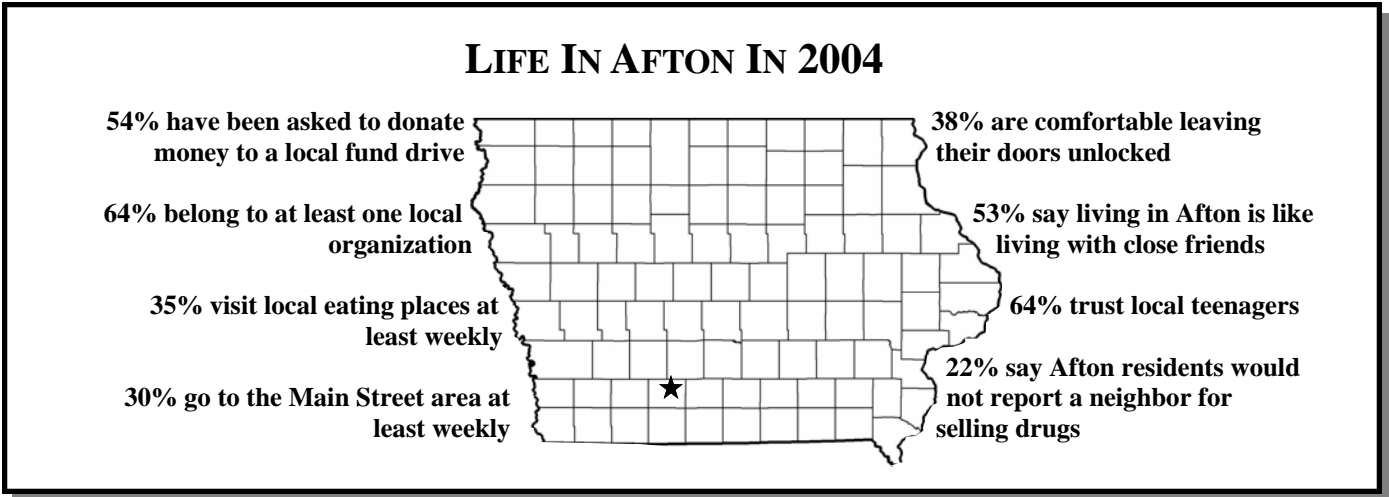


A DECADE OF CHANGE IN AFTON

In February 2004, the Rural Development Initiative Project at Iowa State University conducted a survey designed to look at changes in the social conditions in Iowa's rural towns. The survey was mailed to nearly 15,000 households in 99 towns, one of which was Afton. Ten years ago, residents of these same 99 communities were asked to complete a similar survey. The households for both surveys were selected randomly from local telephone directories (150 households per community). In 1994, 111 Afton residents responded to the survey, and 96 responded in 2004. This report is a summary of the results, including how the opinions of Afton residents have changed over the past decade.



LOCAL PATRONAGE PATTERNS

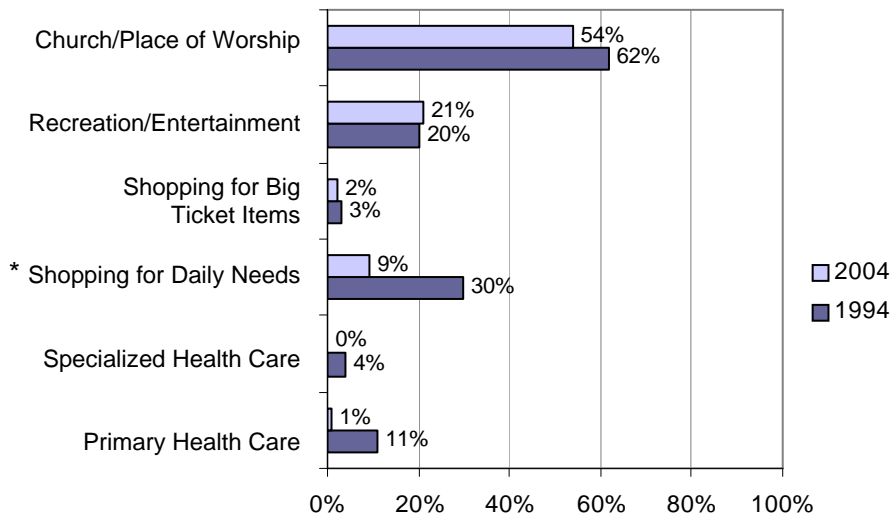


Figure 1: Percent Selecting "Local"

For a variety of reasons, many residents of Iowa's smaller towns rely on neighboring cities for services. Results from this survey suggest that Afton residents followed this pattern in 1994 and even more so in 2004. Figure 1 shows the percentage of residents who reported patronizing services of various types in Afton. While over half of residents remained in Afton to attend church or a place of worship, only one in five remained for recreation or entertainment. Nine percent of residents stayed to shop for their daily needs, a significant decrease from 30 percent ten years ago, while only 2 percent reported shopping for "big ticket" items in town. Very few residents reported obtaining primary health care in Afton, and no one stayed for specialized health care.

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A Note on Interpretation: For Afton, differences in percentages between 2004 and 1994 of less than 11 percent should be considered a statistical "dead-heat." That is, they fall within the margin of error range, which occurs whenever samples are used to draw conclusions about a larger group. With the modest sample sizes used in this study, the differences must be relatively large before we can be confident that they are real. Throughout the report, differences that are equal to or exceed 11 percent are statistically significant and are indicated with an asterisk ().

RATINGS OF LOCAL SERVICES AND FACILITIES

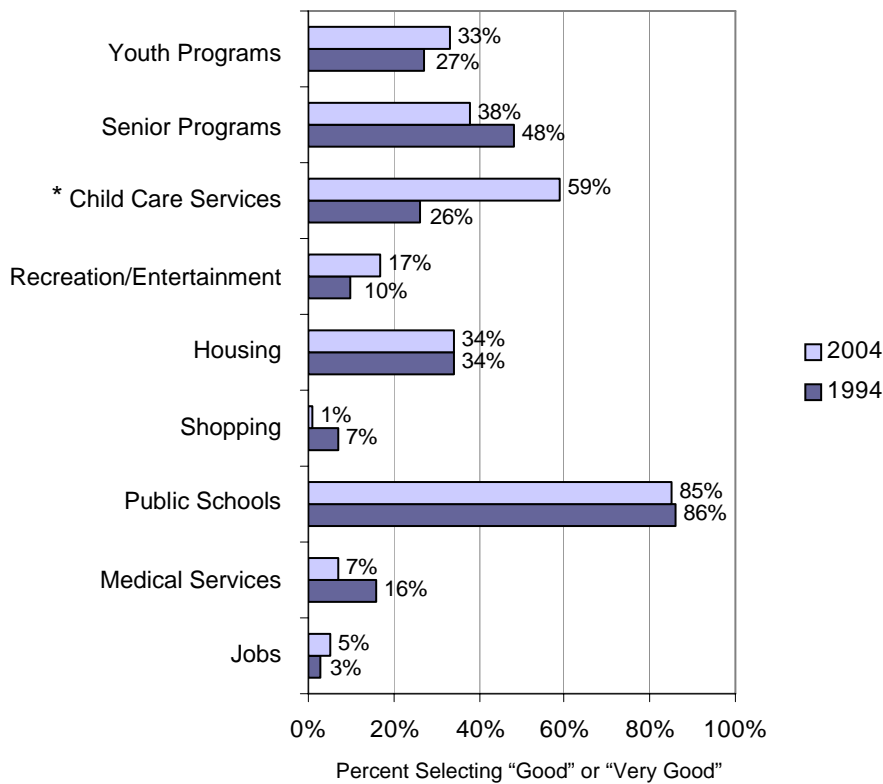


Figure 2: Ratings of Local Services and Facilities

Nine local services were listed on the questionnaire along with instructions to rate each as “very good,” “good,” “fair,” “poor,” or “not available.” Figure 2 shows the percentage of residents who rated each service as “good” or “very good” in 1994 and 2004. For both years, most residents rated public schools as good or very good. About one-third gave positive ratings to housing and youth programs, while fewer than ten percent gave favorable ratings to shopping and jobs. For most services, ratings have changed very little since 1994, however, the percent of residents giving positive ratings to child care services increased significantly from 26 percent in 1994 to 59 percent in 2004.

RATINGS OF GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Respondents were asked to provide ratings for seven services normally provided by local governments. Figure 3 shows the percentage of residents rating each service as “good” or “very good” for 2004 and 1994. Overall, Afton residents reported being satisfied with most of their government services. Well over three-quarters rated emergency response, garbage collection, fire protection, water, and the condition of parks as good or very good. Over half gave positive ratings to police protection, although the percentage of positive ratings declined significantly since 1994. The condition of the streets received the lowest percentage of favorable ratings in both years.

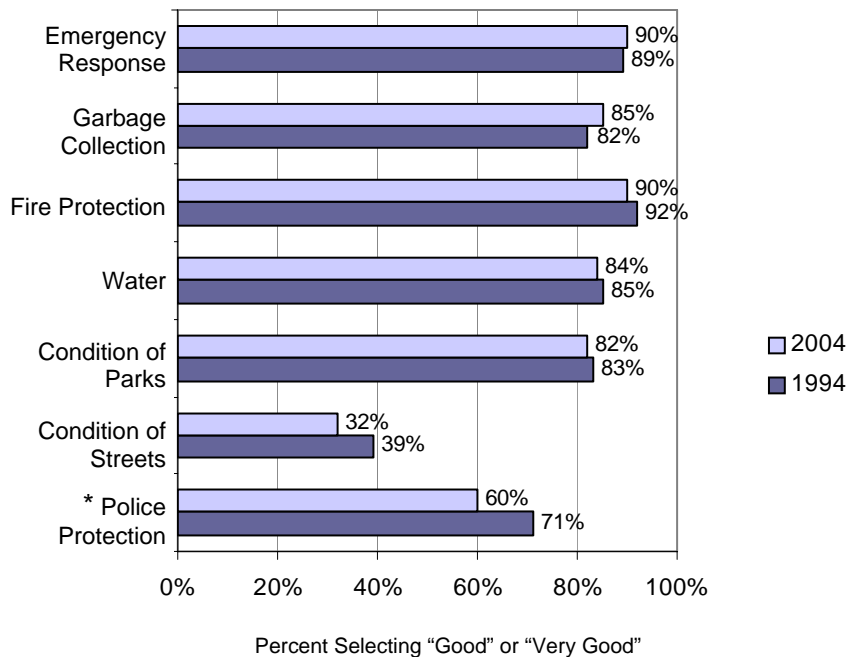


Figure 3: Ratings of Local Government Services

AFTON'S 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 project has been to determine the extent to which Iowa's rural towns possess favorable social environments. Accordingly, a variety of questions were included on the survey asking residents to evaluate various social attributes of their communities.

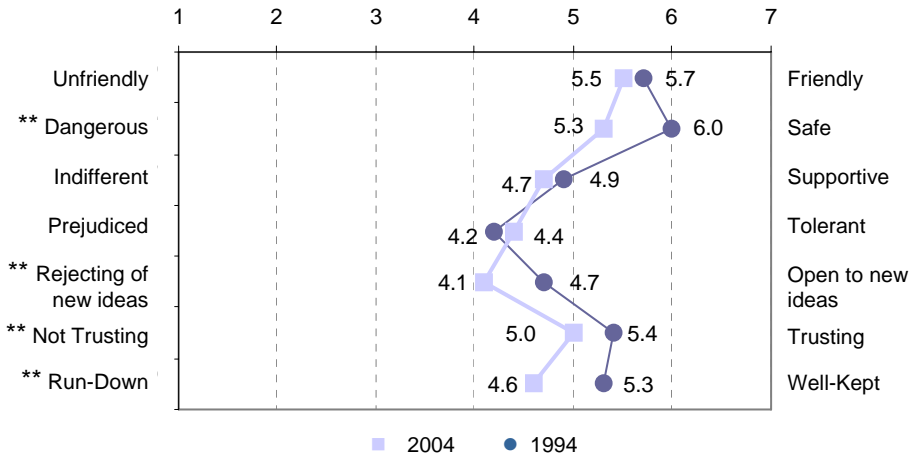


Figure 4: Average Rating of Social Qualities on a 1 to 7 Scale

Residents were presented with a list of qualities and asked to evaluate their town on each quality using a 7-point scale. The average ratings shown in Figure 4 reveal that in 1994, residents assigned the highest rating to the safety of Afton, followed closely by the friendliness of the town. In 2004, those two qualities also received the highest ratings. The lowest ratings in both years were assigned to tolerance and openness to new ideas. Significant changes over the decade are that residents in 2004 viewed Afton as less safe, less open to new ideas, less trusting, and more run-down than it was in 1994.

** The margin of error is calculated differently for averages, and will sometimes vary from question to question within the survey depending on how many people answered each question. Thus, changes of the same size may exceed the margin of error for some items in Figure 4, but not for others. Only those items designated by double asterisks (**) have differences large enough to fall outside of the statistical margin of error and can thus be considered to have changed since 1994.

SOCIAL TIES

“Everybody knows everybody” is often cited as a feature of small towns. The extent to which people know and interact with each other influences commitment to the community and interest in its well-being. As such, questions were included to assess local social ties. In 2004, 43 percent of Afton residents reported knowing the name of half or more of the people in Afton, compared to 52 percent in 1994. Similarly, 43 percent indicated that half or more of their friends live in Afton, compared to 50 percent in 1994. Fifteen percent of residents said that half or more of adult relatives and in-laws live in Afton in 2004, compared to 22 percent in 1994. (Note: These differences are not greater than the margin of error.)

COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT

Do Afton residents feel at home in their community? When asked this question 87 percent said that they do (see Figure 5), compared to 95 percent in 1994. Furthermore, in 2004 seven of ten indicated that they would be sorry to leave if they had to move away from Afton, a significant decrease from the 84 percent who expressed that sentiment in 1994.

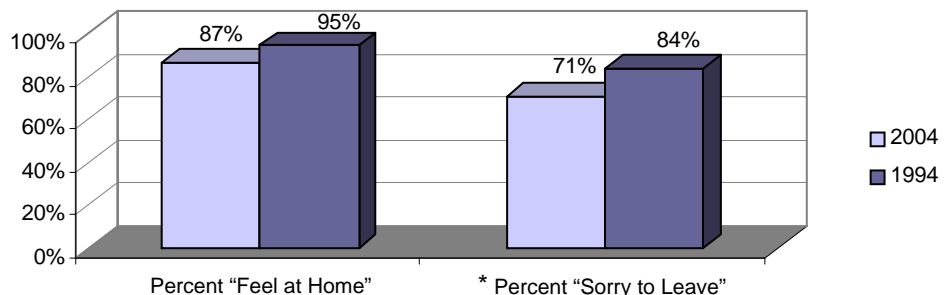


Figure 5: Community Attachment

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Citizens working together to accomplish local goals is an important feature of small towns. For Afton, 59 percent of residents indicated that the spirit of community participation is “good” or “very good.” At the same time, just under half (49%) reported participating in a community improvement project during the year prior to the survey, and about one-third (31%) considered themselves to be “somewhat” or “very” active in local community activities and events (see Figure 6). This compares to 57 percent of residents participating in a project in 1994, and 49 percent rating themselves as “somewhat” or “very” active in the community. When asked to consider a variety of factors that limit their involvement in community improvement projects, the top three factors selected were lack of time to participate (63%), not being asked to volunteer by others (39%), and lack of interest in participating (39%).

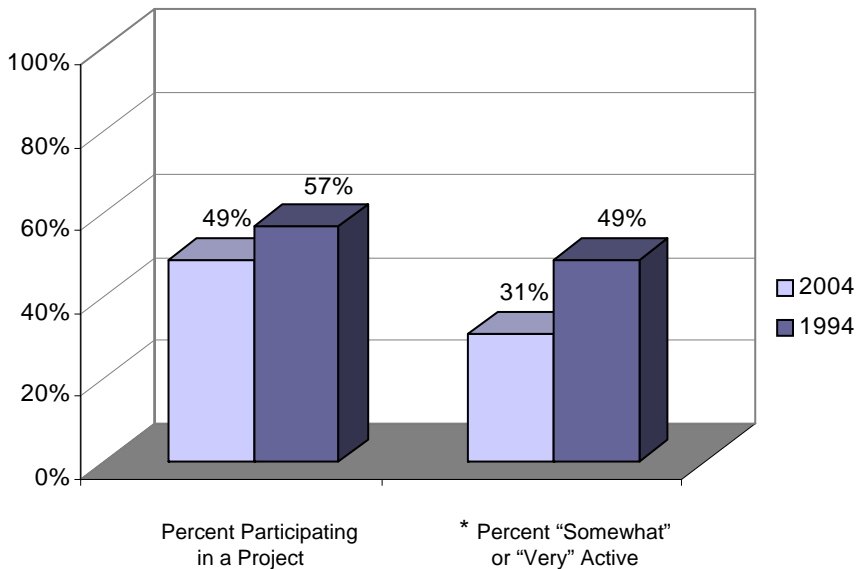


Figure 6: Community Involvement

SUMMARY

A major goal of this project is to examine changes in the social conditions in rural Iowa over the past decade. As previously discussed, the differences between 2004 and 1994 shown in this report must be interpreted to account for the margin of error—that is, we cannot say with confidence that a change has occurred unless the difference is equal to or greater than 11 percentage points. Using this standard, what has changed in Afton over the past decade? Afton residents are shopping for their daily needs outside of the community more today than ten years ago. The evaluations of the quality of local child care services increased, but ratings for other local services and facilities remained essentially unchanged. The evaluation of the quality of local government services remains high—the only change was a decrease for police protection.

The social environment has changed somewhat. Afton residents view their town as less safe, less trusting, and less well-kept, and less open to new ideas than it was in 1994. Ratings for the friendliness, supportiveness, and tolerance of the town did not change significantly. Afton’s residents remain “attached” to their communities—that is, a large majority feel at home in the community and would be sorry to leave. However, the percentage of those saying they would be sorry to leave decreased since 1994. Finally, participation in community activities is still important to Afton residents, as nearly half indicate participation in local activities. However, the percent who describe themselves as active in the community has declined.

The past decade has been challenging for Iowa’s small towns. We hope this information will prove useful in planning for Afton’s future. **We wish to thank the Afton residents who participated in the 1994 and 2004 studies for providing the information that made this report possible.**

RDI

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