

# The Death of Main Street: The Loss of Rural Minnesota's Downtowns

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## Abstract

With the growth of major cities in the U.S. and many people doing their shopping at one convenient location, like Wal-Mart, many small more rural downtowns are becoming shadows of what they used to be. "Main Street," once a central location where people could come and go partaking in buying, selling, and trading, is a dying place today.

The purpose of this proposed study, assuming that these issues are happening within Minnesota, is to determine why these issues are happening within these smaller more rural towns, and looking at what some of the possible causes of these issues might be.

## Significance

In her book *The Economy of Cities* (1969), urban theorist Jane Jacobs claims that cities first came together for primitive economic activity. She presents a scenario where natural resources lead to primitive economic activity. It is then through this economic trade that more people come and bring more goods to be traded. According to Jacobs, cities formed as a central place where people benefited off of those living within close proximity to one another through trade.

Downtowns, then, are a result of these economic trading cities. The downtowns were the central point of these places where everyone could go and partake in buying, selling, and trading. In *Downtown America, A History of the Place and the People Who Made It* (2004), Alison Isenberg discusses the early phases of the American downtown and the changes that it has then gone through over the years. She says that the downtown was once a vibrant urban center, she describes it as: "a place where the lights were brighter, and where people went to spend their money and forget their worries." In the book she discusses how the downtown has become a shadow of what it once was, and how it has succumbed to economic competition and commercial decline. She also talks about the death of Main Streets across the country.

The purpose of this proposed study is to look at the changes that cities and towns within Minnesota have gone through, try to determine why these issues are happening, and what some possible causes are. This information is important to know for several reasons. It can look at the effects of a decreasing population, from the rural to urban shift, within these areas. It is also significant in the fact that in losing these smaller towns means a loss of history.

## Methods

This study will make use of: mail surveys with small-town residents, in-person interviews, and observational periods. Ten small towns, with a population smaller than 20,000, will be randomly selected from southern Minnesota.

The mail surveys will be randomly sent out to the general public within the community. Fifty surveys will be sent out, and with the responses learn who is using the downtown area, how often are people using the downtown area, and for what reasons.

Two interviews will be conducted, both with business owners who have owned a business in the downtown area for at least ten years. These interviews will help see the changes that a city and its downtown have gone through.

Observational periods will be held at specific times throughout each day. These periods of time will be used to gather data, noting the number of people seen using the downtown area, the gender of each person, and an assumed age.

## Anticipated Results

Over time, with the expansion of major cities, urban sprawl, and the population shift from small/rural to large areas, Minnesota is losing its smaller, more rural areas.

While surveys and interviews have not yet been conducted, data has been collected on who is using the downtown areas of the City of Saint Peter and Albert Lea. In these two locations, the data shows both similarities and differences. Saint Peter has a larger variety of age groups using the downtown area in comparison to Albert Lea (Figures 3 and 4), and, in both places, women frequent the downtown areas more than men and children (Figures 5 and 6).



Figure 1: Sign posted on door of a downtown business in Albert Lea, MN. (taken by author 2011).

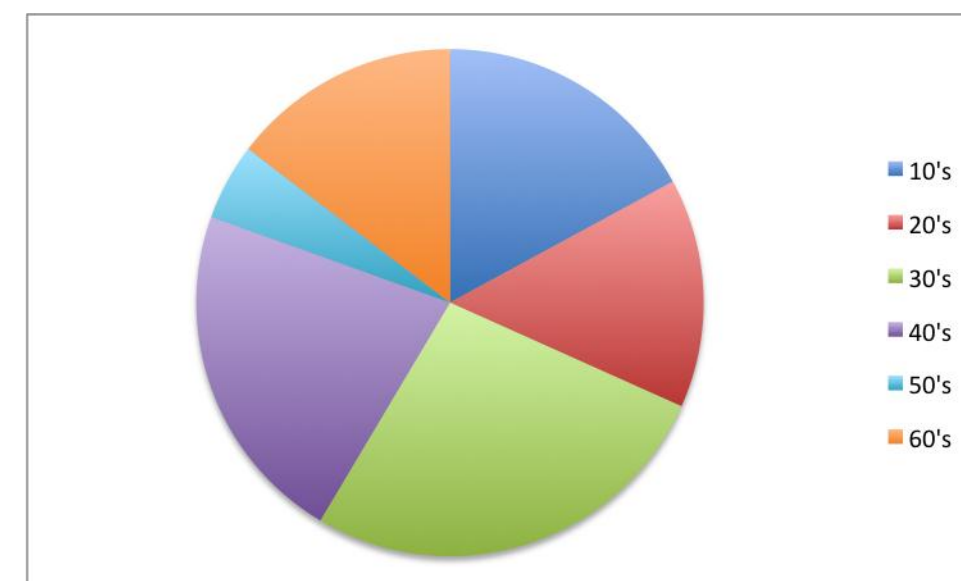


Figure 3: This chart shows the different age groups using the downtown area of Saint Peter during one observational period.

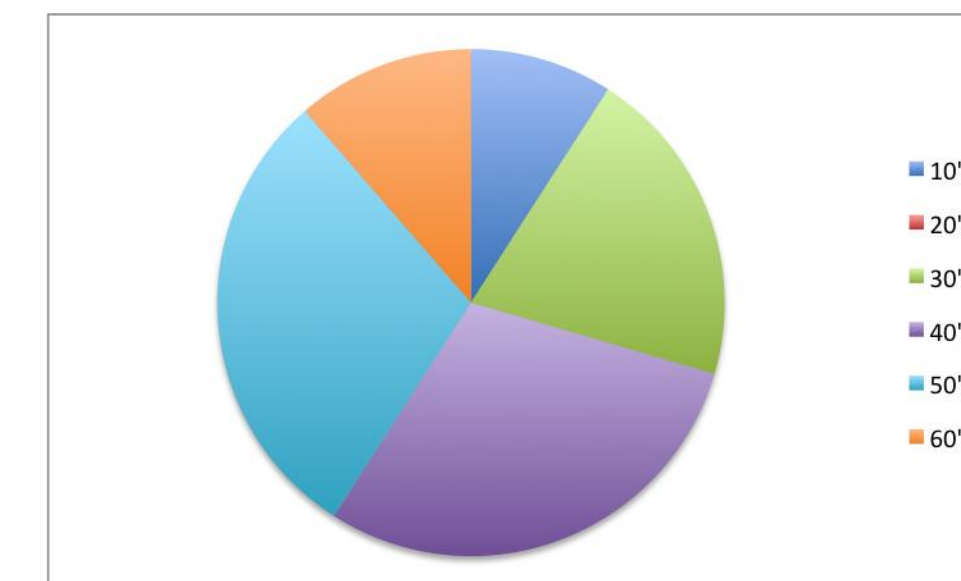


Figure 4: This chart shows the different age groups using the downtown area of Albert Lea during one observational period.

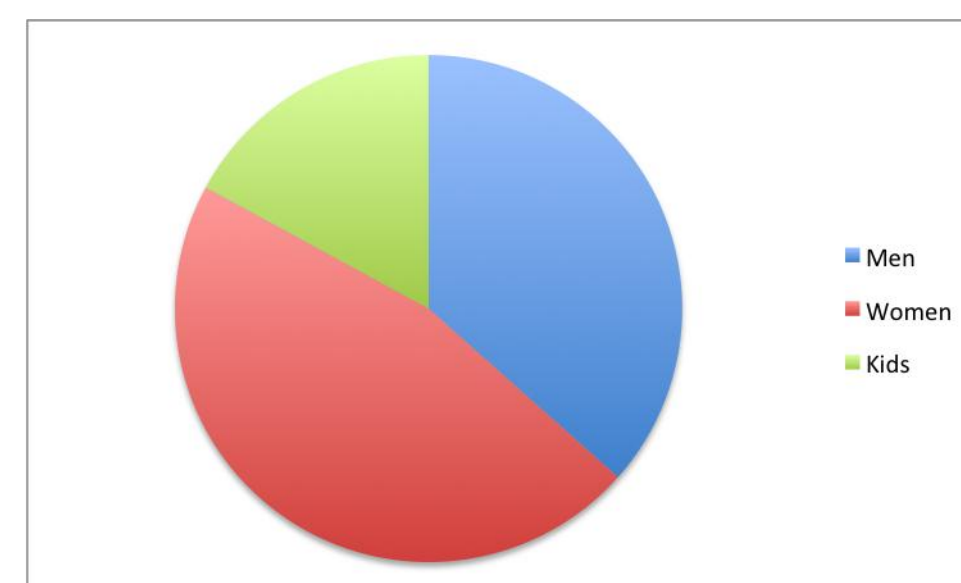


Figure 5: This chart shows a comparison of men, women and children using the downtown area of Saint Peter during one observational period.

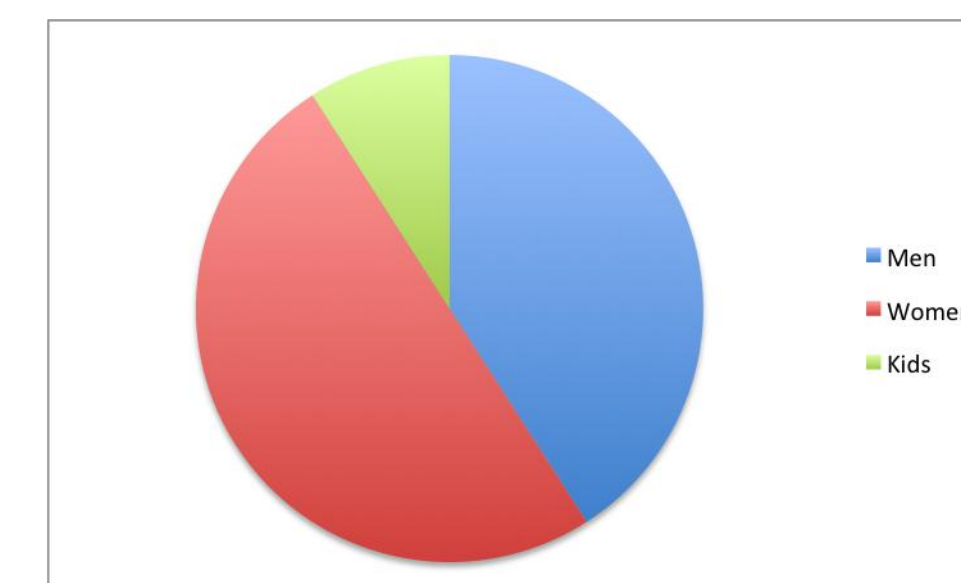


Figure 6: This chart shows a comparison of men, women and children using the downtown area of Albert Lea during one observational period.

## References

Isenberg A. 2004. "Downtown America, A History of the Place and the People who made it." The University of Chicago Press.

Jacobs J. 1969. "The Economy of Cities." New York Random House Inc.