



NSRC Progress Report 2022

Escaping to the Northern Forest: Migration, Housing, and Community Implications in the Time of COVID

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Project Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, popular press and local anecdotes paint a picture of people fleeing urban spaces to take refuge in amenity-rich, rural regions. Fear of contracting the virus paired with an unlinking of employment from geography and a renewed appreciation for outdoor recreation, spurred moves into rural spaces, including the Northern Forest region. However, regional stakeholders were unable to quantify this migration.

Community and economic development professionals from across the Northern Forest region suggest that understanding how many people have moved into communities and the migrants' characteristics will highlight challenges and opportunities for serving new residents, supporting locals, and sustaining communities. Beyond this specific wave of migration, identifying factors that "pull" migrants into one part of the region over another helps inform stakeholders' long-term planning for future migration, including in response to climate change, natural disasters, and waves of generational retirements.

Researchers will estimate patterns of COVID-era migration into the Northern Forest region, identify the extent of migration, the socio-demographic characteristics of migrants, and the features of communities that have attracted the greatest number of migrants. By using multiple sources of administrative, sales, survey, tax, and interview data, researchers will analyze migration in each county within the Northern Forest, for groups of communities, and for the entire region. Community and economic development stakeholders across four states will serve as informal advisors and will benefit from the research and recommendations emerging from this project.

Progress in 2022

The project team focused on completing the compilation of quantitative data sources and ongoing recruitment for in-depth qualitative interviews. Quantitative data have been carefully obtained, cleaned, and merged to ensure that data are correctly linked to the proper counties across sources (see figure below for overview of data sources and progress). This process, although tedious, has yielded a finalized master quantitative dataset which we are confident is high-quality and appropriately merged. A literature review to support the academic paper is fully drafted and has shaped the analytic plans for 2023.

For primary data collection, a list of regional realtors was compiled (and expanded), and interview recruitment continues. This project uses snowball sampling to round out the sampling frame. Interviews are being transcribed as completed, in preparation for qualitative analysis (coding of themes) in 2023.



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Progress on Sourcing, Cleaning, and Integration of Multiple Data Sources

Data	Source	Progress	KEY
Identify extent of migration			✓ Complete
Home sales	State realtor associations	✓	🕒 In Progress
Real estate or property transfer tax data	State departments of revenue, taxation or administration	✓	
Change of address requests	U.S. Postal Service	✓	
American Community Survey microdata	U.S. Census Bureau	✓	
Identify migrant characteristics			
Social security recipients	Social Security Administration	✓	
School enrollments	State departments of education	✓	
Personal income by component	Bureau of Economic Analysis	✓	
Realtor interviews; mover interviews	Proposed collection here	🕒	
Identify community characteristics & migration histories			
American Community Survey	U.S. Census Bureau	✓	
County-to-county migration flows	U.S. Census Bureau	✓	
Community-specific historical data	Historical societies, local press	Ongoing	

Escaping to the Northern Forest project progress on sourcing, cleaning, and integration of multiple data sources.

Problems or Changes

Regarding data collection, recruitment for qualitative interviews remains the biggest methodological challenge, although this is not specific to this project. To address this challenge, we expanded the sampling frame for interview recruitment, streamlined the interview signup process by leveraging an online scheduling tool (Microsoft Bookings), and have begun explicitly offering phone interview options in addition to Zoom.

Plans for 2023

With the completion of the master dataset, the major quantitative activities for the first part of 2023 will be analysis, aiming to estimate and contextualize the migration patterns and characteristics of migrant-receiving communities in the Northern Forest region. Primary data collection will continue through in-depth interviews, focusing on strategic sampling to build out underreached geographic areas, transcribing and cleaning as we proceed. Once we've reached saturation, interviews will be complete, and we will transition to analysis (coding of analytic themes). Following the completion of qualitative and quantitative data analysis, we will turn towards producing final deliverables. These are anticipated to include a journal article for publication in a peer-reviewed journal, a policy-focused research brief published through the Carsey School of Public Policy, at least one webinar, and any additional, tailored deliverables based on stakeholder input and interest (e.g., infographic, video).