West Virginia's Lost Youth: Appalachian Stereotypes and Residential Preferences

George Towers

Abstract
This study uses a cognitive mapping survey to examine the effect of Appalachian stereotypes on West Virginia high school students' residential preferences. The research addresses the popularly held hypothesis that West Virginia is suffering out-migration of its young people in part because of negative regional imagery. Survey results provide some support for this position. Appalachian stereotypes are a leading explanation given by survey respondents for their residential disinclinations toward their home state. This research indicates the influence of regional stereotypes on residential intentions and the usefulness of cognitive mapping in exploring geographic stereotyping.

Key words: *Appalachian stereotypes, cognitive mapping, West Virginia.*

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West Virginia is suffering a demographic crisis. Young adults are moving away, the remaining population is aging, and population growth is stagnant. Leaders in state government, economic development, education, and the media are struggling to stem these demographic trends and restore the state's vitality.

Many fear that negative stereotypes associated with West Virginia discourage young people from staying in the state. Like the rest of "Appalachia," West Virginia has been ascribed with crippling economic and social backwardness. Appalachian Studies scholars across the humanities and social sciences have focused considerable attention on the region's popular image. Their findings document the content and sources of Appalachian stereotypes.

The empirical study presented below builds upon methods developed by geographers interested in cognitive mapping. The present survey examines West Virginia high school students' perceptions of their state and their inclinations about staying in the state. Survey results yield two principal findings: cognitive mapping is a useful means of examining geographic stereotypes; and, that the above concerns regarding negative stereotypes are borne out by a strong association between regional imagery and residential intentions.

West Virginia's Lost Youth

> Much of the state's out-migration has been younger people ... The "Graying of America" has already started in West Virginia (West Virginia Health Statistics Center 2002).

West Virginia is losing its young people. In 1990, there were 443,577 West Virginians under age 18. By 2000, this population had fallen to 402,393, a decline of nine percent. In relative terms, West Virginia ranked 38th amongst the states in 1990, with 25 percent of its population under age 18. By 2000, with only 22 percent of West Virginians under 18, the state had sunk to last place (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992; U.S. Census Bureau 2002). The younger adult population has also long been in decline: the number of West Virginians between the ages of 15 and 44 dropped from 886,615 to 747,030 between 1950 and 2000 (West Virginia Health Statistics Center 2003).

The loss of young people intersects two other trends: an aging population and stagnant overall population growth. As the state's youthful population shrinks, older West Virginians comprise an increasingly large share of the state. The number of people aged 45 to 64 grew by over 100,000, and those over age 65 doubled from 137,729 to 276,895 between 1950 and 2000 (West Virginia Health Statistics Center 2003). In 2000, West Virginia was the oldest state in the nation, with a median age of 38.9 years (U.S. Census Bureau 2002).

West Virginia's population growth rate lags behind the rest of the nation. During the 1990s, the state grew by a miniscule 0.8 percent, ranking West Virginia 49th of the 50 states. The growth trend worsened from 2000 to 2001 as the state lost 0.4 percent of its population. Only North Dakota's population loss of 1.2 percent surpassed West Virginia's (U.S. Census Bureau 2002). This pattern is expected to continue: West Virginia's population is projected to grow by only 2.4 percent from 1999 to 2015, 49th fastest in the nation (Morgan and Morgan 2000).

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Both out-migration and low birth rates contribute to the state's moribund growth. Between 1950 and 2000, 797,001 people left the state. This trend is spatially and temporally sensitive to the state's economy, with the most losses concentrated in the state's southern coalfield counties and during layoffs in the coal industry in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1980s. As young adults leave the state, West Virginia's birth rate falls commensurately. By 1997, the Mountain State not only had the lowest birth rate in the nation but also had become the first state to suffer natural decrease as the birth rate fell below the death rate (West Virginia Health Statistics Center 2002).

Responding to Demographic Pressure

The population trends described above are a crisis for West Virginia. In response, state government has created the Providing Real Opportunities for Maximizing In-State Student Excellence (PROMISE) Scholarship Program and the Vision Shared economic development initiative. The issue has also received extensive media coverage and public interest.

The PROMISE Scholarship Program, approved by the state legislature in 1999 and implemented in 2002, is a direct response to out-migration:

> Getting more students into college is the best thing we can do to turn around the economies of our communities, to attract energetic people to the state and to keep our best students home in West Virginia (West Virginia Higher Education Policy Committee 2003).

PROMISE scholarships pay full tuition at any public state college or university or $2,800 towards tuition at any West Virginia private college for West Virginia high school graduates who have earned a B average and made at least average scores on the ACT or SAT college entrance examinations. The state spent $17 million on the program in 2003 and will spend $27 million in 2004 (West Virginia Higher Education Policy Committee 2003).

The West Virginia Council for Community and Economic Development, comprised of state legislators and public and private sector executives appointed by the governor, seeks to improve the competitiveness of West Virginia's economy. Acknowledging that the state is in an economic crisis, the Council finds that out-migration of young people, aging, and slow income growth are the primary causes of West Virginia's economic problems. In response, the Council created the West Virginia: A Vision Shared Economic Development Strategy in 2000. The Vision Shared program will help organize educational advances, economic development, governmental reform, inter-regional cooperation within the state, and improvements in West Virginia's image (West Virginia Council for Community and Economic Development 2003).

The Home for Good project demonstrates the high level of media interest in West Virginia's demographic trends. The *Huntington Herald-Dispatch*, West Virginia Public Broadcasting (WVPB), and Marshall University's WMUL-FM radio station have collaborated to identify the causes of out-migration and to "build a future for young West Virginians." The project not only includes a newspaper article series, television and radio broadcasts, and a website, but also has commissioned a poll of young adults about their reasons for leaving West Virginia and a web-based geographic information system that displays migration patterns to and from the state (*Huntington Herald-Dispatch*, WVPB, and WMUL-FM of Marshall University 2003).

Stereotypes of West Virginia and Appalachia

> Hillbilly Stereotype Is No Joke: Negative Images of West Virginia Hurt Growth, Encourage Young to Leave, Poll Says - Headline in the *Huntington Herald-Dispatch*, April 30, 2002 (Cantley-Falk 2002).

Before assessing the hypothesis advanced by the *Herald-Dispatch* headline, this section of the paper provides a general discussion of geographic stereotyping and an overview of the external sources and functions of Appalachian and West Virginia stereotypes.

Blaming the Hillbilly: West Virginia Stereotypes and Their Sources

> Stereotypes play an important part in the configuration of social space because of the importance of distanciation in the behavior of social groups, that is, distancing from others who are represented negatively, and because of the way in which group images and place images combine to create landscapes of exclusion (Sibley 1995, 14).

Sibley's "landscapes of exclusion" merge ideology with territory in an exercise of social, economic, and political power. By geographically corralling low status groups with negative stereotypes, society's dominant elements cleanse their own lifeworlds of disruptive subordinates, creating sufficient social and physical distance to desensitize themselves to engendering oppression and exploitation.

Appalachia is a stereotypical landscape of exclusion. Indeed, among the National Geography Standards for high school students is the goal to: "Explain how places and regions are stereotyped (e.g., how the West became "wild" or *how all of Appalachia is associated with poverty*)" (Geography Education Standards Project 1994, 196, emphasis added). Of all the Appalachian states, West Virginia, termed the "heart of Appalachia" in a recent award-winning memoir celebrating West Virginia heritage (O'Brien 2002), is the most strongly linked with popular Appalachian imagery. The content, source, and effect of stereotypes of Appalachia and West Virginia are studied by scholars in a variety of fields across the humanities and social sciences.

Appalachian stereotypes consist of violent, lawless, and deviant behavior patterns attended by passive and fatalis-

tic attitudes. Images of mountain feudists and moonshiners are regularly recycled in our popular culture, reinforcing these associations (Billings 2001; Roberts 2003; Shelby 2001).

Stereotypes ascribing these self-defeating behaviors and attitudes engage the poverty that is associated with the region. While historians have demonstrated that West Virginia's and Appalachia's chronic economic distress has resulted primarily from interregional political and financial relationships (cf., Billings and Blee 2000; Eller 1982; Lewis 1998; Salstrom 1994; Williams 2003), Appalachian stereotypes blame the local population for their poverty, holding them responsible for tolerating impoverishment and enabling economic dependency (Billings 2001; Foster and Hummel 1997). The pervasiveness of this stereotypical causality is such that the Vision Shared project itself reifies the reasoning. Answering the question "Why is West Virginia where it is?" the West Virginia Council for Community and Economic Development finds that

> Historically, West Virginia is not a state that has embraced change because, many times, change did not bring good things. ... There is an incredible fear of change among some West Virginians because they believe it threatens the values they hold dear. This has been a significant obstacle to the State moving forward in the past (West Virginia Council for Community and Economic Development 2003).

Researchers studying the sources of Appalachian imagery have located the exclusion and exploitation that Sibley sees visited upon occupants of stereotyped landscapes in self-interested victim blaming. Allen Batteau (1990) claims that the image of a backward Appalachia was "invented" to justify enforcing its cultural and economic dependency on metropolitan America.

Culturally, turn of the century Protestant Home Missionaries and educators such as Berea College's William G. Frost emphasized Appalachian otherness in their altruistic efforts. They contributed to the popular impression that Appalachia is an anachronistic cultural backwater inhabited by practitioners of primitive religions, speakers of defunct dialects, and crafters of authentic folk artifacts. Henry Shapiro's influential *Appalachia on Our Mind* (1978) led charges that they also targeted a needful clientele for their ministrations.

An exchange reported by early twentieth century educator John C. Campbell helps make Shapiro's case. Campbell, traveling homeward with a minister after both had attended a conference on social and educational issues in the southern mountains, "... denounced the unfairness of citing local and particular instances in such a way as to give the impression that they were universal and typical." The minister replied:

> It is all very well to talk in that way, but it doesn't raise money. The instances cited by workers who come before us are true, whether they are true of the whole mountain section or not. The contributing public doesn't want to hear about change and progress, and about improvements other people have made. It wants to hear about the pathetic and the picturesque – to feel that the mountaineer is dependent upon its charity. As far as I am concerned, I believe it is right for the speakers to say such things if it will bring them money. They might as well. Everybody else is doing it! (quoted in Campbell 1921, 324).

In economic matters, scholars assert that Appalachian stereotypes ideologically buttressed internal colonialism and federal dependency. Altina Waller (1988) demonstrates that journalists' presentation of those archetypal hillbillies, the Hatfields and McCoys, as degenerated feudists eased qualms of national conscience over late nineteenth century corporate land grabs and economic disenfranchisement in the mountains.

When the coal industry laid off thousands during the Great Depression, the Hatfields and McCoys were joined by a slew of slothful fictional kinfolk like Al Capp's Li'l Abner, Billy DeBeck and Fred Lasswell's Snuffy Smith, and Paul Webb's *Esquire Magazine* cartoon hillbillies. Batteau (1990, 132) asserts that as the architects of the New Deal sought their solutions, "they drew on the hillbilly as a cartoon character standing for the degeneration and disorder that had resulted from the earlier era of individualism." To correct the private sector's reckless rural industrialization, the New Dealers used the Tennessee Valley Authority's dams and the Resettlement Authority's planned communities to overhaul Appalachia's economic landscape. Despite their differences, the coal barons and the federal planners shared a common view that mountaineers were inherently incapable of regional leadership and encouraged themselves with the conviction that Appalachia depended upon their grand designs (Batteau 1990).

Information and Out-Migration: The Effect of West Virginia Stereotypes

> It is information with which we evaluate and judge, and upon which we often decide. And remember that young, well-educated people are the most mobile of any group in a very mobile society. Their decisions mean *migration.* (Gould 1983, 160, emphasis in original)

Stereotypes influence people's spatial behavior. The primary cost of negative impressions is that they direct people away from places. Our physical avoidance precludes investment of energy and resources in stigmatized places. On a neighborhood scale, Ladd's (1967) classic study of children's mental maps demonstrated how fear and avoidance are spatially structured. White neighborhoods were left blank on Black children's maps, revealing the children's racial apprehensions. In a recent cognitive mapping study of spatial fear, researchers collected Los Angelenos'

mental maps revealing fear of nearby neighborhoods. While subjects' fears focused on the presumed likelihood of crime, analysis showed that fear of crime was triggered by stereotypes of minority neighborhoods and communicated by television and casual communication (Matei, Ball-Rokeach, and Qiu 2001). Similarly, negative regional imagery generates out-migration. For example, Gould and White (1986, 136) assert that there is a causal correlation between young adults' unfavorable perceptions of the Great Plains and out-migration from the region.

Stereotypes of Appalachia weigh heavily upon residents. Throughout the southern Appalachians, many people resent the regional derogation described in the preceding section (Raitz and Ulack 1981). In West Virginia, expressed opposition to the state's disparagement is commonplace. The Home for Good poll found that 83 percent of young adults in the state agree with the statement that "resentment of the 'hillbilly' stereotype is deeply rooted in the consciousness of West Virginians" (*Huntington Herald-Dispatch*, WVPB, and WMUL-FM of Marshall University 2003).

The state's media and universities broadcast this outrage. The *Charleston Gazette*, the capital city's morning newspaper, regularly publishes articles rebutting Appalachian stereotypes and lamenting their ubiquity (Brandt 1993; Casto 1996; Hewitt 2004; Janovsky 1996; O'Brien 2003; Swint 1998; Towers 2004). For the television audience, WVPB producer John Nakashima reveals how the hillbilly label causes self-directed shame and resentment of outsiders in his 1995 documentary "Mountaineer" (WNPB Morgantown and WVPB 1995). Similarly, the state's two research universities each sponsor academic programs—Marshall University's Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Gender in Appalachia and West Virginia University's West Virginia Dialect Project—focused on redressing the unfairness of Appalachian imagery.

West Virginia prose authors provide a final example, having found the juxtaposition of their sense of place with outsiders' biases an evocative subject. Popular recent expressions of this genre include Denise Giardina's *The Unquiet Earth* (1992) and John O'Brien's *At Home in the Heart of Appalachia* (2002).

Made aware that they come from a "landscape of exclusion" and that to remain in residence will reinforce their otherness, young West Virginians are led to doubt their future in the state. Seventy-eight percent of 18 to 34 year olds believe that negative stereotypes hurt the state's ability to attract business investment, and 64 percent think that unfavorable imagery not only diminishes West Virginians' self-esteem but also limits their collective ability to address issues facing the state (*Huntington Herald-Dispatch*, WVPB, and WMUL-FM of Marshall University 2003). This uncertainty finds expression in out-migration. According to Kevin Compton, 30, a public relations professional from southern West Virginia, "[youth] are surrounded by images and talk that says, 'We're disadvantaged' ... If you want to accomplish something, you have to go somewhere else. If everyone gets that mindset, then it turns into a truth" (quoted in Cantley-Falk 2002).

Mapping Spatial Preferences

By eliciting patterns in people's spatial preferences, geographers can contribute to our understanding of regional stereotypes. Pioneered by Peter Gould and Rodney White (Gould 1965, Gould and White 1986), "mental mapping" methodology is simple: respondents are given reference maps and asked to rank places according to where they would like to live. Mapping the composite rankings produces a vivid impression of people's spatial preferences. The curiosity sparked by Gould's maps, coupled with the accessibility of his methodology, has made mental mapping a popular exercise in geography classrooms at all educational levels.

Over the years, geographers have offered valuable procedural refinements. In terms of measurement, forcing subjects to rank a list of places may falsely represent people's ambiguous perceptions of places as precise differentiations between places. Instead, asking respondents to assign interval measures of spatial preferences will produce more adequate results (Thill and Sui 1993).

Turning to interpretation of results, mental mapping researchers often offer their own explanations of their subjects' preference patterns. For example, Gould and White's composite maps from college students in several northern and western states reveal a "West Virginia Depression" in residential desirability. The authors speculate that

> Problems of poverty, rapacious strip-mining, and an appalling lack of decent medical care in this area of Appalachia, are all well-publicized aspects that form part of the information available to this group of socially aware students [from California] (Gould and White 1986, 57).

In light of the pervasiveness of negative Appalachian imagery, Gould and White are perhaps correct to ascribe students' aversions to regional stereotypes. It is lamentable, however, that not only do they uncritically endorse such "socially aware" perceptions but also that they did not ask subjects to provide their own reasons for their rankings. While more recent researchers have correlated spatial preferences with the demographic characteristics of the places rated, they too have not collected respondents' ranking rationales (Matei, Ball-Rokeach, and Qiu 2001, Teo 1994). Mental mapping methods may, therefore, be easily improved with survey information about why subjects find places desirable or undesirable (Cutter 1985).

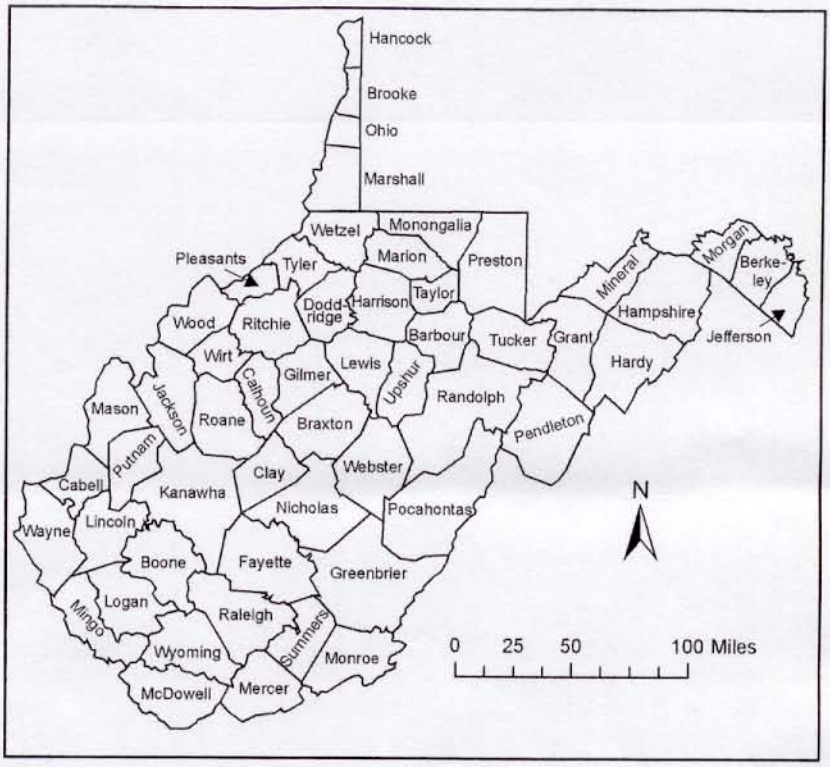
Residential Desirability and Migration Survey of West Virginia High School Students

Survey Design and Goals

The overarching goal of the cognitive mapping survey discussed in this section is to understand West Virginia high school students' residential intentions. Students were asked if they want to live in West Virginia after complet-

ing their education and to identify the regions within West Virginia that are the best and worst to live in. They were then asked to identify the qualities that make the regions they identified the best and worst in West Virginia. To ensure that the relative influence of regional imagery could be accurately assessed, survey questions were brief and open-ended, making no mention of Appalachian stereotypes.

In contrast to Gould's mental mapping method, students were not presented with a list of places to rank, but were given a county outline map of the state (see Fig. 1) and asked to draw the boundaries of their "best" and "worst" regions on the map. Students were not required to rate places with which they were unfamiliar or towards which they were ambivalent (Thill and Sui 1993).



Map 1. West Virginia Counties.

Classroom Application of the Survey to Meet National Geography Standards

Middle school and high school teachers may easily adapt the survey described in this paper to their geographic region and administer it in their classrooms. Such survey exercises will meet three categories of learning outcomes that are included in the National Geography Standards.

First, survey exercises will identify the content and sources of regional imagery. The creation and influence of regional stereotypes is covered in Standard 5E for grades 5-8, which requires that students are able to "Evaluate the influences and effects of regional labels and images ..." (Geography Education Standards Project 1994, 153).

Second, survey exercises will help assess the influence of regional imagery upon students' residential intentions. The survey's elicitation of residential preferences will assist in meeting Standard 2D for grades 5-8 which assesses students' ability to "Analyze ways in which people's mental maps reflect an individual's attitudes toward places ...", and Standard 2C for grades 9-12 which requires students to be able to "Compare the mental maps of individuals to identify common factors that affect the development of spatial understanding and preferences ..." (Geography Education Standards Project 1994, 147, 187).

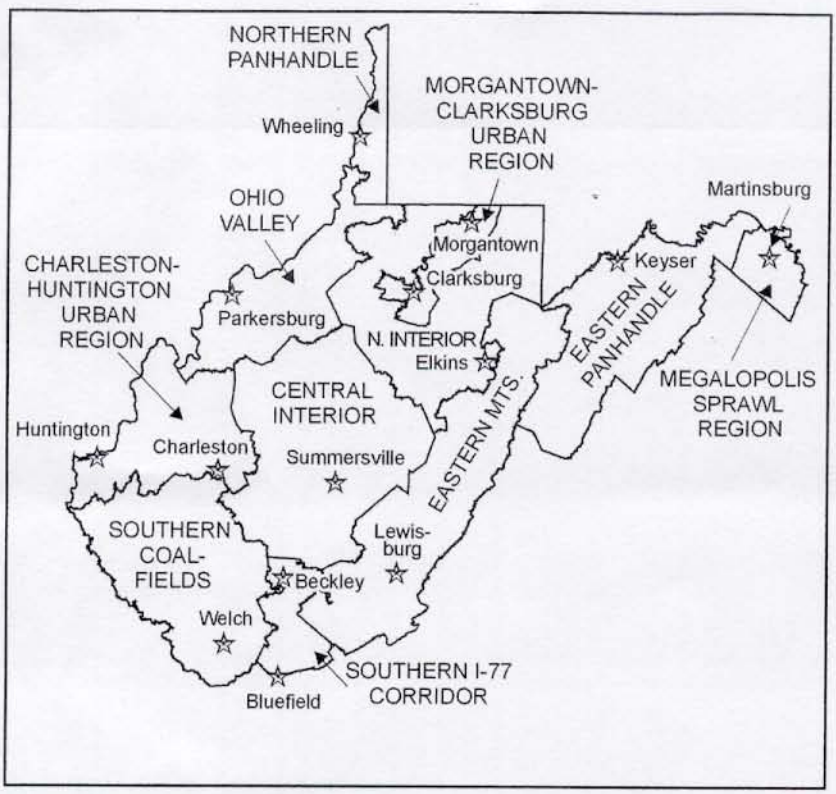
Third, because the survey can be tailored to gather background information about respondents, it will help teachers implement Standard 6B for grades 9-12 which is met by students' ability to "Explain how individuals view places and regions on the basis of their stage of life, sex, social class, ethnicity, values, and belief systems ..." (Geography Education Standards Project 1994, 195).

Regional Geography of West Virginia

By asking students to identify their own preference regions, the survey is designed to capture the perceptual significance of intra-state regional geography. West Virginia, like most states, is riven with deep regional differences (Brown 1974; Hill 1977; Lieble 1974; Williams 2001). Vernacular understandings of these regional differences undoubtedly informed students' responses to the survey. Figure 2 provides an introduction to the regional geography of West Virginia, dividing the state into formal regions based on a blend of historical, cultural, socio-economic, and political characteristics (Towers and Manzo 2003).

The Civil War led to the creation of West Virginia and left a cultural fault line splitting the state in half. Unionists in what would become northern West Virginia successfully seceded from Virginia in 1863, forcibly bringing southern counties into the new state. To this day, southern West Virginians are southerners. Very broadly, they speak with a local variant of the southern accent, belong to Baptist churches, and identify their ancestry as "American." Northern West Virginians tend to sound like their neighbors in Pennsylvania and Ohio, attend Methodist and Catholic churches, and claim German, Irish, and Italian heritage.

Regional economic differences result from settlement patterns and environmental provinces that run northeast to southwest. The first European settlers arrived in the eighteenth century, spreading northwestward from Virginia's Shenandoah Valley into West Virginia's eastern ridges and valleys. Today, the Eastern Mountains and Eastern Panhandle regions contain vast federal lands and are sparsely populated. The regional economy is based on tourism, farming, and forestry. The state's easternmost tip flattens into the Shenandoah Valley itself. Berkeley and Jefferson Counties are facing sharply different challenges from the rest of West Virginia as they absorb sprawl from the southern end of America's East Coast "Megalopolis."



Map 2. Regions of West Virginia.

West Virginia's Ohio Valley and Northern Panhandle regions were originally settled from the Ohio River in the Revolutionary War era. Along the river, heavy industry came to dominate the economy, and the Northern Panhandle cities of Wheeling and Weirton emerged as steel centers. The Kanawha River, a tributary of the Ohio, is an industrial waterway flanked by Charleston's chemical plants. In the Kanawha and Ohio valleys, communities are struggling to make the transition to the post-industrial economy.

The forbiddingly rugged interior of the state was settled last, experiencing population growth in the mid-1800s and mining and timber booms at the end of that century. Today, the state's interior suffers a depressed natural resource economy. Figure 2 divides the interior into three subregions, the Northern Interior, Central Interior, and Southern Coalfields. The Northern and Central Interior regions are on opposite sides of the approximate boundary between the northern and southern strains of American culture. The considerably greater reliance on the coal industry separates the Southern Coalfields from the Central Interior. The Southern Coalfields, home to Devil Anse Hatfield and the Dancing Outlaw, is the part of the state most associated with stereotypical Appalachia.

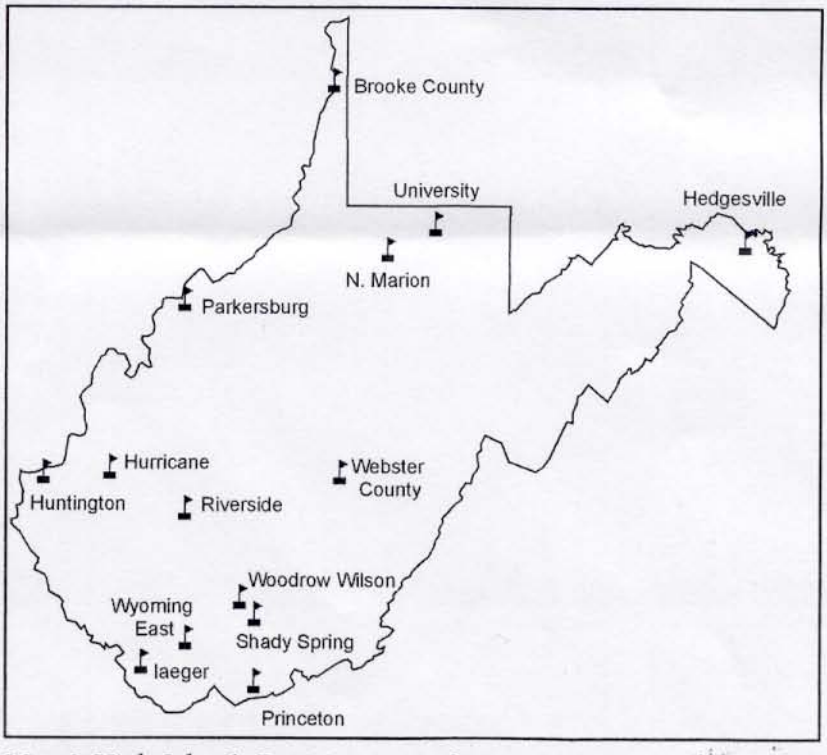
An investigation of young West Virginians' residential intentions must account for these significant regional differences. By identifying these differences in regional perceptions, the survey is designed to better elucidate contributing factors to migration decisions and assess the influence of stereotypes on geographic perceptions and residential intentions.

Survey Administration

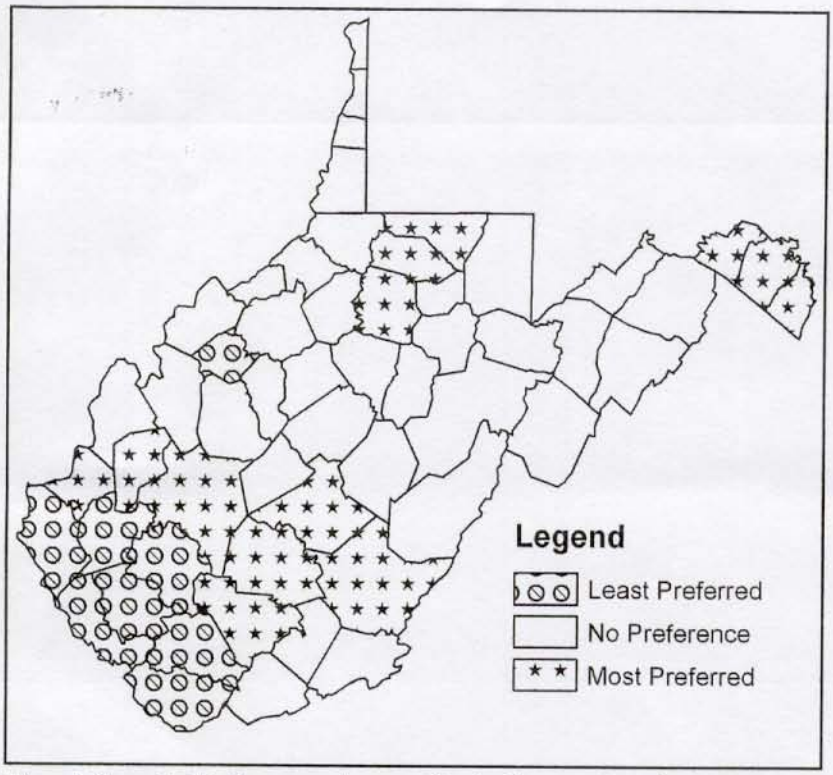
The survey was administered by West Virginia Geographic Alliance teachers to their students in fourteen high schools across the state in the Fall of 2003. Figure 3 shows the location of these schools. Completed surveys from 689 students were received and tabulated. Instructions for administering the survey were mailed along with the surveys. The survey instructions were intended to draw out students' personal perceptions by prohibiting group work and the use of reference materials beyond the survey's reference map of West Virginia.

Survey Results: Regional Preference Patterns

Residential preferences were mapped by recording the counties within students' "best" and "worst" regions. West Virginia counties are a useful level of cartographic generalization primarily because a large majority of respondents used county lines to demarcate their regions (see Figure 1). Although the survey instructions were intended to discourage strict reliance on county boundaries by asking respondents to identify multi-county regions that contained all or parts of two or more counties, the county lines displayed



Map 3. High Schools Participating in Survey.



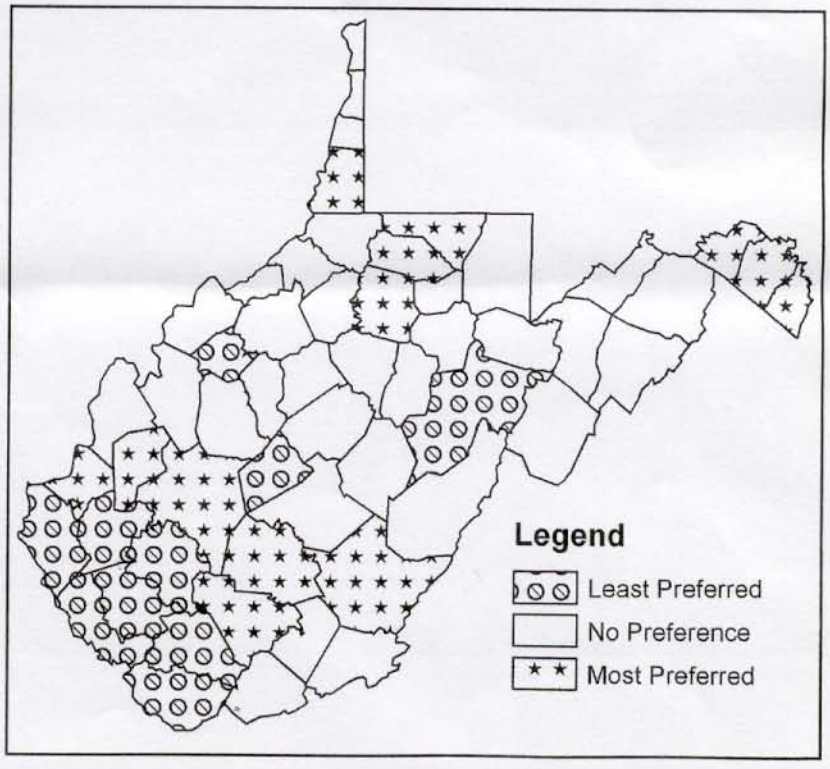
Map 4. County Preferences Among Entire Survey Population.

on the survey instrument undoubtedly encouraged the use of county limits as regional boundaries. Perhaps of even greater influence are counties' roles as functional regions in West Virginia, especially in that school systems are organized by county. Finally, county boundaries are useful because West Virginians tend to identify with their county and its history (North 1998). Fortuitously, the state's fifty-five counties are numerous enough and similar enough in size that they do not greatly constrain the identification of regions, that is, counties can be grouped into a vast number of regional configurations.

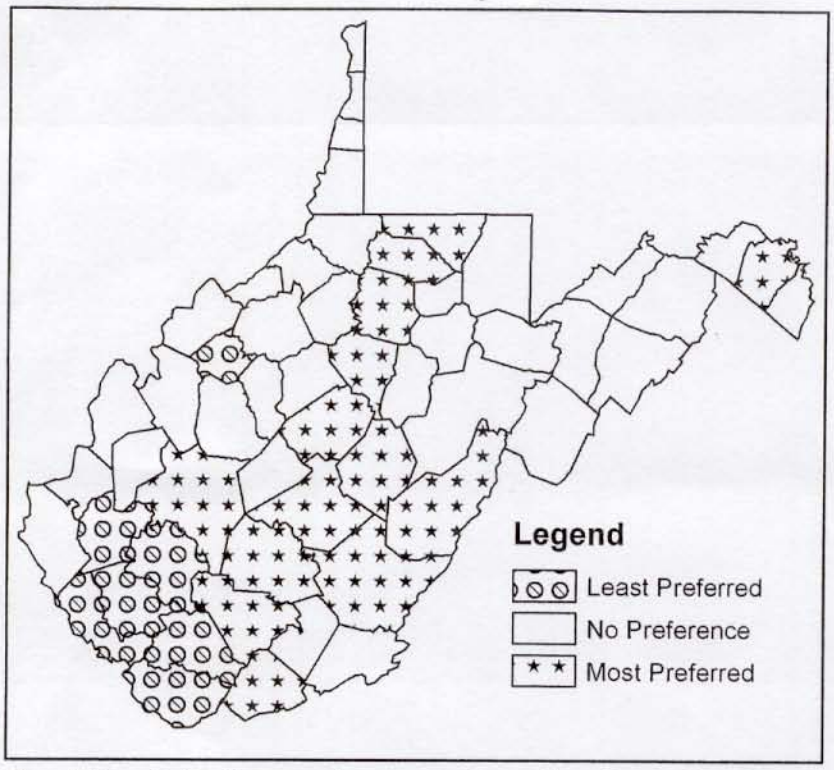
County preference consensuses were calculated by subtracting the number of respondents locating the county in a "worst" region from the number placing the county in a "best" region, then expressing the difference as a percentage of the survey population in question. In other words, a 100 percent positive consensus means that every respondent included the county in a "best" region; a 0 percent consensus means that the same number of respondents included the county in a "best" region as in a "worst" region; and, a 100 percent negative consensus indicates that every respondent placed the county in a "worst" region. This calculation method builds upon Heatwole's (1993) procedure of asking subjects to list the states they would most like to live in and least like to live in and then classifying states according to their preference margin. For example, with a group of 25 subjects, Heatwole categorized states with a positive margin of between one and four respondents as "moderately desirable," and those with a margin of five or more as "very desirable." The "consensus" statistic used here standardizes these preference margins as a percentage.

This method was used to create Figures 4, 5, and 6. On these choropleth maps, counties are divided into three classes, "most preferred," "no preference," and "least preferred." "Most preferred" counties were included in a "best" region by a consensus of five percent or more of the respondents. Conversely, "least preferred" counties were included in a "worst" region by a consensus of five percent or more. Counties were placed in the "no preference" category if their consensus statistic fell between positive five and negative five percent.

Figure 4 shows the preferences of the entire survey population. Students generally prefer urban areas and disdain the Southern Coalfields region. This pattern is consistent regardless of students' residential intentions. Three hundred and sixty one of the 689 respondents, a 52 percent majority, are "leavers" who do not want to live in West Virginia after completing their education. Two hundred and twenty (32 %) are "stayers" wishing to remain in the state, and 108 (16 %) are undecided. Figure 5 shows leavers' residential preferences and Figure 6 shows stayers' preferences. While stayers are more favorable



Map 5. County Preferences Among Students Planning to Leave West Virginia.



Map 6. County Preferences Among Students Planning to Stay in West Virginia.

towards rural counties and leavers show more of an urban bias, the two groups share a pronounced aversion to the Southern Coalfields. In sum, Figures 4, 5, and 6 collectively demonstrate that young West Virginians focus their apprehensions about their state on this region.

Survey Results: Regional Preferences and Appalachian Stereotypes

The close relationship between this spatial pattern and Appalachian stereotypes is documented with students' explanations for their regional preferences. Regionally specific responses were tabulated by matching the response categories with the regions demarcated in Figure 2. To eliminate the effect that regional residents have on the apparent desirability of their home regions, regionally specific responses were divided between those from "outsider" high schools, located outside each region, and, those from "insider" high schools.

Table 1 shows outsiders' leading negative regionally specific responses. Remarkably, although all respondents considered all of the regions shown in Figure 1, all of the top five responses refer to the southern coalfield region. Of the 689 survey respondents, 108 are from the southern coalfields, leaving 581 "outsiders." The categories of poverty and the personal qualities of southern coalfields residents lead the list. While listed separately, the two perceptual categories are closely related. As discussed above, Appalachian poverty is stereotypically explained by social pathology. The longstanding popularity of the "culture of poverty" theory attests that, for many Americans, poverty reflects not so much the failings of the larger economy as the personal shortcomings of the poor themselves. Indeed, as the following survey responses about the southern coalfields suggest, idealizations of Appalachian people and assessments of coalfields poverty are inseparable:

> "It is terribly poor and hillbillyish down there" – *Brooke County student*
>
> "Uncivilized like, basic necessities ... are non-existent (computers, TV)." – *Brooke County student*
>
> "It has a reputation for being nothing but rednecks and welfare people." – *Huntington student*

These responses reveal that the impressions some West Virginians have of southern coalfield residents conform to the stereotypical slurs directed at Appalachian people in general. Repeatedly, the terms "hillbilly," "redneck," and "hick" were used to explain why the southern coalfields are undesirable residential real estate.

Along with these insults, respondents from other parts of the state harbor resentment over the injury that southern coalfield residents have supposedly done to West Virginia's reputation.

> "This is where West Virginia gets its bad reputation" – *Huntington student*
>
> "Boone County is evil! ... They are the epitome of WV stereotypes." – *Morgantown student*
>
> "There was a movie[1] that was going around about people that lived there [Boone County] and they were giving West Virginia a bad name." – *Webster County student*
>
> "The people, racism, no environmental policy, they give the state a bad name, not too bright." – *Morgantown student*

These students voice the ironic opinion that by labeling their neighbors as hillbillies, they can exempt their own corners of West Virginia from the unfairness of Appalachian stereotypes.

Aware of outsiders' attitudes, southern West Virginians resent their stereotyped portrayal. For example, a McDowell County student wrote: "People look down on us. We have some of the best people come from our area. They [the media] play us off like we're stupid."

Southern coalfields residents view their region's struggles on a structural, not individual scale. As Table 2 shows, they cite the lack of jobs, followed by pollution and the scarcity of recreational amenities as their region's principal drawbacks. Economic anxiety is focused on the failure of the local economy to provide work, not on the poor themselves. Similarly, characteristics of local residents are not a push factor. Instead, for those southern coalfields students who included their home region among the best in West

Table 1. Leading Negative Regional Qualities Reported by Outsiders Statewide.

Region	Negative Quality	Respondents	Percentage of Outsiders (n = 581)
Southern Coalfields	Poverty and "backwardness"	57	9.8 %
Southern Coalfields	Personal qualities of regional residents	50	8.6 %
Southern Coalfields	Floods	49	8.4 %
Southern Coalfields	Lack of jobs	38	6.5 %
Southern Coalfields	Nothing to do	37	6.4 %

Virginia, their neighbors' character traits are the region's strongest asset.

Summary

This study used a cognitive mapping survey to explore geographic stereotypes and out-migration. The results demonstrate that by asking respondents to explain their spatial preferences, cognitive mapping surveys are a useful means of eliciting and analyzing geographic stereotypes. The Appalachian stereotypes investigated by humanities scholars and social scientists pervade the popular imagination and emerge prominently in the present cognitive mapping survey results.

As feared by many West Virginians, these stereotypes channel dissatisfaction with their state and discourage young residents from staying home and contributing to the state's future. Ironically, while those outside West Virginia who are inclined to apply Appalachian stereotypes do so without making regional distinctions within the Mountain State, Table 1 shows that locals, themselves targeted by outsiders' clichés, insist on inflicting Appalachian stereotypes on their fellow West Virginians. This cascading cycle of victim blaming causes the young to scorn their state. As Figure 5 shows, the Southern Coalfields region, recipient of West Virginians' Appalachian stereotyping, is rated by those expecting to out-migrate as the worst place to live in the state. Table 3 corroborates this finding, showing that a higher percentage among those making stereotypical slurs against the Southern Coalfields plan to leave the state than among the remainder of the survey population. Setting aside the 108 respondents who were undecided about their residential plans, a chi-square test indicated that the relationship between the use of Appalachian stereotypes and plans to leave the state is statistically significant at the .05 confidence level.

Table 3. Use of Appalachian Stereotypes and Residential Intentions (Totals Calculated Left to Right).

	Intend to Stay in West Virginia	Intend to Leave West Virginia	Residential Intentions Undecided	Total
Used Appalachian Stereotypes in Reference to the Southern Coalfields	9 (18 %)	33 (66 %)	8 (16 %)	50 (100 %)
Did Not Use Appalachian Stereotypes in Reference to the Southern Coalfields	211 (33 %)	328 (51 %)	100 (16 %)	639 (100 %)

$x^2 = 5.33$ with one degree of freedom, significant at the .05 level.

These inter-regional resentments are matched by West Virginians' identification with larger, more prestigious communities outside the state. The state's urban geography facilitates centrifugal tendencies as many of the state's

Table 2. Leading Negative Qualities of the Southern Coalfields According to Residents of the Region.

Negative Quality	Respondents	Percentage of Insiders (n = 108)
Lack of jobs	34	31.5 %
Pollution	17	15.7 %
Nothing to do	9	8.3 %
Crime and drugs	9	8.3 %
Floods	7	6.5 %
Poverty and "backwardness"	7	6.5 %

larger cities and towns lie near surrounding states (see Figures 1 and 2). For example, among students surveyed from the Northern Panhandle, the most attractive residential quality of their region is its proximity to cities in Pennsylvania and Ohio; for Morgantown students, access to Pittsburgh ranks behind only West Virginia University among their region's positive features. Looking towards their futures across the state line, young West Virginians are encouraged by regional stereotypes to turn their backs on home.

This study demonstrates that Appalachian stereotypes promote out-migration from West Virginia. To borrow the subtitle of a recent anthology, "confronting stereotypes" is imperative. The popularity of regional slurs gave rise to deconstructionist Appalachian scholarship which charged a variety of public sources—for example, journalists, philanthropists, and bureaucrats—with their dissemination. Survey results attest to the relevance of this research by revealing how deeply negative regional imagery is implanted in West Virginians' consciousness. Of the fifty respondents volunteering Appalachian clichés as reasons for avoiding southern West Virginia, 36 responded to the request for identification of their source of regional information. Of these 36, eighteen claimed their personal travels informed their opinions; twelve listed family members, friends, or acquaintances as their source of information; and, three cited conventional wisdom in the form of "hearsay" or "everybody says so." In other words, ninety-two percent (33 of 36) of these respondents report that West Virginians tell themselves and each other to look down on their state. While negative messages from the public sphere would be easier to address, only three such sources were identified—the media, a movie, and a junior high teacher—and these by only one student each. Despite these challenges, acknowledging the pervasiveness of regional stereotypes, understanding their deleterious effects, and committing to confronting them are necessary steps towards redirecting young West Virginians' residential plans.

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Note

1. The movie in question is probably *The Dancing Outlaw*, a 1991 documentary produced by Jacob Young for West Virginia Public Broadcasting. The film depicts the eccentricities of Boone County resident Jesco White. As the website devoted to the film (www.dancingoutlaw.com) reports, *The Dancing Outlaw* is a "cult classic" and "a revealing portrait of the nearly extinct hillbilly culture."

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