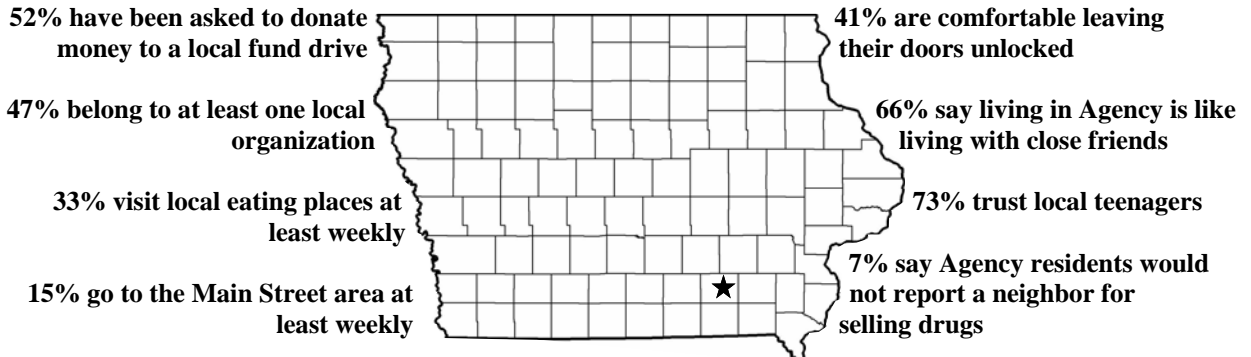


# A DECADE OF CHANGE IN AGENCY

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 Agency. 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, 94 Agency residents responded to the survey, and 92 responded in 2004. This report is a summary of the results, including how the opinions of Agency residents have changed over the past decade.

## LIFE IN AGENCY IN 2004



## LOCAL PATRONAGE PATTERNS

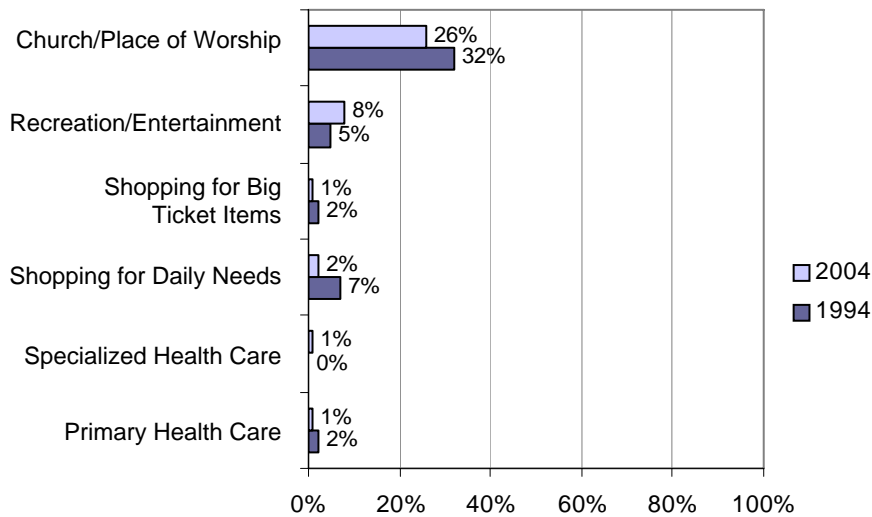


Figure 1: Percent Selecting "Local"

For a variety of reasons, many residents of Iowa's smaller towns rely on neighboring cities for services. Results from this survey suggest that Agency 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 Agency. While about one fifth of respondents remained in Agency to attend church or place of worship,

that is less than the fourth who stayed in town for religious services in town in 1994. All of the differences seen above in patronage patterns in Agency are within the margin of error for this study.

\*A Note on Interpretation: For Agency, differences in percentages between 2004 and 1994 of less than 12 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 12 percent are statistically significant and are indicated with an asterisk (\*).

## RATINGS OF LOCAL SERVICES AND FACILITIES

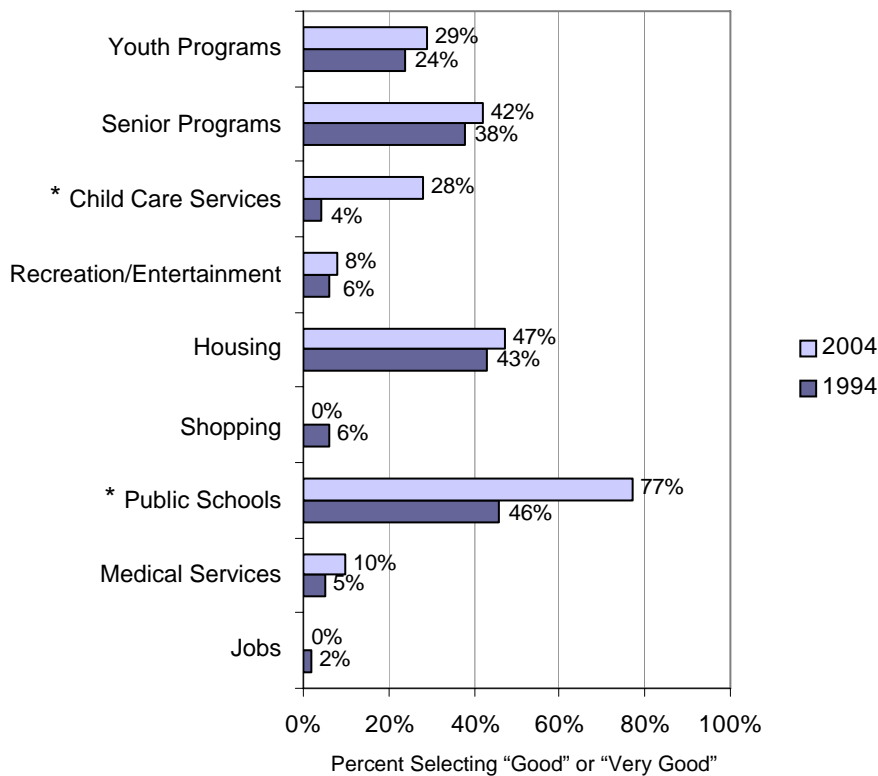


Figure 2: Ratings of Local Services and Facilities

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 percent of residents who rated each service as “good” or “very good” in 1994 and 2004. Ratings changed very little since 1994 for most services. However, two service areas received significantly higher evaluations in 2004 compared to 1994. Public schools went from 46 percent approval in 1994 to 77 percent in 2004 and child care services increased by 24 percent in that time. Slightly more than 40 percent of residents evaluated housing as good or very good in both 1994 and 2004. Jobs, shopping, recreation, and medical services received the lowest ratings of all services in both years.

## 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, Agency residents reported being satisfied with most government services. The vast majority of residents rated emergency response, garbage collection, fire protection, water, and condition of parks as good or very good in 1994 and 2004. Police protection received the lowest rating in both years, but received positive ratings from significantly more people in 2004 than in 1994. Similarly, ratings for water services and garbage collection improved over the past decade.

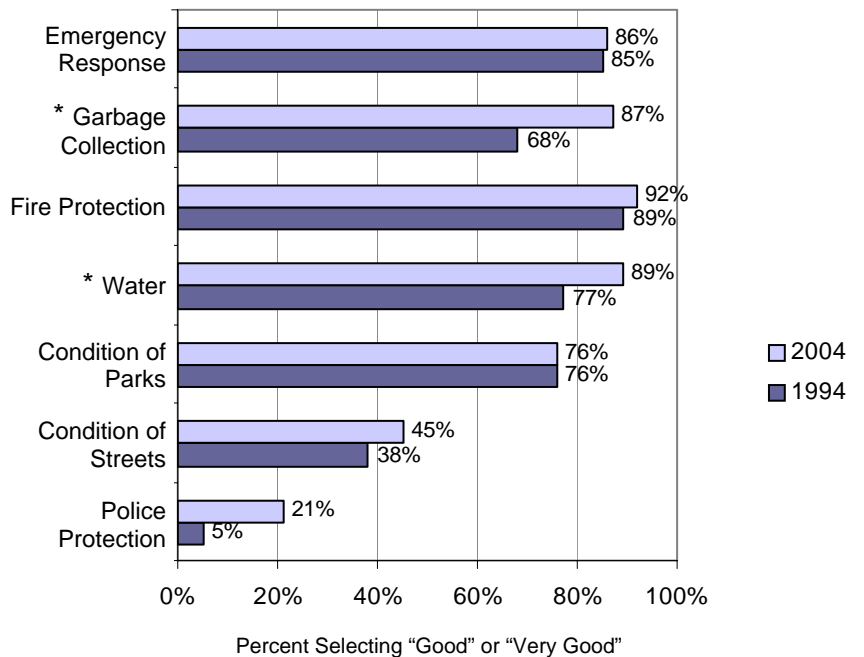
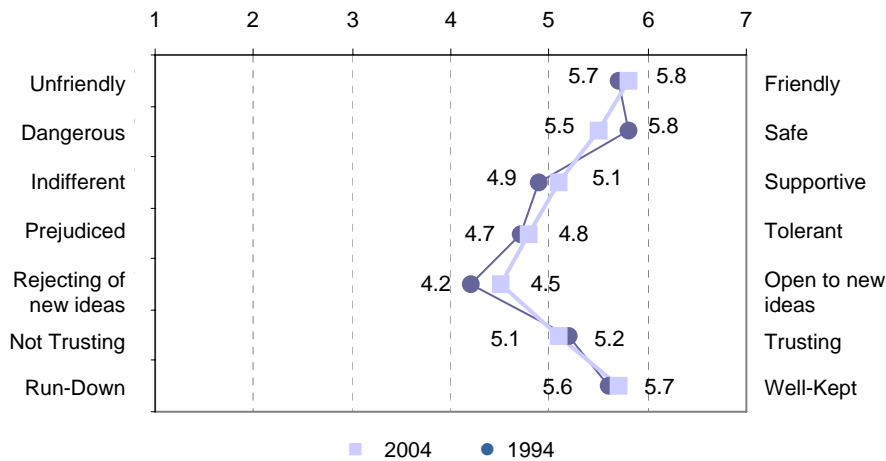


Figure 3: Ratings of Local Government Services

## AGENCY'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 friendliness and safety of Agency, followed by appearance. The lowest ratings in 1994 were in the areas of openness to new ideas and tolerance. That pattern is unchanged in 2004. Agency is still viewed as a friendly, safe, well-kept town where the lowest rated qualities are openness to new ideas and tolerance.

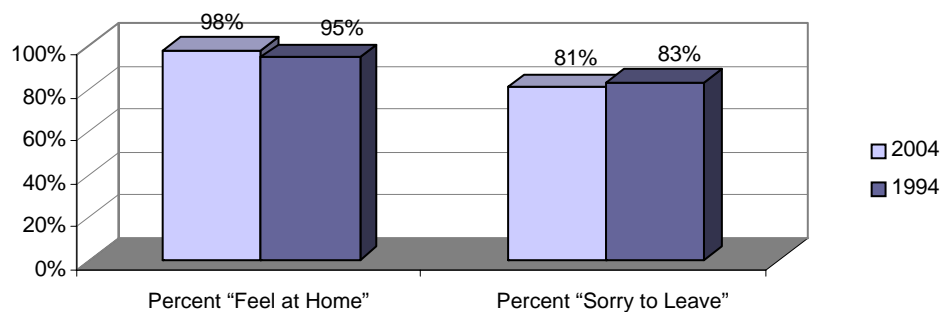
\*\* The margin of error is calculated differently for averages, and will sometimes vary from question to question within the survey depending on how many people answered each question. Thus, changes of the same size may exceed the margin of error for some items in Figure 4, but not for others. Only 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, 32 percent of residents reported knowing the names of half or more of the people in Agency, compared to 25 percent in 1994. Similarly, 28 percent indicated that half or more of their friends live in Agency, compared to 23 percent in 1994. Eleven percent of residents in 2004 and 12 percent in 1994 said that half or more of their adult relatives and in-laws live in Agency. (Note: These differences are not greater than the margin of error.)

### COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT

Agency residents appear to be as highly attached to the community in 2004 as they were in 1994. Almost everyone reported that they feel at home in Agency in both 1994 and 2004 (see Figure 5). In addition, about eight of ten people in both 1994 and 2004 indicated that they would be sorry to leave if they had to move away from Agency.



**Figure 5: Community Attachment**

## COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Citizens working together to accomplish local goals is an important feature of small towns. For Agency, 78 percent of residents indicated in 2004 that the spirit of community participation is

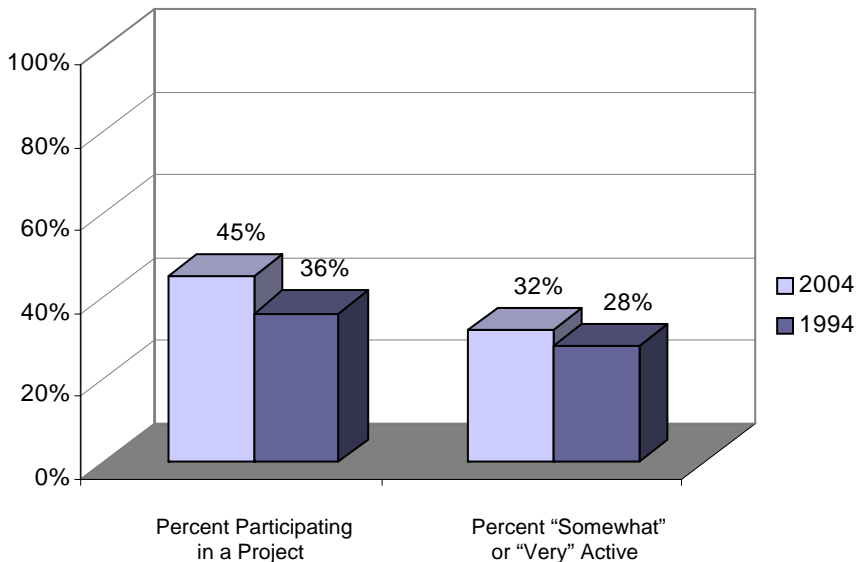


Figure 6: Community Involvement

“good” or “very good.” Slightly less than half of residents reported participating in a community improvement project during the year prior to the survey and about one in three described themselves as “somewhat or “very” active in local community activities and events (see Figure 6). This was about the same as in 1994 when 36 percent reported participating in a project and 28 percent rated themselves as “somewhat” or “very” active. When asked to consider a factors that limit their involvement in community improvement projects, the top factors mentioned by residents were lack of time (58%), not being asked to volunteer (39%), and not knowing how to become involved (36%).

## 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 12 percentage points. Using this standard, what has changed in Agency over the past decade? Public schools, child care services, garbage collection, water services, and police protection received more positive ratings in 2004 than 1994. The evaluations of other local services and local patronage patterns remained essentially the same.

Likewise, there has been no apparent change in the social environment. Residents rated Agency in 1994 and 2004 as friendly, well-kept, and safe. They expressed strong attachment to Agency with almost everyone “feeling at home” and over 80 percent reporting that they would be sorry to leave the town. More than three quarters of residents indicated that the spirit of community participation in Agency is good or very good, 45 percent participated in a community improvement project in the last year, and around one third consider themselves active in the community. This level of involvement is about the same as ten years ago. It is interesting that of those who are not involved, more than a third reported that they were not involved either because they had not been asked or did not know how to get involved. This suggests possible strategies to increase community involvement in the future.

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

**RDI**

Prepared by: Terry Besser, Kerry Agnitsch, Laura Forster, Jean Friestad, Tom Rice, Vern Ryan, and Nick Recker, Department of Sociology, Iowa State University. For further information, contact Terry Besser, 515-294-6508, tbesser@iastate.edu or Kerry Agnitsch, 515-294-4095, kagnitsc@iastate.edu.

**RDI-127** — This report was prepared through the **Rural Development Initiative** Project, Iowa State University and funded by the National Research Initiative, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under Agreement No. 2003-35401-13828.