

Understanding Rural Migration: Myths, Trends, and Opportunities

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Change in rural communities over the past 100 years has been significant. In fact, it could easily be re-termed a *restructuring* of rural society. Farming as the core rural industry has declined, now involving just six percent of the rural labor force.¹ School consolidations reduced the number of school districts and empty storefronts need attention. Churches, hospitals, and more recently post offices, have closed. In many cases, these changes result in a dramatic blow to hometown spirit. Headlines and book titles proclaim this demise, so that the public conscious has an embedded view of rural areas as in decline. Specifically, there is much hand-wringing about the “brain drain” because young people leave their small hometowns and head to the city to pursue education and careers. But doom-and-gloom statistics for rural America can be challenged with a deeper examination of the numbers that reinforce the message of rural demise.

The release of the 2010 U.S. Decennial Census data allowed us to further explore population dynamics that were first examined in 2009, and to draw some new conclusions and comparisons.²³ Among the findings is the number of rural counties across the country that experienced gains in the 30–49 age cohort. This trend is a continuation of one that has been occurring in rural places in the 1970s, 1990s, and 2000s. It is hoped that this white paper will deepen the understanding of migration patterns, and refocus the rural narrative on the opportunity offered by 30–49 year olds changing their quality of life – and the future of our rural communities – by continuing to choose rural places.

Rural demographic data and the problem of comparison

Clearly the United States has become urbanized over the past 100 years. The relative percentage of those living in rural counties decreased from 26 percent in 1970 to 19 percent in the 2010 Decennial Census. However, framing “rural” change relative to “urban” leads to statistics that lack nuance; these statistics can mislead public understanding of simple concepts. Take, for instance, the apparent decrease in rural population cited above. In the time period that the six percent decline occurred, some counties that were called “rural” were re-classified as urban. As an example, in Minnesota alone, six counties (Carlton, Dodge, Houston, Isanti, Polk, Wabasha) were reclassified as urban between 1974 and 2003. When these rural areas “graduate” to urban status, the urban population gains entire counties in its count, while more remote rural areas lose their most prosperous counties. With this shift, there is an impact on

¹ Benson, C. (2009, October 5). The myth of rural America. *Congressional Quarterly Weekly*. Washington, D. C.: CQ Roll Call.

² Winchester, Benjamin. 2009. *Rural Migration: The Brain Gain of the Newcomers*. University of Minnesota, Extension Center for Community Vitality.

³ Winchester, Benjamin; Nash, Art; and Tobias Spanier. 2011. *The Glass Half Full: A New View of Rural Minnesota*. Rural Minnesota Journal 6(1): 1-30.

statistical averages that make rural areas appear more bereft than before the reclassification – from home values to educational levels to household incomes – though actual conditions in the remaining rural areas may have stayed the same. This statistical dynamic furthers the narrative of decline in rural descriptors. This was most significant during the 1960s and 1970s, when the concentric ring surrounding the Twin Cities metropolitan area swallowed up many formerly rural areas.

A second example of misleading statistics in the rural narrative involves changes in the percentage of the U.S. population living in rural areas. It is true that the relative percentage of those living in rural places has declined. However, the actual number of people living in rural areas *increased* between 1970 and 2010 from 53.5 million to 59.5 million. Urban areas grew too, but at a rate faster than rural areas, resulting in a proportional decline of the population living rural. This is not to say that all rural areas experienced gains; but that there must be dynamics at work underneath the surface.

While it would be wrong to paint a singular rosy picture of rural challenges, our purpose in dissecting the demographics is to discover where rural areas are successful, and which migratory population trends could provide viable opportunities to rural areas. In this way, data can be more helpful to community leaders who want to build on available assets, and leverage them for the future.

The urban ideal or rural idyll?

There is a generally held belief that people want to live in metropolitan areas. However, there is evidence that small towns and rural areas are a residential preference for large parts of the urban population. Research completed by the Pew Research Center shows that 51% of Americans would prefer to live in a small town or rural area.⁴ Additionally, research by the Economic Research Service illustrates, in fact, the Baby Boom generation's preference for residing in a variety of places, both urban and rural.⁵

Awareness of the quality of life rural communities offer also extends to our youth. Assessments by the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship involving over 45,000 middle-to-high-school-age students indicate that over 50% picture themselves living in their hometown in the future. Interestingly, this trend is very consistent across varied regions of the rural America. Related research indicates that a small percentage of alums returning home on a sustained basis can stabilize population loss and revitalize rural communities. This is due to the exponential impact young families have on population when alums return home with a spouse and children.

⁴ Taylor, P., Morin, R., Parker, K., Cohn, D., Wang, W. (2009). *For Nearly Half of America, Grass is Greener Somewhere Else*. Pew Research Center.

⁵ Cromartie, J. & Nelson, P. (2009). *Baby Boom Migration and Its Impact on Rural America*. U.S. Department of Agriculture: Economic Research Service. ERR-79.

These preferences have translated into growth as evidenced by the rural population increase mentioned above. The focus on migration rather than overall population change allows a picture to emerge of the complex relationship between age and residential preferences.⁶ By isolating the dynamics of age-related out-migration and in-migration, we can gain a better understanding of how our small towns play a valuable role in the life-cycle decisions people make across our state. The highly mobile nature of our population, together with the changes in population and demographics of rural areas, are enough to warrant further investigation.

What is the brain gain?

As described in the original research report – *Rural Migration: The Brain Gain of the Newcomers*⁷ -- population growth and decline examined in the 2000 census information is not consistent across age groups. Digging deeper into demographic shifts in rural counties within age cohorts, we see a loss of high school graduates in the “brain drain” ages of 18-25. Members of this cohort leave their home communities to attend college, locate employment, and expand their horizons.

The loss of young adults is just one facet in the complex picture of migration within the life cycle of our population.⁸ People migrate at all ages, and while some rural researchers choose to focus on one specific age demographic, the intention of the summit is to put the traditional brain-drain concept in context with other migration patterns we find across the country.⁹

At the same time, many rural counties experienced gains in the 30-49 age cohort. Further examination of this rural demographic found that this cohort was choosing to move to rural areas for a better quality of life.¹⁰ This we have termed a “brain gain” because, as we examine the demographics of the 30-49 year old cohort, we see that those migrating to rural areas are in their early/mid-career; they bring significant education, skills and connections to people and resources in other areas. This cohort is an asset to rural areas.

A deeper examination of the phenomenon was done in 2010. A group of economic development leaders in central Minnesota wanted to develop strategies to recruit and retain the newcomers identified in the “brain gain” report. The census data provided the group a starting point and the group took the initiative to further investigate the trends. This group, led by the Upper Minnesota Valley Regional Development Commission based in Appleton,

⁶ McGranahan, D., Cromartie, J., Wojan, T. (2010). *Nonmetropolitan Outmigration Counties: Some Are Poor, Many Are Prosperous*. U.S. Department of Agriculture: Economic Research Service. ERR-107.

⁷ Winchester, B. (2009, December 10). *Rural migration: The brain gain of the newcomers*. Retrieved from University of Minnesota Extension website: <http://www.extension.umn.edu/U-Connect/components/BrainGain.pdf>

⁸ McHugh, K.E. & Gober, P. (1992). Short-term Dynamics of the U.S. Interstate Migration System. *Growth & Change*, 23(4):428.

⁹ Plane, D.A. & Jurjevich, J.R. (2009). Ties That No Longer Bind? The Patterns and Repercussions of Age-Articulated Migration. *Professional Geographer*, 61(1):4-20.

¹⁰ Winchester, B. (2010). Regional recruitment: *Strategies to attract and retain newcomers*. Crookston, MN: University of Minnesota EDA Center.

Minnesota, distributed mail surveys to new residents and conducted focus groups across the region.

The leaders found that the top reasons cited for migration to rural Minnesota include: 1) a desire for a simpler life, 2) safety and security, 3) affordable housing, 4) outdoor recreation, and 5) for those with children, locating a quality school. Surprisingly, jobs were not found in the top 10 reasons. In short, the decision to move was based on concerns about quality of life. These findings parallel those found in a similar study in the panhandle of Nebraska.¹¹ To read more about these aspects, and many more in-depth analysis of this study, please visit the University of Minnesota Extension brain gain website at www.extension.umn.edu/community/brain-gain.

Demographic history of brain drain

Demographic decline is an old story. Communities have expanded and contracted throughout history for a variety of reasons. However, concern about brain drain is relatively new. Traditionally, migrants tended to be poorer and less educated than those who stayed. When hometown opportunities were scarce, the people who most needed to move did so. Hence, the economically dislocated in the rural South streamed northward to cities such as Chicago during the Great Migration of the early 20th century.

The tendency of the least educated to be the most geographically mobile held until the global economic boom of the 1950s. Particularly in the United States, demand for highly-skilled labor skyrocketed. The Innovation Economy, successor to the Manufacturing Era, was in full bloom. The defense industry needed brains. College graduates would have to relocate to where the jobs are.¹²

Exacerbating the trend, the federal government started privileging highly-skilled immigration during the 1960s. Such international talent headhunting first gave rise to the concern about “brain drain” from the United Kingdom. Later, the United Nations would sound the alarm about the best and brightest abandoning the Global South for the wealthier Global North.¹³

The demographic inversion of migration had a profound impact on the landscape of the United States. In 1970, people with college degrees were evenly distributed throughout the country. The gravity of a few regions such as Silicon Valley concentrated world class talent into a handful of winners by the 1990s. At the turn of the millennium, just about every community fretted about brain drain as Britain did back in the 60s.

While who migrated changed dramatically, our metrics for community vitality did not. Mechanization freed up bodies from the farm, who could just as easily toil in an urban factory.

¹¹ University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Center for Applied Rural Innovation. (2007, September). *Buffalo Commons survey*. Retrieved from <http://cari.unl.edu/communitymarketing/buffalo-commons-survey>

¹² See *The New Geography of Jobs* by Enrico Moretti.

¹³ See *Stepping Out of the Brain Drain* by Michele Pistone and John J. Hoeffner.

We measured that change in terms of population. Birth rates stayed high and death rates plummeted. Cities and towns alike blossomed with demographic surplus. Surely, anyplace with a shrinking population must be doomed. That Industrial Era framework survives to this day. “Declining population” equals “brain drain”. Local workforce may be at an historical high and better educated. The community is still dying.

Rewriting the Rural Narrative

New economic times require new measures. The demographic challenges facing our rural communities exist, but they must be recast in a more contemporary context that acknowledges a dynamic global economy, highlighting the quality of migration instead of the quantity. A regional symposium is scheduled for June 4-5, 2014 in Morris, MN to explore and discuss the complex migration trends that broaden the rural narrative, and focus on strategies that recruit newcomers and former residents back home. Information about the symposium is available at: <http://www.morris.umn.edu/cst/symposium/>

Resources

1. Brain Gain Website - <http://www1.extension.umn.edu/community/brain-gain/>
2. Rural Migration: The Brain Gain of the Newcomers
<http://www1.extension.umn.edu/community/research/docs/BrainGain.pdf>
3. The Glass Half Full: A new View of Rural Minnesota <http://www.ruralmn.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/RMJ6-11winchester.pdf>
4. Strategies to attract and retain newcomers
http://www.edacenter.org/downloads/Ben_Winchester_Report_2.pdf
5. Economic Impact of Newcomers <http://www1.extension.umn.edu/community/brain-gain/docs/2011-NewcomerHH-BEI-overview.pdf>
6. Youth Engagement Strategies
http://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org/solutions/youth_engagement_system.html