

Why Families DO or DON'T Leave Farming

More than financial sacrifice or low farm income is involved in a farm family's thinking of a change in occupation or location. Other factors are social, psychological and economic ones other than low farm income.

by Gordon E. Bivens

THE GAP between farm and nonfarm family incomes continues to widen—with nonfarm incomes averaging higher. Thus, some farm families with currently low incomes could expect to receive higher incomes in nonfarm employment. But even though the movement from farm to nonfarm employment has been sizable, it hasn't been as great or as rapid as might be expected on the basis of the income gap. Why hasn't it been greater or more rapid?

There are some definite limitations on the speed with which movement out of agriculture takes place. One of these is that *money income* in itself apparently *isn't* the *most important* thing to *all* farm families. It appears that most additional adjustments will come as people currently established in farming relinquish control of farming operations because of retirement, death or other reasons—and as fewer young people enter farming and more seek nonfarm careers.

The decisions, in each instance, will largely be ones of personal choice—based on many different factors. No individual or group has yet proposed saying this family will “go,” this one will “stay.”

Farm families and young people will make their own choices, based on the factors that are most important to *them*.

What Factors?

Psychological, social *and* economic factors will affect the decisions or choices of both established farm families and young persons—in turn affecting the rate at which farm people move to nonfarm environments and occupations or stay in farming. Economic considerations will be important, but not necessarily the *most* important, in a family's or young person's decision. Let's look at some of the factors involved. From here on, we'll talk in terms of established farm families. But the same factors, perhaps in different degrees, apply also to young people who may or may not enter farming.

Psychological Factors: Uncertainty of the results of a move off the farm is one obstacle to movement. A family's *uncertainty* about their aptitude for unfamiliar work, to find satisfying personal ties in a new community and to adapt to different social conditions may make a family hesitate to move from familiar surroundings. And the relative certainty of the old adds to this effect. More cer-

tainty of personal abilities to meet their present situations, satisfactions from having their “roots” in a community and their degree of social status make for a tendency to stay in familiar surroundings doing familiar work.

Social Factors: Family ties, community loyalty and local commitments may tend to keep a family from moving despite possibilities of higher earnings in off-farm employment. Here, as with the psychological factors, monetary and nonmonetary satisfactions vie for consideration and serve as a backdrop against which decisions are made. For example, a family may feel strongly about farming as a way of life—the chance for parents and children to work together, opportunity for sons to receive direct occupational training from their father, etc. If so, financial sacrifices may fade into the background. They may not be ignored, but their place in the family decision may be relatively minor.

Economic Factors: A low average farm income isn't the only economic factor that affects choices, either. The costs of moving from the farm to a nonfarm location, uncertainty about economic opportunities in any given location and differences in opportunities at various locations are

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some of the other economic factors involved. Additional ones include costs of training (either new training or "refresher" training) uncertainty about nonfarm family living costs compared with farm living costs and the possibility of unemployment or lack of a steady job. Uncertainty regarding *any* one or more of these may be great enough to prevent movement.

Some of these considerations tend to run at cross currents, creating a paradox for a family. Economic sacrifice or low income may be spurring a family to think of moving. But the costs of movement and adaptation and the uncertainties surrounding these may be having an opposite effect, as may some of the noneconomic factors.

Must Have "Need"

Before a family will voluntarily move from a farm, it must have what the sociologists call a "felt need." Various forces may give rise to felt needs—such things, for example, as desire for greater money income, regular hours or income and fringe benefits.

One indication of a recognized "felt need" is *consideration* of a change in occupation for the head of the household. This isn't a fool-proof indication; a family might recognize a felt need to do something but may not have thought of a change in occupation as a solution. The family may, instead, have considered only other ways of solving the situation. But a family that *has considered* changing vocations obviously has recognized a felt need of some sort.

Survey Results . . .

We conducted an interview survey among 203 farm families selected randomly in southern Iowa and northern Missouri in 1957.

Only about 8 percent said at that time that they had seriously considered leaving farming for another occupation. But of these 8 percent, low farm income was the reason most frequently mentioned for *considering* a change in occupation. Other reasons included health, a preference for other work and desire for retirement.

Though they had considered a change in occupation, none of the 8 percent had made a change at the time of the survey. Why?

Most of the reasons given involved the kinds of psychological, social and economic factors (other than low farm income) that we mentioned earlier. Family ties to the farm was mentioned most often as a reason for *not* making a change. Others included lack of training for nonfarm work, waiting to work out arrangements for transferring the family farm, hopefulness about future crop and income prospects, health and social security considerations.

In each case, the latter types of factors were sufficient—at least temporarily—to offset the factor or factors that had prompted a family to consider a change.

We conducted two related surveys in north-central and southern Iowa. We asked randomly selected farm families in both areas to estimate their annual money income for the 2 years preceding 1957. Then we asked them to estimate the income they would have to expect to *consider* moving to nonfarm employment (1) in the same locality, (2) 100 miles away and (3) 300 miles away. The families indicated they'd have to have from 1.5 to 2.7 times their present farm incomes to consider nonfarm employment—with the amount increasing as the probable distance of nonfarm employment increased from their present locality.

The southern Iowa families in-

dicated they'd need 2.3 times their present incomes to consider a change to nonfarm employment in their present locality. The comparable figure for families in north-central Iowa was 1.5 times. With nonfarm location 300 miles away, the figures were 2.7 and 2 times, for southern Iowa and north-central Iowa families, respectively.

In a Nutshell . . .

The three surveys have tended to confirm that more than financial sacrifice (low farm income) is involved for a farm family to consider or to make a change in occupation. Most of the other factors involved are psychological, social and economic factors other than low farm income.

From these surveys, it appears that farm families in both southern and north-central Iowa are willing to accept money incomes in farming considerably less than they'd have to expect from off-farm employment. But there were some differences between the southern and north-central Iowa families, too.

On the basis of incomes required before considering a move to a nonfarm occupation, southern Iowa families appear to be more firmly "committed" to agriculture than north-central Iowa families. On the other hand, southern Iowa families appear to place a smaller dollar premium on having off-farm employment close at hand once expected incomes were high enough for them to seriously consider off-farm employment opportunities.

The combination of low farm incomes and potentially higher money earnings from nonfarm employment undoubtedly is responsible for much of the continuing movement from farm to nonfarm employment. But, as might be expected and as our surveys have tended to confirm, much more than the combination of these two factors is involved in the thinking and decisions of individual families. And it may be more and more important to recognize these other factors as we consider and develop future farm policy.

Estimated average farm income and expected nonfarm income required for families to change to off-farm employment.

	Est. annual net farm income (1955-56)	No. times farm income necessary to change to nonfarm employment		
		Same locality	100 mi. away	300 mi. away
Iowa area				
North-central	\$3,279	1.5	1.8	2.0
Southern	3,143	2.3	2.5	2.7