Migration Patterns of the Baby Boom Cohort

Baby boomers have followed well-established age-related migration patterns but have shown an increased preference for rural and small-town destinations, compared with older and younger cohorts. Their early childhoods coincided with a massive wave of rural outmigration and suburbanization. Many of their parents had come of age in the countryside during the Great Depression and World War II. Financial support through the GI Bill and federally subsidized mortgages enabled the parents of boomers to leave the farm or escape congested urban settings and move to newly constructed suburbs (Newman, 1993). The rural connections they maintained while raising urban and suburban families influenced the next generation's subsequent migration decisions.

Baby boomers who entered young adulthood in the 1970s faced increased labor and housing market competition due both to economic trends and the unprecedented size of their cohort. Extensive plant closures and layoffs throughout the northern, urban-industrial belt exacerbated the difficulty of absorbing rapidly increasing numbers of new workers (Bluestone and Harrison, 1987). In addition, increased housing demand coincided with rising interest rates and inflation. These conditions made it harder for many baby boomers to match the income expectations set by the previous generation, start a family, and buy a home (Plane and Rogerson, 1991; Pandit, 1997b). Boomers responded demographically by postponing marriage and remaining at home with their parents longer than earlier cohorts. Couples delayed childbearing and adopted multi-earner strategies, significantly increasing female labor-force participation, which further increased job competition (Newman, 1993).

Boomers also responded geographically. Net migration from the Northeast and Midwest regions to the South and West tripled in size during the 1970s. This sharp rise in what was an already-established population shift from "Rust Belt" to "Sun Belt" was tied directly to the migration adjustment of boomers in the face of increased labor market competition and escalating housing costs (Plane and Rogerson, 1991; Plane, 1992). At the same time, rural and small-town America experienced a remarkable demographic turnaround, as nonmetro population gains in the 1970s exceeded those of the previous four decades combined (Johnson and Cromartie, 2006). Many factors contributed to this "rural renaissance," including the economic stress of baby boomers (McGranahan, 1985). Decreasing urban job opportunities inhibited the rural-to-urban flow of young workers. Additionally, boomers already living in cities but unable to enter the housing market looked beyond metro boundaries to cheaper options in small-town and rural hinterlands. Overall, they still favored metro destinations as they aged through their twenties, but their net outmigration rate from nonmetro areas was less than half that of similar age groups during the 1960s (Johnson et al., 2005).

The ebbs and flows of nonmetro population change since the 1970s have been strongly linked to the migration of baby boomers (Nelson et al. 2004). An exceptionally severe farm crisis and economic recessions heavily focused on goods-producing industries made it harder for rural areas to retain current residents or attract new migrants in the 1980s. Large metro regions in particular regained much of the economic momentum lost in the 1970s. The demographic response to these regional economic shifts came largely from boomers in their late twenties and early thirties migrating more to increasingly career-friendly urban centers (Nelson and Sewall, 2003).

Later, baby boomers led a short-lived rural “rebound” in the early 1990s, stimulating recreation-based economies and boosting population growth in the intermountain West, the southern Appalachians, the Upper Great Lakes, and other scenic locations (Nelson et al., 2009). In 1995, baby boomers were 31-49 years old and still strongly career oriented. Much of their nonmetro migration fueled rapid suburban expansion into counties adjacent to metro centers. Many of those moving to more remote settings, most notably in the intermountain West and other scenic regions with recreation opportunities, benefited from expanding airline services and the Internet, which enabled them to stay connected to urban-based employers and customers. Whether driven by technological changes, increased wealth, changing lifestyle preferences, or a combination of factors, areas once popular as recreation and tourist destinations became increasingly popular as permanent residences. If these geographic patterns mark a socioeconomic transition toward retirement, it is the beginning of a migration trend that will have increased over the current decade and will persist well into the next (Bures, 1997).