

Young adults in their 20s are the most mobile segment of the population. This stage in life is associated with leaving home, entering college, and starting a career, which often require long distance moves. While the literature shows a general trend away from urbanization during the last three decades, it appears that these young, educated adults are attracted to cities and are settling there at a higher rate than the general population. Consistent with the human capital model, they are attracted by the wealth of employment opportunities in urban areas relative to those in rural areas. It is likely they are also attracted by the “bright lights” – the abundance of social activities and tolerance of diversity equated with urban areas – and are repelled by the lack of relevant work opportunities (related to their education) as well as perceived lifestyle restrictions and closed-mindedness associated with rural areas.

This research takes an in-depth look at the migration behaviors of recent bachelor degree recipients in their first year out of college, focusing on the characteristics of movers to rural areas versus urban areas and their reasons (employment versus quality of life) for that move.

Data from the Baccalaureate and Beyond (B&B) Longitudinal Study 2000/2001 were used. The B&B study tracked nearly 12,000 individuals who completed their bachelor degrees during the 1999-2000 academic year as a longitudinal follow-up to the 2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS). A small number of migration items were included in the B&B interview.

To answer the research question “who moves to rural areas versus metropolitan areas?” zip codes of current residence were collected and mapped to Rural Area Commuting Codes (RUCA) to determine rurality or urbanity of destination. Of the respondents who indicated they migrated more than 50 miles from the place they lived when they last attended high school,

approximately 84 percent settled in a metropolitan area, nine percent in a large town, four percent in a small town, and two percent in a rural area.

Polytomous logistic regression was used to look at the effects of employment, education, and background characteristics on a) migration to a rural area/small town relative to a metropolitan destination and b) migration to a large town relative to a metropolitan destination.

The results indicate that among recent college graduates who migrated, movers to rural areas/small towns (rather than metropolitan areas) tend to be those with low demand majors, those not currently enrolled, those whose jobs are not the start of a career, who work in low demand fields, those with children, and those who lived in a rural area or small town at the time they graduated from high school. Those who migrate to large towns (rather than metropolitan areas) tend to be those who considered themselves to be primarily employees (rather than primarily students) while enrolled, those who migrated shorter distances to college, those who did not cite speculative employment reasons, those who were older, married, and from a rural area or small town.

The disparity between labor market prospects for college graduates in small towns/rural areas versus metropolitan areas drives some to metropolitan areas to fulfill their career ambitions. No such disparity in employment prospects seems to exist for large towns relative to metropolitan areas. Lifestyle choices based on stage in life are driving those with children to small towns/rural areas and married people to large towns rather than to metropolitan areas which appeal to the more footloose population (singles, those without children). The final force pulling people to settle in a rural area/small town or large town as opposed to a metropolitan area seems to be a preference for a similar-sized community as one grew up in.

Reason for migrating was asked of respondents who lived more than 50 miles from the place they lived in high school. Responses were collapsed into employment-related reasons and quality of life reasons. Approximately two-thirds of migrants provided an employment-related reason and the remaining one-third provided a quality of life reason as their first reason cited.

Logistic regression was used to test the effects of employment, education, and background characteristics on reason for migrating. The results indicate that those citing quality of life reasons tend to be engineering majors, those currently enrolled, those working in a job that is the start of a career, males, those who are younger, those who are single, and those who went to high school in a nonmetropolitan area. Employment reasons were cited by those with low demand majors, those not currently enrolled, those working in a job that is not the start of a career, females, those who are older, those who are married, and those hailing from metropolitan areas.

Two of these effects were initially surprising. First, high achievers (respondents with higher grade point averages, respondents who graduated with honors, and those intending to pursue a doctorate or professional degree) and those in high demand fields were significantly less likely to cite employment reasons than were the not-so-high achievers and respondents with low demand majors. But this finding is actually quite reasonable: high achievers and those in high demand fields have more options available to them upon college graduation. Despite the sluggish economy, they may have received multiple job offers or felt secure enough to choose where they wanted to live rather than going where employment prospects appeared favorable. Those with lower grades, lower aspirations, and in lower demand fields may have felt more desperate to get a job, so employment prospects weighed more heavily in their migration decisions. Second, the finding that male respondents were significantly more likely to cite

quality of life reasons for moving compared to female respondents was unexpected. If anything, I would have expected women to cite quality of life (especially family-related) reasons more often than men. One explanation for this effect may have to do with the options they perceive to be available to them. Another may have to do with gender differences in risk aversion. Men, perhaps, are more likely than women to choose a destination based on quality of life considerations because they expect to be able to land a job anywhere and are more willing to take risks. Women, still relatively new to the professional labor force, perhaps feel pressure to prove their education is put to good use and therefore migrate for job-related reasons.

Respondents from rural areas and small towns were much more likely to migrate, were more likely to settle in a rural area/small town or in a large town (rather than a metropolitan area) and tended to cite quality of life (rather than work-related) reasons for migrating compared to those from metropolitan areas. The lack of employment opportunities for college graduates in rural areas and small towns was expected to drive these young adults to larger communities, and to a certain degree it does. However, these results suggest that recent college graduates have a preference for a similar size community as the one in which they grew up, and in relatively close proximity to where they grew up. The quality of life reasons cited by small town and rural respondents reinforce the notion that something other than employment, perhaps proximity to family or preference for a slower-paced, rural environment, is the most important consideration for this subpopulation when choosing a destination.