Settling Down: Why Do Some Return Home to Rural America and What Difference Does It Make?

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Questions addressed

1. Why do people in their late 20s and 30s choose to return home to rural communities?

2. What barriers prevent return migration among people who considered moving back home?

3. What impacts do return migrants have on their home communities?
Why study return migration?

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

Note: Rural counties are equivalent to nonmetropolitan counties and urban counties are in metropolitan areas.
Source: ERS, based on estimates from the University of Wisconsin-Madison: http://www.netmigration.wisc.edu/
Why did we focus on remote, rural counties?

Site visits took place in remote, rural counties with net migration loss, 2000-2007

* Approximate location of site visits

Note: Net migration estimates come from the U.S. Census Bureau. Alaska and Hawaii were not included in this study. Source: University of Montana, Department of Geography, and USDA, Economic Research Service.
Why high school reunions?

1. High school reunions include former residents visiting from out of town.

2. This makes it possible to simultaneously interview stayers, returnees and nonreturnees.

3. Reunions provide a unique research opportunity, to speak with people who grew up together, started their adult journeys at the same time, but made different migration choices.
Findings: Reasons for returning and not returning
Reasons can be summarized around three themes:

1. Family-related reasons
2. Employment and career barriers
3. Community assets

These components often operate in tandem. For example:

“\[\text{I wanted to raise a family with my wife...and make a difference in a community.}\]”
Family-related reasons for returning: children

“We have five children and I thought it would be a good place to raise a family. We lived in...a very large city and...even though it treated me and the wife well financially we just thought it was the right time [to move back home].”

“I wanted to raise my family in a rural setting. I wanted my kids to be on the farm. I wanted them to be able to do the same things I did growing up.”

“Once you get married you really want the best for your kids. So you want to look for a quieter place. And this is it!”
Family-related reasons for returning: parents and extended family

“I grew up with a large family... I wanted my kids to know their grandparents, their cousins...it was important to me to have that family connection”

“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.”

“I came back to farm ... Mom and Dad live on a farm and he's 68 and he needs help.”
Family-related reasons missing for nonreturnees

“It’s a great place to raise kids. I'm not married, I don't have kids... So for me this town doesn't really offer too much.”

“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.”
Family-related reasons: schools

Returnee:

“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.”

Nonreturnee:

“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.”
Family-related reasons: school sports

Returnee:

“You want your kids to ... be able to do anything they want. 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.”

Nonreturnee:

“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...”
Employment-related reasons for not returning

“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 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.”

“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.”
Community-related reasons for returning

1. Slower pace of life
2. Close connections with neighbors
3. Greater sense of safety and security
4. Opportunities to volunteer and make a difference
5. Shorter trips for work and shopping
6. Proximity to outdoor recreation
7. Municipal parks, community centers, bike paths

“You don't realize it till you leave here and come back just how quiet it is and how friendly everybody is.”

“With the lower cost of living and the safety and the easy commute, it’s easy living here... You know, it’s just two minutes to the grocery store.”

“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.”
Community-related reasons for not returning

1. Lack of big-city amenities
   • Cultural events
   • Shopping and dining
   • Vibrant downtowns

2. Too much familiarity, lack of privacy

“The breadth of stuff that there is to do in the city! Like, we both really like Indian food and Thai food.”

“I don’t know who exactly this [town] can appeal to. We need more retailers on Main Street... We need another restaurant, we need another coffee shop.”

“Here is not near as much privacy. When you get to a bigger area, people tend to kind of leave you alone. There is a lot less judgment.”
Findings: Impacts of return migrants on home communities
Impacts can be summarized around three themes

1. Demographic
   - Adding to the population
   - Increasing school enrollment
   - Increasing education and skill levels
   "We are putting three children into the school system."

2. Economic
   - Increasing demand for services
   - Filling professional positions
   - Taking over or starting businesses
   "I got my degree, I got 10 years of practical experience and I want to apply that here. . . . [I want] to bring ideas and some business back."

3. Social
   - Office holding and charity work
   - School participation
   - Building on social connections
   "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."
Summary

• The presence of family and the desire to raise children back home were the most common reasons given for returning to rural, remote communities.

• Limited employment and career constraints were critical barriers in returning.

• Aspects of small-town life bolstered decisions to move home, including a slow pace of life, shorter drive times, proximity to outdoor recreation, and good public community facilities.

• Returnees came home with spouses and children, replenishing aging populations.

• Returnees used advanced education degrees, job skills, and life experiences gained while away to fill business and leadership positions.
Thank you!

Questions?
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You may find the ERS report at:

Or the *Amber Waves* article at: