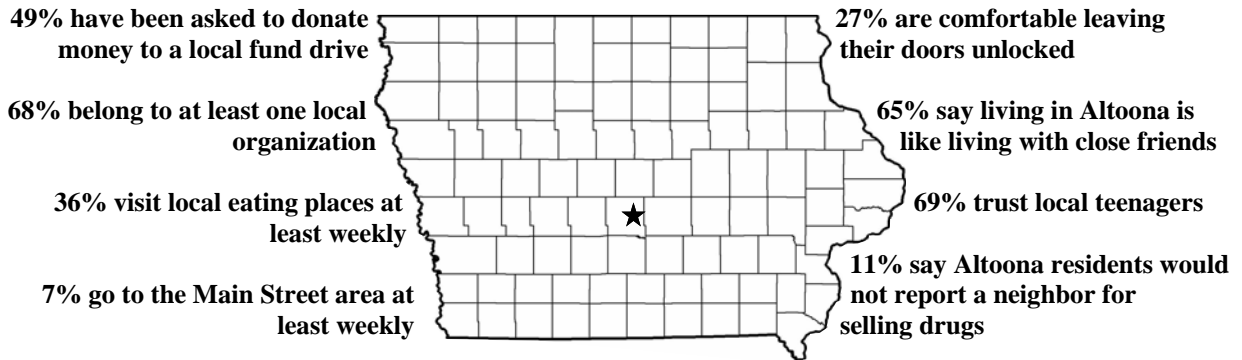


# A DECADE OF CHANGE IN ALTOONA

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 Altoona. 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, 102 Altoona residents responded to the survey, and 85 responded in 2004. This report is a summary of the results, including how the opinions of Altoona residents have changed over the past decade.

## LIFE IN ALTOONA IN 2004



## LOCAL PATRONAGE PATTERNS

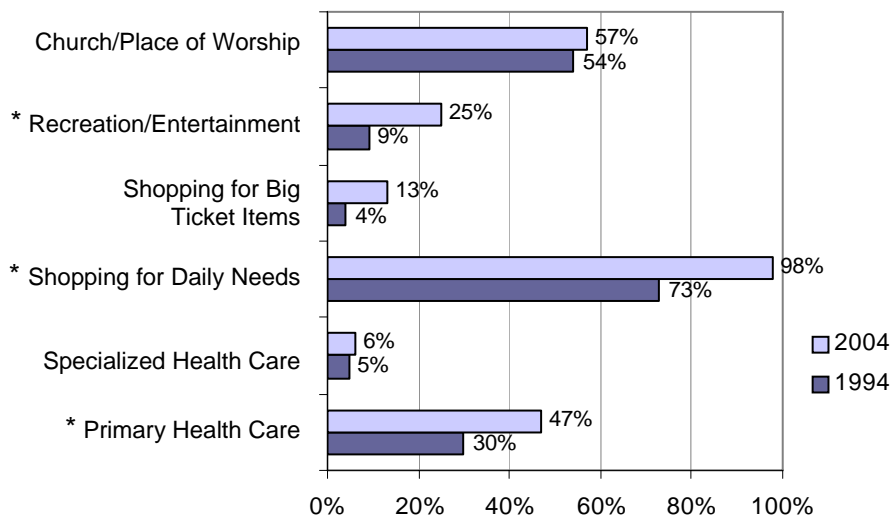


Figure 1: Percent Selecting "Local"

For a variety of reasons, many residents of Iowa's smaller towns rely increasingly on neighboring cities for services. Results from this survey suggest that Altoona residents defied the trend for some services. Figure 1 shows the percentage of residents who reported patronizing various services in Altoona for 1994 and 2004. Almost all residents remained in Altoona for shopping for daily needs in 2004, a significant in-

crease from 73 percent in 1994. Also, the percent of residents who patronized local recreation/entertainment and primary health care increased significantly from 1994 to 2004. More than half of Altoona residents attend a local church/place of worship, which was about the same as ten years ago. The changes in patronage patterns for other local services are within the margin of error of the study.

\*A Note on Interpretation: For Altoona, 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

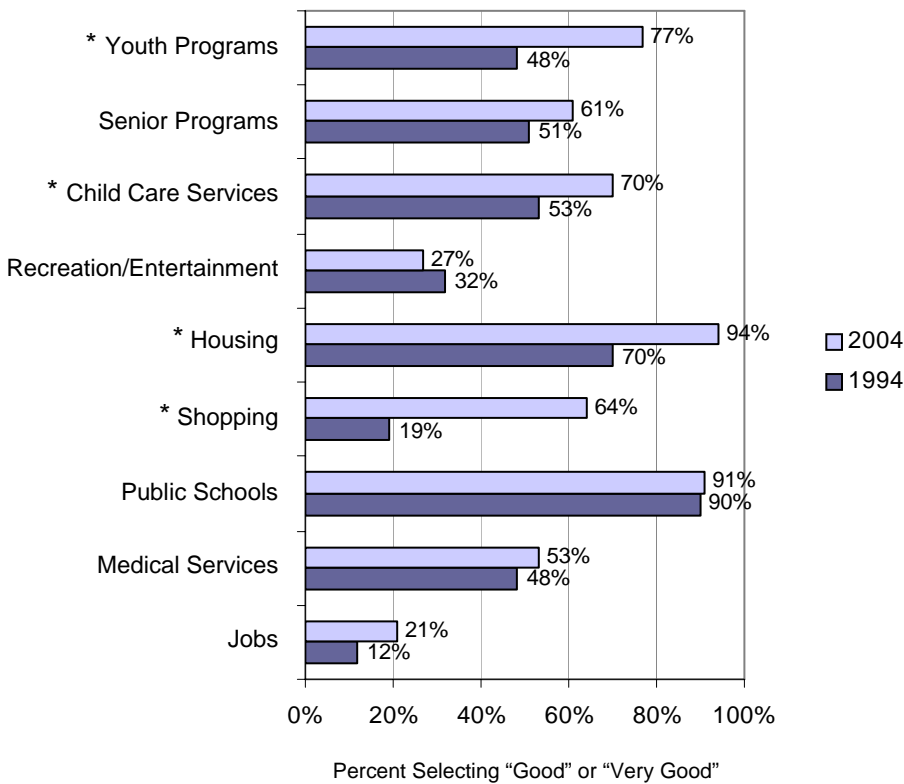


Figure 2: Ratings of Local Services and Facilities

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 percentage of residents who rated each service as “good” or “very good” in 1994 and 2004. The vast majority of residents rated housing and public schools positively in 2004. Housing experienced a significant increase in approval from 1994. Also, the ratings for youth programs, child care and shopping improved markedly between 1994 and 2004. About seven in ten residents assessed youth programs and child care services favorably in 2004. Jobs received the lowest ratings in both periods. Evaluations of other services remained essentially unchanged over the ten year period.

## 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. Generally, Altoona residents reported being satisfied with local government services. More than eight in ten rated emergency response, garbage collection, fire protection, water, the condition of the parks, the condition of the streets, and police protection favorably in both time periods. There is no significant change in the evaluation of these government services in Altoona over the ten years from 1994 to 2004.

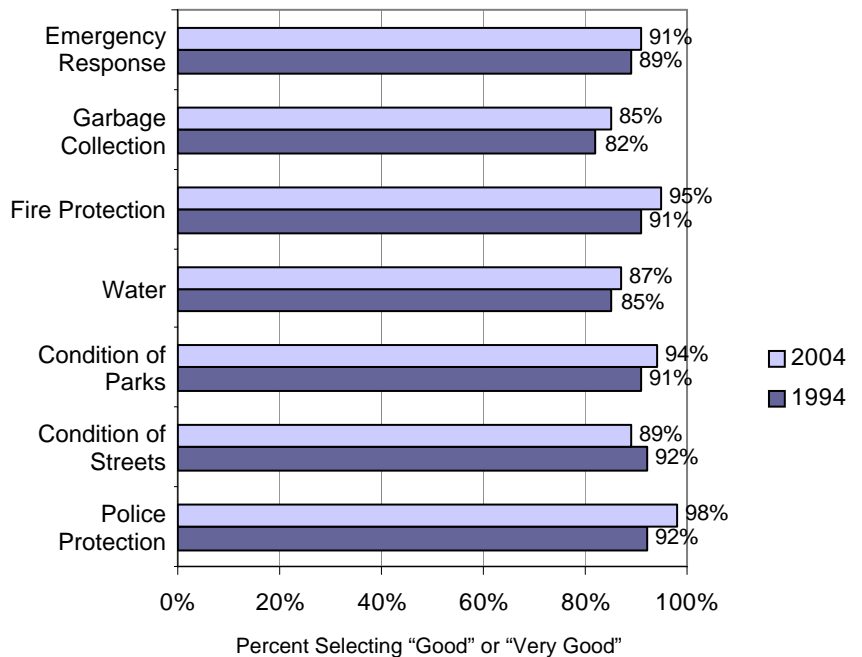
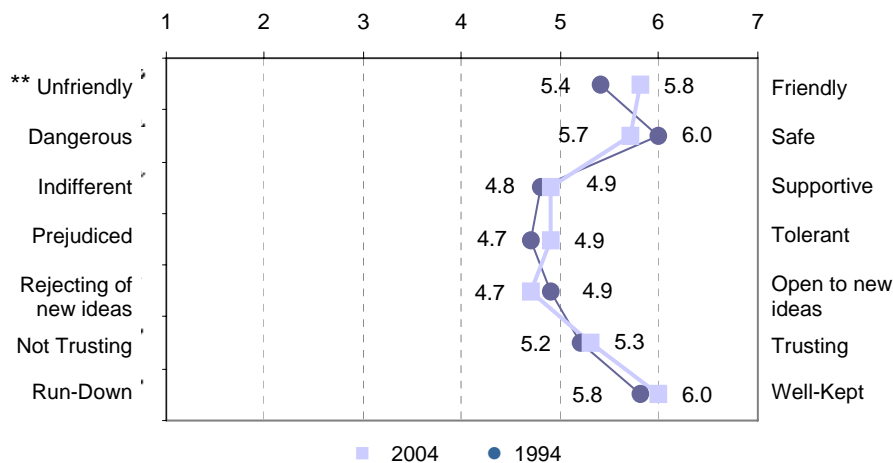


Figure 3: Ratings of Local Government Services

## ALTOONA'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, safety, appearance, and friendliness had the highest average evaluations. Tolerance, supportiveness, and openness to new ideas received low ratings in both 1994 and 2004. Appearance, friendliness, and safety were also given the highest ratings in 2004, although residents described Altoona as significantly more friendly in 2004 than in 1994. The evaluations of other qualities remained the same over the decade.

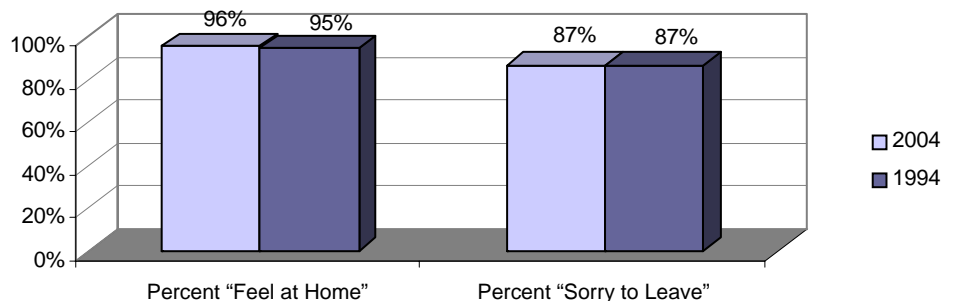
\*\* The margin of error is calculated differently for averages, and will sometimes vary from question to question within the survey depending on how many people answered each question. Thus, changes of the same size may exceed the margin of error for some items in Figure 4, but not for others. Only 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, 9 percent of residents reported knowing the names of half or more of the people in Altoona, compared to 3 percent in 1994. Similarly, 29 percent indicated that half or more of their friends live in Altoona, compared to 24 percent in 1994. Fifteen percent of residents in 2004 and 8 percent in 1994 said that half or more of their adult relatives and in-laws live in Altoona. (Note: These differences are not greater than the margin of error.)

### COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT

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



**Figure 5: Community Attachment**

## COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Citizens working together to accomplish local goals is an important feature of small towns. For Altoona, 83 percent of residents indicated in 2004 that the spirit of community participation is “good” or “very good.” In 2004, about half reported participating in a local improvement project during the year prior to the survey which represented a significant increase over the 34 percent who participated in 1994 (see Figure 6). In both 1994 and 2004, less than one in four described themselves as “somewhat” or “very” active in local community activities and events.

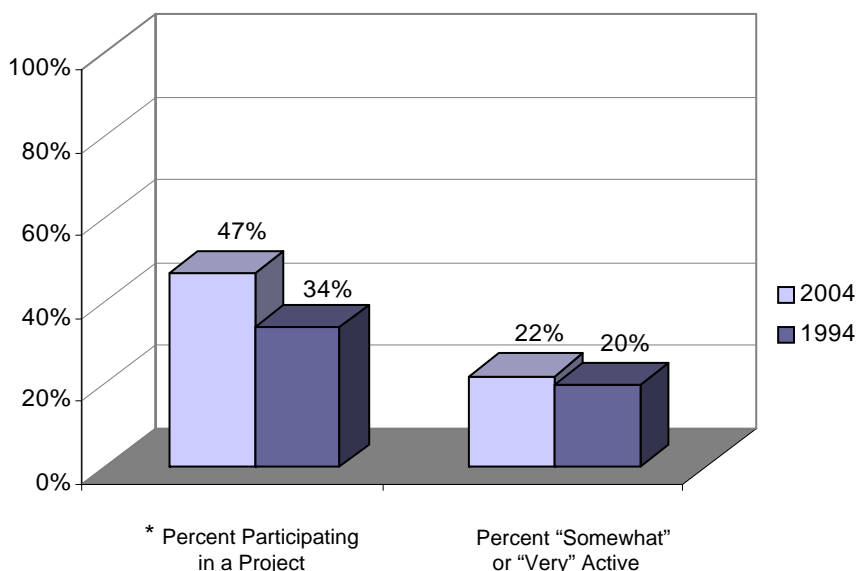


Figure 6: Community Involvement

When asked to consider a variety of factors that limit their involvement in community improvement projects, the top three factors mentioned by Altoona residents were lack of time (68%), not being asked to volunteer (63%), and not knowing how to become involved (40%).

## 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 Altoona over the past decade? Altoona residents were more likely to patronize local services for primary health care, shopping for daily needs, and recreation/entertainment in 2004 than in 1994. More than half still remained in town for church/place of worship. Approval for youth programs, child care services, shopping, and housing increased over the decade. The vast majority continue to rate government services favorably.

The social environment has changed somewhat. Altoona residents still describe their town as a well-kept, safe, and friendly community that is even friendlier at the end of the decade. Residents remain strongly attached to Altoona—that is, a vast majority feel at home and would be sorry if they had to leave. More than eight in ten rated the spirit of community participation as high and residents reported increased involvement in community projects in 2004. It is interesting to note that two of the top reasons people gave for not being involved in community projects was that no one asked them and they don’t know how to get involved. These suggest possible strategies to increase resident participation.

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