



Get to Know Your Neighbors: Social Cohesion and Health

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE AHS 2008



The Issue

For years, it has been known that where you live matters to your health. Health-related problems are strongly associated with the social characteristics of communities. Factors such as poverty, employment, family structure and the race/ethnicity of a community help predict how healthy its residents are – even when individual attributes and behaviors are taken into account.

Much of the research to date has focused on how socioeconomic characteristics explain health *disadvantages*. But as we all know, many socially disadvantaged people buck such risk factors to achieve optimal health.

Our question: Can strong communities, where people feel connected to their neighbors, have a *positive* effect on your health? Can communities with strong social connections explain why some socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods fail, while others thrive? If so, what factors influence how connected people feel to their neighbors and their communities?

Dr. Alex Zautra and Rebeca Rios from Arizona State University analyzed data from the 2008 Arizona Health Survey. This issue of *HealthTakes* summarizes their findings.

The Evidence

Knowing, spending time with and helping your neighbors may be good for your health and well-being.

Researchers looked at the relationship between people's connections to their neighbors and their self-rated health and well-being. Those interviewed were asked questions such as whether they trusted people in their neighborhood, whether they felt they could count on them, and whether people in their neighborhood help one another out.

The researchers found:

- There is a positive relationship between how people perceive their connections to their neighbors and their reported health and well-being.
- People who are non-Hispanic, older, married, and of higher socioeconomic positions are more likely to perceive their communities as being socially cohesive.
- While communities with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to be socially cohesive, neighborhood connectedness plays a larger role in self-reported health status among people with lower socioeconomic status.
- There is a strong relationship between culture and neighborhood connectedness. Neighborhoods that are more ethnically homogeneous are more likely to trust and feel connected to their neighbors, benefiting their overall health and well-being.
- People are more likely to consider feeling connected to their neighbors if they live in a community where residents have higher education levels.
- Factors such as the number of neighbors moving in or out of a community, the median income of households, and the percentage of owner occupied housing were *not* predictive of neighborhood connectedness (when other factors were taken into account).

The Implications

How well people know, trust, and feel connected to their neighbors is related to their overall health and well-being. Thus, efforts to encourage neighbors to get to know and trust one another may ultimately affect the health of individuals and as well as communities as a whole. Efforts to strengthen low-income neighborhoods will most likely have a positive effect on health status. Nonetheless, building neighborhood connectedness is beneficial to everyone, regardless of socioeconomics.

This finding contrasts sharply with the way many of us typically view health. Too often, health is seen only as something that is affected by our individual attributes and behaviors – or external socioeconomic factors beyond our control. This research suggests that health is not only influenced by the context in which we live but our interactions with others.

It is easy to shrug off such research by asserting that in communities such as Maricopa County, community connectedness is all but impossible. After all, many people who live in the Phoenix area are from somewhere else originally. This research, however, shows the contrary. Despite rapid growth and mobility in Maricopa County, residents *can* feel connected to their neighborhoods. The survey and research revealed that people who lived in the same community for five years or more did not perceive their communities as being any more socially cohesive than those who were newer to their communities.

This research also suggests that cultural homogeneity within a community *can* be a *strength*. While cultural homogeneity, taken to extremes, can foster isolation and social separateness between cultures and income groups, it can also benefit social cohesion– and overall health and well-being. While health disparities do exist among ethnic groups such as Hispanics that present themselves disproportionately in culturally homogeneous communities, there are also benefits to living in culturally connected, homogeneous communities. Failing to recognize some of these benefits misses the complexities of the reality, and fails to explain why many people can achieve optimal health – despite a community’s racial and ethnic disparities.

That said, it is one thing to be well and stay well in a culturally homogeneous community, and quite another to deliberately exclude oneself and others from coming together to participate in the public life of the wider heterogeneous society.

The research also found that education plays a role in how neighbors feel about one another. Thus, efforts to promote access to higher education may help build stronger, more connected communities, ultimately affecting health and well-being.

This research suggests that efforts that support both the connectedness of neighbors and the educational attainment of community members may contribute to improved health and well-being. For example, efforts to engage families in supporting the education of young people in their community and their neighborhood school may result in improved educational outcomes for a community’s youngest citizens *and* improved health status for everyone.

The Source

This issue of *HealthTakes* is based on a study conducted by Alex Zautra, Ph.D. and Rebeca Rios, MA from the Department of Psychology at Arizona State University. Their research sought to evaluate neighborhood social cohesion as a protective factor contributing to the health and well-being of neighborhood residents. Data for the study were from the 2008 Arizona Health Survey, a comprehensive survey of 4,200 households designed to assess health insurance coverage, health status, health-related behaviors, and social and environmental factors that affect population health. This particular study focused on the 3,139 adult residents of Maricopa County who participated in the study. For more information about the survey and population health, please visit www.arizonahealthsurvey.org.

For more information about the health and well-being benefits of neighborhood social cohesion, see [LINK TO FULL REPORT](#).



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2929 N Central Ave, Suite 1550, Phoenix Arizona 85012 | 602.385.6500 ph | 602.385.6510 fx