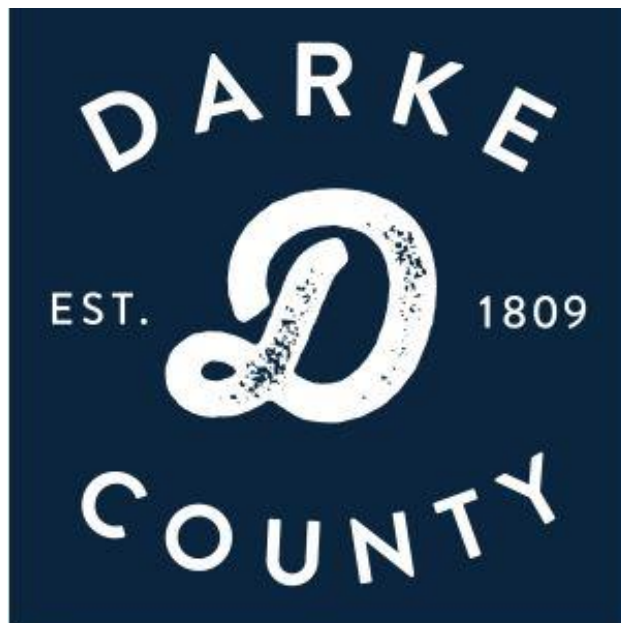# Darke County Community Needs Assessment

Prepared by:

Nancy Bowen-Ellzey, Becky Nesbitt,
David Civittolo and Gage Smith
Ohio State University Extension
Community Development

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THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF FOOD, AGRICULTURAL,
AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

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Introduction

Millennials, defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as Americans born between 1982 and 2000, recently overtook Baby Boomers as the largest living generation. It's no secret that millennials are seen as an essential demographic for urban prosperity. In October 2019's *Politico* survey[1] of American mayors found that 85 percent of them considered attracting this desirable population as one of their top 10 priorities. Nearly half of the mayors surveyed identified cultural amenities as their cities' most important selling point, but the vast majority said the biggest obstacle to attracting and retaining millennials was the lack of affordable housing and reliable public transit (Governing, Dec. 2017).

At the same time Millennials are surging, Boomers are retiring, creating many workforce vacancies that need to be filled. The Darke County NextGen group is looking strategically at how the county can position itself to be more attractive to Millennials and young professionals (YPs) by identifying and addressing amenity gaps. The lead organization, the Darke County Community Improvement Corporation and partner organizations including the Convention Visitors Bureau and Main Street, contracted with Ohio State University Extension, Community Development to develop a community needs assessment that reviews existing conditions and makes recommendations for improvements to help achieve these goals. A planning meeting between the organizations and Extension was held and a scope of work was agreed upon that included the following components:

Questions: How can we retain and attract young professionals? What amenity gaps need to be addressed? Are there best practice examples that can be cited?

- survey of the perceptions of Darke County by citizens from surrounding counties.
- case studies and best practice examples from demographically similar, but growing, Ohio counties
- three facilitated focus group sessions with business and community members to identify quality of life gaps
- analysis of findings and an inventory of quality of life features or amenities that are needed to attract and retain young adults
- infographic that can be shared with community members across media platforms, including a presentation of the report and findings to local leadership

Darke County has many assets, including a valued and historic downtown, a strong manufacturing sector that attracts a specialized workforce, a deeply ingrained and recognized heritage, and a strategic location near metro Dayton. Despite these assets, Darke County population has been declining for decades. In addition, the population is older and there is a low percentage of residents with postsecondary degrees in comparison with case study counties highlighted in this report.

Using the findings from this report, NextGen is planning to implement strategies to encourage population growth, particularly to attract young professionals to the county. This needs assessment report identifies several potential strategies that can help NextGen achieve their objective.

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[1] https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/10/30/mayors-poll-millennials-cities-urban-policy-215765

Evidence Basis for Assessment

A rural county in southwest Ohio, Darke County's population in 2017 was 51,536, representing flat or negative growth over several decades. By 2020, the population is projected to decrease by about 266 people or .05 percent. The county shares a small section of its southern border with Montgomery County which, with Dayton as its largest city and with a total population exceeding 535,000, is the fifth most populous county in Ohio.   The Whirlpool Corporation is Darke County's largest employer, one of 204 industries with a total employment of 28,585 in the county.

Darke County Demographic Data

Population Trends: Past, Current, and Future Populations

Total Population Projections

49,141   55,096   53,619   53,309   52,959   51,536   51,270

The total population is projected to decrease by 0.5 percent between 2017 and 2020.

1970   1980   1990   2000   2010   2017   2020
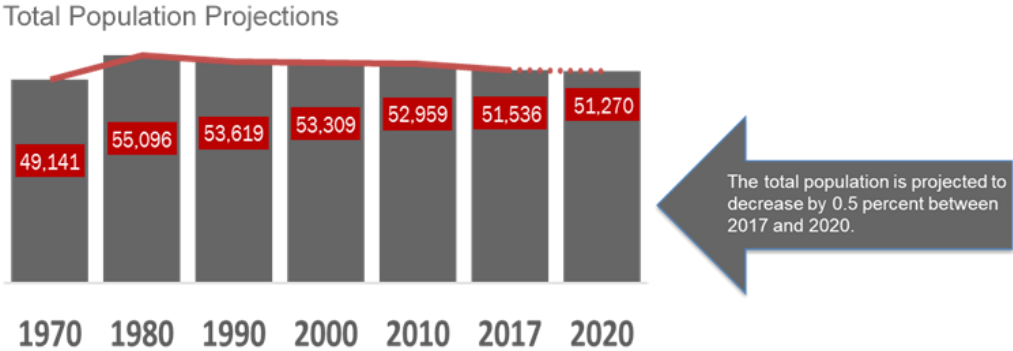
Darke County's total population decreased 3.3 percent between 2000 and 2017. The key contributor to that decrease was domestic migration (number of people moving into the county from Ohio or the U.S. minus the number moving out of the county to other parts of U.S., suffering a net loss of 2,859 individuals). Projections are showing another 0.5 percent decrease between 2017-2020.

Components of Population Change, 2000-2017

	2000-2010	2010-2017
Natural Increase	1,137	241
International Migration	77	30
Domestic Migration	-2,355	-1,699
Total Change	**-1,431**	**-1,428**

Natural increase (births minus deaths over that span of time) and international migration (the number of people moving in from outside the U.S. versus the number moving outside the U.S.) added 1,378 and 107 individuals, respectively, from 2000 to 2017.

Age Distribution
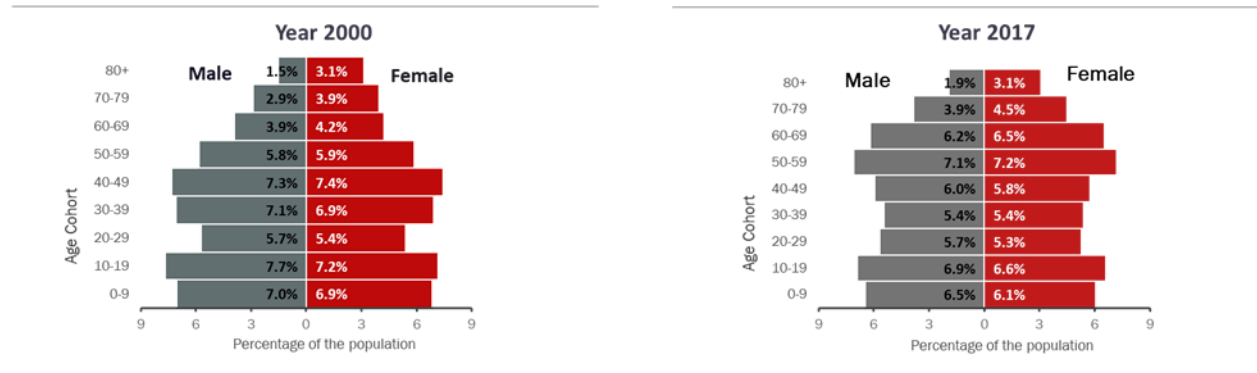
The proportion of people (males and females) 50 years of age and older expanded from 31.2 percent to 40.3 percent from 2000 to 2017. Several other age groups suffered a decline in Darke County. The percentage of people under 20 years old fell slightly from 28.8 percent to 26.1 percent from 2000 to 2017. Among them, individuals under 10 years old (age 0-9) shrank from 13.9 percent to 12.6 percent. Those individuals of prime working age between 20 and 49 years old experienced a downturn from 39.8 percent to 33.6 percent over the 2000 to 2017 time span.

The decline of people of prime working age, shrinking the pool of able-bodied workers necessary to attract new businesses or to expand existing companies in the county could be an indication of concern . The proportion of males and females in Darke County changed minimally between 2010 and 2017. About 50.4 percent of the population, 26, 696 individuals, was female in 2010, and that number decreased to 25,888 females in 2017.
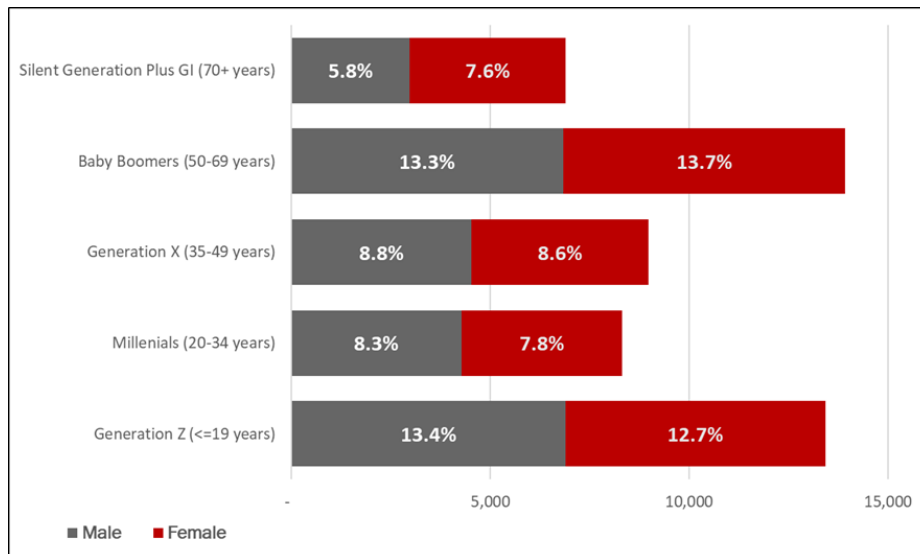
Of the generations listed, the Baby Boomer generation (ages 50-69) has the largest population at 13,921 in 2017, followed closely by Generation Z (less than 19 years old) with a total population of 13,433. Related to the county's working population (ages 20-49), nearly 18,000 are considered Millennials or Generation X. Specific strategies should be developed to expand the working population, particularly younger workers who will be filling gaps left as the Boomers continue to leave the workforce through retirement..

Educational Attainment
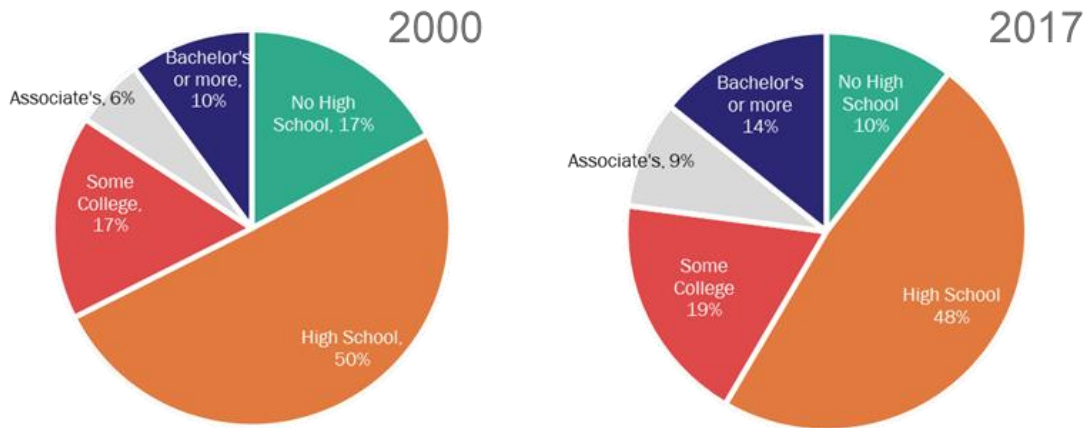
Darke County's share of adults with a bachelor's degree or higher increased by 4 percent from 2000 to 2017, while the proportion of adults with a high school education decreased by 2 percent. Residents with less than a high school education dipped by 7 percent over this period. There were 6,041 adult individuals who did not have a high school diploma in 2000—and that number dropped to 3,700 by 2017. The percentage of adults with an associate degree increased by 3 percent, while adults with some college education increased by 2 percent.

Journey to Work and Commuteshed
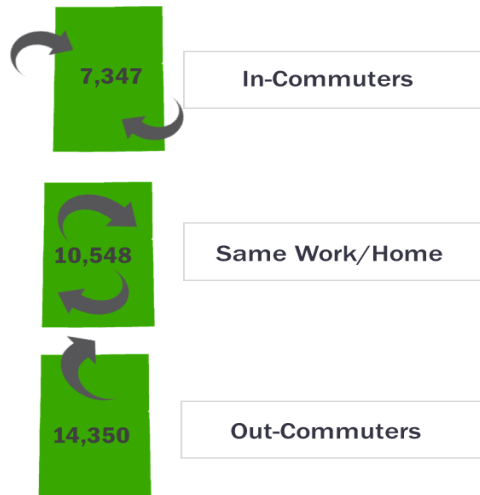
Darke County has more workers commuting out than commuting into the county for work.

Net commuting is negative with a deficit of 7,003 commuters. For every 100 employed residents, there are approximately 72 jobs in the county. This suggests that the county is not serving as a job center for the region.

	2015 Count	Proportion
Living in Darke County	24,898	100.0%
Both living and employed in the County	10,548	42.4%
Living in the County but employed outside	14,350	57.6%
Employed in Darke County	17,895	100.0%
Both employed and living in the County	10,548	58.9%
Employed in the County but living outside	7,347	41.1%

Darke County has more workers commuting out than commuting into the county
for work. Net commuting is negative with a deficit of 7,003 commuters. For every 100 employed residents, there are approximately 72 jobs in the county. This suggests that the county is not serving as a job center for the region.
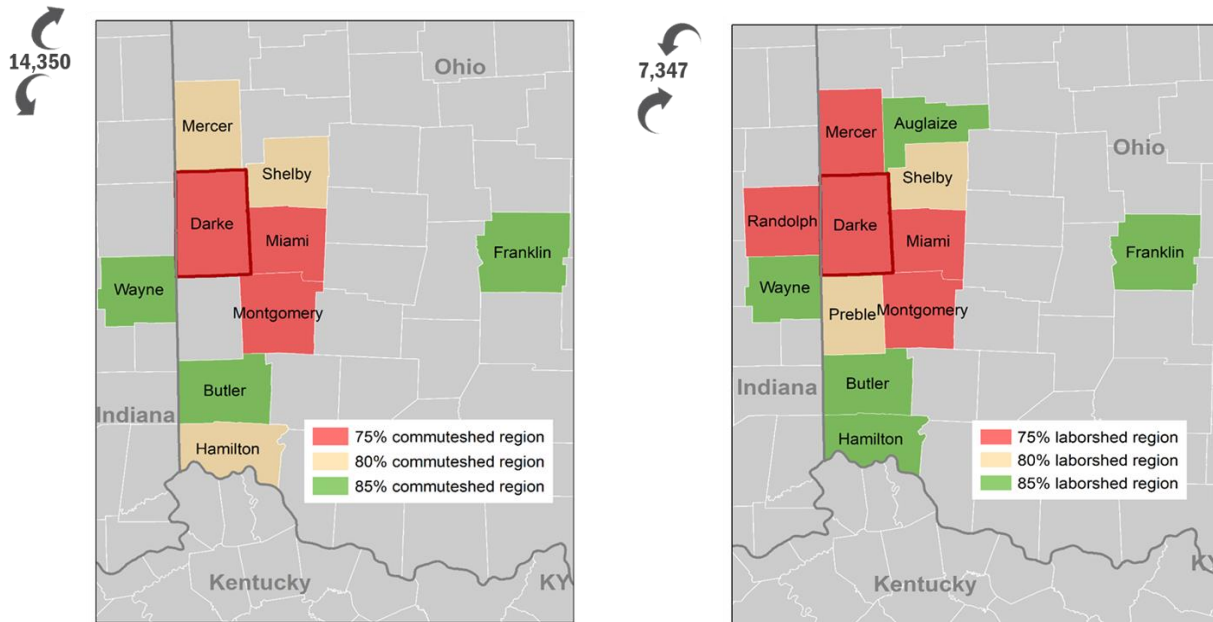
Commuteshed map (left side):
Approximately 75 percent of Darke County's working residents are employed in Darke, Miami, and Montgomery counties in Ohio. Another 5 percent of workers commute to Shelby, Mercer, and Hamilton counties in Ohio. An additional 5 percent of workers commute to jobs in Butler and Franklin counties in Ohio and Wayne County in Indiana. Collectively, these 12 counties represent roughly 85 percent of the commuteshed for Darke County.

Laborshed map (right side):
Nearly 42 percent of individuals working in Darke County commute from other counties. Miami County, Ohio is the largest source of workers, contributing 6.5 percent of the total employees in Darke County. Montgomery and Mercer counties, in Ohio, along with Randolph County in Indiana, complete the top five sources of outside workers in Darke County.

Seventy-five percent of Darke County's workforce is drawn from Darke, Miami, Montgomery, and Mercer counties in Ohio and Randolph County in Indiana. Another 5 percent is drawn from Preble and Shelby counties in Ohio. An additional 5 percent commute from Franklin, Hamilton, Butler, and Auglaize counties in Ohio and Wayne County in Indiana. Combined, these 12 counties represent 85 percent of Darke County's laborshed.

Darke County Economic Data

Unemployment Rates

	2003	2010	2017
Labor Force	28,802	27,050	26,262
Unemployment Rate	6.7%	11.2%	4.2%
Labor Force Participation Rate	N/A	87.8%	88.4%

Since 2003, the total number of Darke County residents in the labor force has dropped from 28,802 to 26,262 in 2017. It also should be noted that the unemployment rate has dropped to 4.2 percent in 2017, since a high of 11.2 percent in 2010. The labor force participation rate has increased slightly to 88.4 percent. This measure is the number of people in Darke County 16 years old and over that is either working or actively seeking work.
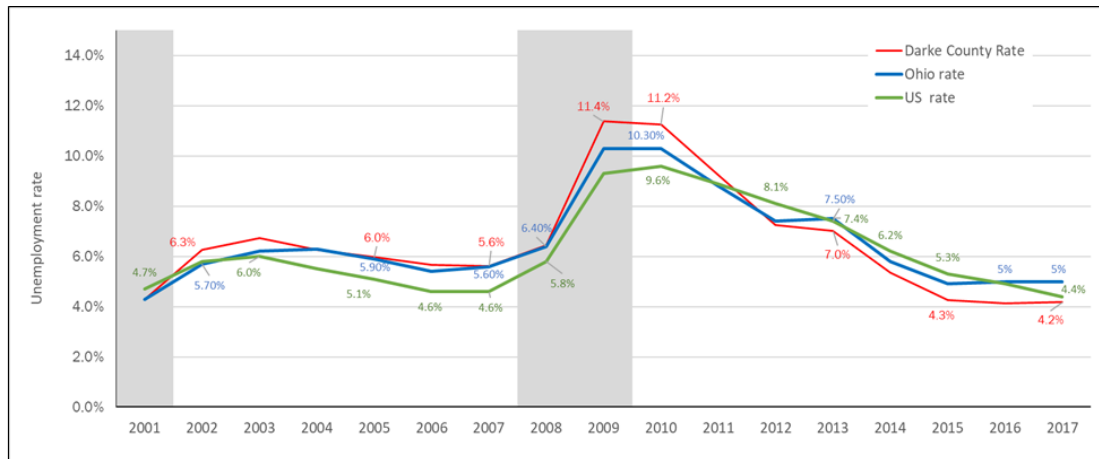
Source: BLS

The unemployment rate in Darke County increased dramatically after 2007, peaking at 11.4 percent in 2009. Since that time, the rate has been on a steady decline, dropping to 4.2 percent in 2017, which is lower than the State of Ohio's (4.4 percent).

Income and Poverty

Changes in Jobs (2003-2018)		Jobs
Gained by	New Start-ups	14,525
	Expansion	7,917
	In-migration	576
Lost by	Closings	16,749
	Contractions	7,519
	Out-migration	537
Net Change		**-1,787**

Beginning in 2003, over 23,000 jobs were added to the Darke County economy. Of the 23,000 new jobs created, almost all of them were the result of new business start-ups and/or the expansion of current businesses in Darke County.

However, during the same time (2003-2018), almost 17,000 jobs were lost by business closings and another 7,500 by business contractions. In total, 23,018 jobs were created, and 24,805 jobs were lost, demonstrating a net loss of 1,787 jobs for the county during the 2003-2018 timeframe.

Stage	Establishments 2018	% Change (2003-2018)	Jobs 2018	% Change (2003-2018)	Sales 2018 ($ 2018, Million)	% Change (2003-2018, $ 2018)
Stage 0	353	0.0%	353	0.0%	34.9	-48.4%
Stage 1	1,490	14.6%	5,723	14.1%	927.9	-28.2%
Stage 2	391	-8.4%	9,943	-5.0%	2,600.0	27.0%
Stage 3	23	9.5%	3,906	-9.7%	572.6	-51.5%
Stage 4	3	0.0%	1,705	-46.3%	176.2	-71.8%
Total	2,260	7.4%	21,630	-7.3%	4,312	-17.3%

The total number of establishments in 2018 in Darke County were 2,260, up 7.4 percent from 2003. However, during that same timeframe, the total number of jobs (21,630), decreased by 7.3 percent.

	2001	2009	2017
Total Population in Poverty	7.7%	11.9%	9.2%
Minors (Under Age 18) in Poverty	11.0%	16.8%	12.5%
Real Median Household Income ($2017)*	$55,563	$46,703	$53,954
Real Per Capita Income ($2017)*	$37,414	$35,371	$39,773
	2000	**2008**	**2017**
Percent of Household in Upper Income Bracket ($100,000 +)**	6.1%	9.0%	14.9%
Percent of Household in the Lowest Income Bracket (Less than $30,000)**	36.2%	31.7%	27.4%

*Real median household income is the middle income value in the county. Half of the county's households fall above this line and half below. Real per capita personal income is the average income per person in the county.

**Percent of household in upper income bracket: 2017 is 5 year ACS, 2008 is 3 year ACS, 2000 is Census summery file 3 (SF-3).

The time period for this graph is 2000, 2008 and 2017 because data for 2001 Percent of Household in Upper Income Bracket and the Lowest Income Bracket are not available. These data are available either from 3-Year or 5-Year ACS.

Median household income in Darke County dropped by $1,609 between 2001 and 2017 in real dollars (that is, adjusted for inflation), while average income per person increased by $2,359 in real dollars over the same period. What these data suggest is that there is a growing income inequality that may be taking place in the county. Median income refers to an income level in which 50 percent of the population has income that exceeds that number and 50 percent falls below that number. If real median income goes down, that suggests that 50 percent of the population is now earning less than they did in 2001, adjusted for inflation. The total population in poverty increased by 1.5 percentage points between 2001 and 2017, another factor that could have contributed to the decline in median income. As for child poverty, it grew at the same pace, 1.5 percentage points during this same time period.
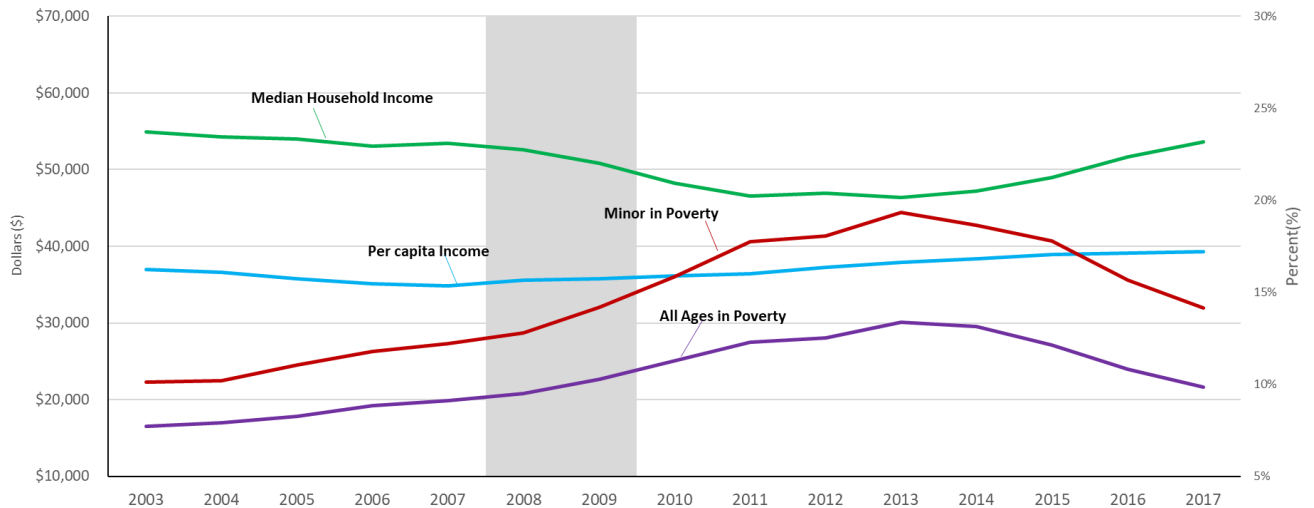
Note: Ending point is shown as the time period.

This chart takes a longer historical view of income and poverty in Darke County. The data reveal that median household income in Darke County has been fluctuating for the past 15 years, dropping to a low of $46,951 in 2011 and increasing to $53,573 in 2017. Real per capita personal income has remained relatively steady since 2003. The overall poverty rate for all ages and among individuals under 18 years of age has been increasing since 2001 until 2013 when it reached over 13.0 percent, but has been decreasing since that time.

Methodology

The Process

OSU Extension professionals collaborated with the NextGen group to develop project priorities,with a focus on understanding what assets are needed to attract and retain young professionals. An in-person meeting with the group was held in May 2019 to discuss priorities and expected outcomes and to establish a timeline. It was determined that the project would have four elements:

1. Demographic profile. Since the NextGen group cited the Jay County Indiana Economic Development Plan, OSU Extension worked with the Purdue University Center for Development to produce a demographic profile for Darke County that was similar to what was developed for Jay County.
3. A perceptions survey of about 500 people who resided in Darke County and in adjacent counties to Darke to determine their perceptions and attitudes regarding living and visiting Darke County.
4. Three focus group sessions were conducted with young professionals at three of the top employers in Darke County: Whirlpool Corporation, Midmark Corporation, and Wayne HealthCare.
4. An examination of case studies and best practice examples employed to attract and retain young professionals in other counties throughout Ohio.
5. Dr. Ned Hill, professor, joint appointment with John Glenn college of Public Affairs and the College of Engineering, will speak to NextGen in January 2020, to address strategies that rural counties have effectively implemented to grow their popuations and improve their livability.

Community Perceptions Survey

A web-based survey to measure perceptions of Darke County was developed with 11 questions. NextGen subsequenty distributed the survey to community and membership organizations in neighboring counties who then e-mailed the survey link to their membership database. The survey was also distributed at the Darke County Fair as well as other venues throughout the region. More than 500 respondents shared their thoughts, perceptions, and experiences related to Darke County and desired quality of life indicators. The results of the survey are summarized and included in this report.

Focus Groups

A primary goal of the leadership team was to hear from young professionals who work in the county, but who live elsewhere. The purpose is to better understand the considerations related to motivations and decisions about where to live and why. Three focus group sessions were conducted with professionals, under age 40, at three of the top employers in Darke County. Each session was about 1 to 1-½ hours in duration. A total of 15 participants contributed feedback during the sessions.

Case Studies Best Practices and Relevant Research

A list of potential best practice case study counties in Ohio was reviewed and agreed to by the leadership group. The list includes demographically similar rural counties that are growing and thriving. Theyhave also been highly ranked on lists developed by HomeSnacks, a ranking group from Raleigh, NC. Research into why these counties are successful included researching recent press releases and reports, reviewing demographics and rankings and, in a couple cases, interviewing local leadership. A literature review of best practices in several other counties was also included in the report.

Development of the Plan

The Darke County NextGen Group and OSU Extension team met during one face-to-face and two CarmenZoom meetings to plan the scope of the needs assessment and to make necessary adjustments. A demographic profile was developed and presented to the group. The group studied the responses from the perceptions survey and focus group sessions. The needs assessment took shape as a product of this process.

Review of Research

Past research helps shed light on what rural regions and communities are doing to attract and retain a future workforce, particularly young people, who are filling jobs left by retiring boomers. Three examples of the literature, conclusions and reflections regarding Darke County, are below.

Rating Aspects of Living in NW Ohio	Mean
Safe Place to Live	5.09
Good place to raise a family	4.94
Affordable cost of living	4.68
Quality schools	4.59
People share my beliefs and values	4.50
A good place to further my education	3.46
There is positive growth in the area	3.25
Enough recreational activities	3.23
Good income potential	2.95
Interesting and fun activities	2.92
Enough employment opportunities	2.88
Enough cultural activities	2.86

Factors that Influence Youth Retention in Northwest Ohio (2010)
In 2010, a team of OSU Extension 4-H Youth Development educators and researchers sought to find out how to retain young people in rural Northwest Ohio. They conducted a survey of 25-35 year olds asking them to rate (from 1-5) various aspects of living in Northwest Ohio.[2] The 2010 survey findings resonate with perception survey findings from our current project, since several of the same indicators, including safety, rank highly. Respondents were describing wanting to live in a place that is affordable, safe and a good place to raise a family. In general, a good quality of life.

The study found that the three most significant reasons why young people decide to live or move back to the region are: 1) safe place to live, 2) good place to raise a family and, 3) affordable cost of living. Quality schools also ranked in the top five. The researchers found a correlation between job satisfaction and whether they decide to return to live in Northwest Ohio. Because of this correlation, they recommend working closely with schools to match high school youth with career fields that link them back to rural areas, so there are more opportunities for employment back home.

Highest rated variables: Safe place to live. Good place to raise a family. Affordable cost of living. Quality Schools.

Communities must start with a good quality of life and be attractive and compelling places to live in order to attract and retain YPs. Darke County has many of the basic assets needed - a diverse mix of manufacturers offering high skilled and good paying jobs, affordable cost of living, outdoor activities, quality health care and improving the area school systems. According to a Brookings Institution report, the quality of life that communities offer their present and prospective residents has become a critical factor in defining the economic development potential of the city and region (Alan Berube, MetroNation, Brookings Institution 2007, p45).

Extraordinary Results in Ordinary Communities (2010)
A report by the Kettering Foundation in 2010 studied four exemplary rural communities to find out what made them successful. A team embedded themselves into the communities for months to interview citizens, attend meetings and study what they could about the communities.

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[2] Homan, G., Hedrick, J., Dick, J. (2010). Factors that influence youth retention in Northwest Ohio. North American Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture (NACTA) Journal. Vol. 2., no 54.

The primary finding of the study was that the successful community begins with "catalysts" who are laser-focused on achieving goals, changing the status quo and improving the community. All four communities were originally rooted in an agricultural economy but were transformed over time to become more diversified. They also became more focused on quality of life and aesthetics including downtown development. All this because one or more local catalysts had a vision and determination to change things for the better.

The NextGen group is a good example of a catalyst in Darke County. This group has the determination and desire to facilitate improvement. Several successes have already taken place that demonstrate how a small group of people can initiate change. One example is the work done being in downtown Greenville. Survey respondents were complimentary of the First Friday events and other family-friendly activites in addition to the historic architecture and feel of the downtown. But, as this study describes, change takes time and should not be expected to occur overnight. Dr. Ned Hill advises, "Play the long game and have a wide strategy."

Playbook for Successful Rural Communities (2019)
Dr. Hill, who teaches economic development policy at The Ohio State University's John Glenn College of Public Affairs, promotes an asset-based strategy. What does a community already have in place? Dr. Hill's playbook for successful rural communities advises thinking long term using an asset based strategy that prioritizes local investment which, in turn, leads to external investment. He recommends the "adapt, not adopt" approach. Every community has unique assets that set them apart. Discovering what these current assets are, then building on them, is a key recipe for success.

Examples of assets in Darke County include anchor institutions like the Whirlpool Corporation, Wayne HealthCare and MidMark Corporation. These institutions not only contribute to economic development and quality of life, but also have significant human capital resources that can be tapped. Anchors can be employers, education institutions, foundations or other long-standing institutions that have influence in the community or region. Darke County has the opportunity to further leverage anchors to help them achieve their goals.

Wall Street Journal and USA Today Articles on Millennial Moving Trends
Three recent articles, "Millennials continue to leave big cities"[3] "Millennials are coming to america's small towns"[4], and "Millennials to small cities: Ready or not here we come!"[5] describe the growing trend of millennials moving away from big cities to small town America. One article states that, in 2018, for the fourth consecutive year, almost 27,000 Millennials aged 25-39 left big cities. High housing costs and poor schools are the main reasons. Many are also looking to escape long commutes and tight spaces and find jobs in small towns that provide a safer, more affordable, less harried existence. They are also looking for a chance to remake small towns into their own.

This trend, Millennials leaving cities for small towns, is also driven by employers like Cummins, in Columbus, Indiana. Cummins has been targeting knowledge workers, from engineers to computer programers to management, and is seeking out YPs to fill these roles. Opportunities are being created for rural counties like Darke to partner with employers to recruit this mobile, young professional demographic.

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[3] https://www.wsj.com/articles/millennials-continue-to-leave-big-cities-11569470460

[4] https://www.wsj.com/articles/millennials-are-coming-to-americas-small-towns-11570832560

[5] https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2017/11/05/millennials-small-cities-ready-not-here-we-come/830955001/

Case Study and Best Practice Counties

Many rural counties are looking for ways to attract and retain young professionals. In an October, 2018 Harvard Politcal Review blog, "Keeping Rural America Alive," Nina Eikadi describes unique examples of what rural communities are doing to reverse population loss. One young innovator proposed creating mini tech hubs throughout rural America. These hubs will provide software development jobs with starting salaries starting at over $50k. The first tech hub, "The Jefferson Forge," celebrated a grand opening this past September in the city of Jefferson, Iowa[6].

Immigrants are also filling the workforce void in communities such as Storm Lake, Iowa and Garden City, Kansas, where populations are now booming. Still other communities have recognized that the factors that attract Millennials are also attractive to the Empty Nester demographic.

What are rural counties in Ohio doing to address population loss? In this section, case studies and best practices are profiled. Four characteristically similar Ohio counties were chosen as case studies – Delaware, Hancock, Hardin and Wayne. Another three counties were chosen to describe best practices that are helping reverse population decline. They are Auglaize, Sandusky and Van Wert.

Several of the counties are included in recent rankings "Best Counties to Call Home for 2018" or "10 Best Places to Buy a House in Ohio for 2019," by HomeSnacks[7]. Criteria for the first designation were based on eight measures.

- Median home values
- Median income
- Unemployment rates
- Adult education levels
- Health insurance coverage
- Poverty rates
- Violent crime
- Property crime rates

For the second designation, the general criteria is that the places are growing, have seen home prices increased in recent years, and are relatively inexpensive for Ohio.

- Change in population
- Change in median home prices
- Home prices relative to the state average

The table below compares Darke Caounty with selected counties for five-year population change, percentage of postsecondary degree attainment and median age. Three of the four case study counties have increased population, while best practice counties Van Wert, Auglaize and Hardin, have seen very small population increases in the past year or two (unseen in the table).

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[6] https://cityofjeffersoniowa.org/events/the-opening-of-the-first-rural-forge/
[7] HomeSnacks Rankings, Raleigh, NC

Table 3. Comparison of Case Study Best Practice Counties

County	Population (2018)	Population (2013)	Population Change (2013-2018)	Postsecondary Degree+ (2018)	Median Age (2018)
Darke	51,323	52,666	-1,343	21.7%	41.8
Auglaize	45,804	45,906	-102	28.7%	41.1
Delaware	204,826	185,319	19,507	53.8%	38.4
Hancock	75,930	75,239	691	35.4%	38.9
Hardin	31,480	31,886	-406	22.9%	35.6
Sandusky	58,799	60,619	-1,820	24.8%	41.7
Van Wert	28,281	28,685	-404	26.7%	41.4
Wayne	115,967	115,915	52	28.7%	38.7

Case Studies
Delaware (pop. 204,826)
Strategy: Historic preservation/downtown redevelopment
Delaware is an example of a community that has gone from distressed to dynamic within a few decades. Downtown Delaware, Ohio, was a burgeoning community in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with strong institutions like Ohio Wesleyan University and the county courthouse anchoring the neighborhood. But economic growth faltered in the 1970s and 1980s. (American Planning Association, Creating Great Communities for All, 2019).

Boarded-up buildings dotted the three-block stretch of Sandusky Street, the commercial heart of downtown, and vacancy rates soared. Downtown Delaware was no longer a destination for visitors or residents. Recognizing the negative impact that losing a historically, aesthetically, and economically meaningful center would have on Delaware, city officials jumped to action to preserve the downtown's architectural heritage, a move that would ultimately halt downtown Delaware's retail exodus.

The Sandusky Street Corridor became a designated National Register Historic District, which led the city council to establish the Historic Preservation Commission[8] tasked with preserving the character of the historic structures and ensuring compatible new construction with the district. City administrators took advantage of funding offered through the Ohio Department of Transportation and Ohio Department of Development to make it easier for residents and visitors to access and to enjoy the amenities returning to Downtown Delaware.

With five million dollars in local and state investment, the city was able to install new streetlights and bricking throughout the downtown and to make needed drainage, curb, and sidewalk improvements. At the same time, the city council began offering tax incentives to local business

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[8] http://www.delawareohio.net/about-the-planning-community-development-department/historic-preservation-commission/

owners and residents to reinvest in their downtown buildings. The city developed a comprehensive plan and corridor design standards to guide redevelopment efforts.

A renewed downtown Delaware began to emerge in the mid-2000s with the return of residents, students, and visitors to local shops and restaurants. Demand for housing in the neighborhood grew, with new apartments in redeveloped, second-floor spaces above retail. Bikeways were constructed to connect people, parks, neighborhoods, services, and businesses.

Progress stalled in 2008 when the Great Recession hit. Through the planning process, residents and business owners voiced their support for outdoor dining options in the downtown. The city obliged, permitting restaurants to offer al fresco options for the first time.

The city also tapped Ohio's unused Community Development Block Grant economic development revolving loan fund as a funding source for downtown improvement projects. Twenty-nine businesses leveraged nearly $1 million through the city's facade improvement project. Many other community groups like Main Street Delaware[9] and Preservation Parks District[10] have created programming that reflects the interests of Delaware residents and invested in space that gives downtown Delaware its distinctive look.

The future of Historic Downtown Delaware looks bright. Ninety-five percent of the downtown's commercial space is occupied, with retail space and occupancy rates expected to climb. In addition to downtown successes, public schools in Delaware County have continuously improved and are now in Ohio's top 10%.

With a current population of 204,826, the county is the fastest growing county in Ohio, having grown by almost 100,000 people since 2000. Median income is one of the highest in the state at $94,234. Delaware is also the only county in the state where more than 50 percent of its adult residents have a bachelor's degree. The US average is 33 percent. The county is ranked #6 in Ohio by HomeSnacks as the "Best County to Call Home for 2018."

Hancock County (pop. 75,930)
Strategy: Economic development/infrastructure improvements
Findlay has demonstrated continued economic development success, having been ranked first among 575 micropolitan areas (cities with populations between 10,000 and 50,000) for business growth. The national ranking by Site Selection is based on the number of investment projects of $1 million or more and addition of at least 20,000 sq. ft. of space. In 2018, the community had 23 such projects.

Population has continued to increase in Hancock County every year for the past five years. New residents can possibly be attributed to increased job opportunities, particularly technical positions in manufacturing and healthcare. Last year, population increased by 176 people. Hancock county leadership credits the cooperation of city, county and economic development entities for much of the recent accomplishments.

Tim Mayle, the economic development director, agrees that cooperation is key. He cites examples of direct communications between businesses and the County to head off problems before jobs are lost. One company called to announce it was leaving but agreed to work with the economic development leadership to attract a replacement business..which they did. There is a reliance on relationship building and open communications to assure positive job growth.

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[9] https://www.mainstreetdelaware.com/
[10] https://www.mainstreetdelaware.com/

He states that they are also very interested in making sure the "peaks and valleys" are leveled out as much as possible so the economy stays on a fairly even keel.

Many also credit Findlay Mayor, Lydia Mihalik, who resigned early this year to accept the top job with Ohio's Department of Development for economic development successes. As the first female Mayor , she was instrumental in attracting a few large grants to tackle the issue of flood mitigation. Flooding had become a barrier to growth and improvements were necessary to lower the risk factor for new or expanding businesses. With improvements in place and flooding less of a concern, expansions have been at an all time high as companies feel more at ease investing in Findlay and Hancock County.

Another common concern is strengthening the workforce for new or expanding businesses. The county has two key education anchors, the University of Findlay and Owens Community College, both which are developing customized training and degree programs to prepare the workforce for highly skilled jobs. At over 35%, the population includes a relatively high percentage of people with postsecondary degrees, an asset to attract new companies. On the other hand, since many technical positions don't necessarily require a degree, educational institutions must stay at the ready to develop new, customized programs that meet company needs. Steve Robinson, President of Owens Community College says "we need to ramp up efforts to get people to think that technical careers are cool, and make community colleges first steps".

As the county continues to grow, it is cognizant of the fact that it is a rural county within Northwest Ohio, a region known for a strong work ethic. When asked by a Toledo Blade reporter what Findlay/Hancock County's secret is…is it politics, is it location, or is it luck? The economic development director responded that "it really just comes down to the people and building relationships."

Hardin County (pop. 31,480)
Strategy: Agency collaboration/anchor investment
The Hardin County Chamber and Business Alliance is a multi-organizational approach to development and growth that combines the chamber, tourism, economic development and community development offices. They share a physical space, membership, board, president and support staff. The organizational structure has been successful in moving forward a number of new growth initiatives.

A five-year strategic plan[11] was completed in 2015. It has focused on five core goals including business, workforce, community, and operational excellence. In the five years since the plan was complete, its effectiveness as a collaborative effort has had numerous positive outcomes, including leveraging the involvement and commitment of one of the county's primary anchors, Ohio Northern University (ONU).

ONU, has a very successful student placement rate, with a good percentage of students staying in Hardin or surrounding counties after graduation. A recent survey of graduates found that 95 percent were either employed or in an advanced education program. Some remain in Hardin County after graduation.

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[11] http://hardincountyoh.linkedupradio.com/assets/files/HCCBA_Five_Year_Strategic_Plan_ BoardApproved.pdf

Located in Ada, the college is a strong partner with the economic development alliance to help Hardin County grow and prosper. As a sustainable campus generating 10 percent of their own power, through wind and geothermal technologies, they have been leaders and supportive of wind development in Hardin County. Three wind farms are soon to be operational.

ONU is a partner with the collaborative, contributing to economic and community development efforts. Their support has also attracted other private sector investment and support of the collaborative initiatives. The plan has not only leveraged private sector but also public grants for additional plans on the village level, in addition to infrastructure projects.

Hardin County's median age is 35.6, compared to Ohio's median age of 38.8. Some of this can be attributed to ONU graduates staying in the region, some of whom have started new businesses. As Hardin County continues to grow, albiet slowly, it can cultivate leadership and entrepreneurship among a base of younger residents who can help to propel the county forward in the future.

Kenton, the largest city in Hardin County, was ranked #1 by HomeSnacks as the best place to buy a house in Ohio for 2019. Criteria considered included positive change in population, change in median home prices (people willing to pay for it) and home prices relative to the state average. Housing indicators, along with a younger population base, and a culture of collaborating to create quality jobs and holds the promise to continue to attract and retain YP's to the county.

Wayne County (pop. 115,967)
Strategy: Downtown development/entrepreneurship
Wooster is the largest city in Wayne County with a population of 26,618 in 2017. Between 2013-2018, Wayne County's population has begun to increase, showing an addition of 52 people during this five year period. Much the growth and success of the county is attributed to Wooster's vibrant downtown, which is helping to attract young professionals.

Main Street Wooster, Inc. incorporated in June, 1985, is the cornerstone of the community and county. Implementation of the program began over 30 years ago, January, 1987. The community took on improvement in the downtown area when it was realized that 42 percent of storefronts and 67 percent of upper stories were vacant in the mid-eighties. The change has been remarkable, but gradual, starting with community meetings and efforts to bring people downtown. As community interest grew, the city began to invest in the square and in public buildings.

They established a Community Reinvestment District (CRA), historic district and renovation district to acquire funding, and this helped to spur developers to invest in the downtown. This led to private sector investment in buildings, including renovations to upper floor areas for residential occupancy. Hands-on assistance has been provided to property owners and businesses to aid with building projects, interior and exterior, including involving design consultants and contractors.

Main Street also established new promotions and events to create community ownership of downtown Wooster and to entice visitors and residents to want to be and to live in the downtown. Wooster's efforts to assist small or startup businesses to locate and expand in the downtown have benefited young entrepreneurs. As a few have been successful, others are seeking to join in the success.

Gradually, people embraced loft living and now, many people live and work in the downtown. The effort has resulted in 300 businesses which include retail, service, governmental, education, and non-profits. Today, there is more than 90% occupancy in retail, restaurant and service businesses, and 96% occupancy in the second and third stories of the buildings, showcasing more than 148 lofts and 15 condominiums.

Wooster was designated one of Ohio's "Best Hometowns" by Ohio Magazine in 2006 and 2017; an All-American City (AAC) in 1975, an AAC semifinalist in 1997 and has been a Tree City since 1976. Wooster's motto is: "Keeping Tradition a Part of Our Future."

Best Practices

Auglaize County (pop. 45,804)
Strategy: Workforce development strategies/online resources
The county has been successful capping population loss and achieving a relatively high per capita income. They were early adopters of developing a strategic alliance with companies to post job opportunities online and market those opportunities to young people. The website, HometownOpportunity.com[12] was launched as a two-county initiative and includes job postings, sample career paths, video testimonies of businesses and job search resources. The purpose of the site is to help people looking for jobs in the region, whether they already live in the county or elsewhere. The website has since expanded and includes jobs available in Darke County. Within 18 months of its November 2012 launch, the website has received over 80,000 unique visitors and had 4,000 jobs posted.

Why Wapakoneta, Auglaize County's official economic development website, also includes workforce data and information on workforce resources to assist companies in making location decisions. Wright State University Lake Campus provides customized career pathway training programs to companies to help them upskill existing employees and train new ones on the job. The depth and breadth of online workforce resources is helping Auglaize County fill vacant jobs with young professionals looking to return to the region.

Auglaize was listed as #3 for the "Best County to Call Home" in 2018 by the HomeSnacks ranking organization. Criteria include wealth indicators.

Sandusky County (pop. 58,799)
Strategy: Boomerang Young Professional leadership
Like many rural Midwest counties, Sandusky is facing an aging and declining population. At 41.7, Sandusky's median age is almost three years older than Ohio's median age (38.8). Only Darke and Morrow counties have a higher median age (highest in the state). That's why the emergence of a young leadership coalition, "The Boomerangs," is so impactful. An article published August 23, 2019, "Sandusky Boomerangs Back, and Business is Booming," describes the return and contribution of four Millennials who grew up in the county and returned to catalyze change for the community.

In just five years, the coalition has been instrumental in developing a master plan that is already making a big difference. It has spurred investment in expanded public transit, parks and recreation, schools, and in the downtown. New businesses, including an upscale bar and restaurant in the downtown, have begun to draw new visitors. And voters approved a $70

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[12] https://hometownopportunity.com

million school construction package to improve the aging schools. Their sentiment is encouraging. "It feels like we've covered a lot of distance, but we know that if we keep working together we can cover even more ground."

For the fourth year in a row, Sandusky ranked among the top small cities in the country for its continued growth in economic development. Site Selection Magazine named Fremont-Sandusky County 19th among 551 eligible micropolitan areas. Sandusky County's five-year plan has a goal to add 1,500 jobs and retain 18,000 jobs through 2022.

Van Wert County (pop. 28,281)
Strategy: Leveraging private sector investment
Van Wert's Business Development Corporation (BDC) has been in existence since the 1950s. It was the predominant economic development organization during the 50s, 60s and 70s, when it was responsible for establishing two industrial parks. The organization became dormant for decades until the early 2000's when it was revived as a more nimble, private-sector-driven group focused on results-oriented community development initiatives.

The group has been successful conducting funding campaigns focused on specific projects that have helped transform Van Wert's quality of life. The first was the Niswonger Performing Arts Center, a $5 million regional project that opened in 2007. In 2014, the group raised another $3 million to start the Opportunity Fund which provides the group flexibility to acquire land, buildings and provide creative financing to assist new businesses. Now the group is seeking $1.2 million for a new initiative, Accelerate Van Wert, to expand upon work accomplished by the Opportunity Fund. The funds will address three economic challenges: competition for jobs, a declining population and quality of place issues, such as dilapidated issues and a lack of amenities.

BDC's President, Andy Czajkowski, stated "For me, it's always about jobs and population growth". The true success of the BDC is the ability to leverage private sector resources to get things done. Van Wert appears to have begun a slow population climb, adding new people between 2017-2018 for the first time in two decades. The county was rated in the top 10 affordable small towns by Realtor.com this past year.

Perception Survey Results

Data collection period: June 4 – September 9, 2019
556 total respondents

In an effort to gather data from residents in counties neighboring Darke County, the leadership team launched a web-based survey that was distributed to members of Chambers of Commerce and other professional organizations. Perceptions of and attitudes about Darke County were explored and reported. The survey was also promoted at the Darke County Fair, offering an opportunity for Darke County residents to weigh in on the questions and share their thoughts and experiences with the county.
The perception survey results indicate the majority of respondents, both Darke and non-Darke County residents believe Darke County is family friendly, safe and welcoming. While a large majority of residents believe the county has good public schools and is a good place to work, the opposite perception prevails among non-Darke County residents, with less than half (34% and 44% respectively) agreeing with these two statements.

In general, it appears that Darke County has a perception problem since non-Darke residents tend to disagree with Darke residents on some key indicators, especially their feelings about the public schools. There is an agreement that quality public schools is a very important indicator for deciding where to live, in addition to being safe and affordable, with a variety of dining and retail options, near family and work.

Survey participant age, in years:

Darke County residents

18-30
7%

31-50
18%

65+
58%

51-65
17%

Non-Darke residents

18-30
5%

31-50
19%

65+
57%

51-65
19%
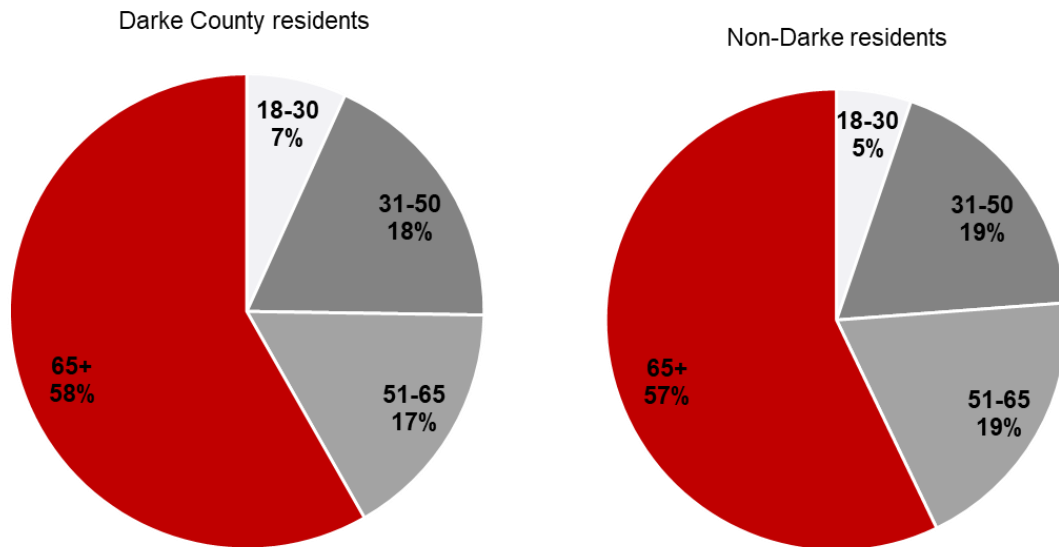
*Note: Designations of "All Non-Darke residents" include responses from residents of Auglaize, Greene, Mercer, Miami, Montgomery, Preble, and Shelby counties. Those indicating "Other" are not included.

Important considerations when thinking about a good place to live:

Respondents were asked to share the most important considerations when deciding where to live. The survey participants were permitted to select as many choices as applied.
The chart below compares the responses, all ages, from Darke and non-Darke residents.

All ages
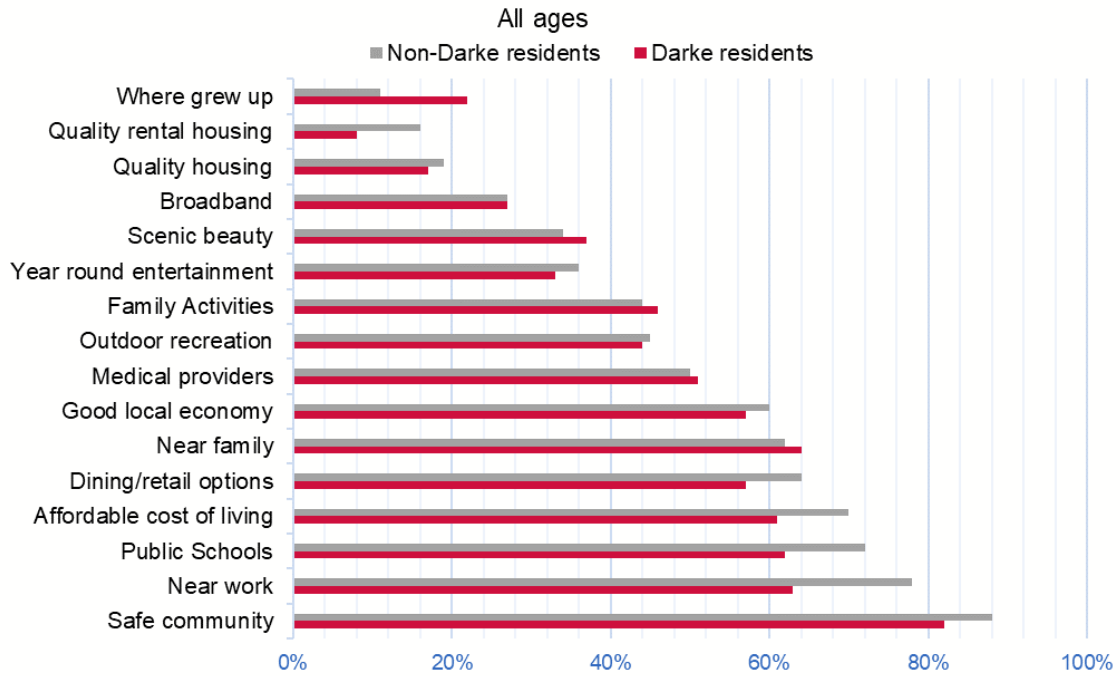
The chart below shows responses from survey participants aged 18-50 years.

Ages 18-50 years
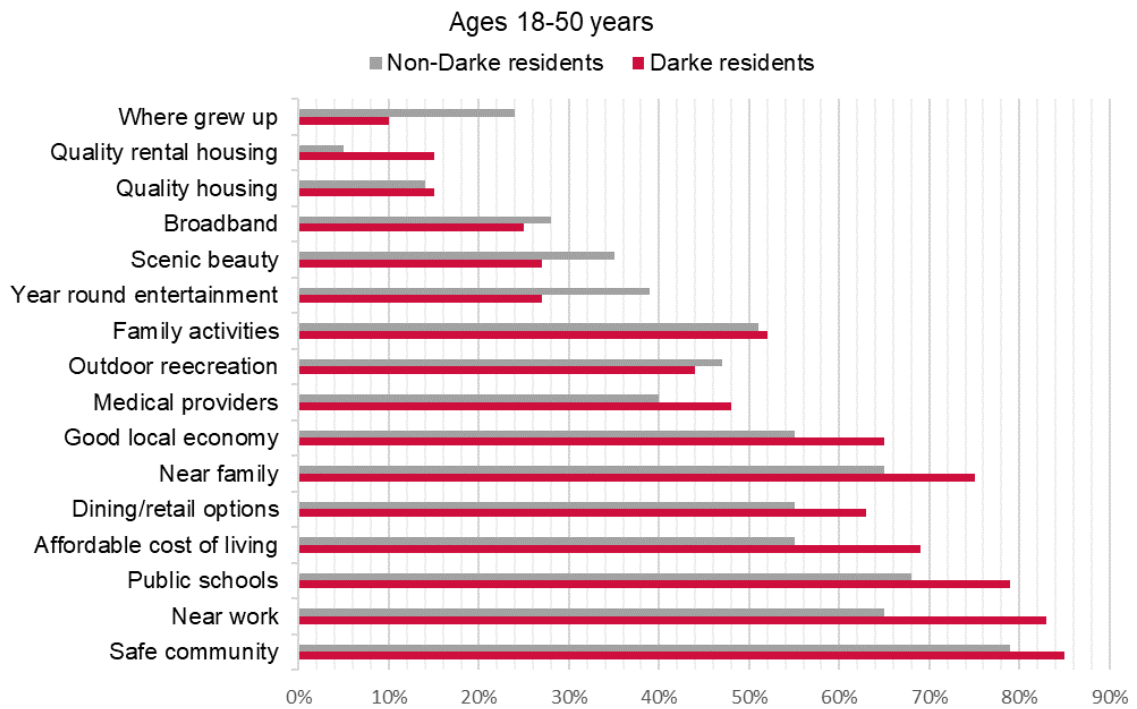
Have you ever lived in Darke County? (Non-Darke residents only)

22%

78%

■ Yes ■ No
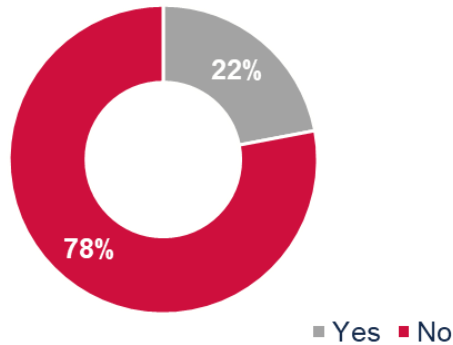
Non-Darke residents: Specific reasons why they don't live in Darke County:

The non-Darke survey participants were asked to select the primary reasons that they have chosen not to reside in Darke County.

Category	Percentage
Too far from work	48%
Family not in Darke	46%
Public schools	33%
Shopping/retail options	16%
Local economy	15%
Outdoor recreation	14%
Family/social activities	14%
Dining options	13%
Not as attractive	12%
Not as safe	8%
Broadband	5%
Lack of high end housing	2%
Lack of rental options	2%
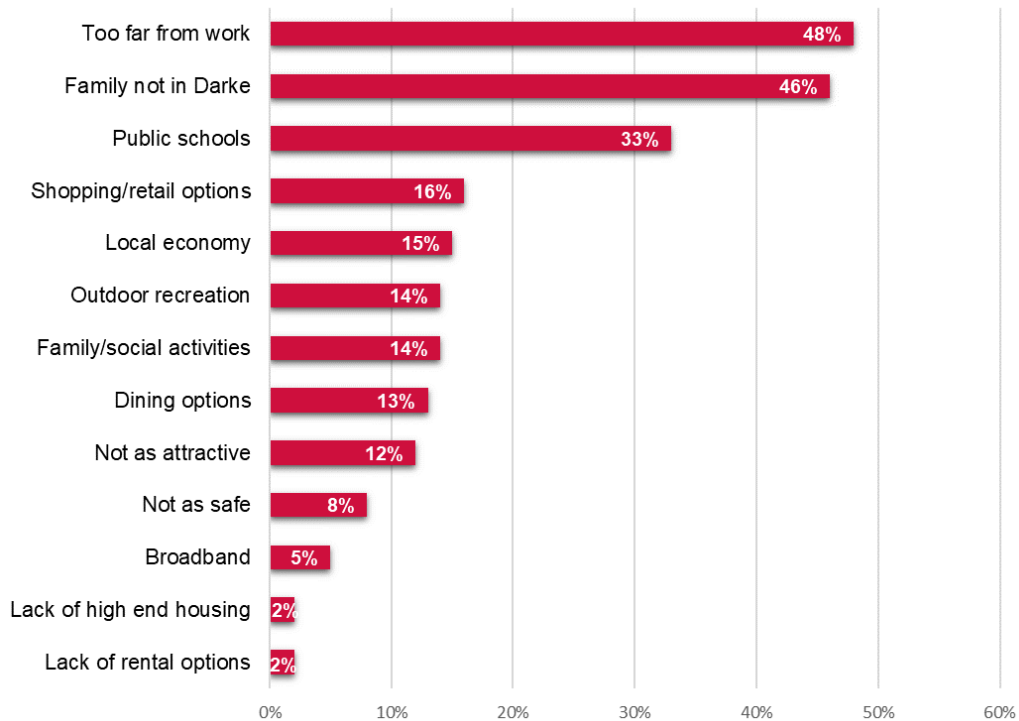
How often do you travel to Darke County for non-work activities? (Non-Darke residents only)

Legend:
- Several times/week
- About once/week
- 1-2 times/month
- 8-10 times/year
- Once/year
- Never
- Not applicable

Pie chart values: 4%, 2%, 12%, 44%, 28%, 7%, 3%
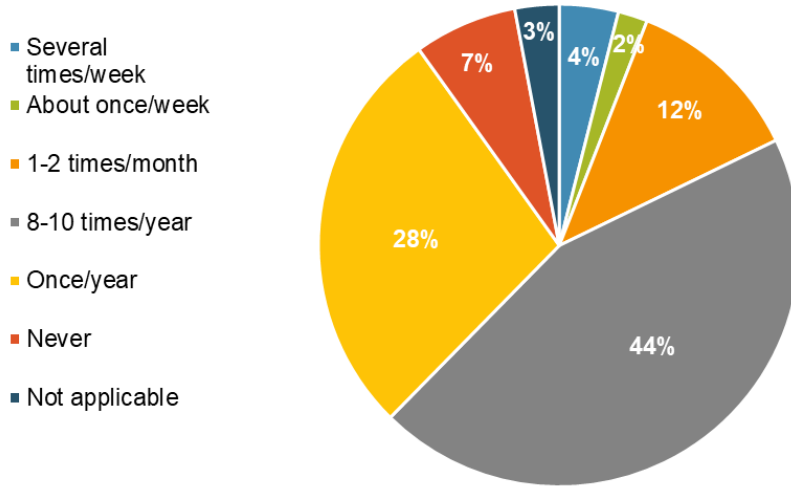
In general, what activities bring you to Darke County? (Non-Darke residents only)

Activity	Percentage
Festivals/Fairs/Carnivals	60%
Dining	47%
Shopping	39%
Work	33%
Visiting friends/family	25%
History	19%
Tourism	17%
Outdoor recreation	12%
Entertainment (arts/performances)	12%
I don't travel to Darke County	9%
Medical appointments	7%
Education	4%
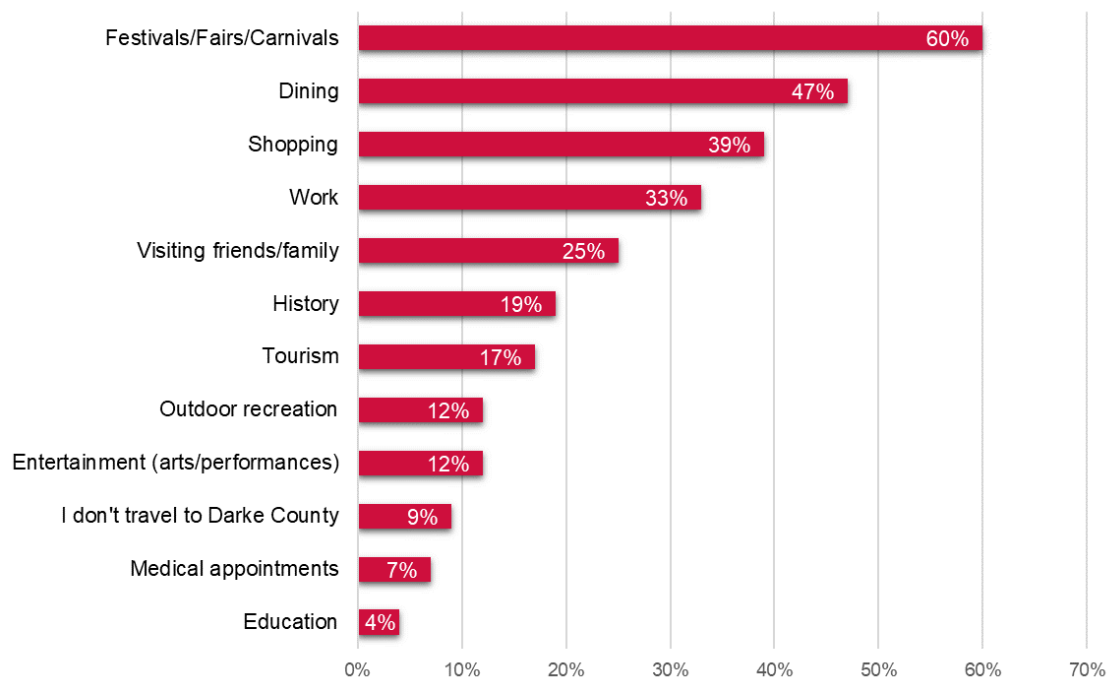
Are you now or have you ever been employed in Darke County?
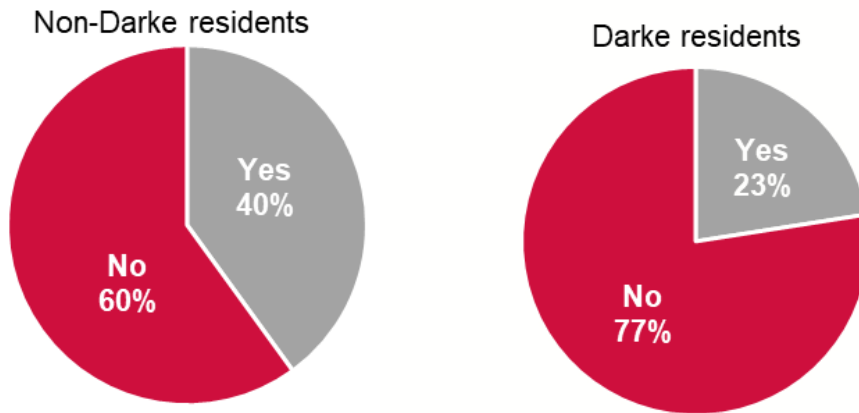
When you think of Darke County, what ONE word comes to mind?
(Word size in image indicates answer frequency.)

Non-Darke County residents:

Darke County residents:

Do you think Darke County is a good place for a young adult (ages 19-40) to work and live (by age)?

All survey respondents were asked whether they believe that Darke County is a good place for young adults to work and live. The data below is divided by residence relative to Darke County and age. The categories below reflect both Darke and non-Darke residents of all ages, as well as Darke and non-Darke residents aged 18-50 years.
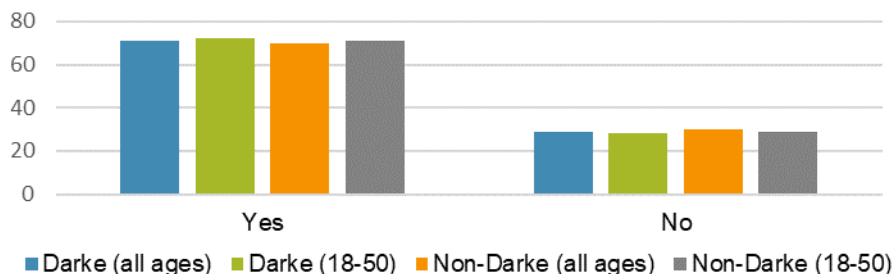
Non-Darke residents of all ages who answered "no" above cited the following explanations:

- I really am not sure, but my perception is that if you can get a factory job that is the best you can do, retail or restaurant is the next choice. I moved from the area because I felt like I would get stuck without moving forward. The cost of living is lower, which is

attractive but it is due to the economic situation of the area, people can't afford to pay more due to the jobs they have

- Not enough evening activities.
- So many people on drugs here-I have seen them at Walmart and in parking lots.
- Too many drugs.
- Not enough activities focused on young people and families.
- Outside of factories and agriculture, there isn't enough work.
- I think that most young adults want to be in communities with larger youth populations. Rural areas are not the first place you think of for significant young adult activities. It may not be an accurate perception, but it is hard to overcome.
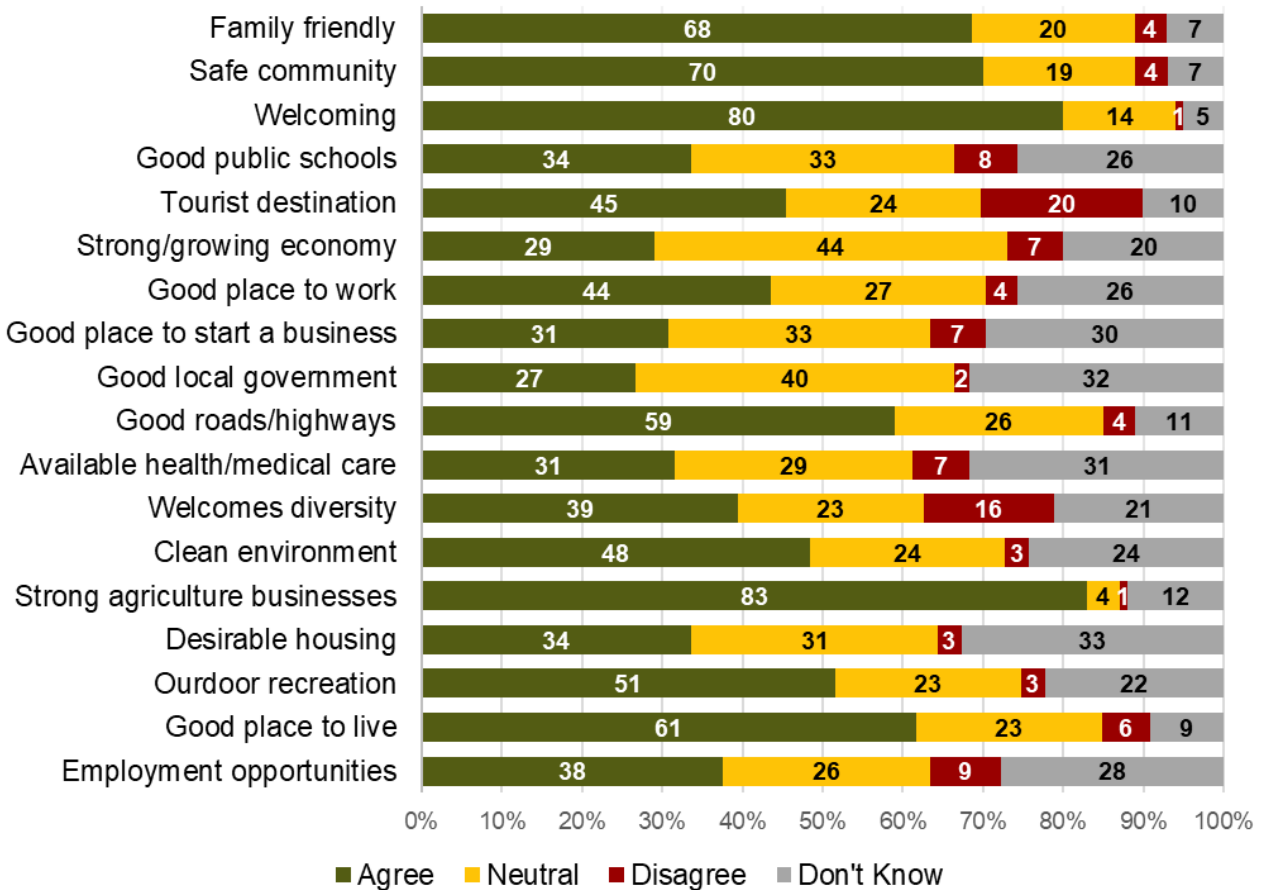- Reputation of being closed-minded politically, as well as religious-driven politics. If you are not a Trump supporter, you are not welcomed.
- No for a young adult without kids. If you are a young adult with kids, then I would say I would say yes.
- Darke County seems to be stuck in their history so much that it impedes progress.
- When I think of Darke County, two things come to mind: County Fair and agriculture. The latter tends to mean conservative "values" which says to me little diversity, not as progressive in thought, therefore not as welcoming a place for young people. I'm sure the job opportunities are there, much like Shelby County, but attracting or keeping the younger demographic isn't as easy.
- I think choices for growth may be less available within the county.
- Not enough good paying jobs.
- Schools not up to par, lack of diversity, higher education and high paying jobs too far away
- Not a lot of career opportunities, not safe.
- I don't know of any opportunities.
- Far more social opportunities in nearby counties like Miami and Montgomery.
- Unless they have children, I can't imagine what would attract young adults in terms of entertainment, shopping, dining, etc.
- Too rural for a young person to live who may not have children.
- Not enough attractions for those who are young adults without children.
- Too far from entertainment - big city amenities.
- Not known for cultural and outdoor activities, theater, dining, trails - thought of as ag-rural-boring.

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following in regard to Darke County:

Non-Darke county residents were asked to consider a series of statements about Darke County. In the chart below, the responses reflect the participants' level of agreement in relation to Darke County. Darke County is family friendly. Darke County is a safe community, etc.

Non-Darke County residents - all ages

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Don't Know
Family friendly	68	20	4	7
Safe community	70	19	4	7
Welcoming	80	14	1	5
Good public schools	34	33	8	26
Tourist destination	45	24	20	10
Strong/growing economy	29	44	7	20
Good place to work	44	27	4	26
Good place to start a business	31	33	7	30
Good local government	27	40	2	32
Good roads/highways	59	26	4	11
Available health/medical care	31	29	7	31
Welcomes diversity	39	23	16	21
Clean environment	48	24	3	24
Strong agriculture businesses	83	4	1	12
Desirable housing	34	31	3	33
Ourdoor recreation	51	23	3	22
Good place to live	61	23	6	9
Employment opportunities	38	26	9	28

■ Agree ■ Neutral ■ Disagree ■ Don't Know

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following in regard to Darke County:

The chart below shows the responses of Darke County residents to the same statements as above.

Darke County residents - all ages

Category	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Don't Know
Family friendly	89	9	3	
Safe community	82	11	6	
Welcoming	79	15	6	
Good public schools	68	23	8	1
Tourist destination	51	26	22	1
Strong/growing economy	44	33	21	3
Good place to work	68	24	5	2
Good place to start a business	37	38	17	8
Good local government	24	36	36	4
Good roads/highways	49	26	24	1
Available health/medical care	63	22	13	2
Welcomes diversity	49	27	23	2
Clean environment	77	17	4	2
Strong agriculture businesses	93	5	1	2
Desirable housing	66	21	12	2
Ourdoor recreation	80	14	5	
Good place to live	86	12	2	
Employment opportunities	57	21	20	2

■ Agree   ■ Neutral   ■ Disagree   ■ Don't Know

Focus Group Session Results

3 focus group discussions conducted on October 9th, 2019:
    Midmark Corporation, Versailles, 6 participants
    Whirlpool Corporation, Greenville, 5 participants
    Wayne Healthcare, Greenville, 4 participants

> Note: Text in *italics* represents a direct quote from a focus group participant.

If you had to relocate to a different area, what are the most important considerations when choosing a community in which to live?

Safety
- o Safe neighborhoods for children and families
- o Low crime

Health
- o Environmentally clean and healthy community (clean water, good agricultural practices, environmentally responsible industries/manufacturing plants)
- o Outdoor recreation areas for hiking, running, exercising
- o Health focused activities and opportunities for children
- o Good, comprehensive healthcare facilities and providers
- o Sporting facilities

Housing
- o Affordable, attractive, good neighborhood or area, quiet neighborhood
- o Options: attached garage, some acreage, near amenities (restaurants, shopping, outdoor activities)
- o Near good schools
- o Good rental options for professionals
  - Well-maintained or new homes for families
  - Affordable, but not government subsidized housing; performs background checks on potential renters
  - Additional options such as downtown loft, first rate complex that offers amenities (gym, pool, etc.), rental complex with other young adults, options for pets
  - Close to downtown and entertainment opportunities
  - In good school district
  - Within 30 minutes of work
  - Quality rental homes in rural areas

The housing available for families is pretty slim. I had a very hard time finding a place to rent that was suitable for a family of 5 and pet friendly. I was coming from (another state) *and had to take a home site unseen, and I could only find something in Eaton. So it's quite a commute (40 minutes). I would have preferred something closer to the hospital, but since I have school aged children, I don't want to change schools again, so now we will stay in our current district.* (From a recently relocated physician.)

Amenities
- o Restaurants (chain and locally owned)
- o Brewery, winery
- o Shopping (Target, Costco, grocery stores
- o Transportation options such as Lyft or Uber
- o Outdoor recreation options such as kayaking, hiking, dog park, golf, fishing
- o University close by
- o Cinema
- o Broadband
- o Good cellular coverage throughout the county
- o Affordable, good cable options
- o Churches nearby
- o Attractive downtown area
- o Clean community, evidence of civic pride

We need more than just an attractive downtown. I had to drive to Muncie for clothing shopping. We need something other than Walmart for shopping.

Local Activities
- o Fairs and festivals

- Live performance (plays, music, historical reenactment, etc.)
- Activities that attract young adults as well as families

What would it take to get you to move to Darke County?

- Acceptable housing – rental and for purchase
- More spaces available in the local schools for open enrollment
- Better rated school districts
- More shopping options such as Target and other big box stores
- More young adults living in the area
- Churches with younger congregations
- More convenience options such as ride sharing (Uber, Lyft), more restaurants, ability to live close to work and amenities

Do you consider Darke County to be a good place for young professionals to live?
(All reponses listed are quoted from participant discussions.)

- *It's demographically like Florida with the average age of people and the number of nursing homes.*
- *I don't think it's a good place to live – but it's a good place to work because it's close to Dayton.*
- *Not really. There are not many places to hang out for young adults. And it seems almost tribal, cliquey, at times. It makes transplanting here difficult.*
- *When young people in Mercer County graduate from Wright State, they tend to stay there and work at companies there. Mercer County has a strategic plan to recruit and retain young people.*
- *If you have a family it would be ok, but not as a single person.*
- *I like living here and raising my family here and not have to live in the city. I like the proximity in Darke County to the urban areas.*
- *Only if they have kids.*
- *Development of the downtown area is huge and would definitely bring young people to an area. But we have a lack of available housing listed online or known to HR people when recruiting new employees. There are very few nice apartments or rental housing options.*
- *One thing I like about Greenville is the downtown. I like to go down there for lunch or dinner.*
- *There aren't a lot of good employers here to attract young professionals.*
- *I'm only living in Greenville because I don't want to drive in snow, so I need to live close. If I could I'd use a cab in bad weather.*
- *My mother was concerned (when I moved here) because all of my neighbors were older. She didn't see many people, especially people my age here. She felt it was unsafe because there weren't people around.*
- *The area has grown on me. If there were good housing options here I'd definitely consider them. Greenville is a larger city than I realized – good downtown, some good restaurants, grocery stores, good parks throughout the city.*
- *Younger professionals will have a harder time finding peers in the community*
- *The stores and restaurants close too early.*

Do you think Darke County is a good place for young families to live?
(All responses listed are quoted from participant discussions.)

- *Yes, it's a good, safe community.*
- *That's why people come back, because it is a great area to raise a family.*
- *Darke's proximity to Troy and Dayton is a benefit for families in Darke. In Mercer County, you have a longer drive to a metro area.*
- *People from the area have become accustomed to driving places…everything is a trip. But for people from outside, they like the walkability of places and don't expect to have to drive everywhere.*
- *I wish the school system were better. I like the rural-ness of the area.*
- *I'm concerned that there's not enough investment in younger people in the community.*

What physical attributes in Darke County do you find pleasing?

Greenville
- Downtown and Main Street visually attractive – especially when renovation is completed
- Wayne health expansion will be very attractive
- Flags in the circle – shows pride in veterans
- Garden club activities with flowers
- Horse parade, statue of Annie Oakley
- Historical focus in Greenville
- Repurposing old buildings
- Cute shops downtown
- Downtown looks well cared for

Infrastructure
- Roads – no potholes
- Lacking signage off of SR 127 to bring people into downtown
- Good sidewalks, new lighting in Greenville helps with mobility and shows pride

What physical attributes in Darke County are displeasing or a turn-off?

- Some houses are not well cared for
- Empty businesses – gives the impression that people are leaving the area
- In the rural areas, the smell of barns, agriculture
- The gateways into Greenville are not attractive

What else would you like us to know about your perceptions or experience with Darke County?

Positive Perceptions/Experiences
- Fairs, First Fridays, and festivals are fun; could be improved with bands and food trucks
- Slow pace of life

- o   Pretty lawns, nice homes, civic pride
- o   Greenville – downtown areas

I love living in a small town! I know people and see folks I know at the florist or grocery store. That makes it feel like home.

New is not better, fake is not good; I like history and original, and Greenville has that and plays that up. We need more like the Merchant House.

Suggestions/Ideas for Improvement
- o   More temporary housing for new employees/professionals
- o   Improve ability to search about housing and the community on Google, Wikipedia, Yelp, Trip Advisor, etc.
- o   Improve and market social media to share information about the community
- o   Improve communication between local realtors and HR folks at major employers to assist with housing options, questions about schools, etc.
- o   Increase funding, such as grants, for creative development/projects
- o   Improve local schools, including sporting facilities (locker rooms, etc.)
- o   Attract convenience restaurants such as Chik-Fil-A
- o   Manage resistance to change

Because we have an older population, there are not a lot of entrepreneurs.

We have a good foundation/structure and people who want development, but there are still "good ole boy" barriers that are making some forward movement difficult.

Key Components

In reviewing research, case studies, survey and focus group results, several key components emerged that may positively impact the success of small towns in retaining and attracting young professionals. First, communities need to have a plan. Research shows that successful counties have detailed strategic plans to describe what they want to do, by whom and when. They seek input from a diverse cross-section of the population which informs their plan of action.

Community planning and zoning
In all best practice and case studies, we found that a basic component was an action plan and a focus on land use policies. Successful communities need a detailed and realistic plan nailing down priorities, timeline and who will be responsible for enacting the goals and plan. This strategic alignment not only attracts investment, including grants, but demonstrates to citizens and volunteers that the effort is worthwhile and is being taken seriously.

Catalysts
Another common theme in every successful community is the existence of a catalyst, which can be either a group or an individual. The catalyst will see to it that change is taking place by leveraging anchor institution(s) who can attract and retain Millennial talent. They have the muscle and influence to move things forward from start to finish. None of the case study communities would have been successful without a catalyst group or individual.

Good quality school systems

Especially for YPs with kids, good public schools can rank highest on their list. They look to improve the advantage their children will have in life and they know good schools in close proximity to where they live is a very important criterion. They must be able to check off this box in order to move forward to assess other criteria.

Vibrant downtowns and quality spaces

Since the downtown in rural communities is usually the center of activity, they can become go-to locations for YPs. Vibrant restaurant offerings such as local food breweries (a mix of which are family-friendly) are key. Keeping the historical look to downtown is also important. Add to that retail and other mixed-use development and interesting public spaces, including outdoor theatres, and the downtown can be a big asset.

Parks and recreation

Local parks, nature preserves, historic landmarks or other places to enjoy the outdoors are very important to YPs. An adequate array of walking and bike trails and other outdoor activities is a necessity for the majority of this group.

Quality and variety of housing options

Housing options, both for rent and purchase, are very desirable, and with a variety of styles and locations. Mix of downtown (including loft) or suburban apartment and housing options, should be available in both higher end and affordable price ranges.

Easy commuting, but available transportation options

Rural counties have the huge advantage of having less congestion and easier commutes. But, in addition to housing options, YPs also seek alternative transportation options. They drive less than their counterparts in previous generations and demand options like transit or ride-share services, bicycle facilities, pedestrian accommodations, and other alternative modes of transportation.

Access to metro area(s) and/or nearby college or university

YPs may seek employment in a rural community but, in most cases, they desire to be within a short distance of a major metro area with a younger population base. Dayton and Troy are close enough to Darke County, which can offer the best of both world's; safe, small town living in close proximity to the big city happenings.

Recommended Strategies

Strategy 1: Build capacity of catalyst group – NextGen
- *Action step*: Hold a young leadership forum to get input on needs assessment and next steps.
- *Action step:* Develop website and social media tools to reach YPs and to begin promoting the area.
- *Action step:* Develop an action plan prioritizing steps and answering the who, what, when and how. Track progress using measurable indicators.

Strategy 2: Focus on downtown housing options, particularly loft development
- *Action step*: Develop zoning addendum that eliminates any barriers to a variety of desired housing in the downtown and targeted areas including multi-family, duplex or loft apartments.

Strategy 3: Build on unique existing assets, including parks and heritage tourism
- *Action step*: Hold community meeting to brainstorm ways to capitalize on history and heritage of area. *OhioTraveler* chose Greenville as a "best place to visit."
- *Action step*: Identify targeted green spaces and other public spaces for potential public/private investment. Involve anchors.
- *Action step*: Use a placemaking approach to capalize on assets and potential and to create quality places for residents and visitors to gather.

Strategy 4: Increase quality and variety of housing options
- *Action step*: Talk to real estate professionals and developers to describe specific housing gaps and what types of development are needed for the community.
- *Action Step:* Create a systematic process to reclaim vacant and abandoned property (Land Bank) to secure land for new housing.

Strategy 5: Create partnership with local anchors
- *Action step:* Meet individually with local anchor institutions to share needs assessment results.

Strategy 6: Partner with local public schools and educational institutions
- *Action step:* Hold roundtable with education leadership to discuss perceptions (real or not) of school district and plans to change.
- *Action step*: Help schools identify job training geared to existing industries' needs to support needed skills and to retain or attract new higher paying jobs to the area.

Conclusion

As with most aspects of society, factors influencing successful community development continue to evolve. For rural communities in particular, the old prescription of industry and job growth may not prove to be a strong indicator of population growth, especially among the young adult demographic. Increasingly, the Millennial generation is focused on attributes beyond employment when considering where to live. Quality rental housing, along with retail and dining options top the list for these young professionals. Access to a peer group, young adult activities, a safe community, good local schools, and vibrant downtown areas are also key priorities.

Recognizing the need to grow the young adult population in Darke County, the NextGen group has taken a scientific approach to identifying factors that may explain why young professionals travel to the county for employment, but choose to reside in neighboring counties. Much like the data from other communities, the information gathered in this study demonstrates that Millennials are considering not only a job, but a lifestyle, when deciding where to live. When contemplating growth in Darke County, the collected data may have implications for future housing and business development. This study also shows the potential advantages of growing and supporting local entrepreneurs, investing in downtown revitalization, and the need to continually evaluate the county's quality of life indicators that help residents establish and maintain meaningful connections to the community and its people.

Acknowledgements

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