

Connections and Engagement

A Closer Look



Small Steps to Big Change

Vancouver Foundation's *2012 Connections and Engagement Survey* found that most neighbourhood connections in metro Vancouver are weak, most residents do not participate in any form of community activity, and forging meaningful relationships is a challenge for many, particularly across barriers of difference such as ethnicity.

The survey goes a long way toward understanding how people experience life in the region. It measures the scope and strength of relationships with friends, neighbours and people in the larger community. It measures attitudes towards others. It measures participation in activities that make neighbourhoods and communities better places to live. And it explores the barriers that prevent people from connecting and engaging.

What the survey did not do was examine what people need in order to move from being isolated, indifferent to one another and disengaged from community life, to being caring and involved citizens.

We asked Sentis Market Research to use the data from the survey to create a model that would show the drivers that can change people's attitudes and influence their actions.

Caring and Involved Residents Scale

Sentis began by analyzing the attitudes and actions of all 3,841 survey participants. Then they created a scale from 0 to 5 that they called the Caring and Involved Residents scale and put all respondents on that scale based on how they responded to five measures.

People who scored 0 had the lowest levels of connection and engagement across the five measures. People who scored 5 had the highest. This means they:

1. were the most optimistic about their neighbourhoods
2. felt their neighbours would work together to solve local problems
3. participated in neighbourhood and community projects in the last year
4. attended a neighbourhood and community meeting in the last year, and
5. volunteered in the last year.

0 lowest level of care/involvement	1	2	3	4	5 highest level of care/involvement
23%	27%	22%	16%	9%	3%

The table shows that just 28 per cent of survey participants received a score of 3 or higher, meaning they answered in the positive direction on at least three of the five items.



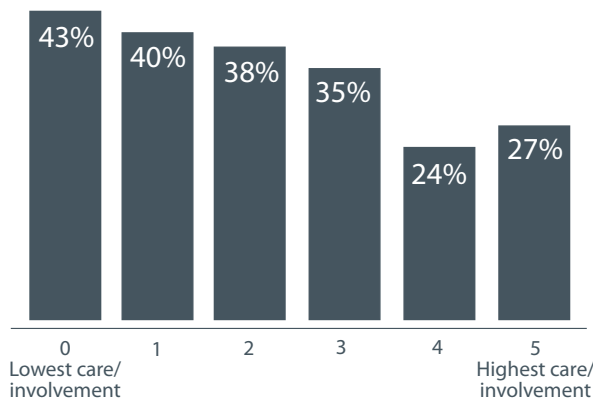
Validating the Caring and Involved Residents scale

Sentis validated the Caring and Involved Residents scale by proving the connection between it and the characteristics of strong, vibrant neighbourhoods and communities that we measured in the survey. Here are three examples.*

1. Connecting across cultural and ethnic boundaries

The Caring and Involved Residents scale does not include any variables that tap directly into residents’ relationships or attitudes toward different cultural groups. However, as scores on our scale increase, so does the likelihood that residents will attend cultural and ethnic events different from their own culture, and the likelihood that they will have close friends in an ethnic group different than their own.

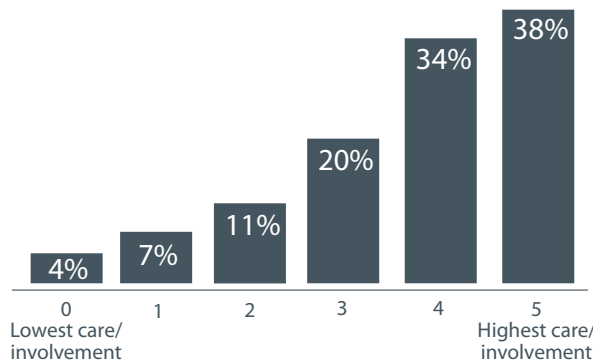
Percentage with no close friends in a different ethnic group



2. Civic participation

Higher scores on the Caring and Involved Residents scale are strongly associated with attendance at school board and city council meetings, and with the likelihood that residents will sign petitions. The survey results showed that these forms of participation were also associated with participation closer to home—for example, getting together with neighbours, participating in a neighbourhood or community event—as well as a greater sense of trust among neighbours and a willingness to help neighbours.

Percentage who have attended a city council or school board meeting in the past year



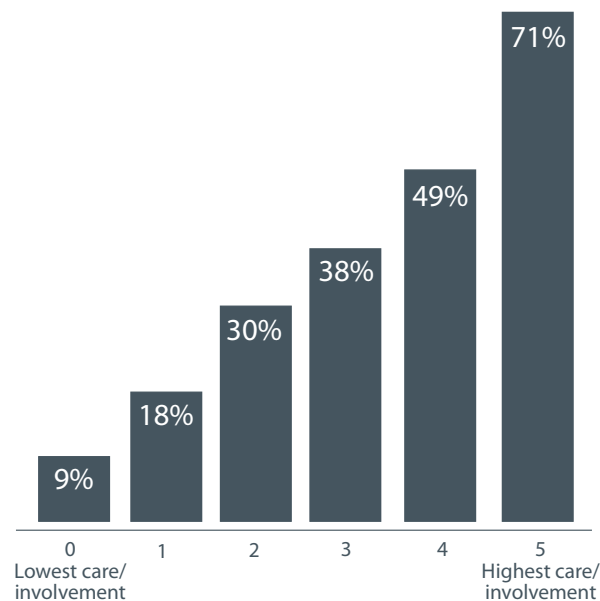
*The full set of tables is in the Sentis report, *From Connection to Engagement: Pathways to a More Caring and Involved Citizenry*, at www.vancouverfoundation.cda/connect-engage

3. Neighbourhood relations

The survey found strong relationships between meaningful contact with neighbours and neighbourhood trust. Those who have regular conversations with their neighbours and who get together with their neighbours socially are more trusting, and are more likely to participate in neighbourhood and community activities. Those who do not feel a sense of trust among neighbours feel much less welcome in their neighbourhood. They also feel more alone and find it difficult to make friends.

They are also more likely to hold negative attitudes about the future direction of metro Vancouver. For example, they are more likely to agree that Vancouver is becoming a resort town for the wealthy. It is not surprising, therefore, that low scores on the Caring and Involved Residents scale are strongly associated with a lack of neighbourhood trust and a lack of meaningful contact with neighbours.

Percentage who have been over to a neighbour's home in the past year



Implications of the Caring and Involved findings

The extent to which residents score higher on the Caring and Involved Residents scale, the more they connect across cultures, develop stronger personal relationships, feel comfortable in community spaces, trust their neighbours, and participate in civic life.

In most cases, the differences between those who score 0 versus those who score 3 or higher are very dramatic, meaning that trying to influence scores on this scale in a positive direction will have a significant impact on neighbourhoods and community.

What is more, the results are relevant not only for Vancouver Foundation but also for a wide range of organizations and groups:

- Governments should be interested given the implications for civic participation.
- School boards should be interested given the relationship between the scale and attendance at school board meetings.
- Police departments should be interested given the powerful relationship between the scale and the extent to which neighbourhoods contain residents who are actively interested in their neighbours' welfare.
- Social service agencies should be interested given the relationship between the scale and the extent to which residents can forge meaningful personal relationships within a diverse community.
- Land use planners should be interested given the implications of the scale for the use of community spaces.

The Drivers of Change

The next question was what would move people from 0 to 1 on the Caring and Involved Residents scale. What would move people from 1 to 2, and so on.

Again, using the survey data and testing over 100 models, Sentis created a model that shows the drivers of change. They found two pathways that can change people's attitudes and actions:

1. A bridging pathway. This strengthens bridges between groups, for example between people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.
2. A bonding pathway. This strengthens the bonds within groups, for example between neighbours.

It's important to note two things about these pathways:

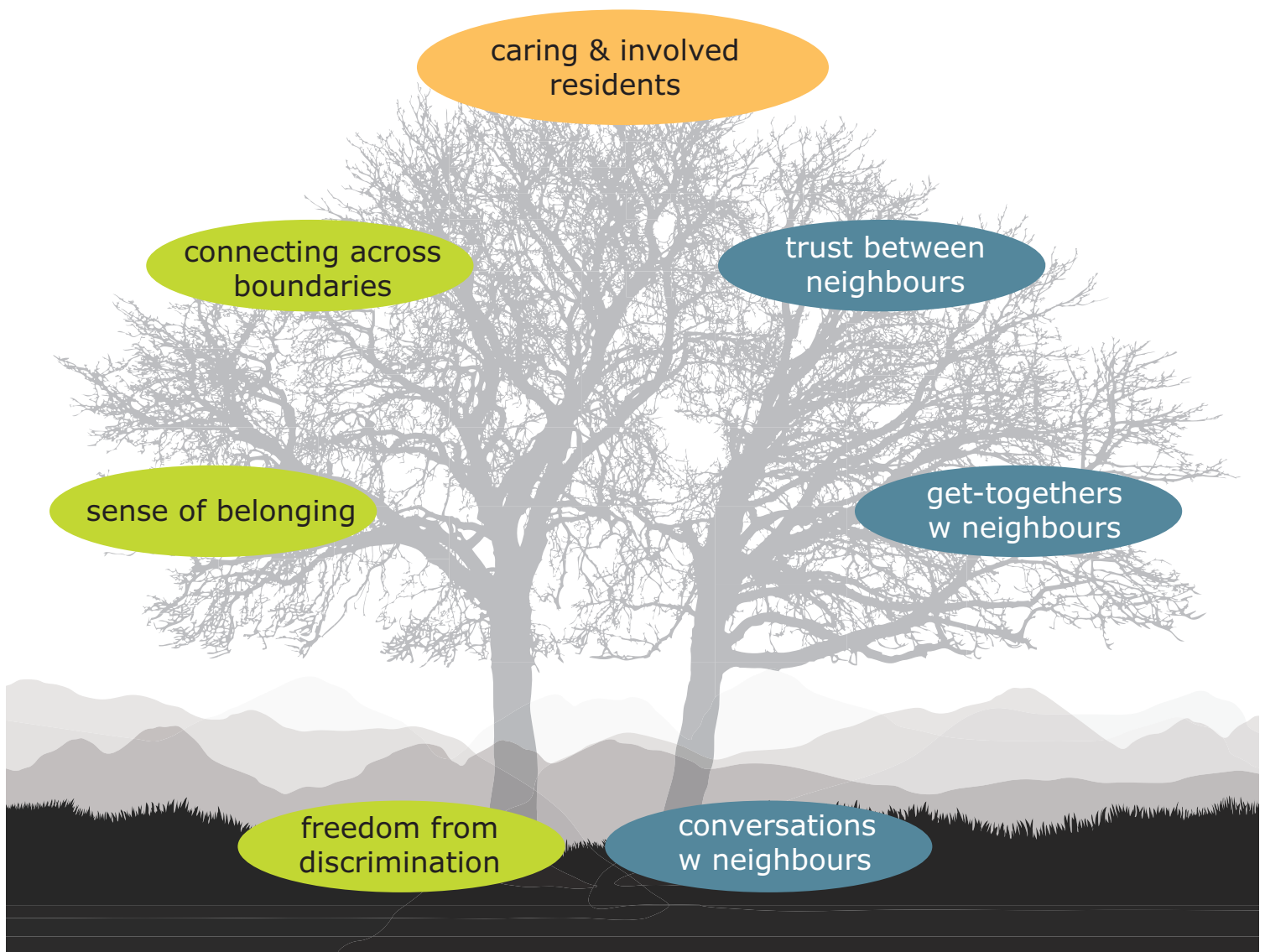
- The survey measured neighbourhood and community connections and engagement. That is why the model shows these particular pathways. If we had measured, for example, the role of government or business in creating stronger communities, the model would look different and there would be different pathways.
- There is overlap between the two pathways. For example, strengthening bonds between neighbours in diverse neighbourhoods would also strengthen bridges between groups of people with different backgrounds.

The model explained

At the base of the bridging pathway is “freedom from discrimination”, whether that is based on ethnicity or age, or one’s economic situation, appearance or disability status. Feeling discriminated against is the key barrier—the first door that must be opened—before people can feel a part of their neighbourhood and community.

As the model shows, freedom from discrimination fosters a stronger sense of belonging. That leads to more trust, a greater ease in forging relationships and connecting across boundaries such as ethnicity, more care about the welfare of neighbours, and a greater sense of personal obligation to improve our neighbourhood and community.

At the base of the bonding pathway is “conversations with neighbours”. Interactions—more than just a wave or casual hello—have a direct impact on trust. When we trust our neighbours we become committed to acting in their best interests. We take collective steps to make the neighbourhood and community a better place to live—for everyone. We care and get involved.



Conclusions

The Connections and Engagement Survey showed that the more often people talk to their neighbours, the higher the trust levels in the neighbourhood. People who do more than just know their neighbours' names, who do favours for each other and who go over to one another's homes, report higher levels of trust and are more optimistic that the ties in their neighbourhood are growing stronger.

Weak neighbourhood connections are associated with a lack of trust, and pessimism about neighbours' willingness to work together to solve local problems or make the neighbourhood a better place to live.

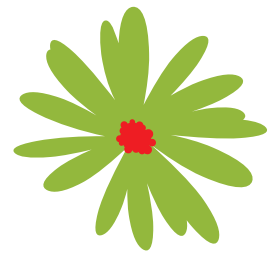
The survey also showed that people who report feeling isolated and alone are less trusting of others. They feel less cohesion with their neighbours, and attitudes toward community harden, leading to disengagement.

The survey also revealed the challenges of living in an increasingly diverse region. Over one-third of the respondents have no close friends outside their own ethnic group. Most agree that people prefer to be with others of the same ethnicity. In neighbourhoods with a greater diversity of languages, there is a lower sense of trust and a lower sense that the neighbours would work together to solve local problems.

The Sentis model complements the survey by showing the drivers that can change people's attitudes and influence their actions. Through the bridging and bonding pathways it shows how residents can become more caring and engaged.

The model also demonstrates why those who are interested in building vibrant neighbourhoods and communities should care about influencing the things we measured—and why they should be interested in moving residents from 0 to 1, from 1 to 2, and so on, on the Caring and Involved Residents scale. It would be difficult to argue that those who scored higher on the scale do not represent the types of residents that community leaders and government officials view as the strategic reserve that will keep the work of neighbourhood and community moving forward, even when funding to address a range of neighbourhood and community issues becomes scarce.

For the complete report, including recommendations, information about the strength of the drivers, and technical aspects of the statistical procedures, see the full report at www.vancouverfoundation.ca/connect-engage



About this publication

A Closer Look is a series that explores, in more detail, some of the interesting findings from our Connections and Engagement Survey released June 2012. The survey and analysis was done by Sentis Market Research, who interviewed 3,841 people across metro Vancouver.

The full survey report is on our website at: www.vancouverfoundation.ca/connect-engage

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