

Nonmetro Migration Continues Downward Trend

John Cromartie

The number of people moving into nonmetro areas reached its lowest point in 6 years during 2000-2001, marking an end to the 1990s rural population rebound. At the same time, the number of nonmetro outmigrants jumped to over 2.6 million, according to the latest data from the March 2001 Current Population Survey (CPS). The combined effects of far fewer in-migrants and many more outmigrants led to a net out-migration of more than 1 million, the first significant nonmetro population loss from net migration since the 1980s. A gradual shift in migration patterns away from nonmetro areas has been underway since 1996, when the population grew by 350,000 through net immigration, but the downturn between 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 was sharper than in previous years.

The shift from net migration gain to loss is part of an overall slump in nonmetro mobility rates. Not only are fewer people moving in from metro areas, but fewer nonmetro residents are moving at all. On average, 15 percent of non-metro persons changed residence

in the previous year during 1996-98, with 9 percent making local moves within the same county (table 1). The average annual mobility rate dropped to 13 percent during 1999-2001, while the rate for local moves dropped to 7 percent. Local residential change slowed within all age groups, but the drop in longer-distance moves from metro to nonmetro areas occurred only among younger residents, ages 1-39, who move much more often than those 40 or older.

The slowdown in nonmetro population growth from migration reflects both changing economic

conditions and the aging of the population. The sustained period of economic prosperity during the 1990s, while quite beneficial to many parts of rural America, created more jobs and reduced unemployment more in metro areas. As job-seeking opportunities grew in metro areas, fewer workers just entering the labor market or seeking career advancement moved to or within nonmetro areas. At the same time, members of the large baby-boom generation are gradually aging out of young adulthood into middle age when mobility is less frequent. Fifteen percent of nonmetro

Table 1
Average annual percentage of nonmetro residents who moved, by age, 1996-98 and 1999-01
Overall nonmetro mobility decreased among all age groups

	All ages	1-19	20-29	30-39	40-64	65 and older
1996-98						
Total mobility	15.2	18.7	32.4	17.2	8.9	4.0
Moved within same county	8.8	11.3	18.9	9.8	4.7	2.3
Moved between nonmetro counties	2.5	3.1	5.2	2.9	1.5	0.7
Moved in from metro county	3.7	4.1	7.6	4.4	2.5	1.0
Moved in from abroad	0.2	0.2	0.7	0.1	0.1	0.0
1999-01						
Total mobility	13.2	15.9	29.8	15.4	8.1	3.6
Moved within same county	7.3	9.5	16.5	8.8	4.0	1.8
Moved between nonmetro counties	2.3	2.6	5.4	2.6	1.4	0.8
Moved in from metro county	3.4	3.6	7.3	3.9	2.5	1.0
Moved in from abroad	0.2	0.2	0.5	0.2	0.1	0.0

Source: Calculated by ERS using data from Current Population Survey.

John Cromartie
(jbc@ers.usda.gov, (202) 694-5421)
is an economist in the Rural Economy Branch,
Food and Rural Economics Division,
Economic Research Service, USDA.

residents age 30-39 moved in the previous year during 1999-2001, compared with only 8 percent of those age 40-64 (table 1).

Geographical mobility at any level—local, regional, or national—is always an important determinant of rural development prospects. Most changes in the relative size and composition of rural communities occur because of migration, rather than differences in birth and death rates. Over several years, an annual mobility rate averaging 13 percent substantially changes the location and characteristics of the population, affecting economic opportunity and the availability of public services in rural areas. In periods of rising outmigration, an increasing number of rural communities across the country lose population altogether, experience downtown business closures, and are forced either to spend more per capita providing services such as health care and transportation or to cut back on the services they provide.

In addition to those moving in from metro areas, about 100,000 immigrants moved directly to nonmetro areas from foreign countries each year since 1995, according to CPS estimates. The actual level of immigration to rural areas is probably higher due to difficulties in tracking undocumented workers. Even with an accurate count, nonmetro immigration would still not have added enough population to offset the domestic migration loss during 2000-2001. In addition, immigration is more regionally and locally concentrated, favoring nonmetro areas in Florida, Texas, Arizona, and specific counties in other States.

About the Data

These migration statistics are from the Current Population Survey (CPS), conducted monthly by the U.S. Census Bureau for the U.S. Department of Labor. CPS derives estimates based on a national sample of about 60,000 households that are representative of the U.S. civilian, noninstitutional population. The sample is large enough to provide information on the demographic and economic characteristics of the nonmetro population at the national and regional level, but not generally at State or local levels. The March CPS contains a supplemental question asking respondents where they were living a year prior to the survey. Metro and nonmetro migration statistics are derived by comparing past to current residence. This article uses 6 years of March CPS data, 1996-2001, the only years with consistent, up-to-date metro and nonmetro residence classifications available. Prior to 1996, the CPS used a metro-nonmetro definition based on 1980 rather than 1990 census data.

Mobility rates shown in table 1 are the percentage of current nonmetro residents who moved in the previous year, averaged over two 3-year periods. Nonmetro net migration rates shown in figures 1 and 2 represent the annual percentage change in population occurring because of differences in migration flows. They are calculated by dividing the number of immigrants minus the number of outmigrants by the population at the beginning of the year. Three-year, moving averages are shown rather than single-year estimates to minimize the effect of short-term fluctuations. Net migration is the small difference between two much larger migration streams—immigration and outmigration—that are known to fluctuate annually. In addition, estimates from the CPS can fluctuate even when actual net migration is stable, due to sampling and non-sampling error. Therefore, the interpretation of nonmetro migration presented here emphasizes trends rather than specific point-in-time estimates.

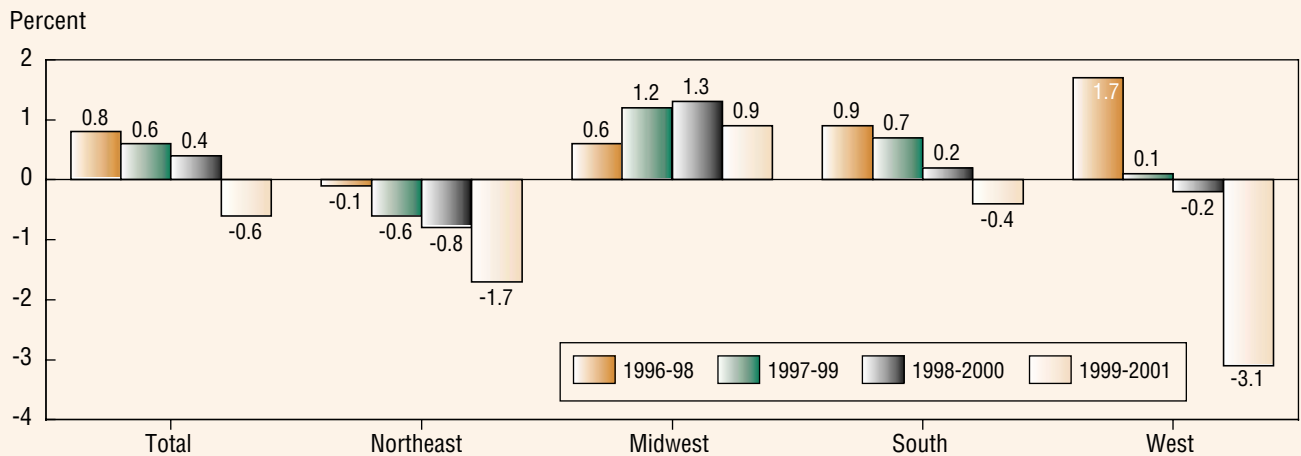
Nonmetro West and South Losing Migrants

The Current Population Survey provides 6 years of consistent data showing the flows into and out of nonmetro areas (see “About the Data”). Comparing 3-year moving averages from 1996-98 through 1999-01 shows downturns in nonmetro migration in most regions of the country (fig. 1). Population growth from net migration remained positive only in the Midwest. While the South and West were attracting migrants in record numbers during most of the 1990s, the Midwest saw slower growth. During 1999-2001, however, the Midwest nonmetro population

grew by almost 1 percent per year through migration while all other regions showed net outmigration.

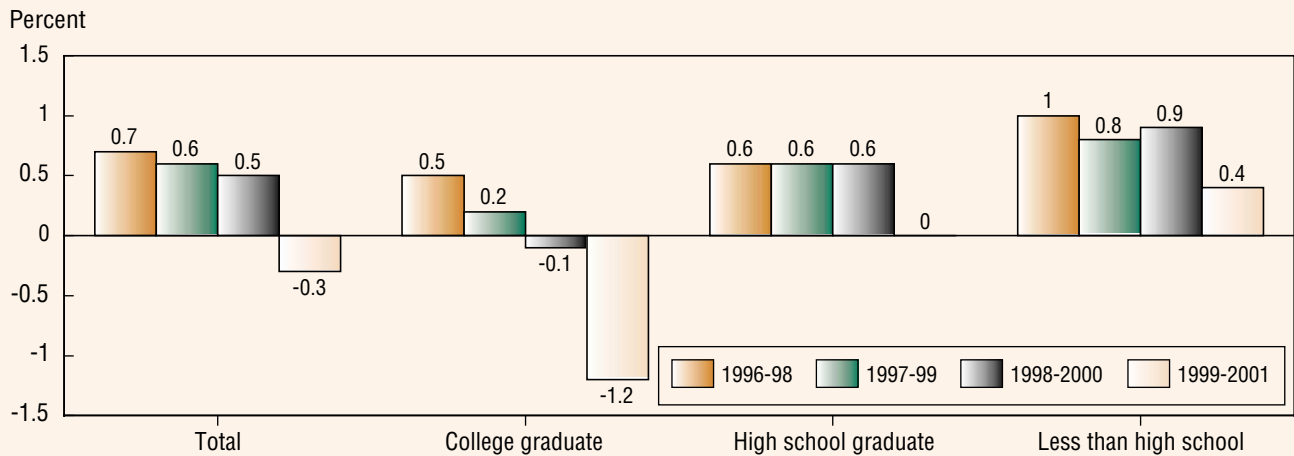
Much of the continued growth in the Midwest may be attributed to the outward expansion of the region’s highly urbanized population into adjacent nonmetro counties. Bedroom communities in some farming areas are expanding to such an extent that many current nonmetro counties will be reclassified as metro based on the 2000 census. Other nonmetro growth in the Midwest is associated with success in attracting high-tech manufacturing and service industries, or with migrants seeking new homes in high-amenity areas, such as in

Figure 1
Nonmetro net migration rates by region, 1996-2001
Nonmetro Midwest maintains growth from net migration



Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the March Current Population Survey.

Figure 2
Nonmetro net migration rates by education, ages 25 and older, 1996-2001
Population loss from net outmigration highest among college grads



Source: Calculated by ERS using data from the March Current Population Survey.

the northern Great Lakes region. The Northeast, also highly urbanized, has not been able to attract migrants or retain current residents within rural sections. Some growth probably continues in scenic areas and around the edge of large cities, but not enough to offset losses due to declines in the region's rural manufacturing base and related service industries.

The preference for high-amenity rural settings, combined with a downturn in the California economy, spurred growth to record levels in the nonmetro West during the early 1990s. As late as 1996-98, the West easily led other regions in net migration gains (fig. 1). With a strong economic recovery in California and in metro areas throughout the West, fewer rural migrants were expected during the

second half of the 1990s. However, the emergence of net outmigration in both the nonmetro West and South during 1999-2001 is surprising given the continuing allure of natural amenities throughout the Sun Belt and the continuing spillover of metro areas into nonmetro territory. The greater fluctuation in migration rates in the West is due in part to the smaller population base compared with the South.

Nonmetro Outmigration Highest Among College Graduates

Outmigration dampens future population growth because it is highly concentrated among young adults, who quite often leave rural areas just as they are beginning to raise families. This pattern holds for all types of nonmetro areas, even for those rich in natural amenities with a tourist or recreation-based economy. Such places attract older families and retirees with high levels of discretionary income, but often do not provide enough good jobs to support those just entering the labor force with high education and other marketable skills.

For those 25 years or older, the largest decline in nonmetro net migration occurred among college graduates (fig. 2). The average annual migration rate during 1999-01 fell to levels approaching the “brain drain” of the 1980s, when outmigration among this group reached 2 percent per year. Such high losses are quite unexpected, because technological advances and other rural restructuring trends, especially in manufacturing, increased rural opportunities for the well educated.

Nonmetro net migration also dropped substantially in 1999-01 for high school graduates, and

remained positive only among people without a high school degree (fig. 2). Less-educated workers face a narrower range of options in today’s technology-driven, urban job markets and are likely to remain in places where low-skill work is more available. The correlation between higher education levels and higher outmigration, a persistent hindrance to economic development prospects in many parts of rural America, has become more pronounced and widespread during this most recent period of increased rural outmigration.^{RA}

Coming in February 2003 . . .



New magazine published by the Economic Research Service, USDA.

Further details are on the inside back cover.

