



Retaining Residents Is Important to New Hampshire's Future: Why Do People Stay?

Kristine Bundschuh and Kenneth M. Johnson

Introduction

A key factor impacting New Hampshire's demographic and economic success is retaining and growing its population. The state has one of the most mobile populations in the United States. In an average year, 56,000 people move to New Hampshire and nearly 46,000 residents leave the state. What motivates people to move to New Hampshire is important to the state's future and garners considerable policy attention. Much less consideration is given to retaining current residents. Yet on average, nearly 1.3 million New Hampshire residents do not migrate into or out of the state in a given year. Understanding why those residents stay in New Hampshire can be an important element of the state's comprehensive development strategy.

Many New Hampshire residents are not natives of the state—only 44 percent of the state's population, and 33 percent of those 25 and older, were born in the state.¹ Thus, the majority of the state's residents migrated to the state and decided to stay. Migrants who have lived in New Hampshire for more than 10 years, together with residents born in the state, are the focus of this brief.

Why Do Established Residents Stay in New Hampshire?

We asked a representative sample of over 3,300 established residents to tell us, in their own words, their top three reasons for staying in New Hampshire rather than moving to another state. We analyzed their verbatim responses and grouped them into categories, revealing seven main reasons to stay (Figure 1).

Over half the respondents offered economic reasons, with responses ranging from employment

KEY FINDINGS



Development policy often focuses on attracting migrants to a place, but retaining established residents is also important.



A representative survey of New Hampshire residents shows that most long-term residents stay in New Hampshire for multiple reasons, rather than just one.

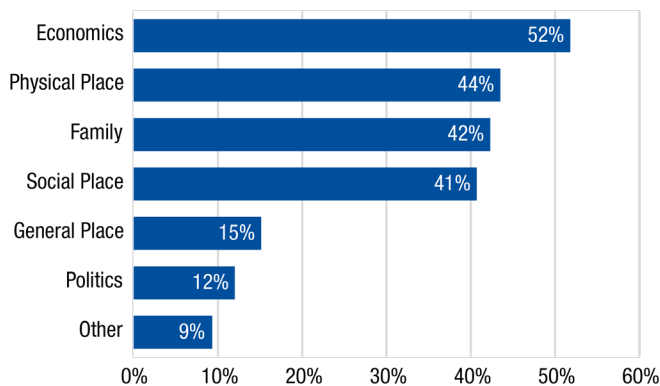


People are most likely to report staying in the state for economic reasons, the physical environment, family, and the social atmosphere.



Reasons to stay are interconnected, with people appreciating the overall experience of living in New Hampshire because of a combination of local benefits.

FIGURE 1. ESTABLISHED RESIDENTS' TOP REASONS TO STAY IN NEW HAMPSHIRE



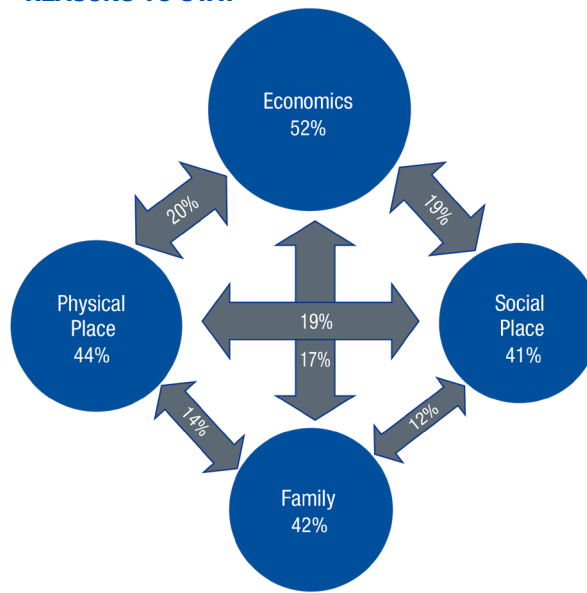
Note: Respondents could provide up to three reasons for staying in New Hampshire, so percentages in this figure exceed 100 percent. Source: NH Granite State Poll, 2010–2012 and 2018–2019.

to taxes to housing costs. Many people also mentioned the appeal of physical place, including the natural environment and physical location of New Hampshire. Family, such as being near grown children and parents, was another top reason to stay. Social place, reflecting people’s connection to the community, lifestyle, and social atmosphere, was the fourth main reason to stay. Themes mentioned less frequently included the general appeal of the state (e.g., “I just like the state”), politics, and other reasons (e.g., health and avoiding city life). Here we focus on the top four reasons for staying and on the more nuanced sub-dimensions of each of these reasons.

Connections Across Reasons to Stay in New Hampshire

Almost everyone who stayed in New Hampshire did so for a combination of reasons. In fact, 88 percent of all established residents mentioned more than one reason for staying. For example, while over half of respondents stayed for economic reasons and 44 percent stayed because of the physical appeal of the state, 20 percent of all respondents mentioned both economics and physical place among their reasons to stay (see top left arrow, Figure 2). There are similar patterns of interconnection among all four of the top reasons for staying, underscoring the multidimensional aspect of people’s decisions to stay.

FIGURE 2. CONNECTIONS ACROSS THE TOP FOUR REASONS TO STAY



Note: Respondents could provide up to three reasons for staying in New Hampshire, so percentages in this figure exceed 100 percent. Arrows show the share of respondents who selected both of the options indicated. Items in the figure are scaled according to the percent of respondents represented. **Source:** NH Granite State Poll, 2010–2012 and 2018–2019.

Economic Reasons to Stay

A closer look at the open-ended responses within each of the top four categories reveals the nuanced and interconnected reasons people remained residents of the state. Over half of

established residents reported staying due to economic factors, including the state’s general economy and cost of living, employment, taxes, and real estate (Table 1). These economic advantages of living in New Hampshire enhance residents’ ability to earn, save, and spend.

Economic sub-themes included staying due to one’s own or one’s spouse’s employment, the lack of income and sales tax, and the affordability of housing and property. Many of these reasons intertwine, enhancing residents’ ability to

build wealth. For example, saving money through the tax structure and the low cost of living are beneficial for people interested in purchasing real estate. As one resident noted, “my job is here,” there is “no sales tax or income tax,” and

TABLE 1. EXAMPLES OF ECONOMIC REASONS TO STAY

Dimensions	Percent of All Open-Ended Responses	Example Responses
Economy and Cost of Living	8%	“More affordable than anywhere else in New England”
Employment	27%	“It’s where I’m employed” “My husband owns a business here” “Job availability”
Taxes	19%	“Reasonable tax structure” “Because New Hampshire is tax free” “The lack of income or sales tax”
Real Estate	6%	“Housing is cheaper”

Note: Some people provided more than one economic reason for staying, so the percentages vary from the total for the category. **Source:** NH Granite State Poll, 2010–2012 and 2018–2019.

“we own our home and have no mortgage.” Residents who listed economic dimensions as their first, second, and third reason for staying often provided a succinct list of reasons, such as “less tax burden [...] real estate [...] cheaper in general” and “cost of living [...] state tax [...] employment.” People who wanted to build wealth appreciated the combination of secure employment, affordable real estate, lower costs of living, and lower taxes, including the lack of an income tax and a sales tax.

Physical Place Reasons to Stay

Residents also reported staying because of New Hampshire’s physical appeal, describing the benefits of the state’s natural environment and its geographic location (Table 2). Together, the natural environment and the physical location tied nearly half of all established residents to the state.

There are several subdimensions of the natural environment, including natural amenities, access to the ocean and mountains, outdoor recreation, the state’s natural beauty, and the seasons. Geographic location encompasses proximity to large cities and access to bordering states within New England. When describing why they stay in New Hampshire, many established residents mentioned both the natural environment and geographic location. Residents noted how a short drive gives them access to a variety of natural amenities as well as proximate large cities, illustrating how the natural environment and the geographic

TABLE 2. EXAMPLES OF PHYSICAL PLACE REASONS TO STAY

Dimensions	Percent of All Open-Ended Responses	Example Responses
Natural Environment	39%	“Outdoor activities the state offers” “Beauty of New Hampshire” “I can drive an hour to the ocean and an hour to the mountains” “Balance of seasons” “The environment is cleaner”
Geographic Location	8%	“Really like New England in general” “Within a reasonable drive to Boston” “It’s pretty close to Vermont”

Note: Some people provided more than one physical place reason for staying, so the percentages vary from the total for the category. **Source:** NH Granite State Poll, 2010–2012 and 2018–2019.

location coalesce to help retain residents. Responses like “access to mountains, beach, city,” “driving distance of White Mountains, and ocean or lake, Boston,” and “easy access to Boston as well as oceans, lakes, and mountains” portrayed the interconnected advantages of New Hampshire’s location. These benefits are rooted in the state’s physical geography and natural environment. Given that nearly half of all residents stayed for reasons associated with physical place, it is critical that development efforts recognize

the importance of maintaining and enhancing the state’s physical appeal, both as an outdoor recreation space and an attractive commuter location.

Family Reasons to Stay

Family also motivated many established residents to stay in New Hampshire. However, family can mean different things to different people as reflected in our family subdimensions including general family, to be near family, and household family (Table 3).

TABLE 3. EXAMPLES OF FAMILY REASONS TO STAY

Dimensions	Percent of All Open-Ended Responses	Example Responses
General Family	17%	“Family” “Relatives”
To Be Near Family	16%	“Son and daughter live close” “Grandson lives here” “Proximity to husband’s family” “I take care of an elderly mother”
Household Family	11%	“We’ve established roots here with our children” “My wife likes New Hampshire”

Note: Some people provided more than one family reason for staying, so the percentages vary from the total for the category. **Source:** NH Granite State Poll, 2010–2012 and 2018–2019.

While many respondents simply wrote “family” as their reason to stay, others provided more details including living near grown children, grandchildren, parents, or their spouse’s family. People also stayed because it benefited their immediate family, such as their spouse and children. Family reasons for staying varied across the life cycle, reflecting concerns about both immediate household family and extended family living nearby. As one respondent described, “I have family in New Hampshire: seven grandchildren and three daughters. Even though we visit other states, I would never be able to get my wife out of New Hampshire.” Although specific family-related reasons varied, many residents were eager to remain in New Hampshire because it facilitated relationships with their family.

Social Place Reasons to Stay

Social place was the fourth-most mentioned reason to stay in New Hampshire. It is multidimensional, encompassing six themes: general social place, social connections, being established in New Hampshire, rural and small-town lifestyle, safety, and being a good place to raise children (Table 4). Established residents’ responses illustrated how the social aspects of a place contribute to a person’s quality of life, encouraging residents to stay to enjoy their local neighborhoods, communities, and region.

Social place spanned numerous intertwined themes, but all were tied to the quality of life fostered by residents’ familiarity with the people and communities of New

TABLE 4. EXAMPLES OF SOCIAL PLACE REASONS TO STAY

Dimensions	Percent of All Open-Ended Responses	Example Responses
General Social Place	13%	“Quality of life is incredible” “We like the lifestyle here” “New England culture”
Social Connections	13%	“People are nice and friendly” “We have a lot of friends here” “We feel connected to the community”
Established in New Hampshire	10%	“This is where I call home” “I’ve always considered myself a New Hampshire” “It’s where I was born. It’s where I’m from”
Rural and Small-Town Lifestyle	5%	“Small town feel” “The quiet, cozy atmosphere” “I like that there’s no traffic” “New Hampshire is just very laid back”
Safety	5%	“I feel safe all the time” “Low crime rate”
Good Place to Raise Children	4%	“New Hampshire is a fabulous place to raise children” “More family oriented”

Note: Some people provided more than one social place reason for staying, so the percentages vary from the total for the category. **Source:** NH Granite State Poll, 2010–2012 and 2018–2019.

Hampshire. Responses like “It’s nice and quiet, and people get along,” “Feeling safe and more of a community,” and “I like the country living and I like the people” illustrated how different social place themes interact to provide a high-quality lifestyle to residents. The combination of enriching social connections and a location that enhances safety and serenity drew many residents to remain in the state and emphasizes the power of social place to tether residents to communities.

Conclusion

Established residents’ reasons for staying in New Hampshire were multifaceted and interconnected, underscoring the complex

decision-making process that underlays people’s decisions about where to live, work, and raise families. Nearly 90 percent of these established residents offered at least two different reasons for staying in New Hampshire.

Our in-depth analysis of the top reasons to stay—economics, physical place, family, and social place—illustrates the breadth and depth of factors that cause people to stay. Many respondents mentioned the economic benefits of residing in the state, including employment opportunities, low taxes, and modest housing costs compared to nearby states, all of which reduce the cost of living. Residents valued the proximity of large metropolitan areas and the

easy access to natural amenities, including mountains, lakes, forests, and the ocean. A host of social and family factors also influenced decisions about staying in New Hampshire. Some remained to be near children, grandchildren, parents, or siblings, while others stayed because New Hampshire is a good place to raise children and provides safe communities. Thus, it was not a single factor, but rather an interconnected set of reasons that encouraged residents to reside in New Hampshire long term. Any one element of this matrix may be more important to one established resident than another. For example, retirees may be less concerned about employment opportunities but place more weight on proximity to family and the natural appeal of the state. In contrast, families with young children may value access to employment, the fact that the state is a good place to raise a family, and the ability to easily visit the mountains or the beach.

Given these findings, simple development strategies based on any one factor, like low taxes or stronger environmental laws, are unlikely to trigger substantial population retention alone. Rather, the multidimensional and interconnected reasons identified here provide a roadmap for crafting programs and policies to maintain and enhance the state's economic, social, and natural environment, both to retain more current residents and to attract new ones.

Data

Data were collected by the University of New Hampshire Survey Center's Granite State Poll administered by telephone to New Hampshire residents using random-digit dialing. From 2010–2012 and 2018–2019, 3,372 respondents who were established residents—meaning they had lived in New Hampshire for more than 10 years—were asked their top three reasons for staying in New Hampshire rather than moving to a different state. The questions were open-ended, allowing respondents to offer their answers in their own words, rather than constraining them to a pre-determined list. The data were thematically coded into emergent subdimensions, dimensions, and overarching categories based on why people stayed in New Hampshire. The specificity of the subdimensions created no overlap across the categories. The 9,407 responses fell within seven main categories. There were no substantial differences between responses in the two time periods, so all responses were combined.

Endnote

1. Kenneth M. Johnson, Dante J. Scala, and Andrew Smith, "First in the Nation: New Hampshire's Changing Electorate in Changing Times," Regional Issue Brief No. 60 (Durham, NH: Carsey School of Public Policy, University of New Hampshire, 2019).

About the Authors

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