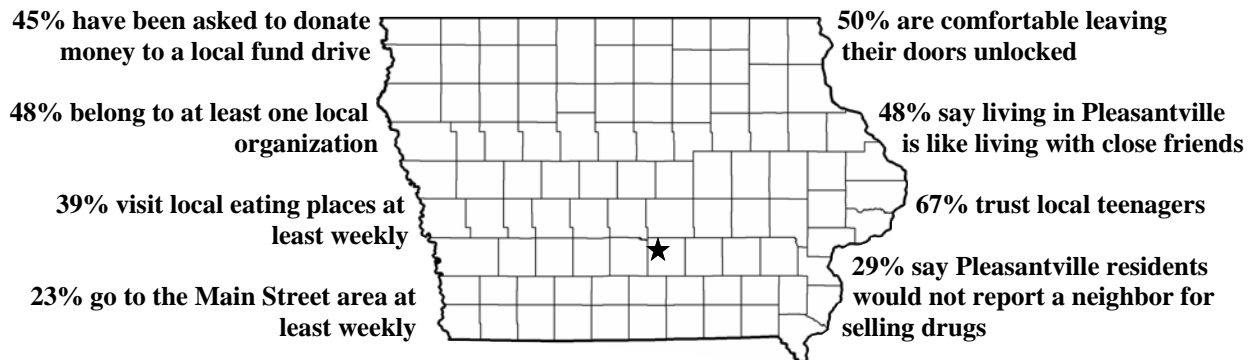


# A DECADE OF CHANGE IN PLEASANTVILLE

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 Pleasantville. 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, 96 Pleasantville residents responded to the survey, and 86 responded in 2004. This report is a summary of the results, including how the opinions of Pleasantville residents have changed over the past decade.

## LIFE IN PLEASANTVILLE IN 2004



## LOCAL PATRONAGE PATTERNS

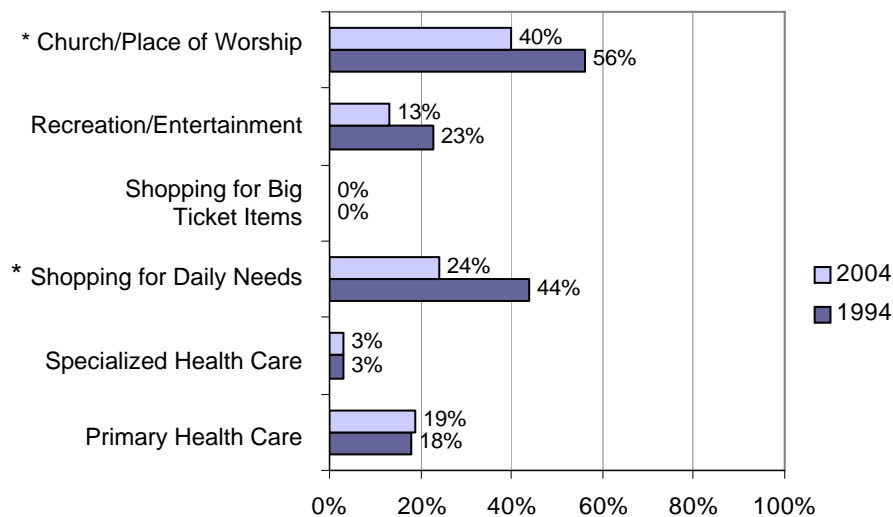


Figure 1: Percent Selecting "Local"

For a variety of reasons, many residents of Iowa's smaller towns rely on neighboring cities for services. Results from this survey reveal that residents stay in town for some services and travel for others. Figure 1 shows the percentage of residents who reported patronizing various services in Pleasantville. The percentage of residents who reported staying in Pleasantville to attend church or a place of worship decreased significantly from 56 percent

in 1994 to 40 percent in 2004. Thirteen percent of residents said that they stay in town for recreation or entertainment. Approximately one-fourth of residents in 2004 reported staying in Pleasantville to shop for daily needs, down significantly from 44 percent in 1994. No residents said they shop for "big ticket" items in town. Similarly, 19 percent of residents indicated that they stay in Pleasantville to obtain primary health care, while only 3 percent stay for specialized health care.

\*A Note on Interpretation: For Pleasantville, 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

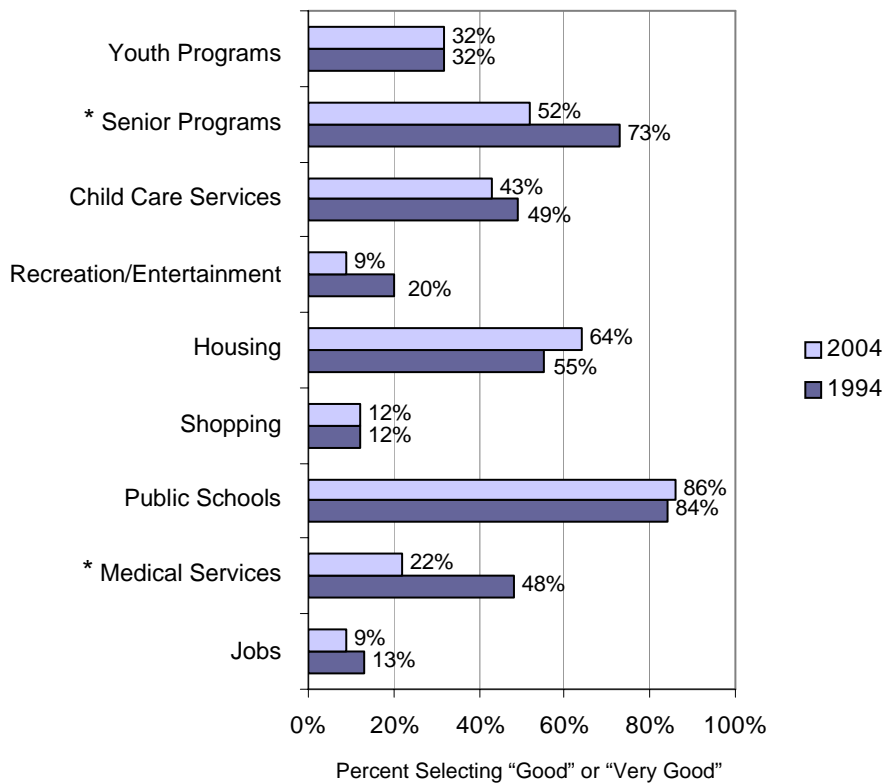


Figure 2: Ratings of Local Services and Facilities

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. In both years, most residents rated the public schools as good or very good, while over half assigned positive ratings to senior programs and housing. Relatively few residents gave positive ratings to recreation, shopping, or jobs. The percentage of favorable ratings declined over the past ten years for senior programs and medical services. Ratings did not change significantly for youth programs, child care services, recreation, housing, shopping, public schools, or jobs.

## 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, Pleasantville residents were satisfied with their local government services. Over three-fourths rated emergency response, garbage collection, and fire protection as good or very good in both years, and over half gave favorable ratings to water and the condition of the parks and streets. Police protection received the lowest number of positive ratings. Compared to ten years ago, the percentage of favorable ratings decreased for water, the condition of the streets, and police protection.

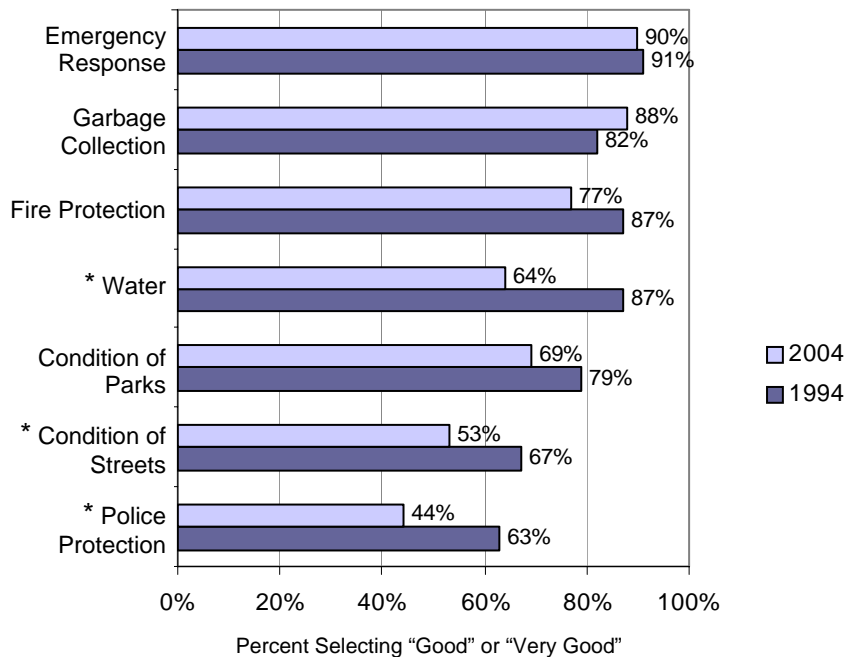
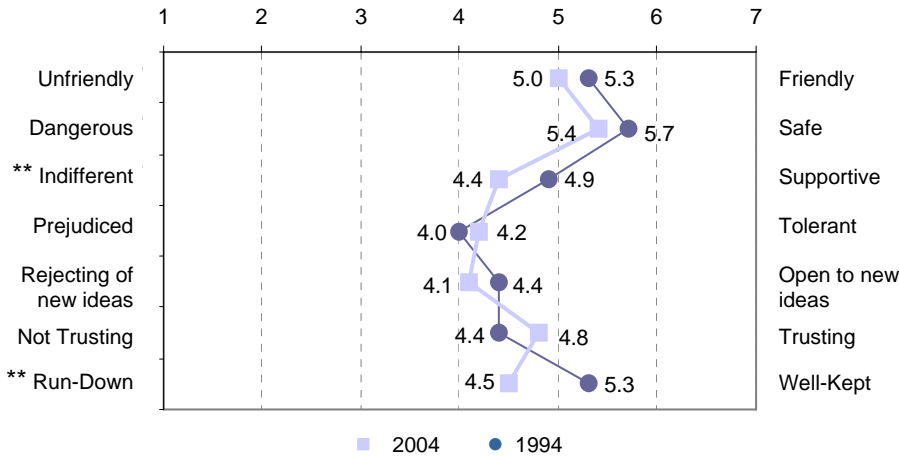


Figure 3: Ratings of Local Government Services

## PLEASANTVILLE'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.

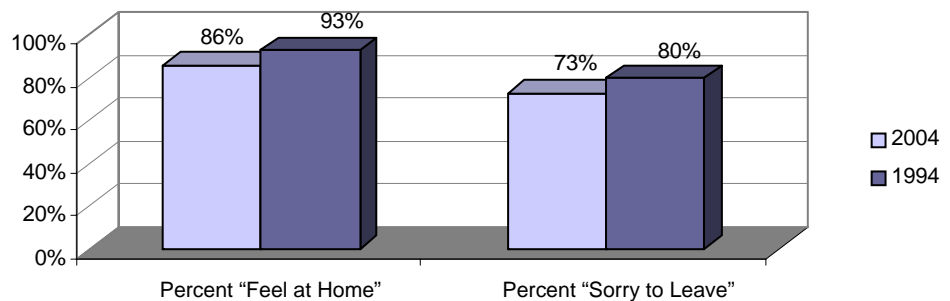
Residents were presented with a list of qualities and asked to evaluate their town on each quality using a 7-point scale. The average ratings shown in Figure 4 reveal that both years, residents assigned the highest rating to the safety of Pleasantville. The lowest ratings in both years went to the extent to which Pleasantville is tolerant and open to new ideas. Compared to ten years ago, residents view Pleasantville as less supportive and less well-kept. Ratings for the friendliness, safety, tolerance, openness to new ideas, and trusting nature of Pleasantville did not change significantly.

## 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, 42 percent of residents reported knowing the names of half or more of the people in Pleasantville, compared to 51 percent in 1994. Similarly, 42 percent indicated that half or more of their friends live in town, compared to 46 percent in 1994. As for relatives, 27 percent of residents in 2004 and 35 percent in 1994 said that half or more of their adult relatives and in-laws live in Pleasantville. (Note: These differences are not greater than the margin of error.)

## COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT

Do Pleasantville residents feel at home in their community? When asked this question in 2004, most said that they did (see Figure 5). Furthermore, 73 percent of residents said that they would be sorry to leave if they had to move away from Pleasantville. These responses are similar to those reported in 1994, indicating that most Pleasantville 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 Pleasantville, 70 percent of residents reported in 2004 that the spirit of community participation is “good” or “very good.”

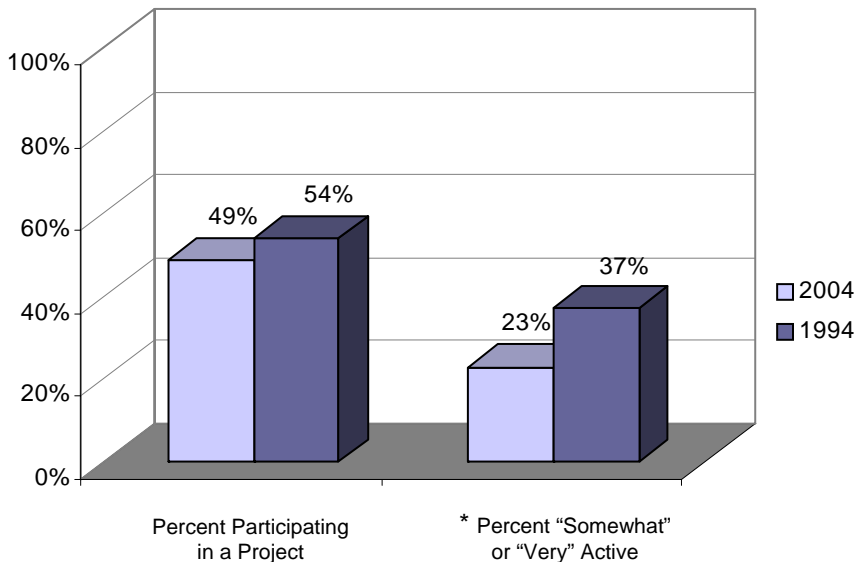


Figure 6: Community Involvement

Approximately half of residents in both years said that they had participated in a community improvement project. 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 37 percent in 1994 to 23 percent in 2004. When asked to consider a variety of factors that limit their participation in community projects or activities, the top three selected by Pleasantville residents were lack of time (56%), not being asked by others to participate (49%), and not knowing how to become involved (37%).

## 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 Pleasantville over the past decade? There was a decline in the number of residents who shop for their daily needs or attend church or a place of worship in Pleasantville. Evaluations of the quality of senior programs and medical services decreased significantly. Evaluations of the quality of local government services remain high, although there were decreases in positive ratings for water, the condition of the streets, and police protection.

The social environment has changed very little. Residents view Pleasantville as less supportive and less well-kept than it was ten years ago, although ratings for friendliness, safety, tolerance, openness to new ideas, and trust did not change. Nor did the extent to which people know each other in Pleasantville. Pleasantville residents remain attached to their community—that is, most feel at home in Pleasantville 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 Pleasantville’s future. **We wish to thank the Pleasantville residents who participated in the 1994 and 2004 studies for providing the information that made this report possible.**

**RDI**

Prepared by: Kerry Agnitsch, Terry Besser, Laura Forster, Jean Friestad, Tom Rice, Vern Ryan, and Nick Recker, Department of Sociology, Iowa State University. For further information, contact Kerry Agnitsch, 515-294-4095, kagnitsc@iastate.edu or Terry Besser, 515-294-6508, tbesser@iastate.edu.

**RDI-202** — 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.