

2023

Survey of Rural
CHALLENGES

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

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

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RESOURCE

Survey of Rural Challenges 2023

To find out what rural people felt were their biggest challenges, SaveYour.Town and SmallBizSurvival.com surveyed 315 rural people from the US, Canada and Australia between November 2022 and January 2023. The results make up this fifth edition of the [Survey of Rural Challenges](#).

What the survey found

Rural people were twice as likely to say they were optimistic about their communities' future as negative.

Lack of housing, inactive downtowns and population losses continued to rank the highest as rural community challenges. **Lack of childcare** debuted in the top 5 challenges.

The ongoing lack of **workers, support services** and **usable buildings**, along with stiff **competition from online** businesses and **marketing** ranked the highest as challenges to rural small businesses.

Other preconception-changing results

Defying stereotyped stories focused on **poverty, crime and drug abuse** as the primary rural challenges, rural people continually ranked these **near the bottom** as community challenges.

Rural businesses innovate. Far from stuck in their ways and out of date, the most common business assets listed were **innovative ideas and up-to-date marketing techniques.**

Although **rural economic development often centers around jobs, it was one of the least-mentioned challenges** in this survey. Rural people **mentioned available jobs or good jobs as often as mentioning a lack of jobs** or low paying jobs.

The lack of small business lending has received a lot of publicity, but rural people said **usable buildings are harder to find than loans**, a continuing trend from previous surveys.

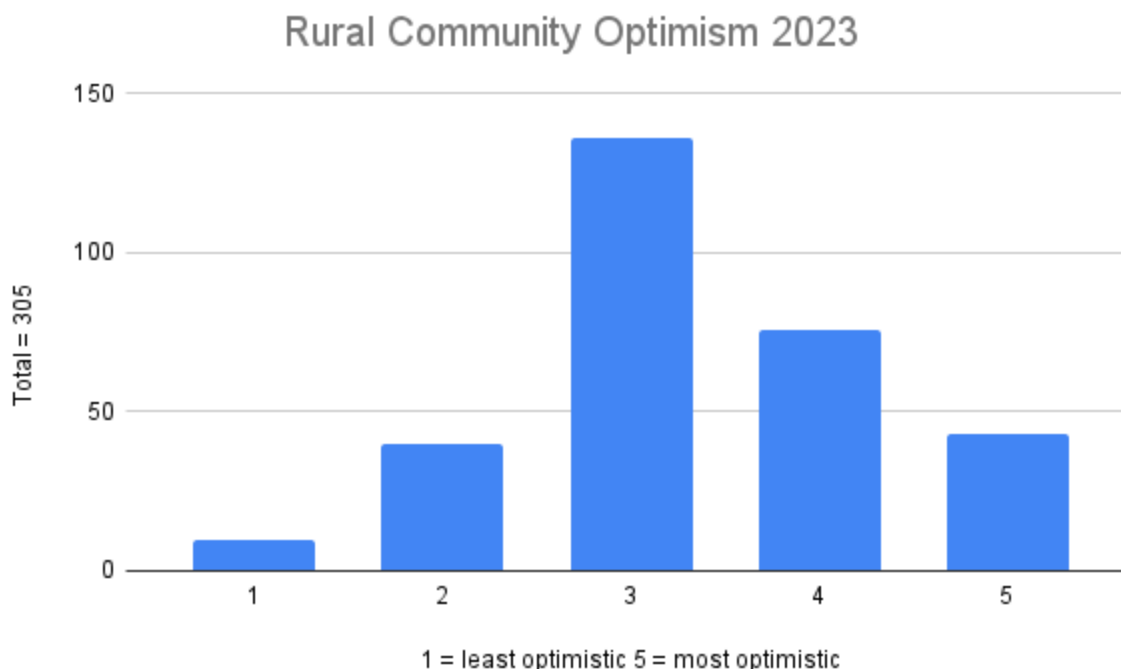
Rural small business owners showed **little or no interest in business plan assistance and pitch competitions**, yet these types of assistance continue to be commonly offered to rural businesses. Rural business people were more likely to say that they need **help with marketing, starting a business, or receiving economic development incentives on par** with those offered to recruit out-of-town firms.

How optimistic are rural people about the future of their communities?

A new question in 2023 asked respondents “Do you think your community will be better off in 10 years?”

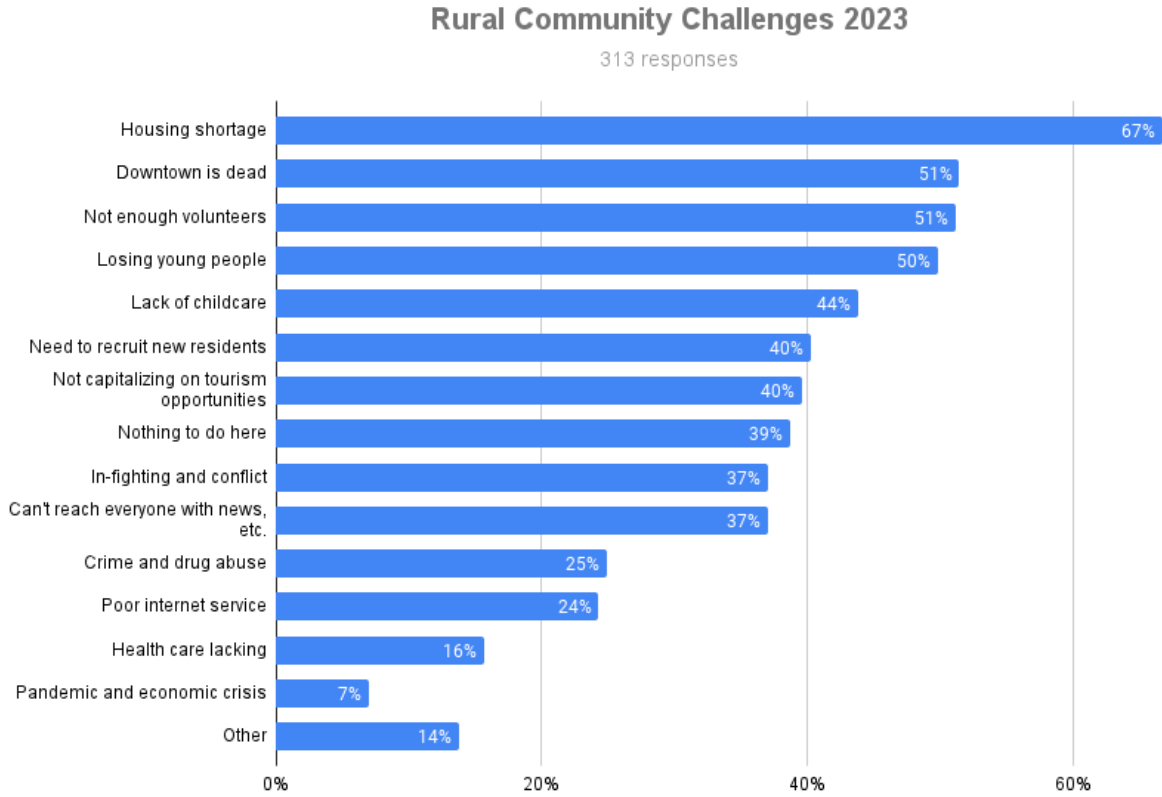
More than twice as many people gave a positive response (119) than a negative response (50) about their communities' future. Almost as many were positive (119) as were neutral (136).

Nearly all of the survey participants responded to this question, 305 out of 315. Answers of 1 or 2 were considered negative, 3 was neutral and 4 or 5 were considered positive.



Rural Community Challenges

Lack of housing, inactive downtowns and population losses continue to rank the highest as rural community challenges. Lack of childcare also ranks in the top 5.



The top five rural community challenges in 2023 were:

1. Shortage of good housing
2. Downtown is dead
3. Not enough volunteers
4. Losing young people
5. Lack of childcare

How these community challenges compare to previous survey results

Top five concerns at the community-wide level this year are somewhat different from the results from 2021, 2019, 2017 and 2015.

“Not enough good housing” held the top spot this year and in 2021, up from third in 2019, when it was a newly-offered choice. The third ranking choice **“Not enough volunteers” moved up from fifth** in 2021, which was the first time it ranked in the top five.

“Lack of childcare” was a newly-offered choice and ranked in the top five. **“Losing young people” and “Downtown is dead” have appeared in the top five in all rounds of the survey.**

More about rural community challenges

Through open-ended responses, participants could enter more detailed answers about their challenges. Out of 177 comments, the most common topics mentioned broke down into these rough categories.

- **Attitudes:** Poor leadership, sticking with outdated methods and infighting were mentioned by 39% of responses.
- **Infrastructure:** Empty buildings, a lack of housing or usable commercial buildings, broadband, water, wastewater, transportation featured in 26% of responses.
- **Economic opportunity:** Lack of funding, lack of services and support for small businesses, and a need for a specific business in the community were mentioned in 26% of answers.

In the previous survey in 2021, the broad topics of people’s attitudes, infrastructure and economic opportunity all came up most often in open-ended responses.

Rural Community Assets

On the open-ended questions, people mentioned their community's assets in 233 responses.

Natural resources, land, outdoor recreation, location and tourism were the most common assets, mentioned in 64% of responses.

Committed people, volunteers, an engaged community, workforce and effective local leaders were mentioned in 48% of the answers.

Events, arts, education and culture came up in 32% of the comments.

Local businesses, a thriving downtown, the variety of local businesses, business development and agriculture featured in 28% of responses.

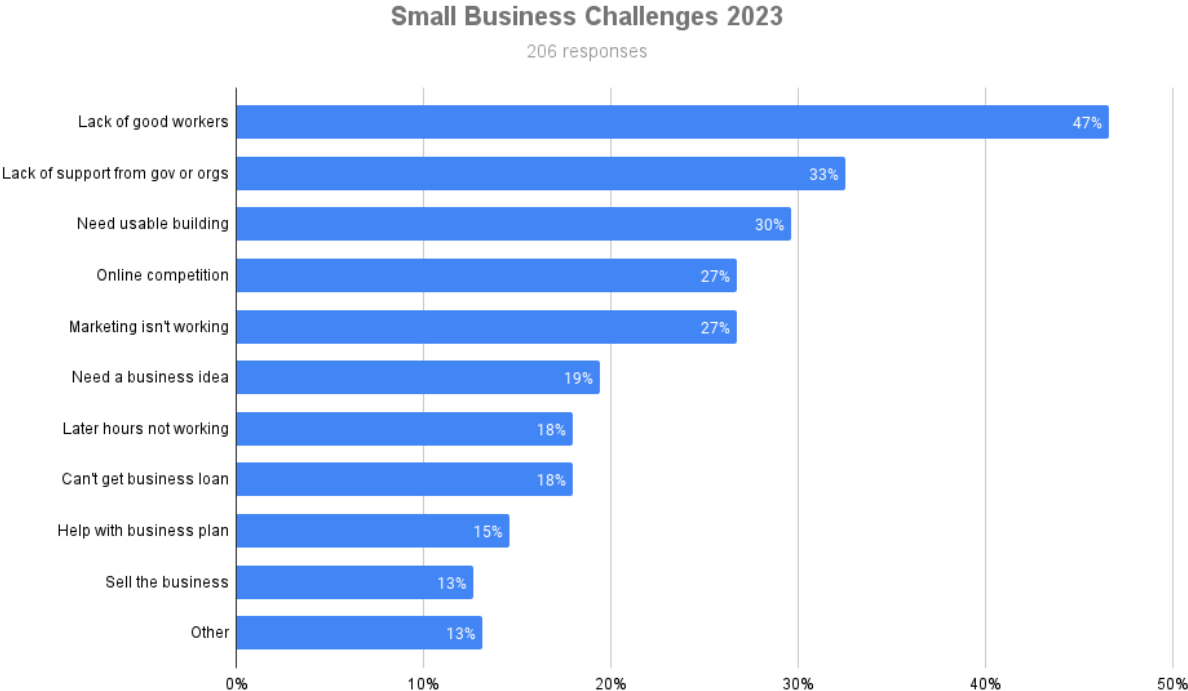
Infrastructure, buildings, housing, broadband and technology were considered an asset in 9% of answers.

Healthcare was listed as an asset in 7% of responses.

In the previous survey in 2021, the broad topics of **natural resources** and **caring people** were the most common responses.

Small-town Business Challenges

The lack of workers and difficulties with marketing continue to challenge rural small businesses. Lack of support from government or agencies ranked second. Lack of usable buildings continues to climb in importance, breaking into the top five.



The top five challenges ranked by rural small businesses were:

1. Lack of good workers
2. Lack of support from agencies, government or organizations
3. Need a usable building
4. Online competition
5. Marketing isn't working

How small business challenges compare to previous survey results

Almost $\frac{2}{3}$ of respondents identified themselves as current or prospective small business owners by answering this question. That's twice the percentage who did so on the 2021 survey.

“Lack of good workers” was also the number one challenge in 2021 and 2019. It has ranked in the top five on all rounds of the survey.

“Lack of support from government or organizations” was a newly-offered choice, immediately ranking second.

“Need a usable building” rose to rank in the top five for the first time.

Online competition slipped from second in 2021 to fourth. It has ranked in the top five since 2019.

“Marketing isn't working” remains in the top five on all rounds of the survey.

“Need to sell the business” and “Tried later hours without success” dropped from the top five.

More about rural business challenges

Through open-ended responses, participants could enter more detailed answers about their challenges. Participants mentioned rural business challenges in 43 responses.

The most common topics mentioned broke down into the following rough categories.

- **Small business assistance:** 30% mentioned needing business assistance including a lack of competent service providers, support programs, training and technical assistance.
- **Customer service challenges** were mentioned by 26%.
- **Competition:** Big box stores and other competition were mentioned in 17% responses.
- **Over 20 other issues were mentioned** in the 43 responses, indicating a **diversity of challenges facing rural small businesses.**

In the previous survey in 2021, the most commonly mentioned challenge was difficulty getting people to **shop and support local businesses.** In 2021, a few people (5) mentioned the **pandemic** had hurt their business.

Small-town Business Assets

Across the open-ended questions, people shared more about their business's assets in 112 responses. **More than twice as many of these responses mentioned business assets as mentioned challenges.** The most common topics mentioned broke down into these rough categories.

People were the top small business asset. Caring people, loyalty, relationships and engagement came up in 22% of answers. Although the lack of workforce was the most commonly chosen challenge, **nine people specifically mentioned their workforce as an asset.**

Trying new ideas and new marketing was common. Almost 20% of answers included new ideas the business had tried successfully. Up-to-date marketing techniques were mentioned as assets in 12% of the answers.

Customer service was mentioned positively in 13% of answers. More people mentioned it as an asset (16) than mentioned it as a challenge (11).

The makeup of rural communities

An open-ended question invited participants to tell more about the makeup of their communities.

Race, ethnicity and cultural backgrounds including White, Black, Hispanic or Latino, Native American or Indigenous, Francophone and general diversity were mentioned in 95% of answers.

Age was included in 69% of responses. Two-thirds of those answers mentioned elderly or aging populations specifically.

Income or education levels were mentioned in 35% of responses.

All other groups were mentioned in few answers. People mentioned **openness to different groups, challenges or lack of acceptance, and lack of opportunities for differing people**. Less than 6% brought up politics.

The percentage of participants entering an answer to this question increased from fewer than 50% of people in 2021 to 80% in 2023. This may have been influenced by switching to a more neutral wording in 2023.

How the question was worded in 2021 vs. 2023:

2021: "Tell us about the diversity of the people that make up your community. Is it increasing, decreasing, about the same? What is being done to include everyone in the community?"

For example: ages, colors, languages, disabilities, genders, incomes"

2023: "Tell us about the different kinds of people that make up your community. Is the makeup of your place changing? For example: different ages, incomes, cultures, colors, languages, disabilities, genders or other things that come to mind."

About the survey methodology

The survey was open from November 11, 2023 to January 31, 2023. A total of 315 responses were collected online from subscribers and visitors to SaveYour.Town and SmallBizSurvival.com, from media coverage and cooperating groups that publicized the survey.

Respondents identified themselves as rural by completing the survey, and 206 identified themselves as business owners by responding to the business question. Participants included 295 from the USA, eleven from Canada and six from Australia.

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

Previous editions of the survey

Across 2015, 2017, 2019 and 2021, a total of 1446 responses were collected online from subscribers and visitors to SaveYour.Town and SmallBizSurvival.com, from media coverage and cooperating groups that publicized the survey. Most people were from the United States, 79 from Canada, 24 from Australia and 19 from other international locations.

Reports of prior survey results are available at <https://saveyour.town/survey-of-rural-challenges-news/>

Full text of 2023 questions and challenges

Which of these rural community challenges would you be excited to learn more about addressing? Choose as many as you want.

- Our downtown is dead. How can we fill empty buildings and make it a living place?
- No one volunteers. How can we get more people to help?
- We need to recruit some new residents. How can we draw new people in?
- There's nothing to do here. How can we get more going on?
- There's so much conflict and in-fighting in this town. How can we bring our community together?
- There's very little health care available here. How can we get the care people need?
- There's no way to reach everyone in town with news, ads or social media. How do we get the word out?
- We're missing out on tourism opportunities. How can we draw more visitors to town?
- We're losing our kids. How can we keep young people from moving away?
- There is not enough child care. How can we make more available?
- Our internet service is awful. How can we get our broadband up to speed?
- Our town was really hurt by the pandemic, a disaster or another crisis. How will we ever recover?
- There is not enough good housing here. Where are people supposed to live?
- There is so much poverty, crime and drug abuse. What do we do about it?
- Other - Click to add a different challenge

What are your community's best assets? What have you tried that worked well in your community?

Do you think your community will be better off in 10 years?

If you own or run a small business: Which of these rural business challenges would you be excited to learn more about addressing? Choose as many as you want.

- I don't know what business to start. How do I get an idea?
- I can't find a usable building in this town. Where can I put my business?
- There's no help or support for business owners here. Why aren't organizations like a chamber or local government helping?
- I need to sell my business. Where do I find a buyer in this small town?
- Customers love what I sell, but then they go buy the same things online. How can I make them buy from me?
- I'm struggling to write a business plan and really need to. Who will help me write it?
- I'm doing all this marketing, but it doesn't do any good. How do I get customers to listen to me?
- I tried being open later hours, but no one showed up. How do I get people to shop evenings?
- I need to hire workers, but there aren't any good employees here. How do I find good people?
- I can't get a business loan. Where do I find the money I need?
- Other - Click to add a different challenge

What are your best assets in your business? What have you tried that worked well in your business?

Where are you from? This will help us see if there are patterns in the different challenges in different places.

- USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, other great country

Which state, province or territory? What's your town, village, place, city or neighborhood called? You can be as specific as you want.

Tell us about the different kinds of people that make up your community. Is the makeup of your place changing? For example: different ages, incomes, cultures, colors, languages, disabilities, genders or other things that come to mind.

Anything else you'd like to tell us? We're listening!

About SaveYour.Town

SaveYour.Town believes small towns can be saved by their own people using their own resources. Rural experts 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, audios 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. Over the past 17 years, 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 co-founder of Save Your.Town, where she shares insights from her real-world experience as a business owner and cattle rancher. Her practical perspective is featured at her highly-ranked website, SmallBizSurvival.com, and in her award-winning book, *Small Town Rules*. She's been featured in books, newspapers, magazines, blogs, podcasts and university publications. She makes her home in Hopeton, Oklahoma, a community of 30 people.

Deb Brown is a small town enthusiast and expert *for* small towns. Her practical approach 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. She collaborates with Becky McCray at www.saveyour.town and has her own business www.BuildingPossibility.com.

Survey Results and News Room:

- <https://saveyour.town/survey-of-rural-challenges-news/>

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- Survey of Rural Challenges
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- What a small town needs
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- Small town issues
- Urban-rural divide
- Rural policy
- Diversity in rural communities
- Diverse small towns
- Rural assistance programs

For more info contact

Becky McCray becky@smallbizsurvival.com

Deb Brown deb@saveyour.town

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