

# Rural Research Report



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## Bigger Is Not Always Better: Bardstown, Kentucky

Since we were young, we have been raised to believe that "bigger is better" and that the big city is the place you have to go to live an exciting life and have a successful career. Far too many individuals believe that small and rural towns are not the places for opportunity but that they are places to live for those who have no aspirations for achievement and where excitement and nightlife are basically nonexistent. As someone who works and lives in a growing small town, I believe this could not be further from the truth. There are successful communities with continuous population increases, and residents could not imagine living anywhere else.

Small towns are still places where many large national companies call home, where they have located their corporate headquarters, including L. L. Bean in Freeport, Maine; Smuckers in Orrville, Ohio; and Cracker Barrel in Lebanon, Tennessee. The founders of each of these companies realized that the size of a community did not matter when a vision and a desire to do something great exists. These companies attest to the quote that "big fish can swim in small ponds." People also locate in small towns for reasons other than business. They are now retiring and sometimes reinventing themselves in small towns. However, we must also be honest and realize that there are those communities across the country where, unfortunately, the forecast is not so bright.

During the industrialization of our country, we became a society of factory workers. With the lack of interest for a new generation of farmers, many of our large farms sold off, and farmers went from the field to the manufacturing line as their farms were sold and developed as subdivisions, a new commercial center, and industrial parks. However, today, with the changing of the global market in big and small towns alike, so many factories sit as vacant buildings as these jobs are now exported overseas, and the towns that so desperately depended on these companies for jobs are struggling to survive. This exodus forced many small town residents to find new jobs in the closest urban area.

This change in our society has resulted in a significant challenge to rural communities as they struggle to provide job opportunities for not only those who live there today, but for the young adults they hope will return home in the future.

### Can Small Towns Be Enticing to Our Youth?

Small towns are some of the most seductively charming places you will ever live. While the small town feel and neighborly attitude is certainly an attribute, it is much more than that. In small town America, the smell of freshly mowed grass lingers for what seems like blocks. The low cost of living makes it an affordable place to live, and within just minutes of the most congested area of town, you can be in wide open spaces where the sky just opens up. One of the most appealing virtues of a small town is that you can easily become engaged and be a part of the decisionmaking process, whether it be by being on the City Council or as a member of a volunteer committee of the Chamber of Commerce.

All of these factors combine to increase the quality of a place, but are they enough to entice someone to want to move there? There has to be financial and career goal expectations brought into the equation and that is where small town America is falling short.

Why is it that rural areas continue to struggle with keeping its best and brightest at home? Society can take part of

the blame as we teach our children from a young age to do well in school, go on to college, and aspire to get a good job. In essence, we are moving our kids out of our small towns and into the cities where the majority of the higher paying jobs are. This exporting of youth to the urban areas means that rural America is poised to continue to suffer from this major loss of our future generations of talent and of our community's future leadership.

## Bardstown, Kentucky

I want to categorize this report as a “grassroots” report with ideas and information from people who live and work in rural America every day to foster economic growth and to lessen the spiraling population decline with which so many smaller communities are dealing.

Much of this report is based on what I experience in my hometown of Bardstown, Kentucky (pop. 11,000), and the surrounding region. My community's forefathers were smart and insightful. They knew that to survive you could not put all of your eggs in one basket but that you needed to spread them out in baskets of various shapes and sizes. In Bardstown, our economic basket is diversified. We have a large tourism base as we are a historic community, the second oldest in the state of Kentucky (ca. 1780), with over 200 buildings in our downtown district designated on the National Register of Historic Places. Bardstown is the home of My Old Kentucky Home State Park, our state shrine that was made famous by American composer Stephen Foster in a song by the same name. To diversify our basket even further, we have the distinction of being known as the “Bourbon Capital of the World” with about 80% of the world's bourbon produced in this region. The Kentucky Bourbon Trail runs through the community, and Bardstown has touted itself as the “Napa Valley of the Bourbon Industry.” In addition to bourbon production, Bardstown and Nelson County are home to a variety of retail and service businesses and 40 manufacturing operations, including numerous automotive suppliers, cabinet makers, and plastics companies.

Bardstown has been listed in the book *100 Best Small Towns in America*, *50 Best Southern Towns*, and *BoomTown USA* and is included in the book *1,000 Places to See Before You Die*. Each of these publications brings us thousands of visitors a year to enjoy the wide array of attractions that we have to offer. On occasion, we will learn that someone has enjoyed their visit so much that they have chosen

Bardstown as a place to live. Of course, I would be remiss if I did not say that being located less than 50 miles from Louisville, Kentucky, the state's largest city (pop. 700,000) works to our advantage as they possess many amenities we lack such as the arts, shopping, universities, and diversity. Generations of families have been driving and carpooling to work in Louisville. We have become a very mobile society, and a 50-minute drive to the city and all it has to offer is to us just a way of life.

Does being located near a metropolitan area have its advantages? For Bardstown it does, and we maximize this advantage in our marketing and recruitment efforts.

In my book, *Small Town Sexy, the allure of living in small town America* (2009), I interview Louisville Mayor Jerry Abramson about the importance of our communities' relationship. I told him that being located near Louisville assists in Bardstown's economic development efforts, knowing we do not have all the amenities that companies or individuals need to live or do business in our community but that being located near the city, we are close to just about anything we need, including an international airport. While he agreed, he turned the tables and explained how important the smaller neighboring communities are to the economic vitality of Louisville. He understands that not only do small towns benefit from being geographically close to a large city but that cities benefit as well because they need patrons for the arts and entertainment venues, customers at regional shopping malls, families at amusements parks, and fans at the universities' ballgames. Many of those who enjoy all these big city amenities are from the small towns surrounding Louisville.

He also noted that communities, big or small, suffer some of the same challenges, “however in the big cities you are usually dealing with a few more zeros to the left side of the decimal point when you talk budgets and funding” (p. 144).

## Regionalism Is the New Game Plan

*Regionalism* has become a buzz word for economic developers all across the country. We are no longer only competing with our neighbors in counties next door or even adjoining states for projects; we are now competing globally. Multi-county, self-defined regions are popping up all across the country. These regions agree that there is power in numbers in that working together is one way to compete globally. One of the strategies of regionalism is to rethink recruitment and create a world class entrepreneurial and innovative environment of new companies. It's not your grandfather's smokestack chasing society anymore, and we must change our game plan and transform our way of doing business in order to evolve into a more creative economy.

In 2008, the Lincoln Trail Area Development District (LTADD), a Kentucky agency comprised of eight, mostly rural counties, received a \$5 million WIRED (Workforce Initiative for Regional Economic Development) grant from the Department of Labor to study and implement regional workforce development strategies that would not only force counties to go beyond their boundaries to work together but that would prepare us for the 21st century economy. With the change of the global economy from a mostly goods-based economy to a knowledge-based economy, these new age companies have a greater need for a knowledge worker with a higher level of education.

From the eight original counties, LTADD expanded the program, which they named WIRED65 (the 65 referring to the interstate that most of these counties had in common), into 26 counties, including the Louisville Metro region and seven counties in southern Indiana. After considerable study, it was determined on what the WIRED65 efforts would focus. One critically important piece of this report was to determine how this region rated in the attraction and retention of the next generation of workers. WIRED65 engaged Next Generation Consulting (NGC) of Madison, Wisconsin, to identify the region's strengths and liabilities and to gain insight from this 20- to 40-year-old age group. After surveying hundreds of people who live in the region, as well as those who moved out of the state, it was evident that the region lacked opportunities for young professionals. The report stated that the region scored high on the following:

- Affordable cost of living
- Growing metro hub
- College and university systems that can help retain the talent in the region

Dissecting this even further, the survey results of those who were homegrown and who have chosen to stay said they stayed for the following reasons:

- The town has a strong sense of family and friends.
- A good job is keeping them here.
- Housing is plentiful and affordable.
- They are community minded; people have the opportunity to be engaged in the community.

However, the challenges were more compelling, including the perception that young professionals are forced to leave the region to have a prosperous career and the quality of life amenities they so desperately desire. The challenges were as follows:

- Lack of employment opportunities
- Wanting to further education after graduation
- Wanting to experience a bigger city with more to offer young professionals

The strategies that were recommended by NGC to stop the outmigration of youth were as follows:

- *Engage and retain the region's current young professionals* – Focus on retaining the ones who are living and working in the region now.
- *Build a region that's a talent magnet for the next generation* – Focus on knowledge-based job recruitment and more cultural connections.
- *Connect emerging professionals to internships, jobs, and employers in the community* – Get these young adults connected so they have a buy-in to their community.
- *Convince the Convincibles* – Of those surveyed, 68% said they would consider moving back. Keep in touch with this group to make them aware of everything going on in the region.

## Grassroots Ideas to Help Retain Youth

Small towns all across America are becoming quite clever in developing ways to bring attention to the allure of living there. Their efforts usually do not require a lot of funding

but, more importantly, a buy-in of the government, business, and economic development communities to understand the importance of looking toward the future and engaging

their next generation of leaders. Some grassroots efforts that small towns are implementing are as follows:

- *Connect Youth Early On* – While youth are still in school, they need to become engaged in their community. Introduce them to local leaders, have them work with a nonprofit, and get them involved with the economic development organizations so they will get to know the community where they live. Young Leaders programs are becoming popular as a Chamber of Commerce outreach program.
- *Internships* – Whether they are in high school or college, students should have the opportunity to participate in an internship program, which is a great introduction to your local business community to show them the different types of opportunities that would be available to them after graduation. A critical point to remember is that these students want more than to just make copies or file papers, they want to be part of a real-life business process.
- *Teachers to Business* – Teach those who are teaching our youth. Get the teachers into your industries, city hall, and local companies to educate them on the types of professions that are available in your community so they can go back and teach this to their students.
- *Hometown Tour* – During family or class reunion weekends or during the holidays, rent a bus and take the ex-patriots who are home visiting their families on a tour of their hometown, focusing on everything that's new: new school, park, subdivision, industrial park, hospital. Show them how their community has grown since they lived there.
- *Young Professionals Program* – Start a Young Professionals program in your community to engage this age group (25 to 40) in the decisionmaking process. This is critical in helping to retain those you have now by learning about their wants and needs.

### The Creative Rural Economy – How Can You Compete with a “Cool” City?

Can a small town compete with a “cool” city? So many books have been written about the creative economy and what it is that people are looking for in a place to live. Is it a Starbucks on every corner, is it an exciting nightlife, is it the large array of shopping outlets available, or is it events each evening at the local art gallery? Richard Florida (2003) in his book *The Rise of the Creative Class* is adamant about his belief that all cities aspire to lure that “creative class” of individuals and to do that we need creative environments and stimulating places to live and work. But honestly, how do small towns compete with this? Yes, there are those small towns that have as many “cool factors” as some big cities, including great recreational opportunities, diversity of dining and shopping, and a first class livability factor. These are great small towns, with a bright future that should prosper for years. However, many small and rural communities struggle to be what most consider the stereotypical definition of cool. They do not have a nightlife; they are miles away from an entertainment venue; and the only type of coffee available is at the fast food restaurant.

Most small towns cannot compete with the social environment of the urban areas, and we cannot fool ourselves into thinking we can. We must be authentic and true to who we are, and we must attack on another angle and redefine “cool” as it relates to what is truly doable for small towns.

Living within an hour’s drive of a big city is a selling point for many small towns. What we lack can be found only an

hour away. This point has been used by those of us in small town America for decades. What we must do is use what we have and what we do best. Small towns have to be honest with themselves about the opportunities available within their county limits. There are not enough jobs for everyone wanting one, and a significant percentage of the labor force will be forced to commute out of town. Commuting is not a four-letter word and is a reality for many. We must embrace the fact that while many must travel outside our county lines to work, they have chosen to put their head in their bed in the small town they call home.

Many small towns do not have art galleries or venues for large concerts, but we do have great school and community theatre.

We may not have a variety of shopping options, but what we do have are stores owned by our friends and neighbors where often to pay all you have to say is “Charge it.”

No, we are not the state capital nor do we have large state universities, but you can become part of your community’s decisionmaking process and chances are there is a great community college nearby. We don’t need dog parks because we all have wonderful front and back yards and wide open green spaces. We don’t need public transportation because many of us live only minutes from work, and, if we want, ride our bikes—and not just because it’s the

“green thing to do” but because it allows us to see things that can’t be seen from the windows of a car or bus.

Some of the greatest outdoor recreation opportunities are in small town America. Most of Kentucky’s great state parks are located near a small town, and many of the country’s national parks are also located adjacent to smaller communities. These communities understand the importance

of their location and tend to capitalize on the tourism benefits from these visitors.

Small towns must keep up with technology to be considered worthy contenders. We must be wired with broadband capability and have cell phone service. Offering wireless hot spots for visitors is also a plus in the so-called “cool” factor.

### What About Those Who Choose to Stay?

We spend so much academic time, resources, and funds on our youth who are destined to do well in school and to pursue higher education opportunities. These are the students who are the achievers in school, leaders of school organizations, and the ones who are destined to go on to college. College preparatory courses are offered and scholarships given to those who achieve academic excellence, but what about that next level of student, the student who may not be on the honor roll, an officer in a school club, and probably will never make it to college? In Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas’s (2010) book *Hollowing Out the Middle*, they refer to this group as the “stayers” (p. 18).

This is the group who will, more than likely, remain in the town in which they were raised. Some who are included in this group may be seen as underachievers and undermotivated, and some of them may not have finished high school. But let’s not forget another group of stayers who just coasted under the radar while in school. They may have been good students, but they were that middle group that never received much attention. Chances are that many in this group did not take the advanced courses, put in for scholarships, participated in the academic clubs, and were not the students who made the newspaper. This is a forgotten group who will probably not leave after graduation but will remain in the community in which they were raised. These students will go directly into the workforce, go on to a community college, and some will enter the military. However, this group is very important because they have

chosen to stay and begin this next stage of their lives at home. We do not have to lure them back. Are we as a community doing a good job in preparing this group of students to be our next generation of business owners, plant managers, or City Council members?

Education leaders have developed a curriculum for those who will be going on to college. Why not develop a special curriculum for those who plan to stay at home and go into the workforce? Shouldn’t we be preparing them with business and entrepreneurial courses or with information about where they can advance their skills to go directly into the workforce or, even better, be their own boss? We have basically underinvested in this group of students. We need to do a better job of mapping out a course for these students early on and build partnerships and links between high school, postsecondary education, and the business community. We match our best and brightest to scholarships and universities, why not do the same with this middle group, matching them with technical and vocational training and job prospects? Encourage homegrown companies. Isn’t it easier to convince a person who already lives in the community to do business than it is to convince someone who lives out of town? Half your battle has already been fought. They are there!

Junior Achievement reports that 68.6% of students want to be entrepreneurs. They do not want to follow their parents into the factories; they have a desire to be their own boss.

### The New Faces of a Small Town

The faces of a small town have changed over the years. We are starting to see some newcomers who are discovering what we have known for years—that indeed you can live large in a small town. Some new faces we are seeing in our area include re-inventors, retirees, and boomerangs.

#### Re-Inventors

In the past five years, we have welcomed many families to Bardstown who have no connection to the community but who have decided at mid-life to change jobs, change their location, and move to small town America. They have come from coast to coast, and many from some of the most populated areas of the country. They now want to

slow down and redefine themselves and have found that they can live the life they want in a small town.

### Retirees

Retirement is not just about moving to Arizona or Florida anymore. Towns near good airports with a good quality of life are what retirees are looking for in their golden years. Retirees have time on their hands, so recreation and adult education opportunities are important to them as well. This group also includes some of the community's best volunteers because they have experience and time to give.

### Conclusion

Just like people, small towns are all different. There is no cookie cutter to determine a size or shape, and like a snowflake, there is certainly no two that are alike. There are those small towns that economically are doing well and others that are struggling to keep the tumbleweeds from

### Boomerangs

Just like the simple Australian piece of wood, these individuals come back after being gone for awhile. After living a life in school and maybe after a job in the city, they have chosen to come home to the good life they remember from when they were growing up. Many of these include young couples with children who want to raise their children the way they were raised in a small town with schools where they know the teachers and on the same little league teams they were on. Nostalgia is a very powerful thing that can lure many home.

blowing down the main streets. While they all have their own share of opportunities as well as issues, you would find it difficult to find that magic bullet that makes a small town great. For many reasons, too numerous to mention, towns survive and towns decline.

### So What Makes a Small Town Successful?

Of course there are those basic things like location, quality of life, business climate, and good leadership. But the more important question we must ask ourselves, as well as our leaders, is what does our future look like? The one way that small towns will continue to achieve success is by opening our arms and welcoming home our young people, making it a community in which they want to live and spend the rest of their lives. They are the future of the community. They are the next bank presidents, business leaders, educators, and heads of government, and without a plan in place for a community's future, it will be difficult for small towns to survive.

Small towns all across America are holding their breath in anticipation of the new census numbers. For the last two years, researchers have predicted a growth in the metropolitan areas and a decline in population in rural America. All of us in small town America need to take a hard look at these numbers since they represent a crystal ball into the community's future. Is your highest percentage of population in the above 60 age category? Are the numbers of jobs in your community mostly agriculture, manufacturing, or entrepreneurial based?

Small towns are quite resilient and most often take these ups and downs in the economy in stride. However, as we start to see more and more of our youth leaving and not

coming back, there is a sense of panic as we are forced to realize that our towns and our lack of resources are just not that alluring to our children. So often it is not that they don't want to come back, but that there is nothing for them here.

Small towns are not your grandfather's towns anymore. While so many communities have been dependent on agriculture and manufacturing, those who only put their eggs in those baskets are finding their baskets are becoming empty. As manufacturing slips away to destinations overseas, so slips away those jobs that were vital, and so goes some of our brightest young people.

We went through this transformation once when the agriculture jobs gave way to manufacturing. Why not make another transformation—one in which people don't just work for other people but work for themselves instead, taking control of their own future and destiny. I have been told on many occasions when speaking to youth organizations that they did not want to follow in the footsteps of their parents working for someone else or for a large company in a manufacturing line all day. They wanted to be in control, have a say in their own future, and be innovative and progressive. But how? How do they make this journey into a profession that has sparked more interest and discussion in the 21st century. How do they become entrepreneurs?

Bottom line, our youth today want to be their own bosses, and they also want a life with fun and excitement. Like the baby boomers before them, they are looking for the American Dream—maybe not in bell bottoms, but perhaps in business casual.

It is the job of community leaders to make their towns worth coming home to. It is important for people to know that the same businesses you can run in an office tower in big city America are the same businesses you can now run from Main Street USA.

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