

Why Is Baby Boom Migration Important to Rural America?

The migration of baby boomers, though just one segment of overall rural population change, will affect rural economies and rural development policy efforts for years to come. Economic and social impacts from migration connect to broader age-related issues subject to vigorous debate at Federal and State levels. Places that emerge as migration destinations for Americans approaching or entering retirement today will be influenced increasingly by Federal policy decisions regarding Social Security adjustment, pension guarantees, workforce issues (including immigration policy), and health care provision, among others. For example, communities that experienced retirement-related population growth in the 1990s showed a significant rise in government transfer payments as a proportion of their income base (Nelson, 2005). Also, many rural and small-town destinations for older Americans witnessed high levels of migration of Hispanics, who are finding work in sectors stimulated by the arrival of retirees (Nelson et al., 2009).

Population change from net migration is unevenly distributed across the landscape. Rural jurisdictions will face different demands for local goods and services and different opportunities for economic expansion, depending on population trends. New baby boom residents are likely to have a positive impact on income and employment levels in migration destinations. They may also increase infrastructure and social-service costs for local governments and require surrounding areas to make investments in health care and related services. Counties experiencing surges in population growth sometimes suffer from lack of planning and strained fiscal resources, while needs arise quickly for housing, transportation, and retail infrastructure. This report provides information that can be used to assess the potential impact of baby boom migration on rural and small-town areas. Within clearly marked ranges, the report projects the level of boomer migration for counties facing different economic or demographic scenarios.