

## Reversing Population Decline in Rural Pennsylvania

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From 2010 to 2020, rural America collectively experienced population decline – commonly referred to as “population shrinkage” – for the first time in history. Pennsylvania rural counties largely followed that trend. While there were slight population increases due to in-migration in some parts of rural America between 2017 and 2019, most rural counties in Pennsylvania did not experience similar in-migration.

This study was conducted to understand what factors might lure (pull toward) or block (push away) people from relocating to rural areas and engage them to stay, and how those factors align with existing population shrinkage strategies, specifically for rural communities.

The study employed a cross-sectional survey of residents of Pennsylvania and neighboring states who were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk).

### Key Findings

#### Attachment to Current Living

- Roughly two-thirds of both Other State and Pennsylvania non-rural residents appear attached to where they currently live, but between 15 percent and 25 percent may not be attached, demonstrating a possible openness to relocating.
- Feelings of place attachment for Pennsylvania respondents do not differ between urban and rural populations, as defined by either self-classification as rural or urban or by county population density as rural or urban.

#### Preference of Where to Live

- Out of six categories, “rural area” accounted for about one-quarter of respondents’ most preferred place to live for the Other State (24 percent) and Pennsylvania (27 percent) respondents.
- “Rural area” also accounted for 21 percent of Other State and 30 percent of Pennsylvania respondents least preferred place to live.
- According to their place preference selections, respondents in Massachusetts and Rhode Island appear most interested in living in rural areas across the 10 states sampled.

#### Influence of Demographics and Push/Pull Factors on Relocating to Rural PA

- Respondents from both the Other State and Pennsylvania non-rural samples who are more likely to move to rural Pennsylvania over the next five years are: 1) married, 2) living in a household with school-aged children (K-12), 3) currently working remote in some capacity, 4) have some level of student debt, and 5) hold conservative political views.
- The five characteristics above along with identifying as white were characteristics of Other State and Pennsylvania non-rural respondents that were found to be statistically significant in at least five of the eight statistical models that assessed thinking about moving to rural Pennsylvania, willing to move, and intending to move within the next five years or within one’s lifetime.
- The three most prevalent pull factors for both Pennsylvania non-rural and Other State respondents when considering relocation to rural Pennsylvania were: 1) access to a strong K-12 education system, 2) access to outdoor activities, and 3) having a place with a relaxed pace of life. Conversely, access to primary healthcare and access to multiple food options were not incentives for either sample.

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## Affective Perceptions of “Rural Pennsylvania”

- Pennsylvania and Other State residents have similar but subtly nuanced perceptions of rural Pennsylvania – both lean toward thinking of something related to the environment and rural landscape when thinking of rural Pennsylvania, with “farms” as a top response. However, Pennsylvania residents more frequently think of quite different rural landscapes, such as forests and mountains.
- Pennsylvania residents appear to have a more negative affective response to “rural Pennsylvania” than Other State residents – 14 percent of Other State respondents compared to 24 percent of Pennsylvania respondents reported a negative affective response to the first, second, and third thoughts or images that came to their mind when they thought of “rural Pennsylvania.”
- Rural Pennsylvania residents view “rural Pennsylvania” more favorably than their urban Pennsylvania counterparts, with 78 percent reporting a positive rating to their first thought or image compared to 64 percent, respectively.

## Testing Potential Relocation Incentives via Discrete Choice Experiments

- The most popular incentive was Pennsylvanians choosing the 10-year state income tax credit rather than a \$15,000 relocation grant. For example, Pennsylvanians chose the 10-year state income tax credit 73 percent of the time, compared to 61 percent for the Other State sample. This suggests Pennsylvania residents may be familiar with the burden of the state’s income tax and may be more receptive to such an incentive than residents in other states and as opposed to a lump sum relocation grant.

- The most preferred relocation incentives were those in which shorter driving times for certain amenities were paired with less lucrative economic incentives. For example, \$10,000 in relocation grants and a 20-minute drive to amenities were preferred over \$15,000 in relocation grants and a 40-minute drive to amenities.

## Conclusions

Overall, the study results support the argument that there are people living in both neighboring states and in non-rural Pennsylvania that are not attached to where they currently live, would prefer to live in a rural area, and may respond positively to relocation incentives that are tailored to their needs and wants. The policy considerations

that align with the findings include:

- Target marketing of rural Pennsylvania based on individual characteristics of people more likely than others to relocate.
- Support community development based on the needs and wants of unique rural communities.
- Ensure that marketing of rural Pennsylvania covers the wide variety of what “rural” means in Pennsylvania.
- Further explore and pilot test both economic and non-economic relocation incentives at both state and local levels.
- Enhance local government capacity and expertise to address population shrinkage.
- Foster civic engagement with current residents to increase place attachment.

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