

Is your community child-friendly?

by Alice Peters



Much research has focussed on the socio-economic impact that a child's neighbourhood has on their future.^{1,2,3} Studies have also shown that parents' perceptions of crime and other social problems in their neighbourhood affect their sense of belonging and the approach they take to raising their children.⁴ How do Canadian parents, especially mothers, feel about their own neighbourhoods? Do they feel they are safe places to raise their children? Do they believe they have good neighbours who will watch out for their children and help them when they are in need? This study uses data from the 1999 National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth to

1. Sampson, R.J., S.W. Raudenbush and F. Earls. 1997. "Neighbourhoods and violent crime: A multilevel study of collective efficacy." *Science* 277: 918-924.
2. Connor, S. and S. Brink. 1999. "Understanding the early years." *Community Impacts on Child Development*. Human Resources Development Canada.
3. Sampson, R.J., S.W. Raudenbush and F. Earls. 1998. "Neighbourhood cohesion — does it help reduce violence?" *National Institute of Justice Research Preview*. National Institute of Justice: Washington, D.C.
4. Such as the work done by Harvard University's Center for Childhood Development and the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighbourhoods.

This article is based on data from the 1999 National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY). The NLSCY is conducted by Statistics Canada in partnership with Human Resources Development Canada. It is designed to develop a better understanding of the factors that contribute to a child's development over time. In 1999, over 30,000 children were sampled for the third cycle of the NLSCY. Demographic questions about the household were asked to determine the "person most knowledgeable" (PMK) about the child (usually the mother. In fact, 94% of the PMKs were female). Questions about neighbourhood safety, which cover length of residency in the neighbourhood, satisfaction with the neighbourhood as a place to bring up children, safety, social cohesion and neighbourhood problems, were completed by the PMK. For reasons of simplicity, the PMK is usually referred to as "parent" in this article.

For more information, see Statistics Canada, *National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth: Overview of Survey Instruments for 1999* (Report no. 89F0078XIE1999003).

examine how parents (usually the mother) feel about various aspects of their neighbourhood, especially how they feel about bringing up children there, as well as their assessment of problems in their neighbourhoods and their sense of "community spirit."

Most believe they live in good neighbourhoods

With increased numbers of lone-parent families and two-parent families where both parents work outside the home, neighbourhoods are very different than in previous generations. We live in an increasingly busy world, where many people leave their homes early in the morning to go to their jobs and return to take on another set of responsibilities at home. In this environment, leisurely chats over the fence with neighbours are probably much less frequent than they were a generation ago. Yet, in general, respondents view their neighbourhoods in a very positive light. Most parents believe their neighbourhood

is excellent (51%) or good (33%) as a place to bring up children. They also have strong perceptions that people are willing to help their neighbours (88% strongly agree or agree), and that they can count on adults in their neighbourhood to watch out that children are safe and don't get in trouble (86% strongly agree or agree). Parents had especially positive perceptions that there were adults in the neighbourhood that children can look up to: 20% of respondents strongly agreed, and 63% agreed, with only 8% disagreeing.

Similar results are found when parents were asked if their neighbours would keep their eyes open for possible trouble when they were away (88% strongly agree or agree). People were a little less likely, however, to perceive their neighbourhood as one in which the neighbours get together to deal with problems: 15% of respondents strongly agreed and 53% agreed, but 22% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

These findings are consistent with previous research. A 1999 study found

that a majority of Canadians (60%) were firm in their belief that crime in their neighbourhood was lower than crime in other Canadian communities, and a further 28% believed that crime was about the same as in other neighbourhoods.⁵

Higher incomes mean more neighbourhood satisfaction

Because the type and location of housing people choose depend on what they can afford, income has a large impact on a family's perceptions of safety and how fearful they are of being victims of crime. Studies from the "Moving to Opportunity" experiment in the U.S., which helped families from housing projects move to much more affluent neighbourhoods, found that parents and children who moved to better neighbourhoods experienced large improvements in measures of well-being, such as overall resident satisfaction, lower crime incidence and improved health.^{6,7}

It is not surprising, then, that parents with higher incomes feel more positively about their neighbourhoods. In 1999, 63% of those who had incomes above \$80,000 felt that their neighbourhood was an excellent place to bring up children compared with 35% of those with incomes below \$15,000. Those with incomes above \$80,000 were also much more inclined to strongly agree or agree that neighbours are willing to help

5. Statistics Canada. 2000. *A Profile of Criminal Victimization: Results of the 1999 General Social Survey* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 85-553-XIE).

6. Katz, L.F., J.R. Kling and J.B. Liebman. 2001. "Moving to Opportunity in Boston: Early Results of a Randomized Mobility Experiment." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 116, 6: 607-654.

7. Ludwig, J., G. Duncan and P. Hirshfeld. 2001. "Urban Poverty and Juvenile Crime: Evidence from a Randomized Housing Mobility Experiment." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 116, 6: 655-680.

CST Do Canadians worry about their personal safety?

The 1999 General Social Survey examined Canadians' perceptions of crime and personal safety. The survey asked respondents how safe they felt when walking alone in their neighbourhood after dark; waiting for or using public transportation alone after dark; and being home alone at night. In 1999, 54% of those who used public transportation alone at night indicated that they were not at all worried when waiting for or using it; 43% felt very safe walking alone in their neighbourhood at night; and 80% of Canadians indicated that they were not at all worried when home alone at night.

Feelings of safety from crime for population aged 15 and over, 1999

	Population 15 and over (000s)	% of population 15 and over
Total	24,260	100
While waiting for/using public transportation alone after dark, how do you feel about your safety from crime?¹		
Not at all worried	3,306	54
Somewhat worried	2,390	39
Very worried	438	7
Don't know/not stated	42	1
Total	6,176	100
How safe do you feel from crime when walking alone in your area after dark?¹		
Very safe	7,964	43
Reasonably safe	8,322	45
Somewhat unsafe	1,627	9
Very unsafe	412	2
Don't know/not stated	63	--
Total	18,388	100
While alone in your home in the evening or at night, how do you feel about your safety from crime?²		
Not at all worried	19,104	80
Somewhat worried	4,374	18
Very worried	496	2
Don't know/not stated	44	--
Total	24,018	100

-- Amount too small to be expressed.

Figures may not add to total due to rounding.

1. Based on responses for people who engage in these activities.
2. Excludes the estimated 1% of the population that is never home alone.

Source: Statistics Canada. 2000. *A Profile of Criminal Victimization: Results of the 1999 General Social Survey* (Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 85-553-XIE).

each other (93%), compared with those with incomes below \$15,000 (66%), and that there are adults in the neighbourhood for children to look up to, at 89% for the higher income parents versus 64% for the lower income parents.

Older respondents were also more likely to rank their neighbourhoods highly. This result is to be expected, since older people have had more time in which to accumulate financial resources and therefore have more options in housing choices. Of those aged 40 and over, 55% felt that their neighbourhood was excellent as a place to bring up children, while 43% of those aged 25 to 29 felt the same. Those aged 40 and over were also much more likely to strongly agree or agree that neighbours deal with problems together, at 70%, compared with 58% of those aged 25 to 29.

Also, ties to our neighbourhoods seem to strengthen with the passage of time. The longer people had been residents, the more likely they were to feel positively about their neighbourhoods. Only 42% of those who had lived in their neighbourhood for less than a year thought it was an excellent place to bring up children, compared with 60% of those who had lived in their neighbourhood 10 years.

Housing type affects neighbourhood satisfaction

Many researchers believe that housing design has an impact on how we interact with our neighbours. Modern planning techniques, for example, have helped create suburbs filled with lower-density, single-family houses and city cores with high-density multi-storied apartment buildings. Previous studies of the frequency of people's contact with other residents of their 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 as factors that affect how neighbours interact.⁸

So it is not surprising that parents living in single family, semi-detached or garden homes were more likely to rate their neighbourhood excellent as a place to bring up children, at 55%, compared with 28% of those who lived in duplexes or apartments. Residents of single family, semi-detached or garden homes were also much more likely to believe that their neighbours deal with problems together, are willing to help each other, and would watch out for trouble in their absence. They also felt more certain that their neighbours kept an eye out for children's safety and that there were adults in the neighbourhood children could look up to.

Community involvement increased neighbourhood satisfaction

Parents who did volunteer work were more likely to rank their neighbourhoods highly than those who did not: 58% of those who volunteered ranked their neighbourhood as an excellent place to bring up children, versus 48% of non-volunteers. Those who volunteered were also more likely to strongly agree or agree that neighbours deal with problems together and are willing to help each other, that there are adults in the neighbourhood for children to look up to, that neighbours watch out that children are safe, and that neighbours watch out for trouble when other people are not at home.

Summary

How a person feels about their neighbourhood is subjective and difficult to measure. Everyone has a different reaction that varies according to their age, level of education and income

8. Kremerik, F. Summer 2000. "The other side of the fence." *Canadian Social Trends*. p. 20-24.



Families in single family, semi-detached and garden homes feel more positively about their neighbourhoods...

	Strongly agree or agree	
	Single family, semi-detached or garden homes	Duplexes or apartments
	%	
Neighbours deal with problems together	70	53
There are adults for kids to look up to	86	68
Neighbours are willing to help each other	91	75
Neighbours watch out that children are safe	89	72
Neighbours watch out for trouble in their absence	91	73

... as do those who volunteer

	Involved in volunteer work	Not involved in volunteer work
	%	
Neighbours deal with problems together	76	64
There are adults for kids to look up to	91	81
Neighbours are willing to help each other	94	87
Neighbours watch out that children are safe	91	86
Neighbours watch out for trouble in their absence	94	87

Source: Statistics Canada, National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, 1999.

status. Income largely determines the type and location of housing that a person chooses. Those with higher incomes, therefore, tend to live in better houses and better locations, and are more satisfied with their neighbourhoods. Respondents living in single family, semi-detached or garden homes were much more likely to perceive their neighbourhood as an excellent place to bring up children than were those who live in duplexes or apartments.

In general, however, respondents had very positive perceptions about their neighbourhood as a place to bring up children. Most believed that their neighbours were willing to help each other and watch out that children were safe. Respondents aged 40 and older ranked their neighbourhoods highest. As well, the longer people had

lived in their neighbourhoods, the more likely they were to feel positively about them. Parents with higher levels of education and those who were involved in volunteer work were also more likely to rank their neighbourhoods highly.



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