants recommended allocating resources to improving the schools and providing better opportunities to kids.

To retain current residents, participants recommended allocating resources to educate high school students on the career opportunities within Wabash County and improve infrastructure and amenities like expanding sidewalks, updating City Park, and adding trails to improve walkability. For high school and college students to stay in Wabash County, one participant recommended more formal collaboration, possibly a county hire liaison, between the high schools, college, and local businesses. As a local business leader, the participant saw a great

need for the local government or another entity to help businesses network and recruit new employees to fill their open positions.

Do you think you will still be living in Wabash County in 5 years?
Between the two focus groups, about half raised their hand saying they expect to be living in Wabash County. Many said that their job or their children being enrolled in school were reasons they would stay. For those who think they may move away, one was interested in a bigger town or city where he could walk down a street and not everyone would know who he was. Two others mentioned their salaries as teachers are too low for them to continue to live off of.

Do you think that Wabash County suffers from "brain drain" (once a person gets a post-secondary degree they move away)?
Most focus group participants feel that Wabash County does suffer from brain drain and that the "best and the brightest" don't always return. Some feel that people aren't returning because their career tracks aren't as readily available in Wabash County. One concern raised from this discussion was that the community feels the same, and that it's lacking different types of social groups to get new ideas in the community. A suggestion was made to see what kids are majoring in to know what our citizens are looking to do and try to keep them in Wabash County.

The $5 Million Question
There were multiple answers provided to this question, often building on ideas mentioned earlier in the discussion. Responses mentioned centered around the following:
- Attracting diverse industry
- Tax incentives to give businesses a reason to come here including small businesses
- Improve housing market and community upkeep
- Create a destination/attraction (e.g., Great Wolf Lodge) to draw people here to boost the local economy
- Increase early childhood education availability
- Afterschool programming for youth (low income, middle income, at-risk, etc.)
- Increase social events (e.g., first Fridays, community events)

Transplant Focus Groups – Individuals living in Wabash County who did not grow up there

Two focus group meetings were held with transplants living in Wabash County. The focus group meeting held in Wabash had 11 participants, and the one held in North Manchester had 5 participants. While millennial has been defined as those born between 1980-2000, there were a few attendees that were just a few years older, but still had a valuable insight for this project.

Why They Moved to Wabash County
The majority of our participants have lived in Wabash County for 8-10 years. The majority of participants moved to Wabash County for a job (about 70%) while two retired to Wabash County and one moved because of a relationship. One participant mentioned that their top secondary reason for moving to Wabash County was the low cost of living.

When asked what they think the primary reason most current Wabash County residents would give for living there, participants feel work or family are the top reasons for residents.

Satisfaction with Wabash County

To determine how satisfied focus group participants were with various resources and attributes of Wabash County, they were asked to fill out a Likert scale question with the various attributes and rating them from very dissatisfied to very satisfied. The areas in which transplants were most dissatisfied were retail attractions and public transportation. Housing was not included in the Likert question, but participants brought it up as an area they are dissatisfied with. The areas in which they were most satisfied were family-friendliness and recreation/wellness opportunities.

One person mentioned having looked for 18 months and finding no contenders. Inventory, size, and price are all issues in the Wabash County housing market. Others mentioned rentals are a struggle to find, especially for young professionals in North Manchester. At least one participant has purchased a house outside of the county due to the issues with the housing market.

When asked why they think people choose to leave Wabash County, participants believe it could be attributed to not being connected with the community (poor personal network), a lack of nightlife, or better job opportunities elsewhere. Multiple participants agreed that when people don't grow up in Wabash County, it can be hard to break through and become a part of the community and not an outsider.
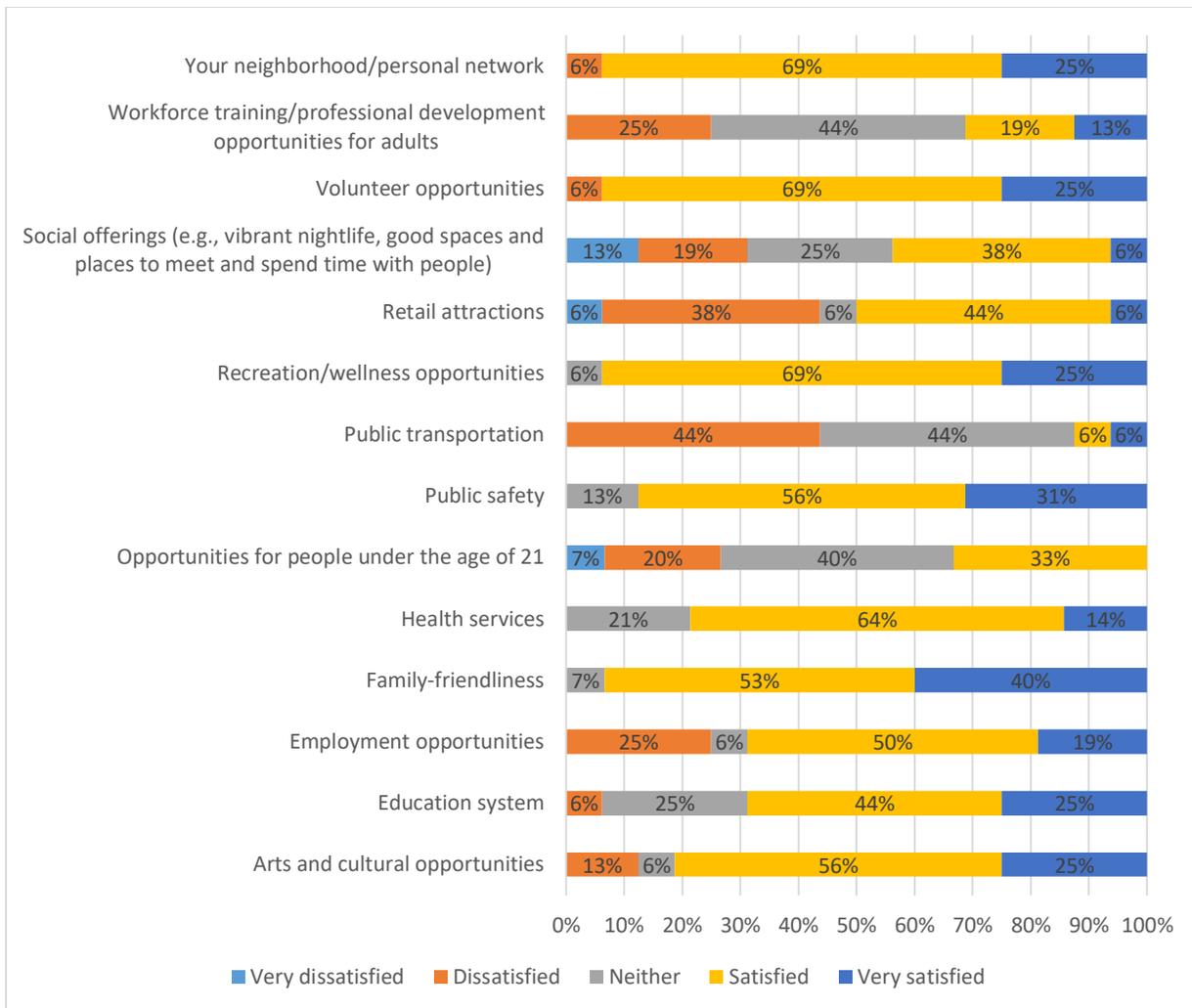
Figure 12: Transplant residents' satisfaction with Wabash County

How to Attract and Retain Residents

The two focus groups came up with four main areas where Wabash County needs to allocate its resources to attract new residents. They believe the county should invest in marketing campaigns, and that the small business revolution did good things for the community. Reliable and fast internet was brought up as something that could attract new residents, especially those who are able to work remotely. Participants also recommended investing resources in quality of life items (e.g., parks, trails, sidewalks) and promoting opportunities in the (K-12) schools.

To retain current residents, participants recommended allocating resources to recruit young people after they've left for a while. Also, reframe the message that Wabash County is not scared of young people leaving, but that we want them to come back. Encouraging the development of a new medical device factory/think tank with incentives (drawing from industry in Warsaw), and investing in infrastructure at the airport could help retain current residents by providing additional job opportunities and opportunities for corporate advancement.

Do you think you will still be living in Wabash County in 5 years?
These focus groups had more than half of participants raise their hands saying that they believe they'll still be living in Wabash County in 5 years.

Do you think that Wabash County suffers from "brain drain" (once a person gets a post-secondary degree they move away)?
Most focus group participants feel that Wabash County does suffer from brain drain. One participant wonders if the lack of family housing could be exacerbating the issue of people not returning home because they can't find housing. Another thinks maybe brain drain is supposed to happen with good schools turning out good kids. A Manchester University faculty member had noticed that while half of the faculty live in North Manchester, it appears that of the newest 25% of faculty, about a third live in Wabash County. Some of the newer faculty don't think of Wabash as a place to live and instead choose places lie Fort Wayne or Indianapolis. With its focus on community, the faculty member thinks the university could be more proactive or partner to help reverse this trend of newer faculty living outside of the county.

The $5 Million Question
There were multiple answers provided to this question, often building on ideas mentioned earlier in the discussion. Responses mentioned centered around the following:
- Attract new industry
- Improve housing market
- Increase quality of place initiatives
- Bring reliable high-speed internet to the county
- Tax incentives to give businesses a reason to come here
- Community improvements (e.g., fix sidewalks)
- Create a destination/attraction (e.g., Great Wolf Lodge) to draw people here to boost the local economy
- Address education from Kindergarten to college
- Create a marketing/PR campaign to keep Wabash County in the front of people's minds

Interviews - Individuals who work in Wabash County but live outside of the county

Phone interviews were conducted with 17 individuals and one individual submitted written answers to the interview questions between May 3rd and May 16th, 2019. Participants were recruited from personal and professional contacts of Grow Wabash County, CFWC, and TCG who are known to work in Wabash County but live outside the county. The participants were nearly 50/50 female or male, and they ranged in age from early 20's to early 60's.

Where They Live Currently (County)

Allen - 5	Miami - 4
Grant – 1	Whitley – 2
Hamilton - 1	
Huntington - 3	
Kosciusko - 2	

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How Long They Have Worked in Wabash County
Participants for interviews varied in age and thus vary in the amount of time they have worked in the county. About a third have worked in the county for 20+ years, a few have worked there for 10-15 years, and nearly half have worked in the county for less than 5 years.

Have they ever lived in Wabash County? Could they see themselves moving to Wabash County?
Only two participants mentioned having lived in Wabash County previously. Four participants lived in Wabash County for college. A couple of participants mentioned that they lived or grew up within a mile of the Wabash County line.

More than half of participants do not see themselves moving to Wabash County. Typically, their reason was that they're established where they are, they're not looking to get a second mortgage, or they're accustomed to the amenities they currently have. About six people said they were unsure. Often it would depend on something occurring such as downsizing once children move and an attractive house available, or something changing that made it so that they were looking for a shorter commute or a lower cost of living.

One respondent thought they might be interested in moving, and that they've enjoyed meeting great people in Wabash County but are unsure of what there is to do for people his age in the area.

Top Reasons for Living in Another County
Below are answers that were brought up in more than one interview in order of frequency (with the top bullet being the item that came up the most often). Having a spouse with a job in another county, a job that required location in a particular area, or better job opportunities in another county was mentioned by half of the interview participants. The commute being easy for many in surrounding counties was one reason they justified being the spouse to commute. Being close to family and having grown up in an area (or already established there) were the number two and three top reasons to decide to live in another county. A couple of participants said they tried to move to Wabash County but couldn't find a house to buy, and two participants mentioned living elsewhere for better schools.
- Spouse's job outside of county
- Close to family
- Grew up there/established
- Couldn't find a house in Wabash
- Easy commute
- Better schools

Best Attributes of Wabash County That Make It an Attractive Place to Live
Below are answers that were brought up in more than one interview in order of frequency (with the top bullet being the item that came up the most often). The best attributes most frequently mentioned were the small-town feel, close-knit community, and the active development/investment in making the downtowns an attractive place.

- Close-knit community
- Small-town feel

- Active development/investment in downtown areas
- People care about the community
- Downtown areas
- Honeywell Center
- University brings in events and speakers
- Family-friendliness
- Low cost of living
- Slower pace community and lifestyle
- Charley Creek Inn
- Small schools

Greatest Challenges That Prevent People from Living in Wabash County
Answers to this question varied more than answers of what the greatest attributes of Wabash County are. In a few cases, some of the previous attributes can also be the greatest challenges to people living in Wabash County such as not being close to a big city, lacking big city amenities, being too small of a community. After vicinity to a large city, job opportunities and the lack of diversity in industry was one of the top answers provided as a challenge to someone moving to Wabash County. Participants also mentioned the lack of retail options (grocery and big box stores for example) and a poor housing market as challenges.

Why do you think most current Wabash County residents would give as their primary reason for living here?
Nearly every participant provided one of two answers to this question. They believe people live in Wabash County because they grew up there and possibly still have family there, or they moved to Wabash County for a job.

Why do you think people choose to move away from the county?
According to participants, the top reason people choose to move away from the county is because of job opportunities. This was mentioned by over half of participants. Some other reasons they believe people move away is because they want a larger city or to move somewhere where there's more to do. The issue of housing also came up with two participants saying that their house was cheaper in Allen County than a comparable house in Wabash County.

How to Attract and Retain Residents (and How to Attract and Retain Younger People)
Participants seem to be in agreement that attracting residents and retaining them in some cases comes down to job opportunities, particularly in new industries and for those who hold postsecondary degrees. The other thing to focus on to attract younger people to live in Wabash County is quality of life initiatives involving community events, entertainment options, more dining, and more shopping. Some participants noted that there are things to do for those who are elderly or young children, but there are not as many things to do for older youth and adults.

Often the answers on how to retain current residents were similar or the same as those to attract younger people to live in Wabash County. One item that came up more when talking about retaining current residents was investing more resources into schools and new housing developments.

Do you think Wabash County Suffers from "brain drain" (once a person gets a post-secondary degree they move away)?

Many interview participants are educators in K-12 schools or at higher education institutions so their perspective on this question is particularly relevant. Those in higher education feel that many of their students do not stay in Wabash county after graduation including those who grew up here. Some participants know of individuals who looked to stay in Wabash County but couldn't find a job, and that there are few opportunities for jobs for individuals right out of college. Multiple participants mentioned that this is a reason Wabash County needs more job opportunities that span different industries and require different levels of education.

For both age groups, one participant feels they're leaving not because they want to get out but because they lack awareness of what they could do in Wabash County. They're just starting to see some of the short commuting opportunities.

Do you think the reasons for a declining population are similar in Wabash Counties and its surrounding counties?

Most participants feel that Wabash County is not unique in its struggles to keep the population declining. They feel that rural areas across the state and the country are dealing with the same issue. In particular, the decline of the agriculture and manufacturing industries are affecting Wabash County as they are other rural counties.

Some participants mentioned that some areas are growing such as Warsaw due to its booming orthopedics industry and Huntington County being so close to Fort Wayne.

One attribute that participants brought up that not all rural communities have is a local college, Manchester University. Many see that as an opportunity to partner to bring more residents and amenities to the community. Others mentioned that Wabash County is ahead of the work of other counties to address the decline in population by actively working to address the issue.

Have you seen any business closures or layoffs that you believe contributed to population loss in Wabash County within the last 5 years?

Participants familiar with the Wabash area could not think of too many business closures or layoffs in the last 5 years, but most participants from North Manchester were quick to mention the closing of The Foundry as well as two local fast food restaurants. Some noted that while these weren't huge losses in terms of number of employees, the community still felt the loss. A couple of participants mentioned General Tire, and while that wasn't a recent closure, it was a big blow to the city and county that the community is still feeling the effects of.

Some participants noted closures occurring in surrounding counties such as the pending closure of Schneider in Peru which probably employs residents of Wabash County. The major concern mentioned when a participant discusses a closure of a business is whether the county has job opportunities for these newly unemployed people or whether they'll have to seek employment outside of the county.

Other Reasons for the Declining Population in Wabash County

- Family farms can no longer employ their whole family and are struggling to compete with big farm corporations. (changing dynamics of farming)
- Poor cell phone reception and internet – makes the county look like it's not as advanced or doesn't have the resources to support these things.
- Multiple participants mentioned at different points in the interview, a struggle to be accepted or integrated into the community when you are not from Wabash County originally.

The $5 Million Question
- Invest in housing, amenities, education, and attract and retain businesses.
- Working with higher education institutions in the county who are bringing the millennials in, to convince them to make Wabash County their home.
- Invest in young graduates by providing high school students scholarships to attend Manchester University or provide loans for students that will be forgiven if they come back to live/work in Wabash County for so many years after graduation.
- Invest more in North Manchester's downtown like they're doing in Wabash.
- Continue initiatives to better the community such as festivals and bike trails.
- Enhance the school systems. Thinks the Wabash County high schools need to consolidate resources, and that the community needs to focus on progress and not so much on tradition.
- Bring housing developers to build in Wabash County.
- Add an attraction and keep building the tourism industry in Wabash County.
- Bring opportunities in emerging industries like technology, entrepreneurship, and starting small businesses that could be driven by younger minds.
- Internships or ways to get people connected to Wabash County so then they'll stay.
- Renovate more places to attract more businesses.
- Continue what's happening in downtown Wabash but expand to roads/buildings, replacing empty lots, and get rid of old factories so site selectors see Wabash as clean and see the best attributes (e.g., river, Honeywell, etc.).
- Invest in jobs.
- Enhance activities throughout the county such as bike trails, parks, and things to do outside the normal work day.
- Entice businesses to come to the county – either with money or other amenities to make it an attractive place.
- Build a water park or other family attraction. (Columbia City just built a small one, and it's been huge for the community.)
- More emphasis on non-traditional students, and those who don't want to go to a year college.
- More emphasis placed on training and potential financial supports (such as those pursuing a CDL or nursing license).
- Marketing of opportunities – what's available to kids, what careers are in our vicinity, and embracing that there might be some opportunities to work outside the county but live in Wabash County.
- Quality of life improvements (e.g., diversity of dining, entertainment, and shopping options)

- Opportunity to partner with the university to develop workforce needed for target industries.
- If we're going to keep people here, we need them to be able to work within the job sectors here. Part is training and part is attracting employers into the area.

Of note is that multiple participants took a moment to say they appreciate the hard work that has already been going on in the areas of downtown redevelopment, philanthropic investment, and quality of life initiatives. They recognize that leadership is looking to move Wabash County forward and see the county being an example to other counties who haven't begun the hard work of stemming population decline.

4. Summary

From all of our audiences in their responses to surveys, interviews, and focus groups, there were some common topics that came up as barriers to moving to Wabash County and areas to invest resources to attract and retain residents,

Cross-cutting barriers and areas to invest to attract and retain residents:
- Diversify employment industries
- Address housing issues (inadequate supply for young professionals and executives)
- Invest more resources in K-12 schools
- Market Wabash County (particularly inform people of jobs and cultural and community opportunities)
- Develop more retail and social offerings
- Partner with Manchester University on these initiatives (MU is an untapped resource)
- Increase number of quality jobs and wages (especially for those with a postsecondary degree)