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Feature: *Rural Economy & Population*

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Why Some Return Home to Rural America and Why It Matters

by **John Cromartie**, Christiane von Reichert, and Ryan Arthun



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John Cromartie, USDA/ERS

Persistent population loss is a fact of life for hundreds of small communities across the country. In nearly half of today's nonmetropolitan (rural) counties, more people have moved out than moved in during every decade since 1950. The clustering of these counties in regions such as the Great Plains and Corn Belt illustrates that population loss is associated with low population density, low urban accessibility, and few natural amenities. Communities in these areas face challenges adjusting to aging populations, fewer workers, and declining revenues.

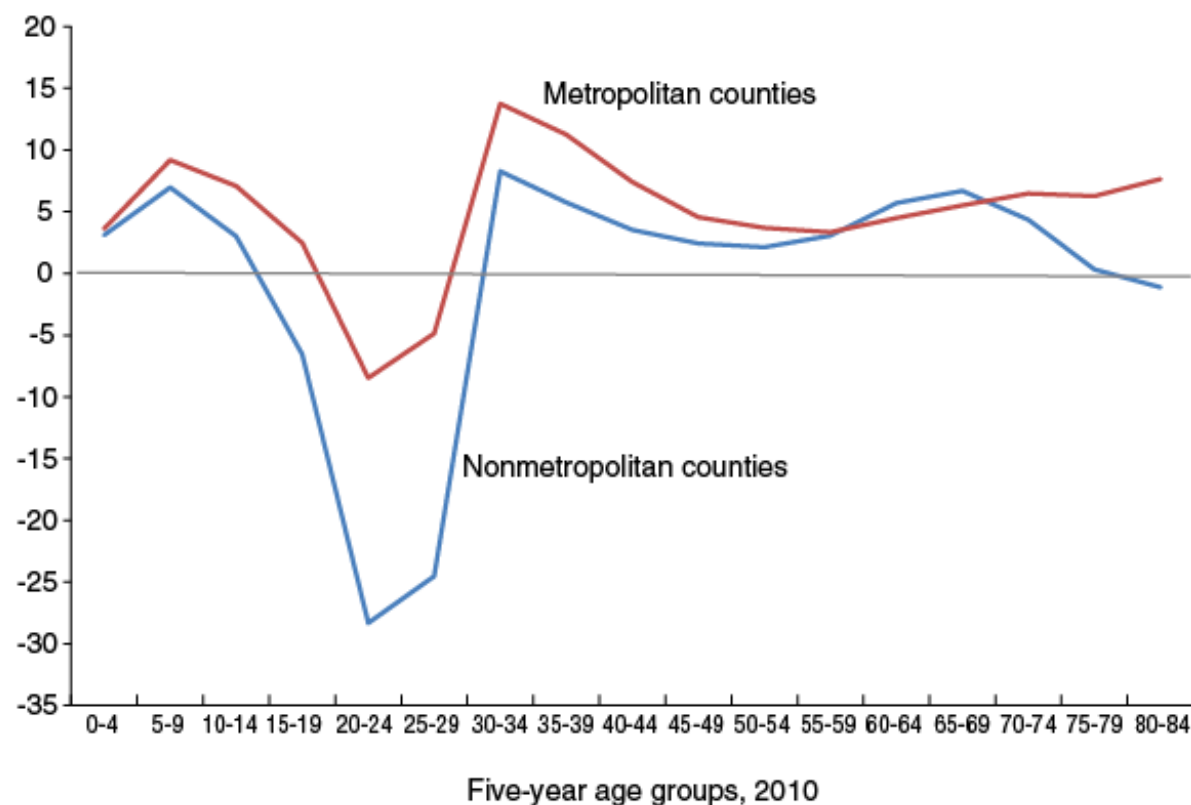
Rural population loss is generally characterized by policymakers and others as young people leaving. Net out-migration caused an average (median) 28-percent decline among 20-24 year olds in nonmetropolitan counties during 2000-2010, compared to just an 8-percent decline in metropolitan counties. However, stemming rural population loss and spurring economic development may depend less on retaining young adults after high school than on attracting them back as they settle down to start careers and raise children. Median net migration rates in nonmetropolitan counties are highest among adults age 30-34 and children age 5-9. Return migration likely plays a large role in these life-cycle migration trends.

Highlights:

- Continued population loss in rural communities is caused as much by low in-migration as by high out-migration; in remote rural communities lacking natural amenities, return migrants make up a large share of total in-migration.
- Return migrants potentially play a critical role in rural areas in slowing population loss, rejuvenating the population base, generating jobs, and increasing human, social, and financial capital.
- Family ties, increased opportunities for outdoor recreation for the whole family, and fuller participation in school sports for their children were often mentioned as motivating factors for moving back to rural America.

High rural out-migration among 20-30 year olds is partially offset by in-migration among older adults and young children

Median percent county population change due to net migration, 2000-2010



Source: ERS, based on estimates from the University of Wisconsin-Madison:
<http://www.netmigration.wisc.edu/>

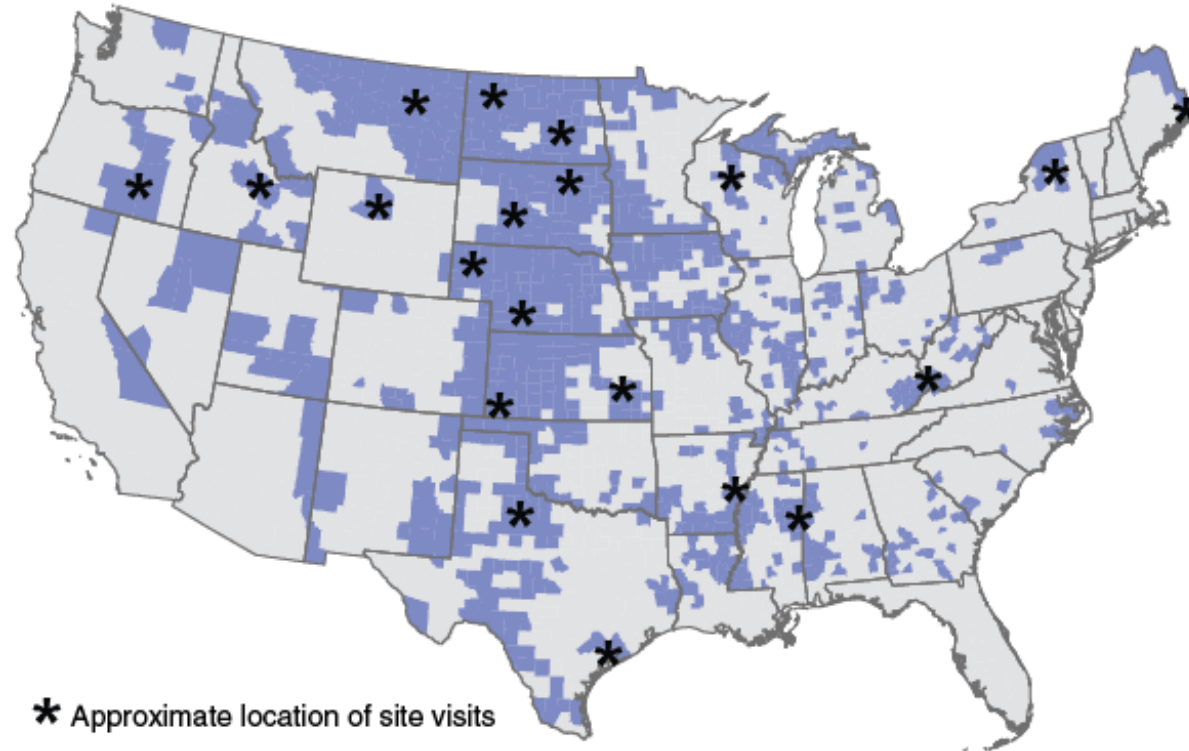
Return migrants potentially play a critical role in their rural home communities by slowing population loss, generating jobs, and increasing human, social, and financial capital. However, little is known about rates of return migration to different types of places, the timing of moves back home, or the socioeconomic characteristics of returnees compared with other groups. Most migration data sources cannot adequately identify return migrants, especially those moving back to rural areas.

To answer questions about the causes and consequences of rural return migration, researchers traveled to 21 communities in 17 States and interviewed over 300 individuals at high school reunions during the summers of 2008 and 2009. Reunions are the only venues that allow for simultaneous interviews with stayers (who never moved away), return migrants (who moved away and later returned), and

nonreturn migrants (who moved away and still lived elsewhere at the time of the interview). Researchers also spent time interviewing business and community leaders outside of reunion events to learn about aspects of community life affecting return migration decisions.

Community visits took place in a subset of rural counties that experienced net outmigration between 2000 and 2007. This subset of counties had moderate to low levels of natural amenities and were located in geographically isolated areas. These geographically disadvantaged counties were chosen not because return migration is unimportant elsewhere, but because communities in these counties do not attract many newcomers and thus depend much more on attracting returnees to offset population loss. Most counties in the Great Plains and Corn Belt fall into this study area, with other clusters in the Intermountain West, the Great Lakes region, the lower Mississippi Valley, and Appalachia.

Study area: Geographically disadvantaged counties with net migration loss, 2000-2007



Note: Alaska and Hawaii were not included in this study.
Source: Department of Geography, University of Montana.

Open-ended interviews at reunion events included questions exploring reasons for staying, returning, or not returning. Returnees were asked why they moved away in the first place and why they returned. They were also prompted to describe the impact they had made on their home communities after returning, such as by starting businesses and hiring employees, assuming leadership positions, or volunteering. Nonreturnees were asked if they had ever considered moving back and, if so, what prevented the move. Questions about education, occupation, marital status, presence of children, and parental ties were also included.

Family-related Reasons Motivated Most Return Moves

The presence of family members and the desire to raise children back home were primary motivators among return migrants interviewed. Most came home with spouses, brought young children with them or started families soon after returning, and had one or both parents still living in their home community. Conversations about returning home centered on the value of family connections for child raising in a small-town environment:

“I wanted to raise a family with my wife ... It isn't anything much more complicated than that. I just wanted to be in a good place to raise a family and be close enough ... to extended family that they can be a part of that. So our kids have been around both sets of grandparents and that's been a positive thing for them.”

Many returnees described shifts in their personal attitudes in favor of living at home after becoming parents. For others, moving home was not a question of whether, but when:

“My husband ... always had the desire and the want to come back here and raise a family and ... didn't want to come back here unless he was married and [in] the process of having a family.”

Almost all returnees had parents still at home, whereas many nonreturnees did not. If parents no longer lived in the home community, the incentives to return diminished. Nonreturnees were also more likely than returnees to be single or to be married but not planning to have children:

“We're not planning on having kids. So the kids and education, and idyllic life I was talking about—the Norman Rockwell—is really not a big factor.”

Relatively few moves back home among those interviewed were motivated by the need to care for aging parents, most likely because of the relatively young age of many interviewees. Most returnees were in their late 20s or 30s, with relatively healthy parents. However, several returnees described moving back to help parents with family-run businesses:

“Mom and Dad live on a farm and he's 68 and he needs help ... This felt like the right place to be.”

School Quality and Community Investments Influenced Return Migration Decisions

In addition to family ties, return migrants described other positive aspects of their home community that bolstered their decision to move

back. For some, it was simply a strong sense of familiarity. After living in larger cities, people from small towns often missed close connections with neighbors. For others, it was the slower pace of life:

“I love it here ‘cause it’s so peaceful ... I told my mom it’s like ... you don’t realize it till you leave here and come back just how quiet it is and how friendly everybody is.”

Just as school quality determines many residential moves within cities, decisions to return or not return to rural communities hinged heavily on evaluations of local school systems. Nonreturnees expressed reservations about the academic standards of hometown schools and valued the broad range of activities offered in larger, urban schools. Conversely, returnees touted smaller class sizes, closer relations with teachers, and better chances for kids to play for school teams:

“It’s a smaller school system, you know the teachers by their first names, you see them in the grocery stores, you see them on the streets.”

Physical aspects of rural home communities also influenced decisions to return back home or not. The physical compactness of small communities made for shorter trips for work, shopping, and visiting family. Proximity to natural landscapes was highly valued. Many parents wanted to pass on experiences they had growing up, so opportunities for camping trips, hunting, fishing, and hiking were strong draws. Community leaders readily pointed out recent recreational investments and understood their importance in making their towns more attractive to newcomers and returnees alike. Interviews with returnees also revealed a high level of value placed on the availability of municipal parks, community centers, bike paths, and other recreational infrastructure:

“We have a country club in this community. You can go play golf. We have a nice community center. We have a swimming pool.”

“Kids get to ride their bikes and go to the swimming pool, and you don’t really have to worry about that kind of stuff.”

Low Wages and Career Limitations Were Cited as Primary Reasons for Not Returning Home

Roughly half of nonreturnees made it clear they had never considered moving back home and probably never would. For some, this reflected a strong preference for city living, especially the cultural amenities. For others, it was a career-based decision; many pursuing higher end technical and professional careers described the need to be located in a large city. Other nonreturnees who had considered moving back cited low wages and lack of career opportunities as the primary barrier:

“There would be nothing for my husband to do as far as a job here. He’s an electrical engineer and there’s no opportunity probably for what he does.”

“There is no money to be made here. There is not any way to really support yourself unless you would want to make minimum wage. To provide a better life for me and my daughter, you have to be in a bigger area.”

Dual-earner families felt especially challenged relocating to smaller towns. For returnees, career and financial sacrifices were recurring themes. Benefits gained by moving home, such as closer family ties, often came with lower earnings in the short term and limited career options in the long term.

“We lived in Arizona in a very large city and ... even though it treated me and the wife well financially we just thought it was the right time and it was a realistic decision for our kids.”

Migration researchers distinguish between situations in which “people follow jobs” and others in which “jobs follow people.” Returnees interviewed for this study were generally not drawn back home by career opportunities. As one community leader put it, *“You have to want to live here. This must be the kind of lifestyle you want.”*

Returnees Bring Home Education, Work Experience, and Leadership Skills

Overall return migration numbers are believed to be small compared with initial outmigration. However, return migrants do replenish the population to some extent, and those with families add more people back into the population than were removed when they left on their own. Children of returnees are typically quite young, giving them a better chance to establish strong friendships and other ties to the community. Both returnees and community leaders noted positive benefits from increased school enrollment coming as a result of return migration, since small increases in school enrollment can sometimes make the difference between retaining or cutting programs. By adding back to the population, return migrants also boost the demand for local services and lower per capita costs of providing public services.

In addition to adding population, return migrants usually increase average levels of education and technical skills. Most attended college, then spent time working or serving in the military. To some extent, the education, skills, and experience gained while away can alleviate the effects of the rural “brain drain,” the outmigration of the most talented among high school graduates in these communities:

“I got my degree, I got 10 years of practical experiences and I want to apply that here. [I want] to bring ideas and some business back.”

“I went to cooking school and I am really interested in culinary history ... I have been proposing ... that we start some culinary tours and things that we will end up bringing in tourism into this part of the State.”

Returnees who left home for education and training came back to fill positions as doctors, pharmacists, accountants, bankers, lawyers, hospital administrators, teachers, business managers, and entrepreneurs. They moved into family businesses—insurance companies, newspapers, real estate agencies, restaurants, retail stores, manufacturing plants, farms—or took over businesses from retiring owners. By expanding an already sizeable business and deciding to keep the headquarters in his hometown, one return migrant contributed significantly to the employment base, in part by drawing on his social networks and recruiting other returnees. Returnee businesses sometimes capitalized on recent renovation and beautification projects and made these community investments pay off by occupying storefronts in prime locations and adding to the range of local services.

Returnees added various social benefits through office-holding, charity work, and participation in school activities, recreation projects, and business associations. Returnees also filled leadership roles in a broad range of organizations, some dealing with economic development (such as Chambers of Commerce or regional development councils), others with community governance (such as school boards and city councils), and some covering resource issues (including land-use planning and water protection). Volunteer work by migrants benefited schools and recreation groups in particular, because returnees derived satisfaction from involvement with their children. Conversations revealed feelings of belonging and social connections that promoted community involvement and motivated returnees to get involved:

“I am very involved because in a small town that’s what you are expected to do. I am on a city council and a variety of boards and people just take turns. That comes with the turf.”

Promoting Return Migration May Be More Effective Than Retaining Youth or Attracting Retirees

Return migration plays a vital role in rural America, but information about rates of return migration, the timing of moves back home, and the potential economic impacts of returnees is not available through standard quantitative assessments. The interview-based research reported here shows that decisions to move back to rural communities are grounded in social relations that promote civic engagement. While returnees mainly move back for their children and parents, they also value involvement in familiar social networks and the

opportunities to make a difference. Investments in college and job training made elsewhere by these young adults translate into valuable community assets down the road. They raise the ability of rural towns to sustain community functions in the face of limited financial and human resources.

Return migration strategies may prove more effective than attempts to retain young people in the years right after high school. For talented and motivated youth, leaving rural communities is a necessary, inevitable, and highly encouraged rite of passage from adolescence into adulthood. Several community leaders wanted to modify this mindset to make them feel welcomed and encouraged to move back:

"... So it creates a culture, right from the beginning of people saying hey, you don't stay around here if you're young, you go someplace else and figure out what life's all about. Well, if we're going to be successful at maintaining ... our rural communities ... we're going to have to change that perception, that culture so that people understand that it's OK to come back and that there are opportunities here."

Many States and rural communities invest in strategies to attract retirees, whose migration tendencies and economic impacts have been thoroughly scrutinized. The potential for younger return migrants to replenish rural populations and revive struggling economies is arguably higher, because they add more to the labor force and to school enrollment. People who return home in their 20s and 30s are especially well positioned to take on long-term entrepreneurial and leadership roles. As one participant put it, *"I like this community. I think it's given me a lot so I wanted to come back and give back to the community."*

Repopulating rural communities is an explicit aim of the current USDA Strategic Plan for 2010-2015. However, economic development strategies geared towards recruiting return migrants remain underdeveloped in the United States compared with other countries, partly due to limited knowledge of return migration trends. Policymakers in Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, and other States have promoted campaigns designed to encourage return migration. For several years, congressional sponsors called for a New Homestead Act, which would have provided small-business loans, housing subsidies, college debt relief, and other incentives to individuals and families agreeing to move to geographically disadvantaged counties. Interviews with return migrants to these counties provide evidence that specific types of family-oriented investments in schools and community facilities could also be used to enhance population potential and economic growth.

This article is drawn from...

Factors Affecting Former Residents' Returning to Rural Communities, by John Cromartie, Christiane von Reichert, and Ryan Arthun, USDA, Economic Research Service, May 2015

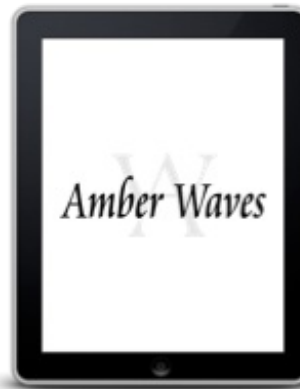
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"Returning Home and Making a Living: Employment Strategies of Return Migrants to U.S. Rural Communities" , by Christiane von Reichert, John Cromartie, and Ryan Arthun, *Journal of Rural and Community Development*, Vol. 6(2), 2011

"Reasons for Returning and Not Returning to Rural U.S. Communities" , by Christiane von Reichert, John Cromartie, and Ryan Arthun, *Professional Geographer*, Vol. 66(1), February 2014

"Impacts of Return Migration on Rural U.S. Communities" , by Christiane von Reichert, John Cromartie, and Ryan Arthun, *Rural Sociology*, Vol. 79(2), June 2014

Coming Home: Why Some Return to Rural Communities and Some Do Not, and What Difference It Makes (Webinar), USDA, Economic Research Service, July 2015



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