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# Themes in community resilience: A meta-synthesis of 16 years of Idaho Community Reviews

Joshua Hightree<sup>a,b</sup>, Andrew Kliskey<sup>b</sup>, Lorie Higgins<sup>b,c</sup>, Lilian Alessa<sup>b</sup>, Tammi Laninga<sup>b,d</sup> and Jon Barrett<sup>b,e,f</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Bioregional Planning and Community Design, University of Idaho, Moscow, ID, USA; <sup>b</sup>Center for Resilient Communities, University of Idaho, Moscow, ID, USA; <sup>c</sup>Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology, University of Idaho, Moscow, ID, USA; <sup>d</sup>Environmental Studies, Western Washington University, Bellingham, WA, USA; <sup>e</sup>Idaho Rural Partnership, Boise, ID, USA; <sup>f</sup>Clearstory Studios, Boise, ID, USA

## ABSTRACT

To address socioeconomic challenges in rural Idaho, some communities have participated in a community review process through Idaho Rural Partnership's Community Review program. To understand patterns and trends in perceptions of local assets and challenges, we used a mixed-methods approach, including aggregation and statistical analysis of survey data collected over the course of 15 years, and qualitative analysis of open-ended survey questions, focus group data, and assessment reports. Respondents were most dissatisfied with employment and availability of higher education, and most satisfied with items indicative of strengths in bonding social and cultural capital. Satisfaction for some community characteristics was found to vary by time, remoteness, and population size. Results aligned well with other research on rural wellbeing. Findings can help direct community planners and residents addressing local issues to develop response strategies, such as increased focus on infrastructure, health, community branding and placemaking, and building local leadership capacity.

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## Introduction

In industrialized, globalized societies, rural communities face a range of challenges to their social, economic, and environmental viability (Brown & Swanson, 2003; Cordes, 1989). These challenges include remoteness or industrial isolation, global competition, rapid demographic change, outmigration of youth, and a decreasing agricultural workforce. Economic factors described by central place or location theory often favor clustering of businesses, human and intellectual capital, educational resources, and many forms of infrastructure, which favors more urban and connected communities (Anselin, 2003; Audretsch, 2003; Krugman, 1999). Agricultural and natural resource-based industries once sustained rural communities in industrialized societies, but with technological advances, these industries have become increasingly consolidated and disbursed globally (Busch & Bain, 2004; Irwin, Isserman,

Kilkenny, & Partridge, 2010; Radin et al, 1996). The numbers of farm households in agricultural areas have declined, shrinking many rural communities' population and economies, resulting in challenges such as the rural brain drain (Artz, 2003; Artz & Yu, 2009; Estes, Estes, Johnson, Edgar, & Shoulders, 2016).

At the same time, some rural communities have experienced population growth as a result of amenity migration (Gosnell & Abrams, 2011) or due to their proximity to growing urban areas. While creating opportunities, growth brings a different set of challenges, including gentrification and income inequality (Golding, 2014). Even as global competition increases, transportation and telecommunication infrastructure and wage disparities have allowed rural communities to more easily compete in global commerce (Cronin, McGovern, Miller, & Parker, 1995; Munnich & Schrock, 2003). In response to this nexus of opportunities and challenges, 40 State Rural Development Councils (SRDCs) were organized across the US as part of the 1990 President's Initiative on Rural America with a mandate to establish their own mission, structure, and action plans. Several states, including Idaho, created some form of community development assessment process.

Now part of the National Rural Development Partnership (NRDP), Idaho Rural Partnership (IRP) facilitates "innovative collaborations to strengthen communities and improve life in rural Idaho" (Idaho Rural Partnership [IRP], 2016). To fulfill this mission, IRP's signature community development assessment program is the Idaho Community Review Program. Community reviews (CR) are designed to provide host communities with systematic information from external community development professionals, create a forum to express internal leadership viewpoints and citizen feedback, recommend resources, and provide follow-up as needed. To understand patterns and trends in the perceived range of assets available to a community and the challenges facing rural Idaho residents, a meta-synthesis was completed of CR reports and of city-wide surveys generated for 32 CRs over a 16-year period. The Community Capitals Framework (CCF) and community resilience literature provide a theoretical basis for this article. We also provide context by comparing our findings with previous studies of rural community resident satisfaction surveys and attributes of thriving towns (Cordes, 1989; Luther & Wall, 2008)

### ***Theoretical overview***

This article addresses three related research questions: (1) How do rural residents perceive local challenges? (2) What are the range of assets available to address local and regional challenges? and (3) What role do community characteristics play in making a community more or less resilient to change? Because the data-set spans 16 years and an entire state, spatial and temporal patterns in perceptions, available assets, and community attributes are also identified. Several existing theoretical frameworks and literature on qualitative and quantitative approaches help us explore these patterns and questions.

Initially developed as a way to analyze how communities function as a system or set of interconnected systems, CCF is now widely used by scholars and practitioners to identify community systems' relationships and measure the success of community development initiatives (Emery, Higgins, Chazdon, & Hansen, 2015; Flora & Flora, 2013). Capital is defined here as: "any resource or asset invested to create new resources" (Flora & Flora, 2013, pp. 10, 11). Flora and Flora (2013) found that most successful communities paid attention to all seven types of capital: natural, built, human, social, cultural, political, and financial. CCF

focuses on interactions between different types of capital, as well as how investments in one type of capital can “spiral up” levels of others (Emery & Flora, 2006). For example, investments in social, cultural, and human capital, usually described in terms of relationships or networks, have been shown to lead to enhancements in other forms of capital, including financial and built capitals (Hansen Kollock, Flage, Chazdon, Paine, & Higgins, 2012). Social capital has been subdivided into a number of types; this analysis focuses on bonding (ties between individuals within a group) and bridging (ties between groups) social capital (Magis, 2010). Small communities are known for high levels of bonding capital, tightly connected people and groups within the community, but isolation from urban centers, state capitals, and available services leads to a dearth of bridging networks connecting communities and groups to each other and outside resources (Flora & Flora, 2013).

While community resilience has primarily centered on catastrophic changes such as those resulting from natural hazards and disasters (Cutter, 2008; Norris, 2008; Sherrieb, 2010), there is a growing body of research dealing with dramatic community level changes resulting from social and economic drivers (Magis, 2010). A broadened definition of community resilience is “the existence, development, and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise” (Magis, 2010, pp. 401, 402; Steiner & Cleary, 2014). Community resilience is therefore also concerned with understanding positive community-level responses to adversity, including strengthening social capital, networks, and support (Berkes & Ross, 2013; Kirmayer, 2011).

The concepts of community resilience and community capital are both predicated on community resources and engaging those resources for community wellbeing, recognizing the role of community members to leverage such resources, and consequently to develop a community’s capacity to respond to change (Buikstra et al., 2010; Magis, 2010). While CCF can be applied to community development broadly, community resilience focuses specifically on a community’s capacity to adapt to change and uncertainty. Development and refinement of a range of community capitals is therefore a key step for building community resilience – communities that learn to live with change and uncertainty and also build and engage the capacity to thrive in that uncertainty become resilient (Buikstra et al., 2010; Kulig, Edge, Townshend, Lightfoot, & Reimer, 2013).

Throughout this analysis, community capitals are used to indicate presence or absence of community assets according to survey satisfaction ratings and content analysis of CR reports, and to understand opportunities for improved community resilience and satisfaction with a range of amenities and services. These conceptualizations of what it takes for small communities to thrive align well with the “20 Clues” work conducted by the Heartland Center for Leadership Development. These clues, elucidated with case studies in Clues to Rural Community Survival (Luther & Wall, 2008), tie together resilience and various community capitals with on-the-ground strategies. Heartland Center research focuses on small US towns that have not only survived, but thrived in the wake of dramatic economic change because they invest resources with the future in mind, embrace inclusive public involvement in community decisions, and have a strong sense of self-efficacy, among other attributes.

Another pertinent ongoing effort is in Nebraska, where University of Nebraska-Lincoln regularly conducts state-wide surveys, with questions similar to those asked in the Idaho CR survey (Vogt, Burkhart-Kriesel, Cantrell, & Lubben, 2014; Vogt, Burkhart-Kriesel, Cantrell, Lubben, & McElravy Jr., 2016). By comparing CR data with published results of the Nebraska

Rural Poll as well as the Clues list, we can identify patterns of strength and relative weakness and provide additional corroboration for this synthesis.

## Methods

Methods were designed to create a meta-synthesis of results from community reviews for 32 different Idaho communities conducted over a 16-year time period. Meta-synthesis is a mixed methods approach that integrates results from a number of different but interrelated qualitative and quantitative studies using an interpretive, rather than an aggregating, approach (Walsh & Downe, 2005). The CR studies for Idaho communities include both qualitative and quantitative results for which meta-synthesis is well suited (Urquhart, 2010). In contrast, meta-analysis approaches are applicable only to quantitative results, allowing analysis of the magnitude of effects for aggregated studies based on a standardized set of statistical techniques (Koricheva, Gurevitch, & Mengersen, 2013; Paterson, Thorne, Canam, & Jillings, 2001), and thus not appropriate for this article. The meta-synthesis used here is built on three elements: the community review process, questionnaire survey instruments, and the analytical process.

### Community reviews

In Idaho, each CR is initiated by a mayor, city council, chamber of commerce representative, or some other concerned community member, with submission of an application to IRP. Up to three CRs lasting two to three days are conducted each year. This analysis incorporates CRs conducted from 1999 to 2016. Qualifying communities contain less than 10,000 residents, though some may grow beyond that after reviews are conducted, or are in close proximity to larger urban population centers. The application form includes, among other things, a choice of three focus areas that determine formation of visiting teams and on which the subsequent review is centered. Each visiting team is comprised of professionals from a variety of local, state, and federal entities, with a corresponding home team selected by and drawn from within the community.

Surveys are completed and responses are tabulated and shared with home and visiting teams before the community visit in order to provide insight into residents' levels of satisfaction with various aspects of community services and attributes. Activities during visitation include a bus tour, town hall meetings to gather additional public input, focus team tours and group interviews called "listening sessions," and visiting team work sessions to compile and summarize insights.

### Community surveys

In each CR process, approximately one month before visitation, surveys are sent to every mailing or water billing address in the municipality, except in larger communities where a random sample of addresses receives surveys. While not all addresses are viable, this approach, along with an online survey and paper copies made available in public offices, has been an effective means of gathering as many completed surveys as possible, with response rates among the 32 communities varying from 9.4 to 47.5% and an average of 27.5%. This average is typical, with the range reflecting non-response bias in some

communities and increased response rates in later years when an online option was available to potential respondents (Kaplowitz, Hadlock, & Levine, 2004). There are other challenges with the data-set, including survey bias.

Two sources of potential survey bias include survey question selection bias (a form of measurement error) and demographic bias (or non-response bias specific to certain demographics as discussed in the Results section). Survey question selection bias originates in part from customization of surveys to suit each community's circumstances. In other words, survey questions often differ from community to community, which complicates the analysis as described below.

### Analytical process

This analysis attempts to enlarge sample size and spatial and temporal sample frames beyond which a single CR survey can provide, but since surveys were not conducted using a standard sampling framework, no attempt is made to perform null hypothesis significance testing. Rather, aggregation and summary are the aim. Analysis is based on transcription of aggregate data from 32 surveys suitable for the analysis producing 226 unique survey questions (an average of 72 questions per survey).

The analysis included four distinct steps:

*Step 1:* Raw survey data were available in a variety of formats and in five different Likert scales. These different scales were converted to a 1–5 scale measuring satisfaction. For example, 1–3 scales and 1–7 scales were transformed to 1–5 scales (as described in Table 1). Of 32 community surveys, 8 used terms other than “satisfaction” and related terminology (e.g. “good, fair, poor”). Included in this analysis are five transformed 1–7 scale surveys and three 1–3 scale surveys.

*Step 2:* A “Single Survey Value” (a number combining all responses from one community survey for one question) was calculated from: (a) conversion to a Likert scale; (b) calculation of the percentage of response corresponding to Likert scale item; and (c) calculation of the weighted average (Single Survey Value). The sum of these products was then divided by the total percentage of response *excluding missing or N/A responses*. For example, 3% = 1, 15% = 2, 47% = 3, 20% = 4, 5% = 5, and N/A = 10% would become a value of 3.10.

For a given community's survey, total percent response varied by question. In other words, different questions had different response rates within a particular survey. Response rates per question were on average 87%, ranging from a minimum response rate of 33% on “Availability of mental health care” in one community to 100% on most other questions.

**Table 1.** Likert rating scale conversion methodology to 1–5 scale.

Raw data Likert scale	Type	Conversion to 1 to 5 Likert scale
1–7	Very Poor to Very Good	2 (1–7scale) distributed proportionally between 1 and 2 (1–5scale) 6 (1–7scale) distributed proportionally between 4 and 5 (1–5 scale)
1–5 1–3	Highly Dissatisfied to Highly Satisfied Good to Poor	No conversion [0.6*Poor = 1 (1–5scale)], [0.4*Poor + 0.2*Fair = 2 (1–5 scale)], [0.6*Fair = 3 (1–5 scale)], [0.2*Fair + 0.4*Good = 4 (1–5 scale)], and [0.6*Good = 5 (1–5 scale)]
1–5 or 1–7	Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree	Treated as though a 1–5 or 1–7 scale, but in some cases, the question wording required the values to be reversed 5->1

*Step 3:* Creation of meta-questions addressed inconsistencies in survey question wording and was key to this analytical process. Single Survey Values were collated into a table with 226 questions listed in rows and 32 communities in columns. This data-set included questions posed in only one survey, similar questions posed in multiple ways in one survey, and a variety of other combinations. To arrive at meta-questions, the following was done:

- (1) Where multiple questions applied to a very similar topic in the same survey they were averaged, and wording reflecting both was adopted (Sowmya et al., 2008).
- (2) Where different wordings of essentially the same question were found in different surveys, the more prevalent question wording was adopted for both.
- (3) After the previous two combinations, any meta-questions that represented six or more communities were retained for the analysis.

This produced 71 meta-questions, each with between 6 and 30 communities represented (an average of 38 meta-questions per community), used in the analysis. This method did not screen low response rate questions or surveys, and the time frame spanned 16 years. Additionally, there was non-response bias (described in the findings section). In short, though there are statistical deficiencies, a high level of reliability and validity of this method of analyzing imperfect survey data is demonstrated by congruency with other analytical components and research, including content analysis of CR reports, 20 Clues research, and Nebraska Rural Poll survey results (Vogt et al., 2014, 2016). Alignment with CR report content provides internal validation, while consistency with findings of other similar research efforts provides external validation (Burns, 1999).

*Step 4:* Single Survey Values were averaged for each meta-question using the 6 to 30 communities' responses producing a combined score. These were ranked to aid in determining themes.

Each *community* was weighted equally, regardless of how many survey responses were received or population. However, results were also tabulated by weighting each survey *response* equally, and thematic results were similar. Weighting communities equally allowed examination of recurrence of themes in Idaho's different communities, which is analytically preferable to focusing on themes throughout the population of rural inhabitants who were more concentrated in a few of the largest communities surveyed. After ranking meta-questions by combined score, themes were generated by assessing those meta-questions above and below one standard deviation from the median/mean.

Assessment of community perceptions was corroborated using triangulation of closed-end survey questions, open-ended survey responses included in CR reports, and CR report content. Text from all CR reports was coded to categories aligning with survey meta-questions and organized in a spreadsheet. Supporting quotations from surveys and reports are provided, enhancing validity and reliability of the quantitative analysis (Patton, 1999). Results were not weighted, as CR reports (and usually the surveys) did not contain adequate information to weigh by age, gender, or race (Rubin, 1987). The 71 meta-questions, ranked by their combined scores, result in a normal distribution centering around 3.02 on a 1–5 scale; the median is also 3.02, and the standard deviation is 0.46. There are on average 17 communities and over 3900 survey respondents represented for each meta-question's combined score.



## Findings

The synthesis involved 32 surveys with an average of 217 responses (median of 184 and range of 1000) and an average response rate of 27%. Included communities are from every region in Idaho, though southwestern and central regions were less represented due to lack of rurality and fewer community reviews conducted there. In addition to expected persistent concerns with economic factors, strongest patterns of satisfaction and dissatisfaction are related to educational and recreational opportunities, communal relationships, and shared values. Other key findings include changes in satisfaction levels with community attributes over time and patterns related to remoteness and population level (Figures 1(a) and 1(b)).

### *Dissatisfaction with employment and higher education availability*

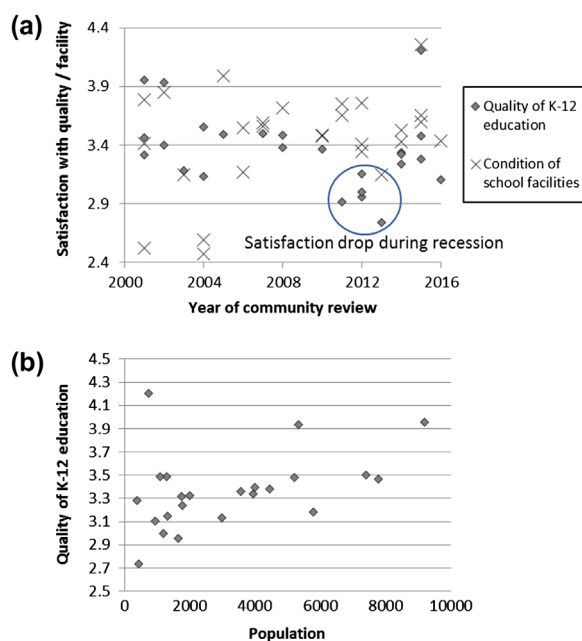
Across 16 years of CRs included in this analysis, quality jobs, especially living wage industrial jobs for those with only high school diplomas, are perceived to be extremely limited. Disappearing industry is frequently suggested to be the driver in open-ended survey responses. Few vocational or higher educational opportunities is an issue intertwined with job scarcity insofar as job abundance for those without post-secondary education would decrease demand for post-secondary educational opportunities and corresponding dissatisfaction with its absence.

This theme is prevalent among open-ended survey responses. Frequent complaints include: (1) Few living wage jobs for new high school graduates; (2) Limited local vocational or collegiate opportunities; (3) Little ability to provide jobs for youth who might like to return after college or vocational training; and (4) Declining numbers of vocational and hands-on training electives offered in high schools. Despite these concerns, potential solutions were offered. For example, a frequently expressed desire is to more consciously connect employers to the community's education system so that high school students become more aware of employment opportunities and the higher education levels those jobs require (IRP, 2014). Comments focused on these interrelated issues can be found in CR report focus area sections for at least nine communities. Further reinforcing this theme, only one community has a Single Survey Value greater than 3.0 of 30 communities surveyed for "Availability / quality of local jobs," and only one reports a Single Survey Value greater than 3.0 of the 20 communities surveyed for "Variety of industry."

In contrast to remote communities, two communities near urban areas with several colleges and universities have Single Survey Values for "Availability of higher / adult education opportunities" of 4.1 and 3.6 (only 2 of 17 are greater than 3.0). Again, for "Availability of vocational or workforce training programs," two communities have Single Survey Values of 3.2 and 3.1 (only 2 of 24 are greater than 3.0), suggesting opportunities to enhance human capital are more readily obtained in less remote rural communities. Since 2014, satisfaction with "Availability of info / training for people starting new businesses" has been surveyed, and Single Survey Values have not yet exceeded 2.5.

Despite a prevailing sense of inadequacy of employment and continuing education opportunities, survey respondents generally view the K-12 educational system as performing well and housed in adequate facilities. Focus area sections in CR reports confirm that rural community residents highly value their schools and believe youth receive a better education than urban counterparts. As shown in Figure 1(a), satisfaction with "Quality of K-12 education"





**Figure 1.** Satisfaction with “Quality of K-12 education” and “Condition of school facilities/buildings” by (a) Year, and (b) Community population.

appears to have dropped during the recession and rebounded after 2013. In contrast, satisfaction with “Condition of school facilities/buildings” steadily increased throughout the recession (Figure 1(a)).

### ***Narrow range of recreation and entertainment opportunities***

Comments about outstanding outdoor recreational opportunities are found in at least 25 CR report focus area sections and in abundance in open-ended survey responses. Rural Idaho is rich in natural capital. However, combined scores are very low for four meta-questions related to entertainment, two of which are under two standard deviations (0.92) below the average and median combined score of 3.02 (Table 2). All four of these very low scores focus on availability of entertainment for teens and adults (as opposed to children and seniors). Low scores often correlate with, and are corroborated by, open-ended responses in which respondents identify teen behavioral concerns or loss of economic activity as teens go out of town for recreation. “Availability of Arts and Cultural Opportunities” also had a below average combined score of 2.83.

The age-specific nature of this issue is seen in high combined scores for “Recreation for children 12 and under,” “Community parks and playgrounds,” “Quality of Library,” and “Availability of senior programs and housing.” Like community parks and playgrounds, libraries generally serve child patrons. Idaho’s libraries offered 31,000 programs in 2014 with roughly 86% for children and 10% for young adults. Percentage of youth and adults participating in library programs overall roughly matches these proportions (Joslin, 2015). Older and retired residents (the majority of survey respondents) feel that senior housing and

**Table 2.** Combined scores for Idaho Community Review meta-questions.

Meta-questions	Combined score	N
<i>Theme 1: Dissatisfaction with employment and higher education</i>		
Availability/quality of local jobs	2.17 -	30
Variety of industry	2.31 -	20
Availability of info/training for people starting businesses	2.29 -	6
Availability of higher/adult education opportunities	2.50 -	17
Quality of K-12 education	3.35	25
Condition of school facilities/buildings	3.42	28
Quality of library	3.99 ++	27
<i>Theme 2: Range of recreation/Entertainment opportunities</i>		
Night life (tracked until 2004)	2.02 --	7
Recreation for teenagers	2.07 --	14
Recreation for adults	2.43 -	13
Bicycle and pedestrian access (or facilities)	2.80	22
Number/quality of restaurants	2.82	18
Availability of local arts and cultural opportunities	2.83	25
Recreation for children 12 and under	2.91	14
Availability of senior programs and housing	3.24	25
Community parks and playgrounds	3.58 +	23
Quality of library	3.99 ++	27
<i>Theme 3: Moderate political capital and strong social and cultural capital</i>		
Political capital meta-questions		
Long-range planning and zoning	2.56	15
Community involvement in decision-making	2.75	22
Representative diversity in leadership (up to 2004)	2.74	7
Cooperation between city and county	2.92	9
Effective community leadership	3.01	6
City staff response to challenges	3.02	7
Cooperation between local government and civic groups	3.08	13
Social and cultural capital meta-questions		
Acceptance of minorities	3.03	15
Welcome given to newcomers	3.02	15
Level of business involvement in the community	3.09	26
Progressive community spirit	3.10	13
Availability of senior programs and housing	3.24	25
Community civic organizations (tracked until 2004)	3.32	6
Overall community quality	3.43	8
Friendliness/neighborliness of residents	3.77 +	15
Involvement of churches in community	3.81 +	14
Quality of library	3.99 ++	27

Notes: ++ Two standard deviations above the mean; -- Two standard deviations below the mean; + One standard deviation above the mean; - One standard deviation below the mean..

programs are satisfactory as revealed by combined score of 3.24, with only 3 of 23 communities having a Single Survey Value below 3.0.

A statement in one CR report focus area section summarizes the issue: “students reported their appreciation for [the] small-town atmosphere, while lamenting a lack of youth-oriented activities and employment options. Several felt there was no economic future for them locally once they had graduated from high school” (IRP, 2002, p. 36). Though stated slightly differently in each community, 13 other communities include similar comments in CR report focus area sections.

Respondents’ wish list for addressing the perceived lack of recreational opportunities for teens includes skate parks, bowling alleys, outdoor activity mentors/programs, movie theaters, recreation centers, better dining options, safe “hang-outs,” swimming pools, and alternate

activities for kids, especially those not involved in sports. At the same time, a significant barrier to obtaining these sorts of activities mentioned by residents is lack of financial resources and critical mass of patrons to support such enterprises. Though not addressed clearly in surveys, residents frequently cite quality and variety of outdoor recreation opportunities, as well as landscape beauty as some of their greatest assets. So while natural capital is abundant in Idaho's rural communities, recreation opportunities where built, social, and cultural capital intersect, are considered lacking.

### ***Strengths and weaknesses in social and cultural capital***

Six of the 10 meta-questions with combined scores above one standard deviation appear to be related in some way to social capital and shared values around belonging and affiliation. Social capital is defined here as an ability and willingness of community members to participate in actions directed to community objectives, and to processes of engagement, that is, individuals acting alone and collectively in community organizations, groups, and networks (Magis, 2010; Williams, 2004). Cultural capital includes not only types of activities people like to engage in together, but also norms and values around caring for friends and neighbors, even among those who do not always get along. In addition to "Friendliness / neighborliness of residents" and "Involvement of churches in community," which are directly related to social capital, other meta-questions indicate shared norms related to friendliness and supporting fellow residents in need.

Many CR reports note libraries and library support groups among their most cherished community assets: "The library is a central hub of activity for all community residents and considered a safe meeting space for young people" (IRP, 2001, p. 40). The Idaho Commission for Libraries investigated sources of high satisfaction in five rural libraries surveyed with conclusions that these libraries provided internet, prized community space, customer service, and programs for all ages (Biladeau & Lipus, 2015).

Open-ended survey responses also indicate high levels of social and cultural capital. For example, community togetherness, a great sense of community, local residents being what makes a community a great place to work and raise a family, and progressive community spirit were among highly rated and often expressed sentiments. A common theme in CR reports is mistrust of newcomers, which some residents jokingly define as "anyone who has lived here less than 20 years." Another related theme is a tendency for residents to form cliques or factions, with limited interaction between groups.

Despite tendencies to form factions in small towns, nearly all CR reports note that whatever differences exist among residents, none matter when someone is in crisis or great need – the perception is that everyone steps up to help. Behind the scenes there may be discord, but rural residents, when asked to list the assets and strengths of their community, almost without exception report friendliness of fellow residents, sometimes simply stated as "the people," as one of the top reasons they value their town. Small town identity is strongly tied to cultural values for caring for one another and conviviality. Bonding social capital is abundant in Idaho's small towns, but bridging social capital is not, except when normally disconnected groups in a community come together for a common cause, such as a family in crisis or a flood.

Combined scores for meta-questions relating to governance entities convey a sense about political capital, which intertwines with social and cultural capital, providing a glimpse into

why some meta-questions related to social and cultural capital do not have higher satisfaction. “Long-Range Planning and Zoning” is among the lowest values, likely due to a lack of planning staff in most rural Idaho communities or little general knowledge about professional planning and its potential value to small towns. “Cooperation between City and County” is also low, likely for similar reasons. According to CR reports, it is typical for residents to feel political power is concentrated in the hands of a few. These networks are perceived as not providing opportunities for new leaders to participate in decision-making. Satisfaction with “Community involvement in decision-making” is below average at 2.75, supporting sentiments of residents who tell CR team members public input opportunities are limited. Former and current elected officials, however, perceive that information is disseminated (often in multiple forms and repeatedly), yet they often hear they failed to inform citizens of impending decisions. Satisfaction with “Quality and quantity of information provided by the city” is near average at 3.06. It appears the combination of lack of financial capital in rural Idaho and stronger bonding than bridging social capital tends to weaken political capital, and this may exacerbate a distrust of government.

### ***Population, temporal, and spatial correlations***

Given the geographic and temporal scope of data, observable spatial patterns across time were anticipated to emerge from this analysis. While small data-set size for each meta-question prohibited rigorous statistical analysis, there are a few discernible temporal and spatial trends when Single Survey Values for a given meta-question are plotted on x-y scatter plots against independent variables of population, distance from population center over 20,000 (a measure of remoteness), or by year of CR. Temporal correlations are uncommon. Two such correlations are related to housing. Satisfaction with “Condition of owner-occupied housing” dropped around 2005, and satisfaction with “Availability of homes to purchase” declined steadily from 3.75 in 2000 to 2.5 in 2013 before rebounding to around 3.0. Satisfaction with “Housing affordability” has only been surveyed since 2010, and has been flat over time at around 2.9, though it did show a regional correlation with highest satisfaction in southcentral and southeastern portions of Idaho. Remoteness and population correlate with one another, and as such confound the analysis, but two correlations exist for remoteness that do not hold for population. First, remote communities generally exhibit higher satisfaction with the attractiveness of community gateways, and second, remote communities generally are less satisfied with number of doctors. Population appears to be the dominant corollary with rural resident’s satisfaction, with both negative and positive correlations (Table 3).

These correlations make intuitive sense in most cases, and as such offer little insight, but population levels at which satisfaction climbs or drops is in itself useful. Also, as noted earlier, rural communities view their K-12 education as superior to urban areas. That said, satisfaction trends positively with population as shown in Figure 1(b), indicating some optimum population where adequate financial and built capital exists, while advantages in social and cultural capital remain. Taken together, these insights suggest a pattern of perceptions of disadvantage that typically accompanies small, and remote, populations.

**Table 3.** Idaho Community Review meta-questions negatively correlated (higher satisfaction at lower populations) and positively correlated (higher satisfaction at higher populations) with population, where *N* is number of communities asked the meta-question.

Meta-questions	Population threshold	<i>N</i>
<i>Negatively correlated with population</i>		
Parking downtown	<5000	15
Amount of traffic	<5000	17
Friendliness/neighborliness of residents	<4000	15
Quality of library	<750	27
Community involvement in decision-making	<750	22
<i>Positively correlated with population</i>		
Recreation for teenagers	>7000	14
Availability of vocational or workforce training programs	>3000	24
Condition of rental housing	>5000	14
Availability of higher/adult education opportunities	>5000	17
Appearance of public buildings	>3000	25
Storm water management/flood control	>3000	17
Appearance of downtown	>3000	28
Availability of day care for children	>2000	25
Appearance/quality of neighborhoods	>7000	17
Number/quality of entertainment opportunities	>5000	16
Availability of rental housing opportunities	>5000	14
Condition of streets and roads	>2500	28
Accessibility of community for people with disabilities	>3000	18
Condition of owner occupied housing	>3000	23
Availability of doctors	>4000	14
Availability of homes to purchase	>3000	26
Quality of K-12 Education	>3000	25
Police protection/law enforcement	>3000	26
Availability/quality of local jobs	>3000	30
Recreation for adults	>7000	13
Access to hospitals	>3000	14
Sewage collection and disposal	>5000	26
Garbage collection and disposal	>1500	14

**Discussion: Capitals, clues, and community resilience**

Meta-synthesis findings were organized by first combining survey questions and responses into meta-questions and then ranking meta-questions by combined score. High and low satisfaction meta-questions were examined for themes, which were then corroborated by qualitative analysis of community review report content and interpreted according to the Community Capitals Framework. The result is a deeper understanding of how different capitals tend to be systemically linked in these communities. This analysis also identifies patterns in how rural Idahoans perceive relative strengths and weaknesses of their communities.

Financial capital generation through (non)existence of robust and diverse industries is seen as intertwined with local opportunities to enhance human capital. Postgraduate training and education combined with presence of a strong economic base is hard to come by in very small and remote communities.

Financial and built capitals are also perceived to be intertwined. Large-scale economic shifts have led to replacement of medium-sized family farms with ever bigger mega-farms and the consequent impacts on rural towns have been devastating. In one community, a home team volunteer did some research and documented historical losses of private business and deterioration of building stock:

During the community review, the visiting team also learned about the loss of service and retail businesses over the years. As jobs and then people left the community "... the number

of visible retail and service businesses in [our community] has decreased from 28 to 7 over the last 30 years." (IRP, 2013, p. 46)

This common experience in rural communities indicates towns lack some of the attributes indicated by the Heartland Center's 20 Clues, such as "Awareness of competitive positioning," "Active economic development program," and "Attention to sound and well-maintained infrastructure." Achieving these goals, however, is difficult if there are deficits in human, social, and political capital, to which some of the other clues speak.

Social capital, especially bonding social capital, is rated highly, especially in the smaller, more remote communities. Idaho's rural communities are "friendly" and "caring." Even youth appreciate that strength and report they would not want that to change. Libraries are a noted bright spot in rural Idaho community life. A Denmark study similarly found that rural libraries provide bonding, bridging, and institutional social capital as they meet numerous needs and interests of many local community residents and organizations (Svendsen, 2013).

Bridging social capital, specifically engaging new residents in community activities and decisions, elicits low satisfaction ratings. CR reports support this finding, noting that newcomers have a tougher time being accepted in their adoptive towns. In this way, social and cultural capitals are linked in Idaho's small towns. However, mistrust of "outsiders," fierce independence, and eschewing financial and technical help from the outside (or not knowing how to access it) tend to isolate small towns and further limit opportunities for community and economic development. The 20 Clues point to why this presents challenges. Successful communities celebrate diverse leadership (Clue 11), and though they realize change has to be initiated in the community (Clue 20), seeking help from the outside is important too (Clue 19).

A deficit in transitional political capital, as reflected in low combined meta-question scores, appears to be a structural problem in that there are few mechanisms in place for transitioning leadership to the younger generation. Similarly, CR reports frequently note that relative newcomers attempting to attain a leadership role are shut out and even long-term residents feel excluded from local decision-making. Clues such as "Participatory approach to decision-making," "Deliberate transition of power to a younger generation of leaders," and "Celebration of diversity in leadership" refer to attributes that appear to be underdeveloped or absent in many rural Idaho communities. Recognizing this and addressing issues related to leadership, education, and economic opportunity would seem to be part of the path forward as is often recommended in CR reports.

One major factor affecting a community's resilience is in- and out-migration dynamics. Social capital enhances adaptation while simultaneously attracting return-migrants, fostering economic development, and cultivating civic action in complementary ways (Emery & Flora, 2006; Magis, 2010). Drawing on findings in surveys and CR reports, those who are old enough to make migration decisions appear to remain in or move to rural communities in order to gain desired natural capital and bonding social capital. This sometimes comes, however, at the expense of financial and built capital in the form of entertainment opportunities and jobs. Similarly, in one study revealing resident-perceived value of social capital, residents of a small Nebraska community were only willing to move away from their community to a similar community, but one without their friends and family, in exchange for a pay increase of more than \$30,000 per year (Cordes et al., 2003). In another study, those employed in professional and technical professions "overwhelmingly preferred living in rural

rather than urban communities” and resisted moving to communities that did not match their ideal (Noe & Barber, 1993).

That attractive aspects of social and cultural capital increased with reduced size of community was observed in the Nebraska Rural Poll, and aligns with qualitative descriptions about return migration (Comartie, von Reichert, & Arthum, 2015; Ulrich-Schad, Henly, & Safford, 2013; University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2015; Vogt et al., 2014, 2016). Decisions to return migrate are complex, involving family and social ties, economic opportunities, and place attachment, with family and social ties being the most significant factor (von Reichert, Cromartie, & Arthun, 2014). Many people treasure (and will “pay” for) the “small town atmosphere” mentioned so frequently in CR reports. Many recommendations in CR reports center on community branding, placemaking, main street revitalization, improved communication between social and civic groups, parks, etc. These seem related to issues that so strongly affect rural migration preferences and, ultimately, viability of the community. This research points to these and other potential priorities for community development practitioners, local leaders, and residents seeking to improve quality of life in rural towns.

Patterns identified above in financial, built, social, political, and cultural capitals, and how they are systematically linked in Idaho communities provide a foundation for building community resilience. By recognizing and situating these interacting community capitals, capacity of communities to adapt to change can be enhanced, and consequently community resilience is boosted (Berkes & Ross, 2013; Buikstra et al., 2010; Magis, 2010). These capitals are resources that can be strategically invested by a community to adapt to change. Response of a rural community to social or ecological change can be characterized as leading typically to demise or resilience (Wilkinson, 1991); however, a third possibility exists, that of social re-creation where relatively new elements of community and wellbeing are created to replace those elements that have been damaged or destroyed. This third possibility is highlighted by the Buffalo Creek mining disaster of 1972 where Schwartz-Barcott conclude “that it is more appropriate to say that community and well-being have been re-created along Buffalo Creek rather than to claim that the community has recovered, been rebuilt, or been resilient” (Schwartz-Barcott, 2008, p. 396). Community resilience is considered to have been maintained if original form and function of the community persists – social-ecological system typologies provide tools for assessing form, function, and community resilience, for example, in mountain communities (Altaweel, Virapongse, Griffith, Alessa, & Kliskey, 2015). Community capitals provide resources that can be marshaled to either support maintenance of that form and function – enhancing resilience – or those resources could contribute to re-creation of new elements of community and wellbeing (Flora & Flora, 2013; Magis, 2010).

## Conclusion

This research makes use of existing data, collected over the course of 16 years to support Idaho Rural Partnership’s efforts to assist Idaho’s rural communities via the “Idaho Community Review” program. The meta-synthesis aggregates survey data, includes content analysis of written reports, and is interpreted according to the Community Capitals Framework. It identifies areas of highest and lowest satisfaction for rural residents in 32 communities of all sizes and in different areas of Idaho, and how some of those areas correlate to population level and remoteness. Confidence in findings would have been stronger had the surveys been conducted using a standardized survey instrument. Given data limitations, the analysis



provides insights into patterns and trends related to challenges and assets identified by rural residents, and unpacks the context in which they perceive local conditions. Heartland Center's "20 Clues to Rural Community Survival" research further suggests there are many commonalities between rural towns across the US. This analysis did not include alignment between findings and CR report recommendations, which represents another future research opportunity. Collaboration between IRP and others conducting similar surveys, such as the Nebraska Rural Poll, could potentially identify broader similarities and differences between communities in rural states. In turn that may help inform national policy as it relates to education, economic development, local government, granting initiatives, or less obvious influences (e.g. international trade) that disproportionately impact rural communities and are well beyond their sphere of influence.

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