

NSRC Progress Report 2021

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

PI Jessica A. Carson, University of New Hampshire

Project abstract

Nearly a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, popular press and local anecdotes continue to paint a picture of people fleeing urban spaces to take refuge in amenity-rich, rural regions. Fear of contracting the virus has paired with a new unlinking of employment from geography and a renewed appreciation for outdoor recreation, spurring moves into rural spaces, including the Northern Forest region. However, regional stakeholders have thus far been unable to quantify this migration.

Community and economic development professionals from across the region suggest that understanding how many people have moved into communities and their characteristics will highlight challenges and opportunities for serving movers, 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 impending waves of generational retirements.

NSRC 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.

Summary of progress in 2021

In 2021, the project has focused on obtaining, cleaning, and merging the quantitative data sources necessary to build the master dataset central to this analysis (see Figure for overview of data sources and progress). Doing so requires careful processes of aggregation and matching to ensure that data are correctly linked to the proper counties across sources. Specific activities include sourcing and standardizing data from individual state departments, which demonstrated significant inter-state variability in format and availability; writing and testing an algorithm to fill in data on moves by town (suppressed by the U.S. Postal Service for privacy reasons); parsing schools into the districts, municipalities, and states that they serve; merging all county-level data with consistent identifier codes; and compiling a list of all realtors in the region to form a sampling frame for in-depth interviews.

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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

Program-wide challenges with hiring and retaining skilled staff, relevant but not exclusive to this project, slowed project commencement by a few months. Staffing constraints have been alleviated and timeline is realigned for 2022.

Plans for 2022

In 2022, we will finalize our master quantitative dataset, enabling us to estimate the extent of migration, migrant characteristics, community characteristics, and migration histories. Initial estimates will be returned to the community stakeholders who supported the project's development. Building on the sampling frame created in 2021, we will begin sampling for in-depth interviews with realtors, who will themselves form part of the sampling strategy for reaching movers to the region. Those data will be transcribed, cleaned, and coded for 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.