

# Beyond the Numbers: Rethinking What Drives Economic Change in Gateway Communities

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By: Dr. Jordan Smith, Director, [USU Institute of Outdoor Recreation & Tourism](#)

As someone who's spent over a decade studying gateway and natural amenity region (GNAR) communities, I've heard a common refrain from local leaders: *"Our town is different."* And in many ways, that's absolutely true. But when it comes to the economic realities facing full-time residents—especially around income levels and inequality—our latest research suggests the story is more complicated.

Along with my colleagues, former USU Masters student Elizabeth Depew and current PhD student Ahamed Zakaria, I recently [published a study in \*Tourism Economics\*](#) that examined income dynamics in 39 gateway communities located near national parks across the American West. We looked at how factors like park visitation, in-migration, and seasonal housing use relate to both median incomes and income inequality over time. One of the most surprising findings? **National park visitation had no significant impact on median incomes or income inequality among full-time, year-**

**round residents.** That doesn't mean visitation doesn't matter—it absolutely does. Visitor spending is a critical driver of jobs and local revenues. But our analysis suggests those economic gains are concentrated in certain sectors of the economy like food service and lodging. They don't appear to lift the income levels of the people who call these communities home year-round.

We also found that **in-migration was significantly and negatively associated with median incomes** in gateway towns. This runs counter to the idea that more people always means more prosperity. The key, I believe, lies in who is moving in. Amenity migrants—remote workers, retirees, and others seeking the lifestyle these places offer—often bring financial and human capital that can boost local economies. But when migration is dominated by seasonal workers or others employed in low-wage sectors, it may actually depress average earnings for the broader community. The influence of in-migration on earnings in gateway communities is very complex, and highly variable across all gateway communities. It's an incredibly interesting topic with significant implications for the economic development strategies – we're continuing to work on the topic within our research efforts here at the GNAR Initiative.

Finally, we didn't observe statistically significant differences in income inequality between gateway and other rural communities, emphasizing the point that **statistics don't always capture what people feel.** The contrast between high-income second-home owners and low-wage workers in many gateway towns is real—and deeply visible. That juxtaposition can amplify the perception of inequality, even when official statistics suggest otherwise.

**So, what should this mean for planners and local leaders?**

- **Look beyond traditional metrics.** Standard indicators like median income don't always tell the full story. Local data collection, interviews, and community engagement can provide a better understanding of the economic dynamics that residents actually experience.
- **Rethink growth strategies.** Park visitation numbers are important, but they aren't the only measure of success. Planning that centers on resident well-being—especially for year-round workers—may offer more sustainable returns.
- **Pay attention to who's coming in.** Gateway communities need more than just people—they need the right mix of people. That means considering how different types of in-migrants shape everything from wages to housing affordability to civic engagement.

If you're interested in digging deeper, I invite you to read the full article [HERE](#) and check out our [Boom Town Webinar Series](#) which explores many of these themes in more detail.

As always, we at the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism welcome your feedback and collaboration. Let's keep the conversation going.



**Dr. Jordan W.**

**Smith** serves as Director of the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism at Utah State University, where he oversees initiatives that bolster Utah's economy by helping communities and agencies navigate the complex tradeoffs involved in outdoor recreation and tourism development. Under his leadership, the Utah Outdoor Recreation Strategic Plan and the Gateway and Natural Amenity Region Initiative have equipped underserved communities throughout the Intermountain West with critical tools for sustainable economic growth.

An interdisciplinary scholar, Dr. Smith integrates econometric modeling, geospatial analytics, and social-ecological frameworks to address pressing natural resource challenges. His research examines how environmental changes and shifting population dynamics affect common-pool resources, including outdoor recreation opportunities and naturally dark skies—elements that are fundamental to Utah's quality of life and economic vitality. Through studies on monitoring and managing outdoor recreation across the West, his work underscores the importance of balancing environmental stewardship with economic growth.

A champion of collaboration and innovation, Dr. Smith has spearheaded projects such as the Basecamp Conference and Workshop, uniting stakeholders to develop creative

solutions for outdoor recreation management. Through these efforts, he exemplifies Utah State University's commitment to fostering innovation, cultivating talent, and strengthening the state's position as a national leader in sustainable development and economic competitiveness.