December 2007

Newcomers to the Nebraska Panhandle: How Do We Keep Them Here?

Cheryl A. Burkhart-Kriesel
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/agecon_cornhusker
Part of the Agricultural and Resource Economics Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/agecon_cornhusker/346

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Agricultural Economics Department at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Cornhusker Economics by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
Newcomers to the Nebraska Panhandle: How Do We Keep Them Here?

A lot of media attention over the years has been given to the steady decline of population in rural areas across Nebraska. However, there is another side to this story. Research using the 2000 U.S. Census shows that significant numbers of people do move in and out of rural regions within our state. Unfortunately, very little is really known about the new residents’ motivations for moving to the region, and reasons why they choose to remain or consider leaving their new community.

To bridge the information gap a group of UNL researchers, funded by a 2006 grant from the USDA-National Research Initiative (NRI), has begun to look at the characteristics and motivations of new residents in the eleven counties of the Western Nebraska Panhandle region (Figure 1). One aspect of the on-going project included a mail survey to a sample of new resident households within the region. 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. Two aspects of the survey, their consideration of other relocation sites and their willingness to remain in the community, will be highlighted in this article. [Note: further information on the scope of the project, research methodologies and survey results can be found at: http://cari.unl.edu/buffalo/ ]

**Communities Do Have Competition for New Residents**

The research showed that more than half (55%) of new residents considered other locations before choosing their current location (Figure 2). However, a significant portion (45%) only considered their current location in Western Nebraska. Persons moving from the largest distance are the group most likely to say they considered only their current location. Forty-seven percent of persons moving from other states not adjacent to Nebraska considered only their current location in the Nebraska Panhandle. Forty percent of persons moving from other parts of Nebraska, a slightly smaller number, considered only their current location. Persons moving from non-adjacent states are also the group, though,
most likely to have considered locations in other states. Just
over one quarter (27%) considered other locations in other
states, compared to ten percent of persons moving from states
adjacent to the Panhandle. Persons moving from elsewhere in
Nebraska are most likely to have considered other locations
in the state. Twenty-two percent of persons moving from
Eastern Nebraska considered other locations in the state, com-
pared to ten percent of persons moving from other states
not adjacent to Nebraska. Persons moving from adjacent
states are most likely to have considered other locations in
both Nebraska and other states (29%).

A Majority Stay But Many Do Leave

Over one half (60%) of new residents say they probably
or definitely will be living in their current community five
years from now (Figure 3). Eighteen percent say they
probably or definitely will not be living there, and 22 percent
don’t know. Thus, a sizeable proportion of newcomers are not
planning to stay or are not sure.

Older persons are more likely than younger persons to be
planning on living in their current community five years from
now. Sixty-five percent of persons age 65 and older say they
probably or definitely will be living in their current
community five years from now. Less than one half (46%) of
persons age 19 to 29 have plans to live there five years from
now.

Persons who have lived in Nebraska before are more
likely to be planning to stay in their community five years from
now, than persons who have not. Approximately two
thirds (66%) of persons who have lived in Nebraska before
are planning on being in their community five years from
now, compared to 53 percent of persons who have not lived
in Nebraska before.

The expectation of staying in their current community is
also related to how they rate or perceive community and life
factors in their new residence. In a list of 29 factors the top
five were: a feeling of belonging in the community, suitable
housing and neighborhoods, clean environment, job security,
and available job opportunities. However, the strongest
relationship is with the feeling of belonging in the community
(Figure 4). The majority (86%) of persons who rate the
feeling of belonging in their community as excellent are
planning to remain in their community five years from now.
But, only 16 percent of persons who rate the feeling of
belonging in their community as poor plan to stay.

What Was Learned

Communities have competition for new residents. Most
considered other locations before choosing their current
community. This suggests that active recruiting by a com-
unity can influence the decision to move to the Panhandle.
By better understanding what drew new residents here,
communities can develop targeted marketing campaigns
designed to draw more new residents to the area.

Many new residents are either not planning to stay in their
current community or aren’t sure of their plans. The numbers
of persons planning to leave or who are unsure are higher for
younger persons. This means that communities must work
hard to implement or improve retention strategies to keep these
new residents in their communities.

Even though persons who have lived in Nebraska before
are more likely than persons who have never lived in Nebraska
to be planning on living in their community five years from
now, a majority of persons new to Nebraska are planning to
stay. This is a very encouraging finding.

The feeling of belonging in the community has the
strongest relationship with the expectation of staying in the
community. Communities must recognize the need and work
to integrate new residents into community life, organizations
and leadership opportunities in order to increase the odds that
they will remain in the Panhandle. These actions, perhaps
taken for granted in the past, should be deliberately planned if
the retention rate of new residents is to increase.

Research team members include: Randolph Cantrell, University
of Nebraska Rural Initiative; Cheryl Burkhart-Kriesel and Bruce
Johnson, Department of Agricultural Economics; Charlotte Narjes
and Rebecca Vogt, Center for Applied Rural Innovation.

Cheryl Burkhart-Kriesel, (308) 632-1234
UNL Extension Community Development Specialist
Panhandle Research and Extension Center
cburkhar@unlnotes.unl.edu

Figure 1.
Figure 2

Locations Considered Before Choosing Current Location

- Only this location: 45%
- Other locations in NE: 14%
- Other locations in other states: 16%
- Other locations in both NE and other states: 23%
- Other: 2%

Figure 3

Likelihood of Living in Community Five Years from Now

- Definitely will: 19%
- Definitely not: 6%
- Probably will: 41%
- Probably not: 12%
- Don't know: 22%

Figure 4

Likelihood of Living in Community Five Years from Now by Feeling of Belonging in Community

- Excellent: Definitely/probably will stay = 86%, Don't know = 7%, Definitely or probably won't stay = 7%
- Good: Definitely/probably will stay = 68%, Don't know = 20%, Definitely or probably won't stay = 12%
- Fair: Definitely/probably will stay = 46%, Don't know = 27%, Definitely or probably won't stay = 26%
- Poor: Definitely/probably will stay = 16%, Don't know = 40%, Definitely or probably won't stay = 44%