

Is Portland Really the Place Where Young People Go To Retire? Migration Patterns of Portland's Young and College-Educated, 1980-2010

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September 2012

Executive Summary

For many metro areas, including Portland, being economically competitive in today's knowledge and information economy depends on attracting and retaining young, college-educated (YCE) migrants. On this indicator, Portland has been most successful: since 1980, the Portland metropolitan region has attracted college-educated individuals under the age of 40 at some of the country's highest net migration rates in good economic times and bad.

Though not unique to Portland, the resiliency of Portland's migration streams, even in periods of economic uncertainty, calls attention to an increasingly selective group of YCE migrants who appear to place greater relative value on non-economic factors—from political milieu to access to quality public transportation—compared to employment opportunities. This trend directly challenges a long-established cornerstone of traditional migration theory suggesting that the decision to move is predicated on benefits exceeding costs, and linked to the importance of jobs and economic opportunity as attractive forces for working-age households.

Reading between the lines of recent media accounts, and in particular the television show *Portlandia*, the shift from economic to non-economic factors has been portrayed in a most interesting way: because young migrants to Portland place relatively low value on work and traditional careers, their desire to exchange employment opportunities for quality of life (amenity) factors indeed makes Portland the city "where young people go to retire." The question is: in the short and long-term, how sustainable is Portland's trend of attracting and retaining YCE migrants if labor market outcomes continue to remain worse compared to other metro areas?

What are the facts? In this paper we draw upon U.S. Census Bureau data from the 2000 Census and more recent American Community Surveys from 2005-2007 and 2008-2010, to compare migration patterns in Portland to the other 50 largest U.S. metros. Our analysis highlights several critical findings:

- The Portland region has consistently attracted and retained YCE migrants at some of the highest levels of any metro in the U.S.
- The Portland metro's migration patterns among YCEs have consistently exceeded the expected rate given the region's labor market conditions.
- Portland attracts and retains not only YCEs, but also empty-nester and retirement (age 40 and above) migrants at levels exceeding its metro peers.

- Unlike most large metros, Portland's net exchanges of YCE migrants are unusually strong across metropolitan areas of all sizes.
- In 2008-2010, almost 1 in 7 YCE in-migrants to the Portland metro were immigrants. Equally important, the Portland region's foreign-born population has educational attainment levels that rival the region's native-born population.

Of the largest 50 U.S. metro areas, only Portland and Seattle ranked in the top 15 metros for each period analyzed, 1980 to 2010, with the highest rate of attracting and retaining YCE migrants. This statistic not only underscores the Portland metro's competitiveness in attracting and retaining college-educated talent, but also showcases the consistency of Portland's YCE migration patterns. Other metro areas, including Austin, Denver, and Phoenix, also demonstrated an impressive ability to attract and retain YCE migrants during this period, but also experienced 'bust' periods where YCE migration flows ebbed.

In the end, our findings suggest that most Portland college-educated migrants appear to place greater relative value on amenity values compared to economic opportunity. Moving to and remaining in Portland despite less-than-stellar economic opportunities is truly 'voting with your feet' for the region's quality of life. What's more, given Portland's ability to not only attract but also retain YCEs, amenities will likely remain important for keeping college-educated individuals as residents of Portland. In addition to YCE migrants, our results suggest that Portland's urban and natural amenities are also strong pull factors for empty-nester and retired (age 40 and above) college-educated migrants.

Given the strong attractiveness of Portland's quality of life to both Portland residents and would-be Portlanders, our findings underscore the importance of carefully navigating the 'amenity paradox'—managing future growth in a way so to avoid eroding the very quality of life that attracts and retains the region's human capital. We believe addressing this challenge will be essential to ensuring the sustainability of college-educated migration both in the short and long-term, and with definite implications for economic development in the Portland region.