

RESIDENTIAL PREFERENCES AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY

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INTRODUCTION

Since 1970, fewer people have been moving to the city, and increased numbers have been moving to rural (nonmetropolitan) America.² For a few decades, however, population policy has focused on the problems of city growth, suburban expansion, and rural decline. Now, this new growth is bringing changes in rural land use, infrastructural development, social and medical services, and impacts on rural environment and ecology. These changes and their attendant problems and opportunities are linked to population dynamics and, particularly, to the migration flows into and out of different kinds of geographic areas.

In this article, we review these changes and discuss social, economic, and attitudinal explanations. Next, we analyze the role of residential preferences in decisions to migrate and the resulting policy implications. Attempts to explain migration by using attitudinal data have

not, in general, been a predominant mode of analysis. However, as mobility becomes economically easier, each person's non-monetary preferences for a place to live become more significant. Further, such motivations provide insight into the residential requirements of current and potential movers.

CHANGING TRENDS IN POPULATION DISTRIBUTION

"The dominant geographic fact in the demography of the conterminous United States in the twentieth century has been metropolitan concentration" (10).³ During the forties and fifties, a seemingly endless stream of migrants left farms and small towns to seek economic opportunity and a modern way of life in the city. In the sixties, a net of 6 million people moved to metropolitan counties; by 1970, 148 million people lived there. About 3 million of these migrants came from nonmetropolitan counties.

This long term trend has changed. Between 1970 and 1976, population and employment growth in rural America exceeded that in the large cities (1, 2, 11, 12).

This change may lessen the urgency of calls for population distribution policies, particularly those aimed at lessening metropolitan concentration. What it raises for policymakers are the issues of rapid growth in rural areas and continuing concern for declining rural communities (about 600 U.S. counties continued to decline in the seventies). Policies for rural areas cannot be considered separately from those for urban sectors, especially the central cities. The migration flows may have reversed in the seventies, yet the reversal, as we shall see, hinges on crucial similarities and differences between the urban and rural sectors.

MORE JOBS AND HIGHER INCOMES

No complete explanation for the reverse migration yet exists but some statements can be made. Structural economic conditions in rural America have been improved, as discussed in the previous articles. Briefly, employment opportunities have decentralized into nonmetro counties, and the nonmetro-metro gap has been closed in disposable income. Both the growth in rural employment and the types of jobs being created are significant. Increasingly, persons are finding work in the service industries more than in mining, agriculture, forestry, and manufacturing. Openings for bankers, clerks, insurance salesmen, realtors, school teachers, physicians, and appliance and auto mechanics exist in most communities. Thus, people who work in the service sector can live almost

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² The terms rural and nonmetropolitan are used interchangeably in this article.

³ Italicized numbers in parentheses refer to items in References at the end of this article.

anywhere and hope to find jobs.

Other incentives to migration also reduce the isolation of rural areas and open them up for growth: the interstate highway system, sophisticated communication networks, and the air travel and transport networks.

PREFERENCES FOR RURAL LIVING

Although structural changes provide some explanation for the reverse migration, they do not fully account for it. A complementary explanation begins with the fact that a majority of Americans prefer smalltown living. In almost all State and national surveys dating back to 1948, the most popular place to live was a small town or rural area (14, 7). For example, in a national Roper poll in 1948, 65 percent preferred a "small city, town, or rural area," even though people were migrating from rural to urban America in large numbers. If we assume that most Americans have long preferred smalltown living, lessening of economic constraints to living in nonmetropolitan areas would make it possible for people to move to them.

Since 1970, surveys have provided many insights about where people want to live, what size of area they prefer, reasons for their choices, and how their present residences and preferences relate to their actual moves. Studies in Washington (6), Arizona (4), and Indiana (9) have focused on the preferred community. All show that most people do not wish to live in the largest cities and the small, remote places but that they strongly prefer rural areas close to a larger city or town. Studies in Wisconsin (13) and Pennsylvania (5) showed a simi-

lar preference for living within the commuting ring of large cities.

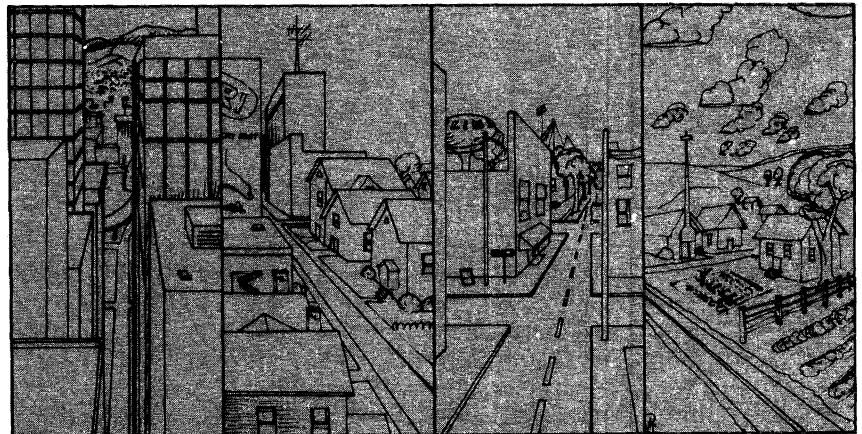
National surveys also have repeatedly found decided preferences for living in the country and in small towns, particularly within commuting range of a metropolitan central city. For example, small towns and rural areas in the vicinity of a medium-sized metropolis were the most favored choice of residence among respondents in a sample of the U.S. population taken in 1974. However, for many people, actual residence differs from preferred location (see the table and fig. 1).

The data in figure 1 can give us an idea of the population redistribution that would occur if people moved in accordance

with their stated preference. The greatest shift in population, if preferences were realized, would be between the large or medium-sized central cities and their nearby communities. Population of the small towns and country nearby would grow. Small cities, but not rural areas, near large metropolises would lose some population. Small cities farther from large cities would basically hold their own. The most isolated settings would change only slightly. Thus, people generally value the rural setting, but almost always they want it to be near a city.

Massive movements into cities that occurred before 1970 will not likely be countered by the current flow into rural areas. Instead, we may expect

Figure 1
Actual and Preferred Residential Location of Persons Sampled in 1974



Actual Residence			
31%	48%	16%	5%
Preferred Residence			
19%	55%	20%	6%
Large cities and suburbs	Medium-sized cities and suburbs	Small cities and nearby location	Rural villages, open country

Source: 1974 NORC national sample.

Actual and preferred residence of respondents by size of place
and location with respect to a large city, 1974

Location	Actual	Preferred*
	<i>Percent</i>	
Large city (over 500,000)	19.3	8.8
Near environs (within 30 miles):		
Small cities, towns	10.7	6.2
Rural areas	1.4	4.1
Subtotal	31.4	19.1
Middle-sized city (50,000-499,999)	22.4	13.0
Near environs (within 30 miles):		
Small cities, towns	14.3	18.8
Rural areas	11.1	23.0
Subtotal	47.8	54.8
Over 30 miles to city of 50,000		
Small cities (10,000-49,999)	6.6	6.0
Near environs (within 30 miles):		
Villages, towns (less than 10,000)	6.1	4.7
Rural areas	2.9	9.5
Subtotal	15.6	20.2
Other villages	2.1	1.8
Other open country, rural areas	3.1	4.1
Total	100.0	100.0
(Number of cases)	(1,476)	(1,476)

*Preference for proximity to large, middle-sized, or small cities includes replies of respondents who answered "don't know" or "no preference" (about 5 percent) distributed according to their location.

continued growth of suburban locations with an overflow into nearby rural areas. Population of farther locations will continue to grow, however. People surveyed want the best of both environments—proximity to employment opportunities, services, and amenities usually associated with large urban centers, and the natural and community attributes of a rural setting.

Not everyone preferring to live in a different location than their current residence prefers

it strongly. When potential consequences of a move, especially a lower income, were raised with persons interviewed in the 1974 national survey, about half those who preferred a rural area would give up their preference. Similarly, in Arizona, while a majority (52 percent)

preferred living in a community of less than 50,000 people, only 3 percent were interested in moving if it would involve a loss of income and lengthy commuting (over 1 hour) to a job in a major city.

THE ATTRACTION OF RURAL LIFE

Obviously, economic and other factors interact in determining the strength of preferences for the country and for

small towns. What then is the attraction of smaller places? In figure 2, the reasons for residential preferences are ranked according to preferred type of place.

Nationally, people who preferred smaller communities gave the following reasons: less crime, better quality of air and water, better life for children, and lower cost of living. People preferring to live in a big city gave as their reasons: higher wages, better jobs, contacts with a variety of people, and recreational and cultural opportunities.

People who preferred a particular size of place were also likely to desire the same kinds of things that people valued who actually lived there and intended to remain.

In a survey of Arizona residents, respondents said they felt that schools, police services, and outdoor recreational facilities were better in nonmetropolitan areas, as were community spirit and pride, satisfaction, and friendliness. They did not judge medical services as being as good, nor availability of jobs, cultural activities, and the privacy of personal life (3).

Perhaps people are simply responding to stereotypes about privacy, environmental quality, and services. Yet the pattern of attractive characteristics and of problems tends to be consistent with the views of policymakers as to problems in health care, public services, housing quality, and jobs in the rural sector.

PREFERENCES AND POLICY IN RURAL AREAS

Renewed growth in rural areas has come through an expansion of job opportunities in manufacturing, recreation, and services, and the development of energy resources such as coal and oil.

This expansion has lifted the economic constraints for many in the labor force who would prefer a less urban style of life. Similarly, new sources of income, better pensions, and a lower cost of living have made nonmetropolitan areas attractive for the retired. Migrants from each of these groups are looking for a place that has virtues beyond economic security. They value most the maintenance of the attractive features, the quality of the environment, the lower crime rates and greater physical safety, and a smaller scale community.

MEETING NEEDS OF LONGTIME AND NEW RESIDENTS

It is not only important to attract new people to nonmetropolitan areas: to retain the current residents is also essential. The reversal in migration streams came about in two ways: through increased immigration, which has received national publicity and attention, and through decreased outmigration. While the preference studies all show a desire for life in the country or in small towns, the single most preferred location remains one's current location. Rural people strongly desire to stay where they are living. This group, particularly the young entering the labor force, continues to need jobs. For example, although rural America gained 1.6 million people in 1970-75, it had a net loss of 381,000 persons aged 20 to 24. Apparently, not all preferences are being fully satisfied.

Rural areas continue to experience numerous economic problems. While the income gap has diminished, it has not been eliminated. A disproportionate share of the poor continue to live in rural areas (primarily in the South). Although job opportunities have increased, they are not yet sufficient to absorb fully both the resident population and newcomers.

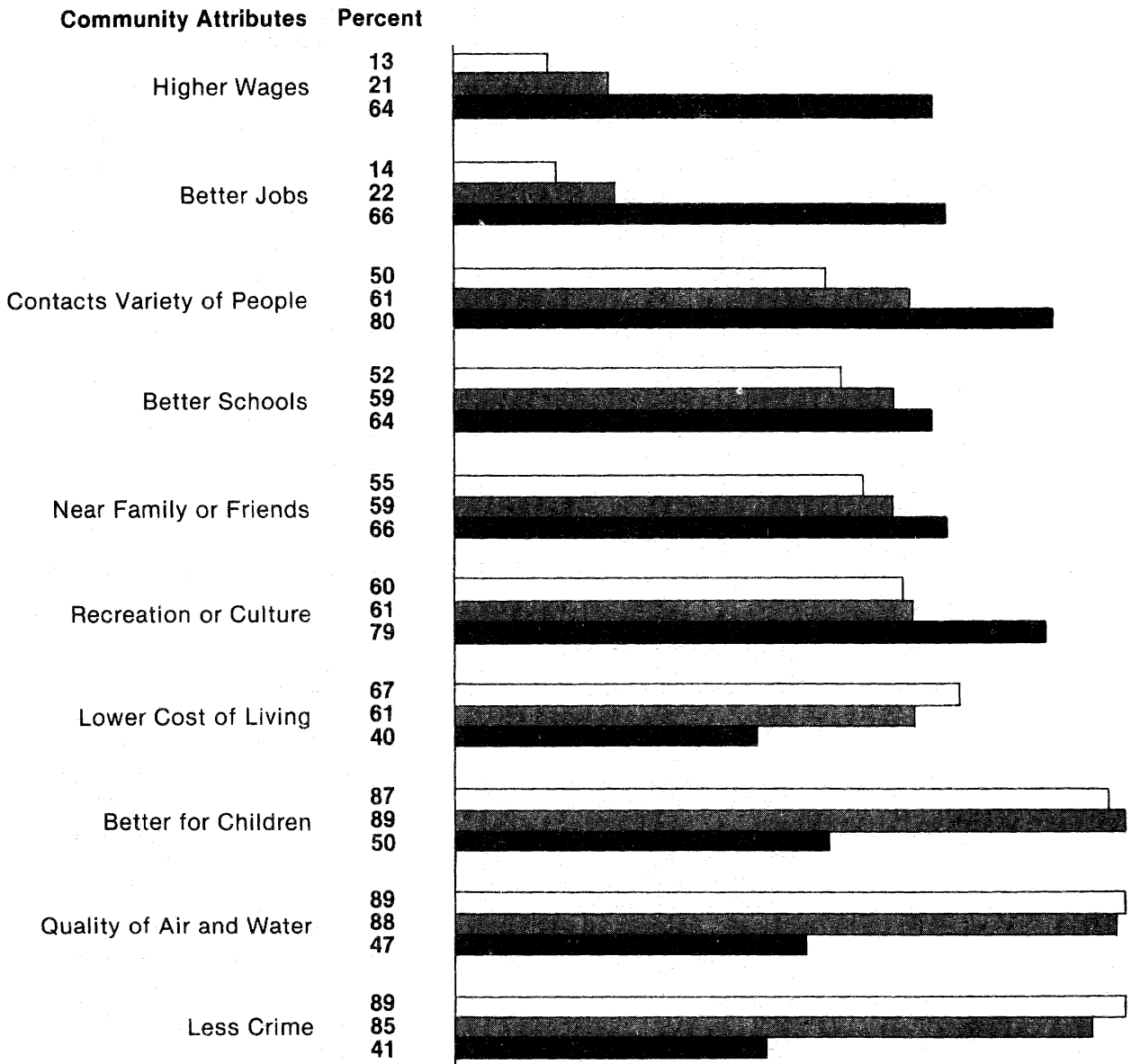
The perspective of policymakers should reflect these compositional differences among areas. It is not enough simply to plan for job expansion or health care or crime prevention. Instead, a multifaceted approach is needed, flexible enough to fulfill local needs, yet broad enough to plan for those in and out of the labor force, and for the indigenous population and the newcomers.

Maintaining the Quality of Rural Areas

Maintenance of rural attributes in a pristine state becomes harder and harder as more people move in. Use patterns change, costs accelerate, and environmental regulations are both a benefit and a burden to the community. As population grows, any lack of financial support for planning and implementation of plans may lead to a deterioration of the very features originally attracting residents. Sufficient water supplies, energy services, and waste and garbage disposal cannot be taken for granted as the population expands. Many of the services required for household and commercial developments are more costly and less conveniently provided in a rural community. Planning is needed to ensure that population growth

Figure 2

Percent of Respondents Stating a Reason for Residential Preference by Type of Preference



Respondents Prefer Residences To Be:

Away From Big City
 Near Big City
 Big City

Source: Adapted from Fuguitt, Glenn V., and James J. Zuiches. "Residential Preferences and Population Distribution." *Demography* 12(3):491-504.

will not lead to the destruction and contamination of the rural environment.

Meeting Multiple Needs

As the retired seek a lower cost of living in rural areas and young families seek a more relaxed lifestyle, the potential for community conflict arises. The young, better educated families, in demanding changes in school policies or more funding to school and related services, may confront retirees whose needs for health care, transportation, and physical security are paramount. School bond issues in smaller communities are especially difficult to get passed as higher property taxes conflict with retirees' goal of a stable cost of living.

Also, as energy costs rise, the cost of heating fuels, especially oil and propane, cuts deeper into every household budget. Roads passable year round make the car attractive in the country—and essential. Rural residents currently absorb higher gasoline bills, yet rising prices strike at their freedom to live farther away from the city.

Such examples reflect the continuing need for communities to anticipate and adjust to population change. Needed are programs of infrastructural improvements, support for local community decisionmaking, and human resource programs such as job training. Planning, particularly at the State and local level, is essential yet funds are often lacking. Such planning for utilities, land use, and commercial and public establishments is fundamental for the preservation of rural ideals.

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