

(Example: Lay Summary)

Lay Summary

When younger generations migrate to cities and investments dry up, rural towns lose more than just businesses. They lose their social heartbeat. This ongoing decline creates "civic deserts," isolated places where local services vanish, traditional support networks erode, and communities lose their ability to withstand economic or demographic shocks.

The dissertation explores how we can reverse this decline. The core of my research focuses on the power of "social infrastructure;" the physical and digital spaces like modern community centers, local parks where people naturally gather, and internet hubs.

The significance of this work lies in proving that public spaces are not optional luxuries; they are essential remedies for vulnerable towns. By evaluating how physical environments and digital access intersect, this study shows that these spaces function as vital catalysts for local democracy. They give remaining residents a place to connect, combat profound isolation, volunteer, and organize.

Ultimately, this research provides a practical blueprint for policymakers and urban planners. It demonstrates that long-term rural survival cannot be achieved through economic incentives alone. By shifting the focus from simply managing decline to actively building community resilience, this dissertation proves that investing in shared spaces breathes new life into civic participation, ensuring rural communities have the strength and social connection to thrive in a changing world.

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