

Social Capital and the Community Profile in Four New Hampshire Towns

Social capital and income level are positively associated with successful citizen involvement in NH communities.

The Community Profile is a New Hampshire project designed to help communities solve problems and deal with change in their community. How does this happen? The project, coordinated by the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension, helps communities strengthen their “civic infrastructure”-- that is, the people, systems and institutions used to make decisions and come to consensus.

Communities who have conducted the Community Profile have discovered it can lead to an increased volunteer/leadership base, foster the creation of action groups to accomplish a vision of the community and in addition, help the community celebrate itself and its history.

To date, over 65 Community Profiles have been conducted in New Hampshire. For a full listing of Profiles conducted to date, please visit <http://ceinfo.unh.edu>.

This study, conducted through telephone interviews by the UNH Survey Center in 2001, focused on four New Hampshire towns, all of which conducted the Community Profile in 1997 and 1998. The towns, labeled Town A, Town B, Town C and Town D were chosen based on the length of time since the Profile was conducted, as well as specific demographic information such as income and education level.

The following aspects of these towns were measured:

- 1) level of participation in the Community Profile event;
- 2) level of awareness of the Community Profile and its aftermath, and
- 3) the perceived impact of the project on the community.

Each of these aspects was measured by demographics (gender, level of education and income) and by level of social capital.

Data for this paper are from the New Hampshire Social Capital Survey carried out by the UNH Survey Center along with UNH Cooperative Extension and the UNH Institute on Disability. A random sample of 300 residents age 18 and older was selected from each community. They were administered an abbreviated version of the nationwide Social Capital Benchmark Survey as well as questions pertaining directly to the Community Profile.

This study is important not only because it examines the effects of the Community Profile project on these communities, but also because it enables us to look at the impact of social capital in these communities.

Current research cites that higher levels of social capital within communities have been associated higher educational achievement, better performing governmental

institutions, faster economic growth, less crime and violence as well as happier, healthier people with longer life expectancy (NH Charitable Foundation).

For this study, the sample (n=966) found that there were more female than male respondents (56% vs. 44%); thirty-eight percent (38%) of respondents reported having a higher school education or less, 32% had some college and 30% reported 16 or more years of education.

The overall sample was divided into three groups according to the score they received on the social capital index. This index was based on several survey questions to categorize people based on their level of community involvement and participation. Thirty-one percent (31%) of the sample were classified in the high social capital group, 38% in the middle and 32% in the low group.

Participation

Overall, those who scored high on the social capital index had a significantly higher participation rate (19%) than did those with middle (5%) and low (4%) scores. Female respondents generally reported higher household participation rates than males, except for Town A, who exhibited the opposite trend (6% females versus 12% males).

Town level participation patterns by socioeconomic status were similar to that of the combined sample. The rate of lowest education group was less than half the rates of the two higher education groups, and the highest income group in each town had a much higher participation rate than the low and middle-income groups.

The finding regarding social capital and Community Profile participation is clear: those with high social capital in each town had far higher participation rates than those with middle or low social capital.

Awareness

There was little gender difference in awareness of the Community Profile by town and it generally increased with the level of education in each town. The pattern of Community Profile awareness by income level in the four towns was similar to that for education. The most disparate rates of Community Profile awareness are by level of social capital. Forty percent (40%) of those in the high social capital group reported that they were aware of the Profile happening in their community, compared to 22% in the middle group and only 10% in the low social capital group.

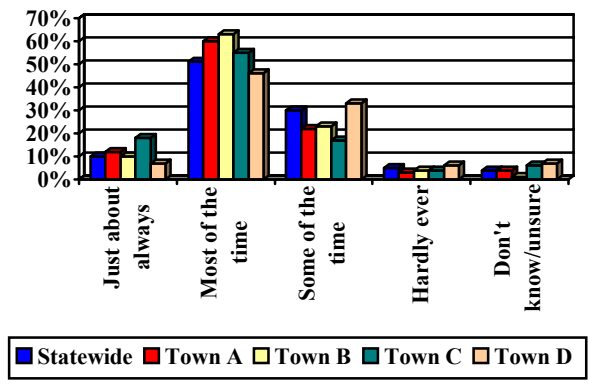
Perceived Impact

The overall percentage of respondents who reported a positive impact was 55%. Women were more likely than men to report a positive impact (60% versus 48%). The two SES measures -education and income- had very different patterns for this measure. There was little difference in perceived positive impact by level of education. Level of

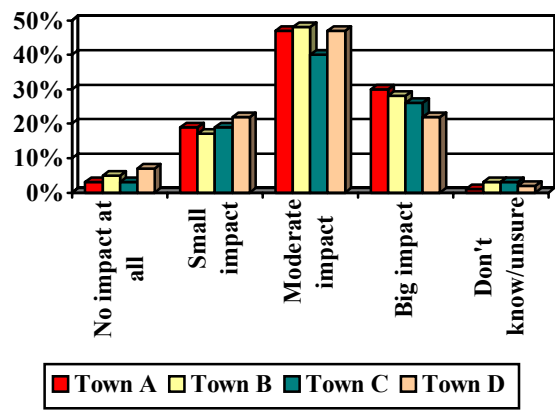
income, however, exhibited vast differences in positive impact. A much higher percentage of low-income respondents (80%) reported positive impact of the Community Profile, followed by the 30-59,000 group (59%), the 60-99,000 group (46%) and the 100,000 group (41%). There is clearly a different relationship between income and Community Profile perception on the one hand, and education and Community Profile perception.

The higher the level of social capital, the more likely the respondent was to report that the Community Profile had a positive impact on the community. The high social capital group (66%) reported higher than middle (45%) and low (32%).

Other factors measured through this study included asking participants how much they trust their local government. It is clear that the overall sample felt they could trust their local government “most of the time” as can be seen in the chart below:



Respondents were also asked how much of an impact they could have on their community and the results were as follows:



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