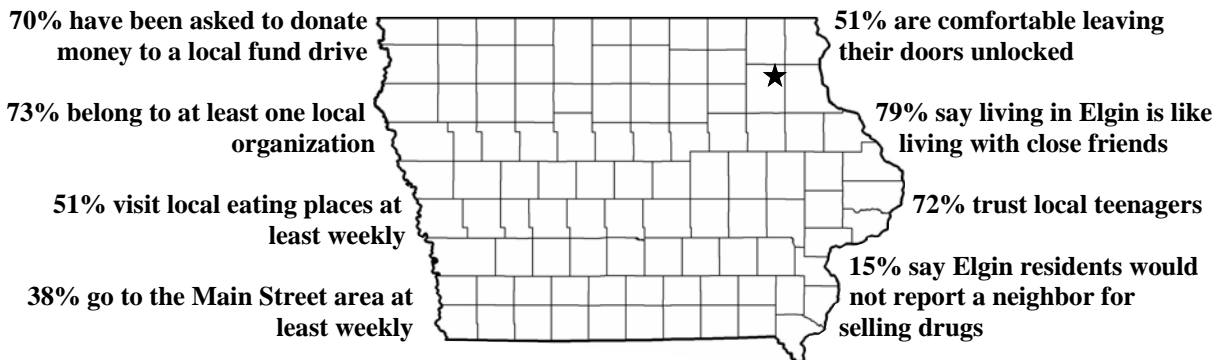


A DECADE OF CHANGE IN ELGIN

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 Elgin. 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, 121 Elgin residents responded to the survey, and 116 responded in 2004. This report is a summary of the results, including how the opinions of Elgin residents have changed over the past decade.

LIFE IN ELGIN IN 2004



LOCAL PATRONAGE PATTERNS

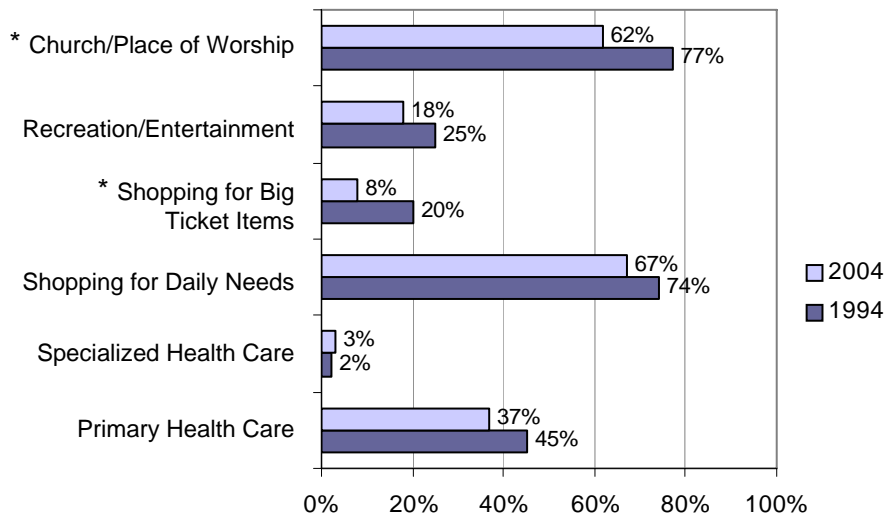


Figure 1: Percent Selecting "Local"

For a variety of reasons, many residents of Iowa's smaller towns rely on neighboring cities for services. The Elgin survey results, which are displayed in Figure 1, show that residents stay in town for some services, but travel for others. In both 1994 and 2004, approximately 70 percent of the residents reported shopping for their daily needs in town. The percentage who attend church/place of worship in town fell from 77

percent in 1994 to 62 percent in 2004. The percentage who shop for big ticket items in Elgin also dropped significantly, from 20 percent to eight percent. There was little change in the patronage for the other local services over the past decade. About four in ten residents stay in town for their primary health care and far fewer stay in town for recreation/entertainment and specialized health care.

A Note on Interpretation: For Elgin, 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

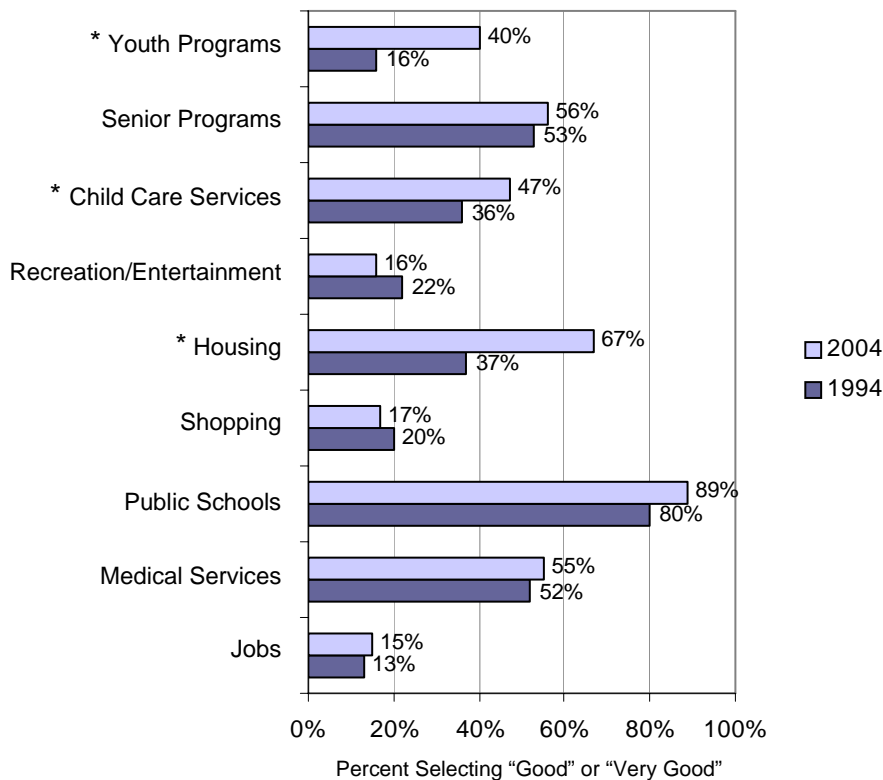


Figure 2: Ratings of Local Services and Facilities

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. Public schools received the highest ratings in both years with more than 80 percent of Elgin residents rating them positively. The evaluations for housing improved from 37 percent in 1994 to 67 percent in 2004. Also, significantly more residents rated youth programs and child care services positively in 2004 compared to 1994. Jobs, shopping, and recreation/entertainment received the lowest evaluations in both periods. The ratings for services other than the three mentioned above remained unchanged over the decade.

RATINGS OF GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Residents were asked to rate 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. In both years, Elgin residents were pleased with the quality of most of their government services. Almost all residents were pleased with fire protection and emergency response. Well over half were also pleased with garbage collection, water, and parks. Police protection received the fewest positive ratings in both periods. Positive assessments of the condition of streets increased from 1994 to 2004, while positive ratings of the condition of parks declined. Ratings for other services were essentially unchanged.

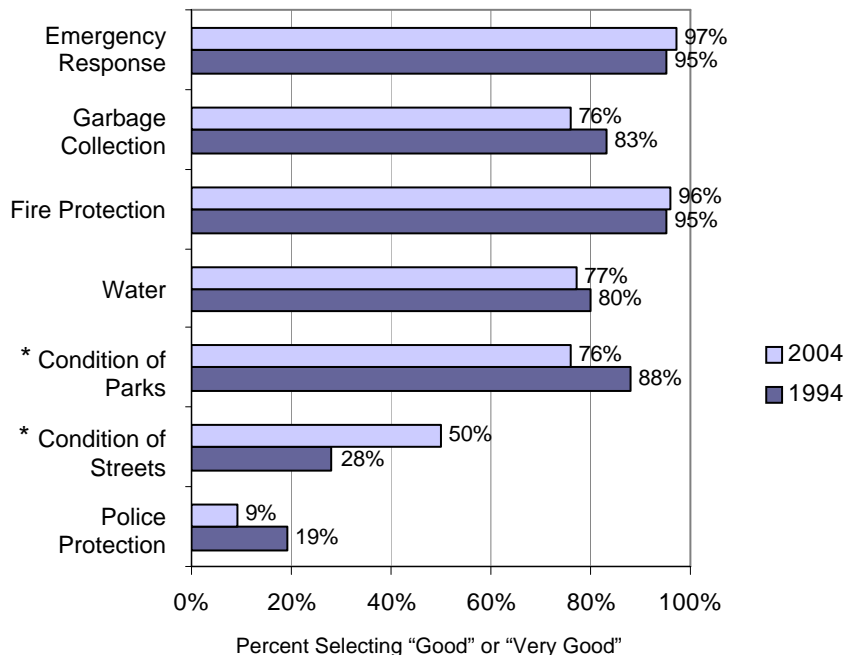


Figure 3: Ratings of Local Government Services

ELGIN'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.

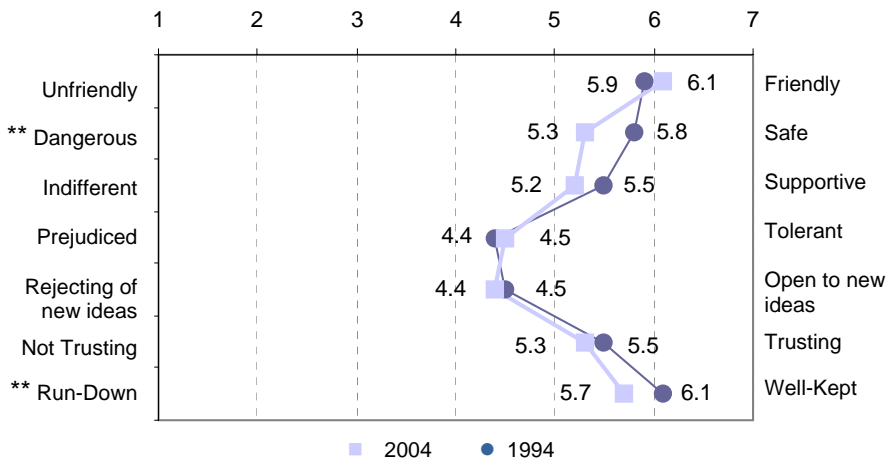


Figure 4: Average Rating of Social Qualities on a 1 to 7 Scale

** 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.

Residents were presented with a list of qualities and asked to evaluate their town on each quality using a 7-point scale. Figure 4 shows how Elgin residents evaluated their town on these qualities in 1994 and 2004. In 1994, residents assigned the highest ratings to friendliness and appearance, and these two areas also received the highest ratings in 2004. The lowest ratings for both years were for tolerance and openness to new ideas. Between 1994 and 2004, the ratings for safety and appearance decreased significantly. The ratings for all of the other areas stayed about the same across the decade.

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, 60 percent of the residents reported knowing the names of half or more of the people in Elgin, compared to 70 percent in 1994. Similarly, 55 percent indicated that half or more of their friends live in town, compared to 58 percent in 1994. Fourteen percent of the residents in 2004, a significant decrease from 26 percent in 1994, said that half or more of their adult relatives and in-laws live in town.

COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT

Do Elgin residents feel at home in their community? Figure 5 shows that almost all of the residents in both 1994 and 2004 felt at home in Elgin. Almost as many residents also said that they would be sorry to leave the community. These high levels of community attachment in Elgin have not changed significantly over the last ten years.

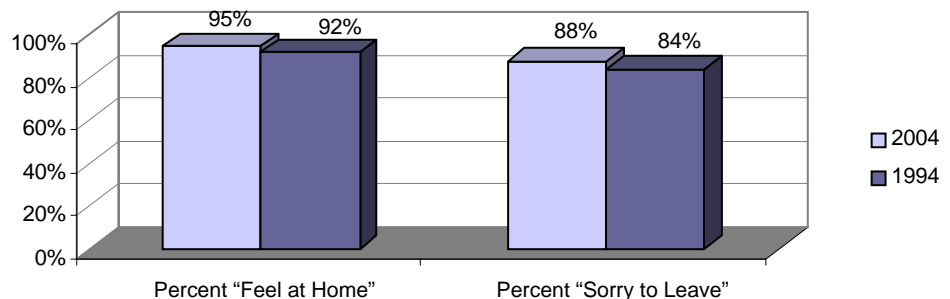


Figure 5: Community Attachment

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Citizens working together to accomplish local goals is an important feature of small towns. For Elgin, 86 percent of the residents indicated in 2004 that the spirit of community participation is “good” or “very good.”

In 2004, 65 percent of the residents reported participating in a community improvement project in the year prior to the survey, up significantly from the 53 percent in 1994 (Figure 6). The percentage of residents who said they were “somewhat” or “very” active in local community activities remained about the same from 1994 to 2004.

When residents were asked to consider the factors that limit their involvement in community improvement projects, the top response given in 2004 was that they lacked time to get involved (60%). Other common responses were that they had not been asked to volunteer (38%) and that they did not know how to become involved (28%).

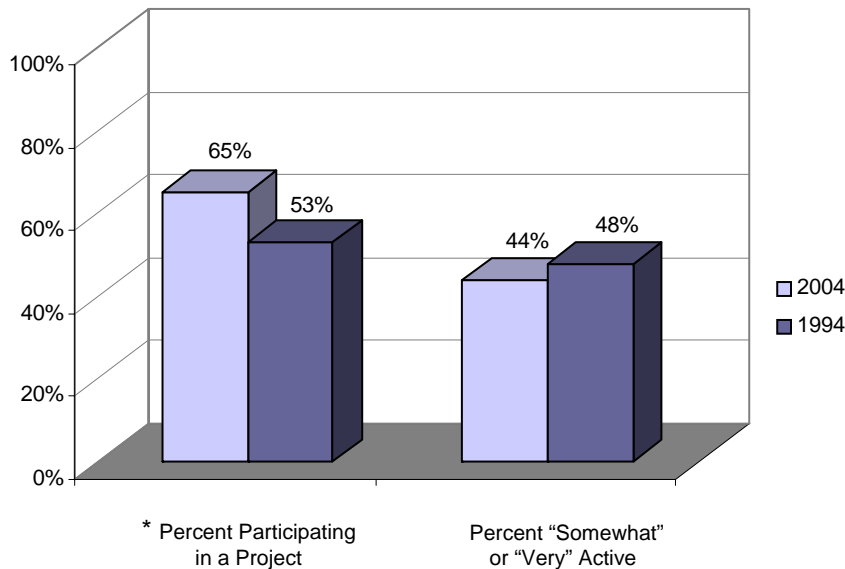


Figure 6: Community Involvement

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 Elgin over the past decade? The percentage of people who stayed in Elgin to attend church or a place of worship declined, as did the percentage who shopped for big ticket items in town. Residents’ evaluations of the condition of streets, housing, and youth programs improved, but their evaluation of the quality of parks declined. Overall, residents continued to rate most local government services positively.

The social environment in Elgin has changed somewhat. Significantly fewer residents reported that Elgin was a safe and well-kept place, but levels of community attachment remained high over the past decade. Residents remained attached to the community. Significantly more residents reported participating in a community improvement project in 2004 than in 1994. It is interesting to note that two of the top three reasons people gave for not being involved in community projects were that nobody had asked them and that they did not know how to become involved. These responses suggest possible strategies for further increasing 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 Elgin’s future. **We wish to thank the Elgin residents who participated in the 1994 and 2004 studies for providing the information that made this report possible.**

RDI

Prepared by: Tom Rice, Terry Besser, Kerry Agnitsch, Laura Forster, Jean Friestad, 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-158 — 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.