

# Why They Moved

**2021** A Study of American  
Migration to Small Cities



# What You'll Learn

**The average American will move about 11.9**

**times in their lifetime.** Some of these moves coincide with big life events — going to college, starting a new job, getting married, retiring to the beach. Others represent less drastic changes, but momentous nonetheless — like buying a larger home in the subdivision down the street.

In any event, each of these moves entails a complicated calculus meant to prioritize certain place characteristics and arrive at a preferred (or optimal) living location.

For the purposes of talent recruitment, this poses both an opportunity and a challenge. **The period of time when people are most mobile — their 20s to 40s — coincides with their prime working years.** But that period of time is also characterized by shifting plans and priorities. Only the country's largest cities can rely on the reputation they have built over decades to attract talent of all ages. In some cases, even reputation is not enough to sustain population growth in key demographics. Instead, relevant and adaptive messages can help widen a city's appeal to the fresh-out-of-college crowd as well as mid-career managers ready to settle down.



**11.9x**  
Average amount  
of times people  
move in their lifetime.\*

\* Source: 2019 U.S. Census Bureau Data and 2018 National Center for Health Statistics Data

*We wanted to aid smaller cities in developing talent recruitment and retention strategies that foster a healthy and diversified local economy.*

— Roberto Muñoz,  
North Star Research Director



With these considerations in mind, North Star pursued our first proprietary study of the talent attraction marketplace, focusing exclusively on the wants and needs of the talent itself. We wanted to aid smaller cities in developing talent recruitment and retention strategies that foster a healthy and diversified local economy. **Thus, we surveyed 150 people who relocated to small and medium-sized metropolitan areas in the past three years hoping to answer one very complex question, “Why did they move?”**



# Our Approach

By its nature, much of the current relocation and talent attraction research relies on a winners-and-losers narrative. **It's simple math: for one city to gain one resident, another loses one.** There are, for example, annual lists of the places with the highest migration gains and losses that capture where people are moving. However, it's difficult to make specific conclusions that inform recruitment and retention marketing from location-based data. Sure, the fastest-growing cities probably check a lot of boxes for talent, but the question remains what those boxes are and which ones were checked.

## Survey Respondent Locations



**We designed our research instrument to answer those key questions about desires and motivations** — the kind of information that is most useful when crafting compelling messages that resonate with target audiences. We also decided to tailor our study to better understand the appeal of thriving small and medium-sized cities that do not have the renown of New York City or Los Angeles. Lastly, we felt that we could not ignore the paradigm shift we are currently experiencing together: **the COVID-19 pandemic brought the world to a halt, but it accelerated the transition from in-person to remote work.** We had to know how this transition could factor into relocation patterns moving forward.

# Who Took The Survey?

In April-May 2021, we surveyed 150 people who relocated any time after January 2018 because they accepted full-time employment somewhere or could work remotely from anywhere. The survey was geographically targeted to a pool of 158 different metropolitan areas with a population under one million and noticeable population growth between 2010 and 2019. Of the 150 respondents, 52% worked from home at some point since January 2018 and answered additional questions on that experience.

## Key Sample Figures:

### 78 metropolitan areas are represented in this study

Respondent count by metro population size:



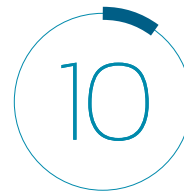
under 250K



250K – 500k



500K – 750k



750K – 1M



**150**  
Respondents

32

Occupations

90%

Employed Full-Time

70%

White (Not Hispanic)

77%

Married or in  
Domestic Partnership

AGE

25–34

39%

35–39

33%

40–55

28%

HOUSEHOLD  
INCOME

\$40–69k

22%

\$70–99k

34%

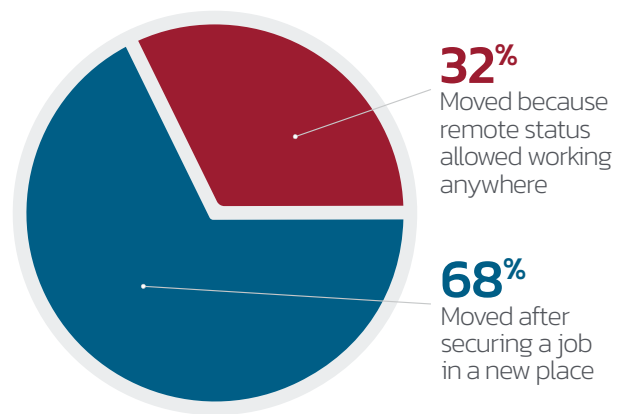
\$100k<sup>+</sup>

38%

8% margin of error

## Why They Moved

To qualify for the study, survey respondents had to have relocated for a work-related reason: **68% moved because they secured a job in a new place, while 32% moved because their remote job allowed them to work from anywhere.** However, we could not assume that each of these decisions to relocate were one-dimensional. If only it were that simple.



In fact, respondents indicated that work was only part of the equation — **only 12%** considered finding the right job (regardless of place) to be their primary goal in relocating. By comparison, **42% said that their priority was finding a balance** between the right job and the right place to live, while **46% thought finding the right place to live was of greatest importance.**

Thus, for the vast majority of respondents, **the decision to relocate included evaluating the quality of the place to which they were moving as well as their job prospects.** Respondents reported that job security, earning potential, and career goals were about as important to them as affordability, housing, safety, and a family-friendly atmosphere. **When asked whether they wished they had researched other aspects of their new home, respondents reiterated that affordability and housing should've been top of mind, alongside shopping/dining options and weather.**

By and large, respondents showed that they were happy with their decision to relocate.

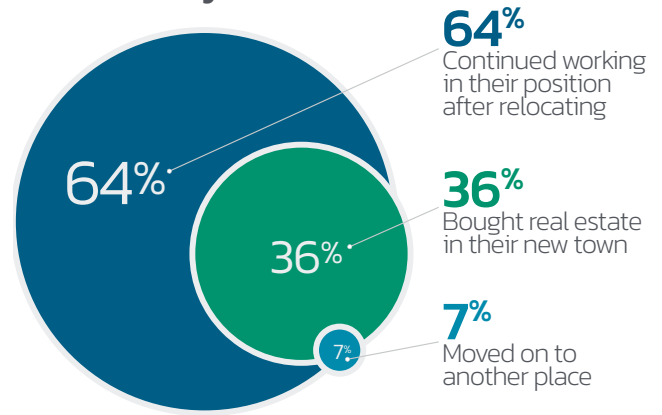
**Almost two-thirds (64%) continued working in the position for which they relocated, 36% bought real estate in their new town, and only 7% moved on to another place.** Additionally,

respondents had a high level of advocacy for their adopted metros. We were able to compare the sample's **Net Promoter Scores** (percentage of promoters minus percentage of detractors)

for living in, visiting, and conducting business in

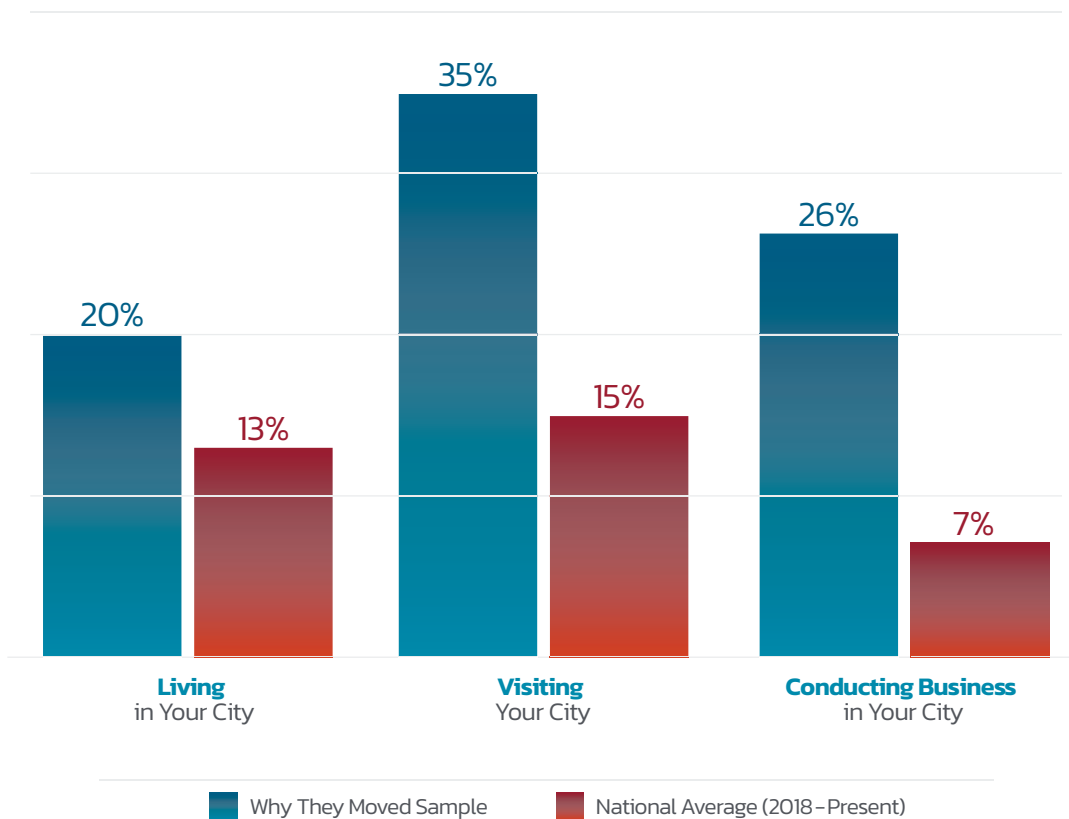
their communities to the running average in our database (North Star's Brand Barometer, which we continuously compile through research in and around partner communities):

### After They Moved...



## Migrating Workers Are Very Happy With Their New Communities

Net Promoter Scores vs. National Averages



## WFH Reasons & Preferences

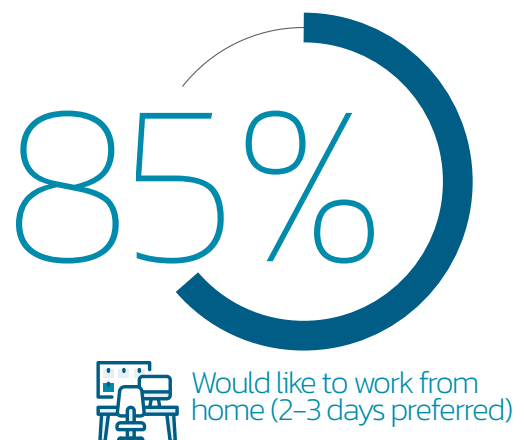
Just over half of respondents (52%) indicated that they had worked remotely for their employer in the past three years, with 82% of them doing so directly because of the COVID-19 pandemic. While we did not ask them to speculate whether WFH is here to stay (given so many industry variables), respondents nevertheless had the opportunity to weigh in on the new trend.

A resounding 85% of respondents would like to work from home for all or part of the workweek (2-3 days is preferred) after the pandemic subsides.



By the time that we fielded our survey, **64%** of respondents had worked from home for over six months, and **47%** were doing so five days a week. That is to say, this group was certainly qualified, as many now are, to compare their new normal with the way it used to be. And **if it were up to them, the new normal would be here to stay.**

Presented with a non-exhaustive list, respondents valued every benefit of working from home over any benefit of working on site. To them, a greater degree of flexibility as far as managing their time and workload — coupled with more privacy and the ability to connect with coworkers online — outweighed the convenience of having a dedicated space to work, collaborate, and socialize with others.



# Marketing to Relocating Workers

In light of our research, the question remains: how can this information be used to improve talent attraction and retention strategies for smaller metro areas and cities? **Judging by our sample, the average person today wants to have it all — the dream job and the dream town.** It's a familiar narrative, and perhaps one that is becoming more common in our hyper-connected world where everything is a click away. Therein lies a possible key: people today spend so much of their time online, that it only makes sense that they would be shaping big life decisions in that space as well.

When asked how they found out about and researched job opportunities and places, respondents identified online listings for jobs and real estate as primary sources of information, with online and in-person networks as valuable complements. **Around 35% of people in our sample passed through websites like Indeed and LinkedIn when looking for and vetting jobs, while 35% also rifled through neighborhood and housing options on sites like Zillow and Trulia.**

Unfortunately, this means that places may have to rely on impressions created by third-party sites (where they cannot control content directly) to stay ahead of the competition. Zillow and Trulia listings include a wealth of information about houses and housing markets as well aggregated data about lifestyle indicators like schools, crime, walkability, and inclusivity. But in the end, it's a snapshot unlikely to capture a community's entire story. Likewise, Indeed and LinkedIn provide extensive information about companies and employment opportunities, but information on the communities where jobs are located is lacking or missing altogether.

An effective marketing strategy, then, should provide key content contributors with accurate and engaging place information that they can append to listings on Zillow and Indeed. Rather than accept their portrayal on third-party sites, cities should make sure that their housing developers, real estate agents, and employers have resources and materials that highlight the benefits of their location. For example, home and rental listings can include a brief description of the city and neighborhood beyond aggregated data; **people need to be able to visualize themselves in a community before they commit to it**, and details like character of place, affinity groups and amenities can be additional selling points.



The same principle applies to job listings. Prospects generally know that they are applying for a 9 to 5, but emphasizing work-from-home privileges and lifestyle amenities can make the difference when competing head-to-head with similar employers in other places.

In addition, social media represents an alternative that gives places greater control over their image and narrative. Investments in a Facebook, Instagram, or even Tik Tok presence can be as low-cost as regular updates featuring landscapes, local businesses, and community events. Collaborations and sponsored content may also be a viable option, as long as the partnership benefits the brand of both the place and content creator.

## Key Takeaways

It is impossible to reduce talent attraction and retention down to a formula that works from one place to the next. Instead, what we have tried to offer through our study of “Why They Moved” is a look at the considerations and motivations that may persuade talented individuals to pick one destination over another.

**1 Quality of place is a BIG part of the equation.** The vast majority of talent is looking for a place to live as much as (or more so than) a place to work. They want to make sure that they have options for recreation, entertainment, and personal growth during their non-working hours.

### What Cities Can Do:

*Continuously invest in improving your quality of place.*

**2 Smaller metros satisfy talent needs.** The allure of the big city is always there, but people who value affordable, family-friendly communities find their way to places that fit their lifestyle better. And they rarely regret it.

*Sell the power of a smaller, more livable community.*

**3 Here comes the work from home crowd.** A third of our respondents relocated because they can work remotely from anywhere. They simply seek the best place to live their lives, so services and amenities are of utmost importance.

*Assess your remote work infrastructure and make sure you're competitive.*

**4 And they're here to stay.** Four in five workers don't want to give up remote work for at least part of the workweek. Employers and cities, take note: this is one perk of the job that can make a difference when filling a position with the best of the bunch.

*Collaborate with local employers to support hybrid work models.*

**5 Location, location, location—online, that is.** Competitive places have nothing less than a significant online presence. Real-world connections with realtors, employers, and content creators are necessary to tell compelling stories about communities on third-party websites, not just your own.

*Implement a comprehensive, analytics-backed online marketing program and measure progress regularly.*



We are passionate about the matchless qualities that define and shape each and every community. Using two decades of experience and perspective, we help client communities uncover and express their authentic story and inspire local action to achieve their preferred future.

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