



LAWRENCEVILLE, NJ (EMBARGOED UNTIL APRIL 20, 2008) – People in central New Jersey are better educated, more racially and ethnically diverse, and have higher incomes than national averages — key components for community involvement. But they are no more likely than their national counterparts to be engaged in civic activities despite average work and commute times that are two hours less per week than the national average, according to a groundbreaking new survey of the region.

“The first-ever Social Capital Benchmark Survey of central New Jersey presents the good, the bad, and the opportunity to make life better here,” said Nancy Kieling, president of the Princeton Area Community Foundation, whose organization partnered with the Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce Foundation to commission the survey.

“Social capital refers to the interpersonal networks that bind us together – literally who knows and trusts whom, and the character and strength of our personal and business relationships,” said Dr. Marc Weiner of the Bloustein Center for Survey Research at Rutgers, the principal investigator of a project that randomly surveyed a representative sample of central New Jersey residents. “The survey measures levels of trust among people and, generally speaking, the degree to which people will work together and extend themselves for others.”

“And at the same time, the survey raises challenging questions. If we have fewer constraints because our education, income, and trust levels exceed the national average, and we are no busier than others, how is it that we score only average in our rates of civic engagement and volunteerism? Are we living up to our potential?” Weiner asked.

“Higher levels of social capital are good for residents, for businesses, and will help build stronger communities throughout central New Jersey,” said Karen Colimore, president of the Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce Foundation. “Improved educational achievement, better performing governments, stronger local economies and less crime and violence are more likely to be found where there are higher levels of social capital,” she said. “And people living in these communities generally report being happier and healthier.”

The Community Foundation and Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce Foundation today launched a five-year initiative, including a challenge to community leaders to increase social capital in the region. Together they will roll out an informational campaign this spring and summer, culminating in a regional forum in the fall. They are calling on CEOs of local businesses and leaders of academic, religious and nonprofit organizations to encourage their workers, members and clients to notice how important their connections to others are, and to take steps that can make these relationships richer — like encouraging employees to serve on regional local non-profit and community boards, explore opportunities to get to know their communities and neighbors better, or simply make a point to sit with new colleagues in the cafeteria.

The Princeton Area Community Foundation will award \$2.5 million in grants over the next five years to organizations encouraging greater social interaction and building bridges among people and towns. The Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce Foundation will use the survey results to work on a regional basis, much as Silicon Valley and Research Triangle Park have done, to improve social capital and promote public/private partnerships to drive regional competitive economic advantage.

The survey showed the percentage of central New Jersey residents with a bachelor's degree at 51%, compared to 28% nationally, and household incomes over \$100,000 in 36% of respondents, compared to 15% nationally. But in questions about people joining groups and organizations, the differences between central New Jersey and the nation were small, less than 3% in most categories, including involvement in religious, youth, neighborhood and parent organizations and adult sports leagues. In some categories, central New Jersey respondents were less involved than national averages. In charity or social welfare organizations, 62% of central New Jersey residents claimed involvement, compared to 66% nationally. In literary, art, discussion and strategy groups, 77% of central New Jersey residents said they were involved, compared to 81% nationally.

“Our numbers were strong, but they could be stronger,” said Kieling. “We believe that in an area that scores so high in so many areas, our levels of social capital should be similarly high.”

Karen Colimore added, “From a Chamber Foundation point of view, we hypothesize that our social capital baseline scores would look far less positive if they were compared with other regions of the country enjoying greater economic growth than we have vs. a national average. We believe improving social capital is the key to improving regional economic growth.”

The questionnaire was adapted from Harvard University's Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America, which is an on-going initiative of Professor Robert Putnam at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. The survey interviewed 870 randomly selected people across nineteen central New

Jersey municipalities about how they felt about eight areas of social capital that measure how connected people feel to their communities and to others. The survey was conducted on the phone with each interview lasting 19 minutes.

The eight areas surveyed include general social trust, interracial trust, involvement in associations, diversity of friendships, faith-based involvement, informal socializing, civic leadership and volunteering.

The 19 municipalities studied were Trenton, Hamilton, Princeton Borough and Township, Hopewell Borough and Township, Pennington, East Windsor, Hightstown, Ewing, Lawrence, West Windsor, and Robbinsville in Mercer County; Montgomery, Rocky Hill, and Kingston in Somerset County; and Cranbury, Plainsboro, and South Brunswick in Middlesex County.

Similar social capital surveys have been conducted in 29 other communities across the U.S. from California to Maine.

“This is a first-ever snapshot of us,” said Colimore. “It’s the first time we’ve ever quantified how we relate to one another in central New Jersey. We want the survey results to stimulate thought and shape discussions about planning for our common health and well-being for years to come,” she said.

The sponsors plan to publicize and promote the findings of the survey at schools, public meetings, and community events through a campaign called “Better Together.” The Community Foundation will focus on the region’s municipalities, including elected representatives and municipal officials, and nonprofit organizations — while the Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce Foundation will focus on businesses.

“With ‘Better Together,’ we want people to understand that by simply stopping and taking a moment to talk with one another, they’re taking an important step toward increasing our region’s social capital,” said Kieling. “Welcoming a new neighbor, offering to pick something up at the store, greeting your fellow commuter on the train — small gestures that build connections go a long way.”

Complete survey results can be found on both the Princeton Area Community Foundation and the Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce Foundation websites: www.pacf.org and www.princetonchamberfoundation.org.

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