

Lessons From Rural Iowa

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The logo for Iowa State University, featuring a red background with a yellow and white curved line above the text.

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Today's Presentation

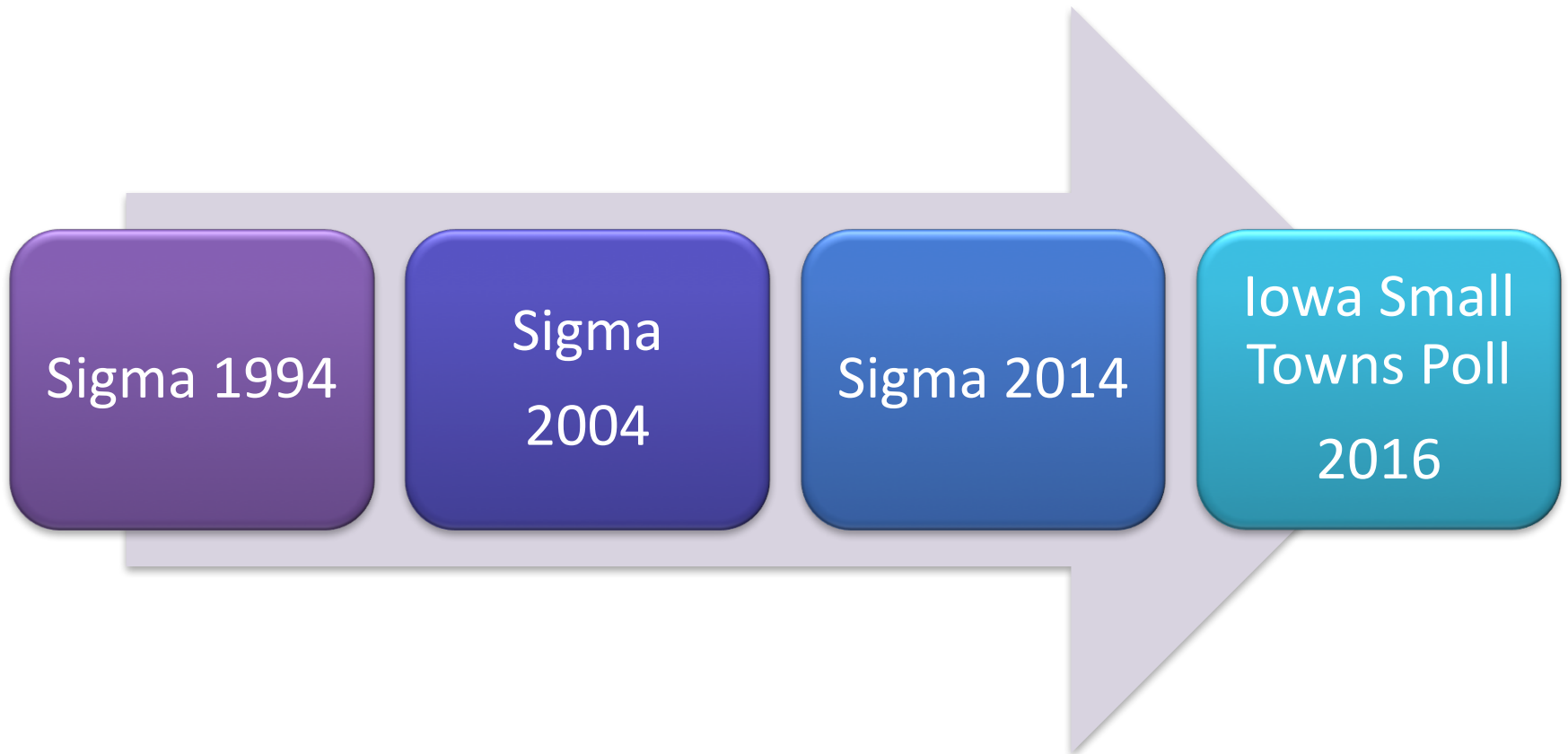
- Background: Iowa Small Towns Project
- Trends in Iowa 1994-2014
- Deep dive into trends
- Implications and applications for WI

A photograph of a snowy street in a small town. The street is covered in snow and slush. Several cars are parked along the side of the road. In the background, there are several brick buildings with multiple stories. One building has a sign that says "FISHING TACKLE". Another building has a sign that says "DAVIS". There are also some street signs, including a blue sign with a yellow arrow pointing up and a blue sign with a white wheelchair symbol. The word "BACKGROUND" is written in large, bold, black letters across the middle of the image.

BACKGROUND

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Iowa Small Towns Project



What is Sigma?

“Sigma” is a *mythical town* and can be anywhere in rural Iowa ...

“**Sigma** illustrates the current status of Iowa’s communities ... It is *created* using information provided by citizens Sigma is based on resident’s ratings of their own communities”

Vern Ryan



About Sigma



- ISU has been collecting data on the *same* 99 small Iowa *communities* for 20+ years (1994, 2004, 2014)
- No other study examines community life for such large number of small towns for over two decades
- Reveals unique insights into changes in small towns in Iowa and generally the Midwest
- Next data collection scheduled for 2024.

About Sigma: Case Studies

- Summer of 2015 – case studies on amenities, social capital and networks in 6 communities: Cherokee, Donnellson, Epworth, Hamburg, St. Ansgar, Webster City
- Focus on local leadership, organizational networks, social capital, amenities and *quality of life*



Iowa Small Towns Poll?

- Continuation of Sigma, but more frequent
- Includes same 99 communities plus 26
- Panel design (compensated) – can survey same respondents every few years
- Similar questions for continuity, but also topical issues

Why Small Towns?

- Iowa and Wisconsin states of small towns
- Iowa and Wisconsin counties predominantly nonmetro
- Nonmetro is a “residual” category
- Most research focuses on metro areas

*Besser, Terry. 2016. *Leadership Patterns, Civic Engagement and Quality of Life Amenities in Small Iowa Towns*. Iowa State University. Department of Sociology.

Challenges Identified

- Farm economies
- Declining industries
- Population change
- Aging infrastructure
- Declining revenues
- Shrinking labor supply
- Natural and economic shocks





TRENDS

Changes:



- Local church attendance
- Local shopping
- Sense of community
- Community attachment
- Civic engagement
- Involvement in local organizations

Changes:



- Importance of social ties relative to jobs
- Quality of local government services
- Improvement in quality of life

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APPLAUSE

Changes:



- Lack of strong feelings about local leadership
- Can still count on each other, but not as much
- Most popular meeting places – gas station convenience stores

Should We Be Concerned?

On one hand ...

- Rural and small town economies important to states
- Trends can impact quality of life and socioeconomic conditions in rural communities

On the other ...

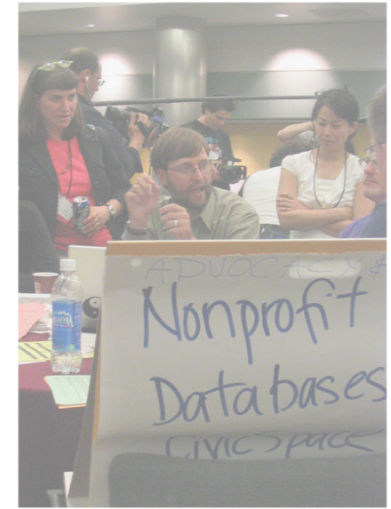
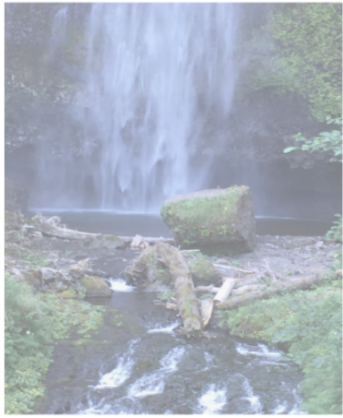
- Quality of life is improving
- We are seeing problems that can be *addressed* within our communities

So ... ?



- Sigma facing challenges but opportunities too.
- Sigma emphasizes importance of *local government, private sector, non-profit and **service organizations*** in creating quality of life and well-being.



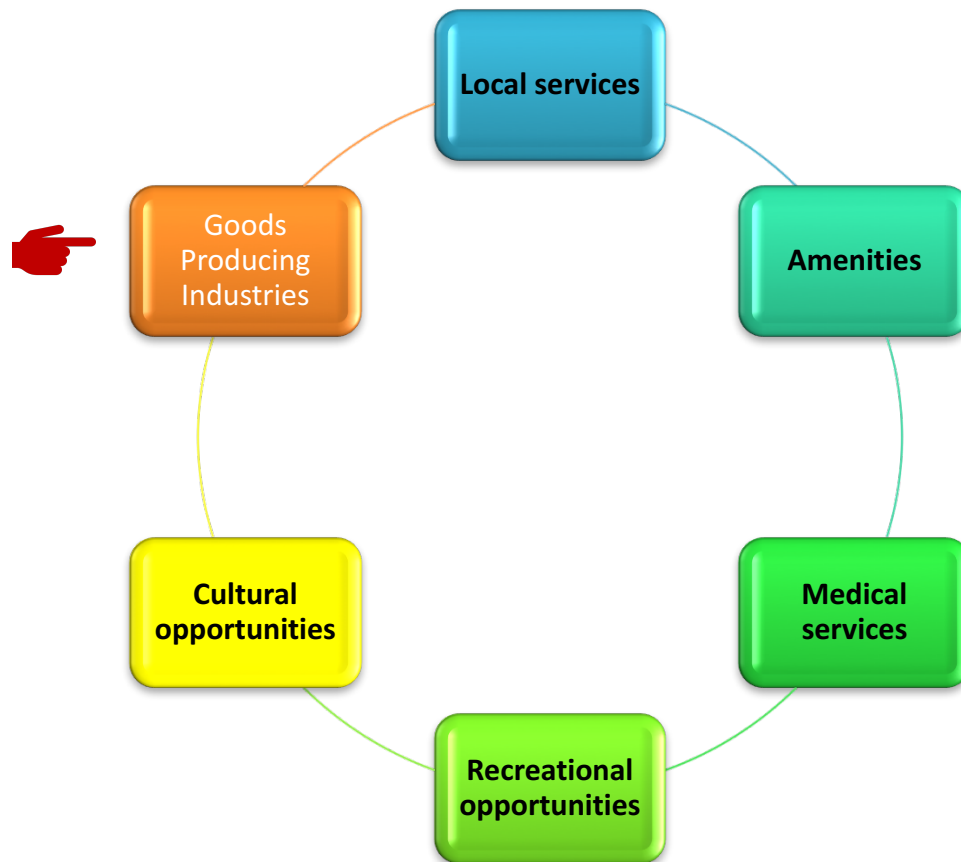


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Rural Quality of Life?



What is Happening?

- Quality of life improving in *most* Iowa small towns – even more so towns with more than 1500 people
- **Communities with higher quality of life tend to have more stable and growing populations**



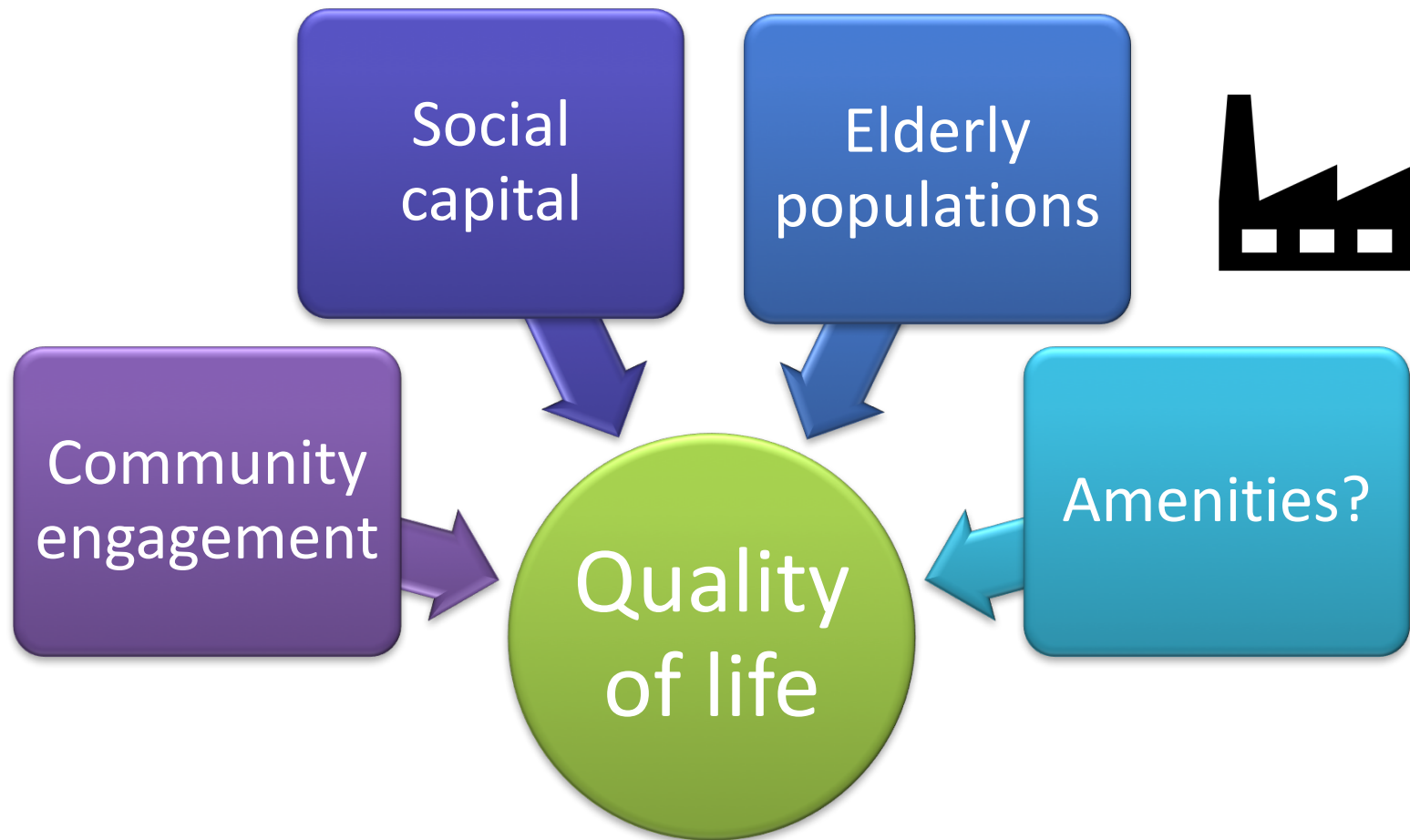
Drivers of Quality of Life

In small towns:

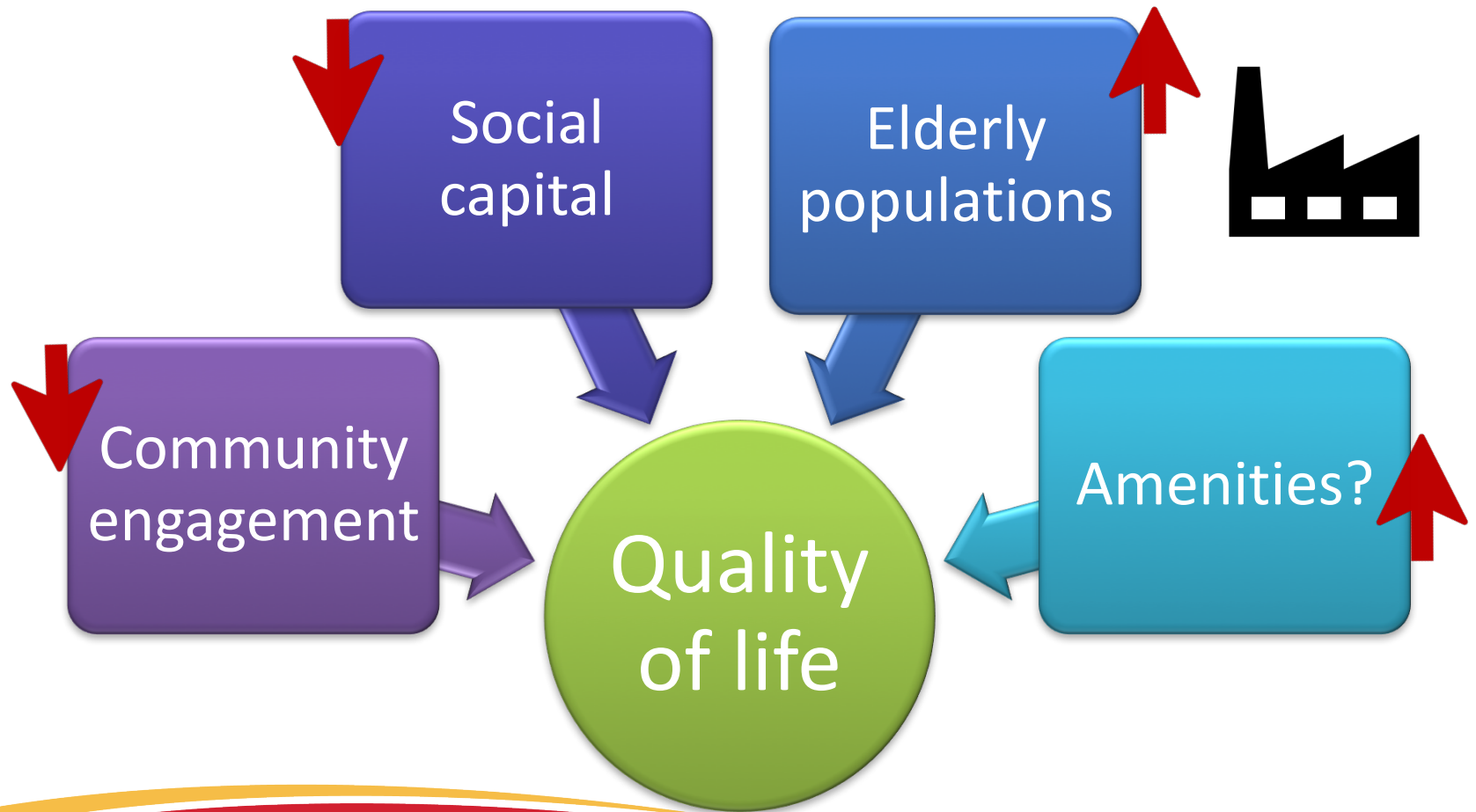
- Increased civic/community engagement
- Higher social capital (social ties)
- More elderly populations
- Jobs in goods producing industries
- Amenities

Sources: Besser, Terry. 2016. *Leadership Patterns, Civic Engagement and Quality of Life Amenities in Small Iowa Towns*. Peters, David. 2017. *What Drives Quality of Life in Small Towns*. www.soc.iastate.edu/SmallTowns

Drivers of Quality of Life



Drivers of Quality of Life



IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

Sigma certainly
facing challenges but
*... where there are
challenges, there
are opportunities.*

IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

Sigma certainly facing challenges but
... where there are challenges, there are opportunities.

Building a foundation in community engagement is the first step in the process of turning challenges into opportunities.

Community Engagement and Social Capital



Sources: Besser 2009, Liu and Besser 2003, Putnam 1993, 2000, Wilson & Musick 1997, Rice 2001, Deller & Deller 2010, Messner et al. 2004, Crowe 2008, Tiepoh et al. 2004)

Building Social Capital

Research shows that:

Community
engagement
and leadership

Creates
repeated
interaction,
networks and
social capital

Increases
community
capacity to
address
challenges

Can contribute
to civic, social
and economic
outcomes

Building social capital can be a deliberate process

Building Social Capital

Increases community capacity to address challenges:

Civic engagement and involvement, community attachment, local patronage

Can contribute to civic, social and economic outcomes



Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.....

Margaret Mead

Thank you!

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