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Periodic Atlas of the Metroscape: Pattern Recognition: Migration and the Identity of the Region

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Pattern Recognition: Migration and the Identity of the Region

by Alton Straub

Between the 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census, Oregon's population grew 20% (from 2,842,321 to 3,421,399), ranking it as the 11th fastest growing state. The four largest counties of the Metroscape (Multnomah, Washington, Clackamas, and Clark) grew even faster, their growth ranking in the top 4% of all 3,141 U.S. counties. There are two basic components to population growth: (1) natural increase (births minus deaths) and (2) net migration (people moving in minus people leaving). In Oregon, net migration accounted for 73% of growth from 1990 to 2000. In the Metroscape, net migration accounted for a staggering 82% of growth. To anyone who lives here, it is clear that demography matters and that migration can have a wide variety of impacts, both positive and negative, on the quality of life in our communities. In the end, demography may make or break our "Eden."

This version of the Periodic Atlas investigates migration in Oregon and the Metroscape using recently available data. It maps not just how many people are in-migrating and out-migrating, but where they come from and where they are going. This, of course, raises a fair question—does it really matter where new residents come from or where current residents go? Despite the fact that we are justifiably proud of our traditional freedom to move among states and communities seeking more opportunity and better lives, most states and communities have unique cultural icons (often stereotypical) with which they identify. If we sense that Oregon's culture is changing along with its population (as we know it has in the past), looking at its new residents would be a good place to begin understanding those changes.

One convenient source of Oregon demographic data is the Oregon Population Survey (OPS), a telephone survey of between 4,000 and 12,000 Oregonians conducted every two years by the Oregon Office of Economic Analysis. One of its questions asks where respondents were living five years ago. Population surveys from 1996 to 2004 paint a relatively accurate picture of how migration patterns changed in the 1990s (i.e., from 1991 to 1999, five years before 1996 and 2004, respectively). Using OPS data, figure 1 shows that California contributes over 12% fewer of Oregon's in-migrants than it did in 1991. Those in-migrants now come from other Western states, principally Washington, Idaho, Nevada, Utah, and Montana. The switch is most likely due to improved economic conditions in California but may also say important things about the interconnectedness of migration patterns in the Northwest (Portland, Seattle, Boise, Las Vegas, and Salt Lake City are much bigger and transportation among them more regular than in 1991).
In-migration, Out-migration, and Median Income

One of the few federal agencies to collect data on an annual basis from a large number of Americans is the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). Figures 2 and 3 use IRS tax return data from the most recent year available, 2003, to show the number of tax-filers whose primary address changed during that year. The number labeling each state is the number of “exemptions” migrating to or from that state, and the color illustrates the percent of Oregon’s migrants represented by that state. According to this dataset, in 2003 there were 89,426 in-migrants to the state and 80,567 out-migrants from the state.
The mapped data are from only one year, providing a "snapshot" and not a trend, and the picture is far from perfect in many ways. For example, the data do not capture students, retirees, or low-income workers who do not file tax returns – populations that may migrate in large numbers. However, IRS data do present a unique opportunity to combine information on the number of migrants with information about their income levels. Figures 4 and 5 show the median income of Oregon's migrants as number labels on each state. The state's color compares the median income of those Oregon migrants to the median income of all of that state's residents. For example, the median income of in-migrants from Montana is $14,802, an amount that is less than 35% of that state's over-all median income of $34,108. In contrast, the median income of in-migrants from Texas is $20,732, more than 50% of that state's over-all median income $39,271. Migrants to or from all states had a lower median income than Oregon's 2003 median income ($41,638).

When examined together, these five maps (figures 1-5) show that we move around a great deal and that economic conditions, distance, and population seem to heavily influence the number and origin of Oregon migrants. Nearby states and more populous states produce more Oregon in-migrants and attract more Oregon out-migrants. Understandably, California and Washington dominate our migration patterns. In 2003, Oregon had a net gain of 9,963 taxpayers from California, but a net loss of 4,333 taxpayers to Washington. Those Washington out-migrants had a significantly higher median income than did their California-bound compatriots. Were they leaving for better jobs? Many other Western states contribute substantially to in- and out-migration; the largest are Idaho, Colorado, Arizona, and Texas. In fact, on a per capita basis (in other words, adjusted for that state's population), Idaho and Montana have as strong or stronger migratory connections to Oregon than California does. Interestingly, Oregon in-migrants from Montana and Idaho have relatively low median incomes while out-migrants to those states have relatively high median incomes. Some of the high-income out-migrants may be retirees with investment income, or this effect might be the result of the generally higher incomes of all Oregonians. However, the out-migrants might also reflect the perception of many that the Northern Rockies are a more desirable place to live than they used to be, with cultural amenities and middle class jobs to go along with the scenery.

One of the fascinating things seen in figure 4 (Median Income of Oregon In-migrants) is that Oregon seems to be attracting relatively low-income in-migrants from the Rocky Mountains, Great Plains, and Northeast, but relatively high-income in-migrants from a large swath of Sunbelt states. Does this reflect the higher costs associated with moving from Southern states, or does it reflect poorer economic conditions in many Western states? Perhaps Oregon, ironically, attracts some residents of Sunbelt states for its lifestyle (clean environment and recreational opportunities, for example), while it attracts some Westerners with family wage jobs and governmental services. The data do not provide definitive answers, only provocative questions.
Metroscape In-migrants, 2003

Source: US Internal Revenue Service

Figure 6

Seattle-Tacoma In-migrants, 2003

Source: US Internal Revenue Service

Figure 7
To Portland or Seattle? (population adjusted)

Figure 8

Where is Eden - Portland or Seattle?

It is hard to deny that in the consciousness of much of the United States (if not the world), Seattle holds a preeminent spot as the largest and best-known city in the Pacific Northwest. However, after weighing all the factors, many Metroscape residents would tell you that Portland is a better place to live. We all know that there will never be a definitive answer, but if people vote with their feet (by moving to one city over the other), then migration data can provide some clues.

The IRS tabulates the number of in-migrants into every county but only provides specific data on in-migrants from counties where more than 10 people originated. Figure 6 shows the number of in-migrants into the Portland-Vancouver area (the six counties of the Metroscape). Figure 7 shows the number of in-migrants into the Seattle-Tacoma area (Snohomish, King, and Pierce Counties). Like the maps of state-level immigration, these maps reflect distance and population centers. Los Angeles, San Diego, Santa Clara (San Jose), and Maricopa (Phoenix) Counties appear prominently. A much greater number of counties appear on the Seattle-Tacoma map than on the Portland-Vancouver one, including quite small counties in seemingly out-of-the-way places. Many of these small counties contain military installations. Personnel stationed at places like Fort Drum (Jefferson County, New York) or Norfolk Naval Station (Norfolk County, Virginia) routinely relocate to Fort Lewis, McChord Air Force Base, or Naval Station Everett. It is impossible to sort out these involuntary relocations. However, it is possible to adjust for at least one confounding factor - the relative sizes of Seattle and Portland.

Tax returns for Snohomish, King, and Pierce Counties reported 2,357,754 exemptions, while those for the six Metroscape counties reported only 1,448,084. Demographic studies often adjust or weight numbers in order to make fair comparisons. Figure 8 shows what happens when you directly compare the number of in-migrants to Seattle-Tacoma and Portland-Vancouver after adjusting for the smaller total population of the latter (i.e., multiply the Portland-Vancouver values by 1.6). Orange counties are those where the majority of people leaving that county are going to Seattle-Tacoma. Blue counties are those where the (adjusted) majority of people leaving that county are going to Portland-Vancouver. In this per capita comparison, the Metroscape fares quite well. Interestingly, many blue counties east of the Mississippi River have reputations for being the most "liberal" in their states. Many contain educational institutions: Purdue University, the University of Vermont, the University of Nebraska, the University of Wisconsin, the University of Michigan, and the University of North Carolina to name but a few.

Which is better, Seattle or Portland? Maybe it depends on whether you are military or not, how much education you have, or what kind of job you are looking for. Or maybe it just depends on whether you liked Matt Dillon more in Drugstore Cowboy or Singles.
Living Alumni of the National College of Naturopathic Medicine

Figure 9

Source: NCNM Data

Living Alumni of the Western States Chiropractic College

Figure 10

Source: WSCC Data

Figure 11

Metroscape
Alumni of Lewis & Clark School (1929-2004)

If You Teach It, They Will Come

One of the things that help define Portland is its reputation as a center for alternative educational experiences—the kind of programs that you just cannot find anywhere else. People from around the country (and around the globe!) are attracted to the Metroscape for these programs, and when they leave, they take something of Portland with them. The programs help to create what could be considered Portland’s “sphere of influence,” something that cannot always be measured strictly in demographic or economic terms. Three of them can be used as examples: the National College of Naturopathic Medicine (NCNM), Western States Chiropractic College (WSCC), and Lewis & Clark Law School (with its national reputation in environmental law).

Maps of alumni residences can provide some idea of a program’s influence. Figures 9, 10, and 11 show the distribution of North American alumni of the three institutions listed above. Figure 12 shows their distribution of international alumni. From the maps it is easy to see that Metroscape educational programs have an influence on life far beyond our boundaries. Western states appear to hold the most attraction for graduates, and Canadians are a surprisingly large component of alumni from the NCNM and WSCC. In fact, WSCC may have the largest international reach of any college its size in the Northwest. One of the great challenges all of these programs face, according to alumni directors, is getting graduates to leave after spending several years in the Metroscape. Not that alumni directors do not like their graduates, but it would be a problem if, for example, all the newly minted chiropractors from WSCC set up practices in Portland. Luckily for all those spines outside of Oregon, 41 states and provinces have a higher percentage of living WSCC alumni (from 1926-2004) than recent students (from 2002-2004). In other words, we seem to be a net exporter of chiropractors to California, Arizona, Florida, Hawaii, Massachusetts, and many other states. The same, however, cannot be said of lawyers. There are 41 states with a lower percentage of living Lewis & Clark Law School alumni (from 1929-2004) than recent students (from 1999-2004). The greatest disparities are (on the negative side) in California (-7.1%) and Utah (-2.5%) and (on the plus side) in Oregon (+22.9%) and Washington (+1.0%). Is it that there are more jobs in Oregon, or is it the scenery? Given the state’s beautiful landscape and conflicting land use policies, perhaps it is both.

Source: Lewis & Clark Data

Source: Lewis & Clark, NCNM, WSCC

Metroscape