Trending towards oblivion: Endangered towns and their demographic landscape on the Great Plains

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Population decline, continuous outmigration and aging in place have been standard demographic dynamics across the rural counties of the Great Plains, noted by several scholars over the last decades (Popper and Popper 1987, Rathge and Highman 1996, Johnson and Rathge 2006, White 2008). These trends are connected to less labor intensive modes of agricultural production, diminishing economic opportunities in remote rural communities, and changing residential preferences. Some rural communities have been able to avoid prolonged decline by utilizing natural resources or amenities, attracting either extractive industries (Kromm and White 1992, Johnson and Beale 2002, Broadway and Stull 2005), or affluent retirees (Brown and Glasgow 2008, Brown et al 2011). Such relative success however either came with the price of path dependent economic unsustainability or was very selective for a few places with little hope to be repeated elsewhere.

The demographic landscape of the rural Great Plains, especially if viewed from a historical perspective, is littered with ghost towns. These communities were once centers of economic activities and homes to many settlers who were looking for a better future and were willing to work for it too. Today several of these towns are tourist attractions but the rest are mostly forgotten. The popular mindset is that ghost towns are a historical curiosity, reflecting trends that had occurred in the distant past. People generally assume that most ghost towns are products of the fundamental changes in the economy and settlement morphology before the 1960s, and if towns had survived until today they will continue to do so in the foreseeable future as well.

Between the old ghost towns and the places with a few hundred or thousand people where public policy occasionally tries to intervene to stop further decline are communities with only dozens of people. There are many of these places across the Great Plains. In Kansas alone there are close to a hundred communities with less than a hundred people, accounting for

approximately one sixth of all incorporated places in the state. One may wonder what helped these places survive with so few people against all demographic odds. Once most of the jobs had disappeared together with local social services, there was little reason apart from place identity and cultural attachment to stay behind. Yet, many thousands live in such tiny places, keeping these communities on the map.

These places are somewhat forgotten in demographic research, because outside the decennial census data are seldom collected for communities this size and socioeconomic indicators are often withheld for confidentiality reasons. This study attempts to close some of this gap in the research literature, focusing on this neglected group of places.

Standard demographic wisdom tells that continuous outmigration eventually leads to aging in place and puts communities on a downward spiral of long term population decline. However, cohort effects should be factored in, and it is possible that it was the Baby Boom generation which has kept these places from emptying out, providing a demographic cushion against the harsh reality of social and economic change. In this case however emerges the question of what is going to happen when the Boomers pass through their life course, and whether we would see an acceleration of population decline followed by new ghost towns appearing on lists maintained by state historical societies.

This study investigates the demographic landscape of incorporated places with less than a 100 people in the Great Plains, using the regional definition of Fenneman (1931). We are particularly interested in their age structure and basic population trends over time in order to predict their potential future trajectories. Using census data between 1960 and 2010, we examine the demographic pathways of those places that are very close to become the next wave of ghost towns in the United States. We focus on nonmetropolitan counties only, and pay particular attention to USDA's Frontier and Remote Area definition in conjunction with our own typology.

Our goal is to provide a more detailed demographic, social and economic profile of places that have arrived to the symbolic population size of 100 people. Using this profile, we plan to conduct a path analysis to see the future demographic pathway of these places as well

as make preliminary predictions about demographic conditions that are likely to put other places on the same trajectory.

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