



www.soc.iastate.edu/smalltowns



SOC 3082
May 2017

David J. Peters
Associate Professor
Extension Rural Sociologist

What Drives Quality of Life in Iowa Small Towns?

What makes a community an attractive place to live? It's a question policy makers often ask. What do current residents like about their town that keeps them there? What do residents lack that might drive them to leave? What features of the community might attract or deter newcomers?

These questions are especially important in smaller communities that have lost population over the past several years. Quality of life is one way to measure a town's attractiveness. Previous research demonstrates that communities with high quality of life tend to have more stable and often growing economies and populations (Auh & Cook 2009). The purpose of this bulletin is to understand the drivers of quality of life in Iowa's small towns over the past 20 years.

First, key terms need to be defined. **Quality of life (QoL)** is measured

using residents' subjective ratings of community services provided locally by private, non-profit, and government groups. Quality community services have been found to be a large component of community QoL (Sirgy et al. 2011).

Small towns are defined by ZIP codes that include a municipality with a population between 500 and 6,000 people, but not adjacent to a major city, based on the 1990 United States Census. **Minor towns** have fewer than 1,500 people, while **major towns** have populations between 1,500 and 10,000.

Data on QoL and social conditions are from the Sigma Study, a long-term USDA-funded research effort in Iowa. Residents in 99 small towns were surveyed in 1994, 2004, and 2014. Socioeconomic data is taken from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2008-2012 American Community Survey and the 1990 Decennial Census.

Key Findings

- Residents in minor towns (500-1,500 people) rated their QoL as "fair", while major towns (1,500-6,000) posted higher QoL with a rating of "good".
- Quality of local schools and local government is rated "very good," but jobs and retail are rated "poor" in small towns.
- QoL improved for most small towns in Iowa over the past 20 years, with larger improvements occurring in major towns.
- Improvements in quality of entertainment, child care, and local government since 1994. No change in local schools. Worsening senior services.
- QoL driven by greater civic engagement, higher social capital, more elder populations, and growing jobs in goods-producing industries.

How high is quality of life in Iowa's small towns?

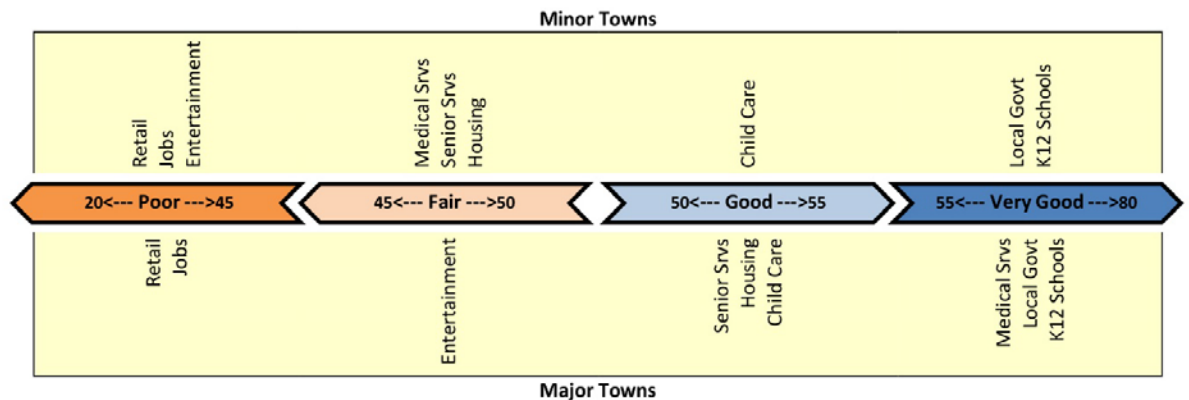
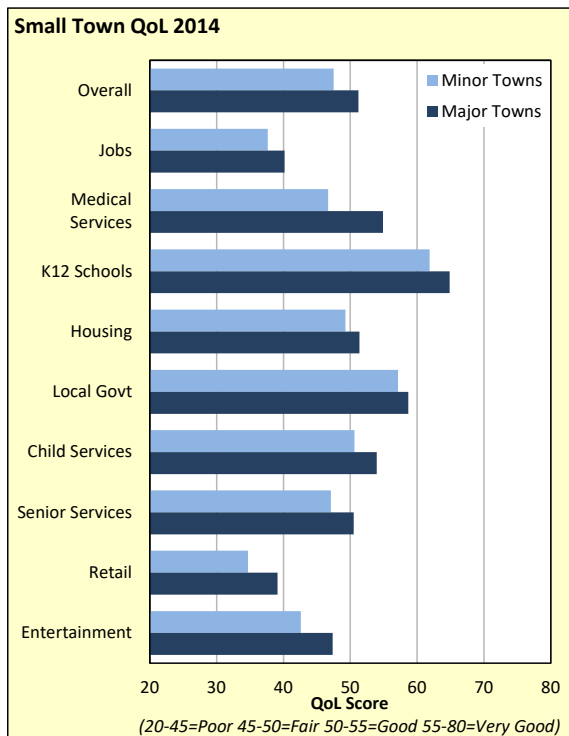
Schools and government are rated very good; jobs and retail are rated poor.

We first look at quality of life in Iowa's 43 **minor towns**, with each having an average population of about 1,000 residents. Iowans living in minor towns rated their QoL as fair, scoring 47.5 overall. Local schools (61.9) and government (57.3) are rated as very good. By contrast, entertainment options (42.6), job opportunities (37.6), and in particular retail venues (34.7) are rated as poor quality.

In looking at the scores for Iowa's 49 **major towns**, those averaging about 3,000 residents, we find that community quality of life is rated as good (51.2), slightly higher than in smaller places. Similar to minor towns, local schools (64.9) and government (58.7) are rated as very good along with medical services (54.9) and child care facilities (54.0). Surprisingly, job opportunities (40.2) and retail shopping options (39.1) have poor quality ratings – one would expect these to be higher in larger towns.

Comparing **major versus minor towns**, we find larger communities have much better medical services (8.2 points higher), entertainment and recreations options (4.8 points higher), and retail and shopping venues (4.4 points higher) than what is found in Iowa's smaller towns.

In general, major towns have higher overall quality of life (3.7 point higher) because they are better able to provide health and social services to their residents. This is likely due to these towns having a larger population base that makes provision of such services more feasible, compared to smaller towns.



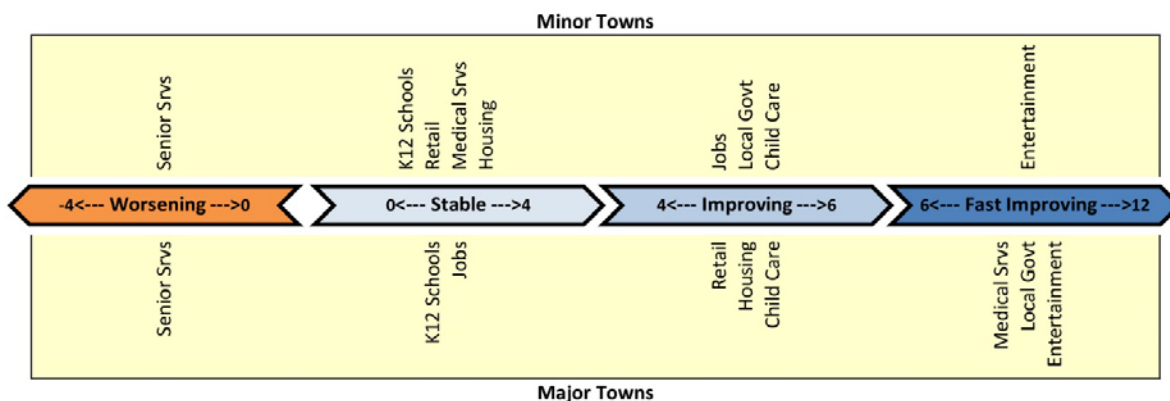
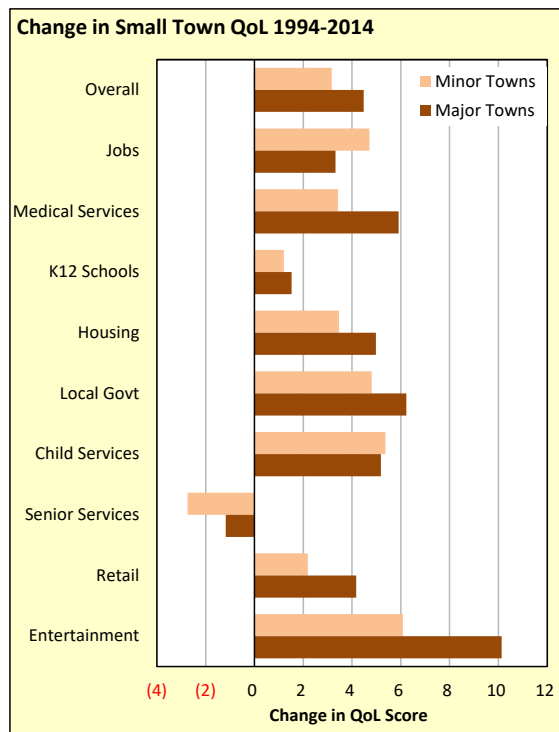
Has quality of life in small towns changed over the past 20 years?

*Improvements in entertainment, child care, and local government.
No change in schools. Worsening senior services.*

In Iowa's **minor towns**, the quality of life for residents has improved over the past 20 years. QoL in towns of about 1,000 people increased by 3.2 points between 1994 and 2014. The largest improvements in QoL were in better entertainment options (6.1), child care facilities (5.4), local government services (4.8), and better job opportunities (4.7). Housing and medical services also saw gains, but at a much slower pace. Quality of retail venues and local schools has gone largely unchanged since 1994. Most distressing is the large drop in quality of senior care services (-2.8), given that a sizable segment of small town populations are over 65 years of age.

Major towns also saw gains in overall quality of life since 1994, rising by 4.5 points over the past 20 years. There were large improvements in quality of entertainment options (10.1), local government (6.2), and medical services (5.9). Perceptions about child care (5.2), housing (5.0), and retail venues (4.2) also got better over time. However, the quality of job opportunities (3.3) and local schools (1.5) saw little improvement. Like minor towns, the quality of senior services declined (-1.2) since 1994, but at only half the rate of smaller places.

Comparing change in quality of life between **minor versus major towns**, we find to our surprise that minor towns had better improvement in job opportunities than in larger towns (1.4 points faster). However, this was the only category where minor towns outpaced major towns. In all other services smaller towns lagged behind larger ones, with slower gains in entertainment venues (-4.0 points slower), medical services (-2.5 points slower), and retail options (-2.0 points slower).



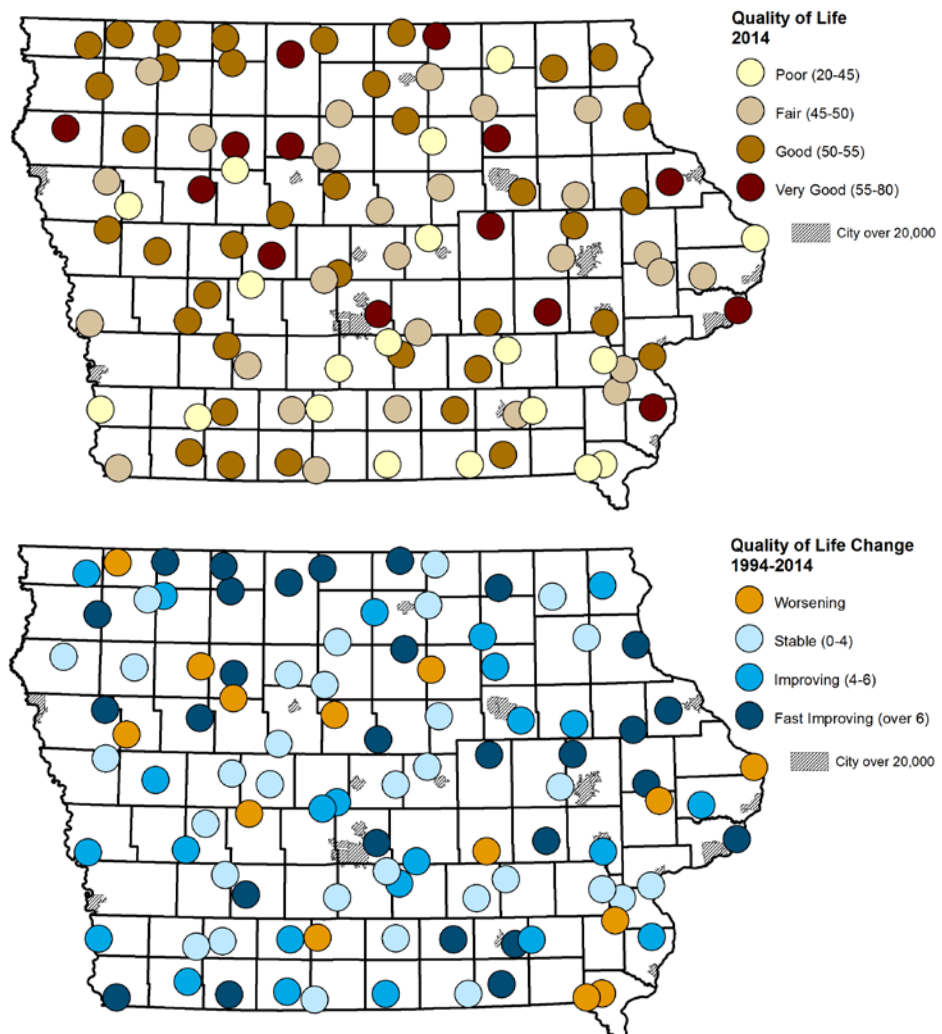
Where are high quality of life towns located?

Small towns with higher quality of life (good to very good) tend to be located in the northern half of the state, while towns in the southern and central parts of Iowa tend to have lower quality of life (fair to poor). Towns with the highest QoL include Williamsburg, Waverly, St. Ansgar, and Bancroft.

Quality of life has improved in most small towns across Iowa over the past 20 years. Towns with the largest gains include Le Claire, Epworth, Bancroft, Buffalo Center, and

Agency. Worsening QoL tended to be clustered in the west-central and southeast parts of the state. QoL was more stable or slower growing in central and southern Iowa.

The spatial pattern is weak, however, with high and low QoL towns dispersed across Iowa. Surprisingly, proximity to larger cities of 20,000 or more people did not correlate with higher quality of life, indicating urban influence is not a main driver of QoL.



What drives quality of life in small towns?
Greater social capital and civic engagement.
Growing jobs in goods-producing industries.

What are the characteristics of high quality of life towns in Iowa? Is it driven simply by larger populations and higher incomes, or is something else at work? To answer these questions, we compared both high and low quality of life towns across a number of demographic, economic, and social conditions while holding population size constant.

High QoL towns are those scoring above the mean for Iowa, while low QoL towns fall below it (± 0.5 standard deviation). While most measures are self-explanatory, civic engagement and social capital need to be defined further. **Civic engagement** measures actions designed to identify and address community issues. **Social capital** measures trust, reciprocity, cooperation, networks, and attachment that facilitates and improves coordinated actions in a community.

For **income**, high QoL towns possess ...

- No differences in household income, poverty, or inequality.

Income and poverty matter less to quality of life.

For **demographics**, high QoL towns have ...

- More elders aged 65 years and older.
- No differences in population density, minorities, and educational levels.

Elders matter more to quality of life.

For **employment**, high QoL towns employ ...

- Growing numbers of jobs in goods-producing industries over the past 20 years, such as manufacturing, construction, and mining.
- However, no employment differences in other industries.

Employment matters less to quality of life.

For **civic engagement**, high QoL towns are ...

- More involved in community improvement projects.
- Members in more local organizations, but members of fewer non-local organizations outside the community.

Local civic engagement matters more to quality of life.

In terms of **social capital**, high QoL towns rate themselves as ...

- More well-kept, supportive, open to new ideas, trusting, safe, tolerant, and friendly.
- Becoming more open to new ideas, tolerant, well-kept, safer, friendlier, supportive, and trusting over the past 20 years.

Social capital matters more to quality of life.

Socioeconomic characteristics of small towns by quality of life.
Means estimated controlling for population size

	2014		1994-2014	
	Low QoL	High QoL	Low QoL	High QoL
Demographics				
Population	2,082	2,082 ^a	-2.24	2.14 ^b
Population Density (per sq.mi)	62.83	96.50	-2.13	3.71
Minority (%)	6.08	3.09	4.75	2.54
Age 17 & under (%)	22.78	22.64	-3.53	-2.24
Age 65 & over (%)	17.95	23.02 **	-0.90	-1.26
High School Non-Completers (%)	10.87	10.35	-11.88	-15.06
College Graduates (%)	15.85	18.62	6.02	7.00
Income				
Poverty (%)	11.95	11.17	-0.51	-0.21 ^b
Gini Income Inequality (0-100)	38.00	40.14	3.12	1.46
Median Household Income (2010\$)	\$49,733	\$45,992	21.97	22.89
Employment				
Employment	48.76	48.52	3.68	4.99
Agriculture (%)	7.03	6.87	-5.28	-4.68
Goods Producing (%)	24.85	24.99	-0.62	2.58 *
Transport, Telecomm, Utilities (%)	7.42	7.42	0.50	1.58
Professional, Health, Educ (%)	31.64	32.52	4.89	2.94
Retail & Leisure Services (%)	22.24	21.79	1.11	-0.56
Civic Engagement				
Involved in Town Project (%)	39.70	48.21 *	-9.12	-5.88
Membership in Local Groups (#)	0.90	1.37 **	-0.66	-0.63
Membership in Outside Groups (#)	0.83	0.67 *	-0.03	-0.08
Social Capital				
Friendly (0-100)	77.99	82.46 **	-0.99	2.44 **
Safe (0-100)	79.49	86.24 **	-0.27	3.57 **
Supportive (0-100)	70.77	78.08 **	1.98	5.35 *
Tolerant (0-100)	68.42	73.33 **	6.29	11.70 **
Open to New Ideas (0-100)	61.16	68.42 **	-1.45	4.95 **
Trusting (0-100)	70.36	77.38 **	-1.13	1.96 *
Well-Kept (0-100)	64.68	80.85 **	-4.66	-0.35 *

a population constant. *b* percent change.

Difference from Low QoL towns using Scheffé Test at **p*<.05 and ***p*<.01.

Implications for small towns

Small towns wishing to improve their community's quality of life should focus on four areas: (1) increasing civic engagement, (2) enhancing social capital, (3) retaining elder populations, and (4) creating jobs in goods-producing industries. **Enhancing engagement and social capital** should be priority goals for all communities because they are inexpensive, actionable in the near-term, and the community has power to make improvements themselves without outside help. By contrast, **retaining elders and growing industrial jobs** are secondary goals because they require sizable financing, long-term plans, and carry risk because the community has little control over the global economy and migration.

Encouraging more residents to **participate in local projects** and to become members of **local organizations** and clubs are ways small towns can enhance the quality. Local organizations provide the structure to identify community needs, gain community support, garner human and financial resources, and coordinate activities to implement a community improvement project. Memberships in non-local organizations outside the community detract from QoL since the focus is often on state or regional concerns, not local issues. Greater public participation in community improvement projects demonstrates the commitment of local residents to improve their town's QoL, increasing the likelihood of the project's long-term success.

Social capital is strongly linked to better quality of life in Iowa's small towns. Residents in high QoL towns rate their communities as better kept-up (rather than run-down), more supportive, more open to new ideas, more trusting, and more safe. Further, over the past 20 years these towns became more open to new ideas and more tolerant.

Social capital is both cause and consequence of QoL, where using the capital creates more of it. For example, social capital can drive civic engagement that leads to greater QoL. Gains in QoL often lead to additional gains in social capital, which in turn drives more civic engagement that repeats the cycle. In short, advantage begets advantage with social capital, so high QoL towns tend to stay that way over time.

The presence of **elders** may contribute to quality of life by this population having the time, local connections, and financial resources to advance projects that enhance the community. Besides being the largest population group, Baby Boomers (those 55 to 74 years old) often have the most leadership experience in small towns. As this group retires and ages, it is important for small towns to keep these residents to provide assistance and support for community projects. Local investment in expanded senior services and senior housing are keys to keeping elders in the community. In short, elders are an asset to small town quality of life.

Quality of life does not depend on whether the community's economy is based on services, agriculture, or manufacturing – all have roughly the same quality of life. However, job gains or losses do play a role. Better quality of life is linked with growing numbers of jobs in the **goods-producing sector** in industries like manufacturing, construction, and mining. Firms in this sector offer many middle-skill and middle-wage jobs, many which are full-time and full-year positions with decent benefits. Thus, growth in "quality" jobs suited to small town economies does promote overall community quality of life.

ISU Extension and Outreach Resources

Community and Economic Development has several programs available for communities aimed at *improving civic engagement and social capital*.

- Community Voices
- Developing Dynamic Leaders
- Visioning and Facilitation Services

<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/programbuilder/>

Human Sciences has programs to assist individuals and families in *adult caregiving and other elder issues*.

- Mid-life and Beyond
- Powerful Tools for Caregivers

<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/humansciences/caregiving-adult-caregiving>

Other Resources

The **Center for Industrial Research and Service** can assist businesses and communities in retaining, expanding, and creating opportunities in the *goods-producing industry*.

- Economic Development and Innovation
- Administrative, Quality, and Supply Chain Management

<http://www.ciras.iastate.edu>

For more information, contact ...

David Peters
Associate Professor and Extension Rural Sociologist
Department of Sociology

dpeters@iastate.edu | 515-294-6303
www.soc.iastate.edu/smalltowns

Photo credit: Iowa State University Sociology Department

This institution is an equal opportunity provider. For the full non-discrimination statement or accommodation inquiries, go to <https://www.extension.iastate.edu/diversity/ext>