

— Research in Brief —

New Book Sheds Light on the Lifecourses of Young People in Nordic Rural Regions



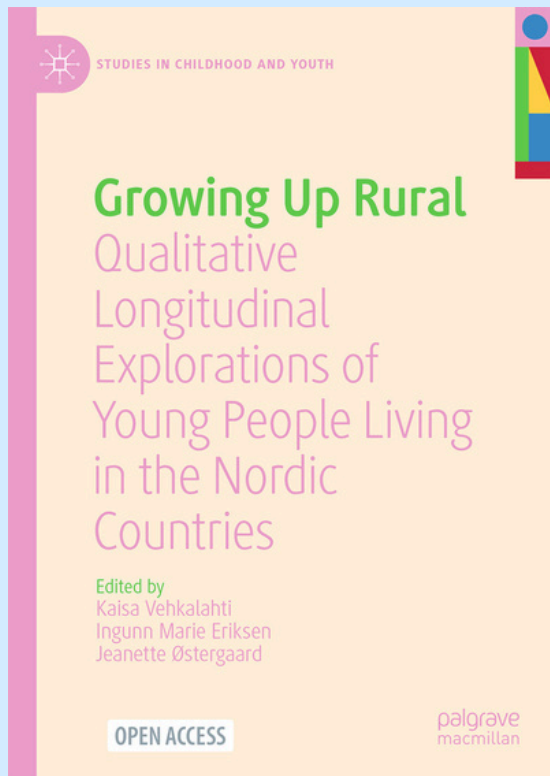
Vehkalahti, K., Eriksen, I. M., & Østergaard, J. (Eds.)

Growing Up Rural : Qualitative Longitudinal Explorations of Young People Living in the Nordic Countries.

Palgrave Macmillan Singapore. Studies in Childhood and Youth.

Growing Up Rural is essential reading for researchers, educators, policymakers, and anyone interested in the future of rural communities and the young people who shape them.

Growing up Rural provides a refreshing antidote to one-sided stories about deprived young lives in rural areas. By drawing on a rich longitudinal data from four Nordic countries it highlights the vast varieties in young people's lives as well as their agency. The volume advances methods of youth studies by exploring the potential of qualitative longitudinal approaches.



In recent years, the field of rural youth studies has gained significant attention, reflecting a growing recognition of the unique challenges and opportunities faced by young people in rural areas. *Growing up Rural: Qualitative longitudinal explorations of young people living in the Nordic countries*, edited by **Kaisa Vehkalahti**, **Ingunn Marie Eriksen** and **Jeanette Østergaard** offers a fresh perspective to growing up in rural areas, focusing particularly on the Nordic countries.

The Nordic welfare states are often seen as models of egalitarianism and wealth. However, during the recent years they have been under increasing pressure. Many of the challenges the rural areas in these nations face are near universal: deindustrialisation, economic challenges and centralisation of education, making the situation for youth in rural Nordic areas both particular and universal at the same time.

The edited volume seeks to contribute to the ongoing discussions in youth studies by opening fresh perspectives into the lives of young people in rural areas, their belonging to their homeplaces and how they imagine and construct their lives and futures.

“Our aim was to move beyond the one-sided story of rural decline,” says editor of the book **Kaisa Vehkalahti**, University of Jyväskylä. “This book captures the complexity, creativity, and resilience of young people, and highlights the diverse ways they navigate their futures.”

Challenging dominant narratives of marginalisation, the book explores the everyday lives, aspirations, and transitions of young people growing up outside urban centres in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. The book draws on a decade of qualitative longitudinal research involving nearly 200 young people aged 13 to 24 in these four countries.

The volume also advances youth studies theoretically by exploring the potential of qualitative longitudinal methods.

Published as part of The Future of Nordic Youth in Rural Regions -project, the book is a collaborative effort supported by Future Challenges in the Nordics -program and features contributions from leading scholars in youth and rural studies

The book in glance

The book is divided into two parts:

Part I: *The Art of Qualitative Longitudinal Research* explores methodological and ethical challenges in qualitative longitudinal studies, especially in studying youth over time in small rural communities.

Part II: *Explorations of Youth in the Nordic Rural Regions* presents comparative and country-specific case studies on themes such as belonging, peer relations, education, gender, and future expectations.

Key findings include:

In rural areas where organized leisure activities are scarce, young people create their own do-it-yourself youth cultures, that foster community and creativity.

Moving from lower to upper secondary school can be challenging for rural youth. Limited options and long distances often force tough decisions, but young people show agency in navigating these transitions.

Educational and career choices are influenced by local structures, such as educational opportunities and local labor markets, but also by gender norms and individual goals.

The experience of belonging—or not belonging—to the countryside may strengthen over time, or weaken, or be increasingly complex, over the course of youth. Different types of trajectories are linked to gender, socioeconomic status and family resources.

Although the pressure to move away is strong in the Nordic rural areas, many young people imagine meaningful futures in their home regions. Their dreams are shaped by everyday life, relationships, and local opportunities.

Highlights from results

Educational choices are shaped by local realities

Young people's education and career paths are influenced by what's available locally—schools, jobs, and social norms—but also by personal goals and gender expectations.

“Moving from lower to upper secondary school can be challenging in rural areas. Limited options and long distances often force tough decisions, but young people show agency in navigating these transitions”, says professor of educational work **Maria Rönnlund**, Umeå University.

Drawing on extensive qualitative longitudinal data from Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark, *Growing Up Rural* highlights how the structural conditions in rural areas often, but not always, complicated the young people's transition, forcing them to set priorities and opt out of certain interests and educational options.

Young people applied and balanced different strategies in response to societal ideals of how a successful transition to adulthood should take place, such as ‘not wasting time’, ‘buying oneself time’ and ‘keeping doors open’.

Particularly typical for girls from sparsely populated rural regions was the strategy of ‘keeping doors open’ as long as possible. This meant educational choices that would give them as wide possibilities for further education, and employment as possible in the changing labor market.

Young people are creative and resourceful in rural areas

Discussion about free time activities in the countryside often focuses on the lack of arranged, adult-led activities and long distances that prevent participation in hobbies. This may overlook the meaning-making of young people themselves, who may be—or may have to be—very innovative in arranging activities on their own.

“In places where organized hobbies are limited, young people create their own activities and social spaces. These DIY cultures foster community and innovation”, says research director **Päivi Armila**, University of Eastern Finland.

Armila and her Finnish colleagues explored local ‘do-it-yourself’ (DIY) and ‘do-it-together’ (DIT) youth cultures in the sparsely populated countryside. Young people turned, for example, public or semi-public village spaces into their own spaces. In addition, homes, nature and online communities offered spaces for DIY-activities.

However, even in small communities, all spaces are rarely open for all young people: local youth cultures often involve non-articulated practices of inclusion and exclusion. Some of the local DIY-spaces occupied by young people could also become stigmatised and subject to moral conflicts in the communities.

Highlights from results

Belonging is complex and evolving

Growing up Rural investigates what constitutes Nordic young people's sense of belonging—or not belonging—in their rural communities. The authors distinguish between three central dimensions of youth belonging—the social, spatial, and cultural belonging—and identify three common trajectories in rural youth.

In strengthening belonging, all dimensions of belonging strengthen commitment to the rural place over time: tense social networks, place attachment, and appreciation of values, traditions, and lifestyles characteristic of their region. In weakening belonging, on the contrary, all dimensions of belonging weaken over time, which makes it easier for the young people to move away. In the final category of conflicting belonging, different dimensions of belonging are in conflict with each other.

“These trajectories of belonging are often solved in different ways”, says research professor **Ingunn Marie Eriksen**, Oslo Metropolitan University. “If you feel a strengthening sense of belonging, it is likely you want to stay on in your local community when you grow up. Contrary, if you have little emotional bonds to neither the social, cultural or spatial dimensions of your home place, one likely solution is to leave when you are old enough.”

Other times, such solutions may be less easy, and conflicting belonging lacks such “simple” solutions to stay or leave. It is often not coincidental who follow the different trajectories.

For example, working-class boys seem to feel stronger bonds of belonging over time than girls who aspire to go on to higher education. In addition, young people who do not ‘fit in’ the gendered local cultures are more likely to leave rural communities.

Growing up Rural highlights that belonging is often partial, involves negotiation and struggle, and is a result of continuous recreation. “Longitudinal perspective allowed us to reflect on the dynamics between different dimensions of belonging in time. Earlier bonds of belonging may loosen, while others are reinforced over time in different phases of life”, Eriksen points out. “The way that different dimensions of belonging intertwine and change has severe consequences for the life trajectories of rural young people.”

Highlights from results

Methodological innovations in qualitative longitudinal youth studies

Growing up Rural is based on a pioneering Nordic project *The Future of Nordic Youth in Rural Regions*, which is part of the Future Challenges in the Nordics -program.

Youth studies that compare qualitative data from several countries are extremely rare. The project establishes the first cross-national study of young people in the Nordic countries, which is based on qualitative longitudinal data.

“This unique longitudinal setup, where the same young people have been followed systematically in all four countries, opens up unique possibilities to capture the processual nature of youth transitions”, says the director of the consortium **Kaisa Vehkalahti**, University of Jyväskylä.

Growing up Rural introduces innovative methodological approaches to better understand the interplay of time and place in youth transitions. For example cross-contextual temporal analysis offers tools for researchers working with longitudinal data cross-nationally.

The edited volume also highlights the importance of ethics when doing research in small communities. “Long-term research in tight-knit rural areas requires extra care to protect young people's privacy and well-being, especially when sensitive topics are involved”, Vehkalahti points out.

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