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# Factors Affecting Former Residents' Returning to Rural Communities

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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

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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.