



Getting Smart About “Shrink Smart”

*Presented to the
Rural School Advocates of Iowa Annual Meeting
on October 17, 2023*

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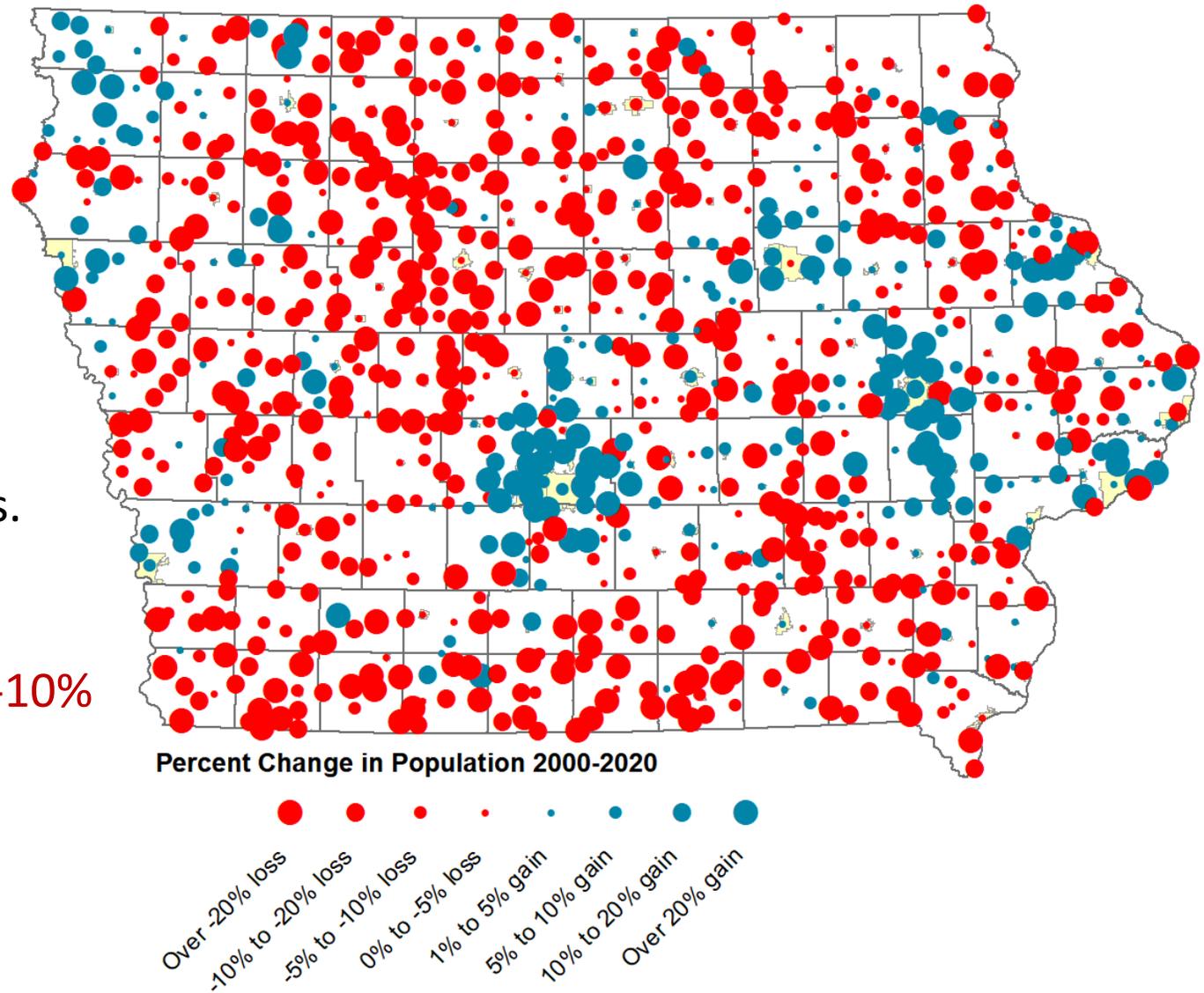
*Funded by NSF SCC #21952007
USDA AFRI #2014-68006-21827*



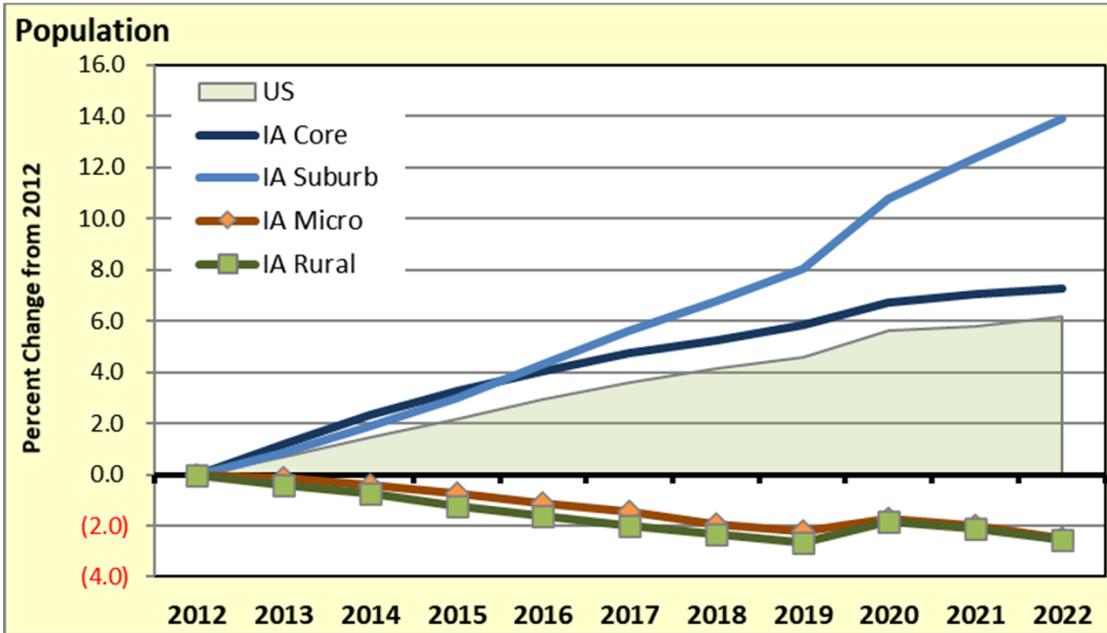
941 towns and cities.

→ 87% under 2,500

→ 52% shrunk over -10%

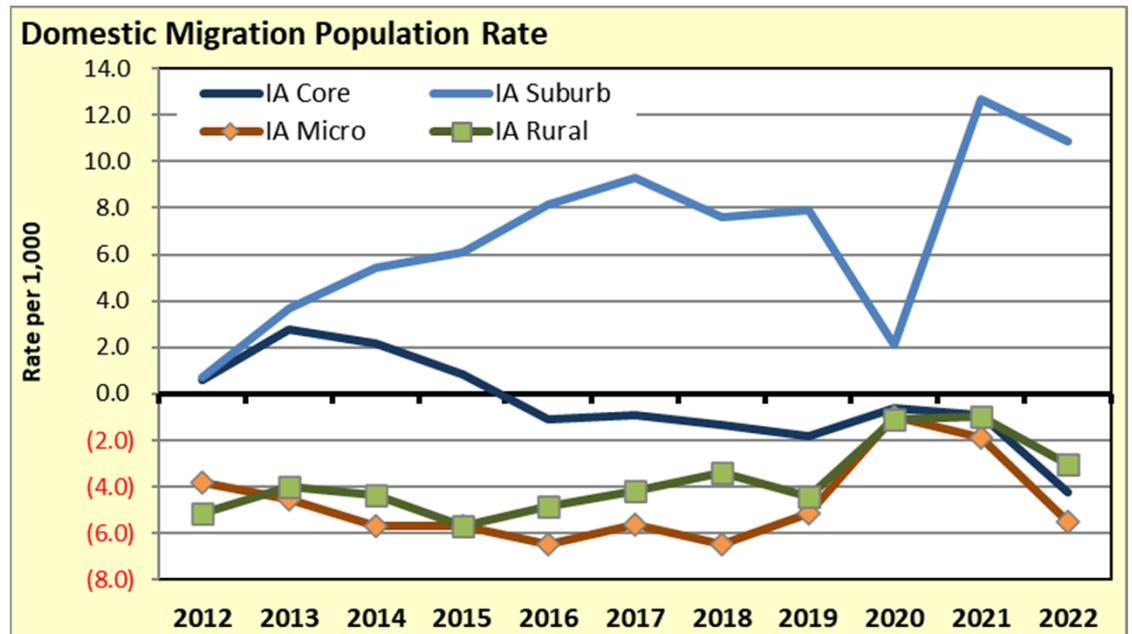


The Problem



Rural decline
Metro boom

Rural Iowa's biggest export?
Our people!





You can lose population, but still thrive!

- Population loss is a process to be managed, NOT a problem.
- Quality of life is partly within YOUR control.

Beware economic development as a typical response!

- Poor likelihood of success. Expensive.
- Might do everything right, but limited opportunities and fierce competition.

Shrinking smartly does NOT prevent future growth!

- Keeping current residents first step towards growth.
- Attracting *workers* more important than attracting *jobs*.

“Smartness” about community resiliency

- Social capital helps your town deal with ANY issue.
- Building your town’s *entrepreneurial* social infrastructure.



Data ...

- Iowa Small Towns Project 1994-2014. Decennial Census data 1990-2010
- n=90 small towns in Iowa (500-5,000 people, not adjacent to large city)
- Structured interviews in 9 towns (5 smart, 4 declining)

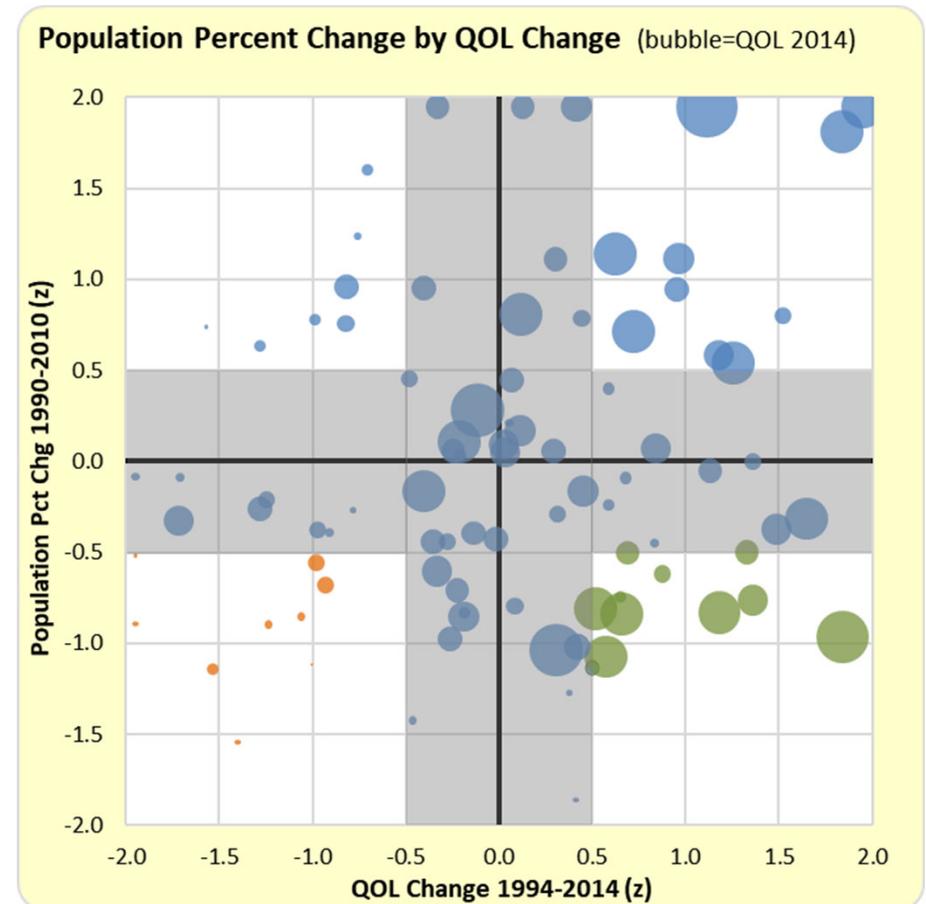
Measures ...

- “Shrinkage” = pct chg in population
- “Smartness” = chg in subjective QoL
(jobs, medical, childcare, senior services, local govt, K12 schools, housing)

Why subjective QoL?

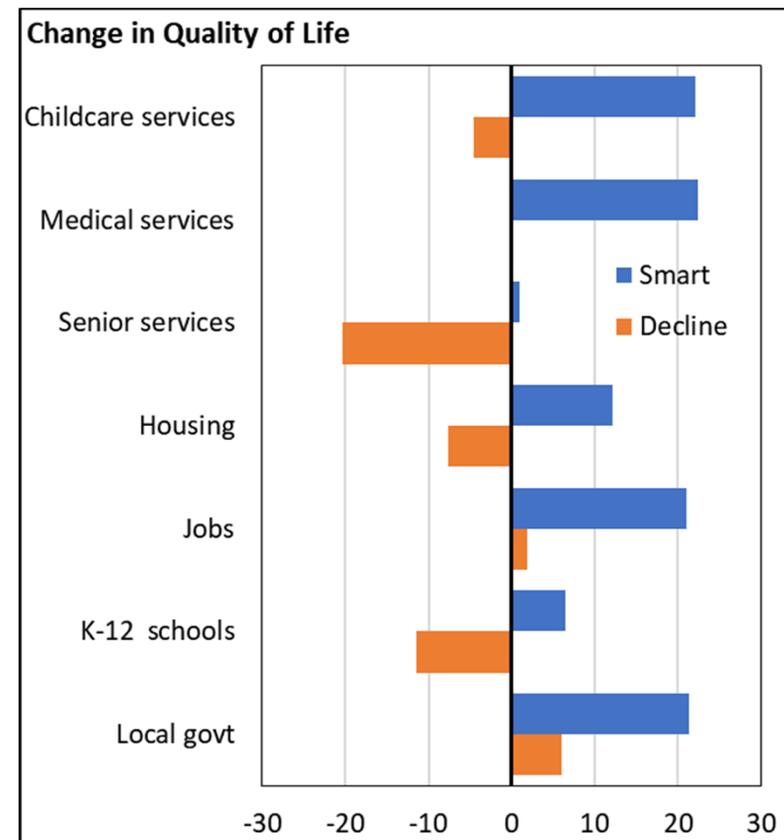
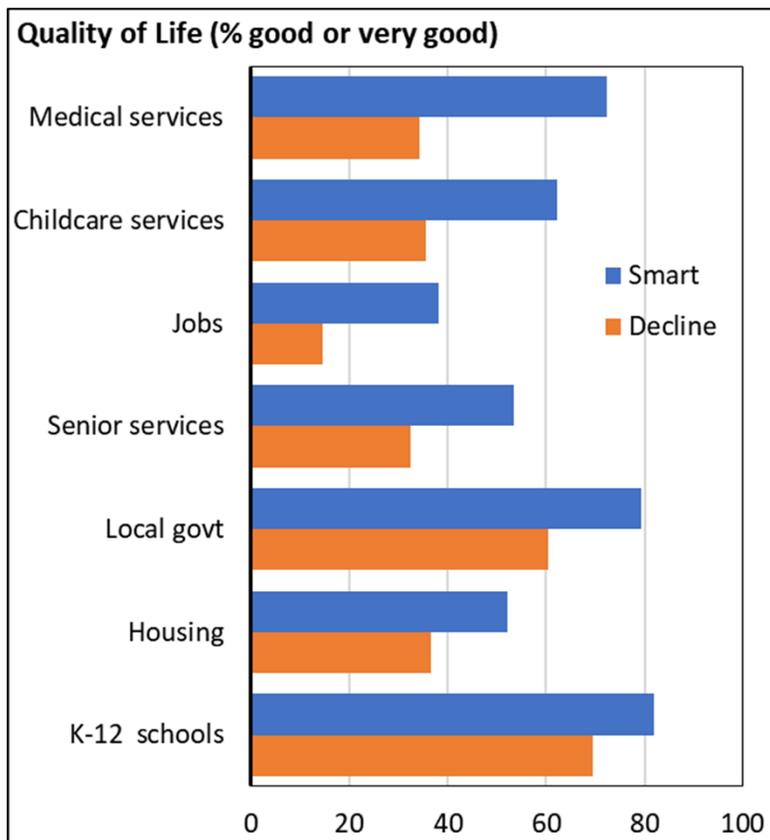
- Perceptions matter more to people.
- *Think healthcare and schools*

Next wave in 2024!





“Smart” shrinking towns have high and growing QoL ...



... but what makes them “smart”?



Smartness not due to demography or geography ...

- Similar population, similar rates of decline
- No differences in age, race, or education
- Not near large cities, major highways, nor natural amenities

Smartness partly due to economics ...

- More employment participation
- More full-time full-year jobs
- Work closer to home
- More goods-producing jobs
- Fewer retail & services jobs
- Same MHHI, but lower poverty
- Poor did not become poorer, and rich did not get richer



What is “smartness”? Entrepreneurial Social Infrastructure!

Social capital ...

- Trusting and supportive
- Openness and tolerance

Civic mindedness ...

- More participation
- Support for projects

Connected ...

- Local and outside groups

Leadership ...

- Shared vs. authoritarian or laissez-faire styles

Confidence ...

- Town has a future, is worth the time and investment



Ethic of local giving

- *Town of 600, 4 foundations with assets of \$750k.*

Projects led by community groups, not government

- *Local govt doesn't help, but doesn't stand in the way. Active orgs.*

Openness of leadership ...

- *Younger ones take charge, older ones write checks.*
- *Leaders share credit and mentor upcoming leaders. Spaces for multiple leaders.*
- *Leaders are champions AND conveners ... not the "Chamber" model.*

Finding the "right" leaders and making it happen ...

- *Businesses allowing leaders on "company time". City paying to get good staff.*

Volunteering for 2023 versus 1953 ...

- *Social media, web signups, shorter shifts, childcare and food.*

Trying new ideas

- *Failure OK. Odd ideas get discussed ... World's Popcorn Capital.*



Socializing

- *Lots of local events. Social media. Known as an active town.*

Focus on needs within their control

- *Daycares, fitness centers, senior transport. Avoids typical econ dev.*
- *Repurpose “symbolic” buildings.*

Strong identity

- *Source of pride to have better QoL than larger towns. Underdogs!*

Not always been a “smart” town

- *For some it happened last 5 years. Took 2-3 people who cared.*
- *For others they have always been a “progressive” town.*

No one is coming to save our town

- *Accepted it was up to them to save the community.*

“Success” based on subjective NOT objective measures

- *Young families moving in. High school Mariachi band. New vibe in town!*



How can K-12 schools get involved?

Challenges ...

- Boundaries. Politics. Leadership.

Opportunities ...

- Iowans love their schools! Important part of QoL.
- Engaging young people to be future leaders.
- Tackling workforce issues.

Thank you!

Feel free to contact me

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