



## WHEN DOES DIVERSITY ERODE TRUST?

### KEYWORDS

**Multiculturalism; diversity; trust; social cohesion; neighborhoods; neighbors**

### WHAT'S THE STORY?

Diversity is a contentious issue of both popular and academic debate. As North American neighborhoods become more ethnically or racially diverse, many believe that vital community ties between residents are eroding. The pessimists typically point to a body of research showing that people tend to lose trust when surrounded by others who look different than them. If neighborhood diversification always erodes trust in your neighbors, then it would seem that all forms of cooperation and engagement in community life are at stake.

This study engages this debate with evidence that diversity does not uniformly erode trust across residents of a neighborhood. People are likely to distrust their neighbors mainly when their neighborhoods are diverse *and* they do not regularly talk to their neighbors. The negative effect of diversity on trust is much weaker for those who live in diverse setting but do interact with their neighbors. In short, the study suggests that contact between neighbors

is key to understanding when diversity actually poses a threat to social cohesion.

The project is based on recent surveys and population census information from Canada and U.S. It is one of the few studies of diversity and trust to examine the issue across countries and, specifically, in the neighborhood setting.

### HEADLINES

#### **Diversity and Distrust**

People who live in diverse neighborhoods are less trusting than those who do not. This is particularly true in Canada, but also in the U.S.

#### **Unequal Effects**

The negative effect of diversity on trust is strongest for people who belong to the racial majorities. Diversity has only a weak effect on trust levels for visible minorities in Canada and has no effect on minorities in the U.S.

#### **Do You Talk To Your Neighbors?**

People who live in diverse settings *and* who talk to their neighbors are more trusting than those who live with diversity but rarely talk to those who live around them.

Generally speaking, the comparison between the U.S. and Canada yields similar results. In both contexts, the routine practice of talking to one's neighbors is shown to mediate the negative influence diversity has on levels of trust. Diversity has virtually no influence on trust for those who make it regular practice to interact with those living nearby. Hence, diversity threatens trust most for those who live in isolation of their immediate neighbors.

The neighborhood-level analysis developed in this article is a major advance in this field. Past research has mainly depended on higher geographic units – cities or provinces (states) – to measure exposure to diversity. But as the authors point out, that measurement strategy may not reflect the diversity that most people experience in the course of routine day. The neighborhood level is proposed as a more accurate indicator of the diversity people are normally exposed to.

## HOW WE DID IT?

Two representative surveys of Americans and Canadians are used for the analysis. The U.S. sample of about 1,000 participants was collected for 2005 the Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy survey (CID). The Canadian sample, including more than 5,600 respondents, was collected for the Equality Security Community Survey (ESCS) in 2002/3. Census data, indicating neighborhood diversity, are from the 2001 Canadian Census, and 2000 U.S. Census. For both surveys, the series of questions used to measure trust levels were based on a "lost wallet" scenario. Respondents were asked to assess the chances of their wallets being

returned if found by a series of different individuals, including their neighbors.

## FOR PUBLIC DEBATE

This article does not contest the claim that neighborhood diversification may negatively influence trust levels among residents. Nor does it prove that talking to neighbors will promote trust in diverse neighborhoods. It does suggest, however, that trust is likely to erode quickly in neighborhoods when diversity increases *and* people tend to live isolated from one another. The contribution to future debates on this matter is clear: diversity does not automatically jeopardize the social cohesion of a neighborhood. Trust between neighbors begins with real contact.

**“In short,  
diversity is a  
challenge to trust  
only when it is  
not accompanied  
by enough social  
interaction”**

## LEARN MORE

Stolle, Dietlind, Stuart Soroka and Richard Johnston. 2008. "When Does Diversity Erode Trust? Neighborhood Diversity, Interpersonal Trust and the Mediating Effect of Social Interactions." *Political Studies* 56(1): 57-75.

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00717.x/full>

