

AARP Survey on Civic Involvement (Summary)

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New Survey Shows American Public Involved in their Communities Survey Dispels Common Myths about Civic Mindedness in our Society

(Washington, D.C.) -- Is America's social fabric coming apart at the seams? Has America completely lost its sense of community? Despite the alarms raised in recent years about Americans becoming less involved, a new AARP study shows that the nation's social fabric appears to be in relatively good shape, and interesting patterns of public participation are reflected in communities around the country.

The study, *Maintaining America's Social Fabric: The AARP Survey of Civic Involvement*, identifies levels and forms of civic involvement from a large cross-section of age groups. It measures and assesses the extent to which Americans are involved in and attached to their communities, where their involvement is, and their attitudes toward one another and their government.

"Conventional wisdom would have us believe that we are a nation made up of disinterested, disengaged and uninvolved people. Our survey clearly shows that this is not the case. We found that people are engaged at a local level where they can feel the impact of their efforts. Ninety-eight percent (98%) of those surveyed reported being involved in at least one activity that connects them with people outside of their household," said Jane Baumgarten, a member of AARP's volunteer national board.

Membership in organizations is higher than previously reported. The average respondent has more than four memberships in more than three types of organizations. Religion is the leading type of organizational involvement for all age groups. Sixty-one percent of those surveyed belong to some type of religious organization. Health and sports clubs, professional trade groups, school groups, and neighborhood groups are other types of formal organizations that Americans are joining.

In identifying what "community" means, 6 out of 10 people said "community" has geographical connotations. Yet the meaning of community varies with age. Respondents



between the ages of 31 and 71 frequently thought in terms places while those under 30 were more likely to speak in terms of informal groups.

Contrary to widespread fears, most Americans feel a sense of attachment to the communities in which they live. Seventy-two percent said they want to be living in the same geographical area five years from now. Ninety-six percent (69%) said they know at least one of their neighbors on a first-name basis, and eighty-five percent reported they have had a conversation with a neighbor in the past three months.

"Our survey clearly demonstrates that people are engaged in their local communities, and feel that they have a vested interest in being involved with their neighbors. One-third of the survey respondents reported that they have worked with others to solve local problems, and almost three-quarters of respondents spend time discussing a myriad of local issues. Eight out of ten people surveyed believe that they can solve local problems by acting in concert with others," said Constance Swank, AARP research director.

The role of religion in social and community involvement appears throughout the results of the survey. There is a strong correlation between individual's involvement in organized religion and their attachment to where they live, involvement with others, membership in associations, and willingness to help others through volunteer work. Those who attend a house of worship more than once a week are far more likely to be involved with their community than those who never attend religious services. Of those who do volunteer work, 56 percent (56%) report that at least some of their time is spent on work "sponsored or organized by religious organizations," and 34 percent say they volunteer "because of my religious commitment."

One big unknown is how these data may play out as the younger generation gets older. The survey found that those adults between 18 and 26 exhibited the most distrust and the least involvement in their communities. A full sixty percent (60%) of respondents in this youngest adult group are distrustful of others. Less than half of all other respondents, ages 37 through 76 plus, said they were distrustful of others.

While Americans are less involved in group activities than they are in the private and economic aspects of their lives, large percentages of Americans are involved in socializing with friends, religious commitments, youth activities, hobbies shared with others, and volunteer work. The survey found that 78 percent (78%) visit with friends, 64 percent (64%) are engaged in religious activities 61 percent pursue hobbies outside their household, 57



percent (57%) perform activities with teens and children, and 53 percent (53%) volunteer their time.

The AARP "*Survey of Civic Involvement*" was a national telephone survey of American adults conducted at the end of 1996. Of the 1,500 people from all regions of the United States who participated in the survey, half were between 18 and 50, and half were 50 and older. The survey has a sampling error of plus or minus 2.5 percent (2.5%).

AARP is the nation's leading organization for people 50 and older. It serves their needs and interests through advocacy, research, informative programs and community services provided by a network of local chapters and experienced volunteers throughout the country. The organization offers members a wide range of special benefits, including *Modern Maturity* and the monthly *Bulletin*.

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