

Sociologist leads research on the 'new destination towns' in the Great Plains

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Terry Besser, an Iowa State professor of sociology in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, is leading a project studying the amenities and some of the keys to economic vitality in small, rural communities in the Corn Belt and Great Plains -- such as Story City, Iowa, which is shown here. While Story City was not one of the six Iowa "new destination towns" profiled in the study, it is the type of community that can benefit from the research. Credit: Bob Elbert, ISU News Service

Small town America is getting smaller. The latest U.S. Census data shows increasing population losses from small towns to more urban areas. And those losses are being felt acutely by rural communities in the Corn Belt and Great Plains -- like those in Iowa.

But some Midwestern communities have managed to buck the trend, according to a team of researchers from Iowa State University, Kansas

State University, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. They've identified 12 rural communities (populations of 10,000 or fewer) that are "new destination towns" in Iowa, Kansas and Nebraska -- experiencing a significant increase in [Hispanic population](#) in the last two decades. They matched these towns with six similar towns that have no growth in Hispanic population in [two reports](#) profiling those communities, their amenities and some of the keys to their economic vitality.

The reports create a roadmap, in effect, for other small towns to follow in their revitalization efforts -- starting with jobs and amenities.

"The old-time philosophy would be, 'If you put jobs there, then people will come,'" said Terry Besser, an Iowa State professor of sociology in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and leading the project. "Now there's a slight variation on that philosophy, which says, 'If you have amenities, then you attract the workforce that will bring businesses that will create more jobs.'"

The researchers define amenities as "features of a town that make it a good place to live" -- such as natural resources, outdoor and indoor recreational infrastructure and cultural and entertainment opportunities, among others. Their report documents the amenities in sampled towns for an index that other rural community leaders can use in their own amenity audits.

Amenities alone won't create jobs

Besser acknowledges that amenities alone may not bring jobs to town. And the growth and prosperity of local business is still seen as critical to community survival and vitality today.

The research team studied one facet of the small town business

landscape that has changed since the early 1990s -- the increasing proportion of businesses owned by women and, in some small towns, Hispanics. They interviewed approximately 300 [business owners](#) and managers in the 18 targeted towns, including all the Hispanic business owners through the use of bilingual interviewers.

The researchers found that small town entrepreneurs have very different reasons for going into business than their counterparts in metropolitan areas.

"For the nation as a whole, what motivates entrepreneurs is typically making a lot of money, as well as the challenge of coming up with an idea and seeing it come to fruition," Besser said. "But we didn't find that to be the case with small business owners in small towns."

Because other income opportunities are often limited, Besser says many small town entrepreneurs are "pushed" -- rather than "pulled" -- into starting their own business to support their family and fill a community need. And there are some specific differences in the ways Hispanic entrepreneurs do business.

"One is that they're more motivated by the challenge than the white, male business owner," Besser said. "They also report they're more willing to take risks. And they want to grow their business; they are planning to expand at far higher numbers than are the white male business owners.

"But they don't want to work together with other businesses," she continued. "And it's primarily because they do not have a cultural background that encourages them to trust strangers."

Resistance to joining business associations

Besser says those cultural differences sometimes keep Hispanic owners

from joining business associations, which have been found to help businesses become more successful within their communities. According to the team's research, only 24 percent of Hispanic-owned businesses were business association members. It also found that a slightly lower percentage of women owned-businesses (59.3 percent) were association members than businesses owned by white men (69.5 percent).

The researchers cite the importance of having a flexible schedule for family and personal lives as one reason fewer Hispanic and women business owners become business association members. They provide business association leaders specific ideas on how best to address that to promote greater membership, which is an important step in the revitalization process.

"We are confident that such an investment in addressing the needs of the increasingly diverse group of business operators in rural communities is an important component of any rural economic development plan," the researchers wrote.

Provided by Iowa State University

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