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# PROJECT PLAN: HARMONIZING KANSAS LOCAL GOVERNMENT SURVEYS TO STUDY CAPACITY, WORKFORCE, AND INFRASTRUCTURE CHALLENGES

## ABSTRACT

This Community Data Lab project is designed to give students hands-on experience working with real-world public sector survey data related to Kansas local governments. The project centers on harmonizing two complementary survey datasets: an earlier Kansas-only ARISE city survey and a more recent CivicPulse national survey, which includes an oversample of local governments from Kansas. Both surveys examine local government capacity, infrastructure, and service provision; however, some questions differ in wording, structure, and emphasis, making them well suited for a student-led data harmonization and applied analysis project.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The primary objective of the project is to guide students through the process of harmonizing two independently designed survey instruments in order to construct a coherent analytical framework and dataset for studying local government capacity in Kansas. Students will identify overlapping concepts across surveys, reconcile differences in response scales and wording, and document the methodological decisions involved in aligning variables. The emphasis is on learning how to work with imperfect but policy-relevant data sources.

## 2 BASELINE OR INITIAL ANALYSIS

Students will begin by reviewing the survey instruments and codebooks to identify overlapping constructs and key differences. They will then develop harmonized variables, document coding and recoding decisions, and assess the implications of those decisions for analysis. Depending on project scope, students may conduct descriptive analyses, cross-tabulations, regression-based exploration, or simple visualizations to examine relationships between harmonized measures.

Following harmonization, students will explore substantive questions related to local government capacity and resilience. One illustrative example is the challenge of hiring and maintaining a sufficient local government workforce, a concept measured in both surveys. Students may examine how workforce challenges relate to fiscal condition, infrastructure needs, grant capacity, governance practices, or interorganizational relationships. This focus is intentionally flexible, allowing students to pursue related questions that emerge during exploratory analysis.

## 3 OPTIONAL ANALYSIS

The project allows for optional extensions that incorporate spatial or contextual analysis. Because the ARISE survey includes city and county identifiers and rich information on intergovernmental networks, students may link harmonized survey measures to external community-level data, such as the presence of anchor institutions or regional characteristics. Students may also produce maps or network-based visualizations to illustrate variation across

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Kansas jurisdictions, if appropriate for the course or lab structure.

#### 4 FINAL GOALS & EVALUATION

By the end of the project, students will have experience working with multi-source survey data, navigating the challenges of data harmonization, and conducting applied policy analysis relevant to local governments. Expected outputs may include a harmonized analytical dataset, written documentation of harmonization decisions, exploratory analytical results, and visual or spatial summaries of findings. The project emphasizes transferable skills in data management, methodological reasoning, and applied research communication.

#### 5 RELATED WORK

#### 6 DATA & TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

The project draws on two survey datasets. The first is the ARISE city survey, a Kansas-specific dataset that includes detailed information on infrastructure systems, governance capacity, grant challenges, fiscal stress, and intergovernmental and organizational networks. It was administered in 2023 and yielded 309 completed responses from 217 different Kansas jurisdictions.<sup>1</sup> The second was administered by CivicPulse on behalf of ARISE researchers in Fall 2025. It resulted in 87 responses from Kansas local officials and provides complimentary data including more nuanced measures of workforce challenges. Together, these datasets provide complementary perspectives on local government capacity and constraints. Environmental, economic and demographic data from the US Census and other sources will further supplement this survey data.