

# MOVING TO THE RURAL GREAT PLAINS: POINT OF ORIGIN DIFFERENCES IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

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**ABSTRACT**—Census data demonstrate that the movement of population in the rural Great Plains is not one-way. People do indeed move into as well as out of the region. Past research has identified perceptions of the quality of life in rural areas as an important consideration in the decision to migrate to such areas. However, those studies have not segmented the population of migrants in such a way as to fully inform efforts to recruit new residents. Using data collected from a survey of new Nebraska Panhandle residents, this study describes the motivations of recent migrants from both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan points of origin, and identifies significant differences in how both push and pull factors are perceived.

**Key Words:** in-migration, labor force, population, population retention, rural community

## INTRODUCTION

Rural advocates often argue that quality of life characteristics held to be typical of smaller communities and rural regions differ in important ways from those found in urban centers. These characteristics typically include

qualitative dimensions such as friendliness, perceived safety, educational quality, environmental quality, outdoor recreational opportunities, traditional value sets, and more.

In the context of rural development, rural–urban differences in quality of life are generally perceived to be a competitive advantage, with rural characteristics being

more desirable for many people. The implied expectation is that these characteristics are valued and will be sought out by individuals who see them as amenities. That expectation supports the assumption that the essential factor limiting a resurgence of rural population is jobs: Create the jobs and workers will come.

Previous research has identified the demographic characteristics and stated motivations of new rural residents in the northern Great Plains (Cordes et al. 1996; Leistriz and Sell 1998; Leistriz et al. 2001; Burke and Edelman 2007) and elsewhere (Stinner and Van Loon 1992; Karlgaard 2004; Coffman and Athan 2005). These studies strongly suggest that in-migrants to nonmetropolitan areas do indeed attach a great deal of significance to qualitative social, cultural, and environmental characteristics of localities when determining the desirability of migration.

These studies have been instructive, and have done much to inform those development programs that have introduced resident recruitment functions. Such programs have in fact become more common. In the last round of Nebraska's state-supported grants under the Building Entrepreneurial Communities Act, seven of 13 awardees had proposed residential recruitment programs as part of their request. Most of those programs included some Internet-based effort at reaching potential residents with employment information. In this paper, we suggest that in today's labor market, jobs alone may not be enough to attract new residents to a given community and that stereotypical rural-urban quality of life differences can also be valuable in local recruitment efforts.

In 2007 we surveyed new in-migrants to the Nebraska Panhandle and provided them with series of place characteristics describing qualities that commonly form the basis of stereotypical rural-urban dichotomies. We asked respondents to report the extent to which those characteristics entered into their decision to move. Previous studies have treated all new migrants as a pool, and in doing so have masked the importance of several classifiable population characteristics that are instructive in understanding what rural quality of life characteristics might actually be advantageous in attracting new residents. Here, we segment our respondent group according to point of origin (metropolitan or nonmetropolitan) and examine the local assets that they report to have been important in their selection of a location in which to reside.

If in fact there are quality of life advantages that are generically rural, then one would expect that individuals contemplating a rural-to-rural move will be less concerned about obtaining access to those advantages (which

they in theory already enjoy) than will individuals making an urban-to-rural move.

To the extent that differences in urban and rural quality of life characteristics enter into the decision to move, we hypothesize that respondents moving from metropolitan areas will be more likely to report having assigned importance to indicator variables for those differences than will respondents moving from rural locations. Conversely, we expect the null hypothesis to hold where the typical experience of rural-urban differences is perceived as minimal, or is not in fact valued highly enough to enter into a residential decision.

### RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY AREA

Nebraska's Panhandle is representative of much of the decline-prone northern Great Plains. Within much of the region, the Poppers' (1997) often-cited vision of a "buffalo commons" is easily understood. In fact, the Nebraska Panhandle lies essentially at the center of that mythical region.

Encompassing 14,000 square miles (18% of the state) and having a current population of about 90,000 people (5% of the state's population), the Panhandle region has an average population density of about 6.4 persons per square mile. Six of the eleven Panhandle counties have population densities below that average. Seven Panhandle counties reached their historical population peak prior to 1920, and all have historically been more heavily populated than they are today (see Fig. 1).

Only 35 of Nebraska's 537 communities are located in the Panhandle. Of these, only two were found to be at their population peak by the 2000 Census. One of those was Scottsbluff, the largest community in the region, with a population of 14,700 (the 12th largest city in Nebraska). The other was tiny Harrisburg, an unincorporated community of fewer than 100 residents and the county seat of Banner County. Twenty-one of the region's communities reached their population peak sometime before 1950.

Between the years 1990 and 2000, seven Panhandle counties and 16 Panhandle communities lost population. Five counties experienced an excess of deaths over births and seven experienced net out-migration during that same decade.

Despite what one might interpret as a pattern of regional decline, people do indeed move to the Nebraska Panhandle. The last Decennial Census inquired of people age five years and older where they lived five years previously. These most recent Census data indicate that significant numbers of people (10,500 between the years 1995

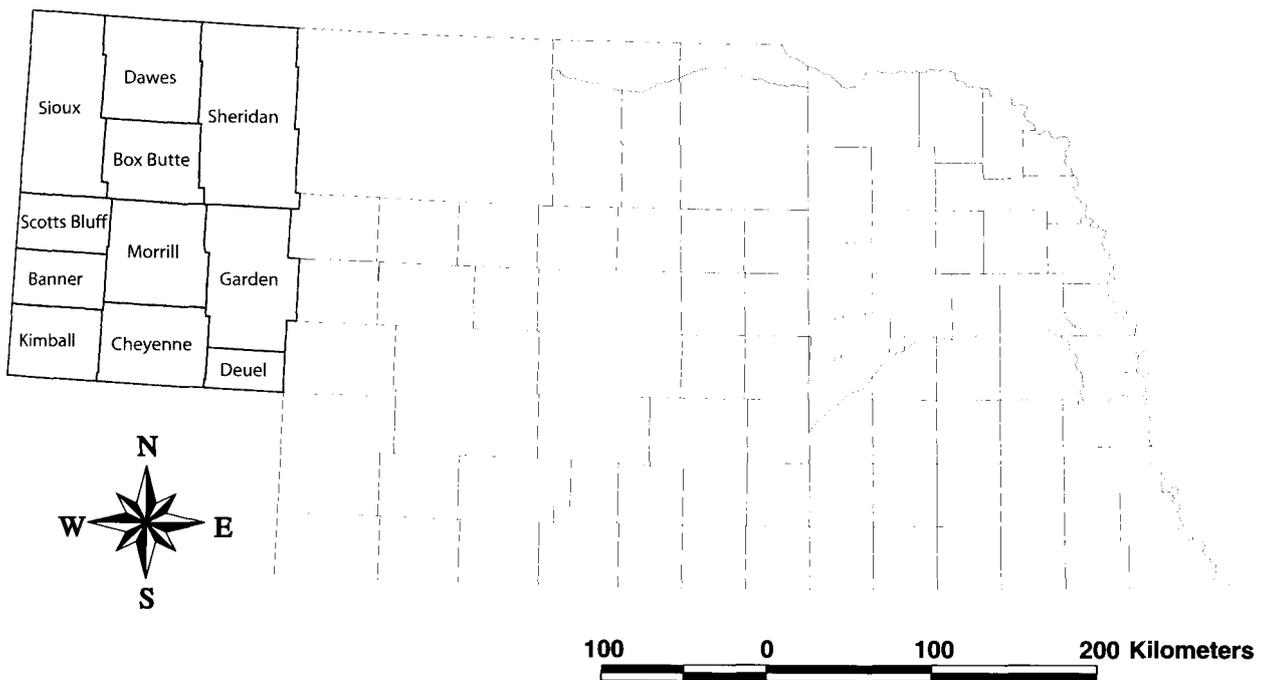


Figure 1. Nebraska's Panhandle counties.

and 2000) migrated to the Panhandle from some other state or region of Nebraska (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). In short, one in nine residents in 2000 was a new resident. It is these people who are of most interest to this study, as they represent a population that might possess characteristics which, if fully understood, could suggest effective marketing strategies for workforce recruitment.

The Panhandle is not unique in the demographic importance of new in-migrants. In fact, county-level data actually tend to mask the importance of this population group. When one looks at smaller geographic units (communities and townships) one finds that such minor civil divisions commonly saw 20% or more of their 2000 population arrive from some other county, state, or country during the five preceding years (Cantrell 2005). Such migration is not limited to retirees and older workers. Two-thirds of respondents to the 2005 Nebraska Rural Poll, age 20 to 29 years, indicated that they had moved to their current residence from other locations in the previous decade (Vogt et al. 2005).

## METHODOLOGY

A self-administered questionnaire was mailed in May and June of 2007 to approximately 1,050 households in the Nebraska Panhandle using two mailing lists purchased from the commercial vendor Experian. A "New

Mover" list identified households that moved to their current address during the previous two years. A second list identified consumers with a length of residence at their current address of less than five years. Responses from those who had moved within the Panhandle were excluded. Our effective return rate for usable surveys was 33%, or 321 households. These 321 households represent a total of 847 new residents. Thirteen respondents failed to provide information on their community of origin, and were excluded from this analysis, leaving a sample size of 308.

A total of 189 usable surveys were returned by new Panhandle residents who had moved from a metropolitan area, and 119 from new Panhandle residents who had moved from some other nonmetropolitan area. The overrepresentation of metropolitan origins reflects the overrepresentation of metropolitan residents in the general population.

The eleven counties included in the sample were Banner, Box Butte, Cheyenne, Dawes, Deuel, Garden, Kimball, Morrill, Scotts Bluff, Sheridan, and Sioux. The 14-page survey included questions pertaining to the new residents' background, reasons for moving, decision-making tools used, and views of their current community.

Analysis in this paper is confined to measures of statistical significance for the bivariate association between

the point of origin (defined as metropolitan or nonmetropolitan) of new Panhandle residents and the importance accorded to various place-relevant characteristics when making the decision to move as measured by a series of five-point Likert-type equal-appearing interval scales. In this case, importance is defined as having rated a given characteristic as either "important" or "very important" as opposed to any other rating. The entire questionnaire can be found online at <http://cari.unl.edu/buffalo/householdsurvey.pdf>.

Since the independent variable, point of origin, is nominal and the dependent variables are ordinal and include only two response categories, this analysis is based on the nonparametric Chi Square measure of association.

### DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF NEW PANHANDLE RESIDENTS

Almost one-half (47%) of the new residents surveyed had moved to the Panhandle in 2006. Thirteen percent had moved in both 2007 and 2005. These new residents had brought many assets to the region. On average, they were younger and more highly educated than current Panhandle residents. Forty-one percent of new residents were found to be between the ages of 20 and 40, compared to 23% of all current Panhandle residents who are in that age class.

Ninety-seven percent reported having at least a high school education, with 81% having at least some college education. Among newcomers, 40% reported having attained at least a bachelor's degree, compared to an average of only 18% for the region. As seen in Table 1, new residents moving from metropolitan areas were more likely to hold graduate or professional degrees, while new residents moving from other nonmetropolitan locations were more likely to hold an associate's or bachelor's degree.

One-third (33%) of new residents reported household incomes of under \$30,000 while just under one-half (48%) reported household incomes of \$50,000 or more. In comparison, 47% of current Panhandle residents have household incomes under \$30,000 and 28% have household incomes of \$50,000 or more. There was no difference in the level of household income between new residents arriving from metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas.

The new residents reported an average of 1.8 adults in their household and 0.9 children. Twenty-one percent of the new residents were living alone. Just over one-third (34%) were living with another adult and 35%

TABLE 1  
DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESPONDENTS BY  
PREVIOUS COUNTY TYPE

	Previous county type		Significance
	Metro	Nonmetro	
Age (mean years)	46.2	45.5	.676
Education (%)			
High school, diploma or less	20	17	
Some college, no degree	29	23	
Associate's degree	12	16	
Bachelor's degree	19	31	
Graduate or professional degree	20	12	.068
Household income (%)			
Less than \$30,000	32	32	
\$30,000-\$49,000	18	20	
\$50,000-\$74,999	26	25	
\$75,000 or more	23	23	.950
Race or ethnicity (%)			
White	94	97	
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1	1	
Spanish/Hispanic/Latino	4	1	
Asian or Pacific Islander	1	0	
Other	1	1	.559

Note: n = 308 new Panhandle residents.

reported both another adult and children in the household. Forty-three percent of the new residents reported having children in their household, compared to 33% of current Panhandle households.

Ninety-five percent of new residents identified themselves as white, 1% as American Indian, and 3% as Hispanic or Latino. Eighty percent of new residents reported at least one employed person in their household. Twenty-seven percent of employed respondents reported working in a professional or related occupation. Fifteen percent of employed respondents were working in management, business, and financial operations and 13% were employed in transportation and materials moving. New residents moving from a metropolitan area were somewhat more likely to be Hispanic or Latino (4%) than were those moving from another nonmetropolitan area (1%).

New Panhandle residents in the survey came from many different locations, arriving from 38 different states. As might be expected, most came from other parts of Nebraska (20%) or from the neighboring states of Colorado, Wyoming, South Dakota, and Kansas (42%).

TABLE 2  
REASON FOR LEAVING PREVIOUS RESIDENCE BY PREVIOUS RESIDENCE

Reason for leaving previous residence (n responding)	Percentage of respondents indicating important or very important			
	Previous residence		Pearson chi square	Significance
	Metro (%)	Nonmetro (%)		
Urban congestion (281)	50.9	12.3	42.52	<0.01
High cost of living (279)	49.4	20.0	23.98	<0.01
Fear of crime (280)	36.4	14.4	15.54	<0.01
Few cultural opportunities (281)	6.3	21.9	15.15	<0.01
Lack of job opportunities (281)	25.0	41.9	8.74	<0.01
Unsafe place to live (280)	24.7	13.2	5.38	0.02
High state and/or local taxes (282)	22.2	13.2	3.47	0.06
Quality of natural environment (281)	21.0	12.4	3.36	0.07
Lack of outdoor recreational opportunities (282)	11.9	19.8	3.24	0.07
Poor schools (280)	14.9	7.6	3.22	0.07
Long commute (281)	25.6	17.1	2.68	0.10
Too far from relatives (282)	34.1	32.1	1.21	0.73
Poor place to raise children (280)	22.3	19.0	0.41	0.52
Undesirable climate (281)	20.9	23.1	0.18	0.67
Community did not share values (280)	15.4	16.2	0.03	0.86

Note: n = 308 new Panhandle residents.

But 37% came from places that might not be expected, including Arizona, California, Florida, Nevada, and Texas. As described earlier, more than one-half (61%) moved to the Panhandle from a metropolitan county.

The new residents had lived in their previous community for an average of 12.6 years. Many (23%) had left a community in which they had lived for over 20 years. Most (56%) were homeowners in their previous community.

More than one-third (38%) of responding new residents indicated that they were returning to a place (community or county) where they had lived before. That percentage was somewhat lower among new residents who had college or professional degrees, professional occupations, and annual incomes above \$50,000.

### PUSH AND PULL FACTORS IN URBAN TO RURAL MIGRATION DECISIONS

Previous research has identified the importance of both dissatisfaction with one's current residence, push factors, and the expected benefits of a new location, pull factors, as being important considerations in the decision to move (Cordes et al. 1998; Leistriz et al. 2001; Burke and Edelman 2007). From this study, it appears that both

push and pull factors are assigned different levels of importance depending upon the origins of the mover.

Survey respondents were asked, "In your decision to leave your previous community, how important were each of the following (20) reasons for leaving?" As seen in Table 2, new Panhandle residents originating from metropolitan areas were significantly more likely than those from nonmetropolitan areas to rate urban congestion as a push factor that encouraged their resettlement. This makes intuitive sense; however, it should be remembered that well over half of nonmetropolitan residents are located in micropolitan counties, with central cities of between 10,000 and 50,000. Responses to this question from individuals with nonmetropolitan origins suggest that some of them found even communities of that scale to be too congested.

Migrants originating from metropolitan areas were also significantly more likely than their nonmetropolitan counterparts to identify high cost of living, fear of crime, and general safety concerns as push factors that were important or very important in their decision to move from their previous residence. They were also more likely to attach importance to high taxes, the quality of the natural environment, poor schools, and long commutes in identifying reasons to leave their previous residence, although the statistical differences between metropolitan

TABLE 3  
REASONS FOR SELECTING PANHANDLE RESIDENCE BY PREVIOUS RESIDENCE

Reason for selecting Panhandle residence (n responding)	Percentage of respondents indicating important or very important			
	Previous residence		Pearson chi square	Significance
	Metro (%)	Nonmetro (%)		
To find a less congested place to live (280)	65.3	26.2	40.53	<0.01
To lower cost of housing (276)	61.0	27.9	28.53	<0.01
To find a simpler pace of life (279)	65.7	33.6	27.23	<0.01
To find a safer place to live (282)	44.6	22.4	14.10	<0.01
To have lower taxes (270)	26.6	12.9	7.09	0.01
To find arts, entertainment, cultural activities (281)	10.3	20.8	5.93	0.02
(New) community shares attitudes/values (277)	37.8	25.7	4.29	0.04
To secure a better job for spouse/partner (268)	29.9	18.8	4.10	0.04
A better environment for raising children (277)	36.0	24.8	3.83	0.05
To live in a more desirable natural environment (277)	40.7	29.5	3.51	0.06
To find more affordable health care (278)	18.6	10.4	3.40	0.07
To find better quality schools (278)	25.4	17.1	2.59	0.11
To be closer to relatives (284)	41.4	43.1	1.86	0.17
To find more outdoor recreation activities (279)	25.3	30.5	0.89	0.35
To obtain a higher-paying job (278)	37.6	42.9	0.76	0.38
To be nearer friends (279)	29.5	33.0	0.39	0.53
To obtain a job more in line with skills (277)	33.3	36.9	0.36	0.55
To have a more desirable climate (277)	27.3	25.7	0.09	0.77

Note: n = 308 new Panhandle residents.

and nonmetropolitan origins are less definitive for those items.

Migrants originating from nonmetropolitan areas were significantly more likely to identify a lack of cultural opportunities and lack of job opportunities as having been important or very important push considerations in their decision to move. Perhaps surprisingly, individuals moving from one nonmetropolitan area to another were slightly more likely to cite lack of outdoor recreational opportunities as an important consideration.

Migrants from both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan locations were equally likely to see living too far from relatives, the environment for childrearing, the climate, and local values as considerations in leaving their previous home.

### CHOOSING THE NEBRASKA PANHANDLE

Prior research has found that the pull of perceived advantages to be found in a new location tends to mirror the push of dissatisfying factors that motivate individuals

to leave their previous residence (Cordes et al. 1998; Leisritz et al. 2001). Similar results are found among recent in-migrants to Nebraska's Panhandle. The considerations for leaving one's previous community described in Table 2 closely correspond to the considerations for selecting a new residence found in Table 3. Again, significant variation in the importance accorded to specific attributes is found to be associated with the type of community from which the respondents originated.

Respondents were asked, "In your decision to move to your current community, how important were the following (26) factors for your household?" New Panhandle residents originating from metropolitan areas were significantly more likely than their nonmetropolitan counterparts to indicate that seeking a less congested location was an important pull consideration in selecting a Panhandle location. Indeed, this was reported as an important consideration by 65% of those moving to the Panhandle from a metropolitan location. They were also significantly more likely to identify the pull of lower-cost housing, a simpler pace of life, a safer living environment,

lower taxes, shared values, and an improved environment for childrearing than were their nonmetropolitan counterparts. While less significant statistically, they were also slightly more likely to identify a desirable natural environment and affordable health care as important considerations.

Respondents moving to the Panhandle from other nonmetropolitan locations were more likely to cite finding improved arts, entertainment, and cultural activities as a matter of importance. However, only 21% of such migrants rated this consideration as either important or very important. Migrants from nonmetropolitan areas were more likely than those with metropolitan origins to see lack of outdoor recreational opportunities as important in deciding to leave their previous location, but no more likely to consider the pull of such opportunities when selecting their new residence.

Differences between respondents migrating from metropolitan and nonmetropolitan locations were not statistically significant with regard to environmental, school, and job-related considerations. Neither was there a significant difference seen in the importance accorded to locating near friends and relatives.

## LABOR FORCE IMPLICATIONS

The fact that seeking higher wages or work more in keeping with a respondent's skills were not rated as important more often than they might be seen as something of a surprise. The availability of a job is certainly an important consideration for a sizable portion of new Panhandle residents. Over one-third (36%) of new residents had moved to the Panhandle in order to accept employment with a new employer. Twenty-four percent of their spouses or partners moved for this reason.

Slightly less than half (45%) of new Panhandle residents who were under the age of 40 moved in order to accept employment from a new employer. Persons between the ages of 40 and 49 were the age group most likely to move to start or take over a business (18%).

Ten percent of newcomers and 8% of their spouses or partners were transferred by their current employer. Eight percent of newcomers and 5% of their spouses or partners moved to start or take over a business. Only 1% of both newcomers and their spouses or partners moved because of a military transfer.

Having a job in hand, however, was not sufficient to explain all migration to the Panhandle. About one-quarter (26%) of the respondents moved to look for new work or a new job, while 25% of the spouses or partners looked

for new work after their move. These percentages do not vary significantly by metropolitan and nonmetropolitan origin.

The reality of today's labor market is that jobs, and especially jobs for skilled workers, are available in many places, and workers often have choices as to where they will locate. Since wage rates tend to be lower in rural areas (US-BEA 2005), rural employers are often at an economic disadvantage in attracting new employees.

The Nebraska Panhandle region has in fact been much more successful at creating jobs than it has been at attracting new working-age residents to fill those jobs. According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, the region added a total of 1,510 new jobs between the years 2001 and 2005. During the same period, the potential labor force (persons age 16 to 65 years) declined by 380 (US-BEA 2005; U.S. Census Bureau 2005).

The Panhandle is not unique in this situation. Comparing the same 2001 and 2005 data sources for nonmetropolitan portions of the northern Great Plains (Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota), one finds that the region added 24,663 jobs and only 6,273 members to the potential labor force. Since both male and female labor-force participation rates in the northern Great Plains are among the nation's highest (North Dakota State Data Center 2004), the excess of new jobs over new workers can best be explained as an artifact of multiple jobholding (both full-time and part-time), delayed retirement, the conversion of full-time to part-time jobs and commuting.

While adding new jobs faster than new workers is not in itself sufficient to describe a workforce shortage, it does suggest that current population trends are unlikely to support significant job creation and economic growth. Job creation is an important aspect of the planning process in most communities and is the primary goal of virtually all community development professionals. Meeting the goals of workforce recruitment is obviously an important issue to community development professionals and the communities that they represent.

## CONCLUSIONS

The idea that rural youth, having left their home communities in search of life experiences and advanced training, can be enticed to bring their new skills back home is a pleasing one. Indeed, over 40% of new residents from both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan origins report proximity to friends and relatives to be an important consideration in their migration decision. That said, 40%

is not a majority, and the likelihood of familial or historical connections influencing movement to a rural location is even lower among new residents with advanced educational credentials and professional occupations. The fact is that the majority of new rural residents, especially those with critical skills, will be convinced to move for some other reason.

As the very large baby boom generation enters retirement, the ability of nonmetropolitan communities and regions to attract in-migrants will grow to greater importance (Dohm 2000; Horrigan 2004). In-migration of working-age people will be a determining factor in how successfully such places will be able to compete for a place in a national economy characterized by labor force shortages and competition for skilled workers.

For individuals moving from one nonmetropolitan area to another, employment is the nonfamily factor most likely to be identified as important in their decision to migrate. However, as a result of the current U.S. population distribution, most individuals who move to a nonmetropolitan area are likely to be moving from larger urban centers, and for them it is quality of life considerations that are most often cited as important in their decision to move.

We do not interpret this finding as meaning that rural lifestyle amenities alone are enough to attract new residents (other than perhaps retirees) to rural areas. Were that the case, rural areas would not be experiencing the well-documented population losses of the last 50-plus years. However, it does seem likely in today's labor market, characterized by competition for skilled labor, that rural communities do in fact have a competitive advantage in offering an alternative to modern urban problems.

Persons moving from metropolitan counties are looking for a less congested place to live, a safer place to live, a simpler pace of life, and a lower cost of living. Labor force recruitment efforts aimed at larger metropolitan areas should emphasize such amenities along with key structural elements such as the quality of schools and the availability of health care. Certainly, job creation and business retention and attraction strategies are essential to attracting new residents. However, as demonstrated in this study, community quality of life amenities can be the factors that ultimately lead persons to choose to move to a specific rural community.

By better understanding what drew new residents from both nonmetropolitan and metropolitan areas to the region, rural Great Plains communities can develop more

effective and targeted marketing campaigns designed to draw more new residents to the region.

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