

Including Youth in an Aging Society

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Northern BC is a rural landscape whose small town communities are struggling to cope with economic, social, and political change. Population aging, workforce aging, and an out-migration of young working families and youth has prompted a shift in policy attention to the growing needs of older residents.

Despite such general shifts towards issues for older residents, there still remains a large share of children and youth in northern BC communities. If we are to understand the impacts of rural restructuring, we must also understand and address the needs of youth. How they are impacted, and how they react, will affect the ways by which community development and community renewal play out in rural and small town Canada.

Overview

- Rural and Small Town Restructuring
- Demographic Changes
- Methodology
- Results
 - Human capital
 - Social cohesion and social capital
- Discussion



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This presentation explores gaps impeding the development and capacity of youth to respond to rural change. We begin by reviewing the impacts of rural restructuring, as well as the important role of youth in community renewal. We then draw our attention to exploring key gaps impeding the development of human and social capital amongst our next generation of community builders.

Rural Restructuring: Post 1980

- Industrial consolidation
- Labor shedding technology
- Fewer jobs for youth
 - Less seniority / experience
 - First to be laid off
 - Low levels of education
 - Prolonged unemployment
- Services reduced, regionalized, or closed



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Historically, booming resource industries attracted labor with many low-skilled, high paying jobs. Since 1980, industrial consolidation and labor shedding technology has resulted in fewer employment prospects.

With less seniority and experience, younger workers are amongst the first to be laid off. With lower levels of education, youth also tend to experience prolonged periods of unemployment. The ability of rural youth to respond to community and economic restructuring has concomitantly been stifled by neoliberal policies that have reduced, regionalized, or closed service supports in smaller places.

Youth and Community Renewal

- Youth inclusion can:
 - Lead to life-long participation
 - Sense of ownership in CED initiatives
 - Greater sense of belonging
- Youth assets support renewal
 - Aging population
 - Fewer professionals / volunteers



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At the same time, policies and community development initiatives have undervalued the contributions that youth can make towards community renewal.

Community participation and inclusion of youth, however, are important tools to develop youth citizenship and can lead to life-long participation. Youth can acquire a greater sense of ownership over community development initiatives that can also lead to a greater sense of belonging and commitment to place. However, an aging population and out-migration of young families has meant there are fewer professionals and volunteers to sustain local initiatives during community change.

Human Capital

- Knowledge
- Skills
- Training
- Work experience
- Life experience
- Volunteering



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Two key concepts have been used to understand gaps impeding the development of our future leaders and community builders in rural and small town places.

First, if youth are to become successfully employed and engaged in community development, they need to develop their human capital.

In general, this refers to the knowledge, skills, and training that improve individual well-being and capabilities. It also includes other forms of learning through work and life experiences, as well as volunteering.

Social Cohesion and Social Capital

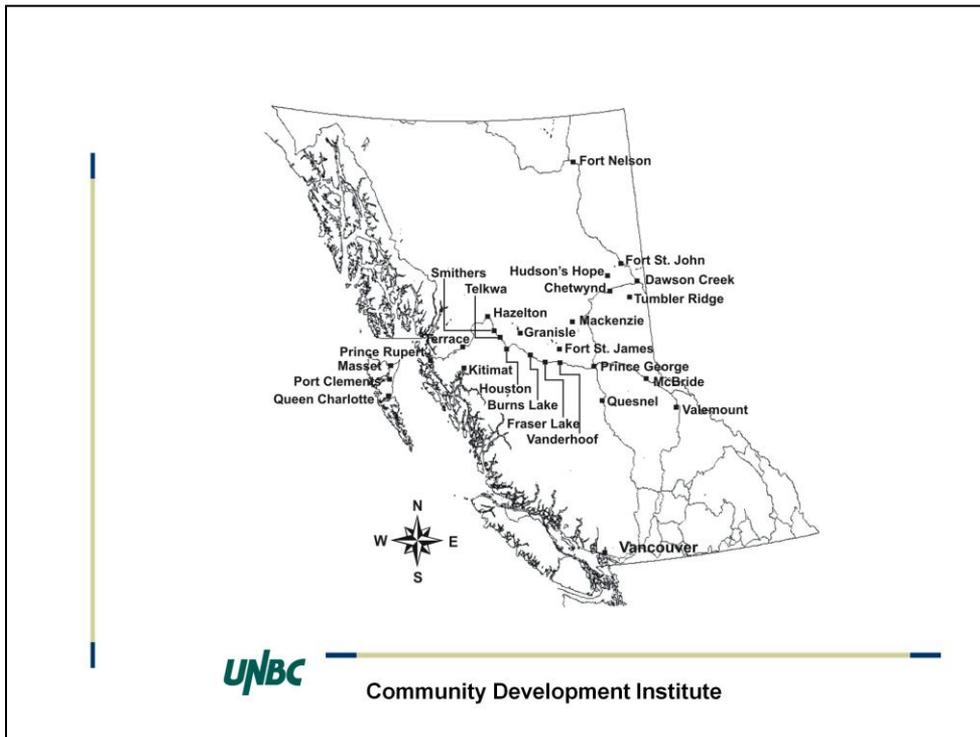
- Social cohesion
 - Collective response to stress
 - Relationships and social interaction
- Social capital
 - Networks and trust
 - Links to expertise, resources, and support
- Impacts ability of youth to respond to change



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Identifying how relationships and networks are used to build trust, skills, and a sense of community helps to illustrate how social processes can impact the ability of youth to respond to rural change. This can be accomplished by exploring social cohesion and social capital.

Social cohesion is broadly defined as processes of interaction. Relationships and routine interaction have provided an important foundation to build networks and trust that can link youth to a broader range of supports and resources to help them cope with the pressures associated with rural restructuring. These social capital assets assist young people as they engage in their community and economy.



Our research is based on a study conducted in 26 communities for the United Way of Northern BC. An exploratory, qualitative methodology was used to explore capacity gaps amongst youth aged 15-24 years of age. The results are based on 237 interviews with local leaders, service providers, and community groups.

Human Capital Gaps I

Education

- Youth not completing high school
 - Lack of homework clubs, tutoring, and literacy programs
- Lack of high school courses
 - Need investments in technology



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Rural restructuring processes have resulted in a routine loss of community experience and human capital. The future renewal and quality-of-life in rural and small town communities will depend, in large part, on the development of youth and their ability to mobilize their skills and knowledge.

In our study, participants described four key deficiencies in the development of human capital amongst youth.

First, for rural youth in northern BC who have not completed their high school education, participants expressed concerns that they were not equipped with sufficient knowledge, skills, and appropriate learning habits to make them successful citizens and successful adults. As a result, there were calls for more resources and programs to support student learning. This was especially notable for the young people at-risk of dropping out of the school system. Suggestions included homework clubs, tutoring, and increased literacy resources.

An increasing demand for high-skilled jobs means that many rural youth must pursue post-secondary education in order to acquire the necessary skills to compete in the labour market.

In preparation of post-secondary education, and perhaps more importantly life long learning, rural youth are at a disadvantage as many places do not offer courses typically available in urban centres.

Every other year they do Physics 12 because they just don't have enough kids to do it. (ID#2 Mackenzie)

To have a successful kid, you need to have a well educated kid. There are gaps where courses are not available because there aren't enough students, but even with the opportunities for improved technology, the services could be available. They are available in other communities, but I have not seen them here in Burns Lake. (ID#75 Burns Lake)



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With fewer students and a limited number of teachers, rural and small town high school courses required to get into university were often not offered on an annual basis.

By developing partnerships with schools in larger urban centres, some communities have experimented with the use of video conference technology to deliver a broader range of courses to rural students.

These initiatives have been hampered by inconsistent funding, training, supervision, and technical and administrative supports by school districts.

In this respect, investments in technology have not become mainstream across northern BC's communities, but rather seem stuck as temporary pilot experiments.

Human Capital Gaps I

Education

- Youth not completing high school
 - Lack of homework clubs, tutoring, and literacy programs
- Lack of high school courses
 - Need investments in technology
- Lack of cultural / linguistic skills
 - Need ESL programs / cultural programs



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Participants also highlighted youth deficiencies with cultural and linguistic skills. Developing these skills is an important step to develop a greater sense of belonging and achievement – especially amongst vulnerable Aboriginal and immigrant youth populations. ESL and cultural programs can also act as an incubator for building social networks and facilitating community engagement.

Human Capital Gaps II

Work Experience

- Lack of employment opportunities
- Lack of work experience programs
- Need to synthesize employment programs with employer practices
- Need broader range of work experiences



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Second, rural restructuring trends have left youth with fewer opportunities to gain valuable work experience. Youth have not just been impacted by the loss of permanent full-time jobs, but there are fewer summer jobs as well.

There are also fewer work experience programs, such as apprenticeships, mentoring, and job shadowing programs to help youth make the transition from school into the workforce.

While participants praised summer employment initiatives, they are often so poorly organized as to limit their effectiveness. For example, employers are given a short three week time period in January to apply for government support to hire summer students. As hiring practices typically occur in the spring, greater efforts are needed to synthesize government sponsored employment programs with employer hiring practices.

Furthermore, participants called for a broader range of work experiences to reflect the diverse interests and capabilities of youth, as well as labour market demands.

Human Capital Gaps III

Personal Development

The school gets you prepared for some things. It doesn't get you prepared for the real world. There are programs that are supposed to help teach employment skills and things, but they're really theory based and not reality based. Kids need to know how to go out and get auto insurance, how to comparison shop, how to get a bank account, how to go grocery shopping. They need real life skills (ID#31 Quesnel).



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A third key gap in youth capacity concerns a lack of life skills required to make the successful transition into adulthood. As demonstrated by this participant, a number of skills continue to be underdeveloped amongst rural youth, such as problem-solving skills, decision-making, shopping, budgeting, and financial and career planning.

Unfortunately, participants noted that many provincially funded life skill programs require referrals and are not readily accessible to the general youth population.

Human Capital Gaps IV

Volunteer Experience

- Youth are underutilized
 - i.e. delivering senior programs
- No community engagement strategy
- Need to adopt volunteer recognition / reward programs



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Volunteering can also play an important role in renewing local capacity as it can broaden youth networks, build confidence, and provide leadership training and career related experiences.

A key concern for participants, however, is that youth are underutilized in community development initiatives. For example, some felt that rural youth could play a greater role in delivering senior programs.

Very few communities had a community engagement strategy in place for youth. Despite the important role youth will play in the future of communities, youth are still often ignored.

There are, however, some communities that have few youth participating in volunteer activities and have adopted volunteer recognition and reward programs. For example, youth may collect stamps for video rentals or swimming pool passes.

Exposing youth to volunteer activities is important to develop life-long engaged citizens that can support renewal efforts.

Social Cohesion / Social Capital Gaps I

Developing Social Skills

- Difficulty interacting with peers
- Short-term funding for social skills / relationship programs
- Social etiquette will help youth to build relationships / networks
 - To participate in community building, governance structures



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In terms of social capital, participants identified three key areas that need to be addressed.

First, some youth lack the skills to interact with their peers. Bullying, cultural intolerance, and conflict management are key issues impeding interaction.

With inconsistent, short-term funding for social skill and relationship programs, many participants felt that more resources are needed to develop engaged, responsible citizens.

Strong social etiquette will help youth to build networks that can link them with opportunities to participate in community building and governance structures.

Social Cohesion / Social Capital Gaps II

Opportunities for Social Interaction

- Lack of social / recreational programs
 - After school / summer programs
 - Affordable / free activities
- Need broader range of programs to reflect diversity of youth interests
- Need networking opportunities for vulnerable youth groups



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Second, participants in every community talked about gaps with social and recreational programs to support youth development. Others argued that a lack of affordable or free activities limits opportunities for youth to engage in the community.

There were also several calls to develop a broader range of social and recreational programs to reflect the diversity of youth interests such as adventure programs, non-sport related programs, and culturally specific programs for First Nations youth.

Some also argued that special attention is needed to develop social networking opportunities for vulnerable groups, such as immigrant youth, in order to ensure that they are included and integrated into the community.

Where such programs exist or have existed, they are clearly disjointed, uncoordinated, and lack sustainability.

Social Cohesion / Social Capital Gaps III

Social Infrastructure

- Lack spaces where youth can interact
 - Youth centre / recreation facilities
 - Inconsistent hours of operation
 - Lack of human / financial resources
 - Leasing arrangements
 - Repairs needed
- Lack of transportation



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Finally, rural and small town places need to develop social infrastructure in order to provide spaces and opportunities for youth to interact.

The absence of youth centres and recreational facilities in the community has not only affected a sense of belonging amongst rural youth, but it has also led to negative behaviours.

Unfortunately, many facilities struggle to maintain consistent hours of operation and programming due to limited financial resources and volunteers, as well as problems securing leasing arrangements.

Many of our facilities are called “Centennial Arena” or “Centennial Hall” linking to their 1967 or 1971 construction. Many of these have fallen into disrepair.

Furthermore, participants talked about the absence of regional transportation options to link rural youth with social and recreational venues.



*Effective public transit is needed because
kids hitchhike everywhere around here.
To swimming pools and summer camps.
(ID#197 Hazelton)*

Note: Hazelton lies along BC's "Highway of Tears" for missing children.



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For example, one participant told us, "Effective public transit is needed because kids hitchhike everywhere around here. To swimming pools and summer camps". Without effective transportation supports in place, youth will be unable to develop and mobilize their assets to their full potential.

Discussion I

- Neoliberal policies have undermined ability to nurture youth assets
- Youth assets are critical to support community renewal
- Next generation of community builders



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In a rapidly changing economic and neoliberal policy landscape, youth have become an important asset to support renewal and community development.

To develop effective policies and programs that support our next generation of community builders, we need to understand which capacity issues need to be addressed in rural and small town places.

Discussion II

- Need to support student learning
- Need investments in technology
- Need a comprehensive approach to develop human capital
 - Investments in life skills to support transition into adulthood
 - Experiential learning opportunities for work
 - Invest in many venues for learning (i.e. volunteering, recreation, community engagement strategy)



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If youth are to become successfully employed and engaged in community development, they need to first develop their human capital. In this regard, three key steps are needed.

First, more programs are needed to support and develop student learning habits with particular attention to vulnerable youth populations. The learning skills that youth acquire now will help them to be life-long learners and successful adults. Furthermore, support and investments in technology are needed to ensure that rural youth have equal opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills that will enable them to pursue future educational opportunities and be competitive in the labour market. Third, while formal education has preoccupied much of the resources targeted at human capital development for rural youth, a much broader comprehensive approach to developing human capital of rural youth is needed.

This includes equipping youth with the life skills needed to make the transition into adulthood. It also involves greater attention to linking youth with experiential learning opportunities within the workplace to help youth test their interests, acquire experience, and build networks outside of classroom settings. A comprehensive approach should also invest in other venues for learning, such as volunteering, recreation, and other forms of community engagement.

Discussion III

- Need consistent, frequent, and affordable venues for interaction
- Invest in a diverse range of youth infrastructure
- Provides a foundation for life-long participation



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Social capital is another key area that needs to be addressed within a comprehensive youth development strategy. Youth need consistent, frequent, and affordable venues for interaction in order to enable youth to repeatedly mobilize their skills and keep them engaged in community activities.

In this respect, the value of a diverse range of youth infrastructure cannot be underestimated as it helps youth to develop a sense of ownership over space within the community and provides a foundation for life-long participation.

Discussion IV

- Successful youth requires successful programs
- Policy decisions to withdrawal limited resources need to be reconsidered
 - Need long-term stable resources to acquire adequate human resources
- Pay attention to renewing capacity of voluntary sector
 - Incentive programs, training, financial resources, and in-kind support



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Finally, to have successful youth, we must have successful policies and programs. Service restructuring decisions that continue to withdrawal limited resources from rural and small town places need to be reconsidered. Long-term, stable resources are needed to acquire adequate human resources to support the operations of these programs.

As government cuts have resulted in an expanding voluntary sector to provide these services, communities will also need to pay attention to renewing this capacity by providing incentive programs, as well as training, financial, and in-kind support for operations and capacity development.

Furthermore, any approach to delivering youth programs and services must recognize that youth are not a homogenous population, and youth programs need to reflect their diversity. In addition to age and stage of life cycle, our communities have a rich cultural diversity of young people.



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This presentation explored some of the gaps that small places need to address in order to develop the capacity of rural youth. This topic is important as places respond to pressures from social, economic, and political change.

Developing an effective youth engagement and development strategy will be important to enhance the vitality and resiliency of small places. By investing wisely and purposefully in our youth, communities can draw upon a broader range of assets for community development and renewal.

Not only are the needs significant and our efforts thus far inadequate; addressing the needs of young people is each day becoming more and more difficult as government and social attention shifts to the aging baby boomers. In northern BC's rural and small town places, however, young people remain a significant part of the local population and their needs cannot fall off the agenda.