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THE DILEMMA of South Dakota Youth

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE

SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
The Dilemma of South Dakota Youth

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Introduction

More than 35,500 young people left South Dakota from 1950 to 1960 and the trend continued for more out-migration in the last decade. Why did they leave? Where did they go? Why do others stay? Can anything be done to reduce out-migration?

Seeking answers to these questions, attitude surveys were mailed to 3,900 students selected at random from 24 high schools and colleges in South Dakota in 1969. Some 2,490 useable surveys were returned.

Mindful at the outset of a certain amount of truth in the adage, "the grass is always greener in the other pasture," we must acknowledge that many outward bound South Dakotans—especially young adults—express dissatisfaction no different than younger persons who intend to out-migrate from a dozen other Midwestern states. But what South Dakota has been witnessing in many small towns is the development of an hour glass age spread—wide at the top with the elderly retired and wide at the bottom with school age youngsters, but slim-waisted in between with fewer tax paying jobholders. For many observers this condition correlates with economic decline in a community, because it represents an exodus of potential economic risk-takers who could have made the community grow.

One of the goals of the Rural Development Program of the Cooperative Extension Service is to encourage and help stimulate job opportunities. Hopefully, providing more equal job opportunities in South Dakota will encourage young persons to remain. Careful planning for growth and building a favorable climate for economic development is groundwork for creating more jobs in agriculture and industry. Efforts are being made in that direction.

It is with the idea that clues may be found to help stem the tide of out-migration that we examine these attitudes of South Dakota high school and college students.

Reasons for Out-Migration

The survey results depict the intended out-migrant from South Dakota typically as a person whose father is strict, whose family is not close, and whose family encourages him or her to leave. Family and friends of the out-migrants tell the youth that economic opportunities are better elsewhere.

The survey further finds that this typical out-migrant believes (whether rightly or wrongly) his home town is dying and that it is controlled by a local power structure which limits competition in business and causes the decline of the community. The out-migrant also views the state as unprogressive and dying. He or she believes the state offers very limited economic opportunities, since it is controlled by a few men who wish to prevent its economic growth.

The young man or woman who intends to leave South Dakota also feels that he is not offered any incentives to remain. The intended out-migrant has no faith in the local or state social structure for offering social advancement opportunities. The out-migrant sees South Dakota as lacking in proper recreational activities and feels its press, radio and TV facilities rate below other states in dissemination of pertinent information. The study also reveals that the out-migrant feels the state has poor public transportation and highway facilities.

1 Riley, Marvin P. and Pew, James E., "The Migration of Young Adults, 1950-1960: South Dakota Counties, State Economic Areas and States in the North Central Region," Agricultural Experiment Station, Rural Sociology Department, South Dakota State University, Nov. 1967, Pamphlet No. 122, p. 27.

2 The survey investigated the following variables as causes of out-migration: (1) Opportunities for employment: a. in father's business, b. with father's employer, c. in home town, d. in county, e. in South Dakota, and f. out-of-state; (2) Wages; (3) The state and local economic structure; (4) The state and local social structure; (5) Attendance of college out-of-state; (6) Military service; (7) Local and state political structure; (8) Lack of opportunity to use one's education; (9) Climate; (10) Religion; (11) Appeal of other areas; (12) Opportunities elsewhere; (13) Lack of incentives to remain; (14) The family; (15) Friends; (16) Teachers; (17) Taxes; (18) Cost-of-living; (19) Health; (20) Recreation; (21) Transportation; (22) Radio; (23) TV; (24) The Press; (25) Destination; (26) Intent to migrate or remain; and (27) Possibilities of remaining in South Dakota.
Significantly more non-migrants than out-migrants indicate that their teachers are telling them to leave South Dakota. However, the intended out-migrant sees himself as being educated to work elsewhere, since he or she does not believe opportunities exist in the state to use his training. The out-migrant also indicates that he believes that his home town lacks freedom of religion. He or she feels South Dakota is hampered by a one-party political system, yet he or she isn’t interested in state or local politics. The intended out-migrant also indicates that a desire for a military career is a significant reason for leaving.

The intended out-migrant from South Dakota feels jobs are not available in his home town, county or the state. Even when jobs are available in an intended career area, many young out-migrants seek the security of having several job alternatives which a densely populated metropolitan area can provide. Their rationale—if they lost a job, they could always find another without moving to another city. They also feel there is more opportunity to climb higher on “the ladder of success.”

The out-migrant does not intend to enter the same occupation as his father, nor to work for his father. Also, the out-migrant does not believe that there is any chance of finding jobs in his desired occupation in the state, since he or she believes that there is a lack of jobs in the state. The youth who plans to leave South Dakota feels short-changed on wages offered in the state and in his home town, especially in his chosen occupation. The intended out-migrant indicates that he would not stay in his home town even if he could find jobs with adequate pay there. Unlike the non-migrant, the out-migrant does not think the cost of farm land is too high in the state, because he does not plan to buy land.

The out-migrant thinks the weather is too cold and the climate is “terrible.” He does not regard the climate as stimulating or good for agriculture. He or she also indicates that droughts and dust storms occur too often. He or she believes the western states and the East are more appealing than South Dakota and that other areas are better for health reasons. The out-migrant typically has decided that the rest of the world is much more exciting than South Dakota (74.3% of the intended out-migrants feel this way).

Destination of Out-Migrants

The real and imagined appeals of other areas to South Dakota youth is extremely varied. The intended out-migrants feel their futures lie either in the western states or in the jobs and good pay found in the eastern portions of the nation. They are not significantly attracted to the South or to Alaska. The young people indicate they are attracted to other areas they believe are “more healthy” than South Dakota.

With these attitudes in mind, an examination of the intended destination of out-migrating South Dakota youths yields some interesting observations. The results of this attitude study indicate that South Dakota youths are most likely to migrate to one of three states, two of which are similar in climate and location to South Dakota. Some 42.5% of the intended out-migrants indicate that they plan to live in Colorado, California or Minnesota.

Colorado is the most popular in number for respondents who indicated a migration preference. It had 241 votes, followed by California with 235 and Minnesota with 211 (see map). There are strong indications from other studies that these are the same states where friends or acquaintances have gone after acquiring training for professional skills or where pay for skilled jobs is higher than in South Dakota. An additional 211 respondents were undecided about their destination.

Where will they go? This map depicts where out-migrants plan to go. Information here was obtained from a survey of 2,490 South Dakota high school and college youths—1,617 of that group indicated they planned to leave the state.
The big three states attracting South Dakota youth far outdistanced fourth-place choice Washington state, which had 90 respondents. Arizona with 54 was fifth, Oregon with 50 was sixth, Illinois with 44 was seventh, New York with 34 was eighth, and Wisconsin and Texas tied for ninth with 30 each.

The least popular states which received no responses included Arkansas, Mississippi, Delaware, Rhode Island and West Virginia. These were followed in low popularity by Virginia, New Hampshire, South Carolina, Alabama and Louisiana with 1 each, and North Carolina with 2 intended out-migrants. Alaska attracted 28 young people and tied for 12th place with Montana.

Foreign lands offered virtually no appeal to South Dakota youth with only 8 intending to move to Canada, while 6 planned to move to Europe, 3 to South America and 3 to Australia.

In relation to regional areas of the United States, 11 chose the East, 5 the Upper Midwest, 4 each to the West and South, and 3 to the Southwest.

**Reasons Given for Remaining in State**

The 35% of the respondents (871 replies out of 2,490) who indicated they intend to remain in South Dakota listed three major attractions—some of them contradicting the reasons given by those leaving.

At the top of the list for staying by non-migrants was the availability of jobs in the state. One-third of the non-migrants gave this reason for staying. The vast majority of youth electing to remain in South Dakota intend to enter the fields of education, personal services, professional occupations, technical work, religious and governmental services.

Curiously, many of the young persons who intend to stay plan to work for the state government, while many of those who intend to leave plan to land federal jobs. However, very few of the youths—whether they were out-migrants or not—expressed a desire to seek production line jobs in industry. Those who were interested in industry were interested in it only from the standpoint of managerial skills. Two-thirds of the interviewees who looked toward agriculture for a livelihood plan to stay in the state.

The second major reason for remaining in South Dakota was that father, mother, brother, sister, etc. live there.

The third major reason for staying was that the interviewees simply "liked South Dakota." The non-migrant feels that the climate is favorable, un-mono-tonous and stimulating. He or she also indicates that the presence of friends in South Dakota is a major factor in the decision to remain.

The survey did not query persons who immigrated to South Dakota, but it is likely that their values and attitudes are similar to those that follow, expressed by non-migrating South Dakotans.

The non-migrant likes the lighter population of South Dakota. He or she also believes the state offers good opportunities in life, particularly enjoyment of outdoor recreation and rural life.

The non-migrant sees the wages in the state as "adequate" or "good" and, typically, feels a high wage is not the sole motivating factor in his life. He wants to be educated in South Dakota and wishes to avoid the problems he envisions in city life. He or she also feels the cost of living in South Dakota is low.

The non-migrant also wants to improve South Dakota while preferring to breathe "clean air" and drink "pure water." The non-migrants also indicate that some own land or property in South Dakota. Others simply enjoy life in small towns.

The crux of the decision of whether or not to stay in the state then, depends mainly on attitudes and values. Good paying jobs are important too. Those youths who plan to stay in South Dakota are happy here and see opportunities and advantages of staying in their home state and communities; those who intend to leave see little opportunity or advantage in staying.

So what is true, sometimes is not as important as what you think is true—the survey points this up rather vividly. Older persons who have experienced success in business or in carving out a career may realize what youth may have not yet had time to—that an optimistic attitude can carry people through some otherwise truly dismal moments.
Can South Dakota Afford Out-Migration?

Some 65% of the 1,619 youths who intend to leave South Dakota also indicated they would remain in the state if they could obtain jobs with adequate pay in their home towns. The question facing the people of South Dakota is whether or not continuing out-migration is something the state can afford. In order to answer this question, an examination of the effects of out-migration is most valuable.

First, who leaves the state? According to previous studies of out-migration, young women are the first to leave, going to urban areas to seek employment or husbands. Soon the young men follow. But these are not the only ones who leave. Persons of all ages migrate, but the older an individual is, the more likely he will remain, unless he seeks the way of life offered in the new retirement cities or the facilities near the larger hospital complexes.

However, younger people, particularly those under 40, are the ones most likely to leave. As an example, a young married couple in their late 20s might move to Minneapolis or some other large city because jobs there pay more. When they leave, the state not only loses two persons to Minneapolis, the state also loses their two children. There are other readjustments to be made within the social-economic structure—the state loses four customers, one or two workers, students, church members, club members, tax payers, friends and relatives.

Another example can be drawn from that of a typical college graduate—21 and male. Simply because he is college trained there is a 45 to 80% chance that he must leave to find a good-paying job demanding his developing professional skills. There are not enough jobs in this state to handle this brain power. If he out-migrates, what does the state lose? It loses a young man in whom the people of South Dakota and his parents have invested 16 to 17 years of education, a young man who possesses the talent and training that South Dakota would need to progress, a young man who could become a leader of his community or state, a young man who might some day develop a business or industry that could save some of the small towns or create employment for hundreds of people. The state each year exports hundreds of its best young men and women to developing states like Colorado, Minnesota, California or elsewhere.

The vertical social-economic mobility available to those who accept the challenge and want to rise has helped make America the most technically advanced nation in the world and made it a land of opportunity for trained talent. Operating hand-in-hand with this growth has been this country's ability to train young people for professions and vocations in a highly complex, technological society. Neglect of education or discouraging people to take advantage of this social-economic mobility would lead to national stagnation and be a disservice to the young. The current situation is this—young men and women from South Dakota are a resource which other states are in a better position to exploit and bid top dollar for, because of their more industrialized economies. That growth attracts still more investment in terms of money and people. In this sense, out-migration is South Dakota's loss and another state's gain. Yet, if the same job opportunities were available in South Dakota, two-thirds of those interviewed would prefer to stay in the state.

The harsh reality that this state must face is that under present conditions the odds for small towns to buck the out-migration trend are slim, because the markets aren't there—they're in the metropolitan areas where all the people are. Unless some drastic changes are made, some small towns will have to be content with less-than-adequate services.

On the other hand, the opportunity for continued growth is much brighter for Midwestern towns which have populations over 10,000.
Can We Reduce Out-Migration?

If South Dakota can slow down out-migration and grow in the areas demanding human talent there will be less strain on the state’s economy. Ultimately new jobs will have to be created so the young person entering the job market won’t be forced to find employment in some other state.

South Dakota is attempting to create more jobs by attracting new industry. A number of industries have found the state feasible for industrial development. Establishment of “job fairs” where business and industries hold recruitment fairs to attract youths to their firms is one possible way to educate youth to job opportunities available in the state.

Another route for tackling the problem of out-migration is to study trends to determine South Dakota’s greatest potentials for development. A recent survey of 126 South Dakota firms by the Agricultural Education Department at South Dakota State University found that at least 2,485 new workers with competencies in agriculture will be needed in off-farm agri-business positions in the next three years. The prospect of irrigation expansion in the next decade or two is another challenge on the horizon. There will be a need for skills in irrigation technology. It may be that persons from South Dakota will have to learn these skills from other states and then be encouraged to return so this state may acquire the irrigation know-how. Irrigation development will create service jobs also.

Market development for existing raw materials and resources is a possible area for growth in the 1970s and 80s.

Another area of potential growth is in processing and handling of agricultural products. Presently we don’t have enough trained and experienced people to show this state how to fully exploit this growing packaging and processing industry.

Another area of growth, emerging because of more leisure time for working people, is outdoor recreation. Exploitation of seasonal recreation may make the seasonal changes in South Dakota one of the state’s greatest assets.

But perhaps the biggest potential for growth lie in motivating young people to the challenge of leadership. Their initiative can make a difference in industrial development, in community development and in social development. Replacing a negative attitude with a positive attitude can in itself change things.

Transportation is another area to ponder. Chicago is but an hour away now from Sioux Falls by jet. The same is true of other major South Dakota cities. This means that it takes less time to deliver goods to cities than it takes to drive from the suburb into the heart of a city. Exploitation and expansion of transportation could mean that it will make no difference whether an industry is located in Chicago, New York, Pittsburgh, Houston, Los Angeles or any place in South Dakota.

No one yet has been able to unequivocally forecast the future, although there indications that national policy will emphasize a healthier distribution of population, for if the nation’s population continues to concentrate in the already crowded urban and metropolitan areas, this will multiply the problems of pollution, noise, congestion, poverty and crime. Therefore, it is all but inevitable that the trend of out-migration from Midwestern states be reversed or at least dampened.

Should this occur, South Dakota, with its vast water and land resources and sparse population, will certainly be involved in the national reallocations of economic investment and population.

However, whether there is an eventual influx of people and money to the Midwest seeking space and opportunity or whether the present out-migration only continues, there still exists an urgent need for rural development and planning to safeguard and improve the natural and economic resources of South Dakota.

Other SDSU Publications on Out-Migration


Riley, Marvin P. and Pew, James E., “The Migration of Young Adults, 1950 to 1960: South Dakota Counties, State Economic Areas and States in the North Central Region,” Agricultural Experiment Station, Rural Sociology Department, South Dakota State University, Nov. 1967, Pamphlet No. 122.

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A copyrighted LIFE POLL by Louis Harris, appearing in Life magazine’s special double January 9, 1970, issue which looked into the ‘70’s, adds greater perspective to the South Dakota attitude survey. The Harris Poll indicates that an emerging minority alliance of younger people, racial groups and college educated persons in the next decade in the national scheme of things will outnumber the older generation, the less well-educated and the blue collar worker.

Bayard Hooper, Life’s editor for the article, “The Real Change Has Just Begun,” using conclusions based on the LIFE POLL, says that geographic regions, community size, age, education and race became indicators of division and fragmentation in the 60s. However, despite these manifestations of cultural disorientation and depersonalization in America, both the status quo coalition and the emerging coalition of dissatisfied minorities have one area of agreement—“a growing disgust with bigness, especially the big city.”

Hooper observes that “while demographers are predicting that 80% (or more) of the U.S. population will be urban by 1980, only 45% of those in the LIFE POLL want to be living in or near a city 10 years from now and of the 31% living in cities, two-thirds would like to get out.”

The LIFE POLL, asking young, old, blacks and whites alike to choose among 26 things they considered important to happiness, received answers that were overwhelmingly in support of suburban, middle-class values:

The Things Americans Want Most

Green grass and trees around me 95%
Neighbors with whom I feel comfortable 92
A church of my faith nearby 86
A first-rate shopping area nearby 84
A kitchen with all the modern conveniences 84
Good schools nearby 81

“...At the very bottom of the list are ‘living near close relatives’ (40%). ‘living off the beaten track’ (35%) and ‘living where the action is’ (27%)—a rejection of both rural and urban life and the old-fashioned multi-generation family of an earlier day.”

“When asked to rate which of nine categories were ‘very important’ to them, people’s answers again stress personal fulfillment (in A LIFE POLL by Louis Harris). But the tradition of hard work and saving money has fallen on bad times, more so among college-educated, only 38% of whom feel it is important, than among those with grade school educations, 58% of whom profess the Horatio Alger dream, or blacks, 65% of whom believe in it. When it comes to getting to the top, only 36% of the college-educated care about it, while 45% of the very young and 56% of all blacks care deeply about success.”

(Nationally) What Goals and Values Are Most Important?

To be at peace with yourself and have honest relationships with others 82%
Raising a family in a way that will be admired by your friends and neighbors 62
Being able to do what you feel like doing when you want to do it 62
Having a full and relaxing time in your leisure (non-working) life 59
Fixing up your house the way you want it 54
Hard work and saving money 54
Getting to the top in your work 38
Enjoying the best in cultural experiences 32
Traveling to different parts of the country and the world 25