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Keeping Wyoming's Young People Is a Generational Project

By Lynne Davis · October 2026

The scale of the problem

Wyoming has two reliable exports: minerals and its young people. And only one currently is bringing a return on investment. Some 60% to 70% of Wyoming-born residents permanently leave the state by age 30, and Wyoming now has the highest youth out-migration rate in the country.

This isn't an abstraction. More than half of Wyomingites (53%) say a child, grandchild, or family member has left the state for opportunity. Governor Gordon has said Wyoming is effectively training the workforce for Colorado, Nebraska, Utah, Idaho, and Montana.

We like to believe our kids will come home once they've seen the world. The data says otherwise. Harvard's Growth Lab followed Wyoming-born people across six decades of census data and found no meaningful "boomerang." They leave young and, on average, they don't return. Today only about 43% of the people living in Wyoming were born here.

I want to be honest about something before going further: there is no quick fix. Anyone promising one in a single legislative session or a single county term isn't taking the problem seriously. What we can do is start, deliberately, and keep going.

Why it persists

This is not a new problem, and it is not caused by any one administration, election, or downturn. In 1965 a University of Wyoming demographer was already reporting that the state was losing its teenagers. Every generation born here since the 1950s has left at roughly the same rate: about 60% gone by their 20s.

That tells us something important. Booms haven't fixed it. The 1970s oil boom brought in about 140,000 people, yet young people born here kept leaving. Our economy decides how many outsiders arrive and how many families flee in a bust. It has never given enough of our own kids a reason to stay.

On top of that long-standing pattern, newer pressures are stacking up:

- **Jobs.** Year after year, young people say the number one reason they'd leave is a job opportunity elsewhere. Our economy remains narrow, and when energy busts, young workers go first.

- **Housing.** Harvard's Growth Lab found Wyoming's housing supply responds poorly to demand, raising costs and holding back growth. The Wyoming Community Development Authority reports there is no county where a family earning the local median wage can afford a typical home.
- **Healthcare.** Since 2022, four Wyoming hospitals have closed their labor and delivery wards. Casper, our second-largest city, has gone from about six OB-GYNs to two. Young families notice.
- **Belonging.** In exit interviews collected by the Wyoming Business Council, young people who left cited cultural belonging and safety. Those words aren't well defined yet, and we should find out exactly what they mean. But we shouldn't dismiss them.

The result compounds. Fewer young adults means fewer births: Wyoming's fertility rate fell about 24% between 2005 and 2023, and the state now adds fewer than 400 people a year through births over deaths. A state that can't keep its young people eventually can't sustain its schools, hospitals, or main streets either.

What the evidence says

Other states and communities have tried to keep young people. Some approaches have measurable results. Others have spent a lot of money for little return. Both lessons matter.

What hasn't worked well on its own:

- **Scholarships with no strings.** Research across states with strong merit scholarships found they raise the odds a graduate lives in their home state at ages 24 to 30 by less than three percentage points. Georgia's HOPE scholarship kept many top students in-state for college; many of them left afterward. Our Hathaway Scholarship keeps students in Wyoming schools, but nothing ties it to building a life here.
- **Cash incentives alone.** A 2023 Kansas legislative audit found the state's Rural Opportunity Zones program did little to slow rural depopulation. Only 14% of student loan participants said they wouldn't have moved without it.

What has measurable results:

- **Training tied to a commitment and an employer.** South Dakota's Build Dakota scholarship pays full technical college tuition in exchange for three years of work in the state, usually with an employer sponsor. Among 2022 technical college graduates, 87% were working in South Dakota or still in school six months later.
- **Leaving to learn, with a road back.** Wyoming already has proof this works. Our WWAMI* medical program sends students to train across a five-state region, with a three-year service commitment in Wyoming. About 61% of graduates who finish residency return, and roughly 80% of those stay well beyond their obligation.
- **High school career and technical education with local employers.** A Minnesota study found students who concentrated in career and technical education (CTE) were more likely to be employed locally five years after high school, in every region studied.

- **Learning rooted in place.** Rural students whose math and science classes connected to local industry showed higher confidence, career interest, and aspirations to build a life in their communities.
- **A real role in the community.** In Nebraska's statewide youth survey, students overwhelmingly liked small-town life, yet 76% said they didn't feel they played a role in their community. That's a gap we can close.

The common thread: money alone underperforms. What works pairs opportunity with relationships, commitment, and a genuine place in the community.

A realistic start for Laramie County

A county commission can't fix this alone. Tax structure, Medicaid rates, and scholarship rules are set in Cheyenne's statehouse, not the county building. But the county controls land use, sits at the table with our colleges, school districts, and economic development partners, and decides who serves on local boards. That's enough to begin.

1. **Measure what we're trying to change.** Today no one can say how many Laramie County graduates stay, leave, or come back. The county should work with the school districts, Laramie County Community College, and state data agencies to set a baseline and report on it every year. That includes defining what young people mean by "safety" and "belonging" through a real survey, rather than guessing. (Here's a draft.) [Draft survey: davis4wyoming.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/10/Laramie-County-Young-Adult-Survey.pdf]
2. **Build pipelines with a commitment attached.** Laramie County is hosting some of the largest employers to arrive in decades, including major data centers. The county can convene those employers, our hospitals, LCCC, and the school districts to build sponsored training in the Build Dakota model: training paid for, a job waiting, and a commitment to work here. Data centers that benefit from our land, power, water, and tax incentives should help pay for it. The county should make funding for local training pipelines a standard term in any payment in lieu of taxes (PILOT) or community benefits agreement (CBA) it negotiates with them.
3. **Plan for permanent housing, not just temporary camps.** Much of the county's recent housing debate has centered on temporary quarters for out-of-area construction crews. We should put equal effort into attainable homes for the young people and families we want to keep, using the land-use tools the county actually has.
4. **Give young people a real seat.** Where the law allows, open county boards and advisory roles to young adults, and create paid internships in county departments. Belonging starts with being asked.
5. **Support learning rooted in this place.** Back the school districts and LCCC in expanding career and technical education and work-based learning tied to local employers or entrepreneurial programs, so students can see a future here before they graduate.

6. **Push the state on what the county can't do.** That means maternity and rural healthcare, a Hathaway Scholarship that rewards building a life in Wyoming, and a revenue system that lets communities afford to grow. The county should speak up for these with one clear voice.

How long this will take, and how we'll know

This is a generational effort, and we should say so out loud. A child starting kindergarten this fall graduates high school in 2039. Wyoming's WWAMI program began in 1997, and its strong return rate is the product of nearly 30 years of steady work. South Dakota's Build Dakota has been running for more than a decade. Programs that work take years to build and longer to prove.

That's exactly why we need honest measures from the start, so progress doesn't depend on anyone's say-so:

- The share of Laramie County graduates living and working here one, five, and ten years after graduation
- The number of homes built that young workers and families can actually afford
- How many young adults serve on county boards, commissions, and advisory groups
- Local access to maternity and primary care
- What young people themselves report, year over year, about safety, belonging, and opportunity

Some early signs could come within a few years: internships filled, sponsored training cohorts launched, a first survey published. Real movement in the numbers will take much longer. Our commitment has to outlast any single election cycle.

Choosing our future

Some people would honestly prefer a smaller, quieter Wyoming, and that's a legitimate view. But it should be a choice we make openly, with the tradeoffs in plain sight. The alternative is a future decided by default: an aging state, rising home prices set by people who earned their money elsewhere, and hometowns our own children can't afford to come back to.

Wyoming's traditions are worth carrying forward. Carrying them forward requires people to carry them. Our young people don't need us to keep things exactly as they've always been. They need us to make room for them, with good work, a home they can afford, care when their families grow, and a voice in what comes next.

Wyoming's future will be decided either way. The only question is whether we decide it.

**WWAMI - Acronym for the states comprising the Wyoming regional education partnership: Wyoming, Washington, Alaska, Montana and Idaho.*

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