Rewriting the Rural Narrative

Speak softly and carry statistics

Benjamin Winchester
Senior Research Fellow
Minnesota Extension
People keep leaving rural America. According to U.S. Census figures from 2010, just 16% of the country’s population lives in rural areas, down from 20% in 2000, and down dramatically from 72% about a hundred years ago. But there are stories, both of the people who left their rural homes, and of those who remained, to form the small percentage of Americans who still live in rural America. There are stories, too, of people who came to small towns they never left for myriad reasons. We want to know those reasons, and the story of rural life that they tell.

Rural Minnesota is in trouble. Young people are fleeing the farms and forests of the Gopher State, and the residents left there are aging. And they’re dying. While populations decline outstate, the Twin Cities area, especially the suburbs, booms.

We became kind of the poster child for the war on poverty, and any time somebody wanted to do a story about poor people, we were the first stop.

Sociologists Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas spent two years in a small town in Iowa trying to find out why so many young people are leaving rural America. What they found was that many small towns are playing a role in their own demise, by pushing the best and brightest to leave and under-investing in those who stay.

Rural Populations Continue to Shrink

Is Rural America Struggling? provides an excellent summary of the economic and population issues facing rural America. Key quote:

… rural America’s job growth is stagnant and the population is in decline. In fact, it’s the first time such a population decline has been recorded in the nation’s rural counties.
The slow, agonizing death of the small US town

HOLLOWING OUT THE MIDDLE

The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America

When death comes to a small town, the school is usually the last thing to go. A place can lose its bank, its tavern, its grocery store, its shoe shop. But when the school closes, you might as well put a fork in it.
Deficit Approach

Fixing things that can’t or shouldn’t be fixed
No More Anecdata!

anecdata (noun). information which is presented as if it is based on serious research but is in fact based on what someone thinks is true
1900-1950

• Mechanization of agriculture
• Roads and transportation
• Educational achievement and population loss
• Church closings (Delafield)
1950+

- Main street restructuring
- School consolidations
  - MN 432 districts in 1990 to 337 in 2010
- Hospitals closings
The rural idyll

“Agriculture is no longer the mainstay of the rural economy.”
The Media Idyll Persists

Who are you going to find in a small town when you travel to small towns in morning and afternoon?

"It looks like a ghost town," said Bill Gibson, a 74-year-old farmer, whose grandfather broke ground on the family's land with a team of oxen in the middle of the 19th century. "I sure miss the people."
Rural is Changing, not Dying

- Yes, things are changing
- Small towns are microcosms of globalization
  - Many of these changes impact rural and urban areas alike (not distinctly rural)
  - Yet more apparent in rural places
- Survived massive restructuring of social and economic life
- Research base does NOT support notion that if XXXX closes, the town dies
  - In Minnesota only 3 towns have dissolved in past 50 years
Rural Rebound

- Since 1970, rural population increased by 11%
  - Relative percentage living rural decreased

1970
- Urban: 26% 
- Rural: 74%

203,211,926
(53.6m rural)

2010
- Urban: 81%
- Rural: 19%

308,745,538
(59.5m rural)
Rural Data

Population figures reduced by formerly rural places now designated as urban (since 1974)

- Minnesota 352,224 rural residents now classified urban
- Montana 120,261
- Nebraska 170,855
- South Dakota 207,790
- Texas 1,339,142

Urban areas have grown WIDER, not TALLER
Mobility

Households Moving Between 1995 and 1999:

44% Iowa
46% Minnesota
North Dakota
Wisconsin
47% Nebraska
48% South Dakota
49% United States
If nobody even moved in or out…

2000

20-24

Age

20-24

30-34

2010
But in reality people do move…

Age 20-24

Moving out - 4

Moving in + 6

2000

Age 30-34

2010
2000-2010, Percent Cohort Change

Rural Prairie County

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Driven to Discover™
Rural Recreational County
Core Metropolitan County
Newcomers: Why?

- Simpler pace of life
- Safety and Security
- Low Housing Cost
Newcomers: Who?

- 36% lived there previously
- 68% attain bachelors degree
- 67% household incomes over $50k
- 51% have children in household
- May be leaving their career or underemployed
- Yet, Quality of Life is the trump card
Avg. American moves 11.7 times in lifetime
(6 times at age 30)
Choosing Rural

• Brain Gain: migration to rural age 30-49
  – Also 50-64 but not as widespread
  – Brain drain is the rule, not the exception
  – Happening since the 1970s

• Newcomers look at 3-5 communities
  – Topical reasoning (local foods regions)
  – Assets vary by demographic

• Employee recruitment must get past “warm body” syndrome
Rewriting the Rural Narrative: The Demand for Leadership in Rural America
Social Life is Not Dying
Nonprofit Growth: 2000-2010

- **U.S.** gained 10% in population and 32% in the number of nonprofits.

- The most rural counties experienced a loss of 1% in population, yet the number of nonprofits increased 15%.

*National Center for Charitable Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau*
Minnesota gained 8% in population and gained 19% in the number of nonprofits.

– The most rural counties experienced a loss of 5% in population, yet the number of nonprofits increased 14%.

This growth can be both good and bad news for rural places.

National Center for Charitable Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau
There are also gains and losses between these time periods, losses (or gains) don't mean just losses (or gains).
Population per Organizational Role by County, 2010
Changing Types of Involvement - The Social Organization (historical)

- Place-based
- Broadly focused
- Word of mouth

Green & Haines. 2007. Asset Building and Community Development
Changing Types of Involvement - The Social Organization (present)

- Cover wide geographic area
- Narrowly focused goals/self-interest
- Diverse social interests
- Technological – social media

The people today are challenged in “connecting” with the existing social infrastructure.

Green & Haines. 2007. Asset Building and Community Development
Dynamics of the Minnesota Housing Supply
Workforce Housing Shortage

Workers in regional centers > population
  • However, many people need to hedge their family economic bets by living between multiple job opportunities
  • Some just don’t want to live in the larger cities where they work

Population increases don’t predict home building, income does
  • In many small towns, new homes are appraised at values lower than they cost to build
Percent Owner-Occupied Homes Owned by Boomers

47.0% Cook
46.8% Lake o’ Woods
44.9% Washington
43.9% Anoka
43.7% Carver

33.1% Blue Earth
34.5% Stevens
35.5% Benton
35.6% Clay
35.8% Lyon
Percent Owner-Occupied Homes Owned by Age 65+

- 40.2% Aitkin
- 38.8% Traverse
- 36.0% Big Stone
- 34.7% Lincoln
- 34.6% Faribault
- 17.2% Dakota
- 16.2% Wright
- 13.8% Sherburne
- 13.6% Carver
- 12.8% Scott
Percent All Homes that are Seasonal/Recreational

- 52.4% Cook
- 49.8% Aitkin
- 47.4% Cass
- 46.2% Lake o’ Woods
- 35.2% Hubbard
- 30.9% Lake
- 29.7% Crow Wing
- 28.8% Pine
- 27.1% Otter Tail
- 25.5% Itasca
- 24.3% Becker
Planned Churning

Moving IN

Moving OVER

Moving OUT
Transfer Receipts

Retirement (Social Security only) and disability insurance benefits and Medicare/Medicaid benefits

Source: Regional Economic Information System, Bureau of Economic Analysis
Just 55% of income comes from jobs.
Just 60% of all income earned in a rural county comes from a job.
County income is not all about jobs.

Now make up 20-30% of ALL $ flowing into a rural county.

Does not include private retirement accounts such as 401(k) or IRAs.
A Senior Service Economy

• Local economy is only going to become more integrated with boomer-related services

• We want to retain these transfer receipts

• Housing is the opportunity
The New Economic Narrative

- Brick and mortar is less indicative of local economic success
- People-focused (self-employment, 1099)
- Diversified occupations and industries
- Self-employment, multiple-job holding
- Recruitment is more than just the job and work-related benefits
  - Especially in tight labor markets
Broadband and Technology

Internet fast-lane bypassing rural Minnesota?

• Rural assets online

• Upstream matters
  – Producers not just consumers

• No one “rural” broadband
The Rural Choice

The bottom line is people WANT to live and move here for what you are today and will be tomorrow, not what may have been!
The Rural Choice

These newcomers are:

- Creating groups, building their community
- Diversifying the economy
- Buying/starting businesses, working from home
- Living in a region (no longer a 1-stop-shop)
- More than warm bodies (employee recruitment)
• Greater Minnesota Rising
• Fairmont Area Brain Gain
• Upper MN Valley RDC Regional Recruitment
• MNbump.com
• Return to Rural (Canada) returntorural.ca
• Independence, Iowa (housing incentives)
  – http://www.absolutelyindee.com/new-resident-housing-incentive-program/
• Iowa New Movers Study
  – http://www.cvcia.org/content/projects/8.migration.and.population/index.html
• Dakota Roots http://dakotaroots.com/
• Nebraska Rural Living http://www.nebraskaruralliving.com/
• Norfolk Area Recruiters http://www.norfolkarea.org/
• South Dakota Rural Enterprise http://www.sdrei.org/bringbak.htm
• Wayne Works http://www.wayneworks.org/
• South Dakota Seeds http://www.dakotaseeds.com/
• Rural By Choice (Kansas) http://www.ruralbychoice.com/
Brain Gain Landing Page
http://z.umn.edu/braingain/

Symposium Proceedings
http://z.umn.edu/ruralmigration/

Rural Issues and Trends Webinars
http://z.umn.edu/ruralwebinar/

Please ring this bell
benw@umn.edu