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Factors Affecting Former Residents' Returning to Rural Communities

John Cromartie, Christiane von Reichert, and Ryan Arthun





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Abstract

Throughout rural America, especially in remote areas lacking scenic landscapes, hundreds of communities face the difficult challenge of adjusting economically and socially to dwindling populations. High school graduates leave for college, good-paying jobs, the military, or simply to see the world, and only a small number return. However, those who do return often bring spouses and young children back with them, along with education and skills gained elsewhere. This study reports on the factors that influence decisions to move back to rural areas and the impacts that return migrants make on home communities. Interviews at high school reunions show that limited rural employment opportunities are barriers for those considering a move back home. Those who do return find ways to secure employment, but are primarily motivated by family considerations. Return migrants use skills and experiences acquired elsewhere, and their commitment to their places of origin, to start businesses, fill professional positions, and take on leadership roles in ways that uniquely impact rural communities.

Keywords: migration, return migration, qualitative research, high school reunions, rural America, rural development, life-cycle migration, population change

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What Is the Issue?

Persistent population loss is a challenge for many rural communities in the United States, especially those in more remote counties lacking scenic amenities. Young people often leave such communities to obtain an education, find a job, join the military, build personal relationships, or otherwise gain life experiences in a different locale. However, reducing rural population loss and spurring economic development may depend less on retaining young adults after they graduate from high school and more on attracting them back later in life. Return migration plays a largely overlooked role in replenishing population numbers while raising education levels and labor supply, and increasing the social vitality of thousands of rural communities nationwide.

This research identifies reasons for returning and not returning to remote rural communities in the United States and examines the demographic, economic, and social effects that return migrants can have on their home communities. Policymakers in Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, and other States have promoted programs designed to encourage such migration. Repopulating rural communities and promoting economic development are also part of the current U.S. Department of Agriculture Strategic Plan. This report provides details on what motivates return migration, the barriers to making such moves, and the difference it makes to rural and small-town America.

What Did the Study Find?

Research findings come from interviews that took place in a subset of rural, remote counties with relatively low scenic amenities. Census data show that these counties typically lost 20- to 24-year-olds to outmigration at nearly twice the rates seen in other rural counties, but showed higher immigration among 30- to 34-year-olds and young children. Return migration likely plays a large role in these migration trends, as these counties make up some fraction of population lost in the years after high school by attracting returnees and their families.

Among those interviewed, the presence of parents and the desire to raise their children back home were the most frequently cited reasons for returning to live in relatively remote rural communities. In addition to the support received from family and friends, returnees sought familiar environments that they perceived to be less anonymous and more easy-going than where they

ERS is a primary source of economic research and analysis from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, providing timely information on economic and policy issues related to agriculture, food, the environment, and rural America.

currently lived. Increased opportunities for outdoor recreation for the whole family and fuller participation in school sports for their children were often mentioned as motivating factors. Differing assessments of urban/suburban and rural school systems distinguished returnees who chose to bring their kids back home from parents who did not. Returnees tended to have a more positive assessment of the rural schools than their counterparts who decided not to return based partly on their assessment of urban/suburban schools as better meeting their children's needs.

Family motivations dominated, but returning home also depended on securing a job, often involving creative strategies to overcome employment limitations. Return migrants frequently mentioned their acceptance of financial and career sacrifices for returning home. Most nonreturnees who may have considered coming home cited low wages and lack of career opportunities as the primary barriers to their return.

Many returnees described positive aspects of small-town social life as bolstering their decisions to move home, including opportunities in the community to volunteer and take on leadership roles. Other factors that made a return move attractive were shorter drive times for work or shopping and proximity to outdoor recreation areas for camping, fishing, or hunting. The availability and quality of public community facilities, including schools, parks, bike paths, and swimming pools, also were cited as positive factors in their decisions to return.

Too much familiarity was often cited as a reason for not returning by people who preferred the greater sense of privacy available in big cities. Conversely, most returnees thrived in, or at least accepted, the tight-knit social networks typical of small towns. Lack of cultural events, shopping and dining options, and other urban amenities also were frequently mentioned by those with no plans to return.

Most returnees interviewed for this study brought spouses and children back with them, increasing school enrollments and overall population. They came home with education and training to fill positions as doctors, pharmacists, accountants, bankers, lawyers, hospital administrators, teachers, business managers, and entrepreneurs. Strong community ties made it easier to translate their education and training into economic and social benefits. Returnees benefited rural communities through office-holding, charity work, and participation in school activities, recreation projects, and business associations.

How Was the Study Conducted?

The authors conducted roughly 300 interviews at high school reunion events in 21 rural communities during 2008 and 2009. Such venues provided a chance to speak with people who grew up together but made different migration choices. Community visits took place in a subset of rural counties identified as geographically disadvantaged, based on measures of remoteness and low scenic attractiveness. Interviews were open-ended but always included questions exploring reasons for staying, returning, or not returning. Returnees also were prompted to describe what effects they believed they had had upon their home communities when they moved back. Additional interviews with community leaders outside reunion events yielded insights on the effects of return migration and provided contextual knowledge about economic conditions, social dynamics, and overall regional development prospects in their communities.

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Introduction

Persistent population loss is a fact of life for hundreds of small counties across the United States and a central focus of rural policy efforts, especially in more remote regions with relatively few scenic attractions. In nearly half of today's nonmetropolitan (rural) counties, more people have moved out than moved in during every decade since 1950.¹ The clustering of these counties in regions such as the Great Plains illustrates the strong correlation that exists between population losses on the one hand, and low population density, low urban accessibility, and low natural amenities on the other. Communities in these areas face challenges adjusting to aging populations, fewer workers, and declining revenues.

The deleterious effects of rural population loss are characterized by policymakers and other concerned parties mostly in terms of young people leaving. This is understandable given the historic importance of outmigration and its on-the-ground visibility. Migration off the farms and out of small towns triggered massive urbanization that transformed U.S. society during the 20th century. Perennially high outmigration of youth continues today and remains the most noticeable driver of rural population loss (Carr and Kefalas, 2009). Many rural communities are accustomed to an annual phenomenon of high school graduates leaving in large numbers to pursue further education or other life experiences.

However, stemming rural population loss and spurring economic development may depend less on retaining young adults after high school than on attracting those former youths back as they settle down to raise children or, later, as they retire. Earlier research showed that nonmetropolitan counties experiencing population decline were distinguished as much by low rates of immigration among people in their late 20s and 30s as they were by high rates of outmigration of high school graduates (Gibbs and Cromartie, 1994). Communities in remote counties lacking natural amenities attract far fewer newcomers compared with similar communities in other counties. Thus, a much higher share of immigrants to these counties are return migrants, people returning to hometowns after spending time away (McGranahan, Cromartie, and Wojan, 2010). They often return with spouses and children, or begin child raising soon after returning. Many have gained education, work experience, and other skills while away.

¹ The terms "nonmetropolitan" and "rural" are used interchangeably in this report. They refer to counties and populations outside of Metropolitan Statistical Areas, which include cities of 50,000 or more and counties connected to these cities through commuting. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-classifications/what-is-rural.aspx>

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. Severe data limitations hamper standard quantitative assessments. Most migration data sources cannot adequately identify return migrants, especially those moving back to rural areas, and research findings vary considerably depending on who gets counted (von Reichert, 2002; Wilson et al., 2009). Also, return migration peaks among adults in their late 20s and 30s, an age period of migration that grabs fewer headlines compared with youth or retirement migration and garners less research attention than is warranted given its demographic influence and policy relevance.

This study used a qualitative, interview-based research approach to better understand why some people return to rural areas, why others choose not to return, and what impacts these returnees have on their home communities. Methods for interpreting interview results, borrowed from ethnographic research, describe the migration experience from an insider's perspective, in contrast to more common statistical assessments based on survey or census data. Interviews took place primarily at high school reunion events, because they provided the only opportunity to simultaneously interview stayers (who never moved away or did not move away for very long), returnees (who moved away for some significant period of time but had returned), and nonreturnees (who moved away and still lived elsewhere at the time of the interviews).

Background

The 10-year period after high school is the most “demographically dense” stage of life, when people migrate to complete their education, join the military, find their first jobs, get married, and build families (Rindfuss, 1991). Half of all residential moves occur during this crucial period for the development of skills, experience, and leadership capacity (Rogers and Raymer, 2002). Most rural out-migration occurs at this time as well, resulting in population losses among 20- to 30-year-olds of 20 percent or more each decade (Johnson and Cromartie, 2006). Less attention is given to rural migration gains among 30- to 40-year-olds and the children they bring with them. Among geographically disadvantaged rural counties (described in the next chapter), a 20-percent population loss among 25- to 29-year-olds was partially offset by a 10-percent gain among 30- to 34-year-olds during 2000 to 2010 (see figure 2). Immigration of young families and their children during this “settling down” period is a key marker of economic well-being for rural counties (McGranahan, Cromartie, and Wojan, 2010).

Return migration, usually defined as individuals moving back to their hometowns or other previous residences, has been a major component of migration among adults in their late 20s and 30s (Long, 1988). However, precise statistics on how many people return and who participates are difficult to construct and vary considerably from one data source to another. Statistics on return migration require a data source that measures an individual’s residential location at three points in time. Return migrants are defined as those living in the same geographic area at time points 1 and 3 but elsewhere in between. Quantitative assessments of the size and character of return migration depend on the specific geographic areas and time intervals used to measure migration. For instance, the American Community Survey (ACS) records State of birth, residence 1 year before the survey, and current residence. Thus, return migration statistics are available at the State level but not for individual counties or rural areas. In previous decades, the U.S. Census Bureau used a different time interval to measure migration (residence 5 years prior to the survey) that resulted in lower estimates of return migration occurring at longer average intervals.

Data measurement affects who gets counted among return migrants, their socioeconomic status compared with other groups, and their potential economic impact back home (von Reichert, 2002; Wilson et al., 2009). Influential economic studies, focused on short-interval return moves among initial job seekers, created a lasting impression of return moves as “failed migration” (DaVanzo, 1976; DaVanzo, 1983; and Herzog and Schlottman, 1982). Young workers, especially those with limited education and job-search skills, are especially prone to make initial moves based on imperfect information and to face difficulties securing employment in new destinations. Thus, short-term, “corrective” return moves were found to be concentrated among less educated migrants under 25 years of age (DaVanzo and Morrison, 1981).

More recent studies rejected the “failed migration” hypothesis, instead finding that return migration occurs relatively equally at all education levels (von Reichert, 2002). Beyond the hectic years immediately after high school, return migrants in their late 20s and 30s are more likely to be married, employed, working in a professional or managerial position, and better educated (Morrison and DaVanzo, 1986; Wilson et al., 2009). This view aligns with numerous qualitative studies characterizing

return migration as a “brain gain” for struggling regions in the United States and around the world (Latapí, 2009; Lianos and Pseiridis, 2009; Stack, 1996).

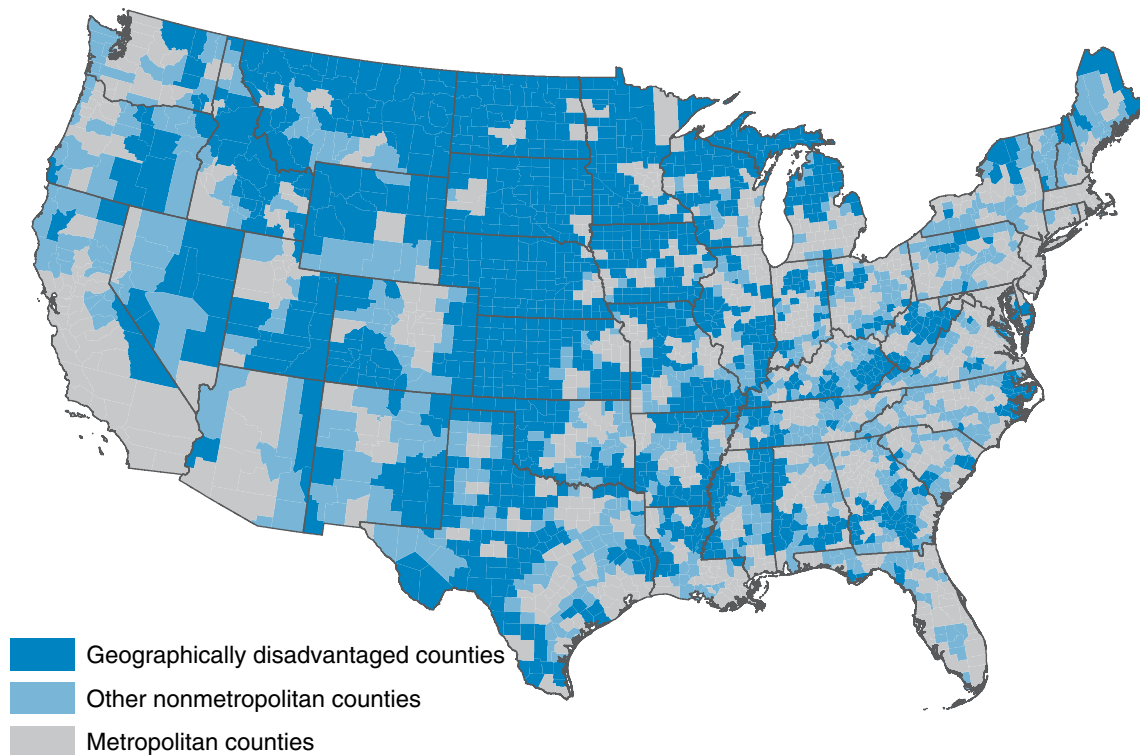
As noted, the size of rural return migration and the extent to which it offsets outmigration cannot be measured directly with Census data. An indirect measure is available that broadens the concept of return migration to include spouses, children, and others who are technically newcomers but move as part of return migration households (Cromartie and Stack, 1989). For the United States as a whole, roughly half of 25- to 40-year-old migrants during 1995 to 2000 were part of return migration streams (McGranahan, Cromartie, and Wojan, 2010). For rural, remote counties that struggle to attract newcomers, more than 80 percent of immigrants arrived as part of return migration streams.

The economic development impact of return migration is under-researched compared with retirees (Reeder and Bagi, 2014). Return migrants who are 25 to 40 years old may be more numerous than retirees and may have a more positive economic impact because they bring spouses and children with them and are joining the labor force near the beginning of their careers. Pronounced interest in retirees, despite their relatively low mobility, is due in part to their economic impact through local spending from nonemployment sources of income, such as real estate equity or other investment-based savings (Nelson, 2005). The potential impact of return migrants extends beyond such spending but recruitment strategies are underdeveloped compared with retiree programs. Understanding what draws people back to their home communities, what they require economically, and what they value in terms of community assets may provide key information for new economic development approaches.

Study Area: Geographically Disadvantaged Counties

Rural immigrants tend to move to counties near metropolitan areas, or other counties containing large towns (micropolitan areas), or to scenic areas with strong recreation- and tourism-based economies (Johnson and Cromartie, 2006). Conversely, rural counties that are geographically remote or relatively lacking in scenic amenities attract far fewer newcomers, thus their (much smaller) immigration flows include much higher proportions of returnees. This study focused on these “geographically disadvantaged” counties, not because return migration is unimportant elsewhere, but because these types of counties depend much more on attracting returnees to offset population loss. Community visits took place in a subset of nonmetropolitan counties, identified as geographically disadvantaged based on four indicators combined into a single index. Three indicators captured different aspects of remoteness: (1) size of nearby populations, using a formula that controls for distance; (2) distance to regional airports; and (3) distance to interstate highways. The relative presence or absence of attractive physical characteristics was measured using the fourth indicator, the ERS Natural Amenities Index, which itself combines different measures of pleasant climates, mountains, and bodies of water into a single index (McGranahan, 1999). The resulting set of 1,278 counties had combined remoteness and scenic amenity index scores below the national average (fig. 1).²

Figure 1
Geographically disadvantaged counties



Note: Geographically disadvantaged counties are geographically remote and relatively lacking in scenic amenities. Alaska and Hawaii were not included in this study.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service and University of Montana, Department of Geography.

² The ERS Natural Amenities Index ranks all U.S. counties on a national scale and combines different climate and landscape components. Several counties visited for this study featured one or more attractive landscape features (e.g., mountain ranges, wilderness areas, rivers, lakes) but had low combined scores compared with other locations.

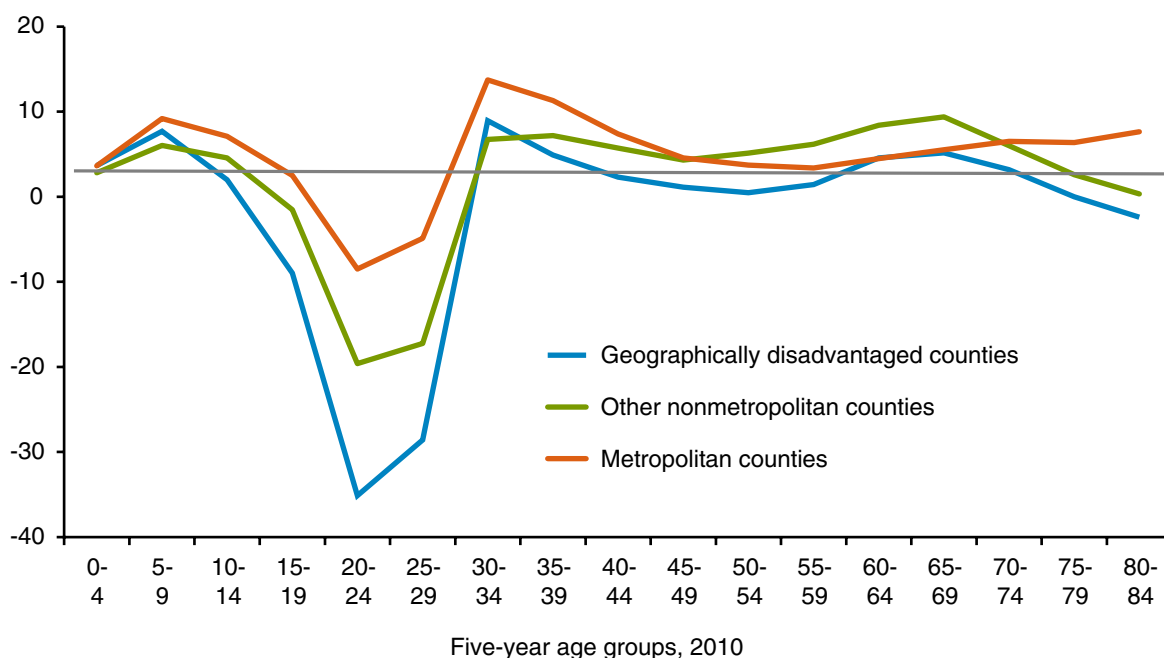
Most counties of the Great Plains, from North Dakota and Montana to western Texas, fall into the study area. Large clusters are also found in the Corn Belt (Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Illinois), the Intermountain West (Idaho, Nevada, Utah, Colorado), and Appalachia (West Virginia, Kentucky), with smaller clusters and individual counties dispersed throughout the rest of the country. Highly urbanized regions, such as in coastal States, contain far fewer geographically disadvantaged counties. Three-quarters of geographically disadvantaged counties experienced net outmigration during 2000 through 2010, compared with less than one-third of other nonmetropolitan counties. They typically lost young-adult populations at nearly twice the rates seen elsewhere (fig. 2). Median net migration rates for geographically disadvantaged counties were lower in all other age groups as well, with two notable exceptions: adults ages 30- to 34-years old and young children. Return migration likely plays a large role in these life-cycle migration trends, as remote rural counties make up some fraction of population lost in the years after high school by attracting returnees.

Geographically disadvantaged counties do not differ sharply from other nonmetropolitan counties on measures of economic performance or social well-being, based on comparisons of median county values (table 1). In fact, unemployment and poverty rates are slightly lower, per capita income and home ownership rates are slightly higher, and a higher percentage of adults 25 years or older graduated from high school. In part, these differences reflect a relative absence of hardships associated with rural minority status, as these counties have much higher percentages of non-Hispanic Whites (Lichter and Johnson, 2007). The challenges associated with geographic disadvantage show up

Figure 2

Net migration by age, 2000-10, relative to county population, 2010

Median percent county population change due to migration



Note: Geographically disadvantaged counties are geographically remote and relatively lacking in scenic amenities.
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service based on estimates from University of Wisconsin-Madison: <http://www.net-migration.wisc.edu/>

Table 1

Geographically disadvantaged counties show higher population loss and higher percent elderly

	Geographically disadvantaged counties	Other non-metropolitan counties	Metropolitan counties
----- Median county value -----			
Population			
Population size, 2010 (numbers of people)	11,061	32,923	99,478
Population density, 2010 (people per square mile)	17.7	52.2	170.7
Population change, 2010-13 (percent)	-0.8	-0.4	1.1
Natural change, 2010-13 (percent)	0.1	0.3	0.9
Net migration change, 2010-13 (percent)	-1.0	-0.7	0.2
Demographic characteristics			
Age 65 years or older, 2010 (percent)	17.7	15.7	13.5
Non-Hispanic White, 2010 (percent)	91.2	84.2	80.3
No high school degree, 2008-12 (percent)	14.3	17.7	12.9
College diploma or higher, 2008-12 (percent)	15.8	15.4	22.3
Economic indicators			
Unemployment rate, 2010 (percent)	8.20	9.90	9.00
Poverty rate, 2012 (percent)	16.10	18.70	14.70
Per capita income, 2008-12 (dollars)	21,867	20,970	25,165
Home ownership rate, 2008-12 (percent)	75.1	73.0	72.4
Employed in agriculture, 2008-12 (percent)	8.8	3.8	1.5
Employed in manufacturing, 2008-12 (percent)	10.7	12.4	11.4
Number of counties	1,278	745	1,083

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service, using data from U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau; and U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics.

primarily in demographic trends, including persistently higher population loss and an aging population. Nearly 18 percent of people are 65 years or older in the typical geographically disadvantaged county, compared with 16 percent in other nonmetropolitan counties and fewer than 14 percent in metropolitan areas.

Data and Methods

Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were employed to capture critical aspects of return migration—reasons for returning, reasons for not returning, and community impacts—as expressed by the migrants themselves. The approach is similar in many ways to a large number of recent ethnographic studies that explicitly address reasons for making return moves.³ These indepth case studies from around the world show return migration to be a complex social process that nonetheless displays similar features in different geographic settings. For instance, almost all studies find that family ties and social networks strongly influence the decision and timing of return moves (von Reichert, Cromartie, and Arthun, 2014b). The research reported here relied on shorter interviews and less immersive community visits than typically found in ethnographic research, but asked similar questions and followed similar procedures in collecting and interpreting data.⁴

Approximately 300 interviews took place at high school reunion events during 2008 and 2009, including at family picnics, happy hours, evening mixers, school tours, and dances. High school reunions were selected as the primary venues for these conversations because they included a large number of former residents visiting from out of town, making it possible to compare reasons for returning and not returning. Compared with other homecoming events, such as annual fairs, Fourth of July weekends, or centennial celebrations, class reunions made it easier to speak with people who grew up together, started their adult journeys at the same time, but made different migration choices.

Community Selection

Not all geographically disadvantaged counties were considered for community selection. Roughly one-quarter of these counties experienced net immigration during 2000 through 2007. The 21 communities visited for this study were selected from 942 rural counties that were both geographically disadvantaged and were losing population through net outmigration (fig. 3). Figure 3 shows the sites visited in their approximate location only, to avoid disclosure.

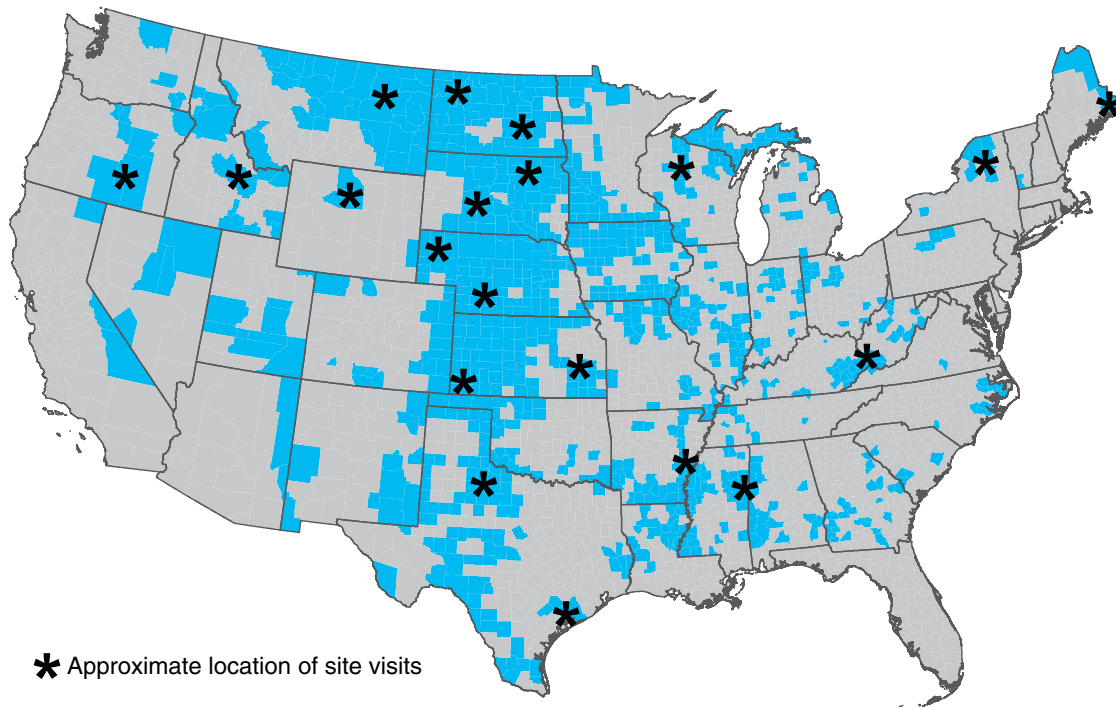
Selecting sites for community visits started with a high school database overlaid with the study area yielding approximately 2,400 potential reunion sites (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Prior research experience showed that very small schools typically opt for all-class reunions that attract smaller cohorts for any specific reunion year (von Reichert, 2000). For this reason, only the 1,570 high schools with over 150 students were considered. Using that set, we followed a selection process aimed at national coverage and containing a range of community population sizes and economic profiles. Reunion visits fell within the range of 10- to 30-year anniversaries, to optimize discussions of return moves that took place when partici-

³ These studies, primarily focused on international return migration, are summarized in von Reichert et al. (2014a, 2014b). They are labeled “ethnographic” because they follow a more indepth and geographically focused approach to field interviews, involving longer time spent in fewer places. McHugh (2000) provides a summary of the critical insights derived from ethnographic studies in migration, especially return migration.

⁴ Field-based surveys, including some ethnographic studies, were a central component of USDA research on rural migration from the 1910s until the 1950s (Larson and Zimmerman, 2003). Landmark ethnographic studies exploring more recent aspects of migration to U.S. rural communities include books by Janet Fitchen (1991), Sonya Saloman (2003), and Carol Stack (1996).

Figure 3

Study area: Geographically disadvantaged counties with net migration loss, 2000-07



Note: Geographically disadvantaged counties are geographically remote and relatively lacking in scenic amenities. Net migration estimates come from the U.S. Census Bureau. Alaska and Hawaii were not included in this study. Source: USDA, Economic Research Service and University of Montana, Department of Geography.

pants were 25 to 35 years old. Receiving permission to attend reunions depended on establishing rapport with reunion organizers, who were identified from telephone calls to schools, newspapers, city governments, Chambers of Commerce, and potential reunion venues.⁵ Telephone calls with reunion organizers proved more effective than e-mails in establishing trust and receiving permission to attend reunion events. The majority of organizers who were contacted agreed to our visits, and their generous collaboration was essential to the success of the project. Attempts to connect with several communities had to be dropped because of their lack of response to voice messages or e-mails. Only three reunion organizers explicitly rejected requests, mostly out of privacy concerns.

Interview Methods

Interviews at reunions were designed to be relatively short but open-ended, to minimize intrusion but allow for longer conversations with participants willing to take the extra time. They averaged 11 minutes in length but ranged from less than 5 minutes to more than a half hour. Most interviews were conducted in the earlier part of the gathering, also to avoid too much interruption. All interviews included a series of questions exploring reasons for staying, returning, or not returning. An

⁵ Reunion-related social-networking websites, such as Facebook or Classmates.com, were rarely used in rural areas in 2008 but had noticeably increased in 2009.

initial set of questions established the migration category (see box, “Identifying Return Migrants, Nonreturn Migrants, and Stayers”). Subsequent questions necessarily varied by migrant type. Stayers were asked if they had ever considered moving away and what factors influenced the decision to stay. Returnees were asked to discuss reasons for moving away in the first place and reasons for returning. They were also prompted to describe the impact they had made on their home communities after returning, for instance, by starting businesses and hiring employees, assuming leadership positions, or volunteering. Nonreturnees were asked, “Have you thought about moving back? Why or why not?” For all migrant types, questions were included about marital status, presence of children, parental ties, educational pathways, and current occupations.

On average, we spoke with 15 reunion attendees per community, with the highest number being 28 and the lowest being 5. Fewer interviews took place on visits limited to a single reunion event for one high school class and attended by one interviewer. More interviews were possible in the seven communities that hosted multiple class reunions on the same weekend and during the five community visits attended by more than one interviewer.

Before or after high school reunions, 2 or 3 days were spent in each town interviewing community and business leaders, usually in previously arranged meetings. These conversations provided contextual information about the social and economic factors influencing the decision to return or not return, as well as specific information about community impacts of returnees. On average, we spoke with five leaders per community. Conversations lasted from 20 minutes to well over an hour and included several group interviews. Many persons contacted as community leaders or interviewed in chance encounters were themselves returnees, and their stories were included in the findings.

Identifying Return Migrants, Nonreturn Migrants, and Stayers

The question “Where do you live now?” revealed that nearly 60 percent of reunion interviewees (183 out of 309) lived elsewhere, usually in much larger cities or towns. These nonreturnees constitute the unique component of this study, because they are potential returnees to rural areas who are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to track down and interview outside reunion events. Nonreturnees were diverse with respect to migration histories. Most moved away right after high school and many made additional moves. Some returned and left again, while others returned to the region but not close enough to be classified as returning to their home community. Location within a 30-minute drive to the home community was used as a rule of thumb to distinguish returnees and nonreturnees, but was applied flexibly depending on other questions showing the relative strength of community attachments.

Those who lived in or near their town of high school graduation were asked “Did you always live here?” Among those who responded “no” to this question, 94 were classified as returnees, including 22 who came home directly after completing college. Included among returnees were those who moved back to a location within a 30-minute drive of their home town, as long as they self-identified as returnees and spoke of activity spaces that included the town of high school graduation. The 32 interviewees identified as stayers were those who answered “yes” when asked “Did you always live here?” along with a small number who answered “no” but had lived away for a relatively short period.

Almost all interviews were recorded, with permission. Data were transcribed and imported into NVivo, a software package used to organize text data, keep track of interviewee and community attributes, and code and connect themes as they were identified (QSR International, 2009). NVivo uses “nodes” to label and group similar answers to key questions (e.g., no jobs here; prefer big city amenities; came back for parents). Labels were not preselected, but emerged as each interview was analyzed. Labels evolved as interview segments were added, often split into subcategories or later combined.

Quotes used in this report were carefully chosen to represent key findings identified through the interview interpretation process. Many quotes were streamlined for clarity. Sections that were repetitive or irrelevant were removed and replaced with ellipses. Bracketed paraphrasing was used in limited cases for clarity, but more often to replace specific names of people or places. Otherwise, original wording was used.

Limitations of the Approach

High school reunions do not attract a representative sample of either returnees or nonreturnees. Classmates are more likely to attend reunions if they live close by, think favorably of their childhood and high school experience, maintain social ties with other classmates, or still have family members living back home. These same attributes increase the likelihood of returning home or considering such a move. Those who perceive themselves to be leading successful lives are more likely to attend reunions and engage in longer, more informative interviews. Employed and financially secure classmates are over-represented in this study, along with married couples, parents, professionals, and community leaders. Interviews did document return moves caused by career or financial setbacks, failed relationships, or difficulties adjusting to new settings, but in numbers that were likely not representative of the community at large. This selection bias makes reunions problematic for overall cohort representation, but well suited for reaching return migrants and potential returnees who are likely to have a positive economic impact on their home communities.

Other factors contributed to disproportionate contact with more successful classmates. First, the necessity of avoiding very small high schools (less than 150 students) meant that visits were made to larger than average communities for the study area. Such places were better positioned economically to attract relatively successful people back home. Second, the approach provided no information on high school classmates who did not graduate, though very high graduation rates in most study-area counties mitigated this factor. Third, organizers on multiple occasions described low attendance among stayers. Compared with classmates who had spent time away, stayers were less likely to have attended college or developed professional careers.

The interview process itself contained an inherent bias against interviewing stayers, who in the end made up only 10 percent of attendees interviewed. At each event, we were introduced as a research team interested in migration. Most reunion organizers and classmates were helpful in pointing us toward migrants. Interviewers counted only six cases in which reunion attendees declined to be interviewed. Findings from stayers, whose interviews were much shorter than average, are not included directly in this report, but their stories provided context on the draw of rural communities that complemented insights from migrants.

Over 95 percent of reunion interviews were with non-Hispanic Whites. In large part, this corresponded with the composition of the study area during the relevant high school graduation years (1978 to 1999). In 1990, 85 percent of the study-area residents were non-Hispanic Whites, 9 percent were non-Hispanic African-Americans, and 4 percent were Hispanics. At reunion visits in the rural South, interviews were conducted with African Americans, but far too few to consider racial dimensions of rural return migration. Similarly, we encountered and interviewed very few Hispanics, thus the findings reported here are most telling of non-Hispanic Whites.

Results

Reasons for Returning and Not Returning

The presence of family members and the desire to raise children back home were primary motivators among return migrants interviewed for this study. Employment options and community assets also shaped decisions to move back or to continue living away from home. These three themes—family, jobs, community—are described separately below. However, many of the quotes reveal how these components often worked in tandem. For instance, the odds of acting on family-related motivations were either enhanced or diminished by assessments of school quality or other aspects of community attractiveness.

Family-related reasons. Most returnees interviewed for this study 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 ... and make a difference in a community. Just to raise kids ... who could pursue their own life of happiness. 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.*⁶

My brother and his wife decided to move back, and so he is back with his wife and three kids, and it's just really fun to have all my nephews and my niece around. The [reason] we are back ... is because of family moving back here. We wanted our kids to know their cousins.

Returnees expressed both practical and emotional aspects of parental engagement:

Luckily ... there are so many people that are there to support you and help you, ...like my family helping out with renovating and with watching the kids. ... My grandpas are still around and they are able to help babysit ... so I haven't had to get him into daycare, which is nice.

We ... moved back for our children—to make some memories with our parents.

Many described shifts in their personal attitudes in favor of living at home after becoming parents, including two returnees speaking as though their stories applied to others as well:

They want to come back because their parents or grandparents live here. They want to be close to their family. Even though they've gone away and spread their wings and gone south or north of here, they ... realize it's in the back of their head that they had a great childhood, they had good friends, they were involved in multiple things from sports to dance. ... It's a great community to raise a family. It's not so great as a profession, but it's a great commu-

⁶ In this report, quotes are placed in italics rather than using quote marks to enhance readability and create more contrast with the rest of the text.

nity to raise [kids] and I think that's what a lot of people come back here for. They thought, I had just a really good life, and I want that for my children.

Usually the reason you leave the roost, the house, the nest is because you think there's something better on the other side—better job, better paying job. And then you go there and you find out, well yeah, it pays more, but the cost of living is more, there's more crime. ... Well, you were brought up here for 18-24 years, it's your house ... You come home because you finally have found that inner peace within yourself, ... that comfort zone.

For some, 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 here.

Nonreturnees were more likely than returnees to be single or to be married but not planning on having children. For many of them, lack of incentives centered on child-raising reduced motivations to return:

I don't think I would [move back] even though it was a wholesome upbringing. ... I like it to be a little bit larger... but maybe if I had a family. I might come here if I had a wife and kids because it's a wholesome place to go. ... I think if I had a family, I would not be prejudiced against this at all.

For others, diminished family and social ties reduced the likelihood of returning:

[Moving back] would have been easier, but her father ... got a job in another town and he did have to move away. If they would have been here and my father and mother would have been here, it would have been a lot easier.

My friends moved from here, so I really don't have anything to go back to. It's definitely a personal thing, personal relationships. I don't have any there anymore.

Like all residential relocations, return moves are typically much easier to make when children are very young and diminish considerably for families with middle- and high-school students. This helps explain why migration rates generally are considerably lower for 40- to 60-year-olds compared with 25- to 40-year-olds. The timing of migration emerged as an issue for some couples who had considered returning:

He wanted to come back and I didn't, and then when I wanted to come back, he didn't, and then it just got to the point to where our kids were old enough that we weren't going to move them and uproot them out of the schools and everything. So we did think about coming back, ... but we were never on the same page.

I think family is a big pull. Our kids are starting to get a little older, so sadly, it's not as much of a pull as they're so involved in things now. Four or five years ago, it was a huge draw. You get to a certain age where your kids are mostly grown and all those things change. ... So if you get to the next 10 years, we're not likely to come back at all.

It's important to me for them to stay in the same place and not move around and leave their friends. And so, I told my husband, if we are going to move back, ... it has to be before they get into middle school, otherwise we are going to stay until they graduate from high school.

Relatively few moves back home 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 likely to be still working (von Reichert, Cromartie, and Arthun, 2013). But several returnees described moving back to help parents with family-run businesses, including farms:

I came back to farm.... Mom and Dad live on a farm, and he's 68 and he needs help. I came back every summer, regardless of where I was. I came back and helped him on the farm and played baseball with our town team. ... This felt like the right place to be.

Along with a strong desire to share family connections, returnees sought familiar environments they perceived to be safer for their children, less anonymous and more easygoing:

It's a smaller community. If the kids want to walk around and go do things, which is what I did as a kid, ... there's a comfort level more than anything, and life seems to kind of ... you can feel it slow down when you get out here.

[Children] can do lots of different things in a small town. We send them down to the grocery store and they can go ride bikes. ... [If] they're out doing something wrong, somebody's going to call us and tell us. That type of thing still goes on in small towns. I mean, bad things happen, too, but ... that was the biggest thing for us. We wanted our kids to be able to grow up and feel like they could do anything they wanted.

Crime and unhealthy social environments for teenagers were viewed as disadvantages for raising children in larger cities. A common perception that rural towns were safer for kids came through in conversations with nonreturnees as well as returnees:

I think the draw of the small towns is for raising children. In [our current location], we even worry about letting them go out and ride their bikes. In rural towns as kids, I think you can just let them go and be themselves, explore, do stuff, and [our kids] don't get that opportunity. ... They don't get that opportunity to be by themselves and learn how to take care of themselves. I can understand people who stay in the smaller towns for that reason.

I do feel like I have to keep closer tabs on my kids. We walked to school without supervision, that kind of stuff, but now I wouldn't let my kids walk to school without me. They walk but with me. So yeah, there is definitely a difference and maybe it is a perception, but it is definitely my perception.

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 were often critical of the educational experience offered in small towns:

If they want the young families that are going to revitalize their community, they need to keep their school systems really strong. That's bigger than anything. That would be the one

factor that would bring us back that we think about from time to time. I get the impression it's not the same as it used to be.

The opportunities aren't here like they are closer to the city, and my son is real active in sports and we are looking at possible scholarships and stuff like that. So, the bigger our school, the more opportunities.

Conversely, returnees drawn to hometown schools touted smaller class sizes, closer relations with teachers, and better chances for kids to play for school teams:

You want your kids to ... be able to do anything they want. If they want to do sports, great. If they want to do sports and they want to do band, they can do both in a small town. They can do all kinds of sports. They can do lots of different things in a small town.

My kids are going to get a great education. They're in ... with 20 kids at the most in 1 classroom. I think it's mainly 16, and they can go on and do whatever they want.

I would say, the strengths are raising your children in a small-town environment. ... You know ... who their friends are You have that power of knowing a little bit more about your children and their upbringing. 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. I would say that is probably the main strength.

The importance of family formation as a key triggering event highlights the connection between life-course changes, shifts in residential preferences, and social expectations. At earlier life stages, returning was often viewed as less attractive. Classmates and community leaders alike pointed out that expectations of leaving a rural place right after high school were deeply entrenched, creating a culture that promoted rural population loss. Some of them wished for a culture shift that also promoted family-centered return migration at later life stages:

Growing up, it was the mindset of our community that you grow up, you get educated, and if you're going to find a good-paying job, it's more than likely you're going to leave the community. Or you grow up hoping you'll be leaving the community, which is not a good culture to instill in your young people. They need to get something going in the school systems. ... They need to get into the culture of the community and get involved in the school systems and the youth programs and instill the idea that this is a good place to live and stay and hope, for the long term, to raise your family there. [a returnee]

You're from a small community, right? How many times did you hear yourself or friends or people like that say "get your high school education, go to college, and then go someplace and get a real job?"... [a community leader]

Employment-related reasons. The ability to make return moves depended on securing employment back home, a fact well known to community leaders:

It is a great place to raise a family and a great school system and things like that, but it just doesn't have enough commercial or job opportunities to keep people coming back.

Employment barriers were often best expressed by nonreturnees. Roughly half of nonreturnees made it clear they had never considered moving back home and probably never would. For some it was simply a strong preference for city living, especially the cultural amenities, while 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:

I wouldn't [move back] because my primary interest is in chemistry. I don't see any opportunities here. Also the salary I get out there, I don't think there's any chance I would make anything close to that here. Although I'm sure the houses cost less, ... I love the river, but I've no interest in moving back. ... It just doesn't have a lot of opportunities for university graduates, the industry, whatever is needed for the higher level, white-collar jobs.

Other nonreturnees, who had seriously considered returning or were simply more amenable to the idea, also cited low wages and lack of career opportunities as the primary barrier:

We would like to [move back] in some respects but, in reality, it's terrible about the money deal. There are no jobs here. I'm making more money than I ever dreamed possible. So [working here] you would be [at] less than half your pay.

I don't know, there are basically no jobs around here for what I'm doing, I guess. So the money's not around here. But, yeah, I mean I grew up here all my life. If the place would grow. ... They're talking about a power plant coming in, that would actually populate the area, then yeah. ... My mom and dad are here and three of my siblings.

There is not any way to really support yourself. ... 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 with limited employment options. At the same time, a surprising number of good jobs for administrators, managers, and other professionals were hard to fill, reflecting well-known recruitment challenges in rural areas lacking scenic amenities. Community leaders described chronic labor shortages of various kinds in both the public and private sector, especially for technical workers with specific, sought-after skills:

The business leaders I've talked to, they've struggled to find enough good-quality workers. ... That's why they're really willing to work with us, at the high school, to try to develop their own workers here.

They also understood the advantages of recruiting former residents and provided numerous examples of return migrants filling these types of positions:

He is from [here] originally, he actually worked for our bank. We brought him back in to work for our bank, and then he worked, well, 5 years here and then had the job opportunity as the Economic Development Council director, and what a fabulous opportunity for him and for all of us too to have somebody really great in that position. You know a person that knew the area and understands the area and loves the area as much as my husband and other Main Street people do. ... We really seek them out, and they in turn know that we are here.

... I mean I know the things that have enticed people I know to move back. [A friend] was in Nashville. ... She is an actor and director, and she does the [local theater group] here. She is the director of that theater company. She talked to the mayor a lot before she came back.

A number of returns were prompted by job openings, often learned about through long-established social networks (von Reichert, Cromartie, and Arthun, 2011). Returnees moved into family businesses—insurance companies, newspapers, real estate agencies, restaurants, retail stores, manufacturing plants, farms—or took over businesses from retiring owners. In the majority of cases, job opportunities were a necessary but not motivating factor:

I think my biggest worry was a job, finding jobs that would be able to support families. ... That was probably the reason I didn't move back sooner.

They are trying to raise kids in Dallas, and they say, "We are not going to do this." And they come home simply because they have seen a better way to have a family. And they come here, and they make a living one way or another.

Career and financial sacrifices were a recurring theme. Migration research has shown that people who move to high-amenity areas often engage in financial tradeoffs, paying more for housing and settling for lower earnings in exchange for the scenery and recreation opportunities (von Reichert and Rudzitis, 1994). Returnees described similar sacrifices to take advantage of family ties and other social amenities offered by home communities:

We have five children, and I thought it would be a good place to raise a family. I wanted my kids to have a good life. They had a good life in the big city but not as good as here. ... If it was just me and the wife, I would have stayed down there because financially we were better off.

I've turned down two promotions because my kids absolutely do not want to leave the area they're in. It may be [my] loss and the kids' gain. ... If I hadn't had kids I would have probably moved.

Migration researchers distinguish between situations in which “people follow jobs” and others in which “jobs follow people.” Returnees interviewed for this study were not drawn back home by career opportunities for the most part—most were not following jobs. As one community leader put it:

You have to want to live here. This must be the kind of lifestyle you want.

Community-related reasons. Most return migrants maintained strong ties to family and friends while away and described many 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 because it's so peaceful. ... You don't realize it until you leave here and come back just how quiet it is and how friendly everybody is.

It's a different way of life. Here, entertainment is call some people over, fire up the grill, have some hamburgers, some steaks or whatever, watch the football game. In the city, it's going out to dinner, it's going to this, it's going to a concert. You're constantly running. To me, a small community is an opportunity to catch your breath, slow down, appreciate the things that are important to you and just relax.

If I could put it in one sentence why I'm here, it's quality of life. It's why I'm here. ... I come down that road when I play golf here and do you know how many people are waiting to play golf? None. You just drive in and play golf.

I think the draw is—I can say this—it's a much simpler pace. I don't mind going to [big cities]. Been there, done that, but I don't want to stay there for long, the traffic, the crime. It's those kinds of things. It's the good life, just like it says on the State sign coming in. It's nice being out here in wide open spaces.

Still other returnees valued the opportunities to volunteer and make a difference. Themes of commitment and obligation to the community at large came through in many discussions. Feelings of trust and willingness to help were cited as attractive qualities of small towns:

You could ask anyone in this place for a hundred dollars and they would give it to you right now, with no questions asked. Not that it's money. You could ask anyone for anything, and they would give it to you. It's a small-town thing.

This is a great community. If you ever have a problem, if someone dies in your family, your car gets totaled, there are people who reach out and go the extra mile to help you. I've seen that. I've done it since I've been back here.

The contrast between returnees and nonreturnees was often most striking in terms of how they valued the social milieu of small towns, with returnees able to thrive or accept tight-knit networks of friends, family, co-workers, and neighbors:

Small communities, rural communities, everybody is connected and related somehow, and that is why I would move back and that's why I like [my current hometown], as it's the same way.

Too much familiarity was often cited as a reason for not returning by people who preferred the greater sense of privacy available in big cities:

When you get to a bigger area, people tend to leave you alone. There is a lot less judgment.

Physical aspects of rural home communities also influenced decisions to return back home or not. The physical compactness of the community made for shorter trips for work, shopping, and visiting family. Proximity to natural landscapes was highly valued. Frequent camping trips and other recreational activities—hunting, fishing, hiking—were strong draws for families with children, with many parents wanting to pass on experiences they had growing up:

There are wide open spaces, rural. ... My dad was the game warden, you go to the mountains, you fish, you learn sports.

I like to hunt ,so it's nice to get back to a rural area where I still know people and I can go up and say, "Remember me? Can I still hunt?"

I've been in New York City and I loved it, it was great. But open spaces, I don't think anything beats that. I don't like being crammed in, you know.

Lack of big-city amenities—cultural events, shopping and dining options—and a vibrant downtown were frequently mentioned by those with no plans to return:

I think Des Moines is probably the smallest city we could ever live in. ... We felt like we were compromising a lot to even move to Des Moines. The breadth of stuff that there is to do in the city. We both really like Indian food and Thai food.

When you look at the characteristics of those [bigger] places, we just don't have enough of that, not even close you know. Boulder, no, you are not going to get these smart kids to come here, there is not enough. I don't know who exactly this [town] can appeal to, we need more retailers on Main Street, and we have had a couple of them pop up. That is like a fundamental project. ... We need another restaurant, we need another coffee shop.

It is sad when you see all these little towns just ... I mean, there's nothing downtown. There used to be a dime store. ... I used to go to and everything. There's nothing. [A friend's] parents used to own the hardware store when we were growing up, and it's since closed down.

Interviews with returnees revealed a high level of value placed on the existence of municipal parks, community centers, bike paths, swimming pools, and other recreational infrastructure:

... The shopping is probably one [negative] because you have to drive 100 miles to go somewhere. But other than that, everything's a [positive]. 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.

All I can do is think about what they've done now to clean up the town. They've put [through] new laws ... to clean it up. The new school is going to be great. Park systems, they've added that in, recreation. The ... youth organization, it's incredible, what they've done to get younger kids, our kids' age, active in the community.

Community leaders readily pointed out recent recreational investments and understood their importance in making their towns more attractive to newcomers and returnees alike. The frequency with which these types of facilities were touted corresponds with the family-oriented nature of most return moves and parallels similarly frequent comments by returnees that the quality of the local schools was a fundamental draw. These findings provide evidence that specific types of investments in community facilities could enhance population potential and economic growth.

How Return Migrants Impact Home Communities

Discussions with return migrants and community leaders provided information about migration impacts not easily captured with traditional data. In addition to uncovering demographic and economic impacts, this interview-based approach showed how return migration affects levels of community involvement and overall social cohesion.

Demographic impacts. Migration into and out of rural communities not only influences population size, it reshapes the age structure, changes education levels, and alters other demographic features of places over time. Communities visited for this study were experiencing population loss through net outmigration and an aging of the population due to the concentration of outmigration among rural youth. Previous research on return migration makes clear that overall numbers in return migration flows tend to be small on average, compared with initial outmigration streams. However, return migrants do replenish the population to some degree, and those with families add more people back into the population than were removed when they left on their own.

By including children, return migration raises the future population potential of the community to a far greater degree than retiree migration. Conversations with recent returnees having three or more children were common, and interviewees were often aware of their demographic impact. Children of returnees are typically quite young, giving them a better chance to establish strong friendships and other ties to the community that further increases future population potential.

The most talked-about age-related impact of return migration was on the size and quality of hometown schools. On the one hand, interviewees were well aware of shrinking school populations and the challenges posed by increasingly limited resources. On the other hand, many returnees described closer relationships with teachers, benefits from smaller class sizes, and increased involvement in school-related parental activities as major benefits of coming back home. 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.

In addition to adding to current residents and future population potential, return migration invariably increases average levels of education and technical skills. Return migrants typically moved back after spending several years away. Most attended college, then spent time working or serving in the military. The education, skills, and experience gained while away injected much needed human capital assets into struggling rural communities. Returnees described themselves and their spouses as motivated and well suited to take on leadership roles, given the human capital gained while away, their outside and local knowledge, and their ties to the community:

I went to cooking school and I am really interested in culinary history. ... I have a good friend ... who grew up here. ... She was away ... for, I can't remember if it was 3 years or 6 years. ... She has an interest in these sorts of things too, so, for example, there is an arts council that has been re-established, and so I have a few contacts from just being out in the world that may help us out. ... I have been ... proposing to her that we start some culinary tours and things that will end up bringing tourism into this part of the State, because people will travel, I think, for [such] things.

It is important to bring back educated people so that they become part of your city council, school boards and various other things. ... People who are willing to think outside the box, ... those positive people ... who, you know, are always looking to make things better.

In a small way, this pattern helps alleviate the effects of the rural “brain drain” caused by the outmigration (and nonreturn) of the “best and brightest” among high school graduates in these communi-

ties. Close community ties enhanced the odds among returnees of translating their education and training into substantial economic and social benefits: *Because I'm from here, I didn't have to break through that layer of mistrust, ... and I think I've done a lot of good.*

Economic impacts. Immigrants of all ages boost local economies, starting with spending to buy homes and getting settled in. By adding back to the population, return migrants boost the demand for local services (grocery stores, bowling alleys, car repair shops) and lower per capita costs of providing police protection and other public services. These types of impacts take place whether a town is growing rapidly or declining in population. Community leaders in small towns spoke often of the importance of bolstering populations in order to keep services in place.

Interviews with community leaders provided numerous examples of recruitment challenges:

We have a doctor. ... He is cutting back his hours, and I think he would like to look at [retirement]. But it is a challenge to get somebody to come in and fill those shoes.

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. Among the 55 community leaders who described their migration status (out of a total of 108), 35 were returnees. An additional 20 interviews with return migrants took place outside reunion venues, such as through chance encounters with shopkeepers. Many described bringing home an increased level of confidence in interacting with and communicating ideas to others:

I think a lot of it is perspective. ... Once you have experience from outside your community, ... whether ... from watching ... local governments and watching ... people and how they function, or watching businesses and how they operate, it is a lot different than what you see in this community. ... There is a different idea base. ...

In the types of relatively isolated and sparsely settled rural regions selected for this study, a disproportionate percentage of workers were self-employed. Entrepreneurship shaped the culture to a large degree, especially in agricultural communities. Many returnees rejoined family farms or ranches, increasing the chances that the land would stay in the family and in production by locally based operators. Many more returnees spoke of taking over or joining manufacturing operations, banks, insurance companies, restaurants, and other retail establishments. By expanding an already sizeable, multistate 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.

Communities benefited in diverse ways from self-employed returnees. In a number of cases, interviewees described taking over establishments from retiring owners who would have closed the business without a buyer. Conversations outside of reunion events included several with owners or managers of downtown retail stores. Some had succeeded by bundling services in new and complementary ways—for instance, by combining an existing flower shop with tuxedo rental and dry cleaning services. In another example, a husband and wife turned a decaying landmark building on Main Street into a regionally known photo studio. Intimate knowledge of local culture and tastes, combined with creativity and with experience accrued while away, led to a successful business typically found in larger cities.

Return migrants who moved into rural downtowns as entrepreneurs not only took advantage of cheaper rents, they sometimes filled vacant storefronts and help maintained the viability of downtown districts. In many cases, returnee businesses 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. In some communities, return migrants felt isolated as beginning entrepreneurs, not receiving a lot of support during their startup period. Many other communities supported new businesses with loans, technical assistance, and networking through Chambers of Commerce and other business groups, according to several interviews with community leaders:

You know, for people to come back, there has to be something for them to do. Sometimes that is a job for them to do, but also things for them to be involved with. ... It's nice to know that, even if there isn't something, if you start it, the town will be pretty supportive of it. Like the civic center here, or like the local theater, ... a lot of people I know try to go every weekend because they want to support it and keep it going. I think [the town] is open to having people come back and letting them be involved.

Telecommuting did not seem to be a major strategy in overcoming employment challenges—only a small number of returnees interviewed were working remotely. This may have changed in intervening years with increased access to high-speed Internet funded by the National Broadband Initiative, which started a year after these interviews took place. A few returnees added jobs in e-commerce or maintained urban-based jobs by relying on professional networks and new strategies for working remotely:

I make court appearances by telephone because the traffic is so bad in Atlanta, ... I have to go back once a year, ... but otherwise I do all my work from here.

Social impacts. Returnees added myriad social benefits through office-holding, charity work, and participation in school activities, recreation projects and business associations. Community leaders described difficulties recruiting young people to fill leadership positions in towns with declining populations, and thus welcomed the commitment and sense of obligation to hometowns they so often heard from returnees.

It easier to get involved because people know each other, and you kind of work together to get things accomplished. You do things because it's your neighbors there. It's not just a faceless person. You do what you have to do.

I can't feel like I make a difference in a big city like I can in a small town. ... I like to help people, and I can do that here.

Volunteering on the part of return migrants took many forms. Schools and recreation groups in particular benefited from high levels of parental commitment, and returnees often described the satisfaction derived from involvement with their children. In these small communities, people who return home were quickly tapped to help out, reflecting high social expectations for civic engagement. Conversations revealed feelings of belonging and social connections that promoted community involvement and motivated returnees to get involved:

I showed up, and I kind of "got told" I was going to be on the volunteer fire department.

I think it's a lot easier to be able to make a difference when you have your influence and state your opinions and make sure that you can get your point across a little bit easier.

Returnees filled leadership roles in a broad range of organizations, some dealing with economic development (Chambers of Commerce, regional development councils), others with community governance and infrastructure (school boards, city councils, fire protection groups, Main Street project teams), some covering resource issues (land-use planning, water protection, grazing and land management), and more. They provided support out of their understanding of social expectations and contributed toward raising the capacity of rural towns to sustain community functions in the face of limited financial resources:

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.

You know you are required to serve on certain boards, just because it is good to be involved in the community. ... If you are a good leader, you just need to become involved in the community always.

Conclusions

Return migration plays a vital role in rural America, but much-needed information about rates of return migration, the timing of moves back home, and the economic impacts of returnees is not available through standard quantitative assessments. The research reported here used a strictly qualitative, interview-based approach to document reasons for moving back, reasons for not moving back, and the impacts of return migration on rural home communities. The study did not encompass all of rural America, but rather focused on geographically disadvantaged counties—remote areas lacking high scenic amenities—because such places find it difficult to attract newcomers and thus depend much more on return migrants to maintain population. The study also focused on relatively successful return and nonreturn migrants in their late 20s and 30s who were attending high school reunions. Earlier research that focused on younger cohorts left a lasting impression that returning home was a form of “failed migration,” because 18- to 25-year-olds engage more in short-term, corrective return moves following difficulties encountered away from home. Returnees interviewed for this study were more likely to be settling down into professional or entrepreneurial careers, taking on leadership positions, and raising families.

Interviews at high school reunions and with community leaders showed that career constraints and limited rural employment opportunities were critical barriers for nonreturnees who had considered moving back home. Roughly half of the nonreturnees interviewed were open to the possibility of returning or had considered such a move at one time, and the majority of these nonreturnees cited work-related barriers as the primary reason for staying away. Those choosing to return came back primarily for family reasons and found ways to secure or create employment. Career sacrifices to meet family needs showed up in many returnee interviews. They are similar to tradeoffs made by people moving to popular resort destinations, who pay more for housing, food, and other necessities, while earning less, in exchange for recreational amenities. Those intent on returning to rural communities with fewer natural amenities sometimes waited until the right job opened up or relied on creative career choices. Many started their own businesses, sometimes with little or no previous experience.

Family-based motivations were listed first and foremost as the reason for returning home. Few cases of return migration could be described as motivated primarily by employment decisions or place ties. In the flow of conversations, family-based reasons were shown to be tightly intertwined with employment factors and issues of community attractiveness. In addition to the presence of parents, returnees valued recreational opportunities and wilderness access. Camping, hunting, and fishing were major draws in those settings where such assets existed. Returnees viewed new schools, parks, bike trails, and other community investments favorably, describing them as critical assets for themselves and their children. Nonreturnees described numerous shortcomings that outweighed family ties, such as limited shopping choices, fewer restaurants and cultural venues, and not enough kid-friendly activities.

For aging rural communities facing labor market shortages, dwindling school enrollments, and possibly the loss of their schools through consolidation, student populations are critical. The majority of returnees interviewed for this study brought spouses and children back with them, increasing the short-term and long-term population. Frequently, one person left but returned with

three or more people. Their children were typically quite young, thus were well placed to develop strong place ties over time and increase the odds of further population growth.

Return migrants who return in their late 20s and 30s bring back much-needed human capital in the form of advanced education, job skills, and life experiences. In all communities visited, returnees constituted a significant portion of people in business and leadership positions. They moved into professional positions that were often hard to fill. Entrepreneurial activities and self-employment of many return migrants added to the employment base and expanded available services. Interviews showed how decisions to move back were grounded in social relations that promoted civic engagement. While they mainly moved back for their children and parents, return migrants valued involvement in familiar social networks and the opportunities to make a difference in their rural hometowns.

Policies aimed at encouraging return migration may help with economic challenges that have increased in the aftermath of the Great Recession. The number of rural counties experiencing population loss from net outmigration jumped from under 1,100 in 2004-06 to over 1,500 in 2010-2012. Repopulating rural communities is an explicit aim of the current USDA Strategic Plan for 2010-2015. 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 an inevitable and highly encouraged rite of passage from adolescence into adulthood (Carr and Kefalas, 2009). Several community leaders wanted to modify this mindset: while talented high school graduates are rightly encouraged to move away to gain education and skills, they should also 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 a population of our rural communities and rural America, 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 there.

Professional opportunities may be limited in small communities, but they do exist in health care, schools, finance, utilities, and the like. In a return-migration scenario, human capital investments made elsewhere by these young adults translate down the road into valuable community assets. Interviews show that being known, being recognized, and being able to make a difference are important benefits of the return-migration decision.

Many States and rural communities invest in strategies to attract retirees, whose migration tendencies have been thoroughly scrutinized. Many retirees are also returning to home communities and making positive economic contributions, such as buying homes, increasing tax revenues, providing leadership experience, and volunteering. The potential for younger return migrants to replenish rural populations and revive struggling economies is arguably higher compared with retirees, but remains largely unexplored by researchers and policymakers. In most geographical settings, the bulk of return migration occurs when younger adults settle into careers and begin building families. People in the 25- to 35-year-old age groups are not only adding to the labor force and to school enrollment,

they are in a strong position to take on long-term entrepreneurial and leadership roles. Returnees are especially well positioned to make positive community impacts. 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.

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