

Countering Depopulation in Kansas: Understanding Perceptions of Rural Life and the  
Effectiveness of the Rural Opportunity Zone Program

by

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## **Abstract**

Many rural areas throughout the Great Plains and Midwest have been affected by a “brain drain,” or the outward migration of highly trained or well-educated people. This hurts many facets of rural communities, including local schools, economies, and available services. In response to a negative outlook for rural areas, in 2012 the State of Kansas implemented the Rural Opportunity Zone (ROZ) Program to encourage young, college-educated adults to move to rural counties. The ROZ program provides tax waivers and student loan repayments to those willing to relocate to participating counties. This research looks at what influences young educated adults to participate in the program as well as how the ROZ’s financial benefits potentially outweigh the drawbacks associated with rural life. The research employed a survey of Kansas State University students as well as interviews with local economic development officials who manage the program. Survey results reveal that even though the majority of students have a stated rural preference most do not view themselves as likely to participate in the program. Despite student interest in the program benefits most view the lack of services and employment opportunities in rural Kansas to be too much of a drawback. County officials expressed similar feelings. Interviews revealed that, though the program primarily benefits those though were already intending to live in a rural area, the program rarely attracts newcomers. In addition, the program is poorly funded in many areas and the lack of affordable housing or high paying jobs limits population growth in a way that the benefits of the ROZ cannot outweigh. Findings from this research will allow communities to make changes that build upon their attributes as well as limit their undesirable characteristics. This research also highlights the need for changes to be made by the State of Kansas concerning the program’s benefits and awareness.

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family, especially my mom, and my girlfriend, Kassie. You all have always been supportive of my desire to continue my education. You all have spent so much time checking my typos and fixing my terrible writing, and I thank you for that.

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## Chapter 1 - Introduction

Many rural areas throughout the United States have experienced population decline that threatens the economic and social livelihoods of small rural communities. Depopulation has been especially dramatic in rural Kansas, where between 2000 and 2010, 77 of 105 counties lost residents (US Census 2000 and US Census 2010). Out-migration by well-educated and young people, what many call a brain drain, is especially concerning. In many Kansas communities, youth leave to pursue a college education somewhere else. After graduating, these young men and women do not return to their hometowns, but instead move on to careers in urban areas. The primary explanation for this phenomenon is that life in rural small towns does not provide the economic or social rewards of life in the big city (Carr and Kefalas 2009). The loss of educated and young residents hurts economic growth in these areas in profound ways, leading to lower levels of fertility and diminishing the chances that rural America will experience a demographic rebound (Johnson 1993).

To counteract this emptying of the plains, the Kansas Legislature created the Kansas Rural Opportunity Zone (ROZ) Program in 2012. The statewide initiative is meant to encourage college-educated individuals to relocate to counties experiencing population loss by offering two incentives: waivers of state income tax and student loan repayments. This program not only aims to entice rural college graduates to return to their hometowns, but also to attract urban individuals from Kansas and other states to start families and businesses in rural communities that need growth. Rural Kansas communities may not offer all the amenities associated with an urban lifestyle, but ROZ program developers hope that direct financial incentives, combined with privacy, good family environments, and a simple lifestyle, can tip the scales when it comes to educated individuals deciding where to live.

No similar program exists in the United States. Typically, other non-metro investment programs are oriented toward businesses and entrepreneurship. The Rural Opportunity Zone program is a one-of-a-kind opportunity for rural sociologists, demographers, and population geographers whose research will provide not only meaningful understanding in a significant systematic area of geography—population geography—but also an in-depth case study of people's perceptions of rural Kansas. Studying migration and human populations is one of the big themes of geography (Cutter et al. 2002). Understanding migration can help communities take advantage of their strengths and encourage smart growth (Stockdale 2006). Determining how a population is

changing also lies at the core of other aspects of life, including the economy, agriculture, family structure, and considering what to expect in the future concerning human impacts on the environment (Trewartha 1953). This study also provides greater understanding of how people view regions—in this case the rural Great Plains—which is a priority for geographers and their discipline (Abler 1993).

The purpose of this research is threefold. First, it attempts to understand the effectiveness of the ROZ program in incentivizing its target audience to move to rural Kansas. This research investigates several facets of the ROZ program, including the influence of the program's benefits, awareness of the ROZ program by the target audience, and the characteristics of likely participants. Research on the ROZ program will help the state of Kansas improve it. The second purpose of this study is to assess perceptions of rural life in Kansas held by the program's target audience. Related to the perceptions of rural life, this research examines the residential preferences of college students as well as factors that limit population growth in rural Kansas. Finally, this research uncovers why some individuals choose to return to their rural hometowns, and what factors influence the decision by someone with high human capital to relocate to rural areas.

Social scientists have a better understanding of why people leave than why people return or choose to move to a rural area. This research will lead to a better understanding of why young college educated adults decide to live in rural communities, which will allow communities to take advantage of their perceived strengths and create policies to prevent depopulation and encourage future growth. Understanding how communities can attract young and educated individuals is important because young adults form the entrepreneurial heart of a community (Von Reichert et al. 2013).

Simply put, this research grapples with the question: “Does the ROZ program work?” The answer depends on determining whether the program's incentives are attractive to potential participants, and on uncovering people's perceptions of life in rural Kansas. To find out if the program is working, this research is based on data collection from two groups of individuals: those likely to participate in the program and those who manage it.

For this research, Kansas State University students were a the surrogate for the ROZ program's target audience. The program is designed to be relevant to K-State students, as future college-educated individuals already living in Kansas. To gain insights about the program's financial benefits, as well as non-student perceptions of rural Kansas life, interviews were also

conducted with county Economic Development Commissioners and Chamber of Commerce Officials from counties participating in the program. This study's research questions include the following:

1. What types of individuals are likely to participate in the ROZ program?
2. Are students aware of the ROZ program? What kinds of students are aware of the program?
3. What are the perceived positive and negative aspects of the Rural Opportunity Zone Program for current students and economic development coordinators?
4. What are the perceived positive and negative aspects of life in rural Kansas for current students and economic development coordinators?
5. What changes can improve the Rural Opportunity Zone Program?

This study contains six additional chapters. The next chapter in this research focuses on the literature on population trends, return migration, and college students' residential preferences. The third chapter offers an overview of the ROZ program and the research's study area. The fourth chapter describes the data and methods used. Chapters five and six discuss the results from the survey of K-State students and interviews with county officials, respectively. Finally, the conclusion and discussion chapter summarize the research and provide ideas for further studies.

## **Chapter 2 - Literature Review**

The depopulation of the Great Plains, including rural Kansas, and the reasons why people leave, have been the subject of in-depth research. But other questions, such as why people return to rural Kansas and elsewhere, and what efforts are being made to attract growth, call for further inquiry. This study provides new insights on this topic.

This chapter contains six sections. The first two explain the causes and effects of population decline in America's rural areas. It covers a body of literature that is important for understanding why rural Kansas has experienced extensive outmigration and what factors may limit a potential rural rebound. The third and fourth sections focus on the literature concerning return migration to the countryside as well as current and previous efforts to encourage rural demographic and economic growth. Understanding why some people choose to migrate to non-metro areas and community efforts to encourage growth are paramount. This chapter's last two sections investigate graduate migration and the migration of skilled labor. A review of the literature offers a comprehensive picture of why some individuals may choose to participate in the Rural Opportunity Zone Program and why others might not.

### **2.1 Causes of Rural Outmigration**

The rural Great Plains, including most of rural Kansas, has been losing population for a long time. In many communities, population figures peaked in the early 1900s (Baltensperger 1991). At the same time, the Great Plains region, taken as a whole, has experienced steady population growth, primarily in urban centers like Kansas City, Wichita, and Denver (US Census 2010). Even though rural areas of the heartland have experienced periods of growth, the future of many small communities looks dim without a reversal of outmigration by young and educated people.

This review focuses on rural population change since 1940 because most of the current population trends date back to this period. Research concerning depopulation has concentrated on the State of Kansas specifically, but to tell the story of depopulation in Kansas, this study uses research that looks at the Great Plains and the Midwest (Shortridge 1985).

The consensus amongst researchers is that the mechanization of agriculture caused rural depopulation (Beale 1964, Curtis-White 2008). Following World War II, the mechanization of agriculture allowed for higher crop yields, disease-resistant seeds, nutrient-rich fertilizer, and cheaper tractors, all of which made farming more profitable and more efficient. Greater efficiency

diminished the need for manual labor on the family farm, allowing rural individuals to pursue non-farm employment (Beale 1964, White 1994). This technological revolution in the agricultural sector also led to a reduction in rural birth rates. Because new technologies were expensive, farmers were required to farm more land to pay back loans (Beale 1964). Starting in the 1940s, significant portions of rural youth left to take higher paying jobs, available far from home in urban areas (Hass 1990). For many communities, the 1940s through the 1960s witnessed the fastest rates of population decline (Adamchak 1981). Since the 1930s, the Great Plains has been experiencing the general trend of farm consolidation, meaning there are fewer families farming, which has only worsened depopulation (Lobao and Meyer 2001). In addition, rural counties that are economically dependent on agriculture have experienced the largest population losses (Beale 1964, White 1994, Johnson and Rathge 2006, Curtis-White 2008).

From the 1940s to the 1960s, a variety of factors led many scholars to believe that rural areas were eventually going to die out (Beale 1964). Yet contrary to prevailing wisdom, beginning in the 1970s, rural areas experienced population gains, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as “the Rural Renaissance.” The in-migration of new residents was the primary cause of this growth (Albrecht 1993, Johnson and Winkler 2015). Starting in the 1970s, many corporations relocated manufacturing centers and factories to rural areas because in general, developable land is cheaper there than in metro areas, labor costs in rural America are lower than in metro areas, and workers there are less likely to be unionized than their urban counterparts. This movement of manufacturing firms brought new jobs to rural residents. In some areas, factory work employed more residents than farming (Johnson and Beale 1994).

The other driving force behind the Rural Renaissance is the preference for low-density areas. Research has shown that people prefer, or at least say they prefer, living in communities with less than 50,000 people (Brown et al. 1997). Surveys from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s show that most people prefer communities that match the size of their current community, or smaller towns or villages (Brown et al. 1997, Barcus 2004). Rarely do people express a desire to move to a larger community. What is interesting, however, is that many who claim they prefer rural areas frequently do not live in non-metro areas. In fact, the proportion of the US population that prefers rural areas is much greater than the percentage of Americans that lives in nonmetro areas. This rural preference was constant through the 1970s and 1980s, but recent surveys have shown a trend toward urban settings (Brown et al. 1997). Another relevant finding is that even though many

people have a stated preference for rural communities, after moving to the countryside, they do not report a higher level of residential satisfaction (Barcus 2004).

An explanation for this growth in the 1970's is the "clean break," referring to a complete shift from the general trend of urbanization (Domina 2006). The clean break suggests that in the 1970's people moved to rural areas because rural areas are people's natural preference, and that given the chance, individuals naturally opt to live in less dense areas. It is also important to note that many rural residents became urban dwellers without leaving their homes. This was due to changing urban/rural classification schemes and to growing rural areas that became part of metro areas, which led to reclassification from rural to urban (Artz and Orazem 2006).

Many of the counties that grew during the 1970's were those closest to metropolitan areas, in places where residents live in rural towns but have access to high-paying jobs in a metro core. More remote regions, where growth was less substantial, also experienced population increases. As previously mentioned, increases were not equally distributed. Agriculturally-dependent counties experienced the slowest growth (Curtis-White 2008).

By the beginning of the 1980s, population loss had returned to the Great Plains and rural Kansas (Richter 1985, Haas 1991). The 1980s experienced the most drastic population loss for rural counties since the 1950s. Many businesses relocated factories overseas to take advantage of cheaper labor, and the Farm Crisis bankrupted many family farms (Adamchak et al. 1999). Areas rich with natural amenities proved exceptions to this decline; rural counties where skiing, lakes, and beautiful vistas attracted residents looking to leave the big city (Cromartie et al. 1998, Nelson and Nelson 2008, Nelson et al. 2010). Yet Great Plains counties lack natural amenities, especially in Kansas, where there are no dramatic amenities (USDA-Economic Research Service 1999). The absence of natural amenities means that in general, Kansas has not experienced as much growth as other rural places.

During the 1980s, many scholars believed that rural depopulation would continue into the future. But against expectations, the 1990s witnessed another period of growth for non-metropolitan America, a decade known for its "rural rebound" (Fugitt and Beale 1996, Johnson and Beale 1999). While a rural rebound characterized developments across the country and rural Canada (Mitchell 2008), growth was most dramatic in the Great Plains (Fugitt and Beale 1996). It was smaller than the rural rebound of the 1970s, but many communities, particularly those on the metropolitan fringes, experienced remarkable growth (Johnson and Fugitt 2000, Johnson and

Cromartie 2006). Some scholars consider this increase during the 1990s as part of a greater trend of counter-urbanization, the movement of Americans away from high density areas (Mitchell 2004, Mitchell 2008).

Many towns experienced growth from an unexpected group: retirees, (Rowles and Watkins 1993, Stallmann and Jones 1995) who moved to rural communities to take advantage of a simpler and slower pace of life, often in areas with many natural amenities. Age plays a key role in determining movement from non-metro to metro areas, with young people more likely to leave non-metro locations than older people (Domina 2006). Many retirees also returned to where they grew up, to be closer to family and old friends. As with other trends, this growth was not equally distributed. Farm-dependency left many agrarian counties demographically stunted by population loss and aging (Johnson 1993, White 1994, McHugh and Mings 1996, White 1998, Curtis-White 2008). Among many left-behind counties were several in western Kansas, counties that are often extremely agriculturally-dependent.

Despite the 1970s and 1990s being times of revival for rural America, the overall population is still declining due to the exodus of rural youth (Carr and Kefalas 2009). Education plays a crucial role in shaping non-metro to metro migration; residents with a high school education were more likely to leave non-metro areas (Domina 2006). Many schools are indirectly encouraging rural students to leave due to a curriculum that prepares students for college and provides them with skills that are suited for jobs available in urban areas (Huang et al. 1997). Academically gifted students are actively encouraged by their parents, teachers, and other adult figures to leave because “they are too good for this town” (Car and Kefalas 2009, Demi et al. 2009). Studies have shown that rural youth rarely aspire to live in their hometown by the age of 30 (Demi and McLaughlin 2009). Even though some rural youth desire to leave, many report internal conflict between their hopes to out-migrate to achieve economic goals, and wishes to stay to be near one’s family and familiar surroundings (Hektner 1995).

Across the developed world, people marry later and have fewer kids. Rural areas are no exception (Arnett 2004, Lesthaeghe and Neidert 2006). This limited natural growth has made the effects of out-migration even worse for rural communities. Overall, ongoing rural depopulation has had undesirable consequences for communities: socially, demographically, and economically.

## **2.2 Effects of Rural Outmigration**

Young people, the largest group leaving rural America, are moving out of hometowns to attend college elsewhere or find employment in urban areas (Carr and Kefalas 2009). This trend has created a large break in the age distribution of Great Plains and rural Kansas towns. In many places, the average age of residents has increased (Beale 1964, Barcus 2004). This trend has long-lasting effects and will likely be difficult to reverse (Beale 1964). A shortage of young people has also lowered birth rates in many rural counties in significant ways, and in many communities deaths are outpacing births (Johnson 1993).

Young people who leave rural communities often come from affluent or educated families, while those who remain tend to represent poorer households (Car and Kefalas 2009). Young people from families lower on the socioeconomic ladder often stay because they lack human capital needs for more urban jobs and lack a social network outside of their rural community (Fitchen 1994). Over time, this has led to a consolidation of poverty in rural counties; the rich leave while the poor who remain have even more impoverished children (Nord 1998, Car and Kefalas 2009).

A general trend of farm consolidation also has reduced the number of small and medium-sized farms, which tends to produce both outmigration and higher rates of rural poverty (Lobao and Meyer 2001).

Another important effect of population decline is a loss of social services. In many places, shrinking school enrollment has led to consolidation, forcing students to travel great distances by bus to attend school. The loss of the community school has practical consequences, but also breaks rural community spirit. Communities that used to rally around the varsity football team no longer have these opportunities which has lowered social morale. School closures have led to job losses, often high-paying employment, which has only increased out-migration (Haas 1990). Depopulation has also caused the closure of healthcare facilities, which is especially concerning, considering the concentration of elderly in rural America (Albrecht 1993). Rural grocery stores are also closing, leading to food deserts and forcing rural residents to drive long distances to obtain groceries and other household items (Wright Morton and Blanchard 2007). Places that have remained—often gas stations and convenience stores—have not provided residents with access to healthier food or fresh produce.

Population loss in the Great Plains and rural Kansas has led many communities to adopt unconventional measures to slow this decline, and even encourage return migration by residents

who have left. Attracting new residents, no matter how many, is cause for celebration in these rural communities. The next section of this chapter focuses on efforts to encourage growth and trends in rural in-migration.

## **2.3 Rural Development**

Efforts to counter depopulation in the Great Plains is a particularly relevant topic and understanding these efforts will highlight some of the advantages and disadvantages of the Rural Opportunity Zone Program. Most rural development efforts exist at the local level, relying on funding from the county or municipal governments that are able to customize development efforts to meet a community's needs. But most non-metro local governments are more financially strained than their urban counterparts, and many provide more services with a lower tax base than metro governments (Lobao and Kraybill 2005). Many local governments have banded together to pool resources to help encourage shared growth (Lu 2011). Yet programs aimed at repopulating specific areas are a rarity in the United States. Those that exist draw on direct financial incentives and are targeted towards business rather than people (Fuchs and Demko 1979).

The quintessential rural redevelopment effort now present in the rural Great Plains is an attempt to attract manufacturing firms to relocate to the community. Colloquially, this process is referred to as “elephant hunting.” Elephant hunting is a high-risk but also potentially highly rewarding effort to encourage growth (Carr and Kefalas 2009). Towns often conduct elephant hunting using free industrial land giveaways to companies and tax abatements while touting the benefits of cheaper rural labor and a business-friendly climate. This process is risky because there are only so many manufacturing companies willing to seek relocation and they may leave again when they receive attractive offers from other places. Today, it is usually cheaper for a company to relocate overseas.

One type of rural redevelopment has proved successful in some regions, chiefly southwestern Kansas: meatpacking plants. A vital industry in southwestern Kansas starting in the late 1990s and early 2000s, (Broadway 2007, Artz et al. 2010) meatpacking takes advantage of cheap labor, proximity to large cattle farms, and a business friendly climate in southwestern Kansas and other rural areas. This growth has produced a boomtown effect for several Kansas towns, such as Garden City, Liberal, and Dodge City. The group rushing in to take jobs in these new factories, however, is not returning rural youth, but Hispanic laborers, chiefly Mexicans (Broadway 2007, Artz et al. 2010).

Ethanol plants have been another area of promise for many Great Plains communities, providing talking points for politicians and community leaders (Selfa et al. 2011). On the surface, ethanol plant construction seems to benefit the community, by bringing extra money and good, high-paying jobs. Yet research has shown that the effects of these plants are limited; they provide minimal employment and a tremendous strain on local infrastructure (Selfa et al. 2011). Ethanol plants throughout the Great Plains have had limited effects on increasing population and reducing aging in place (Kulcsár and Bolender 2011).

Free land programs are an important frontier of redevelopment efforts. Across the Great Plains, including several counties in Kansas, free land programs assist those wishing to relocate by providing them with new opportunities (Lu and Paull 2007). Each municipality administers its own program, and each program looks different. Some cities go beyond free land, offering down payment assistance and tax abatement for new residents. The free land program has garnered media attention, from national to international television coverage. Many participating families who relocated to take advantage of the program came from out of state, and say they would have never considered living in the Great Plains without these programs. The programs proved attractive because of the promise of a simpler life in rural towns as well as the desire for children to attend a smaller school district. Despite the limited demographic effects of the program, new families who come for free land have become a point of pride for many communities and a source of community reinvigoration.

Many communities in rural areas have also grown because they have taken advantage of their natural amenities (Cromartie et al. 1998, Nelson and Nelson 2008, Nelson et al. 2010). These communities, mostly in the Mountain West and the Sun Belt, have attracted retirees and people looking to work in the growing service sector, chiefly hospital and tourism jobs (Cromartie et al. 1998, Nelson and Nelson 2008, Nelson et al. 2010). Many counties in rural Kansas and the Great Plains are, unfortunately, low in natural amenities, and therefore are unlikely to attract similar growth.

In rural areas, digital development, or increased accessibility to high-speed internet, is attractive due to the purported benefits of bringing internet-based jobs to the area. Interviews with former rural residents revealed that they would return if they could have access to all the amenities available in larger cities, the internet, chief among them (Carr and Kefalas 2009). Research on this topic goes against conventional thought. Previous findings have shown that access to high-speed

internet is not significant for population growth in non-metropolitan counties (Mahasuweerachai et al. 2010). Although many potential rural residents say they would relocate to non-metro areas if high-speed internet were available, there is no statistical proof that internet access encourages rural growth. Despite limited impact on growth, digital development may limit further population loss (Malecki 2003). The internet connects people to the world, culturally and economically, which may encourage both individuals and businesses to remain long-term in non-metro areas.

Some rural communities are directing marketing efforts at urban residents (Burkhart-Kriesel et al. 2014). Research has shown that the best marketing techniques highlight the positive environment for families in rural areas. These marketing campaigns feature pictures of children playing outside, outdoor scenery, or streets with no traffic congestion (Burkhart-Kriesel et al. 2014). Research has shown that marketing playing up economic attributes are generally ineffective. Understanding what truly attracts people to rural areas is important because rural communities have limited resources; displaying the right attributes can go a long way in encouraging growth.

Research on community efforts to attract growth and support population growth has revealed that if a county or town dedicates resources to reinvestment, it often succeeds (Chacko 2007). Reinvestment may take the form of new infrastructure, attracting business, active marketing campaigns, or even better, parks. Understanding why a town or county has grown, and why individuals and families have migrated to rural communities is important to understanding the ROZ.

## **2.4 In-migration Trends**

Despite the general trend of depopulation in “America’s Heartland”, there have been areas where population growth has occurred. Studies have examined why people have returned to their rural hometowns, and why some places are attracting newcomers from urban areas or other rural areas. A review of this literature provides useful insights for understanding who is likely to participate in the ROZ program and why they may choose to do so.

Those who migrate to the Great Plains come from a variety of places, which makes it important to determine why different groups are migrating. One way of examining new migrants is to assess how migrants from non-metro and metro areas differ. A study on newcomers in the Nebraska Panhandle (Cantrell 2008) revealed that on average, new residents coming both from metro and non-metro areas were younger, almost all under the age of 40, more educated, and higher

paid than on-going inhabitants. New residents from metropolitan counties were much more likely to indicate a need to live in a less congested area, reside somewhere with a lower cost of living, and a desire to live in a “simpler and safer” place. Residents from non-metropolitan counties voiced less uniformity than metro newcomers in their responses to why they chose to move to the Nebraska Panhandle, and why they left their last place of residence. For newcomers from non-metro areas, the most popular reasons were to be closer to relatives and to obtain a higher paying job (Cantrell 2008). The differing rationale between urban and rural newcomers is important because if communities wish to target specific groups, then communities must use different marketing techniques and offer incentives that are tailored to the target group.

Return migrants, or those moving back to areas where they previously lived, are a vital group of migrants. Studies of rural return migrants is scarce but imperative to understanding the effectiveness of the ROZ program. Research conducted at high school reunions in remote rural counties showed that people returned to live in their hometown for a variety of reasons (Von Reichert et al. 2012, Von Reichert et al. 2013, Wall and Van Reichert 2013). The majority of those who left rural communities did so for financial reasons, and those who returned for economic reasons often came to take advantage of business opportunities that arose through family connections (Von Reichert et al. 2012). Many also returned so that children could attend school in a smaller district with a better student-to-teacher ratio. Many returners expressed a desire to live near family. A final purpose of return migration was to have access to the natural amenities of one’s hometown and a slower pace of life that comes with living in a rural area (Van Reichert et al. 2012).

Divorce also plays a key factor in return migration (Wall and Van Reichert 2013). People who have recently divorced are more likely to relocate to a place with strong social or familial connections or somewhere they regard as safe. Divorced return migrants cited several reasons for returning to their rural community (Wall and Van Reichert 2013). The first was a desire to be closer their family for their wellbeing, or a desire for children to be near grandparents. The second reason was relocating to a “simpler” place, living in a more modest or slower-paced environment after divorce or the death of a spouse. The final reason was a desire to resume one’s old life, to return to life before the failed marriage (Wall and Van Reichert 2013).

Return migration has a significant impact on the economic and social life of a community (Von Reichert 2013). Return migration leads to growth in school-age population. Small increases

in school-age population can stabilize school systems, by putting an end to shrinking. An additional benefit of return migration is that many returners start a new business or take over a business that might have been in jeopardy without new migrants. These new business owners often bring with them professional expertise from their time in a major city. Additionally, many return migrants help strengthen social bonds in the community, serving as little league coaches or starting charting charities. Contrary to fears of some longtime residents, return migrants do not harm local economies by increasing competition in the labor market or increasing housing costs (Von Reichert 2013).

Research on return migrants in Scotland has revealed useful insights that have a direct application to the ROZ program. Migrants in rural Scotland who returned to their rural hometown were either viewed as failures by others, or see themselves as failures; this was most likely due to the assumption that an individual only returns after personal or economic failures elsewhere (Stockdale 2006). Scottish migrants to rural towns also expressed a desire for “hard” benefits from the government, such as tax breaks and monetary payments. A final takeaway is that perceptions around rural communities need to change. Interviewees stated that their hometowns were not as bad as popularly perceived, but negative perceptions were too great for some to overcome (Stockdale 2006).

Some literature explores the likelihood of an individual’s return to his or her place of origin after a period away. A study of Canadian migrants shows that 77 percent of migrants went back to a province where they had previously lived, that 67 percent of return migrations were to the province of birth, and that roughly 17 percent of these migrations were to a prior residence (Newbold 2001). Research shows that certain demographic characteristics play a role in determining whether one returns to a former place of residence (Newbold 2001). The most likely groups to return are those aged 20-24, the highly educated, and the unmarried; this is mostly likely because young unmarried college graduates are likely to go home to live with mom and dad. On the other hand, individuals aged 25-45, others employed in skilled occupations, and women are less likely to return migrate. These groups are likely to move to where the jobs are located rather than where their family is, and women are more apt to migrate with a husband to where the husband is from rather than to own hometowns. This research is important because determining whether a migrant returns home or moves to a new place is critical for both economically and demographically depressed areas (Newbold 2001).

The ROZ program goes beyond trying to attract those who have left to return to rural Kansas; the program also tries to encourage educated newcomers to relocate to participating counties. Therefore, a review of the literature that focuses on graduate migration and skilled labor migration is necessary. Although not directly related to the Great Plains and rural Kansas, lessons taken from a review of this literature provide helpful insights into why some people may choose to participate in the program.

## **2.5 Graduate Migration**

A highly relevant body of literature is graduate migration, which looks at the migration patterns of college graduates, typically just after college. This body of research is paramount because it provides potential factors affecting predictors on how potential participants view the ROZ program and why some choose to participate and why others do not.

Research shows that two important factors influence whether a college graduate will return to his or her hometown after graduation (Rèrat 2014). The first reflects socio-familial characteristics. There is no difference in the likelihood of female versus male return migration. A central factor for return migration is whether one's partner is from the same region. According to one study, 63 percent with a partner from the same region returned, compared to only 20 percent who came back despite having a partner from a different region. The partner's home region is important because if one's partner comes from the same region, then that person, with additional familial and social incentives, is more likely to return. Graduates are likelier to return if their parents do not have a college degree; the rationale being that parents without a college degree are more probable to have a lower income and may need financial support from their children. Assisting parents is easier to do when the child lives nearby (Rèrat 2014). Interestingly, research has shown that distance from home does not significantly affect the propensity to return (Rèrat 2014).

The final set of factors has to do with professional characteristics. Research shows that 56.9 percent of those with a bachelor's degree will return, compared to only 37.7 percent of those with a master's degree. Among individuals who plan to work in the public sector, 43.2 percent will return, while only 31.3 percent of those who intend to work in the private sector will return. Finally, individuals with teaching degrees are 4.2 times more likely to go back to their rural home region than the average college graduate (Rèrat 2014).

An important task for graduate migration researchers is locating migration destinations of people with specific degrees. Research concerning graduate migration examines the relationship between college major, income, and migration (Winters 2016). Research suggests that the least likely candidates for out-migration are students who major in Criminal Justice, Education, and Agriculture. The logic behind why students who major in these subjects stay is that they have gained specific locally human capital, such as a teaching or police license, for the state where they currently reside. On the other hand, the most likely majors to out-migrate are Engineering, the Physical or Lab Sciences, and Humanities. Students of the former two majors are likely to out-migrate to seek high paying jobs that are in high-demand and available to them. In other words, these graduates migrate to where the best jobs are. Reportedly, humanities majors are likely to out-migrate because they are typically people who may want to experience or see the world after graduating from college (Winters 2016).

Winters (2016) show that Kansas college-graduates have a higher than average outmigration rate, with 46.1 percent of those ages 22-30 having out-migrated, and among those between the ages of 31 and 50, 57.2 percent have out-migrated. When examining out-migration among different demographic groups, white women are most likely to out-migrate while African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asians, taken together, less likely to out-migrate (Winters 2016).

For men and women, higher job earnings in an individual's birth state significantly reduce the probability of migration. A 10 percent increase in major-specific earnings decreases out-migration by 0.7 percent on average. In general, these results suggest that the number of college graduates in a state depends on the demand for college graduates in the area and the incomes that graduates can earn. Logically, people move to areas where their human capital earns higher wages (Winters 2016).

Research on the long-term migration patterns of college graduates has shown that those who attended college in-state are much more likely to work in the state 15 years after college than are those who attended college in another state (Groen 2004). Interestingly, regardless of whether one attended college in or out of state, students who attend a public university are more likely to work in their home state than those who attended a private institution. Higher achieving students, meaning those with higher SAT scores, are less prone to work in the same state that they grew up in (Groen 2004).

A final area of research concerns the relationship between population growth in non-metro counties, the percent of people in that county with a college degree, and the percentage of the population enrolled in higher education (Winters 2011). Results show that an increase in the population with a bachelor's degree is related to an increase in the in-migration rate, yet only with negligible differences in the net migration rate. The discrepancy between the effects of increased human capital on in-migration rates versus net migration rates might be that even though an increase in human capital correlates with more people moving to a non-metro area, it still does not prevent or discourage other people from leaving the county. Another interesting result is that both increases in the manufacturing share of a county's workforce and distance to the nearest metro correlate with a decrease in the in-migration rate. Simply put, remote manufacturing-based counties are likely to experience limited population growth.

Not surprisingly, a county with a higher share of the population with a bachelor's degree will experience an increased net change in the population enrolled in higher education (Winters 2011). Other factors that influence the relationship between community educational attainment and migration are: per capita income; population size; and distance to nearest metro. Overall, the results show that the share of the population with a bachelor's degree has little to no effect on the net migration rate (Winters 2011).

## **2.6 Skilled Labor Migration**

The migration of highly educated workers, or skilled labor migration (SLM), is one of the fastest growing topics in migration studies today. Researchers in a variety of disciplines examine this movement of people because of the impact on families, businesses, and regional development. Understanding skilled labor migration is highly relevant to the ROZ program. Determining where skilled migrants are moving offers a better understanding of why K-State students may participate in the program. The decision-making process for educated migrants becomes clearer after studying the literature, as well as why some individuals choose to migrate to a place, despite its perceived negative attributes.

While research on SLM has continued since the 1960s, it was not until the late 1980s and 1990s that the topic became more prominent and received attention from the greater academic community (Koser and Salt 1997). Common research questions have focused on the internal movement of workers within trans-national corporations and the contrast between the deregulation of financial markets and increased regulation of immigration. A limited area of study has targeted

the micro or personal level of skilled labor migration. Most research on skilled labor migration has been economic, about how the movement of skilled labor away from less developed areas has limited economic development opportunities for these nations. The limited work that exists on the sociocultural elements of skilled migration has looked at the impact that cultural differences have on migrants and the relationship between migrants and their employers (Koser and Salt 1997). A general takeaway for future research is that studies of skilled migrants should go beyond economic impacts to incorporate more personal effects that migration has on individuals and the places that they leave behind.

Iredale (2001) has also focused on explaining the five typologies of migration. These are tools to categorize migrants and the reasons they move in ways that are meaningful and helpful. The first typology is ‘by motivation’ (Iredale 16), which explains why migrants have moved, including brain drain or retirement. The second typology categorizes migrants by their point of origin and destination. Third is differentiating migrants by channel or mechanisms, which primarily looks at the practices used by private firms or governments to attract new workers and relocate residents. The fourth typology is to categorize based on type of stay, whether permanent or temporary. Finally, there is “the “mode of incorporation” typology, which tries to understand whether migrants are discriminated against upon arrival, as outsiders, or if they receive some higher status because of their existing political, social, or economic status (Iredale 2001). This research does not exactly organize migrants according to these five typologies, but it does identify why certain people become migrants and for what reasons.

Research on skilled migrants and return migration has shown that it is important to differentiate temporary migrants, using various subtypes to draw distinctions (Dustman and Weiss 2007). The four kinds of temporary migration are: (1) Return migration, the return of migrants to their place of origin; (2) contract migration, migration for a predetermined period dictated by a contract such as a work permit or a student visa; (3) transient migration, the migration of individual in a temporary way with the individual having no long-term plans of staying; and (4) circulatory migration, a pattern of migration featuring the cyclical movement of several places, often to take advantage of seasonal work.

An important question for migration research is: whether skilled men or skilled women migrate more (Docquier et al. 2012). This issue is an old one in the field with roots going back to Ravenstien’s laws of human migration. There has always been a general notion that women tend

to migrate over short distances while men are more likely to migrate over long distances. There has also been contradictory and inconclusive research over which sex is more migratory (Docquier et al. 2012). Simply put, skilled women are more migratory than their male counterparts; this finding is statistically significant across various models and even with other intervening variables (Docquier et al. 2012). The reason for this is that women and men do not respond to push and pull factors in similar ways (Docquier et al. 2012). Women are also more likely to migrate to follow a spouse or male partner than the other way around. Finally, a woman's human capital is likely more valued in certain cases than a man's human capital (Docquier 262). This might be because more jobs are available to unskilled men, or because women are marginalized in many societies. Education is an effective means for women to move up the social ladder. Will those who choose to take part in the ROZ program have high levels of human capital? Are skilled migrants men or women? Skilled women might participate because women are more migratory in general. Alternatively, those participating in the program are men because types of human capital associated with males, primarily in agricultural or manufacturing fields, match up better with rural Kansas.

Traditionally most migration research has focused on the individual movement of single people and how individuals determine whether to migrate. Many scholars argue that only examining the migration decisions of individuals is limiting and does not provide a full understanding of why some relocate (Stark and Bloom 1985). A more complete understanding of why migration occurs is looking instead at family migration and why some sacrifice personal gain but instead migrate to areas where their families can be better off (Stark and Bloom 1985, Cooke 2008). Often the migration decisions made by families are more complex and calculated. When considering family migration, family decision makers must determine where is the best economic, school, and social location for all family members. Research has shown that families move often away from areas where they can make the most money but to where the social support network is largest or where they feel children will be safest (Cooke 2008).

There have also been efforts to differentiate why some migrants permanently leave an area and why others return home after a period (Labrianidis and Vogiatzis 2013). Studies show that most college graduates who do not return cite economic reasons, such as higher incomes and a desire to work in fields relevant to their education. Conversely, those who return after a period of absence are on average much less educated than those who permanently leave and are more likely

to have studied at a nearby university. A fundamental difference between the two groups is spousal origin; over 50 percent of those who stay far from home have a spouse from a different region, while 13.7 percent of returners are married to another person from their home region.

Furthermore, over 70 percent of those who did not return work in a permanent or non-temporary position, compared to just 20 percent of returners. A general conclusion is that those who return are not as “successful” abroad as those who choose to remain abroad. Another possible conclusion is that brain drain in some less well-off areas is due to a mismatch between supply and demand in certain professions, in particular those that rely on highly skilled workers (Labrianidis and Vogiatzis 2013).

A topic in the field of skilled labor migration that is relevant to this research is the different pathways taken by migrants. Specifically, how do migrants find their place in a new environment? (Liversage 2009, Qureshi et al. 2013). Each migration is unique because it occurs in a particular time and place. Understanding the unique stories of migrants not only lets researchers understand the personal struggles of skilled migrants, but also how their pathways are generalizable to skilled migration as a whole. Research has shown that migrants who succeed economically after moving away from home is correlated with whether a migrant’s academic or technical credentials are transferable. In the case of the U.S., most degrees are directly transferable to other areas, but it is still necessary to understand if a migrant’s softer skills, such as writing, leadership, or business connections, are a good fit for their new location. Furthermore, most skilled migrants, when moving to a new location, spend time being underemployed. Those who remain underemployed for long periods, or those whose skills do not match their new environment are likely to return to their previous location. (Liversage 2009, Qureshi et al. 2013).

Understanding the reasons why skilled migrants may return is a critical area of research (Dustman and Weiss 2007). A general rule is that if a skilled migrant resides in a place for more than five years, he or she is likely to live in that location in the long term. Overall, research has shown that it is important to think about potential return migration in a way that goes beyond the simple neo-liberal way of thinking about migration, that is, thinking about migration through differences in wages.

Simply put, migrants are people, and people have preferences, perhaps for foods they grew up eating or warmer or cooler climates. Another factor determining why some migrants return is the high purchasing power of the host region’s currency in the migrant’s home region. A similar

movement is when a migrant leaves to live in a one area for a while to acquire wealth and then returns to their home area, to spend their savings. Skilled migrants may also accumulate human capital away from home then return to use these skills to participate in the local economy. Migrants often move to take advantage of educational and occupational opportunities, such as attending a prestigious university in another region. Once a migrant has acquired a degree or enough work experience in their host country, they can take their newfound knowledge and use it in their country of origin. Studies have also shown that migrants move to where their skills are rarest, most needed, or most valued, and if the value of one's skills decreases in the host country, there is less incentive for the migrant to stay and greater incentive to return home (Dustman and Weiss 2007).

## **Chapter 3 - Study Area and ROZ Program**

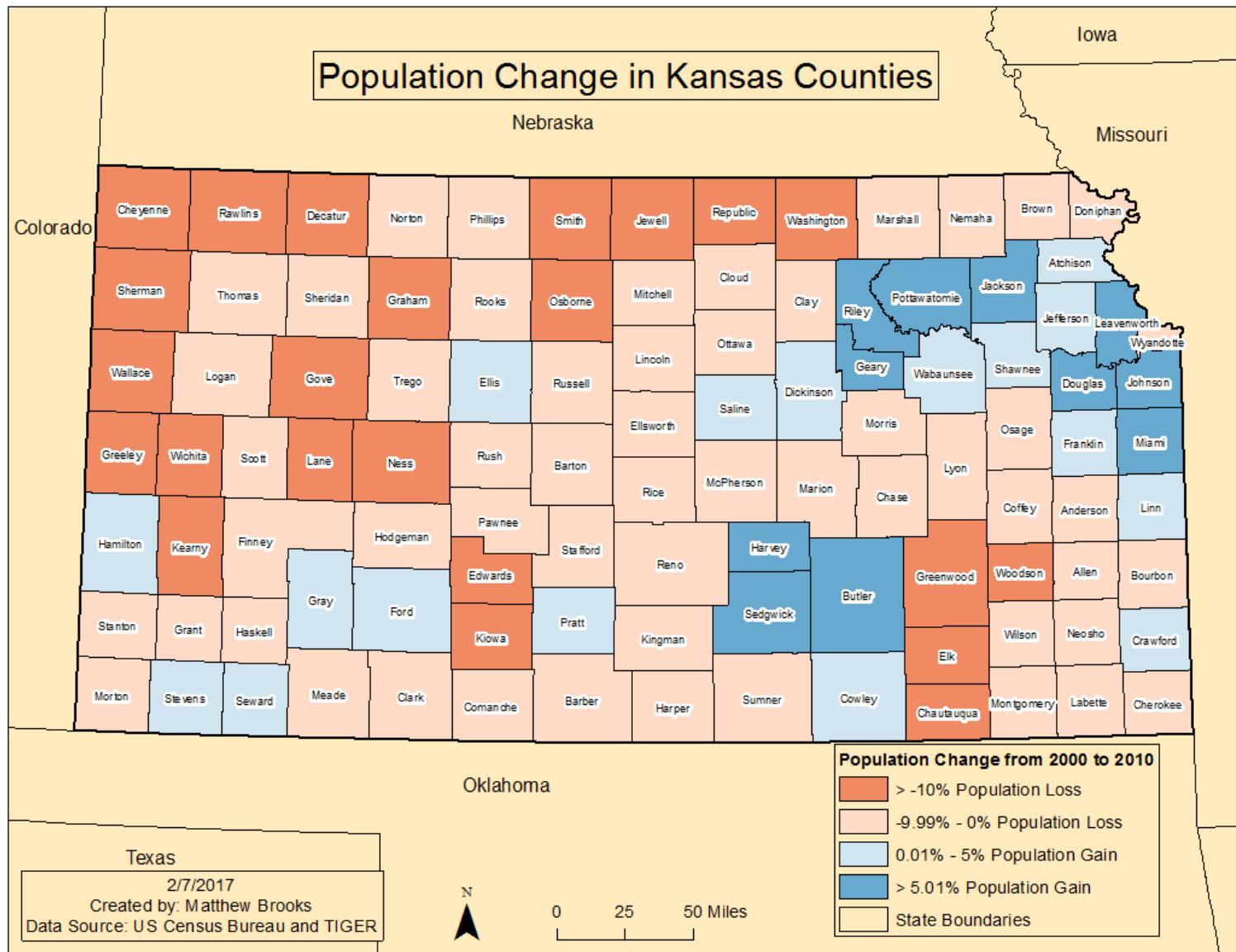
This chapter describes the two study areas of this research and provide an overview of the Kansas Rural Opportunity Zone Program. The first section details the economic and demographic attributes of the state of Kansas, primarily the state's rural counties. The following section conveys why this research uses K-State students to understand the effectiveness of the ROZ program. The last section outlines the incentives of the ROZ program and how the state manages the program.

### **3.1 Economic and Demographic Summary of Rural Kansas**

As of 2015, Kansas' population stood at almost 2.9 million (US Census 2015a), which is an increase of over 200,000 since 2000 (US Census 2000). Not surprisingly, most of this growth was in the state's five metropolitan areas. The state's population is also highly concentrated in just a few counties and with population growth and loss varying across the state (Figure 3.1).

On the other hand, most of the state's land area and natural resources are located in relatively remote and rural areas. In fact, 71 of the 105 counties are not a part of metropolitan areas. These rural counties range from metro adjacent counties with a population of over 20,000, to counties with no cities and a population of over 2,500. In fact, a majority of Kansas counties have a rural-urban continuum code (RUCC) greater than seven (see figure 3.2). The rural-urban continuum codes are a classification scheme created by the USDA's Economic Research Service that differentiates metropolitan counties by their population size and nonmetropolitan counties by their degree of urbanization and adjacency to a metro area or areas.

Despite the overall growth of Kansas's population, not all areas of the state are prosperous. This research focuses on parts of Kansas that are hurting, both demographically and economically, and need help. The primary study area of this research is the 77 rural counties that participate in the ROZ program. These 77 counties all lost population from 2000 to 2010, and on average, lost eight percent of residents during this ten-year period (US Census 2000 and US Census 2010). Counties that participate in the ROZ program have a much older population on average than the state. The average median age in these counties is 43.6, while 20 percent of the population is over 65, compared to a state average of 36.1 years and 13.1 percent over 65 (US Census 2015a). Regarding educational attainment, on average 14.5 percent of those over 25 years old in ROZ counties have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 31 percent of the state's population over 25 (US Census 2015b). ROZ counties are also much poorer than the state average, with the mean household income in participating counties around \$46,000, while the state's median income is



**Figure 3-1 Population Change in Kansas Counties**

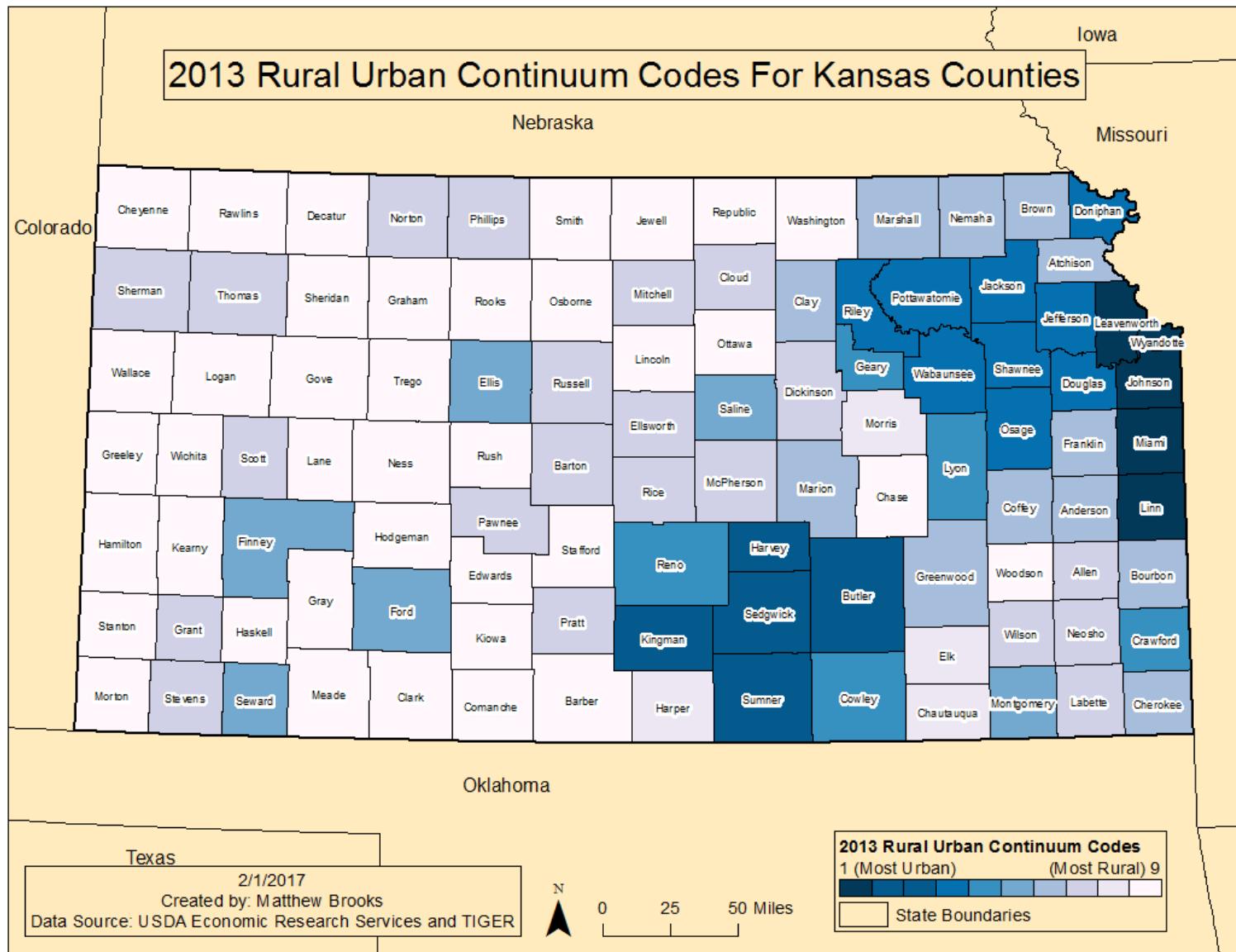


Figure 3-2 2013 Rural Urban Continuum Codes for Kansas Countie

over \$52,000 (US Census 2015g). Residents of ROZ counties are also much more likely to hold a job in the agriculture industry when compared to the average Kansan (US Census 2015d). Many rural counties of the state also have a significant Mexican population (US Census 2015c). Some rural counties, primarily those in southwestern Kansas, have Hispanic populations that are well over 20 percent of the total population (US census 2015c).

Finally, median home value in ROZ counties is just under \$70,000, which is well below the state's median home value of \$122,600 (US Census 2015f). The average age of a home in a ROZ county is 60 years, compared to the Kansas average of 45 (US Census 2015e).

In summary, ROZ counties have an older, less educated, and lower paid population compared to Kansas as a whole; ROZ counties also have a poor housing stock. Most ROZ counties are located in the western half of the state, which belongs to the Great Plains. Because these counties experience little rainfall, they are known as hot, windswept places. Most western Kansas counties have few lakes or full flowing rivers; generally the terrain is flat. A dry, flat environment provides little to no natural amenities and is often viewed as unattractive or boring.

### **3.2 Kansas State University Students**

K-State students were selected for the survey because they are ideal proxy for individuals likely to participate in the ROZ program. Kansas State University is the institution of interest for a variety of reasons. As of the fall semester 2016, there are over 23,000 students enrolled at K-State, 19,472 of which are undergraduates. This large student body represents students from diverse backgrounds and academic concentrations. Kansas State is a large land grant university, and because of its prestigious programs in agriculture, engineering, and applied sciences, more students are likely to work in industries with an economic presence in Kansas. Therefore, Kansas State University students can more likely benefit from the ROZ program, compared to students who attend other universities in the state. Another advantage of Kansas State is its diversity; the university is home to students from a variety of backgrounds and has an in-state student to out-of-state student ratio of 2.34 to 1. These characteristics allow for diverse opinions and attitudes among students, which is necessary when trying to understand the broad spectrum of perceptions of the ROZ program.

### **3.3 Incentives of the ROZ Program**

The Kansas Rural Opportunity Zone Program is a state-run program that began in 2012 in response to the declining population of rural counties in Kansas. It can trace its roots back to the

2002 “New Homestead Economic Opportunity Act,” often shortened to the New Homestead Act, which was a piece of national legislation that attempted “to reward the hard work and risk of individuals who choose to live in and help preserve America’s small, rural towns, and for other purposes.” (H.R. 5273). The bill aimed to encourage growth in rural areas by offering incentives to college-educated individuals who choose to relocate to depopulating counties. The incentives of the program included student loan repayments, tax credit, home loan programs, and medical expense repayment. It is important to note that then Kansas senator Sam Brownback and several other farm state senators supported the bill. The New Homestead Act did not pass, but it apparently inspired the ROZ, which has been championed by Brownback after he became the governor of Kansas. The ROZ program passed in 2011 (Topeka Capital-Journal 2011), with 50 counties participating. In 2013, 23 additional counties joined the program and in 2014, four more counties did (Topeka Capital-Journal 2011, Hays Post 2013). Currently 77 counties participate in the program.

The Kansas Department of Commerce and individual counties that participate in the program jointly manage the program. The ROZ program offers two financial incentives to participants who choose to relocate to a participating county, a Kansas income tax waiver for up to five years, and student loan repayments up to \$15,000.

To qualify for the Kansas income tax waiver individuals must have:

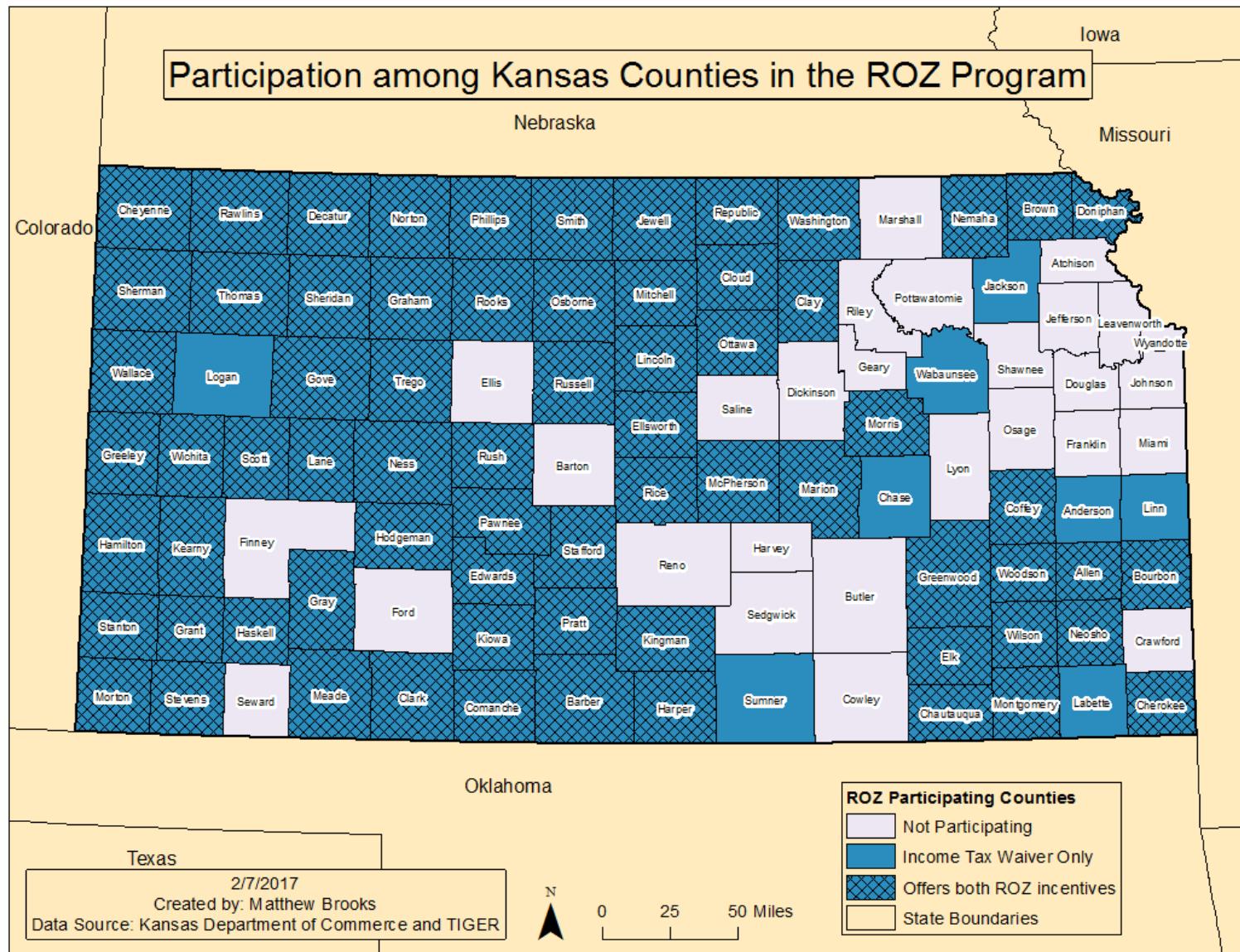
- Established residency in a ROZ county on or after the date the county became part of the program.
- Lived outside Kansas for five or more years immediately prior to establishing residency in a ROZ county.
- Earned less than \$10,000 in Kansas Source Income in each of the five years immediately before establishing residency in a ROZ county.

To be eligible for student loan repayments, individuals must have:

- Established residency in a ROZ county after July 1, 2011, and on or after the date on when the county opts into the student loan program.
- Hold an associate’s, bachelor’s, or post graduate degree.
- Have an outstanding student loan balance.

All 77 participating counties offer the income tax waiver program, but only 69 counties offer student loan repayments (Figure 3-3). To apply to participate in the program, an individual

must complete an application with the Kansas Department of Commerce. Funding for the tax waiver comes from the State, while funding for the Student Loan repayment comes from county-based sources. The exact funds available for the program vary from county to county. If a county does not have enough funds, but an individual qualifies for the program, the county may place the individual on a waiting list. A county official manages the program, and these officials are usually head of a county economic development commission, or head of the largest city in a county's chamber of commerce. Any advertising for the program is usually conducted and paid for by an individual county, not the state.



**Figure 3-3 Participation among Kansas Counties in the ROZ Program**

## **Chapter 4 - Data and Methods**

At the core of this research is the question of whether the ROZ program works. Does the program efficiently encourage educated individuals to relocate to rural counties participating in the program? Understanding the ROZ program's effectiveness relies on answering two related questions: Are the program's incentives attractive? Are people aware of the ROZ program? And, what are people's perceptions of life in rural Kansas? Logically, people participate in the program if they view its financial benefits as outweighing any negative aspects associated with life in rural Kansas. To determine whether the program is working, this research collected data from two groups of relevant individuals: those likely to participate in the program and those who manage it.

Any individual with a college education is eligible for the program. However, those without ties to Kansas, and others with well-established lives elsewhere are not likely to participate. The group more probably to take part in the ROZ program includes relatively young and unestablished individuals and those with ties to Kansas. Undergraduate students at Kansas State University (K-State) offer the perfect proxy for those expected to take part in the program. Kansas State students with outstanding student loans can take advantage of the loan repayment program, while out-of-state students are able to avail themselves of the income tax waiver. Most undergraduate students are young and have no pre-established career; therefore, they are not likely to be deterred from living in an unfamiliar place. Furthermore, because these students already live in Kansas, they have a connection to the state and are likely to have acquired human and social capital relevant to Kansas. To collect the opinions and perspectives of students, this research employed a direct email survey, which collected responses from a variety of students. These responses were easy to code and analyze statistically.

In addition to conducting the student survey, there were interviews with county officials who help manage the ROZ program. These county officials typically work within a county economic development commission or the city chamber of commerce. This report uses the general term “county coordinator” to describe these individuals.

Understanding how county coordinators view and evaluate the program affords a useful perspective that differs from those of potential participants: K-State students. County officials understand how the program affects their community, how community attributes influence growth, and how benefits of the ROZ counteract negative characterizations of a community. To understand these facets of ROZ effectiveness, interviews provide the best means of gaining this information.

Interviews allow for more elaborate detail than survey data and require a smaller sample size; there are only 77 county officials compared to over 19,000 K-State undergraduates. Additionally, information culled from interviews allows a researcher to identify overarching themes and understand the unique circumstances of a community participating in the ROZ program. It is important to note that data taken from the student surveys is the more important dataset in this research. Findings from interviews accompany and supplement survey results; interviews provide additional insights on the same research questions but from a different perspective.

This chapter contains two sections. The first outlines the data and methods used for the student survey. The latter section describes the data and the methods utilized in coordinator interviews.

## **4.1 Data and Methods for the Student Survey**

To investigate the ROZ Program's effectiveness and rural life perceptions, this study employs a nonexperimental research approach: an emailed survey to selected Kansas State University undergraduate students, in combination with the interviews of local experts. The survey design allows the researcher to draw inferences from the population (Creswell 2009). The purpose of this survey is to understand K-State student perceptions of the ROZ program and rural life. Students were targeted for this survey research because as future degree holders, they may benefit from participating in the program, and often are the target group for the program

Based on university reports from fall 2016, there were 19,472 undergraduate students at K-State. Based on the desired 95% confidence level, 377 completed surveys were required to meet this confidence level (Dillman et al. 2009). The survey distribution followed a modification of Dillman's system of five "compatible" contacts, omitting the first and final contact attempt (alert email and reminder postcard, respectively) (Dillman et al. 2009). The distribution steps utilized were:

1. An initial contact email with link to survey website.
2. A reminder email to non-respondents.
3. A secondary reminder email to non-respondents.

To effectively distribute the survey to relevant students, the survey group does not include graduate students or international students. Upon request, the University's Information Technology Services and the Register's Office provided access to randomly selected undergraduate email addresses. Due to technical and privacy constraints, these offices only

supplied 6,000 (out of 19,472) randomly selected undergraduate email addresses. IT Services also granted access to *Qualtrics*, under the K-State license, to distribute surveys electronically. The *Qualtrics* distribution system was helpful because it increased ease of survey creation and distribution. Qualtrics also allowed student responses to remain anonymous and confidential.

On December 1, 2016, students received the first email with a link to the survey. On December 5 and December 8, non-respondents received a follow-up email. The survey closed to students on December 14; by then 656 people had attempted the survey. These attempted surveys included 511 completed surveys, and 511 completed surveys provided a confidence level of over 95 percent and a margin of error of 4.28 percent.

The research questions that accompany this survey are as follows:

1. What types of individuals are likely to participate in the ROZ program?
2. Are students aware of the ROZ program? What types of students are aware of the program?
3. What are the perceived positive and negative aspects of the ROZ program?
4. What are the perceived positive and negative aspects of life in rural areas?
5. What changes can improve the Rural Opportunity Zone Program?

To address the research questions, survey development began with 32 base questions (See Appendix A.1). These questions asked students about basic demographic information, future career plans, attitudes towards certain aspects of rural life, opinions on program benefits, their likelihood of participation, and other topics. After editing, 24 survey questions were adapted. The survey was pilot tested in two sections of GEOG 200, Human Geography, which contained about 80 students in total. Pilot testing revealed questions that were misleading or unclear to students, and how to better arrange the survey's questions.

The final survey contained questions using a Likert scale, multiple choice questions, numeric entry questions, and open-ended questions (Appendix A.2). It also contained a brief explanation of the ROZ program and its financial benefits.

The key dependent variable created from the survey is a respondent's self-reported likelihood to participate in the ROZ program, scaled from zero (highly unlikely) to ten (highly likely). Understanding who is likely to take part in the program is imperative for determining its

effectiveness and whether the program is attracting individuals to participate. Likewise, it is crucial to understand which ROZ financial benefits students view as worthwhile and beneficial. The survey was also designed to assess whether those likely to participate are newcomers, with no preexisting connection to ROZ counties, or returners who had grown up in ROZ counties. If the program is only helping those who were already planning to live in rural Kansas, then it serves little to no purpose.

The other main area of interest addressed by the survey is how students perceive rural Kansas life. This helps us grasp factors that potentially limit rural population growth. The survey also contained questions about their opinions of certain aspects of rural Kansas, such as positive attributes of rural communities. The survey also asked students if they think that living in rural Kansas aligns with their future career and family plans. Finally, the survey asked students about their basic demographic information.

Data were collected in *Qualtrics* and exported to *Microsoft Excel*, where certain responses were numerically coded. The analysis of responses from completed surveys included descriptive statistics, such as measurements including central tendency and the dispersion of responses. This analysis also included inferential statistics like ordinary least squares regression (OLS) regression and measures of central tendency, to explore the relationship between response variables. This analysis used *STATA 14.2* for data analysis.

## **4.2 Data and Methods for ROZ Coordinator Interviews**

To complement the results of the survey, this research incorporated interviews with coordinators in several Kansas counties, and aimed to complete six to eight interviews. The purpose of interviews was to increase understanding how the program is affecting rural population change and how the program might be improved.

The sampling method used to select particular counties was a stratified random design. The selection stratum used for this sampling is the 2013 Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (RUCC).. After determining the numbers of counties to contact within each group, this research employed a random selection process within each group, via a random number generator. For counties that did not have coordinator's contact information available online, another county with the same RUCC value was randomly selected. To gain additional perspectives, county officials in ROZ counties with an RUCC value of one and two (depopulating counties in a metro area) also received inquiry emails. To conduct six to eight interviews, 15 county coordinators received inquiry emails (Table

4.1), but due to non-responses, eventually 18 total coordinators received inquiry emails. Two emails were initially sent to individuals within a county government who then recommended that the researcher contact another person within the same county. Most contacted coordinators received an initial email during the second week of November 2016. Over the course of the two months, coordinators sent back their responses. There were seven interviews conducted in total.

**Table 4-1 Number of Counties to Contact**

RUCC	Number	Percent of 77	Number to Contact (15)
1	1	12.9%	0
2	2	2.5%	0
3	3	3.8%	1
4	0	0	0
5	1	1.2%	0
6	9	1.1%	2
7	19	2.4%	4
8	4	5.1%	1
9	38	4.5%	7

Rather than face-to-face or telephone interviews, questions were administered by email, as a part of a method known as “asynchronous email interviews” (Ratislavová and Ratslav 2014). Contact between the researcher and coordinators generally involved the following series of emails:

1. An initial inquiry email (Appendix B3).
2. A confirmation email agreeing on email format. This email contained interview questions.
3. A possible clarification email concerning confidentiality and individual interview questions.
4. A final thank you email.

In total, 53 emails were a part of this research, which included emails sent by the researcher and participating coordinators.

Many coordinators agreed to participate in these interviews under the condition that they would receive a copy of the research findings. Some coordinators were concerned about confidentiality, and only agreed to participate if promised that any publicly available reports do

not mention full names. Therefore, this report will make no mention of the individual interviewees or their respective counties.

The interviews attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What types of individuals are likely to participate in the ROZ program?
2. What are the perceived positive and negative aspects of the Rural Opportunity Zone Program?
3. What are the perceived positive and negative aspects of life in rural Kansas?
4. What changes can improve the Rural Opportunity Zone Program?

Based on the research questions, interviews involved seven questions, which included follow up questions (Appendix B.1). Original research questions are not used in the interviews because they are too broad, and could be misinterpreted without proper context. Questions used in the interviews contain follow-up queries to prompt more information from the interviewee. I asked coordinators to provide answers to the following seven questions:

1. What incentives does your community or county provide to those looking to move here? How do these programs incentivize growth? Do you view these as effective?
2. Can you tell me about the kinds of people you see participating in the Rural Opportunity Zone (ROZ) program? Are they returning locals or newcomers? Where do they work? What brought them to this county or community?
3. Do you think the benefits of the ROZ program provide enough of an incentive to attract people to live in rural Kansas?
4. What changes would you make to improve the ROZ program?
5. What do you think stands in the way of growth for your community?
6. What do you think are outside perceptions of your community? What about rural life in general?
7. What are the most positive attributes of your county and community? Conversely, what are negative attributes of your county and community?

Questions were similar to queries found in the student survey, but were designed to be appropriate for interviews with county coordinators. Interview questions were also aimed at the opinions of coordinators concerning the effectiveness of the ROZ program. First, this research inquired whether counties use other incentive programs, such as free land, alongside the ROZ program, to encourage growth. Another question asked whether they believe the program provides enough incentives for educated people to relocate. County coordinators likely have a clear opinion of what types of benefits the ROZ should offer. Finally, interviews asked what coordinators think is necessary to improve the ROZ program.

After the completion of all interviews, this research utilized *NVivo 11 Plus* to store transcripts and code and identify themes. After text analysis and coding, this research then identified overarching themes that appeared in interviews.

## **Chapter 5 - Results of the Student Survey**

This chapter outlines the results of the survey of Kansas State University students. This survey was designed to increase understanding of how students view the program, what types of students are likely to participate in the program, student perceptions of rural life, and the interaction between the program's benefits and student perceptions of rural life. This chapter has six sections. The first section provides descriptive statistics of the students who took the survey. The next section addresses student awareness of the program. Sections three and four examine student perceptions of the program and student likelihood to participate in the ROZ program, respectively. The fifth section outlines student's residential preferences and their perceptions of rural life. The final section attempts to answer what changes that might improve the ROZ program, based on the survey results.

### **5.1 Descriptive Statistics of Student Respondents**

The mean age of the survey respondents is 22.52 years old, which is high due to outliers on the upper end of the age spectrum. The median age is 21 years old. Students also provided their year in school. K-State freshmen made up 16.8 percent of those surveyed, sophomores 17.6 percent, juniors 11.8 percent, and seniors 41.4 percent. Regarding gender, 60.9 percent of the respondents were female, 37.7 percent were male, and the remaining 1.4 percent were students that indicated their sex as "other," trans-gender, or preferred not to answer.

As previous research has shown, intended career is important in determining migration pathways (Rèrat 2014, Winters 2016). The simplest way of grouping students by intended career is to have students answer, "What college is your major(s) apart of?" Students could have selected multiple colleges if having multiple majors. Of the respondents 27.8 percent were majors in the College of Arts and Sciences, 22. percent in the College and Engineering, 21.9 percent were in the College of Agriculture, 13 percent in the College of Business Administration, 11 percent in the College of Human Ecology, 7.9 percent in the College of Education, and 1.4 percent in the College of Architecture, Planning, and Design.

One's point of origin, either rural or urban, has been shown to greatly influence future migration (Cantrell et al. 2008). Survey results revealed that 51.6 percent of students were from rural hometowns, 34.7 percent from suburban hometowns, and 13.7 percent from urban hometowns. It is important to note that students based their hometowns on their own perceptions; two students from the same hometown may view the same locale as a suburban place or as an

urban place. Regarding the location of that hometown, 80 percent of students are from the state of Kansas, 16.9 percent are from another state, and 3.1 percent are from outside of the United States. Lastly, of the students from the state of Kansas, 61.7 percent came from a non-ROZ county while 38.3 came from a county that participates in the ROZ program.

**Table 5-1 Comparison of Student Survey and Kansas State University**

	Student Survey	Kansas State University
Percentage of Women	60.9%	48%
Percentage of Men	37.7%	52%
Average Age (Years)	22.52	20
College of Agriculture	21.9%	14.3%
College Of Architecture, Planning, and Design	1.4%	2.4%
College of Arts and Sciences	27.8%	29%
College of Business Administration	13.1%	14.2%
College of Education	7.9%	6.2%
College of Engineering	21.9%	20.5%
College of Human Ecology	11%	13.5%
Comes from Kansas	80%	78%
Comes from other state	16.9%	17%
Comes from Other Countries	3.1%	5%
Comes from Kansas, ROZ county	38.3%	17%
Comes from Kansas, non-ROZ county	61.7%	82%

In many ways this survey is very representative of the whole student body of Kansas State domestic undergraduates (Table 5-1). There are only two noticeable differences between the two groups. First survey respondents were much more skewed towards women, while for all students the sex ratio is much more even. The emails provided for this research were randomly selected and therefore there is no explanation for these differences. Also, the students who responded to survey were more likely to be from an ROZ county, compared to the student body at large. This is likely because students with some familiarity of the program, likely those from ROZ counties, are more likely to participate in the survey than those who were unaware of the program. Despite these two differences, it is highly likely that the survey responses are representative of all students in many aspects due to large amount of completed surveys.

## 5.2 Student Awareness of the Program

The first survey question asked students if prior to the survey they were aware of the program. Results show that 73.5 percent of students were not aware of the program at all and 92.9 percent of students do not know anyone who is participating or has participated in the program (Table 5-2). Not surprisingly knowing someone who has participated or is participating in the program strongly correlates with program awareness, a correlation coefficient of .36 (Table 5-3). Which demonstrates a strong relationship between the two variables. Interestingly, no other variables correlate with program awareness with a coefficient greater than .1.

**Table 5-2 Cross Tab of Program Awareness**

Program Awareness	Know someone who participates		
	No	Yes	Total
Not aware	370	4	374
Somewhat aware	87	27	114
Very Aware	16	5	21
Total	473	36	509

**Table 5-3 Correlation between Program Awareness and Student Characteristics**

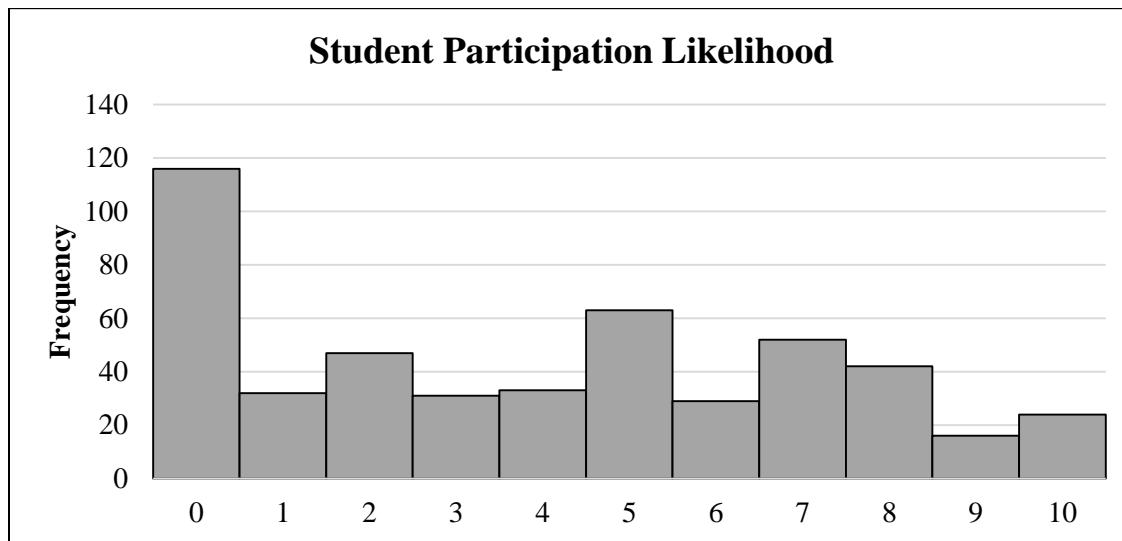
	Program awareness
Program awareness	1
Know someone who participates	0.36
Age	0.03
Class	0.1
Male	0
Majoring in Agriculture	0.03
Rural Hometown	0.04
Come from Kansas	0.06
Come from ROZ County	0.08

This lack of awareness is likely because the state does not advertise the program to students well. There is no publically available document detailing how the program is being advertised, but based on an internet search the state rarely advertises the program at all. The only major examples of advertisements are at K-State sporting events, such as basketball games, and on billboards along the Kansas Turnpike (Carpenter 2014).

## 5.3 Student Perceptions of the ROZ Program

Students reported their supposed likelihood on a scale from zero to ten, with zero being extremely unlikely and ten being extremely likely. As shown in Figure 5-1, the most frequently

selected likelihood is zero, and only 66.4 percent of respondents reported a likelihood less than five. The average participation likelihood is 3.96. It is not surprising that most students are not likely to participate. Even though the ROZ program does not place any occupational or other restrictions on participants, the program is naturally more suited to those whose future goals are achievable in rural Kansas. In addition with a large number of students previously unaware of the program, it is not likely that they would report a high possibility of participating at this point.



**Figure 5-1 Participation Likelihood**

**Table 5-4 ROZ Participation and Future Plans**

	Frequency	Percent
Greatly counteracts my future career plans	105	21
Somewhat counteracts my future career plans	91	18.2
Neither complements or counteracts my future career plans	167	33.3
Somewhat complements my future career plans	81	16.2
Greatly complements my future career plans	57	11.4
	Frequency	Percent
Greatly counteracts my future family and life plans	64	12.8
Somewhat counteracts my future family and life plans	58	11.6
Neither complements or counteracts my future family and life plans	219	43.6
Somewhat complements my future family and life plans	92	18.3
Greatly complements my future family and life plans	69	13.8

This survey asked students two related questions “Does potentially participating in the Rural Opportunity Zone program complement or counteract your future career plans?” and “Does potentially participating in the Rural Opportunity Zone program complements or counteract your

future family plans?" As seen in Table 5-4, most students believe that participating in the ROZ program neither complements nor counteracts their future career plans. What is interesting though is that 39.1 percent of students indicated that at some level potentially participating in the program would work against their career plans, compared to 27.6 percent who thought it would complement their career plans. Past findings have shown that rural areas are generally viewed as great for family but not for starting a business (Von Reichert et al. 2012).

Regarding family and life plans, most students perceive the program with generally mixed feelings. Likely more family oriented students are drawn to move to the town where their parents reside; therefore, for students with families in urban areas participating in the program is counterintuitive while students with rural families view the program more positively. Overall, most students view the program as not helping them meet their career or family plans.

Despite student general lack of awareness prior to the survey of the program, at the beginning of the survey students given a brief overview of the program and its benefits. This information allowed students to make a quick judgement about the benefits and how they would influence students to participate. Students generally deemed the programs benefits to be influencing students to participate in the program (Table 5-5). The greatest factor influencing potential participation is the student loan repayments. This is likely due to many students having large amounts of loans and participating in this program provides an easy way of repaying them. Interestingly, "all program benefits" is primarily indicated as a slight influencer, this might be because even though students like the student loan repayment benefits, the tax waiver lower influence may drag down the total benefit influence. This is likely because the tax is not available to all students. Regretfully there was no question relating to the required program participation length of five years.

The ROZ program offers financial incentives to attract people to rural Kansas but also to counteract the negative aspects of rural life. The degree to which rural life is viewed as undesirable varies from person to person, but it is likely that many students hold at least some negative views about some aspect of rural life. To find out if students feel that the ROZ program's benefits outweigh their negative opinions about rural Kansas, the survey asked students, "Do you feel that the benefits of the Rural Opportunity Zone program outweigh the potential drawbacks of life in rural Kansas?" As seen in Table 5-6, 54.7 percent of students felt that the programs benefits outweigh drawbacks to some extent. A sizeable portion of students felt that the program's benefits

equal the drawbacks. Very few students felt that the drawbacks of rural life outweighed the program benefits. These attitudes do not correspond to the number of students who indicated they were likely to participate. Only 21.8 percent of student felt that rural life drawbacks outweighed the program benefits, implying that most students felt the program to be worthwhile; yet 66.4 percent of students indicated themselves as unlikely to participate. This inconsistency may be because students view the program as beneficial but not participating and living in an urban area is still more desirable, allowing students to have positive opinions about the ROZ while still not wishing to participate.

**Table 5-5 How Benefits Influence Student Participation**

All Program Benefits		Frequency	Percent
Greatly influences student to participate		91	18.3
Slightly influences student to participate		208	41.8
Neither influences student to participate or not participate		172	34.5
Slightly influences student to not participate		11	2.2
Greatly influences student to not participate		16	3.2
Student loan repayments		Frequency	Percent
Greatly influences student to participate		196	39.3
Slightly influences student to participate		146	29.3
Neither influences student to participate or not participate		131	26.3
Slightly influences student to not participate		12	2.4
Greatly influences student to not participate		14	2.8
Kansas income tax waiver		Frequency	Percent
Greatly influences student to participate		94	19.4
Slightly influences student to participate		198	39.7
Neither influences student to participate or not participate		174	34.9
Slightly influences student to not participate		15	3
Greatly influences student to not participate		15	3

**Table 5-6 Program Benefits and Rural Life Drawbacks**

	Frequency	Percent
Drawbacks greatly outweigh program benefits	31	6.2
Drawbacks somewhat outweigh program benefits	78	15.6
Program benefits equal drawbacks	117	23.5
Program benefits somewhat outweigh drawbacks	179	35.7
Program benefits greatly outweigh drawbacks	95	19

## **5.4 Student Likelihood to Participate**

Survey results indicate that, in general, students have positive perceptions of the ROZ program's benefits. Despite this there are differences in student self-reported likelihood to participate. These differences stem from the fact that rural life is more naturally appealing to students with particular backgrounds, intended careers, and residential preferences (Brown 1997, Barcus 2004, Demi and McLaughlin 2009). Understanding what types of students are likely to participate in the program is important because it allows for a better understanding of how the program can encourage growth (Barcus 2004, Cantrell et al. 2008, Demi and McLaughlin 2009, Von Reichert 2012, Winters 2016).

To identify what types of students are likely to participate in the program this study utilized the ordinary least squares (OLS) regression technique for analysis of characteristics related to likely participation. For this regression the key dependent variable is a student's likelihood to participate, which ranges from zero (extremely unlikely to participate) to ten (extremely likely to participate). There are two groups of independent variables used in this analysis, demographic variables, such as age, sex, hometown; and attitudinal variables related to a respondent's specific opinions about rural Kansas. This regression model also features beta coefficients. Beta coefficients allow for standardization between variables that use various types of units.

First, in order to determine the general relationship between the independent variables and dependent variable correlation coefficients were first produced. There are no variables strongly correlated with participation likelihood, but there are several variables with noteworthy relationships (Table 5-7). Age is the only variable with a noteworthy negative correlation. The variables that have a positive relationship are (1) majoring in in the College of Agriculture, (2) having a rural hometown, (3) coming from the state of Kansas, and (4) coming from an ROZ county. Class at K-State and sex do not have a strong relationship with the key dependent variable. It is important to note that this lack of sex as a participation determinant does not contradict past findings related to sex and migration (Docquier et al. 2012). Past studies, dealt with migration in general while this finding indicates that sex does not affect likelihood to relocate to a rural areas.

A correlation coefficient cross tabulation was also produced for attitudinal variables. All independent variables have a relationship stronger than .1 or -.1. The following attitudes have a positive correlation with participation likelihood, (1) viewing oneself as likely to find employment in rural Kansas, (2) viewing rural Kansas as socially exciting, (3) having a variety of economic

opportunities, (4) a good place to raise families, (5) as diverse, (6) as visually attractive, (7) and providing natural amenities. Conversely, viewing rural Kansas as geographically isolated has a negative correlation.

**Table 5-7 Correlation for Participation Likelihood with Student Characteristics**

	Participation Likelihood
Age	-.11
Class	.07
Female	.09
College of Agriculture	.25
Rural Hometown	.29
Comes from Kansas	.12
Comes from ROZ County	.31
	Participation Likelihood
Likely to find employment in Rural Kansas	.42
Rural Kansas is Social Exciting	.42
Rural Kansas has a variety Economic Opportunities	.39
Rural Kansas is good place for Families	.37
Rural Kansas is Diverse	.33
Rural Kansas is Visually Attractive	.37
Rural Kansas provides Natural Amenities	.25
Rural Kansas is Geographically Isolated	-.21

The results of this regression model are in Table 5-8. This regression has an R-Squared of .33, meaning that 33 percent of variation of “participation likelihood” can be explained by the variables featured in this regression. The mean variance influence factor (VIF) of the regression is 1.54, indicating that there is low multicollinearity among the variables. High multicollinearity means relationships among the variables can skew data and lower accuracy.

Overall, there are six independent variables that a statistically significant relationship with participation likelihood. First, the older a student becomes the less likely they are to participate in the program. Older individuals are less likely to move than younger individuals for a variety of reasons, such as family or stronger ties to their current location, and therefore less likely to relocate to rural Kansas and participate. Being female is also an influencing factor in whether someone will participate in or not. According to this set of results, females are more likely to participate in the program than males. Research has shown that skilled and educated women are more migratory than men (Docquier et al. 2012). An important factor is that students who come from ROZ counties are more likely to participate, this may be because these students already have connections in their

home county and are more prone to moving back to be near family or to help operate a family business (Von Reichert et al. 2012, Von Reichert et al. 2013).

The next statistically significant variable of note is “Likely to Find Employment in Rural Kansas.” Regression results show that those see themselves are likely to find jobs in rural Kansas are also more likely to participate in the program. People are always more likely to migrate to where they think that they can find jobs, and deciding to move to rural Kansas is no different. The combination of employment likelihood and coming from an ROZ indicate that many who participation in the ROZ program would likely move to rural Kansas even if the program and its benefits were not available. This may mean that the program is not serving its purpose of attracting new residents and encouraging growth.

**Table 5-8 Regression of Participation Likelihood**

Independent Variable	Coefficient	Standardized Beta
Age	-0.06 *	-0.11
Class	0.1	0.04
Female	0.56 *	0.09
College of Agriculture	0.43	0.06
Rural Hometown	-0.03	0
Comes from Kansas	-0.6	-0.04
Comes from ROZ County	1.03 **	0.15
Likely to Find Employment in Rural Kansas	0.43 **	0.19
Rural Kansas is Social Exciting	0.21	0.08
Rural Kansas has a variety of Economic Opportunities	0.17	0.06
Rural Kansas is good place for Families	0.18	0.05
Rural Kansas is Diverse	0.34 *	0.11
Rural Kansas is Visually Attractive	0.44 **	0.16
Rural Kansas provides Natural Amenities	-0.07	-0.02
Rural Kansas is Geographically Isolated	-0.25	-0.08
<i>Constant</i>	0.33	...
R-Squared	0.33	
Adjusted R-Squared	0.31	
<i>Significance: * &gt;.05 ** &gt;.01</i>		

The program is also attractive to those who have positive views of rural areas. Regression shows that having a positive view of certain aspects of rural life is more important than others. Likely participants view rural Kansas as diverse, and visually attractive. Results also reveals that students who view themselves as likely to find employment in rural Kansas are more likely to

participate in the program. Overall, it is important that likely participants both have a generally positive view of the social aspects of rural Kansas but also seem themselves as likely to find a job in rural Kansas.

Regression results show that age and gender matter in terms of participation likelihood. Older students are less likely to participate. An explanation for this is that older students may have more established social connections to a place and are therefore unlikely to move to a new location, in this case rural Kansas. Results show that females are more likely to participate in the program. Past reports that skilled women are more likely to migrate than skilled men (Docquier et al. 2012). Therefore skilled women, those who college degrees, are more likely to participate in the ROZ program than skilled men.

Surprisingly it is not important to be from a rural area but it is important to be from a ROZ county. This means that the ROZ may not be attractive to those from rural areas outside of ROZ counties. Viewing rural Kansas as geographical isolated has a negative relationship with participating. This is important because literature has shown that even when individuals hold rural residential preferences they wish to live near larger metro areas on the metro fringe (Brown et al. 1997). Simply put, if students wish to be near metro areas they are unlikely to participate in the program because very few ROZ counties are on the metro fringe. Most commonly ROZ counties have a RUCC value of nine (38 counties), meaning they are remote and have no urban centers of over 2,500 people.

As previously mentioned, Beta coefficients provide standardized coefficients, allowing for the direct comparison of magnitude between variables. The dependent variable with the largest positive effect on participation likelihood is viewing oneself as likely to find employment in rural Kansas. Every unit increase in this attitude leads to a higher participation likelihood value of .19. Coming from an ROZ county and viewing rural Kansas as visually attractive both have a sizable positive effect on participation likelihood.

Due to the program's tendency to be attractive to potential returners, those with highly likelihoods of being employed in rural areas, and those who have a positive view of rural Kansas, the program is likely not effective. The program is likely only beneficial to those who would live in rural Kansas even without the ROZ program.

## 5.5 Student Perceptions of Rural Life

A key part of understanding the effectiveness of the ROZ program is trying to understand the relationship between the financial benefits of the program and people's perceptions of rural areas. In theory, the monetary benefits of the program are available to counteract the negative perceptions potential participants may have about rural Kansas. To understand people's perceptions of rural life the survey contained questions regarding residential preferences, what aspects of rural life people deem desirable, and what positive aspects of community people associate with rural life. The research question addressed by these results is "What are the perceived positive and negative aspects of life in rural areas?"

As seen in Table 5-9., 51.7 percent of people identified as having a rural preference while only 41.4 percent of students prefer urban areas. Several reports support this rural preference (Brown et al. 1997, Barcus 2004, Demi and McLaughlin 2009). Additionally, very few students indicated no preference; meaning that there are few individuals who have not made up their mind on what type of environment they prefer, and therefore may be more easily enticed by financial benefits to live in rural areas. Additionally, just because over 50 percent of people indicated that they prefer rural areas does not mean that they actually want to live in rural places. Many student may in fact have a suburban preference. Students may also be imagining an idealized rural or urban space and not what is actually present in reality, which may affect people's perceptions. Even though most students have a stated rural preference, when questioned about the subcomponents of rural Kansas life contradictory results become apparent.

**Table 5-9 Student- Rural Urban Preferences**

	Frequency	Percent
Strong urban preference	76	15.6
Slight urban preference	129	26.1
No preference	34	6.9
Slight rural preference	136	26.1
Strong rural preference	127	25.7

The survey included questions regarding student's opinions about rural Kansas. As shown in Table 5-10, students hold opinions of rural Kansas that do not match up with the reported average rural-urban preferences. First, in general most students do not view rural Kansas to be a

socially exciting place to live, with only 30.82 percent indicated so. Students also generally view rural Kansas not to be a place of economic opportunities. Both of these perceptions stand in the way of rural population growth: if students believe rural areas to be lacking in social and economic opportunities they are unlikely to participate in the ROZ program. Finally, according to students responses, rural Kansas is also very geographically isolated, with over 70 indicating this belief. This perceived isolation may be a barrier to growth due to things like lack of high-speed internet and grocery stores.

**Table 5-10 Rural Kansas Perceptions (Percent)**

	Strongly Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Slightly Agree	Strongly Agree
Rural Kansas is a socially exciting place to live.	19.4	29.4	20.4	21.8	9
Rural Kansas is a place with a variety of economic opportunities.	14.9	31	20.4	26.5	7.1
Rural Kansas is a good place to raise families.	2	3.7	13.5	30.8	50
Rural Kansas is a racial and ethnically diverse place.	29.7	36.8	21.5	10.2	1.8
Rural Kansas is a visually attractive place to live.	5.3	10.2	11.4	34.5	38.6
Rural Kansas provides many natural amenities	2.5	5.1	18	42.2	32.2
Rural Kansas is a geographically isolated place to live.	2.3	9	18.5	43.7	26.4

Students do view rural Kansas as a good place to raise families, and finding the best place for one's family is often a key factor when determining where to live. Even though most students agree that rural Kansas is good for families, many students may not be thinking about having a family immediately after graduation, hence this positive attribute of rural life may not be a factor in determining whether to participate in the ROZ program at this stage of life (Lesthaeghe and Neidert 2006). Rural Kansas is also seen as a place with many natural amenities by 74.5 percent of students.

In addition to asking students about their perceptions of rural Kansas, the survey asked respondents to indicate which, of a list of potential responses, positive attributes of community they associated with rural and urban life. For most items responses were quite different for rural versus urban areas (Table 5-11). This shows that for students there is a clear division between rural

and urban life, and that there are positive attributes clearly associated with one setting but not the other. Students indicated that the positive attributes of rural life were “cost of living,” “natural amenities,” “knowing all my neighbors,” “personal and family safety,” “privacy,” and “strong community spirit.” On the other hand, according to students the positive attributes of urban life are “ability to live near my family,” “ability to attend cultural events,” “economic opportunities,” “good schools,” “geographic proximity,” and “living amongst a variety of cultures.” None of these attributes comes off as surprising or unexpected, except for privacy. Privacy has two potential meanings in this context; it could be interpreted as physical privacy meaning that one is physically distant from neighbors and others; or privacy may mean that no one is intrusive into the personal lives of others. It is likely that most students used the first definition of privacy, because small towns are often seen as places filled with nosy neighbors where everyone knows everyone else’s business. Surprisingly, the only attributes with similar numbers for both rural and urban is “the ability to live near people similar to me” and “ability to live near my family.”

A key take away from these findings is that rural areas do have many positive attributes, as seen by K-State students. For students who may be less economically minded and more family-minded, rural areas are a very desirable place. Yet, in order to have population growth, rural small towns need to try to not only take advantage of their existing strengths but also try to attract amenities associated with urban life, such as cultural events or good teachers.

**Table 5-11 Positive Attributes of Rural and Urban Communities**

	Rural	Urban
Ability to live near my family	52.5%	32.7%
Ability to live near people similar to me	39.4%	34%
Ability to attend arts, sports, concerts, and other cultural events	10.2%	86.7%
Cost of living	77.1%	7.6%
Economic opportunity	14.5%	71.4%
Good schools	30.8%	59.7%
Geographic proximity	7.8%	80.8%
Natural amenities	55.1%	8.2%
Knowing all my neighbors	59.4%	7.6%
Living amongst a variety of cultures	4.3%	65.2%
Personal and family safety	66.5%	10.2%
Privacy	74.5%	11.9%
Strong Community Spirit	59.4%	21.5%

As part of the survey, students responded to several short answer questions, one of which asked students “What may be the potential drawbacks to participating in the Rural Opportunity Zone program?” The responses that students gave overwhelmingly dealt with issues concerning rural life. Student responses were coded in *NVivo 11* and then were grouped into six themes. These themes were “Lack of Employment Opportunities,” ‘Lack of Amenities and Services,’ “Geographic Isolation,” Conflict of Values,” “Low Salary,” and “Bad Schools.” Overall, there were 340 responses to this survey question with there being 180 references to the six themes (Table 5-12).

**Table 5-12 Themes Present in Program Drawbacks**

Theme Name	References
Lack of employment opportunities	92
Lack of amenities and services	32
Geographic isolation	29
Conflict of values	15
Low salary	8
Bad schools	4

The most referenced theme is lack of employment opportunities. Many students stated that they did not want to work in agriculture so moving to rural Kansas would be detrimental to their career plans. Students often stated that it would be impossible for them to find a job that relates to their academic major, one student said,

“There are not many opportunities in the nuclear engineering field in Kansas. Participation in this program would severely limit my potential career.”- (Junior in Mechanical Engineering).

This fear of joblessness in rural Kansas is important to students because to many of them the thought of how to pay off their student loans is always looming; if one is unable to work then they cannot pay off their loans. A related theme present in the survey responses is that jobs in rural Kansas have low salaries. Students generally felt that even if they could work in rural Kansas they would make significantly less money than if they worked the same job in an urban areas. For example,

“As a future dentist, I could be \$750,000 in debt, and rural Kansas may not pay off. I understand that paying back student loans helps to make up the deficit, but I

think that practicing in a larger city would help pay back those loans faster.”  
- (Freshman in Psychology).

For most students the \$15,000 made by participating in the ROZ program does not match the higher salary available in big cities; the difference in salary that may actually be bigger than the program’s \$15,000.

Another very prevalent theme is that students view rural areas as undesirable due to lack of amenities. Students felt that rural Kansas lacks a wide range of amenities, including everyday services like grocery stores, retail, and cultural events like museums and concerts. Many students expressed views that rural Kansas is boring and lacks entertainment opportunities. Several respondents also mentioned that they feel rural areas lack a certain type of amenity, good schools. According to students, schools in rural areas lacked things such as honors and AP programs, and focus too much on sports.

There was a great deal of overlap between the “Lack of Amenities” theme and the theme concerning geographic isolation. To most students rural life seemed undesirable because students felt that to access anything in rural areas you have to drive and that nothing is close by. This geographic isolation also relates to jobs. Many students referenced that in rural areas people have to commute long distances to get to their jobs.

The final theme of interest is “Conflict of Values.” To many students living in places where people dominantly support conservative values was undesirable. Simply put, many students said they do not want to live next door to Trump supporters. One student said,

“The sociopolitical discourse and public attitudes that prevail in Kansas (primarily rural Kansas) are not something that money could persuade me to ever deal with.”- (Junior in Biochemistry).

Students often value things such as diversity and progressive values, and for many students their political and social beliefs and those of rural Kansas are simply incompatible with each other.

## **5.6 Student opinions on ROZ Changes**

As survey results have shown, students in general think the financial benefits of the ROZ program influence students to participate in the program. Despite the general positive views of the program, many students do not wish to participate because of the negative aspects of rural life. These aspects of rural life are unlikely to change in the short term and the means of making rural areas more desirable is likely up to individual communities. The ROZ program, on the other hand,

is much easier to change and improve upon. Understanding how to improve the ROZ program is crucial because the program needs to be as appealing as possible to potential participants in order for the program to be effective and encourage growth. As part of the survey, students answered, “What could be done to further improve the ROZ program?” Student responses ranged from general suggestions to detailed interesting new incentive plans.

There are six themes present in this set of responses. These themes were “Improve Awareness,” “Expand Benefits,” “Help Current Residents,” “Rural Area Problems,” “Expand Counties,” and “Clearer Requirements.” Overall, there were 299 responses to this survey question with there being 247 references to the six themes (Table 5-13).

**Table 5-13 Themes Present in Program Changes**

Theme Name	References
Improve Awareness	92
Expand Benefits	51
Help Current Residents	34
Rural Area Problems	31
Expand Counties	30
Clearer Requirements	9

The most commonly referenced theme was “Improve Awareness.” Survey results revealed 73.5 percent of respondents had never heard of the ROZ program prior to this survey. Many students think it would be good if the state advertised the program around campus, particularly in buildings that host relevant majors, as well as school administrators mentioning the ROZ in classes to incoming students. In addition, students expressed an interest in the program’s marketing to feature success stories of families or individuals that have participated in the ROZ program. One student said it best:

“Further improvement could be putting more advertising out there for the program. I have lived in rural Kansas my whole life and have never heard of such a program until this survey popped up. Let people know that you are here.”-  
(Sophomore in Special Education)

The effort to improve awareness should come from both levels; the state should advertise the program as a whole in places like the K-State campus, while specific counties should try to market the program to students who originate from that county.

Related to the “Improve Awareness” theme is students’ desire have the program’s benefits and requirements explained in a simpler way. To many students the legal terminology used on the program’s website is too complex. Students also indicated that the program’s description should try to convey how the program can benefit one’s life; for example, one student said,

“The wording of this ROZ intro is still too vague for me to see how it applies specifically to my life. I need samples. Example: Johnny is in the ROZ program. He started out as a \_\_\_\_\_ and is now working to become a \_\_\_\_\_. He decided to join the ROZ program because \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_. He now lives in \_\_\_\_\_. In the future he plans too \_\_\_\_\_. ” – (Sophomore in Open Option)

A prevailing theme found in these responses is the need for expanded benefits to accompany the program. Students conveyed a desire for a wide range of new benefits. Many students stated that the \$15,000 in student loan repayment is simply not enough to make a sizeable dent in their outstanding student loan balance, and to remedy this the program should increase the repayments to \$25,000 or \$30,000. Similarly, some students indicated that benefits such as property tax waivers or free land would be a nice incentive. Many local municipalities offer these types of incentives; they should advertise these additional local benefits alongside the existing program benefits. Surprisingly, students suggested a variety of benefits such as free vacations, job placement programs, distance or continuing education programs, increased monetary payouts to residents who bring family members, and housing assistance. Even though some of these benefits may seem out of reach financially for governments to provide there is interest among students for benefits that go beyond the current two offered as part of the ROZ program.

Student responses also exposed a major flaw of the ROZ program, that is the program restricts benefits to those who are from the state of Kansas and those who maintain their legal address in the ROZ counties. The program does not offer tax waivers to those participating but who lived in Kansas before participating. This includes people who relocated from both the state’s urban areas and other rural areas. The program also does not offer benefits to students who attend school elsewhere but who legally reside in an ROZ county. Essentially these students do not live in these counties and, according to students, the government should treat these individuals as newcomers when they return, allowing them access to the programs benefits. This change would help students who wish to return to their rural hometown, and as regression results have shown, coming from a ROZ county significantly increases the expressed likelihood of participating in the

program. Overall, the program should be more accessible to those who are from the state of Kansas. It is much harder for communities to attract growth if urban Kansans or ROZ students cannot participate.

A related student suggestion for how to improve the ROZ program according to students is to expand the counties that participate. Numerous students recommended that the program expand to include the whole state. This expansion would include many fast growing and prosperous parts of Kansas, which would defeat the purpose of the program. Other students recommended that the program expand to counties, such as Atchison or Finney, that are primarily rural counties but actually have a growing population. Expanding to these more prosperous rural counties would increase the population even more, which may eventually have spillover effect on surrounding counties. One student stated

“[The ROZ should be] including more counties. My home county, Osage County, is a rural county, but it does not participate. My hometown was the second biggest with 1,000 people and there is not a stop light in the entire county. So I don't understand why they aren't included.” – (Junior in Life Sciences)

An interesting suggestion from students is to focus the program on rural school districts regardless of county. In theory, the rural parts of metro counties need assistance just as much as rural areas in rural counties. Focusing on school districts would help encourage growth in school districts that are struggling financially and might potentially consolidate due to lack of students.

The last theme present in student responses deals with recommended changes to the ROZ program but instead that true problem lies with the rural areas themselves. To many students, no matter how nice the benefits are they do not make up for the negative aspects of rural life. These negative aspects include lack of jobs, lack of amenities, and geographic isolation. The program's benefits do not easily counteract these negative aspects of many rural locations. In addition, for some students their values, career plans, and family plans are incompatible with rural areas. Overall, students feel there are several changes that can improve the ROZ program; the most prominent of those is increased awareness and increased benefits.

## **Chapter 6 - Results of the Coordinator Interviews**

The student survey results can only reveal so much about the effectiveness of the ROZ program. They are limited because students are only potential participants. Therefore, insights need to be taken from those who manage the program and have an understanding how the ROZ program is actually affecting rural Kansas counties are needed as additional information.

This chapter outlines the results of the interviews with the coordinators who manage the ROZ program on a county level. The purpose of these interviews is to understand better how the program is affecting the counties that participate in the ROZ program and what may stand in the way of growth. This chapter has six sections. The first section briefly describes the population change in the seven counties. The second section presents the themes present in the interviews. The third section investigates what types of individuals are participating in the program. Next, is a section concerning coordinator perceptions of the ROZ program. The fifth sections concerns perceptions of rural life as presented by interviewees. The last section discusses coordinator opinions about potential ROZ change.

### **6.1 Population Change in Interview Counties**

**Table 6-1 Population Change from 2010 to 2015**

	2010 Population	2015 Pop	Change
County A	2597	2593	-4
County B	3077	3038	-39
County C	7858	7790	-68
County D	12660	12290	-370
County E	10117	10005	-112
County F	24132	23638	-494
County G	7053	6997	-56

It is important to provide a brief context on how the ROZ program is potentially changing the population of the seven counties featured in these interviews. Even though this research attempts to understand the ROZ program beyond its numerical demographic effect on counties it is still take into account any potential change. As shown in table 6.1, all seven counties experienced population loss from 2010 to 2015 (US Census 2010 and US Census 2015a). The decrease in these counties ranges from an estimated small handful of individuals to almost 500 people. This is a relatively small time frame to understand if the ROZ is encouraging growth, but it is evident that

even if the ROZ is encouraging individuals to relocate to these counties, it is doing so at a rate that still allows for an overall population decrease.

## 6.2 Themes Present in Interviews

Seven interviews with county coordinators were conducted via email. Texts of the interview responses were imported to *NVivo 11 Plus*. Based on text analysis, six themes were identified. These themes are “Returners vs. Newcomers,” “Economic Opportunities,” “Lack of Amenities,” “Quality of Life,” “Affordable Housing,” and “Lack of Funding and Awareness.” Some themes were present in every interviews while others were found in just a few interviews (Table 6-2).

**Table 6-2 Themes Present in Coordinator Interviews**

Theme Name	Sources (Numbers of Coordinators)	References
Returners vs. Newcomers	6	19
Economic Opportunities	6	15
Lack of Amenities	7	11
Quality of Life	7	11
Lack of Affordable Housing	5	8
Lack of Funding and Awareness	2	4

The most prevalent theme found in the interviews was “Returners vs. Newcomers.” An important question in understanding the ROZ program is determining whether those participating are mostly returning to rural areas or are mostly newcomers. Even though the interviewed officials did not give the exact ratio of returners to newcomers, in general they believed most participants have some connection to the area. One coordinator said

“Many of the ROZ applicants have ties to the area, but once in a while we do get someone with no ties or State ties to move in.”

Likewise, the another interviewee said,

“The qualified participants on the waiting list are mixed with returning locals and newcomers, but most have family ties to this area.”

A common observation is that local manufacturing or agricultural firms recruit newcomers straight out of college. Typically, these firms are hiring individuals with engineering or technical backgrounds. The interviewees mentioned that the ROZ program is often used as a hiring incentive

by manufacturing firms to attract new employees. Finally, many who returned often did so to take part in a family business.

The “Economic Opportunities” theme was also predominant in the interviews. Most of the communities featured in the interviews offer loan programs or tax abatements to new businesses. Respondents also mentioned that there is a lack of growth because of the lack of high paying or white-collar jobs. Not surprisingly, multiple coordinators said that there are not many jobs available, in general, and very few not related to agriculture, in particular. There also seems to be an ongoing cycle of population loss causing business loss, which contributes to more population loss. On the positive side, some ROZ program participants are entrepreneurs who are either taking over a family business or starting a new one of their own. Young people are coming to rural areas because they can make an easy impact in the community. For example,

“Young people are very valued here, especially those who come back and take on leadership roles in the community. If you want to go somewhere where you are appreciated and needed as a young professional, rural is it.”

Interview results indicate that coordinators view the lack of services, such as broadband internet, healthcare, cultural venues, and even Walmart in their communities, to be a deterrent for growth. For example, one coordinator said,

“no fast food restaurants or chain retail stores is a huge deterrent. Most people that come to visit me love the quiet pace and the friendliness of this county but the first question they ask is ‘How far to Walmart?’.”

There is a general feeling from many coordinators that even though their community has positive features and offers a good quality of life, the positives are often heavily outweighed by a lack of services in the minds of potential residents. All seven officials interviewed believe their communities provide a good quality of life. Three respondents reported that a lack of crime was a positive attribute of their community. Additional positive quality-of-life attributes included low cost of living, good people, family, and a simpler and stress-free lifestyle.

The housing stock in rural Kansas counties is in general older and less well maintained than desired by potential residents and homeowners. In addition, there is a lack of rental housing, which may prevent young adults from moving into a community; owning a home is often too expensive for a recent college graduate. One respondent said,

“Our housing stock is older and most of it has been torn down. For builders to build out here, there are a lot of obstacles. Plus, if you build a house, it is a lifetime commitment, because you probably aren't going to sell it for even close to the amount that you built it for in most towns.”

Other respondents reported similar feelings that “housing is hard to find in some communities” and a lack of affordable acceptable quality housing prevents new businesses from moving in. Overall, there is a feeling that this lack of affordable housing for rent and for purchase stands in the way of growth and attracting people to participate in the ROZ program. One coordinator thought that the incentives of the ROZ program actually counteracted the lack of housing because participants could now spend money they would otherwise spend on paying back student loans.

A troubling theme that emerged from these interviews is that in some counties the program lacks funding. In one county, for instance,

“Unfortunately, our County does not help pay for the ROZ program except for a cap of 2 people per year.”

Several officials believe the program will not work unless there is more funding. In places where the ROZ is perceived to be working by the coordinator, the coordinators may perceive a lack of understanding of the program’s effects by officials. One interviewee believes that officials in her county want to see growth but are unwilling to offer the necessary incentives. Another coordinator believes that the state government, including the governor, should be made more aware of the program’s benefits; this would also help to ensure that the program is safe in the future.

### **6.3 Likely Program Participants**

An important research question is whether the ROZ program is primarily utilized by returning residents or by newcomers. The interviews give some indication that their perception is that mostly returners part in the program, but newcomers are being recruited by local businesses. Coordinator responses do correspond to numerical results of the student survey: regression results from the survey showed that being from an ROZ county increases the likelihood of participating in the ROZ program. The interviews also implied that some participants relocated for employment in local manufacturing or agricultural firms. Once again, interview findings also complement

regression results, with likely participants being likely to major in agriculture and seeing themselves as likely to find employment in rural Kansas.

A potential explanation for more returners compared to newcomers is that in many counties potential participants are placed on a waiting list until funds become available. The coordinator from one county said,

“The qualified participants on the waiting list are mixed with returning locals and newcomers, but most have family ties to this area.”

Potential participants from ROZ counties may be likely to be more willing to stay on this waiting list either because they have a stronger desire to live in the county compared to newcomers due to having family in the area.

As mentioned previously, greater program utilization by those with prior connection to the county, often those who lived there in the past, indicated that the program’s positive effects might be limited. The program is intended to encourage growth in areas of depopulation, and this growth can only happen if new residents move to the area. There is nothing wrong with the program helping communities maintain residents but the intended goal of the program is to encourage new growth.

#### **6.4 Coordinator Perceptions of the ROZ Program**

Inquiring about coordinator perceptions of the ROZ allows for a better understanding of how the program actually works and the flaws of the program. Overall, the program coordinators felt that the program provides good incentives to those who participate. Because the program allows participants not to have to pay back a certain amount of their student loans, program participants are now able to spend money in other areas. One coordinator said that program participants in their community spent the money they would otherwise spend on loans on a mortgage instead. As previously mentioned the lack of affordable housing is a problem in rural Kansas. There are few rental properties in most towns so new residents must buy a home. The ROZ program also offsets some of the lower salaries in rural areas. One coordinator said,

“I think that ROZ program provides a compelling incentive. Our research has shown that because of the astronomical increase in student loan amounts since 1980, combined with the fact that the average salaries here don’t pay enough to pay back the student loans without ROZ.”

As mentioned previously many students were unlikely to live in rural Kansas due to lower wages, but according to the county coordinators these lost wages are made up for by the \$15,000 available from the ROZ program.

Coordinators also said that the program is often used as an additional incentive by local companies when trying to attract new employees. This use of the ROZ's benefits of as a hiring incentive not only helps local companies attract skilled workers but also allows recent graduates to relocate to rural Kansas. The program is likely only helping those who would move to rural Kansas regardless, including those with degrees in agriculture and those who possess rural relevant human capital, such as degrees in agriculture or experience working with elderly populations. As survey results show, being likely to find employment in rural areas increases the likelihood of a student to participate in the ROZ program.

Conversely, coordinators also noted two major flaws in the ROZ program: lack of funding and lack of community amenities. In two interviews, coordinators mentioned that the program is underfunded and hence cannot be used by everyone who qualifies. In some communities, there is a waiting list of applicants, and because of this individuals may move away due to lack of funding.

The other main problem with the ROZ program is that despite its financial incentives it cannot completely counteract the lack of jobs and amenities in rural communities. This theme also appeared in the student survey. The ROZ is unable to stem population loss, which only worsens available amenities and services, as doctors and grocery stores close due to a lack of a customer base. One coordinator summed it up by saying

“Population loss begets business loss begets loss of opportunity to create a sustainable local economy.”

## **6.5 Coordinator Perspectives of Rural Life**

The ROZ program is designed to entice individuals to relocate to rural areas by enhancing pull factors. What a potential ROZ participant considers positive or negative about rural life varies from person to person, but there are likely to be aspects of rural life that are relatively uniformly liked or disliked. As part of the interviews coordinators were asked to answer three questions relating to rural life perceptions “What do you think stands in the way of growth for your community?”, “What do you think are outside perceptions of your community? What about rural

life in general?", and "What are the most positive attributes of your county and community? Conversely, what are the negative attributes of your county and community?"

A prevalent theme in the interviews is that rural communities lack amenities and attractive jobs. This combination makes it very difficult for most rural Kansas communities to grow. A lack of services and amenities include lack of broadband internet, lack of restaurants, lack of hospitals, and lack of nightlife activities. This negative aspect of rural life not only prevents growth but some coordinators also believe is also causing even further depopulation. For example, one interviewee said

"As we continue to lose our rural hospitals, we will see an out migration of our elderly to the urban areas where they can get the health services they require."

There is a strong perception that the benefits of the ROZ program do not outweigh the negatives of rural life. Coordinators also felt that their rural communities lack non-agricultural or manufacturing jobs as well as high paying jobs. Correspondingly, students felt that a lack of high paying jobs in rural Kansas was an area.

It is interesting that in general coordinators put the most emphasis on lack of services as the main negative perception of rural life. This contrasts students who primarily reference a lack of desirable jobs and lack of high paying jobs as the least desirable aspect of rural life. This may be because students are primarily worried about paying off loans and starting a career, and what amenities a community has is more of an afterthought.

Coordinators also expressed a feeling that rural Kansas communities lack affordable housing. In many communities, the housing market is very stagnate making it very hard for newcomers to purchase homes. Coordinators also stated that most newcomers want to live in rental properties. Rentals are very rare in rural Kansas, which makes these rural small towns even more undesirable to outsiders. It is interesting that no students mentioned lack of affordable housing as a negative aspect of rural Kansas life. This may be because students do not think of housing costs until they actually begin planning to move to a place.

Coordinators also discussed the positive attributes of rural life. In general, coordinators felt that rural communities offer a good quality of life and a strong sense of community. Several interviewees mentioned that there is very little crime in rural Kansas. Rural communities also offer a low cost of living, including low taxes and cheaper goods and services, and low traffic, which is

a huge advantage over urban life. Local respondents mentioned that rural Kansas has a strong sense of community, and that people truly care about each other. For example,

“Everybody knows everybody so it is always, “Good Morning” or “How is your day”. I recently had some health issues and every church in town was praying for me.”

One coordinator also highlighted the shared sense of place and shared values of community residents. Students held similar opinions on the positive aspects of rural life. Students overwhelmingly felt that attributes such as “cost of living,” “natural amenities,” “knowing all my neighbors,” “personal and family safety,” “privacy,” and “strong community spirit” were positive aspects of rural communities.

An interesting theme that emerged from coordinators’ responses to the positive aspect of rural life is that coordinators felt that rural communities value young adults and young professionals. This makes sense because if a former resident comes back after college to take over a failing local business then these young individuals will be praised throughout the community for their work ethic and for trying to be successfully economically in rural Kansas. One coordinator said,

“Young people are very valued here, especially those who come back and take on leadership roles in the community... If you want to go somewhere where you are appreciated and needed as a young professional, rural is it.”

Overall, coordinators felt that there are clear positive and negative aspects of rural Kansas life. Many of these opinions of rural life are shared by students, but there are a few differences. Both groups felt that rural Kansas offered a good quality of life. Similarly, rural Kansas is a place to know your neighbors, and has a slower pace of living. Students put more emphasis on the lack of jobs as a negative of rural life while coordinators put more emphasis on the lack of amenities and services. Coordinators also felt that young professionals would be appreciated in rural communities; students made no mention of this.

## **6.6 Coordinator Perspectives on ROZ Change**

The interviews have indicated that coordinators believe that the ROZ program is effective in attracting certain types of individuals but does not fully outweigh some of the negative aspects of rural communities. Coordinators were asked about their opinions concerning changes to the

ROZ program. Understanding how coordinators think the ROZ can be improved, along with the recommendations from students, provides a good foundation for how the program might be altered to help increase growth in rural communities.

The county officials think the program needs better funding, awareness, and expanded incentives. A theme that was established in the interviews is that the ROZ program is underfunded. In many counties, recently relocated individuals who have applied for ROZ benefits are put on a waitlist due to lack of funding from the county. Several coordinators have stated that they have zero dollars available in their budgets to fund the ROZ. Lack of funding and waitlists likely discourage people from participating in the ROZ program. It will be very difficult for counties to grow if they are not able to fund people to participate in the program. This lack of funding may be because rural county governments generally have a limited tax base on which to raise funds for the program or it may be because lawmakers are unaware of the program's potential effects and therefore unlikely to properly fund the ROZ (Lobao and Kraybill 2005).

Several coordinators felt that ROZ program is not fully understood by legislators, which is limiting the funding available for an otherwise good program. One coordinators said when asked about changes to the ROZ,

“I wouldn't make any changes to the program, other than making the legislature and a possible new Governor more aware about how impactful this program has been and could be in the future. To make it more secure for the future. It is one of the only State programs that most rural areas qualify for.”

There is sentiment among some coordinators that the county commissioners, those who manage a county's budget, desire change and growth in the county but are simply unwilling to offer the incentives necessary. A lack of program awareness was also brought up quite frequently in the student surveys. If both students and county coordinators feel that the program is not fully appreciated or marketed correctly then it is safe to assume that this lack of awareness should be a top priority to fix.

The other recommended change is a need for expanded or additional benefits. Some coordinators believe that ROZ's student loan repayments should be increased to \$20,000. Overall, \$15,000 dollars is not considered to be enough of an incentive. Coordinators also recommended additional benefits such as property tax abatements. Even though coordinators still advocated for expanded benefits they were not vocal about this recommended change. This may be because

coordinators are aware that their communities offer incentives to new businesses and new residents that go beyond the ROZ or it may because they are more aware of budget issues.

The findings and insights taken from the county coordinators interviews revealed that the ROZ program is primarily used by a returning local, someone currently living elsewhere but originally from the community, or by those being hired by local firms. Coordinators felt that very few individuals seem to take part in the ROZ program without a direct family or economic reason to do so. In general, the ROZ program is perceived as good because it allows individuals to better afford needs such as housing. In addition, the ROZ can be used by businesses as an additional incentive in attracting employees. On the other hand, most view the program as underfunded and under-appreciated by other government officials. Interviews showed the positive aspects of rural area such as being good for raising family, low cost of living, low crime, and a simpler way of life. Coordinators stated that their rural communities lacked services that would attract new residents, including a lack of retail, lower quality housing, and lack of higher paying jobs. These positive and negative aspects generally echoed student's perceptions of rural life. Like with students, most coordinators felt that the negative aspects outweighed the positive aspects for attracting new residents. Finally, from the perspectives of county officials, two main changes need to be made to the program. First, the ROZ program needs to be better funded. This lack of funding likely comes from a lack of awareness by lawmakers of the potentially positive effects of the program. The second change is the addition of more incentives, such as property tax abatements, and more money available for student loan repayment.

## **Chapter 7 - Discussion and Conclusion**

### **7.1 Discussion**

The student survey, with over 650 responses, and the seven interviews with county coordinators provided great insights into the effectiveness of the ROZ program. This research also shed light on what types of individuals are likely to participate in the program, individuals' perceptions of rural Kansas life, and what changes might improve the ROZ program.

Based on analysis of responses of the student survey, likely participants in the program are those who originate from an ROZ county, those who view themselves as likely to find employment in rural areas, and those who hold positive opinions of rural life and rural communities. Those who originate from ROZ counties are likely to participate because they have familial connections to their hometowns and are therefore likely to move back to be near family and/or to take part in a family business. Age and gender also play roles in determining likelihood. Employment likelihood is an important determining factor on whether to participate or not. If a student views themselves as unlikely to find employment in Kansas then they are unlikely to wish to participate in the ROZ program. Regression results have shown that those who view rural Kansas as diverse and visually attractive are likely to participate in the ROZ program. Conversely, students who view rural Kansas as geographically isolated are unlikely to participate.

The results of the student survey are supplemented by interviews with county coordinators. The coordinators interviewed believe that most people participating in the ROZ program are returners, often coming back to be part of a family business. Newcomers have been hired specifically by a local manufacturing or agricultural firm. These individuals are hired straight from college to hold positions as engineers or technicians.

A central part of the ROZ program's effectiveness is having qualified individuals apply to the program. People are only able to apply to the program if they are aware of the program; therefore assessing the program's awareness among students is crucial. Survey results show that very few students had heard of the program prior to the survey, with only 26.5 percent of students reporting awareness of the program. This lack of awareness is a huge hurdle in the success of the program and its ability to encourage growth in rural Kansas. Research has shown that the program is rarely advertised by both the State of Kansas and the counties involved in the ROZ. In order for the ROZ program to effectively encourage growth, the state and the individual counties should better advertise the program. Effective marketing might include billboards in ROZ counties, posters

around the K-State campus, or presentations by county officials to groups of students who are likely to participate. Effective marketing should highlight the social and lifestyle benefits of rural life, as well as how the program benefits those who participate (Burkhart-Kriesel et al. 2014).

This research also investigated how rural communities are perceived, both positively and negatively. Answering questions related to rural life perceptions will help the understanding of what parts of program really incentive people to participate and how do the program's financial benefits counteract potentially negative aspects of rural life. Most students see themselves as unlikely to participate in the program. This is interesting because overall students felt that the ROZ program's benefits were enticing. Students especially felt that the student loan repayment program was beneficial and influenced students to participate in the program. In addition, most students felt that the program benefits outweigh drawbacks of rural life to some extent, with 54.7 percent reporting so. Interestingly even though most students feel that the program is beneficial they do not view themselves as likely to participate. This may be because students are thinking that the program may be great for other students but not for themselves or because students view the program as beneficial but living in an urban area is still more desirable. Students also felt that participating in the ROZ program were incompatible their future career plans and had mixed feelings towards how the program affected their future family and life plans. The reason for this is likely that some students view rural places to raise a family, this depends on where the student grew up and where the students family lives; yet most students see rural areas as a place not to start a business.

County coordinators also had generally positive opinions about the ROZ program. They felt that program provides a good incentive to recent graduates because it allows new residents to pay off loans and spent money on other things such as housing costs. The ROZ is also beneficial because it can be used by local businesses as a hiring incentive, allowing businesses to more easily attract skilled workers. Coordinators noted that the ROZ program in some communities is underfunded, preventing those who would like to participate from doing so. Based on the interviews, some coordinators believe that the ROZ benefits do not make up for the lack of jobs or services in rural Kansas in the eyes of potential participants.

The benefits of the ROZ program are offered in part to counteract the negative perceptions people have of rural life. Therefore as part of this research it is import to understand what aspects of rural life are viewed as positive and negative. Understanding what is viewed as positive will

allow communities to build upon their strengths and most appealing attributes, which in turn can help encourage growth. Understand what is viewed as negative will allow for a better understanding of what stands in the way of population growth and what communities should do to make themselves more desirable to potential new residents. Overall, surveyed students have a stated rural preference, with over 50 percent of student reporting that they preferred rural communities to urban communities. Based on survey results the positive attributes of rural communities include a low cost of living, access to natural amenities, ability to know all of one's neighbors, personal and family safety, privacy, and strong community spirit. Conversely, students viewed rural areas as not very socially exciting, lacking in economic opportunities, lacking in services, and lacking in cultural and retail amenities. The attribute of rural communities that was the most overwhelmingly viewed as negative was lack of jobs, particularly a lack of high paying jobs. Many students expressed that it would be impossible for them to find jobs that related to their major in rural Kansas. Also, many students felt that if they could find a job in rural Kansas that job would much lower paying than the same position in an urban area.

County coordinators held similar views of rural Kansas life; many coordinators cited lack of jobs and amenities as a deterrent for rural growth. Coordinators also cited lack of affordable housing as a negative aspect of rural communities, a factor that was not mentioned by students. In many rural communities there is a lack of rentals or affordable housing, particularly housing that is of acceptable quality, which prevents growth. Interviewees stated similar positive attributes to those found in the student survey. A noteworthy difference is that county coordinators stated that a positive of rural communities is that rural communities value youth and young professionals.

The last question of this research is how could the ROZ program be improved. Students and coordinators recommended many changes to the program but there are three recommendations that standout; expanded benefits, greater awareness, and expanded ease of participation. Both K-State students and program coordinators felt that the ROZ could benefit from expanded or increased benefits. The most common of these recommended changes was to increase the student loan repayments to \$20,000 or \$25,000. The feeling is that the current amount available is not large enough to pay back a sizeable portion of the average student's debt, an increased repayment amount would likely attract more people to participate. Other recommended benefits included property tax waivers, continuing education programs, and more money for individuals who have children.

As previously mentioned, students were overwhelmingly unaware of the ROZ program prior to the survey and when students were asked what changes should be made to the program they recommended that the program should be better advertised to students. Coordinators also felt that the program's positive effects on communities were not fully understood by lawmakers, therefore the positive effects of the program should be somehow conveyed better to those who make decisions regarding funding. Presumably better awareness of the program by lawmakers will also increase the program's funding.

The last major potential improvements to the ROZ are that the ROZ should be made available to those who come from rural counties and the tax waiver should be made available to all. Currently those who originate from an ROZ county but attend school elsewhere are not eligible for the ROZ benefits when they return. Even though these students' permanent address has not changed these individuals have essentially left the community. Making the ROZ program available to these individuals will encourage students to return home after graduation and prevent further population loss. Students also recommended that the ROZ program's tax waiver should be made available to those who are relocating from the state's urban areas. Currently urban Kansans are only eligible for the student loan repayments. If both program benefits were available to people from urban Kansas counties then likely more of these individuals would choose to participate in the program, encouraging more growth.

## **7.2 Significance of this research**

This research's finding are of significance in two main ways. This research has provided a better understanding of the ROZ program as a piece of public policy and this research has provided insights on the perceptions of rural communities in Kansas. Research on the ROZ program will allow the state of Kansas to make adjustments to the program, correct potential flaws in the program, and build upon the program's strengths. This research will also allow for a better understanding of the awareness Kansan's have of the program; this will allow the State to better advertise the program and make sure the knowledge of the program's benefits finds the right audience. In addition, understanding who is likely to participate in the program is important because it allows for program to be marketed towards the groups of individuals most likely to participate. Also, this research has identified that the program is being utilized primarily by returns. This finding indicates to policy makers that the program may not potentially be effective at encouraging new growth but is instead only preventing further depopulation.

The reasons why people leave are more understood than the reasons as to why people return to or choose to move to a rural area. This research has led to a better understanding as to why young college educated adults choose to live in rural communities. A better understanding of the reasons why young adults choose to live in rural areas allows communities to take advantage of their perceived strengths and create policies that will prevent depopulation and encourage future growth. Understanding this is significant because young adults are the entrepreneurial heart of a community and can further strengthen a community through their children who will attend local schools (Von Reichert, Cromartie, and Arthun 2013). This research has also shed light on what stands in the way of further growth in rural Kansas communities, which will allow community leaders to be aware of the changes needed to help their community grow or at least prevent further demographic decline.

### **7.3 Limitations of Research**

There are several limitations of this research, most of which come from the limited time frame allowed for this research. First, in order to provide an easy substitute for likely program participants only Kansas State students were surveyed. Kansas State students are more likely to come from certain Kansas counties and have certain career goals, both of which may affect the findings of the survey and how it relates to likely program participants. If students from Kansas universities, such as Emporia state, or from an out of state university, like the University of Missouri, were also surveyed then the findings may have been different.

The research is also limited because it does not account for the effects of family or groups decision making in regards to migration and where an individual chooses to participate. Past reports have shown how important it is to consider the effect of families in migration ( Stark and Bloom 19 85, and Cooke 2008) Yet, the ROZ program can only be applied for by individuals, not families or couples. Even though many families may relocate because of the ROZ program in the eyes of the State of Kansas, the program is only being taken advantage of by single migrants; therefore this research was primarily looking into just the motivations to migrate by single individuals.

Other limitations of this research come from a lack of additional sources of relevant data. As stated before the accurate census data for most rural counties is not available at the time of this research therefore it is hard to determine what the actual population change has been in ROZ counties. Also, this research lacked data that could be found in the program participation

applications. These applications would be good source of where actual program participants are coming from, moving too, their intended career, income, if they are bringing families, and so on.

## **7.4 Further Research**

This research could be expanded upon in two ways. First, in order to better understand who is participating in the ROZ program and why research should investigate the ROZ applications of current and past program participants. Program applications are available from the Kansas Department of Commerce. Many questions asked in the ROZ program application are open ended and there is a potential for these responses to be coded to gain a better understanding of why people choose to participate in the program and why participants want to live in rural Kansas. The program application asks participants to provide various personal and financial information. Research based on applications would allow for demographics, careers, and point of origins of would-be program participants to be known. This research would further the understanding of how the ROZ program is encouraging growth in rural Kansas and who is actually attempting to participate in the program and for what reasons.

The second way this research could be expanded is by looking at census data for ROZ counties. The ROZ program began in 2012 and at the time of this research, it would be difficult to see the growth that has been caused by the ROZ program. Census data for rural communities is not available every year, and data available at this time is unlikely to have incorporated growth related to the ROZ program. The 2020 decennial census would provide an estimate of the population growth or lack thereof caused by the ROZ program. An examination of the census data would involve looking at changes in a county's population, change in the population of those aged 22-40, and changes in the number of residents with college degrees.

## **7.5 Conclusion**

This research has lead to better understanding of many facets of the ROZ program, including its effectives as a piece of policy and how the program is affecting rural Kansas communities. In order to summarize this research, each individual research question will be addressed.

**Question 1: What types of individuals are likely to participate in the ROZ program?**

**Answer 1:** Primarily those from ROZ counties, those likely to be employed in rural Kansas, younger people, women, and those with positive opinions of rural life.

**Question 2: Are students aware of the ROZ program? What kinds of students are aware of the program?**

**Answer 2:** There is an overwhelmingly unawareness, 74% of students never heard of the program. Students who are aware of the program are those who know someone who has participated or is participating in the program.

**Question 3: What are the perceived positive and negative aspects of the Rural Opportunity Zone Program for current students and economic development coordinators?**

**Answer 3:** The program's benefits are generally incentivizing, but participation does not help most achieve future goals and only slightly outweighs rural life drawbacks. The program also suffers from funding problems in many counties.

**Question 4: What are the perceived positive and negative aspects of life in rural Kansas for current students and economic development coordinators?**

**Answer 4:** Rural areas lack attractive jobs, specifically white collar and paying jobs, and lack amenities, such as retail and entertainment options. Rural areas offer a strong community spirit, are a good place for families, offer natural amenities, and youth and entrepreneurship is appreciated.

**Question 5: What changes can improve the Rural Opportunity Zone Program?**

**Answer 5:** The program's awareness needs to be improved, primarily through direct advising to those who are likely to participate in the program such as college students from ROZ counties. The program needs to increase its benefits to match the wages lost by moving to rural areas. Also, the program's benefits should be open to returning graduates who didn't change their address during college and the tax waiver should be available to all Kansans. Finally, there is only so much that can be done to improve the program; efforts need to come from rural towns to limit their barriers to growth.

Overall, it has been too soon since the creation of the ROZ program to tell if the program will have long-term effects on the growth of rural Kansas counties. Yet, based on the findings of this research the program does offer enticing benefits to those who qualify. The real question lies in whether changes will be made in rural communities to limit community attributes that are preventing growth and whether there will be efforts by lawmakers to make needed changes regarding awareness and benefits of the ROZ program.

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## Appendix A - Student Survey

### A.1 Base Survey Questions

1. What was the respondent's awareness of the ROZ program before the survey?
2. How did the respondent hear about the ROZ program before the survey?
3. Does the respondent personally know anyone who has participated in the ROZ program?
4. Does the respondent feel all benefits of the ROZ program influence their decision to participate in the program?
5. Does the respondent feel that the student loan forgiveness influences their decision to participate in the program?
6. Does the respondent feel that the income tax waiver influences their decision to participate in the program?
7. Does the respondent feel that benefits of the ROZ program outweigh the potential drawbacks of life in rural Kansas?
8. Does the respondent feel that there is any potential drawbacks to participating program?
9. What could be done to further improve the ROZ program?
10. Do the benefits of the ROZ program compliment the respondent's future family/life plans?
11. Do the benefits of the ROZ program compliment the respondent's future career plans?
12. Would is the respondent's likelihood of participating in the ROZ program?
13. Was the respondent planning on living in rural Kansas regardless of the benefits of the ROZ?
14. Do the benefits of the ROZ program incentivize the participants to live in a rural area over an urban area?
15. Does the respondent prefer living in urban or rural areas?
16. Which does the respondent feel are positive attributes about living in rural Kansas?
17. Which does the respondent feel are negative attributes for living in rural Kansas?
18. Does the respondents feel that they could find future employment in Rural Kansas?
19. How much do respondents agree with the statement "Rural Kansas is a socially exciting place to live?"
20. How much does the respondent agree with the statement "Rural Kansas is a place with a variety of economic opportunities?"
21. How much does the respondent agree with the statement "Rural Kansas is a good place to raise families?"
22. How much does the respondent agree with the statement "Rural Kansas is a racial and ethnically diverse place?"
23. How much does the respondent agree with the statement "Rural Kansas is a visually attractive place to live?"
24. How much does the respondent agree with this statement "Rural Kansas provides lots of natural amenities?"
25. How much does respondent agree with the statement "Rural Kansas is a geographically isolated place to live?"
26. What is the respondent's age?
27. What is the respondent's sex?
28. What is respondent's racial background?
29. What is the respondent's major(s)?
30. Does the respondent come from a rural, urban, or suburban place?
31. Does the respondent come from the state of Kansas?
32. If so, does the respondent's county participate in the Rural Opportunity Zone?

## A.2 Student Survey in Qualtrics



### Countering Depopulation in Kansas

#### Survey Introduction

The Kansas Rural Opportunity Zone Program is program sponsored by the Kansas State Department of Commerce that began in January 2012 and is designed to incentivize individuals to relocate to selected rural Kansas Counties. There are 77 Rural Opportunity Zone counties that have been approved to offer one or both of the following financial incentives to new full-time residents:

- Kansas income tax waivers for up to five years
- Student loan repayments up to \$15,000

To be eligible for Kansas income tax waivers, individuals must have:

- Established residency in a ROZ county on or after the date the county became part of the program
- Lived outside Kansas for five or more years immediately prior to establishing residency in a ROZ county
- Earned less than \$10,000 in Kansas Source Income in each of the five years immediately prior to establishing residency in a ROZ county

To be eligible for student loan repayments, individuals must:

- Establish residency in a ROZ county after July 1, 2011 and on or after the date on which the county opts-in to the student loan program. The student loan repayment incentive is open to both Kansas and non-Kansas residents.
- Hold an associate's, bachelor's or post-graduate degree
- Have an remaining student loan balance

Not all counties participate in both programs, 77 counties participate in the income tax waiver program and 69 counties participate in the student loan repayment program. (See figure 1).

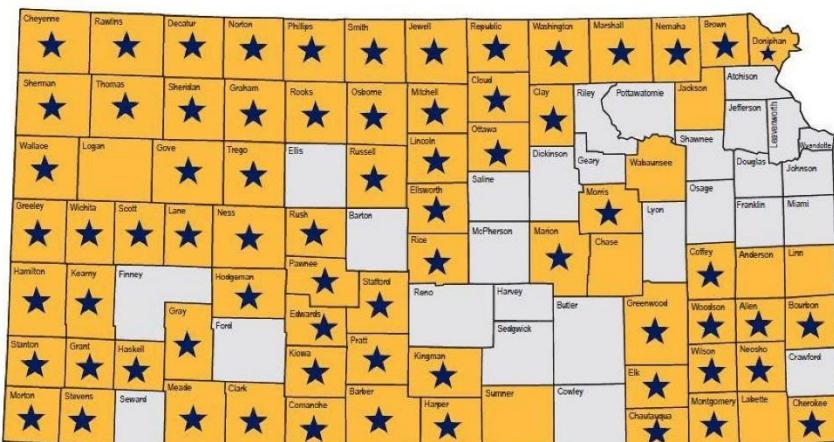
For more information about the Kansas Rural Opportunity Zone Program [click here](#):

The following survey will ask you questions regarding your feeling towards the ROZ program, your residential preferences, and your general background information.

**This survey should take no more than 10 minutes to complete.**

**To begin the survey please press the "Next" button.**


  
**Kansas**  
**RURAL OPPORTUNITY ZONES**



★ County is also participating in student loan program.

#### ROZ Program Effectiveness

The following questions will ask about your feelings about the Rural Opportunity Zone Program and your likelihood to participate in the Program.

Prior to this survey, how would you rate your awareness of the Rural Opportunity Zone program?

- Very Aware
- Somewhat Aware
- Not Aware

Do you know anyone who is participating or has participated in the Rural Opportunity Zone program?

- Yes
- No

How do the following influence your decision to participate in the Rural Opportunity Zone program?

	Greatly influence to <b>not</b> participate	Slightly influence to <b>not</b> participate	Neither influences to participate or not participate	Slightly Influence to participate	Greatly influence to participate
All benefits of the program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Student loan repayments	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Kansas income tax waiver	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Do you feel that the benefits of the Rural Opportunity Zone program outweigh the potential drawbacks of life in rural Kansas?

- Program benefits greatly outweigh drawbacks
- Program benefits somewhat outweigh drawbacks
- Benefits equal out drawbacks
- Drawbacks somewhat outweigh program benefits
- Drawbacks greatly outweigh program benefits

Does potentially participating in the Rural Opportunity Zone program complement or counteract your future career plans?

- Greatly complements my future career plans
- Somewhat complements my future career plans
- Neither complements or counteracts my future career plans
- Somewhat counteracts my future career plans.
- Greatly counteracts my future career plans.

Does potentially participating in the Rural Opportunity Zone program complements or counteract your future family plans?

- Greatly complements my future family or life plans
- Somewhat complements my future family or life plans
- Neither complements or counteracts my future family or life plans
- Somewhat counteracts my future family or life plans.
- Greatly counteracts my future family or life plans.

Were you planning in living in Kansas regardless of the benefits of the Rural Opportunity Zone Program?

- Yes
- No

Were you planning in living in **rural** Kansas regardless of the benefits of the Rural Opportunity Zone Program?

Yes

No

---

How would you rate your likelihood of participating in the Rural Opportunity Zone program on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being extremely unlikely to participate and 10 being extremely likely to participate?

Your answer to this question is very important for understanding potential flaws with the Rural Opportunity Zone program. *Please take your time answering this question.* What may be the potential drawbacks to participating in the Rural Opportunity Zone program?

Your answer to this question is very important for understanding how to improve the Rural Opportunity Zone program and allow for more people to participate in the program. *Please take your time answering this question.* What could be done to further improve the ROZ program?

### Rural Life Perceptions

---

The following questions will ask your residential preferences and perceived positives and negatives about urban and rural life.

---

Do you prefer to live in urban or rural areas?

Strong urban preference

Slight urban preference

No preference

Slight rural preference

Strong rural Preference

---

Which of the following do you feel are positive attributes about living in a **rural** area? *Check all that apply.*

- Ability to live near my family
- Ability to live near people similar to me
- Ability to attend arts, sports, concerts, and other cultural events
- Cost of living
- Economic opportunity
- Good schools
- Geographic proximity to goods and services
- Natural amenities
- Knowing all my neighbors
- Living amongst a variety of cultures
- Personal and family safety
- Privacy
- Strong community spirit

Other

---

Which of the following do you feel are positive attributes about living in an **urban** area? *Check all that apply.*

- Ability to live near my family
- Ability to live near people similar to me
- Ability to attend arts, sports, concerts, and other cultural events
- Cost of living
- Economic opportunity
- Good schools
- Geographic proximity to goods and services
- Natural amenities
- Knowing all my neighbors
- Living amongst a variety of cultures
- Personal and family safety
- Privacy
- Strong community spirit

Other

---

How likely or unlikely do you feel that you could find future employment in rural Kansas?

- Highly likely
  - Somewhat likely
  - Neither likely nor unlikely
  - Somewhat unlikely
  - Highly unlikely
- 

To what degree do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Rural Kansas is a socially exciting place to live.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Rural Kansas is a place with a variety of economic opportunities.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Rural Kansas is a good place to raise families.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Rural Kansas is a racial and ethnically diverse place.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Rural Kansas is a visually attractive place to live.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Rural Kansas provides many natural amenities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Rural Kansas is a geographically isolated place to live.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

---

### Demographic Info

---

The following questions will ask about your personal background information

---

What is your age?

---

What year are you in school at K-State?

- Freshman
- Sophomore

Junior

Senior

---

What is your sex?

Male

Female

Trans-gender

Other

Prefer not to Answer

---

What college is your major(s) apart of? *Select all that apply*

Agriculture

Architecture, Planning, and Design

Arts and Sciences

Business Administration

Education

Engineering

Human Ecology

---

What is your major? *If multiple majors please choose your primary majors.*

---

Did you grow up in a urban, suburban, or rural place?

Urban

Suburban

Rural

---

Did you grow up in Kansas, another state, or outside of the United States?

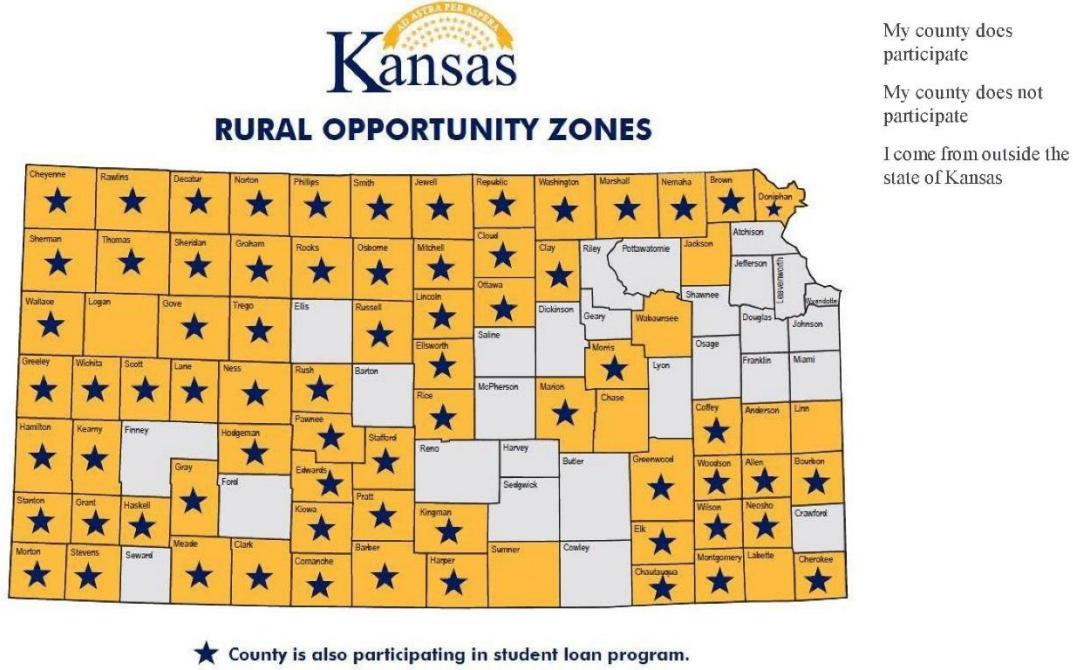
Kansas

Another state

Outside of the United States

---

If you come from the State of Kansas, does your county participate or not participate in the Rural Opportunity Zone program?



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### A.3 Survey Initial Contact Email



Department of Geography



## Perceptions of Rural Kansas Life and of the Kansas Rural Opportunity Zone Program

Dear Student,

You have been randomly selected to participate in a survey about perceptions of rural Kansas and the Kansas Rural Opportunity Zone (ROZ) program. Participation is voluntary: you may refuse to participate, you may refuse to answer any question you do not wish to answer, and you may stop participating at any time. This survey aims to better understand the costs and benefits of the ROZ program, the perceived positives and negatives of rural Kansas life, and what can be done to improve to ROZ program.

**This survey should take no more than 10 minutes to complete.** It will consist of questions regarding your feelings about rural Kansas, your perceptions and awareness of the ROZ program, your feeling concerning the program's benefits, and so forth. All of your responses will be confidential and will be shared only between the student conducting the research and their advisor. You will not be identified in any report or presentation based on this research.

**To access the survey please follow the link here:**

[Take the Survey](#)

**If you are unable to follow the link please paste this URL into you search bar.**

[https://kstate.qualtrics.com/SE?SID=SV\\_8vT0KOVK6t3Prnn&Preview=Survey&Q\\_CHL=preview](https://kstate.qualtrics.com/SE?SID=SV_8vT0KOVK6t3Prnn&Preview=Survey&Q_CHL=preview)

### Project Description

This study is being carried out by Matthew Brooks, a graduate student in the Department of Geography at Kansas State University, as partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master's degree. This study contributes to the understanding of rural population change and how rural Kansas is viewed by students. Results may contribute to generating a framework for improving the outcome of rural livelihoods initiatives nearby and afar.

Research on the Kansas Rural Opportunity Zone Program is critical for regional well-being; some counties have lost more than half of their overall population in the past 50 years. This research will contribute to a more full understanding of the potential for a rural rebound in Kansas and what role the ROZ program plays in encouraging this growth. Results of the study may be published and presented at academic conferences.

### Questions or Feedback

If you have questions about this study, please contact Matthew Brooks, 651-788-5196 (mmbooks@ksu.edu), or Dr. Max Lu, 785-532-3413 (maxlu@ksu.edu), Department of Geography, Seaton Hall, Kansas State University; Manhattan, KS 66502. If you would like a

summary of the results of this study, let one of us know and we will provide a summary when the study is completed. If you have concerns or complaints about this project, please report them to the Chair of Kansas State University's Internal Review Board, Rick Scheidt, 785-532-1483 ([rscheidt@ksu.edu](mailto:rscheidt@ksu.edu)), or to the University Research Compliance Office at 785-532-3224 ([comply@ksu.edu](mailto:comply@ksu.edu)).

If you wish to opt out of further emails click [here](#):

[Opt Out](#)

Thank you,  
Matthew Brooks  
Graduate Student  
Kansas State University

## A.4 Student Survey Reminder Email



Department of Geography



Dear Student,

As an earlier mailing indicated, you have been randomly selected to participate in a survey about perceptions of rural Kansas and the Kansas Rural Opportunity Zone (ROZ) program. Participation is voluntary: you may refuse to participate, you may refuse to answer any question you do not wish to answer, and you may stop participating at any time. This survey aims to better understand the costs and benefits of the ROZ program, the perceived positives and negatives of rural Kansas life, and what can be done to improve to ROZ program.

**This survey should take no more than 10 minutes to complete.** It will consist of questions regarding your feelings about rural Kansas, your perceptions and awareness of the ROZ program, your feeling concerning the program's benefits, and so forth. All of your responses will be confidential and will be shared only between the student conducting the research and their advisor. You will not be identified in any report or presentation based on this research.

**To access the survey please follow the link here:**

Take the Survey

**If you are unable to follow the link please paste this URL into you search bar.**

[https://kstate.qualtrics.com/SE?SID=SV\\_8vT0KOVK6t3Prnn&Preview=Survey&Q\\_CHL=preview](https://kstate.qualtrics.com/SE?SID=SV_8vT0KOVK6t3Prnn&Preview=Survey&Q_CHL=preview)

### **Project Description**

This study is being carried out by Matthew Brooks, a graduate student in the Department of Geography at Kansas State University, as partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master's degree. This study contributes to the understanding of rural population change and how rural Kansas is viewed by students. Results may contribute to generating a framework for improving the outcome of rural livelihoods initiatives nearby and afar.

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(rscheidt@ksu.edu), or to the University Research Compliance Office at 785-532-3224 (comply@ksu.edu).

If you wish to opt out of further emails click here:

[Opt Out](#)

Thank you,  
Matthew Brooks  
Graduate Student  
Kansas State University

## **Appendix B - Coordinator Interviews**

### **B.1 Interview Questions**

1. What incentives does your community or county provide to those looking to move here? How do these programs incentivize growth? Do you view these as effective?
2. Can you tell me about the kinds of people you see participating in the Rural Opportunity Zone (ROZ) program? Are they returning locals or newcomers? Where do they work? What brought them to this county or community?
3. Do you think that the benefits of the ROZ program provide enough of an incentive to attract people to live in rural Kansas?
4. What changes would you make to improve the ROZ program?
5. What do you think stands in the way of growth for your community?
6. What do you think are outside perceptions of your community? What about rural life in general?
7. What are the most positive attributes of your county and community? Conversely, what are the negative attributes of your county and community?

## **B.2 Interview Inquiry Email**

Dear (*Coordinators Name*),

My name is Matt Brooks and I am graduate student in the Geography Department at Kansas State University. For my master's thesis I am looking at the perceptions of rural life in Kansas, the Kansas Rural Opportunity Zone Program, as well as other local program that are aimed at stimulating economic growth. As part of my thesis, I interviewing county economic development administrators and chamber of commerce officials, such as yourself.

I am inquiring if you would like to be interviewed as part of thesis work. These interviews could be in person, over the phone, or even simply by email. I would be asking you seven interview questions and the whole process should take no more than 30-40 minutes of your time.

All of your responses will be confidential and will be shared only between myself and my advisor, Dr. Max Lu. We will not identify you in any report or presentation based on this research.

This study contributes to the understanding of rural population change and how rural Kansas is perceived. Results may contribute to generating a framework for improving the outcome of rural livelihoods initiatives nearby and afar. Research on the Kansas Rural Opportunity Zone Program and other similar programs is critical for regional well-being; some counties have lost more than half of their overall population in the past 50 years. This research will contribute to a more full understanding of the potential for a rural rebound in Kansas and what role in the ROZ program plays in encouraging this growth. Results of the study may be published and presented at academic conferences.

If you have questions about this study, please contact me at 651-788-5196 (mmbooks@ksu.edu), or Dr. Max Lu, 785-532-3413 (maxlu@ksu.edu), Department of Geography, Seaton Hall, Kansas State University; Manhattan, KS 66502. If you would like a summary of the results of this study, let one of us know and we will provide a summary when the study is completed. If you have concerns or complaints about this project, please report them to the Chair of Kansas State University's Internal Review Board, Rick Scheidt, 785-532-1483 (rscheidt@ksu.edu), or to the University Research Compliance Office at 785-532-3224 (comply@ksu.edu).

I hope you choose to participate in this interviews,  
Matt Brooks

Matt Brooks  
M.A. Geography  
GTU - Beta Psi Chapter President  
Kansas State University, 2017  
mmbrooks@ksu.edu