Reasons for Returning and Not Returning to Rural U.S. Communities*

Christiane von Reichert
The University of Montana

John B. Cromartie
Economic Research Service/U.S. Department of Agriculture

Ryan O. Arthun
The University of Montana

Population loss persists in nonmetropolitan America, especially in isolated counties with limited natural amenities. Communities in these counties experience high levels of outmigration among high school graduates, but low in-migration is more important in distinguishing declining from growing nonmetropolitan counties, and return migration is a much more prominent component of in-migration to these locationally disadvantaged areas. This research uses a multisited, interview-based methodology to understand the factors that influence decisions of people in their late twenties to late forties to move back to rural communities and the barriers that keep others from making such moves. The life course segment considered here captures a critical "settling down" period when career and family obligations overlap and return migration peaks. Interviews at high school reunions, the only venues where stayers, return migrants, and nonreturn migrants are found together, show that limited rural employment opportunities are barriers for nonreturnees. Others intent on returning find ways to secure or create employment but are primarily influenced to move home by family concerns. Connections to the larger social and physical environment of the community are important as well. Interviews affirm that factors affecting migration decisions work in combination, and ties to both people and place are critical for understanding rural return migration. **Key Words: population loss, qualitative methods, return migration, rural, United States.**

美国非都会区域人口持续流失, 特别是在孤立且自然风情有限的郡县中。这些郡县中的社区经历了高中毕业生的高度人口外移, 但为数不多的移入者, 对于区别萎缩中和成长中的非都会区域而言更为重要, 且对这些地点较不具优势的区域而言, 返乡移民是移入者中更为重要的组成。本研究运用多重地点、以访谈为基础的研究方法, 了解影响年龄介乎二十岁末期至四十岁末期的人决定搬迁回乡村社区的因素, 以及阻止其他人做出该决定的阻碍。本研究所考量的生命历程切片, 捕捉了当事业和家庭责任重迭并达到迁徙返乡高峰的关键"安顿"时期。我们在高中同学会这个长期定居者、返乡移民者和非返乡移民者齐聚一堂的唯一场合所进行的访谈, 发现对非返乡移民者而言, 乡村工作机会的缺乏是返乡的阻碍。其他打算返乡者则寻找能够确保或创造就业机会的方式, 而其返乡的动机主要受到家庭考量所影响。社区与外界的社会及物质环境的联系也相当重要。访谈确认了迁徙的决定是受到多重因素共同影响, 而与人际和地方的联系则是了解乡村的返乡移民之关键。 **关键词: 人口流失, 质化方法, 返乡移民, 乡村, 美国。**

La pérdida de población es un fenómeno que persiste en las áreas no metropolitanas de EE.UU., especialmente en los condados marginales dotados de pocas comodidades naturales. En las comunidades de estos condados se experimentan altos niveles de emigración en los graduados de educación media, aunque el escaso movimiento migratorio contrario es más importante para distinguir la declinación con relación a los condados no metropolitanos en crecimiento, y la migración de retorno es un componente mucho más notorio de la migración interna hacia estas áreas locacionalmente desfavorecidas. Esta investigación utiliza una metodología de sitios múltiples basada en entrevistas para entender los factores que influyen las decisiones de retornar a las comunidades rurales entre la gente con edades situadas entre los veintes tardíos y los finales de los cuarenta, y establecer las barreras que previenen a otros de tal desplazamiento. Este segmento del curso de la vida que se considera aquí engloba un período crítico de "asentamiento" cuando las obligaciones de la carrera y la familia se traslapan y la migración de retorno llega a su pico. Por entrevistas hechas durante asambleas en los colegios de bachillerato, únicos sitios de reunión donde se pueden encontrar juntos a quienes no han migrado, los que retornan y los otros migrantes, muestran que las limitadas oportunidades de empleo rural son una seria barrera para los in-migrantes. Otros intentan con el retorno descubrir los medios para hallar empleo o crearlo, aunque lo que primariamente los inclina a regresar al terruño son asuntos de familia. Las conexiones con los aspectos más amplios del entorno social y físico de la comunidad son también importantes. Las entrevistas confirman que los factores

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que afectan las decisiones de migración operan en combinación, y los vínculos con gente y lugar son críticos para comprender la migración de retorno rural. **Palabras clave: pérdida de población, métodos cualitativos, migración de retorno, rural, Estados Unidos.**

Hundreds of communities throughout rural America face the difficult challenge of adjusting economically and socially to a dwindling demographic base. In most years, more people move into nonmetropolitan America than move out. At the county level, however, these net migration gains are unequally distributed, so that over half of nonmetropolitan counties persistently lose population due to net outmigration. A strong correlation exists between nonmetropolitan population loss on the one hand and low population density, low urban accessibility, and lack of scenic amenities on the other (McGranahan and Beale 2002).

Communities in such areas are attuned to a relentless, and quite visible, annual phenomenon, as a large proportion of each high school graduating class leaves town in pursuit of further education or other life experiences. Rural areas experiencing population decline, however, are distinguished less by high rates of outmigration of high school graduates and more by low rates of in-migration of people in their late twenties and thirties (Gibbs and Cromartie 1994). Compared to areas with higher locational advantages, these areas attract fewer newcomer in-migrants, depending to a greater extent on their ability to lure back return migrants during life course stages overlapping with the "settling down" period (White 1992; McGranahan, Cromartie, and Wojan 2010). For rural communities, return migration is a less visible and more gradual process than outmigration.

To gain an understanding of the reasons for and barriers to rural return migration, this study used a multisited, interview-based methodology to evaluate individual and household migration decisions. Interviews took place in small towns at ten- to thirty-year high school reunions, the only venues where stayers, return migrants, and nonreturn migrants are found together, allowing simultaneous recording of reasons for returning and reasons for not returning. The dominant conceptualization of migration used here—migration as a family-related and deeply community-embedded process—draws most heavily on social network theory, especially as formulated in new interview-based research on return migration in transnational settings (e.g., Conway, Potter, and St Bernard 2008; Ralph 2009; Reynolds 2009). The project's overall design and much of its analytical strategy, however, builds on life course perspectives that dominate current empirical research on U.S. domestic migration (Chen and Rosenthal 2008; Whisler et al. 2008; Cromartie and Nelson 2009; Plane and Jurjevich 2009). The personal views of rural return migrants and their fellow classmates who faced, and continue to consider, similar return migration reveal the complex interplay of economic circumstances, family incentives, and social and place settings that are a hallmark of life course perspectives.

Few interview-based studies of domestic return migration in the United States have been conducted (Cuba and Hummon 1993; McHugh and Mings 1996; Stack 1996). Recent case studies of international return migration, however, have significantly broadened knowledge about the social context of return migration. Although myriad geographical, historical, and institutional factors differentiate domestic and international migration processes, the reasons for making return migrations, especially as voiced by the migrants themselves, are uncannily similar across a wide spectrum of race, class, and space. Return migration to rural areas of the United States operates in settings very similar to those described in international migration studies. In both contexts, returnees typically leave more dynamic labor markets for home places with fewer employment opportunities, suggesting that factors other than job seeking come into play. Across diverse geographic contexts, the core questions for exploring return migration are the same: What are the motivations to move back to a place for people who left earlier in life, often for better opportunities elsewhere? What reasons and barriers keep others from moving back?

Background

Return migration has long been recognized as a prominent feature of human migration within both domestic and transnational migration streams throughout the world (Eldridge 1965; Gmelch 1980; Long 1988). Current understanding of internal return migration in the United States and Canada draws from a rich tradition of census-based analyses and survey research showing strong geographic variation in return migration levels and the socioeconomic characteristics of returnees (DaVanzo 1976; Miller 1977; White 1987, 1992; Shumway and Hall 1996; Newbold 1997; Wilson et al. 2009). Sizable differences in the geography of return and differences in the relative importance of economic versus family reasons have been extensively documented (White 1987; Long 1988; von Reichert 2002; U.S. Bureau of the Census 2009b; Niedomysl and Amcoff 2011). Survey and census-based research on return migration in the United States supports findings from similar quantitative research on life course migration showing the significant extent to which migration reasons vary by destination (Plane and Jurjevich 2009).

A recent and burgeoning literature on causes and consequences of return migration focuses on international return migration, much of it directed toward understanding the family context and broader social dynamics of international labor migration circuits in a globalizing age. Continuing theoretical challenges to traditional economic frameworks, creative use of new data sources, and increased efforts on the part of researchers to let migrants speak for themselves have

added much needed information regarding the causes of return migration and the critical role it plays in overall migration dynamics.

This new emphasis is not surprising, given the very high incidence of return migration in both international and domestic, rural–urban labor circuits (Bailey et al. 2002; Constant and Massey 2002; Olesen 2002; Zhao 2002; Wenfei Winnie and Fan 2006; Dustmann and Weiss 2007). Renewed attention to return migration also follows logically, given the sharp move away from economics-based migration theories that view migrations as discrete events (Sjaastad 1962; Greenwood 1969; Todaro 1969). Early theorizations severely constricted explanations of return migration, most typically viewing it as "failed migration" (DaVanzo 1976). An inordinate emphasis on assimilation processes at the destination masked evidence of counterstream dynamics (Ley and Kobayashi 2005). Beginning in the 1970s, researchers remodeled migration into socially constructed, network-connected events, geographically embedded in an ongoing dynamic linking individuals, families, and multiple locations (Bach and Schraml 1982; Wood 1982; Cromartie and Stack 1989). The full emergence of critical theories in population geography and the very strong move toward qualitative approaches has contributed to a broad-based social science agenda that has served to bring return migration out of the shadows (McHugh 2000; Bailey 2009).

Notions of return are constitutive of terms that have come to replace *migration* in much of the literature: *transnationalism* typically embodies the idea of a continual grounding in home communities, as does the more broadly applicable description of migrants as *translocal* (Bailey et al. 2002). Within agendas set by critical migration theory and the desire for migrants to speak for themselves, the topic of return migration often takes center stage. Included are ambitious, mixed-method projects that place migration in the details of everyday life (Bailey et al. 2002; Ní Laoire 2007; Conway, Potter, and St Bernard 2008; Phillips and Potter 2009). Additionally, these and several other studies focus on untying complex theoretical and conceptual knots, addressing such questions as "What constitutes a return move?" and "What is the meaning of home in a translocal age?" (Christou 2006; Ralph 2009; Barcus and Brunn 2010). Another large component of the literature focuses on the impacts of return migration, including its role in entrepreneurship and economic development in poor nations (Goulbourne 1999; Murphy 2000; Olesen 2002; Zhao 2002; Black and Castaldo 2009). It is clear from several of these accounts that returnees contribute in different ways to the economy of their home countries (Thomas-Hope 1999). In many cases, they bring back significant entrepreneurial skills and are supported in these endeavors by transnational social and business networks (Cassarino 2000).

Most relevant to our study is the growing body of interview-based case studies that explicitly address reasons for making return moves, as voiced by the migrants themselves (Murphy 2000; Lidgard and Gilson 2002; Ní Laoire 2007; Phillips and Potter 2009). These studies largely confirm the necessity of framing return migration in a family strategy perspective, mediated by life course decision making. The family strategy perspective on migration pulls from overlapping theoretical strands, including social network theory, social capital theory, and life course approaches (Boyd 1989; Findlay and Li 1999; Bailey 2009). Applied to migration, social capital theory shows how diverse and ever-changing connections with families and friends are crucial resources for migrants in generating and maintaining "networks and relationships of trust and reciprocity" across space (Reynolds 2009, 801).

Embeddedness in social networks is a key influence on the decision and timing of return moves. Reciprocal trust, feelings of social connectedness, and the many ways families provide support to migrant communities constitute the social networks of families (Tannenbaum 2007). Even when the research agenda is not explicitly focused on capturing reasons for return migration, family-based motivations are usually part of the story (Wenfei Winnie and Fan 2006; Ní Laoire 2007; Phillips and Potter 2009; Ralph 2009).

Children play an important role in almost all return migration contexts, although this aspect remains understudied. Intergenerational ties and the educational needs of children are a central factor in explaining the unique dynamics underlying migration circuits between Hong Kong and Canada (Ley and Kobayashi 2005). In a recent survey, a desire for children to grow up in New Zealand was cited as a major reason for returning home from abroad (Lidgard and Gilson 2002). A survey-based model of Turkish families in Germany shows that the presence of children influences decisions to return and the effects differ for sons and daughters (Constant and Massey 2002). Working from a traditional economics framework, Dustmann (2003) endeavored to show that return decisions are inherently linked to life course decisions connected with children. If altruistic concern for children is the dominant motivator, it can lead to diminished return migration when career prospects for the parents are perceived to be better away from home or it might lead to increased return when parents think that the home area provides a more appropriate environment.

Return migration is a complex social process that nonetheless shows common patterns over the life course and operates under very similar conditions in different geographic settings. Family ties show up as a primary factor in all interview-based case studies that explicitly address motivations for returning home, but the form and underlying motivations of family-based strategies vary geographically and shift over the stages of the life course. Given its social complexity, multilocational nature, and sensitivity to time, return migration can only be understood through an accumulation of knowledge from case studies employing a diverse set of creative methods (McKenzie and Mistiaen 2009).

This research sets out to add to this base of knowledge about return migration by focusing on a certain

set of regions for which return migration is especially important: demographically struggling and geographically isolated rural U.S. communities with limited natural amenities. It focuses on a particular segment of the life course, namely, on people in their late twenties to late forties, capturing people in the labor force and typically in the family stage. It uses a qualitative methodology based on interviews at high school reunions.

Data and Methods

High school reunions provide the only opportunity to speak with common cohorts of stayers (who never moved away), return migrants (who moved and later returned), and nonreturn migrants (who moved away and still live elsewhere). In 2008 and 2009, 309 interviews were conducted at twenty-seven reunions in twenty-one communities across seventeen states, at evening mixers, school tours, family picnics, and other events taking place on reunion weekends. On average, we spoke with fifteen reunion attendees per community, with the highest number being twenty-eight and the lowest being five. Fewer interviews took place on visits limited to a single reunion for one high school class attended by one interviewer. More interviews were possible in the six communities that had multiple class reunions on the same weekend (e.g., simultaneous ten- and twenty-year events) and during the five community visits attended by more than one interviewer.

Study Area

Interviews took place in nonmetropolitan counties that were both geographically isolated and had relatively limited scenic and recreational amenities, two characteristics strongly associated with persistent population loss (McGranahan and Beale 2002). These counties attract far fewer newcomers than metropolitan areas or other nonmetropolitan counties; thus, their in-migration flows are highest for migrants between ages thirty and forty and contain much higher proportions of returnees (McGranahan, Cromartie, and Wojan 2010). To identify the study area, Z-scores were combined for three measures of geographic isolation: (1) a gravity-type, urban accessibility measure; (2) distance to regional airports classified by size; and (3) distance to interstate highways. The presence of attractive physical characteristics—pleasant climates, mountains, bodies of water—was measured using the Economic Research Service's (ERS) Natural Amenities Index (McGranahan 1999). The resulting study area consisted of 942 nonmetropolitan counties with combined urban access and natural amenity scores below the national average, which also experienced net outmigration between 2000 and 2007 (Figure 1).

Reaching the Study Population

A high school database overlaid with the study area yielded approximately 2,400 potential reunion sites. Prior experience showed (von Reichert 2000) that very small schools typically opt for all class reunions that include far fewer participants in our targeted age groups, so we chose only to consider visits to the 1,570 high schools with more than 150 students. From that set we developed a sample that was national in scope and representative of the range of community sizes found in our study area. Eight of the visits were to towns with fewer than 2,500 people; one visit was to a city with more than 10,000 people; and the other twelve were to intermediate-sized towns. Figure 1 shows that all major regions of the country were visited except the Southwest, where numerous exploratory calls

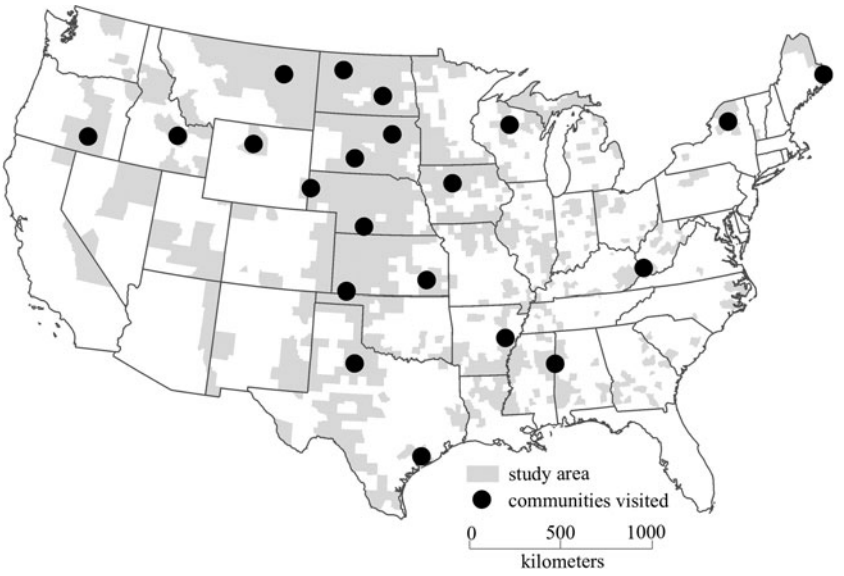

Figure 1 *Study area and approximate location of communities visited (locations may have been shifted for confidentiality).*

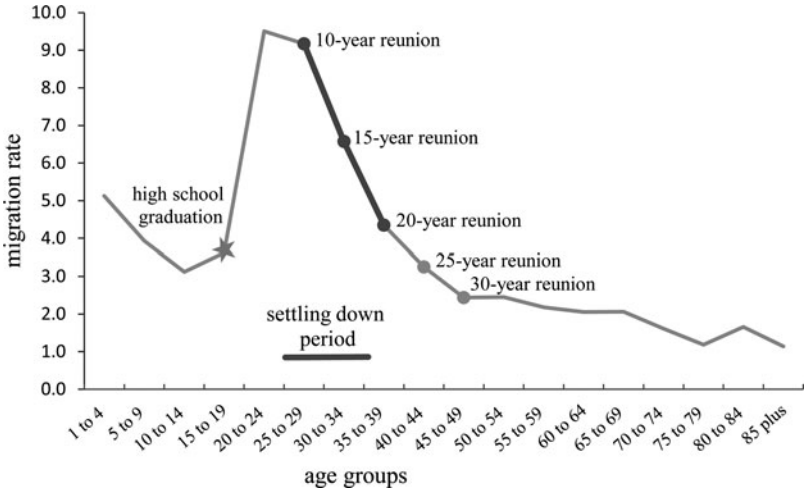

Figure 2 *Age migration schedule and settling down period. Derived from Current Population Survey (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2009a).*

revealed that rural high school reunions are not common among Hispanics, Native Americans, and Mormons. Only approximate community locations are shown on the map to retain confidentiality. For similar reasons, geographic references have been altered throughout the article.

Visits were made to ten- to thirty-year high school reunions, for interviews with people in their late twenties to late forties. The age cohorts considered here include peak ages of return migration from twenty-five to thirty-five (Miller 1977; Long 1988). In most geographical settings, the bulk of rural return migration occurs during this critical settling-down period associated with childrearing and career maturation. As shown in Figure 2, derived from Current Population Survey data (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2009a), migration propensities for life stages after the settling-down period are much lower (Rogers and Castro 1981; Plane 1992). This implies that locational choices made while settling down, between the late twenties and the forties, have greater permanence and bearing on community population levels and characteristics.

Over 95 percent of reunion interviews were with non-Hispanic whites. In large part, this focus corresponded with the racial and ethnic composition of the relevant high school graduation years (1978–1999). In 1990, a meaningful census year for this graduation interval, 85 percent of the study-area population was non-Hispanic white, 9 percent were non-Hispanic African American, and 4 percent were Hispanic. We visited one of the 124 study-area counties in which African Americans made up 20 percent or more of the 1990 population and one of the sixty-five counties with similarly high Hispanic percentages. At reunion visits in the rural South, we interviewed a small number of African Americans, far too few to consider any of the very important racial dimensions of rural return migration. Similarly, we encountered and interviewed very few Latinos. Although several of the communities visited have gained Latinos in recent years, there were relatively fewer Latino high school graduates in the ten- to thirty-year reunion classes we visited. Given that, findings from our work are mostly telling of non-Hispanic whites.

Receiving permission to attend reunions hinged on establishing rapport with reunion organizers, who were identified from phone calls to schools, newspapers, city governments, chambers of commerce, and potential reunion venues. Reunion-related social networking websites, such as Classmates.com, were rarely used in rural areas in 2008, but the use of personal social networking sites—for instance, Facebook—had noticeably increased in 2009. Phone calls with reunion organizers proved more effective than e-mails in establishing trust and receiving permission to attend reunion events. Beyond a few exceptions, the collaboration of reunion organizers was remarkable and their introductions and assistance throughout the community visit were vital for the success of the project.

Recorded interviews were conducted near the beginning of reunion events, to minimize intrusion. Conversations ranged from a few minutes to a half-hour, for an average of eleven minutes. Interviews were open-ended, including questions that varied by migrant type. We asked returnees about reasons for leaving and for returning. Nonreturnees laid out their thoughts about leaving, returning, and not returning, and stayers spoke about the draw of their hometown. The interviews were transcribed and imported to NVivo (QSR International 2009), a software package helpful in organizing text data, keeping track of attributes, and coding themes as they emerged from interviews.

Before or after high school reunions, we spent several days in each town collecting information on economic and social conditions and gaining a sense of community dynamics. We conducted nearly 100 interviews with community leaders outside of reunions,

including several group interviews. A few community leaders were in their mid-thirties, but more typically they were older than the reunion interviewees. Primarily, these conversations were meant to provide broader contextual information about the social and economic factors influencing the decision to return or not return. Many persons contacted as community leaders were themselves returnees, and their stories were included in our findings. We also had twenty-one interviews with returnees outside of reunions. Such interviews were often longer, ranging in length from twenty minutes to over an hour, and frequently provided a more detailed understanding of reasons for returning and the decision-making process.

Identifying Nonreturn Migrants and Return Migrants

The question "Where do you live now?" revealed that nearly 60 percent of reunion interviewees (183 out of 309) now live elsewhere, not in the town of high school graduation (Table 1). Almost all live in much larger cities or towns. These "nonreturnees" make up a critical and unique component of this study. They are potential returning migrants to rural areas who are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to track down and interview outside reunion events. By asking them "Have you thought about moving back? Why or why not?" we learned of the potential appeal and most common barriers to rural return migration.

As expected, nonreturnees are diverse with respect to migration histories. Most moved away right after high school to larger urban places, and many made additional moves. Some returned to their home community and later left again, and some returned to the region but not close enough to be classified with other returnees. We spoke with a small number of couples who had lived elsewhere before returning to the other spouse's hometown, a move that certainly qualifies them as a return couple but not from the perspective of the graduating class and the community being studied.

Those who lived in or near their town of high school graduation were asked "Did you always live here?" allowing us to distinguish between stayers and returnees. We spoke with ninety-four people we classified as returnees, including twenty-two return migrants who came home directly after completing a college education elsewhere. We also included among returnees those who moved back to a location within a thirty-minute drive of their hometown as long as they self-identified as returnees and spoke of activity spaces that included the town of high school graduation. Determination of return migration status hinges on research-relevant criteria as well as an understanding of the context for the move.

Only 10 percent of reunion interviews were with stayers, including a very small number who had left for a few months and quickly returned. The relatively small proportion of stayers partly reflects the interview process—we introduced ourselves as a research team interested in migration and most reunion organizers and classmates were helpful in pointing us toward migrants. In addition, low attendance among stayers was cited on multiple occasions by reunion organizers. Some stayers mentioned that opportunities to see classmates outside reunion venues (by virtue of living in their hometown) lowered the incentive to attend reunion events. Information from stayer interviews was not included directly in the findings for this study but did provide context on the draw of rural communities that complemented insights from other interviews.

We noted the gender of the high school graduate and conducted a nearly even number of interviews with men and women. Although the community context of migration differed somewhat for men and women, findings overall did not reveal strong gender differences in factors affecting migration. This is not surprising given the dominance of joint decision making expressed in the interviews undertaken, many of them with couples.

High school reunions are not representative of small-town graduating classes and they most often do not include class members who did not graduate. Reunion attendees tend to have strong ties to their classmates and seek out class reunions as a way to connect with childhood friends. In general, they think

Table 1 *Interviews by type of migrant and reunion year*

	Reunion year					
Interviews by migrant type	**10-year**	**15-year**	**20-year**	**25-year**	**30-year**	**Total**
Number of interviews						
Stayers	10	2	7	0	13	32
Nonreturnees	37	3	85	6	52	183
Returnees	17	4	42	4	27	94
Total	64	9	134	10	92	309
Number of reunions	7	1	11	1	7	27
Interviews per reunion						
Stayers	1.4	2.0	0.6	0.0	1.9	1.2
Nonreturnees	5.3	3.0	7.7	6.0	7.4	6.8
Returnees	2.4	4.0	3.8	4.0	3.9	3.5
Total	9.1	9.0	12.2	10.0	13.1	11.4

favorably of their high school experience and their home community. This selection bias renders reunions problematic for overall class representation but makes them highly useful for reaching actual and potential return migrants. They allow us to pose two complementary questions—"Why did you move back?" and "What keeps you from moving back?"—to people from the same community who now live in different locales. We have no interviews revealing migration decisions of high school dropouts, but we expect that their overall numbers are quite small, given relatively high graduation rates in the types of counties making up the study area. We also expect lower migration propensities among dropouts because they rarely gain entry to colleges, a primary migration motivation for young adults. This suggests that this group makes up a fairly small percentage of actual and potential returnees in the study area.

Given interview time constraints at reunion events and the primary focus of this work, we chose not to probe about migration intentions other than return to the specific reunion community. The topic of alternate migration destinations did arise in response to a question we asked all interviewees: "Where do you expect to live in ten years?" Some younger interviewees, from ten-year reunions, at times spoke of moving on for more "stretching of wings." A small number of older (thirty-year reunion) interviewees spoke of following their kids to new destinations, and others spoke of retirement-related moves to high-amenity locales (e.g., Baja California, Costa Rica, Gulf of Mexico). Our findings focus on what for many potential returnees was a central component of their migration story—a clearly delineated choice between staying put and coming home.

The process of analyzing interviews with more than ninety returnees and over 180 nonreturnees uncovers a broad range of themes but also strikingly similar responses voiced by returnees on the one hand and nonreturnees on the other. The following synthesis of these responses brings in numerous interview quotes as a way of drawing on the voices of interviewees. No attribution to an individual is given as chosen quotes are exemplary of the many conversations we had during visits of twenty-seven high school reunions in twenty-one rural communities.

Findings

Interviews with returnees and nonreturnees revealed that employment options represent, as expected, one of the factors shaping migration decisions. Life course dynamics and the role of the family emerged as the dominant theme for understanding return migration. Migration decisions are also shaped by the broader social context and community attractiveness. What follows is a discussion of three separate threads: employment, family, and social and community contexts. The interviews show, however, that these themes interact and are tightly intertwined.

Employment Context

Employment as a motivation for initial outmigration. Ravenstein's (1885) maxim—people move primarily to better themselves financially—echoed throughout conversations at small-town high school reunions, especially in response to the question: "Why did you leave after graduating from high school?" Recalling decisions made ten or more years ago, interviewees typically linked post–high school outmigration with job prospects or career-related goals. For some, outmigration after high school led directly to jobs: "We moved to Atlanta for work, and we have family there as well." Others left to join the military: "I did eight years in the military." For most, it meant going to college in pursuit of better paying jobs and more lucrative careers. "Well, I graduated from high school and the next natural step was college and I went to. . . . "

Interlaced throughout this primary narrative were frequent comments revealing highly complementary, but nonpecuniary, motives, including desires to escape the social confines and routines of small-town life, opportunities to travel and learn new things, or a chance to just get out and see the world: "Then I joined the Navy . . . so I could actually get out of here . . . and travel a lot." Others looked for a chance to spend time in a big city and seek romantic attachments; for example, "I left the day after I graduated, I was gone. I needed adventure. I need more. I knew there was more out there." Indeed, in all but a few instances, rural high school graduates who moved away left for a larger, more urban destination.

Employment as a barrier to return migration. Limited employment, especially for those with advanced or professional degrees, is described as a defining characteristic of isolated small towns by the people interviewed in this study. As expected, decisions not to move back home centered on job and career issues:

> There would be nothing for my husband to do as far as a job here. He's an electrical engineer and there's no opportunity probably for what he does anywhere in this state.

Employment-related barriers to returning were often expressed in terms of a limited capacity to earn enough money to support a family. Outmigrants found wages to be unacceptably low or they felt that the communities were too small to run a profitable business:

> There is no money to be made there, there is not any way to really support yourself unless you would want to make minimum wage. To provide a better life for me and my daughter, you have to be in a bigger area.

Although challenges in overcoming employment-related barriers were substantial, most return migrants described decisions to move back despite career limitations (von Reichert, Cromartie, and Arthun 2011). In many cases, returnees took up new career paths (e.g., starting a retail business) or worked out a myriad of creative employment solutions. Many described drawn-out, deliberative plans to accommodate a return

move with systematic searches for employment opportunities back home: "In my case it took six years."

Multiple conversations with returnees in almost all communities visited revealed income trade-offs similar to those analyzed in the amenity migration literature (Knapp and Graves 1989; von Reichert and Rudzitis 1992; Rudzitis 1999). Benefits gained by moving home, such as raising a family, come at the expense of wage cuts in the short term and career sacrifices in the long term:

> If it was just me and the wife I would have stayed down there because financially we were better off. If you're an adult it's definitely a better place in a lot of ways.

Employment as a reason for return migration. Numerous contrasting stories reveal return moves prompted by job openings. Specific examples include utility workers, administrators, health care providers, lawyers, pharmacists, policemen, and teachers:

> I got a pretty good job here, I teach and coach. . . . I didn't really know if I was going to come back here, but I'm kind of glad that I did. It's good when people come back to the area with an education and then want to make a difference.

In interviews conducted separately from high school reunion venues, business and community leaders in most of the towns visited described recruitment challenges, reflecting unfilled career opportunities in both public and private sectors. Isolated rural communities with limited scenic amenities often find it hard to attract and retain people in managerial and professional positions (McGranahan 1998). For some who left for an education, these opportunities presented themselves at the right time and allowed them to come back, at times fairly soon after completing their education. Returnees described drawing on their social networks or being known by an employer to realize job opportunities:

> I had an [industry] scholarship. . . . And then they offered me a job, so I came back to work here.

In communities where agriculture continues to play a prominent role, the family farm acted as a magnet for inducing return migration. In some cases, return migrants expressed a sense of expectation and obligation to return:

> Dad had some health troubles so it was time to either step up or—. Of course I had to come back.

In other cases, a desire to farm was the prime motive:

> My husband wants to farm so he's looking to inherit my grandma's farm if something happens to her. So he wants to stay here.

Themes of obligation and opportunities for many other types of family businesses, including insurance companies, real estate firms, restaurants, and retail stores, were raised:

> I decided to come back and help. It's a family business, so to help my father to grow the business back here.

Ties to family-owned businesses point to the larger relevance of family-based return migration. The following section describes family as the primary motivation for return migration to the types of communities studied here. In almost all cases, however, these family-based moves were contingent on employment conditions, specifically on the ability of breadwinners to find a way of making a living:

> Basically that was the draw: that my mother was still here. . . . And then just the fact that we both were able to find work.

Family Context

Some returnees described the desire to return as something they carried with them from the start: "I always knew I would come back." A much larger proportion, however, started with a very different mindset:

> I swore that I would never come back. I hated this town, I could not wait to get out of high school and get away from here.

Dozens of statements reflect a shift in attitudes about living back at home, taking place anywhere from five to fifteen years after high school. Changes partly stemmed from experiencing other places:

> You have to go somewhere else and see something else and . . . learn . . . what's out there. . . . I think it's a great place to come back to but I think it's important that you get out for a while.

This suggests that life course changes and shifts in place preferences are closely linked. As young adults settle into careers, marriages, and parenthood, their residential preferences often change along with their life goals. In conversations with both returnees and nonreturnees, family formation and childrearing responsibilities clearly emerged as the key triggering events bringing people back home:

> Once you get married you really want the best for your kids. So you want to look for a quieter place. And this is it!

Child-raising as key family-related motivation. The presence of children was cited as a major reason for people to move back to their smaller rural hometown. Some return migrants stated explicitly that they would not have moved back if they did not have children. Repeatedly, the theme of career sacrifice appeared. The timing of the move and the consideration of trade-offs that often constituted the make-or-break decisions were affected by the presence of children:

> We moved back for the kids. Now if we were still single, well not single, but no kids, I don't think we would have come back. We would have stayed there.

Many other returnees spoke of returning for the sake of their children:

> The main reason I moved back to Wyoming isn't because I like to be cold in the winter. It's, we have five children and I thought it would be a good place to raise

> a family. We lived in Arizona in a very large city and . . . even though it treated me and the wife well financially we just thought it was the right time and it was a realistic decision for our kids.

The importance of children with respect to residential decisions at this life stage was also apparent in several statements by nonreturnees. They pointed out that they would consider moving back if they had young children:

> It's a great place to raise kids. I'm not married, I don't have kids so I guess if I was in that situation . . . the decision-making would be different. . . . So for me this town doesn't really offer too much.

The probability of return migration greatly decreases as children age into their teen years. This helps explain the age pattern of return migration that universally peaks when people are in the late twenties to mid-thirties (Eldridge 1965; Miller 1977). Typically, nonreturnees whose children have grown up to be teenagers or "left the nest" no longer show interest in moving back:

> We've become comfortable in Stillwater. It's not just the job. It's not just the schools but we're comfortable where we are. Our kids are in high school, middle school. Oh my goodness, it would be such a change! Not just that high school is high school, but the upheaval, their friends, their social ties, soccer, and their goals of what they want to accomplish at that particular school.

For returnees, recurring themes revolve around a safe environment for children and the opportunity for them to gain autonomy by pursuing activities independently. Parents felt that the community was watching out for children, and they derived comfort from knowing their children's friends and their friends' families. These motivations were sometimes expressed in very practical, concrete ways (leaving doors unlocked) or many times in more general feelings of security or nostalgia (a better life experience):

> I live here since I have a little boy and another baby. And I can leave my doors unlocked. Everyone knows everybody. Everyone would do anything for anybody here. The kids can go to the park by themselves.

> I want to see my kids grow up in a small community. I think you get a better—maybe not necessarily a better education but you get better life experiences.

> You don't have the crime like you do in the big city. And that is the biggest thing with my kids.

The school system and the educational experience offered in a small town were critical for people's decision to move back. Many parents felt that their children received a good education in a smaller town, partly due to smaller class sizes and more attention from teachers. They valued opportunities for children to participate in sports and other school-related activities, also a function of small school size. They also felt rural schools were safer than urban schools:

> The kids get more opportunities to do things than they would in bigger schools. That's one thing that I like too.

> We have a daughter that plays soccer. You know, if she was in a larger school she might not be good enough to make the team but here she can pretty much walk on the team and get to play.

> We were in big cities, we weren't going to put her [our daughter] in schools in the big cities. So that's the main reason we came back to Clinton, is because of the school.

> School systems, I think you get more personal attention. And personally, I just think they're better.

In contrast, many parents who now live elsewhere cited schools as a reason for not moving back. They had reservations about academic quality and standards and perceived the broad range of activities offered in larger schools as a real plus:

> [Our kids] have larger schools and bigger athletic programs and academics. For my kids to relocate back here would be very, very difficult after what they have been exposed to and have available there.

Parents were particularly critical if they thought of their own educational experience as subpar:

> The schools, I didn't think were very good growing up. So . . . when it comes to my kids, they're going to have the best that I can give them.

As parents, both returnees and nonreturnees want the best for their children and, when deciding where to live, look for places they believe can deliver the best. They differ in how they evaluate and compare their previous hometown vis-á-vis other places. That evaluation plays strongly into the return migration decision.

Parents, siblings, and other kin. The presence of one or both parents in the community served to differentiate returnees and nonreturnees; almost all returnees did have parents still at home, whereas many nonreturnees did not. If their parents no longer lived in or near the home community, the incentive to return diminished: "There's nothing for me here. My family doesn't live here any longer."

Although strongly intertwined with the child-related reasons in many discussions, return migrants also expressed family as a separate reason:

> Well, the answer you have heard a hundred times, I am sure, mainly family and kids. . . . Our kids were young, starting to enter kindergarten. . . . We wanted our kids to not move through [different] schools: one school, one town, from start to finish, no bouncing around. . . . And second to that, very close, was my family.

Returnees expressed their motivations related to parents in two, often overlapping, ways: specific and practical on the one hand and general and more emotional on the other. The practical expressions dealt with intergenerational support, especially child care; more general descriptions touched on the value of regular contact and the emotional satisfaction from close proximity:

> I have a two-year-old son and so it is easy for me to be home, close to home, close to mom and dad. I mean, I live within a half mile of my mom and dad. It is easy for

> me to go over there and for them to see him. . . . To live close to mom and dad really helps out a lot.

Returnees were also drawn back by the presence of other kin, especially their siblings. Indeed, in several instances, people moved back after one or more siblings had moved back, especially if those siblings also had children. In numerous conversations, returnees wanted to foster relationships between their children and other kin:

> I have two brothers and they have kids and I grew up with a large family and a lot of cousins. And here we were, isolated over there in Indiana. . . . Just the cousin factor. I wanted my kids to know their grandparents, the cousins, and it was important to me to have the family connection.

The decision to return or not return is greatly affected by the spouse. The residential background and preferences of the spouse can facilitate or hinder return migration. A spouse from the same community shares an understanding of the area. Additionally, the important pull of the family is doubled if both spouses are from the same place. Spouses from different, although smaller, communities tended to be supportive of a return move as well:

> My wife, we were in the same grade together. . . . So yah, family's around here. So there's a strong pull to get back.

> My husband is from North Carolina, from Grifton, so he really loves it here.

Some interviewees had returned to the spouse's rural hometown for very comparable reasons: to raise their children in close proximity to family. Not surprisingly, they expressed no intention of returning to their own community of upbringing:

> My wife is from Winchester and we came back because family, kids, cousins, and everyone's there. We decided to stop chasing the career and start planning our life according to our terms and we plan to stay there the rest of our lives. That's our intent.

Agreement between spouses from similar areas is in sharp contrast to that of spouses from urban areas or other parts of the country:

> I think about it [moving back] all the time. I got family here. My dad lives here, my sister lives here. I like the area. I've always liked the area. She [my wife] won't move back here.

In a few cases, returnees volunteered that a divorce or separation played a role in their move. The barrier to returning associated with a spouse obviously disappears in the face of divorce:

> I moved away when I was twenty-one and got married and moved to Kansas. I came back when I was probably thirty 'cause I got a divorce.

Some spoke of seeking functional support from family: "I had a small son and obviously needed help." Others hinted at the emotional benefits of being close to family and friends in a familiar place: "It felt like the right place to be."

The importance of children and family was stressed by return migrants regardless of gender or the location of the community, but we detected modest gender differences in discussions of the social and community context. There were also different emphases between communities reflecting local conditions, although no striking differences by region.

Social and Community Context

Previous work on return migration, both international and domestic, documented the importance of social ties and location-specific capital. Interviews at high school reunions captured the complexity of social and place ties, ranging from more practical aspects to highly personal and emotional expressions. At one end are the social ties that help in locating employment, get the car fixed, or provide child care. At the other end, but often in the same conversation, are the comforts people derive from being in a familiar environment, from being known and recognized, and from knowing that they live in an attractive community in close proximity to unspoiled, natural settings.

Degrees of familiarity. Conversations with return migrants often touched on the feeling of comfort that comes from familiarity with their hometown. After living elsewhere, people from small towns discovered that "knowing and being known" added meaning to their lives:

> We never thought we'd come back to our small town. . . . As we got out and got into bigger cities . . . we just found that "hey, it is really nice being in a small town where people know you." And you go to the grocery store and they know your name and they can welcome you and greet you and ask about your family. And that was important to us.

Although familiarity was a main draw of rural communities, return migrants were also conflicted about it:

> Just know your neighbors and saying "howdy." Of course the downside is knowing too much of everybody's business that is typical of a small town.

Although returnees valued and some nonreturnees were missing the feeling of belonging to a community, others—especially women—felt constrained by it and expressed appreciation of the privacy they found elsewhere:

> Here is not near as much privacy. When you get to a bigger area, people tend to kind of leave you alone. There is a lot less judgment.

Those who valued a sense of familiarity explained that being on friendly terms with community members leads to higher feelings of trust and greater willingness to provide support. The willingness to come to the aid of neighbors was described as a strong trait of small towns:

> You could ask anyone of the people in this place for a hundred dollars and they would give it to you right now with no questions asked. Not that its money. You could ask anybody for anything and they would give it to you. It's a small town thing.

Communities as places to make a difference. Repeatedly, return migrants expressed connections between sense of community, sense of belonging, and desire to contribute. Education and work experience, acquired while away, positioned them to make a difference for the larger community. Through their ability to make a difference, people also derive gratification. Return migrants' involvement in improving their communities is intimately tied to notions of "home" as described by Stack (1996, 199): "What people are seeking is not so much the home they left behind as a place that they feel they can change, a place in which their lives and strivings will make a difference—a place in which to create a home."

> I decided to return here . . . because I thought that would be the perfect fit for me. . . . Being involved in so many different aspects of the community . . . my hope was to coach and having that opportunity to influence young men and be a part of their lives.

> To me, the small town offers something that the big town can't. . . . Here you matter. Your family matters, and you can make a difference and see that difference. I have been in big towns and it takes a lot more . . . to actually matter and not just be a statistic.

Communities as spaces of attractiveness. The natural or built environment also influenced decisions to make a return move. Physical attributes most frequently mentioned were close proximity to the open countryside and to built recreation spaces. Also frequently mentioned was the compactness of the community and the greater ease that shorter travel time provided in conducting everyday activities. The overall attractiveness of the town, especially the downtown retail center, was frequently mentioned by returnees and nonreturnees.

Proximity to natural landscapes was valued for its own sake—people expressed a sense of satisfaction, even a spiritual benefit, just knowing that wild lands were nearby: "It's just something about wide open spaces." In most cases, people spoke less about the scenic qualities of nearby landscapes and more about the activities that such spaces allowed. Interacting with nature through hunting and fishing represented a strong draw, especially for men:

> I like to hunt so it's nice to get back to a rural area where I still know people and I can go up and say, "Remember me? Can I still hunt?"

Many people who moved away continued to value the recreational opportunities available in rural areas. The following nonreturnee, whose job blocked him from acting on a strong desire to return, was enthusiastic about being outdoors:

> I love coming home . . . I mean, I grew up here . . . I'm a hunter. I come back. Every year I duck hunt all winter long. You can go fishing all summer long. I mean, we have wonderful deer and turkey hunting.

Community leaders in many of the towns visited were keen to point out any recent investments in recreational infrastructure: parks, bike paths, golf courses, aqua centers, and playgrounds. These efforts seemed in most cases to have favorably influenced decisions to move back:

> Like the waterslides, and the kids' park, so there is lots of fun things for little guys to do. . . . So that was a big part of why we came back, too, because it was going to be such a nice place to raise kids.

Recreational infrastructure also impressed nonreturnees interested in moving back:

> We have a country club in this community. You can go play golf. We have a nice community center. We have a swimming pool.

The overall small size of the community makes for shorter trips when shopping, commuting to and from work, visiting family and friends, and chauffeuring children. In one way or another, almost all returnees interviewed referred to an easier, less stressful existence:

> With lower cost of living and the safety and the easy commute: it's easy living here. . . . You know, it's just two minutes to the grocery store.

Contrasts with the big-city experiences were numerous:

> Then you go somewhere like Minneapolis or Eau Claire. And man, you are glad to come back here. 'Cause it's so laid back, you know, slow. You ain't got to worry about three lanes of traffic.

Whereas return migrants portrayed the ease of travel in and around rural places as a plus, nonreturnees often described the smallness and isolation in negative terms. They did not like the extra travel involved in getting from these towns to the broad range of amenities and services available only in larger cities:

> No, I mean I probably will never move back. Because I have a city that is five miles down the road, a big one, and then another one that is twenty miles on this side. And I got so used to being able to eat where I want to, whenever I want to and we can go to whatever department store. It's just so much easier. . . . Remember when we bought our school clothes, when we lived here? We had to drive to Birmingham.

Lack of access to big-city amenities was commonly cited as a reason for not returning among those who clearly indicated they had no plans to return. After having lived in larger urban areas, they would miss the shopping and dining options, the cultural events, or other features:

> There's just, there's just not a whole lot. You know, there's not much shopping opportunities. There's not much dining opportunities. There's just not a whole lot.

In contrast to bigger cities, options for a night on the town were limited in smaller towns as well:

> The breadth of stuff that there is to do in the city! Like, we both really like Indian food and Thai food and . . .

Many return migrants mentioned that they missed the nice restaurants and the coffee shops and that it was sometimes difficult to buy some types of consumer items: "I had to go twenty miles to buy a sewing needle." Although they would certainly consider this a drawback, many returnees did not view limited access to shopping as a fatal flaw. In a few communities, shortcomings turned into employment opportunities for returnees who took over or managed restaurants and opened their own coffee shops, day spas, bike shops, and other retail and service businesses.

Interviews with community leaders and those attending high school reunions showed that efforts to improve and maintain a town's physical appeal and retail viability represented a form of community development most appreciated by long-term natives. Such efforts certainly would influence newcomers as well, but they were especially appealing for those considering a return move and for those who had already moved back. In the words of a community leader actively involved in a major downtown restoration project, "We want this to be the kind of community *we* want to live in."

Summary and Implications

By analyzing just over 300 interviews conducted at high school reunions in twenty-one U.S. communities, we identified three broad contexts that shaped decisions to return or not return to rural hometowns: employment, family, and social and community ties. Viewed separately, there is no question that family-based motivations were listed first and foremost by the migrants themselves as the primary trigger for returning home (see also von Reichert, Cromartie, and Arthun forthcoming), with only a handful of cases that could be described as motivated primarily by employment decisions or place ties. In the flow of conversations, however, these three components mostly worked in combination, not isolation. For instance, family-based reasons were generally stated first but were tightly intertwined with larger social-contextual factors and community attractiveness:

> It's that my mom lives here, my dad. We got the family farm over in Fairview. . . . That's huge for me being able to just drive out into the country and knowing that I have got a place to go that you can go shoot a gun, or go fishing, or go hunting, or see my family. My brother has two little girls—my little nieces. I [was] missing them growing up. I want to be around. I want to be able to go and hang out over a weekend. Above and beyond that I think there is a whole different attitude and it's a way of life.

To discern the interplay among family, career, and community ties, it was particularly valuable to be able to compare statements made by returnees and nonreturnees. These personal descriptions of migration choices, made by former high school classmates who grew up in a shared social environment, started their adult journeys at the same time, but ended up (for the time being) in different places, reveal common dynamics in every community visited. The desire to settle down and raise a family in a familiar, small-town setting, and especially the chance to reengage with parents and other family members still living at home, were the dominant factors triggering family households to consider a return move. The few single persons who likewise considered returning lacked childrearing motivations but shared strong family ties as the dominant reason for moving.

The presence of family was almost always the necessary condition for coming home to these relatively remote settings, but it was not typically a sufficient, stand-alone condition. Decisions to act on family-motivated desires to return were either enhanced or diminished by evaluations of the broader social and physical environment. For example, returnees described an ease in reconnecting to social networks and making community contributions. They placed a high value on recreation and exposure to wilderness settings for their children or praised community investments in parks, swimming pools, and bike trails. Nonreturnees described trade-offs that outweighed family ties, such as lack of urban-style amenities ("there isn't a decent coffee shop here"), a deteriorating downtown ("we would hang out at the drug store or the bowling alley, but they've long gone"), diminishing social ties ("none of my friends are here anymore"), or lack of privacy ("everyone knows everyone's business"). Interviews at high school reunions with return and nonreturn migrants show that, although social and community ties rarely determined return migration on their own, in combination with family reasons they were important in contributing to a return:

> I think there has to be some love if you're going to come back. There had to be something about the community in the first place—the people, the environment, the nature. There had to be *something* to bring you back.

Family motivations dominated return migration decisions, but the ability to move back to a rural place invariably hinged on securing employment. For nonreturnees who had contemplated moves back home, career constraints and limited employment options were usually the critical barriers in the choice not to return. Those intent on returning sometimes relied on creative career choices. In some cases, the move home occurred after job searches spanning several years. Career sacrifices to meet family needs showed up in many returnee interviews, a critical migration dynamic that is quite similar to the trade-offs between jobs and natural amenities that has long been recognized as a hallmark of internal, urban-to-rural migration in the United States (Knapp and Graves 1989; Rudzitis 1999). The findings presented here align with research on amenity migration and advance the understanding of broader counterurbanization trends, by showing

rural return migration to be a frequently complex balancing act. Participants pursue multiple life goals, centered on family strategies but contingent on employment needs and quality-of-life pursuits, which collectively can only be realized in particular rural localities.

The family–job trade-off so frequently raised in our interviews appears less in life course research focused on U.S. domestic migration than it does in international migration studies. Results here show that domestic return migration to rural U.S. communities and transnational return migration share important features. Feelings of rootedness, connections to family, and ties to social and community networks drive rural U.S. return migration, just as they do among transnational migrants. Results here affirm a broad consensus on the importance of uncovering how factors shaping decisions to return are blended: "Return is a search for home ... facilitated by a sense of belonging and continuity with the culture and the presence of kin and community networks" (Ralph 2009, 189).

Although qualitative in design and focused on a specific age range, the research presented here owes much to work on life course dimensions of U.S. rural–urban migration. Mostly employing quantitative methods, the rapidly expanding life course literature paints an increasingly nuanced picture of age variation in the overall propensity to migrate, the factors influencing migration decisions, and the geography of U.S. migration flows. Common themes have been explored in different geographic settings—for instance, how economic factors dominate in early adult years—compared with the greater emphasis on quality-of-life and amenity factors among those approaching retirement. Findings here suggest the need to incorporate methods that allow for detecting the interplay among factors at each life stage.

The interplay of factors affecting migration could be particularly complex for the age cohorts considered here. Life course research tends to focus more on highly mobile young adults, who often move up the urban hierarchy in pursuit of education or employment, and lower mobility cohorts approaching retirement who often move down the urban hierarchy for lifestyle reasons. In between is a very critical settling down period that deserves increased attention from a life course perspective. Among people in their late twenties to early forties, when career and family obligations overlap and return migration peaks, overall mobility declines steadily. Migration choices made during this period are more permanent and consequential; thus, it is not surprising to find myriad factors being considered. Although our findings come from interviews with people in a particular age range and from a study population with rural roots, the observed interplay among economic, family, and social–community factors affecting return migration decisions could very well have relevance for different age groups and for comparable population groups with different geographical ties. ■

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CHRISTIANE VON REICHERT is in the Department of Geography, The University of Montana, 32 Campus Drive, Missoula, MT 59812. E-mail: c.vonreichert@umontana.edu. Her research interests include migration and population change in the rural United States.

JOHN B. CROMARTIE is with the Economic Research Service/USDA, 355 E Street SW, Washington, DC 20024–3221. E-mail: jbc@ers.usda.gov. His research interests include U.S. Migration, population change, and the well-being of rural communities.

RYAN O. ARTHUN is in the Department of Geography at The University of Montana, 32 Campus Drive, Missoula, MT 59812. E-mail: ryan.arthun@mso.umt.edu. His research interests include rural communities and programs and policies that enhance the quality of rural life.