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FEWER AMERICANS UPROOT THEMSELVES FOR A NEW JOB

Better job prospects near home, growing reluctance to disrupt children's routines prompt more people to stay put

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Fewer U.S. workers are moving around the country to seek new job opportunities, as changing family ties and more openings near home make people less willing to uproot their lives for work.

About 3.5 million people relocated for a new job last year, according to U.S. census data, a 10 percent drop from 3.8 million in 2015. The numbers have fluctuated between 2.8 million and 4.5 million since the government started tracking annual job-related relocations in 1999 – but have been trending lower overall, even as the U.S. population grew by nearly 20 percent over that stretch.

Experts cite a number of factors that in some periods have kept people in one place, including a depressed value for their home or limited job openings. In the current strong economy, real-estate values have rebounded, but that has made housing costs prohibitively high in some regions where jobs are abundant, such as major East and West Coast cities.

And while more positions are available, often at better pay, many people aren't interested in relocating for family reasons or because they can get a better job nearby without the disruption and expense of moving.

Heather Murray recently got a call from a former colleague who tried to tempt her to his tech company. The senior vice president role he had in mind came with more pay and more responsibility – the logical next step in her career. But it also came with a deal breaker: She would have to move from Florida to a city in the Mid-Atlantic region.

Ms. Murray opted to keep her vice president position at technology distributor Tech Data Corp. in Clearwater, Fla. Though she earns more than \$300,000 a year, she said her refusal to entertain offers in other cities has held back her career.

"Making another \$100,000, \$200,000, whatever it is, that's not what motivates me," said Ms. Murray, who shares custody of her two children with her nearby ex-husband. "Kids need their parents."

People with children are less likely to move after a divorce than they were in prior decades, as more parents opt for shared-custody arrangements that include their children living with them for periods of time, according to Thomas Cooke, a sociologist at the University of Connecticut who studies U.S. mobility patterns. "Any way you measure it, families are more complex than they used to be," he said.

Mr. Cooke said adults increasingly make decisions with their children's input, partly out of a reluctance to disrupt their routines and friendships.

Both men and women are spending more time on child care, with a majority of fathers saying that parenting is extremely important to their identity, according to the Pew Research Center.

Pew data also show women are contributing more to their family's incomes, making it difficult to replicate a family's standard of living if only one spouse has a new job waiting in a different city. And as the country grows older, the number of adults caring for aging parents has grown.

Such trends are chipping away at the once-common pattern of families following careers – typically the husband's – and changing how workers think about distant job opportunities.

The share of job seekers relocating has fallen dramatically since the late 1980s, when more than a third moved to take new opportunities elsewhere, according to surveys from outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas Inc. In the 1990s, job-related moves ebbed and flowed at between 20 percent and 35 percent of the labor force, then fell below 20 percent after 2000. About 10 percent of job seekers relocated in the first half of this year, Challenger said.

Aimee Cohen, a career coach in Denver, said relocation packages have gotten skimpier and even executives wonder how long a new gig will last.

"You're not made any promises," Ms. Cohen said, adding that many employees' mentality is, "Am I going to uproot my family? For what? And for how long?"

Doug Ringer and his wife have made seven moves during their 22 years of marriage, all of them driven by his job changes. The most recent was in 2014, when the Ringers moved with their two children from Louisville, Ky. to Fort Collins, Colo., so he could take a product-management job with Schneider Electric SE .

Mr. Ringer explained the new opportunity to his daughter and son, then 17 and 15. "We asked for their opinions."

The children wanted to see Fort Collins, so Mr. Ringer arranged for Schneider to fly the family to Colorado for a few days. Though his children agreed to the move, he said he now feels it was too tough on his daughter, who had to start a new high school in the middle of her junior year.

When Mr. Ringer lost his job in a round of layoffs in January, looking for a new job far afield was off the table, he said. His son was still in high school, and his daughter is enrolled in a college nearby. His wife is happy at her job at Colorado State University, where she is a veterinary technician.

For now, Mr. Ringer is consulting with small and midsize businesses while continuing to look for work locally.

John Touey, a principal with executive search firm Salveson Stetson Group Inc., said he used to assume moving wasn't a problem unless a job candidate specifically mentioned that it was.

"Now we go into the situation thinking it probably is an issue, so we need to bring it up," he said, likening his job these days to that of a relocation consultant. He said he has to talk with job seekers about their spouse's careers and children's school needs – "the whole life situation of the candidate."

Dan Gallagher, 46, has been job hunting since the end of 2017, after he left his senior vice president role at Comcast Corp. in the Philadelphia area after 17 years with the company. His four young sons' lives are a top consideration as he sizes up potential positions.

In previous generations, "you had this binding loyalty to the organization and if a promotion meant you had to move, you'd do that," Mr. Gallagher said. "Today, there's so many moving pieces."