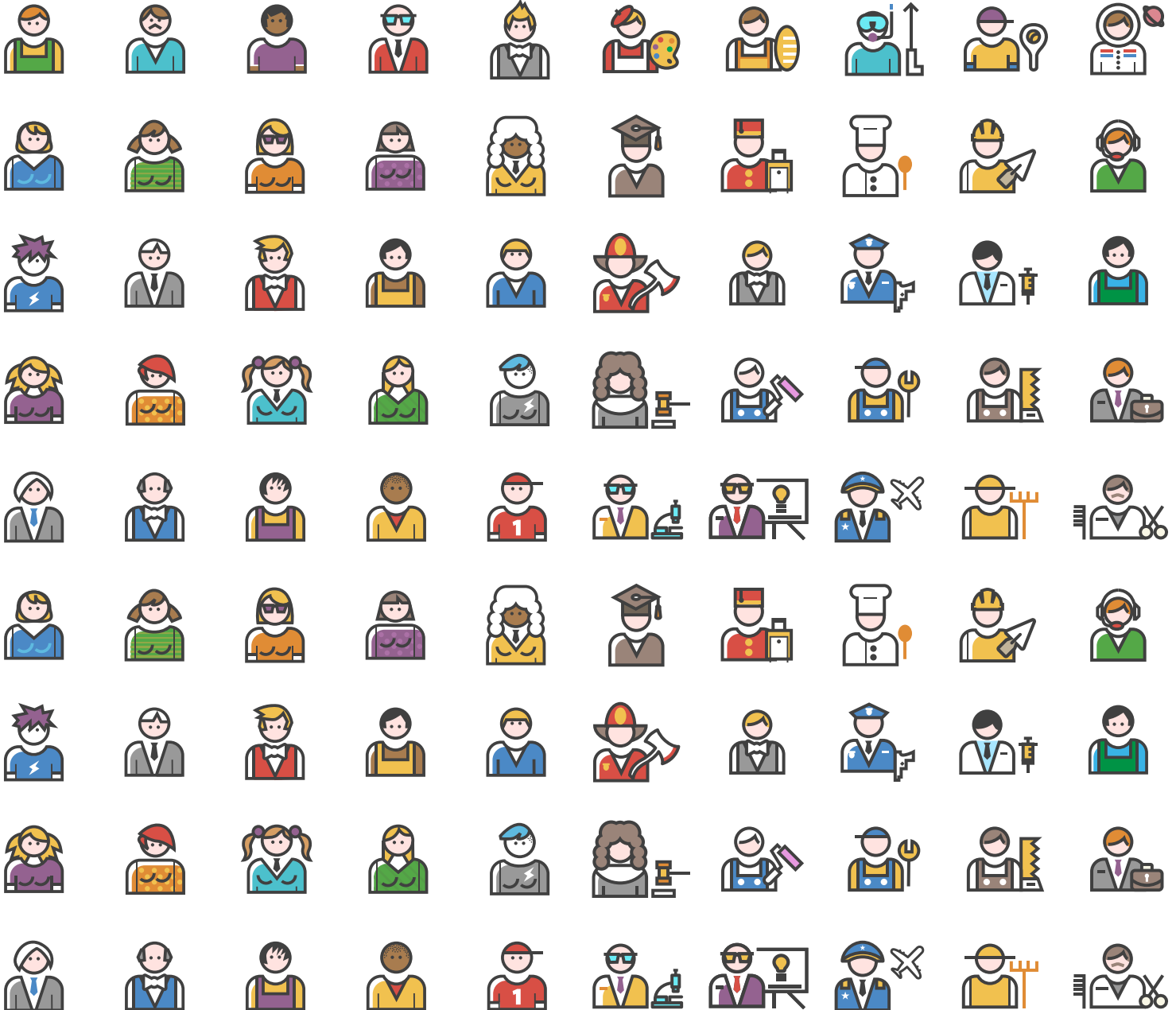




Reversing the Outmigration of Our Emerging Workforce



Understanding and Reversing the
Number of Young Workers Leaving
Southwest Virginia



Implications of the Outmigration of Our Emerging Workforce

Rural Appalachian communities have long struggled with young, educated adults leaving in search of economic opportunities elsewhere. Southwest Virginia (SWVA) is no different, and this has far-reaching implications for the economic health and stability of our region.

By 2030, the state of Virginia is projected to see a 26% increase for people aged 20-34¹, while SWVA is expected to lose 16% of people in this age group^{2,3}. The emerging workforce (aged 16-24) is an especially fast out-migrating group⁴. This age group represents a critical workforce within a regional economy, as they are employable and able to work during school or college, are starting a career with an associate's degree, or are close to entering the workforce with a bachelor's degree.

Reversing this out-migration is a critical step towards building a healthy economy. In this report, we drill deeper into the motivations and perceptions of the young workforce and explore possible solutions.



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Note on Data Collection:

In April, 2024 EO deployed an electronic survey to all graduating high school seniors as part of the EO IGNITE workforce readiness program. 432 students from 11 school districts in SWVA responded.

"Southwest Virginia" in this report includes the localities of: Bland, Bristol, Buchanan, Carroll, Dickenson, Floyd, Galax, Giles, Grayson, Lee, Montgomery, Norton, Pulaski, Radford, Russell, Scott, Smyth, Tazewell, Washington, Wythe, Wise.

In addition to the survey, secondary data is referenced throughout and is sourced on the last page of this report.

Seeking Better Economic Futures

According to a recent survey of high school students, 30% plan to leave Southwest Virginia. The most common places students plan to move to are just over the state line to North Carolina (22%) and Tennessee (19%), or to other parts of the state (19%).

**In SWVA,
30%
Plan to Leave
After Graduation**



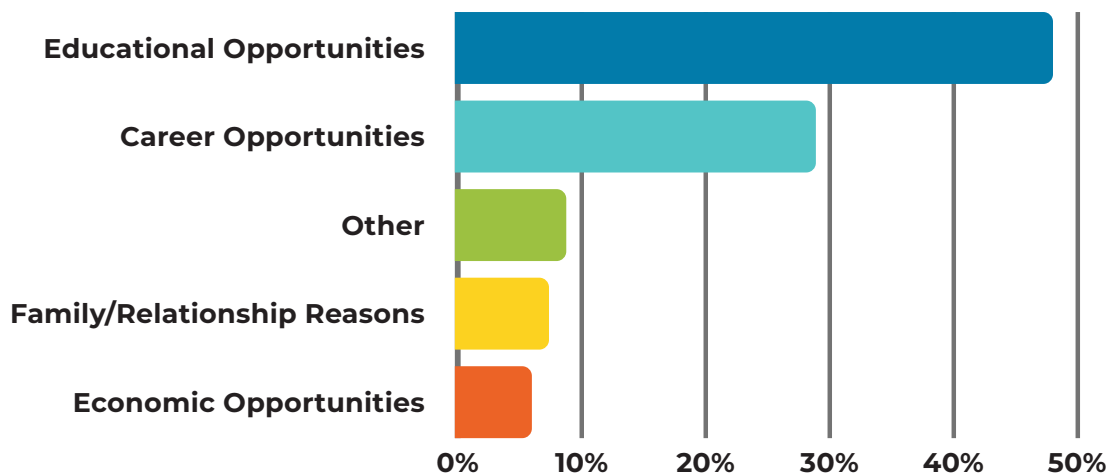
Plan to Leave



Plan to Stay

Many graduating students (36%) are leaving for economic or career opportunities and perceive a lack of good paying jobs in the region in their field of interest. The rest are leaving for educational opportunities (48%), family (7%) or other (9%). The students leaving for educational opportunities reported their college of choice being outside of the region or wanting the opportunity to experience a new place. Students who plan to leave are also less likely to report learning about careers in the region.

Reason For Leaving Southwest Virginia After Graduating High School



What Motivates Those Who Stay?

More than half (55%) of the students surveyed who plan to stay report doing so for family or other relationship reasons.

“ I wish to be near my family so I have them throughout my milestones. ”

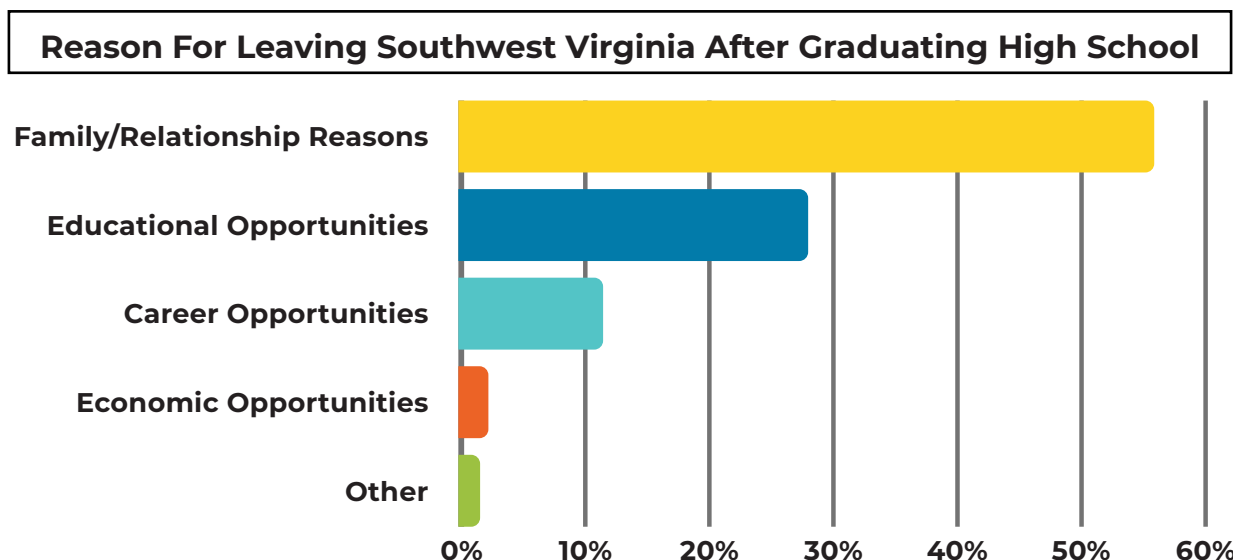
“ I am going to be very glad to stay close to my family and people that I know while furthering my education. ”

Connection to community is a reliable indicator of emerging adults staying in or returning to their rural communities⁵. However, there must be quality economic and career opportunities available to these young adults and their families for them to thrive in the place they call home. Studies have found that for college graduates, feeling that there are career and educational advancement opportunities in rural regions increase the likelihood of staying in the region⁶.

“ It's the most affordable option for me to live at home and go to community college before going to a university. ”

“ I like to stay close to home and I know that there are many job opportunities in my region that interest me. ”

While fewer than 15% of students reported staying for career opportunities, almost a third of students reported staying for post-secondary education opportunities. For many students, being around family while continuing education was important.



The First Years After High School: Education, Career Paths and Industries

The most common “next step” for surveyed students was continuing their education through community college, a 4-year college or university, or a trades program. 7% of students planned to immediately join the workforce.

Comparing the survey data between those leaving and those staying, students planning to stay in SWVA are more likely to initially skip a four-year college university, instead opting to attend a community college, trades program, take a gap year, or enter straight into the workforce.

The top five industries that surveyed students planned to work or study in were, in order of interest, Healthcare (28%), Science, Technology, Engineering, + Mathematics (12%), Education (10%), Creative Arts (8%) and Business (5%). 12% of students reported not knowing what their career focus was. Comparing student interest to industries with the greatest projected workforce growth⁷, there is some alignment between health care and business sectors. Less than 3% of students reported planned career paths in manufacturing, transportation, distribution, + logistics, and hospitality + tourism.

Top 5 Industries Student Interest



Healthcare



STEM



Education



Creative Arts



Business

Top 5 Industries 5-Yr Projected Growth*



Manufacturing



Healthcare



Business



Transportation,
Distribution, + Logistics



Hospitality + Tourism

*Data from Virginia Office of Education and Economics, Education, and Workforce Alignment Dashboard, 2028 Projections by Occupational Group

Career Exploration and Regional Educational Opportunities Key To Stopping Out-Migration

Reversing the rapidly out-migrating younger workforce is paramount to the long-term economic stability and success of Southwest Virginia. Addressing the perception that there are no career or economic opportunities is an important early intervention and the evidence is strong that exposure to jobs and industries while in K-12 shapes long-term career paths.

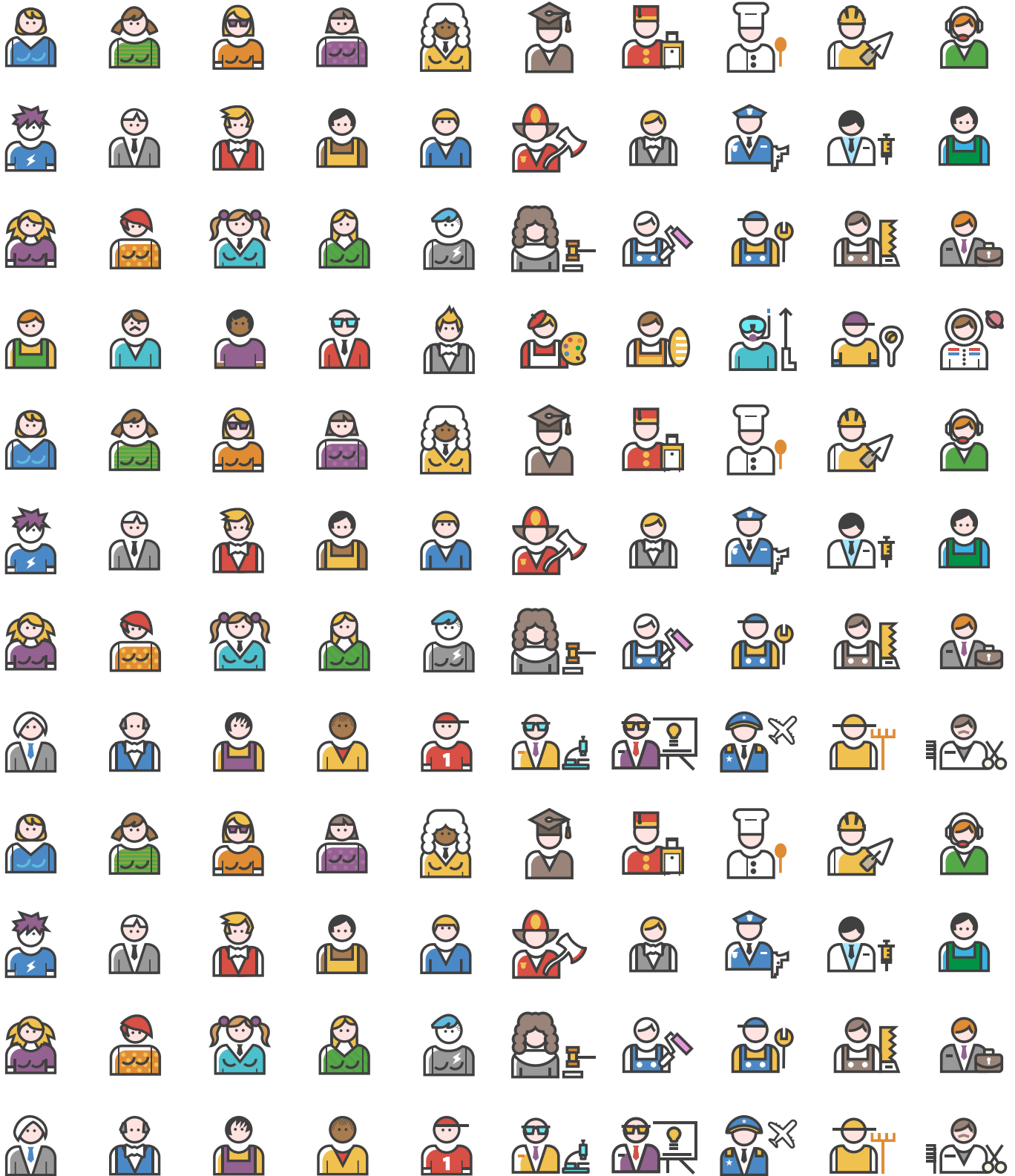
29% of students surveyed reported that they did not have an opportunity to learn about and explore different careers.

29% of students surveyed reported that they did not have an opportunity to learn about and explore different career opportunities in Southwest Virginia, a number that corresponds with students planning to leave the region. Conversely, one in three graduates reported a job or career exploration opportunity influenced their plans. Importantly, students who planned to leave the region were also less likely to report having career exploration opportunities. Building a pipeline for a healthy workforce requires early exposure to opportunities and hands-on exploration of career pathways. With so many students wanting to stay in Southwest Virginia, it is critical that they have early exposure to the education and career opportunities available to them and a promise of good-paying jobs when they complete their education goals.



Sources

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