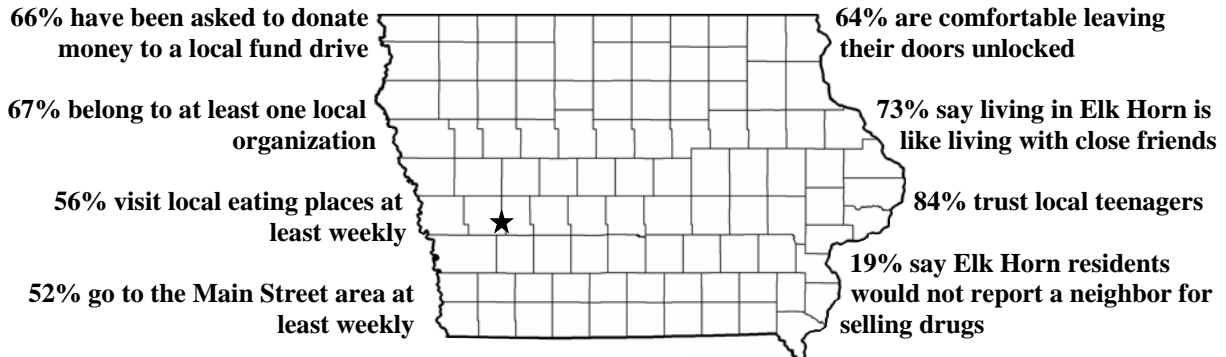


# A DECADE OF CHANGE IN ELK HORN

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 Elk Horn. 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, 112 Elk Horn residents responded to the survey, and 105 responded in 2004. This report is a summary of the results, including how the opinions of Elk Horn residents have changed over the past decade.

## LIFE IN ELK HORN IN 2004



## LOCAL PATRONAGE PATTERNS

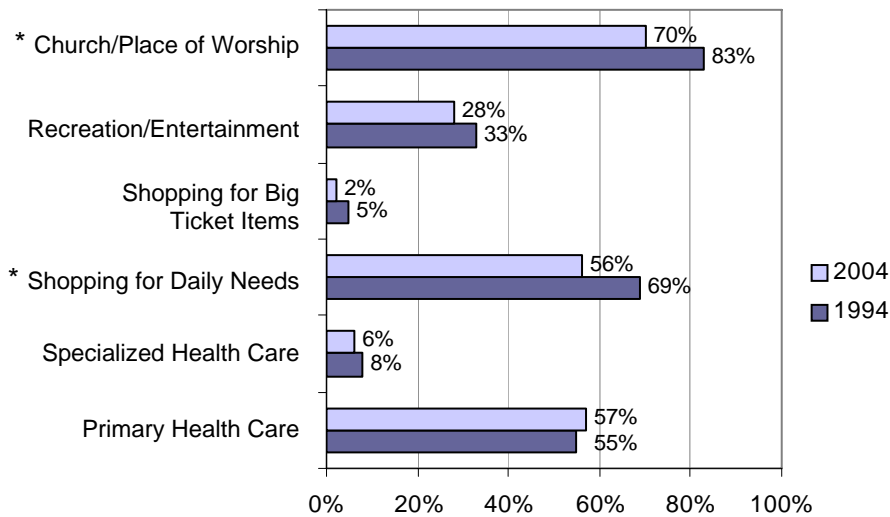


Figure 1: Percent Selecting "Local"

For a variety of reasons, many residents of Iowa's smaller towns rely on neighboring cities for services. The Elk Horn 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, the majority of residents stayed in town for church or place of worship, daily shopping, and primary health care. Approximately 30 percent stayed in town for recreation/entertainment.

Very few residents, however, shopped for big ticket items in town or received their specialized health care in town. Between 1994 and 2004 the percentage of residents who attended church or place of worship in Elk Horn dropped significantly, from 83 percent to 70 percent. The percentage shopping for daily needs in town also fell significantly, from 69 percent to 56 percent.

\*A Note on Interpretation: For Elk Horn, 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

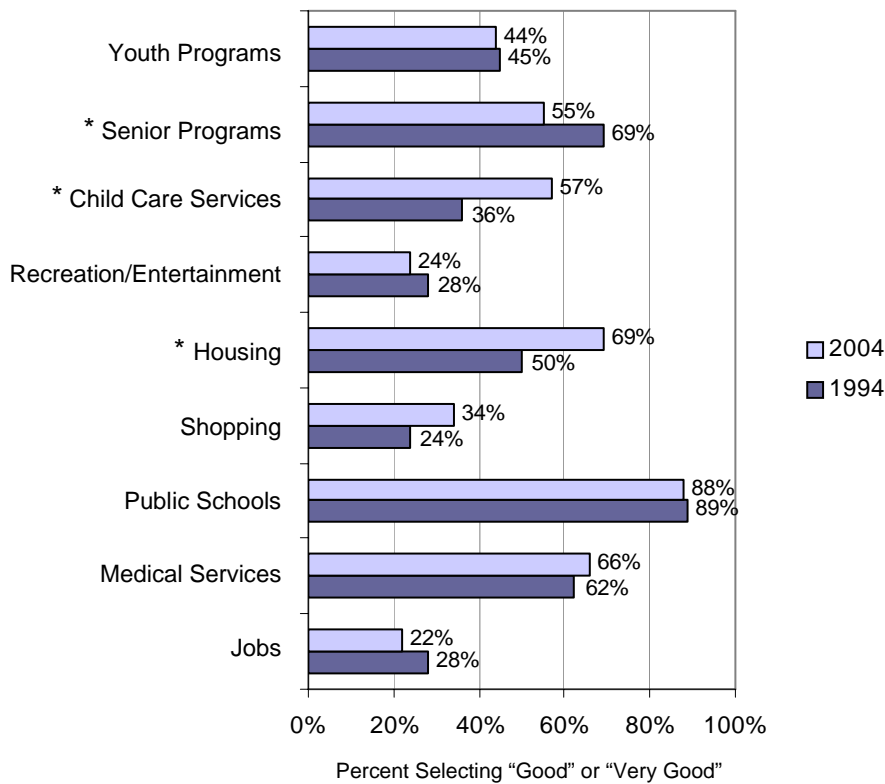


Figure 2: Ratings of Local Services and Facilities

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 almost 90 percent of Elk Horn residents rating their schools positively. The lowest ratings in both years were for recreation/entertainment, jobs, and shopping. The ratings for housing and child care improved substantially in 1994 compared to 2004, but the positive ratings for senior programs fell sharply, from 69 percent in 1994 to 55 percent in 2004. The ratings for the other services and facilities changed very little from 1994 to 2004.

## RATINGS OF GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Residents 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. In both years, Elk Horn residents were pleased with the quality of most of their government services. Approximately 90 percent of the residents were satisfied with their emergency response, garbage collection, fire protection, and parks. Police protection received the fewest positive ratings in both years. Opinions about water quality dropped sharply from 1994 to 2004. In 1994, 85 percent of the residents rated water quality as either “good” or “very good,” but by 2004 this had fallen to 49 percent.

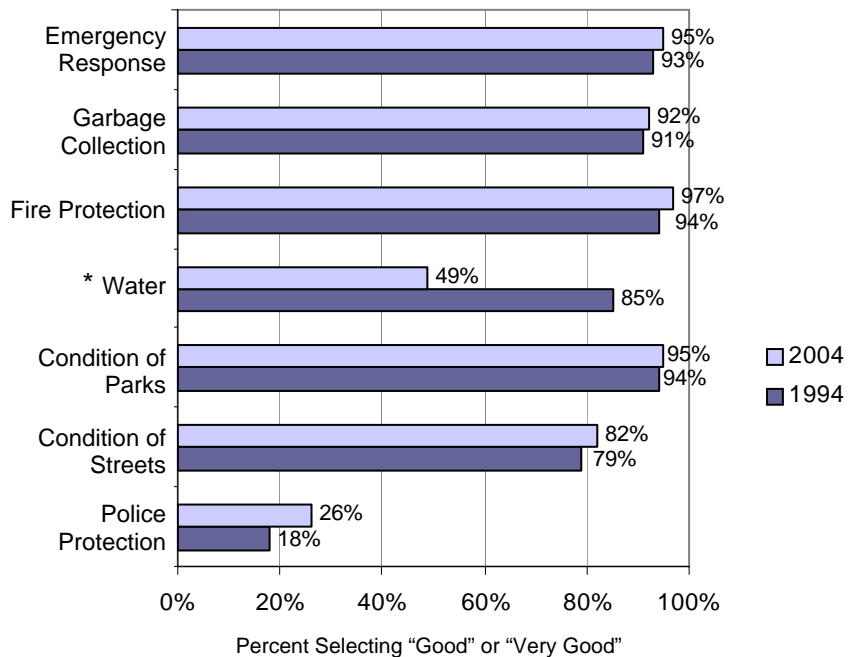
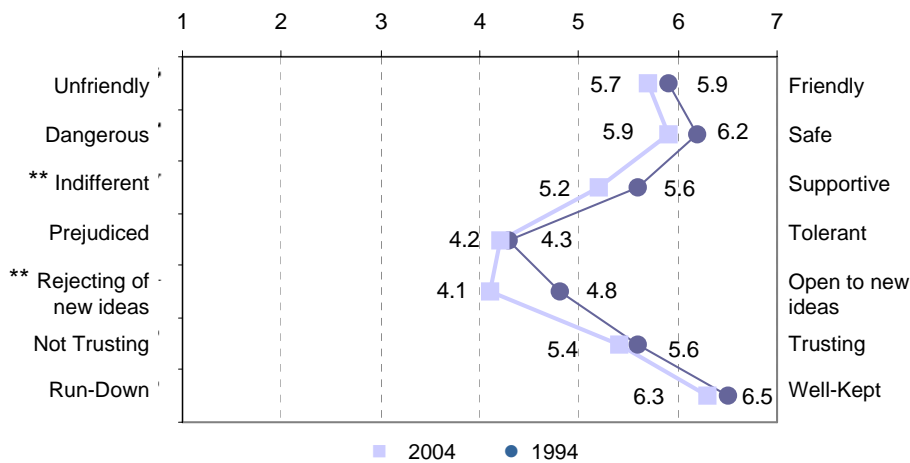


Figure 3: Ratings of Local Government Services

## ELK HORN'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.

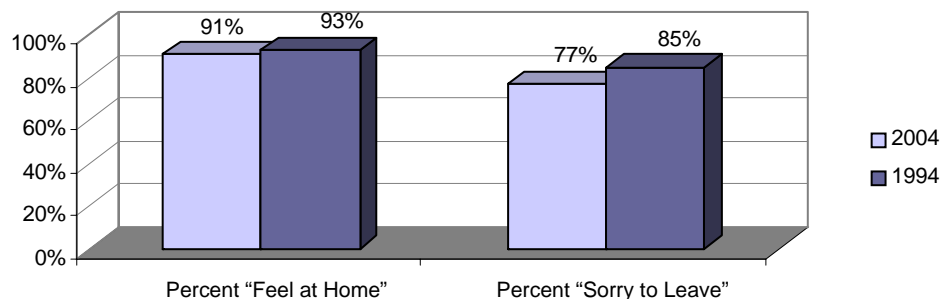
Residents were presented with a list of qualities and asked to evaluate their town on each quality using a 7-point scale. Figure 4 shows how Elk Horn residents evaluated their town on these qualities in 1994 and 2004. In 1994, residents assigned the highest ratings to safety and appearance, and these 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 supportiveness and openness to new ideas fell significantly. The ratings for the other areas did not change across the past 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 both 1994 and 2004, 76 percent of the residents reported knowing the names of half or more of the people in Elk Horn. In 2004, 53 percent indicated that half or more of their friends live in town, compared to 62 percent in 1994. Sixteen percent of the residents in 2004, a significant decrease from 28 percent in 1994, said that half or more of their adult relatives and in-laws live in town.

## COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT

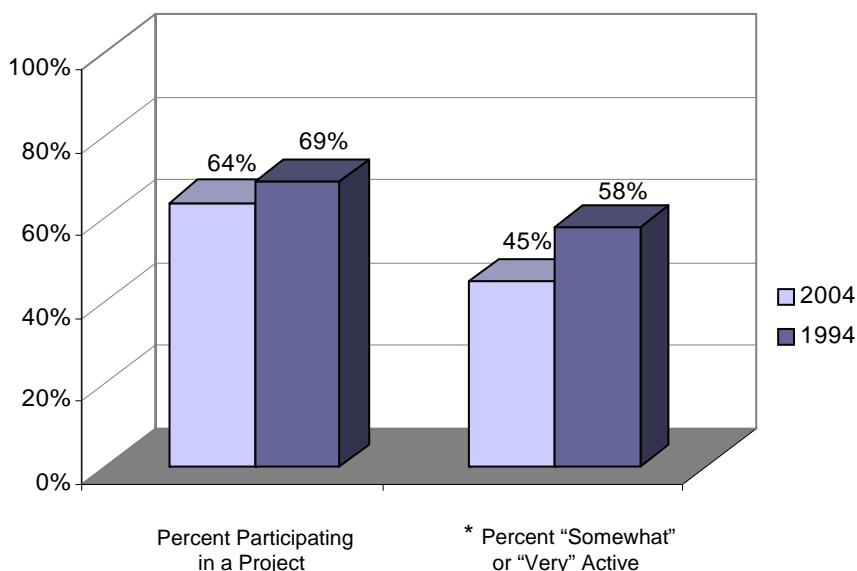
Do Elk Horn residents feel at home in their community? Figure 5 shows that almost all of the residents in both 1994 and 2004 felt at home in Elk Horn. Almost as many residents also said that they would be sorry to leave the community. These high levels of community attachment in Elk Horn have not changed 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 Elk Horn, 93 percent of the residents indicated in 2004 that the spirit of community participation is “good” or “very good.” In both 1994 and 2004, approximately two-thirds of the residents reported participating in a community improvement project in the years prior to the surveys (Figure 6). The percentage of residents who said they were “somewhat” or “very” active in community activities dropped substantially from 58 percent to 45 percent over the past decade. When residents were asked to consider the factors that limit their involvement in community improvement projects, the top response in 2004 was that they lacked time to get involved (51%). Other common responses were that they had not been asked to volunteer (32%) and that they lacked the skills needed to contribute (24%).



**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 Elk Horn over the past decade? The percentage of people who stay in Elk Horn to attend church or a place of worship declined, as did the percentage who shop for daily needs in town. Residents’ ratings for housing and child care improved, but their evaluations of senior programs and water quality declined. Government services, except for water and police protection continued to be positively rated by the majority of residents.

The social environment in Elk Horn has changed somewhat over the past decade. The ratings that residents gave their community on many qualities remained unchanged, but significantly fewer residents felt that Elk Horn was supportive and open to new ideas. However, levels of community attachment remained high over the decade. Significantly fewer residents reported being active in community activities in 1994 than in 2004. It is interesting to note that one of the top reasons people gave for not being involved in community projects was that they had not been asked to volunteer. This suggests one possible strategy for increasing community involvement.

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

<b>RDI</b>	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.
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