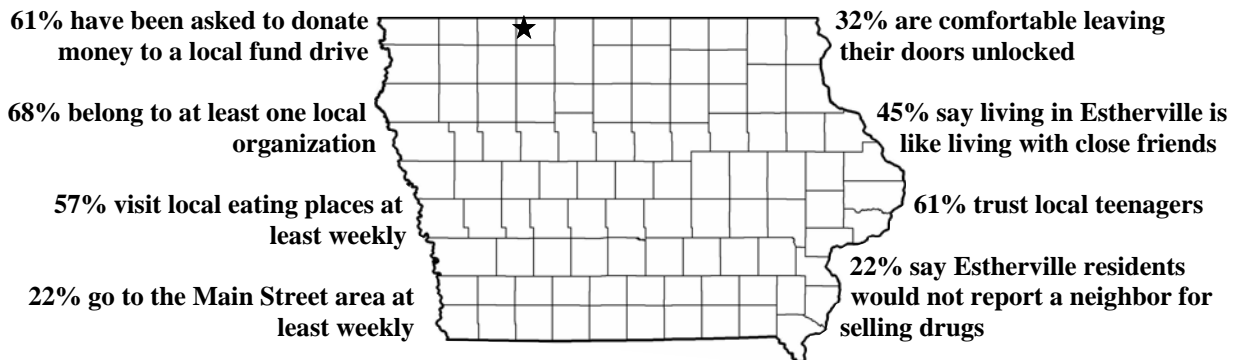


# A DECADE OF CHANGE IN ESTHERVILLE

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 Estherville. 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, 118 Estherville residents responded to the survey, and 101 responded in 2004. This report is a summary of the results, including how the opinions of Estherville residents have changed over the past decade.

## LIFE IN ESTHERVILLE IN 2004



## LOCAL PATRONAGE PATTERNS

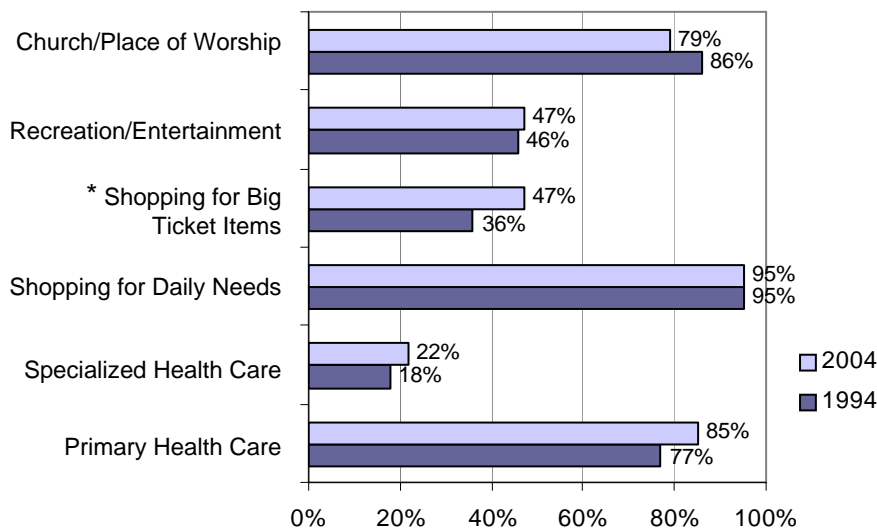


Figure 1: Percent Selecting "Local"

For a variety of reasons, many residents of Iowa's smaller towns rely on neighboring cities for services. The Estherville survey results, which are displayed in Figure 1, show that residents stay in town for some services, but travel for others. Over 75 percent of the respondents reported staying in Estherville for church or their place of worship activities, for their daily shopping needs, and for primary health care. Less than half stay in town for recreation/entertainment and when shopping for big ticket items. Finally, about 20 percent remain in Estherville for their specialized health care. The only significant change from 1994 to 2004 is that the percentage of residents who stay in the community when shopping for big ticket items dropped from 47 percent to 36 percent.

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\*A Note on Interpretation: For Estherville, 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

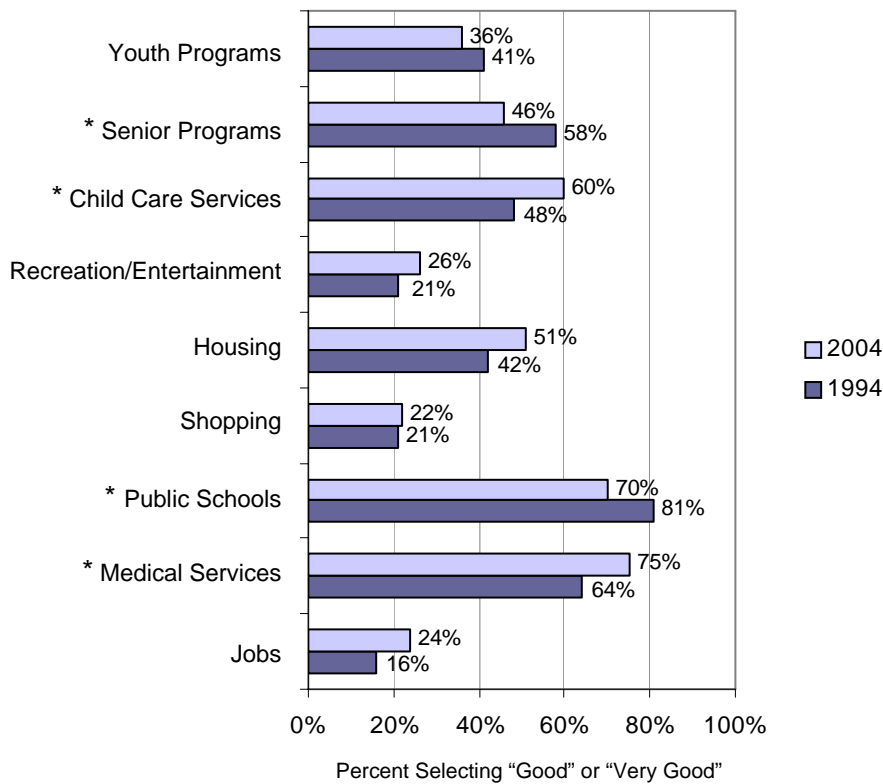


Figure 2: Ratings of Local Services and Facilities

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. In both years, public schools and medical services had the highest ratings, while recreation/entertainment, jobs, and shopping received the lowest positive ratings. The assessment of medical services increased significantly from 64 percent in 1994 to 75 percent in 2004. Eighty-one percent of the residents rated public schools positively in 1994, but this dropped significantly to 70 percent in 2004. The percent evaluating senior programs positively also declined in 2004 by 12 percentage points. The ratings for the other services did not change.

## 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. In both years, Estherville residents were generally pleased with the quality of their government services. Almost everyone evaluated the quality of emergency response services and fire protection services positively in 1994 and 2004. All government services were rated as “good” or “very good” by at least two-thirds of the residents in both periods. Residents’ perceptions of the quality of Estherville government services were essentially unchanged over the past ten years.

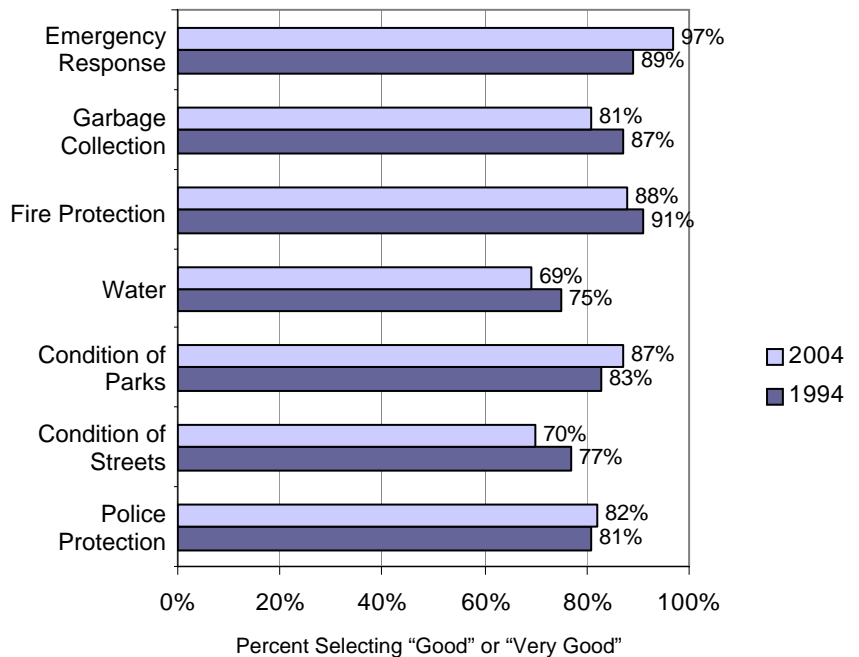
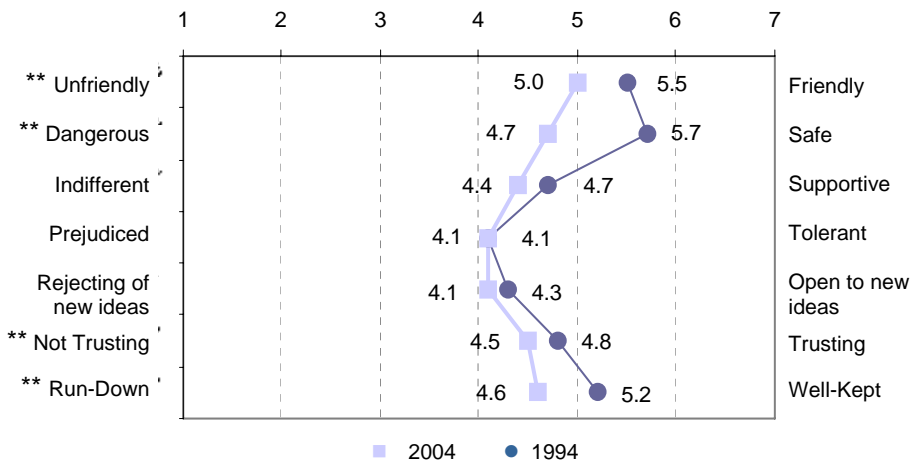


Figure 3: Ratings of Local Government Services

## ESTHERVILLE'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. Figure 4 shows that there were many changes in how Estherville residents evaluated their town on these qualities from 1994 to 2004. Safety had the highest ratings in 1994 and friendliness had the highest score in 2004. Tolerance and openness to new ideas had the lowest ratings in both years. Ratings for friendliness, safety, trustworthiness, and appearance declined significantly. The greatest decrease occurred in ratings for safety, falling from 5.7 to 4.7.

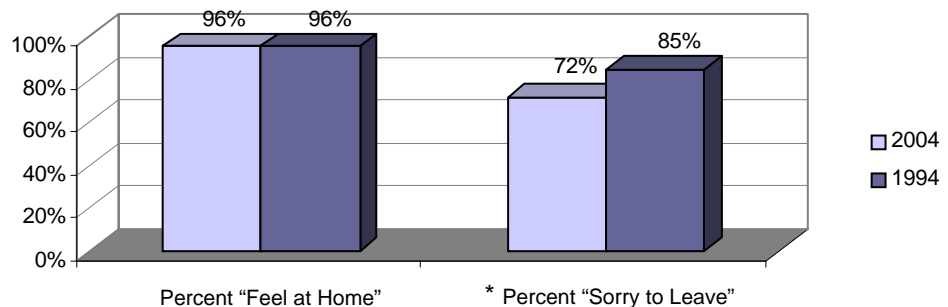
\*\* The margin of error is calculated differently for averages, and will sometimes vary from question to question within the survey depending on how many people answered each question. Thus, changes of the same size may exceed the margin of error for some items in Figure 4, but not for others. Only 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. As such, questions were included to assess local social ties. In 2004, 32 percent of the residents reported knowing the names of half or more of the people in Estherville, compared to 37 percent in 1994. Sixty percent in 2004 indicated that half or more of their friends live in town, a significant decrease compared to 73 percent in 1994. Twenty-eight percent of the residents in 2004 and 35 percent in 1994 said that half or more of their adult relatives and in-laws live in town.

### COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT

Do Estherville residents feel at home in their community? Figure 5 shows that 96 percent of the residents in both 1994 and 2004 felt at home in Estherville. However, there was a significant change in the percentage of those who said that they would be sorry to leave town. In 1994, 85 percent said that they would be sorry to leave, but this dropped to 72 percent in 2004.



**Figure 5: Community Attachment**

## COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Citizens working together to accomplish local goals is an important feature of small towns. For Estherville, 57 percent of the respondents indicated in 2004 that the spirit of community participation is “good” or “very good.” In

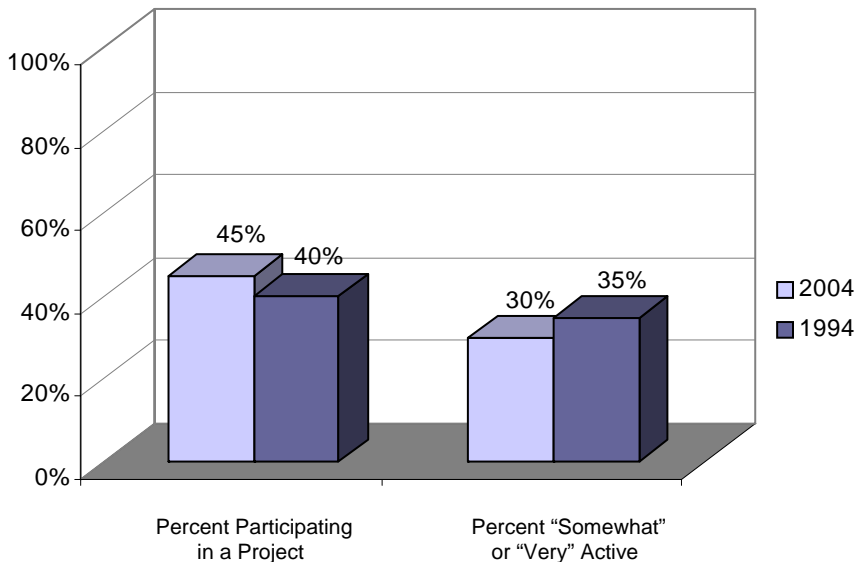


Figure 6: Community Involvement

In 2004, 45 percent of the respondents reported participating in a community improvement project in the year prior to the survey, compared to 40 percent in 1994 (Figure 6). The percentage of respondents who said they were “somewhat” or “very” active in local community activities was 30 percent in 2004 and 35 percent in 1994. When asked to consider the factors that limit their involvement in community improvement projects, the top four answers mentioned by Estherville residents in 2004 were lack of time (68%), not knowing how to get involved (35%), lack of interest in participating (32%), and not being asked to volunteer (32%).

## 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 Estherville over the past decade? The percentage of residents who shop for big ticket items in town has increased. Opinions about the quality of local medical services and child care services have improved, but opinions of public schools and senior programs have declined. Government services continued to be evaluated positively by the vast majority of residents.

The social environment in Estherville has changed significantly. Residents rated their town as less friendly, less safe, less trusting, and less well-kept in 2004 than in 1994. Further, fewer people reported that their friends live in Estherville. Compared to 1994, fewer residents in 2004 said that they would be sorry to leave Estherville if they had to move away. There were no significant changes in the percentage of residents who said that they participate in community improvement projects or the percentage of residents who say that they are active in community projects. It is interesting to note that two of the top reasons for not participating in community projects were not knowing how to become involved and not being asked by others to volunteer.

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

**RDI**

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