

CALLING PEOPLE IN: UNDERSTANDING THE UNMET NEEDS FOR BELONGING & CONNECTEDNESS IN AROOSTOOK COUNTY

ABOUT OUR PROJECT

The **Aroostook County Health Improvement Partnership** is a demonstration project supported by Maine's Rural Community Health Improvement Partnership (R-CHIP), a DHHS-funded initiative that aims to **improve health outcomes and reduce health disparities in rural communities** across the state. The initiative focuses on addressing the **unique health-related social needs of Maine's rural communities**, which often face significant challenges related to **access to care, transportation, and economic resources**. **Belonging and connectedness had a profound impact** on individuals' ability to overcome these barriers...and to thrive in Aroostook County.

CONNECTIONS TO RURAL MAINE

Belonging plays a crucial role in rural communities. Research shows that a strong sense of belonging contributes to **improved physical and mental health, resilience, and social support**, particularly in areas with limited access to formal services (Pretty et al., 2003).



Understanding **how community is experienced** in rural areas is essential for **designing interventions** that respond to the human need for connection and belonging.



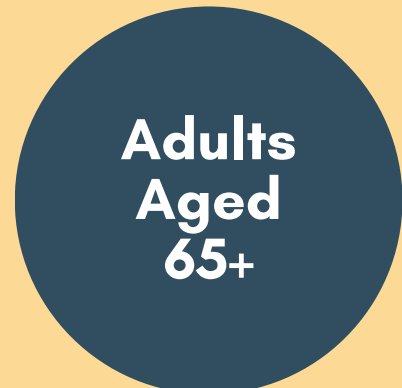
In our research, some residents emphasized **close-knit, mutually supportive relationships** as defining aspects of rural culture. Others **struggled to feel fully integrated** due to challenges like limited privacy, intolerance of differences, and being perceived as part of an "outgroup."



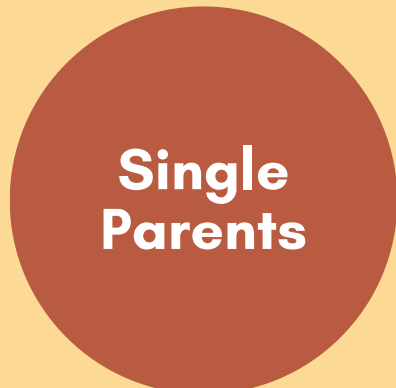
ACHIP's goal is to amplify these experiences to **promote awareness of how insular rural culture can be** and to **foster greater empathy, understanding, and inclusion**. We plan to continue **community conversations** about the need to "call in" our neighbors and to continue innovating to build a sense of belonging for everyone.

Our work highlights a **profound sense of disconnection and alienation**, particularly among the **most vulnerable members** of our rural communities, that **adversely affects the ability to access the supports needed to thrive**. **Rather than being "called in" to their communities, these individuals feel that they are denied belonging, othered, and viewed as "less than."**

PRIORITY POPULATIONS



Adults
Aged
65+



Single
Parents



Behavioral
Health
Concerns



Income
< \$40K
(80% AMI)

OUR METHODOLOGY

Extensive **demographic and lived experience research** conducted in the fall of 2023 enabled us to validate the challenges faced by these residents, who often experience persistent economic distress and social vulnerability, and to **hear their voices regarding the lives that they lead** here in Aroostook County.

800

45-question
quantitative
surveys

60

10-question
key informant
interviews

FOR MORE INFORMATION



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WHAT WE LEARNED: KEY FINDINGS

58%

of survey participants strongly agreed that **they have people that they can turn to** in tough times, leaving nearly **4 in 10 people with uncertain levels of support**.



The **close-knit community** that people originally from Aroostook County reported cherishing often felt like a **barrier to social acceptance for newcomers** to the area and, ultimately, to **getting the knowledge and resources needed to thrive** here.

KEY QUOTE: "I've been in Maine since 1986, but I'll always be from away. The fact that I married in Maine helps."



County residents relied extensively on **family and friends for informal supports**, although interviews with older adults revealed that **aging has left many without their original support networks** and therefore in **positions of heightened vulnerability**.

KEY QUOTE: "If you don't have a friend or a relative that's going to help you, you're pretty much screwed."



Pride was deeply ingrained in individuals' self-concepts, with the internalized value of **self-reliance leading people to eschew supports** in their communities. Attitudes about self-sufficiency also **influenced views of others who did use these services**.

KEY QUOTE: "It's hard to ask for help because it's everybody knows that you got help. Nobody wants anybody to know that."



In rural communities in which "everyone knows everyone," there is a **concern about one's privacy and, by extension, judgment of one's lifestyle**. Respondents frequently experienced **significant stigma** as a result of **poverty, mental health issues, and substance use disorder**.

KEY QUOTE: "Most of my friends are just as broke as me, if not worse, and mentally probably a little disturbed, as well...people like me are typically looked down on."



While we did not speak to a statistically significant number of people who identified as **AIAN** (American Indian and Alaska Native), we heard **positive comments about how their racial identities contribute to belonging** and a sense of support, suggesting a **unique strength of tribal relationships**.

KEY QUOTE: "The Micmacs are here in my area. It has been a plus for me and my kids. I can reach out [to a whole other tribe]."