

FACTORS IN OUT-MIGRATION AMONG ENGLISH SPEAKERS IN THE EASTERN TOWNSHIPS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY*

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Abstract

The study reported in this paper provides some exploratory qualitative data on the experiences of a purposive sample of recent English-speaking Townships leavers. The study aimed to provide descriptive insight into the leavers' reasons for migrating, their choice of new location and reasons for this, the nature and extent of their continuing ties to the Townships, and factors that might influence choices to return to the region. It involved qualitative telephone interviews with 26 Townships leavers living in Ontario, Alberta or elsewhere in Quebec whose first official language was English and who had migrated in the last 10 years. Findings confirmed those of other studies that employment and educational opportunities were the main drivers of out-migration. While respondents still had many ties to the Eastern Townships, most had not regretted their choices about leaving and most were able to identify significant advantages to their subsequent locations, over and above the availability of suitable employment. The interview findings suggest that there is a continuum of leavers, ranging from those who would not at this point in their lives reconsider their move, to those who would have preferred to stay and would reconsider under the right conditions. Actions to redress out-migration, either by preventing it or by encouraging re-entry to the region, could perhaps best be targeted according to specific points on this continuum.

Résumé

L'étude qui fait l'objet de cette communication fournit des données qualitatives exploratoires sur les expériences d'un échantillon choisi à dessein d'anglophones des Cantons-de-l'Est ayant récemment quitté la région. Cette étude cherchait à donner un aperçu descriptif des raisons derrière la migration, le choix de la destination, la nature et l'étendue des liens durables des émigrants avec les Cantons-de-l'Est ainsi que des facteurs pouvant influencer leur décision de revenir ou non dans la région. Des entrevues qualitatives menées par téléphone ont été réalisées avec 26 anglophones

*This study was supported by the Hazel McVety Bequest to Townshippers' Association.

ayant quitté la région au cours des 10 dernières années et qui habitent maintenant en Ontario, en Alberta ou ailleurs au Québec. Les conclusions sont venues confirmer celles d'autres études selon lesquelles l'emploi et la poursuite des études sont les principaux moteurs de l'émigration. Même si les répondants avaient encore plusieurs liens avec les Cantons-de-l'Est, la plupart d'entre eux ne regrettaient pas leur décision de quitter et pouvaient identifier des avantages non négligeables, autres que des meilleures possibilités d'emploi, associés à leur région d'adoption. Les conclusions tirées de ces entretiens suggèrent qu'il existe un continuum de personnes qui quittent la région, allant de ceux qui ne sont pas prêts, pour l'instant, à reconsidérer leur départ à ceux qui auraient préféré rester et qui reconsidéreraient leur décision dans un contexte favorable. Les actions pour contrer l'émigration, qu'elles visent à éviter qu'elle se produise ou à promouvoir le retour dans la région, pourraient probablement être mieux ciblées en tenant compte des caractéristiques particulières de ce continuum.

INTRODUCTION

Out-migration of the English-speaking community from the Eastern Townships has been a concern for several decades. Early landmark studies by Caldwell (1980; 1992) described in detail the patterns of out-migration among cohorts of English-speaking youth followed over several years, raising awareness of out-migration as an issue for sustainability of the English community in the region. More recent studies have continued to show high levels of out-migration of the English-speaking community, especially among youth (Floch & Warnke, 2004). While these studies provide a useful population-level view of the patterns of out-migration and their implications for Eastern Townships community composition and demographics, they provide little information about the reasons and motivations that underlie individual choices to move away from the Townships, nor about the factors that would work for or against ex-Townshippers returning to the region.

Recent studies with current residents of the Townships have identified issues that may contribute to out-migration. A focus group study of English-speaking high school and vocational school youth in the Townships found that a majority, 61%, felt that they would likely leave the Townships in the next few years for education-related reasons (Brault, Karpenko & Kishchuk, 2005). Similarly, a survey of Bishop's students showed that overall, 61% of students intended to leave the region after graduation; this included 36% of students who were originally from the Townships

(Aljane, 2004). These studies echo other findings about the mobility of the broader Anglophone Quebec community, which is primarily influenced by economic and educational concerns (Magnan, 2004; Missisquoi Institute, 2002; Jedwab, 2004).

The study reported in this paper is a small attempt to provide complementary qualitative data on the experiences of a sample of recent English-speaking Townships leavers. The purpose of the study was, within the current political, social and economic context, to provide descriptive insight into the leavers' reasons for migrating, their choice of new location and reasons for this, the nature and extent of their continuing ties to the Townships, and factors that might influence decisions to return to the region.

METHODOLOGY

Study sample

The study involved qualitative telephone interviews conducted with 26 Townships leavers whose first official language was English and who had left the region within the last 10 years. The sample was identified using a purposive, snowball sample method (Atkinson & Flint, 2001), informed by the statistical portrait of out-migration. Specifically, data from the study being simultaneously conducted by Warnke (this issue) was used to construct sampling targets within categories of age and post-Townships location. Given the concentrations of ex-Townshippers in Ontario, Alberta (especially Calgary) and Montreal, sampling efforts were concentrated in these areas. Respondents were sought in three age categories: under 25 years, 25–44 years, and 45 years and older.

Initial or "seed" respondents were identified through interpersonal contacts with Townshippers' Association staff or board members. Contact with these individuals established first their eligibility for the study, and second whether they could nominate additional potential respondents in the target regions and age ranges. Although there were several nominated individuals who did not return the researchers' telephone calls, there were no refusals to participate in the study.

Alternative sampling procedures were considered (such as recruiting respondents through advertising in the newspapers of the target region), however, the snowball method was adopted because of its relative efficiency and low cost. The sample should not be considered representative of the entire population of Township leavers, but rather as illustrative of a certain set of experiences.

Interview procedures

Once eligible interviewees were identified and had agreed to participate, telephone interviews were scheduled. These were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide focusing on the study questions. The interviews lasted between 20 and 45 minutes.

Respondents were informed that their answers would be kept confidential and that no individuals would be identified by name in the report.

Analysis

The interviewers' notes were summarized in text documents and then analyzed using a standard matrix-based content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

FINDINGS

Sample characteristics

Fourteen of the 26 participants had left the Townships prior to 2000, and 12 had left after 2000. When they left the Townships, nine were aged 15–24, and 17 were 25–44 (with a concentration in the younger ages of this range). Sixteen were female and 10 were male.

Respondents had resided in the Townships for a wide range of periods: 12 had lived in the Townships their whole lives or since early childhood, three had lived in the region for many years, and 11 had lived in the Townships for five years or less. This latter group was comprised mainly of students who had come to the region to study at Bishop's University and left immediately or shortly after completing their studies.

This pattern of association is reflected in respondents' last location of residence in the Townships: 15 had been living in Lennoxville, four in Sherbrooke and seven in other locations throughout the region. These included towns mainly from the western part of the region.

The sample was highly educated: 21 respondents had completed or were completing undergraduate or graduate university studies. The highest level of education achieved for the remainder was CEGEP (4 respondents) or high school (1 respondent).

All but two respondents considered themselves to be bilingual, in that they could fully function in either an English or French work environment.

Overall, the sample was comprised of two fairly distinct profiles:

Former Bishop's students who resided in the Lennoxville area for the duration of their schooling, and others from various parts of the region, most of whom had been long-time residents.

Main reasons for leaving the Townships

Work-related reasons. Employment reasons were by far the most common main reason for leaving the Townships. Almost all of the respondents (23 of 26) mentioned work-related reasons, for example: *"When I graduated from university, there was limited opportunity for a business career in the area."* Those few who did not mention work as a primary reason for leaving the Townships were seeking a more urban environment that they also associated with employment opportunities: *"At the time I pretty much thought 'OK it's time for work, that's the city.'"*

Leaving the region to look for work elsewhere generally coincided with the end of schooling, either for the respondent or his or her spouse or partner. In some cases, the choice to leave was driven by a concrete job offer elsewhere, sometimes accepted before graduation, and sometimes before the respondent had considered staying in the region as an employment option: *"I was offered a job in [the city] straight out of university."* In other cases, the choice to leave was driven by perceptions or experiences of limited opportunities within the region, coupled with a perception that prospects for meaningful and well-paying work were better outside the region: *"I had applied everywhere for jobs... There just isn't anything for me in the Townships job-wise."*

Sectors that seemed especially challenging for respondents' employment opportunities within the Townships included the information technology sector (*"Job opportunities in the Tech/IT field. If I could get a job there in Lennoxville, I would move back"*) and the creative sectors (arts, design, fashion). Several respondents aimed to start businesses in their field of work but mentioned perceptions of significant bureaucratic and population barriers to successful entrepreneurship in the region.

This is not to say that all respondents had completely excluded the possibility of staying in the Townships. In a few cases, respondents had included the Townships in their consideration of employment opportunities after completing university but had ended up making a choice of a location outside the region. Several respondents mentioned directly that they would have stayed in the region if appropriate jobs had been available: *"I would have preferred to stay. It is a matter of there not being any job opportunities for me."* In one

case, a respondent had left the region to study elsewhere and had wanted to come back after graduation but had not found suitable work: *"I tried to move back to the Townships, but could not find a full-time job."*

Education-related reasons. A few respondents had left the Townships to pursue educational goals that they could not reach within the region, for example: *"I couldn't get the education that I needed here."* This was the case for individuals seeking specialized educational programs not available in the Townships or more general education programs that are not available in English in the Townships.

Change-related reasons. Finally, the third main reason for leaving the Townships mentioned by a few respondents was not to move towards better work or educational opportunities, but simply to move away from the Townships and their existing lives: *"I just wanted to get out of there when I was young... I wanted to get out of the area and experience new things. So I moved to an area I didn't even know just to get away."* For some, this was expressed as wanting to move out of a small-town or to get away from small-town life: *"It's good to be away and not have everyone in your hair."* Similarly, several respondents stated they had moved because of a desire to experience city life. For a few, leaving the region was driven by wanting to create distance from their families.

Choice of new location

About half of the 26 respondents first moved to Montreal. Others left the Eastern Townships for Toronto or other Ontario locations, either other parts of southern Ontario or the Ottawa region. A few respondents initially went to other Canadian cities, mainly Calgary. Only one respondent left the Townships for another rural Quebec region. Many had moved several times in the years they had left the Townships, some coming back to Quebec but none to the Townships, even briefly.

As would be expected from the preceding results, the main factor behind the choice of these locations was actual or anticipated work opportunities. Similarly, for some, the choice of location was driven by the availability of particular educational programs or institutions. For the group of shorter-term Townships' residents who had come to the region to study and who thus did not have pre-existing friendship or kinship ties to the region, their choice of location was determined by their desire to return to their "home" location, or the location of family members and/or friends. One respondent

summed up her trajectory as follows: *"I returned to Montreal because that's where my family is. And then I moved to Toronto because there are more job opportunities. I came with a friend of mine and we just wanted to go somewhere new, really."*

Experience in post-Townships locations

Respondents were asked to describe their experience in their new locations. Several clear themes, both positive and negative, emerged from their responses.

Diversity. Younger respondents were particularly likely to mention appreciating a greater diversity in their new location. This was expressed at several levels. Generally, these new locations were appreciated for the range and diversity of activities they offered, especially for social and cultural activities: *"The diversity, multicultural, so much arts and culture."* Cultural diversity of the population and its expressions in terms of activities and events also contributed to satisfaction with the new location: *"There is more cultural diversity here. More people obviously, but also events, films, dances and things like that."* For some, diversity in friendships was an important factor: the opportunities to associate with different people, from varied backgrounds.

Public services. Better public services were also seen as an important positive factor, especially, but not only, among older respondents. This was particularly true in regards to health services. Several respondents expressed concerns about access to and quality of medical services, especially hospitals, in the Townships, and compared their experiences in other provinces very favourably: *"Health care is great. The environment is clean... Service is fantastic everywhere you go because people are so happy."* For the younger members of the sample, many of whom did not own cars, the availability of public transport was another main positive factor they experienced: *"Having the metro is a big plus."* This contributed to greater freedom and mobility, and consequently a greater capacity to participate in a wider variety of cultural and social activities.

Bilingualism. Several respondents noted that their bilingualism was a great asset in their lives outside the Townships, whether in Montreal or other Canadian locations. These respondents reported having experienced being a bilingual Anglophone in the Townships as a handicap to work opportunities and advancement, whereas elsewhere their linguistic skills were valuable and contributed to employability and advancement: *"In the rest of the country my French is an asset, in Quebec my French is a liability."*

Political stability. Only a few respondents mentioned political issues as part of their experience in their new locations. When mentioned, it was in terms of being comfortable with the greater political stability in their new province: *“Also, the political environment in Quebec is not the most conducive to raising a family. It was great when I was young to experience Quebec, but now that I have kids I would rather provide them with a happier, safer, more stable environment,”* and not missing the uncertainties of Quebec politics: *“I don’t miss the separatist thing, I must say.”*

Approximating the Townships elsewhere. Interestingly, several respondents mentioned factors in their new environment that resembled features of their Townships' life that they particularly appreciated: *“I live in a place similar to the Townships just outside of the city.”* These factors were often proximity to nature and the outdoors, through parks and green spaces, enabling easy access to outdoor recreation such as skiing or cycling: *“There is skiing here too, closer than in the big cities... Here it’s not on your doorstep like there (in the Townships) but it’s still close.”* For some, living in a neighbourhood of a larger city that had a strong local or historical identity permitted approximation of a small town feeling in daily life. Some appreciated the possibility of moving easily between a faster-paced urban environment and this small-town urban setting: *“I live in a (neighbourhood) and I get a good mixture of the city and the mountains and nature.”* As one respondent noted: *“You miss it when you leave it and you try to recreate it wherever you go.”*

Negative factors. The negative factors mentioned by respondents when describing their experiences tended to reflect the trade-off for life in more urbanized settings. These included higher levels of pollution, traffic issues, and lack of safety both within their neighbourhoods and in sectors of their cities that had to be avoided: *“we hitchhiked from Lennoxville to Sherbrooke often... I would never do that in Toronto. I would be afraid of getting shot or something.”*

Ties to the Townships and potential for return

All but two respondents stated that they still have ties to family and friends in the Eastern Townships, for example: *“My family and friends are still there. So I have many ties to the area.”* For many, these ties seemed quite strong, and a few who had lived in the region most of their lives stated that they still considered the Townships as their home: *“I have grown to appreciate the Eastern Townships more and more since I moved away. I definitely consider myself a Townshipsper.”* Several respondents, including some having spent

only a few years there, noted that they have visited the region since they left, and some continued to visit regularly: *"I love the Townships. When I lived in Ontario, I used to visit often."* Several also noted that they try to encourage others to visit during holidays or for other activities, seeing themselves as promoters or ambassadors to the region although they no longer live in the Townships.

When asked about the circumstances that would lead them to consider moving back to the Townships, many of these ex-Townshippers were open to the idea, if only on a theoretical level. Specifically, most respondents said they would consider moving back if they found work that they considered equivalent or better to their current conditions: *"if there were more industries and good places to work."* For some, this was in terms of salary or job level (especially among those older respondents who had by now acquired considerable seniority within their work domains), but for many others, this equivalence meant essentially work in their domain of qualification or interest. Since most had excluded the possibility of staying in the Townships because of lack of work, they essentially felt that it was extremely unlikely that current employment opportunities would allow them to consider moving back: *"It kind of pains me to say that. That I wouldn't go back. But I have a good life here and as much as I love it there, I wouldn't move back permanently. If there were more career options I would consider it though."* For those respondents in long-term relationships with working spouses, including those few respondents who were not working, moving back would also require equivalent work for their spouses. As one respondent summed it up: *"Maybe if there was a job opportunity; I could not survive without a job. But if there was a good job for me I would move back for sure. Of course there would have to be a job for my husband too."*

For some younger respondents, moving back to the Townships would be an option they would consider when they reached the point in their lives of wanting to settle down and begin a family. Again, these responses were mostly at a theoretical level, and did not indicate concrete plans in this direction: *"Maybe when I am older, to settle with a family. Like when I decide to get married and have children."*

A few older respondents mentioned seeing the Townships as a good place to retire, that is, as an option for later life. For these individuals, the quieter pace in circumstances where employment was no longer an issue would be an attraction factor: *"I like the friendliness and you feel like a close community. It would be a good place to retire."* However, two respondents also mentioned that in these

circumstances they would first view the Townships as a location for a second residence (country home or cottage); because of the higher tax burden in Quebec they would prefer to maintain their primary residence outside the province.

Over and above the availability of suitable employment, a factor that some respondents stated would increase their interest in living in the Townships again was increased economic and social development, leading to a greater diversity of activities and services: *"If there was more development in the Townships. Like English movie theatres, a face lift, like new stores and new facilities."* Some of the younger respondents noted that as the Townships' population aged, there was less for younger people to do. They would be more interested in returning to the Townships if the population was younger: *"If there were more jobs and more action I guess. We would need a car for sure."* A few respondents noted that they felt that the region had become increasingly French-speaking since they left, and they perceived there to be correspondingly fewer English services and activities. For these respondents, an increase in English activities would be a factor contributing to a decision to return. Finally, a few respondents stated that needing to live near family members, in particular aging parents, would be another motivating factor: *"If there was family need for a long-term move."*

When asked about factors that would make them hesitate about moving back to Townships, many of the issues already mentioned were raised again – in particular the lack of suitable work: *"A very good business opportunity might lure me back with my family."* Over and above work factors, linguistic factors were mentioned by seven respondents, as well as the perceived increasing predominance of French, the lack of activities, services and interactions in English, or the handicap of being an Anglophone. Other factors contributing to hesitations were related to the perceived lack of diversity already discussed: not enough to do, difficulties of finding people with similar interests, and lack of cultural diversity. Also mentioned as a hesitation factor was the overall climate for business development. A few respondents felt that the relative insular environment made it harder to establish new businesses in the Townships than elsewhere. For some, returning to the Townships would mean reduced access to and quality of health care, and this was a factor that would make them hesitate to move back: *"I never got the impression that health services in the Estrie were top notch and quite often found the services to be less than friendly and professional since I am not fully bilingual."* Other factors mentioned were the lack of public transporta-

tion, the small-town culture where everyone knows everyone, the political situation, the Quebec bureaucracy especially in business dealings (“*Quebec is so bureaucratic, it would be hard to be there*”) and the high taxation rate.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Although this study was conducted with a small and non-representative sample of leavers from the Eastern Townships, several patterns emerged that merit further exploration in larger studies. First, the study suggests clearly that work is the driver for both leaving and for coming back. While most of these respondents had and maintain strong emotional ties to the region, these have not been, and are not likely to be, sufficient to overcome the need to find meaningful, suitable work. For some, the search for work and eventual relocation seemed to have been based on perceived lack of opportunity in the Townships; for others, real opportunities presented themselves, obviating the Townships as a choice. Educational choices showed a similar pattern, but seemed to be less based on perceptions and more on veridical assessments of lack of desired post-secondary and/or post-graduate programs in the region. These findings are entirely consistent with the bulk of previous work on out-migration from the Townships as well as other non-urban areas (Magnan, 2004).

Second, although this may be an artefact of the particular sample, it seems that post-secondary education stages – moments when people enter and leave education levels – are critical moments for decisions to either move into or out of the Townships. This is hardly surprising, because employment decisions tend to be tied to these stages. However, this observation has important implications for the nature and timing of efforts to reach potential leavers with information and opportunities that could shape their decision-making.

Overall, ex-Townshippers in this study had not regretted their choices about leaving the Townships, and most were able to identify significant advantages to their subsequent locations, over and above the availability of suitable employment. Many of these factors mirror concerns and dissatisfactions expressed by current residents of the Townships (Missisquoi Institute, 2000; Groupe Recherche Focus, 2004). For many of the younger respondents, leaving the Townships meant moving toward a more urbanized lifestyle and more opportunities to experience diverse activities and relationships. To the extent that similar features were available in the Townships, they would be factors in attracting them back to the

region. A more dynamic and open business environment would also be a factor, coupled with a more active level of economic development and activity. Linguistic and political factors were important but not central among these, and tended to be raised in the sense of being happy to have left these annoyances behind, rather than having escaped from personally threatening situations. Interestingly, however, leavers often sought to re-create or approximate valued features of the Townships in their new environments, suggesting that these features – outdoor amenities, close and supportive communities – have continued appeal.

Implications for actions to redress out-migration

Overall, the study findings would seem to be discouraging to those interested in promoting retention of the English-speaking community in the Eastern Townships. Many of the factors responsible for out-migration and for the positive experiences encountered by leavers in their new locations are the product of macro-level economic and demographic forces, well beyond the control of local or regional development activities. These factors are part of a broader phenomenon of out-migration from non-urban areas, which was already contributing to out-migration of English-speaking youth in Quebec in the 1980s (Caldwell, 1992). As noted earlier, they also echo findings from previous larger studies and reviews about mobility and migration in the English-speaking community, in which work and education have consistently been major factors (Magnan, 2004; Jedwab, 2004; Missisquoi Institute, 2000).

At the same time, however, the study results suggest some points of potential leverage that could be further explored. The interview findings suggest that there is a continuum along which Township leavers can be placed and along which they may move during their cycles of education, career and family. At one extreme are individuals who see leaving the Townships as an escape from a limited environment and perhaps from family situations they would rather leave behind – generally toward a more exciting, diverse and urbanized setting. Individuals at this end of the continuum are not, at least at this point in their lives, ready to consider the Townships as an option. At the other extreme are a few individuals who have already made attempts either to stay or to come back, and would benefit from concrete help to support a decision that would be relatively easily made. This includes many of the individuals who had been long-term residents of the region. In the middle of the continuum are the majority of those who end up leaving but who, if

the right information or opportunity had come up at the right critical moment – generally when entering or leaving school – might have made other choices. This group included some of those who came to the region to study at Bishop’s University, as well as some of those long-term residents who had found better opportunities outside the region.

Actions to redress out-migration, either by preventing it or by encouraging re-entry to the region, could perhaps best be targeted according to specific points on this continuum. Initiatives such as *www.topportunity.ca* and Topportunity Talks (Brault, Karpenko & Kishchuk, 2005), aiming to provide timely information about employment opportunities in the region and redress negative perceptions, may be helpful in this regard. In the longer term, strategies designed to retain young graduates in the region until the point where they make strong friendship ties and start families may be crucial. Such strategies – for example, increased availability of a wider range of entry-level professional and technical positions; more effective professional and technical education programs in English in the region – would be consistent with existing recommendations for regional economic development (Comité national, 2000; Caldwell, 1992) and could contribute to increased retention.

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