

# Connections and Engagement



A survey of metro Vancouver  
June 2012

vancouver  
foundation

## Table of Contents

3	Background	26	Community Connections
4	Introduction	38	Understanding the Undecided
5	Methodology	40	Opportunities
6	Key Findings	42	About Vancouver Foundation
8	Personal Friendships	43	Acknowledgments
16	Neighbourhood Connections		



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**Web:** [vancouverfoundation.ca/connect-engage](http://vancouverfoundation.ca/connect-engage)

**Email:** [info@vancouverfoundation.ca](mailto:info@vancouverfoundation.ca)

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# Background

This report is a result of a journey we began in the summer of 2011. We set out to learn what issue people in metro Vancouver care about the most. The intent was to help us decide where to focus additional energy and resources to have a greater impact in the community.

As a community foundation we fund across a broad range of issues. This is our strength. It is also our weakness in that it pulls us in many directions. While we wanted to remain a broad funder, we also knew it was time to dedicate more effort to tackling a specific, community-identified challenge.

In 2011 we polled 275 charitable organizations. We also talked to over 100 community leaders across metro Vancouver. What they told us was a surprise. We expected people would choose poverty or homelessness or any of the social ills that dominate the headlines. They did talk about these things, but none emerged as the most important.

What people said concerned them the most was a growing sense of isolation and disconnection. They said we live increasingly in silos, separated by ethnicity, culture, language, income, age and even geography. They lamented what they saw as a deepening civic malaise that has resulted in more people retreating from community activities. They said this corrosion of caring and social isolation hurts them personally and hurts their community.

And they asked us a hard question: How can we begin to tackle complex issues like poverty and homelessness if people are disconnected, isolated and indifferent? How can we make people care about community issues if their concern stops at their front yard?

In the end, the big question for our foundation was “what can we do to help build a more connected and engaged community in metro Vancouver?”

This survey is an important first step in our work. We invite you to read it and begin to look for ways that we can all help build a connected and engaged community.



# Introduction

Before we could invest in building a more connected and engaged community, we needed to understand our starting point. We also wanted data on what areas of the community needed our investments the most.

We worked with **Sentis Market Research** to design a survey that would measure how connected and engaged residents are in metro Vancouver. The survey would also explore what prevents people from being more connected and engaged.

When we use the word “connections” we mean our relationships with others and the strength of those relationships. “Engagement” means our commitment to community and the willingness to take actions to solve problems or participate in activities that make our community better.

Connections and engagement are two sides of the same coin. It is only through strong relationships that we can care enough to work together to make our community a better place for everyone.



# Methodology

In our survey we measured connections and engagement on three levels – from the micro to the macro level of our lives.

First, we explored the most intimate level of connection – people's personal friendships.

We then moved on to ask about their connections to their neighbours and neighbourhood.

Lastly, we investigated people's relationship with and attitudes toward the larger community of metro Vancouver.

We also inquired about residents' participation in various aspects of community life, and explored what prevents them from being more connected and engaged.

In total, we surveyed 3,841 people across metro Vancouver. Sentis used a mixed mode method for gathering the data: 2,806 online surveys and 1,035 telephone interviews were collected in April and May, 2012. Over 80 ethnic groups were represented. Most interviews took place in English. When necessary, interviews were also conducted in Cantonese, Mandarin or Punjabi. The survey has a margin of error of +/- 1.6% at the 95% level of confidence.

For more on methodology and demographic information, please visit our website at:  
**[www.vancouverfoundation.ca/connect-engage](http://www.vancouverfoundation.ca/connect-engage)**



# Key findings

As a community foundation, we care deeply about people and community. Part of our goal for this survey was to measure how residents are experiencing life in metro Vancouver right now. And there is much good news to report.

Of even more value to our foundation is an understanding of how we can strengthen our community. We are particularly interested in identifying the gaps; the areas where we can help improve people's lives and help people connect and engage for the greater good of everyone in the community.

There are interesting patterns that emerge in the data, as you will see in the following pages. Certain groups of people are struggling more than others to feel connected and engaged. Ignoring their needs will cost our community.

This report is a high-level overview of the findings. Over the next few months we will delve deeper into the data to better understand how specific groups of residents are experiencing life in our region and we will release additional reports.

Most important however, is the way forward. This survey was not just an investigative exercise. It was designed to inform our work as a community foundation. In the final section of this report, entitled "Opportunities", we share how we will begin to use this information to help build a better connected and engaged community in metro Vancouver.



# These are the key gaps the survey identifies:

- **Metro Vancouver can be a hard place to make friends.** One-third of the people we surveyed say it is difficult to make new friends here. And one in four say they are alone more often than they would like to be. In both cases, people who experience this also report poorer health, lower trust and a hardening of attitudes toward other community members.
- **Our neighbourhood connections are cordial, but weak.** While most of us know the names of at least two of our neighbours, the connections typically stop there. Most of us do not do simple favours for our neighbours (like taking care of their mail when they are away) and fewer have visited a neighbour's home or invited a neighbour over.

The most often-cited reason for not knowing neighbours is that people seldom see each other. However, another significant reason seems to be indifference: we prefer to keep to ourselves, or have little interest in getting to know our neighbours.

One-third of the people we surveyed do not know if their neighbours trust each other. And barely a majority thinks that the ties in their neighbourhood are growing stronger.

We found that it isn't enough to know your neighbour's name and say hello. Instead, things like doing small favours for one another and inviting each other over lead to greater trust, greater commitment to community and the willingness to work together in the neighbourhood's interests.

- **Many people in metro Vancouver are retreating from community life.** In the past year, most of us have not participated in neighbourhood and community activities.

It isn't a lack of time that stops people from getting involved. The most often-cited reason for not participating in neighbourhood and community life is a feeling that we have little to offer.

- **There are limits to how people see diversity as an opportunity to forge meaningful connections.** Over one-third of us have no close friends outside our own ethnic group. And we generally believe that people prefer to be with others of the same ethnicity.

Many people believe all new immigrants and refugees, regardless of where they come from, would be welcome in their neighbourhood. However, some residents rank which groups they believe would be the most and the least welcome.

- **The affordability issue in metro Vancouver is affecting people's attitudes and beliefs.** Most people believe Vancouver is becoming a resort town for the wealthy. These same people also tend to think that there is too much foreign ownership of real estate.

# Personal Friendships





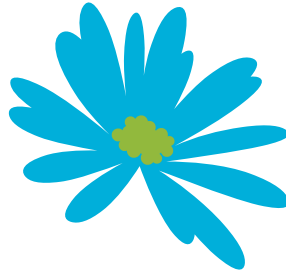
# Our findings

We start with our friends – our closest personal relationships. It's our friends who listen to us when we are troubled, support us when we are hurting, grieve with us, care for us. They create safe places for us at the same time they open the world to us. It is often friends who inspire us through their own actions to get involved in causes.

As part of a benchmark survey, we wanted to do a simple count of the number of friends people have. We also wanted to separate that from the number of close friends people have.

But we also wanted to measure something that we often hear about our community – that it's hard to make new friends here, and that people are alone more often than they would like. We found that one-third of all people across metro Vancouver say it is difficult to make new friends here. People who have lived in Canada or in their neighbourhood for fewer than five years find it the hardest to make friends. We might say that this just makes sense but these are precisely the people who are trying to make friends – who need to make friends – and who are finding it difficult.

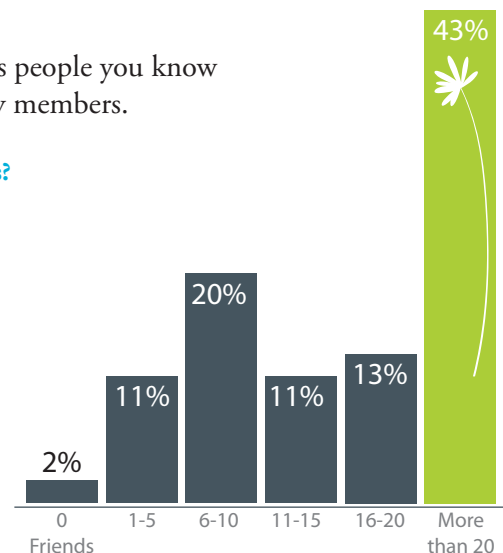
Our survey also found what we consider to be a high level of loneliness in metro Vancouver. One in four people say they are alone more often than they would like. Young people aged 24 to 34 and people living in suites in houses (like basement apartments) report feeling alone more than others.



## Number of friends

We asked people about their friendships, which we defined as people you know and like and socialize with but who are not relatives or family members.

**Question: How many people would you count among your friends?**



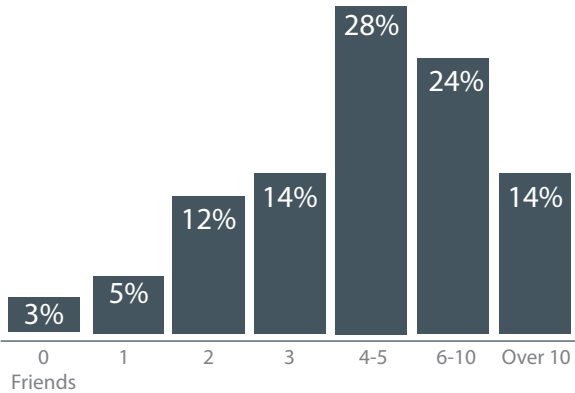
## Number of close friends

Because it is human nature to count casual acquaintances among our friends — from work colleagues to the friendly, local shopkeeper — we decided to dig deeper. We asked people about their really close friends, which we defined as people you can confide in, tell your problems to, or call when you really need help.

**People who have been in Canada for fewer than five years** have smaller networks of close friends. 42% report a network of three or fewer close friends. This compares to those living here six years or longer (32%).

There are no differences between the number of close friends reported by men or women. But there is a difference across ages. 32% of young people aged 18 to 24 report they have four to five close friends, while only 22% of **people over 65** report the same number.

**Question: How many really close friends do you have?**



## Close friends in the neighbourhood

We were curious about whether people lived in the same neighbourhood as their close friends. We found that the majority have at least one close friend nearby.

**South Asians** are the least likely to say they had at least one close friend living in their neighbourhood (48%).

**Question: Of your really close friends, how many live in your neighbourhood?**

0	34%
1-2	35%
3-5	19%
6-10	8%
Over 10	4%

## Close friends from a different ethnic group

The majority of people who took our survey have one or more close friends from a different ethnic background. However, 35% of people polled had no close friends outside their ethnic group. This figure is even higher for seniors. 44% of **seniors** report no close friends from a different ethnic background.

People of **South Asian** descent are significantly more likely than other groups to have at least one close friend from a different ethnic group (89%).

**Question: Of your really close friends, how many are in a different ethnic group than your own?**

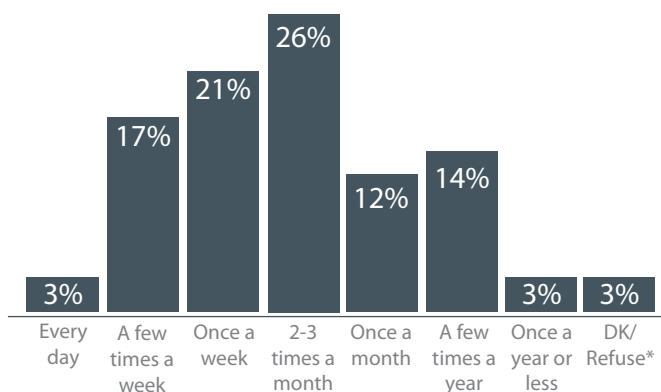
0	35%
1-2	34%
3-5	20%
6-10	7%
Over 10	4%

## Frequency of getting together with close friends

People who have **lived in Canada for fewer than five years** have a smaller network of close friends but they get together with them more frequently – 54% get together with close friends at least once a week. Compare this to people who have lived here six years or longer (38%).

The majority of people between the ages of 18 and 24 report seeing their close friends once a week or more. That frequency drops for people aged **25 to 54**, suggesting that as you get older and have more obligations, time becomes an issue. After 65, time frees up, and so does your time to socialize.

**Question: How often do you get together with your really close friends?**



***“People are polite but  
I wish they were more friendly.”***

**Vancouver survey respondent**

\*DK/Refuse is an abbreviation for ‘Don’t Know/Prefer Not to Answer’

## Obstacles to seeing close friends

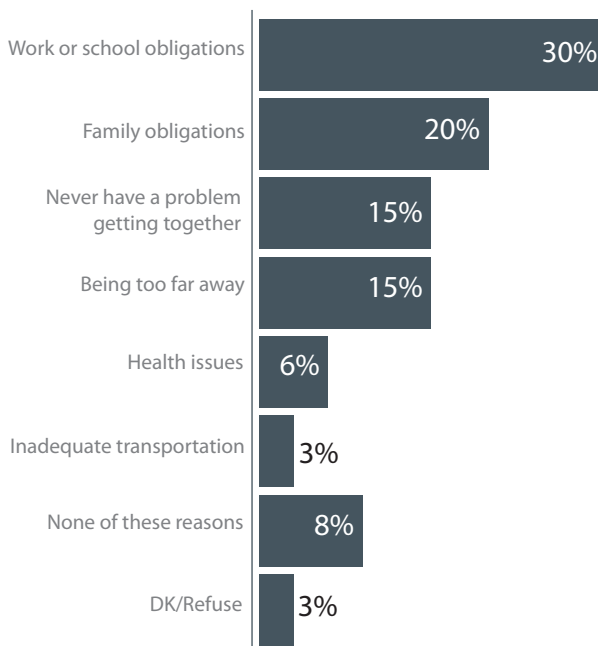
A slim majority of people usually socialize at one another's home or apartment.

Despite the often-cited complaints about transportation in the region, it does not register as among the most important reasons for not getting together with friends. Work, school and family obligations represent the biggest barriers.

Of those who get together in a public space like a community centre or park, there is a large spike among people who have **lived in Canada for fewer than five years**. For that group, 64% use public spaces to get together, compared to 42% of longer-term Canadians.

When examined by ethnicity, the highest users of community centres or parks to get together with friends are **South Asians** at 50%, compared to Chinese at 39%.

**Question: When you have problems getting together with your really close friends, which one of the following most often gets in the way of seeing them?**



## Difficulty making friends in metro Vancouver

We often hear that Vancouver can be a difficult place to make friends. Newcomers describe people here as polite but distant. People who moved here years ago tell stories about feeling alone for a long time; not being invited over for dinner by new work colleagues, introduced to people or shown around their new city.

A simple count of friends does not get at this more elusive attitude toward how hard it can be to create a social network. We asked people if they agreed or disagreed with the statement “It is difficult to make new friends here.”

Our survey found that even though people report frequent get-togethers with their close friends, 31% still feel that metro Vancouver can be a challenging place to develop friendships.

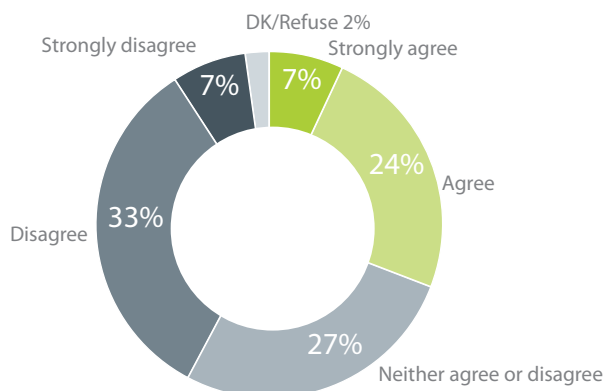
Although there was a “don’t know” option, a significant number (27%) replied they neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. It may be indifference to the question, or perhaps their experience making friends is mixed: sometimes it has been easy, and sometimes not easy.

51% of **adults living with people who are not family members** think that it’s hard to make friends here. **People aged 24 to 34** find it harder to make friends than people younger or older than them.

50% of people who have **lived in Canada for fewer than five years**, and 44% of people who have **lived in their neighbourhood for fewer than five years**, say it is hard to make new friends.

And 43% of **people who live in suites in houses, such as basement apartments**, find it hard to make new friends.

**Statement: It is difficult to make new friends here.**



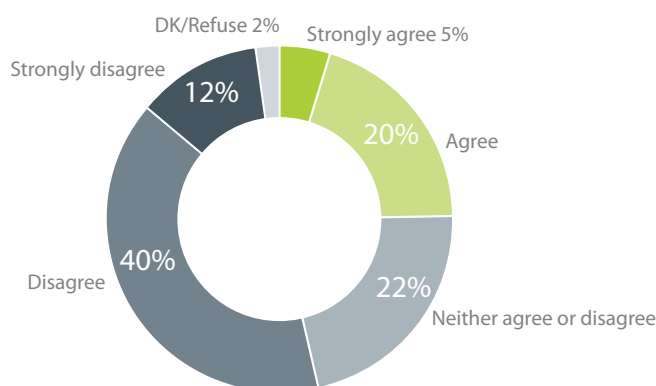
## Feeling alone

We also asked if people agreed with the statement “I find myself alone more often than I would like to be.” One in four people (25%) agreed that this was true for their lives.

Fewer, but still a sizable portion (22%), said they neither agree nor disagree, leaving us again to wonder if their experience is mixed and they can’t make up their mind which is more true, or if they are indifferent toward the statement.

Men and women’s responses were about the same. And again, as with other questions about friendships, the **24 to 34 year-olds** reported feeling more alone than people younger and older than them. People who have **lived in Canada or in their neighbourhood for fewer than five years** reported feeling alone more often than they would like. And 41% of **people living in suites in houses** experience these feelings, compared to 22% of people living in houses.

**Statement: I find myself alone more often than I would like to be.**



***“I wish people would take more time out to connect with each other. Everyone is always so busy these days and concerned about their own lives without making real-life connections with people.”***

**North Vancouver survey respondent**

# Analysis

As a community foundation, we are concerned that one-third of all the people we surveyed think that it is difficult to make new friends here, and that one in four people feel alone more often than they would like. We now know that newcomers to Canada, newcomers to neighbourhoods and young people between the ages of 25 and 34 feel this most acutely. And that these feelings seem to be affected by where people live – in a house or in a suite in a house, such as a basement apartment.

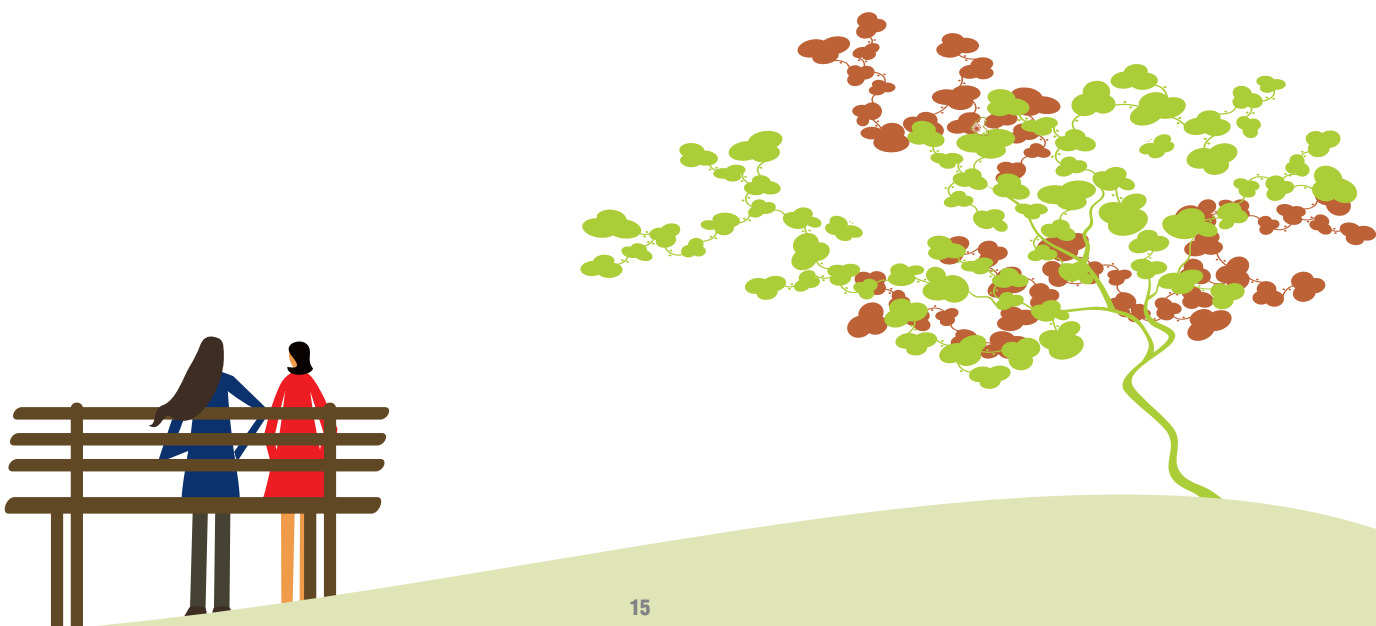
Our survey shows a link between loneliness and poor health. People who are alone are twice as likely to report fair or poor health as people who do not feel alone. Are they isolated because of their health problems or is their poor health a result of their loneliness? We don't answer that question but our survey shows the connection.

Research shows that, over time, lonely and disconnected people can move to the fringes of social networks. Lonely people have fewer friends and their loneliness can lead them to lose the few ties they have left. It is important to recognize loneliness and help these residents connect with a social network.

Friendships are critical to our well-being. We need friends the way we need air and water and shelter. There are many long-term physical and emotional benefits of close friendships:

- Research shows that loneliness is associated with a variety of mental and physical diseases that can shorten life. In fact, being lonely has as much impact on your health as being morbidly obese or smoking three packs of cigarettes a day.
- People who are socially engaged and visit with friends throughout the week are happier as they age.
- Having close friends lessens grief and helps you cope with loss, while being socially alone tends to worsen depression associated with losing a loved one.

And while we are very connected through social media — a 2010 Angus Reid poll found that people in Vancouver are more connected through social media than other Canadians — it doesn't satisfy all our needs. That same poll found that people in Vancouver are among the loneliest in the country. In the end, nothing beats face-to-face relationships.



# Neighbourhood Connections





# Our findings

Next to our personal friendships, our neighbourhood plays an important role in our day-to-day lives.

A neighbourhood is so much more than a geographically localized area. It is the place we call home, where our children play, and where we have the most invested financially and emotionally. If we care about any place in our community, it would normally be our immediate neighbourhood.

Despite the known benefits of strong neighbourhood connections, our survey found that neighbourhood relationships in metro Vancouver, while cordial, are not particularly deep.

Although there are always exceptions – certain blocks where people make an effort to really get to know one another – our neighbourhood connections are mostly at the surface. We say hello, we may know each other's first names, but it generally doesn't go much further than that.

Most of us have not had a neighbour over for a visit, or done a favour for a neighbour, like collecting their mail or newspapers while they are away. Not surprisingly, few residents report knowing where their neighbour's spare key is located, something that requires a higher level of trust.

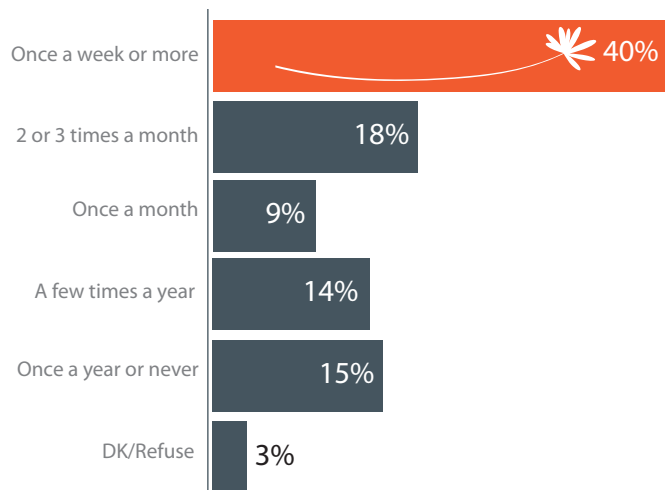


## Frequency of conversations with neighbours

We asked people to think about their immediate neighbours — the three or four households closest to them — and tell us how often they have a conversation with any of these neighbours, meaning something more than just a casual hello.

**High-rise and apartment** life clearly affects people's abilities to get to know their neighbours. Twice as many apartment dwellers (15%) as those living in townhomes or single detached homes (7%) never chat with a neighbour. Similarly, 26% of **renters** say they never chat with a neighbour or do so once a year or less, compared to 12% of homeowners.

**Question: About how often do you have a conversation with any of these neighbours – something more than just a casual hello?**



## Knowing your neighbours' names

We asked if people know the first names of at least two of their immediate neighbours.

Knowing neighbours' names depends on who you are and how you live. Among **renters**, 39% do not know the first names of at least two of their neighbours, compared to 18% of homeowners. It's worse for **people in high-rises**; 43% of them do not know at least two of their neighbours' names.

Immigrants who have **lived in Canada for under 20 years** are somewhat less likely to know their neighbours' names. And there is a difference among ethnic groups: 68% of **Chinese** residents report knowing their neighbours' names compared to 74% of all the people we surveyed.

**Question: Do you know the first names of at least two of your immediate neighbours?**

Yes	74%
No	24%
DK/Refuse	2%

## Getting together with neighbours

It's one thing to smile and wave at a neighbour; another to visit in each other's homes. Socializing with neighbours is evidence of a much closer relationship.

We wanted to know if people had their neighbours over to their house, or if they were invited to their neighbour's house.

Most people do not get together with their neighbours.

Again the same patterns emerge, with **apartment dwellers** and **those living in suites in houses** as well as **Chinese residents** being the least likely to socialize with their neighbours at home.

**Question: In the past 12 months, have any of these neighbours had you over for dinner, a barbecue or some other kind of get-together?**

Yes	26%
No	72%
DK/Refuse	2%

Newcomers — people who have been in their **neighbourhood for under three years** — are somewhat less likely to have their neighbours over (21% vs. 26% among all respondents).

**Question: And in the past 12 months, have you had any of these neighbours over for dinner, a barbecue or some other kind of get-together?**

Yes	26%
No	73%
DK/Refuse	1%



## Doing favours for your neighbours

Taking care of a neighbour's mail or picking up their newspapers when they are out of town is a relatively easy favour. Yet the majority of people we surveyed have not done this during the past 12 months. That spikes to 77% among those who live in **high rises**.

**Question: Have you taken care of the mail for one of these neighbours, or picked up their newspapers while they have been out of town?**

Yes	41%
No	57%
DK/Refuse	2%

Knowing where a neighbour keeps their spare key requires a higher level of trust than picking up their mail. Homeowners (32%) are almost twice as likely as **renters** (17%) to know where a neighbour's key is or to have been left with a spare key. By ethnicity, **South Asians, Chinese** and **other Asians** are the least likely to know where a neighbour's key is located.

**Question: Have any of these neighbours left you with a spare key for their home or told you where they keep a spare key in case of emergency?**

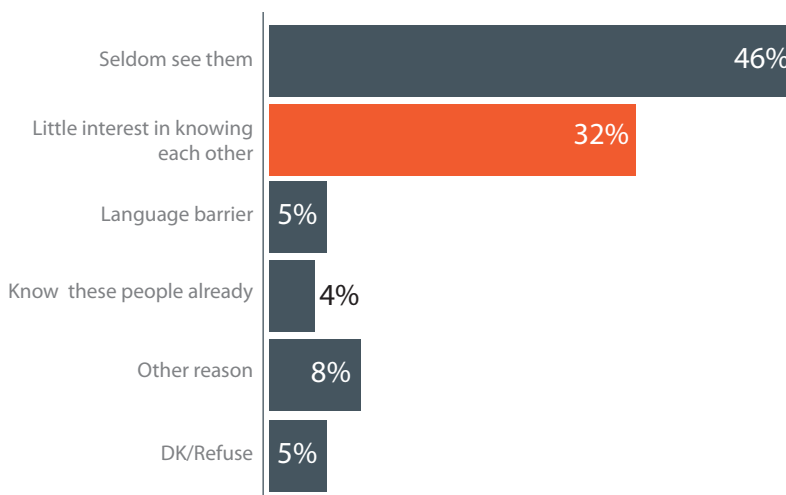
Yes	28%
No	70%
DK/Refuse	2%

## Obstacles to knowing people on your street or floor

We wanted to better understand what got in the way of people knowing their neighbours. In a day of electronic garage door openers, busy lives, and apartment or condo buildings designed to promote privacy and security, most people say they simply never see their neighbours.

However, it is notable that the second biggest reason is what could be viewed as indifference: a wish to keep to ourselves, a feeling that we have little or nothing in common with the person next door, or a sense that our neighbours don't want to know us, so why bother.

**Question: What are the reasons for why you may not know some of these people very well?**



## Diversity in the neighbourhood

We asked people to think about all the people that live on their street or on their floor. We wanted to understand the composition of the people that live around the residents we interviewed.

Our survey reflects what we know about metro Vancouver. It is a diverse community with many cultures and ethnic backgrounds sharing a street or a building.

How many speak languages different than your own?	
All or almost all	20%
About half	18%
A few	33%
None	13%
DK/Refuse	16%

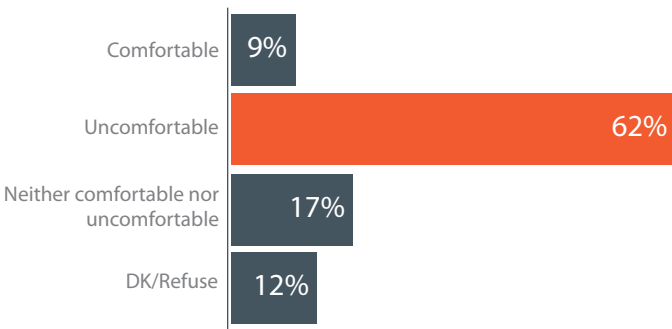
How many are in a different ethnic group than you?	
All or almost all	27%
About half	21%
A few	35%
None	7%
DK/Refuse	10%

## Welcoming neighbourhoods

It is important for us as a community foundation to understand the community we serve. That meant asking some difficult questions about how people really feel about different kinds of people moving into their neighbourhoods. Only by understanding these sentiments can we look for ways to build bridges between different types of residents.

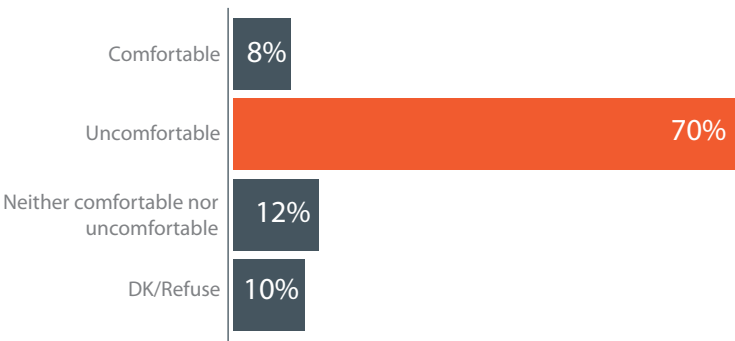
We asked people about having a shelter or group home for homeless people move into their area. Residents who have **lived in their neighbourhoods for over five years** are slightly more uncomfortable (65%) with the idea of a shelter or group home than others. Aboriginal respondents report a lower discomfort rate at 54%; as do renters at 52%.

**Question: How comfortable do you think your neighbours would be if a shelter or group home for homeless people moved into your neighbourhood?**



There is even less comfort with the idea of a shelter or group home for people with alcohol or drug addiction moving into the neighbourhood. In particular, 73% of **homeowners** are uncomfortable with the idea, compared to 61% of renters. **South Asian** (82%) and **Chinese** (80%) respondents are the most uncomfortable. Again, residents of Aboriginal descent report the lowest rate of discomfort (59%).

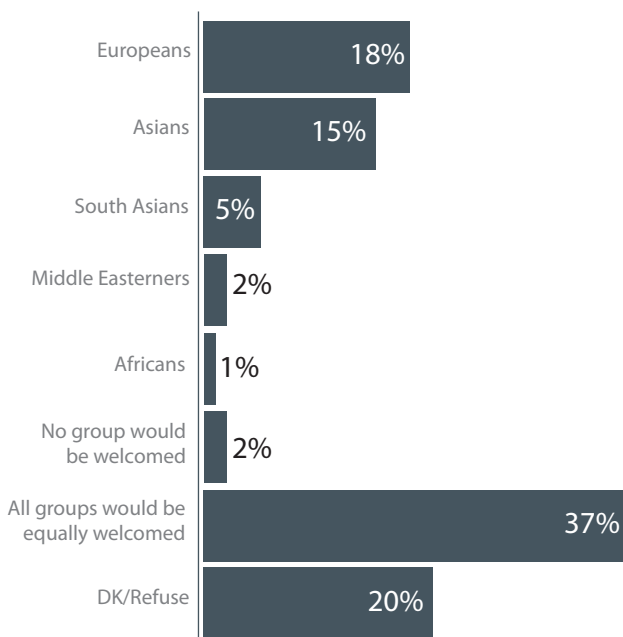
**Question: How comfortable do you think your neighbours would be if a shelter or group home for people with alcohol or drug addiction moved into your neighbourhood?**



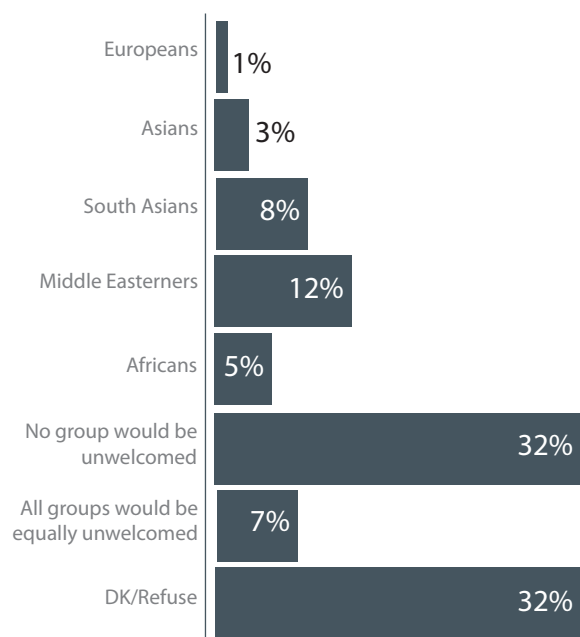
We went on to ask even more difficult questions about diversity. We wanted to know if recent immigrants or refugees from certain regions of the world moved into the area, which groups would be most welcome and least welcome by their neighbours.

Of those who answered the question, about four in 10 people feel all groups would be equally welcome. However, a significant number say they do not know or chose not to answer. This likely reflects a discomfort with the questions and/or a reluctance to rank how particular groups might be welcomed or not welcomed into the area. Or it could reflect a real lack of knowledge of their neighbours' attitudes.

**Question: If immigrants or refugees from the following places moved into your neighbourhood, which group do you think would be the most welcomed?**



**Question: And which group would be the least welcomed?**



Of those who answered the questions, most people say that no groups would be unwelcome in their neighbourhoods. An equal number say they do not know or chose not to answer.

Still, a percentage of people do rank the newcomers, and people from the Middle East (meaning countries like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, etc.) are identified as the least welcome. We don't know what is driving this attitude and further study is required to better understand what underpins this feeling. However, as a community foundation it concerns us that this feeling is broadly shared across all demographic groups regardless of ethnic origin, age, gender, income, etc.

## Neighbourhood ties

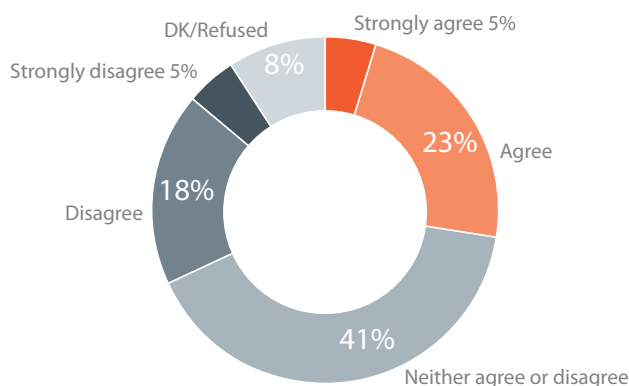
We presented a series of statements about life in neighbourhoods and asked people whether they agree or disagree.

We asked people if they think that the ties among people in their neighbourhood are growing stronger. 28% agree that they are, compared to 23% who disagree.

We found a link between attitudes about neighbourhood ties and certain interactions with neighbours. The people who do not know their neighbours' names, do not do favours for them, and do not visit at each other's homes are the same ones who disagree that neighbourhood ties are strengthening.

South Asians are significantly more likely than any other ethnic group to agree that ties are growing stronger (41%). Among the various municipalities, West Vancouver residents are also among the most optimistic about ties (44%).

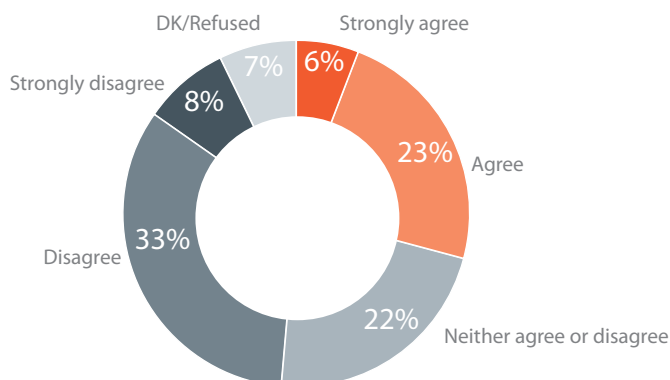
**Statement: The ties among people in my neighbourhood are growing stronger.**



We asked about cooperation and problem solving in the neighbourhood.

33% disagree with the statement "If there were problems in my neighbourhood, it would be hard to get people to work together to solve them." These are the fortunate residents who believe they live in a neighbourhood that can rally together to address issues of mutual concern. And again, there is a link between people's attitudes about their neighbours' willingness to cooperate, and their interactions with neighbours. The people who think their neighbours could work together also tend to be the same people who know their neighbours, do favours for them, and get together in each other's homes.

**Statement: If there were problems in my neighbourhood, like cars driving too fast or people not taking care of their property, it would be hard to get people to work together to solve them.**

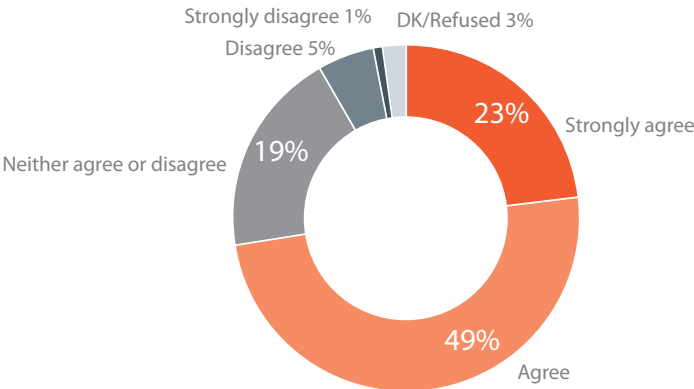


Most people say they feel welcome and that they belong in their neighbourhood. Homeowners feel this more strongly (76%) than **renters** (65%).

While most ethnicities feel welcome in their neighbourhood, **Aboriginals** are the one group more likely to disagree (15%) with the statement that they feel they belong in their neighbourhood.

As well, people **aged 25 to 34** (63%) and those who have **lived in their neighbourhood for two years or less** (62%) tend to report lower than average feelings of being welcome.

**Statement: I feel welcome in my neighbourhood and feel like I belong here.**



In terms of trust, 52% feel that people in their neighbourhood trust each other. This trust factor increases over time from a low of 43% among those who have lived in a neighbourhood two years or less to a high of 60% among those who have lived in their neighbourhood 20 years or longer.

It is notable that one-third of the people we surveyed do not know if most people in their neighbourhood trust one another.

**Question: Do you think most people in your neighbourhood trust each other?**

Yes	52%
No	15%
Don't know	32%
Prefer not to answer	1%



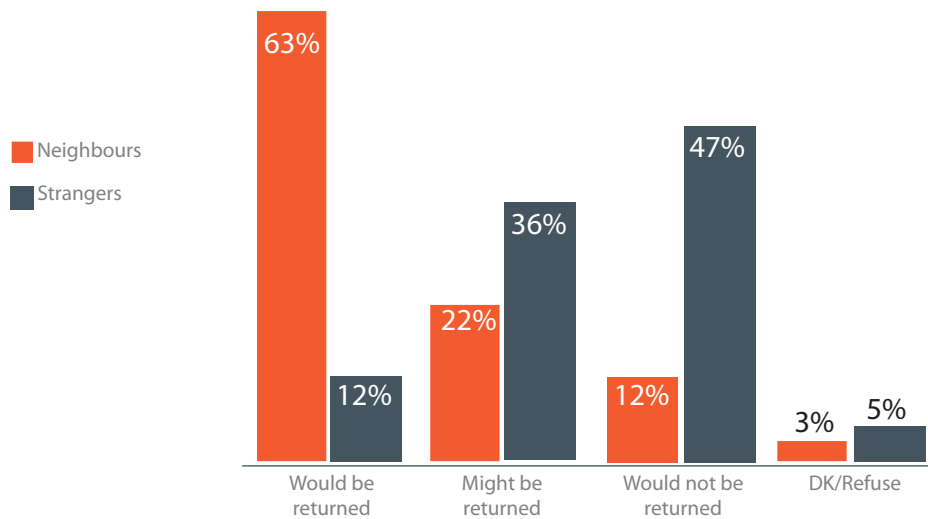
***“It would be great to have neighbours reach out more to each other. I miss knowing more of them.”***

**Richmond survey respondent**

Another way to get at the issue of trust is to ask a hypothetical question. We asked people to imagine losing a wallet or purse with 100 dollars inside. Did they think the wallet would be returned? Would it be more likely to be returned if it was found by a neighbour or a stranger?

People who have lived in their neighbourhood for more than 20 years are the most likely (72%) to expect to get their wallet back from a neighbour. Fewer **Chinese** respondents (52%) think the wallet would be returned by a neighbour. And **people aged 25 to 34** are the least likely of any age group (55%) to expect they would get their money back if a neighbour found their wallet.

**Question: If you lost a wallet or purse containing 100 dollars, how likely do you think it would be returned to you, with the money inside, if it was found by:**



***“I wish there was more friendliness between neighbours.”***

**Pitt Meadows survey respondent**



# Analysis

The neighbourhood is a critical place for community building. It also should be one of the easiest places to build connections since people have the most vested interest in what happens there.

We know from many studies that the safest and most resilient neighbourhoods are where people know each other's names and where residents see each other and get together. These are the neighbourhoods where people are the most trusting and able to work together to tackle issues of concern.

In metro Vancouver, we found many of us have polite but somewhat indifferent relationships with our neighbours.

Our survey found that after three years in a neighbourhood the extent to which people connect with and trust their neighbours doesn't change much, if at all.

In fact, whether a resident has been living in the neighbourhood for five years or more than 20 years, people are no more or less likely to say that people in their neighbourhood trust one another, or that they have neighbours over, or that they get invited to neighbours' houses, or have regular conversations with them.

Part of the reason people claim they may not know their neighbours is that they seldom see one another. However, another significant reason is that they do not seem to want to be bothered to get to know one another.

We found that 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, also report that the ties in their neighbourhood are growing stronger.

This means that very simple actions can have a direct impact on our attitudes toward our neighbourhoods, leading to a greater commitment to community.

Bonds of trust between neighbours have power. When neighbours know and trust one another, they can work together to identify and solve local problems in ways that serve everyone's interests and that help make their neighbourhood a better place to live.



# Community Connections



# Our findings

We may love our close circle of friends and care deeply about our neighbourhood but do these bonds extend to the larger community? Do we make an effort to understand the variety of cultures, histories, attitudes and values that make up our larger community?

It is in this larger arena where we have the greatest opportunity to feel part of something bigger and better; to develop connections with those who are not like us but with whom we share this place called metro Vancouver.

It's these bonds — especially across barriers of difference such as ethnicity and culture; age and income — that create the caring and compassion we need to work together for the greater good.

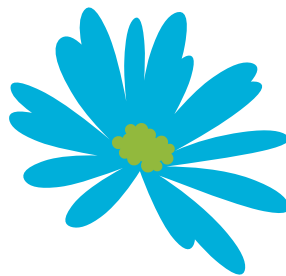
There are many examples across metro Vancouver of people and groups collaborating and working hard to create a vibrant and healthy community.

But our survey found that too many people seem to have retreated from civic life and do not participate in the many neighbourhood or community activities that are available. We were surprised to learn that the most cited reason is that people think they have little to offer.

We also uncovered some nuanced attitudes towards the community-at-large.

We found that while people embrace diversity and value what it brings to our community, most think that people prefer to be with others from the same ethnic group as their own.

We also found that the financial stress people attribute to mortgage or rent payments has a direct and negative effect on how people view their community. More than half of the people we surveyed think that Vancouver is becoming a resort town for the wealthy. And many residents link Vancouver's reputation as an exclusive place for the wealthy to foreign ownership of real estate.



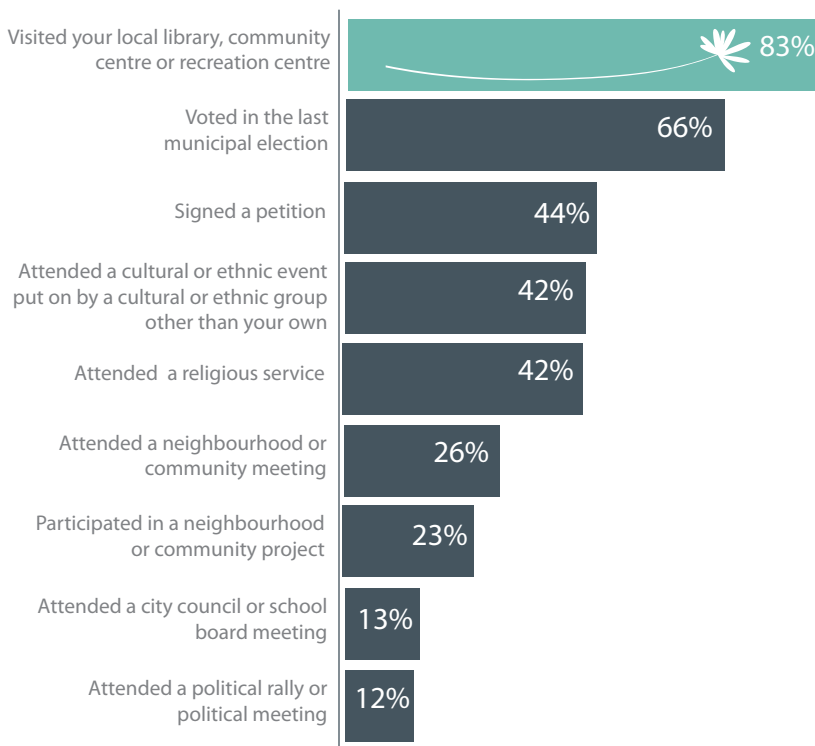
## Participation in community life

We measured participation across nine activities. Most people said they have not taken part in any of these activities during the past 12 months with the exception of two things — visiting the local library, community or recreation centre, and voting.

Libraries and community and recreation centres offer a wealth of programs, from book readings for children to ESL for adults to skills workshops and fitness classes. We are pleased to see these facilities being supported by their neighbourhoods.

As in all surveys, people overstate their voting habits. While 66% of the people we surveyed say they voted in the last municipal election, the actual voter turnout was just under 30%.

**Question: Thinking about the past 12 months, have you:**



***“We have lost a fair amount of the community neighbourhood feeling we had 20 years ago. I’d like to have that back.”***

**Coquitlam survey respondent**

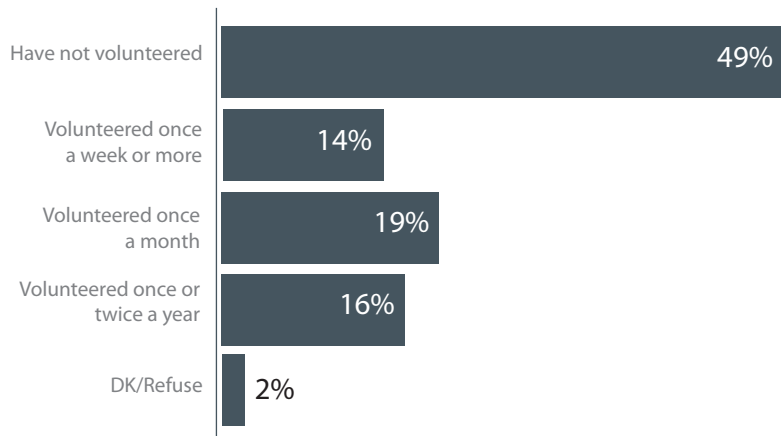
## Volunteering

Among the people we surveyed, 49% say they volunteer. That reflects what other surveys have found. The actual rate could be lower. Research shows that people who voluntarily take surveys like ours already have high rates of volunteerism.

We found that the longer people have been in Canada and the longer they live in their neighbourhood, the more likely they are to volunteer.

Homeowners are somewhat more likely (52%) to volunteer than **renters** (43%). People aged 18 to 24 report the highest volunteerism at 65%, and **25 to 34 year-olds** report the lowest levels at 45%.

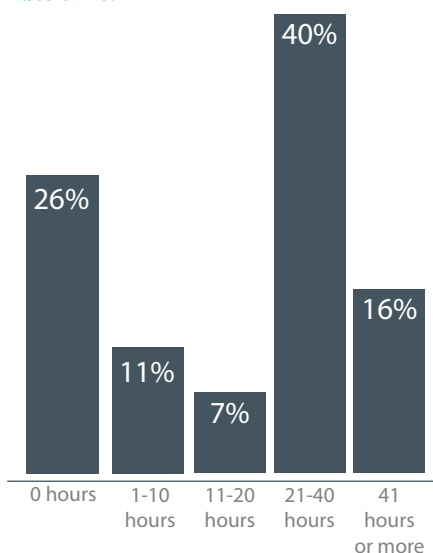
**Question: In the past 12 months, have you done any volunteer work for any organization or group? How often do you do this volunteer work?**



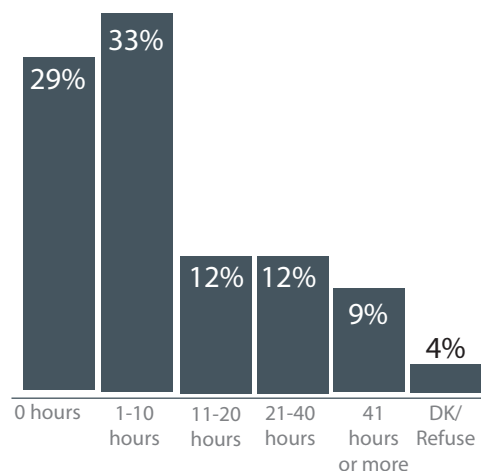
## Time pressures and financial stresses

Time spent looking after family does not appear to be hugely affected by where you live or how much money you make. It does however, depend on your age and to some extent on your ethnic background. People aged **25 to 44**, peak child-rearing years, spend more hours on family obligations. And 36% of **South Asians** report looking after family members 20 hours a week or more, compared to 21% of all people surveyed.

**Question: Approximately how many hours per week do you spend at work or at school, not counting your commute time?**

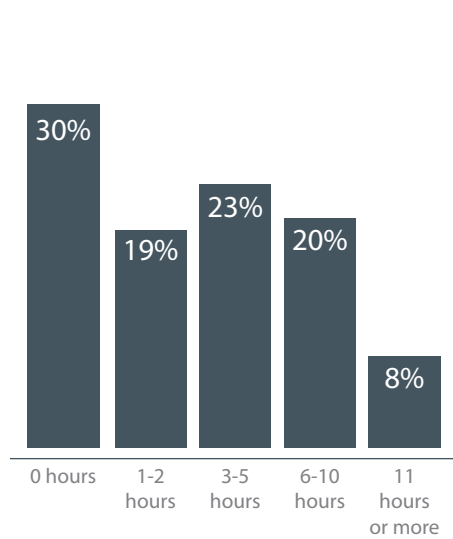


**Question: Approximately how many hours per week do you spend looking after family members?**

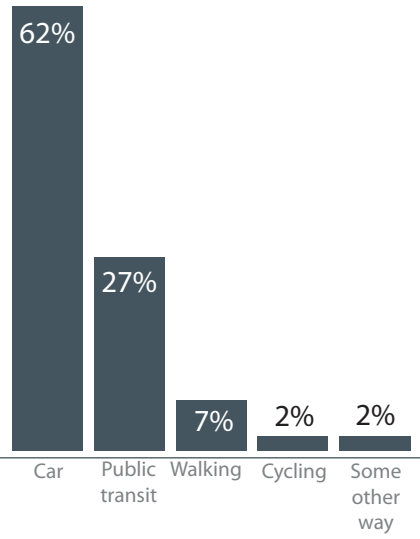


Not surprisingly, Vancouver residents report shorter commute times, less car use and slightly more public transit and bicycle use. Among Richmond residents, 75% use their cars to get to work or school, compared to 49% of Vancouver residents.

Approximately how many hours per week do you spend commuting to work or school?



And do you mainly commute by car, public transit, walking, cycling or some other way?



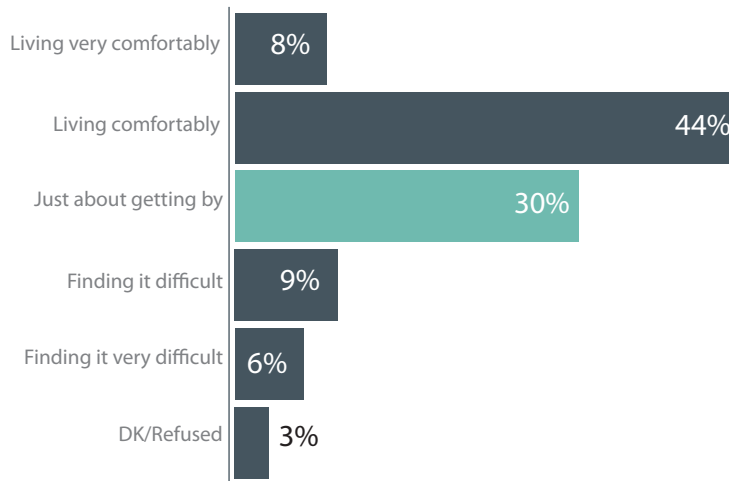
***“I no longer recognize my neighbourhood as the place I grew up in. I often feel like I am living in a different country.”***

**Delta survey respondent**

Vancouver was recently ranked as the most expensive city in North America to live in. This comes as little surprise to the many metro Vancouver residents who want to build their futures here, buy homes and raise children.

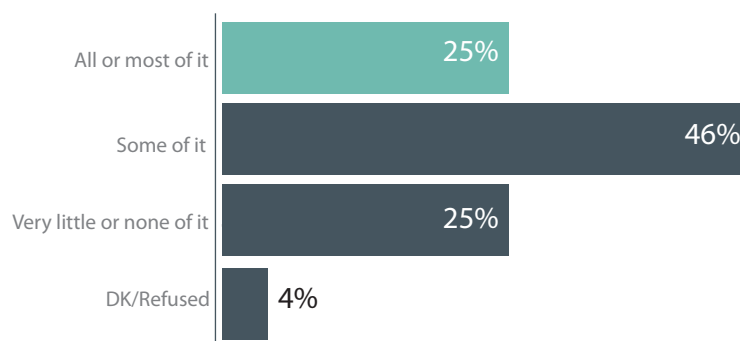
Our survey found that 45% of residents say they are ‘just about getting by’ or ‘finding it difficult or very difficult.’ Seven in 10 attribute some or all of their financial stress to the size of their mortgage or rent payments. Clearly, housing affordability remains a critical issue for Vancouver and the region.

**Question: How well would you say you are managing financially these days?**



Among those who say they are ‘just about getting by’ or ‘finding it difficult or very difficult’, 71% say some, all or most of it is because of mortgage or rent payments.

**Question: How much of that is because of mortgage or rent payments you have to make?**



## Obstacles to community engagement

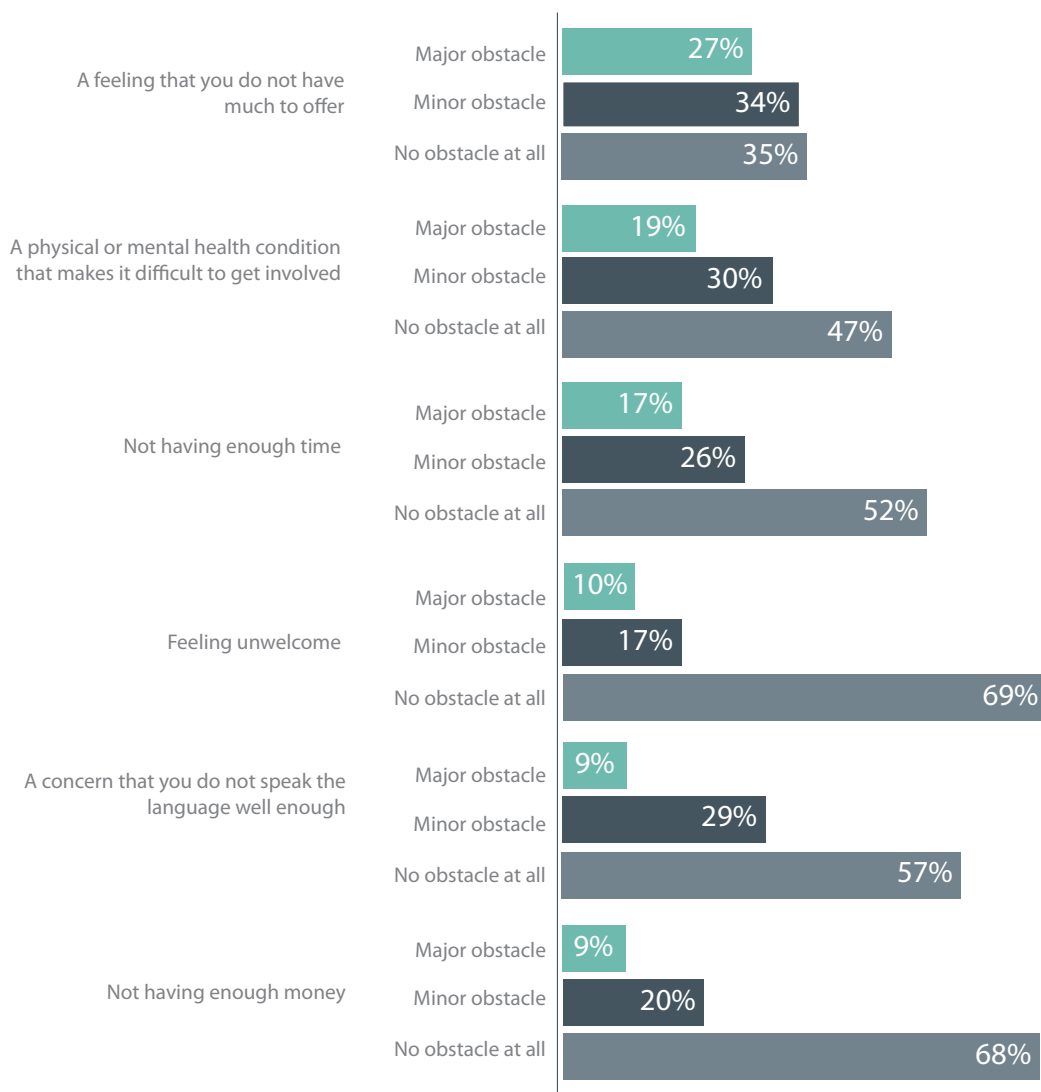
We wanted to understand what prevents people from being more engaged in their community. So we presented them with a variety of reasons and asked if these were a major, a minor or no obstacle to being more active in civic life.

Despite the diversity of metro Vancouver, it is not language that presents the biggest barrier to participation. Instead, the most often cited ‘major barrier’ is the belief that they don’t have much to offer (27%) — essentially a barrier based on confidence. The next most often cited barrier is a physical or mental condition that make it difficult to get involved (19%) followed in third place by a time crunch (17%).

Those who are **living in a suite** in a house (34%), those who are **under 44 years of age** (35%), and those of **Chinese** descent (32%) are likely to say that they do not have much to offer.

The groups that most often identify language as a major barrier to participation are Chinese (16%) and residents from other Asian backgrounds (15%).

**Question: Thinking about your own life, please tell me whether each of the following is a major obstacle, a minor obstacle or no obstacle at all to your participation in activities that could make your neighbourhood a better place to live.**





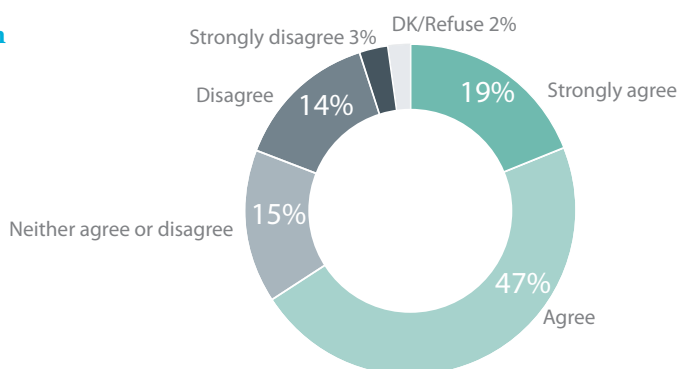
## People's connections to the larger community

We explored people's attitudes and experiences, not just in their neighbourhoods but in metro Vancouver as a whole. We did this by asking some difficult questions.

Many surveys that broach the subject of discrimination ask whether or not people have experienced prejudice at any point during a certain time period, for example, during the past 12 months. We wanted to measure the extent to which people experience discrimination in their day-to-day lives. While all instances of discrimination are harmful, experiencing prejudice in one's day-to-day life is likely to have a particularly negative impact.

Given the nature of our survey question, it may not be surprising that 66% of respondents agree that they do not experience discrimination in their day-to-day lives. We are concerned however, that 17% of respondents do. The most likely to report discrimination are **single parents** (24%), people of **Aboriginal** ancestry (27%), and **South Asians** (28%), the ethnic group with the fastest-growing number of new immigrants.

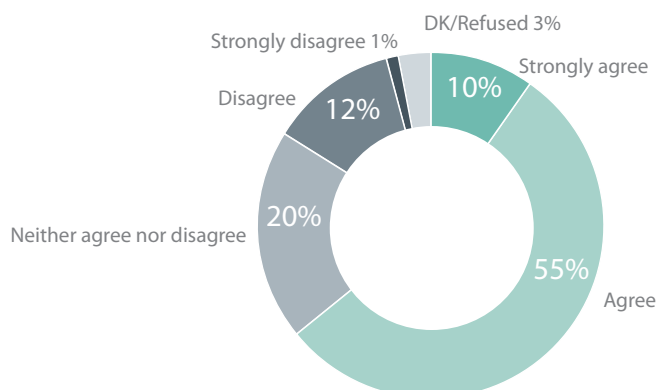
**Statement: I do not experience discrimination in my day-to-day life.**



Past surveys show that people in the region are highly tolerant of diversity, and value the contributions that different ethnic groups make in our community. We wanted to know if people see diversity as an opportunity to forge meaningful connections, or if people still prefer to associate with those in their own ethnic group.

Fully 65% of those surveyed agree that while most people are tolerant of different ethnic groups, most prefer to be with people in the same group as their own. This means that as a community, we embrace the contributions that different ethnic groups make and the opportunities they afford to enrich our lives but most of us still see our own ethnic group as our "in-group."

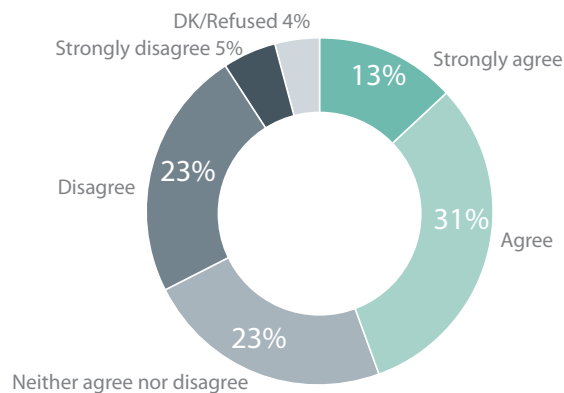
**Statement: Most people are tolerant of different ethnic groups but most prefer to be with people in the same ethnic group as themselves.**



Speaking the same language is a foundation for building meaningful relationships. We wanted to know if people think that those who do not speak English are not trying hard enough to be part of the community and build those relationships.

Our results indicate that people are conflicted on this point. While 28% do not view non-English speakers as disinterested in community participation, almost half (45%) do.

**Statement: People who live here and do not speak English simply do not try hard enough to be part of the community.**

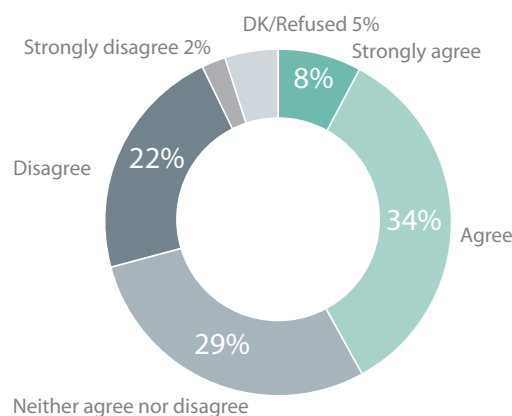


By 2031 it is estimated that over 20% of people in metro Vancouver will be 65 or older. It will become even more important to foster meaningful connections between older and younger generations.

42% of metro Vancouver residents surveyed agree that younger and older generations do not make an effort to get to know one another and understand each other. Only 24% disagree.

**Young people** are most likely to feel that the two generations are not making enough of an effort to connect. 51% of those aged 18 to 34 agree that the two generations do not make an effort to get to know and understand each other. 30% of people over 65 agree with this statement.

**Statement: The younger and older generations do not make an effort to get to know one another and understand each other.**



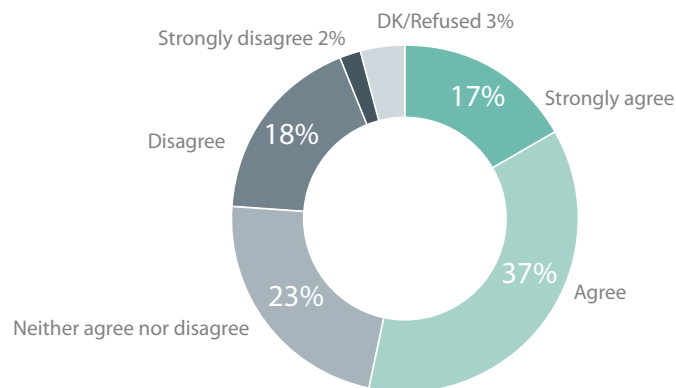
It has been suggested by some that Vancouver is becoming a place for the wealthy, and that there is too much foreign ownership of real estate here. Irrespective of whether these statements are true or not, we wanted to quantify the extent to which our community actually holds these attitudes.

Just over half of residents agree that Vancouver is becoming a resort town for the wealthy (54%) and that there is too much foreign ownership of real estate here (52%).

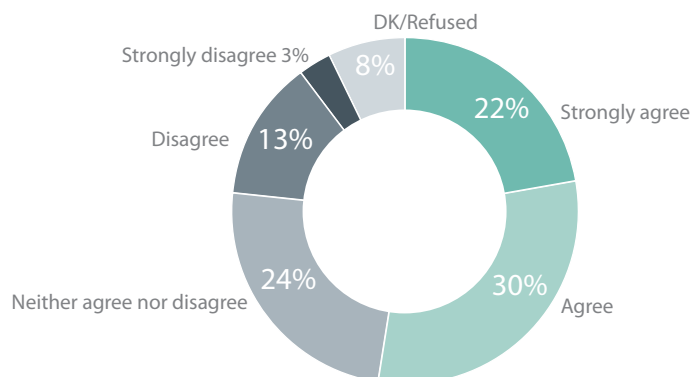
Residents between the ages of **25 and 34** are the group most likely to agree with these statements (61%). Many of these young people are likely trying to start careers and families and are confronting the high-priced housing market as first-time buyers. The challenges they face may be negatively impacting their perceptions of Vancouver as a place where the ‘average person’ can afford to live and the role they believe foreign ownership has on driving up real estate prices.

It is important to note that these two attitudes are strongly related. Among those who agree that Vancouver is becoming a resort town for the wealthy, 68% also agree that there is too much foreign ownership of real estate. This means that many residents link Vancouver’s reputation as an exclusive place for the wealthy to foreign ownership of real estate.

**Statement: Vancouver is becoming a resort town for the wealthy.**



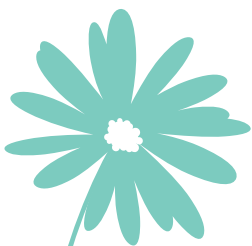
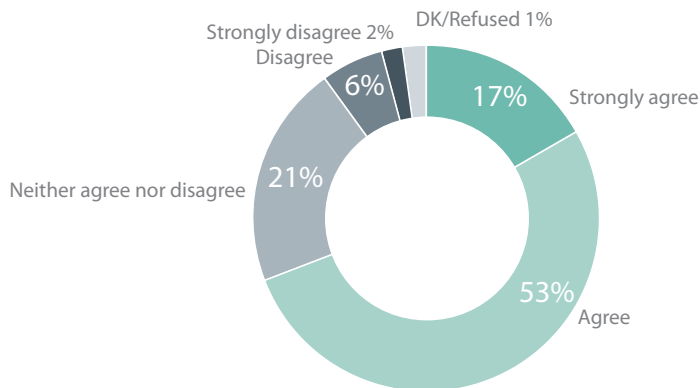
**Statement: There is too much foreign ownership of real estate.**



It's notable that despite the challenges in the region, our thin neighbourhood connections, and low participation in community life, a strong majority (70%) feel welcome and feel like they belong here. Only a small percentage feel like they do not (8%).

People who have been **living in Canada for less than 10 years** are less likely than those who have been here longer to agree that they feel welcome and belong. However, these residents still have a relatively strong sense of belonging (64% for those in Canada 10 or fewer years; 73% for those in Canada more than 10 years).

**Statement: I feel welcome in metro Vancouver and feel like I belong here.**



***“I wish that we could all speak one language, as we have trouble communicating. We still talk, but I know we would be closer if we could understand each other.”***

**Maple Ridge survey respondent**

# Analysis

As a community foundation, we are concerned that only about one in four people took part in any kind of community or neighbourhood project, such as a neighbourhood clean up or community garden. We are concerned too that in a region as diverse as ours, only about one in four people attended an ethnic or cultural event put on by an ethnic or cultural group different than their own.

Our survey shows that people's ethnic and cultural background has a dramatic impact on how they experience community. We will analyse this data thoroughly and will have more to say about diversity, and building bridges between different ethnic groups, in future reports.

Little happens when people stay home with their own kind, and aren't interested or engaged in what happens beyond their own front yard. It's getting out into the community and taking part in community activities that sparks engagement and creates the possibility of change.

It's good for the entire community and it's even good for us as individuals.

There is an astonishing finding that comes from work done in the U.S. into the benefits of connections and community engagement. Simply joining a club is as good for your health as quitting smoking, exercising or losing weight.

Despite evidence that getting involved in community activities benefits us personally, many of us are retreating from civic life. We vote less, give less, volunteer less and join less. This fraying of community leads to indifference, a corrosion of caring and compassion and a retreat from the very things that make our community a better place to live.

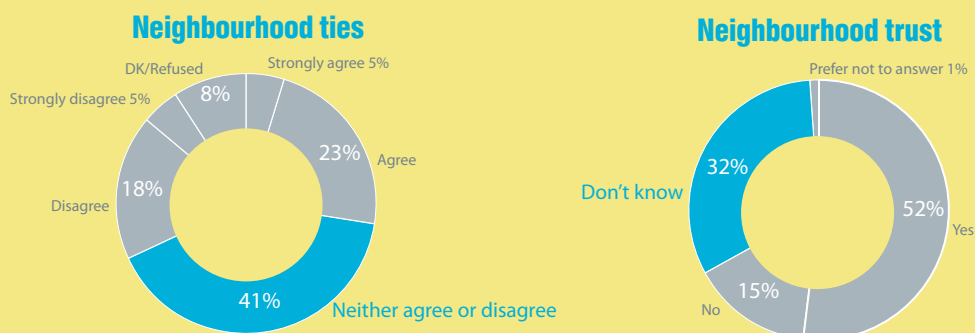
Our research tells us there is a link between negative attitudes toward the community and difficulty making friends. People who agree that it is difficult to make new friends here are much less trusting of others, are less connected to their neighbours and less optimistic about the prospect of people being able to forge meaningful connections.

We are also concerned about links between affordability and people's attitudes toward the community. This is particularly true for younger adults. Their experiences appear to negatively affect their perceptions of Vancouver as a place where the 'average family' can afford to live and the role they perceive foreign ownership has on real estate prices.



# Understanding the undecided

Throughout our survey, we were surprised to see so many people unable or unwilling to take a position on certain questions. It seemed as though large numbers of people could neither agree nor disagree on some issues. For example, 41% of the people we surveyed say they ‘neither agree nor disagree’ with the statement “The ties among people in my neighbourhood are growing stronger.” And 32% of the respondents say they ‘do not know’ if most people in their neighbourhood trust each other.



We wondered about this, and we speculate in several places throughout the report why so many people might be unable or unwilling to say what they think or how they feel. The truth is that we will never know their reasons without going back and asking them. However, we could understand them better by looking at how they answered other questions in the survey. So we asked Sentis Market Research to do just that.

**They found that the people who appear on the surface to be non-committal or undecided are in fact less trusting and more likely to have negative attitudes about neighbourhood and community.**

Here's an example: We took the question “Do you think that most people in your neighbourhood trust each other?” We looked at how the people who said ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answered other questions about their neighbours. Then we compared them to the answers from the ‘don't know’ group.

It broke down like this:

- 79% of the people who said ‘yes’ to the trust question also think that a lost wallet would be returned by a neighbour with the money inside.
- 37% of the people who said ‘no’ to the trust question think the wallet would be returned.
- And 49% of the people who said they ‘don't know’ if most neighbours trust each other think the wallet would be returned.

We can see from this that ‘don't know’ is not a neutral response to the trust question. That group is less trusting that the wallet will be returned and more like the group that said ‘no.’

The comparison holds across other variables.

We compared how people answered the trust question to how they answered a question about whether they feel welcome in their neighbourhood:

- 89% of those who think that most people in their neighbourhood trust each other also feel welcome and feel that they belong in their neighbourhood.
- 49% of the people who said 'no' to the trust question feel a sense of belonging in their neighbourhood.
- And 59% of those who said they 'don't know' if most people trust each other say they feel welcome and have a sense of belonging.

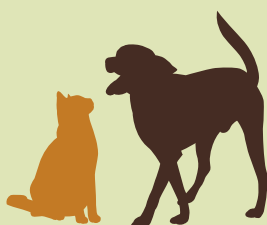
The analysis shows two important things: that perceptions of neighbourhood trust relate powerfully to how people interact with their neighbours and how they view the intentions of their neighbours. And that the large percentage who say they 'don't know' if most people in the neighbourhood can trust each other, actually act and feel like those who said 'no' to the same question.

The early analysis holds true for the group that could 'neither agree nor disagree' with certain statements. Their answers to other questions in the survey indicate that they feel less connected and less engaged with the community, and that their attitudes to community are more negative.

For example:

- 45% of the people who 'agree' with the statement "The ties among the people in my neighbourhood are growing stronger" have had a neighbour over to their house during the past year.
- 14% of people who 'disagree' with the statement who have had a neighbour over.
- And 22% of the people who could 'neither agree nor disagree' with the statement have had a neighbour over.

We will continue to analyse and report on these responses. **It is significant that the people who appear on the surface to be non-committal are in fact less trusting, feel less welcome in the neighbourhood and are less optimistic about the prospect of people being able to forge meaningful connections.**



# Opportunities

The results of our survey offer a mixed picture of our community.

But we see opportunity. We cannot fix what we don't know is broken. We cannot create bridges if we don't know there is a need for connection. Now that we know so much more about our community, we are eager to roll up our sleeves and further this work.

Even before we completed this survey, Vancouver Foundation took a hard look at everything we do and asked, "How can we better use our current resources to start building a more connected and engaged community?"

Every year we grant millions of dollars to hundreds of charities who do amazing community projects. We still want to support these great projects, but we will work with organizations to ensure that more projects – whether it's a river conservation initiative or a new theatre production – include a dimension that builds bridges and brings together people who may not have had the opportunity to work together before.

The Foundation will use the results of this survey to focus on how we can help certain residents become more connected and engaged. We will also consider what initiatives we can work on with our community partners to enhance our residents' experience of being part of a larger community. In some cases we may support further research to better understand some of the attitudes and barriers that we uncovered in this survey.

We will continue to expand our Neighbourhood Small Grants (NSG) program so that one day there will be a small grants program in every community in metro Vancouver. NSG helps residents connect and engage in their community by encouraging them to come up with ideas that strengthen their neighbourhoods. The program harnesses the existing skills of people by providing small grants of \$50 to \$1,000 for projects initiated and undertaken by local residents.

NSG stimulates creativity, encourages local solutions, builds connections between neighbours, and





engages people from all backgrounds and circumstances in the life of their community. It is an excellent tool for building bridges at the very local level.

In addition to funding projects, it is critical that we engage the general public in conversations about solutions. After all, we are all members of this community. The only way we can tackle big issues is if all community members, including business, participate in the solutions. To this end, we will be identifying ways to engage all sectors in our work.

Another first step is a collaboration with Simon Fraser University's Public Square program to host a week-long series of dialogues and events in September 2012. The summit, entitled "Alone Together: Connecting in the Urban Environment," is an opportunity to explore ideas that matter with many different audiences.

We also want to find new ways to engage current and future donors in this important work. Donors have an important role to play. They are the optimists who believe things can get better, and who demonstrate that belief by helping us invest in great ideas.

We recognize it won't always be easy for people to appreciate this concept of building a connected and engaged community. It is less tangible than buying a MRI machine or paying for a shelter bed. However, this work is just as important in creating a healthy, vibrant and livable community.

As one young woman recently said to us, "Getting people connected and engaged to their community underpins everything. Without that sense of responsibility, vast numbers of people will sit on the sidelines and we will not be able to tackle the serious problems facing our community."

We're excited about these opportunities. We're in this together.

Join us today.



# About Vancouver Foundation

At Vancouver Foundation we are passionate about community. Everything we do is designed to help build more vibrant, healthy and resilient communities across B.C.

We accomplish our work by harnessing the gifts of energy, ideas, time, and money of caring residents to make meaningful and lasting impacts. We are Canada's largest community foundation and we've been investing in our communities since 1943.

We take a very broad approach to our work, recognizing that communities are complex and that many things are needed to make them the best they can be. That's why every year, with our donors, we fund hundreds of innovative projects – large and small – in areas such as arts and culture, education, children and youth issues, environment, animal welfare, community health, and social development.

Although Vancouver Foundation is a broad funder, we also have two specific areas where we are focusing additional effort and resources for the next few years.

We want to tackle the underlying causes of youth homelessness and improve how the community addresses the needs of at-risk youth, particularly those who are coming out of the foster care system.

As well, we are concentrating on initiatives that will help strengthen our residents' connections and engagement in their community. As part of that, we want to explore ways to build bridges between the many different types of residents that call metro Vancouver home.

This survey is an important first step in this work to build a connected and engaged community.



# Acknowledgments

## Vancouver Foundation Board of Directors

Gordon MacDougall (Chair)  
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**Sentis Market Research** is a market and public opinion research firm located in Vancouver, with associates in Calgary and Toronto. The company was established in 2011 and provides services at all stages of the research process, from data collection to the implementation of strategies and action plans. For more information visit [sentisresearch.com](http://sentisresearch.com)

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