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Series S, Rural Sociology

OLDER URBAN MIGRANTS IN RURAL SETTINGS:  
PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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April, 1980

No 80-S-15



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## ABSTRACT

A substantial portion of the current urban to rural migration stream consists of older persons who are choosing to live in countryside residences rather than in towns. This paper draws on experiences of older migrants in order to explore some of the objective and subjective implications of residential choice. The data demonstrate that while older persons living in the countryside have less access to goods and services, they are more satisfied, more likely to perceive a net improvement over the former residence, and more attached to their residences. The research suggests that the circumstances of older migrants in rural areas must be closely monitored to determine what effects aging and living costs will have on subsequent residential mobility.



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## Older Urban Migrants in Rural Settings: Problems and Prospects

### INTRODUCTION

Urban dwellers have shown a renewed interest in rural areas in recent years. This has resulted in a reversal of the familiar rural-to-urban migration trend which characterized America throughout most of the 20th century. Not only are many rural counties now attracting new residents, but the least urbanized parts of those counties, the open-country nonfarm portions, are gaining a disproportionate share of the migrant households (Zelinsky, 1976). A recent study of metropolitan to nonmetropolitan migrants in the North Central region,<sup>1/</sup> which is the focus of this research, established the fact that two migrant households opted for countryside living for every one that settled in a town or other incorporated place (Sofranko and Williams, 1980).

A substantial fraction of metropolitan to nonmetropolitan<sup>2/</sup> migrants are relatively old, often retired from the work force. For the North Central region as a whole, Sofranko and Williams (1980) demonstrated that about one-third of the household heads identified as metropolitan to nonmetropolitan migrants were 60 years of age or older. Research in various subareas of the region have documented even higher proportions of older migrants (Dailey, et. al. 1977; Koebernick and Beegle, 1978). The point of departure for the present paper is the as yet unrecognized fact that older migrants, just like their younger counterparts, choose to live in the countryside rather than in towns, and in a ratio of two to one.

At a superficial level, it seems quite plausible that older urban migrants to rural areas would prefer open-country settings. An expressed desire to "go fishing" is a familiar response to inquiries about retirement plans. On the other hand, however, there is a growing awareness among

planners and public officials that open-country settings, especially, leave much to be desired in terms of the provision of services and opportunities for older persons. And it is less than obvious that one has to live in the countryside to "go fishing," or, more broadly, to enjoy the presumed recreational and other advantages of rural living. This paper draws on the experiences of older persons who have migrated from large urban centers to fast growing rural areas in the midwest in order to explore some of the objective and subjective implications of residential choice, such as access to services, adjustment difficulties, and residential satisfaction. The specific comparisons will focus on the experiences of older migrants relocating in towns versus those who have moved into the countryside.

#### RESIDENCE CHOICES OF OLDER MIGRANTS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

Migration rates among older people are generally low in comparison with other age groups, and particularly low when compared with younger individuals and households (Shaw, 1975:18). As a matter of fact, while the general population "turnaround" in migration has been adding to the population of many rural areas, those same rural areas continue to be net losers of young people (Wardwell, 1977). Older people, in contrast, when they choose to migrate at all, exhibit a propensity to move in a more rural direction.

The import of the residential preferences of older migrants lies in the fact that rural growth areas in the midwest tend to be gaining older people at a disproportionate rate. Thus with reference to older age groups only, the migration "turnaround" is, in one sense, not as much a reversal for rural areas as it is an amplification of an established pattern.

The proportion of older people in the rural population has generally been higher than that in cities for some decades because older people were less likely to migrate. Now, however, the proportion of older persons in rural areas is increasing still further because those older urbanites who do migrate show a preference for rural living.

Older urban-to-rural migrants are attracted to rural areas for a variety of reasons. Lower costs of living, personal safety, the friendliness of rural people, recreational opportunities and scenic beauty are among the attractions of rural life. The implications of large numbers of older migrants relocating from urban to rural areas could be far-reaching, however, when one considers the service infrastructure of rural and urban places. On average, metropolitan areas provide many more opportunities for involvement in activities of various kinds, better access to public transportation, more extensive medical facilities, and relatively easy access to a wide range of routinely needed goods and services. Rural areas, almost by definition, have less to offer in the way of goods and services. With reference to older persons in particular, more than one researcher has concluded that "compared to urban areas facilities and services for older people in rural areas are deficient in availability, access, and quality, and are more costly" (Taietz, 1975).

The preference among older urban migrants for rural living may be problematic for several reasons. First, as was pointed out above, rural areas are typically limited in availability of and access to goods and services. Second, any disadvantage in access to goods and services which may characterize rural areas generally should be more evident in open-country settings than in the towns in those areas. Third, it is reasonable to assume that limited access to goods and services will be of greater



consequence to older people, given the physical and other limitations that accrue with advancing years. And fourth, it may well be the case that the positive aspects of rural living which attracted older migrants to the area are substantially offset by the disadvantages actually encountered and especially for those living in the country.

Whether a particular residential choice proves to be problematic for older migrants is a matter for empirical determination, of course, and we now turn to that task. Comparisons are made in the following pages between older urban migrants living in open-country and town settings with respect to: objective differences in access to goods and services; subjective reactions to the availability and quality of goods and services; and, finally, migrants' perceptions of the gains and losses they have experienced in making the move from an urban area to a rural residence.

#### SAMPLE

The data on older migrants presented here are part of a larger project which was designed to address, across a broad geographical base, many of the questions being raised by the metropolitan to nonmetropolitan migration trend (Sofranko and Williams, 1980). The research consisted of a telephone survey of migrants into the 75 high net immigration nonmetropolitan counties (rates of 10% or greater, 1970-75) of the North Central Region. Within each of these counties a systematic sample of households was obtained from 1977 telephone listings and matched against the appropriate 1970 directories. This procedure, designed to maximize the probability of obtaining an in-migration on any given call, yielded two strata: expected resident (matched) households, and expected migrant (unmatched) households.



Within this survey population of households, three respondent types were interviewed in the spring and early summer of 1977: (1) continuous residents (since 1970) of the high growth counties; (2) metropolitan-origin migrants who had moved in since April, 1970, and (3) nonmetropolitan-origin migrants since April, 1970. Heads of households were the primary respondents, although spouses were interviewed after several unsuccessful attempts to contact the household head. Only persons who reported their location at the end of the interview as their usual place of residence were interviewed, thus eliminating seasonal or temporary residents. The present paper is based on data from those metropolitan origin migrants who were aged 60 or older at the time of the interview (N = 158). Two-thirds of these older migrants (N = 104) were living outside any incorporated place when interviewed, and the remainder (N = 54) stated that they lived in a town or village.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

Although this paper is concerned only with older metropolitan to non-metropolitan migrants, it may be useful at the beginning to contrast the residential choices of this group with those of the other respondents interviewed in the larger study. While, as noted earlier, two-thirds of the older urban origin migrants chose to live in the countryside, this is true for only 45 percent of the older (age 60 or above) migrants who had come in to the same counties from other rural areas. Similarly, only 50 percent of the older long-term residents interviewed were living outside incorporated places. The older urban migrants, in short, show a decidedly stronger preference for countryside living than other older people in the same area. Whether that preference presents any problems remains to be seen, however.

Access to services

Older urban-origin migrants who have chosen town and countryside residences are compared, in Table 1, on the distances they travel for various goods and services. Respondents were asked how far they traveled for a given purpose, and the answers they have given do not preclude the possibility that a respondent may bypass a nearby facility for one at a greater distance as a matter of personal preference. Nevertheless, it is clear from the data in Table 1 that many and even most of the town-dwelling older migrants are essentially within walking distance (less than 1 mile) of the places they patronize for the goods and services listed. Shopping for major appliances and obtaining medical care are least likely to be done nearby, but this is to be expected in view of the fact that the towns in question are small. Only 11 percent of the town-dwelling older migrants were residing in towns of 5,000 or more (1970 population) at the time of the interview.

Older migrants living in the countryside are not likely to be able to obtain goods and services nearby and this is reflected in the figures shown in Table 1. Except for religious services, a majority of the countryside residents travel to obtain all of the services listed in the table. Even grocery shopping involves a distance of more than 5 miles for 63 percent of the older migrants living in the countryside. It is reasonable to infer from the table that these older migrants are not living at the edges of small towns, an inference which is supported by the fact that, on average, they reside 6.5 miles from the center of the place with which they identify. Furthermore, the places with which they identify are themselves quite small. Ninety two percent of the countryside households are living near places under 5,000 (in 1970 population),

In summary, most goods and services are unlikely to be available nearby and the bulk of these migrants to the country report travelling substantial distances for most goods and services.

Objectively, it would appear that older urban migrants living in the countryside are at a disadvantage with respect to access to a range of goods and services. Recent examinations of quality of life, however, caution against relying strictly on objective measure to make inferences about life in rural areas (Dillman and Tremblay, 1977). In response to this concern, we have witnessed a wider use of more subjective measures. In the next section we will explore the question whether older countryside dwellers define access to services and other aspects of their residential setting as problematic, again by comparing their responses with those of town dwellers. Before looking at their subjective reactions, however, we should also note some demographic differences between the two residence categories of older migrants, differences which may offset the potential disadvantage of distance from goods and services. Respondents living in the countryside were, for example, younger, averaging 66 years in age, while town dwellers averaged 69 years. They were also less likely to be living alone, and they had higher incomes. Fourteen percent of those in the countryside were living in single-person households, compared with 35 percent of those in town. Current household incomes tended to be low for both categories, but while 33 percent of those living in the country reported \$5,000 or less in income for 1976, this was true for 41 percent of those living in town. The foregoing comparisons suggest that urban origin migrants living in the countryside, while relatively distant from services, may also be better able to cope with the necessary travel, at least in the short run. They are somewhat younger than town dwellers, tend

to have higher incomes, and are much less likely to be living alone, all of which would tend to offset the disadvantage of having to travel some distance to obtain most services.

### Subjective Reactions to Place of Residence

All residential shifts involve some problems, especially when the shift is from a large urban area to a predominantly rural area. Even when moves are voluntary and based on prior information about the destination area, as they were for the older migrants of concern here, residential change is in some respects disruptive and presents problems. At issue here, though, is whether older countryside and town dwellers experienced similar problems, and to the same extent. The data in Table 2 provide the basis for comparing the two residence types on the problems they experienced upon relocating in the rural area.

All older migrants were presented with a fixed set of commonly experienced problems and asked if each was a problem for them in their new residence, at the time of the move. They were then asked to indicate their main problem (Table 2). A large portion of both residence groups (44 percent and 43 percent for the town and countryside residents, respectively) responded that they experienced no problems.<sup>3/</sup> Among those who did have some problem or problems, fewer than one in five of either group had problems making new friends, and less than 10 percent had any problem getting involved in clubs or organizations. The two problems which did occur with somewhat greater frequency were getting good medical care and buying the types of consumer goods they were accustomed to. The medical care problem is noteworthy, especially since it is one of the attributes of a residence which is viewed as being critical for older persons (Wiseman and Virden, 1977). The data point out, however, that there are essentially no town-countryside differences, with both types identifying



identical problem areas, and to about the same moderate extent.

Looking at the second portion of Table 2, which presents the main adjustment problem, it can be seen once again that older countryside dwellers did not experience different types of problems than town residents. Both residence groups single out getting medical care and shopping as their main adjustment problems, and once again the town-countryside differences are only minor.

The countryside residents, by virtue of their having to travel further than town residents for almost every activity, might have been expected to experience more as well as different problems. This was not the case, for there were only minor town-country differences. One can only infer that adjustments to rural living had been adequately anticipated by the older migrants and thus presented no major problems. It is also possible that the differences between countryside and town living are not so great as to present unique difficulties for those living in the country. In any case, the subjective reactions discussed here, which focus on adjustments following the move itself, do not suggest that country living is perceived as particularly problematic by older urban migrants.

Residential satisfaction among older migrants constitutes another area designed to probe migrants' subjective reactions to the places in which they live. In this case the time perspective is that of early 1977, when the interviews were conducted, rather than the period immediately following the move. Except for a few recent arrivals, most respondents had a few years of experience in their new setting when interviewed, time enough for problems, if any, to become apparent. Respondents were asked how satisfied they were with the several characteristics of their communities listed in Table 3. The proportions saying they were "very" or "somewhat" satisfied were added together and those sums are presented in the table.

One can conclude from the figures shown in Table 3 that the minorities among the older migrants who experienced some problem associated with the move itself did not grow into majorities over time. Only the question on public transportation (explicit reference was made to bus and taxi service in the interview) yielded less than a majority of "satisfied" responses. The items shown in Table 2 and 3 are not identical but they cover much the same ground, and it is fair to say that most older migrants are quite satisfied with their places of residence ("As happy as clams," in the words of one participant in the study). Overall satisfaction, reported in the last row of Table 3, derives from a direct question about satisfaction with the community in general. Almost all older migrants seem to be generally satisfied with their current residence.

Another inference from the data in Table 3 is that older migrants living in the countryside are moderately but uniformly more likely to be satisfied with their communities than town dwellers. The proportion of countryside residents expressing satisfaction is higher for each of the characteristics listed in the table, as well as on the overall satisfaction measure.

In spite of the fact that access to goods and services involves considerable travel for those living in the country (Table 1), the latter are more likely to express satisfaction with shopping facilities, for example, than town dwellers for whom access is easier. Medical facilities, similarly, are considered to be satisfactory by 80 percent of those living in the countryside versus 65 percent of the town dwellers. And if the limitations which people must face in old age are being experienced or anticipated by those older migrants, there is no evidence here that those living outside the towns see themselves as being at a particular disadvantage. Fully 94 percent of the countryside residents expressed satisfaction with local programs for senior



citizens, for example, compared with a lower but still substantial 74 percent of the town residents.

#### Perceived Trade-Offs in Metropolitan Versus Rural Living

Thus far we have reviewed objective differences in travel distance for obtaining various goods and services for older urban migrants living in towns and in the countryside, and the subjective reactions of both categories of migrants to the settings in which they have chosen to live. It was assumed that the lure of country living might have come to be viewed as less attractive with first-hand experience among those in the countryside because of difficulties in gaining access to goods and services. If there are problems associated with country living, there is little evidence in the data presented above that older urban migrants in the countryside are regretting their choice to live at a distance from most services. On the contrary, the country dwellers experienced few problems and seem to be more satisfied than those in town. The fact that the older urban migrants living in town are, on average, three years older and more likely to be living alone than those in the countryside may imply that the vicissitudes of growing older will, in just a few years, bring home to the country dwellers the realization that their relative isolation is a disadvantage. Present data do not permit addressing that type of question, though it should be pursued in future studies.

In this, final section of the report we have combined both the objective and subjective approaches to take still another look at the implications of residential choice - the gains and losses associated with moving. Older respondents were asked to compare the particular metropolitan setting from which they had moved to the new rural setting on the several community characteristics listed in Table 4. They were asked to express

their subjective judgment as to whether, on each characteristic, the situation was "better here" or "better there." The results, displayed in Table 4, represent an articulation of the trade-offs experienced by the migrants, and, as before, the point of interest in the comparison between older migrants in town and country settings.

In addition to being more satisfied with every aspect of their current residence, countryside dwellers also tend to evaluate their current residence more favorably when compared with the place of origin (Table 4). Although both groups view their current residences in much more favorable terms than their former residences, the countryside residents in general experienced a greater perceived net improvement as a result of migrating. They are, for example, much more likely than those residing in towns to view their new neighbors as being friendlier, to see themselves as having more privacy in their lives, and as living in a healthier environment than had been the case in their former residence. The town elderly, on the other hand, show one major improvement in their current residence, and that is their proximity to family members. In summary, both residence types see the present residence as an improvement over the former residence, and on all items. But the countryside dwellers have an even greater perception of improvement. On practically every measure older countryside residents exhibit more satisfaction with their current place of residence.

As further confirmation of the above general picture which shows a distinctly positive balance in the trade-offs experienced by these older migrants, we might draw on other residential preference and mobility expectation data obtained in the survey. Few would prefer to live elsewhere or in fact expect to move (within the next three years). Here again, however,

the marginal differences between town and country residents indicate greater satisfaction with the chosen place of residence among those in the country; twelve percent of the older migrants in town said they would prefer to live elsewhere, versus 10 percent of those in the country. Similarly, 14 percent of the town residents said they expected to move within the next three years, versus six percent of the countryside residents. Thus at this point in time, at least, the countryside dwellers appear to be well entrenched in their residences, with neither the desire to move or an expectation that they will move in the near future. There is clearly no evidence that countryside living is part of a broader "step-migration" process.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The comparisons between the older town and countryside residents reveal some expected and unexpected differences. As might be expected, those in the countryside have less access to services. They live relatively far from even the most commonly needed goods and services, and consequently must travel considerable distances to meet their needs. On the other hand, the comparisons based on the more subjective measures show a decidedly higher level of satisfaction among the countryside residents, which would suggest that living some distance from a community, and its attendant travel costs, have not been translated into residential dissatisfaction. In point of fact the opposite appears to have occurred; those residing in a more decentralized location seem to be fulfilling a desire for a rural residence. They are, as a result, more satisfied, more likely to perceive a net improvement over the former residence, and they are more attached to their residences. There is thus very little evidence, overall, that older migrants locating in more rural, countryside residences are at any greater disadvantage than town residents.

While those living in the countryside appear to have achieved an idealized type of residence, it is possible that since they are a different type of older migrant than the town residents, the effects being attributed to a particular type of residence are simply masking other factors. In other words, older migrants moving to the countryside may be selectively different from those moving to towns. It was noted, for example, that those in the countryside are younger, which could explain their apparently greater mobility in obtaining goods and services; they are less likely to be living alone, which might obviate the problems of isolation and loneliness frequently attributed to the aged in rural areas (Harbert and Wilkenson, 1979); and they also tend to be somewhat better off economically. And even moderate income differences can loom large in an era of steeply rising prices. Demographic differences of the moment, of whatever kind, are no guarantee of longer-run satisfaction for these particular migrants; circumstances do change.

We conclude that the circumstances of the many older urban migrants now in rural areas must be closely monitored. A dream of life in a rural setting apparently realized may already be losing its glow. Steeply rising transportation and other costs are bound to have a heavy impact on the typically fixed-income older segment of society. Failing health, or the loss of a spouse are the all too familiar concomitants of the aging process. Will the "home in the country" continue to be a source of satisfaction? The "new migration" is too new to have answers to such questions, but there would seem to be an urgent need for studies to monitor both the migration process itself and its implications.

Table 1. Distances travelled for various goods and services, older metropoli migrants by type of residence.

Distance to services	Town Residents	Countryside Residents
Grocery shopping	. . . . percent \ . . . .	
Less than 1 mile	56	1
1-5 miles	26	36
over 5 miles	18	63
Shopping for major appliances		
Less than 1 mile	35	2
1-5 miles	19	27
over 5 miles	46	71
Medical care		
Less than 1 mile	38	0
1-5 miles	27	28
over 5 miles	35	72
Banking		
Less than 1 mile	50	1
1-5 miles	23	43
over 5 miles	27	56
Auto and major appliance service or repair		
Less than 1 mile	40	4
1-5 miles	36	38
over 5 miles	23	58
Religious services		
less than 1 mile	54	8
1-5 miles	32	47
over 5 miles	14	45





Table 2. Problems Experienced by Older Migrants, by Residence Type.

Problem	Town Residents	Countryside Residents
Did you have a problem.....	. . . % responding "yes" . . .	
Making new friends	18.5	19.4
Getting good medical care	31.5	28.8
Joining clubs & organizations	7.4	5.8
Buying consumer goods	35.2	34.6
Other problems	11.1	8.7
What was the biggest problem?		
Making new friends	9.3	8.7
Getting good medical care	20.4	17.3
Joining clubs & organizations	0.0	1.0
Buying consumer goods	22.2	21.2
Other	3.7	6.7



Table 3. Older Migrants' Assessments of Satisfaction with Their Residence by Residence Location.

Residence characteristic	Town Residents	Countryside Residents
	. . . . . percent. . . . .	
Medical care facilities	65	80
Senior citizen programs	74	94
Shopping facilities	67	76
Public transportation	41	48
Friendly neighbors	94	96
Outdoor recreation	78	96
Maintenance of roads, streets	74	86
Local taxes	72	74
Overall satisfaction	94	97



Table 4. Older Migrants' Comparisons of Current and Former Residence or Selected Characteristics, by Residence Type.

Comparison of current and former residences	Town residents		Countryside residents	
	"Better <sup>a/</sup> here"	"Better there"	"Better here"	"Better there"
	. . . . .percent. . . . .			
Neighbors friendlier	47.2	11.3	53.9	10.8
Feel safer	76.9	0.0	81.7	2.9
Tax rates are higher	19.6	58.7	17.5	62.9
Environment healthier	83.0	7.5	95.0	0.0
Less privacy	25.9	53.7	9.9	78.2
Higher living costs	28.3	37.7	25.5	42.2
Closer to family	40.4	21.2	21.2	14.4

a/ Respondents were also permitted the choice "same here as there". These have been omitted from the table to simplify presentation of the data.





#### FOOTNOTES

1. The North Central region consists of the 12 states from North Dakota at its northwestern extreme south to Kansas, from Kansas east to Ohio and the northern states between Ohio and North Dakota.
2. The terms rural and urban are used interchangeably with the terms nonmetropolitan and metropolitan throughout the paper.
3. The relatively large portions of older migrants reporting no adjustment problems may stem from the fact that few had no ties in or with the destination area prior to moving. Two thirds had friends or acquaintances living in the area; almost a half (48 percent) had relatives living in the area. In addition, two thirds or more had visited or vacationed in the area at some time in the past. It might also be pointed out, however, that relatively few, less than one in four, were return migrants.



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