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The youth of small town Nebraska is starting to feel the negative effects of rural depopulation in new ways.

High school sports are taking a hit from a slow decline in the population of rural Nebraska communities. Some counties fail to field full basketball or football teams, despite their popularity among students. They have found alternatives for football in six and eight-man play, in opposition to the traditional 11-man style; basketball has proven to be a bit more difficult, particularly for women.

“All you need are five kids on the court to field a basketball team,” Debra Velder, associate director of Nebraska School Activities Association, said. “You can have up to twelve players on a roster, but some schools can’t even produce the five.”

Women’s basketball is one of the hardest sports to field a complete team for in the state of Nebraska. Even schools in Douglas County, the most populated in the state, are having trouble finding enough girls and staff to put a team on the court.

“It used to be that you could play almost any sport. I played football and ran track in high school,” Cal Rasser resident of Webster County said. “With Hastings and Grand Island in such close proximity, it’s getting harder and harder for our town to field teams.”

Velder says the reason high schools cant field teams is because they can’t find coaches up to the task.

“When teams can’t find enough coaches or players, they are forced to join forces with another high school team with the same issue or they simply won’t have a team,” said Velder. “We call this a cooperative sponsorship, and it is really one of the only alternatives to keeping sports in small towns alive.”

Some of the smallest counties in Nebraska are actually still able to field football and basketball teams, but it is not clear how long they will be able to do so.

Data for 2015-2016 from the Nebraska Department of Education shows that the five counties with the lowest populations of high school students may be facing these issues soon if not already. These counties are:

* Keya Paha: 66 students, 29 girls and 37 boys
* Loup County: 66 students, 48 girls and 38 boys
* Hayes: 90 students, 45 girls and 45 boys
* Boone: 91 students, 50 girls and 41 boys
* Wheeler: 93 students, 46 girls and 47 boys

These counties have less than 50 boy or girls in high school, and not all of them are athletes.

Rasser is a farmer from Red Cloud Nebraska with daughters that are six and eight-years-old. He is concerned about their futures in school athletics. Webster County has a population of more than 3,500, twice the size of Loup and Key Paha County. That is no guarantee that his hometown of Red Cloud won’t have issues with sporting programs in the future.

“Larger towns like Hastings and Grand Island are less than an hour away,” said Rasser. “If you aren’t a farmer, there is really no reason for you to live in Red Cloud. I want my daughters to be able to play the competitive sports that they want to.”

Rural depopulation is a trend that has been happening in the United States for more than 40 years. Since 1970, rural farm communities have been plagued by a loss of youth. The younger generations leave towns for other opportunities, disrupting a fragile echo-system dependant on their return to start new generations.

Between the 1980 and 2010, more than 32 percent of 1,043 U.S. counties lost population, according to a study done by The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation and the 2010 United States census.

Despite the drop in rural populations, the total number of United States residence has increased by more than 36 percent in that same period. Nebraska is one of, if not the greatest victims in these population losses.