

Bridging the Gap Between Rural Communities and Higher Education

Charles Riedel¹, Donna Tiu¹

¹Department of Computer Science, ²Department of Social Work, Fort Hays State University

Research Mentors: Dr. Anas Hourani¹, Dr. Vinod Srivastava²



FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY

Forward thinking. World ready.

Introduction

Following the economic downturn in 2008, college enrollment numbers increased significantly by 16% between 2007 and 2010 (18.1 million) but decreased by 7% between 2010 and 2017 (Irwin et al., 2021). Research has shown that rural Kansans are less likely to pursue higher education than their urban counterparts (Choy, 2002). This is partly due to a lack of access to higher education institutions in rural areas. Additionally, many rural students face financial barriers to higher education, including the cost of tuition, housing, and transportation (Perna, 2010).

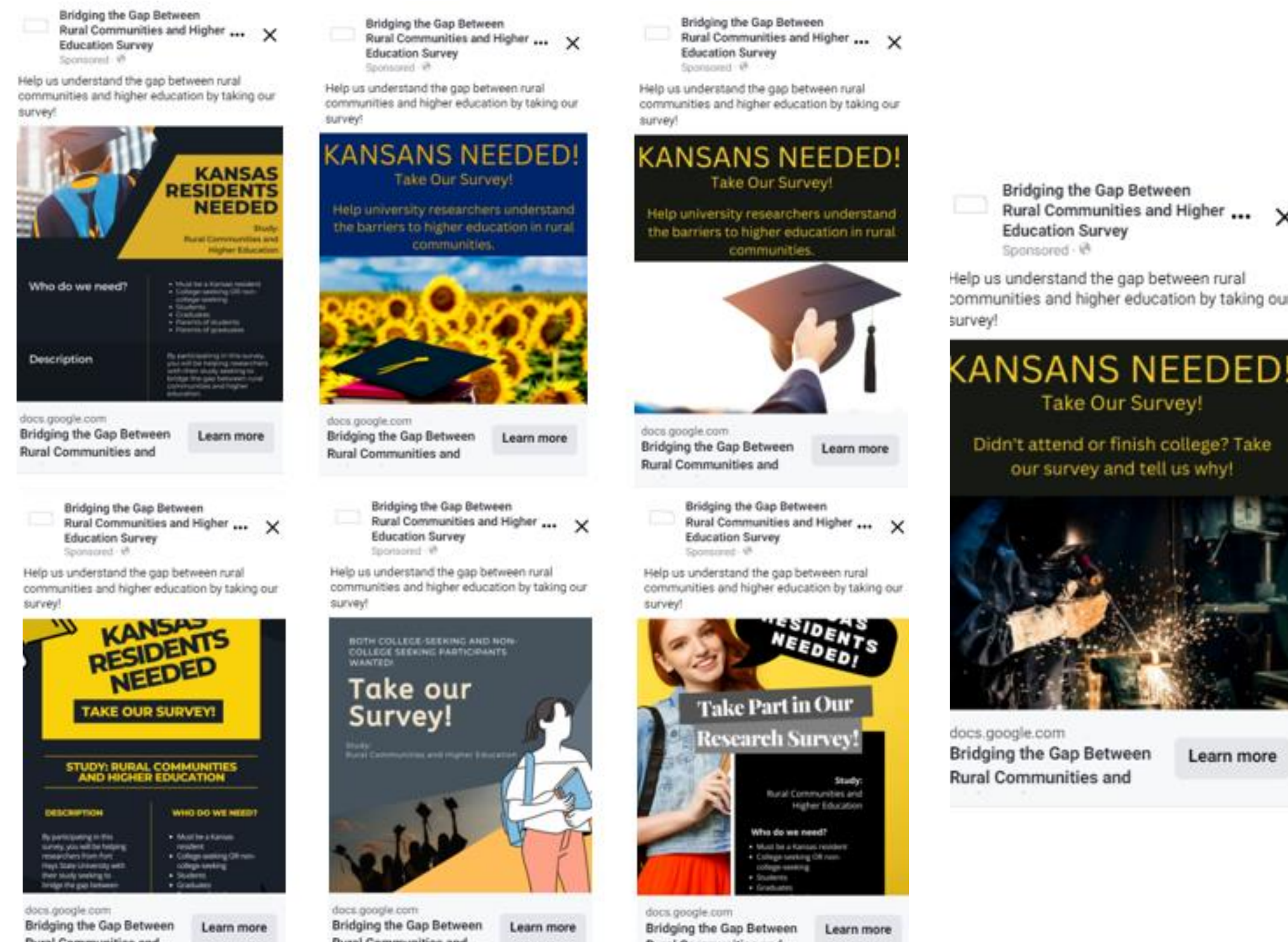
Key Findings

Lower higher education attainment in rural Kansas may be driven by ample employment alternatives, lower perceived need and family influences (both parents and children).

Methods

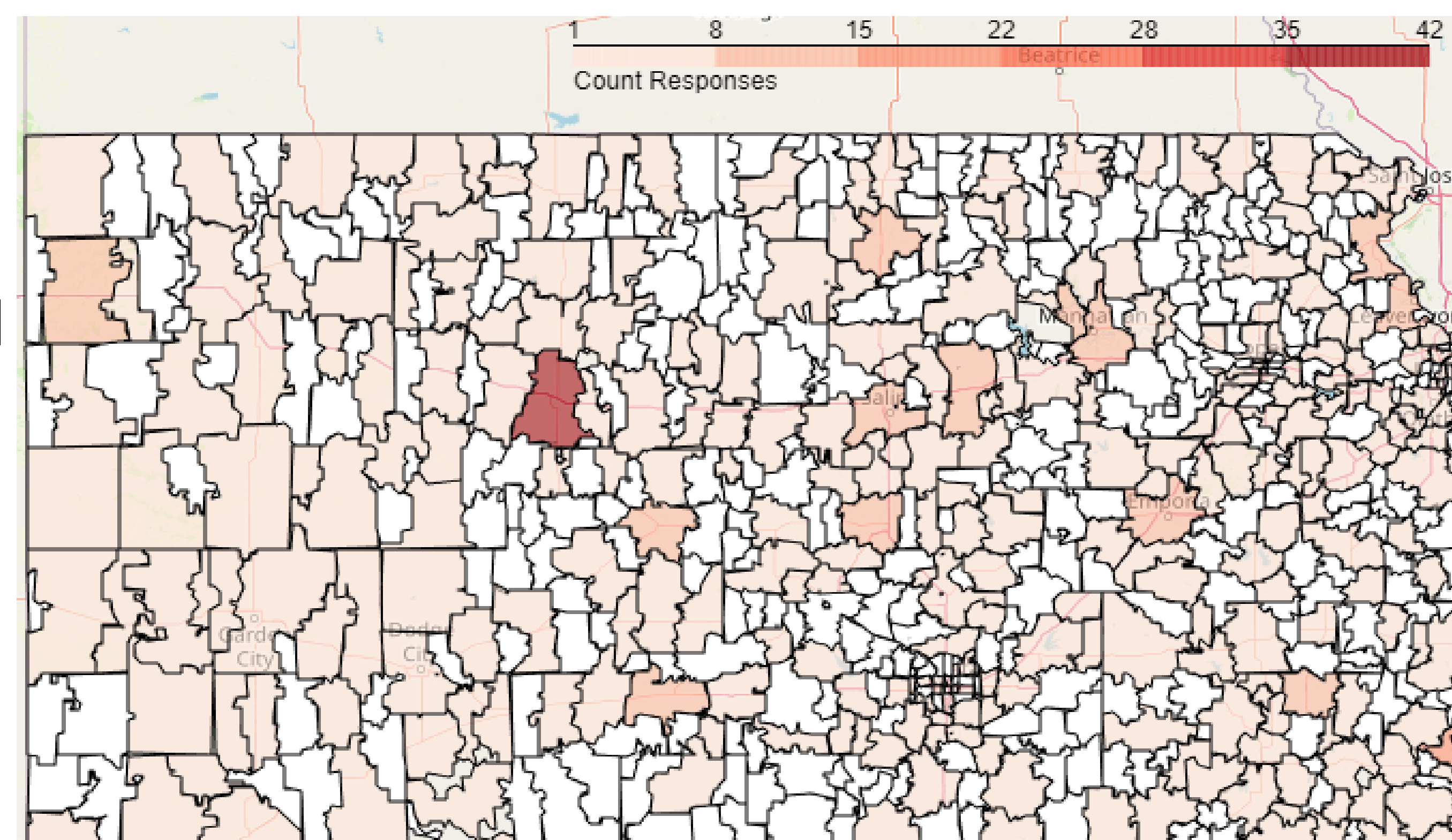
Kansans were given a 34-question survey. Respondents who identified as not having attended or completed a degree were classified into the non-college group and the rest were classified as college-attending. Respondents were classified as urban or rural using Census Urban Areas (Missouri Census Data Center, 2022). The survey was administered with Google's Forms tool, and participation was solicited through Meta's ads platform between July 6 and December 31, 2022.

- 802 surveys were received
- 59% urban and 41% rural
- Approx. 86% college and 14% non-college in both urban and rural groups



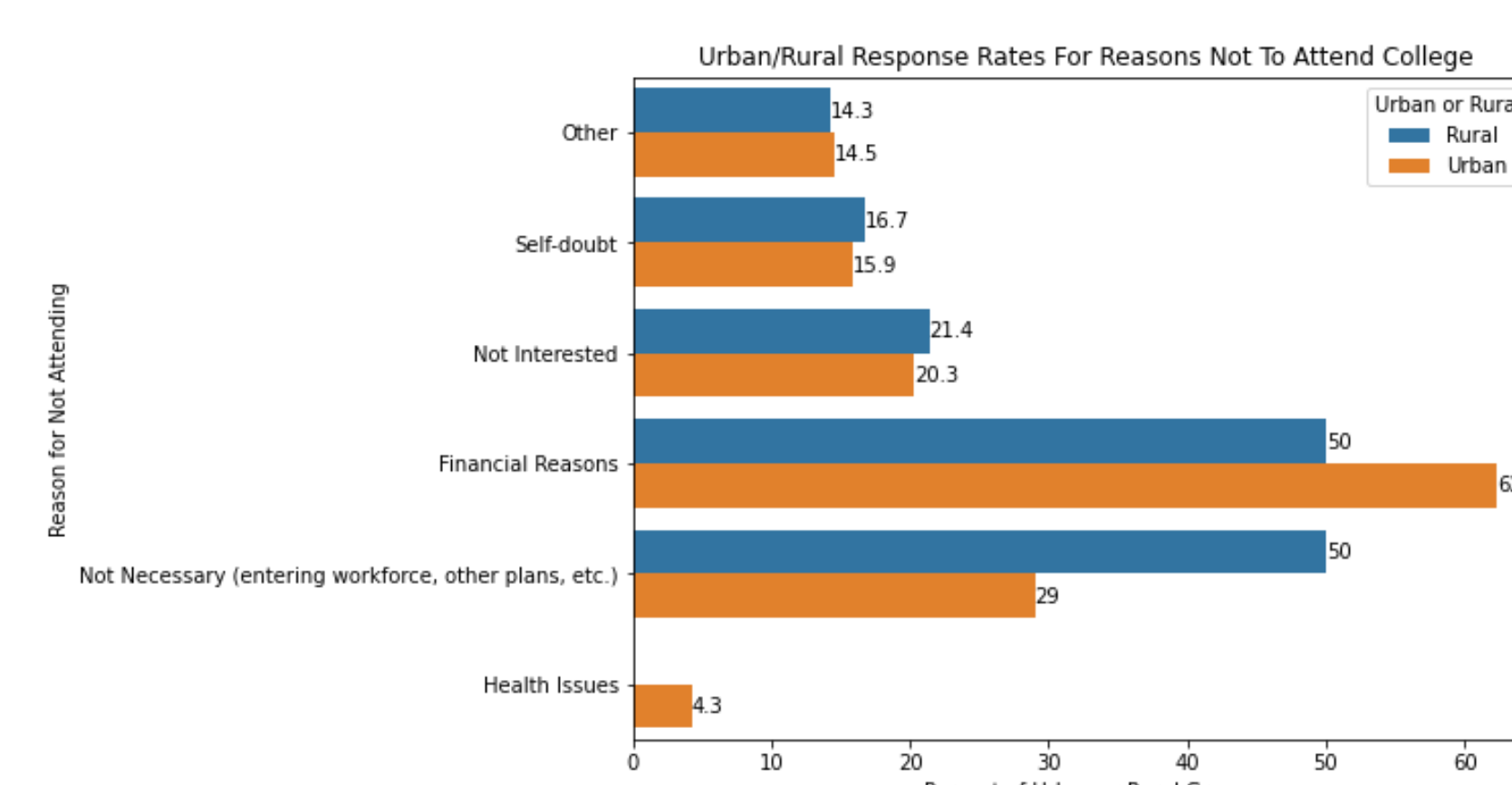
Analyses

Response rates for urban and rural groups were compared across 20+ independent variables.

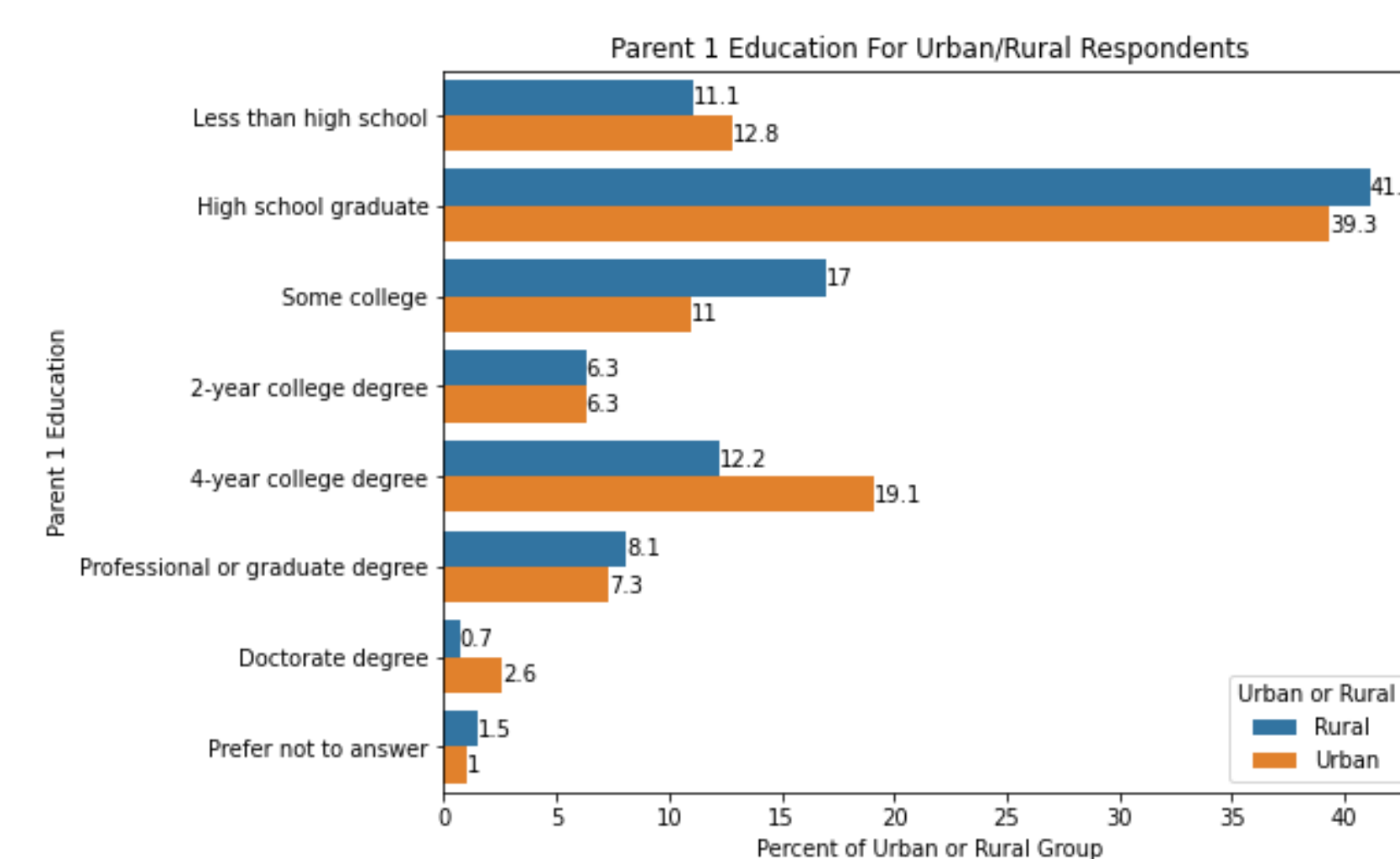


Response rates for Kansas zip codes

Results

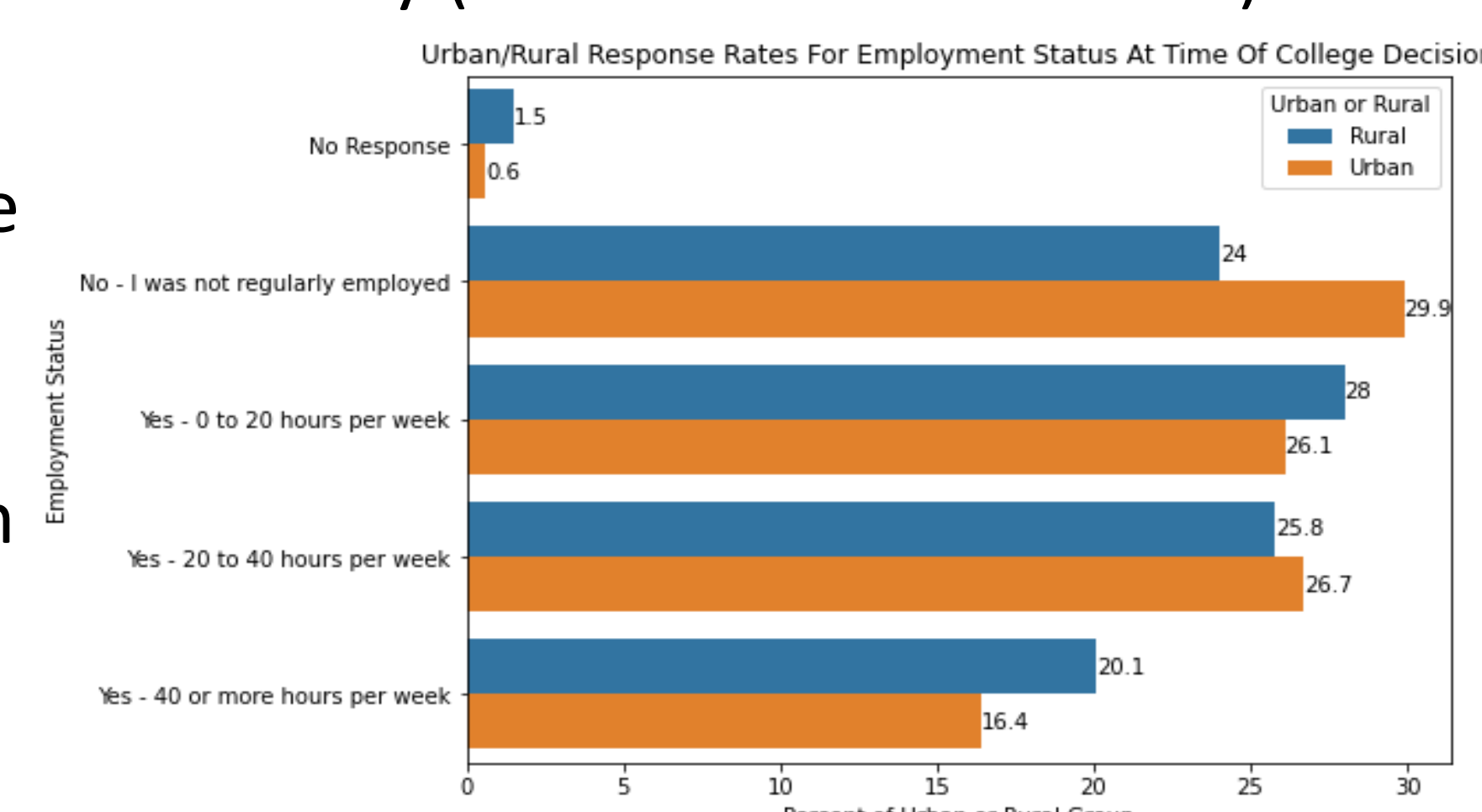


Full employment was reported slightly more frequently (20.1% rural vs 16.4% urban) among rural respondents. Unemployment was reported more frequently (29.9% urban vs 24% rural) among urban respondents.

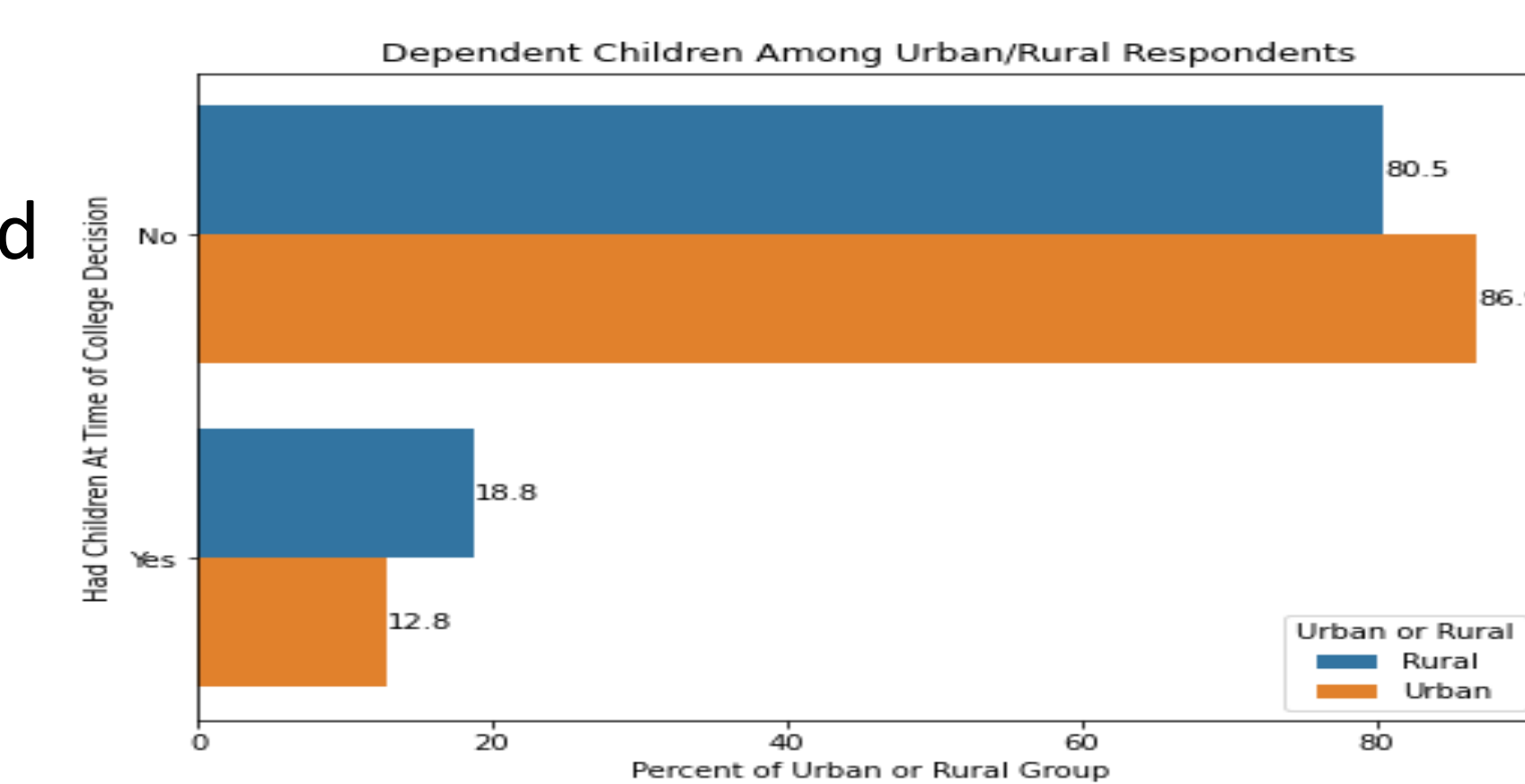


Respondents were asked if they had dependent children at the time they decided to attend or not attend college. A higher proportion of urban respondents reported having dependent children at the time of their higher education decision (18.8% vs 12.8%).

Urban respondents reported financial reasons for not attending slightly more frequently (62.3% urban vs 50% rural), while rural respondents more frequently reported attending or completing college was not necessary (29% urban vs 50% rural).



Urban respondents indicated that their parent had a 4-year college degree slightly more frequently (19.1% urban vs 12.2% rural). Rural respondents reported a parent that had started but not completed college more frequently (17% rural vs 11% urban).



Conclusions

The survey found perceived lack of necessity and existing family, or work obligations may play a role in lower rural higher education attainment rates. Lower college completion rates among rural parents may also be contributing. Rural respondents more frequently indicated that higher education wasn't necessary, and were less likely to be motivated by financial factors in deciding to attend or not attend.

Rural respondents:

- More likely to be employed full-time and less likely to be unemployed at the time of their decision
- More likely to have dependent children at the time of their decision
- Indicated less perceived need to attend
- Cited financial conditions less frequently as a reason not to attend

References

- Irwin, V., Zhang, J., Wang, X., Hein, S., Wang, K., Roberts, A., ... & Purcell, S. (2021). Report on the Condition of Education 2021. NCES 2021-144. *National Center for Education Statistics*.
- Perna, L. W. (2010). Understanding the working college student: New research and its implications for policy and practice. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- Choy, S. P. (2002). Nontraditional undergraduates (NCES 2002-012). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.
- *Geocorr 2022: Geographic Correspondence Engine, ZIP/ZCTA to Urban Area*. Missouri Census Data Center, 4 Dec. 2022, https://mcdc.missouri.edu/cgi-bin/broker? PROGRAM=apps.geocorr2018.sas& SERVICE=MCDC_long& debug=0&state=Ks20&g1 =zcta5&g2 =ur&wtvar=pop10&nozerob=1&title=&csvout=1&namoptf=b&listout=1&lstfmt=html&namoptr=b&oropt=&counties=&metros=&places=&latitude=&longitude=&locname=&distance=&kiloms=0&nrrings=&r1=&r2=&r3=&r4=&r5=&r6=&r7=&r8=&r9=&r10=&lathi=&latlo=&longhi=&longlo=.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by Fort Hays State University [grant number: 11372, URE FY22 – Srivastava].