

# SPONGE CITIES ON THE GREAT PLAINS

Urban Communities in Rural States Like North Dakota Grow by “Soaking Up” the Residents of Surrounding Small Towns, Farms, and Ranches

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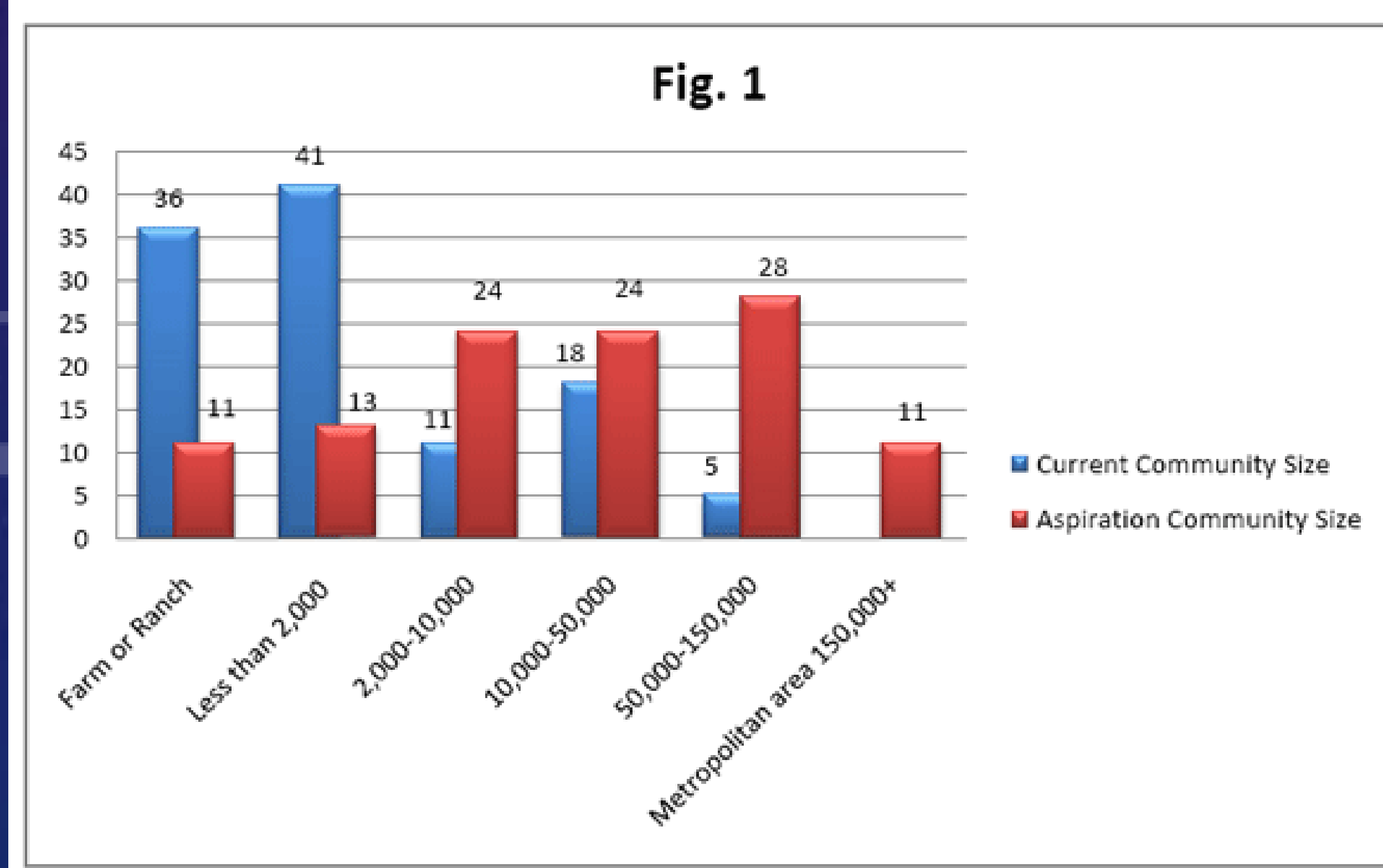
## Aspiration Cities

North Dakota’s four largest cities, Fargo, Bismarck, Grand Forks, and Minot, are growing in large part due to the young adults who for decades have chosen to move there as they exit their smaller North Dakota communities to “aspiration cities.”

## Current vs. Aspiration Community Size

A survey of 111 North Dakota high school juniors and seniors offers a glimpse into the minds of the state’s young adults as they stand on the precipice of adulthood. They were asked to choose the size of community in which they aspire to live and work. Although roughly four in 10 were raised in communities of fewer than 2,000 residents, out of the over 100 students surveyed, only six wished to live their adult lives in a town of fewer than 2,000. Overall, 70 percent aspired to live in larger communities than those of their childhood (see Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1: Current vs Aspiration Community Size for North Dakota High School Students**



## Migration

This migration pattern is not new, nor is it unique to North Dakota. Historically, one of the most significant demographic trends in the United States has been the movement of people from rural to urban areas. In 1915, sociologist E.A. Ross declared that small Midwestern towns reminded him of “fished out ponds populated chiefly by bullheads and suckers.”

## Age Specific Migration

The young adult population (age 20-30) has been immigrating to metro areas each decade since 1950 while in the farm dependent rural counties, they are outmigrating in sizeable numbers (Figure 2). The phenomenon of sponge cities will change the nature of states like North Dakota. At the turn of the twentieth century, a mere seven percent of North Dakotans were urban. By 1980, one out of ever three residents was urban, and currently North Dakota is 50 percent urban and 50 percent rural.

## Impact

- A dozen young adults moving from Edgeley, North Dakota, (population 637) to Fargo is irrelevant to Fargo as it absorbs the new residents with barely a nod, but to Edgeley, the shift represents significant and chilling loss of young, skilled, educated workers that will have a detrimental impact on the town’s future prosperity or even survival.
- North Dakota is facing a protracted population crisis as significant numbers of its small communities are on a slow slide to extinction.

