

# **Rewriting the Rural Narrative**

## **Living in the Middle of Everywhere**

*Benjamin Winchester*

*Rural Sociologist*



**How do you describe rural  
life, rural communities,  
rural people?**

# 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
- The lucky few escape



- What we had
- What we don't have
- What we wish we had
- What we could have had...

# Charles Galpin *Rural Life*



Parting of the Ways, Wyoming

Galpin, Charles Josiah. 1918. *Rural Life*. The Century Co: New York

## Local Newspaper

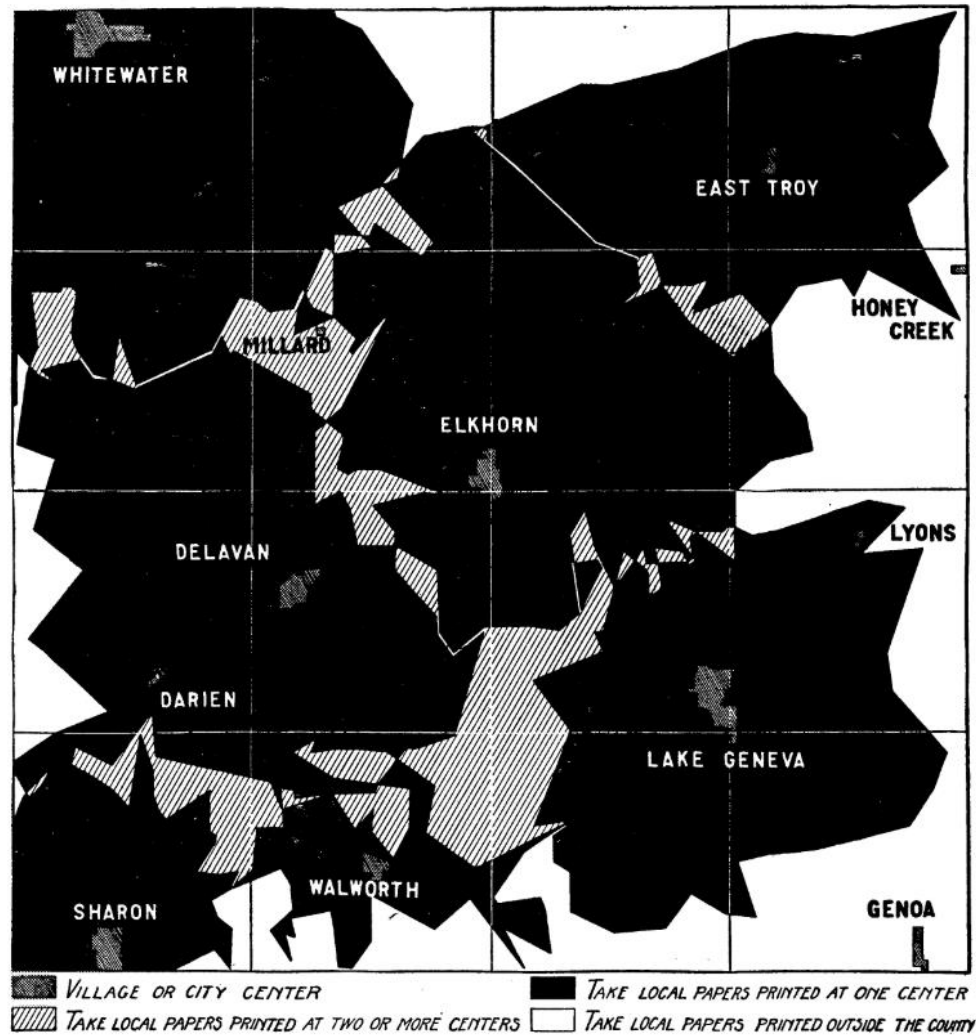


FIG. 4. LOCAL-PAPER COMMUNITIES

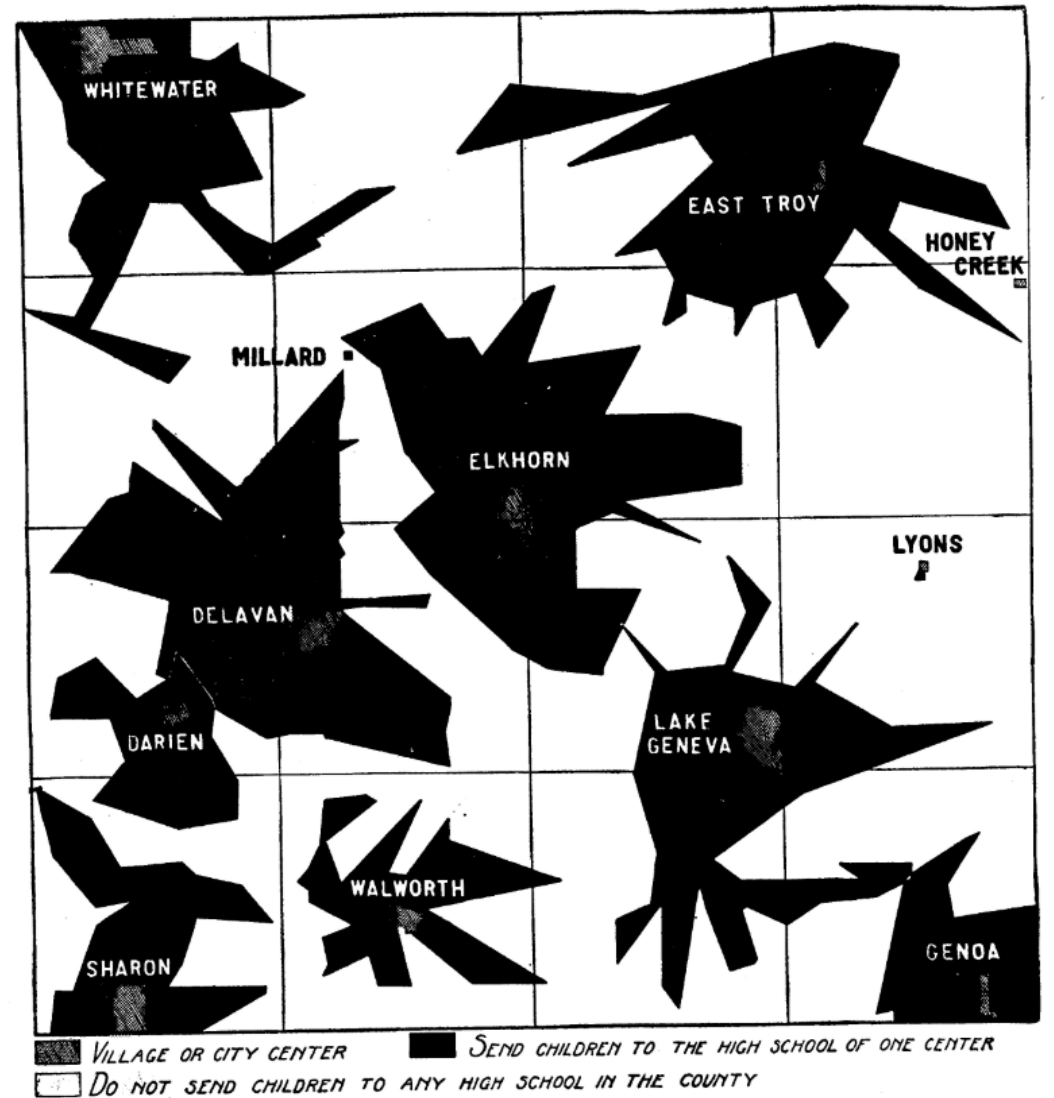
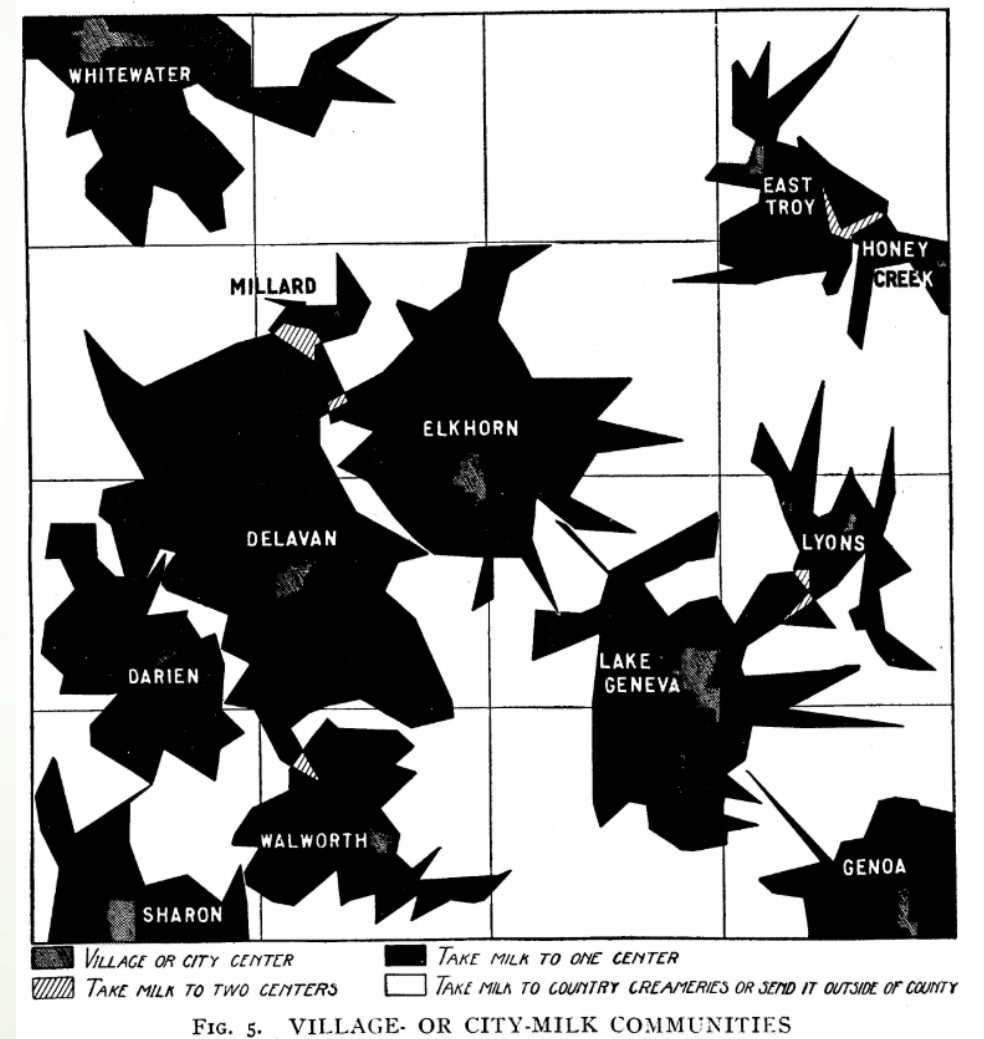


FIG. 7. HIGH SCHOOL COMMUNITIES IN WALWORTH COUNTY, WISCONSIN

## High School



## Milk Market





UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA  
**EXTENSION**

**Nebraska Buffalo  
Commons Research  
2012**

**Workforce Movers  
University of Minnesota,  
2004, 2012, 2020**



**Montana Movers Study, 2021**

# Newcomers: Why?

**Simpler pace of life**



**Safety and Security**



**Low Housing Cost**







# Newcomers: Who?

- 31% moved primarily for a job
- **25% lived there previously**
- 91% have some college or bachelor's
- 75% household incomes over \$50k
- **47% have children in household**
- 21% households have a telecommuter

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



# **Living in the Middle of Everywhere**

*"We ended up landing in Roscoe, Illinois because of the location. It's a quick drive to Chicago (90 minutes), Milwaukee (60 minutes), & Madison (45 minutes)"*

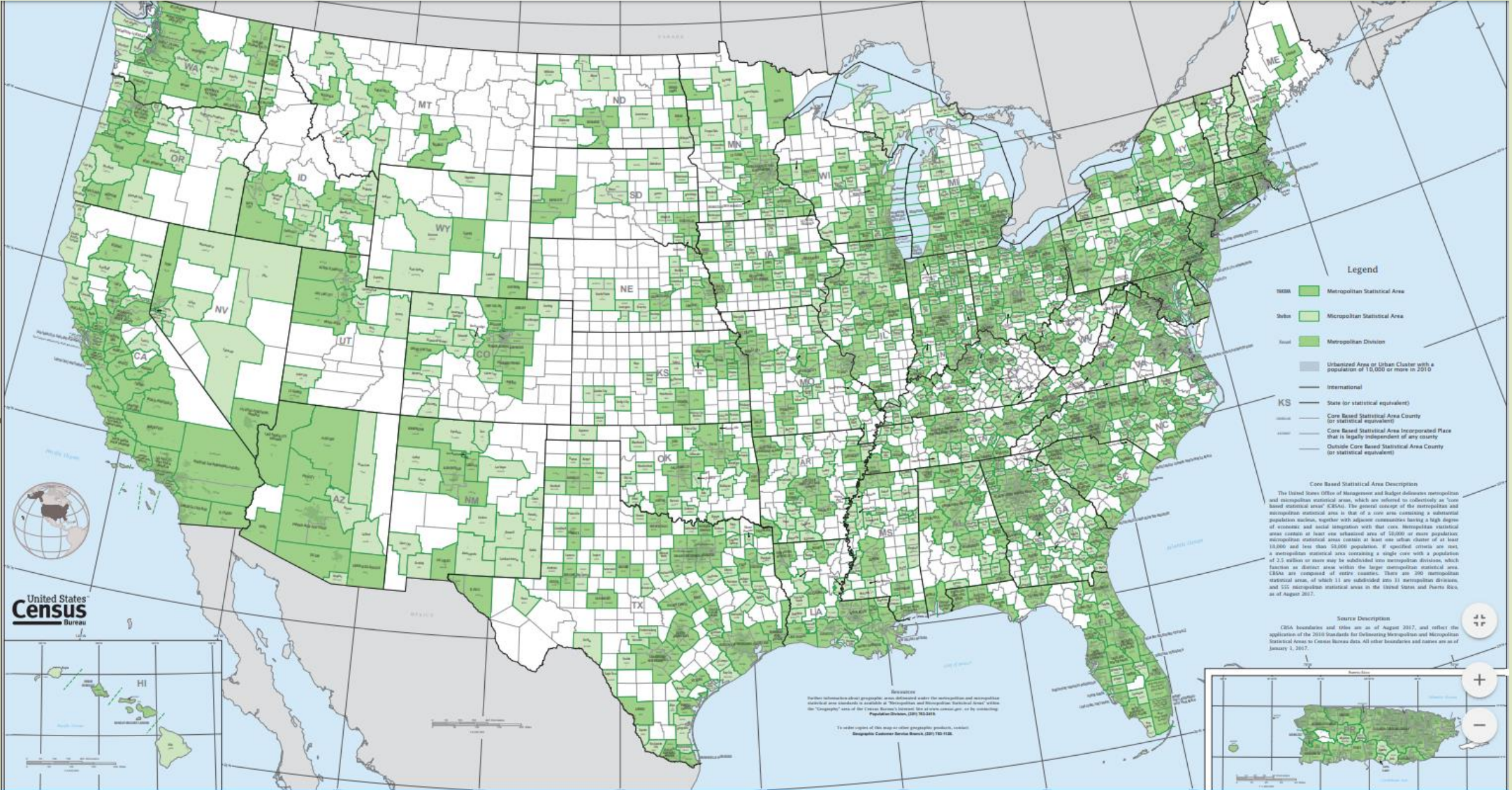
<http://sprudge.com/snowdrift-coffee-129804.html>



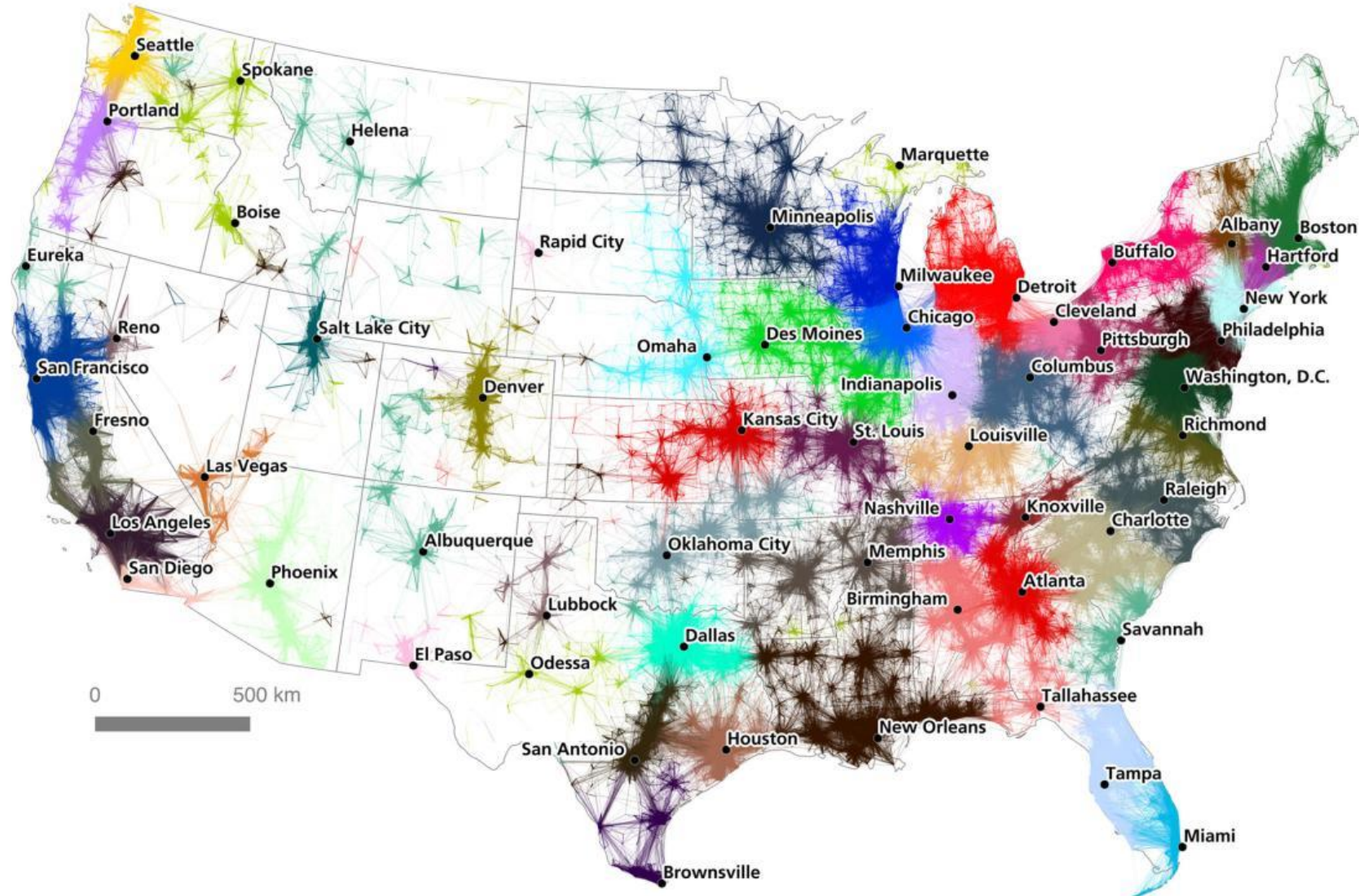
**Middle of Everywhere**

**Jobs and the Economy**

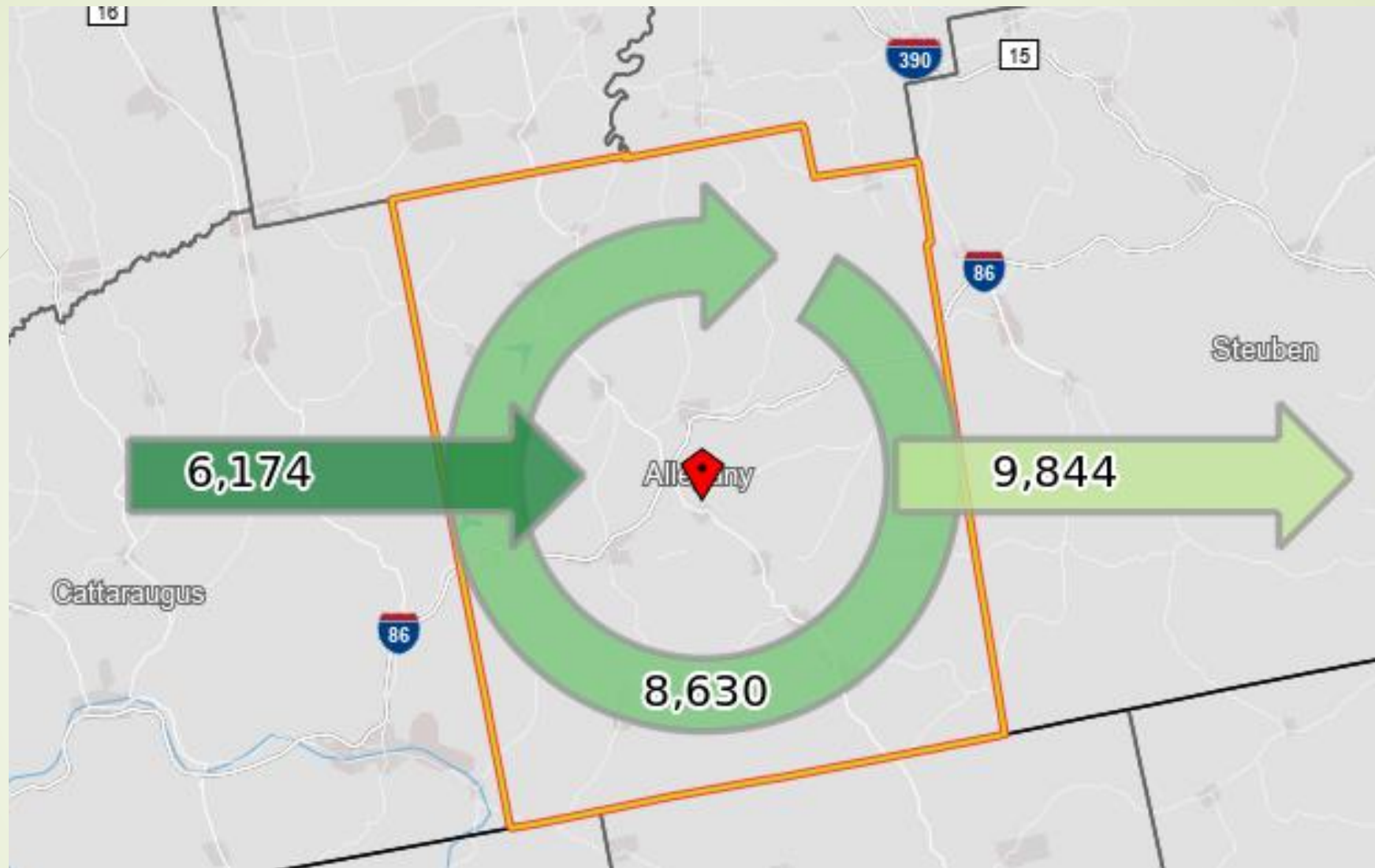
# regional centers



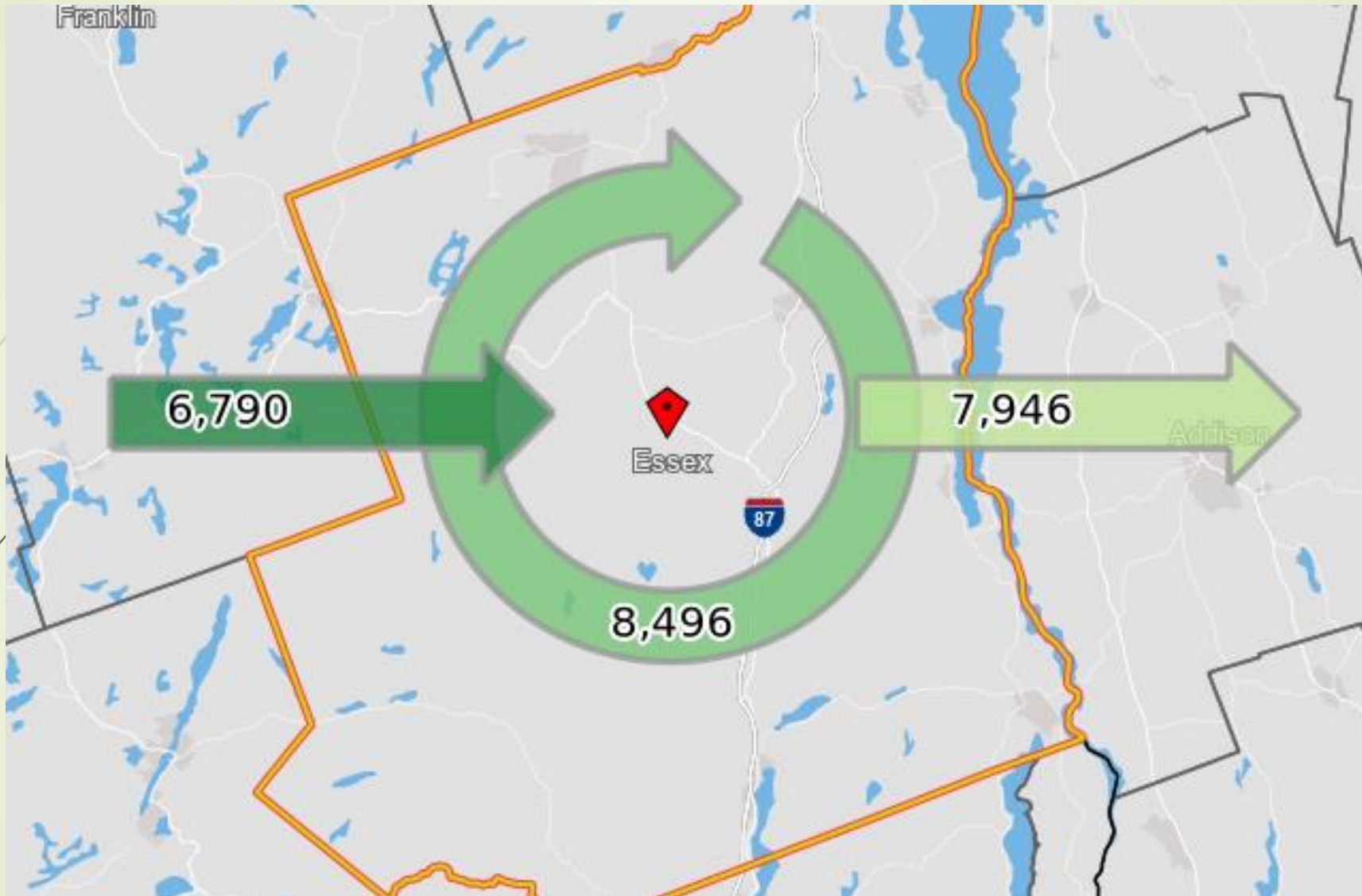
# Megaregions



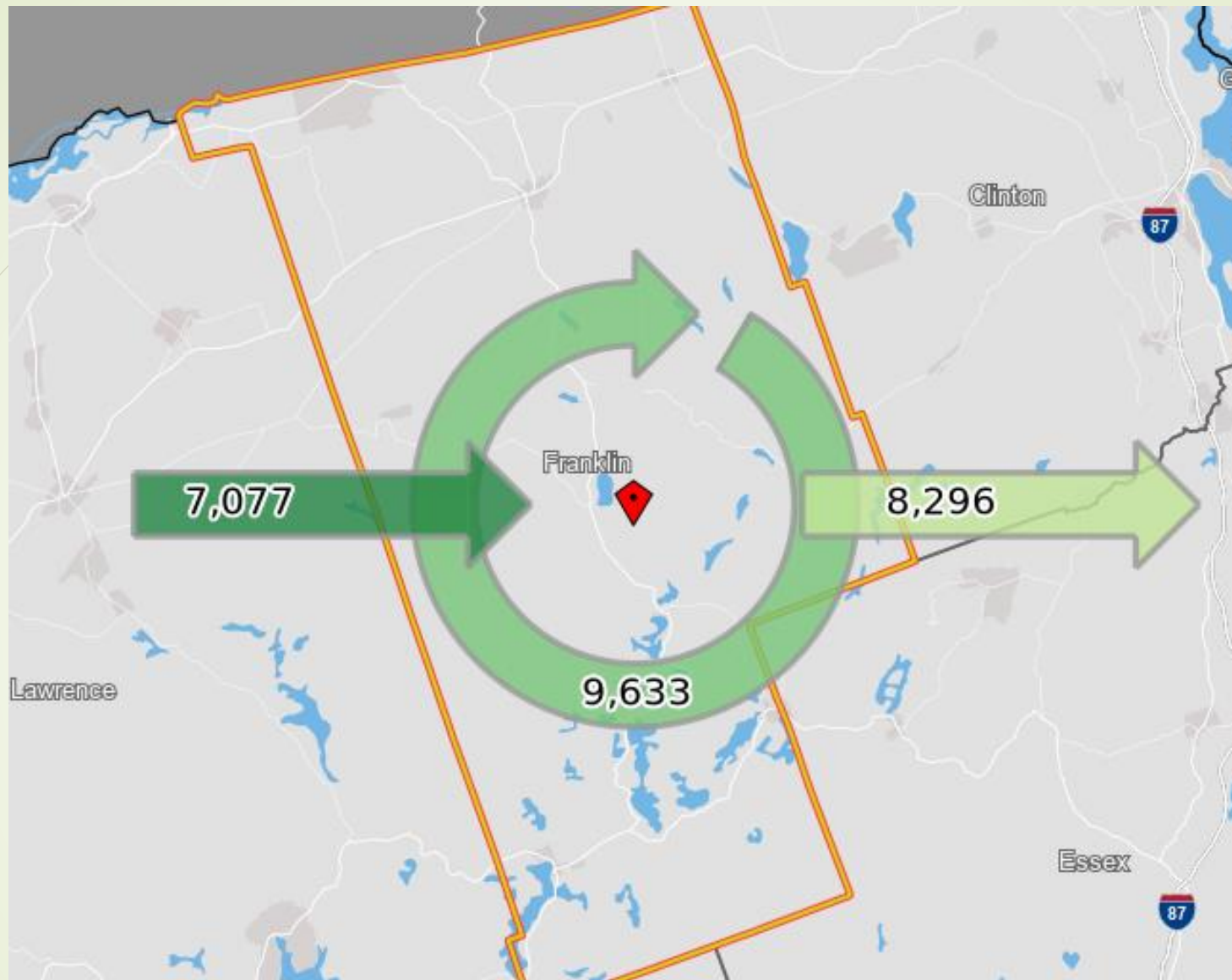
<http://discovery.dartmouth.edu/megaregions/>



Allegany County  
47% live and work

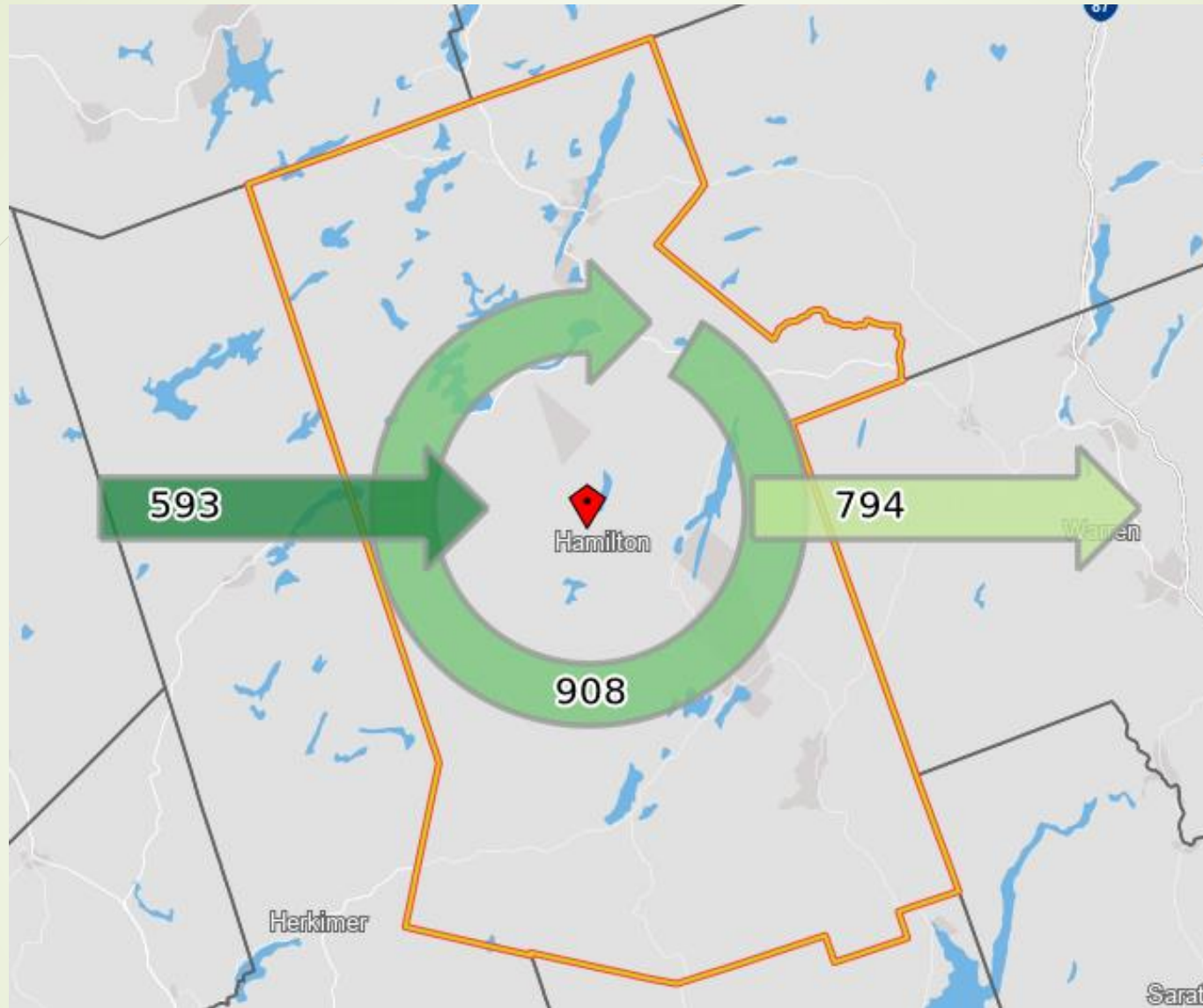


Essex County  
52% live and work



Franklin County  
54% live and work

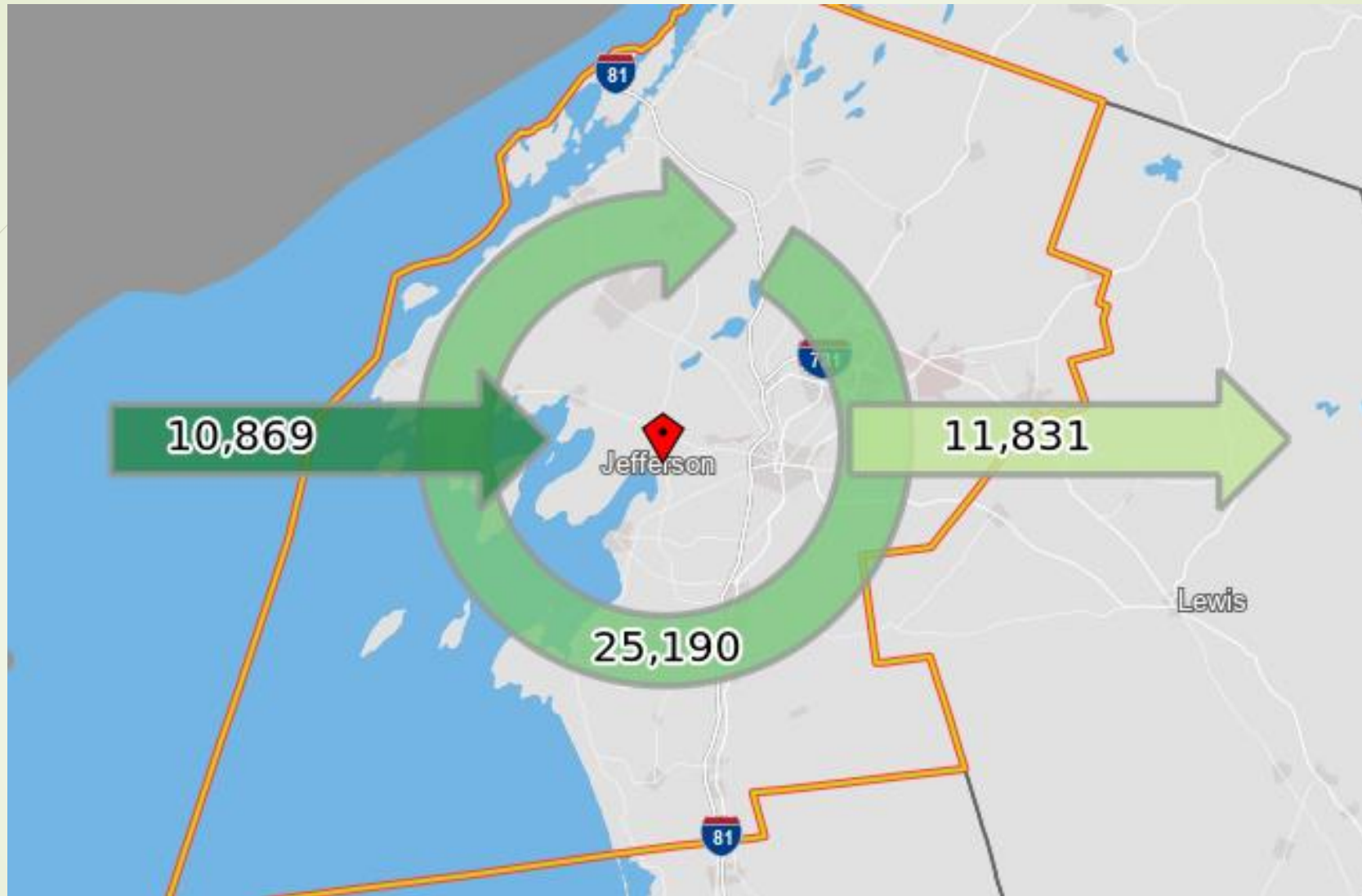




Hamilton County  
53% live and work



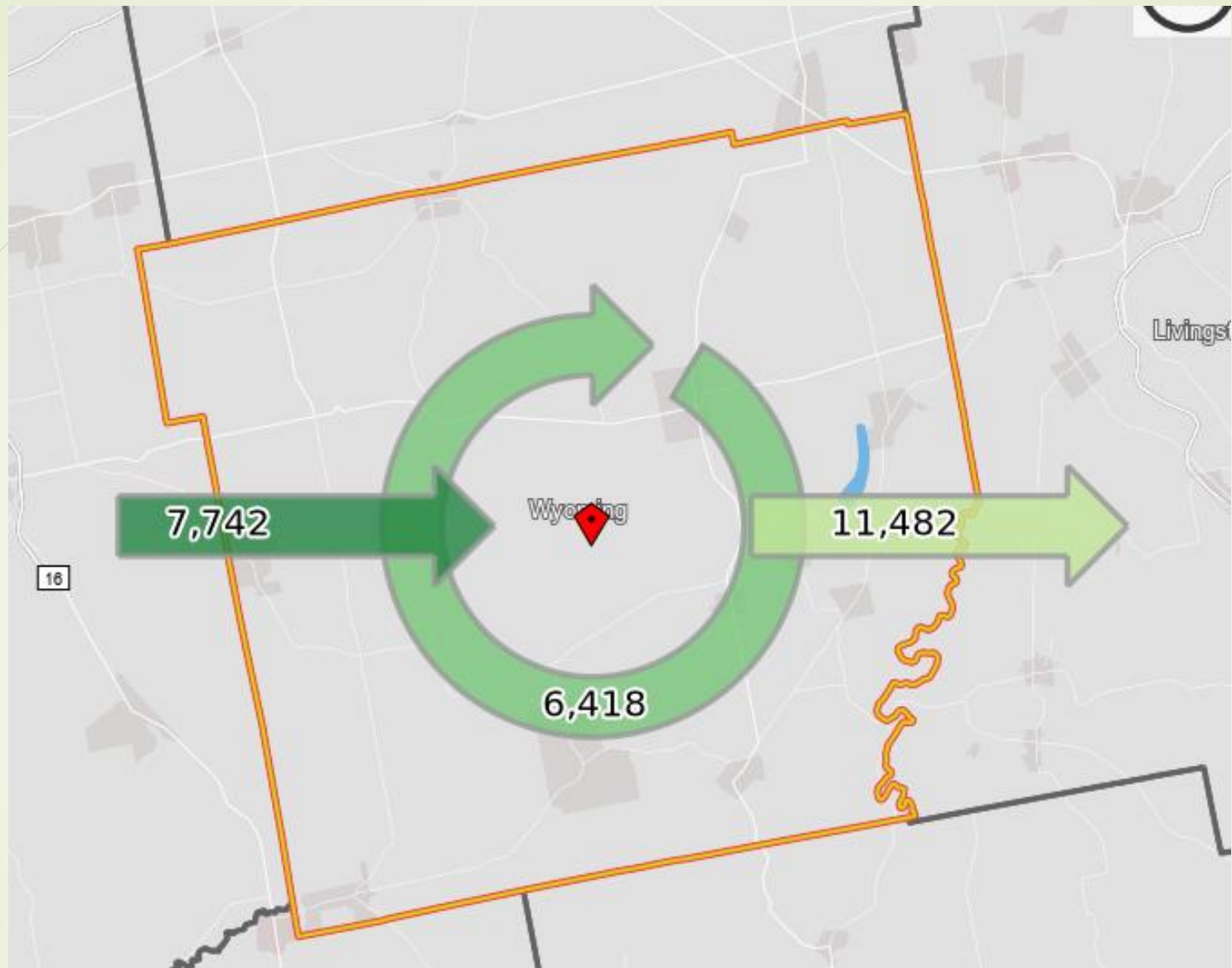
Herkimer County  
32% live and work



Jefferson County  
68% live and work

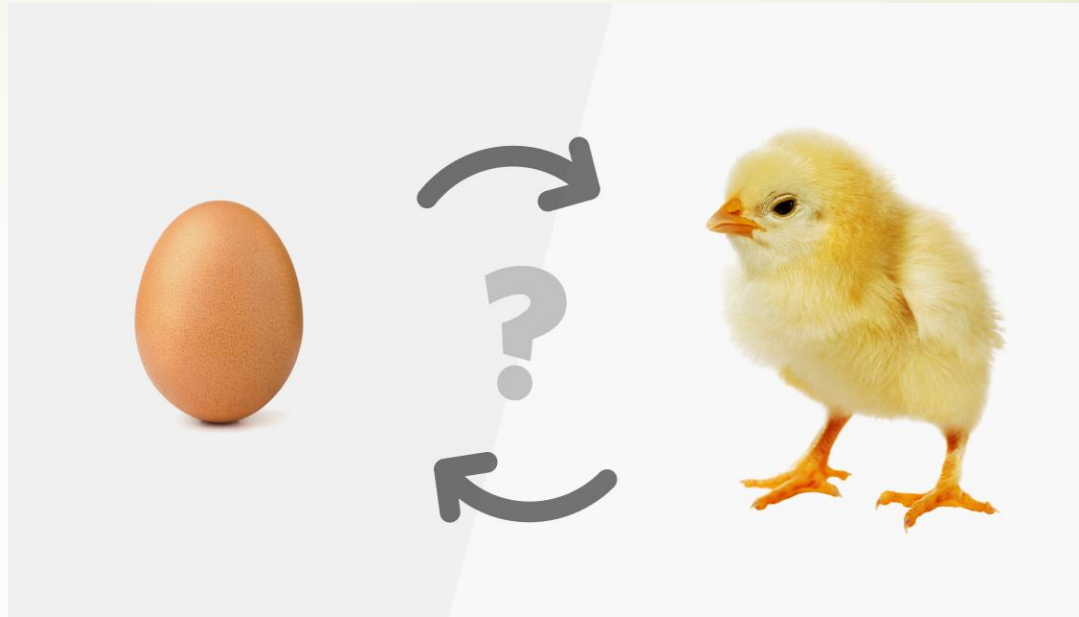


Orleans County  
33% live and work



Wyoming County  
36% live and work

# 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**

# The Middle of Everywhere

## Exercise

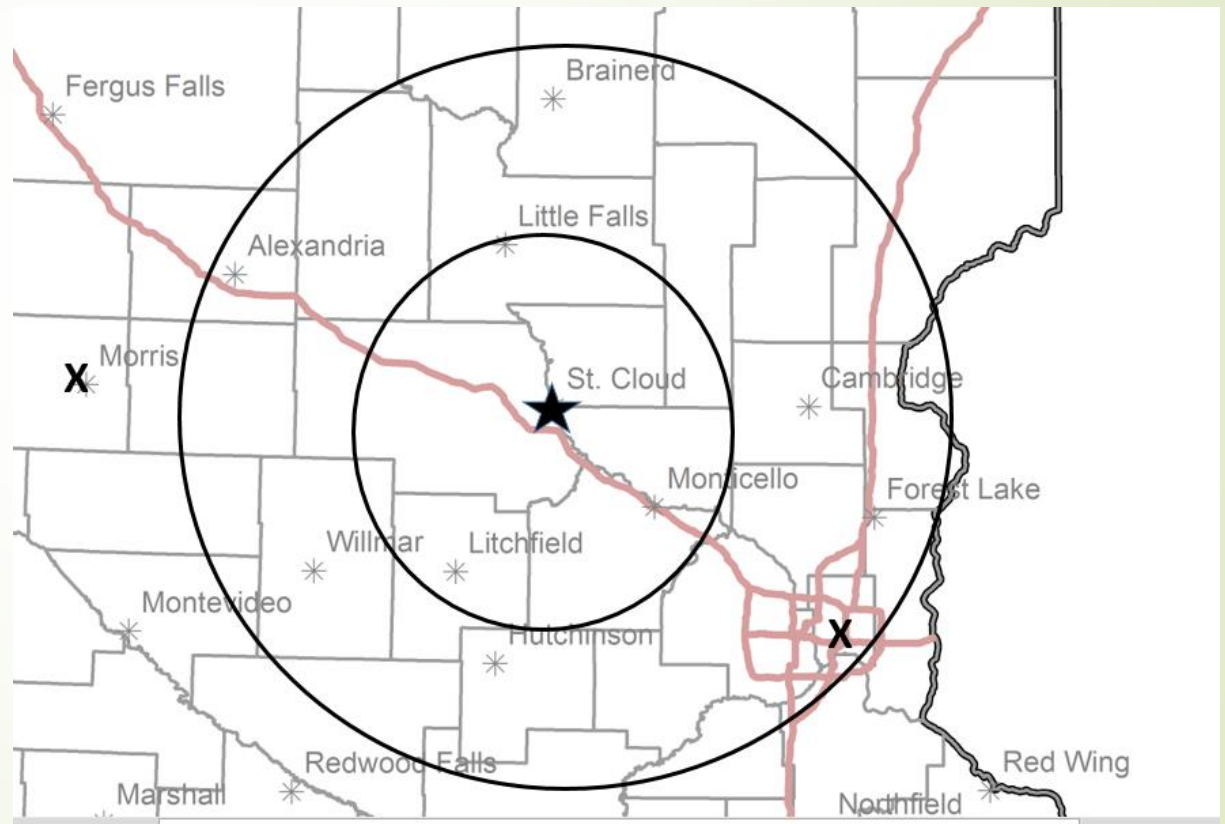
- ★ where you live
- X where you work

Circle around:

1. Shop / eat out
2. Play / recreate

Age range

Assets



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

# Directions

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

Start with a map of your region.

1. Put a ★ where you live
2. Put a X where you work and another where your spouse/partner works.

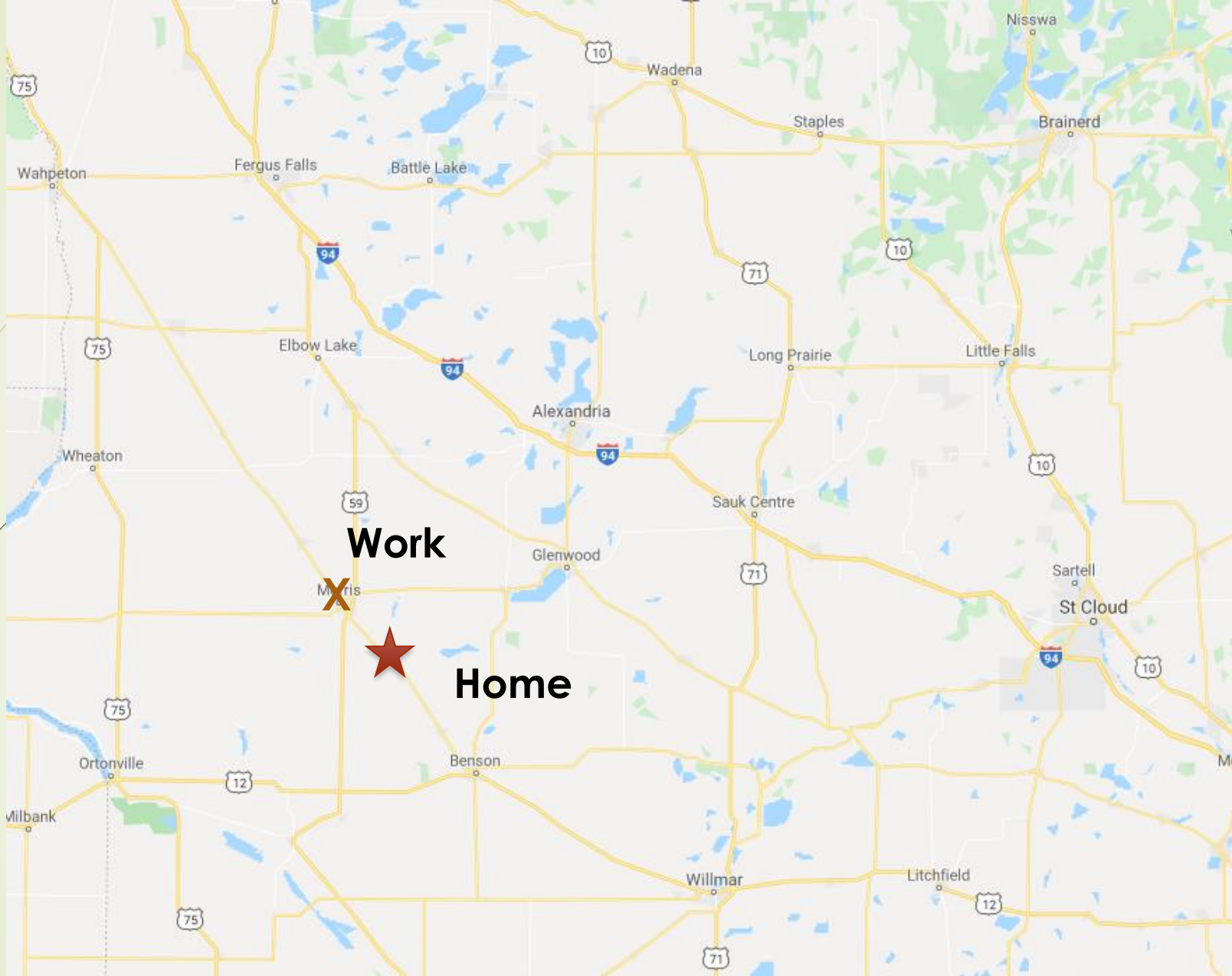
Draw boundaries around how far you go to:

1. Shop / eat out
2. Play / recreate

- Put your Age range in the box, such as 30s or 60s
- List 3-5 of your favorite assets in the region. These should be real places, events, etc. Not nebulous things like “hardworking people”







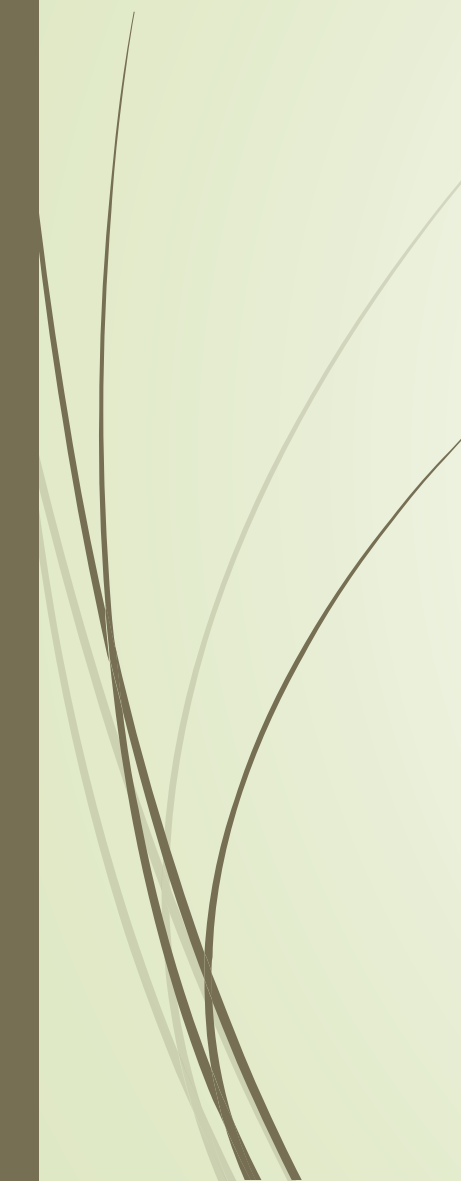
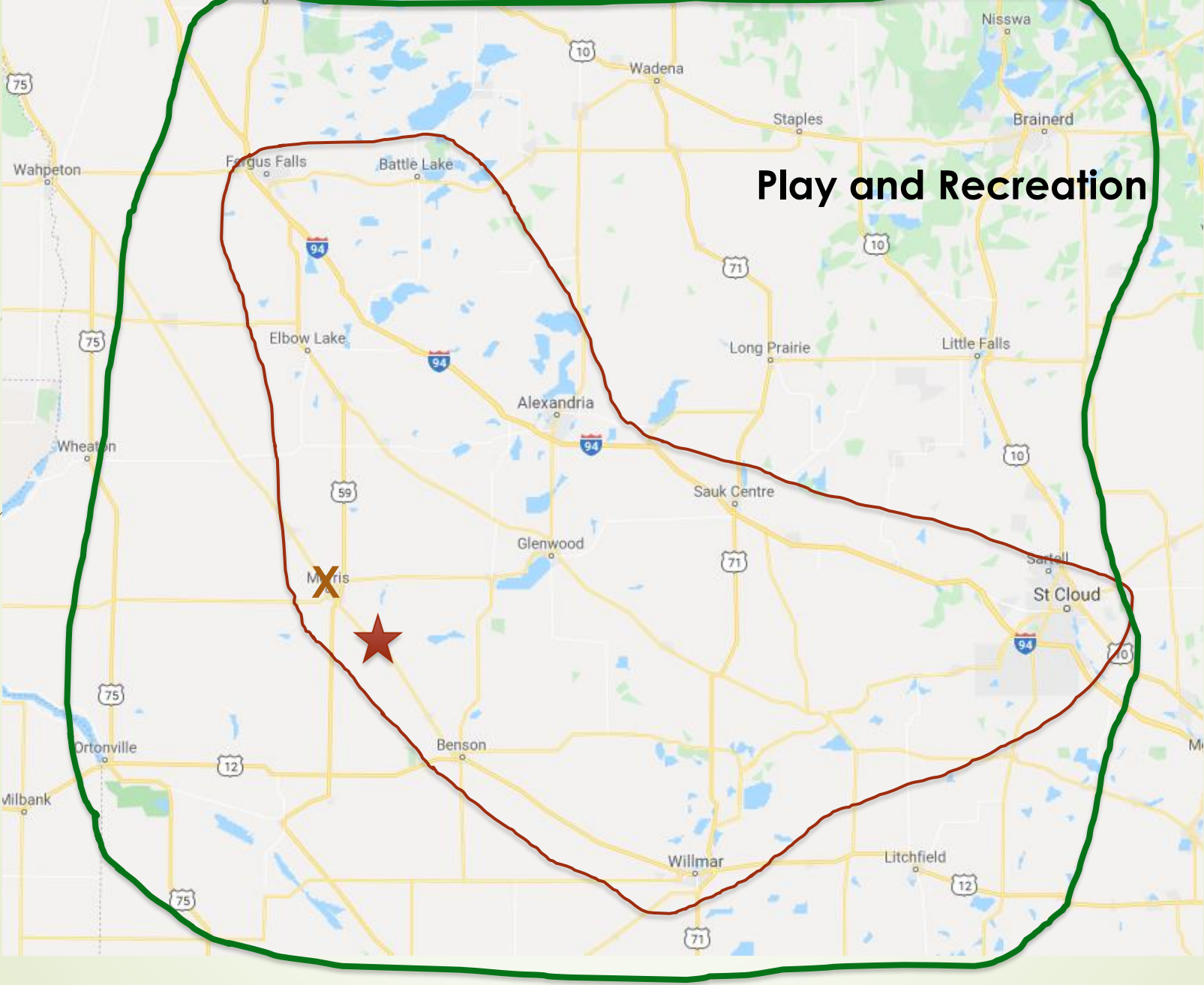


**Shop and Eat Out**

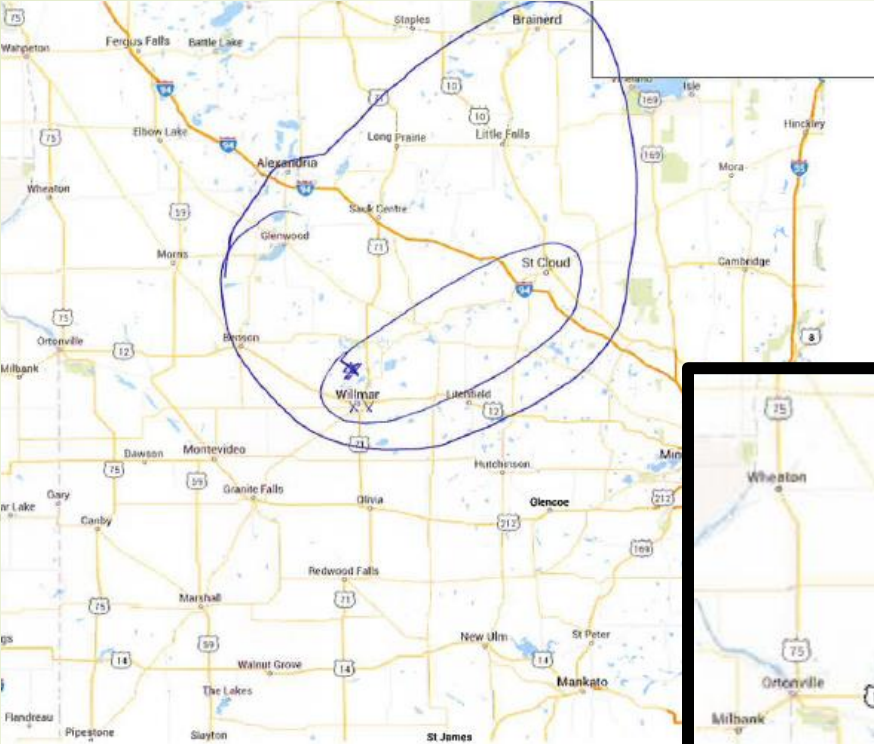
✕  
Morris



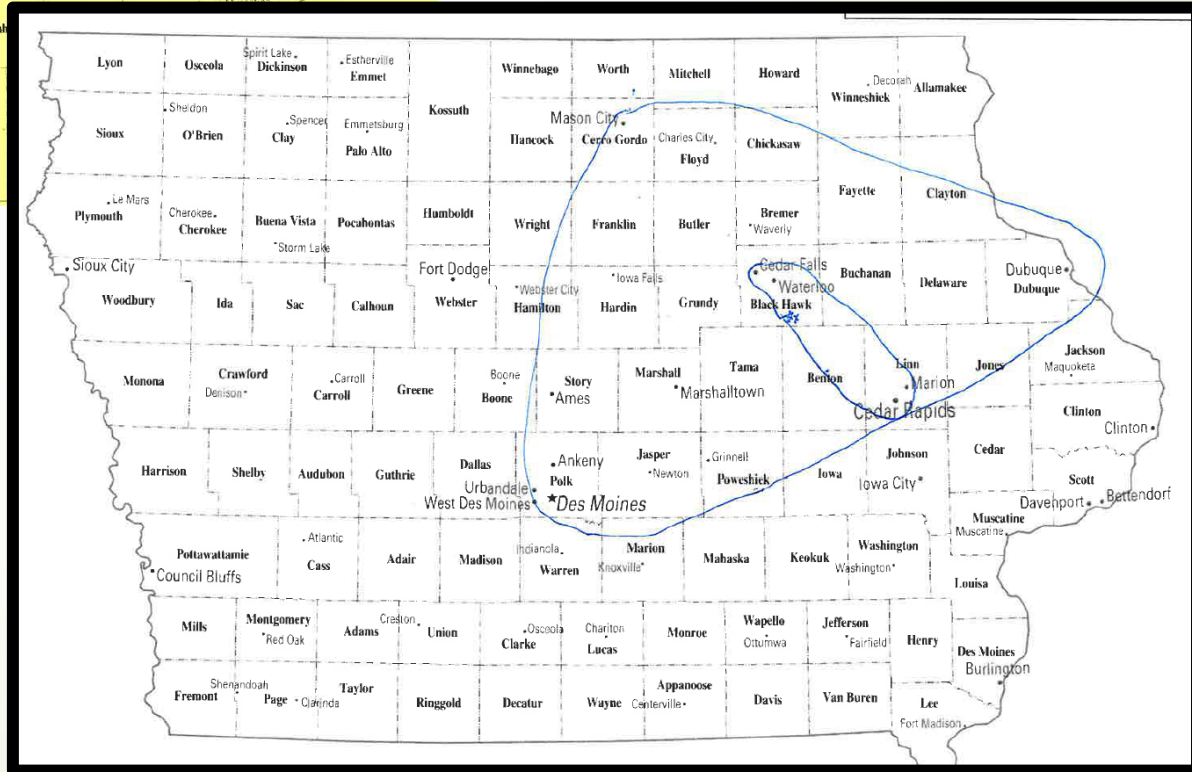
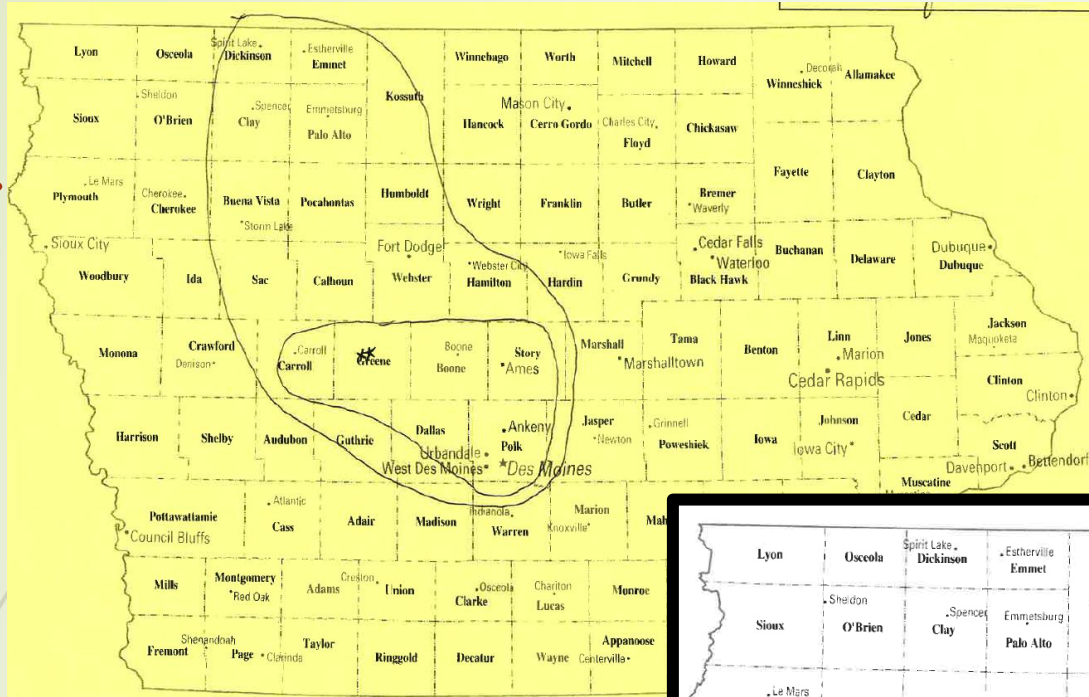
# Play and Recreation



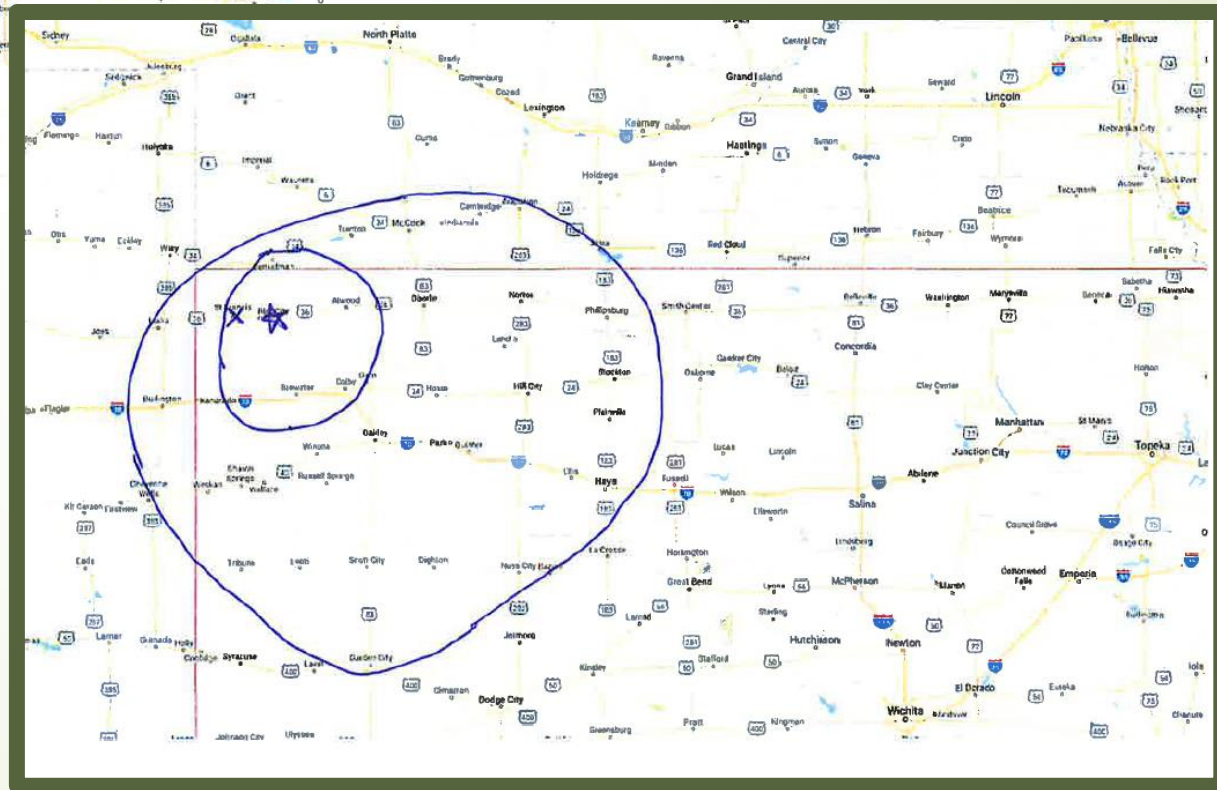
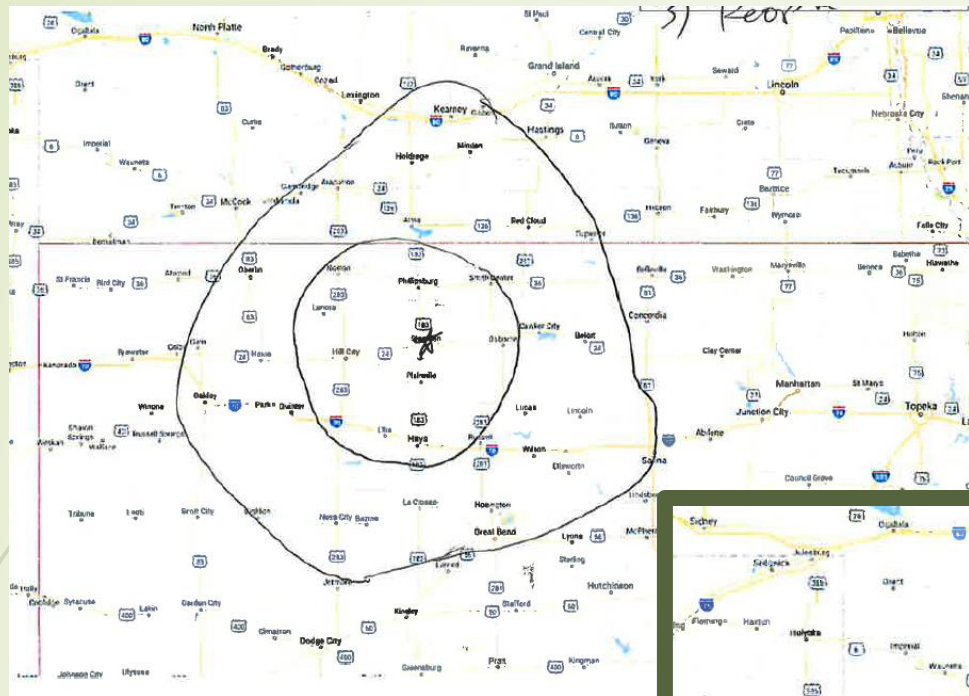
# Minnesota



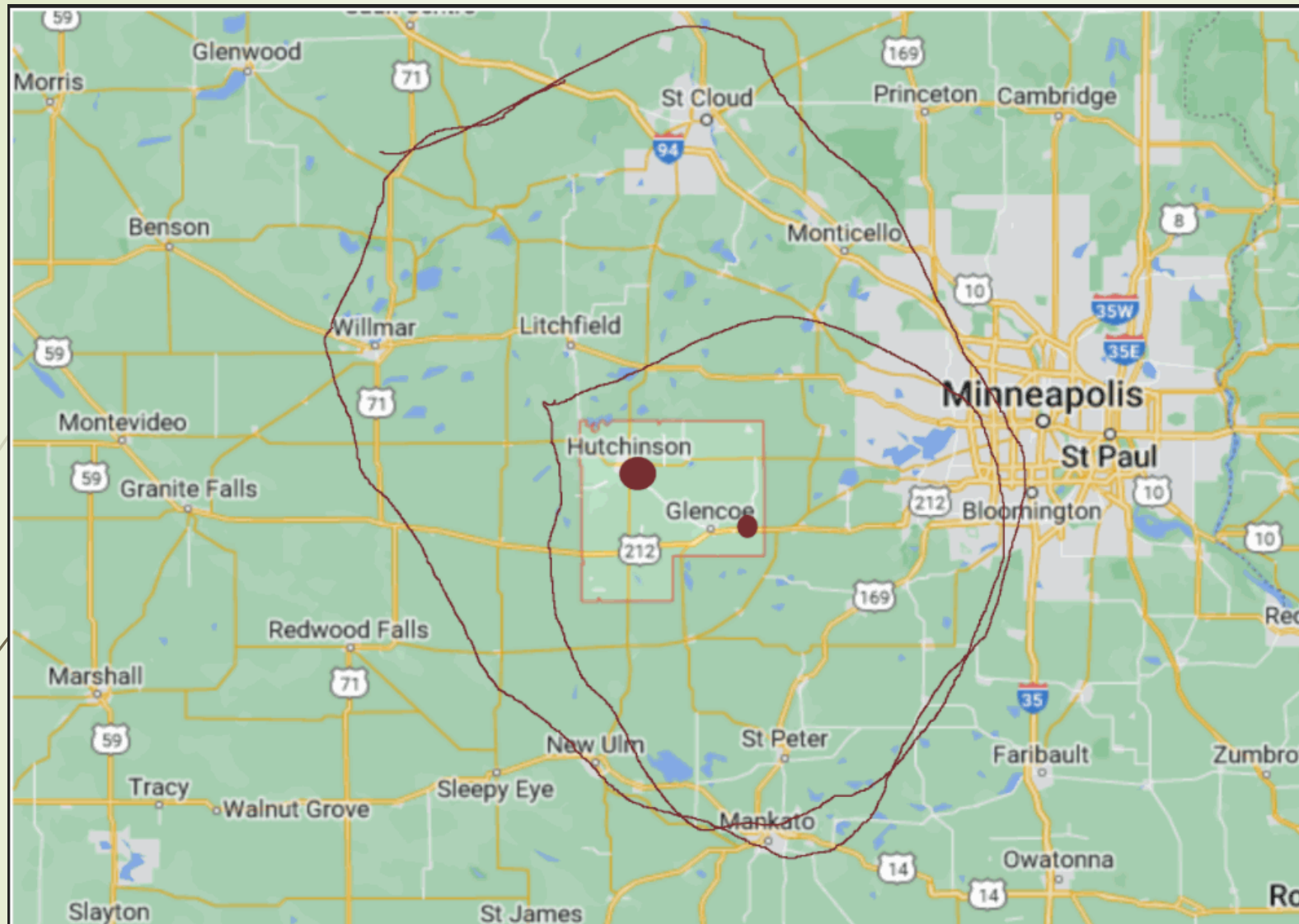
# Iowa



# Kansas



# Shop and Eat



60 miles



# Middle of Everywhere

- No town is a one-stop-shop
- Home → Work: 30/45 minutes
- Home → Eat/shop: 45/60 minutes
- Home → Play – 2+ hours!

# Patterns

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



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

- “Everywhere” expands with age
- Assets vary significantly by age

# 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?**



➤ Marketing

➤ Transportation planning

➤ Employee / resident  
recruitment

➤ Housing



**We live in a REGIONAL  
COMMUNITY.**



**in the Middle of Everywhere**

Staying  
at Home

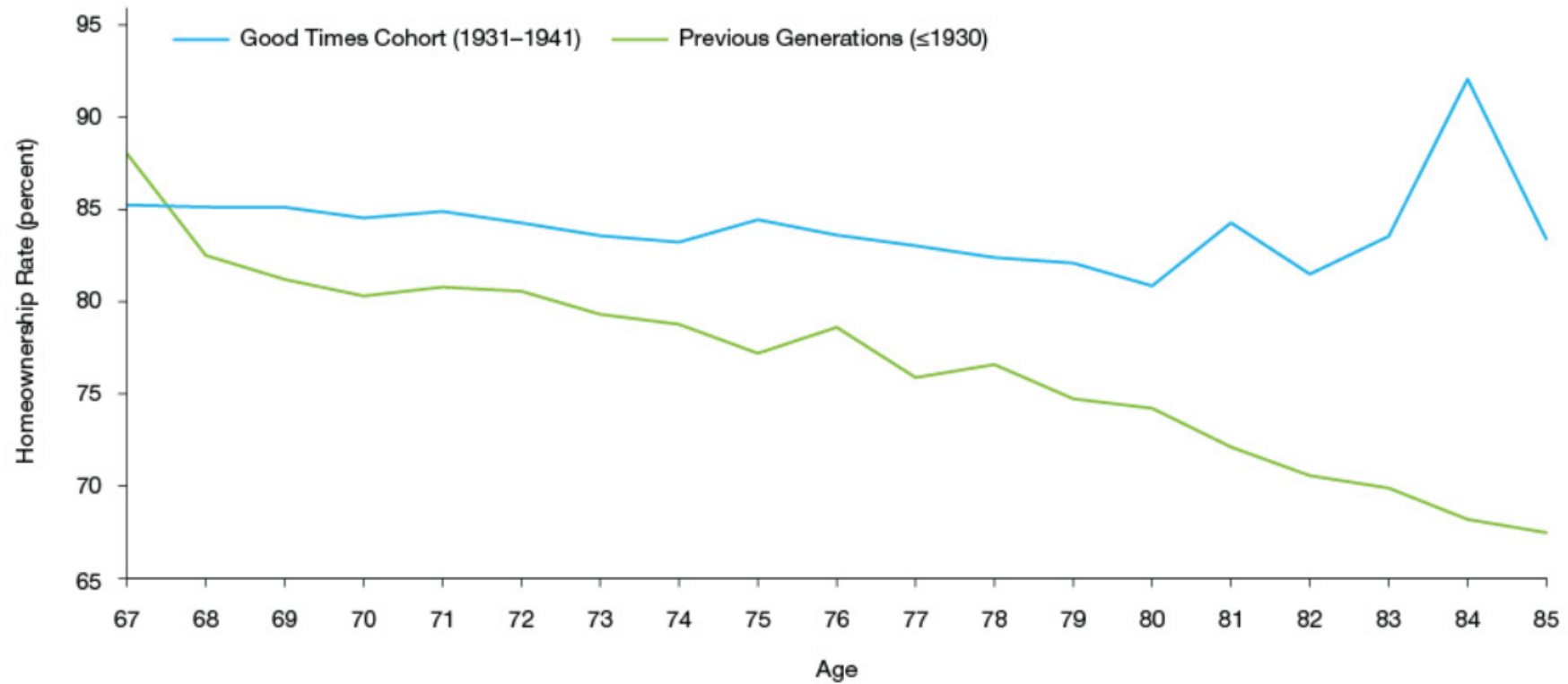


**58%** of older adults have not changed residences in more than 20 years

## Exhibit 1

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

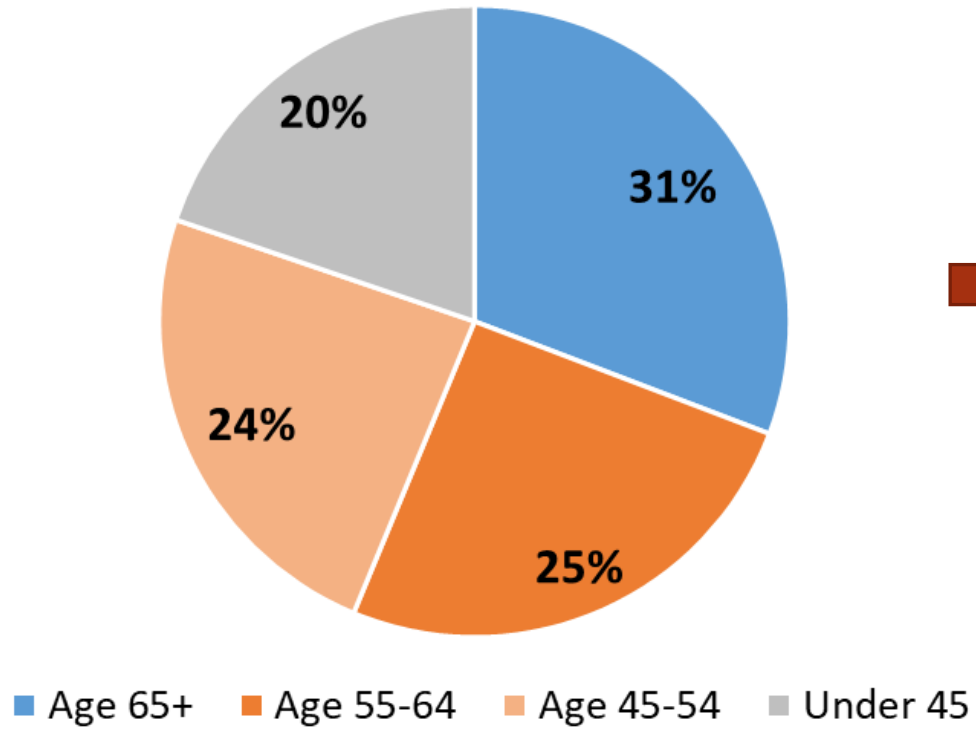
Current generations of older homeowners are holding onto their homes for longer than previous generations



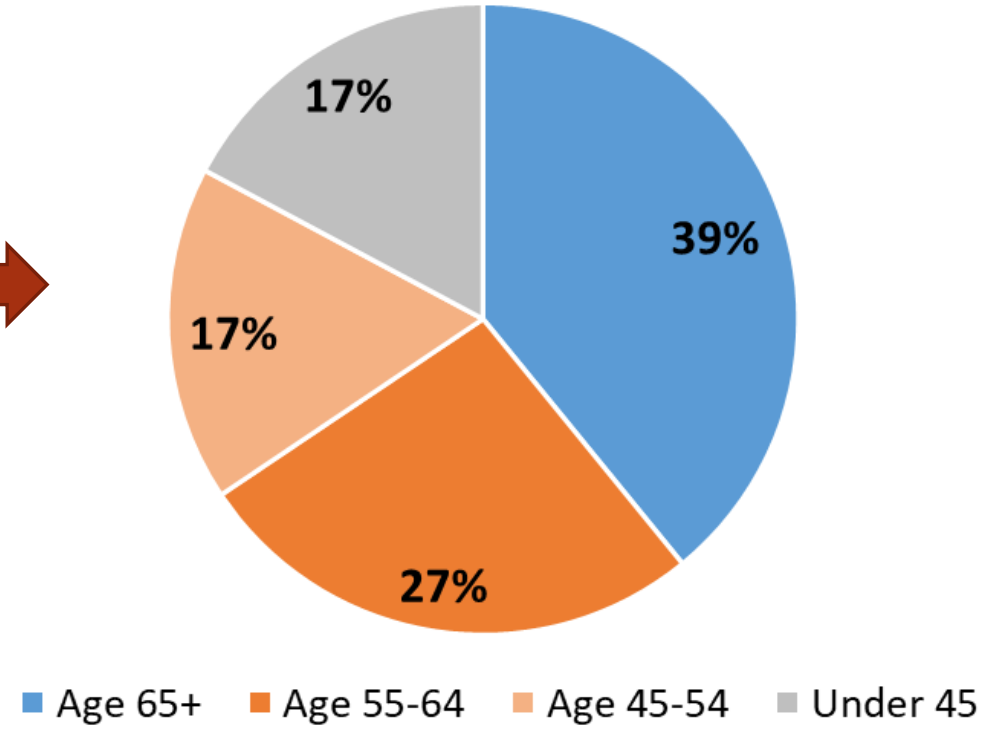
<https://familymattershc.com/the-united-states-of-aging-survey/>

[http://www.freddiemac.com/research/insight/20190206\\_seniors\\_age\\_millennials\\_wait\\_page?](http://www.freddiemac.com/research/insight/20190206_seniors_age_millennials_wait_page?)

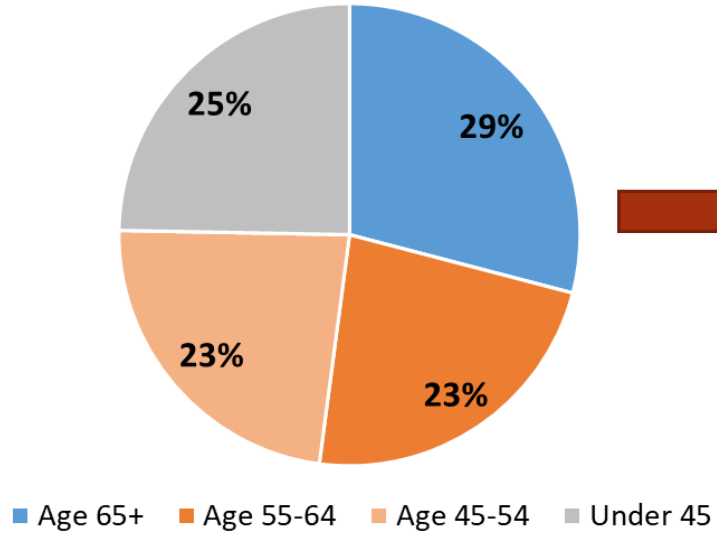
Columbia County, New York  
Percent of Owner-Occupied Homes by Age, 2010



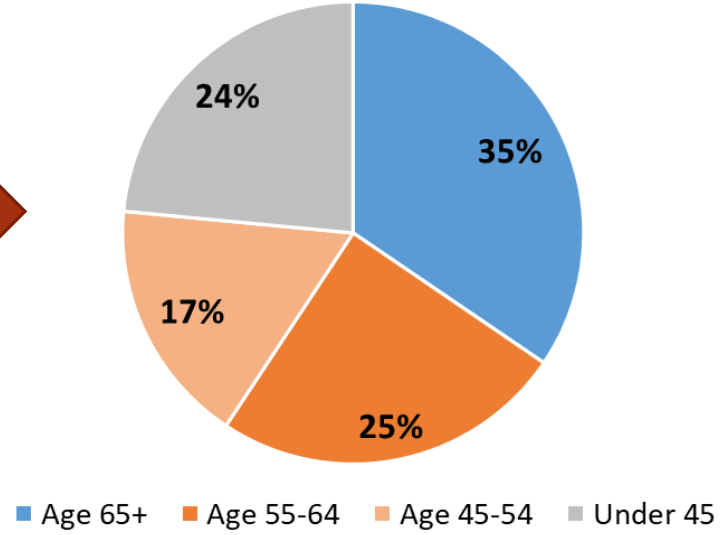
Columbia County, New York  
Percent of Owner-Occupied Homes by Age, 2020



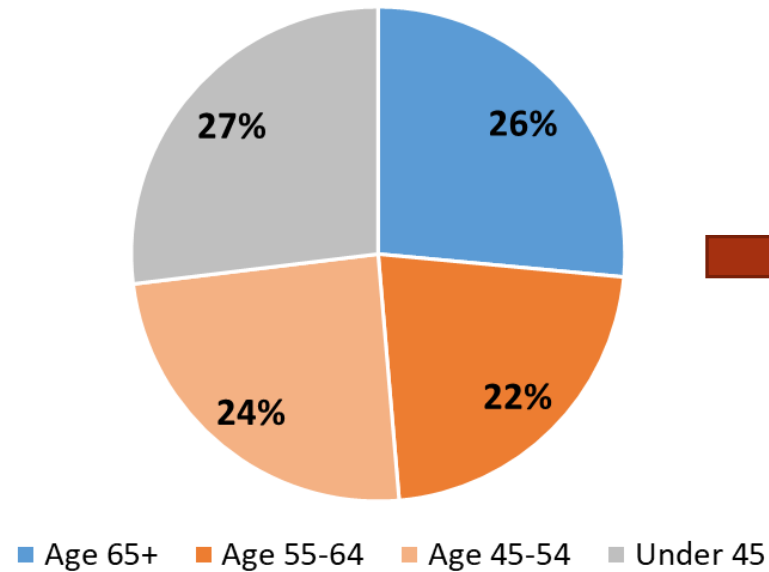
Allegany County, New York  
Percent of Owner-Occupied Homes by Age, 2010



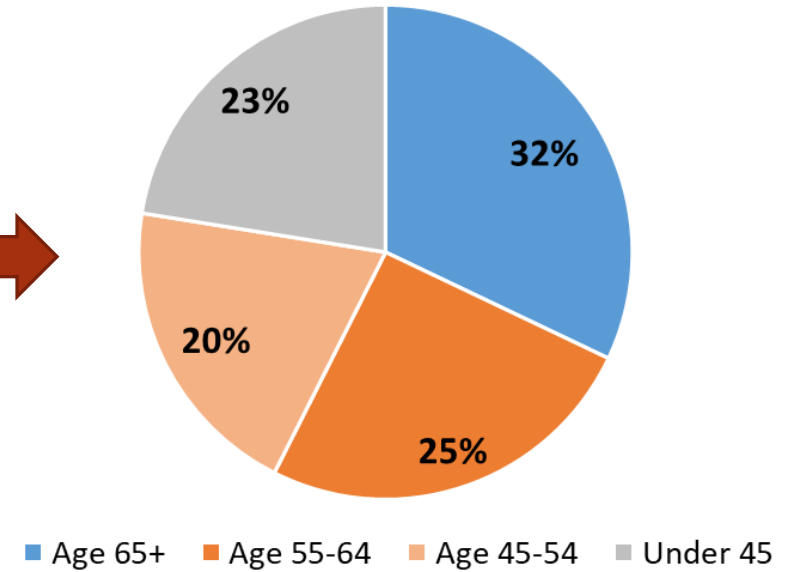
Allegany County, New York  
Percent of Owner-Occupied Homes by Age, 2020



Franklin County, New York  
Percent of Owner-Occupied Homes by Age, 2010

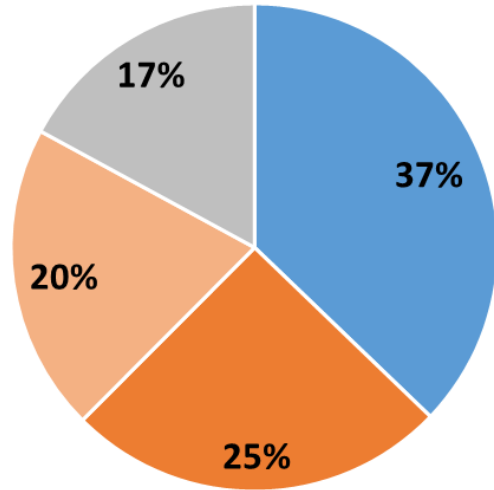


Franklin County, New York  
Percent of Owner-Occupied Homes by Age, 2020



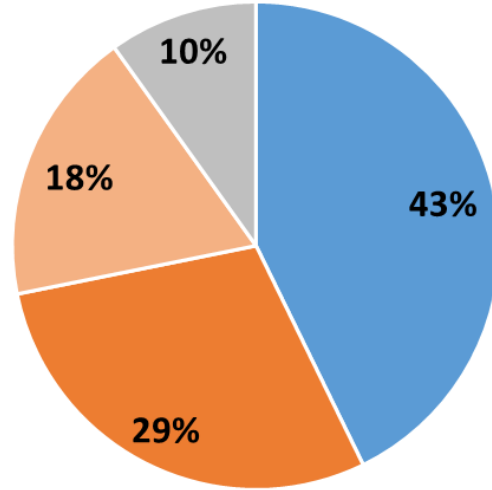


Hamilton County, New York  
Percent of Owner-Occupied Homes by Age, 2010



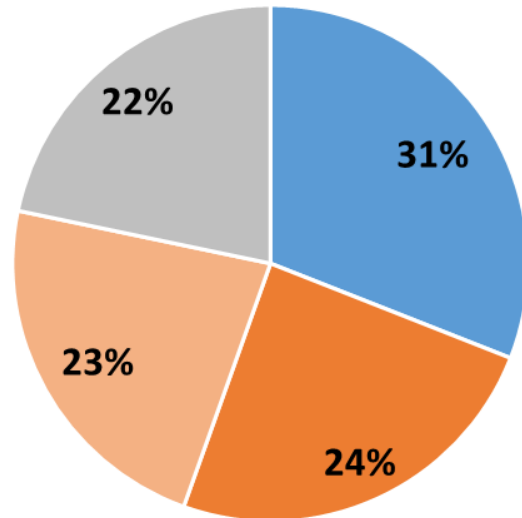
■ Age 65+ ■ Age 55-64 ■ Age 45-54 ■ Under 45

Hamilton County, New York  
Percent of Owner-Occupied Homes by Age, 2020



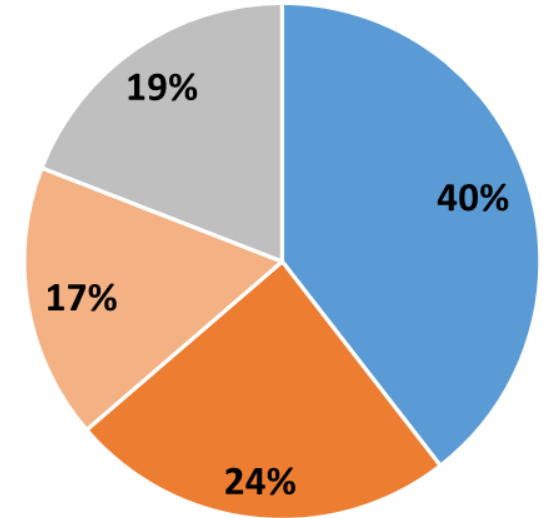
■ Age 65+ ■ Age 55-64 ■ Age 45-54 ■ Under 45

Otsego County, New York  
Percent of Owner-Occupied Homes by Age, 2010



■ Age 65+ ■ Age 55-64 ■ Age 45-54 ■ Under 45

Otsego County, New York  
Percent of Owner-Occupied Homes by Age, 2020



■ Age 65+ ■ Age 55-64 ■ Age 45-54 ■ Under 45



**Labor shortage?**

I think you mean

**Housing shortage.**

## 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.

## Americans Big on Idea of Living in the Country

BY FRANK NEWPORT

## 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.*

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

## 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.*



## The Heartland's Revival

by Joel Kotkin



## 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	<b>44%</b>



# resident recruitment

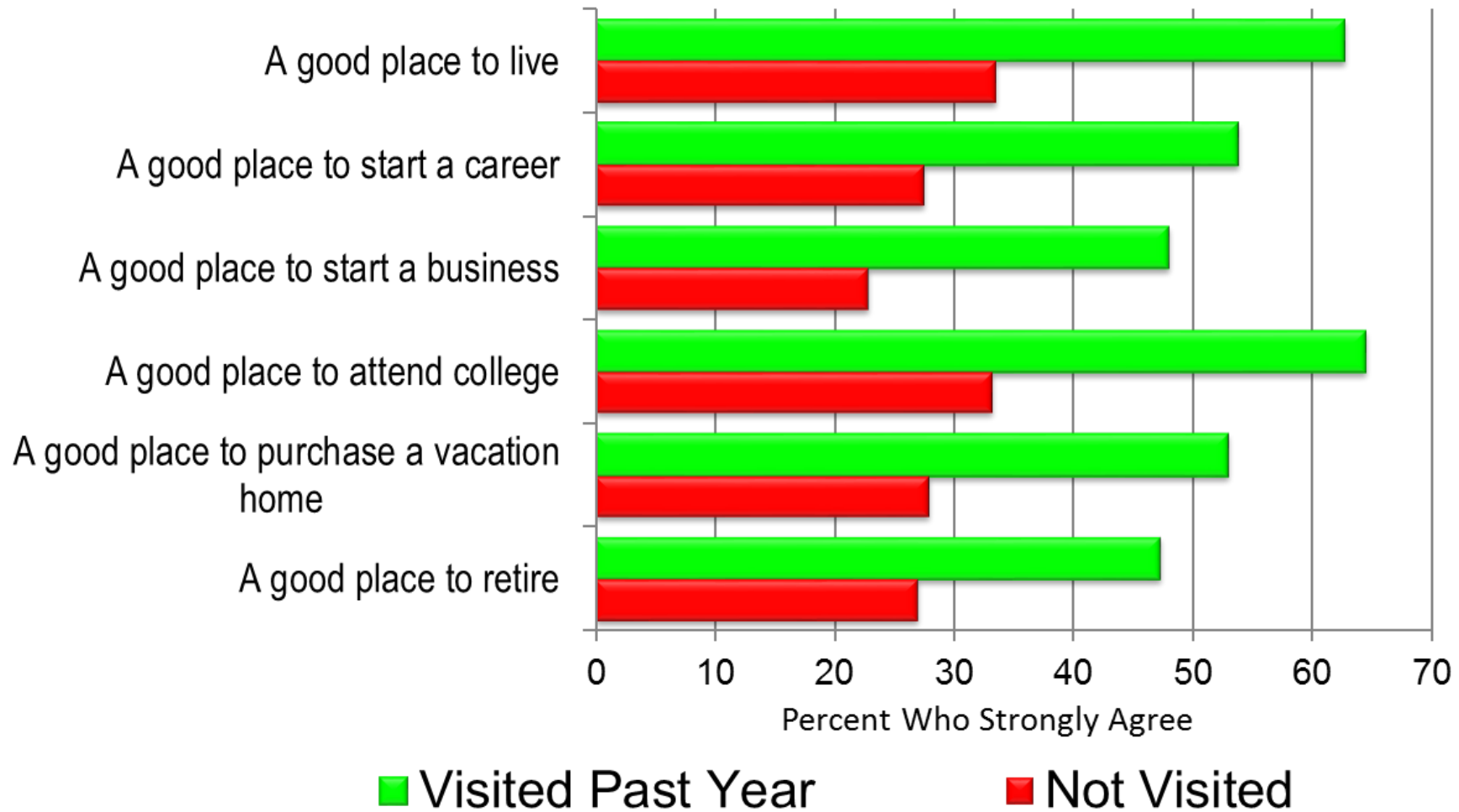


Community Development

Economic Development

Tourism

# Halo Effect: Visitation and Image





# 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 worker training
- Co-working space
- Self-employment services
- 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, schools

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

# What is Your Narrative?





Thank you.