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Demographic Factors and Community Perceptions Impact Young Adult Retention Trends in Rural Areas

Abstract

The out-migration of youth from rural areas is an issue predominantly driven by economic factors and leaves small communities with a shallow pool of skilled workers. But are there factors that outweigh urban economic opportunity that keep young workers in rural agricultural areas? This study examines trends related to the retention of young adults in rural Northwest Ohio. Extension researchers sampled over 340 young adults (25-34 years of age) from 8 counties in Northwest Ohio. Results highlight rural community perceptions of young adults as well as those factors that impact the decision to remain in rural northwest Ohio. Sampled adults report those with stronger northwest Ohio roots, i.e., who were raised in northwest Ohio along with their parents or spouses, were more likely to settle in the area themselves. The research shows there are correlations between certain demographic factors and the way respondents perceive their community or rural area.

Introduction

The old adage of “we reap the benefits of what we sow” does not accurately reflect what is happening in many of our agricultural areas across the country as it relates to retaining a young workforce. For many rural communities in the U.S, families invest in good educations for their children; raise them with strong work ethics and values, only to see them out-migrate for better employment/post-secondary opportunities located in urban areas. The existence of out-migration of youth in small communities implies three issues according to research findings of Ley, Nelson, and Beltyukov (1996); their hometowns had few economic opportunities; they lacked faith in their hometowns’ ability to provide favorable economic conditions, and rural youth were willing to look elsewhere for opportunities. This trend leaves small community businesses and family owned farms with a limited workforce and a scarcity of qualified young workers for the jobs that are the life-blood of rural areas.

Some rural young adults do indeed choose to stay in the agricultural areas they were raised, return back home after schooling, or return after getting some experience with out-of-area employment. Current research documents that rural youth often decide to leave their small hometowns and not return. Half of rural college attendees leave home and do not return by age 25 (Gibbs, 1995). Those that do return are drawn back largely by home ties and intervening life choices rather than local job opportunities (Gibbs, 1995). Urban areas simply offer more employment and educational opportunities. However, there is a select subset of young workers that stay in their rural communities or return after a period of time in young adulthood. Pollard, O’Hare, and Berg (1990) found community factors do play an important role in the out-migration of rural youth.

According to Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas (2009) in their study of small-town Iowa, 40 percent of the young adults were “stayers”, who had never left; 25 percent were “achievers”, who left for college and rarely returned; 10 percent were “seekers” who joined the military, and the rest (25 percent) were “returners”, who left but eventually returned.

The respondents in this retention survey who were raised in Northwest Ohio (considered to be Midwest dominated by grain farming and livestock production) were a combination of “stayers” and “returners”. The researchers in this study explored the influences that lead to why this subset chose to stay or return in rural communities spread throughout Northwest Ohio. This report summarizes the responses given in a young adult retention survey that was written and distributed by an Extension research team from The Ohio State University and Wright State University to participants within rural Northwest Ohio.

The research team identified people in an eight-county area between the ages of 25 and 34 and invited them to participate in an online survey. About 50 percent of the respondents had a bachelor’s degree or a graduate degree of some sort. This is much higher than would be expected. According to an article posted in the

online Daily Yonder in 2009, 16.8% of adults in rural counties had at least a B.A. degree (approximately half the urban rate). The maps provided in the article also indicated that most of rural Northwest Ohio has a “well below average; less than 14 percent” of its adult population holding a college degree despite the fact that most Ohio residents live within 30 miles of a college or university campus (Riley, 2008). However, the rural retention survey outlined in this report was conducted online, which in turn, would tend to skew respondents toward a higher education level. Online survey respondents are likely to be younger, better educated, and more affluent than the general population (Pokela, et al., 2007).

The researchers acknowledge numerous factors that lead young adults to become a “stayer” or a “returner”. The methodology described below was chosen to closely examine these factors and the role they play in retention trends.

Methodology

The rural retention survey targeted 25-34 year old residents of an eight-county rural area within Northwest Ohio. The counties were selected based upon populations ranging from 19,614 to 45,949 and demographically having no local urban center. The economies of the selected areas are driven primarily by agriculture-based business, manufacturing, and county government/local schools employment (Ohio Dev. Service Agency, 2010).

The sample population was identified using existing county registered voter lists. From this list of over 12,000 possible participants in the targeted age range, a total of 1500 were randomly selected and distributed equally within the eight targeted counties. These randomly selected participants received a mail invitation that directed them to a web based survey. There were 342 usable surveys that were completed. The survey took an average of 10 minutes to complete. Figure 1 depicts the targeted area for the survey.

Figure 1. *Counties included in Survey*



The survey instrument was designed to continue previous research by this same research team. The authors revised a similar reliable instrument utilized in previous studies (Homan, et. al. 2010, Hedrick, et. al. 2011). The survey instrument was piloted with a group of community college students at Wright State University with minor format and content changes made to improve flow and presentation. The authors utilized a web-based survey administrative technique to save on survey implementation costs (such as return postage). Selected participants were invited to participate through a written letter that included a web-based link for survey completion.

The guiding research questions include:

- What are the current retention trends of working young adults particularly in rural areas of NW Ohio?
- How do young adults feel about their home community?
- How do parents, peers, economic factors, impact decisions of remaining in NW Ohio?

Results

All respondents were between the age range of 25 and 34 years. This same age range was chosen because it is used in the census, and is representative to young adults earlier in their career or in their first job out of college. The percentage of adults in each age was fairly evenly distributed from 6.7 to 12.6 percent of the respondents which was not significant to any results. There were greater variations among the responses by county of residence rather than age (Table 1). Auglaize County, which has the largest population of the surveyed group, attracted one of the smallest numbers of respondents. Paulding, the smallest county population among those in the survey, attracted about the same number of responses as Auglaize County. The two counties with the highest number of respondents were also home counties to the educators.

Table 1
County of Residence

Population (ages 24-35) (Ohio Dev. Service Agency, 2010)	County of Residence	Number of Responders (N)	Valid %
6,150	Auglaize	31	9.1
3,603	Hardin	47	13.8
3,428	Henry	48	14.1
4,747	Mercer	55	16.1
2,459	Paulding	33	9.7
4,200	Putnam	59	17.3
3,675	Van Wert	29	8.5
4,332	Williams	39	11.4
32,594	Total (N = 342)	341*	99.7

* One respondent did not complete this question.

Gender of Respondents

Respondents in this survey were more likely to be female (about 60% female compared to 40% male). This is not surprising as current research suggests women respond to web based and paper surveys at higher rates than do men (Underwood et al., 2000).

Self and Family Raised in Northwest Ohio

A large majority of the respondents, along with their parents, were identified as “stayers” (Carr and Kefalas, 2009) or those that grew up in Northwest Ohio and have roots in the area. In fact, nearly 90% of the respondent’s indicated they were raised in the area and have stayed as shown in table 2. Family was found to be a key indicator to whether the respondent wants to live and stay in Northwest Ohio.

Table 2
Respondent, Mother, or Father Raised and Stayed in Northwest Ohio?

	Respondent		Mother		Father	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Yes	297	88.4	251	74.9	270	80.6
No	39	11.6	84	25.1	65	19.4
Subtotal	336*	100.0	335**	100.0	335**	100.0

* Six did not answer this question ** Seven did not answer this question

Marital Status

Slightly more than 70 percent of the respondents were married and nearly a quarter have never been married. Surprisingly, approximately 4% indicated they were divorced. The average percentage of divorce in the surveyed area is 47% (Ohio Department of Health, Center for Public Health Statistics and Informatics, 2008). This could be a flaw in the survey since it asks questions about the respondent’s spouse. A survey that would use skip logic would have helped with this factor.

Number of Children

Respondents were asked about the number of children under the age of 18 living with them in their home. One-third of the surveyed 25-34 year olds indicated they had no children and another 46% had one or two children. The remaining 21% had more than two children living with them. Since this is a younger population, we would not expect them to have large families before age 34.

Household Income

This group of respondents was on par with the rest of the country in earnings. While the average rural household income in the United States is \$50,221, the median earnings for the surveyed respondents were between \$50,000 and \$59,000.

Trends of Young Adults in Agricultural Areas of Northwestern Ohio

Among the most interesting points of this analysis include a very high percentage of respondents (88.4 percent) indicated they were raised in Northwest Ohio, and a large percentage of their parents were as well. According to a 2008 Pew Research Center report, 46 percent of rural Midwesterners have spent their entire life in one community. Perhaps unsurprisingly, respondents’ spouses (if they had one) provided the greatest influence on the respondent’s decision to remain in Northwest Ohio, followed by the respondents’ parents. When asked who had the greatest influence over the decision to remain in the area, more than 60 percent of respondents reported that their spouse had a strong influence. Nearly 45 percent of respondents listed their parents as having a strong influence, and the number for in-laws dropped to about one-third. There was a strong relationship between parental influence in staying in the area and the presence of (grand) children. (Please note that nearly all of the missing variables in the “spouse” and “in-laws” columns were from people who are not married).

Table 3
Parental and Spousal Influence on Decision to Stay in Northwest Ohio

	Parents		Spouse		Grand Parents	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Strong	150	44.8	149	60.6	80	32.7
Moderate	105	31.3	51	20.8	76	31.0
Weak	80	23.9	46	18.6	89	36.3
Total	335*	100.0	246	100.0	245	100.0

* Seven respondents did not answer this question

Correlations were found between certain demographic factors and the way respondents perceive their community or area. In particular, education level, income level, whether the respondents (and his/her parents) were raised in the area and job satisfaction are positively correlated with all four “mini-indices” of community perceptions (Viable Activities, Economics, Education, and Community Quality of Life). The survey asked a series of questions about the respondent’s perception of Northwest Ohio and/or the individual’s community. Table 4 indicates how each

of these aspects was rated using a Likert scale of 1 = Little or No Influence to 6 = Strong Influence.

Table 4
Rating Various Aspects of Living in Northwest Ohio

	Mean
Safe Place to Live	5.09
Good place to raise a family	4.94
Affordable cost of living	4.68
Quality schools	4.59
People share my beliefs and values	4.50
A good place to further my education	3.46
There is positive growth in the area	3.25
Enough recreational activities	3.23
Good income potential	2.95
Interesting and fun activities	2.92
Enough employment opportunities	2.88
Enough cultural activities	2.86

The variables receiving the highest ratings were safe place to live, and good place to raise a family, affordable cost of living. The variables receiving the lowest ratings were good income potential, enough employment opportunities, interesting and fun activities, and enough cultural activities. In fact, all of the variables related to employment and activities are in the bottom portion of the table. These variables were split into 4 separate indices in order to compare various aspects of “community satisfaction” with other survey questions, particularly the demographics. The indices are as follows:

Activities:

- Recreational activities
- Cultural activities
- Interesting and fun activities

Economics:

- Affordable place to live
- Positive growth
- Employment opportunities
- Income potential

Education:

- Quality schools
- Further my education

Community:

- Good place to raise a family
- Safe place to live
- People share my values and beliefs

In order to determine whether any of these factors significantly affected respondents' outlook on the area, correlations were run of these four mini-indices against gender, education level, income level, whether the respondent and his/her parents were from Northwest Ohio, and other factors.

Table 5
Effect of various factors on respondents' satisfaction with area characteristics

	Activities	Economics	Education	Community
Gender	NS	NS	NS	NS
Education level	NS	NS	NS	** .184
Income level	NS	** .189	NS	** .167
Marital status	NS	NS	NS	NS
Raised/parents raised in NW OH	NS	** .153	NS	** .124
Round-trip commute	NS	NS	NS	NS
Job satisfaction	** .238	** .264	** .193	** .250
High school GPA	NS	NS	NS	NS
Participation in high school activities	NS	NS	NS	NS
Participation in activities outside of high school	NS	NS	NS	NS
Participation in activities outside of high school, not job-related	NS	NS	NS	NS

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tiered)

It turns out there is no significant correlation at all for most of the factors tested. However, respondents with higher incomes and those with stronger Northwest Ohio roots, i.e., who were themselves raised in Northwest Ohio along with their parents (another index), were more likely to feel positively about Northwest Ohio's economic outlook and the community's strength. In addition, the higher the respondent's education, the more likely the respondent was to react positively regarding the community's strength/safety.

Respondents were given the opportunity to provide additional comments or elaborate on why family influence had impact. A trend occurring within the comments indicate that family and work are intertwined:

- "I work on my father's farm"
- "Now operating third generation family business."
- "I work with my parents."
- "My parents own and farm the land I work on."
- "(My spouse) has a good job and part of family business. If not, we would move."

Living in close proximity of family members and friends was also a common theme among the open ended questions:

- "My friends and family were a big part growing up"
- "They supported our decision to live anywhere, but we wanted to be close."
- "Most of my family has lived here; I love it here."
- "If my family was not located in NW Ohio, I do not think I would have chosen to live here."
- "Spouse would prefer to move outside of the area. However, both she and I work near this area as well as most of our family and friends reside in the area so for now we have chosen to stay."
- "My father-in-law is getting older, so moving away from him would be hard for my husband. But he would not keep us here if we wanted to go."

Others indicated different reasons for remaining in Northwest Ohio not directly connected with parental influence:

- "Born of us are raised here...guess I don't know any different."
- "I like the small community I live in. Did not want to move to a city."
- "Moved away for several years, but moved back because of job position, not because of family."
- "I'm only living with my parents here because I got laid off from my job in Philadelphia."
- "(My husband) has no desire to leave the area. He loves not having too many neighbors, the cost of living, and he likes living where he grew up. I can't wait to get to a real city, with real attractions again."

Respondents with children were even more likely to say that their parents are highly influential in their decision to stay in rural Northwest Ohio. Some respondents wrote:

- “Wanted to stay close to home while raising our kids.”
- “I enjoyed my upbringing and wanted to provide my children with the same type of environment.”
- “They don’t pressure us into staying in the area...but, we want our children to
- know their grandparents.”

Conclusions

Participants indicate that there is influence stemming from family to stay in the rural areas of Northwest Ohio. However, contradictory to this influence is also the pressure for its young adults to become educated beyond high-school and seek successful careers. There is a common assumption in this region that to become successful, mobilization gets you better opportunity. Therefore, it is no surprise that our young generations have perceptions that they need to leave their rural roots in pursuit of what they hope is something better.

The desires to stay local are often at conflict with the fear of being stagnated in the rural community. Generally, young adults indicate encouragement from their parents to remain in Northwest Ohio. Those students whose parents were originally from Northwest Ohio reported a higher level of interest in living in the area and indicated more positive evaluations of their home community. The families that are located here in Northwest Ohio tend to be deeply rooted with a strong desire reported by these young people to want to stay here if the employment opportunities are available for them. Community leaders and Extension Educators have opportunities to reframe what these rural areas offer our younger generations. As a result of this Extension research, many area communities have begun rebranding initiatives to help youth develop their aspirations, and at the same time, highlight career opportunities within these rural communities to which these young workers can aspire. One example of this effort is the emergence of a program called “Hometown Opportunity” which was developed to ensure that young skilled workers in the region are aware of the jobs and careers available to them. Local companies are in need of local talent, but all too often young workers do not realize the great opportunity right in their own backyard.

Northwest Ohio has a strong foundation of stable families, strong communities, quality schools, and a history as a great place to live and raise a family. However, population trends reveal some challenges regarding the inability of the area to retain youth. A number of recommendations should be considered to further position Northwest Ohio to retain the next generation of working young people. Central to the issue of retaining youth in Northwest Ohio is employment opportunity for the next generation and the preparation for this group to match the future job needs of the area. The researchers suggest an analysis of the advising and preparation of high school students as they make choices in their future educational and career

goals. These youth need to be aware of what future employment opportunities might look like. Career exploration, mentoring, young professional speakers, etc. can strengthen the link between community employers and their potential workforce. Internships, job shadowing, tours, and other methods of showcasing a realistic view of local employment opportunities will enable youth to make an educated knowledgeable decision on career goals. Many of these things can be facilitated through Extension programs. To encourage talented youth to remain in Northwest Ohio, they have to be able to see viable professional career options from a realistic perspective.

The linkage with future working professionals should continue beyond the high school setting as youth pursue college training. Some organizations and communities have been successful building linkages with students in the form of internships, coops, and work study arrangements. As organizations consider their financial support of students traditionally given in the form of scholarship grants, they may want to consider formalizing the relationship in terms of a paid part-time or summer position, or asking for a return of investment with a certain amount of community service hours in the home community.

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