



2010 Summary Report

Introduction

The Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll is an annual survey that collects and disseminates information on issues of importance to rural communities across Iowa and the Midwest. Conducted every year since its establishment in 1982, the Farm Poll is the longest-running survey of its kind in the nation. Iowa State University Extension, the Iowa Agriculture and Home Economics Experiment Station, the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, and the Iowa Agricultural Statistics Service are all partners in the Farm Poll effort. The information gathered through the Farm Poll is used to inform the development and improvement of research and extension programs and is used by local, state, and national leaders in their decision-making processes. We thank the many farm families who responded to this year's survey and appreciate their continued participation in the Farm Poll.

Who Participates?

The 2010 Farm Poll questionnaires were mailed in January and February to a statewide panel of 2,224 farm operators. Usable surveys

were received from 1,360 farmers, resulting in a response rate of 61 percent. On average, Farm Poll participants were 64 years old. Most Farm Poll participants draw a significant proportion of their overall household income from farming. Forty-eight percent of participants reported that farm income made up more than half of their 2009 household income, and an additional 19 percent earned between 26 and 50 percent of their household income from the farm operation.

Much of the 2010 Farm Poll survey focused on community and economic development issues. This report presents data on changes in perceptions about rural community life over time, including trends in quality of life, neighboring, access to services and commerce, and population change. Agritourism is increasingly seen as a potential source of economic development, and the 2010 survey examines farmers' perspectives on agritourism's prospects in Iowa. Copies of this or any other year's reports are available from your local county Extension office, the Extension Distribution Center (www.extension.iastate.edu/store), Extension Sociology (www.soc.iastate.edu/extension/farmpoll), or from the authors.

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Highlights from the 2010 Farm Poll

Community Life and Neighboring

Friends and neighbors are a critical part of social support networks and influence quality of life. The Farm Poll has tracked changes in rural social networks for nearly 30 years. Similar to previous years, the 2010 survey points to mixed perceptions of the current state of rural social relations. On the down side, nearly 90 percent of farmers agreed that people do not depend on each other as they have in the past; 71 percent believed that they have fewer neighbors than they did 10 years ago; 55 percent indicated that they only see their neighbors when they drive by their farms; and only 32 percent agreed that their neighborhoods are close-knit (table 1). Questions examining changes in relationships between neighbors over the last 10 years provided similar results: 58 percent believed neighbors helping each other had declined, and 79 percent indicated that visitation among neighbors had declined (table 2).

Not all assessments of community life and neighboring were negative. On the positive side, 72 percent of farmers agreed that they can always count on their neighbors if they need help, and only about one-third indicated that people do not seem to help each other as much as they did in the past (table 1). Sixty-nine percent agreed that when people in their communities need a hand, there are always neighbors who are willing to help out. Farmers' assessments of changes in their own relationships with neighbors indicated stability over the last decade: 77 percent of farmers rated their level of helping other neighbors as either unchanged or improved and 59 percent indicated that the amount of visiting they do with neighbors had stayed the same or increased (table 2).

The Farm Poll has been tracking quality of life (QOL) among Iowa farmers every even-numbered year since 1982. Results from 2008 showed the largest increases in QOL in several years. Assessments from 2010 were largely positive as well. Eighty-three percent of farmers reported that their families' quality of life had either stayed the same (52 percent)

Table 1. Community Life

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
	—Percentage—				
People don't depend upon each other like they once did.....	1	5	5	66	23
I can always count on my neighbors if I need help	2	7	18	58	14
I have fewer neighbors than I did 10 years ago	3	22	5	47	24
Whenever someone in our community needs help, there are always plenty of neighbors willing to help them.....	1	6	24	61	8
Farmers are so well equipped today that few farmers need their neighbors' help	1	17	17	57	8
I'm not as active in community affairs as I should be	3	23	17	53	4
About the only time I see my neighbors is when they drive past my farm.....	2	35	9	50	5
People don't seem as willing to help each other as they once did.....	3	39	20	33	5
Our neighborhood is close-knit.....	4	32	32	30	2

Table 2. Neighboring

	Greatly Declined	Somewhat Declined	Remained the Same	Somewhat Increased	Greatly Increased
—Percentage—					
Do you feel that neighbors helping each other over the past 10 years has.....	12	46	40	2	0
Do you feel that neighbors visiting each other over the past 10 years has.....	26	53	20	1	0
Over the past 10 years, how has your level of helping other neighbors changed	4	19	67	9	1
Over the past 10 years, how has your level of visiting other neighbors changed	8	34	52	7	0

or increased (31 percent) over the previous five years. Farmers’ appraisals of how other families in their communities had fared were somewhat less positive, with 52 percent reporting no change and 17 percent reporting improvements. Attitudes about future QOL were generally bright, with 79 percent of farmers predicting no change or improvement for their own families and 69 percent forecasting the same for other families in their communities. Projections regarding the overall economic prospects for Iowa farmers were less optimistic: 41 percent believed that they would deteriorate, 17 percent predicted improvement, and the remaining 42 percent expected no change.

Changes in Perceptions over Time

One of the unique and important characteristics of the Farm Poll is that its longevity allows for tracking of changes over time. All of the questions reported in the previous section have been asked multiple times over the life of the Farm Poll. This year we look back in time to assess how responses regarding these important issues have changed over the years. We examine the five years in which all of the questions above were asked in the same year: 1984, 1990, 1996, 2006, and 2010. Similar to the results from 2010, results were mixed when viewed over the past three decades. Some indicators appear to have improved, while others have declined.

Rural social fabric and neighboring

Most of the declines appear to be related to changes in the social fabric of rural communities. Most rural Iowa counties have suffered double-digit percentage losses of population since 1980, and many have seen declines of more than 20 percent. Some areas have experienced an influx of new residents as people have moved to rural areas to live on acreages or seek employment. Both population loss and arrival of new residents can result in changes in the ways that neighbors relate to each other.

The indicators that have declined appear to be related to such changes. For example, the percentage of farmers who agree or strongly agree that their neighborhoods are closely knit had declined from 42 percent in 1984 to 32 percent in 2010 (figure 1). While most farmers still agreed that they (73 percent) and other people in the neighborhood (69 percent) can count on their neighbors for help if they need it, these percentages had declined from 81 and 84 percent, respectively, since 1984.

At the same time, however, there have been a number of positive trends that are important to note. In 2010, 47 percent of farmers agreed with the statement, “I’m so busy now-a-days I don’t seem to have time to visit with my neighbors,” (figure 2). This represents a substantial decline from a high of 69 percent in 1990.

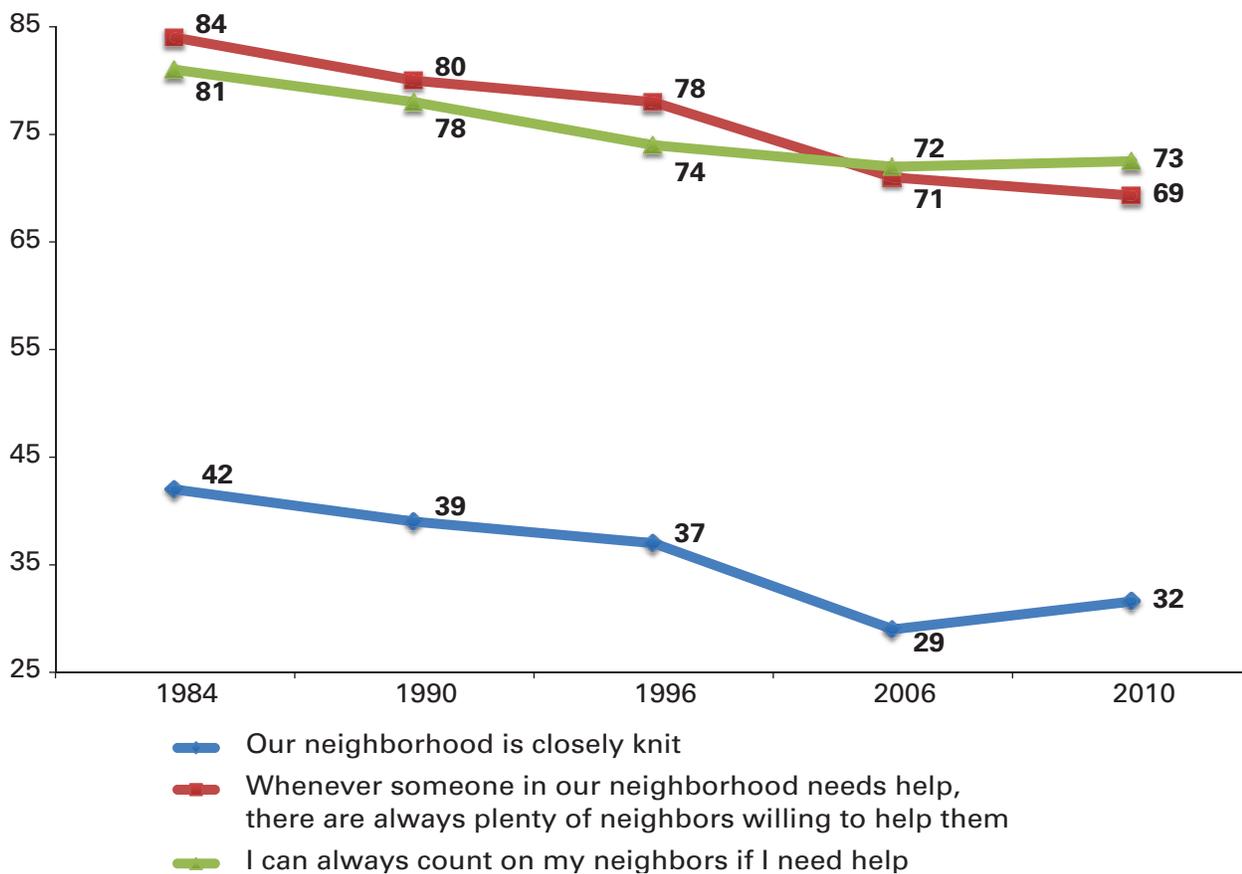


Figure 1. Rural social fabric, 1984–2010, part 1 (percent agree or stronger agree)

Similarly, level of agreement with the statement, “It is difficult to get people to volunteer to help on community projects,” was 50 percent, compared to 65 percent in 1990. Other questions that showed declines included, “I’m not as active in community affairs as I should be,” (65 to 58 percent) and, “Farmers are so well equipped today that few need their neighbors’ help,” (72 to 65 percent). Finally, agreement with the statement, “People don’t seem as willing to help each other as they once did,” declined from 50 percent in 1984 to 38 percent in 2010. These trends, while they are not necessarily major shifts, suggest that farmers perceive modest improvements over the last three decades.

Another measure of the vitality of social networks is neighboring. Farm Poll participants’ assessments of their own and their neighbors’ behavior over time suggest that “good neighboring” is on the rise. The proportion of

farmers who rated levels of visitation between neighbors over the last 10 years as either unchanged or increasing rose slightly from a low of 15 percent in 1984 to 21 percent in 2010 (figure 3). Likewise, the percentage of farmers who rated levels of mutual support among neighbors as either unchanged or increasing rose from 27 percent to 42 percent over the same period.

At the same time, farmers’ assessments of their own behavior over the previous 10 years also showed improvements. In 2010, 59 percent of farmers reported that levels of visiting with their neighbors either stayed the same or increased, compared to 50 percent in 1990 (figure 3). Seventy-seven percent of farmers also reported that levels of helping their neighbors had stayed the same or increased, compared to 66 percent in 1990.¹ It is worth noting that the 2010 scores are the highest ever recorded

¹ These questions were not asked in 1984.

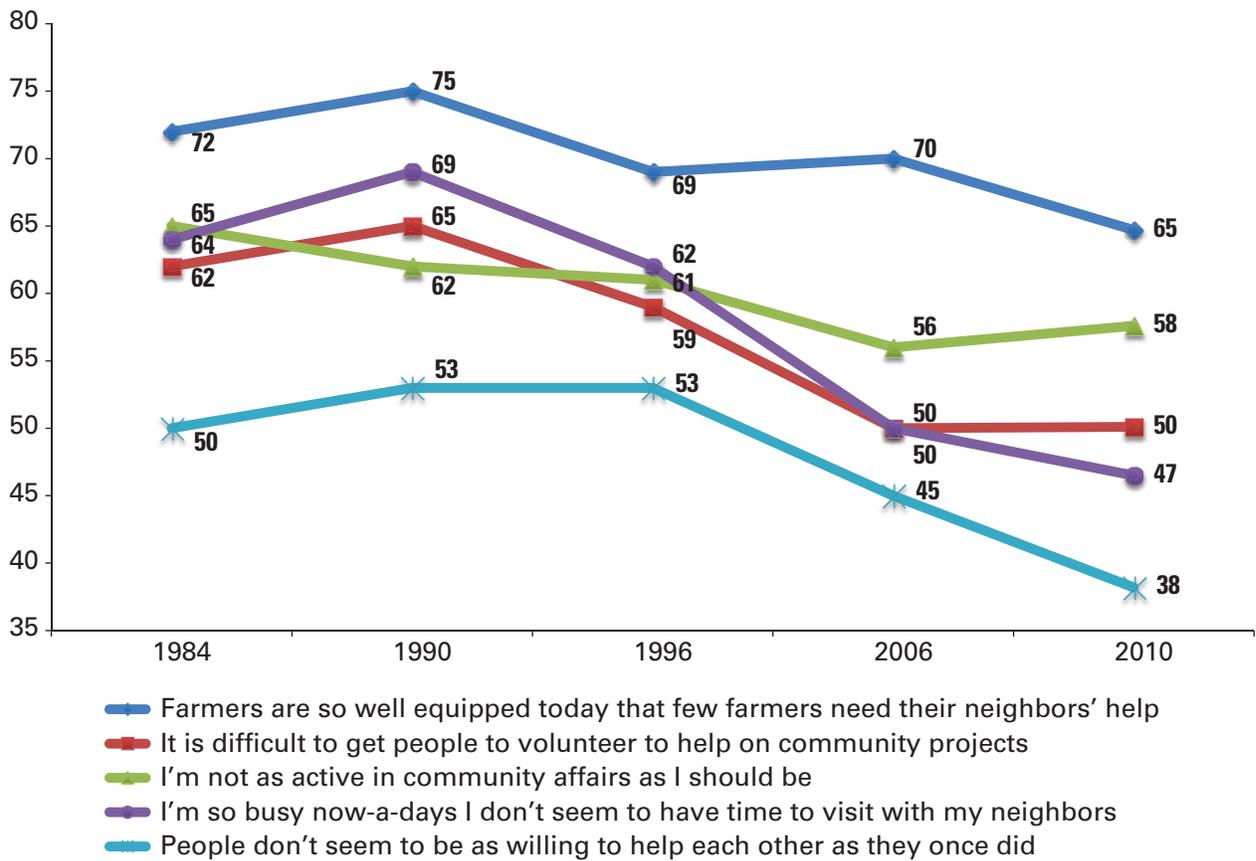


Figure 2. Rural social fabric, 1984–2010, part 2 (percent agree or strongly agree)

on these questions, and all of the 2010 results were higher than in 2006.

Quality of life

The Farm Poll survey has collected data on quality of life among farm families and other families in their communities every two years since the inception of the study. We define quality of life as “degree of satisfaction with all aspects of life,” and ask farmers to evaluate how their families and other families in their communities have fared over the previous five years and to predict how they will fare over the coming five years. Assessments of quality of life have remained remarkably steady over the last 25 years or so. Figure 4 charts the percentage of participants who responded that quality of life had either remained the same or improved over the past five years or would remain the same or improve in the next five years.

After a steep increase between 1984 and 1990, a period which marked the passing of the farm crisis, farmers have for the most part viewed their quality of life as either holding steady or improving (figure 4). Of particular importance is the stability of past quality of life and slight increase in predictions for the future between 2006 and 2010. These numbers indicate that on the whole, farm families maintained their quality of life despite the deep recession and several major weather events, and remain optimistic about the future.

Population loss

More than three-quarters of Iowa’s counties have lost population since 1980, and half have seen their populations drop by more than 10 percent. Counties that rely the most on farming have generally been the hardest hit, with a number of Iowa’s farm-dependent counties losing 20 percent or more of their

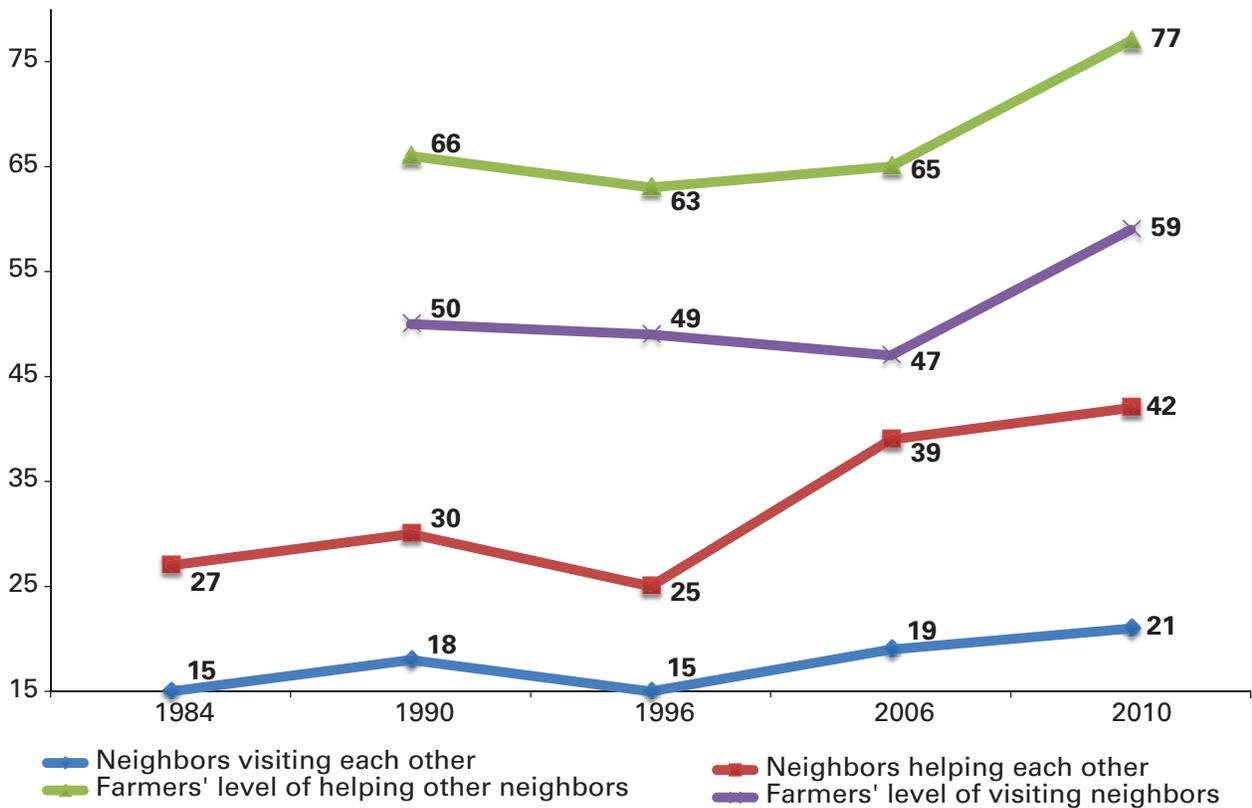


Figure 3. Change in neighboring behavior over last 10 years, 1984–2010 (percent stayed the same or increased)

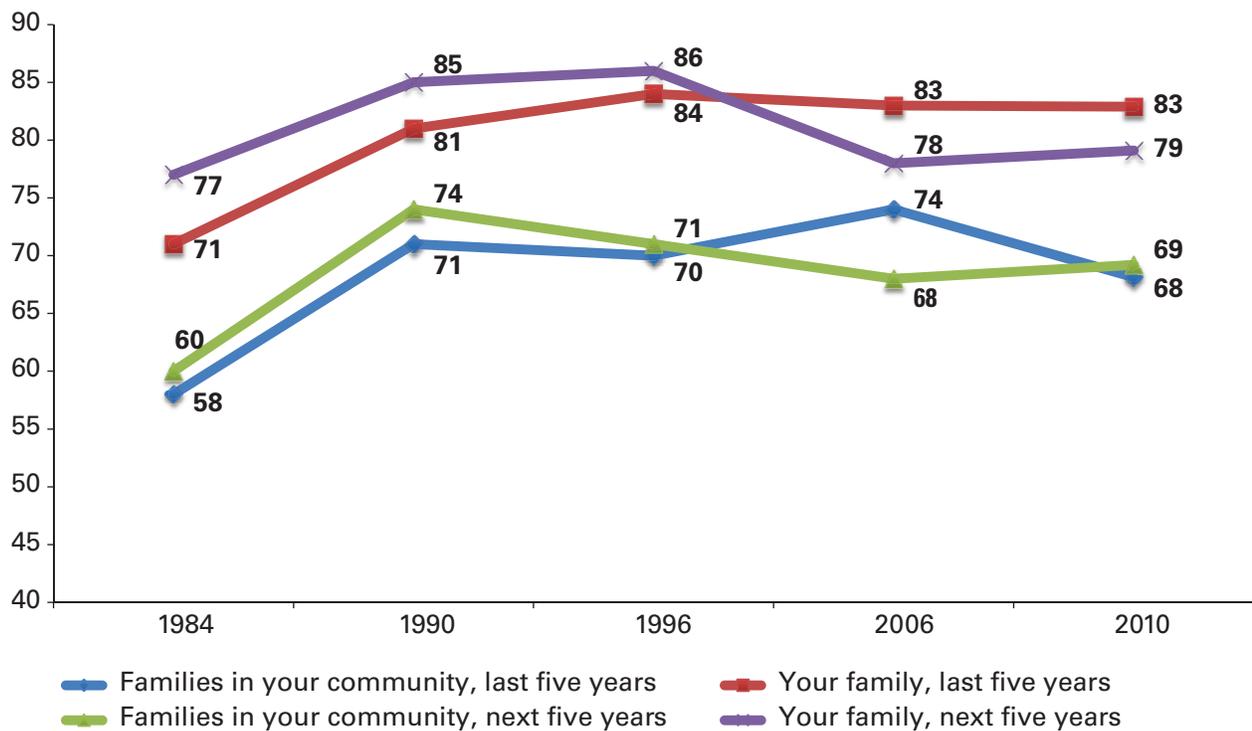


Figure 4. Quality of life, percent remained the same or improved 1984–2010

population between 1980 and 2000. Over that same period, the rural population that lives on farms declined from nearly 400,000 to under 200,000. While this is a long-term trend, population loss, especially the loss of young, educated people from Iowa’s rural areas—often referred to as the “rural brain drain”—has garnered increasing attention over the last several years.

This year’s Farm Poll included two sets of questions to explore farmers’ perspectives related to population decline, and especially the loss of young people from rural areas. The first asked farmers to evaluate several key issues related to population decline. The second set of questions focused on the loss of young people to other areas and examines reasons underlying that out-migration.

The first set of questions asked farmers to rate the degree to which a series of population-related issues are a concern in their communities on a five-point scale ranging from “not a concern at all” (1) to “a major concern” (5). The highest-rated issues were directly related to the out-migration of younger community members. Three items were rated at 3.5 on the five-

point scale: inability to attract or retain young people; loss of the brightest young people to other places; and, an increasing proportion of older residents due to out-migration of young people (figure 5). Following in order of level of concern were the loss of young people to urban areas (3.4) and declining viability of local schools (3.4). Interestingly, general population decline, while it did rate as a concern, was rated lowest at 3.3 on the five-point scale. This finding suggests that overall population decline is less of a concern in rural communities than the loss of young people.

Farm Poll participants were provided a list of 11 statements about factors that may be considered potential contributors to rural out-migration among Iowa’s youth and young adults. They were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement, “about the reasons that young people leave,” on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Analyses focused only on the farmers who indicated that this phenomenon is a major concern in their communities. Only responses from farmers who selected four or five on one or both of the five-point concern scales for the items, “the loss of young people

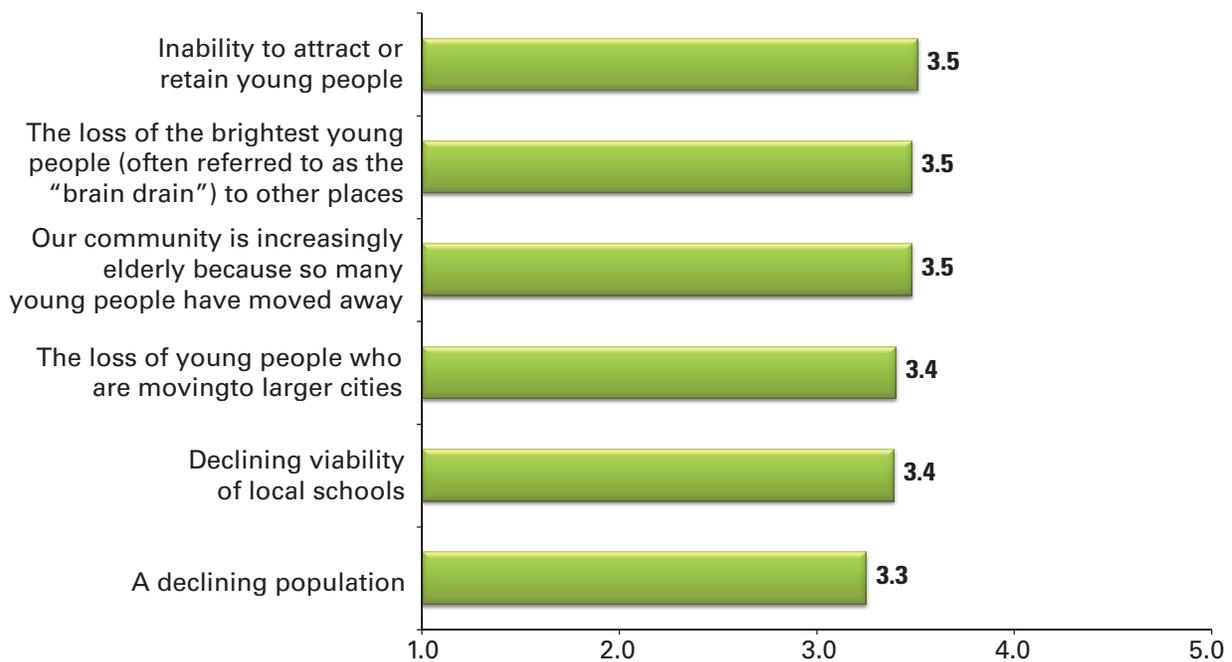


Figure 5. Concern about population loss

who are moving to larger cities,” and, “the loss of the brightest young people to other places,” were analyzed.

Not surprisingly, economic factors topped the list of potential reasons for leaving. Ninety-five percent of farmers agreed or strongly agreed that young people have left their communities because larger communities offer higher paying jobs, and 94 percent agreed that a lack of good jobs in their communities has contributed to young people leaving (figure 6). Two other statements received levels of agreement greater than 50 percent: “There is really nothing here to retain young families,” (60 percent); and, “Young people are no longer interested in farming and rural living,” (51 percent).

Several other statements run counter to recent assertions about community actions and reactions to the out-migration of young rural Iowans. Some analysts suggest that many rural communities have done little to retain their young people, or have actively encouraged them, especially the best and brightest, to leave in search of opportunities elsewhere. On the whole, Farm Poll participants do not agree with those assessments. Only about one-third

of farmers agreed that community leaders do not appear to care about loss of the younger population, and just 32 percent agreed that their communities have ignored the issue (figure 6). Only thirty percent agreed that young people are encouraged to leave. Nevertheless, these levels of agreement with statements about inaction and/or explicit or implicit encouragement to leave indicate that a substantial minority of farmers believe that their communities have not done enough to retain young people.

Agritourism

The 2010 Farm Poll introduced three sets of questions about agritourism with the following text: “Agritourism is seen as a potential means to diversify and increase farm income and expand tourism income in rural areas. The term *agritourism* refers to the act of visiting a working farm or any agricultural, horticultural or agribusiness operation for the purpose of enjoyment, education, or active involvement in the activities of the farm or operation.” The questions that followed asked farmers about their current involvement in agritourism-related activities, potential interest in support for agritourism development, and opinions about

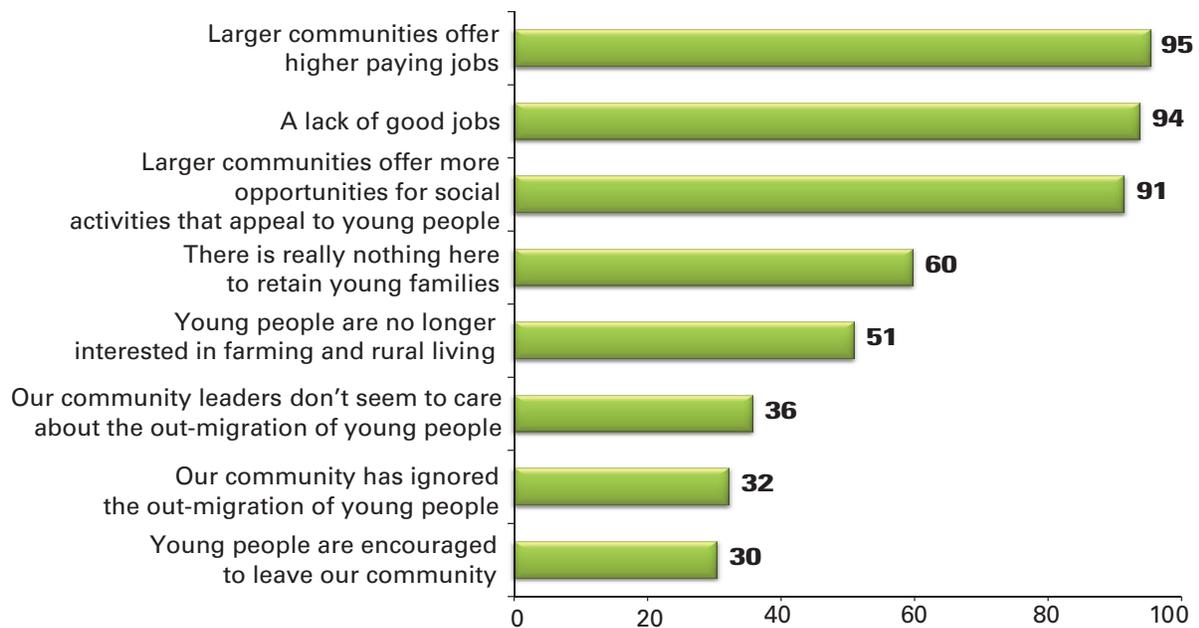


Figure 6. Reasons young people have left, percent agree or strongly agree

agritourism's prospects as an economic development tool in Iowa.

On-farm sales of farm products, hosting of farm tours for school-aged children, and agriculture-related entertainment such as corn mazes are some of the more common forms of agritourism enterprises. Few Iowa farmers engage in such activities. Twelve percent of Farm Poll participants reported that they direct market farm products, either on the farm or through farmers markets or similar outlets. A much smaller percentage (two percent) reported that they host educational tours on their farms. Slightly less than one percent host entertainment activities such as festivals or corn mazes.

While current involvement in agritourism activities appears to be low among Iowa farmers, Farm Poll participants expressed some support for further development of the sector. Forty-one percent of farmers agreed that support for agritourism should be increased (table 3). Forty percent agreed that agritourism could be a good strategy for involving more family members in an agricultural operation. Thirty-four percent agreed that Iowa farmers should get more involved in agritourism.

Three items gauged farmers' interest in taking part in agritourism support activities. Twenty-two percent expressed interest in receiving printed guides regarding operation of an agritourism enterprise, 20 percent agreed that they would like to learn how to develop or improve an agritourism operation, and 16 percent agreed that they would be interested in joining a group that provides support and opportunities to learn more about the topic (table 3). One question focused on liability concerns: 73 percent of farmers agreed that liability issues represent a barrier to agritourism development activities.

A third set of questions asked farmers to rate the potential that various types of agritourism might have to become a significant contributor to economic development in rural Iowa. Off-farm sales of products directly to the consumer through farmers markets and similar outlets was rated highly, with 80 percent of farmers indicating that this option had either some potential or high potential to be a significant source of economic activity (table 4). On-farm direct sales of unprocessed agricultural products such as you-pick fruit and vegetables and on-farm sales of value-added products manu-

Table 3. Agritourism, Part 1

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
	—Percentage—				
Liability issues are a barrier to agritourism.....	1	4	22	50	23
Iowa should increase support of agritourism ...	3	11	45	38	3
Agritourism could be a good strategy for including more family members in an agricultural operation	3	14	44	38	2
Iowa farmers should get more involved in agritourism.....	2	11	53	32	2
I would be interested in receiving printed materials about agritourism such as how-to and financial guides.....	9	35	34	20	2
I would be interested in learning about how to develop or improve an agritourism operation..	6	34	42	18	2
I would be interested in joining an agritourism working group that provides support and learning opportunities.....	6	38	40	14	2

factured on the farm such as jellies or wine were also rated highly. About three-quarters of farmers viewed each of these two alternatives as having some or high economic potential.

Fee-based outdoor recreation services such as fishing, hunting, or horseback riding followed in importance at 72 percent, and hospitality services such as bed and breakfasts were seen to have some or high economic potential by 68 percent of farmers (table 4). Educational experiences such as farm tours, cooking classes, or wine tastings, and entertainment-based activities such as festivals or corn mazes were endorsed at the lowest rates, yet were still seen as having some or high economic development potential by 59 and 54 percent of farmers, respectively. Taken together, these results suggest that agritourism has a prospective niche in the overall rural economic development landscape.

Access to Commerce and Services

As population has declined in many parts of Iowa over the last several decades, a consistent concern has been the degree to which rural communities can support public and private services and commercial enterprises. Access to critical services such as hospitals and physi-

cians and vital commercial businesses such as grocery stores have significant implications or quality of life in rural areas, particularly for areas with aging populations. Once each decade over the last thirty years, the Farm Poll has asked participants about the distances they travel one-way to reach many of these important suppliers of goods and services. This year marks the third time we have asked these questions, allowing us to track changes since 1990.

Average reported distances that farm families travel for goods and services have remained remarkably stable over time, with distances varying by no more than two miles for any category over the last 30 years (table 5). Travel to hospitals continues to be, at 17 miles, the farthest one-way distance that farmers report traveling for any of the selected services or commercial establishments. Machinery dealers and repair services are the second most distant, at 15 miles. Auto sales and repair services, physicians, lumber yards, grocery stores, and hardware stores are all between 10 and 15 miles distant on average. Banks, grain elevators, and libraries were all less than 10 miles distant.

It is important to recognize, however, that these are averages over the entire sample,

Table 4. Agritourism, part 2

	No Potential	Low Potential	Some Potential	High Potential	Uncertain
— Percentage —					
Off-farm direct sales of products at farmers' markets, fairs, or other special events.....	3	13	54	26	4
On-farm direct sales of raw products such as you-pick fruit and vegetables.....	4	18	53	22	4
On-farm direct sales of products manufactured on the farm such as jellies, cider, or wine	4	18	54	20	4
Outdoor recreation such as fishing, hunting, wildlife observation, or horseback riding for a fee	4	19	48	23	6
Hospitality services such as bed and breakfasts, farm and ranch stays, and guided tours.....	5	22	52	16	5
Educational experiences such as farm tours, cooking classes, or wine tastings.....	5	30	46	13	6
Entertainment such as festivals or corn mazes....	6	33	48	6	6

meaning that around half of farmers have to travel longer distances to reach these critical goods and services. Some travel much farther. For example, 10 percent of Farm Poll participants reported that the closest hospital is more than 30 miles away, and five percent reported that it was 40 or more miles away.

The Farm Poll survey also asked participants if they use the closest source for each of the types

of goods and services listed. The great majority of farmers reported that they use the closest source (table 5). This is important because money spent locally often “turns over” in local economies more times, meaning that money flows through multiple sites and hands. This can result in a multiplier effect that magnifies the economic impact of each dollar spent.

Table 5. Miles traveled for goods and services, one-way

	Miles, one-way			Percent using closest source, 2010
	1990	2000	2010	
Hospital.....	17	17	16	87
Machinery dealer/repair	14	15	15	87
Auto sales/repair.....	13	14	14	86
Physician/medical clinic	13	13	12	83
Lumber yard.....	9	11	11	90
Supermarket/grocery store	10	10	10	86
Hardware store	8	9	10	94
Bank	8	8	8	82
Grain elevator	7	7	7	91
Library.....	7	7	7	95

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