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Baby Boom Migration Tilts Toward Rural America

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- The size and direction of migration patterns vary considerably by age, and baby boomers are increasingly migrating to rural destinations.
- If baby boomers follow migration patterns similar to those of their predecessors, the rural population age 55-75 will increase by 30 percent between 2010 and 2020.
- Local economic development strategies aimed at attracting more jobs will likely have little effect on the migration decisions of baby boomers searching for a better quality of life.

As Americans age, their likelihood of migrating, their reasons for moving, and their destination choices shift dramatically. Baby boomers—born between 1946 and 1964—are entering a stage when moves to rural locales increase, especially to areas with scenic amenities and lower housing costs.

"Boomers" have already demonstrated an affinity for moving to rural and small-town destinations, compared with older or younger cohorts. They led a short-lived rural "rebound" in the early 1990s despite being at an age when career-oriented motivations strongly influence migration decisions.

Today's 83 million boomers, ranging from age 45 to 63, represent a fourth of the total U.S. population. There has never been such a large share of the workforce approaching retirement. By comparison, 42 million were age 45 to 63 in 1990. Boomers are now poised to significantly increase rural and small-town elderly populations by 2020, with major social and economic implications for their chosen destinations.



John Cromartie, USDA/ERS

Migration Patterns Change With Age

Each individual or family makes unique migration decisions, but commonalities exist at different life stages that affect the number of people moving and their destination choices. Migration rates for children (who mostly accompany parental moves) decline to very low levels during high school, and then rise precipitously. Most migration occurs when people are in their twenties, as they finish college, make initial career decisions, serve in the military, form families, or simply act out of a sense of restlessness. Urban destinations dominate among young singles seeking jobs, social opportunities, and creative cultural environments.

Migration rates decrease steadily and shift geographically through a person's working-age years. Individuals and families settle down as career decisions become more firm. Married couples with children place a higher premium on residential space, better schools, feelings of personal safety, and other qualities associated with suburban settings.

As they age toward retirement, Americans are much less prone to move than in their youth, but those that do are much more likely to move to the countryside. Many "empty nest" couples begin seeking leisure and recreational opportunities, lower housing costs, and a slower pace of life. Quality-of-life considerations begin to replace child-rearing and employment-related factors in decisions about when and where to move. For older Americans, rural migration is highest early in the retirement process and declines sharply as health care needs increase.

Many people develop strong ties to particular places over an extended period, such as while vacationing or visiting family and friends. Thus, retirement-related migration may progress slowly over several years rather than occur as a discrete, one-time event. Couples often purchase a second home or simply visit the same location annually or on weekends with their children, then visit more often and for longer stretches as children leave home. Beginning in the 1990s, the Internet has greatly facilitated work from more remote locations

and contributed to an increase in permanent moves to second-home destinations. Areas that are popular as recreation and tourist destinations are increasingly favored as permanent residences.

Baby Boomers Have Rural Ties Despite Suburban Upbringing

Baby boomers have followed well-established, age-related migration patterns, but at times have shown more of a preference for rural destinations than older and younger cohorts. Their early childhoods coincided with a massive wave of rural outmigration and suburbanization. Many of their parents had come of age in the countryside during the Depression and maintained rural connections while raising urban and suburban families. These hometown ties have had an enormous influence on the baby boomers' subsequent migration decisions.

As they entered young adulthood, baby boomers faced increased labor and housing market competition, due both to economic trends and the unprecedented size of their cohort. They responded demographically by postponing marriage and delaying child-bearing. They responded geographically by migrating from the Northeast and Midwest to the South and West in record numbers and increasing their migration into nonmetropolitan (nonmetro) counties. Overall, they still favored metro destinations as they aged through their twenties, but not as strongly as older or younger cohorts did.

The economic recessions of the 1980s hit rural areas harder than urban areas and contributed to a resurgence in rural outmigration. Urban migration surged for baby boomers in their late twenties and early thirties, especially to large metro centers that were regaining economic momentum lost in the 1970s. In the early 1990s, baby boomers again increased migration to rural areas, stimulating recreation-based economies and boosting population growth in the intermountain



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West, the southern Appalachians, the Upper Great Lakes, and other scenic locations.

In 1995, baby boomers were age 31-49 and still strongly career oriented. Much of their nonmetro migration was fueling rapid suburban expansion into nonmetro counties adjacent to metro centers. Many of those moving to more remote settings were able to use expanding airline services and the Internet to stay connected to urban-based employers and customers.

More Baby Boomers Heading to Rural Areas

Younger members of the baby boomer generation are still in the middle of child rearing, while those in their fifties are more likely to be empty nesters. Employment considerations still exert a strong influence on their collective migration decisions but will decrease sharply in the next decade. Baby boomers are increasingly drawn to areas with the right combination of scenic amenities (varied topography, relatively large lake or coastal areas, warm and sunny winters, and temperate summers), recreational or cultural opportunities, and reasonable housing costs. The presence of seasonal housing has been a particularly strong indicator of where retirement-related migration is likely to occur.

Net migration increased the number of baby boomers living in nonmetro areas by 1.1 million during 1990-2000. If baby boomers follow the same age-specific geographic patterns of migration as their predecessors (see box, "Projecting Future Net Migration"), their presence in nonmetro locations will increase by 1.2 million in this decade and by 1.1 million during the 2010s, despite declines in their overall propensity to migrate. If they continue the marked preference for nonmetro destinations exhibited during their earlier life stages, nonmetro net migration of baby boomers could reach as high as 1.5 million in this decade and 1.6 million in the next.

Over the next 10 years, baby boomer migration will likely contribute to a significant deconcentration of the population. Assuming a midrange projection between the two outcomes described above, baby boomer net migration to core (predominantly urban) metro counties will switch from a 979,000 gain in the 1990s to a 643,000 loss in the 2010s. Fringe (predominantly rural) metro counties had the highest rates of baby boomer migration in the 1990s (a 17-percent increase, compared with a 9-percent gain for nonmetro counties), but are projected to drop to 8 percent during the 2010s. Fringe counties, along with adjacent nonmetro counties, received the bulk of past suburban

expansion, but movement to these areas is becoming a smaller component of migration among baby boomers.

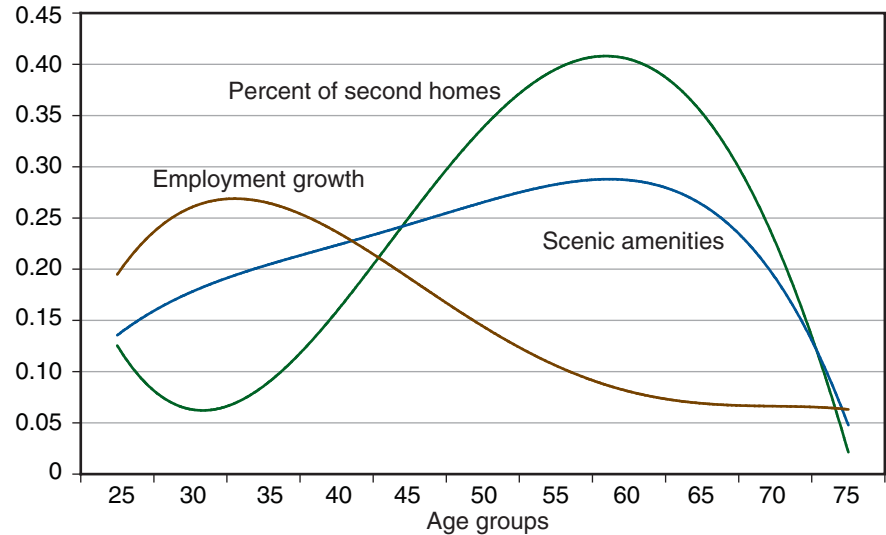
When measured in terms of relative change, more remote (nonadjacent) nonmetro counties will see the most dramatic changes from baby boomer migration. While nonadjacent counties gained 277,000 residents from net migration among baby boomers during the 1990s, midrange projections indicate that they will increase by nearly 362,000 and 383,000 during this decade and the next.

Whether adjacent to big cities or less accessible, counties with desirable physical attributes—pleasant climates, mountains, beaches, and lakes—are likely to increase their already high share of baby boomer migration. The ERS Natural Amenity Index attempts to measure the attractiveness of an area's natural amenities. Among the 500 nonmetro counties with the lowest scores, net migration is projected to decrease from a 180,000 gain in the 1990s to near zero in the 2010s. At the same time, net migration to the 500 counties with the highest scores will grow from 520,000 to 720,000. However, differences between projected and actual population outcomes are potentially greater for rapidly growing counties, such as those with scenic amenities and booming recreation-based economies. In the past, net migration decreased as such areas "filled up," often in response to higher housing prices. The current mortgage foreclosure crisis, particularly strong in recreation towns that experienced a recent housing boom, creates uncertainty about future demographic trends in these areas.

Regardless of future economic and housing market conditions, baby boomers will increase the size of rural America's retirement-age population. Assuming a midrange projection, the rural population between ages 55 and 75 will increase from 8.6 to 14.2

Aging baby boomers drawn more by scenic amenities and second home locations than by employment growth

Percent effect on net migration per 1-percent change in indicator¹

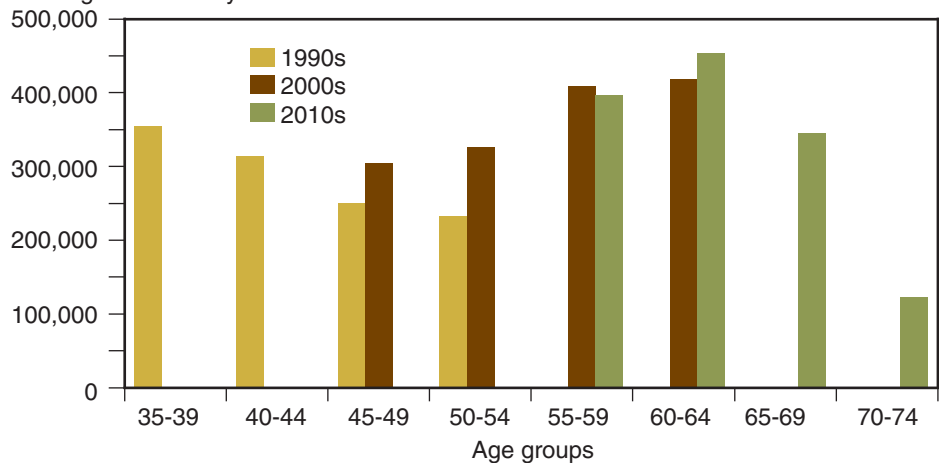


¹Regression analysis was used to measure the influence of several socioeconomic indicators on county-level net migration rates for 1990-2000, and how those effects shift with age. Values on the vertical axis show increases in net migration rates associated with a 1-percent increase in the socioeconomic indicators.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the Bureau of Economic Analysis, and the National Center for Health Statistics.

Older baby boomers currently lead nonmetro migration, but younger members will likely dominate after 2010

Net migration of baby boomers to nonmetro counties



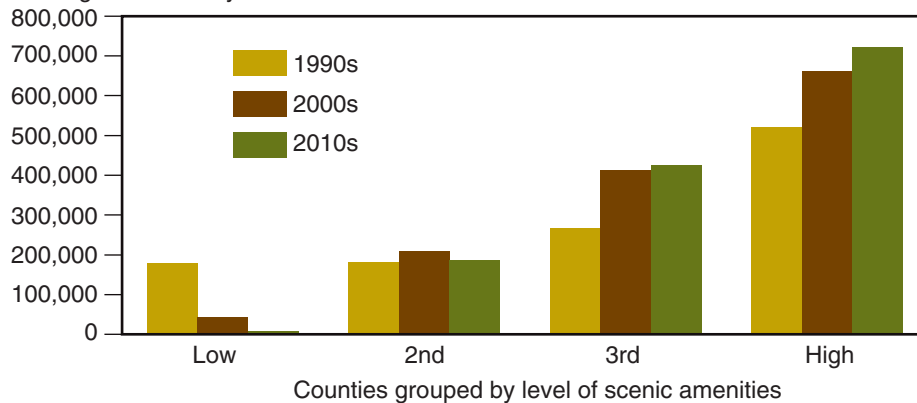
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service. Net migration estimates for 1990-2000 were tabulated using population data from the U.S. Census Bureau and vital statistics from the National Center for Health Statistics. Projections for 2000-10 and 2010-20 were based on statistical models of age-specific net migration and forward survival methods.



John Cromartie, USDA/ERS

Baby boom migration is directed toward counties with high scenic amenities

Net migration of baby boomers to nonmetro countries



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service. Net migration estimates for 1990-2000 were tabulated using population data from the U.S. Census Bureau and vital statistics from the National Center for Health Statistics. Projections for 2000-10 and 2010-20 were based on statistical models of age-specific net migration and forward survival methods. Scenic amenities were measured using the ERS Natural Amenities Index.

Rate of growth has tripled for nonmetro retirement-age populations since the 1990s

U.S. region	Nonmetro population ages 55-75				Growth rate of retirement-aged population		
	1990	2000	2010	2020	1990s	2000s	2010s
	<i>Millions</i>				<i>Percent</i>		
Northeast	0.886	0.925	1.276	1.686	4.4	37.9	32.1
Midwest	2.633	2.685	3.235	3.944	2.0	20.5	21.9
South	3.480	3.868	4.972	6.272	11.2	28.5	26.1
West	0.957	1.152	1.708	2.251	20.3	48.2	31.8
Total	7.957	8.631	11.191	14.152	8.5	29.7	26.5

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, using data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Center for Health Statistics. Projections for 2000-10 and 2010-20 were based on statistical models of age-specific net migration and forward survival methods.

million between 2000 and 2020. The overall rate of growth among this age group has likely tripled to 30 percent during the current decade, compared with that in the 1990s, and will remain above 25 percent in the next decade.

Without baby boomer net migration, the rate of growth for the rural population age 55 to 75 would be 18 percent in this decade and 15 percent during 2010-20. These trends affect not just traditional retirement regions in the South and West, but regions throughout the country. The biggest jump in nonmetro net migration rates is projected in the nonmetro Northeast, which is projected to be growing as fast as the nonmetro West during the 2010s.

Baby Boomers Will Continue To Reshape Rural Communities

Baby boomers are aging toward retirement and moving into high-amenity counties with concentrations of second homes. Migration to nonmetro counties adjacent to metro areas will remain high, but baby boomer migration is likely to become much more dispersed than in the 1990s and not as strongly tied to suburban expansion. New destinations will likely be more isolated, with more empty nest households, and lower housing costs.

Projecting Future Net Migration—Answering “What If” Questions

County-level, post-2000 data on age-specific, net migration—the difference between the number of people moving into and out of a county—will not be available for several years. However, it is possible to project patterns of baby boomer migration into rural and small-town areas, for this decade and the next, using data from the 1990s. Age affects migration in relatively predictable ways that can be statistically measured. The overall size of age cohorts is also easy to project using forward survival methods because age-specific death rates are relatively fixed. Immigration’s relatively small impact on older age groups can be measured using the Census Bureau’s “best guess” estimates of future, age-specific immigration flows. Thus, researchers can project the size of future baby boom cohorts in different types of metro and nonmetro counties.

Unlike death rates, migration flows between counties are subject to short-term fluctuations. They are affected by employment trends, housing prices, and other factors subject to much uncertainty, especially given current economic conditions and prospects. Also, baby boomers may pioneer new migration paths that differ from those of preceding generations as they age into retirement. Projections are constructed by asking: “What will future migration patterns look like if the most recently measured age-specific migration rates (from the 1990s) stay the same?” They provide useful analytical and planning information but must be seen to fall into a probable range of outcomes.

Migration impacts are unevenly distributed across the landscape. Rural jurisdictions face different demands for local goods and services and different opportunities for economic expansion, depending on population trends. Anticipating the types of areas that will receive large numbers of baby boomers in the near future could help communities plan for rising demand for housing, transportation, health care, and retail infrastructure.

The economic and social impacts of baby boom migration connect to broader age-related issues subject to vigorous debate at Federal, State, and local levels, including Social Security adjustments, pension guarantees, and health care provision. In this case, baby boom migration will bring both additional benefits and costs for rural destinations. New residents are likely to have a positive impact on income and employment. They may also increase infrastructure costs

for local governments and require health care and other services not currently available.

Development professionals often emphasize traditional strategies designed to attract manufacturing jobs to their communities. Infrastructure investments geared toward fostering this type of export-based employment growth likely will have minimal influence on the rising number of footloose baby boom migrants who are looking for an improved quality of life. Other development specialists realize that net migration increasingly drives regional economies. Older migrants often bring significant new money into a county’s economy, generate new demand for a variety of services, and boost job levels. Increased awareness of key factors attracting baby boomers to rural and small-town America will contribute to more effective, migration-based development strategies. **W**

This article is drawn from . . .

Baby Boom Migration and Its Impact on Rural America, by John Cromartie and Peter Nelson, ERR-79, USDA, Economic Research Service, August 2009, available at: www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err79/

“The Baby Boom and Nonmetropolitan Population Change, 1970-1990,” by Peter Nelson, James Nicholson, and E. Hope Stege, in *Growth and Change*, 24 (4) (2004): 526-544.

Challenges From an Aging Population chapter in the ERS Briefing Room on Rural Population and Migration, available at: www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/population/challenges.htm

You may also be interested in . . .

Rural America, Vol. 17, Issue 3 (special issue on the aging of the rural population), USDA, Economic Research Service, December 2002, available at: www.ers.usda.gov/publications/ruralamerica/ra173/

Natural Amenities Drive Rural Population Change, by David McGranahan, AER-781, USDA, Economic Research Service, October 1999, available at: www.ers.usda.gov/publications/aer781/

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