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**Pronouncer:** Kulcsar sounds like "culture"

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## POPULATION EXPERT AT K-STATE SAYS GREENSBURG FACES EVEN MORE CHALLENGES IN RETAINING POPULATION AFTER TORNADO

MANHATTAN — Rural towns in the Great Plains already face many challenges in retaining and growing their populations, but the deadly tornado that nearly obliterated Greensburg will only make things more challenging for that town, according to a population expert at Kansas State University.

Laszlo Kulcsar, assistant professor of sociology and director of the Kansas Population Center at K-State, said the aid money flowing into Greensburg could help the town get back to how it was before the tornado, but that it won't necessarily change the underlying issues that had been making Greensburg a declining town before the tornado hit.

He said Greensburg is not unlike other rural towns in Nebraska, the Dakotas and other Great Plains states. Compared with the United States as a whole, the town has a disproportionate number of residents age 65 and older and a disproportionate number living in poverty. The trend of aging in place has meant that as people get older, many of them have stayed in town while many of their adult children left for larger communities. Elderly residents will be less likely to have resources to rebuild and will be more likely to move to other places, Kulcsar said.

"For those who have relatives — especially adult children — in other places, they're probably going to move in with them in larger places like Wichita or Dodge City, because most likely that's where their children are," he said.

Declining population causes problems that feed even more population loss, Kulcsar said. Businesses face a challenge in rebuilding because fewer young people staying in town means fewer workers to keep those businesses running. And without essential businesses like grocery stores, people have another reason to relocate. If younger people with families leave, local schools can suffer. The schools may not need to employ as many teachers and support staff, who may pack up and leave, too.

(more)

Even though Greensburg is the county seat of Kiowa County, Kulcsar said county seats in such areas are only successful in drawing people from their own county and often can't overcompensate for the residents they're losing.

Greensburg, however, has a few statistics in its favor, Kulcsar said. The town may fare better because of the role of agriculture in the area. The land is still there, whereas a manufacturing packing plant, for instance, would lose everything if its building were destroyed. About 70 percent of Greensburg residents own their homes — more than the national average. Although Kulcsar said part of that high rate can be attributed to older people who are more likely to own their own homes anyway, it still seems to indicate people who have a greater stake in staying. Kulcsar also said 74 percent of Greensburg residents are native-born Kansans, which would seem to foster strong ties.

"Given the culture and emotional draw, I expect that there should be a strong feeling of community in these places," he said.

Kulcsar said research about population shifts after another great natural disaster, Hurricane Katrina, has little relevance to Greensburg. Part of that reason is because New Orleans was and is quite different demographically. More than 90 percent of Greensburg residents identify themselves as white, whereas more than half of the population of New Orleans is black. Demographics also play a large part in who's moving back and who's staying away, too. People with fewer resources are more likely stay where they've relocated rather than move back to New Orleans, Kulcsar said. Another difference may be that monetary incentives for rebuilding and the allure of the New Orleans culture are drawing people who didn't live there before the hurricane.

Because most population research related to Hurricane Katrina isn't applicable to Greensburg or other rural towns struck by tornadoes, Kulcsar said that it opens up a new area of research for sociologists. For instance, researchers are using methods like tracking change of address forms to see who is moving in and out of New Orleans, but Kulcsar said it's harder to see whether they are the same people, especially if multiple moves are involved. The Kansas Population Center, in association with the Consortium for Global Research on Water-Based Economies at K-State, is working on a tool to predict demographic changes in the region.

"What we can learn are better methods to assess population change and the social and economic impacts of such disasters," he said.