

Social Integration among Older Nonmetropolitan In-migrants

by
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What is the Issue?

With the aging of baby boomers, a large number of persons will reach retirement age, and many of them can be expected to move to amenity-rich non-metropolitan retirement destinations. Accordingly, those places should be planning for a renewed influx of older residents. Since retirement-age newcomers may have relatively higher incomes and levels of education than the long-term older residents, their presence boosts the economies of their new non-metropolitan locales. How integrated are older in-migrants in their new communities compared to longer term residents, and what are the consequences for communities experiencing this influx?

How was the Study Conducted?

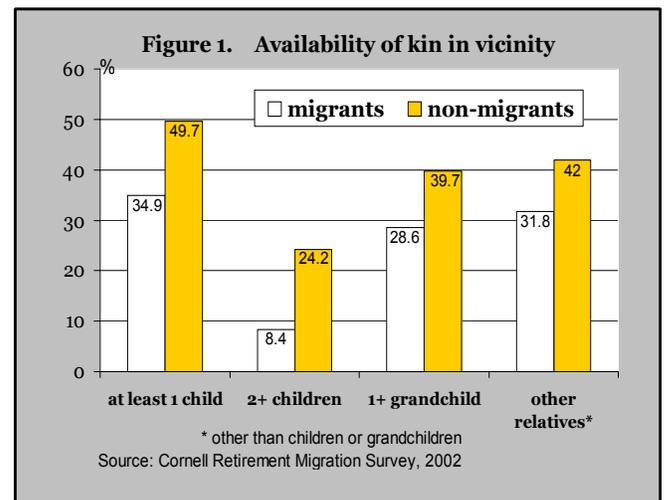
To say that a person is socially integrated means s/he is embedded in a network of social ties, the most proximate of which are family, friendships and affiliations with community organizations.

Our study is based on a survey of older persons living in 14 non-metropolitan retirement destinations across the US. We investigated migrants' informal social relationships and their participation in formal community organizations compared with that of longer-term older residents of non-metropolitan retirement communities, and we examine why some older residents of non-metropolitan retirement destinations are more likely to participate than others.

Findings:

Informal Networks

While longer-term older residents are more likely than in-migrants to have family members in retirement destination counties, in-migrants do have a considerable number of family and friend connections in their new communities as well.

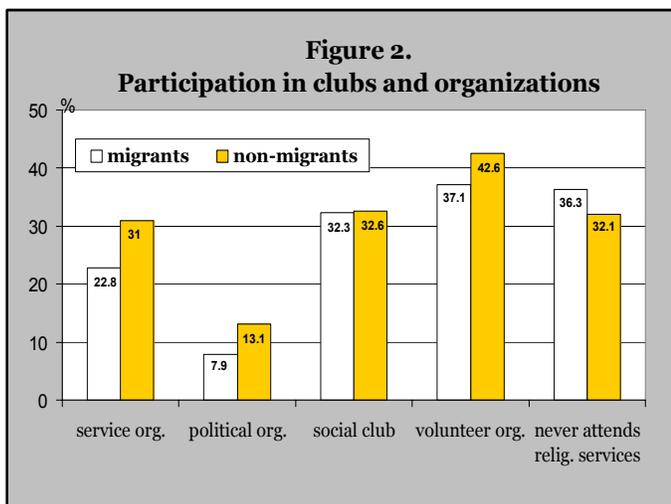


Our findings contrast with the model of elderly migration that hypothesizes that moves to amenity-based retirement destinations occur among recent retirees who are moving for the amenities, not to be near adult children or other family members. Rather than moving near family later in old age following a decline in health, the onset of disability, or the death of a spouse, our data indicate that many older persons consolidate their family ties much earlier in life during their first move after retiring. From the standpoint of informal

social integration, both older migrants and non-migrants appear to have ample opportunities to interact with and obtain support from family and friends. Both older migrants and longer-term residents report visiting family and friends once or twice per week.

Formal Social Participation

Participation in formal organizations and community activities is thought to have a positive effect on the health and well-being of rural older people. We found that while longer-term residents have higher rates of formal participation than do in-migrants, the difference is modest.



These findings are important because longer-term residents had lived in their communities an average of 22.1 years compared with about 3 years for in-migrants. It appears that in-migrants integrate rather quickly into their new communities.

Why Are Some Older Residents More Likely To Participate?

Even though our data indicate that migrants and longer-term residents have similar levels of participation in formal organizations and activities, the data show substantial variation in participation *within* both the in-migrant and non-migrant

groups. Those older non-migrants who were better educated, healthier, and whose duration of residence was longer were significantly more likely to participate in formal organizations. Having one or more adult children living nearby had a depressive effect on formal social participation. Frequent interactions with family are thought to substitute for social involvements in the wider community. More highly educated in-migrants are more likely to participate in formal activities and organization, while in-migrants currently working or having activity limitations (i.e., a disabling condition) were less likely to participate. Hence, the process of social integration is somewhat different for non-migrants vs. in-migrants. For both migrants and non-migrants, however, a relatively higher education predicted greater participation in community organizations.

Policy Implications & Conclusions

Newcomers' integration is important from both the community's and individual migrants' perspectives. More effective integration into the community contributes to migrant health, longevity, and overall quality of life, while better-integrated migrants provide time, experience and know-how that can contribute to accomplishing important communal goals. Even though in-migrants have a relatively high level of social involvement soon after their arrival, community leaders could take concrete actions to encourage participation in a broad spectrum of community activities, acknowledging and supporting in-migrants' potential contributions to the community. A balanced consideration of the pluses and minuses of this demographic change will help to prepare retirement destinations to benefit from this change.

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