

Understanding Rural Return Migration

Reasons for, Barriers to, and Impacts of Persons Moving Back to Rural Home Towns

By Christiane von Reichert and Ryan Arthun

Overview

Many rural communities in the U.S., especially those in remote locales with limited natural amenities, have lost population for quite some time (McGranahan and Beale, 2002). Outmigration of rural youth, often after high school, is a visible trait and often thought to be the cause of rural population loss (Carr and Kefalas, 2009). However, outmigration of youth is near universal and found in rural and urban, growing and declining places alike (von Reichert, 2009). What distinguishes rural-declining from rural-growing counties is low inmigration (Gibbs and Cromartie, 1994). In areas of low inmigration, returning migrants make up a sizeable share of inmigration streams (McGranahan, et al., 2010).

Our study sets out to shed light on understanding return migration to demographically struggling rural communities and to look for insights on how to promote it. We concentrate on isolated places with relatively modest natural amenities and experiencing migration loss. (See Figure 1 on next page.) We focus on people in the labor force, not retirees, given the greater challenges of bringing in people who need employment, and who potentially have considerable impacts on the community.

Findings

Interviews revealed a web of interconnected themes which both motivated and countered rural return migration. Three broad categories emerged as both reasons for and barriers to rural return migration: family, community, employment. Through these conversations we also learned of impacts returning migrants had on their rural home towns.

Family

People who returned typically had children, and their return was geared to provide a desired environment for their children's upbringing. Schools of rural home towns were often thought to be better suited than urban or suburban schools based on smaller class sizes, one-on-one attention from teachers, and opportunities to participate in a range of activities. Concern for schools and educational quality, essentially the same motivations, kept other people from moving back. Those who thought more highly of schools in larger urban or suburban settings ruled out a return for their children's sake.

Parents living in the home town significantly played into the return migration decision. The child-grandparent relationship between returnees' children and their parents was an important

SUMMARY

This study focuses on understanding return migration to demographically struggling rural communities. We concentrate on isolated, modest-amenity places, and on people in the labor force. During visits of 21 communities in 17 states we interviewed over 300 people who graduated from rural high schools at 10- to 30-year reunions and approximately 100 community leaders. Family reasons and affinity for small-town life draw people back to their rural home towns, while employment constraints are barriers. Returning migrants favorably impact their communities by adding to the population base, the labor pool, and the cadre of volunteers and community leaders. Rural communities can benefit from our findings by strategically highlighting their assets to attract returning migrants and by tackling the barriers that hinder others from moving back.

consideration. Bonds to other family members mattered as well. Additionally, some returned to assist with the family enterprise, often a farm or another business, and to support aging parents. If the parents had moved away or passed away, the propensity to return was very low.

Community

People who moved back had fond memories of their childhood. They valued the familiarity that comes with living in rural areas. They were okay with limited shopping opportunities and saw the plus in short small-town travel distances. Returnees also found the recreational and entertainment choices of smaller towns appealing.

Those not inclined to move back generally preferred the urban lifestyle. They felt comfortable with greater anonymity and valued the broad range of urban services. A few non-returnees revealed they were not at all nostalgic about their rural upbringing and felt no desire to come back.

Employment

Given our focus on persons in the labor force, return migration hinged on securing employment. However, employment did not drive, but rather permitted return migration. Those who returned found ways to overcome employment challenges in small rural labor markets. Some stepped back into family businesses, or transitioned into a business available upon retirement like pharmacies, dental clinics, or repair businesses. Some created new urban-style businesses, such as day spas

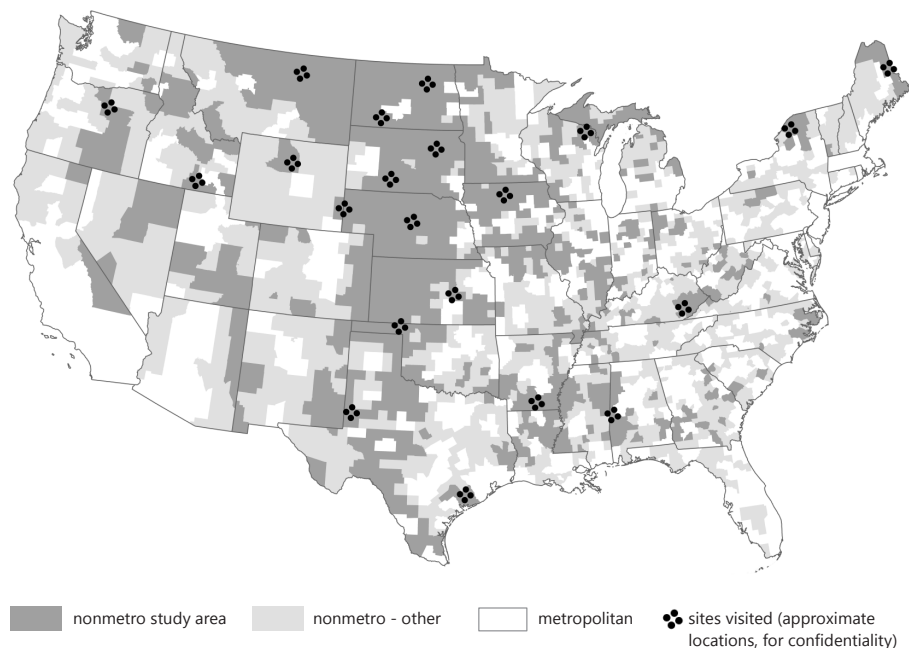
or coffee shops. Some brought their employment with them by working remotely. Others often filled professional positions, for instance in the school, health care, or financial system. Others again pieced-together employment by finding part-time work and creating self-employment, such as repair services, catering, or child-care services.

Repeatedly, returnees mentioned financial sacrifice, working for less, or foregoing promotions. For persons not in a position to accept those sacrifices or in careers rarely found in rural labor markets, employment proved to be the barrier to returning. Importantly, we encountered quite a few non-returnees inclined to move back if they could overcome employment challenges.

Impacts: Demographic, Economic, Social

Returning migrants impacted their rural home towns in favorable ways. As most returned with a spouse and young children, there were positive demographic impacts. Returning migrants, who typically moved away for an education and returned after work experience elsewhere, also added to the human capital base. Given their outside education and experience, they brought ideas and vision to their rural home town.

Returning migrants who took over businesses or created new businesses positively affected the rural economy by maintaining or adding service offerings. Employers seeking to recruit professionals also valued returnees for their propensity to stay, not leave again, thereby cutting down on job turn-over.



Source: Christiane von Reichert, Department of Geography, University of Montana

Figure 1. Map of Study Area and Sites Visited.

Impacts on community and society were considerable and appreciation of their upbringing sparked a desire to give back. Civic engagement and a sense of duty were quite typical. Many found community involvement gratifying and even saw that as a benefit of moving back.

What This Means for Rural Communities

Family reasons and community attributes are what draw people back to their rural home towns, while employment constraints act as barriers. This insight can benefit rural communities in highlighting their assets to attract returning migrants and in tackling the barriers that hinder others from moving back.

Most returning migrants hold fond memories of growing up in a child-friendly rural setting, with good schools, and ample recreational opportunities. They are in the family stage of life and want their children to experience a youth similar to their own. Investments in education and recreation therefore hold promise to re-attract rural natives and their families. Promoting these assets also raises community appeal to families already living there.

Affinity for rural and community life was prevalent among returnees. Several revealed that feeling valued and the desire to make a difference played into their return migration decision. Being proactive in emphasizing the merits of return migration may instill thoughts of moving back to their rural home town—even before rural adolescents move away. Any stigma, mentioned by some, as connected to return migration should be countered with a positive message about return migrants' contributions to rural society. This would resonate well with returning migrants.

Limited employment opportunities were brought up as a main barrier to rural return migration. At the same time, smaller towns had difficulty filling technical and professional positions or transitioning businesses

to successors. This makes communication about existing employment and business opportunities key in reaching the pool of out-migrants who wish to move back—if they only could find employment. To support telecommuting and self-employment, high speed internet is a must. Grant and loan packages can also assist entrepreneurial returnees apt to start up small businesses. Additionally, career counseling in high schools, as already done in some places, can pave the path to return migration. Rural youth might opt for careers in health care and education, in insurance and finance, in utilities and the like, if made aware of opportunities for these occupations in rural labor markets.

When youth move away after high school graduation they rarely move to a final destination. Repeat migration is common before people settle down, usually in the early to mid-segment of the family stage (between 25 and 35 years of age). This makes for a window of opportunity for rural communities to reach out to previous high school graduates when they decide on settling down.

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