better together

Princeton Area Community Foundation
connecting people who care with causes that matter across central new jersey

PRINCETON REGIONAL CHAMBER OF COMMERCE FOUNDATION

Q&A: The 2007 Central New Jersey Regional Social Capital Benchmark Survey

Q. What is social capital?
A. "Social capital" refers to the friendships, acquaintances, and working relationships that tie people together. The bonds of social capital make neighborhoods safer, schools better, and people healthier. When people are invested in each other and their communities, they are more likely to vote, volunteer, care for one another, and cooperate even though they have differences. Social capital is a composite measure of attitudes and behaviors.

Q. Why is social capital important?
A. A growing body of research* shows that communities with higher levels of social capital are likely to see more educational achievement, better-performing governments, stronger economies, and less crime and violence. People living in these communities report being happier, healthier, and living longer.

Where social capital is strong, it is easier to mobilize people to tackle problems. It is easier to bridge differences and take advantage of opportunities that benefit everyone.

Q. Can the benefits of social capital be quantified?
A. Yes. National research conducted by the Saguaro Seminar at Harvard and the 2007 Central New Jersey Social Capital Benchmark Survey measure levels of social trust and civic engagement by asking a random sample of people questions which, when analyzed collectively, quantify measures that have been proven to tell us about an important component of our communal lives.*

Q. When did the Princeton Area Community Foundation and the Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce Foundation commission this survey, and why?
A. The survey was commissioned in 2007 to give us a baseline for the region to inform our grantmaking and business initiatives in the community. In an effort to help increase social capital in the workplace, we will publicize the results and foster further discussion at a forum we plan to hold this September.

Q. What was the cost of the survey?
A. $75,000

Q. Who paid for the survey?
A. The Princeton Area Community Foundation and the Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce Foundation. Both are non-profit organizations.

Q. Who conducted the survey?
A. The survey research was conducted by Marc D. Weiner, JD, PhD, faculty fellow and associate director of the Bloustein Center for Survey Research at the Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University.

Q. What were the areas surveyed?
A. All municipalities in Mercer County; Cranbury Township, Plainsboro Township and South Brunswick Township in Middlesex County; and Montgomery Township and Rocky Hill in Somerset County.

Q. Why did you define the catchment area as you did?
A. The survey's sponsors both serve this region.

Q. Who was interviewed and when?
A. 870 randomly selected people were interviewed by telephone between May 1 and June 8, 2007. The majority of participants, 81.3%, were from Mercer County, with 13.2% and 5.5% from Middlesex and Somerset Counties respectively.

Q. What are some key results?
A. We found that we work and commute at rates near the national average, so lack of time is not our enemy. Our choices about how we spend our time in community are interesting — we are active in PTAs, youth-focused efforts, and professional associations; less so in faith-based activities and in informal socializing, aka just hanging out.

Q. What were the results of the other surveys conducted across the country, and how does central New Jersey compare?
A. Central New Jersey compares favorably to national data on many of the common questions posed. However, our demographics are different. On average we are better educated and have higher incomes than the national sample. Given those advantages, we need to ask ourselves if results that show us to be comparable to national averages on measures of civic engagement are good enough. Are we fulfilling our potential?

Q. How did you determine that the idea of "place" is important to social capital in our region?
A. Place is a core concept of social capital. Connections among people are always built in places, whether in people's homes, offices, schools, community organizations like libraries, and other public spaces such as parks, businesses, town squares, and neighborhood playgrounds.

Q. Is it accurate to conclude that municipalities trying to create town centers are on the right track?
A. From a social capital perspective, a sense of place matters. Any efforts that create new spaces or expand the use of existing ones are positive forces for increasing the connectedness of people who live here.

Q. Did the survey ask questions about specific public places in central NJ?
A. No, but examples of place as a driver of social capital can be found in almost every community surveyed. Some of them are described in short "social capital profiles" prepared by the Community Foundation and the Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce Foundation.

Q. How will the survey results be used?
A. The Community Foundation and the Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce Foundation will promote the survey results as well as the idea of increasing social capital and civic engagement all across central New Jersey in a campaign called 'Better Together.' Community Foundation and Chamber Foundation representatives will visit elected officials, businesses, schools, civic clubs and other organizations to publicize the importance of social capital to the health and well-being of our region. In addition, a social capital forum is scheduled to be held in the fall of 2008, and the Community Foundation will use the results to help guide its grant making to local nonprofit organizations.

Q. Have other, similar studies been conducted in central NJ?
A. No. This is the first-ever such survey here.

Q. How does this initiative tie in to the statewide "Smart Growth" initiative?
A. Smart Growth encourages more concentrated development where infrastructure already exists in an effort to manage development in an already very densely populated state that is looking toward total build-out within 25 years, according to planners. While Smart Growth rests on a different conceptual base, it is very closely allied with efforts to build social capital.

Q. Are more major national surveys being conducted now?
A. Not at the moment. Social capital develops and changes slowly, so it is reasonable to wait at least five years between surveys. We would expect that further national research won't happen until at least 2011, or after.

Q. Now that the Social Capital Benchmark Survey has established a baseline for the region, where do we go from here?
A. First, the Community Foundation and the Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce Foundation will work through their grant making and initiatives to encourage greater social capital. Then, a follow-up survey will be done in 2012, to see if greater awareness and understanding of social capital, and support for efforts to improve it, have caused an increase; and to learn what steps taken during the next five years have most enriched the social capital we already have.

* Visit www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro for more information on The Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America, an initiative of Professor Robert D. Putnam at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, and author of the book, Bowling Alone.