

Sociology Research Briefs

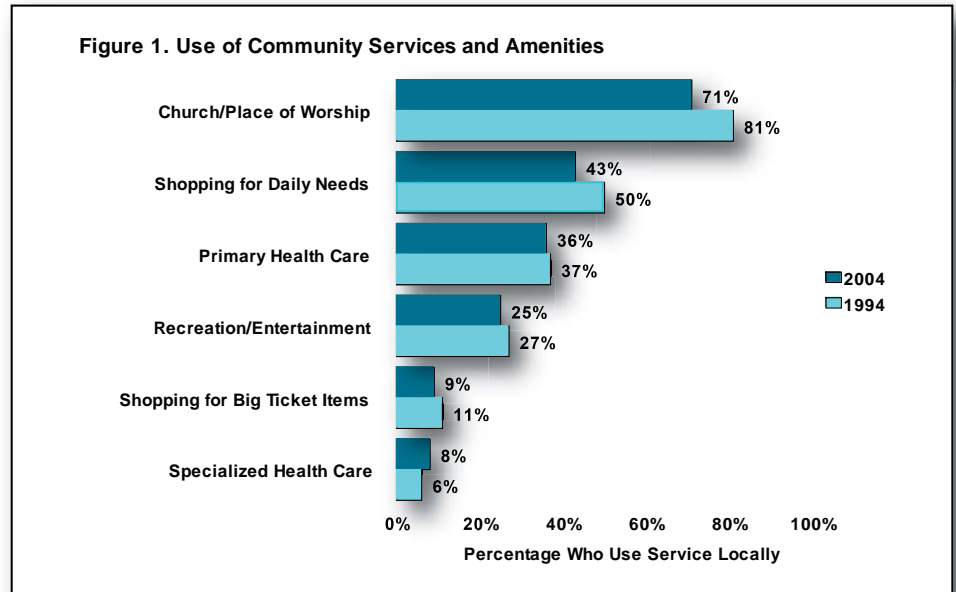
A Decade of Change in Iowa's Small Towns

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Traditionally, small towns have served as the cultural and socioeconomic hub for Iowa's residents. In recent years, due to a variety of demographic and economic changes, the vitality of many of Iowa's small towns is in question. Declines in the number of farms and businesses have contributed to a steady out-migration of residents, leaving fewer residents and less public revenue to address local needs. Recognizing the significance of small towns to Iowa's heritage, a major research effort was initiated in 1994 to assess the social conditions in Iowa's rural communities. Ten years later, in 2004, the study was repeated to learn how the social conditions have changed. This Research Brief highlights the major changes that have occurred in Iowa's small towns in terms of community quality of life, the social environment, and citizen involvement.

Community Quality of Life

Community quality of life is a broad term that refers to the extent to which the features of a town serve to meet the wants and needs of its population. The availability and quality of local services and amenities, such as parks, grocery stores, public safety services, medical facilities, schools, and others, determines, in part, the quality of life for local citizens. The ability of a community to provide services and amenities is largely dependent on public revenue—a resource that decreases as the local population ages or moves away.



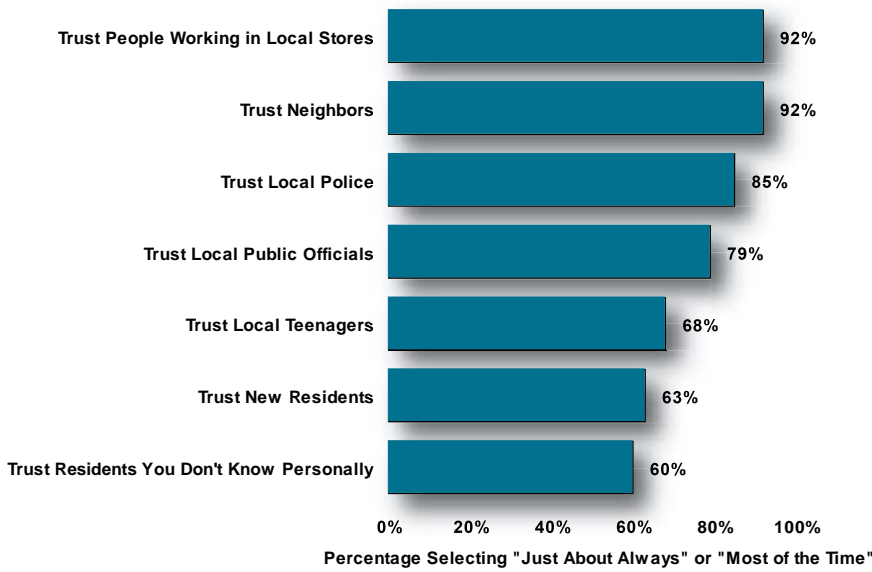
How have these statewide demographic and economic changes affected quality of life for Iowa's small towns? Not surprisingly, fewer residents in 2004 reported staying in their home community to attend church, to shop, or for recreation than did so in 1994 (see Figure 1). There was, however, a slight increase in the number of residents obtaining specialized health care locally.

Residents also reported that the overall quality of government services increased from 1994 to 2004, while the overall quality of non-government services decreased. In both years, residents expressed approval for most government services. Nearly all rated fire protection and emergency response as good or very good, although only about half were pleased with the quality

of local police protection and the condition of the streets. The percentage of positive ratings decreased for the condition of local parks and for the public schools over the ten-year period.

Non-government services received fewer positive ratings from residents in both years. About half of residents assigned positive ratings to housing, child care, and senior programs in both years, while less than one-quarter were pleased with local recreation and entertainment, shopping, or jobs. The percentage of positive ratings decreased since 1994 for senior citizen programs, recreation and entertainment, and local jobs, while favorable evaluations increased for housing and child care services.

Figure 2. Trust in Residents and Other Authorities in 2004



Social Environment

In spite of the frequently publicized economic challenges faced by many of Iowa's small towns, they are regularly praised for having favorable social climates. A main goal of this research has been to determine the extent to which Iowa's rural towns possess positive social environments, and whether or not the local social fabric has changed over the ten-year period.

The results show that the social environment has changed somewhat. In 2004, residents still viewed their towns as friendly, safe, trusting, and well-kept places, but less so than in 1994. In 2004, 52 percent of residents reported knowing the names of at least half of the other people in town, down from 55 percent in 1994. Similarly, residents indicated that fewer of their close friends and relatives lived in town compared to ten years earlier.

Despite these changes, residents in 2004 reported a great deal of trust in local citizens and authorities. The vast majority said they trusted their neighbors, people working in local stores, the local police and elected officials (see Figure 2). Local teenagers, new residents, and local "strangers"—citizens who are not

known personally—were trusted by over half of the residents. Additionally, residents remained "attached" to their communities over the ten-year period. Nearly all residents in both years reported that they felt at home in their town, and most would have been sorry to leave.

Citizen Involvement

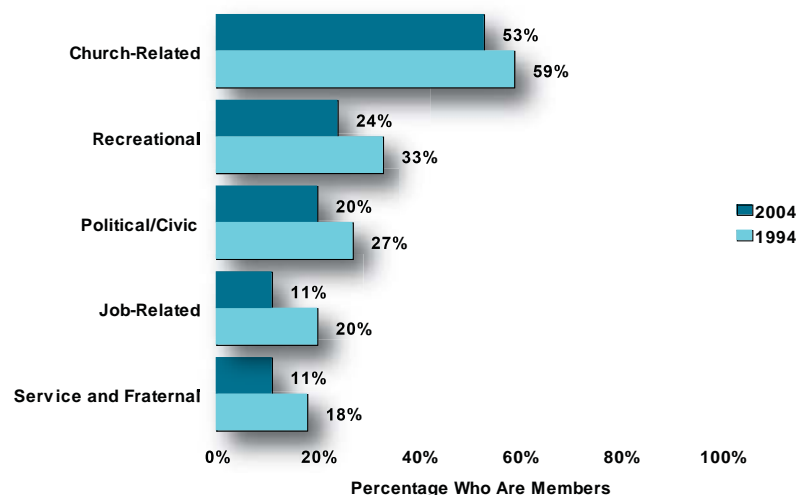
As the availability of local resources declines, the success of community projects often depends on the willingness of citizens to volunteer their time on behalf of the community. Citizens can volunteer in formal ways,

by belonging to local organizations or participating in formal projects, or in informal ways, such as by donating money or helping out with a city-wide clean-up. Recently, studies have lamented the loss of "civic-ness" in America (Putnam, 2000), and found that citizens have become increasingly less likely to belong to voluntary organizations or participate in their communities.

Does that trend exist in Iowa's small towns? In many ways, it does. Compared to 1994, fewer residents in 2004 described themselves as active in the community. Additionally, membership in local organizations declined over the ten year period. Although a majority of the residents in both years reported belonging to at least one local voluntary organization, the percentage decreased from 67 percent in 1994 to 63 percent in 2004. This pattern was consistent across a variety of types of organizations—compared to 1994, fewer residents reported belonging to church-related groups, recreational groups, political or civic organizations, job-related groups, and service and fraternal organizations (see Figure 3).

In spite of the downturn in organizational membership, residents were still involved in their community. In fact, the percentage of residents who participated in a community

Figure 3. Membership in Local Organizations by Type of Organization



improvement project increased slightly from 51 percent in 1994 to 53 percent in 2004. Additionally, two-thirds felt that most people in their community would help out informally by assisting during the aftermath of a tornado or conserving water during a drought.

Why do residents choose **not** to volunteer in their communities? Not surprisingly, lack of time is a major factor. Nearly six in ten residents said they do not volunteer because they simply lack the time. Thirty-nine percent said they had not been asked to volunteer, while just over one-fourth did not know how to get involved or had no interest in participating.

Summary

The results of this study reveal areas of concern for Iowa's small towns. Residents are using local services and amenities less frequently than ten years earlier, especially when it comes to shopping and attending church. Schools—typically a mainstay of social life in small towns—are declining in quality according to local residents, as are programs for senior citizens and avenues for entertainment. Not surprisingly, ratings for the quality of local jobs fell. The social fabric shows signs of strain as well. Today, fewer people in Iowa's small towns know each other or have local friends and relatives, and membership in local organizations has decreased.

In spite of these changes, however, it is also evident that Iowa's small towns retain many of the traits that are attractive to those who choose to live there. These are still safe, friendly places where residents know and trust each other. Citizens participate in local projects to help improve their community. Most government services earn approval from residents, and some local amenities, such as housing and child care, have improved over the ten year period.

References

Putnam, Robert. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

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Methodology

The data presented in this report is from a study of 99 small towns in Iowa conducted in 1994 and 2004. In 1994, one town between 500 and 10,000 in size was randomly selected from each of Iowa's 99 counties. In both 1994 and 2004, 150 households were randomly selected from telephone directories for the 99 towns and a resident

in each household was asked to complete a mail survey. Altogether, 10,798 residents participated in 1994 (72%), and 9,962 participated in 2004 (67%).

...and justice for all

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