

Migration among the Retired and Disabled Populations

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Understanding how populations migrate within the United States is an important public policy issue. State and local governments might use information on recent migration to attract business or to plan public services. Demographers might consider how rates of lifetime migration change across cohorts. Historical comparisons reveal whether populations are becoming more—or less—mobile over time. In this study, we extend previous research of lifetime migration in the United States by using a new source of data, the Understanding America Study (UAS) Internet panel. We use a UAS survey that asked whether individuals have ever moved a substantial distance from their birthplace, and whether they returned. We exploit the data to examine moving behavior among potential Social Security beneficiaries—retired populations and disabled populations.

The literature is not clear on whether retired populations and those with disabilities are more likely to have made a substantial move during their lifetime than the working population. In terms of the retired population, a body of literature suggests that tax incentives may drive retirees away from their state of origin or attract them to a state with more favorable tax policies (see Conway & Rork 2012a for a review). Yet, some studies question whether the response to these incentives is as large as originally hypothesized (Conway & Houtenville 2003; Conway & Rork 2012b). Relatively little evidence exists on the migration patterns of the population with disabilities. Studies of elderly populations find that people with disabilities are more likely than their healthier counterparts to move; for example, in order to be close to family and other social support (Conway & Rork 2011; Sharma 2011). Other studies find that Medicaid, a program for low-income individuals with disabilities, does not encourage migration across state lines (Goodman 2017). None of these studies applies specifically to the working-age population with disabilities, regardless of income, however. And, in terms of both the retired and disabled populations, none include lifetime migration prevalence. Understanding the profile of retired populations and those with disabilities may be informative to local governments who serve these populations.

Data and Methodology

The UAS is a nationally representative, Internet panel with roughly 7,000 panel members. In addition to completing a quarterly demographic survey, panel members are invited to participate in a number of surveys throughout the calendar year. UAS 153, the survey that includes our study questions, was fielded in September 2018 and has a response rate of 78.4 percent. The survey measures lifetime migration, as well as demographic and personality traits.

We descriptively measure the migration prevalence and the reasons for moving among working-age people with disabilities and retired individuals. Through multivariate analyses, we explore demographic, socioeconomic, and personality traits that relate to migration. We weight all statistics to the

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population of non-institutionalized U.S. population. The study sample includes all U.S. residents age 18 and older, who were born in the United States (n = 4,717).

We divide the sample into lifetime mobility groups using the answers to the question “Which of the following most closely describes where you have lived your life?”

- “I have always lived within about an 8-hour drive of the area where I was born.” (**non-migrants**)
- “I currently live further than an 8-hour drive from where I was born, or I was born in another country.” (**migrants**)
- “I have lived in places that are further away than an 8-hour drive from where I was born, but I now live within that distance of where I was born.” (**return migrants**)

Findings

Both the retired and disabled populations are more likely than the working population to have ever moved—55.1 percent, 49.3 percent, and 42.1 percent, respectively. Part of the reason is that the retired and disabled populations are older than the employed population, on average, and thus have had more time to move. Interestingly, while a minority of all, retired lifetime migrants (36.7 percent) report having returned, a slight majority of lifetime migrants with disabilities (50.1 percent) have returned home.

Using a logistic regression model that predicts the likelihood of lifetime migration, we find that both the retired population and the population with disabilities are more likely than the working population to have ever migrated, when controlling for demographic and personality factors. Using a multinomial logistic regression model that predicts the likelihood of migrating and returning and migrating but not returning (compared to the likelihood of never migrating), we find that the retired population is more likely than the working population to have moved but not returned. The population with disabilities is more likely than the working population both to have moved and not returned and to have moved and returned.

The retired population and working-age people with disabilities are more likely than the working population to have migrated a substantial distance during their lifetime. It is also interesting to consider whether the retired population and people with disabilities report different reasons for migrating, returning, or staying. A plurality of individuals in each population initially migrated because their parents moved. Moving for work, school, or a marriage or relationship are also common. People with disabilities are less likely than other groups to move for work and school, however. Conversely, people with disabilities are more likely to move to be close to family or for a lower cost of living than are other populations.

The vast majority of the retired migrants and those with disabilities who return to a location near their birthplace do so for family reasons—67.6 percent and 66.0 percent, respectively. Only the retired population reports returning for retirement (7.0 percent), although this is a much less common reason than returning for family. Meanwhile, the population with disabilities is more likely than other groups to return for a lower cost of living (15.7 percent compared to 5.9 percent of the total population).

More than half of the population (55.0 percent) has not migrated more than eight hours in their lifetime. Previous literature tends not to focus on this population but asking individuals why they do not move may also be informative to understanding migration. Most individuals (61.0 percent) report not moving because of family ties. People with disabilities are less likely than other groups to report not moving for school or work. They are more likely than other groups not to move because of cost of living (16.5 percent versus 6.1 percent of the full population).

Conclusion

We found that nearly half of the adult population (45.0 percent) has moved more than eight hours from their birth location at least once in their life. The retired population and working-age people with disabilities are more likely than the working population to have migrated a substantial distance during their lifetimes. Each subpopulation overwhelmingly cites family, rather than economic, motivations as the most common reason for moving, returning, and staying. The most noticeable difference between subpopulations is that people with disabilities are more likely than other groups to cite cost of living as a consideration in migration decisions.

These findings add to the existing literature in many ways. As we noted, until now, the literature was not clear on whether retired populations and those with disabilities are more likely to have made a substantial move during their lifetime than the working population. We have shown that they are indeed statistically more likely. Likewise, we presented literature showing that economic factors may drive retirees away from their birth place (see Conway & Rork 2012a for a review), but we find that retirees do not cite cost of living as a factor in their decision to move. Finally, we have added to the literature on the migration patterns of the population with disabilities, supporting finding in other studies that people with disabilities are more likely to move to be closer to family.

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