Return Migration to Rural and Small Town America

John Cromartie & Robert Gibbs
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John Cromartie & Robert Gibbs
Economic Research Service, USDA

Christiane von Reichert
University of Montana
Collaborative Research between ERS and the University of Montana

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Questions:

1. What factors influence the decision to return?
2. What social and economic adjustments do return migrants commonly face?
3. What can be done at the community level to increase the likelihood for return migration?
Mixed-methods Research

• quantitative analysis:
  – cohort-specific, county-to-county migration flows using 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census data

• qualitative methods:
  – interviews to evaluate return migration decisions and their impact on geographically-disadvantaged rural communities.
In this presentation:

• Geographic disadvantage and its relevance to the study of return migration

• Analysis of counterstream migration flows: methods and initial results

• Next steps
Geographic disadvantage

Nonmetro population and job growth consistently higher in:

• Counties adjacent to large or fast-growing metro areas

• Counties with important regional centers (micropolitan areas)

• Counties with interstate highways

• Scenic areas
Geographic disadvantage

3 county-level measures combined into an Index of Geographic Disadvantage:

1. Access to urban areas (gravity model)

2. Distance to transportation infrastructure (interstates and regional airports)

3. ERS Natural Amenities Index (mild climate, mountains, lakes)
Figure 1. Index of Geographic Disadvantage

Note: values are the sum of 3 standardized scores representing decreasing urban access, increasing distance to transportation infrastructure, and lower scores of the ERS Natural Amenities Index.

Population growth rate, 2000-2006
The New Homestead Act: Opportunities to help individuals who make a commitment to live in rural counties suffering from high out-migration

http://dorgan.senate.gov/issues/north-dakota/homestead case.cfm
Counterstream migration

- Return migration hard to measure directly with current data
- New method: estimate return migration by studying counterstreams
- Every major migration stream generates a counterstream
- Matching age-specific, county-to-county streams with their counterstreams 10 years later provides an indirect measure of return migration
Counterstream migration

- Match streams with counterstreams
- 3 types of counterstreams
  1. Balanced: counterstream highly correlated with previous out-migration stream
  2. Out-dominant: smaller than expected counterstream
  3. In-dominant: larger than expected counterstream
- Return migration more likely to be part of types 1 and 2.
Figure 4. Percent of 25-29 year old in-migrants in return migration counterstreams, 1995-2000

- Less than 50 percent
- 50-59 percent
- 60-69 percent
- 70 percent or higher
- Metro
Figure 1. Index of Geographic Disadvantage

Note: values are the sum of 3 standardized scores representing decreasing urban access, increasing distance to transportation infrastructure, and lower scores of the ERS Natural Amenities Index.

Figure 5. Percent of 25-29 year old in-migrants in return migration counterstreams, 1995-2000
Next Steps

• Same analysis for 30-34 and 35-39 age groups
• Analyze connections between return migration and economic growth in geographically-disadvantaged counties
• Select representative counties for qualitative analysis
• Interviews at high school reunions, the only venue that brings together non-migrants, out-migrants, and return migrants