

“When the Government Leaves Town: Perceptions of Government Stability in the Wake of Military Downsizing and Prison Expansion”

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My research uses a case study of a county in rural Illinois to chart how people’s trust in government is impacted by military downsizing and prison expansion. While many communities have experienced restructuring after a private company leaves, an understudied corollary are communities where it is the government itself that has restructured, deindustrialized, or left town. What would it mean to live in a community where the government has withdrawn from some of its most tangible investments?

I discovered that two such economic withdrawals from the county under study—the closure of a local Army installation and a recently constructed but still empty prison—have generally led residents to think about the federal and state government as unreliable. At the Army installation, economic redevelopment has been long stalled due to remaining environmental contamination and property transfer issues. The prison has been virtually empty since it was constructed in 2001, yielding none of the economic benefits that residents had anticipated. The net effect of living alongside these markers of government abandonment has been disaffection. While there are distinctions in how residents analyze the disuse of both sites, people generally place blame on the government for its opaque and political processes, and see the decade-plus emptiness of both sites as the direct outcome of political inaction.

While my case study focuses on one county, the dynamics at play are not specific to this community. Starting in the 1980s, the Department of Defense’s Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRAC) began to close and consolidate long-standing military installations across the country that were no longer seen as essential. Of the hundreds of facilities that have been shut down nation-wide by BRAC since 1988, more than half continue to have environmental contamination issues, making redevelopment difficult. Like the county under study here, a number of communities have built prisons after BRAC closures to help rejuvenate their economies. Across the U.S., not just in BRAC communities, prison expansion has increased dramatically since the 1980s, and rural communities have been the sites of a disproportionate amount of this expansion.

In places where the governmental infrastructure of defense and punishment has been changing, residents have little control over the economic forces affecting their community, and they often sense that their economic and social problems are compounded by their relative lack of political power. To combat financial harm and political disaffection, cleanup and property transfer procedures must be prioritized at all BRAC sites. Prison expansion must be carefully planned by state and federal agencies to avoid building unnecessary or unusable facilities. Ultimately, all communities need to be given meaningful control over their own economic development and redevelopment.

(Can link to my BRAC map website: <http://bracfacilitymap.weebly.com/>)