

# 'Smart shrinkage' in small towns driven by strong social infrastructure, research shows

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As small Iowa towns continue to lose population, a strong social infrastructure – rather than economic or physical factors – determines whether residents report greater quality of life, according to new

research out of Iowa State University.

Over the past year, an Iowa State research team studied the 99 communities in the Iowa Small Town Poll to figure out why some towns losing population are "shrinking smart," while others are not.

The [Iowa Small Town Poll](#) collects data on 99 towns across Iowa that had populations between 500 and 10,000 in 1990. The research team applied different frameworks to the data to determine whether smart shrinking towns have higher levels of "entrepreneurial social infrastructure," which describes a town's collective action, ability to mobilize resources and diverse, inclusive networks.

The team includes Kimberly Zarecor, associate professor of architecture; David Peters, associate professor of sociology; Sara Hamideh, assistant professor of community and regional planning; Eric Davis, assistant professor of computer science; and Marwan Ghandour, professor of architecture at Louisiana State University. The results of the first phase of their research are published in the peer-reviewed Journal of Rural Studies.

Their National Science Foundation grant has been extended through next summer to complete work on the second and third phases of the project, which focus on using data science and visualization strategies to understand more about smart shrinkage and developing strategies to share with small communities.

Through their research, the team defines towns in four ways:

- Smart shrinking towns are losing population but gaining in [quality](#) of life measures
- Declining towns are losing both population and quality of life
- Thriving towns are gaining in both population and quality of life

- Adverse growing towns are gaining in population but losing in quality of life.

"Instead of seeing population loss as a problem, we need to start looking at it as a process that needs to be managed," Peters said.

After analyzing survey data collected since 1994 and traveling Iowa to do interviews and site visits in small towns, the team's research shows several key qualities of a community that lead its residents to report a better quality of life – even if their town is losing population.

- Residents of smart shrinking towns are more civically engaged and have stronger social networks.
- These residents tend to say their towns are more trusting, supportive and tolerant.
- Smart shrinking towns have more private and public investment.
- Residents say their leaders work on behalf of everyone and newcomers are welcomed as leaders, showing strong "bridging social capital," a term that refers to how people connect across society.

Smart shrinking towns tend to have a group of community members who not only work to improve their towns, but are influential in mobilizing others and mentoring the next generation of community leaders.

"Population in these towns will continue to go down because of factors outside the community's control," Zarecor said. "All of these towns are there because of 19th-century family farms, and they're part of a 100-year changing economy. It's not about reversing population loss; it's about working within that context to stabilize and improve quality of life."

While a strong social infrastructure is the key ingredient in smart

shrinking towns, the researchers also found some economic differences between smart shrinking and declining towns. Smart shrinking towns have greater shares of residents working full-time jobs in manufacturing, construction and other goods-producing industries with solid, steady wages. That is compared to growing shares of service and leisure jobs in declining and adverse growing towns.

Because the towns described as shrinking smart vary geographically, the researchers say gains in quality of life likely have nothing to do with proximity to urban amenities.

The team's work also involves outreach across Iowa and the Midwest, including presentations to the Iowa League of Cities, Iowa Ideas Conference, Midwest Big Data Hub and more. Their research is ongoing, with additional papers planned for peer-reviewed journals in the coming months.

"Focusing on [social infrastructure](#) doesn't cost a lot of money, but it does require leaders and a community that is willing to follow its leaders," Zarecor said. "The results of our work are for any small town, whether they're gaining or losing [population](#)."

Provided by Iowa State University

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