

Who are the New Vermonters? Learning from Very Recent Migrants to Rural Vermont

Report to James M. Jeffords Fund, Grant Program for Policy Studies

June 23, 2022

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The Jeffords Fund generously funded the “Who are the New Vermonters?” project from July 1, 2021 – June 30 2022. This report documents the work accomplished from this project and sets out the agenda for planned outcomes from this study. I am grateful to the Jeffords Family, the Fund, and the Provost’s Office for making these funds available.

SUMMARY

Research Question and Context

The New Vermonters research sought to answer the question: **How do “New Vermonters” who have moved into the rural areas of the state of Vermont during the 2020 pandemic perceive Vermont’s cultures, landscapes, and environments, and what social needs and questions do they express?** The study aimed to provide Vermont’s rural civic leaders, planners, employers, and educators with information to **formulate policies and programs that address the on-going demographic crisis by learning from the experiences and perceptions of people who have recently moved into Vermont’s small towns and villages.** The research aimed to provide early insight into **potential drivers of housing and landscape change in the future.** The study builds on previous research colleagues and I have conducted on residential decision making and mobility among Vermonters (Morse 2015, 2017; Morse and Geller 2015; Morse and Mudgett 2017, 2018).

Methods and Analysis

Phase One

In the first phase of the project, I collaborated with demographer Peter Nelson of Middlebury College who was piloting using cell phone data to locate areas of the state that appear to be experiencing increased population. We used this information to target particular areas of the state, such as south central Vermont, to recruit participants. Richard Watts, Director of the Center for Research on Vermont, placed a question on a follow up survey he conducted with new and returning Vermonters that allowed respondents to express interest in further research. We used the contact information generated in that study to reach out to prospective participants. We also used social media posts in Front Porch Forums in communities across the state, contacts in town offices, and development offices, and other forms of “snowball” networking to build a list of potential participants.

Phase Two

In the second phase of the research, I hired an undergraduate research assistant, Cal Hale, who worked on administration, focus groups and interviews, and transcriptions over the course of the grant's duration. Between July and October 2021 we conducted six focus groups and three individual interviews with people who have moved to Vermont since the start of the COVID19 pandemic in March 2020. In total 29 participants were involved in the research. We interviewed men and women, people from all socio-economic backgrounds and age groups, and people with diverse racial, ethnic, and sexual orientation identities. They moved to Vermont from all regions of the United States, mainly from urban places to small towns and villages in Vermont.

Phase Three

We discovered there was great interest from the public in the findings from this research. This interest prompted us to put together a list of preliminary and general findings while we were simultaneously working on detailed analysis of the transcripts for an academic paper. In September, I presented these initial findings at a conference based in Keene, NH titled "Radically Rural" which attracts a national audience of planners, economic developers, and academics. I then delivered a paper titled "Rural Refuge? Environmental Displacement in COVID Times" to the Gund Institute of Environment at UVM in October 2021. In addition, I gave several interviews to reporters working in Vermont and at the national scale (and one international paper). The bullet titled "Public media coverage" below lists the outlets that drew on our preliminary findings to make sense of the residential decisions Americans were making during COVID, and also due to environmental and climate change-induced crises.

Phase Four

I am now working on the fourth phase of the research: conducting a detailed analysis of the transcripts in order to prepare a white paper for Vermont policy makers, planners and research participants, as well as a manuscript that I will submit to the international journal "Population, Space and Place" in August 2022.

Preliminary Findings

- Individuals and families draw on a number of independent and intersecting push and pull factors, ranging from the financial, to the emotional, environmental, and imaginative as they decide to move to Vermont
- Weather and natural disaster events due to climate change are driving some people to leave their homes elsewhere in the US to move to Vermont
- The perception that Vermont will be resilient to climate change impacts are drawing some movers to Vermont
- Environmental conditions such as natural beauty and privacy, as well as outdoor recreational activities are drawing movers to Vermont
- About one-third of New Vermonter couples interviewed brought at least one remote job into the state when they moved to Vermont
- Movers are finding it difficult to locate housing in Vermont, and are willing to take risks in order to secure housing
- People in middle to lower income brackets are using direct networking in communities to locate housing

- Some movers perceive Vermont to be more welcoming to people of color, queer people, and people with non-conforming gender identities than other states
- New Vermonters experience both welcoming and unwelcoming attitudes from Vermonters
- Some movers cite concern that Vermont's population lacks racial and ethnic diversity
- New Vermonters are seeking out volunteer opportunities and ways to join local communities
- New Vermonters have many questions about Vermont, and would like to know how to engage with others

OUTCOMES AND DELIVERABLES

Completed

- Conducted 6 focus groups and 3 individual interviews with a total of 29 participants
- Undergraduate student was trained in qualitative research methods and analysis
- Delivered "Who are the New Vermonters? Environment, Place Identity, and Rural Migration in the Age of Pandemic" to Radically Rural conference, Keene, New Hampshire, Sept 2021
- Delivered presentation titled "Rural Refuge? Environmental Displacement in COVID Times" to the Gund Institute of Environment at UVM, October 2021.
- Public media coverage:
 - Hurdle, Jon. As Climate Fears Mount, Some in U.S. Are Deciding to Relocate. YaleEnvironment360. March 24, 2022. <https://e360.yale.edu/features/as-climate-fears-mount-some-in-u.s.-are-deciding-to-relocate>
 - Arntsen, Erlend Ofte. US Climate Refugees: Done with California. Vergens Gang (VG-Norwegian national paper). March 29, 2022. <https://www.vg.no/nyheter/utenriks/i/dn0z8A/usas-klimaflyktninger-ferdige-med-california> (in Norwegian).
 - McCallum, Kevin. Fave Little State: Climate Migrants From Around America Are Seeking Refuge in Vermont. Seven Days. Jan 12-18, 2022. <https://www.sevendaysvt.com/vermont/IssueArchives?issue=34646955>
 - Colburn, Kevin. Who are the New Vermonters? UVM Office of Engagement. December 2, 2021. <https://www.uvm.edu/news/engagement/who-are-new-vermonters>
 - Suachelli, Liz. Out and About: Recent Vermont Transplants, Speak Up. Valley News. July 13, 2021. <https://www.vermontpublic.org/vpr-news/2021-05-07/a-lot-of-road-to-cover-as-schools-close-some-kids-face-longer-bus-rides>
 - St Angelo, Lilly. We Heard About Pandemic Migration to Vermont. New Research Shows Where People Went. Burlington Free Press. October 15, 2021. <https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/news/local/vermont/2021/10/15/vermont-population-migration-research-shows-shift-urban-areas/8466885002/>

Underway

- White paper “Welcoming New Vermonters” circulated to VT agencies and organizations
- Journal article on climate migration submitted to international journal *Population, Space, and Place*

BUDGET

All of the funds were used to pay an undergraduate research assistant from July 2021 to May 2022.

Proposed Budget Item	Projected Rate	Fringe at 4.7%	Projected Total	Final Amount
Projected: Undergraduate Research Assistant, July-December 2021	\$15/hour x 200 hours = \$3000	\$141.00	\$3141	
Final undergraduate Research Assistant, July 2021-May 2022				\$3,407.48
Projected: Annual Meeting Conference Fee American Association of Geographers	\$300		\$300	0
Final: Attended Radically Rural Conference instead, conference fee and lodging were complementary				0
Projected budget			\$3,441	\$3,407.48
Final budget				

References

Morse, C. and J. Mudgett. 2018. *Happy to be Home: Place Attachment, Family Ties, and Mobility of Contented Rural Stayers*. **The Professional Geographer**, 70 (2), 261-269. DOI: 10.1080/00330124.2017.1365309.

Morse, C. 2017. *The Emotional Geographies of Global Return Migration to Vermont*. **Emotion, Space and Society**. 25:1 4-21. DOI: 10.1016/j.emospa.2017.09.007.

Morse, C. and Mudgett, J. 2017. *Longing for Landscape: Homesickness and Place Attachment Among Rural Out-Migrants in the 19th and 21st Centuries*. **Journal of Rural Studies** 50: 95-103.

Morse, C. 2015. The Risk and Rewards of Using Social Media in Rural Migration Research: Findings from the Vermont Roots Project. **The Northeastern Geographer**.

Morse, C. and W. Geller. 2015. *Vermont Roots Migration Project: Summary of Initial Findings*. Center for Research on Vermont, University of Vermont, <http://go.uvm.edu/vermontrootsmigration>.