



Rewriting the Rural Narrative

Speak softly and carry statistics

February 12, 2021
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Rural Sociologist
Extension Center for Community Vitality

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....

1 year ago.....



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



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 and population loss
- Church closings (Delafield)



1950+

- 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?

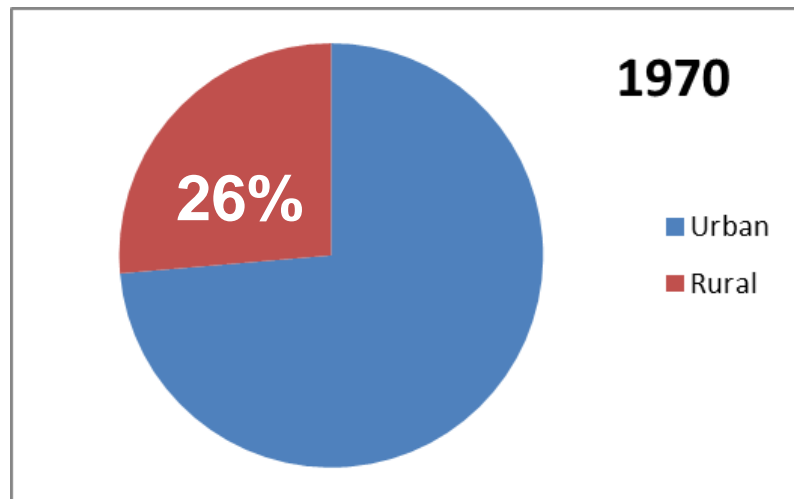
RURAL IS CHANGING, NOT DYING

- 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

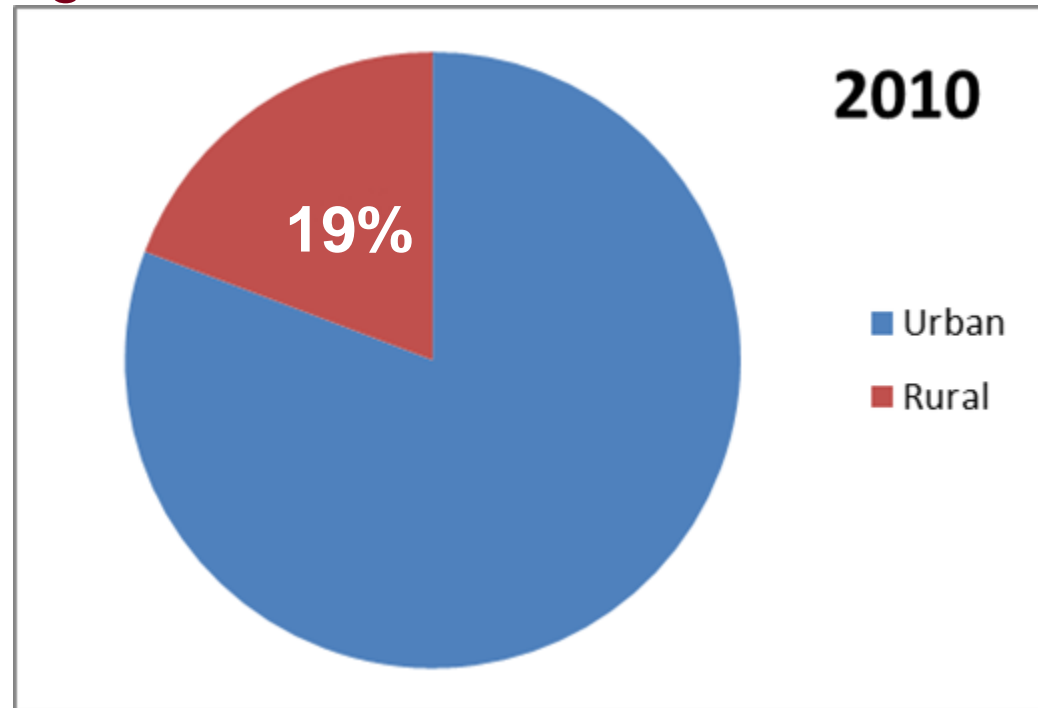


Rural Rebound

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



203,211,926
(53.6m rural)



308,745,538
(59.5m rural)



Rural Data

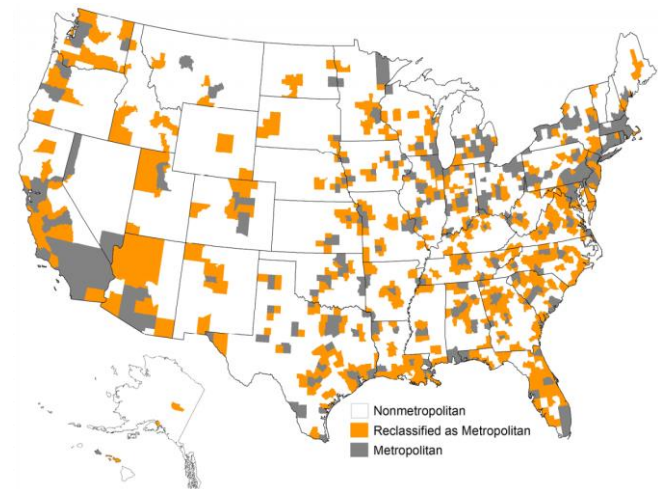
Rural Populations Continue to Shrink

[Is Rural America Struggling?](#) provides an excellent summary of the economic and population issues facing rural America. Key quote:

... rural America's job growth is stagnant and the population is in decline. In fact, it's the first time such a population decline has been recorded in the nation's rural counties.

Population figures reduced by formerly rural places now designated as urban (25% since 1974)

- Iowa 473,312
- Minnesota 352,224 rural residents now classified urban
- Montana 120,261
- Nebraska 170,855
- North Dakota 181,639
- South Dakota 207,790

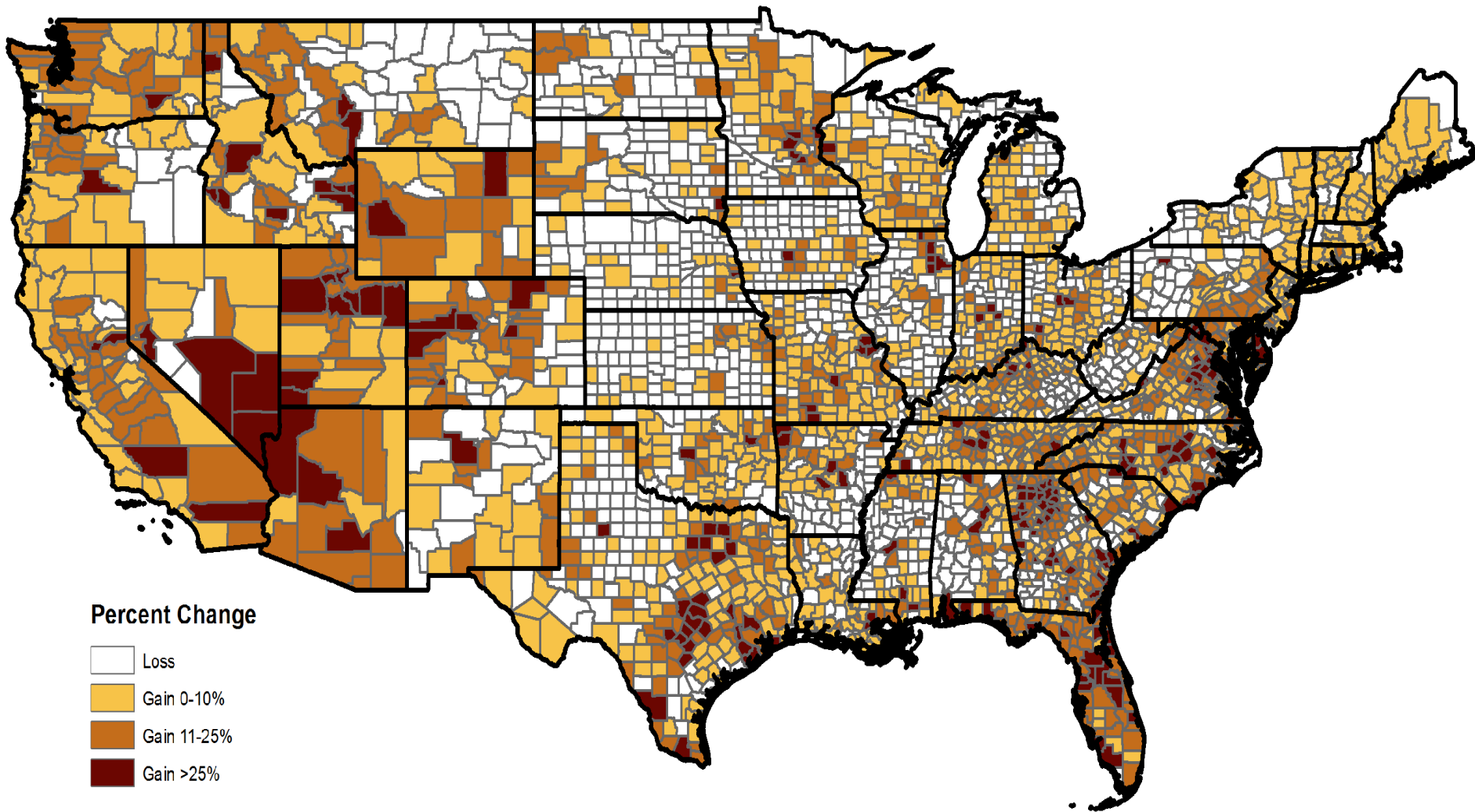


Urban areas have grown WIDER, not taller



Total Population Infatuation

2000-2010



Total Population Infatuation

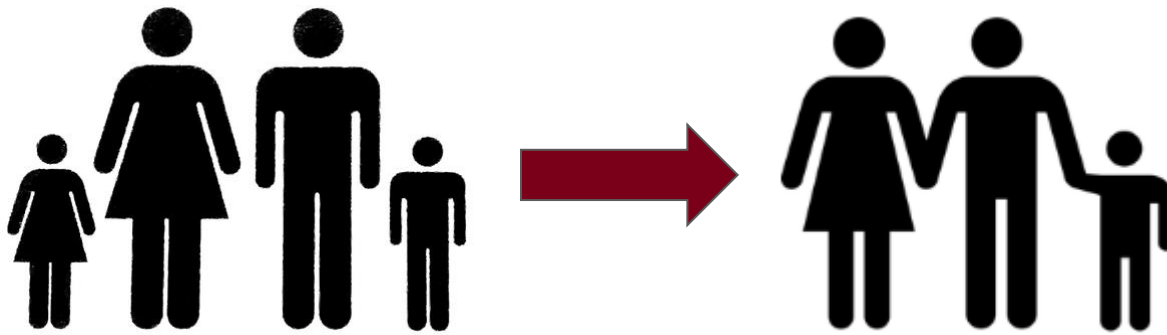
Wait, what?

Comparison Historical Population from 1960 to 2010

Community	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	% Change
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

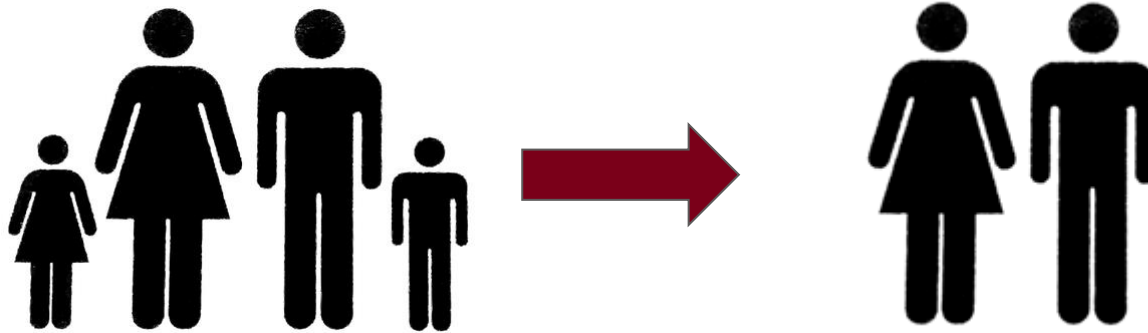




Avg HH Size

1940: 3.6

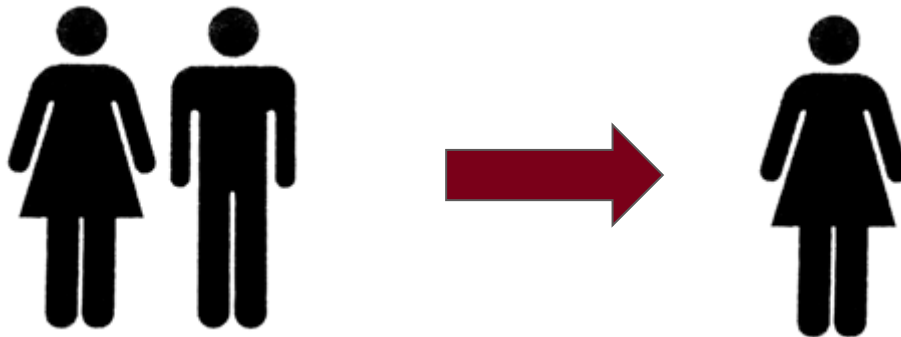
2018: 2.6 (-29%)



Kids graduate

Population: -2

Households: NC



Spouse passes

Population: -1

Households: NC



2000-2010 Population and Housing Units Change

The Narrative



County	% Pop Change	% Housing Change
Bowman	-3%	+5%
Foster	-11%	+0%
Logan	-14%	-4%
McIntosh	-17%	0%
Ransom	-7%	2%
Sargent	-12%	-1%
Sheridan	-23%	-3%
Trail	-4%	2%

Population loss is demographic destiny!
(and may continue to be so)





Mobility

Households Moving Every 5 Years:

44% Iowa

46% Minnesota

North Dakota

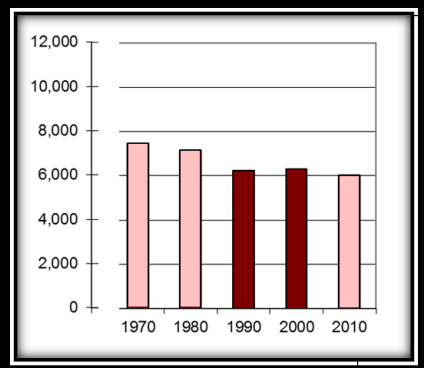
Wisconsin

47% Nebraska

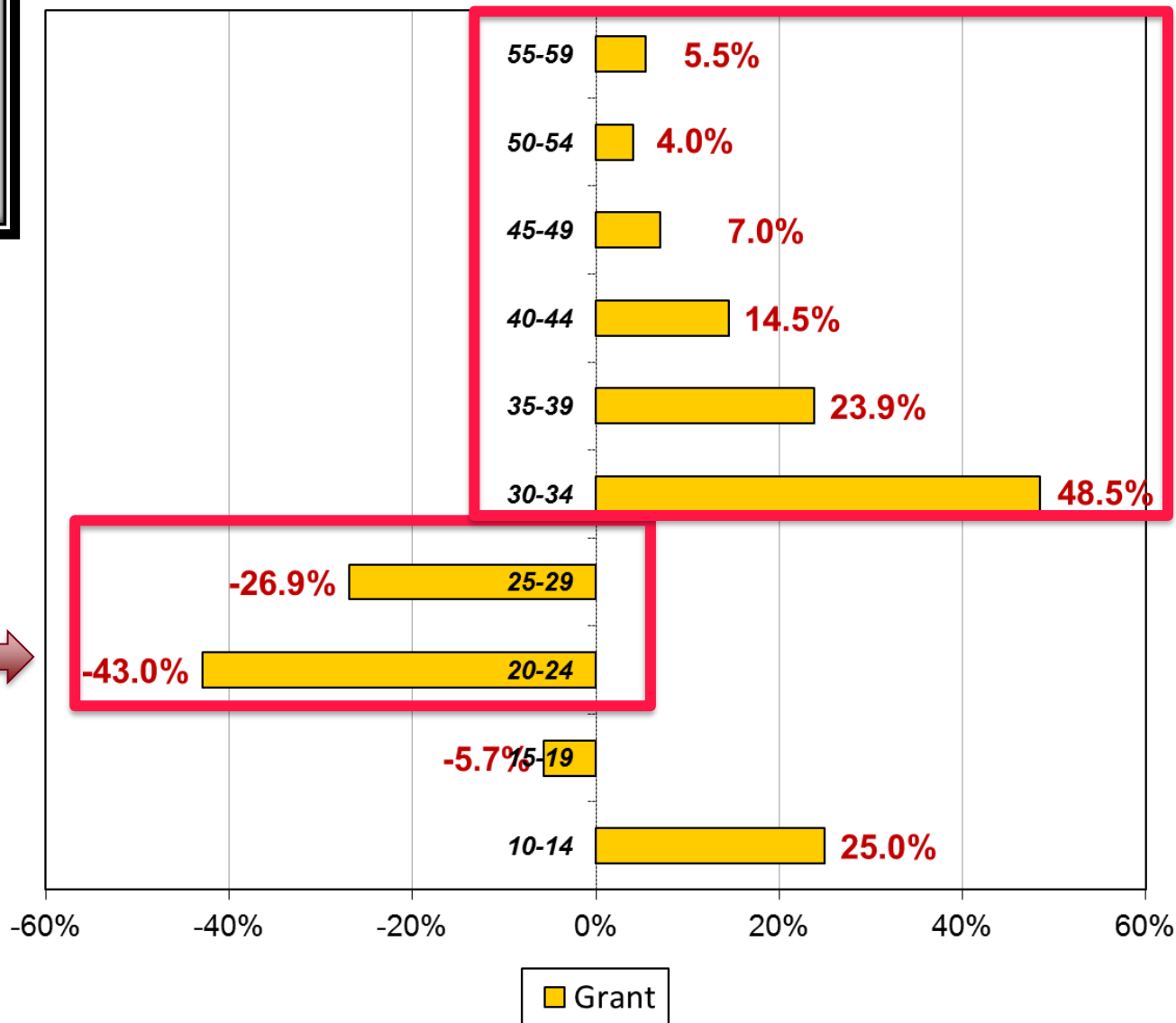
48% South Dakota

49% United States





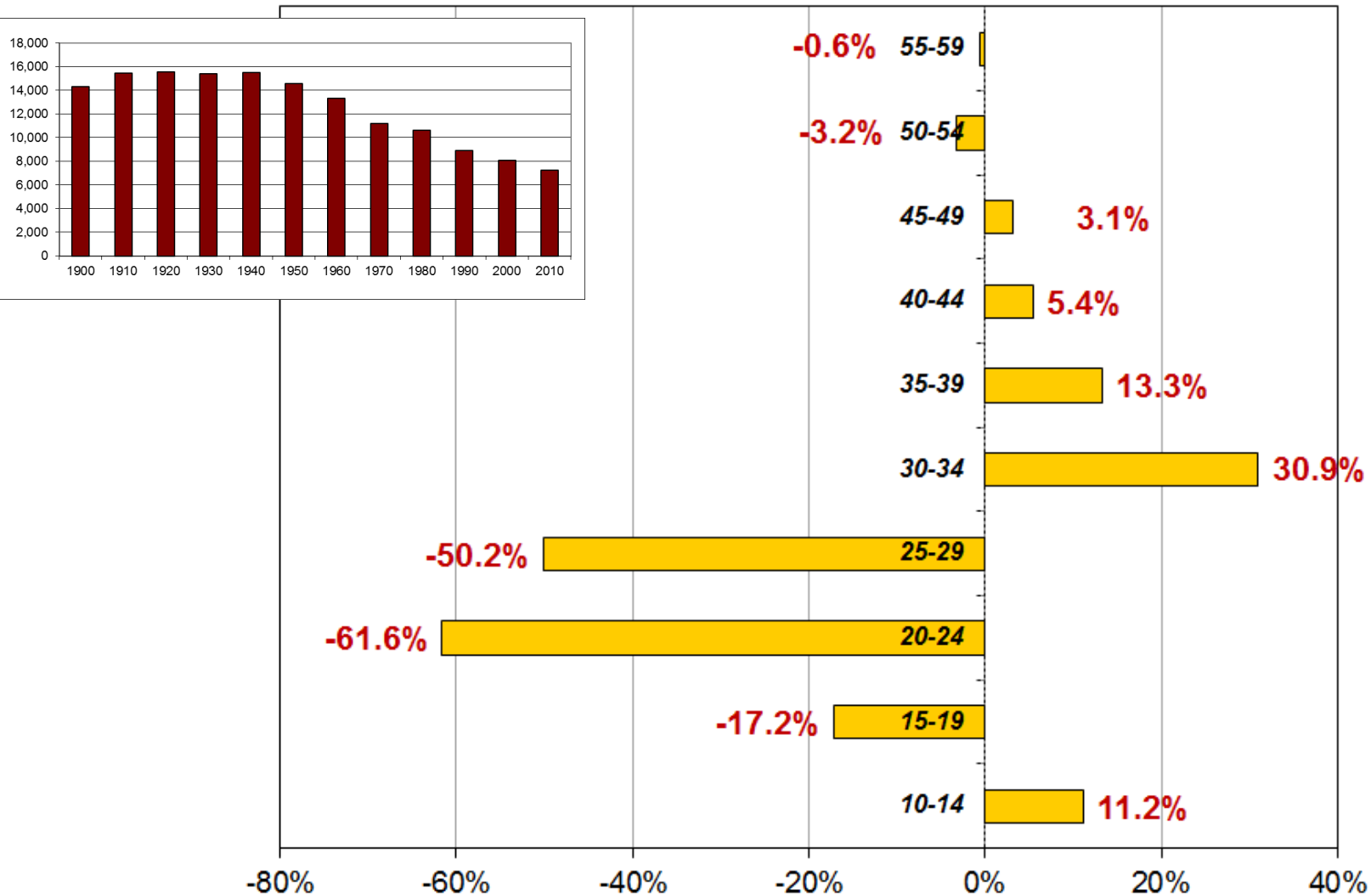
1990-2000, Percent Cohort Change



Brain Drain



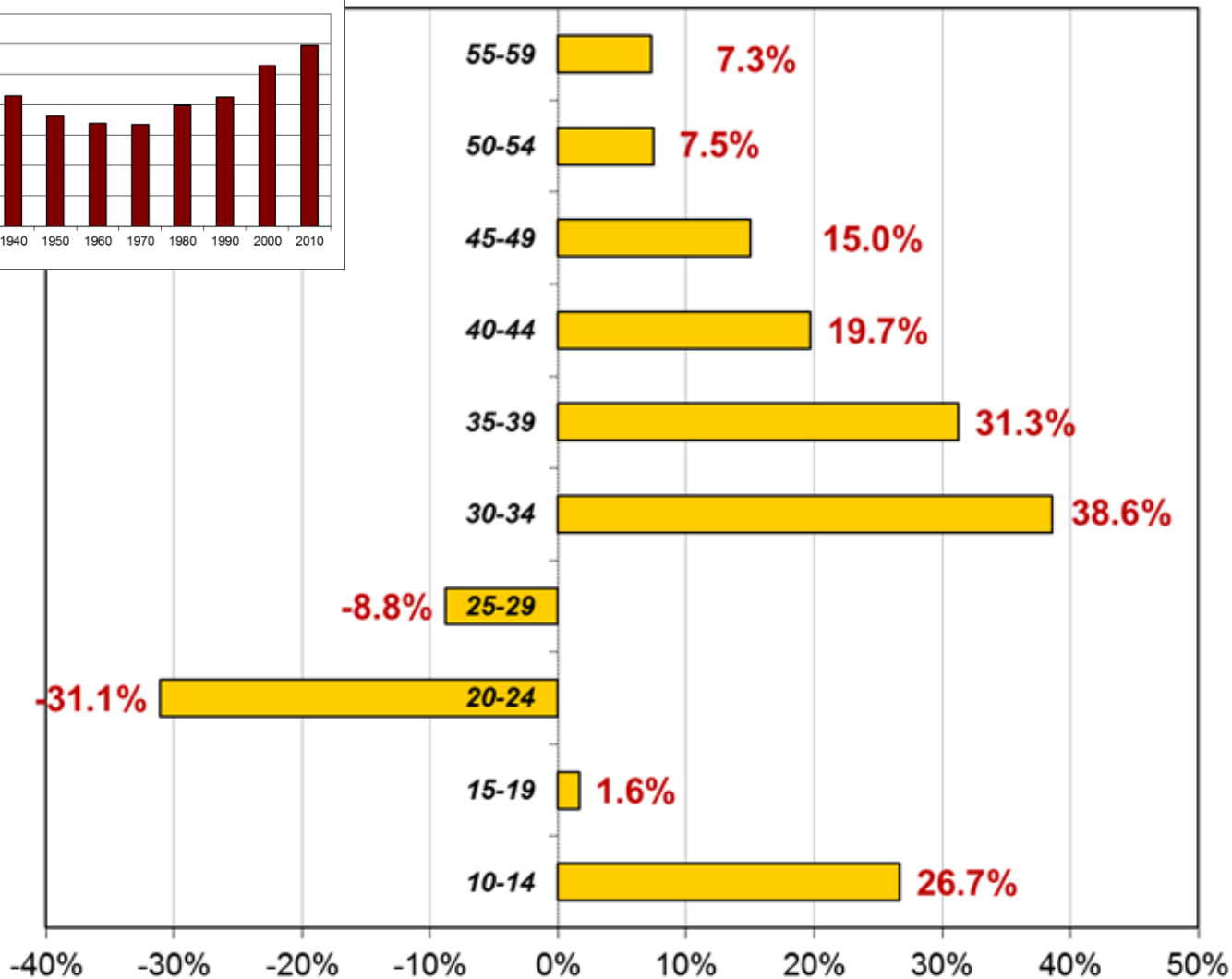
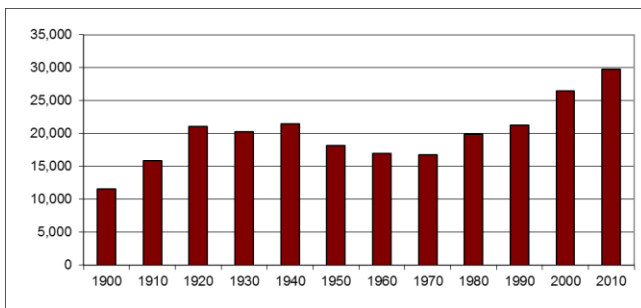
2000-2010, Percent Cohort Change



Rural Prairie County



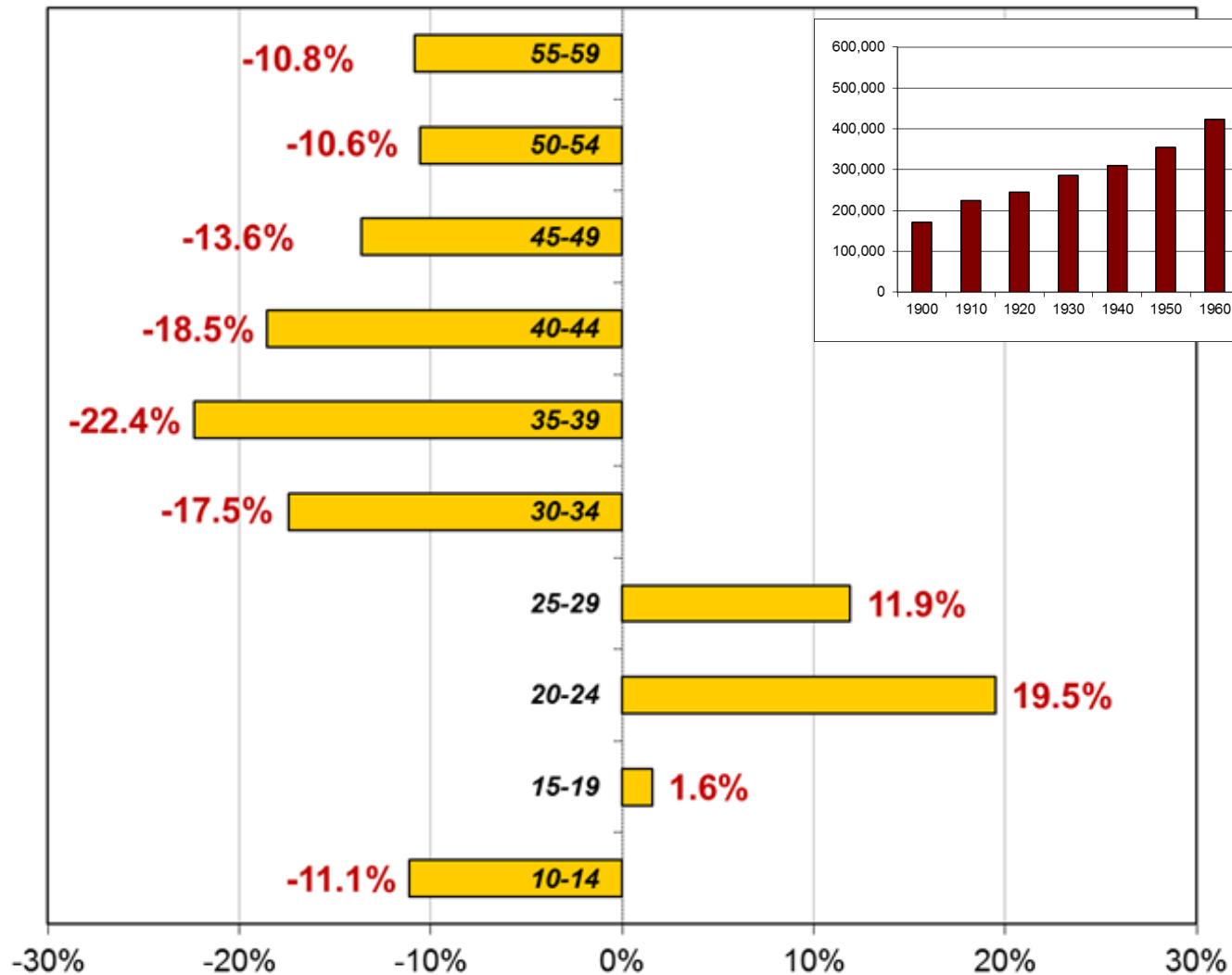
2000-2010, Percent Cohort Change



Rural Recreational County



2000-2010, Percent Cohort Change



Core Metropolitan County



Buffalo Commons Research

Dr. Randy Cantrell and Cheryl
Burkhart-Kriesel
University of Nebraska



Newcomers: Why?

Simpler pace of life



Safety and Security



Low Housing Cost





Newcomers: Who?

- 31% moved primarily for a job
- 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.



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.



Cohort Lifecycle



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



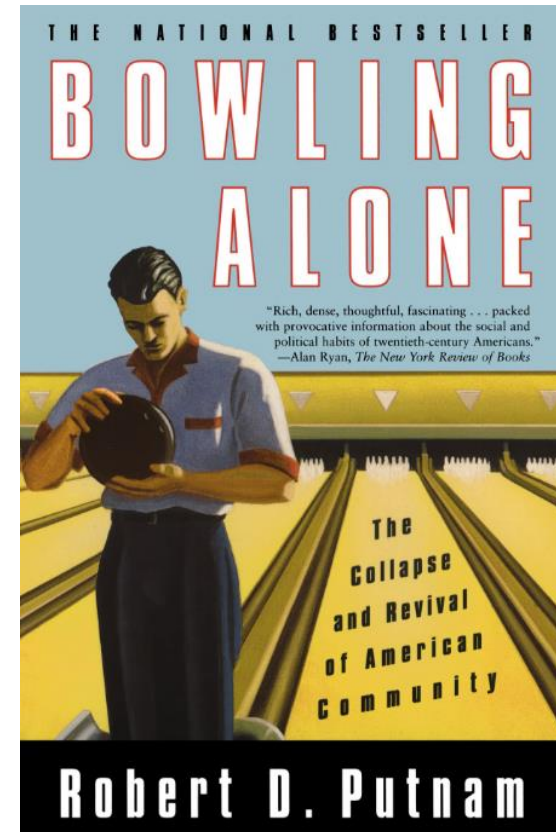
CHOOSING RURAL

- 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**



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**?



Social Life is **Not Dying**

Nonprofit Growth: 2000-2010

- North Dakota gained 5% in population and 6% in the number of nonprofits.
 - The most rural counties experienced a loss of 5% in population, yet the number of nonprofits increased 6%.
- This growth can be both good and bad news for rural places.

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



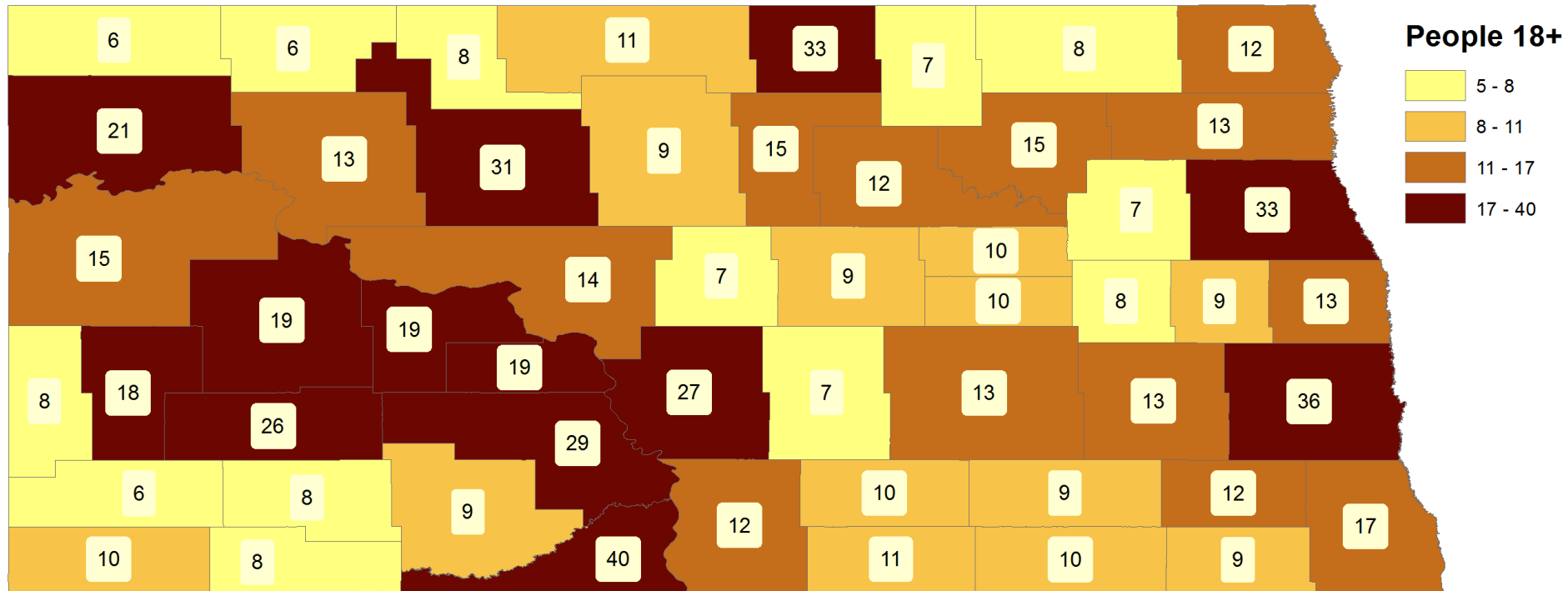
POPULATION PER ORGANIZATIONAL ROLE

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

- Yes, people serve on multiple boards.
- Assumption of 3 per board is conservative.
- Age 18+ includes many age groups that are less active.



NORTH DAKOTA HAS THE HIGHEST DEMAND IN THE U.S.



1 IN 20 ADULTS MUST SERVE AS A LEADER!

NUMBER OF PEOPLE EACH ORGANIZATION HAS AVAILABLE TO THEM TO LOCATE A POSITIONAL LEADER.



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



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*



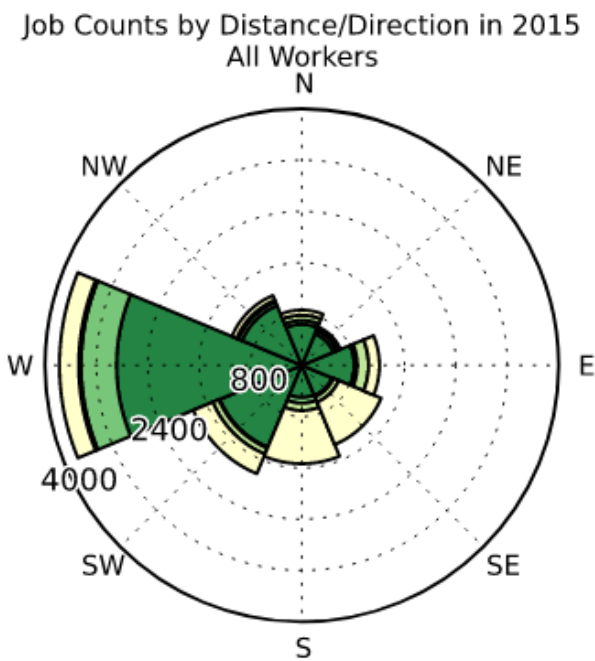
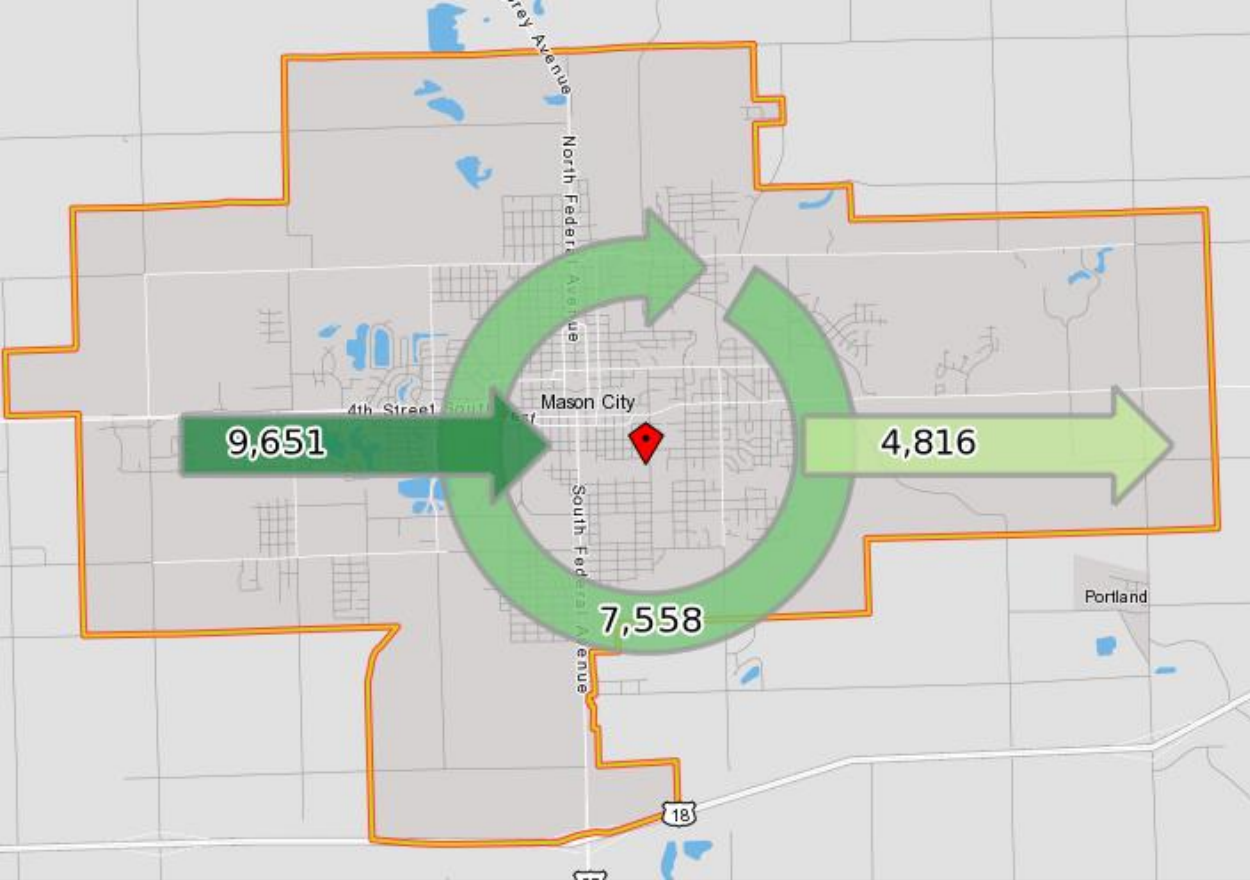
OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

- 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



Living in the Middle of Everywhere

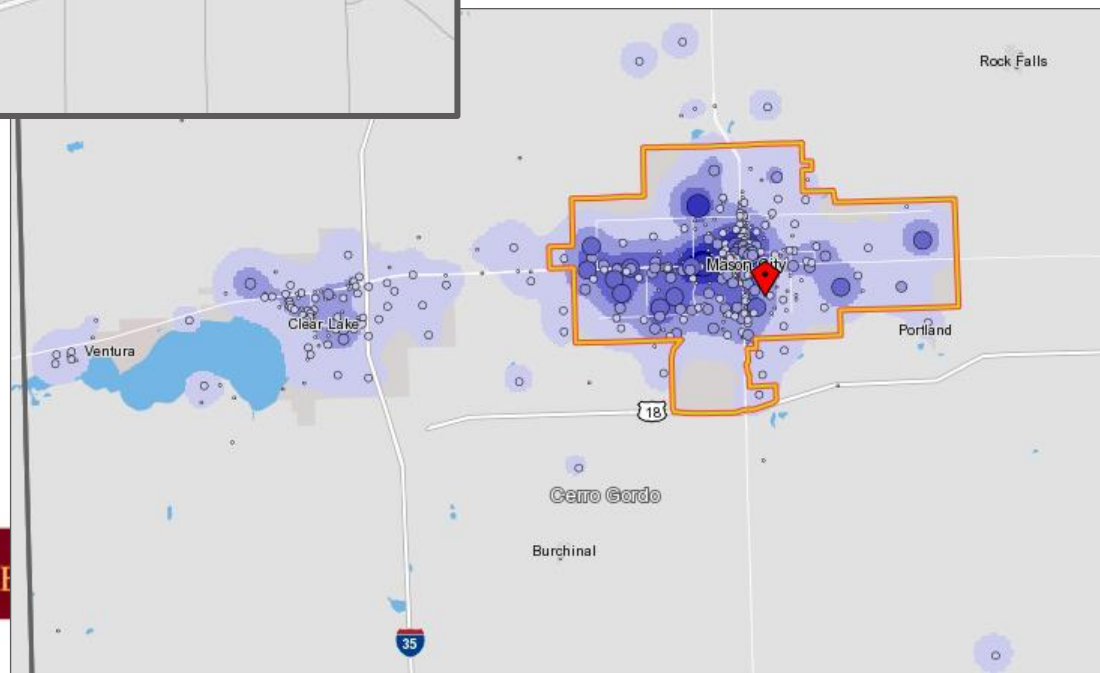




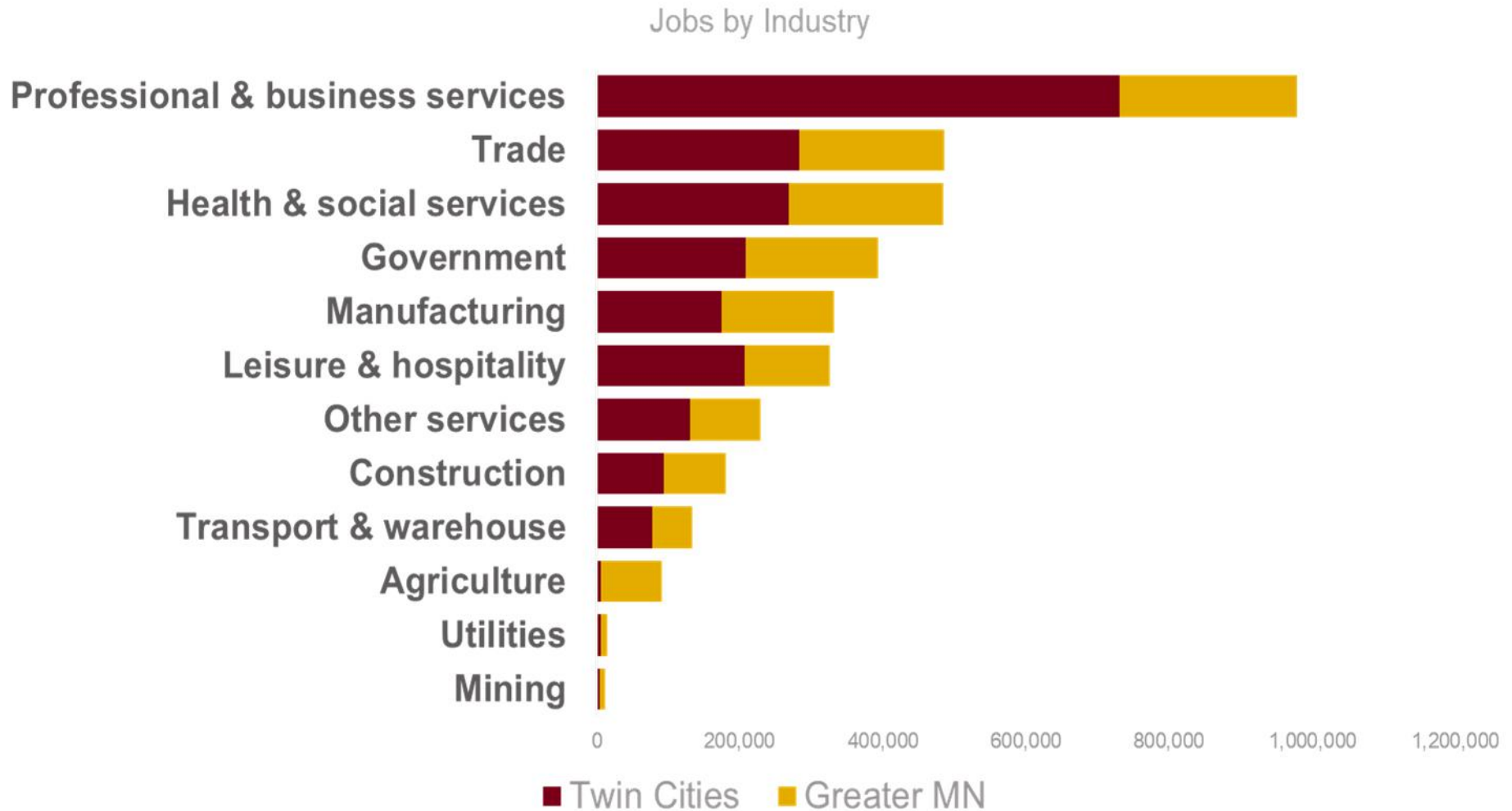
<https://onthemap.ces.census.gov/>



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA EXTENSION



Diversifying the rural economy



**We live in a
REGIONAL COMMUNITY,
not an ECONOMY**



MIDDLE OF EVERYWHERE

No town is a one-stop-shop

- Home → Work: 30 minutes
- Home → Eat/shop: 45 minutes
- Home → Play – 2+ hours!



MIDDLE OF EVERYWHERE

- Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)
 - Most effective in a town or small region
- How do we include people that work and visit in our community planning?
- Partner with groups, not just in your place but different “jurisdictions”
- Social Capital needs **Bonding and Linking** capital



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?



IMPLICATIONS

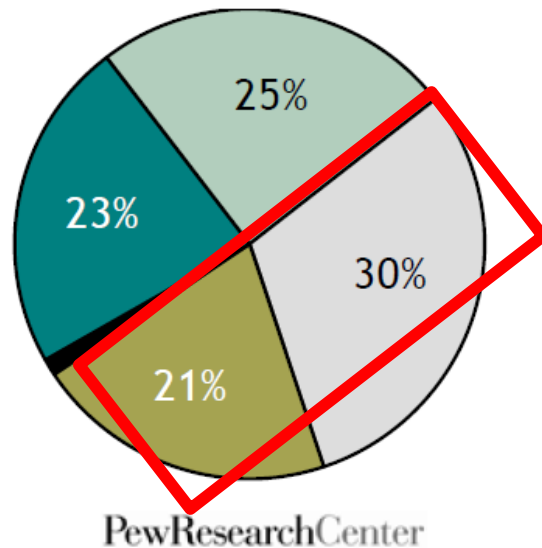
- Marketing



Where We Live and Where We'd Like to Live

by community type

■ City ■ Suburb
■ Small town ■ Rural area



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.



Reframing Rural Migration

- National societal preferences to live in small towns and rural places (low-density)
- Not everyone is leaving small towns
 - It's a lot of work to make this move but people are doing it
- Not everyone is flocking to the city
 - Most urban have gotten wider, not taller
- A new urbanity is found in formerly rural places



MIGRATION AND THE NARRATIVE

- Migration patterns open the door to discussing the narrative
- There are varied reasons for people to move to small towns and rural places



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



75% of rural homeowners are

Baby Boomers and older.

30% over 70 today!



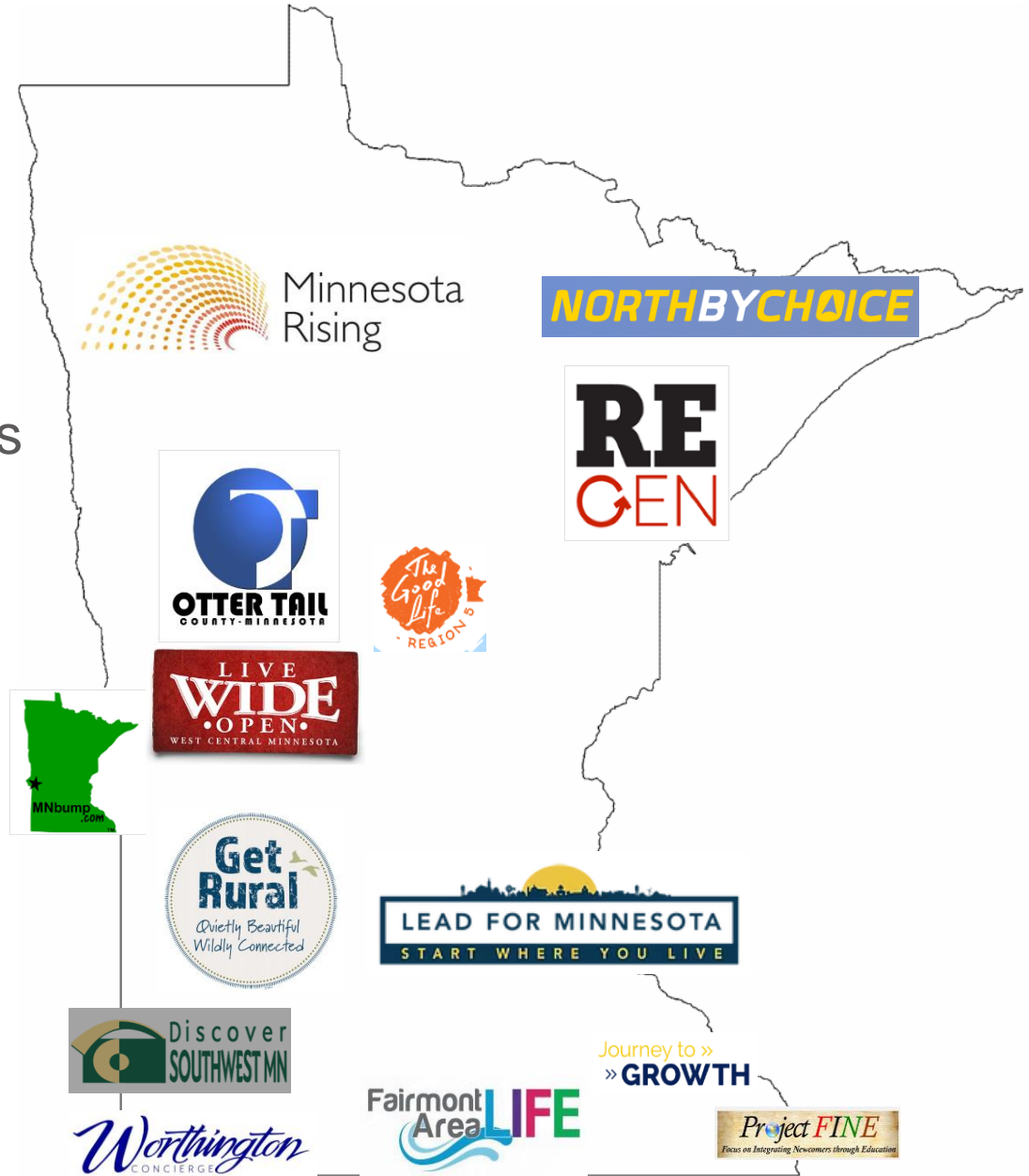
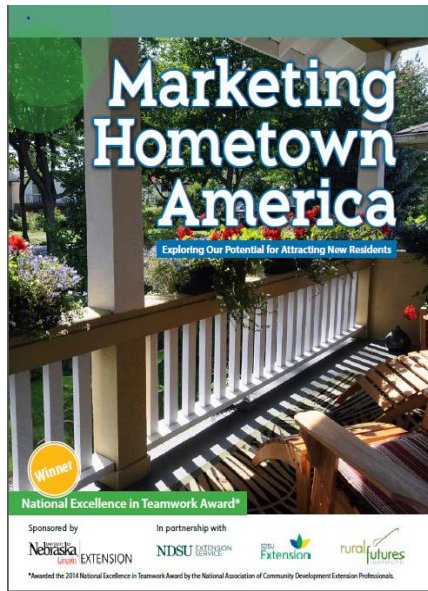
Narrative Matters



You're not really from here....



Resident Recruitment Efforts In Minnesota



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



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!



Rural Issues and Trends Webinars

<http://z.umn.edu/ruralwebinar/>

