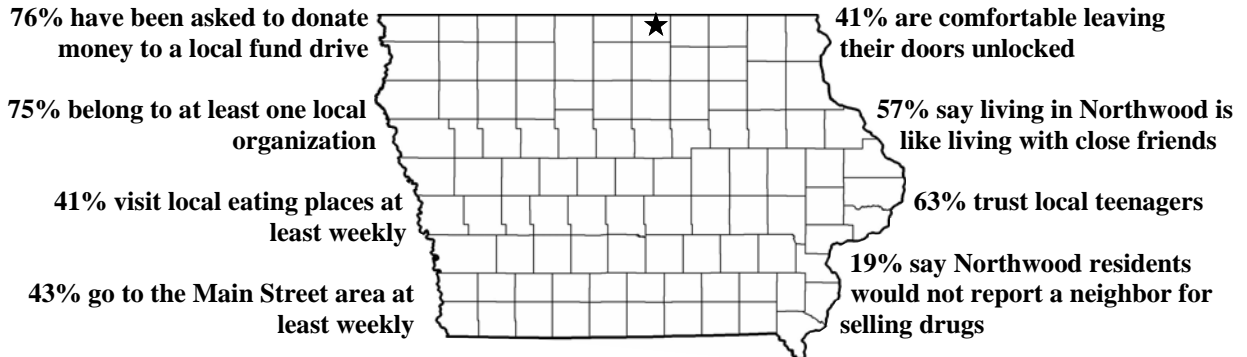


# A DECADE OF CHANGE IN NORTHWOOD

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 Northwood. 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, 100 Northwood residents responded to the survey, and 106 responded in 2004. This report is a summary of the results, including how the opinions of Northwood residents have changed over the past decade.

## LIFE IN NORTHWOOD IN 2004



## LOCAL PATRONAGE PATTERNS

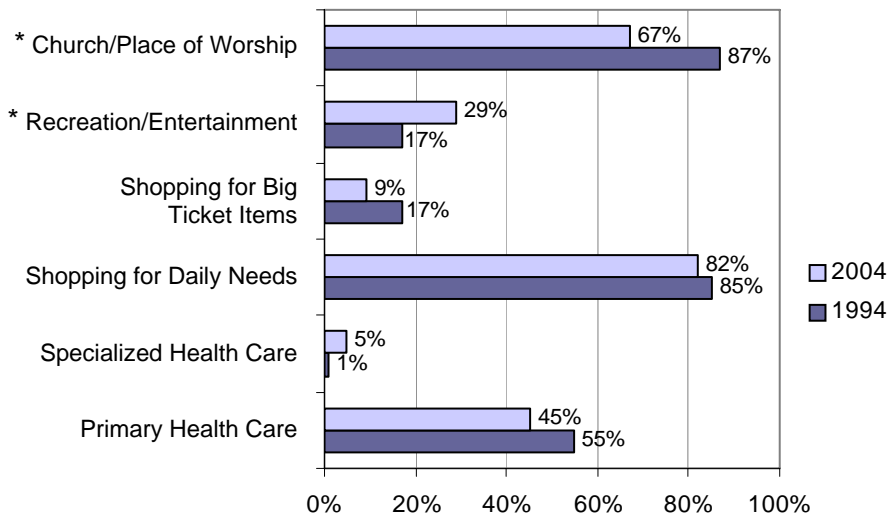


Figure 1: Percent Selecting "Local"

For a variety of reasons, many residents of Iowa's smaller towns rely on neighboring cities for services. Results from this survey reveal that Northwood residents stay in town for some services and travel for others. Figure 1 shows the percentage of residents who reported patronizing various services in Northwood. The percentage of residents who stay in Northwood to attend church decreased significantly over the past ten years from 87 percent to 67 percent.

However, there was a significant increase in those who stayed in town for recreation or entertainment. While a large majority of residents reported that they stay in Northwood to shop for daily needs, only nine percent stayed to shop for big ticket items. Similarly, nearly half said they stay in town for primary health care services, but very few obtain specialized health care in Northwood.

\*A Note on Interpretation: For Northwood, differences in percentages between 2004 and 1994 of less than 12 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 12 percent are statistically significant and are indicated with an asterisk (\*).

## RATINGS OF LOCAL SERVICES AND FACILITIES

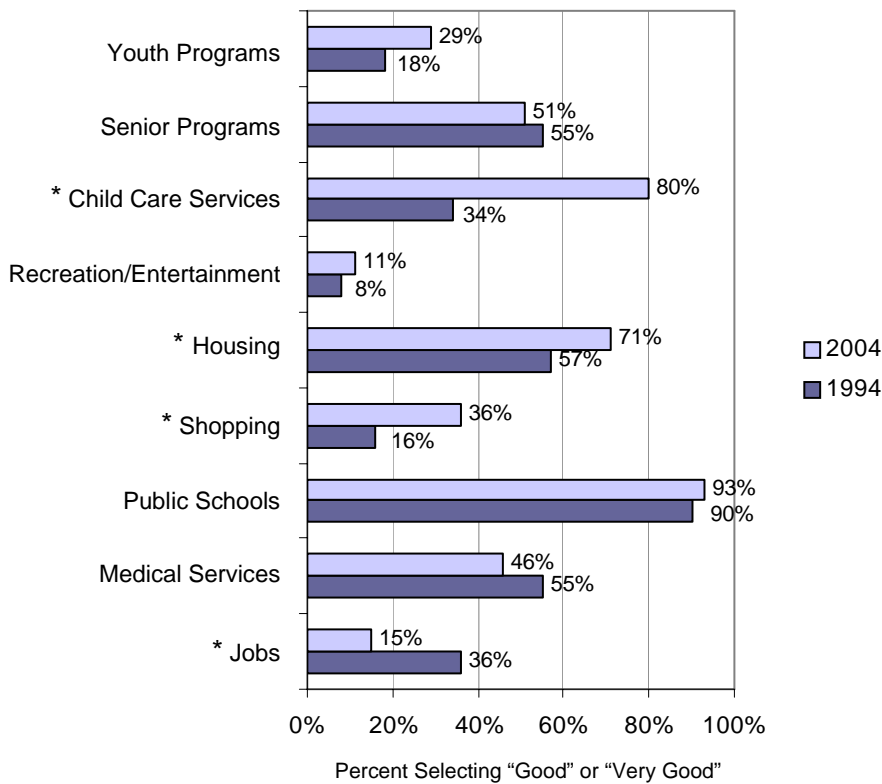


Figure 2: Ratings of Local Services and Facilities

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. Nearly all residents in both years rated the public schools as good or very good, and over half gave favorable ratings to senior programs and housing. Recreation and jobs received the lowest number of favorable ratings in 2004. The percentage of positive ratings decreased significantly over the past ten years for jobs from 36 percent in 1994 to 15 percent in 2004. However, favorable ratings increased for child care services (from 34 percent to 80 percent), housing (from 57 percent to 71 percent), and shopping (from 16 percent to 36 percent).

## 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. Overall, Northwood residents reported being satisfied with their government services. Nearly all residents rated emergency response, garbage collection, fire protection, and the condition of the parks as good or very good. Water, the condition of the streets, and police protection received favorable ratings from at least two-thirds of Northwood residents. The percentage of positive ratings for water services decreased compared to a decade ago, while ratings for other government services did not change significantly.

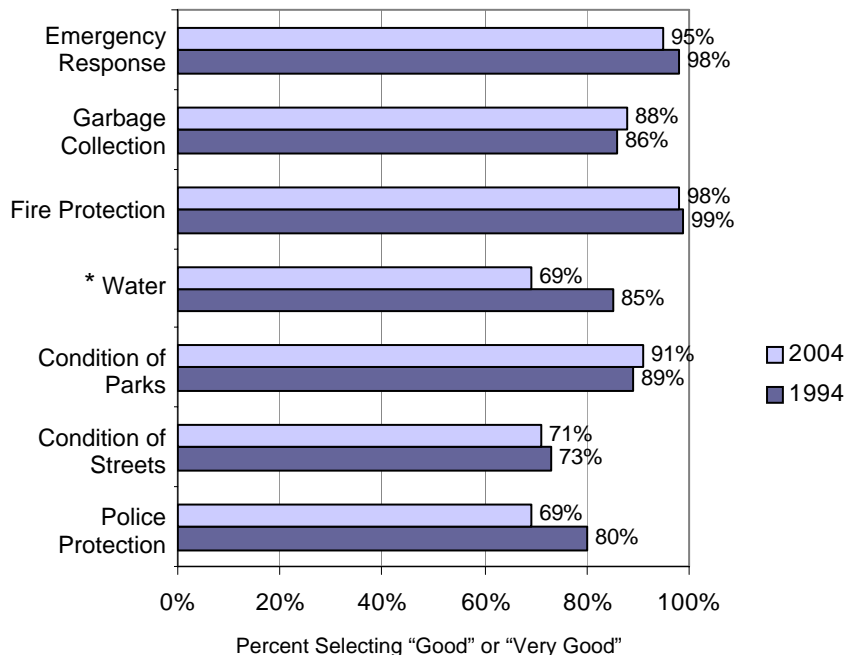
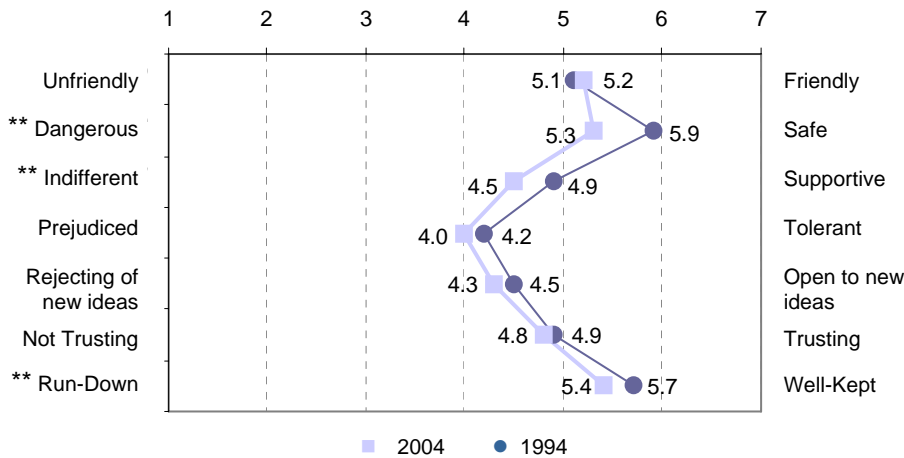


Figure 3: Ratings of Local Government Services

## NORTHWOOD'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 both years, residents assigned the highest ratings to the safety and appearance of Northwood. The lowest ratings in both years went to the extent to which Northwood is tolerant and open to new ideas. Significant changes over the past decade are that residents view Northwood as less safe, less tolerant, and less well-kept than it was ten years ago.

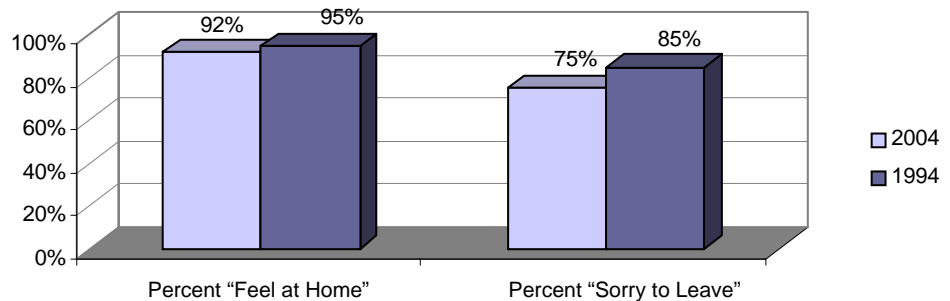
\*\* The margin of error is calculated differently for averages, and will sometimes vary from question to question within the survey depending on how many people answered each question. Thus, changes of the same size may exceed the margin of error for some items in Figure 4, but not for others. Only 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, 51 percent of residents reported knowing the names of half or more of the people in Northwood, compared to 56 percent in 1994. Similarly, 62 percent indicated that half or more of their friends live in town, compared to 69 percent in 1994. As for relatives, 32 percent of residents in 2004 and 34 percent in 1994 said that half or more of their adult relatives live in Northwood. (Note: these differences are not greater than the margin of error).

### COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT

Do Northwood residents feel at home in their community? When asked this question in 2004, most said that they did (see Figure 5). Furthermore, 75 percent of residents said that they would be sorry to leave if they had to move away from Northwood. These responses are similar to those reported in 1994, indicating that most Northwood residents still feel attached to their community.



**Figure 5: Community Attachment**

## COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Citizens working together to accomplish local goals is an important feature of small towns. For Northwood, 75 percent of residents reported in 2004 that the spirit of community participation was “good” or “very good.” Over half of residents in both years indicated that they had participated in a community improvement project during the past year (see Figure 6).

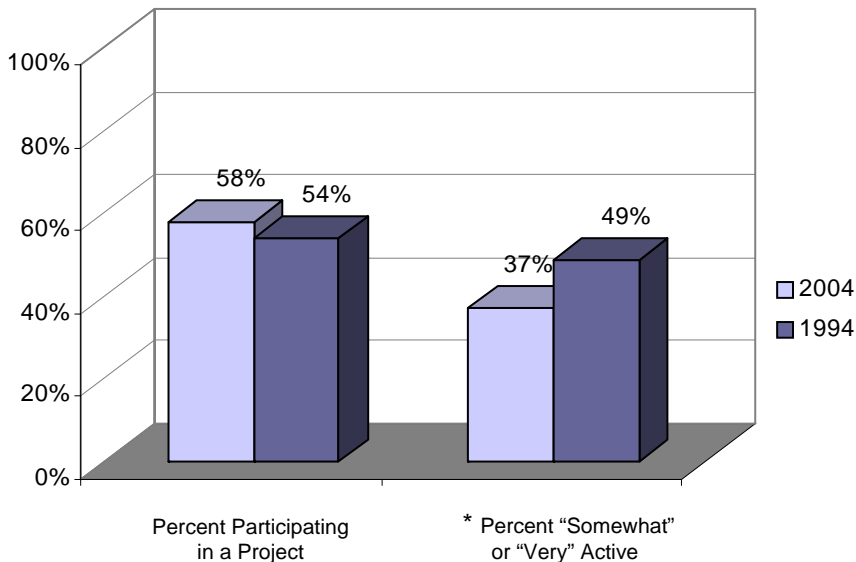


Figure 6: Community Involvement

However, the percentage of residents who considered themselves to be “somewhat” or “very” active in community activities and events decreased over the past decade from 49 percent in 1994 to 37 percent in 2004. When asked to consider a variety of factors that limit their involvement in the community, the top three were lack of time (51%), not being asked by others to volunteer (37%), and not knowing how to become involved (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 12 percentage points. Using this standard, what has changed in Northwood over the past decade? Fewer residents are attending church in Northwood, although a larger number are staying in town for recreation and entertainment. Evaluations of the quality of child care services, housing and shopping increased, while ratings declined for jobs. Evaluations of the quality of government services remain high—the only change is a decrease in ratings for water services.

The social environment has changed very little. Residents view Northwood as less safe, less supportive, and less well-kept than it was ten years ago, while ratings for friendliness, tolerance, openness to new ideas, and trust remain the same. There was also no change in the extent to which people know each other in Northwood. Northwood residents remain attached to their community—that is most feel at home in Northwood and would be sorry to leave if they have to move away. Finally, levels of community involvement changed somewhat. While levels of participation in local projects did not change, the percentage of those who describe themselves as active in the community declined.

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

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