Community economic development in two rural Kansas communities: A thematic analysis

by

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Abstract

Rural communities across Kansas face growing challenges of population decline, limited financial resources, and shifting economic structures. This study examines the factors that shape community economic development (CED) in two rural Kansas towns, Sterling and Nickerson, using the Community Capitals Framework (CCF) as an analytical lens. The CCF identifies seven interrelated forms of capital that collectively influence a community's development trajectory. Through a qualitative comparative case study approach, nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with local leaders and stakeholders from both communities. Data were coded deductively using the seven capitals and analyzed inductively through thematic analysis.

Findings reveal four interrelated themes shaping CED in these communities: (1) the power and limits of social capital, (2) political capital as a gatekeeper to development, (3) identity and attachment to place, and (4) built strengths and constraints. The study concludes that communities with well-coordinated political, social, built, and cultural capitals are more likely to "spiral up" toward sustainable growth, while those with fragmented or exclusionary networks risk "spiraling down."

By applying the CCF to rural Kansas, this study contributes to the understanding of how small towns mobilize their assets amid structural and demographic challenges. The findings offer insights for policymakers, local leaders, and development practitioners seeking to strengthen community resilience and guide equitable economic growth in rural America.

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Introduction

Rural communities across the United States face mounting challenges related to population decline, economic stagnation, and the shifting demands of a global economy. Between 2010 and 2020, rural America did not merely grow more slowly than urban areas; it experienced population loss for the first time in history (Johnson, 2022). In Kansas, where small towns form the backbone of regional identity and economic life, these challenges are particularly pronounced. From 2010 to 2020, the vast majority of Kansas counties lost a significant portion of their population, as illustrated in Figure 1 (Institute for Policy & Social Research, 2020). Many rural municipalities must now balance the preservation of community identity with the pursuit of economic vitality amid changing demographics and shrinking tax bases.

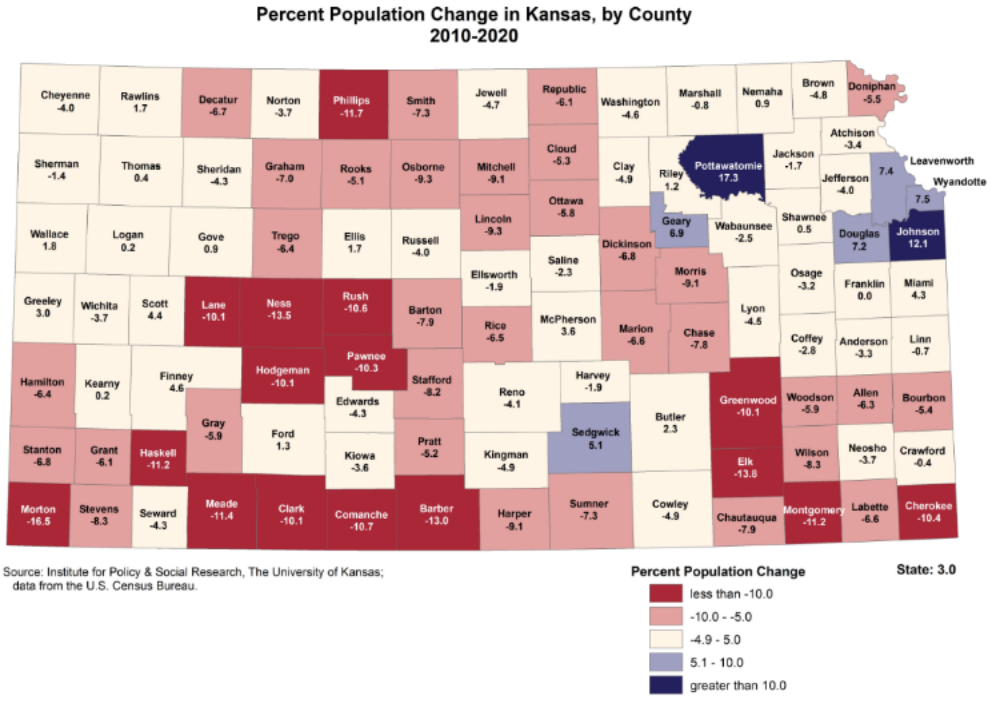

Figure 1. Percent Population Change in Kansas, by County (Institute for Policy & Social Research, 2020)

Despite facing similar geographic, demographic, and economic challenges, not all communities experience economic development in the same way. The study of community development, as described by Flora, Flora, and Gasteyer (2015), explores the actions people take to improve the overall quality of their communities. Economic development represents one vital component of community development, requiring adaptation to the models and assets a community employs. Therefore, understanding how residents and leaders work to enhance the overall quality of their community, including economic initiatives, is essential to understanding how rural towns adapt to change.

The Community Capitals Framework (CCF), developed by Cornelia & Jan Flora (2015), provides a useful lens for examining these processes by identifying seven interrelated forms of capital (social, cultural, human, political, financial, built, and natural) that collectively shape a community's trajectory. The CCF emphasizes that sustainable economic growth relies not only on financial investment but also on the strength of relationships, leadership, and shared community values. Understanding how these capitals function in real-world rural settings is crucial for informing future policy and practice in community and economic development. This study explores how different forms of community capital contribute to economic development in two Kansas communities. Through a qualitative case study design, it examines local perceptions of development and identifies the community factors that shape each town's economic trajectory.

Research Question

The purpose of this study is to examine the factors shaping community economic development in two rural Kansas communities. To organize and better define factors, the CCF was utilized in the research design. This study will assess data through a qualitative lens, seeking

an answer to the research question: What factors shape community economic development in Sterling, KS, and Nickerson, KS?

This research highlights perceptions of community economic development in two rural communities in Kansas through the analysis of interviews which focused on the presence (or absence) of each community capital, as well as evaluation of the economic trajectory of each community. This study includes an analysis of the different community capitals and the role that each play in contributing to each community's economic development strategy.

Research Approach

To answer the research question, two communities in south-central Kansas were identified based on a set of comparable characteristics, including geographic proximity, demographics, and recent investment in infrastructure. Both communities show similar levels of economic well-being on the Distressed Communities Index (DCI), a national measure developed by the Economic Innovation Group (2025) to assess local economic health. According to the DCI, one community is classified as "At Risk" of distress, while the other is categorized as "Mid-Tier." These classifications indicate comparable economic standing and development potential, making them appropriate for a comparative case study. Additional factors described by Yin (2003), including convenience, access, and geographic proximity, were considered during site selection to enable an in-depth pilot case analysis. These factors allowed the researcher to build meaningful relationships and gain deeper contextual insight during data collection.

The boundaries of each case are defined by the municipal limits of the community, while also recognizing the influence of those who live outside formal boundaries but engage with the municipality through work, education, or civic participation. Together, Nickerson and Sterling serve as illustrative examples for understanding how different forms of community capital

contribute to rural economic development in Kansas. To draw conclusions from these cases and demonstrate a successful framework for future community analysis, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework of thematic analysis was utilized to identify themes to provide an answer to the research question.

Review of the Literature

This literature review examines the existing scholarship relevant to understanding the factors that shape community economic development (CED) in rural Kansas communities. It begins by defining what constitutes a "rural" community and how rurality influences local economic and social structures. The review then explores the conceptual relationship between community development and economic development, identifying how the two fields intersect in practice and theory. Finally, it discusses the Community Capitals Framework (CCF) as a central theoretical model for analyzing how communities mobilize their assets to foster sustainable economic growth. By synthesizing these bodies of literature, this review establishes the foundation for a case study exploring how the seven community capitals influence local CED in two rural Kansas communities.

Rural Economic Development

When discussing rural CED defining "rural" is important for providing an understanding of the places being discussed. However, researchers generally agree that extant literature has failed to establish a consistent definition of rural that fully captures the rural context (Dunstan, Henderson, Griffith, Jaeger, and Zelna, 2021). When governments establish rural labels, are they usually for eligibility purposes to designate which communities are eligible for certain programs. Scholars use the rural label for analytical purposes, but since community development scholars are working with federal data sets, they tend to default to the federal government's labels (Flora et al., 2015). The U.S. Census Bureau (2020) defines rural areas as "all geographic areas that are not classified as urban," and urban areas as either: Urbanized areas, which contain 50,000 or more people; or Urban clusters, which have at least 2,500 people but fewer than 50,000 residents. These areas are delineated by population density, and the Census Bureau uses land use

and distance criteria to assess whether to include territory in an urban area. Figure 2 is a graphic depiction of the U.S. Census Bureau's Urban/Rural Classification. This study uses the Census Bureau's definition of rural.

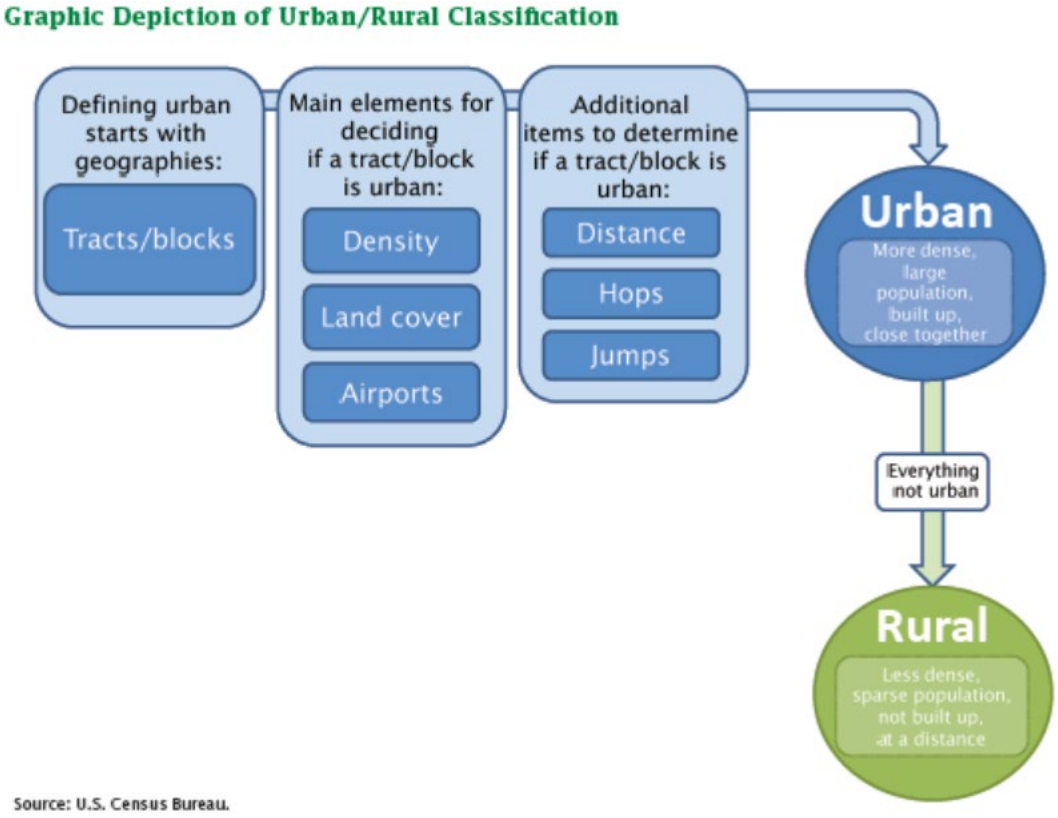

Figure 2. Graphic Depiction of Urban/Rural Classification (Ratcliffe, Burd, Holder, and Fields, 2016)

Community Economic Development

Community economic development (CED) is defined by Phillips' & Pittman's (2009) as the field linking two separate fields: community development and economic development. The International Association of Community Development's (IACD) definition of community development reads:

> Community development is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes participative democracy, sustainable development,

> human rights, economic opportunity, equality and social justice, through the organisation [sic], education and empowerment of people within their communities, whether these be of locality, identity or interest, in urban and rural settings (IACD, 2018)

While this definition includes economic opportunity in coordination with other aspects of a healthy and sustainable community, it is broader than the way many practitioners working solely in economic development define economic development. The International Economic Development Council (IEDC) defines economic development as:

> [The] programs, policies and activities that seek to improve the economic well-being and quality of life for a community by creating and retaining jobs and providing a stable tax base. Ultimately, economic development is a revenue strategy for a community, generating additional tax dollars from new business investment (IEDC, n.d.).

Shaffer, Deller, and Marcouiller (2006) make the case that the definitions of community development and economic development are undoubtedly linked, writing that CED occurs when people analyze the local economy, determine needs, and move towards goals. Therefore, communities with social capacity are in a better position to act on economic development processes if they choose, as community members are better equipped to complete the process of CED as opposed to outsiders. In short, CED utilizes the process of community development to mobilize economic development outcomes. This process is closely related to the Community Capitals Framework described below, which has become a key metric in analyzing the capacity of CED in rural communities.

CED studies have explored many factors in rural communities. Quality of life is often discussed as an advantage for rural areas because businesses and residents may be attracted to a rural area as a safe environment to live and raise children if the rural community is perceived to be safe and clean (Iverson and Maguire, 2000). Competitive advantages for businesses in rural areas include low cost of living, cheap land, lower wages, and cheaper production costs (Argent, Walmsley, and Sorenson, 2010).

However, despite these assets, challenges in rural economic development are numerous. Financial resources remain slim as local governments struggle with a declining tax base due to population decline (Ryser and Halseth, 2010). Several policy decisions beginning in the 1950s to the present arguably increased economic stress on rural communities throughout the United States (Leslie, 2005). For example, the construction of the interstate highway system is still debated on its impact on the economy of rural communities, as easier access from rural to urban areas allowed businesses to access new markets and labor. While touted by some as bringing opportunity to rural areas, research by Dorf & Emerson (1978) argues that highways do not necessarily bring new business, and the economic development it does inspire does not improve residents' quality of life (i.e. gas stations, travel plazas). In fact, convenient access to urban areas can incentivize rural residents to simply seek out urban amenities rather than shop closer to their rural homes (Boarnet & Haughwout, 2000). Businesses have also migrated. Manufacturers saw a surge of migration to rural areas from urban centers in the 1970s-1990s, only to see another migration out of the United States with the introduction of free trade agreements (Flora et al., 2015).

Place Context: Kansas and the Rural Great Plains

The rural Great Plains of the United States has faced similar CED pressures as described above. The economy in this region is structured around agriculture and energy use. This provides a somewhat stable economic base but requires sparsely populated land usage which leads to rural isolation in the historic settlement of communities in this region (Harrington, 2010). Economic stress from the trends of the 1950s to the present adversely affected the already small towns in the region (Leslie, 2005). As Popper and Popper (1987) predicted, "the small towns in the surrounding countryside will empty, wither, and die. The rural Plains will be virtually deserted" (p. 16). Popper and Popper (1987) made the case that the federal government should buy private land in the Great Plains and return it to its pre-colonial condition, a vast wild prairie with bison because of its unsuitability for human agriculture and settlement.

While there was strong pushback from residents and regional scholars, with some correctly noting flaws in the assumptions the article made such as assuming depopulation equated to below capacity land use, the broad trends in the rural Great Plains are driven by depopulation today. In Kansas specifically, White (1994) noted that a few communities such as Garden City, Liberal, and Dodge City, were "gainers" in population as they became key trade centers in the area and have recently seen a large influx of immigrants, largely employed in packing plants. But much of the rest of central and western Kansas has seen and is continuing to see population loss, with young residents leaving and older residents aging in place (Harrington, 2010).

In addition to economic stress, environmental stress looms large. Development of rural areas is still highly contingent on the usage of natural resources and connections to global markets, such as exporting wheat to other countries (Argent et al., 2010; Harrington, 2010). Drought has affected much of Kansas and the Great Plains region over the past two decades, and

previous drought events have been more prolonged and extreme, significantly impacting the agricultural industry (Lin, Harrington, Ciampitti, and Knapp, 2017). Climate change will contribute to these stresses in the future, as temperatures increase and a decrease in precipitation is likely in the region in the future (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2007). Additionally, while some farmers in rural Kansas are aware of the looming effects on climate change in Kansas, the ability to communicate about this is difficult. Most respondents in one study said they almost always avoid the topic due to possible conflict with community members, or that publicly stating their concerns could hurt business if neighbors or potential customers and laborers disagreed with their views (Vu, Nguyen, Izhar, and Diwanji, 2025). These natural and cultural challenges are present for many rural communities and their CED strategies.

Recent literature has analyzed rural CED strategy through place attachment, or the bonds that arise between people and their sociophysical settings (Brown, Altman, and Werner, 2012). In a study that focuses on the extent to which social capital impacted economic development in the small town of Valemount, B.C., Darko and Halseth (2025) ask if place attachment is a contributing factor in response to economic hardship. Their critical finding was that "by recognizing and leveraging social connections through people's attachment to their community, small resource towns can harness collective strengths to navigate economic challenges and create sustainable futures." However, leveraging place can be difficult for the Great Plains region. As Harrington (2010) argues, "place" is not apt to replace "sector" as the focus of economic strength in the Great Plains, because while "places" are found within the vast space of the Plains they are weakly differentiated with characteristics that attract a small proportion of the population.

Community Capitals Framework & Economic Development

A community capital is any asset used to develop resources in a community. Flora, Flora, & Gasteyer (2015) write that, "Every community, however rural, isolated, or poor, has resources within it. When those resources, or assets, are invested to create new resources, they become capital" (p. 32). There are seven types of capital that can be used to gauge a community's resources: Natural, Cultural, Human, Social, Political, Built, and Financial Capital. Figure 3 below offers a visualization of each of these areas and their interconnectedness. The Community Capitals Framework (CCF) is a useful tool to analyze to what degree the seven areas work together in a community (Flora et al., 2015; Jacobs, 2011). When the seven capitals work well together, sustainable communities that seek to bring economic security to all and offer safe and accessible networks to citizens are formed.

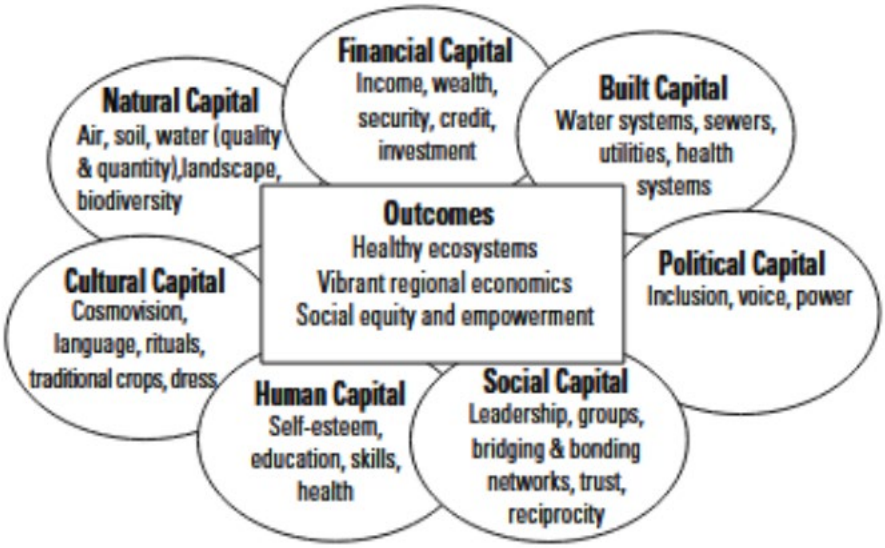

Figure 3. Explanation of the Seven Community Capitals & Outcomes (Jacobs, 2011)

Social Capital

Social capital has been studied outside of and within the CCF as a driver of CED. Social capital, specifically from the civic perspective offered by Robert Putnam (1993), refers to

"features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (p. 2). Social capital has been studied as a key element of developing countries' economies. Dense social networks were found to lower transaction costs and speed up innovation in developing East Asian economies (Lajčiak, 2017). Within developed economies, even weak social ties can be impactful for the labor market in countries like the U.S. and the concept of networking is closely tied to social capital's impact on the developed economy (Granovetter, 1973). Economist Robert Lucas (1987) goes so far as to argue that "that human capital accumulation is a *social* activity, involving groups of people in a way that has no counterpart in the accumulation of physical capital" (p. 19).

Emery and Flora (2006) expanded the idea of social capital and how it contributes to CCF and CED, contending that communities have the capacity to "spiral up" or "spiral down" in their economic development process, as demonstrated in Figure 4. Their contention is that when one community capital is strengthened through community investment, it has the potential to strengthen all other capitals. By the same token, if one is weakened, then all capitals are weakened. Using a case-study approach they found that social capital presents the most potential for the spiraling up process, as investments in leadership and capacity building make it easier to invest in other areas. Economic pressures that rural communities face today can send the community in the "spiraling down" process if strong community development programs are not in place to combat it.

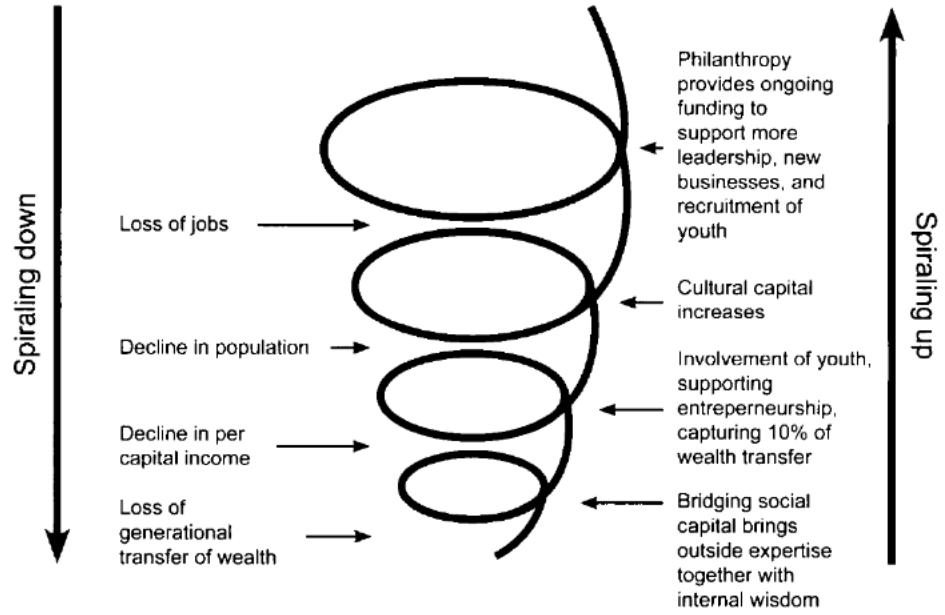

Figure 4. The Spiral Process of Community Capital Development (Emery & Flora, 2006)

Summary

While numerous studies have explored the role of CED in the United States, the processes that shape CED in rural communities remain less understood. Existing research highlights several factors that influence the success or decline of rural CED efforts, including the availability of financial capital and infrastructure, the strength of local leadership, the density of social networks, and the community's ability to adapt to economic and environmental change. Studies consistently demonstrate that communities with high levels of social capital, civic engagement, and collaborative leadership are more likely to experience positive development outcomes (Putnam, 1993; Emery & Flora, 2006). Conversely, communities experiencing population decline, weakened institutions, and limited access to external resources often face "spiraling down" effects that reduce their development capacity (Emery and Flora, 2006; Flora et al., 2015).

Within this context, the CCF provides a comprehensive lens for analyzing how communities mobilize their resources across seven forms of capital (natural, cultural, human, social, political, built, and financial) to achieve development goals. Each of these capitals is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. Although the CCF has been applied in several rural studies, few have examined its application in the context of rural Kansas, particularly through a holistic qualitative approach that centers local leadership perspectives. Additionally, the operationality of the CCF is far from concrete, and transferring a tool for community self-evaluation to a replicable research method is challenging.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining how the seven community capitals are utilized and how they interconnect to shape CED in two rural Kansas communities. Through a qualitative case study approach, the research draws on interviews with local leaders to identify which factors most strongly influence their community's development trajectory. By applying the CCF as an analytical tool, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how rural Kansas communities leverage their assets, respond to challenges, and sustain economic growth in the face of long-term demographic and economic shifts.

Methodology

Research Design

This study seeks to discover the factors that shape community economic development in two rural Kansas communities. To provide context, this section outlines the process of selecting sites and employing a case study methodology with thematic analysis. In this study, the phenomenon examined is the process of Community Economic Development (CED). Each of the two communities studied offers a unique case bounded by its geographic, social, and economic distinctions.

Using a hybrid approach of both deductive and inductive coding, qualitative data were gathered from interviews and coded first deductively to the seven community capitals. Then, using thematic analysis, themes were formed inductively by identifying them within the data with the assistance of artificial intelligence. A thematic analysis is the process of identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The goal of this hybrid design is to understand both the unique and shared factors that influence CED within and across the two communities. A hybrid design makes sense because the seven community capitals are existing stratifications which were used to create interview questions, but the data that was collected revealed new themes. The study emphasizes the perspectives of local stakeholders, including leaders, business owners, and residents who are directly involved in community development initiatives.

Site Selection

Sterling, Kansas, and Nickerson, Kansas, were selected for this study due to their apparent similarities and certain distinguishing characteristics. Both are small towns located in south-central Kansas, approximately 11 miles apart along Highway K-96. Despite their

proximity, they are in different counties, Nickerson in Reno County and Sterling in Rice County. Reno County has a substantially larger population due to the presence of Hutchinson, Kansas, a regional economic hub with a population of 40,006 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

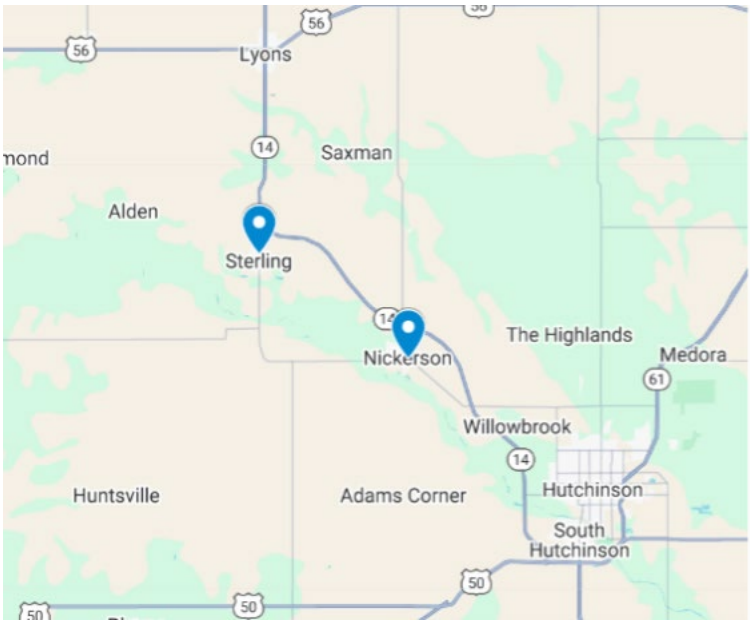

Figure 5. Location of Nickerson, KS, and Sterling, KS (Google My Maps, n.d.)

Nickerson is slightly smaller than Sterling, with a population of 1,058. Around 7.7% of people in Nickerson live below the poverty line. Sterling is larger but still rural with a population of 2,248 and a poverty rate of 6.4%. Both towns are grappling with population decline in the past decade, with Nickerson shrinking 10.2% and Sterling declining by 11.9% between 2010-2020 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Median Household Income is incredibly similar between the two towns, with Sterling at $49,323 and Nickerson $50,350 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

Table 1. Population and Income Data for Nickerson, KS, and Sterling, KS (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

Statistic	**Nickerson, KS**	**Sterling, KS**
Population	1,058	2,248
County Population	61,793 (Reno)	9,362 (Rice)
Poverty Rate	7.7%	6.4%
Median Household Income	$50,350	$49,323
Population Change, 2010-2020	-10.2%	-11.9%

To select cases of comparable size, proximity, and socioeconomic factors, as Yin (2003) recommends for case study analysis, indexed data were used to ensure the validity of community selection. The Distressed Communities Index developed by the Economic Innovation Group (2023) was used for this purpose. This index utilizes census data to assess the degree to which a community is economically distressed or at risk of distress. It analyzes communities by ZIP code, which is particularly useful because both Nickerson and Sterling are assigned unique ZIP codes encompassing their surrounding rural areas. According to this index, Nickerson is categorized as "At Risk" of distress, while Sterling is labeled "Mid-Tier."[1] These neighboring classifications suggest broadly similar economic development trajectories. However, as Flora et al. (2015) note, community development depends on the actions people take to improve their

[1] Communities are analyzed based on seven criteria for their economic distress score: No high school diploma percentage; Housing vacancy rate; Share of adults not working; Poverty rate; Median income ratio; Employment percent change; and Business establishment percent change. Each community receives a distress score from 0 to 100, based on its average percentile rank across the seven equally-weighted indicators. The "At Risk" designation indicates Nickerson scored within the 61st - 80th percentile in this distress score and Sterling's "Mid-Tier" designation means it scored within the 41st - 60th percentile (Economic Innovation Group, 2023).

communities, making each process unique, hence the need for further research through case study analysis.

A final factor motivating this research was Sterling's recent economic development activity. Despite census data suggesting that both towns are on similar trajectories, the Kansas Department of Commerce announced in 2024 a $105 million investment in Sterling projected to create 251 new jobs and spur housing development (Kansas Department of Commerce, 2024). This investment followed the completion of the new K-96 Highway, a state highway rerouted to bypass the downtown districts of both towns. The K-96 Location Study (Kansas Department of Transportation and Wilson and Company Engineers, 2010) predicted that the project could "increase or decrease local or regional economies," depending on community adaptation. No current economic data exists on the impact of the new highway in either community, further justifying the need for this study.

Data Collection

Using purposive sampling, a sampling method commonly used within the CCF and evident in studies such as Jiang, Prayag, Chowdhury, Hossain, and Akter (2025), twenty community members involved with CED were identified by analyzing community websites. Of the twenty community members who were contacted, nine agreed to participate in the study: five from Sterling and four from Nickerson. Using unobtrusive data collection methods, such as website and document analysis, along with interviews with leaders involved in CED efforts can provide "a plethora of information on successful CED efforts that have taken place in rural areas" (Fey, Bregendahl, & Flora, 2006, p. 2). Participants represented diverse sectors of the local community, such as government, education, business, and civic organizations. This approach ensured that a variety of perspectives were included to reflect the multifaceted nature

of local development. Although the final sample size was nine, saturation was reached as similar themes recurred across interviews, and no substantially new categories emerged. As Ahmed (2025) describes, qualitative studies such as this one can often benefit from a small sample size of 5-30 participants if the goal is to explore unique perspectives and lived experiences. However, voices from marginalized populations, newer residents, and individuals less formally involved in CED remain under-represented and should be included in future research to further strengthen the findings.

Interviews were conducted in person and were recorded with the participant's informed consent. Approval for this project was obtained through Kansas State University's Institutional Review Board before beginning data collection. Each interview lasted approximately 30–60 minutes and followed an interview guide (Appendix A) focused on the participants' perceptions of the presence of each community capital, how their role interacted with local development, and what economic trajectory the local community was on. Follow-up questions were asked by the researcher as needed to provide greater context for coding. Supplementary materials, such as community documents and public reports, were reviewed to provide additional contextual understanding as needed based on participant responses. The study received institutional ethics approval, and participants were invited to clarify or elaborate on statements during the interview to support accuracy.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy. Transcripts were then anonymized, with pseudonyms assigned to participants and identifying information removed. Data were organized using a secure digital system, and each transcript was labeled by case (Community A or Community B) to facilitate both within-case and cross-case analysis.

Interview Process

Before beginning, a brief conversation occurred with each participant defining CED and providing a brief overview of CCF. The following questions were asked to gather basic background information on the interviewee and the community:

- Can you describe your role in your organization?
- How long have you been in your position?
- Can you describe what role your organization has within the community development of [Nickerson/Sterling]?
- What recent community economic development projects has the community undertaken?
- Do you see the community on a positive or negative economic trajectory? Are there any specific examples you can point to for local economic triumphs or struggles?

While these questions do not directly measure any capital, they allowed the interviewee to describe critical context on how they viewed their local communities. Some responses immediately painted a picture of what assets and deficits were present that could later be sorted into the CCF. The following questions were developed to address each capital within the framework:

<u>Social capital</u>

- Can you describe what role your organization has within the community development of [Nickerson/Sterling]?
- How would you describe the sense of community in [Nickerson/Sterling]?

- How would you rate the level of trust among community members? Between community members and local government? Between community members and your organization?

As described in the literature review, social capital has been researched as a key factor of CED as it allows organizations to encourage public participation and volunteerism, organizations invested more effectively in CED to work together, and stronger social ties making the community more appealing to additional investment. Strong relationships and trust among people and organizations strengthen the ability of CED work to be done and has direct economic benefit to a community. As Kalish, Holdowski, and Wolf (2021) argue, "trust is like an interdependent web that connects all actors in an economy and influences how they work together to drive growth." Additionally, asking about the sense of community led to some discussion on if these communities were "closed" or "open" in the words of the participants, which can be an indicator of how trustworthy the community is to new residents and outsiders, and how easy it is for them to access networks that have the potential to generate social capital.

Political Capital

- What is the key decision-making body or bodies in the community?
- How much representation do you feel the community gets in county-level government organizations and non-governmental organizations?
- Have there been any recent county-level decisions that have been especially beneficial to the community economy?

The value of political capital in the CED process is critical. As Phillips (1990) writes, "Especially in smaller communities and rural areas, which have limited resources to work with, the public and private sectors must work together to promote the region" (p. 13). Asking about

the key decision-making body allowed participants to discuss what they perceived to be the governing body that influenced the CED process. Follow-up questions were asked if participants indicated that the decision-making body had effectively accomplished its CED goals. The two questions about county-level representation were created due to one of the key differences observed during site selection: Despite both communities being rural with a population difference of only about 1,000 people, Nickerson is on the border of Reno County (pop. 61,898) and is geographically in the Northwest corner of the county, while Sterling is within Rice County (pop. 9,427) and geographically south-central in the county.

Natural Capital

- What natural resources is the community especially well-positioned with?
- Do you feel that this [natural resource(s)] has a significant role in the local economy?

The first question looked at the natural resources the communities themselves had that the participants were aware of and asked the interviewee to consider if their local economy is structured around natural resource extraction or preservation and, if so, how much of an impact this has on the local economy. The second question allowed participants to speak to the degree to which (if any) natural resources presented an opportunity or a challenge for future CED.

Cultural Capital

- Does the community have a unique culture to it, in your opinion?
- Does anything about the community's culture lead to economic development?

Much like social capital, cultural capital contributes to levels of trust between residents, local businesses, and institutions. It also fosters intangible connections to place, feelings of belonging and attachment, that are critical for population retention, volunteerism, and tourism

development (Tubadji & Nijkamp, 2016). Additionally, cultural values, prior beliefs, and identities such as religion or national heritage can shape patterns of trust in economic transactions and community cooperation (Guiso, Sapienza, & Zingales, 2006).

In rural communities such as Nickerson and Sterling, identifying perceptions of cultural distinctiveness helps reveal how culture operates as both an asset and a constraint in economic development. For instance, a strong shared culture may strengthen local networks and attract heritage tourism, while cultural resistance to change could create barriers for new businesses. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing CED strategies that leverage cultural capital as a resource for long-term resilience and growth.

Financial Capital

- Are there challenges in accessing funding or financial support for local projects?
- What (if any) loan programs are available at the county or city level for entrepreneurs or expanding businesses?
- Are local financial institutions involved in the CED process, and do they find ways to support access to capital?

Financial capital plays a central role in CED within the Community Capitals Framework. It provides the resources necessary to match business demand with available capital and fuels entrepreneurial growth. A key area of economic development in many rural communities is entrepreneurship. Rural areas with populations under 2,500, not adjacent to metropolitan areas, have the highest rates of entrepreneurship in the United States (Figure 6). Because entrepreneurship is often the engine of rural economies, ensuring access to adequate financial resources is essential.

In Kansas, one critical mechanism for strengthening financial capital is Network Kansas' E-Community program. This initiative partners with local communities to provide the state's largest network of gap financing programs for entrepreneurs, filling critical funding shortages that traditional lenders often cannot address (Network Kansas, n.d.). When combined with social capital through local partnerships and cultural capital that values entrepreneurship, programs like these enable financial capital to act as a catalyst for broader CED strategies (Dumont & McGee, 2022).

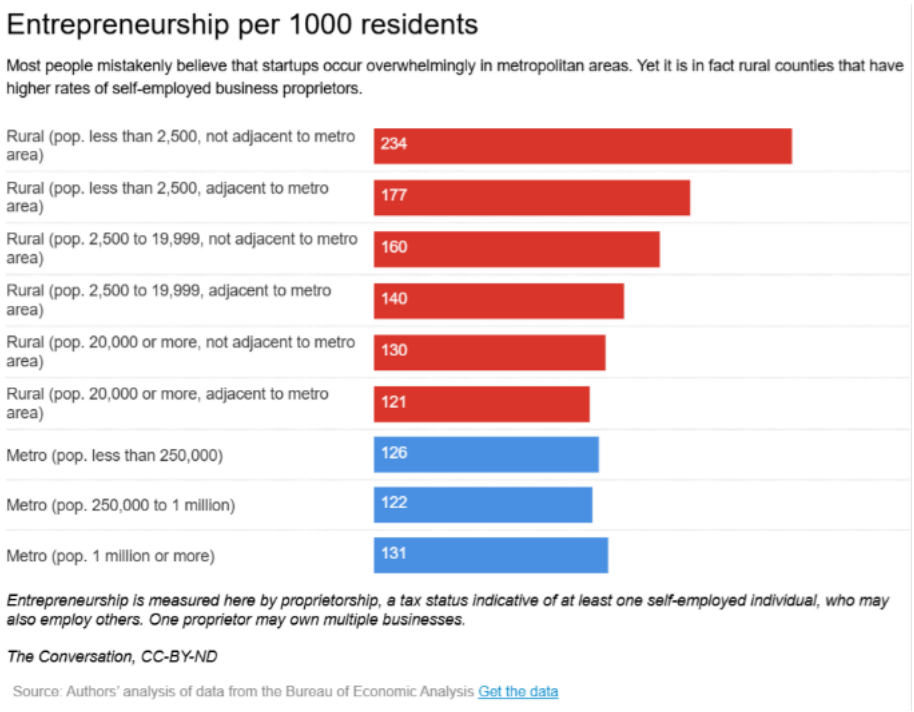

Figure 6. Entrepreneurship per 1,000 residents, grouped by rural and metro population statistics (Thiede, Grieman, Weiler, Beda, & Conroy, 2017)

Human Capital

- Do the town's residents have adequate access to education and training to prepare them for the careers available in the area?
- What does the labor force look like in [Nickerson/Sterling]?

The labor force in these communities relies on a local talent pool due to their rurality. Therefore, the first question asks if the town's residents can access education and training programs. It is worth noting that a key employer and trainer is Sterling College, a small, Christian liberal arts college in the community of Sterling. Responses helped determine if Sterling College, as well as other area institutions, are meeting the needs of the community's labor force. The second question is broader, asking if labor force needs are being met.

Built Capital

- What are the community's greatest strengths in terms of infrastructure, such as roads, buildings, utilities, or technology?
- Do you believe the construction of the new K-96 highway had any impact on the community feeling? On economic activity?

Infrastructure plays an important role in the local and regional economy. The first question allows participants to think about the greatest strength for built capital, or to respond if they view there is a clear deficit to be addressed. The second question draws on current events, with the construction of the new K-96 highway which routes traffic directly around both Nickerson and Sterling. There is no data that currently indicates how this highway is affecting the CED strategy in each community Allowing participants to give their input not only reflects the community's feeling toward a major infrastructure change planned and completed by a state agency, but also shares their thoughts on if this is a possible asset or deficit when it comes to the community.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the six-phase framework of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), in conjunction with ChatGPT version 5 (OpenAI, 2025) as an analytic

assistant. Thematic analysis was used to identify and interpret recurring patterns and themes within the interview data. To support systematic coding and data management, the researcher utilized QDA Miner Lite, a qualitative data analysis software that allowed for efficient organization, coding, and retrieval of textual data.

This study applied a deductive coding approach using the Community Capitals Framework (CCF), defined by Flora et al. (2015) as the pre-determined coding structure. The seven community capitals, Natural, Cultural, Human, Social, Political, Financial, and Built, served as the primary codes for organizing the data. Further, each capital was divided into either an "Asset" or "Deficit" for coding purposes. This was done to allow the researcher to better identify opportunities for assets to be used and to identify the challenges in CED that emerged. While CCF originated to map assets and observe how those assets interact, the framework can also be useful in identifying community challenges (Fernando & Goreham, 2018). Each interview excerpt was reviewed and assigned to one or more of these capitals.

The six phases of thematic analysis (Figure 6) guided the researcher's process. During coding, ChatGPT functioned as a reflective research assistant following the structured steps for human intervention described by Lee, van der Lubbe, Goh, and Valderas (2024), also illustrated in Figure 6. Given that the codes were formed deductively, ChatGPT was used for assistance in stages three through five of the six-phase framework. The analysis of themes also occurred in two stages: within-case analysis for each community and cross-case analysis to identify commonalities and differences. ChatGPT was used solely to support reflection and coding organization, acting as a member of the research team as Lee et al. (2024) recommend. All final coding, interpretation, and theme determination were completed by the researcher.

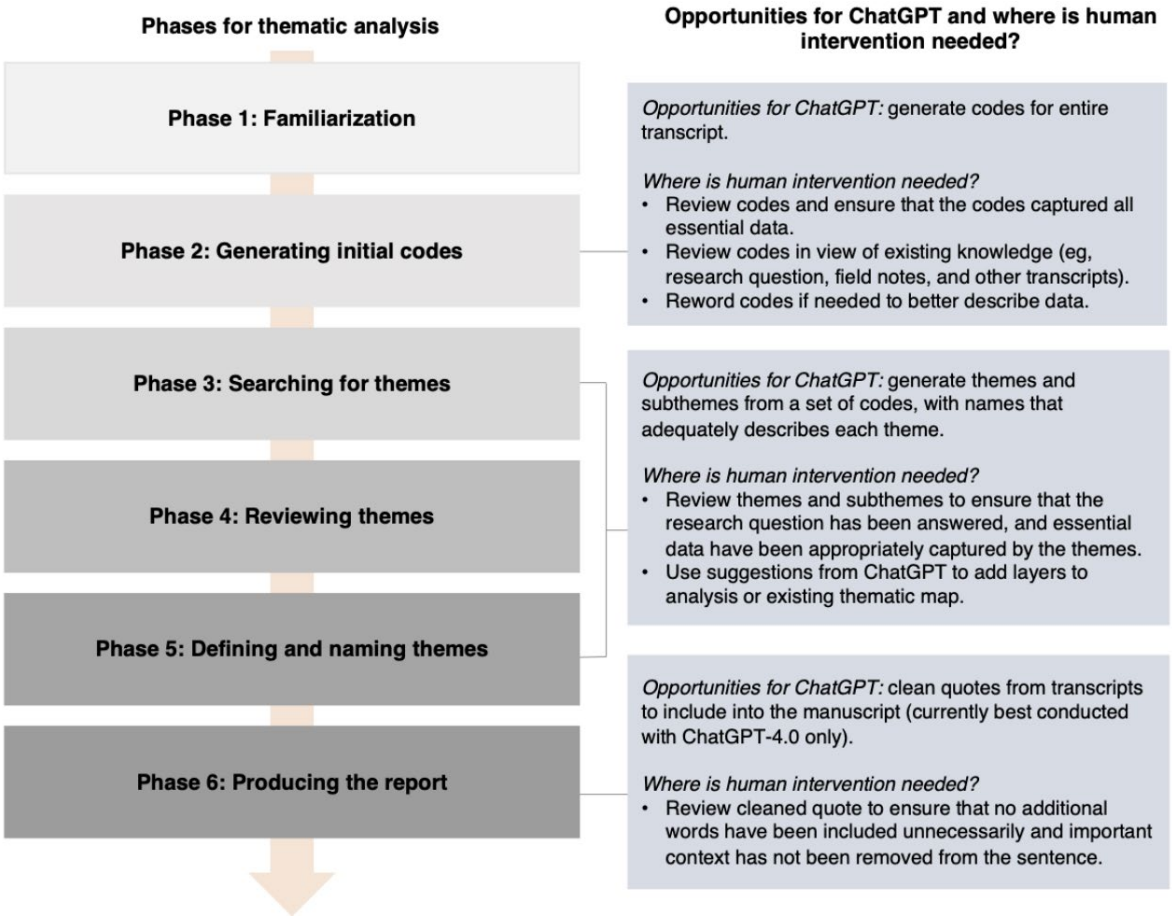

Figure 7. Opportunities for the usage of ChatGPT during the thematic analysis process and where human intervention is needed, the data analysis method this study follows (Lee et al., 2024)

The following describes the prompts input into ChatGPT during the thematic analysis process:

- "Generate codes for the entire transcript using the Community Capitals Framework, dividing each capital into an asset or deficit." This prompt occurred during Phase 2 and was done to confirm coding validity performed by the researcher. This prompt was used for each transcript. Codes generated by ChatGPT were compared to the researcher's work and final coding was completed by the researcher.

- “Generate themes and subthemes from the uploaded set of codes, with names that adequately describes each theme.” This prompt was used during Phase 3-5 and was done to help shape themes and subthemes. An excel sheet including all codes for both Nickerson and Sterling was uploaded to determine the themes. Final theme determination was completed by the researcher considering suggestions from ChatGPT.

To ensure transparency and reproducibility in assisted analysis, ChatGPT was used following the structured workflow (Figure 7) with multiple safeguards recommended by Lee et al. (2024). AI outputs were reviewed to refine, but not determine, the final thematic structure. Guardrails included sharing only anonymized excerpts or code labels, completing independent coding and verifying with AI consultation, and treating AI suggestions as memos rather than decisions. Disagreements between human and AI codes were resolved by reviewing code definitions, determining whether discrepancies reflected unclear coding or AI overreach, and making final determinations based solely on researcher judgement.

Findings

Introduction

To interpret what factors shape community economic development (CED) in Nickerson and Sterling, interview data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach. Guided by the Community Capitals Framework (Flora et al., 2015), each interview was deductively coded across the seven capitals, and responses were further categorized as perceived assets or deficits within each community. This coding process allowed for systematic comparison between Sterling and Nickerson, revealing where residents identified strengths to build upon and where they perceived constraints to progress. Code frequencies provided an empirical foundation for identifying patterns across the data (Tables 1 and 2), highlighting that Sterling respondents tended to emphasize assets, while Nickerson participants more frequently pointed to deficits. From these coded patterns, four interrelated themes emerged that illustrate how the capitals interact in practice: The Power and Limits of Social Capital, Political Capital as a Gatekeeper to Development, Identity and Attachment to Place, and Built Strengths and Constraints. Each theme represents a convergence of capitals that either enable or restrict CED, offering insight into how local context shapes the mobilization of resources, relationships, and identity in small-town Kansas.

Overview of the Themes

Following Braun and Clark's method of thematic analysis, all interview data were coded before themes were determined. For this study, the Community Capitals Framework was used as the deductive coding framework, with each capital further broken down into assets or deficits depending on how interviewees perceived each capital. Themes were developed by comparing

how each community's residents perceived their capitals as assets or deficits, highlighting where strengths and constraints emerged.

Table 2. Code Frequency of Interviews Conducted with Sterling, KS Individuals (N = 5)

Code	**Frequency**	**% Codes**
Cultural Capital - Asset	29	8.30%
Cultural Capital - Deficit	15	4.30%
Political Capital - Asset	21	6.00%
Political Capital - Deficit	18	5.10%
Social Capital - Asset	53	15.10%
Social Capital - Deficit	33	9.40%
Financial Capital - Asset	31	8.80%
Financial Capital - Deficit	26	7.40%
Built Capital - Asset	36	10.30%
Built Capital - Deficit	31	8.80%
Natural Capital - Asset	17	4.80%
Natural Capital - Deficit	2	0.60%
Human Capital - Assets	20	5.70%
Human Capital - Deficit	16	4.60%

Table 3. Code Frequency of Interviews Conducted with Nickerson, KS Individuals (N = 4)

Code	Frequency	% Codes
Cultural Capital - Asset	5	3.7%
Cultural Capital - Deficit	15	11.1%
Political Capital - Asset	7	5.2%
Political Capital - Deficit	9	6.7%
Social Capital - Asset	11	8.1%
Social Capital - Deficit	13	9.6%
Financial Capital - Asset	8	5.9%
Financial Capital - Deficit	12	8.9%
Built Capital - Asset	10	7.4%
Built Capital - Deficit	15	11.1%
Natural Capital - Asset	8	5.9%
Natural Capital - Deficit	3	2.2%
Human Capital - Assets	9	6.7%
Human Capital - Deficit	10	7.4%

Tables 2 and 3 show the prevalence of each capital in the interview responses. Percentages in Tables 2–3 were calculated using the total number of coded excerpts (348 for Sterling and 135 for Nickerson) as the denominator, with individual excerpts allowed to contribute to multiple capitals when relevant. This multi-coding approach was applied carefully to ensure that frequency counts reflected patterns in the data without overshadowing the qualitative meaning of the excerpts.

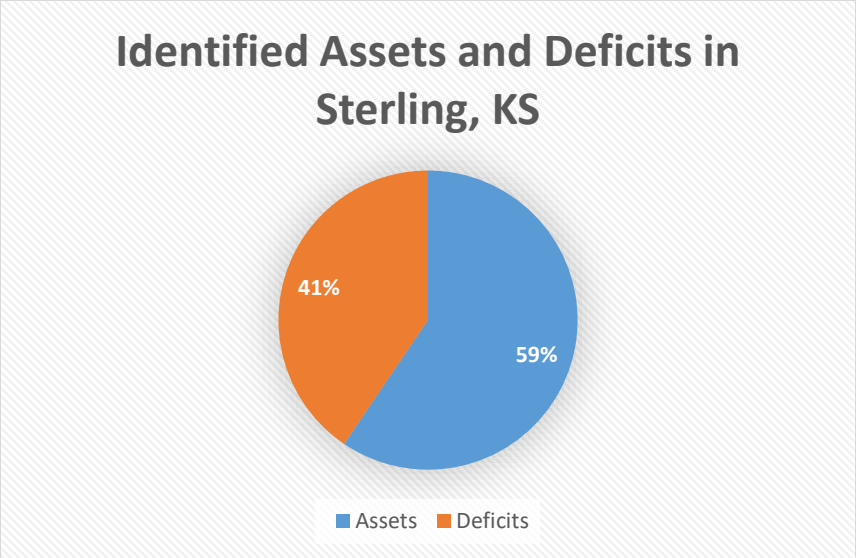

Figure 8. Identified Assets and Deficits in Sterling, KS

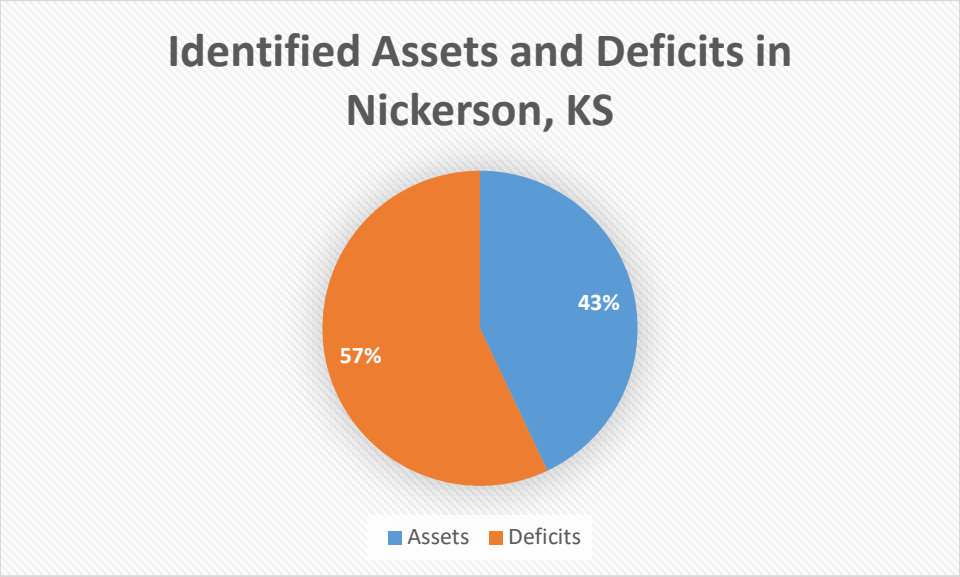

Figure 9. Identified Assets and Deficits in Nickerson, KS

Figures 8 and 9 provide a summary of identified assets versus deficits in each community. As shown in Table 2 and Figure 8, Sterling participants discussed a wider range of community assets, particularly emphasizing social, built, and financial capitals. This suggests that residents view collaboration, infrastructure improvements, and investment as ongoing

strengths, although this sentiment was far from unanimous, and deficits were also identified. In contrast, Nickerson participants more frequently identified deficits, especially in built, cultural, financial, and social capitals, indicating perceived challenges with downtown revitalization, business support, and community trust, but also identified many assets on which to build (Table 3, Figure 9).

Using the data gathered from these initial codes, the following themes emerged: The Power and Limits of Social Capital; Political Capital as a Gatekeeper to Development; Identity and Attachment to Place; Built Strengths and Constraints. Counts and patterns observed in the coded excerpts were used to identify areas of convergence and divergence across capitals, providing the analytic logic for grouping related codes into broader themes. Rather than isolating each capital, the analysis revealed four interrelated themes that cut across all domains. Each theme represents a cluster of assets and deficits shaping local development trajectories. To illuminate these dynamics, each theme is discussed comparatively across Sterling and Nickerson. This approach highlights how similar factors operate differently within each community's unique social and institutional context. By integrating the Community Capitals Framework with a case study lens, the analysis reveals not only what factors influence economic development but also how local context shapes their interactions.

Table 4. Emergent Themes and Associated Codes

Theme	**Associated Codes**
Power and Constraints of Social Capital	Social, Cultural
Political Capital as a Gatekeeper	Political, Financial, Social
Identity and Attachment to Place	Cultural, Social, Built, Human, Financial
Built Strengths and Constraints	Built, Financial

Theme #1: The Power and Limits of Social Capital

The first theme identified across both communities was the role of social capital within the CED process. Social capital emerged as one of the most significant factors influencing economic development in both Sterling and Nickerson. Participants in each community emphasized that relationships, trust, and collaboration form the backbone of any local initiative. Yet, participants also recognized its limits, particularly as it relates to long-standing networks' ability to reach new voices. Social capital was identified in 24.5% of the total codes in the Sterling data, and 16.1% of the Nickerson data, among the top identified Capitals in each community.

Sterling:

In Sterling, participants consistently portrayed social capital as a vital community strength. As one resident reflected:

> The sense of trust is very strong. People generally trust their neighbors, know them, and have respect for them. There is a sense of interdependence; being a bit more isolated out here means people rely on the community itself to get through daily life.

Another participant noted:

> I think every place has some struggles. I think that there's always things that you'll run into that can cause steps backwards, but the good thing is that you don't quit and you just keep pushing forward. And I think that Sterling's always done that. So when there has been setbacks, they've always continued to try to work towards getting better and overcoming that setback... I think that the sense of community in Sterling is very strong within the city limits. So I think that it's a very tight-knit

> community. I think that they work really well together. And I think that they really support each other within the city limits.

Overall, this sentiment captures the trust networks in Sterling, especially in neighbor-to-neighbor networks among those who have resided in Sterling for a time. Participants also mentioned how citizens "show up" and do activities for the sense of the community, responsiveness of the city and CED organizations to concerns, and corresponding trust in these organizations.

However, nearly all participants noted a boundary in the social capital networks, noting that decision-making often occurs within a familiar circle of long-time residents. This leaves newer and younger community members often uncertain or unable to become involved in the CED process. As one participant noted the levels of trust between residents and new members to the community were "very low", and expanded that:

> It can feel like a threat to the way of life that the historic population wants, appreciates, desires when an outsider is bringing in different ideas. That can be seen as a threat or untrustworthy or, you know, they're coming in here to take over our way of life and we don't want that. I don't think it's always that way. There is a degree of you have to earn trust if you haven't been here forever. I think it can take a long time. It's not a one or two years and you're in, it's maybe a decade or two. If you stick around that long.

Another resident discussed the idea of being welcoming to new residents and groups, saying:

> We're pretty homogeneous, racially not diverse whatsoever. That concerns me. And it kind of hurts my heart a little bit, I guess, that we may not be welcoming or approachable or engaging, you know, but on the other hand, I think our core is intact. It's questionable whether or not we are, what's the old Coveyism, "preserve

> the core or stimulate progress?" I'm not entirely sure we always are stimulating progress. I do feel like we are preserving the core.

The intact core of decision making can have some benefits for the CED process, allowing for efficiency in decision-making and reinforcing collaboration across networks that are in the trusted core. However, the culture of being a "closed community," as some respondents called it, can constrain innovation and inclusivity within the CED strategy. The same trust networks that drive collaboration can, unintentionally, limit fresh ideas or diverse participation. Overall, Sterling's social capital was generally seen as an asset for the community to build on, but with room for improvement to invite newcomers to the community into these networks.

Nickerson

Nickerson participants broadly described a community struggling to sustain cohesive social capital, but with some distinct assets to build upon. Interviewees frequently pointed to good leadership in the community, but overall, two networks exist between active volunteers and leaders and disengaged residents. As one participant observed,

> I think they're like a lot of communities. I think there's a group of people who are connected and involved and working to build a better community, then there's another group of people who are outside of that, and it's hard to connect those two groups of people.

Additionally, some of the leaders identified were from an older generation, and some concern was raised about volunteerism, wondering if involvement is strong enough to continue to build community.

Opinions differed on the sense of community within Nickerson. Some noted that there was a distinct sense of trust among residents in Nickerson, particularly of collectively being "not

Hutchinson", the larger city 7 miles away from the community. Another said there was a nice "small-town feel." However, distrust was noted as being fairly high, with one respondent saying,

> There is a high level of distrust. I think I always had the view that a lot of people who lived in Nickerson lived in Nickerson because it was off the beaten path and out of the way, and people would stay out of your business and you could do whatever. Even though it was a small town, everybody in a small town kind of is in your business, and it's hard to hide anything. There's also the idea that you didn't have like a big government coming down on you, you didn't have like a lot of code enforcement because of Nickerson's not the kind of town that has a lot of money to do that. So it felt like a lot of people, there were a significant number of people who lived in Nickerson because they could get by with things they might not be able to get by with, or they could live a life that they might not be able to live in another community.

Despite these challenges, moments of collaboration organized by leaders within the community were noted as great strengths. One of which was Klear Nearly Days, the annual community summer festival. Another highlight was the community's general support and trust in the local high school. However, these efforts are short lived and heavily dependent on the actions of individuals, who work full-time jobs and volunteer when they can. The uneven distribution of social capital in Nickerson thus acts as a social constraint and could act as an economic constraint following Emery and Flora's (2006) argument, potentially limiting the community's ability to pursue development initiatives.

Theme #2: Political Capital as a Gatekeeper

The second theme that emerged in the process of thematic analysis was the role of political capital in each community, and the way in which it operated as a gatekeeper to financial and social capital. While both towns are municipalities of similar size and with similar decision-making bodies, a key distinction in their political organization is the county in which they are located. This theme emerged as participants discussed available financial and built capital programs, and the interaction of political capital. Political capital was discussed thoroughly across all interviews, with 11.1% of codes in Sterling interviews centered around the idea, and 12.5% in Nickerson.

Sterling

Sterling is the second-largest town within Rice County, which has a population 9,427 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Overall, Sterling recognized political capital as an asset for the community, with many responses specifically pointing to access to county resources as a strength. Many participants described the county's political capital being centered around Lyons (the county seat and largest community within Rice County) and Sterling, with Sterling receiving much attention and many resources. One participant responded:

> I feel like Sterling gets a lot of attention. There is a dynamic in Rice County, it is age old, between the two largest communities in the county vying for dollars, vying for attention or spotlight. I think some of that is changing generationally. I think we get into some of the younger generations where this school systems have joined forces on some activities in order to give both communities [Lyons and Sterling] an opportunities to engage, I think that is a contributing factor to some change around the idea that if any part of our county is gaining attention or has exciting things happening, we all benefit from it. So I think it's changing. But I do

> feel like Sterling has, you know, always received some degree of attention and consideration at the at the county level, simply because of population, being larger than the majority of the other communities in the county. I think there are lots of other communities in our county that are under-recognized or unsupported. It's just because of the volume of human beings.

Within the CED process, political capital was identified as a key factor for Sterling due to how CED resources were organized within the county. The organization broadly identified as the lead CED organization within Sterling and Rice County was the Economic Development Department, housed by Rice County's government. This organization was noted as being involved with many boards involved in CED throughout the county, and as a financial capital resource, housing loan programs for entrepreneurs and business retention and expansion, as well being a key grant writing resource for the county.

Participants also noted the importance of interacting with county and city governments when it comes to infrastructure improvements. Specifically, the KMW expansion in Sterling, a $105 million project to create a new precision manufacturing plant, was noted among respondents, because it required collaboration between city, county, and state agencies along with the private sector. One participant said of the city's role in KMW's expansion:

> The development agreement the city signed with them [KMW] states that the city will provide all the public infrastructure for the project or at least coordinate the construction. This includes a roadway to the facility, as it's currently just a field north of downtown near the bypass. The city will handle electrical improvements, waterlines, and sewer lines.

Another noted County cooperation on the project:

> Rice County Economic Development has been involved with their deals with Kansas Commerce and working with KMW's land purchasing and things like that. So the county is involved in portions of that purchase.

The decision for KMW's expansion in Sterling was described differently by different respondents. Social and cultural capitals were discussed as one reason: "I have to credit the president of KMW, who really wanted to keep the company in Sterling because he believes, as I do, that it's a special community." Political capital and access to financial and built capital were also major factors, as discussed above. However, the decision to mobilize political capital for the KMW project was not universally popular. One respondent argued,

> Well, it's blatant and gratuitous corporate welfare. I can tell you that. It's expensive for all of us who live here to fund the infrastructure. I don't really predict that people will bail out or be like the tax burden is so high. I don't think they'll be like an exodus. But I do wonder if it's a zero sum sort of a deal, like the in terms of population, if we may have run off as many people as we otherwise would have attracted as residents. I think we still have to do it.

Sterling's experience illustrates how political capital can serve as both a catalyst and a gatekeeper in the CED process. The community's strong political standing within Rice County grants it privileged access to county resources, representation, and networks that enable large-scale projects like KMW's expansion. Yet, this same concentration of influence raises questions about equity, accountability, and whose interests are served. While Sterling's capacity to mobilize political and financial resources demonstrates the power of an interconnected governance structure, it also reveals the potential for political capital to reinforce existing hierarchies, prioritizing established institutions and economic actors over broader community

inclusion. In this way, political capital functions as a selective gatekeeper; it opens doors to transformative opportunities for communities with established leverage, while leaving smaller or less-connected voices on the margins of decision-making and resource distribution.

Nickerson

In Nickerson, participants noted challenges in political capital, again speaking to the theme of a group of involved residents in the CED process and other residents of the community. The primary identified agents of political capital were the City Council and County Commission and agencies such as StartUp Hutch and Hutchinson Community Foundation. The City Council was pointed to by many participants as having good leadership in place but lacked funding to accomplish CED goals. One participant noted, “I don't know that I've seen a concerted economic development effort in Nickerson.”

Nickerson’s relationship with county-level governance was distinct from Sterling. Where Sterling is the second largest town by population in Rice County, Nickerson is the fifth largest in Reno County. With the regional trading center of Hutchinson also being located within Reno County, the population of Nickerson only makes up 1.7% of Reno County. Despite this, some participants characterized a good working relationship with county-level agencies, saying that Nickerson receives proportional representation at the county level, and that many county leaders are originally from Nickerson:

> I think within [one organization involved with economic development], I can say, I think it's proportional. I think we are actively trying to represent Nickerson and it's what, a thousand people out of 65,000 in the county. But I mean, we give it more than just 2% of our time. I think I've seen more representation in counting organizations from folks who have come from Nickerson but left and moved into

> Hutch. There's a large contingent of Nickerson graduates that are very involved in the Community Foundation and Extension. A lot of community entities, these countywide entities, they are staffed and full of former Nickerson graduates that don't live in Nickerson.

However, county dynamics and population bases were discussed as a possible hindrance to the CED process within Nickerson. As one participant described:

> I can do work just in Hutchinson and find a way to get a win pretty quickly because I have more paths to that. I have more paths to success. It's harder work to do in a small community. You have fewer assets, you have fewer organizations, so it's harder, I think, to make that. I think most organizations have that challenge. I think most organizations, you can focus on Hutch and you get a win, you get a splash. The local newspaper writes about you, the radio station puts it on the air and you get to celebrate your win, which is much harder to do in a town like Nickerson, or Sterling, for that matter. And these towns fall just outside of the media circle, right? Like the media wants an audience. So I can focus on Hutch that has a 40,000 person audience, or I can focus on Nickerson or Sterling, which together have a 6,000 person audience, right?

Taken together, these perspectives reveal how political capital in Nickerson functions as both an enabler and a gatekeeper in the community's development process. While local leadership is viewed as capable and connected, its influence is constrained by limited financial resources and broader county-level dynamics that favor larger population centers like Hutchinson. The concentration of decision-making power, visibility, and funding at the county and regional levels means that smaller communities such as Nickerson often struggle to advance their own priorities

or gain recognition for their efforts. Thus, political capital in Nickerson operates through a selective network, one that can open doors through relationships but simultaneously gatekeeps access to broader resources and recognition, shaping the pace and direction of community and economic development.

Theme #3: Identity and Attachment to Place

The theme of identity and attachment to place captures how residents' sense of belonging, pride, and collective memory shape community and economic development (CED) efforts. Rooted primarily in cultural capital, this theme reflects the shared traditions, values, and narratives that define how residents perceive their community and its potential. These elements of identity are reinforced through social capital, as networks of trust, friendship, and shared experience, and they strengthen the emotional connection individuals feel toward their town. At the same time, human capital then transforms these attachments into action by channeling residents' skills, knowledge, and leadership toward initiatives that preserve or enhance the community. Finally, built and natural capitals often serve as physical representations of this attachment: historic downtowns, schools, parks, or landscapes become symbols of local identity and pride. Together, these capitals form the foundation for understanding how a community's sense of place not only reflects its history but also motivates collective action toward its future.

<u>Sterling</u>

Sterling was cited by many participants as being a community that takes pride in itself and seeks to present itself as a safe, family friendly location. One participant noted:

> Beyond that, it's a community that takes a lot of pride in itself. When I first came here, I was surprised at how full downtown was of businesses and how nice almost all the neighborhoods were. People maintain their lawns meticulously, and

> everything looks neat and beautiful... Sterling is also very safe. Parents can let their kids ride bikes around town and come home at dark without concern. It's a slower, more traditional way of life. The joke is often made that Sterling is like a community out of the 1950s.

Built capital was seen as a key component of Sterling's cultural capital, as one participant said:

> Their downtown is fantastic, and they've kept up their downtown and maintained a historic downtown community for years and years and they take good pride in that. And I think that that's pretty awesome and makes people want to come there, live there, be around the area.

It was noted that cultural and built capital would not happen without strong social capital to maintain them. The Sterling Chamber of Commerce and Main Street Sterling were noted by participants as doing a good job of networking business owners and connecting resources to downtown buildings.

A key component of Sterling's culture that was also discussed was its relationship with the public high school and the private liberal arts college. This was seen as an example of the community's identity, and by extension a strength in CED, by one participant who said:

> The community values education. So I think probably demographically, our numbers are good in terms of like educational achievement. I think that generally probably is correlated to economic performance. I think we probably are able to attract some residents because of that identity that we have.

Both the college and high school were pointed to having exceptional arts programs, which was seen as a strength by some. As one participant said:

> The arts culture, which kind of has its origins in Sterling College, that's the origin story of our arts identity, which originated essentially in the early '70s, when Gordon and Diane Kling thrived with their theater department at the college, and then, of course, you sort of have a domino effective of things that happen after that to kind of result in that existing in Sterling High School, for decades and decades and decades. And I think what's great about that is that at this point the community recognizes that the benefit of the arts culture far exceeds the cost of promoting the arts cultures. So it's not even particularly challenged. It's not a challenged assumption, I think people recognize that this is a really good thing, that we have culturally, is this arts culture. It just allows us all to sort of experience excellence. And then once you have excellence that you can be proud of and just sort of see how it operates, then that tends to like expand to other things that you do, and then those tend to be lifted as well. So I think that's a real strong advantage that we have.

However, one participant was concerned that Sterling was abandoning the arts culture in the community in favor of athletics at both the high school and college, saying:

> Not really a positive culture [is present], in my opinion, because it's not a culture that I necessarily identify with. I think it's a very athletics focused culture. At the high school and college. And then the community kind of centers around that too. So if you're not involved in athletics, in K-12, or collegiate, then you're are not attending and watching and talking about all of the major sporting activities and orienting your life around that.

Generally, the sense of culture and attachment to place was seen as a strength in Sterling, with 29 codes assigned to “Cultural Capital – Asset" and 15 assigned to “Cultural Capital – Deficit” for the community. Many of the concerns about culture revolved around the idea of Sterling having a culture of a “closed community,” which is discussed at length in Theme 1. One participant elaborated that Sterling “does have some factors that may feel closed off to certain individuals and may not feel like a safe place.” All individuals interviewed noted that this was something that they were working on within their roles, but that it is still a downside to Sterling’s community.

Nickerson

In Nickerson, participants expressed a complicated sense of identity and attachment to place, shaped by both pride in community heritage and frustration with present challenges. While some respondents described Nickerson as a close-knit town where people “take pride in their small community” others pointed to deep-seated distrust and divisions that weakened collective identity. One participant described the culture:

> Yes, it has a unique culture. And it's going to be hard for me to explain it. I think just my view, Nickerson kind of has this, like, a little bit of a badass reputation, right? Like, don't mess with us. But also, like, we know what everyone thinks of us, right? We're this little town, Buhler thinks it's so much better than us. Haven does too, and we don't even know why, because Haven sucks. Right? I mean, it's like not really, but that's the view from Nickerson, right? I just think there's a culture in Nickerson that's like, well, we're just going to do it on our own. And other people don't like us and we don't like them either, so we'll just do it our way.

Several participants noted that Nickerson's proximity to Hutchinson, along with a lack of local amenities, has also contributed to residents' identification with the broader region rather than with the town itself. This blurring of place identity reflects both social and cultural capital deficits, as networks of trust and shared norms have eroded over time.

Built and financial capitals also play a role in shaping attachment to place. Participants frequently mentioned deteriorating or limited housing as barriers to attracting and retaining residents, which in turn undermines investment in community identity. Programs such as Reno County's Neighborhood Revitalization Program (NRP) were cited as positive steps toward rebuilding pride and stabilizing neighborhoods. There was also a concern voiced about vacant businesses, with some participants noting that some property owners have let storefronts sit vacant, rather than work with organizations who have expressed interest in them. A sense of local nostalgia was cited as a reason for this, which could be a hindrance for growth in the future. Still, residents' attachment is often rooted in nostalgia for what Nickerson once represented, even as the town struggles to define a cohesive sense of place within the shadow of larger neighboring communities.

Theme #4: Built Strengths and Constraints

The theme of Built Strengths and Constraints explores how the physical and infrastructural environment shapes CED in both communities. Within the Community Capitals Framework, built capital represents the physical assets that enable communities to function and grow, such as roads, utilities, broadband, housing, and community facilities. As discussed in Chapter 3, one of the rationales for selecting these sites was the construction of a new highway, K-96, that rerouted traffic around both communities. Examining this factor, along with other built environments reveals how similar infrastructure changes can have a different impact due to

leveraging other capitals, and how these dynamics ultimately shape each town's capacity to pursue sustainable development.

Sterling

Overall, built capital was seen as a net-positive for Sterling. While controversial when proposed and constructed, the impact of K-96 on Sterling's CED process is considered, at worst, neutral and at best as an asset to capitalize on by participants. One participant said,

> I was emphatically in favor of the construction of that project [K-96]. I wanted it to be located as close to Sterling as possible, the interchange to be as close to Sterling as possible and for there only to be one interchange. That's how it turned out, not necessarily because of my efforts. I do not sense, and I think I think my sensors have been up, but I do not sense that there has been any degradation of community because of K9-6.

Another noted that the construction of K-96 could be viewed as an asset for the community to draw and keep residents as it increases accessibility to regional trading centers, saying,

> I would say a lot of people in Sterling like [K-96] because it allows them to get to Hutchinson and Lyons faster. It makes their lives a little more convenient, and they don't have to deal with all the truck traffic downtown. There is still a fair amount of truck traffic that goes through, but it's not constant like in Lyons. That is especially helpful for the people who live on Broadway. Previously, it was hard to stand in your front yard and have a conversation with a neighbor because of trucks passing for five minutes straight. Not to mention the condition of the roads, which were difficult because it was a state highway.

One possible explanation for the resilience that Sterling feels despite a highway rerouting around the community could be because of its strong sense of social capital. Sterling's CED seems to revolve around Sterling residents keeping their business local when possible, rather than relying on pass-through traffic from the former highway that ran through the middle of town. One participant described this feeling by saying:

> People show up and support things when there's a need in the community. People are very generous in Sterling and fill those needs. So I think there is like a good sense of community in Sterling.

In addition to the highway, the condition of downtown buildings was noted as a particular draw for future development. As discussed in Theme 3, this intersects with cultural capital as the community sees the condition of its downtown as a sense of community pride.

Sterling also has a local power plant, which was broadly seen as an asset to participants. One respondent noted:

> One standout strength is that Sterling has its own electric utility and power plant, which is a major source of pride. For example, during the 2019 ice storm, Sterling was the only place in the county with power, and residents from other towns came here for groceries and gas. Running the plant is expensive, but it makes the community more self-reliant.

The local power plant was seen as a strength for Sterling's CED as businesses have a reliable and responsive source of power. However, maintaining the power plant does come at a cost as consumer energy bills are higher than neighboring areas, and as noted in Theme 2, the expansion of KMW is thought to have a negative net impact on the cost of this utility going forward.

Nickerson

Respondents reported that Built capital presented a challenge for Nickerson. The construction of the new K-96 highway was seen as a challenge by all participants compared to Sterling. One participant thought that the highway has and will continue to create a further isolationist culture within the community, which could harm the community's CED, saying:

> I think K-96 will exacerbate the town's culture. I think it certainly creates another opportunity for Nickerson to isolate. Right? Because now we're even more on our own. They built a highway around us so now nobody comes here. And so going back to what I said about sometimes there was a feeling that you could live the life that you wanted in Nickerson with less oversight and interference, certainly with fewer people coming into your town, that's going to be even more true. But I think also you just feel more on your own.

Another noted that the vision of Nickerson was harmed due to the construction of the highway, fostering a sense of hopelessness:

> I think, especially older locals were kind of like, this is it, we're cooked. I know I have a friend who his family has lived in the area his whole life, and when they were talking about building the highway, his dad was like, "Oh, this is going to wipe Nickerson off the map." So definitely negative feelings about what the new highway was going to mean for the town.

Nickerson participants noted that there was a distinct feeling in the community that they were "no longer on the map," and that while opportunities for leveraging the highway for positive development in the future exist, there are many challenges to overcome with cultural and social capital to fully mobilize these opportunities.

Nickerson also struggles with the condition and availability of buildings for businesses to develop, posing a key challenge to CED in the town, as described in Theme 3. As a sense of nostalgia permeates the town's identity, participants noted that growth could be and is currently blocked as nostalgia could contradict growth. This, combined with the construction of the highway that is perceived as a deficit, could create a spiraling down effect on the community's other capitals if current trends are not reversed (Emery & Flora, 2006).

Conclusions

This project uses a unique approach to analyze two rural Kansas communities' community economic development (CED) through qualitative data analysis, relying on the Community Capitals Framework (CCF) to code data, and using this data to detect themes. The themes that emerged provide a better understanding of the assets and threats to CED in these two communities. Despite being two communities of similar size and location, external factors such as the construction of a new highway and internal factors related to social, cultural, and political capital were perceived differently by the two towns.

Influential Factors and Recommendations for Communities

For both communities, four themes emerged to answer the question, What factors shape CED in Sterling, KS, and Nickerson, KS? Theme 1: *The Power and Limits of Social Capital,* and Theme 2: *Political Capital as a Gatekeeper* reveal that relationships and governance are key factors shaping CED in both communities. In Sterling, as threats to the local economy appear, the community seeks to support itself through strong social networks. Dense networks of trust and long-standing collaboration fostered resilience, civic pride, and capacity to execute complex projects. Yet, this cohesion also produced barriers for newcomers and outsiders, reinforcing what some described as a "closed community." This finding echoes Putnam's (2000) distinction between bonding and bridging social capital. Putnam describes bonding social capital as networks that are close-knit, continuous, and strong, which certainly describes Sterling's described strength. Conversely, bridging social capital is networks that are looser, weaker, and comprised of people with diverse backgrounds and different resources. While both forms of social capital are important, Putnam is particularly concerned with bridging social capital as these create new forms of community and often provide more opportunities for marginalized

groups. Sterling's challenge going forward is to maintain their strong bonding social capital but find ways to increase bridging social capital in order to enhance its CED strategy. By allowing more people from diverse backgrounds and with different ideas, the community can innovate and build broader consensus, as well as leverage existing resources from more networks within the community (Claridge, 2018).

Nickerson, conversely, displayed fragmented social capital. The divide between active leaders and disengaged residents limited broad-based participation, while distrust and volunteer burnout weakened community cohesion. These divides also intersect with political capital. Although local leadership was viewed as capable, the town's small size and peripheral position within Reno County restricted its access to county-level resources and visibility. Social and political capital are key factors that influence Nickerson's development, and there are assets to capitalize on, including good leadership and a sense of small-town community. To better position itself, Nickerson should promote bridging social capital, attempting to link the active leaders and disengaged residents in the community, and bonding social capital to increase trust and cohesion within the community, which may lead to "spiraling up" (Emery and Flora 2006). Both cases thus illustrate the paradox of rural governance: communities require strong social and political networks to mobilize development, but those same networks can become gatekeepers that perpetuate exclusion or inequity if not continually examined.

The third theme, *Identity and Attachment to Place*, highlights how deeply rooted cultural and social meanings influence the success of CED efforts. Consistent with literature on place-based development (Darko & Halseth, 2025; Harrington, 2010), the findings show that a community's sense of identity can either reinforce resilience or foster stagnation depending on whether it promotes adaptability or defensiveness. Sterling's identity as a safe, family-oriented,

and education-driven community contributes positively to its development narrative. Its pride in maintaining a historic downtown and strong arts and education culture reflects high levels of cultural capital. This sense of identity fosters collective ownership over the town's image and motivates local action, even as some participants worry that the community may prioritize tradition over innovation. Sterling should continue to promote its unique culture as an arts-centric community and implement additional programs to build on this and build additional attachment to place and the community.

Nickerson's identity, in contrast, is more fragmented and defensive. Participants described a "do-it-ourselves" culture rooted in independence and resilience but also in skepticism toward governance and larger institutions. While this identity provides a degree of cohesion, it also reinforces social isolation and limits collaboration. The tension between pride and frustration, between nostalgia and progress, captures the complexity of rural attachment to place in communities facing economic decline and outmigration. Nickerson should take action to understand the best way to positively market itself. One suggestion that emerged from the interviews was the unique opportunity for Nickerson to turn itself into a bedroom community for Hutchinson and begin developing a sense of place that understands and promotes itself as a good place to raise a family and attend a small school with a distinct sense of pride. While this is not without challenges, including a large necessary investment in the town's housing stock, a unique opportunity remains due to its proximity to a larger city.

The final theme, *Built Strengths and Constraints*, underscores how physical infrastructure interacts with other capitals to shape local economic trajectories. Both towns experienced the same external change, the rerouting of K-96, but responded differently based on how they leveraged other capitals. Sterling's relative political influence, cohesive social structure, and

proactive planning allowed it to view K-96 as an opportunity for future growth and improved livability. The community has already leveraged this into a major new investment promoted statewide. Nickerson, lacking comparable institutional capacity, experienced the highway bypass more as a symbol of marginalization, another reminder of limited connectivity to broader regional systems. For Sterling, built capital reinforced other forms of capital; for Nickerson, it exposed underlying deficits. For both communities, the perceived strengths and deficits relating to infrastructure should be viewed as ways to leverage other capitals to respond to external threats. Table 5 describes key differences identified in this study between the two rural communities.

Table 5. Key Differences between Sterling, Kansas, and Nickerson, Kansas

Theme	Sterling, Kansas	Nickerson, Kansas
1. The Power and Limits of Social Capital	Strong, dense social networks foster trust, collaboration, and civic pride; community mobilizes effectively during threats. However, cohesion creates barriers for newcomers ("closed community").	Fragmented social capital with divides between leaders and residents; distrust and burnout limit participation; cohesion weaker overall.
2. Political Capital as a Gatekeeper	Strong local governance and civic leadership; ability to mobilize projects and influence local outcomes.	Capable local leaders but limited influence at county and regional levels; comparative restricted access to external resources.
3. Identity and Attachment to Place	Strong, positive community identity centered on education, family, and arts; high cultural capital and pride in history; risk of overemphasizing tradition.	"Do-it-ourselves" culture promotes independence and pride but also defensiveness and isolation; fragmented sense of identity.
4. Built Strengths and Constraints	Viewed highway rerouting (K-96) as an opportunity; leveraged political and social capital for new investments and livability improvements.	Perceived highway rerouting as marginalization; limited capacity to capitalize on change.

This study sought to identify what factors shape CED in Sterling, Kansas, and Nickerson, Kansas. In Sterling, factors that shape CED negatively include weak bridging social capital, which led to the description of the town as a "closed community." However, factors that shape CED positively in Sterling include the built environment, specifically the K-96 construction,

strong attachment to place, strong local governance and civic leadership, and strong social networks. In Nickerson, factors that shape CED negatively include built capital, specifically the sense of marginalization around the construction of K-96, isolating culture, and fragmented social capital. Factors that shape CED positively in Nickerson include a sense of independence and pride, and capable local leadership. These communities were selected due to their relatively similar location, population, and infrastructure. The Economic Innovation Group's (2025) Distressed Communities Index identified Nickerson "At Risk" of economic distress and Sterling as "Mid-Tier." Generally, the findings of this study support these categorizations. In Sterling (mid-tier), social capital, political capital, cultural capital, and built capital were all viewed as strengths in the town's CED. While economic threats were certainly identified, participants noted each of these capitals were factors that the community could draw on in the future. In Nickerson (at risk), participants identified strengths of the community, but also noted that social capital, access to political capital, cultural capital, and built capital were identified as factors that could be detracting from the town's CED. There is a unique opportunity for Nickerson to build on its identified assets, but currently these factors are limiting the CED strategy. The identified answers to the research question are the four emergent themes. Each of these themes describes a factor which contributes to Sterling's and Nickerson's CED.

Limitations to the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the factors shaping CED in small Kansas towns, several limitations should be acknowledged. These limitations do not undermine the validity of the findings but rather clarify the scope of their applicability and highlight directions for future research. First, the study's design relied on two case studies which were selected purposefully to reflect variation in local development outcomes within a shared regional and

demographic context. This limited sample provides depth of understanding but restricts the generalizability of results. The findings should therefore be interpreted as contextually specific rather than broadly representative of all rural Kansas communities.

Second, data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews with community members identified through purposeful sampling. While this approach allowed for rich, nuanced perspectives, it also risked bias toward more visible or civically engaged participants. Residents less involved in local leadership or civic life may hold differing views on community dynamics that were not fully captured here.

Third, as with all qualitative research, the researcher's positionality likely influenced interpretation. The researcher's background in community development and familiarity with rural Kansas contexts informed both data collection and analysis. While steps were used to mitigate bias, complete neutrality is not possible in interpretive research.

Finally, the study focused primarily on internal community dynamics rather than external structural forces such as regional economic policy, state-level investment, or federal rural development programs. These external influences undoubtedly shape local capacity but were beyond the immediate scope of this project. Subsequent studies could expand outward to examine how state and regional governance structures enable or constrain local agency.

Taken together, these limitations highlight the interpretive and bounded nature of the study's conclusions while affirming the value of small-scale, community-based qualitative research. By situating the findings within a clearly defined context, this study contributes to the growing literature on community economic development within rural areas and provides a method through which to use CCF moving forward.

Recommendations for Future Research

Building upon the findings and limitations of this study, several avenues for future research emerge. First, future studies could extend this comparative framework to include additional rural communities across Kansas or the broader Great Plains region. Expanding the sample would allow researchers to explore how variations in geography, proximity to metropolitan areas, or demographic composition influence the interaction of community capitals. Such analyses could reveal broader patterns of resilience or decline across rural contexts and clarify which community strategies are most transferable. Choosing similar situations where external forces are putting pressure on rural communities could further contribute to the ability to leverage Capitals in response to these pressures.

Second, additional research methods could be utilized to create a more comprehensive picture. While this study relied on qualitative data analysis through interviews, using a quantitative approach to measure CCF would provide more insights and possibly allow for more community participation. Finally, future studies might explore the role of leadership and intergenerational succession in sustaining community capacity. As many rural towns face leadership turnover and volunteer fatigue, understanding how to cultivate new forms of civic engagement and link younger residents into established networks will be critical for long-term vitality. While data from this study revealed the importance of social capital within each community's CED strategy, a more focused approach seeking to answer the deficits that appeared could inform local leadership development programs and contribute to practical models for community renewal rooted in the Community Capitals Framework.

Summary

This study examined how factors shape community economic development (CED) in small Kansas towns through a comparative case study of Sterling, Kansas and Nickerson,

Kansas. Grounded in the Community Capitals Framework (Flora & Flora, 2013) and guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis, the research sought to understand how relationships, governance, and local identity influence economic outcomes in rural settings. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with key community members identified through purposeful sampling, allowing for in-depth exploration of local experiences, challenges, and strengths.

Analysis revealed four major themes: (1) The Power and Limits of Social Capital, (2) Political Capital as a Gatekeeper, (3) Identity and Attachment to Place, and (4) Built Strengths and Constraints. Together, these themes illustrated that the success or stagnation of CED efforts depends not on any single capital but on the dynamic interplay among them. Sterling demonstrated how strong social networks, political influence, and civic cohesion can create a "virtuous cycle" of development in which local assets reinforce one another but also showed a weakness of bridging social capital. Nickerson, by contrast, faced challenges rooted in weaker bonding capital, limited institutional capacity, and a perceived infrastructural disadvantage, resulting in slower or uneven progress.

While limited to two cases and reliant on qualitative methods, the research contributes to understanding how relational and cultural dynamics underpin economic resilience in small rural communities. It underscores that effective CED requires not only material investment, a strength for both communities, but also the cultivation of inclusive, adaptive, and forward-looking forms of social and political capital. Future research should expand to additional cases, incorporate longitudinal and mixed-method approaches, and examine how leadership succession and intergenerational engagement shape the long-term sustainability of rural development efforts.

Ultimately, this study affirms that small towns like Sterling and Nickerson illustrate both

the challenges and possibilities of rural revitalization. Their experiences demonstrate that sustainable economic development in Kansas and rural contexts depends as much on the strength of relationships and identity as it does on infrastructure or external funding.

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Appendix A - Community Interview Questions

Basic Background:

1. Can you describe your role at your organization?
2. How long have you been in your position?
3. Can you describe what role your organization has within the community development of [Nickerson/Sterling]?

Economic Background:

1. What recent community economic development projects has the community undertaken?
2. Do you see the community on a positive or negative economic trajectory? Are there any specific examples you can point to for local economic triumphs or struggles?

CCF:

1. How would you describe the sense of community in [Nickerson/Sterling]?
2. Do you believe the construction of the new K-96 highway had any impact on the community feeling? On the local economy?
3. How would you rate the level of trust among community members? Between community members and local government? Between community members and your organization?
4. What is the key decision-making body or bodies in the community?
5. How much representation do you feel the community gets in county-level government organizations and non governmental organizations?
6. Have there been any recent county-level decisions that have been especially beneficial to the community economy?
7. What natural resources is the community especially well-positioned with?

8. Do you feel that natural resources have a significant role in the local economy?

9. Does the community have a unique culture to it in your opinion?

10. Does anything about the community's culture lead to economic development?

11. Do the town's residents have adequate access to education and training to prepare them for the careers available in the area?

12. What does the labor force look like in [Nickerson/Sterling]?

13. Are there challenges in accessing funding or financial support for local projects?

14. What (if any) loan programs are available at the county or city level for entrepreneurs or expanding businesses?

15. Are local financial institutions involved in the CED process, and do they find ways to support access to capital?

16. What are the community's greatest strengths in terms of infrastructure, such as roads, buildings, utilities, or technology?

Final Thoughts:

1. What do you see as the most pressing community needs in [Nickerson/Sterling]?

2. In your opinion, are there untapped resources or partnerships that could enhance community collaboration?