

The Rural Brain Drain

Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas
The Chronicle of Higher Education

September 21, 2009

What is going on in small-town America? The nation's mythology of small towns comes to us straight from the *The Music Man's* set designers. Many Americans think about flyover country or Red America only during the culture war's skirmishes or campaign season. Most of the time, the rural crisis takes a back seat to more visible big-city troubles. So while there is a veritable academic industry devoted to chronicling urban decline, small towns' struggles are off the grid.

And yet, upon close inspection, the rural and urban downturns have much in common, even though conventional wisdom casts the small town as embodiment of all that is right with America and the inner city as all that is wrong with it.

The Harvard University sociologist William Julius Wilson famously describes how deindustrialization, joblessness, middle-class flight, depopulation, and global market shifts gave rise to the urban hyper-ghettos of the 1970s, and the same forces are now afflicting the nation's countryside. The differences are just in the details. In urban centers, young men with NBA jerseys sling dime bags from vacant buildings, while in small towns, drug dealers wearing Nascar T-shirts, living in trailer parks, sell and use meth. Young girls in the countryside who become mothers before finishing high school share stories of lost adolescence and despair that differ little from the ones their urban sisters might tell.

In both settings, there is no shortage of guns, although in North Philadelphia's Badlands or Chicago's South Side those guns might be concealed and illegal, while in small towns guns hang on display in polished oak cabinets in the sitting room. Residents of rural America are more likely to be poor and uninsured than their counterparts in metropolitan areas, typically earning 80 percent what suburban and urban workers do.

The most dramatic evidence of the rural meltdown has been the hollowing out—that is, losing the most talented young people at precisely the same time that changes in farming and industry have transformed the landscape for those who stay. This so-called rural “brain drain” isn't a new phenomenon, but by the 21st century the shortage of young people has reached a tipping point, and its consequences are more severe now than ever before. Simply put, many small towns are mere years away from extinction, while others limp along in a weakened and disabled state.

In just over two decades, more than 700 rural counties, from the Plains to the Texas Panhandle through to Appalachia, lost 10 percent or more of their population. Nationally, there are more deaths than births in one of two rural counties. Though the hollowing-out process feeds off the recession, the problem predates, and indeed, presaged many of the nation's current economic woes. But despite the seriousness of the hollowing-out process, we believe that, with a plan and a vision, many small towns can play a key role in the nation's recovery.

Civic and business leaders in the places most affected by hollowing out will tell anyone willing to listen how it is their young people, not hogs, steel, beef, corn, or soybeans, that have become their most valuable export commodity. Richard Russo, the Pulitzer Prize-winning observer of small town life, believes that any story of small-town America is, at its core, the story of the people who stay and the ones who go. Yet, what is different at this moment is how, in a postindustrial economy that places such a high premium on education and credentials, the flight of so many young people is transforming rural communities throughout the nation into impoverished ghost towns. A new birth simply cannot replace the loss that results every time a college-educated twentysomething on the verge of becoming a worker, taxpayer, homeowner, or parent leaves. And as more manufacturing jobs disappear every day, the rural crisis that was a slow-acting wasting disease over the past two decades has evolved into a metastasized cancer.

Why does hollowing out matter? Surely there have always been regional winners and losers. Richard

Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* celebrates how modern-day boomtowns prospered when the young and the educated flocked to cities like Austin and Chicago in search of good jobs, culture, diversity, and tolerance during the 1990s. But the incipient decline of the Rust and Corn Belts illustrates the darker side of the creative-class story—the fates of the people and places left behind.

But if this is just the latest version of the boom-and-bust cycle of frontier towns, why not just let it take its course? We believe that it would be a mistake to abandon the region, because hollowing out has repercussions far beyond the boundaries of the small towns it affects. The health of the heartland is vital to the country as a whole. This is the place where most of our food comes from; it can be ground zero for the green economy and sustainable agriculture; it is the place that helps elect our presidents, and it sends more than its fair share of young men and women to fight for this country.

As we came to uncover this slow-burning crisis during our research in Iowa, we learned that hollowing out results from a combination of macro forces reshaping nonmetropolitan America: the unfettered rise of agribusiness and big-box retailing that has suffocated local ownership, the decline of unions and blue-collar wages, employers' increased reliance on exploited undocumented workers, and the systemic underinvestment in younger workers entering the new economy's labor force without college degrees. The rise of agribusiness has meant that there are hardly any farmers left in America's agricultural regions: Just 2 percent of Americans operate farms now, and 42 percent of Midwestern farmers earn less than \$20,000 per year. Independent family farmers today live more like sharecroppers, and, as the new film *Food, Inc.* so powerfully shows, the "Jeffersonian ideal of pastoral life" has been subsumed by a farming system dominated by mega-farms and hog hotels.

For generations, the Corn Belt's biggest employers were factories where building Deere tractors and Maytag washers sustained the region and made it possible for workers on the line to be middle class. But in an old, familiar story, automation and outsourcing dried up the demand for labor and diminished wages. Deindustrialization came later to the countryside than it did the inner city, but has caused just as much harm. Workers with seniority earned \$30 per hour and got pensions, while their children, doing the same job, earned one third that amount and nothing for retirement.

Those larger economic trends are only part of the story, though. And it was not until we spent time living in a typical small town in Iowa and interviewed young adults who came of age there that we came to understand how small towns collude in their own demise. In 2001, with support from the MacArthur Foundation's Network on Transitions to Adulthood, a multidisciplinary research collaborative, we moved to the pseudonymous Ellis, Iowa, population 2,000, a farm-and-factory town in the northeastern corner of the state. Just as the husband-and-wife sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd had traveled to Muncie, Ind. to chronicle how the 20th-century industrial era was transforming the lives of small-town America in their *Middletown* series, we took our family to Ellis to document how 21st-century Iowans were trying to survive in a postindustrialized, global era.

Our year and a half spent interviewing the more than 200 young people who had attended the town's high school in the late 1980s and early 1990s led us to categorize our young Iowans according to the defining traits of where their lives had taken them by their 20s and 30s. The largest group, approximately 40 percent, consisted of the working-class "stayers," struggling in the region's dying agro-industrial economy; about one in five became the collegebound "achievers," who often left for good; just 10 percent included the "seekers" who join the military to see what the world beyond offers; and the rest were the "returners," who eventually circled back to their hometowns, only a small number of whom were professionals we call "high fliers." What surprised us most was that adults in the community were playing a pivotal part in the town's decline 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.

The paradox was summed up for us early during our time in Ellis by the local high school's guidance counselor, who informed us that "the best kids go while the ones with the biggest problems stay, and then we have to deal with their kids in the schools in the next generation." These "best kids" are the high-achieving, most-likely-to-succeed students destined for college—the achievers. The ones with the biggest problems, the stayers, get trapped in the region's fading economy. So as achievers are pushed, prodded, and cultivated to leave, and credit their teachers for being integral to their success, the stayers view school as an alienating experience and zoom into the labor force because few people are invested in keeping them on the postsecondary track, and the lure of a regular paycheck is hard to resist.

At first glance, teachers, parents, and kids (stayers and achievers) seem comfortable with that arrange-

ment. Schools devote their energies to the most serious and committed students, and young people who are adrift get focus and maturity, not to mention, money, from work. Yet it is that compromise, which makes so much sense during those high-school years, that ultimately comes back to betray the community and its young people. In a postindustrial economy that places such a high premium on credentials and has ever less demand for workers with just a high-school diploma, the choices stayers make doom them to downward mobility and poverty. Moreover, given that these communities are hemorrhaging young people, investing most of their energy in developing young people who will end up elsewhere makes little sense.

What can be done to plug the brain drain?

Though the problem is daunting, we believe that it is not intractable, but that any set of solutions must combine changes at micro and macro levels.

Small towns need to equalize their investments across different groups of young people. While it would be impractical, and downright wrong, to abort students' ambitions, there must be a radical rethinking of the goals of high-school education. The single-minded focus on pushing the most motivated students into four-year colleges must be balanced by efforts to match young people not headed for bachelor's degrees with training, vocational, and assorted associate-degree programs. Those programs fill the needs of a postindustrial economy but acknowledge that not every student wants to, or will, pursue a more traditional college path.

Also, school officials, parents, educators, and students must resist the temptation to think the noncollege bound will just get a job if a degree is not in the cards. Gone are the days of plentiful, well-paying blue-collar factory jobs that provided a 19-year-old with a living wage. Thinking that working the line at John Deere or Winnebago will vault you into the middle class makes about as much sense as buying eight-track tapes in the iPod age. All the planning and investments have been geared to collegebound students, while the reality is that students not earning a college degree need as much, if not more, intensive preparation for today's labor market.

The next step is to build better links between high-school and postsecondary education, and map existing opportunities onto regional economic goals. Most of the job growth within Iowa is expected to come from computer, biotech, wind energy, and health care. Matching high-school students not headed for university with vocational or community-college programs, nurturing their interests while in high school through internships and training, will prepare them for the new economic growth areas. Such partnerships require close collaborations among business and civic leaders, elected officials, and secondary and community-college administrators who are accustomed to working in their own bureaucracies. Moreover, the growing distance-learning technology should not cater only to older, returning students. If students are interested in wind technology or nursing, rather than making them take social studies senior year, how about connecting them with a distance-learning class at Iowa Lakes Community College in Introduction to Computers?

Third, small towns should seek to embrace immigration whenever possible. The phenomenon of Hispanic boomtowns, a common occurrence in the Midwest, has the potential to transform moribund local economies. Such transformations will be possible only if there is careful planning to ensure that immigrants are integrated into the community in such a way as to increase contact between natives and immigrants and with attendant labor-law reform that curbs abuses and ensures sufficient wages and benefits for workers in agribusiness and manufacturing. Ph.D.'s from India or China and less-skilled immigrants from Mexico or Central America should all be recruited and supported in an effort to make the heartland an immigrant enterprise zone. The region is in critical need of professional-class workers, and bringing in Hispanic workers for the food industry will not be enough to rejuvenate the region.

Fourth, areas that are losing population can help remain vibrant by enticing much-needed high fliers to come back home. There are free land programs in Kansas, Minnesota, and North Dakota, a statewide campaign in Iowa to bring back professionals, and student-loan-forgiveness programs in Maine and West Virginia for college graduates willing to commit to stay in the state. While the jury is out on whether any of those programs work, we believe that towns can help themselves by identifying future professionals prospectively and offering them tuition relief for graduate school that is contingent on a 10-year commitment to practice in the area. Many rural areas and towns are medically underserved and this is one way to tackle that basic problem.

At a more macro level, there is much that can be done, and ironically, the current economic crisis provides perhaps an unrivaled opportunity to do it. First, the economic stimulus provides much-needed investment that can help kick-start efforts to rebuild regional economies, but it must be accompanied by changes that

will provide a more fundamental makeover. Specifically, there is ample scope for developing so-called green-economy initiatives in wind and solar power. Already, for instance, the shuttered Maytag plant in Newton, Iowa, has been refitted to produce wind turbines. Workers will need to be retrained to staff these nascent industries, and community colleges can fulfill that role.

Alongside the green economy, we should rethink how we produce food in America. Michael Pollan has argued persuasively that now is the time to provide incentives for polycultural farming that will diversify the food produced in the Corn Belt, reduce the use of artificial fertilizers, and increase the availability of organic and locally grown meat and produce. Though it is a daunting prospect to try to loosen the agribusiness stranglehold, reinventing the food industry offers a chance to bring people back onto the land. Alongside those efforts should be reforms allowing agricultural workers to organize and curbing the all too prevalent labor abuses that contribute to the long-term fragility of rural economies. To that end, national immigration policy should also be reformed away from the costly and often counterproductive interdiction efforts toward ones that offer longtime undocumented workers a pathway to citizenship and encourage a more complete participation of immigrants in their home communities.

A third area for national action is in the reshaping of postsecondary education to better meet the challenges of globalization and the postindustrial economy. Based on the experiences of the stayers and many of the returners we spoke with, we see a need to provide training in the fields and specialties most sought after, and community colleges will be key in that regard. Already, President Obama has recognized the crucial role community colleges can play when in July he introduced the American Graduation Initiative, which will commit over \$12-billion in funding to provide scholarships for students, modernize colleges, and build links with other schools and businesses.

Ultimately, with a plan and a vision the undoing of Middle America is not preordained. The rural crisis has been ignored for far too long, but, we believe, it isn't too late to start paying attention. The residents of rural America must embrace the fact that to survive, the world they knew and cherished must change. And, on a national level, rural development must be more closely linked to national economic growth priorities, and policies must be created to help these communities prepare for a future that is already here.

Husband-and-wife sociologists Patrick J. Carr (Rutgers University at New Brunswick) and Maria J. Kefalas (Saint Joseph's University, Philadelphia) are associate members of the MacArthur Foundation's Network on Transitions to Adulthood and authors of *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America*, published next month by Beacon Press.

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The Chronicle of Higher Education
1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037