



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA EXTENSION

MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN MINNESOTA: ENVIRONMENT + FOOD & AGRICULTURE + COMMUNITIES + FAMILIES + YOUTH

# Rewriting the Rural Narrative Joy and Healing

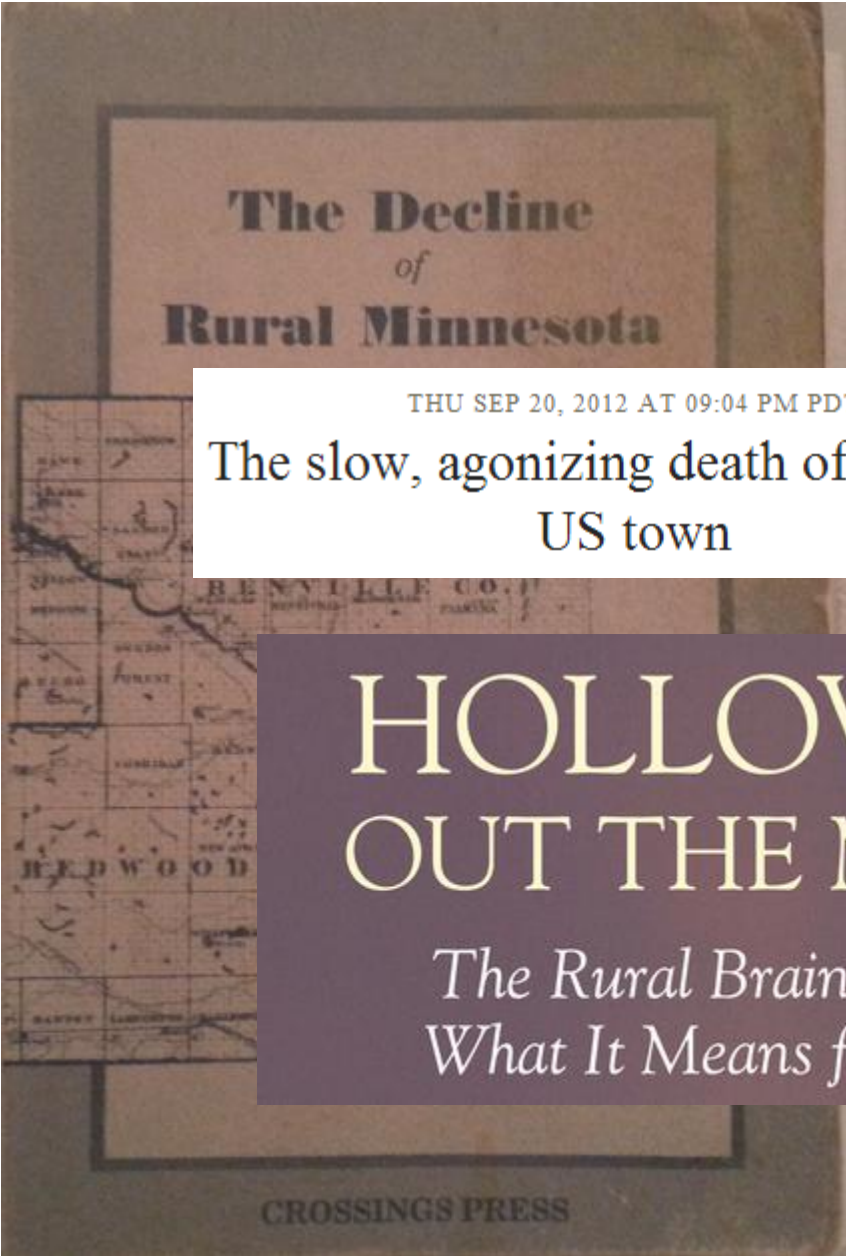
June 15, 2026

Benjamin Winchester

Rural Sociologist

Extension Department of Community Development

# The Rural Narrative



The Decline  
of  
Rural Minnesota

CROSSINGS PRESS

The image shows the cover of a book titled 'The Decline of Rural Minnesota' by Crossings Press. The cover features a historical map of Minnesota with various county names like 'BENNYVILLE CO.' and 'REDWOOD'. The title is printed in a serif font at the top.

THU SEP 20, 2012 AT 09:04 PM PDT

The slow, agonizing death of the small  
US town

## HOLLOWING OUT THE MIDDLE

*The Rural Brain Drain and  
What It Means for America*



Survival  
of Rural  
America

VICTORIES AND BITTER HARVESTS

Richard E. Wood

The image shows the cover of a book titled 'Survival of Rural America: Victories and Bitter Harvests' by Richard E. Wood. The cover features a photograph of a person standing in a field with a horse and a tractor. The title is printed in a serif font at the top.



# THE NARRATIVE

- There's a brain drain
- **We live in the middle of nowhere**
- We are a sleepy town
- Everyone knows one another
- Nobody locks their doors
- The lucky few escape



- What we had
- What we don't have
- What we wish we had
- What we could have had...

# Mechanization of agriculture



# Roads & transportation



# Main street restructuring

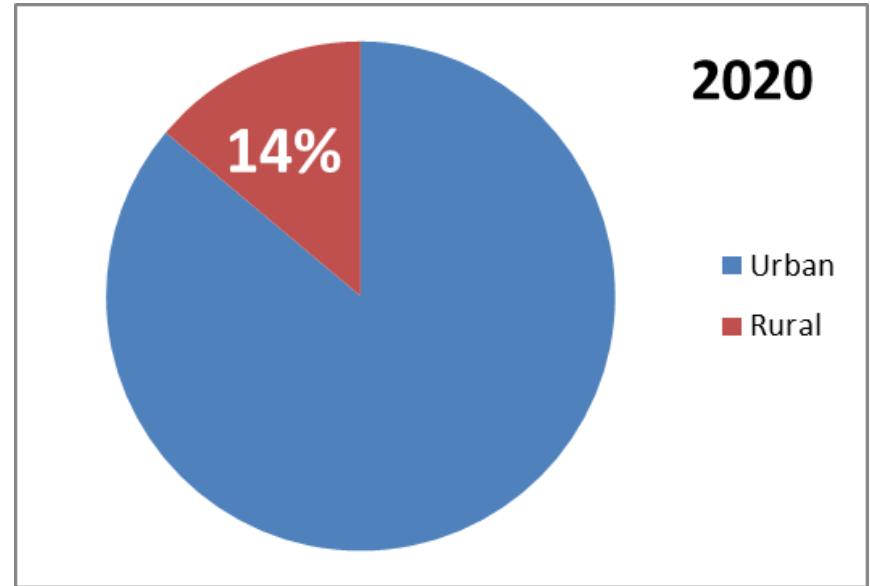
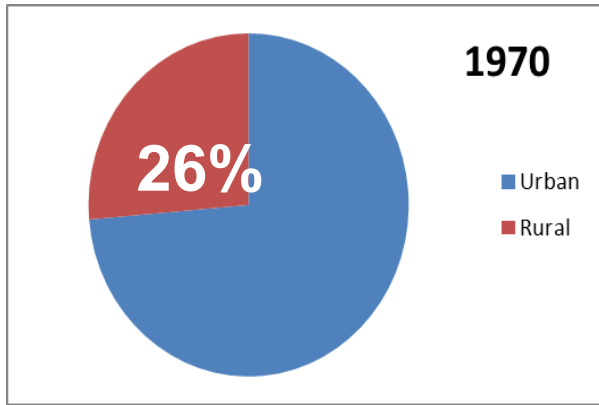
# School consolidations

*Rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated. –Mark Twain*

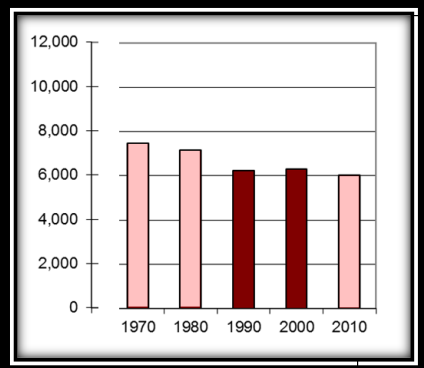


Rural is **changing**,  
not dying.

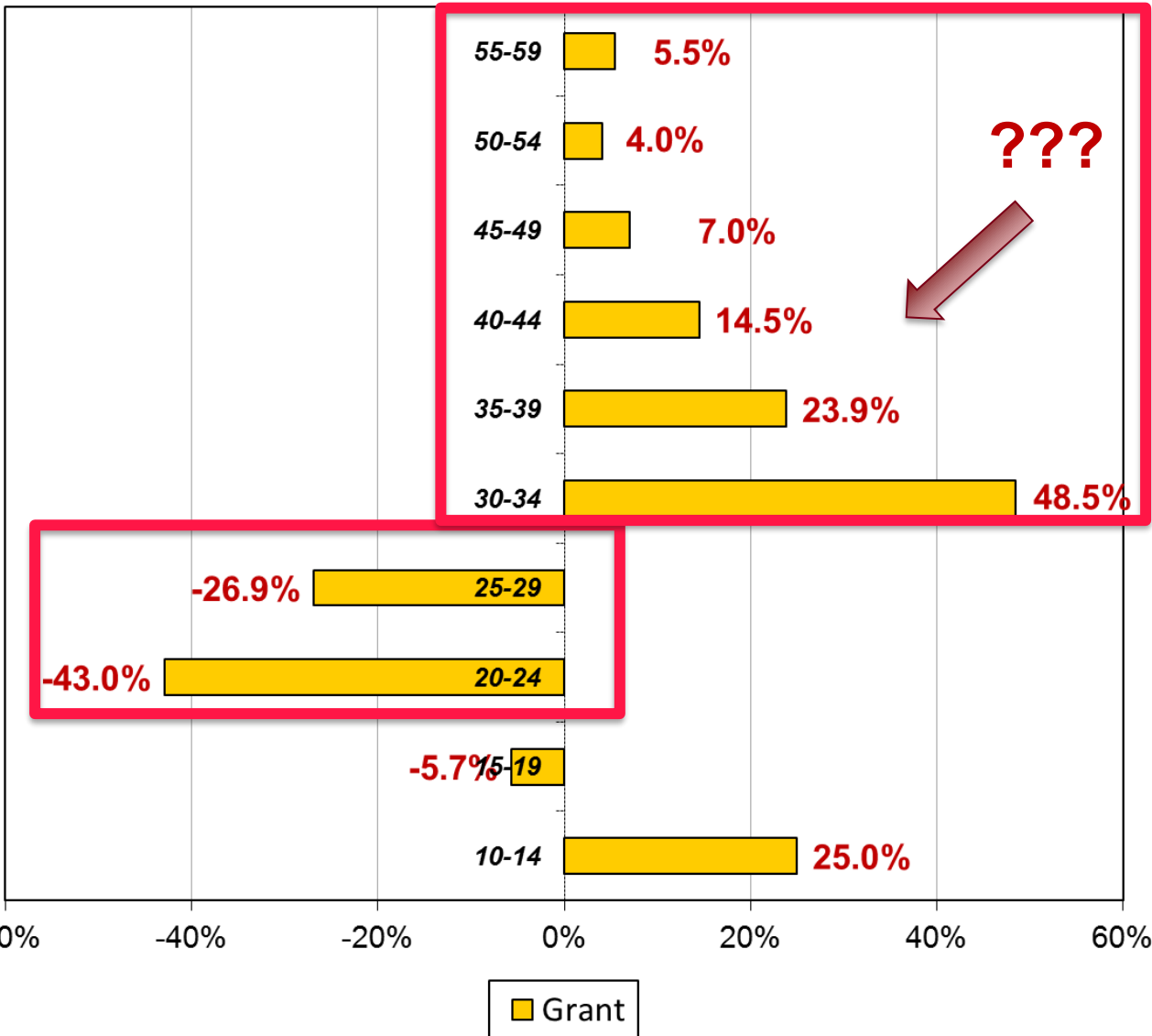
In the U.S. the rural population has **increased by 11%** since 1970.



As rural populations grow, residents get **reclassified.**



### 1990-2000, Percent Cohort Change



**Brain Drain** →



# UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA EXTENSION

**Nebraska Buffalo Commons  
Research 2012**

**Minnesota Workforce  
Movers 2004, 2012, 2019**

## Montana Movers Study, 2021



## South Dakota Movers Study, 2025



# Newcomers: Why?

Simpler pace of life



Safety and Security



Low Housing Cost





# Newcomers: Who?





- 41% moved primarily for a job  
(50% youngest/ 35% oldest)
- 25% lived there previously
- 91% have some college or bachelor's
- 75% household incomes over \$50k
- 47% have children in household
- 14% telecommute!

Source: 2020 University of Minnesota Extension Center for Community Vitality. Rural workforce movers study. Funded by the U. S. Department of Agriculture.



# Newcomers: Who?



	MN 2019	MT 2021	SD 2025
Moved primarily for a job	41% 	35% 	26%
Lived in the community before	25% 	34%* 	23%

\* Access to housing supply

# The Rural Brain Gain

They choose rural age

**30-49**

And also when they are 50-64  
(since the 1970s)



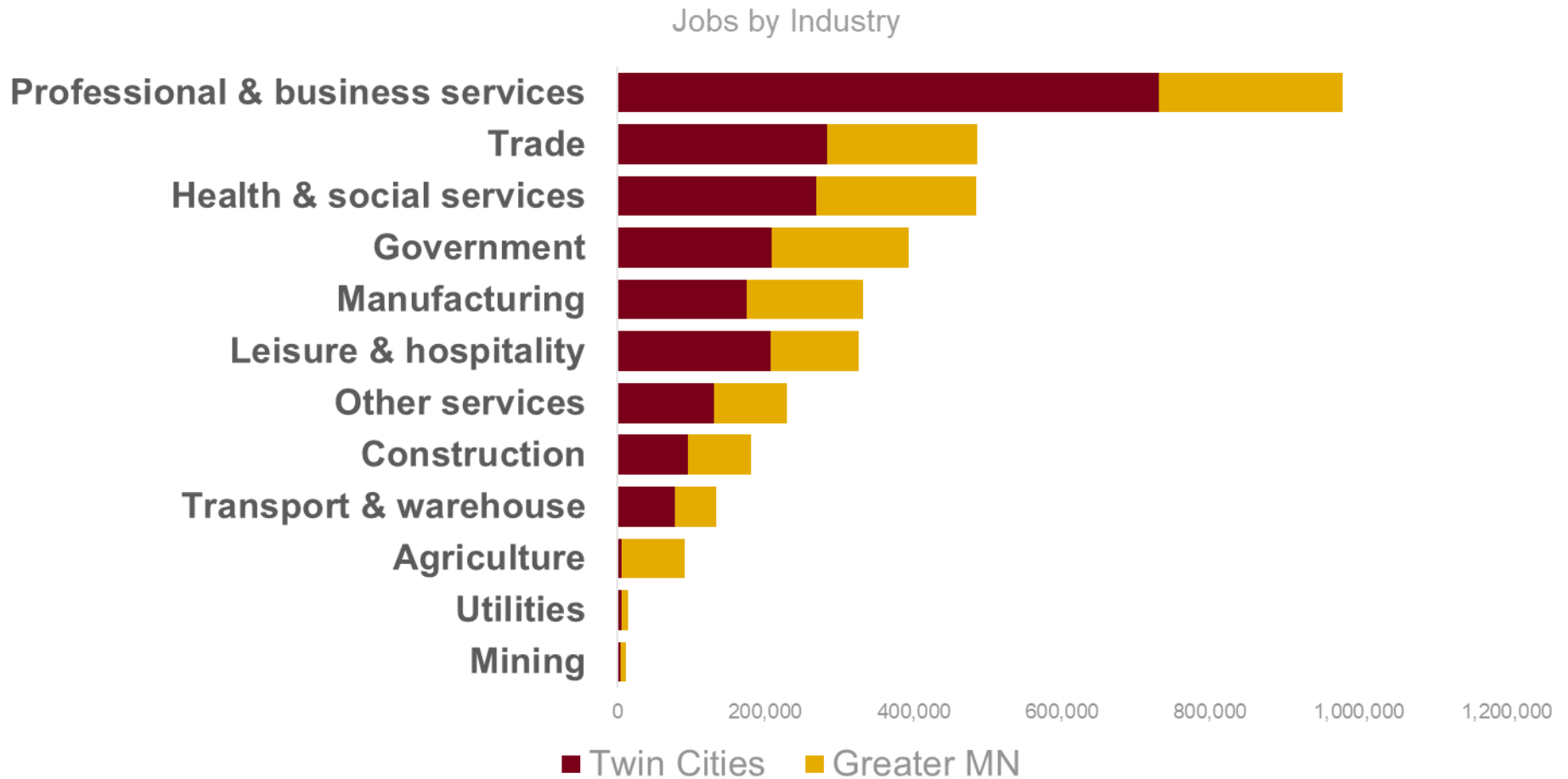
## Move Factors with Preference

*Proportion of households that indicated it was important in some way.*

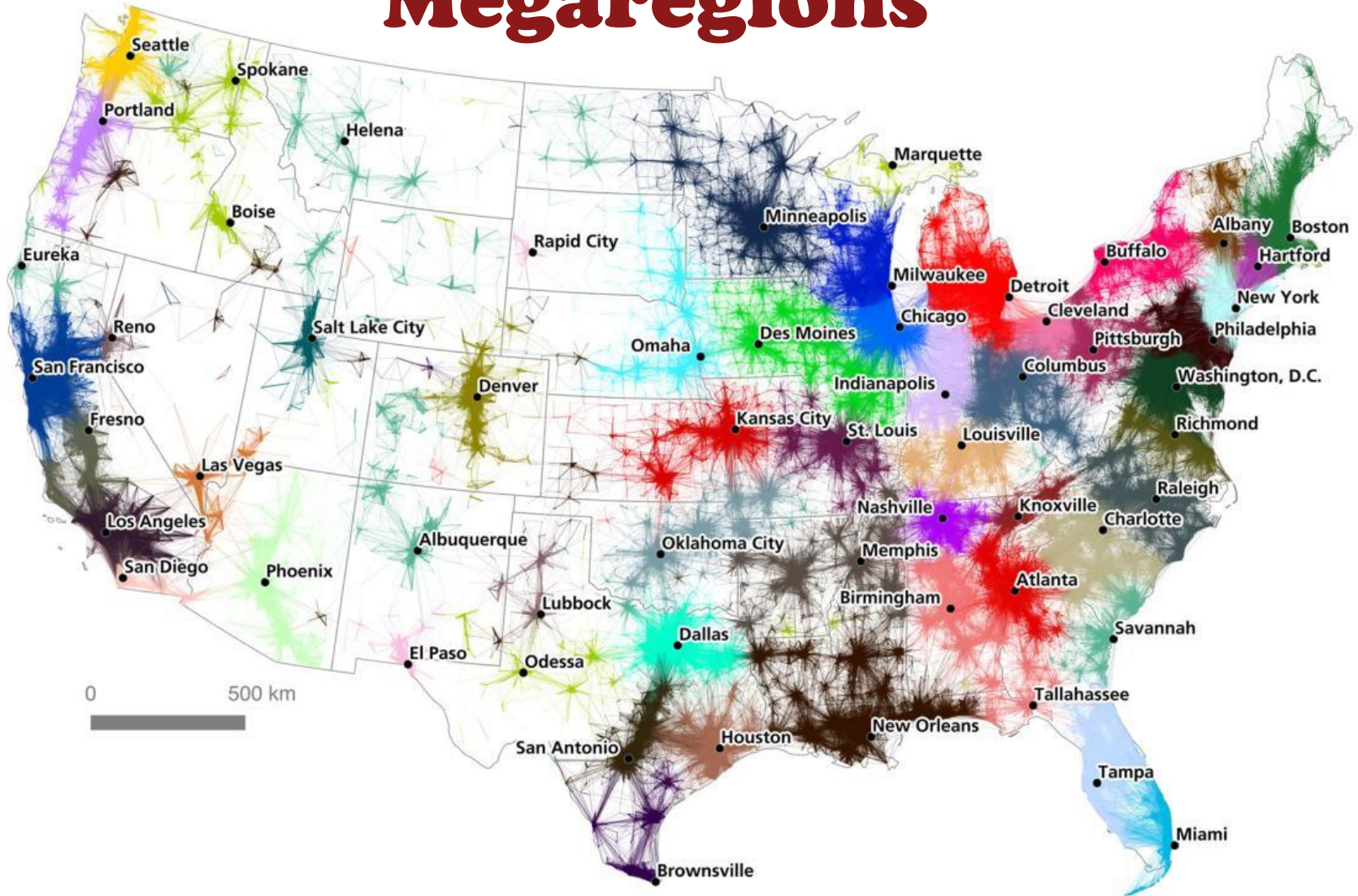
	Percent
Take advantage of the slower pace of life	71
To live closer to relatives	70
To find a less congested place to live	69
To live among people with similar values	68
To find lower priced housing	67
To find a safer place to live	67
To live in a smaller community	66
To find a lower cost of living	65
To find a good environment for raising children	65
To find a job that allowed a better work-life balance	61
To find a job that matches my skills	60
To take on a new job	58
To find a higher paying job	56
To live closer to friends	50
To find higher quality schools	49

Source: 2020 University of Minnesota Extension Center for Community Vitality. Rural workforce movers study. Funded by the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

# Diversifying the rural economy

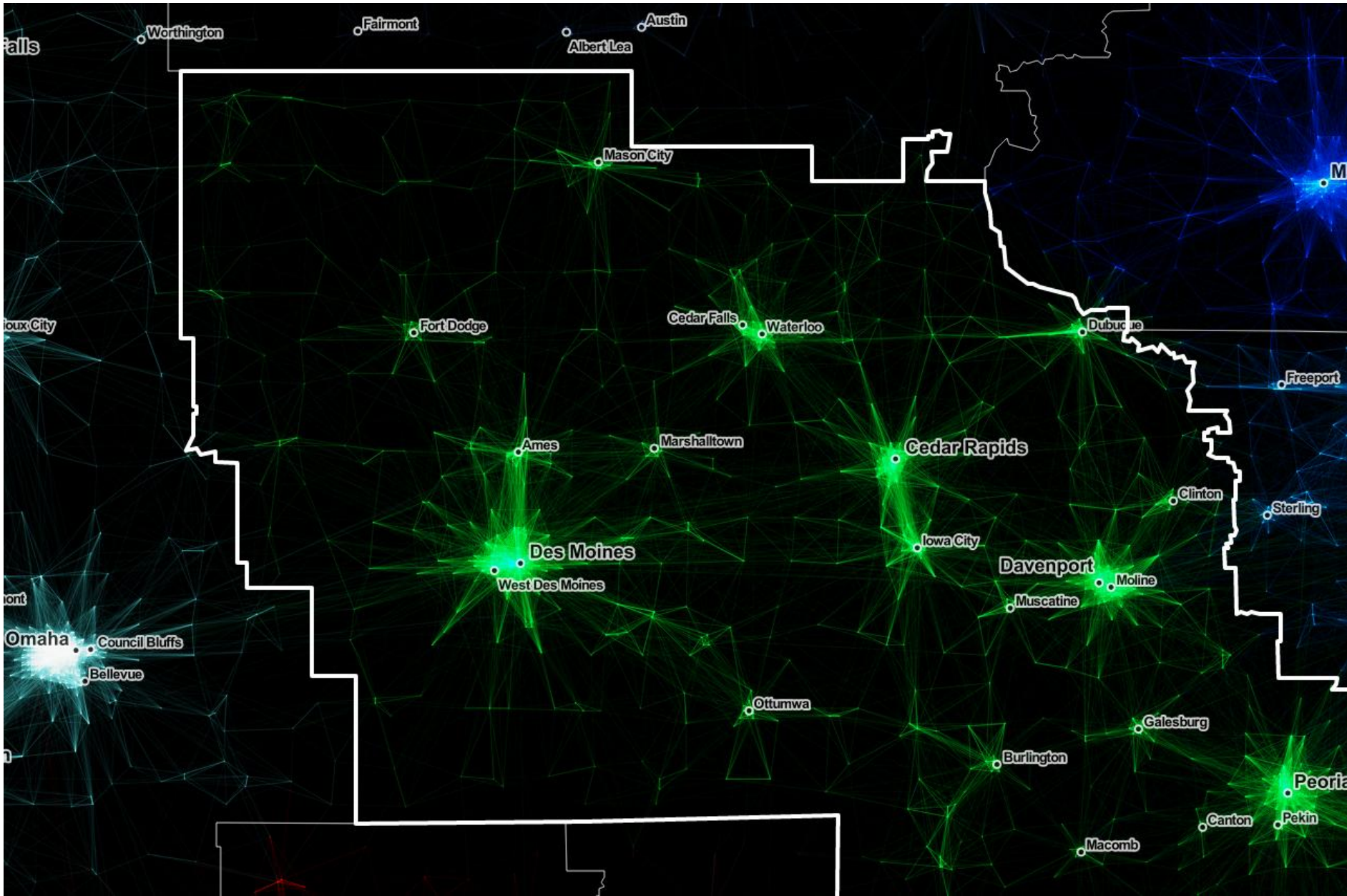


# Megaregions

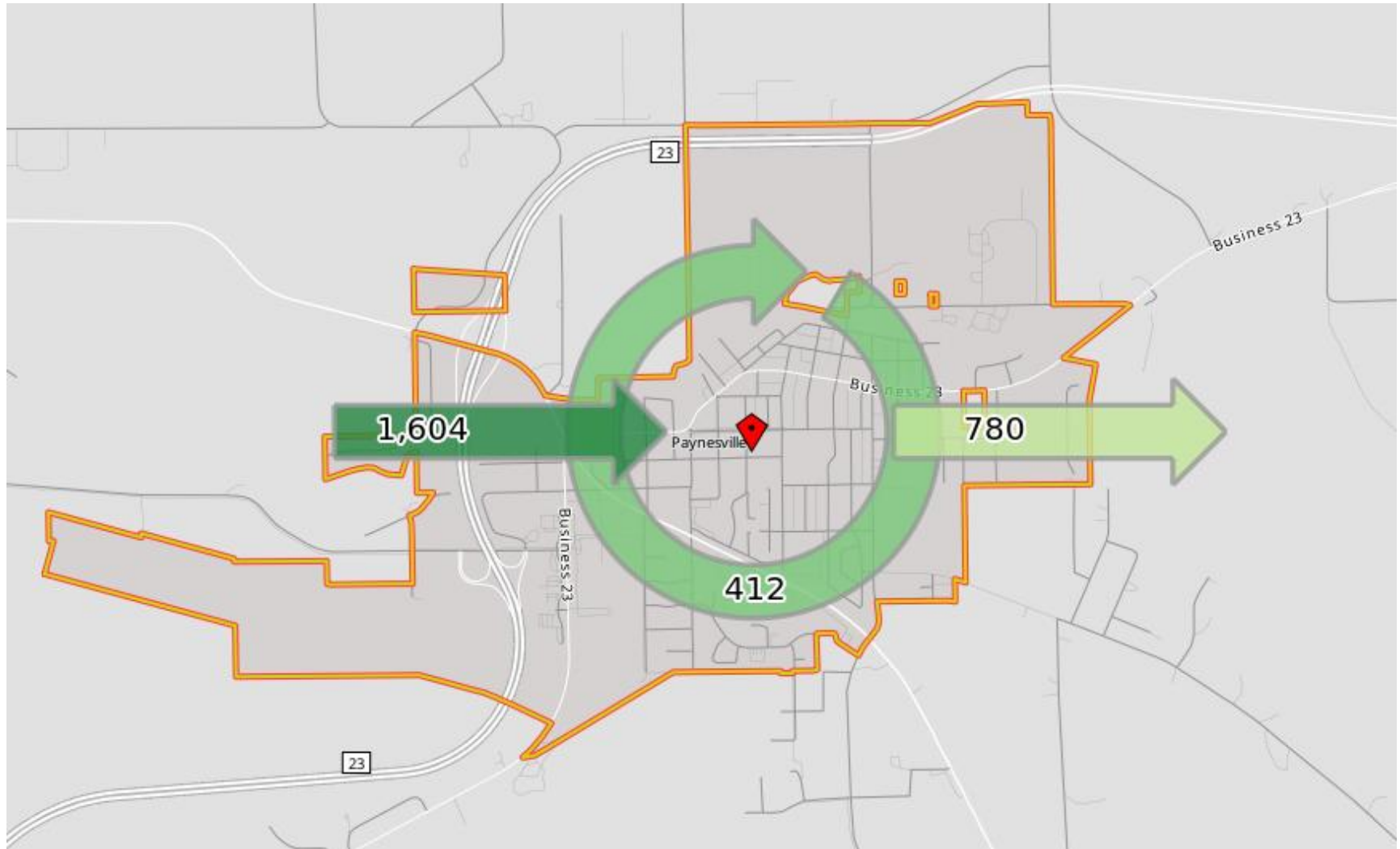


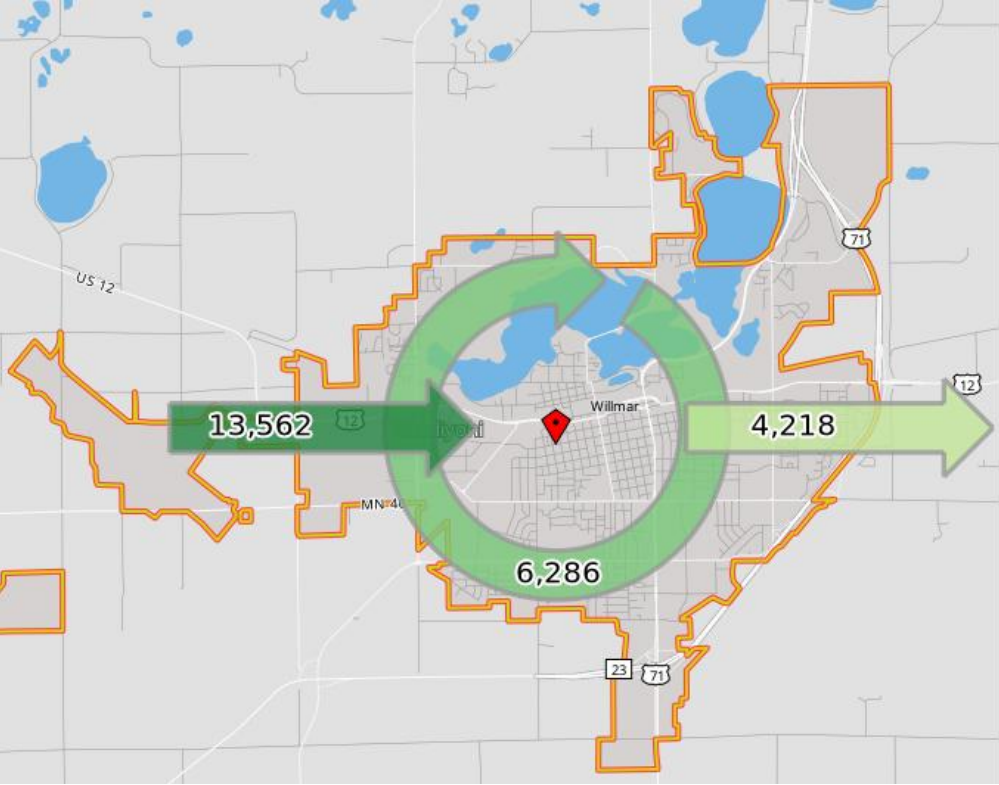
<http://discovery.dartmouth.edu/megaregions/>



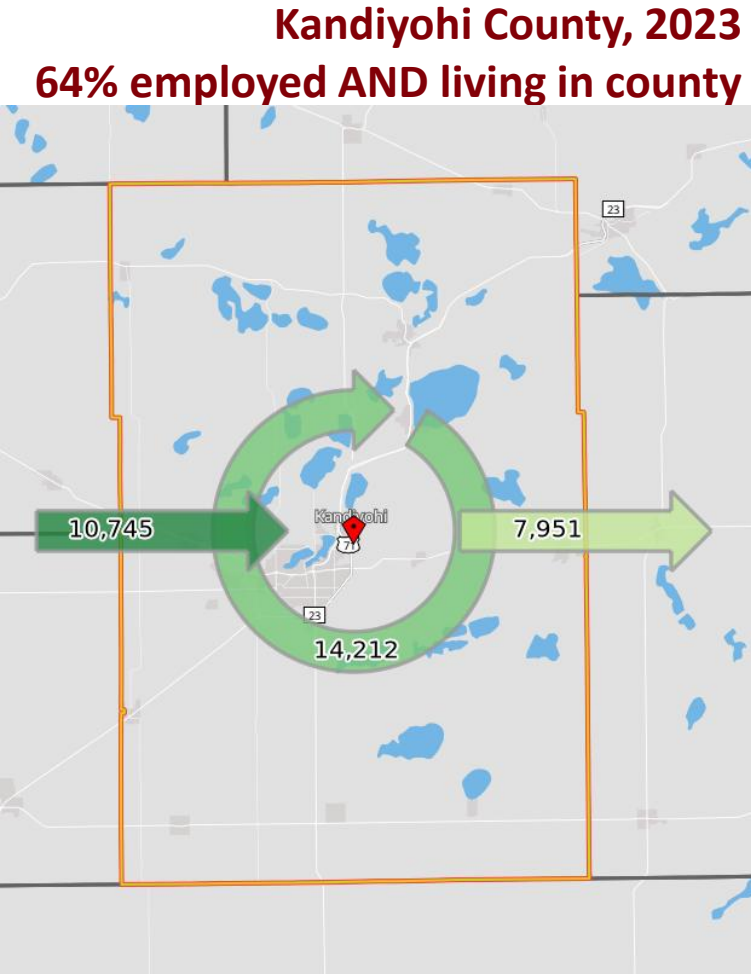


**Paynesville City (2,016 employed)  
35% Employed and Living in city**





**Willmar City, 2023**  
**60% employed AND living in city**

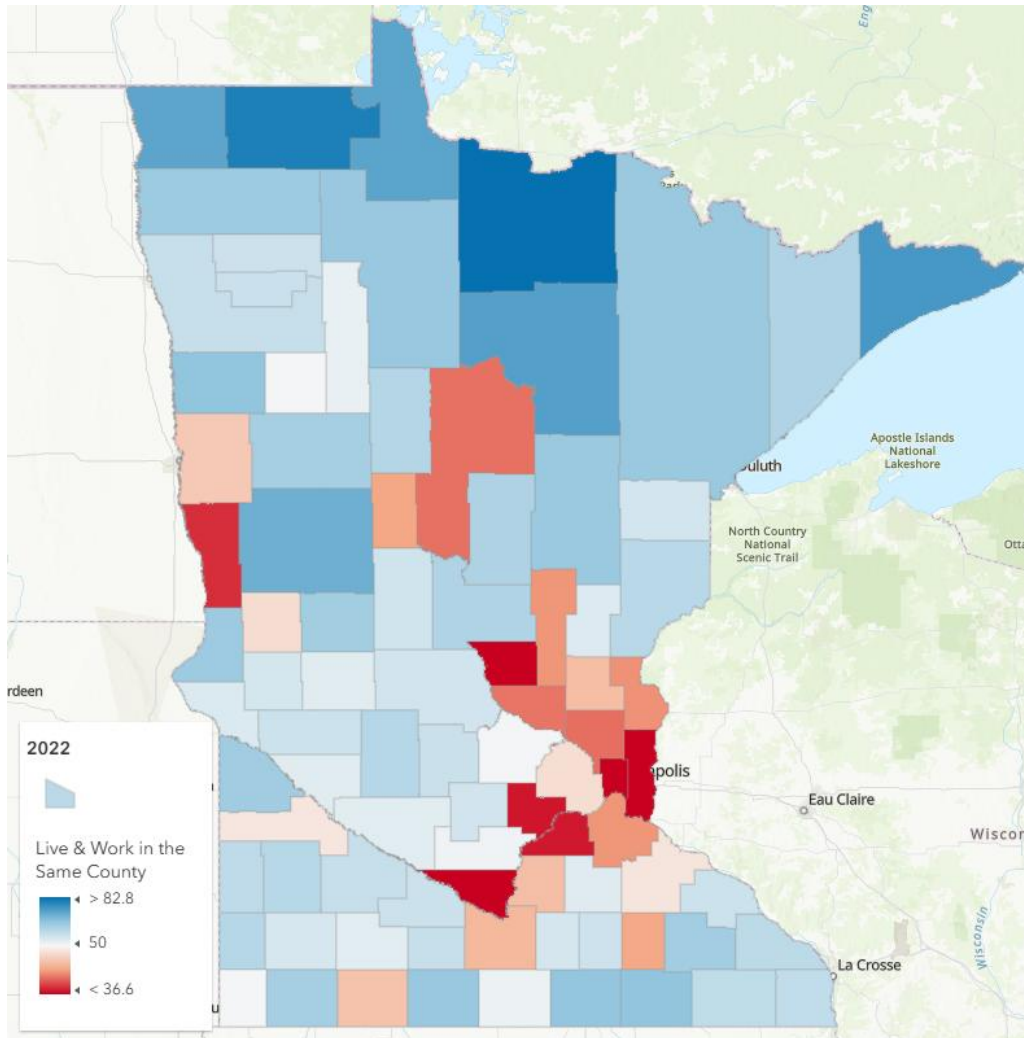


**Kandiyohi County, 2023**  
**64% employed AND living in county**



Kathryn Leys

Extension Educator, Community Economics  
Regional Office Marshall



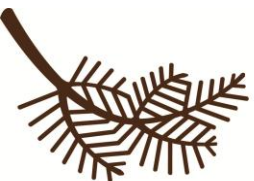
***Decoupling of Home and Work, 2022:  
Across Minnesota, 52% work OUTSIDE their home county.***

# TELECOMMUTING

Question: Do you typically telecommute or work remotely for a company not located in your region?  
(of those in workforce)

Respondent	14%
Spouse	16%

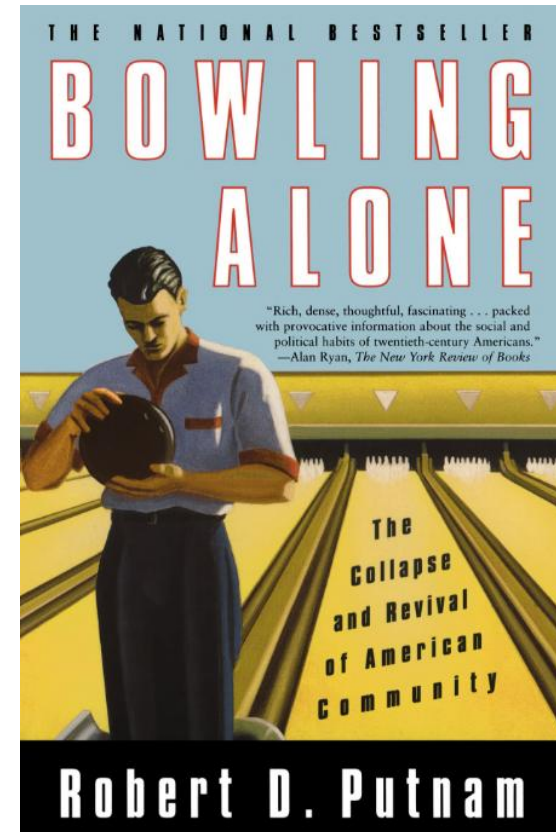
***21% of Households have a member that telecommutes!***



Blandin Foundation™  
STRENGTHENING RURAL MINNESOTA

# SOCIAL LIFE IS DYING!

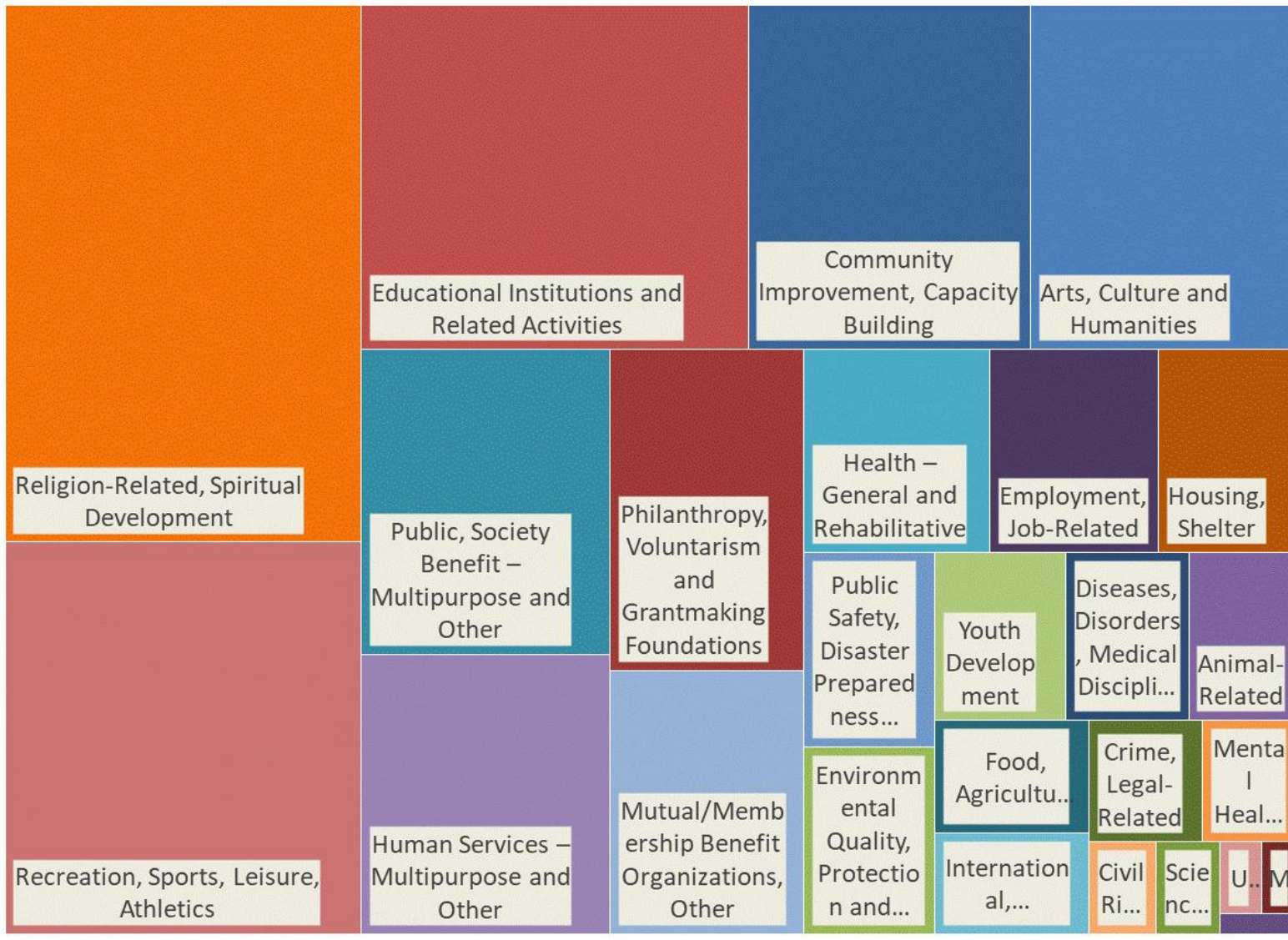
- First question: How many people do we need to run our town?
- We have numerous leadership programs currently training **leader supply**, but are we keeping up with the **organization demand**?



# Minnesota

Nonprofit NTEE composition

2020

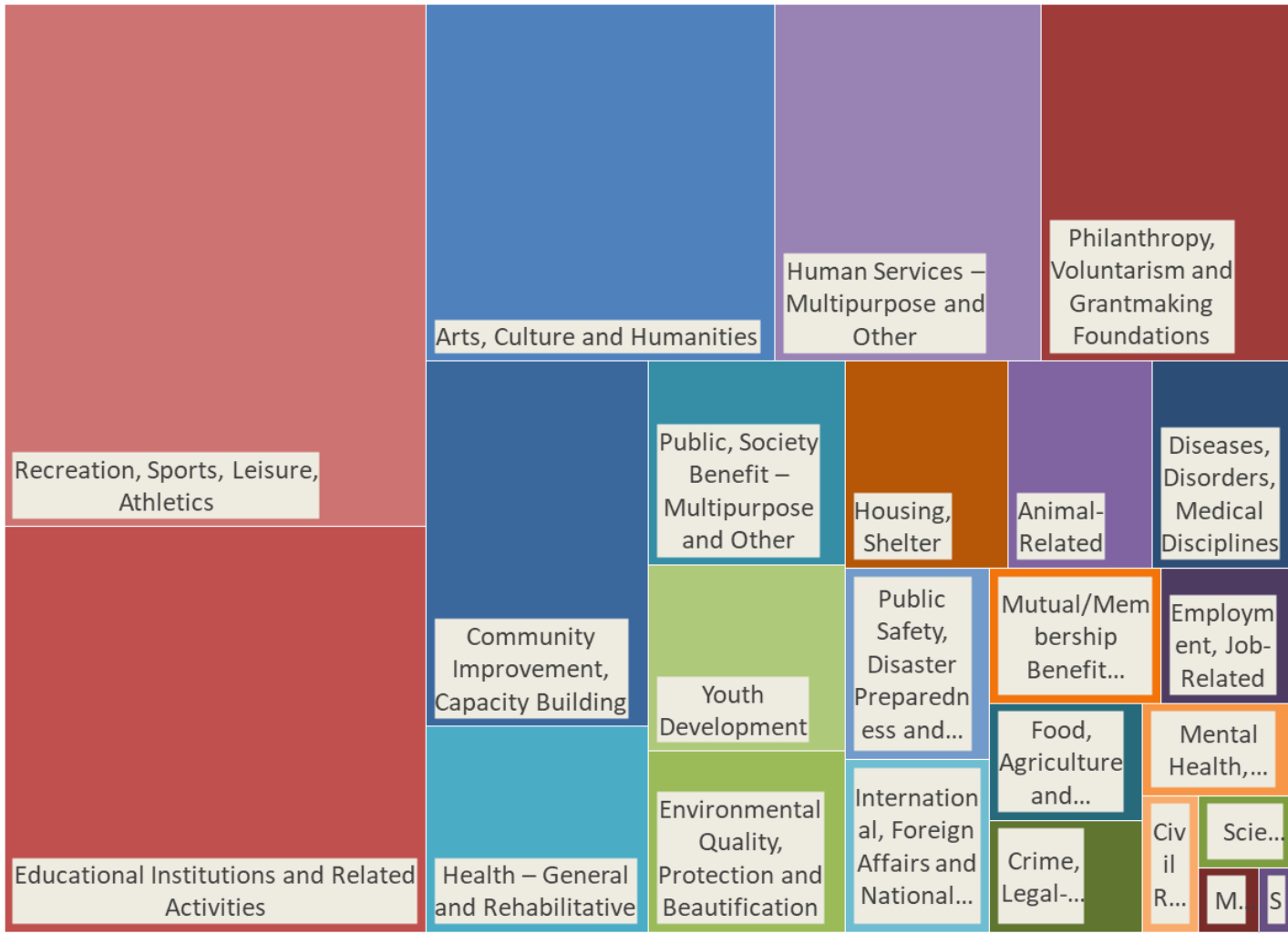


# 17,753 of the 31,603 (56%) nonprofits were formed in the past 30 years

## Legacy Amendment is visible

### Minnesota

2020 Nonprofit NTEE composition not including Religion, groups formed last 30 years



The Legacy Amendment increases the state sales tax by three-eighths of one percent beginning on July 1, 2009 and continuing until 2034. The additional sales tax revenue is distributed into four funds as follows: 33 percent to the clean water fund; 33 percent to the outdoor heritage fund; 19.75 percent to the arts and cultural heritage fund; and 14.25 percent to the parks and trails fund.

# Social Organizations

- Diversification of rural life socially, too
- Reflect the social interests at any given time
- Today is not 25 (or 50, or 100) years ago!
- The people today seem unable to “connect” with the existing social infrastructure

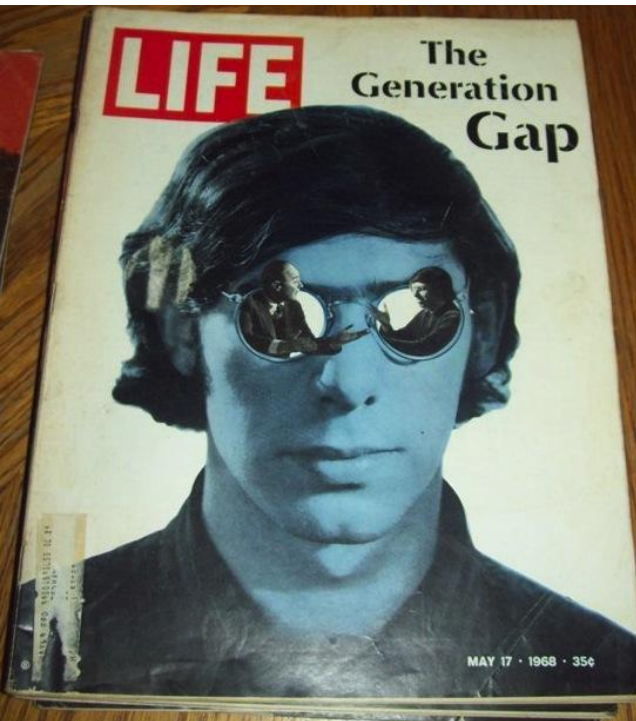


# KIDS THESE DAYS

*The Making of Millennials*

MALCOLM HARRIS

This has happened before...



1968



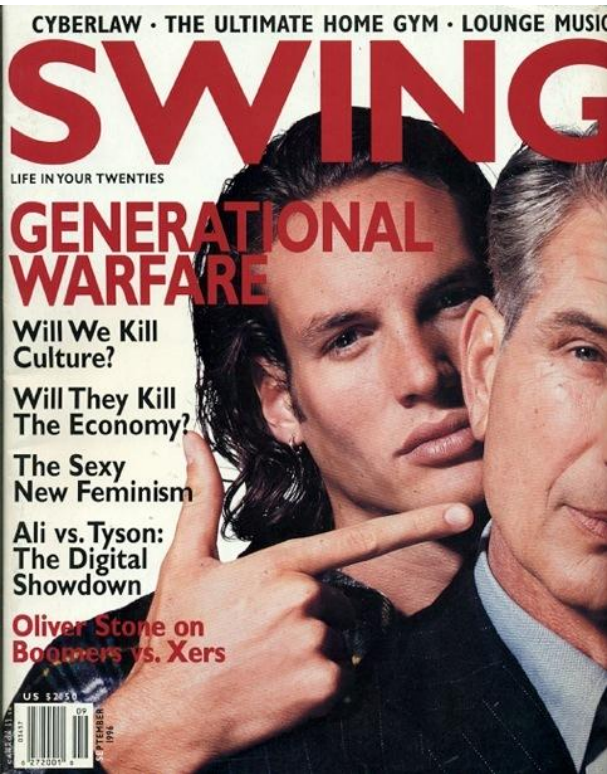
1976



1990



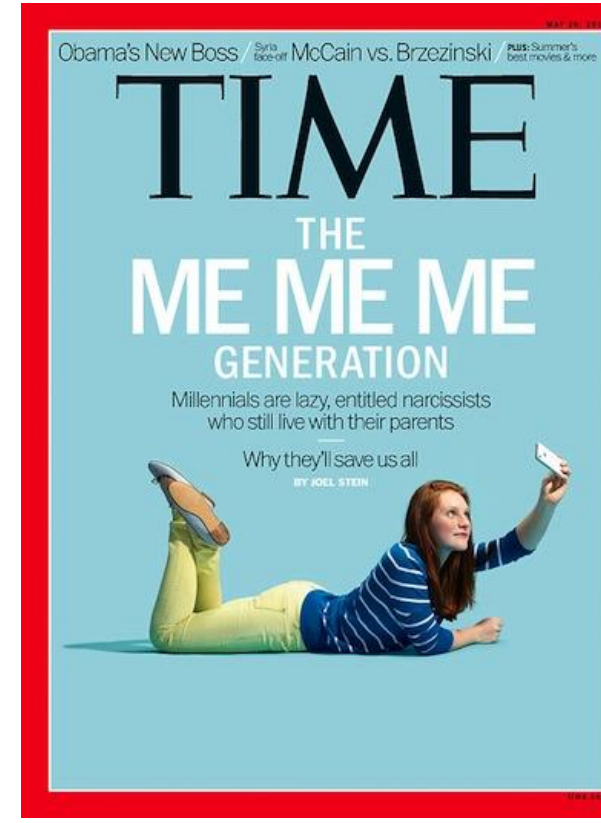
and it will happen again...



1996



2007



2013



# ***SHIFT in Engagement***



**Narrow geography**  
**Broad focus**  
Action: consensus

**Broad geography**  
**Narrow focus**  
Action: the small



# OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

- New residents are more than warm bodies
- Younger people (Millennials age 18-34)
  - Decentralized approaches to leadership
  - Simplified methods of communication
- Generational interests change yet organizations do not
- Start with a small request
- Engagement before leadership



**We live in a REGIONAL  
COMMUNITY.**



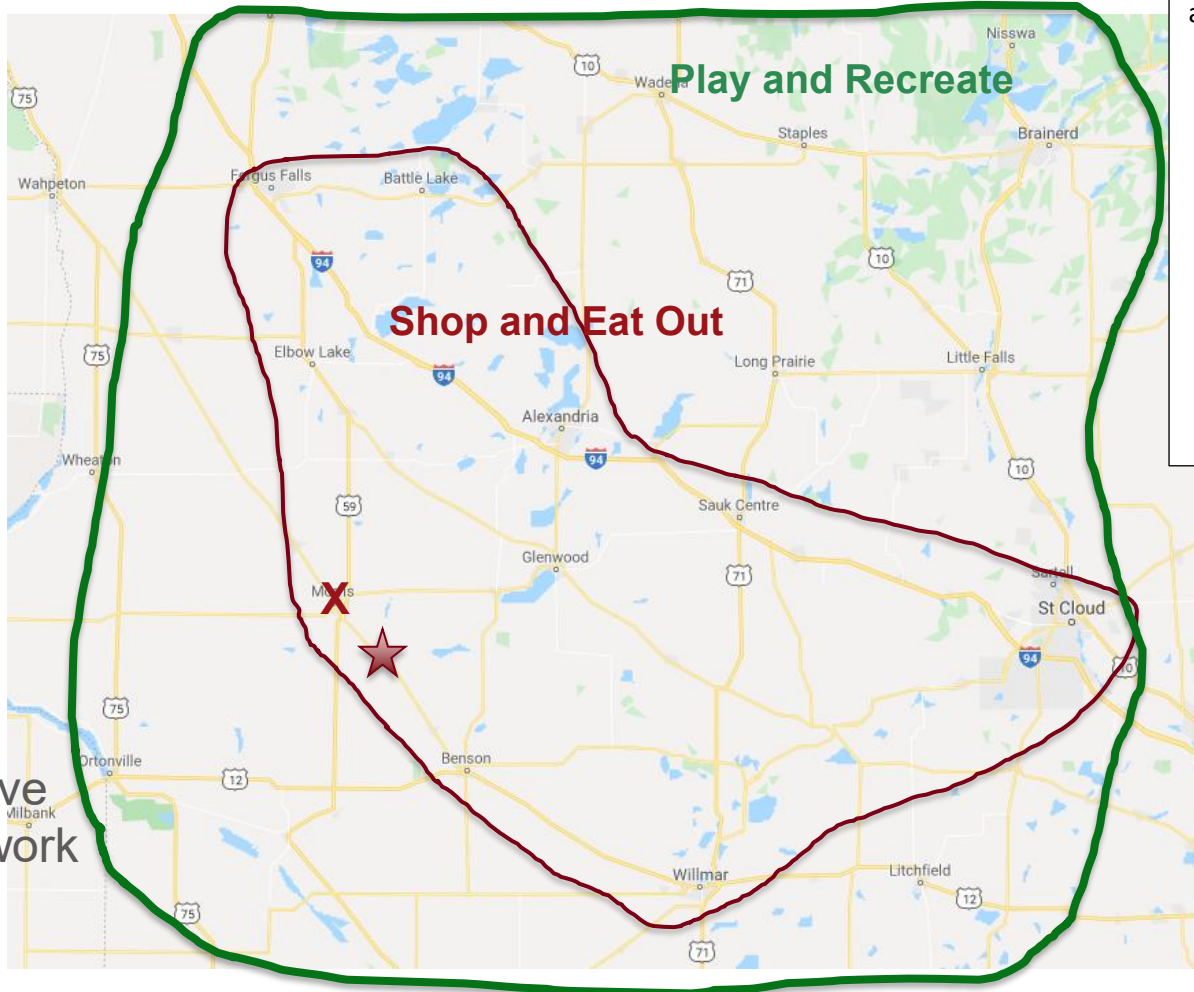
**in the Middle of Everywhere**



# The Middle of Everywhere Exercise

Age: \_\_\_\_\_'s

List 3-5 of your favorite assets in your region:



- ★ where you live
- X where you work

- Circle around:
1. Shop / eat out
  2. Play / recreate

# Narrative Matters

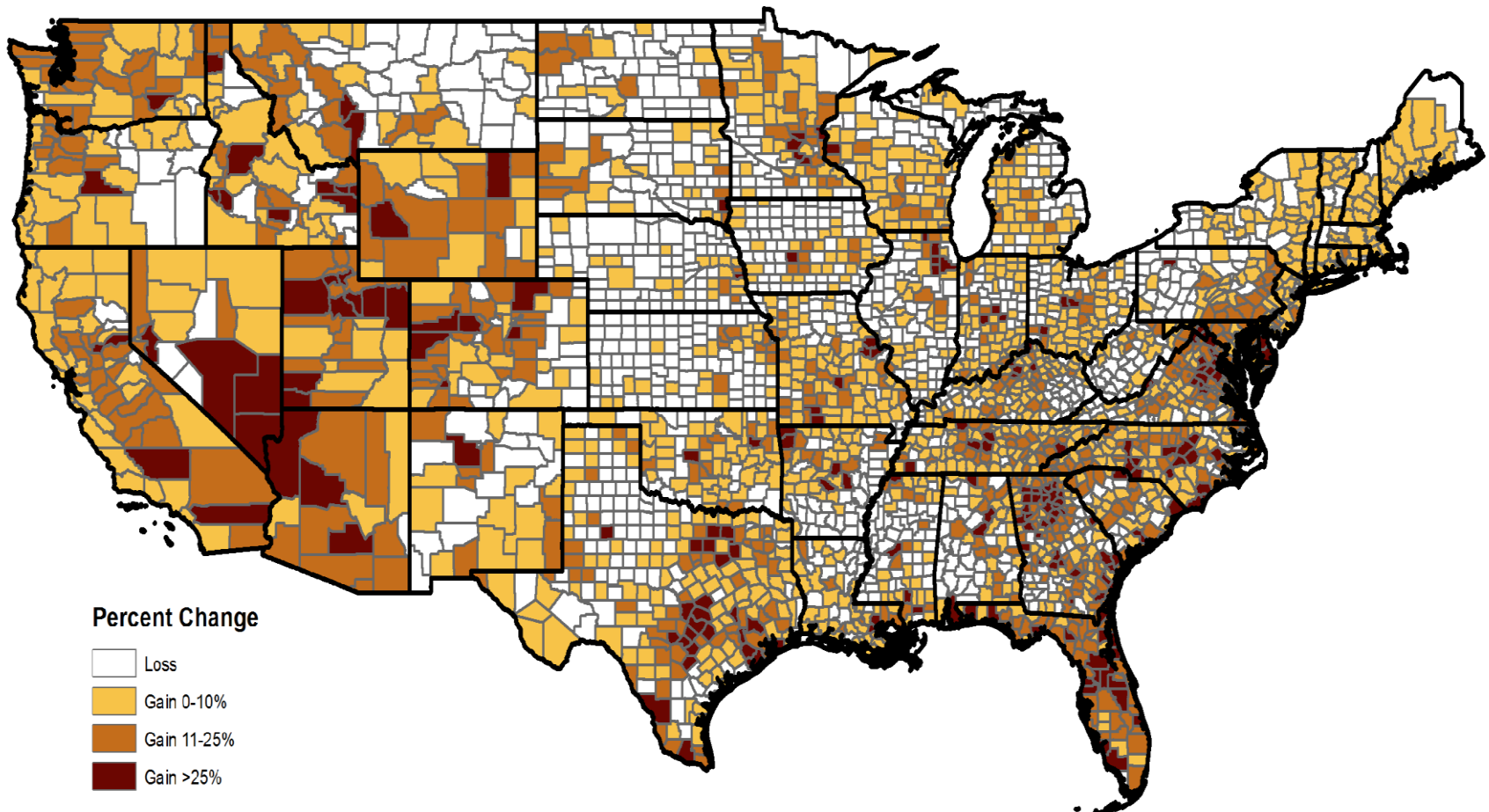
*If rural is dying then why can't  
I find a house to buy?*

*First glimpses in my research  
on total population infatuation*



# Total Population Infatuation

*a.k.a. If you're not growing you're dying*



## Percent Change

- Loss
- Gain 0-10%
- Gain 11-25%
- Gain >25%



# Total Population Infatuation

## Wait, what?

### Comparison Historical Population from 1960 to 2010

Community	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	% Change
<b>UMVRDC Region</b>	<b>69,063</b>	61,806	59,822	50,845	50,011	<b>45,190</b>	<b>-34.57%</b>
<i>Households</i>	19,428	19,367	22,026	20,088	19,846	20,039	3.14%
Big Stone County	8,954	7,941	7,716	6,285	5,820	5,269	-41.15%
Chippewa County	16,320	15,109	14,941	13,228	13,088	12,441	-23.77%
Lac qui Parle County	13,330	11,164	10,592	8,924	8,067	7,259	-45.54%
Swift County	14,936	13,177	12,920	10,724	11,956	9,783	-34.50%
Yellow Medicine County	15,523	14,415	13,653	11,684	11,080	10,438	-32.76%

Source: US Census Bureau





Avg. HH Size:  
1940: 3.6  
2018: 2.6

*With a fixed # homes, you will lose 29% pop  
due to demographic destiny alone.*



Spouse passes

Population: -1

Households: NC

*Yes there is outmigration but demographics work  
against growth and even stability (stagnation).*



## The Narrative



County	Pop Change	Housing Change
Big Stone, MN	-9%	-2%
Houston	-4%	+5%
Lake of the Woods	-11%	+13%
Marshall	-7%	+0%
Murray	-5%	+5%
Norman	-8%	-1%
Pope	-2%	+10%
Redwood	-4%	+1%
Roseau	-4%	+5%
Wadena	+1%	+9%

Population loss is demographic destiny!  
(and may continue to be so)



Shift indicators of success from  
population to houses.

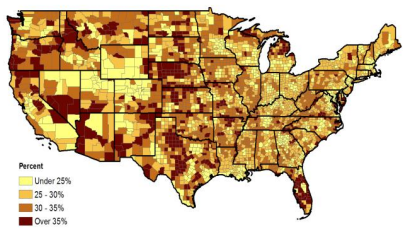
- Housing stocks are
- 1) a measure of community wealth,
  - 2) home to individual wealth, and
  - 3) persistent over time.

# Change is coming

30% of rural homeowners are 70+!

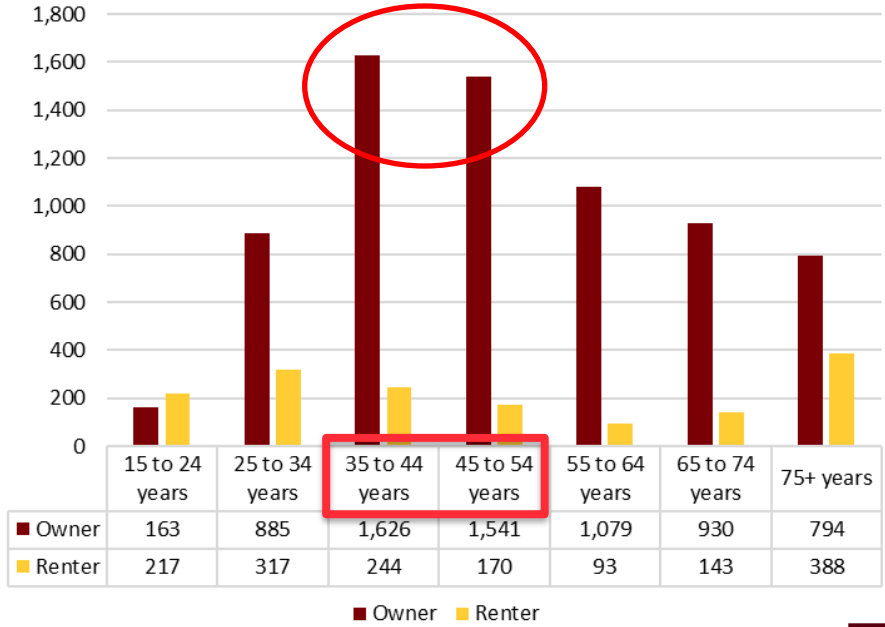
75% are baby boomers  
and older!



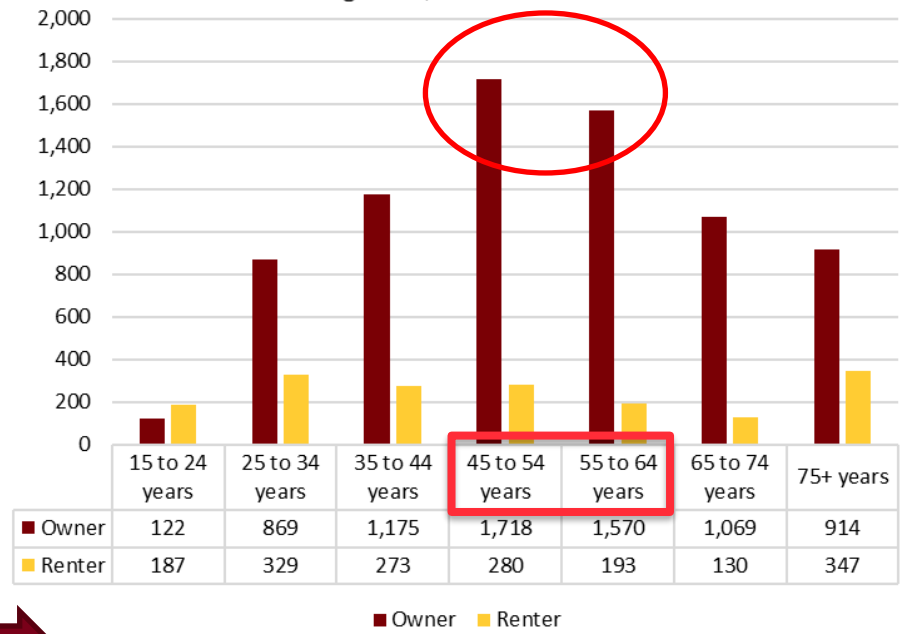


Baby Boomers

Meeker County, Minnesota  
Housing Units, 2000



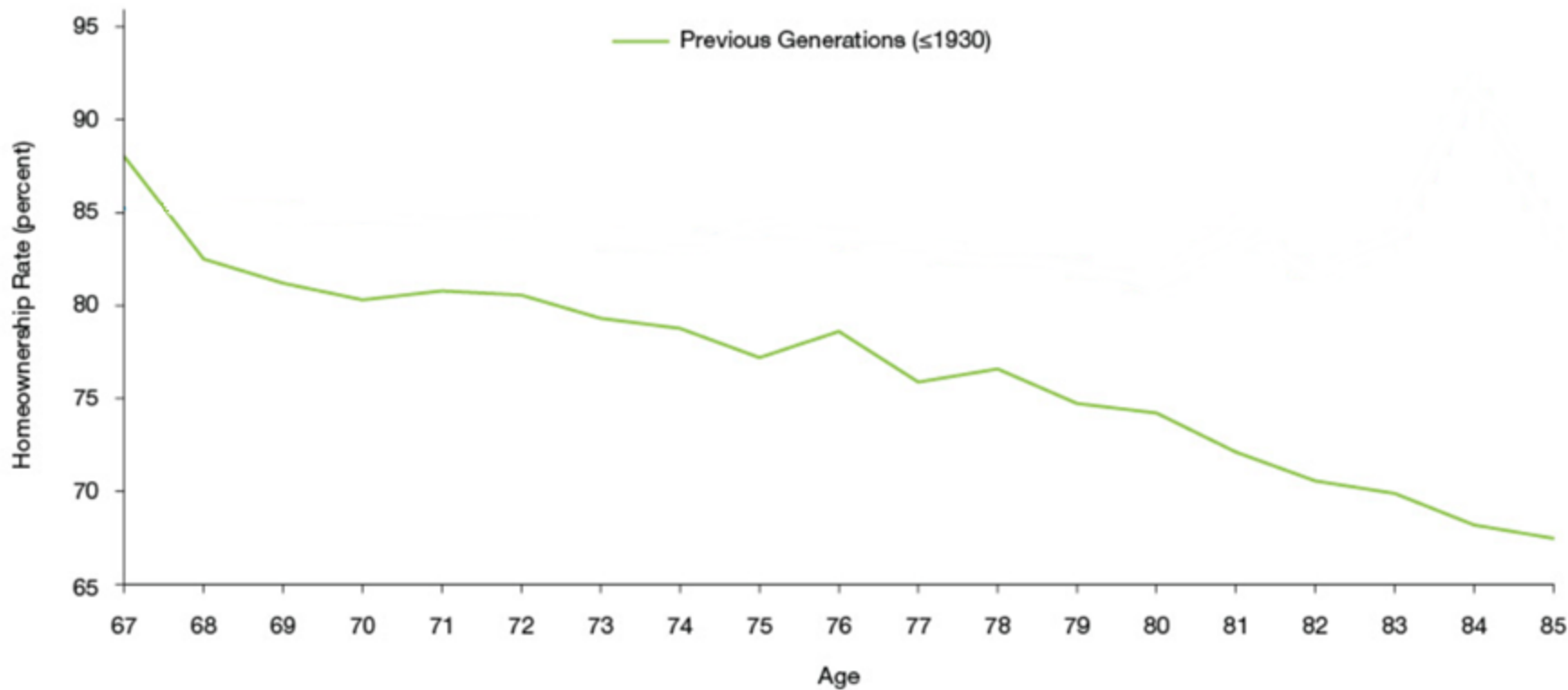
Meeker County, Minnesota  
Housing Units, 2010



+10 years

## Historical homeownership rates for household heads aged 67–85

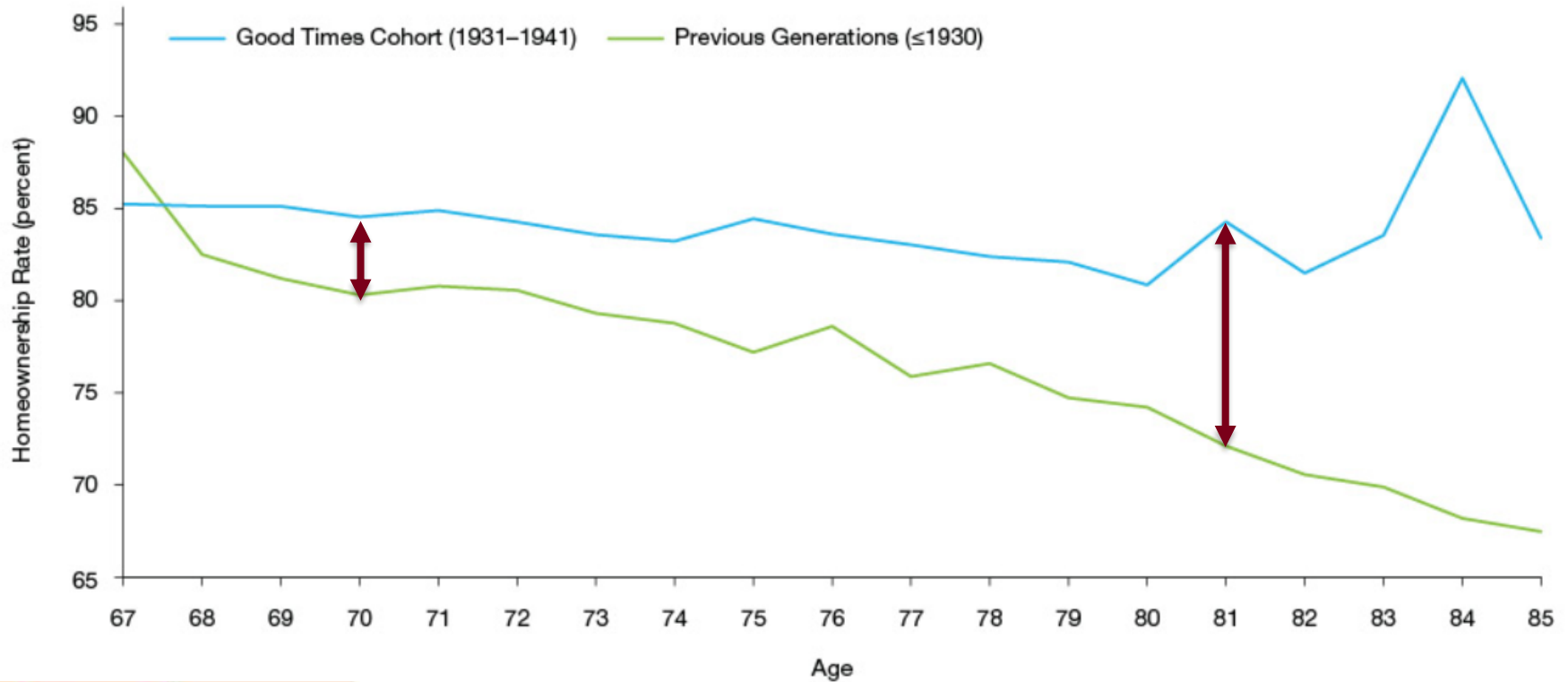
Current generations of older homeowners are holding onto their homes for longer than previous generations



<https://familymattershc.com/the-united-states-of-aging-survey/>  
[http://www.freddiemac.com/research/insight/20190206\\_seniors\\_age\\_millennials\\_wait.page?](http://www.freddiemac.com/research/insight/20190206_seniors_age_millennials_wait.page?)

## Historical homeownership rates for household heads aged 67–85

Current generations of older homeowners are holding onto their homes for longer than previous generations

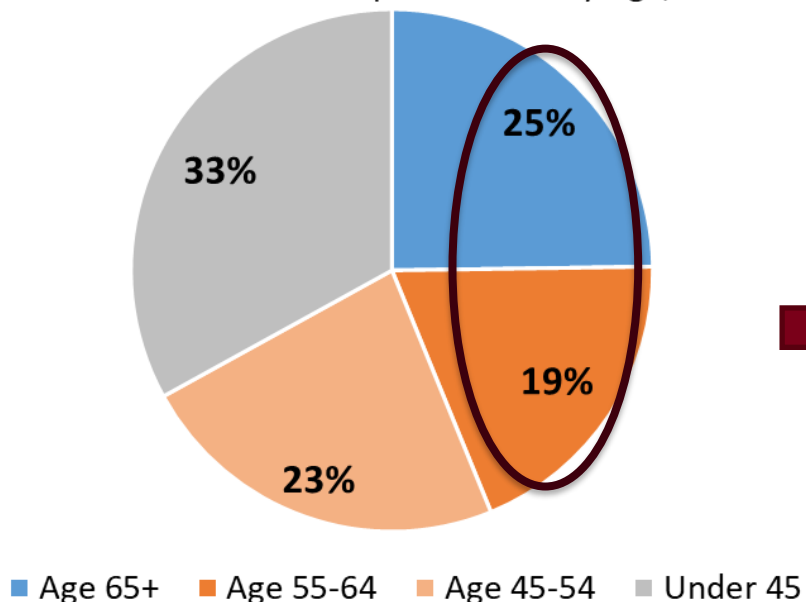


### Staying at Home

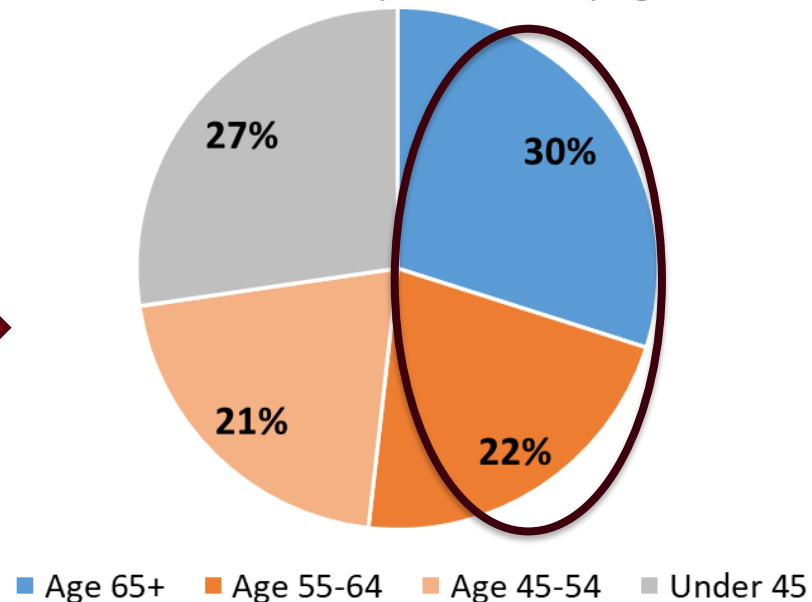
**58%** of older adults have not changed residences in more than 20 years

<https://familymattershc.com/the-united-states-of-aging-survey/>  
[http://www.freddiemac.com/research/insight/20190206\\_seniors\\_age\\_millennials\\_wait.page?](http://www.freddiemac.com/research/insight/20190206_seniors_age_millennials_wait.page?)

McLeod County, Minnesota  
Percent of Owner-Occupied Homes by Age, 2010



McLeod County, Minnesota  
Percent of Owner-Occupied Homes by Age, 2020



*Circled ages: fewer (if any) children*

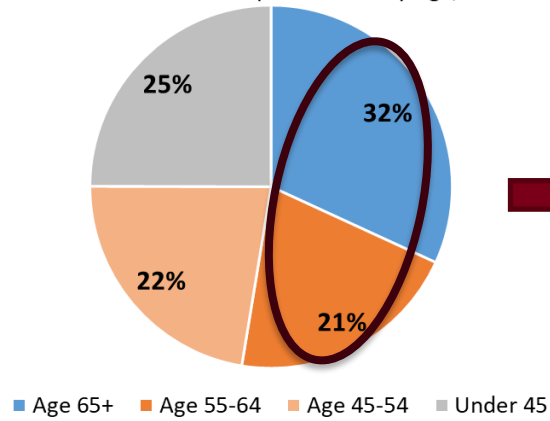
*It's hard to welcome people in when there's nowhere for them to live.*

*But when housing substitutions DO happen we will be replacing 1 or 2 person households with multigenerational families, many with children.*

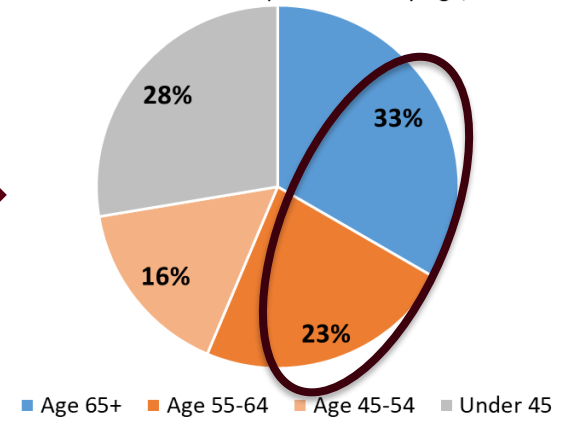
*47% of newcomer households have children*



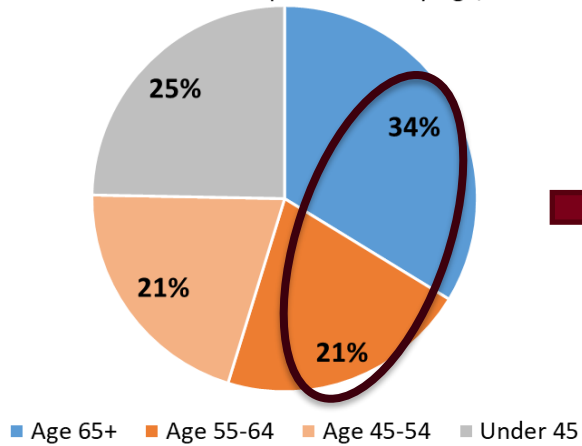
Jackson County, Minnesota  
Percent of Owner-Occupied Homes by Age, 2010



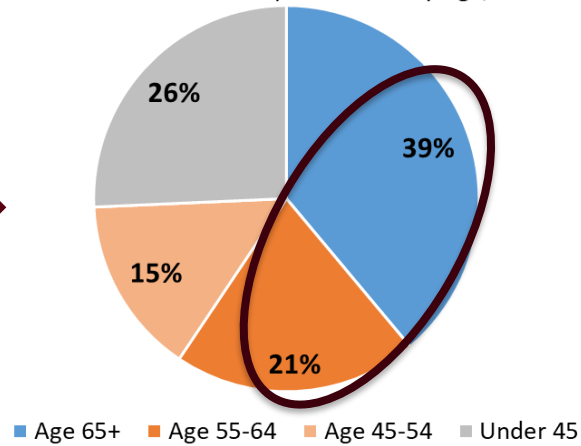
Jackson County, Minnesota  
Percent of Owner-Occupied Homes by Age, 2020



Cottonwood County, Minnesota  
Percent of Owner-Occupied Homes by Age, 2010



Cottonwood County, Minnesota  
Percent of Owner-Occupied Homes by Age, 2020



# Aging in home long-term



*The relatively higher percentage of seniors living in rural communities, which, combined with their tendency to want to age in place, the emphasis on helping them do so, and the lack of assisted living facilities in rural communities, is causing not only a bottleneck in houses coming on the market but also **increasing the likelihood that the number of dilapidated housing will increase in the future.***

*What is the public cost of private inaction?*

<https://www.ruralmn.org/the-workforce-housing-shortage-getting-to-the-heart-of-the-issue/>



# Housing Substitutions: Death brings rebirth

*OUT*

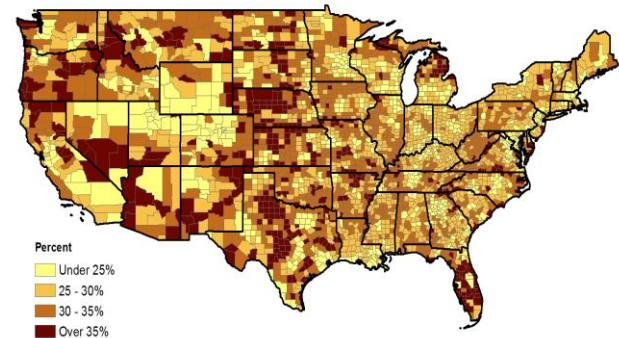
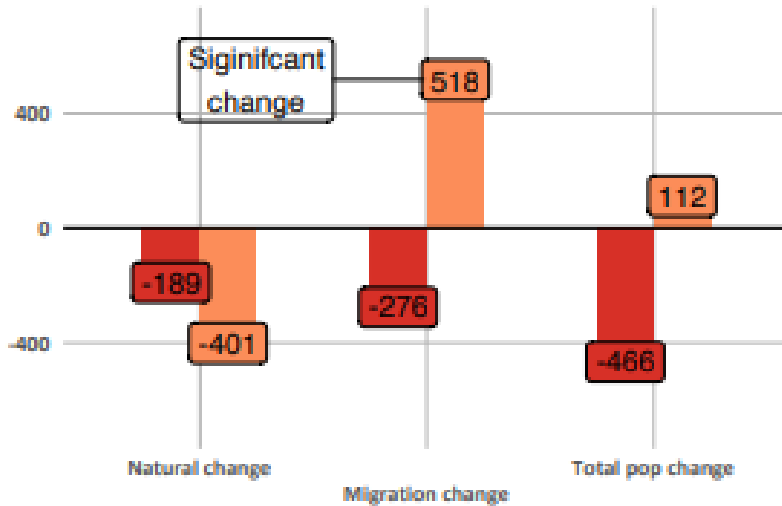


*IN*



*47% of newcomer households have children*

Entirely rural



# The Senior Service Economy

- ***Private retirement not a large portion yet***
- Local economy is only going to become more integrated with boomer-related services
- We should want to retain these transfer receipts
- “Move over” housing is the opportunity
  - Current home may be only equity of the oldest people



So, Housing is a key

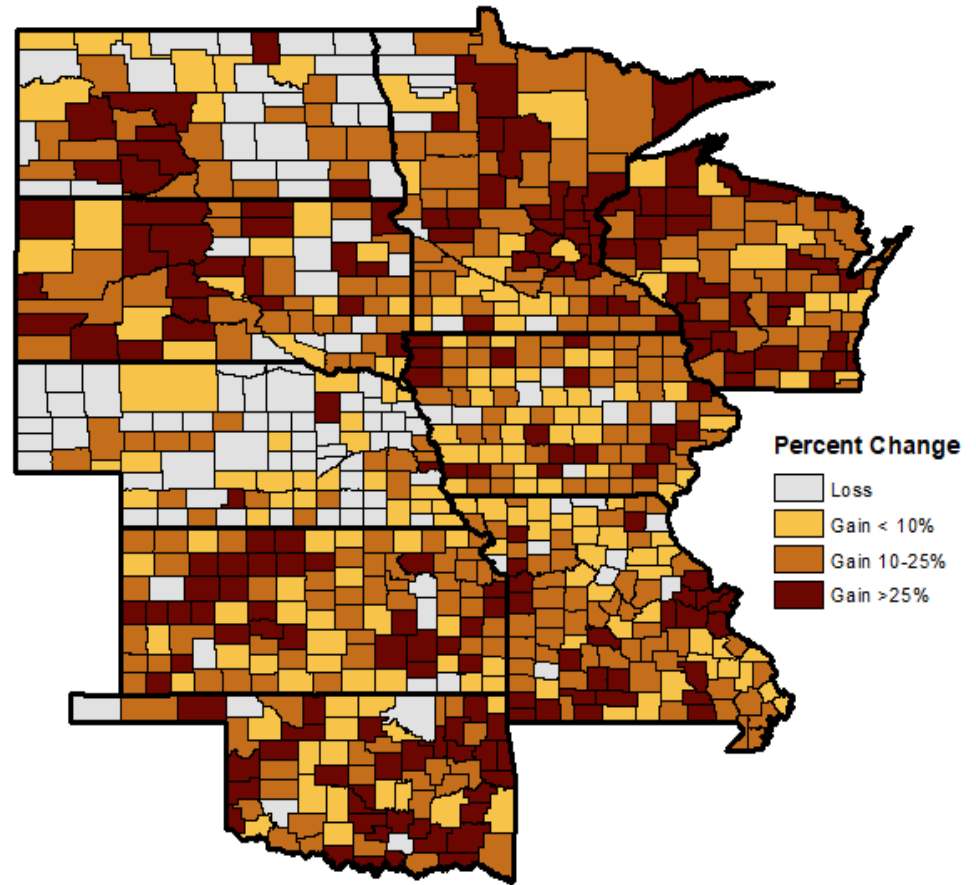
A house is not just a private  
asset, but also a  
**COMMUNITY** asset that  
persists over time



# Survey of Rural Midwest

September, 2017

n=368



# Welcoming In

	Count	Pct
None	173	47%
One	79	21%
Two	51	14%
Three	35	10%
Four	21	6%
Five or more	9	2%

Total number of non-Church groups utilizing facility  
(n=368)

# Reaching Out

	Count	Pct
None	216	59%
One	97	26%
Two	33	9%
Three	14	4%
Four	6	2%
Five or more	2	1%

**Total number of community groups to which Pastor belongs**



# Bridge to People and the Community

The Church is not an island upon itself in small towns.

The church may be the only stable connection  
between the old and new populations.

Need to provide in-reach as much as reaching-out.



# Rural Culture and Continuity

## The Role of Institutions in the United States



### 2. The Salad Bowl



#### In Cultures:

- People with different cultures come together
- Cultures mix, but every culture stays separate



# THE COMMUNITY IS WELCOMING OF NEW RESIDENTS BY THOSE LIKELY TO STILL LIVE IN COMMUNITY IN 5 YEARS

The Community is Welcoming	Likely to Live Here in 5 Years
Strongly agree	86%
Agree	77%
Disagree	68%
Strongly Disagree	44%
<b>All respondents</b>	<b>78%</b>

# *The Rural Choice*

The bottom line is people want to live and move  
to your towns for

**what you are today and  
will be tomorrow,**

not what may have been!



# Community Succession



**Maybe one of the best things you can do for the future of your community is to ensure there is somewhere for people to live.**

**More broadly, COMMUNITY SUCCESSION plans for housing, leadership, and businesses**





UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA EXTENSION

Driven to Discover<sup>SM</sup>



Thank you.

© Regents of the University of Minnesota. All rights reserved.

The University of Minnesota is an equal opportunity educator and employer. In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, this PowerPoint is available in alternative formats upon request. Direct requests to 612-624-1222.