

Ladies and gentlemen thank you for standing by welcome to the Returning to Rural America Webinar. During the presentation all participants will be in a listen only mode should you wish to ask a question during the presentation please use the chat feature located in the lower left hand corner of your screen. If you need to reach an operator at any time please press star zero. As a reminder this conference is being recorded Wednesday July 8, 2015. I would now like to turn the conference over to Mike Illenburg.

Thank you, hello everyone and welcome to Coming Home and Why Some Return to Rural Communities and Others Do Not and What Difference It Makes my name is Mike Illenburg and I'm going to be moderating the webinar, John Cromartie will be joining us he'll be delivering the webinar today. John is a geographer with the Rural Economy Branch and Resources and Rural Economics Division of the Economic Research Service he conducts research on rural migration, population distribution and the effects of demographic change on rural policy makers on definition used in USDA's Rural Development programs. He serves as consultant to the Office of Management and Budget on Metropolitan Area Definitions and to the American Community Survey. John is a visiting lecturer in the Department of Geography at George Washington University where he has taught a class on population geography, welcome John.

Thank you Mike and good afternoon everyone, today I'm going to be discussing the contents of a USDA report titled Factors Effecting Former Residents Returning to Rural Communities and an article summarizing this report was released just this Monday in the ERS Magazine, "Amber Waves". The findings that I'm going to talk about today come from interviews conducted in 21 communities across rural America. It's a project that was funded by USDA's National Research Initiative and the work was done by a team which included myself and two colleagues from the University of Montana, Professor Christiana von Reichert of the Department of Geography and her student Ryan Arthun. The purpose of the project was to answer, was to answer three relatively straight forward questions. Why do people, why do some people return to remote rural areas and why to others choose not to return and what impacts do return migrants make on their home communities. So this webinar might be of interest to you if you are concerned about the wellbeing of small towns, their economic future and especially if you focus on challenges associated with rural population laws and out migration or you may be looking

more generally at rural economic development strategies and simply want to consider what can be done to increase return migration to your area or community or to rural America in general. So the fact is we don't know a lot about return migration because it's hard to measure directly. You have to, you do have data on residents from the Census but it's just not precise enough to really measure rural, rural return migration. We do know that return migration typically happens at certain ages such as when couples are settling down to raise families or when people are retiring. What this graph is showing is the percentage of population loss or gained at different ages from the under fives here on the left to 80 to 84 year olds here on the far right and comparing urban and rural areas. So what we can see is the average or median rural county lost 28 percent of their 20 to 24 year olds during the 2000's compared to only 8 percent for the typical metro county and most people, most rural people are aware of this part, the fact that there's this large out migration of young kids right after high school. What this graph also shows that is often not appreciated or is well known is that rural migration gains are highest during this the settling down period that is for adults in their 30's and for their kids under, they're under 10 year old very young children and we believe that return migration likely plays a role in these particular age groups. So the interview approach that we used was meant to get at key questions directly as expressed by the migrants themselves such as why did you choose to return home. So we only visited places in a sub set of rural counties shown here in blue that we identified as remote. They are not in your large cities and they don't have access to interstate highways or regional airports. Now we focus on these areas not because return migration is unimportant elsewhere it is but because these types of counties have a harder time attracting newcomers so they depend much more on attracting returnee's to offset any population loss. We also ruled out most of the really scenic areas with some recreation and tourism economies for the same reason. Those types of areas are better situated to attract newcomers and finally the 21 communities that we selected for this study that are shown here on the map in their approximate locations only to avoid disclosure were located in counties that at the time were experiencing population loss from net out migration. The innovative approach that we used in this study involved conducting interviews at high school reunion events. Former residents attend these events so they provide this unique opportunity to simultaneously interview three types of people, stayers, those who are, people who never moved away, returnees who moved away but had come back at some point and non returnees who moved away and still live somewhere else at the time of the interview. Now getting permission to attend reunions began with phone calls to schools, newspapers, chambers of commerce and it really depended mostly on connecting with reunion organizers and I have to just say we owe the organizers a special thanks since their cooperation made this work possible, also to

their classmates who were very generous in responding to our questions. We did roughly 300 interviews during 2008 and 2009, these were open ended interviews that we tried to keep short and informal but they always included questions about reasons for returning or not returning, we talked to returnees about the impacts they made like starting businesses, polling offices, volunteering, we asked non returnees if they had thought about coming back and what stopped them and finally we asked everyone demographic questions about their marital status, children, parents, education, careers, that kind of thing. So getting into the findings I'll be presenting them in two parts, the first being on reasons for returning and not returning and then looking at impacts. The reasons that we found can be summarized around three topics, family, employment, community, however as you can see from the quote here these themes interacted and were closely intertwined in the interviews themselves which was one of the really big advantages of this approach. Now the findings come in the form of quotes from the interviews so I am going to pause for a couple of seconds at the end of each slide to give everyone a chance to read them. Raising children back home was the most common reason mentioned among return migrants that we interviewed. Most of them were in that stage of life in their late 20's or 30's when they came home they came home with spouses, they brought young children with them or they started families soon after they came home. They talk a lot about the value of family connections for raising their kids in a small town. Some of them even stated quite emphatically that they would not have moved back were it not for their children and this theme of career sacrifice came up repeatedly for instance in the quote on the left. Parents were also really critical in the decision to return. The quote on the left has one of the most common sentiments that we've heard, I wanted my kids to know their grandparents. There were, there weren't a lot of moves that we heard about in these interviews at least that were because someone needed to take care of aging parents and that's because most of the returnees we talked to were in their late 20's or 30's with relatively healthy parents even likely to still be working so they didn't need to come home to take care of them but, like the quote on the bottom here several returnees described moving back to help parents with family run businesses including farms. . .and this was the big demographic difference between returnees and non returnees that we talked to, almost all returnees had parents still at home where as many returnees did not and non returnees were much more likely to be single or they were married but not planning on having any kids. They just, they sometimes just didn't have that family motivation and the strong social ties remaining back to home communities and this seemed to greatly reduce the likelihood of returning. As with any family related decision about where to live schools figured a great deal in these interviews and it was really interesting to see the different perspectives on rural school systems it seemed to really make a

difference, returnees were more likely to talk about smaller class sizes and the attention that their kids get from teachers non returnees on the other hand had reservations about the perceived academic quality and the standards that you get in rural schools. Several of them talked about several of the non returnees that is talked about the wide range of activities that are offered in urban schools as a, as a real plus. . . and this was to me a really interesting finding school sports came up in a surprising number of conversations, several returnees talked about small school sizes because their children could participate in sports and other school related activities, they could do a lot of different things at the same time in contrast a small number of returnees mentioned the more competitive sports environment of big city schools and the chance to win college scholarships as a reason for staying away. So moving on to the second theme, employment and career barriers, now returnees of course needed to find jobs and careers when they came home and this involved all kinds of interesting, creative strategies to overcome what were often very limited employment options but here I'm going to talk about non returnees because that's where we really learn the most about employment barriers and the non returnees that we interviewed fell into two groups of roughly equal size and one of these groups, people in the first group made it clear that they had never, never considered moving back to their rural home town and probably never would. This usually was just a strong preference for city living or it was a career based decision for those pursuing higher end careers. The other group did consider moving back at one time or another and for most of them it was low wages and lack of career opportunities that kept them away. We spoke with several couples with dual careers and they felt especially challenged relocating to a smaller home town. The third set of reasons centered on aspects of the home town themselves so both, this would be both physical and social aspects and again it really helped to compare returnees and non returnees. Return migrants described lots of positive aspects about their home towns, they liked the familiarity, they had, they'd been missing these close connections with neighbors and they really appreciated the slower pace of life. Returnees often talk, expressed the belief that rural schools and neighborhoods were safer for their kids and another factor that came up a lot was simply the physical compactness of small communities, it made for shorter trips for work, shopping and for visiting friends and family, the fact that there were woods and rivers and lakes nearby was highly valued. Returnees wanted to pass on these experiences they had growing up, the camping trips, the hunting, the fishing, the hiking. Also they liked the municipal parks, the community centers and another real surprise for me, bike paths came up a lot in conversations and we saw that a lot of these towns were building them. I think what these interviews brought out was, was how these different reasons for returning worked in tandem. So family motivations did dominate but investments in schools and parks,

downtowns really seemed to make a difference, it really helped in decisions to return home. So for non returnees it was the lack of urban amenities, the restaurants, the theaters, sports teams made it hard to move back. A lot of conversations centered on what was left in the downtown sections of their home towns, a lot of them had changed over the years and lost businesses and non returnees said they missed the drug store or the bowling alley where they used to hang out, they also tended to be less attracted to the tight knit social world of small towns, they valued the greater sense of privacy available in big cities. The . . .okay, so the second part of this study which I will take just a short time to summarize explored the ways in which return migrants made a difference in their home towns. These impacts can be organized into three themes, demographic, economic and social. So starting with the demographic impacts return migration is usually pretty small from what we can tell from the data, that it's never a large migration stream especially compared to the initial out migration right after high school but return migrants do add to the population to some extent and especially those with families who add more people back into the population than were removed when they left on their own. Children of returnees are typically quite young which means they have a better chance to establish strong friendships and other ties to the community, also return migrants add to the education levels of small towns, they usually attended college, spend time working or serving in the military while they were away and they brought back that kind of training and experience with them. In terms of economic impacts most of the returnees that we spoke to came back to fill professional positions, not all of them but quite a number of them, they were doctors, pharmacists, accountants, bankers, teachers, business managers and entrepreneurs, a lot of them had moved into family businesses not just farms but we talked to people who were running insurance companies, newspapers, real estate agencies, restaurants, retail stores of various kinds and even manufacturing operations, sometimes they even took over businesses from retiring owners that otherwise would have closed. Finally in terms of civic engagement, volunteering, charity work and office holding, all of this was quite common, returnees were involved in chambers of commerce, in city councils, fire protection, land use planning, volunteering in schools was especially common as expected with parents and serving on park and recreation committees and the like. Their, their ties as this quote kind of shows this, their ties to the community brought a sense of obligation to pitch and also made it easy to jump in and take on leadership roles. So in summary these interviews showed pretty clearly that family motivations do dominate in the decision to return, that employment and career options are the critical barriers to returning and that aspects of the towns themselves, community assets make a big difference. I think what we learned was that return migration, I'm sorry, return migrants are, are in this really unique position to make positive

impacts on their home towns and that specific types of family related investments in schools, in parks and other community facilities could help with population and economic growth where it's really critically needed. So there are several articles that go into more depth about particular topics for example I didn't get to talk a lot about what's in this first article just what do return migrants do for a living once they come home and that's a very interesting aspect of the story. You can find this same list of articles in the back of the ERS Report or in the Amber Waves article that is the links and provided here. So thank you very much and I'm happy to take questions.

Thank you John, if you have any questions you can enter them into the chat and I will reiterate them for those who cannot see the chat. I do have a couple of questions that have come up while you were talking John and I'll just go right into those.

Okay.

One of the first questions we had was did you see parallels between the reasoning return migrants, migrants between cities and rural towns, what their reasoning was and what the reasoning is behind maybe international migration and return migration trends?

I missed the very first part of that question can you repeat the first part, I'm sorry.

Absolutely, is there a parallel between the reasoning the return migrants that you spoke with had between coming back to a small city or from a city to a town as perhaps somebody who traveled internationally or had migrated internationally returned?

Yes, sure, I think it's, return migration is a universal phenomenon, it was one of the earliest laws of migration to be discovered that every migration stream generates return migration streams so it's, so you find it everywhere and a lot of the research being done these days and some of the inspiration for this research comes from people studying international migration say from Europe, from developed countries back to less developed countries and the impacts that return migrants have on places like the Caribbean or Sub Saharan Africa and that's a very important policy issue on the international level and there are very many parallels I think between that form of return migration and what you see when you look at migration within a country like the United States especially from the big city back to rural areas so yes I would say there are a lot of parallels and there are, there's lots of published research along these same lines which use interviews to just, to let migrants sort of express the reasons they came home and the impacts they were making and those articles find the same sorts of issues to be important that is that the decision to return is very often a family based decision.

Thank you, we have another question, was there any information or did you hear any information about the internet and the effect of poor internet connectivity on migration?

We surprisingly we did not and maybe that's because the people that are running internet businesses may not have been quite as publicly available as others because we did in addition to attending reunion events we spent two or three days in each town speaking with community leaders and talking with people on main street, people who were running businesses and we actually added a lot of informa, a lot of interviews of returnees from that part of the visit as well as the high school reunions. So we talked to people running stores and running bike shops and community leaders, school principals etcetera and we did, we did try to ask about the impact of the internet and there would always be a mention of one or two people that were, that came back and we did, we did talk to people who said yes I'm back here, I have to go, I have to go back to the city once or twice a month to do my job but otherwise I'm connected to my work through the internet, there was evidence of it I wouldn't say there was a lot.

Great, we have another question, did you find that most returnees stayed there for good or did you find that they migrated out after being there for a short time?

I would say the majority of the people that we spoke with did not have plans to move away again, they were in the settling down phase and they especially if they had children they were, they had pretty much settled in for the time being. There was, there were a number of interviews that described some back and forth like two or three times or moving back home and then moving away again but it wasn't, it wasn't really all that common. There certainly were people who were among non returnees who had made several moves that that wasn't uncommon but the, it seemed to, it seemed like that it was a relatively permanent situation for most of the returnees we talked to.

Great, Ken wants to know if you could give us some idea of how the people who attend high school reunions in the small towns might compare to the overall high school class that they graduated in or the populations of these types of countries, of counties more generally?

That's a very good question, they, and it does relate to I think some of the bias inherent in this approach that we discuss in the report to some degree. We found that it was for instance much easier to talk to returnees than non returnees rather than stayers and that obviously or not obviously but that high school reunions tended to be attended by relatively more successful people, people with families and that in particular we would miss interviewing people who did not complete high school so there were some definite demographic difference that need to be recognized in this study that were, that we are more likely in this, using this approach to speak with people who do maintain a strong connection with their home town at least relative perhaps to people who don't attend high school reunions. You know you've, if you've moved away right after high school and you didn't look back so to speak you may be less likely to attend high school reunions so there are, there were differences like that that we did sort of outline in the report.

Christy would like to know if you've identified specific communities that had higher than average return migration numbers and if so what common traits did they share?

Yes that's a problem that gets back to this issue of Census data that is just not really accurate enough to look at the levels or the characteristics of return migration to rural communities. You can study return migration more broadly but not really you're not really able to separate out what is unique about rural return migration. We know for, from return migration in general that it again happened at certain ages and, but we don't, we don't really have the ability to answer those questions to compare to look at the variation in return migration which would be very interesting and the interviews this approach was really not designed to measure the differences in the levels of migration to these communities it really focused on the motivations and the impacts.

So we have a question from Ben and, I mean, are you familiar with the rural brain gain trend identified by the University of Minnesota and Nebraska and are these returnees just a subset of that overall migration, were there similarities or differences and if you are familiar with it could you let us know what it is?

Yes, I probably won't represent it quite perfectly but I have looked at that work and I believe it is very much identifying the same kinds of trends, I'm trying to think back in my memory. I found the work very interesting and did to some degree overlap with what we're looking at but perhaps they were including a wider range of migrants including retirees or at least older migrants but yes I think they were discussing from one angle I believe people coming back with, with entrepreneurial skills and with professional degrees and, but I guess what I remember from that work is that they weren't, they didn't really talk about it in terms of whether they were new comers or returnees but I got the feeling from what they were looking at that a lot of it was return migration and yes I think that we found, we found at least, if it wasn't a brain gain at least it helped to stem some of the brain drain loss that is so common in these area because the people who leave right after high school tend to be those that are going to be going off to college and earning professional degrees and that kind of thing so there's a well known brain drain,

that's the label, that rural areas are often challenged by and what these people have identified is that a lot of times that's offset by a brain gain later in life.

Okay, we have one last question from David, he was wondering what the population range of the communities in which you did the interviews I think you touched on that but maybe you want to just repeat it?

I don't know, I don't think I did, they tend, for the counties themselves it tended to be the more rural of rural counties that is those that are remote and that are, that tend not to be able to attract newcomers and therefore they have more sparse populations, however the need to identify class reunions for specific reunion anniversaries 10, 15, 20 anniversaries meant that we couldn't visit the smallest towns and I don't have my statistics in front of me and I'm probably going to misquote my own article but it was, it tended to be towns above the 5,000 range and, but no larger than say 20,000 so it was in that range, that rough range I believe, not the smallest of the small and not the larger of the, of rural communities but in that 5 to 20,000 range.

Great thank you, I think that we've gone through all of the questions just to wrap up I want to thank John again for joining us and giving us this talk today, the webinar will be available, will be recorded and put on the ERS website. A few people have put in and asked about receiving copies of the presentation, you can either contact John directly and you see his email there on the screen or you can contact me and we'll make that available to you. My email address is millenberg, millenberg@ers.usda.gov and thank you, again, thank you John and I hope everyone has a great day.

Thanks Mike.