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. Behind these stories, both of the people who left their rural homes and of the small percentage of Americans who still live in the nation. There are stories, too, of people who’ve left for myriad reasons. We want to know those stories.

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 choose to stay.

**From Breadbasket to Basket Case**

In the 1980s, rural Americans faced fewer teen births and lower divorce rates than their urban counterparts. Now, their positions have flipped entirely.

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 population in the Twin Cities area, especially the suburbs,

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.
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.
The narrative

• There’s a brain drain
• We live in the middle of nowhere
• We are a sleepy town
• Everyone knows one another
• Nobody lock their doors

• What we had
• What we don’t have
• What we wish we had
• What we could have had...
No More Anecdota!

anecdota (noun). *information which is presented as if it is based on serious research but is in fact based on what someone thinks is true*
Mechanization of agriculture

Roads & transportation

Main street restructuring

School consolidations
Rural is Changing, not Dying

Small towns are microcosms of globalization
  ◦ Many of these changes impact rural and urban areas alike (not distinctly rural) yet are more apparent in rural places

Survived massive restructuring of social and economic life (with volunteer leadership)

Research base does NOT support notion that if XXXX closes, the town dies
Rural Rebound

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

1970
203,211,926 (53.6m rural)

2010
308,745,538 (59.5m rural)
### Comparison Historical Population from 1960 to 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UMVRDC Region</td>
<td>69,063</td>
<td>61,806</td>
<td>59,822</td>
<td>50,845</td>
<td>50,011</td>
<td>45,190</td>
<td>-34.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households</td>
<td>19,428</td>
<td>19,367</td>
<td>22,026</td>
<td>20,088</td>
<td>19,846</td>
<td>20,039</td>
<td>3.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Stone County</td>
<td>8,954</td>
<td>7,941</td>
<td>7,716</td>
<td>6,285</td>
<td>5,820</td>
<td>5,269</td>
<td>-41.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chippewa County</td>
<td>16,320</td>
<td>15,109</td>
<td>14,941</td>
<td>13,228</td>
<td>13,088</td>
<td>12,441</td>
<td>-23.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lac qui Parle County</td>
<td>13,330</td>
<td>11,164</td>
<td>10,592</td>
<td>8,924</td>
<td>8,067</td>
<td>7,259</td>
<td>-45.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swift County</td>
<td>14,936</td>
<td>13,177</td>
<td>12,920</td>
<td>10,724</td>
<td>11,956</td>
<td>9,783</td>
<td>-34.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow Medicine County</td>
<td>15,523</td>
<td>14,415</td>
<td>13,653</td>
<td>11,684</td>
<td>11,080</td>
<td>10,438</td>
<td>-32.76%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: US Census Bureau
**Stability**, not stagnation or sinkholes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pop Change</th>
<th>Occ HU Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carter</td>
<td>-15%</td>
<td>-2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawson</td>
<td>-1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garfield</td>
<td>-6%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judith Basin</td>
<td>-11%</td>
<td>-3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillips</td>
<td>-8%</td>
<td>-2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richland</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosebud</td>
<td>-2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silver Bow</td>
<td>-1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheatland</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2000-2010 U.S. Census Bureau
Avg HH Size:
1940: 3.6
2018: 2.6 (-29%)

Kids graduate
Population: -2
Households: NC

Spouse passes
Population: -1
Households: NC
Myth: Only the “lucky few” escape rural America

Roughly 49% of Montana residents move every 5 years.
Brain Drain

1990-2000, Percent Cohort Change

- 55-59: 5.5%
- 50-54: 4.0%
- 45-49: 7.0%
- 40-44: 14.5%
- 35-39: 23.9%
- 30-34: 48.5%
- 25-29: -26.9%
- 20-24: -43.0%
- 19: -5.7%
- 10-14: 25.0%
The Rural Brain Gain

They choose rural age 30-49

And also when they are 50-64 (since the 1970s)
Newcomers: Why?

Simpler pace of life

Safety and Security

Low Housing Cost
## Move Factors with Preference

Proportion of households that indicated it was important in some way.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Move Factor</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Take advantage of the slower pace of life</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To live closer to relatives</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To find a less congested place to live</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To live among people with similar values</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To find lower priced housing</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To find a safer place to live</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To live in a smaller community</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To find a lower cost of living</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To find a good environment for raising children</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To find a job that allowed a better work-life balance</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To find a job that matches my skills</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To take on a new job</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To find a higher paying job</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To live closer to friends</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To find higher quality schools</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Workforce Newcomers 2020: Who?

• 31% moved for a job
• 25% lived there previously
• 60% attain bachelors degree
• 75% household incomes over $50k
• 47% have children in household
• 82% own their home
• 54% commute 10 minutes or less
Question: Do you typically telecommute or work remotely for a company not located in your region? (of those in workforce)

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

18% currently own a business (14% not a farm).

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Already existed</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Created it</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10% currently own a farm.

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Already existed</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Created it</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cohort Lifecycle

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
Diversifying the rural economy

Jobs by Industry

- Professional & business services
- Trade
- Health & social services
- Government
- Manufacturing
- Leisure & hospitality
- Other services
- Construction
- Transport & warehouse
- Agriculture
- Utilities
- Mining

Twin Cities vs. Greater MN
MYTH: Social life is dying...

First question: How many people do we need to run our town?

We have numerous leadership programs currently training leader supply, but are we keeping up with the organization demand?
Nonprofit Change: 2000-2010

+33%
Social Life is Not Dying
Nonprofit Growth: 2000-2010
Population per Organizational Role, 2010

2nd highest demand for leaders in U.S.  
1 in 22 people must LEAD*

* Assumes 3 people per new group
Population per Organizational Role, 2000 - 2010

794 new leaders per year

1 in 22 people must LEAD*

* Assumes 3 people per new group
SHIFT in Engagement

Narrow geography
Broad focus
Action: consensus

Broad geography
Narrow focus
Action: the small
Where We Live and Where We’d Like to Live
by community type

- 25% City
- 23% Suburb
- 30% Rural area
- 21% Small town

20% live rural/small town
51% would PREFER to

MOVING IN : Demand for rural and small town living!

Negative Narratives

Would we allow this negative language to permeate a product or service we were selling?

Why do we do it?

Cannot continue to portray rural success as the exception

VANISHING POINT; Amid Dying Towns of Rural Plains, One Makes a Stand
resident recruitment

Community Development

Economic Development

Tourism
The Rural Choice

These newcomers are:

• Diversifying social life
  • 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)
The Rural Choice: Opening New Doors and Welcoming New Neighbors

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!

Rural Revitalization is Upon Us!
Brain Gain Landing Page
http://z.umn.edu/braingain/

Reddit: Rural By Choice
/r/ruralbychoice

Twitter: @grokrural

PLEASE RING THIS BELL

benw@umn.edu