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“Deft and detailed case studies bring the population to life, making the poor prognosis heartrending. . . . Whatever the future may hold, the authors alert readers to this major change with clarity and compassion.”

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“...an impassioned, mostly persuasive manifesto from two advocates for small-town America.”

--Kirkus Reviews

HOLLOWING OUT THE MIDDLE: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America

by

Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas

www.hollowingoutthemiddle.com

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When the MacArthur Foundation’s Network on Transitions to Adulthood dispatched sociologists Patrick Carr and Marie Kefalas to Ellis, Iowa, their interest was in examining the experiences of young adults from rural communities as compared to that of their peers in the cities and suburbs of the coasts and the Midwest. Ultimately, though, Carr and Kefalas’s research took them beyond an analysis of young people’s experiences and into the heart of how small town America is sowing the seeds of its own decline.

In **Hollowing Out the Middle**, Carr and Kefalas link the troubling exodus from America’s small towns to the ways young people’s paths are shaped by the adults who surround them as they grow up. They describe a selecting and sorting process in which some of a town’s young are positioned to leave for higher education and lives beyond their rural roots, while others are sidelined, destined to become hourly wage earners in their hometown’s struggling economy. They underscore how this process, long practiced and rarely questioned, is contributing to an out-migration epidemic that is slowly destroying America’s heartland.

“Teachers, parents, and other influential adults cherry-pick the young people destined to leave and ignore the ones most likely to stay or return,” they argue. “Civic leaders may lament the rural youth exodus and the accompanying brain drain, but they fail to see how their own actions have helped create the problem. No one can deny that rural areas have less and less to offer their young people economically. Yet it hardly makes sense to expend time and energy on the cadre most likely to succeed *and* leave while neglecting the needs of the kids with fewer options and resources, the kids most likely to stay.”

Drawing on over a hundred interviews with young Iowans spread over fifteen states, Carr and Kefalas follow the trajectories of college-bound “Achievers”; working-class “Stayers,” trapped in a dying agro-industrial economy;

“Seekers,” who join the military as a way out; and “Returners,” who eventually circle back to their hometowns. They talk to graduates from the University of Iowa who head for cities and high paying jobs; to those who made it through high school, but are stuck making \$15 dollars an hour building ambulances and assembling microprocessors; to high school dropouts who put eggs in cartons or slaughter hogs at the meat processing plant, and to enlisted soldiers who joined the military for a number of reasons, from the signing bonus and medical coverage to the promise of a college education.

The authors find that a young person’s decision whether to stay or leave, or eventually return, is shaped by both personal issues (including academic and athletic achievements, their position in the town’s hierarchy, and their relationships with influential adults) and social and economic forces. Through individual portraits, readers get a sobering look at the challenges facing rural areas; from the rise of agribusiness and the attendant decline of the family farm to deindustrialization and the loss of factory jobs; from tension over how immigration has affected wages to environmental damage caused by factory farms; from problems associated with rising drug use (including the crystal meth and oxycontin epidemics) to rising poverty and crime. “What is happening in many small towns—the devastating loss of educated and talented young people, the aging of the population, and the erosion of the local economy—has repercussions far beyond their boundaries,” caution the authors. “Put simply, the health of the small towns that are dotted across the heartland matter because, without them, the country couldn’t function, in the same way that a body cannot function without a heart.”

Noting that it is critical for Americans to understand the importance of investing in rural communities, Carr and Kefalas go on to examine the range of solutions that governors and senators from Maine to Montana have put forth in trying to lure twenty-somethings back home, including tax cuts and credits, loan forgiveness and free land programs, and focusing on “the three Ts”—talent, technology, and tolerance—in building a more vibrant cultural scene. Iowa’s “brain-gain” campaign, they report, has included invitations to attend lavish cocktail parties with the governor and ads promoting the state as more than just “hogs, acres of corn, and old people.”

The authors contend, though, that most local and national policies are aimed at attracting the educated leavers while ignoring both the untapped resources of those who stayed and the reasons the non-professional Returners came back. They call for economic initiatives that would satisfy the job needs of knowledge workers, as well as those that don’t have college degrees. They point to how the heartland could meet emerging demands for local food production, sustainable agriculture and renewable clean energy and underscore the importance of building microeconomies, upgrading small towns’ digital technology infrastructure, and investing in human-capital development so that rural areas can compete in the globalized marketplace.

Carr and Kefalas also offer specific educational solutions, including using the community college infrastructure to build technical skills among Stayers and Returners and creating high school vocational and pre-professional programs in accounting, business, nursing, and medical and computer technology for non-college bound students. Finally, they look at how immigration, if managed in ways that reduce intergroup tensions, can contribute to a region’s growth and viability. “On a fundamental level,” they assert, “small towns can—if they question many of the taken-for-granted assumptions they have about who they should invest in and how—play a pivotal role in securing their own futures. We are convinced that holding on to old ways of life, ignoring the problem, or passively refusing to act are simply not options. Why let small-town America die when, with a plan and a vision, it could be reborn and once again vital?”

About the Authors

Patrick J. Carr is associate professor of sociology at Rutgers University-New Brunswick, and **Maria J. Kefalas** is associate professor of sociology at Saint Joseph’s University in Pennsylvania. The authors, who have three published books between them, live outside Philadelphia.

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