

“Keep Our Walmart Open!”: What Happens When Walmart Closes Its Doors and Moves Away from Small Town Rural America?

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Abstract. As a powerful global entity, Walmart has created a risk in the daily experience of rural Americans. It is not just an ordinary retail store, it is part of people's culture. This study attempted to describe the community response to the closure of Walmart stores in small towns. As a source of low-prices and fresh food for people in small-towns, the closure of Walmart is devastating. Individuals and households are exposed to multiple risks and consequences such as loss of jobs, access to fresh food, increased prices for food and household items, higher costs for a long drive to get groceries, and knock-off effects on local businesses. Walmart effect *pulls upwards* and *pushes downwards* at the same time. The community powerlessness is not a sign of personal or collective failings but rather reflects the incapacities of the broader structure to have the bargaining power towards the neoliberal economic system.

Keywords: Rural America, Rural Identity, Small Towns, Walmart Effect, Walmart Exit.

1 Introduction

Walmart closed 269 stores permanently in 2016, 154 locations were in the U.S., including the company's 102 smallest-format stores called Walmart Express, which were opened as a test in 2011. Most of the stores that closed permanently in the U.S. (95%) are within ten miles of another Walmart¹. Three months before the closing announcement, Walmart's CEO, Doug McMillon, mentioned to investors that Walmart would review its fleet of stores to increase competition from all fronts, including from online rival Amazon.com². Walmart was focusing

¹ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/walmart-to-shutter-269-stores/>

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<https://corporate.walmart.com/newsroom/business/20160115/doug-mcmillon-answers-questions-about-s-harpened-focus-on-stores>

in the U.S. on Supercenters, Neighborhood Markets, the e-commerce business, and pick-up services for shoppers.

As reported by the media and in the Walmart annual report, Walmart has already closed at least 22 stores across 14 U.S. states and Canada in 2019³. Caruthersville's and Piedmont's stores in Southeast Missouri are two of those who were not fortunate enough to survive this new policy. On Friday, October 21, 2016, Walmart notified its employees in Caruthersville that the store would be closing in January 2017.

After careful review of several factors, we have decided not to renew the lease at our Caruthersville and Piedmont stores. We care deeply about our associates impacted by this decision, and our priority is to take care of them. Our goal is to find them as many opportunities to continue to serve our customers as possible (*Pemiscot Press*, Wednesday, October 26, 2016).

This announcement was shocking news for the employees and the communities of both small towns. Walmart has been a long-standing employer in the area since 1977 in Caruthersville and 1987 in Piedmont. Not only does the store employ many people, but it is also a significant tax base for the local community. The company plan is focused on winning with stores, deepening its digital relationships with customers, and enhancing critical capabilities through technology and data for the next generation supply chain. Walmart said they conducted a thorough review of stores worldwide, considering many factors, including financial performance, to make the decision.

These trend of Walmart store closures in rural areas seem to be continuing over the next couple of years since the company is moving forward in serving its urban customers and investing heavily in its digital features and markets⁴. Another reason for closures is the age of many store buildings, especially in the Midwest area. These older buildings were mainly built with a Discount Store format (smaller than a Supercenter), located in rural or small towns, and were built between 1970-1990. Walmart needs to decide whether they convert the Discount Stores to Supercenters or create a new Supercenter nearby and close the older Discount Store. If Walmart decides to close the Discount Stores, then townspeople will lose their only Walmart store which has been part of the town for decades. As a source of low-price food and products [1], a lack of big retailers like Walmart seems to be the next crisis for rural communities across the Midwest.

Walmart is well-known for having positive impacts (i.e., lower prices, increasing business efficiency, providing jobs, creating new industry areas) for a city and its residents [2]. But at the same time, Walmart is also well-known for negative impacts such as an increase in obesity rates [3], poverty rates [4], and driving out local entrepreneurs or small establishments at the community level [5]. With the promise of and capacity to give lower prices for everyday items, Walmart seems successful in attracting people from different social classes and income levels to meet their daily needs. That is why the remarkable expansion of Walmart has drawn

³ <https://www.businessinsider.com/walmart-stores-closing-list-2019-3>

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<https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/18/why-an-emboldened-walmart-is-looking-to-beyond-retail-for-future-growth.html>

the interest of academia in many disciplines, from economists, sociologists, geographers, and politicians to historians, engineers, and opinion leaders for decades [6]. This research explores and investigates the empirical impact of Walmart store closures at the micro-community level to fulfill this gap within the literature about the effect of Walmart.

There are many studies on the impact of Walmart's entry and presence in towns. However, understanding the effects of Walmart's presence on local areas is still accompanied by the difficulty of obtaining complete blanket conclusions [7]. On the other side, the study of Walmart's impact when they leave town is still rare. Many reports of the problems that arise after Walmart closes were covered by the media but still lack attention from academia.

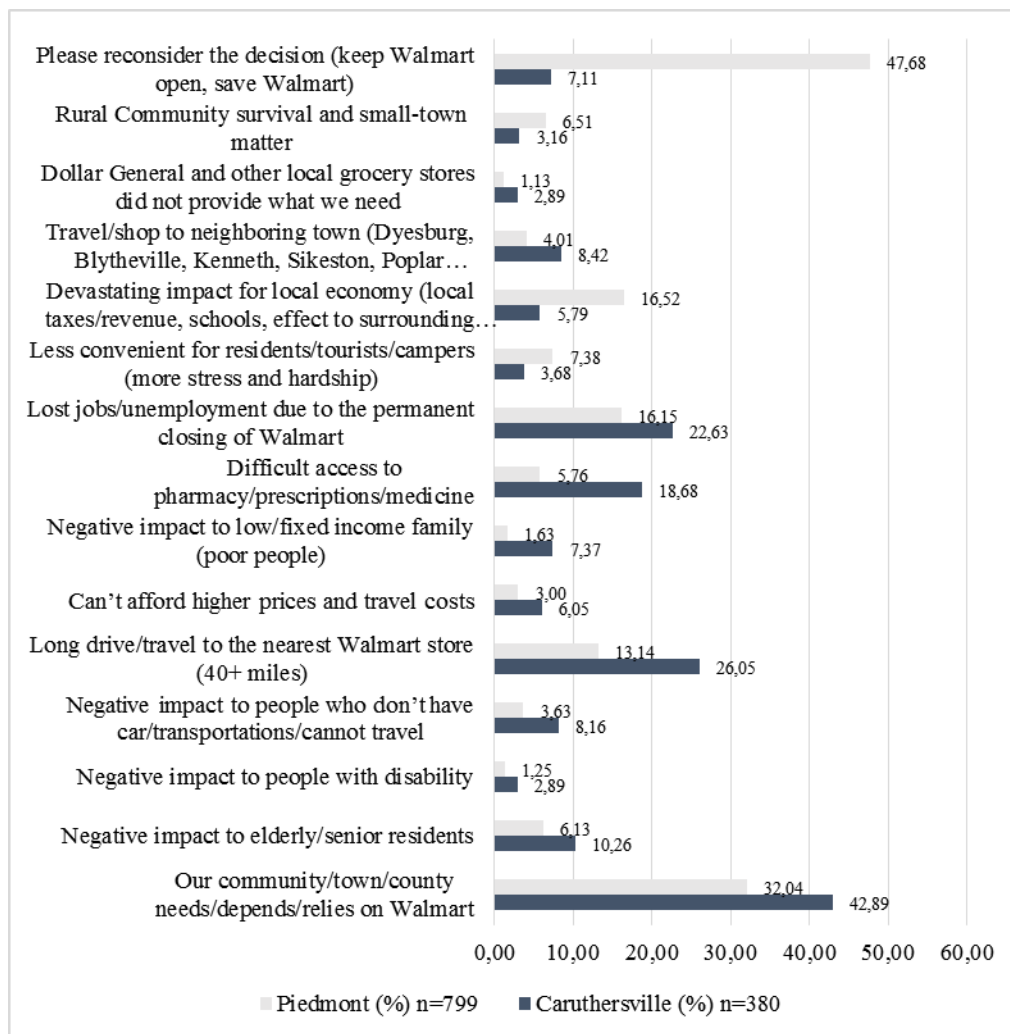


Fig. 1. Caruthersville and Piedmont's Online petitions analysis results.

While many towns in the rural U.S. struggle with the persistent problems of poverty, lack of infrastructure, and declining population, now they are facing another crisis in losing larger retailers like Walmart. The permanent closure of Walmart means losing a source of jobs and revenue. It is important that this socioeconomic downturn in rural areas is captured scientifically to find any recommendations or solutions for rural people if possible. This study is focused on addressing the impact of Walmart store closures in small town Missouri as an example of explorative research, especially from a rural sociology perspective. The purpose of this study is to identify factors affecting the residents' perception of and response toward the impact of Walmart's store closure in Rural Areas. For this reason, we developed one main research question: what happens when Walmart closes its doors and moves away from small town rural America?

2 Methodology

This study investigates the impact of Walmart store closures in rural America using a qualitative exploration. This research aims to describe how community leaders and members perceived the impact of Walmart's closure and describe the approaches of those community leaders and members to improve their local socio-economic sustainability after Walmart departed their town. In this qualitative study, we used multiple techniques and sources for data collection: (1) observation, (2) In-depth interviews, (3) focus group discussion, and (4) document analysis. We taped and transcribed each interview verbatim [8]. As a part of qualitative research, document analysis was employed for this study. The primary types of documents used in this study were documents available in the public domain, such as local newspapers published during and after the closure of a Walmart store (2016-2019). Besides printed newspapers, other documents were gathered from the internet, such as online petitions and all news related to the closure of Walmart stores in the research area. We used interviews as a primary data collection method to gather information from individuals about their practices, beliefs, or opinions related to the impact of Walmart's closure. In semi-structured interviewing, a guide is used with questions and topics that must be covered. When conducting focus groups in Caruthersville and Wayne County, we invited participation from individuals who had the characteristics, experience, or knowledge needed to provide rich information on the impact of Walmart store closure to the community. We used Nvivo 12 qualitative software for data storage, coding, and theme development to analyze the text data within each case and across the subjects.

3 Walmart's Store Closure in Caruthersville, MO

Caruthersville is in the Bootheel region close to the Missouri border along the western bank of the Mississippi River. According to the 2010 census, there were 6,168 people, 2,454 households, and 1,567 families residing in the city. The racial makeup of the town was 63.89% White and 33.09% African American. Significant resources for the Caruthersville area include commerce supplied by the Mississippi River and agriculture (60% of the local economy). Rice and cotton are cash crops grown in the area flowing through the Mississippi River. Socially

and culturally, one of the community leaders, TT, describes people's friendliness in Caruthersville.

You know, there aren't any better people in the state of Missouri, friendly people, everybody who comes to this town, that had never been here before, says, those the nicest people I ever met, the friendliest people, they ever met a stranger by welcoming newcomers. People who lived here for short times says it's the best place they ever live. Even with all of the shortcoming (Interview with TT, resident of Caruthersville).

Walmart opened its store in this area in 1977 and closed it in January 2017. The closest cities with Walmart stores are Kennett (MO) in the west, Dyersburg (TN) in southeast, and Blytheville (AR) in the southwest. It is about twenty-five miles in each direction. In general, the socioeconomic conditions in Caruthersville reflect the situation of its county, Pemiscot County. For example, Pemiscot has been ranked as the poorest county in the state of Missouri for several years. Between 2000 and 2012, the population in the Bootheel area declined by 2.65% but the most significant loss occurred in Pemiscot County which experienced an 8.77% decrease in population during these 12 years. One of the most significant factors, particularly in Caruthersville, was a tornado that hit in April 2006. Hundreds of residents moved out after this disaster. Pemiscot had the highest poverty rate (30.7%) and ranked 115 out of 115 counties in the state of Missouri on both health outcomes and lifespan. All these demographic compositions - higher average number of residents living in poverty and without health insurance[9] - and geographic conditions shape the unique setting of rural lives.

The closure of Walmart made everyone in Caruthersville worried about what would happen if Walmart left the town. Would any new business come? How would tax revenue be affected by Walmart leaving town? What would happen to employees and their families? Then the rumors spreading across questioning the reason why Walmart closed its stores in Caruthersville and Piedmont. While the countdown to closure continued, Walmart still donated funds to the local fire department. A \$2,500 Walmart Community Grant was received by the Caruthersville fire department⁵. This kind of support and generosity makes Walmart an essential part of a community. The store served as a one-stop shopping center for people in the community and the neighboring towns as well as the commuter whose loyalty to the store directly led to the closure of mom-and-pop businesses forty-years earlier.

Another rumor was spread in the community about the prospects of another tenant taking over the Walmart store property as the former Mayor, Mike McGraw, said⁶. He said that while city officials were anxious to see the property used by a business as soon as possible, the decision ultimately fell to the landlord and potential tenants. He would not specify what individuals or companies had expressed interest in the building and land. McGraw had relayed messages to the owner while attempting to respect his confidentiality. Nevertheless, after more than three years, the former Walmart building is still empty.

⁵ "Walmart Donates \$2,500 to local fire department," by Steve Harris, published in *Pemiscot Press*, Wednesday, January 4, 2017.

⁶ "Interest in Walmart Building," by Jeremy Hall, published in *Pemiscot Press*, Wednesday, December 7, 2016.

One store closing, like Walmart, is a significant loss for a small-town community. Retail and grocery stores in small towns are as important as the hospital. Walmart is essential for small-town communities. This store is not only a place to find daily needs and supplies, but also an “anchor,” a “community center,” and a “social hub” for small community members. In Bourdieu’s perspective, Walmart is a part of the economic field [10]. Chris, a resident of Caruthersville, said in the petition that Walmart ruined peoples’ lives both when they came and left the town:

Thanks, Walmart for coming into our town 40 years ago and destroying all the mom-and-pop stores in our town. Now 40 years later you going to close the doors and leave us with another building that will soon be another eye sore to our community. You ruined people's lives when you came here and ruining people's lives when you leave.

Much has been written about what happens when a corporate giant opens up in an area, with numerous studies recording how it kills downtown and forces the closure of mom-and-pop stores in local areas [4]. Less understood is whether Walmart closures will make the local economy suffer or if it is an opportunity for local business and entrepreneurship to grow. Also, the wave of store closings across the U.S. most acutely in small-towns and rural communities that already have had high population loss. When we combine the county’s economic downturn with Walmart’s increasingly ferocious battle against Amazon for dominance in online retailing, we can see why Walmart cuts off their presence.

When Walmart leaves a town, it starts by slashing prices on all its products, stripping the shelves bare, before vanishing and leaving behind only the empty building and a vacant parking lot. Rural areas like Caruthersville are experiencing significant depopulation which is a limiting factor for the company's development and expansion. Hit hard by the long-term decline in agriculture that is the mainstay of the area and tornado damage in 2006, Caruthersville has seen a devastating and sustained erosion of its people, from almost 8,643 in 1960 to about 5,801 in 2016.

There were knock-on effects, too, for local businesses. Local hotels and restaurants in a radius of several miles from the store complain of empty rooms and tables, while houses and shops in close vicinity to Walmart are now up for sale. Over the 40 years of the store’s existence in Caruthersville, many people grew dependent on the store in many ways. Dollar stores, Walmart’s competitor, have picked up some of the trade left by Walmart, but they haven’t created many jobs for local people. For instance, Walmart employed 85 people in Caruthersville⁷. It was one of the largest employers in the area after the local casino. After the store closure, many employees felt they had no choice and either commuted long distances or relocated to work at other Walmart outlets.

Well, most of the employees were a retirement age. They were all in retirement. And most of them they transferred had under the requirement of five years to even

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<https://www.kfvs12.com/story/34309912/walmart-stores-in-caruthersville-piedmont-now-closed-permanently/>

get anything. So, then they were out of their age so that they were going to the doctor a little bit more often. They (Walmart) just really looked at Caruthersville as a loss. Well, (they said) there was no profit in there. They are a business, regardless of who ate the money and who got greed. They are in a business to make money (Interview with LV, resident of Caruthersville and former Walmart employee in Caruthersville).

After jobs, taxes are the next thing affected by the closure of Walmart. The county government lost its tax revenue from Walmart, most of which went to schools. Economic losses are only one aspect of the hurt felt locally because of Walmart's closing. However, there is a casino in Caruthersville, Lady Luck, which has revived the local economy and provided a new source of tourist revenue. The Walmart store and the casino are the two big fiscal resources for this town. It was estimated that \$100,000.00 was lost in annual tax revenue per month when Walmart closed its doors in Caruthersville⁸. The city has the safety net of a casino that injects roughly \$1.5 million per year into the local revenue stream (the casino provided \$4,286.36 per day from various taxes and agreements with Caruthersville).

According to the 2016 Missouri Gaming Commission Annual Report, and information provided by the city, Lady Luck was budgeted to provide \$974,448.41 in gaming revenue expenditures to Caruthersville during the 2019-2020 fiscal year. That was to include more than \$752,168.00 for water/wastewater improvements and \$123,680.00 for street improvements. The expenditures also were to fund public safety (\$71,598.00) and other infrastructure (\$27,000.00). In fact, the Lady Luck casino allowed Caruthersville to avoid the devastating fate of similar-sized towns that lose Walmart or other retail outlets after decades of operation. That means the \$100,000.00 lost with the departure of Walmart, was easily outmatched by the casino funding. When Walmart left, the casino still became the main resources from business operated in this area together with other small business that still exist. The Lady Luck casino continues its role as a major employer in Caruthersville. However, the number of employees at the casino has decreased each year. The facility employed 228 in 2016, 232 in 2017, 207 in 2018, and 199 in 2019.

According to Bourdieu's work on distinction⁹ (1984), we can see that individual and collective interpretations of social phenomena are embedded in (but not determined by) structural properties in their everyday life context. Bourdieu exemplifies this logic by demonstrating how actors' judgments of cultural products vary systematically between classes [11]. In this case, actors' responses are rooted in their social class background, resulting in different

⁸ *Pemiscot Press*, Wednesday, December 21, 2016, page 3, "Casino softens blow of loss of Walmart" by Jeremy Hall, *Democrat Argus*.

⁹ Distinction is a certain quality of bearing and manners that is nothing other than difference, a gap, a distinctive feature, in short, a relational property existing only in and through its relations with other properties (Bourdieu, 1998:6)

actions among them. Bourdieu introduced the concepts of cultural capital¹⁰, social capital¹¹, and symbolic capital¹² alongside economic capital.

Low-income families, for instance, try to compensate for Walmart's departure by seeking out fresh fruit and vegetables in the surrounding area. But it's not easy. The nearest replacement store is too expensive, and another Walmart, in Piedmont for instance, is an hour's drive away. If someone earns \$1,200 post-tax monthly salary, they will spend most on housing, utility bills, car insurance and repayments, and have little left for building savings. So, they would prefer less pricey meals, such as hamburgers or spaghetti, rather than a fresh salad. One of the community leaders in the area mentioned these significant losses:

Everyone in Pemiscot County uses this Walmart! Everyone knows someone who works there as well. Taking away something so crucial to this community as well as all these wonderful people would be truly horrific! We would have too many good loving people without a way to support their families. Some of these employees wouldn't be able to drive to and from a different location in the other towns that, by the way, are far for some. Many good people within Caruthersville doesn't even have a vehicle to travel so it's always been reassuring to have this Walmart in such close proximity. Too many would hurt from the loss of this beloved store! (FGD in Caruthersville, July 2, 2019).

For some people, Walmart was a way of coping with the grief of loneliness. When people had nothing to do, they would go to Walmart and find someone to talk to. It was a vast social network. When the store closed, some people lost their convenient channel for socialization. It's a rare place like Walmart where folks can stand, chat, and keep track of others. Walmart is not just a store; it's a community center for people in rural areas. People would meet their friends, hang out with family, and talk to their neighbors in Walmart. Seniors, low-income families, people who don't have cars, and disabled people depend on this store to get their necessities like medicine, school supplies, and so on. Laura, one of the residents, said Walmart was an exceptional place for her family and friends in the area.

Caruthersville Walmart hosts many, many memories with my family and friends. The majority of my family has worked there for years and years as well as family friends. In fact, my grandma still works there to this day and has for as long as I can remember. It would be such a great loss for the strong family bond that facility has. I would hate to see such a great place close down. This Walmart will always be held special to my heart for several reasons. Keep it open! (Laura, a resident of Caruthersville)

It's not only about the "everyday low price" but also the identity of people in small towns and remote areas. They were proud of having a Walmart in their community. The closure of

¹⁰ Defined as culturally valued taste and consumption patterns.

¹¹ Defined as various kinds of valued relationships with significant others.

¹² Cultural capital which is further elevated through social recognition to confer prestige, legitimacy, and value.

Walmart means losing something big in the community, and it's hurtful, devastating, and can make people feel hopeless. David, one of the petitioners, mentioned this in his comment:

I really depend on our local Walmart for a lot of things. My son has health problems, and we go there. It is quicker than going to Kennett when there is bad weather. Elderly people would be sick without keeping it. Please do not close down our local Walmart. Employees need their jobs they have families (David, a petitioner from Caruthersville).

Walmart in a small town like Caruthersville is not just an ordinary store. It's part of people's culture in a rural area. Here, culture can be defined as patterns of meanings embodied in symbols and denoted in a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms which allow individuals and communities to communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life [12]. It is impossible to understand these individuals and the community's sense of belonging toward Walmart without understanding the local context and the ways people behave in the area. It's hard to understand because culture encompasses the various practices of everyday life and the different meaning for individuals embodied in social structures and human belief systems.

This is what Bourdieu calls habitus, which refers to the taken-for-granted, shared meanings and behaviors utilized by an individual within a social group [13]. It provides a way of explaining how it is that various discourses might be reconciled by a social subject [14]. Habitus is a set of internalized beliefs and attitudes that are developed by living and socializing in a specific environment. The individual and community response toward Walmart's closure is not merely the manifestation of social structure at the individual level but represents the social structure and how personal or group histories navigate and interpret those structures and changes.

4 Walmart's Store Closure in Piedmont, MO

Different from Caruthersville, Piedmont is in the Ozark Foothills Region, on the convergence of State Highways 34 and 49. Piedmont, translated as "foot of the mountain," is named for its geographic placement at the foot of Clark Mountain. In general, the Ozarks is an area in transition in which urban civilization is making rapid inroads at the expense of the early American rural culture which had maintained itself with little change until the development of the automobile and improved highways [15]. Influenced somewhat by topography, the earlier generation in Ozark drew from two different types: the small farmer and hill man.

This area were early French and German settlements. The former may be said to constitute the original white settlers, for even before 1800 they had occupied the lead mining region of St. Francois and Ste. Genevieve counties. The French, however, were not attracted to rural life, and their influence was confined almost wholly to the villages. By 1860 the German population of these counties was between fifteen and twenty thousand, but their influence was never strong enough to modify the rural American character of the region. In line with the losses of religious groups, the gains and losses of population in the Ozarks region is relatively typical of the state as a whole [15].

Piedmont and the surrounding areas are really more connected as a whole. So, it is really hard to separate the uniqueness of Piedmont in general from the other towns in Wayne County. Generally speaking, though, from other areas in Southeast Missouri, Piedmont is: This unique geographical structure that puts us in the midst of Clearwater Lake, Sam A. Baker State Park, rivers, streams, and thousands of acres of national forest. Piedmont has its own airport, short distance off a four-lane highway, railroad runs through town. Piedmont does seem to be an assortment of various types of people moving into the area from other parts of the state as well as the country. For early retirement people, Piedmont holds a vast amount of recreation for an extremely affordable cost of living (Interview with VC, a resident of Piedmont).

The population in Piedmont was 1,977 at the 2010 census. The racial makeup of this town was 96.5% White. Like other counties in the Ozarks area, this town is famous for tourism, such as campgrounds and fishing in the clear water lake area. Before Walmart closed, everyone could buy their supplies for camping and recreation at Walmart. Now, the building is empty with a large vacant parking lot in the middle of town. An anonymous Piedmont's resident expressed their frustration on the petition:

The town of Piedmont relies on Walmart for more than just goods for the community, it provides people employment in a very poor county, it provides tourist revenue, and it provides 30% revenue for the town. The town can't afford to be out of the revenue or for 78 people to lose their jobs. A lot of the residents do not have the financial means or reliable vehicle to drive the 45 minutes required to reach Poplar Bluff for essential items. Please reconsider the closing of Walmart, you are closing more than a store, you would be closing the town and the people.

Piedmont had a similar experience to Caruthersville when Walmart closed and left their town. Walmart opened its store in 1987 and closed in January 2017 (30 years). However, the impacts were different based on geographical and local economic characteristics. In Piedmont, a lot of small business still exist, even though Walmart entered this town 30 years ago. It is because Piedmont is a tourist destination (camping ground, clear water lake, etc.). A lot of families there run a small business in this tourism-based small town. The town had a relatively faster recovery after losing tax revenue and other things. When the Piedmont Walmart opened in 1987, the city and surrounding area had grown primarily because of retiree migration, according to a University of Missouri Extension study¹³. This growth continued throughout the 1990s when a robust national economy supported continued gains in people and jobs.

Both areas are primarily low-income areas, majority of families have one adult working full-time and one working at least part-time. Both towns have a strong Christian outlet with food pantries and clothes closet with free or extremely cheap clothing items and household items for those in need. Caruthersville may have a larger population than the Piedmont/Patterson area but both towns seem to strive to better their community for all the residents that live and visit there. Caruthersville has lost revenue since Walmart closed, because that brought in thousands of people

¹³ <https://www.waynecojournalbanner.com/2019/01/11/study-shows-retirees-migrating-to-area/>

from out of town that not only shopped there but would also shop at the other local stores (Interview with DP, a resident of Piedmont).

During the 2000s, growth slowed dramatically as the population increased by only 2.0% compared with a 14.9% increase in the 1990s. As the Great Recession took hold of the local and regional economy in 2008, the growth stalled. Between 2007 and 2018, Madison is the only county in the region that added jobs and Butler and Carter are the only counties that have a larger population now than they did in 2007. This region has continued to be plagued by high rates of poverty and a low-income profile. Wayne County has the highest poverty rate (26.0%) and lowest income profile in the region. So much has been said about Walmart leaving Piedmont. The store showed a profit and was a significant employer for the community.

When Walmart closed its store in 2017, Piedmont was the smallest store location in Missouri. In the decade before the closure, the growth in retail sales of 10.2% was significantly below that of the nearest community hosting Walmart stores (Poplar Bluff, 18.3%). An analysis of 15-minute drive time markets for the areas reveals Piedmont lags behind both of these markets in every indicator of retail viability including significantly lower sales potential, lower incomes, less buying power, and lower population density. In the year following the store closure, retail sales dropped from \$46,645,539.00 to \$38,180,644.00, a decline of 18.1% based on University of Missouri Extension's study. Hilary, a teacher in Wayne County, says the Walmart store closure in Piedmont will change the community.

As a teacher in Wayne County, I care deeply about the well-being of the families in the district and surrounding areas. Many students in both the Greenville and Clearwater districts have family members employed by the Piedmont Walmart and live too far to drive to another Walmart's location for employment. The communities in Wayne County depend on this Walmart for the pharmacy, groceries, childcare necessities, and more. Closing this store down would require these families to travel to further distances than they're able to in order to provide for their household (Hilary, a Wayne County resident)

When communities lose a major employer and source of tax revenue like Walmart, it can be disruptive and distressing. It can influence the capacity to provide services to residents. The job losses may contribute to population decline as workers move to find employment. A large empty building can become a liability if it remains vacant for a long time. Wayne County, in general, has more deaths than births. If Wayne County did not have people moving in, the population would be in free fall. However, the study showed this town still attracts about 100 people per year to make up the difference. They are attracting more age 65-69 retirees than any neighboring counties and many of them come from out of state. One of the reasons they come here is Clearwater Lake and the low cost of living.

That vacant Walmart building has been a source of conversation among city leaders. Finding a tenant has been the top priority. As the retail sector of the economy is in turmoil at the national level, seeking a new tenant for the Walmart building a difficult challenge in the current retail environment.

There is a mixture of people in our area for sure, but most generally want to help others and see our community prosper. That is what the Chamber has been zeroing in on for the last few years. Trying to build the morale of the people and getting them excited about the area in which we live. Some employers have been critical of the type of workers that are available in our area, but those business, such as Fine Labs, who have treated the employees well, given them decent pay with a good work environment, see very little turn over and are growing (Interview with VC, resident of Piedmont and one of the representatives from Piedmont Chamber of Commerce).

The 33,000-square-foot building is currently for sale, listed at \$1.2 million. The long and expensive footprint is a problem in a rural community like Piedmont with limited market potential. Shopko¹⁴, one of the few department store developers in rural America that has stores of this size, is going out of business and closing all locations. Rural King¹⁵, another potential developer, already has a store in Farmington. Orscheln¹⁶ has increasingly avoided small towns in favor of larger retail centers and already has a store in Poplar Bluff. Buchheit¹⁷ is based in Perryville but has not been developing new properties. Big R is another opportunity, but they do not have any stores in Missouri. The impacts of the retail apocalypse are reaching deep into rural America at a time when many small towns are still recovering from the Great Recession and are now facing another economic downturn due to the Covid-19 crisis.

Poverty in our area is an issue, but I think that is all rural Missouri when we compare our county with other Missouri rural counties. There is a bigger topic of rural vs. urban agendas in our local and state government that need to be addressed (Interview with VC, resident of Piedmont).

5 The Winners and Losers

Millions of people still living in these areas lack access to decent jobs, housing, and other social services. The socioeconomic gap between rural and urban America has widened and migration to jobs no longer offers the same opportunity for people in rural areas to improve their economic condition [16]. Rural residents feel that urban areas look down on rural areas and forget them in decision-making [17]. Of course, there are many reasons for rural stagnation, including structural factors. In the Missouri Ozarks, population decline has been associated with the closing of mines and factories and the loss of farms in areas where off-farm jobs are not available to supplement the income from farming jobs [18]. During this study of five small towns in Southeast Missouri, the author heard that many people in this area still hold a deep distrust of government, and most households do not keep or share detailed records of their finances. This kind of adaptive tactic by rural people to keep and transmit their

¹⁴ <https://www.shopko.com/>

¹⁵ <https://www.ruralking.com/>

¹⁶ <https://www.orschelnfarmhome.com/>

¹⁷ <https://www.buchheitonline.com/default.aspx>

local knowledge from person to person seems common in building an informal economy in rural areas.

Although rural areas continue to have large numbers of low-income families, social capital and local knowledge can still improve the quality of life of those living in poverty or trying to survive. One of the informants in Piedmont, DP, describes the characters of her town and county as a supportive community. DP has lived in this area for 18 years. She joined the Army National Guard in her senior year of high school, and that is where she met her husband, originally from Wayne County, MO. She moved to Wayne County after her husband was deployed overseas for the first time. She came to live with her mother-in-law so she could have help with their daughter while she was enrolled in college at Fort Leonard Wood, MO, trying to finish out the semester.

It is always important to imagine rural or small-town communities as collectivities, a place where moral obligation plays a fundamental role in everyday life. A small town is a 'home' where residents send their kids to the local school district, shop at local grocery stores, attend worship at local churches, go to local post offices, and each inhabitant has a mental image of the place they can quickly identify "I am from there.". We call it community because their familiarity and identity are based on people's social relations and practices, and it is a circular process among the community members [19]. A community is a particular form of social organization based on a spatially bounded locality [20]. By holding on to their shared rural identity, community members can work across dimensions of difference to reorganize and sustain their communities more effectively [21].

A young lady from Piedmont, JK, also pointed out similar perspectives on how kind and generous the people in her town are. JK was born and raised in Piedmont, as were her parents. She said in the interview that her daily activities were mundane. She went to school in the local school district. She would go to school at Clearwater, grab a snack afterward, then hang out with her friends in the Walmart parking lot, or just drive around. She also realized that poverty is very high in Piedmont. Like many other young people, she wants to leave Piedmont after college because she feels like she will not be able to find a good-paying job in her field after college.

Poverty rates are very high in Piedmont because there aren't any real jobs to support the population. My mother used to work in the doctor's office, but that requires a college education. My father works in the court system for Wayne County and that also requires a college degree. With that being said, it is difficult for everyday people to get a job here (Interview with JK, resident of Piedmont).

Losing young people seems common in this area. College-educated people tend to leave small towns because they must go to college or university elsewhere. Like JK, she must leave Piedmont to study at The University of Missouri in Columbia which is about five hours from her town. This phenomenon, of course, robs the talent and the future of communities. Another concern for the young generation in a small rural city is the lack of jobs.

Since fewer people in the town are working, young people have fewer connections for getting jobs and fewer positive role models in the neighborhood. Children and teenagers also receive less supervision. There is also a need to survive on a smaller family income due to an increase

of single parents' households in rural areas. The depressed conditions and disorganized family units worsen the process of social isolation [22]. This problem is clearly on the minds of everyone met during the studies performed in these towns. The closure of a major local economic institution like Walmart becomes a big issue for all community members since it showed a profit and was a major employer in the community.

Besides the fear of others losing their jobs, the failure to attract new business to town also reduces the community's pride. Since Walmart was part of the community's pride and identity, the failure to keep Walmart open and a lack of new business opening creates both economic and social trouble. Keeping a business afloat in a small town has been a struggle alongside stagnation or even decline of the population.

Though it was before my time, when Walmart moved in initially back in the 80s the real losers were the small business owners, the local mom and pop shops if you will. That same group could be the winners now. There are obstacles to overcome, the small business owners have a very important role to play in the post Walmart community (Interview with VC, resident of Piedmont).

Walmart opened its Piedmont store in 1987. A study from the University of Missouri Extension found that more and more retirees came to the area in that period. During the 1990s, Wayne County experienced positive population growth. However, during the 2000s, growth suddenly declined from 14.9% in the 1990s to only 2.0%. The Great Recession happened in 2008 and population and economic stagnation have continued since then. Following the population decline, the poverty rates in Wayne County have also increased. Wayne County has the highest poverty rate (24.1%), and the lowest income profile in the region. This number is higher than the national average of 13.1%. The largest demographic living in poverty is males 45-54, followed by females 45-54, and then females 25-34¹⁸.

The number of residents in Wayne County increased in the 1970 to 2010 period. The proportion of married couple households decreased from 70.5% to 52.7%, while single adult families increased to 14.6%, and one-person households increased from 20.4% to 27.7%. The largest proportional increase occurred in households with unrelated persons living together, which increased from 0.7% to 5.0%. These changes were consistent across all neighboring counties. Most new home construction occurred in the 1970s and 1990s. During the 2000s, construction slowed to less than one half the rate of the 1990s and since 2010 has practically stopped. Wayne County is notable because it has the lowest value housing stock in the region with a median home value of \$72,700, the largest proportion of mobile homes (28.2%), and a significant share of housing in seasonal use (16.3%)¹⁹.

When Walmart closed its store in 2017, Piedmont was the least profitable store than the neighboring Walmart store in Poplar Bluff. In the year following the store closure, retail sales for the area dropped from \$46,645,539.00 to \$38,180,644.00, a decline of -18.1%. These indicators (less sales potential, lower incomes, less buying power, and lower population

¹⁸

<https://datausa.io/profile/geo/wayne-county-mo#:~:text=24.1%25%20of%20the%20population%20for,the%20national%20average%20of%2013.1%25>.

¹⁹ <https://www.waynecojournalbanner.com/2019/01/11/study-shows-retirees-migrating-to-area/>

density) might be one of the objective factors that caused the store's closing. Losing a major employer and tax base revenue can be disruptive and devastating to a local economy. The job losses may contribute to population decline as workers move to find employment. A big empty building can become a liability if it remains vacant for a long time. For some community members, the closing of Walmart may also be a sign of losing more resources. Often, the community's struggles also reflect the struggles of the households and families in the area.

The city cannot perform its duties, such as buying equipment, fire trucks, and things of that nature within their communities, without this type of tax revenue. John said that the fire department had received grants throughout the year from Walmart, even before they left in 2016. Buddy Barker, Walmart ex-manager, helped the Caruthersville fire department get a grant for some communication pagers. Walmart donated \$2,500.00 to the local fire department (Pemiscot Press, January 4, 2017). It appears that some of the Walmart managers had the best interests of the community in mind. In 1996, John was made the full-time fire chief. He didn't have time to work on weekends, but he always communicated with the Walmart manager. He always wanted to work with whoever was in charge at Walmart, do fire inspections on the building and work closely with them.

But over the last several years, they (Walmart) weren't participating from Bentonville as they should be. So, the people of our community now only have one grocery store and a Dollar General store that people despise, to go in there. They can't keep their shelves full. They don't have enough checkers to checkout line to take a line to the checkout line (FGD in Caruthersville, July 2, 2019).

Like Walmart, Dollar General (DG) is a retail business built upon small-town values and orientation. DG has more than 14,000 stores, more than 60,000 employees, and more than \$6 billion in annual sales across the U.S. It is another success story of family business like Walmart (Turner, 2018). Some analysts believe that DG is expanding because rural America is struggling. DG is very famous as one of the most profitable retailers in the U.S. and a lifeline for lower-income customers²⁰. In the cynical words, the Guardians reported that DG has already taken over rural America²¹. DG is opening stores at the rate of three stores per day across the U.S. It moves into places that Walmart does not enter, targeting rural towns and damaged inner-city areas.

A giant company like Walmart provides the most familiar form of the late twentieth century's new capitalist culture. With its fearsome market power, technological sophistication, low wages, and low-price business model [23], Walmart set an economy driven by distribution and retailing rather than manufacturing [24]. As consumers expected to pay low prices for the necessities, workers' wages stagnated, and agribusiness assault sprouted in rural areas. Since 1988, when Walmart entered the grocery business by opening its first supercenter, it has been a significant catalyst in the bankruptcy of 27 market chains. Financial services and wholesalers are also affected directly by Walmart. More than half of Walmart's annual imports from China are already sourced directly through its global procurement function. In his autobiography

²⁰ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-dollar-general-became-rural-americas-store-of-choice-1512401992>

²¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/aug/13/dollar-general-walmart-buhler-haven-kansas>

with John Huey, Sam Walton: Made in America (1992), Sam Walton himself mentioned why his company imported so much from overseas:

Walmart, like every other American retailer, is a huge importer of merchandise from overseas. In some cases – too many in my opinion – importing is really our only alternatives because a lot of American-made goods simply aren't competitive, either in price, or quality, or both. We, like any other retailer, will only buy American if those goods can be produced efficiently enough to offer good value. We're not interested in charity here; we don't believe in subsidizing substandard work or inefficiency (page 241).

There are two paths for a retailer to survive in this era. The first path is to become an active retailer, which rejects a passive role as supermarket landlord and makes a more intensive effort to reach out to customers and not be imitated by competitors. The second path is to grow as large as possible by selling goods and services that are always available in infinite supply. This second path is Amazon's and Walmart's strategy [25]. In comparison, Walmart is still trying to find its place in the internet-based shopping market, while Amazon has successfully taken this path. Amazon has the most efficient warehousing practices with unlimited inventory that creates the lowest price for its products. In terms of business model, Amazon is a pure selling machine that provides convenience better than any other retailers [26].

Globally, retailers are also shifting away from large to smaller format stores. This is due to an increasingly urbanized population [27]. When sales at the hypermarket slowed, Walmart decided to expand the number of Neighborhood stores (42,000 square feet) and Walmart Express stores (12,000-15,000 square feet). However, this transition was not easy. The express store experiment and expansion failed because its size was too small to fill customers' needs. Also, the locations were too close to other Walmart stores make this smaller store less profitable. Walmart ended up deciding to close 102 Walmart Express stores in 2016. This closure announcement disproportionately affected lower-income, low-density areas²². Different from Walmart Express, the Neighborhood stores have been more successful since they provide more groceries that are in line with urban customers' needs.

Thirty or forty years ago, small family enterprises were many business players in the U.S. farm and food economy. Today, market control is concentrated on only a few big companies. Only four companies—Smithfield, Tyson, JBS, and Cargill—control 66% of pork slaughter²³, only four companies control 84% of cattle slaughter (beef)²⁴, just three companies control over 60% of chicken slaughter²⁵. Dean Foods and Dairy Farmers, one large cooperative, control milk production in America and Dairy Farmers of America (DFA) controls about a third of the national milk supply²⁶. This consolidated power in a small minority of global actors has significant effects on producers, distributors, workers, consumers, and other environments,

²² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/business/walmart-closings/>

²³ <https://www.foodandpower.net/pork/>

²⁴ <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/meat/industrial/consolidation.html>

²⁵ <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/meat/industrial/consolidation.html>

²⁶ <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=112002639>

including that of the animals themselves [28]. Farmers face less competitive markets in selling their goods and this creates more vulnerability for buyers. Distributors and suppliers feel their prices squeezed by large retailers, like DG and Walmart. Many consumers and eaters, like the people in Caruthersville and Piedmont, do not have any choice left but to accept whatever is on the shelves of Walmart and DG.

Another indicator to see the hardship of both cities is by looking at their sales revenue performance. Sales tax *itself* is forced on retail sales of tangible personal property and certain services that are generally expected to be taxable unless specifically exempted by law. The Missouri state sales tax rate is 4.225%. However, cities, counties, and certain districts may also impose a local sales tax. The amount of tax sellers accumulate from the buyer depends on the combined state and the local taxes²⁷. While Kennett, MO (which happens to have a Walmart supercenter in town) and Greenville (which doesn't have Walmart in town) have steady revenues, trends of sales tax revenue in Caruthersville and Piedmont are looks struggle to bounce back to 'normal.' (see figure 1).

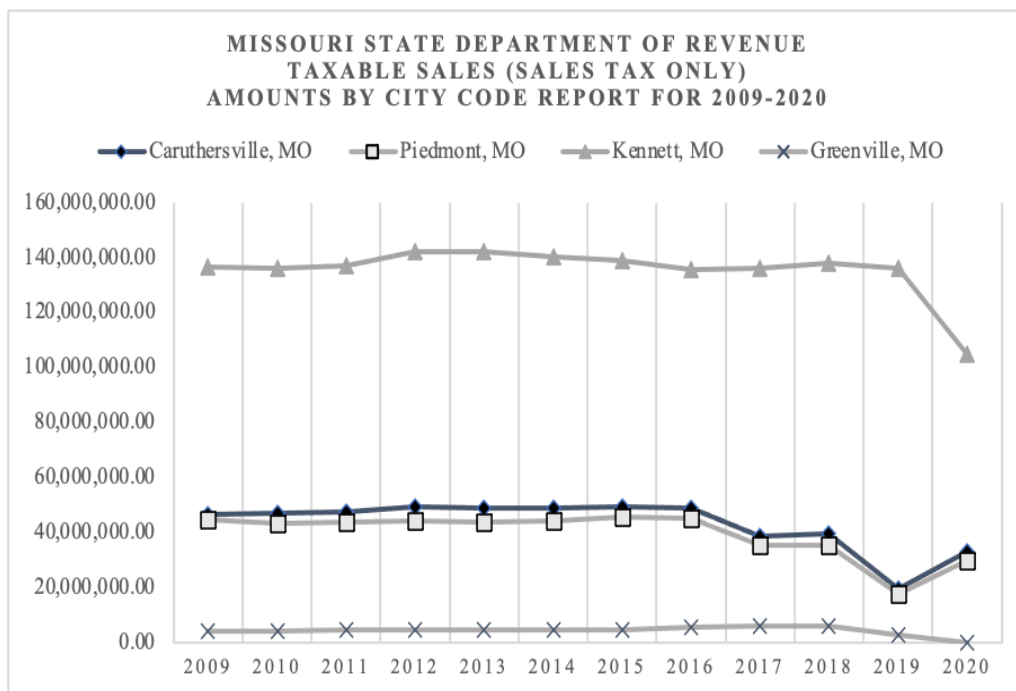


Fig. 2. The sales tax revenue trend in Caruthersville, Piedmont, Kennett, and Greenville.

²⁷ <https://dor.mo.gov/business/sales/>

6 Where do we go from here?

The mayor of Caruthersville received news from Ridge Investment Group during an economic development meeting (Pemiscot Press, Wednesday, 10/23/2019). She said that the investor would open a Dollar Tree store in Caruthersville. The preliminary civil plans were finalized, and construction was set to start in November 2019. It took three years after the closure of Walmart for the city to get another prominent investor into the town. This is, of course, big news for the community. Dollar Tree stores are well known for offering their items at \$1.00 each, and the store provides a wide variety of products, including snacks, food, candy, party décor, craft supplies, housewares, etc.

Dollar General (DG) and Dollar Tree (DLTR) are the two largest Dollar store operators in the U.S., combining for more than 30,000 stores throughout the country²⁸. Walmart (WMT) only has 4,700 U.S. stores. DG targets mainly low- and middle-income customers in rural and suburban areas. DLTR targets suburban, middle-income shoppers, while a third Dollar store, Family Dollar, focuses on lower-income urban and rural customers. Some experts say that this discourages bigger stores or supermarkets from opening²⁹. It also threatens local mom-and-pop grocers, just like Walmart did thirty and forty years ago. DG doesn't offer fresh produce, which also makes healthy food options more limited for rural people. Some cities even passed legislation trying to limit and restrict Dollar stores in their cities.

In contrast, for those who support DG and other Dollar stores, having a DG might be considered an asset in a food desert area. These companies build stores 15 or 20 miles from the closest big-box retailer or grocery store. Around 75% of DG stores are in towns with the lowest populations (fewer than 20,000 people). They usually choose to locate at the edge of a city, away from the traditional downtown, to draw customers. DG can open quickly in new areas because they are smaller (7,400 square feet on average), have fewer employees, and have lower operating costs than grocery stores.

While residents in Caruthersville welcome a new DT, Piedmont residents and the surrounding towns are still waiting for another investor to come into the area. The city already has two Dollar stores right now. It is unlikely to have a third Dollar store arrive. It is probably another sign that Piedmont will be challenged to get another grocery store or a bigger store to open in the area since there are two Dollar stores already in town. Some other businesses closed in 2018 following Walmart's closure in 2017, such as Clearwater Vision Center³⁰, MiMi's Restaurant, Neighbors Cleaners, and Angie's Stop and Shop. But this was not all bad news. Some new businesses were also opened: Junior's Steakhouse on Elm Street, The Boys Are Back Food Service, Tiger Salvage, and Tiger Fitness and Treasures³¹.

²⁸ <https://www.cnn.com/2019/07/19/business/dollar-general-opposition/index.html>

²⁹ <https://progressive.org/magazine/dollar-stores-prey-on-the-poor-sainato-191001/>

³⁰

<https://www.waynecojournalbanner.com/2018/08/23/clearwater-vision-in-piedmont-to-close-after-32-years/>

³¹ <https://www.waynecojournalbanner.com/2018/01/19/new-businesses-opening-in-piedmont/>

The community and the local institutions are not passive. They are also trying to be more proactive in building opportunities. Like in Caruthersville, the city partnered with the University of Missouri Extension program to develop a plan for the future of Caruthersville. As reported in the Pemiscot Press, the second community-wide meeting was held in October 2019. Over 55 people attended the meeting and talked about their future facilitated by the Extension Community Economic and Entrepreneurial Development (ExCEED). The group has tentatively settled on four opportunities to start the planning process: (1) city clean-up/appearance and marketing the community, (2) workforce development, (3) riverfront tourism development, and (4) value-added agriculture. The community members themselves chose these four proposals, and the work is about increasing the residents' confidence and believing in the community itself to make a change.

A similar strategic meeting was also held in Piedmont. The city partnered with the University of Missouri Extension to have a demographic study conducted of the area. Results from the study were presented in a public meeting on December 18, 2019. The University of Missouri Extension helped the city plan their future economic development. The University of Missouri Extension believed that Piedmont and Wayne County, in general, had an extraordinary opportunity even though economic indicators did not look promising. Wayne County had a large amount of public land which is a good asset for outdoor recreation and tourism. Isolation is not always a bad thing. The real problem was the declining population.

When the population declines, it is followed by declines in other aspects of life because population itself is the main driver of the local economy [29]. According to the University Extension's study, Wayne County was unique because it had the lowest value housing stock with a median home value of \$72,700. This county also had the largest proportion of mobile homes (28.2%) and share of housing in seasonal use (16.3%)³². Outdoor recreation, beautiful amenities, and low cost of living are a few of the reasons for a new migration coming to Piedmont and Wayne counties. The study found that the Wayne County attracting more age 65-69 retirees than any adjoining counties.

Although all these images of rural and small-town America make it look like a place where time stands still or even moves backwards, we know that these areas are also always changing both economically and demographically. "Rural stability" is a myth. The boom and bust and population and depopulation of the rural Midwest is a story of economic opportunity [30]. The rural Midwest attracted many newcomers in the 1970s, then many of those people left again in the 1980s and 1990s. Today, we have found that natural amenities, like lakes and forests in the Ozarks, have attracted retirees and newcomers [31]. While significant sections of rural areas continue to be plagued by chronic poverty [32], every town, rural area, and resident tends to have a positive outlook on the future and continuously seeks ways to provide more and better resources for everyone whether it is food sources, healthcare needs, activities and programs for youth, or assistance for the elderly. As Flora & Flora described, the Midwest's small-town communities are a mixed bag of both the good and the problematic.

³² <https://www.waynecojournalbanner.com/2019/01/11/study-shows-retirees-migrating-to-area/>

7 Conclusion

Many small towns in rural America have similar problems. However, small towns and communities are different in history, size, culture, and location. They range from an isolated town like Piedmont to a riverfront town like Caruthersville. We can not generalize. These variations then specify different aspects that create an identity for the townspeople and community living in these small towns or rural areas [33]. Townspeople, in general, would say that their communities are safer, friendlier, more familiar, more caring, and a better place to raise a family compared to larger cities. Since most small towns are vulnerable in their dependency on a few big employers, a revitalization strategy could be a chance to thrive in a global economy. There are so many ideas on how to fix rural America. The first step is to educate more Americans about the real problems and forces that threaten rural America, and how as a nation, they need to prioritize solving these problems and investing more in them [34]. The government should be able to help small towns to participate more and flourish in today's economy by offering some new skills and improving local infrastructure. Investing in technologies (rural broadband) [35] or improving existing natural amenities are great ideas for small towns in America, especially for enhancing the quality of life and helping local businesses and entrepreneurship to grow.

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