A Listening Project on Youth Flourishing in Martinsville and Henry County

Prepared by the Virginia Tech Center for Economic and Community Engagement

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Executive Summary

The Vibrant Virginia Community Exploratory: Martinsville & Henry County project, led by Virginia Tech's Center for Economic and Community Engagement (VTCECE), focused on understanding what it means for youth to flourish in the region. In collaboration with The Harvest Foundation and other local stakeholders, the initiative was designed to assess the needs, challenges, and opportunities facing young people and to identify actionable strategies that support academic, social, and career success. The project built upon Martinsville-Henry County's existing efforts and resources—such as the SEED and PASSGO programs—while acknowledging persistent disparities in opportunity and outcomes for youth, particularly those from low-income and historically marginalized backgrounds.

The region, historically shaped by manufacturing and textile industries, has experienced decades of economic restructuring, leading to job loss, population decline, and high poverty rates. Nearly 20% of families with children live in poverty in Henry County, and over 30% in Martinsville. Youth are disproportionately affected, with over 80% of Martinsville households with residents under age 25 classified as ALICE (Asset-Limited, Income-Constrained, Employed). Economic mobility is limited, and incarceration rates are twice the national average, further compounding these challenges.

To guide its analysis and recommendations, the project used a mixed-methods approach, including youth and community surveys, interviews, focus groups, a SWOT analysis, and demographic research. Youth across the region expressed a desire for more engaging educational experiences, supportive relationships, access to mental health services, and pathways to college and careers that are accessible and relevant.

The final report presents strategic recommendations that emphasize a multi-sector approach to youth flourishing. These include building out-of-school programming, strengthening career pathways, addressing transportation barriers, investing in mental and behavioral health supports, and enhancing community engagement opportunities. The report also proposes a decision-making matrix to help prioritize strategies based on impact and implementation difficulty.

By fostering stronger coordination among local partners and aligning efforts with Virginia Tech's resources and expertise, the initiative aims to support sustained progress toward a more vibrant future for all youth in Martinsville and Henry County.

Background

The Vibrant Virginia Community Exploratory: Martinsville & Henry County (MHC) was part of a broader initiative launched by Virginia Tech in 2018 to strengthen partnerships between universities and communities across the Commonwealth. As a key component of the Vibrant Virginia initiative, Community Exploratories were designed as place-based engagements focused on locally defined priorities to promote economic vitality and well-being. Learn more about Vibrant Virginia [here](#).

The Exploratory in Martinsville-Henry County centered on the theme of Thriving Youth, with the goal of understanding what it means for young people in the region to flourish—both within their communities and beyond. The project aimed to identify actionable pathways to support youth success and well-being through academic, social, and career-related opportunities.

Despite the presence of promising initiatives such as the SEED and PASSGO loan forgiveness programs, many young people in MHC continued to face barriers to opportunity. The project sought to better understand these disparities and to explore how the community could more effectively equip its youth with the knowledge, skills, and support needed to pursue their goals. A key focus was ensuring that all students had equitable access to diverse experiences that inspire academic curiosity, foster belonging, and support long-term success.

The project began with community-wide listening sessions and a comprehensive situation analysis to assess the current conditions for youth in MHC. Through this process, the project team gathered input from local families, educators, youth, and community leaders to uncover strengths, challenges, and areas for growth.

Led by The Harvest Foundation, a Project Advisory Team made up of regional leaders and youth-serving organizations worked in partnership with a multidisciplinary team from Virginia Tech, including the Center for Economic and Community Engagement (VTCECE), the Center for Rural Education, and the College Access Collaborative.

The outcomes of the project included a detailed situation analysis and a strategic roadmap designed to inform future investments in youth-focused programs and services. In addition, VTCECE served as a liaison to connect Virginia Tech's resources and expertise with local partners to support sustained community impact in Martinsville-Henry County.

Regional Overview

Martinsville and Henry County (MHC), located in Southside Virginia along the North Carolina border, have long been shaped by a legacy of manufacturing and furniture production. However, decades of economic transition have led to deep structural changes, including population decline, job loss, and persistent poverty. These conditions have particularly impacted the region's youth, shaping both the challenges they face and the opportunities they can access.

As of 2023, Martinsville's population stands at approximately 13,500, while Henry County is home to just over 50,000 residents.
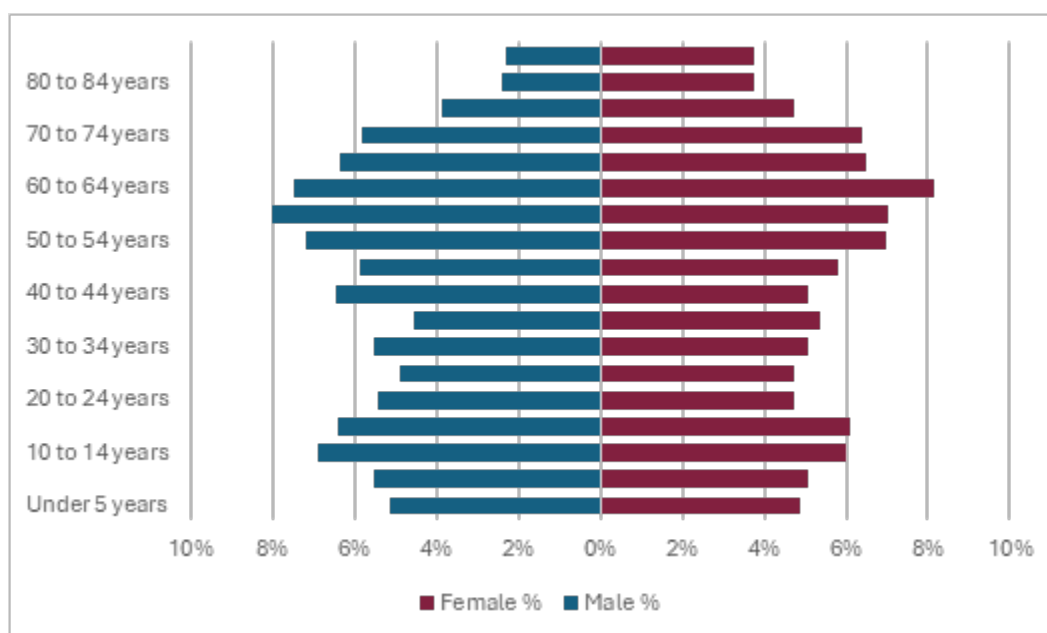
Figure 1: Martinsville-Henry Age Pyramid
Source: U.S. Census, ACS 2022 5-year estimates, Age and Sex [S0101]

Together, the region has seen a steady population decrease over the past two decades. The median household income remains significantly below the state average—$39,500 in Martinsville and $45,800 in Henry County, compared to Virginia's median of $87,000. Nearly 20% of families with children under 18 live in poverty in Henry County, and over 30% in Martinsville, rates that far exceed the statewide figure of 13%.

Table 1: Poverty Rate Disaggregated by Race

	Black and African American	Hispanic/ Latino	White
Henry County	14.1%	22%	9.3%
Martinsville City	35.5%	20.9%	13.9%

In Martinsville and Henry County, a significant portion of households face economic challenges that prevent them from achieving financial stability. Households classified as ALICE (Asset-Limited, Income-Constrained, Employed) earn above the Federal Poverty Level but still lack the financial resources to meet basic needs such as housing, childcare, food, transportation, and healthcare. In Henry County, 40% of households are ALICE, with Martinsville slightly lower at 34%. However, the ALICE rate for youth under 25 is much higher, with 69% of Henry County households and 82% of Martinsville households facing economic limitations, significantly surpassing the state average of 34%.

Table 2: 2022 ALICE Characteristics

Location	Median Household Income	Labor Force Participation	ALICE Households	Households in Poverty	Under 25 Below ALICE
State of Virginia	$85,873	65%	29%	11%	34%
Henry County	$43,694	51%	40%	18%	69%
Martinsville City	$39,127	56%	34%	27%	82%

The region struggles with key economic factors such as job opportunities and housing affordability. Henry County scores poorly on both, with a job opportunity index of 34/100 and a housing affordability index of 40/100. Martinsville fares slightly better, with scores of 42/100 and 54/100 in job opportunities and housing affordability, respectively, but still faces challenges in community resources, with a score of 46/100.

Social mobility data highlights additional barriers to economic progress for children from low-income families in the region. The median household income for this group is $26,601, well below the national median of $33,000. The incarceration rate is twice the national average, and the region's social mobility indicators—such as the percentage of individuals reaching the top income brackets—are also below national levels. These factors underscore the limited opportunities for upward mobility, contributing to the cycle of economic hardship faced by youth in the area.

Table 3: Social Mobility for Children from Low-income Parents, 2015

Indicator	Martinsville Henry County Region	County Median in the United States
Household income	$26,601	$33,000
Incarceration Rate	4.0%	2%
Individual Income (Excluding spouse)	$19,429	$23,000
Fraction married	31.8%	42%
Spouse's income	$32,557	$34,000

Employment rate	74.5%	74%
Frac. In Top 20% Based on Household Income	**5.5%**	**9.6%**
Frac. In Top 20% Based on Individual Income	**6.4%**	**10%**
% Staying in Same Commuting Zone as Adults	66%	65%
% Staying in Same Tract as Adults	29.2%	27%
Household Income (In Commuting Zone)	$22,527	$31,000
Individual Income (Stayed in Commuting Zone)	$16,497	$21,000
Number of Children	510	3,300

Educational attainment in Martinsville and Henry County highlights areas for growth and opportunities to build stronger pathways to success. In Martinsville, approximately 15% of adults hold a bachelor's degree or higher, while Henry County is slightly higher at 17%. While these figures are below the Virginia state average of 42%, there is a clear opportunity to enhance local educational resources and career pathways. High school graduation rates are strong—about 88% in Henry County and 85% in Martinsville—indicating a solid foundation from which further educational advancements can be made.

Local institutions such as the New College Institute and Patrick & Henry Community College play a vital role in offering accessible educational opportunities. Additionally, programs like SEED (Students Excel through Education and Development) and PASSGO (Providing Access to Student Success and Great Outcomes) are helping to break down financial barriers for students seeking postsecondary education. These programs, along with ongoing efforts from local school divisions, create a supportive environment for the community, helping to build a more robust future workforce.

Standards of Learning (SOL) assessments provide valuable insights into student performance, and both Henry County and Martinsville City show promising areas for growth. While the localities' passing rates in areas like English: Writing and Science currently fall below the state average, there is significant potential for improvement through targeted educational programs. For example, Henry County's passing rate in English: Writing is 40.66%, and Martinsville City's is 39.55%, compared to the Virginia average of 64.64%. In Science, Henry County's passing rate is 58.81%, and Martinsville City's is 52.74%, while the state achieves a rate of 66.59%. These figures provide a clear focus for the community to strengthen instruction and student support in key areas.

In Mathematics, although both Henry County and Martinsville City report higher failing rates compared to the state average, these results present an opportunity for strategic interventions that could yield meaningful improvements in student achievement. Overall, these educational indicators highlight areas where continued investment and

collaboration can make a significant impact on the academic success and future opportunities for youth in the region.
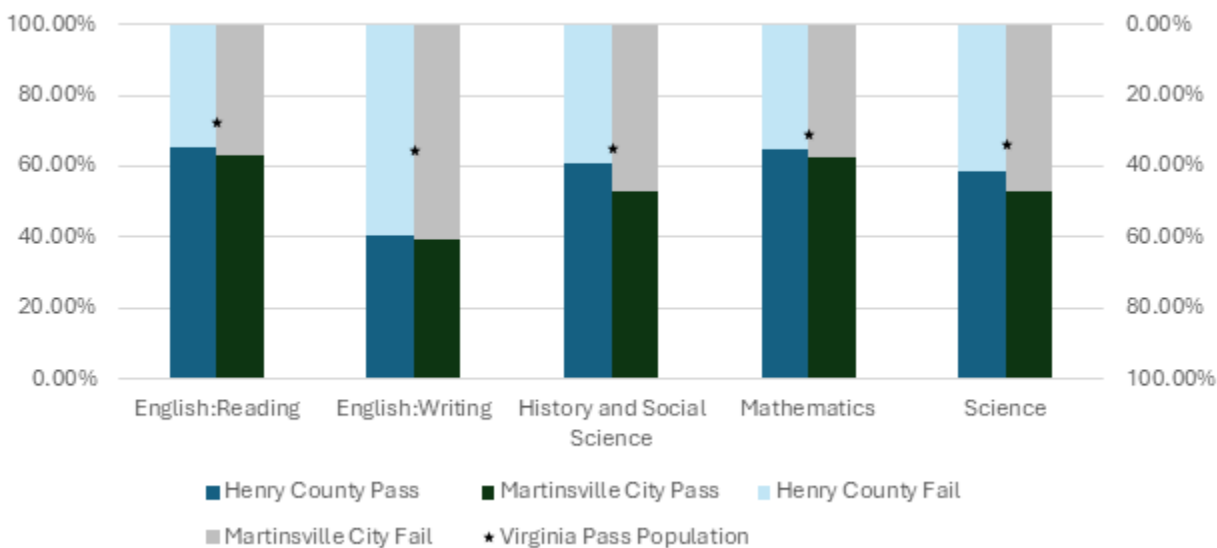

Figure 4: SOL Pass/Fail Rates for Martinsville-Henry High Schools[3]

From a workforce perspective, MHC continues to rebuild its economy around advanced manufacturing, logistics, and health care. Yet employers across sectors note difficulties in filling positions due to skill mismatches, transportation barriers, and a lack of career readiness among recent graduates. These issues point to the need for more targeted youth development efforts—those that provide mentorship, exposure to high-opportunity careers, and support systems both in and out of school.

Table 4: Top 10 Industries by Employment in Martinsville-Henry County Region

NAICS	Description	2019 Jobs	2024 Jobs	2019 - 2024 Change	2019 - 2024 % Change	2023 LQ
31	Manufacturing	5,074	5,684	609	12%	2.57
90	Government	4,225	4,200	(25)	(1%)	1.05
62	Health Care and Social Assistance	3,783	4,069	286	8%	1.11
44	Retail Trade	3,616	2,905	(711)	(20%)	1.14
56	Administrative Waste Management	2,574	2,443	(132)	(5%)	1.42
81	Other Services (except Public Admin.)	2,046	1,801	(245)	(12%)	1.34
72	Accommodation and Food Services	1,726	1,667	(59)	(3%)	0.72
48	Transportation and Warehousing	1,353	1,316	(37)	(3%)	1.09

54	Professional, Sci., & Tech Services	641	1,141	500	78%	0.53
23	Construction	696	762	66	9%	0.48

This broader context shaped the Martinsville-Henry County Community Exploratory's focus on Thriving Youth—acknowledging that investing in the well-being, education, and future of young people is key to revitalizing the region as a whole. Through listening sessions and collaborative planning, the project worked to understand the conditions young people face today and to co-design solutions that ensure every youth in MHC has the opportunity to flourish.

Community Insights

To better understand the experiences, needs, and aspirations of local youth and their families, the project team conducted a series of engagement activities across the Martinsville-Henry County region. These included a community-wide survey, targeted small-group input sessions, and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders. This qualitative approach provided valuable context to complement quantitative data, helping to surface lived experiences and community-identified priorities. The insights shared through these activities reflect both the challenges facing young people in the region and the community's deep commitment to supporting their success. For more information on the engagement that took placed, please see the Appendix section.

Youth Strengths and Regional Assets

Across all engagement methods, several assets were consistently recognized:

- **Strong Sense of Community**: Youth and adults alike emphasized the warmth, friendliness, and connectedness of the community. Students described a deep emotional tie to the region and an appreciation for local traditions, natural beauty, and the social support networks that exist in schools and community spaces.
- **Valued Educational Programs**: Dual enrollment through Patrick & Henry Community College, SEED and PASSGO tuition support, and specialty programs like Governor's School, ACE, and technical training (e.g., motorsports, welding) were frequently mentioned as important resources.
- **Extracurriculars and Recreation**: Students pointed to performing arts, sports, and recreational spaces like the Smith River Sports Complex and YMCA as outlets for connection and wellness. Arts and cultural events, as well as volunteer opportunities, were also highly valued for personal development.
- **Youth Leadership and Engagement**: Programs like the Harvest Youth Board, CHILL Advisory, TRIO, and Drug Free MHC were praised for fostering leadership and giving youth a platform to voice their concerns and solutions.
- **Committed Adults**: Interviews highlighted the dedication of educators, counselors, nonprofit staff, and others who go above and beyond to support local youth, often serving as trusted adults in students' lives.

Skills and Supports Youth Need to Thrive

Youth consistently identified a set of skills they believe are essential to future success and called for support in building them:

- **Soft Skills**: Communication, teamwork, leadership, and emotional intelligence

- **Career Readiness**: Resume writing, interviewing, professional etiquette, and job shadowing
- **Financial Literacy**: Budgeting, savings, debt management, and college financing
- **Vocational Training and Career Exploration**: Exposure to career pathways, especially for non-college-bound students

The survey reinforced these themes, with strong agreement (81%) that their education is preparing them for future careers, though respondents also noted areas for improvement in guidance and relevancy of programming.

Barriers to Youth Thriving

A number of challenges surfaced across interviews, small group discussions, and survey responses:

- **Access to Mental Health and Support Services**: A shortage of youth-specific mental health providers, stigma around seeking help, and logistical barriers (e.g., transportation, Medicaid access) were cited. Students highlighted the need for safe spaces and trusted adults they can turn to.
- **Transportation Limitations**: Both youth and adult stakeholders repeatedly mentioned the lack of reliable transportation—especially in rural areas—as a barrier to attending afterschool programs, internships, and jobs.
- **School Safety and Behavioral Health**: Bullying, violence, and drug use were recurring concerns. Students also pointed to increased emotional distress post-COVID and a perceived lack of in-school mental health resources.
- **Economic Instability at Home**: Many students face financial pressures, unstable housing, or caregiving responsibilities. These stressors impact academic performance, mental health, and future planning.
- **Information Gaps**: Youth often feel left out of communication loops about available programs, scholarships, and events. Survey and session participants called for more accessible and youth-friendly communication strategies.
- **Stigma and Low Expectations**: Students expressed frustration with being unfairly judged—especially youth of color or those who don't "fit" a certain mold. They emphasized that supportive relationships with adults can be transformational.

Youth-Driven Priorities and Ideas for Change

Youth across all engagement methods shared a consistent and hopeful vision for improving their region:

- **Youth Development Center**: A safe, inclusive, and low-cost hub for tutoring, mental health support, creative programming, and recreation was the most frequently voiced idea across all engagements.
- **Expanded Career and Technical Education**: Youth and stakeholders stressed the need for more robust non-college pathways, including apprenticeships, skilled trades, entrepreneurship support, and workplace readiness training.
- **More Diverse and Accessible Activities**: Students requested more non-sports activities—such as robotics, gaming, art, and music—as well as inclusive events that build community and belonging.
- **Better Communication and Guidance**: Improved career counseling, clearer information about resources, and outreach that reaches *all* students—not just the high-achievers—were identified as critical.
- **Reliable Youth Transportation**: Whether through expanded bus routes or youth-focused ride programs, accessible transportation was seen as essential to equity and participation.
- **Mental Health Investment**: Students asked for more on-site mental health services, normalized conversations around emotional well-being, and more trauma-informed approaches in schools.
- **Support for Staying Local**: Despite challenges, the vast majority (92.3%) of surveyed youth reported that they are likely to remain in the region. Many expressed a desire to see continued investment in infrastructure, education, and entrepreneurship that would make staying in Martinsville-Henry County a fulfilling choice.

Conclusion

The collective input from youth and community members paints a compelling picture: Martinsville-Henry County is a region with strong community values, dedicated educators and service providers, and engaged young people eager to shape their future. However, for youth to truly thrive, there is a need for intentional investment in mental health, transportation, inclusive spaces, and expanded pathways to career and personal development.

SWOT Summary

To better understand the landscape of opportunities and challenges affecting youth in Martinsville-Henry County, a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis was conducted based on findings from community surveys, small group input sessions, and interviews with local stakeholders. This analysis synthesizes both qualitative and quantitative insights gathered through the Thriving Youth initiative and provides a framework for identifying areas of momentum, recognizing persistent barriers, and guiding future strategies that support youth success and well-being across the region. The summary below highlights key themes emerging from community voices and data.

Strengths

1. **P&H Community College - Dual Enrollment Opportunities**
   One of the key strengths is the availability of dual enrollment opportunities through P&H Community College. This program allows high school students to earn college credits while still in school, providing a clear pathway to postsecondary education. Dual enrollment helps bridge the gap between high school and higher education, ensuring youth are better prepared for future academic and career pursuits. Expanding access to such programs can help foster academic success and career readiness among the region's youth.

2. **SEED Fund**
   The SEED Fund is another significant strength in the region, offering financial support and resources to youth-led initiatives and entrepreneurial projects. This fund empowers young people to take ownership of their future by providing the means to turn their ideas into action. Leveraging the SEED Fund can further promote innovation and leadership among the youth, giving them the tools to create solutions for local challenges while developing valuable skills for their future.

3. **Increased Coordination Among Youth-Serving Entities**
   A positive trend in the region is the growing coordination among youth-serving entities. Various organizations, schools, and community groups are beginning to collaborate more effectively to provide comprehensive support for youth. This increased coordination ensures that resources are not only accessible but are also better aligned to meet the diverse needs of young people in the area. By building on this momentum, there is potential to create a more seamless and efficient network of support for youth.

4. **Positive Views of the Community by Youth and Adults**
   Both youth and adults in the region hold a generally positive view of Martinsville-

Henry County as a place to live and raise a family. This sense of pride in the community can be a powerful motivator for continued investment in local youth development. When young people feel a sense of belonging and pride in their community, they are more likely to engage in positive behaviors, contribute to community initiatives, and remain in the region to pursue opportunities.

5. **Youth Voice and Leadership Opportunities**
   There are already several youth voice and leadership opportunities in the region, such as the CHILL program and the Harvest Youth Board. These programs provide youth with platforms to express their opinions, influence decisions, and take on leadership roles. Such opportunities are critical for fostering confidence, leadership skills, and a sense of responsibility among young people. Building upon these opportunities and expanding similar programs will give youth more avenues to become active participants in shaping their futures and their communities.

6. **Existing Active Resources, Programs, and Places for Youth**
   The region is home to an extensive range of active resources, programs, and spaces designed specifically for youth. These include recreational activities, arts programs, mentorship initiatives, and more. The sheer variety and number of available resources create a rich environment for youth development. Enhancing the accessibility of these resources and ensuring that they are inclusive of all youth, particularly those facing barriers, will help ensure that more young people can take full advantage of these opportunities.

7. **Schools as a Community Strength**
   Schools are widely seen as a strength in Martinsville-Henry County, particularly in terms of the activities they offer. Programs such as band, athletics, and Career and Technical Education (CTE) are highly valued by both students and the community. These programs provide youth with opportunities to develop their skills, build teamwork, and prepare for future careers. Continuing to support and expand these programs, particularly CTE, will ensure that youth are prepared for both college and career success. Additionally, schools can serve as hubs for further community collaboration and youth engagement.

Challenges

These challenges reflect both systemic issues and individual barriers that hinder youth from fully participating in opportunities available to them. Below is a breakdown of the 13 key challenges that must be tackled to ensure a supportive environment for all youth in the region:

1. **Vulnerable Youth and Families**
   A key challenge is the need for enhanced support for youth and families that are vulnerable, high-risk, or face more barriers to participation. These families may struggle with economic hardships, access to services, or other external factors that prevent them from engaging with available resources. Targeted support for these youth is critical to ensuring that all young people, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to succeed.

2. **Substance Use Prevention, Treatment & Recovery**
   Substance use prevention, treatment, and recovery services are essential, particularly as youth face increased pressures related to substance abuse. Additionally, the stigma surrounding substance use and recovery can prevent youth from seeking the help they need. Programs to reduce stigma, offer support for recovery, and provide education on prevention are necessary to support youth facing these challenges.

3. **Mental, Social, & Emotional Well-being**
   Mental, social, and emotional well-being continues to be a significant challenge for youth, especially as they navigate pressures from social media, screens, and other external stressors. Many youth report feeling overwhelmed or disconnected, and more resources are needed to support their mental health. This includes providing counseling services, stress management resources, and creating safe spaces where youth can connect with peers and trusted adults.

4. **Career and Work**
   There is a clear need for career awareness and guidance, as well as work experience opportunities. Youth often lack access to connections to employers, job search assistance, or the guidance needed to make informed career decisions. Providing youth with access to career exploration opportunities, internships, apprenticeships, and mentorship programs is crucial for preparing them for the workforce.

5. **Fewer Places for Youth**
   A significant concern is the lack of places for youth to gather and engage in meaningful activities. There is a shortage of teen centers, third spaces, and a wider range of activities for youth. These spaces are important for fostering socialization, creativity, and personal development. Expanding or creating such spaces will provide youth with safe, constructive environments where they can build relationships, learn, and grow.

6. **Need for Greater Coordination and Information Sharing**
   There is a need for greater coordination and information sharing to help families and youth be aware of and access available resources and services. Currently, many families and youth are unaware of the full range of support systems available to them. Streamlining communication between community organizations, schools, and local agencies can improve access to these critical resources.

7. **Youth Voice & Leadership**
   While there are some opportunities for youth leadership, there is a need for more substantive and extensive youth involvement in community decision-making. Youth desire greater service and leadership opportunities that allow them to influence their community and gain valuable experience. Creating more avenues for youth to take on leadership roles will empower them and help build a stronger, more engaged next generation.

8. **More Individualized Support**
   Many youth would benefit from more individualized support, such as mentoring, coaching, tutoring, and counseling. Providing tailored assistance that addresses the unique needs of each youth can help them overcome personal challenges, improve their academic performance, and better navigate social or emotional difficulties.

9. **Skill Development**
   There is a need for training in essential life skills, including communication, decision-making, anger management, career search skills, and relationship and interpersonal skills. These skills are vital for youth to navigate the complexities of their personal and professional lives. Offering more comprehensive programs focused on life skills development can empower youth to become more resilient and capable individuals.

10. **Parent and Family Support and Assistance**
    Many youth face challenges that stem from economic and family-related issues, such as parenting skills, economic hardship, housing instability, and transportation difficulties. Providing supportive services that take a whole family approach can help address these systemic barriers. Strengthening family support programs will help ensure that youth have stable, nurturing environments in which they can thrive.

11. **Re-entry and Intervention Needs**
    Youth who have been involved in the juvenile justice system or treatment programs often require targeted interventions and support to reintegrate into their

communities. The re-entry process can be difficult, and there is a need for programs that focus on providing support for these youth, addressing their specific needs, and helping them transition successfully back into school and community life.

12. **Enhanced Support for Student Learning**

There is a growing need for enhanced support for student learning, particularly in the form of teacher and administrator retention, training, and professional development. Investing in educators ensures they have the tools and support to help students succeed. Additionally, creating a learning environment that is responsive to students' needs will improve overall educational outcomes.

13. **Violence Prevention & Empathy**

A key challenge is the need for a greater focus on preventing violence, isolation, and bullying, while also promoting empathy and social connection among youth. Encouraging positive peer interactions, promoting conflict resolution, and fostering empathy can help reduce incidents of violence and bullying. Implementing programs that teach social-emotional learning and conflict resolution skills can create safer, more supportive environments for all youth.

Strategic Recommendations

The following strategic recommendations were developed through a comprehensive process that incorporated community input, data analysis, and stakeholder engagement as part of the Thriving Youth initiative in Martinsville-Henry County. To help prioritize next steps, the project team utilized a strategic prioritization matrix assessing each possible response by two key factors: Importance/Impact and Time/Difficulty to Implement.

This matrix provided a framework for organizing strategies into categories based on feasibility and expected benefit. Community stakeholders contributed ideas and feedback through a structured engagement approach—Inform, Iterate, Inquire, Imagine—ensuring the strategies reflect local priorities and lived experiences. The resulting recommendations aim to build on the region's strengths, respond to persistent challenges, and create the conditions necessary for all youth to thrive.

Strategies are grouped into three categories:

- **Lowest Hanging Fruit**: Actions that are relatively easy to implement and show visible progress.
- **Easiest Meaningful Wins**: High-impact, short-term strategies that are achievable with current capacity.
- **Hard Things Worth Doing**: Long-term, more difficult initiatives that address systemic barriers and promise transformative change.

I. Lowest Hanging Fruit

These recommendations represent practical, early opportunities to generate momentum and engagement:

- **Youth Engagement and Awareness**
    - Organize a regional youth forum, co-led by youth, featuring programming for both young people and adults.
    - Launch a youth-centered online platform or social media campaign to highlight opportunities, featuring local youth influencers.
- **Resource Mapping and Access Promotion**
    - Conduct an inventory of existing youth spaces and programs, with youth involvement to identify usage gaps.
    - Create and distribute maps and directories to raise awareness of current resources and identify accessibility barriers.

- **Mental Health and School Culture Initiatives**
  - Offer Mental Health First Aid training to community members and caregivers.
  - Provide mini-grants for student-led mental health initiatives to reduce stigma and promote peer support.
  - Encourage positive school culture efforts such as peer-led recognition systems and team-building strategies.
- **Career Exposure and Employability Skills**
  - Expand the number and quality of career day events and job readiness opportunities, such as mock interviews and resume workshops.
- **Technology and Well-Being**
  - Develop a mobile application to connect youth with local activities and support services.
  - Pilot targeted violence prevention and social-emotional learning (SEL) programs in schools and community organizations.

II. Easiest Meaningful Wins

These strategies are both highly impactful and achievable in the near term with existing partnerships and resources:

- **Integrated Resource Navigation**
  - Establish a centralized clearinghouse and deploy trained navigators to assist families and youth in accessing services and supports.
- **Expanded School-Based Mental Health Supports**
  - Implement a comprehensive K–12 mental health framework, integrating SEL across the curriculum.
  - Increase the presence of counselors, behavioral specialists, and school-based health staff.
- **Technology Literacy and Screen Use Education**
  - Promote community-wide policies and programs that address youth screen time, social media use, and mental health impacts.
- **Family Support and Early Childhood Readiness**
  - Launch a coordinated parent support initiative—modeled after "Routes to Ready"—offering both digital resources and personalized navigation.
- **Youth Mobility and Exposure**
  - Improve transportation access for youth to participate in school, work, and enrichment opportunities.

- o Expand funding for out-of-region exposure, including college visits and career exploration trips.
- **Support for Promising Local Initiatives**
  - o Continue investing in programs like Pass GO and other locally-developed efforts showing early evidence of success.

III. Hard Things Worth Doing

These long-term strategies require greater investment, coordination, or policy shifts, but offer potential for deep, lasting change. While not yet fully detailed, this category includes priorities that should be explored further in future planning efforts. Areas for consideration include:

- Systems-level reforms in youth mental health access and workforce development
- Creation of dedicated youth spaces and third places
- Development of long-term solutions to transportation, housing, and economic stability for families

Appendix

Regional Overview

Demographic and Economic Overview

Population

In 2023, the Martinsville-Henry County region has a total population of 64,468. This represents a modest growth of 420 individuals between the years 2019-2024. Projections indicate that this trend will continue, with an anticipated increase of 1,678 individuals over the next five years. Around 23% of the population is under the age of 19 which is consistent with the state of Virginia and United States average of 24%.
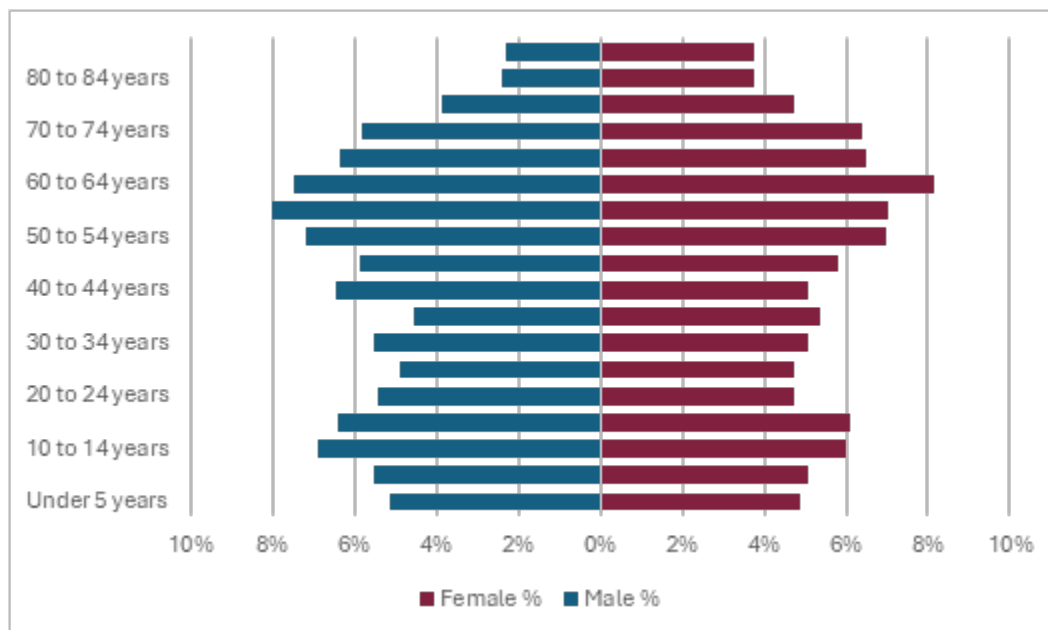

Figure 1: Martinsville-Henry Age Pyramid
Source: U.S. Census, ACS 2022 5-year estimates, Age and Sex [S0101]

The Martinsville-Henry county region has a majority white population (62%), with Black and African American accounting for 28%, and Hispanic making up 7% of the total population.

Median Household Income

Martinsville City and Henry County rank in the lowest 25th percentile for median household incomes in Virginia, with figures of $36,800 and $41,000, respectively. This disparity becomes stark when contrasted with Virginia's state median household income of $80,600, one of the highest in the nation, primarily concentrated in the Northeast. When compared to the national average median household income of $69,000, the gap narrows

slightly, yet Martinsville and Henry County still fall short by over $25,000. Figure 2 illustrates the median household income differences across these regions.
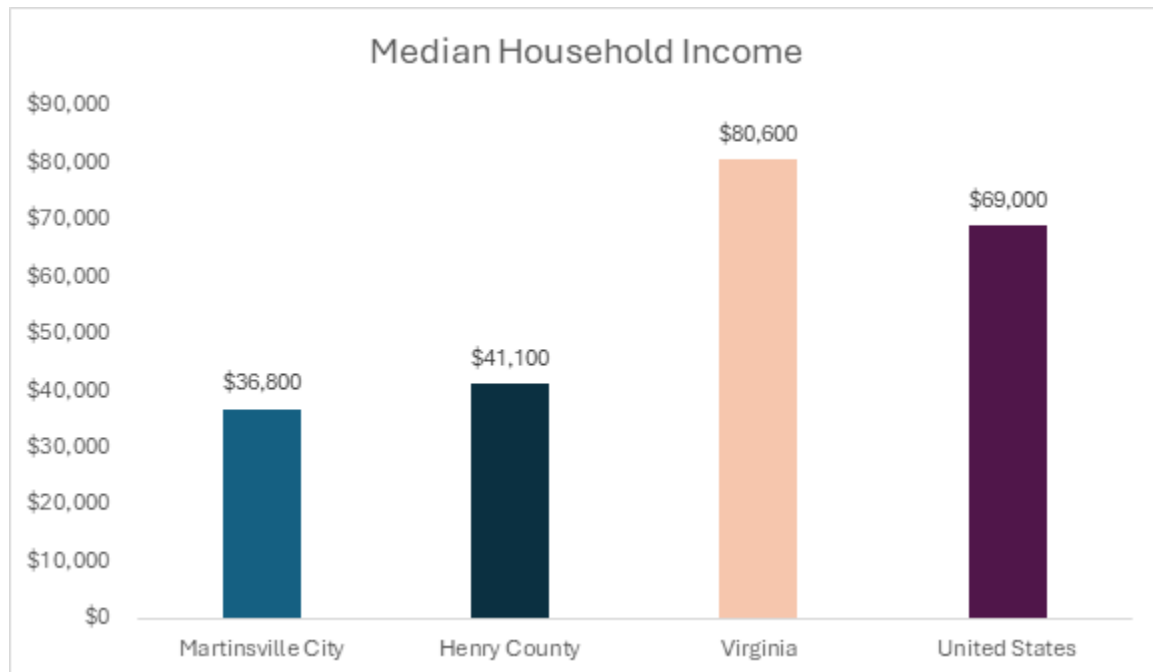
Figure 2: Median Household Income
Source: U.S. Census, ACS 2022 5-year estimates

Poverty

Martinsville and Henry County have notably higher poverty rates compared to Virginia as a whole. In Martinsville, 25% of the population lives in poverty, while in Henry County, the rate is 15%. This contrasts with the state average of 13% and the national average of 12%. Since 2018, Henry County has made significant progress, achieving a 25% reduction in its poverty rate, whereas Martinsville's rate has remained unchanged. Child poverty is a critical issue, with 31.5% of children in Martinsville and 22.1% in Henry County living in poverty, compared to 12.7% in Virginia and 16.3% nationwide. Over the past five years, there has been a noteworthy decrease in child poverty: an 18% reduction in Martinsville and a 33% reduction in Henry County, although these improvements exclude the COVID-19 years. Disaggregating the data by race reveals significant disparities in poverty rates, highlighting the need for targeted interventions.

In Martinsville, about 35% of Black and African American residents live below the poverty line, a rate significantly higher than the approximately 14% for White residents and 21% for Hispanic/Latino residents. Meanwhile, in Henry, Hispanic/Latino residents face a poverty rate of around 22%, which is higher than the roughly 14% for Black and African American

residents and 9% for White residents. Table 1 displays the poverty rate, disaggregated by race.

Table 1: Poverty Rate Disaggregated by Race

	Black and African American	**Hispanic/ Latino**	**White**
Henry County	14.1%	22%	9.3%
Martinsville City	35.5%	20.9%	13.9%

ALICE (Asset-Limited, Income-Constrained, Employed)

ALICE (Asset-Limited, Income-Constrained, Employed) households are those that earn above the Federal Poverty Level but below the cost of living in their area. These households do not have sufficient income to cover a basic budget that includes housing, childcare, food, transportation, and healthcare. In Henry County, 40% of households face economic limitations, though scores vary by community. For instance, Stanleytown and Chatmoss have lower ALICE scores at 33% and 37% respectively. Martinsville has a slightly lower rate of 34%. Overall, this region is slight above the state average of 29% for ALICE households.

When examining the population under 25 in the Henry-Martinsville region, both localities show substantial increases in ALICE scores. In Henry County, 69% of households face limitations, while the city of Martinsville has an even higher rate of 82%. This region's figures significantly surpass the state average of 34%. Table 2 describes ALICE characteristics in Virginia, Henry County, and Martinsville City.

Table 2: 2022 ALICE Characteristics

Location	Median Household Income	Labor Force Participation	ALICE Households	Households in Poverty	Under 25 Below ALICE
State of Virginia	$85,873	65%	29%	11%	34%
Henry County	$43,694	51%	40%	18%	69%
Martinsville City	$39,127	56%	34%	27%	82%

The Economic Viability Dashboard consists of three indices that assess the economic conditions most crucial to ALICE households: Housing Affordability, Job Opportunities, and Community. The Appendix defines each of these indices. This Dashboard provides insights into why numerous households across Virginia find it challenging to attain basic economic stability, with some regions facing greater difficulties than others. Each county's index score ranges from 1 (worse economic conditions) to 100 (better economic conditions), indicating its relative standing compared to other counties within Virginia.

These indices are intended solely for intra-state comparison, not for evaluating conditions against other states.

Henry County faces notable challenges in job opportunities, scoring only 34/100, and housing affordability, with a score of 40/100. Despite these difficulties, it shows relative strength in community resources, scoring 60/100. In comparison, Martinsville City performs better in housing affordability (54/100) and job opportunities (42/100) than Henry County. However, its community resources score of 46/100 indicates opportunities for improvement in local support and amenities.

Social Mobility

Social mobility data from Opportunity Atlas show children's outcomes in adulthood using anonymized data overlaid on Census tracts with American Community Surveys. Figure 3 below illustrates social mobility for childcare from low-income parents in the Martinsville-Henry county region. Children from low-income families in the Martinsville-Henry County region face significant challenges compared to national medians. The median household income for this population is $26,601, much lower than the national median of $33,000. The incarceration rate is notably higher at 4.0%, double the national rate of 2%. The fraction of individuals married is also lower at 31.8%, versus 42% nationally. Surprisingly, employment rates are in line with the nation, averaging 74%. However, only 5.5% of individuals from this region reach the top 20% based on household income, and 6.4% reach the top 20% based on individual income, compared to 9.6% and 10% nationally. Overall, these indicators highlight the region's lower economic outcomes and limited social mobility opportunities. Expanded data values are available in the Appendix of this report, which include a comparison to the national median.

Table 3: Social Mobility for Children from Low-income Parents, 2015

Indicator	Martinsville Henry County Region	County Median in the United States
Household income	$26,601	$33,000
Incarceration Rate	4.0%	2%
Individual Income (Excluding spouse)	$19,429	$23,000
Fraction married	31.8%	42%
Spouse's income	$32,557	$34,000
Employment rate	74.5%	74%
Frac. In Top 20% Based on Household Income	**5.5%**	**9.6%**
Frac. In Top 20% Based on Individual Income	**6.4%**	**10%**
% Staying in Same Commuting Zone as Adults	66%	65%
% Staying in Same Tract as Adults	29.2%	27%

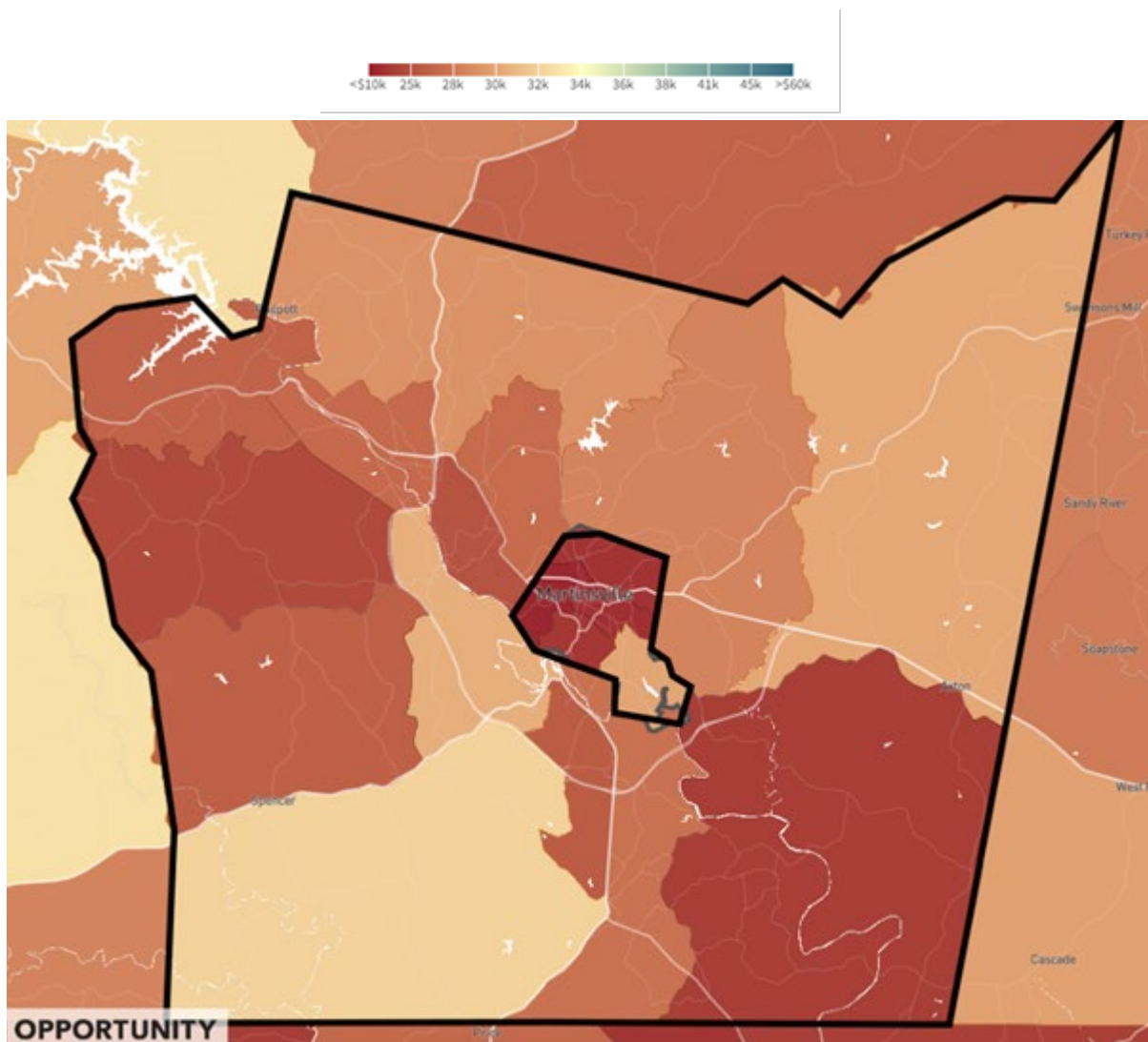| Household Income (In Commuting Zone)	$22,527	$31,000
Individual Income (Stayed in Commuting Zone)	$16,497	$21,000
Number of Children	510	3,300

Figure 3: Household Income at Age 35 for Children of Low-Income Parents [1]

Employment and Industry

Labor Force

From 2018 to 2022, labor force participation rates in Henry and Martinsville showed fluctuations, with Henry peaking at 51.30% in 2018 and declining to 51.10% by 2022, while Martinsville decreased from 56.90% to 55.70% during the same period. Both areas

experienced a significant dip in 2020 due to the pandemic but showed partial recovery afterward.

Nationally, the U.S. participation rate remained relatively stable, hovering around 63.30% to 63.60% during 2018-2022. Virginia consistently had higher rates, steady around 65.80% to 65.90%, with a slight drop to 65.30% in 2022. Overall, Henry and Martinsville had lower participation rates compared to the national and Virginia averages.

Unemployment Rate

In general, unemployment in the region trends higher than the state, with rates at 3.7% compared to 2.8%, respectively. However, it aligns with the national average of 3.6%. The city of Martinsville has a significantly higher unemployment rate at 4.6%, compared to 3.4% in Henry County.

Employment Change

Martinsville-Henry county regional employment has decreased by 2.6% in the past 5 years with a 753 net-decrease in jobs. Each locality saw similar trends in job loss. Over the next five years, the region is expected to grow employment by 1,089 positions, or 3.9%. Although employment is growing in the region, many of those working full and part-time are hourly workers. Those who work by the hour are more likely to experience income fluctuations and not receive benefits.

Industry By Employment

Manufacturing is the leading employment industry in the region, employing 5,684 individuals in 2024. Over the past five years, the industry saw significant growth (12%), adding 609 jobs. With a location quotient of 2.57, Manufacturing is more concentrated in the region than nationally, indicating regional specialization. Government and Health Care and Social Assistance are the second and third largest industries, together employing 8,269 individuals in 2024. Health Care and Social Assistance has experienced notable growth of 8% from 2019 to 2024, partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services saw a substantial increase of 500 jobs, or 78%, during the same period.

Both localities share similar top industries by employment, with notable growth distinctions. In Henry County, Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services experienced a remarkable 101% growth, adding 482 jobs over the past five years. Conversely, Martinsville saw significant growth in the Construction sector, which increased by 102%, adding 88 jobs during the same period. These highlights underscore the varied economic development trajectories within the region. Appendix has a breakdown of industry concentration by locality.

Table 4: Top 10 Industries by Employment in Martinsville-Henry County Region

NAICS	Description	2019 Jobs	2024 Jobs	2019 - 2024 Change	2019 - 2024 % Change	2023 LQ
31	Manufacturing	5,074	5,684	609	12%	2.57
90	Government	4,225	4,200	(25)	(1%)	1.05
62	Health Care and Social Assistance	3,783	4,069	286	8%	1.11
44	Retail Trade	3,616	2,905	(711)	(20%)	1.14
56	Administrative Waste Management	2,574	2,443	(132)	(5%)	1.42
81	Other Services (except Public Admin.)	2,046	1,801	(245)	(12%)	1.34
72	Accommodation and Food Services	1,726	1,667	(59)	(3%)	0.72
48	Transportation and Warehousing	1,353	1,316	(37)	(3%)	1.09
54	Professional, Sci., & Tech Services	641	1,141	500	78%	0.53
23	Construction	696	762	66	9%	0.48

Table 5: Top 10 Industries by Employment in Henry County.

Henry						
NAICS	Description	2019 Jobs	2024 Jobs	2019 - 2024 Change	2019 - 2024 % Change	2023 LQ
31	Manufacturing	4,222	4,677	455	11%	3.30
90	Government	2,584	2,515	(68)	(3%)	0.98
62	Health Care and Social Assistance	1,618	1,761	144	9%	0.73
44	Retail Trade	2,162	1,669	(493)	(23%)	1.02
48	Transportation and Warehousing	1,212	1,258	46	4%	1.62
81	Other Services (except Public Admin.)	1,271	1,206	(66)	(5%)	1.39
56	Administrative & Waste Management	1,367	1,057	(310)	(23%)	1.01
54	Professional, Sci., and Tech. Services	479	961	482	101%	0.69
72	Accommodation and Food Services	968	950	(18)	(2%)	0.64
23	Construction	610	589	(22)	(4%)	0.59

Table 6: Top 10 Industries by Employment in the City of Martinsville.

City of Martinsville						
NAICS	Description	2019 Jobs	2024 Jobs	2019 - 2024 Change	2019 - 2024 % Change	2023 LQ

62	Health Care and Social Assistance	2,165	2,308	143	7%	1.77
90	Government	1,641	1,684	43	3%	1.16
56	Administrative & Waste Management	1,207	1,386	179	15%	2.17
44	Retail Trade	1,454	1,235	(219)	(15%)	1.37
31	Manufacturing	852	1,007	155	18%	1.25
72	Accommodation and Food Services	759	717	(41)	(5%)	0.86
81	Other Services (except Public Admin.)	775	595	(180)	(23%)	1.25
54	Professional, Sci., & Tech. Services	162	180	18	11%	0.25
23	Construction	86	174	88	102%	0.29
52	Finance and Insurance	227	165	(62)	(27%)	0.43

Occupation

i. Top 10 Occupations below $15 per Hour

The top in-demand occupations below $15 hourly earnings in Martinsville-Henry County are Home Health and Personal Care Aides, Packers and Packagers, and Janitors and Cleaners. Most of the in-demand occupations do not require any formal educational credentials or only a high school diploma.

Table 7: Top 10 Occupations below $15 per Hour

SOC	Description	2023 Jobs	2019 - 2024 Change	2019 - 2024 % Change	2023 Hires	Avg. Annual Openings	Median Hourly Earnings	Typical Entry Level Education
31-1128	Home Health and Personal Care Aides	1,384	161	13%	1,147	241	$13.01	High school diploma or equivalent
53-7064	Packers and Packagers, Hand	220	50	29%	330	40	$13.45	No formal educational credential
37-2011	Janitors and Cleaners, Except Maids and Housekeeping Cleaners	483	23	5%	465	76	$14.55	No formal educational credential
35-2011	Cooks, Fast Food	118	41	54%	154	23	$12.70	No formal educational credential

SOC	Description	2023 Jobs	2019 - 2024 Change	2019 - 2024 % Change	2023 Hires	Avg. Annual Openings	Median Hourly Earnings	Typical Entry Level Education
43-4111	Interviewers, Except Eligibility and Loan	63	31	97%	52	12	$14.33	High school diploma or equivalent
35-2014	Cooks, Restaurant	164	13	8%	252	31	$13.15	No formal educational credential
53-7081	Refuse and Recyclable Material Collectors	53	27	98%	42	12	$14.66	No formal educational credential
35-2021	Food Preparation Workers	123	13	12%	172	25	$13.51	No formal educational credential
35-2012	Cooks, Institution and Cafeteria	89	8	10%	72	16	$14.92	No formal educational credential
43-4171	Receptionists and Information Clerks	185	2	1%	135	36	$13.23	High school diploma or equivalent

Table 8: Top 20 Occupations below $15 per Hour

SOC	Description	2023 Jobs	2019 - 2024 Change	2019 - 2024 % Change	2023 Hires	Avg. Annual Openings	Median Hourly Earnings	Typical Entry Level Education
31-1128	Home Health and Personal Care Aides	1,384	161	13%	1,147	241	$13.01	High school diploma or equivalent
53-7064	Packers and Packagers, Hand	220	50	29%	330	40	$13.45	No formal educational credential
37-2011	Janitors and Cleaners, Except Maids and Housekeeping Cleaners	483	23	5%	465	76	$14.55	No formal educational credential
35-2011	Cooks, Fast Food	118	41	54%	154	23	$12.70	No formal educational credential
43-4111	Interviewers, Except Eligibility and Loan	63	31	97%	52	12	$14.33	High school diploma or equivalent

35-2014	Cooks, Restaurant	164	13	8%	252	31	$13.15	No formal educational credential
53-7081	Refuse and Recyclable Material Collectors	53	27	98%	42	12	$14.66	No formal educational credential
35-2021	Food Preparation Workers	123	13	12%	172	25	$13.51	No formal educational credential
35-2012	Cooks, Institution and Cafeteria	89	8	10%	72	16	$14.92	No formal educational credential
43-4171	Receptionists and Information Clerks	185	2	1%	135	36	$13.23	High school diploma or equivalent
35-9011	Dining Room and Cafeteria Attendants and Bartender Helpers	87	5	6%	151	18	$12.87	No formal educational credential
53-7061	Cleaners of Vehicles and Equipment	63	11	20%	47	11	$14.21	No formal educational credential
51-3011	Bakers	36	21	108%	24	9	$14.62	No formal educational credential
31-9096	Veterinary Assistants and Laboratory Animal Caretakers	39	37	368%	16	12	$12.93	High school diploma or equivalent
35-9021	Dishwashers	51	9	20%	85	10	$12.23	No formal educational credential
39-2021	Animal Caretakers	41	22	92%	20	10	$12.41	High school diploma or equivalent
31-9097	Phlebotomists	26	10	65%	29	5	$14.63	Postsecondary nondegree award
35-3041	Food Servers, Non restaurant	34	4	14%	44	8	$14.34	No formal educational credential

SOC		200	-16	-7%	113	31		$14.66	No formal educational credential
37-3011	Landscaping and Groundskeeping Workers	200	-16	-7%	113	31		$14.66	No formal educational credential
35-3031	Waiters and Waitresses	283	-36	-11%	539	67		$12.52	No formal educational credential

ii. Top 20 Occupations at or above $15 per Hour

The top in-demand occupations at or above $15 hourly earnings in Martinsville-Henry County are Laborers & Freight, Stockers and Order Fillers, and Office Clerks. Most in-demand occupations require a high school diploma or greater.

Table 9: Top 20 Occupations at or above $15 per Hour

SOC	Description	2024 Jobs	2019 - 2024 Change	2019 - 2024 % Change	2023 Hires	Avg. Annual Openings		Median Hourly Earnings	Typical Entry Level Education
53-7062	Laborers & Freight, Stock, & Material Movers	849	113	15%	1,123	133	$16.60		No formal educational credential
53-7065	Stockers and Order Fillers	726	83	13%	693	134	$15.36		High school diploma or equivalent
43-9061	Office Clerks, General	537	9	2%	418	71	$15.83		High school diploma or equivalent
43-4051	CSR	517	(211)	(29%)	539	82	$16.26		High school diploma or equivalent
53-3032	Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers	482	106	28%	278	68	$21.96		Postsecondary nondegree award
11-1021	General and Operations Managers	477	161	51%	229	65	$43.07		Bachelor's degree
29-1141	Registered Nurses	443	40	10%	198	35	$32.64		Bachelor's degree
51-2098	Miscellaneous Assemblers & Fabricators	428	15	4%	430	64	$17.14		High school diploma or equivalent
49-9071	Maintenance and Repair Workers, General	337	57	20%	172	41	$19.32		High school diploma or equivalent

31-1131	Nursing Assistants	306	13	4%	362	66	$15.24	Postsecondary nondegree award

Table 10: Top 20 Occupations at or above $15 per Hour

SOC	Description	2024 Jobs	2019 - 2024 Change	2019 - 2024 % Change	2023 Hires	Avg. Annual Openings	Median Hourly Earnings	Typical Entry Level Education
53-7062	Laborers & Freight, Stock, & Material Movers	849	113	15%	1,123	133	$16.60	No formal educational credential
53-7065	Stockers and Order Fillers	726	83	13%	693	134	$15.36	High school diploma or equivalent
43-9061	Office Clerks, General	537	9	2%	418	71	$15.83	High school diploma or equivalent
43-4051	CSR	517	(211)	(29%)	539	82	$16.26	High school diploma or equivalent
53-3032	Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers	482	106	28%	278	68	$21.96	Postsecondary nondegree award
11-1021	General and Operations Managers	477	161	51%	229	65	$43.07	Bachelor's degree
29-1141	Registered Nurses	443	40	10%	198	35	$32.64	Bachelor's degree
51-2098	Miscellaneous Assemblers & Fabricators	428	15	4%	430	64	$17.14	High school diploma or equivalent
49-9071	Maintenance and Repair Workers, General	337	57	20%	172	41	$19.32	High school diploma or equivalent
31-1131	Nursing Assistants	306	13	4%	362	66	$15.24	Postsecondary nondegree award
51-1011	First-Line Supervisors of Production	305	36	13%	117	36	$29.08	High school diploma or equivalent
41-1011	First-Line Supervisors of Retail Sales Workers	281	(87)	(24%)	144	37	$20.26	High school diploma or equivalent

53-7051	Industrial Truck and Tractor Operators	280	65	31%	179	43	$17.50	No formal educational credential
43-3031	Bookkeeping, Accounting, and Auditing Clerks	280	4	2%	208	41	$19.46	Some college, no degree
43-6014	Secretaries and Admin.	263	(52)	(17%)	184	34	$18.45	High school diploma or equivalent
33-3012	Correctional Officers and Jailers	253	(8)	(3%)	84	27	$23.09	High school diploma or equivalent
25-2021	Elementary School Teachers, Except Special Ed.	237	1	1%	59	21	$26.78	Bachelor's degree
43-5071	Shipping, Receiving, & Inventory Clerks	234	26	13%	136	29	$17.48	High school diploma or equivalent
43-1011	First-Line Supervisors of Admin.	233	(39)	(14%)	126	29	$25.79	High school diploma or equivalent

iv. Top 20 In-Demand Occupations

Home Health and Personal Care Aides are the top in-demand occupations, followed by Cashiers. Both occupations are largely employed jobs in the region, which may imply high turnovers rates of these positions. The top in-demand occupations are found in transportation and warehousing, retail service, healthcare, and administration. They require little no entry level education and have median hourly earnings ranging from $12.61-21.96.

Table 11: Top 20 In-Demand Occupations

SOC	Description	Avg. Annual Openings	Median Hourly Earnings	Typical Entry Level Education
31-1128	Home Health and Personal Care Aides	241	$13.01	High school diploma or equivalent
41-2011	Cashiers	161	$13.24	No formal educational credential
35-3023	Fast Food and Counter Workers	145	$12.61	No formal educational credential
53-7065	Stockers and Order Fillers	134	$15.36	High school diploma or equivalent
53-7062	Laborers and Freight, Stock, and Material Movers, Hand	133	$16.60	No formal educational credential

41-2031	Retail Salespersons	99	$14.47	No formal educational credential
43-4051	Customer Service Representatives	82	$16.26	High school diploma or equivalent
37-2011	Janitors and Cleaners, Except Maids and Housekeeping Cleaners	76	$14.55	No formal educational credential
43-9061	Office Clerks, General	71	$15.83	High school diploma or equivalent
53-3032	Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers	68	$21.96	Postsecondary nondegree award

Table 12: Top 20 In-Demand Occupations

SOC	Description	Avg. Annual Openings	Median Hourly Earnings	Typical Entry Level Education
31-1128	Home Health and Personal Care Aides	241	$13.01	High school diploma or equivalent
41-2011	Cashiers	161	$13.24	No formal educational credential
35-3023	Fast Food and Counter Workers	145	$12.61	No formal educational credential
53-7065	Stockers and Order Fillers	134	$15.36	High school diploma or equivalent
53-7062	Laborers and Freight, Stock, and Material Movers, Hand	133	$16.60	No formal educational credential
41-2031	Retail Salespersons	99	$14.47	No formal educational credential
43-4051	Customer Service Representatives	82	$16.26	High school diploma or equivalent
37-2011	Janitors and Cleaners, Except Maids and Housekeeping Cleaners	76	$14.55	No formal educational credential
43-9061	Office Clerks, General	71	$15.83	High school diploma or equivalent
53-3032	Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers	68	$21.96	Postsecondary nondegree award
35-3031	Waiters and Waitresses	67	$12.52	No formal educational credential
31-1131	Nursing Assistants	66	$15.24	Postsecondary nondegree award
51-2098	Miscellaneous Assemblers and Fabricators	64	$17.14	High school diploma or equivalent
39-9011	Childcare Workers	56	$13.60	High school diploma or equivalent
37-2012	Maids and Housekeeping Cleaners	54	$13.67	No formal educational credential
53-7051	Industrial Truck and Tractor Operators	43	$17.50	No formal educational credential
43-3031	Bookkeeping, Accounting, and Auditing Clerks	41	$19.46	Some college, no degree
49-9071	Maintenance and Repair Workers, General	41	$19.32	High school diploma or equivalent
53-7064	Packers and Packagers, Hand	40	$13.45	No formal educational credential
41-1011	First-Line Supervisors of Retail Sales Workers	37	$20.26	High school diploma or equivalent

Education

Standard of Learning Pass Rates

The Standards of Learning (SOL) assesses student learning outcomes. The tests are based on minimum standards of learning for all students established by the Virginia Board of

Education.[2] SOLs are administered at all public schools in the Commonwealth. Test scores can indicate youth outcomes, showing how well they are educated to pass the test.

Henry County and Martinsville City show room for improvement in standardized testing outcomes compared to the statewide average. Particularly in English: Writing, both areas have passing rates below Virginia's statewide average of 64.64%, with Henry County at 40.66% and Martinsville City at 39.55%. Similarly, in Science, Henry County and Martinsville City demonstrate passing rates of 58.81% and 52.74%, respectively, while Virginia achieves a higher pass rate of 66.59%.

These disparities also extend to failing rates, where both localities exceed the statewide average. For instance, in Mathematics, while Virginia reports a failing rate of 30.87%, Henry County and Martinsville City report rates of 35.03% and 37.45%, respectively. This highlights opportunities for targeted educational support and improvement initiatives across the region.

Figure 4: SOL Pass/Fail Rates for Martinsville-Henry High Schools[3]

The SOL scores of various elementary schools in Virginia showcase a spectrum of academic achievements. Axton Elementary stands out with strong performance across subject areas, achieving 71.86% in English: Reading, 78.43% in History and Social Science, 81.55% in Mathematics, and 76.12% in Science. In contrast, Mount Olivet Elementary faces challenges with lower scores: 54.73% in English: Reading, 67.50% in History and Social Science, 56.67% in Mathematics, and 27.42% in Science. These results highlight both areas of excellence and opportunities for growth across schools, emphasizing the importance of targeted strategies to enhance educational outcomes.

Table 7: SOL Scores by Elementary Schools[2]

School Name	English: Reading	History and Social Science	Mathematics	Science
Axton Elementary	71.86%	78.43%	81.55%	76.12%
Campbell Court Elementary	64.46%	51.28%	66.12%	69.05%
Drewry Mason Elementary	65.50%	68.06%	74.50%	73.13%
G.W. Carver Elementary	63.88%	76.00%	70.18%	55.56%
Meadow View Elementary	60.60%	76.24%	63.04%	64.00%
Mount Olivet Elementary	54.73%	67.50%	56.67%	27.42%
Rich Acres Elementary	71.96%	84.62%	79.44%	76.67%
Sanville Elementary	60.66%	75.68%	66.39%	55.26%
Stanleytown Elementary	60.48%	62.00%	54.47%	72.73%
Albert Harris Elementary	52.13%	66.10%	51.85%	54.84%
Patrick Henry Elementary	54.44%	38.18%	55.03%	43.33%

Fieldale-Collinsville Middle School demonstrates strong performance in History and Social Science (74.50%), English-Reading (61.98%), and Science (54.14%). However, there is room for improvement in English-Writing (36.46%). Martinsville Middle School stands out with exceptional scores in English-Reading (63.04%) and Mathematics (62.88%). Meanwhile, Laurel Park Middle School faces challenges across subjects, particularly in English-Writing (45.23%) and History and Social Science (51.71%).

Table 8: SOL Scores by Middle Schools[2]

Pass Rate	English-Reading	English-Writing	History & Social Science	Mathematics	Science
Fieldale-Collinsville Middle	61.98%	36.46%	74.50%	58.41%	54.14%
Laurel Park Middle	60.24%	45.23%	51.71%	55.06%	42.96%
Martinsville Middle	63.04%	39.55%	67.65%	62.88%	54.01%

Magna Vista High achieves top marks with the highest pass rates in English reading (86.21%) and History and Social Science (58.82%). Bassett High also excels, notably in English reading (77.89%) and Mathematics (79.28%). While Martinsville High faces significant challenges, particularly with a notably lower pass rate in History and Social Science (6.82%), English reading consistently shows the highest pass rates across all high schools.

Table 9: SOL Scores by High Schools[2]

Pass Rate	English: Reading	History and Social Science	Mathematics	Science
Bassett High	77.89%	48.54%	79.28%	59.83%
Magna Vista High	86.21%	58.82%	74.40%	64.75%
Martinsville High	84.44%	6.82%	76.88%	52.66%

CTE Programs

Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs are available for students in grades 6-12 across Virginia. CTE courses help prepare students for successful careers post-graduation. The eight CTE program areas are: Agricultural Education, Business and Information Technology, Family and Consumer Sciences, Health and Medical Sciences, Marketing, Technology and Engineering Education, Trade and Industrial Education. Program areas help students specify their interests and provide hands on experiences.

Students can take an extra step forward and try to earn industry credentials. Industry credentials provide students with proof of competency in career and technical education for their desired field, increasing their likelihood for employment and advancement in their desired career path.[4] In Virginia, approximately 16% of students pursued credentialing opportunities. Martinsville City reported a higher participation rate of 23%, indicating strong engagement in credentialing efforts. Meanwhile, Henry County had a participation rate of around 7%, suggesting an area for potential growth in fostering credentialing initiatives.

Community Programming

Alongside formal educational programs, Martinsville, Henry, and other localities in the region have many programs to help improve youth conditions. Henry County Parks and Recreation offer numerous afterschool programs that provide children with opportunities for physical activity, and parents for more childcare opportunities. Further research is needed to understand the full scope and scale of these after-school and summer programs. However, the presence of these programs is a signal that Martinsville and Henry are working to improve conditions for their youth. According to the Montgomery Child Care Association (2023), after-school programs contribute to creating healthy habits, improving physical and mental health, teaching leadership skills, and building confidence.

Education Attainment

The city of Martinsville and Henry County present a complex educational landscape with some notable disparities compared to national and state averages. High school dropout rates are higher in Martinsville (15.7%) and Henry County (11.8%) compared to the national average of 9.5%. However, both areas show encouraging trends in post-secondary education, with higher proportions of residents having some college education or associate's degrees (56.7% and 44.0%, respectively) compared to the national figure of 39.4%. Despite this, the region falls short in bachelor's degree attainment or higher, with Martinsville at 10.6% and Henry County at 7.5%, lagging behind Virginia's 14.9% and the U.S. average of 13.4%.
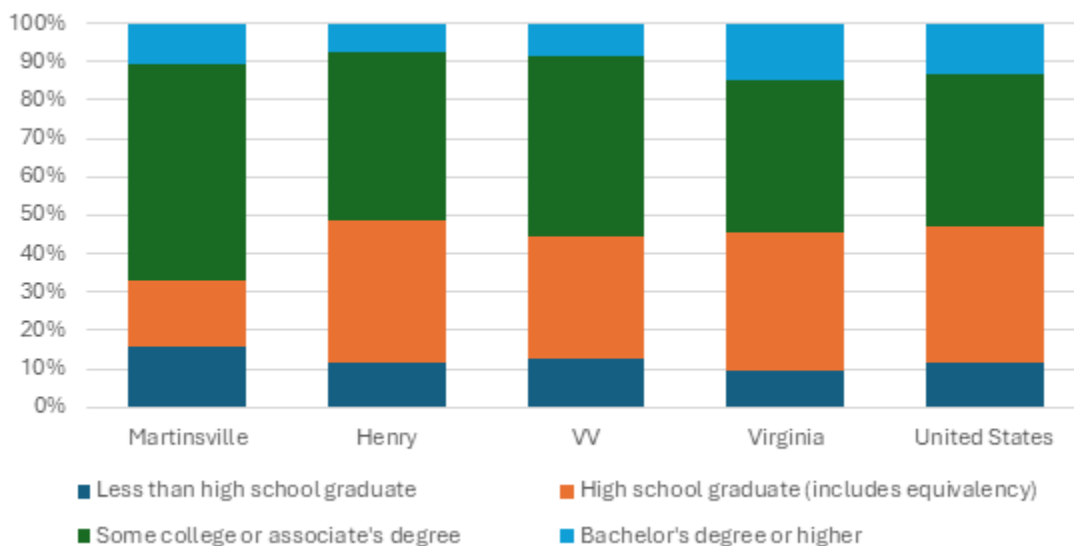
Figure 4: Martinsville-Henry Education Attainment, 18–24-year-olds [5]

Martinsville's poverty rates reveal significant educational and economic challenges. A significant 31.2% of individuals without a high school diploma live in poverty, compared to

8.1% of those with a bachelor's degree or higher. Similarly, 26.6% of high school graduates in Martinsville face poverty, whereas only 4.7% of those with a bachelor's degree or higher do. These figures highlight the critical role that high school completion and further education play in alleviating poverty, underscoring the need for targeted educational interventions and support in these communities.

Resources in High Schools

High school represents a crucial developmental period for young people. Piedmont Community Services provides a range of programs designed to address the challenges faced by many high school students in the region. These initiatives encompass in-school curricula focused on issues such as depression, relationships, and substance use. Additionally, specialized programs offer at-risk youth the opportunity to engage with experts and receive personalized support and treatment.

High School Outcomes

Martinsville City boasts a graduation rate of 89.05%, slightly below Virginia's average of 91.51%, but with a dropout rate of 10.95%, higher than the state's 8.49%. Conversely, Henry County exhibits a lower graduation rate of 83.88% and a notably higher dropout rate of 16.12%. The combined graduation rate for the region is 84.86%, with a dropout rate of 15.14%, indicating ongoing efforts to improve educational outcomes compared to the statewide average.
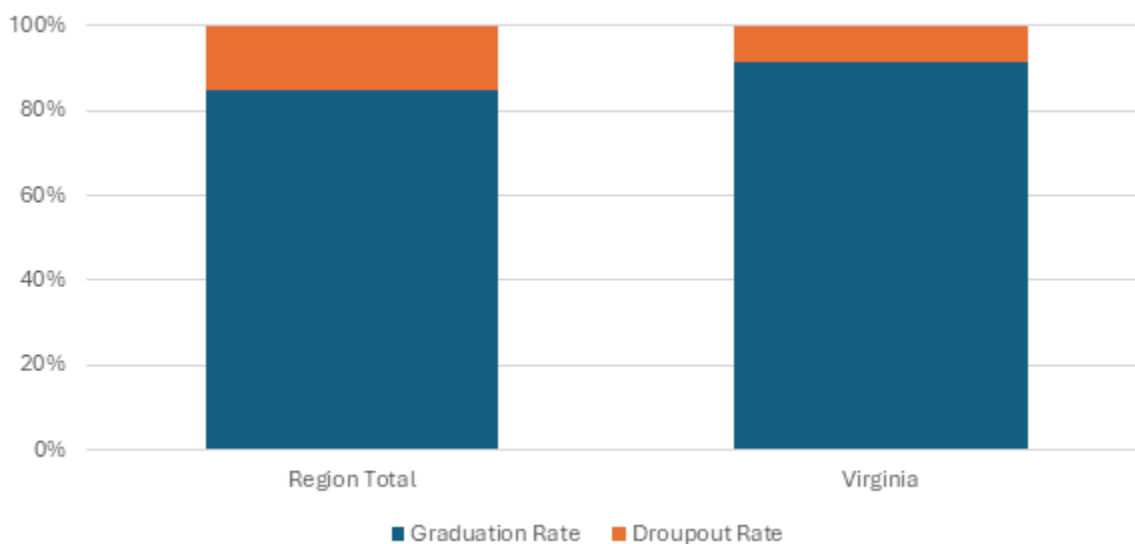
Figure 5: Martinsville-Henry High School and Dropout Rates[6]

Continuing Education and Workforce Pipeline

In the 2022-2023 graduate year, among Henry county's 518 graduates, a substantial proportion intended to pursue further education, with 37.6% planning to attend a two-year college and 19.9% opting for a four-year college. This contrasts with Martinsville's 144 graduates, where 41.7% planned to attend a two-year college and 41.7% aimed for a four-year college. Additionally, while 15.3% of Henry's graduates intended to directly enter the workforce, this figure was slightly higher at 17.4% for Martinsville.

Patrick & Henry Community College is the only postsecondary institution located in the region. In 2022, the institution had 699 program completions across all subject areas, an 8% increase in the past two years.

Liberal Arts and Sciences programs had the greatest postsecondary program completions (452) for the Martinsville-Henry county region. Individuals with these careers often pursue roles in education, such as teaching and academic advising, and in business, including human resources and management consulting. Careers in social services, arts and culture, technology, law, healthcare administration, and writing are also common, reflecting the broad applicability of this interdisciplinary education.

Indices

The Housing Affordability Index

The more affordable housing is in a county, the easier it is for a household to be financially stable. The Housing Affordability Index is defined using three indicators.

- The Affordable Housing Gap Indicator measures the difference between the total number of available renter and owner units and the number of those units that households below the ALICE Threshold can afford while spending no more than one-third of their income on housing.
- The Housing Burden Indicator measures the percent of households whos housing costs exceed 30 percent of their household income.
- The Real Estate Taxes Indicator represents the amount of real estate taxes a household must pay each year. The higher the taxes, the lower the score.

The Job Opportunities Index

The Job Opportunities Index focuses on job opportunities for the general population and households living below the ALICE Threshold. The Job Opportunities Index is defined using three indicators.

- The Income Distribution Indicator measures the share of income for the lowest two quintiles. The more evenly income is distributed, the more likely that ALICE households can reach the median income.
- The Unemployment Rate Indicator measures the unemployment rate in each region. The higher the unemployment rate, the more difficult it is to find income-earning opportunities.
- The New Hire Wages Indicator measures the average wages someone receives when they first start a job in each region. Higher wages increase the likelihood that ALICE households can reach the median income.

The Community Resources Index

- The Education Resources Indicator measures the percent of 3- and 4-year-olds enrolled in preschool. Preschool enrollment is used as a proxy for the level of education resources in the region. The higher percentage of preschool enrollment, the more resources available to households to afford early education.
- The Health Resources Indicator measures the number of households without health insurance. This indicator tries to highlight the measure of people living below the ALICE threshold who do not qualify for Medicaid, and cannot afford the lowest-cost Affordable-Care-Act plans.

- The Social Capital Indicator measures the percent of people who voted in the most recent national election. Increased civic participation leads to increased representation of community ideals and needs in local governance.

Literature Review

Introduction

Youth flourishing refers to the multidimensional well-being of young people, encapsulating their physical, emotional, and social health, as well as their ability to succeed and thrive in various domains of life. Today, youth are facing numerous challenges that can hinder their development. These challenges range from mental health crises exacerbated by social media and societal pressures to economic hardships that delay critical milestones, such as completing education or achieving financial independence. Youth flourishing is critical not only for their personal development but also for societal progress, as they represent the future workforce, leaders, and innovators.[1]

This synthesis examines the current state of youth well-being, identifies the key factors contributing to youth flourishing, and highlights promising practices to foster their success.

Current State of Youth Well-being

Recent research highlights alarming trends regarding the well-being of young people globally. Studies by organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO) indicate a significant increase in mental health issues among adolescents and young adults, including anxiety, depression, and social isolation.[2] These challenges have been worsened by economic uncertainties, educational disruptions, and societal pressures, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.[3]

Today's youth face numerous economic hurdles, including high unemployment rates, housing insecurity, and escalating education costs, which contribute to a decline in overall happiness and life satisfaction compared to previous generations. Addressing these challenges is crucial for enabling young people to thrive and reach their full potential. It is essential to develop a comprehensive understanding of youth flourishing to inform effective interventions and policies.

In the United States, approximately 1 in 9 teenagers and young adults aged 16-24 are currently disconnected from school and employment. This group, often referred to as opportunity youth, is at high risk for long-term emotional, behavioral, and health issues, and their disconnection represents a significant loss of human capital, resulting in considerable social and economic costs.[4]

Factors Contributing to Youth Well-Being

The ability of young people to flourish is influenced by multiple factors, encapsulated in the "Thrive by 25" framework, which identifies five key domains essential for youth

development: basic needs, permanent connections, education and credentials, financial stability, and youth leadership.[5]

1. Basic Needs and Well-being

Meeting the fundamental needs of young people is paramount for their overall well-being. This includes ensuring access to essential resources such as food, safe housing, healthcare, transportation, and childcare.[6] When basic needs are unmet, youth often struggle to focus on education, employment, or personal development. Studies indicate that the absence of these essential resources correlates with poor mental health, lower academic achievement, and disengagement from the workforce.[3]

Promising Practices:
To effectively address the basic needs of youth, various programs have emerged:

- Essential Services Programs: Initiatives providing free or reduced-price meals, affordable housing, and mobile health services can alleviate barriers for vulnerable youth populations. Ensuring that these services are readily accessible within schools and community centers enhances their effectiveness.[1]
- Mental Health Screenings: Implementing school-wide screenings can identify the mental health needs of students, allowing for timely interventions.[3]
- Early Intervention Programs: Programs such as the "Bounce Back" intervention focus on supporting children who have experienced trauma, demonstrating positive outcomes in mental health, school engagement, and social connections. [7] Similar evidence-based interventions that strengthen core capacities in children can benefit them in a range of ways, from lower risks of mental health and substance use problems to school dropout, social isolation, and self-harm.[8]
- Family Navigation Systems: Projects like Ready Ready's "Routes to Ready" connect families with effective services, offering universal assessments to identify strengths and needs. These navigators provide resources for mental health, social drivers of health, and other challenges impacting young children's development.[9]

2. Permanent Connections

Stable, supportive relationships with family members, mentors, and other adults are crucial for youth development.[3] Research consistently shows that youth with strong social support networks are more resilient and better equipped to navigate academic, financial, and emotional challenges.[6] These permanent connections provide essential guidance and stability during the transition to adulthood.

Promising Practices:
To foster these connections, the following practices are essential:

- Mentorship Programs: Initiatives like Big Brothers Big Sisters help create lasting relationships that offer emotional and practical support, aiding youth in their personal and academic journeys.[6]
- Community Engagement Initiatives: Programs that encourage intergenerational conversations and connections enhance youth well-being. A supportive social network—including parents, peers, and teachers—has been shown to improve adolescent mental and behavioral health.
- Family Strengthening Initiatives: Programs that facilitate positive parenting practices, conflict resolution, and family communication can strengthen familial ties and enhance youth resilience.[10]

3. Education and Credentials

Access to quality education and the opportunity to obtain credentials are critical for economic success and upward mobility.[3] Educational attainment directly influences future earning potential and career opportunities. However, many young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, face significant barriers to completing their education. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these inequalities, leading to learning disruptions.[11]

Promising Practices:
To promote educational success, initiatives must focus on:

- Academic Support Programs: Providing targeted assistance, vocational training, and dual enrollment initiatives can help youth earn credentials and improve educational outcomes.
- Financial Literacy Education: Incorporating financial literacy and life skills into curricula equips students with essential knowledge for adulthood.[1]
- Access Enhancements: Programs should be designed to ensure accessibility—by providing transportation, fee waivers, and simplifying enrollment processes—thereby removing barriers that prevent participation.[12]
- Engagement with Employers: Collaborations between schools and local employers can create internships and apprenticeships that offer real-world experience and skills development.[13]

Other considerations include:

- Aligning program content and staffing with student interests and needs.[1]
  - o Providing age-appropriate homework help (i.e., literacy for younger students, academic support for middle schoolers);

- o   Offering programs that fill important needs—enrichment activities such as fine arts/music lessons in high-poverty schools, or programs to broaden the reach of important pursuits, such as chess for girls or STEM for under-represented groups;
- o   Making sure programs are culturally responsive; and
- o   Sub-contracting with local organizations that have expertise in working with specific populations of students or running specific types of programs

4. Financial Stability

Financial stability is a key determinant of youth well-being. Many young people face precarious employment, low wages, and limited access to benefits, which can hinder their ability to achieve financial independence and significant life milestones. The rise of the gig economy has further complicated financial security for youth.

Promising Practices:
To enhance financial stability, it is essential to implement:

- Workforce Readiness Programs: Initiatives that prepare youth for careers in high-demand industries, combined with financial literacy education, can provide the skills and resources needed for economic success.[14]
- Youth-Led Input in Program Design: Programs that incorporate feedback from young people, particularly from marginalized communities, have demonstrated higher success rates.
- Financial Assistance Programs: Providing scholarships, grants, and low-interest loans can alleviate financial burdens and support youth in achieving educational and career goals.

5. Youth Leadership and Civic Engagement

Fostering leadership skills and promoting civic engagement among youth are vital for long-term success.[15] Youth who engage in their communities and take on leadership roles are more likely to experience personal fulfillment, academic achievement, and social responsibility.[16] Civic engagement also nurtures a sense of agency, empowering youth to advocate for themselves and their communities.

Promising Practices:
To promote youth leadership, the following strategies can be beneficial:

- Youth Leadership Development Programs: Initiatives like those from the National Youth Leadership Council create opportunities for young people to engage in policy discussions and lead community improvement efforts.

- Civic Engagement Opportunities: Programs that allow youth to participate in community service, policy advocacy, and leadership roles cultivate a sense of belonging and responsibility.
- Skill-Building Workshops: Workshops focusing on communication, critical thinking, and negotiation skills can prepare youth for leadership roles and enhance their capacity to effect change.[17]

Promising Practices for Enhancing Youth Well-Being

To effectively support youth well-being, several promising practices have emerged from research and successful initiatives:

1. Mental Health Services

Expanding access to mental health services is a critical priority in addressing the rising rates of mental health challenges among youth. School-based mental health programs, peer support networks, and culturally responsive interventions have shown significant promise in promoting mental and emotional well-being.

- Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) Model: This comprehensive approach integrates education and health, emphasizing ten key components—such as physical education, health services, and family engagement—to create a supportive environment for students' overall well-being.[18]
    - Community School Model: Transforming schools into hubs for collaboration among educators, families, and community partners can provide integrated support services, enrichment programs, and family engagement initiatives.

2. Safe and Inclusive Spaces

Creating safe and welcoming environments is essential for youth well-being.[19] Schools, community centers, and online platforms should prioritize inclusivity and support marginalized groups, fostering a sense of belonging and positive identity development.

- Inclusive Programming: Implementing programs that address the needs of diverse racial, gender, and cultural backgrounds can enhance youth engagement and well-being.
- Anti-Bullying Policies: Establishing and enforcing anti-bullying policies helps create a safe environment where youth can thrive.

3. Family and Community Engagement

Strengthening family support and community ties is key to fostering resilience among youth. Programs that promote intergenerational communication and build connections between youth and their communities play a vital role in supporting flourishing.

- Engaging Families in Programming: Initiatives that solicit parent input, provide translation services, and offer virtual meetings can enhance family engagement in youth programs.
- Targeted Funding: Allocating resources to areas that support social and emotional learning and diversity can significantly impact youth development.
- Community Partnerships: Collaborations between schools and local organizations can provide additional resources and support for families.[20]

4. Structured Activities for Character Development

Organized activities, such as sports, arts, and community service, play a crucial role in moral and civic character development among youth. Structured programs that provide leadership opportunities and mentorship contribute to positive developmental outcomes.

- Future Research Directions: Exploring the unique impact of different types of activities on youth character development can guide the design of effective programs.
- Extracurricular Programs: Offering a variety of extracurricular activities can help youth develop diverse skills and interests, promoting personal growth.[21]

Conclusion

The comprehensive understanding of factors contributing to youth well-being underscores the necessity for multi-faceted approaches that address basic needs, foster connections, enhance educational opportunities, promote financial stability, and develop leadership skills. By implementing promising practices across various domains, communities can significantly enhance the flourishing of their young people, empowering them to navigate challenges and achieve their full potential. These practices not only support individual youth but also contribute to healthier, more resilient communities, ultimately fostering a brighter future for society as a whole.

Youth Survey Summary

In partnership with the Harvest Foundation, the Virginia Tech Center for Economic and Community Engagement (VT CECE) in partnership with The Virginia Tech College Access Collaborative and Reynolds Homestead, administered a survey to collect data from youth under the age of 25 in the Martinsville-Henry region to better understand how they are being supported in the region. The efforts to distribute the survey were also supported by educational institutions and community organizations. The Youth Survey was published online and distributed to a mailing list of over X stakeholders representing businesses, community organizations, educational institutions, and other local, regional, and state government agencies. The team collected responses over six weeks, August 1st – September 16th. During this period, 675 surveys were completed.

Table 1: Survey Completion Breakdown

Completed Surveys	675
Incomplete/Duplicate/Bugs	185
Total Responses	860
Completion Rate	78.4%

The majority of respondents fall within the 17-19 and 20-22 age ranges, representing 30.61% and 29.57%, respectively. This suggests that nearly 60% of the surveyed youth are in late adolescence or early adulthood, a demographic more likely to engage in community activities and respond to surveys. A small percentage (0.30%) of respondents are under 10 years old. Additionally, the survey shows that the majority of respondents (64.34%) live in Martinsville City, while 35.07% reside in Henry County.
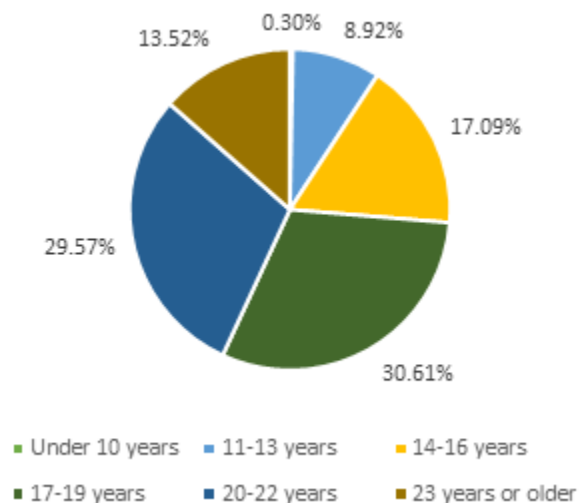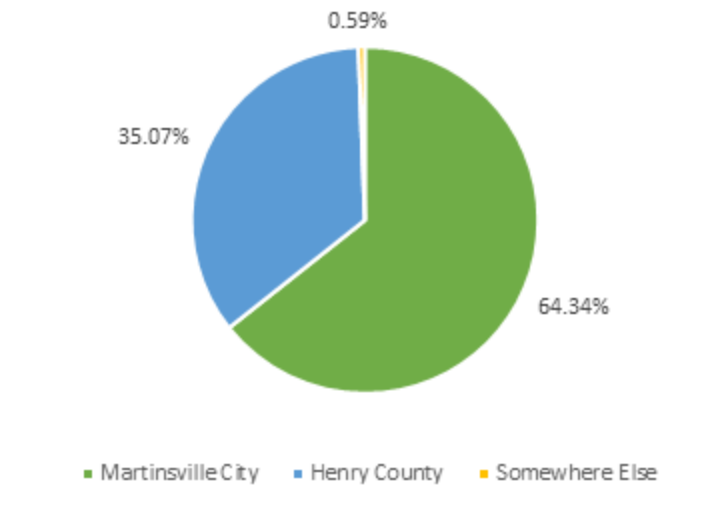

Figure 1: Age Distribution

Figure 2: Survey Respondent Residence

Respondents were asked to use one word or phrase to describe growing up and living in the region. Responses were a blend of positive and challenging experiences. Key themes highlighted robust community connections, a tranquil rural setting, and nostalgia, with respondents expressing fond memories of their childhoods and emotional ties to the region.

Figure 3: Respondent Positive Words or Phrases

However, challenges such as "poverty", "lack of job opportunities", and "economic struggles" were also noted, with some describing the region as "boring" or "disappointing". Despite these challenges, there was optimism for the future, with mentions of "growth opportunities" and "entrepreneurship". The region's educational offerings and "heritage" were also valued, with a sense of "revitalization" and "life satisfaction" among many respondents.

The majority of respondents are generally positive about the opportunities for youth in the Martinsville-Henry region, with 42.18% indicating they are satisfied and 37.26% reporting they are

very satisfied. Dissatisfaction is relatively low, with only 4.47% dissatisfied and 1.34% very dissatisfied. This suggests that while most youth are content with the available opportunities, there may still be room for improvement.
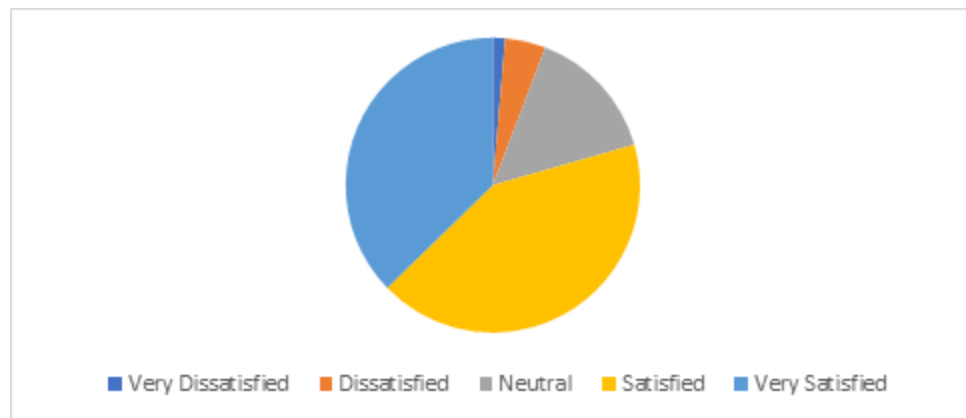

Figure 4: Satisfaction with opportunities for youth in the region

The survey responses reveal that the overall level of support from community resources for life skills and career planning is generally positive, with a mean score of 77.90 and a median score of 81 out of a possible 100.

Respondents were asked to choose which activities or programs have helped their personal development or well-being. The most frequently cited activities include sports and recreation (28.96%) and arts and culture events (25.30%), indicating that physical engagement and cultural enrichment are highly valued. Extracurricular activities and volunteer opportunities are also significant, with 22.68% and 22.40% of respondents respectively highlighting their importance.

Figure 5: Activities and programs for personal development and well-being

Currently, the region's appeal is driven by several key aspects. When asked what youth enjoy most about the region, residents and visitors alike cherish the strong sense of community and the plethora of local events, from cultural festivals to volunteer opportunities, which foster a vibrant social atmosphere. The Virginia Museum of Natural History and various historical sites offer valuable educational and cultural experiences, complemented by events like Martinsville Speedway races and traditional festivals that enhance the region's cultural vibrancy. The region's natural beauty, exemplified by its parks, lakes, and trails, provides abundant opportunities for outdoor recreation such as hiking, fishing, and kayaking. Additionally, the presence of local businesses and diverse dining options, including farmers markets and unique food trucks, is appreciated for boosting the local economy and enriching the culinary scene. The warmth and friendliness of the community, coupled with well-regarded educational and recreational facilities like schools, libraries, and sports centers, contribute to a welcoming and supportive environment for all.

When survey participants were asked to rate the availability of recreational and cultural activities, a generally positive sentiment was revealed. A majority of respondents rated the availability as either "Good" (47.85%) or "Excellent" (30.31%), indicating a strong satisfaction with the range of activities available. However, there are notable portions of the population who view it less favorably, with 17.09% rating it as "Fair," and a combined total of 4.76% rating it as "Poor" or "Very poor." This distribution suggests that while most individuals find the options for recreational and cultural activities satisfactory or superior, there is still a significant minority who perceive them as inadequate.

Figure 6: Availability rating of recreational and cultural activities that are of interest

The same trends can be seen when youth were asked if their education prepares them for future career opportunities in the Martinsville-Henry region. A substantial majority, 81%, indicated a positive outlook, with 36.26% strongly agreeing and 44.73% agreeing that their education equips them well for future careers in the area. A smaller percentage, 4.31% (comprising 3.57% disagreeing and 0.74% strongly disagreeing), expressed dissatisfaction.
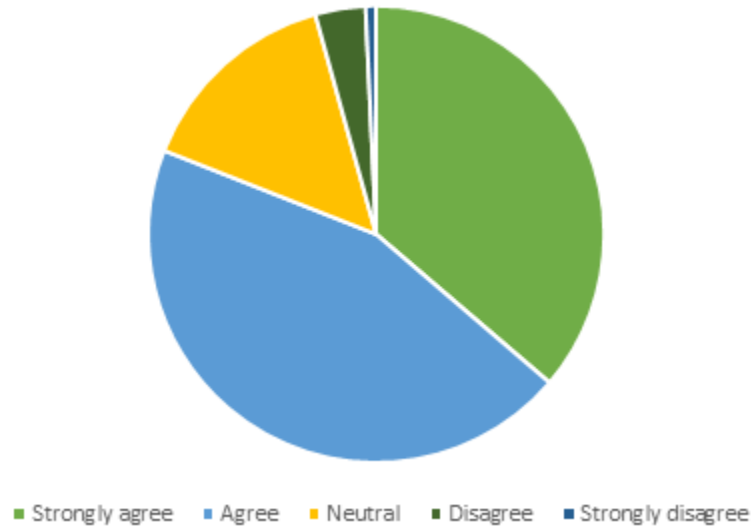
Figure 7: Participants who favor that their education prepares them for future career opportunities

Responses to the question "What is one challenge or problem that concerns you or your friends?" reveal a range of significant issues impacting individuals and their communities. Foremost among these concerns are economic and employment-related challenges, including the lack of job opportunities, economic inequality, and low wages. Education and skills development also emerge as key concerns, with respondents highlighting issues related to the quality of education and the relevance of career skills. Environmental and sustainability issues are prominent, with a focus on environmental protection and inadequate infrastructure. Additionally, there is a clear demand for improved recreational and cultural facilities, better access to health services, and enhanced community engagement. Social concerns such as safety, crime, and social equity are also significant, alongside personal development needs and the desire for a stronger sense of community and belonging.
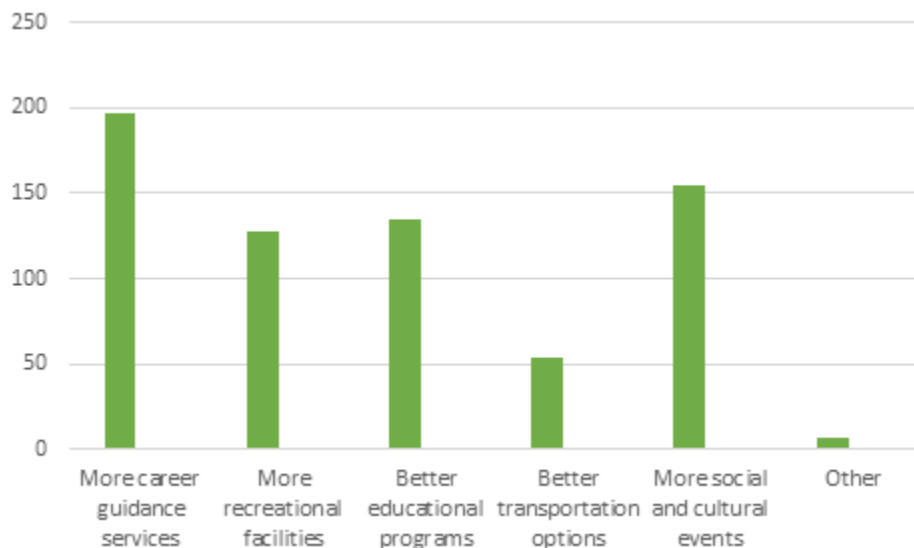
Figure 8: Requested Improvements to the region

The survey responses reveal a strong desire for various regional improvements, with the majority of participants emphasizing the need for enhanced career guidance services, which received 27.85% of the votes. Additionally, better educational programs were highlighted by 20.48% of respondents, while 21.86% expressed a need for more recreational facilities. Social and cultural events were also noted as an area for growth, garnering 20.83% of the responses. Transportation options were less prioritized, with only 8.17% of respondents indicating this as a desired improvement. A small fraction, 0.81%, suggested other and highlighted a need for improved financial literacy and economic support, including guidance on managing personal finances and creating more job opportunities. Additionally, there is a call for enhanced community and environmental initiatives, with a focus on safety in schools and more recreational programs.

The majority of respondents expressed a strong likelihood of remaining in the Martinsville-Henry region after completing their education, with 92.3% indicating that they are likely to stay. In contrast, only 7.7% of respondents felt it was unlikely they would remain in the region.

To enhance the Martinsville-Henry region for young people, respondents suggested a range of improvements focused on community, education, infrastructure, and health. Key themes include developing more exercise and recreational facilities, such as skate parks and climbing gyms, and increasing entertainment options like modern cinemas and community theaters.

"Engages young people and strengthens community cohesion through regular community events, music festivals, art exhibitions and sporting events."

In education and career development, there is a call for investment in local schools, improved teaching resources, and expanded vocational training opportunities, alongside enhanced career guidance and job training programs.

"High-quality educational resources: Improve the educational quality of local schools, introduce more high-quality teachers, and offer diversified courses and training programs."

Infrastructure improvements, such as better public transportation and urban planning, are also emphasized to create a more attractive living environment. Furthermore, promoting community involvement through volunteering and supporting local businesses, alongside ensuring access to quality healthcare and better food options, are seen as vital for improving overall well-being and engagement among youth.

"Encourage and support local small businesses and creative industries to give young people more opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship."

Small Group Input Sessions Summary

As part of the *Thriving Youth in Martinsville-Henry County* initiative, a series of small group input sessions were conducted with high school students and youth stakeholders across the region. These sessions, including the CHILL Advisory meeting and other student-focused gatherings, were designed to center the voices of young people—those most directly impacted by current conditions and future planning. Participants shared candid reflections on the opportunities available to them, the barriers they face, and their vision for a community that fully supports youth success and well-being. The insights below represent recurring themes from these rich conversations.

Youth-Recognized Strengths and Community Assets

Despite the challenges they face, students and youth were quick to acknowledge the resources and programs they value in the region:

- Educational Programs & Dual Enrollment: Programs like the Governor's School, ACE, and dual enrollment through Patrick & Henry Community College were viewed as valuable opportunities for students seeking advanced academic experiences. Some students expressed appreciation for access to motorsports, welding, and other technical training programs that aligned with their interests and aspirations.
- Internship and Career Exposure: Students noted that paid summer internships, particularly through Martinsville City Schools, were powerful experiences that helped them explore career interests, build skills, and develop confidence in professional settings.
- Creative and Extracurricular Outlets: Performing arts, music, and sports were widely recognized as critical parts of student development. These activities help build friendships, confidence, and a positive connection to school and community. Youth also mentioned recreational spaces like the Smith River Sports Complex and the YMCA as important hubs for socialization and wellness.
- Youth-Led Initiatives: Many students expressed pride in peer-led efforts, including public awareness campaigns around substance use and parent education. The Harvest Youth Board, CHILL program, and TRIO services were named as meaningful platforms where youth leadership is nurtured and celebrated.

Skills Youth Believe Are Essential for Success

In discussing the tools they need to thrive, students showed a strong awareness of the skills necessary for navigating both school and the future workforce:

- Financial Literacy: Youth emphasized a desire to better understand budgeting, savings, debt, and how to pay for college—indicating a widespread need for earlier and more accessible financial education.
- Soft Skills: Communication, teamwork, leadership, and initiative were consistently mentioned as crucial. Students understood the importance of building these skills both in school and through real-world experience.
- Career Exploration and Vocational Training: Many students were eager to see more hands-on learning opportunities and expressed interest in learning about non-traditional paths, including trades and entrepreneurship. Career exposure through job shadowing, mentoring, or field visits was a common request.

Barriers and Challenges Faced by Youth

Students also spoke openly about the roadblocks they encounter in their personal, academic, and social lives. Their reflections revealed a deep understanding of systemic challenges and the intersecting barriers that affect their ability to thrive:

- School Safety and Mental Health: Safety was one of the most frequently raised concerns. Students reported violence, bullying, and drug use within school settings, with many noting a rise in these issues since the COVID-19 pandemic. Mental health challenges—including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation—were described as widespread, yet often unsupported due to stigma, limited resources, or lack of trust in available systems.
- Transportation Gaps: Lack of accessible transportation, especially in the county, limits student participation in afterschool programs, jobs, and community events. Youth who don't drive or lack reliable rides are often excluded from critical opportunities. Several mentioned a need for youth-specific public transit options or partnerships to fill this gap.
- Communication & Information Access: Students expressed frustration at not knowing about available programs, scholarships, or support services. They emphasized the importance of better outreach strategies that reach *all* students—not just high achievers or those with strong adult support.
- Economic Instability and Family Struggles: Many students reported experiencing financial hardship at home. Limited housing affordability, food insecurity, and lack of adult support—particularly in single-parent or grandparent-led households—make it harder for students to focus on their futures. Youth acknowledged how these pressures shape their academic performance and mental health.
- Stigma and Low Expectations: A recurring theme across sessions was the stigma surrounding teens, especially those who are seen in public without supervision or

those who may dress or act differently. Youth felt unfairly judged and expressed that adults often expect too little—or too much—without taking time to truly know them. Many students shared that they can tell when an adult genuinely cares, and that these relationships can make or break their motivation.

Youth Priorities for Improvement

When asked what would most improve their lives and communities, students proposed tangible, thoughtful changes that reflect both their lived experiences and hopes for the future:

- Youth Development Center: A top priority across all sessions was the desire for a free or low-cost youth center that offers afterschool activities, tutoring, career exploration, counseling, recreation, and creative programs. Students emphasized the need for a safe, non-judgmental space where they feel seen and supported.
- Expanded Job and Career Opportunities: Youth called for more local jobs for teens, better access to apprenticeships and career pathways, and a stronger connection between local employers and high schools. They stressed that not all students plan to attend college, and those pursuing trades need to be equally supported and valued.
- Mental Health Supports: Students strongly advocated for normalized access to mental health services in schools and community settings. They emphasized the importance of trusted adults, safe places to talk, and education that reduces stigma around seeking help.
- Reliable Transportation: Many participants highlighted the need for reliable transportation—whether through a youth-oriented transit route, expanded school bus service, or ride-share partnerships—to ensure all students can access programs, jobs, and support.
- Broader Extracurricular Offerings: Not all students are interested in sports, and they expressed a need for more inclusive and creative programming—like robotics, gaming, music production, cultural clubs, and art. These outlets are especially important for youth who may not feel a strong sense of belonging in traditional school environments.

Youth Vision for a Thriving Martinsville-Henry County

Youth painted a hopeful and inspiring vision of a region where young people can live, learn, grow, and work:

- A place where education is innovative, well-funded, and inclusive, with schools that reflect high expectations and provide strong emotional support.

- A community with safe neighborhoods, welcoming recreational spaces, and activities that encourage healthy lifestyles and friendships.
- A local economy that values youth workers and offers job pathways that allow young adults to stay and thrive in the region after graduation.
- A culture of youth empowerment, where young people are trusted, included in decision-making, and recognized as contributors to their communities.

Students emphasized that relationships matter most—they thrive when adults take time to listen, believe in them, and show up consistently.

Interview Summary

To better understand the conditions that impact youth well-being in Martinsville and Henry County, the project team conducted a series of in-depth interviews with local leaders, service providers, and professionals who work directly with young people. These stakeholders offered rich perspectives on both the strengths of the region and the systemic challenges that limit opportunities for youth. It's important to note that this section summarizes findings drawn solely from interview notes. Insights from small-group sessions and survey responses will be reported separately.

<u>Barriers to Youth Thriving</u>

Interviewees described a range of barriers that limit the ability of youth in the region to flourish, both inside and outside of school settings:

- Access to Services: Many youth and families struggle to access the resources they need, including mental health care, counseling, mentoring, and legal or social supports. A lack of reliable transportation, gaps in bilingual services, and challenges navigating Medicaid and insurance processes were frequently cited, especially for immigrant families and those living in poverty. As one interviewee noted, "Sometimes the only thing stopping a child from getting help is a ride—or a parent who knows where to go."
- Family Instability and Disengagement: A recurring theme across interviews was the impact of unstable home environments. Many youth live with extended family members or non-parental guardians, and some lack consistent support systems altogether. Professionals working in juvenile justice and schools emphasized that many of the youth they serve experience high levels of instability, neglect, or trauma at home, which often affects their behavior and engagement in school.
- Substance Use and Mental Health Needs: Stakeholders expressed growing concern about early exposure to drugs and alcohol, particularly among pre-teens and younger teens. This is compounded by unmet mental health needs, including anxiety, depression, trauma, and self-harm. Several interviewees noted that youth mental health issues have increased in both frequency and severity in recent years. Despite this, many young people are not receiving the early support or diagnosis they need, and there is a shortage of youth-specific mental health professionals in the area.
- Delayed Intervention and Justice System Involvement: Multiple stakeholders described a reactive system in which youth only receive services once they are "in enough trouble"—such as being suspended, expelled, or involved with law enforcement. This delay often results in missed opportunities for early prevention.

Participants emphasized the need for stronger diversion programs, proactive mentoring, and earlier identification of youth at risk. "We shouldn't wait for a kid to be in court to offer help," one provider said.

- Limited Safe, Engaging Spaces for Youth: The absence of low-cost or no-cost "third spaces" where youth can safely gather, learn, and relax outside of school hours was another frequently mentioned issue. Stakeholders pointed to the closure or limited access to spaces like community pools and recreation centers. Youth who are not engaged in sports or traditional extracurriculars often have nowhere to go. Interviewees stressed the importance of creating welcoming, inclusive environments that reflect diverse interests and backgrounds.

Youth Strengths and Local Assets

Despite these challenges, stakeholders were quick to point out areas of strength that can be built upon to better support youth in the region:

- Educational Programs and Access: Interviewees praised existing education-related initiatives such as dual enrollment opportunities through Martinsville High School and the availability of free community college tuition for local students through programs like SEED and PASSGO. These efforts were seen as meaningful steps toward reducing financial barriers to postsecondary success and creating tangible pathways for youth.
- Dedicated Professionals and Community Leaders: Many interviewees shared examples of teachers, counselors, probation officers, and nonprofit staff going above and beyond to support youth. This strong local commitment to young people was viewed as a critical asset that could be leveraged in future youth-centered initiatives. "We may not have a lot of resources, but we have people who care deeply," one stakeholder reflected.
- Existing Programs Making a Difference: Programs such as Drug Free MHC, the Youth in Crisis Board, and DARS (Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services) were highlighted for their positive impact. Youth shelter care services, group homes, and programs like the "7 Challenges" substance use intervention were noted as promising models. Additionally, GED and employment-focused programs for older youth offer alternative routes to success for those who have disengaged from traditional school pathways.

Opportunities for Growth

The interviews surfaced a number of ideas and recommendations that could help create a more supportive and opportunity-rich environment for youth in Martinsville-Henry County:

- Establish a Youth Development Center: One of the most commonly shared ideas was the creation of a centralized, community-supported youth center. Stakeholders envisioned a space that would offer mentorship, recreation, academic help, mental health services, and job readiness programming. Accessibility and affordability were emphasized as critical components, with several noting that it must be welcoming to youth who may not feel like they belong in traditional school settings.
- Expand Career and Technical Pathways: While programs like SEED and PASSGO serve college-bound students well, interviewees identified a gap in resources for students who are interested in trades or workforce entry after high school. They called for expanded partnerships with local employers, paid internships, soft skills training, and more visible exposure to career options beyond college.
- Improve Access to Mental Health and Prevention Services: There is a strong desire among stakeholders to see increased investment in mental health services tailored to youth. Recommendations included expanding school-based counseling, improving trauma-informed training for adults working with youth, and developing systems to identify and support at-risk students earlier.
- Strengthen Collaboration Across Systems: Several participants spoke to the need for stronger communication and coordination between schools, courts, mental health providers, and community organizations. Breaking down silos and sharing data (where appropriate) would enable more effective, holistic support for youth and their families.
- Broaden Extracurricular Opportunities: Youth who are not involved in sports or traditional clubs need access to a wider range of activities—including those related to gaming, technology, music, art, and entrepreneurship. Providing diverse outlets for engagement can help foster a greater sense of belonging and purpose.

SWOT Analysis

Strengths/Assets – where do we see youth thriving in MHC; in MHC, what are the assets, resources, or strengths that help youth thrive?; what organizations, programs or groups that stand out?; Are there leaders, individuals, or community values that make a difference?

- The schools (Martinsville High School and Henry County High School and Patrick & Henry CC) are our #1 asset.
- People in community – that is a great strength – a sense of belonging and connection here. There are welcoming people in this area. It is a good place to live.
- 4-H- monthly youth meetings; connection point for youth and families, in-school programming; summer programs
- Athletics and sports, especially middle and high school programs; recreation leagues, etc.
- Bands and music programs in school
- Agriculture program – Henry County High School
- Clubs in schools
- 23% of the MHC population is under age 19
- Dual enrollment opportunities with community college; Patrick & Henry CC (dual enrollment lets students get a step ahead and potentially be more successful and less costs at a 4-year institution due to already having credits and doing college-level work early).
- Harvest Youth Board
- Harvest Foundation – esp in early childhood education - critical – making sure we have quality childcare available and good strong early education is important
- SEED fund opportunity – high school graduates can go to P&H CC and earn a two-year degree without incurring costs or debt.
- Faith-based organizations, youth groups, church programs for teens and children; etc.
- Verizon Innovative Learning Camp at P&H CC
- Upward Bound
- MHC After 3 - 21st century learning grant - after school childcare – helping parents or students who need support
- United Way
- Boys and Girls Club
- Anchor Commission, "The mission of ANCHOR is to provide a new chance for youth in our community. While they remain close to home, ANCHOR provides comprehensive care and individualized treatment to assist youth and their families in achieving optimal health and well-being." Services include ANCHOR Group Home/Shelter Care – for boys; Outreach/Surveillance and GPS; Seven Challenges Substance Use Treatment; Brief Challenges; Aggression Replacement Training; Co-Parenting: Two Parents, Two Homes; Transitional Day Program (TDP); and Lee Ford Camp
- Piedmont Community Services – multiple programs and resources
- Chamber of Commerce is very strong – very inclusive, opportunity to network with small businesses – opportunity for businesses to connect with schools
- Reynolds Homestead, NCI, GoTEC – IALR – goes into middle schools have career connections lab
- Just call Granny

- Summer camp opportunities
- Henry County schools created a Hispanic liaison position
- There are many examples of involved youth – in clubs, groups, task forces, etc.
- PCS youth leadership group, CHILL, that meets monthly. The Communities Helping Improve Local Lives (CHILL) taskforce, is a youth-led organization comprised of 9th through 12th grade students in MHC, Franklin County, and Patrick County. CHILL meets once a month after school at all local public and private high schools. They primarily do prevention-related initiatives and campaigns in their local schools and communities. All of the work at CHILL is youth-led and supported by adults.
- High School CTE programs
- PCS Youth in Crisis is a new group that connects those who work with youth in community
- Local Robotics competitions and increased STEM programming
- Schools offer after-school programs and summer feeding/programs - these keep kids active and engaged outside of regular school hours and help fill gaps (food, nutrition, childcare, a safe place to go, study assistance).
- Many organizations are collaborating already in the region; examples of strong collaboration
- A number of dedicated, talented and passionate teachers, leaders, and staff in schools - – a number are aware of barriers students face to education – trying to do all they can to help students overcome barriers
- Having assets in community like VMNH (Virginia Museum of Natural History), enable experiences for youth to learn and explore, on own or through school trips and programs
- Piedmont Arts and other arts entities – being able to visit cultural institutions is something that can open new doors and perspectives for teens and others
- YMCA in Martinsville
- NSBE – connect with students
- Local fraternity – mentoring with students Omega Si Phi
- Having "third spaces" like The Ground Floor in downtown Martinsville – safe places for teens and others to meet, visit, spend time, connect outside of structured class and programs
- Parks and Recreation in Henry county, serves all ages from kids to seniors. Do a lot with kids and sports. Special events for families (outdoor festivals, fair in the fall), Holiday activities (letter from Santa, Christmas card design, crafts for holidays), rocket building, cooking, hiking, art classes, geo catching, scavenger hunts. (some weeks, some days – in summer multiple per week); 29 park facilities, playgrounds, ball fields, rail trail (painted), bike for free, smith river blueway (river access points to get on the river and kayak). Promote healthy outdoor recreation.
- food banks provide essential support by offering free lunches, dinners, and snacks to school children in need
- Youth serving agencies are coming together and saying, yes we need to do better. There was a "house party" event in the Spring where agencies provided information to parents/youth.
- PCS starting a new advisory group called Thrive– PCS is trying to train them on leadership skills (The THRIVE group includes kids who are in need of support whereas the CHILL group is more the leaders or the kids who already tend to make better choices).
- This area's scenic beauty, the extensive trail and park system ideal for outdoor recreation, and a robust sports and recreation infrastructure. The area boasts an impressive sports complex with eight soccer fields that attract participants from diverse locations..

- Fieldale Pool – only pool unless you belong to a country club
- Library system – places to go, programs, reading clubs
- Boy scouts and girl scouts

Weaknesses/Challenges – (in region)

- Youth and families that are under-served or not engaged due to situation or circumstance
- How to better engage, involve, and support Hispanic families and youth
- Behavioral and mental health
- Young people (high school/community college/post-high school) not as aware of the region's career and job opportunities – how to better connect youth with employers and raise career awareness of various in-demand or higher wage occupations.
- Transportation to events and programs for youth – major barrier that limits opportunities
- Lack of hope or absence of positive feelings from youth about the region – specifically career and job opportunities, or lacking strong connection, or pride in, place (among SOME youth)
- Too many youth still have substance use – whether alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs
- Parental and family involvement – overall;
- Also, a number of youth are in families with no parents or with lower levels of parental or family support, or parents face a number of challenges or risk factors themselves
- Youth decision making
- Need to engage and involve high-risk and vulnerable youth
- A segment of youth do actively participate in sports, clubs, extracurriculars and take advantage of academic opportunities – but many youth are left behind and are less able to benefit, whether due to access, support earlier in their academic careers, family support, transportation, or other reasons – how to help these youth to better thrive
- Some youth with fewer role models/mentors;
- Relationship and social challenges (loneliness, bullying, friends, conflict and communication skills, etc)
- Costs of participation a barrier to some youth and families
- How to engage and reach youth given the digital/social media context -
- Some in community (families, students, and general public) have negative feelings or perceptions about schools – how to shift that perspective and reframe narrative so that there is a pride in the schools and community
- Younger or first-time parents (or caregivers) can be a challenge – lack parenting skills or knowledge, not knowing how to best support children and organize family life
- Not enough things/places for youth to gather, meet, do things together outside of school that are accessible, affordable, appealing.
- Schools don't have a lot of space in curriculum on life skills – so students do not receive information or learning about making healthy choices.
- Martinsville City and Henry County rank in the lowest 25th percentile for median household incomes in Virginia. In Martinsville, 25% of the population lives in poverty, while in Henry County, the rate is 15%.

- Some students need affordable or donated clothes/uniforms for jobs – Martinsville City has a CTE clothes closet for students for CNA program at P&HCC (scrubs), suit/skirt - school will provide – not all students will communicate their needs – pride is a big thing – counselors/teachers are on the look out for those in need.
- More and more middle and high school students display a "pervasive lack of emotional maturity" – general awareness/basic life skills
- Substance use, and not enough resources devoted to prevention, treatment, recovery
- Social media, smart phones, gaming, - time spent on line or on screens contributes to a host of issues - anxiety, poor health, less exercise, social disconnectedness, etc
- Pervasive vaping habits,
- Less focus/less total time on physical education programs during elementary, middle, and high school.
- Poorer nutrition or dietary habits among a number of youth and families (fast food, processed foods, sugary drinks, or energy drinks, etc) – maybe less food planning and culinary skills among families, parents, caregivers as well.
- A number of youth lack exposure to places and experiences beyond the local region – travel, urban contexts, cultural awareness, etc. This limits their understanding of what opportunities and experiences are available beyond their immediate surroundings and influences how they see the world or their openness to new experiences in general.
- Drug problem has intensified, with more dangerous and additive drugs now more readily available such as fentanyl.
- Many people (students and families) may not be aware of the resources that are available and how to take advantage of them.
- Anger management (how youth handle conflict and manage emotions); along with school attendance are major risk factors - according to Juvenille Justice assessments.
- Drug use is very high in region. Past 2 years – there are so many more students using marijuana. Also, more parents using. With more drug use in community there are also more negative outcomes from that (criminal offenses, accidents, overdoses, deaths). More marijuana use – families and youth – there is a perception of it being harmless or being legal for underage youth which it is not.
- Region does need more youth counseling – outpatient treatment for youth and substances. PCS and Anchor do work together on substance abuse/outpatient but that is mostly for folks in Juvenile Justice system.
- More mentors/mentoring services are key.. people to model positive behavior, encourage kids, provide positive examples, and some level of accountability or support. No longer any Big Brother/Big Sisters anywhere.
- Also need Support groups for youth with substance issues (youth version of AA, NA, etc) – none in area.
- Youth need more support and training on decision-making, dealing with conflicts, and basic skills like study skills, self-care, time management, punctuality.
- For youth in juvenile justice or substance recovery, the re-entry part is tough – often young people have to go back to same or similar situation that brought them there- and what helps them is the structure and etc that is sometimes lacking in their home setting (regular meal and bed times, dedicated homework time, chores, etc)

- Incorporating more things for people to do – more activities and places to go (trails, downtown revitalization, outside assets, tourism). Activities for people with different interests are needed – groups and clubs for kids into games, or technology or fashion or music.
- Housing can be a challenge – how to help people find a place to stay – get to more stable, safe, affordable housing situation.
- Transportation in MHC is HUGE barrier – tough challenge and it is all about funding – they do have PARK bus but hard to get people to and from.
- Life and career skills are needed - many young people have no idea how to secure employment (dress, behave, do an interview, be professional); also young people (many of them) do not know how to effectively advocate for themselves – in a way that is not aggressive or angry or too passive - interpersonal communication; basic professional etiquette; being able to navigate in life – pay bills, make a budget, stick to a schedule, manage self-care, make decisions, - decision-making; self-management; healthy behaviors and lifestyles.
- Basic needs and over-stretched households: many young people face uncertainties about basic needs like food and parental support. For instance, some youth may not know where their next meal is coming from or if they will have parental or custodial guidance at crucial times. This lack of stability can significantly hinder their ability to access resources and support systems necessary for their development and success.
- Many youth need training and experiences for more effective communication, which is currently lacking for a number of students, particularly in face-to-face interactions, public speaking, and written communication. Problem-solving abilities to handle challenges are also needed, as well as the need for innovation and creativity, as great ideas often stem from creative thinkers. Additionally, there needs to be more focus on teamwork, underscoring the necessity of working collaboratively with others.
- Social media use among youth is a concern – it skews reality – then coping with reality because challenging and has so many factors impacting mental health
- Teacher retention, morale, performance is an increasing concern.
- There is a sense of increased, or more noticeable incidents, of violence in schools – kids fighting, kids who don't go to bathrooms b/c of fights, etc.
- Youth voice is missing – critically important to find leaders among younger people – that can guide this work – tends to be a lot of the same people in leadership in their 40s, 50s, and beyond - things are different now, if you going to focus on youth you need to have youth around the table;
    - o need to focus on growing leaders among our young people that can service on boards/committees/advisory
    - o Voice of diverse group of young people is going to be critically important to determining what we need to do to have a thrinv youth
- The community needs more activities and resources geared towards boys/guys (other than sports).
    - o Example for gamers or with niche interests. School started dungeons and dragons club and that was a great example. The community needs more of those types of things – groups or clubs for people interested in a wider range of activities.

- Finding jobs is a challenge, even summer or seasonal work. One example was a daughter home for summer break from college who could sometimes find it hard to find a job – not a lot for people to come home from school and work for a few months – less seasonal opportunities.
- Drug use is prevalent, even amidst younger age groups
- Lots of students in public schools with mental health challenges and the numbers on daily medications are high– some for major mental health concerns, diabetes, immunodeficiencies
- We all need more education and knowledge in the effect of gaming and social media on kids.
- More frequently seeing students show disregard or lack of empathy for fellow classmates – self-centeredness amongst some students – less collaboration, teamwork, empathy for others
- The Department of Social Services (DSS) is overstretched with the number of cases in the region, which results in youth living in environments they should not be in for longer than they should be.
- Youth need support to learn self-advocacy, to be empowered to use their voice to speak up and demand change in their environments. Part of this relates to early prevention for substance use issues.
- All youth need high levels of reading, literacy and critical thinking skills.
- Stigma against teenagers is awful - people are suspicious or judging of teens – we need to help students understand how to find the person that cares about them. There is a sense that teens are stereotyped or not allowed to have a bad day. We need to consider our messaging and how we think about teems.
- We need to find time and provide safe spaces and opportunities to hear students stories, to let them be vulnerable and to be vulnerable with them
- Social and emotional support is critically needed – Students need access to social emotional learning, mental health, and we need to take the stigma away from receiving this care -- need to build into system like physicals are required and perceived as necessary
- Bullying is a concern. With social media, bullying and peer issues continue 24 hrs a day – leads to more mental health issues.
- Youth have little unstructured time for reflection and exploration, to try out new ways to be, and to reflect…
- Need for more programs to identify and help youth before they get in serious trouble (after school, mentors) when risk factors are identified in school.
- We need enhanced communication between agencies and the schools, better information to students.
- Increasingly there can be a language barrier (mostly with Hispanic students)
- We need even more consistent police outreach, kids and police need to interact with each other, lower barriers of fear and stereotype, see people.
- We need more mental health training for everybody! (mental health first aid and etc) We need more mental health training opportunities. People, parents, teachers – we all need to be able to identify defiant or moody youth behaviors vs mentally unwell youth.

Opportunities (external to youth organizations or outside region)

- Martinsville City Council is organizing a new parks plan – making parks safer, more vibrant will be a great asset, increase usage and offer more recreation opportunities

- Schools do have a required community service expectation for students to graduate – but some students do not complete – is there an opportunity to enhance this experience and make it more appealing and more of an opportunity to contribute to the community?
- New YMCA facility is planned – much larger and with an Early Learning Center.
- Need for better job opportunities in MHC that offer stability and higher income, to improve living conditions and access to education, making it more appealing for youth to pursue degrees and build sustainable futures.
- Cultivating resilience is crucial for navigating difficult situations, whether in academics, sports, or the workplace, and in encouraging youth to embrace challenges rather than retreat from them.
- Protective factors (factors that protect youth from more risky behaviors) are things like stable home life, engaged parents/families, or involvement in extracurriculars – how to enhance protective factors.
- Over the past five years, there has been a noteworthy decrease in child poverty: an 18% reduction in Martinsville and a 33% reduction in Henry County
- Resource navigators or counselors who work full time and fully understand ALL the resources that ae available available would be invaluable … such as understanding Youth Quest and understanding requirements for Hispanic kids and be sure they get enrolled – and to work with all kids and connect them to programs, encourage applications and etc. Have a comprehensive knowledge of what resources are out there and be able to plug them in to kids and introduce them to opportunities….
- We can be an area with vision, willing to take risks, to do something no one else has done, investing in kids – (like the older "laptops in hands" initiative of Henry County Public Schools before other schools were doing that - but something relevant for now)– but we need to find something that is a stretch vision that is risky, innovative, ambitious and future-focused –
- Would love to see more activities that kids want to be involved in – and get their point of view and really listen and respond to what they would like to see.   Kids that have sports are good, but we need a lot more in region. More transportation. More activities for parents. Expose kids to new opportunities and experiences.
- Would like to see more events that appeal to different types of interests and for them to be better publicized, more accessible and more of them in general. More activities and events that are inter-generational or youth-focused also. Also, more community involvement in general – more people engaged.   Used to be more carnivals, more community pools.
- There are always good things happening in region – becoming more forward-thinking and forward-looking (especially with Harvest Foundation and other organizations). The region went through a localized "Great Depression" – through 90s and beyond they lost thousands of good paying jobs -that made a huge shift in how the area worked and how people looked at community. Became hopeless. Something always bad happening. But that is turning around – and we are seeing that turning around in many ways…
- what may be missing is having some program or organization that is one central place to refer people to – especially young people – a clearinghouse that is available and works intensively with young people - Lots in region – but compartmentalized and siloed…… can be daunting to access resources, paperwork, bureaucracy – fear of unknown, etc.
- The region could be fostering more entrepreneurial young people, offering mentorship and training and creating a robust incubator for small businesses where innovative ideas can receive

the support they need to succeed. The MHC can be a hub of innovation and growth for the youth.

- MHC could have one or more recreation centers or places like a rec center – with computers and internet access – some place open to kids to just be after school – lightly monitored with adults. There are few places now for kids to just hang out. Right now there is the Y – but not free, have to be a member.   Parks in area are older- kids need safer, cooler places to hang out. More safe accessible spaces for youth to spend out of school time. And a variety of places and locations.
- Very best thing you can give a kid is a person that cares if they make it and holds them to high standards with accountability –
- We need one or more youth centers that help youth and parents, something cheap that meets people where they are. Staffed by professionals who are there to help people succeed.
- Need more third spaces for youth
- We also need a safe place for youth to go with counsellors who can help. Some kids just need somewhere to go, they run away from home and find themselbves in horrible situations.
- Since 2018, Henry County has made significant progress, achieving a 25% reduction in its poverty rate, and Martinsville has not decreased.
- Over the next five years, the MHC region is expected to grow employment by 1,089 positions, or 3.9%.
- Manufacturing is the leading employment industry in the region, employing 5,684 individuals in 2024. Over the past five years, the industry saw significant growth (12%), adding 609 jobs. With a location quotient of 2.57, Manufacturing is more concentrated in the region than nationally, indicating regional specialization.
- The top in-demand occupations below $15 hourly earnings in Martinsville-Henry County are Home Health and Personal Care Aides, Packers and Packagers, and Janitors and Cleaners. Most of the in-demand occupations do not require any formal educational credentials or only a high school diploma.
- The top in-demand occupations at or above $15 hourly earnings in Martinsville-Henry County are Laborers & Freight, Stockers and Order Fillers, and Office Clerks. Most in-demand occupations require a high school diploma or greater.
- In MHC, the top in-demand occupations are found in transportation and warehousing, retail service, healthcare, and administration. They require little no entry level education and have median hourly earnings ranging from $12.61-21.96.
- Both Martinsville and Henry County have several schools considered high-performing on state standards of learning assessments.
- Overall in Virginia, approximately 16% of students pursued credentialing opportunities through CTE programs. Martinsville City reported a higher participation rate of 23%, indicating strong engagement in credentialing efforts.
- MHC has encouraging trends in post-secondary education, with higher proportions of residents having some college education or associate's degrees (56.7% and 44.0%, respectively) compared to the national figure of 39.4%.

Threats (outside of control or external to region)

- The Covid-19 pandemic was hard on youth – socially, academically, emotionally and that experience is still affecting young people in community.
- Brain drain – younger populations leaving the region for work and school and not returning. Region not attracting as many young people and families from outside the region as well.
- Child poverty is a critical issue, with 31.5% of children in Martinsville and 22.1% in Henry County living in poverty, compared to 12.7% in Virginia and 16.3% nationwide.
- ALICE (Asset-Limited, Income-Constrained, Employed) households are those that earn above the Federal Poverty Level but below the cost of living in their area. These households do not have sufficient income to cover a basic budget that includes housing, childcare, food, transportation, and healthcare. In Henry County, 40% of households face economic limitations, though scores vary by community. Martinsville has a slightly lower rate of 34%.
- Some students may see high school experience as less valuable or drop out just to go ahead and go to work – (moreso sometimes in Hispanic population). Is there a way to encourage students to remain in school and/or to make working concurrently more feasible?
- The young people who do obtain college degrees or credentials may find limited opportunities to utilize them within the region, prompting them to seek better or higher paying employment elsewhere.
- School systems here (since smaller, and more rural) may receive fewer resources than schools in more populous or wealthier localities which may limit what they can provide to students.
- "The economic reality of living in SWVA is a big challenge." – this relates to some of the economic conditions in MHC (relatively higher levels of poverty, lower household incomes on whole, etc)
- Social mobility data from Opportunity Atlas show children's outcomes in adulthood using anonymized data overlaid on Census tracts with American Community Surveys. Children from low-income families in the Martinsville-Henry County region face significant challenges compared to national medians. The median household income for this population is $26,601, much lower than the national median of $33,000. The incarceration rate is notably higher at 4.0%, double the national rate of 2%. The fraction of individuals married is also lower at 31.8%, versus 42% nationally. Only 5.5% of individuals from this region reach the top 20% based on household income, and 6.4% reach the top 20% based on individual income, compared to 9.6% and 10% nationally.
- A lot of young people do rely on devices and don't learn how to interact as much.
- Youth face challenges in transitioning to the workforce. Despite the availability of jobs and low unemployment rates, companies are struggling to find qualified candidates. There is a potential disconnect between education and employment.
- Martinsville-Henry county regional employment has decreased by 2.6% in the past 5 years with a 753 net-decrease in jobs
- Sedentary lifestyles among some youth contribute to poor health outcomes and other issues (boredom, isolation, depression or anxiety, obesity).
- Poverty – huge barrier – looks different in various areas of MHC – more urban poverty in Martinsville area and then more rural poverty in far reaches of the county - can manifest in behaviors – acting out, not attending, dropping out or poverty can be almost like a shame or low self-esteem – come to school, where they can get a meal – really takes a toll on emotional wellbeing

- Increasingly high demands on teachers – strenous requirements/mandates, difficulties of classroom management with more and more students in a class
- Henry County and Martinsville show room for improvement in standardized testing outcomes compared to the statewide average. Particularly in English: Writing, both areas have passing rates below Virginia's statewide average of 64.64%, with Henry County at 40.66% and Martinsville City at 39.55%. Similarly, in Science, Henry County and Martinsville City demonstrate passing rates of 58.81% and 52.74%, respectively, while Virginia achieves a higher pass rate of 66.59%.
- These disparities also extend to failing rates, where both localities exceed the statewide average. For instance, in Mathematics, while Virginia reports a failing rate of 30.87%, Henry County and Martinsville City report rates of 35.03% and 37.45%, respectively. This highlights opportunities for targeted educational support and improvement initiatives across the region.
- Overall in Virginia, approximately 16% of students pursued credentialing opportunities through CTE programs. Henry County had a participation rate of around 7%, suggesting an area for potential growth in fostering credentialing initiatives.
- High school graduation rates are lower in Martinsville (15.7%) and Henry County (11.8%) compared to the national average of 9.5%.
- Despite the relatively high percentage of residents with associates or some college attainment, the region falls short in bachelor's degree attainment or higher, with Martinsville at 10.6% and Henry County at 7.5%, lagging behind Virginia's 14.9% and the U.S. average of 13.4%.