



## Rural gentrification and linked migration in the United States

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### A B S T R A C T

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Although gentrification is a process commonly associated with urban landscapes, rural areas in advanced economies have also experienced gentrification over the past two decades. Largely based on case study approaches, the Rural Studies literature describes transformations in the housing market, changed cultural attitudes toward the environment, political conflicts surrounding land-use planning, and heightened class polarization as outcomes of rural gentrification. The analysis in this paper extends our understandings of rural gentrification in two fundamental ways. First, drawing on US census data from 1990 and 2000, the paper systematically examines gentrification in nonmetropolitan counties across the United States and develops a methodology for identifying areas with similarly strong evidence of gentrification. The second section of the analysis compares the geographic distribution and socioeconomic change in gentrifying counties with the rest of nonmetropolitan America emphasizing the changes in the baby boomer and Latino populations. In so doing, the analysis opens up new possibilities for comparative analysis of gentrification both between and within countries, connects our understandings of rural gentrification to other processes of globalization playing out within rural space, and argues for work on rural gentrification to more explicitly integrate questions surrounding race and ethnicity alongside questions of class.

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### 1. Introduction

Since at least the 1960s, gentrification has been a topic of keen interest among social scientists. While generally described as the arrival of middle- and upper-class households into often neglected lower cost urban neighborhoods, gentrification has also been a concept applied to the transformation of rural communities in the wake of the Rural Renaissance of the 1970s and the Rural Rebound of the 1990s. Scholars examining rural gentrification in a variety of geographic contexts have documented causes and consequences of rural gentrification typically relying on in-depth case studies as their primary methodology. Thus, while the literature exploring rural gentrification at the local level is rich, we have scant understanding of the extent of rural gentrification at a more macroscale. This paper forwards the rural gentrification literature in two primary ways. First, we develop a methodology for identifying counties in the rural United States with strong evidence of gentrification. This methodology allows us to assess how common

gentrification is across the country and geographically describe the areas most impacted by processes of gentrification. Second, the analysis highlights two key demographic shifts taking place in areas with strong evidence of gentrification: an aging of the population as evidenced by the rapid growth of the baby boomer population, and increasing ethnic diversity generated by the arrival of large numbers of Latinos. These two populations have grown rapidly in rural areas (Nelson et al., 2009), and by explicitly drawing these connections between gentrification and contemporary rural demographic dynamics on a macroscale, the paper extends the concept of the 'global countryside' forwarded by Woods (2007). Just as the gentrification by highly skilled professionals in global cities has stimulated parallel flows of low wage typically immigrant labor (Sassen, 2006), we demonstrate how gentrification of rural areas by affluent baby boomers has the potential to draw low wage Latino workers to the same sets of destinations.

The remainder of this paper is divided into four additional sections. Section 2 presents a literature review of rural gentrification focusing on its causes and consequences. Section 3 describes our methodology for quantitatively identifying areas with strong evidence of gentrification. Section 4 presents the results of our analysis cartographically and through a series of statistical summaries, emphasizing the changing demographic composition of gentrifying counties. The concluding section situates our results

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within current theorizations of rural gentrification and argues for future analysis sensitive to both race and class dynamics (see also Nelson and Nelson, 2010).

## 2. Literature review – The causes and consequences of rural gentrification

Gentrification within cities has been attributed to an array of coalescing factors including the rise of a service economy, increasing preference for urban living, widening ‘rent gaps’, and growth of nontraditional households. The consequences of gentrification in urban areas are equally broad ranging from the redevelopment of once neglected neighborhoods to the displacement of lower income groups (for a thorough review of the urban gentrification literature, see Hamnett, 1991). Similarly, rural gentrification has widely ranging causes and outcomes. Rural gentrification has been tied to economic restructuring and the creation of footloose service workers, declining employment in the traditionally resource based sectors, an aging population with loosening ties to the labor market, the rise of leisure and concurrent proliferation of second homes, dissatisfaction with suburban living, and the pursuit of a perceived higher quality of life available in the countryside. As new populations of gentrifiers arrive in rural destinations communities are often confronted with inflated housing markets, political disputes over community resources, and increasing class polarization, and these processes of gentrification are playing out in many postindustrial economies from the United States to Spain and from Germany to Australia. This section briefly reviews the current literature on rural gentrification summarizing these causes and consequences, highlighting the role of case study methodologies in the rural gentrification literature to date, and identifying some of the ways rural gentrification is unique from its manifestations in the urban landscape.

### 2.1. Causes of rural gentrification

A ‘Rural Renaissance’ began in the 1970s when for the first time in nearly a century, rural areas in many advanced economies gained population at faster rates than urban areas. Rural growth lagged in the 1980s but returned once more in the 1990s with the ‘Rural Rebound’ (Champion, 1988; Fuguitt, 1985; Fuguitt and Beale, 1996). These population dynamics are evidence of the ways individuals, households, and business owners are lured to rural areas by deeply held beliefs of the promise of rural living. Rural space has come to embody tranquility, safety, family, nature, stability and a general nostalgia for some bygone era that migrants are searching for in their move to a rural destination. As Bunce (2003) describes, this rural idyll is a cultural construction produced through works of popular culture that have been shaping our perceptions of rural areas since childhood. Just as gentrification scholars focused on urban areas have argued that urban gentrifiers are attracted to inner-city neighborhoods because of the cultural values (architecture, diversity, lifestyle, etc.) associated with urban living (Hamnett, 1991; Ley, 1981) and the growing cultural dissatisfaction with suburbia (Muzzio and Halper, 2002), so too are rural gentrifiers attracted to rural destinations by what they believe rural living will provide. That the rural idyll can actually influence migration behavior is testimony to its power, and a combination of economic and demographic shifts only serves to increase the pool of potential rural gentrifiers.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For a thorough review of the literature on amenity migration and rural socio-economic change, see Gosnell and Abrams (2010).

While at one point, unique economic structures served to distinguish urban from rural areas, economic restructuring over the past 35 years has blurred such distinctions rendering rural economies much more similar in structure to their urban counterparts. Between 1970 and 2000, the relative share of nonmetropolitan employment in the primary and secondary sectors declined while employment in the tertiary sector increased. In 1970, farming accounted for 14.4% of nonmetropolitan employment in the US, but by 2000 this share had dropped to only 6.5%. Similarly, manufacturing declined from nearly 20% of nonmetropolitan employment in 1970s to only 15% in 2000. In contrast, services grew in relative importance over the same 30-year period from 51.5% of total employment in 1970 to 61.8% of total employment in 2000 (Vias and Nelson, 2006). It follows then, that many of the rural gentrifiers come from this expanding service sector.

The increasing importance of service sector employment in rural areas has opened up opportunities for footloose service workers to move to rural communities attracted to environmental amenities, recreational opportunities and a perceived higher quality of life. For these individuals, the lure of the rural idyll can be quite powerful. For example, restructuring in Southeast England created an expanding number of workers in professional and technical services who went on to become agents of gentrification in Aylesbury Vale outside London (Murdoch and Marsden, 1994). In a gentrifying region of rural Spain, the growth of residents working in professional occupations greatly exceeded the number of local jobs for such workers. Similar to the situation in Aylesbury Vale, this discrepancy suggests a growing segment of professional residents in the gentrifying community in rural Spain who do not work locally but rather commute (in person or through tele-work) to neighboring urban centers like Barcelona (Solana-Solana, 2010). Using surveys of business owners in the rural US, Beyers and Lindahl (1996) and Johnson and Rasker (1995) demonstrate the attraction of rural living for footloose entrepreneurs. Two-thirds of business owners surveyed in rural locations across the United States indicated the high quality of life as a major reason for locating their business in its current rural location (Beyers and Lindahl, 1996). Similarly, a survey of business owners in the Greater Yellowstone region of the Northern Rockies found ‘Scenic Beauty’ and ‘Quality Environment’ to be the top two reasons business owners cited for choosing their current business location (Johnson and Rasker, 1995). The lure of rural living also extends beyond business owners to individuals and households. Rudzitis (1999) reports that over 40% of recent migrants to the Interior Columbia River Basin in the Western United States indicated outdoor recreation and ‘landscape’ as the primary or secondary reason why they chose their new residential location. Thus, as economic differences between urban and rural areas decrease, individuals and business owners previously unable to choose a rural residence are now able to act on their rural preferences and become agents of gentrification.

Layered on top of these economic changes are demographic shifts that will greatly expand the potential for rural gentrification in the coming decades, and these demographic shifts in some ways distinguish rural from urban gentrification. Urban gentrification is often viewed as a process whereby young middle-class singles or couples typically without kids move into a previously run-down neighborhood and initiate the processes of gentrification.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the age structure of the gentrifying households in rural areas tends to be older as the move from urban to rural areas often coincides with couples becoming ‘empty-nesters’. The post-war

<sup>3</sup> Admittedly this is an oversimplification, but it remains the orthodox view of urban gentrification.

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