

Why Did Migrants Choose Vermont in 2020-2023?

Climate, Rural Landscapes, and Small Communities

Key Findings

- One in three research participants moved to Vermont for climate-related reasons.
- New migrants to Vermont highly value the rural landscape, small community size, and left-leaning political culture.
- New migrants cite housing availability and affordability as well as a lack of racial and age diversity in Vermont as concerns.

Research Overview

Vermont, with a population of approximately 647,000, is a small, rural state [1]. The majority of Vermont residents (64.9%) live in small towns defined as rural [2]. The state has a cold temperate climate and is mainly forested with pockets of agricultural land. Just over 1 in 5 Vermonters are of retirement age (65 years and older). Vermont has experienced periods of migration over the course of its history as a state, including in the recent decades. Yet, shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, the media began to report on increased numbers of people moving into the state, occupying second homes, buying properties sight-unseen, and bringing remote jobs with them.

This case study asked migrants who moved to Vermont during the pandemic why they chose Vermont, what they expected of the state, and what their experiences have been over a three-year period.

Research Team & Funding

Cheryl Morse, PhD, is Associate Professor in Geography and Co-Director of Environmental Studies at the University of Vermont. Dr Morse researches the relationships between people and places in rural contexts. Cal Hale and Kara Campbell provided research assistance. The research was supported by a grant from UVM's James M. Jeffords Fund, Grant Program for Policy Studies.

cheryl.morse@uvm.edu

[Cheryl Morse website](#)

[Vermont Roots Migration Project](#)

Research Participants

In 2021 we held group or individual interviews with a total of 29 people who had moved to Vermont since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020 (see Methods). Participants ranged in age from 23 to 72 years at the start of the research. Fifteen (15) identified as women and 14 identified as men. Most were white (26 white, 3 people of color). Participants represented a range of incomes from low income to high income; half had annual household incomes of higher than \$100,000.

Participants moved to Vermont from regions across the United States including American locations outside the continental United States. Nearly all participants moved from urban areas to small towns in Vermont. At the time of the interviews, participants lived in mainly small rural communities that spanned from far southern to far northern Vermont. Five (5) lived in Chittenden County: 2 in the City of Burlington, and 3 in surrounding communities. Eleven (11) participants were renting their homes while 18 had purchased their homes.

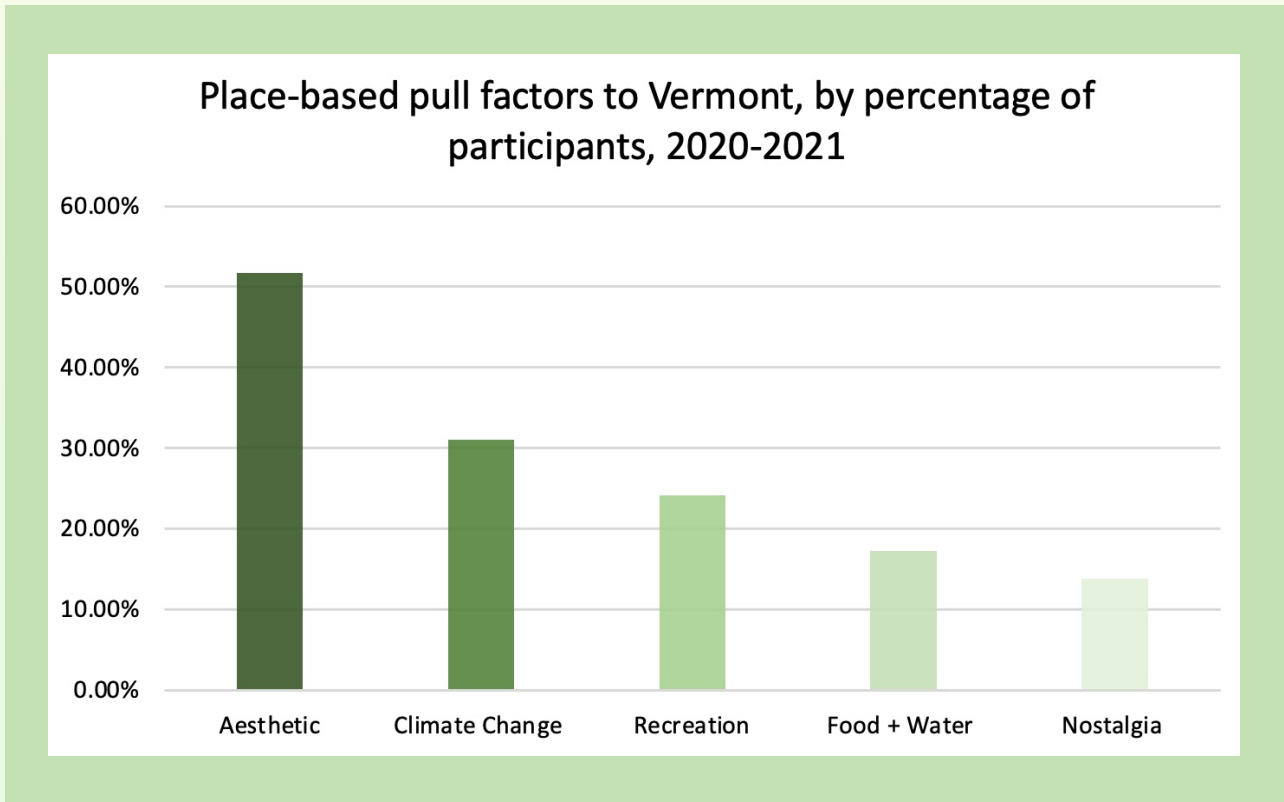


The University of Vermont

Department of Geography and Geosciences
200 Old Mill
Burlington, Vermont USA 05405

Why Vermont? Factors for Moving to Vermont

Each research participant named multiple reasons for moving to Vermont, and described their set of expectations for what life in Vermont would offer. While some migrants had previous experiences in Vermont such as attending summer camp or college in the state, and others had family members in the state or nearby, **the draw of rural landscape and lifestyle, along with what was seen as a culture of liberal values** that is accepting of racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual orientation differences were the most widely named factors for moving to the state.



Interpreting the Chart

Participants valued a range of features of Vermont as a place. These included "aesthetic" factors like visual beauty and quiet. Climate change names the fact that they believed Vermont would be a safe place in a period of increased natural disasters. Recreation refers to the value participants place on outdoor activities available in Vermont. The ability to grow food and have access to clean water in Vermont is captured by "Food + Water." "Nostalgia" refers to the valuing Vermont as a place participants visited in the past, for summer camp, college, or visiting family.

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“I love looking out the window and looking at how green everything is. It just-- Every day it's amazing just to be able to look out the window and see how beautiful it is. Even mud season there is still a unique beauty to the place.” (Bridget, mover from American West)

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Climate Change Movers

One-third of the research participants named climate factors as a reason for their move to Vermont. Some cited climate-based “push factors” in their previous locations, including wildfires, water shortages, and soil erosion. Some had experienced natural disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes, and severe flooding. As for Vermont’s climate, participants anticipated that Vermont would be a safe location relative to their previous locations. They believed Vermont would have temperate temperatures, sufficient water resources, and access to land in the future. Some participants also noted that they believed Vermont’s small communities would allow for more direct and effective responses to climate and natural disaster challenges in the future.

'I'm very overwhelmed by climate change; there were winters on Long Island where there was absolutely no snow, and it did not go below 40 degrees and this was really starting to freak me out.' (Jane, mover to central Vermont)

Nearly all of the participants who chose to move to Vermont due to climate factors had sufficient personal resources to secure housing and work. They could have moved to any number of other places in the U.S., but chose Vermont. For this reason, we refer to these participants as climate movers rather than climate refugees. This research did not include international resettled refugees, as their pathways to Vermont are quite different from internal migrants.

“[In our previous state] the air quality was getting so poor that there's many, many days where it was advised no to go outside. The water quality was diminishing.” (Winn-Stan, mover from the American West)

Are Migrants Rethinking Vermont After Disaster?

In late July 2023 we sent a second online follow-up survey to the 22 participants who we knew were still living in Vermont. We asked participants if they were reconsidering their moves to Vermont after the statewide flooding and the episodes of poor air quality due to wildfire smoke. We received responses representing 18 of the 22 respondents. Just one respondent said they were reconsidering their move to Vermont. The majority, 17/18 (94.4%) are not second-guessing their moves. Generally, the movers said that Vermont’s climate and response to disasters was better relative to where they had lived previously.



Vermont Flooding 2023

photo: J. Laggis

“Being from Texas where heat is rising and floods are very often, we still absolutely love Vermont. This is nothing.” Cindy, Northern Vermont

Prior to their move to Vermont, research participants anticipated that Vermont would offer **peace, quiet, and a slower pace of life** as well as a **sense of community**. They imagined a **green landscape of forested hills, plenty of water, and many outdoor recreational opportunities**. In the group interviews the participants expressed eagerness to engage with their small communities through volunteerism and neighborly interactions.

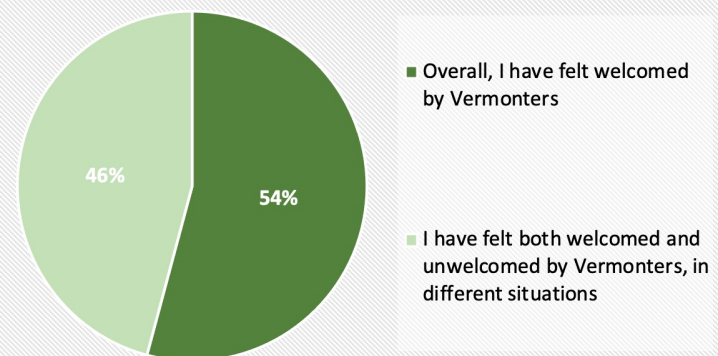
Migrant Experiences of Vermont and Vermonters

Research participants' lived experiences once arriving in Vermont generally matched their expectations. Many appreciated the aesthetics of the landscape: seeing stars at night, the sight of wild animals, and views of mountains and hills. They commented on the sense of community they have experienced. Some named access to outdoor recreational sites and the positive impact living in Vermont has had on their well-being. Half of the respondents remarked on the liberal-leaning values of Vermonters. Some specifically moved to the state because they perceived it would be more welcoming to people with diverse backgrounds, especially people with queer or non-gender conforming identities. However, some noted that socially conservative values are present in their Vermont communities, and a few were skeptical that white Vermonters were not as open-minded about racial diversity as they profess to be.

In response to the question, "When you hear the word "Vermont" now, what is the first image that comes to your mind?" one participant answered: **"A rural beautiful place with liberal mindsets."** This statement captures the overarching experience of the new migrants. Respondents said they appreciated the values of openness and acceptance rather than affiliation with a particular party. As Julia described, **"I think people are pretty liberal minded and progressive up here, but it's a kind of an openness that I really value, so that's the Vermont values piece of it that really appeals as well."**

Just under half of the new migrants said they have felt welcomed by Vermonters, and **just over half of respondents said they had instances of feeling both welcomed and unwelcomed by Vermonters**. Several participants described the relief they felt when they obtained Vermont license plates for their cars. It made them feel less conspicuous as outsiders. Several also noted that it took more time than they expected to forge friendships with long-time residents who were friendly but did not invite newcomers into social events. Some migrants focused on engaging in volunteer activities in order to develop relationships with neighbors and fellow town residents. As these migrants arrived during the pandemic, some used on-line public meetings to get to know the activities, town government, and volunteer opportunities in their communities.

Percent of movers who felt welcomed or both welcomed and unwelcomed by Vermonters, 2023, n= 24



"I feel like I need to actually prove myself as a neighbor to my neighbors. We are getting close, but I suspect there's a level of awfully polite hazing to endure before you're trusted out here. I also suspect that neighbors suspect that you'll leave once the winds change if you aren't 9 generations out." (Luka, who lives in central Vermont)

“We have built a larger community since moving here than any of the four other cities we’ve lived in for multiple years” (Oliver, moved from a city on the West Coast)

Most Migrants Stayed in Vermont

The majority of research participants have stayed in Vermont, and plan to remain here. A follow-up survey accounted for 24 of the 29 original research participants. Two (2) of the 24 respondents had moved out of state; 3 had moved from one town to another within Vermont, and 19 remained in the same location. When asked why they remained in Vermont, participants mainly expressed feeling content living in Vermont. Oliver, who moved to southern Vermont wrote, “It’s been wonderful for our mental well-being. We also love the weather, living side by side with nature, the resilience, kindness and openness of the people, and the values that are shared here.”

‘We take pride in being part of the Vermont community and embrace the values and experiences associated with living in this state. However, we also recognize the importance of respecting the perspectives of those who have long-standing family ties to Vermont when engaging in conversations about our identity.’ (Patricia, moved from a large city on the East Coast)

Migrants' Concerns

More than one-third of the new migrants we interviewed named housing availability and affordability as a major challenge in Vermont. Many expressed that finding a place to live was the result of good luck. Those with limited buying power described creative ways of networking through communities to find homes by word-of-mouth. Those with the means to purchase more expensive homes noted that compared to the urban places they were moving from, Vermont homes, even at elevated prices, were relatively affordable for them.

Meg, a 30-something person in the above \$100,000 income bracket said, “I mean, I am a gentrifier and that weighs heavy on me and I don’t want to contribute to creating a place that’s unaffordable for the people who’ve already been here... there’s a housing shortage, and I’m contributing to it.”

Some research participants also saw **Vermont’s lack of diversity – by race and age, specifically – as a drawback for the state.** One couple who moved from a racially diverse neighborhood described ensuring that their white daughter had a strong diversity curriculum at her Vermont elementary school as a way to address their concern about Vermont’s whiteness. Two women of color who were also mothers explained how they attempted to maintain their children’s sense of racially identity by reinforcing their culture at home.

One person of color left the state. He wrote this explanation: “[Vermont] did not have the right environment for me, claims to be LGBTQ and minority friendly....not sure that it is true...Vermonters like to think they are.” Apart from cultural and racial diversity, migrants coming to Vermont remarked on a lack of diverse foods in the state. One woman who moved to northern Vermont asked, “Where are the green chiles?”

“ I mean, we're just extremely lucky... the houses are so big and so expensive or they're tiny and in poor condition ... there’s hardly anything in between... Where's the little three-bedroom two-bath house--ranch? Vermont is in desperate need of the middle, you know?... We were lucky to find something that was the right size in the right place and we feel extremely grateful.” (Lucy, mover to central Vermont)

**“My guess is that more will come.”
Julia, a climate mover to central
Vermont**

Methods

Is Vermont Ready for More Migrants?

Analysis of the narratives of movers to Vermont in 2020-2021 reveals that Vermont’s rural landscape, small communities, and perceived safe climate have drawn newcomers to the state. Vermont’s environmental challenges in 2023—statewide flooding and air pollution—have not dissuaded new migrants from staying in Vermont. They see environmental impacts in Vermont as less hazardous than in other places. Yet the disasters of summer 2023 signal that Vermont will also contend with negative impacts from climate change. Prior to the 2023 flooding, housing shortages and affordability posed obstacles for newcomers to settle in Vermont, and for longtime residents of Vermont. Provision of housing for all income levels and efforts to develop resilience to environmental hazards must be developed in tandem to meet the needs of today’s Vermonters and future Vermonters.

Thank you

We are deeply grateful to the research participants who shared their time, stories and insights with us.

Notes

1. U.S. Census Bureau, Vermont Quick Facts, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/VT#>
2. U.S. Census Bureau, Urban and Rural, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html>

In the summer of 2021, the researchers used social media (such as Front Porch Forum) and an on-line survey to recruit people who had moved to Vermont since March 2020 for this study. In 2021 we spoke with a total of 29 adults in an interview setting. Researchers held 6 group interviews and 3 individual interviews between July and October 2021. The participants included 4 married couples, with both spouses participating in a group interview. One interview was conducted in-person, but due to an increase in COVID-19 cases in Vermont in summer 2021, the remainder of interviews were conducted on-line. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the transcriptions were coded for main themes. An on-line follow-up survey was emailed to all participants in June 2023. We received responses from 24 of the 29 original participants. In late July 2023, we emailed a second on-line follow-up survey, following the statewide flooding and wildfire air pollution events experienced across the state. We received responses from 18 of the 22 participants who we knew remained in Vermont. All participant names are pseudonyms. This research was conducted with approval from the University of Vermont Institutional Research Board.

Study Limitations

This case study involved a small number of participants; they may not be representative of the total population of movers to Vermont in 2020-2021. The research may have attracted people who are willing to join groups and therefore their collective experiences may over-represent people who engage in volunteer and community service.

