



Census Bureau Reports a Decline in Geographic Mobility

Marissa Sanfilippo

February 10, 2017

The Census Bureau's most recent geographic mobility data shows moving is at the lowest rate since tracking began in 1948. People move less frequently within their originating county as well as to different counties within the same state or to new states.

The only increase for the most recent data – which tracked moves from 2015 to 2016 – is in the number of people moving from abroad. However, this only increased by a tenth of a percent between 1948 and 2016. While the number of people moving is higher today than it was in 1948, the percentage of people moving is far lower.

To understand mobility trends better, it is necessary to first explore the historical framework.

Nathan Connolly, award-winning author and the Herbert Baxter Adams associate professor of history at Johns Hopkins University, provides insight into the history of movement throughout the country. Historically, citizens and immigrants moved in search of increased security for themselves and their families and for new employment opportunities.

Connolly explains, “People stay in, or migrate to, those areas where they believe they or their children will have a chance at real success, however they imagine it.”

This was evident in the westward expansion of the 19th century and again in the mass migration to urban centers between 1916-1930 and 1940-1970. Since that time, regional differences and opportunities have become less distinct and thus people are less likely to make substantial geographic changes.

Many people believe they're unable to afford moving long distances anymore, regardless of their desire. Whether that's true or not is up for debate. But there also are other reasons for reduced mobility.

Intercultural strategist and coach Annalisa Nash Fernandez points to the cultural acceptance of adult children living at home longer due to economic constraints as part of the decreasing trends in mobility. As a result, she says, “These adult children don't relocate for that first job, and by their second job, they're married with kids and increasingly less mobile.”

The highest percentage of moves still occurs within the same county, although the rate has also experienced the most dramatic decline. In 1948, 13.6 percent of the population experienced a move within the same county; in 2016, the total was 6.9 percent.

It is possible that this number reflects the housing crisis and economic downturn experienced over the past several years. It is also possible that these numbers reflect people dislocated due to eviction from one residence who then move to another location nearby.

Online real estate company Redfin compiled data from American Information Research Services on evictions in 19 states. The results: Rent and housing prices have soared beyond income growth during the same time period. Eviction rates increased in the locations with the greatest increase in housing prices.

The Census Bureau data shows the number of renters moving to new locations is greater than the number of homeowners. This may point to the decline in housing prices overall that has left many homeowners stuck in a home they cannot afford to sell.

Career opportunities are still considered one of the main factors propelling people to move, but changes in the labor market have made this reason less compelling. The CATO Institute notes the increase of government licensure and regulation requirements has risen significantly.

In the 1950s, for example, about 5 percent of workers were required to maintain government licensure; the current rate is around 30 percent. Many licenses are state specific, making it more difficult for individuals to cross state lines in search of better job opportunities without incurring the time and financial cost of obtaining a new license.

Another factor that may contribute to the decline in mobility is the steady increase of women in the civilian labor force over the same time span. As more households have become dependent on two incomes, it may have become more difficult to coordinate a move to a new location that will have careers for both workers.

Ultimately, the downturn in geographic mobility likely is rooted in a variety of factors. Trouble in the economy coupled, higher housing prices, changes in worker demographics, and government restrictions each have a role. Other factors may also be in play, including increased opportunities to work remotely and an aging population with established careers and very little incentive to look elsewhere.