

Center on Aging

Research Report

Where the Sun Sets: Aging in Place in rural Kansas

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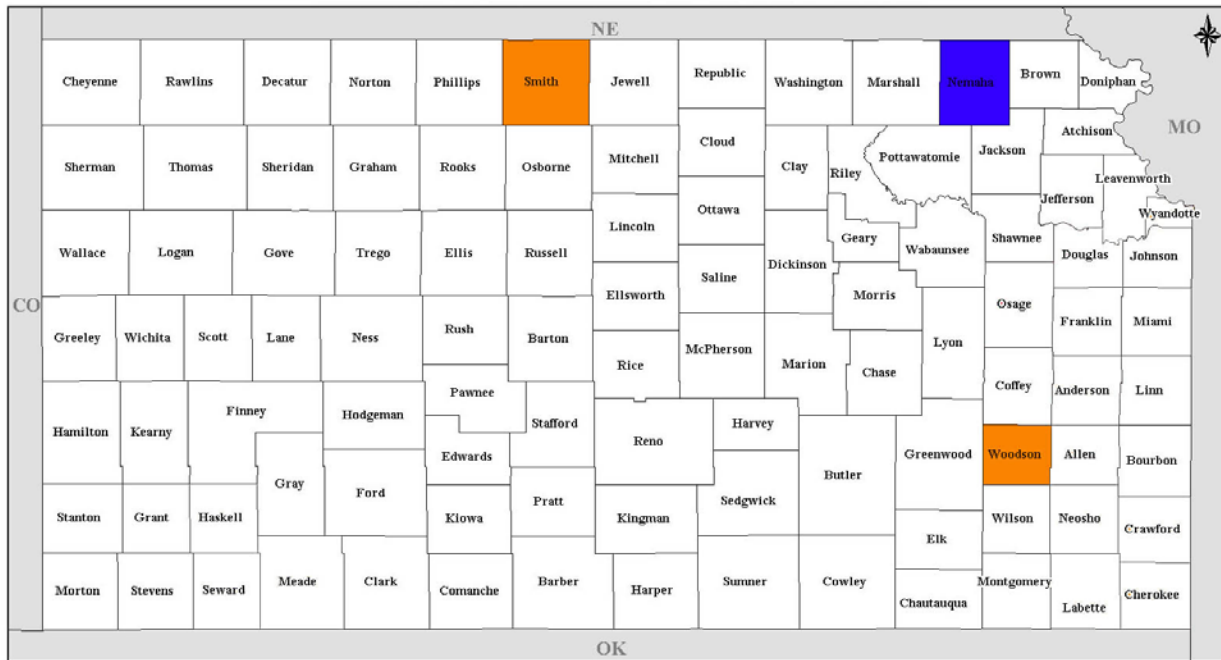
1. Introduction

This research project investigated aging in place in rural Kansas, seeking to demonstrate how local socioeconomic characteristics, including development legacies and local cultures, influence the policy challenges of aging. This project conducted exploratory research about the local perception and challenges of aging in place. Our research question was the following: How do the most important socioeconomic characteristics and local development legacies influence policy challenges regarding an aging population? The significance of this research is to put the general trend of aging into a local context, both in terms of comparing Kansas to the US average and describing local community responses within Kansas, based on various socioeconomic characteristics and development legacies.

To understand how aging plays out in a local context, we conducted two community case studies in Kansas. The case study sites, Smith Center in Smith County and Yates Center in Woodson County (Figure 1), were selected after multivariate statistical analysis of the local patterns of aging. The selection procedure included three steps. First we investigated four county-level variables: proportion of 65+ population in 1990 and 2000, and median age in 1990 and 2000. Counties were selected if their score in at least three of the four categories at least two standard deviations higher than the state average. This was because we wanted to select the most aged places. Second, counties were filtered out if the population of the central place was less than 1,500 in 2000: we wanted to have a central community large enough for at least some economic and social diversity. Finally, in step three, simple random selection was used to select the two case study communities, keeping in mind that those communities had to be at least two counties apart from each other to minimize spatial autocorrelation.

With a matching USRG grant, we were able to conduct some exploratory interviews at a third case study site: Sabetha in Nemaha County. This place was not selected at random, but was chosen because Nemaha County is the only retirement migration destination county in Kansas, as defined by the Economic Research Service at the USDA. Our preliminary finding was that, in contrast with declining communities, such as Smith Center or Yates Center, in Sabetha, a community with similar demographic and landscape characteristics, people see aging through a very different perspective. We will return to this finding at the end of this report.

Figure 1. Community case study sites



2. The social demography of aging in place in rural areas

Population aging, defined as an increasing proportion of people age 65 and above, is a general demographic trend in many societies, including the United States. It has a number of socioeconomic implications both at the national and local levels of social organization, including its impact on further demographic change, elderly well-being and poverty, community development, and economic growth. The demographic dynamics behind aging reflect a complex web of societal processes, albeit with relatively simple demographic root causes. Declining mortality and the related increase in longevity have extended the life period of humans over 65. That seems the most obvious cause. However, it is declining fertility that makes the real difference in age composition at the national level. Fewer births mean fewer young people and therefore a higher proportion of people in the older age categories.

Besides mortality and fertility, the third determinant of any demographic change is migration. While there are spatial differences in fertility and mortality, migration is the most important contributor to differences in aging across geographic areas (especially smaller areas). Migration and aging are connected in retirement migration and in aging in place. In retirement migration, well-off retirees move into certain communities. Through aging in place, the out-

migration of younger generations leaves the older people behind. The latter process has multiple impacts. For one thing, the flight of people in their twenties and thirties itself modifies the age composition of the area. Further, the community also loses the generation whose fertility behavior is the key to future population replacement. It is this pattern of aging in place that is most visible in rural Kansas today.

There are a number of social concerns generated by the process of population aging. The provisioning of national healthcare and Social Security are among them. However, rural small towns may have particular disadvantages when it comes to dealing with the changes brought about by aging in place. The history of out-migration from rural communities is well documented (Longino and Haas 1993; Longino and Smith 1998; Redford 1998). A number of possible reasons for this exist. One likelihood is that younger people move out of rural areas for economic reasons. Either job opportunities in urban areas appear better, or there just are not enough jobs available in rural areas to employ them all. Further, increased 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 2000). Younger people who move out of rural areas to attend college are more likely not to come back. This is because rural areas have few jobs for these people with their newly acquired skills. Further, some have argued that the consolidation of agriculture has created barriers to entry for new, younger farmers (Holcomb 1994).

For whatever reason rural out-migration of the young occurs, it both creates and combines with rural population aging to have severe consequences for the rural community. Some of these differences are greater levels of poverty (Glasgow 2003; Glasgow and Brown 1998; Krout and Coward 1998), worse average health status (Coward et al 1994; Glasgow 2003; Krout 1986; Wallace and Wallace 1998), difficulty in the public and private provision of services (Coward et al 1994; Krout 1986; Krout and Coward 1998), changing family structures (Glasgow 2003; Stoller 1998), transportation and housing issues (Kihl 1993), and, as we have discovered, general community decline (Kulcsár and Bolender 2006). However, research is scant as to exactly what causes these differences between rural and urban areas. 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 any case, though trends in aging related issues in rural and urban areas are converging, there are still significant differences that warrant attention (Glasgow 2003).

While this research investigated the community development challenges regarding aging, it is important to emphasize that aging itself is not a problem. Population aging is a general demographic trend, which might have both positive and negative consequences. The balance of these consequences is contingent on community capacity to deal with this phenomenon. Thus, it is very important to study aging in the context of local economic and social capacity. The increasing proportion of elderly population does impact local culture, social organization and economic structure, but the outcome of this process varies significantly. To design and implement effective policies regarding aging, decision makers have to understand these trends and their origins as well as their future course.

3. Aging in place in Smith Center and Yates Center

This section describes the two case study sites, Smith Center in Smith County and Yates Center in Woodson County, with respect to their demographic characteristics compared to the state and national averages (Table 1). For space considerations, the information is not presented for Smith and Woodson counties in which the case study sites are located. Note though, that the population structure of these places and their surrounding counties are fairly similar, probably at least partially due to the fact that the case study locations make up around 42% of the total populations of their counties.

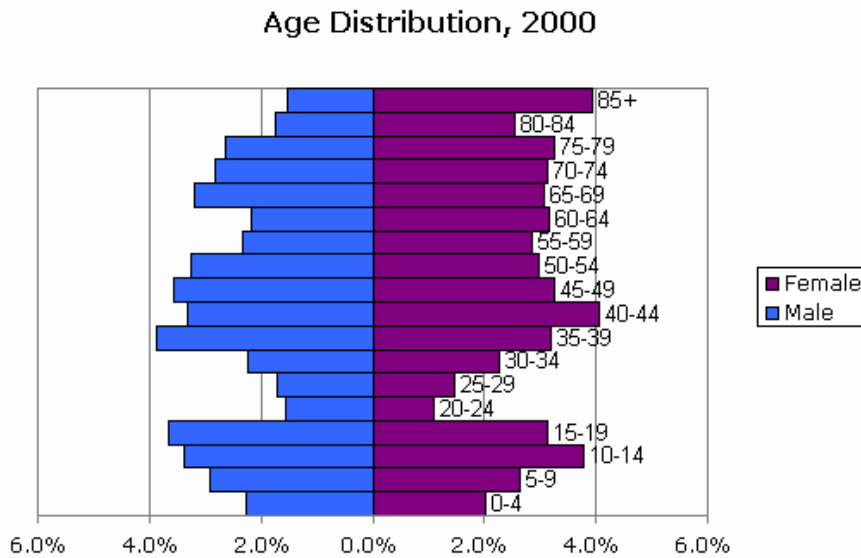
Table 1: General Demographic Characteristics

	Smith Center	Yates Center	Kansas	United States
Total population	1,931	1,599	2,688,418	281,421,906
% Age 0-17	21.0	21.8	26.5	25.7
% Age 18-64	46.9	50.3	60.3	61.8
% Age 65+	32.1	28.0	13.3	12.4
Median age	46.9	43.7	35.2	35.3
% Male	45.7	44.8	49.4	49.1
% Female	54.3	55.2	50.6	50.9

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000

Smith Center is a town of about 1,900 people. With about 32% of its population at ages 65 or above and a median age of almost 47 years, it is quite a bit older, proportionally than either Kansas or the United States as a whole. The table also shows a much lower percentage of people in the working ages (between 18 and 64) than in Kansas or the U.S. Further, we can see that a higher percentage of the population of Smith Center is female than the larger areas. This is probably due to the gender selectivity of aging. Women, across time and societies, have shown a propensity for longer life and lower mortality rates than men. Because of this, aging communities are also many times feminized communities.

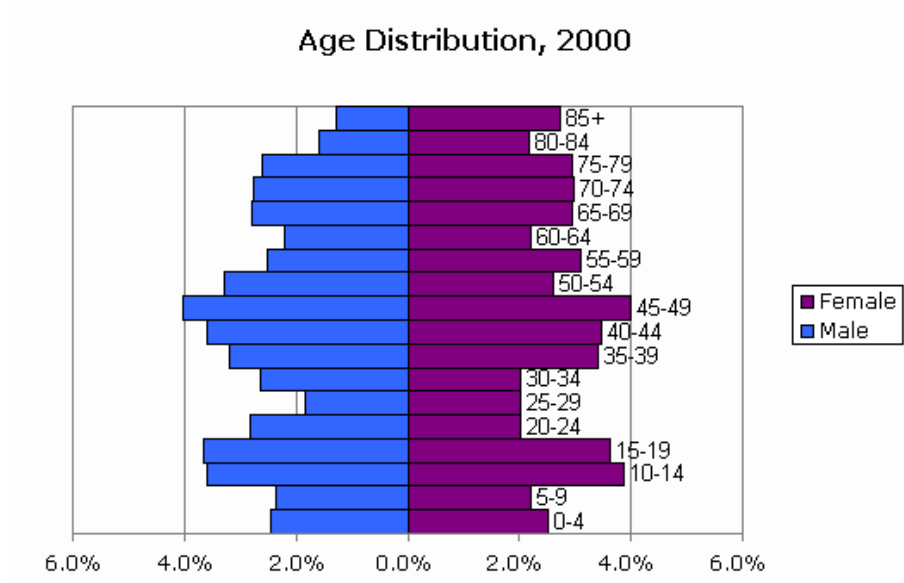
Figure 2. Age Distribution in Smith County, KS



Source: Census Scope.org

Figure 2 depicts the age composition of Smith County visually. Again, the age structure of Smith Center and Smith County are very similar. Here we can easily see the effects both of aging and of the feminization associated with it. Also, of particular note here is the lack of people age 20 to 30. One likely cause of a population pyramid with this type of structure is high levels of out-migration among people in these age groups. Migration is an age selective process. People in these younger adult age categories tend to have higher levels of migration than any other age group (their children, those age 0-10 are a close second). This relationship tends to hold true across time and space.

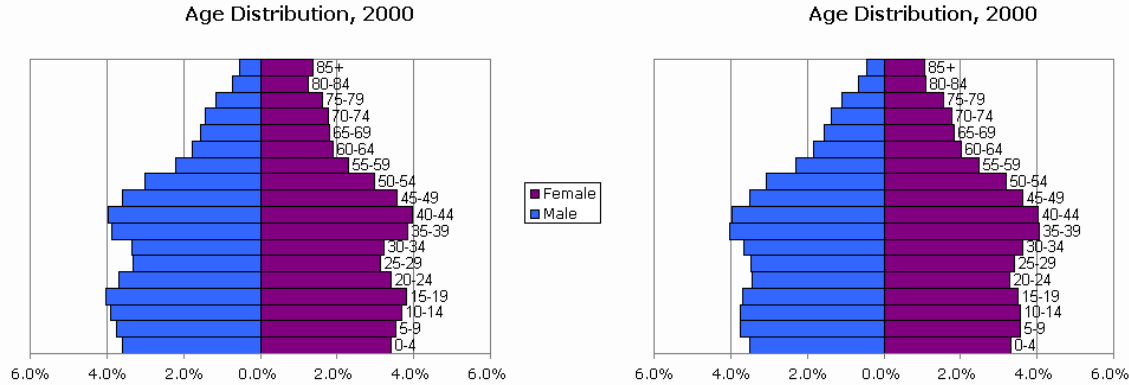
Figure 3. Age Distribution in Woodson County, KS



Source: Census Scope.org

We can see the same patterns in the population pyramid for Woodson County (Figure 3). However, here they are not quite as pronounced. It appears that there has been out-migration among the 20-30 year olds, and there are somewhat more women than men in the older age categories. We can tell from Table 1 that Yates Center has many of the same characteristics as Smith Center, only slightly less pronounced. A much higher proportion of people fall into the older age category (28%) than the state or national average. The median age of almost 44 years is 8.5 years higher than either the state or the country. Further, Yates Center has an even higher proportion of the population that is female than Smith Center. When we compare the age distributions of Smith and Woodson counties visually with the U.S. and Kansas age structures (Figure 4), it is easy to see that there are large differences in these areas.

Figure 4. Age Distribution of Kansas (left) and the U.S. (right)



Source: Census Scope.org

Table 2 shows summary measures for selected socioeconomic characteristics of the case study locations, Kansas, and the U.S. Both Smith Center and Yates Center show a lower proportion of the population with college degrees than the state or country as a whole. They also have a lower percentage of the population defined as “in the labor force”. It is hard to tell why this is from quantitative data. This could either reflect a lack of occupational opportunity in the area, or it could simply reflect the fact that a higher proportion of the population is retired and therefore considered “out of the labor force” and not “unemployed” (Kulcsár and Bolender 2006).

Table 2: Selected Socioeconomic Characteristics

	Smith Center	Yates Center	Kansas	United States
% high school graduate or higher	79.6	80.9	86.0	80.4
% with bachelor's degree or higher	17.4	14.0	25.8	24.4
% in labor force (age 16+)	52.4	55.3	67.5	63.9
% families below poverty level	8.7	9.0	6.7	9.2
Median household income 1999 (\$)	26,857	23,920	40,624	41,994

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000

The percentage of families below the poverty level, while higher than the Kansas average, does not seem significantly different from the U.S. proportion. However, median household incomes in Smith Center and Yates Center are considerably lower than the larger areas. From

these numbers, we could assume that these places struggle in terms of economic activities. That is, in fact, what we found.

4. Findings

Many rural places, due to out-migration of both farmers and young people, have experienced net population decline for most of the century. The loss of population presents a number of problems to the communities. These include a declining tax base, lack of or consolidation of services like health, education, and government, economic decline, further loss of services, and increased poverty with little hope of recovery.

Our case study work has led to the following conclusions. First, community leaders have varying degrees of knowledge and concern over issues regarding aging. Some had never thought about it before while others were aware of the problem and were actively trying to fix it. Second, they also varied in terms of how positive an outlook they had for the future. Some thought that in 15 years, their communities would be ghost towns. Others pointed out that it would be a big success if the place could maintain the current situation, as opposed to further decline in business and population. Only a few thought the future would bring expansion and growth. However, all wanted ideas on what to do to save their towns.

One consistency in their thinking was a linkage between the demographic processes of aging and population loss with ongoing economic decline. Though it is hard to tell which came first, it seemed apparent that population loss and economic decline formed a spiral of anti-development. A causal relationship could be hypothesized either way. Population loss (and subsequent aging) could lead to a loss of laborers and consumers for local businesses. As more businesses faced impending economic difficulties, some would be forced to close. Their workers would then have to either find new employment or migrate away.

Another possibility is that some factor, like cheap and easy transportation, made it possible for people to make trips to larger towns to do their shopping. A number of informants cited the fact that many people in town drove an hour or more, one way, on the weekends in order to do their shopping in larger places. If larger businesses like Walmart and mini-malls attracted people away from small towns in the first place (be it with price, selection, or convenience), economic decline could have started in this way. Again, as local businesses closed,

not only would owners and employees out-migrate, but also the town would become less attractive to possible in-migrants as well. Further, fewer available jobs would mean less incentive for the community's children to stay in the area, contributing even more to the problems of out-migration and aging in place.

It is also possible that capitalist agricultural production practices could be contributing to this spiral effect. Both of the areas studied so far had substantially more people in 1900 than today. Since manufacturing plants have never really been a large part of rural Kansas life, it is safe to assume that many of these people were employed in agriculture or farming related industries. This idea is supported by the fact that agricultural technology would have required much more labor power than it does today. As capitalist production accelerated and technology developed, both farmers and farm labor were most likely displaced. Given the lack of alternative employment, many people would have left the area looking for work. This could have either put the downward spiral in motion, or at least accelerated it.

Today, these two towns face significant hardships. As long as family farmers remain in the area, it is likely that these places will not become ghost towns. However, many places in their areas have already had to consolidate their legal and educational institutions with neighboring small towns. The problem is that these places are so small now that they have trouble attracting any new businesses. Factories see a labor force that is too old, retailers see a consumer population that is too small, and other businesses see vast distances to urban areas.

Even with options that might provide population youth and growth, these towns might still have problems. For example, when presented with the southwestern Kansas model of immigrant labor and meatpacking, many informants thought that their community was too conservative to accept it. One alternative idea our informants expressed was a desire to make their towns retirement migration destinations. However, natural and cultural amenities are considered principle inducements to attract retirement migrants (Johnson and Beale 2002; Longino and Haas 1993; Longino and Smith 1998). With these communities lacking notable natural amenities and suffering from economic decline, their chances for success on this front are extremely slim.

An additional issue regarding the retirement migration scenario is the lack of services, such as housing, transportation, and first of all healthcare. As our research revealed, there are significant shortcomings regarding these services. A housing market for the elderly, for example,

is more than just a stock of houses to purchase. These houses should be accessible by wheelchairs, have a structure which accomodates the needs of the elderly, and have local maintenance services in landscaping or repairs. Healthcare in many places probably declined for exactly the same reasons that businesses left. The situation has become bad enough that certain specialists might not even always visit these places. This means additional travel time for local residents to get to a larger place in order to obtain needed services. However, some people are unable to make and others are unable to afford such trips.

The advantages of small rural places are public safety, friendliness, affordable living and laid back small town lifestyle. These advantages however are present at almost all locations. Hence, retiree migrants can select from a large number of "small town America" places offering the same basic conditions. This means that their relocation decisions are more likely to be based on additional amenities these places can offer. In some cases, economic development strategies are in sharp contrast with those local characteristics that make the community attractive in the first place. For example, locating a prison in town may look good to local policy makers in terms of immediate development, but it probably takes away from the perception of public safety in the area, regardless of the real security measures taken.

We also need to place these local trends into the general context of aging in the United States. The dominant trend in the near future will be the retirement of the Baby Boom generation. Officially starting in 2011, this huge, postwar cohort will gradually retire, making a significant shift in the age composition of the country. At the national level, part of this aging will be offset by immigration which is age selective. But while Baby Boomers will retire across the country, immigration will not have this balancing affect everywhere. Places that are unable to attract migrants or retain population will likely continue to stay in their current developmental trajectory. Hence, the Baby Boomers who are currently in the work force will create a massive shift in age composition for rural America. If places are already struggling with development questions connected to aging, the future might bring even bigger problems.

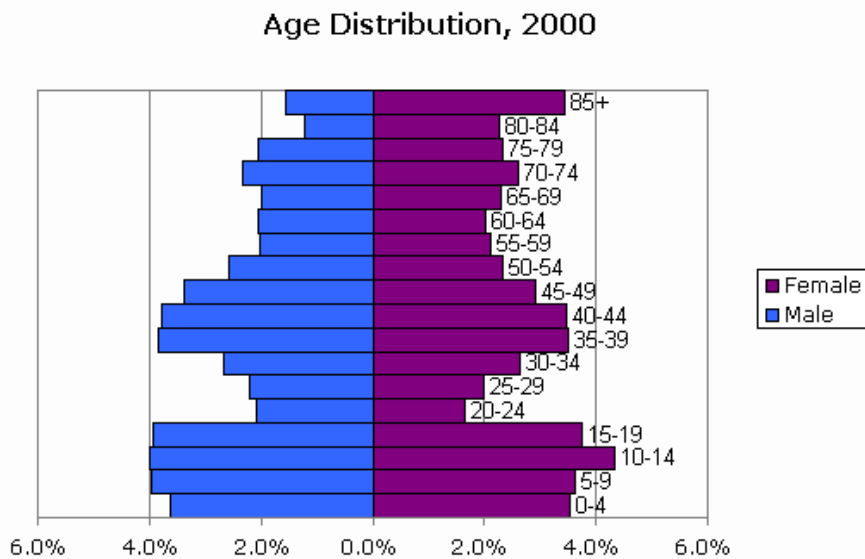
Finally, we have to note that Smith Center and Yates Center are both central places in their respective counties. This means that rural aging probably has even more dramatic consequences in smaller incorporated places, often less than 500 in population, that are located in the hinterlands of county centers. Institutional consolidation usually starts at the smallest places,

and those in these two counties we investigated probably face even more difficulties. Future research can help investigating this issue from a settlement system perspective.

5. Nemaha County, KS: the peculiar case

As indicated at the beginning of this research, some preliminary analysis was made on Nemaha County, starting the groundwork on an exploration of the situation. Nemaha is the only county officially classified as a retirement destination county by the Economic Research Service of the USDA. Our preliminary findings are that the economic system in Nemaha is continuing to thrive, in contrast with the general trend in rural Kansas communities. This is surprising news, given that the demographic characteristics of Nemaha County are very similar to Smith and Woodson counties (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Age Distribution of Nemaha County, KS



Source: Census Scope.org

While the population characteristics seem similar to those of both Smith and Woodson counties, the preliminary results indicate a substantially different economic and developmental trajectory. Further study is needed to verify our results and to investigate the community model that seems to be leading to this success. Plans for this research are currently being developed

with the purpose of constructing a community development model which might be applicable to other rural places in Kansas.

The case of Nemaha County shows that aging itself is not necessarily a problem. Retirees are valuable resources in many places. They generate demand for services, help create jobs, and mobilize the local economy. The impact of aging is always determined by the local capacity to address changes in the community. Aging is one of many development challenges. Because of this, it is necessary that policy measures should also address the building of general capacity building along with making interventions that target particular issues.

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