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COMMENTARY

Rural Outmigration and Youth Aspirations

How Perceptions of Local Economic Conditions Drive Rural Youth Decision-Making About Future Residence

AUTHORS

Robert A. Petrin | Ipsos Public Affairs

Kai A. Schafft | Penn State University

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Over the past several decades demographers have consistently documented the outmigration of younger residents from rural areas. This is especially the case in economically-lagging rural places where local labor markets disproportionately offer part-time, temporary and contract work, often with limited or no benefits.

Youth outmigration is problematic for rural communities in several respects. Net losses of young adults from nonmetropolitan areas have historically been much greater than for older adults, and those leaving rural areas tend to be better educated and more highly trained. Conversely, those left behind tend to be disproportionately comprised of the less well educated, and individuals with lower incomes and fewer skills. As a result, local disadvantage may increase in rural areas not only because of shrinking economies, but because patterns of selective outmigration have fundamentally altered the demographic and socioeconomic composition of local populations. Perhaps not surprisingly, this processes of uneven development often results in ambivalence for rural youth and parents regarding the role and value of education since educational attainment is so closely linked to youth outmigration. A pressing challenge for many rural communities then is how to retain and/or attract younger populations and stem the tide of youth outmigration.

Some recent scholarship has suggested that rural schools and educators may be complicit in inadvertently encouraging rural youth outmigration, as educators devote extra attention and resources to the highest achieving students—those most likely to leave their rural communities after high school—in the process reinforcing norms equating outmigration with "success." In this study, we investigate this hypothesis using data from a national multi-method study involving survey data from a sample of nearly 9,000 rural 9–12th grade students from 73 sites, supplemented by focus groups with students, educators and community members in a sub-sample of 12 sites.

Our data suggest that even though the highest achieving rural students are among those most likely to leave their communities, they also have the greatest community attachment, and show few differences from their less academic peers in terms of their desire to leave their home community. We also find little evidence to suggest that schools or educators groom students to leave. Instead, contact with teachers or other school personnel about career or future plans, if anything, tends to be associated with student aspirations to remain in rural communities. To the contrary, what we do find is that, net of the influences of residential factors and family structure, student perceptions of local economic conditions are far more influential in shaping post-secondary residential aspirations than the advice of educators, or the economic status of the school and community. This is the case for the most academically-oriented and well-integrated students, as well as students who are less academically-oriented and less

integrated into their schools and communities.

This work suggests the extent to which a great many rural youth harbor strong attachments to their communities, and how rural communities in turn might be able to retain and/or attract highly skilled young people if in fact opportunities are available. Accordingly, researchers and policymakers should investigate national and regional policies that can help enhance rural community capacity and sustainability. Ultimately, it may be the case that youth brain drain in rural America has less to do with the systematic underinvestment at the local level in those rural youth likely to remain in their home communities, than with a lack of opportunity and a systematic underinvestment at the regional and national levels in rural America more broadly.

The full study can be found in Petrin, R., Schafft, K.A., & Meece, J. (2014). Educational sorting and residential aspirations among rural high school students: What are the contributions of schools and educators to the rural brain drain? American Educational Research Journal, 51(2), 294–326.

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Policy Analysis for California Education

Stanford Graduate School of Education
507 Lasuen Mall | Suite 205
Stanford, CA 94305
Phone: 650.576.8484

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