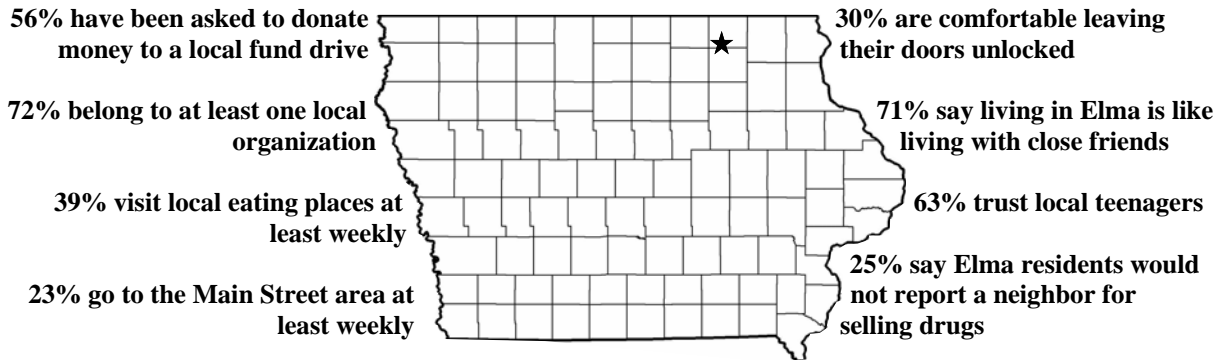


A DECADE OF CHANGE IN ELMA

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 Elma. 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, 123 Elma residents responded to the survey, and 110 responded in 2004. This report is a summary of the results, including how the opinions of Elma residents have changed over the past decade.

LIFE IN ELMA IN 2004



LOCAL PATRONAGE PATTERNS

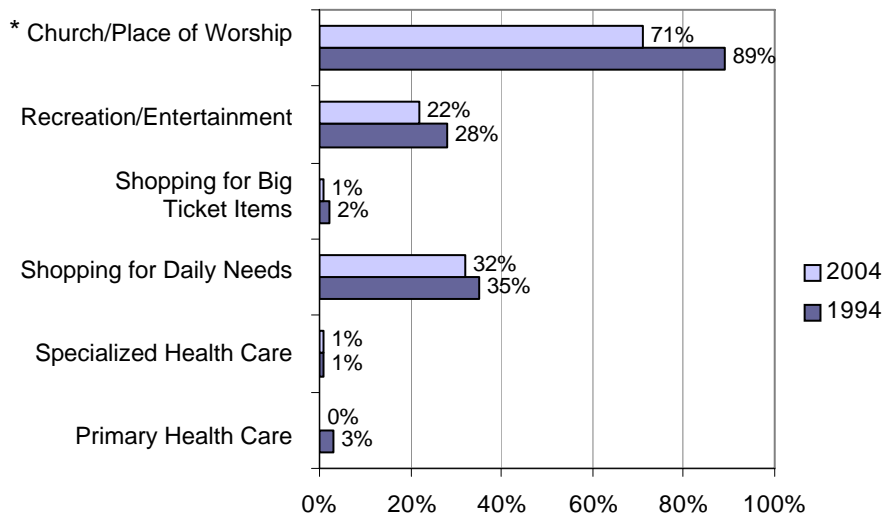


Figure 1: Percent Selecting "Local"

For a variety of reasons, many residents of Iowa's smaller towns rely on neighboring cities for services. Results from this survey suggest that Elma residents follow this pattern. Figure 1 shows that most residents stay in town to attend church or place of worship, but that they tend to leave for all of the other services. Slightly more than 30 percent shop for daily needs in Elma and about 25 percent stay in town for recreation/entertainment, but almost no residents receive their health care or shop for big ticket items locally. From 1994 to 2004, the percentage of residents who attend church or place of worship in Elma decreased substantially, from 89 percent to 71 percent. There were no other significant changes in patronage patterns over the last 10 years.

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A Note on Interpretation: For Elma, 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

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. Approximately 60 percent of Elma residents rated their schools positively. The ratings for housing improved significantly, moving up from 20 percent in 1994 to 46 percent in 2004. However, the percentage of residents who rated senior programs as “good” or “very good” dropped substantially over the last 10 years. The ratings for the other services and facilities remained low and did not change from 1994 to 2004.

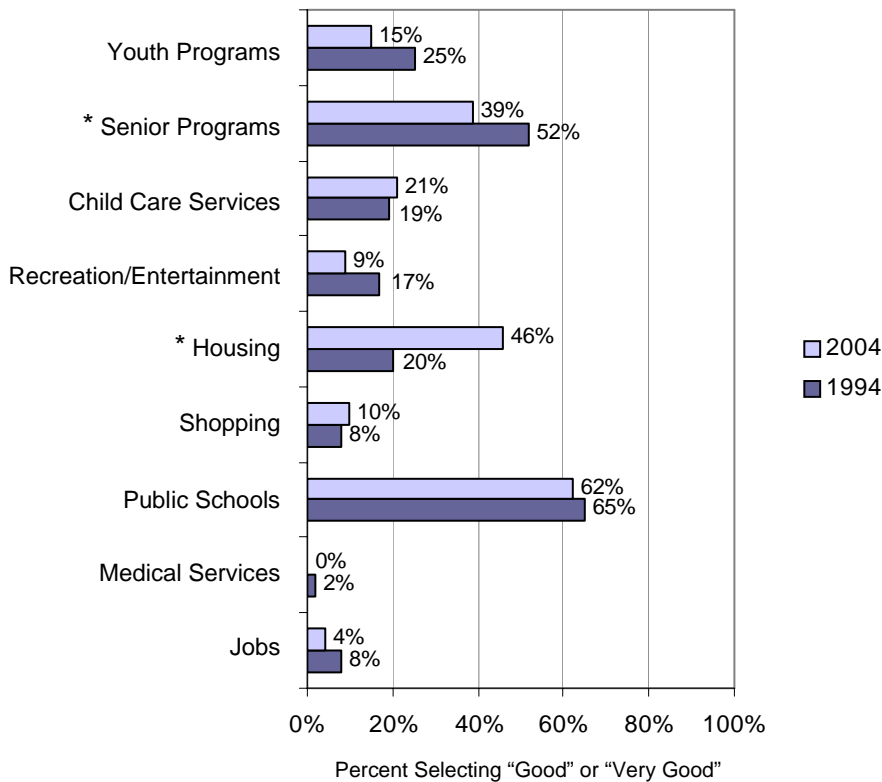


Figure 2: Ratings of Local Services and Facilities

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, the majority of Elma residents were pleased with the quality of most government services. Over 70 percent of the residents were satisfied with fire protection, parks, and garbage collection. Police protection received the fewest positive ratings. From 1994 to 2004, the percentage of residents rating the condition of streets as “good” or “very good” increased substantially from 23 percent to 51 percent. There were no other significant changes in the ratings of other services.

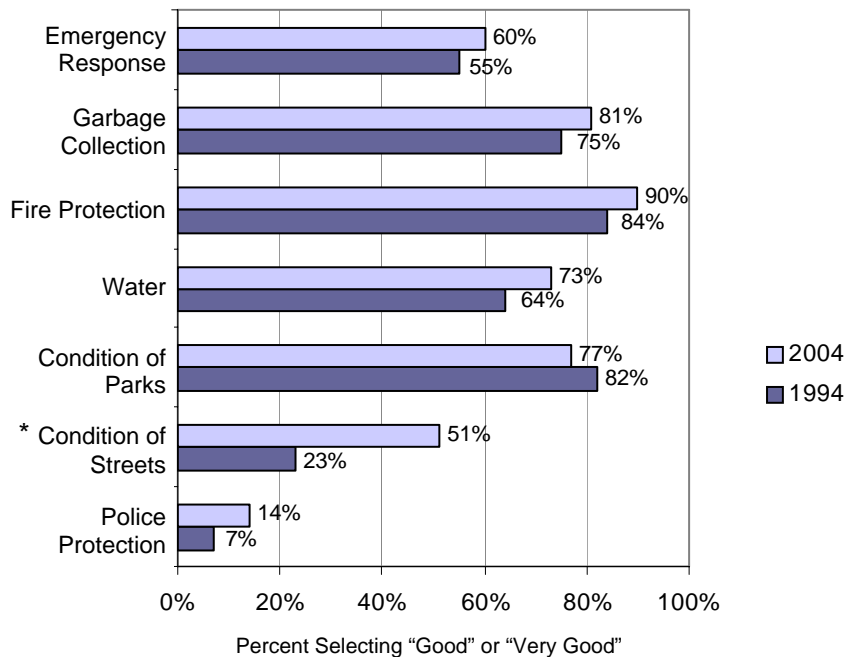


Figure 3: Ratings of Local Government Services

ELMA'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.

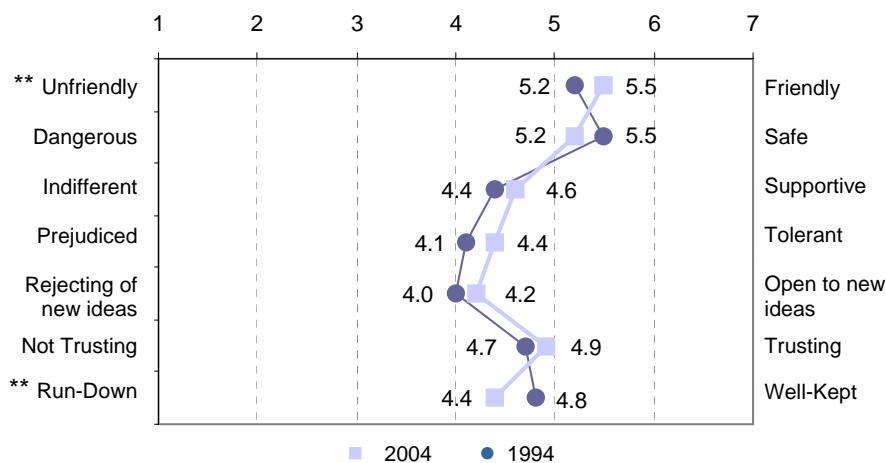


Figure 4: Average Rating of Social Qualities on a 1 to 7 Scale

** 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 Elma residents rated their town on these qualities in 1994 and 2004. In 1994, residents assigned the highest ratings to friendliness and safety, and these two areas also received the highest ratings in 2004. The lowest rating in both years was for openness to new ideas. Between 1994 and 2004, the rating for friendliness increased substantially, but the rating for appearance dropped substantially. The ratings for all of the other areas did not change significantly 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, 68 percent of the residents reported knowing the names of half or more of the people in Elma, compared to 75 percent in 1994. Similarly, 57 percent indicated that half or more of their friends live in town, compared to 51 percent in 1994. Twenty-one percent of the residents in 2004 and 25 percent in 1994 said that half or more of their adult relatives and in-laws live in town. (Note: These differences are not greater than the margin of error.)

COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT

Do Elma 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 Elma. Approximately three out of four residents also said that they would be sorry to leave the community. These high levels of community attachment in Elma have not changed significantly over the last ten years.

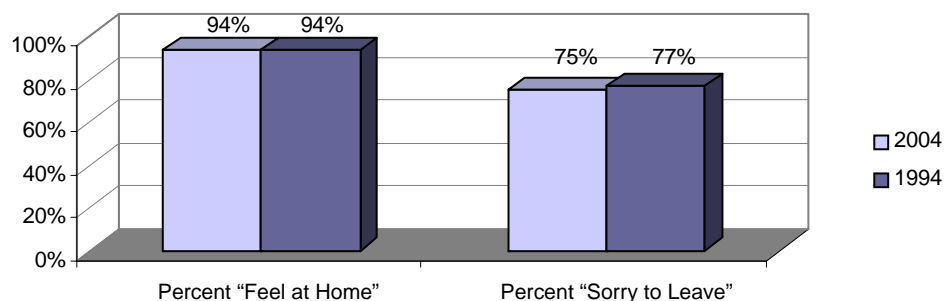


Figure 5: Community Attachment

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Citizens working together to accomplish local goals is an important feature of small towns. For Elma, 65 percent of the residents indicated in 2004 that the spirit of community participation is “good” or “very good.”

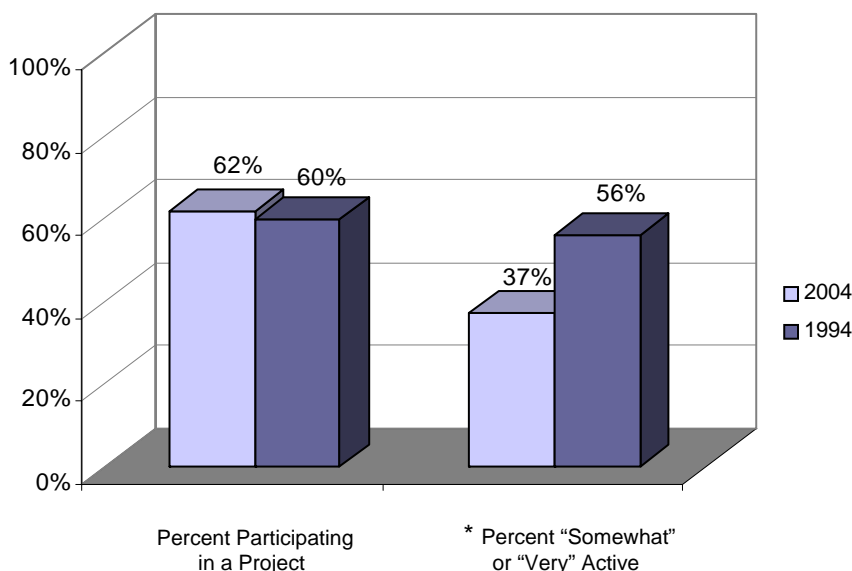


Figure 6: Community Involvement

In both 1994 and 2004, approximately 60 percent of the residents reported participating in a local community improvement project during the years prior to the surveys (see Figure 6). The percentage of residents who said they were “somewhat active” or “very active” in community activities fell sharply, from 56 percent in 1994 to 37 percent in 2004. 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 for involvement (62%). Other common responses were that they had not been asked to volunteer (38%) and that they lacked the necessary skills to contribute (27%).

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 Elma over the past decade? The percentage of people who stay in Elma to attend church or place of worship declined. Residents’ evaluation of housing and the condition of streets improved, but their rating of senior programs declined. Assessments of all other facilities and services stayed about the same over the ten year period. The vast majority of residents continue to approve of most government services.

The social environment in Elma has changed somewhat over the decade. Residents perceive the community to be friendlier, but they consider it to be less well-kept than ten years ago. Levels of community attachment remain high—that is, residents feel at home in the community and would be sorry to leave if they had to move away. In terms of community engagement, significantly fewer residents reported being involved in community activities in 2004 than in 1994. 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 way 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 Elma’s future. **We wish to thank the Elma 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.
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