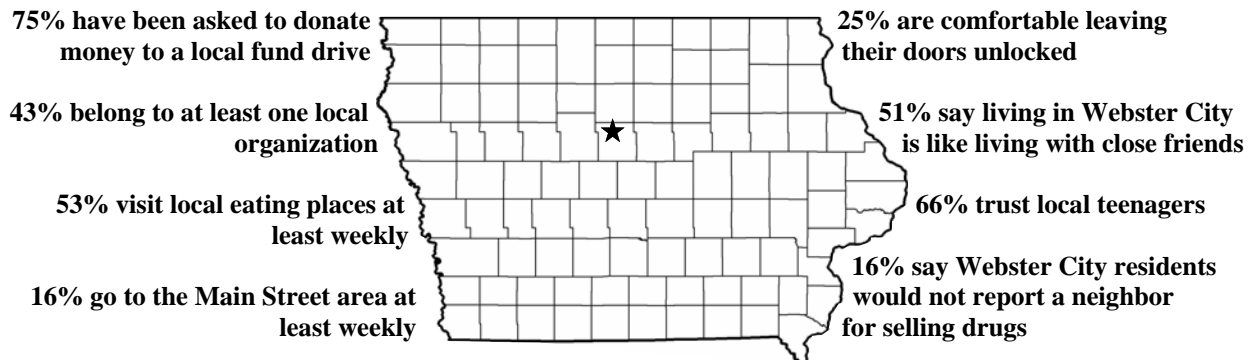


A DECADE OF CHANGE IN WEBSTER CITY

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 Webster City. 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, 103 Webster City residents responded to the survey, and 101 responded in 2004. This report is a summary of the results, including how the opinions of Webster City residents have changed over the past decade.

LIFE IN WEBSTER CITY IN 2004



LOCAL PATRONAGE PATTERNS

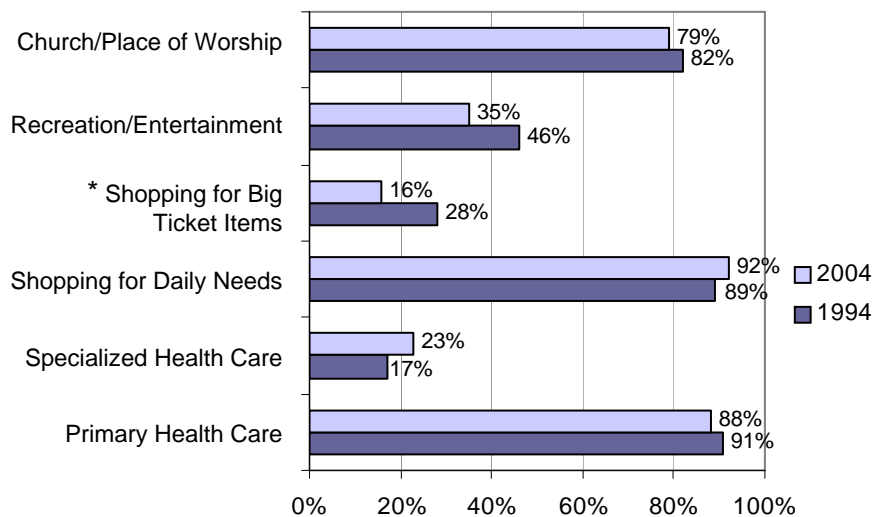


Figure 1: Percent Selecting "Local"

For a variety of reasons, many residents of Iowa's smaller towns rely on neighboring cities for services. Results from this survey suggest that Webster City residents stay in town for some services, but travel for others. Figure 1 shows the percentage of residents who reported patronizing various services in Webster City. About nine out of ten residents reported shopping for daily needs and receiving primary health care in town

in both survey years. About one-fifth in both years received specialized health care in Webster City. However, only 16 percent shopped locally for big ticket items in 2004, a significant decrease from 28 percent in 1994. Finally, a large majority of residents reported attending a local church or place of worship, and about one-third in 2004 stayed for recreation and entertainment.

A Note on Interpretation: For Webster City, 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

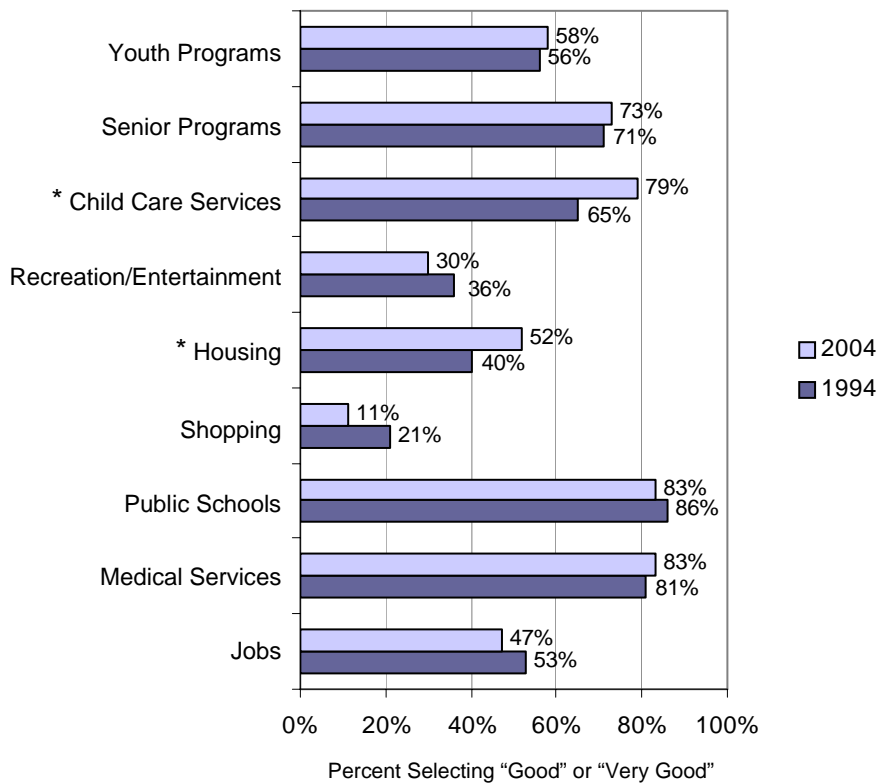


Figure 2: Ratings of Local Services and Facilities

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. The vast majority of residents rated public schools and medical services favorably in both survey years. More than half evaluated the youth programs, senior programs, and child care services in Webster City positively in 1994 and 2004. Shopping and recreation/entertainment received the lowest ratings in both periods. The percentage of Webster City residents assigning positive ratings to child care services and housing increased significantly over the past decade. Assessments for other services did not change significantly over the past decade.

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, Webster City residents were satisfied with their government services. About 80 percent or more rated emergency response, fire protection, and police protection favorably. A majority also gave positive ratings to garbage collection, water, and the condition of parks. Less than half of residents evaluated the condition of streets positively in 1994 and 2004. The percentage of positive ratings given to the condition of parks in Webster City declined in 2004 compared to 1994.

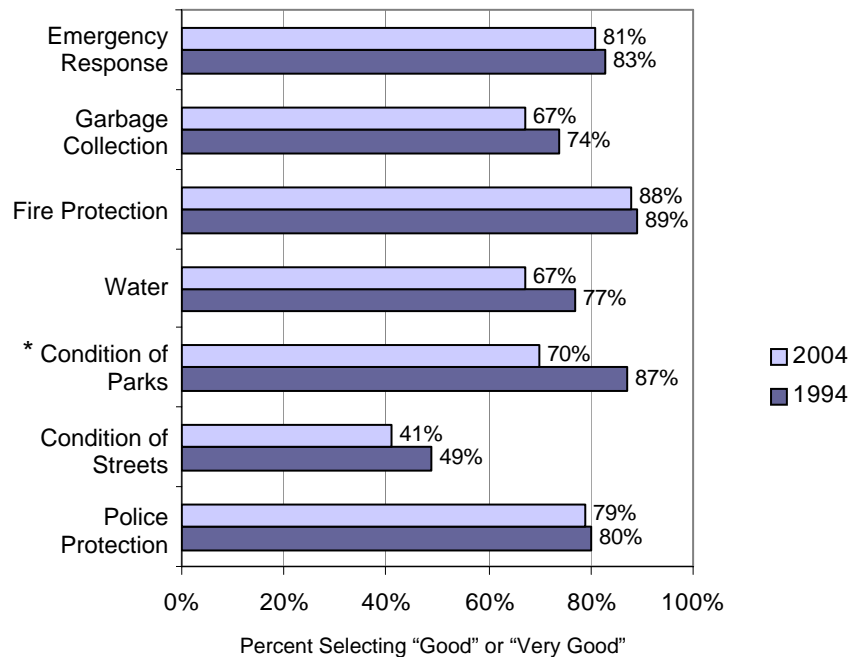


Figure 3: Ratings of Local Government Services

WEBSTER CITY'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.

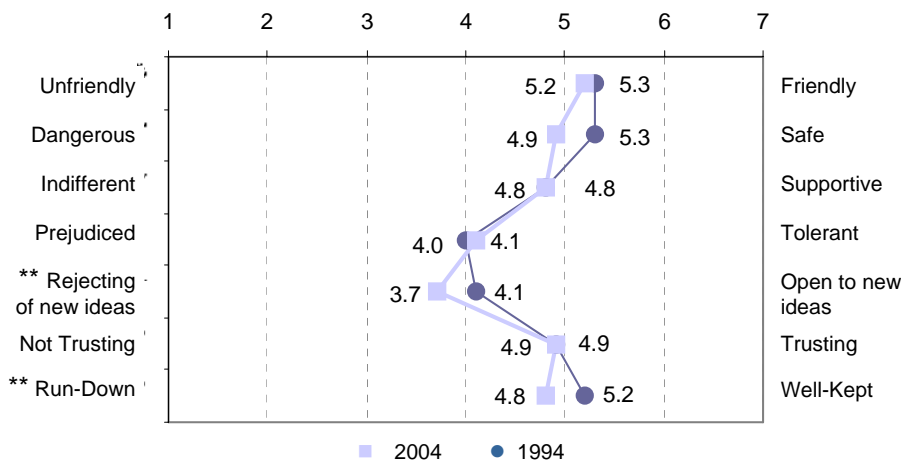


Figure 4: Average Rating of Social Qualities on a 1 to 7 Scale

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 1994, residents assigned the highest ratings to the friendliness and safety of Webster City. In 2004, friendliness received the highest ratings again, followed closely by safety and the trusting nature of the town. The lowest ratings in both years were assigned to the extent to which Webster City is tolerant and open to new ideas. Significant changes over the past decade were that residents view the town as less open to new ideas and less well-kept.

** 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, 27 percent of residents reported knowing the names of half or more of the people in Webster City, compared to 18 percent in 1994. Similarly, 72 percent indicated that half or more of their friends live in Webster City, compared to 64 percent in 1994. Thirty percent of residents in 2004 and 29 percent in 1994 said that half or more of their adult relatives and in-laws live in Webster City. (Note: These differences are not greater than the margin of error.)

COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT

Do Webster City residents feel at home in their community? When asked this question, almost all residents in both years reported that they do feel at home in Webster City (see Figure 5). Furthermore, a large majority indicated that they would be sorry to leave if they had to move away. These responses indicate that most Webster City residents are attached to their community.

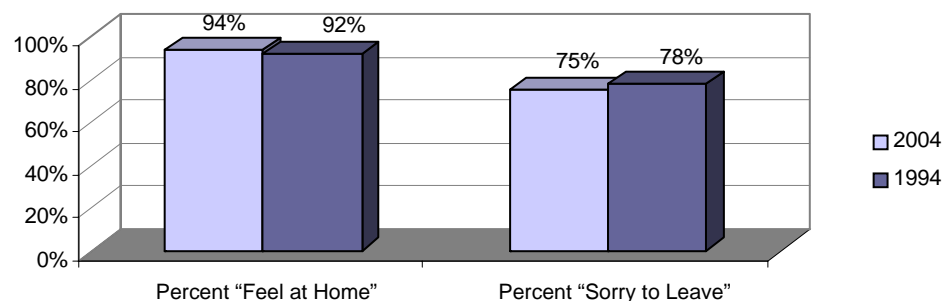


Figure 5: Community Attachment

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Citizens working together to accomplish local goals is an important feature of small towns. For Webster City, 67 percent of residents indicated in 2004 that the spirit of community participation in Webster City is “good” or “very good.” Also, 55 percent reported participating in a community improvement project in the year prior to the survey, a significant increase from 43 percent in 1994. At the same time, 28 percent in 2004 considered themselves to be “somewhat” or “very” active in community activities and events, compared to 36 percent describing themselves as active in 1994. When asked to consider a variety of factors that served to limit their involvement in the community the top three reasons mentioned by Webster City residents were lack of time (64%), not being asked by others to volunteer (43%), and lack of interest in participating (31%).

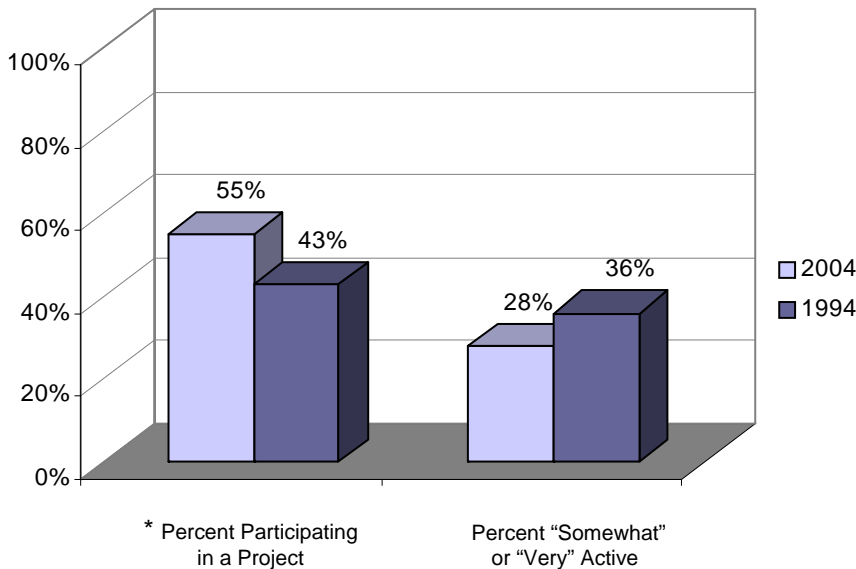


Figure 6: Community Involvement

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 12 percentage points. Using this standard, what has changed in Webster City over the past decade? Fewer residents shopped for big ticket items in Webster City compared to ten years ago. The evaluations of the quality of child care services and housing increased significantly. The evaluations of the quality of local government services remain high, although there was a decrease in positive ratings for the condition of parks in Webster City.

The social environment has changed somewhat. Webster City residents still describe their town as friendly and safe, but view it as less open to new ideas and less well-kept than it was ten years ago. Residents remain attached to their community—that is, most feel at home in the community and would be sorry to leave if they had to move away. Finally, community involvement is important to Webster City residents, as reported rates of participation increased significantly over the past decade. Still, it is interesting to note that one of the top reasons given by people for not participating was not being asked by others. This suggests possible strategies for further increasing community participation.

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

RDI

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