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Report studies trends shaping Vermont's future

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(Host) The Council on the Future of Vermont was formed two years ago to help the state chart a course for the next two decades.

And now two St. Michael's College professors have identified the most important trends that are shaping that future.

VPR's Ross Sneyd has our story.

(Sneyd) Professors Vince Bolduc and Herb Kessel run the Center for Social Science Research at St. Michael's College.

They combed through a pile of data from such far-ranging sources as the free-market Ethan Allen Institute to the more liberal Public Assets Institute.

Professor Kessel says what emerged was 160 trends. He says, taken together, they paint a picture of where we are - and offer a roadmap of how to shape the future.

(Kessel) ``What strikes me is this report, this study is very difficult to summarize in a single sentence or a single theme. And in fact each chapter tells a number of stories, some of which are very encouraging and others are challenging.''

(Sneyd) Here are a few of their highlights.

The number of Vermonters with at least a bachelor's degree has risen in 20 years, from fewer than 100,000 to 150,000. The professors say that dispels the notion that Vermont suffers from a ``brain drain.''

Vermont is a safe place. The number of highway deaths has fallen sharply since 1980 - and the percentage of them that involved alcohol also has declined. And violent crime has remained pretty steady over that period.

Vermont is not diverse. The percentage of Vermonters born outside the United States has fallen two percentage points over 40 years to about 4 percent. 96 percent of the state's population is white and non-Hispanic.

Professor Bolduc says that sameness can have economic consequences.

(Bolduc) ``Because we're so small and homogeneous, we don't have the

economic base, the diversity of economic base to create some of these things. It's a little bit worrisome. Vermont is a little bit like a mid-sized city and kind of homogenous. So we miss some of the diversity that would be very nice to have. It would give us a little more strength than we have. Things are a little precarious."

(Sneyd) There are uncertain economic signs.

Some of the state's higher-paying industries have been in decline - manufacturing, construction. Growth has been in lower-paying jobs ... local government and social assistance.

But Vermonters' per capita disposable income has risen. The researchers say that's because more Vermont women work and contribute to the family budget than do women nationally.

The information in the report will help inform a report to be released this spring on the state's future. Paul Costello leads the Council on Vermont's Future and the Vermont Council on Rural Development.

(Costello) ``What's crucial about this report is it provides a statistical, quantitative, comprehensive and analytical back story. It's a testing point for us because sometimes people have contradictory opinions. Sometimes we have myths about the future of Vermont they may be disconnected from ground realities."

(Sneyd) Costello says a final report will be issued by his group in April. The group will hold a statewide summit a month later to get the public's reactions.

For VPR News, I'm Ross Sneyd.

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