

# **Love or Tolerate Thy Neighbor?**

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## **Neighborliness In San Diego**

Ever since Robert Putnam presented his thesis on social capital in the book “Bowling Alone,” the study of the ability of neighbors and community networks to build social capital has intensified. A March 2001 survey showed San Diego County scoring below average and its civic interconnectedness lagging behind the likes of Seattle, Cincinnati and the Silicon Valley. While this installment of the KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Poll does not replicate the larger study, it does look at aspects of neighborliness – specifically trust, interaction, community action and friendships.

The results on trust are the most encouraging. The data shows that San Diego County residents tend to trust their neighbors more than they did four years ago. Like the nation as a whole, San Diegans tend to move a lot. In fact, one-in-five residents have lived in their neighborhoods less than three years. San Diegans interact with their neighbors just as frequently as the larger national population does, though we may lag slightly in how often we work with our neighbors on community projects. The survey shows that 34% worked with neighbors to improve something in their community, compared with 37% locally and 39% nationally in 2001. Getting more personal, 43% say that their next door neighbors are their friends while only 13% do not know those living next to them and just 2% are unfriendly with their immediate neighbors.

## **How Do We Compare to Other Areas?**

Setting aside the question of how the United States has changed since September 11, 2001, it is remarkable how similar we are to the nation as a whole. On a basic level, neighborhood lengths of residency are the same. Forty-one percent have resided in

their neighborhood in both San Diego County and the US less than five years. Anyway you slice it, that is a lot of “churn” and should be music to the ears of Realtors everywhere. At the same time about 44% both nationally and locally have lived in their neighborhoods for more than a decade, so there is a substantial amount of stability as well. Locally, residents who are new to a neighborhood are much more likely to be younger (half are under the age of 35), while nearly all long-time residents are over the age of 35.

The County and nation also converge on how often neighbors get together. About 56% of us talk or visit with our neighbors at least several times a week. The surveys also show that about 15% either rarely meet their neighbors or have never met them at all. So, for the most part, we inhabit friendly communities.

Though San Diego County residents may slightly lag in how often we work together to solve community problems, the difference here is not significant.

But it is the added trust we seem to have developed with our neighbors over the past few years that is the most intriguing. Nationally, 47% said they trusted their neighbors “a lot” in 2001 and locally the figure stood at a paltry 41%. That figure has increased substantially to 56%. One factor could certainly be a post-September 11<sup>th</sup> mentality whereby we have grown closer to our neighbors while perhaps becoming more suspicious of “others.” Unfortunately we do not have recent national data on trust to test this theory. But closer to home, it is possible that the dreadful fires of October, 2003, may have spurred higher levels of trust as neighbors pulled together for each other. This survey finds exceedingly high levels of trust among East County neighbors, where the inferno left almost no one untouched in some way (see the KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Wildfire Poll, December, 2003 <http://www.cerc.net/pages/currentresearch.htm> for details).

## **In Neighbors We Trust**

The survey turns up some fascinating findings related to trust. First, among the factors we examined, the only one significantly associated with a higher quality of life is how much someone can trust those around them. Specifically, those who trust their neighbors more tend to reside in communities where the quality of life is better.

But what, in turn, drives higher levels of neighborhood trust? Location for one. The survey shows that those living in communities north of Interstate 8 generally trust their neighbors more. For instance, in north coastal communities 71% trust their neighbors a lot while only 4% trust them only a little or not at all. In contrast, only 45% in the south suburbs (south of the San Diego-National City border) say they trust their neighbors a lot and nearly one-third either do not trust them at all or only a little. Trust is only slightly higher in the area between National City and Interstate 8. As Putnam would argue, the differential in inter-neighbor trust between north and south has huge implications for the development of social capital in each area.

Another big predictor of neighborly trust is whether someone is a renter or a homeowner. The latter display far more trust in their neighbors as 64% exhibit a lot of faith in them. In contrast, just 38% of renters trust their neighbors a lot and 21% distrust them. Though there are many economic arguments for promoting home ownership, these results present a solid social argument creating an “ownership society.”

Age is another factor. Almost all residents over the age of 45 trust the folks on their block. Those in the 35 to 44 year age group, though largely trusting, do not reach the high levels of their older counterparts. On the other hand, those in the 18 to 34 year-old cohort display notably less trust, with about one-quarter confiding that they *distrust* their neighbors. Note that analysis of the data found that age -- not length of residency -- is what works to build trust. The implication is that “it’s not how long you’ve lived there; it’s

how long you've lived" that builds neighborhood trust.

Yet another fascinating finding is that middle-income residents tend to be less trusting of their neighbors than those who either earn high or low incomes. Close to two-thirds of those who earn the least money (less than \$20,000 annually) and the most money (more than \$150,000 annually) trust their neighbors a lot and almost none distrust them. But distrust runs at 30% among those in the \$80,000 to \$100,000 category and trust generally is significantly among those earning between \$40,000 and \$100,000. Could it be that the affluent are able to buy themselves into trustworthy neighborhoods while the poorest residents have little to steal so they can "afford" to be more trusting? The corollary to this hypothesis would be that folks earning middle incomes have enough money to generate suspicions about their neighbors, but not enough to leave the area they are in. In any event, it is clear that neighborhood trust is based somewhat on personal economics.

Finally, the survey finds that women trust their neighbors a bit more than men do. In particular, while 7% of women admit to distrusting those in their community, 21% of men distrust their neighbors. The gender difference in trust is partially due to the fact that men tend to interact less with their neighbors. While 21% of females get together with their neighbors once a month or less, 29% of males fall into that category.

### **Interaction Can Help Build Trust**

The data shows a strong relationship between developing neighborly trust and interaction between neighbors. Unfortunately, there is no way to be certain, from this study, which comes first.

But neighborhood interaction is one of the driving forces behind social capital and the survey finds that, like trust, residents over the age of 34 are much more likely to engage

in it. About 60% over the age of 34 meet their neighbors at least several times a week, with 72% of the elderly getting together that often. On the other hand, over one-third of those under the age of 25 have either never met their neighbors or see them once a year or less. Could this be a reflection of the Internet age where e-mail brings faraway friends and relatives closer but acts to distance neighbors?

Those in the north county get together with their neighbors more frequently. About one-third in the north coastal and north inland areas claim they visit with their neighbors *just about everyday*.

Another interesting finding is that those who are more connected to the military are much more likely to interact with their neighbors than those with no connection. Only 38% with no tie to the military interact with their neighbors on a weekly basis, while well over 60% of those with a direct link fall into the same category. This indicates that, contrary to popular perception due to the itinerant nature of military service, the armed services exert a positive influence on social connectedness.

Finally, the survey also finds that the longer a person has lived in the neighborhood the more likely they are to interact with the neighbors. Part of this can be explained by the simple lack of time newcomers have had to establish relationships. For instance, 17% of those who have lived in a neighborhood less than three years have never met their neighbors. That decreases to 4% for those in the 3 to 5 year category. So, as people become more settled the amount of interaction increases and, to the extent that they continually move, neighborhoods tend to suffer.

## **Working Together**

When it comes to actually working for the common good, it is homeowners who really get the job done. Forty-one percent of homeowners say they have worked with others

to get people in their immediate neighborhood to fix or improve things in the past two years. When compared to renters – among whom only 20% have worked with others to better the neighborhood – homeowners look very industrious. This provides further evidence that home ownership is one key to building social capital.

The survey also shows that those in the city of San Diego are a bit less likely to work with their neighbors than residents outside the city. The difference here is only 10% (29% in the City have worked with their neighbors compared to 39% outside the City) but it is significant and implies that urbanites are less cooperative.

### **Next Door Neighbors: Friends or Acquaintances but Rarely Enemies**

Forty-two percent of the folks next door are our friends and 12% say the neighbor beside them is among their best friends. Only 2% say they don't get along with their next door neighbor.

While these numbers suggest peaceful relations, the amount of harmony largely depends on one's age. As with neighbor trust and interaction, the youngest residents appear to have some difficulty making friends. Just 22% of those in the youngest category are friends with their neighbors. Though this does not generally lead to acrimony, an astonishing 28% do not even know the folks next door! Will this dissipate as the young adults get older or is this a permanent shift in personal relations? The data interestingly point to a shift occurring around the age of 55. At this point, one-in-five say they are best friends with their next door neighbor and this increases to 24% among 65 to 74 year-olds and 28% among the elderly. Perhaps friendships just take time.

Again, another big factor is home ownership. Forty-percent of residents who own their home are friends with the people next door and 15% claim they are best friends.

Among renters only 30% are friends and 8% are best friends with their next door neighbor. Twenty-two percent of renters do not know their immediate neighbors. Neighbor-to-neighbor bonds are clearly stronger when one owns their residence. One finding that might seem frivolous at first blush is that friendships are also related to how someone feels about the Chargers football team. Specifically, those who are bigger fans tend to know their next door neighbors. Only 6% of the Chargers' biggest fans do not know the folks next door while 13% of casual fans and 19% of non-fans fall into that category. The inference here is that sports serves as a significant icebreaker and this may be another argument for being a "major league" town.

Military ties are also important here in developing better relationships. Those with direct connections to the armed services are significantly more likely to know and be friends with their next door neighbors. On the other hand, 20% of those who profess no ties to the military do not know their immediate neighbors.

When it comes to geography it is the north side of the County again – specifically the north coastal region – that shines at making friends. Twenty-two percent in the area from Del Mar to Oceanside say their next door neighbors are among their best friends and none are unfriendly with their neighbors.

## **Conclusion**

What is probably most important about this study is its confirmation that trust in a neighborhood is directly related to the quality of life associated with it. Though not a new finding, it restates the importance of one of Putnam's major tenets: that trust produces tangible goods. Almost equally important is the heartening finding that San Diego has seen a significant boost in neighbor trusting neighbor. This may well do more to avert the deterioration of the region's quality of life than widened freeways and expanded economic opportunities.

That said there are big holes in the fabric of San Diego's neighborhoods. The survey shows renters are at a severe disadvantage when it comes to building better neighborhoods. For them, the solution is to buy a house or work harder to develop those neighborhood relationships despite infertile ground.

Some areas are much better than others for neighborhood building. The northern tier generally, and the north coastal area in particular, are certainly good incubators of neighborliness. But that means those on the south side of the County are not deriving the benefits of fully-engaged neighborhoods.

The lack of neighborliness, when it does exist, may be resolved by the passage of time. The survey conclusively shows that, time and again, older residents have tapped into the joys of the neighborhood. The question is whether new technologies have ushered in a period where the next generations are ill-equipped to build the personal relationships and inter-connectedness that their parents have.

Finally, there is no denying the military's influence on San Diego County and the neighborhoods within it. Though some may cling to the idea that the armed services beget poorer quality relationships between neighbors, this study shows that the opposite is true. Those tied to the military are more engaged than those unconnected to the armed services. Without military families providing some of the glue, San Diego's communities would not be knit as closely as they are now.