



BELONGING → BUILDS ← COMMUNITY



A SOUL OF THE COMMUNITY FOLLOW-UP REPORT



COMMUNITY
FOUNDATION
OF GREATER FORT WAYNE

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BELONGING BUILDS GROWTH

Northeast Indiana is experiencing significant development, offering abundant opportunities for economic, social, and cultural advancement. At Young Leaders of Northeast Indiana (YLNi), we contribute to that growth by cultivating the next generation of leaders and driving positive change within our community.

To do that, though, we must have a thorough understanding not only of all our community offers, but also of how the next generation *feels* about it. What do they love about living here? What makes them choose this region over others throughout the country? Just as important, what hinders their desire—or ability—to stay here?

Every business, organization, and individual should seek to know the answers to these questions. With an increasingly global workforce, talented employees have options. By making each person feel welcome, especially our young people, we build their sense of connection and increase their likelihood of choosing Northeast Indiana as the place to develop in their careers, grow their families, and give back to their community.

At YLNi, we see evidence of this in our diverse initiatives and programming that help Northeast Indiana attract, develop, and retain talent. As we approached our 20th anniversary in 2025, we recognize that it has been almost 15 years since the last study was done to measure residents' sense of belonging. So, we rallied our partners and collaborators to figure out what the next step looks like—and the result led to this *Soul of the Community* follow-up report.

In this report, you'll learn how young residents feel about the community through the lens of defined drivers of attachment. You'll also learn about the most significant barriers standing in our way. Armed with this information, we hope that our community's stakeholders will develop a deeper understanding of its challenges and take ownership to create lasting change.

Together, let's continue to build a community of belonging.



Ian Broad-White
Board President, YLNi



Taylor Fisher
Executive Director, YLNi

Residents in Fort Wayne express a higher level of overall attachment to their community in 2010 than they did in 2009 or 2008. The 2010 mean score of 3.77 out of a possible 5.00 compares positively with a mean score of 3.64 in 2009 and 3.60 in 2008. Results reflect the study conducted in Allen, Wells, and Whitley counties.

Community attachment in Fort Wayne is higher than that of similar Knight Foundation communities. Among the nine communities, Fort Wayne's attachment mean score is the highest, representing the Fort Wayne community.

Community	2008	2009	2010
Low/Medium Population	3.84	3.89	3.89
Fort Wayne	3.60	3.80	3.49
High/Medium Population	3.65	3.96	3.90
Overall	3.77		

Community	2009	2010
Fort Wayne	3.79	3.77
High/Medium Population	3.87	3.79
Low/Medium Population	3.64	3.79
Overall	3.73	3.74

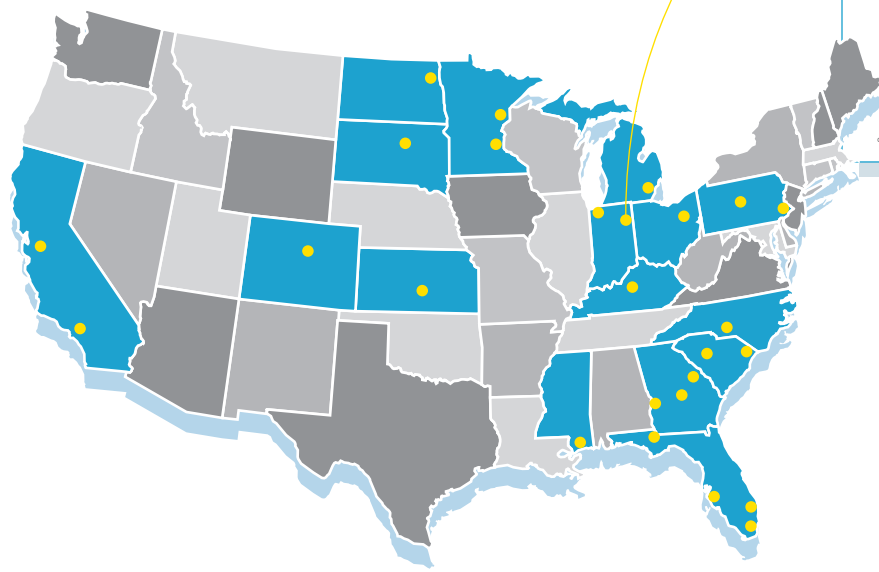
Community	2009	2010
High Urban Density Communities	3.91	3.90
Low Urban Density Communities	3.87	3.79
Overall	3.79	3.77
High Urban Density Communities	3.64	3.79
Low Urban Density Communities	4.03	4.00
Overall	3.22	3.17
High Urban Density Communities	3.69	3.38
Low Urban Density Communities	3.87	3.82
Overall	4.00	4.08
High Urban Density Communities	3.73	3.74

ABOUT THE 2025 REPORT

YLN, in partnership with the Community Foundation of Greater Fort Wayne (CFGFW), conducted a study in 2025 to follow up on the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation's 2010 *Soul of the Community* report. The goal of the 2025 study was to understand Allen County's strengths and challenges in building a connected community that supports positive talent attraction, development, retention, and engagement. While the original report included responses from all ages in the community, the 2025 report focuses on the experiences and opinions of young adults.

HISTORY OF SOUL OF THE COMMUNITY

The Knight Foundation, in partnership with Gallup, developed the *Soul of the Community* project in 2008 to support its mission of creating more informed and engaged communities. As part of this initiative, the Knight Foundation conducted studies over three years in 26 cities across the United States where the Knight Foundation is active, including Fort Wayne. The third and last *Soul of the Community* report was published in 2010.



Knight Soul of the Community 2010

Why People Love Where They Live and Why It Matters: A Local Perspective

Indiana
FORT WAYNE

www.knightfoundation.org

KNIGHT *Soul of the Community*
A study of how communities attract, retain, and grow talent.

satisfaction, loyalty, and even passion. A community's most attached residents have strong pride in it, a positive outlook on the community's future, and a sense that it is the perfect place for them. They are less likely to want to leave than residents without this emotional connection. They feel a bond to their community that is stronger than just being happy about where they live.

Why Attachment Matters

Over the past three years, the Soul of the Community study has found a positive correlation between community attachment and local GDP growth. Across the 26 Knight communities, those whose residents were more attached saw more local GDP growth. This is a key metric in assessing community success because local GDP growth not only measures a community's economic success, but also its ability to grow and meet residents' needs.

Local GDP Growth by Levels of Community Attachment

Community Attachment	GDP Growth (2006-2009)	Population Growth (2006-2009)
<3.70 (n=7 communities)	0.3%	-0.2%
3.71-3.84 (n=9 communities)	6.7%	2.6%
3.85+ (n=7 communities)	6.9%	2.1%

GDP and population growth figures available for 23 of the 26 communities.

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Gallup research proving the link between employee engagement in a workplace to business outcomes such as productivity, profitability, and employee retention helps to underscore why emotional attachment matters. Just as actively engaged employees are more productive and committed to the success of their organizations, highly attached residents are more likely to actively contribute to a community's growth.

ON TWITTER: #SOTC



ABOUT YOUNG LEADERS OF NORTHEAST INDIANA

Young Leaders of Northeast Indiana's mission is to attract, develop, and retain emerging leaders through community, professional, and social engagement. Our vision is that Northeast Indiana is an attractive region influenced by diverse, emerging leaders who are engaged, inclusive, and attached to their community.

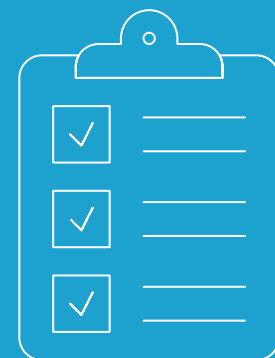


ABOUT THE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION OF GREATER FORT WAYNE

The Community Foundation of Greater Fort Wayne does three things: help people make their charitable giving more impactful, connect resources to nonprofits through grantmaking and education, and provide leadership to address community needs. The organization connects people and resources daily to build a more vibrant community. As of December 31, 2024, the Community Foundation held charitable assets of approximately \$247 million and awarded more than \$11 million in charitable grants and scholarships throughout the same year. Since its formation in 1922, the Community Foundation has awarded more than \$195 million in charitable grants.

METHODOLOGY

With support from the Community Foundation of Greater Fort Wayne, Young Leaders of Northeast Indiana engaged Andrew Downs Consulting and SurveyUSA to conduct a study. From January 28 to February 9, 2025, SurveyUSA interviewed 413 young adults in Allen County between the ages of 20 and 40. Following the survey, Andrew Downs Consulting facilitated eight in-person focus group discussions, with 13 participants across all interviews.



BELONGING BUILDS SUCCESS

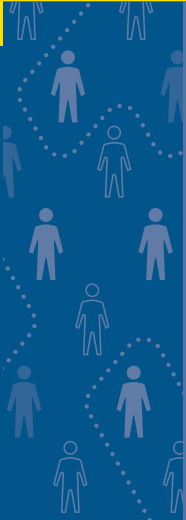


Community *connection, attachment, and belonging* all refer to the same thing: they refer to a person's happiness in a place, not wanting to leave that place, and, most importantly, willingness to make it better.

According to the 2010 *Soul of the Community* report, there's a positive correlation between community attachment and GDP growth. This is especially crucial for our young people, looking for a place to build their lives. Keeping our local talent and attracting regional and national talent to Northeast Indiana helps our economy grow. And when residents love where they live, they're not only more likely to invest their time and money locally, but they're also more likely to support and contribute to the growth of their community.

KEY DRIVERS OF BELONGING

While many factors contribute to an individual's sense of connection to their community, Knight Foundation defines *social offerings, openness, and aesthetics* as the three most prominent drivers across all Knight communities.



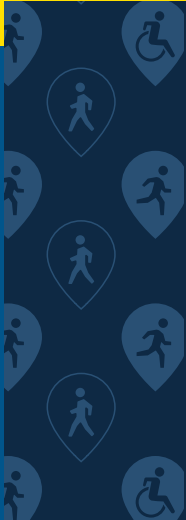
SOCIAL OFFERINGS

Opportunities for people to meet each other and the feeling that people in the community care about each other



OPENNESS

How welcoming the community is to different types of people, including families with young children, minorities, and talented college graduates



AESTHETICS

The physical beauty of the community, including the availability of parks and green spaces

KEY TAKEAWAYS



DRIVERS OF CONNECTION

Do young people feel connected to Northeast Indiana?

Overall, young people are mostly content with Allen County as a place to live, but based on key attachment drivers (social offerings, aesthetics, and openness), today's young people feel more negatively about Northeast Indiana than our community did 10 years ago. It's important to understand how these two audiences' perspectives differ to hone our strategy for supporting the 20–40-year-olds in our community.

In 2025, young people...

Say they are satisfied with Allen County as a place to live

66%

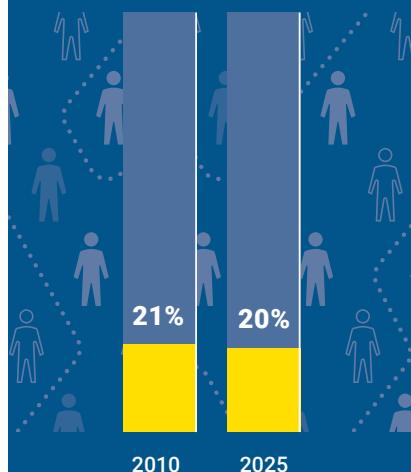
Would recommend Allen County as a place to live to a friend or associate

67%

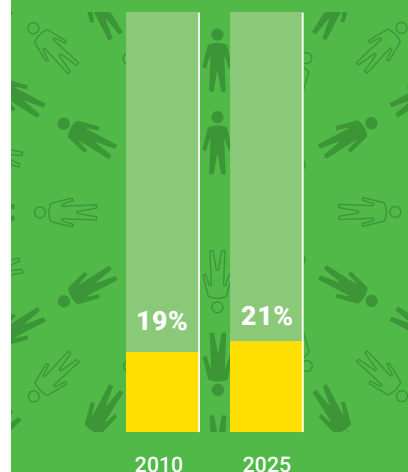
Say they are proud to live in Allen County

58%

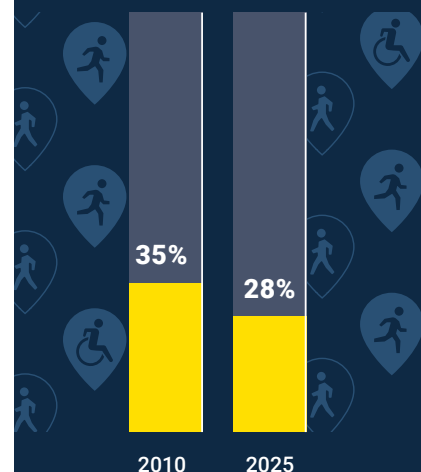
Percentage of Survey Respondents Rating Social Offerings Highly



Percentage of Survey Respondents Rating Openness Highly



Percentage of Survey Respondents Rating Aesthetics Highly



Young people are optimistic about the future.

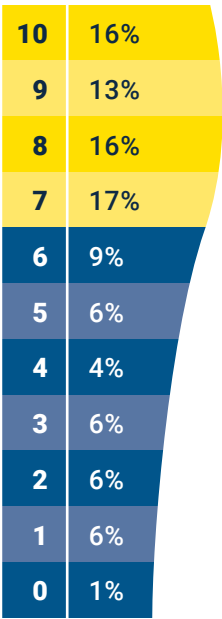
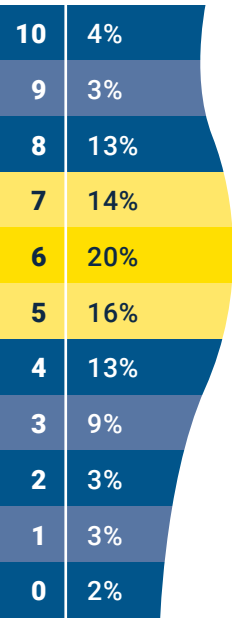
When asked to place themselves on a “ladder,” rating the quality of their life on a scale of one to 10, 50% of young people selected between five and seven. When asked where they think they would place themselves on the ladder five years from now, 62% selected seven or higher. Now and into the future, young people are hesitant to use superlatives like “best” or “perfect,” and this reflects an attitude of continual growth and improvement.

Fifty percent of respondents believe Allen County will be much or somewhat better as a place to live in five years, which supports the data indicating that 50% of survey respondents who place themselves on the higher half of living their best possible life in the future. Thirty-six percent believe it will be about the same, and 14% believe it will be somewhat or much worse.

Current Ladder

Future Ladder

10 = Best Possible Life / 0 = Worst Possible Life



BARRIERS TO CONNECTION

What’s stopping young people from feeling connected to Northeast Indiana?

While each person’s experience is unique, trends have emerged from the data regarding the factors that hinder young people’s connection to our community. Economic security, civic engagement, and social relationships are barriers to fostering a sense of belonging.

ECONOMIC SECURITY

Young people are concerned with economic conditions, especially affordable housing.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Young people do not understand how to and do not engage with local government, and they don’t understand their own potential impact in the community.

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Young people do not have strong social relationships in the community.

The following pages dive deeper into the results of Allen County’s community attachment drivers and barriers.





KEY TAKEAWAYS

SOCIAL OFFERINGS

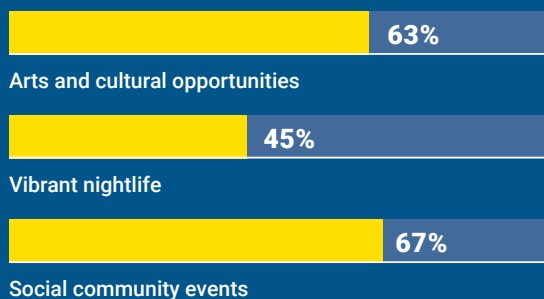
Just over half of young people feel positively about Allen County's overall social offerings—with good arts and culture opportunities, social community events, and places to meet people. The focus groups observed that they have “bought into the marketing.” They believe that Allen County has great festivals and parks because they've been told so, even if they haven't attended or visited them themselves. Most young people (67%) believe Allen County has a good availability of community events such as festivals, parades, and fairs, while 59% of respondents have attended such an event in the last year.

53%

believe Allen County is a good place to meet people and make friends.

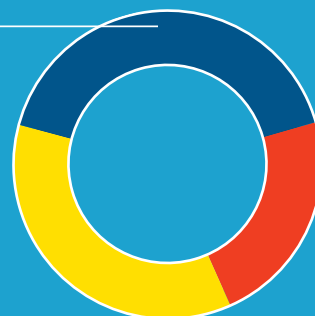


Young people believe Allen County has good...



Young people rate how much Allen County people care about one another as...

Good 42%
Neutral 36%
Bad 23%





OPENNESS





KEY TAKEAWAYS

OPENNESS

Roughly half of young people rate Allen County's overall openness as good, specifically believing the community is welcoming to families with young children, older people, and young adults without children. In the survey responses, there were also a high percentage of "neutral" responses when asked about Allen County as a place to live for different groups. The focus groups attribute this to young people's high self-awareness, that they cannot understand the experiences of other groups if they don't share their backgrounds.

Young people rank Allen County as a good place to live for the following populations from best to worst...

- 1 Families with young children
- 2 Young adults without children
- 3 Senior citizens
- 4 Racial and ethnic minorities
- 5 Young, talented college graduates looking to enter the job market
- 6 Immigrants
- 7 LGBTQ

In the 2010 study, openness was one of our community's greatest challenges, and continues to be an issue today.

When asked if they agree with the statement, "Allen County has a good reputation to outsiders or visitors who do not live here," young people...

Agree 59%
Neutral 26%
Disagree 15%



Hispanic respondents were more likely to **disagree** with the statements, "Allen County is the perfect place for me," and "Allen County has a good reputation to outsiders or visitors who do not live here."



SO THE AS





KEY TAKEAWAYS

AESTHETICS

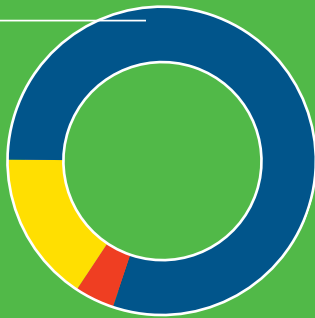
Of the three key drivers of community connection, young people rate Allen County's aesthetics mostly highly, with 68% of respondents saying its overall aesthetics are good. This considers both the availability of and improvements to the natural elements of our community, such as trails, as well as some aspects of our community that are embedded into the landscape, such as our rivers.

Young people believe our community's parks, playgrounds, and trails are...

Good 80%

Neutral 16%

Bad 4%

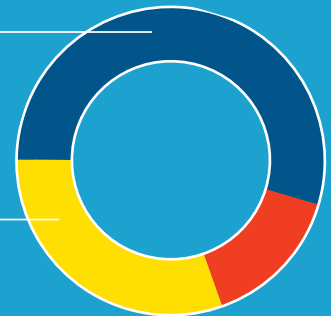


Young people believe our community's beauty or physical setting is...

Good 55%

Neutral 31%

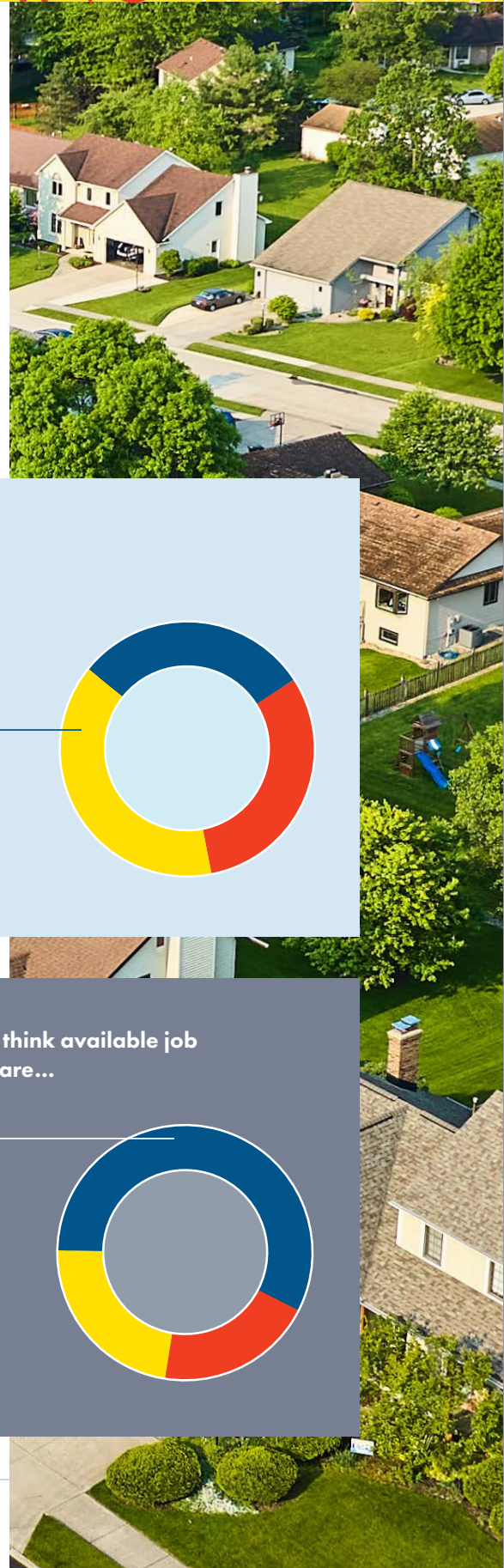
Bad 15%



BARRIERS TO BELONGING

ECONOMIC SECURITY BUILDS COMMUNITY

While young people are generally optimistic about their futures, their economic outlook worries them. When people are concerned about their basic needs, such as their job security and access to affordable housing, they're more likely to consider establishing their lives elsewhere. Concerns about economic conditions are high nationwide, and Fort Wayne is no exception.

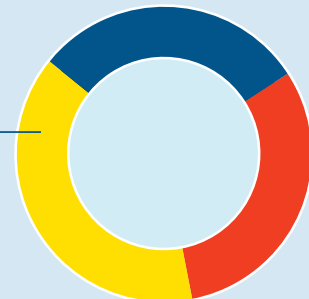


Young people think the economic conditions in Fort Wayne are...

Good 47%
Neutral 30%
Bad 23%

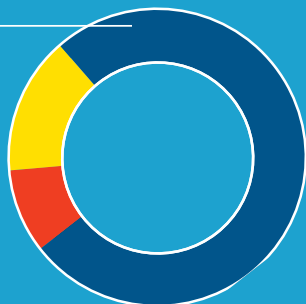


Getting Better 30%
Getting Worse 39%
Staying the Same 31%



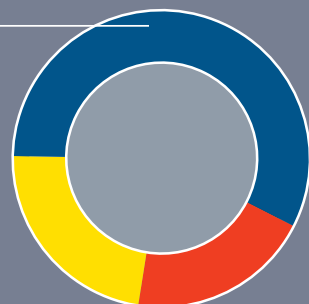
Young people, when asked about their current job satisfaction, are...

Satisfied 76%
Neutral 15%
Dissatisfied 9%



Young people think available job opportunities are...

Good 58%
Neutral 23%
Bad 20%

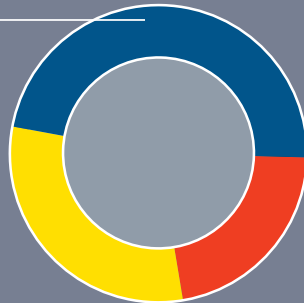


Young people rate Allen County as a place to live for young, talented college graduates looking to enter the job market as...

Good 48%

Neutral 31%

Bad 22%



Young people renting are more likely to say that economic conditions are bad.

21% Young people who own a home

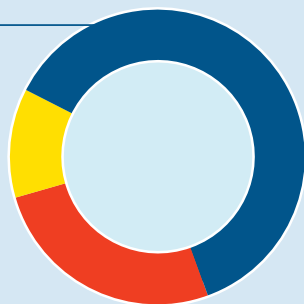
26% Young people who rent

When asked if their job provides them with the income to support their family, young people...

Agree 62%

Neither Agree nor Disagree 12%

Disagree 26%



Sixty-six percent say they are extremely satisfied or somewhat satisfied with Allen County as a place to live. Unsurprisingly, those with the highest household incomes are more likely to say they are extremely satisfied, while individuals with an income between \$35K and \$45K and those ages 25 to 29 are least likely to recommend Allen County as a place to live.

Young people think the availability of affordable housing is...

Good 35%

Neutral 24%

Bad 41%



A CALL TO ACTION

During a time of national economic uncertainty, how do we encourage and support our young people and give them hope for the future in our county? How do we help connect those in need with resources?

BARRIERS TO BELONGING

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT BUILDS COMMUNITY

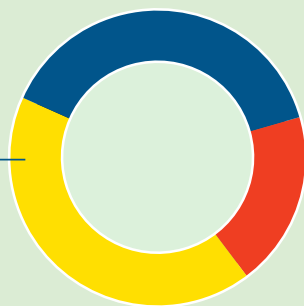
Civic engagement refers to individuals working independently or together to make a difference in their communities. These opportunities are political and non-political, and young people in Allen County find it especially difficult to understand and leverage their roles in local government. Meanwhile, they give back to their community in other ways but struggle to understand (and even doubt) how their actions contribute to large-scale change, which aligns with national trends.

Young people rate the leadership of elected officials in their cities...

Good 39%

Neutral 42%

Bad 19%



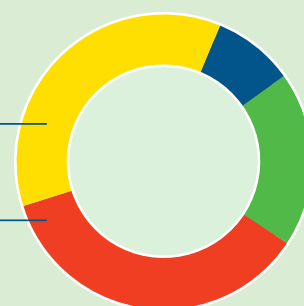
Young people trust the local government to do what is right...

Just about always 9%

Most of the time 36%

Only some of the time 36%

Hardly ever 19%



Eighty-nine percent of survey respondents are registered to vote, yet only 43% report that they voted for candidates in the most recent local election for offices like county commissioner, council, treasurer, or coroner. Only 13% attended a local public meeting in which local issues were discussed in the last 12 months, and almost all focus group participants said it was difficult to find information about how the government works and how to get involved in decision-making.

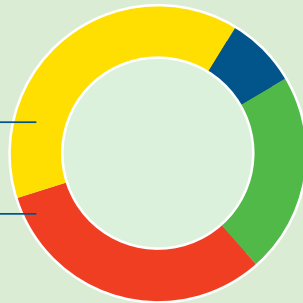
When asked how much impact people like them can have in the community, young people said...

No impact at all 8%

A small impact 39%

A moderate impact 32%

A big impact 22%



In the last 12 months, young people have...



Given money or food to an individual in need who is not related to them



Donated money to help a local organization



Performed local volunteer work for any organization or group



Worked with other residents to make change in the local community



Provided free shelter to an individual in need who is not related to them



A CALL TO ACTION

Knowing their general lack of confidence in and understanding of local government, how can organizations and officials create clarity around the processes? And, how can we encourage young people to participate in and understand the value of their time, talent, and treasure?

BARRIERS TO BELONGING

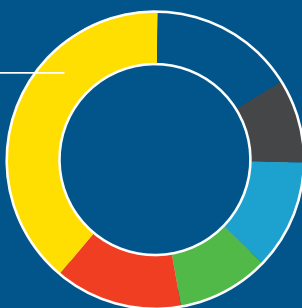
SOCIAL CONNECTIONS BUILD COMMUNITY

While Allen County has plenty of social offerings and infrastructure to meet others, young people aren't necessarily taking advantage of these opportunities. It's important to note how people connect these days—compared to 2010, individuals are more likely to connect in a digital landscape, where proximity is not a factor. This has caused a shift in the traditional ways that people meet and maintain relationships, which affects their attachment to the place they live.



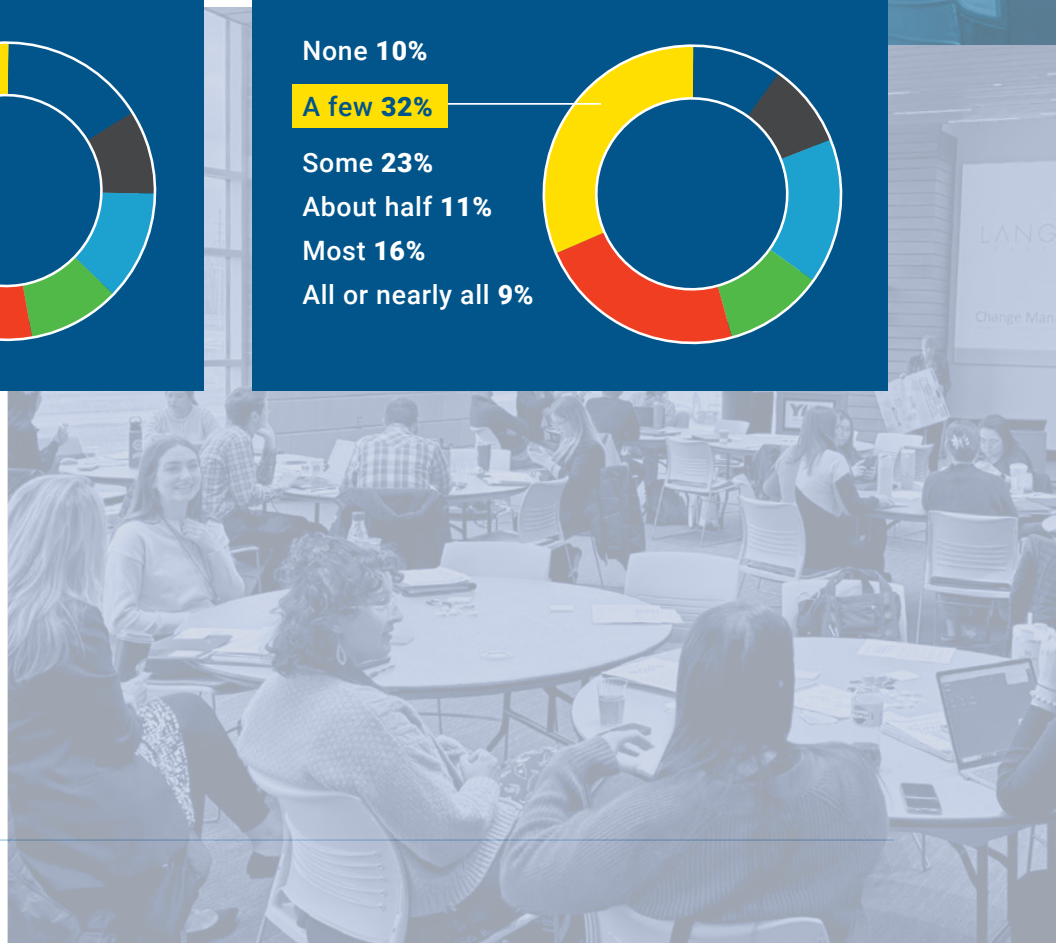
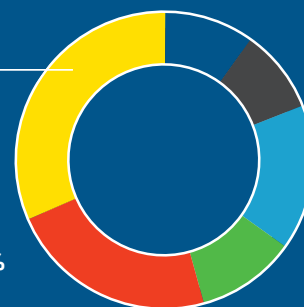
How many of young people's close friends live in their community...

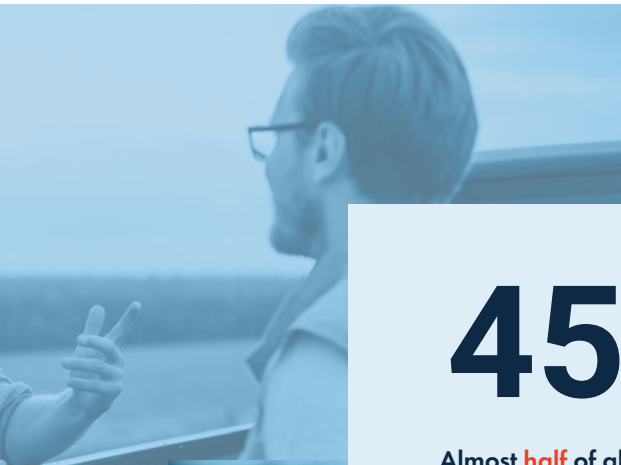
None 16%
A few 39%
Some 14%
About half 10%
Most 12%
All or nearly all 9%



How many of young people's friends are also friends with each other...

None 10%
A few 32%
Some 23%
About half 11%
Most 16%
All or nearly all 9%





45%

Almost **half** of all survey respondents do not belong to any formal or informal groups or clubs that meet monthly.



28%

of young people say they **never talk to or visit with their immediate neighbors** (the 10 or 20 households closest to them). Fourteen percent say they do so once a year or less.

A CALL TO ACTION

With most young people in Allen County being a technology-first generation, how can we encourage more in-person interactions within their communities? Or, how can we adapt our current social opportunities to meet them where they are, how they like to interact?

OUR NEXT STEPS

Looking toward the future of YLNI—and our community—the data in this report will support and inform our strategic direction as an organization. We'll also continue to seek out new collaborations that address the barriers and uplift the strengths identified in this report.

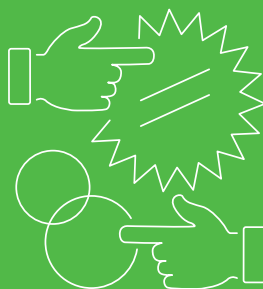
Moving forward, we will:



ADVOCATE FOR POLICIES THAT SUPPORT QUALITY OF PLACE.

We will use insights from the report to advocate for investment in inclusive public spaces, reliable transit, affordable housing, and vibrant cultural amenities that enhance regional attachment.

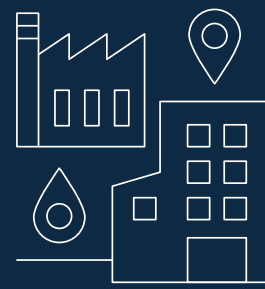
1



CREATE MORE ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES.

We will expand our existing opportunities for young people to become socially or politically engaged in the community.

2



EXPAND COLLABORATION WITH REGIONAL EMPLOYERS.

We will help employers understand and apply the report's findings to their recruitment, retention, and workplace culture strategies.

3

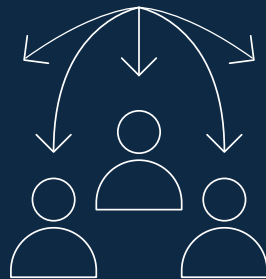
HELP US BUILD COMMUNITY



ELEVATE YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULT VOICES.

We will partner with schools, colleges, and youth-led groups to engage younger generations in community conversations and leadership development opportunities.

4



LAUNCH TARGETED PROGRAMMING TO ADDRESS BELONGING GAPS.

We will develop or adapt events, mentorship, and engagement opportunities that specifically serve groups who feel the least connected to the community, such as young professionals of color, remote workers, LGBTQ, or recent transplants.

5

This report is the result of collaboration, and we hope that stakeholders throughout our region will use it as a tool to inform their decisions, programs, and initiatives to make Northeast Indiana a place where young people want to live, work, study, and play.

If you or your organization helps advance economic security, civic engagement, professional development, or social connections, reach out to us to see how we can support one another in growing a more vibrant Northeast Indiana.

To learn more about YLNI and its next steps, get involved, or read the full report, contact YLNI at

info@ylni.org



BELONGING
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COMMUNITY

CONTACT

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