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Do rural brains really drain?

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, VA.—I often get requests to not write about certain individuals with whom I share mixed marital arts. Therefore, I will not name my wife, Melissa, as the only requester in this group of one.

In that context, my reportorial ears perked up when our 24-year-old daughter, Molly, alone and miserable with a fever, laryngitis and sinus infection in her New York apartment, croaked over the phone, “Write about woe is me.”

While the unnamed person not mentioned above has been fretting over her sick daughter’s 500-mile separation from the vital personal nagging to drink liquids that only she can provide, I’ve worked up a good fret of my own over the societal consequences of Molly draining her brain from Blue Grass, Virginia to Bloomberg News in Manhattan.

Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America, by Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas (Beacon, 2009), argues that the most talented young people are leaving rural small towns while changes in farming and industry have left the economic landscape bleaker for those who don’t.

Based on 200 interviews with 30-something individuals from a farm-and-factory town of 2,000 in Northeast Iowa, Carr and Kefalas believe that the “export” of young people is leaving such communities “hollowed out” and close to extinction.

About 40 percent of their interviewees were “stayers”— mainly working-class kids who struggled economically; 20 percent were college-bound “achievers”; 10 percent were “seekers” who joined the military; and the rest were “returners” who eventually came home. A small number of returners were “professionals”; the authors dubbed them, “high fliers.”

Carr and Kefalas write that small towns collude in their own declines by “pushing the best and brightest young people to leave, and by underinvesting in those who chose to stay, even though it was the latter that were the towns’ best chance for a future.” (Carr and Kefalas, “The Rural Brain Drain,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 21, 2009.)

My observations over almost 40 years don’t quite square with theirs.

Some rural places are losing population while others are not. Demographers use different definitions of “rurality” and different measures of population

decline, but the general consensus is that rural population loss is most severe in the Great Plains (from Texas to Canada), Upper Midwest, Mississippi River Valley from the Gulf Coast to Illinois and the Appalachian Mountains from Tennessee to Maine. ([See this map](#) showing county rurality scores, defined as “degree of isolation from and inability to participate in the programs of the larger society.” [Population Losses Mount in U.S. Rural Areas, Double Whammy Rural Counties Lose Population Two Ways](#) and [Sweeping out the Plains](#) by Jack Coffman and George Antham.

Net population loss typically results from two factors: out-migration exceeding in-migration and deaths exceeding births. U.S. Census Bureau data from 2007 showed that 1,346, or 43 percent, of all U.S. counties -- both rural and metro -- lost population since 2000 compared with only 689 net losers in the 1990s. About 700 rural counties are among the significant losers.

Molly is part of America’s internal migration that has been shifting people -- and particularly youth -- out of rural areas since the 1930s.

Economics is responsible for part of this redistribution. The increasing mechanization of agriculture, forestry and mining has allowed these rural industries to increase production with less and less labor. Rural communities have also experienced a deindustrialization that has closed their factories, mills and retail stores, which, in turn, has reduced related opportunities, jobs and local taxes.

The other reason for rural population loss has to do with young people seeking opportunities that don’t appear to exist where they grew up—Molly is one of those. Some of her classmates left because they saw no other choice; others left because they wanted to.

Those coming in to rural America are looking for high environmental values, lifestyle opportunities, lower living costs and less stress. Some are retirement relocators, while others are middle-aged individuals with the wherewithal to live and work beyond metro areas.

All rural communities say they want to retain their young people through “economic development.” I’ve watched -- and participated in -- these public and private programs for decades. Better rural infrastructure -- transportation, communications, utilities -- is better than “worsen” infrastructure, but these improvements alone rarely offset serious disadvantages in location, climate, workforce inadequacies, environmental degradation or lifestyle liabilities.

Economic-development programs work best in the most advantaged of the least distressed areas. They haven’t done much in the rural “zones of repugnance” that the market has abandoned or ruined. It’s possible, of course, that they would show more success if they were conceived better and

financed longer.

I doubt that efforts to “revitalize” the several hundred hardest-hit rural counties will either stop the population loss or be worth the time and money, because both the private sector and individuals are running in the opposite direction—and they are more powerful over time than scattershot, countervailing development projects..

In some circumstances -- with the right idea, people and funds -- public money, foundations and private investment can create enclaves of employment that retain population in disadvantaged rural communities. But this has rarely happened on a county level, let alone regionally.

Recruiting “industry” to places that are less favorable than available alternatives is a largely unrewarding economic-development strategy. The other approach, which few economic-development efforts try with sustained seriousness, is to *recruit and then enable* people -- local and non-local -- who are willing to invest their work, talent or money. Enabled individuals can create jobs in these places.

The rural brain drain is the collective expression of thousands of individuals pursuing their best economic-development strategy. When the reasons that brought people to the countryside no longer exist, it will make economic sense for people to leave and force these communities to find a new -- and, admittedly, often lower -- level of sustainability.

Economically sensible decisions frequently come with loss, pain and regret. Some small towns will disappear. Many farmhouses will be abandoned or neglected. And the Nation, as a whole, will lose a valued part of the cultural and political fabric that we’ve worn for a long time.

My impression of watching local kids leave over more than 25 years doesn’t square with the finding of Carr and Kefalas. Both stayers and leavers in this county of 2,500 are a cross-section of their group. All the best don’t leave, and all the worst don’t stay—the pattern that Carr and Kefalas report. The drain is one of numbers primarily, not quality.

I’ve come to believe that all rural kids *should* leave their hometowns for a while, whether or not they go to college. They improve themselves when they function on their own in a broader world. They learn skills and develop networks. They rub intellectual and financial elbows with people unlike themselves. They return better able to make a living and a difference.

I’ve told Molly to keep the farm after we’re gone, because it will always be home in a community that knows her. But she and I know that our local economy is not likely to have a job for a humor columnist—her stated career

objective, which would be very funny if she were joking, which I hope she is but fear she isn't.

***Oak to acorn! Fall farther from the tree!***

“You have to figure out how to get paid for stuff you write from out here...in dollars,” I said to the kid with two head infections at the other end of the line. “Your mother once traded her legal services for fresh horseradish and day-old donuts. Barter is a business model that will only bring you tears and stale calories.”

“Dad. It's now called, ‘monetizing content,’ not ‘getting paid for stuff.’”

“Well, at least you understand the theory of cash payment. If you move back to the country, you need to have first established yourself as a writer rather than try to break in from Pluto.”

“Quit telling me what to do. My head hurts, and my nose is stuffy. Do something.”

So I did. I wrote about her woes and my worries.

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