



Building Resilient Rural Communities: Belonging Through Bridging

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NSF Smart & Connected Communities Grants, #1736718 & #1952007

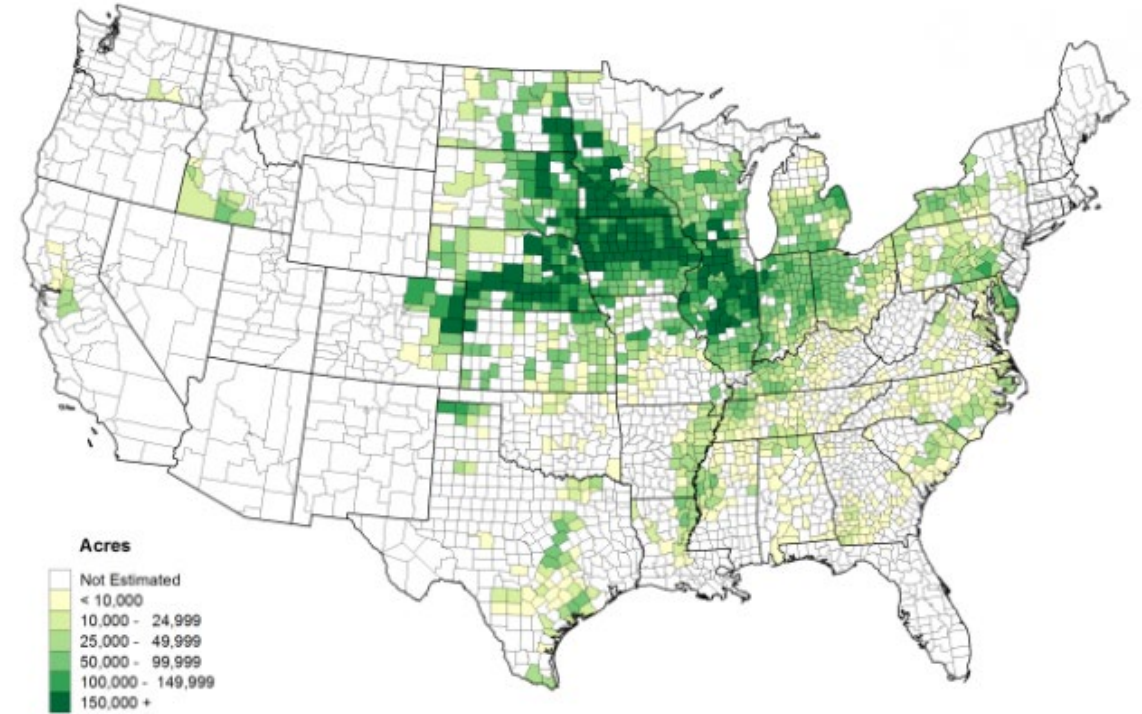
Overcoming the Rural Data Deficit to Improve Quality of Life and
Community Services in Smart & Connected Small Communities

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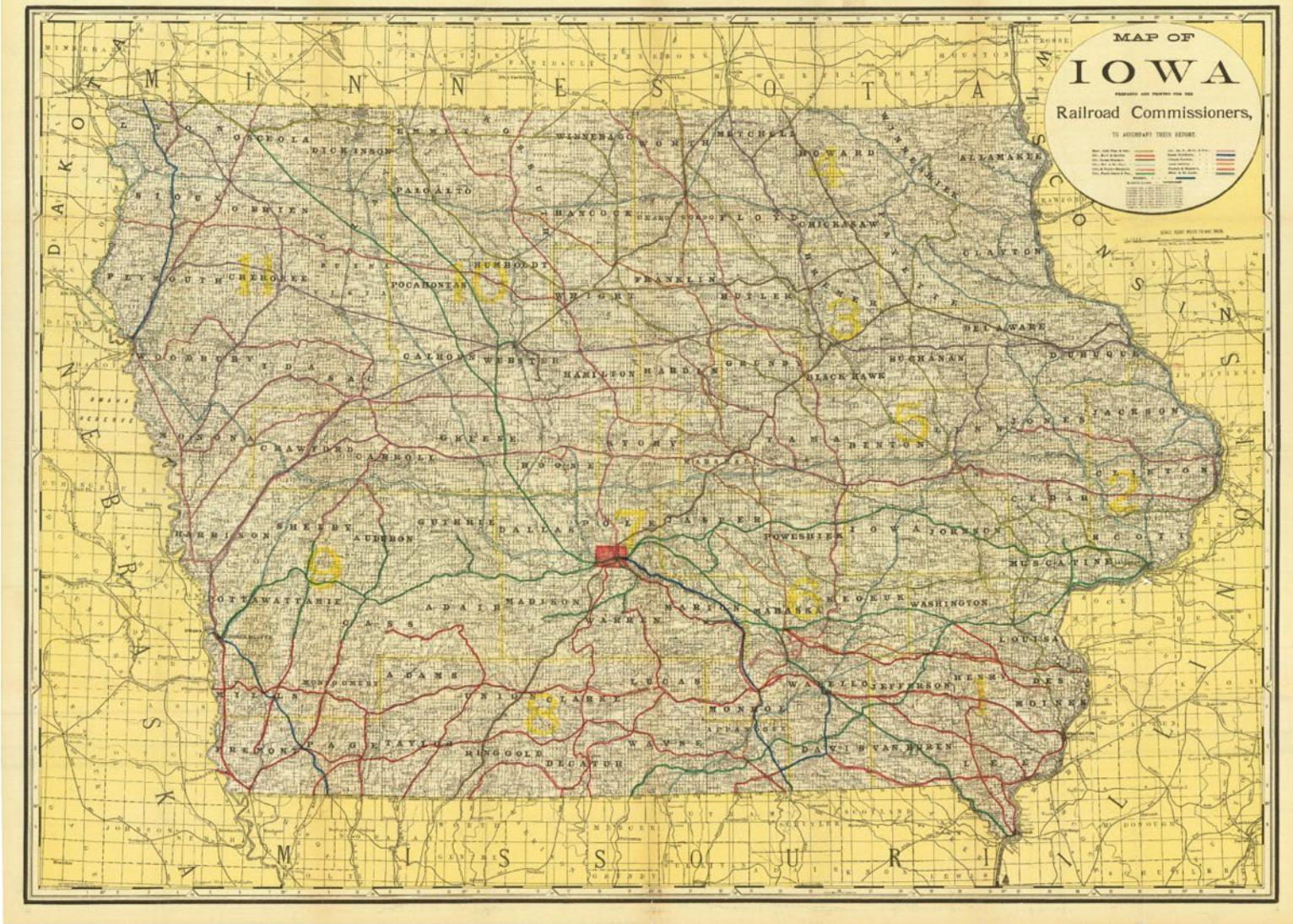
Acres of corn planted by county, 2022.

Source: USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service

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Railroad map, 1904 (one of the densest networks in the US at the time serving many small towns)

940 towns in Iowa, c. 2023

Smallest = Population 11 (As of 2024)

Largest = 211,034 (As of 2022)

Approximately 50% of towns in Iowa have fewer than 500 residents

All passenger rail service is gone other than one line through southern Iowa on Amtrak (national rail service)



Global and economic happenings:

1950s-1960s

Increased mechanization and inputs,
less need for labor

1970s

Oil crisis, rising costs, economic
recession

1980s

Farm crisis, high interest rates, debt
burden, low commodity prices,
overproduction = bankruptcies,
foreclosures, consolidation

Farmers and supporters rally in 1983 in Iowa, seeking price supports for crops and a moratorium on farm foreclosures. Source: Bettmann Archive



In 2023, the US Surgeon General released an 82-page report declaring an epidemic of loneliness.

How does this affect Iowa's rural communities?

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/30/opinion/loneliness-epidemic-america.html>

<https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/05/03/new-surgeon-general-advisory-raises-alarm-about-devastating-impact-epidemic-loneliness-isolation-united-states.html>

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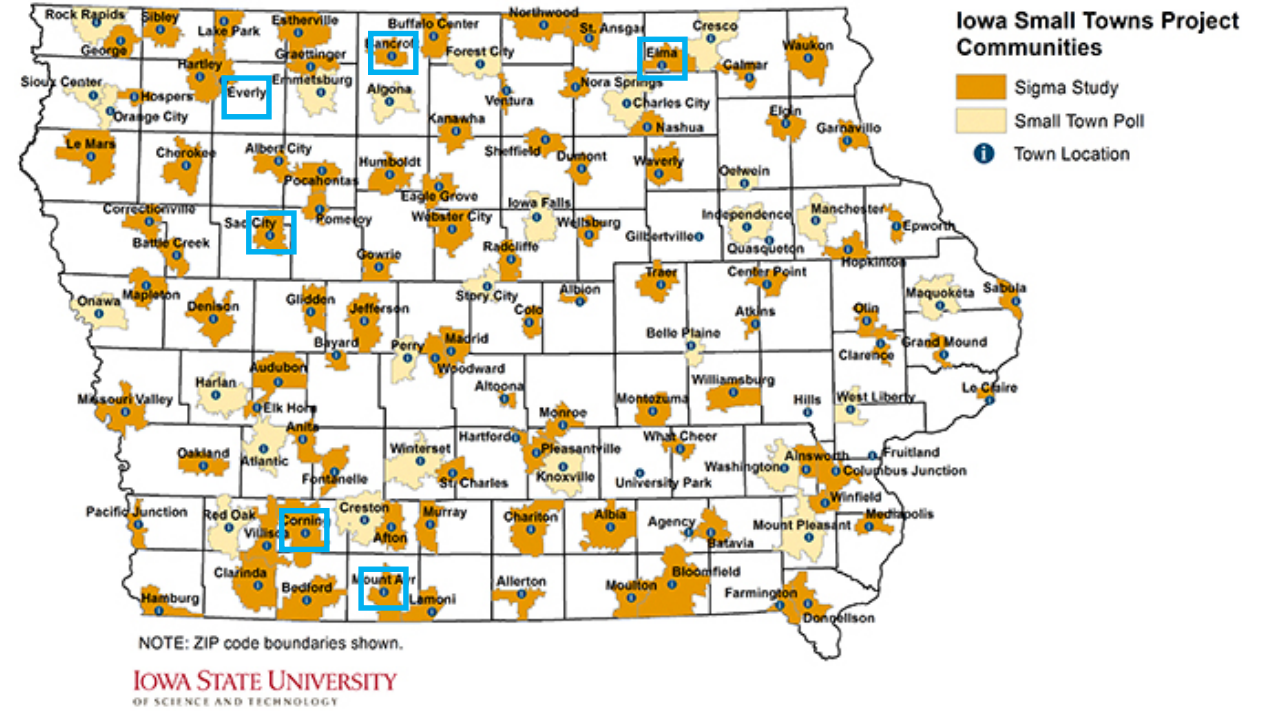
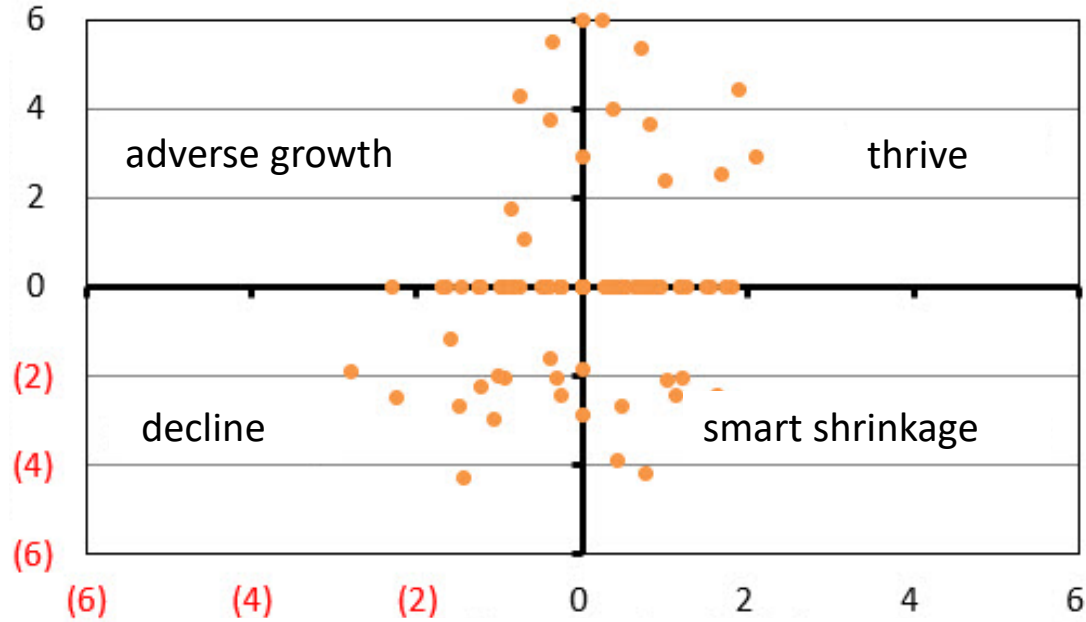
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Growth-Shrinkage by Quality of Life 1994-2014



Rural Smart Shrinkage Project
Began in 2019

Iowa Small Towns Project
99 towns in the Iowa Small Town Poll
Quadrant analysis of the poll data.
<https://smalltowns.soc.iastate.edu/>

Collaborating Towns: Bancroft, Corning,
Elma, Everly, Mt. Ayr, Sac City

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Bancroft, IA (pop. 699)



Sac City, IA (pop. 2,063)



Mt. Ayr, IA (pop. 1,623)

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New paradigms:

Most communities have been conditioned to think that growth is a sign of a healthy community. **Our research moves away from this growth mentality.**

The shrinkage of rural populations in agricultural regions cannot be fixed in most places because these towns grew to serve a pre-industrialized agricultural economy.

Towns in Iowa will continue to shrink, and this is not something that will change much (maybe a small gain every once in awhile, but generally trending slowly downward).

Despite this, depopulation and decline are NOT mutually exclusive.

Communities need a mindset of acceptance and adaptation to this shrinkage. Our research says a community should focus on Quality of Life (QoL) instead of its size.

We are learning from communities doing better than expected in managing perceptions of quality of life within the context of this population loss. This is called Rural Smart Shrinkage.

We have observed in the group of rural shrink smart communities:

1. relationships, big and small, develop **a sense of belonging** for people. “The need to belong is a powerful, fundamental, and extremely pervasive motivation.” (Baumeister and Leary, 1995)
2. **trust** can be acquired/cultivated/strengthened among new people = cultivate *bridging* social capital by building and maintaining relationships with people beyond your immediate family and friend network.
3. **purposeful collective action** is when communities act together to identify and address problems = through acting together people feel valued.
4. economic development as a typical response is expensive and has a poor likelihood of success. Individual communities cannot control national and global economic trends that encourage out-migration from sparsely populated areas.

The priority of rural Iowa communities should be building social capital through collective action =

Building Belonging Through Bridging

This framework reorients our focus as researchers, and the goals of our collaborating towns, away from an economic development product-oriented approach toward a relational process-oriented approach.

A relational process-oriented approach is the most effective way to maintain or grow a perception of high QoL in rural towns while adapting to decreasing population through rural smart shrinkage.

Acknowledging the Good

The How Matters

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Measuring the Curriculum

Designing a simple 3-question survey with open-ended answers to understand:

What the participants heard during the workshop

Question 1 – Describe the moment of the workshop that felt the most impactful today.

How they interpreted what they heard during the workshop

Question 2 – Describe the idea that resonated most with you today.

What they took away from the workshop

Question 3 – Describe how this workshop will affect your practices of community going forward.

	A	B	C	D
1		Question 1	Question 2	Question 3
2	Participant 1	Networking and seeing the list of where we need to bridge. * Work on diversification	How we need to remember to be inclusive of other's interests and that we still have work to do. * Embrace art more. * Create flyer that lets people know how to volunteer. * Have bridgable places (spatial) to network and gather (outward)	Make sure we include people that don't necessarily feel invited or haven't been invited.
3	Participant 2	Group discussions ideas	Getting more involved	Take more interest in what is happening here
4	Participant 3	The presenters were very informative. They were great listeners and communicators . Groups discussed the topics with interesting inputs.	My involvement in the community. What can I do to help bridge and not be a barrier?	Being more positive and active
5	Participant 4	Bridging - Not so much with in the community but now I can use it across our business as well to lessen that gap. Getting to (know) the rest of the community and their functions	What we need to work on to build that gap (spatial)	Get more active - How to promote volunteers at work to get them more involved.
6	Participant 5	Difference between bonding and bridging	Finding new ways of bridging. What??	Publicizing our positives. Bridge more projects - find opportunities. How do we embrace our increasing diversity?
7	Participant 6	I really thought the bridging section was great. Many great ideas .	Creating networks and improving social capital.	It will increase my collaboration with others.
8	Participant 7	The realization that we are leaving MASSIVE resources on the table by not including or considering the churches and schools. - Realising that class or socioeconomic divides have been kind of an invisible five in the Sac, and now that I'm aware of it, I can see the interpersonal problem and lack of ownership this causes.	Putting a name (naming) to the concepts of bonding and b	Bonding, bridging, and belonging: All of those nebulous connections now have classifications in my mind and I will now be able to develop individual relationships and connective bonding plans based on those classifications.
9	Participant 8	Drawing the map made me really think about the community and belonging.	Bridging	The workshop made me think about the things that we automatically do, how we can invite others to participate in activities in the future to continue to grow.

(1) Describe the moment from the workshop that felt most impactful today.

- THE REALIZATION THAT WE ARE LEAVING MASSIVE RESOURCES ON THE TABLE BY NOT INCLUDING OR CONSIDERING THE CHURCHES AND SCHOOLS
- REALIZING THAT CLASS OR SOCIOECONOMIC DIVIDES HAVE BEEN KIND OF AN INVISIBLE ISSUE IN SAC, AND NOW THAT I'M AWARE OF IT, I CAN SEE THE INTERPERSONAL PROBLEMS AND LACK OF OWNERSHIP THAT CAUSES

(2) Describe the idea that most resonated with you today.

My involvement in the community.
What can I do to help bridge & not be a barrier.

(3) Describe how this workshop will affect your practices of community going forward.

The workshop made me think about the things that we automatically do & how we can invite others to participate in activities in the future to continue to grow.

<https://ruralshrinksmart.org/>

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