



Social Connectedness and Health

A person's number of close friends, frequency of interactions with family and friends, trust in neighbors, and level of participation in volunteer activities or community events all play a role in supporting well-being and can also influence health, both directly and indirectly. Together, these examples begin to describe social connectedness - the extent to which people interact with one another, either individually or through groups.

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How does social connectedness influence health?

Strong social ties can have a direct and positive impact on health. Research has shown that higher levels of perceived social connectedness are associated with lower blood pressure rates, better immune responses, and lower levels of stress hormones, all of which contribute to the prevention of chronic disease (Uchino et al., 1996). Studies have also shown that higher levels of trust between residents are associated with lower mortality rates (Lochner et al., 2003).

Social connectedness can also promote health indirectly. Bonding and bridging relationships between individuals can create healthy social norms, help people connect with local services, provide emotional support, and increase knowledge about health – or “health literacy” – within social networks (Kim et al., 2008). Communities with high levels of bridging and linking social capital are also better positioned to influence policies that support health, particularly when there is socioeconomic and demographic diversity within social networks.

In contrast, the lack of social connectedness – social isolation – is considered a risk factor for multiple chronic diseases, including obesity, high blood pressure, cancer, and diabetes (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2003). Studies have shown that the greater the social isolation of individuals, the greater their symptoms of depression and the more likely they are to report being in fair or poor health, when compared to individuals with larger social networks. The effect of isolation on health occurs regardless of socioeconomic status, age, gender, or race, but the negative impacts of social isolation appear most among disenfranchised communities, including the poor and the elderly.

Lack of social connectedness can increase stress levels and lead to behavior that increases health risks, such as increased tobacco and alcohol use, or reduce healthy behaviors, such as eating well, exercising, and getting adequate sleep. Isolation can also mask symptoms and increase the delay in seeking care (Institute of Medicine, 2001).

Social connectedness is one of many terms used to describe the complex relationships both between individuals and among groups. Others terms include: social capital, social support, community connectedness, social cohesion, and social integration.

BONDING, BRIDGING, AND LINKING SOCIAL CAPITAL

These relationships can be sorted into three categories:

- **Bonding social capital** is the intimate ties between family, close friends, and others who share very personal relationships. Bonding creates inward-looking, tightly-formed groups that support and nurture their own members.
- **Bridging social capital** reflects more intermediate relationships, such as among coworkers or community residents. This type of social capital can result in like-minded people from different social networks working together to address common concerns or achieve shared goals.
- **Linking social capital** refers to networks formed among people with very different social backgrounds or levels of power, such as policy makers and their constituents.

—Adapted from Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009

However, not all close social bonds support positive behavior. Exclusive social networks can have negative consequences. For example, high social connectedness among some residents in a geographic area can exacerbate social divisions based on race, class, and other social features. Social connectedness can also reinforce negative norms and unhealthy behaviors. Gangs are one example of highly bonded groups that exert strong negative influences. Tightly knit families may also have high levels of bonding social capital, yet experience greater stress because they feel greater responsibility for the well-being of other family members (Mitchell & LaGory, 2002).

What do we know about social connectedness in Minnesota?

The emerging research on social connectedness and related concepts contains a variety of measures, from volunteerism to the number of friends/acquaintances in an individual's social network to people's own perceptions of connectedness or isolation. While limited, the available indicators show that many Minnesotans of all ages feel connected to their communities. However, there are disparities based on socioeconomic position.

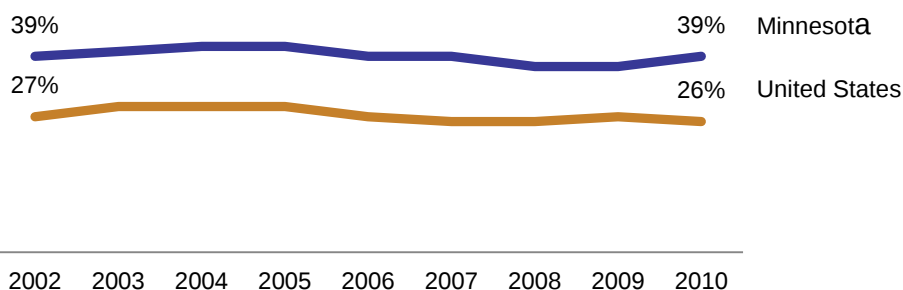


HOW CONNECTED ARE MINNESOTA ADULTS?

VOLUNTEERISM

In 2010, nearly 40 percent of Minnesota adults (age 16+) volunteered; 13 percentage points higher than the national average. The percentage of Minnesotans who volunteer have stayed fairly consistent since 2002, when it was first collected.

Percentage of people age 16+ who volunteer

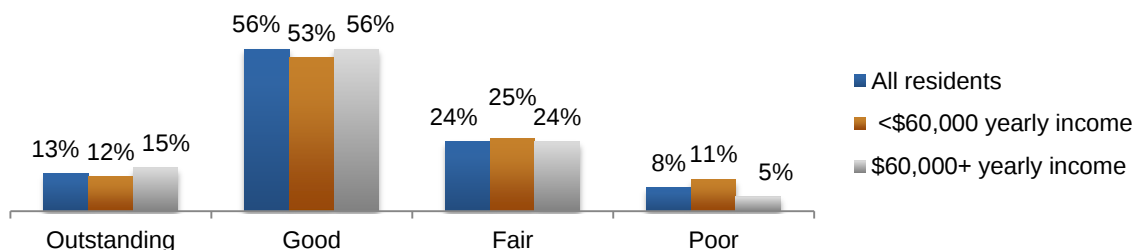


Source: Compiled by MNCompass, from: Current Population Survey, Volunteer Supplement, conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Retrieved from <http://www.mncompass.org/civicengagement>.

SENSE OF COMMUNITY

The ability of community residents to work together to influence and create change is an important indicator of social connectedness. A recent statewide survey demonstrates that while most residents (69%) would give their community a positive rating in how well people work together to improve the community, lower-income residents are significantly more likely to rate their community as “poor” in this area.

Minnesotans’ perceptions of how well people work together to improve their community, 2009

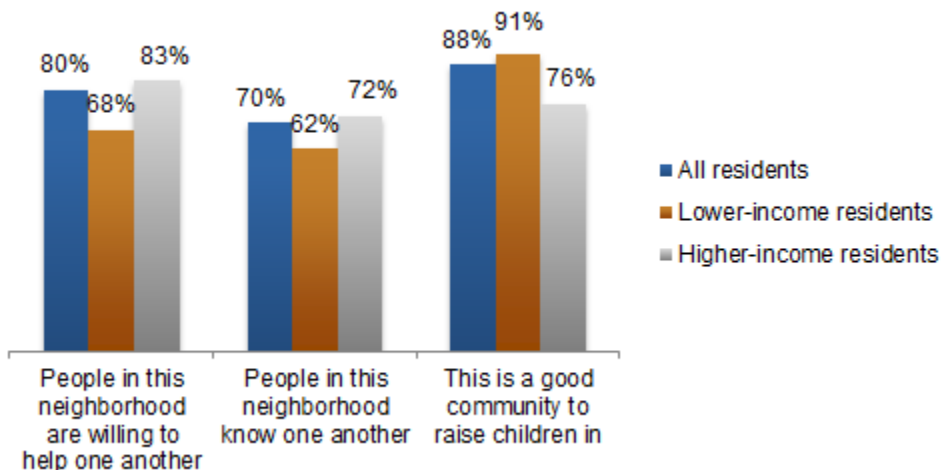


Source: Compiled by MNCompass, from: 2009 Minnesota State Survey. Retrieved from <http://www.mncompass.org/civicengagement>.

TRUST IN NEIGHBORS

In Hennepin County, residents are regularly surveyed about social connectedness. Overall, social connectedness in Hennepin County is quite high, but lower among residents with lower incomes. A majority of residents in Hennepin County reported people in their neighborhood know (70%), and help one another (80%), and a majority also feel that their community is a good neighborhood to raise children (88%).

Social connectedness in Hennepin County, 2010



Source: Hennepin County SHAPE survey (2010), analyzed by Hennepin County Human Services & Public Health Department.

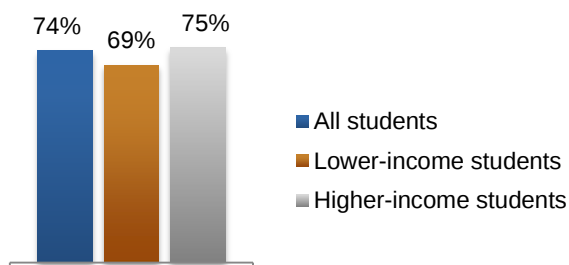
Note: "Lower-income residents" refers to those with incomes less than 200% of the federal poverty level. "Higher-income residents" refers to those with incomes 200% of the federal poverty level or higher.

HOW CONNECTED ARE MINNESOTA YOUTH?

CONNECTION TO CARING ADULTS

For youth, relationships with caring adults in the community - including teachers, spiritual leaders, coaches, and informal/formal mentors – is an important measure of social connectedness. In 2010, nearly three-quarters of Minnesota students felt they had at least one non-family caring adult in their lives. However, lower-income students were less likely to have this connection to community.

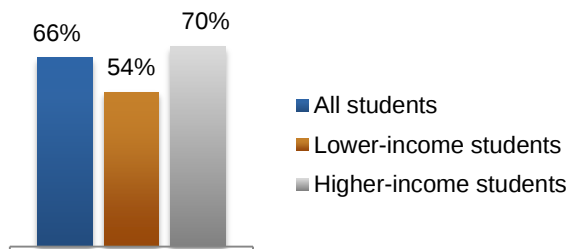
Percentage of Minnesota students with a caring adult in their life, 2010



INVOLVEMENT IN ENRICHMENT ACTIVITIES

Students can be involved in their school, faith-based, or neighborhood communities in a variety of ways, such as through participation in fine arts programs, school or community recreation sports teams, or faith-based youth programs. Although 6 in 10 Minnesota students participate in 3 or more after school activities each week, students from lower-income families are less likely to be involved.

Percentage of Minnesota students involved in 3+ after-school activities each week, 2010



Source for caring adults and enrichment activities data: Compiled by MNCompass, from: Minnesota Student Survey. Retrieved from <http://www.mncompass.org/childrenyouth>

Note: "Lower-income students" refers to those enrolled in the free or reduced-price lunch program. "Higher-income students" refers to those not enrolled in the free or reduced-price lunch program.

How can communities promote greater levels of social connectedness?

To make change locally, people need to begin thinking, talking, and acting on ideas to create positive connections and reduce isolation. To begin this conversation, consider what encourages or discourages positive interactions between people in a specific community. For instance, you could ask:

- What events, community gathering places, and programs are available to residents? Are they equally accessible, welcoming, and appealing to all residents?
- Do crime or safety concerns deter residents from spending time outdoors, using parks, or participating in community programs? If so, how can these problems be addressed?
- In our community, who tends to be isolated? What changes can be made to ensure all residents are welcome to participate in the community?

Communities can help residents develop stronger relationships with one another and have greater influence on policy decisions that impact health. In 2009, the Minnesota Department of Health convened an advisory group and conducted a series of key informant interviews to explore the concept of social connectedness (Minnesota Department of Health, 2010). As part of that effort, a number of strategies were identified to strengthen social connectedness by improving the physical conditions and safety of neighborhoods, involving residents in the development of health equitable policies, and creating or establishing programs that provide opportunities for interaction between residents of all ages, cultures, and socioeconomic classes (bridging social capital), including:

- Use community planning and design elements that encourage active living, creating opportunities for greater interactions between residents.
- Establish recreation programs for youth, as well as gathering opportunities for residents of all ages and cultures.
- Support community efforts to address and encourage economic opportunity, supportive work environments, and integration and appreciation of the community's diverse cultures.



Other tips and strategies for increasing social connectedness include: investing in existing community “hubs” (for example, an African-American church) that serve as linkages to information and resources; connecting civic and political institutions to give residents greater influence on decisions; recreating public space in both physical and online settings to encourage social connections; involving residents in health policy decisions through health impact assessments or other community-driven processes; and using planning approaches that focus on enhancing community strengths.



References

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Minnesota Compass, a quality of life project, provides data and information related to social connectedness on the Minnesota Compass website: www.mncompass.org. For additional breakdowns of the measures highlighted in this brief, including breakdowns by region and demographic characteristics, see the key measures listed under the Civic Engagement and Children and Youth topics.

Resources found in the Minnesota Compass library include:

[Soul of the Community: St. Paul, MN](#)

John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, November 2010, 20 pp.

Reports on what emotionally attaches people to a community and what makes them want to put down roots and build a life there from a survey conducted in 26 cities throughout the U.S.

[Rural Pulse 2010](#)

Blandin Foundation, October 2010, 44 pp.

Presents demographic information, and findings from survey questions about the condition of the community's economy and quality of life, community leadership and a person's ability to affect change. Respondents were also asked to select the most critical issue to their community.

[Reinventing Aging: Baby Boomers and Civic Engagement](#)

Harvard School of Public Health - MetLife Foundation Initiative on Retirement and Civic Engagement, January 2004
Examines the possibility and potential impact of a national effort to mobilize Baby Boomers to contribute their time, skills and experience to address community problems.

[BetterTogether](#)

Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, December 2001, 100 pp.

Discusses social capital and principles for social capital building in the workplace; arts; politics and government; religion; and schools, youth organizations and families.

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