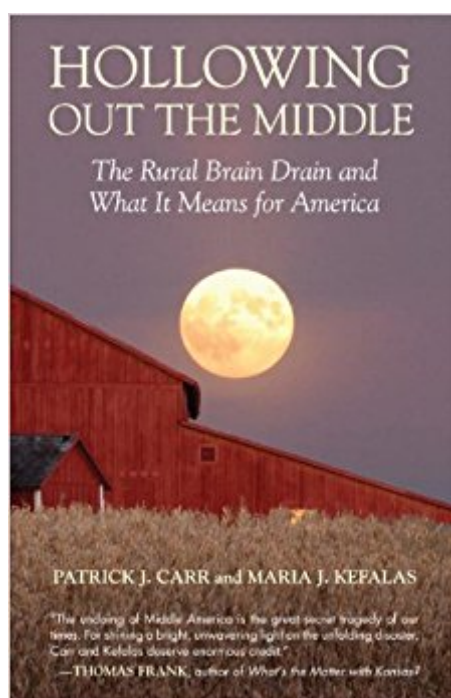


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# Hollowing Out The Middle: The Rural Brain Drain And What It Means For America



## Synopsis

In 2001, with funding from the MacArthur Foundation, sociologists Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas moved to Iowa to understand the rural brain drain and the exodus of young people from America's countryside. They met and followed working-class "stayers"; ambitious and college-bound "achievers"; "seekers," who head off to war to see what the world beyond offers; and "returners," who eventually circle back to their hometowns. What surprised them most was that adults in the community were playing a pivotal part in the town's decline by pushing the best and brightest young people to leave. In a timely, new afterword, Carr and Kefalas address the question "so what can be done to save our communities?" They profile the efforts of dedicated community leaders actively resisting the hollowing out of Middle America. These individuals have creatively engaged small town youth "stayers and returners, seekers and achievers" and have implemented a variety of programs to combat the rural brain drain. These stories of civic engagement will certainly inspire and encourage readers struggling to defend their communities.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Written in an easily accessible style for the lay reader, this volume is filled with their observations of life in a rural community that is just 'hanging on,' and stories from the young adults they met." "Journal of Rural Social Sciences" "An intriguing new book . . . [They] argue that it will take more than just free land initiatives to reverse rural America's brain

drain.â •â "Christina Gillham, Newsweek Â â œA fascinating study that brilliantly describes and analyzes the problems of rural towns in America that are emptying out.â •â "William Julius Wilson, Lewis P. and Linda L. Geyser University Professor, Harvard University Â â œThe authors present a brave and daunting examination of why the most talented, the most productive young people leave our small towns. . . . This book is so generative, so fiercely compelling . . . I urge you to read it.â •â "Mildred Armstrong Kalish, author of *Little Heathens: Hard Times and High Spirits on an Iowa Farm During the Great Depression*â œThe undoing of Middle America is the great secret tragedy of our times. For shining a bright, unwavering light on the unfolding disaster, Carr and Kefalas deserve enormous credit.â •Â â "Thomas Frank, author of *Whatâ™s the Matter with Kansas?*â œDeft and detailed case studies bring the population to life. . . . The authors alert readers to this major change with clarity and compassion.â •â "Publishers Weekly, starred reviewÂ â œA worthy contribution to a conversation we desperately need to have.â •â "Bill Kauffman, *Wall Street Journal*Â â œDeftly researched and written, this book is highly recommended for sociologists, educators, policymakers, and anyone concerned about the future of this country.â •â "Library Journal, starred review

Patrick J. Carr is associate professor of sociology at Rutgers University-New Brunswick and the author of *Clean Streets*. Maria J. Kefalas is a professor of sociology at Saint Josephâ™s University, the author of *Working-Class Heroes*, and coauthor of *Promises I Can Keep*. The authors live outside Philadelphia.

I read this book after hearing one of the authors interviewed on the radio. I live in a rural area but did not grow up here so the subject matter was near and dear to me. As I read it, I found myself nodding in agreement over and over. Yes, this IS how life operates in rural and small town areas of flyover country, although many of the families who have lived here for generations refuse to see it. I have seen my own area decline greatly in the 30 years we have called it home and this book explains why. If you live in a rural area, or strive to understand those in mid-America, this book is a great place to start. After I read it, I passed it on to my husband and then my children (who grew up and moved away, like so many others have) and we were all in a agreement that yes, this is how it is.

Carr and Kefalas's *HOLLOWING OUT THE MIDDLE: THE RURAL BRAIN DRAIN AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR AMERICA* is a scientific, yet heart-felt look at the demise of small town rural America. Setting up in a renamed Iowa town, the authors ask why the best and the brightest often leave their

heartland roots behind and then ask what can be done to reverse the trend. They divide rural young people up into four main categories: 1) The Achievers--those who are not only personally driven to succeed, but praised throughout their communities for their talent and achievements. They earn awards, go off to college, and never return because they have over-qualified themselves to return home. 2) The Stayers--those who want to make a go of it in the only place they have ever called home. They love their families, the community, and the opportunity to raise their kids in the homeland, despite the fact that employment opportunities are limited and the chance to earn high wages low. 3) The Seekers--As Carr and Kefalas put it, "What the Seekers know, with the utmost certainty is that they do not want to stay in the countryside all of their lives." 4) The Returners--Whether an Achiever or a Seeker, the Returners decide in time that there is no place like home, even if that means a lower standard of living or the abandonment of a dream. As one who left a small town, the descriptions and motivations of each group are spot on. I felt as if I was re-living my own upbringing and decisions. In that regard, the book is gripping. The book's weakness rests in the solutions that Carr and Kefalas propose. They recommend immigration and the broadening of the population base, which have the feel of abstract and sociological solutions out of a textbook. Their attempt to help is honest, but the truth is that no one has the solution.

What I liked most about this book is how you could easily compare the shrinking town in Iowa, "Ellis," to many countries that are also experiencing a brain drain. Both my parents are immigrants (to the US) so I am a product of a brain drain, and have been hearing about it all my life. I never thought about the rural brain drain, because migration to the city has always seemed to me as a sign of modernization, in fact this book counters Florida's Rise of the Creative Class, which talks about how cities need to have culture and a cool reputation as well as businesses with flexibility and a cool reputation to attract the best professionals. Hollowing out the Middle shows that small town school systems and communities dig their own graves by preparing the best students to leave, while kind of ignoring the ones likely to stay. The ones who leave also tend to be wealthier or prettier and have families with good reputations - this favoritism isn't unique to the Heartland. Even if the ones more likely to stay were given more attention, the authors show that the lack of jobs and the lack of things to do is the main reason people leave. My favorite story from the book is about a "Mike Craun," softspoken, hardworking, recent father, who partied like a crazy person and took a lot of drugs which one night resulted in him totaling a brand new car and almost getting arrested for arson: "'Why did you get into all this crazy stuff?' we ask. Mike answers, 'I was just bored.'" I think that this is 70% of the motive behind any teenager or young person or maybe any person getting

into drugs or drinking. Boredom is the real plague of rural America, and small towns everywhere. Overall this book is a quick and easy read and uses many stories to illustrate how rural America is making itself extinct and how it can improve.

The 2016 election was the second time that the outcome was driven by the electoral votes of rural America vs the popular votes in the cities. This book helps to put the concerns and policy failures of rural America in context. The authors make an effective case for why rural development should be a higher priority in the national policy agenda. They powerfully point out the self-harm that small towns do themselves by focusing on the academically bound Achievers who leave small towns vs. the family- and work-oriented Stayers who are the future of their communities. The policy prescriptions were less convincing; a quantitative treatment that compared the demographics of the labor supply to the industrial demand suitable for rural areas would have been useful for policymakers. However, overall the sociological research and stories documented in this book are an excellent primer for 21st century American political dynamics.

I grew up in a small town in the Midwest and can relate to the stories in this book. True, these small towns can be towns that time forgot but that is what attracts some people to them. It is not all about high-powered jobs, money to amass objects and constant stimulation for all people. People living in small towns or rural areas are not as intellectually or spiritually devoid as stereotypes would have it. Yet I do understand that poverty and poor living conditions are just as rampant in small towns and rural areas, as it is in cities-just less noticeable. I recommend the read.

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