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Moving to the Rural Great Plains
Point of Origin Differences in the Decision Making Process

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Abstract – Census data demonstrate that the movement of population in the rural Great Plains is not one-way. People do indeed move into as well as out of the region. Past research has identified perceptions of the quality of life in rural areas as an important consideration in the decision to migrate to such areas. However, those studies have not segmented the population of migrants in such a way as to fully inform efforts to recruit new residents. Using data collected from a survey of new Nebraska Panhandle residents, this study describes the motivations of recent migrants from both metropolitan and non-metropolitan points of origin, and identifies significant differences in how both push and pull factors are perceived.

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Introduction

Rural advocates often argue that the quality of life characteristics held to be typical of smaller communities and rural regions are more desirable than those found in urban centers. These characteristics typically include qualitative dimensions such as friendliness, safety, educational quality, environmental quality, outdoor recreational opportunities, traditional value sets and more.

In the context of rural development, rural/urban differences in quality of life are generally perceived to be a competitive advantage. The implied expectation is that these characteristics are valued and will be sought out by individuals desiring such amenities. That expectation supports the assumption that the essential factor limiting a resurgence of rural population is jobs: Create the jobs and workers will come.

Previous research has identified the demographic characteristics and stated motivations of new rural residents in the Northern Great Plains (Cordes, et. al., 1996: Leistritz and Sell, 1998: Leistritz, et. al., 2001) and elsewhere (Stinner and VanLoon, 1992; Coffman and Athan, 2005; Kargaard. 2004). These studies strongly suggest that in-migrants to non-metropolitan areas attach a great deal of significance to the qualitative social, cultural and environmental characteristics of localities when determining the desirability of migration.

These studies have been instructive, and have done much to inform those development programs that have initiated resident recruitment functions. Such programs have in fact become more common. In the last round of Nebraska's state supported Building Entrepreneurial Communities Act grants, 7 of 13 awardees had proposed residential recruitment programs as part of their request. Most of those programs included some Internet based effort at reaching potential residents with job information. However, some communities are beginning to realize that jobs alone may not be enough to attract new residents to a given community, and stereotypical rural/urban quality of life differences are now starting to be emphasized alongside economic opportunities in local recruitment efforts.

In this study we surveyed new in-migrants to the Nebraska Panhandle and provided them with series of place characteristics describing qualities that commonly form the basis of stereotypical rural/urban dichotomies. We asked the respondents to report to us the extent to which those characteristics entered into their decision to move. Previous studies have treated all new migrants as a pool, and in doing so have masked the importance of several classifiable population characteristics that are instructive in understanding what rural quality of life characteristics might actually be advantageous in attracting new residents. Here, we have segmented our respondent group according to point of origin (Metropolitan or non-Metropolitan) and examined the place characteristics that they report to have been important in their selection of a location in which to reside.

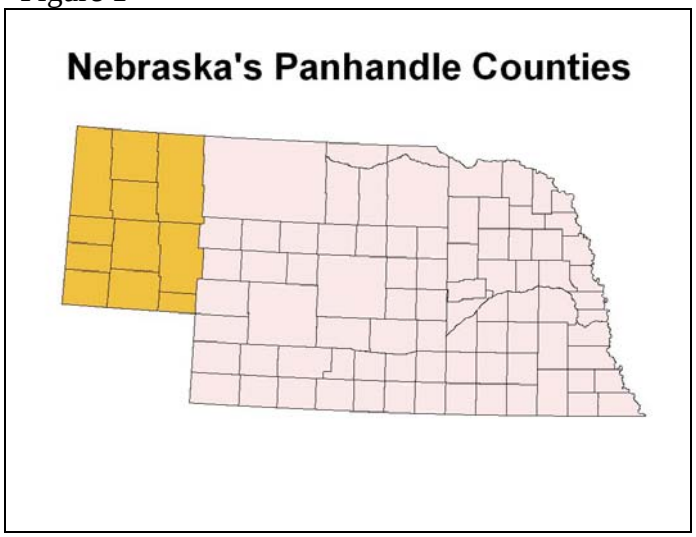
To the extent that rural quality of life characteristics are in fact seen as desirable one would expect them to enter into the decision to move. If that is so, respondents moving from metropolitan areas will be more likely to report having assigned importance to those

characteristics than will respondents moving from rural locations. This is because such characteristics are theoretically absent (or at least limited) in metropolitan areas, and thus something to be sought out. On the other hand, one would expect that individuals contemplating a rural to rural move will be less concerned about obtaining access to rural quality of life amenities which they, in theory, already enjoy.

Relevance of the Study Area

Nebraska's Panhandle is representative of much of the decline-prone Northern Great Plains. Within much of the region, the Popper's (1997) often cited vision of a Buffalo Commons is easily understood. In fact, the Nebraska Panhandle lies essentially at the center of that mythical region.

Figure 1



Encompassing 14,000 square miles (18 percent of the state) with a current population of about 90,000 people (5 percent of the state population); the Panhandle region has an average population density of about 6.4 persons per square mile. Six of the eleven Panhandle counties have population densities below that average. Seven Panhandle counties reached their historical population peak prior to 1920, and all have historically been more heavily populated than they are today.

Only 35 of Nebraska's 537 communities are located in the Panhandle. Of these, only two were found to be at their population peak by the 2000 Census. One of those was Scottsbluff, the largest community in the region, with a population of 14,700 (the 12th largest city in Nebraska). The other was tiny Harrisburg, an unincorporated community of fewer than 100 residents and the county seat of Banner County. Twenty-one of the region's communities reached their population peak sometime before 1950.

Between the years 1990 and 2000, seven Panhandle counties and 16 Panhandle communities lost population. Five counties experienced an excess of deaths over

births (natural population decline) and seven experienced net out-migration during that same decade.

Despite what one might interpret as a pattern of regional decline, people do indeed move to the region. The last Decennial Census inquired of people age five-years and older where they had lived five years previously. These most recent Census data indicate that significant numbers of people migrated to the Panhandle from some other state or region of Nebraska (a net total of 10,500 between the years 1995 and 2000). It is these people who are of most interest to this study, as they represent a population that might possess characteristics which, if fully understood, could suggest effective marketing strategies for workforce recruitment.

The Panhandle is not unique in the demographic importance of new in-migrants. In fact, county level data actually tend to mask the importance of this population group. When one looks at smaller geographic units (communities and townships) one can see that such minor civil divisions commonly saw 20-percent or more of their 2000 population arrive from some other county, state or country during the five preceding years (Cantrell, 2005). Such migration is not limited to retirees and older workers. Two-thirds of respondents to the 2005 Nebraska Rural Poll age 20 to 29 years indicated that they had moved to their current residence from other locations during the previous decade (Vogt, et. al., 2005).

Methodology

A self-administered questionnaire was mailed in May and June of 2007 to approximately 1,050 households in the Nebraska Panhandle using mailing lists designed to identify households that were new to the area in the previous five years. Responses from those who had moved within the Panhandle and those who moved more than five years ago were excluded. Our effective return rate for usable surveys was 33-percent, or 321 households. These 321 households represent a total of 847 new residents. Thirteen respondents failed to provide information on their community of origin, and are excluded from this analysis, leaving a sample size of 308.

A total of 189 usable surveys were returned by new Panhandle residents who had moved from a Metropolitan area, and 119 from new Panhandle residents who had moved from some other non-Metropolitan area. The over representation of metropolitan origins reflects the overrepresentation of metropolitan residents in the general population.

The eleven counties included in the sample were Banner, Box Butte, Cheyenne, Dawes, Deuel, Garden, Kimball, Morrill, Scotts Bluff, Sheridan, and Sioux. The 14-page questionnaire included questions pertaining to the new residents' background, reasons for moving, decision making tools used and views of their current community.

Analysis in this paper is confined to measures of statistical significance for the association between the point of origin (defined as metropolitan or non-metropolitan) of new Panhandle residents and the importance accorded to various place-relevant

characteristics when making the decision to move. In this case, importance is indicated as having rated a given characteristic as either “important” or “very important” as opposed to any other rating.

Demographic Profile of New Panhandle Residents: Metropolitan and Non-Metropolitan

Almost one-half (47%) of the new residents surveyed had moved to the Panhandle in 2006. Thirteen percent moved this year (2007) and another 13% had moved two years ago (2005). These new residents have brought many assets to the region. On average, they are younger and better educated than current Panhandle residents. The average age of new residents in the Nebraska Panhandle is 46 years. Forty-one percent of new residents are between the ages of 20 and 40, compared to 23 percent of current Panhandle residents.

Ninety-seven percent have at least a high school education, with 81 percent having some college education. Among newcomers, 40 percent reported having attained at least a bachelor’s degree, compared to an average of only 18 percent for the region.

One-third (33%) of new residents have household incomes under $30,000 while just under one-half (48%) have household incomes of $50,000 or more. In comparison, 47 percent of current Panhandle residents have household incomes under $30,000 and 28 percent have household incomes of $50,000 or more.

The new residents have an average of 1.8 adults in their household and 0.9 children. Twenty-one percent of new residents live alone. Just over one-third (34%) live with another adult and 35 percent are living with another adult and have children in the household. Forty-three percent of new residents have children in their household, compared to 33 percent of all current Panhandle households.

Ninety-five percent of new residents are white, one percent are American Indian and three percent are Hispanic or Latino. Eighty percent of new residents have an employed person in their household. Twenty-seven percent of employed respondents report working in a professional or related occupation. Fifteen percent of employed respondents are working in management, business and financial operations and 13 percent are employed in transportation and materials moving.

New Panhandle residents came from many different locations, arriving from 38 different states. However, as might be expected, most came from other parts of Nebraska (20%) or from the neighboring states of Colorado, Wyoming, South Dakota and Kansas (42%). But, 37 percent came from places that might not be expected, including Arizona, California, Florida, Nevada and Texas. As described earlier, the majority (61%) of those responding moved to the Panhandle from a metropolitan county.

The new residents had lived in their previous community for an average of 12.6 years. Many (23%) left a community in which they had lived for over 20 years. Most (56%) were homeowners in their previous community.

Push and Pull Factors in Urban to Rural Migration Decisions

Prior research has found that the pull of perceived advantages to be found in a new location tend to mirror the push of dissatisfying factors that motivate individuals to leave their previous residence (Liestritz, et. al., 2001; Cordes, et. al., 1998). Similar results are found among recent in-migrants to Nebraska's Panhandle (Table 1).

At least one-half of all recent migrants to the Panhandle cite the desire to find a simpler pace of life (53%), to find a less congested place to live (50%), and to be closer to relatives (50%) as important factors in their decision to move to their current community. Other reasons that were important to at least one-third of newcomers include: To lower the cost of housing (48%), to lower the cost of living (45%), to obtain a higher paying job (39%), to live in a desirable natural environment (37%), to find a safer place to live (36%), to obtain a job more in line with their skills (35%), and the belief that this (new) community shares my (our) attitudes/values (34%).

Table 1

Reasons for Moving to a Panhandle Community

% of Respondents Indicating Important or Very Important

Simpler Pace of Life	53%
Less Congested Place	50%
Closer to Relatives	50%
Lower Cost of Housing	48%
Lower Cost of Living	45%
Higher Paying Job	39%
Desirable Natural Environment	37%
Safer Place to Live	36%
Job that Better Fits Skills	35%
Community that Shares Values	34%
Better Place for Kids	32%
Closer to Friends	32%
Lower Taxes	22%

These considerations are, however, assigned different levels of importance depending upon the origins of the new residents. As seen in Table 2, new Panhandle residents originating from metropolitan areas are significantly more likely than those from non-metropolitan areas to rate urban congestion as a push factor which encouraged their resettlement. This makes intuitive sense, however it should be remembered that well over half of non-metropolitan Nebraskans are located in Micropolitan counties, with central cities of between 10,000 and 50,000. Responses to this question from individuals with

non-metropolitan origins suggest that some of them found even communities of that scale to be too congested.

Similarly, migrants originating from metropolitan areas are significantly more likely than their non-metropolitan counterparts to identify high cost of living, fear of crime and general safety concerns as push factors that were important or very important in their decision to move from their previous residence. They were also more likely to attach importance to high taxes, the quality of the natural environment, poor schools and long commutes in identifying reasons to leave their previous residence, although the statistical differences between metropolitan and non-metropolitan origins are less definitive for those items.

Migrants originating from non-metropolitan areas were significantly more likely to identify a lack of cultural opportunities and lack of job opportunities as having been important or very important push considerations in their decision to move. Perhaps surprisingly, individuals moving from one non-metropolitan area to another were slightly more likely to cite lack of outdoor recreational opportunities as an important consideration.

Migrants from both metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations were equally likely to see living too far from relatives, the environment for child rearing, the climate and local values as considerations in leaving their previous home.

Table 2

Reasons for Leaving Previous Residence
308 New Panhandle Residents

Reason for Leaving Previous Residence (n responding)	Percent of Respondents Indicating Previous Residence: % Metropolitan	% Non-Metropolitan	Pearson Chi Square	Significance
Urban Congestion (281)	50.9	12.3	42.52	< 0.01
High Cost of Living (279)	49.4	20.0	23.98	< 0.01
Fear of Crime (280)	36.4	14.4	15.54	< 0.01
Few Cultural Opportunities (281)	6.3	21.9	15.15	< 0.01
Lack of Job Opportunities (281)	25.0	41.9	8.74	< 0.01
Unsafe Place to Live (280)	24.7	13.2	5.38	0.02
High State and/or Local Taxes (282)	22.2	13.2	3.47	0.06
Quality of Natural Environment (281)	21.0	12.4	3.36	0.07
Lack of Outdoor Recreational Opportunities (282)	11.9	19.8	3.24	0.07
Poor Schools (280)	14.9	7.6	3.22	0.07
Long Commute (281)	25.6	17.1	2.68	0.10
Too Far from Relatives (282)	34.1	32.1	1.21	0.73
Poor Place to Raise Children (280)	22.3	19.0	0.41	0.52
Undesirable Climate (281)	20.9	23.1	0.18	0.67
Community did not Share Values (280)	15.4	16.2	0.03	0.86

As suggested by past research, the considerations for leaving one's previous community described in Table 2 closely correspond to the considerations for selecting a new residence found in Table 3. Again, significant variation is found in the importance accorded to specific attributes associated with the type of community from which the respondents originated.

New Panhandle residents originating from metropolitan areas are significantly more likely than their non-metropolitan counterparts to indicate that seeking a less congested location was an important pull consideration in selecting a Panhandle location. Indeed, this was reported as an important consideration by 65% of those moving to the Panhandle from a metropolitan location. They were also significantly more likely to identify the pull of lower cost housing, a simpler pace of life, a safer living environment, lower taxes, shared values and an improved environment for child rearing than were their non-metropolitan counterparts. While less significant statistically, they were also slightly more likely to identify a desirable natural environment and affordable health care as important considerations.

Table 3

Reasons for Selecting Panhandle Residence
308 new Panhandle Residents

Reason for Selecting Panhandle Residence (n responding)	Percent of Respondents Indicating Previous Residence: % Metropolitan	% Non-Metropolitan	Pearson Chi Square	Significance
To Find a Less Congested Place to Live (280)	65.3	26.2	40.53	< 0.01
To Lower Cost of Housing (276)	61.0	27.9	28.53	< 0.01
To Find a Simpler Pace of Life (279)	65.7	33.6	27.23	< 0.01
To Find a Safer Place to Live (282)	44.6	22.4	14.10	< 0.01
To Have Lower Taxes (270)	26.6	12.9	7.09	0.01
To Find Arts, Entertainment, Cultural Activities (281)	10.3	20.8	5.93	0.02
(New) Community Shares Attitudes/Values (277)	37.8	25.7	4.29	0.04
To Secure a Better Job for Spouse/Partner (268)	29.9	18.8	4.10	0.04
A Better Envrionment for Raising Children (277)	36.0	24.8	3.83	0.05
To Live in a More Desirable Natural Environment (277)	40.7	29.5	3.51	0.06
To Find More Affordable Health Care (278)	18.6	10.4	3.40	0.07
To Find Better Quality Schools (278)	25.4	17.1	2.59	0.11
To be Closer to Relatives (284)	41.4	43.1	1.86	0.17
To Find More Outdoor Recreation Activities (279)	25.3	30.5	0.89	0.35
To Obtain a Higher Paying Job (278)	37.6	42.9	0.76	0.38
To be Nearer Friends (279)	29.5	33.0	0.39	0.53
To Obtain a Job More in Line with Skills (277)	33.3	36.9	0.36	0.55
To Have a More Desirable Climate (277)	27.3	25.7	0.09	0.77

Respondents moving to the Panhandle from other non-metropolitan locations were more likely to cite finding improved arts, entertainment and cultural activities as a matter of importance. However, only 21% of such migrants rated this consideration as either important or very important. Migrants from non-metropolitan areas were more likely than those with metropolitan origins to see lack of outdoor recreational opportunities as

important in deciding to leave their previous location, but no more likely to consider the pull of such opportunities when selecting their new residence.

Differences between respondents migrating from metropolitan and non-metropolitan locations were not statistically significant with regard to environmental, school and job related considerations. Neither was there a significant difference seen in the importance accorded to locating near friends and relatives.

The Importance of Employment Considerations

The availability of a job is certainly an important consideration in the decision to move to a new location. Over one-third (36%) of newcomers moved to the Panhandle in order to accept employment with a new employer. Twenty-four percent of their spouses or partners moved for this reason. Persons moving from other parts of Nebraska are more likely than persons moving from other states to accept employment by a new employer. Over one-half (51%) of persons moving from other regions of Nebraska moved to accept employment by a new employer, compared to approximately 32 percent of persons moving from other states.

Slightly less than half (45%) of persons below the age of 40 moved to accept employment by a new employer. Persons between the ages of 40 and 49 are the age group most likely to move to start or take over a business (18% compared to 2% for persons age 65 and older).

Ten percent of newcomers and eight percent of their spouses or partners were transferred by their current employer. Eight percent of newcomers and five percent of their spouses or partners moved to start or take over a business. Only one percent of both newcomers and their spouses or partners moved because of a military transfer.
Having a job in hand, however, is not sufficient to explain all migration to the Panhandle. Just over one-quarter (26%) of the respondents moved to look for new work or a new job while 25 percent of the spouses or partners looked for new work after their move. These percentages do not vary significantly by metropolitan and non-metropolitan origin.

The Nebraska Panhandle region has in fact been much more successful at creating jobs than it has been at attracting new working age residents to fill those jobs. According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, the region added a total of 1,510 new jobs between the years 2001 and 2005. During the same period, the potential labor force (persons age 16 to 65 years) declined by 380 (U.S., 2005).

The Panhandle is not unique in this situation. Comparing the same 2001 and 2005 data sources for non-metropolitan portions of the Northern Great Plains (Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota), one finds that the region added 24,663 jobs and only 6,273 members to the potential labor force. Since both male and female labor force participation rates in the Northern Great Plains are among the nation's highest (North Dakota State, 2004), the excess of new jobs over new workers can best be explained as an

artifact of multiple job holding (both full-time and part-time), delayed retirement, the conversion of full-time to part-time jobs and commuting.

Conclusions and Implications

While adding new jobs faster than new workers is not in itself sufficient to describe a workforce shortage, it does suggest that current population trends are unlikely to support significant job creation and economic growth. Job creation is an important aspect of the planning process in most communities and is the primary goal of virtually all community development professionals. Meeting the goals of workforce recruitment is an obviously important issue to community development professionals and the communities they represent. As the very large baby boom generation enters retirement the ability of non-Metropolitan communities and regions to attract in-migrants will grow to an even greater importance (Dohm, 2000; Horrigan, 2004). In-migration of working age people will be a determining factor in how successfully such places will be able to compete for a place in a national economy characterized by labor force shortages and competition for skilled workers.

For individuals moving from one non-metropolitan area to another, work and proximity to family are the factors most likely to be identified as important to their decision to migrate. However, most individuals who move to a non-metropolitan area will be moving from larger urban centers, and for them it is quality of life considerations, not just employment, which appear to weigh most heavily in their decision to move.

Persons moving from metropolitan counties are looking for a less congested place to live, a safer place to live, a simpler pace of life, and a lower cost of living. Workforce recruitment efforts aimed at larger metropolitan areas should emphasize these amenities along with structural elements such as schools. Certainly, job creation and business retention and attraction strategies remain important to new resident recruitment strategies. However, as demonstrated in this study, community quality of life amenities can be the factors that ultimately lead persons to choose to move to the Nebraska Panhandle.

By better understanding what drew new residents from both non-metropolitan and metropolitan areas to the region, rural Great Plains communities can develop more effective and targeted marketing campaigns designed to draw even more new residents to the area. Since it is the case that at least some metropolitan residents are willing to relocate to rural areas in search of what they perceive as rural amenities, those amenities should be treated as assets by communities and development groups.

Acknowledgements

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