

# Rewriting the Rural Narrative

*Speak softly and carry statistics*



Benjamin Winchester  
Rural Sociologist

# 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....

## National Rural Narrative

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 those statistics, though, is a whole collection of 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 stayed in rural America. They left for myriad reasons. We want to know the stories. You 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.

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.

# 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*

# 1900-1950



- Mechanization of agriculture
- Roads and transportation
- Educational achievement and population loss
- Religious and Ancestral diversity

# 1950+

- Main street restructuring
- School consolidations
- Hospitals closings





# The rural idyll



# 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.

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# 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

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

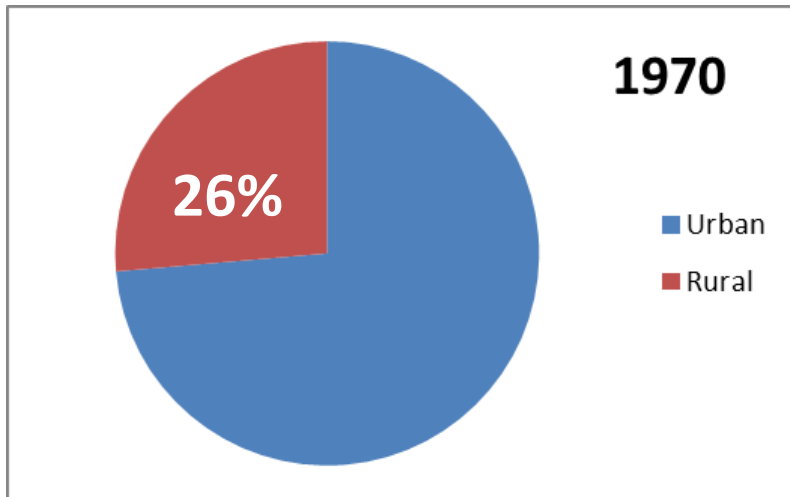
Survived massive restructuring of social and economic life (with volunteer leadership)

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

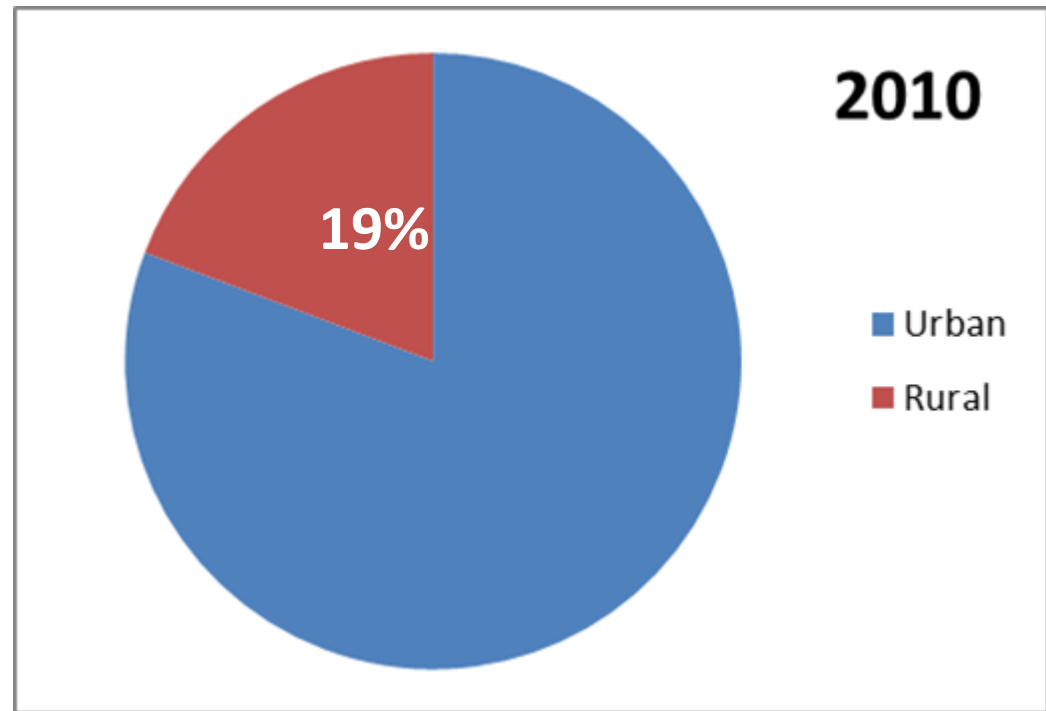
# Rural Rebound

Since 1970, rural population increased by 11%

- Relative percentage living rural decreased



203,211,926  
(53.6m rural)



308,745,538  
(59.5m rural)

# 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 (since 1974)

Nationally, 528 counties, 21% of all counties, were reclassified from nonmetro to metropolitan  
(now home to 36m people)

Urban areas have grown **WIDER**, not **TALLER**

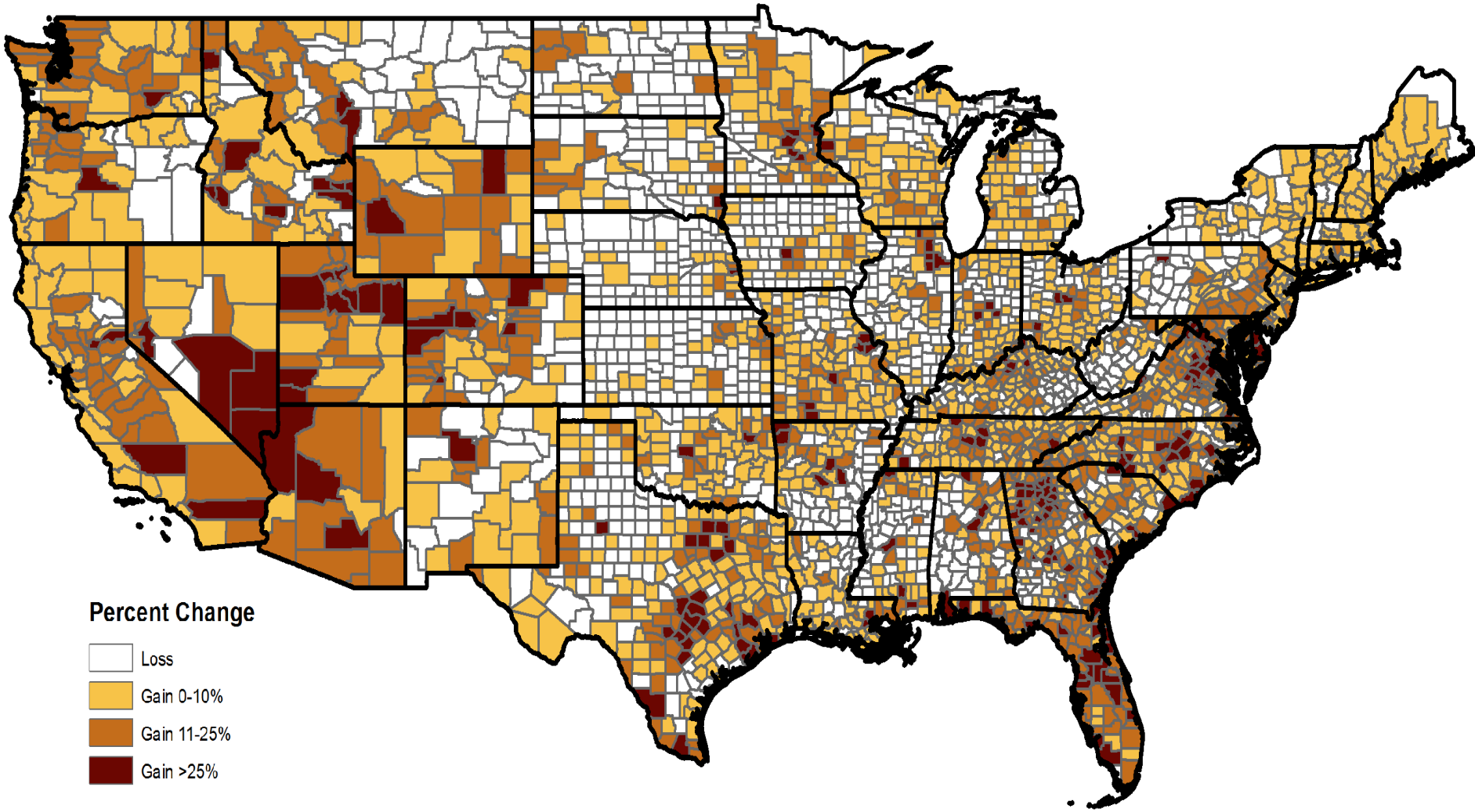
# Narrative Matters

*If rural is dying then why can't  
I find a house to buy?*

*First glimpses in my research  
on total population infatuation*

# Total Population Infatuation

2000-2010



# Total Population Infatuation

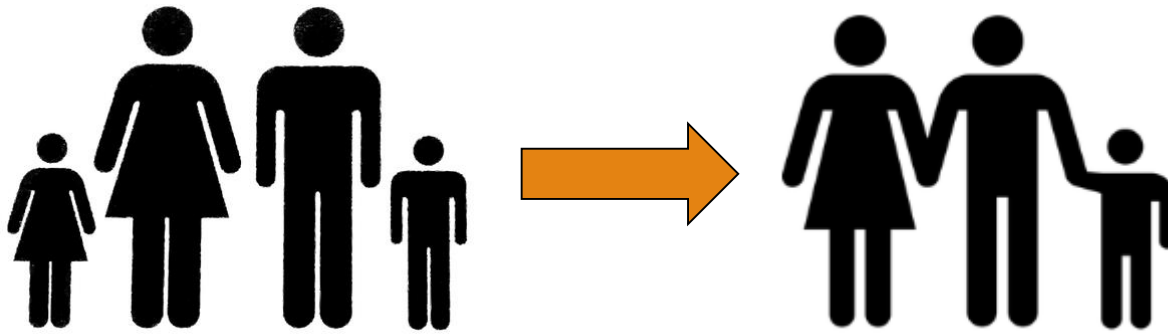
Wait, what?

Comparison Historical Population from 1960 to 2010

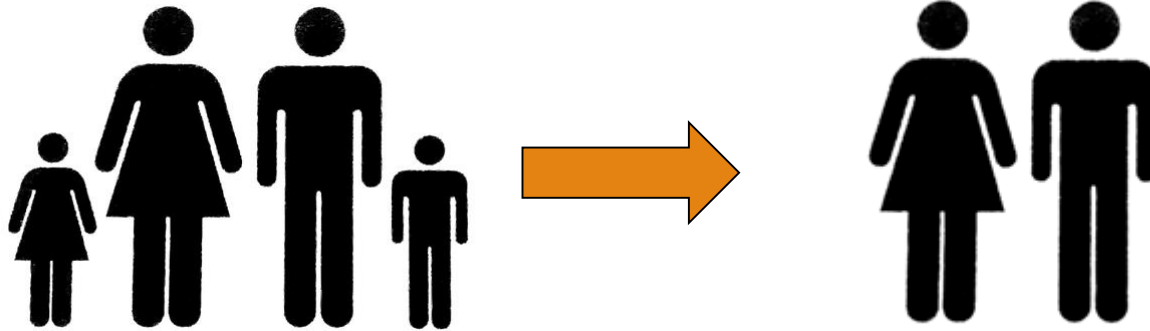
Community	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	% Change
<b>UMVRDC Region</b>	<b>69,063</b>	61,806	59,822	50,845	50,011	<b>45,190</b>	<b>-34.57%</b>
<i>Households</i>	19,428	19,367	22,026	20,088	19,846	20,039	3.14%
Big Stone County	8,954	7,941	7,716	6,285	5,820	5,269	-41.15%
Chippewa County	16,320	15,109	14,941	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





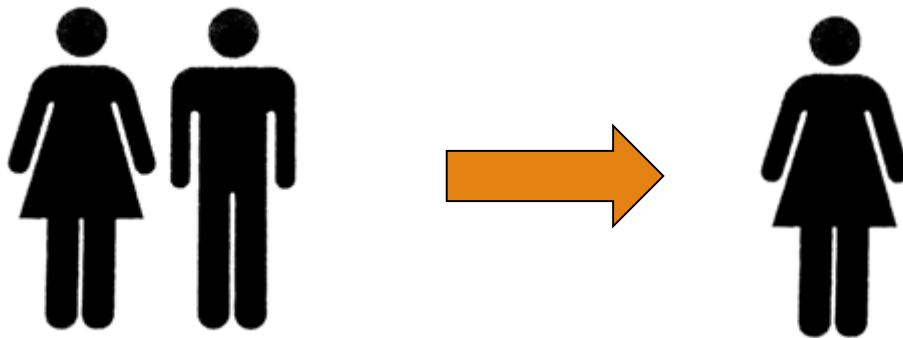
Avg HH Size:  
1940: 3.6  
2018: 2.6 (-29%)



Kids graduate

Population: -2

Households: NC



Spouse passes

Population: -1

Households: NC

## *The Narrative*



County	Pop Change	Housing Change
Vilas County	+2%	+12%
Iron	-14%	+5%
Forest	-7%	+8%
Oneida	-2%	+13%
Price	-11%	+16%

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



# Mobility

Households Moving Every 5 Years:

44% Iowa

46% Minnesota

North Dakota

***Wisconsin***

47% Nebraska

**49% United States**

If nobody even moved in or out...

20-24

Age

30-34



2000

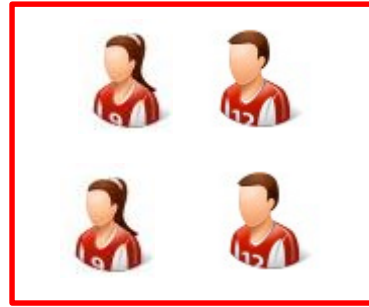
2010

# But in reality people do move...

*Age 20-24*



Moving out  
- 4



Moving in  
+ 6

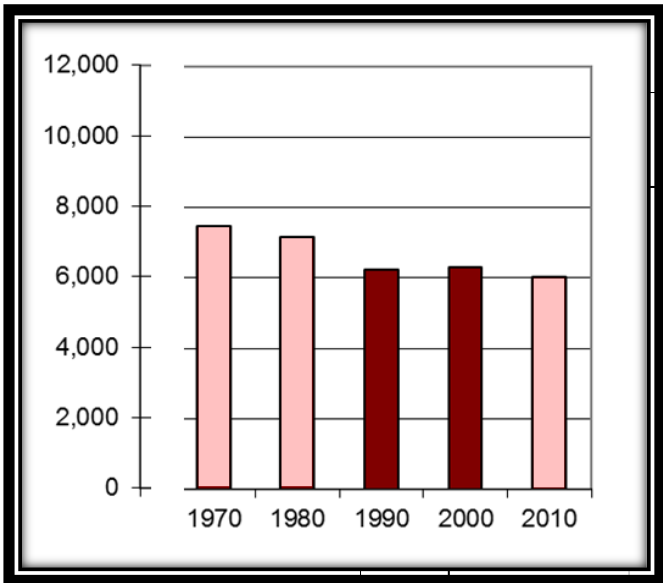


2000

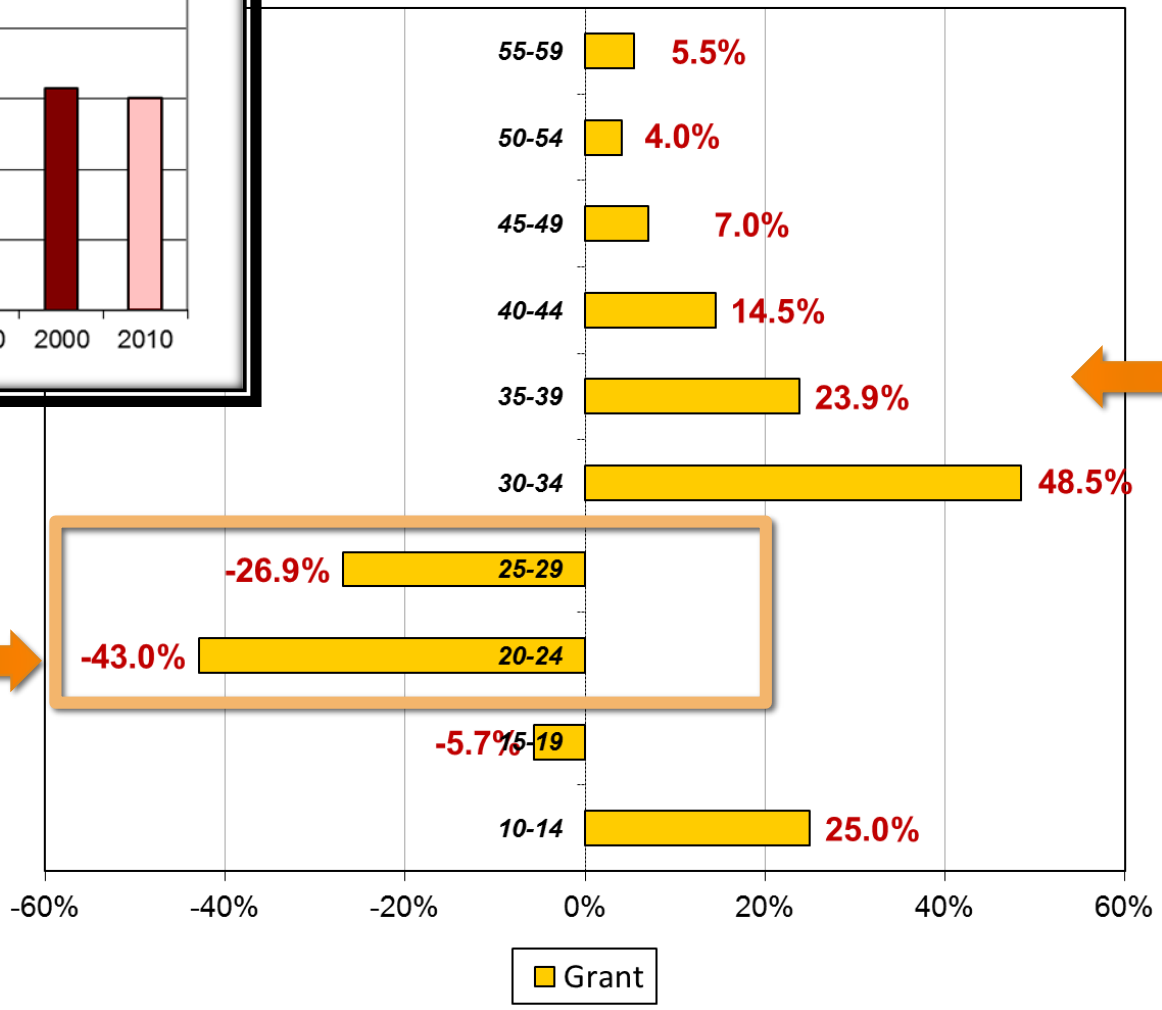
*Age 30-34*



2010



1990-2000, Percent Cohort Change



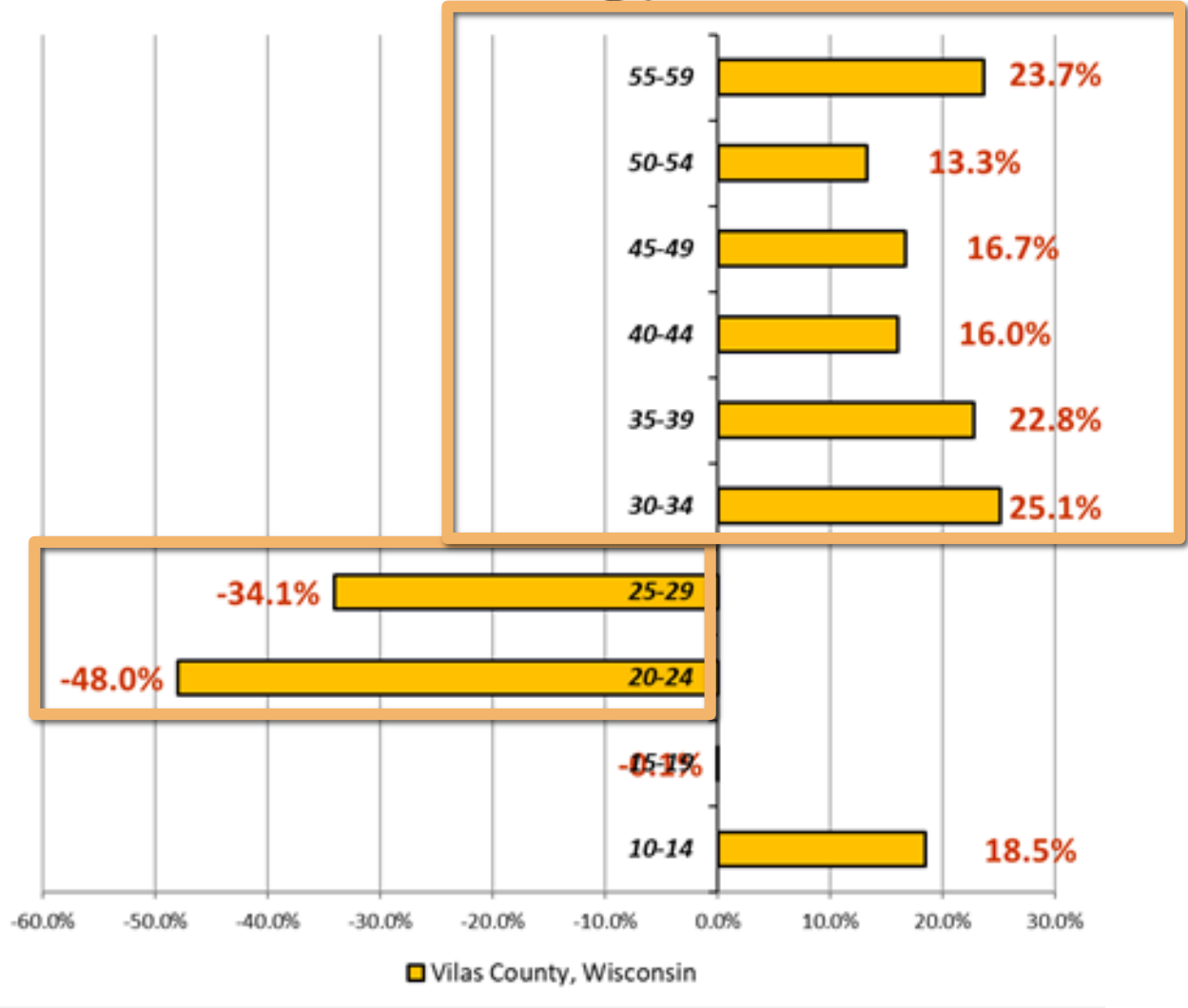
Brain Drain



What?



### Percent Cohort Change, 2000-2010



Brain Drain



# Rural Movers Research

2002, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2019





# The Rural Brain Gain

*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

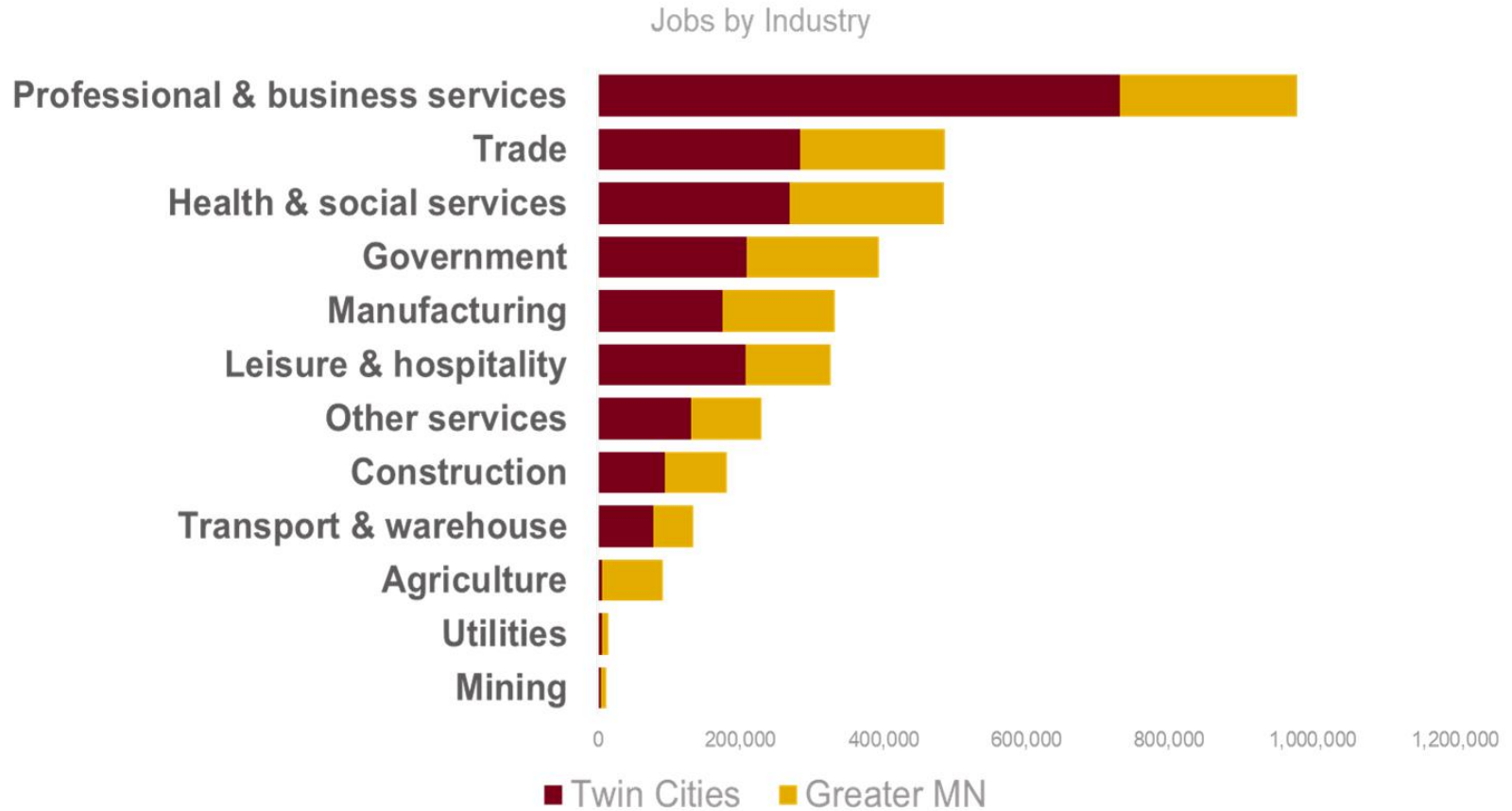
Brain Gain: migration to rural age 30-49

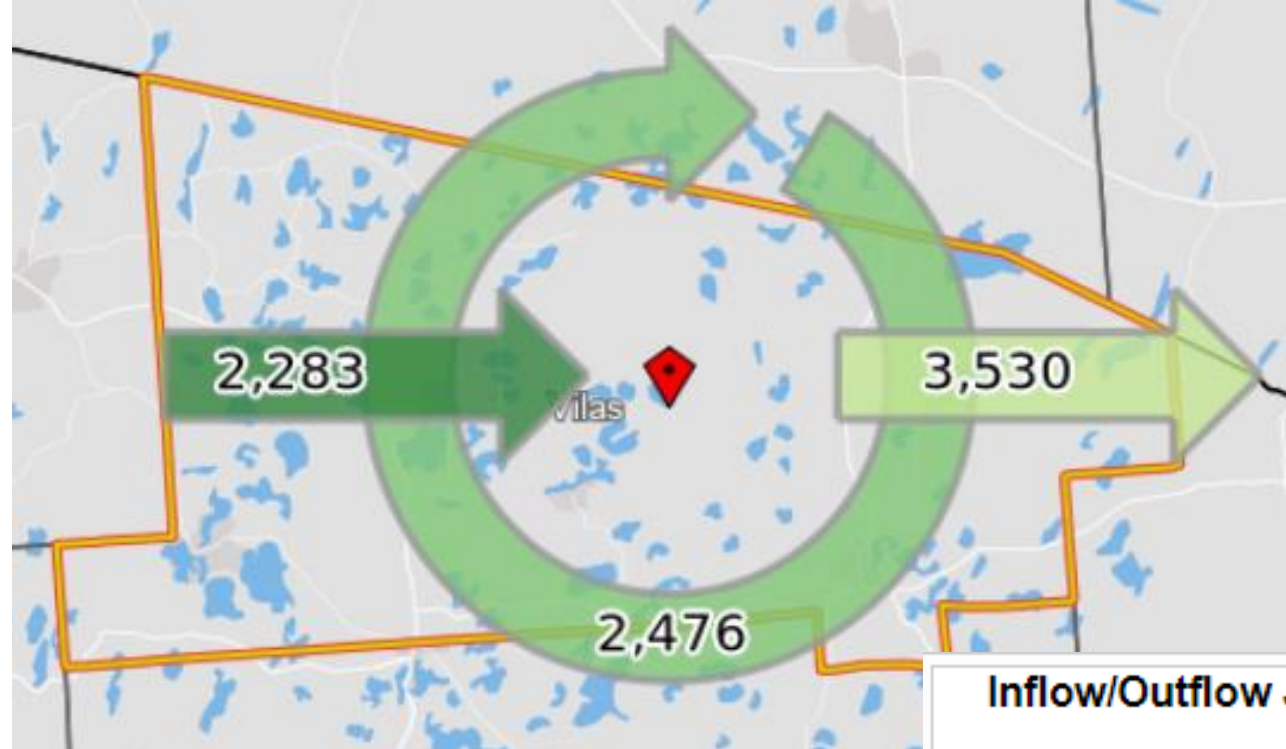
- Also 50-64 but not as widespread
- Brain drain is the rule, not the exception
- Happening since the 1970s
- Newcomers look at 3-5 communities before choosing

Where people locate their homes vs. locate their jobs

*Live in large regions*

# Diversifying the rural economy





**Inflow/Outflow Job Counts (Private Primary Jobs)**

	2017	
	Count	Share
<u>Employed in the Selection Area</u>	4,759	100.0%
<u>Employed in the Selection Area but Living Outside</u>	2,283	48.0%
<u>Employed and Living in the Selection Area</u>	2,476	52.0%
<u>Living in the Selection Area</u>	6,006	100.0%
<u>Living in the Selection Area but Employed Outside</u>	3,530	58.8%
<u>Living and Employed in the Selection Area</u>	2,476	41.2%

***8% of Vilas County workers work from HOME.***

**Rewriting the Rural Narrative:**

**Leadership in Rural America**

**Social life is dying?**



# Social Life is Not Dying

Nonprofit Growth: 2000-2010

Wisconsin:    Population    + 6%  
                  Nonprofits    +26%

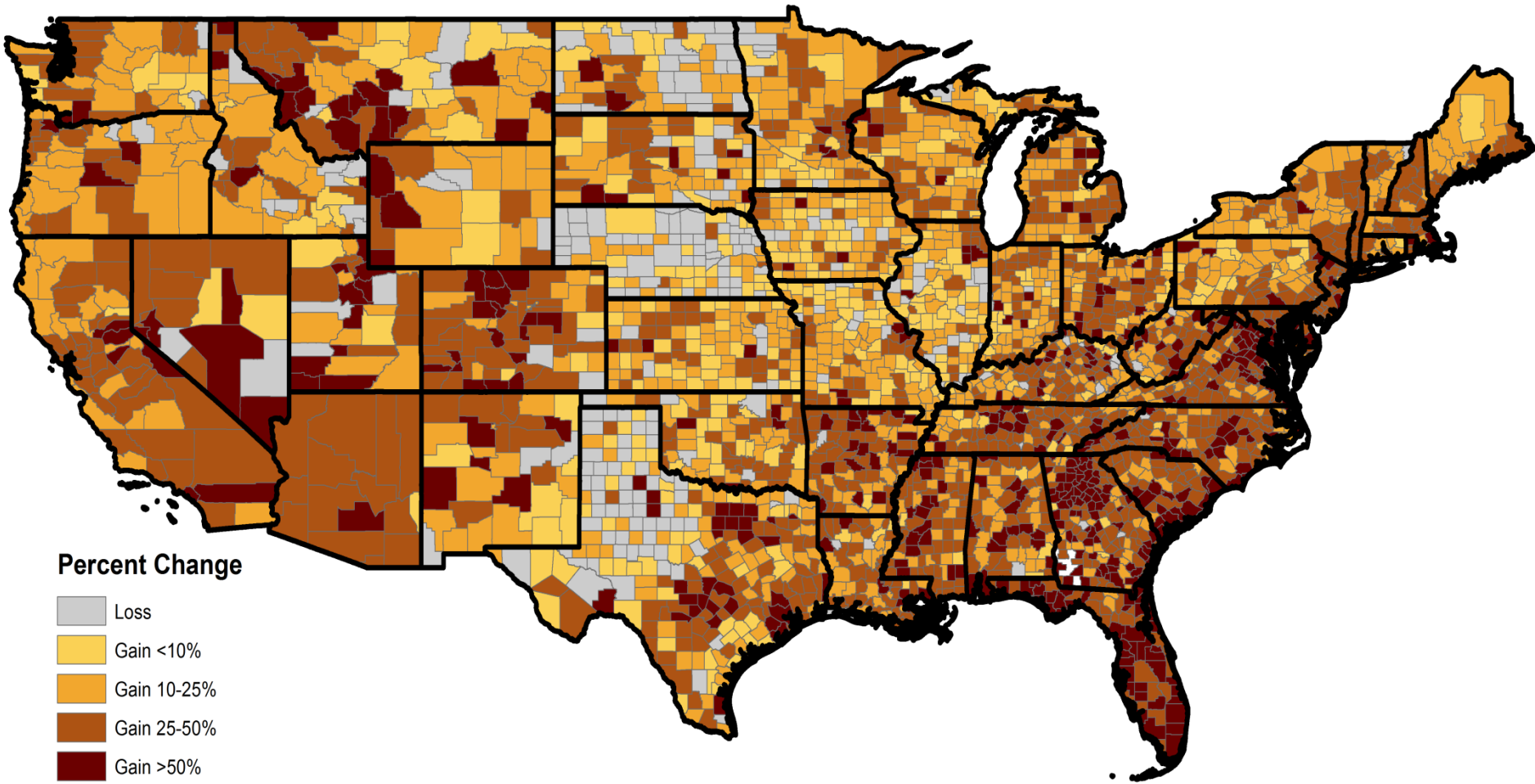
The most rural counties

Population    - 6%  
# Nonprofits   +26%

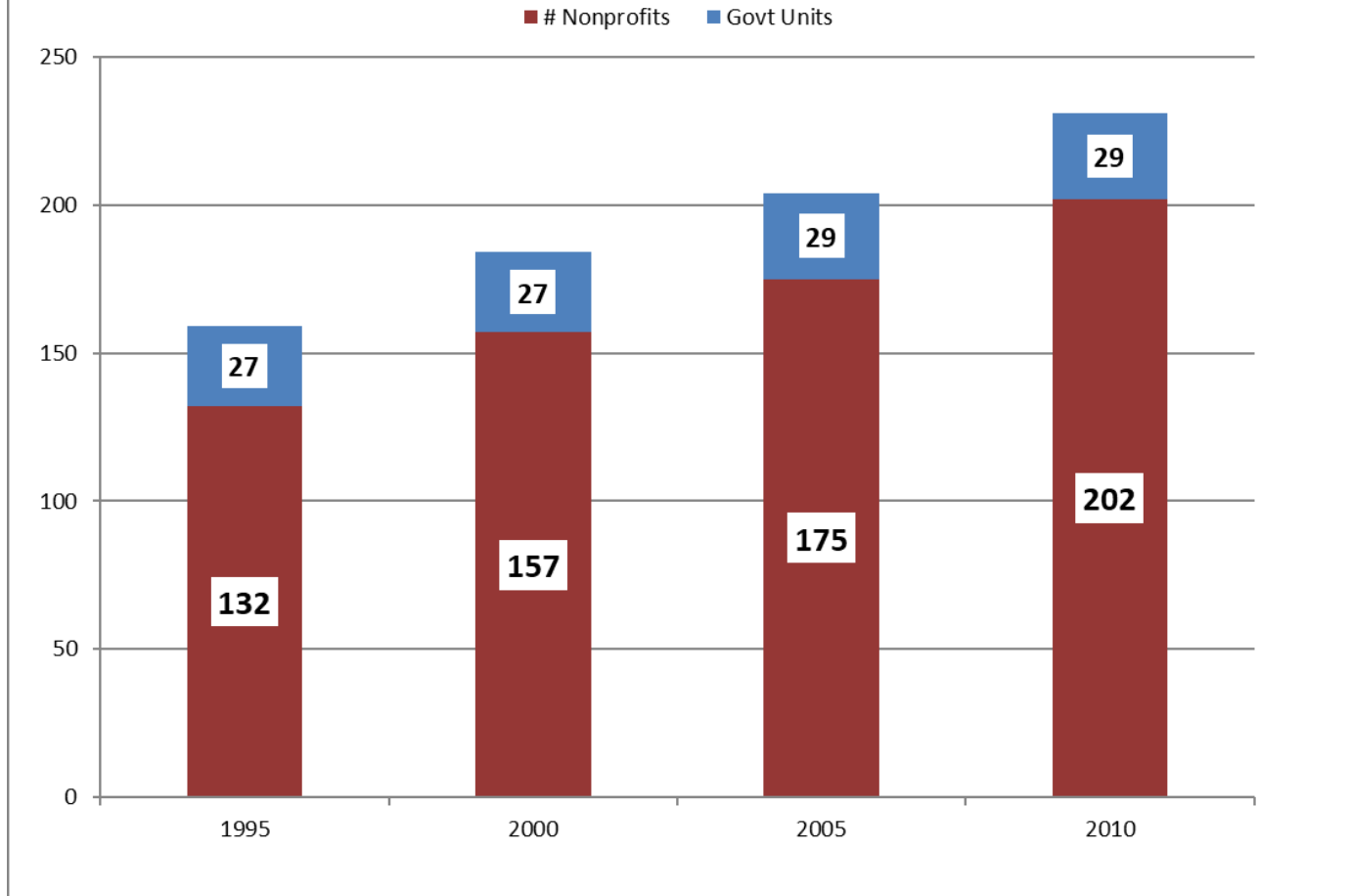
This growth can be both good and bad news for rural places.

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

# Nonprofit Change: 2000-2010



## Vilas County, Wisconsin



2000-2010

	Population	Nonprofits	Gov't Units
<i>Vilas County</i>	2%	29%	7%
<i>Wisconsin</i>	6%	26%	2%
<i>United States</i>	10%	32%	3%

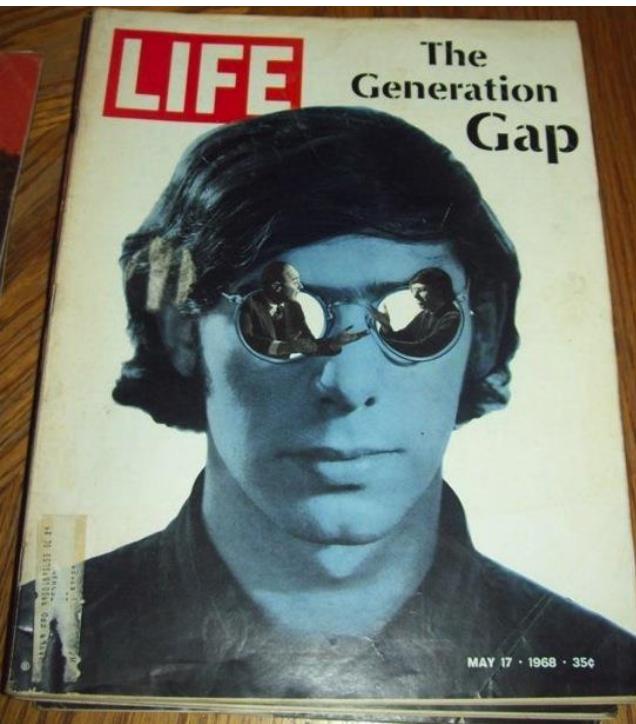
# Selected characteristics

	<i>Vilas County, WI</i>			
	<b>1995</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2010</b>
<b>Number of Nonprofits</b>	132	157	175	202
<b>Number Filing 990</b>	37	43	65	110
<b>Revenue (of Filers)</b>	\$15,032,303	\$24,294,881	\$46,820,842	\$56,224,425
<b>Assets (of Filers)</b>	<b>\$10,248,936</b>	<b>\$23,271,956</b>	<b>\$122,132,598</b>	<b>\$148,670,342</b>
<b>Governmental Units</b>	27	27	29	29
<b>Total Organizations</b>	159	184	204	231
<b>Population, Total</b>		21,033		21,430
<b>Population Age 18+</b>		16,688		17,621
<b>Groups per 1,000 people</b>		8.7		10.8
<b>Revenue per Organization</b>	\$406,278	\$564,997	\$720,321	\$511,131
<b>Revenue per Person</b>		\$1,456		\$3,191
<b>Population per Organizational Role</b>		<b>15</b>		<b>13</b>

**Note: Assumes average board size of 6.**

*Note: The "Number filing 990" generally indicates filing by organizations with gross receipts of \$50,000 or more.*

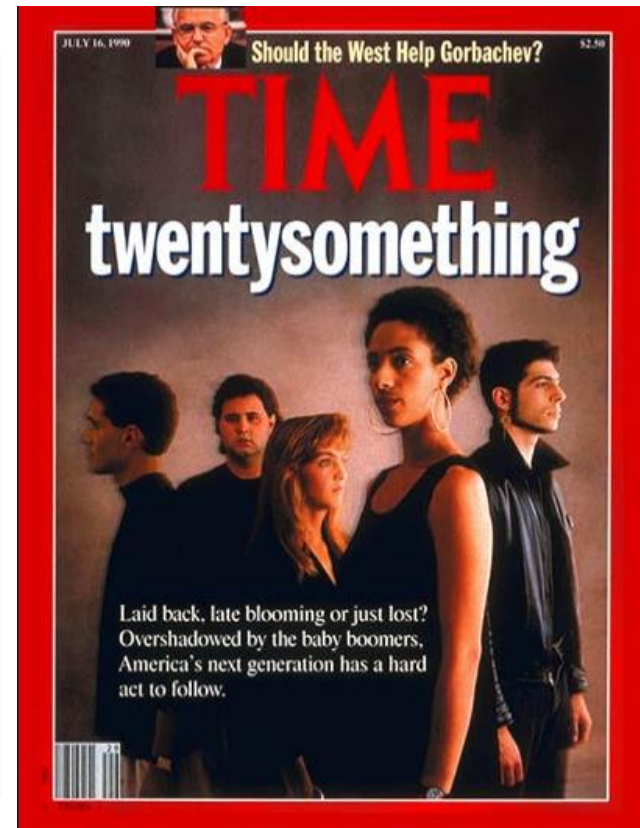
All of this has happened before...



1968

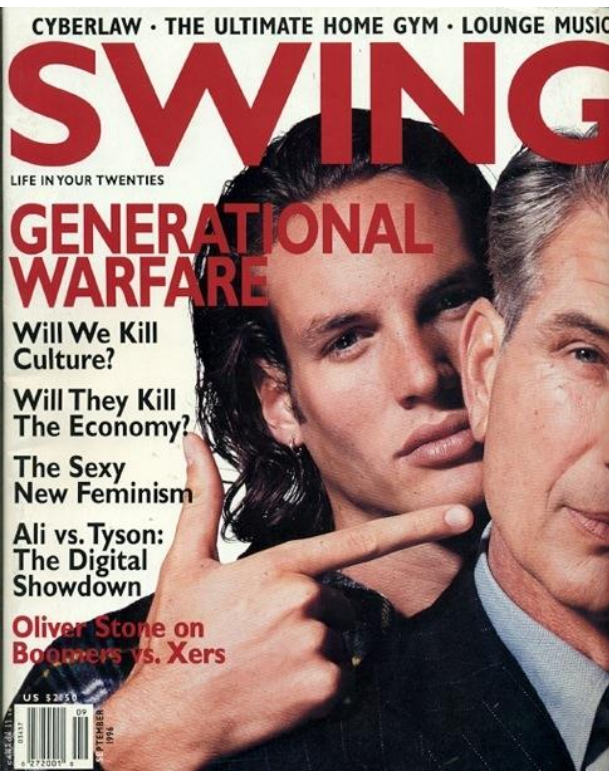


1976



1990

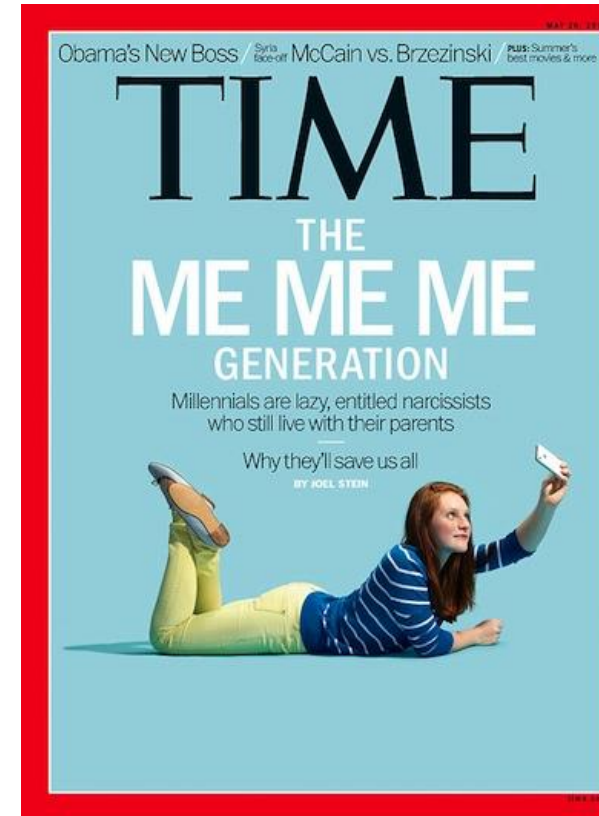
and it will happen again...



1996



2007



2013

so say we all.

# *SHIFT in Engagement*



**Narrow geography**  
**Broad focus**  
Action: consensus

**Broad geography**  
**Narrow focus**  
Action: the small



**We live in a REGIONAL  
COMMUNITY.**



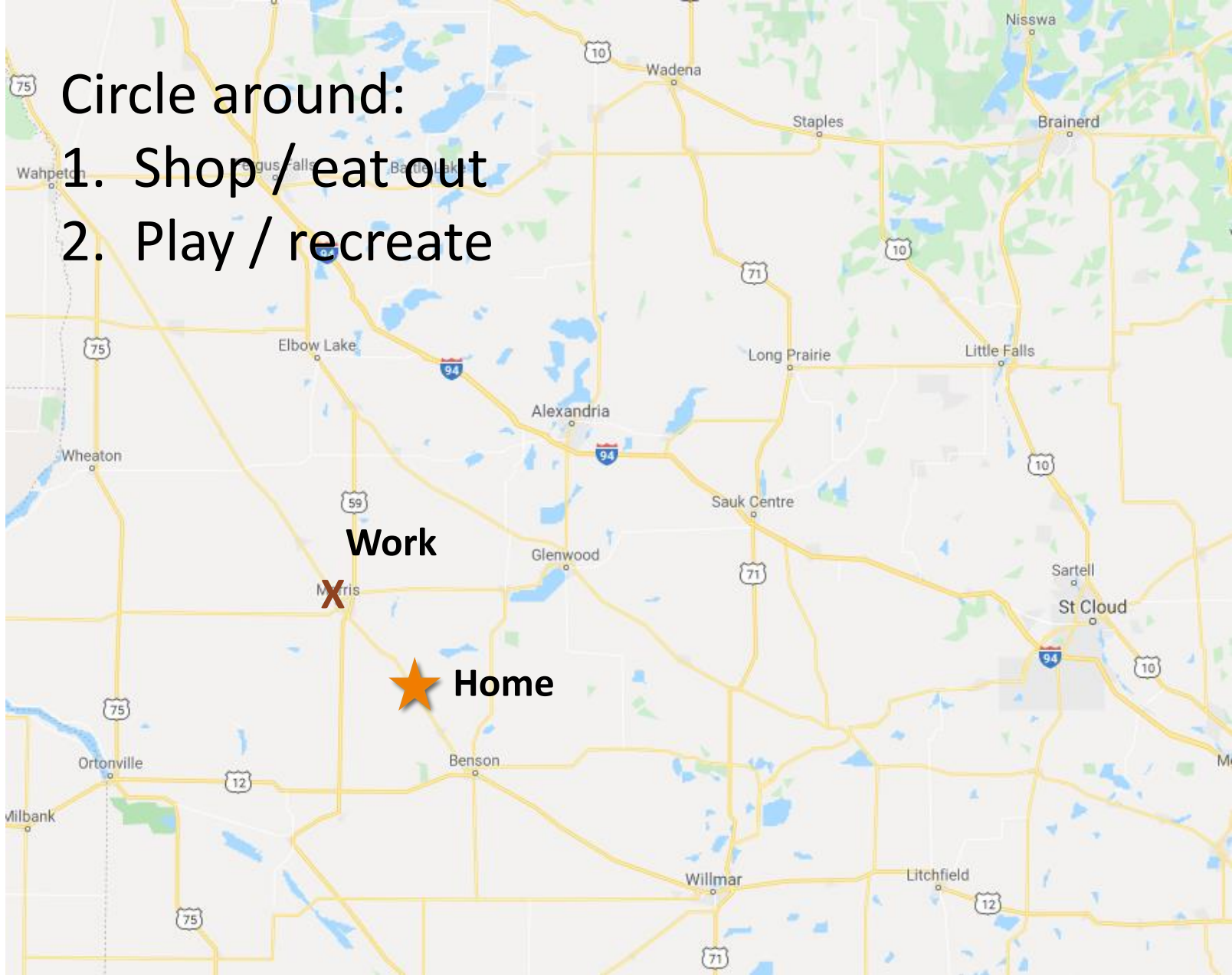
**in the Middle of Everywhere**



Circle around:

1. Shop / eat out

2. Play / recreate



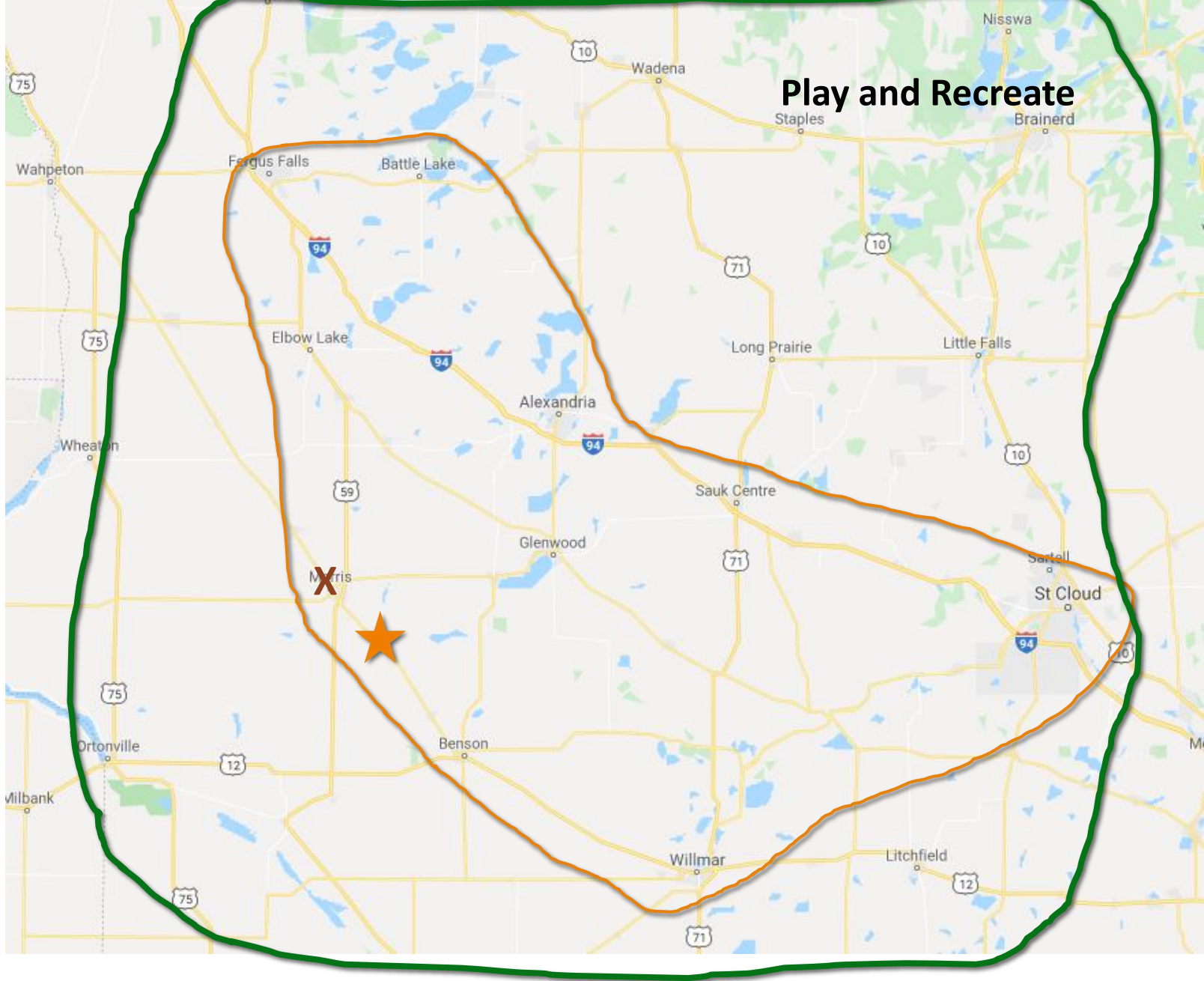


**Shop and Eat Out**

**X** Morris



# Play and Recreate



# Middle of Everywhere

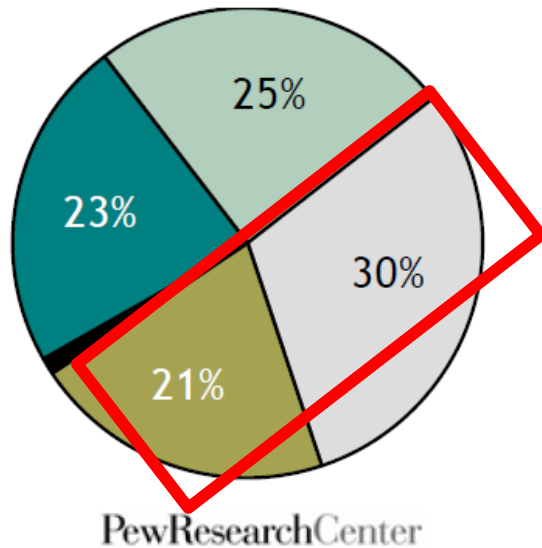
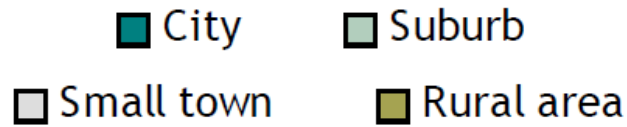
How can we make local decisions while at the same time respect the reality of lives?

**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?**

# 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*

# beyond 2020 in Vilas County

40% of homeowners are 75+

>80% are Baby Boomers and older.

Vilas County, Wisconsin				<i>Pop Ch. +0%</i>
	<u>2000</u>	<u>2010</u>	<u>% Change</u>	<u>2010 – 13/17</u>
Total housing units	22,397	25,116	12%	+2%
Occupied housing units	9,066	9,658	7%	+11%
Owner-Occupied	7,416	7,722	4%	
Renter-Occupied	1,650	1,936	17%	
Vacant housing units	13,331	15,458	16%	-4%
For rent	155	385	148%	
For sale only	213	370	74%	
Rented or sold, not occupied	97	51	-47%	
<b>For recreational or occasional</b>	<b>12,587</b>	<b>14,306</b>	<b>14%</b>	
For migratory workers	0	3		
Other vacant	279	343	23%	

More recreational homes than occupied homes.



# Vacant → Occupied Second Homeowners

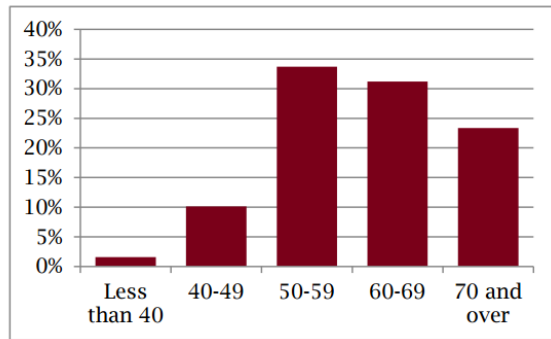
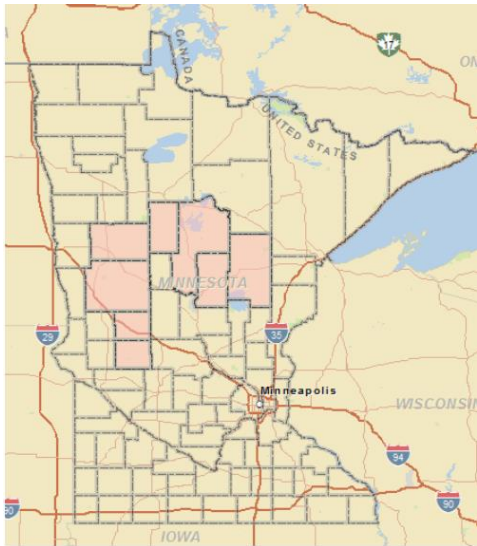


Figure 2: Age of respondents (n=561)

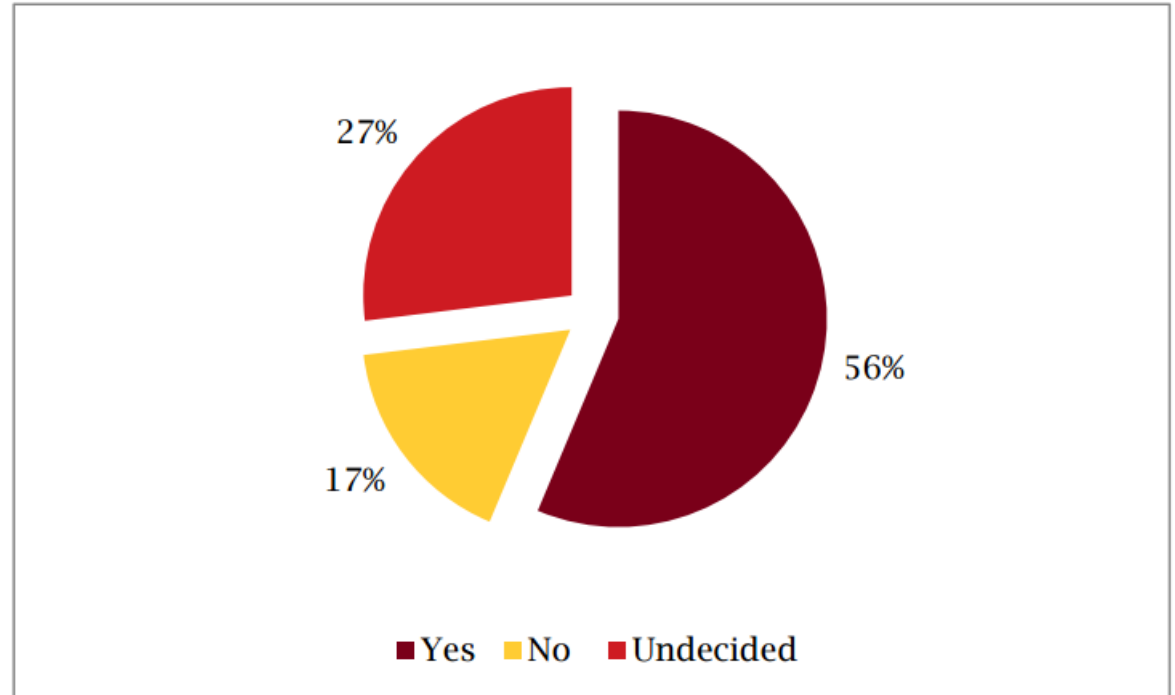
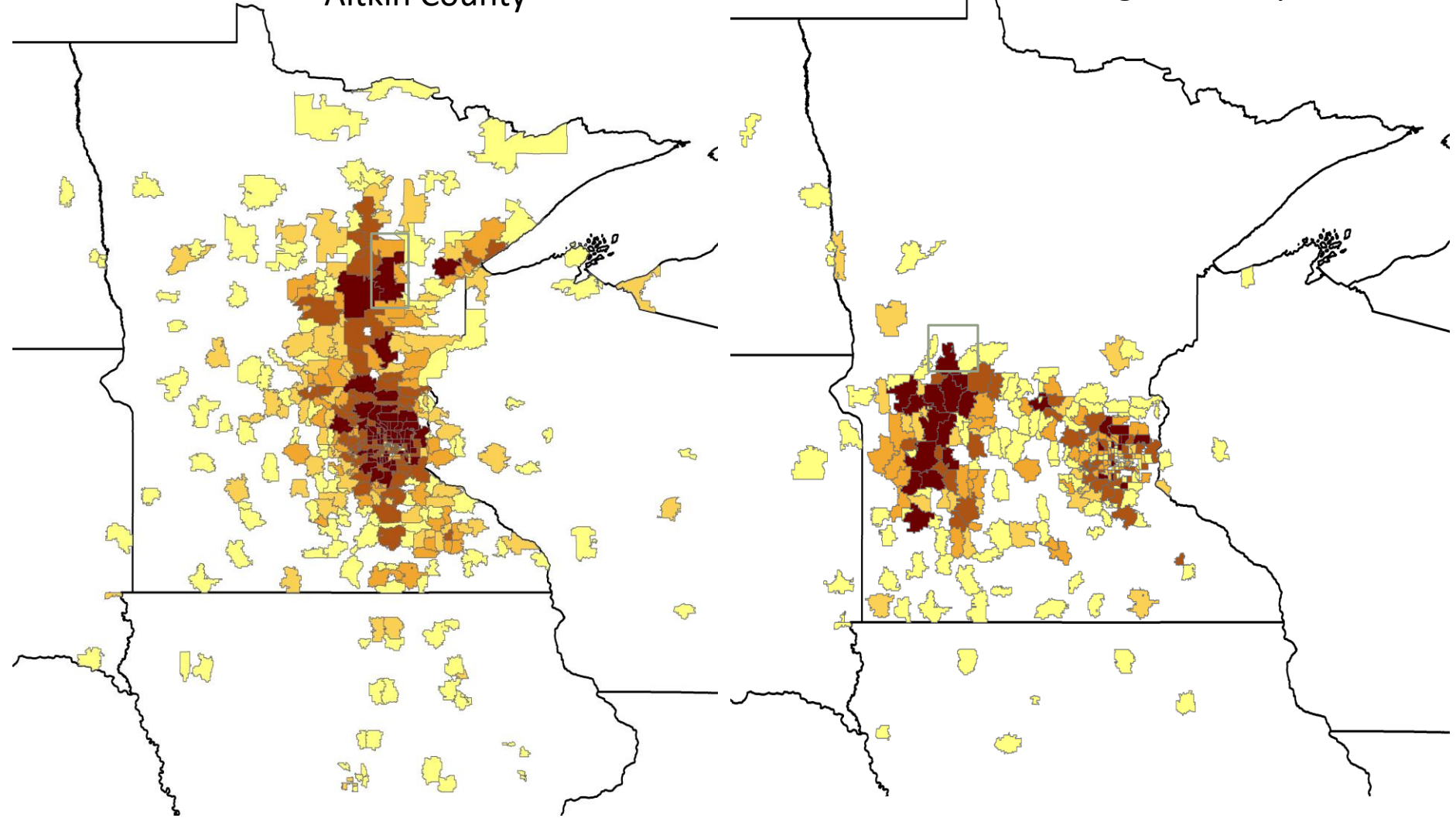


Figure 13: Intention of respondents to retire to second home property (n=569)

# Home residence of second homeowners

## Aitkin County

## Douglas County



# **resident** recruitment

Tight labor market

Workforce housing shortages

Now, pandemic hits

# resident recruitment

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Community Development

Economic Development

Tourism

*On the Map – Over the Edge – Welcome Home*

# resident recruitment

- Complement the industrial recruitment model of economic development
- In a tight labor market...labor has the power to choose. Why will they choose your town over another? Everything but the job matters...
- Many of the factors newcomers cite for choosing are also reasons people love to visit the area! Tourism!

# resident recruitment

economic supports

- Broadband
- Remote workers
- Self-employed
- Business transitions

Vilas County – built this technological and social infrastructure to be a modern rural *community idea factory*. ***This is how you write your new narrative.***

# resident recruitment

## Invitations

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



# resident recruitment

Welcoming

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

- Grab-a-bite
- Newcomer supper



# resident recruitment

Involving

- Regional events
- Involvement starts with a small request
- Make room for newcomers to “leave their mark” for themselves
- Leadership development programs



## *Narrative Matters*



# 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)

Rural Issues and Trends Webinars

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



# Panel Discussion

Jonathan

Karie Jo

Lizeth

Rubie & Brad