

Rewriting the Rural Narrative

Speak softly and carry statistics



Benjamin Winchester
Rural Sociologist

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 the stories, both of the people who left their rural homes and the small percentage of Americans who still live in rural America, there are stories, too, of people who've left for myriad reasons. We want to know those stories and tell.

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.

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.

Fighting for an American Countryside

The Decline of Rural Minnesota

THU SEP 20, 2012 AT 09:04 PM PDT

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.

Survival of Rural America

VICTORIES AND BITTER HARVESTS



Richard E. Wood

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 Anecdotal!

anecdotal (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

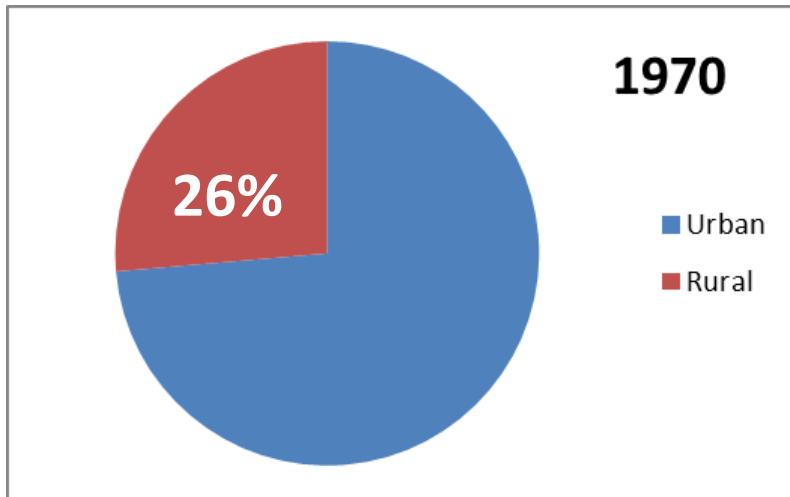
Survived massive restructuring of social and economic life (with volunteer leadership)

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

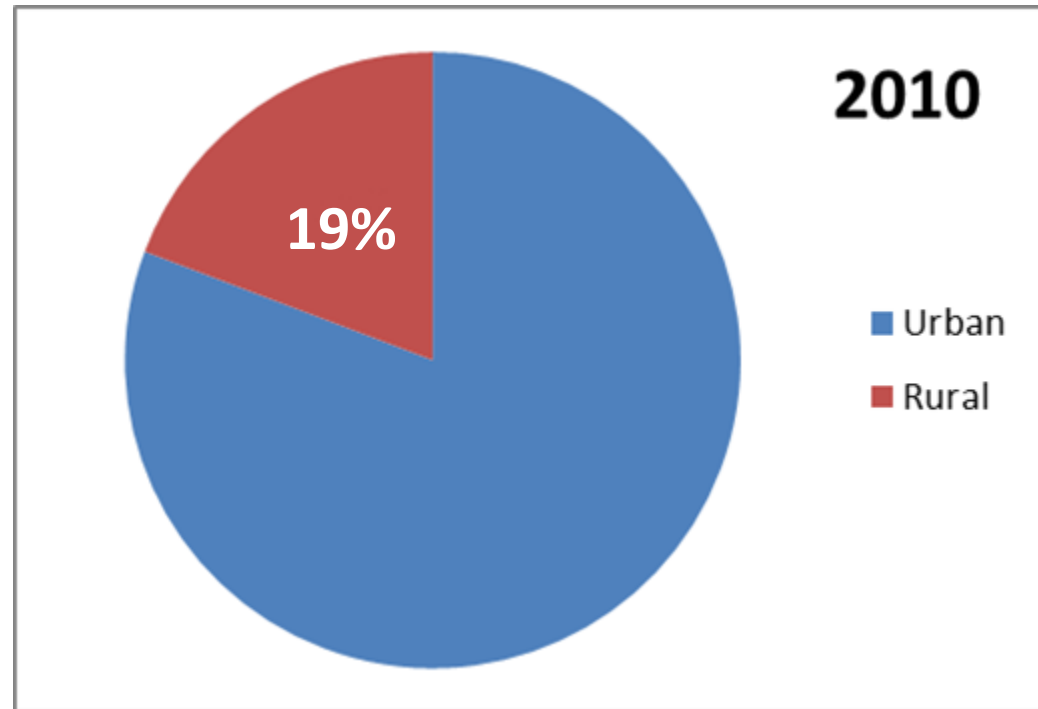
Rural Rebound

Since 1970, rural population increased by 11%

- Relative percentage living rural decreased



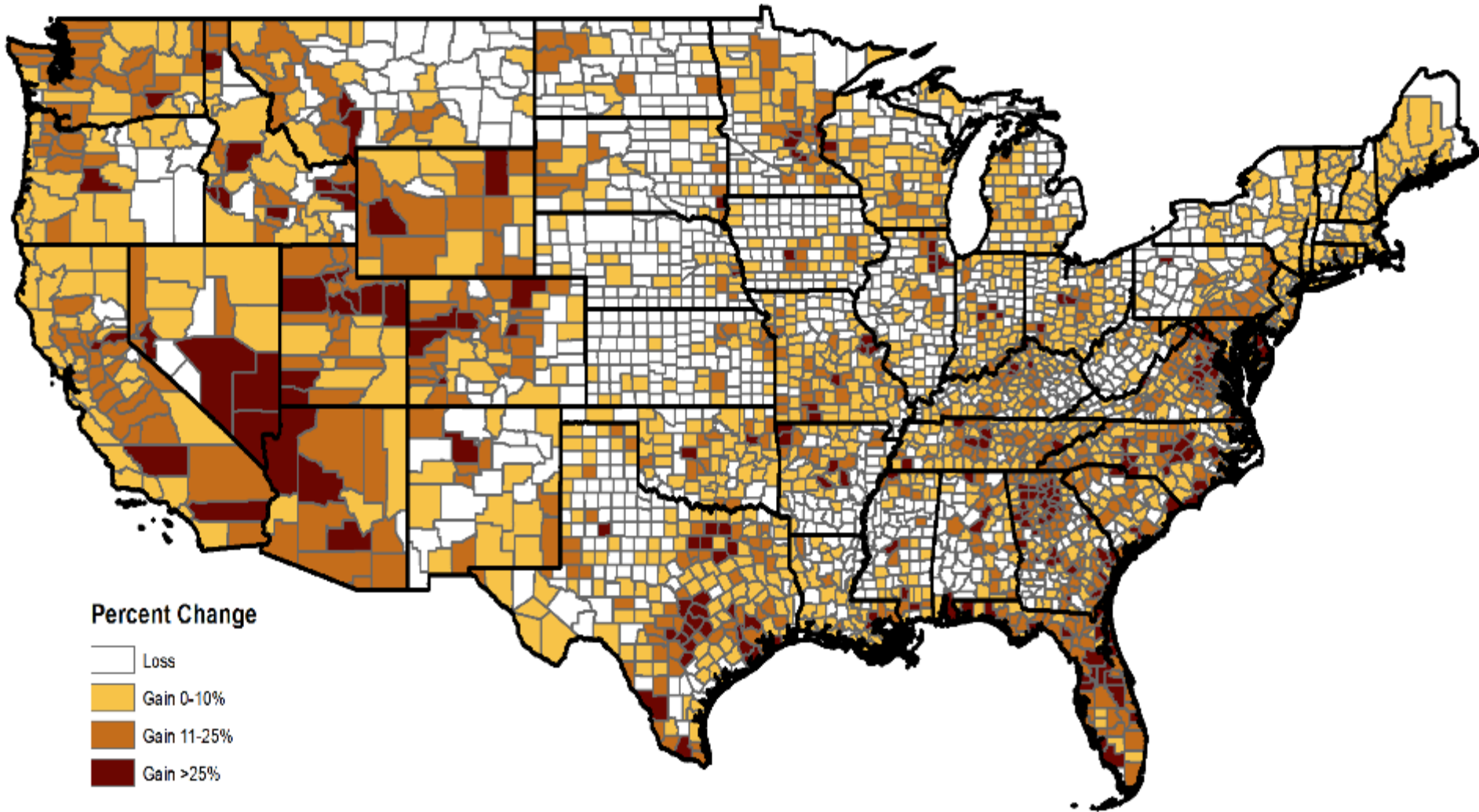
203,211,926
(53.6m rural)



308,745,538
(59.5m rural)

Total Population Infatuation

2000-2010



Total Population Infatuation

Wait, what?

Comparison Historical Population from 1960 to 2010

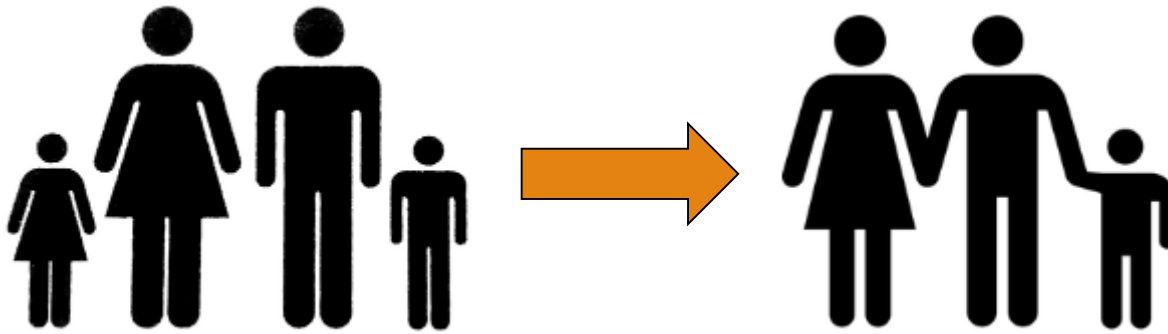
Community	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	% Change
<i>UMVRDC Region</i>	69,063	61,806	59,822	50,845	50,011	45,190	-34.57%
<i>Households</i>	19,428	19,367	22,026	20,088	19,846	20,039	3.14%
Big Stone County	8,954	7,941	7,716	6,285	5,820	5,269	-41.15%
Chippewa County	16,320	15,109	14,941	13,228	13,088	12,441	-23.77%
Lac qui Parle County	13,330	11,164	10,592	8,924	8,067	7,259	-45.54%
Swift County	14,936	13,177	12,920	10,724	11,956	9,783	-34.50%
Yellow Medicine County	15,523	14,415	13,653	11,684	11,080	10,438	-32.76%

Source: US Census Bureau

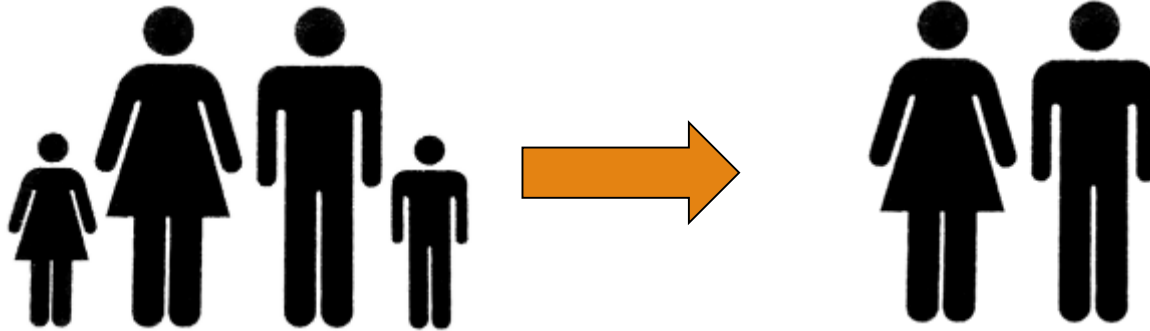
Stability, not stagnation or sinkholes.

	Pop Change	Occ HU Change
Carter	-15%	-2%
Dawson	-1%	3%
Garfield	-6%	0%
Judith Basin	-11%	-3%
Phillips	-8%	-2%
Richland	1%	7%
Rosebud	-2%	3%
Silver Bow	-1%	3%
Wheatland	4%	4%

2000-2010 U.S. Census Bureau



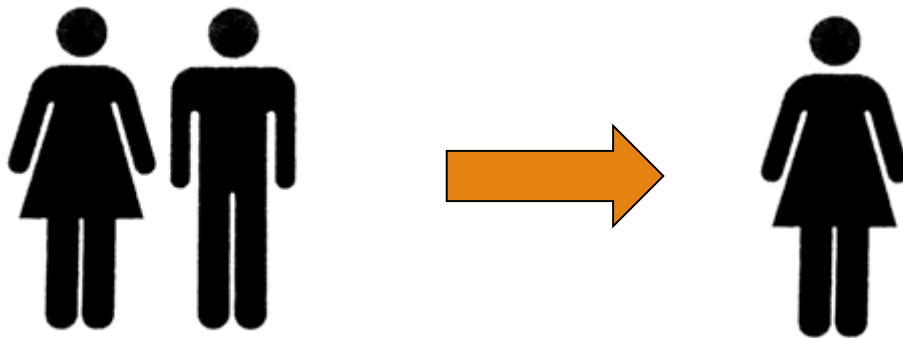
Avg HH Size:
1940: 3.6
2018: 2.6 (-29%)



Kids graduate

Population: -2

Households: NC



Spouse passes

Population: -1

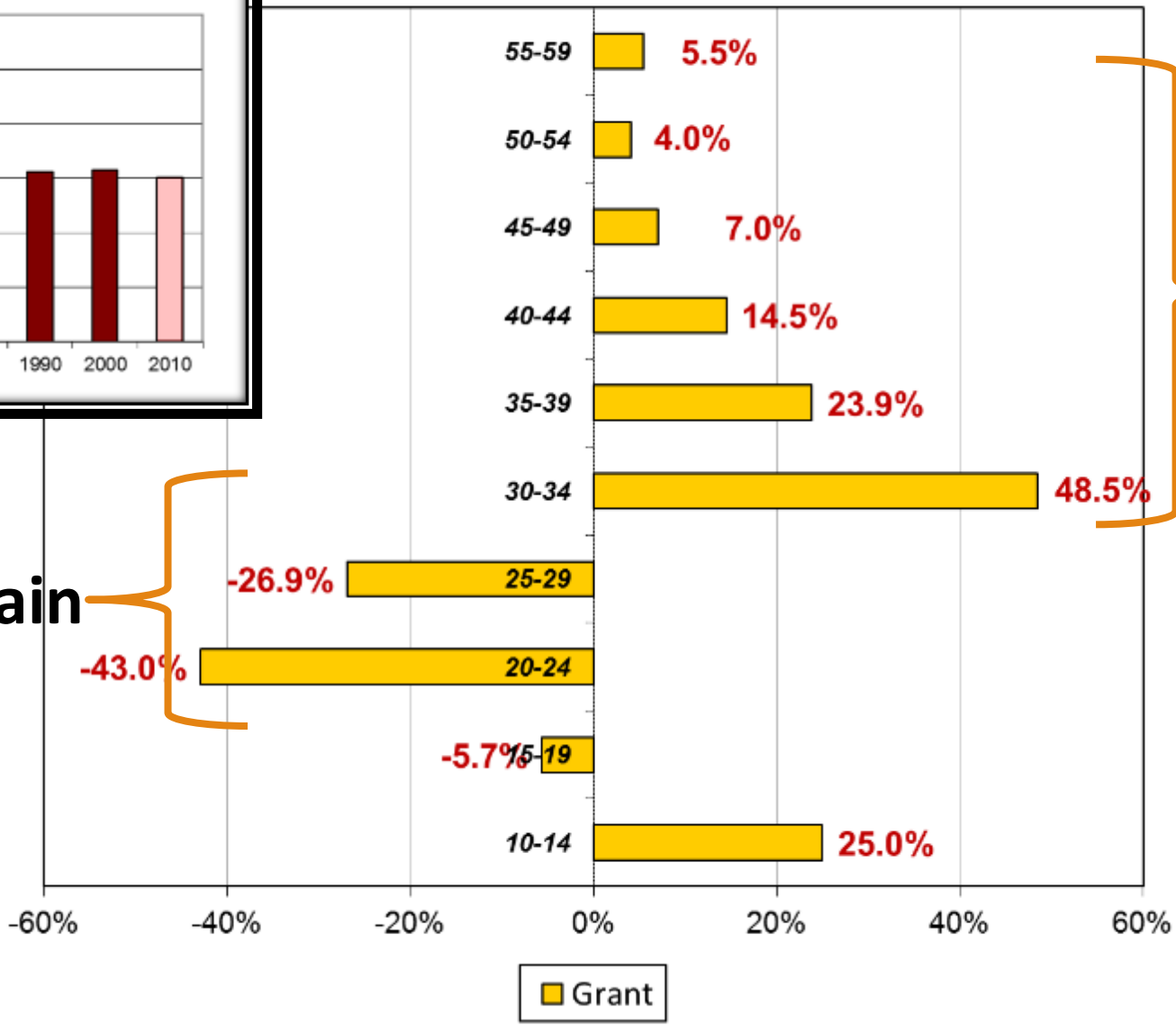
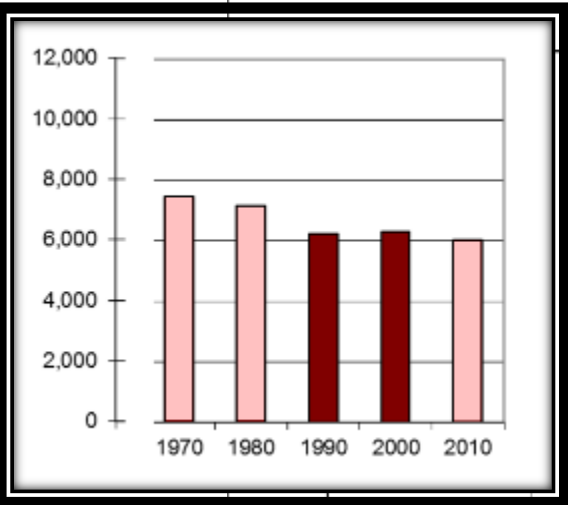
Households: NC

Myth: Only the “lucky few” escape rural America



Roughly 49% of Montana residents
move every 5 years.

1990-2000, Percent Cohort Change



Brain Drain

??

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.

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

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)

Respondent	14%
Spouse	16%

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

Already existed	36%
Created it	65%

10% currently own a farm.

Already existed	70%
Created it	30%

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

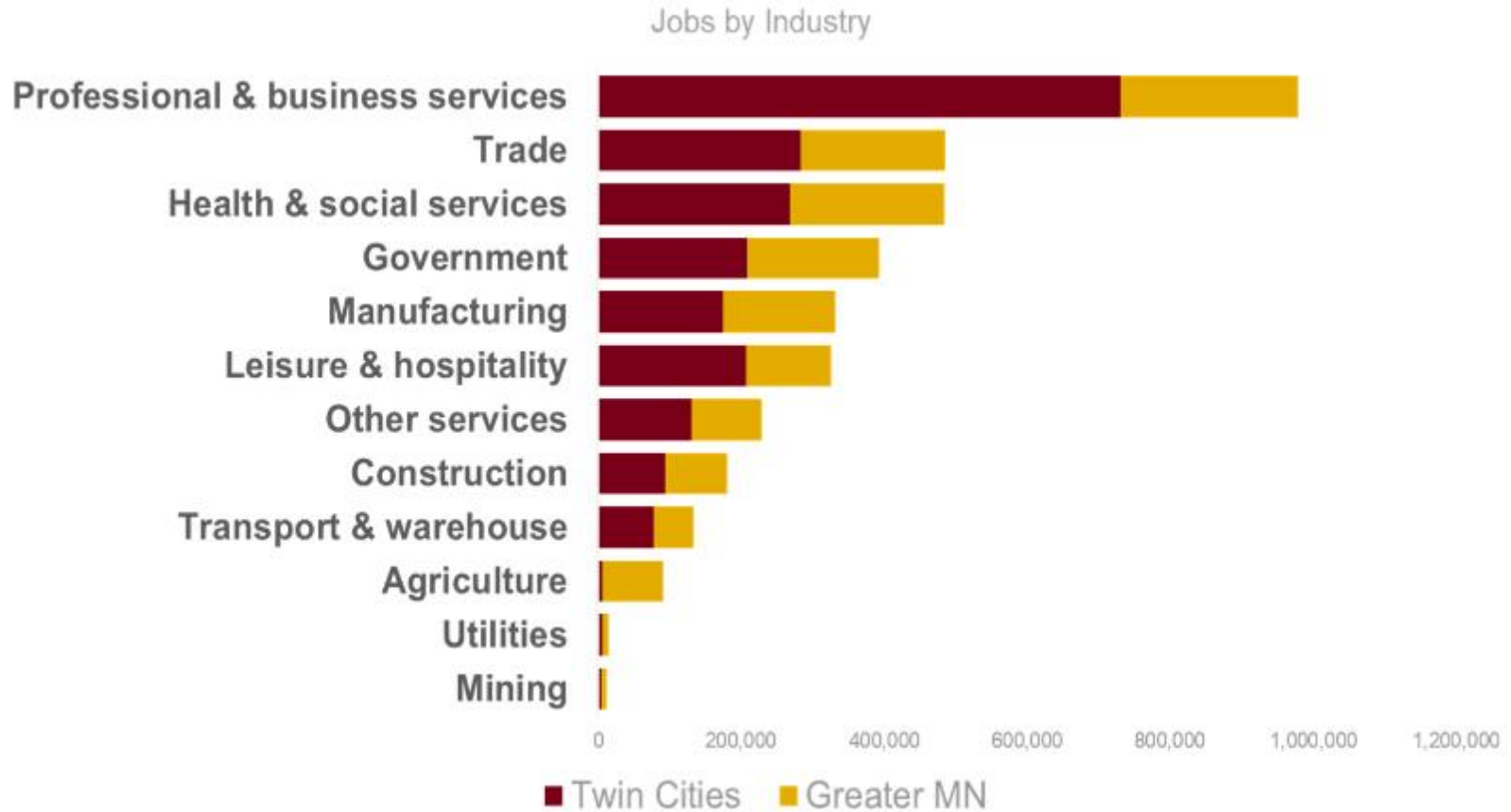
- Also 50-64 but not as widespread
- Brain drain is the rule, not the exception
- *Happening since the 1970s*

Newcomers look at 3-5 communities

- Topical reasoning (local foods regions)
- Assets vary by demographic

Employee recruitment must get past “warm body” syndrome

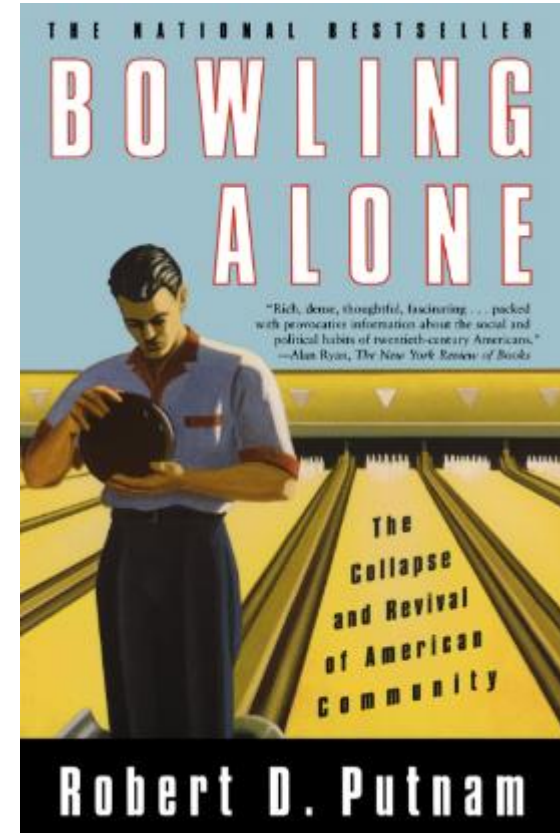
Diversifying the rural economy



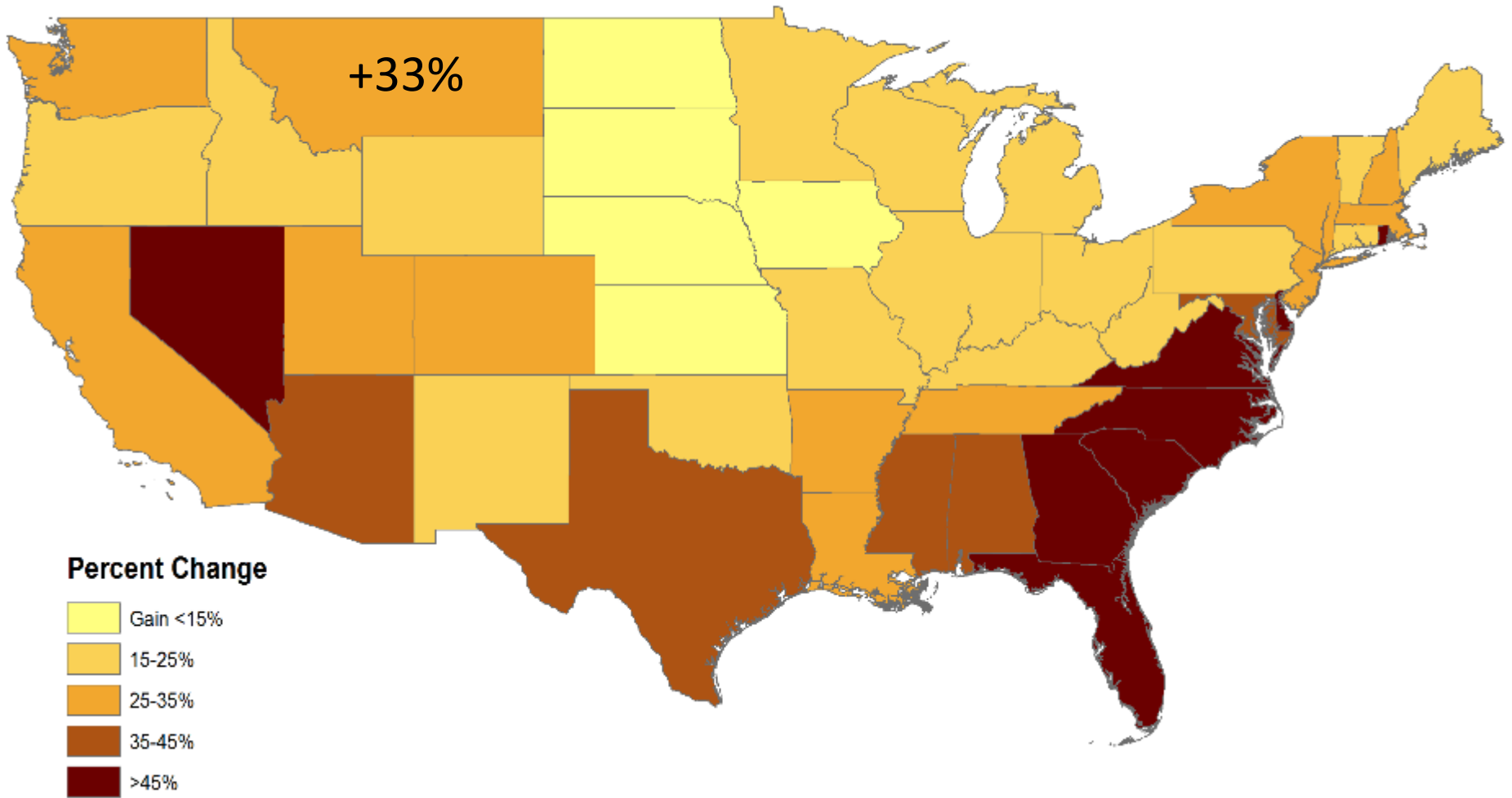
MYTH: Social life is dying...

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**?

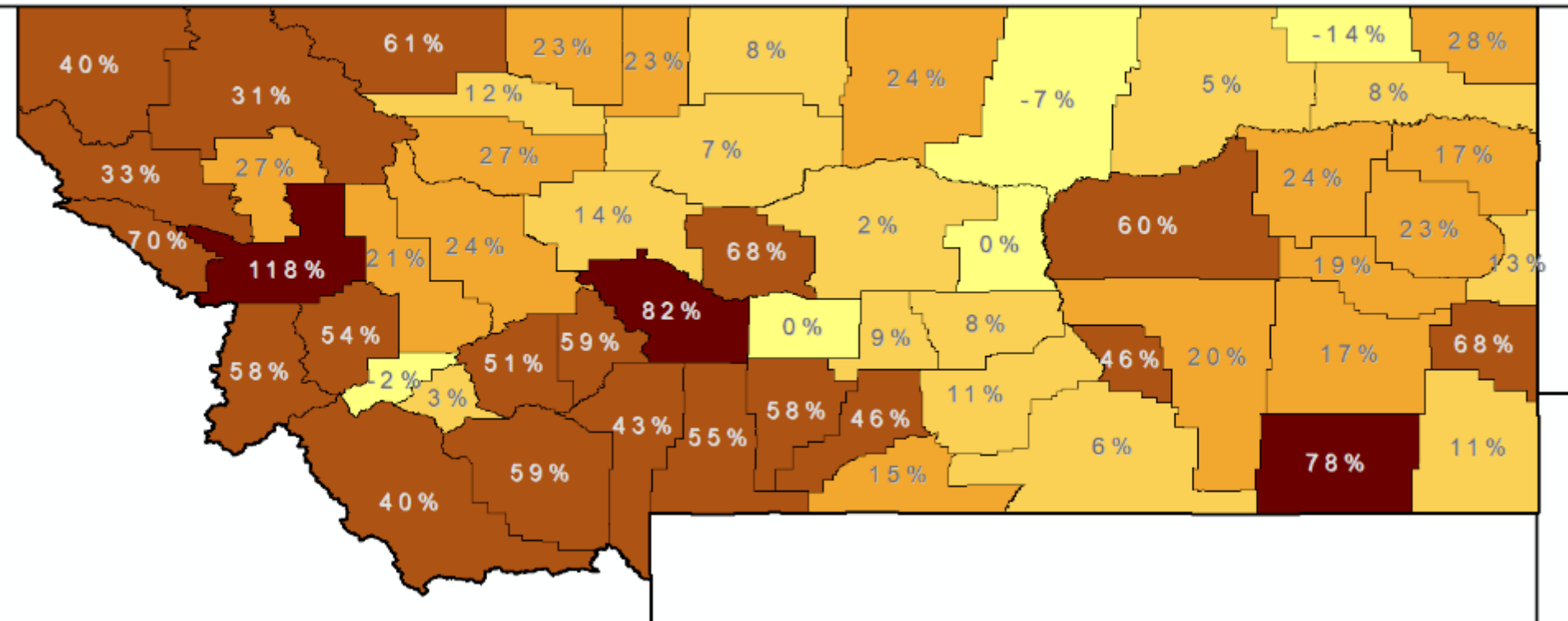


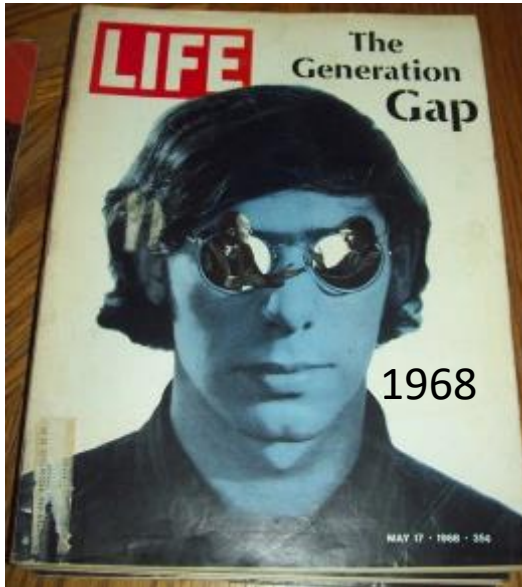
Nonprofit Change: 2000-2010



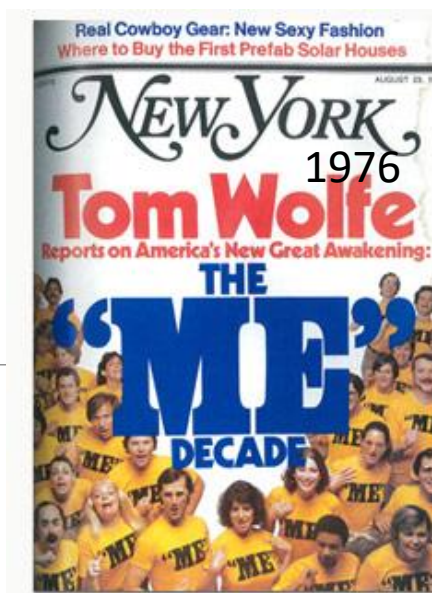
Social Life is Not Dying

Nonprofit Growth: 2000-2010





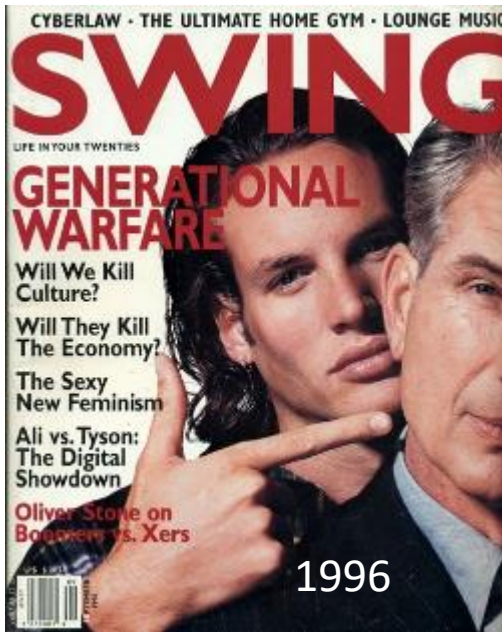
1968



1976



1990



1996

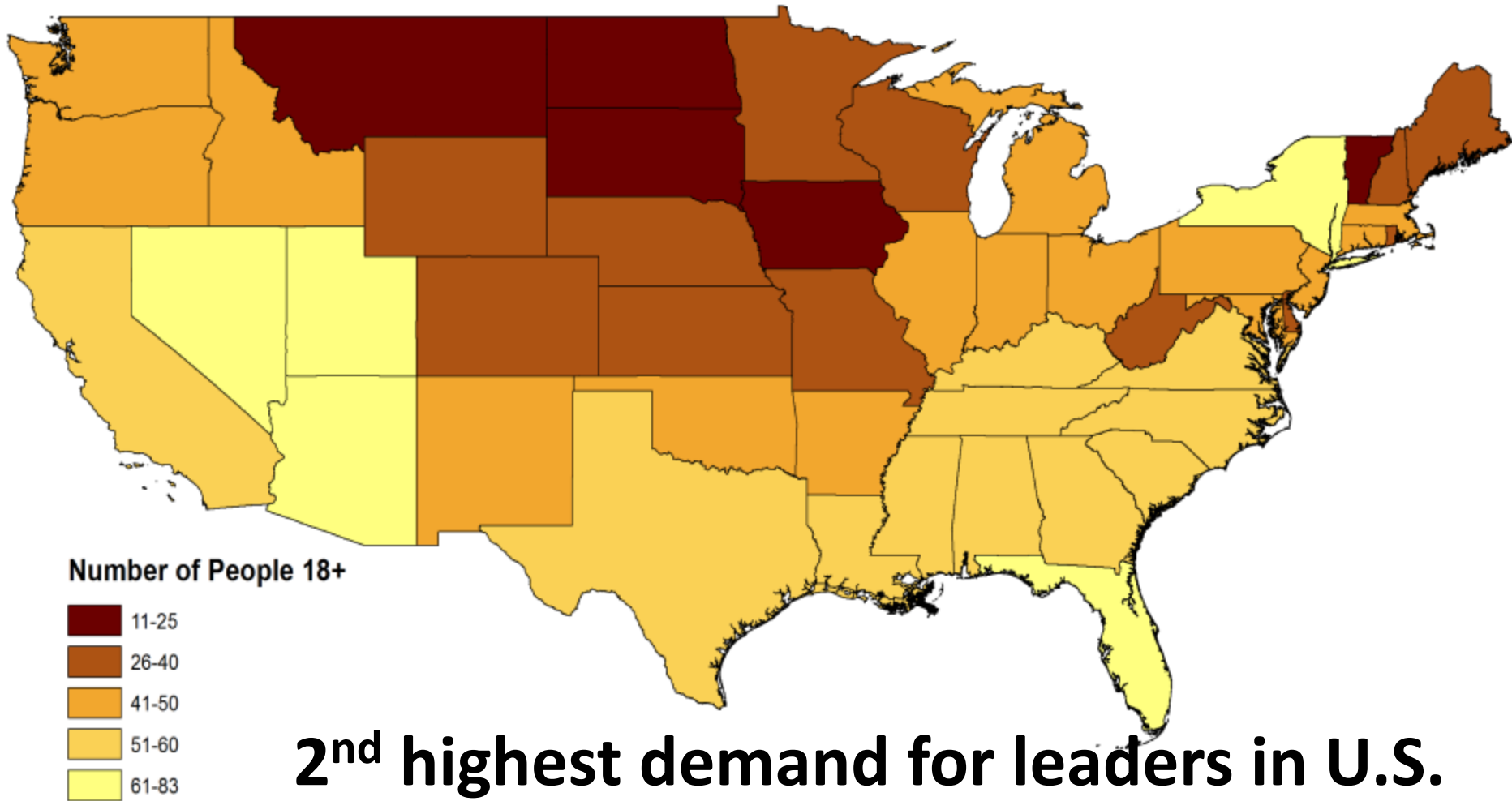


2007



2013

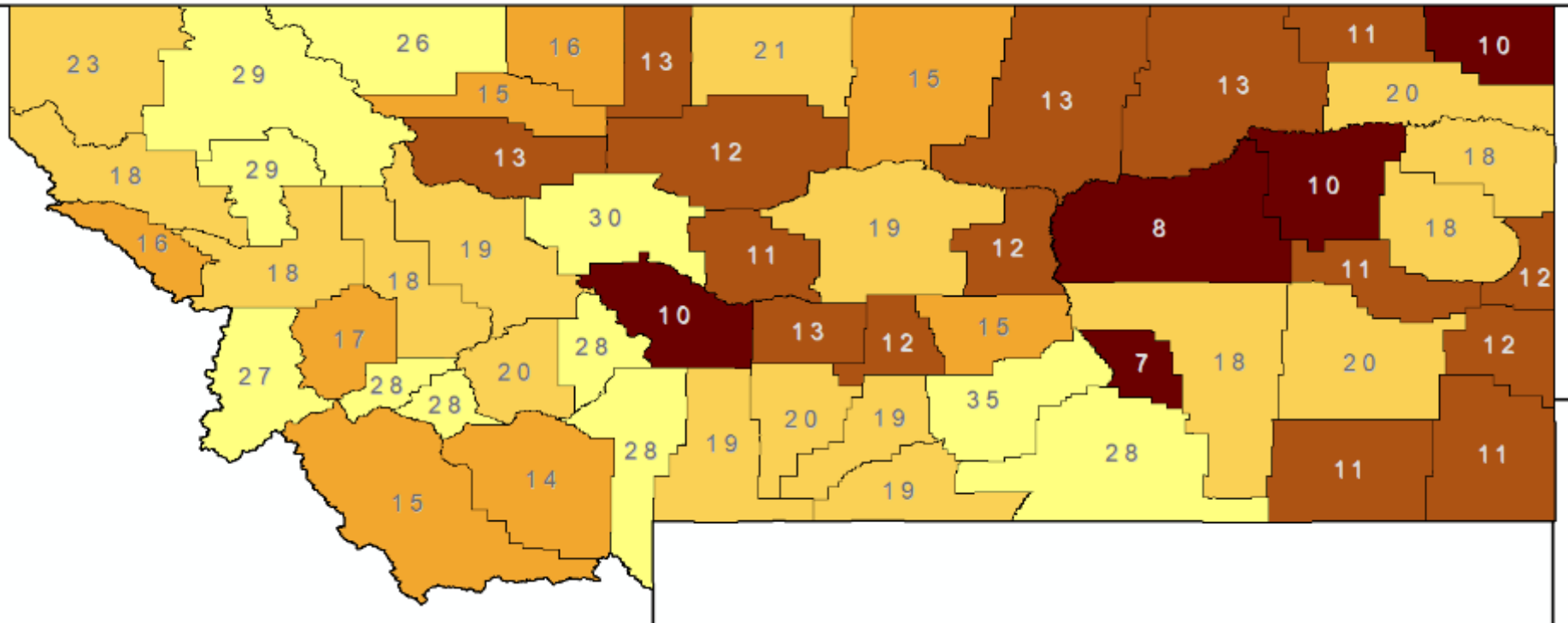
Population per Organizational Role, 2010



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



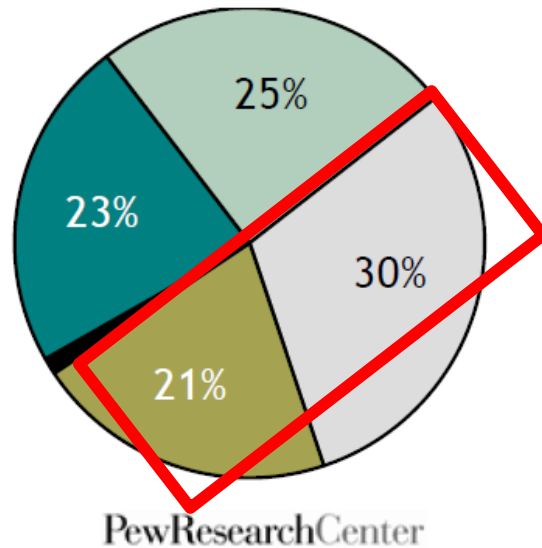
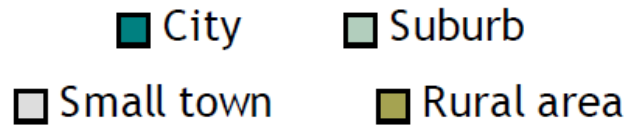
Narrow geography
Broad focus
Action: consensus

Broad geography
Narrow focus
Action: the small



Where We Live and Where We'd Like to Live

by community type



20% live rural/small town

51% would PREFER to

MOVING IN : Demand for rural and small town living!

Source: "For Nearly Half of America, Grass is Greener Somewhere Else". Pew Research Center, 2009.

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

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

