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## Why some people stay in their declining small towns

### Dispatch New Mexico

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From the U.S. Census Bureau comes this bit of news: The nation's poverty rate has gone down, but in New Mexico it went up. New Mexico has never been a wealthy state, but the second-to-the-bottom ranking (ahead of Mississippi only) stings and says something about how bad a lot of people have it in this dis-enchanted land.

One reason for this state's high poverty rate — which stands at 19.5 percent, compared to 14.9 percent nationwide — is that we're still a rural state. Roughly half of the state's population lives in communities with populations under 20,000. There's still a lot of countryside in this geographically large and diverse state.

Generally speaking, in New Mexico and throughout the U.S., the rate of poverty in rural settings is higher than in the urban areas. That's because the most of the jobs are in the metro areas. In New Mexico, Census figures show that the four largest counties in population — Bernalillo, Dona Ana, Sandoval and Sante Fe counties — have 60 percent of the nonfarm-related jobs. That must be why, slowly but surely, New Mexicans are moving to the cities.

What's more, it's easier to live in the cities, where jobs and modern conveniences are nearby and abundant. For some people, moving to the city simply makes sense.

But it's another kind of sense — a sense of place — that makes some people dig in and keep their roots intact. For a wide range of reasons, they're determined to stay in their little towns and villages, and they're determination becomes the backbone of efforts to keep their community alive.

Others, however, are simply left behind. Some older people and others become trapped in their small-town poverty, as opportunities disappear. Many of those who stay in these dying communities come to depend on government assistance. They learn to live on less, as the mom-and-pop shops, once a fixture in every downtown and small town in this nation, find it harder and harder to keep their doors open.

All over New Mexico, small cities and towns — mostly county seats — have at one point or another focused their attention on their historic downtowns as a way to bring their communities back to life, and with mixed success.

In Silver City, for example, the downtown area along Bullard Street is now vibrant with both day and nightlife. But in Carrizozo, it seems that this old railroad town only exists as the Lincoln County seat and as host to an intersection of two U.S. highways running across the arid region.

A couple of counties east, in Lea County, small cities like Lovington and Hobbs are reaping the financial rewards of an oil-and-gas boom. Their problems lie more in keeping up with the growth rather than in managing a decline. The same seems to be true for Roswell, the largest city in the region and a regional hub of economic activity (particularly drilling and ranching) in southeastern New Mexico.

In other areas around the state, there's not a lot of growth outside the Albuquerque, Las Cruces and Santa Fe areas. Even Farmington in the northwestern corner of the state is on the decline as oil-and-gas production in the area has been slowing down for years.

Sometimes it's an abrupt change that sends a community on a downward spiral. In Questa, the nearby Chevron mining operation has closed, leaving about 300 miners unemployed. The cleanup will keep some jobs in the area for maybe a decade, but unless Questa reshapes itself in a hurry, there will likely be an exodus from this Northern New Mexico village in the years to come.

Maybe tourism will help turn Questa around. A lot of small towns are trying to make this industry their savior, and it's understandable. Everywhere in New Mexico there are incredible natural and manmade attractions just begging for an infusion of tourism dollars. Plus, tourists don't require a lot of water, and that's important to a lot of small communities around New Mexico.

However, whether your community is along Historic Route 66 or the old Santa Fe Trail, beside the Rio Grande or up against Shiprock, there's only so much you can do to buck the migration to the cities. The reality is, big city life is attractive to younger generations, so a lot of them are going to leave to those big-city amenities — jobs, opportunity, comfort and convenience. It's all there, in the city.

But that's not all there is to life, and there will always be people who prefer to live away from all that. They prefer the simpler life, and that's what small towns do best.

*Tom McDonald is editor of the New Mexico Community News Exchange and owner/ manager of Gazette Media Services. He may be reached at [tmcdonald@gazettemediaservices.com](mailto:tmcdonald@gazettemediaservices.com).*



**Tom McDonald**