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RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN COMMUNITY ATTRIBUTES AND RESIDENTIAL PREFERENCE IN NONMETROPOLITAN NEBRASKA

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ABSTRACT—This paper examines the residential preferences of rural Nebraskans. Data from the 1998 Nebraska Rural Poll were analyzed at two levels. First, the residential preferences of rural Nebraskans were compared to those of the general population of the United States. Second, the relationships between the attributes of the respondents' current community and their residential preferences were examined. Current community size, the social attributes of the community, and evaluations of local community services were all determined to be important influences on residential preferences. The findings illustrate the possible positive impact on rural Great Plains communities of enhancing social interaction and creatively providing service delivery.

KEY WORDS: Nebraska, population, rural communities

Introduction

Residential Preferences in the 1970s and 1980s

Residential preference has been an important subject for examination by rural sociologists since the 1960s. Previous research on the topic often has focused on general patterns of migration to rural areas, leaving unanswered the basic underlying question of whether or not rural residents prefer to live in rural areas.

In the early 1970s several residential preference studies were conducted to examine the potential for population turnaround, in other words, increased migration to rural areas of the nation (Dillman and Dobash 1972; Mazie and Rawlings 1972; Zuiches and Fuguitt 1972). Shortly after the completion of these studies, census data revealed that a majority of rural places had seen a population increase. This new information made the preference studies obsolete, according to some scientists. As Dillman (1979:960) said, "some cryptic comments as 'rural people have voted with their feet instead of their hearts'" portrayed the view among many scientists that the issue of rural population growth had already been decided.

Scientists suggested that factors influencing this population turnaround ranged from continued growth of metropolitan centers and their spillover into nonmetropolitan counties to decentralizing of manufacturing, increased early retirement, leveling off of farm population loss, and reduced cost of living in rural areas. Many other issues were also raised in attempts to explain the change in patterns of migration to rural areas. One factor that was included in the explanation of migration in the 1970s is the preference for living in rural areas. All of the preference studies conducted in the 1970s indicated that, in general, the American people prefer residential locations more rural than their present ones (Dillman and Dobash 1972; Mazie and Rawlings 1972; Zuiches and Fuguitt 1972; Ryan et al. 1974; Carpenter 1975; DeJong and Sell 1977; Dillman 1979). Nonetheless, the preference expressed for rural living in the early 1970s was not unconditional. Fuguitt and Zuiches (1975) reported that about one-half of those individuals who had a rural preference would give it up if it meant lower incomes and other potential negative consequences.

Other research conducted on the topic suggested that the preference for rural living is linked to a preference for living in the countryside. Dillman and Dobash (1972) reported that 65% of those indicating a preference for rural living would prefer to live outside the city limits of the nearest community. The proportion so stating increased steadily as city size preference decreased. Dillman (1979:964) wrote that, "[t]o many people, a rural preference may imply a home in the country complete with trees, spacious yard, and other idyllic qualities."

Also emerging from these early 1970s studies were individuals' perceptions of urban and rural places. Individuals who preferred rural areas were less likely to place high quality-of-life scores on metropolitan amenities; however, the availability of good jobs was perceived as much higher in urban areas than rural, no matter what the residential preference. Often,

those individuals who preferred rural areas also cited intangible aspects of the community such as friendliness of neighbors and respect for law and order as positive points for rural communities (Dillman and Dobash 1972).

Finally, Williams and Sofranko (1979) examined the question of whether or not preference influenced migration population turnaround of the 1970s:

> [Our] findings are consistent with the argument that migration from metropolitan to non-metropolitan areas is, as reported by migrants, substantially a function of the unattractiveness of urban areas and the relative attractiveness of more rural areas, and that it is based more on environmental factors than on employment. (247)

However, to infer that residential preference influenced the population turnaround of the 1970s would be, as Dillman (1979:965) said, "tantamount to declaring guilt by association." Although evidence developed during the late 1970s to early 1980s supporting the notion that residential preference was related to migration patterns, the question has continued to be raised by researchers, as some rural areas have seen growth while others have declined.

Meanwhile, studies on residential preference using different variables emerged in the 1980s. Fredrickson et al. (1980) used the concept of community satisfaction to explain the relationship between migration intentions and residential preferences. In their study, they found that residential preferences and community satisfaction are interrelated and each has an independent effect on migration. Also, they adopted the concept of "preference status" used in their earlier study (Fredrickson et al. 1980), which indicates a discrepancy between the respondent's current residence and the size and location of the community identified as most desired.

Howell and Frese (1983) emphasized a life-cycle framework for investigating the dynamics of both residential preferences and location in an attempt to explain in part how the association between preferences and residence strengthens from adolescence to adulthood. After pointing out the limitations of 1970s residential preference research in shaping policy, they insisted that research should ascertain how residential preferences mix with other factors to shape migration patterns. Also, they recommended that research on migration might be conceptualized as one part of a broader set of theoretical concerns, namely, the study of life course.

Population Change and Residential Preference in the 1990s

Population trends in the 1990s have provided an opportunity to reexamine the role of residential preferences in population redistribution in the United States. Between 1980 and 1990 the US nonmetropolitan growth rate was 2.7%, while the metropolitan areas showed an 11.8% increase in population. However, between 1990 and 1995 the migration patterns became more similar, with a 5.8% increase in metropolitan areas and a 5.1% increase in nonmetropolitan areas (Beale 1997).

However, not all regions of the country saw equal growth patterns. The central region of the United States, which contains the Great Plains and the major corn-growing region, saw a 2.0% increase in nonmetropolitan population compared to an 11.7% increase in the western region. According to Beale (1997), the 1995 growth rate of rural areas reflects patterns similar to those in the 1970s. A closer examination of these trends reveals that both higher in-migration and lower out-migration fueled this nonmetropolitan population growth. The central region's growth was attributed mainly to its increased in-migration (Cromartie 1997).

Nebraska's historical pattern of population change mirrors the national picture but represents an extreme case. Nebraska, situated in the center of the central region, has shown some disparity when compared to the overall trends. Between 1980 and 1990 all but 10 of the 93 counties in the state (including the six metropolitan counties) saw declines in population. A reversal of this trend occurred between 1990 and 1995 when 48 of the state's counties saw population growth. Many of these were frontier counties (six people or less per square mile) and had not seen growth since the early 1900s. During this time period (1990-1998), 42 counties in the state experienced net in-migration, compared to only three counties during the 1980s (US Bureau of the Census, July 1998 Population Estimates).

As was the case for the Great Plains, much of Nebraska's in-migration can be attributed to its natural amenities and quality of life. A study of new residents to Nebraska revealed that the top three reasons for moving to the state were (by proportions of those choosing each as "very important" in their decision): to be closer to relatives, looking for safer place to live, and quality of local schools (Cordes et al. 1996).

Recent research on residential preferences in the United States has emphasized that population in rural areas experienced a turnaround in the 1970s (from a trend of population loss to population growth). This trend reversed in the 1980s and in the 1990s appeared to be reversing itself once

again (Brown et al. 1997). Researchers argue that the complex causes of these distribution shifts involve social and demographic changes, as well as the structural reconfiguration of economic activities allowing an expansion of rural job opportunities. However, they argue that residential preference may also play a role in this distributional shift. In examining the preference-for-residence research, scientists find evidence to support two propositions: (1) many Americans would like to live in small towns and rural areas and (2) the proportion having this preference exceeds the proportion currently living in rural places (Brown et al.:411). A 1972 study revealed, however, that earlier studies had overestimated the popularity of rural areas when respondents were asked if their preference depended on access to urban areas. Fuguitt and Zuiches (1975) found that few people want to live far from larger cities (four of five persons who preferred living in rural areas wanted their home to be near urban areas).

Brown et al. (1997) found in their study that residential preferences have remained fairly stable during the last three decades and that most people prefer their current residence types. Those who did not were most likely to prefer smaller and/or less dense locations. The researchers recommended that future studies investigate the content of residential preferences and how they are formed. Many have thought that a preference for rural areas reflected "anti-urbanism" (Blackwood and Carpenter 1978). Or perhaps this preference reflects the values and quality-of-life factors that are typically associated with rural areas.

Objectives of the Study

Previous residential preference literature has mainly examined the potential for preferences to explain migration patterns in the United States. What has been lacking, however, is an attempt to explain preferences. What makes people prefer certain community sizes? One possible factor that influences residential preference is current residence.

The residential preference literature has unequivocally demonstrated that the single most preferred location is one's current residence (Fuguitt and Brown 1990). Furthermore, previous experience often provides a basis for judgments about the desirability and qualities of a specific type of community (Zuiches 1980). And, Howell and Frese (1983:569) state that researchers need an understanding "of how community attributes are involved in the desire for an enhanced quality of life on the part of those with migration intentions." They also argue that assessing the specific attributes

that underlie residential preferences can offer important insight into what people desire from their communities. Therefore, a study that looks at the relationship between current community attributes and preferred residential locations is warranted.

This paper aims to identify the residential preferences of nonmetropolitan Nebraska residents and to examine the relationship between those residential preferences and a set of community attribute variables and demographic variables.

Methods

The data used in this analysis were collected in February and March of 1998. A self-administered questionnaire was mailed to 6,500 randomly selected households living in nonmetropolitan counties in Nebraska. This paper is based on 4,196 completed questionnaires. A 65% response rate was achieved using the total design method (Dillman 1978).

The average respondent was 51 years of age. Ninety-five percent of the respondents were married and 50% lived in a town or village. On average, respondents had lived in or near their current town or village 29 years and had lived in Nebraska 44 years. Seventy-two percent were living in or near towns or villages with populations less than 5,000.

When compared to the entire population of rural Nebraska (using 1990 US Census data), this sample tended to be slightly overrepresentative of the following groups: those between the ages of 40 and 64, females, persons with higher educational levels, persons with higher household incomes, and married respondents. The census data show that 64% of rural Nebraskans are married. In addition, 38% are between the ages of 20 and 39, 36% are age 40 to 64, and 26% are age 65 and older. In comparison, 25% of our sample are between the ages of 20 and 39, 48% are age 40 to 64, and 20% are age 65 and older.

Residential Preference Variable

The residential preference variable is based on a comparison of the respondents' preferred and current community size. To ascertain respondents' preferred community size, they were asked the following question: "In terms of size, if you could live in any size community you wanted, which one of these would you like best?" The answer categories were as follows: a large metropolitan city over 500,000 in population; a medium-sized city

50,000 to 500,000 in population; a smaller city 10,000 to 49,999 in population; a town or village 5,000 to 9,999 in population; a town or village 1,000 to 4,999 in population; a town or village less than 1,000 in population; or in the country outside any city or village. The wording of this question is identical to that used in the study by Brown et al. (1997), thus allowing comparisons to be made between nonmetropolitan Nebraskans and the general US population. The only difference is that more answer categories are provided in the Nebraska study.

To determine current community size, two questions were combined. First, the respondents that lived outside city limits were classified as living "in the country." Then, those living within city limits were divided into the following community sizes: less than 1,000; 1,000 to 4,999; 5,000 to 10,000; and over 10,000.

The residential preference variable is based on the combinations of these questions. The respondents were recoded into two categories: those that are currently living in their preferred community size (1) and those not currently living in their preferred community size (0). This method is similar to the concept used by Fredrickson et al. (1980), although they use one question reflecting both size and location.

Independent Variables

The independent variables used in this study are composed of five sets of community attribute variables and selected demographic variables. The first community attribute variable measures respondents' perceptions of change. The perception of change category involves two questions. Respondents were first asked to complete the following sentence: "When you think about this past year, would you say: My community has changed for the . . ." The answer categories were as follows: worse, same, and better. They were then asked a question to determine their individual change: "All things considered, do you think you are better or worse off than you were five years ago?" The answer categories were as follows: worse off, about the same, and better off. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics for these variables as well as for the other community attribute variables described below.

The second variable included three social attributes of the community, as assessed by the respondents. Specifically, respondents were asked if they would describe their communities as friendly or unfriendly, trusting or distrusting, supportive or hostile. For each of these three dimensions, respondents were asked to "rate" their community using a seven-point scale

TABLE 1

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF VARIABLES USED IN ANALYSIS

Predictor variables	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha
Perceptions of change:			
Perceptions of community change	2.13	0.68	NA
Perceptions of individual change	2.26	0.70	NA
Community social attributes:			
Friendly community	5.26	1.42	NA
Trusting community	4.92	1.45	NA
Supportive community	4.95	1.43	NA
Community participation and tolerance:			
Everyone can contribute to government	3.76	0.91	NA
Receptive to new leaders	3.14	1.00	NA
Allow difference of opinion	3.55	0.89	NA
Satisfaction with community services:			
Transportation services	10.96	2.89	.81
Environmental services	11.05	2.57	.85
Consumer services	9.11	3.09	.77
Human services	20.96	4.36	.77
Local government	6.43	1.95	.77
Local transportation infrastructure	6.81	1.97	.62

Note: NA = not available.

between the two contrasting views. The scale was coded so that 7 indicated "friendly, trusting, and supportive."

The third category of variables included ratings of community participation and tolerance. Respondents were instructed: "Rate your community as a place to live by indicating whether you agree or disagree with the following statements." The three statements were as follows: Most everyone in my community is allowed to contribute to local governmental affairs if they want to. Residents in my community are receptive to new residents taking leadership positions. Differences of opinion on public issues are avoided at all costs in my community. Respondents rated these statements on a five-point scale, with 1 being "strongly agree" and 5 being "strongly

disagree." The variables were recoded, if necessary, so that 5 indicated stronger community participation and tolerance.

The fourth category of community attributes included evaluations of local services and amenities. These variables were generated by applying factor analysis, that is, principal factor extraction with varimax rotation. Factor analysis makes it possible to simplify a number of measures into groups that are highly correlated and are presumed to reflect common characteristics (Child 1970). These factors were derived from a question in which the respondents indicated how satisfied they were with 25 different services and amenities (taking into consideration availability, cost, and quality). Respondents used a five-point scale to rate the services and amenities, with 1 being "very dissatisfied" and 5 being "very satisfied."

The first factor included evaluations of six human services: Head Start programs, daycare services, senior centers, nursing home care, basic medical care, and mental health services. The second factor is made up of evaluations of four transportation services: air service, bus service, rail service, and taxi service. The third factor is comprised of three environmental services: sewage disposal, water disposal, and solid waste disposal. The fourth factor encompasses evaluations of three consumer services: retail shopping, restaurants, and entertainment. The fifth factor is composed of evaluations of two levels of local government: county and city/village government. The sixth factor is made up of evaluations of local transportation infrastructure: streets as well as highways and bridges. Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.62 to 0.85 for the sets of items included in each factor.

The final community attribute measured was the size of the respondent's current community. The respondents were given six answer categories: less than 100; 100-499; 500-999; 1,000-4,999; 5,000-10,000; and over 10,000.

The final independent variables are related to seven demographic characteristics of the respondents. Gender, marital status, and life-cycle status were recoded so that 0 denoted male, not married, and no children at home, respectively. Conversely, 1 indicated female, married, and children at home. Age was recoded into four categories: less than 39, between 40 and 49, between 50 and 59, and over 60. The number of years they have lived in their community was classified as follows: less than 9 years, between 10 and 29 years, between 30 and 59 years, and over 60 years. Household income was categorized as follows: less than $29,999; between $30,000 and $59,999; and over $60,000. Finally, education was classified into the following three categories: high school or less, some college, and college graduate.

TABLE 2

COMPARISONS OF SIZE OF ACTUAL AND PREFERRED RESIDENCE OF RESPONDENTS BETWEEN A NATIONWIDE SAMPLE (1992) AND NONMETROPOLITAN NEBRASKANS (1998)

Size of residence	United States		Nonmetropolitan Nebraska	
	Current residence (%)	Preferred residence (%)	Current residence (%)	Preferred residence (%)
City				
500,000+ population	17	9	0	1
50,000-500,000 population	27	20	0	5
10,000-50,000 population	23	22	9	19
Subtotal	67	51	9	25
Town or village				
5,000-9,999 population			5	12
1,000-4,999 population			16	18
Less than 1,000 population			19	11
Subtotal*	18	15	40	41
In the country	15	33	51	34

Note: Percentages exclude cases of "don't know" or "no answer" responses.
* The data for the nationwide sample was not split out in as many categories as was the nonmetropolitan Nebraska sample.

Results

First, respondents' current and preferred residence size were compared to responses from a nationwide sample collected in 1992 (Brown et al. 1997). These comparisons are shown in Table 2. Differences exist in the preferred residences of the two samples. Fifty-one percent of the nationwide sample preferred a city with more than 10,000 people; however, only 25% of nonmetropolitan Nebraskans preferred this size of community. Also, more of the nonmetropolitan Nebraska sample preferred to live in towns or villages with less than 10,000 population (41%) compared to the nationwide sample (15%). The proportions preferring to live in the country were almost identical for both samples (33% vs. 34%).

When the nonmetropolitan Nebraska sample is examined in more detail, some interesting findings emerge. The proportion of respondents preferring to live in a city is much larger than the proportion currently living in such a place. Twenty-five percent would prefer to live in a city, compared to only 9% who currently do. The proportions preferring and currently living in towns or villages was almost identical (40% vs. 41%). However, the proportion currently living in the country is greater than the proportion preferring to do so. Fifty-one percent of the respondents currently live in the country, compared to only 34% who would prefer this type of residence. This implies that those living in Nebraska cities with populations greater than 10,000 are more satisfied with their current community size, but those living in the country appear to be less satisfied with their current community size.

The Nebraska sample was further surveyed for its preferred proximity to a large city and whether or not the respondents currently lived in their preferred size of residence (Table 3). When examining the preferred community sizes for both those who currently live in their preferred community size and those who do not, the preference for larger towns becomes more evident. Twenty-nine percent of those not currently living in their preferred size of community would like to live in cities with populations between 10,000 and 49,999. However, only 10% of the persons currently living in their preferred size of community prefer to live in a city of this size. A sizeable difference also exists among those preferring to live in the country. Only 14% of those not currently living in their preferred size of community would like to live in the country, compared to 54% of those who do live in their preferred residence.

With regard to location preference close to or farther away from a larger city, approximately two-thirds (65%) of the respondents would prefer to live within 30 miles of a large or medium-sized city. When only the persons who do not currently live in their preferred location are analyzed, differences are noted according to their size preference. As preferred community size decreases, the proportion preferring to live within 30 miles of a city generally increases. For example, 57% of those preferring to live in a smaller city would like to be within 30 miles of a larger city; in comparison, 73% of those preferring a town or village with less than 1,000 people would like to be within 30 miles of a larger city. However, those preferring to live in the country were less likely than those preferring to live in towns or villages to want to live within 30 miles of a city.

A similar pattern occurs with the respondents currently living in their preferred size of community. As preferred community size decreases, the

TABLE 3

NONMETROPOLITAN NEBRASKANS' PREFERRED RESIDENCE BY SIZE OF PLACE AND LOCATION WITH RESPECT TO A LARGE CITY

Preferred residence size	Preferred proximity to large city: Within 30 miles (%)	Farther away (%)	Total (%)
	Do not live in preferred size of residence		
Large city (over 500,000)	*	*	1
Medium-sized city (50,000 - 500,000)	*	*	10
Smaller city (10,000 - 49,999)	57	43	29
Town/village (5,000 - 9,999)	70	30	20
Town/village (1,000 - 4,999)	71	29	21
Town/village less than 1,000	73	28	6
In the country	65	35	14
Total	65	35	
	Currently live in preferred size of residence		
Large city (over 500,000)	**	**	**
Medium-sized city (50,000 - 500,000)	**	**	**
Smaller city (10,000 - 49,999)	40	60	10
Town/village (5,000 - 9,999)	70	30	5
Town/village (1,000 - 4,999)	69	31	15
Town/village less than 1,000	81	20	16
In the country	64	36	54
Total	66	34	

* Respondents choosing this size preference were not asked their location preference.
** There are no communities of this size in nonmetropolitan Nebraska.

proportions wanting to live within 30 miles of a city increase, with the exception of those preferring to live in the country.

Relationships Between Residential Preference and Community Attributes

The relationships between current community attributes and whether or not one lives in his or her preferred community size were then examined. A logistic regression analysis was used to gain a more thorough and precise view of each independent variable's unique contribution to and importance in explaining whether or not respondents prefer the same size of community

TABLE 4

PREDICTION OF MATCH BETWEEN CURRENT AND PREFERRED COMMUNITY SIZE BY EACH VARIABLE GROUP

Independent variables	B	Exp (B)	Chi-square
Perception of change:			8.775*
Community change	0.086	1.090	
Individual change	.126*	1.135	
Community social attributes:			23.412***
Friendly	-0.062	0.940	
Trusting	-0.004	0.996	
Supportive	.182***	1.199	
Community participation and tolerance:			14.562**
Everyone can contribute to government	-0.085	0.919	
Receptive to new leaders	.125***	1.133	
Allow differences of opinion	.117*	1.124	
Satisfaction with community services:			102.046***
Transportation services	0.000	1.000	
Environmental services	-.129***	0.879	
Human services	-0.011	0.989	
Consumer services	.112***	1.119	
Local government services	0.050	1.051	
Local transportation infrastructure	.061*	1.062	
Current community size	.082**	1.086	8.524

Notes: B = logistic regression coefficient; Exp (B) = estimated odds ratio; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

in which they currently live (Table 4). The dependent variable is coded so that 1 indicates they currently live in their preferred community size. Each category of community attribute variables was analyzed separately. The models of each set of predictor variables were statistically significant, indicating that each set of variables influenced whether or not respondents currently live in their preferred community size.

Respondents' perceptions of their individual change was statistically significant. The better off respondents think they are than five years ago, the more likely they were to be living in their preferred community size.

Although overall community social attributes did influence whether or not respondents currently live in their preferred community size, only the variable measuring how supportive the respondent rated their community

was statistically significant. The more supportive the respondents rated their communities, the more likely they were to be living in their preferred community size.

Two of the community participation and tolerance variables were statistically significant. These two variables were receptiveness toward new residents in leadership roles and whether differences of opinion on public issues are allowed. The more receptive residents felt the community was toward new residents in leadership positions and the more they felt the community was open to different opinions, the more likely they were to be living in their preferred community size.

Four groups of community services and amenities were statistically significant in predicting whether or not respondents' current and preferred community size were the same. These three services were environmental services, consumer services, and local transportation infrastructure. In the case of consumer and local transportation infrastructure, higher satisfaction levels led to a higher likelihood of living in their preferred community size. However, the more satisfied the respondents were with environmental services, the less likely they were to be living in their preferred community size.

The last variable analyzed was the respondents' current community size. This variable was statistically significant. The larger their communities, the more likely they were to be living in their preferred community size.

Residential Preferences by Demographic Variables

Finally, we analyzed whether or not respondents currently live in their preferred community size by using demographic variables (Table 5). Seven demographic variables were used in this analysis. As shown in Table 5, three variables (life-cycle status, age, and education) were statistically significant. Those who do not have children under age 19 at home were more likely to be living in their preferred community size. And, the higher the respondents' age and educational level, the more likely they were to be living in their preferred community size.

Discussion and Conclusions

One important finding of this paper is that residents in nonmetropolitan Nebraska differ from the rest of the country in their preferred community

TABLE 5

MEAN DIFFERENCE BY DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

Variables	Value	Freq.	Mean	S.D.	t / F	Sig.
Gender	Male	1256	2.07	0.559	-1.27	NS
	Female	1660	2.10	0.544		
Marital Status	Not married	132	2.13	0.623	0.817	NS
	Married	2795	2.08	0.547		
Life cycle status	No children	849	2.13	0.551	3.560	$p<0.001$
	With children	1409	2.08	0.552		
Age	Less than 39	755	2.03	0.536	11.558	$p<0.001$
	Between 40 and 49	804	2.06	0.553		
	Between 50 and 59	574	2.06	0.568		
	Over 60	796	2.18	0.536		
	Total	2929	2.09	0.550		
Years lived in current community	Less than 9	561	2.09	0.564	0.991	NS
	Between 10 and 29	1028	2.06	0.582		
	Between 30 and 59	969	2.10	0.524		
	Over 60	370	2.11	0.502		
	Total	2928	2.09	0.550		
Household income	Less than $29,999	793	2.10	0.506	2.689	NS
	$30,000 - $59,999	1399	2.06	0.577		
	Over $60,000	737	2.11	0.542		
	Total	2929	2.09	0.550		
Education	High school or less	1083	2.05	0.535	3.643	$p<0.05$
	Some college	1066	2.09	0.558		
	College graduate	687	2.13	0.564		
	Total	2836	2.08	0.551		

Notes: S.D. = standard deviation; t / F = test statistic; NS = not significant.

size. Most previous preference studies have shown that people tend to prefer the size of their current community, and those that do not tend to prefer smaller or less dense communities. This study revealed, however, that nonmetropolitan residents in Nebraska (who do not currently live in their preferred community size) tend to prefer communities larger than their current location.

This finding can be explained by both demographic and economic reasons. There are over 530 communities in Nebraska. Over one-half of these have populations less than 2,500. Thus, it makes sense demographically that rural Nebraskans, who primarily live in some of the smallest communities in the Great Plains, would prefer to move to a larger place.

Economic reasons also play an important role in community preference. Fuguitt and Brown (1990) found that people preferring to live in smaller communities were more likely to give quality-of-life reasons, but those preferring larger places were more likely to give income reasons. Persons living in nonmetropolitan Nebraska who are not currently living in their preferred community size may prefer larger communities because they perceive cities as having more economic opportunities than their current community.

Another important finding of this paper is the relationship between current community attributes and residential preference status. Perceptions of individual change, ratings of the supportiveness of their community, ratings of the tolerance of their communities, satisfaction with certain community services, and current community size are all related to whether or not one is currently living in his or her preferred community. Resident who believe they are better off than they were five years ago, those who rated their communities as being supportive, persons who rated their communities as tolerant of new residents in leadership positions and allowing differences of opinion on public issues, and persons who were satisfied with consumer services and the local transportation infrastructure were more likely to be living in their preferred community size. In addition, current community size and residential preference status were positively related; residents living in larger communities were more likely to be living in their preferred community size. Meanwhile, the finding that satisfaction with environmental services was negatively related to whether or not one currently lives in their preferred community size needs further study.

These findings seem to lend support to the notion that past experience helps form judgments about different community types. If respondents have been satisfied with life in their current communities, they are more likely to prefer to live in that size of community.

This analysis provides insight into where rural residents prefer to live. Given the ambiguous patterns of rural in-migration, it is important to gain a deeper understanding of where rural residents prefer to live. However, it is important to keep in mind that residential preferences do not always correspond with actual mobility behavior. Hwang and Albrecht (1987) explored

various constraints to fulfilling residential preferences. When analyzing social structural constraints and life-cycle factors, they found that the fulfillment of residential preference depended on preference types, occupation, and age. People preferring residences in less exclusive areas, persons with professional occupations, and older persons were more likely to have their preferred and actual residence be the same. When explaining the age factor, they argued that younger persons tend to delay the fulfillment of their residential preferences until they are older because of career considerations.

This study also found that older respondents were more likely than younger respondents to be living in their preferred community size. In addition, persons without children at home and those with higher educational levels were also more likely to be living in their preferred size of community. These findings indicate that certain constraints may prevent individuals from fulfilling their residential preferences.

Rural Nebraskans have tended to migrate out of state or to regional economic hubs or to stay in their community of choice. These individuals have made decisions that enhanced their attachment to place. While younger residents have often moved on, the older residents have remained in their communities of preference for long periods of time. While national statistics also reveal this trend, it is interesting to note that rural citizens of the Great Plains have found places they call home and actually have found ways to remain in these communities.

Findings from this research indicate that, on average, rural Nebraskans prefer larger places to live than their current communities. This finding may contribute to an increased urbanization phenomenon among retail trade centers in rural areas in Nebraska. It may also reflect their desire for increased economic opportunities in these larger communities.

On the other hand, rural communities may be able to maintain their populations by enhancing social attributes and creatively designing service needs for current residents. By examining how to enhance various entertainment options as well as local transportation infrastructure, rural residents may be more willing to stay in smaller communities. This may also appeal to residents of larger communities who may consider a move to rural Nebraska.

While this research focused only on rural Nebraska, many similarities would be expected in other Great Plains states. In separate studies of inmigrants to North Dakota and Nebraska, researchers found many similarities in their demographic characteristics, their motivations for moving to these Great Plains states, and their satisfaction with their new communities

(Leistritz et al. 2000, 2001). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the residential preferences of rural Nebraskans are representative of the entire region.

This study's findings are striking in that rural Nebraskans continue to place a great deal of value on the social attributes of their community when indicating where they prefer to live. Yet, the lack of economic opportunities continues to plague rural residents. This particular study provides some insight into how preference for a specific type of community can be supported. First, enhancing the social attributes within a community setting influences where individuals want to live. Social gatherings of the past have often been replaced by more individual interaction patterns, even among rural citizens. A clearly focused program to enhance social interaction within a community may provide greater satisfaction with living in a small community. It may also stimulate new entrepreneurial activities that may enhance the local economic opportunity structure.

As the population ages, social services become even more important. Creative solutions to delivering health care and other services in rural places will play an important role in rejuvenating or at least sustaining rural population in the Great Plains. These two strategies, as suggested by this research, may also provide alternative economic development strategies that can support enhanced social interaction and attachment to place. In addition, new and creative social service delivery may provide additional local economic opportunity.

Further research needs to be conducted on how specific development activities, such as social gatherings, creative social service delivery, and other grassroots programs, influence preference for community size. These results could provide a basis for enhancing the economic and social environment among rural communities in the Great Plains.

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