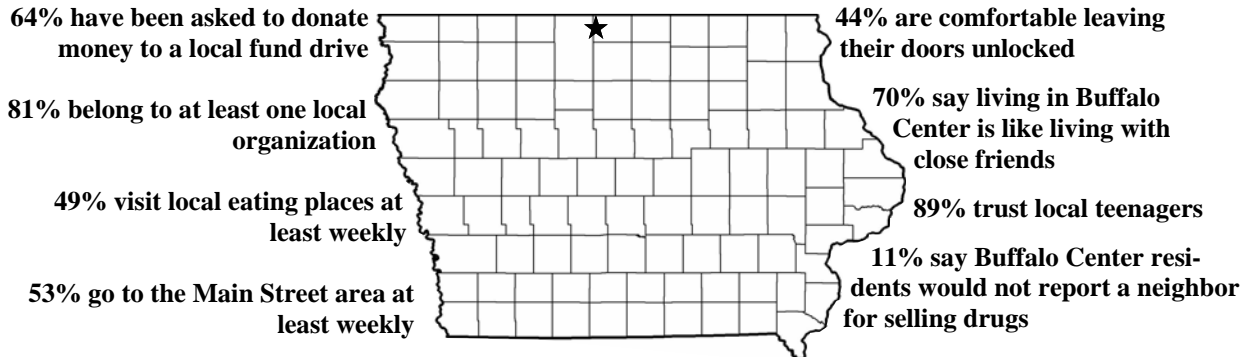


A DECADE OF CHANGE IN BUFFALO CENTER

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 Buffalo Center. 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, 122 Buffalo Center residents responded to the survey, and 108 responded in 2004. This report is a summary of the results, including how the opinions of Buffalo Center residents have changed over the past decade.

LIFE IN BUFFALO CENTER IN 2004



LOCAL PATRONAGE PATTERNS

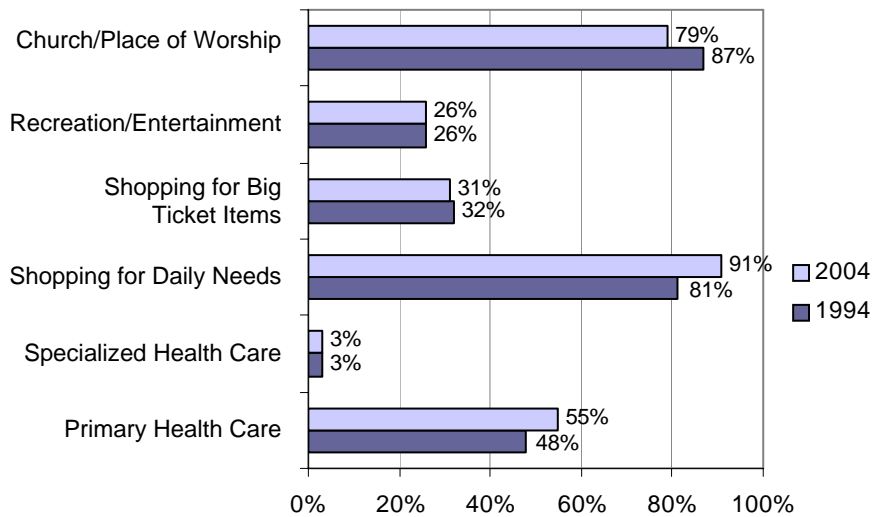


Figure 1: Percent Selecting "Local"

For a variety of reasons, many residents of Iowa's smaller towns rely on neighboring cities for services. Results from this survey suggest that Buffalo Center residents defied the trend for some services. Figure 1 shows the percentage of residents who reported patronizing various services in Buffalo Center in 1994 and 2004. More than 70 percent of residents remained in town for church/place of worship and for

shopping for daily needs in both time periods. Slightly more than half utilized local primary health care. Less than a third stayed in town for recreation, shopping for big ticket items, and specialized health care. Changes in patronage patterns in Buffalo Creek over the decade are within the margin of error and essentially unchanged.

A Note on Interpretation: For Buffalo Center, 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

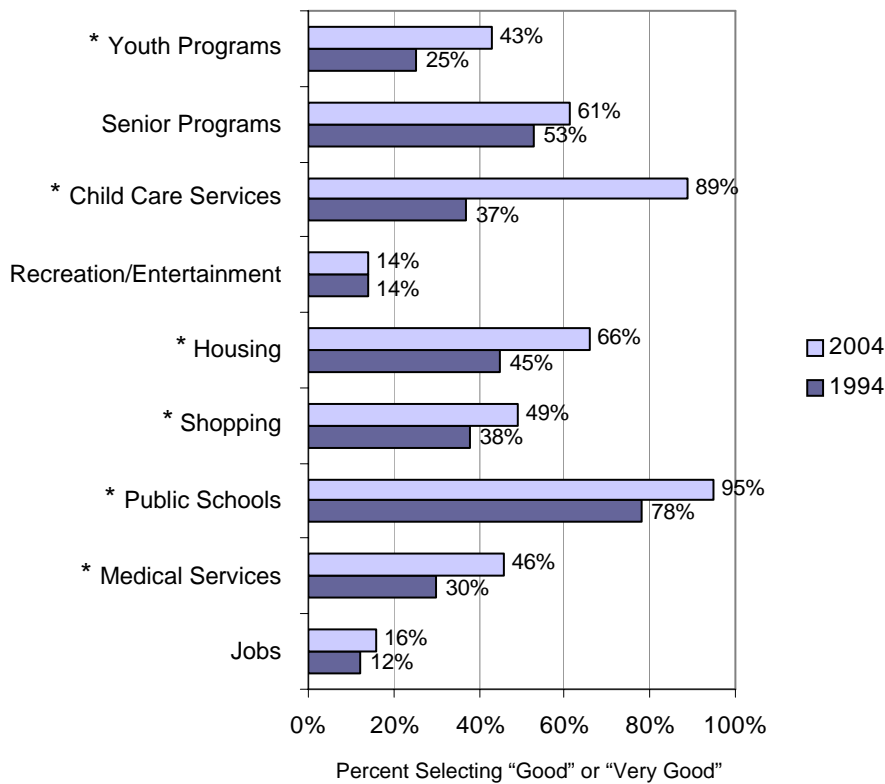


Figure 2: Ratings of Local Services and Facilities

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. Two thirds or more of residents rated the public schools, child care services, and housing positively and about half or more rated senior programs, shopping, and medical services favorably in 2004. There were substantial improvements in the ratings for youth programs, child care services, housing, shopping, public schools, and medical services over 1994 levels. Jobs and recreation received the lowest ratings in both periods with fewer than one in seven residents indicating the services were good or very good.

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, Buffalo Center residents reported being satisfied with local government services. The vast majority rated emergency response, garbage collection, fire protection, water, and the condition of the parks favorably in both surveys. More than half indicated police protection was good or very good in 2004. The condition of streets received the lowest evaluation in both periods and declined significantly from 1994 to 2004. The ratings for other services were the same over the ten years.

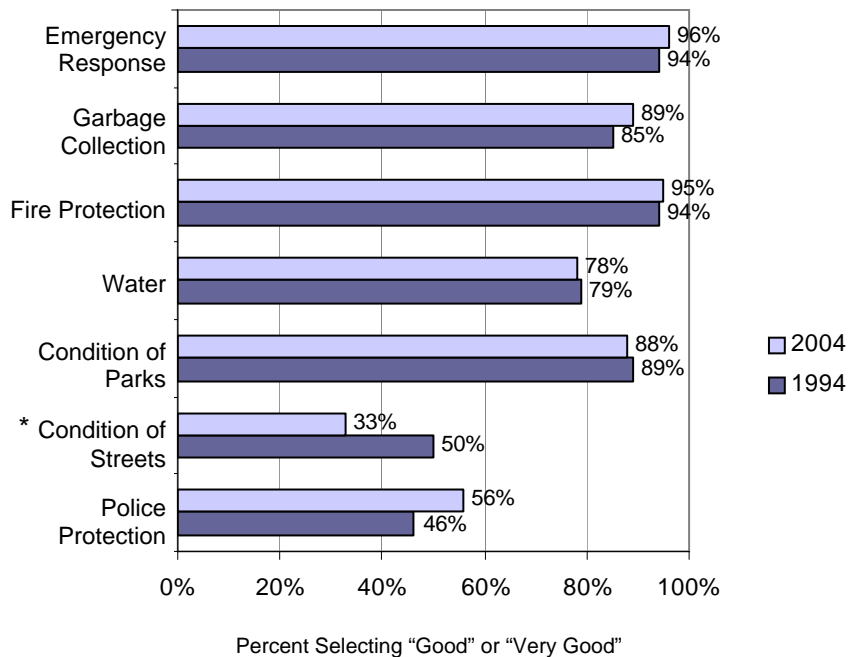


Figure 3: Ratings of Local Government Services

BUFFALO CENTER'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.

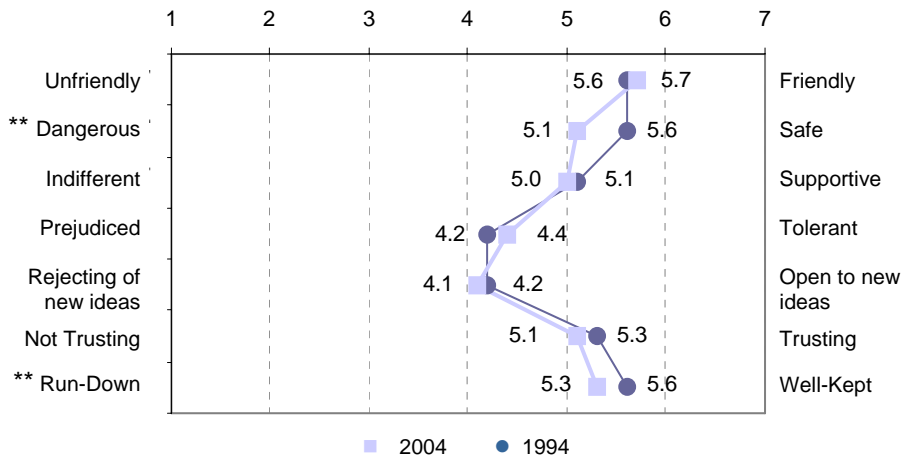


Figure 4: Average Rating of Social Qualities on a 1 to 7 Scale

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, friendliness, safety, and appearance had the highest evaluations. In 2004, there were significant declines in residents' assessment of safety and appearance. Even so, friendliness and appearance still received the highest ratings. Tolerance and openness to new ideas received the lowest ratings in both 1994 and 2004. The evaluation of other qualities remained essentially the same in 2004 compared to 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. In 2004, 75 percent of residents reported knowing the names of half or more of the people in Buffalo Center, compared to 76 percent in 1994. Similarly, 69 percent indicated that half or more of their friends live in Buffalo Center in 2004, compared to 68 percent in 1994. While levels of these two kinds of social ties were unchanged, the percentage of people reporting that half or more of their adult relatives and in-laws live in town was down significantly from 31 percent in 1994 to 15 percent in 2004.

COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT

How attached are Buffalo Center residents to their community? Almost everyone reported that they feel at home in Buffalo Center in both 1994 and 2004 (see Figure 5). About eight 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 Buffalo Center have not changed significantly in the last decade.

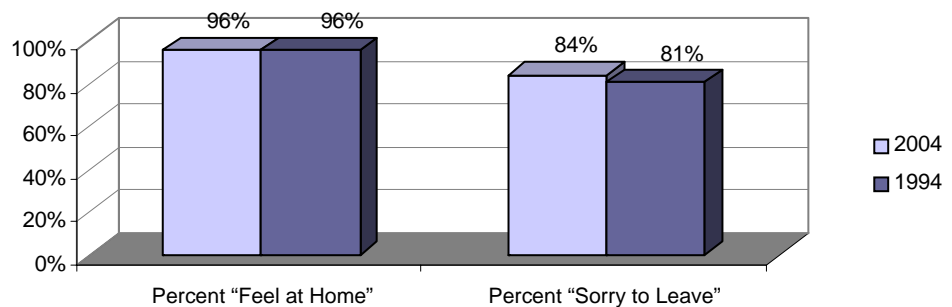


Figure 5: Community Attachment

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Citizens working together to accomplish local goals is an important feature of small towns. For Buffalo Center, 80 percent of residents indicated in 2004 that the spirit of community participation is “good” or “very good.” Two thirds reported participating in a local improvement project during the year prior to the survey and 45 percent described themselves as “somewhat” or “very” active in local community activities and events (see Figure 6). This level of involvement is essentially unchanged from 1994 when 56 percent reported participating in a project and 52 percent rated themselves as active in the community. 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 (56%), not being asked to volunteer (42%), and not knowing how to become involved (31%).

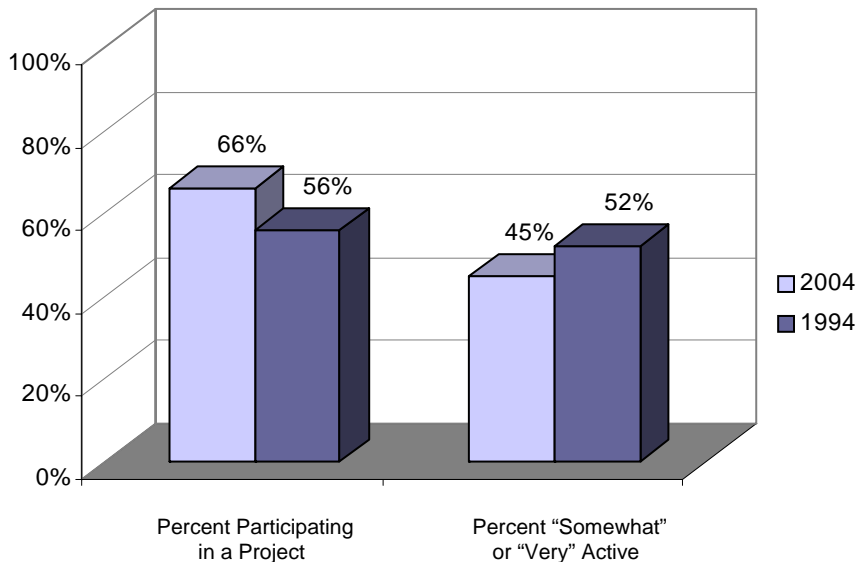


Figure 6: Community Involvement

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 Buffalo Center over the past decade? Residents evaluated the quality of youth programs, child care services, housing, shopping, public schools, and medical services more positively than in 1994. However, ratings for the condition of the streets declined. Other government services and the public schools continue to be rated positively.

The social environment has changed somewhat. Buffalo Center residents still described their town as a safe, friendly, well-kept community, but viewed it as less safe and well-kept compared to 1994. The level of family ties was lower in 2004. Even so, residents remained strongly attached to Buffalo Center. Eight in ten reported that the spirit of participation is good or very good overall and community involvement remained unchanged from 1994 to 2004. It is interesting that two of the top three reasons people gave for not being involved in the community were that “no one asked me” and “don’t know how to become involved”. These suggest possible strategies to increase 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 Buffalo Center’s future. **We wish to thank the Buffalo Center residents who participated in the 1994 and 2004 studies for providing the information that made this report possible.**

RDI

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