



PATHS OF RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: BUILDING ON REGIONAL STRENGTHS

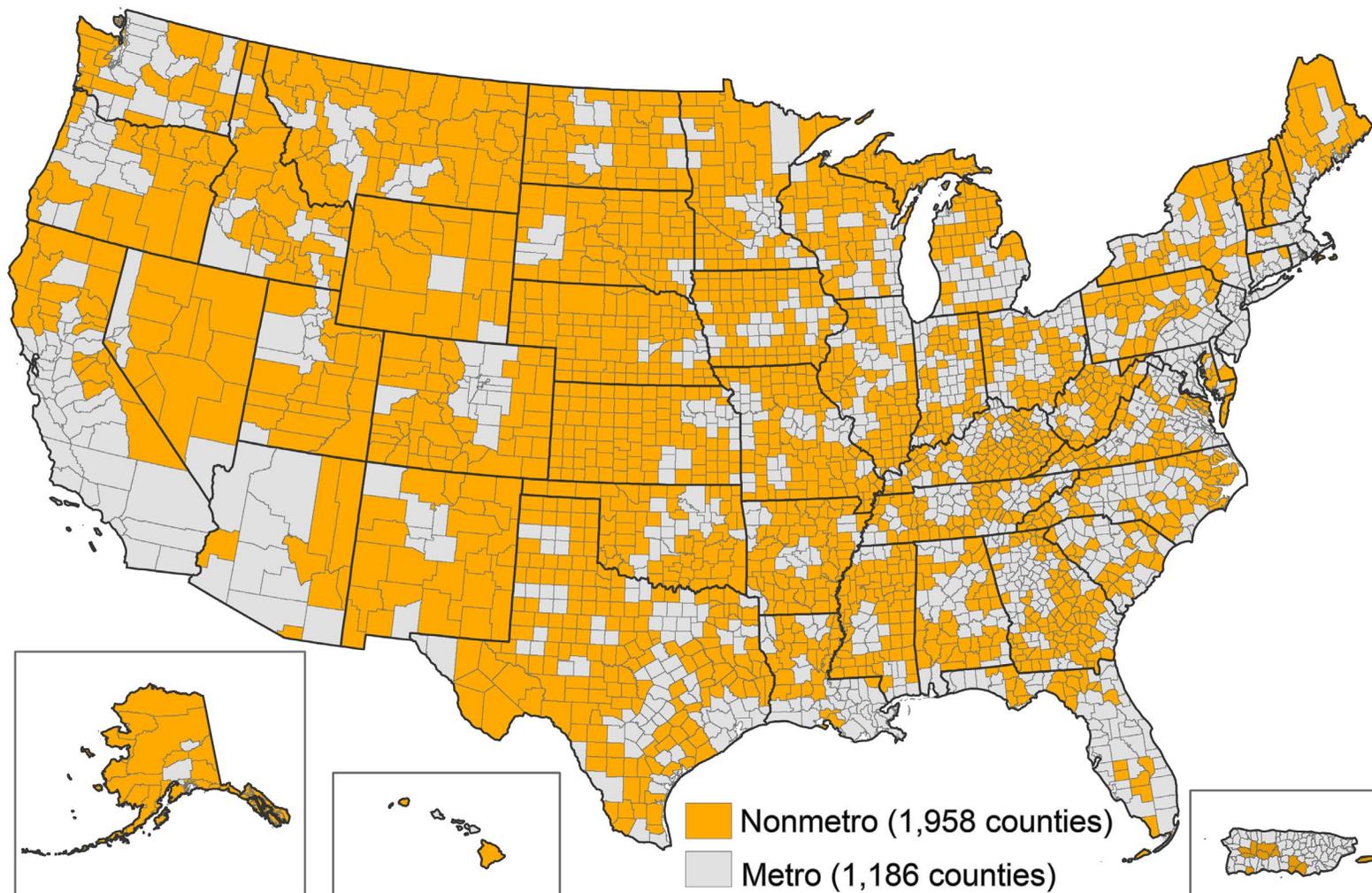
Amanda McMillan Lequieu, PhD
Department of Sociology, Drexel
University, Philadelphia, PA



WHAT IS RURAL?

Includes some combination of...

1. open countryside,
2. rural towns (places with fewer than 5,000 people and 2,000 housing units), and,
3. urban areas with populations ranging up to 50,000 people that are not part of larger labor market areas (metropolitan areas).



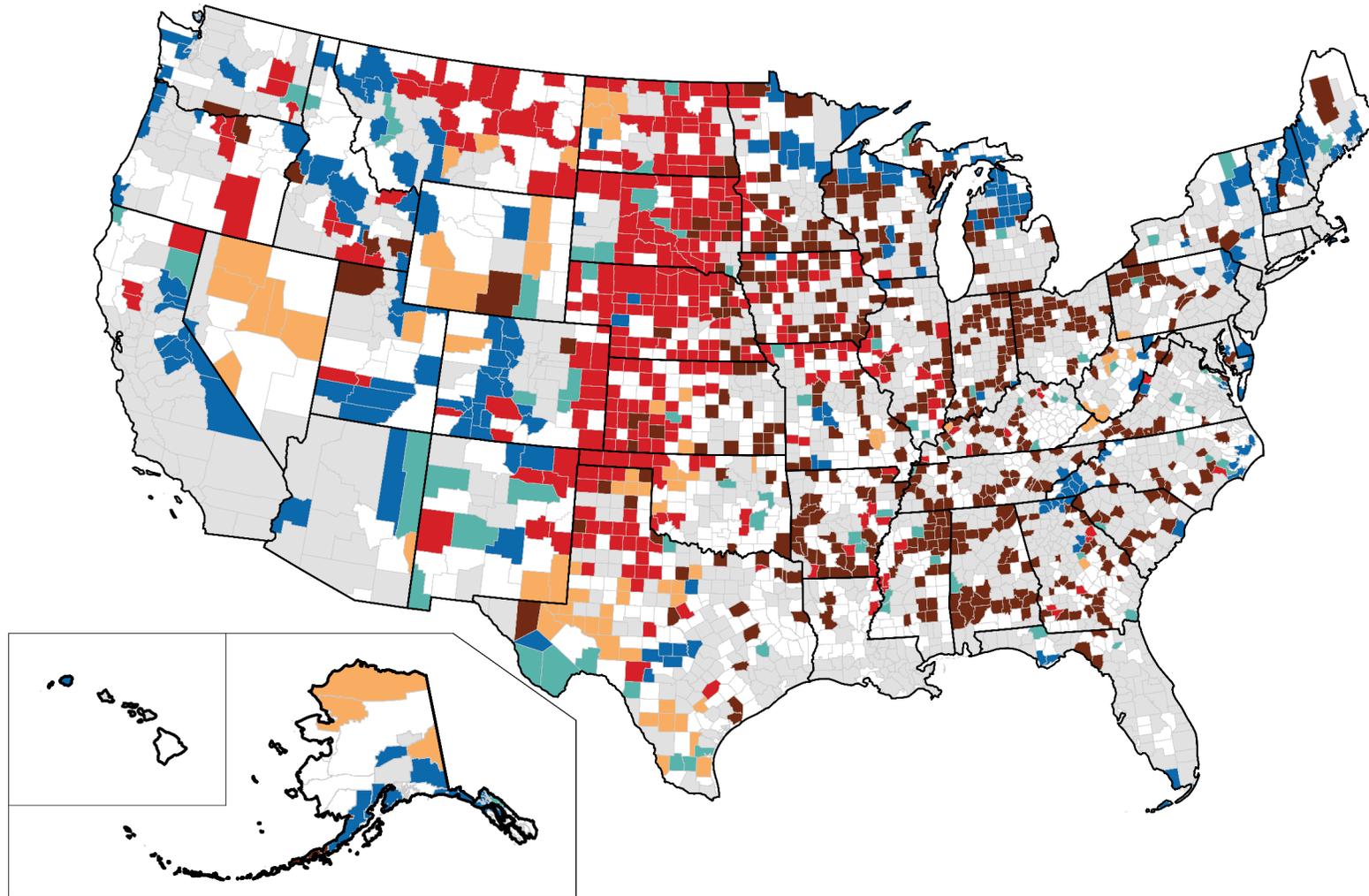
Note: Alaska, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico are not drawn to scale. Metro/nonmetro delineations are not available for other U.S. island territories.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Office of Management and Budget and U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census.



WHAT DO WE *THINK OF* AS RURAL? |

Nonmetropolitan county industry dependence, 2025 edition



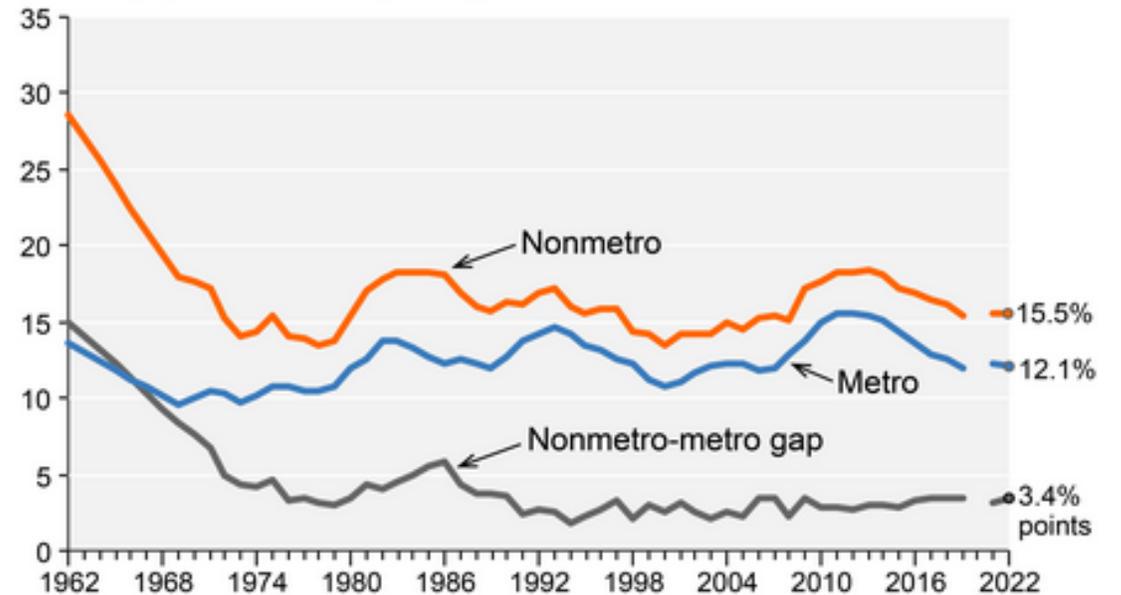
Industry dependence of nonmetropolitan counties (number of counties)

- Farming dependent (329)
- Manufacturing dependent (495)
- Mining dependent (78)
- Government dependent (79)
- Recreation dependent (200)
- Not dependent (777)
- Metropolitan

CHALLENGES IN RURAL ECONOMIES

U.S. poverty rates in metro and nonmetro areas, 1962–2022

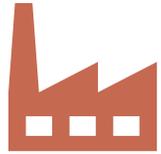
Percent of population below poverty level



Note: Metro status of some counties changed in 1984, 1994, 2004, 2014, and 2018.
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey (CPS) for 1960–2009 and annual American Community Survey (ACS) estimates for 2009–22. Estimates from the 2020 ACS were not published. CPS poverty status is based on family income in prior year and ACS poverty status is based on family income in the past 12 months.

<https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/chart-detail?chartId=58300>

TYPICAL SOLUTIONS TO ECONOMIC CHALLENGES



1) Incentivize large-scale investments by big companies



2) Commodify the landscapes of 'rural'

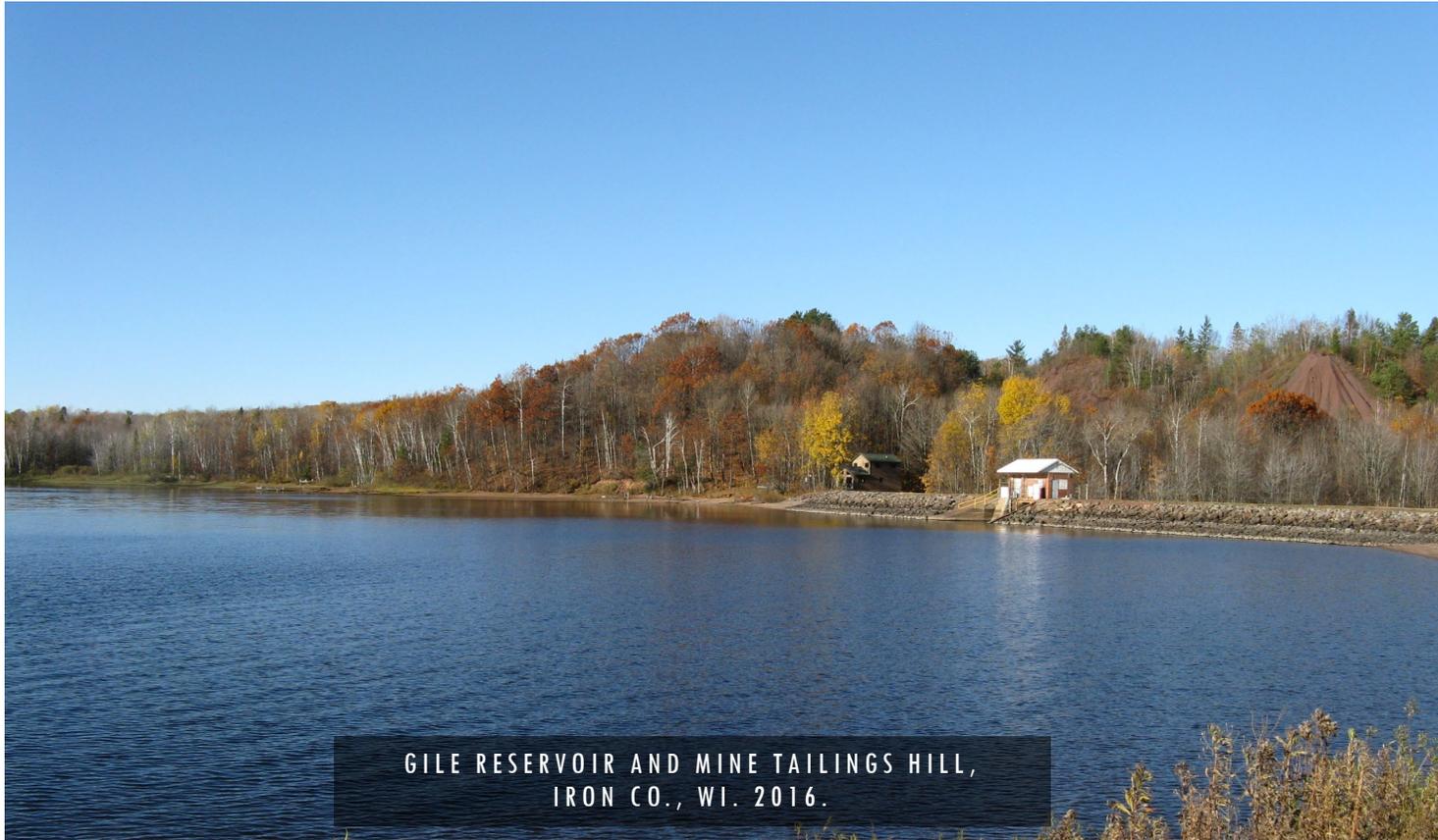


3) Build a diversity of small businesses



CASE STUDY: PATHS OF ECONOMIC REDEVELOPMENT

Iron County, Wisconsin



GILE RESERVOIR AND MINE TAILINGS HILL,
IRON CO., WI. 2016.

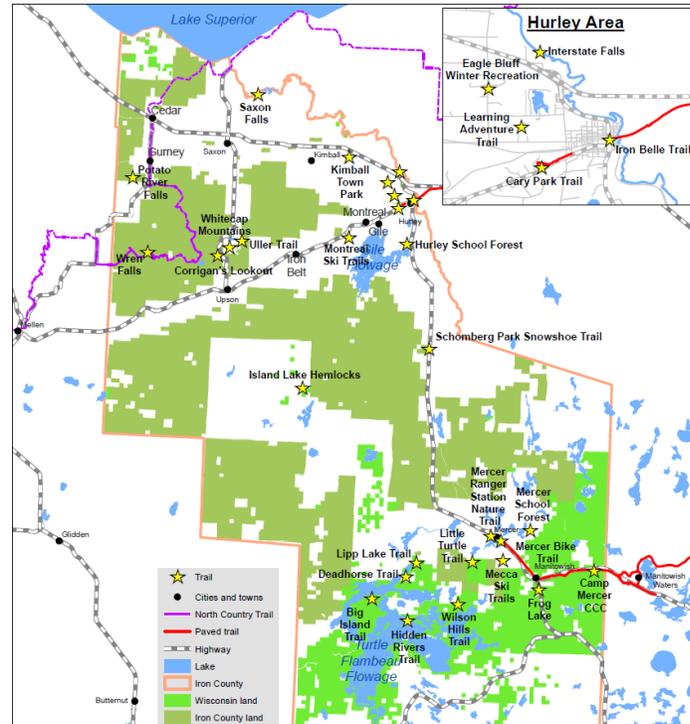
IRON COUNTY BY THE NUMBERS

- First mine opened: 1880
- Last mine closed: 1962
- 2020 population: 6,000 residents
- Avg. poverty rate, 1970-2020: 14%
- Avg. unemployment rate, 1970-2020: 12%



Iron County Trails

29 walking, hiking, biking, and ski trails in Iron County, Wisconsin.



Benefits

“If you want to come up here and wander around in the woods, it’s the best place to do that. It’s national forests, state forests, national parks, state parks, county parks—you’re free to roam where you want to.”
 – Walter

PATH 1: NATURE-BASED TOURISM



PATH 1: NATURE-BASED TOURISM

Challenges

“A lot of people who come for our beautiful scenery in the summer or fall, they don’t spend a lot of money” – Cheryl

“Tourism doesn’t get you a 401k, it doesn’t get you healthcare. It’s a survival deal.” –Rupert



Benefits

“I was kind of excited about the mine situation ... I thought, huh, that'd be pretty good... [to] get things moving again. More stores, more things to do, more family-type things, property values may move up.”

— Lewis



PATH 1: REINDUSTRIALIZATION



Cortney Ofstad/Daily Globe

A CROWD of people prepare to listen to a question and answer session between the Iron County Board of Supervisors and Gogebic Taconite representatives during a special meeting on Tuesday at the Iron County Courthouse in Hurley.

PATH 1: REINDUSTRIALIZATION

Challenges

PATH 3: BUILDING ON A DIVERSITY OF ASSETS...



Building local human capacity through state-wide programs



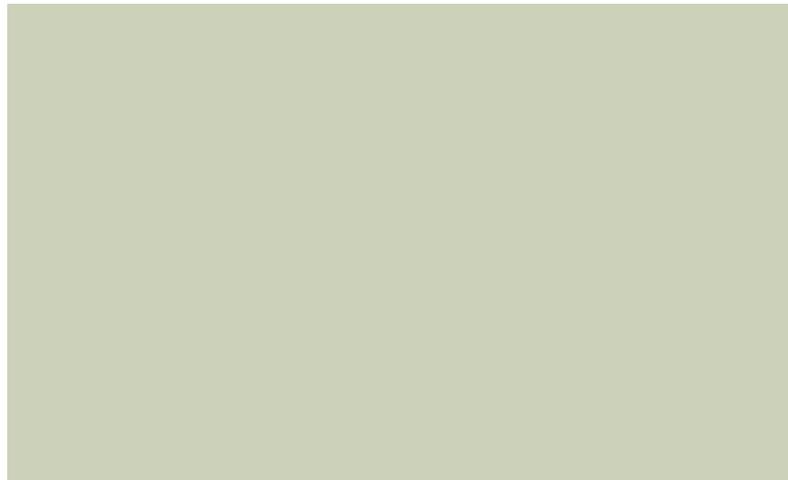
Establishing a TIF zone



Expanding internet connectivity

“We can’t be miners anymore. . . . The tourist industry is only going to take it so far. . . . What could happen here? What kind of industry can flourish here? Well, you know, in the dot com age, why wouldn’t you want to live in a place like this and work from home? You know?” – Gary

ECONOMIC
REDEVELOPMENT:
MULTIPLE PATHS



THANKS.

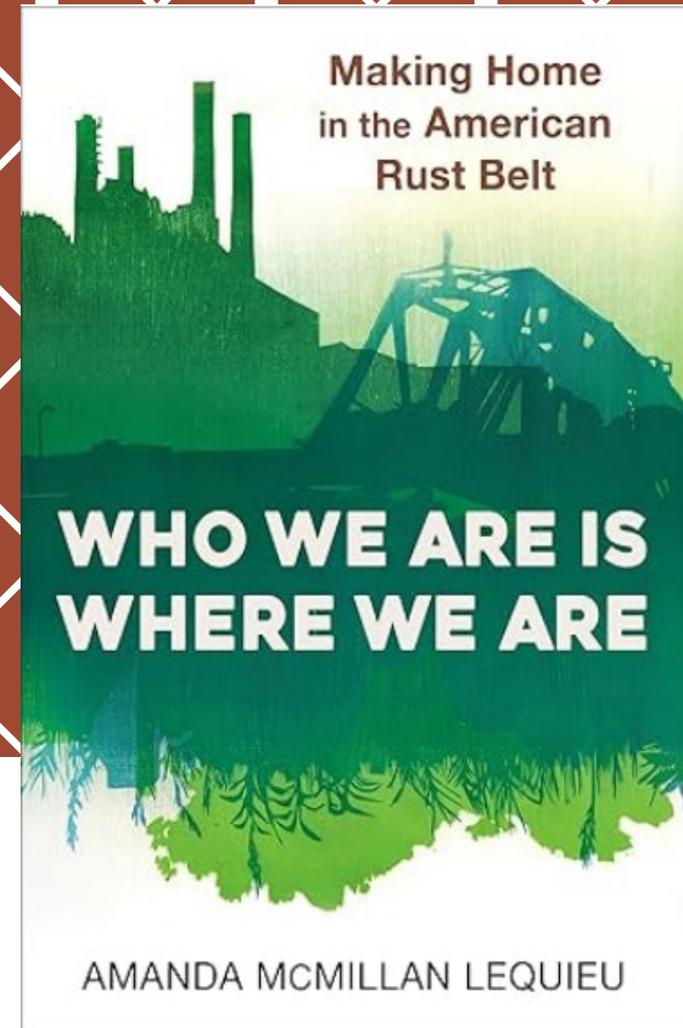
Amanda McMillan Lequieu

aml524@drexel.edu

Department of Sociology

Drexel University

Quotes/data on Iron County also in my 2024 book, Who we are is where we are: Making home in the American Rust Belt, Columbia University Press



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

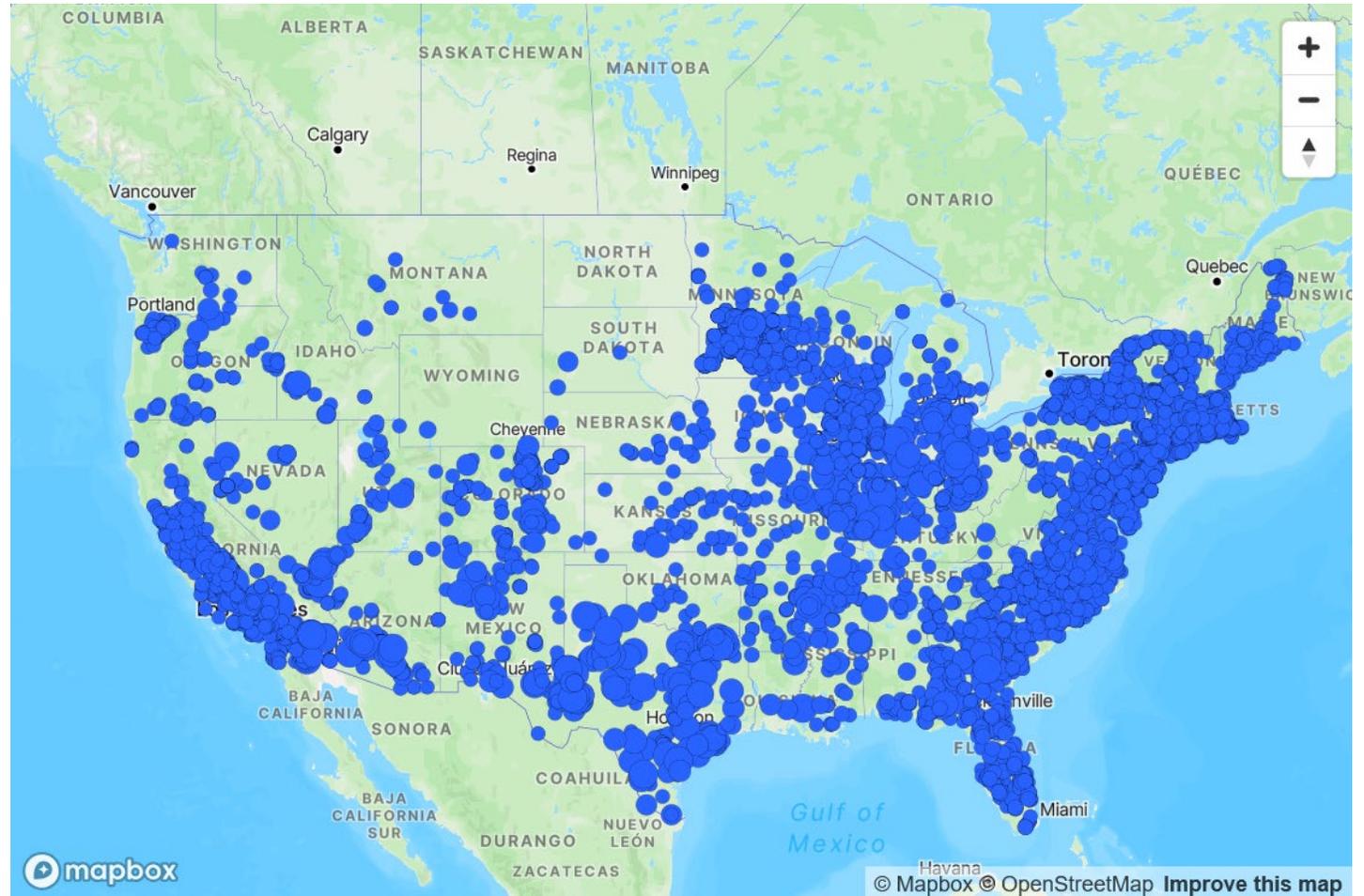
UTILITY-SCALE SOLAR

- Why rural America for solar?
 - Farmland is flat and cleared
 - Lease payments offer stable, consistent revenues

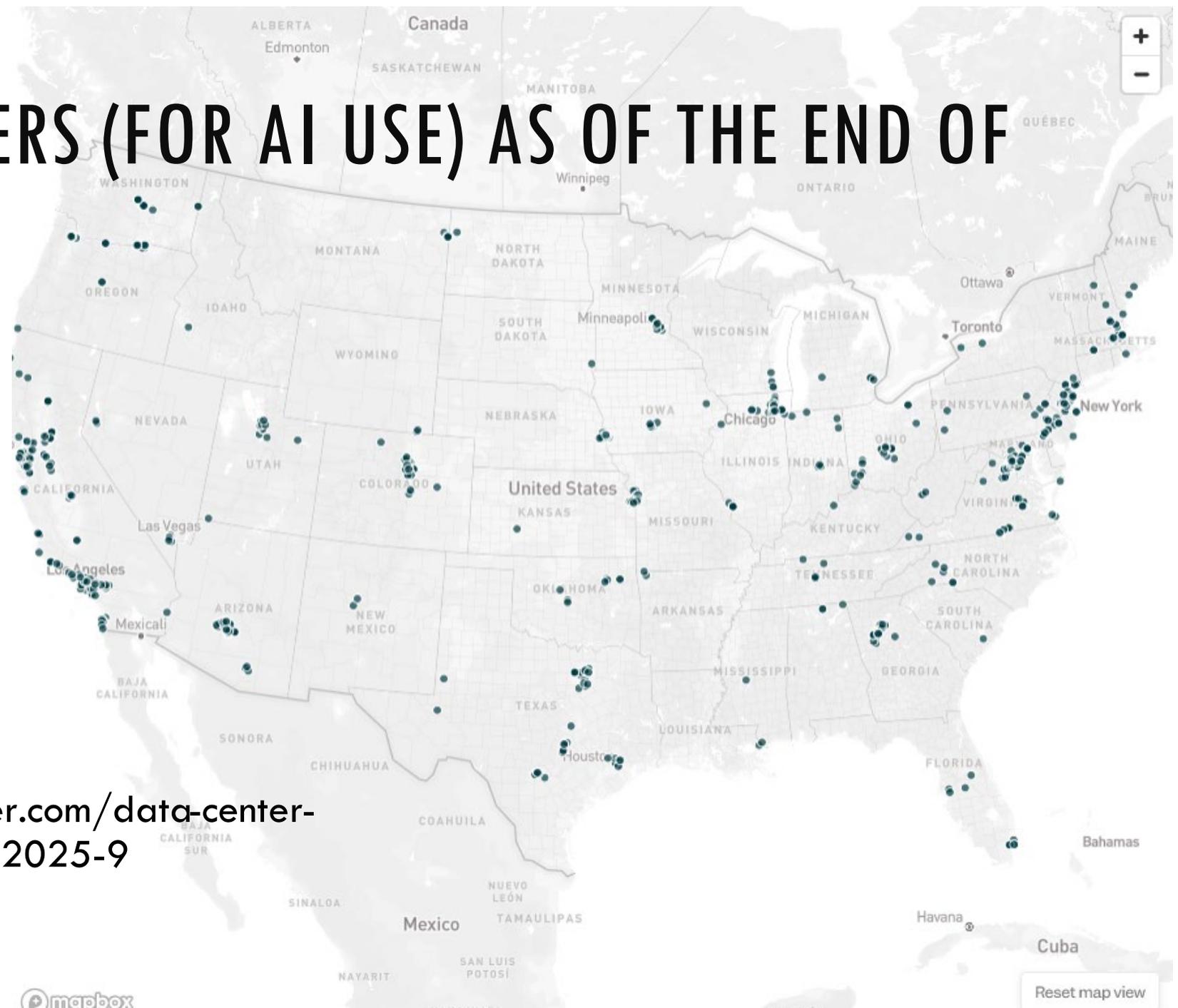
More resources: <https://cleanview.co/solar-farms/us>

<https://seia.org/research-resources/major-solar-projects-list/>

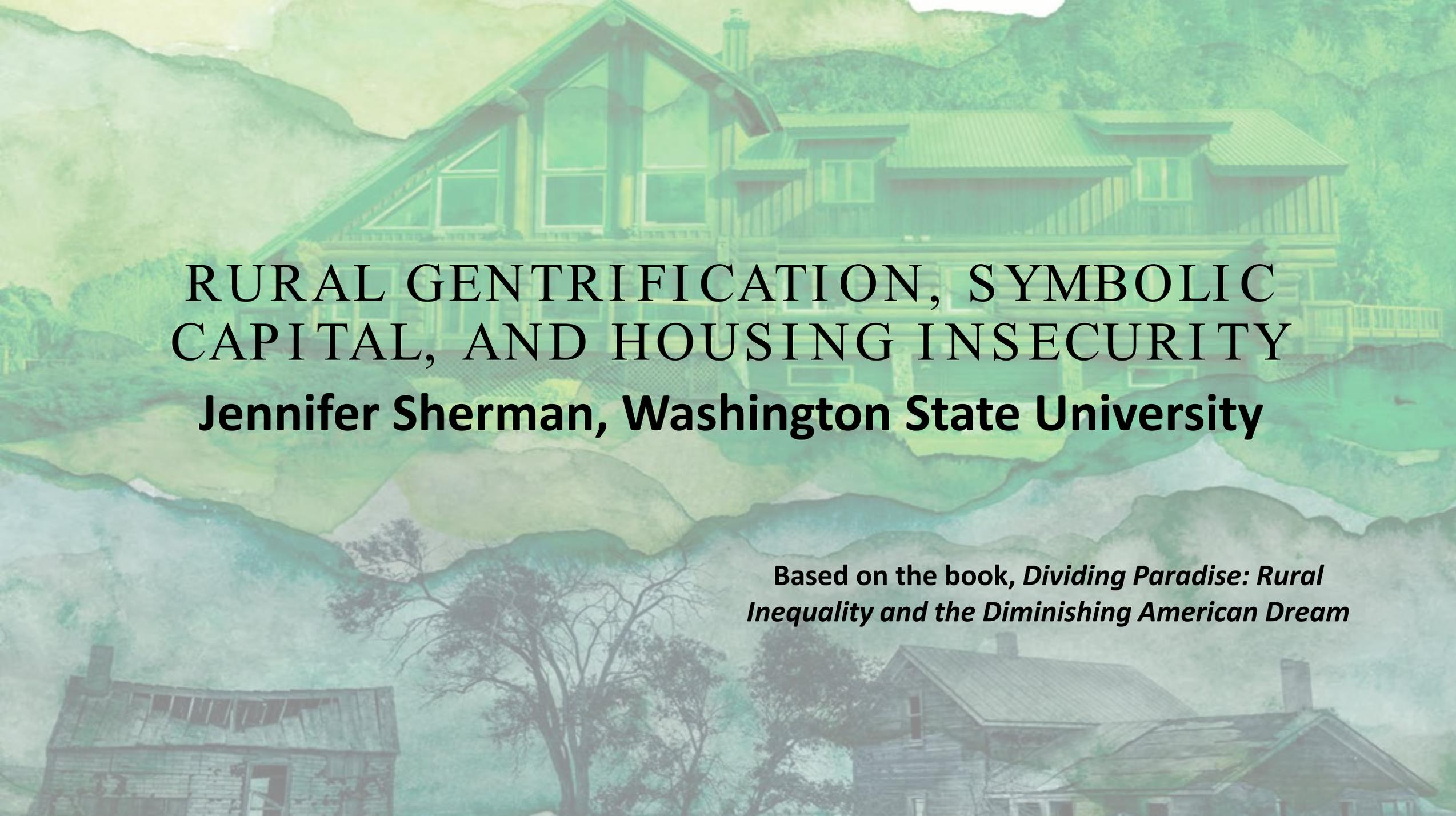
https://cleanpower.org/wp-content/uploads/gateway/2024/02/ACP_Solar-on-AG-Land_240202_Fact-Sheet.pdf



DATA CENTERS (FOR AI USE) AS OF THE END OF 2024



<https://www.businessinsider.com/data-center-locations-us-map-ai-boom-2025-9>



RURAL GENTRIFICATION, SYMBOLIC
CAPITAL, AND HOUSING INSECURITY

Jennifer Sherman, Washington State University

*Based on the book, **Dividing Paradise: Rural
Inequality and the Diminishing American Dream***

HOUSING INSECURITY AND GENTRIFICATION

- Gentrification: process of replacement that results in rising housing costs and housing insecurity (Shaw 2008).
- Previous rural residents are pushed out of homes and communities by wealthy urban in-migrants and second-home owners.



PARADISE VALLEY, WASHINGTON*

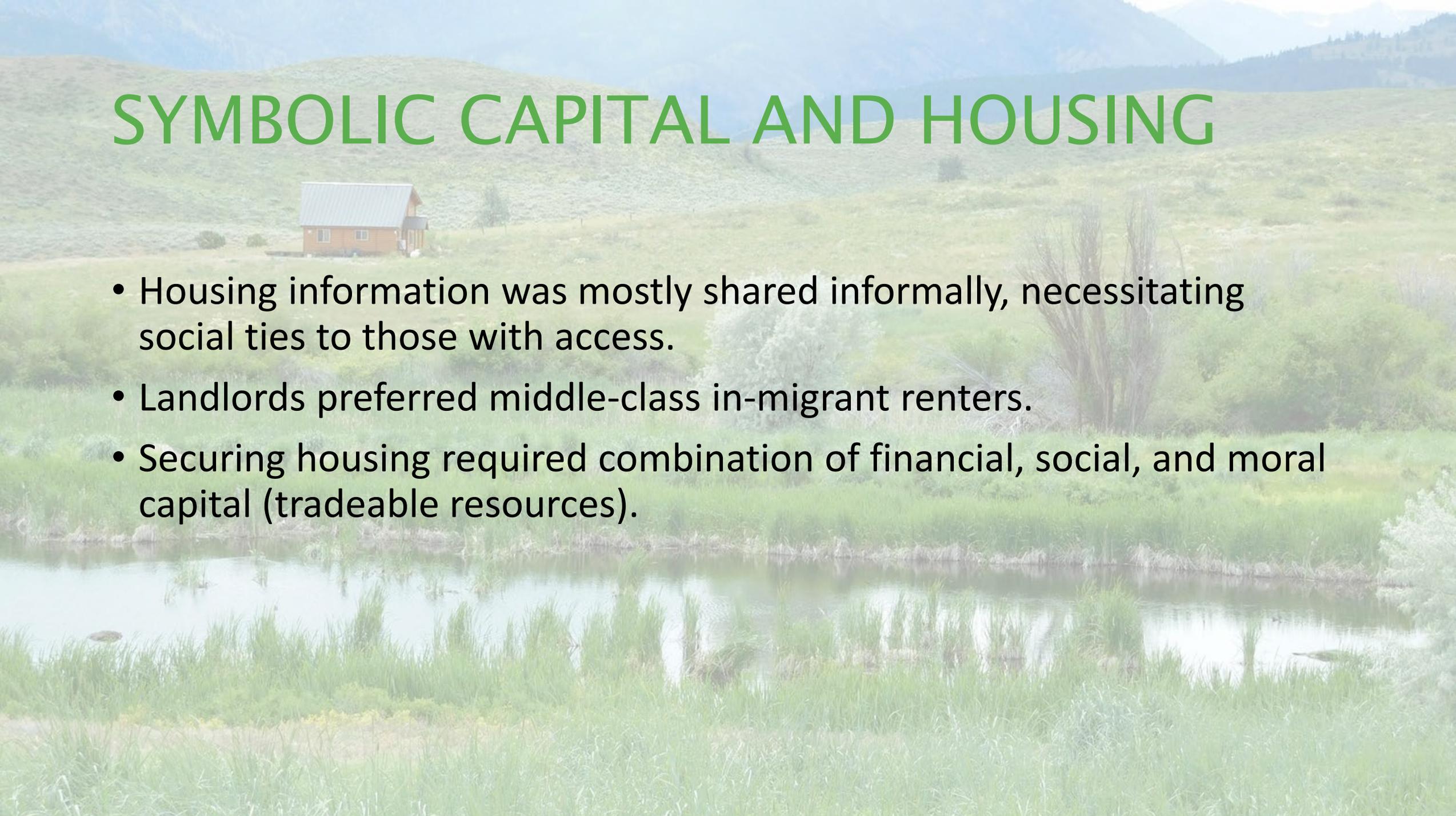
- ~5,000 mostly white residents.
- Economic dependence on tourism, amenity-migrants, and second-home ownership: half of local homes owned by non-year-round residents.
- Half of all local employment in retail or accommodations/food services.

*All names of people, places, and institutions are pseudonyms.

RESEARCHING PARADISE

- Based on 10 months of fieldwork from 2014- 2015.
- 84 in-depth, recorded interviews.
- 10 months participant observation, including regular volunteer jobs at local food bank, family support center, and library. Also volunteered regularly for local events and organizations.

SYMBOLIC CAPITAL AND HOUSING



- Housing information was mostly shared informally, necessitating social ties to those with access.
- Landlords preferred middle-class in-migrant renters.
- Securing housing required combination of financial, social, and moral capital (tradeable resources).

SOCIAL AND MORAL CAPITAL AND HOUSING SECURITY

- “I’ve known [the landlord]. He’s been in the valley for a long time. I’ve talked to him and stuff. My son found it online, and I called him, and he, as soon as he met me, well, we realized we knew each other. He said, ‘You want it?’ ‘Sure.’ We shook hands on it. So that’s pretty much how we got it....”
 - “We were told by our landlord we can stay there as long as we want to, and we’re planning on it.”
- Audrey Patterson, 59 years old, poor, disabled, Valley native

LOW SOCIAL AND MORAL CAPITAL AND SUBSTANDARD HOUSING

- “My childhood bedroom was bigger than the entire house that I live in right now. It’s like a 250 square-foot cabin. Has like, probably ten-foot ceilings with a beam across. I have ants really bad. They live in the ceiling. I also have some kind of other creature that lives up there. I’ve tried many times to find it and kill it. It’s not working, so it just like makes a bunch of noise at night... We have minimal electricity.... We have a hose. I have a sink indoors, but I have to run the hose around and it’s only cold water.”
- Beth Miller, 32 years old, poor, sporadically employed, 5 years in Paradise Valley

LOW SOCIAL AND MORAL CAPITAL AND SUBSTANDARD HOUSING

- “When it got too cold I stayed at friends’ houses... [or] I just gave our friends like \$200 per month to be able to use their washer and dryer and shower when we were in – but for the most part we were camped out.”
 - “The community’s kind of a nightmare. And you get to see that ugly side of it when you’re not you know, friends with the right people.”
- Beth Miller

LOW SOCIAL AND MORAL CAPITAL AND INSECURE HOUSING

- “We tend to like, bump right up to the edge of paying late... But barring that and their getting irritated about it enough to make us, to ask us to leave, I want to and hope to stay here ‘til [my son’s] graduated from high school. You know, like I’m done moving if I can possibly be. This is enough for me, I don’t want anything better, and thank you very much, please don’t take this.”
 - Ryan Boyle, 39 years old, poor, unemployed, Valley native
- “[Ryan] ruined his first couple of real jobs around here by partying too much.”
 - Jessica Wheeler, 38 years old, poor, waitress, Valley native

RURAL HOUSING AND SYMBOLIC CAPITAL

- Social ties are necessary, but not sufficient.
- Inequality limits social ties between those with different resources.
- Rural setting creates surveillance and amplification of moral capital's importance.
- Double-bind for the most vulnerable: unemployment and poverty lead to stigma that exacerbates the impacts of low income and low social capital.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Gentrifying rural communities challenged by contestation over who is deserving of existing housing.
- Social class differences → affordable housing monopolized by those with more resources.
- Efforts at equitable housing must ensure that marginalized residents are not excluded from safe, stable, and affordable housing.



Asset-Based Framework for the Ethics of Care in Rural Education

Jamon H. Flowers, Ph.D.

University of Georgia

Rural education:

- Rural schools are not broken. Rural educators are carrying a lot and they're still getting young people across the finish line – and beyond.
- Rural high school graduation rates are higher than suburban, town, and city (e.g., 90% rural vs. 82% urban and suburban).
- Rural educators have longer tenure compared to urban educators.
- Rural schools serve as the social hubs.
- Growing focus on rural education

ABIRE: (Asset-Based Innovation in Rural Education)

Drs. Phillip D. Grant, Jr., J. Kessa Roberts, and Jamon H. Flowers

A collaborative improvement framework that:

- starts with **local strengths** (people, institutions, land, culture, networks),
- is anchored in an **ethics of care** (relational accountability, dignity, belonging),
- and turns assets into **usable improvement inputs** (design constraints, prototypes, and measures).
- ABIRE helps communities *convert place-based assets into scalable routines*

What ABIRE looks like in practice-(3 moves)

1. Asset mapping that's actionable

Not just what do we have?, but what can we mobilize for attendance, engagement, advising, transitions, staffing, and mental health supports?

2. Co-design routines

Students/families/community partners help define the problem and test small changes (short-cycle improvement).

3. Care as an operational principle

Care becomes observable: stronger relational coordination, reduced exclusionary practices, better navigation supports for students.

Results of ABIRE

- ABIRE strengthens **implementation fit** (solutions align to local realities).
- ABIRE increases **ownership** (less initiative churn; more continuity).
- ABIRE builds **capacity** (schools learn how to innovate repeatedly, not just adopt programs).

The Bridge: How are they connected?

- **Economy → Education**

Economic diversification changes the *skills map* and the *identity map* of communities. Schools are where young people learn whether they belong in the local future or must leave to be somebody.

- **Housing → Education**

Housing insecurity is not just a housing issue; it is an attendance, concentration, and staffing issue. Housing volatility shows up as chronic absence, mid-year mobility, and teacher retention challenges.

- **Education → Economy + Housing**

Schools are one of the few institutions with daily contact across generations. That makes them a uniquely powerful platform for stabilizing opportunity—through partnerships, wraparound coordination, and youth-to-career pathways that match real local development trajectories.

Summary

- **Context:** Rural change is multidimensional; schools are inside it, not outside it.
- **Problem:** Deficit framing → misfit solutions → burnout/churn.
- **ABIRE:** Asset-based + ethics of care + collaborative improvement.
- **So, what:** ABIRE helps rural schools innovate in ways that support economic transitions and mitigate housing pressures.