



Rewriting the Rural Narrative

Speak softly and carry statistics

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Rural America booms as young workers leave the cities behind

BY KRISTIN TATE, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 02/22/21 06:00 PM EST
THE VIEWS EXPRESSED BY CONTRIBUTORS ARE THEIR OWN AND NOT THE VIEW OF THE HILL

484 COMMENTS

664 SHARES



SHARE



TWEET



...

Just In...

Most of America's rural areas are doomed to decline



David Swenson, Associate Scientist of Economics, Iowa State University

September 26, 2020 · 5 min read



Sunset over an Iowa farm. [BJontzPhoto/shutterstock.com](#)

Are we doomed?
By what measure?

Or are we being saved?
Do we need to be?

**Where have you heard a narrative
have power in your community?**



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Why the Pandemic Is Making Some City Folks Think Rural

Drawn by remote work, perceived safety and lower cost of living, some young people are making the move.

Americans Big on Idea of Living in the Country

BY FRANK NEWPORT

People Fleeing Big Cities May Spur Economic Growth In Smaller Metros



Remington Tonar and Ellis Talton Senior Contributor ©
Leadership Strategy
We explore urban innovation and infrastructure.

Millennials Could Be a Boon to Smaller Communities. How Can Those Towns Attract Younger Workers?

Time To Move? Data Suggests Americans May Flee To Rural Areas Post-COVID



Jeff Rose Contributor ©
Personal Finance
I'll show you a new way to accelerate your wealth building.



The Heartland's Revival

by Joel Kotkin



A long time ago in a galaxy far,
far away....



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 numbers are the stories, both of the people who left their rural homes and the small percentage of Americans who still live in them. 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 is dropping 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
- The lucky few escape



- What we had
- What we don't have
- What we wish we had
- What we could have had...





Deficit Approach

Fixing things that can't or shouldn't be fixed

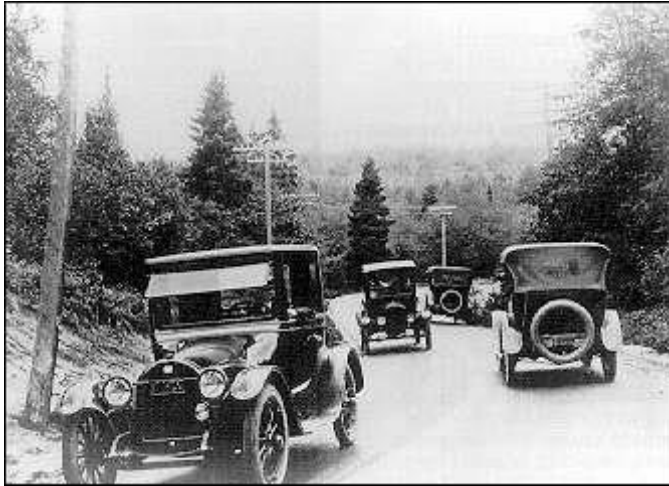


NO MORE ANECDATA!

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*



1900-1950



- Mechanization of agriculture
- Roads and transportation
- Educational achievement

*It drives like a horse; does the work of ten
but eats only when at work*

That's the Detroit Tractor, the machine that represents fifteen years and thousands of dollars spent in actual field work to find the right principle to apply in a tractor for BOTH the small and large farmer.

It Drives Like a Horse—

This exclusive feature enables a man to drive the tractor home—it won't tear up the roads—hitch it to the plow, mowing machine, binder, spreader, wagon or ANY implement in use on any horse-farmed estate, and ONE MAN WILL OPERATE BOTH TRACTOR AND IMPLEMENT WITH EASE. No other tractor will do it. It is the ONLY ONE MAN TRACTOR.

You can change hitch from one implement to another as quickly as with a team. It will do with the belt what ANY OTHER TRACTOR WILL DO.

Does the Work of Ten Horses—

The Detroit tractor can work from sun up to sun down and the night through, and will outwork four teams of horses. That means that four teams can't endure to get over the ground the Detroit can in any given length of time. The tractor will do much better work than horses—for instance, it will plow any depth and allow its owner to farm according to modern methods.

The Detroit Tractor

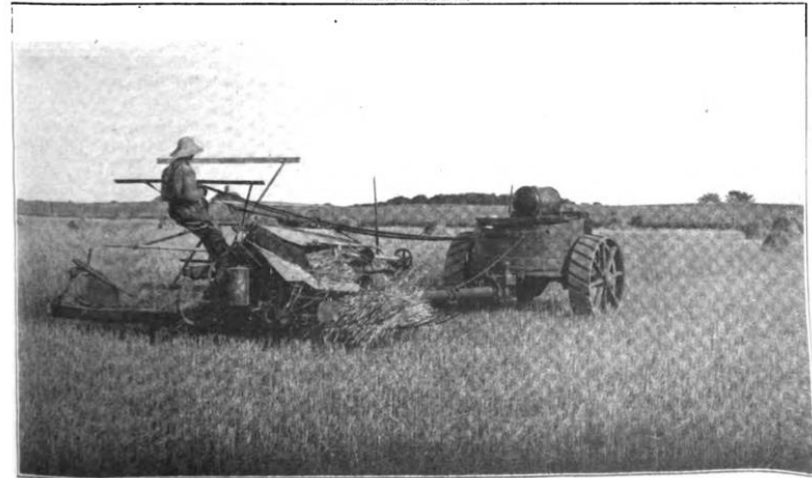
Eats Only When It Works—

Most farmers are compelled to keep several horses that are used only at rush times—the rest of the year they "eat their heads off." By working the Detroit long hours the farmer takes care of his rush work. When the work is done the tractor eats nothing. We'll demonstrate that the Detroit will cut horse farming costs in half.

We want the chance to tell you more about the Detroit Tractor. Our catalog shows several views of it in actual use on small farms. Write today.

DETROIT TRACTOR COMPANY
Department T
LA FAYETTE, INDIANA

One Man Controls It All



1950+



1958 Interstate Highway

- Main street restructuring
- School consolidations
- Hospitals closings



The rural idyll



“Agriculture is no longer the mainstay of the rural economy.”



Iron Range town fighting for more than the mail

Calumet challenges the decision to close its post office, which is a social hub for its residents.

The Media Idyll Persists



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



RURAL IS CHANGING, NOT DYING

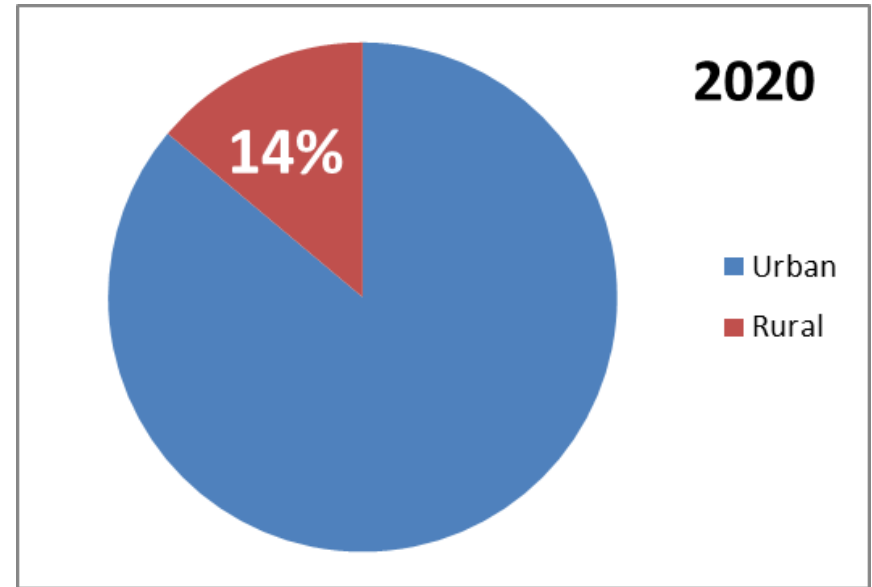
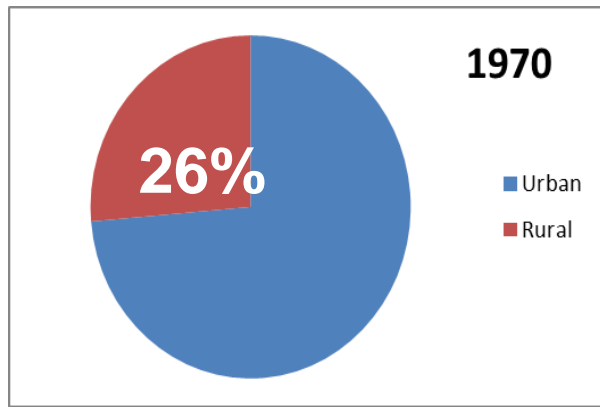
- Yes, things are changing
- Small towns are microcosms of globalization
 - Many of these changes impact rural and urban areas alike (not distinctly rural)
 - Yet more apparent in rural places
- Survived massive restructuring of social and economic life
- Research base does NOT support notion that if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



Rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated. –Mark Twain



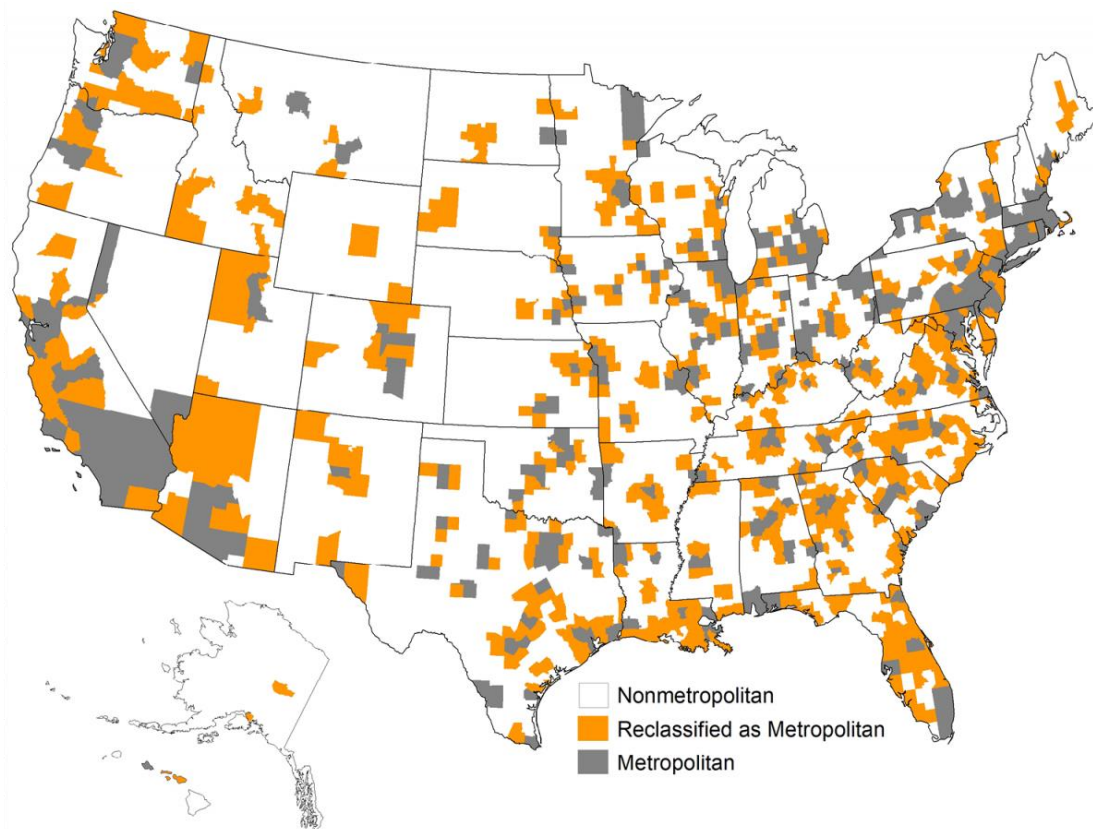
In the U.S. the rural population has
increased by 11%
since 1970.



As rural populations grow, residents get
reclassified.



As rural populations grow, residents get **reclassified.**



753 nonmetropolitan counties that were redefined as metropolitan between 1963 and 2013 shifted nearly 70 million residents from nonmetropolitan to metropolitan America by 2017. This represents 21% of the entire 2017 U.S. population. In fact, *all* the proportionate growth in metropolitan America from 67% of the population in 1970 to 86% in 2017 resulted from metropolitan reclassification.

Population figures reduced by
formerly nonmetro places
now designated as metro.

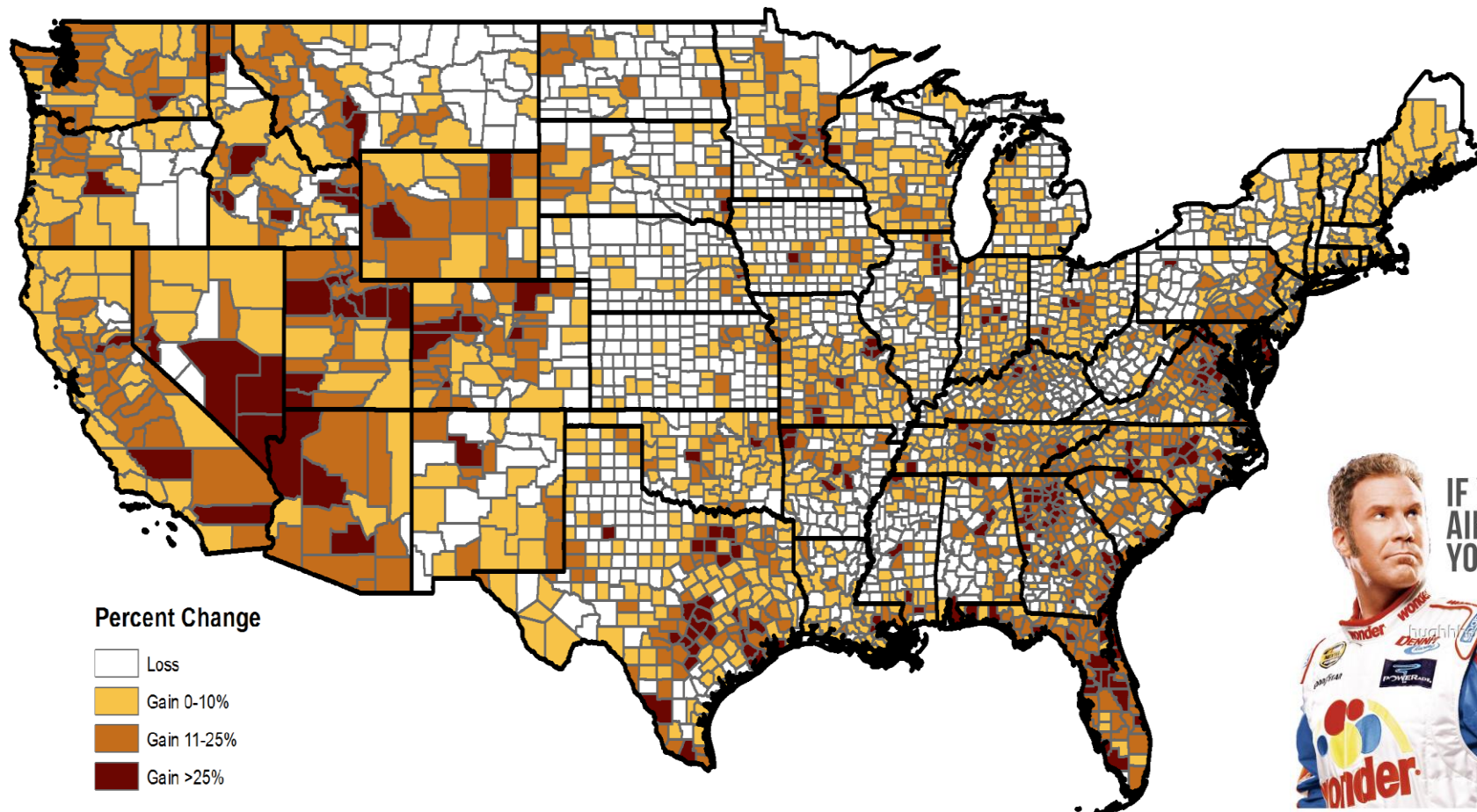
(25% all counties since 1974)

Success is taken away from rural as urban areas have grown **WIDER**, not taller.



Total Population Infatuation

a.k.a. If you're not growing you're dying



Total Population Infatuation

Wait, what?

Comparison Historical Population from 1960 to 2010

Community	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	% Change
UMVRDC Region	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





Avg. HH Size:
1940: 3.6
2018: 2.6

*With a fixed # homes, you will lose 29% pop
due to demographic destiny alone.*



Spouse passes

Population: -1

Households: NC

*Yes there is outmigration but demographics work
against growth and even stability (stagnation).*



The Narrative



County	% Pop Change	% Housing Change
Boissevain-Morton CSD	-2%	+4%
Bottineau	-2%	+4%
Rolette	+2%	+4%
Towner	-3%	0%
Bowman	-3%	+5%
Foster	-11%	+0%
Logan	-14%	-4%
McIntosh	-17%	0%
Ransom	-7%	2%
Sargent	-12%	-1%
Sheridan	-23%	-3%
Traill	-4%	2%

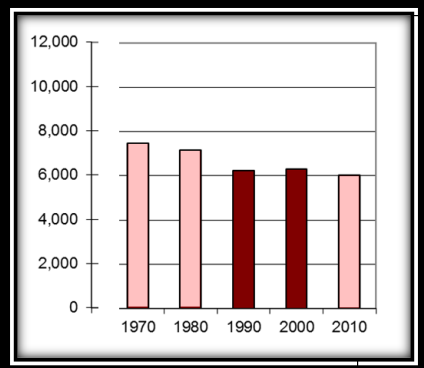


Myth: Only the “lucky few” escape rural America

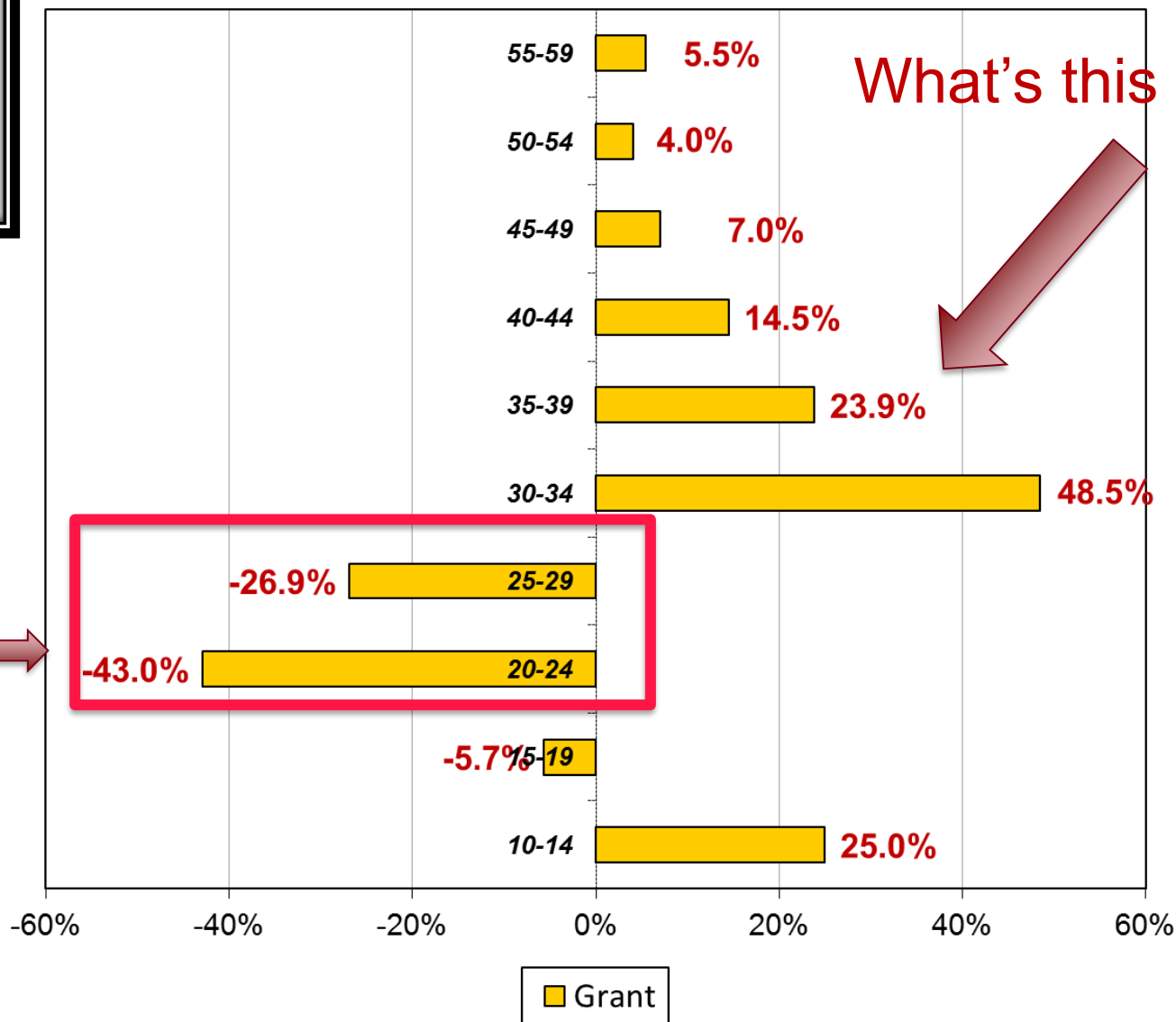


46% of North Dakota households
move every 5 years.





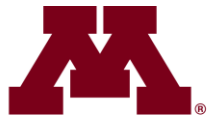
1990-2000, Percent Cohort Change



Brain Drain

What's this now?





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**Nebraska Buffalo Commons
Research 2012**

**Workforce Movers
University of Minnesota,
2004, 2012, 2019**



Montana Movers Study, 2021



Newcomers: Why?

Simpler pace of life



Safety and Security



Low Housing Cost





Newcomers: Who?

- 41% moved primarily for a job
(50% youngest/ 35% oldest)
- 25% lived there previously
- 91% have some college or bachelor's
- 75% household incomes over \$50k
- 47% have children in household
- 14% telecommute!

Source: 2020 University of Minnesota Extension Center for Community Vitality. Rural workforce movers study. Funded by the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

Newcomers: Who?



	MN	MT
Moved primarily for a job	41%	35%
Lived in the community before	25%	34%*
Have children in household	47%	39%
Household income >\$50k	75%	78%

**14% telecommute
(pre-pandemic!)**

*** Social
housing
supply?**

Source: 2020 University of Minnesota Extension Center for Community Vitality. Rural workforce movers study. Funded by the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

2021 Montana State University Extension Movers Study.

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

Source: 2020 University of Minnesota Extension Center for Community Vitality. Rural workforce movers study. Funded by the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

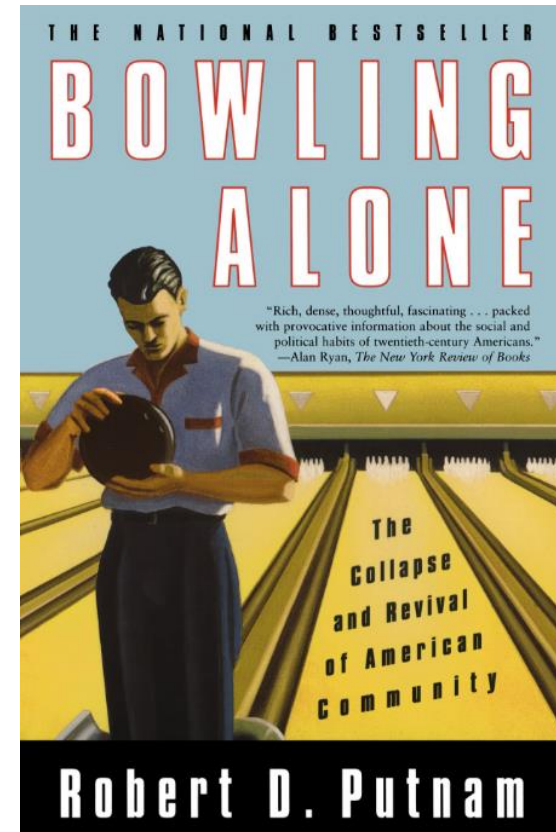


Rewriting the Rural Narrative: The Demand for Leadership in Rural America



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**?



LEADERSHIP DEMAND

How do we measure the demand for leaders that organizations make upon the resident population?



Governments

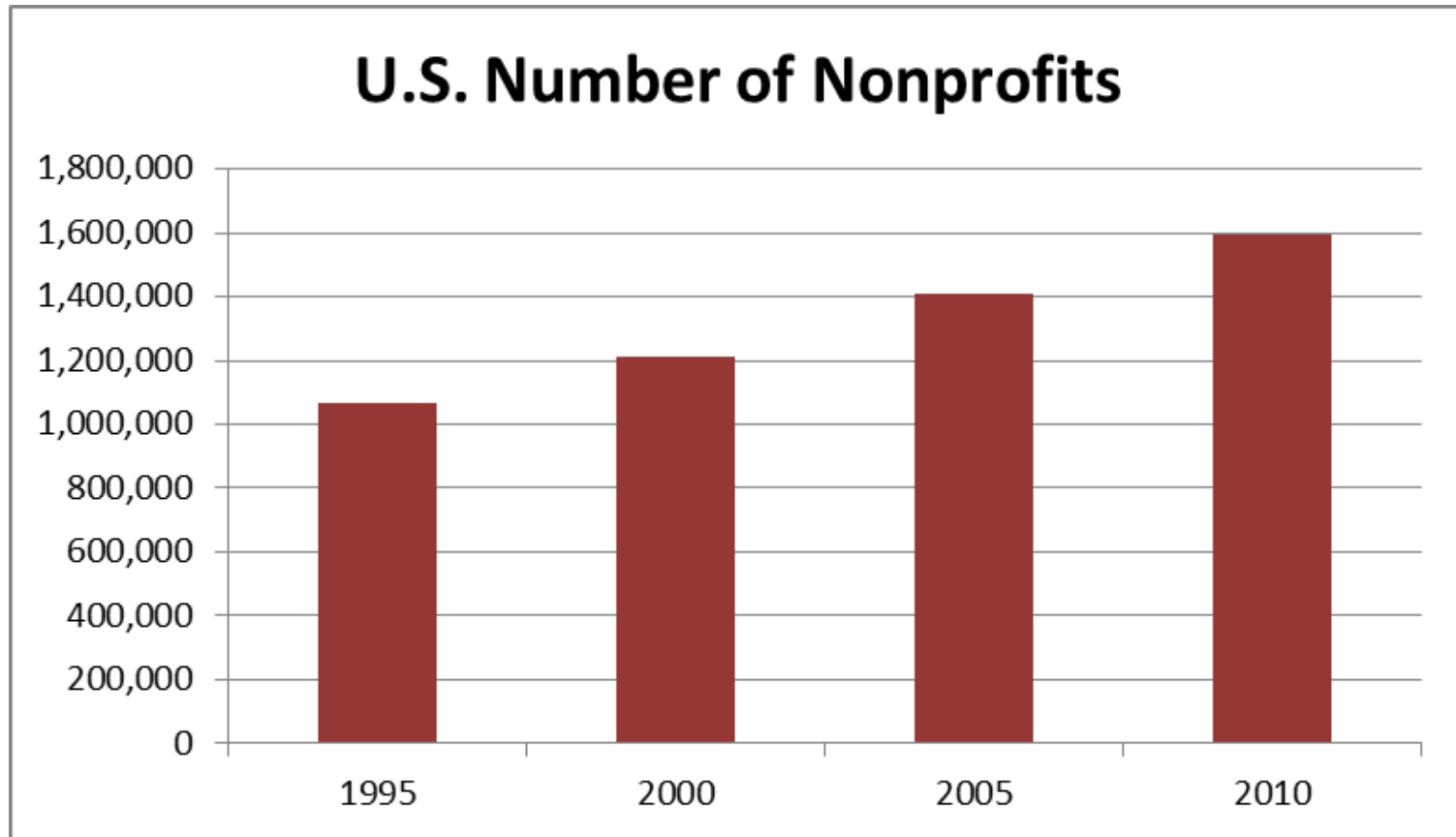


Nonprofits



Social Life is Not Dying

Nonprofit Growth: 1995-2010

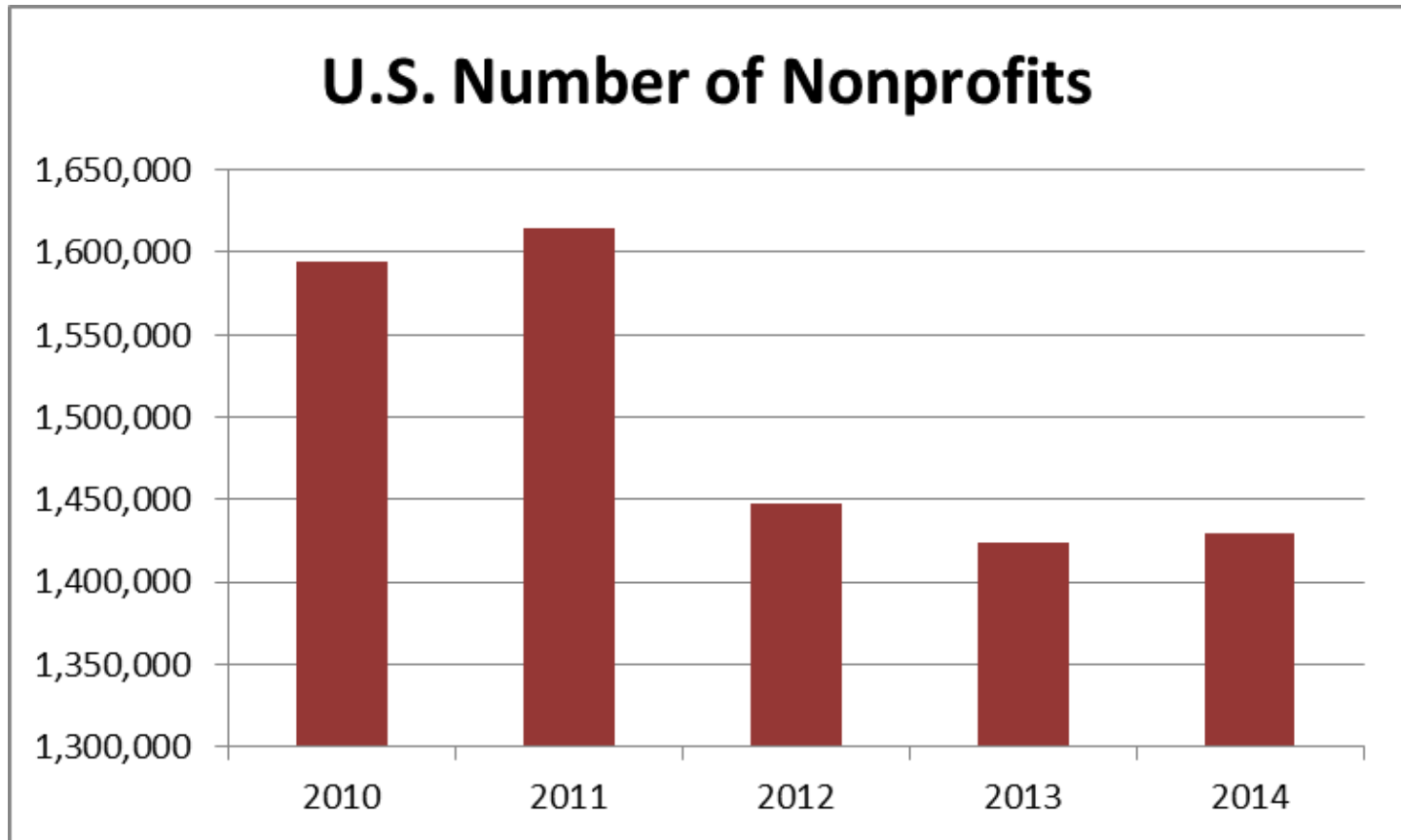


1995-2000	13.6%
2000-2005	16.3%
2005-2010	13.1%

National Center for Charitable Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau



Nonprofit Change: 2010-2014

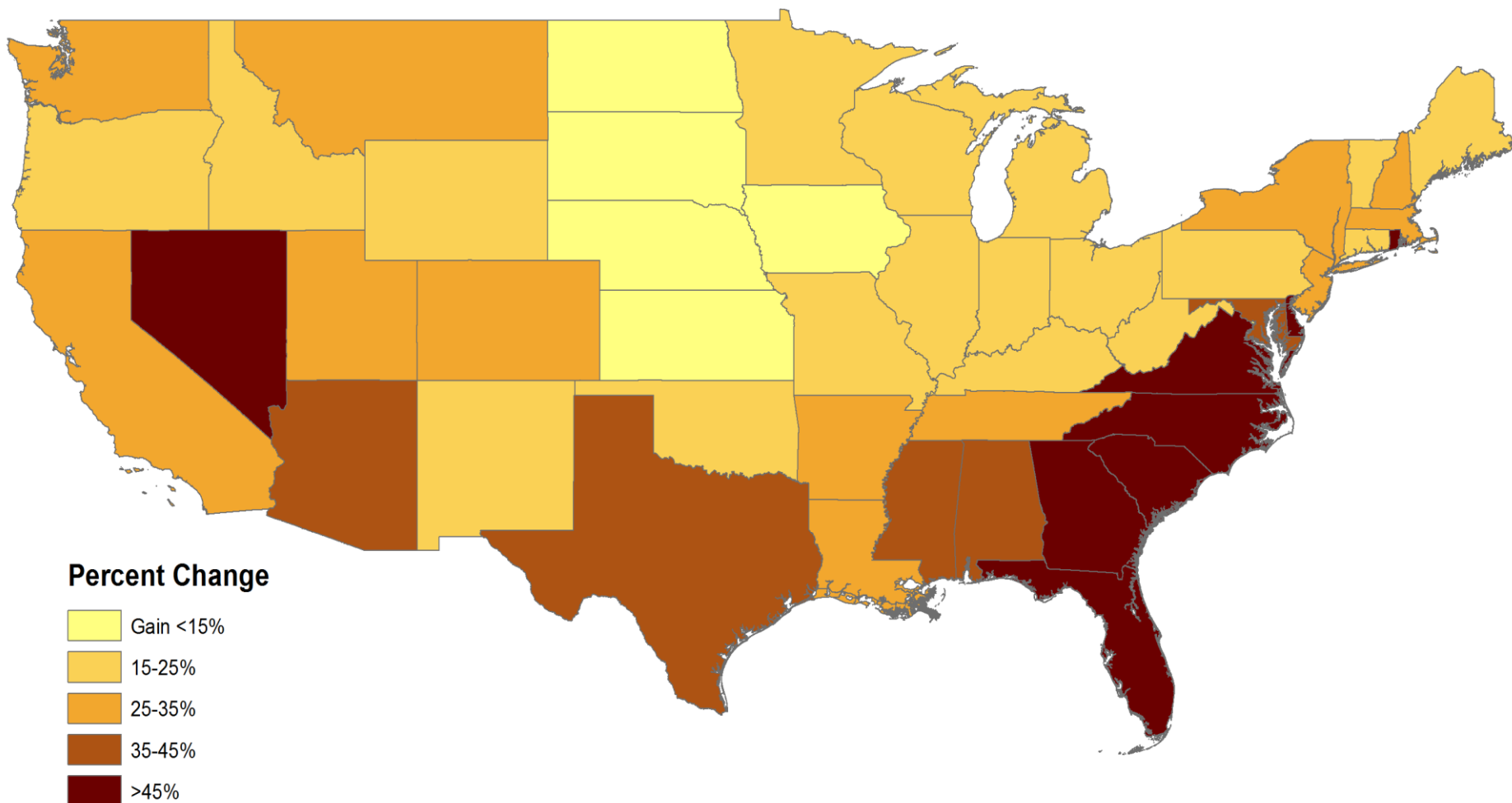


The “cleanse”

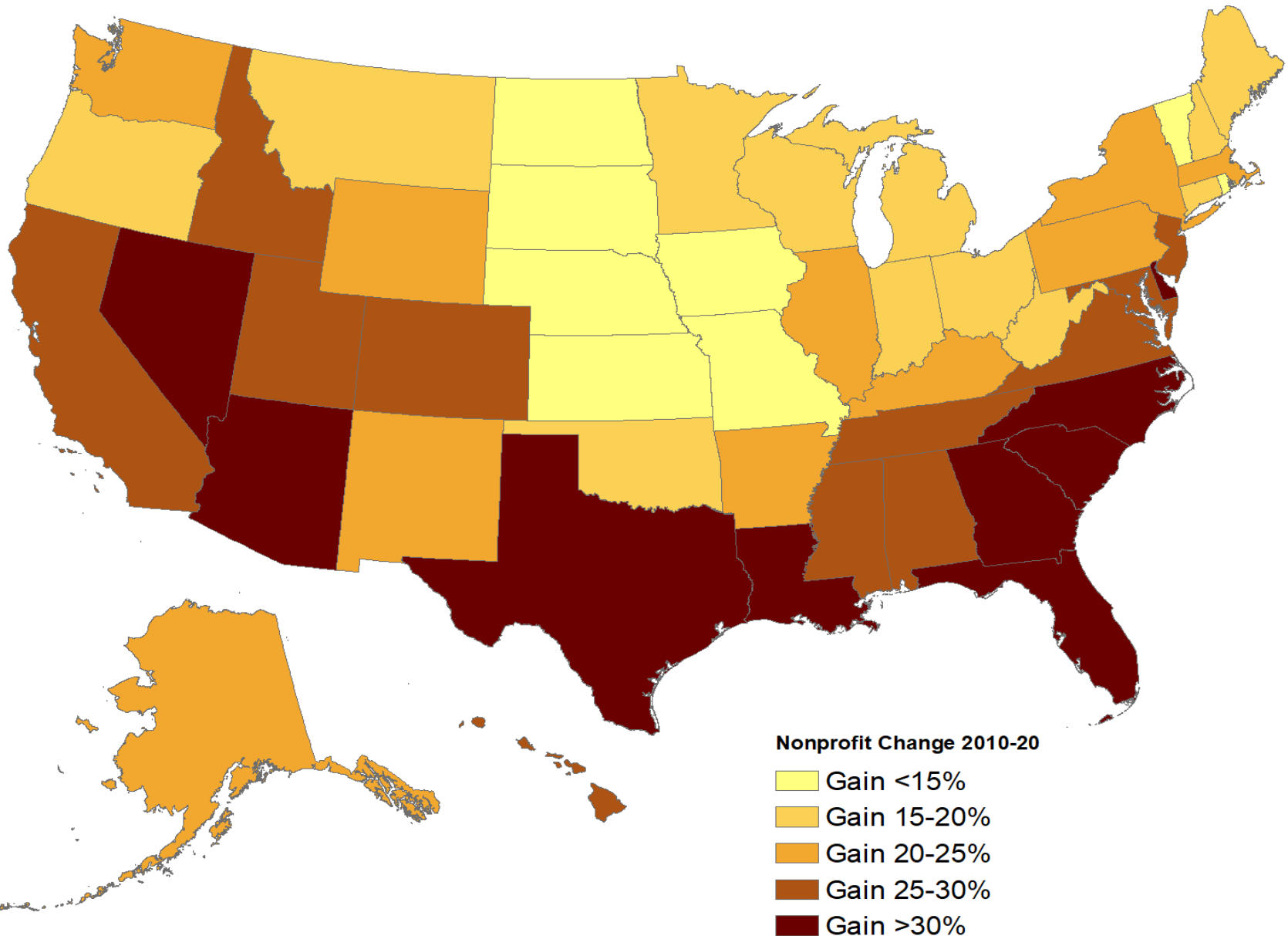
National Center for Charitable Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau



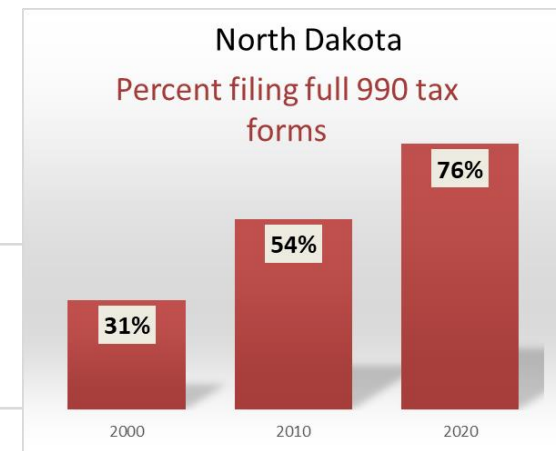
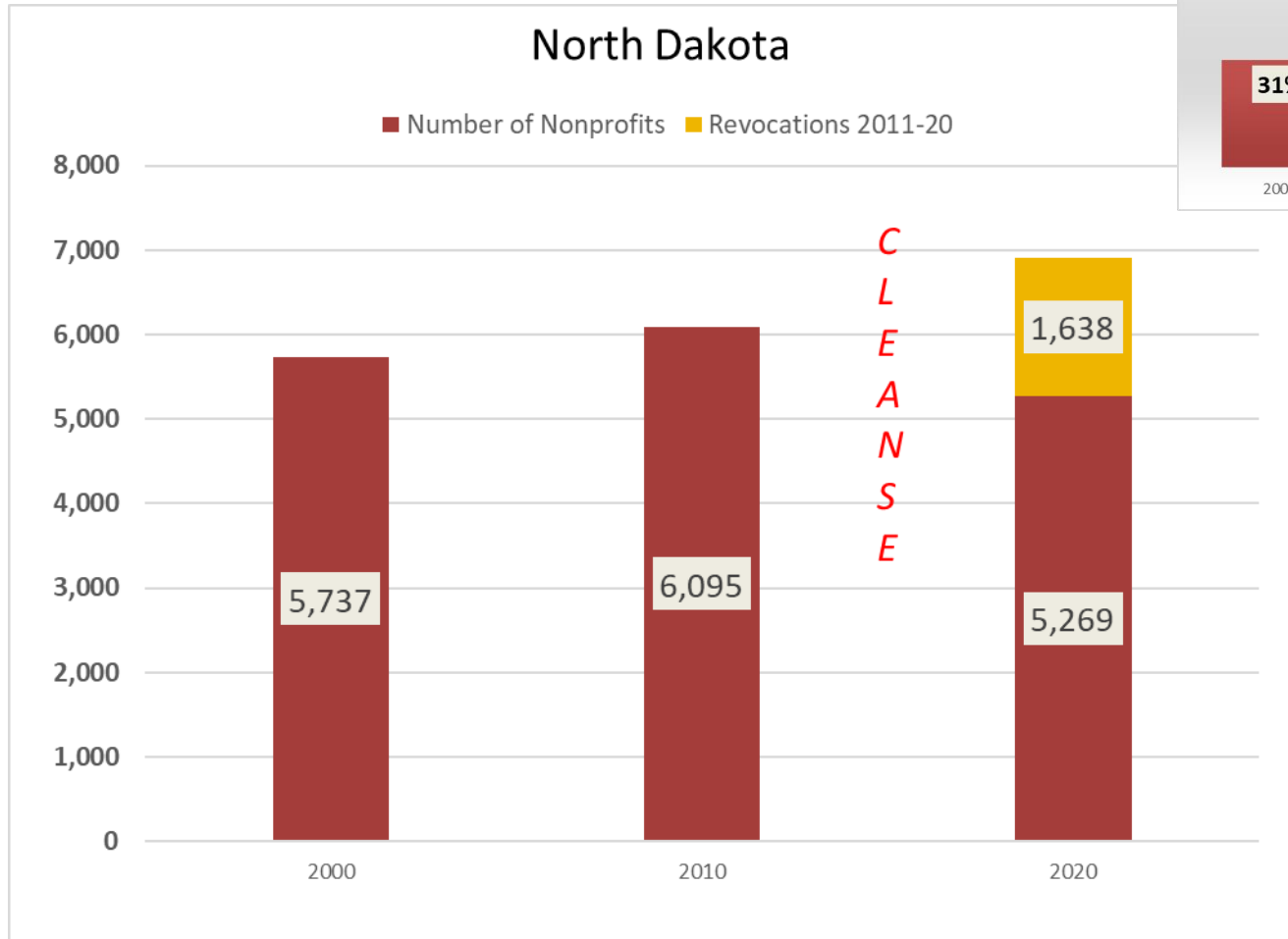
Nonprofit Change: 2000-2010



Nonprofit Change: 2010-2020



Social Life is Not Dying



National Center for Charitable Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau



SUPPLY TRENDS



Social Organizations

- Diversification of rural life socially, too
- Reflect the social interests at any given time
- Today is not 25 (or 50, or 100) years ago!
- The people today seem unable to “connect” with the existing social infrastructure

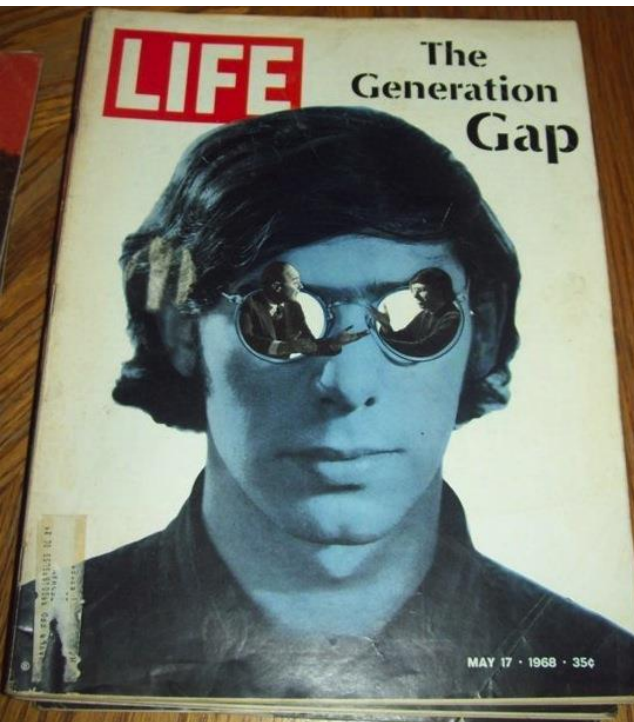


KIDS THESE DAYS

The Making of Millennials

MALCOLM HARRIS

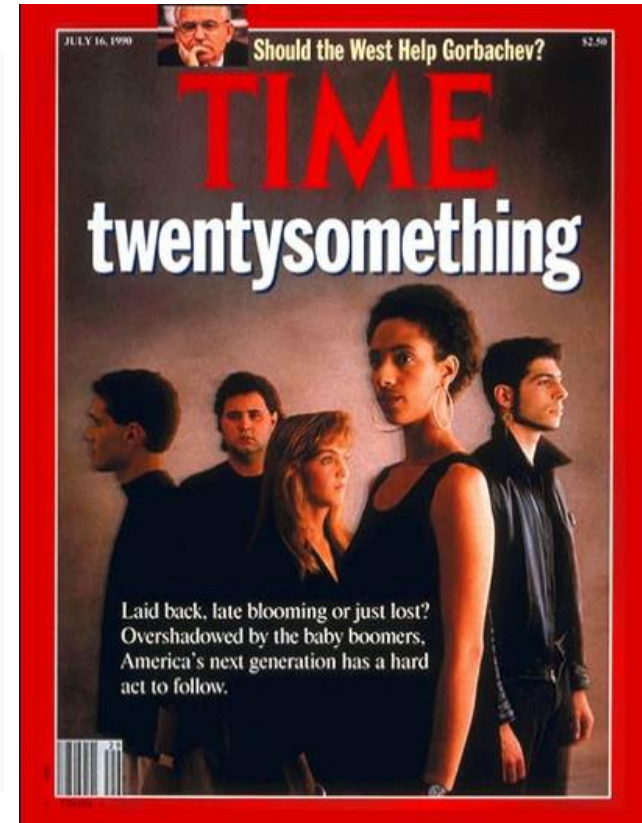
This has happened before...



1968



1976

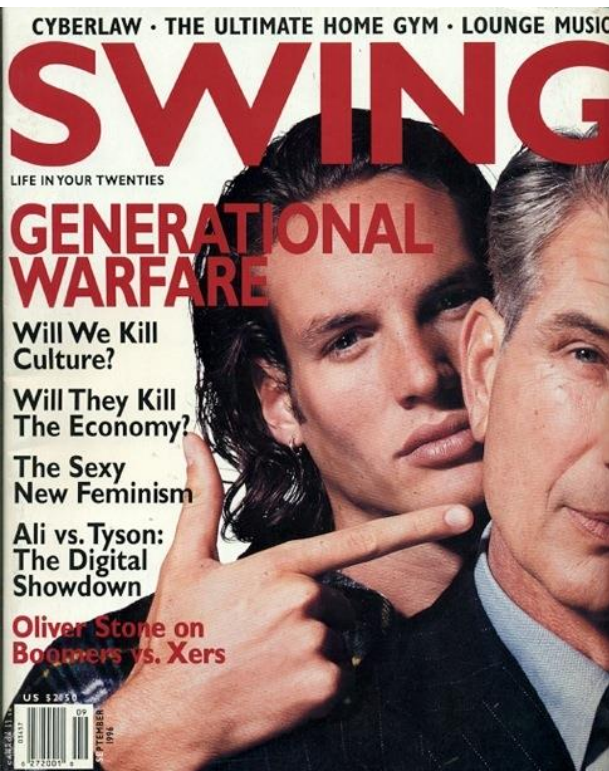


1990



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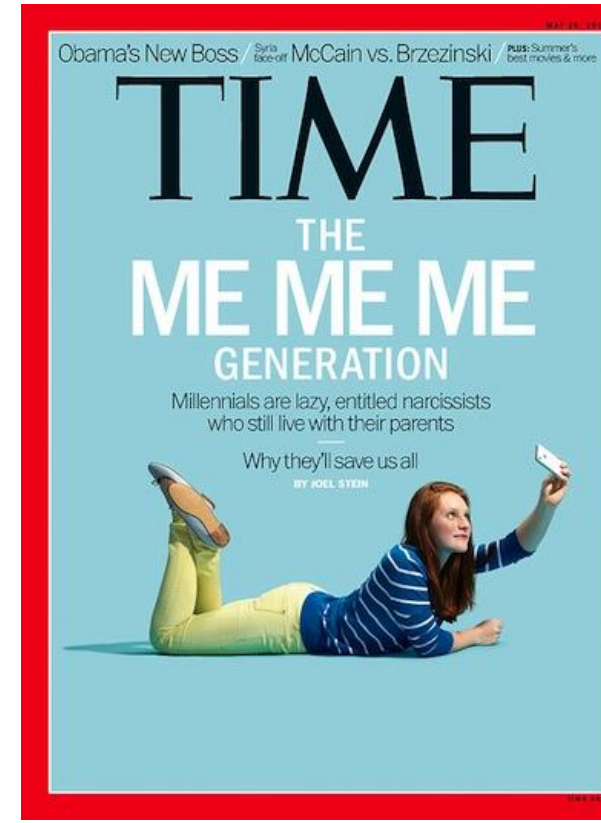
and it will happen again...



1996



2007



2013



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EVEN GEN Z'ERS ARE STARTING TO BELIEVE CLICHÉS ABOUT GEN Z

There's no scientific consensus that today's young people are especially narcissistic or self-involved, but the public has bought into the notion—as have young people themselves.

TOM JACOBS · MAY 15, 2019

<https://psmag.com/news/even-gen-zers-are-starting-to-believe-clichés-about-gen-z>



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



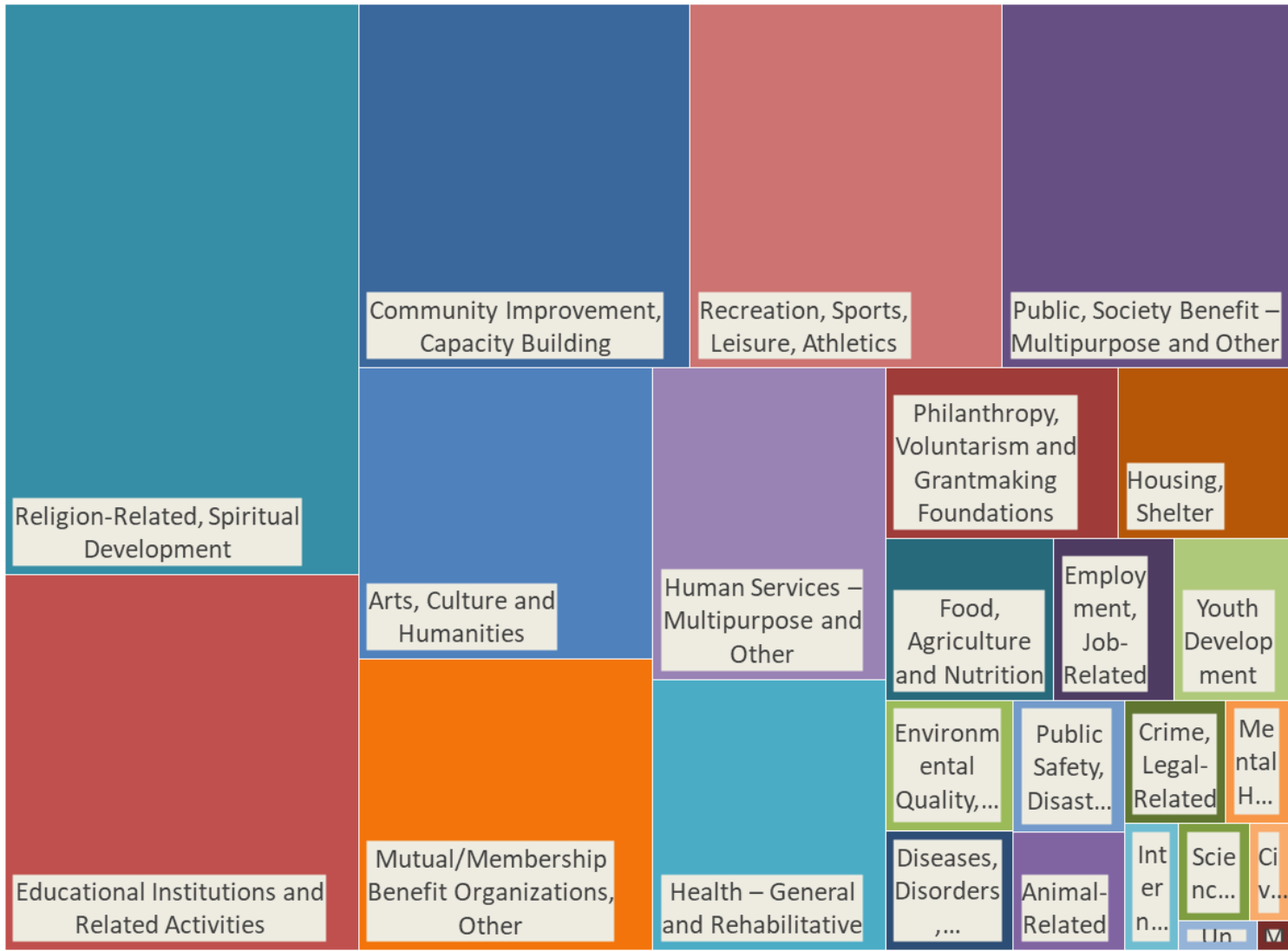
The people today are challenged in “connecting” with the existing social infrastructure.

Green & Haines. 2007. *Asset Building and Community Development*



North Dakota

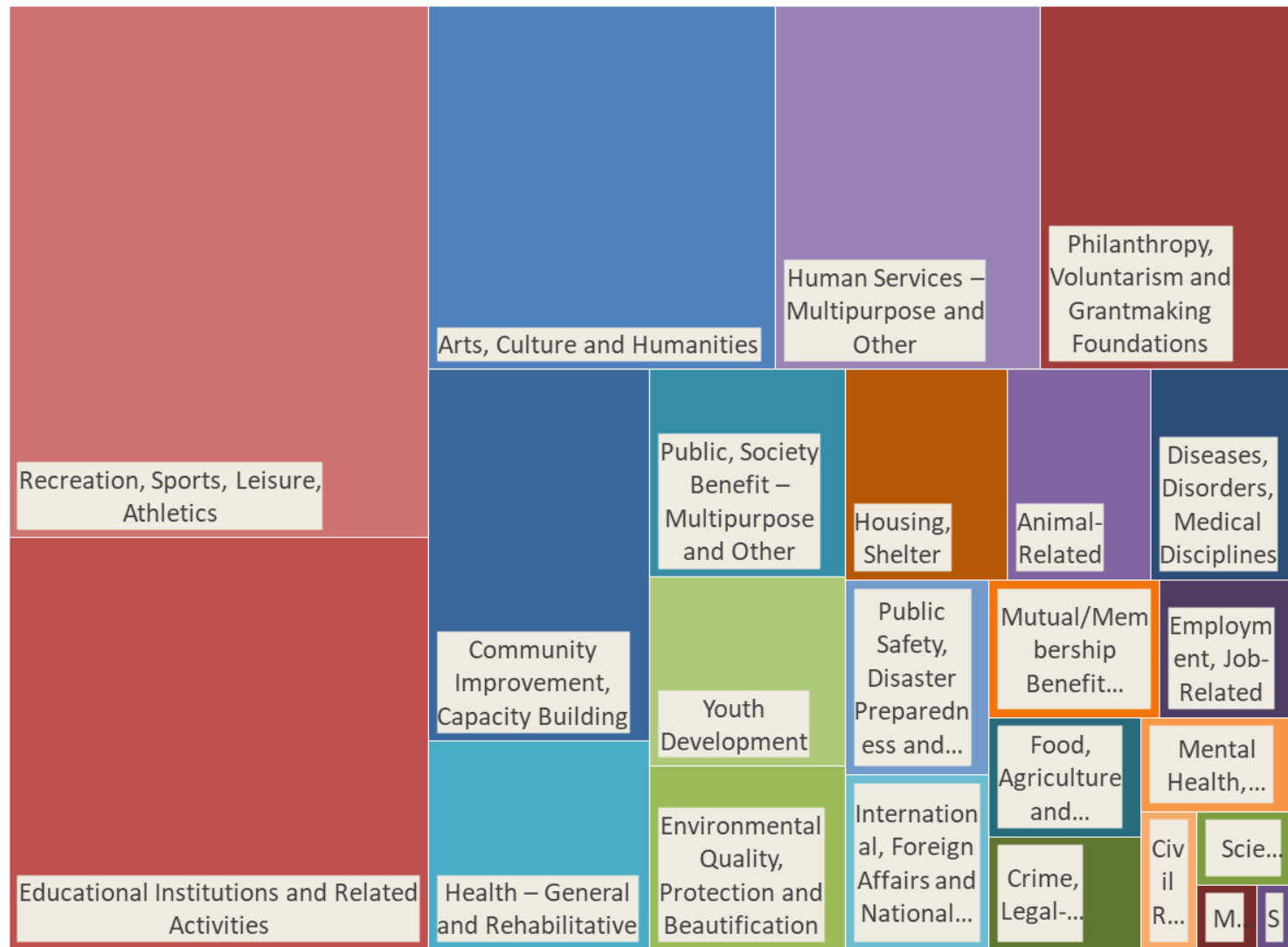
2020 Nonprofit NTEE composition



41% of all nonprofits created in the last 30 years!

North Dakota

2020 Nonprofit NTEE composition not including Religion, groups formed last 30 years



IMPLICATIONS



POPULATION PER ORGANIZATIONAL ROLE

Definition: Number of people each organization has available to them to locate a positional leader.

In North Dakota, 1 in 13 needed to serve

- Yes, people serve on multiple boards, wear multiple hats.
- Age 18+ includes many age groups that are less active.
- Assumption of 5 positions per government and 6 positions per nonprofit is conservative.



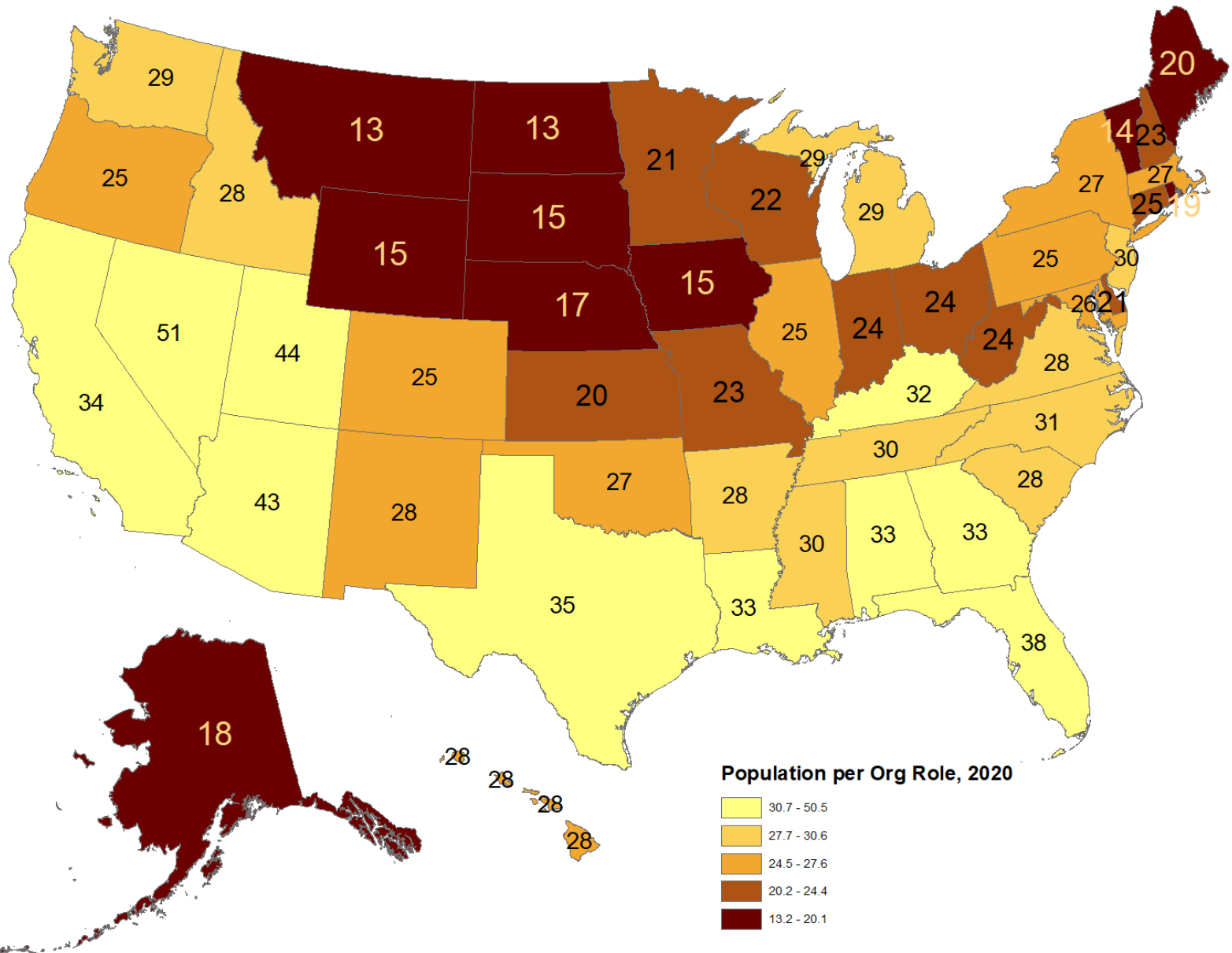
Supply and Demand, 2020

	Demand: Total Orgs	Supply: Pop Age 18 +	Org Demand	National Rank Overall/ Just NPs
Iowa	28,210	2,450,103	1 in 15	4 / 2
Kansas	18,940	2,229,316	1 in 20	11 / 15
Minnesota	35,246	4,389,033	1 in 21	13 / 12
Montana	10,817	850,123	1 in 13	2 / 1
Nebraska	14,999	1,476,127	1 in 17	7 / 8
North Dakota	7,933	596,093	1 in 13	1 / 7
South Dakota	7,782	660,650	1 in 15	6 / 5
Wisconsin	35,326	4,612,300	1 in 22	14 / 13

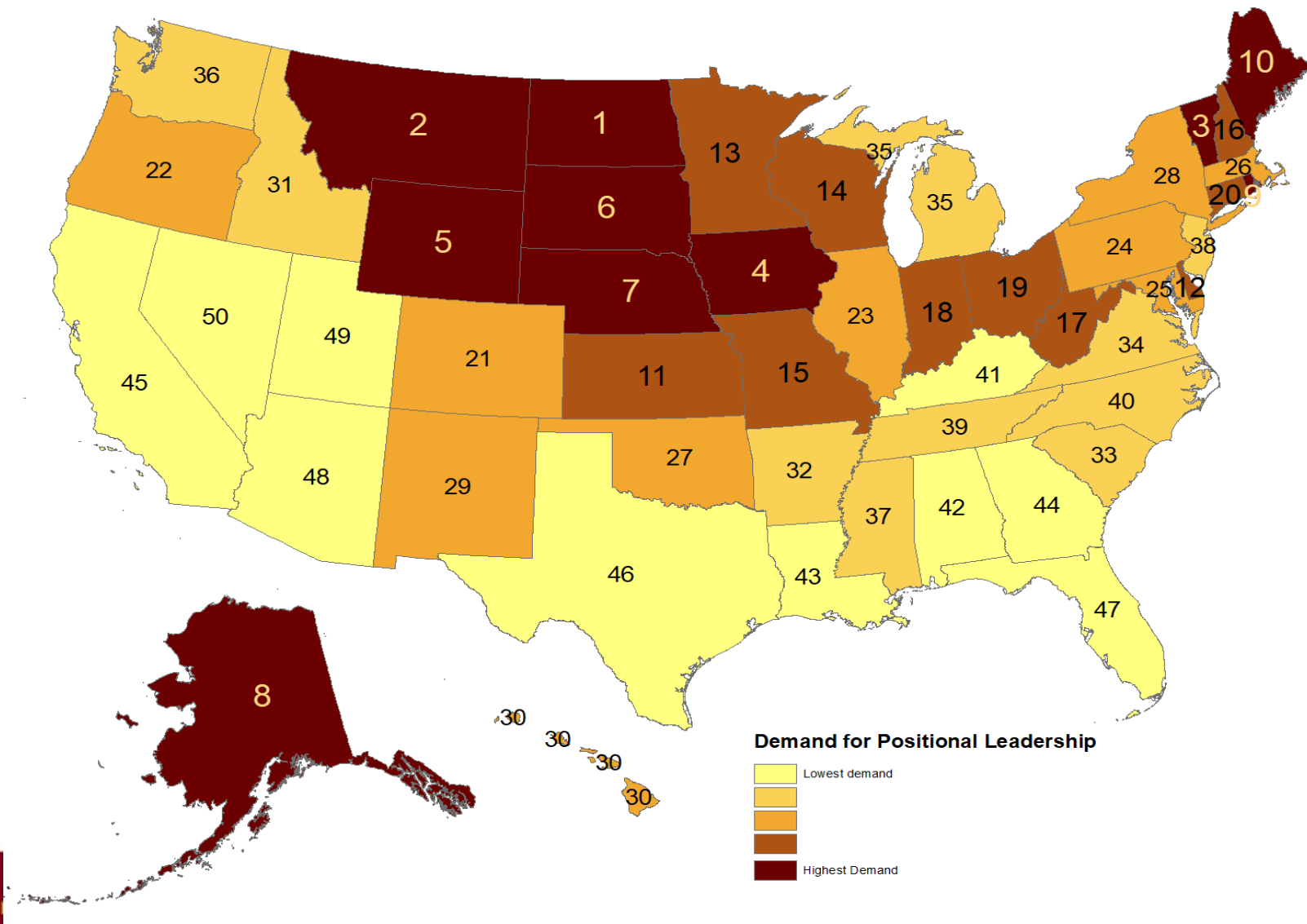
In Minnesota, 1 in 21 adults must serve as a leader in a governmental or nonprofit position.



POPULATION PER ORGANIZATIONAL ROLE, 2020



Rank of Organizational Demands, 2020

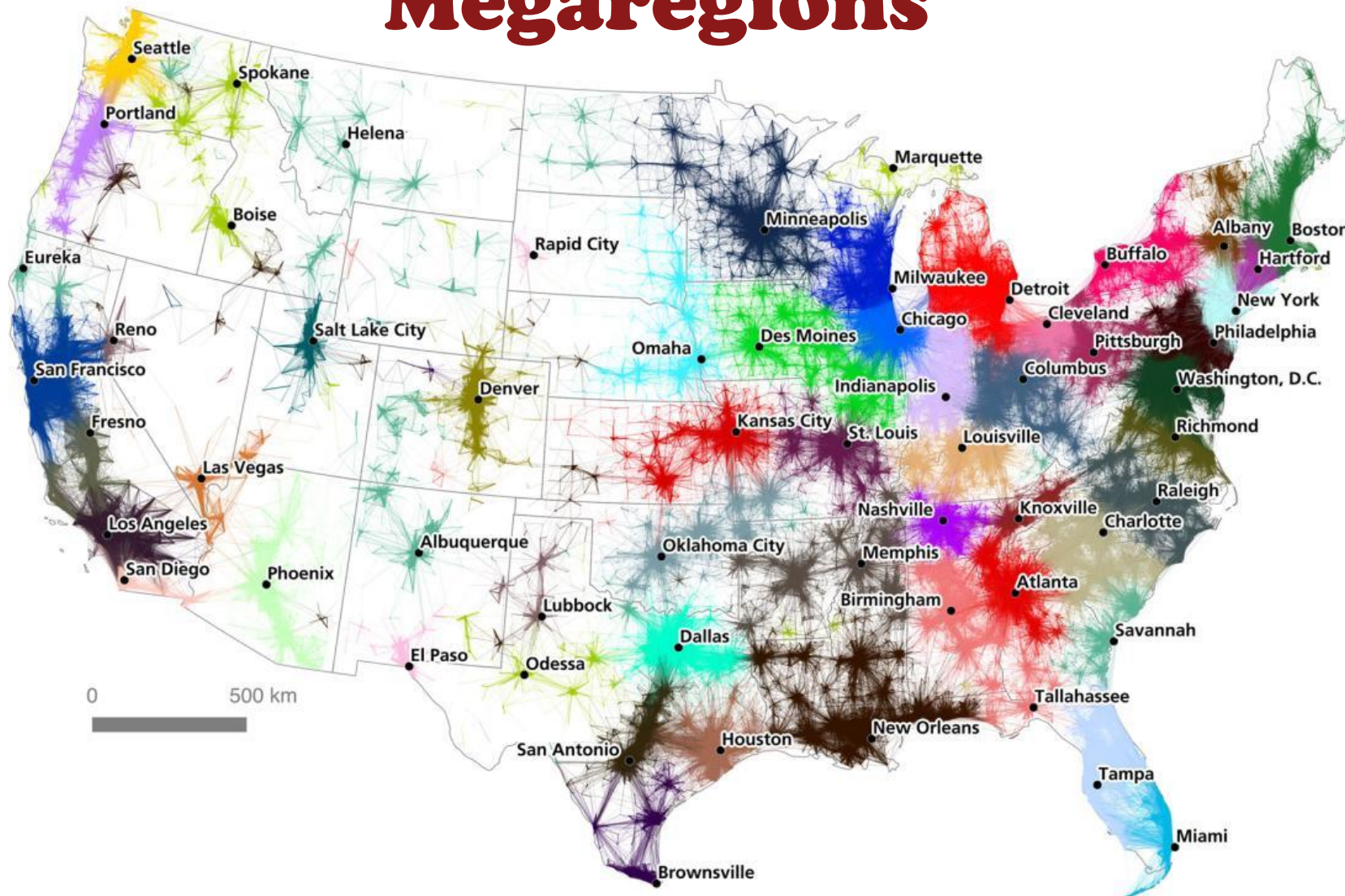


OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

- New residents are more than warm bodies
- Younger people (Millennials age 18-34)
 - Decentralized approaches to leadership
 - Simplified methods of communication
- Generational interests change yet organizations do not
- Start with a small request
- Engagement before leadership



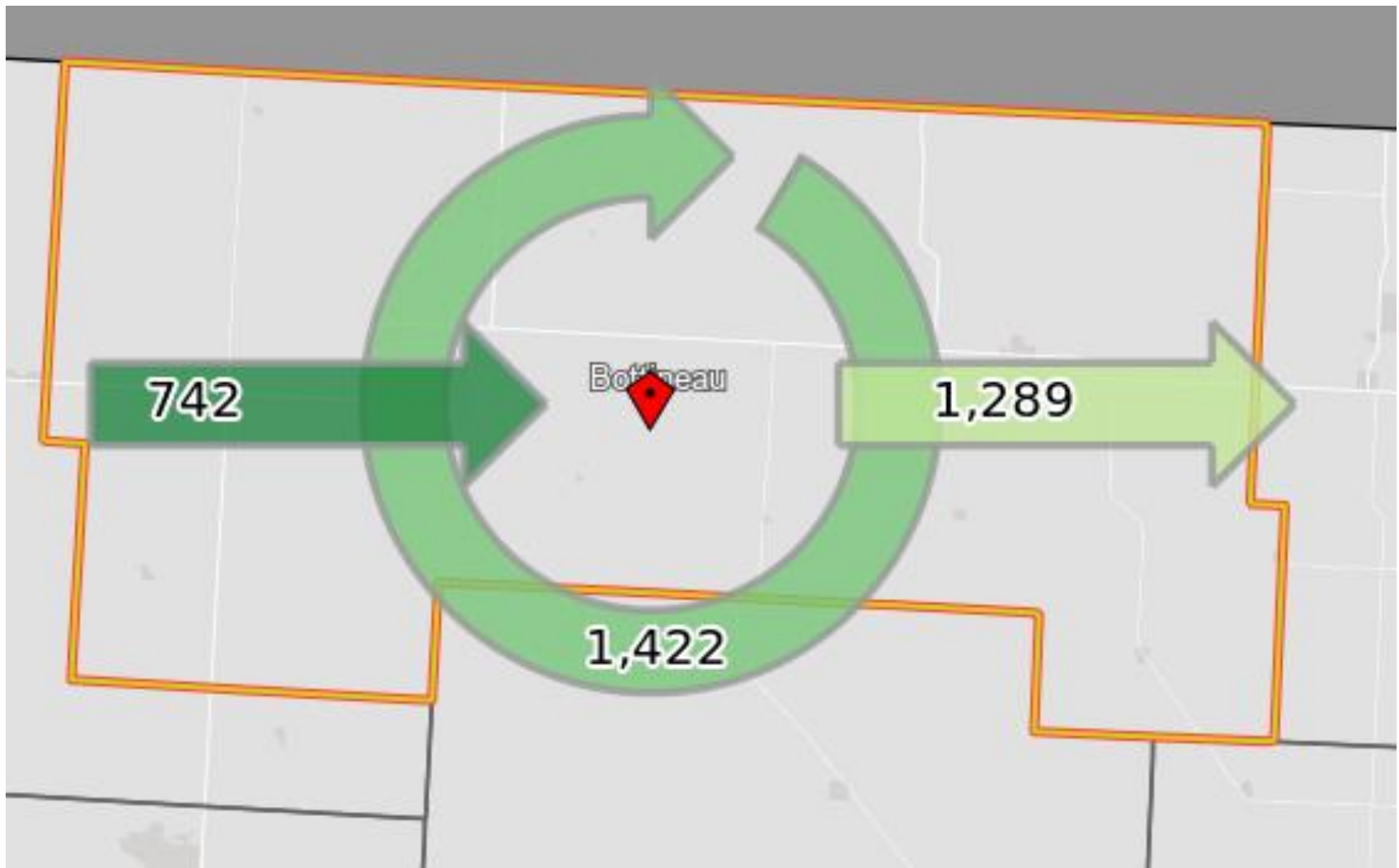
Megaregions



<http://discovery.dartmouth.edu/megaregions/>



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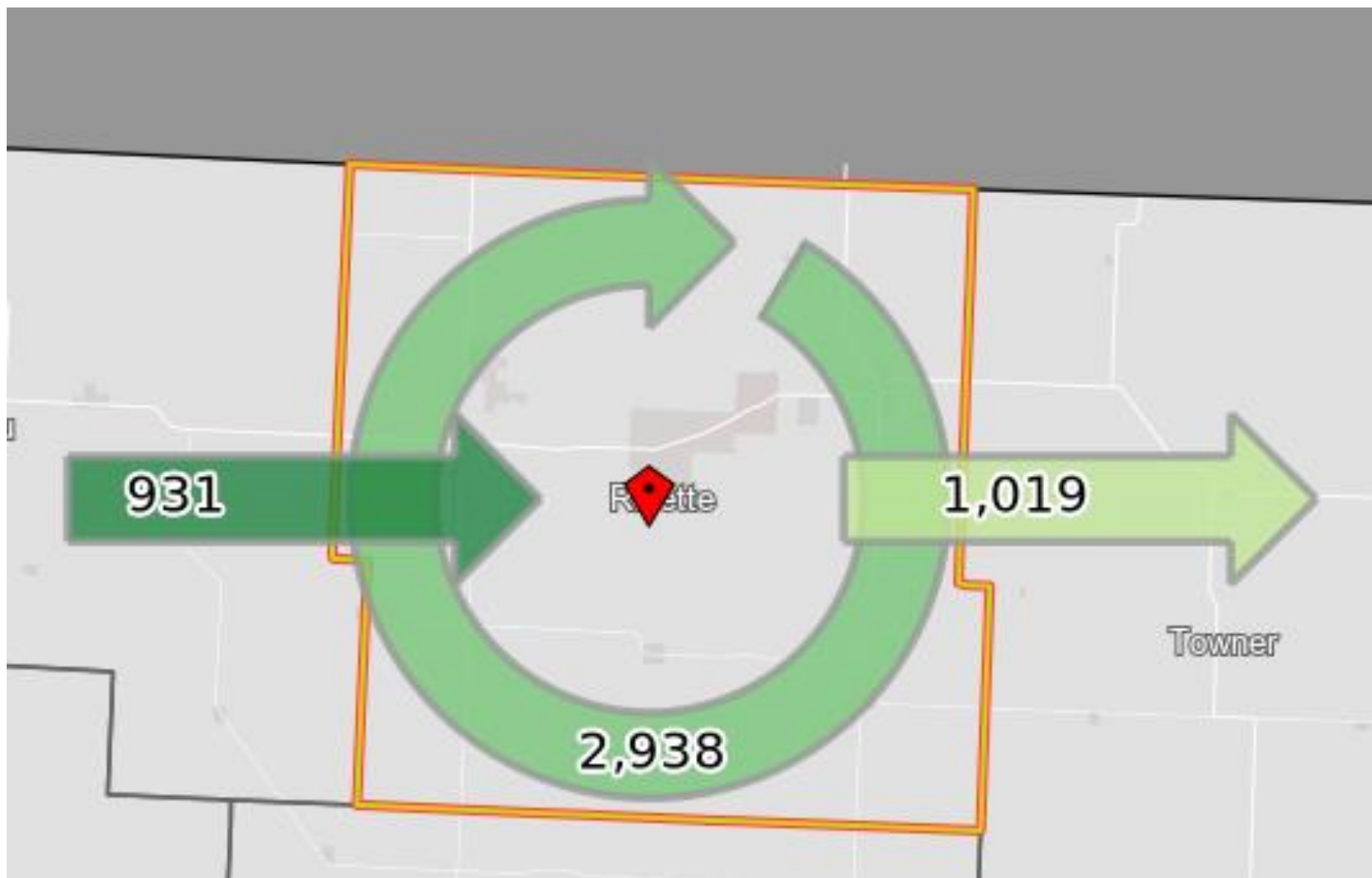


53% live AND work in Bottineau county

<https://onthemap.ces.census.gov/>



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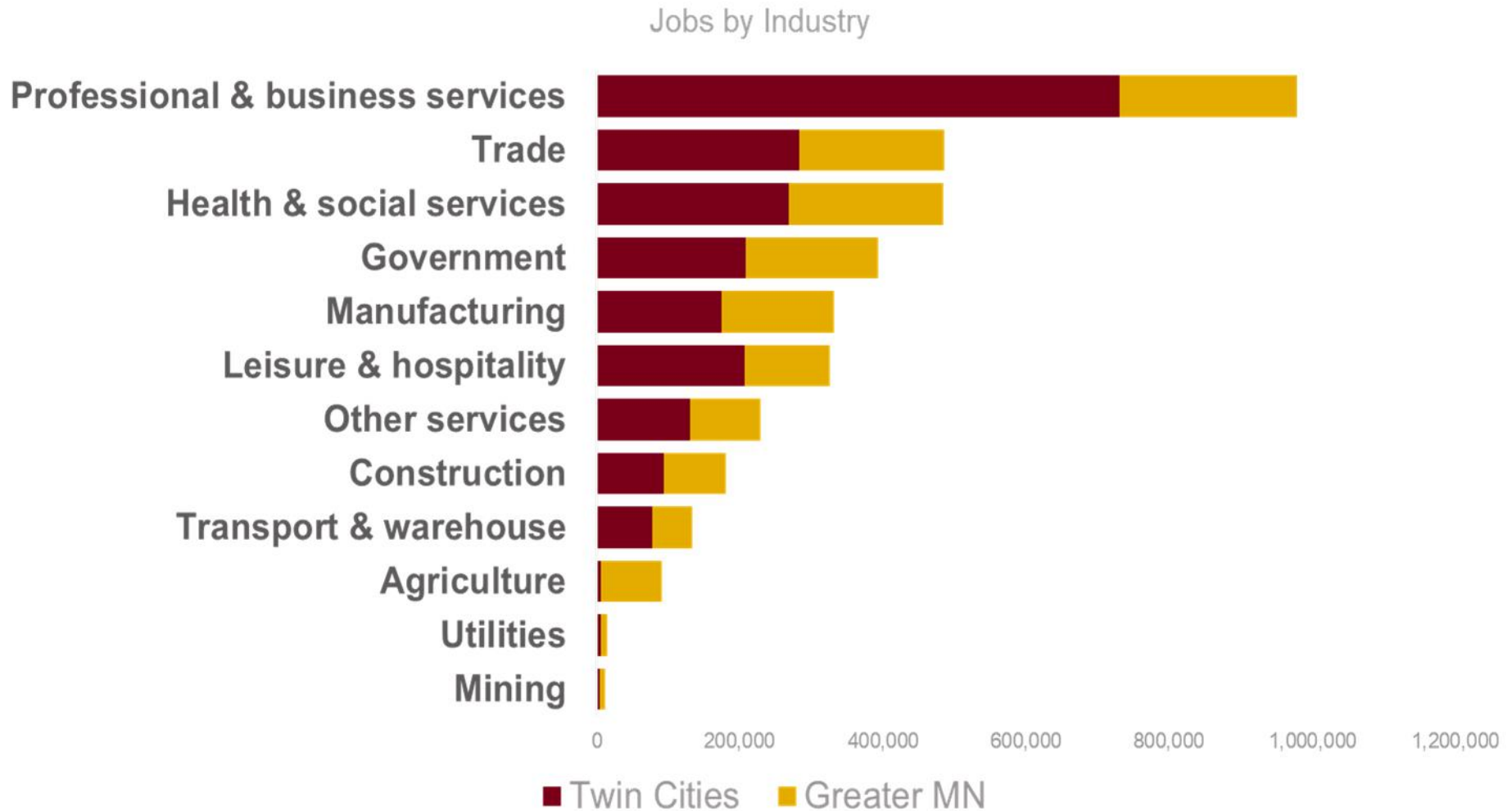
74% live AND work in Rolette county

<https://onthemap.ces.census.gov/>



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Diversifying the rural economy



TELECOMMUTING

Question: Do you typically telecommute or work remotely for a company not located in your region?
(of those in workforce)

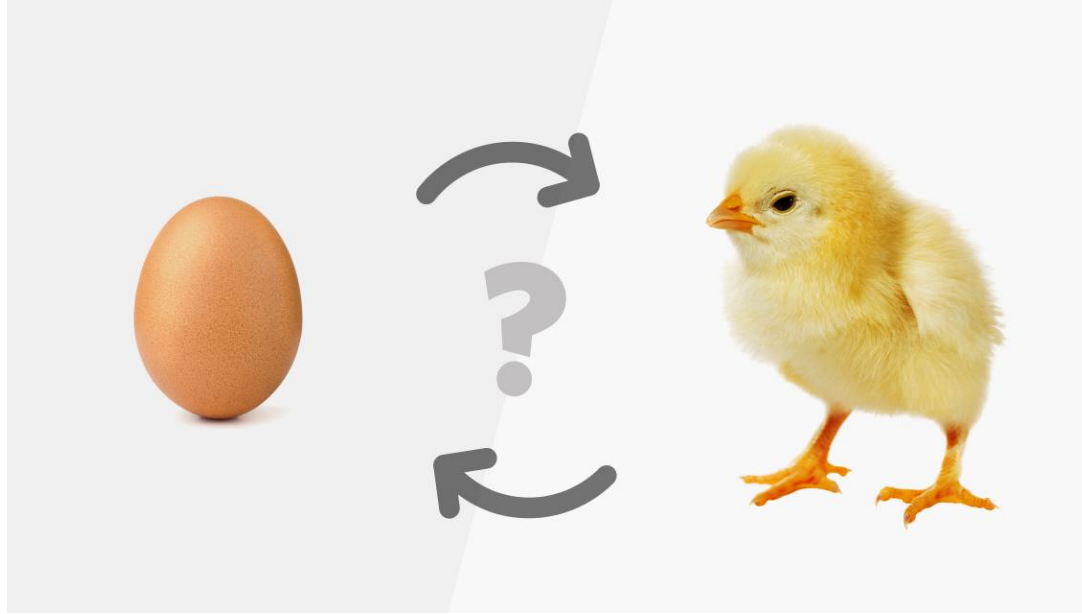
Respondent	14%
Spouse	16%

21% of Households have a member that telecommutes!



Blandin Foundation™
STRENGTHENING RURAL MINNESOTA

Traditional: Employer-based Community Resident Recruitment



Jobs are the attraction for new residents.
Without a job why would anyone move here?
What we've found...

Work and Home continue to decouple
2019, just 51% of workforce work/live in county



**We live in a REGIONAL
COMMUNITY.**

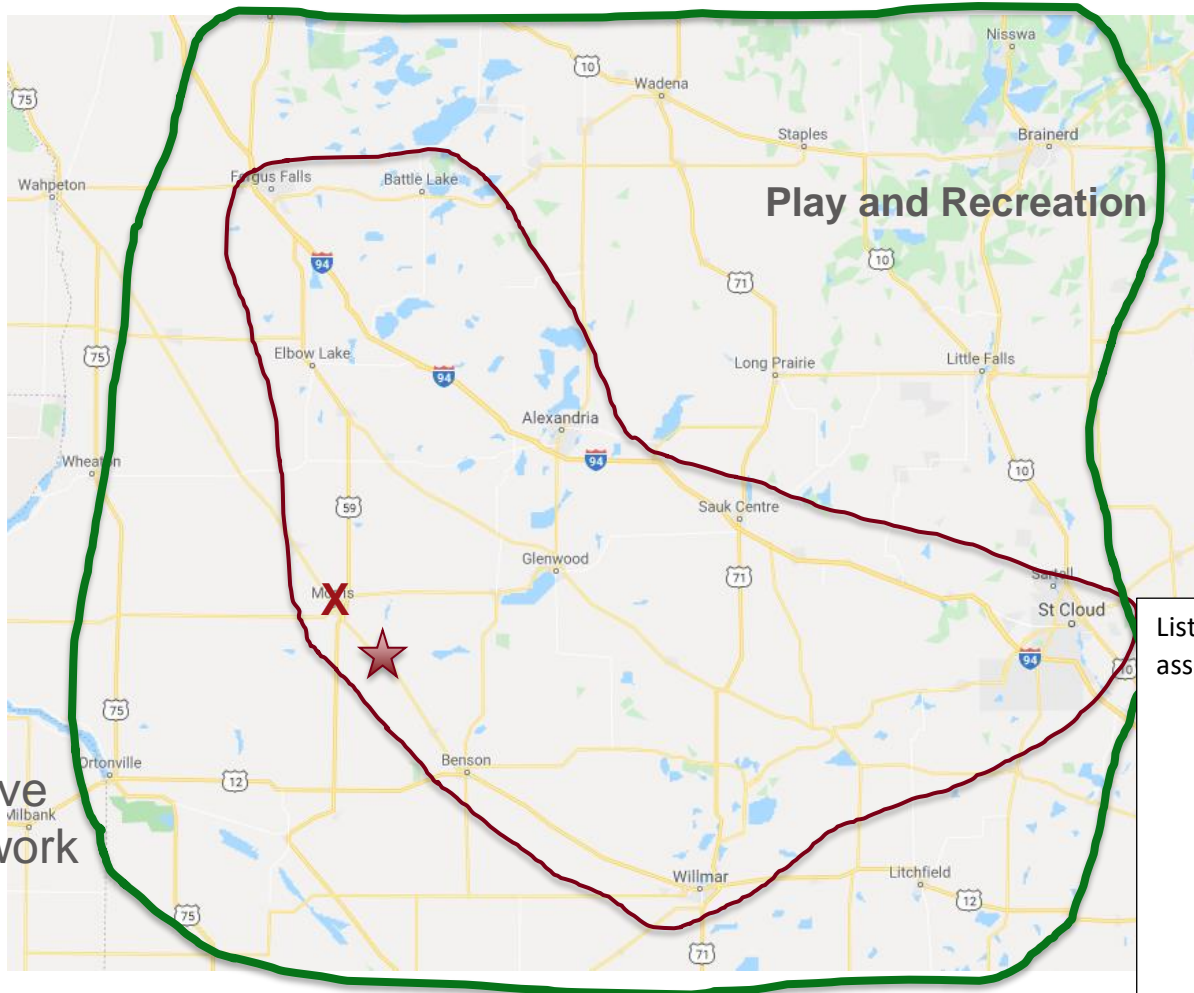


in the Middle of Everywhere



The Middle of Everywhere Exercise

Age: ____'s



Play and Recreation

List 3-5 of your favorite assets in your region:

- ★ where you live
- X where you work

Circle around:

1. Shop / eat out
2. Play / recreate

Living in the Middle of Everywhere

"We ended up landing in Roscoe, Illinois because of the location. It's a quick drive to Chicago (90 minutes), Milwaukee (60 minutes), & Madison (45 minutes)"

<http://sprudge.com/snowdrift-coffee-129804.html>



MIDDLE OF EVERYWHERE

How can we make local decisions while at the same time respect the reality of lives?

The REGION is the primary unit of interest

Mayor, how do you market your town if you don't know what's going on around you?



Cohort Lifecycle



*Avg. American moves 11.7 times in lifetime
(6 times at age 30)*



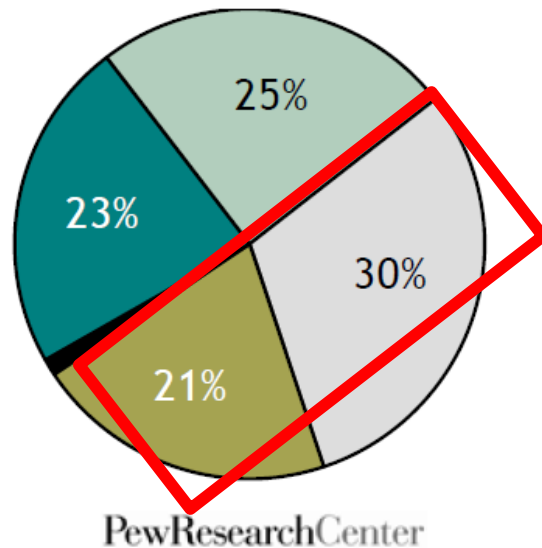
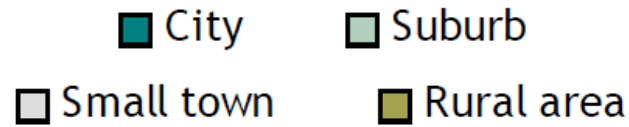
CHOOSING RURAL

- 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**



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.



*Prepare for one of the **largest demographic changes** to rural America since 1930*



Change is coming

30% of rural homeowners are 70+!

75% are baby boomers
and older!



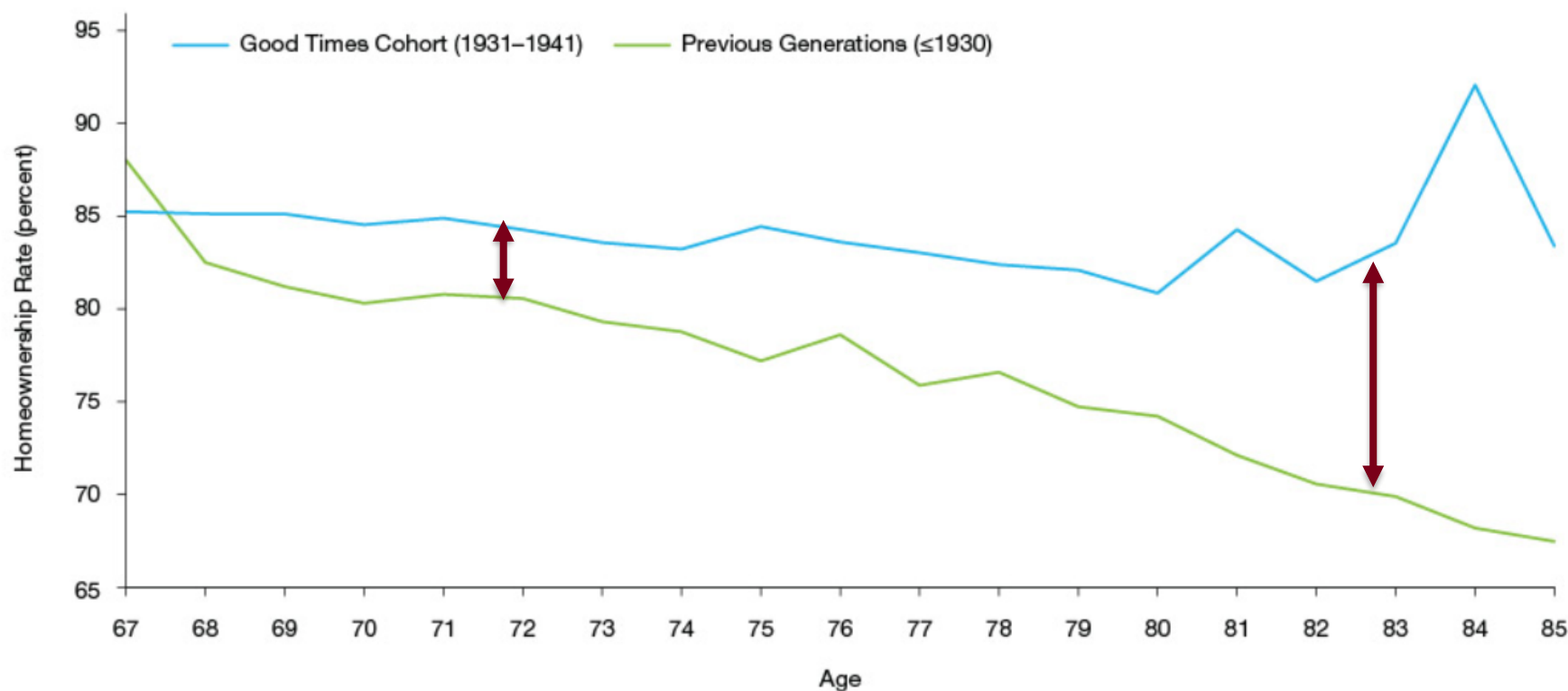


58% of older adults have not changed residences in more than 20 years

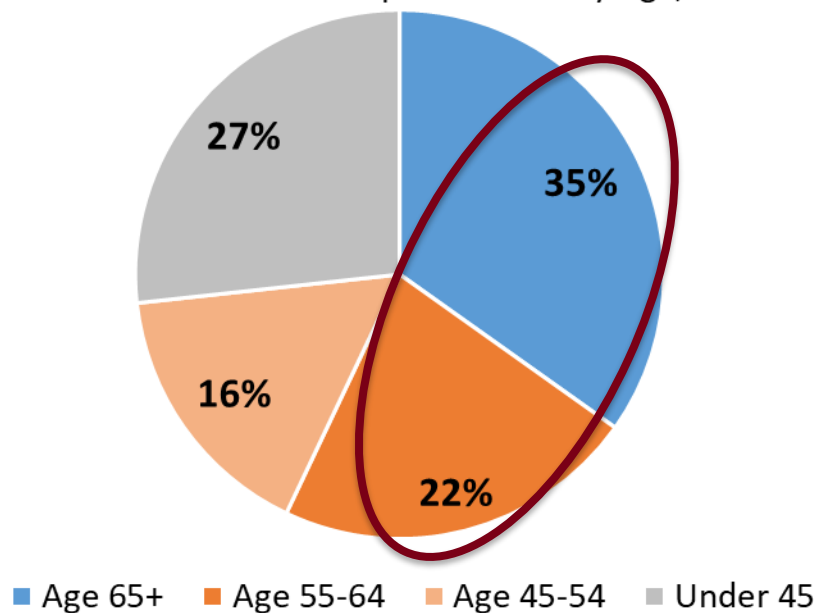
Exhibit 1

Historical homeownership rates for household heads aged 67–85

Current generations of older homeowners are holding onto their homes for longer than previous generations

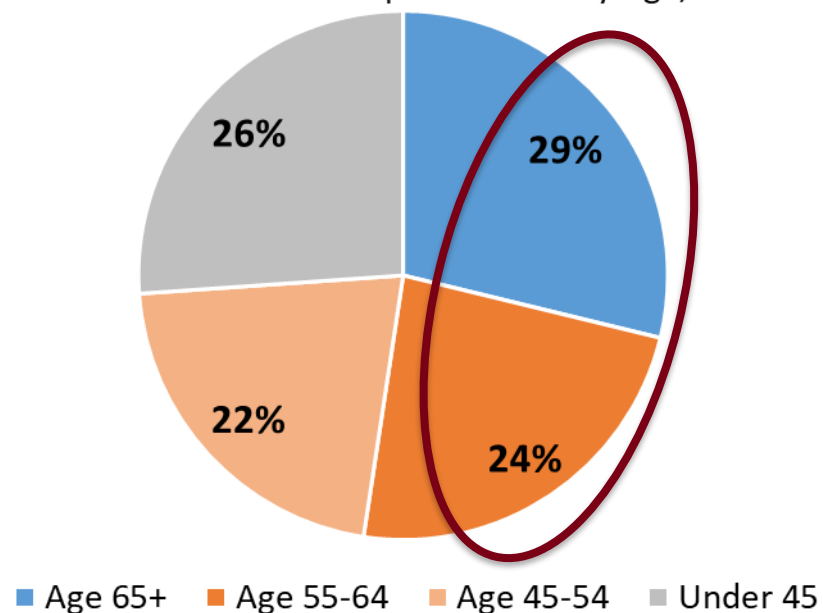


Bottineau County, North Dakota
Percent of Owner-Occupied Homes by Age, 2020



Labor shortage is confused with housing shortage.

Rolette County, North Dakota
Percent of Owner-Occupied Homes by Age, 2020



Housing Substitutions

OUT



IN



*47% of newcomer households
have children*

Through death comes rebirth!



THE COMMUNITY IS WELCOMING OF NEW RESIDENTS BY THOSE LIKELY TO STILL LIVE IN COMMUNITY IN 5 YEARS

The Community is Welcoming	Likely to Live Here in 5 Years
Strongly agree	86%
Agree	77%
Disagree	68%
Strongly Disagree	44%
All respondents	78%



resident recruitment

Community Development

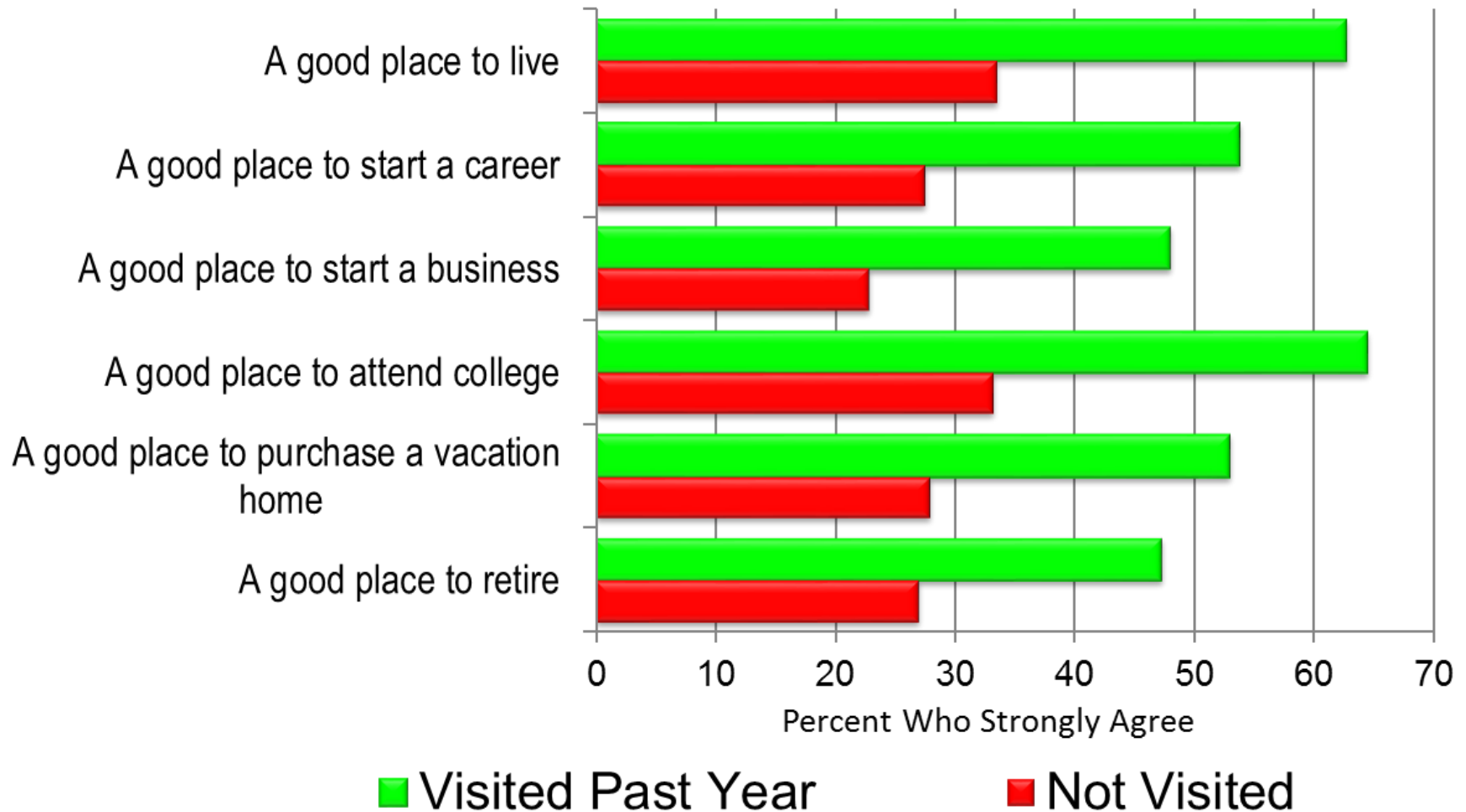
Economic Development

Tourism

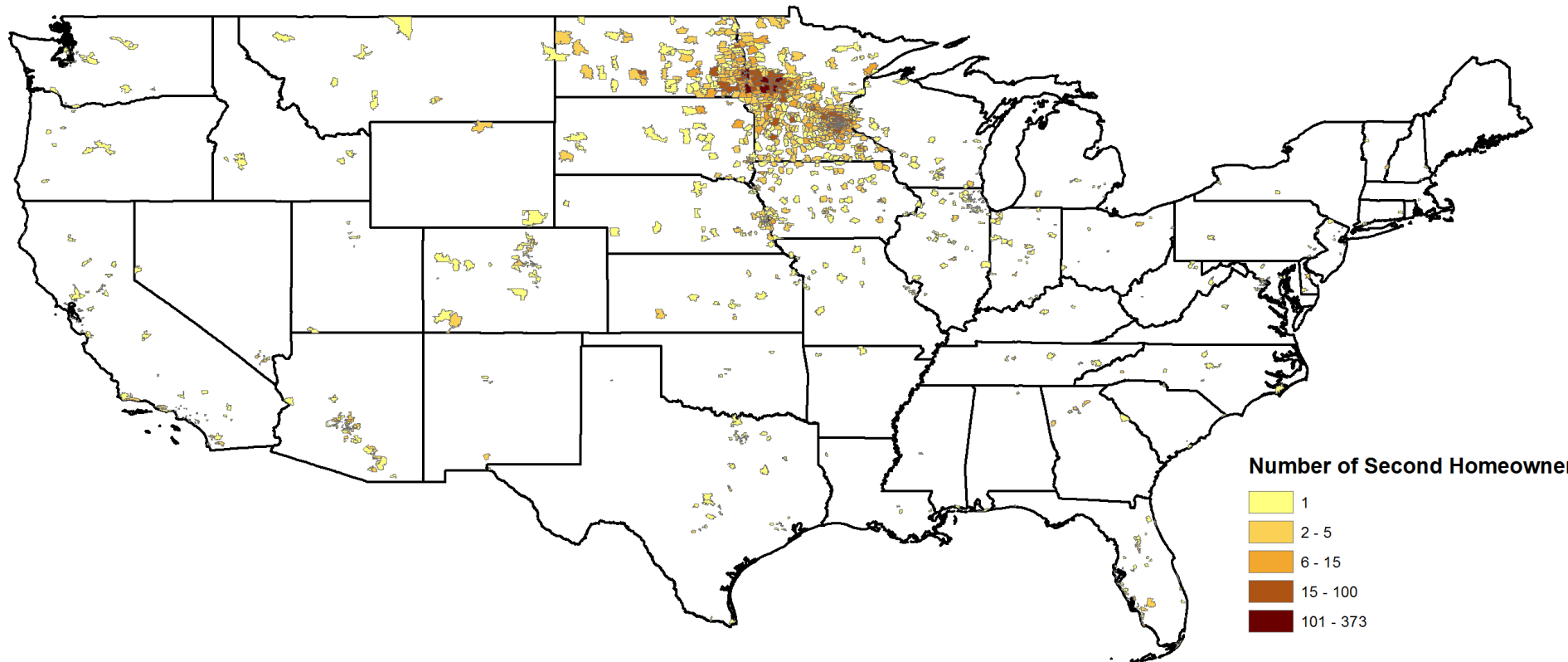
On the Map – Over the Edge – Welcome Home



HALO EFFECT: VISITATION AND IMAGE



Home residence of second homeowners in Otter Tail County



Vacant ➡ Occupied Second Homeowners

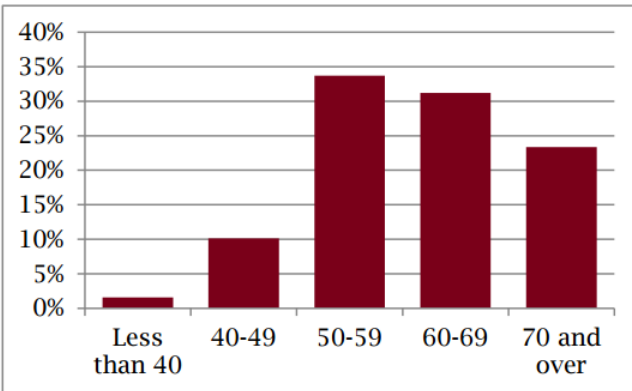
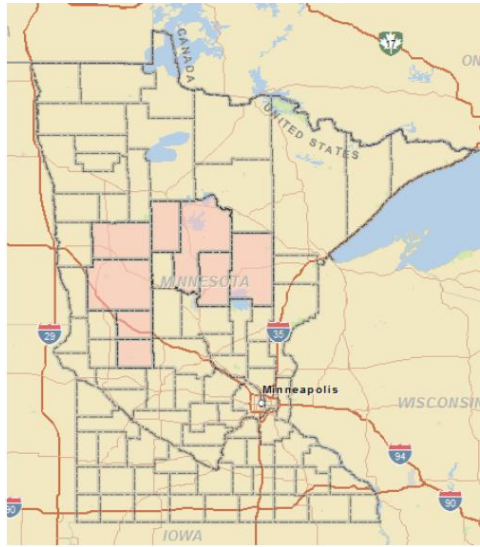


Figure 2: Age of respondents (n=561)

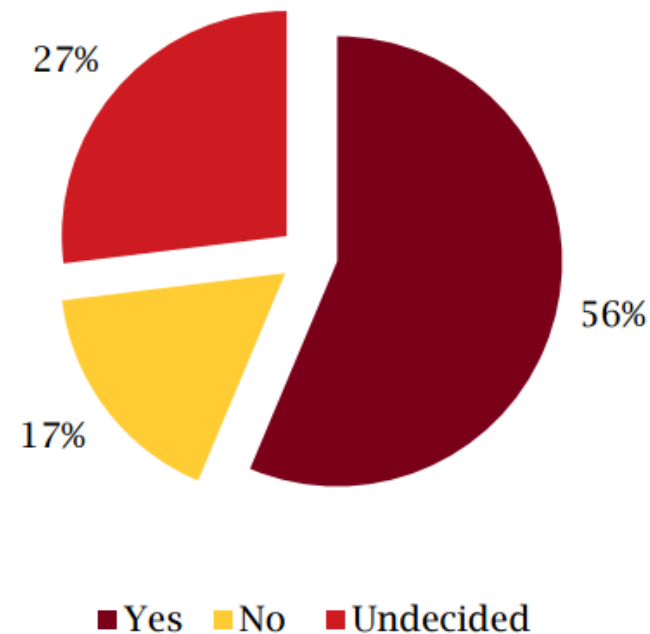
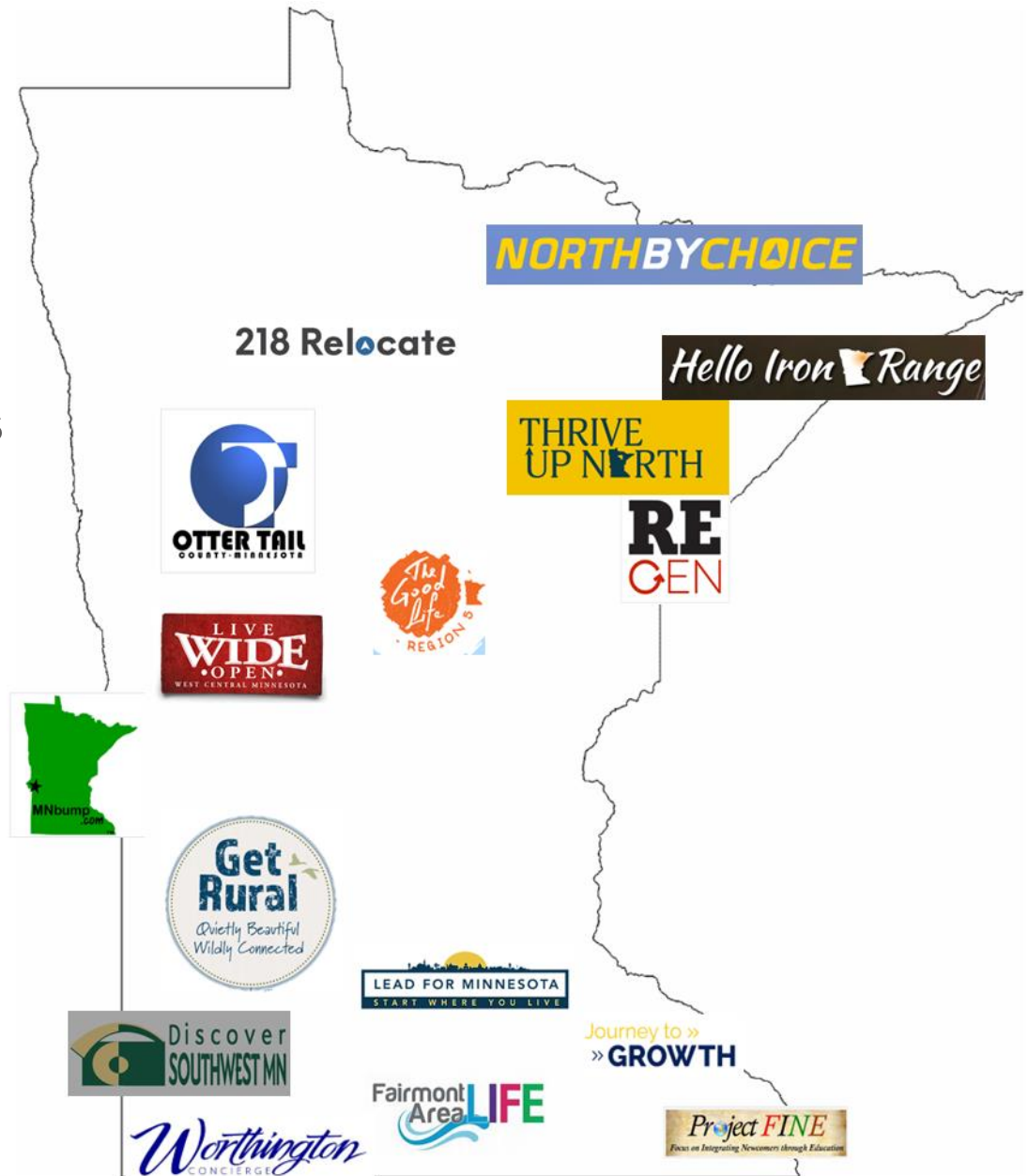
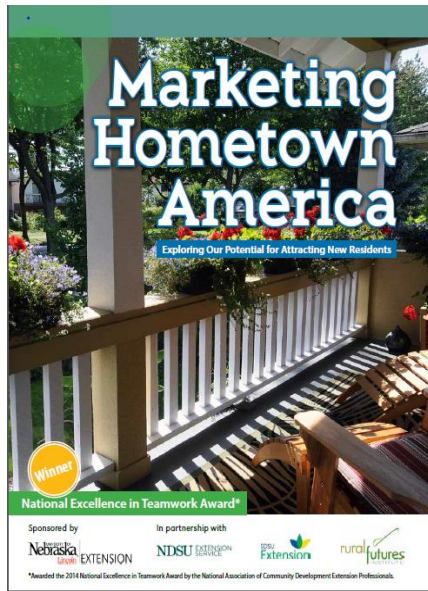


Figure 13: Intention of respondents to retire to second home property (n=569)

Pesch and Bussiere. 2014. Profile of Second Homeowners in Central and West Central Minnesota



Resident Recruitment Efforts In Minnesota



resident recruitment

The coordinated economic and community development actions needed to identify, attract, and invite new residents moving to the region.

- Distributes recruitment (and retention) costs across the communities.
- In a tight labor market...**labor has the power to choose.** Why will they choose your town over another? Seems everything but the job matters...
- The **LIFE-WORK** balance



resident recruitment

Invitations

- Graduates / class reunions
- Tourism locations - narrative
- Media / Facebook / Google Ads
- Existing resident networks – lift up voices of newcomers
- Narrative matters here!



resident recruitment

Incentives

tulsa
remote

- Land, utility waiver, tax credits
 - Cash, moving costs, down payment
 - Bicycles / park passes
 - Co-working spaces
-
- Community incentives can stack here with occupational incentives (lawyers, doctors, public service workers)



resident recruitment

economic supports

- Broadband
- Child care
- Remote workforce training
- Co-work space, self-employment support
- Business Succession programs
- Spousal employment
- Regional housing inventory

There is a tension here with housing



resident recruitment

Welcoming

Front lines: Real estate agents, property managers, city clerks

- Front line narrative training program
- Concierge service
- Welcoming Communities program
- Grab-a-bite (Otter Tail county)
- Newcomer supper



resident recruitment

Involving

- Making it Home program
- Regional events and organizations
- Involvement starts with a small request
- Make room for newcomers to “leave their mark” for themselves



Narrative Matters



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.





WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Consider resident recruitment as a possible outcome in your marketing efforts
- Learn about newcomers in your community
- Consider that some visitors might be looking for this information already...make it easy to find when they arrive



Rural is...

1. Durable – we are still here
2. Desirable – housing is full
3. Engaging – nonprofits growing
4. Diversifying – demographically and economically



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)



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](https://www.reddit.com/r/ruralbychoice)

Twitter @GrokRural

