

The Survey of Rural Challenges

**What small town people see as their
biggest challenges**

**And what topics rural people most
want help with**

*See the results at
<https://saveyour.town/survey>*

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**SMALL BIZ
SURVIVAL**

THE RURAL AND SMALL
TOWN BUSINESS
RESOURCE

2019 Survey of Rural Challenges

For all the concern over small business lending, people say usable buildings and good ideas are as hard or harder to find than loans in small towns.

Despite the media obsession with lost factories and mines, rural people are more interested in their downtowns.

Defying stereotypes of poverty and drug abuse, local businesses are more challenged with effective marketing and keeping up with technology.

About the survey methodology

The survey was open for approximately 6 weeks in June and July 2019. A total of 680 responses were collected online, from subscribers and visitors to SaveYour.Town and SmallBizSurvival.com and from media coverage and cooperating groups that chose to publicize the survey. Respondents identified themselves as rural, and 320 identified themselves as business owners by responding to the business question. Participants included 623 from the USA, 39 from Canada, 13 from Australia and 5 from other international locations.

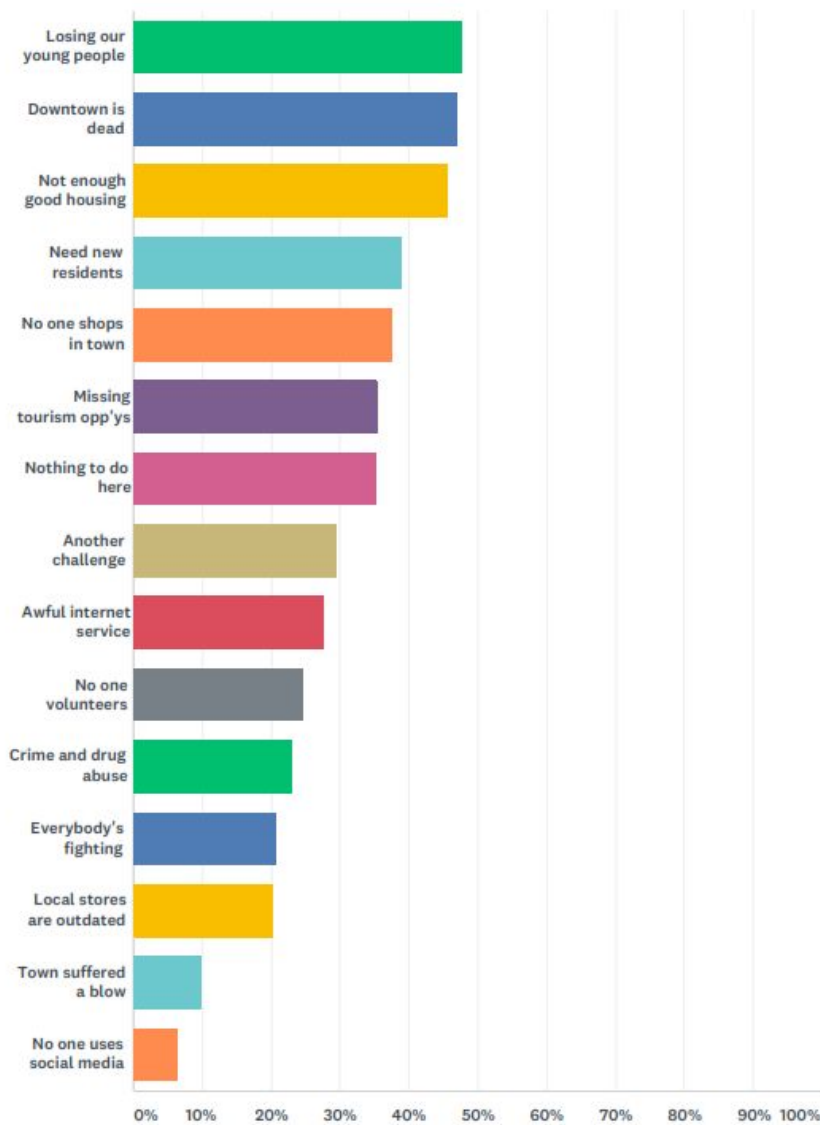
Based on SaveYour.Town customer data, most respondents serve as community leaders and officials, work in community and economic development, own their own businesses or work in a community-oriented business.

Rural Community Challenges

Top five concerns at the community-wide level this year are very similar to the results from 2017 and 2015.

Q1 Which of these rural challenges would you be excited if we talked more about facing them? Pick as many as you would be thrilled to learn more about.

Answered: 650 Skipped: 30



Which of these rural challenges would you be excited if we talked more about facing them? Pick as many as you would be thrilled to learn more about.		650
Help, we're losing our young people! How can we keep them from moving away?	47.69%	310
Help, our downtown is dead! How can we fill empty buildings and make it a living place?	47.08%	306
Help, there is not enough good housing here! Where are people supposed to live?	45.69%	297
Help, we need new to recruit some new residents! How can we draw them in?	38.92%	253
Help, no one shops in town! How can we get people to shop local first?	37.69%	245
Help, we're missing out on tourism opportunities! How can we get people to take advantage of these opportunities?	35.38%	230
Help, there's nothing to do here! How can we get more going on?	35.23%	229
Help, we have another challenge you didn't list! It's like this...	29.54%	192
Help, our internet service is awful! How can we get our broadband up to speed?	27.69%	180
Help, I'm the only one who cares! No one volunteers! How can we get more people involved?	24.62%	160
Help, there is so much crime and drug abuse. What do we do about it?	22.92%	149
Help, my town is really messed up! Everybody's fighting! What can we do about this?	20.62%	134
Help, our local stores are awful! How can we get them to get with the times?	20.31%	132
Help, our town has suffered a terrible blow! How will we ever recover?	9.85%	64
Help, no one uses social media here! How can we get people online?	6.46%	42

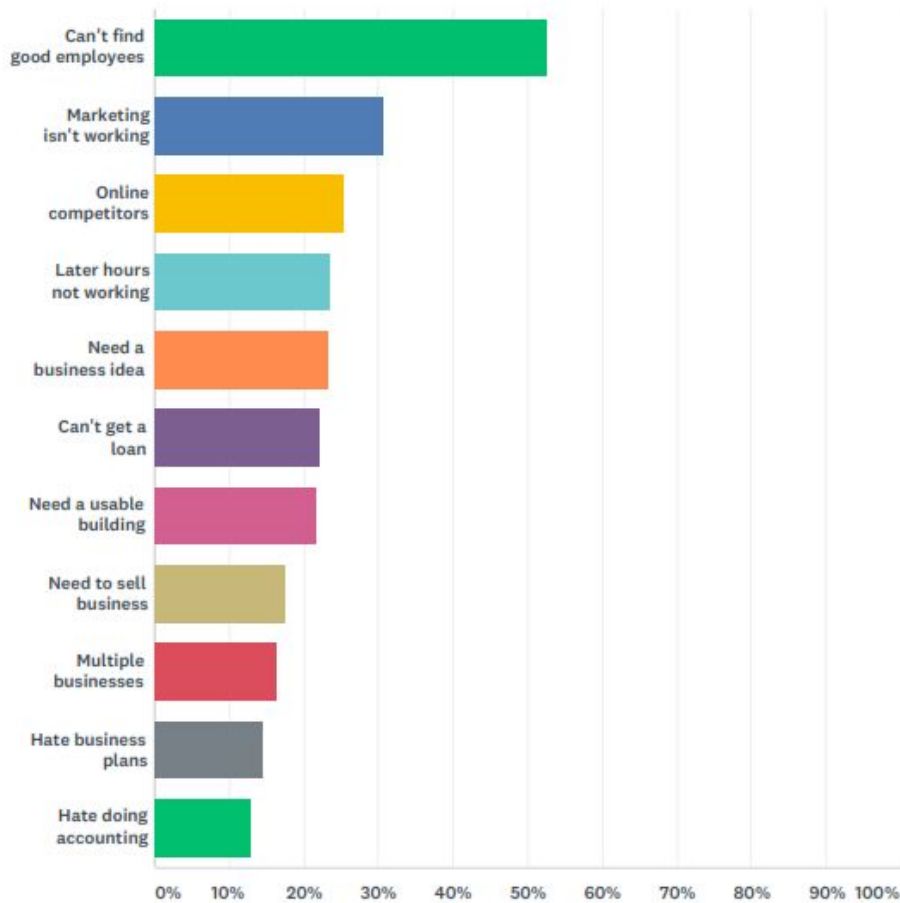
“Losing young people” and “Downtown is dead” have dominated the top 2 spots in 2015, 2017 and 2019. “Not enough good housing” is a new entry that wasn’t included as a choice in the 2017 or 2015 surveys. “No one shops in town” also appears in the top 5 in all three rounds of the survey.

Small-town Business Owner Challenges

Almost 1/2 of those surveyed identified themselves as current or prospective small business owners or having an interest in business challenges by answering this question.

Q3 Which of these rural business challenges would you be excited if we talked about them? Choose as many as you would be thrilled to learn more about.

Answered: 320 Skipped: 360



Which of these rural business challenges would you be excited if we talked about them? Choose as many as you would be thrilled to learn more about.		320
Help, I need help, but there aren't any good employees! How do I find good people?	52.50%	168
Help, I'm doing all this marketing, but it doesn't do any good! How do I get customers to listen to me?	30.63%	98
Help, customers love our stuff, but they buy it online instead of from us! How can we stop them?	25.31%	81
Help, I tried being open later hours, but no one showed up! How do I get people to shop later?	23.44%	75
Help, I want to start a business, but I don't know what business to start! How do I get an idea?	23.13%	74
Help, we can't get a loan! Where do we find the money?	22.19%	71
Help, I can't find a usable building in this town! Where can I start my business?	21.56%	69
Help, I need to sell my business! Where do I find a buyer in this small town?	17.50%	56
Help, I'm juggling multiple businesses! How do I keep them all in the air?	16.25%	52
Help, I hate business plans, but lenders and others keep asking for mine! How do I get help without one?	14.37%	46
Help, I have no idea how to keep books! How do I stay in business when I hate doing the accounting?	12.81%	41

A new choice, “Can’t find good employees” was chosen by over 50% of respondents making it the number one challenge. It replaced a previous choice, “Need help but cannot hire,” in the top 5.

“Marketing isn’t working” has been consistently in the second spot, and “Opening later hours without success” remains in the top 5 on all three surveys. Online competition moved up to 3rd this year from 6th in 2017 and 2015. Needing a business idea returned to the top 5 after dropping to 9th in 2017.

What's working

A new question in 2019 asked people what they or their community are trying to address their challenges. The four choices ranked in this order.

1. **Traditional economic development groups**
2. **Informal idea copying**
3. **Formal programs**
4. **Other things**

Traditional economic development was the clear top choice with over 75%, and informal copying of ideas was chosen by over 50%.

In their own words

When offered the opportunity to share more in their own words about challenges, what is working, or anything else, 389 people shared more. Their responses can be grouped into these general categories with both positive and negative themed responses.

1. **Government, leadership or officials**
2. **Business and economy issues**
3. **Community teamwork, volunteers and engagement**
4. **Non-government programs such as Main Street, Chamber of Commerce and many others**
5. **Workforce, employees or jobs**

Here are some of the individual responses.

- Team work is what is working and working best. What isn't working is thinking that the money pool is the [economic development group] or Chamber [of Commerce]
- There is a group of us that are willing to try new things and looking for ideas. There are some in town who are stuck in the old way of doing things. We are starting small and I think the big will come. With each idea, it seems like more ideas are starting to happen.
- The empty building tour worked well. We will be planning another one for the Fall. Getting everyone working together is not working well.
- After losing some major employers, some people have opened businesses, also some spin-offs related to remaining businesses. Landing the "big one", outside employer, has not been successful.
- A group of progressive minded "young" (30 to 55) leaders have joined together to celebrate what is right about our community and to make some fun things happen.

Each community is different, and different people from within a single community can see the challenges and opportunities differently.

Diversity in rural people and communities

How diverse were survey respondents? An open-ended question invited people to say if there were ways they considered themselves diverse, and 278 people chose to answer. Some answered with their own personal diversity, but most answered about their community at large.

More rated their communities as diverse than not

Over fifty percent more people said their communities were diverse than the number of people who said their communities were not diverse. Over 70 people said their community was diverse now or increasingly diverse. Another 43 responded with average or not sure; and 42 said no, not diverse or not applicable.

The top 5 most common descriptive answers were grouped into these rough categories.

- 1. Color, race, ethnicity or cultural origin**
- 2. Age**
- 3. Education, skills or technology use**
- 4. Businesses, professions or commerce**
- 5. Cultures, ideas and ways of thinking**

The grouping of cultures and ways of thinking includes common perspective divides such as new vs. longtime residents, farm vs. town, city/urban vs. rural/small town, and full time vs. part time residents.

Gender spectrum and LGBTQIA diversity featured in over 50 of the responses. Diversity in income or class, disability, family makeup, religion, political views and military service were also mentioned.

About SaveYour.Town

SaveYour.Town believes small towns can be saved by their own people using their existing assets. Deb Brown and Becky McCray joined forces in May 2015 to help small towns and rural communities thrive. They deliver speeches and presentations internationally, lead site visits and community brainstorming sessions, and create online videos and short courses of practical steps that can be put into action right away.

About Small Biz Survival

SmallBizSurvival.com publishes practical articles for rural small businesses. It was founded in January 2006 by Becky McCray from Oklahoma. It achieved top ranking among small business blogs on sites like Technorati, Invesp BlogRank and BizHumm, and it continues to appear on lists of top small business blogs. For her work as publisher, McCray has been named one of the Power Players in Technology Business Media and a Small Business Influencer Journalist four times.

Bios

Becky McCray is a lifelong small-town entrepreneur. As co-founder of Save Your.Town, she shares insights from her real-world experience as a business owner and cattle rancher. Throughout her career, rural has been the focus. She managed a retail store, served as city administrator and nonprofit executive, bought and sold antiques and

taught classes in business and technology. Her practical perspective is featured at her highly-ranked website, Small Biz Survival, and in her award-winning book, Small Town Rules. She's been featured and quoted in books, newspapers, magazines, blogs, podcasts and university publications. She makes her home base in Hopeton, Oklahoma, a community of 30 people.

Deb Brown is a small town enthusiast and expert for small towns. Her practical approach for getting communities into action right away has been shared at national conferences, local visits, service organizations and everything in between. Her wealth of experience includes foreign casualty insurance underwriting, bartending, retail management, selling knives around the US, leading a chamber and working with small towns. Deb has lived in tiny towns, small towns, small cities and a major metro city. Yet, she's come home to a small town and travels to many other rural communities to help. She collaborates with Becky McCray at www.saveyour.town and has her own business www.BuildingPossibility.com.

Survey Results Pages and News Rooms:

- <https://smallbizsurvival.com/survey>
- <https://saveyour.town/survey>

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