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Boom or Bust: Opportunities and Challenges of Aging in Rural Kansas

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Abstract

Population aging is gaining a great deal of attention as we move toward the retirement of the Baby Boom generation. However, few studies have examined the processes and consequences of these aging trends in rural Kansas—and by extension, the Great Plains—at the community level. To that end, this project examines the community level impacts of population aging in rural Kansas. Primary methods included statistical community profile comparisons, site visits, and key informant interviews with local area leaders. The research team examined three non-metropolitan Kansas counties, two that were aging in place and one that is the single officially defined retirement migration destination in Kansas. Results indicate that areas that are aging in place also face significant challenges sustaining their population and economic structure. The retirement destination, on the other hand, has managed to slow population loss and economic decline through a certain combination of economic structure, family relations, local culture, and appropriate services.

Introduction

What does population aging look like on the ground in rural Kansas? To my knowledge, few, if any have tried to answer this question. This lack of attention could spell considerable trouble for Kansas and other predominantly rural states in the coming years, especially with the Baby Boom generation, the largest cohort in US history, moving toward retirement. Will rural states be ready for the changes ahead?

This paper examines the process, challenges, and potentials of population aging in selected rural Kansas communities. It uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate the processes of aging in place and retirement migration, and how they impact rural community development and sustainability in Kansas.

It should be kept in mind that population aging is not necessarily a good or bad phenomena. Previous research has indicated either could be true, depending on the capacity of the community to deal with the issues raised. In general, aging in place can present difficulties in the form of the provision of services, the maintenance of businesses, and the out-migration of the young.

Retirement migration, on the other hand, is often praised for driving development through its particular blend of retiree spending and specialized demands with little or no associated competition for local jobs.

The real challenge lies in a community's historical positioning and its capacity to deal with changes in the age profile. Due to global changes in health and fertility behavior, population aging is a relatively new occurrence, but it is increasingly common especially in many of the richer countries of the world. As we become proportionally older as a society, we may help to examine the impact of aging at the local level so that we can better prepare for the future.

OVERVIEW OF THE SOCIAL DEMOGRAPHY OF AGING

Population Aging as a Demographic Process

Change in a geographic population's age composition can be the result of three factors: fertility, mortality, or migration. Falling mortality rates seem to be the most intuitive cause of aging patterns. If people are living longer, it would appear obvious that the average age of the population should increase. However, this is not always the case. Declines in fertility rates also increase a population's relative age because fewer children being born means a larger proportion of people fall into the older age categories. In aging research at the national level, falling fertility rates are generally given causal precedence over changes in mortality. Increased life expectancy during periods of continued high fertility would simply produce a rapidly growing—but not necessarily aging—society (McCracken and Phillips 2005¹; Bean, Myers, Angel, and Galle 1994²).

Migration, on the other hand, is often ignored as a factor in large scale population aging. It is debatable whether or not this is the best approach. In many instances, especially in population projections, net immigration rates (or the total number of people gained or lost through international migration) are simply assumed to equal zero. One argument for this practice is that immigration accounts for relatively little proportional change at the national level. Another line of reasoning is that immigration rates are too variable to predict due to their much stronger dependence on the relatively fickle agenda of policy makers. In essence, immigration rates could fluctuate almost overnight, leading to the possibility of wild inaccuracy in national population projections. As such, they are accounted limited value.

In truth, both mortality and fertility decline should be present in order to see population aging at the national level. At the sub-national level, however, the effects of fertility and mortality rates are greatly reduced compared to the relative importance of migration (Bean et al 1994³). This is because, at least in the United State, intranational migrants face fairly few barriers to relocation. Assuming they possess sufficient funds for relocation, people in the U.S. are relatively free to move to whatever area they desire for a wide variety of reasons. This is important because the age composition of migrants (both in and out of an area) can quickly and drastically alter the age structure of a community, especially in rural locations.

Population aging at the sub-national level can be divided into two types, and both are linked to migration patterns. The first, aging in place, occurs due to the out-migration of the young. In

this situation, much like a drop in fertility, a population will become proportionally older because there are fewer people in the younger age categories. Further, the out-migration of people in their child-bearing years can lower local fertility rates and compound this situation. In essence, the young who leave are taking their children and future children with them.

The second, retirement migration, results from an in-migration of the elderly. These older people contribute directly to the proportion of people in the higher age categories. This pattern often exists in the classic rural amenity-based retirement destinations. In fact, much of the literature on retirement migration focuses on natural amenities. The problem is, older people change residences for many other reasons, from family to service provisions to cheaper housing. Because of this, it is important to remember that not all older people are moving to retirement meccas in Florida and Arizona. Many choose or are forced to follow less conventional paths.

Patterns of Social Change in an Aging Society

A number of possible concerns have been raised revolving around population aging in the United States. For clarity, I generally describe these social changes in a three-part classification scheme: economic, political, and cultural changes. Physical change, which deals with the medical and biological aspects of growing older, could also be included. However, the experience of biological aging, while very much a part of the social makeup, is an individual phenomenon at its core. As such, it is outside the realm of this discussion.

Economic change tends to be one of the most popular discussion topics in the literature. These issues range from demographic support ratios, to fiscal responsibility, to elderly rates of poverty, to the role of pension capital in the stock market, expansion and contraction of markets for the baby boomers, and the female disadvantage for pensions and Social Security (Moody 2002⁴; Burton and Whitfield 2006⁵; Crystal 2006⁶; Glasgow and Brown 1998⁷; Machunovich 1998⁸ and 2002⁹; Morgan and Kunkel 2001¹⁰; Muller 1980¹¹; Oppenheimer 1981¹²; Vincent 2005¹³).

Political change covers decisions by policy makers regarding how to deal with national, state, and local aging issues. Typical questions are the provision old age assistance policies like Social Security and Medicare, the political organization and power of the aged, and the control of population aging through policy decisions (Diamond and Orszag 2004¹⁴; Manza 2000¹⁵; Moody 2002¹⁶; Morgan and Kunkel 2001¹⁷; Offe 1984¹⁸; Quadagno 1984¹⁹; Uhlenberg 1992²⁰).

The third type of change, cultural, is a little broader. This type includes integration of the aged into society, the role of women as caregivers, the dependency strain on families, the migration choices of the young and old, the impact of divorce and widowhood on older marital status (especially that of women), the multiple jeopardy effects felt by older people in already disadvantaged social gender, race, class, and location categories, and the provision of services through formal and informal means (Cherlin 2002²¹; Coward et al 1994²²; Hagestad 1981²³; Kingson, Hirshorn, & Cornman 1986²⁴; Kihl 1993²⁵; Krout 1986²⁶; Krout and Coward 1998²⁷; Oppenheimer 1981²⁸).

It should be noted that these categories overlap to a great degree. Many economic issues have social and political aspects as well. Social Security, for example, crosses all of these conceptual areas. It makes up a large proportion of poorer elder's income, it is hotly debated in the political sphere, and it helps to determine people's retirement planning and familial obligations. In addition, it should be noted that many aspects of change associated with population aging have a historical specificity when dealing with particular locations. It is really the combination of particulars that results in a certain developmental trajectory. Not only do individual people have a biographical life course that helps determine their older age situation, but also places have a certain level of path dependence.

AGING IN PLACE AND THE THREAT OF DECLINE

Many of the social concerns and problems with aging in place are considerably magnified in rural settings. Aging in place in rural areas is primarily due to the out-migration of the young and working age populations. Many small towns have experienced such net out-migration of these younger age groups for much of the 20th century (Glasgow 2003²⁹; Kulcsár and Bolender 2006³⁰). This coincides with the general demographic trend of urbanization and economic changes in rural areas. In general, smaller, resource-dependent areas like farming, logging, and mining communities have struggled to maintain both population and businesses in the US since the 1970s.

The history of out-migration from rural communities is well documented (Longino and Haas 1993³¹; Longino and Smith 1998³²; Redford 1998³³). A number of possible reasons have been identified. One primary cause is that younger people move out of rural areas for economic reasons. Either job opportunities in urban areas appear better, or the number of jobs in rural areas is insufficient. Further, increased general levels of education contribute to this pattern. Rates of education and college completion have been rising steadily since WWII (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000³⁴). Younger people who move out of rural areas to attend college are often not likely to return to their home communities, in part, because rural areas tend to have few jobs for people with professional or technical skills.

With the loss of the young, aging in place can create significant challenges for rural communities in relation to their more urban counterparts. These issues include greater levels of elderly poverty, poorer health status, more difficulty in providing services, more salient changes in family structures, lack of transportation and quality housing, and general community decline. In fact, many of the same rural problems associated with aging in place are found in other developed countries, such as Canada and New Zealand (Joseph and Cloutier-Fisher 2005³⁵). However, research is scant as to exactly what causes these rural/urban differences. Some argue that it has more to do with the qualities of rural people than it does with the rural area itself. Others contend the reverse. In either case, while trends in aging related issues in rural and urban areas are converging, there are still significant differences that warrant attention (Glasgow 2003³⁶).

The first major difference is the level of poverty in the rural elderly population (Glasgow 2003³⁷; Krout and Coward 1998³⁸) and its various causes. One is that rural areas are poorer in general

than urban areas. Another is that rural people, especially those who have lived in the area for a long time, have a higher probability of having worked on farms, in agriculture related industries, or at other jobs that pay lower than average wages (Krout 1986³⁹; Glasgow and Brown 1998⁴⁰). The lower average wages in rural areas also influence the lack of pensions and the lower level of Social Security benefits (Dorfman 1998⁴¹).

Further, some research points out the effects of multiple jeopardy and cumulative disadvantage in rural areas (Glasgow and Brown 1998⁴²). Multiple jeopardy refers to the different negative statuses can combine to further disadvantage a particular person. This is especially true for women and minorities (Coward, Netzer, and Peek 1998⁴³; McCulloch and Kivett 1998⁴⁴). For example, an 85+ year old minority woman who lives in a rural area is both more likely to be poor and to also have less income than someone who falls into only one or two of those categories. Cumulative disadvantage occurs when status problems during life transitions build over time. In other words, older people who lived in a rural area all their lives are more likely to be poor compared to a recent rural migrant from an urban area. Negative statuses can combine both historically and cross-sectionally, resulting in dramatic disadvantages and fewer life options. chances.

A second major difference between the rural and urban elderly is the lower average health status among those in rural areas (Coward et al 1994⁴⁵; Glasgow 2003⁴⁶; Krout 1986⁴⁷; Wallace and Wallace 1998⁴⁸). Among the reasons cited for this is the more difficult physical work found in employment in rural areas which may lead to greater problems in later life. Another possibility is the generally limited access to medical services in rural areas. This can lead to its own type of cumulative disadvantage as perpetually untreated medical problems take a severe toll on people's bodies over time.

Whatever the reason for rural elders' reduced health status, services (health, transportation, and others) are generally lacking in these areas (Coward et al 1994⁴⁹; Krout 1986⁵⁰; Krout and Coward 1998⁵¹). In many cases, rural towns are less able to attract professionals and/or provide adequate levels of medical and other necessary services. Further, the greater physical distance between people and their closest town can lead to significant difficulties with transportation to and from the places and activities that elders need to reach (Kihl 1993⁵²; Krout 1986⁵³). In addition, economic problems in these areas are often so acute that quality, affordable housing can be very difficult, if not impossible, to find (Belden 1993⁵⁴).

On a more personal level, family structures in rural areas also are changing. In a way, this can interact with the provision of services. Today, proportionally more elderly rural inhabitants are married and fewer are divorced (Stoller 1998⁵⁵). Historically, most care needed by elders has been provided by family members, commonly by a spouse or child (Barber 1989⁵⁶; Cherlin 2002⁵⁷). This pattern continues today. From their children, rural elders tend to expect more support than do urban elders (Glasgow 2003⁵⁸). One might think that this causes problems, given that rural elders are less likely to live within close proximity to a child. However, a majority of older rural people still have a child living within a short distance (Glasgow 2003⁵⁹; McCulloch and Kivett 1998⁶⁰). Generally, a greater proportion of rural men are married while a greater proportion of rural women are widowed (due to the greater life expectancy of women)

(Glasgow 2003⁶¹). This causes considerable trouble for women given their already disadvantaged status in terms of Social Security, pensions, and wages.

Aging in place creates other issues for the community as well as for its resident elders. In general, an aging population can stem from and contribute to economic decline. As small rural towns lose farms and businesses, they also lose the job opportunities that young people (especially educated young people) need and the services they desire. These working-age people increasingly leave to get a job or go to college and never return. This, in turn, leads to a loss of consumers and tax revenue, contributing to further business failures and crumbling local infrastructure. In a sense, many rural towns that are aging in place are almost trapped in a negative, de-development spiral with demographic and economic trends reinforcing each other. For many reasons, most communities want to avoid this downward spiral and seek possible solutions.

RETIREMENT MIGRATION AND THE HOPE OF DEVELOPMENT

People migrate for a number of reasons. Popular theories of migration focus on employment opportunities (Smith, Tayman, and Swanson 2001⁶²), life-course transitions (Boyle, Halfacree, and Robinson 1998⁶³), or for quality of life like those that are amenity or family based (Greenwood 1985⁶⁴; Hunt 1993⁶⁵). Older people share many of the same motivations for moving as the rest of society. They are, after all, just people in an older age category. The same factors are likely at play in their migration decisions as are with any other age group. However, there are definitely a number of differences that set retirement migration apart from the general themes shown in the literature.

The biggest of these is that retirees, for the most part, are not part of the labor market (Heaton 1981⁶⁶). This means that they are much less likely to respond to changes in employment than younger age groups. While the young may move from place to place in search of occupational, income, or status mobility, elderly people generally do not. Here, economic disequilibrium theories of migration lose some steam, as they are unable to adequately explain retirees' relocation patterns.

To make up for this, many authors posit various forms of amenity-based migration. These seem to be, by far, the unspoken rule in the literature on retirement migration. Amenities have been classified as natural (McGranahan 1999⁶⁷), recreational (Beale and Johnson 1998⁶⁸; Johnson and Beale 2002⁶⁹; Johnson and Stewart 2005⁷⁰), and cultural-historic (Goe and Green 2005⁷¹). At the same time, though, little empirical evidence supports such claims. In fact, retirees are likely to list housing, family, and health reasons first when asked why they moved (He et al 2005⁷²). Older people move not only for fun in the sun, but also for cheaper housing, to be closer to their children, or because of health problems. This seems to have little to do with warm winters, beautiful mountains, rushing streams, or art museums.

An alternative conceptual framework was developed by Walters in 2000⁷³. He proposed a three-part typology for retirement migrants. The first type, amenity migrants, fall into the usual picture of better-off retirees moving to places they find more pleasant than their current home. The

second type, assistance migrants, consist of those who, experiencing either financial or health problems, move to a place where they can receive a low level of help. Generally, this tends to be either with or near an adult child. The third type, those who move in response to severe disability and spouse absence, usually take up residence in assisted living facilities or in nursing homes.

Any one of these factors can and do affect the migration patterns of elderly people. In fact, taking a page from the life-course theories of migration, all three of these transitions could happen to the same people. Younger elders (say age 55-65) who are financially better-off may initially moved to an amenity rich location to spend their later years. Later, when one spouse dies, the remaining person may seek to move closer to his or her children for emotional, physical, or financial support. Finally, as that person ages and care responsibilities become greater, they may move to an assisted living center or a nursing home in order to obtain more specialized and complete services. Regression modeling on net migration rates for different age groups has shown significant results that support these models (Bolender and Kulcsár 2008⁷⁴). None of these transitions seems conceptually out of the ordinary, yet most of the literature on retirement migration tends to focus only on amenities. In addition, evidence has surfaced that natural amenities do not always remain significant in logistic regression models predicting retirement destination status for rural counties (Kulcsár et al 2008⁷⁵).

Connected to this, academics and policy makers often believe that retirement migration is good for community development. There are a number of reasons for this. First, older people who move are primarily white and middle class, a group more economically prepared for migration. Relocation is a much more difficult process for someone without economic resources. Second, retiree migrants are much less likely to be looking for jobs in their new homes. From the viewpoint of the prospective destination, these two factors combine to make retirees look quite attractive for any community. Middle-class retirees moving into a community essentially represent the addition of consumer resources (they still buy retail products and services) without the normally accompanying labor market strain (they will not compete for jobs with people already there).

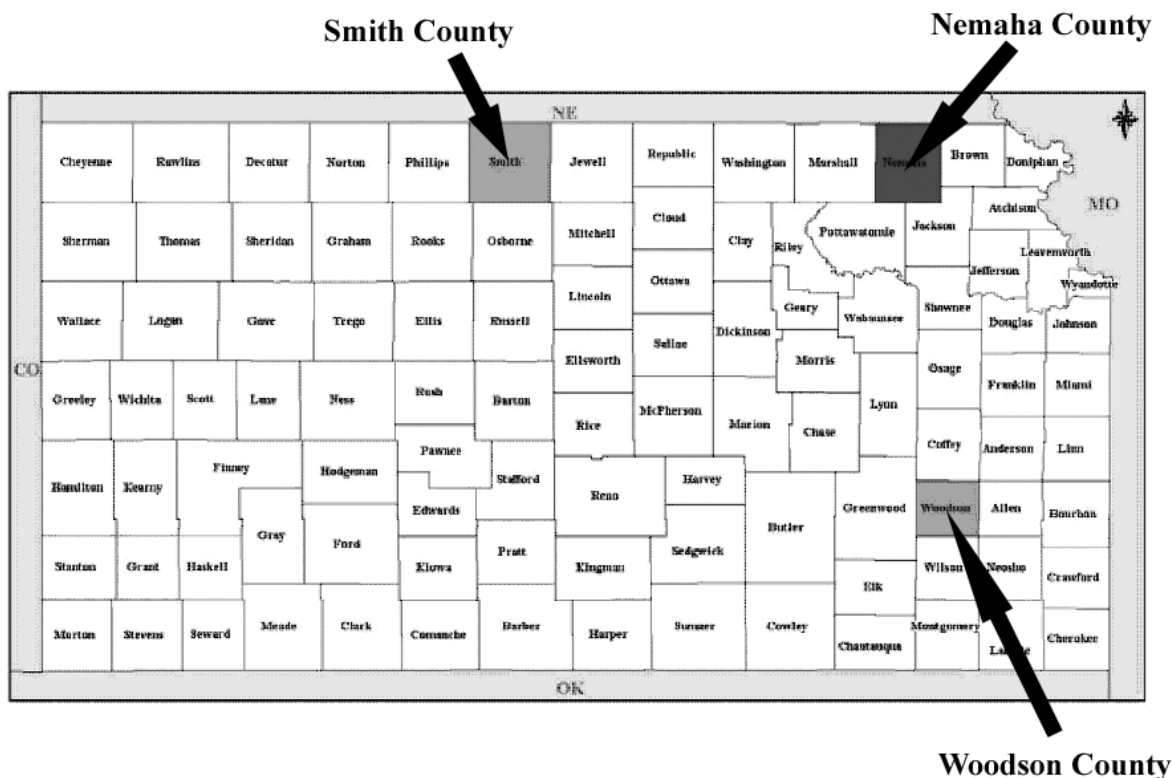
Further it has been suggested that retirement migration tends to bring in other types of migrants as well (Brown and Glasgow 2008⁷⁶). The demand that retirees produce in recreation and health services creates job growth. These job opportunities create both incentives for young people to stay in the community and reasons for working-age people from other areas to in-migrate. For both of these—economic opportunities and the influx of retiree consumer capital—retirement migration is hailed as the way out of the spiraling decline facing many rural towns.

DATA AND METHODS

This study uses a combination of methods to assess the phenomenon of aging in place and retirement migration in rural Kansas places. Three counties were chosen to represent different aspects of the aging process (See [Figure 1](#)). Smith County in north-central Kansas and Woodson County in south-eastern Kansas represent smaller rural areas that are experiencing aging in place. They were chosen out of a pool of highly aged counties (based on their proportion of the

population age 65+ and a high median age) that had a central place of over 1,000 people. Examining places that were any smaller would have created both logistical and theoretical problems. It is not as likely, for example, that very small places would have the local government capacity or business structure to be thoroughly aware of or to address problems of community development.

Figure 1. Case Study Locations: Woodson, Smith, and Nemaha Counties



The chart above shows case study locations. Woodson and Smith Counties in southeast and north-central Kansas respectively, were chosen due to being areas that are “aging-in-place.” Nemaha County, in northeast Kansas, was selected because it is the only retirement migration destination in Kansas as defined by the ERS at the USDA. Source: Case study selection procedure.

Nemaha County was chosen as the third case study site because it is the only retirement destination county in Kansas as officially classified by the Economic Research Service at the United States Department of Agriculture (2005⁷⁷). It is a curiosity because, as discussed above, retirement destinations are supposed to be natural amenity hot spots. Given knowledge of Great Plains geography and climate, it seemed unlikely that the same types of living opportunities were bringing people to Nemaha County as were attracting them to Florida and Arizona.

Quantitative analysis utilized the US Decennial Census of the Population, the Regional Economic Information Systems, the Kansas County Historical Database, County Business Patterns, and the 1990-2000 net migration file compiled by Voss et al (2003⁷⁸) to create a number of national, regional, state, and county comparisons. County profiles resulting from these data allowed the examination of historical trajectories as well as the comparison of similarities and differences across case study locations.

However, large-scale quantitative examination is not enough. To see how these patterns play out at the ground level, in-depth qualitative techniques were also used. The research team traveled to four towns to conduct face-to-face semi-structured interviews with key informants. While on site, we also performed non-participant observation of town life and content analysis of the local media. These towns were Smith Center (the county seat of Smith County), Yates Center (the county seat of Woodson County), Seneca (the county seat of Nemaha County), and Sabetha (the other most populous place in Nemaha County). The interviews took place near the end of 2006 and throughout 2007. The participants included people from city and county governments, business organizations, and health care facilities.

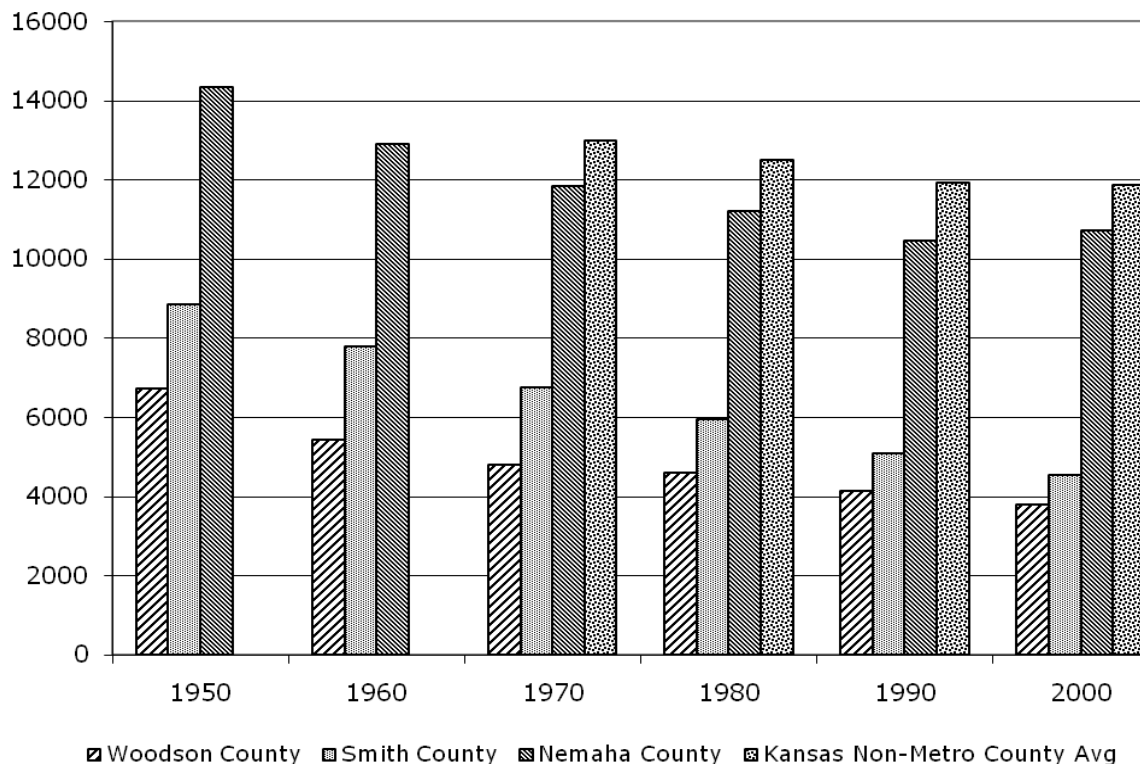
The interviews covered a number of topics from the participants' general views on aging in society to particular questions about developmental strategy, community life, local values, and their particular visions of the future of their towns. The responses were recorded and extensive notes were taken. Unfortunately, complete transcripts are not available for all interviews due to time and funding constraints. As such, the narrative in this paper will include only analytical comments and not direct quotes.

COMMUNITY CASE STUDIES

Quantitative Comparisons

[Figure 2](#) shows the total population sizes for each of the three case study counties and the average for all non-metro Kansas counties. All three case study counties have experienced population loss throughout the second half of the 20th Century. In this, all three are following the trend in Kansas non-metropolitan areas. Woodson County fell from 6,711 to 3,788 people from 1950-2000. Smith County had an even greater loss (almost half the population), going from 8,846 to 4,536. Nemaha County dropped from 14,341 to 10,446 in 1990 then rose to 10,717 in 2000. While they have lost people overall since 1950, they appear to be beginning to reach stability or even starting to grow.

Figure 2. Total Population: Woodson, Smith, and Nemaha Counties Compared to the Kansas Non-metro County Average



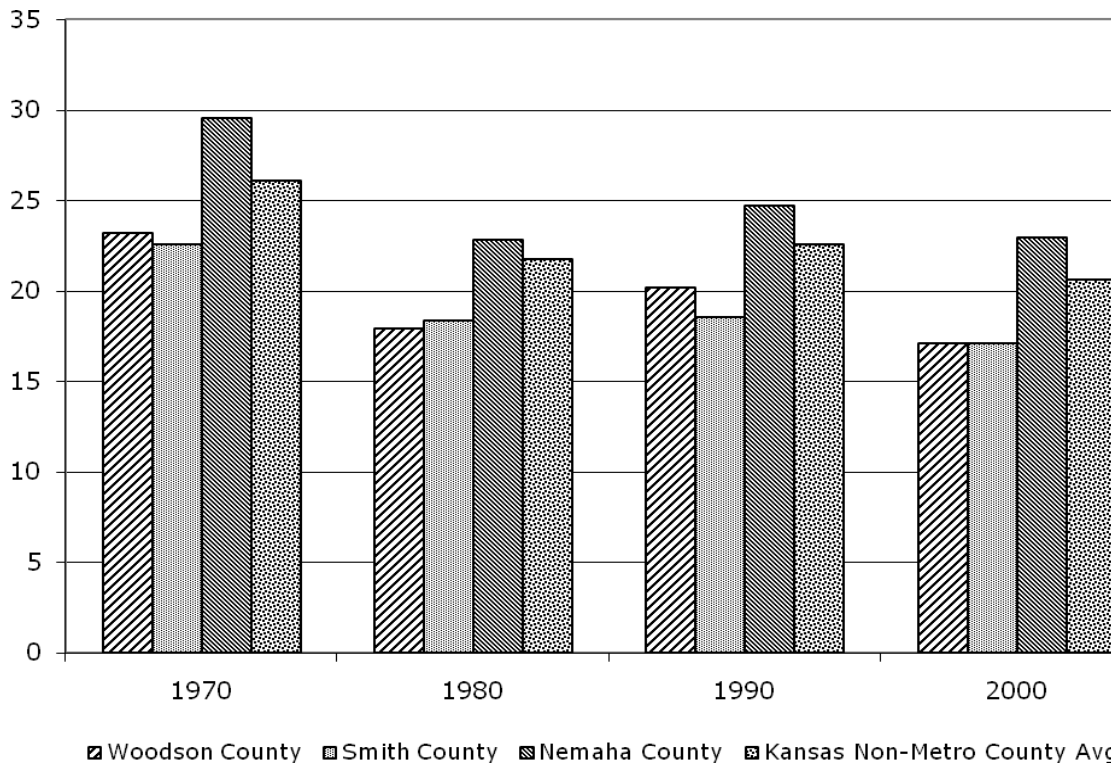
The data compare population size in the three study counties with the average of all non-metropolitan counties in Kansas. While most areas lose population throughout the timeframe, we can see that the loss has been somewhat abated in Nemaha County during the 1990s.

Source: US Census of the Population and the Kansas County Historical Database

[Figure 3](#) shows the proportion of the population falling into the 0-14 age category while [Figure 4](#) shows the proportion in the 65+ age category. What is immediately noticeable in both is that Nemaha County is much younger, on average, than the other two counties or the Kansas non-metro average. Proportionally more young people live in Nemaha along with proportionally fewer older people. This supports the argument that retirement destinations do not necessarily have older populations. As discussed, older people moving into a community can have a bolstering effect on the local economy, thereby creating a smaller net loss, or even a net gain, in the younger generations.

At the same time, the aging in place communities have a much older population compared to the non-metro county average. This shows that there is considerable spatial variation when it comes to the distribution of older people in rural areas. On average, in non-metro Kansas counties, only 16% to 19% of the population has been 65+ since 1950. For Woodson County, that range is approximately from 23% to 25%, and for Smith County, it is around 23% to 27.5%. That means that in these places around 1 in 4 people are considered elderly. As previously discussed, that can generate some significant community sustainability challenges for local business leaders and policy makers.

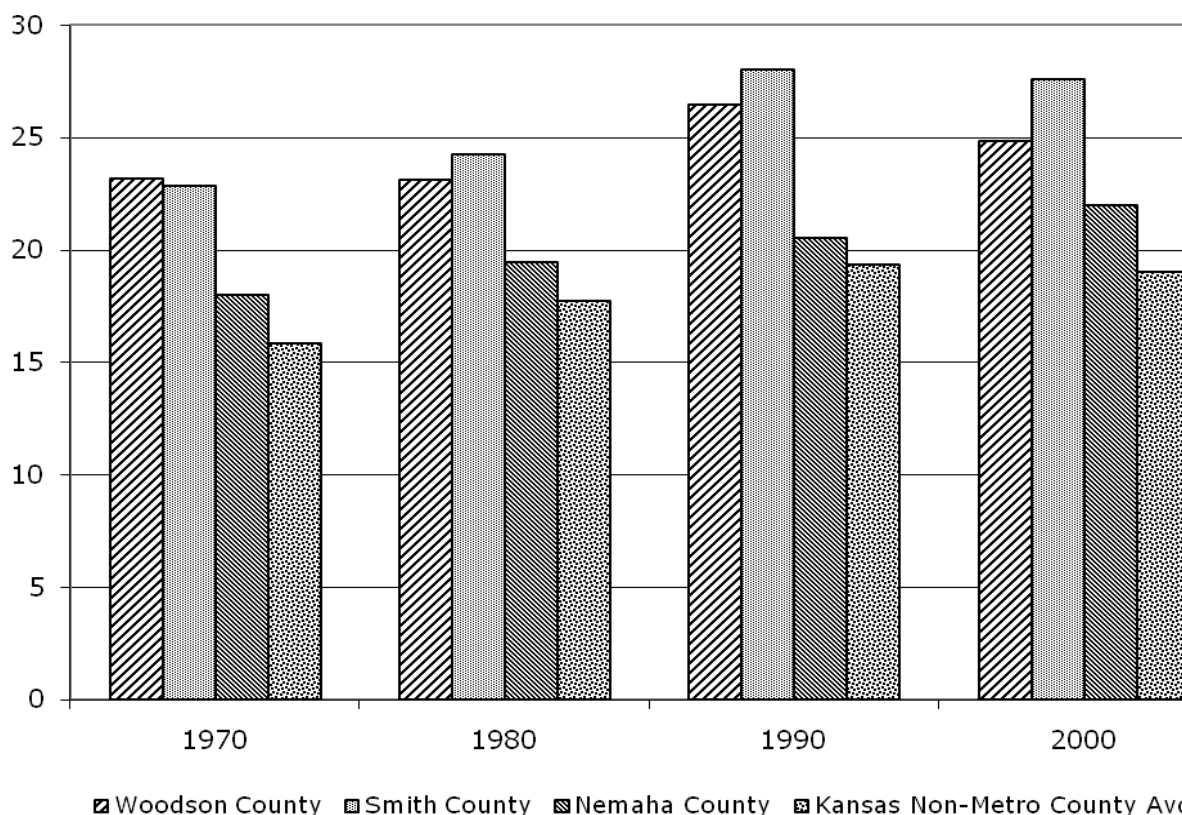
Figure 3. Percent of the Population Age 0-14 from 1970-2000



The data show the percent of the population falling into the younger age categories (0-14) in the study areas and for the average of non-metropolitan Kansas counties. Nemaha County has been consistently younger than any of the other areas.

Source: US Census of the Population and the Kansas County Historical Database

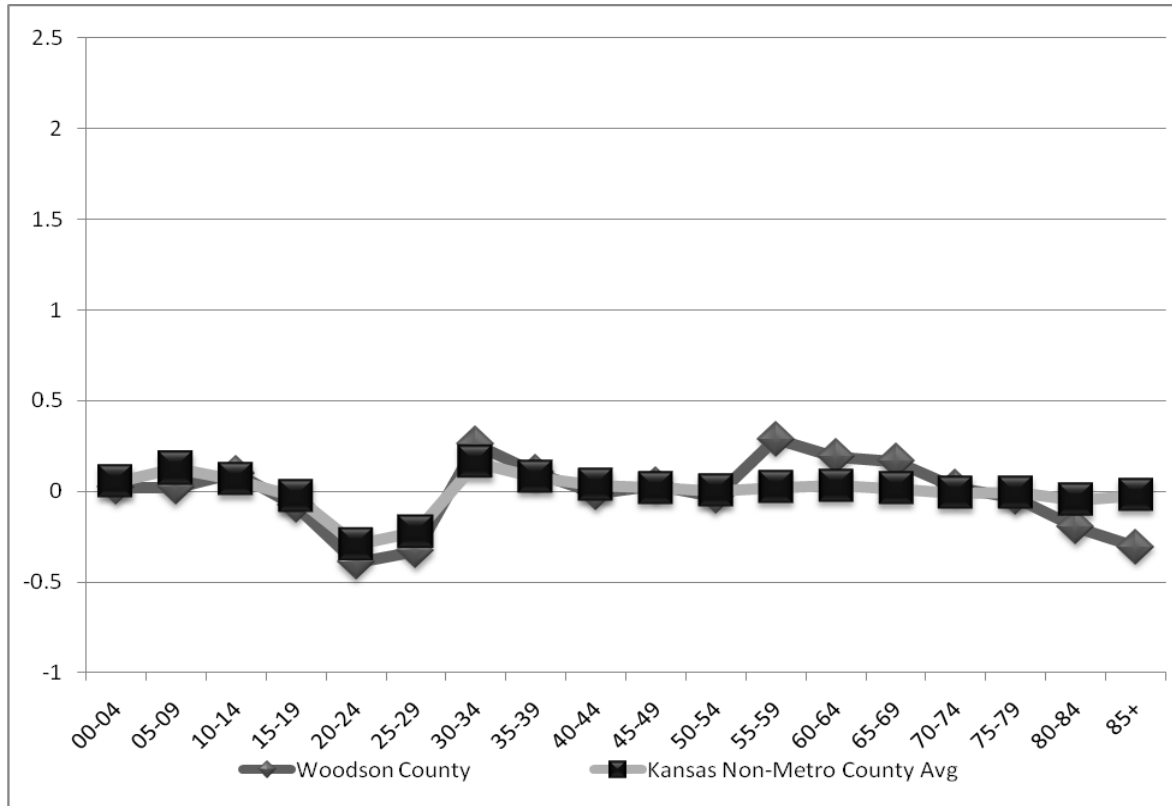
Figure 4. Percent of the Population Age 65+ from 1970-2000



The data show the percent of the population falling into the older age categories (65 and above) in the study areas and the average of non-metropolitan Kansas counties. While Nemaha County was consistently younger than either Woodson or Smith Counties, it had a greater proportion of older people than non-metropolitan Kansas as a whole. *Source: US Census of the Population and the Kansas County Historical Database*

Figures 5-7 show the net migration patterns that have been at least partially responsible for these differences. In this case, a value of 0 for an age group would indicate no change in the number of people from migration, while 1 would mean that the county gained 1 person for every person that was there before. We can see that in each county, it is common for 15-29 year olds to migrate away. This corresponds to the most common life cycle stage for migration and typical rural migration patterns. People leave to go to college, begin a career, and/or start a family. We can also see that these places tend to make up for their loss at the younger working ages with a slight return of those in their early 30s. Smith County seems to be doing especially well in this respect.

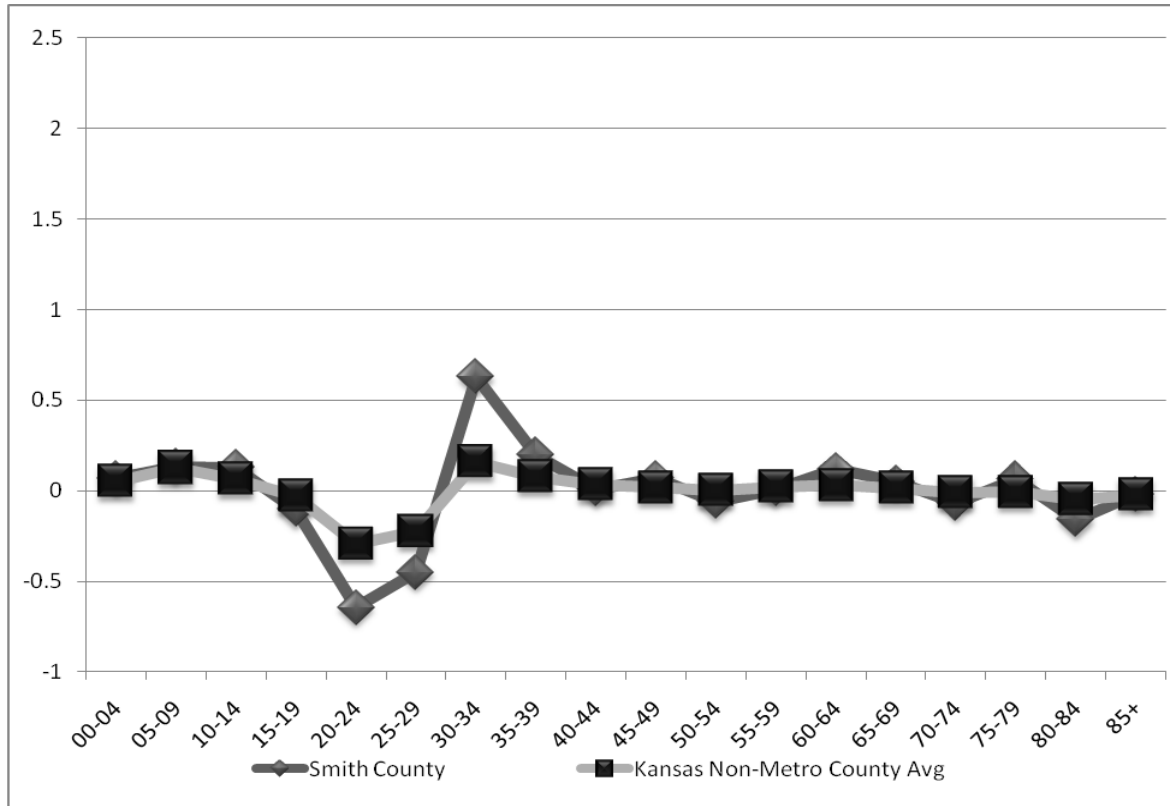
Figure 5. Woodson County Age Specific Net Migration Rates 1990-2000 (Per Person)



The data present age specific net migration rates for Woodson County and the average of non-metroplitan Kansas counties in the 1990s. In this chart, 0 means no change while +1 or -1 would mean one person in that age group gained or lost for each person that was there in 1990. We see that Woodson shares the common pattern, though it appears to lose proportionally more in the college age and advanced older age categories while gaining more people in their 50s.

Source: Net migration data compiled by Voss et al (2003⁷⁹)

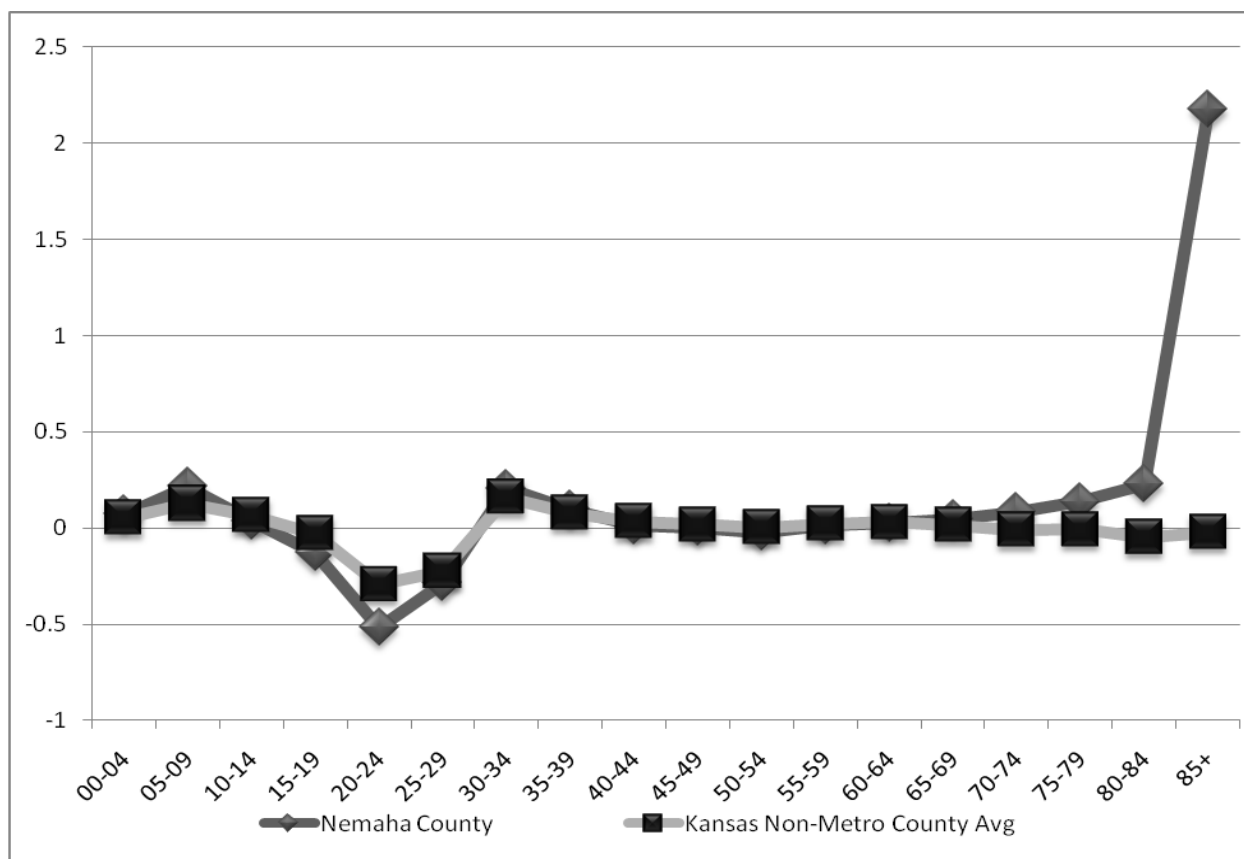
Figure 6. Smith County Age Specific Net Migration Rates 1990-2000 (Per Person)



The data present age specific net migration rates for Smith County and the average of non-metroplitan Kansas counties in the 1990s. In this chart, 0 means no change while +1 or -1 would mean one person in that age group gained or lost for each person that was there in 1990. Smith County follows a very similar pattern to non-metro Kansas. The main difference is a much larger loss in college age adults. However, that loss does seem offset somewhat by the attraction of people in their early 30s.

Source: Net migration data compiled by Voss et al (2003⁸⁰)

Figure 7. Nemaha County Age Specific Net Migration Rates 1990-2000 (Per Person)



The data present age specific net migration rates for Nemaha County and the average of non-metroplitan Kansas counties in the 1990s. In this chart, 0 means no change while +1 or -1 would mean one person in that age group gained or lost for each person that was there in 1990. Nemaha County also mirrors many other parts of non-metro Kansas except for the extreme in-migration of people age 85+. These numbers show that for every person age 85+ in Nemaha County in 1990, there were three people in 2000 due to the effects of migration.
 Source: Net migration data compiled by Voss et al (2003⁸¹)

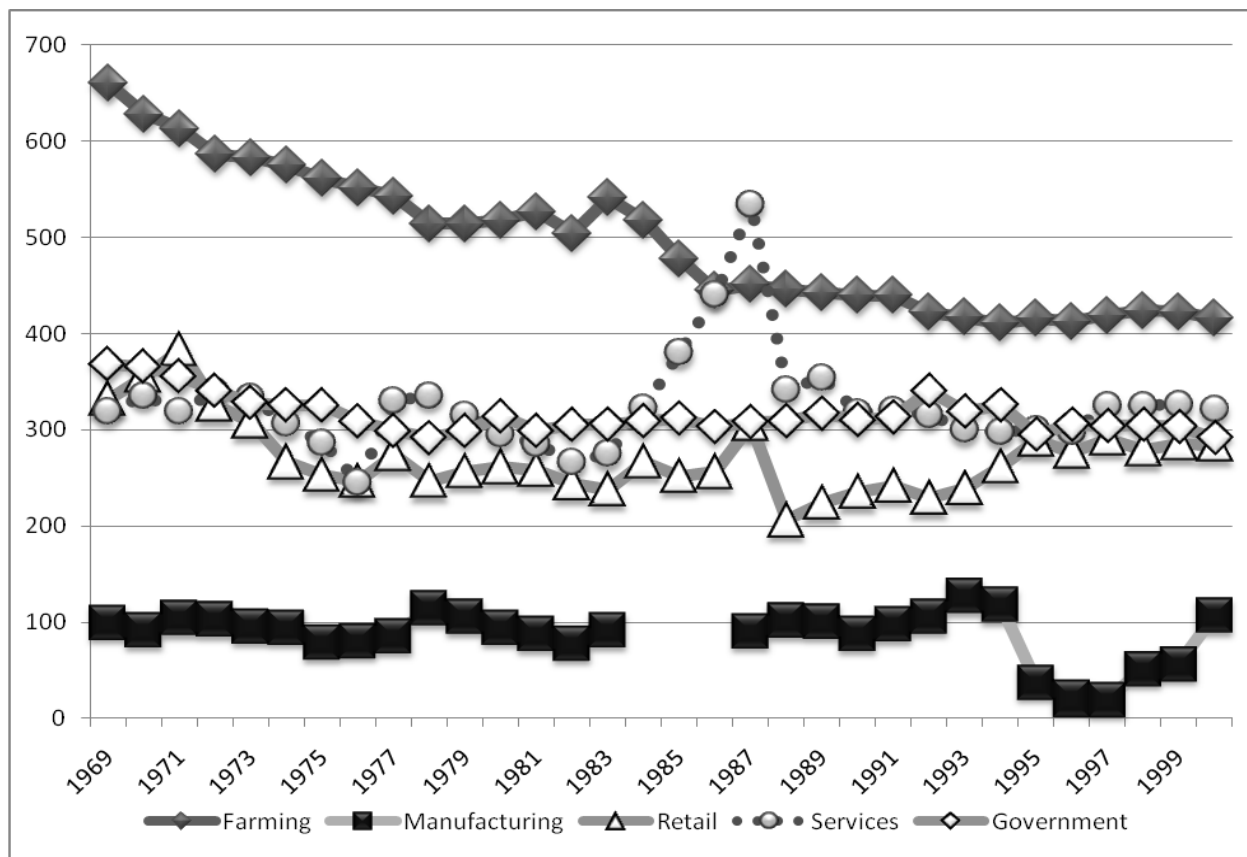
The major difference between areas can be seen in the large spike at the right side of the Nemaha County chart. Nemaha County is, in fact, gaining large numbers of people at age 85+. In terms of population growth, that means that the population of 85+ people in the county more than *tripled* between 1990 and 2000 due to migration. We suspect these numbers are slightly inflated. The 85+ category is a residual, containing every age group above it. However, there is still a very noticeable difference between Nemaha and the other areas.

As the interviews showed, the Nemaha phenomenon is related to the movement of older infirmed people into nursing homes in the area. This would represent the third-phase migration. Nemaha is not attracting younger elderly with money to spend. Instead, they really are focusing on a specific service niche—healthcare for the aged.

The final three charts, Figures [8-10](#), show the real number distribution of jobs in the top five employer industries in Woodson, Smith, and Nemaha Counties. In all three, farming is

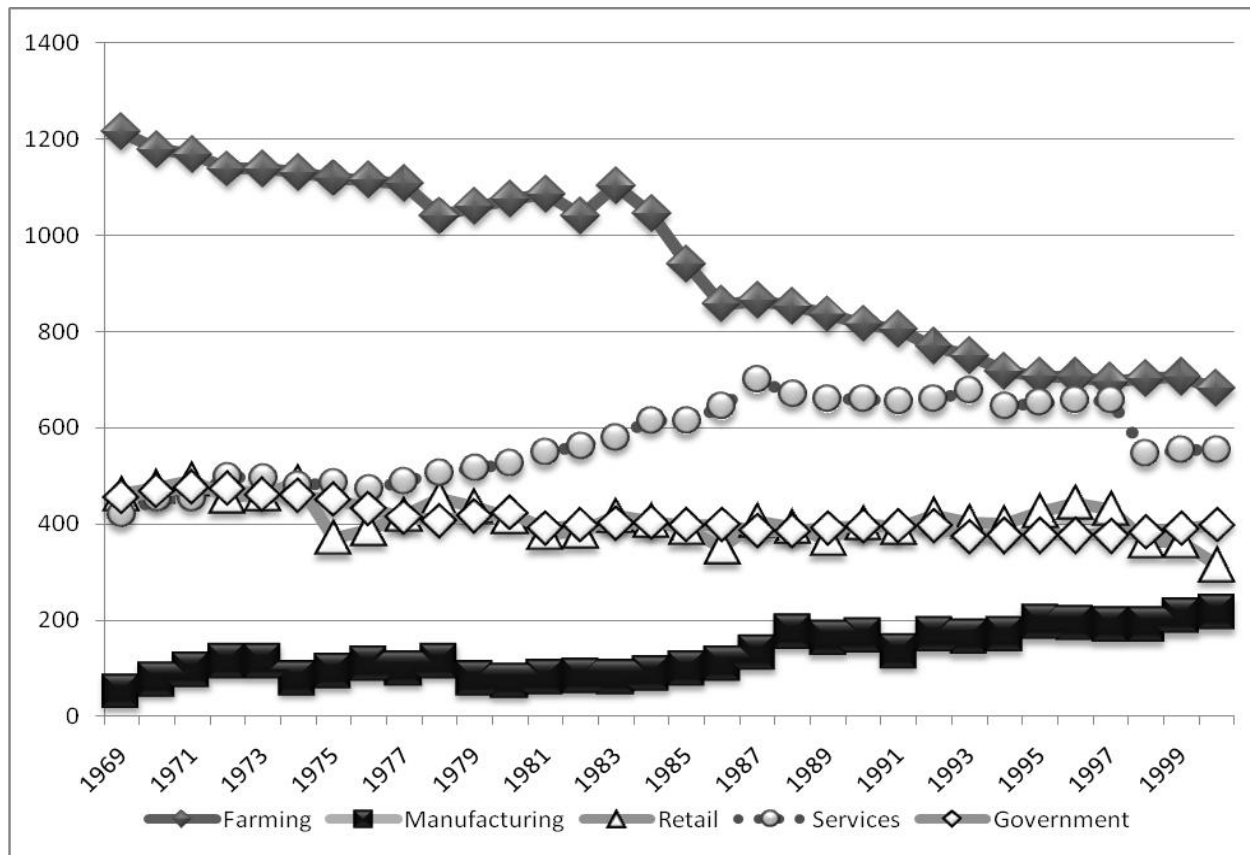
accounting for a smaller and smaller proportion of employment. In Woodson County, most other occupations have been holding steady. The spike in services that occurred in the 1980s could not be explained by local key informants. In Smith County, manufacturing and services rose until the late 1980s then held steady. In both cases, we can see a decline in agriculture jobs coinciding with the loss of population over the period. This makes sense, given the extensive literature on farm consolidation, rural to urban migration, and population loss in rural areas.

Figure 8. Jobs by Number in Woodson County



The data show changes in the actual number of jobs in farming, manufacturing, retail, services, and government employment sectors in Woodson County, Kansas, between 1969 and 2000. As farm jobs decline, most other industries remain steady except a spike in services in the mid-1980s and a loss of manufacturing in the mid-1990s. *Source: The Regional Economic Information Systems data (2007 release).*

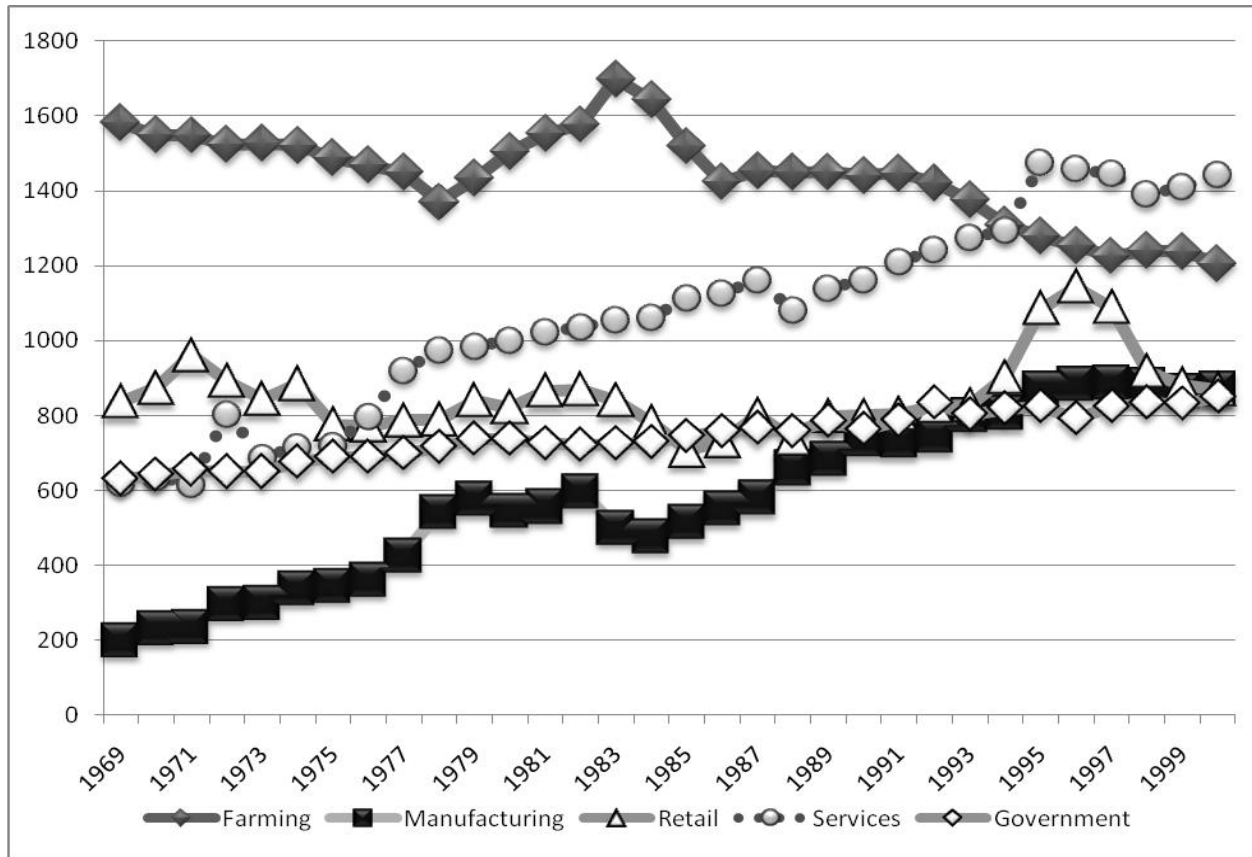
Figure 9. Jobs by Number in Smith County



The data show changes in the actual number of jobs in farming, manufacturing, retail, services, and government employment sectors in Smith County, Kansas, between 1969 and 2000. As farming jobs decline, most other occupations remain relatively steady except for a marginal rise in service employment.

Source: *The Regional Economic Information Systems data (2007 release).*

Figure 10. Jobs by Number in Nemaha County



The data show changes in the actual number of jobs in farming, manufacturing, retail, services, and government employment sectors in Nemaha County, Kansas, between 1969 and 2000. Farming also is declining in Nemaha County (though not as quickly). Other industries, such as manufacturing and services are increasing levels of employment to offset farm-related losses.

Source: *The Regional Economic Information Systems data (2007 release)*.

In Nemaha County, we also see a decline in farm jobs (see [Figure 10](#)), though it is not quite as pronounced. However, we also see a commensurate rise in other employment opportunities as agricultural work falls away. This has most likely helped to maintain Nemaha County’s economic and demographic structure in the face of farm consolidation. It is also possible that this has led to an increase in or at least a stable level of services that retirees would find necessary in a resettlement location. This suggests that maintaining a diversified economic structure may be leading to both community sustainability in terms of retaining and attracting the young, but also in drawing in migrating retirees.

Qualitative Interviews

The primary focus of this research was the qualitative interviews with community leaders. Much of what was found about aging in place supports previous research on the topic. In contrast, what was discovered about retirement migration does not. The picture in relation to aging in place was one of difficulty and struggle. Community leaders were very aware of their respective area's economic and demographic decline. At the same time, they did not seem to recognize the reinforcing relationship between the two.

These areas shared a general feeling of powerlessness. They knew that agricultural jobs were disappearing because of farm consolidation. They were aware that they had few openings for people with professional or technical educations. They also understood that they were likely to lose these people and with them, the specialized services the employees provided. When the town doctor or dentist retires, for example, it would be fairly difficult to recruit a new one. Further, educators, faced with declining enrollment, feared losing their jobs to the inevitable school consolidations. Courts, governments, and schools in their surrounding areas had already started to merge, in an effort to cut costs.

With the loss of these professional and educational jobs, community identity seemed threatened. It is no secret how important high school sports are to rural communities. Losing the local high school can send shock waves through a community's sense of place. At the same time, and probably as a reaction, development politics in these areas seemed to be very conservative. Residents were proud of their community identity and wanted to keep it, even if it meant denying access to larger, commercialized businesses. The people were happy with a small town feeling and wanted to keep it that way.

It seemed there were two sides to these conflicts. On the one side were some local politicians and business leaders pushing for development and growth. On the other side, were other community leaders (some in office, and some not) pushing for tradition and conservation. The conflict between these groups may have been at least partially contributing to some of the stagnation and difficulties. However, it would be wrong to think that the material and spatial conditions of these towns had nothing to do with their current problems. It can be argued that having a small, aging town in rural Kansas leaves few good strategies for economic growth.

However, hoping for the future, a number of development plans were raised. Some talked about being a center for transportation. They believed that being in Kansas, the geographic center of the contiguous US, should give them an advantage in the shipping market. Another idea was to become a node for information workers. In theory, this could work, since technology has made it easier than ever for these types of people to telecommute and work wherever they want. The problem is, there is still a general lack of amenities in these areas. People with professional and technical training tend to gravitate toward areas that offer the goods and services they desire (like specialized shopping, recreation opportunities, and entertainment options).

When informed about the aging composition of their populations, many people in Smith and Woodson Counties remarked that they could become retirement destinations. They thought that their safe, small-town atmosphere would be a great attraction for older people. While this is true,

such a marketing strategy comes with a couple of problems. The primary difficulty is that many rural places can say that they are safe, small towns. This results in a great deal of competition over possible retirees. Without specialized services, a favorable location within commuting distance of a metropolitan area, or a high level of some other amenities, the hopes of the average rural place becoming a retirement migration destination are pretty slim.

This brings us to the question of how Nemaha County became a retirement destination. As previously discussed, Nemaha County is not especially gifted in terms of natural amenities or recreation opportunities. They do, however, have a very highly developed health care system and a strong religious local culture. Probably the most important thing that Nemaha has, in terms of attracting retirees, is its health care system. Both Seneca and Sabetha (about a 20 minute drive) had fully functioning hospitals. They both also have several nursing homes and assisted living facilities each. The largest, the Apostolic Christian Home in Sabetha, has room for over a hundred residents at different levels of care. Seneca also has several nursing homes and had recently opened a brand new assisted living community that is part of a national franchise.

It is these nursing homes that are contributing to the influx of older people. This is supported by the net migration rates in the area. The age specific rates show that people are not moving into Nemaha County as a first move after retirement. If that were the case, we would see higher net migration rates for people in their early to mid-sixties. Instead, we see that people are migrating in at ages beyond 85. The interviews confirmed that a majority of the in-movers are coming for the nursing homes and assisted living facilities.

This is by no means amenity migration in the usual sense. Older people are not locating in Nemaha for palm trees and warm sun. They are moving there because they need help. We might ask, why here and not somewhere else with nursing services? The answer may lie in the religious nature and family orientation of the communities. Sabetha seems to be largely Apostolic while Seneca is primarily Catholic. A number of people interviewed directly sited religious networks for why people they knew had moved to town.

Family networks reinforced these pulls. First, families provided connections through which older and younger people could reduce the difficulties involved in migration. In many migration situations, people in a destination place can provide information and support that can be very helpful. Second, many of the businesses in town were family owned. Often, older people would move back to be near their kids who still had established businesses or steady jobs in the area.

Nemaha County is doing well in terms of health and community services for older people, but why are younger people staying there as well? Many of the same religious and family reasons also apply to younger residents. Family businesses can provide at least some jobs for college educated kids, creating a kind of business person replacement cycle. A few of the younger participants referenced the strong religiosity of the community (especially the number of churches) when talking about their own reasons for relocating.

Another factor deals with employment. In addition to nursing homes, both places in Nemaha have extensive employment opportunities. Some participants complained that they had more jobs than people to fill them. Both Seneca and Sabetha had at least one moderately large

manufacturing plant and several smaller industries. These industrial factories employed people at various educational and technical ranges, providing jobs for college graduates. They were also opening new public and private schools in the area. Combining agriculture and industry (primarily male occupations) with health services and education (primarily female ones) creates an interesting situation that offers job possibilities for members of educated, dual-earner couples. This may be leading to increased retention of the young, economic stability, and to the in-migration of others.

Conclusions

This study sought to discover what aging in place and retirement migration look like in a rural Kansas context. As the literature suggests, aging in place can be associated with the out-migration of the young, difficulty in the provision of services, and economic and public administration decline. Aging can definitely contribute to a negatively reinforcing spiral of rural de-development. At the same time, the main problem is not necessarily aging, but the differences in communities' capacity to deal with it. Smith County and Woodson County are in no way unsatisfactory places, they are simply struggling with the reality that many rural areas will face in the coming years.

In contrast, the project's findings on retirement migration do not fit well with existing literature. The only retirement destination in Kansas, Nemaha County, seems to be drawing people not with natural, but with health service, religious, and value based amenities. In this way, this is not "retirement migration" in the normal sense. It is post-retirement, need-based, culture-driven migration.

Further, it seems that retirement migration is contributing to community development, but also not in the usual way. The economic benefits that older people are providing are not through consumerism, but instead through a demand for health services that is helping to support the local economy as farming jobs decline. Health services combined with education, manufacturing, agriculture, and local culture create a community that seems sustainable to a wider range of people, namely those with families or who want to start them.

In a way, the differences between Nemaha, Smith, and Woodson Counties are not that large. All three were typical agricultural areas. All have experienced farm consolidation and the associated difficulties. However, through historical accident (as few people were even aware of its retirement destination status), Nemaha County ended up with the unique combination of economic and business activity in the right areas to remain sustainable.

Unfortunately, Nemaha County does not necessarily present a good model for other rural counties to emulate. It seems to be more of a situation of being in the right place, at the right time, with the right combination of resources. Further, it is likely that all these aspects had to be present at once in order to produce Nemaha's success. For example, opening a large nursing home in the average rural town would not automatically attract large numbers of older residents, younger in-movers, and the subsequent economic growth. The health services in Nemaha were strongly supported by the religious component both in the administration of the centers

themselves and in the towns in general. Religiosity, family networks, and job opportunities may be difficult, or even impossible to engineer in a short period of time.

This is not to say, however, that the study of retirement migration can learn nothing from the Nemaha example. On the contrary, it should open our eyes to the possibility that other factors beyond climate and recreation can lead to successful retirement destinations. It is very possible that other kinds of unconventional retirement destinations may be out there. It may also be the case that there are certain factors that community planners can manipulate to influence their area's attractiveness to retirees. To that end, our future research should seek to use mixed methods to investigate whether patterns in other unconventional retirement migration destinations might lead to a new community development model or, at the very least, inform policy makers of the limitations involved in trying to socially create induced retirement migration.

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Ben Bolender is a research assistant and PhD student in sociology at Kansas State University. He received a bachelor's of science, summa cum laude, in both Applied Sociology and Philosophy from Northern Michigan University (NMU) in 2004. He was also named the sociology department's outstanding graduating senior. He was inducted into the honor society of Phi Kappa Phi in 2005 and received his Masters of Sociology from Kansas State University in 2006. His thesis examined the influence of demographic, economic, and political factors on changes in the process of occupational status attainment in the post-1970 period.



His research interests include population dynamics, aging, research methodology, and occupational stratification. He has been involved in a number of research projects including a student opinion poll on laptop use at NMU and work on cultural transmission of second and third generation Finnish-Americans in Pelkie, Michigan. He is currently working with the Kansas Population Center on projects to study the process of aging and its implications in the rural United States Midwest. Future projects include the continued study of aging in the U.S. and Eastern Europe and work on the relationship between natural resources, economic development, and population dynamics in Western Kansas.