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Aspirations and Expectations of Rural Indiana Adolescent Males

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### Introduction and Purpose

This is a qualitative study of how place affects outlook with special attention paid towards class background. I conducted interviews with rural adolescent males in Southwest Indiana about their personal, professional, and educational aspirations and expectations over the course of their lives at a time of renewed interest in rural areas and white masculinity spurred by the political ascent of Donald Trump. I asked for reflection about their rural community—where has come from in recent decades and their thoughts about its present and future, as well.

Since 2011, when I moved first to Bloomington, Indiana, when my parents retired and then that fall to the Bay Area for my undergraduate degree, I have been trying to explain to about anybody who will listen the realities of rural life as I experienced it growing up in rural Southern Indiana. With brief interruptions—specifically, the early years of the Baby Boom and what I imagine to be the 1970s’ bull agricultural market—the population has been in decline since 1940.

There is coal beneath the land upon which I came of age. Scores of men were blown to bits, suffocated, or crushed during a 1925 mine explosion. During the Depression, the Indiana National Guard camped on my hometown’s Courthouse Square when labor unrest provoked martial law. This nearly repeated itself in the early 1970s, during the same strike action that was depicted in the celebrated documentary *Harlan County, USA* (“It’s powerful, provocative, exciting, and *frightening, because it’s real,*” said the trailer’s narrator, over footage of a fat, middle-aged Kentucky redneck in a rusted pickup truck waving a pistol).

My home county is also agricultural: corn and soybeans, mostly, with some melons and tomatoes grown on the sandy soil near the Wabash River. My father’s paternal grandfather

owned a tract of extremely productive land and was a Democratic State Senator who benefitted from having constituents who, in addition to being United Mine Workers, saw that the Depression's Republican Party would sooner have allowed afflicted people to starve than raise taxes on the rich to provide for the common welfare. My mother's maternal grandfather was a geologist who discovered a massive deposit of coal in Wyoming. He called the family "hillbilly aristocracy" because we were educated. My mother's father, the son of chicken farmers, worked his way through college, owned a gasoline distribution business, and bought a newspaper. My parents married because they were the only two single, educated, unrelated people in Sullivan County and ran the paper.

I digress. I grew up in a literate household that had high expectations of me. Because of my deep roots in the area, because my parents managed the day-to-day record of the place, and because my maternal grandmother lived next door and relayed, through clouds of cigarette smoke, some hundred years' of family lore, I got a sense of that from whence I came. Because I was damaged by an openly gay adolescence in an very culturally conservative area, I feel concerned enough with lives of rural Midwestern adolescents to have devoted two academic studies towards them and a year of AmeriCorps work in rural college access. You could say that this is a form of psychodrama for me.

Beyond my personal experience, my research and absorption of local history allows me to relate that the rural United States has been in constant decline since the end of World War I. This has occurred in fits and starts—the population has occasionally grown, additional industries have from time to time replaces those that were lost due to the deindustrialization of the American economy—but it has been constant. It began at the end of World War I, when

advancements in farm machinery lessened the need for raw manpower to work farms and the war year's bull market collapsed in a commodity bust—remember the role this played in causing the Great Depression to begin with. New Deal agricultural policy stabilized the market, and the region enjoyed relative economic calm and demographic stability due in no small part to the Baby Boom. In the 1970s, another commodity boom—recall as well the staggering rates of inflation in the price of food in the early part of that decade—enticed farmers to buy marginal land and additional equipment on credit. In 1980, President Carter declared a grain embargo against the Soviet Union that quickened the bubble's burst, along with large-scale drought and recession in the early 1980s. That decade's farm crisis resulted in thousands of family farms going bankrupt.

Manufacturing, which partly moved from cities to rural areas around this time because of tax incentives that also enfeebled local governments' ability to reap capital from them as well as cheaper labor costs from a non-unionized workforce, has lately been leaving rural areas for even cheaper labor outside of the United States. The savings & loan crisis of the 1990s severely damaged small towns' autonomous economic vitality. The information technology boom lessened the need for educated professionals to run and work firms and branches in rural America. Without local elites, civic institutions and local philanthropy eroded. Rural public schools suffered from diminished expectations and fewer talented teachers (Flora and Flora 2014). Each year, six percent of rural people with bachelor's degrees migrate to a metropolitan area (Domina 2006), and rural communities are beginning to have difficulty attracting professionals (i.e. doctors, accountants) to replace those who retire (Domina 2007).

Donald Trump campaigned in this setting with a message of right wing populism and

found a receptive audience to his campaign rhetoric. And now there is popular attention being paid to poor rural white people, as evidenced by the popularity of Louisiana State Professor Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash*, a pop history tome, and the celebrated conservative J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*.

The *New York Times* in January 2017 took it upon itself to let a small town Iowa radio news director explain "Why Rural America Voted for Trump." It begins,

One recent morning, I sat near two young men at a coffee shop here whom I've known since they were little boys. Now about 18, they pushed away from the table, and one said: "Let's go to work. Let the liberals sleep in." The other nodded.

They're hard workers. As a kid, one washed dishes, took orders and swept the floor at a restaurant. Every summer, the other picked sweet corn by hand at dawn for a farm stand and for grocery stores, and then went to work all day on his parents' farm. Now one is a welder, and the other is in his first year at a state university on an academic scholarship. They are conservative, believe in hard work, family, the military and cops, and they know that abortion and socialism are evil, that Jesus Christ is our savior, and that Donald J. Trump will be good for America

They are part of a growing movement in rural America that immerses many young people in a culture — not just conservative news outlets but also home and church environments — that emphasizes contemporary conservative values. It views liberals as loathsome, misinformed and weak, even dangerous.

I am not wont to allow this proposition to be relayed without systematic qualitative social scientific fieldwork; ergo, this project. I aim to what the life aspirations and expectations of rural male Midwestern teenagers are, in terms of their future professional, educational, and personal lives. I examine this *now*, in light of an elected President that embodies "disruption" to American politics and government, who was elected with the profound support of rural white people and after several decades of rural decline in population and cultural and economic importance. I am

also presenting it to academia which, as far as I can see from my experience at Stanford and the University of Chicago, has been blithely uninterested in devoting resources or funding tenured faculty to study the history and present circumstances of the myriad of issues affecting life in the rural United States, especially rural whites. I examine this in Southern Indiana, which is a hodgepodge of a region: the Midwest, but the Lower Midwest, agricultural and with a heritage of natural resource extraction, populated by the descendants of white Methodist and Baptist pioneers who came up the Ohio's tributaries and over the Appalachians to hack substance from wilderness. This is the same stock that populates Appalachia and the Upland South while belonging to the same region as Wisconsin or even the Dakotas.

To speak to this decline, ironically, first from an anecdotal level, I want to briefly relay two conversations I had with school administrators in rural Indiana. There is a survey component to this project that I asked rural educators to administer to their 18-year-old male students for me. I talked to one principal for one of five high schools in a hilly county of around 30,000. "Morale is at an all-time low—I haven't been able to raise salaries in nine years," he said. The new Interstate 69 extension between Evansville and Indianapolis was, far from being the economic boon that they anticipated, sucking more capital and people away from the area. The local population was not thrilled at the prospect of school consolidation—small town schools are important cultural institutions for small towns—yet they were also not apt to raise local taxes through referenda for desperately needed funding. Worse still was the fact that their new school, constructed in the previous decade, was shoddily built and already falling apart, spurring costly litigation with the contractors they had hired and making it likely that consolidation, which he implicitly allowed was inevitable, would leave the whole building abandoned anyway. We

briefly touched upon the new Education Secretary, Betsy DeVos, and he said, “I think their goal is just to completely privatize public education, and, frankly, in Indiana, it looks like we’re going that way.” With a tone of defeat, despair, and powerlessness, he let everything flow out as if he had needed an outlet for some time.

The other was with the administrators at my school, with whom I met during a December cold snap while we were all still gobsmacked by the November election. I brought paczki with me from Chicago in a flat-footed attempt at joviality while hamfistedly attempting to project urbanity (“They’re these Polish donut things! I thought they were appropriately Chicagoan!”). I ran over myself in flattery, using the tired old tropes that people use to describe the mythical white working class: “This has always been a poor region,” I said, “But I know the people here are a proud people, a fighting people.” I asked how they thought a bunch of union Democrats who had come within a percentage point of turning the county blue for then-Senator Obama eight years before had just voted nearly three-to-one for President Trump, and the superintendent said that he believed that people were as desperate for a change eight years before as they had been a month before. I asked these educated men charged with overseeing the education of the community’s youth, if any discussion had occurred regarding plans to make top-performing students desire to return to Sullivan County and aid in rebuilding it, and I asked about their own beliefs regarding the potential future of the County and whether it could economically regenerate. No discussions had been held, they said, and they were both pessimistic—hopeless, even—about the area’s long-term economic and demographic trends.

Iowa State University, one of the few powerhouses of rural sociological research in the United States, published in 2015 “A Snapshot of Rural Iowa” relaying three key demographic

developments affecting the rural parts of the state from the 1980s: the aforementioned farm crisis, the development of malls in regional metropolitan areas that shifted retail from small towns towards them, and the entry of Wal-Mart into local communities that doubly strained small town retail markets. The authors came to my conclusion that these developments are still the defining events of rural Iowan life: “Resulting outmigration continues to impact labor availability. Employment, media, health systems, and banking all became more regionalized. The economic fortunes of communities often became tied to sub-state regional economies.” They note a quicker recovery in post-Great Recession manufacturing jobs in urban counties and that twice as many rural counties lost manufacturing jobs in those years as gained them. They conclude, bluntly and obviously, that the lack of “available labor” in rural areas impedes economic development and that rural areas’ wellbeings are increasingly tied to the wellbeing of adjacent metropolitan areas.

The proverbial dead canary dropped in 2015 with Case and Deaton’s landmark study showing that middle aged white Americans were diseased and dying at increasing rates—a trend not seen in other races. As said earlier, the political ascendancy of Donald Trump has focused educated attention on white rural America’s strife. A 2017 *Wall Street Journal* feature’s title is perhaps the clearest embodiment of the new national concern for this region: “Rural America Is the New ‘Inner City.’” The authors cite data that, from 2013, more people have died than been born in the most sparsely populated American counties—the rural population has been in decline for five years. The bottom line: “In terms of poverty, college attainment, teenage births, divorce, death rates from heart disease and cancer, reliance on federal disability insurance and male labor-force participation, rural counties now rank the worst among the four major U.S.



population groupings.” In its case study of Hardin County, Ohio, population 30,000, the percentage of the population living in poverty has risen 45 percent; median household income has fallen seven percent; the percentage of adults who have divorced has tripled. The authors credit the late-1990s shift to a knowledge-based economy to cities’ regeneration—twice as many urbanites hold college degrees as rural people, and the median rural age is five years older than that of urban areas, a shift from the 1980s when both measures were equal in both places. Hospital consolidation has lessened chances for medical care amid higher rates of rural obesity and smoking. In Hardin County, drug cases have risen from 20 to 80 percent of the local prosecutor’s cases.

And so I want to take note of young men’s perspectives on their futures amid such longstanding misery and decline that has now been recognized by the “outside world.” Political scientist Theda Skocpol has described rural white America as being a place where “families and marriages are fragile, drug deaths are rampant, churches are the only community institutions, men try to piece together service and construction jobs, low paid, while women do the same and try to raise kids.” I wanted to study young men because of popular attention to the supposed crisis of white masculinity in our time. The independent variable is class background. I want to see whether what these young people, having come of age in a period of heightened economic uncertainty and nationwide social change and discord, would ideally have happen to them, what they expect to have happen to them, and what accounts for the difference, if there is any. A brief literature review should examine the material on rural adolescence (particularly areas of difference between the genders), the developing model of “rural consciousness,” and of this study’s subject itself: adolescents’ aspirations and expectations, especially among rural

adolescents.

### Literature Review

*Hollowing Out in the Middle* is an ethnographic book by Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas describing the rural brain drain in Iowa. The authors put students into categories based on their trajectories after high school. They label as “achievers” the educated parents’ children and students who exhibit enough promise to prompt encouragement from interested adults. The achievers left for college and did not come back. “Stayers” transitioned to adult roles—marriage, independent living, etc.—quicker than achievers did, but their blue collar work was prone to stagnant wages. “Seekers,” unable to afford college, usually enlisted in the armed services. “Returners—high flyers” are achievers who lost their footing and returned home, while “returners—boomerangs” were usually veterans or community college graduates who returned home to work. The authors observe that “Small towns are especially good at recognizing, nurturing, and launching talented individuals. They rally to prepare Achievers to leave, succeed brilliantly in doing so, then lament the loss of their combined talents” (2009:51–52).

The most recent research explicitly concerned with rural youth’s educational and career aspirations was published by Robert Apostol Janet Bilden of the University of North Dakota in 1991, though it was only concerned with their career and educational aspirations. Educational aspirations had no statistical difference between gender—68 percent of males aspired to a four-year college, 21 percent listed a two-year program, and 11 percent indicated full-time employment. This was compared to only 29 percent of the national sample aspiring to go to a four-year college. The authors also found that rural females aspired to have higher paying careers than males.

Regarding socioeconomic status, other studies echo Carr and Kefalas, showing a correlation in rural areas between college-educated parents with college-matriculating children (Legutko 2008). Low-SES parents who are involved in their children's educations increase their aspirations but *not* their academic performance; high-SES parents with similar involvement have children with high aspirations, high achievement, and fewer behavioral problems. Some draw a link between the latter two trends with high-SES parents being better able to advocate for their children within schools (Hill *et al.* 2009). There is evidence that rural students benefit from unique community social resources, absent among metropolitan students, that engenders completion of a bachelor's degree compared with lower SES metropolitan students; overall, however, rural students' lower average SES compared to metropolitan students makes them less likely to finish college over all (Byun, Meece, and Irwin 2012).

High school students with high aspirations perceive their schools to be more supportive than students with low aspirations. Low-aspiration students find few opportunities for mentoring that raise their levels self-confidence and excitement for education (Plucker 1998). Rural students are as likely as metropolitan students to desire a bachelor's degree but far less likely to say they desire a graduate degree (Howley 2006). This carries a point that youth aspirations tend to reflect the professional atmosphere of local rural economies: rural adolescents may only interact with professional, college-educated teachers and medical workers on a regular basis, not those with more advanced degrees.

We know that rural Indiana is economically disadvantaged, with little deviation from the median income, few opportunities for professional, lucrative careers, and low educational attainment levels. The most capable students, the children of educated parents or students who

have other adult champions, tend to go to college and not come back (though some lose their footing and do return); many who do not go to college or enroll at community college stay. Parental involvement in education grows aspirations regardless of class background, but class background is correlated to academic performance. Rural students' aspirations tend to reflect local economic trends and professions.

It may be useful at this point to consider the target population's attitude or, more broadly, worldview, as it will be of paramount importance to their aspirations and expectations over the course of their lives. This is a different thing than the tendency for rural students to not express a desire to be, say, investment bankers, because investment bankers do not live in rural areas. This is an expression of how rural people think of their rurality and how they thus relate to broader society—remember the *Times*'s two Iowan teenage boys who would rather get to work and let strawmen liberals sleep. Katherine J. Cramer, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, argues that the rural-versus-urban divide in political attitude combines powerfully with resentment that explains rural voting behavior. She defines “rural consciousness” as a belief that rural areas are ignored by policymakers, they they do not get a fair share of resources, and that they had a distinct cultural identity than metropolitan people (2016, 12). I hasten to conject too much into this article for fear of lapsing into “culture of poverty” tropes, but the sheer speed of the social and economic change that the United States has undergone since 2001 has obviously made rural white Americans feel detached, overlooked, or persecuted. Enter a man saying that we could make America great again. Given that evidence points to the primacy of family background, not schooling itself, between educational attainment and social orientations (Sieben and de Graaf 2004), decades of brain drain that have exasperated

a trend towards less-educated people living in rural areas, and severe strain on rural families because of continuous economic decline, I expected to hear from the target populations reflections of the resentment and discord that has characterized white rural people in the popular press and in some scholarly works.

The question that is not addressed in the research is whether the students are satisfied with their expectations or if they feel that things are holding them back. And if such things exist, what are they? Class background? Rurality? Has the election and President Trump's voicing of populist, white nationalist themes affected the way they view the future or how they view the present situation in their rural communities? What do these students think will happen to their rural communities over the coming years, and do they think they have will have a place in them? What is the bottom line in a region that has been in decline for so long?

### Methodology

This project consists of a survey administered to boys attending rural Indiana high schools aged 18 or above that returned some information about the parameters of life aspirations and expectations; it also functioned as a screening survey for a round of field interviews conducted with the target population. I chose to limit the study to 18-year-olds because they are legal adults and because of their position in life: as they were seniors in high school, they were faced with imminent change and an end to of the K through 12 path. I figured they would be more apt to be thinking about the future at that point and would return richer qualitative data.

The survey, hosted on Qualtrics, first ascertained that the respondent was at least 18, identified as male, and consented to take it alongside a description of the project. I asked whether they were going to pursue any education after graduating from high school and, if they were, the

number of schools to which they had applied and to name them, divided into two- and four-year colleges. I asked whether they had selected a college. I asked if they were working and, if so, where, whether they would stay with this job after they graduated and whether they had a job lined up after they would graduate. I asked if they could do *any* job for a career what it would be and whether they would prefer to move away from or stay in the place in which they currently lived. I then asked if they *planned* to move away or stay in the place in which they currently lived. I then asked whether they thought the place in which they lived was becoming a better or worse place to live or if it was staying about the same. The survey ended with some questions regarding demographics—race and ethnic background, parents' educational attainment, GPA, participation in their schools' free or reduced-price lunch program, and whether they were enrolled in Indiana's 21st Century Scholars program, which provides scholarships to income-eligible students who meet educational benchmarks and do not get arrested. Because students' parents must enroll them in the program during middle school, it also shows a degree of future planning and investment in education on the part of the family.

As I focused the research on educational, professional, and personal aspirations and expectations; my interview questions were sequenced in that order, as well. I began by asking about their immediate educational plans and how they had undergone the college choice process. I asked how well-prepared they thought they were for college, as far as planning was concerned, whether or not they believed they would graduate in four years. I had a set of questions for students not immediately planning to pursue postsecondary education, but all the students I interviewed were planning on attending either a two- or four-year institution.

I then asked the respondents how they came to be interested in the careers they planned to

pursue and what environment in which they would want to work—whether in a firm or in a business that they themselves owned, for instance. I asked them to name a “dream job” and to tell me what made this prospect different than the career they expected to have. I asked whether they believed that they could do the work they envisioned themselves doing in the town where they lived, what would make that more or less likely, and whether they would want to either way. And I asked what factors they saw as being most consequential for how their work lives would actually pan out.

Finally, I asked about hopes and expectations regarding their personal lives: whether and when they wanted to get married and start families and why. I asked about personal opinions and values in this line of questioning: whether they thought quality of life in their towns had increased, decreased, or stayed the same in the past 50 years; what they thought President Trump meant when he promised to “Make America great again” and their expectations of the impact of politics on their lives; whether they expected the quality of life in their towns to increase, decrease, or stay the same over the next 50 years; and whether they expected to have a better, worse, or about the same quality of life as their parents had enjoyed.

I transcribed each interview and coded each transcript with applicable schemes using NVIVO software; the analysis, framed by the returned survey data, follows.

In addition to my upbringing in rural Indiana, I have done previous qualitative research there on the college choice process of top-performing rural there. That undertaking led me to realize the utter difficulty of soliciting participation in research when the onus to participate is solely upon the student: I did not expect to be able to have rural high school disseminate my contact information to students and recruit participants that way, hence my use of the in-school

survey to gain broad information about the subject and to screen for interview participants.

I was surprised about the apprehension of some rural schools to participate in the survey and in the end only secured two school partnerships—from the high school I attended and from another, smaller high school where I knew the guidance counselor. This returned around 35 completed surveys. This additionally yielded a small pool of interview participants—in the end, I conducted seven interviews. I contacted the students who expressed an interest in doing an interview over the phone, and they were compensated with a 20 dollar gift card for their participation. I conducted the interviews at a public library in rural Indiana in June 2017.

#### Survey data

80 percent of the survey respondents, 29 of 37, self-reported that they were white. A third of them all received a free or reduced price lunch, and a quarter of them participated in the 21st century scholars program. 35 answered the question regarding whether the educational attainment of their mothers or “Guardian A”: roughly a third each had graduated from high school, received an associate’s degree or “some college,” or received a bachelor’s degree or postsecondary degree (seven with a BA, four with a postsecondary degree). Only one reported that his mother had not graduated from high school. Out of their fathers or “Guardian B”, 10 percent had not graduated from college, 40 percent had a high school diploma, around a fifth had an associate’s or some college, 6 out of 36 had received a bachelor’s degree, and 3 out of 36 had a graduate or professional degree. 29 out of 36 respondents reported that they lived with their parents; four lived alone, two lived with extended family, and one lived with roommates.

83 percent of respondents reported that they intended to pursue further education in the year after they graduated from high school. When I asked the number of postsecondary



institutions to which they had applied, the mode and median were three. Eight reported that they had applied to two-year postsecondary institutions, namely Ivy Tech (Indiana's community college system), Vincennes University (Indiana's residential two-year college), and a few who applied to Lincoln Trail College in Southeast Illinois. 22 applied to four-year colleges and universities. Only 22 indicated which postsecondary institution they had decided to attend: Nine were to matriculate at one of Indiana's non-flagship public institutions, four were set to attend either Indiana University or Purdue University, seven selected a community college, one Oakland City University, a private religious college in Indiana, and one the University of Chicago.

21 out of 37 of the students were working ("for compensation, whether full- or part-time, paid in cash or otherwise"), and of the 18 who reported where they worked, 12 said they worked in the service industry, in some role at a restaurant or as a cashier. Nearly three-quarters of them said that they did not intend to work at their present after they graduated from high school. A fill-in-the-blank question asked, "If you could do any job for a career, what would it be?" This question returned a number of responses without much of a trend one way or another. Some were whimsical: one reported that he wanted to be a bounty hunter, another said that he wanted to be in the NBA. Three others wanted to do a career in sports—either a sports analyst and two who wanted to be football coaches. Two each said that they wanted to be teachers, psychologists, mechanics (one wanted to work in drag racing), attorneys, sports managers, welders, scientists (one a marine biologist, another in forensics) and physicians. One each reported a desire to ideally be a politician, in law enforcement, a veterinarian, a nurse practitioner, and a musician, a chef, a physical therapist, an academic, and an artist.

Out of the 36, 22 said that they would *prefer* to move away from the city and county in which they lived after high school. As far as planning is concerned, there appeared to be little difference between living idealizations and expectations: 12 *planned* to live with their parents, 14 planned to move out at some point, and 10 planned to move out immediately. 25, nearly 70 percent, said that they *thought* they *hypothetically* could leave their hometowns after graduating from high school, but around 44 percent *expected to stay* in the area in which they lived at the time they took the survey.

As far as the standard of living in the area in which they lived is concerned, 20—over half—reported that they thought it was stay about the same quality place to live. About a fifth said that it was becoming a worse place to live and a quarter said that it was becoming better. At the same time, a little over half reported that they thought they would live a better life than their parents had lived; 5 respondents, around 14 percent, said worse and 11, a little over 30 percent, said about the same.

The responses of the students who indicated that they received a free or reduced price lunch, a proxy measure of class background, suggests that students from a lower class background tend to be far less optimistic about their futures and their communities' trajectories than more well-to-do students. Seven of the twelve students who receive a free or reduced price lunch reported that they planned to pursue postsecondary education, but two said that they had not applied to any schools; three such respondents had applied to two, and two had applied to three. Only five of the twelve were 21st Century Scholars. Ten of the twelve students said that they would like to move away from their hometowns after they graduated from high school; three-quarters said that they expected to be able to do this. Out of the students who did not

receive a free or reduced-price lunch, 22 out of 24 said that they intended to pursue postsecondary education. They were more likely to be working, and they were evenly split about whether or not they would prefer to move away from the town wherein they lived.

One third of the students receiving a free or reduced price lunch said that they thought the towns in which they lived were becoming worse places to live, though seven of the twelve said that it was about the same. Only one said that he thought that his town was becoming a better place to live. One quarter said that they expected to have a worse quality of life than their parents; one third said about the same; five of the 12 said worse. Out of the 24 students who did *not* receive a free or reduced-price lunch, one third said that the quality of life was increasing where they lived—only an eighth said that it was becoming worse while 13 of the 24 said that things were staying about the same. Out of the students with a higher class background as defined by not participating in their school’s free or reduced lunch program, 15 said that they expected a better quality of life than their parents, two said worse, and seven said about the same.

While the students who said that they thought their towns were becoming better places to live or would stay the same both overwhelmingly said that they planned to pursue postsecondary education, three of the seven who said that they believed the quality of life was going to decrease did not think that they would do the same. Those with a negative outlook in terms of their towns’ predicted quality of life trajectory were also the group wherein students who received a free or reduced lunch made up a majority—out of the optimistic students, eight out of nine did not. While majorities of the students who thought that their towns’ quality of life would improve or stay the same said that they expected to have a better life than their parents had, only three in seven students who thought that the quality of life would decrease said the same: one thought

theirs would be worse and three said about the same. A majority of students who expected their lives to be better than their parents' lives, twelve of twenty, said that they thought the areas in which they lived were staying the same; six out of the eleven who expected a similar quality of life as their parents said the same of their towns; out of the five who expected a worse quality of life as their parents, two thought their towns were becoming better places to live, one thought worse, and two thought about the same.

To summarize the distinctions between students from lower and upper class backgrounds, the former are tend to be less likely to intend on pursuing postsecondary education (58 percent of those receiving a free or reduced lunch plan to do so compared to 92 percent of those that do not); more likely to say that they would prefer to leave the area in which they currently lived (83 percent to 50 percent), though both groups report basically the same plans regarding their planned living situations in the year after they graduate from high school. A majority of students from a lower class background report that they do expect to stay where they are living now, while a majority of higher class background students do not. Majorities of both groups say that the quality of life will stay about the same in their communities, but, while a third of students from a higher class background report that they thinks things will improve, one third of students who receive a free or reduced lunch think things will get worse. Nearly two-thirds of upper class background students think they will lead better lives than their parents live, but only 42 percent of lower class background students reported the same—and one quarter expected a worse quality of life.

#### Interview Data

Two of the seven respondents were 21st Century Scholars and one received a free or

reduced-price lunch. All respondents were 18-years-old and white. Two had moved to the rural community in middle school from an Indianapolis suburb. All students were planning on matriculating at a postsecondary institution in the fall.

I began the interviews with a discussion of each students' college admissions process. Five of the seven said that they started thinking about college in high school—three spurred by teachers or guidance counselors, one who said he was self-motivated, and one who started investigating because of his involvement in Jobs for America's Graduates ("JAG"), an in-school college access nonprofit that serves income-eligible students. Two respondents reported that they had begun thinking about college early in elementary school—one because of discussions with his family, the other through his involvement in 4-H, an organization funded through the federal Department of Agriculture that focuses on youth development and is extremely popular in rural areas for its emphasis on agricultural education. He said,

I showed cattle, pigs, welding. I did baking for the first couple years. But it really made me start thinking about my future because I'd sell animals in the auction, and that was adding up; that can pay for quite a bit of school. So that's kinda what made it a driving factor: me going ahead and thinking about where I wanted to go to school—if I wanted to go to a very expensive university and blow all that money in the first couple years. I had to really think about that.

He scored in the 80th percentile on the ACT college admissions exam and considered a number of postsecondary schools with veterinary programs. Uncommonly, this meant that he applied to several such institutions outside of Indiana—Kansas State (where his sister's boyfriend attended and championed to him), Michigan State, and Ohio State—in addition to three in-state liberal arts colleges and a nearby second-tier teaching public institution, and a local community college. Purdue University has Indiana's flagship veterinary program, but he feared that he would not get

in (he reported that the undergraduate program only admits 42 students a year) and thus applied to several institutions. Nevertheless, he was admitted and earned a large scholarship through his involvement in 4-H, and, besides, he had always been a Boilermakers fan.

The student who participated in JAG was also the only student who reported that he received a free or reduced-price lunch. The organization also led to his projected career interest, law enforcement, since he scored best in the “wanting to help others” category on a skills inventory test they administered. He told me how he stayed late and came in early to his job at a fast food restaurant and how he, in law enforcement, wanted to help people “straighten their lives out.” The local sheriff’s department did not require a college degree, but he felt like his career options would be improved with one—he could leave his county if he wanted to, or perhaps work at the local state prison. He was unsure of what degree, two- or four-year, that he intended to get, however. He did not take a standardized admissions exam and only considered community colleges. In the end, he decided to attend Vincennes University because he could live there, rather than spend time commuting to another two-year postsecondary institution. He also wanted a “college experience,” and both his parents (both employed at a nursing home: father a dieticianary manager who graduated, mother a laundress who did not) attended VU as well.

In the end, the students’ desire to stay close to home, whether the school had a good program for their intended major, and concerns about tuition came to be the most common determinants of their college choice decisions. Two students said that they considered joining the military to help pay for college but decided against it—one because he wanted to go straight to college and another because he felt like his weight would preclude him from serving. The only student moving far away from Indiana for college was moving to Florida because his father lived

there—and he was going to attend a community college there because it was the cheapest option available to him. Unsurprisingly, many students chose their particular school because it offered majors that they thought could lead to their career; another student chose to attend a community college in Southern Illinois because he was recruited to play a sport there—he hoped to transfer to Indiana State and play on their Division 1 baseball team—and wanted to work in that industry after he graduated. Most of the students reported that they were set to receive scholarships but spoke nebulously about incurring debt to fund their educations. Students were also not envisioning substantial issues with finishing; most students reported that they felt academically prepared by high school, though a few reported that they felt concerned about the change in schedule and expectations. Another student who moved to town from the Indianapolis suburbs conceded that there were far fewer course options at his small rural high school but said he was more into school for the sports.

The path to career interests reflects existing research that says that students migrate towards careers that they know. One student was from a family of teachers, so he was interested in becoming of teachers. He also came from a family of rural Democrats, a dwindling breed, and became swept up in Senator Bernie Sanders's presidential campaign the previous spring. He was thus choosing between law and education, making a decision about whether to matriculate at Indiana State University, known for its education program, or to Vincennes University, where he planned to get his generals out of the way before transferring to Indiana University in Bloomington, where he wanted to major in economics and do the pre-law track. Interestingly, two of the students planned to major in nursing, contra to my expectations regarding gender norms in a culturally conservative rural area. One student's father was a paramedic, and another

student reported that he felt like he could easily get a job in that field. The latter student who wanted to be a nurse was also introduced to the profession by his mother, who went back to school for it when he was a child:

When my mom was taking the classes, she'd ask me to come over and ask whether I could understand it. Everything she was doing, it was kind of like, "Oh, this actually isn't horrible. It's kind of interesting." So when she was home home, because she'd take classes throughout the day when we were at school, when she was home at night, when she was doing her homework, she'd talk to us about it a lot. It seemed interesting.

Other students reported that they were interested in their chosen school because it a specific academic plan that they believed could lead to an uncommon career that they wanted—one student, as stated, wanted to be a college athlete because he wanted to work in sports; the student moving to Florida was interested in his chosen school's program in ocean engineering. Rather than speaking about potential issues regarding proofing buildings for the upcoming effects of climate change, as I anticipated, he told me instead, "I've just always loved the atmosphere—the sun and the weather." He did have an aunt, however, who was in charge of admissions at an engineering college and encouraged him to pursue it because he liked math.

Aside from the student who reported that he wanted to be a bounty hunter and another who said that he wanted to play professional basketball, none of the surveyed students reported truly pie-in-the-sky "dream jobs." This was broadly the same among the students that I interviewed, as well. The student who wanted to study ocean engineering wanted to open his own firm be his own boss. The student who wanted to study law or education wanted to run for elected office. The students who wanted to pursue nursing would ideally be a physician or pursue a Doctor of Nursing Practice degree. The student set to play college baseball wanted ideally to



manage a professional sports team, but said, “I want to do, like, big sports, but I think realistically I’ll end up in a system, like, not a sport I would like, like managing concessions in like tennis or hockey. Like not a big sport.”

The exception was a student who wanted to work in law enforcement—he told me that his “dream job was to work for a video game company, like every nerd wants to do.” He did not, however, think he was capable of doing this. His high school offered a few computer science classes, but he said that they “don’t really teach you how to do anything.” When I pressed him further, he said further that he did not feel like he was smart enough and that his small rural school could not accommodate his schedule in a way so that he could take them. He confessed that he had not actually graduated because he had yet to pass his qualifying exam in English and that he was dyslexic.

Each of these profiled students spoke rather nebulously about their intended career and how they could achieve the pinnacle of what they wanted with one exception. The student who did 4-H and wanted to be a livestock veterinarian had an existing background in agriculture—his father worked as an agricultural loan officer, and his parents had enrolled him in 4-H at the earliest possible age. He had even networked with veterinarians throughout his region. When I asked him whether he would want to open his own practice, the detail in his answer surprised me:

From what I've been told, those that I've worked for for three or four years, his brother-in-law came straight out of vet school and wanted to open his own practice, but if I make it into vet school and I'm able to graduate, I would not try to open my practice immediately because that's a substantial amount of money to spend, and you have to go into debt for a number of years before you finally break even. I don't know if I'd be willing to go that far into debt after going through that much school. I'd rather go somewhere, start up with a company or with someone that already has a practice going for them and just go in and help them. And then after a few years maybe go part-owner or

buy into that or, but after I'm able to repay some of my debt.

He raised show pigs, heritage breeds that can sell for thousands of dollars, for 4-H from a young age and, as stated, realized that this could be quite lucrative. So his plan is to get a degree at Purdue and then pursue a graduate degree somewhere in veterinary medicine, work in agribusiness and one day open his own practice, and pursue his show pig hobby in the meantime. And he wanted to spend his professional life living in rural Indiana.

All of the respondents expressed a desire to marry and have children, though nobody was interested in doing so before they finished their college degrees. One respondent's girlfriend planned on moving to Chicago for art school, and he, the one who was interested in law enforcement, would move with her. Nevertheless, he hoped to stay in his hometown—he said that Chicago is too loud.

The students I spoke to were pretty evenly divided as to whether or not they wanted to stay in their rural communities. Two expressed a desire to leave their rural communities because they felt less than fulfilled by their rural communities: “After you live in a small town for a while, you get kind of sick of it. Everything becomes routine. Somewhere a bit bigger, but not like a city or anything. Somewhere different.” Both of these respondents said that they planned to leave Indiana, to Florida but also to the Nashville suburbs after he finished college—he liked the trees, he said, and he liked Nashville a lot. The athlete said that he was particularly keen on living and felt that his sports career in the town had hurt his chances of getting recruited:

This town gets old. It's too small for me. I want to go to a big, like Charlotte. I like Charlotte a lot. Or maybe Orlando. I want to be somewhere where it's warm. Not necessarily in Indiana, and a lot bigger. I want to have more opportunity for my future family. I don't think, in sports perspective, I have friends at my old school who are being recruited by big schools, and they're not necessarily better than anyone here. It's just that no one cares about a little town like Sullivan

compared to the state champion there.

Another said that, while he loved his little town in which he had deep roots, he feared that he would not be able to return because he heard that it was difficult to practice law in the area. If he were to enter politics, he was interested in staying in his hometown and commuting to Indianapolis.

Other respondents wanted to stay in their communities precisely because of the unique properties of rural life, however. One said that he liked privacy—being able to live eight miles outside of town while still being able to get there in ten minutes. Another student originally from suburban Indianapolis compared the small town favorably with it:

It's secure. It's safe. It's a good place to raise a family just because, in [the suburb], it's huge, and [in this town], you have three stoplights in the whole town. I really like a lived in both big and small, and since I came here, I really like how everything's small and everyone knows everybody. If you do something, you're not going to get away with it, basically, because someone you know will see you do it and say, "Oh, hey, why are you doing that?"

*And that's not the case in [the suburbs]?*

No, it's just, I feel like, since it's bigger, there's a lot more people, so there could be a lot more bad stuff that could happen. Your kids could fall in trouble with the wrong people, and you wouldn't even know because they have 900 kids in their class. You could walk down a hallway and graduate and not even know the person who just walked across the stage.

*Did bad things happen in [the suburbs]?*

No, it's just, from around here, the general community of people I know who do bad things. You have to stay away from bad things. It's just here, it's just present, and obviously if it's present here, it's got to be present somewhere else. But obviously how big everything is. I will say that I do know some of my friends that I don't really talk to anymore from Avon are kind of into that stuff, so I haven't really talked to them in four years. I'm not too worried about it.

While I often had to tease it out, I was keen on getting a sense of the “rural consciousness” identified by Katherine Cramer over the course of her fieldwork in Wisconsin. The pig-raising proto-veterinarian had a lot to say about this. He worried that those who only see pigs being shown and minded with a whip may think that the process is cruel, when in reality he lotions his pigs twice daily and rinsed in cold water four times. When I asked him why there was such discord in the United States in 2017, he said,

We’re raised differently. I feel like we're raised differently as in we all know each other, and a lot of us have a lot of connection around that. We can have friendly conversation with 90 percent of the people in this town. When you go to bigger towns, people with huge schools, they don't know any other grade but their own, and I think that being able to make the connections that you do in such a small area allows you to connect, and even though that clique can be huge, you can all connect that you're from the same area. If you're in a big town, I don't think there's as much around which you can connect as out here. When you try to explain something to a person from a big town, they don't understand the lingo or where you're coming from with it.

*You think that being in a smaller population creates more community rather than being white or male or something like that?*

Yes, in my opinion.

One of the respondents, who had moved to the rural community from the Indianapolis suburbs said of the difference between the two, said in a clear echo of the conservative Iowan teenaged boys quoted by the New York Times contributor:

The way that we do things down here is a lot different than up there. We farm. We hunt. We fish. You have some of that up there, but usually those people are more along the lines of “We live in an expensive kind of community, so we deserve nice things.” They don't have to work as much, because, I guess, their parents can afford to live up there. They get stuff more handed to them, but down here, you have kids that work throughout high school. They work at night, then

they go to school in the morning. This is not than expensive place to live at all, because it's rural, there are farmers and stuff like that. So people actually have to work to make a living down here. I'm not saying they don't up there, but their parents are well-off, more than the people down here. Down here, we have to work harder, though physical labor, for our money than up there.

One of the students who expressed a desire to leave, however, said that the less savory elements of rural life had moved him to want to leave the town. He told me that a black friend of his from a nearby city of 60,000 had moved to the town but moved back after a week because of the racial harassment.

Although I did not bring up the town's past trajectory in the survey, I asked the interview respondents whether they thought that their communities were better, worse, or about the same quality of places 50 years ago. Some said worse—one said that the he imagined the agricultural economy would have taken up more free time, the other said that the town was probably more “run-down” (he pointed out that people bathed outside during the Depression) and pointed out local infrastructural investments done in recent years. Other respondents, however, said that life was better in the past. One blamed issues with drug addiction. Another blamed increased levels of poverty, population decline, and an evaporation of local businesses. Another, the pig shower, said that life was better when more kids were working on farms.

The respondents had no consensus about what they thought the town would be like in 50 years. To return to the survey data, it would be useful to acknowledge that majorities of both respondents who said that they did and did not intend to live in their home communities after graduating from high school thought that the areas in which they lived would stay about the same—though those that planned to stay were more inclined to say that things were going to improve. Out of the interview respondents, those who thought that their town would stay the

same generally cited the low potential for population or economic growth. One person said that he did not think it would be entirely abandoned, “Because the people living here, they can't afford to leave. They just settle down here and have a family. More people are coming [here] because it's a quiet little town and settling and having a family. I think it's going to rise.”

While a little over half of the survey respondents reported that they thought their lives would be better than their parents' lives, all interview respondents expressed this view. Many of them reflected upon the sacrifices that their parents had made to ensure that they had opportunities—“They, growing up, told me everything that they had growing up, what they had done, what they wouldn't do, what I should do better. So they're shaping me to be a better person of themselves so I will not go in and make the same mistakes that they do.” One respondent dwelled on his apprehension about becoming a teacher, a popular trade in his family, because he had heard about the pay cuts in Indiana from them.

One of the towns in which I did interviews has an active coal industry, and it came up in regards to the long-term vitality of the region and when I asked the respondents about their views on contemporary politics, especially give the attention it received during the 2016 presidential election. One said that he thought the mining industry had brought more jobs into the region, especially for those without higher education. He hoped that it would lead to less drug addiction in the area. When I mentioned the decline in the industry nation-wide, he countered

I think it's, from what I understand, it's harder and more expensive to get the clean energy. I don't think coal is as expensive and it helps create a lot more jobs in areas than what wind or solar power would create. Solar panels you put up and there're crews to maintain it, and the same with wind energy and you just have to maintain them. Whereas with coal, you have to have miners. That creates jobs through the country for people.

He also said that he was not concerned about climate change. Another student, the Democrat who wanted to potentially run for office, had this to say:

I think that the coal industry is going to fizzle out more and more and more, and that's a big part of this town, so if that continues to fizzle and fizzle out, then maybe this town will die as it fizzles out. It just depends on what the coal industry is for this town. If they bring in more renewable-type energy jobs to replace, and that replaces coal, then I don't think it'll necessarily die, but if it just fizzles out and the coal industry is gone, then I think that [this county] will die.

Perhaps because all the interview respondents indicated that they were planning on going to college for a reason and had specific careers in mind, only one respondent commented that he would like to see more employment opportunities come to his town. Another said that he wanted it to be bigger. Another said that he wished people were more accepting. But the thing I heard most was that they just wished there were more things to do. Three respondents complained that there were a number of pizza places in their town but no great variety otherwise in terms of restaurants. However, this sparseness of amenities is the calling card of rurality, as evidenced by this dialogue:

*If you could change something about this town, what would you change?*

Something different to eat rather than pizza. A more diverse thing of what you can do—you can go to sporting events, but people hardly go to the Square anymore, but hardly anybody goes up there. I think there's been a shift—people now, I don't even know. My friends would go after a football game and hang out with our girlfriends, then we would go back and sleep. Then we get up and watch film [of the football game]. Sometimes we go to the Lake and go out there and sit around.

*You wish there were more businesses and restaurants and that kind of thing—the question I beg to ask, then, is why not move to a city if you want more diversions?*

Because for as much as I complain about not having enough to do, I get bad road rage. I can't stand having more than two cars in front of me at a stoplight. It drives

me crazy to drive to Terre Haute during lunch. I hate the smell of asphalt. I just—I'm not a fan of big towns. I can stand it for a few days if I'm away from all the traffic, but I grew up in a system.

*You just like rurality, even with the boredom?*

Yeah.

### Conclusion

President Donald Trump was not mentioned as much as I anticipated over the course of the interviews on the respondents' initiative, but I did ask what they thought he meant when he said that he wanted to make America great again. Negative interpretations stressed war and a general retreat of decorum and civil rights; positive interpretations emphasized generally conservative viewpoints:

I think it means getting out of this hole we've dug ourselves in, including mostly debt, but, in general, we were the greatest country from World War I until desert warfare with Iraq [...] But I just feel like since we've dug ourselves into a huge hole of debt, I feel like we haven't been that great jobs-wise and keeping stuff here. Like we always go overseas to bring stuff here, like China, Taiwan: we bring everything in. I feel like he's trying to keep jobs here. At least that's what he's trying to say. And also the whole wall thing, or whatever. I think it's better. Not so much building the wall, but keeping immigrants out.

*Why?*

Just because I feel like people trying to come here just for a free ride. "Come to the United States, because it's awesome." That's what gets us into this hole money-wise, so if we can keep out people that are just staying here just to hang out, I guess.

One respondent expressed a total ambivalence about politics and did not give an answer other than that.



I remember the phrase muttered by so many elders in the town during the darker days—the freefalling days of Autumn 2008—of the Great Recession: “Feels like we’ve been down so long that the bottom for the rest of the country looks like up to us.” To be sure, this is a region of stagnant decline. Market forecasts are not particularly rosy for a revitalization of the coal or other natural resource or resource extraction industry. The rural brain drain continues; school consolidation and declining tax revenue appears to be the new normal; a hoped-for renaissance of people moving to rural areas due to expanded high speed internet access enabling work from home has not occurred, all while cities are more fashionable places to live than they have been in decades. But students reported in surveys that they do not expect decline as much as a continuance of the same—even in light of the election of a President who promised to turn their fortunes around. This stagnant decline is nothing new: it is the normal state of things for rural America. I think this was reflected upon by the respondents who took part in this study.

What students did reflect positively upon when looking to the future of their towns was tangible infrastructural improvement. What they wanted to see in their towns were the amenities like diversified that yielded a more positive quality of life. This was the case among students who said that they wanted to leave and go presumably to places where such amenities could be found as well as among the students who said that they simply preferred living in a rural area because they liked the local values or disliked urban areas. Furthermore, students said that they desired to leave if they could not do the career they wanted to do there.

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I explained this project to people casually as an attempt to know what rural men who had just graduated from high school expected to have happen over the course of their lives, what they

actually expected to happen, and what, if anything, accounted for the difference. From what I heard from the students that I interviewed, there was not much disconnect: students had plans in place to educate themselves in such a way to be able to do what they wanted to do, professionally, and they had plans to either leave or come back depending on their professional aspirations and personal opinions regarding the rural lifestyle. In the future, I think the question that needs to be asked is what happens after the students start postsecondary school. Surely some choose not to come back, and we should ask why. We should ask students who returned and students who left if they are happy with that decision. I think the issue ultimately is that plans are one thing, but what a person actually does and how they reflect on that is really the thing that matters.

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## Appendix A: Survey

My name is Aaron Gettinger, and I am a graduate student at the University of Chicago. I am from Indiana: I grew up in Sullivan, south of Terre Haute.

You are invited to take part in a research survey about asking senior boys in Indiana high schools about their plans and expectations for the future.

—Your participation will require approximately 10 minutes and is completed online at your computer.

—There are no known risks associated with this survey.

—Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to be in the study you can withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with anyone at your school or at the University of Chicago. If you do not want to take this survey, you don't have to – deciding not to take this survey will not affect your grades or any other part of your relationship with your school.

—Your responses will be kept strictly confidential; your identity will be held confidential; and digital data will be stored in secure computer files. Any report of this research that is made available to the public will not include your name or any other individual information by which you could be identified. Your answers to this survey will not be given to anyone at your school.

—If you have questions or want a copy or summary of this study's results, you can contact me at [adgettinger@uchicago.edu](mailto:adgettinger@uchicago.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, contact the University of Chicago Institutional Research Board by phone at 773-834-7835 or [by email at [sbs-irb@uchicago.edu](mailto:sbs-irb@uchicago.edu)].

- Do you consent to participate in this research?
  - Yes [continue]
  - No [skip to end]
- Are you 18 or older?
  - Yes [continue]
  - No [skip to end]
- Do you identify as male?
  - Yes [continue]
  - No [skip to end]

### Section 1: Education

- Do you intend to pursue further education in the year after you graduate from high school? This means any kind of school: college or university, community college, trade school, etc.
  - Yes
    - How many colleges, universities, or other education or training programs have you already applied to? [Drop down numbers, 0–10+]
    - What are the 2-year colleges, universities, and/or institutions to which you applied? [fill in the blank]
    - What are the 6-year colleges, universities, and/or institutions to which you

applied? [fill in the blank]

- If you have selected a college, university, or institution to attend, what is it? [fill in the blank]
- o No

### Section 2: Occupation

- Are you currently working? This means working for compensation, whether full- or part-time, paid in cash or otherwise.
  - o Yes
    - Where do you work? [fill in the blank]
    - What is your position? [fill in the blank]
    - Do you plan to continue with this job after you graduate from high school?
      - Yes
      - No
  - o No
    - Do you have a job lined up after you graduate?
      - Yes
      - No
- Ideally, if you could do any job for your career, what would it be? [fill in the blank]
- After you graduate from high school, would you prefer to
  - o Move away from the the area (city/county) in which you are living now?
  - o Stay in the the area (city/county) in which you are living now?

### Section 3: Location

- Do you currently live
  - o With your parents
  - o Independently
  - o Other—specify [fill in the blank]
- In the year after you graduate high school, do you expect to
  - o Live with your parents the whole year
  - o Move out on your own at some point during the year
  - o Live outside of your parents' house the entire year
- After you graduate from high school, do you expect to be able to move away from the area in which you are living now?
  - o Yes
  - o No
- After you graduate from high school, do you expect to stay in the area in which you are living now?
  - o Yes
  - o No
- Do you think that the area in which you are living now is becoming a
  - o Better place to live?
  - o Worse place to live?
  - o About the same?
- Do you think you will have a better or worse life than your parents have lived?

- o Better
- o Worse
- o About the same
- What is your zip code? [fill in the blank]

#### Section 4: Demographics

- What is your racial/ethnic background? Check all that apply.
  - o White
  - o Hispanic or Latino
  - o Black or African American
  - o Native American or American Indian
  - o Asian / Pacific Islander
  - o Other
- What is the highest level of education of your mother/Guardian A?
  - o No high school
  - o High school diploma
  - o Associate's degree (two years)/some college
  - o Bachelor's degree (four years)
  - o Graduate/Professional degree
- What is the highest level of education of your father/Guardian B?
  - o No high school
  - o High school diploma
  - o Associate's degree (two years)/some college
  - o Bachelor's degree (four years)
  - o Graduate/Professional degree
- Do you participate in Indiana's 21st Century Scholars program?
  - o Yes
  - o No
- Do you participate in your school's free or reduced-price lunch program
  - o Yes
  - o No
- What is your GPA? [fill in the blank]

#### Section 5: Interview

In the second part of this study, I will talk in person to a small number of students who took this survey to learn more about their future aspirations and expectations. Students who are chosen and agree to do this will receive a 20 dollar gift card as a token of my thanks for their help.

If you are interested in being considered for this roughly one hour conversation about your hopes and plans for the future, please provide an email address through which I can contact you below, a phone, or both.

I will only use the contact information provided here to be in touch with those selected for conversational follow-up. This information will be destroyed once enough cases are contacted.

Even if you provide contact information here, you may still decide later to withdraw.

- o I am interested in participating:
  - What is your email address?
  - What is your phone number?
- o I am not interested in participating.

End

Thank you for your participation in this research.



## Appendix B: Interview Guide

“I am conducting research with graduating high school senior boys in Indiana about your future plans and expectations. The purpose of the research is to learn what you hope will happen and what you expect will happen do or don’t line up and what you think about that. Your participation will involve one informal interview that will last around forty minutes. This research has no known risks. Please know that I will do everything I can to protect your privacy. Your identity or personal information will not be disclosed in any publication that may result from the study. Notes that are taken during the interview will be stored in a secure location and destroyed upon the publication of this research. I must audiorecord this interview to transcribe it; the recording will be destroyed once I have transcribed it. I will review transcripts and remove your name and references to places or people that might identify you.”

Education, if R immediately pursuing postsecondary education:

- When did you first start thinking about college?
  - What or who got you thinking about college?
- How did you decide to which schools you would apply?
  - Location? Kind or quality of academic instruction? Tuition?
- Do you feel well prepared for college?
  - How confident are you that you will finish?
  - What factors are likely to make finishing a challenge, if any?
  - What will you do to graduate in four years?
  - Tell me how you will pay for college.
- I noticed that the colleges to which you applied are [community colleges/mostly or all in Indiana/out of state/religious institutions/etc.]. Why did you choose these specific institutions?
- Do you have a job or career in mind that you’d ideally like to do?
  - What is it?
  - How likely do you think it is you’ll be able to get a job in that field?
    - What do you think it will depend on?
- Did you always expect to attend college or was this uncertain?
  - What made it uncertain?

I can code questions into the following schemes: how he began to think about college and who influenced him; how his high school affected his college choice process; what kind of college he wants to attend

Education, if R is not immediately pursuing postsecondary education [*not used*]:

- Why did you decide not to attend college at this time?
  - Do you think anything in particular affected your decision to not go to college?
  - Do you hope to attend later? Why do you hope that?
  - Do you expect to attend later? What makes you think that you will/won’t?
- Did you hope or want to go to college?
  - Yes
    - What changed or how did things emerge so that you aren’t doing this?
- Do you expect that you go to college at some point in the future?
  - Would you want to?

- o [If yes] When do you think this could happen?
  - What will need to happen for you to attend college?

Schemes: Reason for not immediately enrolling in college; absence or presence future postsecondary plans or aspirations

### Work

- You said in your survey that you are interested in being [profession]. How did you come to be interested in this?
  - o What matters most to you that explains your interest in this job? That you'll make good money in it? That it's fun? That you think you'll be really good at it already?
  - o Do you know anybody who does this job? Tell me about your interactions with them.
  - o Tell me about the kind of work that people do in this town.
- Do you want to work for yourself or do you want to join an already-existing business?
- Your parents are [professions]. How did this affect what you wanted to be when you grew up?
- Tell me about your "dream job."
  - o Do you think you will really get that job?
  - o What makes it likely or unlikely you will get that work?
- Do you think you want to work in this town after you finish your education?
  - o [If no]: What sort of place would you like to work ideally?
  - o How likely do you think that it is you will actually work (here/in other desired place)? What makes it likely or unlikely?
- Tell me how you think your work life will be most like to go over the years.
- What factors do you see as being most consequential for how your work life actually plays out?
  - o What would be most helpful?
  - o What would cause the most trouble?

Schemes: How they became interested in a job; role of parents; role of town; disconnect between desired job and ideal situation; assumed trajectory

### Personal life/opinions

- What is your involvement with organized religion? Do you expect to keep this level of involvement over your lifetime?
- Do you hope to get married?
- Do you hope to have children?
  - o [If yes] Ideally, when would you want to get married and start a family?
    - How likely does it seem to be that will happen?
      - What things would make it more likely?
      - What things would make it less likely?
- When you think about this town, do you think life 50 years ago was better, worse, or about the same as now?
  - o How so?
  - o [If better or worse] What has the main reason been for this change??

- Do politics in the US currently affect what you hope or expect for your life? In what ways?
  - Our President was elected promising to “Make America Great Again.” What do you think he meant by this? Do you think he will accomplish this?
    - What do you expect to see in American politics over the course of your lifetime?
- How do you think that this town will change over the next 50 years?
  - Do you expect the size or types of people living here to change?
    - In what ways?
- If you could change something about this town, what would you change?
- In the survey you returned, I asked if you think you will have a better life than your parents. You said [...]. Can you tell me more about why you think this?
- Ideally, what do you expect your life to be like?
- What do you think it will actually be like?
- What do your chances of having the life you want most depend on?
  - What sorts of things will make it more likely?
  - What sorts of things will make it less likely?

Schemes: Religion; family life; town history and trajectory; national history and trajectory