



# Rewriting the Rural Narrative: Resident Recruitment

## The chicken and egg of residential motivations

Benjamin Winchester  
Rural Sociologist  
Extension Center for Community Vitality

## Why the Pandemic Is Making Some City Folks Think Rural

Drawn by remote work, perceived safety and lower cost of living, some young people are making the move.

## Time To Move? Data Suggests Americans May Flee To Rural Areas Post-COVID



**Jeff Rose** Contributor @  
Personal Finance

*I'll show you a new way to accelerate your wealth building.*

# Millennials Could Be a Boon to Smaller Communities. How Can Those Towns Attract Younger Workers?

## Americans Big on Idea of Living in the Country

BY FRANK NEWPORT



## The Heartland's Revival

by Joel Kotkin



UNIVERSITY OF M

## People Fleeing Big Cities May Spur Economic Growth In Smaller Metros



**Remington Tonar and Ellis Talton** Senior Contributor @  
Leadership Strategy

*We explore urban innovation and infrastructure.*

A long time ago in a galaxy far,  
far away....



## Fighting for an American Countryside

### The Decline of Rural Minnesota

# HOLLOWING OUT THE MIDDLE

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

by  
Joseph Amato

## Survival of Rural America

SMALL VICTORIES AND BITTER HARVESTS



### From Breadbasket to Basket Case

In the 1980s, rural Americans faced fewer teen births and lower divorce rates than their urban counterparts. Now, their positions have flipped entirely.





# THE NARRATIVE BASIS

**Mechanization of agriculture**



**Roads & transportation**



**Main street restructuring**

**School consolidations**



# THE NARRATIVE

- There's a brain drain
  - We live in the middle of nowhere
  - We are a sleepy town
  - Everyone knows one another
  - Nobody lock their doors
- 
- What we had
  - What we don't have
  - What we wish we had
  - What we could have had...



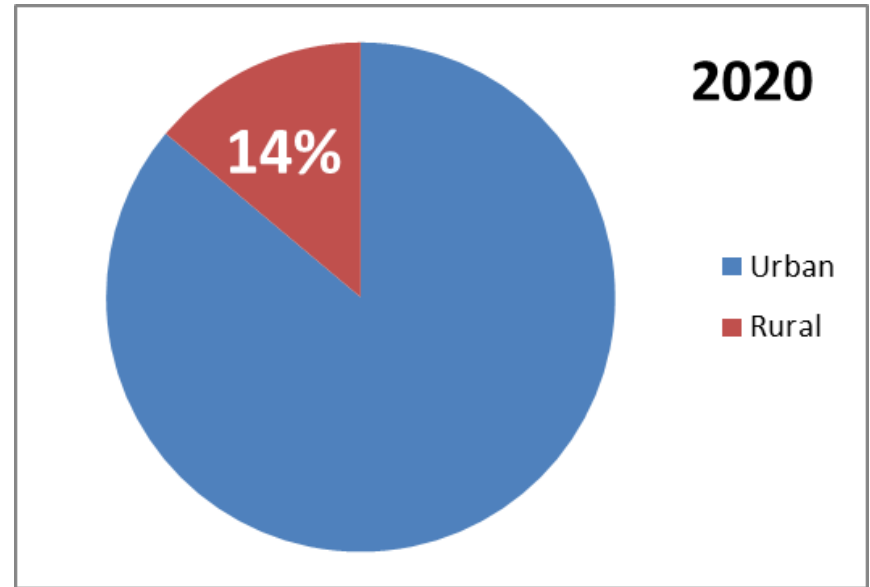
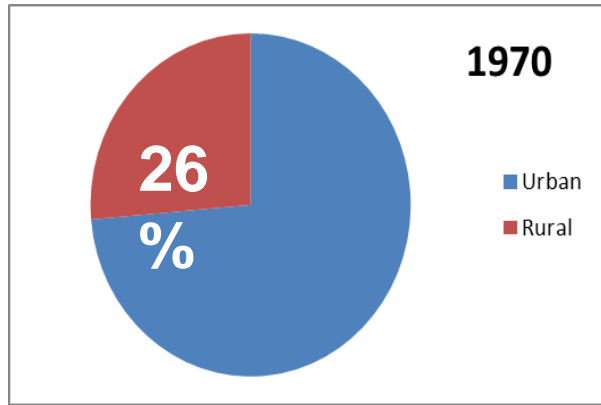
*Rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated. –Mark Twain*



Rural is **changing**,  
not dying.



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

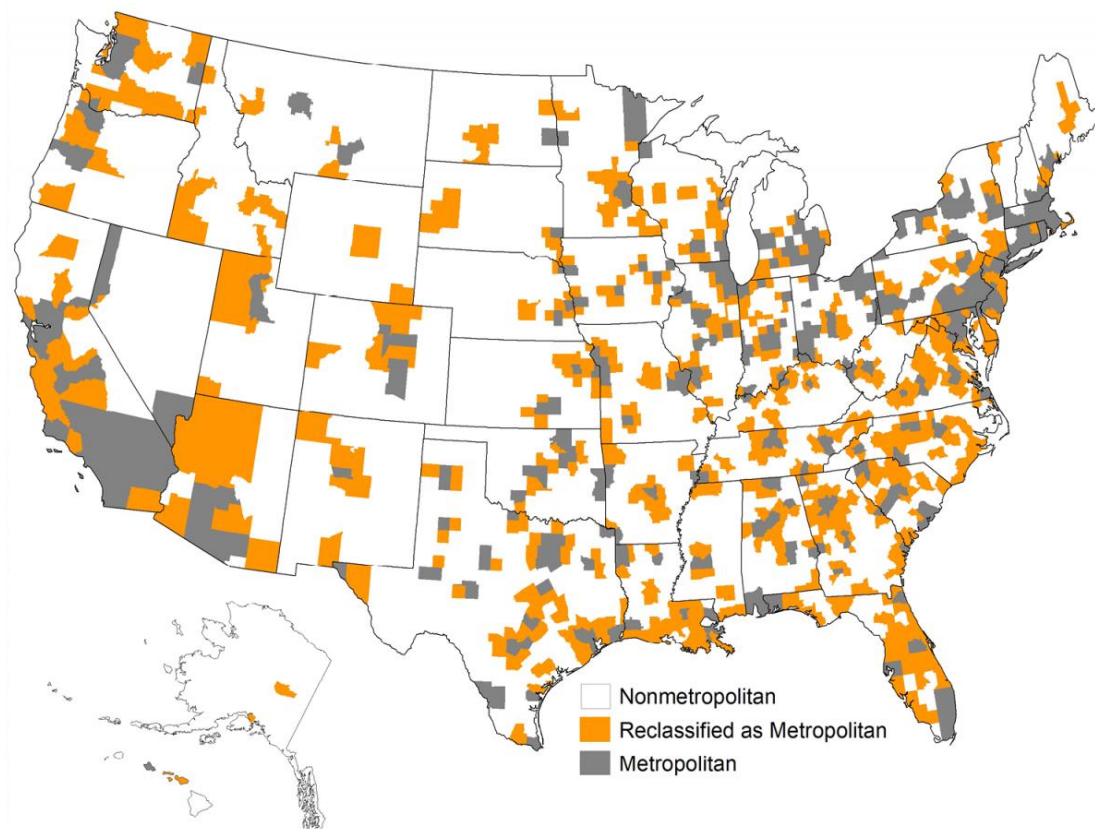


As rural populations grow, residents get  
**reclassified.**





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



753 nonmetropolitan counties that were redefined as metropolitan between 1963 and 2013 shifted nearly 70 million residents from nonmetropolitan to metropolitan America by 2017. This represents 21% of the entire 2017 U.S. population. In fact, *all* the proportionate growth in metropolitan America from 67% of the population in 1970 to 86% in 2017 resulted from metropolitan reclassification.

Population figures reduced by formerly nonmetro places now designated as metro.

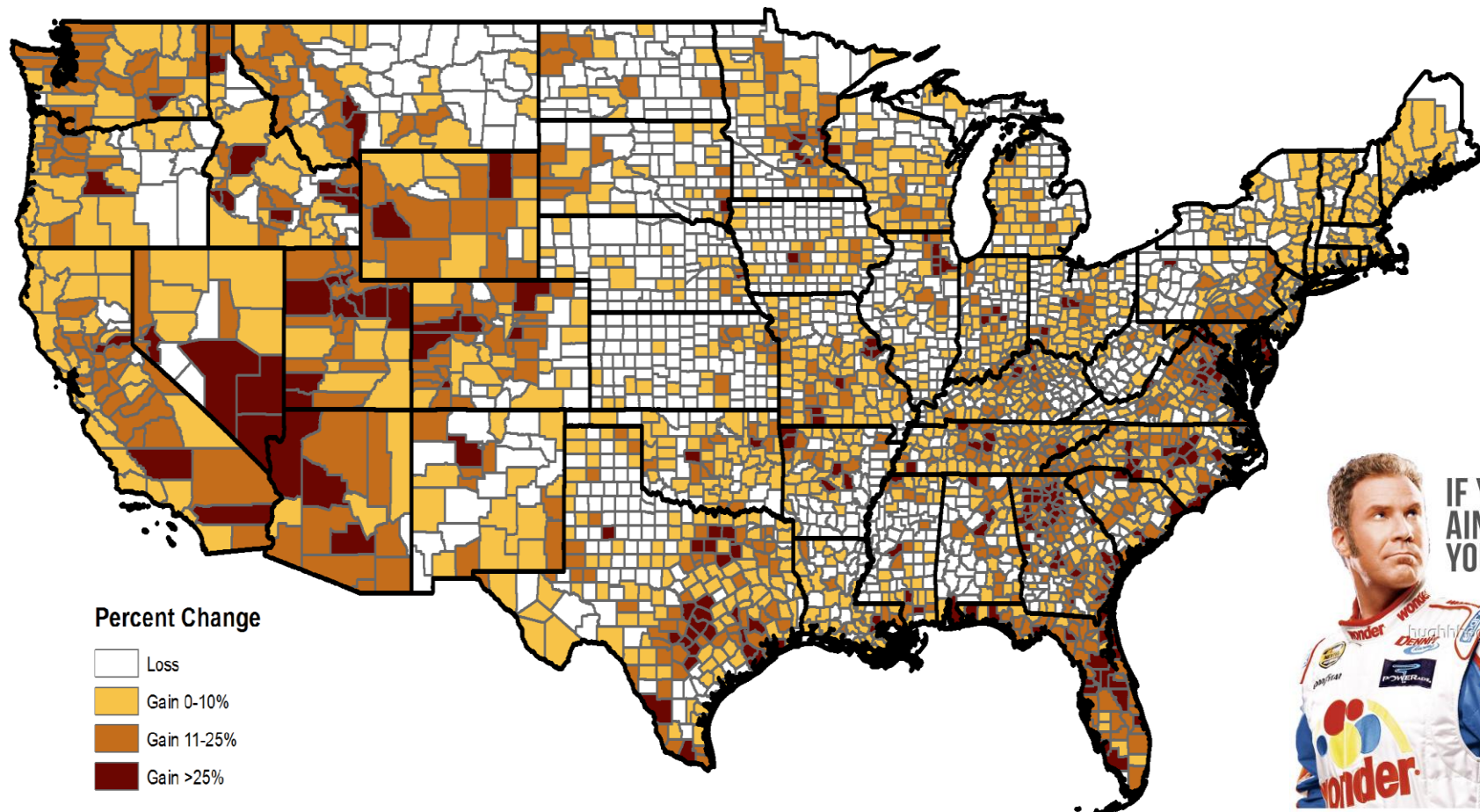
*(25% all counties since 1974)*

Success is taken away from rural as urban areas have grown **WIDER**, not taller.



# Total Population Infatuation

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



# 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>	<b>61,806</b>	<b>59,822</b>	<b>50,845</b>	<b>50,011</b>	<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).*



**Myth: Only the “lucky few” escape rural America which results in a Brain DRAIN.**

40%-50% of residents **move**  
every 5 years.





# The Rural Brain Gain

They choose rural age

**30-49**

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





# UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA EXTENSION

**Nebraska Buffalo Commons  
Research 2012**

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



# MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY

## EXTENSION



MONTANA  
COMMUNITY  
FOUNDATION



**Montana Movers Study, 2021**



# 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	MT
Moved primarily for a job	41% 	35%
Lived in the community before	25% 	34%*
Have children in household	47% 	39%
Household income >\$50k	75%	78%

**14% telecommute  
(pre-pandemic!)**

**\* Social  
housing  
supply?**

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

2021 Montana State University Extension Movers Study.



## ***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.

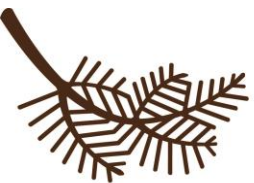


# TELECOMMUTING

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

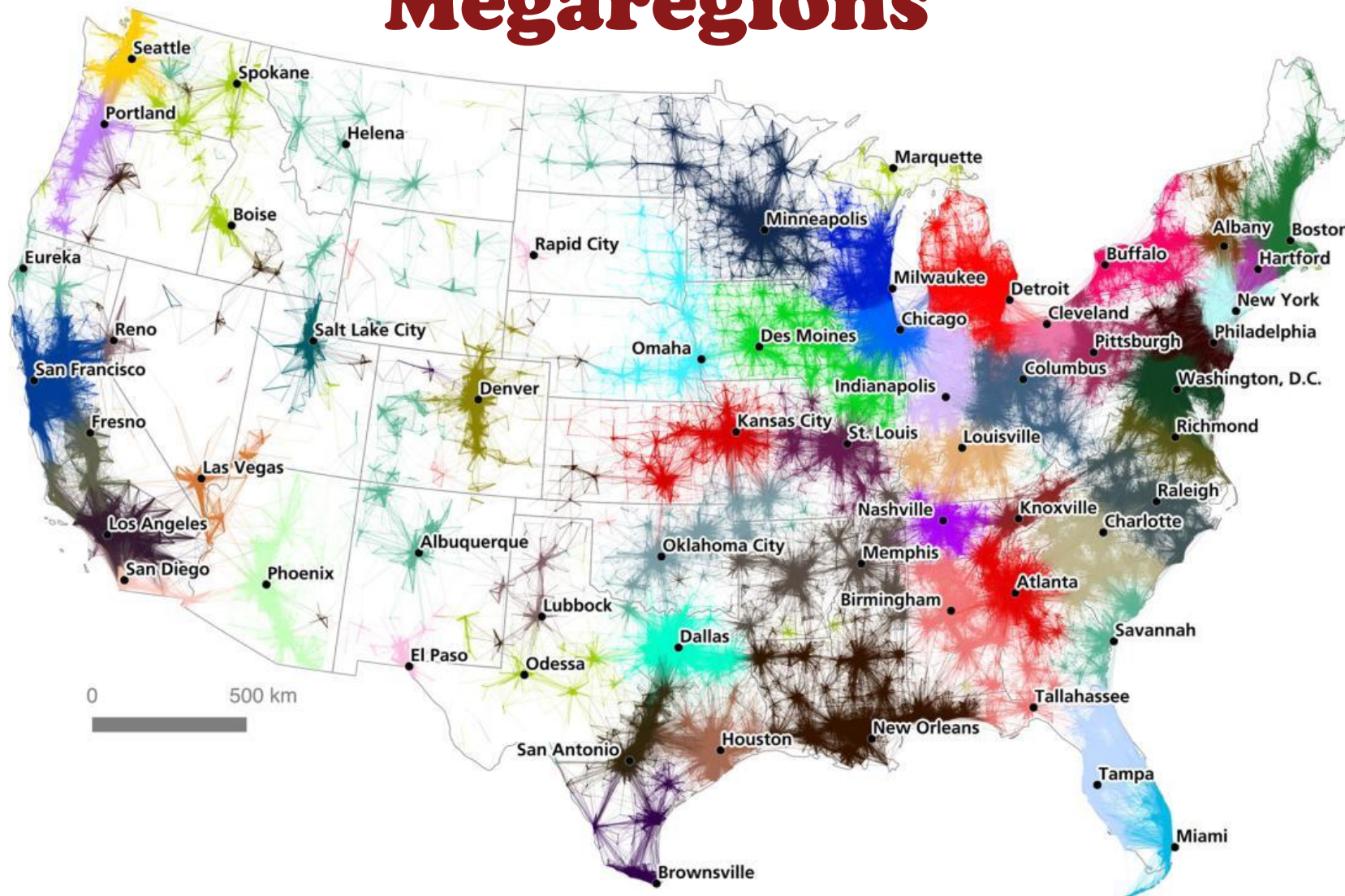
Respondent	14%
Spouse	16%

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



Blandin Foundation™  
STRENGTHENING RURAL MINNESOTA

# Megaregions

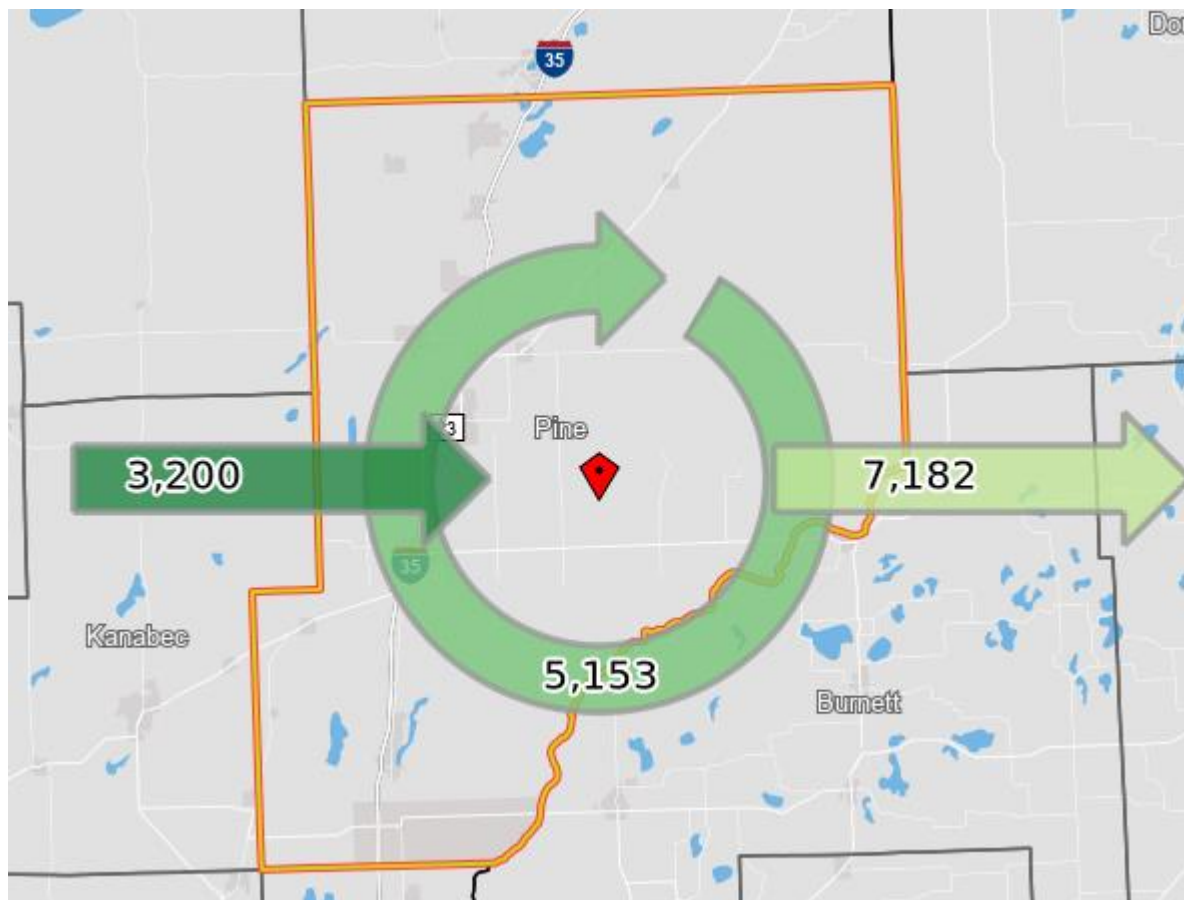


<http://discovery.dartmouth.edu/megaregions/>



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## Pine County

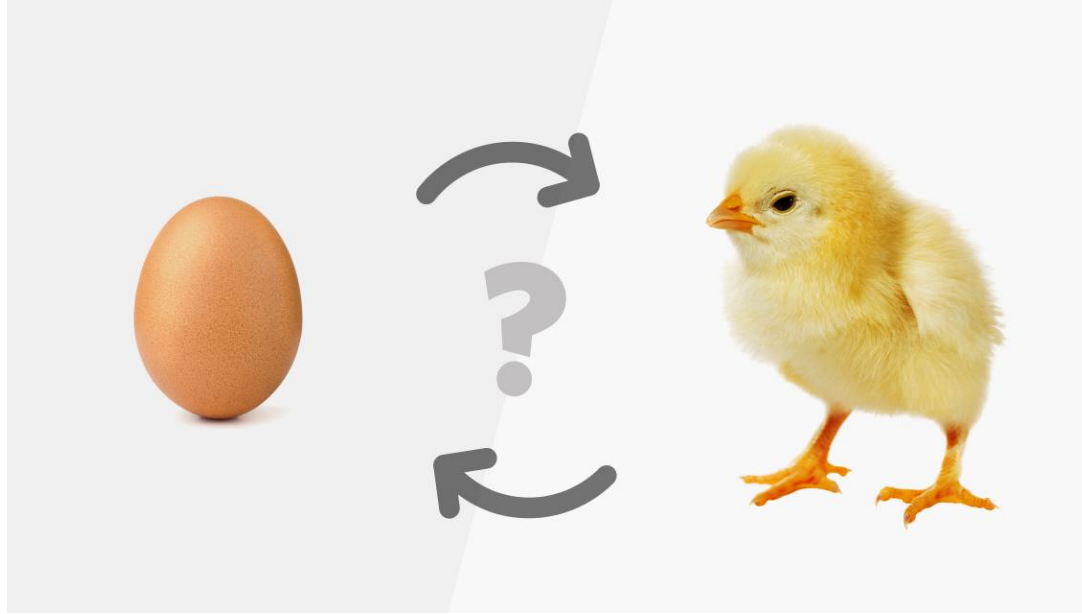
***Across Minnesota, just 51% work in the county they live.***

<https://onthemap.ces.census.gov/>



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA EXTENSION

# Traditional: Employer-based Community Resident Recruitment



Jobs are the attraction for new residents.  
Without a job why would anyone move here?  
What we've found...

Work and Home continue to decouple  
2019, just 51% of workforce work/live in county





**We live in a REGIONAL  
COMMUNITY.**



**in the Middle of Everywhere**



# The Middle of Everywhere

## Exercise



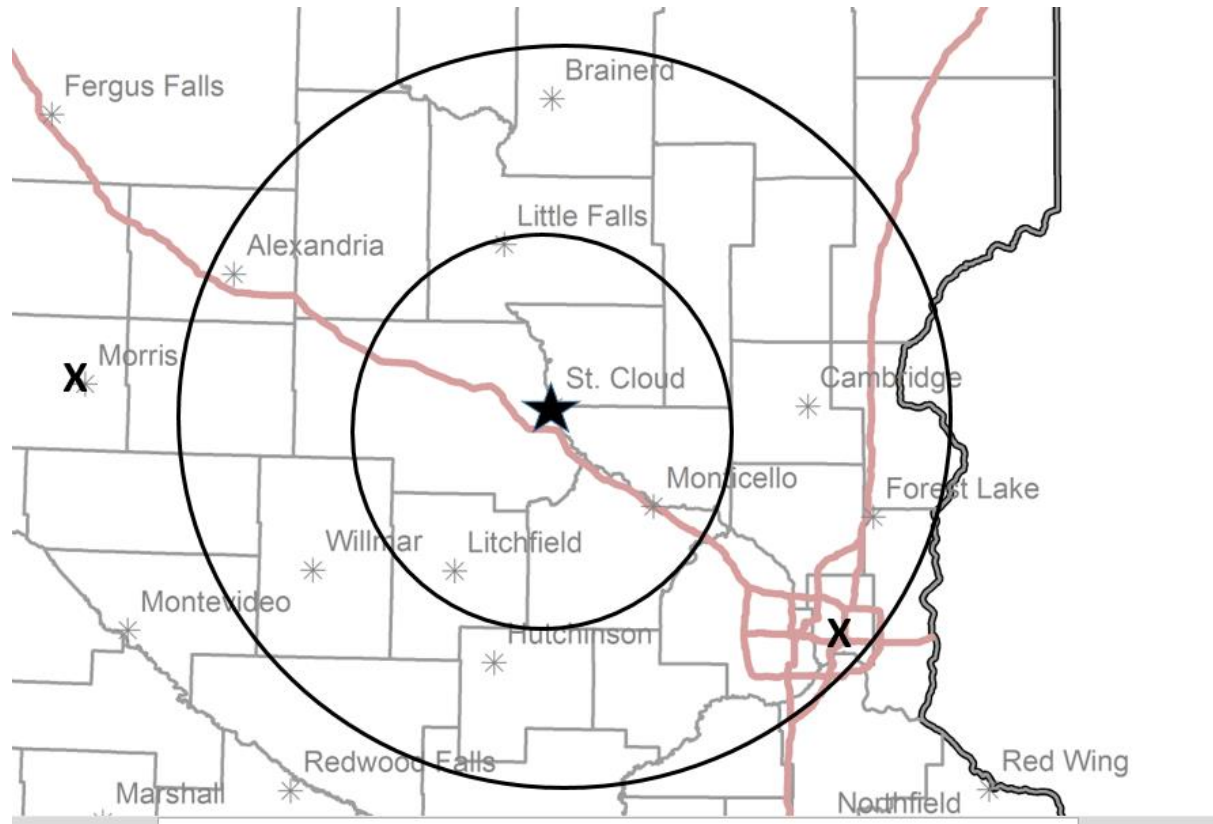
- ★ where you live
- X where you work

Circle around:

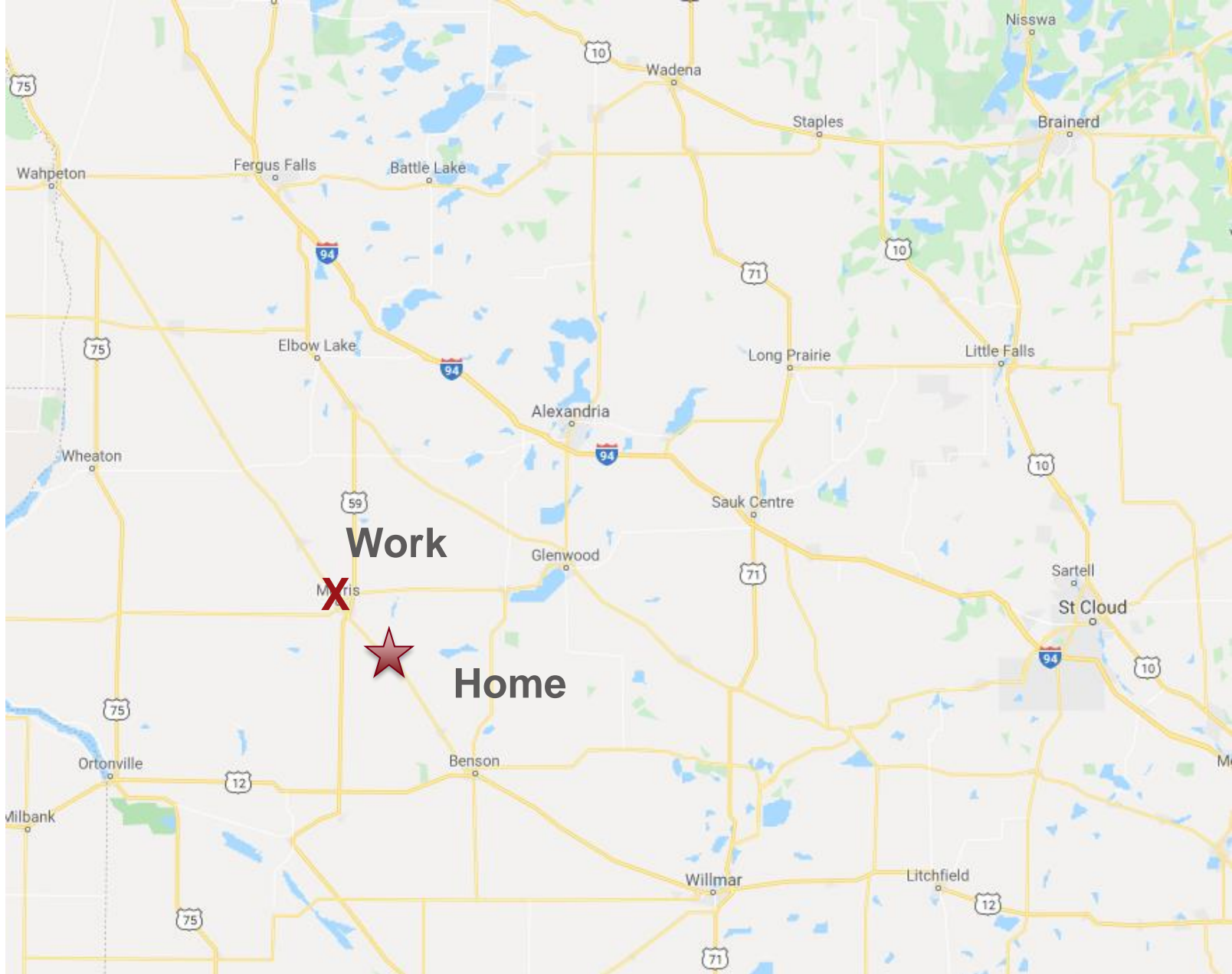
1. Shop / eat out
2. Play / recreate

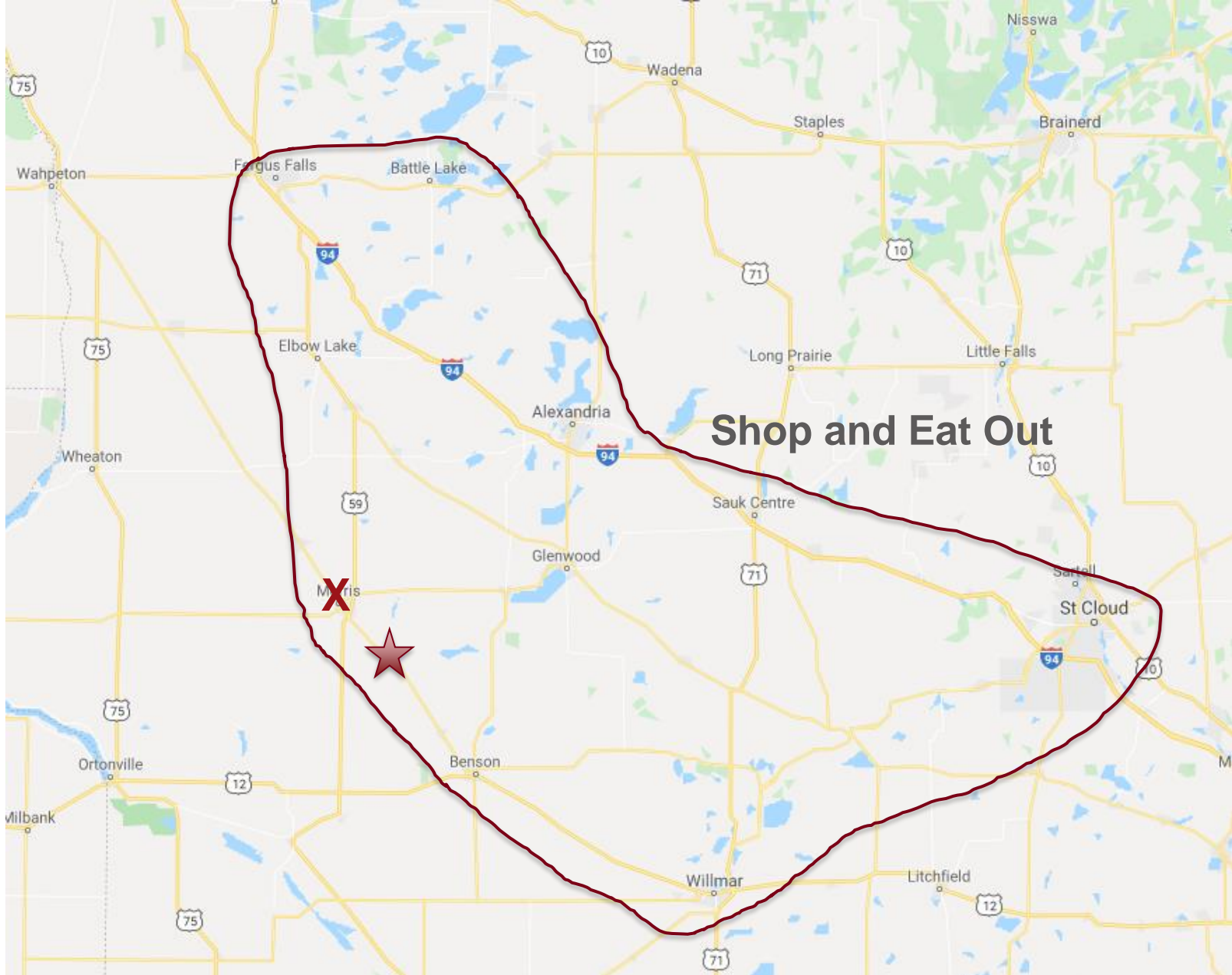
Age range

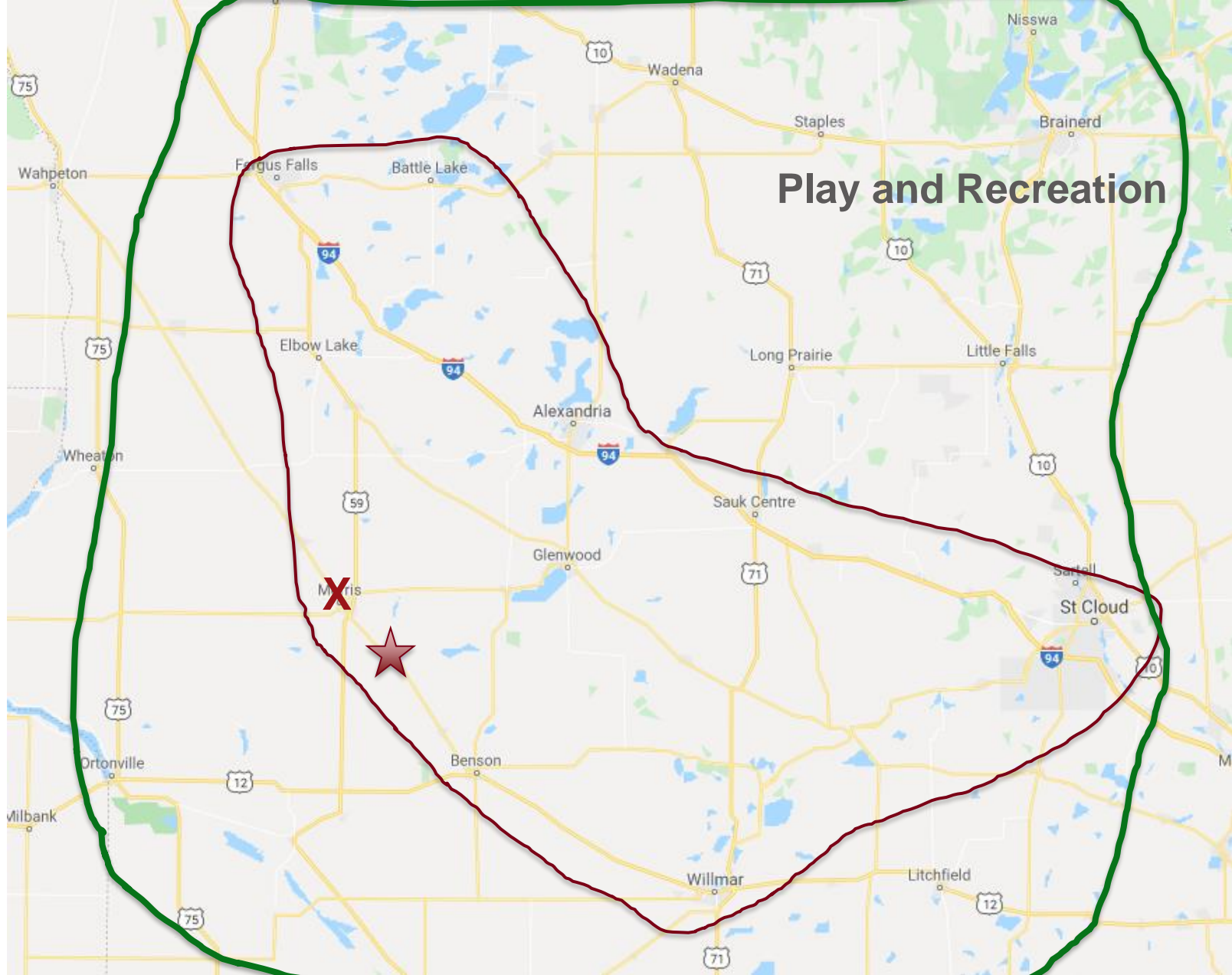
Assets





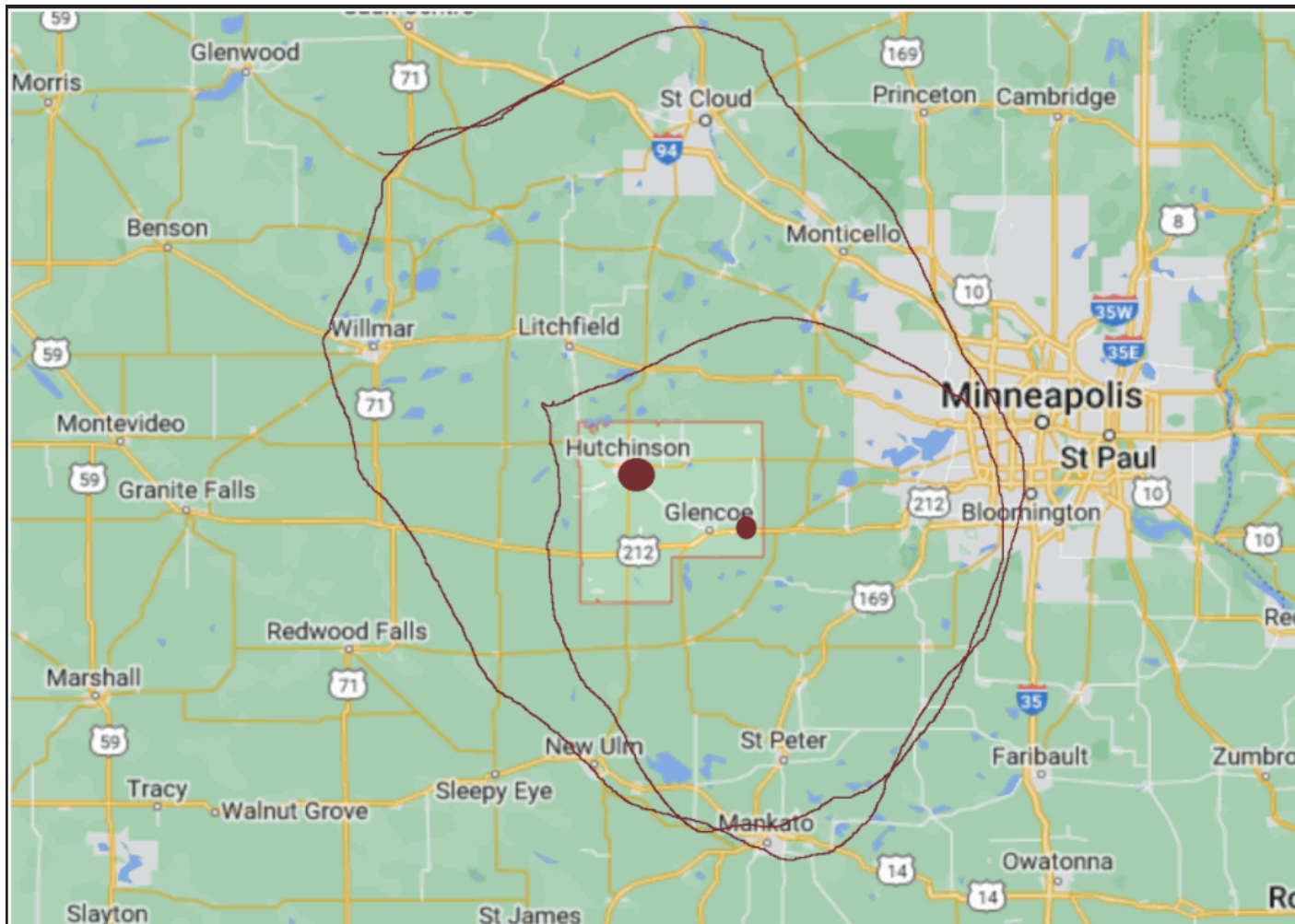








Shop and Eat



60 miles

# PATTERNS

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

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

- **Everywhere expands with age**
- **Assets vary significantly by age**



# RURAL LIFE-SHED

No town is a one-stop-shop

- Home → Work: 30/45 minutes
- Home → Eat/shop: 60 minutes
- Home → Play – 2+ hours!



# MIDDLE OF EVERYWHERE

- Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)
  - Most effective in a town or small region
- How do we include people that work and visit in our community planning?
- Partner with groups, not just in your place but different “jurisdictions”
- Social Capital needs **Bonding and Linking** capital



# MIDDLE OF EVERYWHERE

How can we make local decisions while at the same time respect the reality of lives?

**The REGION is the primary unit of interest**

**Mayor, how do you market your town if you don't know what's going on around you?**





# resident recruitment

In rural areas first:

- Tight labor market
- Workforce housing shortages

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

Then, pandemic hits...



# 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%



# resident recruitment

Community Development

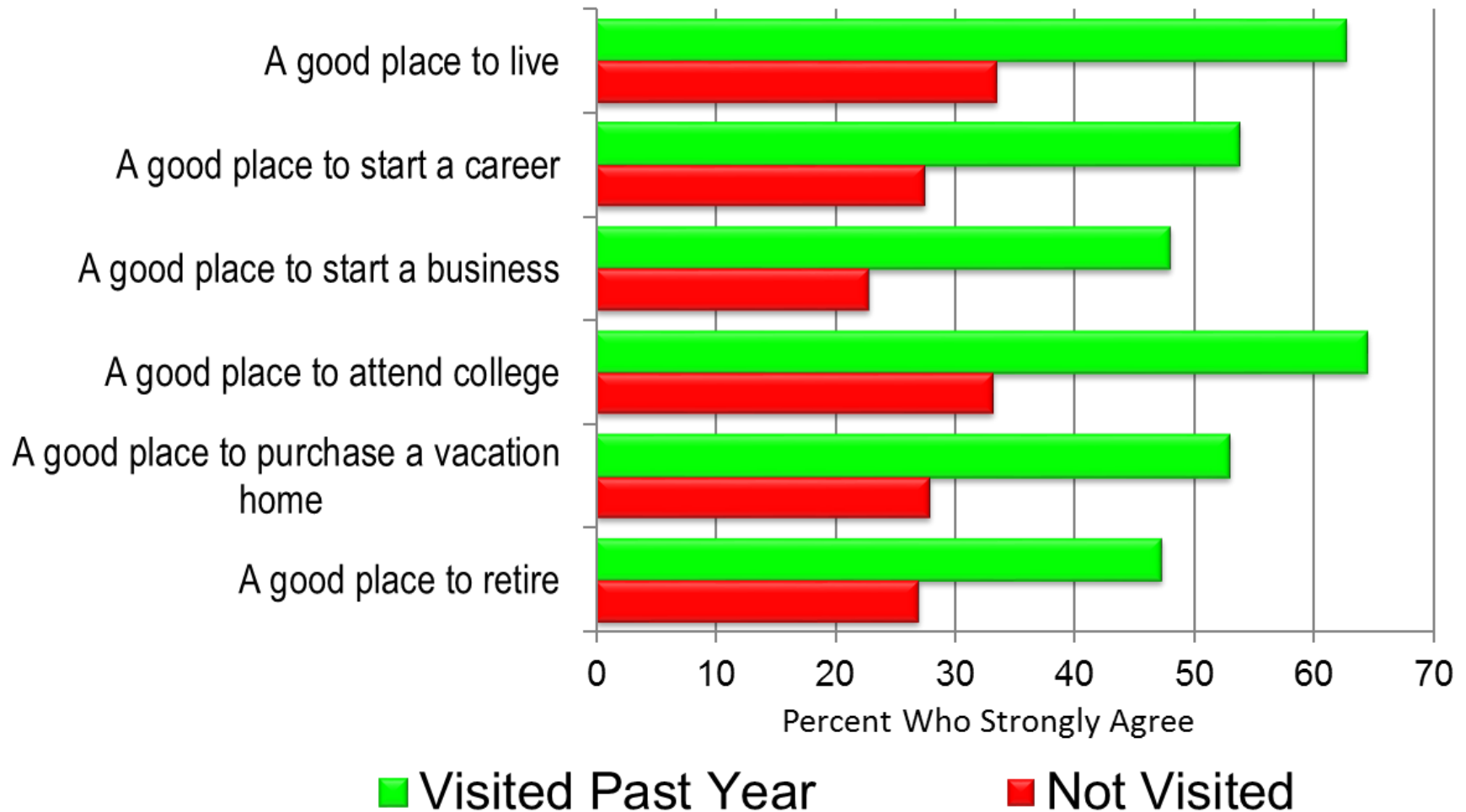
Economic Development

Tourism

*On the Map – Over the Edge – Welcome Home*



# HALO EFFECT: VISITATION AND IMAGE



# Vacant Occupied Second Homeowners

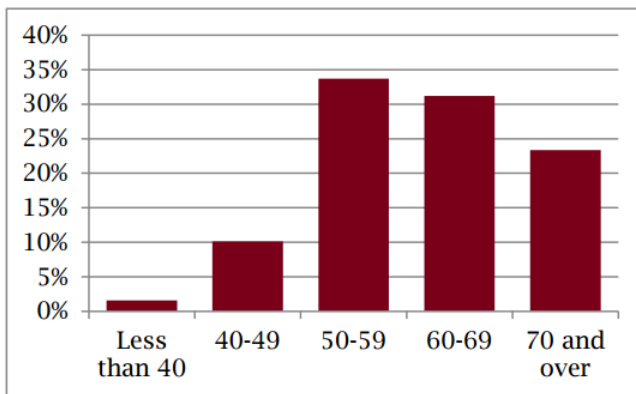
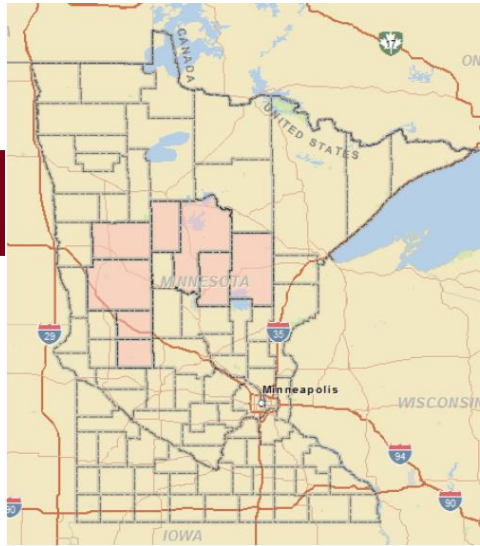


Figure 2: Age of respondents (n=561)

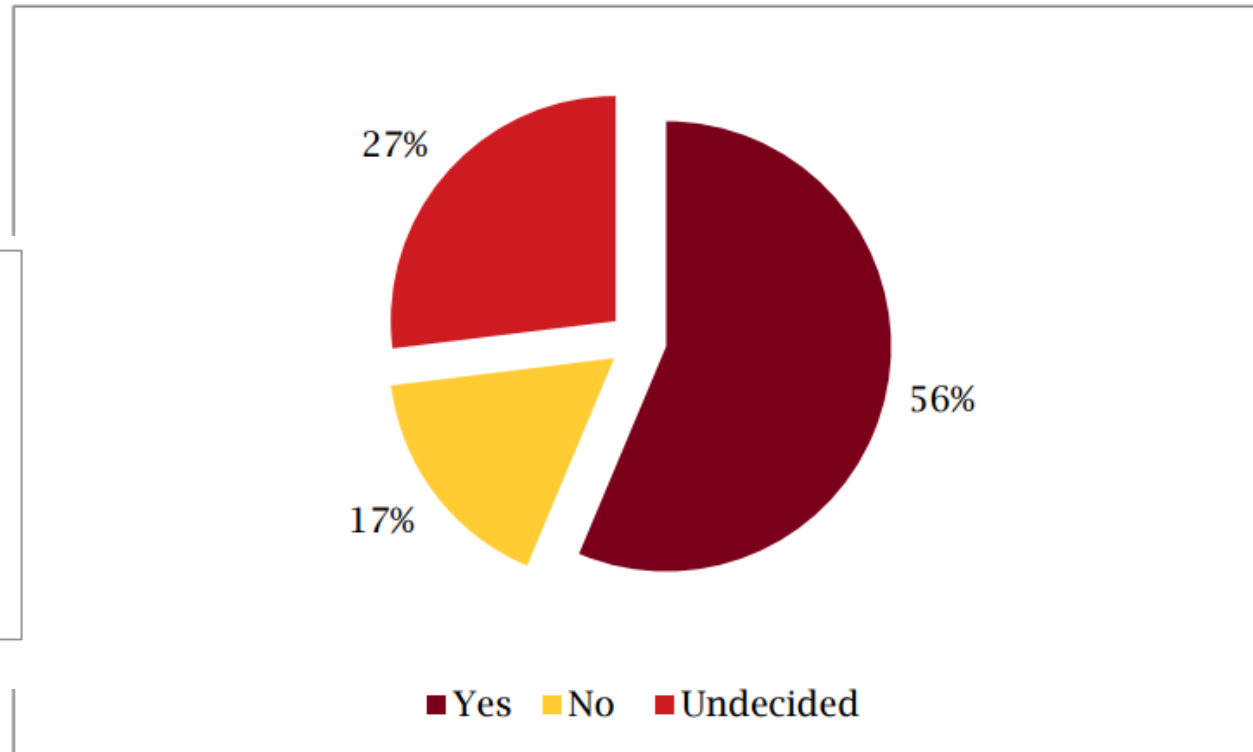


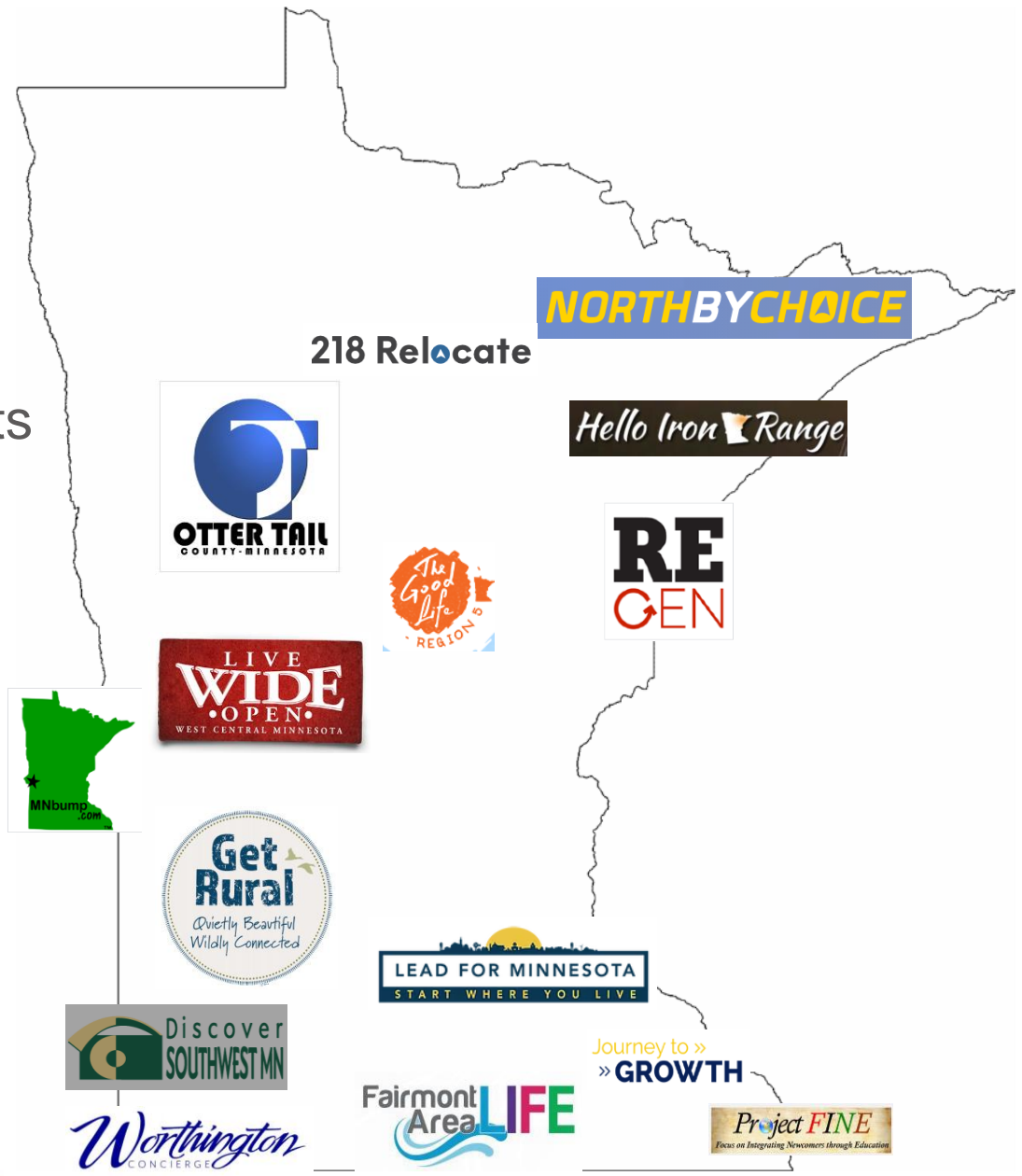
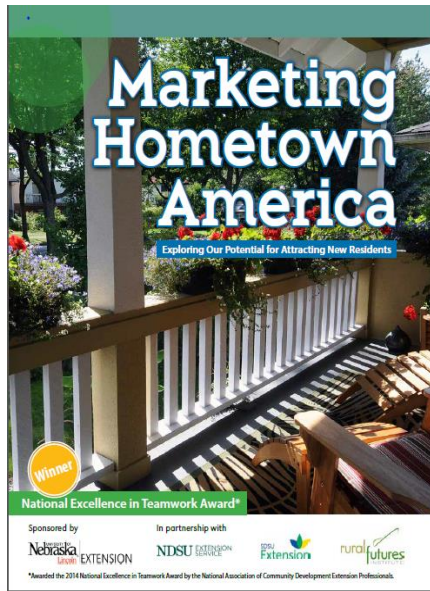
Figure 13: Intention of respondents to retire to second home property (n=569)

Pesch and Bussiere. 2014. Profile of Second Homeowners in Central and West Central Minnesota





# Resident Recruitment Efforts In Minnesota



# resident recruitment

*The coordinated economic and community development actions needed to identify, attract, and invite new residents moving to the region.*

- Distributes recruitment (and retention) costs across the communities.
- In a tight labor market...**labor has the power to choose.** Why will they choose your town over another? Seems everything but the job matters...
- The **LIFE-WORK** balance



# resident recruitment

## Invitations

- Graduates / class reunions
- Tourism locations - narrative
- Media / Facebook / Google Ads
- Existing resident networks – lift up voices of newcomers
- Narrative matters here!



# resident recruitment

Incentives

tulsa  
remote

- Land, utility waiver, tax credits
  - Cash, moving costs, down payment
  - Bicycles / park passes
  - Co-working spaces
- 
- Community incentives can stack here with occupational incentives (lawyers, doctors, public service workers)



# resident recruitment

economic supports

- Broadband
- Remote workers training
- Co-work space
- Self-employed
- Business Succession programs
- Spousal employment
- Regional housing inventory

**There is a tension here with housing**





# resident recruitment

Welcoming

Front lines: Real estate agents, property managers, city clerks

- Front line narrative training program
- Concierge service
- Welcoming Communities program
- Grab-a-bite (Otter Tail county)
- Newcomer supper



# resident recruitment

Involving

- Making it Home program
- Regional events and organizations
- Involvement starts with a small request
- Make room for newcomers to “leave their mark” for themselves

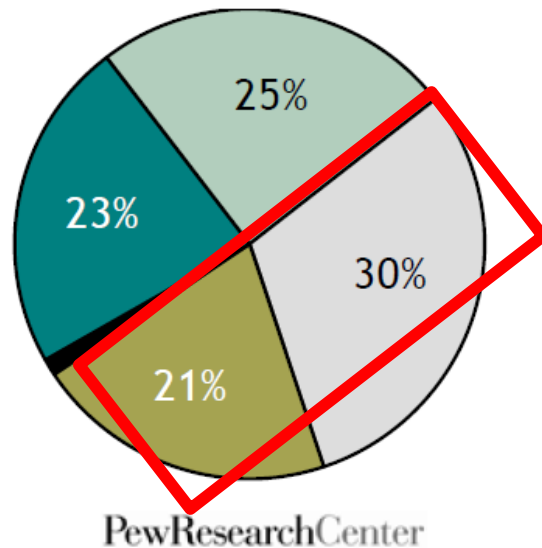


[illegible]

## Where We Live and Where We'd Like to Live

by community type

■ City      ■ Suburb  
■ Small town      ■ Rural area



**20% live rural/small town**

**51% would PREFER to**

# MOVING IN : Demand for rural and small town living!

Source: "For Nearly Half of America, Grass is Greener Somewhere Else". Pew Research Center, 2009.





# **Change** is coming

**30% of rural homeowners are 70+!**  
(another 45% are BB)

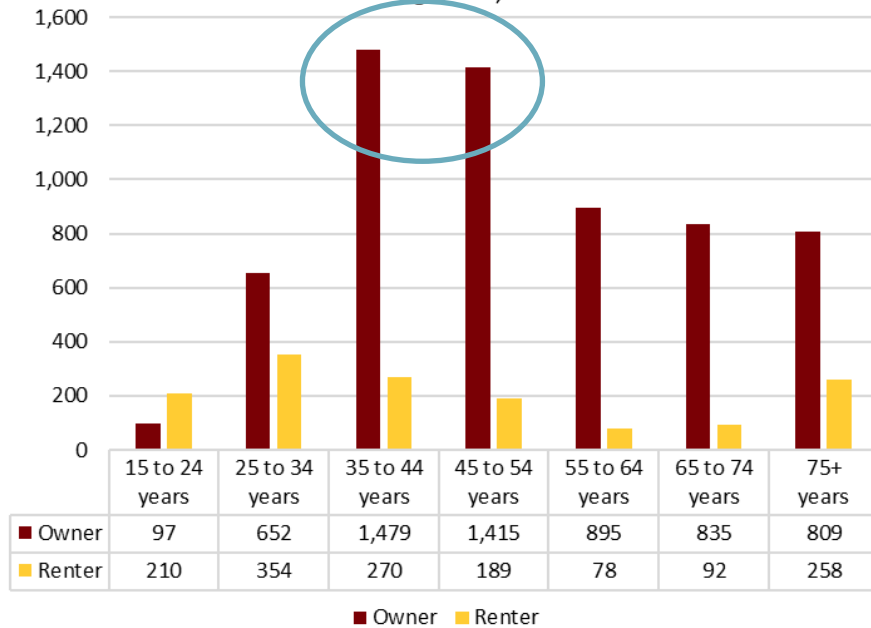
**75% are Baby Boomers  
and older!**





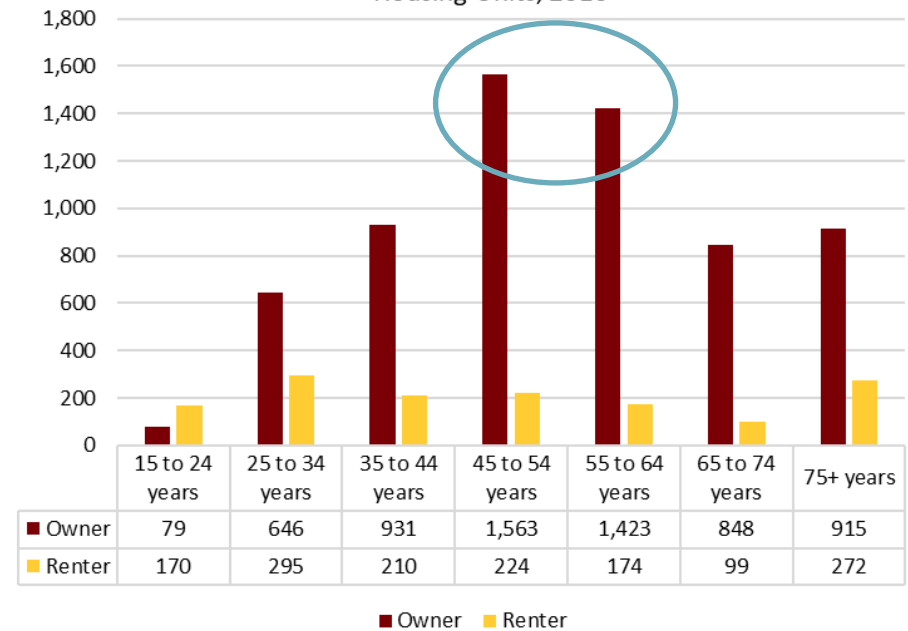
## Houston County, Minnesota

### Housing Units, 2000

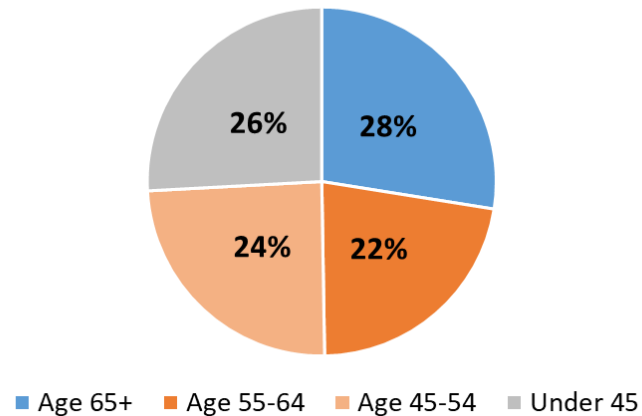


## Houston County, Minnesota

### Housing Units, 2010



### Percent of Owner-Occupied Homes by Age, 2010



Source: U. S. Census Bureau: 2010 Decennial Census



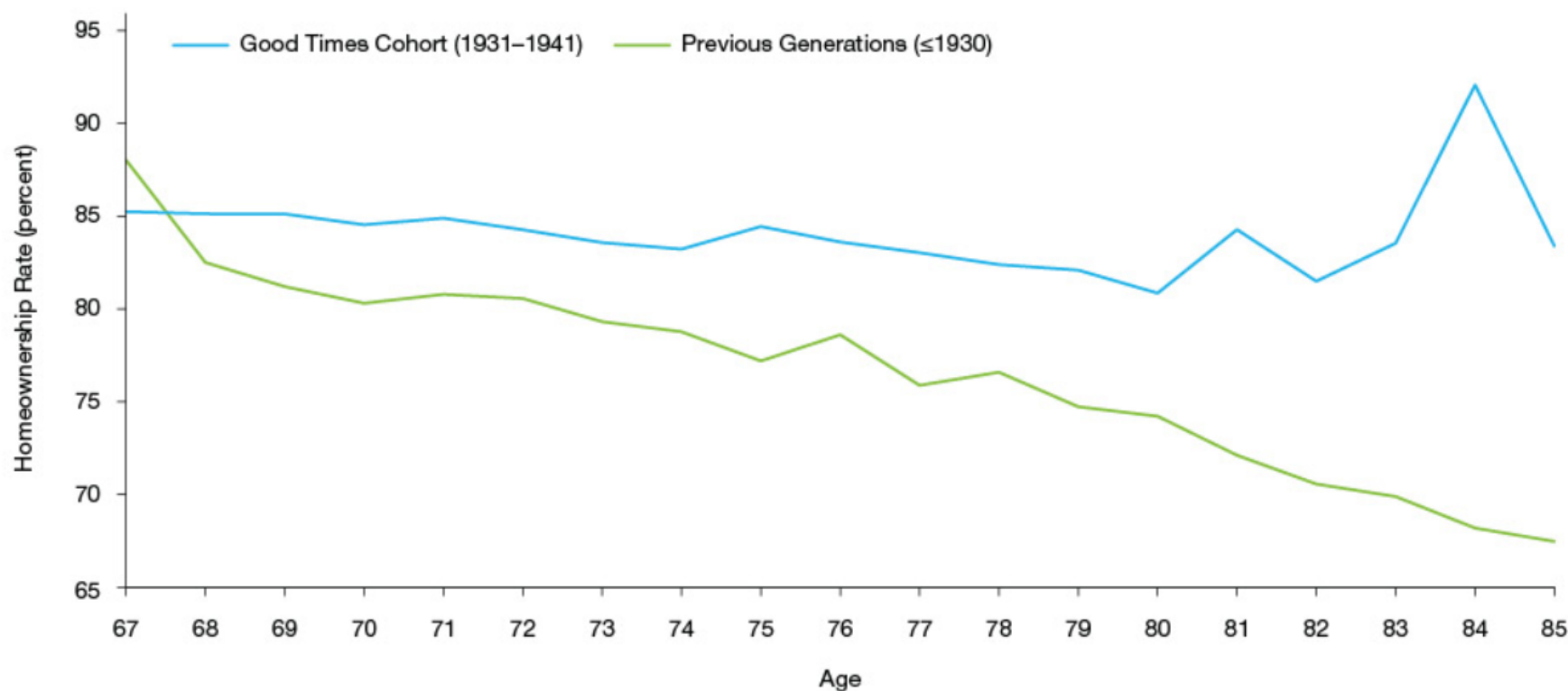


**58%** of older adults have not changed residences in more than 20 years

## Exhibit 1

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

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



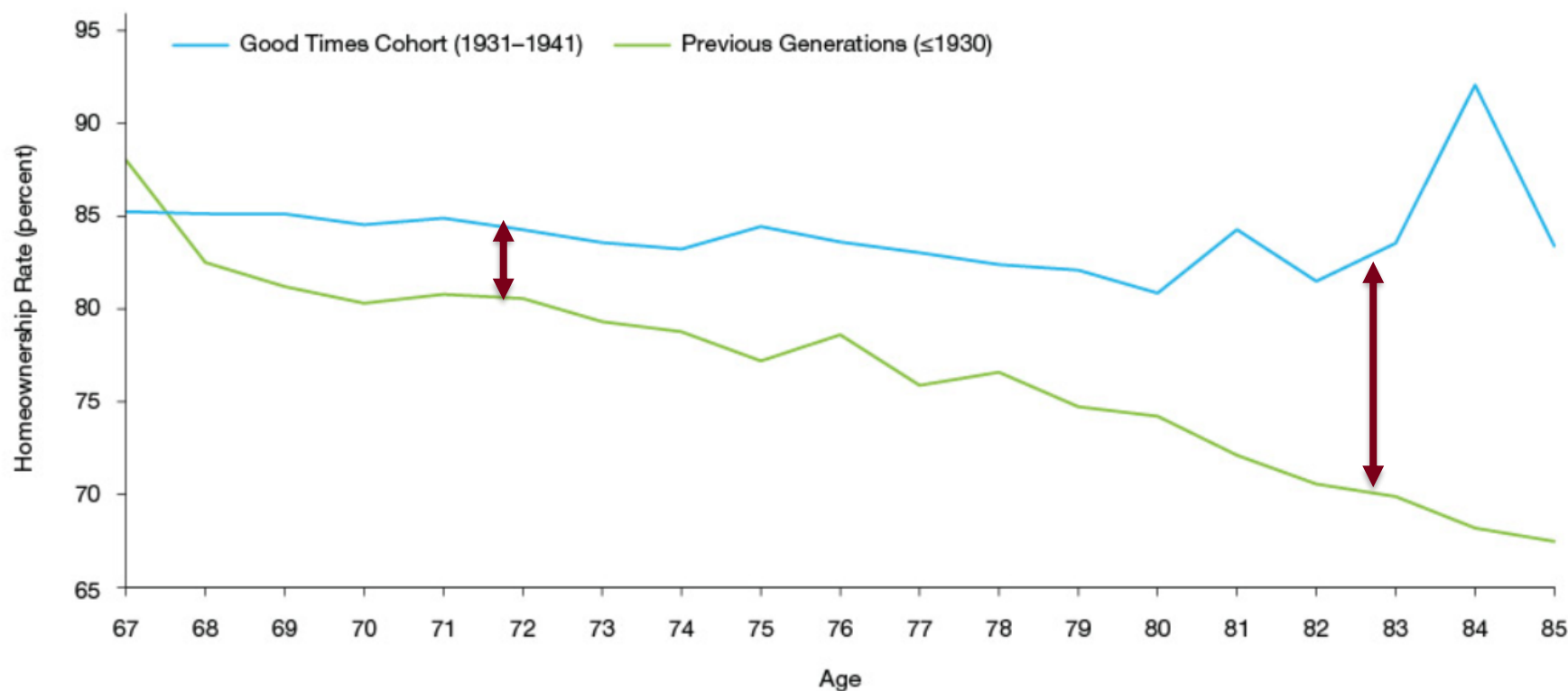


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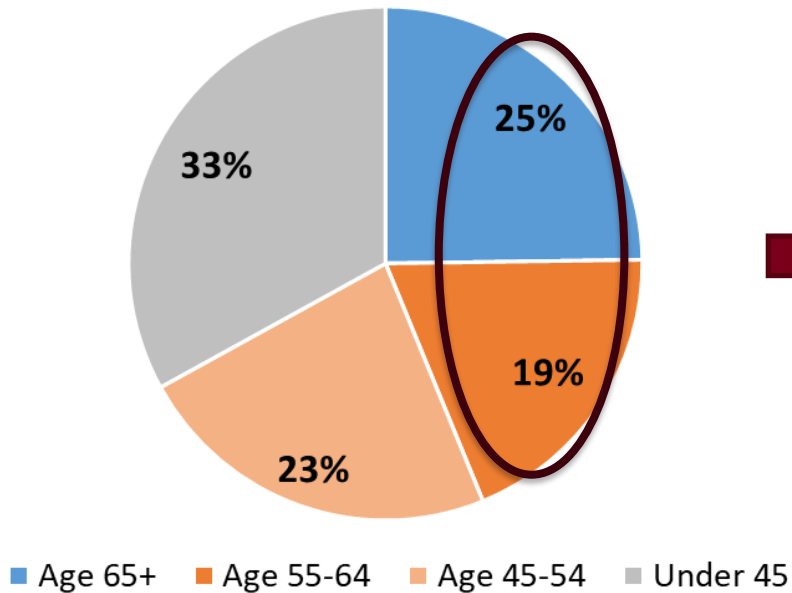
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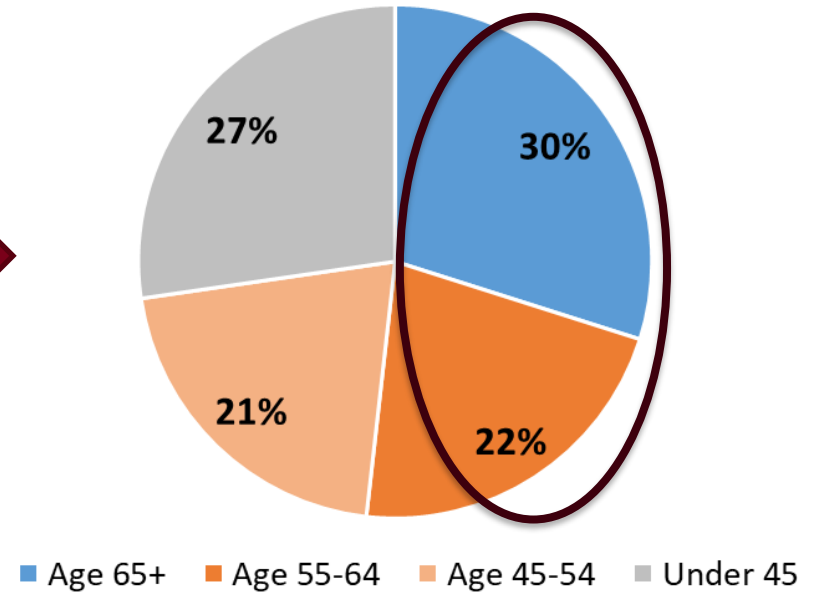
Current generations of older homeowners are holding onto their homes for longer than previous generations



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*

**Housing substitutions replace: 1 or 2 person households with  
multigenerational families, many with children.**

*Half of newcomer households have children*

**Change happens at the pace of housing turnover.**

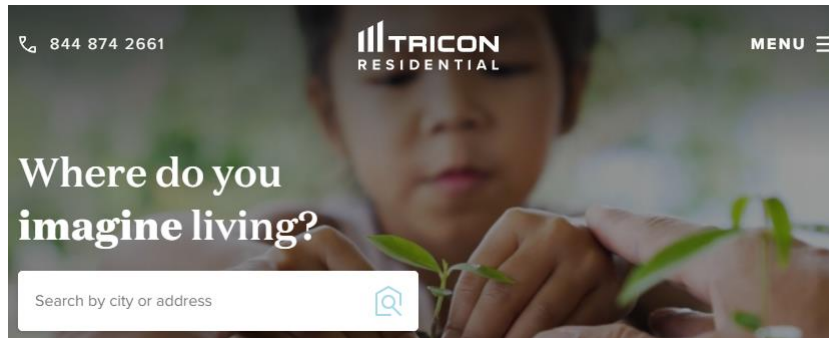


# Related Trends

## Zillow, Other Tech Firms Are in an 'Arms Race' To Buy Up American Homes

"iBuyers" are gearing up to grow massively in the coming years, with unforeseen consequences for the U.S. housing market.

MS By Maxwell Strachan



## Speak Your Piece: Is Airbnb Killing the Rural Rental Market?

*Property owners say they can generate more profit and fewer headaches by renting to vacationers instead of local residents. The boom in short-term rentals could have some long-term consequences in the rural housing market.*



<https://twitter.com/KirkSiegler/status/1481312896277614595>

## Institutional investors are stiff competition for homebuyers

Amy Scott | Apr 13, 2021

Heard on:  MARKETPLACE



Pandemic homes sales were  
NOT all Arms-Length Transactions





# 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**





Thank you.

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