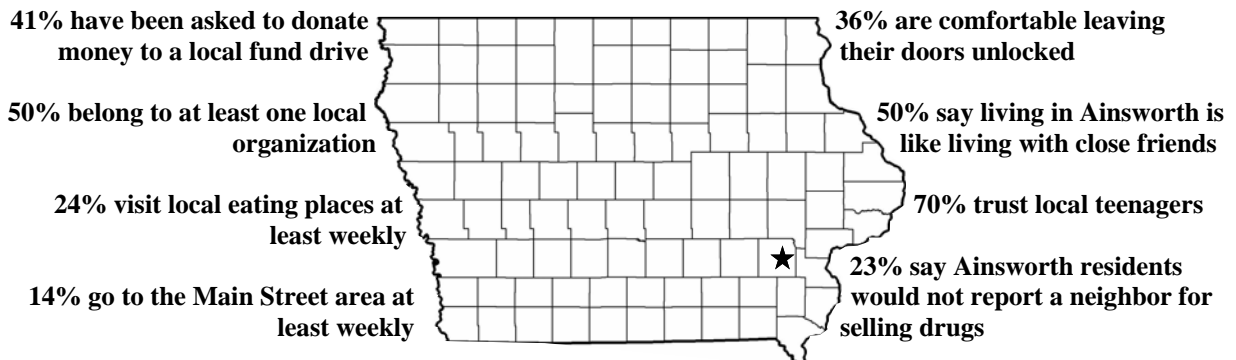


# A DECADE OF CHANGE IN AINSWORTH

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 Ainsworth. 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, 113 Ainsworth residents responded to the survey, and 96 responded in 2004. This report is a summary of the results, including how the opinions of Ainsworth residents have changed over the past decade.

## LIFE IN AINSWORTH IN 2004



## LOCAL PATRONAGE PATTERNS

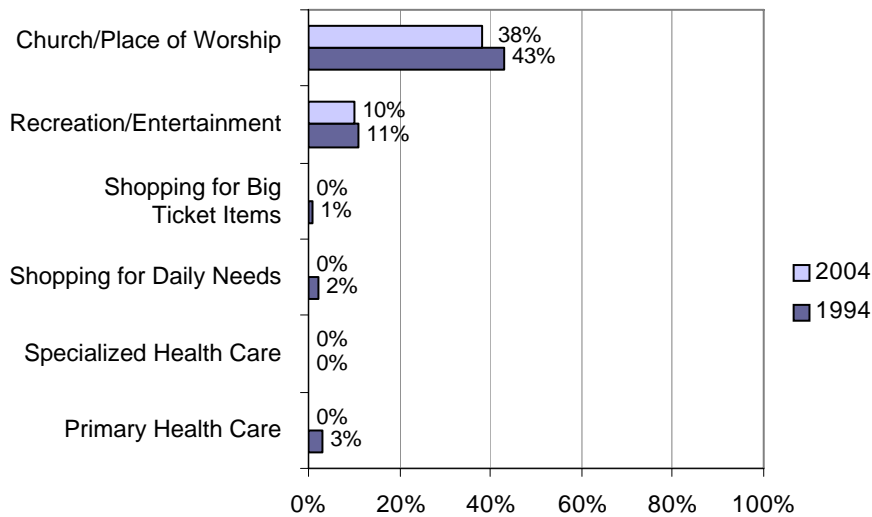


Figure 1: Percent Selecting "Local"

For a variety of reasons, many residents of Iowa's smaller towns rely on neighboring cities for services. Results from this survey suggest that Ainsworth residents followed this pattern in 1994 and 2004. Figure 1 shows the percentage of residents who reported patronizing services of various types in Ainsworth. Almost everyone went out of town for all services except attending church or place of worship. About four of ten

residents remained in Ainsworth for church related activities in 1994 and 2004. All of the differences seen above in patronage patterns are within the margin of error for this study.

\*A Note on Interpretation: For Ainsworth, 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

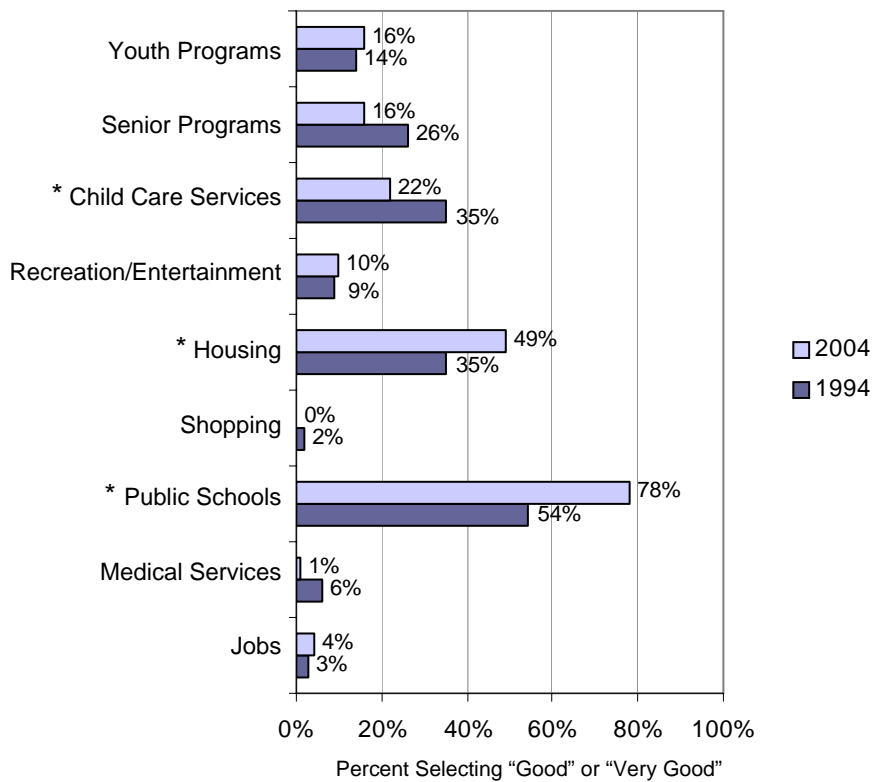


Figure 2: Ratings of Local Services and Facilities

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. Only public schools received a favorable evaluation from more than half of residents in both periods. In 2004, more than three-fourths indicated that the quality of public schools was good or very good and about one-half rated housing positively. There was significant improvement in ratings of public schools and housing in 2004 compared to 1994 ratings. Favorable evaluations for child care services declined from 35 percent in 1994 to 22 percent in 2004. Ratings for other services were essentially unchanged from 1994.

## 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. Emergency response and fire protection were rated positively by roughly three of four Ainsworth residents in 1994 and 2004. Police protection received the lowest rating in both years, with fewer than one in three residents indicating the service was “good” or “very good.” About one in three residents evaluated streets positively in both years. Water was rated positively by 64 percent in 1994, but dropped to 43 percent approval in 2004. Ratings for other Ainsworth government services did not change significantly in 2004.

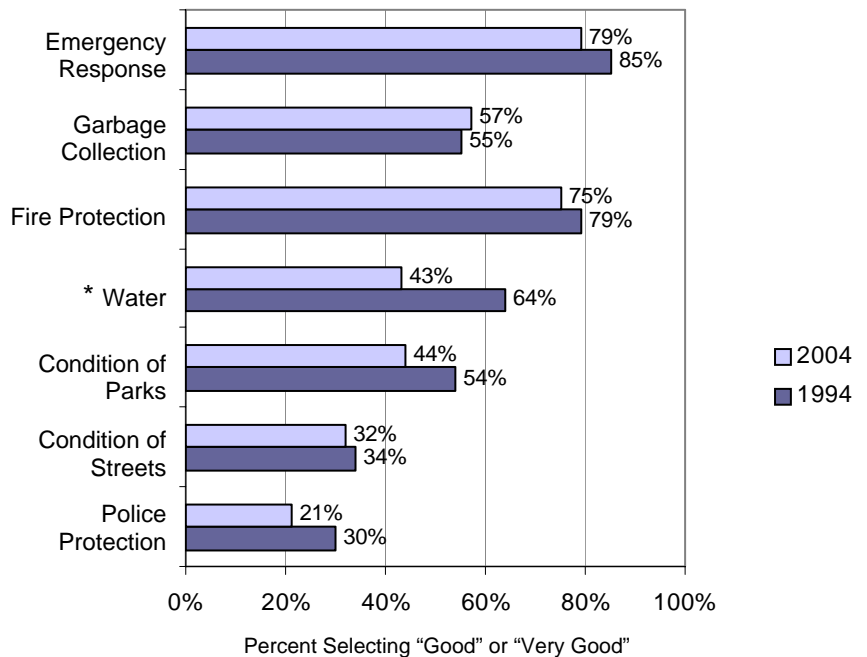
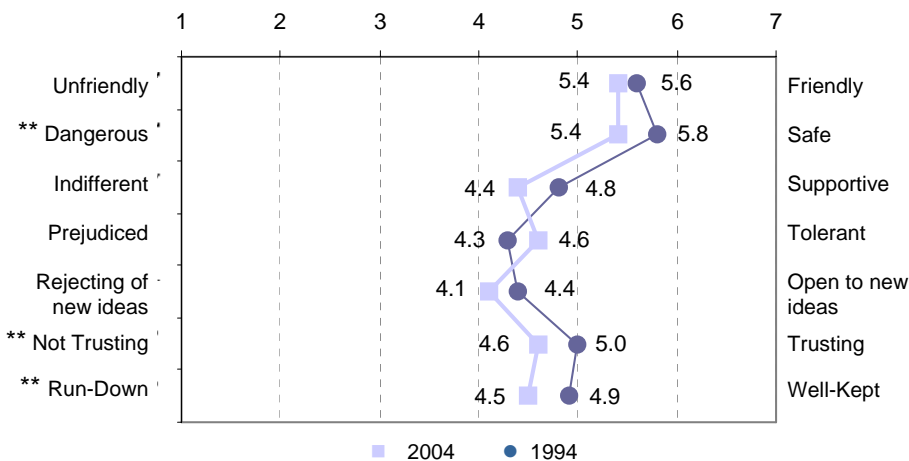


Figure 3: Ratings of Local Government Services

## AINSWORTH'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 safety in Ainsworth, with friendliness second. Tolerance received the lowest rating. In 2004, safety and friendliness still received the highest ratings, but safety was significantly lower than in 1994. In addition, note the significant decline in trust and appearance between 1994 and 2004. The lowest rating in 2004 was for openness to new ideas. In four of the seven areas, there was no significant change.

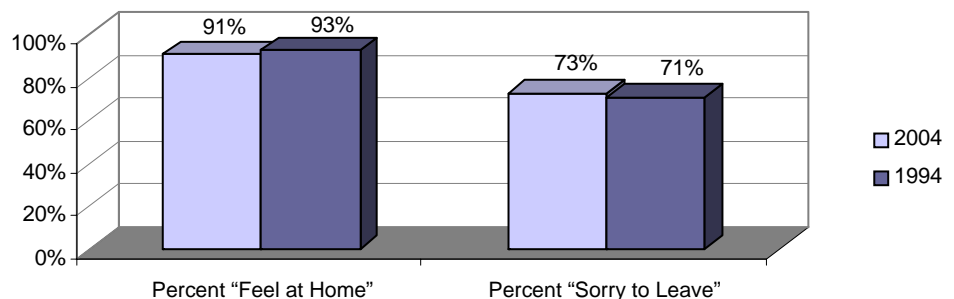
\*\* The margin of error is calculated differently for averages, and will sometimes vary from question to question within the survey depending on how many people answered each question. Thus, changes of the same size may exceed the margin of error for some items in Figure 4, but not for others. Only 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. Therefore, questions were included about local social ties. In 2004, 47 percent of residents reported knowing the names of half or more of the people in Ainsworth, roughly the same as the 38 percent in 1994. Similarly, 14 percent of residents in 2004 and 22 percent in 1994 said that half or more of their adult relatives and in-laws live in Ainsworth. However, the percent who indicated that half or more of their friends live in Ainsworth in 2004 (33%) was significantly less than the 1994 level (59%).

### COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT

Are Ainsworth residents attached to their community? Almost everyone reported that they feel at home in Ainsworth in both 1994 and 2004 (see Figure 5). Furthermore, about seven of ten in both 1994 and 2004 indicated that they would be sorry to leave if they had to move away. Feelings of attachment to Ainsworth have not changed significantly in the last decade.



**Figure 5: Community Attachment**

## COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Citizens working together to accomplish local goals is an important feature of small towns. For Ainsworth, 47 percent of residents indicated in 2004 that the spirit of community participation is “good” or “very good.” In addition,

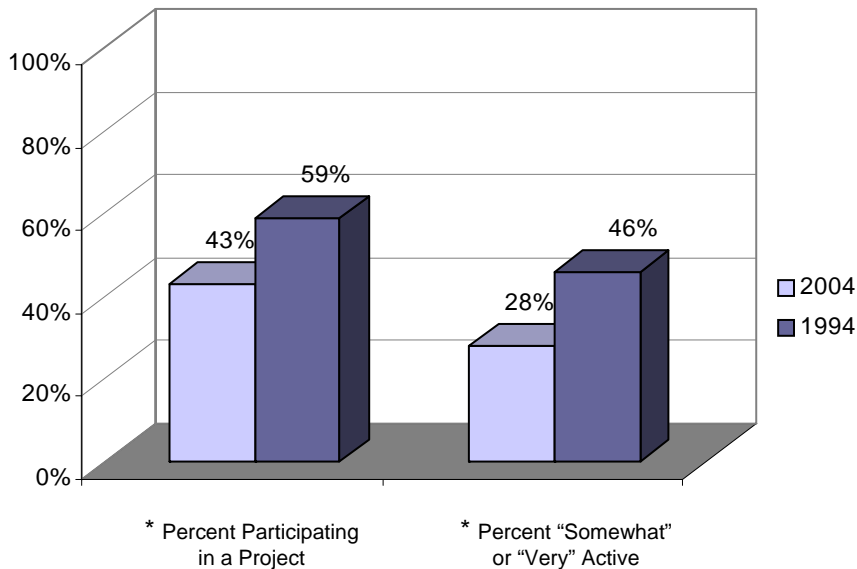


Figure 6: Community Involvement

less than half reported participating in a local community improvement project in 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 represents a significant decline from 59 percent who reported participating in a project and 46 percent who rated themselves as active in the community in 1994. When asked to consider a variety of factors that limit their involvement in community improvement projects, the top three factors mentioned by residents were lack of time (62%), not being asked to volunteer (36%), and not knowing how to get involved (29%).

## 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 Ainsworth over the past decade? The evaluations of the quality of the public schools and housing have increased, but ratings for local child care and water services have declined. Residents’ opinions of other services and their patronage patterns have not changed over the past decade.

The social environment has changed somewhat. Ainsworth residents still describe their town as a safe and friendly community, but less safe, less trusting, and less well-kept compared to 1994. Residents remained strongly attached to Ainsworth—that is, a majority feel at home and would be sorry if they had to leave. Even so, levels of community involvement have decreased significantly from 1994 to 2004 and less than half reported that the spirit of community participation is good or very good overall. It is interesting to note that two of the top three reasons people gave for not being involved in community projects were that no one asked them and they didn’t know how to get involved. These responses suggest potential avenues for increasing community participation in the future.

The past decade has been challenging for Iowa’s small towns. We hope this information will prove useful in planning for Ainsworth’s future. **We wish to thank the Ainsworth 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.

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