

# **An Evaluation of Iowa's Rural Main Street Program**

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## **Abstract**

Despite its popularity, the Main Street Program has been subjected to little empirical research. This paper evaluates the economic benefits associated with the Rural Main Street Iowa program. This particular Main Street program is unique in that it targets very small communities with populations less than 5,000. The findings indicate that the Rural Main Street Iowa program has made a positive economic contribution to participating communities. Participants in the Rural Main Street Iowa program have experienced a degree of economic stability as indicated by their pull factors as well as a slight increase in the number of firms.

Keywords: Main Street Program, downtown revitalization, economic contribution, economic stability, pull factor

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## **1.0 Introduction**

In 1977, the National Trust for Historic Preservation launched the Main Street Program. The program consists of a comprehensive revitalization strategy designed to stabilize and improve traditional downtowns throughout the country. The Main Street program, which consists of a copyrighted four-point approach, combines community organization with promotion, economic restructuring and historic preservation. The program has become immensely popular. As of 2009 over 2,000 communities in 43 states have participated in the program (National Trust Main Street Center, 2009). One state that adopted the Main Street program with much enthusiasm was Iowa. One of the reasons why this program has been so strongly embraced by the State of Iowa is that it was specifically designed for smaller communities with populations between 5,000 and 50,000.

In 1985, the Iowa Legislature adopted the National Trust's Main Street Program by approving the establishment of Main Street Iowa within Iowa's Department of Economic Development. Iowa was in the middle of the farm crisis and its many smaller communities were suffering economically. The adoption of the Main Street Program was viewed as something positive the state could do to assist these communities. In 1989, Iowa became the first state to implement a Rural Main Street (RMS) program, which specifically targets communities of less than 5,000 in population (Olson, 1997). The application of this program to smaller communities (those under 5,000 in population) was somewhat controversial and not specifically recommended (Daniels, Keller, Lapping, Daniels, & Segedy, 2007; Olson, 1997). Despite the widespread popularity and adoption of this program, relatively little independent empirical research has been conducted that evaluates the Main Street Program (Robertson, 2004). The purpose of this paper is to examine and assess the benefits associated with the Rural Main Street Iowa (RMSI) program.

### ***1.1 Main Street Program***

Started in 1977 by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Main Street Program encompasses a comprehensive revitalization strategy to encourage economic development within the context of historic preservation (Glisson, 1984; Skelcher, 2000). The Main Street program was developed in response to inquiries from communities across the country that were looking for ways to address the economic and physical problems facing their downtowns. As a result, the Main Street Program is an economic development program that promotes community initiatives to revitalize downtown districts by leveraging local assets including cultural, architectural, and business, combined with community pride to enhance the area economy.

The program was initially administered as a three-year pilot project involving three Midwest towns (Galesburg, Illinois; Hot Springs, South Dakota; and Madison, Indiana). The National Trust assisted these communities by providing an analysis of each downtown's assets and needs, including architectural and economic profiles (Glisson, 1984). In addition, a full time Main Street Program manager was hired for each of the communities to serve as an advocate for the downtown, coordinate project activities, and convince merchants, property owners and city officials to commit funds to the project (Smith, Jones, & Parrish, 1996). At the end of three years the project was deemed a huge success. Business improved in all three downtowns, new businesses opened, sales tax revenue increased, occupancy rates rose and numerous buildings were rehabilitated and put back into productive use (Glisson, 1984; Smith et al., 1996).

As a result of the achievement of the pilot project, the National Main Street Center was established in 1980 by the National Trust with the assistance of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Department of Transportation, the Economic Development Administration and the Small Business Administration, as a means to share the knowledge and success of the pilot program with other communities (Smith et al., 1996). With this objective in mind the Main Street Program was modified in terms of how it worked. Instead of working directly with communities, the Main Street Center administered the program through the states, creating State Main Street Programs (Smith et al., 1996). This change allowed for the development of state level support systems to assist local revitalization efforts and resulted in the state programs being customized to the local conditions and communities. This focus on the states also facilitated the creation of local networks and partnerships as a means to better mobilize resources to aid the revitalization efforts. The first six states selected for implementing this phase of the program were Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Texas (Glisson, 1984). By 1983 the results of this program were also considered a success based upon the total investments occurring in downtown projects, the number of building rehabilitations taking place and the number of new firms created and located in the downtowns of these communities (Glisson, 1984; Smith et al., 1996). More recent research estimates that each dollar spent on Main Street programs has generated, on average, another \$40 dollars of investment (National Main Street Center, 2004). However, other researchers acknowledge that the Main Street program is not a quick or guaranteed fix for all communities, stating that the program is successful for about three out of every four communities that participate (Daniels et al., 2007).

The accomplishments of the Main Street Program are attributed to the four-point approach that involves: Design, Organization, Promotion and Economic Restructuring.

- **Design** involves utilizing appropriate design and preservation concepts to enhance the visual quality of the downtown (including buildings, signage, landscaping and window displays).
- **Organization** involves bringing together the public sector, private groups and individual citizens to work together in improving the downtown.
- **Promotion** works to focus efforts on making the downtown a source of community pride, social activity and enhancing economic development potential.
- **Economic Restructuring** works to diversify the downtown economy by identifying new market niches, finding new uses for vacant or underutilized buildings and improving business practices.

The key to this approach is associated with the fact that all four points must be implemented. Thus the program emphasizes comprehensiveness, while integrating all four areas of the approach. It is a community-driven strategy that enables communities to customize the approach to their specific circumstances and needs. Through the application of this four-point approach communities are able to reestablish the traditional downtown as a community focal point and activity center.

Today the National Main Street Center is involved in a number of activities and provides a variety of services. These include training programs for state and local Main Street managers and staff, consulting services to both state and local Main Street communities, providing information, research, publications and audiovisual materials, as well as hosting an annual national conference.

Despite its popularity and the abundance of literature on the program (Glisson, 1984; Kemp, 2000; Robertson, 1999; Smith, 2007; Smith et al., 1996) little empirical research has been conducted that evaluates the impact of the Main Street Program. Most of the literature that exists is descriptive in nature rather than evaluative (Robertson, 2004). In addition, much of the literature utilizes data and information collected in-house, from the Main Street communities themselves, and while this provides useful information, this does not constitute independent and objective research (Robertson, 2004). One key reason why independent evaluation of the Main Street program hasn't taken place is likely due to data limitations and the nature of the program itself. The fact that the program involves a four-point approach, involving organization, promotion, design and economic restructuring makes it difficult to evaluate all aspects of the program. Also the inability to obtain independent data or measures concerning aspects of organization, promotion or design also means that these aspects of the program can only be evaluated descriptively or by utilizing data from the Main Street communities themselves. However, one aspect of the program can be evaluated utilizing independent, empirical data and that is economic restructuring. Specifically focusing on evaluating the economic aspects is particularly appropriate given that the primary aim of the program is "economic development within the context of historic preservation" (Main Street Iowa, 2009a). Thus the purpose of this study is to empirically evaluate the economic impact of the Rural Main Street Program on Iowa's small towns.

## 1.2 Main Street Iowa

In 1985, the Iowa Legislature adopted the National Main Street Center’s model and established Main Street Iowa as a program within the Iowa Department of Economic Development. The mission of the Main Street Iowa program was “to improve the social and economic well-being of Iowa’s communities by assisting selected communities to capitalize on the unique identity, assets and character of their downtown area” (Main Street Iowa, 2009b). Thus, Main Street Iowa utilized the copyrighted four-point approach described previously, and the eight guiding principles, consisting of Incremental Process, Comprehensive Four Point Approach, Quality, Public and Private Partnership, Changing Attitudes, Focus on Existing Assets, Self-Help Program and Implementation Oriented, developed by the National Main Street Center.

By 1989, Main Street Iowa was receiving frequent requests from numerous small towns (those with under 5,000 in population) asking for assistance to help them improve the economic health of their downtowns (Buehler, 1996). Main Street Iowa realized that they needed to respond to these requests and thus created the Rural Main Street Iowa program (RMSI). While some smaller communities had participated in the Main Street program prior to this point in time, this was the first time that a specific state program had been developed for smaller communities (Olson, 1997). This was a controversial move on the part of Main Street Iowa. The National Main Street Center believed that these very small towns (those smaller than 5,000 in term of population) did not have sufficient resources to adequately fund the program and, in particular, would not be able to sustain the volunteer commitment needed to administer the revitalization process (Olson, 1997). Other experts generally agree with this assessment (Daniels et al., 2007).

As of 2009, there were 46 active Main Street communities in Iowa, with the greatest number, 24, involving Rural Main Street communities (those with populations below 5,000) (Main Street Iowa, 2009c). It is interesting to note that since its adoption, not only is the Rural Main Street Iowa program the most popular, but it is also the most active of all of the Main Street programs (see Table 1). Of the 29 communities that have participated in the Rural Main Street Program, 24 remain active resulting in a participation rate of 82.8 percent. This finding contrasts with other state Main Street programs. Smith (2007), in her examination of Kentucky’s Main Street program, found that programs located in metropolitan areas were more likely to be active, embracing all four points of the Main Street approach, in comparison to nonmetropolitan Main Street programs.

Table 1. *Types of Main Street Iowa Programs and Participation Rates*

Program Type	Number of Communities Accepted	Number of Past Participants	Percent Active
Main Street Communities	26	11	57.7
Rural Main Street Communities	29	5	82.8
Urban Main Street Communities	5	1	80
Urban Neighborhood Districts	4	1	75
<b>Total</b>	64	18	71.8

Source. Main Street Iowa, 2009c.

While the process communities must undergo to be selected as a participant in the Main Street Iowa program is quite considerable, the benefits are quite substantial. Once selected as a Main Street community, the State of Iowa invests approximately \$100,000 during the first three years within the community through on-site visits, training and technical assistance (Main Street Iowa, 2009d). The state will invest approximately \$10,000 per year, per community after that point in time. Given the considerable amount of money the State of Iowa has invested in this program, it will be interesting to examine what the economic impact has been on the participating communities.

In 2005, all 19 of the Rural Main Street Iowa communities were surveyed as part of a research study (Wagler, 2006). Each of the RMSI communities were asked to identify the percentage of the program's effort that was devoted to each of the four components of design, organization, promotion and economic restructuring (or in the case of Iowa – business improvement). In the case of the RMSI communities, business improvement was identified as the second most emphasized element at 23.9% behind promotion at 36.3% (Wagler, 2006). These results differ somewhat from Robertson's (2004) findings. He reported economic restructuring as the least used of the four elements and that it was identified as less effective than design and promotion strategies. Obviously in Iowa, business improvement is an important element of the program.

## **2.0 Methodology**

While numerous reports document the benefits and overall impacts of the Main Street program, most of these studies utilize data that come from the Main Street communities themselves and thus are not able to be independently verified. To overcome this possible bias, it was decided to utilize published secondary data from independent, reliable sources as part of this evaluation. Since the purpose of this study is to evaluate the economic benefits associated with the Rural Main Street Iowa program, the research design was structured to allow examination of the communities before they entered the program (pre-test) and after they had participated in the program (post-test). Thus any benefits observed between the two time periods could be attributed to the impact of the program (Bartik & Bingham, 1997). To further strengthen the study, the research design was expanded to include a series of comparison communities that have not participated in the Rural Main Street Iowa program, along with the communities that are program participants. The presence of a comparison group within the research design helped to alleviate some the weaknesses associated with validity, since both sets of communities were subject to the same regional economic circumstances (Bartik et al., 1997).

Twelve Rural Main Street Iowa (RMSI) communities were selected for examination. These twelve RMSI communities were selected because they represent half of all participants currently enrolled in the program, were the first communities selected to participate in the program and thus have been in the program long enough for the impacts of the program to be evident. This is particularly important since other researchers have noted that successful Main Street programs typically undergo three distinct development phases requiring approximately six to twelve years from start to finish (Smith, 1996). Thus the RMSI communities needed to be in the program a sufficient period of time to ensure that they had moved through these three phases. Table 2 contains the list of

the communities, their year of enrollment in the Rural Main Street Iowa program and their populations in 1990. The list of the twelve comparison communities as well as their 1990 populations can also be found in Table 2.

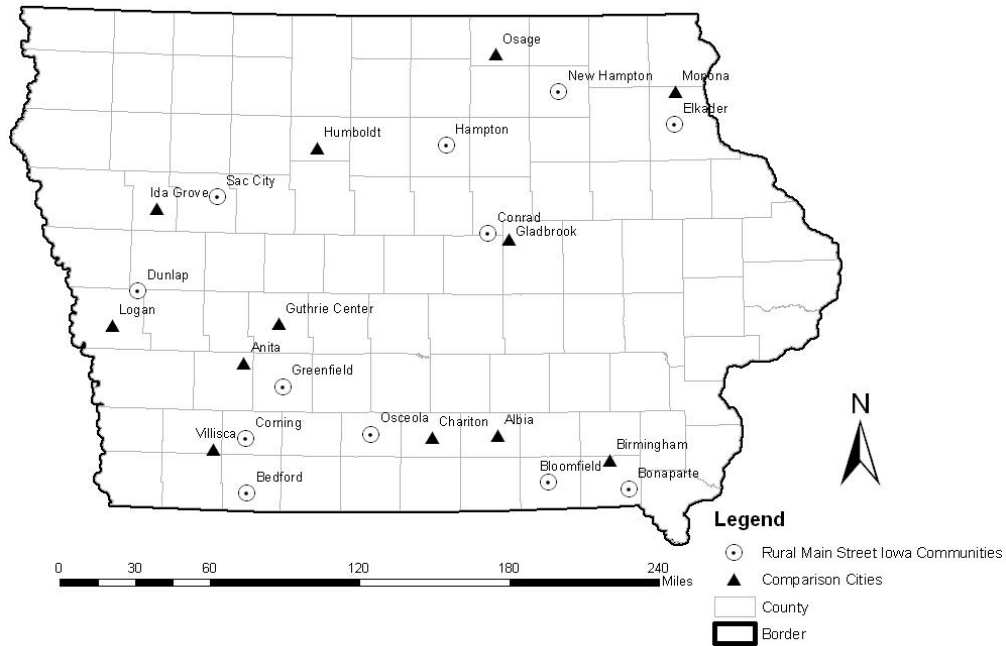
Table 2. *List of Rural Main Street Communities and Comparison Communities*

<b>Year joined</b>	<b>RMSI</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>Comparison</b>	<b>1990</b>
<b>RMSI Program</b>	<b>Community</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Community</b>	<b>Population</b>
1990	Bonaparte	465	Birmingham	368
1990	Corning	1806	Anita	1068
1991	Conrad	964	Gladbrook	881
1991	Elkader	1510	Monona	1520
1991	Hampton	4133	Humboldt	4438
	New			
1993	Hampton	3660	Osage	3439
1994	Bedford	1528	Villisca	1332
1994	Dunlap	1251	Logan	1401
1995	Bloomfield	2580	Albia	3870
1995	Greenfield	2074	Guthrie Center	1614
1996	Sac City	2516	Ida Grove	2357
1997	Oscela	4164	Chariton	4616
	<b>Total</b>	26651		26904

*Sources.* Main Street Iowa, 2009c; State Data Center, 2009.

The comparison communities were purposefully selected to be as similar as possible to the communities participating in the Rural Main Street Iowa (RMSI) program. Therefore these communities were chosen based upon their geographic location (located in relatively close proximity to a RMSI community – either in the same county or in a neighboring county), population and overall conditions (access to major transportation routes and relative proximity to larger communities). It should also be noted that none of the comparison communities have expressed interest in participating in the Rural Main Street program. While it is impossible to match the communities perfectly, Table 2 indicates the overall total population of the RMSI communities is similar to the overall 1990 population for the comparison communities. It is important for the RMSI communities and the comparison communities to have similar populations in 1990, since this was the year the Rural Main Street program started. Thus any differences observed over time between the RMSI communities and the comparison communities can most likely be attributed to the presence of the Rural Main Street program, since both regional economic circumstances and population size have been taken into account. Figure 1 shows the locations of the Rural Main Street Iowa communities and the comparison communities.

Figure 1. Map of Rural Main Street Iowa and Comparison Communities



While this study does overcome some weaknesses present in other studies, it does contain several limitations. First, it only examines the economic benefits associated with the Rural Main Street Iowa program, and as previous discussions have indicated this is only one aspect of a highly comprehensive and integrated program. Second, significant data limitations hamper this study as well. Only two economic indicators (pull factor and number of firms) were available from an independent, secondary source for the time period necessary (1980 to 2008) to allow for the longitudinal study. The 1980 to 2008 time period was selected for the study since this enabled examination of conditions present in the various communities prior to the introduction of the program (1980 to 1990) as well as a reasonable amount of time after the program was implemented (1998 to 2008). The data that was used in this study came from a series of Retail Sales Analysis and Reports produced for the various communities by the Regional Economics and Community Analysis Program (ReCAP), which is administered by Iowa State University Extension (Iowa State University, 2009a). One of the key reasons why this data source was used is because the Retail Trade Analysis Reports are prepared at the city-level and profile the size and competitive characteristics of the local retail sector over a 30-year period (Iowa State University, 2009b). ReCAP is a coordinating agency within the State Data Center of Iowa and thus utilizes data and information collected by various state agencies, such as Iowa’s Department of Revenue as well as various federal agencies such as the U.S. Census Bureau, the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis and the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service (Iowa State University, 2009c).

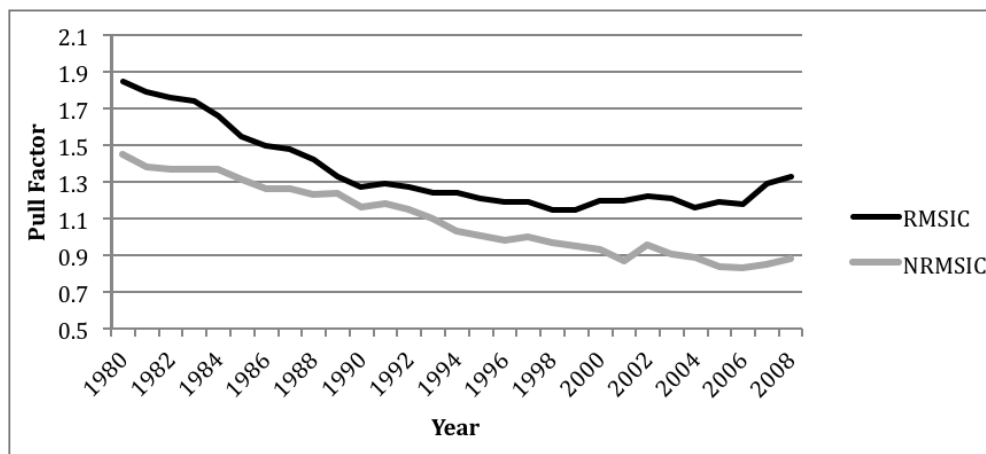
### 3.0 Findings

One of the economic indicators utilized in this study is the “pull factor”. The pull factor is an economic indicator developed by Iowa State University Extension Service to provide a standard for retail sales performance in a locality (Iowa State University, 2009d). It is a ratio of the market area around the city (which provides an estimate of

the number of customers drawn to shop in the community) divided by the population. If a community's pull factor is greater than 1 then it attracts customers from outside the community as well as from the community. If the pull factor is less than 1, then people in that community are shopping in other communities.

As Figure 2 shows, Rural Main Street Iowa communities (RMSIC) have a higher pull factor when compared to the non-participating, comparison communities (NRMSIC). Overall the trend for the pull factor declines for both RMSI communities and comparison communities (NRMSIC) although it appears that the decline for RMSI communities tends to level off and remains more stable by the mid 1990s (shortly following the implementation of the Rural Main Street program beginning in 1990 through to 1997). Also, the pull factor for RMSI communities never falls below 1, but the pull factor for the comparison communities does fall below this critical level.

Figure 2. Comparison of Average Pull Factors



Source. Iowa State University, 2009a.

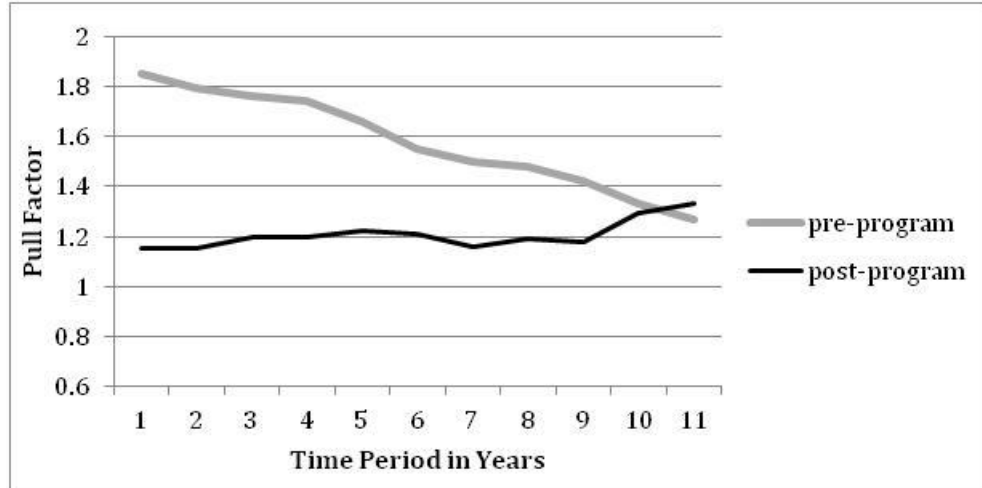
It is also important to note that the pull factor for RMSI communities starts off higher and remains higher throughout the study time period in comparison to the pull factor for non-participating, comparison communities. This finding is not all that surprising given the nature of the program and likely indicates a selection bias associated with those communities that participate in the RMSI program. Communities must apply and meet specific criteria in order to be selected into the RMSI program. It is a fairly long and complicated process, whereby Main Street Iowa reviews the application, and then visits the community to work with local residents to explore the prospects and commitment of the community to the program. Typically this process takes between one to two years before a community is selected as a new Main Street community. In other words, communities in Iowa are self-selecting to become participants in the Main Street program. Thus those that choose to participate in the Rural Main Street Iowa program tend to be characterized as those that have the most to lose if they do not join (designated by a higher pull factor), and/or those that are significantly concerned about the economic future of their community and are willing and committed to taking action (such as participating in the Rural Main Street program) as a means to improve their economic situation.

Figure 3 compares the average pull factor for Rural Main Street Iowa communities for two time periods: before (pre-program: 1980 to 1990) and after (post-program: 1998 to 2008) the program was implemented. Economic decline is clearly indicated by the



declining pull factor present before the RMSI program was implemented. This figure also clearly shows a stable, very slightly increasing pull factor (from 1998 to 2008) for communities after participating in the RMSI program.

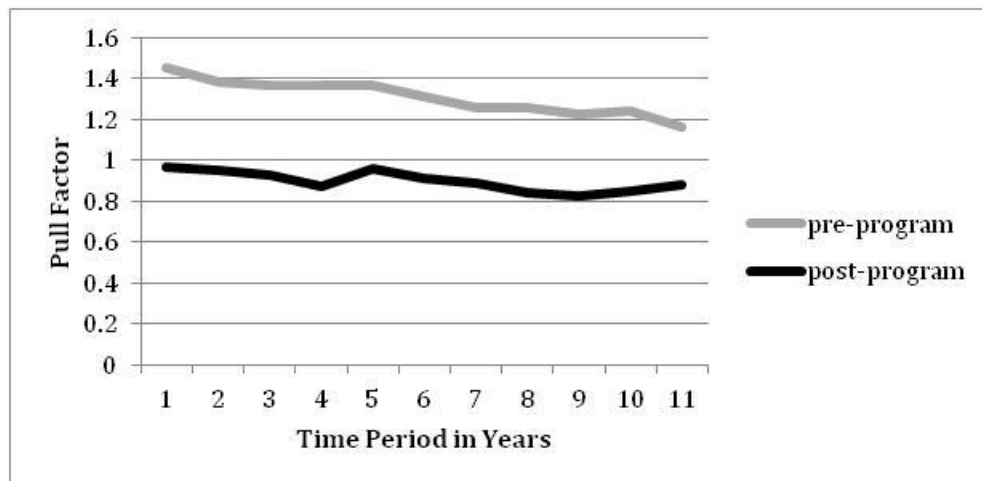
Figure 3. Average Pull Factor for Rural Main Street Iowa Communities



Source. Iowa State University, 2009a.

In contrast, Figure 4 compares the average pull factor experienced by the comparison communities (those that have not participated in the Rural Main Street program) for the two time periods before (pre-program: 1980 to 1990) and after (post-program: 1998 to 2008) the program was implemented. These comparison communities experienced declining pull factors similar to those experienced by RMSI communities prior to the implementation of the program (during 1980 to 1990). However, in contrast to the communities that participated in the RMSI program, these comparison communities experienced slightly declining and less stable pull factors in the later time period (1998 to 2008) as well.

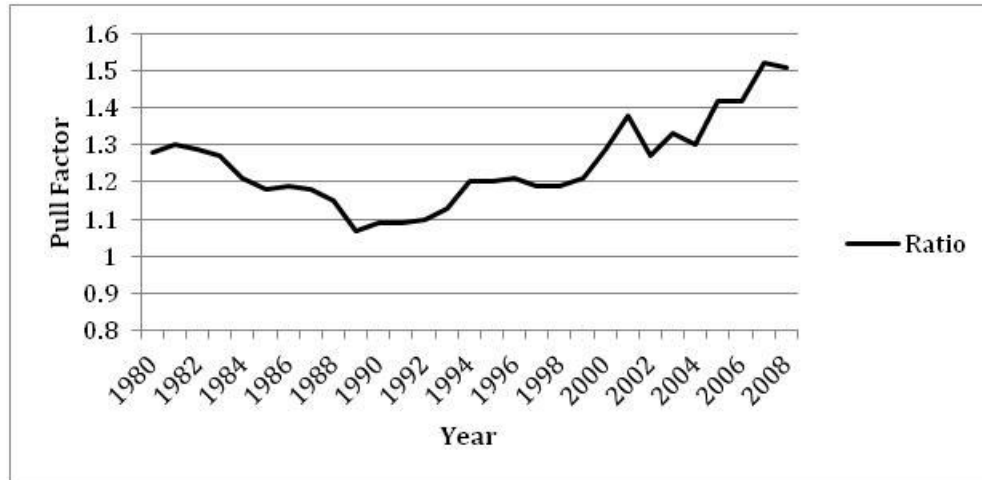
Figure 4. Average Pull Factor for Comparison Communities



Source. Iowa State University, 2009a.

Figure 5 shows the ratio between the two pull factors for the two sets of communities – RMSI and NRMSI communities. The upward trend of this figure that begins around 1991, which is immediately followed the implementation of the Rural Main Street program that occurred in 1990, shows that the gap between the two pull factors is widening over time. This indicates that those communities that participated in the RMSI program experienced higher pull factors over time and that benefits to their pull factor tended to increase the longer they remained in the program.

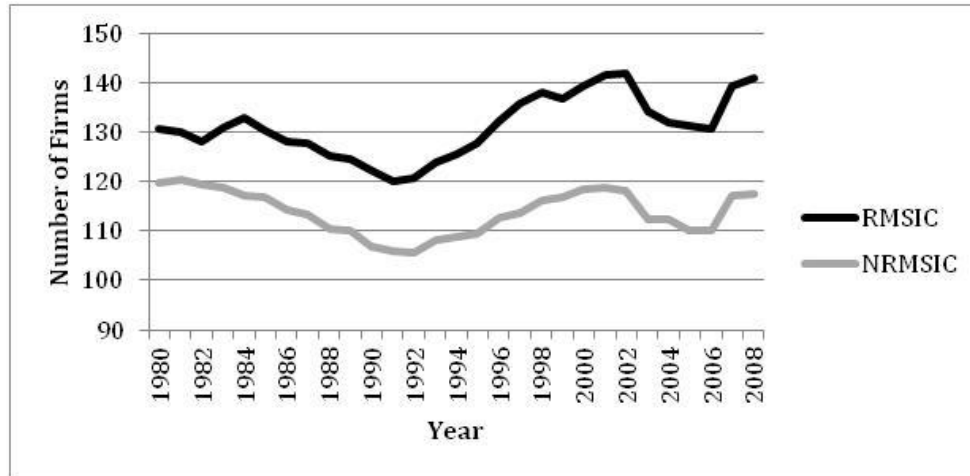
*Figure 5.* Ratio of Average Pull Factor for Rural Main Street Communities and Comparison Communities



*Source.* Iowa State University, 2009a.

Figure 6 shows that the average number of firms found in RMSI communities is higher than the average number of firms located in non-participant, comparison communities (NRMSIC). Once again RMSI communities start out with more firms and continue to have more firms on average throughout the study time period. The average number of firms for RMSI communities actually increases, although only slightly, from the beginning study time period (1980 to 1990) with an average of 128 firms, when compared to the latter time period (1998 to 2008) with an average of 137 firms. In the case of the comparison communities, although there is some decline and fluctuation in the average number of firms over the study time period, the average number is basically the same at the end of the study time period at approximately 115 firms, as when it started.

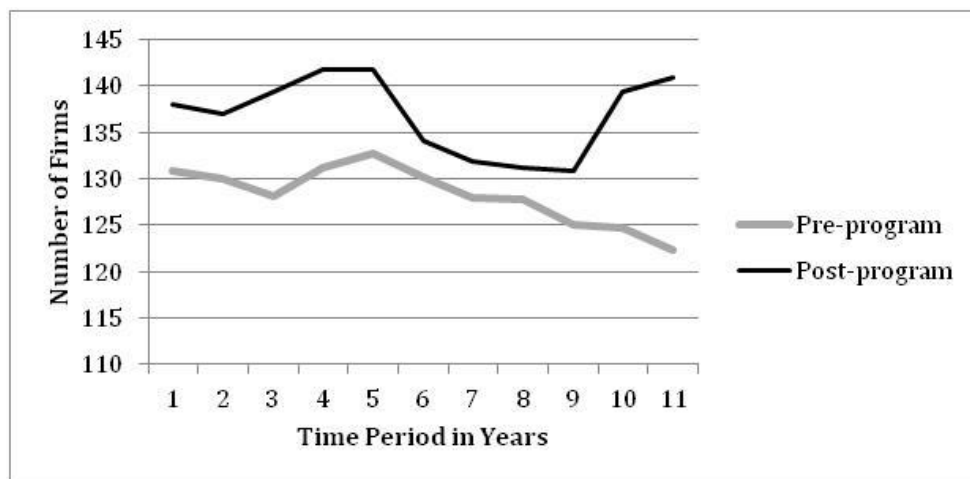
Figure 6. Average Number of Firms for Rural Main Street and Comparison Communities



Source. Iowa State University, 2009a.

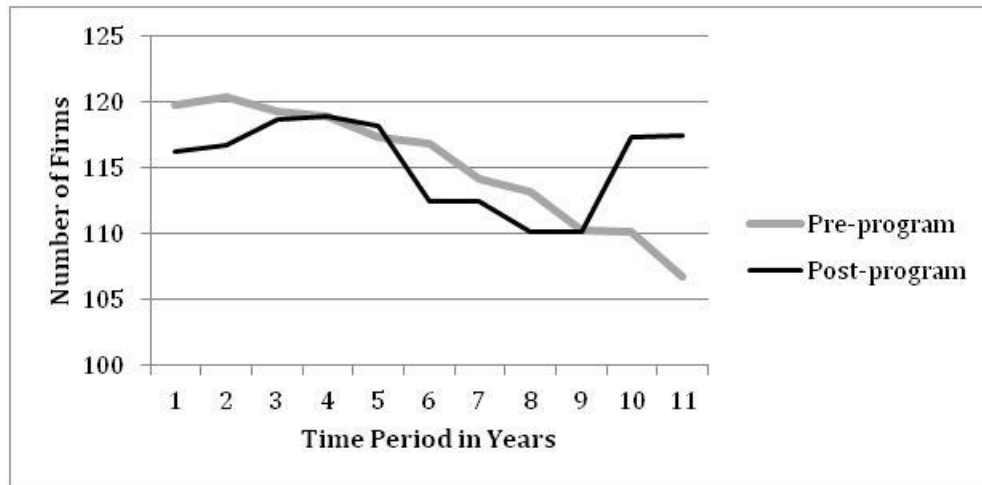
It is also interesting to note that the lowest point on the figure for both RMSI and comparison communities is around 1991-1992. This corresponds to the ending of the farm crisis. This also corresponds to the time when the RMSI program was being adopted and implemented by participant communities. While both RMSI communities and the comparison communities seem to demonstrate recovery, based upon the fact that the average number of firms increases after 1992, the recovery seems to be much greater for RMSI communities as demonstrated in Figure 7, especially when compared to Figure 8. Figure 7 shows that the average number of firms for RMSI communities is greater after the program was implemented at approximately 137 (post-program: 1998 to 2008), than before the program was implemented (pre-program: 1980 to 1990). In contrast the average number of firms for non-participant, comparison communities is about the same for both the pre-program and post-program time periods at approximately 115 firms (see Figure 8).

Figure 7. Average Number of Firms for Rural Main Street Iowa Communities



Source. Iowa State University, 2009a.

Figure 8. Average Number of Firms for Comparison Communities



Source. Iowa State University, 2009a.

#### 4.0 Conclusions

While this study was limited in that it only examined one aspect of the Main Street four-point approach, the results are still useful. As the preceding findings indicate, the Rural Main Street Iowa program has had a positive economic impact on the communities that enrolled in the program. The findings show that the communities that participated in the RMSI program have been able at least to stabilize, if not actually to increase their ability to attract customers from outside the community as well as from the community. Although this may not at first glance be considered a significant economic indicator, this is a substantial achievement. Certainly for community residents, the ability to shop and obtain basic goods within their local community contributes to their overall quality of life and their sense of community viability. Especially for these relatively small towns, the loss of one or two key retail establishments affects the whole community and once a retail establishment is lost the likelihood of it being replaced is slim given that residents will quickly develop new shopping patterns outside of the community.

The data relating to the average number of firms clearly demonstrates that communities who have participated in the RMSI program have performed much better in terms of increasing the number of firms in their communities when compared to other, similar communities. While the increase in the average number of new firms was small, it did show a positive increase and once again, given the size of these communities, the addition of nine new firms is a considerable increase.

While the economic gains resulting from this program may appear small or even marginal, one must keep in mind the context. These are extremely small towns and the fact that these communities have been able to maintain their economic viability, as indicated by their pull factors, is significant. Iowa, like many other mid-western states has experienced relatively slow economic and population growth over the last 20 years. This has resulted in the decline and loss of many small towns. Small communities that once dotted the landscape and defined the urban fabric are disappearing and with them a whole way of life. The ability to stabilize at least some of these communities is a huge accomplishment.

There is another important aspect to this program that this analysis has not considered. The Rural Main Street Iowa program is one of only a handful of economic development programs available to small towns. For a community, being selected to participate in the program provides residents with a sense of hope for the future, a sense of pride in their community and perhaps most importantly, a sense of control over their economic future. All of this goes a long way in bringing about positive changes within a community. Perhaps the greatest contribution of the Rural Main Street Iowa program is that it respects these small towns, and the people who call them home. This program gives residents a means by which to bring about positive change within their community, not only economically, but physically as well, in terms of historic preservation. While certainly being able to point to empirical measures of success is important, clearly there are other significant benefits associated with this program beyond these measures.

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