

rural new york minute

ISSUE NUMBER 14/FEBRUARY 2008

Are Older In-Migrants to Rural Communities “Grey Gold”?

 By **David L. Brown**, and **Nina Glasgow**, Cornell University

Migration often accompanies life course transitions, including retirement. While young people are much more likely to move than older folks, almost 10% of Americans aged 60+ migrated between 1995 and 2000, with a disproportionate share of them moving to rural communities, which we call rural retirement destinations (RDD). This phenomenon is not as widespread in NYS as it is nationally, but the 2000 Census showed that 12 NYS counties (9 of which are rural) had positive rates of older in-migration (see Figure 1). Older in-migration has a profound effect on destination communities. Because older in-migration affects age composition, it indirectly shapes community needs and demands for goods, services, and economic opportunities as well as patterns of consumption, life style and social relationships.

Our research identified opportunities and challenges for the rural communities these retirees move to. We conducted a nationwide study of older in-migrants, and the communities in which they settle, using a combination of survey research and census analysis. In addition, we interviewed over 60 civic, business and organizational leaders in 4 communities. Our main findings include:

- Older in-migrants become quickly involved in their new communities. Our initial concern that older in-migrants would be socially isolated was unfounded; they are active in a wide range of social, civic and service organizations, especially as volunteers. Through their labor, technical expertise, and financial contributions older in-movers are often a driving force in community activities and organizations.
- In-migration of retirees has a positive impact on the real estate market and on construction; in-migrants provide financial and technical assistance to a wide array of civic needs; and they invigorate the arts and cultural scene.
- Benefits associated with older in-migration may also have costs, depending upon one’s perspective or position.
- Rising real estate prices, for example, reduced the supply of affordable housing, especially for teachers, health workers, first responders and young families. Volunteering reduces public costs, but it may diminish the demand for paid professional workers, thereby undermining a community’s ability to retain its better trained youth.
- Older in-migrants who take positions of cultural leadership may be insensitive to traditional ways of doing things and may force their tastes and preferences on the community. Older in-migrants who become politically active may compete for power with the established leadership.
- About 30% of older in-migrants have adult children residing nearby, and thus are unlikely to move away as they age, become ill or disabled, lose their spouse, or have to relinquish their driver’s license. They are likely to remain after their contributions to the community diminish in relation to their costs.

How can rural destinations maximize the opportunities and reduce the costs associated with older in-migration? Older in-migration should not be seen as a “pensions and care issue” or as a panacea for strapped rural economies, but rather as a source of challenges and opportunities. With thoughtful planning, older in-migration can contribute to rural community development. We recommend the following:

- Communities should encourage high levels of social participation among older residents. This will contribute to productive aging among the older in-migrants themselves, and it will supply volunteer labor and other types of support for community organizations and activities.
- Community decision-making should be open and inclusive so that all voices are heard when the public agenda is established and when policy actions are taken. In-migrants’ needs and opinions cannot be privileged above those of longer-term residents.
- Community planning must engage both shorter and longer-term concerns. Older in-migrants may have few immediate needs, but they may require public transportation, more health care and other forms of assistance as they age.

As the baby boom enters older age and new waves of older in-migrants move to rural destinations, the population of such areas will take on a more diverse age composition. This will result in a complex mix of costs and benefits to be considered when planning for community needs and opportunities in the future. The “grey gold” that older in-migration represents in the perceptions of some public officials and community leaders needs to be considered from a balanced perspective.

Figure 1: NYS counties with positive net migration of persons age 60+

