CHAPTER 1

“We’re Not Dead Yet”—Small Cities Become Big(ger) Players?

> Our community has experienced rapid commercial and residential development in the last 10 years. More turmoil over the services the city should provide & how to pay for them [has emerged]. We’ve also had to develop and enforce new ordinances, i.e., a landscaping ordinance.
>
> —Baxter, Minnesota Parks and Recreation Board member, 2000

> [The] town is only 11 years old. At first the smaller population was homogeneous. Growth issues are now more prevalent.
>
> —Queen Creek, Arizona Planning Commission member, 2001

A central premise of this book is that we need to know more about how small cities are governed. Much of the urban politics research focuses on large metropolitan areas, and the core cities of those metro areas, whereas small cities are rarely studied. When they are, scholars tend to rely on case studies to try to draw broader conclusions. Implicit in this call for more research on small cities is the notion that these places are important for us to understand because they play a significant role in the overall American democratic political landscape. Although certainly this view can be seen as (and is) normative, clear empirical evidence exists to support the significant role that small cities play in the way millions of Americans experience political and community life on a day-to-day basis. Thus before embarking on the effort to understand more clearly how small cities are governed by exploring their board systems, this chapter analyzes and discusses important historical and demographic trends affecting small cities in recent years. In this way, the research presented later can be viewed in light of a larger framework and context regarding the nature of small cities.

Perhaps the best starting point in this regard is simply to note that in spite of what could be called the myth of the sleepy small town and the oft-suggested narrative that small towns are dying, or are dead (e.g., Wheeler, 1964; Davies, 1998), small cities are, for the most part, neither sleepy nor dead. It is true that some are very quiet and appear to be sleepy, and some have died, or seem to be dying, but this gross generalization is not accurate for the vast majority of small cities in the country. In fact, not only are most small cities not dead, many of them are experiencing rapid population growth and all the attendant service delivery and public policy challenges that come along with such growth. It seems that small is big these days, at least when it comes to the question of what demographic and economic forces are shaping the nature of American society in the early years of the 21st century. Even a cursory search of the recent literature on small towns results in several articles and books sounding a similar chorus of how population shifts and economic trends over the last couple of decades have reshaped many smaller communities across the country, including some that have practically come back from the dead (e.g., Nasser, 2004; Schultz, 2004; Johnson, 2006; Halebsky, 2009; Connolly, 2010; Macgregor, 2010; Wuthnow, 2011; Williams, 2011; Greenfield, 2012; Kotkin, 2012). For much of the 20th century, certainly the first 70 years, migration patterns were fundamentally rural to urban. Though the volume waxed and waned each decade, the trend was clear. More Americans fled rural small towns and cities for the larger metropolises than vice versa. This pattern subsided by 1970, picked up again in the 1980s, but once again waned in the 1990s and 2000s (Johnson, 2006, 1). In short, the last 2 decades have seen a "rural rebound" (Johnson & Beale, 1995), and according to demographer Wendell Cox ". . . urban areas with fewer than 1 million people expanded by 15%, compared to barely 9% for larger urban areas" (quoted in Kotkin, 2012, 2).

To be clear, America is still an urban nation. According to the 2010 census, 81% of Americans live in urban areas; this is up from 79% in 2000 (Berg, 2012). What is noteworthy, however, is that the nature of urban America is being altered. The Census Bureau officially lists two types of urban areas. An "urbanized area" is defined as 50,000 people or more, whereas an "urban cluster" is an area between 2,500 and 50,000. The population is split roughly 70–30 between urbanized areas and urban clusters. However, what is worth noting here is that of the roughly 3,500 urban areas in the United States, the vast majority of them are urban clusters—smaller in size (containing approximately 10% of the total U.S. population) but larger in number compared to urbanized areas (Berg, 2012, 1). This trend is so significant that a new label, "micropolitan statistical area," has been created by the government to more precisely delineate these fast-growing urban areas. A good example of this new type of small city is Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina. Just 2 or 3 decades ago, Roanoke Rapids was no more than a spot on the map along Route I-95 serving essentially as a travel pit-stop for vacationers heading from the Northeast to southeastern beaches. Once a sleepy little mill town, as the national economy transitioned from industrial to service based, Roanoke Rapids was transformed into an economic hub of activity and now serves as the anchor community for over 76,000 people who live in and around the town (Nasser, 2004, 1). Indeed, *Forbes* magazine has reported that of the 30 urban regions adding jobs at the fastest rate in 2012, 27 of them were in smaller and midsized metro areas, including fairly small areas such as Columbus, Indiana; Williamsport, Pennsylvania; Holland–Grand Haven, Michigan; and Casper, Wyoming (Kotkin, 2012, 2).

The significance of this large-city to small-city demographic shift that seemed to pick up speed in the 1990s was highlighted in *Beyond the Metropolis: Urban Geography as if Small Cities Mattered* (Ofori-Amoah, 2007). As Ofori-Amoah notes, our American urban system is characterized by a collection of cities of many different sizes and functions, yet the vast majority of urban studies research is focused on the extremes of very large cities and very small, rural outposts. Not enough research has been dedicated to those cities that lie between the extremes (2007, 3–4). Like this book, Ofori-Amoah's volume takes a stab at filling that gap; Brennan and Hoene contribute a chapter that focuses on the just-mentioned demographic shifts occurring in small cities during the 1990s. To begin they make the salient point that the overwhelming majority (97%) of American cities have fewer than 50,000 residents, and if the population threshold is dropped to only 10,000, the percentage of all American cities that fall into this category is still very large, at 87% (Brennan & Hoene, 2007, 69). Regarding the six states discussed in this book, the numbers are strikingly similar, as 87–99% of all incorporated cities across the six states have populations below 50,000. Specifically, as of the 2000 Census, this included 76 of 87 (87%) total cities in Arizona, 491 of 497 (99%) total cities in Arkansas, 21 of 22 (95%) total cities in Maine, 850 of 864 (98%) total cities in Minnesota, 924 of 942 (98%) total cities in Ohio, and 265 of 268 (99%) total cities in South Carolina. Moreover, of those citizens living in incorporated communities across these six states, the percentage in each state living in cities with populations under 50,000 ranged from 14.3% in Arizona to 50.1% in Minnesota.

Yet, despite these statistics showing clearly that of cities nationwide smaller cities are much more representative than larger cities, Brennan and Hoene reiterate Ofori-Amoah's point that researchers focus the vast majority of their attention on very large cities. To help correct this imbalance, they focus on the demographic changes in small cities—using the National League of Cities' definition of "small cities" as incorporated places with populations under 50,000 (the same definition used in this book). Relying on the 2002 Census of Governments, a study conducted by the Census Bureau every 5 years, Brennan and Hoene report that during the 1990s a greater percentage of small cities experienced population growth than did medium-sized (50,000–100,000) and large cities (greater than 100,000). Specifically, 892 cities experienced double-digit growth during the 1990s, and 77.5% were small cities, 14.3% were medium-sized cities, and 8.2% were large cities (2007, 72).

For their in-depth analysis, Brennan and Hoene selected a random sample of 100 small cities and then separated them according to population size. Small cities were those with populations under 10,000, medium-sized cities were those between 10,000 and 25,000, and large cities were those between 25,000 and 50,000. One significant trend was that smaller cities experienced greater population growth rates during the decade. The smaller units saw overall increases of 18.5% compared to 12.9% for medium-sized cities and 9.1% for large cities (2007, 78).

Perhaps more telling of the growth trends, though, is when the authors divide the sample of different sized cities into five categories based on their rates of growth. They defined rapid-growth cities as those with growth rates greater than 20%. Strong-growth cities experienced growth of 10–20%. Moderate-growth cities saw 2–10% growth, and no-growth cities saw –2–2% growth. Declining cities saw population declines of more than 2%. Table 1.1 displays the results of this analysis; as can be seen, 47% of small cities experienced rapid or strong growth rates, compared to 51% of the medium-sized cities and 41% of the large cities. Moreover, the larger small cities were more likely to have experienced declines in population (Brennan & Hoene 2007, 78–79).

How did the cities compare across regions? Using the Census Bureau's regional categories of Northeast, South, Midwest, and West, the authors compared growth rates of the small cities across these four regions, and also to the overall growth rates in each region. Small cities in the Midwest and West experienced the fastest growth rates (34% and 32%, respectively) compared to the southern small cities (13%), whereas small cities in the Northeast experienced an overall negative growth rate of 3% (2007, 80). When these growth rates are compared to the overall growth rates for each region, the Western and Midwestern small cities outpaced the growth rates of all cities in their regions. In the Midwest, the overall growth rate (for

Table 1.1. Population Growth of Small U.S. Cities during the 1990s

	Percentage of Small Cities (n = 39)	*Percentage of Moderate Cities (n = 36)*	*Percentage of Large Cities (n = 25)*
Rapid growth (> 20%)	36	28	18
Strong growth (10–20%)	11	23	23
Moderate growth (2–10%)	22	24	33
No growth (-2–2%)	15	13	6
Declining cities (< -2%)	16	12	20

Source: Brennan and Hoene, 2007, 79

all cities) was 8%, 26% lower than for the small cities in the Midwest. For the West, the rate for all cities was 20%, 12% lower than the small-city rate. In the South, the overall rate of 17% was slightly higher than that of the small cities, but in the Northeast, the overall growth rate was 6%, even though the small cities in that region experienced a declining rate (Brennan & Hoene, 2007, 80).

Interesting differences also emerge when small cities near metro areas are compared to ones in nonmetro areas. As shown in Table 1.2, being part of a metro area was a key factor contributing to rapid growth for small cities during the 1990s, but 63% of cities experiencing decline were also part of metro areas (Brennan & Hoene, 2007, 81).

In sum, the data presented by Brennan and Hoene of 100 small cities tells the story of considerable population growth during the 1990s rather than decline and death across all three sizes of cities they analyzed. What about the sample of 60 cities in this study? Is the story generally the same for them during the 1990s? And what about the population changes in the most recent decade? Did the cities continue to experience similar population trends, or not? To answer these questions, population figures were gathered for all 60 cities from the 1990, 2000, and 2010 census data.[1] Percentage

Table 1.2. Population Growth for Small Cities by Metro Area, 1990–2000

	Declining Cities	*No Growth*	*Moderate Growth*	*Strong Growth*	*Rapid Growth*
Metro	63	33	59	45	86
Nonmetro	38	67	41	55	14

Source: Brennan and Hoene, 2007, 81; Cell entries are percentages changes in population were then calculated for each city across each decade. Using Brennan and Hoene's classification schemes for size of city (small, medium, and large), and for population growth (declining, no-growth, moderate growth, strong growth, and rapid growth), the growth rates for the 60 cities were analyzed for the 2 decades under consideration—the 1990s and 2000s.

Table 1.3 shows the distribution of cities according to size across all four decennial census periods. The immediate conclusion that can be drawn is that considerable shifts in the populations of these small communities occurred during the years represented by the data. As previously noted, the decade of the 1980s saw a return of the general 20th-century pattern of rural to urban migration throughout the United States, but beginning in the 1990s, U.S. population dynamics were characterized by a more complex set of factors, with some rural, small-town growth picking up in the 1990s and 2000s (Johnson, 2006, 1). This general trend is supported by data showing the percentage of large cities declines whereas the percentage of small and medium-sized cities increases. Descriptive statistics of population change over the 30-year period between 1980 and 2010 show that these 60 small cities on average were experiencing positive growth rates of about 30%, although the median growth rate was only about 6% due to some positive skewing caused by a handful of cities. By the end of the period, three cities in the study had seen growth rates high enough to cause their populations to go beyond the 50,000 threshold used as the definition for a small city by this study and by the National League of Cities.[2]

What were the growth rates of these different sized small cities during the 1990s and 2000s? Table 1.4 shows size of city compared with growth rate categories, indicating that 45% of cities experienced strong or rapid growth during the 1990s, supporting the arguments mentioned regarding general trends across the United States. Interestingly, it was the smaller and

Table 1.3. Percentage of Small Cities According to Size, 1980–2010

	*1980 Census**	*1990 Census***	*2000 Census***	*2010 Census***
Small cities 0–10K	47 (7)	70 (42)	58 (35)	48 (29)
Medium cities 10K–25K	5 (3)	11 (18)	25 (15)	25 (15)
Large cities 25K–50K	33 (5)	12 (11)	17 (10)	27 (16)

Source: U.S. Census, 1980–2010; *N = 15; **N = 60

Table 1.4. Population Growth Rates of Small Cities, 1990–2000

	Small Cities (n = 42)	*Medium-Sized Cities (n = 11)*	*Large Cities (n = 7)*
Declining cities	21 (9)	18 (2)	29 (2)
No-growth cities	7 (3)	9 (1)	14 (1)
Moderate-growth cities	26 (11)	18 (2)	27 (2)
Strong-growth cities	7 (3)	36 (4)	0 (0)
Rapid-growth cities	38 (16)	18 (2)	29 (2)

medium-sized cities that led the way with higher growth rates, whereas larger cities were more likely to experience decline or no growth over the decade.

Similar data for the decade between 2000 and 2010 are displayed slightly differently in Figure 1.1. Though the trend of strong and rapid growth continues, the larger cities tended to lead the way during the 2000s, whereas a larger percentage of smaller cities (almost 49%) saw declines or no growth.

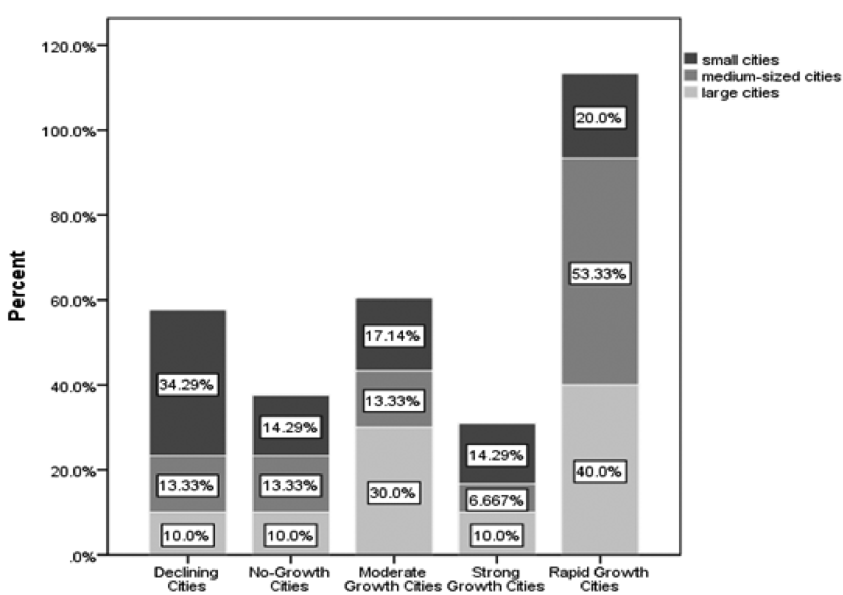

Figure 1.1. Population Growth Rates of Small Cities, 2000–2010

Finally, the small cities were classified as to whether they were part of a metro area or not for 1990 and 2000, allowing for growth rates between the two types of small cities to be compared. Given the findings by Brennan and Hoene that metro-area small cities in their sample experienced higher rates of growth during the 1990s, it was hypothesized that the same trend would hold for the cities in this study, not only for the 1990s but also for the following decade. First, as can be seen in Table 1.5, the variation in metro status for the sample cities was good, with 63 percent (38) of the small cities in nonmetro areas and 37% (22) in metro areas.

Second, the data support the hypothesis, as 69% of the metro-area cities experienced strong or rapid growth in 1990, compared to only 32% of the nonmetro cities. Similarly, for the most recent decade, 69% of the metro-area cities experienced strong or rapid growth, whereas only 29% of the nonmetro cities saw that kind of growth for the decade. By the same token, during the 1990s, 37% of the nonmetro cities experienced decline or no growth, compared to 48% of the nonmetro cities in the 2000s. For each period, the differences in growth rates between metro and nonmetro small cities are fairly strong, as indicated by Kendall's tau-c measures of association. Both measures are statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

In sum, then, although there is considerable variation, for the sample cities in this study significant levels of growth occurred during the last 3 decades, supporting the point made earlier that many small cities are not only not sleepy, dying, or dead but are experiencing growth and the attendant service-delivery challenges associated with such growth.

Table 1.5. Growth Rates for Small Cities According to Metro-Area Status, 1990s and 2000s

Growth Rate	*Metro Area—1990?**		*Metro Area—2000?***	
	Yes	*No*	*Yes*	*No*
Declining cities (13)	9 (2)	29 (11)	14 (3)	32 (12)
No-growth cities (5)	9 (2)	8 (3)	9 (2)	16 (6)
Moderate-growth cities (15)	13 (3)	32 (12)	9 (2)	24 (7)
Strong-growth cities (7)	14 (3)	11 (4)	5 (1)	16 (6)
Rapid-growth cities (20)	55 (12)	21 (8)	64 (14)	13 (2)
Totals	100 (22)	100 (38)	100 (22)	100 (38)

*Kendall's tau-c = 0.38; $p = 0.05$; **Kendall's tau-c = 0.45; $p = 0.002$

Two Competing Narratives

When it comes to the question of how viable American small cities are, and whether they are on a trajectory of decline or growth, two competing narratives exist. One claims that the idea of the vibrant small town with a healthy downtown commercial district, strong social networks, and a high quality of life is at best a thing of the past (Wheeler, 1964) or at worst a mythic construct that never really explained small-town life accurately (Davies, 1998), and that reinventing and redeveloping small cities after the economic shocks of the 1970s and 1980s is a "tall order" that will not be done easily, if at all (Connolly, 2010). The other narrative assumes that although small towns and cities have certainly been buffeted by social and economic forces greatly beyond their control, they have managed not only to survive but in many cases to thrive and redefine themselves within the context of the broader economic, social, and demographic forces at work (Schultz, 2004; Fonseca, 2007; Halebsky, 2009; Macgregor, 2010; Wuthrow, 2011; Williams, 2011; Kotkin, 2012). Though there is some truth to both narratives, the second one is more nuanced and empirically grounded, whereas the first one is perhaps grounded more in nostalgia and sentimentality, although certainly not entirely so. In any event, a review of the arguments and evidence for each will help provide the context for the current study.

A Vanishing America?

Anyone who has seen the movie *It's a Wonderful Life* can relate to the image of small-town life as depicted in the fictional town of Bedford Falls, New York. Everyone knows everyone else, the downtown is a bustling place, neighborhoods are safe places for children to play in, and life seems, well, wonderful. Although a lot of Hollywood went into the creation of such an image, it is based on the commonly articulated myth of the typical American small town. Did these kinds of places ever exist? Do they still? The short answer to the first question is yes, at least in many of our collective memories and past experiences. As to the second question, the answer is perhaps a more qualified yes. Stereotypes are based to some extent on reality, and this common myth is rooted in some historical truth about small cities and towns. In his edited volume on small towns, Thomas Wheeler argues that

> It [the book] asserts that small-town values are a continuing heritage, important to an age of bigness that has swept aside many

> of these towns and swallowed up small communities. . . . Rather than smug or self-satisfied, sectional in concept or suspect of outsiders, the towns were microcosms of a growing nation testing its strength and expanding its outlook. . . . The towns are an example of a life in which commerce and education, work and pastime were in unity (1964, 5).

The contributors to Wheeler's edited volume describe with considerable sentimentality the images of their small towns in ways that contribute to the idea of loss of place and values as these towns have aged.

Other, less sanguine, studies have pushed the argument that small towns have passed their zenith and are on the downward path toward obsolescence. The classic work by Arthur Vidich and Joseph Bensman, *Small Town in Mass Society* (1958) discusses the numerous ways in which the fictional upstate New York town of "Springdale" had been negatively affected by the powerful urban forces operating in a centrifugal manner to pull population and economic resources away from Springdale and other small cities like it. Martindale and Hanson (1969) detail similar trends affecting the small western Minnesota town of Benson, and referring to the same western agricultural region of Minnesota 20 years later, Amato and Meyer (1993) wrote of what they viewed as an inevitable decline that had begun in the 1960s and seemed destined to continue into the future. The region's troubles stemmed from several challenging facts, including "a disproportionate number of old people, with no source of income other than Social Security; dying towns, which steadily lost not only population but also their schools and businesses; an absence of good jobs; and a whole generation of youth who were emigrating because of low-paying jobs" (12).

A *New York Times* reporter and a *Washington Post* reporter reached the same conclusions almost simultaneously about the rural towns in Nebraska. After a research trip to western Nebraska, Dirk Johnson concluded that media images championing the superiority of urban lifestyles had seriously undermined the ability of small towns to keep youth from leaving, and that several young adults he talked to indicated that no job was good enough to stick around a small town for (Johnson, 1994). After his examination of the central Nebraskan town of Anselmo, Heath reported that since 1960 half the population as well as the bank, newspaper, school, and many businesses had left Anselmo, and further decline was imminent as most of the entire high school graduating class of 1995 had already left for jobs in other places (1995, 33–34).

In their study of 34 geographically and economically diverse small- and medium-sized cities, Mayer and Greenberg (2001) identified some common factors that combined to help undermine the ability of these communities to respond to the economic shocks in the 1970s and 1980s that upset their long-standing equilibriums. All of these small communities described themselves as having been highly dependent on either one industry or a small number of companies for employment and economic vitality. When jobs were plentiful during the boom years, the cities prospered, but each one suffered serious decline when these major employers downsized or closed. As the authors note, a consistent theme sounded in the interviews with local officials in these cities was that a delayed response, in some cases as long as 30 years, contributed to the economic setback (207). Complacency and paralysis brought on by disbelief led these communities to languish in a continual state of decline and stagnation. Exacerbating the delayed responses to the economic shocks in these communities were two other commonalities: environmental stigmas and labor barriers. Many of the predominant industries in these once vibrant towns were mining or heavy industry operations that left behind serious environmental degradation in the form of brownfields and other eyesores when they closed. Trying to market their towns to potential companies was difficult when the costs of setting up a factory or enterprise in a relatively clean "greenfield" was a much less expensive proposition compared to cleaning up the old industrial brownfield to make it ready for redevelopment. Moreover, many of these cities did not have zoning laws that would facilitate brownfield redevelopment. As to labor barriers, the older industries tended to be ones that had unionized workforces with relatively good wages and benefits. As the new economy began to take shape, officials with companies seeking to build new facilities or expand existing ones looked to areas of the country with lower unionization levels and/or right-to-work laws that tended to weaken labor unions. Other barriers cited in some communities were lack of infrastructure such as poor access to major highways or a lack of appropriate topography for easy industrial site development (Mayer & Greenberg, 2001, 210–212).

Another extensive study that contributes to the narrative about the fading away of small towns is *Main Street Blues* by Richard Davies. Focusing on his boyhood home of Camden, Ohio, Davies paints a sentimental picture of Camden's earlier days, calling it a typical Midwestern farm town with a few "mom and pop" businesses, a weekly newspaper, and a part-time police chief. It was a town in which crime was virtually unknown, neighbors assisted each other when needed, and where everyone's life was an open book, but hurtful gossip did not get too much out of hand (1998, ix–x). Davies argues that, as has happened in many other small towns, modern urban America had pretty much passed Camden by. Factors such as being abandoned by the railroad, no entrance or exit ramps onto or off of the interstate, economic restructuring during deindustrialization of the 1970s and 1980s, and generational outmigration had all combined to make Camden and similar small towns appear to loosen their hold on life.

From Davies's vantage point of the mid-1990s, just after the decade of the 1980s saw the climax of massive economic restructuring and deindustrialization, particularly in the Rust Belt, this conclusion certainly seems understandable. And it holds true for many small towns today. But, just as Davies was wrapping up his analysis of Camden's decline, forces were starting to coalesce in a way that would reenergize many small cities and towns.

The Revival of Small Towns

The forces just discussed that combined to make it very difficult for small cities to thrive, or even to survive, during the mid to latter part of the 20th century were very hard to combat. For some small cities during these years, a combination of hard work and luck resulted in their ability to at least slow their decline, if only temporarily. But for many small communities a slow fade from their former glory continued. As the 21st century approached, however, the accepted narrative of inevitable small-town decline gradually began to be challenged by a more positive story of small-town revival. Beginning in the 1990s, a triumvirate of factors coalesced that began to reverse the downward trends of economic stagnation and decay across small-town America. The first was the general shift nationally from an industrial- and manufacturing-based economy to an economy based on technology and service. With this shift came new opportunities in the form of jobs for small-town citizens, and although these jobs often did not compare in terms of pay and benefits with the previous manufacturing jobs, they helped stabilize and improve the negative longstanding trends of business and employment losses.

A second factor contributing to the resurgence has been the advances in telecommunications technology, which has made it much easier for professionals to work away from their main corporate offices, and for more sophisticated global businesses to be run from far-flung areas of the country that would not have been conceivable a decade or two ago (Kotkin, 2012, 3).

The third, and perhaps most key, dynamic has been migration. Johnson (2006) points out that after a long period of outmigration affecting rural counties in the United States, greater growth in the 1990s was fueled by increased in-migration (10). A considerable amount of this in-migration has been a large influx of Hispanics moving into small towns, particularly in the Midwest and Plains states (Sulzberger, 2011), that has occurred during the first decade of the 21st century. In western Kansas, as every county was seeing a decline in the non-Hispanic white population between 2000 and 2010, a majority of counties also saw double-digit increases in their Hispanic populations. These increases offset the declines in several counties and small towns, resulting in positive growth rates for the decade. Ulysses, Kansas, is one such town. Still relying largely on agricultural and natural resources such as oil and gas for its livelihood, its complexion has changed dramatically, with more than two thirds of its school-age population now Hispanic (Sulzberger, 2011, A16). Although the native white residents are not all in agreement about what this shift means for their community, one thing they do agree on is that without this influx of immigrants the town would probably continue its slow fade out of existence. The population growth has been fairly steady, at about 3%, but this has been due to the growth of the Hispanic population by 35%. Bazine, Kansas, is another prairie town experiencing such change. One of the smallest of the small towns historically, its population ballooned to 334 because of an increase in Hispanic residents—from 4 in 2000 to 86 in 2010. The school-age population increased from 35 to 46 (Sulzberger, 2011, A16).

Several scholars have taken a careful look at the potential consequences of the new immigration patterns in small-town America. Johnson and Lichter (2008) point out that during the 1990s almost 26% of the nonmetro population growth was Hispanic, and between 2000 and 2006, their share jumped to 45%. Much of this was due to rural Hispanic boomtowns elicited by consolidation and relocation of the meatpacking industry (Kandel & Parrado, 2005). In the wake of this transformation, many immigrants are arriving in small towns straight from their home countries rather than going through a traditional urban gateway and typically have very little familiarity with local customs and culture. This fact creates significant challenges for the many small communities experiencing these trends. Iowa is typical in this regard with an 84% increase in the Hispanic population during the first decade of the 21st century, much of it concentrated in small towns across the state (Carr, Lichter, & Kefalas, 2012, 41). Overall, as many as 221 nonmetro areas would have experienced population declines over the decade without the increased Hispanic influx in the first 5 years resulting in ballooning school enrollments in many small Midwestern cities (Johnson & Lichter, 2008).

This demographic upheaval has had both positive and negative effects on small communities. Carr et al. point out the enhanced tax base and increased local consumer spending in the housing and retail markets that come along with the increased population (2012, 42–43). Studies have also shown that compared to earlier migrants, the newer Hispanic immigrants are more likely to be younger, married with children, and ready to settle down. Additionally, Hispanic women tend to have higher fertility rates than non-Hispanic whites (Parrado, 2011), whose fertility rates are usually lower than needed to replace typical population loss in smaller communities (Carr et al., 2012, 43). With the increased demand for services comes the potential for community services and resources to be overwhelmed, particularly because many of the new immigrants tend to be younger and on the lower end of the economic spectrum. Immigration has frequently been rapid and unexpected as well, creating immediate tensions and challenges of integration and tendencies toward segregation (Carr et al., 2012, 43).

Community responses to these new realities created by immigration have been quite varied. For a while, the state of Iowa, and several small cities there, in particular, aggressively pursued a policy of encouraging immigration as a way to deal with the labor shortages they were experiencing in the 1990s and 2000s. A less positive response to the rapid increase in Hispanic immigration is the famous example of Hazelton, Pennsylvania, which saw dramatic population increases during the last decade that created tensions between the new immigrants and the native Whites. In response, the city council passed a heavy-handed antiimmigration ordinance that among other things imposed a $1,000-a-day fine for any landlord who rented to an illegal immigrant (Carr et al., 2012, 45–47).

In one of the most comprehensive studies of these trends, titled *Remaking the Heartland*, Robert Wuthnow points out that in the nine states that make up his definition of America's Middle West—Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, Minnesota, Missouri, North and South Dakota, Arkansas, and Oklahoma—population in the last half of the 20th century grew less than 50% of the national rate, and thousands of towns declined economically (2011, 1). In spite of this, however, by the beginning of the current century the heartland was not only surviving but flourishing. Economic productivity had grown at rates similar to those of the rest of the nation. The region contained some of the nation's best elementary and secondary schools, as well as institutions of higher learning, and was known for its biomedical and bioscience technology and research (Wuthnow, 2011, 1). In short, the heartland region had remade itself, certainly not without significant costs to millions of people, but the change that had become manifest contrasted significantly with the old narrative of dying towns and stagnating economies. Wuthnow outlines how the cities and towns in these states took advantage of the three factors discussed previously in ways that community leaders were able to leverage their own assets against the larger forces that were at play relative to the national economic transformation to service-based industries, advancements in telecommunications technology, and migration. Added to this was a significant shift in the global importance of agribusiness that affected the states in this region in a disproportionate and positive way (Wuthnow, 2011, 172).

Community leaders in many of these Middle West communities took advantage of these larger forces to try to improve the economic and social conditions of their cities, but as Jack Schultz has argued in *Boomtown, USA* (2004), it takes a strategic approach for success to occur in small cities, and successful small cities tend to share similar characteristics. He coins the term "agurb," which he defines as "a prospering rural town with a tie to agriculture and a location outside a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) . . . [that] has to have experienced growth in population or employment from 1990 to 2000 and have per-capita income growing at more than 2% per year from 1989 to 1999" (2004, xiii). Identifying almost 400 agurbs, Schultz argues that they are characterized by a certain positive attitude that clearly sets them apart from other small cities. Their leaders attempt to articulate a vision for growth, leverage their local resources, encourage entrepreneurialism, endeavor to maintain considerable local control over development and growth, engage in branding and marketing activities, and embrace the ups and downs of successes and failures rather than giving up after one failure (22). Further, arguing that all towns tend to have a certain personality that reflects the mindsets of the people who inhabit them, he proposes a typology of town personality types based on animal characteristics—Mules, Moles, Jackals, and Eagles (Schultz, 2004, 30–32).

One repercussion of the deindustrialization and economic restructuring that occurred in many communities across the country in the last half of the 20th century was a decrease in the number of corporate owners and managers who were local. Without a natural stake in the community that comes from growing up there, or having lived there a long time, it is easier for nonnative corporate CEOs to ignore how a particular town's prosperity might be intimately connected to the company's decision to stay or leave. With this in mind, successful small cities do all they can to achieve and maintain as much local control over major economic development decisions as they can. A great example of this commitment is Effingham, Illinois, Jack Schultz's hometown, where he and some local residents decided to build and operate a short-line railroad to offset much of the consolidation and out-of-town decision making that was taking place in the railroad industry and threatening to leave Effingham without rail service (Schultz 2004, 95).

In their study of local responses to the downsizing or closing of major employers in five rural communities in the upper Midwest, Leistritz and Root (1999) found a mixture of efforts that community leaders took to reduce the negative repercussions of the economic shocks. However, the communities that were more successful in this regard shared certain characteristics, including having a local or regional economic development agency in place prior to the closure and a cohesive group of community and agency leaders who did not get bogged down in turf issues. There tended to be a dual focus on assisting displaced workers while also promoting economic development, and substantial lead time was given to the community prior to the closing or downsizing (Leistritz & Root, 1999, 22–23).

Mayer and Greenberg report similar findings regarding the responses of the 34 communities in their study to the economic shocks they faced. In spite of delayed reactions and the environmental and labor stigmas that combined to make it difficult for the communities to rebound, once they began to formulate strategic plans about how to diversify the local economy, deal with the brownfield redevelopment concerns, and push for community involvement in ways that stimulated pride and optimism, they began to experience success, though sometimes limited depending on the severity of challenges mounted after the major employers left the community (2001, 212–215).

What Schultz refers to as "embracing the teeter-totter factor" (2004, 112) is also argued to be fundamental to how small towns can be successful and experience progress and growth. What he means by this is the notion that a small shift in one direction might be enough to make a negative or positive impact on a community. It does not necessarily take huge paradigm shifts in thinking or approach to result in positive (or negative) outcomes, and Schultz argues that this is good news for small communities that might feel overwhelmed by the challenges they face. A great example he provides is North Adams, Massachusetts, whose largest employer in the 1950s was an electronics manufacturing firm, Sprague Electric, which employed 4,000 people. However, in the 1980s, when Japan began to dominate the electronics industry, Sprague closed the factory, and by 1990 North Adams had the second lowest per capita income in the state (Schultz, 2004, 113). Rather than burying their heads in the sand, or thinking they had to work a miracle, a group of civic leaders moved to reinvent the town based on the emerging new technology of the Internet. A local resident founded a company that helped people build their own websites, and today North Adams is one of the most successful small towns in the state. The former Sprague site is now the largest contemporary art museum in the world (Schultz, 2004, 113).

Large Units in Small Jurisdictions: Superstores, Big Business, and Prisons

In their classic study of the fictional small town of Springdale, Vidich and Bensman (1958) point out how nonlocal organizations can pose significant constraints on the ability of small towns to control their own economic development and planning processes, thereby having potentially negative effects on the character and quality of life in small cities. Although not entirely at the mercy of these nonlocal forces, as Schultz (2004) points out, many small towns still find it very difficult to fight the larger pressures emanating from outside their jurisdictions, and some analysts would argue that the typical small town is even more dependent on nonlocal organizations today compared to the 1950s (e.g., see Halebsky, 2009, 4). In this regard, what Halebsky refers to as "community-corporate conflicts" have become fairly common phenomena affecting communities all over the country, but particularly smaller ones. These involve some sort of protest or organized effort against an action (or inaction) taken by a large corporation that is perceived to have a negative impact on the local community. These conflicts can be triggered by plant closings, disagreements over the costs of attracting and keeping corporations, environmental contamination by corporate activities, and corporate development activities that significantly reshape the character of neighborhoods and entire towns (Halebsky, 2009, 6–7).

One example of these conflicts that has affected hundreds of small towns in the last 25 years is the controversy over the building of a large retail store, or superstore, such as a Wal-Mart, Rite-Aid, or Home Depot. According to Halebsky, the seemingly ubiquitous efforts by these "big box" retailers to locate their stores in small communities across the country stems from a number of factors, including significant changes in the retail industry itself, changes in the relationships between big retailers and product manufacturers, extremely aggressive retail development practices, and favorable zoning and tax laws (Halebsky, 2009, 27–36).

During the last half of the 20th century, the American economy saw significant restructuring across all sectors, and retail was no exception. Long a labor-intensive industry with many small firms existing among larger companies, retail began to be a more concentrated sector with the advent of major technological innovations such as computerized inventory control and centralized accounting and ordering processes brought about by such techniques as bar coding, scanning, and just-in-time delivery systems. As these expensive technological advances took hold, the larger retailers had an advantage over the smaller ones, resulting in a tremendous amount of consolidation and merger activity across the sector that produced fewer, but larger, retail corporations. Market concentration has become so great in retail that 9 of the top 50 U.S. corporations are retail entities, and many of them are global conglomerates with operations in several countries (Halebsky, 2009, 28).

This concentration of the retail sector has also changed relationships among retail entities and their supplying manufacturers such that a single retailer can account for a very high percentage of manufacturer's total output. This makes it difficult for the manufacturer to set its wholesale prices high enough to generate margins that are adequately profitable without risking the loss of the huge retailer's account. Additionally, some retailers have so much clout that they can avoid the large manufacturers altogether and contract with independent suppliers to have goods made and packaged specifically for them (Halebsky, 2009, 32–33).

With all of these changes in the retail sector came the emergence of the superstores themselves. Needing large plots of land, usually on the outskirts of communities, retail corporations took advantage of the typically cheaper real estate, access to major railroads and highways, and less restrictive zoning laws in these areas to quickly put up these stores that are essentially nothing more than very large barns, and thus fairly inexpensive to build. With several states adopting restrictions on property taxes during the last 30 years, local communities have had to find a source of revenue to substitute for the loss in property taxes; sales tax has been the most popular option, further increasing the likelihood that retail superstores are often seen as key to a community's continued fiscal health (Halebsky, 2009, 34–35).

Of course, the poster child for this process is Wal-Mart, and several books have been written that are highly critical of Wal-Mart, specifically (e.g., Bianco, 2006; Ortega, 1998), but many other big box store corporations operate under the same set of principles. The key point here is that all of this sea change in the retail sector has affected small towns more significantly than larger cities because of the relative scale of it in relation to the size of the towns affected. The changes have not all been negative necessarily. In fact, an ongoing debate exists in the literature, as well as on the ground in communities around the country, concerning the pros and cons of superstores. With regard to Wal-Mart as the archetype, the advantages that are usually touted for small communities include improved shopping as a result of lower prices and a greater selection of goods and products, an increase in jobs, and an increase in tax revenues. In his review of the literature regarding these claims, Halebsky reports that evidence supporting them is not overwhelming, and actually runs counter to the claims, particularly regarding job increases (2009, 52–55).

The alleged negative effects of Wal-Mart sitings include the potential loss of local independent retailers, the displacement of higher-wage jobs with lower-wage jobs, downward pressure on local wages, reductions in tax revenue, and the concomitant erosion of a community's quality of life, including its stock of social capital and level of civic engagement (Halebsky, 2009, 55–58). Some support for these allegations has been shown to exist in a number of studies. Superstores also contribute to rural sprawl and a diminution of the unique character and appearance of local communities, thereby potentially undermining the sense of well-being for many residents.

For all of these reasons, both the pro and con assertions, the superstore sitings, particularly Wal-Marts, often become lightning rods for significant community conflict in small towns across the country. For this study, it does not matter who's wrong or right regarding the harm-to-benefit ratio of superstores. What is important is that the issue frequently becomes a significant community controversy because a major venue for resolving the controversy is often one or more of the local city boards or commissions under review here. Most obviously this would be the Planning Commission, but often the Zoning/Appeals Board will also be involved in the decision making surrounding the question of how to deal with the issues that are embedded in such a large economic development project.

In addition to superstores, several small communities around the country have experienced the considerable upheaval associated with the building of a prison in their towns. In recent years, this has often been a result of intense lobbying by local leaders of state and/or federal officials aimed at securing the prison. As Williams (2011) points out, once considered high on anyone's NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) list, or a Lulu (Locally Undesirable Land Use) for years, prisons have now become viewed by struggling small cities as significant economic development opportunities. In his study of controversial land uses such as prisons, landfills, and incinerators, Rasmussen (1992) hypothesized that opposition to these kinds of projects would be weakest when the perceived risk of the project is low and the perceived economic benefit is high. Using data from 33 siting decisions regarding prison and waste disposal facilities around the country in the late 1980s, his results indicated that indeed NIMBY opposition was strongest when the perception of risk from the project was high and the perceived economic benefits were low and that prisons tended to be preferred over waste disposal sites (Rasmussen, 1992, 130–132).

Significant changes in American criminal justice policy during the 1980s and 1990s led to a boom in the growth of prison populations, thus requiring the building of more facilities to house them. Adoptions of mandatory sentencing guidelines, including the controversial three-strike laws in states like California (e.g., Gerber, Lupia, McCubbins, & Roderick Kiewiet, 2001, 60–70) and the federal government's War on Drugs combined to quadruple the number of citizens needing to be imprisoned now compared to the number in 1980 (Williams, 2011, 2).

As economic downturns occurred in small towns due to deindustrialization and sector changes, many communities viewed a new prison as the panacea to their economic woes. This is somewhat understandable because the benefits that were frequently touted included the immediate influx of several, albeit temporary, local construction jobs; the creation of new decent paying permanent jobs; opportunities for local businesses to pursue contracts with the new prison for services and goods; and in the case of private prisons increased revenues from property taxes (Yanarella & Blankenship, 2006, 111–114). Unfortunately, in many instances the hoped for economic salvation did not materialize, certainly not to the degree that was anticipated. As Yanarella and Blankenship report, these benefits were oversold and underdelivered. Many prisons were constructed by national companies who brought in their own workers from the outside, effectively excluding local construction laborers from the jobs. Very few of the higher-paying jobs in the prisons' administrations tended to go to local citizens. Many of the goods and services needed by the prisons have tended to be supplied by large national companies who can afford to manage the supply chains necessary to give the prisons the low bids for the contracts. And while some marginal increase in local property taxes has occurred where private prisons have been built, the amount has not been enough to offset local government budget challenges as hoped. What many small towns have reaped as a result of the prison-building race have been low-wage service jobs at the prison such as janitorial and food service positions (Yanarella & Blankenship, 2006, 111–114).

For many small towns, another challenge of the prison boom is more cultural or social. With many of the prison jobs going to outsiders, a divide develops between them and the local natives that is hard to bridge. In his study of the prison-siting cases in Beeville, Texas, and Florence, Colorado, Williams (2011) highlights this issue with a quote from one native citizen of Florence who says the following about the prison employees. "They aren't