

The other side of the fence

by Frances Kremarik

“Hello, ma’am, I’m Constable Benton Fraser of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. May I be of any assistance?” These oft-repeated lines from the Canadian television program “Due South” often brought a smile to viewers as the Mountie attempted to be friendly in the tough streets of Chicago. It evoked sentiments of a sense of community and of people being good to their neighbours that is now not considered commonplace. But is a friendly “good morning” or chat by the backyard fence a thing of the past, or is the practice still with us?

Where we live, and who we are, all influence how we interact with our neighbours. Who is more likely to say hello, the fifty-year-old family man in the suburban bungalow or the twenty-something woman living with roommates in a downtown apartment? Many geographers believe that

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This article uses data from the cross-sectional component of the 1996-97 National Population Health Survey (NPHS). The NPHS asked almost 82,000 respondents to answer in-depth health questions covering issues such as health status, use of health services, activity limitations, use of medication, risk-taking behaviour and mental and psychological well-being. Part of the component related to well-being asked respondents about the extent of their social support, as measured by their frequency of contact with other people (adult children, family, friends, neighbours) and civic institutions such as volunteer organizations and places of worship. This study draws on the information gathered from almost 66,500 respondents aged 20 and over, representing 21 million adult Canadians, about the frequency of contact with neighbours.

Contact/interaction: the respondent either talked in person or on the phone with a neighbour at least once during the preceding 12 months. Contact could include social activities, but did not include actions such as waving. *High level of contact* refers to contact at least once a week (including every day). If a respondent did not report contact at least once in the previous year, they were classified as having “no contact” with their neighbours.

An exploratory regression analysis was run to estimate the relative importance of the variables discussed in this article (housing type, family structure, etc), but it did not produce conclusive results. This suggests that factors not captured by the demographic and socio-economic variables in the survey may be key predictors of interaction.

housing design has a direct impact on how we interact with our neighbours. When a porch opened onto the street, people were likely to sit there and talk to their neighbours as they walked by. Houses with the garage attached to the front, especially those equipped with electric garage door openers,

mean that people often leave their cars and go directly into the house without having any dealings with their neighbours. In multi-unit dwellings, designs that do not emphasize a common area like a main lounge or a playground make it difficult for people to meet and

Experts have struggled during the past few decades to create a definition that fully encompasses all of the aspects of a neighbourhood; as a result, it has been difficult to define a neighbourhood's boundaries. Generally speaking, it is a district within an urban area, usually with an identifiable subculture to which a majority of the residents conform.¹ More particularly, neighbourhoods are functional areas where residents can identify with the attitudes, lifestyles and local institutions (like public libraries or places of worship) that are part of the locality.² Neighbourhoods can be established in three different ways: 1) the social acquaintance neighbourhood that consists of nearby streets; 2) the homogeneous neighbourhood that consists of residences of similar quality like a subdivision; 3) the unit neighbourhood that also includes commercial and social activities like stores and schools.³

Because there is not an agreed set of parameters to establish a neighbourhood's limits but a number of highly interpretive conditions, it is difficult to agree where a neighbourhood's boundaries are. This is mainly because the area not only has a physical existence, but a psychological one as well: the physical existence is defined by spatial limits like roads or rivers, while the psychological

boundaries are delimited by social interaction.⁴ Thus, one person's neighbourhood may be every house on the same street for one block and another person's may be his street and the next street over for three blocks. People living in apartment or townhouse complexes may see it as every building in the complex, or just their building. Not only is the 'neighbourhood' a personal definition that is as unique as each individual, it is dynamic in nature and its boundaries will normally change over time.

Although a 'neighbourhood' is considered an urban phenomenon, this does not exclude rural residents from having neighbours. Some rural inhabitants would argue that they live in neighbourhoods; however, the literature has focussed on the urban habitat.

1. Johnston, R. J., D. Gregory, and D. M. Smith, eds. 1994. *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, 3rd Edition. 409.
2. Hartshorn, T. A. 1992. *Interpreting the City: An Urban Geography*, 2nd Edition. 247.
3. Harries, K. D. and R. E. Norris. 1986. *Human Geography: Culture, Interaction and Economy*. 156.
4. King, L. J. and R. G. Golledge. 1978. *Cities, Space, and Behaviour: The Elements of Urban Geography*. 248.

establish social relationships within the neighbourhood.

Using data from the 1996-97 National Population Health Survey (NPHS), this article asks whether we talk to our neighbours and how often we do so. It focuses on the role that housing type, family life cycle and place of residence may play in neighbourhood interaction.¹

Changing neighbourhoods changed social interaction

The automobile, in conjunction with new building technologies, changed the Canadian urban landscapes in the 20th century. In the early 1900s, most urban residents lived in low-rise apartment buildings of less than five stories, in row housing, or in single or semi-detached houses. In an era when the main methods of transportation

were horse-drawn tramways, electric streetcars, and simply walking, people in cities tended to live close to their workplaces in order to reduce the amount of travel time.² With the explosion in automobile ownership following World War II, people could move to the edge of the city and enjoy some of the amenities of "country living" without increasing their commuting time. This development greatly enlarged the city's land area, often without a corresponding increase in population.

Meanwhile, technological advances allowed the construction of higher buildings. Initially, they were built to provide more commercial office space on expensive downtown land, but following World War II it became common to construct residential high-rises as well. These forces helped

to create suburbs filled with low-density single detached houses, and city cores with high-density multi-storied apartment buildings.

1. Previous studies of people's contact with other residents of the neighbourhood have identified the importance of the type of housing a person occupies, length of residence at that address, and the proximity of family members in the neighbourhood. Only the first can be confirmed by this study because data for the other variables are not available from the National Population Health Survey.
2. Although there was an established downtown business core, land use planning by-laws were not the norm until the early 20th century; as a result, neighbourhoods often combined both commercial and residential land uses. Leung, H. L. 1989. *Land Use Planning Made Plain*. 217-218.

Neighbourhood interaction most common among house dwellers

In 1996-97, three-quarters of Canadian adults aged 20 and over had some contact with their neighbours, either talking in person or on the phone or engaging in social activities. Just over half had a high level of contact, that is, they had some interaction at least once a week.

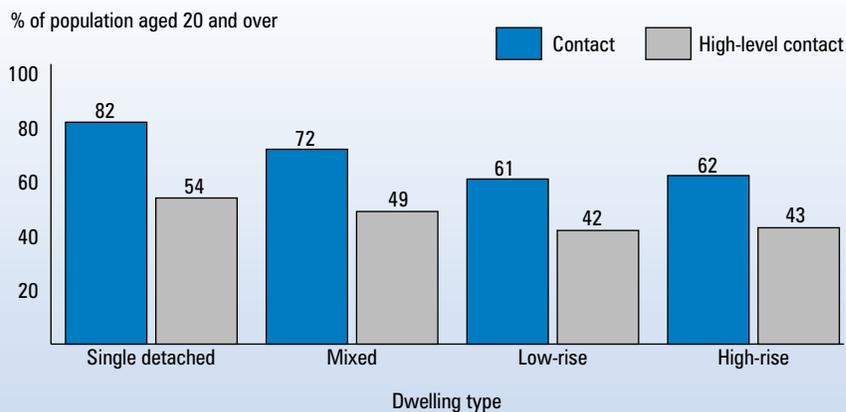
People living in single detached homes were most likely to have contact. About 82% of residents in single detached houses reported having at least some interaction with their neighbours, but less than 62% of apartment dwellers did so. In between these two extremes were people living in mixed housing — duplexes, semi-detached houses, row housing or garden homes — 72% of whom had some contact with others in the neighbourhood.

Not just contact but the frequency of contact differed by housing type. For example, over half of residents in single detached homes had high levels of interaction, but only 42% of apartment dwellers stopped to chat to their neighbours once a week or more.

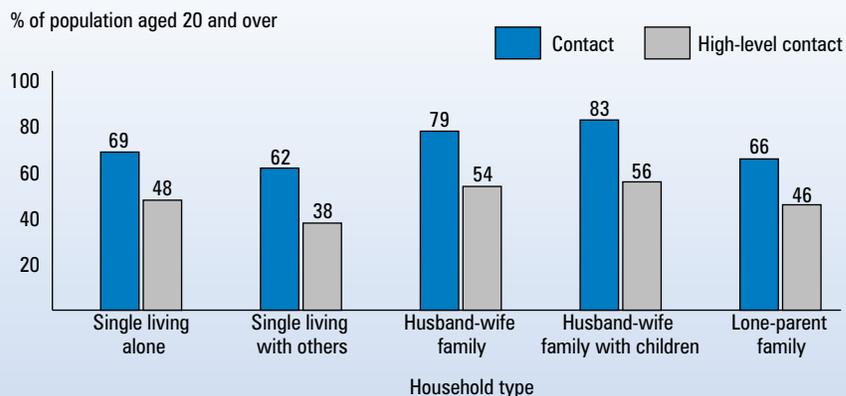
Because the type of housing people choose depends on what they can afford, income could play a role in levels of neighbourhood interaction. The data show that about three-quarters of people in each of the top four income quintiles had at least some contact, but this dropped to 59% in the lowest income quintile. The same pattern holds for high level contact: about half the respondents in the four middle and upper income quintiles reported a minimum of weekly contact with the neighbours, but people in the lowest quintile recorded significantly less (41%). However, when dwelling type is linked to income, the pattern is not as clear. People in the lowest income quintile living in single detached or mixed housing still had lower rates of contact; in contrast, the differences between income quin-

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People living in single detached homes...



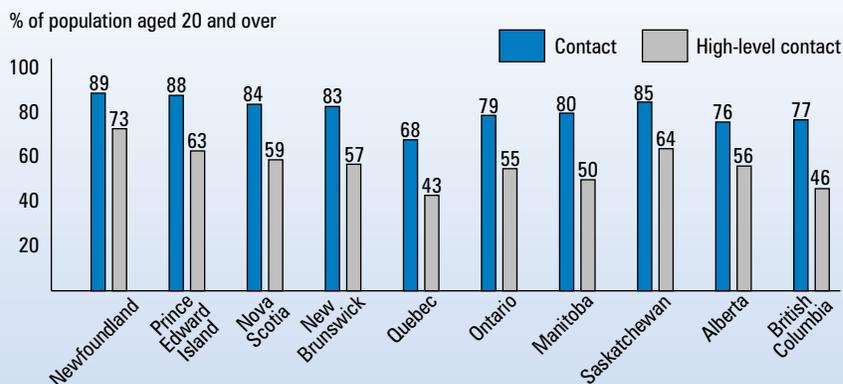
... and husband-wife families have more interaction with neighbours



Source: Statistics Canada, National Population Health Survey, 1996-97.

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People in the Atlantic provinces talk to their neighbours most often



Source: Statistics Canada, National Population Health Survey, 1996-97.

tiles were small for residents of low-rise apartments, and disappeared for residents of high-rise buildings. This finding could reflect the influence of housing design, and possibly the impact of lifestyle choices among higher income Canadians.

Families are friendlier neighbours

Interaction with one's neighbours offers a level of social support in addition to that provided by friends and family. Since it is a link formed by geographic proximity as opposed to shared interests,³ it can ensure that security and assistance are available close by. For example, a family can go away for the weekend knowing that a neighbour will keep an eye on their house, or a parent can ask the elderly couple next door to mind the baby while she goes to school to pick up a sick youngster.

The data on household structure certainly suggest that people who may have a greater need for social support interact more frequently with the neighbours. People in families with two parents and children, and families with two spouses only, had the highest rates of contact with the neighbours (83% and 79% respectively). A single person living with others was least inclined to interact (62%). In between these two extremes were single people living alone (79%) and lone parents (66%).

For the most part, a person's age has little impact upon how often an individual interacts with the neighbours. People in their twenties, however, had the lowest rate of interaction with their neighbours (65%), and the lowest rate of high level contact (39%). In contrast, as people reach their sixties, they tend to be more friendly: 82% had some contact

and about 62% had a high level of contact. When gender is considered in conjunction with age, there is no significant difference between men and women's level of interaction.

A lower rate of contact among younger Canadians probably should not be interpreted as "anti-social" behaviour; it more probably reflects their stage in life. Many people in their twenties are students or are in the process of establishing their careers, and are often transient between residences. Knowing that they are only temporary residents may lessen the need, or even the desire, to interact with the neighbours. Also, younger people may have non-standard hours, thus reducing the possibility of even meeting the neighbours. Likewise, Canadians in their sixties are often beginning retirement, and have more time available to spend at home, raising the likelihood of encountering the neighbours.

Newfoundlanders have highest rates of contact

Place of residence also affects a person's neighbourliness. While 75% of urban residents had some contact with their neighbours, over 80% of rural residents did. Furthermore, rural residents were more likely (56%) to have a high level of interaction with their neighbours than urban residents (50%).

Provincially, Newfoundlanders are the most friendly: 89% had at least some contact with their neighbours, 73% had weekly and over 43% had daily contact. Quebecois had the lowest rates: only 68% had any interaction, although 43% talked to their neighbours at least once a week.

Other social factors can certainly influence a person's tendency to be a friendly neighbour. For example, people who have lived in the same home for a long time are obviously more familiar with their neighbours than somebody who has recently moved

into the area. Data from the 1996 Census suggest that the provincial rates of contact may be reflecting this "rootedness." About two-thirds or more of people in eastern Canada lived in the same house that they had occupied five years previously, while in Alberta and British Columbia the proportion was 50% or less.

The same type of reason probably lies behind the importance of immigrant status. Recent immigrants may be less willing to interact with neighbours until they are more familiar with Canadian social norms and expectations. Indeed, immigrants who had been in Canada for less than 10 years had a noticeably lower level of contact with their neighbours (65%) than people had been born in Canada (77%) and immigrants who had lived in Canada for 10 or more years (75%).

Since churches, temples and synagogues are often a fundamental part of a neighbourhood, attendance at religious services tends to expand a person's social bonds by increasing regular interaction with other community members. This familiarity then results in more interactions outside the religious setting, and can grow to include neighbours who are not members of the same congregation. The NPHS data show that the more often that people attend religious services, the more frequently they have contact with their neighbours, and the more often they do so every day. This pattern is notable among all age groups.

Summary

We do not know whether Canadians are the good neighbours we believe we were in days gone by. However, it is certain that many factors that influence social interaction within the neighbourhood have changed. Society is distinctly more mobile: ties to our neighbourhoods may not be as strong, because we have not lived

3. Jakle, J. A., S. Brunn, and C. C. Roseman. 1976. *Human Spatial Behaviour: A Social Geography*. 49, 54.

there for a significant length of time, and because we are living in more self-contained homes.

This study has found that Canadians, especially husband-wife families, have contact with their neighbours, but the extent and frequency of such interaction depends strongly upon their type of dwelling. Apartment dwellers are less neighbourly compared to residents of single detached homes or mixed housing. Yet apartments are built in urban areas because land costs are high and planning mandates promote mixed housing types. Another strong influence is the province of residence: eastern Canadians, especially Newfoundlanders, are the friendliest neighbours in the country.

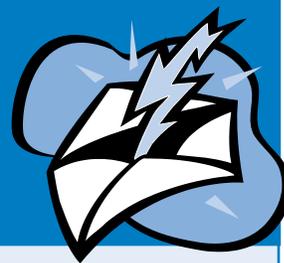


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